



A DEEPER WELL

The Story of the Woman at the Well

JILL EILEEN
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For the misunderstood and misrepresented
and for those who wish they could
undo all the mistakes of their past,
this story is for you.

Prologue



'll never forget the first time I saw him. He sat on a grassy knoll near Jacob's well, eyes closed. He wore an undyed mantle over a long, plain tunic with his blue and white tzitzit visibly hanging below his knees. A Jew. What was he doing here in Samaria?

I couldn't tell if he was sleeping or praying, but the closer I came, the wearier he looked.

I did not fear him. I probably should have. He was a man, after all, and I a woman alone. My only defense was the jar resting on my shoulder. I could have thrown it at him and run back to Sychar. But I was not a fast runner. Besides, what could he do to me that my previous husbands had not already done?

I had no idea why he was sitting there, but I didn't really care in that moment. The sun beat down on me, and sweat trickled down my back, reminding me that if things were different, if I had not made the choice I had made that morning, I wouldn't be here at the hottest part of the day.

And I wouldn't have felt the knot in my middle the moment he lifted his head and gazed at me. His presence unnerved me, but I tried to ignore him as I tied the rope to my jar and lowered it until I heard the distant splash and gurgle of water filling

the jar. I waited, avoiding the man yet ever aware of him. If he moved toward me, I would run, jar or not. But he simply sat there until I had pulled the rope and dragged the jar over the lip of the well.

He shifted slightly, facing me. “Will you give me a drink?”

Those eyes. I will never forget the way he looked at me. As if he knew me. But why was he speaking to me? His exhaustion was evident, and I did not doubt his thirst. Still, I hesitated.

“You are a Jew,” I said at last, “and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?” I mean, honestly. Hadn’t I heard over and over through the years that Samaritan women were unclean to Jewish men? If he so much as took a cup of water from me, he would be unclean, though why we were so maligned, I’d never understood. We weren’t *always* ritually unclean. Still, why was he even here, talking to me? It made no sense, and I wanted no part of him or his reason for being here.

He straightened. Nothing in his appearance stood out as remarkable. He didn’t strike me as anything like the men I had married or the one I had always loved.

“If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water,” the man said after a brief pause, as if waiting for me to fully listen.

Living water?

I had no idea then what he meant or where our conversation would lead us. I did not know that this Jew would be my undoing, would completely change my life. My pathetic, mostly loveless, bitter life, which had cost me much and always would. If only things had been different. If only my father had made a better match for me from the start, I wouldn’t be in this situation. And I would never have been at Jacob’s well in the hottest part of the day, talking to a Jew.

But before I continue with what happened with that man, let me tell you my story from the beginning.

1



kicked at the stones along the path as I lugged water from Jacob's well to my parents' home in Sychar. I glanced behind me at Gali, my best friend, who always lagged behind, and caught a glimpse of Mt. Gerizim in the distance. The sun had dipped below its summit, signaling the need to hurry before darkness fell. Before the young men bent on harm emerged to roam the streets or we had an unfortunate run-in with a Roman.

"Come on, Gali," I called over my shoulder. "They're going to close the gates on us."

"I'm coming." Hurried steps hit the dirt path behind me, but Gali's shorter legs could not keep up with my longer strides. "Slow down, Ness."

I dropped back a bit, but my heartbeat quickened at the distance we still had to cover. "We should have come sooner," I said, shifting the weight of the jar to my other shoulder. My back ached from the cycle that had begun that morning, proof that I was now able to beget, to wed. How relieved Ima had been, though I did not see the urgency. True, I was thirteen and could have married sooner, but I was in no hurry to leave my father's home as my older sisters had done.

"I had to finish helping my ima," Gali said, puffing with the

effort to pick up her pace. “You could have come without me if you’re that worried about the sun setting.”

“You don’t have to sound so irritated.” I frowned as Gali came alongside. “The other women came earlier, but I couldn’t let you come alone and you know it.” Best friend or not, sometimes Gali could be so annoying.

