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The Golden Thread

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# The Golden Thread

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## *Prologue*

“Your mother looks serene, doesn’t she?” commented Isaac’s father with a sob, as he tenderly pushed a strand of long gray hair back from his wife’s face.

Isaac touched her cheek and shuddered.

Her skin was soft, yet had the stiffness of death underneath. “She looks so peaceful,” Isaac observed. “It feels like she could wake at any moment.” A raging tide of grief flooded him and before he erupted into unmanly tears, Isaac escaped his mother’s tent. “I’ll be back later,” he announced over his shoulder.

Feeling very alone, Isaac fled into the desert.

Rebecca’s head throbbed and she pressed her lips together to keep from blurting out what she wanted to say.

“Be quiet! Stop talking!”

But it wasn’t in her to speak the unkind words she was thinking. Meanwhile Lichel, the petite young woman beside Rebecca, who half-ran, half-walked to keep up with Rebecca’s long-legged pace continued her monologue, oblivious to her friend’s frustration.<sup>1</sup>

Lichel’s high-pitched voice droned on about the latest in a line of suitors, “...So, then he looked at me, and....”

Rebecca lengthened her stride.

Her companion stopped her incessant flow of words long enough to complain. “Hey, I can’t keep up!” When Rebecca didn’t slow down, she pleaded, “Please, I can’t walk as fast as you.” Rebecca slackened her pace and Lichel broke up her self-involved spate of words again to ask for an opinion. “Do you suppose he thinks I’m pretty?”

Amused in spite of herself, Rebecca burst out laughing and asked, “Lichel, are you serious? This month alone, fathers of two very eligible bachelors in

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Haran have approached your parents to marry you. That isn't including those in the last six months that they turned down. They don't think anyone is good enough for you."

Exchanging a sideways glance with Lichel, she asked, "Now, tell me. How would you like me to answer your question?"

When Lichel giggled, Rebecca couldn't help but smile. The girl had an infectious laugh, and her lively dark eyes sparkled from under the drab cloth that concealed her hair. Rebecca had tolerated Lichel's self-centered monologues for as far back as she could remember. Their mothers were best friends so it was natural their daughters were lumped together growing up.

Rebecca felt guilty for resenting Lichel.

If she was completely honest about it, her anger might just include a tinge of jealousy. The other girl was much more attractive and charming than she was. Rebecca resolved to be more patient, kinder.

She shifted the heavy clay jar on her shoulder and turned her head to speak pleasantly to Lichel, but something caught her eye. Strangers were lounging under shade trees between the spring's entrance and the main road.

Judging by the camels resting on their haunches, and the way some of the men were slumped wearily against them, she guessed they had traveled far. A tall man, roasted almost black by the sun, stood watching the spring almost as if he was expecting someone.

For some reason, she felt strangely drawn to him.

"Excuse me," Rebecca murmured. Leaving Lichel staring after her open-mouthed, Rebecca hurried toward the stranger, but stopped first to fill her jar from the well.

"Sir, please take a drink." Rebecca held the heavy jar in her strong but small hands, and positioned it to lean towards the man. As he nodded his thanks and reached for the jug, she noted his dignified bearing and the long tapered fingers that circled the carafe as he drank deeply. Satisfied that he was done, she accepted the container back and asked, "I'll also draw water for your camels until they've finished drinking."<sup>2</sup>

The stranger nodded and motioned his men to bring the camels.

Rebecca emptied what water she had left into the water troughs for the thirsty camels. Then she shifted the heavy jar back to her sturdy shoulder to

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retrieve more from the spring.

As Rebecca maneuvered the path, Lichel dragged her by the arm into the privacy of a nearby thicket. “What’s going on? Who are those men? Why did you leave so quickly to go to them?”

“I don’t know who they are,” Rebecca answered defensively, feeling attacked by Lichel’s barrage of questions. “I don’t even know why I felt so compelled to go to them.” She jerked her arm away from the other girl’s rigid grip. “You’re hurting me!”

“I’m sorry,” Lichel replied, dropping her hand, immediately contrite. “It’s just that you’re acting different than usual. You’ve never approached a man like that before by yourself. Normally, you would have asked me to go with you.” She tripped over her words trying to get them out. “I mean, you’re always inviting strangers to your house for meals, but not alone - oh, you know what I mean.”

Rebecca thought for a moment.

It was true. Lichel was right; she was predictable.

“I don’t know what came over me, but I promise I won’t do that again. Okay?”

Somewhat placated, Lichel reluctantly answered, “Yes, I guess.”

Rebecca chose that moment to escape.

Flashing her a grin, she left Lichel to finish retrieving water, and then returned to the caravan. When the stranger spoke to her again once he saw she was back, Rebecca noticed his voice had a refined quality to it.

“Whose daughter are you?” he asked casually.<sup>3</sup>

She looked up shyly and answered him, “Sir, I am Rebecca, Bethuel’s daughter.”<sup>4</sup>

At the questioning look in his eyes, she explained, “Bethuel is Nahor’s son.”

Trying to resist pushing her inquisitive nose where it didn’t belong, Rebecca kept her eyes down and refrained from asking any questions. She felt like a mother bird doling out nourishment to her young, as she busied herself once again pouring water for the camels. Rebecca glanced over through her eyelashes at the visitor, who was now busy removing something from under the heavy ropes that bound packs to the animals.



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“Oh!” she exclaimed, almost dropping the jar. After wiping a glob of spit from her face flung by one of the camels, she then dodged to avoid another’s hooves as it shifted position.

Moving to stand in front of her, the stranger held up shiny objects that glinted in the sunlight. Rebecca fought to mask her excitement as he laid three golden bracelets in her palm. She closed her slim calloused fingers around their smooth surfaces, and examined them.

“Are these for me?” Rebecca looked up and asked warily. No one she knew had ever given such expensive presents.

“Yes, they are,” he answered her, his expression grave.

A sudden alarming thought jolted her back to reality.

Flushing red with embarrassment, she chided herself at having been so immature and accepting. She jutted out her chin, lifted her head proudly, and told him, “I can’t accept these. The water for your men was a kindness, not for pay.”<sup>5</sup>

“Ah. I understand,” the stranger commented simply. And then he asked, “Is there room to stay in your home?”<sup>6</sup>

“We have plenty of straw and feed, as well as plenty of room for you to stay with us.” She pointed toward a small hill and hesitated, waiting. “If you would like to follow me, my family lives just over that rise.”

“Mistress,” he told her gently, “these gifts for you are for reasons other than your thoughtfulness. Would you please accept them?” he implored - his brown eyes warm and kind.

She melted.

“Yes,” Rebecca answered, before turning to lead him over the hill and across the field toward her father’s house. Looking back over her shoulder, she saw him signal his men to follow.

She wove through a herd of sheep as they bleated loudly, displaying their annoyance with her. Glancing back, she reassured herself the man was still following closely behind. As Rebecca reached the familiar cluster of one and two-story whitewashed buildings, smells of roasted meat made her mouth water.

When Rebecca reached the edge of the clearing near her home, she turned to her guest and announced, “You’ll have to wait here. Someone will be with

you shortly.”

When he acknowledged her instructions with another nod of his head, she whirled back around and raced for the house. Rebecca pushed through the wooden gate and charged into the open courtyard.

“Rebecca,” called Laban, waving at her with a piece of meat in his hand, and grinning. As pungent smoke billowed upward, she smiled as he turned back to flirt with the girl smiling at him saucily over her grill.<sup>7</sup>

“Laban and his way with women!” she muttered.

With her cheeks warm and heart beating rapidly, Rebecca climbed the narrow stairway to her family’s main second-story room. She burst in on her mother, who sat on a sheepskin floor mat with her back against a wall, totally engrossed in her sewing. “A man leading a caravan stopped for water and needs a place to stay,” she announced. “He brought gifts. Look!”

When her mother didn’t respond, Rebecca crossed the room and held out her arm to show off the delicate bands on her wrist.<sup>8</sup>

“Who is he?” Her mother frowned at the hand under her nose and looked up. “Wait a moment.” After she finished tying off end pieces, she turned back to Rebecca and repeated a little impatiently, “Who is he and how many people are with him?”

“One,” Rebecca guessed and then noticed an extra place had already been set on the low square table. “I don’t know how many more there are. There’s a caravan of men.” Rebecca reached for an extra cushion mat from a pile against the wall and caught the twinkle in her mother’s eyes. “You already knew about him, didn’t you?”

Her mother smiled and stood up, tucking a stray hair under her head covering. “Of course.”

Rebecca tilted her head and asked, “How?” She never quite understood how her mother always stayed one step ahead of her.

“I heard there was another caravan in at the spring from the servants,” she answered, and walked over to gather Rebecca into her arms. “My kindhearted daughter never misses an opportunity to reach out to strangers, does she?”

Rebecca nuzzled against her mother’s neck, enjoying the softness of her skin. Then she pulled away so she could see Milcah’s face. “His expression changed when I told him who I was. He became excited and agitated.

