

CHAPTER ONE



Lucia

(One Month Before)

Lucia was sure that the white-haired gentleman reclining on the dining couch before her would make a delightful grandfather. As a future husband, though, he left a great deal to be desired.

The man's bushy eyebrows rose as he waited for her to speak. A breeze from the open atrium ruffled the leaves of the potted palms behind her. She stood frozen, staring down at him. "It is a pleasure to see you again, sir," she finally managed.

Lucia's father, Lucius Titurius, waved his dented bronze wine cup at her. "Do not call him *sir*, daughter," he chided from his own dining couch beside the old man. "In a matter of weeks you will be Vitulus's wife."

Her betrothed picked up his goblet — the one her father usually kept locked up, the silver one carved with tiny fighting gladiators — and held it up as well. "I would have us joined sooner — this very night, even — if I did not need to attend to my properties in Sicilia," Vitulus said, the loose skin from his upper arm waving slightly with the movement. His gaze moved languidly from her feet to her face and he added, "Then again,

waiting for the wedding night only increases anticipation, does it not, my darling?”

Lucia suppressed a shudder and looked down. *Jupiter and Juno*. How could her father do this to her?

“Lucia, why don’t you join your betrothed on his couch?” her father prodded.

She forced a smile. “I will sit,” she said, thankful someone had left a chair near the dining couches. She pulled it closer to her father and sat.

The old man chuckled. “Ah. You have brought her up well, Lucius. She knows a woman’s place. I have never believed men and women should share couches. Indeed, no one in my family has ever allowed it. I’m a great admirer of Cato and the old ways, you know.”

Wonderful. Wait until he found out about her writings. He would probably ban that too. Would he even let her *read*?

Lucia smoothed her pale blue *tunica* over her thighs and looked at the sky through the atrium rain pool, seeing, in her mind’s eye, the woods leading up the slope of Mount Vesuvius. The late-afternoon light would catch the gold and green flutters of leaves from the vineyards on the lush mountain’s flanks. She could be *out there*, in the countryside, that very moment with her dog.

Just as the eggs poached in wine and fish sauce were being served, Pontius, the overseer of the gladiatorial school, entered the atrium. Her father’s face darkened. He did not like to be interrupted when he was courting a wealthy guest.

Pontius gave Lucia a quick wink, and she smiled back at him as her father joined him at the other end of the room. The big man bent his head to speak urgently into her father’s ear.

Titurius returned to their guest. “I’m sorry,” he said with a slight bow. “My newest fighter has been injured, and I must assess the situation. Would you excuse me?”

“Of course,” said Vitulus, waving a spotted hand.

When her father disappeared with Pontius, Vitulus focused his gaze on her chest, and her skin prickled with distaste. Keeping her eyes down, she hoped, would discourage him from trying to engage her in conversation. Maybe he would think her a dullard and cancel the betrothal.

“Are you sure you wouldn’t like to join me on this couch, my girl?” Vitulus asked, smoothing the area beside him. “I don’t mind the occasional break with old customs.”

“Oh, no. Thank you,” she said, suppressing another shudder.

“Ah, well. I’ve noticed girls from the country are a bit old-fashioned, which is part of your charm. Country girls are at least better bred than city women, who are much too modern and full of themselves.” Vitulus gulped his wine.

“I would hardly call Pompeii the ‘country,’” Lucia said, bristling. “We have everything Rome has — not to mention a thriving port, and Rome’s navy right across the bay.”

Vitulus laughed. “Oh, child, you have not been to Rome yet, have you? When we are married, you will see the difference. Trust me. Pompeii is a backwater.”

Backwater or not, Pompeii is my home. I don’t want to live anywhere else.

An idea came to her. She stood. “I must inform the kitchen that they need to delay bringing the rest of the food out until Father returns,” she said. “Excuse me while I attend to these matters.”

He nodded, and she released a breath as she hurried out of the atrium, her bare feet skimming over the black-and-white geometric mosaic. The pits and cracks in the floor made her wonder if she should've slipped into her shoes, which a slave had left beside her chair. No, she just needed to get out of there.

Once in the colonnaded inner courtyard, she slowed. Her nurse, Metrodona, who had been waiting nearby, looked at her aghast as she approached.

“What are you doing, child?”

“Father was called away, and I am not staying with that man by myself. I told him I was going to check on the food.”

“You’ve left a guest alone?” gasped Metrodona. “That is the height of bad manners. You cannot insult the man so. You must return right away!”

“But don’t you think it would be highly improper for a young girl to remain in the same room with a man without supervision?” Lucia asked with exaggerated concern.

“It is not improper if he is your betrothed!”

Lucia continued her slow pace toward the back of the house. Metrodona huffed after her. Maybe if she walked toe to heel, she could make this trip last until Vitulus left.

The kitchen abutted the dusty courtyard housing the gladiatorial school’s barracks and training rooms. A couple of slaves rushed past her toward the school’s courtyard.

“What is happening?” Lucia asked as she watched them race away.

“Someone is getting whipped,” a young slave cried, running toward the commotion.

Idly, she wondered if her father was having the gladiator who’d been hurt punished. Perhaps the man had shown terrible form,

which caused the injury. Before she even got to the cook, a serving slave rushed back to report that the master had returned to his dining couch. She sighed. No point in telling them to wait now — she had no other choice but to return to the atrium.

Her father barely flicked a glance at her when she resumed her seat.

“So,” Vitulus said to him, “did you tour Vespasian’s amphitheater when you were in Rome last? No matter how many times I see it, the colossal size of that arena takes my breath away. Titus Caesar promises it will be finished within the year. Do you think it will happen?”

Titurius warmed to the topic, but Lucia’s attention drifted away.

Suddenly, their wine goblets rattled. Somebody yelped as crockery smashed on the floor. Lucia’s chair swayed. She gripped the seat with both hands.

Vitulus sat up in alarm. “What . . . what is happening?”

“Just tremors. They are quite common here in Pompeii,” her father explained.

After another moment, the shaking stilled.

“They are common, yes,” added Lucia. “But lately they have been stronger and more frequent. In fact, I have noticed quite a number of strange phenomena recently —”

“Now is not the time, daughter,” Lucius hissed at her.

“Does that mean a big earthquake is imminent?” asked Vitulus, throwing his hairless, spotted legs over the side of the couch. “I do not want to pour money into your school if the city expects another major earthquake!”

“No, no,” her father soothed Vitulus. “That disaster was seventeen years ago! This kind of trembling is *quite* ordinary.”

“I have heard rumors,” Vitulus persisted.

“One should not listen to the superstitious imaginings of farmers and fishermen, truly,” Lucius said. “Once our houses are aligned, you shall see —”

But the earth trembled once more, cutting him off. A dog howled. Lucia shot to her feet. Poor Minos was chained in the back garden, and he was probably terrified. “Excuse me, Father,” she said. “I must go and make sure all is well with the household.”

Not waiting for permission, she raced out of the atrium, this time grabbing her shoes.