

LINDSEY DAVIS

A
FLAVIA ALBIA
NOVEL

THERE WILL BE BODIES

Lindsey Davis has been a historical novelist for thirty-five years. She began writing about the Romans with *The Course of Honour*, the real life love story of the Emperor Vespasian and Antonia Caenis. She is best known for her twenty-book adventure series about Roman detective Marcus Didius Falco and his partner Helena Justina. *Master and God*, about the paranoid tyrant Domitian, led to a second Roman detective series, featuring Flavia Alba, also set in that dark period.

Her books are translated into many languages and have been dramatized on BBC Radio 4.

She has been Honorary President of the UK Classical Association, Chair of the UK Crime Writers' Association, Chair of the UK Society of Authors and president of the Birmingham and Midlands Institute.

Her awards include the Premio Colosseo (from the city of Rome) and the Crime Writers' Cartier Diamond Dagger for lifetime achievement and, in 2023, the Ivanhoe award at the Historical Novel Festival in Ubeda, Spain.

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There Will Be Bodies

Lindsey Davis



www.hodder.co.uk

First published in Great Britain in 2025 by Hodder & Stoughton Limited

An Hachette UK company

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A CIP catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library

ebook ISBN 978 1 399 71964 3

Paperback ISBN 978 1 399 71967 4

Hodder & Stoughton Limited

Carmelite House

50 Victoria Embankment

London EC4Y 0DZ

www.hodder.co.uk

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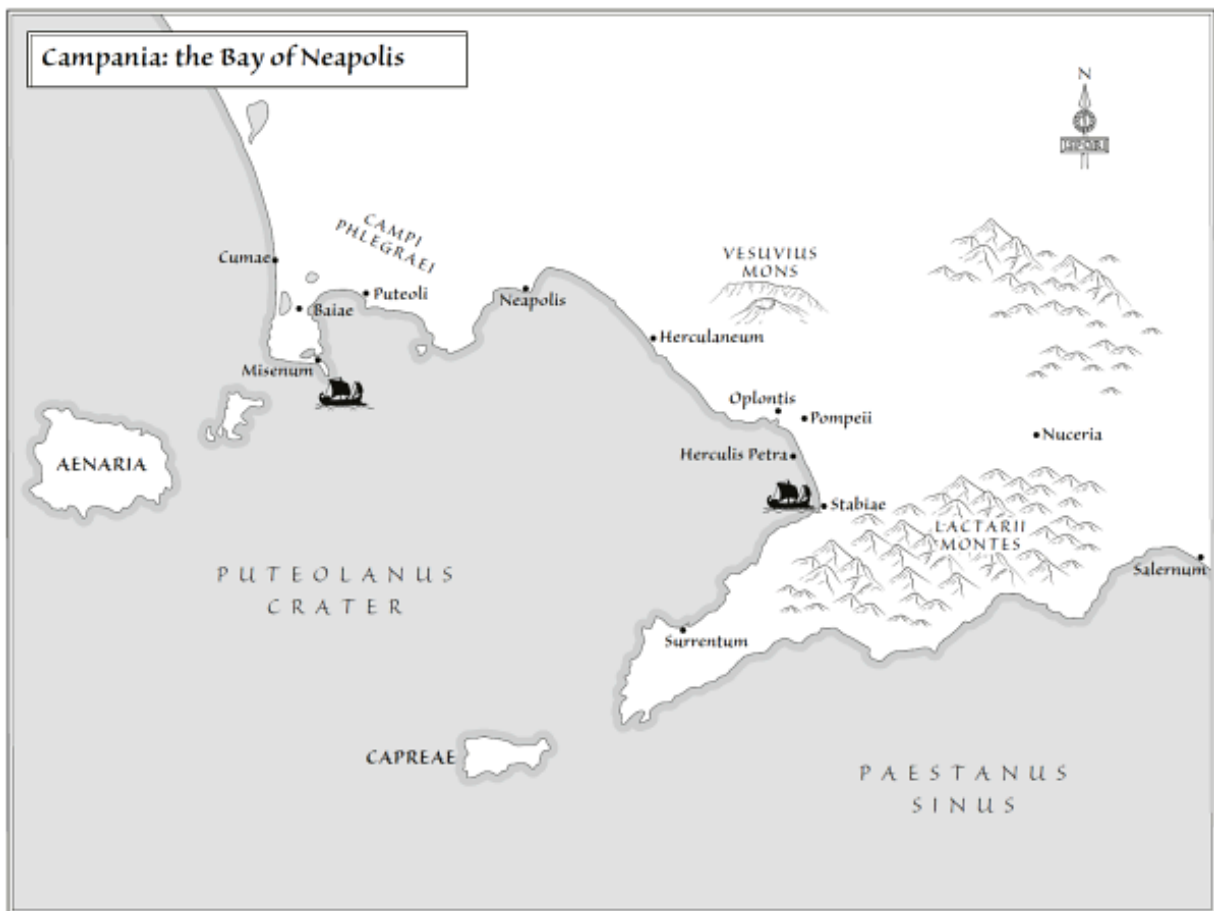
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Rome, AD 90: the Bay of Neapolis area, especially Stabiae

