

## ROME, ITALY

2<sup>ND</sup> FEBRUARY, 2006 AD

All things considered, the Temple of Julius Caesar – or at least, what was left of it – was a decided disappointment.

Max had wondered why he couldn't remember seeing the building before. Surely, over the course of six years working for *Sights* magazine, he must have visited and photographed every moldy old ruin in Rome – but there was barely enough of Caesar's temple to even qualify as a ruin. All that remained were a few big chunks of crumbling brown brick foundation. No steps, no graceful columns, and certainly nothing resembling the cute miniature Parthenon on the postcards for sale at the side of the lot. Any ghosts unfortunate enough to haunt *this* place probably kept their spectral heads down for fear of being laughed at.

"Not quite what you were expecting?" asked Lucy.

"I was thinking of something a bit more picturesque," Max admitted. He raised his camera, but then changed his mind. Not even his nephews, who were endlessly fascinated by the pictures Uncle Max brought home from strange and foreign places, would be interested in these rocks. The idea of presenting them to the editors was ludicrous. "Thanks anyway."

"No problem," said Lucy. "I was surprised you needed to ask where it was. I thought you knew your way around pretty well by now."

"So did I," Max said. He tucked his camera safely back away in its case, and slung it over his shoulder. "Apparently I only know the pretty parts."

She smiled. "Well, it's nice to know you'll be sticking around a while," she said, as they turned away from the ruin. "Why don't you come on back to the cafe, and we can take some proper time to catch up?"

"I don't know," said Max, rubbing his chin in pretended uncertainty. "The editors don't like me sipping coffee with beautiful European women on their time and money."

Lucy, who was almost old enough to be Max' mother, laughed. "We'll walk," she said. "And on the way you can tell me *why* you were looking for the Temple of Caesar."

Max grinned, too. He and Lucy made unlikely friends. Plump, graying Lucia Fabrizio looked very much like somebody's Italian granny; Max liked to joke that he expected any conversation with her to be punctuated by asides extolling the virtues of canned spaghetti sauce. Max himself, on the other hand, with his shaggy blond hair and well-worn flannel shirt, was hard to mistake for anything other than a standard-issue American geek. Anyone making such assumptions, however, would have been wrong on both counts; Lucy and Max were both Canadians, having been born in Vancouver. She had used to baby-sit for him and his sister. Twenty-five years later and half a planet away, she now served Max as a tranquil island of sanity in a city otherwise full of two of his two least favourite types of people: tourists and Italians.

"Well, then?" asked Lucy.

"Well, *what*?" asked Max.

"Temple of Caesar," she prompted, as they left the ruins of the Forum and turned northeast onto the Via Cavour. "I doubt it was intellectual curiosity, and I can't imagine your magazine wanting pictures of it. What were you looking for?"

"You're going to laugh," Max told her. *He* certainly had when his bosses had given him the assignment.

"I can always use a laugh," she said.

"Okay, but I did warn you: I was looking for the ghost."

To his surprise, she frowned. "What ghost?"

"The ghost," Max repeated. "You've never heard about it?" He would have figured that she, as somebody who lived here full time rather than coming and going at the whims of a bunch of editors, would know about such things. "The ruins are supposed to be haunted. There's some guy who shambles around in the middle of the night with his clothes on fire. I *told* you you'd laugh," he added, as she started to giggle.

“Where in the world did you hear that?” Lucy wanted to know.

“Some website,” said Max. “I Googled for hauntings in Rome, and turned up stuff on mysterious balls of light in the Pantheon, a ghostly nun in Santa Maria del Popolo, all *kinds* of nonsense in the Catacombs,” he ticked off each item on his fingers as he spoke, “and a man on fire in the Temple of Julius Caesar.”

“Well, it *must* be true if you read it on the Internet!” Lucy said. “Why does the magazine have you looking for ghosts?”

“They’re doing a special on haunted places in Italy for the October issue,” Max explained. “The editors figured I was in the neighbourhood, so I could hang around a couple of weeks and it would spare them having to look for somebody who actually knows anything about ghosts.”

