

Old Bones Chapter One

The big black bugger at the head of the line was smart, which was probably why he'd landed the job in the first place. He didn't give up, either, even with a breadcrumb three times his size and twice the size of the hole he was trying to push it down. As I watched he pulled it clear and chewed at it one more time. Then, lifting it off the ground, he set his back legs against a loose stone chipping, twisted his body and shoved.

The breadcrumb shot through, smooth as cream, to be grabbed by his pals down below and hustled off to wherever the hell they were stashing the stuff. You could almost hear the cheers.

I tore up a bit more of the bread and watched the little guys behind him pounce on the falling crumbs. Scale's an amazing thing. To an ant, one lunchtime roll's as much bread as you could make from the contents of an Ostian grain barge. Squirrelled away at the rate these bastards had been going it'd last them to the Winter Festival, easy.

'Hey, Perilla,' I said.

The lady looked up from her book. The early afternoon sun, shining through a gap in the trellised vine, caught on her hair. She'd had Phryne fix it up in a simpler style than she usually wore it back home in Athens: when you're on holiday out in the sticks with no one to dress up for sartorial elegance tends to go by the board. Comatic elegance. Whatever. If you could call this a holiday. Personally I thought we'd been suckered into two months' worth of thumb-twiddling, but then that's Mother for you.

'Yes, Marcus?' Tetchy; tetchy as hell: she must've hit one of the juicy bits.

'You think ants throw parties?' I could hear her teeth grate. Well, maybe it did need a context to make it halfway sensible. 'I mean, breadcrumbs only keep underground for so long. It'd save a lot of waste, especially if the different nests worked out a rota.'

'Marcus, why don't you go out for a walk if you're bored?'

'Who said I was bored?'

'It's a logical assumption. People who live full and active lives don't spend their afternoons throwing bread to the ants.'

'Is that so, now?' I brushed a few more days supply of formic corn dole from my tunic and reached for the wine jug.

'That is so.' She set the book down altogether. 'Nor do they spend them getting stewed on the terrace.'

Uh-oh. 'Don't knock it, lady. It has its points.' I poured. Yeah, well, the quality of the wine was one plus at least to set against Mother's dragging us all the way from Greece: Caeretan might not have the name of its big brothers to the south, but drunk

on its home ground it was still pretty good stuff. 'And personally I can think of worse things to do.'

'Indeed?' She picked up the book again and unrolled it. I sneaked a look at the title. Scratch the juicy bits: it was Aulus Caecina's Etruscan History, solid stuff, and par for the course. Perilla's your original conscientious tourist: if it moves she'll read it into submission. Jupiter knew where she'd got Caecina from, mind, because Gnaeus Lentulus whose villa we were currently borrowing was no highbrow; when we'd been at school together the kids had nicknamed him Flatworm, and the name still fitted. A library the guy had - no self-respecting country villa is completely bookless - but Perilla had taken one look at it and quietly closed the cabinet. I had a glance myself, later, and I wasn't surprised: most of the books were the sort of illustrated instruction manuals that eat through their rollers and leave scorch marks on the shelves.

I took an appreciative mouthful of the wine. I hadn't been kidding: there were far worse ways to spend an afternoon when you're stuck out in the country than sitting in the shade of a trellised vine feeding the ants and making a hole in Flatworm's twenty-year-old Caeretan. I could've been out tomb-bashing with Priscus for a start...

'If I'd known you'd be at a loose end this early in the holiday we could have gone into Caere with your stepfather to look at the tombs,' Perilla said. 'It's what we're here for, after all.'

I winced and set the cup down. It wouldn't do a blind bit of good, I knew, but it had to be done. For the umpteenth time. A lovely lady, Perilla, a peerless wife and clever as they come, but sometimes her grasp of the eternal verities would disgrace a clam. These born educators are all the same: they just cannot believe however often you tell them that a diet of temples, statues and the like brings normal people out in hives.

'Lady, would you watch my lips for a moment, please?' I said. Caecina dipped; not seriously, but it'd have to do. 'Short of slugging me with a particularly hefty club and tying me behind a brace of bullocks there is absolutely no way that you are going to get me within spitting distance of any tombs. Mother may've used Priscus's annual tomb-bash as a come-on with you but she sure as hell didn't try it with me because she's a smart enough cookie to know her limitations. Now is that clear or should I draw you a picture?'

Perilla sniffed and turned back to her book. At which point the mule joined us.

