



a LINEAGE

Five stories of unlikely women who changed eternity

of GRACE



FRANCINE
RIVERS



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A Lineage of Grace

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Unveiled is dedicated to those who have been abused
and used and yearn for justice.

Unshamed is dedicated to women who think a past of
mistakes ruins any chance of a joy-filled future. Turn to
Jesus and experience the wonders He has waiting for you.

Unshaken is dedicated to my mother-in-law,
Edith Rivers, whom I admire and adore.

Unspoken is dedicated to women who feel they've lost their
reputation forever. God can make beauty from ashes.

Unafraid is dedicated to Jane Jordan Browne, a woman of faith.

c o n t e n t s

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f o r e w o r d

Dear Reader,

You are about to read five novellas on the women in the lineage of Jesus Christ. These were Eastern women who lived in ancient times, and yet their stories apply to our lives and the difficult issues we face in our world today. They were on the edge. They had courage. They took risks. They did the unexpected. They lived daring lives, and sometimes they made mistakes—big mistakes. These women were not perfect, and yet God in His infinite mercy used them in His perfect plan to bring forth the Christ, the Savior of the world.

We live in desperate, troubled times when millions seek answers. These women point the way. The lessons we can learn from them are as applicable today as when they lived thousands of years ago.

Tamar is a woman of **hope**.

Rahab is a woman of **faith**.

Ruth is a woman of **love**.

Bathsheba is a woman who received **unlimited grace**.

Mary is a woman of **obedience**.

These are historical women who actually lived. Their stories, as I have told them, are based on biblical accounts. Although some of their actions may seem disagreeable to us in our century, we need to consider these women in the context of their own times.

This is a work of historical fiction. The outline of the story is provided by the Bible, and I have started with the facts provided for us there. Building on that foundation, I have created action, dialogue, internal motivations, and in some cases, additional characters that I feel are consistent with the biblical record. I have attempted to remain true to the scriptural message in all points, adding only what is necessary to aid in our understanding of that message.

At the end of each novella, we have included a brief study section. The

ultimate authority on people of the Bible is the Bible itself. I encourage you to read it for greater understanding. And I pray that as you read the Bible, you will become aware of the continuity, the consistency, and the confirmation of God's plan for the ages—a plan that includes you.

Francine Rivers

a c k n o w l e d g m e n t s

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The Lord has blessed me through all of you. May those blessings return upon each of you a thousandfold.

BOOK ONE

UNVEILED



SETTING THE SCENE



Genesis 37:1–38:6

So Jacob settled again in the land of Canaan, where his father had lived.

This is the history of Jacob's family. When Joseph was seventeen years old, he often tended his father's flocks with his half brothers, the sons of his father's wives Bilhah and Zilpah. But Joseph reported to his father some of the bad things his brothers were doing. Now Jacob loved Joseph more than any of his other children because Joseph had been born to him in his old age. So one day he gave Joseph a special gift—a beautiful robe. But his brothers hated Joseph because of their father's partiality. They couldn't say a kind word to him.

One night Joseph had a dream and promptly reported the details to his brothers, causing them to hate him even more. "Listen to this dream," he announced. "We were out in the field tying up bundles of grain. My bundle stood up, and then your bundles all gathered around and bowed low before it!"

"So you are going to be our king, are you?" his brothers taunted. And they hated him all the more for his dream and what he had said.

Then Joseph had another dream and told his brothers about it. "Listen to this dream," he said. "The sun, moon, and eleven stars bowed low before me!"

This time he told his father as well as his brothers, and his father rebuked him. "What do you mean?" his father asked. "Will your mother, your brothers, and I actually come and bow before you?" But while his brothers were jealous of Joseph, his father gave it some thought and wondered what it all meant.

Soon after this, Joseph's brothers went to pasture their father's flocks at Shechem. When they had been gone for some time, Jacob said to Joseph, "Your brothers are over at Shechem with the flocks. I'm going to send you to them."

"I'm ready to go," Joseph replied.

"Go and see how your brothers and the flocks are getting along," Jacob said. "Then come back and bring me word." So Jacob sent him on his way, and Joseph traveled to Shechem from his home in the valley of Hebron.

When he arrived there, a man noticed him wandering around the countryside. "What are you looking for?" he asked.

"For my brothers and their flocks," Joseph replied. "Have you seen them?"

"Yes," the man told him, "but they are no longer here. I heard your brothers say they were going to Dothan." So Joseph followed his brothers to Dothan and found them there.

When Joseph's brothers saw him coming, they recognized him in the distance and made plans to kill him. "Here comes that dreamer!" they exclaimed. "Come on, let's kill him and throw him into a deep pit. We can tell our father that a wild animal has eaten him. Then we'll see what becomes of all his dreams!"

But Reuben came to Joseph's rescue. "Let's not kill him," he said. "Why should we shed his blood? Let's just throw him alive into this pit here. That way he will die without our having to touch him." Reuben was secretly planning to help Joseph escape, and then he would bring him back to his father.

So when Joseph arrived, they pulled off his beautiful robe and threw him into the pit. This pit was normally used to store water, but it was empty at the time. Then, just as they were sitting down to eat, they noticed a caravan of camels in the distance coming toward them. It was a group of Ishmaelite traders taking spices, balm, and myrrh from Gilead to Egypt.

Judah said to the others, "What can we gain by killing our brother? That would just give us a guilty conscience. Let's sell Joseph to those Ishmaelite traders. Let's not be responsible for his death; after all, he is our brother!" And his brothers agreed. So when the traders came by, his brothers pulled Joseph out of the pit and sold him for twenty pieces of silver, and the Ishmaelite traders took him along to Egypt.

Some time later, Reuben returned to get Joseph out of the pit. When he discovered that Joseph was missing, he tore his clothes in anguish and frustration. Then he went back to his brothers and lamented, "The boy is gone! What can I do now?"

Then Joseph's brothers killed a goat and dipped the robe in its blood. They took the beautiful robe to their father and asked him to identify it. "We found this in the field," they told him. "It's Joseph's robe, isn't it?"

Their father recognized it at once. "Yes," he said, "it is my son's robe. A wild animal has attacked and eaten him. Surely Joseph has been torn in pieces!" Then Jacob tore his clothes and put on sackcloth. He mourned deeply for his son for many days. His family all tried to comfort him, but

it was no use. "I will die in mourning for my son," he would say, and then begin to weep.

Meanwhile, in Egypt, the traders sold Joseph to Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh, the king of Egypt. Potiphar was captain of the palace guard.

About this time, Judah left home and moved to Adullam, where he visited a man named Hirah. There he met a Canaanite woman, the daughter of Shua, and he married her. She became pregnant and had a son, and Judah named the boy Er. Then Judah's wife had another son, and she named him Onan. And when she had a third son, she named him Shelah. At the time of Shelah's birth, they were living at Kezib.

When his oldest son, Er, grew up, Judah arranged his marriage to a young woman named Tamar. . . .

ONE



When Tamar saw Judah leading a donkey burdened with sacks and a fine rug, she took her hoe and ran to the farthest border of her father's land. Sick with dread, she worked with her back to the house, hoping he would pass by and seek some other girl for his son. When her nurse called her, Tamar pretended not to hear and hacked harder at the earth with her hoe. Tears blinded her.

"Tamar!" Acsah puffed as she reached her. "Didn't you see Judah? You must return to the house with me now. Your mother is about to send your brothers after you, and they'll not take kindly to your delay." Acsah grimaced. "Don't look at me like that, child. This isn't of my doing. Would you prefer a marriage with one of those Ishmaelite traders on his way to Egypt?"

"You've heard about Judah's son just as I have."

"I've heard." She held out her hand, and Tamar reluctantly relinquished the hoe. "Perhaps it will not be as bad as you think."

But Tamar saw in her nurse's eyes that Acsah had her own grave doubts.

Tamar's mother met them and grabbed Tamar by the arm. "If I had time, I would beat you for running off!" She pulled Tamar inside the house and into the women's quarters.

No sooner was Tamar through the doorway than her sisters laid hands upon her and tugged at her clothing. Tamar gasped in pain as one yanked the cover carelessly from her head, pulling her hair as well. "Stop it!" She raised her hands to ward them off, but her mother stepped in.

"Stand still, Tamar! Since it took Acsah so long to fetch you, we must hurry."

The girls were all talking at once, excited, eager.

"Mother, let me go just as I am!"

"Straight from the fields? You will not! You will be presented in the finest we have. Judah has brought gifts with him. And don't you dare shame us with tears, Tamar."

Swallowing convulsively, Tamar fought for self-control. She had no choice but to submit to her mother and sisters' ministrations. They were using the best garments and perfume for her appearance before Judah, the Hebrew. The man had three sons. If she pleased him, it would be the firstborn, Er, who would become her husband. Last harvest, when Judah and his sons had brought their flocks to graze in the harvested fields, her father had commanded her to work nearby. She knew what he hoped to accomplish. Now, it seemed he had.

"Mother, please. I need another year or two before I'm ready to enter a household of my own."

"Your father decides when you're old enough." Her mother wouldn't look her in the eyes. "It's not your right to question his judgment." Tamar's sisters chattered like magpies, making her want to scream. Her mother clapped her hands. "Enough! Help me get Tamar ready!"

Clenching her jaw, Tamar closed her eyes and decided she must resign herself to her fate. She had known that one day she would marry. She had also known her father would choose her husband. Her one solace was the ten-month betrothal period. At least she would have time to prepare her mind and heart for the life looming before her.

Acsah touched her shoulder. "Try to relax." She untied Tamar's hair and began to brush it with long, firm strokes. "Think soothing thoughts, dear one."

She felt like an animal her father was preparing for sale. Ah, wasn't she? Anger and despair filled her. Why did life have to be so cruel and unfair?

"Petra, bring the scented oil and rub her skin with it. She mustn't smell like a field slave!"

"Better if she smelled of sheep and goats," Acsah said. "The Hebrew would like that."

The girls laughed in spite of their mother's reprimand. "You're not making things better, Acsah. Now, hush!"

Tamar grasped her mother's skirt. "Please, Mother. Couldn't you speak to Father for my sake? This boy is . . . is evil!" Tears came in a rush before she could stop them. "Please, I don't want to marry Er."

Her mother's mouth jerked, but she did not weaken. She pried Tamar's hand from the folds of her skirt and held it tightly between her own. "You know I can't alter your father's plans, Tamar. What good would come of my saying anything against this match now other than to bring shame upon us all? Judah is *here*."

Tamar drew in a ragged sob, fear flooding her veins.

Her mother gripped her chin and forced her head up. "I've prepared you for this day. You're of no use to us if you don't marry Er. See this for what

it is: good fortune for your father's house. You will build a bridge between Zimran and Judah. We will have the assurance of peace."

"There are more of us than there are of them, Mother."

"Numbers don't always matter. You're no longer a child, Tamar. You have more courage than this."

"More courage than Father?"

Her mother's eyes darkened with anger. She released Tamar abruptly. "You will do as you're told or bear the full consequences of your disobedience."

Defeated, Tamar said no more. All she had done was to bring humiliation upon herself. She wanted to scream at her sisters to stop their silly prattling. How could they rejoice over her misfortune? What did it matter if Er was handsome? Hadn't they heard of his cruelty? Didn't they know of his arrogance? Er was said to cause trouble wherever he went!

"More kohl, Acsah. It will make her look older."

Tamar could not calm the wild beating of her heart. The palms of her hands grew damp. If all went as her father hoped, her future would be settled today.

This is a good thing, Tamar told herself, *a good thing*. Her throat was hot and tight with tears.

"Stand, Tamar," her mother said. "Let me have a look at you."

Tamar obeyed. Her mother sighed heavily and tugged at the folds of the red dress, redraping the front. "We must conceal her lack of curves, Acsah, or Zimran will be hard-pressed to convince Judah she is old enough to conceive."

"I can show him the cloth, my lady."

"Good. Have it ready in case it's requested."

Tamar felt the heat flood her face. Was nothing private? Did everyone have to discuss the most personal events in her life? Her first show of blood had proclaimed her womanhood and her usefulness as a bargaining tool for her father. She was a commodity to be sold, a tool to forge an alliance between two clans, a sacrifice for an assured peace. She had hoped to be overlooked for another year or two. Fourteen seemed too young to draw a man's interest.

This is a good thing, Tamar told herself again. Even while other thoughts crowded in, tightening her stomach with fear, she repeated the words over and over, trying to convince herself. *This is a good thing*.

Perhaps if she hadn't heard the stories . . .

For as long as Tamar could remember, her father had been afraid of Judah and his people. She'd heard the stories about the power of the God of the Hebrews, a god who had turned Sodom and Gomorrah to rubble beneath a storm of fire and brimstone, leaving a wasteland of white sands and a growing salten sea behind. No Canaanite god had ever shown such power!

And there were the stories of what the Hebrews had done to the town of Shechem, stories of mayhem . . .

"Why must it be this way, Mother? Have I no choice in what's to become of me?"

"No more choice than any other girl. I know how you're feeling. I was no older than you when I came into your father's house. It is the way of things, Tamar. Haven't I prepared you for this day from the time you were a little girl? I have told you what you were born to do. Struggling against your fate is like wrestling the wind." She gripped Tamar's shoulders. "Be a good daughter and obey without quibbling. Be a good wife and bear many sons. Do these things, and you'll bring honor upon yourself. And if you're fortunate, your husband will come to love you. If not, your future will still be secure in the hands of sons. When you're old, they'll take care of you just as your brothers will take care of me. The only satisfaction a woman has in this life is knowing she has built up the household of her husband."

"But this is Judah's son, Mother. Judah's son Er."

Her mother's eyes flickered, but she remained firm. "Find a way to fulfill your duty and bear sons. You must be strong, Tamar. These people are fierce and unpredictable. And they are proud."

Tamar turned her face away. "I don't want to marry Er. I can't marry him—"

Her mother grasped her hair and yanked her head back. "Would you destroy our family by humiliating such a man as this Hebrew? Do you think your father would let you live if you went into that room and begged to be spared marriage to Er? Do you think Judah would take such an insult lightly? I tell you this. I would join your father in stoning you if you dare risk the lives of my sons. Do you hear me? Your father decides whom and when you marry. Not you!" She let go of her roughly and stepped away, trembling. "Do not act like a fool!"

Tamar closed her eyes. The silence in the room was heavy. She felt her sisters and nurse staring at her. "I'm sorry." Her lip quivered. "I'm sorry. I'll do what I must."

"As we all must." Sighing, her mother took her hand and rubbed it with scented oil. "Be wise as a serpent, Tamar. Judah has shown wisdom in considering you. You are strong, stronger than these others. You have quick wits and strength you don't even realize yet. This Hebrew has taken an interest in you. For all our sakes, you must please him. Be a good wife to his son. Build a bridge between our people. Keep the peace between us."

The weight of responsibility being given her made her bow her head. "I will try."

"You will do more than try. You will succeed." Her mother leaned down

and kissed her cheek briskly. "Now sit quietly and collect yourself while I send word to your father that you're ready."

Tamar tried to think calmly. Judah was one of the sons of Jacob who had annihilated the town of Shechem over the rape of their sister. Perhaps, had the son of Hamor known more about these men, he would have left the girl alone. When he realized his mistake, he made every attempt to placate Jacob's sons. They wanted blood. The prince and his father had agreed to have every man in Shechem mutilated by the Hebrew rite of circumcision. They were desperate to bring about a marriage alliance and assurance of peace between the two tribes! They had done all the Hebrews required, and still, three days after the Shechemites were circumcised, while they were all sick with fevers, Judah and his brothers took vengeance. They hadn't been content with the blood of the offender; they'd cut down every man by the sword. Not one survived, and the city was plundered.

Hebrews were a stench in Canaanite nostrils. Their presence invoked fear and distrust. Even though Judah had left his father's tent and come to live among Tamar's people, her father had never slept easily with Judah so close. Even Judah's longtime friendship with Hirah the Adullamite didn't reassure her father. Nor did it matter that Judah had taken a Canaanite wife, who had given him three sons and trained them up in Canaanite ways. Judah was Hebrew. Judah was a foreigner. Judah was a thorn in Zimran's side.

Over the years, her father had made contracts with Judah to bring flocks to his harvested fields. The arrangement had proven beneficial to everyone and had brought about a tentative alliance. All through those years, Tamar had known her father sought a better and more lasting way to keep peace between himself and the Hebrews. A marriage between the two households might ensure that, if she succeeded in blessing Judah's household with sons.

Oh, Tamar understood her father's determination to bring about her marriage to Er. She even understood his need for it. She understood her role in all of it. But understanding didn't make it any easier. After all, she was the one being offered like a sacrificial lamb. She had no choice as to whether she married or not. She had no choice as to the man she would marry. Her only choice was in how she faced her fate.

Tamar was ready when her mother returned. Her feelings were hidden as she bowed down to her. When Tamar raised her head, her mother placed both hands upon her and murmured a blessing. Then she tipped Tamar's chin. "Life is difficult, Tamar. I know that better than you do. Every girl dreams of love when she's young, but this is life, not idle dreams. Had you been born first, we would have sent you to the temple of Timnah instead of your sister."

"I would not have been happy there." In fact, she would have preferred death by her own hand to the life her sister led.

"So this is the only life left to you, Tamar. Embrace it."

Resolved to do so, Tamar rose. She tried to still the tremors as she followed her mother from the women's chamber. Judah might still decide she was too young. He might say she was too skinny, too ugly. She might yet be spared from marrying Er. But it would change nothing in the end. The truth was hard to face. She had to marry, for a woman without a husband and sons might as well be dead.

+ + +

Judah watched Zimran's daughter closely as she entered the room. She was tall and thin and very young. She was also poised and graceful. He liked the way she moved as she served the meal with her mother. He'd noticed her youthful elegance during his last visit after the harvest. Zimran had put the girl to work in the field next to the pasturage so Judah and his sons could see her. He had been fully aware of Zimran's motives in displaying her this way. Now, on closer inspection, the girl looked too young to be a bride. She couldn't be more than Shelah's age, and Judah said so.

Zimran laughed. "Of course, she is young, but so much the better. A young girl is more moldable than an older one. Is that not so? Your son will be her *baal*. He will be her teacher."

"What of children?"

Zimran laughed again; the sound grated Judah's nerves. "I assure you, Judah my friend, Tamar is old enough to bear sons and has been old enough since last harvest, when Er noticed her. We have proof of it."

The girl's eyes flickered in her father's direction. She was blushing and clearly embarrassed. Judah felt oddly touched by her modesty and studied her openly. "Come closer, girl," he said, beckoning. He wanted to look into her eyes. Perhaps he would glean better understanding of why he'd thought of her at all when the subject of marriage had come to mind.

"Don't be shy, Tamar." Zimran's mouth flattened. "Let Judah see how pretty you are." When she raised her head, Zimran nodded. "That's it. Smile and show Judah what fine teeth you have."

Judah didn't care about her smile or her teeth, though both were good. He cared about her fertility. Of course, there was no way of knowing whether she could produce sons for his clan until she was wed to his son. Life held no guarantees. However, the girl came from good breeding stock. Her mother had produced six sons and five daughters. She must also be strong, for he had watched her in the fields hoeing the hard ground and carrying rocks to the wall. A weak girl would have been kept inside the house, making pottery or weaving.

“Tamar.” Her father gestured. “Kneel before Judah. Let him have a closer look.”

She obeyed without hesitation. Her eyes were dark but not hard, her skin ruddy and glowing with health. Such a girl might stir his son’s hardened heart and make him repent of his wild ways. Judah wondered if she had the courage needed to gain Er’s respect. Her father was a coward. Was she? Er had brought nothing but grief since he’d been old enough to walk, and he was likely to bring this girl trouble as well. She would have to be strong and resilient.

Judah knew the blame for Er’s waywardness could be laid at his feet. He should never have given his wife a free hand in rearing his sons. He’d thought complete freedom would allow them to grow up happy and strong. Oh, they were happy as long as they got their way and were strong enough to abuse others if they didn’t. They were proud and arrogant for lack of discipline. They would have turned out better had the rod been used more often!

Would this girl soften Er? Or would he harden and break her?

When she looked into his eyes, he saw innocence and intelligence. He felt a disquieting despair. Er was his firstborn, the first show of the strength of his loins. He’d felt such pride and joy when the boy was born, such hope. *Ah*, he’d thought, *here is flesh of my flesh, bone of my bone!* How he’d laughed when the young sprout had stood in red-faced fury, refusing to obey his mother. He’d been amused by his son’s passionate rebellion, foolishly proud of it. *This boy will be a strong man*, he’d said to himself. No woman would tell Er how to live.

Judah had never expected his son to defy *him* as well.

Onan, his second son, was becoming as difficult as Er. He’d grown up threatened by his older brother’s white-hot jealousy and had learned to protect himself by cunning and deception. Judah didn’t know which son was worse. Both were treacherous. Neither could be trusted.

The third son, Shelah, was following the ways of his brothers. Confronted with a wrong, Judah’s sons lied or blamed others. When pressed hard enough to get the truth, they appealed to their mother, who defended them no matter how offensive their crimes. Her pride wouldn’t allow her to see their faults. They were her sons, after all, and they were Canaanite through and through.

Something had to be done, or Er would bring Judah’s head down to the ground in shame. Judah almost regretted having sons, for they wreaked havoc in his household and his life! There were moments when his rage was so intense, it was all he could do not to pick up a spear and hurl it at one of them.

Judah often thought about his father, Jacob, and the trouble *he’d* endured

at the hands of *his* sons. Judah had caused his father as much trouble as the rest of them. Er and Onan reminded Judah of his brothers Simeon and Levi. Thinking of his brothers brought back the black memories of the grievous sin he himself had committed—the sin that haunted him, the sin that had driven him from his father’s household because he couldn’t bear to see the grief he’d caused or be in the company of the brothers who had shared in what he’d done.

His father, Jacob, didn’t even know the full truth of what had happened at Dothan.

