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### Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Rivers, Francine, date

An echo in the darkness / Francine Rivers.

p. cm. — (Mark of the lion)

ISBN 0-8423-1307-9

1. Church history—Primitive and early church, ca. 30-600—Fiction.

2. Women slaves—Rome—Fiction. I. Title. II. Series: Rivers, Francine, date

Mark of the lion.

PS3568.I83165E24 1994

813'.54—dc20

94-5909

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Printed in the United States of America

08 07 06 05 04 03 02

22 21 20 19 18 17 16

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THE ECHO



# 1

## ONE YEAR LATER

Marcus Lucianus Valerian walked through a maze of streets in the Eternal City, hoping to find a sanctuary of peace within himself. He couldn't. Rome was depressing. He had forgotten the stench of the polluted Tiber and the oppressive, mingled humanity. Or maybe he had never before noticed, too involved in his own life and activities to care. Over the past few weeks since returning to the city of his birth, he had spent hours wandering the streets, visiting places he had always enjoyed before. Now the laughter of friends was hollow, the frenetic feasting and drinking exhausting rather than satisfying.

Downcast and needing distraction, he agreed to attend the games with Antigonus. His friend was now a powerful senator and held a place of honor on the podium. Marcus tried to still his emotions as he entered the stands and found his seat. But he could not deny he felt uncomfortable when the trumpets began blaring. His chest tightened and his stomach became a hard knot as the procession began.

He hadn't been to the games since Ephesus. He wondered if he could stomach watching them now. It was painfully clear that Antigonus was more obsessed with them than he had been when Marcus left Rome, and he was betting heavily on a gladiator from Gaul.

Several women joined them beneath the canopy. Beautiful and voluptuous, they made it apparent within moments of their arrival that they were as interested in Marcus as in the games. Something stirred in Marcus as he looked at them, but disappeared as quickly as it came. These women were shallow, tainted water to Hadassah's pure, heady wine. He found no amusement in their idle, vain conversation. Even Antigonus, who had always amused him, began to shred his nerves with his collection of ribald jokes. Marcus wondered how he had ever thought such obscene stories amusing or felt any pity for Antigonus' litany of financial woes.

"Tell another one," one of the women laughed, obviously enjoying the crude joke Antigonus had just related to them.

“Your ears will burn,” Antigonus warned, eyes dancing.

“Another!” everyone agreed.

Everyone but Marcus. He sat silent, filled with disgust. *They dress up like vain peacocks and laugh like raucous crows*, he thought as he watched them all.

One of the woman moved to recline beside him. She pressed her hip against him enticingly. “The games always stir me,” she said with purring softness, her eyes dark.

Repulsed, Marcus ignored her. She began to talk of one of her many lovers, watching Marcus’ face for signs of interest. She only sickened him further. He looked at her, making no effort to hide his feelings, but she was oblivious. She simply continued her intended seduction with all the subtlety of a tigress pretending to be a housecat.

All the while, the bloody games went on unabated. Antigonus and the women laughed, mocked, and shouted curses down on the victims in the arena. Marcus’ nerves stretched tight as he watched his companions . . . as he realized they relished the suffering and death going on before them.

Sickened by what he was seeing, he turned to drink for escape. He drained cup after cup of wine, desperate to drown out the screams of those in the arena. And yet, no amount of the numbing liquid could hold off the image that kept coming to his mind . . . the image of another place, another victim. He had hoped the wine would deaden him. Instead, it made him more acutely aware.

Around him, the masses of people grew frenzied with excitement. Antigonus caught hold of one of the women, and they became entangled. Unbidden, a vision came to Marcus . . . a vision of his sister, Julia. He remembered how he had brought her to the games her first time and laughed at the burning excitement in her dark eyes.

“I won’t shame you, Marcus. I swear. I won’t faint at the sight of blood.” And she hadn’t.

Not then.

Not later.

Unable to stand more, Marcus rose.

Shoving his way through the ecstatic crowd, he made his way up the steps. As soon as he was able, he ran—as he had in Ephesus. He wanted to get away from the noise, away from the

smell of human blood. Pausing to get his breath, he leaned his shoulder against a stone wall and vomited.

Hours after the games were over, he could still hear the sound of the hungry mob screaming for more victims. The sound echoed in his mind, tormenting him.

But then, that was all he had known since Hadassah's death. Torment. And a terrible, black emptiness.

"Have you been avoiding us?" Antigonus said a few days later when he came to pay Marcus a visit. "You didn't come to Crassus' feast last night. Everyone was looking forward to seeing you."

"I had work to do." Marcus had thought to return to Rome permanently, hoping against hope that he would find the peace he so desperately longed for. He knew now his hopes had been in vain. He looked at Antigonus and shook his head. "I'm only in Rome for a few more months."

"I thought you had returned to stay," Antigonus said, clearly surprised by his statement.

