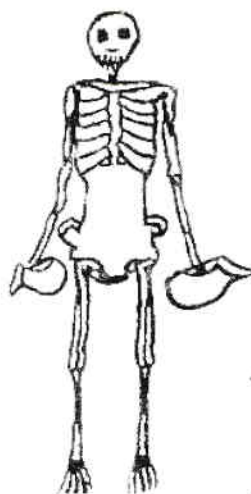


LEBRIS

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SHADOWS IN THE NIGHT

JANE FINNIS



Chapter I

It was a beautiful August dawn, the best sort of summer weather. The only thing that spoilt it was the body.

I didn't notice him at first. I unbolted the front door and strolled out across the forecourt, and up the short track to the main road, enjoying the fresh morning air. The market day traffic was coming down the hill, heading into town. I watched three farmers leading donkeys loaded with baskets of vegetables, then a creaking ox-cart piled with sacks, and two barefoot girls carrying a cage of chickens and driving some goats. The goats scattered as one of our neighbours trotted past in a smart Roman two-wheeled gig, calling out "Morning, Aurelia," and I gave him a wave. A gang of native field-slaves shambled into view, driven uphill by a couple of mounted Roman overseers with whips. One of the natives turned and spat in my direction when the overseers weren't looking. The low sunlight coloured everything gold, even the scruffy slaves.

I could spend all day watching the world go by. Except of course I couldn't, because I had work to do. There's more to being an innkeeper than standing around collecting the customers' money, and getting free samples from the wine-shippers, although those are two of the pleasanter parts of the job. So I turned back to the house, surveying the wide paved area where our customers would park their animals and vehicles later. It was empty now except for the giant oak tree in the middle, and under that, in a pool of deep shadow, was the body.

I'm sorry, I know this isn't the proper way to start an official report to the Governor of the province of Britannia. But I've never done one before. Some people might say I shouldn't be doing one now, it's not woman's work. But my brother has asked me to write down the details of this whole business, so I'll do my best, and you'll just have to tidy it up before it gets to His Excellency's desk.

I should start with the date, I suppose. Right then. It was the tenth year of the reign of Domitian Caesar, on the fourth day of August, the day before the Nones. I know the date for certain, because on the first day of each month we get a delivery of wine from our wholesaler, and this was wine-day plus three. Selling wine to thirsty customers is part of what I do for a living, so that sort of thing sticks in my mind. I'm Aurelia Marcella, the innkeeper of the Oak Tree Mansio, which is about fifteen miles from Eburacum, and just up the road from the small town that we Romans call Oak Bridges. I run the best guest-house and posting-station on the road from the River Humber to the garrison at Eburacum. Well I would say that, wouldn't I?

At first I thought the man was dead, he lay so still. I saw a tall figure huddled up in a travelling cloak, with a huge lump on the back of his head and his fair hair matted with blood. He was a Roman, by the look of him; yes, definitely Roman, and well-dressed, and apparently stone dead right outside my front door. Just what I needed to start the day, and me with a hangover that wouldn't have disgraced the whole ninth legion.

Then I looked more closely, and realised he was still breathing. Just. So perhaps he might be a drunk left over from last night's party. We'd had quite a wild time—well, wild for a remote corner of northern Britannia. Two young military tribunes were staying with us, on a spot of hunting leave from their legion at Eburacum. They'd had a successful couple of days, and were celebrating by buying wine for themselves and beer for the locals as if they'd had a win at the races.

But I didn't recognise the good sheepskin travelling cloak, nor the light riding-boots sticking out beneath it; and when I

gently turned his head to see what he looked like, I didn't know his face. There was blood all over it, from a cut on his cheek, and his whole face was a mass of bruises. I bent over and felt beneath the hair, touching his neck. He was still warm, but not very.

"You need to be inside, my friend," I said. "And I need some muscle to help me get you there."

I listened for the usual morning noises: horses trampling in the stable yard, chickens protesting as someone searched the hen-house for eggs, and, yes, good, the sound of hammering and whistling coming from the workshop near the stables.

"Taurus!" I yelled. Taurus is my handyman. "Come here, will you? Quick!"

