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RUBIES OF
THE VIPER

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THE VIPER

A NOVEL BY
MARTHA MARKS

Rubies of the Viper

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DEDICATION

To Bernie Marks, the talented,
patient, and supportive love of my life.

And to the memory of my parents,
Truman and Margaret Alford,
who took me at an early age to Rome, Pompeii, and
Herculaneum and, among other things,
taught me to appreciate history and good books.

APPRECIATION

To Professor Fred Mench, who helped me get
the historical details right. Whatever errors
may still remain are mine alone.



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SHOW ME A MAN WHO ISN'T A SLAVE.
ONE IS A SLAVE TO SEX.
ANOTHER TO MONEY.
ANOTHER TO AMBITION.
ALL ARE SLAVES TO HOPE AND FEAR.

—*Seneca, 4 B.C. - A.D. 65*

YOU HAVE AS MANY ENEMIES
AS YOU HAVE SLAVES.

—*Roman proverb*

PART I

A.D. 53, MAY

CHAPTER ONE

ROME

Gaius Terentius Varro lurched out of the riverfront brothel, snapped his fingers at the four slaves snoring on the pavement, and crawled into his litter. The bearers hoisted their belching burden and set off through the dark toward the Caelian Hill. It was a trip they had made every third or fourth night for years.

The two men waiting behind a pile of discarded lumber were not there by habit. As the litter neared, they pulled hoods over their heads, drew curved Syrian daggers, and moved into the street. One blade sought the Roman's heart, spurting hot blood onto his white tunic. The other slashed wide and deep across the patrician throat, nearly severing the head. The groggy, unarmed slaves offered no resistance, and within moments the master of one of Rome's greatest fortunes lay dead on his plump silk cushions.

CHAPTER TWO

THE VILLA VARRONIANA, ON THE COAST NORTHWEST OF ROME

Her brother's murder lay heavily on her mind as Theodosia Varro pushed aside the sapphire-blue curtain and stepped into the blackness of the library that their father had added to his ancestral villa eighteen years earlier. It was late, and the bouncy journey up from Rome on the old Via Aurelia had exhausted her, but she had to spend a while here—the one place where she had always felt safe—before she slept.

Accustomed to the well-lit dining room, her eyes could make out little in the library. One small lamp flickered on a table straight ahead; another burned in the corner to her right. The air was thick with the fragrant mix of old leather and costly Egyptian oil.

Groping toward the nearest lamp, she bumped into a bulky object.

Father's couch.

Her fingers played along its carved wooden side as her eyes, gradually adjusting to the dark, explored the room. The oversize strongbox still stood against one wall, flanked by the Etruscan urns from the necropolis at Caere. And the scrolls that generations of her family had collected were still there, too, neatly stacked in their niches.

She walked over and chose a scroll at random. Its leather sheath felt warm and familiar in her hand as she held it down to the lamp.

Terence. Father's favorite playwright.

Aulus Terentius Varro and his daughter had read the comedies aloud here together many times, taking turns at the roles, pitching their voices high or low as the parts required.

Gods, we'd laugh till our cheeks hurt!

Returning to the couch, Theodosia was about to unroll the scroll when, from the corner behind her, came the sound of a man noisily clearing his throat.

She jumped.

There had been too much violence lately for calm nerves.

Then she saw him—beyond the circle of amber light cast by the other lamp—standing on the far side of her father’s desk.

Moments passed. The two stared at each other across the great gulf of the room... he stiff as a pillar, she struggling against her fear, feeling alone and vulnerable.

“Who are you?” she said at last. “What are you doing here?”

“My name is Alexander, mistress. I am the steward.”

In an instant, Otho’s mocking words flooded her memory.

Alexander the arrogant. Alexander the conqueror. Alexander the slave.

Through her mind ran snippets of information gleaned from Tribune Marcus Salvius Otho, a senator’s son and her brother’s best friend who had become Theodosia’s own friend and ally in the two weeks since Gaius’ murder.

An insolent Greek who insists on calling himself Alexander...

Refused to accept the name Gaius gave him...

A strange one...

Insufferably arrogant...

Capable but dangerous...

Only slave allowed off the villa grounds without permission...

Wields as much power at the villa as Nizzo does on the farm...

And then Otho’s final advice, just yesterday afternoon.

Take control fast.

Don’t believe a thing he tells you.

Don’t ever turn your back on him.

Theodosia remembered her surprise that her brother would bring in a stranger and turn the estate over to him to manage.

“I’ll run the place myself, as Father did,” she had promised Otho. “You won’t catch me deferring to a slave!”

Still unmarried at the shamefully old age of nineteen—and with no living male relative to direct her affairs—Theodosia had unexpectedly become the sole owner of the family fortune. Her unique situation placed unique burdens on her. No one else had any claim to her property, but she had to prove she could manage it.

She gripped the scroll and looked at the man in the shadows.

My slave.

“I can’t see you over there. Come here.” There was nothing gentle in the command.

The steward obeyed, then bowed and stood silently. It was not his place to speak first. His comportment was perfect for a servant except for his dark, deep-set eyes, which remained fixed on her face.

She kept him standing awkwardly before her as she inspected him at leisure. Otho had said the steward was Greek, and he looked it. He was taller than Theodosia and lean, with a sloping nose and high cheekbones that carved strong angles on his face. The lamplight picked out a deep, jagged scar on his right jaw.

Without saying a word, Theodosia stepped around him to replace the scroll on its shelf. Determined not to reveal her nervousness, she returned to the couch, rested her hands on its side, and faced him again.

Finally, having prolonged the silence as long as she cared to, she spoke. Her voice had lost none of its pique.

“Why didn’t you make your presence known when I came in?”

“I stood up when you entered, mistress, and thought you would see me. It wasn’t fitting for me to speak.”

For some reason, Theodosia was annoyed by the correctness of this Greek’s Latin. Though accented, it sounded as educated as her own.

“I was told my brother gave you a more appropriate name. ‘Servus,’ I believe.”

“Your brother called me many things, mistress, but my name is Alexander.”

“Your name is whatever your master chooses to call you.”

Silence.

“Isn’t that so?”

“I had a name,” the tone was soft but insistent, “long before I had a master.”

Astonished by his self-assurance, Theodosia let the matter drop.

What does a slave’s name matter, anyway?

“What were you doing there?”

“Compiling a list of household slaves for your inspection. I would have finished it by now, but Tribune Otho sent a message late this morning that he wanted delivered to the farm today. Since I’m the only one from here who goes there—”

“Does Tribune Otho often send you on errands?”

“On occasion, yes. My lord Gaius told me that I was to treat an order from Tribune Otho as if it came from him, my own master.” Alexander paused. “Tribune Otho also sent word that you would arrive tomorrow, mistress, instead of today... as we were originally informed. I intended to present myself to you then, along with a full inventory of your property.”

Theodosia looked aside, puzzled.

Otho knew I was planning to travel today. This Greek must have misunderstood.

“Why were you doing your work here?”

“This is my office. My lord Gaius instructed me to work here.”

“Are you telling me that my brother turned our father’s library—the most beautiful room in the villa—over for the private use of a slave?”

For the first time, the man hesitated.

“My lord Gaius hardly ever came here, mistress. And I have done no harm to anything.”

Theodosia breathed deeply.

If I must battle for control of my estate, then let Father’s library be the first conquered territory.

“Well, Alexander,” she said, exaggerating the syllables of his name, “this room is now reserved for my use. You’re not to come here unless I’ve summoned you. There must be plenty of cubicles in the house that will do for you. Find one. And you will bring me that inventory first thing in the morning. We have much to discuss tomorrow. Now,” she flicked her hand impatiently, “be gone, fellow!”



Alexander dropped the pile of papyrus sheets on top of the chest in the tiny room where he slept and collapsed onto the narrow mattress.

“Damn these Varros!”

Eight years spent trying to please the haughty, irascible Gaius were enough. Alexander had hoped Theodosia Varro would be different.

Damn the great Tribune Otho, too.

If he hadn’t sent that message—or at least if he’d gotten it right—Alexander’s updated inventory would have been finished before the new mistress arrived; the kitchen staff would have known to prepare an appropriate dinner for her, instead of having to rush something out at the last minute; and Alexander would have been here to welcome her properly, instead of coming in from his farm errand while she was eating.

Damn you, too, man. Only a fool would believe anything Otho says.

He lifted the top sheets off the stack and spread them across the bed, smoothing the worn blanket so the pages lay flat. “First thing in the morning,” she had said. “Much to discuss tomorrow.”

Tomorrow sounds delightful.



The lamp burned low. Alexander sat hunched over his inventory when he heard a tap on the door. In the next instant, Stefan ducked his head and shoulders under the frame.

“She’s here!” A smile played across Stefan’s shaggy face. “Got in about dinnertime.”

“I know. We met.”

“Well...?” The smile grew wider.

“Oh, she’s a charmer!”

Stefan grinned.

“What’d I tell you?”

Alexander glanced sidelong at his friend and shook his head. Irony wasn’t something Stefan ever understood.

“Have you had a friendly little chat with her yet?”

“Not yet. Too busy with her carriage and horses.”

“Well, you better plan on sticking with the goatherd’s daughter. Not even your legendary luck with the ladies is going to help you much with Theodosia Varro.”

“I don’t understand.” Stefan’s grin faded.

Of course not.

“That sweet girl you remember has grown up.” Alexander rubbed his burning eyes. “Become a Varro. Become a Roman.”



