

TESSA
AFSHAR



A NOVEL

PRAISE FOR *DAUGHTER OF ROME* AND OTHER NOVELS BY TESSA AFSHAR

“Tessa Afshar has the rare gift of seamlessly blending impeccable historical research and theological depth with lyrical prose and engaging characters. In *Daughter of Rome*, Afshar imagines the multi-textured lives of Priscilla and Aquila, coworkers of the apostle Paul, as they are stretched and shaped through their losses and love. What emerges is a compelling story about their faith and faithfulness—a story that invites our response of faith and faithfulness as well.”

SHARON GARLOUGH BROWN, AUTHOR OF *SHADES OF LIGHT*
AND THE SENSIBLE SHOES SERIES

“Tessa Afshar’s ability to transport readers into the culture and characters of her biblical novels is extraordinary. From the first chapter you’ll feel as if you know Priscilla. You might tear up like I did when she meets Aquila and their story unfolds. *Daughter of Rome* is a feast for your imagination as well as balm for your soul.”

ROBIN JONES GUNN, BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *BECOMING US*

THIEF OF CORINTH

“Afshar again shows her amazing talent for packing action and intrigue into the biblical setting for modern readers.”

PUBLISHERS WEEKLY, STARRED REVIEW

“Lyrical . . . [with] superb momentum, exhilarating scenes, and moving themes of love and determination. . . . Afshar brings to life the gripping tale of one woman’s struggle to choose between rebellion and love.”

BOOKLIST

“Afshar’s well-drawn characters and lushly detailed setting vividly bring to life the ancient world of the Bible. A solid choice for fans of Francine Rivers and Bodie and Brock Thoene.”

LIBRARY JOURNAL

BREAD OF ANGELS

“Afshar continues to demonstrate an exquisite ability to bring the women of the Bible to life, this time shining a light on Lydia, the seller of purple, and skillfully balancing fact with imagination.”

ROMANTIC TIMES

“Afshar has created an unforgettable story of dedication, betrayal, and redemption that culminates in a rich testament to God’s mercies and miracles.”

PUBLISHERS WEEKLY

“With sublime writing and solid research, [Afshar] captures the distinctive experience of living at a time when Christianity was in its fledgling stages.”

LIBRARY JOURNAL

“Readers who enjoy Francine Rivers’s Lineage of Grace series will love this stand-alone book.”

CHRISTIAN MARKET

“With its resourceful, resilient heroine and vibrant narrative, *Bread of Angels* offers an engrossing new look at a mysterious woman of faith.”

FOREWORD MAGAZINE

LAND OF SILENCE

“Readers will be moved by Elianna’s faith, and Afshar’s elegant evocation of biblical life will keep them spellbound. An excellent choice for fans of Francine Rivers’s historical fiction and those who read for character.”

LIBRARY JOURNAL

“Fans of biblical fiction will enjoy an absorbing and well-researched chariot ride.”

PUBLISHERS WEEKLY

“In perhaps her best novel to date, Afshar . . . grants a familiar [biblical] character not only a name, but also a poignant history to which many modern readers can relate. The wit, the romance, and the humanity make Elianna’s journey uplifting as well as soul touching.”

ROMANTIC TIMES, TOP PICK REVIEW

“Heartache and healing blend beautifully in this gem among Christian fiction.”

CBA RETAILERS + RESOURCES

“An impressively crafted, inherently appealing, consistently engaging, and compelling read from first page to last, *Land of Silence* is enthusiastically recommended for community library historical fiction collections.”

MIDWEST BOOK REVIEWS

“This captivating story of love, loss, faith, and hope gives a realistic glimpse of what life might have been like in ancient Palestine.”

WORLD MAGAZINE

TESSA AFSHAR



*Daughter
of
Rome*



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Daughter of Rome

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For Jessie:

Kind. Thoughtful. Funny. Smart. Beautiful.

My lovable bookworm.

You will always be a treasure to my heart.

Also by Tessa Afshar

Bread of Angels

Land of Silence

Pearl in the Sand

Harvest of Rubies

Harvest of Gold

In the Field of Grace

*We will tell the next generation
the praiseworthy deeds of the Lord,
his power, and the wonders he has done.*

PSALM 78:4

Prologue

HEART SLAMMING AGAINST HER CHEST, stomach roiling like floodwaters, Priscilla stood before the closed door. She had come to this same spot four times already without taking a step within. Today she could not turn back. Time had become the enemy she could not conquer. She had to cross over that threshold.

