

OBEDIENT UNTO DEATH

LIISA EYERLY



ST JOSEPH, MISSOURI USA

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To my parents, who nurtured my love for the Lord.

ONE

The harbor lantern's flame flickered behind the two men blocking the entrance to the narrow alley. Black silhouettes of muscles and brawn quavered on the back street's crumbling brick wall like undulating cobras lured from the charmer's baskets at the market agora. The two men shifted uneasily. "If we catch her, she's mine," a deep voice boomed, echoing down the tunneled alleyway.

"Says you. I wouldn't mind a bit of fun." The men edged forward slowly. They paused, squinting into the gloom of the evening fog. A glint of metal flashed in one man's hand.

Halfway down the alley, Sabina squeezed, flattening her body into the concealing threshold of the abandoned boarded-up doorway. Her head turned a fraction. A jagged splinter of wood gouged her cheek. She blinked back tears, ignoring the sting. *Don't get caught.* Her father's threat resounded in her ears.

Her eyes riveted on the advancing men. It was too dark to tell if they were the imperial governor's watchmen or criminals fouling the streets of Ephesus. If caught, the result would be the same. She was a woman alone, and the last thing she could do was confess the truth.

A coarse laugh hurtled toward her down the constricted passage.

She clamped her mouth shut as the men bore down on her, the scuffle of hardened leather sandals approached. Her throat tightened.

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She prayed the charcoal-gray mantle covering her tunic blended into the murky shadows of the shallow portal. It would not hide her for long. She was sure her clattering teeth resounded off the ancient walls. Sabina bit her lip. If she had any hope of escaping, she needed to run, now.

A chorus of snarls erupted a dozen feet from her, near a pile of putrid fish guts. She stifled a scream.

Her stomach had recoiled moments earlier when the moving mound of garbage exposed a trio of half-starved dogs, teeth bared, blocking her way. Scraping against the wall, she had sidled past, cooing words of friendship. Now hackles raised, the animals crouched aggressively, defending their supper from two new invaders.

“You’ve got us chasing a pack of mongrels,” a raspy voice jeered. “I always knew you favored scabby bitches.”

“Shut up.”

One dog barked. The other two snarled, taking wary steps toward the men.

“You wanted her. The devil dog’s all yours.” The first man sniggered. “I’m out of here.”

“I said, shut up.” The crude banter continued as the men shoved and jostled each other.

Sabina’s eyes locked on the backs of the men as they spun around. Her heart pounded in sync with their clomping retreat. The squawking of sea birds heading home late to their newly born chicks broke through her fear. Slowly, she peeled her fingers from the wall and prayed the men would not return. Please, God.

She stepped back, testing her wobbly legs. The evening mist rising from the Aegean Sea clung to her face and crept down her back, setting her teeth chattering again.

Her father would be furious with her. She would, of course, never tell him how close she came tonight to fulfilling his greatest fear. Death was preferable to losing his family honor and equestrian status, forfeiting his wealth, banishment, and humiliation—all risks if Sabina’s illegal worship were made public. *You will drag our family to hell with your false God.* She had stormed out of the house

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tonight, his warning reverberating in her ears. It did not matter who discovered her traitorous act. Two harbor rats would do just fine. Legs shaking, she turned and leaned her head against the wall. Well, she hadn't gotten caught—this time.

She didn't mistake the powerful Roman magistrate's admonition as concern for his only child. Sabina knew better. Since the death of her mother in childbirth twenty years ago, "the family" meant him, and "hell" was his assessment of his dead wife and eight-year-old daughter's bizarre new religion.

There would be no harmony in their home until she stopped worshipping Jesus, the Messiah. Was peace with her father possible? Was his approval worth giving up her faith? How many times had she asked herself that? Her fingernails bit into her palms. Knowing if her father forbade her, she would have no choice.

She shrunk from the doorway and drew the wool covering over her head, tucking the thick braid of russet hair securely out of sight.