Lucilla was busy unpacking. Theodosia could hear her singing in the second bedroom.

She never sounded so happy before.

Over the past two years, Theodosia and her only slave had worked out a mostly amicable relationship despite a hostile start and Lucilla’s occasional surly moods.

Getting out of Rome will be good for her, too.

Theodosia strolled into the sitting room, still unable to believe it belonged to her. It was to this magnificent suite that Aulus Terentius Varro had brought the first Theodosia twenty years before. As a child, their daughter had come here often, sometimes inviting the slave children who were her playmates upstairs for a giggly game of hide-and-seek among the master’s bulky furniture.

Theodosia had always loved this room, where tall bronze lamp-trees cast their golden glow into every corner and Odysseus reenacted his exploits in vibrant frescoes of crimson, green, and gold.

On this warm night, the shutters stood open to the balconies on two sides, offering panoramas of the sea and gardens and filling the suite with crisp, salty air. The mosaic floor had been polished to a high gleam, and an enormous bouquet of sweet-smelling red roses dominated a low chest. There might have been some confusion about the day of her arrival, but someone had prepared the room well.

“Juno,” Theodosia said to herself, “it’s really mine!”

Gaius had been the heir. Only through an advantageous marriage could a girl with a brother hope for splendors like this, and no such match had ever been arranged for Theodosia.

She walked onto the western balcony, propped her arms on the railing, and looked out at the Etruscan Sea. The upturned crescent of Juno the moon, goddess of women, floated above the water, and Theodosia fancied that she smiled.

It’s over eight years since Father died, right here.

She peered down into the garden, remembering how she had huddled there with her friends that night, crying and wondering what would happen now that the despotic Gaius had taken his father’s place as master of them all.

In her mind, she called up those slave playmates: Simi, so dainty and finicky about what she ate; Gerta, smarter than any of the rest of them, Theodosia included; the lovely little Arisata, whom Theodosia always envied for her fine, curly hair; and Stefan, so funny and gentle, with his bright-blue eyes... the son of a housemaid and Aulus Terentius Varro’s life-long body servant. As a child, Theodosia had been unable to say his true name, Stefanus, so she dubbed him “Stefan” and it stuck.

She could hardly wait to see her childhood pals again.

Why haven’t any of them come in for a visit tonight?

Lucilla joined her on the balcony and took a deep breath of the briny air. Born in Rome of German slave parents, she had never seen the sea before this evening.

“Well, what do you think?” Theodosia asked with a smile.

Lucilla turned her broad, blonde face to her mistress and shook her head in wonder, jingling her glass-bead earrings. Her long, looped yellow braids glistened in the lamplight. She stood a full hand’s length taller than Theodosia.

“Oh, miss, I didn’t know places like this even existed!”

“Well, they do, and this is not the finest. Just the best.”

Theodosia stepped back into the room, dropped into a chair with a fat cushion, and stuck her feet out for the slave to remove her sandals.

“Try to be happy here,” she said to the kneeling Lucilla. “I don’t intend to live in Rome ever again. This house is what matters most to me. So... start making friends, because we’re going to be here forever.”

“I talked with a few of the houseboys at dinner. They’re all so good-looking!” Lucilla rose and took the silver pins from her mistress’ hair, then smoothed it with a tortoise-shell comb. “And there’s a stable hand who’s an absolute giant.”

“Well, I’ll not stand in your way this time. That’s a promise.”

Theodosia closed her eyes, surrendered to Lucilla’s big-boned fingers on her neck and shoulders, and let herself be lulled nearly to sleep.

Suddenly—as unwelcome as a nightmare—the face of the man in the library came into her mind, shattering her peace for the second time that night. She jerked her head as if for another confrontation.

“Did I hurt you, miss?”

Theodosia shook her head and pulled her maid into a crouch.

“Tell me something. During your dinner tonight, did you hear the man Alexander mentioned?”

Lucilla’s brow furrowed.

“Alexander? Oh, yes. His name came up a lot. Someone said he had gone somewhere, to see somebody. A couple of men wanted his permission to do something. I’m sorry! I can’t remember any details.”

“How did they sound when they talked about him? Like they resented him?”

“It was more like they felt sorry for him.”

“Why? What did they say?”

A wary look appeared in Lucilla’s eyes.

“Do I have to report everything I hear in the kitchen?”

“Of course not. I don’t need spies in my own house. But there may be some danger. After what happened to Gaius...”

After what happened to Gaius in Rome, only the gods know what might happen to me... all alone out here.

“Tell me what you heard, Lucilla.”

“Just some men complaining about how you was planning to live here full time and take charge. Someone said it ain’t natural to be owned just by a woman. It seemed to slip out before they realized I was there. Then they shut up. But first, a bunch of them was saying that maybe things wasn’t so bad before, that at least the master left this Alexander in charge. And that he was one of them. You know... a slave and a man.”

“So that’s it. I’m not a man.”

“Someone said this Alexander was going to get the worst of it.”

Theodosia sat in silence, remembering her sharpness with the steward in the library. Roman women were notoriously harsh with their slaves. No doubt she'd already managed to confirm that reputation.

Well, so be it. Better a strong start than a weak one.

"There's something else." Lucilla stood and went back to massaging her mistress' shoulders. "Maybe I shouldn't say it, but I get the feeling this Alexander's way too powerful around here. Sounds like he thinks he's the master himself." She bent to Theodosia's ear and whispered, "Oh, miss, please do be careful with him! I get the feeling he could be real dangerous!"

A wave of affection for her maid swept over Theodosia.

"I'm not worried. If he can't adjust to me, I'll get rid of him."

"That'd be good. But still... I think it'd be better if you was married. Then all those fellows would be dealing with a man again. They don't think a woman can run a place like this, especially a young woman and... a pretty woman. There was plenty of comments about that, too."

Theodosia chuckled grimly. Gaius' reputation for abusing his slaves was so bad that even the most jaded Romans had snickered about it for years. And the gossip had increased since his murder. Theodosia had anticipated a better reception from those who had been the easy targets of his fury.

She left her chair and propped an arm against the wall next to the balcony.

"I'm not asking you to spy on anyone, Lucilla," she said, staring at the stars. "But lots of people think it was my brother's slaves who killed him. I wouldn't have come out to the villa by myself if I believed that, of course, but still..." She looked over her shoulder. "You're the only one I know for sure I can trust. If you hear anything that you think matters, you must tell me."

Lucilla made no response. Theodosia faced back toward the sea.

"Living here may not be easy for either one of us, you know. We just have to make sure it isn't life-threatening as well."

CHAPTER THREE

Alexander watched from the shadows of the atrium as Theodosia Varro lingered over her breakfast in the sunny, flower-filled peristyle. Her yellow tunic and ankle-length blue stola fluttered with each gust off the sea, echoing the blue and gold of the frescoed walls behind the colonnade that surrounded her. The breeze caught her hair, too, sending golden-brown wisps flying.

The late-May morning was perfect, so when the houseboys had finished scrubbing the atrium floor, Alexander had instructed them to set up a table beside the pool, next to the bronze figure of Adonis dressed as a hunter. The statue was Greek, of course, as was all the art in the house except the Etruscan antiques collected from the nearby necropolis.

Alexander had selected Dabini and Selicio, the tall Ethiopians who were the best waiters in the household, to attend the mistress this morning. He noted now, with satisfaction, that the two had made no mistakes.

Theodosia Varro even deigned to smile at them as she rose.

She sauntered along the pool, stopping every few paces to observe a goldfish, catch a scent, or admire a blossom.

Alexander's eyes never left her slim figure.

What a lovely thing this must be for you. Home again, after years in exile. What wouldn't I give for such a homecoming?

"Morning, Alexander," she said in Greek as she passed, trailing behind her a subtle clove-oil fragrance.

"Good morning, mistress."

How odd to speak his own language with her. Gaius Terentius Varro always flew into a rage if the Greeks in his household did so, even though he, like all educated Romans, spoke Greek fluently.

Alexander held the sapphire-colored curtain aside and stood behind Theodosia Varro in the doorway as she surveyed the library, awash now with light flooding through the eastern window of the five-sided room, whose views of the sea to the west were spectacular all day long. The morning sun gilded the walnut tables with their mother-of-pearl inlays, the finely wrought chairs, the bronze lamps, the blue-veined marble floor. In the late afternoon, the sun would turn it all to flame.

Alexander never failed to marvel at this room. Window glass was a luxury enjoyed by the wealthiest Romans only; he had never seen it before he arrived here. Having such a wonderful space all to himself had done much to ameliorate the bitterness of his slavery. Now—after eight years—he was losing it.

“You finished your work last night?” There was no hint of a smile in his new mistress’ voice as she marched to the big, sun-washed desk.

There’s no softness in this woman, for all her looks. Maybe I should have told... He sighed. *Too late for that.*

“Everything is ready.” He pulled out the chair for her.

Theodosia Varro sat; then she twisted in her seat to peer through the window, giving Alexander the chance to inspect her as she had inspected him last night. He was struck by the beauty of her skin and hands. Her fingers lay like cream against the deep blue of her stola. Even her arched nose—*so very Varro!*—was becoming. Though her hair was wind-blown now, she obviously preferred loose waves to the tightly curled styles favored by most Roman women. The sun burnished highlights in it that, when she turned back toward him, framed her face in gold.

“Well, Alexander, what have you to show me?”