“It’s February,” said Lucy. “They really have you work that far ahead?”

“I’d rather be in Rome in February than in the middle of summer,” said Max. “When it gets too hot, the tourists start to stink.”

“No,” Lucy smiled, “it’s just that in the heat you notice it more.”

Lucy owned and ran a small coffee shop in an old, cramped part of town, a few blocks north of the Colosseum. With the spectacular ruins so close, a lot of her clientèle was made up of tourists who stopped in hoping for ‘local colour’ - only to throw fits when they learned that what the Italians called a ‘macchiato’ was not at all like the Starbucks version. Tuesdays in February, however, were not heavy tourism days. There were only three people in the cafe when they arrived, and one was Lucy’s nephew, Pietro, absorbed in trying to fix one of the espresso machines.

“Cup of coffee?” Lucy asked.

“Thanks,” said Max. “I’m going to need it.” He took off his backpack and sat down heavily in one of the rickety metal chairs. Lucy’s cafe was in rather bad need of remodeling, although she was reluctant to do anything about it because she claimed its shabbiness gave it character. She had, however, covered up the yellowed old wallpaper as best she could with a lot of travel posters, several of them from Max’s own photographs. “You’d think there’d be ghosts in the Colosseum, wouldn’t you?” he asked, looking up at a picture of that unmistakable landmark. “They fed enough people to the lions there.”

“Maybe people eaten by lions don’t become ghosts,” Lucy suggested. She poured two cups of coffee and set them on the table, then sat down opposite from him. “So tell me something, Max... why *are* you still working for that magazine?”

Max shrugged. “It’s work,” he said – but he couldn’t blame Lucy for rolling her eyes. He’d been thinking about finding something else for ages, but somehow thinking never quite got translated into action. “It pays, and I’m pretty good at it.” He changed the subject. “Do you know of any other hauntings around here? You don’t have to have seen them yourself or anything,” he assured her. “I think the magazine would prefer ghosts that aren’t *really* going to pop up and scare anyone.”

“What, exactly, are you looking for?” Lucy wanted to know. “Something a little more photogenic than the Temple of Caesar, obviously.”

“Yeah,” Max agreed. He sipped his coffee – that was one thing Italians could do, at least; they made good coffee. “But I didn’t really want to use something as famous as the Pantheon. The Catacombs are nice and spooky, but I don’t want to encourage people to go poking around in somebody’s *tomb*. I was hoping for something a little more unconventional, but I’ll probably have to make it up.” This wasn’t an uncommon approach to travel writing... the Loch Ness Monster, for example, had been entirely invented by a Scottish hotel owner. But Max’s conscience preferred to exhaust the other options first.

“Yes, probably,” Lucy agreed. “I’m afraid the only haunting I can remember actually hearing about is our sewer ghost.”

Max’s mouth was full of coffee when he realized what she’d just said, and it was an effort to keep the drink from going up his nose. “What?” he asked, swallowing quickly. “You’re kidding, right? You’ve just got noisy pipes or something.”

“Nope.” Lucy smiled. “We’ve got a haunted sewer. It’s a couple of blocks north of here.”

She waved vaguely in that direction. “I can show you, if you want. The story I heard was that an emperor’s sister or somebody was murdered and her body was thrown into the sewer, and you can still hear her screaming.”

“Ha!” Max snorted. “If I’d spent a thousand years haunting a sewer, I’d be screaming, too. But I don’t think a sewer is *quite* what the editors are looking for.”

“No, I figured not,” Lucy agreed. “Best I could do offhand, though. I do know somebody you might want to talk to, though.” She held up an index finger. “His name is Hector Waldemar. He’s a retired historian, sort of obsessed with ghosts.”

“By ‘sort of’, you mean...?” Max raised a questioning eyebrow.

“Utterly daft,” Lucy said cheerfully. “Get him started and he’ll go on for hours about ectoplasm and psychic echoes and other things I can’t spell. He’s written books about it.”

“Thank you,” said Max, “*no*.”