The wooden slats facing her must have once been painted crimson but had long since faded to a sickly rust color. She raised her hand to knock. Her fingers trembled and she clenched them into a fist. She rested her forehead against the peeling paint. She could not go through with this.

She *had* to go through with this.

Before she could recoil again, she slammed her fist into the wood once. Twice. The third time, she crashed her knuckles against the door so hard, the skin scraped off. She was already bleeding and she had not even taken a step inside.

The door was pulled open by a woman with unkempt gray hair and a fold of loose skin under her chin that shook every time she

moved. "I heard you the first time," she said. "No need to knock the door down." She barred the way with her wide body, like a military sentinel, not budging. "What do you want?"

"I am here to . . ." Priscilla stared at her shoes, lost for words. "To see the physician."

The woman said nothing, appraising Priscilla with cold eyes that seemed to calculate the value of her worn tunic and palla, the mantle she wore over her head and shoulders, the delicate earrings with their minute amethyst beads, and her only other piece of jewelry, the chipped glass and silver brooch that sat on one shoulder. For a moment Priscilla thought the woman might deny her entry. Relief flooded her mind, followed immediately by terror. What was she supposed to do if the physician refused to help?

"Have you come alone?" the woman said.

"Yes."

"Do you have the coin?"

Priscilla fished for the small purse half-filled with clinking silver, which she had knotted into the ribbons at her waist. Her unsteady hands fumbled with the string, taking too long for the woman's liking.

Without ceremony, she shoved thick fingers into the ribbons, making short work of the knots. Pouring the coins into her palm, the woman counted them carefully before returning them to their purse, which she then tucked into her belt. Turning her body, she finally allowed Priscilla to walk inside.

The cloying scent of incense burning in an iron brazier made Priscilla dizzy. She licked dry lips as she followed her hostess into the courtyard, where she was directed to sit on a dirty bench. To her surprise, Priscilla found that she was not the only occupant of the narrow atrium. Another young woman sat on the bench at

the opposite end of the rectangular courtyard. She was clothed in an elegant tunic the color of saffron, her face, like Priscilla's own, half-covered by the curtain of her palla.

Priscilla was not supposed to wear a palla, an article of clothing reserved for wives. That small deceit had been a necessity, protecting her secret.

Needing a distraction from her thoughts, Priscilla glanced over at the other woman. Though she could only see a hint of her profile, something about her regal posture and the silhouette of her face visible through her veil struck Priscilla as familiar. Here sat another soul suffering the consequences of one moment of foolishness, a companion in shame.

Someone screamed in a room above them, making Priscilla jump. The sealed door muted the sound but could not altogether hide the agony of the female whose howls were dwindling to moans. The breath caught in Priscilla's chest. On shaking legs, she pushed herself to the fountain that occupied the middle of the courtyard and leaned into its hot, gray stones to keep from collapsing. She shoved her hand into the water and rinsed her face. The water, as warm as the air, settled wet and heavy on her skin.

A cool breeze wafted in through the wide opening in the ceiling, and Priscilla lifted her head to its caress. It blew harder, making her tunic dance around her legs. From the corner of her eye, she saw the breeze catch the veil covering her silent companion's face, lifting it onto her shoulders. The woman replaced the fabric hastily. But Priscilla had seen enough. She would have recognized that face anywhere.

"Antonia!" she whispered, shocked. "Antonia," she said again, this time louder, lifting an arm in greeting.

Antonia turned her face away, ignoring Priscilla.

Priscilla slumped, dropping her arm. Not that she could blame the young woman. This was no place to be found. Especially not if you were the unmarried niece of the emperor Claudius.

Priscilla could not claim to be the girl's friend. They had barely met. When her father had been alive, he sometimes deigned to take her to gatherings hosted by the nobility of Rome. She had run into Antonia two or three times. Even then, Priscilla had been too unimportant to merit more than a formal introduction. But the aquiline features with their unique cast were hard to forget.

Shoulders drooping, Priscilla returned to the dirty bench and sat, her back sagging against the wall. She wondered what misfortune had brought Antonia to this house of pain. Surely any man would want a girl of such beauty and high connections for his wife. Unlike herself.

