

## Chapter Three

“Lysia, this is my husband, Portius. Husband, greet your new daughter, whom the Lord has sent our way.”

Portius was even fatter than Doria, and a good deal shorter. If I saw him on the street, without seeing his eyes, I would have passed him off as a fat little pig, a brainless boob. Looking him in the eye, though, I knew I would have been totally wrong. The eyes were like two magnets; I could hardly tear my own away. In them, I saw intelligence, beauty, and the strength to endure whatever trials came his way.

He greeted me as warmly as Nyla had, but his eyes asked a question of his wife as he turned to greet her in turn. Nyla told me my story in rapid phrases, filling in some details I hadn't heard about the request from the “body,” as she called them, to take me in as part of the family. His head nodded in agreement throughout the story, and after she finished he turned back to me with a broad smile.

“*L'nai hachté, n'isia!*” I knew I had no reason to fear his reaction; he just accepted me without question or qualification. “*Bestra mastré nakul.*” So he spoke the tongue of Berith as well. “This house is your home,” he said.

“Where is our other daughter?” he asked next.

“Studying in her room, as usual. The child spends too much time indoors, Portius. You must encourage her to get out more.”

Talitha came in at just that moment, attracted by the sound of voices. She fell laughing on her father's neck, throwing her arms around him and showering him with kisses. He extracted himself long enough to turn around and return her greeting, his high-pitched laughter blending with hers in a wild harmony.

“Papa,” she said later, as we shared the evening meal, “I told Lysia we would introduce her to our best friend once you came home. Will you tell her about the Christ, or should I?”

Those marvelous eyes sparkled as Portius turned toward me. “How about it, Lysia? Would you like your new sister to tell you about the One we all serve?”

Although I wasn't particularly enthusiastic about being introduced to a new god, having recently gotten into trouble with an old one, I couldn't bear to disappoint the eager expectancy I saw in Talitha's eyes. I smiled at each of the waiting faces in turn, for Nyla was also with us, and also had her eyes fixed on me. “All right,” I replied after a brief moment, focusing on Talitha, “I will listen to what you tell me, my dear sister.”

She beamed, and the light I saw in her face warmed my heart. “Not so many years ago, in a faraway country called Judea, a baby was born, whose name was Jesus. His mother was still a virgin, for he was born as the son of the only true God. He grew up a perfect and sinless man, the only one ever. When he became an adult, he told his people about God's love, and healed many of them of all their diseases. He was the promised deliverer, the Anointed One whom God sent to bring the world back to himself, out of sin and rebellion. Wicked and cruel men refused to hear what he said, and they had him put to death on a cross, out of envy and hatred. He died for all of us, and bore our sins on

himself. On the third day after his death, he rose again to life. He sent his disciples out to tell all the world about him. All who accept him as Lord and Savior have the promise of eternal life. All of us in our family know him, and he brings us joy and peace. Wouldn't you like to know him, Lysia?"

Looking at her bright smile, it was hard to refuse. Some of the story, though, sounded like some of the legends of the Great Bear, who was also, allegedly, born of a virgin in each incarnation, and who also rose up again after being killed, or on dying a natural death. I just wasn't ready to worship a new god yet; I didn't see the need for it.

"Well," I finally said after several awkward minutes, "I'm not sure, Sister. May I think about it a while?"

It almost broke my heart to see her face crumble, and almost dissolve into tears. Portius gently patted each of us on the hand, in turn. "That was very well done, daughter, but remember it took several years of hearing about Him before you asked Him into your life. Give her some time; it will happen, when God wills."

I felt compelled to say something else. My voice quivered and broke as I spoke, but I didn't really care. "All of you are so special to me, and I love you so much for taking me into your home. You are the sister I never had, Talitha, and the last thing I want to do, ever, is to hurt you. Please just give me a little time; if this Jesus is so important to you, I know he will be to me as well. I just need to think about it a while."

