

# Lupa

*Marie Marshall*

**P'kaboo Publishers  
South Africa  
2012**

**P'kaboo Publishers**

[www.pkaboo.net](http://www.pkaboo.net)

First Edition

2012

Copyright © Licensed to:

P'kaboo Publishers

South Africa

Cover design: Aludar8

ISBN (ebook) 978-0-9870103-7-7

ISBN (paperback) 978-0-9870103-5-3

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publishers.

~ Lupa ~

*Acknowledgements:*

*Lucy P. Naylor who told me to write this book; and my literary agents, Bookseeker Agency in Perth.*

~

*“Quis iniquae tam patiens urbis.”*

## CHAPTER I

“I’m a Serb – and no, that isn’t an apology! People don’t want to hear about atrocities *to* Serbs, and that’s fine by me, because I don’t want to talk about the subject!”

“I wasn’t going to ask,” said Vittorio.

“That’s fine then!”

Undoubtedly this marks a low point in our relationship, and as it happened during our first ever conversation, it sometimes surprises me that we ever got any further with each other. I put the fact that we did down to a base motive on my own part.

It had been one of those days. I was stiff and aching anyway, and my temper was worsened by having been caught in a rain shower, and having had to leap for my life as I tried to cross the road. The traffic in Rome can be bloody, and the prickly feeling under my armpits at an escape from being a statistic was made worse by having to endure a spray of filthy water over my legs and a spray of filthier language from the driver who had

nearly mown me down.

So I was in no mood for bother of any sort when I took refuge in a café, searched my bag and pockets for coins, and ordered a cappuccino. Bother came. Being fairly flustered I lost a grip of my best Italian, and tripped over a bit of grammar which had given me problems since the time I first tried to learn the language in school. The man behind the bar didn't react at all, but the person standing behind me corrected me by quietly repeating the phrase I had used, but with the solecism edited. I was blazing, I turned round and told him what I thought of his effrontery, and here's where the base motive comes into it – my remonstrance sort of tailed off because, frankly, he was attractive. Frankly, he was very attractive.

“I am sorry. I deserve that. It was rude of me,” he said. “Let me get these coffees, it's the least I can do. I insist.”

This was laughable – old fashioned – but my objection to such patronising behaviour seemed to die in my throat before I could say anything. I just thought it. How dare he insult me and then think he could buy me off with a cappuccino and some superficial Roman charm. But nevertheless, I allowed myself to be ushered to a seat, which was held for me to sit down, and to be

brought my drink. More, I allowed him to hang my jacket carefully over a spare chair, and accepted the loan of his handkerchief to dry some of the muck from my legs.

Who carries a handkerchief these days?

Part of me felt like kicking his shins, but perhaps I was more angry at myself than at him, because I could not see anything in his face or demeanour to suggest that he was other than genuinely sorry for his rudeness and genuinely determined to make up for it. Why more angry at myself? I told you, he was very good-looking. He was perhaps about twenty years older than me, but no more than that - tall, slim, and in a tailored, midnight-blue suit which looked bespoke, rather than off-the-peg. His hair was dark, had a wave in it, and was cut in a fairly young style, as if he were the new manager of Lazio, or intended to run for mayor of Milan. No, there was more class about it than that, and it looked natural, as if it had simply grown that way when he was a boy, and had stayed that way. His eyes were blue, like Terence Hill's (I watch a lot of spaghetti westerns these days). He had an air of *insouciance* which over the course of our conversation, quite against my will, gradually put me at my ease. I don't usually go for men in their forties, and I won't say that I had suddenly gone weak-kneed and

gooey about this one, but I found myself feeling more flattered than I ought to be, if you see what I mean. That's why. Women just don't do this sort of thing any more, we like to tell ourselves.

As I recall, I stared blankly over my coffee-cup and out of the window – which makes it strange that I should now be able to describe him. Perhaps I looked him up and down later. No, I remember how he got my attention.

He did most of the talking. He introduced himself, said he had some semi-official position – part archaeologist, part diplomat, or so it sounded. “Oh yeah,” I thought to myself. “Good story, good chat-up line.” Anyhow, he said he had “connections” here and there, but was currently supervising a student “dig” here in the city. The city. That's how he said it – “*La Città*”, as if it had quotation marks around it. I suddenly realised that he was a little embarrassed, and was groping for things to say, hoping to unfreeze my mood. His *insouciance* was slipping somewhat, but that minor change was – oh good grief – rather endearing.

