



SCROLL I

Flavia Gemina solved her first mystery on the Ides of June in the tenth year of the Emperor Vespasian.

She had always had a knack for finding things her father misplaced: his best toga, his quill pen, and once even his ceremonial dagger. But this time there had been a real crime, with a real culprit.

It was a hot, still afternoon, for the sea breeze had not yet risen. Flavia had just settled herself in the garden by the fountain, with a cup of peach juice and her favourite scroll.

'Flavia? Flavia!' Her father's voice came from the study. Flavia took a sip of juice and quickly scanned the scroll to find her place. She would just read one or two lines. After all, the study was so close, just the other side of the fig tree. Her house – like many others in the Roman port of Ostia – had a secret garden at its centre, invisible to anyone on the street. From that inner garden it was only a few steps to the dining room, the kitchen, the store-room, a small latrine, and the study.

'Flavia!'

She knew that tone of voice.

'Coming, pater!' she called. Hastily, she set down her cup on the marble bench and placed a pebble on the open scroll to mark her place.

In the study, her father was desperately searching through various scrolls and sheets of parchment on the cedarwood table. Although Marcus Flavius Geminus was extremely competent aboard his own ship, on land he was hopelessly absent-minded.

'Oh pater!' Flavia tried to keep the impatience out of her voice. 'What have you lost now?'

'It isn't lost! It's been stolen!'

'What? What's been stolen?'

'My seal! My amethyst signet-ring! The one your mother gave me!'

'Oh!' She winced. Her mother had died in childbirth several years previously, and they both still missed her desperately.

Flavia touched her father's arm reassuringly. 'Don't worry, pater. I always find things, don't I?'

'Yes. Yes, you do . . .' He smiled down at her, but Flavia could see he was upset.

'Where did you last see it?' she asked.

'Right here on my desk. I was just letting these documents dry before I sealed them.'

Flavia's father planned to sail for Corinth at the end of the week. As a ship owner and captain, it was his responsibility to make sure the paperwork was ready.

'I left the study for just a moment to use the

latrine,' he explained. 'When I returned, the ring was gone. Look: the documents are here. The wax is here. The candle is here, still lit. But my ring is gone!'

'It wasn't the wind, there's no hint of a breeze,' Flavia mused, gazing out at the fig tree. 'The slaves are napping in their rooms. Scuto is sleeping under the jasmine bush: he didn't even bark. Yes, it's a mystery.'

'It's one of the few things of hers I have left,' murmured her father. 'And apart from that, I need it to seal these documents.' He ran a hand distractedly through his hair.

Flavia had an idea: 'Pater, do you have another seal?'

'Yes, but I rarely use it. My suppliers might not recognise it . . .'

'But it has Castor and Pollux engraved on it, doesn't it?'

Her father nodded. Castor and Pollux, the mythological twins known as the Gemini, had always been linked to the Geminus family.

'Well then, everyone will know it's yours. Why don't you use that ring to finish sealing the documents, and I'll try to find the stolen one.'

Captain Geminus's face relaxed and he looked at his daughter fondly.

'Thank you, my little owl.' He kissed the top of her head. 'What would I do without you?'

As her father went upstairs to search the chest in his bedroom, Flavia looked around. The study was a small, bright room with red and yellow plaster walls and a cool, marble floor. It was simply furnished with a cedarwood chair, the table which served as a desk, and a bronze standing-lamp. There was also a bust of the Emperor Vespasian on a pink marble column beside the desk.

The study had two doors. One small folding door led into the atrium at the front of the house. On the opposite wall a wide doorway opened directly out onto the inner garden. This could be closed off with a heavy curtain.

Now this curtain was pulled right back, and sunlight from the garden fell directly onto the desk, lighting up the sheets of parchment so that they seemed to glow. A little inkpot blazed silver in the sunshine. It was fixed onto the desk so that it would not go missing. For the same reason, the silver quill pen was attached to the desk by a silver chain. Flavia rolled the chain absently between her thumb and forefinger and observed how it flashed in the direct sunlight.

Suddenly her keen grey eyes noticed something. On one of the sheets of parchment – a list of ships' provisions – was a faint black mark that was neither a letter nor a number. Without touching anything, Flavia moved her face closer, until her nose was inches from the sheet.

