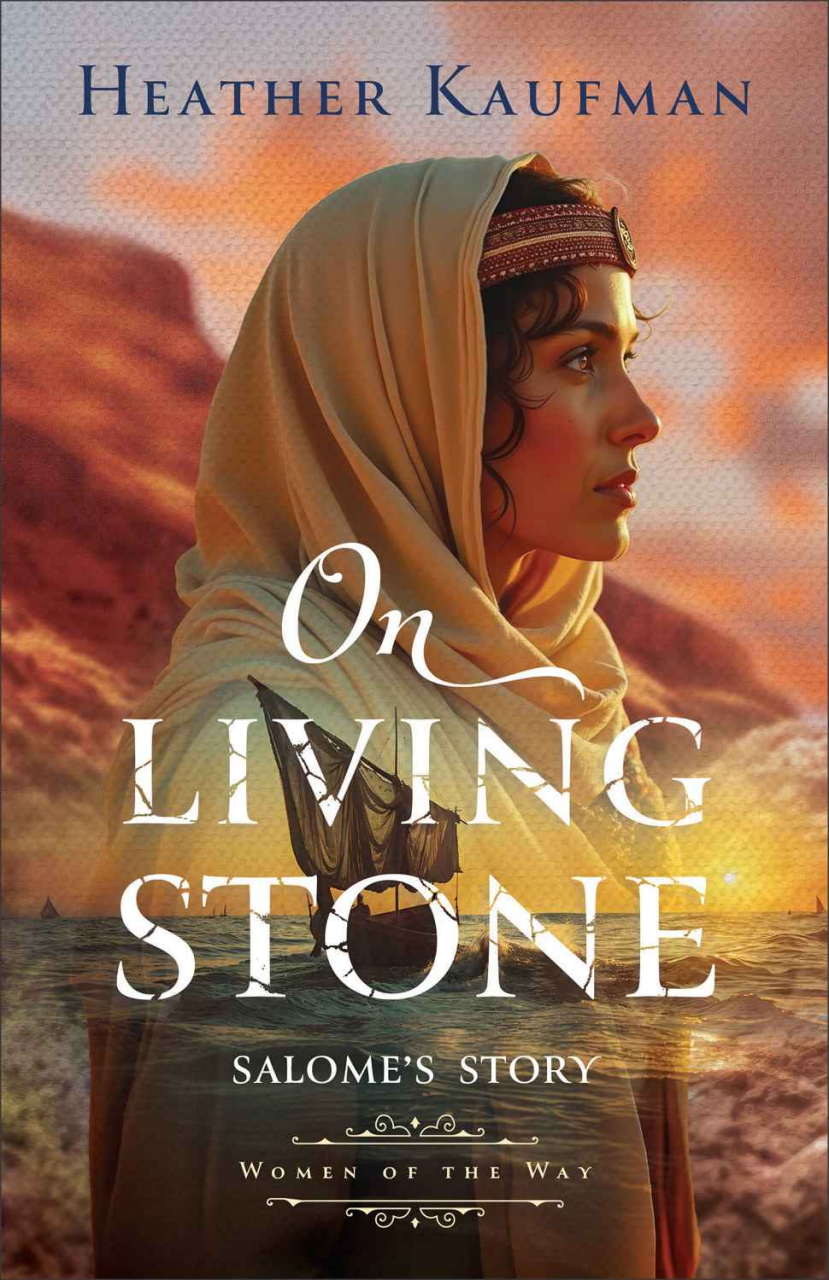


HEATHER KAUFMAN

On
LIVING
STONE

A woman with dark hair, wearing a white headscarf and a brown headband, is shown in profile, looking out over a sunset sea. The sky is filled with warm, orange and yellow light, and the sea is dark with a few small boats visible in the distance. The text 'On LIVING STONE' is overlaid on the image, with 'On' in a cursive font and 'LIVING STONE' in a bold, serif font.

SALOME'S STORY

WOMEN OF THE WAY

WOMEN OF THE WAY
3

On
LIVING
STONE

SALOME'S STORY

HEATHER KAUFMAN



BETHANYHOUSE

a division of Baker Publishing Group
Minneapolis, Minnesota

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Published by Bethany House Publishers
Minneapolis, Minnesota
BethanyHouse.com

Bethany House Publishers is a division of
Baker Publishing Group, Grand Rapids, Michigan

Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Kaufman, Heather (Heather M.), author

Title: On Living Stone: Salome's story / Heather Kaufman.

