

# The Talisman

*Lawrence King*

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*For Daniel Hutchison*



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## Prologue

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James Kaur is on the museum's permanent staff and security is his responsibility. The video cameras throughout the museum are permanently fixed, but traveling exhibits require repositioning the camera heads and additional considerations. He has spent a long day working on video surveillance and is ready to go home to his family.

Masters of the Italian Renaissance is a complex exhibit. It will be a late-spring showpiece for the museum, but its many set pieces, display cases, and specialized lighting have made security more difficult than usual.

Mr. Kaur is still not sure about the tableau in the north gallery, closest to the restrooms. The layout of this portion of the exhibit features an imposing portrait of a Venetian gentlewoman and her dog. The woman is looking straight out at the visitor. The dog, however, is looking down, perhaps at something on the ground. The art director for the exhibit has specified a display case beneath and to the left of the painting. It's in line with the dog's gaze and draws the visitors' attention from the large painting down to the details of the showcase. The case contains objects from the Renaissance woman's personal belongings. The overall effect is quite dramatic.

The lighting for the room is focused on the large portrait. It's one of the most valuable pieces of the exhibit. The video surveillance for the room also focuses on the painting and is angled to pick up people who approach it or withdraw from it.

Mr. Kaur is troubled because the display case doesn't really show up in the camera feed. The case provides illumination for the objects within it, but lighting was not designed for its exterior. On video, you

can barely see the side of the case. Even then, it's poorly lit. He could add an additional camera. It would require rewiring for proper placement, but it could be done.

Mr. Kaur removes his glasses and rubs his eyes. Recalibrating the video feeds has given him a headache. He's inclined to let things be the way they are. It's a small display case. The Italians didn't specify any particular security for it.

He puts on his coat and prepares to leave.

On his way out, he walks through the exhibit. He takes pride in his work and is pleased with the results. Masters of the Italian Renaissance looks wonderful and meets all the security standards that the museum and its insurance provider require.

As he passes the doorway to the north gallery, he notices the portrait of the woman and her dog. The woman's gaze catches his eye, and he enters the room. Her stare is commanding, and Mr. Kaur is drawn farther into the gallery. The placard in front of the painting reads: *Paolo Veronese (Paolo Caliari), Portrait of Veronica Conti, Venice, 1570.*

She's a stout figure with one hand resting at her hip. Mr. Kaur wonders what she would think of the exhibit. Could she have imagined strangers looking at her, centuries after her death? Perhaps that's exactly what she planned by having commissioned the portrait: a form of immortality.

She stares straight at Mr. Kaur with an imperial gaze.

On the left side of the portrait is the subject's dressing table. It's covered with a variety of personal items: a set of combs, a perfume bottle, a hand mirror, and some jewelry, including a broken bronze talisman.

On the right side of the painting is the dog. Mr. Kaur follows its gaze down to the display case. He sighs. *The security is not perfect, but it will have to do.*

He looks into the case and sees a variety of small items that once belonged to the Venetian. Suddenly, he realizes, *These are the actual items from the painting.* Her personal items have been preserved down through the centuries. He frowns. One of them has shifted out of its stand. It's the broken talisman depicted in the painting. The placard for the item reads: *Roman Bronze Talisman. Pompeii. Early Imperial Period, 1st Century BC.* Apparently, the Venetian gentlewoman herself collected ancient pieces of art.

He fishes a set of keys out of his pocket and spends a minute searching for the correct one. He disables the alarm wire, opens the case, and places the talisman back on its small stand. It's heavy for its

size, likely solid bronze. Where broken, its edges are sharp.

Mr. Kaur looks up at the portrait, but from this angle, the gentlewoman is looking over his shoulder. The dog is now staring directly at him. Without relocking the case or enabling the alarm, he stands back to review his work. It's been quite a long day, and he's glad to be going home. All is well. All is safe. Mr. Kaur is smiling.

Above, and to his right, the small dog appears to be smiling right back at him.