Judah tried to console himself. He’d kept Simeon and Levi from murdering their brother Joseph, hadn’t he? But he also remembered that he was the one who’d led them into selling the boy to the Ishmaelite traders on their way to Egypt. He’d made a profit from the lad’s misery—profits shared by his brothers as well. Only God knew if Joseph had survived the long, hard journey to Egypt. It was more than possible he’d died in the desert. If not, he was now a slave for some Egyptian.

Sometimes in the darkest hour of night, Judah would lie awake upon his pallet, filled with an agony of remorse, thinking about Joseph. How many years would it be before he could put the past behind him and forget what he’d done? How many years before he could close his eyes and not see Joseph’s hands shackled, his neck noosed, as he was led forcefully away by the Ishmaelite traders? The boy’s screams for help still echoed in Judah’s mind.

He had the rest of his life to regret his sins, years to live with them. Sometimes Judah swore he could feel the hand of God squeezing the life from him for plotting the destruction of his own brother.

Zimran cleared his throat. Judah reminded himself where he was and why he’d come to the home of this Canaanite. He mustn’t let his mind wander, mustn’t allow the past to intrude on what he had to do about the future. His son needed a wife—a young, comely, strong wife who might distract him from his wicked schemes and devices. Judah’s mouth tightened as he studied the Canaanite girl kneeling before him. Was he making another mistake? He’d married a Canaanite and lived to regret it. Now he was bringing another one into his household. Yet this Canaanite girl appealed to him. Why?

Judah tipped the girl’s chin. He knew she must be afraid, but she hid it well. That would be a useful skill where Er was concerned. She looked so young and guileless. Would his son destroy her innocence and corrupt her as he was so eager to do to others?

Hardening himself, Judah withdrew his hand and leaned back. He had no intention of allowing Er to make the same mistakes he had. Lust had driven him to marry the boy’s mother. Beauty was a snare that captured a

man, while unrestrained passion burned away reason. A woman's character mattered greatly in a marriage. Judah would have done better to follow custom and allow his father to choose a wife for him. Instead, he'd been stubborn and hasty and now suffered for his folly.

It wasn't enough that a woman stirred a man's passion. She also had to be strong, yet willing to bend. A stubborn woman was a curse upon a man. He'd been laughable in his youthful confidence, so certain he could bend a woman to his ways. Instead, he'd bent to Bathshua's. He'd fooled himself into thinking there was no harm in giving his wife freedom to worship as she wished. Now, he found himself reaping a whirlwind with his idol-worshipping sons!

Tamar was of calmer disposition than Bathshua. Tamar had courage. She appeared intelligent. He knew she was strong, for he'd watched how hard she worked. His wife, Bathshua, would be happy about that. No doubt she would dump her chores upon the girl as soon as possible. The quality that mattered most was her fertility, and only time would tell about that. The qualities he could see were more than enough. Yet there was something more about this girl that Judah couldn't define—something rare and wonderful that made him determined to have her in his family. It was as though a quiet voice was telling him to choose her.

"She pleases me."

Zimran exhaled. "You are a wise man!" He nodded to his daughter. Thus dismissed, Tamar rose. The Canaanite was clearly eager to begin negotiations. Judah watched the girl leave the room with her mother. Zimran clapped his hands; two servants hurried in, one with a tray of pomegranates and grapes, another with roasted lamb. "Eat, my brother, and then we will talk."

Judah would not be so easily manipulated. Before touching the food, he made an offer for the girl. Eyes glowing, Zimran plunged in and began haggling over the bride-price.

Judah decided to be generous. Marriage, though far from bringing happiness to him, had brought some stability and direction. Perhaps Er would be similarly diverted from riotous living. Besides, Judah wanted to spend as little time with Zimran as possible. The man's ingratiating manner irritated him.

Tamar. Her name meant "date palm." It was a name given to one who would become beautiful and graceful. A date palm survives the desert and bears sweet, nourishing fruit, and the girl came from a fertile family. A date palm sways in the desert winds without breaking or being uprooted, and this girl would have to face Er's quick, irascible temper. A date palm could survive a hostile environment, and Judah knew Bathshua would see this young girl as her rival. Judah knew his wife would pit herself

against this young bride because Bathshua was vain and jealous of her son's affections.

Tamar.

Judah hoped the girl held all the promise her name implied.

+ + +

Tamar waited while her fate was settled. When her mother stood in the doorway, she knew the matter of her future was decided. "Come, Tamar. Judah has gifts for you."

She rose, numb inside. It was a time for rejoicing, not tears. Her father need not fear any longer.

"Ah, Daughter." Her father smiled broadly. Obviously, he'd fetched a high bride-price for her, for he had never before embraced her with so much affection. He even kissed her cheek! She lifted her chin and looked into his eyes, wanting him to know what he'd done to her in giving her to such a man as Er. Perhaps he would feel some shame for using her to protect himself.

He didn't. "Greet your father-in-law."

Resigned to her fate, Tamar prostrated herself before Judah. The Hebrew put his hand upon her head and blessed her and bid her rise. As she did so, he took gold earrings and bracelets from a pouch at his waist and placed them upon her. Her father's eyes glowed, but her heart sank.

"Be ready to leave in the morning," Judah told her.

Shocked, she spoke without thinking. "In the morning?" She looked at her father. "What of the betrothal—?"

Her father's expression warned her to silence. "Judah and I celebrate tonight, my daughter. Acsah will pack your things and go with you tomorrow. Everything is settled. Your husband is eager for you."

Was her father so afraid that he didn't require the customary ten-month betrothal period to prepare for the wedding? She would not even have a week to adjust to her impending marriage!

"You may go, Tamar. Make ready to leave in the morning."

When she entered the women's chamber, she found her mother and sisters already packing for her. Unable to contain her feelings any longer, Tamar burst into tears. Inconsolable, she wept all night, even after her sisters whined and pleaded for her to stop. "You will have your day," she told them angrily. "Someday you will understand!"

Acsah held and rocked her, and Tamar clung to her childhood for one last night.

When the sun rose, she washed her face and donned her bridal veils.

Her mother came to her. "Be content, beloved one. Judah paid dearly for you." Her voice was tear-choked and faintly bitter. "That Hebrew came

with a donkey laden with gifts. He returns home with only his seal ring and staff."

"And me," Tamar said softly.

Her mother's eyes filled with tears. "Take good care of her, Acsah."

"I will, my lady."

Her mother took Tamar in her arms and kissed her. "May your husband love you and give you many sons," she whispered against her hair. Tamar clung to her tightly, pressing herself close, soaking in the warmth and softness of her mother one last time. "It's time," her mother said softly, and Tamar drew back. Her mother touched her cheek before turning away.

Tamar went out into the morning sunlight. Acsah walked with her as she headed toward her father and Judah, who were standing some distance away. She had cried herself out last night. She would shed no more childish tears, though it was hard not to do so with Acsah weeping softly behind her.

"Perhaps all we've heard isn't true," Acsah said. "Perhaps Er is not as bad as some say he is."

"What does it matter now?"

"You must try to make him love you, Tamar. A man in love is clay in a woman's hands. May the gods have mercy on us!"

"Have mercy upon me and be quiet!"

When she reached the two men, her father kissed her. "Be fruitful and multiply the household of Judah." He was eager for their departure.

Judah walked ahead, Tamar and Acsah following. He was a tall man with long strides, and Tamar had to walk quickly to keep up with him. Acsah muttered complaints under her breath, but Tamar paid her no attention. Instead, she set her mind on what lay ahead. She would work hard. She would be a good wife. She would do everything within her power to bring honor to her husband. She knew how to plant a garden, tend a herd, cook, weave, and make pottery. She could read and write enough to keep proper lists and records of household goods. She knew how to conserve food and water when times were bad and how to be generous when times were good. She knew how to make soap, baskets, cloth, and tools, as well as how to organize servants. But children would be the greatest blessing she could give her husband—children to build the household.

It was Judah's second son, Onan, who came out to meet them. "Er is gone," he said to his father while staring at her.

Judah slammed the end of his staff into the ground. "Gone where?"

Onan shrugged. "Off with his friends. He was angry when he heard where you'd gone. I stayed out of his way. You know how he gets."

"*Bathshua!*" Judah strode toward his stone house.

A buxom woman with heavily painted eyes appeared in the doorway. "What are you yelling about this time?"

"Did you tell Er I was bringing his bride home today?"

"I told him." She leaned indolently in the doorway.

"Then where is he?"

She lifted her chin. "I'm his mother, Judah, not his keeper. Er will be along when he's ready and not before. You know how he is."

Judah's face darkened. "Yes, I know how he is." He gripped his staff so tightly his knuckles turned white. "That's why he needs a wife!"

"That may be, Judah, but you said the girl was pretty." She gave Tamar a cursory glance. "Do you really think this skinny girl will turn Er's head?"

"Tamar is more than she seems. Show her to Er's chamber." Judah walked off, leaving Tamar and Acsah standing before the house.

Mouth tight, Bathshua looked Tamar over from head to foot. She shook her head in disgust. "I wonder what Judah was thinking when he chose you?" Turning her back, she went into the house and left Tamar and Acsah to fend for themselves.



Er returned late in the afternoon, accompanied by several Canaanite friends. They were drunk and laughing loudly. Tamar remained out of sight, knowing what men were like in this condition. Her father and brothers had often imbibed freely and argued violently because of it. She knew the wisdom of staying out of the way until the effects of the wine wore off.

Knowing she would be summoned, Tamar had Acsah array her in wedding finery. While waiting, Tamar willed herself to set aside every terrible thing she'd ever heard about Er. Perhaps those who had spoken against him had hidden motives. She would give him the respect due a husband and adapt herself to his demands. If the god of his father smiled upon her, she would give Er sons, and quickly. If she were so blessed, she would bring them up to be strong and honest. She would teach them to be dependable and loyal. And if Er so wished, she would learn about the God of Judah and bring up her sons to worship him rather than bow down to the gods of her father. Still, her heart trembled and her fears increased with each passing hour.

When Tamar was finally summoned and saw her husband, she felt a flicker of admiration. Er was tall like his father and held the promise of great physical strength. He had his mother's thick curling mass of black hair, which he had drawn back in Canaanite fashion. The brass band he wore around his forehead made him look like a young Canaanite prince. Tamar was awed by her husband's handsome appearance but filled quickly with misgivings when she looked into his eyes. They were cold and dark and devoid of mercy. There was pride in the tilt of his head, cruelty in the curve of his lips, and indifference in his manner. He didn't reach out to take her hand.

"So this is the wife you chose for me, Father."

Tamar shivered at his tone.

Judah put his hand firmly on his son's shoulder. "Take good care of what belongs to you, and may the God of Abraham give you many sons by this girl."

Er stood unblinking, his face an inscrutable mask.

All through the evening, Er's friends made crude jests about marriage. They teased Er unmercifully, and though he laughed, Tamar knew he wasn't amused. Her father-in-law, lost in his own thoughts, drank freely while Bathshua lounged nearby, eating the best tidbits of the wedding feast and ignoring her. Tamar was hurt and confused and embarrassed by such rudeness. What had she done to offend her mother-in-law? It was as though the woman was determined not to show her the least consideration.

As the night wore on, her fear gave way to depression. She felt abandoned and lost in the midst of the gathering. She had married the heir of Judah's household, and yet no one spoke to her, not even the young husband who sat beside her. The hours passed slowly. She was bone weary from lack of sleep the previous night and the long walk to her new home. The tensions of the wedding feast further sapped her. She fought to keep her eyes open. She fought even harder to keep the tears from welling up and spilling over.

Er pinched her. Tamar gasped and jerked away from him. Heat flooded her cheeks as she realized she had unwittingly dozed against his side. His friends were laughing and making jokes about her youth and the impending wedding night. Er laughed with them. "Your nurse has prepared the chamber for us." He took her hand and pulled her up to her feet.

As soon as Acsah closed the door of the bedchamber behind them, Er stepped away from Tamar. Acsah took her place outside the door and began singing and beating her small drum. Tamar's skin prickled. "I'm sorry I fell asleep, my lord."

Er said nothing. She waited, her nerves stretching taut. He was enjoying her tension, plucking her nerve endings with his silence. Folding her hands, she decided to wait him out. He removed his belt sardonically. "I noticed you last year when we brought the sheep to your father's fields. I suppose that's why my father thought you might do as my wife." His gaze moved down over her. "He doesn't know me very well."

She did not fault Er for the hurtful words. She felt he was justified. After all, her heart had not leaped with joy when Judah came and offered a bride-price for her.

"You're afraid of me, aren't you?"

If she said no, it would be a lie. To say yes would be unwise.

His brow rose. "You should be afraid. I'm angry, or can't you tell?"

She could, indeed, and couldn't guess what he would do about it. She remained silent, acquiescent. She'd seen her father in rages often enough to know that it was better to say nothing. Words were like oil on a fiery temper. Her mother had told her long ago that men were unpredictable and given to fits of violence when provoked. She would not provoke Er.

"Cautious little thing, aren't you?" He smiled slowly. "At least you keep your wits about you." He came toward her. "You've heard things about me, I'll bet." He brushed his fingers against her cheek. She tried not to flinch. "Have your brothers carried stories home?"

Her heart beat faster and faster.

"As my father said, you're mine now. My own little mouse to do with as I wish. Remind me to thank him." He tipped her chin. His eyes glittered coldly, reminding her of a jackal in the moonlight. When he leaned down and kissed her mouth, the hair on the back of her neck rose. He drew back, assessing her. "Believe the rumors, every one of them!"

"I will try to please you, my husband." Heat poured into her cheeks at the quaver in her voice.

"Oh, no doubt you will try, my sweet, but you won't succeed." His mouth curved, showing the edge of his teeth. "You can't."

It took only a day of the weeklong wedding celebration for Tamar to understand what he meant.

SEEK AND FIND



Dear reader,

You have just read the story of Tamar as perceived by one author. Is this the whole truth about the story of Tamar and Judah? Jesus said to seek and you will find the answers you need for life. The best way to find the truth is to look for yourself!

This “Seek and Find” section is designed to help you discover the story of Tamar as recorded in the Bible. It consists of six short studies that you can do on your own or with a small discussion group.

You may be surprised to learn that this ancient story will have applications for your life today. No matter where we live or in what century, God’s Word is truth. It is as relevant today as it was yesterday. In it we find a future and a hope.

Peggy Lynch

LEADING HOME

SEEK GOD'S WORD FOR TRUTH

Go back and read the Bible passage quoted in "Setting the Scene" on pages 3–5.

- + What part did Judah play in this sibling rivalry story?
- + What did he and his brothers tell their father?
- + Based on this passage, list some possible reasons that Judah chose to leave his family at "about this time."
- + Have you ever felt ashamed of some careless act you did that affected others? Were you fearful of being found out? What choices did you make?
- + Judah had choices. What could he have done differently?

Proverbs 28:13 tells us, "People who cover over their sins will not prosper. But if they confess and forsake them, they will receive mercy."

Had Judah confessed to God and to his father, the story would have ended there. However, he did not. Instead, he got married! It would seem that Judah was on a pathway of separation from truth. He chose to run and hide rather than confront the real issues. He chose to handle things for himself rather than let God direct his path.

FIND GOD'S WAYS FOR YOU

- + What have you learned about Judah so far? Would you consider him confrontational or passive? Why?
- + In what ways do you identify with Judah?
- + How do you deal with jealousy? with conflict?
- + Where do you turn with life's struggles—to yourself? to family and friends? to comfortable patterns? to God?

STOP AND PONDER

People who cover over their sins will not prosper. But if they confess and forsake them, they will receive mercy.

PROVERBS 28:13

Take a moment to ask God to search your heart. Be quiet before Him. Reflect on what He offers here.

FAMILY TIES

SEEK GOD'S WORD FOR TRUTH

Read the following passages:

About this time, Judah left home and moved to Adullam, where he visited a man named Hirah. There he met a Canaanite woman, the daughter of Shua, and he married her. She became pregnant and had a son, and Judah named the boy Er. Then Judah's wife had another son, and she named him Onan. And when she had a third son, she named him Shelah. At the time of Shelah's birth, they were living at Kezib.

When his oldest son, Er, grew up, Judah arranged his marriage to a young woman named Tamar. But Er was a wicked man in the Lord's sight, so the Lord took his life. Then Judah said to Er's brother Onan, "You must marry Tamar, as our law requires of the brother of a man who has died. Her first son from you will be your brother's heir."

But Onan was not willing to have a child who would not be his own heir. So whenever he had intercourse with Tamar, he spilled the semen on the ground to keep her from having a baby who would belong to his brother. But the Lord considered it a wicked thing for Onan to deny a child to his dead brother. So the Lord took Onan's life, too.

Then Judah told Tamar, his daughter-in-law, not to marry again at that time but to return to her parents' home. She was to remain a widow until his youngest son, Shelah, was old enough to marry her. (But Judah didn't really intend to do this because he was afraid Shelah would also die, like his two brothers.) So Tamar went home to her parents.

GENESIS 38:1-11

Shem, Ham, and Japheth, the three sons of Noah, survived the Flood with their father. (Ham is the ancestor of the Canaanites.) From these three sons of Noah came all the people now scattered across the earth.

After the Flood, Noah became a farmer and planted a vineyard. One day he became drunk on some wine he had made and lay naked in his tent. Ham, the father of Canaan, saw that his father was naked and went outside and told his brothers. Shem and Japheth took a robe, held it over their shoulders, walked backward into the tent, and covered their father's naked body. As they did this, they looked the other way so they wouldn't see him naked. When Noah woke up from his drunken stupor, he learned what Ham, his youngest son, had done. Then he cursed the descendants of Canaan, the son of Ham:

"A curse on the Canaanites! May they be the lowest of servants to the descendants of Shem and Japheth." Then Noah said, "May Shem be blessed by the Lord my God; and may Canaan be his servant. May God enlarge the territory of Japheth, and may he share the prosperity of Shem; and let Canaan be his servant."

GENESIS 9:18-27

† According to the second passage, who was the father of the Canaanites?

Abraham found a wife for his son Isaac from afar—not a Canaanite. Esau displeased his father, Isaac, by marrying not one but two Canaanite women. Isaac sent his son Jacob far away to get a wife who was not a Canaanite.

BOOK TWO

UNASHAMED



SETTING THE SCENE



The sons of Israel, the chosen people of God, took their families to Egypt to escape a famine in their homeland. One of the twelve brothers, Joseph, held a high position in the Egyptian government, and as a result, his large extended family were honored as special guests of Pharaoh himself.

But as the years passed and the Hebrews multiplied, they fell out of favor and were eventually enslaved by the Egyptians. It took the leadership of Moses—and a series of breathtaking miracles performed by God Himself—to deliver them. God was taking His people home, back to Canaan, the land He had promised would belong to His people forever.

On the verge of reclaiming their “Promised Land,” the Israelites’ faith in God failed. Fearing the power of the Canaanites, they refused to obey God’s command to advance and take the land. Their disbelief and disobedience resulted in a forty-year delay in the fulfillment of God’s promise. During those forty years, the Israelites wandered as nomads in the desert. All of the adults who had left Egypt—and rebelled against God—died in the wilderness.

Finally a new generation grew up, ready to take its place as God’s army and claim the land promised to its ancestors. Of the original multitude that had left Egypt, only Moses and his two assistants, Joshua and Caleb, survived.

As the people of Israel approached the Promised Land for the second time, no one could stand against them. First the king of Arad, then King Sihon of the Amorites, then King Og of Bashan—all were put to the sword, their armies annihilated. In desperation, King Balak of Moab hired a sorcerer, Balaam, to curse the Israelites. To Balak’s horror, God used Balaam to instead pronounce blessings upon His chosen people.

Finally, even the five kings of Midian together were unsuccessful in stopping the advancing Israelite army. Kings Evi, Rekem, Zur, Hur, and Reba all died in battle, their armies slaughtered, their towns and villages burned, their wealth seized as plunder.

The time had come. The people of God were ready to claim their inheritance from God—the Promised Land. After designating Joshua as the new leader of Israel, the venerable Moses died, and the people prepared to cross the last remaining barrier between them and Canaan: the Jordan River, swollen with spring floods.

Now, all nations quake in terror at the knowledge that Israel is encamped at Shittim, just a short distance from Jericho. The walled fortress, the gateway to Canaan, awaits.

ONE



Rahab studied the distant plain of Jericho from her window in the city wall, her heart stirring with fear and excitement. Out there, just beyond the Jordan River, the Israelites were encamped, only the floodwaters holding them back. Soon they would cross over and come against the king of Jericho with the same ferocity they had shown in battle against Sihon, Og, and the five kings of Midian. And everyone in Jericho would die.

The king had doubled the guard at the gate and posted soldiers on the battlements. But it would do no good. Destruction was on the horizon. The only hope was to surrender and plead for mercy. The king worried about the size of the invading army, but he failed to see the real danger: the God of the Hebrews. All of Pharaoh's warriors hadn't been enough to defeat Him forty years ago. Not even the pantheon of gods and goddesses had saved Egypt. But all the king of Jericho could think about was improving the battlements, stockpiling weapons, and increasing the number of soldiers! Did men never learn?

Jericho was doomed!

And she was imprisoned inside the city, bound by a life she had carved out for herself years ago. What hope had she, a harlot? Her fate had been set in motion years ago, when she was little more than a child, a peasant's daughter summoned by a king.

"You must go!" her father had said. "As long as you live in the palace and please him, I shall prosper. He's arranging marriages for your sisters. And if you refuse, he will have you nonetheless, killing me to remove any obstacles. Think of the honor he bestows upon you. He chooses only the most beautiful girls, Rahab."

An *honor*? "And will he marry me, Father?" Her father couldn't look into her eyes. She knew the answer. The king had several wives, all of whom he had married for political advantages. She had nothing a king needed—merely a body he wanted to use.

Even then, young as she had been, she knew that lust burned hot but

eventually turned to ashes. In a week, a month, a year perhaps, the king would tire of her and send her home wearing a beautiful Babylonian robe and a few pieces of gold jewelry her father would confiscate and sell for his own profit.

“When I return, will you allow me to sell dates and pomegranates in the marketplace again, Father, or will I end up like so many others? Selling my body for a loaf of bread?”