“All right,” said Lucy. “Now that’s enough about work – what else have you been up to?”

“Besides work?” Max snorted. “The usual.”

“Absolutely nothing,” Lucy guessed. “Well, tell me about it anyway.”

“Stop by again before you leave,” Lucy said an hour later, as Max waved goodbye to her. “I’d like to know what you find out. I’ve always wanted to see a ghost.”

“If I see one, I’ll tell it to pay you a visit,” Max promised.

“And when you come back,” she added, “you can help me strip the paint in the back room. I’m finally trying to do something with this place!”

“Ah, I knew there was a trick!” said Max. “I’ll see you soon, then.”

“*Ciao*,” said Lucy.

Max swung his backpack onto his shoulders and shrugged to get it in place as he stepped onto the street. “Well,” he said out loud to nobody as he unfolded a map of the city, “let’s find some ghosts.”

He needed two or three haunted spots and stories to go with them, and the sooner he found them, the sooner he’d be able to leave. None of the places on the Google list seemed particularly promising – they were too famous, or too cliché, or too generally un-tourist-ish. After looking at the map for a minute, Max decided to forget all of them and start, more or less on a whim, with the Mausoleum of Augustus. He seemed to recall that some suitably ominous bits of that were still standing, and if he couldn’t find any *real* ghosts that sounded likely to please the editors, a mausoleum was a good basis for making one up.

The Mausoleum, however, was also a long way from the Suburra district where Lucy’s coffee shop was located. Not trusting to Rome’s atrocious public transit system, Max hailed a taxi. Several passed him by before one finally stopped, and then the driver cracked the door open and greeted him with a loud, “*no parlo Inglese!*”

“*Non c’è problema*,” Max replied. “*Mausoleo di Augusto, per favore.*”

The driver looked sour, but waved Max inside. Max didn’t complain; as far as he’d ever been able to tell, there wasn’t a single taxi driver in Rome who liked foreigners. And that was quite all right with him, because he didn’t like Rome, either.

He wasn’t entirely sure when he’d realized that he hated the place. There hadn’t exactly been any particular epiphany moment. The first time Max had come here, way back on the very first assignment *Sights* magazine had ever given him, he’d been thrilled. But sometime between then and now it had slowly dawned on him that Rome was old, cramped, dirty, and self-important, and once he’d realized he hated Rome, the feeling had gradually expanded to encompass all of Europe.

Rome remained the worst offender, though. It was one of those famous cities, like London or Paris, which had once been honestly beautiful and important but was now just bloated and old, lumbering on through the ages out of a sort of historical inertia. Rome had been the centre of the world once, but now it was only important because it was famous, and only famous because it was important.

And because the city was famous and important, it was full of tourists.

Max suspected he would have liked Europe a lot better if it hadn't been for the tourists. It probably wasn't fair of him to hate tourists when his livelihood depended on them, but there was something repugnant about anyone arrogant enough to consider somebody else's home, history, and way of life to be things to stand around and gawk at. The average tourist seemed to think that the world outside his or her hometown was a sort of big, fancy museum. He or she therefore wandered through it at will, tossing garbage on the ground and treating the locals like tour guides who would magically understand English if their visitors just spoke loudly and slowly enough.

And just to bring things full circle: because Rome was full of tourists, James Maxwell Tully kept ending up back there. Max didn't doubt that the tourists and the Italians both hated him right back, and he couldn't blame them if they did. Lucy was right – why *did* he do this anymore? He'd enjoyed it once, and part of him still clung to the fact that, if nothing else, his job *did* allow him to go places and meet people. But the places sucked, and the people were jerks. Why the hell was he still here?

Little as he liked to admit it, Max was pretty sure that the answer was because he was simply too lazy to look for anything else. Decisiveness had never been one of his virtues. He'd find better work when circumstances forced him to, and not a minute before.

Max was also reasonably certain that the route the taxi driver took from Lucy's cafe to the Mausoleum was *not* the most direct one, but he kept his mouth shut and paid the fare. He didn't say 'thank you' because he knew the driver wouldn't reply with 'you're welcome', and after making sure he still had all his stuff, he climbed out of the cab and took a look at the tomb of Rome's first emperor.