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## Chapter One

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### *Roman Holiday*

Brian and I are crossing a wide piazza when I feel the tremor. I've lived most of my life in Southern California, so I immediately know it's an earthquake. I see that Brian is stumbling a bit and has a look of alarm on his face.

"It's an earthquake," I say. "We should stay out in the open."

The locals seem to take the quake in stride. Although I don't understand Italian, there's no alarm in their voices. After the initial shock, one couple laughs, and most everyone returns to their activities. They must be used to earthquakes, too.

The last of the afternoon sun bathes everything in a golden light, and Brian and I continue across the piazza. Brian's wearing shorts and sandals with a lime-green polo-style shirt that makes his reddish-brown hair and hazel eyes stand out. The air is warm and calm. Street vendors are beginning to pack up for the day.

When the second tremor hits, I notice Howie.

My dog, Howie, is standing in the doorway of a shop just ahead of us. I'm glad to see him, but also surprised. I didn't expect we'd see him. He shouldn't be here. He's wagging his tail, but when the second tremor hits, he's knocked off balance.

"Howie!"

He struggles to his feet, and I notice that the second tremor is still going. It must be quite a quake. Brian stumbles a second time but

seems OK. He sits down, cross-legged, on the flagstones. He's going to wait it out on the ground.

It's a bit darker now. The first star of the evening can be seen over the ocean in the distance. The second tremor finally dies down. Brian looks up at me as if to say, "Now what?"

That's when Howie takes off.

It's hard to keep up with him when he gets going. Although small, Italian greyhounds are speedy, and he seems to be on a mission.

"I've got to catch him!" I say to Brian as I leave him behind in the piazza. "I can't lose Howie again."

There's an odd scent in the air. Something like rotten eggs or burning vegetation. It reminds me of something, but I can't quite put my finger on it.

I turn a corner and head down another street. As I struggle to keep up with Howie, I pass residential buildings made of stone and brick. Shuttered windows line the roadway. I don't seem to be catching up with Howie—but I can still see him ahead of me.

The third tremor is accompanied by a deafening explosion. A woman screams, and people tumble out of a building on my left. They head back the way I've come, back toward the piazza, downhill toward the sea.

Many of the streets have steps cut into them and are little more than stairways up the slope. Howie ducks into one of these side streets and bounds up the stairs to a higher level. This must be a commercial street. There are shop fronts and market stalls. The shops are now closed or have been abandoned. A lone child sits in a doorway, crying. I hesitate for a moment, but as I walk over to help the little girl, she's picked up by a young woman. "Mama!" says the child, and they hurry off, the child clinging to the woman's neck. They head downslope, back the way I've come.

I look ahead for Howie and see that he's stopped. He's looking back, over his shoulder, up into the sky. I follow his gaze: a fireball. *This isn't just an earthquake.* I remember the eruption of Mount Saint Helens in Washington State and shudder. *A volcanic eruption?*

I track the fireball as it arches overhead and falls downhill from us, far below, into the sea. Sudden clouds of gray steam rise to meet the black clouds above. A wave breaks over the harbor in the distance capsizing many of the fishing boats.

Another explosion creates another fireball, and the sky darkens further. The sun is completely obscured, and I'm plunged into smoke and near darkness.

Suddenly, the air feels hot against my face. The smell I noticed ear-

lier is more intense. *It's from the volcano.*

I've finally caught up with Howie. He's crouching in the entrance of a private residence. I bend down to pick him up, but another tremor knocks me over. Howie and I sprawl on a mosaic of black-and-white tiles. I pick him up and hold him to my chest.

A third fireball arches overhead, momentarily illuminating the darkening clouds from underneath. That's when the thick, smothering layer of hot ash and death begins to rain down on the city.



"That's quite a dream," says Brian. "I noticed you left me alone in the piazza."

For a moment, I think my fiancé is mad at this silly dream, or at me, but then I get it: *He's teasing.*

"Do you still dream about Howie?" he asks.

"Not as often," I say. "More since we've been on the trip, of course." One of our purposes in coming to Italy was to scatter Howie's ashes along the Italian Riviera. I thought I would bring my Italian greyhound back to Italy for his final resting place. Even thinking about it sounds silly; an affectation. All I know is that when we released his ashes Tuesday, on a beach outside of Genoa, I also felt a release in my heart. I completed a promise I had made to myself and feel lighter for it.