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Mother!” she exclaimed. “He’s out there waiting for me!”

She stopped talking and noticed her brother Laban standing just inside the entrance.

“Rebecca, you have invited someone with little or no warning, again. Now, I’ll have to gather enough hay and straw to accommodate an entire caravan!” Laban complained. His brown eyes narrowed and by how his lips were moving, Rebecca figured he was counting how much money it would cost him.

“Look at these, Laban!” The bracelets jangled charmingly against each other as she held her arm out for his inspection. “He brought gifts!”

Laban’s worried expression fled as he fingered the small circles. “He brought gifts. Hmm.” Then he asked, “You won’t mind if I go look to his needs, will you?”

Without waiting for an answer, Laban charged out the door looking for their benevolent guest.<sup>9</sup> Rebecca looked at her mother and they both laughed, fully aware of Laban’s weakness for money

By the time the meal was ready, Laban had returned. Bethuel followed close behind, and lastly, the stranger she had talked to at the spring. Laban’s eyes were alight with excitement as he moved briskly from the curtained doorway to a seat beside Bethuel. The visitor stood in the dim light waiting for his eyes to adjust after the bright sun.

“Come, come... join us. We’re expecting you!” Laban burst out heartily, motioning with ringed fingers for the stranger to drop to the cushion beside him on the cold stone floor.

Rebecca peeked out from behind the dark curtain separating her bedroom from the main room. She gripped the soft material, carefully keeping herself hidden.

The so-far unnamed stranger’s eyes were serious and somber in his dark face. Something told Rebecca this visit had something to do with her, and right then, she felt very alone and afraid.

“No, I am sorry. I cannot eat until you have heard why I have come,<sup>10</sup>” the man insisted. He examined his elegant hands and waited.

“Yes, tell us,” replied Laban, while beside him Rebecca’s mother stood nodding her agreement.

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Rebecca watched nervously as her mother's dark eyes darted from face-to-face like a bird looking for somewhere to land. The way she held a sheepskin flask of watered down wine over an earthenware cup, and then put the container down without pouring anything was disconcerting also.

Why was her mother worried?

"My name is Eliezer and I am the head servant of my Master Abraham's Household.

"God blessed Master Abraham, making him a very rich man. He has also blessed him in his old age, with a son, who will inherit all he has." The man paused to include them all with a look, and then continued speaking slowly. "I believe that God sent His angel ahead of me as my Master asked Him to, because he wanted me to find a wife for his son Isaac."<sup>11</sup>

When Bethuel gave Laban a knowing look, Rebecca clenched and unclenched her hands. She had felt things were going to change, and she was right.

"Some time ago, my Master took me aside and asked me to take an oath. He asked me to travel to his family to find a wife for Isaac. On the way, I prayed that God would direct the right girl toward me. I thought that if she offered us water, and then invited us to stay with her family, it would be easier to find her. This is exactly what happened with Rebecca." He paused to take a sip of water her mother had handed him. "Now that I have found the girl, I need to bring her back with me - with your permission. Whatever you decide is up to you. I believe the road that led me here was the right one, and that your daughter is God's choice to be Isaac's wife."<sup>12</sup>

Bethuel threw up his hands and looked over at Laban, who shrugged. "Since this appears to be from the Lord, who are we to argue? It's up to Rebecca to decide. I see nothing to do, but let her marry this man as the Lord has directed."<sup>13</sup>

Bethuel signaled her mother, who called for Rebecca to come. "Rebecca, come here."

Her mother moved to the curtain and drew her out from behind it to stand in front of Eliezer.

"These are gifts for her." Eliezer unwrapped an exquisitely embroidered green tunic with matching robe and held it up. "Rebecca, these are from

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Master Abraham, along with a number of other gifts.”<sup>14</sup>

Rebecca bit her lip to keep her excitement under control. Demurely, she reached for them. “These are very nice.” Then she looked toward her mother and asked, “Shall I try them on, Mother?”

“Yes, of course,” her mother exclaimed.

Rebecca slipped out to change and discovered to her delight that the ensemble fit perfectly. She almost flew back into the room, delighted with the elegant feel of the material against her arms.<sup>15</sup>

“Do you like it?”

Her mother’s dark eyes sparkled as she smiled approvingly.

Eventually, tired out from all the commotion, Rebecca went to her room. Wrapped in her new clothes, she curled into a ball on her bed. She felt her eyelids drooping and smiled sleepily as sleep quickly claimed her.<sup>16</sup>

She murmured something and struggled, as she dreamed of a man who stood far off in the distance obscured by a haze. He drew closer to her but she couldn’t make out his face. The dream was so vivid that it seemed as though she could walk forward and touch him.

She tried to but her feet were stuck to the ground.

“Hello!” Rebecca cried. “Hello!” she yelled louder.

His face was still a blur through the mist, but she could make out his hair. It was black and curly.

“Who are you?” she tried again, but still no answer came.

“Rebecca!” Her father tried to shake her awake as she frowned and resisted him, preferring to remain in her dream. She wanted to find out who the stranger was, and why he wouldn’t answer her.

“Rebecca!” Her mother’s stern voice broke through the fog around Rebecca. As she woke, the feel of the material against her skin reminded her that very real circumstances had inspired her dream.

Her parents stared down at her. Bethuel had an odd look in his eyes, and a frown creased his forehead. His pursed lips indicated thought, as if he was considering an important decision.

“Mother, is everything all right?” Rebecca asked, wondering what was going on. It was still dark. “Why didn’t you let me sleep until morning?” she asked groggily.

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Her mother cleared her throat, which she only did when uncertain. Nervous anticipation had Rebecca biting her lip.

“There’s no time,” Bethuel replied. “You have to get up.”

“No time for what?” Confusion and doubt obscured the pleasure she had felt over the clothes and gifts. She didn’t like it.

“Rebecca. Can’t you see this is the Lord’s doing?” her mother asked.

“What are you talking about?” Rebecca shook her head to clear the cobwebs from her mind. “Yes, I know you’re talking about yesterday and I do think God sent our guest. What do you mean there isn’t time? The man just got here.”

Mother elaborated, “You’re being asked to leave now, this morning. There is to be no delay and you have to decide immediately.”<sup>17</sup>

Rebecca swallowed a sob and asked in a choked voice, “What about my wedding? Why can’t I remain a few days to prepare? To spend more time with you, Father, and Laban?”

“We’ll understand whatever you decide you should do. Come now.” Mother stretched out her hand to smooth Rebecca’s hair. Tears welled up in her eyes, spilling over warm and wet on her cheeks as she stored away the feel of her mother’s touch. “The men are outside waiting for your decision. Dry your eyes; wash up. Come out - quickly.”

Rebecca started to argue, but closed her mouth as her parents kissed her and left the room. Where was God in this?

She wasn’t prepared to leave with so little warning, and she had so many misgivings! What could she do about Lichel? How would Lichel react? Would she feel abandoned? Rebecca was willing to go, but it was so far away.

Rebecca looked around the room. Her first doll sat in the corner, along with the first clay pot she had ever made. She touched the soft covers and remembered the love Mother had put into sewing them.

With a start, Rebecca threw off her blanket and jumped up. She was falling back to sleep and her father would get angry if she embarrassed him by dawdling further.

A short time later, with her face shiny from a good scrubbing, and her composure intact, Rebecca dragged herself onto the roof. With her chin jutting out and head held high, she forced herself to stare straight into the stranger’s

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eyes.

He, Bethuel, and Laban stopped eating to stare at her.

Bethuel guzzled some wine to wash the food in his mouth down, and then he asked, "Rebecca, are you willing to leave here with this man? Now?"

"Father, I am." She squeezed her hands together. "My things?"

"I have packed them anticipating you would go," Bethuel replied. At her surprised expression, with an indulgent smile he added fondly, "I know you, Rebecca. You're your mother's daughter, and you don't ever turn down a challenge, especially one as exciting as this."

After what seemed like only seconds, but was in reality a couple of hours, Rebecca was saying rushed good-byes to her family. There was no time for any other farewells.

A servant lifted her up onto a camel, and through a mist of tears, Rebecca said her farewells. Her heart was heavy with the knowledge she might never see her parents again.

"But what about Lichel?" Rebecca felt torn in two as she left all she had ever known. "Tell her good-bye for me! Make her understand how much I wanted to see her before I left - and couldn't. Please?" Tears coursed down her cheeks as her mother reached up to hold her hand for what Rebecca was afraid might be the last time.

"Don't worry, dear, I will. Good-bye Rebecca..." were the final words she heard over the clapping of camels' hooves against the sand. Rebecca's last glimpse of her brother and parents' faces remained indelibly in her memory. How she longed for a way to transfer their images to something she could see and hold!

Rebecca's first few days traveling were the most difficult. Having never gone far from home, she was unprepared for the unexpected waves of homesickness that often washed over her. She sometimes even missed Lichel's monologues.

The second day after leaving home, bustling servants preparing to move camp woke Rebecca early from a restless sleep. As she lay on her sheepskin pallets in the semi-darkness that came just before dawn, she listened to the camels snorting and shuffling outside her tent, eager to be moving.