“You talk like you’re a woman like the others. We’re still girls.” Sweat trickled down Gali’s narrow face. She was a year younger and not yet a woman, and I didn’t have the heart to tell her the truth. Why trouble our friendship? And yet, if my mother had her way, I would be betrothed before the next new moon.

I drew my headscarf closer to my face and released a sigh as the gates to the city drew near. We did not speak as we passed the lone Roman guard standing at the entrance. Though the Romans had never bothered us, there was talk of what they had done to other women who walked alone. I breathed easier once we were well past him.

“We made it.” I smiled at Gali, whose scarf blew behind her in the evening breeze.

We continued down the narrow street through the city to a section of homes on the east side. Dusk settled as we stopped in front of my courtyard.

“Tomorrow I’ll try to get away earlier,” Gali said as she turned toward her home next door. She entered her courtyard and lowered the jar to the indentation in the ground near the front door.

I moved through our courtyard and set my jar near our door, then scooped some water into a smaller clay jar resting nearby and carried it into the house. Lamps burned at the window, where white linen curtains fluttered, and also lit the table where Ima and I would set the food.

“I was beginning to worry,” Ima said, looking at me with fondness. “Did the pain slow you down? There is always pain with these monthly cycles, but you’ll get used to it.”

“Gali was late getting away. Tomorrow we will do better,” I promised.

“Set the dishes of cucumbers and olives on the table. And don’t forget the bread,” she called over her shoulder. “The men will be in soon.” She carried a large clay pot of barley stew and placed it on the table where Abba, my brother Chen, and our cousin Lavi would recline. Lavi worked with Abba, and his presence around the table normally brought laughter as his humor was contagious.

I courted a secret smile at the memories of the fun we’d had when we were younger. Lavi often teased me beyond reason, but I didn’t take him seriously. His tone never carried the sting of hurt that came from my sisters when they made fun of my appearance.

“Don’t listen to them, Ness,” Lavi had said. “They’re jealous because you’re so beautiful. You know I’ll marry you one day and they’re jealous of that too.”

Was I really as beautiful as Lavi had said? When I stared in the bronze mirror, it was hard to truly see my reflection, but I had begun to notice the way the young men at synagogue looked at me. Gawked was probably a better description. It made me feel strange inside.

The door opened as I placed the last dish on the table, the men laughing and talking all at once. The nagging pain in my back made me long to lie on my pallet, but I could not leave Ima alone to serve. Besides, I didn’t want to strain this sudden affection Ima showed me. Was becoming a woman so important that it warranted such a change in attitude? Was this what it took to gain my mother’s love?

“Come now,” my father said, taking his place among the cushions surrounding the table. “Let us give thanks.”

I knelt, as did my mother, and the men bowed their heads. “Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the Universe, who brings forth bread from the earth,” they said in unison.

I stood, filled the cups with wine from the skin, and took my place at the end of the table near my mother.

“We have good news to share with you all,” Ima said after dipping her bread into the stew. She looked fondly at me again, making my heart skip a beat. She wasn’t going to tell the men, was she?

“Our Nessa is a woman today!” she said in triumph. “Adonai be praised!”

“Ima!” Mortified, I felt my cheeks grow hot under the scrutiny of the men.

“A woman at last,” Chen said, laughing. “So, you will soon be off to a home of your own like our sisters.”

I studied my food, unable to lift my head to look at any of them.

“Meital, Yaffa, and Adva were thrilled when this day came. Where is your joy, my child?” Ima asked, touching my arm. “Lift your head. You are a woman now!”

“Good,” Lavi said, his tone softer and more serious than normal. “Now you can marry me.”

I gave him a sharp look, then glanced at Abba reclining at the head of the table. He had always favored me and treated me kindly. Would he treat Lavi the same and give him my hand in marriage?

“I’m sure we still have plenty of time to discuss your betrothal,” Abba said, his gaze shifting from me to my mother. “There is no hurry.”

My mother opened her mouth as if to protest, then shut it again and looked away. They would discuss this later, no doubt, when I couldn’t hear them, and in the end, as she always did, my mother would win. But would Lavi? Did I want him to?