No doubt about it. Someone – or something – had touched the ink while it was still tacky and had made this strange V-shaped mark. As she looked closer, Flavia could make out a straight line between the two leaning lines of the V, like the Greek letter psi: Ψ

At that moment, something rustled and flapped in the garden. Flavia glanced up and saw a large black and white bird sitting on a branch of the fig tree: a magpie. The bird turned its head and regarded her with one bright, intelligent eye.

In an instant, Flavia knew she was looking at the thief. She knew magpies loved glittering things. The bird had obviously stepped on the parchment before the ink had dried and then left its footprint.

Now she must discover where its nest was.

Flavia thought quickly. She needed bait; something bright and shiny. Without turning her head or making a sudden movement she surveyed the study. There were various scrolls stored on shelves along the walls, but they were parchment or papyrus, and their dangling labels only leather. The wax tablets on the desk were too big for the bird to carry and the little bronze oil-lamp too heavy.

There was only one thing she could think of to tempt the bird. Slowly she reached up to her throat and undid the clasp of a silver chain. Like every freeborn Roman boy or girl, Flavia wore a special amulet around her neck. One day, when she

married, she would dedicate this bulla to the gods of the crossroads.

But for now, the chain it hung on would serve another useful purpose. Slipping the bulla into the coin purse which hung from her belt, she carefully set the chain in a pool of sunlight. It sparkled temptingly.

Slowly, Flavia backed out of the study and squeezed past the folding door into the cool, dim atrium. As soon as she was out of the magpie's sight, she crept along the short corridor which led back to the garden.

Peeping round the corner, she was just in time to see the magpie fly down into the study. Flavia held her breath and prayed her father would not come back and disturb the bird.

A moment later the magpie flew back up onto a branch, the chain dangling from its beak like a glittering worm. It remained there for a moment looking around, then flew away over the red-tiled roof to the south, towards the graveyard.

Flavia ran through the garden and opened the small back door. For an instant she hesitated.

She knew the heavy bolt would fall back into place behind her and she would be locked out. If she went through the doorway she would leave the protection not only of her home, but of Ostia: her house was built into the town wall.

Furthermore, the door led directly into the

necropolis, the 'city of the dead', with its many tombs and graves scattered among the trees, and her father had warned her never to go there.

But she had promised to find his ring: the ring her mother had given him.

Flavia took a deep breath and stepped out. The door shut behind her and she heard the bolt fall. There was no going back now.

She was just in time to glimpse a flutter of glossy black and white as the bird flew to a tall umbrella pine. She ran quickly and quietly, keeping the trunk of a large cypress tree between herself and the feathered thief.

The magpie flew off again and Flavia ran to the pine tree. Peeping out from behind it, she saw nothing; no movement anywhere. Her heart sank.

Then she saw it. In an old oak near a large tomb something flashed. Something flashed black and white. It was the magpie. It had popped up from the trunk of the oak like a cork ball in a pond, and its beak was empty!

For a few minutes the magpie preened itself smugly, no doubt pleased at its afternoon's haul. Presently it hopped onto a higher branch, cocked its head for a moment and flew back towards the north, probably to see if there was any treasure left in her house.

Flavia dodged among the tombs and trees and reached the old oak in no time. The bark was rough

and scratched her hands but its roughness helped her to get a good grip. She went up it with little difficulty.

When she reached the place where the trunk forked into branches, her eyes opened in amazement: a small treasure trove of bright objects glittered there. Her chain lay on top. And there was her father's signet-ring! With a silent prayer of thanks to Castor and Pollux, she slipped the ring and chain into her drawstring coin purse.

Digging deeper, she found three silver bangles and a gold earring. Flavia put these in her purse as well, but decided to leave an assortment of cheap copper chains and earrings; they had gone green with age. With her fingertip she gingerly pushed aside some glittery shards of Alexandrian glass. Beneath them, right at the bottom, lay another earring, which was still bright and yellow. Heavy, too: it was gold. It had three tiny gold chains with a pearl dangling at the end of each, and it was set with a large emerald. Flavia marvelled at its beauty before slipping this earring into her coin purse, too.

Now she must go quickly, before the big magpie returned. She was just about to ease herself down when a noise made her hesitate. It was an odd, panting sound.

She looked nervously at the large tomb a few yards to her right. It was shaped like a small house, with a little arched roof and door. She reckoned it

might hold as many as twenty funeral urns, filled with the ashes of the dead.

But the panting did not come from the tomb. It came from directly below her.

Flavia looked down, and her heart skipped a beat. At the foot of the tree were at least half a dozen wild dogs, all staring hungrily up at her!