"I've changed my mind," Marcus replied shortly.

"But why?"

"For reasons I'd rather not discuss."

Antigonus' eyes darkened, and his voice dripped with sarcasm when he spoke. "Well, I hope you'll find time to attend the feast I've planned in *your* honor. And why do you look so annoyed? By the gods, Marcus, you've changed since going to Ephesus. What happened to you there?"

"I've work to do, Antigonus."

"You need distraction from these dark moods of yours." He became so cajoling, Marcus knew he would soon be asking for money. "I've arranged entertainment guaranteed to drive away whatever black thoughts plague your mind."

"All right, all right! I'll come to your bloody feast," Marcus said, impatient for Antigonus' departure. Why couldn't anyone understand that he just wanted to be left alone? "But I've no time for idle conversation today."

"Graciously said," Antigonus said mockingly, then rose to leave. He swept his robes around himself and made for the door, then paused and looked back at his friend in annoyance. "I certainly hope you're in a better humor tomorrow night."

Marcus wasn't.

Antigonus had neglected to tell him that Arria would be in attendance. Within moments of arriving, Marcus saw her. He gave Antigonus an annoyed look, but the senator merely smiled smugly and leaned toward him with a sly expression. “She was your lover for almost two years, Marcus.” He laughed low. “That’s far longer than anyone has lasted since.” At the expression on Marcus’ face, he raised a questioning brow. “You look displeased. You did tell me you parted with her amicably.”

Arria was still beautiful, still intent on gaining the adoration of every male in the room, still amoral and eager for any new excitement. However, Marcus saw subtle changes. The soft loveliness of youth had given way to a harder-edged worldliness. Her laughter held no exuberance or pleasure—rather, it carried a quality of brashness and crudity that grated. Several men hovered around her, and she alternately teased each, making jokes at their expense and offering whispered suggestive observations. She glanced across the room then, looking at Marcus in question. He knew she was wondering why he hadn’t been caught by the smile she had cast him when he came in. But he knew that smile for what it was: bait for a hungry fish.

Unfortunately for Arria, Marcus was not hungry. Not any longer.

Antigonus leaned closer. “See how she looks at you, Marcus. You could have her back with a snap of your fingers. The man who’s watching her like a pet dog is her current conquest, Metrodorus Crateuas Merula. What he lacks in wit, he more than makes up for in money. He’s almost as rich as you are, but then our little Arria has money of her own these days. Her book created quite a furor.”

“Book?” Marcus said and gave a sardonic laugh. “I didn’t know Arria could write her name, let alone string enough words together to make a sentence.”

“Obviously, you know nothing of what she’s written or you wouldn’t be making light of it. It’s hardly a laughing matter. Our little Arria had secret talents unbeknownst to us. She’s become a woman of letters, or more precisely, erotica. A do-all, tell-all collection of stories. By the gods, it’s stirred up trouble in high places. One senator lost his wife over it. Not that he minded the loss of the woman, but her family connections cost him dearly. Rumor has it he may be forced into suicide. Arria has never been what you would call discreet. Now, I think she’s addicted to

scandal. She has scribes working night and day making copies of her little tome. The price for one copy is exorbitant.”

“Which you undoubtedly paid,” Marcus said dryly.

“But of course,” Antigonus said with a laugh. “I wanted to see if she would mention me. She did. In chapter eleven. To my dismay, it was a rather cursory mention.” He glanced at Marcus with an amused smile. “She wrote about you in detail—and at length. No wonder Sarapais was so enamored of you at the games the other day. She wanted to see if you were all Arria said you were.” He grinned. “You should buy a copy for yourself and read it, Marcus. It might bring back a few sweet memories.”

“For all her exquisite beauty, Arria is crass and best forgotten.”

“A rather cruel assessment of a woman you once loved, isn’t it?” Antigonus said, measuring him.

“I never loved Arria.” Marcus turned his attention to the dancing girls undulating before him. The bells on their ankles and wrists jingled, grating on his nerves. Rather than be aroused by the boldness of their sensual dance and transparently veiled bodies, he felt discomfited. He wished their performance would end and they would depart.

Antigonus reached out to grasp one of the women and pulled her down onto his lap. Despite her struggling, he kissed her passionately. When he drew back, he laughed and said to Marcus, “Pick one for yourself.”

The slave girl cried out, and the sound sent Marcus’ insides instinctively recoiling. He had seen the look on the girl’s face before—in Hadassah’s eyes when he had let his own passions burn out of control.

“Let her go, Antigonus.”

Others were watching Antigonus, laughing and calling out encouragement. Drunk and provoked, Antigonus became rougher in his determination to have his way. The girl screamed.

Marcus found himself on his feet. “Let her go!”