Throaty growls reverberated along the stone walls, raising the hairs on her arms. Three pairs of yellow eyes lifted, glittered warily, fixed on her.

She backed away slowly. "Shhh, my guardian angel dogs. I'm not after your dinner." The dogs slunk back to the delicacy of their rotted fish.

She approached the back gate of a villa moments later. She fumbled for the latch, then pulled her hand back; she could turn around and go home. Family unity was still a choice. Somebody had scratched a crude fish symbol into the wood above her head. A sign of the Christ, a symbol of peace. Peace? She stifled a grim laugh and lifted the cold iron latch.

The villa stood prominently between two large harbor warehouses and across the cobblestone street from other villas fronting shops and businesses. No villa located within this square insula was as large or as opulent as the home of this successful silk trader and his wife, Portia, Sabina's closest friend. Sabina slipped through the opening, brushing aside the thin branches of a laurel tree. Ahead of her, a narrow rectangle of light silhouetted the back door of the villa's kitchen. She hurried past the emerging shoots in the kitchen garden and reached the door.

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It sprang open. An older woman carrying a bucket collided with Sabina. “Eeeiii!” The woman screamed; her eyes flared wide. The bucket crashed to the ground, and liquid splashed Sabina as the bucket rolled to a stop.

Sabina yelped and stumbled back, recognizing the kitchen servant. “Feya, it’s me.” Sabina dropped the head-covering onto her shoulders.

“I’m sorry. I’m jumpy as a grasshopper. What with Mistress Portia overseeing the feast for tonight’s worship.”

“It’s a special celebration.” Sabina shook water drops from her tunic. She bent and picked up the bucket and handed it to the trembling woman.

“I’m not complaining.” Feya slumped, hugging the bucket to her chest. “I just got bad feelings coming on.”

“We’re all taking precautions.” Sabina understood Feya’s worry. Preoccupied with thoughts of the argument with her father, she had stormed from her house. Not taking her usual precautions, she could have led those men to Portia’s back door, exposing Portia’s family and the congregation she and her husband, Horace, hosted. *Don’t get caught*. Her father’s warning took on new gravity. If the authorities discovered this place of worship, they would arrest them.

She rarely allowed her emotions to distract her. She was usually logical, precise. Each time Sabina came for worship, she varied her route. Every member did—a reminder of the danger they courted. Yet Sabina came—tonight, and every time she had a chance.

“I know we’re careful.” Feya shook her head. “Apollos says God protects His faithful but...” The older woman raised her hand and made a pagan gesture to ward off evil spirits.

Sabina frowned. “Prayer is our power.”

Feya pinched her lips together. “Then why didn’t God save Procurius and his family? They were careful and were arrested last week and martyred. Even his children.”

“We live in a world full of hate and sin. Christians aren’t excluded. Surely, you feel God’s comfort and strength when you pray?”

“I do. I’m solid as a rock in the Lord, and He is in me, but I’m telling you, Procurius is on my mind.”

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Procurius had been on Sabina's mind as well. "He lived miles away in Smyrna. The magistrates here in Ephesus are unaware of our meetings." Except for Sabina's father, who, for now, chose to look the other way. But disclosing a Roman magistrate knew of their Christian activities would not comfort the woman.

"I pray for the day when Christ returns. Apollos says it's soon. Not soon enough for me." Feya grumbled, raised her hand in the superstitious sign, looked at Sabina, and lowered her arm.

"I, too, look to the day we don't suffer for our beliefs. Until then, we pray for God's protection." She thought of the two men she had escaped from and said a silent prayer of thanks before stepping past Feya and into the villa's bustling kitchen.

The acrid smoke from the oven's fire struck her nostrils seconds before the earthy aroma of baking bread. The chaos of cooking preparations churned around her. She closed her mouth and inhaled, blinking away the sting of smoke. She focused on the tranquility of the enveloping heat as muscles relaxed. She exhaled her tension and fear of harbor watchmen. Not the peace of this world, but the peace and joy found in Jesus drew her here to worship, sing praises, and pray to her God.