Lavi’s hopes had soared the moment Aunt Lihi announced that Nessa was a woman now. At last! He’d known nearly as

soon as Uncle Raanan had taken him in after the death of his parents that he would marry Nessa. Cousin or not, he could not imagine loving anyone more.

He'd been so sure that they belonged together and never once doubted she would be his. Until he'd seen the look pass between Lihi and Raanan after his declaration. While he had always spoken his mind around the family table, he realized in that moment he should not have spoken.

Now as he walked from his room to the building where he helped Chen and Raanan build tents, his heart pounded. If Raanan would listen and allow him to state his case, surely he could convince him that he was the only one who could truly love Nessa, not for her beauty—though there was no denying she was a rare gem in a city of ordinary women—but for herself. Raanan would see that, wouldn't he?

He smoothed his hands on his tunic and blew out a long-held breath as he approached the building. The cool mist of morning air brushed the skin on his arms as the damp grass tickled his feet. He glanced about, remembering the many hours he and Nessa had chased each other here as children in the early days of his loss.

The prick of grief never really left him, but quietly and patiently loving Nessa, waiting for this moment, had made his life bearable, even hopeful. Now, if he could convince his uncle to seal their betrothal, life would be perfect.

He opened the door to the shop and was grateful to find Raanan alone. His uncle looked up and gave Lavi a slight nod. Raanan was a man of few words, and Lavi often found it difficult to talk at length with him.

He cleared his throat and approached. "Uncle, may I speak with you?"

Raanan set the flint knife on a table beside him and met Lavi's gaze. "Yes?" His puzzled expression did not help ease Lavi's anxious thoughts.

“It’s about Nessa.” He swallowed hard past the sudden lump in his throat. “It is no secret that I would like her to become my wife. Now that she is . . . able to wed . . . I would like to formally request her hand in marriage.”

Raanan studied him as he stroked his beard. Lavi dare not breathe too deeply, lest it cause his uncle to look on him with disfavor.

“You have no means to support her, my son. If you marry her, you would both be living here, and I would be the one to support you both and any children you have. You are not ready to begin a business of your own nor to purchase a house. Did you plan to live under my roof all of your days and have my daughter as well?” Raanan’s voice remained steady and low, not angry or heated, yet he quashed Lavi’s hopes with every word.

“I would work hard to find a way to support us both. Even if we are betrothed soon, we would have a year. I will prove myself to you,” he said, his words rushed. “I love her, Uncle. I would treat her well.” The pleading in his voice could not be lost on his uncle, yet he saw no change in the man’s expression, though a deep sigh lifted his chest.

“My son, Nessa is a favored daughter, and many men in Sychar have watched her for the past year. Lihi has had mothers approach her, and I’ve had fathers speak to me after synagogue and at the city gate. Every one of them can give us a hefty bride-price, whereas you have nothing to offer either me or Nessa. How am I to answer that?”

“Isn’t my love worth anything?” Lavi hated the plaintive quality in his tone.

“You cannot live on love, my son.”

Lavi’s hopes fell, and he could think of nothing else to say that might convince his uncle.

Raanan motioned to the area where Lavi normally worked. “I will consider your request, but I cannot promise. Now get

to work and show me that you have the ability to one day do as you say and give my daughter the life she deserves.”

To thank him for what felt like nothing did not sit well with Lavi, but he muttered the words just the same. He moved to his area of the building and began to stretch the fabric over the frame to be sure it was the right size, his mind whirling. What more could he do to prove his worth when his uncle had never paid him more than food and a place to live? The few coins he occasionally received could never add up to enough for a bride-price for any woman. Why hadn't he considered that problem years ago?

But he hadn't, and now he would be competing with the men of Sychar, who would not see Nessa for the caring, funny, happy young woman he knew. They only saw her outward beauty—her thick dark hair, large and expressive dark eyes, and heart-shaped face. He didn't need to imagine much to know that she had curves in all the right places and lips that caused him to dream of kissing her when he lay on his mat at night. Men watched her, and he knew they did not have pure thoughts as she passed them in the market or sat with the women at synagogue.