The room fell silent, all eyes staring at Marcus in astonishment. Laughing, Antigonus raised his head and looked at him in mild surprise. His laughter died. Alarmed, he rolled to one side, releasing the girl.

Weeping hysterically, she stumbled to her feet and scrambled away.

Antigonus regarded Marcus quizzically. “My apologies,

Marcus. If you wanted her that badly, why didn't you say so earlier?"

Marcus felt Arria's eyes fixed on him like hot coals, burning with jealousy. He wondered fleetingly what punishment the slave girl would receive at Arria's hands for something that had nothing to do with her. "I didn't want the girl," he said tersely. "Nor any other in this room."

Whispers rippled. Several women glanced at Arria and smirked.

Antigonus' countenance darkened. "Then why intrude upon my pleasure?"

"You were about to rape the girl."

Antigonus laughed dryly. "Rape? Given another moment, she would have enjoyed it."

"I doubt that."

Antigonus' humor evaporated, his eyes flashing at the insult. "Since when did a slave's feelings matter to you? I've seen you take your pleasure in like ways a time or two."

"I don't need to be reminded," Marcus said grimly, downing the remainder of the wine in his cup. "What I *do* need is a breath of fresh air."

He went out into the gardens, but found no relief there, for Arria followed him, Merula at her side. Gritting his teeth, Marcus bore their presence. She talked about their love affair as though it had ended yesterday and not four years before. Merula glared at Marcus, who felt pity for the man. Arria had always enjoyed tormenting her lovers.

"Have you read my book, Marcus?" she said, her voice dripping honey.

"No."

"It's quite good. You'd enjoy it."

"I've lost my taste for trash," he said, his gaze flickering over her.

Her eyes flashed. "I lied about you, Marcus," she said, her face contorted with rage. "You were the worst lover I ever had!"

Marcus grinned back at her coldly. "That's because I'm the only one who walked away from you with blood still in his veins." Turning his back on her, he strolled away.

Ignoring the names she called him, he left the garden. Returning to the banquet, he looked for distraction in conversations with old acquaintances and friends. But their laughter grated;

their amusement was always at someone else's expense. He heard the pettiness behind the amusing remarks, the relish as new tragedies were recounted.

Leaving the group, he reclined on a couch, drank morosely, and watched people. He noticed the games they played with one another. They put on masks of civility, all the while spewing their venom. And then it hit him. Gatherings and feasts such as this had once been a large part of his life. He had *relished* them.

Now, he wondered why he was here . . . why he had ever returned to Rome at all.

Antigonus approached him, his arm thrown carelessly around a richly clad, pale-skinned girl. Her smile was sensual. She had the curves of Aphrodite, and for an instant his flesh responded to the dark intensity of her eyes. It had been a long time since he had been with a woman.

Antigonus noted Marcus' appraisal and smiled, pleased with himself. "You like her. I knew you would. She's quite luscious." Removing his arm from around the woman, he gave her a gentle nudge, though she needed none. She fell lightly against Marcus' chest and gazed up at him with parted lips. Antigonus smiled, obviously pleased with himself. "Her name is Didyma."

Marcus took hold of Didyma's shoulders and set her back from him, smiling wryly at Antigonus. The woman looked from him to her master in question, and Antigonus shrugged. "It would appear he doesn't want you, Diddy." He waved his hand carelessly in dismissal.

Marcus set his goblet down firmly. "I appreciate the gesture, Antigonus—"

"But . . .," he said ruefully and shook his head. "You perplex me, Marcus. No interest in women. No interest in the games. What happened to you in Ephesus?"

"Nothing you would understand."

"Try me."

Marcus gave him a sardonic smile. "I would not entrust my private life to so public a man."

Antigonus' eyes narrowed. "There's a bite in your every word these days," he said softly. "How have I offended you that you take on such a condemning air?"

Marcus shook his head. "It's not you, Antigonus. It's all of it."

"All of *what*?" Antigonus said, baffled.

“Life. Damnable *life!*” The sensual pleasures Marcus had once savored were now dust in his mouth. When Hadassah had died, something within him had died with her. How could he explain the wrenching, profound changes within himself to a man like Antigonus, a man still consumed and obsessed with fleshly passions?

How could he explain that everything had lost meaning to him when a common slave girl had died in an Ephesian arena?

“My apologies,” he said flatly, rising to leave. “I’m poor company these days.”

He received other invitations over the next month but declined them, choosing to immerse himself in his business enterprises instead. But no peace was to be found there, either. No matter how frenetically he worked, he was still tormented. Finally, he knew he had to be clear of the past, of Rome, of everything.

He sold the rock quarry and the remaining building contracts—both at sizable profit, though he felt no pride of satisfaction in his gain. He met with managers of the Valerian warehouses on the Tiber and reviewed the accounts. Sextus, a longtime associate of his father’s, had proven himself loyal to Valerian interests over many years. Marcus offered him the position of overseer to the Valerian holdings in Rome, with a generous percentage of the gross profits.