There were sheets for each of her properties... the residences—this ancestral villa, with its enormous swath of surrounding land and a long stretch of seacoast; Gaius’ mansion on the Caelian Hill in Rome; and the little house in the Subura where Theodosia Varro had been living... and the revenue producers—the vineyards near Reate, the farm, the two marble quarries in Italy, and the three silver mines in Spain.

Alexander spread each set out in turn as he explained them. He had organized the data in columns detailing land, equipment, furnishings, artwork, and slaves; business expenses; gross and net profits and losses for each of the past eight years. It was no mean fortune. Any one of the mines produced enough in a few months to maintain an ordinary family in Rome for a lifetime. All told, the estate included four thousand slaves.

The delicate creature studying those pages might be the wealthiest unmarried woman in the whole Roman Empire.

His fellow slaves could stop their grumbling.

There'll be a new master around here soon enough.

“Why do these go back only eight years?” Theodosia Varro asked after an interval. “Didn’t my father keep records?”

“I couldn’t find any when I came, so I started keeping them.”

It was a matter of pride to Alexander that he wouldn’t have administered the estate any differently—or any better—had it belonged to him.

“Show me the list of slaves here at the villa.”

Alexander pulled out the appropriate sheets. One hundred and fifteen labored in and around the villa. He had categorized them by occupation, noting the age, nationality, and specific tasks of each. On the last page, she would find his name: Alexander, 29, Greek, steward.

The list covered eleven pages, and as Theodosia Varro read through them, Alexander saw her expression change. The eager look he first took for greed vanished, replaced by a furrowed brow. Her eyes scanned top to bottom, quickening with each sheet until she reached the last one.

“Why is it that I don’t recognize any but the oldest servants?”

“That was the master’s doing, mistress.” He paused for her response, but her face was blank, so he went on. “He sold almost the entire household—over a hundred—and bought new slaves to replace them.”

Her mouth fell open. Red blotches popped out on her cheeks.

“But he was raised with them, same as I was!”

“Apparently, that didn’t matter much to him.”

“Uproot an entire household?” Her voice was faint. “On a whim? Gods, how unfair!”

“Where is it written that a Roman can’t indulge his whims? That a Roman must be fair?”

Theodosia Varro turned toward the window, as if to hide her consternation. Alexander regarded her curiously. Up to now, their exchanges had reflected the usual balance of formality and intimacy between a slave and his owner... a self-conscious reserve on both sides.

Suddenly, there was a break in that reserve.

After a while, she leaned back and raised flushed cheeks to him, making no effort to hide her distress.

“The young women... the girls who were around here when I was growing up...” Her eyes were liquid. “All gone?”

“The only females he left were the laundresses and the wives and daughters of the shepherds, goatherds, and gardeners... who live by themselves a distance away.”

Theodosia Varro swung toward the window once more and sat with her back to him, obviously wrestling her emotions into submission. When at last she faced him again, that break in the reserve had yielded to the mask of command that he associated with Roman faces. The red blotches and liquid eyes had disappeared.

“You’ve done a fine job on these records.”

The unexpected compliment surprised him.

“Thank you, mistress.”

“And I understand you’re also responsible for the good service I’ve been enjoying. The waiters told me you trained the entire staff, or at least the younger servants... which I now see is just about everyone. Your talents are remarkable, it seems.” She paused. “Tell me something about yourself. What part of Greece are you from? How on earth did you end up here?”

Alexander sucked in a breath and considered his response. He’d won on the issue of his name, she on the issue of the library. Here was another issue to negotiate.

“That is a long story, mistress, and a very personal one. I would prefer not to talk about it.”

And then he waited. It was unheard of for a slave to refuse to answer a question, much less tell his owner that something was none of her business. In most Roman houses, a remark of that sort would quickly earn him a whipping for insolence.

Alexander looked his new mistress in the eye and awaited her anger.

Theodosia Varro stared at him in obvious disbelief, her eyes remote and appraising. After a long interval, she bobbed her head.

“As you choose.”



They were still in the library when Theodosia caught the sound of horses in the driveway. It was nearly noon.

“Go and see who it is.”

Alexander bowed and left. Theodosia knew she should wait, but she followed right away... too curious to hold back.

She was standing at the top of the wide steps in the main entryway, shielding her eyes from the glare, when a stable hand strode around the corner, coming to take the visitors’ horses. Theodosia exhaled sharply through her mouth.

Juno, what a man!

Tall and robust, with brawny arms and shoulders and a full beard, the slave looked as if he could haul Emperor Claudius' ceremonial chariot with just one of his massive hands. Though he wore the same coarse brown tunic as all the others in the household, on him it hung differently.

This must be the giant that Lucilla was talking about.

Two riders were accompanying an open carriage up the driveway. The burly fellow held the horses as the men dismounted. One was balding and heavy set, the other clearly his son by their identical jaw line.

Alexander offered his hand to a girl inside the carriage; then he lifted out a fat-faced boy of three or four, who immediately took off for the rocks along the shore. Alexander chased him and—to Theodosia's great surprise—swung the squealing child into the air and around his head for a few turns before returning him to his sister's arms.

"Theodosia?" said the heavy-set man. "I am Titus Flavius Sabinus Vespasianus the Elder. Of Reate and Caere."

"Hero of the conquest of Britain, then quaestor, then praetor... and one of my father's dearest friends." She smiled and gave him her hand. "See, General? I know all about you."

"Guess you do. That's dangerous in a woman."

Vespasian turned to his children.

"This is Titus Flavius Sabinus Vespasianus the Younger," he said, drawing the name out for effect, "my daughter, Flavia Domitilla, and troublesome little Domitian."

Already, Theodosia was charmed by Vespasian's Sabine accent. The laugh lines around his eyes testified to the earthy humor and tongue for which he was famous. She had heard much admiring talk about the general from Reate.

"You live in Caere now?" she asked.

"This side of town, near the tombs. Inland, so Flavia's nagging me to build a new villa by the sea." He cast his daughter a pseudo-malevolent frown. "But I'm an honest man, so how am I to get the money?"

"Guess she'll have to wait till she marries her rich lawyer," Titus said.

Titus was already taller than his father, though he looked no more than fifteen. Thick black hair rippled around his face; thick black lashes fringed his eyes.

"Sorry about Gaius' death, Theodosia," he said. "Must be scary for you, all alone here."

Theodosia stifled the urge to wince. The last thing she wanted was for her servants to think her new situation frightened her.

“I understand you’ve been seeing a lot of Lucius Sergius Silus,”
Vespasian said.

Theodosia nodded.

“He was my father’s lawyer and friend. My brother’s lawyer, too.”

“Flavia’s to marry him sometime next year,” Titus said. “Father’s
big catch for her. He’s only thirty years older than she is!”

“But he’s the emperor’s advisor,” Flavia said. “He’ll present me at
court when we’re married.”

“Gods, is Lucius in for a surprise. He thinks he’s getting some meek
little thing for a bride.”

“No, he doesn’t. He’s known me all my life.”

“Anyway,” Vespasian went on, “it was Lucius who told us you were
coming home this week. Since we live out here—so far from all the sons
and daughters of bitches in Rome—Lucius keeps us supplied with the
latest news and gossip.” Vespasian shook his head, eyes twinkling. “By
Juno’s tits, it’s hard to tell the difference these days. So, my dear, don’t
pay any attention to what you hear, especially from a young pup like
this.” He pointed his thumb at his son. “He likes to think he’s got Gaius’
murder all figured out.”

“It was the litter bearers killed Gaius,” Titus said. “But don’t worry.
Your slaves have been well warned by what happened to those four in the
Carcer Tullianus.”

Theodosia shuddered at thought of the notorious prison.

“Titus!” said Flavia. “You know they’d have put the whole
household in Rome to death if they thought the slaves did it. Lucius says
street thugs murdered Gaius.”

A year or so younger than her brother and pretty in an immature
way, Flavia exuded warmth and self-assurance.

“I’ve been dying to meet you, Theodosia! Actually, everyone’s been
curious, even Father.”

“But we really didn’t come just to gawk,” Vespasian said, “despite
what Flavia says. So... just ignore her.”

“That’s all he ever does,” Flavia said. “Ignore me.”

“We came to invite you to dinner—”

“See? Ignoring me!”

“To meet the neighboring landowners. Important folk, all of them.
Interested?”

Theodosia laughed at this example of resolute ignoring.

“Yes, but... only if you’ll stay and have lunch with me today. Eating
alone is going to get old fast. I can see that already.”



“Did you know my mother?” Theodosia asked Vespasian as they strolled through the masses of spotted lilies and red and yellow roses that separated the house from the pergola.

“Actually, no. I knew Terentius’ first wife, but your mother never joined us. I understood she was having a difficult pregnancy. And then, of course, she died.”

“Giving birth to me, I think.”

“You *think*?”

“Father never told me how she died. Never talked about her, just said he loved her so much he gave me her name.”

“Shame he didn’t give you a Roman name,” Titus said from behind them. “You’d have made a wonderful Terentia.”

“Oh, no!” said Flavia. “Greek names are lots more interesting.”

The girl bounded toward the pergola, ran up the stairs under the lilac-covered entryway, and skipped across to the stone wall.

“Theodosia,” she said as the others stepped through the fragrant purple arch, “this is absolutely the most gorgeous place I’ve ever seen!”

Theodosia laughed and nodded. Her earliest memories were of sunny afternoons in this airy, vine-covered arbor built on a flat rock projecting out over the sea. The breeze carried a fine spray from below as gulls swooped and called.