“My friends call me Vittorio. Please feel free to do the same,” he said.

Why? I thought. I'm never going to see you again, and I'm going back to the flat as soon as I've drunk this

coffee!

Suddenly: “I know who you are. You’re *L’Amazonina*.” That got my attention! That’s when I looked him up and down.

“I haven’t gone by that name for two years. I guess I ought to be pleased someone still recognises me. I haven’t worked in the circus since I had my fall.”

“Is that where you got that scar?” he said. That total disregard of tact! How did he square his antique charm with blunt rudeness? My hand flew automatically to my forehead to cover up what was only a little blemish which, for most of the time, I managed to forget.

“I’m sorry.” Another apology.

“It’s nothing,” I lied. “I’m told the horse kicked out when I fell, and just caught me with a hoof. I can’t remember much about it, but I haven’t worked as a bareback rider since.”

“Your accent – it’s Balkan.” Blunt again. That’s where my mouthful of Serbian angst came from. Then of course, after an awkward silence, it was my turn to apologise.

“My real name is Jelena Stepanović,” I said, and we shook hands. Things got better. Outside it had stopped raining. I was dry and when I looked down I could not see much evidence of the spray on my shoes or skirt. He

told me to keep the handkerchief. Up to now I had retained an obstinate knot between my shoulder blades, but it was time to relax and let it go. He wasn't bad company when all was said and done, and we chatted a little more about his archaeological interests. I tried to remember the last time I was at ease in a man's company, and couldn't. Since Franjo, since all the things that had happened to me back home, since coming to Italy and working in a strange circus, I had always kept my guard up. Vittorio, it seemed, had got in behind it, but having done so he did not press on. I found myself trying to figure out how bluntness of speech, obvious charm, and great reserve managed to sit so well in one man, and how they made him complete.

Our first conversation was not deep, and now I come to think about it none of them were. Other things that we came to share were more profound, things that we experienced together without much in the way of words – but I'm running ahead. Let me try and tell this one chapter at a time, much as it did, in fact, unfold.

No, it was not deep, but neither was it small talk. It was the casual rap of two reasonably intelligent people, I thought. Eventually a lull coincided with the dregs of my cappuccino cooling beyond the point where they were pleasant to drink, and I made to stand up. He was up

first, pulling back my seat for me, and offering to help me on with my jacket. As a gesture of independence, I reached for it with one hand, and put it on unassisted. We stepped into the street together.

“Do you live far from here? May I walk you there?”

“Via Stoccolma, not far from the Velodrome – I’m flat-sitting for some friends who are out of the country. And yes, at least I’d welcome company part of the way,” I said, trying to insist on our regarding ourselves as equals, not as protector and protégée. We walked, side by side, and he casually slid one hand into his trouser pocket as if to show that he too had relaxed, that he too was comfortable and accepted at least a show of equality. As days went by, and I got to know him better, I too began to be comfortable with his chivalrous little mannerisms, although they could never entirely be shaken loose from a slight air of assumed seniority. We were – I told myself – equal but different; after all, *he* would never be able to do hand-stands on a horse! It was at least half an hour’s walk, and in other circumstances I might have taken the underground. He did not insist on seeing me right to my door. Rather, when I determinedly stopped with a street to cross and a hundred and fifty metres or so still to walk, and offered him my hand, he shook it firmly and held it for less than a moment.

“Well, goodbye,” I said, and turned to go.

“Come and see the dig tomorrow, if you’re free,” he said suddenly, checking me as I was about to go for a gap in the traffic. I stopped, the gap filled, my determination to go on with my life wavered, and I felt a little frisson of guilty relief.

I agreed, and found myself giving him my telephone number. We shook hands again, and with a “Ciao!” I found another serendipitous gap in the traffic. I dived for it, and used the increasing distance between him and me to hide the fact that a blush had sprung into my cheek. A few strides down the pavement on the far side of the street, and I had begun to convince myself that I was angry at myself again. But try as I might, I couldn’t resist the temptation to look over my shoulder. In fact I stopped and watched until he was out of sight. *He* didn’t look back once.

~

© Marie Marshall, 2012