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Rebecca's tumultuous emotions made her sick to her stomach and she fought to keep from being sick. Though she had seen God's hand in this enough to come, her faith was wavering. What if she and everyone else in her life had guessed wrong – and God hadn't sent Eliezer.

Rebecca reluctantly pulled herself up from bed. With the help of her maidservant, she dressed, brushed out her long dark tresses, and then covered them primly with a headpiece. Rebecca felt the sun's first rays warm against her skin as she stepped out from the dark tent into the clearing. She stared listlessly at a bright array of clay dishes set out nearby on a small table.

She had no appetite for breakfast.

"Is the breakfast not appealing?" A deep voice caused her to look up into the dark piercing eyes of its owner. Eliezer towered over her with a concerned look on his face.

"No. It isn't that," Rebecca answered nervously. "I was just thinking."

"You are missing home," he said sympathetically with a knowing look. "It is quite natural and to be expected."

Tears came to her eyes, but Rebecca blinked them back. "I'm sure I'll be fine," she declared bravely, poking her chin out as she always did when trying to bolster her courage.

"May the Lord bless you for making this difficult decision the way you did." Eliezer hesitated, as if he wanted to say more. His directness defused Rebecca's fragile façade of strength and she fled to her private compartment just as the floodgates of tears burst.

Once her homesickness subsided, Rebecca actually started to enjoy the predictable but monotonous daily routine. Mornings found servants packing tents and belongings onto the pack mules, only to reverse the process each night. After a tedious day of straddling her camel along the desert road, Rebecca always enjoyed the cool stillness accompanying the evening meal.

Day after day, they plodded along. Sometimes, she found speaking with Eliezer a pleasant diversion.

"What's Damascus like?" she asked one day as they rode side-by-side.

"It is a busy place," he commented in his deep resinous voice. "Many



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people from all over come to trade.”

“How did you come to serve in Master Abraham’s household?” Rebecca looked at him sideways and noted the mask that often slid over his expression when she asked personal questions.

“That is a long story, Mistress,” he answered and moved away from her. “Excuse me, but I think I need to check on something.”

Several weeks into the trip, Rebecca came out of her tent to something different altogether.

“Where’s my breakfast?” she asked a servant, who just shrugged and hurried past her. Unaccustomed to such treatment, Rebecca opened her mouth to call him back and then saw Eliezer.

“Get that pack on the camel. Quickly!” he ordered the same servant she had planned to chastise for dismissing her.

Now she saw why.

Rebecca frowned. She couldn’t understand the tumultuous state of the caravan.

“What’s happening?” she asked another servant, who pushed a small cup of wine and a plate of dates into her hands.

“Today we will arrive,” the man explained, before dashing off to take care of some other task.

“Hurry, hurry!” There was another spate of activity, as even the normally quiet Eliezer barked at the servants. “Get that pack tied down tight,” he ordered.

“Eliezer,” she pressed him as he passed her. “Why is everyone hurrying?”

“We’re almost to Canaan.” When he said that, her heart skipped a beat. So far, Rebecca had only dreamed of meeting Isaac, but now she had to confront the actuality of it.

“Come here.” As an afterthought, Rebecca motioned one of the young girls she had brought to attend her needs. “I want my veil. Please get it for me from my things they’ve packed.”

She hadn’t worn her veil for most of the trip because it wasn’t expected, nor was it practical. Now, however, Rebecca needed yet one more barrier, one more piece of protection to help her feel safe.

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Once everything was packed, someone helped Rebecca onto her camel and they set out at a brisk pace. Even the camels didn't need coaxing to get started; they seemed to know the end of their long journey was at hand.

Rebecca flinched when someone shouted from behind her. "There's someone over there on the field!"

She peeked out from behind her veil.

A man rested against a small tree but she couldn't make out his features in the gathering dusk. His robes were far different from the field hands' clothing she had seen working in the fields.<sup>18</sup>

"Do you know who that man is?" Rebecca pulled her veil firmly about her face and addressed Eliezer as he drew up beside her. "He's too well-dressed to be a fieldworker." Her bracelets tinkled against one another as she pointed toward where he was, "There he is."

"I don't know for sure," he answered, looking thoughtfully at her. Rebecca shifted in her saddle, trying to get a better glimpse. "It looks like Master Isaac, but he's supposed to be living in the Negev Desert in Beer Lahai Roi."<sup>19</sup>

"Look. He's running toward us." Nervous perspiration broke out on her forehead. Isaac might decide to send her back.

"Ho!" A brisk order and raised hand from Eliezer brought the line to a sudden stop. "It *is* Master Isaac."

A stocky, ruddy-faced man jogged toward them, and Rebecca lowered her eyes as he approached. Eliezer slipped off his camel to wait.

"Master Isaac!" he exclaimed ecstatically.

"Eliezer!" Isaac cried.

Rebecca furtively eyed the man named Isaac from behind her veil. Wearing a broad grin, he clasped Eliezer's arms and enthusiastically kissed him on both cheeks. "Where have you come from? I knew you were gone, but Father wouldn't say where you had gone."

Eliezer stepped back from Isaac and then asked, "Your father is well?"

"He's as good as can be expected." Isaac spoke quickly; pushing back unruly dark curls from his eyes. Rebecca watched and listened from a few feet behind. "With Mother's death, it's been hard. You've watched Father; you know how he is, Eliezer. He didn't take Mother's death very well in the first place. It was a long while before he even ate or drank. I came back to see how

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he was and stayed on for a bit.” He shifted his gaze toward Rebecca. “Who is this?”<sup>20</sup>

She slid off the camel and stood quietly with her eyes down, hating waiting for an inspection as if she was a sheep at an auction. Remembering who she was, Rebecca jutted her chin out and stood up tall and straight. Though she remained demurely quiet with her hands folded, she watched what was going on through her lashes.

Eliezer explained, “This is your future wife, Master Isaac.” At Isaac’s surprised expression, Rebecca’s courage plummeted - he wasn’t even expecting her. “I was instructed to retrieve her from your father’s lands, then to bring her back if she was willing to come.” At the question in Isaac’s eyes, the man added, “The Lord answered my prayers for guidance and direction, her family recognized God’s hand in the situation, and agreed Rebecca should come.” Eliezer raised his eyebrows meaningfully and continued, “Furthermore, the girl came along with me exactly as your father asked - immediately - with almost no time to prepare.”

“She has lovely eyes.” Isaac stood looking at her thoughtfully, rubbing at his forehead, and frowning. The silence seemed to stretch forever as her heart thundered in her breast. He reached out to tip her chin up so she had to look at him. “A desert flower I knew nothing about, blooming in the wilderness far away.”

He was so handsome!

His serious brown eyes captured hers as he spoke to her. “You came so far knowing so little about what to expect. Why - what made you do this?”

“I believe in God, my lord.” She lowered her eyes again, shyly. “It appeared to be His will that I come, so I did. Could I do any less?” Rebecca’s heart was palpitating wildly. She was sure he could hear it.

What she said was true. If she hadn’t seen the Lord’s hand in this, it might have been too hard.

“Well, it has been an extraordinarily long journey for you. And for you, my friend.” Isaac grinned. “I see God has rewarded your loyalty to my family once again. Shall we move on?” With a twinkle in his eyes, he included Rebecca. “Let’s take our desert flower home.”<sup>21</sup>

**Twenty years later...**

One cool clear night, Rebecca cuddled up against Isaac on sheepskin rugs in Sarai's old tent. A lonely far-off cry of a bird sounded in the distance as Isaac rubbed her aching back as he told her, "I prayed you would become pregnant<sup>22</sup> and God gave you the baby you asked for.<sup>23</sup> Why are you complaining?" His next words stirred the guilt she had been trying to ignore. "Aren't you happy?"

"Of course I'm happy." Rebecca shifted onto her back, but turned her head to look at Isaac, "No man could make any woman happier." She picked his hand up to lay it where the baby was kicking. "This baby is so active! What a lively one - like you!" Rebecca laughed and then sighed. It had taken so long to *get* pregnant that she felt guilty for feeling glad it would be over soon.<sup>24</sup>

"Why don't you talk to the Lord about it in the morning?" He laid a cool hand on her forehead. "Go in the fields. Talk to Him before the dew falls, as the sun is coming up." He smiled reassuringly at her. "I would encourage you to take quiet walks early - now - while you can before the baby comes."

Rebecca nodded slowly as her thoughts drifted.

It was fortunate for her they shared their faith so openly. What a difference it made in the atmosphere of their home to go to God in prayer, rather than take their troubles out on each other. She had avoided more than one argument by dropping to her knees first before opening her mouth.

Her robe jumped as the baby wiggled and Rebecca sighed. It didn't seem normal to hurt so much from one unborn child's movements.

How Rebecca envied Isaac his snoring.

She turned her head and smiled, watching his profile and listening to his raspy breathing. His mouth was wide open.