Talitha's eyes overflowed with tears, and she threw her arms around me. "I love you, Lysia, I really do," she whispered as she wept on my shoulder.

Over the days that followed, days no less happy than the ones before Portius arrived, I asked both Talitha and Nyla a lot of questions. The idea of sin was not too difficult to understand, but I did have a little trouble accepting the notion that everyone was born a sinner. I had been taught that, to please the gods, you just had to participate in certain rituals and feasts, and follow a certain code of conduct. This God, though, Nyla told me, could only be pleased with faith. Nothing we could do would please him otherwise.

The answers to my questions weren't what impressed me. I had never been around people, except maybe Doria, who lived lives so full of love and joy. I knew they weren't perfect; they still did mean and petty things from time to time, even sweet little Talitha. When those things happened, though, there was always remorse and pleas forgiveness.

I was invited to join the times when the family shared together what they called their "devotional" service. Portius would read from scrolls that they treated as their greatest treasures, including some that told the story of Jesus in greater detail, and others that included copies of letters from some man called Paul, and others like Peter and John. Most people in the Way, they said, didn't have the luxury of their own copies of the Gospel, as it was called. Portius had obtained many in the course of his travels.

Other people came by from time to time to borrow one or another of the scrolls, including my dear friend Doria. I heard of small groups of Christians, another name for the followers of the Way, meeting together in private homes. Portius went to meet with them from time to time, or Nyla, but they never went together. Stories of Christians being hauled away and executed were all too common, and no one knew when a spy in their midst might run to the police or the priests to complain.

I was curious about what went on at these gatherings, but Portius wouldn't hear of either one of his daughters attending. "The time will come when we will be welcomed here, and you may worship when and where you please. For right now, though, we have to gather in secret. The Devil has a stronghold here, and it will take a mighty work to pull it down."

The worship times, which I looked forward to if I didn't participate in them, always ended with prayer. Talitha always prayed for me to receive Jesus as Lord and Savior, which made me increasingly irritable. After the prayer time, I became morose, and looked for any opportunity to criticize and find fault. It was not at all unusual for me to drive my foster sister to tears after we returned to our room. I could never stand to see her cry, though, and always asked her to please forgive me. She always did, and I would go to sleep feeling angry, not with her, but with myself.

One particular evening, the one I remember most of all, she had prayed for me as usual during our worship time. I felt like I was going to explode, and when we got back to our rooms, behind closed doors, I did just that. My voice sounded mean and petty even to me, but that didn't stop me.

"Listen, Talitha, don't you *ever* pray for me like that again! I *hate* it. I don't want to hear that name, Jesus, any more. From now on, I'll just stay in my room while you all go through your silly rituals. Just leave me out of it."

Talitha's face went a deathly white. No tears came to her eyes this time; they just looked dead. Her own voice was so low I had to strain to hear it. "Have it your way, Lysia. I'll never mention that precious name to you again. May God forgive you, for I don't know if I can."

We both went to bed in silence, our backs turned away from each other on our sleeping mats. A load settled on my mind and heart so heavy it seemed they both would burst. Every bad thing I had ever done, every bad word or thought I had ever entertained, paraded in front of my eyes, right up to the cruel words I had just spoken. I saw myself as I really was: a selfish, ungrateful wretch, only interested in what I could get out of life. I saw how I had hurt and offended Bantal, a dear, sweet man, not to mention my own mother. I had focused so much on losing Lydia that I failed to appreciate the woman who had given me life, and loved more than her own. In this very house, surrounded by love and caring, I had behaved like a dog; worse, because dogs seldom bit the hand that fed them.

Finally, I could stand it no more. "Talitha," I said softly, turning toward her stiff back.

There was no answer but a stifled sob.

"Please, Talitha, I'm sorry. I didn't mean any of those ugly things. Please – won't you introduce me to this Jesus you serve?"

Her response was immediate. She turned toward me, and even in the dim light of the bedroom I could see the light of joy on her tear-streaked face.