Description: Minneapolis, Minnesota: Bethany House, a division of Baker Publishing Group, 2026. | Series: Women of the Way

Identifiers: LCCN 2025029623 | ISBN 9781540903587 (paperback) | ISBN 9780764246135 (casebound) | ISBN 9781493452545 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Salome (Biblical figure)—Fiction | LCGFT: Bible fiction | Fiction | Novels

Classification: LCC PS3611.A8277 O5 2026

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2025029623>

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Cover design by Jennifer Parker

Published in association with Books & Such Literary Management, BooksAndSuch.com.

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For all the thunderous boys God is growing into men.
And for the mothers who love them.

Consider me and answer, LORD my God.
Restore brightness to my eyes;
otherwise, I will sleep in death.
My enemy will say, "I have triumphed over
him,"
and my foes will rejoice because I am
shaken.

Psalm 13:3–4 CSB

prologue

44 AD

CAPERNAUM, ISRAEL

Their footsteps are slow, sluggish—like the steps of my children after blundering a task, coming to me with half-frightened eyes. I lift my hands from the dough, pluck sticky pieces from between my fingers, and turn to face them.

Two young men enter, bearing sorrow on their shoulders, carrying news that cannot be good, for their gazes refuse to meet mine. I fuss over them, tell them to sit, fear lurching in my chest as I push food upon these sojourners from Jerusalem. They stop me with a kind word and firm hands. Now they are the ones urging me to sit, but I refuse.

“My boys—how are they?” I speak the question, forcing it around the lump in my throat. I am journeying to the Holy City soon. I have finished two warm cloaks for my two strong sons and will bring them with me when I come. “How are my boys?”

Sit. They insist, and so I do, trembling entering these aging bones. With soft voices they give me the hard words. In my heart, I already knew. I bow my head as they say it.

My eldest son—my bold boy grown into a passionate man—he ignited the wrath of Herod Agrippa I. He refused to be silent, refused to draw back even when urged to be cautious. Such was his passion and impact that Herod's only solution was to silence him for good. He faced death by the sword with a song of praise upon his lips.

He is the first of the apostles to die.

Sorrow enters my being—a blade embedded deep. I hold the pain close in trembling hands.

They note my distress and reach to brace me, but I push aside their steady grip, push past their worried faces, and walk out into the night to stand beneath God's stars.

I birthed my boy and taught him to walk along the shores of this lake, catching and righting each stumbling step. In this very home, I kissed him, sweaty from his labors, eyes gleaming into mine with that impish half grin.

Oh, but I am proud of him, my unfaltering, unshakable son.

I stand beneath the stars and blink up into their brilliance, feel the smooth black stones firm beneath my feet. There is rain on this air. I can smell it.

With a shuddering breath, I pull the pregnant air into my lungs and hold it next to the pain, moisture lining my cheeks.

There will be numerous nights in which I give myself over to this grief, tracing the story of our lives along the shores of Gennesaret. But right now, a singular, startling truth pushes up against the pain, both confronting and comforting me.

This moment is not an undoing, not an ending.

We follow a rabbi whose steps extend beyond the grave.

I lift my face to the sky as the first drops come and open my hands. I haven't always understood. I haven't always listened, but I am doing so now, and I hear it.

My boy, his life—

It is singing.



PART
ONE



ONE



SUMMER 2 BC

BETHSAIDA, ISRAEL

“Listen, child—right here.” Abba pressed my smooth cheek against the rough black stone on his workbench. “What do you hear?”

I grinned, raising a skeptical brow. “I hear Noy outside whining to be let in.”

Abba released a hearty laugh. “The dog can wait. I meant in here.” He tapped the slab of basalt with his chisel.

Pursing my lips, I pretended to listen, brow furrowing in concentration. With a small huff, I straightened. “Nothing.”

“Ah, you don’t have the ear for it yet.” Abba leaned over the ordinary stone, one hand cupping it reverently while he listened. “Adonai built potential into the very rock of the earth. It is the stonemason’s job to call that rock out of the ground, shape it with care, give it over to its purpose. When I still myself to listen, that is what I hear—a faint echo as the stone searches for its new place.”

“You hear all of *that*?” I snorted, shifting restless feet.

Abba chuckled as he shuffled to the door to let Noy inside. “It takes time and patience to hear what is unspoken, *Zohar*.”