We're sitting at a café on the sidewalk in front of our hotel in Rome. The early morning spring air is chilly, but not so cold that we couldn't have breakfast outside. Neither Brian nor I have been out of the USA before, and we're enjoying everything about our spring-break visit. In addition to dispersing Howie's ashes, the trip is also a celebration of our engagement. Brian's wearing khaki slacks, a rust-colored polo, and a hooded jacket.

"I'll try the frittata," I say to the waiter. "Just vegetables, please." I've been a vegetarian for over ten years and have learned that I have to ask for things in Italy. I can't expect to see vegetarian things on the menu—even if I could read all the Italian. So far, everyone's been nice enough to make something for me, and it's all been delicious. Most of the service people in Rome speak English, making things very easy. It's been a wonderful trip.

Brian's not as hungry and is having a traditional *prima colazione*, which we've learned is a caffè latte and either sweet rolls or bread and jam.

"What would you like to do today?" he asks. "We saw most of the Vatican, but we've scarcely seen any of the other sights of the city."

Maybe MAXXI, the Museo Nazionale?"

He can see I'm not so excited about another museum, so he changes tactics. "We could always reenact your dream."

"What do you mean?"

"We could go to Pompeii."

Suddenly, it hits me. He's right. It was a dream about Pompeii. Mount Vesuvius erupted shortly after the biblical time of Jesus, and the entire city of Pompeii was entombed in volcanic ash. That must be the background of my dream.

"You're right," I say. "I hadn't thought about Pompeii. That must be what it was. I'm relieved, too. It was one of those dreams that feel like they're going to come true. But I remember reading about Pompeii in a history class. My dream wasn't about what *will* happen; it was a dream about something that *already* happened."

Brian smiles. "Well, it could be both if you want. Not the eruption part, of course. I'm pretty sure Vesuvius is extinct. But we could go there. It's not that far."

Brian can see my eyes lighting up. I'm not sure why Pompeii sounds so intriguing, but it certainly has captured my imagination.

The waiter brings our coffees, and we ask him about it.

"Pompeii? Yes. It's not far from here, *seniori*. But leave your rental car here. You don't want to drive, I think. You want the train. You would drive all day, but it is only ninety minutes by train to Naples, then maybe another hour to Pompeii on the Circumvesuviana."

"Could we do it today, do you think?" asks Brian.

"Oh, *sì, sì*. It's easy. Your hotel has a package, no doubt. Ask the concierge."

"What do you think?" asks Brian, looking at me.

"I'd like to, but it may be a bit weird. A lot of people died at Pompeii."

"I'm fine with that if you'd like to see it."

I remember my dream and think about Howie. Was the dream his way of telling me to visit Pompeii? Was the dream really a prediction of something that I should do or just a subconscious memory from hearing about Pompeii in school?

"I think I *would* like to see it. Who knows when we'll be back to Italy?"

"I'd like to come back," says Brian. "There's so much to see and do. Florence is supposed to be amazing. And Venice. I know we can't fit Venice into our trip this time. We've only got a few days left, but someday, I really want to see Venice. I'd also like to take a cook's tour of Sicily." Brian's eyes light up at the thought of a cook's tour. He saw

a brochure for it in the hotel. He's a good cook, and I benefit from it.

"We can come back," I say, smiling at the thought of Brian learning how to cook more Italian. "Sicily would be fun."

Our food arrives, and my frittata is wonderful. It has sun-dried tomatoes, artichoke hearts, and tiny olives mixed into an egg batter. I almost swallow an olive pit before I remember that they're generally served *with* the pits in Italy. No problem. The taste is heavenly.

As we finish our meal, I notice that we're being stared at. At first, I think the older woman is looking at Brian. He's most obviously the tourist, with his freckles and reddish hair and beard. Nobody in Italy looks much like him, and with his good looks, he gets the occasional stare.

But the focus seems to be on me this time.