She thought of the first time she had seen Appius, with his dark hair and winsome smile as he drew on papyrus, his eyes eating Priscilla with hunger as if she were a ripe plum.

Deprived of social connections and companionship after her father's death two years earlier, she had intended to savor every moment of the feast her brother had allowed her to attend. This fellow guest, whose name she had then not even known, was not going to rob her of enjoying such a rare opportunity.

"What are you doing?" she had asked, wriggling with discomfort under the intensity of his gaze.

"Sketching the most beautiful creature I have ever seen."

Priscilla had rolled her eyes and tried to ignore him. Eventually, unable to bear his scrutiny, she had walked over and stood at his shoulder to examine his art. She burst into laughter when she saw what his drawing had produced.

"That's a bird," she said.

"It's a swan," he clarified, his voice wounded. "A glorious swan."

He had drawn the bird beautifully, she had to give him that. There was something majestic about its pose, long neck turned toward the viewer, beak bright against the black markings of its face.

"You are too lovely to be captured in human form."

Priscilla had pursed her lips as if displeased. But her heart had beat faster, making her flush. "What is that?" she said, pointing to the scarlet crown on the swan's head.

Drawing a finger down the length of a red curl resting on her shoulder, he said, "You have stunning hair. I have never seen its equal. It is lovelier than any crown the goddess Hera ever wore."

Having been teased all her life about her red hair, Priscilla had found his praise a heady wine.

"I am Appius," he had said, bowing his head.

"Prisca."

"Any relation to the famed general?"

He had been sharp enough to pick up the association with her name. "General Priscus was my father," she had acknowledged, forbearing to tell Appius that her mother was no more than a slave the general had carried off from Germania. He had married the red-haired enchantress who brought him no gold or important connections. Those he already had through his own bloodlines, and from his first wife, who had dutifully borne him a son and heir. She had died while trying to bear him another.

What would that father say if he could see her now? He would throw her into the streets. Slit her wrists with his own knife. Anything would be better than this shame. All because a man had drawn the silly likeness of a swan. A few weeks earlier, when after a desperate search she had finally found him, Appius had been drawing another swan. It looked exactly like the one he had

sketched of her, but this one had a golden crown, like the young woman who had supposedly inspired it. Wordlessly, Priscilla had dropped the sketch he had made of her, which she always carried on her person like a precious love letter, into the girl's lap. "It's the only thing he can draw," she had said, hoping to spare another woman the pain of discovering his perfidy for herself.

A door slammed above them, and Priscilla turned her head to see the old hostess lead a woman out. She was crying, her body shivering and swaying, her steps unsteady. Their hostess half dragged and half carried her fragile patient down the stairs.

"Sit here," she commanded. "I will bring you something to settle your stomach." She shoved the woman unceremoniously onto a couch before disappearing down a narrow passageway.

Not *woman*, Priscilla amended as she glimpsed her round face. She was hardly more than a child.

Several large spots stained the girl's tunic. Priscilla swallowed hard when she realized they were blood. How was one so young going to survive this nightmare? Without thinking, Priscilla jumped to her feet and approached the girl. "It will be all right," she said. Kneeling by the couch, she stroked the thin, sweat-drenched hair. "You will be fine." She said the words without knowing for certain if they were true. Could this child in the body of a woman emerge from this moment and one day become whole again?

The girl threw herself into Priscilla's arms and wailed. "It hurts!"

Priscilla cradled her. "It will pass. Lean on me. It will pass soon." She hoped she was not making empty promises.

Their hostess returned, bearing an earthenware cup and a threadbare blanket. She gave both to Priscilla. "Make her drink this," she said brusquely, walking to the other side of the court-

yard. "He is ready for you," she told Antonia, her voice devoid of the merest hint of warmth.

Without hesitation, Antonia rose to her feet and followed the woman in silence. Priscilla watched her climb the stairs and disappear inside the physician's chamber. She had to admire Antonia's perfect calm, posture tall, as if she were visiting the baths instead of submitting to the butchery of a surgeon. Neither the prospect of pain nor the torture of loss seemed to hold any sway over her. Priscilla wished she could display half as much poise under the circumstance.