“Haven’t you ever been here before?”

“Gods, no. Gaius never invited anyone to his villa.”

“Except his buddy, Otho,” Titus said. “Folks used to say Otho spent as much time at Gaius’ villa as Gaius did. Of course, with Otho around, nobody else wanted to be here.”

“Someday,” Flavia said, “I’m going to have a villa by the sea, with a pergola exactly like this. Wait and see!”

Just then, Alexander came into the arbor bearing an ornate silver tray, pitcher, and cups, each of which—Theodosia noted as he drew closer—was adorned with a large ruby in an intricate raised setting.

“To your new life, Theodosia.” Vespasian raised the cup of Falernian that Alexander offered him.

“Ooooooh, what wonderful goblets!” Flavia turned hers around and inspected it closely. “This is biggest ruby I’ve ever seen, and... what an amazing design!”

“Looks like a serpent eating an apple,” Titus said.

“Is that your family crest?” Flavia asked.

“I’ve never seen it before.” Theodosia turned toward Alexander. “Are these family pieces?”

“No, mistress. My lord Gaius brought them from Rome last year.”

“Ooooooh, they’re exquisite!” Flavia ran her finger around the edge of her goblet and down the raised silver face of the ruby-eating snake. “Look at this... even little rubies in the eyes. You’re lucky to have such beautiful things, Theodosia.” She made a show of pouting. “Father’s just so tight. Won’t spend money on anything. Everything we use is as dull and practical as what our slaves use.”

“Soon, my girl,” her father said, “you can squander Lucius Sergius’ money. Let’s hope he’s rich enough to buy you all the things you want.”

Titus strolled across to stand beside Theodosia, who was leaning against the waist-high stone wall.

“Bother you to talk about Gaius’ death?” Titus wrapped his fingers around a vine as thick as his wrist.

“No. We weren’t close at all. I don’t think he ever forgave Father for marrying my mother. When Father died, Gaius banished me to Rome with Phoebe, my old Greek nurse. He wouldn’t give her to me legally, so we were always afraid he might decide to take her back or—” she shot a glance at Alexander, who was standing apart from the Romans, “even sell her to someone else. My poor Phoebe died before it occurred to him.”

Theodosia pulled a leaf off the vine, tore it into pieces, and dropped them one by one into the sea below.

“Gaius never gave me any money, either.”

“What’d you live on?”

“Well, he bought me a tiny house with a couple of shops on the street and let me keep the rents.”

“I didn’t know you lived by yourself in Rome,” Vespasian said. “Just assumed you were with Gaius.”

“Out of the question! He wanted nothing to do with me. No, I was in the Subura.”

Titus looked as if he might choke on his wine.

“The Subura? I wonder you didn’t get killed yourself, what with all the drunken foreigners and freedmen in that miserable slum.”

“Well, I never went out at night, and not all that much in the daytime either. Couldn’t afford to buy much. The rents never amounted to anything. One of the shops mostly stays empty, and in the other there’s an old sandal maker who’s sick a lot. Lately he’s paid me nothing, so nothing was just about all I had these last few months.”

“You didn’t even have a maid?” Flavia was shocked.

“It was four years after Phoebe died before I saved enough to buy a maid, but at least then I had something that Gaius couldn’t take away from me. Lucilla’s the only slave I ever owned till now.”

Just then, a troop of houseboys arrived with a round wooden tabletop, a stone pedestal, five chairs, and cushions, and began arranging them under Alexander’s direction.

“I never wanted to live in Rome,” Theodosia went on, “but Gaius wouldn’t let me stay here in our home. Not once did he invite me to that mansion he built on the Caelian Hill. And guess how often I saw him in those eight years.” She paused for effect. “Three times... and it was coincidental each time. He would be out in his litter with his friends, and I would go say hello to him. My beloved brother always acted as if I were some trash blown up on the street.”

Soon came the Ethiopian waiters with an assortment of fresh fruit, bread, olives, and an array of cheeses. The bowls and trays they carried all bore that same ruby-serpent design.

Titus sat down next to Theodosia and laid his hand on her arm.

“How is it that you’re not married yet?”

“Never found anyone I wanted to marry who wanted to marry me. And at this point, I’m probably too old.”

“Not a chance!” said Vespasian.

Flavia had pulled a roll apart and was stuffing it with cheese. Now she stared into Theodosia’s face.

“That’s unbelievable. Someone as beautiful as you had no suitors?”

“Nobody I’d consider. A couple of greasy freedmen. What Roman nobleman wants an orphaned, half-Greek girl with no dowry?”

Flavia shook her head in mock sympathy, her eyes a gleam.

“Ooooooh, well... I guess that’s one thing you needn’t worry about any more!”

Theodosia felt a blush creep into her cheeks. Titus’ hand on her arm suddenly felt very warm; she slipped out from under it on the pretense of reaching for a roll.

As they were eating, Domitian bolted from the table, raced down the steps, and headed around the side of the pergola, toward the cliff.

Alexander sprinted after him again and hauled him back.

“If you wish, sir,” he said to Vespasian, “I can find a playmate for him.”

“Yes, please.” Vespasian smiled as he spoke.

Theodosia blinked in astonishment.

A famous general... cordial to a slave!

She'd never heard of such a thing before.

Alexander set off for the house and soon returned, hand in hand with a curly headed boy of six or seven. Before long, the two children were chasing each other along the graveled garden paths.

"It's hard to believe that Gaius is dead," Vespasian remarked, watching the boys. "I remember when he was just Domitian's age. What a brutal way to go." He sighed. "There are so many thugs around nowadays, and not all of them are poor foreign folk. I know for a fact that some of our finest young patrician blood runs wild and rough at night."

"But the Praetorians never seem to catch them," Titus said, "as long as their rich papas are in the Senate."

"So the gossips have it. Just remember, my son... I'm not rich, and I'm not in the Senate. There'll be no bailout if you ever get into trouble."

"Have things really gotten so bad in Rome?" Flavia asked. "I knew street gangs beat people up sometimes, but I didn't think they were murderers, too."

"It was robbers killed Gaius," Theodosia said.

"Maybe. Maybe not." Titus glared at the silent slaves standing off to one side. "I still think it was the bearers."

"My son, they questioned them thoroughly."

"Tortured them?"

"Of course, and their stories all matched. Two men. Hooded. Armed with daggers. Some of the slaves even had stab wounds."

"They could have done that to themselves."

"Titus, that's silly." Flavia looked disgusted. "If they murdered Gaius, why would they wait around to get caught? Even a litter slave has more sense than that!"

"Well," said Theodosia, weary of the topic, "the investigators must have been convinced they weren't guilty. Otherwise—as Flavia said—they'd have put to death all of Gaius' slaves in Rome, not just the ones who let him get killed. That's the law, isn't it?"

"Suppose the killers weren't strangers?" It was plain that Titus was enjoying this game. "Suppose someone had a grudge against Gaius?"

The others simultaneously burst out laughing.

"Zeus!" Theodosia said. "My brother was a wastrel and a brute... and everyone knew it. But who would deliberately set out to kill the son of Aulus Terentius Varro?"

She looked the young man squarely in the eyes.

"It was a random act. Nothing more."

CHAPTER FOUR

The houseboy on duty in the atrium responded to the clap of Theodosia's hands.

"Tell Alexander to come here at once."

"But Alexander is—" The boy fidgeted nervously. "He was just starting to eat, mistress."

Theodosia hesitated. Alexander had stayed in the pergola with the waiters to serve her and her guests. In fairness, he should be allowed to finish his own lunch. But there would be others with him in the kitchen.

Good chance to show them all who's in charge now.

"Do as you're told, boy."

Before she knew it, Alexander was standing in the curtained doorway, no expression on his angular face.

"As I told you last night," Theodosia said in Greek, "we have many things to discuss and do today. My family's personal items, to start. It's time you turned them over to me."

Without a word, Alexander stepped to the enormous strongbox and unfastened a leather loop from his leather belt. The iron keys jangled against each other as he selected one, inserted it into the lock, and turned it with both hands. Theodosia remembered when it was a punishable offense for a slave to loiter near her father's strongbox.

Now a slave keeps the key.

The ancient lock snapped as it gave way. Alexander lifted the lid, retreated a step, and motioned toward the chest.

The mustiness of long-stored goods half choked Theodosia as she looked in at scores of wooden boxes stacked to fill three quarters of the large space. She could reach the top ones, but it would be difficult—and undignified—for her to lean over and rummage through the chest.

She looked at Alexander.

“Shall I hand them to you, mistress?”

“Yes, please.”

As soon as she spoke, she realized that she had mimicked Vespasian, answering a slave with all the politeness she would accord an equal. That “please” had come naturally, though. She decided not to sour the moment by retracting it.

She sat near the chest as box after box of treasures passed across her lap... more money and jewels than she had ever imagined existed in the world. Boxes of gold and silver coins. Boxes of long gold bars. Boxes of necklaces. Boxes of bracelets. Boxes of rings. Boxes of earrings. Boxes of pearls. Boxes of unset gemstones of all sizes, colors, and shapes. And boxes and boxes and boxes of rubies.

At first, Theodosia marveled at each piece, taking it out and holding it up to catch the warm afternoon light, delighted by what she saw.

But the delight didn’t last long.

After an hour, she began to grow restless. Alexander continued handing boxes to her, placing each one’s predecessor on the floor in an ever-widening circle around her chair. Another hour later, she was no longer picking up even the finest pieces. Her eyes could no longer focus on them. Her head hurt. Her mouth felt dry.