Taurus came ambling round the corner. He's a big man and never seems to hurry, but he can move quickly when he wants to.

"Morning, Mistress Aurelia. Something wrong? Oh, Saturn's balls! Is he dead?"

"Not quite. Give me a hand to get him inside, will you?"

He stood staring down at the body for a few heartbeats, then he said, "Somebody didn't like him very much."

"No, really?" Well, Taurus isn't the brightest of my slaves, and there's no law against stating the obvious. "Let's move him indoors. You pick him up gently, I'll steady his head."

He bent and lifted the limp body carefully in his arms, making it look easy, and I held the head steady, feeling the sticky blood on my fingers. We carried him through the front door into the bar-room, which was empty this early in the day, and still full of last night's wine-smells.

"He must've been there all night. There's been a mist, and a heavy dew as well. Not good for a wounded man to be out in the open." Taurus laid the stranger down with great care on one of the benches near the window. I opened the shutters, letting in the light and a draught of cold air.

I tried to remember when the party finished last night. "He wasn't here when the last of the customers went home. I locked up about midnight, I think....I don't recognise him, do you?"

He shook his shaggy head. "No. Nice cloak. Good boots, too. They look like army issue. Rather messed up though."

They certainly were; the uppers were scuffed and muddy. The front of his cloak was slimy too, and his hands were filthy. I opened the cloak out near the hem, and sure enough, his fawn wool leggings were covered in mud and grass. He'd been doing some crawling, whoever he was.

I bent closer for a look. He was around thirty, with fair wavy hair and light eyebrows, and a mouth that looked as if it could have a nice smile. I unfastened his belt and loosened his cloak. His blue wool tunic was well-made and warm, and fastened by another, thinner belt, which had a fancy bronze buckle with a dolphin on it. Carefully I felt him over and moved his arms and legs. Nothing seemed to be broken, but he was cold and pale, and lay like the dead. He'd certainly had a hard knock on the head.

I debated searching him for some sort of identification, but decided to leave it for now, or he would get even colder. First things first.

"Fetch Albia, will you, Taurus. Tell the kitchen girls to bring blankets and put some water on to heat. Then get a brazier in here to warm the place a bit. He's chilled to the bone. We'll clean him up, and see if we can wake him."

He ambled off, and almost at once Albia bustled out through the kitchen door.

Albia is my half-sister, and also my housekeeper at the mansion; I call her my chief of staff, and I freely admit I couldn't run the place without her. People don't believe we are sisters, because we each take after our respective mothers. I know that behind our backs we're known as "the pretty one" and "the tough one." Albia's certainly pretty, small, dark, and slim, with bright brown eyes; she's always cheerful and busy, and she isn't nearly as fragile as she appears. Neither is she as stupid as some men think. I don't know why there's a general assumption that women who are pretty and happy are also dim. Men don't make that assumption about me, but I can't work out whether I should be pleased or

not. I'm tall and big-boned, with fair hair that waves on its own whether I want it to or not, and green eyes like my mother's. And I don't even *look* fragile.

Anyway Albia's a great person to have around in a crisis. We've been through a few of those since we came to the Oak Tree. I didn't know then that we were at the beginning of another.

"Morning, Relia, what's... Holy Diana, who's this?" She knelt down beside the man. "He looks a bit the worse for wear! Where did you find him? I thought we'd chucked them all out."

"We did. I found him outside. I don't know how he got into such a mess, but as Taurus just said, somebody didn't like him very much."

"I've seen him before, I think." She frowned thoughtfully, pushing the hair out of her eyes as she bent closer to look into his face. Albia has a marvellous memory for faces. "I just can't place him, but I'm sure...oh well, it'll come." She stood up. "Robbed, I suppose, and beaten up, and managed to crawl here in the dark. It comes to something when a man can't travel the roads at night....ah, wait though." She stopped. She'd just caught sight of the ring he was wearing on his left hand, a gold one with a large emerald in it.

"No self-respecting robber would have left *that* behind," I agreed. "So either the robbers were interrupted, or it wasn't a robbery at all."