She's Italian-looking, short, older, and I would say dressed in an outdated style. Most Italians love modern dress and fashion. Brian has spent more money than I like to think on Italian leather goods since we've been here, and for good reason: Italians have wonderful style. You'll see no flip-flops in Rome and few people wearing jeans or short pants. Everyone looks nice and, for the most part, modern.

But this woman looks more like a peasant from an old movie about Italy. She's wearing a dark, long skirt and a white blouse mostly covered by a dark gray shawl. She's got a head covering that obscures some of her face, but it's clear she's been looking at us—or me—for some time. From across the street and down the block, it's hard to say, but I think she's fingering rosary beads in one hand.

She's just noticed that I'm staring back, and it's troubling her. She looks like she's talking to herself, definitely upset.

I'm a good lip-reader and can almost make out her words: *Il malocchio? Il malocho?*

Now she's stopped fingering the rosary and holds up her hand with the pinkie and forefinger extended. It feels like she's flipping me off, although the hand sign is unknown to me. Her face has a grim, defiant look.

"I see you've attracted some attention," says our waiter, stopping by with the check. Brian turns to see the woman with her outstretched hand, still glaring in our direction.

"What's that about?" he asks.

"She must be from the country," says the waiter. "She must have been raised in the old ways, the superstitious ways. She believes in *il malocchio*. How would you say it? The 'evil eye'?"

"Is that the hand signal?" I ask. "Is she giving me the evil eye?"

"Oh no, *signore*, you misunderstand. You look Italian with your

dark hair and long face and nose. But the eyes, you see. You have the blue eyes that no local would have. In the old days, such eyes would identify a witch. She's not giving you the evil eye. The sign she makes with her hand is to ward off a curse. She thinks you give *her* the evil eye."



The train to Naples was one of the fast ones. The trip was only an hour. We had to wait a bit for the connecting Circumvesuviana train, but we still arrived in Pompeii by midafternoon. The train stop is nearly at the ruins, and it was a short walk to the visitors' center.

While we were on a vacation when I was a kid, Mom and I traveled north from our home in California and went on a road trip through Oregon and parts of Washington. We stopped at the Mount Saint Helens National Volcanic Monument. From high atop one edge of the caldera, you could see the swath of devastation that the eruption of 1980 caused. It blasted the area clean. It's a lifeless landscape like the surface of the moon. Through storyboards and pictures at the visitors' center, we got a sense of the force of the eruption. A popular fishing and hiking destination, Spirit Lake, was completely wiped off the face of the earth. More than fifty people were killed.

I expected Pompeii to be like that: a visitors' center and some storyboards.

Pompeii is not like that. Pompeii is shocking. Pompeii is brutal. At the time of the Mount Vesuvius eruption, it held over eleven thousand souls and covered 170 acres. Virtually everyone died in the eruption of AD 70. Fifteen to twenty feet of hot ash covered the entire city in a matter of minutes. Everything was flash-preserved in a heavy, suffocating blanket of death.

There is a visitors' center in Pompeii, of course. It's a UNESCO World Heritage site and attracts over two million visitors each year. What I didn't realize is that the city was lost for over fifteen hundred years. Most of Pompeii has been dug out since then. The objects that lay beneath the ash have been preserved because of the lack of air and moisture. While the ash removal was taking place, someone got the idea that they might use plaster to fill voids in the layers that once held human bodies. You can now see the exact positions of people when they died. There are whole galleries of the exhumed plaster bodies. Mothers huddled over infants. Lovers embracing. Some of the plaster casts are terrifying, and I make a hasty exit.

Beyond the visitors' center, the area is a vast necropolis with streets and buildings uncovered and homes open to the sky. You can

go on a self-guided exploration of this city of ancient death.

"Does any of this look like your dream?" asks Brian. We're walking down one of the wider streets of excavated Pompeii.

"Not really. It's a little overwhelming. It's like a metropolis-sized cemetery."

"Sorry, honey," says Brian, surveying the landscape. "It *is* a little depressing. Maybe it wasn't the best choice for a day trip."