She forced herself to return her attention to the child who still clung to her limply. "Here now, my dear. Drink from this cup. You will feel better."

The girl drank a cautious sip and made a face. "Drink all of it," Priscilla said, and gently tipped the cup.

She obeyed, coughing as she came up from the last mouthful. The smell of the potion was vile enough to turn Priscilla's stomach. No wonder the child had gagged. Priscilla settled next to the girl on the couch and wrapped the blanket about the slight body. Within moments, the child was asleep, clinging to Priscilla even as she sank into restless dreams.

Time passed like a cloud, with torturous slowness. No screams escaped the chamber above. Whatever Antonia was enduring, she did it silently. The weight of that silence was crushing. Priscilla tried not to imagine what the hands of the physician were busy doing at that moment. Again, she considered running out the faded-crimson door. Running and never returning.

And then what? After her father's death, her brother had become sole heir to the general's fortune. Volero Priscus had never forgiven their father for sullying the memory of his noble mother

by replacing her with an ignorant slave from Magna Germania. Never forgiven the general for covering the slave in fine silks and linens and whelping a child on her.

That child had been a sore Volero could not heal, more thorn than kin. As soon as their father had died, he had thrown out the tutor the general had hired for Priscilla, stripped her of her weekly stipend, and reduced her to a state barely above the slaves in the household.

Her brother's disdain had a tendency to turn into cruelty at the slightest provocation. If he discovered her secret, she had no doubt that her body would soon be floating down the dirty currents of the Tiber.

The river Tiber or the chamber above the stairs. Those were her choices.

Her faithful slave Lollia, who had taken care of her since birth, had unwittingly given her the information she had needed to find this place. She had mentioned a friend who served in the household of Cassius. That woman, Lollia said, had delivered her mistress to this same physician more than once. Lollia had meant to assure Priscilla that she was far from the first Roman girl of good family to find herself in such a quandary. Antonia's presence seemed to confirm that notion.

Yet Lollia, whose half-Jewish ancestry gave her a staunch moral standard, had never intended to suggest that Priscilla should engage the physician's services for herself. She had only meant to comfort Priscilla out of a tempest of despair. In the end, Priscilla had come to this place in secret. No need to add to Lollia's mounting anxiety.

The door to the chamber above crashed open with a deafening boom. Priscilla jumped, tightening her hold on the young girl who rested in her arms. As Antonia emerged, their hostess

tried to grasp her arm and help her toward the stairs. With a violent motion, Antonia shook the woman off. She swayed for a moment and placed a flat hand against the wall to steady herself. Her face, marble white, lacked expression. Taking a deep breath, she straightened and began to descend the stairs. Her progress was slow but proud. A sovereign rather than a sinner.

There was something formidable to the implacability that marked her posture. As if she would allow nothing to stand in her way. She passed in front of Priscilla to get to the front door.

"Antonia," Priscilla whispered. "Was it awful?" Her voice broke.

"Don't be an imbecile. It is a physician's visit like any other. And if you say my name one more time, I will knock you so hard, you won't need the services of the surgeon."

Antonia did not linger long enough to drink the stinking potion or recover from the surgeon's iron hooks and blades. She kept walking, hesitating only a moment to drag open the heavy door and disappear into the street.

"Your turn," the woman with the gray hair said, standing over Priscilla, the fold of skin under her chin shaking like a boat sail in the wind.

One



FOUR YEARS LATER

THE INESCAPABLE STENCH of sewage and rotting garbage assaulted Aquila's senses, making him wince. He had been in Rome for a mere two days and had already seen architectural marvels that left the visitor gaping: lavish buildings with intricate mosaics, paved roads as smooth as a youth's face, ingenious aqueducts, and a splendid array of shops, porticos, and gymnasiums. Yet for all its glory, there were few places in Rome that did not stink.

He picked his way carefully as he followed his uncle past a fishmonger's stall and a tavern, while sidestepping a clutch of beggars. Aquila had never seen so many people in one place. It was said that one million people inhabited Rome. The magnitude of such a number was beyond what his mind could grasp. At night, he crawled into bed and pulled his pillow over his head, trying to drown out the noise of carts and wagons that actually swelled in activity between sundown and sunrise. Rome never slept.