Zohar—not my given name, but the one he used to show tenderness. Zohar—light, brilliance.

As Abba continued his halting way to the door, I scrambled to gather his cane from where it rested against the workbench, bringing it to his side.

With a gentle smile, he accepted the cane, easing his weight off the ruined foot as he unbarred the door. Noy tore into the room, knocking me onto my backside and eliciting a yelp of surprise.

Noy was more wolf than dog. Lean and ragged, he boasted a mangled ear and not a few missing teeth. A few years ago, I'd found him alone and starving, had fed him pieces of fish and bread, and he'd remained by my side ever since. I'd named him Noy, beautiful, for so he was—on the inside.

“Bah, this dog,” Abba grunted, but there was no true anger in his tone. “Better take him back outside before he sets the whole shop in disarray.”

Our home was located on the northern outskirts of the village, farthest from the Sea of Galilee—or as we called it, the Lake of Gennesaret—and closest to the basalt plateaus of the Golan Heights. With Abba's workshop in the front and our living quarters in the back, it was a humble arrangement, small and quiet.

“I need to begin on this piece.” Abba shuffled back to the workbench. “Go feed Noy—outside,” he clarified with a lift to his brow. “And then go find Naysa and make yourself useful.”

A groan slipped past my lips before I could catch it. “She has two daughters, Abba. She doesn't *need* me.”

“Perhaps, but *you* need *her*, so go.”

I wanted to keep protesting. I did *not* need the woman with the shrewd eyes that too easily saw my flaws. But I loved Abba and would not continue to press him. “Come, Noy.” With a cluck of my tongue and a firm hand on his scruff, I led him back outside, sneaking him a bit of bread I'd been saving for later.

Obediently, I wended my way to Naysa's family compound

on the southern border of the village. They were a family of fishermen, making their living off the abundance of the lake. I shouldn't complain so much, for their family was more than generous to us. After Ima's death and Abba's accident, they had kept our table full of fresh fish.

"It's the very least I can do," Naysa had insisted.

Naysa had been my mother's closest friend—so close that she'd been present for my birth, there to wrap my squalling body in linen. Ima had been softspoken and gentle, a stark contrast to Naysa's blunt temperament, but the two had forged an unbreakable bond.

Nearing my destination, I kicked at a rock, watching it skitter across the uneven dirt road. I knew what everyone said about me. The only child of the stonemason with the one good foot. The wild girl with startling, unusual eyes, more at ease with animals than with people.

The girl with no future.

"Jacob, I worry." The other day, I'd overheard Naysa talking with Abba. *"I fear that you indulge her too much. She's twelve and needs to be trained to keep her own home. It's what Miriam would have wanted. You know that. Many girls her age are betrothed. How can she grow into womanhood when you let her crawl all over these hills like an untamed creature?"*

"She will learn in time" came Abba's soft reply. *"She's lost so much and grieves in her own way."*

It'd been a full three years since Ima's passing. Sickness had gripped her suddenly, and when it took her, we were left reeling and confused. The warm, wide world had darkened and grown cold, narrow, quiet. Ima had filled our home with song, steady as a heartbeat, a constant presence whose absence was so jarring that our four walls became foreign. Abba had turned to drink until the accident happened and he put it away for good. And me? I'd turned to the fields and hills.

Abba and I had each other, and some days it was enough. But then there were days when my life folded in upon itself, squeezed and confined until I could scarcely breathe. At such times, I needed to be outdoors, away from the village. Only then, when there was nothing between me and the wild, did the air return to my lungs and the fist loosen in my chest.

Naysa's home sprawled before me, and beyond it was the lake, teeming with its fish. In the central courtyard, Naysa's daughters, Deborah and Leah, were surely busy at the loom or millstone. As soon as Naysa saw me, she'd comment on the state of my hair and put me to work. The thought of sitting in one spot carding wool for hours sparked panic.

Noy panted patiently, attention pinned to my hand as he awaited another morsel of food.

"Abba doesn't have to know if I don't *fully* obey, does he?" I scratched behind Noy's good ear as he moaned in agreement. "Naysa means well, but I can't bear it, not today." Not when we'd just passed the date of Ima's death. Instead, I headed swiftly toward the water before anyone in the family saw me.