"Bring the baskets. The bread's ready." Portia popped up from peeking into the oven. She pushed her bright red hair out of her face, her porcelain skin flushed from the heat of the flames. "Feya, have the mussels been steamed?"

"Yes, as you directed, an hour ago."

"Sabina." Portia flew toward her. The pale green silk of her floor-length tunic swirled, caressing her willowy figure. No one would guess she was twenty years Sabina's senior. "God's peace." Portia moved to greet her friend with a kiss, stopped, and frowned. "Your cheek is bleeding."

Feya spun around, lips pinched tight, expertly balancing two steaming loaves on a wooden paddle.

Sabina rubbed the jagged line of dried blood. "It's a scratch." She batted away Portia's concern.

Portia raised an eyebrow. "You're later than usual."

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“I was held up.” Sabina felt Feya’s eyes watching her as the servant dumped the loaves into waiting baskets. “It’s nothing to worry about.” She wouldn’t dampen the celebration the congregation had been planning for months. “I’m here now. What can I do to help?” Sabina grabbed a basket Feya had laden with hot bread and hoisted it onto her hip.

Portia lifted a second basket. “Follow me,” she responded with an undercurrent of *You’re not getting away that easy*.

Sabina trailed Portia down a short hallway and onto the covered colonnaded walkway bordering the villa’s expansive interior garden. Palm trees bordered a large pond with a life-size bronze dolphin fountain in the middle. Crystal clear water gushed in a perfect arch from its blowhole. When visiting as a child with her mother, Sabina, had been mesmerized by the shimmering dolphin. Back then, their church family had consisted of a dozen people, and Sabina’s mother, Korinna, and Portia became friends. When the emperor Nero began persecuting the followers of Christ, Korinna hid her faith to protect Sabina’s father and his prominent government position. Portia guarded the secret for mother and daughter. Since Korinna’s death, Christians had become more detestable and her father’s political rivals more ruthless.

Sabina skipped aside, dodging a slave girl hurrying past juggling a large platter and two pitchers.

She spotted several plants she had cultivated and given to Portia. “Last fall’s plants survived.” A spindly grouping of pale green spikes would be a glorious border of purple hyacinth in another month. “This year, I will expand your herb garden. I just discovered some delicious Egyptian mint.”

“Are you trying to avoid explaining what happened to your cheek?” Portia’s eyebrow lifted in concern.

“I scratched it while evading a couple of harbor rats.” Sabina smiled in a way she hoped reassured her friend.

Portia stopped and spun around. “Oh, Sabina, you take too many chances.”

Sabina skipped around her. “I’m fine. They didn’t see me. What about the mint plants?”

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Portia shook her head. "I'll speak to my gardener."

Sabina followed Portia around a corner, through the atrium, and into a spacious dining room. Two slaves circled the large room. One lowered the chain of a hanging oil lamp while the other slave lit the wick, then hoisted it to join the other dozens of lamps casting glittering spheres of light into the dark corners.

A group of young mothers watched and laughed as four small children chased one another around the dining tables, their sandals slapping on the black and white mosaic floor.

A newly married young man lingered near the door. His wife, Iris, appeared several minutes later, arriving from a different direction. "God's peace to you, sisters in Christ," she greeted Sabina and Portia.

"God's peace." Sabina nodded and watched as families arrived at staggered intervals. Hopefully, they avoided the attention of curious neighbors or alert city officials. She recalled the slave's worries. Were their safeguards enough?

Eight low tables, each surrounded by six floor cushions, were arranged to view a small wooden altar at the far end of the room, the top adorned with a seven-branched silver candelabra and a linen cloth covering tonight's attraction.

The room hummed with conversation and relaxed laughter. Families arrived carrying bowls and covered platters and placed them on tables, then joined gatherings of friends.

"It appears everyone is coming tonight," Portia hefted her breadbasket.