We heard footsteps in the hallway just then, and Junius, one of the young officers from last night's party, poked his head in through the hall door. He looked as fresh as the morning dew, which gave me a twinge of envy.

"Morning, Albia....Aurelia. Any chance of a bite of breakfast? I could murder some bread and cheese and a cup of wine." He stopped, seeing the new arrival on the bench. "I say, who's this? Someone didn't make it home last night?"

"We think he's been attacked," Albia said. "He's got a bump on the head the size of an egg."

"Really? So that was it."

"That was what?" we both asked.

"There was a noise, a couple of hours after we turned in I think. I'd got up to find my water-flask. Bit of a thirst." He grinned. "I've still got a mouth like a sand-pit, actually! Anyhow there was this odd sort of scuffling, dragging sound, and I looked out from my window, but it was pitch dark and I couldn't see anything. I sent my servant across to the stables, to make sure nobody was trying to pinch our horses." He looked at us in turn. "You didn't hear anything?"

Albia shook her head, and I said, "No, I slept like the dead. Your man would have gone out of the door from the guest wing to get to the stable block, not the main front door from the bar-room. So if the noise was this poor fellow being beaten up, or dragging himself here, he wouldn't have found the body. Anyway, as you say, it was pretty dark."

"Oh, I told him to take a torch and patrol round all the buildings, naturally. He reported back that everything was fine."

"Well, he would," Albia chipped in. I gave her a warning look to shut her up. The officers' two servants had had a real skinful last night, and if either of them had stirred himself to patrol efficiently all round our sprawling complex of buildings in the dark, then I'm the Queen of Brigantia. But customers are always right, especially military ones.

Junius just laughed. "Quite right! My man should have seen him. Lazy slob! I'll cut down his wine ration, that'll teach him."

He came over and looked down at the motionless figure. He touched his shoulder and shook him gently, but the man didn't react at all. "Dead to the world, isn't he? I wonder if he's been robbed." I shook my head and pointed to the big emerald.

Junius pulled back the travelling-cloak further than I'd done. "It looks as though his money-belt is still there as well, under his tunic. Wait a bit though, what's this? What do you suppose...." He pointed to a small bone disc, attached by a crude bronze pin to the front of the blue tunic. Just an ordinary looking object, some kind of official medallion or pass perhaps, the sort couriers often wear. But when Junius unpinned it and began to read

it, he caught his breath, and when he turned the disc over, he swore.

“What is it?” I held out my hand and took the little disc.

On one side was a rough drawing of a skull, with the words “Shadow of Death” written below it. On the other were a few crudely scratched Latin words:

ALL ROMANS WILL BE KILLED

GET OUT OR DIE

We stared at it blankly. It might have been in Carthaginian for all the sense it made. It sounds strange now, but at first it didn’t seem frightening, just weird. Of course if I’d known what it meant, if I’d had any idea of the trouble it would bring us....

But how could I? How could any of us?

While Albia and I cleaned the stranger up as best we could, a couple of the maids came in with mops and pails, soon followed by most of the kitchen slaves, who naturally found speculating about an unconscious mystery man more fun than washing beakers or chopping vegetables. None of them recognized him, and nobody, it seemed, had heard any unusual noises in the night. Not surprising, as the slaves’ quarters are set well back from the road, and anyway slaves tend to become deaf to outside noises at night, that being the nearest they can get to privacy.

“He’s quite handsome,” one of the girls remarked.

“The perfect Adonis,” another scoffed. “If you like them with cuts and bruises. And look at that beautiful black eye!”

Actually, he was quite good-looking: fair hair, a broad forehead, eyes wide-set, prominent chin, and good skin, what you could see of it.

“Still,” I commented, “as our grandmother used to say, you can’t judge a scroll by looking at its case.”

“Our grandmother,” Albia smiled, tucking blankets round the still figure, “never read anything in her life except wine-shippers’ lists. If she’d felt the need of a corny proverb, she’d have said, you can’t judge the vintage by looking at the amphora.”

I shoosed the slaves back to work, and Albia went off to get Junius some breakfast. I'd seen them flirting last night, so I wasn't surprised when she said she'd serve him herself. He was attractive in his boyish way—early twenties, sandy curly hair, and nice grey eyes. And Albia never can resist a uniform.