"It's just not what I expected. I guess I was thinking that Howie brought me here for some reason. I don't see why, though. The landscape certainly doesn't seem familiar."

Brian takes my hand, and we continue walking. Some of the buildings are so well preserved that you can see the colors that the walls were painted. Many mosaic tile floors are perfectly preserved. A few homes have been restored to show how people lived. I am surprised at the amenities. They even had running water and a sewer system.

We spend another hour walking, talking, and looking at Pompeii. We joke about what house we'd want to live in. We laugh at a two-thousand-year-old bathroom and wonder what they used for toilet paper. I'm glad to have Brian with me. His gentle good humor is the perfect antidote to this depressing place.

Shadows from the afternoon sun begin to lengthen, and it's now about four o'clock. The landscape is bathed in the same golden light from my dream. For an instant, I'm stopped cold with *déjà vu* and missing Howie. Brian looks at me with concern.

"Are you OK?" he asks.

"Yes, I'm just reminded of Howie, from the dream," I explain. I must be looking very pale or odd, because an elderly gentleman also stops to see if I'm OK. He doesn't speak English, and I can't quite explain what I'm feeling or why we're here. I want to tell him we came because of a dream, but the best I can come up with is "*il mio cane che dorme*." I hope that means "the dream of my dog," but I'm not so sure. I can speak Spanish, but my Italian comes entirely from a tourist phrase book.

"*Il cane che dorme*?" He repeats it back to me as a question.

"Um, sì..." I say.

"*Seguimi*," he says, pointing ahead. He's clearly happy to help, although I'm not sure to what end. We follow him about a block and make a turn, uphill to the left.

We're in the piazza from my dream in the same spot where we felt the first earthquake and Brian lost his balance. This is the piazza where I first saw Howie.

"Where are we going?" Brian asks the old gentleman, but he

shakes his head, not understanding.

He again says, "*Seguimi*," motioning us to follow.

We cross the piazza as I did in the dream and start down a narrow street, most likely a residential area. We're headed uphill, and I notice the streets that are really stairs cut into the side of the slope. We turn into one of them and climb upward.

We're standing in a wider avenue, a business district. This is the street where I was standing when the first fireball streaked across the sky. The gentleman pauses in thought for a moment, then continues. He makes another turn, also uphill.

"Ah, sì," he says and speeds up a bit.

He's leading us to one of the houses that has been identified with markers for visitors. He leads us to the entrance and turns to face us.

"*Il cane che dorme*," he says with a flourish and points down to the floor of the entryway. It's the entryway from my dream where Howie and I huddled and were entombed by hot ash. I look down at the centuries-old mosaic tiles on the floor. I stifle a gasp.

It's a black-and-white mosaic of a greyhound, of Howie, sleeping. *The Sleeping Dog*.

I begin to cry, but I try my best to thank the old fellow for bringing us here. He nods and smiles, not minding simultaneous tears and happiness.

Brian and I explore the residence. Informational signs in several languages tell you a bit about the owner and his life at the time of the eruption. It was owned by Lucius Caecilius II, a banker. In the well-preserved basement of the house, thousands of documents were found detailing his banking interests and probably acted as a repository for his clients—like an early safe-deposit box system. The house features many frescoes, original wall paintings and floor tiles. The sleeping dog mosaic in the entryway is considered one of Pompeii's treasures.

As Brian looks at some of the surrounding buildings, I sit in the entryway next to the mosaic of Howie. The tiles are cool to the touch. It does look like he's sleeping. I look out and down, across the city. Many of the tourists have left for the day, and the air is still and quiet. I reach down to retie one of my shoes, and I notice the edge of something sticking out of the dirt between the cobblestones against the step to the entryway. It looks odd, like it's made of metal.

I reach down, and it readily comes free of the ground. It's a fragment of something larger, some kind of medallion or disk. It's a segment about one-half-inch wide and a little over an inch long. It's a ragged pie-shaped piece, and the complete object must have been

about three inches in diameter. I hold it in my hand for a minute, looking at its rough edges and trying to identify the metal by its weight and tarnished color. Bronze or weathered copper, maybe. It has a slippery feeling to it, although it's not polished.