Would Raanan truly allow her to marry one of them? The thought made him suddenly nauseous. No. He couldn't. *Please, Adonai, don't let him give her to another.*

Would God hear his prayer? He had never really thought to pray before this moment, but now it felt as though his future depended on more than himself. He needed all the help he could get, and God seemed like the best choice since he had no one else.



I lay awake long into the night, listening to my parents argue in the next room, though I could not hear their actual words. At last sleep came in spurts, and I woke early, no longer able to

lie abed. Restlessness filled me, and with it the need to speak to my father. Surely he would listen to me and not just marry me off to anyone my mother had chosen.

I bided my time as I worked with my mother to grind the grain and sweep the stone floors. The men had left to go to the shop, where they made tents for those who could not afford brick homes and to sell to passersby. For my part, I spun the goats' hair my mother wove to make the colorful rugs, material for the tents, clothing, and other household goods.

"You must take my place at the loom today," my mother said, basket over her arm. "I'm going to market. Be sure to finish the piece I began yesterday."

"Yes, Ima," I said, taking her place at the wooden loom.

"Good girl." Ima left the house without a backward glance, but I caught the determined set to her jaw and knew that this trip would mean more than a casual outing to buy spices or some other product she needed. She was off to tell the whole town of Sychar that I was now able to marry, and I had not yet even told Gali.

Irritation spiked with the embarrassment I still felt from last evening's meal. I walked to the door and peered into the street, making sure my mother was out of sight, then quickly slipped into my plain leather sandals and ran to the back of the house. I needed to tell Gali, but I needed to speak to my father more.

I found him alone, thankfully, carving a piece of wood that would make one of the beams for the tents. "Abba?" I said, coming alongside him.

"Nessa. What are you doing here?" He set the wood aside and faced me. "Did your mother send you?"

I looked behind him to be sure Chen and Lavi were not close enough to hear. I shook my head. "Ima went to market. I hoped to speak with you."

He cupped my cheek with a gentle hand. "You are worried. Tell me, my child."

As his youngest child and fourth daughter, I should not receive special attention from him. After all, his first three children had been a sore disappointment in that they were girls and not beautiful. When Chen came along, I later learned, there was great rejoicing in the household. And when I came a year later, the sting of disappointment was no longer there. For reasons I did not understand, I found greater favor in Abba's eyes than Meital, Yaffa, or Adva ever had. And except for Yaffa, they did not treat me all that well because of it. Couldn't he see that he should not show favoritism? And yet, I needed that favor now.

"Are you going to betroth me to Lavi, Abba? Or has Ima picked someone else I don't know?" I wouldn't mind marrying my cousin, though I wasn't sure my parents felt the same about him. Lavi was humorous and a decent worker, but I'd heard complaints about the friends he ran with when he was not working.

"Do you want to marry Lavi?" He tilted his head to peer into my eyes.

I shrugged. "I don't know. I think so."

"Your ima has had the mothers of other young men approach her for the past year, and she put them off," he said, revealing what I knew but never wanted to ponder.

"Can we put it off a little longer, Abba? I'm not sure I'm ready." I searched his face, and he studied me in return.

"Put it off? For how long?" He frowned and ran a hand over his speckled beard.

"A few months perhaps? Until I adjust . . ." I looked beyond him, avoiding his gaze.

He patted my shoulder. "My dear girl. You are already thirteen." He paused, and indecision flickered in his eyes.

"Please, Abba. Until we are sure about Lavi at least?"

"He already approached me this very morn."

The news surprised me. "I didn't know he was so anxious." I bit my lower lip, suddenly wondering why I was so hesitant

about this cousin I had known all my life. A flash of memory clouded my thoughts of Lavi stealing a loaf of bread from a merchant when I was eight and he was ten.

“Put that back,” I had hissed in his ear. “You shouldn’t steal. They could stone you for it.”

Lavi laughed as he grabbed my hand and ran toward home. “No one saw me.” He tore off a piece and popped it into his mouth, offering me one as well.

I had vehemently shaken my head. “I will not share in your thievery, Lavi ben Erez. It’s wrong!”

“Nessa? What are you doing here?” Lavi’s voice at that moment pulled me up short. I whirled about, then looked back at my father and gave him a pleading look.