I sat on a stool beside the unconscious man for a little while longer, listening to his shallow breathing, and holding the bone disc in my hand. I kept re-reading its sinister message.

ALL ROMANS WILL BE KILLED GET OUT OR DIE

A threat to Romans, but why? I mean, why now?

All right, newly conquered barbarians take a while to accept Roman rule. Everybody knows that, at least everybody living in a frontier province, though the scholars sitting in Italia writing their grand histories overlook it sometimes. Fifty years ago when our legions began to conquer Britannia, only a few natives showed up with welcome banquets and carpets of rose petals. Most of them fought hard. There were battles and massacres enough, young men killed, old ones dispossessed, women and children sold as slaves. All quite justifiable, of course, but not calculated to make Rome popular. This area of northern Britannia was on the edge of the old kingdom of Brigantia, and cost our troops some bitter fighting, besides dividing the tribal aristocracy into pro- and anti-Roman factions. A generation ago, it's true, but well within living memory, and conquered people's memories are tenacious and detailed.

But Roman civilians have been settling Britannia for thirty years and more. Ex-soldiers—traders—farmers....Our own family's been in the province nearly twelve years. And the natives have gained so much from our being here. That's what we Romans are good at, bringing civilisation to barbarian lands. We make them part of the modern world, the Roman world, giving them towns and decent roads and trade and education. And as they become civilised they become our equals.

Isn't that what they want? Of course it is. It must be.

But.... "Get out or die...."

Taurus came in with the brazier. He saw the expression on my face, and asked, "What is it, Mistress Aurelia?"

I held out the little bone disc with its grisly skull drawing, and read him the message.

He thought for a while, then shook his head slowly. "It can't be meant for us. It says 'get out.' But we belong here. We've got nowhere to go to. This is where our home is. Not Rome. I've never even *been* to Rome."

"Neither have I." I regret that sometimes. Stuck in the wilds here, it feels as if I'll never get there now. Our family home was in Pompeii, and after we lost that, we left Italia. Britannia was the coming province, the place for Romans to make their fortunes, or so my father believed. Father had left the army by then, a successful centurion with a good reputation and a nice little nest-egg. First we lived in an army settlement, and then—no, you don't want the whole long story. The important point is that he got the concession to set up the *mansio* here seven years ago, and Albia and I gradually took over the running of it. It's in our brother Lucius' name of course, but we all knew *he'd* never settle down to being an innkeeper, and though I say it myself, Albia and I have made a pretty good job of it. All the same, I shouldn't like to think I'd never see Italia again.

"I was still a girl when we came to Britannia," I said. "And you were only a lad yourself, Taurus."

"Yes." He gave his slow grin. "Your dad bought me for a page-boy. Only I kept spilling things."

I smiled, remembering a couple of disastrous dinner parties where expensive wine ended up splashed over even more expensive gowns. "You're an outdoor man, no doubt about it. Which is more useful when your home's in a frontier province."

"So we do belong here, then. And this warning must be for new people coming over from Rome now. Don't you think so?" His dark eyes looked anxiously for reassurance.

“Yes, it must.” But I felt a shiver of cold doubt inside me. The message said “All Romans,” and we’re Romans. Me, Albia, Taurus, and the half-dozen others we brought with us from Italia...a handful of Romans, surrounded by countless thousands of native Britons: peasants, craftsmen, traders, and of course our locally bought slaves. We think we’re at home, established and permanent. We’ve made Britannia part of the Empire. But this Shadow of Death, whoever he is, sees things differently and wants us out.

It came to me then, with frightening clarity: supposing other native Britons want us out? Supposing they all do?

Chapter II

I shook myself out of my gloomy pondering and went into the private dining-room where Albia had served bread and cheese and olives, and some reasonable Rhodian to go with it. Junius' friend Marius had surfaced by now, and so had our other three guests, two military contractors and a silver mine expert. The smell of the new bread reminded me I hadn't eaten yet, so I cut a crusty hunk of it, and had a drink—water, not wine, in deference to my hangover, which had started to recede. I began to feel better as I listened to the young tribunes cheerfully planning their day's hunting.