"After months of waiting, our assembly is starved to hear the Isaiah scroll read." Sabina felt a shiver of excitement as she scanned the room. People crowded around the tables and overflowed, sitting along walls. Her fellow believers were eager to learn and grow in this new faith.

"Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God."

"A lot to consume. I heard it is twelve feet long."

"It is a lengthy book." Portia nodded. "God's words spoken to the prophet Isaiah over eight hundred years ago will come alive for us tonight."

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Sabina pulled Portia aside, away from the noisy activity. “I pray God’s wisdom will speak to me tonight. I need divine guidance.” She shifted her basket from one hip to the other and pulled a small roll of papyrus from a pouch inside her tunic.

“You have heard from your merchant again.”

“He is not my merchant...” The image of the stocky trader came to mind. Barely an inch taller than she, with bulging rocks for muscles from his years of sailing. “But yes, Marcus sent this.”

The letter unsettled her, much like a newly hatched brood of pigeons. She couldn’t help but think about the possibilities, joys, and complications. But unlike her loyal, dependable birds, humans were unpredictable.

“A love letter?” Portia’s eyebrows raised.

Sabina’s smile evaporated. “Marcus requested a private dinner.” She unrolled the letter. She had been surprised by his communication. At twenty-eight, Sabina’s marriage prospects had dwindled to zero. And her advanced age was not the only reason. “I have had no suitors since my husband’s death eight years ago when everyone in Ephesus agreed I had caused Xeno’s death on our wedding night.”

“Not everyone...only the superstitious,” Portia chided.

“Apparently, any potential suitors are superstitious. I dare not hope Marcus is different.”

“Then you suspect a marriage proposal?”

“No. I’ve only met Marcus twice when Father invited him to his dinner parties.” Sabina closed her eyes for a moment and smiled before answering. “I enjoyed myself more than I expected.”

“More than your father’s usual dinner parties?”

“I was intrigued by Marcus’s company.”

“Not attracted?”

Sabina shook her head. “Flattered. He sought me out and ignored the other guests. Even Felicia.”

“Your beautiful fourteen-year-old neighbor?”

“She flirted with him mercilessly.” Sabina’s brows knit, remembering Felicia’s coy smiles and timid touches. “A skill I will never master.”

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“A little seduction never hurts.”

Sabina frowned.

“But it appears unnecessary here,” Portia shrugged. “I believe you have a suitor.”

“Perhaps not. Marcus returns home to Rome at the end of the week.”

“I understand your determination to be out from under your father’s guardianship. I advise prudence until you know more about him.”

“I have a week. As far as I know, he wants our cook’s recipe for boiled flamingo. He complimented my father on it multiple times.” Was God only taunting her with a chance of a husband and home of her own? Sabina had never imagined a life alone at this age—hosting her father’s social engagements, dutifully running his household. Women were supposed to be surrounded by their children and, at age twenty-eight, grandchildren. Examining her current life circumstances disoriented her. Where did a woman fit in when the purpose of her life appeared inaccessible?

Portia wagged her finger. “You are a widow, not a pariah. You have time.” Portia had a gift of encouragement. Sabina usually relied on her advice. Not all marriages were a blessing.

“Do I? You were a grandmother at my age, independent, successful, and—”

“That’s the same argument you gave me when you married Xeno.” Portia held up her hand, cutting off any argument. “We each have a path to travel. Trust that God has a plan for your life and Marcus’s.”

“I know.” Xeno had been a polite suitor, but fifty-eight years old, financially strapped, overweight, and afflicted with gout. He had offered to marry her for her dowry. The union had turned tragic when Xeno died the night of the wedding. Sabina, and her generous dowry, returned to her father’s house, a widow, a virgin, and the populace believing she carried a curse.

“Does Marcus support your Christian faith?”

Sabina blinked rapidly. “We haven’t had time to discuss that,” she said defensively.

Portia frowned and leveled a steady gaze at Sabina. “You haven’t had time?”