He had covered his face and wept. She’d hated him for taking advantage of her ruin, hated him for making excuses, hated him for telling her she would be better off in the king’s palace than in the grove hut where he and her mother and brothers and sisters lived. She hated him because he had no power to save her.

She had hated her own helplessness most of all.

Even in her wrath, Rahab had known her father couldn’t save her from the king’s lust. A king could take what he wanted. Any gifts he gave were meant to dissolve thoughts of revenge. Life was hard and uncertain, but if the right opportunity arose, a beautiful daughter could make a father’s way smooth. Tax exemptions. Land use. An elevated position in the court. The king was generous when it served him, but usually his generosity lasted only as long as his lust.

Rahab rested her arms on the window, gazing out. She remembered setting foot in the palace that first day, vowing not to end up as a discarded sandal. She intended to find a way to take advantage of her wretched situation and the man who used her. She’d hidden her fury and revulsion, pretending to enjoy the king’s embrace. Every moment in his company, her mind was crouched like a lioness studying its prey, watching, waiting for his weakness to show. And she found it soon enough: the constant arrival of emissaries, spies, and messengers. Without their stream of information, he wouldn’t know who his enemies were or what petty jealousies and rebellions were on the rise.

“Give me a house, and I’ll gather information for you,” she had boldly proposed, once her opportunity became clear to her. How the king had laughed at her sagacity! She’d laughed with him, but continued to entice and solicit for further benefits. She was tenacious in her determination to have something tangible when she left the palace, something with which she could make her own way and sustain herself comfortably for a lifetime. She deserved it after suffering the caresses of that fat, foul-smelling, arrogant old man!

Well, she had gotten what she wanted: a house, a prosperous living, and the illusion of independence. The king had given her this house situated near the eastern gate so she could watch the comings and goings of Jericho. For twelve years she’d looked out this window and picked out men

to share her bed, men who might tell her things that would protect the king's throne and increase his treasury. Every transaction she made brought a double payment. The men paid to sleep with her, and the king paid for the grains of information she gleaned. She knew even more about what was happening outside the walls of Jericho than the king did. And when she wanted to know what was going on inside the palace, she beckoned Cabul, the captain of the guard. He could always be counted on to spill out every secret while in her arms.

She owned half a dozen Babylonian robes, boxes inlaid with bone and ivory and filled with jewelry. Her house was furnished with objects of art, her floor covered with multicolored, woven rugs. Her customers slept on the finest colored linen sheets from Egypt perfumed with myrrh, aloe, and cinnamon. She could afford tasty delicacies and rich, heady wines. Everyone in the city knew she was a friend and confidante of the king. They also knew she was a whore.

But no one knew how much she hated her life. No one guessed how helpless she felt in the face of the plans made for her by father and king. Many would wonder why she had cause to complain. On the outside, she had an enviable life. The king respected her, men desired her, and she could choose her clientele. There were even women in Jericho who envied her independence. They didn't know what it felt like to be used, stripped of humanity. Even now, despite a house of her own and plush surroundings, she was helpless to change anything about her life. She was locked into it.

Yet no one knew the fierce heart that beat within her. No one suspected the stored resentment, the gathering fury, the aching hunger to break free and escape. She was in a prison others had made for her, a prison she had succeeded in filling with earthly treasures. But she had other plans, other dreams and hopes.

And they all depended on the God out there, the One she knew had the power to save those He chose. Somehow she had known—even as a young girl hearing the stories for the first time—that He was a true God, the only true One. When He brought His people across the Jordan, He would take this city and crush it as He had crushed all His enemies.

The end of everything she had known was in sight.

We're all going to die! Doesn't anyone else see that? Are they all blind and deaf to what's been happening for the last forty years? People come and go as they always have, thinking everything is going to be all right. They think the walls we've built will protect us, just as I thought the walls of my father's hut could protect me all those years ago. And we're not safe—we're not safe at all!

She was filled with the terror of death, filled even more with a terrible longing to be a part of what would come. She wanted to belong to the God

who was coming. She felt like a little girl wanting desperately to be swept up in her father's arms and saved from destruction.

Several months ago, an Egyptian had spent a night telling her stories of the God of the Israelites. "But everyone says those are myths," she had said, wondering whether he believed the tales he repeated.

"Oh, no. My father was a boy when the plagues came. . . ." He'd talked far into the night about the signs and wonders and about a man named Moses. "He's dead now, but there's another . . . Joshua."

She went to the king the next morning, but he was only interested in tactics, weaponry, numbers. "It's the *God* of the Hebrews you need to fear, my king," she said, but he waved her away impatiently.

"You disappoint me, Rahab, talking like a hysterical woman."

She wanted to shout at him. Moses might be a great leader, but no man could break the might of Egypt. Only a true God could do that! And He was out there, preparing His people to take all of Canaan.

But one look into the king's eyes and she knew pride was on the throne. Men listened only to what they wanted to hear.

Now, sitting at her window, she stretched her hands out and waved them. *Oh, how I wish I were one of Your people, for You alone are a true God.* Her eyes were hot and gritty. *I would bow down to You and give You offerings if given the chance!* She put her hands down and turned away. She could wish all she wanted, but she was going to share the same fate as everyone else trapped inside these walls. This fortress would become a slaughterhouse.

Because the king was stubborn and proud. Because the king thought the walls were high enough and thick enough to keep him safe. Because he was too stubborn and stupid to put his pride aside for the sake of his people. The king was afraid of the Israelites, but it was their God he should fear. She had known men all her life, and they were all much the same. But this God, He was different. She could *feel* His presence in some strange way she couldn't define, and she was filled with a sense of awe and urgency. Oh, how fortunate were those who belonged to Him! They had *nothing* to fear.

Although she had told the king everything she learned, he refused to listen. Still, she kept trying.

"I never knew you to be so fainthearted, my sweet. Those Hebrews will tuck tail and flee the same way they did forty years ago when the Amalekites joined forces with us. My father drove them out of the land. If they have such a mighty god on their side, why didn't they prevail against us then? Plagues . . . seas opening . . ." He sneered. "Myths to frighten us."

"Have you forgotten Sihon?"

He paled, his eyes narrowing coldly at her reminder. "No army can break through our walls."

“Before it’s too late, send emissaries of peace with gifts for their God.”

“What? Are you mad? Do you think our priests would agree to that? We have gods of our own to appease! They’ve always protected us in the past. They’ll protect us now.”

“The same way Egypt’s gods protected her? Egypt bows down to insects, and this God sent swarms to destroy their crops. They worship their Nile River, and this God turned it to blood.”

“They’re just stories, Rahab. Rumors to spread fear among our people. And you add to them! Go back to your house and do what you do best. Watch for foreign spies. . . .”

And so she did, but not for his sake.

Cabul talked freely last night, boasting of manpower, weapons, and the continuous sacrifices being made to the gods of Canaan. “We’ll be fine. Don’t worry your pretty head.”

Fools! They were all fools! Surely the God who mocked the gods of Egypt and opened the Red Sea would find it easy to break down these walls! What good would stone and mortar idols do against a God who controlled wind, fire, and water? Rahab was certain that one breath from His lips would blow open the gates of Jericho. A sweep of His hand would make rubble of all the king’s defenses!

But no one would listen.

So be it. She had given her last warning. Let it be on the king’s head what happened to Jericho. She was going to find a way to align herself with those who would have the victory. If she didn’t, she would die.

How could she get out of Jericho without jeopardizing the lives of her family members? If she left, the king would have her followed. She would be captured and executed for treason, and every member of her family would suffer the same fate to prevent the spread of her rebellion. No, she couldn’t leave Jericho unless she took her father and mother and brothers and sisters and their families with her. But that would be impossible! Even if she could find a way to leave without arousing suspicion, her family wouldn’t come. Her father believed whatever the king said. It wasn’t in his nature to think for himself.

Rahab raked her fingers through her hair, pushing the curly dark mass over her shoulder. “Rahab!” someone called from below. She didn’t look down. She wasn’t interested in a merchant from Jebus or the owner of a caravan taking spices to Egypt or another soldier from a vanquished army. They were all walking dead. They just didn’t know it yet. Only those Hebrews out there beyond the river were alive. For their God was no stone idol carved by human hands. He was the God of heaven and earth!

And I am just a rat inside a hole in this wall. . . .

What a strange and marvelous God He was! He had chosen the Hebrews—a

nation of slaves—and set them free from Egypt, the most powerful nation on earth. He had taken the lowest of the low and used them to bring down the mighty. She'd heard that He'd even rained bread upon His people. They had nothing to fear, for He was mighty in deeds and yet showed kindness and mercy to them. Who would not love such a God?

Her king. Her people.

I would love Him! Her mouth trembled, and her eyes were hot with tears. *I would serve Him any way He asked. Given the chance, I would bow down before Him and rejoice to be counted among His people!*

Cabul snored loudly from the bed behind her, reminding her of his unwelcome presence. She pressed her palms over her ears and shut her eyes tightly, filled with self-disgust and anger. If she gave in to her feelings, she would shake the man awake and scream at him to get out of her house. He hadn't told her anything new last night. Cabul was a waste of her time.

She watched the road again. She had one small glimmer of hope that had been roused by something her father had told her. Moses had sent spies into the land forty years ago. "We beat them back then." She had wondered about that, mulling over reasons for the Israelites' failure. They had been slaves, freed from mighty Egypt by an even mightier God. But perhaps they had still thought like slaves rather than men under the banner of a true God. Perhaps they had refused to obey. She could only guess why they had failed. But she knew it was not due to any failure of the God who rescued them.

Those who had rebelled all those years ago must surely be dead by now. A new generation had arisen, a generation who had been hardened by desert living, a generation who had been in the presence of Power from their birth. She could only hope that Joshua would do as Moses had done before him and send spies into the land. And she would have to be the first to spot them. With victory assured by their God, the Israelites didn't need to send anyone, but she still hoped the noble leader Joshua would take nothing for granted. Even if it wasn't necessary, it would be prudent to send spies to view the land and evaluate enemy defenses.

Please come. Please, please, please come. . . . I don't want to die. I don't want my family to die. Send someone. . . . Open my eyes so that I'll recognize them before the guards do. If they see them first and report to the king, all is lost!

"Rahab!" a man called to her again.

She glanced down impatiently and saw an Ishmaelite merchant waving at her from among the throng gathered at the gate. He was eager to lodge with her, but she spread her hands, shrugging and shaking her head. Let his camels keep him warm. He held up a gold necklace to bribe her. Ha! What good would gold do when the day of destruction came? "Give it to one of your wives!" she called back. Those around him laughed. Another

man called up to her, but she ignored the entreaties and flatteries and watched the road.

Let them come to me.

If the spies were ragged from wandering, she would give them beautiful robes from Babylon. If they were thirsty, she would give them fine wine. If they were hungry, she would serve them a feast fit for kings. For they would come as servants of the Most High God. She would show them the honor meant for the One they served. For mighty was their God and worthy of tribute!

Her chest was tight with yearning. She wanted to be safe. As long as she was inside this wall, inside this city, she was condemned. She had to be counted among the Israelites to survive. The gods of the Jerichoans and Amorites and Perizzites and a dozen other tribes who inhabited Canaan wouldn't come to her rescue. They were stone tyrants with corrupt priests who demanded constant sacrifice. She'd seen babies taken from their mothers and placed on an altar, their little bodies boiled until the flesh fell away so the bones could be put into small bags and buried beneath the foundation of a new house or temple. As though murdered children could bring good fortune! She was thankful she had never had a child.

But if I did have one, I would give my baby to the God out there, the unseen One who dwells with His people, who shades them by day and keeps them warm at night, the One who protects those who belong to Him as though they were His children. A God like Him could be trusted. . . .

"Ah, the light." Cabul groaned. "Close the curtains!"

Rahab clenched her teeth; she kept her back to him. It was time the man was gone from her bed and her house. "The sun is up," she said in a pleasant voice. "Time you were as well."

She heard a muffled curse and the rustle of linen. "You're hard-hearted, Rahab."

She glanced at him over her shoulder and forced a sultry smile. "You didn't say that last night." She looked out the window again, searching, hoping to see someone who looked like an Israelite spy. What would one look like? How would she recognize one if he did come?

Cabul slid his arm around her waist and reached up to lift the curtain from the hook. "Come back to bed, my love." He pressed his lips to the curve of her neck.

She caught his hand before it could move to caress her. "The king will hear you're missing from your post. I wouldn't want to get you into trouble."

He laughed softly, his breath hot in her hair. "I won't be late."

She turned in his arms. "You must go, Cabul." She put her hands against

his chest. "Your absence at the gate will be noticed, and I'll not have it said that Rahab caused a friend trouble."

"You are causing me pain right now."

"You're man enough to survive a small discomfort."

He caught her hand as she moved away from him. "Is there a rich merchant below?"

"No."

"I heard someone calling your name."

"And what if you did?" Did he think putting a few coins in her hand meant he owned her? "You know what I do for a living."

He frowned, his eyes darkening.

Stifling her annoyance, she brushed her fingertips down his cheek and softened her tone. "Don't forget I came out of my house to find you." In her business, it was always wise to send a man away feeling he was someone special.

He grinned. "So you love me a little."

"Enough to wish you no harm." She allowed him to kiss her briefly and then disentangled herself. "A crowd is waiting at the gate, Cabul. It's time you opened it. If the merchants are annoyed, the king will hear about it." She crossed the room, leaned down, and swept up his clothes. Opening the door, she tossed them back at him. "You'd better hurry!" She laughed as she watched him dress hastily, then closed the door behind him. Dropping the bar to keep any would-be visitors out, she hurried back to her post at the window.

Solitude was a luxury. She stepped up and sat in the window, one leg dangling out. Ignoring the whistles from below, she watched the plain. Was that a column of smoke in the distance? She couldn't be sure. She had heard that the Israelites' God accompanied them as a column of smoke during the day and a pillar of fire at night.

When the heat became oppressive, she closed the curtains, left the window, and brushed her hair. She ate bread and sipped wine. But every few minutes, she parted the red-dyed linen and looked out again, studying every stranger who walked along the road.

+ + +

Salmon had waited all his life to set foot in the Promised Land. He could see it from where he was camped. He was eager for the battles ahead, his confidence strengthened by past victories the Lord had given His people. It was the waiting that was difficult. Salmon felt like a horse reined in, prancing, champing at the bit, ready for the race to begin. He laughed, excitement coursing through him as he sparred with his friend Ephraim. It was early,

the sun just rising, but every day was an opportunity to train, to prepare for God's work of taking the Promised Land.

Gripping his staff, he made a thrust. Ephraim parried, turned, and struck, but Salmon countered him. *Crack! Crack! Crack!* Ephraim came at him with fierce determination, but Salmon was ready. Turning, he swept the staff in a hard circle and swept Ephraim off his feet. Salmon was too confident, for he didn't expect Ephraim to make another swing at him from the ground, which landed Salmon on his back in the dust. Both lay in the dust, panting and grinning.

As soon as Salmon got his breath back, he laughed. "I'll be less smug next time."

"When do you think we'll attack Jericho?" Ephraim said, rising and dusting himself off.

Salmon sat up and looked toward the rise where Joshua stood each day, praying. "The Lord will tell Joshua when the time is right."

"I hope it's soon! Somehow the waiting is harder than the battle itself."

Salmon stood, his staff gripped in his hand. The desert wind stirred Joshua's robes as he stood on the rise. Since Moses had died, Salmon had turned his full attention to Joshua and Eleazar, the priest, for leadership. Whatever they said was law, for they followed the Lord wholeheartedly and spoke only what God instructed them to say. As a boy at his father's knee, Salmon had heard the story of how Joshua and Caleb had spied out the Promised Land and said it could be taken. They'd believed God's promise to give them the land, but the other ten spies had convinced the people—even the great leader Moses himself—that victory was impossible. The people had lacked faith and lost their opportunity, so the promise was deferred to the next generation. Salmon's generation. Salmon hadn't even been born when the Lord had passed judgment and sent the people back into the desert, but he'd been affected by it. He had grown up in the shadow of his father's shame and regrets.

How many times had he heard his father weeping? *"If only we'd listened. If only we'd believed Joshua and Caleb."* Over and over again, year after year. If whining could wear down the Lord, his father's surely would have. *"If only we'd listened, we wouldn't be out in this wilderness, wandering like lost sheep."* Salmon grimaced at the memory of his father's complaints and self-pity, for they hinted of the old rebellion and the unchanged attitude of a man's heart.

Lord God of mercy, save me from such thinking, he prayed. *Make me the man You want me to be—a man of courage, a man willing to step out immediately when You say go.*

It was too easy to sneer at the mistakes of others. Such arrogance. Salmon

knew he was no better than the man who had fathered him. The danger was in looking too far ahead. He must *wait*, as Joshua was waiting. The Lord would speak when He was ready, and when God did speak, Salmon knew the choice would be presented to him: obey or disobey. He didn't want to hesitate like his father had. Better to fear God than men. No matter how frightened he might be of the battle ahead, he knew it was a more fearful thing to displease the Lord. Therefore, he set his mind on obedience. He wouldn't allow himself to give in to his human weaknesses, his fears. How could one fear men and please God?

Jehovah had promised the land of Canaan to His people. The day would come when He would call them to take hold of that promise. It would be up to Salmon and all those of his generation to obey.

So far, none had weakened, but a few were grumbling at the delay, and a few questioned.

Lord God of heaven and earth, I beg You to give me the confidence of Joshua. Instill in me Your purpose. Do not let me weaken. You are God and there is no other!

"Prepare yourself," Ephraim said.

Turning, Salmon brought his staff up and blocked Ephraim's blow.

When the Lord called him into battle, Salmon intended to be ready.

+ + +

"Salmon."

He recognized the deep voice immediately. Jumping to his feet, he pulled back the tent flap and gaped at Joshua.

"I have work for you," the elderly man said calmly.

"Please, enter." Salmon stepped back quickly and bid his commander welcome.

The old warrior ducked his head slightly and entered the tent, looked around briefly, and faced Salmon once more. Salmon shook inwardly with excitement, for what greater honor could there be than to have Joshua seek him out? "Please sit here, sir." He offered him the most comfortable place.

Joshua inclined his head. Setting the bundle he had brought with him to one side, he folded his legs beneath him as easily as a young man. When he looked up at Salmon, his eyes were dark and intent, ablaze with purpose.

Under normal circumstances, the commander would have summoned him rather than come to his tent. "What can I serve you, sir?" Salmon said, curbing his curiosity in order to show respect and hospitality. Joshua would explain when he was ready.

Smiling slightly, Joshua held out his hand. "Nothing. But you can sit."

Salmon did so. Leaning forward, he clasped his hands and said nothing.

The old man closed his eyes for a long moment and then raised his head and looked at him. "I need two men to go on a mission of great risk."

"I'll go." Salmon straightened, heart pounding. "Send me."

Joshua tipped his head to one side and considered him in amusement. "It might be prudent to hear what the mission is before you volunteer."

"If you want it done, it needs doing, and that's all I need to know. The Lord speaks through you. To obey you is to obey God. I'll go wherever you want me to go and do whatever you need done."

Joshua's eyes glowed. He leaned forward. "Then here are your instructions: Spy out the land on the other side of the Jordan River, especially around Jericho. See what defenses they have in place. Discern the mood of the people."

Fear caught Salmon unaware, but he set his mind against it. "When do you want me to leave?"

"Within the hour. Caleb is giving instructions to Ephraim." Joshua raised his hand. "I can see you're ready to grab your sword and go now, but hear me out. Other than Caleb and Ephraim, no one knows you're leaving camp. You'll be going in secret. You're young and on fire, my son, but you must be coolheaded and wise as a serpent. Do not stroll into the city like a conqueror. Keep your head down. Seek out an establishment that will know the mind of the people. Blend in. Keep your eyes and ears open. The battlements aren't as important as what the Jerichoans are thinking. Find out everything you can, and then get out of there as quickly as possible. Waste no time. Do you understand?"

"Yes, commander."

Joshua took the bundle he'd set aside and placed it between them. "Amorite clothing and a weapon."

The clothing had undoubtedly been taken from the body of a vanquished foe, for Salmon saw a stain of blood. He knew he would have to be careful when wearing the tunic. It would be difficult for him to blend in naturally among Jerichoans if anyone saw that stain. Anyone looking at it would know the last man who wore the garment had died a violent death. He would have to wear a mantle to cover it.

Joshua rose. Salmon sprang to his feet. Joshua turned before going out, put his hand on Salmon's shoulder, and gripped him strongly. "May the Lord watch over you and keep you safe!"

"Blessed be the name of the Lord."

Releasing him, Joshua swept the tent flap aside, stooped, and went out. Salmon held the flap open long enough to watch Joshua disappear among the other tents of Israel. Letting it drop back into place, he let out his breath sharply and dropped to his knees. Throwing back his head, Salmon closed his eyes and raised his hands, thanking God for this opportunity to

serve. Then he prostrated himself and prayed for the wisdom and courage to complete the task.



By moonlight, Salmon and Ephraim girded their loins by drawing up the backs of their tunics and tucking them into their belts. Thus unencumbered, they ran, reaching the eastern bank of the Jordan well before daybreak. Gasping for breath, Salmon dumped his bundle on the ground, grasped his tunic, and hauled it up over his head.

"The river looks swift," Ephraim said, stripping off his clothing and catching the Amorite tunic Salmon tossed him.

Swollen by spring floods, the river rose over its banks. And Ephraim was right—the current was swift.

Salmon shrugged into the Amorite tunic. He nodded toward a sloping bank as he strapped on a leather belt. "We'll go in down there and start swimming."

Ephraim's mouth curved sardonically. "I hate to mention this now, friend, but I don't know how to swim."

Salmon laughed mirthlessly. "And you think I do? The desert hasn't exactly afforded us much opportunity to learn, has it?"

"So what are we going to do?"

"Cross over. Stop worrying. If God wills, we'll make it."

"And if not, we'll drown," Ephraim said flatly.

"Do you think the Lord has brought us this far to let us be defeated?"

Ephraim watched the river. "I'd feel better if I had a tree trunk to hang on to."

"The Lord will uphold us." Salmon spoke with more conviction than he felt. *Give me courage, Lord.* "Fill your lungs with air, keep your arms outstretched, and kick like a frog. The current will carry us."

