

Chapter 1

“Pack your things. You’re leaving.”

I stared at my husband’s back, not truly understanding what he was saying. Lucius Quintus Rufius had said nothing of me going on a trip or going anywhere until now. He was usually the one leaving to attend to the Senate’s demands or the demands of his three apartment buildings in Subura. I typically remained in our country villa to see that it was run properly and to care for our sons.

However, he had been especially cold and aloof this last week, even with our two boys who bore their father’s name...the same name. The eldest was Lucius Quintus Rufius *Gullus*, for his cocky attitude. Water drizzled lazily into the impluvium pool as I nursed our two-month-old son Lucius Quintus Rufius who hadn’t claimed a nickname as yet.

I shifted in my chair in the atrium. It wasn’t my place to question why Lucius had been acting this way until now.

“And, why am I leaving?”

Lucius continued to stare through his tablinum window at the sun-filled garden. He just stood there by his desk. One hand rested on the polished oak corner. He was a tall man, lean, and stiff. His aquiline features were made sharper by the afternoon shadows.

“Viciria, your father is here. He waits for you outside.”

Papa? Why hadn’t he come in? It made no sense that he would be made to wait outside. I looked at the door slave whose gaze avoided mine.

“See my father inside.”

“No.” Lucius swiftly turned and motioned to Marta, my personal slave, standing behind me. “Get your domina’s things removed from this house.”

This had gone far enough. I stood up from my chair and handed the child to the slave woman. The boy immediately voiced his fury at being removed from my breast. I covered and then faced my husband who refused to look at me even as he stepped into the atrium.

The ever-present divide between us seemed to be expanding. Not in the five years since my father granted him my hand in marriage had I felt any warmth from this man.

“For how long am I to be gone, may I ask?”

His gaze raked my face like claws. “You will not be returning, Viciria.”

I melted back into my chair. *How was this possible?* Lucius couldn’t be moving me back to my father’s house in Nuceria. This was where my children were. Where they lived. Where I lived.

“Why...will I not be returning?” I gasped. “This...This is my home.”

Lucius’s jaw knotted. A snarl tempted his lips. He bit it into submission. “Your home is with your father now, who can do with you as he sees fit. I no longer care.” He

flung a hand to the air as if to brush a gnat aside. “The divorce is final and your dowry has been repaid. Now, go.”

What divorce? I knew nothing of a divorce. Why? The world around me shattered. Surely, Lucius wouldn’t take my sons from me. My beautiful sons.

I flew at the man to clutch the shoulders of his tunic. “Lucius, why? What have I done to deserve this? By all the gods of Olympus, tell me.”

He peeled my fingers away and gripped my wrists. The corner of his straight lips curved up in humor. His gaze gleamed down on my face. “You? What have you done?” He shrugged. “Nothing.”

His lurking smile grew like an unwanted weed. “Father sees no value to the agreements made between your father’s house and mine.” He tossed me into the water of the nearby impluvium. “As Father has said many times, our marriage has been a waste of time. He expected things to improve between your father’s house and ours. It has not.”

He sighed as if burdened. “As much as I wish otherwise, I have to agree. We simply can’t risk another five years to see if things will change.”

“Nothing?” I lay there with the water seeping into my flesh. “Nothing?”

Had I not done all this man expected of me? Had I not spent my life seeing that his togas were pristine, even if it meant punishing the slaves for their oversights? Had I not continuously made cloth for his household and endured his visits to my bed? Had I not given birth to sons instead of daughters?

I struggled to my feet, dripping, and scanned the very heart of the villa, the atrium, for my sons’ sweet faces. An intense desire to simply touch them nearly overwhelmed me. However, they weren’t there. The slave woman had disappeared to my bedroom with my baby. And our older son was playing somewhere in the fields with his attending slaves. I couldn’t move. I couldn’t breathe.

“I...I have given you two sons. Doesn’t that mean anything?”

Lucius shrugged. “Yes. I thank you for that. But more was expected, as well as from your father.”

I stood to my full height even as water dripped onto the marble floor from the fabric of my stola. I wanted to rip his heart out of his chest for such an insult. Was it my fault that pirates had nearly broken my father’s wealth with their stealing? That Neptune had destroyed three of his galleys?

“No. I do not deserve this.” I couldn’t allow him to take my children from me. “I refuse to leave. I will not go.”

“It is decided, Viciria. You are leaving.”

There was one way I could endure this insult. I would take my sons with me.

I turned to the nearest slave. “Have my sons’ things gathered with mine and prepare them to leave with me.”

Lucius's face darkened, void of all humor. "You know by law they are my sons, wife. They will remain here." He motioned the slave to stay and then smirked at me. "The gods will give you more sons if they so choose."

I had to have my sons. They were my life. They were my existence. "Lucius, you...you can't take my sons from me. They are my flesh."

He just stood there unmoved, as still and quiet as the summer day. "It is determined, Viciria. Now leave." He waved me off like a wanton child.

Marta waited by the vestibule with my belongings. I looked about for my absent sons as if they could magically appear and stop this insanity. However, it was just this stranger whom I had lived with for five years and me, facing each other in the atrium.

I dropped to my knees and gripped the hem of his tunic, begging like a slave. "Don't do this Lucius. Please. Don't take my sons from me. I'll do anything you ask. Anything."

He stepped back toward his office. I crawled forward with him as he motioned over my head. "Get her out of my sight."

Hands gripped my arms and pulled my fingers from his tunic. He was ripping my heart out. Yet, the slaves dragged me through the vestibule toward the heat of the summer sun filling the street.

"No, Lucius! Don't do this! Please. Don't take my sons from me. No! I beg you." I screamed my son's names. Fought for the freedom to flee back inside and find them.

But, in that moment, *in that very moment*, I knew I would never see them again. I also knew that I would forever remember Lucius just standing there, watching.

Hatred solidified in my soul. Hatred of the vilest kind burned in my veins. "May Jupiter strike you and the House of Lucius Quintus Rufius for taking my sons from me!"

Concern broke the façade on Lucius's face. He stiffened, turned, and strolled out to the garden.