“I will consider your request, my daughter. Now return to your work.” He shooed me away, and before Lavi could speak again, I picked up my skirts and ran back toward the house.

I paused at the narrow path between my house and Gali’s. We would see each other that evening, but I couldn’t wait for her to hear my news from someone else.

I hurried to the door and knocked, and when Gali opened it, I knew she had already heard. Were there no secrets in Sychar?

“Why didn’t you tell me yesterday?” Gali crossed her arms over her narrow chest. “I had to hear it from Ima this morning, along with the disappointment that it wasn’t me.”

“I didn’t want to hurt your feelings.” Misery swept through me. Everything was happening so fast simply because I was a woman now.

“Well, you did. You know you can tell me anything. You *should* have told me first.” Gali lowered her arms, then suddenly smiled and pulled me into a hug. “We’re supposed to do everything together, you know. Can you get your father to wait so we can marry at the same time? At least don’t go and marry Harel. He’s mine!”

Harel was a handsome young farmer who lived with his

father's large family on the outskirts of Sychar. Gali had fallen for him when we'd seen him at synagogue.

"I have no plans to marry Harel." Though we both knew that Harel had shown no interest in Gali. I couldn't bear to let her think her choice was impossible.

"Ima will probably pick someone else by the time I am ready to wed," Gali said, her voice low. "But come in and let's talk about it. Who do you want to marry? Will it be Lavi?"

"I can't," I said. "I have to get to work weaving while Ima is at the market or she will be angry. We can talk on our walk to the well tonight." I touched Gali's arm, then turned and ran back home, my mind spinning.

Why did growing older have to make everything so complicated? I would turn back time to be a child again, if only I could.

2

Time passed quickly over the next week as I completed my ritual purification and returned with my family to the synagogue for the reading of Torah and singing of our hymns. The day after Shabbat, I worked with my mother to finish the weaving of her famous colorfully designed rugs, then stood beside our donkey laden with the load of them. Abba, Chen, and Lavi accompanied us and shared our excitement of seeing a passing caravan.

“Ima!” my sister Meital called, hurrying through the market toward us.

“Meital!”

The embrace they shared caused a twinge of hurt to quicken my heart. My oldest sister had always been Ima’s favorite, and everyone knew it.

“Yaffa. Adva. You’re all here,” Ima said a moment after she released Meital and the others ran toward us.

I acknowledged them all with a cursory hug, then focused my attention on the camels bedecked with jewels and ornate saddles. They carried wares from as far away as Syrophenicia, a place to the north of Samaria and all that I knew. What would it be like to travel to distant places?

“Your mother seems happy to see your sisters again.”

I jumped at the sound of Lavi’s voice so near. “Lavi.” My

heart skipped a beat at the way he looked at me. “You scared me.”

He laughed outright. “Scared of me, Nessa? Why?” He looked a little annoyed by my comment amid his humor.

“Surprised would be more accurate.” I met his gaze, smiling. Had he truly asked my father for my hand so soon? While Lavi had his problems—the stealing when he was young and his quick temper at times—I loved him as much as I did Chen. But could I marry him? “Isn’t this exciting?” I said, changing the subject from my wayward thoughts.

Lavi’s fingers brushed mine as we walked closer to the camels. “Let’s take a look,” he said.

I hurried to keep up with him as children darted between the adults in the crowd and men and women bartered with the caravan driver and the merchants accompanying him. The scents of camel dung and sweat mingled with the sweeter smells of pomegranates, spices, and oranges. Leather goods carried a rich, deep scent, drawing my attention. Piles of white wool hung tied on one side of the nearest camel.

“So many things,” I said barely above a whisper. “I hope Ima and Abba can sell their wares for a fair price.”

“Is there anything you see that you like?” Lavi touched a strand of beads hanging from one of the camel’s necks. “These would look beautiful on you.” His dark eyes probed mine, causing my heart to flutter. “But then anything you wear only enhances your beauty.”

My cheeks grew hot. I smacked his arm. “You shouldn’t say things like that. Someone might hear you.” I turned away, both embarrassed and secretly pleased.