"All the way to the Salt Sea."

Salmon ignored his friend's grim sense of humor and pointed. "Aim for those willows on the other side." Tying the sheath to his belt, he jammed his dagger into it. "Let's go."

Despite his bravado, fear shot through Salmon as the river's current tugged hard at his legs. Overcoming his fear, he waded into the Jordan until the water was to his waist. Perhaps he could make it this way, one step at a time, using his own physical strength to keep himself on his feet. But the next step proved he couldn't. He slipped on some slick rocks and lost his footing. Panic gripped him as he was sucked into the current. He was pulled under briefly, but he fought his way up long enough to fill his lungs with air. His body rolled and turned, spun back. He hit something

hard and almost lost his breath. Salmon fought his fear and the river, as the spring flood carried him along.

Lord, help me!

He saw the trees and kicked hard. Clawing the water, he used the current to steer his body. He kept his neck arched and stiff so that his head was above the water and he could breathe and see where he was going. He heard a shout behind him but didn't have time to turn and see if Ephraim was doing any better than he. Making a lunge for an overhanging branch, he caught hold. Reaching up, he got a better grip and looked back. Ephraim was still standing on the far bank.

"Come on!" Salmon called to him.

Ephraim entered the river with obvious uneasiness. Stretching out his arms, he went in face-first. Seeing how fast Ephraim was swept along, Salmon stretched out his body as far as possible so that his friend could reach his ankle. "Grab hold!"

Ephraim succeeded, but the jolt almost yanked Salmon free. His body swung hard around and jerked against the strong pull of the river. Water rippled violently over Ephraim's head. Clinging to the branch with one hand, Salmon reached down and grasped Ephraim and pulled. "Climb!" Ephraim reached up, his fingers biting into Salmon's thigh. Pulling himself higher, his head emerged from the rushing water. He gasped for breath. Salmon grabbed Ephraim's belt and hauled him up farther. Salmon shoved him toward the west bank.

When he made it to shore, Ephraim reached out and gave Salmon a hand and threw himself back as far as he could before the limb broke and toppled into the water. Gaining his footing in the rocky bottom, Salmon slogged his way out of the Jordan and collapsed to his knees. Ephraim was coughing violently.

Chest heaving, Salmon drank in the air. He dug his fingers into the soil and held it up to breathe in the scent of its richness. "The Lord has brought us over," he said in a voice choked with emotion. They were the first of their generation to set foot in the Promised Land. "The Lord be praised!"

Ephraim was still coughing up murky river water, but he managed to rasp, "May God grant we live long enough to enjoy it."

"Amen." Salmon rose. "It won't be long until daybreak." He was eager for the mission ahead, anxious to be on the move, but it wouldn't be wise to arrive wet and muddy from the river—or too early in the day, making them appear anxious to enter the city. Hunkering down by the Jordan, he washed. "If we hurry, we can make it to the palms before full daylight."

"Just give me a few minutes to rest, will you?"

"We've no time to waste. Rest while we walk!"

As they crossed the arid stretch of land west of the Jordan and gained

the road, the sun rose behind them. Even from a distance of several miles, the lush, green spring-fed oasis was visible, as were the high, thick walls of the City of Palms that blocked entrance into Canaan. Salmon's heart sank. These walls were so immense, they would be insurmountable by frontal attack. Nor could they be taken from the west, for behind the walled city was a towering backbone of steep, jagged mountains. "The city is well situated."

"And impregnable. How will we ever conquer such a city? Never has there been such a stronghold!"

Speechless, Salmon studied the walls. They were at least six times the height of any man, and there were battlements on both sides of the gate. Guards standing watch would see an army coming from miles away, giving them plenty of time to close the gates and prepare for battle.

Would Joshua have them build ladders to scale these walls? How many would die in setting them up and keeping them in place until enough soldiers could get over the wall? Could those immense gates be smashed or burned? How many would die in the battle for this city? Thousands! Would he be one of them—if he didn't die here today, on this mission?

"May God protect us from such an end," Salmon said under his breath.

"What should we do now?" Ephraim said. "Join the throng waiting for the gates to open?"

"We'll wait until late in the day. Better if we aren't inspected too closely. The guards will be less attentive then."

They found a grassy place not far from a spring-fed stream and slept in the shade of the City of Palms.

BOOK THREE

UNSHAKEN



SETTING THE SCENE



Ruth 1:1-4

In the days when the judges ruled in Israel, a man from Bethlehem in Judah left the country because of a severe famine. He took his wife and two sons and went to live in the country of Moab. The man's name was Elimelech, and his wife was Naomi. Their two sons were Mahlon and Kilion. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem in the land of Judah. During their stay in Moab, Elimelech died and Naomi was left with her two sons. The two sons married Moabite women. One married a woman named Orpah, and the other a woman named Ruth. . . .

ONE



Ruth walked down the narrow, crowded streets of Kir-hareseth, her mind and heart in turmoil. Her beloved husband, Mahlon, was dying of a lingering illness that had come upon him months earlier. She fought the sorrow and fear stirring in her. How would she live without Mahlon? She'd dreamed of living a long life with the man she loved, bearing his children, growing old with him. And now, she suffered watching him suffer. She grieved that there would never be children to carry on his name.

But it was the new moon, and her mother was expecting her for her monthly visit. They would drink tea, eat the delicacies of her father's table, and talk about family matters. Ruth dreaded this visit. She couldn't keep her mind from her troubles. And she didn't want to hear what her mother thought was the cause of them.

Poor Naomi! How could her mother-in-law bear another loss? Fifteen years ago she'd lost her husband, Elimelech; and her younger son, Kilion, had died last spring. Would Naomi's faith in the God of Israel continue to give her peace, or would she finally crumble beneath the crushing grief of losing her last son?

Oh, Lord God of Israel, hear our cry!

From the time Naomi had told her about the true God, she had believed because she saw such peace in her mother-in-law. It was a peace that defied circumstances. Ruth had never seen such peace, certainly not in the house of her mother and father. She and Naomi had spoken often of God, especially when questions had arisen in Ruth's heart. And the answers had always come down to trusting God, obeying Him, accepting His will, knowing there was a purpose in what was happening even if they couldn't see it. But sometimes the pain seemed unbearable.

And Ruth was afraid.

Would she be inconsolable like her sister-in-law, Orpah, had been when Kilion died last year, wailing and rocking and refusing to eat until Ruth and Naomi were afraid for her health?

Oh, Lord God, don't let me be a burden to Naomi. Give me the strength to help her.

When she reached her father's house, she took a deep breath, squared her shoulders, and knocked. A servant opened the door and smiled brightly. "Ruth! Come," she beckoned eagerly. "Come."

It was difficult to enter her father's grand house with its expensive furnishings and not make comparisons to the humble abode of her husband. Here, everywhere she looked was the conspicuous evidence of wealth—fine urns, rugs, beautifully colored linen curtains, low tables inlaid with ivory. She had grown up in this house and taken her father's wealth for granted. Then she met, fell in love with, and married a young Hebrew merchant who was having difficulty keeping the family business going and, sometimes, keeping food on the table.

Her father and mother took great pride in their possessions, but over the years of living with Naomi, Ruth had come to recognize her own parents' poverty of spirit. There was a richness in Naomi's life that had nothing to do with the house she lived in or the material possessions she had.

"Ah, my beautiful daughter." Ruth's mother entered the room and embraced her. They exchanged kisses. "Sit, my love." She clapped her hands, gave quick orders to a maiden, and sat on one of the plump scarlet and blue cushions. "Do you notice anything new?"

Ruth glanced around. Was there a new table or wall hanging or rug? When she looked back at her mother, she saw her fingering a gold necklace.

"What do you think? It's beautiful, isn't it? A gift from your father. It's from Egypt."

"He's always been generous," Ruth said, her mind drifting back to Mahlon. He'd insisted she come today, insisted she leave him for a while. His mother was with him. Everything was fine. "*Go. Go and enjoy yourself.*" But how could she? All she could think about was Mahlon and how quickly she could leave this place and go home to him, where she belonged.

A servant entered with a tray laden with fruit, bread, two goblets, and an urn of wine. A second servant set down a platter of cooked grain with bits of roasted lamb. Ruth's stomach cramped at the tantalizing aroma of the well-seasoned food, but she didn't extend her hand, even when her mother pressed her. How could she take a bite when Mahlon was too ill to eat anything at all? How could she enjoy the delicacies her mother spread out on the table before her when her mother-in-law had nothing in the house but bread, olive oil, and sour wine?

"You must keep up your strength, Ruth," her mother said softly. "You're so thin."

"Perhaps in a while, Mother."

“Orpah’s mother spoke with me in the marketplace yesterday. Has everything been done that can be done?”

Unable to speak, Ruth nodded. Naomi, insisting there was always hope, continued to pray and beseech God. She and Ruth both prayed. Prayer had become an unceasing habit.

“Oh, my darling. I’m so sorry you’re going through this.” Her mother reached out and placed her hand over Ruth’s. For a moment, she was silent. “What will you do when he dies?”

Ruth’s eyes filled with tears at the blunt question. “I will grieve. I will comfort Naomi. Beyond that, I don’t know. And I can’t think about it now.”

“But you must.”

“Mother,” Ruth said softly in protest and then drew in a sobbing breath as she covered her face.

Her mother rushed on. “I didn’t ask you here to cause you more pain. I know how much you love Mahlon. If your father didn’t love you so much, he would have insisted you marry Kasim, and you wouldn’t be facing such anguish now. Your father wants you to know that you’re welcome to come home. And you know how much I’d love to have you here with me again, even if only for a little while. You needn’t stay with Naomi if Mahlon dies. Come back to us.”

Ruth dropped her hands into her lap and stared at her mother through her tears. “After all Naomi has been through, could I leave her? My duty is to my husband’s household, Mother. You know that.”

“Naomi would be the first to tell you to return to us. Do you think she’ll want to stay here when her last son dies? She will go home to her own people where she belongs.”

The words cut into Ruth’s heart. Her mother spoke as though Mahlon was already dead and Naomi best forgotten. “I must go, Mother.” She started to rise.

Her mother caught her hand. “No, please, listen to me. Naomi’s husband was eager to adopt our customs and become one of us, but your mother-in-law has always held herself aloof. She still dresses like a Hebrew. She’s never set foot in one of our temples nor given a single offering to any one of our gods. Perhaps that’s why she suffers so. Our gods are angry with her.”

“She has a God of her own.”

“Oh yes, and what good is he? What has he given her but poverty and grief?” She made a sweeping gesture. “Look around you, Daughter. See how the gods of Moab bless us. Look at what we have to show for *our* faith.”

“But you’re never satisfied, Mother.”

Her eyes darkened. “I’m satisfied.”

“Then why do you always want more? Possessions don’t matter to Naomi.”

Her mother released her hand angrily. "Of course not. Why would possessions matter to someone who will never have them?"

"You don't understand, Mother."

"I understand that you've turned away from the gods of your own people to worship hers. And what good has come from it? You're being punished for it. Turn back to the gods of our people, Ruth. Leave that house of sorrow and come home."

Home to what? Her father and mother had never been content. The more wealth her father accumulated, the more he wanted. Their appetites were ever whetted for increase. Nothing satisfied. In a few days, her mother would tire of the gold necklace she wore, and she would hunger for something new, something about which to boast.

Naomi boasted in nothing but the God of Israel. And she found peace even in the midst of chaos when she went to Him in prayer.

God, oh God, help me! There are so many things I don't understand. I have no answers for my mother. Can you hear the voice of a frightened Moabitess? I don't want my faith to die if You choose to take Mahlon from me. My mother's words are like spears in my heart. Shield me.

She wept.

"We know you must stay with Mahlon to the end, Ruth. And we understand that you'll want to stay for a few weeks after that and comfort Naomi. Fulfill your duty to her. Then come home to us, my love. Come home where you belong and where life will be so much easier for you. Everyone will understand. Naomi loves you. She'll want the best for you, just as we do. There's no need for you to live in poverty. You're young and beautiful. You have your whole life ahead of you."

But Ruth couldn't imagine her life without the man she loved or the mother-in-law who had opened her heart to her. How could staying a few weeks fulfill her obligation to Naomi? Duty was not the only bond between them. There was also love. Not just love for one another but love for the God they both believed in.

"I can't leave her, Mother."

"But what about your own family? What about your father? What about *me*? Come home, Ruth. Please come home to us. How can I bear to see you live in such poor circumstances when . . ."

Ruth felt torn between her love for her mother and father and her love for Naomi and Orpah. If Mahlon did die, could she turn her back on them and walk away? Could she go back to living the way she had before, bowing down to the statues representing the gods of her mother and father, gods she no longer believed even existed? The bond she had with Naomi was deeper than a relationship by marriage. Ruth had come to embrace her mother-in-law's beliefs in an unseen God. She had explained her new beliefs

to her mother and father, and heard them laugh and shake their heads. “How can you believe such nonsense? An unseen god?” She loved her mother and father deeply, but she wouldn’t turn her back on Naomi or the truth she had come to realize through her.

“Mahlon, Naomi, and Orpah are my family, Mother, just as Father became yours when you married him.”

When her mother’s face crumpled in tears, Ruth embraced her. “You know I love you, Mother. I’ll always love you. But I must do what’s right.”

“This isn’t right! You’re throwing away your life!”

Ruth saw that her mother refused to understand. Things could never be the same as they had been when Ruth was a child in her father’s household. She was a woman now, with a husband and a mother-in-law and responsibilities toward both. Her life didn’t belong to herself anymore. And even if it did, would her decision be any different?

Oh, Lord, give me strength. I feel like a broken jar with all the oil spilling out.

She had to tell her mother the truth. It wouldn’t be fair to leave her with false hopes.

“I won’t leave Naomi, Mother. You have Father. You have my brothers and their wives and children, and my sisters and their families. If Mahlon does die, who will Naomi have left?”

“She will have Orpah,” her mother said stubbornly. “Let Orpah stay with her.”

Orpah didn’t believe in the God of Israel. She still worshiped idols and burned incense to Ashtoreth. “Orpah is a kind and loving daughter-in-law, but she doesn’t share Naomi’s faith.”

Her mother’s eyes darkened in anger. “How can you persist in believing in this unseen god of hers after all that’s happened? It’s not fair that you give up your life for this ill-fated family! If Naomi decides to leave, *let her go!*”

Ruth refused to be drawn into another argument about whose god had grander temples or the most elaborate and pleasurable worship services. She drew back and stood. “Mahlon needs me. I must go.”

Her mother rose with her, weeping again as she followed her to the door. “Please consider carefully what you’re going to do, Ruth. I beg of you! Don’t throw your life away!”

Ruth’s emotions warred within her. Love . . . grief . . . impatience . . . confusion. She turned and embraced her mother quickly. “I love you,” she said in a choked voice. “Tell Father I love him, too.” She released her hold, turned away, and hurried out the door.

As she sped along the narrow city streets, she covered her face with her shawl so those passing would not see her anguish.



Grief is deeper when the sun goes down and memories rise up with the moon and stars. The streets of Kir-hareseth were deserted now, everyone home and asleep, but Naomi's mind was whirring as she sat at the end of her pallet, her back against the cold stone wall of her small house. She felt alone, even though her two beloved daughters-in-law lay sleeping within a few feet of her. They were worn out with sorrow. Each had lost a husband, Orpah first and then Ruth. But they would never experience the deeper grief of losing their children, for they had none.

My sons are dead! My sons, oh, my sons . . . Naomi wanted to scream out her pain, but for the sake of the young women sleeping nearby held it in instead.

It was dark now, so dark the night closed in around Naomi, bringing with it fear and doubt. She tried to pray, but her whispered words seemed to bounce off the ceiling and land back in her lap unheard. And she began to wonder. Had God ever heard her prayers? Had the Lord ever listened to her pleas?

Like the approach of locusts ready to feast upon her faith, the silence hummed inside her head. She pressed her hands over her ears and clenched her teeth. Why was the night like this? Sometimes the darkness was so still she could hear her own blood rushing through her veins. The sound was like a heavy rain washing open the doors of her mind, flooding her with memories she wanted to forget.

The room echoed with her dead husband's voice. "We're going to Moab whether you like it or not, Naomi! There's no famine there."

"But, Elimelech, we mustn't leave Bethlehem! It's our home."

"Our home is turning to dust!"

"If we trust and obey God, He will provide."

"Are you blind? Look around you, woman. God has abandoned us!"

"Because you and others bow down to baals!"

"I bow down to Baal because he's the lord of this land!"

"Moses told our fathers the Lord is God and there is no other!"

"And what good has God done for us lately?" Elimelech argued. "How long since rain last fell on our land? When was the last time our crops produced even a little more than what we need to fill our own stomachs?"

"But you are saying it yourself, my husband. The Lord has provided what we need to survive."

"I'm sick of hearing you say that! *I'm* the one taking care of us, Naomi. I'm the one working my flesh to the bones on this rocky ground and watching my crops die! Don't tell me God is taking care of us! Look at my hands! Look at the calluses and tell me it's God who takes care of you and our

sons. God stands far off and watches while everything I own turns to dust. He's abandoned us! You're just a woman. What do you understand of these things? I'll do what's right in my own eyes."

That same day, Elimelech had mortgaged the land he'd inherited from his father. He'd come home, packed their possessions on two donkeys, and taken Naomi and their sons, Mahlon and Kilion, away from Bethlehem. She'd barely had time to bid good-bye to her friends and few remaining family members. Elimelech had been so certain he was making the right decision! What man wanted to hear the constant dripping of a nagging wife? So she did what she felt she could do: she kept silent with her doubts and she prayed.

She prayed in the morning when she first awakened. She prayed throughout the day as she worked. And she prayed when she lay down upon her pallet at night. She prayed and prayed and prayed—and watched her life turn to ashes.

Elimelech found work in Moab at Kir-hareseth. He cut off his locks of hair, shaved off his beard, and donned Moabite clothing to make his way easier. There were other Israelites sojourning in Moab and living in Kir-hareseth. They, too, had come to wait out the famine in the Promised Land, and they, too, quickly embraced the ways of the people around them and forgot the Law of Moses and the promises of God.

It was summer when Elimelech died.

"I just need to rest." He'd come home complaining of pain in his chest. "I'll be fine in the morning." He'd sat right where she was sitting now, rubbing his arm, up and down, up and down, grimacing. "Naomi?" The strange catch in his throat had brought her to her knees before him.

"What, my love?" She took his hand and covered it with her own, wanting to comfort him.

"Naomi," he said again, the sweat beading on his forehead. He'd looked terrified. "I only did what I thought was right." His lips were blue. She'd wanted to comfort him. She'd held him in her arms and tried to soothe him. But nothing had helped ease his torment.

Even now, after fifteen years, the grief rose up in her again, renewed by Mahlon's untimely death, just as her grief had been renewed and deepened last year when Kilion died. There was no escaping the pain, no hiding from it, no pushing it down deep inside her anymore. She remembered everything so acutely, especially her unanswered prayers. She'd prayed so hard that God wouldn't take her husband from her, prayed that God would have mercy upon him, and kept praying even as she watched the light ebb from Elimelech's eyes. Then she prayed for mercy and saw death take him.

Her sons had buried their father among Moabites. At first, she could scarcely believe Elimelech was gone. She kept thinking she would awaken

from this nightmare and he would be there, complaining as always. When full realization had sunk in that she would never see him again, she had become angry with him. But that, too, passed. She had been too busy helping her sons put food on the table.

It had been fifteen years since Elimelech died, and still the grief would rise up unexpectedly. It was never as sharp as those first weeks, but it never fully dulled. She had thought the pain of losing her husband was the greatest of all, but that was before she had lost sons. Now, she was drowning in a sea of sorrow.

She couldn't even pray anymore. She had always had a glimmer of hope and a sense of God's presence. Now she felt God was beyond reach, His mercy not meant for her. All her prayers were like smoke blown away by an angry wind. Every one of them. Perhaps Elimelech had been right after all. God was standing far off, watching her suffer.

God, where are You? How do I find You?

She wanted to defend herself against His judgment. Hadn't she pleaded with her husband to stay in Bethlehem? Hadn't she begged him to trust in God? Hadn't she prayed that God would change Elimelech's mind and they would go home? Hadn't she wanted to return to Bethlehem when Elimelech died? When God had taken Elimelech, hadn't she tried desperately to convince her sons that they should go back to the land God had promised them? But Mahlon and Kilion had been old enough by then to decide for themselves.

"What is there for us, Mother? This is our home."

Their hearts had been turned away from God and the Promised Land years ago. Their home in Bethlehem was nothing more than a bad memory to them, a place of hardship and heartache. Their father had never said a good word about it. Why should her sons want to return? They knew little of Hebrew customs and laws, for Elimelech had neglected his duties. He'd never taught his sons the history of the Israelites, the Law of Moses, the way of righteousness. Her sons had watched how Elimelech lived and done as he had done. When their father died, they listened to the elders of Kir-hareseth. They listened to the priests of Chemosh. They listened to their own desires and thoughts and did as they pleased, even unto taking Moabite wives for themselves. Oh, the grief her sons had caused her!

Nothing she had said to them had mattered. They loved her, but she was just a woman. What did she know? So they said. So they'd been taught to believe by their father before them.

Naomi looked at her daughters-in-law sleeping nearby. How strange that they were her only consolation now, these young women she'd grieved over when first she heard about them. Foreign wives! The shame of Israel! Oh, how she had despaired. Yet she'd managed to put on a smiling face when

Mahlon brought Ruth home, and Kilion brought Orpah. What else could she do? She could not bring herself to risk losing the love of her sons. And she'd hoped to have some small influence upon their young wives.

Now they were widows like her, and as dear to her as if they had come from her own womb. *Nothing brings people closer together than shared suffering.* She remembered in the beginning, she had accepted them and tried to build a relationship with each of them in order to keep peace in her house. And secretly, she'd prayed that Ruth's and Orpah's hearts would be softened toward the God of Israel. If she could teach them about the Lord, perhaps there would be hope for the next generation. But now her last hope for the future was lost.

