

Chapter 12

“You *can't* come, Lysia. You said yourself it's a very dangerous trip. I still want to marry you, but after I return. This is something I have to do, but it doesn't concern you.”

“Anything that concerns you concerns me, Marcus. You pledged your love to me, and asked me to be your wife. Where you go, I will go; where you die, I will die as well. If you refuse to take me, I'll follow after.”

He got that exasperated look on his face that was to become so familiar over the coming months. “You are the most stubborn woman I've ever known. There's no reasoning with you.”

I smiled my sweetest smile at him. “And that's why you love me so much. Now, just hush and kiss me.”

Once I had my arms around him, and found his lips with mine, the argument was over. He pulled me to him, almost roughly, and we relived the passion we discovered on that first night when he proclaimed his love.

The preparations for the trip had proceeded with amazing speed. Marcus sold his entire stock of jewels, and his shop, to finance the expedition. He bought a string of packhorses and outfitted them, and hired men for protection on the way. It went without saying that Brutellas would be going; he was almost an army in himself. The other men, though, I knew nothing about, and suspected some of them would willingly cut our throats at the first opportunity.

When we pulled apart, Marcus smiled at me in that old magic way. “All right, my love, you can go. You'll share my tent on the way. You can help keep me warm.”

I frowned. “No, I will *not* sleep with you, unless we're married in the eyes of God. You should know that by now.”

He returned my frown. “What? What do you mean, you won't sleep with me? You've already agreed to be my wife. Why does it matter if we haven't gone through some ceremony?”

“It matters to me,” I said, my jaw set in a stubborn line. “In my faith, sleeping with a man who is not your husband is fornication. I will not sleep with a man until my wedding night.”

“But, Lysia, be reasonable. There's no *time* to plan a wedding feast. I would have to rent a hall, arrange for meals, and invite guests. Besides, I have no money for any of that. You know I've spent everything on the trip.”

“We can go the house of Karis. Her husband, Leontis, is an elder in the church. He can perform the ceremony, and it will cost you nothing. Send Lydia; she can make the arrangements. We can do it before we leave.”

The brief ceremony wasn't what I had in mind for my wedding. Marcus was uncomfortable repeating phrases about a strange god he had no interest in knowing about, much less serving. When we left the elegant villa, I felt cheated, and more than a little

angry with my new husband. He was so blinded by greed that he couldn't appreciate what he had, or see what was available so close at hand.

I never knew just how Crispan found about our expedition, though it was probably from some merchant in his hire, or from one of the mercenaries. In any event, he was waiting for us when we returned to Marcus's house.

"Why, friend Marcus, I understand congratulations are in order," he said, extending his hand as we walked together out to the patio. Lydia, who had not gone with us to the wedding, despite my urging, had let him in. He was a regular visitor, though he hadn't been there in several months – since he sold me to Marcus.

Marcus took the proffered hand without enthusiasm, and dropped it almost at once. Crispan continued on, as if he took no notice. "It seems I brought you more than just a slave! A new wife, and you're planning on leaving so soon? I would have thought you would have wanted a more extended honeymoon before heading off toward Tirzah."

Marcus went pale, and looked as if someone had just slapped him in the face. "What about Tirzah? What are you talking about?"

"Oh, come now, Marcus," Crispan replied, his voice silky smooth. "Everyone knows you've sold your entire stock of jewels, and hired twenty men to go with you as far as Tirzah. The street has its voices, and I have many ears. Why don't you let me help? I can ease your way through the badlands, and I've had experience dealing with the Korei."

"No thanks, Crispan. I don't trust you any further than I can throw you. Things will be bad enough without my constantly watching my back because of you."

A dangerous glint came into the slave trader's eyes, but his voice gave no hint of the cold rage apparent in his face. "Why, friend Marcus, what have I ever done to you? If it weren't for me, you never would have found that lovely wife of yours. If you change your mind, you know where I am."

He turned to leave, walked two steps, then turned back toward us again. "By the way, you may have thought there was only one copy of the scroll of the Hagath you bought from Tertius the scroll merchant, but, as it happens, he found another copy for me. I also have someone who reads Tirzan, and the royal script."

With that parting shot, he turned on his heel and walked back through the house, and out. When he was gone, Marcus dropped my hand, unaware once more of my presence. His face was still a chalky shade of white; I thought he might pass out, and reached out my hand to steady him. He shook it off almost angrily, then said, weakly, "Sorry. I didn't mean that."

A sudden resolution gave color and strength back to his face. "We're leaving. Now. I was planning on waiting two more days, to set some things in order, but we can't afford to wait any longer. Get your clothes together, or whatever you need. I'm going to get Brutellas, and have him to assemble the party. Wait for me here."

I did as he asked, quickly gathering my few possessions, and tying them up in a roll, inside a blanket. One hour became two, then three. As night's shadows began flitting through the house, I realized he wasn't going to return. He had never intended to take me along; he only told me what I wanted to hear.

Lydia was sitting with me on the patio, as we waited for the sound of his returning footsteps. I felt a mixture of grief and anger.

“Lydia, he’s not coming back. He had no intention of taking me along. Well, I told him I would follow, and that’s what I’m going to do. Say a prayer for me, dear sister; I’m leaving.”