My conscious mind knows the fragment should be left behind. Tourists are not supposed to take parts of Pompeii home with them. The piece isn't much of anything. I picture myself just putting it back down where I found it.

Instead, I put it in my pocket, and Brian and I begin our way back down the hill to the train station.



Flying to Rome from Boston was easy. Just one stop at London's Heathrow Airport. Coming home turns out to be more complicated, and we're stuck for a long layover in Barcelona. The airport is nice, but you can only look in airport stores so much during a six-hour stop.

Brian's trying his best to nap. There's a row of padded seats he's found, and he's stretched out on them, with a coat for a pillow. He looks tired, which is not surprising. We got up very early for our flight from Rome. He's surrounded by our carry-on bags. We tried to travel lightly but found Italian treasures to bring home with us.

I'm seated, looking over a manuscript of my new textbook. I'm happy to say the first draft is now complete, and my dissertation advisor is pleased. I'm a new faculty member at Miskatonic University in Massachusetts, and part of my teaching contract says I must write a textbook, an introduction to quantum physics.

Turns out writing is just the start. Then there's editing. Then there's getting peer reviewers. Then there's publishing.

As I read, I'm finding a few areas that could use some polishing. I know my editor will help with the spelling and grammar. I'm more concerned with getting the concepts down in a way that's easy to understand and engaging. I think a better example of Einstein's gravity waves is needed, and I make a note of it.

I'm sitting across the aisle from sleeping Brian. A seat away from me in the same aisle is a middle-aged woman in a dark blue pantsuit. She's been observing me for a bit, so I decide to introduce myself.

"Hello. I'm Mac. Do you have a long layover, too?"

"Yes, when I booked the ticket to Rome, I'd forgotten about the layover on the way back to London." Her accent tells me that England is most likely her home.

"Did you enjoy Rome?" I ask. "It was our first trip overseas, and I

think he fell in love with Italy.” I include sleeping Brian in our conversation with a wave of my hand.

“But not you?”

“Oh, I enjoyed the trip, especially the first week and especially Rome. Toward the end, we visited Pompeii, though. The plaster casts of the entombed people were overwhelming. That one day put a cloud over my heart.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. I love Italy for its art more than its history. I’m a bit of a Renaissance art buff, and Italy had the best of the painters and sculptors of the period. I could spend a week just looking at the ceiling of the Sistine.”

I figure she’s talking about the Sistine Chapel in the pope’s official residence. We saw it our first week in Italy.

“It’s hard to imagine Michelangelo being able to paint lying on a scaffolding, isn’t it?” I ask.

“I’m Darlene,” she says, “and yes, painting it, designing it, organizing the workers, it’s hard to imagine any part of it. It’s so grand, so beautiful, so complex. Michelangelo is divine, of course, but Italy was home to so many of the masters: Donatello, Botticelli, Gozzoli, Masaccio.”

I’m not a passionate art lover, but I can tell Darlene is. Her face lights up as she tells me about some of the museums she visited and the paintings and sculptures she admires. She looks like a retired schoolteacher with gray hair pulled into a loose ponytail in the back. She’s not wearing makeup, but with her animated face and happy disposition, it’s easy to think of her as beautiful.

“So many of them survived by doing portraits. You might take years working on a great piece of sculpture, but in the interim, you had to pay the bills with portraits. Every nobleman or noblewoman needed a formal portrait and, as they got older, perhaps another.”

“I have to admit, I didn’t look very closely at the portraits in the galleries.”

“Yes, it’s easy to think of them as just photographs, isn’t it? You walk into a Renaissance gallery and you’re overwhelmed with a sea of portraits all staring at you. From a distance, they look interchangeable. The problem is, they weren’t meant to be displayed that way. They were meant to be displayed as a single focal point in a room. Generally, a nobleman would hang his portrait in a beautifully designed parlor or waiting area. Without modern communication systems, people would just show up at your house and have to wait until they could be seen. While waiting to meet the nobleman, a visitor would have the formal portrait to view. The portraits were designed

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