"Do you really mean it, Lysia?"

"Yes. I can't stand it any more. I feel totally awful. What do I need to do?"

She took both of my hands in hers. “First, you speak to Jesus like you do to me. Tell him you know you have sinned all your life, that you were born in sin, and that you’re sorry for all your sins. Then, ask him to forgive you, and ask him to be your Savior and Lord. If you really mean it, that’s all you have to do.”

It seemed too simple, especially compared to all of the elaborate rituals and sacrifices I was familiar with. I did as she said, though, and when I finished, I felt an enormous load lift from me. For the first time in my life, I felt free, clean inside and out. I felt love settle over me like a warm joy; so this was where the joy came from!

Talitha didn’t ask me what had happened when I lifted my face to look at her; she didn’t need to. She jumped up and started dancing around the room, laughing and crying at once. Not content to keep the news to herself, she opened the door and ran out, shouting “Talitha knows Him” over and over as she ran to her parents’ room.

Moments later, she returned with both of them. Portius was carrying a lighted torch, and his plump face was split by an unrestrained grin from ear to ear. Nyla was the first to reach me, though, and she lifted me up into her arms and drew me to her breast like I was a small puppy. I was full to bursting, and when I tried to pull away enough to tell her how sorry I was for all the mean things I said, she smothered my mouth and eyes with kisses before I could get out a single word.

The next night, we met as we had for many nights before. Portius read a passage from the Word, as he called it, then told us what it meant. It was a passage in which the Christ, one night before he died, said to a Jewish leader called Nicodemus, “For God so loved the world, that He gave his only begotten son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.” It was a thing of great beauty to me that I knew exactly what the words meant.

When we prayed, I prayed, too, and thanked God for my family, for my mother, for Lydia, for Doria, and for the others who had helped me in my life. Talitha was holding my hand as I prayed, and I felt hers tighten on mine as I spoke.

When it was all over, we sat together for a while, saying nothing. Portius broke the silence.

“Lysia, my daughter, one thing remains for you to do. Our Lord says that all who believe in him must be baptized.”

“Then, I will, Father, but what must I do? What is it?”

“An elder of the church will immerse you in water in the presence of witnesses, and proclaim publicly that you have died and been born again, in Christ. You are a new creation.”

“Where must I go?” I wondered. “Where will we find one of these elders?”

Portius smiled. “I am an elder, child. The church has a meeting place underground, among the catacombs of the city, where we have dug out a pool for baptism. When things are arranged, water will be brought, and I will take you there. Only those who have been born again may go there, and it’s as safe as any place can be. I will speak to the other leaders when I can, and we will do what is commanded. You will also share in the Lord’s communion for the first time.”

Just four days later, Portius came home looking sober and mysterious, but his eyes twinkled. “Tonight, child, it will be done tonight. You and I will go alone; we dare not risk going all together.”

“But, Papa,” Talitha pleaded at once. “I led her to Christ. Can I not see her baptized into the body? This will never happen again, and I can’t bear going through life never having seen her baptized.”

Portius and Nyla exchanged glances, and I saw the mother’s slight nod of agreement. “All right, Talitha, we’ll take the risk this once. You must both dress as boys, though. It’s not safe for two young girls to be seen wandering through the streets at night, even with a man along”

Nyla gathered our hair together, and shoved it under caps. She then smudged our faces in effort to hide the soft girl lines, and dressed us in boys’ clothes. When she was done, we looked at each other, and burst out laughing, hugging each other in our glee. Nyla did not share our laughter.

“This is very serious,” she said, in a tone that stifled our giggles at once. “Your very lives may be at stake. I know the Lord will be with you, but you must do your part. Don’t talk if you don’t have to, then try to make your voices as coarse as possible. Keep to the shadows as much as possible, and stay close to your father.”

A light drizzle was falling as we left. I was almost giddy with excitement and anticipation. I had no way of knowing this was the last night we would all be together.