A sudden fever had taken Kilion last spring. Then a lingering illness had brought Mahlon down. Kilion had died in the space of a few days, suffering little discomfort, but poor Mahlon had received no such mercy. When he fell ill, the suffering went on and on. She could do nothing but watch her eldest son, the firstfruit of Elimelech, be eaten alive by disease. She'd prayed countless times for God to ease his suffering, for God to put all the sins of her husband and sons upon her, but the days wore on and on. Poor Ruth, poor faithful, loving Ruth. How many nights had the girl sought to ease Mahlon's pain and ended up weeping over her helplessness? Sometimes Naomi wished she could escape the city and run out into the fields and scream and tear her hair and throw dust over herself. She had wept when Mahlon looked up at her with the eyes of a wounded animal in agony, hounded by terror.

Her own grief had almost consumed her during those long, terrible months, but she had spoken to Mahlon often and gently of the mercy of the Lord. *Mercy!* her heart had cried within her. *Mercy! Lord God, mercy!* While Ruth had ministered to her husband's physical needs, Naomi sat by and told him about the signs and wonders God had performed in Egypt and in the wilderness, and in the land of Canaan. He couldn't resist her now, but was he ready to repent and seek the Lord? She told Mahlon how God had delivered the Israelites from Egypt, not because they deserved it, but because He had chosen them to be His people. She told him about Moses and the Law and how the people were stubborn like Elimelech and rebelled. She told him about the blessings and the cursings. And she told him about the promises. When he slept, she bowed her head and prayed. *Oh, Lord, Lord . . .* She couldn't find the words. *Oh, Lord, search my heart. . . .* She prayed and prayed and prayed.

And still Mahlon had died.

Ruth had been sitting with him and holding his hand when he died. She let out a long, anguished cry when he stopped breathing, then wailed and covered her head.

Had it been only twenty-two days ago?

Orpah had tried to comfort her and Ruth by saying Mahlon would be at peace now; his pain was over. Naomi wanted to believe these words, but they seemed hollow, without foundation. What did Orpah know of God?

Naomi's sorrow was so deep that she felt paralyzed by it. All she could do was wait for the sun to rise so she could go on sitting in this dusty, dank corner and listening to the rush of people going past her door. How dare life go on as it always had, when her sons were dead! She resented the laughter of neighbors outside her door. She was embittered by the changeless activity. Were her loved ones so unimportant they might have been mere grains of sand cast into the Dead Sea, leaving hardly a ripple? Only Orpah and Ruth shared her anguish.

Naomi hated Moab and Kir-hareseth more with each day that passed. She hated these foreign people. And she hated herself for hating them. It wasn't their fault Elimelech, Kilion, and Mahlon had taken up ways displeasing to God. *Men decide their own path, but it is God who judges, God who prevails.*

The sun rose, and Naomi wished she could close her eyes and die. Instead, she found herself alive and aware of what was going on around her. She could hear Orpah and Ruth weeping together and talking in soft voices so they wouldn't disturb her. She ate when they asked her to do so and lay down when they pleaded with her to rest. But she felt lost and angry and hopeless and afraid.

She wallowed in memories, thinking back over the early years of marriage with Elimelech. Oh, how they'd laughed together and dreamed of a fine future brought by hard work and dedication to the land. Naomi, his merry one, he'd called her. She remembered the joy when she found she was with child, the anticipation, the celebration when a son was born—first one, then another. She had sustained them with her body, nursing them until they were able to walk. She had rejoiced in their childish exuberance, laughed at their antics, relished their presence. Life had been full then. She'd felt God's presence in every blessing.

What do I have now? Nothing! I will never know joy again.

Things had been bad in Bethlehem, but everything got worse when they left. She'd tried—and failed—to have influence over Elimelech. She had wanted to raise her sons in the ways of the Lord, but Elimelech felt the Laws of Moses were too rigid, too intolerant. "Our way is not the only way, Naomi. Look around you and see how the Moabites prosper. Those in Bethlehem are still reduced to scraping out a living from the earth." In her heart, she'd known Elimelech was rejecting God, but she could never find the words to convince him he must turn back.

Is that why I'm being punished? Should I have been more determined in

reasoning with Elimelech? Should I have gone to the elders for help instead of being too ashamed to admit what was happening in my home? Should I have gone to his brothers? I should have found someone he respected who might have been able to dissuade him from leaving the land God gave us! Perhaps if I'd refused to leave Bethlehem, everything would have turned out differently. Perhaps if we'd stayed, my husband and sons would still be alive.

How she tormented herself wondering if she could have done things differently, worrying that she had failed those she loved so much.

Oh, why didn't I teach Kilion and Mahlon the importance of the Law? I should have been a better mother. I should have made them sit down and listen. I should have worried less about losing their love and more about losing their souls. And now I've lost them forever. I've lost my sons . . . oh, my sons, my sons . . .

She didn't speak the words aloud, but she was scourged with self-recriminations day after day and night after night.

Father, forgive me. I was weak. I was foolish. I took the easy way and followed Elimelech because I wanted peace in our family. I didn't want to be a contentious wife. I wanted to support him in his endeavors. I wanted to be his helpmate. But You warned us of the cursings to come if we were unfaithful. Oh, Father, I wanted to be faithful. I tried to be faithful. Every day, I felt torn, my husband on one side and You on the other. I didn't know what else to do but pray in silence and hope in secret and walk alongside Elimelech and then my sons. I hoped and prayed every day they would come to their senses and we'd go home to the land You gave us. Oh, God, I've prayed and prayed all these years, and not one prayer has been answered. My husband is dead. My sons are dead! You have stripped me bare! You have poured me out! Who is left but You, Father? What do I have to cling to now but You?

She rocked back and forth, moaning.

Ruth rose and put her arms around her. "Mother, I'll take care of you." The girl's tenderness broke Naomi's heart. She wept in her daughter-in-law's arms, allowing herself to be held and rocked like a baby. But it was no comfort, for other thoughts rushed into her tortured mind and made her cry all the harder.

There would be no children to carry on the names of her sons. It would be as though they never lived at all. *Their names will go down into the dust along with them. No children . . . there will be no children. . . .*



Seventy days passed before Naomi went outside the door of her small house. The sunlight hurt her eyes. She was weak from grieving, having wept enough tears to fill a cistern, and it was time to stop. Crying would not bring the dead back to life. She must think of the living. Ruth and Orpah

were young women, too young to spend the rest of their lives mourning over Mahlon and Kilion, or taking care of an old woman whose life was over.

She sat on the stool outside her door and watched someone else's children. They raced down the street, their laughter echoing back as they rounded a corner. Children were life, and hers were no more. But there was still a chance for her daughters-in-law, if she did what she knew she must.

If she remained in Kir-hareseth, Ruth and Orpah would continue to live with her. They would spend their youth looking after the mother of their dead husbands. How could she allow these sweet girls to waste their lives on her? She loved them too much to continue to see them begging for a handful of grain from strangers or living off charity from friends and relatives. But if she left Kir-hareseth and Moab, her daughters-in-law could return to their families, who would welcome them. Naomi had no doubt their fathers would find husbands for them quickly, for they were young and beautiful. Then Ruth and Orpah would have the joy of children. Naomi wanted that for them more than anything.

As for her, she wanted to go home to Bethlehem. She didn't know if any of her relatives or friends remained there or had survived the famine, but she had heard that the famine had finally ended. Perhaps the Midianite raids had also come to an end. Even so, what did it matter? She longed to go home, and she was willing to accept whatever she found when she reached Bethlehem. If she must be reduced to spending her last years as a beggar, so be it. At least she would feel the Promised Land beneath her feet again. At least she would be where others worshiped God as she did.

Oh, Lord, make it be so. Bring me safely home before I die. Oh, Father, have mercy on me, for I'm alone and in deep distress. My problems go from bad to worse. And I want to do what's right in Your eyes. Help me!

Neighbors greeted her as they passed by. She smiled and nodded her head while her mind raced on. *Why am I sitting here? Am I waiting for God to speak to me audibly as He did to Moses? Who am I that God would speak in such a manner? Do I expect Him to write a letter to me on that wall over there telling me what to do? I know what I must do! I will repent and return to my homeland.*

Naomi put her hands on her knees and pushed herself up. Lowering her shawl to her shoulders, she went back into her house. Ruth was kneeling, flattening bread dough and laying it over the metal stove, while Orpah was mending a garment. Both young women glanced up and smiled at her. She paused, gazing between them, trying to find words to explain, and failing. She turned away and began gathering her few things.

Ruth rose. "What are you doing, Mother?"

"I'm packing."

“Packing?” Orpah said. “But where are you going?”
 “I’m going home.”

+ + +

Naomi had known that Ruth and Orpah would insist on accompanying her to Bethlehem. Impetuous youth. She didn’t argue with them; she knew they would soon understand the immensity of leaving Moab and their families behind. She was sure they would be ready to go home again by the time they reached the Arnon River. It would be far easier to dissuade them at the boundary of their country than to waste her breath arguing with them now. She would enjoy their company awhile longer and then send them home. She didn’t want to ponder the fact that she would never see them again after they left her. She would never forget them, and she would pray for them every day for as long as she lived.

As they prepared to leave the house, Naomi wondered if they would even make it down the hill with all the things Orpah had decided to bring. The poor girl. She couldn’t bear to leave anything behind. She was loaded down with everything she had accumulated during her marriage to Kilion, including a small stool. Orpah moaned in distress. “Oh, I wish we could bring the table and rug . . .”

Ruth, on the other hand, had only a pack full of colorful sashes she’d made, a skin of water, and enough grain and raisin cakes to last for several days. “Where are the rest of your things, Ruth?” Naomi asked her.

“I have all I need. Let me carry the cooking pan, Mother. It’s too heavy for you. We’ll travel farther today if I carry it.”

Naomi had spoken to the family next door, telling them Orpah and Ruth would be returning in a day or two. She wanted to be sure no one bothered what was left in the house. When the young women returned to Kir-hareseth, they could sell everything, including the house, and split whatever came of it. Naomi didn’t care about any of the belongings she was leaving behind. She preferred the plain things of her people to the finery of the Moabites, Philistines, and Egyptians. It was Elimelech who had placed such importance on the gifts he gave her, and they would be out of place in Bethlehem.

She suspected that Ruth would give everything to Orpah. Dear Ruth—she had such a generous heart, not to mention a wealthy father who would want her to return to his house. Naomi knew him well enough to suspect that he already had another husband in mind for Ruth, a rich merchant’s son or an official in the king’s court. Her heart sank at the thought of Ruth married to someone other than her son. Curious . . . the same wasn’t true of Orpah.

Perhaps it was because Ruth had responded to her teachings about the

true God. How Naomi had rejoiced as she watched the slow budding of the girl's faith.

"Did you see your father and mother yesterday, Ruth?"

Ruth shook her head.

"Why not? They should know you're leaving the city."

"They will know that I'm with you."

"Do they know I'm going back to Bethlehem?"

"My mother said you would, and I told her that even if you did, I belong with my husband's family."

Naomi said no more about it. She started off, carrying only a small sack of parched grain, a skin of water, and a leather bag in which was a sandalwood box containing crystals of frankincense. She would give it to the priest when she reached Bethlehem, an offering for the Lord.

She felt a sense of relief as she walked through the gates of Kir-hareseth and saw the road before her. Whatever hardships came, at least she was on her way back to Canaan. She didn't look back. Orpah did look back, weeping softly, but Ruth merely smiled and gazed off toward the King's Highway to the Dead Sea. "It's a good day to begin our journey, Mother."

The day wore on and the sun rose, hot and oppressive. Naomi felt despair creeping into her heart. Soon she would say good-bye to these daughters. *Lord, give me the strength to place their needs ahead of my fear of being alone. Father, bless them for their kindness to me. Take them safely home, and give me the courage to go on alone.*

At midday they stopped to rest beneath a terebinth tree. Naomi accepted the raisin cake and cup of water Ruth offered, but Orpah declined food. She was quiet, her eyes downcast. Ruth sat down and wiped the perspiration from her face. She looked weary but was more concerned about her sister-in-law than herself. "Are you not feeling well, Orpah?"

"I'll be all right after a rest."

Naomi knew what was wrong, but the knowledge gave her no satisfaction. She must send them back now. There was still time enough for them to be safely back inside the city walls before nightfall. She finished eating quickly and rose, lifting to her own back the bundle Ruth had insisted upon carrying to this point.

"What are you doing?" Ruth said, rising as well.

"I'm going on alone."

"No, Mother!"

Orpah came to her feet and joined Ruth in protest, weeping profusely. "Don't go! Please don't go."

Naomi's heart broke, but she knew she must remain firm. "Go back to your mothers' homes instead of coming with me. And may the Lord reward

you for your kindness to your husbands and to me. May the Lord bless you with the security of another marriage.”

Ruth wept. “No.” She shook her head. “No, *no* . . .” She stepped forward. “We want to go with you to your people.”

“Why should you go on with me?” Naomi said, striving and failing to keep her voice from becoming strident with restrained emotion. “Can I still give birth to other sons who could grow up to be your husbands? No, my daughters, return to your parents’ homes, for I am too old to marry again. And even if it were possible, and I were to get married tonight and bear sons, then what? Would you wait for them to grow up and refuse to marry someone else? No, of course not, my daughters! Things are far more bitter for me than for you, because the Lord Himself has caused me to suffer.”

Ruth and Orpah wept harder. Orpah embraced her. “I shall never forget you, Naomi. May you have a safe journey home.”

“Nor I you,” Naomi said and kissed her. “And a safe journey to you as well!”

Orpah took up her bundles and started back toward Kir-hareseth. She paused after a little way and looked back, perplexed. “Aren’t you coming, Ruth?”

“No.” Ruth shook her head, her eyes awash with tears. “I’m going with Mother.”

Orpah dropped her things and ran back to embrace her. “Are you certain, my sister?”

“Never more certain.”

“Please . . .”

“No. Go back without me. I will go on with Naomi.”

With one last look back, Orpah started off again. Naomi watched Orpah walk quickly away and then looked at Ruth. She stretched out her hand and pointed toward Kir-hareseth. “See. Your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods. You should do the same.”

Tears slipped down Ruth’s face, but she didn’t move. “Don’t ask me to leave you and turn back, for I won’t.”

“But how can I not tell you to go?” Naomi came closer. “You heard what I said, Ruth. Should I take you back to Bethlehem with me so you can have the same bitter existence I’ll have? Should you grow old without a husband and children? Go after Orpah! Return to your mother and father!”

“No,” Ruth said, weeping. “I *won’t* leave you. Make me your proselyte.”

Naomi’s heart squeezed tight. “Oh, my sweet one, think of what you’re saying. The lives of my people are not as easy as what you’ve known. We’re commanded to keep Sabbaths and holy days, on which we may not travel more than two thousand cubits.”

"I will go wherever you go."

Naomi knew she must speak the truth, even if it hurt Ruth's feelings. "We're commanded not to spend the night with Gentiles."

"I will live wherever you live."

"We're commanded to keep over six hundred precepts!"

"Whatever your people keep I will keep, Mother, for your people will be my people."

Naomi kept on. "We are forbidden to worship any strange god. Chemosh is an abomination!"

"Your God will be my God."

Naomi spread her hands. "We have four sorts of deaths for malefactors, Ruth: stoning, burning, strangling, and slaying with the sword. Reconsider your words!" When Ruth said nothing, she went on, beseeching Ruth to see the many ways their people were different. "Our people are buried in houses of sepulchre."

"Then let it be so for me as well, Mother." Falling to her knees, Ruth wrapped her arms around Naomi's waist. "I will die where you die and will be buried there." When Naomi tried to press her back, Ruth clung more tightly. "And may the Lord punish me severely if I allow anything but death to separate us!"

Weeping now, Naomi placed her hands on Ruth's head and stroked her hair. Naomi looked up at the heavens. She had never hoped for this, never expected that this young Moabitess would be willing to give up everything in order to go with her. She looked down again, stroking Ruth's head absently. "You will never see your mother and father and brothers and sisters again, Ruth. Do you realize that?"

"Yes." Ruth raised her head. Her face was streaked with tears.

"Your life will be easier if you return."

"Oh, Naomi, how can I go back to my old life when you hold the words of truth?" Her arms tightened again as she began to sob. "Please don't plead with me to leave you. Don't lead me into temptation. I'm going with you!"

"Your God will be my God."

How could Naomi say no to such words? Hadn't she prayed that Ruth's heart would be softened toward the God of Israel? One prayer had been answered, one prayer among thousands. "Be at ease," she said gently and loosened Ruth's arms from around her waist. Cupping Ruth's face, she smiled down at her. She smoothed away Ruth's tears. "As God wills. Whatever comes, we'll face together."

Ruth's eyes shone as she smiled in relief. "I will heed your every word, for I know you'll teach me what I need to know."

"Everything I learned at my mother's knee I will make known to you. All I have is yours. I give it to you with pleasure." For Naomi knew now

there was more than marriage to her son that had grafted this girl into her life and heart. And now she would pray that Ruth would be grafted in among her people as well.

You have not forgotten me, Lord. You knew I couldn't make it home alone. You have not abandoned me.

"Come," Naomi said, taking Ruth's hand and helping her up. "We must make a long journey before we reach home."



Ruth didn't dwell on what hardships she and Naomi might encounter when they reached Bethlehem. Each day of travel was enough trouble to bear without fearing what might come when they reached their destination. Ruth had lived in fear all during the months of Mahlon's illness, and it had accomplished nothing. She'd loved her husband, but she couldn't save him. All her efforts to make him better had failed, and the fear of losing him hadn't prevented death from coming anyway. Nor had fear helped her face the difficulties of surviving without a man to provide for the household. After Mahlon's death, she decided she would never again allow her mind to dwell on things beyond her control. The future was one of these things. She would face whatever came and do the best with whatever life God gave her.

Naomi often comforted her without even realizing it. "The Lord will take care of us," she'd said last night, and Ruth had lain awake on the hard earth, staring up at the stars and thinking about those words. *The Lord will take care of us.* After all Naomi had suffered, she still clung to her faith. Ruth was comforted by Naomi's strength. *The Lord will take care of us.* She chose to believe it because her mother-in-law said it was true.

From the time she had entered Mahlon's home, Ruth had known there was something different about Naomi. First there was the outward sign: her clothing. Even after years of living among the Moabites, her mother-in-law continued to dress as a Hebrew. She didn't do so with an air of pride, as though she was better than those living around her. It was simply who she was. Ruth had also seen her deep faith in God. At first, she'd worried that Naomi's long silences meant she didn't like Mahlon's choice of a wife. But Mahlon had said that wasn't so.

"She's just praying," Mahlon had told her with a shrug. "She's done it for as long as I can remember. Don't let it upset you. It doesn't do any harm. Just ignore her."

But Ruth hadn't ignored her mother-in-law. She could see that prayer meant a great deal to Naomi, and Ruth wanted to understand more about it. So she had surreptitiously watched Naomi. Sometimes her mother-in-law would look so peaceful when she talked to her God, and at other times,

anguished. Every morning, often at midday, and always during the evening hours, Naomi would draw her shawl over her head, sit in the corner of the house, and become still and quiet. Ruth asked her once what she prayed about, and Naomi had smiled and said, "Everything." Her eyes had grown sad. "Mostly about my sons." She'd reached out and put her hand over Ruth's, her eyes softening. "And my daughters."

The kind words had brought tears to Ruth's eyes. Naomi's good opinion had mattered very much, for Ruth admired her greatly. Naomi was kind and pleasant, fair in her division of chores, and she always worked as hard as everyone else. She loved both of her sons deeply and equally, and despite their cultural differences, she embraced Ruth and Orpah as daughters. Love was a gift Naomi had in abundance. And though Mahlon seemed unimpressed, Ruth sensed a deep, abiding knowledge and wisdom in her mother-in-law, knowledge and wisdom she longed to share.

Yet Ruth sensed her sorrow as well. Naomi was never quite settled in Kir-hareseth, never quite at ease with the world around her. It had to do with her God. Ruth had been afraid to approach Naomi and talk with her about it. So she approached her husband instead.

Mahlon had never had much to say about the God of his people. In fact, he seemed to know very little about Him. "Why are you so interested in God?"

"Shouldn't I be able to teach your sons about Him?"

"Teach them about Chemosh if it pleases you. It doesn't matter to me. I'm sure my mother will teach them about Yahweh. The important thing is for them to be tolerant of all religions. That's the only way they're going to succeed in Kir-hareseth."

In Mahlon's eyes, one god was no better than any other, but Naomi could not compromise. She was respectful, never disdaining others' beliefs, but she held to her faith in Yahweh with quiet tenacity.

Ruth looked at her mother-in-law now, curled on her side, her head resting on a stone for a pillow. She'd fallen asleep within minutes after eating the bread Ruth prepared for her. The sun was down and the air was cooling quickly. Ruth rose and carefully draped her shawl over Naomi. The journey was already very difficult for her mother-in-law. She had eaten very little during the weeks following Mahlon's death. Ruth had feared that Naomi would waste away in grief. So she had prepared savory stews in an effort to entice her mother-in-law's appetite. Now it was the physical exhaustion that dampened Naomi's appetite. She was so tired after walking all day, she could barely keep her eyes open long enough to eat anything. It was strange, but Ruth felt as though they had traded positions. Naomi had become the child, and she the caring mother. "But I don't mind," she

whispered, leaning down to kiss Naomi's cheek. She smoothed the tendrils of black hair back from her mother-in-law's sunburned brow.

Ruth rose and hugged her arms close to her body, shivering slightly. Mount Nebo stood in the distance. Naomi had told her this morning that Moses had gone up onto that mountain and died there after putting Joshua in charge of God's people. They had crossed the Jordan River soon afterward and claimed Canaan. She loved it when Naomi talked about what God had done for the Hebrews. She felt a strange stirring within her as she learned of His mighty feats and His unfailing love.

She closed her eyes and lifted her face to the heavens. "Lord, help me to take care of Your servant Naomi," she whispered. "It's because of her that I've come to believe in You. Please guide our steps and bring us safely home to Bethlehem. And, Lord, if it isn't too much to ask, let there be old friends to greet Naomi upon her return, people who loved her in days gone by and who will continue to love her in the difficult days ahead."