Bethsaida stretched along the northeastern shore of the Lake of Gennesaret, on land wedged between the lake and the Jordan River, which poured into it from the north and cut us off from the western Galilean villages. Instead of heading down to the banks of the lake as I was prone to do, I turned east into a wheat field, Noy trotting at my heels. They wouldn't miss me. Well, at least Deborah wouldn't. She was fifteen, recently betrothed, and had little interest or time for me.

A sprawling carob tree loomed above the wheat. I hitched up my tunic and ran toward it. Leah used to join me in seeking out adventure. Two years younger than me, she was sweet and lovely, everything I wasn't. For a while, we were the best of friends, but the longer Abba let me roam free, the tighter Naysa seemed to

hold on to Leah. Now, when we were together, there was a new strangeness as memory mixed with distance.

Reaching the tree, I grabbed at a low branch and hauled myself up. “Sit and stay, Noy! I’ll throw some down.”

Bethsaida housed fishermen, craftsmen, farmers, and merchants, with this particular field belonging to Ephraim, a merchant and one of Bethsaida’s more prosperous residents. I shouldn’t help myself, but surely he wouldn’t miss a handful of carob pods. It was late summer, and they were ripe and ready for the tongue.

The thick foliage was evergreen and easily hid my thin frame as I pulled myself from branch to branch. Plucking a long, dark pod, I snapped it in half, tossing one piece down to Noy and tearing into the other with eager teeth, spitting out the small, hard seeds as I found them. The nutty, sweet flavor flooded my mouth, and my belly rumbled its welcome.

When I was younger, our table had never lacked for provision. Abba had spent long days away from home, pulling stone from the earth all throughout the Golan Heights. He’d worked in both basalt and limestone quarries, and even though we saw much less of him, Ima and I had never gone without. When he wasn’t digging for the stone, he was building with it, helping to construct many of the black basalt buildings in the region.

With the injury to his foot, however, Abba had lost the ability to travel long distances, lost the surefootedness that was so necessary for his former work. Now he spent his days dressing stone, turning the raw product into millstones for grinding or dinnerware for serving. He managed to keep us fed, for others in his guild ensured that he never lacked for work. Sometimes, however, there were hungry days, and in such times, I hid my rumbling belly from his distraught ears.

Plucking another pod, I threw the whole thing down to Noy, who snatched it right out of the air. I chuckled and had just taken

another bite when raucous voices carried on the wind. Peering through the leaves, I saw a group of five boys crossing the field from the north. Unease flared at the sight of Deborah's betrothed, Elazar, at the front. At eighteen, he was broad-shouldered and strong, with an imposing presence and unyielding arrogance. He was also the son of Ephraim, whose carobs I'd enjoyed.

My relief that I was safely hidden was soon destroyed by Noy's yelping declaration of my presence as he pranced beneath the tree, awaiting more pods. Five heads swiveled in my direction.

"Shush, Noy! Shush!" But it was too late. Elazar turned toward the tree, the other four dutifully trailing after him.

Gritting my teeth, I curled into a tight ball. "No, no, no," I muttered. Not these boys. Not these boys.

"This mutt has something caught in the tree," Elazar shouted.

Pieces of pod stuck in my throat, and I gagged, spitting out flecks of the fruit as I clung to a branch.

Gideon, the blacksmith's son, poked his head beneath the tree's canopy. "Ha! Look, it's the girl with the glowing eyes stuck up a tree!"

"Go away, Gideon!" I hissed down the length of the trunk. Unease threatened to turn into fear, but I pushed it aside.

Several other faces joined him, gazing up and snickering. Elazar, however, wasn't laughing. "This is our property. You're stealing, and I'm going to tell my father."

"Shouldn't you all be working and not idling in a field?" I accused. "It's the middle of the day. Perhaps I should be the one telling on you!"

"Fine words coming from the girl who's never where she's supposed to be." Elazar snorted.

"You're more dog than girl." Gideon laughed. "Do you roam with the wildlife at night too?"

"With those eyes, she can probably see in the dark." Another boy smirked.

“Be careful of the company you keep, Jonah,” I warned, recognizing the gangly youth. “Since when did you become so *mean*?”

The taunts had increased after Ima’s death. I went to the well in the middle of the day to avoid the hurtful words and glances. I was “unmarriageable,” according to the other girls. But what did I care? I had Abba, and he was more than enough.