Once the kicking let up, Rebecca closed her eyes and fell into a deep dreamless sleep. The next thing she heard was Isaac's insistent voice. "Sweetheart, wake up. If you are to spend time in prayer and meditation, this must be the time - before the workers go out." At her hesitation, he reassured her, "I will explain to Father why you can't supervise breakfast. He'll understand and we'll get someone else to cover for you."<sup>25</sup>

Once she actually made it outside, Rebecca welcomed the early-morning coolness as she skirted the tent and walked briskly away from the clearing.

Dogs barked behind her in the distance, but she ignored them, confident the mongrels wouldn't leave their scraps to bother her.

"Lord," Rebecca began praying once alone on the path.<sup>26</sup>

It had been *so* long since she had taken early-morning time like this to pray, she had almost forgotten how. "I thank you that you always hear me." It was hard to know where to start. "Thank you for bringing me here to my husband. You know my faith. I try to do what I believe you want me to do. However, right now, I am constantly in turmoil. My concern isn't so much for myself, but for the baby." Rebecca was trying so hard to be brave, but she sobbed as she walked. "Lord, help me! I want my mother and I'm so far from home!"

The breeze shifted direction and gained force, nudging Rebecca away from the path toward an outcropping at the top of a small incline. After discovering a large flat rock shaped like a seat, she sat down to pray.

Absently stretching her long legs out in front of her, she examined her sandy feet peeking out from beneath her robe. The cool air felt so good on her bare face and it was nice that for once, nobody needed anything from her.

Her robe over her tummy jumped where the baby kicked, and she giggled.

Rebecca bowed her head; afraid if she knelt to pray she wouldn't be able to get back up. "Why is my baby so *painfully* active in my womb?" she implored Him to show her.

She was so absorbed in prayer that when a voice suddenly came from nowhere, she jumped.

"There are two nations in your womb."<sup>27</sup>

"Hello?" she asked and sprang to her feet, looking around to see who was speaking.<sup>28</sup> Her only answer was the dry wind blowing through the bushes and down the hill. She shivered with apprehension and suddenly felt very alone.

"The older will serve the younger,"<sup>29</sup> someone said from close by.

"Oh!" Without looking around, Rebecca let out an involuntary cry and slipped to her knees on the rocky ground in spite of her protruding stomach.

She knew who it was - the Lord!

Twins - is that what He meant? How unbelievable.

Now, why would God speak to her?

Was it because she obeyed Him to come so far - or that she took such risks

because she trusted Him?<sup>30</sup>

Rebecca's head hurt.

However, she felt better as His presence surrounded and enveloped her in a soothing cloud of peace. It seemed like hours before she felt released to get up to wobble home, shaken.

She arrived and almost collided with Isaac on her way into the tent. He was adjusting his headpiece and wasn't paying attention, and nearly knocked her down.

"Sorry," he exclaimed and steadied her as she almost fell. After seeing the look in her eyes, he exclaimed, "You look as if you saw a ghost!"

Rebecca could only stand there staring at him as sudden pains sliced through her. She grabbed her abdomen in a protective gesture and as water gushed down her legs, her eyes met Isaac's.

At her unspoken question, he answered, "Yes, sweetheart, it's time."

He put an arm firmly around her and shouted for the midwife. "Help! The baby's coming!"

"Isaac!" Rebecca cried, unable to take another step.

"Hurry!" he bellowed again as three women came from nowhere.

Rebecca panted as she felt herself half-lifted, half-carried into her and Isaac's tent, and then laid on their bed. Only faintly aware Isaac had disappeared, she listened while the women tended her, their voices crooning and encouraging. Pain rifled through Rebecca again, and she screamed.<sup>31</sup>

How she hated Isaac right then!

"Push!" someone yelled. Rebecca pushed with all her might. A wail sounded, then one of the women cried, "It's a boy!"

Rebecca tried to get up on her elbows for a better look, but dropped back down to the bed as another pain came. Immediately, someone commanded her. "Push!" She bore down, and this time smiled weakly, as a second set of cries pierced the air. "It's also a boy!" the midwife cried.

One of the women held up a ruddy-faced fuzzy-haired baby, and said, "This one had hold of the first baby's ankle!<sup>32</sup>" Then she held up the second baby, but Rebecca just closed her eyes - her hair was soaked with sweat, and she felt weak but happy.

About an hour later, one of the women bustling about tending Rebecca and

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the babies herded Isaac into the tent. He stood there uncertainly, and then broke out laughing. Rebecca looked up at him, a babe nestled on either side of her. “Do you see what happens when we pray? We never know what we’ll end up with!”

A few days later, while she nursed one baby at each breast after she and Isaac had finished eating, Rebecca asked him to do something for her. “Tell me about what happened in our family before Eliezer came and found me.”

She smiled up at him as one of the babies gurgled in her arms

“It’s a long story.”

“Tell me – please,” she cajoled him, giving him her special smile. He could never refuse it when she showed him her dimples. “I want to know why you are so much like your father Abraham...”

“Now?” he asked incredulously.

Rebecca smiled at each baby suckling, and then pointedly stared back at Isaac to say, “Do you have anything better to tell our boys than how God led our family?”

“Oh all right,” Isaac conceded and grinned sheepishly. “You win. My father used to be known as Abram before his name was changed... lean back, darling - it’s a long story.”

## ***Chapter 7***

### **Hatred and Healing**

When the day came to implement her plans, Sarai was a wreck.

“Abram.” Sarai spoke around the jealousy that surged through her to Abram, standing in the clearing waiting for her cue. “Hagar is ready.” The image of Hagar, her young supple body rubbed clean, oiled with lotions, and lustrous dark hair spread out loose on soft pillows made Sarai seethe.

*Why* had God put her into this position of having to resort to schemes?

Abram erected a tent for Hagar, physically removing her from Sarai. That way once finished with her duties, she could retreat to her own place. Though doubts had continued to plague Sarai each step of the way, she squashed them down while busily carrying out her plans.

Abram’s concubine wife was heavy with child when the raging volcano inside Sarai finally exploded. “Can’t you get anything right, you imbecile!” Sarai turned around from the fire to the surprised girl holding pita bread ready to be cooked.

They had run out of dung for fuel *again*.

“I have told you to collect droppings from the camels each night!” Sarai could feel her face crimson with anger. She was furious! She raised a hand above Hagar’s head and struck her, hard.

“Mistress Sarai, No!” Hagar cried, holding her hand to a bright red handprint forming on her face. “Why?” Hagar whispered. Her wide eyes were dark with shock and fear, making Sarai feel even guiltier. “Mistress, why?”

“You think you are better than I.” Sarai hated herself for the venom in her voice, but the humiliation of having to face Hagar day after day was stronger than her conscience. All the sideways glances her maidservant had thrown her, the bated remarks, and the looks of others who thought she was accursed.



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None of it was fair.

"I don't think that, Mistress!" Hagar assumed a victim posture, one that Sarai had seen work for her before.

"You do, you little vixen." Sarai couldn't fathom why Hagar had changed so much over the months, but she had. "It was I who raised you up to the position you have today; it will be I who take you down from it!" Sarai cried. "Get out of my sight." Sarai dismissed Hagar. Demeaning the girl may be a way she could avoid her own responsibility in this matter, but Sarai still hated herself for her own cruelty.

Abram arrived just as his second wife was fleeing in tears. "Sarai, why was Hagar crying and holding her face?"

"Why concern yourself over the girl. Come here and eat your lunch - you must be hungry." Sarai tried to divert him, and it worked. He eased to his mat at the table, shaking his head, probably over the complexities of women, Sarai thought.

She grimaced guiltily.

Moments later when someone screamed, she dropped the bowl of currants she was carrying onto the floor and watched Abram's hand fall to the table, the flatbread uneaten.

A man came to the door and announced, "Mistress Hagar is calling for the midwife. Her baby is coming."

Sarai rushed toward Hagar's tent. She knew Abram would wait for word, as custom dictated. With all animosity forgotten for the moment, Sarai felt her heart stir; the baby was coming.

Hagar was lying on her mat, knees up and panting when Sarai arrived. Her hair was drenched with sweat and stuck to her head. She reached up pleadingly to Sarai, who smiled reassuringly and took her hand. "The midwife is coming, Hagar; don't be afraid."

"Mistress," Hagar whimpered, "I mean you no harm!"

"Be at peace..." Sarai reassured her soothingly. Someone handed her a basin of water and she began bathing Hagar's face. "Come now, breathe. Don't scream. That's it..."

When the midwife slipped in quietly, she looked at Sarai, who had assumed responsibility for Hagar in the midwife's absence. Hagar was

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squatted, pressing herself against Sarai, who was leaning hard onto the wall behind both of them.

“The baby’s head is crowning; Hagar is ready to give birth. Okay now, I want you to give one last big push,” the midwife instructed Hagar, positioning herself strategically in front.

“One, two, three... push!” Sarai instructed, then added, “Scream if you need to!”

With a grunt that dissolved into a scream, Hagar bore down and forced the baby out. The high-pitched cry of a newborn split the air.