He came strolling up the terrace steps like he owned the place, chewing on what looked like half the ornamental shrub that Lentulus had planted in an old wine jar by the gate. When he saw us he stopped, grinned and carefully lifted his tail...

'Corydon! No!'

I caught one glimpse of our adopted daughter Marilla's horrified face as she rounded the trellis corner, just as the bugger deposited his load on the gleaming flagstones.

'I'm sorry.' Marilla had grabbed the brute's bridle and was hanging on with all the proprietorial tenacity of the fourteen-year-old animal lover. 'He got away from me as we were coming up the drive.'

'Uh...yeah.' Jupiter! Our major-domo Bathyllus would have a fit! In the two days we'd been here even the sparrows had learned that crapping on the little guy's preserve was a short cut to suicide. 'Where did you pick that thing up from, Princess? If it's not a stupid question?'

'He was wandering about at the foot of our road.' Marilla was stroking the mule's nose while the brute went on grinning like a drain. Accident, nothing: from the satisfied look in the moth-eaten bastard's eye I'd bet he'd been holding himself in for days, just waiting his chance. 'I think he must've slipped his tether.'

I glanced at Perilla. The lady was stiff as hell, but the tips of her ears were pink. A good sign. Maybe the mule would live after all. Certainly having the Princess on his side didn't do any harm.

"Corydon"?' I said.

Marilla blushed. 'Well, I had to call him something.'

'Marilla, you are not keeping him.' Perilla rolled Aulus Caecina up with a snap and laid him on the table beside her. 'Not even temporarily. He was probably on his way home. Take him straight to Alexis. He can find the owner for you.'

Yeah. I'd go for that. Alexis was the smartest of our skivvies, and unlike Bathyllus he didn't regard animals as some sort of divine scourge sent to mess up his nice clean universe. The Princess was right about the tether, too. Although it was the proper length the end looked ragged. Either it had slipped or - more likely - the evil bastard had pulled the knot out specially just so he could come up and shit all over our terrace.

Marilla was looking at me with those big brown eyes of hers. I sighed. Well, it had to be done. And mules, even this fugitive from a glue factory, were expensive animals.

'Perilla's right, Princess,' I said. 'Take him round to Alexis.'

'But -'

'Go ahead. And the next time you find a stray elephant drinking from the birdbath I swear I'll let you keep it.'

She turned and went moping off round the edge of the villa towards the kitchen garden where Alexis would be potting up sprouts or whatever the hell keen gardeners like him did in their spare time. The mule followed her, stopping to tear down a large chunk of trellising on the way. Probably storing up fresh ammunition.

I let her get out of earshot before I turned back to Perilla.

'Okay, lady,' I said. 'You can let your hair down now.'

Perilla smiled. 'Was it that obvious?'

'Only to me.'

'It really wasn't funny.' She glanced at the pile of dung steaming away next to the pristine whitewashed wall and started to giggle. 'Bathyllus will be furious.'

'We can tell him Mother's tame doctor recommended it as a cure for baldness.'

The giggle changed to a laugh, and I got up and kissed her; which was exactly when Bathyllus himself softshoed out looking serious as hell.

'Excuse me for interrupting, sir,' he said quietly. He hadn't even glanced at Corydon's offering, and that was odd, too, if you like: selective astigmatism may be one of the little guy's cultivated virtues, but selectively purblind he isn't, and he'd practically stepped in the stuff. We hadn't got the disapproving stare we're usually treated to when he catches us breaching his personal code of ethics, either.

Weird. Definitely weird.

Oh, hi, Bathyllus.' I straightened while Perilla adjusted her mantle and put on her stiff Roman matron pose. 'Just the man. We, ah, seem to have had a bit of an accident here.' I didn't look at Perilla, but I heard the lady grunt. 'You want to bring a brush and dustpan, maybe?'

He fizzed for a while like Bathyllus never does. 'Yes, sir,' he said. 'Certainly. In a moment.'

Still the perfect butler. Jupiter! There was something badly wrong here. I'd expected the biggest blow-out since Etna last erupted and I hadn't got even a sniff. So far as Bathyllus could ever look six yards out of the game the little guy was doing just that. I stopped grinning. Whatever this was, it was no joke.

'Hey, sunshine,' I said. 'You okay?'

'Yes, sir.' He cleared his throat. 'We've had a message from Licinius Nepos. Your stepfather has just committed a murder.'

I stared at him, my lower jaw scraping the terrace.

'He has what?'

Shit.