“I don’t care who hears me, Ness.” He touched my shoulder, coaxing me to meet his gaze. “You know I want you to be mine.”

I could not pull away. “I know,” I said softly. Shyness swept over me all of a sudden, and I stepped back. “But we are not yet betrothed. We should not assume.”

Lavi scoffed. “Your father knows me, Nessa. Who else would make a better husband to you?” He fingered the earrings that matched an even brighter necklace, one with jewels like a bridal crown. “But I know your mother is also talking to the other mothers in town. I don’t have anything to offer your father as a bride-price. I think he hesitates because of that.” He drew a hand down the scruff on his chin, not yet a full beard. “You know, it would help if you told your father that you want me. He listens to you.”

I found my sandals fascinating at that moment. Anything to avoid the pleading in his eyes. “I asked him to wait a little.” I lifted my head, urging him with a look to really hear me. “I’m not ready, Lavi. Give me a little longer.”

“But why?” He frowned. “Have I offended you?”

“No, no! I’m just adjusting to the idea of marriage, that’s all.” Was that really my reason?

“But we’ve talked about this since we were young. Aren’t all girls anxious to wed once they are able?” His confusion matched the feelings in my heart.

“Well, yes. I suppose so. That is . . . I’m not sure everyone feels the same—”

“Nessa! There you are!” Gali rushed up to me. “Why didn’t you wait for us?” She looked at Lavi. “Am I interrupting something?” she whispered, leaning close.

I shook my head. “You’re fine.” I faced Lavi. “I will be back.” Grabbing Gali’s hand, I pulled her toward the cheese maker’s booth. “Come with me.”

“Are you running from him?” Gali asked when we were out of earshot. “Aren’t you supposed to marry him?”

“He wants to marry me,” I corrected. “I don’t know what I want. Or what my father wants.”

“But he is already part of your family. Your father shouldn’t have any reason to hesitate.” Gali sized me up with her typical no-nonsense expression. “What’s going on, Ness?”

I lifted one shoulder in a half shrug. “I don’t know. I asked my father for a little time to adjust. It’s not like I can wait for you to . . . you know . . . so we can wed at the same time. But I had hoped to be planning our weddings together, and now everything is changing so fast!”

Gali patted my hand. “I want the same thing, but I’ll be one of your maids, and when it’s my turn, you’ll be mine. You can’t slow down what is determined to come, Ness.”

“I know.” The thought simply brought more misery. “I don’t know what’s wrong with me. I can’t imagine marrying anyone else. I guess I should tell that to my father.”

“Definitely,” Gali said.

A commotion of loud voices and boisterous laughter pulled us out of the cheese maker’s booth. I turned to see my father embracing an older man, apparently someone he hadn’t seen in a while. I studied them a moment. The man had a familiar look, but I couldn’t place him.

“Let’s go back to the camels to see the things the merchants have brought,” Gali said, tugging my arm. “They will be gone before we know it.”

I nodded, still watching my father talking with the stranger. My sisters were clustered around my mother, and Lavi had found Chen again. They appeared to be haggling over a large bundle of wool.

Gali stopped at the side of a camel, where beads and jewels hung. “I wonder how much these cost,” she said, her eyes alight. “Maybe they have a bridal crown you could ask your father to purchase for your wedding.”

I scoffed. “My father is not going to spend money on me. He will tell me to wear the bridal crown worn by my mother and sisters. Our family is not going to purchase something new just for me.” Not that I minded. There was something good in knowing I would be wearing my family’s traditional jewels

when that day came. But would a necklace as Lavi had shown me be so wrong to want?

I touched one of the sparkling necklaces and matching earrings as a woman approached from my right. “Ahh, I can see you have good taste in jewels, young woman. But they are quite costly.”

I took a step back. “They are beautiful, but I could never spend money on jewels.”

The woman tsked. “For you? I give you necklace and earrings for two denarii, eh? It is not so much.” She lifted her hands in a dismissive gesture, as if such a large amount should mean nothing to me. Was she serious? “Are you betrothed?” she asked, looking beyond me. I did not dare follow her gaze in case Lavi stood there listening. But she seemed to be directing her words at someone other than me. “Perhaps your young man should come and see me so he has a proper gift to give you on that day.” She searched my face. Her smile showed slightly yellowed and crooked teeth, but her eyes were kind.