“You are wearing armor, my child. Words cannot touch you.” Abba had taught me what to do when mean words came my way. Even so, an uneasy swirl entered my stomach—round and round it spun as the boys circled the tree, Noy barking with confused energy.

Heart thundering, I willed them to leave. “Get out of here!” I demanded.

“Make us!” Gideon cried.

I had no intention of leaving the tree, but then Gideon plucked a carob and held it out to Noy, who stopped barking to snap at it eagerly. With a swift jerk of the hand, Gideon swept the carob out of reach and tossed it to Elazar, who wagged it in Noy’s sight. One after another, the boys tossed the carob, relentlessly teasing Noy, who yelped and dashed between them.

Rough bark scraped at my legs as I slithered down the trunk. “Stop it! You’re being hateful and cruel. Stop it!” Feet touching ground, I flung myself at Jonah, snatching the carob from his hand. “You’re better than this, Jonah! I know you, and you’re better than this.”

Elazar plucked the carob back out of my fingers. “This is my property to do with as I please.” He tore off a bite with his teeth and spat it on the ground. As Noy jumped upon it, Elazar landed a kick to his side.

With a shout, I was upon Elazar with my fists, pounding at his chest, face, anything I could reach. “Wait until I tell Deborah! You aren’t worthy to be a part of their family, hurting a helpless dog.” Fury clouded all judgment as I flung my fists and words at Elazar.

“You’re an animal! Get off me!” Elazar captured my wrists and when I still struggled, shoved me hard. I stumbled back, tripping over a root and crashing to the ground, scraping my head on a rock.

For a moment, I lay dazed and panting as searing pain flashed through my head. Gingerly, I placed fingers to my temple. They left sticky with blood.

“What did you *do*?” Jonah squeaked.

Elazar loomed above me with a large stone in a raised hand, nostrils flaring.

“Put the stone down,” Jonah urged. All fun drained from his voice.

Fear—I could suppress it no longer. Panicked, I searched for Noy. He was growling and pacing, all thoughts of food gone as he snapped at two boys who held him at bay with large sticks.

“Put it down, Elazar!” one of the boys echoed, throwing the words over his shoulder, attention never leaving Noy.

With a mighty snarl, Noy lunged. The boy whacked him in the neck with his stick, and Noy yelped, circling back with bared teeth before making another rapid lunge.

The stone flew through the air, heavy and sure, meeting the side of Noy’s head with a dull thump. He fell to the ground mid-leap and lay still.

I screamed—the sound shrill and cracking in the hot summer air, while Elazar stood empty-handed and tense.

“Y-you’ve killed him!” On trembling legs, I scrambled to my feet, grasping at the trunk as my head swam and blood pooled in my ear and dribbled down the side of my neck.

“He didn’t have a choice.” Gideon scowled. “Your mangy animal would have killed someone.”

Elazar was staring at me. “*I’m unworthy of Deborah’s family?*” He shook his head. “*You’re the unworthy one. I come from a respected family. Your family is cursed. I’ve conducted busi-*

ness with my father from here to Joppa, while you—” His thin lips curled into a sneer. “While you haunt quarries at night like a she-wolf.”

“It’s been a long time since I’ve . . . I don’t go to the quarry . . . I don’t do that anymore.” I was afraid and babbling, offering useless explanations to a boy who didn’t deserve them. Swiftly, I shut my mouth before I further humiliated myself.

Abba had said words couldn’t hurt me, but these words had found cracks in the armor. Trembling rose up my legs and to my arms, spreading to my chin. I hated to look weak! These empty-headed boys with their spiteful words and small hearts shriveled like raisins in their chests—I despised them.

Elazar took a step toward me, and I drew back. His words had landed hard, but rocks would land harder. Blindly I fled, sandaled feet kicking up dirt as I scrambled away from the tree and toward the village. As I ran, I wept angry tears, overcome by my own powerlessness.

Footfalls sounded behind me, and I threw a wild look over my shoulder. They were coming for me, and the village was too far away. I turned and made for the lake instead.

The bank was steep, but I flung myself downward anyway, the brush tugging at my hair and the rocks biting at my flesh as I tumbled into the cold water. Shouts sounded from above, but I didn’t stop to look. I tore into the lake—one stroke and then two—pulling myself deeper into its glinting blue arms.

I was unafraid of the waves, for Ima had taught me to swim from an early age. When only the very tips of my toes could touch bottom, I turned. Four boys stood on the embankment. Only Jonah was pursuing me. Already he was thigh-deep in the water. He shouted and waved, but his words were whipped away by a strong gust of wind.