The room exploded as the midwife cradled the baby and cut the umbilical chord. Hagar slumped down onto the bed and Sarai slipped out from behind her. She smiled through her tears at Hagar, who smiled back, crying and laughing from pure happiness.

For that moment, Hagar had apparently forgotten her hatred.

Two servants bathed the blood and sweat off with soft warm wet cloths. By this time, the midwife handed Hagar the baby, cleaned up and swaddled for her to nurse.

“It’s a boy!” Abram came into the room with his announcement, just as Hagar placed the child to her breast.

Sarai was standing apart from mother and son instructing servants. She turned toward Abram in time to catch the radiant smile Hagar gave him.

Her joy turned stone cold.

Abram’s presence filled the tent. He looked down at Hagar and smiled, a smile that wrenched Sarai’s heart.

“Hello little one.” Abram picked the baby up from the midwife and lifted him high in the air. “My son! His name will be Ishmael!” Then he handed Ishmael back to the midwife, and turned to swing Sarai around in celebration.

“Sarai! We have much to celebrate. There will be a feast tonight in my son’s honor.”<sup>1</sup>

Behind the mask she wore for his benefit, Sarai seethed. This should have been her celebration - her baby - not Hagar’s.

The intensity of her feelings weren’t something she had counted on, and she didn’t know how to control. Nor did she want to. The anger took the edge off the anguish she felt.

She was barren. God had deserted her.

Sarai knew she had compromised her faith, trying to substitute her own plan for God's. Questions plagued her. How could God forgive her? What would happen next? Would God *ever* grant Abram a child through her after what she had done? Most of all, how could she stop this inferno of guilt and rage she felt?

Nothing changed.

The victims of Sarai's anger were the ones least deserving of it - Hagar and Ishmael. One early spring afternoon, Hagar lay on her bed listening to her name being called. Preferring to ignore the woman she hated most in the world, she didn't answer. Hagar's afternoon respite had been too brief; surely Mistress Sarai could wait.

"Hagar." Sarai spoke again softly. "Hagar!"

Loathing filled Hagar as she turned over on the bed and opened her eyes. She despised Sarai - and at the same time loved her.

She spat out the words. "What do you want?"

"Abram's son Ishmael is beating a dog unmercifully," Sarai whispered.<sup>2</sup>

From somewhere, Hagar could hear a dog yelping in pain as she jumped up to pull her robe on.

"Hurry, before Abram returns from the fields. He isn't back yet for the midday meal."

Hagar jumped up, riveted to action by the thought of her son being reprimanded for his cruelty by gentle Abram again. She dragged her robe on first, then her headpiece. "I am *coming*."

No one could ever get the boy to listen, just her and Abram. Sarai seldom even tried.

She yanked back the flap to stand squinting in the midday sunshine. "Where is he?" She shoved past Sarai to peer down the road, and then headed toward the sounds of the crying dog.

"Ishmael!" she shouted in her most ominous tone, hoping it would be effective enough. "*Stop kicking that dog!*" Immediately, the curly haired lad turned from the bleeding dog struggling in the dust, toward the sound of her voice. Hagar moved closer. "What *are you* doing, son?"

“Mother, the dog tried to bite my friend Dan.” Hagar turned and saw the other child crouching beside a tent, hurt. Blood was oozing from a cut in his calf. “It deserves to be taught a lesson.”

Hagar knew Ishmael was always protecting his friend; it was a cruel twist of fate that his father Joshua, Abram’s lead scout, had been killed in a battle, leaving his mother to raise him alone.

“I think you’ve taught him one, Ishmael.” Hagar gentled him with a soft voice. “You need to stop now.” The dog could barely move. Its eyes were swollen and one front leg lay broken at a ninety-degree angle.

“Mother,” Ishmael whined, “I lost my temper again.” His eyes were round with fear. “Father is going to punish me for this because Mistress *Sarai* wants him to.”

Hagar put her hand on his small shoulder, uncertain how to encourage him. What he said was the truth. Though taming her son was a full-time job, Sarai’s resentment, and Abram’s reluctance made it more difficult to do. The dissension between the two of them over Ishmael only intensified the boy’s confusion.

Hagar looked at the anger in her son’s eyes. Ishmael had known little love and affection, except from Hagar herself, and occasionally from Abram. Worked up into a raging fury like this one, Ishmael terrified even the older boys.

Right then, her son’s skin glistened with sweat, his shoulders heaved and his breath was coming in gasps.

“For now, we go to our tent and change your torn clothes.” As much as Hagar hated to, she signaled Sarai with her eyes. “If Mistress Sarai will ask a servant to see to the dog and tend to the other child, we will go now and leave their care to her.” Seldom did Sarai speak or act kindly to her. Hagar could never predict how the other woman’s responses would be, kind one moment, and then angry the next.

“Yes, I will see to the dog and the other boy.” Sarai moved from beside the tent into the compound where the dog lay. “Come here.” She motioned to a man standing by, waiting. Hagar didn’t stop to watch the rest. Instead, she led her son to the tent Abram had made for them when Ishmael was born.

Later, Hagar let Sarai make her way to Abram’s tent to fix his dinner -

alone.

When Abram returned to the camp, he strode towards the tent and stopped, surprised to see only one woman cooking. Sarai jumped up to bathe his dirty feet from a basin of water, then returned to preparing the meal.

“Sarai,” Abram asked as sat back on his seat watching her, “why isn’t Hagar helping you?” She looked up and smiled at him, but said nothing. “Has Ishmael my son been causing trouble again?” Sarai betrayed nothing; she merely kept cooking. Abram, baffled by her uncharacteristic lack of response, stood up and strolled over to Hagar’s tent to see if what he suspected was true.

What he overheard on his unanticipated approach was revealing.

“Why were you angry today, Ishmael?” Hagar asked softly. “Why did you beat that poor dog? Was it just because you were protecting your friend? Or were there other reasons...”

Abram overheard his son say, “Father always worries what Mistress Sarai thinks, then you worry about how Father is going to react. Then you and she fight over everything all the time. Everyone worries about everyone, but nobody cares about me!”

“Son, of course I care about you.” Hagar’s voice had a note of surprise that matched Abram’s over this tender confession. He knew an admission such as this was quite out of character for Ishmael.

“How could you believe otherwise?” she asked.

“I should never have been born.”

Abram’s heart broke over hearing this and he shook his head. The adults’ mistakes weren’t the boy’s fault; neither was his birth a bad thing.

He pushed his way into the tent and asked, “Son, what’s going on?”

“Father,” Ishmael acknowledged coolly as if he had expected Abram all along.

Abram stared at his son; literally a stranger – he had not taken much time to know. Ishmael had all the advantages that came along with being a chieftain’s son - everything but his affection.

To do so openly meant inviting confrontations with Sarai.

“I overheard some of the things you said,” Abram told him, dismissing Hagar with a look. “Son, I can’t explain to you why things are the way they

are. But, this I can tell you: God is faithful. You have been born for a reason.”

The boy hung his head. Abram fought the impulse to go to him. All he could do was reassure Ishmael that his existence had a purpose.

Abram felt awkward. There had always been an insurmountable wall between him and his son. The truth was that he simply didn’t understand Ishmael. The boy was a paradox to him.

Forging ahead to try a different tack, he told him, “I have an idea.”

The boy perked up, his curiosity piqued. “What is it?” Ishmael asked.

“Why don’t you spend more time out in the fields with me from now on? You’ve been helping herd sheep, but I think it’s time to put you in charge of the younger boys. After all, you are my son.”

“Do you mean that?” Ishmael’s usual scowl melted into a grin that lit up his face and transformed him into a different person. “You would put me in charge of the boys helping round up the sheep?”

“Yes, I do,” Abram replied, genuinely liking this side of Ishmael. “If you can keep a civil tongue, show more respect for others, and control your temper, I would like to have you at my side more often.”

“When do I start?”

“Tomorrow will be soon enough.” Abram tousled the boy’s hair and smiled down at him as he turned to leave. “Now off with you; go collect some dung for fuel and we’ll get you going in the morning. After my time in prayer.”

“Father, why do you pray?”

Abram, arrested by Ishmael’s question, turned around. Searching for words, he felt amazed by the avid interest on his face. “Well,” Abram began, “when I was your age, I used to watch the idols. They seemed so big, so strong. But they never *did* anything for the people who prayed to them.”

“I know.” Ishmael rolled his eyes. “Daniel’s gods are the same. Nobody ever talks about them moving, or talking... like the God you and Mistress Sarai worship. I’ve never seen your God, but I *hear* that he shows himself.”

“I go out in the fields early in the morning to talk with God,” Abraham explained.

“Why do you do that?” Ishmael asked. “What do you say to him?”

Ishmael wanted more from him, more than Abram felt comfortable

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explaining. Prayer was such a personal thing.