BOOK FOUR

UNSPOKEN



SETTING THE SCENE



The powerful and mighty King Saul of Israel was jealous of a shepherd boy. The reason was simple: The Lord God had anointed this young man, David, as His chosen king. And more than that, David held the hearts of the people in his hands. When David spoke, people inclined their ear. When he danced, maidens swooned. When he sang, the hearts of men, women, and children rose in praise to God.

When David fled into the wilderness to escape Saul's murderous envy, hundreds of men followed him, camping with him in the caves of Adullam and En-gedi. Some were discontented men. Others were men hounded by Philistine raids. Some were men overtaxed by a king in whom they had lost confidence. And scattered among the honorable men, who longed for the days when God was Israel's supreme Commander, were men of violence and vengeance, men who simply loved shedding blood and grasping plunder.

War ripped the nation into factions as the king's jealousy mounted against his imagined enemy. But David was ever submissive to the king's authority. Refusing to wrest the crown from Saul by violent means, David was content to wait for God to act on his behalf.

Meanwhile, the company who gathered around David swelled steadily—from two hundred to four hundred to six hundred. Among them were thirty mighty men, an elite group of warriors of proven valor and loyalty. David's courage and integrity rallied them, and they held together like a family, fiercely intent upon protecting its own against all enemies, be they the king of Israel who had turned his back on God or the armies of the idol-infested nations surrounding them.

These valiant fighting men did not come alone to fight for David. They brought their wives and sons and daughters with them.

Traveling among the growing throng of David's followers was a little girl named Bathsheba. . . .

ONE



Perched on her grandfather's knee, Bathsheba tore off a piece of bread and offered it to him. Laughing, Ahithophel ate it from her hand. "She's becoming more like your mother every day, Eliam."

Her father watched her with a faint frown. "It's hard to believe she's growing up so fast. Eight years old already. It won't be long before I'll have to find a husband for her."

"A mighty man to protect a pretty young maiden."

She looked across the fire at the man who appeared, to her, like an angel from heaven. Tugging on her grandfather's tunic, stretching up, she whispered her heart's desire. "I want to marry David."

He laughed out loud and looked across at the handsome young man sitting across the fire. "David, here is another who has set you upon a pedestal." Heat flooded into her cheeks as the man she idolized looked back at her grandfather with embarrassed tolerance. Her grandfather kissed her cheek. "Forget David, Bathsheba. He has three wives already, my sweet." As he looked into her eyes, his amusement faded. His expression softened. "Better to be the only wife of a poor man than one woman among many in a king's harem."

"Come inside, Bathsheba!" her mother beckoned. Her grandfather lifted Bathsheba from his knee and set her firmly on her feet, sending her off with a light swat on her backside. When Bathsheba paused to look back at David, her mother caught her by the arm and yanked her inside the tent, flipping the flap down behind them. "It's time for bed." She followed Bathsheba and drew up the blanket as the girl lay down on her pallet. Kneeling, she leaned down and kissed Bathsheba. Troubled, she stroked the wisps of black hair back from Bathsheba's forehead. "Some dreams can only bring heartbreak."

"But I—"

Her mother put her fingertip over Bathsheba's lips. "Hush, child." She leaned back upon her heels and rose gracefully. "Go to sleep."

Bathsheba lay awake, listening to the men's voices rumbling quietly outside. Others had joined them. She recognized Joab's voice and that of his brother Abishai. Both were commanders of David's army, and they often came to talk war with her grandfather, who had earned David's respect for his shrewd tactical advice. He knew a great deal about the Philistines and Ammonites and their methods of battle. He also knew the land of Canaan as well as the lines in the palm of his own hand.

"Saul was in our hands, David," Joab said. "You should have killed him when you had the chance."

Joab's brother Abishai was quick to speak in agreement. "Yes, you need to kill Saul! God gave him to us in the Cave of the Wild Goats. I would have slit his throat for you."

"And I told you why I didn't want him killed," David said. "He is the man the Lord God anointed as king."

"He'll keep chasing you," Joab said. "He'll never stop until one of you is dead."

"It would be better for the nation if you took the crown from Saul now," another said. Bathsheba heard the rumble of agreement among several other men sitting at her father's campfire.

"Strike the shepherd and the sheep will scatter," Joab insisted.

"What am I to do with you sons of Zeruiah?" David said harshly, and she knew his impatience must be directed at Joab and Abishai. "How many times must I tell you I will not raise my hand against the Lord's anointed!"

She heard footsteps moving away.

"I don't understand him," Joab said in frustration. "Speak sense to him, Ahithophel!"

"What would David have gained by murdering the king while he had turned his back to relieve himself?" Her grandfather spoke calmly in the face of the younger men's hot tempers. "When Saul heard David call to him from the cave, he knew David could have killed him—yet David allowed him to walk away with only his pride injured. Would a man who coveted his kingdom have done that? Of course not! Every man riding with Saul now knows David is in the right! And they know David was giving King Saul the chance to repent!"

"Repent! The fire in Saul's belly will be back soon enough, and we'll be on the run again. Should we spare a man who ordered the murder of eighty-five priests and their families at Nob?"

"Leave judgment to the Lord. David's course is a righteous one."

"You know as well as I that as long as there is breath in Saul's body, he will hunt David!"

"I know, too, that God will prevail, Joab. It will be by His efforts, not yours, that David will one day be king. The Lord is in command. Every day,

more men join us. Why? Because they believe as we do: that God is with David wherever he goes. The Philistines, Ammonites, and Amalekites cannot defeat a man who has the Lord God of Israel as his shield."

"I want to see the crown on David's head!"

"So do we all, Joab. But let it happen in God's time and not before."

The men went on talking. Bathsheba's eyes were heavy with sleep. She dreamed of David dressed in royal robes, holding out his hand to her. Startled awake, she lay still, listening. Men were shouting in the distance. Probably another argument. She heard familiar voices outside. Rising to her knees, she peered between the stitches of the tent seam. David had returned and was sitting in the flickering firelight, talking with her father and grandfather.

"We'll join forces with the Philistines," David was saying. "When the fighting turns against Saul, we'll be in a position to turn the battle in his favor."

Her grandfather frowned in concentration. "How many do you plan to take?"

"All of them."

"Who will protect our women and children . . . ?"

Bathsheba gazed at David, her head full of dreams. She loved the way he tilted his head as he listened intently to what her grandfather had to say. She studied every line of his face.

Men shouted again. Her mother moaned softly, rolling over on her pallet. Bathsheba looked out again. David had his head turned toward the disturbance. A muscle in his jaw clenched. "These men are too much for me to manage!"

Her grandfather sat with his hands clasped between his knees. "They are a flock of sheep in need of a strong shepherd."

"Sometimes they behave more like a pack of wolves!" David shook his head and rose. "I guess I should do something." Sighing, he walked away.

"I don't understand him," her father said, tossing a rock into the darkness. "Why is he always coming to Saul's rescue even when it could mean his own death?"

"Have you forgotten that Saul's son Jonathan is David's closest friend? And David's first wife is Saul's daughter."

"Jonathan has chosen sides, Abba, and Michal is defiled. Saul gave her to another man. David lives in hope that everything will change back to the way it was before Saul went mad with jealousy. It will never happen."

Her grandfather poked the fire. "Joab's advice is shrewd. Saul's death would put an end to this war and place David on the throne. But there would be no blessing for David if he kills the Lord's anointed. Ah, my son, David lives to please God. His passion is for the Lord." He looked up,

his face aglow. "If every man among us had the heart David has, what a kingdom God would build for us!" Tossing the stick into the fire, he rose. "Come, let's stand with our friend and hear what the Lord has given him to say this time."

Bathsheba knew David wouldn't shout orders at the fighting men, nor interfere with their arguments. Instead he would simply sit near them and sing. She waited, and after a little while, she could hear the sound of his harp amid the shouting—a soothing melody played quietly against angry, discordant voices. Already the angry voices were dying down. Pulling at the seams, Bathsheba tried to see more from within the narrow view of her father's tent. Her grandfather always said that God gave David's words and music the power to lift hearts and minds from petty differences to God's majesty and the blessings He had poured upon His chosen people. She had heard David play and sing many times before, and she never tired of it.

Her mother was asleep. What harm if she snuck out and crept close enough to watch and listen? She slipped through the flaps and hastened toward the gathering, staying at the edge of firelight. Hunkering down, arms wrapped around her knees, she sat and listened. Her young heart trembled at the sight of David, his handsome face bronzed in the firelight. No one in the entire world could be as perfect as David, her beloved.

"O Lord, our Lord, the majesty of your name fills the earth!" His voice rang out in the night air. His words grew indistinct when he turned away. So she rose and crept closer. One by one, men sat and reclined, gazing up at David as they listened, captivated as he worshiped God more openly than any priest. David stopped in the midst of his men and lifted his head, singing a wordless melody that made Bathsheba's heart ache. Then lyrics came again to him.

"When I look at the night sky and see the work of your fingers—the moon and the stars you have set in place—what are mortals that you should think of us, mere humans that you should care for us?"

Everyone was silent now, waiting as David bowed his head and plucked the strings of his harp. The sound and words pierced her so deeply that Bathsheba felt he was plucking the strings of her heart. "For you made us only a little lower than God, and you crowned us with glory and honor. You put us in charge of everything you made, giving us authority over all things—the sheep and the cattle and all the wild animals, the birds in the sky, the fish in the sea, and everything that swims the ocean currents." David shook his head in wonder and looked up at the stars again, his face rapt. "O Lord, our Lord, the majesty of your name fills the earth!" He played a few more chords on his harp and then lifted his hand slowly above his head, offering his words of praise to the God of all creation.

And the camp was quiet—so quiet, Bathsheba could hear her own heartbeat.

“Sing another psalm, David,” her grandfather, Ahithophel, said.

Others joined in his appeal. “Sing to us of the Lord!”

Bathsheba rose and crept in among the gathering, slipping in next to her doting grandfather, seeking his warmth. “What are you doing up?” he whispered gruffly and put his arm around her, snuggling her close.

“I had to hear, and I was getting cold.” Shivering, she looked up at him pleadingly. “Please, Grandpapa, just for a little while . . . ?”

“You know I can’t say no to you.” He pulled his cloak around her. “One song.”

David sang another psalm, one she had heard many times before. His handsome face glowed in the firelight, and his words poured forth upon her thirsty soul. Unlike so many hearts around her, David’s heart wasn’t turned toward war. He longed for peace. He appealed to God for help and mercy and deliverance from his enemies. What would it be like to live without fear of a pursuing king, of Philistines and Ammonites, of the raiding Amalekites? She looked at her father and saw his eyes were moist as he leaned forward, listening intently. How many times had she heard her papa say God would uphold their cause? God would hide them in the cleft of the rocks and inside the caves of En-ge-di and Adullam. God would sustain them with food and water. God would give them victory against every enemy. Why? Because they were with David, and David did nothing without inquiring of the Lord. David prayed his songs, and God listened.

David walked a few steps and stood for a moment with his head bowed. His eyes were closed. She watched his hands move gently over the strings, strumming softly and making her heart ache. He raised his head and looked from face to face. Would he look at her? Would he notice her sitting between her father and grandfather?

“The Lord is my shepherd; I have everything I need. . . .”

When David’s gaze fixed upon her, her heart leaped into her throat. She held her breath, staring back at him, but his gaze moved on, touching each man there as though every one was equally precious to him. She felt crushed beneath the pressure of her love for him, and dejected that he hardly noticed her among his throng of devoted followers.

You are my shepherd, David. You make me want something I can’t even name. You lead us through the wilderness, but I’m not afraid, because you are with us. And I would do anything for you. . . .

Someone gripped her shoulder tightly, startling her. “Bathsheba!” her mother whispered angrily.

“So you’ve been caught again,” her grandfather whispered, unfurling his cloak from around her back and shoulders. Scowling, her mother scooped

her up and carried her away, setting her on her feet when they were halfway back to the family tent. "You're lucky I don't take a rod to you!" Lowering her eyes, Bathsheba followed her mother through the darkness. Her mother swished the tent flap back. "Get inside!" Once past the opening, her mother gave her a swat on her behind. "Since I can't trust you to stay where you belong, you'll sleep beside me until your father returns." Her mother drew her close. "You know better than to disobey."

Bathsheba sniffled. "I'm sorry, Mama. It's just that I love him."

Her mother sighed. "I know you do. We all love David."

"Not like I do. I'm going to marry him someday."

Her mother's arms tightened around her. "Oh, my sweet one. Every girl among us wishes for the same thing. You must listen to me, Bathsheba. What you hope for is impossible. It's the idle dream of a child."

"Why?"

"Because David is too far above you."

Her throat tightened. "He was a shepherd."

"He still is a shepherd, but not in the way you mean. You must understand. David is destined to be *king*, and as such, he will marry the daughters of kings. You're only the daughter of one of his soldiers."

"Abba is a warrior, one of David's *best* warriors, and one of his *closest* friends. And Grandpapa . . ."

"*Hush!* Remember, David is still married to Saul's daughter Michal, even though Saul gave her to someone else. And David is also married to Ahinoam and Abigail."

"Abigail isn't the daughter of a king," Bathsheba said stubbornly.

"No, but Abigail kept David from committing a great sin. He was grateful for her wisdom. And she is very beautiful."

"Do you think I'll be beautiful someday, beautiful enough—"

"Someday, you'll be very beautiful, and wiser than you are right now, I hope. At the very least, wise enough to understand that some things are not meant to be. Your father will find a good husband for you, and you'll forget you ever thought yourself in love with David."

Never! Never, never, never! Bathsheba blinked back tears and turned her head away.

"When you grow up, my love, you will understand the wisdom of worshipping God and not a man."

Bathsheba lay still until she heard the sound of her mother's deepened breathing. Then she eased out of her arms and crawled to the other side of the tent to peer into the night once more. Her father and grandfather had returned to the fire, and David had joined them once again. They spoke quietly of battle plans. Bathsheba closed her eyes and listened to the sound of David's voice. Content, she fell asleep.



When she awakened the next morning, Bathsheba found herself on her pallet, under her blanket. Her father snored beside her mother. Bathsheba rose quietly and left the tent. David would be up by now. He was always up before everyone else, and he always went off by himself to pray. She had seen him several times coming back from the stream, so she hurried toward it now. Her heartbeat quickened when she spotted David kneeling by a rippling pool, washing his face, arms, and hands. Her father and grandfather always did the same thing before they prayed.

Her footfall caused a soft cascade of pebbles to spill down the slope. David turned sharply, eyes intent, hand on the hilt of his sword. When he saw her, he relaxed.

“You’re up early, Bathsheba. Aren’t you a little far from camp?”

Her heart hammered as she came closer. “I came to get water.”

“Then you have a problem, little one.”

“What problem?”

He smiled. “You have no jug.”

Heat surged into her cheeks. When he started to turn away, she spoke quickly before she lost all her courage. “Could we talk awhile, David? I came all this way to see you.”

He turned and looked at her. “You shouldn’t be so far from camp. It’s dangerous. Go on back to your tent where you belong.”

“But—”

“You know your mother wouldn’t be happy you strayed so far. I don’t think she’d be pleased if she had to come searching for you a second time.”

Crushed by his reprimand, Bathsheba bolted up the slope, ducked behind some rocks, and sat down heavily. Trembling, she put her cold palms against her burning cheeks. Then she took a breath and peered out from her hiding place. David was still standing by the stream, his hands now on his hips. “Go home before you’re missed! And don’t leave the camp again!”

Sucking in a sob, Bathsheba clambered up and ran all the rest of the way back to her father’s tent, thankful no one was awake to see her tears—or ask the cause of them.



Word came that the Philistines were going out against Saul. Bathsheba’s grandfather and father laid out their armor and weapons. Bathsheba helped her mother prepare parched grain and raisin cakes for them to take with them. Her mother was silent, as she always was before the men left. So, too, was Bathsheba as she listened to them talk.

“We go tomorrow and join the ranks of Philistines,” her grandfather

said. Bathsheba remembered the plan she had overheard David talking about. His men would only be pretending to help the Philistines. Really, they were waiting for a chance to help King Saul defeat this enemy army.

"Surely they'll suspect David's offer as pretense," her father said tightly. "It's only through God's mercy that we haven't been caught raiding the Geshurite and Amalekite villages these past years."

"We've timed our raids carefully and left no survivors."

"Rumors spread . . ."

"David wants to be in a position to help Saul. If the Philistines reject our offer of aid, there'll be nothing we can do."

"Saul's fate is in God's hands already, and I don't like leaving our women and children on their own."

As the sun rose the next morning, Bathsheba watched her father and grandfather leave camp with David. As soon as they were out of sight, her mother went inside the tent and wept. She was quickly herself again. She sat in the shade of the tent carding wool and sent Bathsheba off with the sheep.

The day after the men left, Bathsheba was bringing water up from the stream when she heard yelling and screaming. Dropping the skin, she ran up the bank. Amalekite raiders were charging into the camp while women fled in a dozen directions, grabbing up their children as they ran. Defenseless, they were quickly rounded up like a scattered flock.

When Bathsheba saw a man knock her mother to the ground and try to tie a rope around her flailing hands, she shrieked and ran at him in a fury. Jumping on his back, she clawed his forehead and yanked his hair. "Let her go! Let my mother go!"

With an angry shout, the man caught hold of her hair and hurled her over his shoulder. She hit the ground hard. Gasping for breath, she made it to her hands and knees, but someone looped a rope around her neck. Rolling over, she grabbed it and kicked the man. He uttered a harsh groan and bent over, his face going white while one of his company called out a laughing insult. "Is that little flea too much to handle?"

Enraged, the Amalekite gave the rope a hard yank. As she choked, he dragged her up by her arm and shook her violently. "Fight me and I'll drag you to your death!" He sent her flying into the line of women and children.

Sobbing, her mother quickly loosened the rope and clasped her close. "Bathsheba! Oh, Bathsheba!"

Bathsheba coughed violently and wretched and dragged in a full, painful breath. "David will—" Her mother clapped a hand over her mouth and shushed her. She'd never seen terror in her mother's face before this day.

The Amalekite guard turned on her. "*No talking!*"

The women and older children were tied and led away. Younger children

were carried. The band of raiders and captives walked for hours, the midday heat bearing down hard upon the women and children, who were given only enough water to keep them going. They stopped as the sun was setting. Most of the women collapsed, too tired even to whimper. Each captive was given a handful of parched grain.

Bathsheba ate ravenously, but her stomach still ached with hunger. Her neck was bruised and burned from the rope. Her throat hurt from the hard yank she'd received early that day. Her feet were raw from walking across dusty, rocky ground. Her body ached all over. When she began to cry, her mother pulled her close and shared her body warmth as the moon and stars appeared and the temperature plummeted.

"I'm afraid, Mother." Bathsheba cried softly.

Her mother stroked her hair back from her sunburned face. "It does no good to cry. We need to save our strength for whatever lies ahead."

"David will come looking for us, won't he?"

"We will pray that he and your father return quickly." She held Bathsheba tighter. Bathsheba felt her mother trembling and asked no more questions. "Pray, my daughter. Pray hard."

And Bathsheba did. *David, oh, David, come and find us. Come and save us!*

The Amalekites kept the women on the move, hastening them toward a future of slavery, prostitution, and death. Exhausted, the women and children collapsed each night, too bone weary to cause their captors trouble of any kind. After the first two nights, they were left unbound while the men sat around the campfire, drinking and laughing. No guards watched over them. There was no need after so many miles of travel.

When the sun rose and set on the third day, hope waned.



Bathsheba awakened abruptly to the sound of battle cries. The air around her reverberated with shouts and screams. Confused and terrified, she tried to rise, but her mother grabbed her. "Stay down!" She pulled her back and down as a nearby Amalekite grabbed for his sword. He fell back with a scream, his arm severed, and then his head as well. Horrified, Bathsheba looked up at the attacking warrior who jumped across the lifeless body. Her father's friend Uriah! Shouting his battle cry, he charged on. If Uriah was here, surely her father was also, and her grandfather.

"Abba!" Bathsheba screamed. "Abba!"

The Amalekites fell back and tried to run, but they were cut down without mercy by avenging fathers, husbands, and brothers. Bathsheba saw Ittai the Gittite hack, from shoulder to sternum, the guard who had choked her. The roar of battle was terrifying. Israelites cried out in wrath; Amalekites

screamed in terror. The clash of swords and thunder of men's feet were all around her as she cowered against her mother.

And then it was over. As quickly as it had started, it ended, and the silence was a shock. The bloodied bodies of the Amalekite raiders lay sprawled around the camp, while the men left standing were no less terrifying in their stained garments, their hands and arms and weapons splashed with red.

Bathsheba heard David call out, "Ahinoam! Abigail!" Other men cried out names as well, searching for their wives and children.

"Here! I'm here!" women cried back. All was still in confusion.

"Eliam!" Her mother let go of her and ran into her father's arms, sobbing against his chest.

"Bathsheba," he said raggedly and held out his arm, but she couldn't move at the sight of him covered in blood. His eyes were so fierce he looked like a stranger. "Come, Daughter," he said more gently, still breathing hard. "Come to me. I won't hurt you." Trembling violently, she looked away and saw the carnage around her.

Her grandfather was there suddenly, catching her up in his arms, holding her close. "You are safe, my little flower." Over his shoulder, Bathsheba saw David speaking with Ahinoam and Abigail. She lost sight of him again when her grandfather put her back on her feet, his hand firmly upon her shoulder, keeping her against his side. "War is always worse for the children," he said gruffly.

"I didn't think you'd be able to find us," her mother said, her arms still around Bathsheba's father. "Oh, Eliam, you would've been proud of your daughter." She told him about everything from the day the Amalekites had raided the camp.

Bathsheba closed her eyes, but even then she couldn't block out the picture of the slaughter around her. She was cold and couldn't stop shaking. She understood now why her mother cried every time her father left camp with David.

"The Philistines turned us away," her father said. "If they hadn't, we might not have been able to track you so quickly."

Her mother frowned. "Saul?"

"He's outnumbered."