“I am not betrothed yet,” I said. “And I do not know who my betrothed will be, so I could not send him to you.” I bowed to the woman. “But I thank you.”

“Come now. Why don’t you at least try them on? With your beauty, these jewels would shine like the stars.” The woman took them from the camel’s side and held them out to me.

“I couldn’t.” My protest sounded weak.

“Come on, Ness. You know you want to.” Gali was not helping.

The woman draped the shining beads over my neck and slipped the earrings into the holes in my ears, then pulled me toward a bronze mirror to see myself, however imperfectly.

“Oh, Ness, you look amazing,” Gali breathed, a hand to her heart.

I wanted to scoff, but one look in the glass and a glance into Gali’s earnest face, and I held my response in check.

“Nessa?” Ima’s voice from behind made me jump nearly out of my skin.

“Ima!” I yanked the beads and earrings off me and thrust them into the hands of the merchant. “I was just looking.”

My mother, with my sisters crowding around, looked at the jewels then at me. “We have plenty of jewels for your wedding,” Ima said. “There is no need to wish for more when your sisters were perfectly fine with what we have.”

Meital lifted her chin and Adva scoffed, and they both turned and walked away. Yaffa gave me a compassionate look and touched my arm. “Don’t worry, Ness. They’re just jealous.”

I had always sensed it was true but thought Yaffa felt the same way. Was I wrong about this sister?

“Come on, Yaffa!” Meital called over her shoulder. Ima had already followed her and Adva away from the camels to another part of the market.

Yaffa leaned in close to my ear. “You’re Abba’s favorite, Ness. That affects us all.” She turned and left then.

I looked at Gali. “My family hates me.”

“They don’t hate you, Ness,” Gali said, linking arms with me. “You’re just prettier than they are, and for some reason they think your abba loves you more. That would make me jealous too, you know.”

I shook free of her grasp. “Well, it shouldn’t. I have no control over such things.” I stalked away, and Gali hurried after me.

“Ness! Stop!” She reached my side and grabbed my hand. “Please. The merchants are only here for today. Forget your sisters and the jewels and even Lavi. Let’s just look around.”

I drew in a breath. “You’re right. Let’s go.”

Gali led us back to the market, and we spent the day looking at things we could not afford to purchase.

Later that evening I helped Ima in silence, listening as she chattered about my sisters and possible suitors who might come calling any day now. I placed the food on the table as always,

and when the door opened with my father and brother and Lavi, the man I had seen at the market was in their company.

“Hurry and set another place,” Ima hissed as the older man settled on the cushions next to Abba. I ran to the cooking area, found a dish and cup for wine, and set them before the man.

“And this is my youngest daughter, Nessa,” Abba said as I backed away from the man. “Nessa, this is Amichai, an old friend of mine.”

I bowed. “Shalom. A pleasure to meet you,” I said, then rushed from the room.

“She’s a quiet one,” my father said. “But she’s a good young woman. Always helpful.”

Why was he singing my praises when they weren’t even true? I didn’t feel helpful most of the time. Or good. Not with some of the thoughts that ran through my mind.

The men continued to talk, and Ima and I carried the flatbread and sauces to the table and took our seats at the end of the table. I chewed a piece of flatbread that was tasteless despite the spices Ima had added to these loaves.

Chen spoke with Abba and Amichai, but Lavi remained unusually silent. One glance in his direction showed me why. Fear flitted in his gaze, and he kept looking at Abba’s friend as if he was another suitor. But he was simply an old friend of Abba’s, not someone who wanted to marry me.

But Lavi’s misery worried me. I would speak to Abba on his behalf tomorrow. Put Lavi’s fears to rest and begin to plan our betrothal. Yes, that was truly what I wanted. I couldn’t bear to see him fear losing me, especially when there was nothing to fear. I loved him. I did.

Tomorrow I would make sure he knew it.