Alexander was still standing by the chest, holding another unopened box. Theodosia let him take the previous one from her hand; then she shook her head and glanced at him, catching a faint smile in his eyes.

“No more. Leave the rest where they are.”

“You are tired, mistress?” Alexander spoke indulgently, as one humors a child, but there was irony in his voice.

Theodosia chewed on the inside of her upper lip, feeling ludicrous.

“I had no idea we were talking about anything like this. Where did it all come from?”

Alexander shrugged.

“Who knows? Some of the mounted pieces are family heirlooms, but my lord Gaius acquired many others, and all the unset gems. He couldn’t resist a beautiful stone, especially a ruby. He’d buy whatever the dealers showed him, no matter what it cost. A few dozen pieces he had made into jewelry and the dinnerware we served you on today, but everything else ended up here, unset and unworn.”

Theodosia stared at the large circle of boxes on the floor. Nothing in her past had prepared her for the way she felt right now. She had been raised with the standard Roman indifference to inferiors; never before had

she stopped to think about the source of her family's wealth. Now, gaping at the absurd fortune at her feet—a sight far more evocative than lists of men and mines and machinery—she realized what it meant.

Immortal gods! Four thousand slaves!

In shock and guilt, she struck out at the bearer of the bad news.

“So... Alexander! The slaves in the mines and quarries and fields spend their lives sweating to produce vast sums of money, and Gaius throws it away on useless baubles and pretty boys. That's disgusting! Didn't you ever try to stop him?”

Alexander shook his head slowly and deliberately.

“He had a right to spend his money as he wished. He was the master, not I.”

“But you could have said something! You were his steward!”

“A steward is still a slave, mistress, and a slave does not tell the man who owns him what he may or may not do with his property.” The smile had faded from Alexander's face, but the bite was not gone from his voice. “That's not the way to live a long and happy life.”

Half blind with a fury that even she didn't fully understand, Theodosia leaped to her feet.

“But why should you care so much about his money when he was determined to waste it? Why keep such meticulous records of his property? Why exert yourself so far beyond what was required?”

Her rising voice sounded odd to her, as if it came from someone else.

“I don't understand you, Alexander! You had the key to that chest! Why didn't you help yourself to a few of these boxes and head straight for the port at Martanum? Nobody would've stopped you. You could've gotten away without being challenged, and just a fraction of this would've bought a secure hiding place for the rest of your life. By all the gods, I wouldn't have hesitated an instant in your place!”

Suddenly aware of what she was saying, Theodosia jerked her head around and fled to the nearest window.

What a fool!

She was sweating now.

*Forgetting every common-sense rule of how to deal with a slave...
Suggesting that he steal and run away...*

She turned to face him, propping her hands on the window frame behind her, as if braced for an attack.

How do I recover from this?

Alexander exhaled through pursed lips, his intense eyes piercing hers as he produced a crooked smile.

“Want to take that speech back, mistress? I can pretend I never heard it.”

Theodosia stared at him.

Juno, help me! What do I say now?

“You have my word,” Alexander went on. “I’ll never mention it again. Not to you or to anyone else.”

Theodosia leaned against the window frame and closed her eyes.

“No.” She looked into his face. “It was a mistake for me to say what I just said, and we both know it, but it’s no good pretending I didn’t say it. My questions to you were improper and unwise—not to mention unfair to you—but I did ask them and, in truth, I’m curious to know. Don’t feel compelled to answer though.” She risked a smile of her own. “As you reminded me this morning... no one has the right to probe too far into the privacy of another, not even that of her slave.”

Alexander stepped closer. Last night, he had frightened her, but now, for some reason, he no longer did. The fragile air of trust she felt would have seemed impossible, even that morning.

“Thank you.” The irony was gone from his voice, replaced by a warmth that Theodosia hadn’t heard there before. “I appreciate your frankness and your sensitivity, mistress. There are many things—many memories—that are painful for me.”

As he spoke, Alexander rubbed a finger absentmindedly across the jagged scar on his jaw.

Theodosia made no reply. He might volunteer more information than she could ever force out of him.

“My lord Gaius once tried to make me talk about myself, and I refused, as I did with you this morning. Only he didn’t let me out of the fire so quickly as you. But,” his tone sharpened a bit, “if we may go back to your dangerously honest outburst... There’s no reason why I shouldn’t give you some answers. Why take such pains? Why not steal a box or two? Why not run away? Fact is, I’ve asked myself those same questions and others, many times. I don’t have any answers.”

“Maybe you were afraid.”

“Afraid. That must be it.” The irony was back. “If you say so, anyway.”

“You’re insolent, you know.”

“Can a slave be both insolent and afraid?”

Theodosia paused, studying the angles of his face.

“Probably not.”

Her eyes lingered on his, and after a while she shook her head.

“No, Alexander, I don’t think you’re afraid. It’s something else. Am I right that you once were free?”

“How do you know?”

“It shows. The look on your face. Your voice. The way you carry yourself. You don’t have the bearing of a man born to slavery. And didn’t you tell me last night that you had a name before you had a master?”

“You were listening. I wasn’t sure.”

“I was listening. I just didn’t like what I was hearing.” She gave him another tentative smile. “Anyway, what I suspect is that you opted to serve Gaius better than he deserved to be served as a way of proving something to yourself, about yourself.”

“You’ve read Seneca, it seems.”

“So have you, it seems.”

Theodosia was still propped against the window frame, facing into the room. Alexander came up beside her and peered out through the glass.

“As a way of proving... what?”

“Well, you’re a proud man. Odd thing to say about a slave, but it’s obviously true.”

“A lot of good pride does me.”

“So one might think, but— Look, I know what my brother was, and so do you. Everyone in Rome knew he was a monster and a fool. Gaius was nowhere near you, mentally and morally, and you knew it, but things like intelligence and morals don’t matter much between Roman masters and Greek slaves. His power over you was absolute, and that galled you.”

Theodosia stopped to give Alexander a chance to respond, but he said nothing. After a few breaths she went on, feeling her way through the tangle of her thoughts.

“I think you saw your mind as the only thing that Gaius couldn’t command. By serving him better than he deserved to be served, you stripped a bit of power from him.” She chuckled at the idea forming in her head. “I think your dedicated service was a form of rebellion that my brother was just too stupid to see.”

Alexander stood gazing out the window as Theodosia watched his face. When he finally spoke, it was as if to the sea outside. His words were open and honest, and there was no hint of servility in his voice.

“Well, we’re certainly being candid today.” He nodded, eyes still on the sea. “You’re right about one thing, at least. It did gall me to be forced to serve and obey a man who had absolute power over me simply because he was a Roman and I a Greek. And yes, you’re right. I hated him.”

“No doubt you feel the same way about me.”

“I did, till just now.”

“What changed your mind?”

Alexander turned his head and looked directly into Theodosia’s eyes at close range. The sudden intimacy caught her off guard, yet she didn’t seem able to move.

“Perhaps I see that you possess all the attributes your brother lacked. You’re bright, intuitive, and clearly a moral woman. If it’s true, as you say, that my face and voice and bearing betray my former freedom, then it’s equally evident that you would do no harm to anyone.”

Theodosia wanted to look away but couldn’t.

“So, you see,” Alexander said, “no matter how stern you’d like your slaves to think you are, it’s a pose as translucent as the wings of a butterfly.”

Now it was Theodosia’s turn to be speechless. After a moment, she freed her eyes from the grasp of his and moved to the next window, propped her palms on each side of the frame and turned her head slightly toward him.

“All this makes me wonder what form your rebellion will take... now that I’ve discovered your secret and you mine.”

“Perhaps I will feel no need to rebel against you. It should be a pleasant novelty to serve a Roman who is not only wealthy and powerful but intelligent and moral as well. From what I’ve seen, that’s a rare combination indeed.”

Theodosia threw her head back and laughed aloud at that sally, feeling at ease with him for the first time.

“Oh, Alexander! I’m sorry to disappoint you, but I’m afraid you’re in for a terrible letdown.”

“Why? Which of those attributes doesn’t fit? Your morality? Your wealth?” Irony again.

“Actually, I wish that were it.” She snickered. “Look, I’m just a woman, which means that the foulest free-born Roman male sleeping off his cheap-wine stupor in the street has more legal rights than I. And just wait till I marry. If I marry. Watch what happens then to my freedom, my property, and my so-called power. Besides,” she said, over-enunciating for effect, “my mother was Greek, which makes me a half-breed, neither fish nor fowl. A huge social obstacle. So you see, Alexander, we are both pawns at the mercy of Rome.”

Alexander frowned at that. Without a word, he went to the chest, which still lay open awaiting the return of its plundered contents. Reaching in, he removed another—much smaller—box. Then he stood

before her again, his deportment much more formal than before. With a stiff bow, he handed the tiny box to her unopened.

Puzzled, Theodosia dropped her eyes and lifted the lid. Inside, nestled into a white linen cloth, lay a gold signet ring.

Father's seal. The symbol of Varro prestige for generations.

"Lucius Sergius Silus," said Alexander, "took it off your brother's hand the day after the murder and gave it to me for safekeeping."

Theodosia slipped the ring onto the index finger of her right hand. It was much too big.

"Why did you wait till this moment to give it to me?"

"You forbade me to bring anything else out of the chest, remember? But maybe it's not such bad timing, after all, since you appear to need consolation for your hopeless position in this cruel world that has treated you so savagely."