I began planning my own day. I must go outside and check on the stables. The stable-lads were short-handed, but they should cope. All the same, it did no harm to make sure they weren't cutting corners. We're an official *mutatio*, a posting-station where travellers on government business change horses or mules, and our operation has to be clean and efficient. There was the farm work, too; I liked to keep an eye on our farm foreman, who was competent enough, but inclined to be lazy. Then there was a delivery of olive oil due from one of the wholesalers, and his men needed supervising because they seemed to be under permanent instruction to rip us off. And this afternoon, I was expecting a visit from one of the larger fish in our small provincial pond, the Chief of the Oak Bridges Town Council, no less. He was doing his own bit of supervising, presumably, because we

were supplying him with wine for an important dinner. And of course I must make time to see my beautiful black horses, my own special bit of farming enterprise.

But before all that, we'd better move our unconscious visitor to one of the guest-rooms. The first customers would be arriving soon, and it's rather demoralising, if you drop in for a reviving drink, to find yourself sitting next to what looks like a semi-corpse.

I don't suppose you, or anyone reading this report of mine, will ever have visited the Oak Tree, and you're probably picturing something poky and flea-ridden in an unfashionable street of a small provincial town. Well you're wrong. Our town, Oak Bridges, is small and provincial, certainly. I'd call it a village myself, except that the more civilized natives hereabouts have got it officially recognized as a proper town, complete with its own council, and I try not to upset them. Who they had to bribe for that, and what with, you probably know better than I do. Anyway the mansio is a mile or so out of the town, on the main road at the bottom of the Long Hill, which is a stiff climb up to the rolling wold country to the east. Our place is quite big, a farm as well as a mansio. Our main job is to look after officials on the Empire's business, but private guests stay with us from time to time, and we keep open house in the bar-room, where passing travellers, including quite a few natives, drop in for a beaker and a bite to eat.

The bar-room and kitchen and the private dining-room for important guests are in the main block at the front, and there are two wings of rooms sticking out behind, forming three sides of a courtyard. The fourth side is a bathhouse suite, with separate rooms for men and women. Oh yes, we may be in the wilds, but at least we're clean.

The left-hand wing is our private one, mine and Albia's, with windows looking onto a secluded area of garden. The other is for guests. At present there were several spare rooms, so there'd be no problem finding a warm bed for our wounded traveller.

All right, you'll probably cut all that description out on the grounds that the Governor doesn't need a guided tour of the mansio. What I'm trying to make clear is that most of the rooms are connected by corridors and there are several doors to the outside as well. So guests, or anyone, can come and go to the various parts of the house unobserved. Bear that in mind before you start blaming me for not keeping a proper eye on the stranger's room.

Taurus and one of the houseboys carefully carried the man into the cheapest guest room, the one with dull brown walls and without a glazed window. After all, I didn't know who, if anyone, would ever pick up the bill for his stay. As I tucked his blankets round him and Albia opened the shutters, he gave a groan, then a cough, another groan, and opened his eyes. He said, "Burrus! Burrus, are you there?"

Then his gaze seemed to focus properly. He looked at me for a couple of heartbeats, long enough for me to register that his eyes were a very dark blue, almost purple, and that their expression was more surprised than anxious.

"Where am I? Where's Burrus? And who in Hades are you?"

And good morning to you too, sunshine, I thought, but reflected that he was probably feeling pretty foul.

"I'm Aurelia. We're not in Hades though, I'm glad to say."

"Aurelia!" he exclaimed, and lifted his head, which was about all the movement he could manage. "Not....I mean....Aurelia who?"

"Aurelia Marcella. Innkeeper at the Oak Tree Mansio."

"But that's wonderful!" He gazed at me with a sudden dazzling smile, then his eyes closed and his head lolled back. He was unconscious again.

"Gods!" I said. "That's weird."

Albia giggled. "If this was a Greek love story, I'd say the sight of you has just driven him mad with love."

"Be careful," I warned. "It could end up as a Greek tragedy, where the long-suffering heroine beats her sister within an inch of her life for talking rubbish."