*. . . Where Vesuvius rears his broken summit in wrath, pouring out
Flames to rival the Sicilian fires. A marvel! Will
Future generations, when the crops have grown again and this
Wilderness greens up once more, believe that people and cities
Are buried beneath, that an ancestral countryside has vanished,
In an act of fate?*

Statius, *Silvae* 4, probably published in AD 95



Characters, mainly alive

In or from Rome

Tiberius Manlius Faustus a builder, working for nothing

Flavia Albia a freelance investigator, comes at a price

Their household (them again): Gaius and Lucius the dear little nephews; Gratus the smooth steward; Dromo the dim slave; Paris the cheeky runabout; Fornix the celebrity chef; Suza the hopeful beautician; Glaphyra the diligent nurse; Barley the house dog

Their workmen: Larcus the clerk-of-works; Sparsus the apprentice; Serenus the old hand; Vindex and Dexter the leisure-loving painters;

Drax the site watchdog; Mercury the donkey

Tullius Icilius uncle and property impresario

Sextus Curvidius Fulvianus his vendor, honourable, surely

The Seventh Cohort of Vigiles

Gaius Caunus a tribune, gone on a bender

Rufius a cohort centurion, possibly lightweight

Milo and Hyro porridge-eating heavyweights

Acer and Acilius who have lost their appetites

Charis a valiant girlfriend, with a baby

The people of Stabiae: in the town

Apuleius Innocentius the duovir, keeping his head down

Bathyllus a holistic herbalist

Axilius a piecework carpenter

Septimius in second-hand collectibles

Crispus his nephew, shifty

Criton a runaway, safely collected up

Dexiades an utterly legitimate trader in art

Ergon his driver, sinister
Docetius, Surdinius, Bitho, Acatholos further associates
Egloge ‘the jailer’s beautiful daughter’
Waiters in harbourside catering

The people of Stabiae: up on the heights

Publius Curvidius Fulvius Primus mysteriously disappeared
Fulvia Secunda completely absent
Blossia her helpful slave
Tertius curiously missing
Quartilla keeping out of everything
Curvidia Quinctia a priestess, packs a punch
Quinctius Polydorus her freedman, an acolyte perforce
Publilius Gellius and Publilia Lavinia friends of the family (they say)
Porphyry, Endymio, Myrtale deceased slaves, tragic
Anonymous a child, heartbreaking
Nibble a dead watchdog, desperate
Marius a wandering minstrel, philosophical
Bitus a neighbour with a hat
Favonilla and Heius big-hearted smallholders
Pescennius Neo a plutocrat with Roman polish

Chapter 1

‘There will be bodies. It is only fair to warn you,’ my husband told his workmen. Some contractors might have kept quiet, but he liked to be open about risks. Mind you, he had brought me in on the discussion in case he needed support. I won’t say the men were frightened of me, but they were generally wary.

When Tiberius Manlius took over their nearly bankrupt company, the existing team saw it as a fad. But he could recognise the right end of a chisel; they had learned that now. And for men with mortar on their boots, being employed by a toff in a laundered toga was better than losing their jobs.

Not that he was soft: ‘If anyone prefers to stay behind in Rome, I won’t be paying a retainer.’

‘That’s a joke?’ Sparsus, the apprentice, was traditionally young and daft.

‘Afraid not. Are you turning down a free holiday?’ This really was a joke because Tiberius had explained that the project at Neapolis would be hard work. It was a favour to his uncle, a man who had grown rich through screwing his customers and who tended to view even close relatives as people to be played.