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“Of course, I will...” Sabina looked away. Portia didn’t understand. She hadn’t experienced the isolation of an only child, the ostracism after a husband’s suspicious death, or the following eight lonely years of widowhood. And yet, Sabina couldn’t help wondering if veering off God’s path and ignoring His plan for her had cost her a lifelong partner.

A scurrying child slipped and collided with Sabina and crashed to the floor. He screamed. Tears mixing with mucus ran down his face. Sabina plunked the basket down and bent over to help the child up.

Wiping his nose, he swatted her hand away and yelled louder.

Sabina grimaced at the slime smearing her hand. “Eeww,” she said, wrinkling her nose. She stood up and stared into the eyes of the small boy’s heavily pregnant teenage mother.

“I’m sorry.” The young woman’s expression tightened. She pressed her lips together. She picked up the crying toddler. His sobs quieted into hiccups as he dried his face, wiping his nose across her shoulder. “I know children can be a bother...when you don’t have any yourself.”

Sabina’s tight smile absorbed the slight. “I love children.” She clasped her hands together, trying to ignore the slick mucus on her palms. “I didn’t mean...” Sabina’s voice faded away as the young woman nodded skeptically and turned her back, but not before Sabina saw her rolling her eyes.

The mother waddled back to her group of friends, jostling her son on her hip. Their honored ranks closed around the brood of youngsters in the universal camaraderie of motherhood. As the young mother had pointed out, Sabina, an only child, had no experience with children. A familiar awkwardness swept over her.

“I offended her.” Sabina rubbed her hands vigorously on the hem of her tunic. The mothers were giggling. She stopped and stared at her sticky fingers and picked up the basket, clenching the handle.

Portia reached out and gently released the basket from Sabina’s grip. “I think she’s over it. Young mothers are extra-sensitive about their firstborn. After her second baby, her attitude will change. Besides, she doesn’t know you as well as I do.”

“What does that mean?” Sabina narrowed her eyes.

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“It means people can count on your honesty and straightforward advice and action. It’s your gift and one of the many reasons I love you.”

“My childhood nurse, Amisi, would call that tactless, opinionated, and inconsiderate.”

“Opinionated, perhaps. Tactless, sometimes. But inconsiderate—never.” Portia tipped her head toward the bevy of young mothers. “Your concern for her feelings when you did nothing wrong proves my point.”

“Life would be easier if I weren’t so...what, did you call me? Tactless.” Sabina sighed.

“Direct.” Portia’s mouth curved in a sympathetic smile. “And conscientious and kind.” Portia returned the breadbasket to Sabina and gave her arm a quick squeeze. “Come to my house tomorrow. We shall discuss what marriage advice we receive tonight from Benjamin’s eight-hundred-year-old sage.” Portia winked just as a young servant boy knocked a bowl of grapes off the table. “Oh dear, I should go and—”

“Be tactful, sensitive, considerate.” Sabina smiled.

Portia laughed. “I acknowledge my gifts.” She sauntered off, looking unruffled as always.

During Sabina’s childhood, Portia had changed from a mentor into a friend. A friend Sabina hadn’t listened to eight years ago when, wishing to escape from her father’s control, Sabina had prayed but ignored Scripture’s warning of marrying an unbeliever.

Now, eight years wiser, Sabina had promised herself she would listen to Portia’s advice and diligently pray for God’s guidance, precisely what she was doing tonight. Besides, Marcus was only nine years older than she, and his masculine physique and witty banter attracted her, as had his polite but firm rebuff of Felicia. No matter what Portia said, Sabina was running out of time.

She watched as laughing, close-knit families filled the tables in the dining room.

Marcus’s letter could be her deliverance.

A dozen overflow worshippers reclined along the walls. She wound her way through a jostling of bodies, greeting friends she’d known all

her life as well as the new believers she was getting to know. The church was growing. She counted nearly sixty people.

Sabina claimed an empty place at a back table.