"What will David do?"

"The only thing he can do. Nothing."

On the way back to camp, some of the men argued over the share of spoils they'd taken from the Amalekite camp. They were not willing to share with those who had been too tired to cross the river. David commanded that the spoils be divided equally among all the men, with gifts to be sent to the elders of Israel's cities.

And so it was done, but not without grumbling.



An Amalekite came into David's camp, bearing news of Israel's defeat. Bathsheba was listening when he told David that Saul and his son Jonathan had been killed by the Philistines at Mount Gilboa. Their bodies were hanging on the wall of Beth-shan, while Saul's weapons had been placed in the temple of Ashtoreth. When the messenger stepped forward and stretched out his arms, murmurs issued from David's men, who stood by, watching. The Amalekite smiled broadly, triumphant, as he offered David Saul's crown.

David looked at it and began to shake with rage. Bathsheba wondered why he was so angry. David took the proffered crown. "How do you know that Saul and Jonathan are dead?" he demanded.

The man's eyes flickered. Perhaps the Amalekite sensed something ominous in David's tone. "I happened to be on Mount Gilboa," he answered. "I saw Saul there leaning on his spear with the enemy chariots closing in on him. When he turned and saw me, he cried out for me to come to him. 'How can I help?' I asked him. And he said to me, 'Who are you?' I replied, 'I am an Amalekite.' Then he begged me, 'Come over here and put me out of my misery, for I am in terrible pain and want to die.' So I killed him," the Amalekite told David, "for I knew he couldn't live. Then I took his crown and one of his bracelets so I could bring them to you, my lord."

Even from her vantage point, Bathsheba could see the blood drain from David's face. "Were you not afraid to kill the Lord's anointed one?" he cried. As the man shifted his weight, David said to one of his men, "Kill him!" So the man thrust his sword into the Amalekite.

"You die self-condemned!" David spoke into the impaled man's face. "For you yourself confessed that you killed the Lord's anointed one." He yanked the sword from the Amalekite and watched him crumple to the ground.

David must have felt the eyes of all upon him, for he looked around at the silent men, women, and children staring at what he'd done. Bathsheba longed to understand, to share his grief. His emotions burst forth and he cried out, "Your pride and joy, O Israel, lies dead on the hills! How the mighty heroes have fallen! O King Saul!" He sobbed, dropping the sword and holding his head. "Oh, Jonathan! Jonathan, my brother!"

David's grief infected the entire camp as everyone mourned the death of King Saul and David's best friend, Jonathan. David sang songs of tribute to them, reminding the people of the good days when Saul had loved the Lord and served Him.

And when the period of mourning came to an end, David obeyed the Lord and moved his army to Hebron.



It was at Hebron that Bathsheba watched David marry Maacah. Through the years she watched him marry Haggith, Abital, and Eglah, and with each wedding, she heard he made important alliances. He needed allies, for despite Saul's death, the house of Saul continued to wage war upon David. "He has an eye for beautiful women," she heard her grandfather say. Amnon was born to Ahinoam, Kileab to Abigail, Absalom to Maacah.

Messengers came from Abner, commander of the army of Saul's son Ishbosheth, proposing an alliance. Bathsheba's grandfather advised David to be cautious and test Abner's sincerity and strength. So David sent word that he would not agree to anything unless his first wife, Saul's daughter Michal, was returned to him.

"He must love her very much," Bathsheba said. She still could not look at David without feeling a quickening inside her, but she was more clear-sighted now that she was almost grown than she had been as a small child. She no longer clung so tenaciously to her fantasies of marrying the man of her dreams.

Her mother shook her head. "Love has nothing to do with it. What rightfully belonged to David must be restored. He will take Michal into his house, but she will never have children."

"All of his other wives have had children. She will also."

"Your grandfather will advise against it. She's been defiled by adultery. King Saul gave her to another man years ago, when you were just a baby. Besides that, should David beget a child by her and build the house of Saul? May it never be! David will listen to your grandfather. He will provide for Michal and protect her, but he will never touch her again."

Bathsheba felt pity for Michal. "It would have been kinder to leave her with the other man." And David would have one less wife, one less beautiful woman in his household.

"Perhaps," her mother said quietly. "I heard that the man followed her for miles, weeping and wailing. Abner had to order him away. But David is a king, Bathsheba. He is not an ordinary man."

"No one could ever have called David ordinary, even before he was king."

Her mother looked at her solemnly. Bathsheba smiled. "Don't worry, Mother. I know I am only the daughter of a humble warrior." Something flickered in her mother's eyes. Bathsheba turned away. "If David will never have children with Michal, why is it so important she be returned to him?"

"He must prove himself strong. A king who cannot keep possession of the women who belong to him cannot hold a kingdom together."

Bathsheba knew David was strong enough. What strength he lacked

God would provide. She looked toward his tent. "Do you think she loves him?"

"She did once. She even saved his life. But that was years ago."

"I don't think he loves her anymore. I don't think he's ever given his heart to any woman, not completely."

"Oh, my dear." Her mother sighed heavily. "It is wiser for a woman to fall in love with a poor man who can afford only one wife." Bathsheba's throat closed hot, and she blinked back tears as her mother rose and came to her, turning her around and tipping her chin up. "You became a woman a month ago. I spoke with your father, and he says someone has already spoken to him regarding you."

Bathsheba's heart pounded with trepidation. "Who?"

Her mother smiled. "A good man. A strong one."

"Who is it?"

"I won't say until it's settled, but if it comes to be, you will have a husband you can respect."

"Respect, but not love."

"In time, love, too. If you allow it."



Bathsheba's father and grandfather accepted the bride-price from Uriah the Hittite, and all, in their minds, was settled. Her mother, in an effort to encourage her, explained their many reasons for choosing him. Uriah had saved her father once in battle; Uriah was counted among David's thirty mighty men; Uriah had proven himself valorous and dependable in hard times. Ahithophel had seen Uriah charge into the hottest battle without fear in order to defend David. He was admired and respected by all, and a friend of the king. Such a man would be able to protect her and provide for her and the children she would give him.

"He's a courageous man, Bathsheba, and he's loyal. He's been wise with his possessions. Unlike others, Uriah hasn't squandered the spoils he gathered in battles against the Philistines and Amalekites."

"But he's so much older than I am!"

Her mother looked her in the eyes. "He's a year younger than David."

Bathsheba sat heavily, covered her face, and wept in defeat. She was a woman—albeit a young one—and had no say in the matter. The decision regarding whom she would marry had never been hers, and she'd always known in her heart that David was as far beyond her reach as a star in the heavens. She was nothing but a foolish, earthbound child clinging to her dreams, but, oh, how it hurt to have them wrenched from her. Years ago, David had been chosen by God and anointed by Samuel to one day be king of Israel. Who was she to think she was worthy to be his wife—or even

his concubine? What wretched misery to fall in love with a man who was a king!

"If only he'd been an ordinary shepherd . . ."

Her mother stamped her foot. "*Enough of this foolishness! Enough dreaming!* I will not have my daughter act like a selfish child! You should thank God David is more than a shepherd! Where would our people be if he'd never left the pastures and his father's flocks? Even if you were the daughter of a king and worthy to marry him, what then? Could you bear to watch him take more wives and concubines? A king must build a strong house and preserve the kingdom. You would have to put your own desires aside for the sake of a nation that depends upon him."

Her mother grasped her shoulders tightly. "Your father has chosen a fine man for you. Uriah is good and decent, and you will be his *only* wife. David has never so much as glanced at you, Bathsheba, but Uriah looks upon you as though you were a pearl of great price. You will be his most prized possession."

Bathsheba felt ashamed. "I have nothing against Uriah, Mother. It's only that I . . ." Tears streamed down her face. She knew it was useless to say another word. Could she change the inevitable?

Her mother let go of her abruptly and moved away. "No one expects you to love Uriah right away, Bathsheba. In time, you will—if you give him a chance." She turned and looked at her. "But for now, you *will* show Uriah the respect and obedience he deserves as your husband. If you don't, I will take a whip to you myself!"

Bathsheba raised her chin. "I will marry Uriah, Mother, and I will show him the respect and obedience he deserves. But love cannot be commanded."

For as long as she could remember, her heart and soul had belonged to David. And she knew that would never change, no matter what others demanded of her.



Bathsheba never expected David to come to her wedding. When she saw him through the colored gauze of her veils, she almost wept at the pain, knowing he had come not to see her become a wife, but to honor his friend, her husband.

Uriah was dressed like a king for the ceremony. Even then, her husband paled in comparison to her true sovereign lord, who wore a simple tunic and leather girdle. David outshone every man at the ceremony! And even though he placed a groom's crown upon Uriah's head, there could be no comparison between them. There was a nobility about David that proclaimed his place among men. No one was more handsome and graceful.

No one could surpass his gifts of music and dance. No one held a position of greater power, nor had a more humble, tender heart. David asked for no special treatment, but everyone deferred to him out of love and respect. God had blessed David in every way.

The wedding feast proceeded with Bathsheba in a haze. She was relieved when Uriah left her side to greet David. They laughed together and shared a goblet of wine while she sat on the dais and watched. It was David who drew her husband back to her side. It was David who took up a pitcher and replenished Uriah's cup and then filled hers. She brushed his fingers with her own as she took the goblet, sensing his surprise. Did he think she was bold?

"May the Lord bless your house with many children, Uriah," David said grandly, and in a voice loud enough to carry. He raised his cup high. Bathsheba raised her eyes and looked into his, and for an infinitesimal moment, she felt something change between them. Heat spread over her skin. "And," he continued, "may all your sons and daughters look like your wife and not like you." He looked into her eyes as he sipped, his own strangely dark and perplexed.

The men around them laughed, Uriah loudest of all. David blinked and then laughed as well, slapping Uriah on the back and saying something to him that was lost in the din surrounding her. Uriah nodded and looked at her proudly, his eyes glowing. David's eyes met hers again, and her stomach fluttered strangely. The moment was both enticing and terrifying. When Uriah looked at her, she felt nothing. But David's look made her cheeks burn and her heart hammer. She lowered her eyes, startled by the powerful feelings surging inside her. She glanced around cautiously, wondering if anyone had noticed the effect David had upon her. She was trembling. Afraid, she looked at her mother, but she was dancing and laughing with the other women, and her father and grandfather were drinking with the men.

Turning her head shyly, she encountered David's stare. It shook her deeply, for she instinctively understood its meaning. Exultation was overwhelmed by despair.

Why does he look at me as a woman now, when it's too late? Why couldn't he have noticed me a new moon ago?

Uriah came and sat with her upon the dais. He took her hand and kissed it, his eyes bright from admiration and too much wine. "I am blessed among men," he said thickly. "There is not a man here, including our king, who does not envy me such a beautiful young wife."

She smiled back tremulously, embarrassed by his impassioned compliment.

The wedding feast wore on until she was emotionally exhausted. She forced a smile until her cheeks ached. She pretended to be happy, pretended

she wasn't drowning in a sea of sorrow. Twice more, David looked at her. And twice, she looked back at him, fighting against the tears. He always looked away quickly, as though caught doing something that made him ashamed. And that made her suffer all the more.

Oh, David, David, what a wretched woman I am. I love you! I'll always love you the same way I have since I was a little girl. Do you remember how I followed you to the stream of En-ge-di and watched you pray? I was just a child, but love caught me and held me tight in its grip. Nothing can kill it. And now I'm married to a man I can never love because I gave my heart to you years ago!

When David rose and left, she was almost relieved.

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Uriah was a man hardened by years of fighting the Philistines, Amalekites, and King Saul, but Bathsheba found him surprisingly kind as well. "I don't know anything about women, Bathsheba. I've spent my entire life training for battle and fighting alongside David. And that won't change. My allegiance will always be to David first, for he is God's anointed. But I promise I will take care of you. And if anything should happen to me, you will have enough so that you will always have a roof over your head and food to eat." His hands were calloused from using his sword, and he shook when he touched her. "Please don't cry."

She wept because Uriah deserved to be loved, and she had no love left to give him.

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As the months passed, Bathsheba gave up her dreams and fulfilled her duties to her husband. She carried water from the well. She washed, cooked, cleaned, and carded wool. She wove cloth and made garments for her husband. She did everything she knew how to make her husband's life comfortable and pleasant. And though she did come to respect him, she could not *will* herself to fall in love with him.

Uriah spent most of his time with the other mighty men, training David's army, sparring, talking, and planning late into the night. Sometimes he brought soldiers home with him. He told her to keep her face covered so the men wouldn't stare when she served them. He told her to cover her face when she left the house. "There are rough men among David's army, men who have no respect for women."

"I've known such men all my life, Uriah. No one has ever bothered me before."

"Before, you were a child, Bathsheba. Now, you're a beautiful young woman. And you are my wife. Obey me." He tipped her chin and looked into her eyes. "It is always wise to avoid trouble."

Uriah and the other mighty men talked freely while they ate and drank, and by listening, Bathsheba learned much of what was going on in Canaan. She knew within hours that Joab, David's commander, had murdered a man in vengeance. She heard how furious David was, and how he mourned the murdered man. She was among the people when David condemned Joab's actions as evil. She was afraid for David because Joab was a powerful man, and a proud one as well. Why would David retain Joab as commander over his army?

Nothing came of David's reproach, but soon more news changed the course of Bathsheba's life. Ishbosheth, son of Saul and heir to the throne of Israel, was murdered. The men who came with news of the assassination thought David would be pleased to have his rival removed. Now the way was clear for David to assume his rightful place as king over all of Israel! They even brought the head of Ishbosheth with them to prove their foul deed. Rather than rewarding them, though, David had them executed. He ordered their hands and feet cut off and their bodies hung up beside the pool of Hebron.

Many of the men Uriah brought home were violent, more comfortable in war than in peace. Her house was constantly filled with stories of intrigue surrounding David. Why was there such cruelty in the world? And if David was ever crowned king over all Israel, would there be those who would try to assassinate him, just like Saul and Ishbosheth before him?

Often, she would remember her mother's words: *"The life of a king is never easy. . . . Better to love a poor man . . ."* It was not easy to be the wife of a warrior either, for she never knew from one battle to the next whether she would be left a childless widow. "I live in fear every day, wondering if I'll lose your father," her mother admitted when they talked at the community well.

What would happen to Uriah's household if he died now? Bathsheba had no children, but not for want of trying. She wondered if her husband was disappointed in her, but if he was, she saw no sign of it. Two years had come and gone since their wedding feast, and he still treated her with kindness.

All the tribes of Israel gathered at Hebron, appearing before David and declaring that he was God's anointed. "We are all members of your family," the high priest said to him before the people. "For a long time, even while Saul was our king, you were the one who really led Israel. And the Lord has told you, 'You will be the shepherd of My people Israel. You will be their leader.'"

Bathsheba's heart swelled with pride as she stood among the crowd and watched David make a covenant with the people and be anointed king of Israel. He was only thirty years old, and yet the elders of all the tribes bowed

down before him. And Uriah stood nearby, one of David's bodyguards and closest friends, raising his hands to heaven and shouting in exultation.

And then David went to war again, Uriah at his side.



Bathsheba waited with the other wives to receive word about the battle for Zion, and when it came, she cried out in joy with all the rest.

"They've taken Jerusalem!"

But neither David nor Uriah came home to Hebron. Instead, they sent a contingent of warriors to bring the families to the newly conquered mountain stronghold. Building commenced all around the City of David, strengthening Zion for defense. Walls were built. Hiram, king of Tyre, sent cedar trees and carpenters and stonemasons to build a house for David. And Uriah chose a stone house near the site of the king's palace.

Still, peace was elusive. The Philistines gathered against David, spreading out across the valley of Rephaim. And once again, Uriah was called away to war. Bathsheba cried this time, for she had come to care very deeply for him.

"Don't fear for me. The Lord is on our side!" was his parting exhortation. His words were of no comfort to her. She had no son to carry on Uriah's name or to take care of her when she was old.

Word returned that the Philistines were defeated at Baal-perazim. When Uriah came home with an idol, Bathsheba protested. It was the first time in their marriage that she dared argue with her husband. But she knew how detestable idols were to the Lord God. "Would it please God to know you have set that loathsome thing in our house?"

"It means nothing. Everyone carried something from the field of battle. It's a memento of our triumph. Nothing more."

"David wouldn't bring something unclean into *his* house. You should've destroyed it!"

His eyes darkened with the fierce pride of a victorious warrior. "Don't tell me what I should've done! What are you afraid of, woman? It's nothing but clay. Did it save the man who owned it?"

"It's a thing of evil, Uriah!"

He tossed his armor aside and glared at her. "Do you think I don't know there is only one God? It's the Lord who has given David victory on every side! And you'll leave that idol where it stands as a reminder of a battle *I* fought alongside my king, the battle *I* helped win!"

Ashamed of having spoken out so forcefully, Bathsheba said no more.

The Philistines regrouped, and again, Uriah was called away to war. The Philistines were like a plague that lingered. The Lord gave David victory again, and the Philistines were struck down from Geba as far as Gezer. But

Bathsheba knew it would never be over. Men's hearts seemed bent upon war. Uriah's most of all.

Uriah didn't return home. It was her mother who told her that her father and Uriah had gone with David to Baalah of Judah to bring the Ark of God back to Jerusalem. Bathsheba ran down the road with the other women and wept in relief when they returned. Her joy was quickly dampened by their manner, for the Ark was not with them. David looked neither to the right nor to the left as he rode by on his mule. His face was dust-covered and tense. When she spotted Uriah, Bathsheba kept pace with him along the road. An air of defeat hung over them. David gave orders to disperse the men and went up to his house and his wives.

Uriah came to her then. She'd never seen him so tired. She lowered her shawl from her face and searched his eyes.

"What's happened, Uriah?"

"David's afraid to bring the Ark to Jerusalem."

"David's never been afraid of anything."

His jaw clenched. He took her arm and turned her toward home. "He's afraid of God. We all are. Uzzah, the priest's son, is dead. He laid hands on the Ark when the oxen stumbled, and the Lord struck him down. I've never seen a man die so fast." His hand loosened. "He went down as though hit by a thunderbolt."

"Where's the Ark now?"

"At the house of Obed-edom of Gath, where it will stay until the Lord tells David otherwise."

With Uriah home, the house became a gathering place again as soldiers came often to pass time with Bathsheba's husband. Sometimes they lingered late into the night. They could talk of little else but the continuing reports of how God was blessing the household of Obed-edom. After three months of such tidings, David summoned his mighty men and went down for the Ark. Uriah was among them.



From a great distance came the sound of trumpets and shouting, announcing the return of David's mighty men. Women swept out into the street and ran to meet the procession. Jubilant, Bathsheba raced down the mountain road with them. Sunlight shone off the Ark and she thrilled at the sight of it. Each time the men who were carrying it had gone six steps, they stopped and waited so David could sacrifice an ox and a fattened calf. Trumpets sounded. And David danced with all his might. Men, women, and children sang and wept. Stripping off his outer garment, David continued leading the procession, dancing in his tunic. The people caught his zeal for the

Lord. Men sang out praise after praise to God as women joined David in dancing.

The hard years were over at last. God had protected David and given him victory on every side! God had made him king over all Israel! The nations could not stand against him because God was on his side! The Lord had strengthened him and built an army of mighty men around him, and now the Ark would rest upon the mountain where Abraham had once been ready to sacrifice his only son, Isaac, to God!

Bathsheba's racing blood sang with joy. She could not stand still and watch. If she didn't cry out in praise and dance, she would go mad. Laughing and weeping, she tore away her shawl, lifting it high like a canopy over her head as she twirled, dipped, twisted, and was caught up in the ecstasy of the moment.

Peace would reign at last! No enemy could defeat them.

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Yet, crouched at the door was a greater enemy than those who camped around Israel. And a greater battle was coming—one that could tear a nation to pieces. The battle would not take place in the mountains, valleys, or plains of Israel. It would take place in the wilderness of the human heart.

BOOK FIVE

UNAFRAID



SETTING THE SCENE



"You have another daughter." The midwife held the squalling infant up as Anne collapsed back on her pallet, exhausted after hours of labor.

Anne's heart sank at the news. She turned her face to the wall, not watching as the midwife cut the cord, washed the baby, and rubbed salt over the quivering little body to prevent infection.

"Your daughter," the older woman said.

Anne took the tiny wizened infant tenderly in her arms and wept, knowing her husband would be bitterly disappointed. He had been fasting and praying for a son.

Kissing the baby, Anne held her up to the midwife. "Give the child to her father, so that he may bless her." As the woman left the house, Anne shifted on the pallet, wincing at the pain. She strained to hear what her husband had to say, but it was the excited voice of their older daughter, Mary, she heard.

"Can I hold her, Father? Please. Oh, she is so sweet."

Joachim spoke too softly for Anne to hear. When he entered the house, she searched his face. Though he did not look at her with reproach, she saw his disappointment. Leaning down, he placed their newborn firmly in her arms once again. What could he say to ease both their hearts? God had not seen fit to give them a son.

"I love her," Mary said, coming into the house.

"We all love her," Joachim said quickly.

Ah, but Anne understood. A son would work alongside his father. A son would go to synagogue and give distinction to his father. A son would provide for his mother if his father died. A son might one day grow up and stand against Israel's oppressors. Or even turn out to be the long-awaited deliverer, the Messiah for whom all Israel prayed.

But a girl? What use was a girl, other than to share in the daily chores? She would simply be another mouth to feed until the time came for her father to find her a proper husband.

"I've been considering the name Deborah," Anne said quietly, head down. This baby was more delicate than her first, but there was a sweetness in her face that gripped Anne's heart.

"We will call her Mary."

"But Mary is *my* name," their older daughter said, looking between them.

Joachim put his hand on her head and spoke gently. "Your sister shall be *little* Mary."

Anne reached out to her older daughter. "Don't be distressed, dear one. Go outside so that I may speak with your father." When she was alone with Joachim, she looked up at him. "Won't you please consider another name, my husband? Deborah is a strong name. And there are so many Marys. It has become the most common name in all Israel."