"I talk to God out loud in the wilderness because no one can hear; it's just me and God. When He does come and reveal things to me, He mentions those requests I've brought to Him... and answers some of my questions. At first, prayer wasn't easy for me," he explained, grinning. "Talking to someone I couldn't see when I wasn't even sure He was listening was hard. But over time as I grew up, it became apparent God was listening, and that He understood me better than anyone else ever could."

"What kinds of things do you talk to him about?"

"Oh, I usually tell Him how I'm feeling. I talk about what I have on my mind. Often, I try to ask Him for direction, or to help someone I care about." Abram laughed. "The Lord can be very stern, but He even has a sense of humor."

"Really?"

"Oh yes, I've seen it." Abram added, "But my prayer life wasn't always like this, Ishmael. I had to develop it - even at your age. In addition, God helped me do it. Now, enough of this." He pointed toward the tent's opening. "Let me go now. I need to get back to Sarai, who is preparing dinner."

Abram noted sadly that Ishmael's cynical mask, the tool he used to keep the world at arm's length, was back. But, now that he knew there was more to the boy than met the eye, Abram intended on delving to find out what was behind his defenses.

## *Chapter 1*

### **Temporary Reprieves**

David felt disgusted.

He stood with his hands on his hips in the middle of the field, glaring at his six brothers who were leaving their responsibilities to him - at their father's directive.

"So, just because I'm the youngest, I suppose I am just a servant?" sixteen-year-old David challenged his brothers. "Though there are those closer to my age that should be doing errands, I'm going to have to stay here while the rest of you traipse into Bethlehem without me?"

The fields were where David felt he found most of his peace anyway. Nevertheless, should he let them take advantage of him without some resistance?

No.

Holding his ground as the youngest was a matter of survival and maintaining respect if nothing else.

"Look." Eliab spoke for the rest of them as the oldest. He rolled his eyes and ran a hand through his unruly black hair. "We're going to go back to Bethlehem for the feast. Samuel is coming and he has invited all of us, but Father needs someone to tend the sheep - and he has elected for you to do it."

"Aren't I your brother too?" David couldn't believe his ears this time; even Eliab was defending their father's position.

Someone as important as Samuel, a visiting prophet, was coming. David's entire family was included, and they wanted to leave him out in the fields like a hired hand.

"Wait a minute," broke in Abinadab, the second oldest. "Being the youngest means that it isn't as important for you to be there as it is for us." He shot David a disarming grin. "It actually says a lot for you that Father trusts



you above all of us to watch the sheep herds while the feast is going on.”

David had graduated from disgusted to angry, and was now livid.

He took a breath to regain control of his tattered emotions and stepped back for a moment from the conversation to note the differences between his brothers. He was getting nowhere and was forgetting that they didn’t all think the same.

Serious Eliab was tall like an oak, while fun-loving Abinadab was stout and short with a contagious belly laugh. Shimeah, Nethanel, and Raddai were of medium-sized build with nothing noteworthy about them, other than that they were so close in age that they looked like triplets - same short length of black hair, round swarthy faces, and stubby hands. On the other hand, Ozem, tall and broad like Eliab, was only four years older than David, and liked to flaunt it with the others.

“I want to go home first,” David began and saw Abinadab’s smile fade. “I want to see some of the preparations, and talk to Father and Mother.” He also wanted to talk with Grandmother and hear some of her stories. It had been a while since he had spent any real time with her. Though her body was shriveled from age, her eyes always lit up when she talked about their family’s past.

She had helped raise David and he missed her.

Right.” Eliab looked around at his brothers. “You three,” Eliab said, pointing to Shimeah, Nethanel, and Raddai, “you will stay while I take the rest back to town.”

“Why don’t *you* stay here?” Raddai insisted, throwing his short broad hands into the air with frustration.

“Because it takes one of David to do what it takes three of you to do. That’s why!” Eliab shouted, staring at Raddai until he backed up a step. “Father needs us as the oldest to take care of some business matters in town anyway.” Eliab was already grabbing empty food and water pouches to refill and sling over his shoulders. “You guys grab the rest and let’s head back so David can be back here within the next couple of days before the feast.” He pointed at the ground. “There are enough supplies left for the rest of you three to survive on until we get back.”

With that, the four brothers started toward home. David ambled silently

along the dirt path trying to keep up with the rest. As they drew near the neatly laid out village and waved at the familiar faces of those working the fields, he felt better.

“Well, aren’t you a sight for sore eyes! I wasn’t expecting you boys for two days yet.” Jessie, their father, saw them as they passed through the market toward the house on the other side of town. He clasped each of their arms warmly, kissing them on both cheeks in welcome. Of medium stature and build, like his three middle boys, Jessie had to stretch a bit to reach Eliab.

When he got to David, Jessie stood back, puzzled. “I asked you specifically to stay until the feast was finished so the others could come into town for it. Didn’t Eliab tell you what I had instructed you to do?”

With the hawkers shouting in the marketplace, David caught only a few of his father’s words. Mortified, he stammered, “I wasn’t told that this was an absolute - my staying there. I wouldn’t have disobeyed you intentionally...”

Eliab moved to stand beside David. He looked down at his father and explained, “Father, it wasn’t David’s fault.”

Jessie first stared at David, then up at his eldest.

“Explain what you mean by that, son. My instructions are *never* to be disobeyed,” he ordered in a quiet but deadly tone.

Eliab backed up a step, biting his lip nervously. “Uh... I made an independent judgment call. I decided to let David come home for a couple days to rest before taking on the job of caring for the sheep. It only seemed fair.”

“You, boy, I will deal with later.” With displeasure written into every gesture, Jessie turned away from Eliab. “If any of you ever want to disobey a direct order again, think twice.” Though Jessie was small, David knew from experience he could be intimidating, even to those much larger than himself. His father was a scrapper, willing to stand up to anyone. “David, you go home. Now.”

The old feelings of betrayal haunted David as he marched home. After greeting his mother, sister, and grandmother, he separated himself from the tension at home to roam the town.

Though the mood was high, his remained low. The politicians and religious leaders strutting about the marketplace with their self-important airs

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rankled him, souring his mood even more.

*Why?* he asked himself. Why had his father wanted him out of the way, and what did his mother think of his father hiding him in the fields, letting his brothers remain in Bethlehem?

He trudged home and up the narrow stairway just as the sun was setting. When his eyes adjusted to the room, David saw Grandmother lying on a pile of soft lambskins against the wall - alone.

"Grandmother, I'm home." Then he tried again gently, "Grandmother, I'm home!" He peered into the small house's dark interior. "Where are Mother and Abinadab?"

"David." Her eyes crinkled as her mouth curved into a smile. "You're here - are you done roaming town?" She looked around him blankly. "Where is everyone?"

"I don't know where Mother and Abinadab are, but Father and my brothers had tasks to do for the feast today and apparently haven't returned yet. I'll be going back to the fields again; Father *wants* me to go, Grandmother." If she had caught the bitter tone in his voice, she didn't let it show as David unrolled a mat to sit cross-legged in front of her. "So I want to spend time with you while I can."

"To see me, and to hear the old stories?" His old Grandmother's smile widened when David nodded. "Nobody wants to hear about the old days from an old woman." She looked closely at him. "No one but my David." The deeply etched lines on her face relaxed as she closed her eyes again and began to speak.

"It's been a long time since I spoke of what I like to call the 'Mystery of the Golden Thread' - the thread of our lineage..."

David smiled in anticipation.

## ***Chapter 19***

### **Deadly Mistakes**

About three days after a victory against the Amalekites, David sat in his house sipping wine with his officers. One of those closest to him, Benaiah, had just told a joke that had the men laughing so hard they were almost crying.

Suddenly, a stranger with torn clothes and ash smeared over his face and hair was ushered into their gathering. He fell to his knees before David.

“What is it?” David asked, taken aback.

“The *king* is dead!” he shouted.

David dropped the cup with a thud and forced himself to speak. “Where? Where did he die and how is Abishai? Is young Jonathan alive still?” Frozen with grief, he was unable to move.

“No,” was the quick reply.

“How do you know? Did you see it?” David demanded, feeling a flicker of hope they weren’t dead.

The man pulled something from a bag. “Here is the king’s crown,” he told him, handing handed over the golden circlet.

As it touched his skin, David pulled his hand back - it seared his flesh - he didn’t want to touch it any more than he wanted to touch the next golden piece.

“Here is the king’s bracelet also,” the man continued as he passed it to him.

“How did it happen?” David asked, fighting revulsion.

“They were fighting against the Philistines at Mount Gilboa. King Saul was hit with an arrow from a volley.” The man spoke earnestly. “When his armor bearer wouldn’t kill him, Saul ran himself through with his own spear. At least that’s what appeared to have happened from what I could tell.”<sup>1</sup>

“What happened next?” Bile was rising in David’s throat, threatening to choke him.

“The king was in agony. He asked me to kill him because he couldn’t bear the pain,” the man admitted simply. “So I did.”

“What about his sons?” David swallowed. He was so disgusted at the man’s stupidity - and carelessness - for killing the king, something he himself wouldn’t even have done. “What happened to them?” *This man will pay dearly*, David thought to himself.