His uncle Benyamin, who had visited the city several times and had a passing familiarity with its stone-paved avenues and winding

alleyways, was leading the way. They were supposed to meet Rufus at the entrance of the Campi synagogue, located in the northwest corner of the city.

They had left their lodging in the congested neighborhood near Via Appia twenty minutes before. Having entered the ancient part of the city, they were now making their way around Circus Maximus. Aquila studied the Circus, the most famous chariot-racing stadium in the world. It was empty today, save for a few slaves who were clearing horse dung from the huge track.

Benjamin led Aquila down a jumble of narrow roads. He stopped to look around for a moment before taking a decisive right. After a few more turns, he stopped again.

"Are you lost, Uncle?" Aquila hid a smile.

"Of course not. I am merely making sure of my bearings."

"I only ask because we have passed this spot three times. Some people would call that lost. Not me, of course."

"Of course." Benjamin gave him a pointed look. "I am sure you are very wise. In your own eyes."

Aquila grinned. "Well, these eyes detect the Via Tecta coming up to our left. Isn't that what you were looking for?" He pointed to the avenue whose entrance was hidden by several tree trunks. Benjamin, who was considerably shorter, had missed it.

"So it is. Why didn't you notice it sooner?"

The Via Tecta ran parallel to the river. Aquila took in the grand buildings as they walked: theaters, baths, and public memorials. For a moment, he forgot that it was the Sabbath, forgot that a dear friend was awaiting their arrival, and slowed his steps to gaze at his surroundings.

"They will still be here when we come back," Benjamin called from up ahead and Aquila hastened after him. They traveled far-

ther north until they arrived at the Via Flaminia and made their way down a narrow alley toward the Tiber River.

Outside a modest rectangular building, Aquila spied Rufus. He was leaning against the wall, apparently too impatient for their arrival to wait inside. He opened his arms in welcome as soon as he spotted them, his teeth shining white through a short beard.

Benjamin embraced him. "It has been too long, my friend."

"I am relieved you are finally here," Rufus said. "Now I don't have to try and read your letters. I can never make out your crabbed writing. In your last one, I was convinced you wrote that you sold your beard. But I see it is still attached to your face."

Benjamin laughed, stroking the long, full bush of hair growing out of his chin. "Thankfully, you were wrong. It has taken me years of careful grooming to become this handsome." He pointed at Aquila, standing quietly next to him. "You remember my nephew."

Over a decade had passed since Aquila had seen Rufus, son of Simon of Cyrene. It was hard to look at him and not remember the extraordinary fact that this man's father had carried the cross of the Lord for him.

Time had left no trace of its passage on Rufus. His light-brown skin remained free of wrinkles, his tight curls black as ink. His youthful smile shone out like a sunny day.

"No!" he said, raising a thick brow. "This cannot be Aquila. This good-looking fellow with the strapping muscles? The Aquila I remember only came up to here." He held his hand to his chest.

Aquila grinned. "These muscles are a result of too much hard work. Uncle Benjamin shows no mercy."

For a moment they were all silent, remembering why the eldest son of a wealthy merchant had been reduced to a man with calluses on his hands.

Rufus cut through the pained silence. “Well, you are not too big for me. Come here, boy.” He enfolded Aquila in his great arms, holding him with a father’s affection. Aquila felt an unexpected welter of emotion and blinked his eyes. It had been years since anyone save Uncle Benjamin had shown him such open affection.

“Shall we go in?” Benjamin said, rubbing his hands together. “I am longing to hear the Word of God.”

The synagogue was a single-story structure with a wooden door painted sky blue. Aquila had seen far richer and more elegant synagogues in his home province of Pontus, where a large community of Jewish people had lived in relative security for centuries.

Several rows of plaster benches stretched along three sides of the rectangular assembly hall. A simple Torah shrine, an arched nook that housed the sacred Scripture scrolls, sat nestled in the center of the western wall. The tall papyrus cylinder faced the congregation, its elaborate ornamentation the only true luxury that adorned the place. Through a small window, Aquila glimpsed a courtyard, verdant with herbs and flower beds. Beyond it he saw the outline of another building, smaller than the house of assembly. Though not luxurious, everything about the place spoke of careful maintenance. Clean and in good repair, it was obvious that the synagogue at Campi was well loved by its congregation.