His memory had served him pretty well; the Mausoleum was indeed both well-preserved and promisingly spooky. Thanks mostly to Mussolini's legendary ego, it even still had a nice little green park around it. The actual building, which was supposed to have been a circular temple capped with a huge bronze statue of its incumbent, was of course long gone, but the artificial hill it had sat on was still there, ringed with crumbling, mossy stone walls. Set into the side of the mound was a dark arched doorway that would have been right at home in a horror movie, and a cold breeze and interestingly overcast sky not only set the mood but was keeping most of the sightseers indoors. Definitely a good start.

Max set up his camera and got a couple of long shots, then moved closer, trying to find the perfect angle for a picture of the doorway. The few tourists who had decided to brave the weather mostly ignored him, and he ignored them back. Their presence here didn't bother him as much as it would have in, say, the catacombs. The latter were a private place, where only the dead were supposed to be, but if Augustus hadn't wanted people coming and staring at his family's tomb, he wouldn't have built it three storeys tall. The old emperor would probably have been proud of its status as a tourist attraction.

He'd have been less proud, however, of some of the things the tourists did once they got there. Throwing pop cans on the ground, for one thing; the garden around the tomb was littered with garbage. And his Imperial Highness would certainly not have approved of the graffiti. There were guards and guides hanging around who were probably supposed to stop visitors from writing their names on the walls, but they'd evidently failed. From where he was standing, Max could see six felt-marker signatures, plus the words *George and Laurie, our Honeymoon, 2005* written on one side of the doorway arch.

And under *those*, he realized as he came closer, were even *older* inscriptions, cut directly into the stone by people who'd done their traveling before the invention of the Sharpie. Max picked some moss out of a line of letters just below George and Laurie, trying to see what it said:

CN·TVL·HOC·SCRIPSIT

"Sir!" a voice said urgently. "Please – do not touch the walls!"

"Sorry!" Max straightened up and smiled apologetically at the tour guide. It was a kid no

more than about twenty, probably working to pay for his education. “I... uh... well, I realize you’re not a scholar, but do you know what this says?” he pointed to the little engraving.

“That?” The kid bent in to take a look.

“I know it’s about writing something,” Max offered. He actually remembered a surprising amount of Latin for somebody who hadn’t actively studied the language since high school. Sister Hazel had tried to help her students memorize the grammar by having them sing it to nursery songs, with the result that Max still found himself declining nouns every time he heard *Old MacDonald*. *Scipsit* was some form of ‘to write’, and *hoc* was what linguists called the ‘proximal demonstrative’, but *cn tul* was an abbreviation he didn’t recognize.

“Oh, *that*,” said the kid. “It says *Gnaeus Tullius wrote this*.”

Max stared, then laughed. “Does it really?”

“Yes, sir,” said the guide, proud of his knowledge. “Historians believe it was once part of a longer inscription describing...”

“Yeah, thanks,” said Max, who didn’t care to hear the rest. He shook his head. Anybody familiar with human nature didn’t need an historian to tell them why Gnaeus Tullius had decided to write his name on the wall. Human nature never changed, did it? Not even over thousands of years.

“Hey, wait,” he said, realizing the kid was walking away. “I’ve got another question. You don’t happen to know any local ghost stories, do you?”

By sunset, Max had a few more possible hauntings. There was supposed to be a ghostly Cardinal who walked through one of the libraries in the Vatican every day at three o’clock, although the man who described it had been unable to answer when Max asked whether the spectre observed Daylight Savings Time. Somebody else talked about the balls of light that appeared in the Pantheon during thunderstorms, following this with a lengthy and incomprehensible explanation about how it was caused by the quartz in the stone. And to Max’s surprise, two more people mentioned Lucy’s sewer ghost.