Her eyes brimmed with tears, and she reached to embrace me without words. She did pray for me, finally, in broken syllables, but she wouldn’t let go until I forcibly pulled myself away.

“At least let Cook prepare some food for the way,” she said between sobs.

“All right,” I answered, afraid I would lose control if I said more. Minutes later she returned with a bundle of food. She and Marcina both met me at the front gate, and all three of us were crying by the time I turned away with my two bundles clutched tightly to my breast.

The streets were already dark, but it wasn’t just the darkness that caused me to stumble as I walked away from yet another home. Four times I had found a place to lay my head, and comfort my soul; four times I had lost it.

“Lysia!”

When I heard someone whisper my name, urgently, I thought at first Marcus had returned after all, and I all but cried out with joy. When I felt a hand close over mine, though, I knew it wasn’t Marcus’s hand. It was too small.

“Lysia! It’s me, Talitha!”

With that, I did cry out for joy, but she clapped her hand over my mouth. “Shush! Not here! Come with me!”

She took one of my bundles from me, and grasped one of my trembling hands. Untroubled by the darkness, she led me quickly to the streets until we returned to the house of Karis. She led me around the side to the servants’ entrance, which I knew, and knocked three times, sharply. The door opened at once, and one of the slaves I recognized as a fellow Christian let us in.

Once we were through the door, and it closed behind us, Talitha dropped the bundle she was carrying, and threw both arms around me. My own bundle, so precious only a few minutes earlier, also fell to the floor, unnoticed, and I returned my sister’s embrace.

When we disentangled, the slave who had let us in departed discretely, then returned, and showed us to a small room in the slaves’ quarters. He left us there again, and we sat on the floor of the little cell together. Talitha told me her story first.

“Once I discovered you hadn’t followed me, it was too late to turn back. I remembered then what you had said about not being captured, but it didn’t make running away any easier. I didn’t have much difficulty losing the outlaws, since my pony is fastest on all the Kore, but I was afraid to double back and try to find you. The air was full of demons in that place, and I could almost hear them howling for my blood.

“I circled around to the west, and back to the north. I found your pony’s tracks two days later, and saw you were with someone else. A larger set of horse tracks joined your trail and I guessed, or hoped, you had escaped, but were being followed. I lost your trail for a while in a great confusion of tracks on top of a mesa, but managed to pick them out from a large group of hoof prints on the other side.

“At the outlaw camp, I actually managed to sneak among the tents to the very one where you were being held. I may even have managed to rescue you, but the Lord restrained me. As I was leaving the camp, one of the guards spotted me, and raised the alarm before I could stop him. Did you not hear the commotion?”

I shook my head. “I heard nothing, and no one said anything. What happened then?”

“I managed to get away in the darkness, but the pony stepped into a hole that night, and went lame. I knew I should have left him, especially since the leg might be broken, but I couldn’t bear to. We’ve been through too much together. I found a secluded place, and nursed him back to health. That took four days, before he could even walk, and by the time I got back to the outlaw camp, you were already gone. Since you no longer had your pony – it didn’t take long to discover that – I had no way to track you. That is, I followed a set of footprints I thought included yours, but after a while there were just too many tracks to make yours out. It was clear you were going to Kirjath, though, so I made my way here.

“It took me a couple of months to locate you, and then only because the Lord in his kindness led me to the church that meets here in this house. I wanted to let you know I was here, but again the Spirit constrained me. What I did do was watch your house, or the house where you stayed. I saw you and the man there – Marcus, they told me his name was – leave early this afternoon, and come here together. I actually heard you exchange wedding vows, from behind a door, then followed when you left. I saw the slave trader leave; I know him by reputation, and by having him pointed out to me. A little later, I saw Marcus leave, alone, then you. The rest you know. Now – tell me about this man Marcus you love so much, and how you came to be his wife.”

Before I could answer, she hugged me again, and a knock sounded on the door almost at the same time. Talitha broke away answer the knock. Standing at the door, candle in hand, was the tall, elegant form of Karis, who had witnessed my marriage ceremony that afternoon that was so far removed now.

“Talitha – Lysia. I know what has happened. Marcus and his party have already left Kirjath, and Crispan left about an hour later. We have Talitha’s pony saddled and waiting, and we have a horse for you as well, my dear sister Lysia. If you leave now, you may catch up with Marcus before he enters the Badlands. Just be sure to avoid Crispan. Now, God speed, and may the Lord watch over you.”

She gave us both a quick hug, and led us out through the villa to the stables, at the back. As promised, horses were waiting for us: Talitha’s wiry Korei pony, and a small gray mare for me. Both horses were loaded with provisions, and I saw my two small bundles among the packs on mine. We mounted quickly, and the groom let us out onto the street near the stable. Talitha led the way, and we made our way toward the city gates.

It occurred to me to wonder how we would get through, since leaving the city at night was almost as hard as getting in. Just at the moment, though, I tried to sort through the jumble of thoughts and emotions that flooded through my mind. I was worried about Marcus while also being angry at him. I was overjoyed to see my sister, but concerned about what might lie ahead of us. Above all, I wondered again if God's hand could possibly be in all of this. My faith wavered, and all but broke.

All too soon, we neared a small gate I had never seen before. A voice challenged us from the small circle of lamplight in front of the gate.

“Halt! What business do you have that calls you outside the gates?”

I hoped fervently that Talitha had a better answer than I.