The clanking of dishes almost obscured a rhythmic tapping nearby.

Benjamin, a quiet and reserved scribe, sat cross-legged on a floor cushion at the table across from her. His fingers danced on the tabletop.

Tap, tap, tap.

Sabina made her way to him and placed the basket of bread on his table. "God's peace to you, Benjamin. Shouldn't you be sitting in front by the altar?"

"I prefer here." The young man's drumming stopped. He grabbed his cup. His hands trembled.

"Excited?"

His brows knotted, and he dipped his head. "Yes, a little." He licked his lips and took a sip. "Mostly, I'm...nervous."

Sabina arched her brows. "It is a special night for you. Naturally, you would feel that way."

"There are so many people. It's tiring." His timid smile appeared forced.

"It will be over soon." She understood, too well, the discomfort of scrutiny, the emotional toll of duty. How many times had she retreated to the rooftop solitude of her father's pigeon loft? The birds' welcoming chortles were a respite, first for a lonely child and now a bewildered adult. "Try to relax and enjoy the evening." She bit her tongue, repeating Portia's advice to her. "We are all eager to hear the words of God read from your scroll."

"You are kind, but I only copied it." Benjamin smiled, his cheeks turning pink, his pride visible.

An older man with dark brown skin and tight curly black hair strode toward the table. "For this reason, we also thank God without ceasing, because when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you welcomed it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which also effectively works in you who believe."

"Brother Apollos," Benjamin said, standing and greeting the man with a kiss. "God's word to the Thessalonian believers."

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“Benjamin, your memory of scripture is perfect as usual.” Apollos turned to Sabina and clasped her hands. “Blessings, Sabina.” He kissed her cheek, frowning at the scratch.

“I am well,” she reassured as she clasped Bishop Apollos’s hands. A rush of warmth flooded her at the return squeeze from the genial soul, whose trimmed black beard sprinkled with silver threads hid the burgeoning wrinkles of age.

Apollos’s eyes lit up as he gestured toward Benjamin. “Sabina, are you looking forward to the scripture reading tonight as much as I am?”

“It is an amazing accomplishment for a scribe, so—” Sabina stopped before saying *young*. She did not know him well. Benjamin could not be much younger than she, though his thin frame, smooth olive skin, and shy demeanor projected the innocence of an adolescent.

“A scribe so talented.” Apollos smoothed over the awkward hush. “We are blessed that such a gifted scholar chose to belong to our body of believers.”

Benjamin’s color deepened from pink to red before he dropped his head.

“Before I embarrass you more,” Apollos squeezed Benjamin’s shoulder, “I must prepare for our meal.”

Apollos took his leave, and Benjamin sat on his cushion. When he looked up, his gaze passed over Sabina. His features tightened into a scowl.

Sabina turned in the direction of his gaze just as someone stepped on her sandal. “Ouch.” She turned. “Magnus,” she groaned as the heavy-set man shoved past her without apology. Uncharitable thoughts flew through her mind while rubbing her aching foot, *rude, ill-mannered, boorish*.

Magnus plunked his bulk down, half sitting on Benjamin and pinning him under a fleshy thigh. He reached for a wine cup, crushing Benjamin as he leaned forward. Magnus’s elbow collided with Benjamin’s throat, deadening Benjamin’s yelp. Wine sloshed from the cup, splattering both men.

Magnus glared at Benjamin and then gazed into the empty cup, expecting more wine to appear magically. “You spilled my wine,” Magnus thundered.

People nearby stared.

Benjamin's face flushed the same rose color as the wine. "That was my cup," Benjamin said with a note of defiance as he dabbed the speckles blooming red on his white tunic.

Magnus clambered onto his knees and reached for a pitcher across the table, elbowing Benjamin in the stomach.

"Magnus, stop it." Gallus, an Elder of the church, ordered from across the table. "Move." He pointed to Sabina's table as if directing a child.

"There's no room," Magnus said.