A couple of the stories sounded worth looking into, but by the time another taxi dropped Max off at his hotel, the wind had become cold and sharp, and the air smelled like rain. That was probably enough for today. He had dinner and took a shower, then decided to stop in at Lucy’s cafe again. She’d be interested in the haunting stories and pleased to know that her sewer ghost was so famous, and maybe one of her customers would be able to offer him something.

He pushed through the hotel’s revolving doors, and found that the wind had died down again. The atmosphere was still thick and the sky overhead was heavy with clouds, but it appeared to be clearing – in the west, the overcast ended abruptly above a brilliant orange sunset. Except for the relatively quick trip to the Temple of Caesar and back in the morning, Max had taken cars almost everywhere he’d gone that day. It was time, he decided, for some exercise. He made sure he had film and his notebook, and set out on foot.

That was his first mistake. Halfway there, he heard a far-off rumble of thunder and felt a drop land on the back of his hand. Max turned up his collar and started walking faster, but it was too late. Rain started falling, and then fell harder. Ten minutes later, it was *pouring*, and all Max could do was pull his jacket up over his head and run.

That was the second mistake. Max was a good thirty pounds overweight and not in the habit of running anywhere. Soon he was panting, and after only a couple of blocks he had to stop. He bent over, resting his weight on his knees as he tried to catch his breath and swallow the bitter taste in the back of his throat.

And then, he heard the screaming.

Max stood up sharply... and the sound stopped. He blinked and looked around, listening, but there was nothing to hear except for rain on the pavement and distant traffic. Had he only imagined it? He wiped wet hair out of his eyes and took a step forwards.

As soon as he put his foot down, he heard it again. It sounded as if it were coming from far away, echoing down a long tunnel. Max’s skin prickled as he listened to it. It was a woman, in tears,

pleading.

“Hello!” Max called out. “Where are you? Miss!”

The screaming continued as if the woman hadn’t heard him. Where *was* she? The sound seemed to be coming from everywhere at once. Max turned around, and it suddenly ceased again, as if somebody had flipped a switch and shut it off.

Max shook his head hard. Was he hearing things? He tried stepping back into the spot where he’d been standing when he first heard it – a manhole cover in the middle of a dim, ill-maintained back street – and shut his eyes to listen.

There it was. He couldn’t make out the words. In fact, he couldn’t even tell what language the woman was speaking, but her voice was definitely real.

He stepped off the manhole cover, and it vanished again.

He stepped back on and off again a few times, just to make sure, then got down on hands and knees on the wet street and lifted the manhole cover. There was nothing terribly interesting under it, just a yawning black hole that smelled about like a sewer ought to.

“Hello!” Max called into the darkness. His voice echoed back to him – and under it, still very faint, he could still hear the distressed woman sobbing.

Even excited by his discovery, Max couldn’t possibly run all the way to Lucy’s. But he made the trip at a very fast walk, and burst through the door to nearly knock over a customer who’d been on his way out. “Sorry!” Max said, and pushed past the surprised man into the cafe. “Lucy!” he called out. “Are you here?” She wasn’t in evidence, but Pietro was still there, putting the espresso maker back together. “Pete! Where’s your aunt?”

“She’s in the…” Pietro began, then amended the statement to, “there she is!” as Lucy stepped out of the back room.

“Right here,” she said, and stopped in surprise when she saw Max. “Goodness, you’re soaked! Cup of coffee?” She offered her panacea.

“No, thanks.” Max shook his head. “Lucy, you’ve got to come listen to this. I found your sewer ghost!”

“What?” asked Lucy.

“The sewer ghost!” Max repeated earnestly. “The one you were telling me about!”

“You *saw* it?” Lucy looked as if she thought he’d gone mad.

“No, I *heard* it!” said Max. “That’s what you told me, isn’t it? That people hear this woman screaming? You can only hear her if you stand *right* on the manhole. Come on!” He motioned for her to follow him. “Hurry, I don’t know if it’ll still be there when we get back!”

Lucy hesitated, then handed the pile of plates she was carrying to Pietro and wiped her hands on her jeans. “Let me get my umbrella,” she said.