Men and women sat together here, though a group of women seemed to have congregated on the last row in the back. He suspected that God fearers, those who were not of Jewish heritage but believed in the Lord, occupied that space.

“Here is my mother,” Rufus said, pulling them toward the seats on the front row. “She has been impatient to see you.”

Mary had Rufus’s lips, full and smiling, and a fluff of tight

white curls that peeked out under her palla like clouds. Her eyes, when they landed on Aquila, held kindness.

“Welcome, brothers.” She had the merest hint of a lisp, making her words softer. “I hope you are hungry.” She spoke in Koine Greek, the language of the working people in the Roman empire, and the tongue that brought the people of many nations together. Even the Hellenist Jews who had spread across the nations of the world did not speak Hebrew to one another, but Greek.

“I heard of Simon’s passing,” Benjamin said. “God be gracious to you.”

Nine months earlier, Simon’s unexpected death had shaken his friends and family. One night, he had gone to bed at the usual time and, without a whimper or complaint, had passed into glory before the sun arose.

His eldest son, Alexander, had inherited the house and family business in Cyrene, while Rufus came to Rome to expand their trade. Mary had decided to accompany Rufus into Italia.

“Thank you, Benjamin.” She turned to Aquila. “And this is your nephew?”

“Aquila, my older brother’s son.”

Aquila winced at the words and tried to hold on to his smile. “*Was*,” he said, unable to live with the half lie.

Mary rested her hand on his shoulder for a moment. “He is your father still and always will be. Words and legal documents cannot change that.”

Aquila dropped his gaze, turning pale. So Mary already knew of his father’s decision. His shame had become public knowledge. His father had disowned him, setting him aside in favor of his younger brother. In the small Christian world, stories spread fast. Spread even across borders and continents.

Rufus wrapped an arm about Aquila's shoulders. "In this company, that is a badge of honor. You may have lost the favor of your father. But your heavenly Father delights in you. It takes courage to stand your ground. Strength to lose everything and still hold to the truth." He half turned as a man walked toward the Torah shrine. "Ah. We are about to begin. Better take our seats."

Aquila expelled a breath. He barely knew these people, and yet his humiliation was out in the open for all to see. It followed him everywhere, the ache of this wound. The knowledge that he was an outcast. Unwanted by his own family.

The familiar order of worship wrapped itself about Aquila, soothing his bruised heart. He focused on the opening prayer and made the right response. He said the *Shema*, his voice melding with others, male and female, accented and pure, the same words binding them together: *Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one.*

He listened when the readers unfurled the Torah scroll with reverence, seven passages from the Books of the Law, followed by one from the Prophets. The Hebrew was then translated into Greek.

Since Aquila spoke Hebrew fluently, his attention wandered when the translation began. His eyes roamed about the hall, studying the faces of those who worshiped. In the row occupied by the God fearers, his gaze settled on a young woman. Her hair, a bright auburn, stood out in the assembly of dark-haired people. She was no Hebrew, but she did not look Roman either. Her skin was fair, her eyes a startling shade of blue, hard to miss even from this distance. High cheekboned and angular, her face had an arresting quality. He had certainly seen more beautiful women. But few had managed to hold his attention as this one seemed to.

There was a stillness in her face, a depth of reverence as she

listened to the words of the Law that he found compelling. The interpreter had reached the Prophets now and was translating the verses from Isaiah:

Forget the former things;
do not dwell on the past.
See, I am doing a new thing!
Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?
I am making a way in the wilderness
and streams in the wasteland.

With a touch of wonder he saw her eyes fill with tears. She drank in the Word like it was life.

Not many people entered worship with this consuming intensity. Esther never had. Aquila was intrigued to find a foreigner thus enthralled with Scripture.

He had to force his mind to return to the worship service as one of the men in the congregation rose up to give the message for the day. But even as Aquila listened, he found his thoughts returning to the Gentile woman.

She was unmarried—he could tell from the absence of the palla, leaving waves of auburn hair flowing around her shoulders and back. He wondered what had drawn her to this Hebrew congregation. Growing impatient with the turn of his wandering focus, he exhaled a slow, annoyed breath.

He had not come to Rome to ogle foreigners. He was here to start a new life. Here to grow in his faith and spread a truth that burned like fire in his belly. Foreign women with red hair had no part in his plan.