The man’s eyes traveled from Benaiah back again to David. “Jonathan, Zeruiah, and Malki-Shua were found dead on the battlefield.” His face darkened with anger. “When the Philistines found Saul and his sons on the battlefield, they took Saul’s armor and cut off his head. Then they displayed it in the temple they worship Dagon in.”

“Can there be more?” David buried his head in his hands.

“There were brave men from Jabesh, who refused to tolerate this. They stole the bodies back and buried them in Jabesh.”

David barely heard the man’s words.

He cried out and tore at his clothes, as did the others around him. Then David retreated wearily from the main room, climbed the stairs to his bedroom on the roof, and shut the door behind him.<sup>2</sup>

“Men are defecting even from the enemies’ ranks to serve under you!” Abishai exclaimed, looking across the table he and others gathered around. “You’re king now. Take the city - Jebus is yours!”<sup>3</sup> When David just stared at him, he added, “The people have crowned you. Whatever you feel, you’re still the king!”

David pulled his helmet off and mopped the sweat from his head with a towel. He felt more comfortable wearing it than he did his newly awarded crown.<sup>4</sup> Sunshine glinted off the armor of the men clustered into small groups on the hills for as far as he could see.

“All right.” David turned back to speak to the group of thirty commanders gathered under the canopy erected to protect them from the sun. “We’ve discussed our strategy. The Jebusites have had their chance to surrender, but they act contemptuous of us.”

“I heard them myself.” Abishai frowned. “The fools sent our delegation

back with a refusal to admit defeat.” There was disbelief in his voice that matched the expression on his craggy face. “Given a chance to avoid extinction from our swords, they stubbornly hang onto the illusion that their walls can protect them.”

“But they don’t know who they’re facing, do they?” his brother Joab retorted to Abishai. “You’ve taken on - how many was it?” Joab turned to the others. “Wasn’t it around four or five hundred men you killed that day in battle when they thought they had you surrounded?”

“No, it was only three hundred,” laughed David. Throwing his head back, he took a long drag of water from his flask.<sup>5</sup>

“It was because the Lord God was with us,” Abishai added quietly, the lines in his face relaxing. “There might in fact be a lot of valiant men both in our ranks and among us who lead, but it’s God who keeps turning the tides in our favor.”

“Benaiah was clearly evidence of what it means to have God’s strength.” Jashobeam swilled down some water, then wiped his mouth with the back of his beefy hand. “He killed that lion we trapped in the pit with his bare hands - do you remember the one that was harassing us?”<sup>6</sup> He asked David. “Then later, he killed a Philistine very much like our king had as a boy.” He looked David’s way. “I may have killed three hundred men like Abishai and have even been promoted to captain of the guard, but I can *feel* when the Lord’s power is upon me. I *know* who to give credit to.”

“All right, men.” David raised his voice. The jesting stopped abruptly as each of the heavily armored men gave him their complete attention. “I want you,” he pointed at a man in the background, “to bring the mounted rams around to the front, some to the side, and the rest around the back of the city. On my order, you all will begin laying siege to their gates simultaneously.” David motioned to three of the men. “Look at this place; here and here. Have your men...”

Pouring over the diagrams he had drawn, David finalized the plans they had made and motioned to dismiss the men. He prayed. “Great God of Heaven, by your great might, for your glory, and at your bidding, we take this city in Your Name. Grant us victory and favor as we face our enemy.”

The men raised their spears in one last victory cry and turned to scatter to

each of their units. David shouted, “The first man to kill one of the Jebusites will be my chief and commander!”<sup>7</sup>

This brought yet another guttural battle cry and more spears raised into the air.

David felt for his knife and sword, sheathed in their scabbards slung from his waist. His shield bearer picked up David’s heavy shield and waited as David stepped out from under the awning to swing himself up onto the huge haunches of his black stallion.

“Follow me!” he shouted, leading the way down the hill. “Men,” David shouted urging his horse forward. He raised his sword and then lowered it, pointed toward the enemy. “Victory in the Name of our God, for the sake of Israel!” he yelled, guiding his horse through the ranks toward the fortress.

David signaled the rams dragged toward their designated gates, and then called for the other troops to follow him. When David gave the order, thuds hammering against splintering wood resounded over the hills.

He issued another order, and a wave of his soldiers with ropes flowed across the field to scale the walls. The clash of steel against steel, and the screams of dying and wounded men joined the sounds of the battering rams. Suddenly, a loud cry shook the ground as doors to the fortress gave way to the determined thrusts. David led the charge into the city as he and his men swarmed through its gates.

## ***Chapter 1***

### **Change is in the air**

“Mary...” Joseph called aloud. The tang of her name on his lips was sweet. But when he completely woke up, and he remembered what she had done, he pulled back the covers over his head.<sup>1</sup>

Mary had made a fool of him.

After years as a bachelor, he had decided to marry a chaste young girl from a good family - only to find out she was expecting a child!

Her explanation?

It was too outrageous to be true. How in the world could a virgin get pregnant? Of course, the prophesies around the Messiah were real, but had nothing to do with him.

He was just a man – no one special.

Feeling dejected, Joseph fell back into a troubled sleep.

This time in his dream, a man appeared, a tall strapping fellow at least two heads taller than he. Dressed in white, his forehead was completely smooth, his face devoid of wrinkles or any signs of age.

“Joseph, don’t be afraid to claim Mary as your wife. God’s Holy Spirit has conceived the baby she’s expecting. It’s going to be a boy. His name will be Jesus because he’s going to save his people from their sin.”<sup>2</sup>

“Mary!” Joseph shouted in his sleep, waking himself up with the sound of his own voice. He felt for his robe and pulled it on.

Determined to see Mary, he rushed out.

The sun was just rising as Joseph hurried toward Mary’s house. Once there, he banged so loudly the rough wood grazed his knuckles.

Joseph didn’t care what Mary’s mother thought as she cracked open the door to see him. With his hair sticking up, no proper head covering, and his face unshaven, he knew he was quite a sight.



“Please, I have to speak to Mary, he pleaded. “I’ve mistreated her. I’ve done her a grave injustice.”

“Mary’s still asleep. Please come back later when she wakes up...” She shook her head and started to turn away, but Joseph wedged his foot in the door to keep it from closing.

“I have to speak with her. It’s urgent,” he insisted, and pushed open the door.

By this time, Mary’s father had appeared. Both parents stared at him in the open doorway, their eyebrows knit with disapproval. “Sir,” Joseph explained, “I’m sorry to disturb you so early, but it is *important* or I wouldn’t be here like this!”

Mary’s mother, a petite woman with delicate features, stared back at him for a few moments, then sighed. She nodded at her husband, whose shoulders visibly slumped. He shrugged and consented, “All right then – she’s your problem now anyway. You’ll have to wait here in the courtyard until Mary’s dressed. I’ll get her.”

He shut the door.

Joseph lingered impatiently after Mary’s parents had disappeared into the house and the door had snapped shut with a loud click. The minutes felt like hours as he passed time staring down the family’s goat.

“Joseph?” Mary slipped through quietly with sleep still in her eyes. Wisps of hair framed her face with a soft halo in the early morning light. She looked innocent and untouched.

“What do you want?” she asked.

His stomach dropped. For the first time since he had known Mary, she slightly narrowed her eyes with suspicion. Joseph had seen a similar expression before in the eyes of a small gray kitten that liked to sneak into his house when he opened the door. That same look had been in her tiny eyes when he cornered her to put her outside.

He couldn’t fault Mary. It was sensible to hold back from him after how he and everyone had treated her.

“Mary, I was so wrong...” he blurted out. “I was going to send you away... to save you from stoning... from disgrace. I had no idea... how could this be happening to us?”

Her face brightened and Joseph reproached himself even more. He couldn't even begin to understand how much of a burden it had been for her to carry alone.

"What happened, Joseph? How did you find out?" Her voice was barely above a whisper.

"Well, just as you had a visitation from the angel, I also have." He couldn't believe this – it was almost too much to believe – him – visited by an angel. "He said we are to name the baby Jesus."

"No one will believe us." Mary stated, eyes huge with wonder in her small face. "What should we do now?"

"We're to carry out the instructions given by the angel." Joseph knew what he had to do. "Will you forgive me for not believing you?" he asked Mary. As the sun's first light crept across the small courtyard, a rooster crowed somewhere in the distance.

"I want to," she said honestly, looking him straight in the eye. "You only did what anybody else would have done. You could have had me stoned, but you didn't."

Joseph didn't deserve her and he knew it.

He had been about to send her away. She had tried to explain, but he had treated her with contempt. He opened his mouth but the words never made it past his lips.

"Mary!" her father called from the doorway.

Mary flinched, startled by the sharp tone he used.

"You've had enough time out here in the courtyard for the public to view your shame," he called callously. "Come in here now – there are tasks to tend to." The tall thin man stood in the doorway, an ugly expression on his angular face. He looked at Mary as if he was dealing with a smelly piece of trash he had held for too long before disposing of it. He stood holding the door open and with a quick look at Joseph, she lifted her head and walked slowly and deliberately into the house.