Max led her back to the place where he’d heard the voice, then told her to wait while he went and stepped on the manhole cover again. For a moment, he heard nothing, and he felt his heart sink. What if this ghost, like the Vatican’s punctual Cardinal, only appeared at certain times of day? He shuffled his feet. Maybe there was one particular spot he had to touch.

“What are you doing?” asked Lucy.

“Ssh,” Max told her. “I’m listening.” He shut his eyes... and ah, *there* it was! “Here,” he motioned to Lucy. “Come here and listen.”

She stepped onto the manhole cover, and he helped her find the exact same spot where he’d been standing. “Right there,” he said. “Do you hear it?”

Lucy listened for a moment, frowning, and then shook her head. “No.”

“Back up a bit,” said Max. He held her shoulders and made her step back and turn a bit to the left. Was hearing ghosts anything like television reception? Did you have to be in *exactly* the same spot? “There?”

“Not a thing,” Lucy said.

“Move over.” Max pushed her out of the way and stepped back into the spot. The sound was there, exactly where he’d expected it to be. “I can hear it,” he said. “You can’t?”

“Nothing,” said Lucy. “You really think you can?”

"I *know* I can," Max insisted, but he wasn't so sure anymore. If Lucy couldn't hear it, didn't that mean he really *was* just imagining it after all? "Do you know anybody else who can hear it?" he asked. "What about that guy you mentioned earlier... the one who's interested in ghosts?"

"Hector?" Lucy thought about it. "I don't remember him ever saying that he'd heard it personally. A few of my regulars claim they can hear it, but... oh!" her face lit up. "I know who can hear it – Dr. Vanderspiegel!"

"Who's that?" asked Max.

Lucy grimaced. "Let's say he's a former colleague of Dr. Waldemar's and leave it at that." she said. "They disagree over who the ghost is and what happened to her. I don't think they've spoken to each other in ten years."

Max wasn't sure he wanted to talk to people who'd argue like children over a ghost. "Is Vanderspiegel less crazy than the other one?"

"Marginally," said Lucy. "I'll give you their addresses. Let's go back and get you dried out."

In the excitement of finding the ghost, Max had almost forgotten that he was soaking wet. The rain was starting to let up, but his clothes were already wet through. He belatedly remembered his camera, and silently thanked heaven its bag was waterproof. "Um... yeah," he said sheepishly. "That sounds like a good idea."

Lucy laughed and ushered him back under the umbrella.

Fifteen minutes later, Max was sitting in Lucy's back room in his t-shirt and boxers, while the rest of his clothes dried above the radiator. Lucy had made hot chocolate for him, and was now writing the two professors' addresses on a post-it note.

"You need a girlfriend, Max," she said.

"Are you volunteering?" he teased, though at the moment his heart wasn't quite in the banter. Lucy had turned on the radio, but every time a song ended, he could almost still hear the ghost's voice in the silence.

"No," she said. "I'm fairly sure you and I have irreconcilable lifestyles. But honestly, you need somebody to follow you around and make sure you come in out of the rain now and then."

"Oh, a *babysitter*," Max nodded. "So you *are* volunteering!"

She shook her head. "Here you go," she said, offering the addresses. "Do you really think it's worth your time to look into this? Sewers aren't very photogenic."

"No," Max agreed, folding the note in half, "but now I'm curious. If there turns out to be an interesting story, I can dress it up a little and set it somewhere pretty." Maybe he could transpose it to the spooky Mausoleum and... but before he even finished that thought, he knew he couldn't do that. The showy Mausoleum and its megalomaniacal occupant might deserve that... but the poor woman screaming in the sewer didn't.

Max felt his scalp prickle as he remembered the sound of her voice. No, he hadn't imagined that... he'd *heard* it. It had been real, and therefore so, at some point, had she. He wanted to know who she was. What had her name been, and who had killed her and why?

"I'd talk to John first if I were you," said Lucy. "You'll get more sense out of him than Hector."

Max made a mental note of the fact that not only did Lucy know *two* well-educated German ghost-hunters, but was apparently on a first-name basis with both of them. "I'll call on them tomorrow afternoon," he decided.