Uncle Tullius had bought a house. It was uninhabitable, but he presumed that, with a nephew in the building trade, he could have it very cheaply restored. ‘No frills, just a basic clear-out. At cost, of course,’ he had said airily. That meant we should not expect to make a profit.

Tiberius was humouring him. This uncle controlled the family finances: co-operation was the safest approach. Keeping him sweet applied even though the vague ‘clear-out’ would involve excavating volcanic material that had been dumped in and around his new property during the disastrous

eruption of Mount Vesuvius. Most walls were still standing, Tullius had been assured.

‘That could be a lot of pumice, Legate!’ observed our clerk-of-works darkly.

Tiberius nodded. ‘Larcus, it’s clear how Tullius managed to nab this place at a knock-down price. All the easy-rescue projects were knocked off years ago. But we’ll be fine, don’t worry. I deliberately haven’t told him about the sky-high billing rate we devised for “hacking out rubble” on our Eagle Building job. You know Albia had the agent paying for protective gear and specialist insurance.’

Larcus had liked that. We still had equipment from the Eagle Building job stored in the yard for future use, while the supposed insurance premium had financed an end-of-project feast.

‘Helmets. First-aid supplies. Danger money . . .’ I was inventing in the same merry way I had bamboozled our customer’s agent. A year ago, I had known nothing about demolition and restoration, but I learn fast. Like most Roman wives I was now a lead player in the family business. Like most, I was ruthless financially.

‘Custom and practice!’ Tiberius winked at me. ‘If we don’t know what the custom is, we’ll make it up as we go along.’

A year ago, *he* was a leisured playboy, until he came out of his shell when his uncle financed his election as a magistrate. This shift into the political world was intended to raise their business profile, but Tiberius had taken the role seriously. Uncle Tullius had had a big surprise over his nephew’s approach to public service. But the building trade was different: he might have another shock with his ‘honest’ nephew’s approach to working on the new house.

My husband was a practical man, even if some people said his good sense had let him down when he married me. After six months, he was still claiming that was the best thing he had ever done; I just smiled mysteriously.

In theory, if Tiberius Manlius ever decided he had made a mistake, my own work as a private enquiry agent ought to equip me to bring about a painless divorce. I was realistic, however. Why do lawyers die without making their wills? How come doctors are killed off by coughs they have never bothered to treat? Meanwhile, informers' marriages often fall apart: the financial stress is terrible, children are permanently damaged, their dog runs away, and they certainly don't bother with any pretence that the split is so amicable they will stay friends.

Our dog could sleep soundly in her fancy kennel, I thought. Despite all I had learned from tragic clients, I envisaged Tiberius and me sticking it out, hand in hand, until we were doddering. I supported him with love and loyalty, while he showed plain determination. Marriage had been his idea, and he could always make his ideas sound reasonable. That was why most of his men agreed to travel with us to the new site. Sparsus, the excitable apprentice, even pestered us about what any corpses they uncovered might look like.

'To be honest, I don't know.' Tiberius had given it forethought. 'It's been ten years. Victims were buried deep in compacted materials that were very hot. I can't tell you whether any remains in that old crud will be decayed or preserved. We shall find out soon enough. All Tullius knows from the owner is that some people who lived in the house were never seen again. If we do come across victims, we have been asked to collect any evidence of who the poor souls were.'

Serenus, who was an experienced labourer, pulled a face. 'And what are we supposed to do with them?'

'Chip them out as best we can. Then dispose of them reverently.' It sounded as if Tiberius himself was making this rule. I suspected he had not even asked the previous owner what he wanted done. Bodies would be treated with respect, because it was the pious way to behave. I had married a good man. That was a surprise to me, just as my love of his benign character surprised him. He had feared I wanted someone rougher. 'The seller will pay for basic memorials for slaves,' Tiberius reported. 'But he did tell Uncle

Tullius that he wants to hold a full funeral, in the event we are able to identify his long-lost brother.'

A long-lost brother? That was news.

Hmm. In my experience such situations are never as clean-cut as people suppose. However, tracking down a missing relative sometimes brings in business for me, so this could be welcome. 'Will the vendor give us a finder's fee?'

'I suspect not.'

Even young Sparsus, ever curious, was quick to spot the oddity: 'Chief, when fiery lava started flying around, why didn't this brother jump into some crack piece of transport and make a bolt for the hills?'