Sextus was stunned. “You’ve never been so openhanded, my lord.” There was subtle challenge and unspoken distrust in his words.

“You may distribute the monies as you see fit, without answering to me.”

“I wasn’t speaking of money,” Sextus said bluntly. “I speak of *control*. Unless I misunderstand, you’re handing me the reins of your business holdings in Rome.”

“That’s correct.”

“Have you forgotten I was once your father’s slave?”

“No.”

Sextus assessed him through narrowed eyes. He had known Decimus well and had been long aware that Marcus had brought his father little but grief. The young man’s ambition had been like a fever in his blood, burning away conscience. What game was he playing now? “Was it not your goal to control your father’s holdings as well as your own?”

Marcus' mouth curved into a cold smile. "You speak frankly."

"Would you not have it so, my lord? Then by all means tell me so that I might flatter you."

Marcus' mouth tightened, but he held his temper. He forced himself to remember this man had been a loyal friend to his father. "My father and I made our peace in Ephesus."

Sextus' silence revealed his disbelief.

Marcus looked straight into the older man's eyes and held his gaze. "The blood of my father runs in my veins, Sextus," he said coolly. "I haven't made this offer lightly, nor do I have ulterior motives that threaten you. I've given it a great deal of thought over the last few weeks. You've handled the cargoes that have been brought into these warehouses for seventeen years. You know by name the men who unload the ships and store the goods. You know which merchants can be trusted and which cannot. And you've always given a solid accounting for every transaction. Who better for me to trust?" He held out the parchment. Sextus made no move to take it.

"Accept or decline, as you see fit," Marcus said, "but know this: I've sold my other holdings in Rome. The only reason I haven't sold the ships and warehouses is because they were so much a part of my father's life. It was his sweat and blood that built this enterprise. Not mine. I offer this position to you because you are capable—but more important, you were my father's friend. If you refuse my offer, I will sell. Have no doubts about that, Sextus."

Sextus gave a harsh laugh. "Even if you were serious about selling, you couldn't. Rome is struggling to survive. Right now, no one I know of has the money to buy an enterprise of this size and magnitude."

"I'm well aware of that." Marcus' eyes were cold. "I'm not against disposing of my fleet ship by ship, and the dock holdings building by building."

Sextus saw he meant it and was stunned by such opportunistic thinking. How could this young man be the son of Decimus? "You have over five hundred people working for you! Freemen, most of them. Do you care nothing about them and the welfare of their families?"

"You know them better than I."

"If you sell now, you'll make a fraction of what all this is

worth,” he said, alluding to Marcus’ well-known love of money. “I doubt you would carry this through.”

“Try me.” Marcus tossed the parchment onto the table between them.

Sextus studied him for a long moment, alarmed by the hardness in the younger man’s face, the determined set of his jaw. He wasn’t bluffing. “*Why?*”

“Because I’ll not have this millstone around my neck holding me in Rome.”

“And you would go so far? If what you said is true and you made your peace with your father, why would you tear apart what took him a lifetime to build?”

“It’s not what I want to do,” Marcus answered simply, “but I will tell you this, Sextus. In the end, Father saw it all as vanity, and now I agree with him.” He gestured toward the parchment. “What is your answer?”

“I’ll need time to consider.”

“You have the time it’ll take me to walk out that door.”

Sextus stiffened at such arrogance. Then he relaxed. His mouth curved faintly. He let out his breath and shook his head on a soft laugh. “You are very much like your father, Marcus. Even after he gave me my freedom, he always knew how to get his own way.”

“Not in everything,” Marcus said cryptically.

Sextus sensed Marcus’ pain. Perhaps he *had* made his peace with his father after all and now regretted the wasted years of rebellion. He took up the parchment and tapped it against his palm. Remembering the father, Sextus studied the son. “I accept,” he said, “on one condition.”

“Name it.”

“I’ll deal with you the same way I dealt with your father.” He tossed the parchment onto the burning coals in the brazier and extended his hand.

Throat closing, Marcus grasped it.

The next morning, at sunrise, Marcus sailed for Ephesus.

Over the long weeks of the voyage, he spent hours standing on the bow of the ship, the salt wind in his face. There, at last, he allowed his thoughts to turn again to Hadassah. He remembered standing with her on a bow like this one, watching the soft tendrils of her dark hair blowing about her face, her expression

earnest as she spoke of her unseen god: “*God speaks . . . a still, small voice in the wind.*”

Just as her voice seemed to speak to him now, still and small, whispering to him in the wind . . . beckoning him.

But to what? Despair? Death?

He was torn between wanting to forget her and fear that he would. And now it was as though, having opened his mind to her, he couldn't close it again.

Her voice had become an insistent presence, echoing throughout the darkness in which he now lived.