Her father then turned back to Joseph to question him, "You've arranged for Mary to be sent away. Which day? When can we take care of this and put it behind us?"

"I've changed my mind," Joseph said so quietly, that the other man came

out and shut the door behind him.

“What did you say?”

“I said I’ve changed my mind about sending Mary away. I want to marry her – privately,” Joseph explained, trying not to smile. Mary’s father was staring at him like he had lost his mind.

“Why?” The simple word mirrored the incredulous expression on her father’s face. With clear eyes the color of Mary’s, and his lips parted in disbelief, the resemblance between father and daughter was uncanny.

“I believe her story, sir.”

“Why? How can you?” Mary’s father asked.

“An angel appeared to me in my sleep and told me your daughter is carrying the Messiah.”

“That’s preposterous!” he exclaimed rubbing his forehead and frowning. “Our Mary?”

“Yes,” Joseph answered, staring him straight in the eye without blinking.

“Impossible,” the man refuted. He shook his head and placed his hand on the doorknob to go in. “We’ll arrange for the marriage, a private quiet ceremony before the Rabbi. It will happen within a week.” He opened the door and without looking back, he added, “What you do with Mary after that is up to you.” When the door closed, the sound of its latch clicking echoed the finality of his last words.

Joseph smoothed the edge of the small wooden table he had been working on for days since his last conversation with Mary and her parents. Honed to perfection, his blade slid through the wood as if through butter until he hit a knot.

“Ouch!” he cried as the sharp drawknife deflected by the knob bit into his hand. “Why?” he asked aloud into the empty room. “Why does such good news as the Messiah’s birth have to be so hard?”

No answer came.

He lived alone in the stone house he had built for he and his Mary before discovering her pregnancy. Now, he would have to sell it. They couldn’t remain in Nazareth.

Nobody would believe her, even though he did.

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People shunned Mary now – understandably so. Other people’s opinions wouldn’t change, and he couldn’t have her shamed by their ignorance, so what could he do?

The next day, the answer to his dilemma came from an unexpected source. Joseph was striding through the town square about to deliver the table perched on his shoulder to its new owner when he heard shouting. He pushed through a large crowd obscuring the speaker to find out what it was all about.

“Caesar Augustus is issuing a new proclamation,” the speaker hollered with a self-important air as he read from a scroll he held open in his hands. “Everyone anywhere is to go back to where they were born and report to the authorities for a census count.”<sup>3</sup>

Joseph stared dumbfounded.

Caesar had provided a way out of their dilemma, but for his betrothed, who was growing larger with child every day, it would be uncomfortable.

After dropping off the table to its delighted owner, Joseph hurried to tell Mary.

One week later, her father got his wish. After a quiet private ceremony, his daughter Mary was a married woman.

Joseph lifted Mary’s wooden chest of handmade things into a small cart he had built solidly from good wood. He had painstakingly finished it so there were no rough edges. Stepping back, he looked it over. Piled with his and Mary’s things, Joseph was glad he had had the foresight to construct it.

It was good work and he knew it.

Joseph walked around the cart and soothed the donkey upset by an argument Mary was having with her mother. Before he went back to pick up another bundle Mary was taking with her, he looked to see if she was all right.

“But Mother!” Mary protested. “I have to go with Joseph! Caesar Augustus has decreed the census will be taken – with citizens returning to their birthplaces. Joseph will *have* to leave Nazareth to return to Bethlehem and I don’t want to be left behind! I’m his wife!”

As if on cue, Mary’s skin rolled under the robe she wore.

Joseph watched her mother standing in the open doorway of her home. He saw Mary’s face crumple when she looked up into her mother’s eyes. It

wasn't shared joy over the baby's upcoming birth that Joseph observed in his mother-in-law's expression before she dropped her eyes; it was barely veiled disgust. "You're pregnant. It's over one hundred miles to get there." Her mother told her abruptly as if that was the end of their discussion.

Joseph was getting annoyed.

He masked his expression by bending over to pick up the last parcel on the ground and straightened up in time to watch Mary swallow a sob and bite her lip.

"Mother, I'm going with Joseph," she declared with finality, but stared at her mother helplessly like the young girl she was.

"I'm still your mother. Your father may not appear to care, but you're still my daughter." Joseph watched amazed as Mary's mother opened her arms and Mary flew into them, weeping.

He brushed tears from his eyes as he watched the tender scene. As long as he lived, he would never completely understand women.

Mary's mother gently pried her daughter's arms from her neck. She glanced toward the house and added in a low voice. "All right, Mary, you win. You're right – going with him is the best thing – the only choice you have. He is your husband and you can't stay here. I'll pray for your both." She gave Mary one last hug and nodded at Joseph.

Big tears rolled down Mary's face as she stared at her mother's back disappearing through the doorway. Joseph put an arm around her and gave her a squeeze. "You may feel alone now. But you have me, and God has us both."

Mary smiled through her tears and told him, "I'm going to bear the Messiah and *nobody* can take that away from us."

"Ready?" He looked back as she took one last look at her home. He helped her onto the donkey, and walked around to pick up its lead. With eyes straight ahead, he took the first step toward Bethlehem and whatever God had planned for them.

Mary jerked awake.

The donkey's slow rocking pace had lulled her to sleep, but its loud bray woke her up just in time to grab the donkey's mane to keep from slipping off.

"Joseph?" she called,

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He came around and asked, "What is it?"

"Can we stop for the night? We've traveled all day and I'm so tired!" She looked beyond the road they were on through the gathering dusk to the hills beyond.

"I think that outcropping of rock over there would suit us for a place to sleep," he suggested, pointing toward a knoll in the distance ahead. "Can you make it for just a little while longer?"

"I think so," Mary replied hesitantly. She didn't want to complain about her ribs, bruised by the unborn child's constant kicking. "All right then. Let's go."

He turned away to walk back and pick up the donkey's lead. Mary smiled shyly as she watch the back of Joseph's head, at the way his black hair curled around the nape of his neck.

She let her mind drift, wondering what the days ahead would hold. What would life be like with the man she called her husband, but whom she barely knew? Her only first-hand knowledge of him was months ago during the short time he had spent building the addition onto her parents' house.

Once they arrived at their destination and he lifted her down from the donkey to stand unsteadily on her feet, Mary touched his shoulder. "Joseph?" she asked meekly, staring at the ground.

"What?" he answered, tipping her chin up to bring her eyes level with his.

Mary liked his eyes. She liked the direct way he looked at her, his candor, and the way his brown eyes crinkled at the corners, as they were now.

She fought the impulse to pull away.

It was her first time being at such close proximity to a man, and Mary was distinctly uncomfortable. Instead, she let her eyes travel down his face past his prominent nose to his mouth.

"W-would you tell me one of your stories?"

"Of course I can," he answered, letting go of her chin to turn around and lift a bundle from the cart. As he untied the ropes that bound it, Joseph asked, "Are there any special stories you'd like to hear?"

Before Mary could answer, he walked over to a flat grassy area to first spread sheepskins as ground covers, and then blankets on top to wrap up in. Helping him was out of the question. Bending or reaching seemed impossible,

and every bone in her body ached.

"I'm sorry we didn't stop in Scythopolis," Joseph continued, without waiting for an answer to his question as he bustled about. "It would have slowed us down to stop there in the middle of the day. I hope you don't mind sleeping on the ground in the open air."

"It doesn't matter," she told him. "I really don't mind."

Feeling useless, Mary gingerly bent over and reached into the pouch Joseph had opened. She pulled out two plates switched together from pieces of leather and laid them out on a flat rock. Then she unwrapped small bundles of dried fruits, meat, and flat bread they had brought, and prepared dinner.

When Joseph finished what he was doing, he walked over to where Mary was working. "Why don't you come back over here and rest," he suggested. "I'll bring those plates you've fixed."

Once they had settled on their makeshift beds with their plates of food beside them, he asked the question again, "What stories do you like?"

She looked at him timidly. "Father used to love telling the old stories. I would enjoy hearing any you'd like to share."

"You're so undemanding, little one."

Joseph said the words with such tenderness Mary's eyes teared. Since finding out her pregnancy was divine, he had treated her far differently from before, for which she was definitely grateful.

During the time they had made camp, night had already fallen.

After he had started a fire to keep the predators away, she leaned back on her covers to look up at the sky with its mantle of stars winking back at her.

"Solomon was a man torn between two worlds, wasn't he?" she murmured, hoping to introduce the subject by piquing his interest. Mary looked over and saw in the moonlight that he was watching her.

"He was," Joseph agreed. When he smiled, his teeth gleamed white in the moonlight. "Would you like to hear a story about what happened to Solomon after his father, King David, died?"

Mary nodded.

Cleverly woven through dramatization and characters-turned-storytellers, gripping stories of Jesus Christ's lineage span thirty generations of Old Testament History, unveiling God's secrets and revealing mankind's purpose.

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