"And when there are enough, perhaps the Lord will finally hear our cry!" Joachim's voice broke. Color seeped into his cheeks as he looked away. "Her name shall be Mary." He left the house. Anne overheard him tell their older daughter to play with her friends and leave Mama alone to rest.

Anne studied her newborn's face. "Mary," she whispered. "My precious little Mary." Her heart was heavy, for both of her daughters now bore a name that meant "bitterness and suffering." The name *Mary* declared the depth of every Jew's despair under the oppression of Roman conquerors. *Mary* was a cry to the Lord for rescue.

Raising her knees slightly, Anne cradled her baby on her thighs. She unwrapped the cloth and stroked the small arms, studied the legs bowed from nine months in the womb. Tears streamed down Anne's cheeks as she kissed the tiny hand that clasped her finger. Little Mary's skin was softer than a baby rabbit's. "Lord, Lord, please let her name come to mean more than 'bitterness and suffering.' Let it come to mean 'strength is from the Lord.' Let it come to mean 'God's love upholds us.' Let it mean 'trust in God, and let nothing defeat faith in you.' Oh, Lord . . ." She wept softly as she lifted her baby to her breast. "Let the name *Mary* remind us to obey without fear."

ONE



Mary sat alone beneath a mustard tree, her hands covering her face. Did all brides feel this way when the contracts were signed, gifts given, and futures sealed by the will of others? She trembled at the prospect of life with a man she hardly knew, other than as a man admired and befriended by her father upon his arrival in Nazareth three years ago.

"He's of our tribe, Anne," Joachim had announced after meeting Joseph at the synagogue. "And descended from the royal line of David."

"Is he married?" Her mother cast an eye toward Mary.

Thus had plans for her future been set in motion, for her father was quick to find out that Joseph was looking for a wife from the tribe of Judah, a descendant of David, a young woman of unquestioned virtue and faith. Mary knew their ambitions. Mary's older sister was married to a Nazarene, and her parents hoped to marry their younger daughter to another man of their own tribe. And of course he must be devout, kind, and able to provide a good home for her and any children she might give him. So they invited the carpenter to their home frequently, and Joseph was receptive to their hopes.

"Why did he not seek out a young woman in Bethlehem?" Mary had asked her mother once.

"Why ask such questions?" Her mother had been impatient. "Just accept that God sent him here to Nazareth."

Her father had been less inclined to believe that God would be intimately involved in the personal life of a humble carpenter or a poor man with failing health and a daughter soon of marriageable age. "Joseph needs work like anyone else, and Sepphoris is growing. Carpenters and stone-workers can earn more money there than in Bethlehem."

The men had begun to discuss a match, but when her father died, Mary's future was left for her mother to settle. And she intended to settle it sooner rather than later.

"Your father wanted to give you more time, Mary," she had said, "but

time can be an enemy. You are ready to marry, and, considering our circumstances, there's no time to waste. I've already spoken to Joseph, and he has agreed to take you as his wife. All will be well now, Mary. We will not be left to fend for ourselves."

Now, sitting beneath the mustard tree, Mary buried her face in her arms. Would they have been left to fend for themselves? God promised to care for those who put their faith in him. Mary believed the Lord's promises.

All she had ever wanted was to be close to the Lord. Her heart yearned for him. She longed for him as a deer panted for streams of water. How she wished she'd been among the people delivered from Egypt. How blessed they'd been to see God's miracles, to hear the Law for the first time, to see water spring from a rock, and to taste the manna from heaven. Sometimes she almost wished she had been born a man. Then she could have gone to the desert cliffs of Qumran and dedicated her life to God.

Was it youth that made her restless? Her deep thirst for the Lord frustrated her. How could she love the Lord God with all her heart, mind, soul, and strength if she was to be given to a man? How could she love God fully and still give proper honor to her husband?

And yet she understood the practicality of marriage. Women were vulnerable. How often she heard the hoofbeats of Roman soldiers approaching her little village of Nazareth. Countless times she had seen them at the well, filling their waterskins. Then they took whatever foodstuffs they needed from the resentful, downtrodden citizenry. Sometimes they took young women as well, leaving them abused and ruined. Life could become unbearable for an unprotected woman, especially a young one. Mary's mother had taught her to run and hide when she heard the sounds of horses or marching feet. Her heart squeezed tight with anxiety, for she could hear them coming closer now.

Pax Romana had brought anything but peace to Israel, for Mary's people fought Rome's control. Wouldn't it be wiser for her to remain unwed rather than to marry and bring children into such a world? Many Hebrews fought against Hellenistic influences with all their being, nursing their grievances, fanning their hatred into violence. Others turned traitor, rejecting the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and adopting the customs of their conquerors.

Where was God in all this? Mary knew he was as powerful now as he had been when he created the world. Was she disloyal to wonder if her people had brought this wretchedness upon themselves? She knew the history of her people. She knew how God had disciplined them in the past in order to make them turn back to him. Why must Israel repeat her cycles of disobedience, generation after generation? And how much longer would it be until God once again sent a deliverer?

For as long as Mary could remember, she had heard her people crying out for rescue from Roman oppression.

Someday the Lord would send *the* deliverer, the one promised after Adam and Eve's fall from grace, the one who would make all things right, all things new. The Messiah. Every day Mary prayed for him to come . . . as she prayed now, sitting beneath the shade of the mustard tree, struggling with questions beyond her ability to understand. Torn by the turbulent world around her as well as her own now-settled future, Mary cried out for a savior.

Oh, Lord, when will you send us a deliverer? Rescue us from the foreign oppressors who carry golden idols, arrogantly proclaiming their capricious emperor a god!

She must cease this struggling. She would be wed to Joseph. The matter was settled. Mary honored her mother and would obey.

Oh, Lord God of Israel, I don't understand these things. Is it wrong to want to belong to you? My soul longs for you. Help me to be obedient, to be a proper wife to Joseph, for you are sovereign and must have chosen this man for me. Make me a woman after your own heart. Create in me a clean heart, and renew a right spirit within me.

A strange tingling sensation spread over her skin. Her hair prickled as she raised her head and saw a man standing before her. Heart thumping with terror, she stared at him, for she had never seen anyone like him before. Was it merely the sun at his back that made him look so terrifying?

"Greetings, favored woman! The Lord is with you!"

Trembling, she sat still and silent, wondering at his words. She shut her eyes tightly and then opened them again. He was still standing there, looking down at her with kind patience. What did his greeting mean? Were not all God's chosen people favored? And why did he say the Lord was with her? Was he the Lord? Fear filled her, and she closed her eyes again, for surely anyone who looked upon the Lord would die.

"Don't be frightened, Mary, for God has decided to bless you!"

A sob welled up inside her throat, catching her off guard, for she wanted nothing more than to please God! But the Lord knew how undeserving she was. She blushed, remembering that only the moment before, she had resisted the idea of marrying Joseph, though he loved God as much as she. And now, this man said precious words that filled her with joy!

The stranger drew closer, his head inclined toward her. "You will become pregnant and have a son, and you are to name him Jesus."

Jesus. The name meant "the Lord saves."

The angel was still speaking. "He will be very great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give him the throne of

his ancestor David. And he will reign over Israel forever; his Kingdom will never end!"

Mary swallowed, her mind whirling with the implications of his words. He was telling her she would bear the Messiah! As soon as the words were uttered, she felt attacked by a chorus of dark voices.

You? Why would the Lord choose anyone so low? The Messiah will not come from some Nazarene peasant girl. What evil is this, that one so unworthy should dare imagine she could bear the Messiah! Ignore this madman. Look away from him! Reject what he says. Close your eyes! Say nothing!

Yet another voice spoke, a quiet voice, a voice her heart recognized.

What is your answer, Mary?

She stood, tilting her head as she looked up at the angel. "But how can I have a baby? I am a virgin."

The angel smiled tenderly. "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the baby born to you will be holy, and he will be called the Son of God. What's more, your relative Elizabeth has become pregnant in her old age! People used to say she was barren, but she's already in her sixth month. For nothing is impossible with God."

Mary drew in her breath with a smile and clasped her hands. Oh! She knew how Elizabeth had always longed for a child. Nothing was impossible with God! Elizabeth would be like Sarah, who bore Isaac in her old age. She would be like Hannah, dedicating her son to the Lord. The news made Mary's faith leap. She wanted to race to Elizabeth and see this miracle for herself, but the angel stood in front of her, silent, waiting for her answer.

If she said yes, she would become the mother of the long-awaited Messiah. Why the Lord had chosen her to be part of his plan she couldn't even guess. She was uneducated, poor, and lived in an obscure village that most Jews disdained. Yet she also knew from listening to Scripture readings in the synagogue that God often used the most unlikely and unworthy to fulfill his purposes. It didn't matter who she was. God would accomplish his purposes in his way. The angel of the Lord was asking her to be part of God's plan. And everything within her heart and soul cried out a joyous yes.

Do you really think you can be the Messiah's mother? Do you think you will know how to rear God's Son to be king over Israel? The dark voices again.

No. I won't, her heart answered. *But God will.*

Gathering her courage, Mary looked up. "I am the Lord's servant." She spread her hands. "And I am willing to accept whatever he wants. May everything you have said come true."

As soon as she made her decision, the angel was gone. She uttered a soft gasp of dismay. She would have thought she imagined the entire episode had not the air still trembled around her. Shaken, she clutched her hands

against her chest until she remembered the angel of the Lord had said not to be afraid. Letting out her breath softly, she knelt and lifted her face to heaven. She lifted her hands, palms up. *Lord, your will be done.*

Her skin tingled strangely as she saw a cloud coming down. She placed her hands over her heart as she was overshadowed. Closing her eyes, she breathed in the scent of spring flowers, earth, and the heavens. Her skin warmed as her body was flooded with sensation. She drew in her breath and held it. For one brief space in time, nothing moved; no sound was heard as all creation paused.

Within the womb of a poor peasant girl from an obscure village in Galilee, God the Son became one with the seed of Adam.



Joseph glared at Mary. "How can you expect me to believe such a story?" All his hopes for a bright future were demolished. He would never have thought a girl like Mary—so young, so sweet, so devout—could betray him in so foul a manner. *Pregnant!* He was attacked by emotion, shaken by it. He shut his eyes, fighting against the violent thoughts filling his mind: *Denounce her! Cast her aside! Report her to the rabbi! Have her stoned!*

"No!" he cried out, putting his hands over his ears. He opened his eyes and saw Mary's mother, Anne, cowering and weeping in the corner.

Only Mary was calm. "You will believe, Joseph." She looked up at him, her dark eyes innocent. "You will. I know you will."

How could she appear so calm when, with one word, he could have her killed?

"There is only one way a woman conceives."

"For God, anything is possible."

"And God would choose *you* to bear the Messiah?"

She laughed at his sarcasm, her face filled with joy. "Hasn't God always chosen the weak to confound the strong? Oh, Joseph." She clasped her hands, excitement radiating from her. "Think of him. God never chooses as man would choose."

"I can't believe this. *I can't!* It defies all reason!" He had to get out of this house. He couldn't look at her and think clearly.

"Joseph!" Anne rose and came after him. "Joseph! Please!" she cried out as he went out the door and left it ajar behind him. "*Joseph!*"

He ducked around the corner and walked quickly away, heading up a narrow street toward the end of town. He didn't want people noticing he was upset and asking questions. He had to think!

Out of sight of Nazareth, he wept. What should he do now? Forget she was the daughter of a man who had befriended him, a man who was of his own tribe? Could he ignore the fact that she was pregnant with another

man's child? She had committed a sin of abomination! She was unclean! If he married Mary now, people would point the finger at him. Both their reputations would be ruined. The gossip would circulate for years to come. And when the child was born, what then? Everyone would know he was conceived before the wedding ceremony, and would whisper behind their hands as he passed.

Why were women such weak vessels, so easily deceived? He kicked the dirt angrily. Who could have done this to her? Who would dare take advantage of an innocent, fatherless girl? And why would she concoct such a ridiculous, outlandish lie to cover up her sin? He grimaced. An angel came and told her she was to bear the Son of God! What man in his right mind would believe such a story?

When Joachim had offered Mary to him, Joseph thought he'd been offered a future and a hope. Now, he held disaster in his hands. If he exposed her, he would have to stand by and watch the daughter of Joachim stoned to death for the sin of fornication. And the child she carried would die with her.

Yes! Do it! rasped the dark foreign voice. *Why shouldn't she die for betraying you and her father? Why shouldn't she be cut off from Israel for rejecting the Law you live by? Kill her! Kill the child!*

The violence in his thoughts frightened Joseph and he cried out, "Oh, God, help me! What should I do? Why do you throw this catastrophe at my feet? Haven't I tried all my life to do right? to live according to your Law?" He sat, dragging his fingers through his hair. Gritting his teeth, he wept angrily. "Why, Lord? Make me understand!"

The sun set, but he was no closer to an answer. Weary, Joseph rose and walked back to town. The streets were empty, for it was late and everyone had returned home. He entered his workshop and sat at his worktable. He'd never felt so alone. "Where are you, God? Where are you when I need your counsel?" He considered going to the rabbi for advice, but rabbis could not always be trusted to keep confidences. Joseph wanted no one else to know about Mary until he had decided what to do. He ran his hand over the yoke he had been carving, then picked up his tools. Perhaps work would ease his mind.

Who was he to condemn Mary?

Joseph followed the Law, but he knew in his heart that it was only on the surface. Beneath the dutiful hours in synagogue, the giving of tithes and offerings, his heart was rebellious against the yoke of Rome, the yoke of corrupt rabbis, and the weight of the Law itself. How could any man help it? Sin taunted Joseph every time he saw a Roman soldier mocking a woman at the well, or a rabbi haranguing some poor widow for her tithe, or a rich patron who ignored what was owed for work rendered, or a beggar

who cursed him when he had no money to give. Though Joseph had taken countless lambs to the Temple in Jerusalem for sacrifice over the years, he had never felt completely cleansed of sin. The blood of the sacrificial lamb covered it over, and then he'd sin again. He wanted to do right, but he found himself failing again and again.

Stretching out on his pallet, Joseph flung his arm over his eyes, still undecided about what action to take regarding Mary. The Law was clear, but his heart was torn. He closed his eyes, hoping sleep would enable him to think more clearly in the morning. But his sleep was tormented by nightmares. He heard angry voices and a girl screaming. He cried out, but when he tried to run, his feet sank into sand. As he struggled, darkness surrounded him and someone spoke from it. *Kill the girl. Kill her and the spawn she carries!*

"Joseph, son of David," came another voice he'd never heard before, but knew instantly. A man in shimmering white stood above him. "Do not be afraid to go ahead with your marriage to Mary. For the child within her has been conceived by the Holy Spirit. And she will have a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."

Joseph absorbed the words, his soul trembling with delight. All his life he had heard people talk of the coming Messiah. Since the time of David, the Jews had waited for another king to triumph over Israel's enemies. And more than that, the promised Messiah would reign over all the earth. Now the time had come, and God was sending the Anointed One. And Joseph would see him. He would stand at the side of the Messiah's mother and protect the Chosen One as his own son.

You, a simple carpenter, stand as guard? Dark laughter surrounded him, and Joseph moaned in his sleep. *I will kill them. And you, if you stand in my way.*

Joseph groaned again and rolled onto his back. He opened his eyes and felt the darkness around him. Fear gripped him, until a whisper pierced it.

He will save his people from their sins. . . .

Joseph's longing for righteousness welled up in him like the thirst of a man lost in the desert. And he remembered the words of his ancestor David, whispering them into the darkness: "Those who live in the shelter of the Most High will find rest in the shadow of the Almighty. . . . I will *not* be afraid of the terrors of the night, for God will order his angels to protect his Son. The Lord himself will guard him."

The darkness rolled back, and Joseph saw the stars through his window. He stared at them for a long while. Smiling, he went back to sleep.

+ + +

Anne wept in relief, but Mary seemed not the least surprised by Joseph's decision to marry her quickly. In fact, she crossed the room and put her

hand on his arm, surprising him with a demand. "I must go to my relative Elizabeth."

Her mother protested. "Why would you want to go there? The hill country is a hard journey—"

"Oh, Mother, it doesn't matter. Elizabeth is with child!"

"Don't be ridiculous! She's long past her time of bearing children."

"The angel told me she's with child."

"And what do you suppose people will say when you suddenly marry Joseph and then go off to the hill country of Judea?"

"What does it matter what people say if it's the Lord's will I go?"

Joseph saw how the journey could solve several problems. The angel had said nothing about announcing to the citizenry of Nazareth that Mary had conceived by the Holy Spirit and would give birth to the Messiah. What if the news did get out? What sort of dangers might present themselves to the child? When Mary's pregnancy became apparent, there would be gossip. However, if they went on this journey together . . .

"As soon as we are married, I will take Mary to visit her relative."

"People will talk," Anne said.

Yes, people would talk, but the condemnation would be aimed at him rather than Mary.



When Mary's pregnancy became apparent, some in Nazareth thought they now understood the reason for Joseph's haste in marrying her. Women whispered at the well while the men shook their heads and clucked their tongues in the synagogue. What did anyone really know about Joseph, other than that he was a carpenter come from Bethlehem? Poor Joachim. The man had trusted the carpenter because he was a relative, a descendant of David. Surely Joachim's bones were crying out now that it was evident Joseph had taken conjugal rights before those rights were due. Some went to the rabbi and insisted the couple be disciplined so that other young people wouldn't think such behavior was condoned in Nazareth! The rabbi said Joseph had acted within his rights under the contract, gifts having been exchanged and documents signed.

A voice came out of the shadows at the back of the synagogue. "*Will you not destroy the evil among you?*"

The rabbi raised his head from the Torah. "Who speaks?"

"*Does Scripture not say the Lord hates haughty eyes and a lying tongue?*"

The voice was deep and dark and familiar to many. "*We must destroy the wickedness among us.*" Men glanced at one another and voices began to swell as the accuser remained in the shadows. "*Who is this carpenter who defies the Law? Who is this girl who plays the harlot?*"

A man stood, face flushed. "He's right!" Others joined in agreement.

Chilled, the old rabbi raised his hands. "The Law also says there shall be two witnesses. Let them come forward."

A low rumble moved through the gathering of men, but no one moved. Men looked about. Trembling, the rabbi rolled open the Torah. "The Lord also hates a false witness who pours out lies, a person who sows discord among brothers." He spoke quietly, but the words carried.

The accuser departed.

Soon after, all gossip regarding Joseph and Mary died when Roman soldiers arrived in Nazareth carrying a decree from Caesar Augustus. A census of all who inhabited the earth was being taken. Men cried out in dismay. Did this Roman "god" realize what chaos his decree would create? For the order was that everyone must return to the village of his birth in order to be counted.

THE GENEALOGY OF JESUS THE CHRIST



This is a record of the ancestors of Jesus the Messiah, a descendant of King David and of Abraham:

Abraham was the father of Isaac.

Isaac was the father of Jacob.

Jacob was the father of Judah and his brothers.

Judah was the father of Perez and Zerah (their mother was **Tamar**).

Perez was the father of Hezron.

Hezron was the father of Ram.

Ram was the father of Amminadab.

Amminadab was the father of Nahshon.

Nahshon was the father of Salmon.

Salmon was the father of Boaz (his mother was **Rahab**).

Boaz was the father of Obed (his mother was **Ruth**).

Obed was the father of Jesse.

Jesse was the father of King David.

David was the father of Solomon (his mother was **Bathsheba**, the widow of Uriah).

Solomon was the father of Rehoboam.

Rehoboam was the father of Abijah.

Abijah was the father of Asaph.

Asaph was the father of Jehoshaphat.

Jehoshaphat was the father of Jehoram.

Jehoram was the father of Uzziah.

Uzziah was the father of Jotham.

Jotham was the father of Ahaz.

Ahaz was the father of Hezekiah.

Hezekiah was the father of Manasseh.

Manasseh was the father of Amos.

Amos was the father of Josiah.

Josiah was the father of Jehoiachin and his brothers (born at the time of the exile to Babylon).

After the Babylonian exile:

Jehoiachin was the father of Shealtiel.

Shealtiel was the father of Zerubbabel.

Zerubbabel was the father of Abiud.

Abiud was the father of Eliakim.

Eliakim was the father of Azor.

Azor was the father of Zadok.

Zadok was the father of Akim.

Akim was the father of Eliud.

Eliud was the father of Eleazar.

Eleazar was the father of Matthan.

Matthan was the father of Jacob.

Jacob was the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary.

Mary was the mother of Jesus, who is called the Messiah.

MATTHEW 1:1-16

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Francine Rivers began her literary career at the University of Nevada, Reno, where she graduated with a Bachelor of Arts degree in English and journalism. From 1976 to 1985, she had a successful writing career in the general market and her books were awarded or nominated for numerous awards and prizes. Although raised in a religious home, Francine did not truly encounter Christ until later in life, when she was already a wife, mother of three, and an established romance novelist. Shortly after becoming a born-again Christian in 1986, Francine wrote *Redeeming Love* as her statement of faith. First published by Bantam Books, and then re-released by Multnomah Publishers in the mid-1990s, this retelling of the biblical story of Gomer and Hosea set during the time of the California Gold Rush is now considered by many to be a classic work of Christian fiction. *Redeeming Love* continues to be one of the Christian Booksellers Association's top-selling titles and it has held a spot on the Christian best-seller list for nearly a decade.

Since *Redeeming Love*, Francine has published numerous novels with Christian themes—all best sellers—and she has continued to win both industry acclaim and reader loyalty around the globe. Her Christian novels have been awarded or nominated for numerous awards including the RITA Award, the Christy Award, the ECPA Gold Medallion, and the Holt Medallion in Honor of Outstanding Literary Talent. In 1997, after winning her third RITA Award for inspirational fiction, Francine was inducted into the Romance Writers of America Hall of Fame. Francine's novels have been translated into over twenty different languages and she enjoys best-seller status in many foreign countries including Germany, the Netherlands, and South Africa.

Francine and her husband, Rick, live in northern California and enjoy the time spent with their three grown children and every opportunity to spoil their four grandchildren. She uses her writing to draw closer to the Lord and to worship and praise Jesus for all He has done and is doing in her life.

For more information about Francine, visit www.francinerivers.com.