Exactly. Still, relatives can be hard to fathom. Half the time in my investigations, people who have disappeared did it to cause trouble in their family.

'Vesuvius had created utter panic.' I must have sounded sombre. I had been there afterwards. I had told them that, though so far not dwelled on it. 'What came out wasn't slowly creeping lava that people could run away from, but ferocious explosions of rock, ash, mud, gases and heat. If the brother did grab valuables and try to escape, as many people desperately did, some accident might have befallen him. Dashing off in a direction that looked passable, he could have ended up in a village where he wasn't personally known. When his lungs or heart gave out, after he'd breathed in poisonous air and dust, no one sent word to his family. But there was anarchy on the roads. He may never have reached safety. All the social rules broke down. This man could have been set upon for his "crack transport", then he was killed and dumped – one more anonymous victim beside those crowded escape routes.'

Tiberius smiled and commented, 'If you come with us, that will be something for you to investigate, Albia!'

We had already agreed that I was going with them. I cooed back, like a doe-eyed housewife, 'Thank you, darling!'

I made it sound as if I had absolutely no interest, but he knew me: I was already wondering.

Chapter 2

The cut-price villa was at Stabiae, on the southern side of the Bay of Neapolis. We had been told it stood high on the cliffs above the town and port below. Such a grand position must have made a stupendous observation point when Mount Vesuvius exploded – although rather too close for comfort if you were trying to stay alive.

Stabiae and its residents had survived the first day, but as the eruption increased in violence, people either upped and fled in a hurry or they were trapped in deadly fumes. The killing waves of heat and gas that wiped out the famous towns of Pompeii and Herculaneum did reach as far as Stabiae, although with less force. Where Tullius had bought, at the eastern end, many huge, fabulous villas had been built in a tight-packed ribbon along the heights; some became smothered in volcanic debris as high as first storey ceiling level. Tiberius reckoned from advance research it could be fifty feet or so deep. Even so, Tullius had been assured that many along the Surrentum Peninsula were not buried as deeply as farms and towns closer to the volcano. Creeping back home after three days of terror, people could still see through the silence and darkness where the little town of Stabiae had been.

Elsewhere it was different. That's famous. I had gone to Campania afterwards with my father, pointlessly searching for relatives. It had a profound effect on me, which I would have to address once I was ready. Falco had known the area so he could hardly believe what we found. Herculaneum was so deeply buried it was gone for ever. At Pompeii only the very tops of the tallest buildings showed above maybe seventy feet of tephra. Occasional roof fixings hinted at monuments below, or we could sometimes decide the position of streets because lines of excavated holes showed where returning householders or thieves had already tunnelled in. A lot of property

was being retrieved. Opportunists were everywhere – they must have begun scavenging while the infill was still warm. But the famous town had died. Thousands had perished. Falco and I never found the people we were looking for.

As ever, the rich had managed compensation for their grief. Like many well-off Romans, Uncle Tullius had previously owned holiday homes on the bay. Like others, he was now thinking that after ten years things ought to be improving, so that playground for the wealthy ought to become available again. Plutocrats don't accept losses easily, not even when they have to blame the gods.

In the immediate aftermath, Tullius sold his house at Neapolis to an imperial commissioner; he did so as soon as he heard how the government was providing funds to rehome refugees, and he made a packet, naturally. He had also owned a villa near the harbour at Herculaneum, but he lost that. Herculaneum's port was first smashed up by waves, then the town above was engulfed by enormous torrents of boiling mud and rock. The shape of the bay altered. Soon, nobody would even remember where Herculaneum had been.

Tullius had had to accept that his elegant holiday home, with its sunlit balcony and sweet sea breezes, must be permanently written off. He had loved that villa, or so it was said ('love' was never a word I associated with Uncle Tullius). Eventually he jumped at his accountant's suggestion that buying a new place would be good tax management. Stabiae was being recommissioned as a larger port now Pompeii had gone. Sailors could no longer land at the old Marine Gate and walk up into a racy town under the protection of the goddess Venus. Stabiae had once been smaller and staid: this minor beach and spa town was the coming place. Taking on a semi-derelict property there would make Tullius Icilius a social benefactor, giving support to the devastated community.

People did not usually see him as sentimental. Any thought of him as a benevolent old buffer would soon disperse if you met him. However, among