"I guess to someone in your position, my position doesn't seem too bad at all."

"No, miss, it doesn't."

It was the first time that Alexander had dropped the stiff "mistress" in favor of the diminutive commonly used by close family servants. It was a natural shift that reflected the changing tenor of their relationship.

Their meeting had taken most of the day; soon it would be dinnertime. Theodosia remembered with regret that she had deprived Alexander of his lunch.

"Return the boxes to the chest and lock it up. Then, I suspect, you'll want to finish that meal I forced you to abandon."

She was almost to the door when he called to her.

"One more thing, miss, please. With your permission, I'd like to burn some old documents that I recently found in the chest. Nothing you'll ever need."

Theodosia glanced back.

Those old things are part of my heritage.

"No. Hold on to them for now. I may want to take a look at them someday."

CHAPTER FIVE

Alexander completed his task and returned to the cubicle that was a perquisite of his position. Most of the household slaves slept on straw piles in dank barracks below the kitchen. The stable hands enjoyed fresher air, but their loft above the horses was a firetrap. The shepherds and goatherds lived in mud huts a mile to the north, with their own families, kitchen, garden, chickens, and dogs... a self-contained community. The only ones who slept in the villa were the porter, Lucilla, and Alexander.

His tiny room at the service end of the peristyle had little in common with the rest of the house. No frescoes brightened its tufa walls. No mosaic enlivened its cement floor. Besides the low bed, there were only a small chest and a lamp. No chair. No window. The rear wing was far from the hypocaust that heated the family rooms; it was cold in winter.

But this was Alexander's sanctuary. Here alone he found privacy.

Tired and tense after the astonishing afternoon with Theodosia Varro, he closed the door, stretched out, and tried not to hear the voices of waiters carrying her dinner to the dining room. Yesterday at this time he hadn't even met the new mistress. Now they knew one another, but the master-slave formality that Alexander had expected—and used so well to keep his distance from Gaius—had evaporated in just a few hours.

Wide-eyed, he stared at the ceiling, thinking of that evening a week ago when he had followed Stefan up the creaky ladder to the stable loft. He remembered his amazement as Stefan pulled a gunny sack from under a pile of straw and handed Alexander his treasures: a painted wooden doll, a child's silver cup, and a lock of the same golden-brown hair that would later catch Alexander's eye in the library... keepsakes of a girl Stefan had loved all his life and never expected to see again.

But Alexander had just told him that she was, in fact, coming back.

Now, as he lay on his bed in the black cubicle, two faces appeared on the ceiling, as if by some magic of his mind. The gold-flecked eyes and creamy features of one were sharp and fresh. He knew Theodosia Varro's voice, her clove-oil fragrance, the way her hair gleamed in the sun. The other face was harder to recall... just an olive-toned oval surrounded by dark, curly hair. The vagueness of Antibe's features haunted him.

Sweet gods of Greece, I can't even remember the color of her eyes!

After a time, he lit the lamp, took a sheet of papyrus from the chest, and began to write in Greek. The poem came slowly... a love lyric to the young wife whose face and voice seemed harder to recall with each passing year. When it was done, he lay back and let himself fall asleep.

When he awoke, he knew by the din in the kitchen hall that the mistress had finished her meal. He bundled the poem with others in the chest, stepped into the bright night, and made his way—as he often did—to an ancient pine at the edge of the garden, beside the sea. Most times when Alexander had gone out like this, his master had been in Rome, the suite on the second floor dark and shuttered. But tonight the shutters were open, and between them he could see the crimson, green, and gold frescoes aglow in the light of the lamp-trees. Soft notes of a cithara drifted out. A clear, lovely voice was singing in Greek.

He stood for a while staring at the water, enjoying the music.

Then, abruptly, it stopped. He glanced up to see a white-clad figure step onto the balcony. It was Theodosia Varro.

She leaned against the railing and raised her face to the sky, apparently unaware of the man in the shadows below. Alexander watched her briefly, then slipped away to the kitchen.

The new mistress had respected his privacy. He would not spy on her.



Theodosia paced restlessly in her suite. Worries chased each other through her head like angry squirrels.

Fear from the unsolved mystery of Gaius' murder...

Anxiety about her too-frank conversation with Alexander...

Guilt for the absurd fortune in her strongbox...

And a strange new emotion that she couldn't yet define...

Lucilla had unpacked the cithara that Phoebe had taught Theodosia to play so long ago. Hoping to take her mind off her worries, Theodosia picked out a few ballads before laying it down. The muse was absent.

With the cithara came memories of early days in the Subura. After Phoebe's death, Theodosia had kept honing her skill at improvising. In recent years, Lucilla, the cithara, and a few books had provided companionship at times like this. But Lucilla had disappeared tonight.

The soft night beckoned, so she went to her balcony. A hum of voices from the kitchen formed a counterpoint to the waves breaking on the rocks below. Lucilla would be there with the others.

Love to know what they're talking about.

Theodosia propped her arms on the railing and gazed at Orion.

My only companion tonight, I guess.

Then she knew. Loneliness was that new emotion tormenting her.

It was one thing to be a poor girl living with her maid, and quite another thing to be the mistress of an estate like this. For years, she and Lucilla had ignored the social gap between them as they shopped and cooked and ate every meal together. But that gap had widened fast in the last few days and would continue to grow.

Can I ever confide in Lucilla again if I think she'll be out there every night, gossiping about me with my other slaves?

As the hubbub from the kitchen heightened the silence of the elegant apartment, Theodosia realized how thoroughly alone she was.

Everyone has someone to talk to but me.

She decided to take a walk.

Downstairs, she tiptoed past old Jason, the porter—one of the few servants left from her father's day—who was dozing as he always had on his couch by the main door, and hurried out to the gardens. Meticulously designed when the villa was new, they swept along three sides of the house, engulfed the pergola, and fanned out to embrace the shore.

Enjoying the silver light that fell through the vines and leaves onto the stone floor, Theodosia made her way to the far side of the pergola and stared into the cove below, where she had often played as a child.

Juno the moon winked conspiratorially, slipping from cloud to cloud, teasing her to the beach. The rocky steps were moss-covered and slick. Weeds whipped her ankles, but she reached the bottom without slipping.

Halfway across the beach, she kicked off her sandals and squished through the sand to a flat boulder lying just above the tide. There she climbed up, dangled her feet into the water, and reclined on the rock. Spellbound, she savored the mass of stars and the rustic silence—so unlike the cacophony of Rome at night—and lost track of time.

After a while, hearing voices, she glanced toward the pergola overhead. Staring down at her were Alexander and the gigantic stable

hand. She turned her face away, hoping they would ignore her, but when she looked again they had reached the bottom of the steps and were headed in her direction.

“What are you doing here?” she said in Greek, sitting up but making no effort to pull her feet from the water.

The steward came as close as he could without wading into the surf, leaving his companion a few paces behind. He answered in Latin.

“Lucilla was worried about you, miss.”

“I’m perfectly fine,” she said in Latin. “I’ll be along in a bit.”

The giant came forward now, too, and addressed Theodosia. It was a terrible breach of protocol since she hadn’t acknowledged him, much less given him permission to speak. Furthermore, as if to compound his impudence, he used the familiar form of address.

“It ain’t safe for you to come here alone, miss,” he said in uneducated Latin, and suddenly Theodosia understood why Alexander had switched languages. “There are brigands up and down the coast. Bet they wouldn’t like nothing better than to get their hands on you.”

“What would it be to you if they did?”

“I’d feel bad, as an old friend... if you’ll let me use that term with you.” The big man looked anxious. “You don’t recognize me, do you? I’m Stefan, miss.”

“Stefan?” She frowned in disbelief. “Little Stefanus... who used to bring sweets from the kitchen for all of us to feast on down here?”

He nodded as his shaggy face relaxed under a grin.

“And once took a beating when I snitched a honey cake intended for the master’s dinner party. Have I changed so much, miss, that you didn’t know me?”

Theodosia lifted her feet from the water and rose to her full height on the boulder. The stable hand was standing in the sand, but still he towered above her.

“Stefan? Oh, yes, you have changed. Quite a bit! I had no idea who you were.”

She gave him her hands and let him help her off the rock.

“Why didn’t you come in last night to say hello?”

Stefan stared at her, saying nothing. It was Alexander who answered.

“He hasn’t been sure how to deal with you, miss. You spent many years in Rome, and he didn’t know how you’d feel now about people who knew you as a child. Especially since your brother sold off almost everyone else he’d grown up with.”

“Well, I’m not my brother! But, Stefan, why didn’t he sell you, too?”

“Oh, he threatened to many times, up to a couple of days before he got killed. Alexander always managed to talk him out of it. Kept telling him how much more I’d be worth in the market once I stopped growing.”

Theodosia turned grateful eyes to Alexander.

Then she went to find her sandals, slipped them on, and headed for the stairs. Back in the gardens, she looked once more toward the cove.

“I love it down there. Doesn’t the army try to capture the brigands?”

“They go on raids every month,” Alexander said, “and they do get some each time, but they can’t get all of them.”

“Escaped slaves, no doubt. Have any of ours ever joined them?”

Then she blushed, suddenly uncomfortable with the topic.

“Not to join the brigands,” Alexander said. “But three fellows did run off together several years ago.”

“What happened to them? Did they get away?”

“My lord Gaius hired men to hunt them. It took many months and lots of money, but they caught two in Sicily and returned them to him.”