Sabina's jaw clenched. "I'll sit on the floor." Sabina grabbed her mantle from the neighboring table's cushion. "An empty seat." She brandished, controlling the urge to stomp on Magnus's foot herself.

Magnus grunted, shoving against Benjamin as Magnus heaved himself up.

Benjamin looked exhausted. His previously flushed cheeks glistened a chalky white. He rubbed his temples. "I'm so very sorry. I will move." His hands trembled; his pupils darkened, making him look even more vulnerable.

Sabina clenched her fists. Contention followed Magnus like skunk spray. "Don't apologize for Magnus. Tonight is your night. Stay there." Sabina plopped down against the wall.

Apollos clapped his hands, and the congregation quieted. "We give thanks to the LORD, for he is good, and his love endures forever."

The members joined in chanting a psalm of thanksgiving. Baskets of bread, platters of mussels and fish, and bowls of olive oil passed from hand to hand down the tables. Slaves and servants circulated, passing out food to those seated along the walls and refilling pitchers of watered-down wine. Conversations muffled as mouths filled.

Sabina balanced a plate on her lap while relishing her last bite of tuna. She glanced at Benjamin. A glistening trickle of sweat snaked down his nose, beading on his upper lip. He swiped at it then dried his palms on his tunic.

He refused more wine and pushed his untouched food away. Nervous? Anxious? Ill?

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The meal ended. Sabina joined the other worshipers as they pushed away empty dishes. Several women joined the household slaves scooping up and scraping greasy platters, stacking them before carting them to the kitchen. They returned, settling in and joining the rest of the congregation. The dining room transformed into a holy sanctuary.

Conversations fell silent, and mothers quieted their children. Heads turned toward the altar.

Sabina eyed the sacred text shimmering in the flickering oil light. Smoke from the altar's seven candles swirled around it as if alive.

Apollos unsheathed a knife and lifted the scroll. He sliced through the three wax seals guaranteeing the accuracy and authenticity of Benjamin's work. He smiled at Benjamin. "We thank you for the gift of God's message given to his people. Benjamin, believers will read your scroll tonight and a thousand nights hereafter."

Benjamin raised his head, this time acknowledging the praise with a feeble smile. His eyes glittered unnaturally bright. He swayed, and his smile tightened into a grimace. Was she the only one who noticed?

Apollos unrolled one side of the hefty manuscript. His finger moved down the scroll to his chosen verse. "The word of our Lord."

The congregation responded, attention fixed on their bishop. "Man does not live by bread only, but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of the LORD."

Sabina watched Benjamin. Creases of apprehension lined his face.

Apollos began reading.

"All flesh is grass, and all its loveliness is as the flower of the field."

Benjamin dropped his napkin. He gasped and gripped the edge of the table, his fingers turning white. He groaned.

Sabina shot up. Something's wrong.

"The grass withers, the flower fades: because the breath of the LORD blows upon it: surely the people are grass."

Benjamin doubled over.

"The grass withers, the flower fades: but the word of our God shall stand forever."

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He struck his head on the edge of the table. A wine pitcher toppled on its side, spilling its contents, and rolled toward the edge of the table.

Apollos stopped reading.

“Benjamin!” Sabina raced over and dropped to her knees, grabbing at his arm.

Two men rushed to her side. Heads turned in her direction.

Benjamin vomited down the front of his tunic. His eyes rolled back as his body convulsed, jerking violently from her grasp.

Sabina fumbled for him. His robe flitted through her fingers as he slid to the floor. His weight fell against her and dropped her to her knees. She shielded his head as they tumbled to the floor. Somewhere in the back of her consciousness, more people were standing and moving toward her. She heard the scroll crash to the floor.

The empty wine pitcher reached the table’s end, dropped, and shattered on the tiles—stinging shards sprayed Sabina’s hands.

Spittle bubbled out onto Benjamin’s chin. With one last spasm, Benjamin crumpled to Sabina’s lap.