“What did Gaius do?”

“You know the usual punishment for running away.”

“Flogging,” she said softly. “Crucifixion, sometimes, if the escape is part of a slave uprising.”

“My lord Gaius decided to do both, to teach us all a good lesson, so the next day he sent for a meatman.”

“Meatman?”

“A professional flogger, miss.” Alexander’s tone was cool.

“With a set of mean-looking whips.” Stefan was more passionate. “Sharp pieces of metal set into the thongs.”

“You know that big double oak by the kitchen?” Alexander’s voice remained chillingly placid. “Well, the meatman crucified those two on it early one morning. Drove his long iron spikes through their hands and wrists... one man on each side of the double trunk, so they faced each other through the gap. They hung there the whole day, screeching and begging for mercy. That evening, your brother made all the rest of us watch as the meatman whipped them to death, right there on that tree.”

“What about the third man who ran away?” Theodosia asked when she trusted herself to speak.

“We never heard anything more from him.”

Without another word, Theodosia set off at a clip for the house. Halfway along the path, she stopped and turned.

“Something’s just occurred to me. That runaway you mentioned, the one who never was caught— Couldn’t he have been one of the thugs who

ambushed my brother? Maybe he recognized Gaius during the robbery and decided to kill him.”

“Not likely,” Alexander said.

“No, listen. Wealthy patricians don’t tend to get murdered on the street in Rome. Robbed, yes, but not killed. However, if one of the thugs was the third man who escaped from here... wouldn’t he have had reason for wanting to avenge his friends? That’s got to be it! He was involved in a random street crime when he saw his chance to get even.”

Alexander’s eyes darted from Theodosia’s face to Stefan’s.

“It wasn’t a robbery, miss. The master’s gold signet ring was still on his finger when the officials recovered his body later that night.”

“Well... robbers wouldn’t take anything so identifiable.”

“There were no robbers involved. And it wasn’t a random act.”

Theodosia paused for a moment. Alexander spoke with conviction, yet this information, if true, would shatter everything her fragile sense of security was built on.

“How do you know that?” she demanded.

The steward merely shook his head.

“Alexander, statements like that don’t come out of the blue. You must have some reason.”

“Please don’t ask me for reasons. I’m telling you the truth, but I can’t tell you how I know about it.”

Theodosia felt a surge of anger.

“Just because you refused to answer a few questions this morning—”

“That’s not it, miss.”

“Then... you’re saying the bearers really were guilty and the investigators covered it up. A lot of people thought so, and when the litter slaves were put to death it seemed to corroborate that rumor. But I didn’t believe it since the emperor didn’t order the execution of every slave in Gaius’ household in Rome.” She paused again. “There’s no getting around a certain question. Tribune Otho told me he saw you in Rome the day Gaius was murdered. Said he talked to you and—”

“That’s not true.”

“You’re accusing Tribune Marcus Salvius Otho of lying?”

“No. Just that... the only patrician I spoke with was Sergius Silus.”

“What were you doing in the city?”

“I went there on the master’s business.”

“So, why weren’t you there when the authorities sealed his mansion the next morning? After Gaius died, they wouldn’t let anyone in or out until Emperor Claudius decided the fate of the slaves.”

“I left Rome late that afternoon, several hours before the murder. Ask General Vespasian. I stopped by his villa that evening on my way through Caere, bearing a message for him from Sergius Silus.”

“You could have turned around, gone back, and used that as your alibi. Gaius was killed around midnight. You see how easy it would be for someone to suspect you in this business? And you’ve already told me how much you hated my brother.”

“I had nothing to do with your brother’s murder, and the authorities wouldn’t have covered up a slave revolt if they thought that’s what it was. They’d have executed every one of his slaves in Rome. No, miss, the fact that robbers didn’t kill him doesn’t automatically mean his slaves did it.”

“You sound like Titus.”

“Maybe he’s on to something. Think about it. What was my lord Gaius doing in the brothel district in the middle of the night without bodyguards? Nobody expects litter bearers to provide any protection.”

“Gaius went there all the time without guards. You know that. Gods, everyone in Rome knew that.”

“Yes, miss, everyone in Rome knew that.”

“Look, he was in a bad area and got jumped by robbers, who killed him. Either that or he was extraordinarily obnoxious that night, and his bearers rid themselves of him. No other alternatives were investigated.”

“And why weren’t they?”

Theodosia started to answer but stopped short. Robbers would have taken a gold ring. Slaves had nothing to gain from murdering their master. Their claims of innocence would not be believed, even when made under torture. Gaius’ late-night trips were predictable. If anyone had wanted to murder him, that was the perfect time and place to do it.

Alexander shouldn’t have known anything about his master’s death, and he shouldn’t have said anything about it to Theodosia. She’d be justified in turning him in to the Praetorian Guards. And now he was insinuating conspiracy with a calm and confidence that unnerved her. She had no reason to believe him, and yet...

Vespasian’s words returned to her memory.

“There are so many thugs around nowadays, and not all of them are poor foreign folk.”

Theodosia shivered in the warm spring night.

Was Gaius murdered by someone with enough power to influence the investigation?

She shivered again.

And if so, what does that mean for me?

CHAPTER SIX

Full of energy despite a sleepless night, Theodosia rose the next morning with plans to explore every corner of her villa. She felt confident today—her second full day at home—as if confronting her fears in the dark had strengthened her.

She began with the storage area behind the peristyle, sticking her head into every cubicle she passed. There were sacks of barley and other grains; amphorae of olives in their oil; tubs of fruit and nuts from last fall's harvest; honey and pungent spices. One room was locked; she supposed the wine was stored there. Nearby was a tiny sleeping chamber.

Everything appeared to be in order, so she headed to the kitchen, hoping it would be as she remembered... a noisy finch singing in its cage by the door, something fragrant simmering in a kettle over the fire pit, and rough-hewn tables, stools, and benches scattered around the room.

Since time began, it seemed, Varro slaves had gathered here for after-work camaraderie. Theodosia's father had followed the philosophy of his famous grandfather from Reate, Marcus Terentius Varro, among whose prolific writings were treatises on humane slave management. Even Gaius—who abused his servants in many ways—had not chosen to deny them the evenings of unfettered leisure that were a family tradition.

As she neared the kitchen this morning, Theodosia heard a harsh voice railing at someone. Stepping to the door, she saw Milo, the bald-pated head cook, sitting with his back to her, jabbing his finger into the chest of the same curly haired boy whom Alexander had brought to play with Domitian. The kitchen staff sprawled around the table, laughing.

The scullion stood before Milo, his head down. Abruptly, Milo leaned forward, grabbed his shoulder with one hand, and slapped him in the face with the other. The boy tried to pull away, but he couldn't break

Milo's grip. Only when he looked up did anyone notice Theodosia in the doorway.

The child's eyes seemed to grow larger and freeze as he spotted her.

The others followed his gaze, their laughter stopping as they jumped to their feet, scraping benches across the floor and rocking the table. Milo, his face reddening, released the scullion. As Theodosia stood wondering whether to interfere, the boy ran over and dropped to the floor beside her.

"What has he done?" she asked after a moment.

"He is uncooperative and disobedient, mistress. Shirks his duties every chance he gets." Despite being called to account before his staff, Milo's voice sounded steady. "This morning, I sent him to bring buckets of water to wash the dishes. Instead, Denos here," he gestured to one of his assistants, "caught him in the garden, drawing in the dirt with a stick."

Theodosia thought of the piped-in, heated water that supplied the lavish bath in the house. Apparently, such conveniences didn't extend to the working parts of the villa.

Before she could reply, she heard footsteps behind her and turned. The scullion dashed out the door to Alexander, who had stopped a few paces away. To Theodosia's surprise, the boy buried his face in the steward's tunic and clutched him about the legs.

Without acknowledging her, Alexander took the child in his arms and whispered something that Theodosia couldn't hear.

She stepped outside.

"Bring him and come with me."

She led the way into the garden, to a circle of pink oleanders surrounding an elaborate Etruscan urn that had been made into a fountain. Reaching out to the boy in Alexander's arms, she pushed up the long curls that fell over his forehead. There were three old scars on his face, and one cheek was red from Milo's slap. Still, he was beautiful.

"What's your name?"

The boy clung to Alexander's shoulder.

"Don't you have a name?"

"Philip of Macedonia." The voice was expressionless.

"Tell the mistress your real name," Alexander said in Greek, "and speak to her in our language."

The child stared at Theodosia. Finally, he answered... in Greek.

"My mother and father called me Lycos."

"Well," Theodosia replied in Greek, "I think we should call you Lycos, too. Don't you agree, Alexander?"

Alexander gave her a look she had not seen on his face before.

"I certainly do, miss. It was the master who mocked him with the name of our great Greek king. It amused him to give us ludicrous names. He became angry if Lycos used his real name or mine."

"And I'll be angry if anyone calls you anything but Lycos." She patted his arm. "Now, you go play in the garden."

Alexander set the child down and whispered again in his ear. Lycos grinned and scampered away.

"You're fond of that boy," Theodosia said.

"He's a sweet child. Reminds me of another boy I used to know."

"Your own son, perhaps?" The hunch came to her in the instant she articulated it. "You said yesterday that many of your memories are painful. I know I've no right to pry, but am I wrong to guess that you once had a wife and family?"

Theodosia thought he would reproach her, but he just shook his head.

"No, miss, you are not wrong."

"Where are they now?"

"I don't know. I wrote three letters to my wife in Corinth after I came here, but never got an answer."

"How did you send those letters?"

"Bribed sailors leaving Martanum and Ostia for Corinth. Only the gods know if they were ever delivered. A slave's letters, you know. They all probably ended up in the sea."

"Probably so, if they went without a Roman seal."

Alexander stared into the fountain.

"Have you ever loved someone you were powerless to protect?"

"Only Phoebe, my nurse."

"Then you know how terrible it is."

"Maybe I can help you." She snapped a blossom off an oleander and twirled it. "Any letter that Theodosia Varro writes will be delivered."

That unfamiliar expression returned to Alexander's eyes as he looked at her. Theodosia felt as if she had cracked the shell of a very hard nut.

"You would help me find my wife and son?"

"If I can."

"Oh, miss!" Alexander gave an odd half-laugh. "You've no idea how often I have begged the gods to let me know they are alive somewhere. Just to know they are still alive." His voice was husky but controlled. "You asked me yesterday why I hadn't run away. Well, it did occur to me to do so, many times. I kept thinking of Antibe and my little Niko, and also of the fear we would all live in, even if I could get away and find them. So maybe you were right yesterday, when you said I was afraid."

He turned back to the fountain.

Don't interrupt. Let him talk.

"When I was a boy in Corinth, my parents drilled into me the most important lessons a Greek can ever learn. The Romans are all powerful. There's nowhere one can go to escape the reach of Rome. And they were right! All the jewels in that chest couldn't buy safety with so much money and influence chasing me. Your brother was vindictive and cruel. He'd have hunted me down like he did those two in Sicily, just for the fun of it. I couldn't stand being torn from Antibe and Niko again and brought back to face the punishment given to runaways. I'd seen what he would do, and it was dreadful, as I told you last night."

He paused, but Theodosia—sitting now on the fountain edge, letting the water cascade over her fingers—still made no comment.

"I know how the Romans operate," Alexander went on. "They surely sold my wife and son into slavery when they sold me, so I'd be risking that same punishment for them if I tried to free them, which I can't do, because I don't have any idea where they are. They might be in Lusitania, or in Africa, or in Britain. I wouldn't know where to start searching for them, even if I were free and could do it openly."

After another silence, Theodosia looked up.

"I'll write a letter and see if I can locate your wife and son. If so, maybe I can find a way to bring them here. The stewards of estates like this often have their own families; no reason why you should be any different. But... there's a catch."

She rose and confronted him, eye to eye.

"In return for my help, I'm going to demand more of you than Gaius ever did. I want your frankest advice. Your total honesty. I want your friendship, too. I don't want to spend my life worrying that you might be my enemy... somehow conspiring or working against me."

"There's no way I could be your enemy, under the circumstances."

"Oh, I think you could be a real enemy if you chose to be, regardless of the circumstances. But I want more from you than just not to be my enemy. I want us to be friends." She waited for his response, but none came. "Friendship is not something I can order you to give me. Friendship must come freely, as a gift. Can you accept a Varro as your friend?"

"It's a bit hard to think of the person who owns you as a friend."

"Willing to give it a try?"

Alexander turned and stepped away.

"You say you want my honesty? Well—in all honesty—I don't think we can be friends. That's not possible, under these circumstances."

“If not friends, then, at least not enemies. I’ll help you, voluntarily, if you’ll do the same for me. Well, no... maybe it won’t always be voluntary on your part, because—as we both know—I do hold the power in this relationship, and I’ll use it if I have to. I’d prefer your voluntary help, though.” She went to stand in front of him. “Look. Between what you told me last night and what Lucilla says all my other slaves think of me... I’m sure I have enemies I don’t even begin to know about. It doesn’t seem too farfetched that you might be one of them.”

“Miss, I—”

“So, just in case, I’m willing to take some steps to ensure that you have a stake in my survival. Since my father was once governor of Corinth, I should be able to get some answers. We’ll write a letter today, and you may take it to Ostia tomorrow. With my seal on it, you can be sure that it will be both delivered and answered.”

Alexander regarded her warily.

“What do I have to do to earn that favor?”

“Well, since you’re not willing to tackle something as difficult as friendship with a Varro... we’ll make it easier. First, you will tell me everything you know about my brother’s murder.”

“Miss—”

“Everything.” She paused to let the word sink in. “And second, you will escort me to the farm the day after tomorrow.”

“Aren’t you going to wait for Nizzo to call on you?”

“No. I want to see the place for myself, and I intend to arrive unannounced. Just look at all I’ve learned this morning by showing up unexpectedly in the kitchen.”

“Nizzo won’t be pleased. He isn’t used to being supervised.”

“You go there on occasion.”

“As an errand boy, nothing more. Nizzo is free and a Roman citizen, thanks to your father. He’s not about to take orders from a slave.”

“Well, he will take orders from me. Alexander, that farm belongs to me. I have every right to visit it.”

“You said you wanted frankness from me. So, miss, I’ll be frank. You own some of the best farmland in the Roman Empire, plus a horde of brute laborers. Your crops are sold in markets from Ortobello to Pompeii. Your vineyards produce a wine that’s among the most esteemed in Rome, and wool from your sheep may well be in the toga the emperor’s wearing today. It’s a huge, complicated agricultural operation, and for decades Nizzo has run it all. There’s a reason why your father lifted that one man above a thousand others who started exactly where he did and placed him

in charge of them, even while he was still a slave. Nizzo isn't polished, but he's smart and tough and honest and ambitious."

"But it's *my* property. I want to see it."

"You won't like what you see."

"That's no reason for me not to go."

"No? Here's another reason. You say you're worried about enemies? Well, threaten Nizzo's authority and you'll make a formidable enemy."

"He's just a freedman."

"Don't underestimate him. He has many influential friends in Rome. Antagonize Nizzo and you'll have more enemies than you can imagine."

Theodosia turned and studied the roses.

"I know I asked for your advice, but that doesn't mean I have to take it." She laughed, amused at the curious situation she had gotten into. "Look, Alexander. I didn't ask to inherit all this. All I ever wanted was to live here at home. I never envied Gaius his property."

"Well, envy it or not, you've got it now."

"True. I've got it now, and I'm going to see every bit of it that I can."

Alexander reacted with the sigh of one who is not being heeded.

"How do you intend to get there? The place is deliberately isolated. There's no road at all from this side, so you'd have to take your carriage into Rome, then out on the Via Clodia. It would take four days round trip, and you'd probably have to spend a night in that wretched place."

"How do *you* get there and back in one day?"

"Through the woods. On a horse."

"Then I'll go that way, too."

She turned around in time to see a remarkable series of expressions cross his face... as comprehension gave way to disbelief and then to astonishment. He opened his mouth, but no words came out.

"What's the matter? Never seen a woman on horseback?"

"Not a Roman woman, no. Do you ride?"

"I haven't in years, but I used to ride very well. Father taught me, and we'd go galloping off somewhere every day, right up to the afternoon he died. After lunch today, I'll take a horse out and get some practice."

"You'll be sore. General Vespasian's party is just three days off."

"Let me worry about that."

Alexander's astonished look slowly evolved into a grin.

"Well, it's obvious I have no choice."

Theodosia matched his grin.

"No, you don't." Motioning him closer, she changed her tone. "Now... tell me more about that boy, Lycos."

“My lord Gaius bought him in Rome last summer. He speaks Greek, as you saw. Says he was stolen from his parents by pirates. All he knows is that they lived on the coast, but there’s a lot of coast in Greece.”

“Why did Gaius buy such a little fellow? I’m sure it wasn’t out of compassion.”

“He bought him for a plaything, to put it as delicately as I can. The boy was to be trained to serve him flawlessly, in every way your brother might think up.”

“So, why is he working for Milo in the kitchen? I’m guessing you didn’t assign him to that.”

“You are even more intuitive than I suspected. But in fact, I did cause it by befriending him. Shouldn’t have, but... It was easy to imagine he was my son, speaking Greek and all. Same curly hair as my Niko.”

“Gaius didn’t like that much, I’m sure.”

“I guess not! He ordered him to stay away from me, but Lycos kept coming to the library. Every day, except when the master took him to Rome to serve as entertainment at his parties.” Alexander made a face and waved his hands. “You don’t want to know. Anyway, there were times when he left Lycos here, so I began teaching him to read and write. Then one day, my lord Gaius caught us reading. I’d never seen him so angry.” He patted his cheeks. “Lycos and I were both well slapped that afternoon. Slapping in the face was your brother’s favorite form of correction.”

Theodosia closed her eyes briefly as Alexander went on.

“My lord Gaius was so angry that he banished Lycos from the house. Gave Milo complete authority over him and ordered him to report it if Lycos and I even spoke to each other again.”

“I wonder... would you care to add tutoring to your other duties? Train Lycos to be your assistant some day?”

Alexander’s face brightened. He smiled and visibly relaxed, as if their conversation were over. But it wasn’t.

“There’s still one thing left for you to do,” Theodosia said, “to earn my letter to Corinth. Tell me what you know about my brother’s murder. No information, no letter.”

Alexander’s smile had faded as she spoke. Now he winced.

“You’re forcing me to do things that shouldn’t be done.”

She made an impatient little gesture with one hand.

“All right,” he said, “but I’m really not the one you want to talk to.”

Theodosia dropped her head back in exasperation.

“The one you want to talk to is over there.” Alexander nodded sideways. “Drawing his letters in the flower bed.”

End of Sample

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