My toes parted from the ground as a wave swelled beneath me. I rocked in a momentary lapping embrace before the wave

set my feet back onto the pebbled lakebed. I pushed off hard and swam parallel to the shore. Jonah came from a fishing family and was more at ease in the water than I was. Panicked, I swam faster, catching glimpses of the boys running along the shore.

The wind on Lake Gennesaret was unpredictable. I knew this and usually didn't swim so far from shore, but desperation to rid myself of the boys overwhelmed caution. An uncomfortable hitch in my chest finally stopped me. My toes sought ground but found water. As I spluttered and paddled, a wave rose high and plummeted down, crushing me like olives in the press. A swift current grasped my legs from below and then I was tumbling, disoriented and wide-eyed with burning lungs.

"Don't fight the water or try to swim back to shore." Ima's instruction sounded in my mind. *"Let go and relax into the waves."*

But that couldn't be right. If I stopped fighting, I'd be overwhelmed and carried off. My mind told me to obey Ima's words, but my body strained against the current, which pulled at me harder.

Soon it became clear that fighting wasn't working, so with every last bit of effort, I relaxed my body and let the waves take me where they would. With a gasp, I sucked in air as my head broke through the water.

Another wave swelled beneath me, spitting me to shore like the prophet from the great fish. I landed hard on the rocky bed, the receding waves sucking at my legs. Coughing and gagging, I struggled to my feet and stumbled to shore. How far had the current taken me? Hopefully far enough that the boys wouldn't find me. I'd lost my sandals to the waves and waded to shore on cut and battered feet, tensing as I saw figures in the shallows.

Two bare-chested boys crouched among the reeds with spears at the ready, hunting for fish and finding me instead. Our eyes locked, and I tensed, readying myself to fight, hands balling into fists.

“Salome?”

Recognition weakened my legs, and I sank to my knees.

“Salome!” the taller of the two repeated, dropping his spear to run toward me. I let him come, let him pull me back to my feet.

“What happened? Are you okay?”

“Th-they killed him,” I cried. “With a rock. They killed him with a rock.” I blinked up into Zeb’s worried face, barely seeing him for the water obscuring my eyes . . . or was it tears?

Zeb was Naysa’s eldest child and only son. Five years my senior, he was typically out fishing with his father, but when I saw him, he always had a ready word of welcome or teasing for me.

At my dire announcement, his face lost color. “Who has been killed?”

“Someone’s dead?” The second boy splashed toward us—Kadmiel, the eldest son of the synagogue ruler, Baruch.

I bowed my head. “Noy. A bunch of boys were mocking me, and Elazar hit him in the head with a rock.”

“Is that how you received this?” Zeb’s long fingers gently brushed my temple.

“I . . . I fell.”

Distant shouts jerked everyone’s attention back to the bank.

“They’re searching for me!” I cried.

With a grunt, Zeb thrust me into Kadmiel’s arms. “Watch over her. Make sure she gets home to her father.”

Snagging his spear from the bank, he ran off with an easy, loping gait.

Alone with Kadmiel, I found I could muster up no more strength. With a strangled gasp, I sat down right in the water and buried my face in my hands. Was our family indeed cursed? Was that why Ima had died, and now Noy?

Kadmiel extended a hand to pull me up. “Don’t cry. Everything will be all right.”

“I’m not crying!” I shoved his hand away, lurching to my feet and staggering toward land. “And I don’t need your help!”

Fear and sorrow were making me insolent. Regret nipped at my heels as I clambered onto the bank.

Kadmiel hurried after me. “Wait a moment. You’re bleeding! The water must have stemmed the flow for a while, but you’re losing more blood. Here—” Withdrawing a knife, he grabbed his outer garment from the bank and cut off a length of fabric.

“Your mantle!”

“Never mind that.” Swiftly he wrapped the fabric around my head, applying firm pressure and tying a secure knot.

I touched the bandage and found blood already seeping through the cloth. At the feel of the sticky substance, my head went so light a puff of wind would have knocked me sideways.

Kadmiel braced my slumping form. “You’re all right. Steady now. Hold my hand.”

“I don’t need—”

“Just hold my hand, Salome!”

Mutely, I took his offered hand, every scrap of pride balking as he placed a strong arm about my shoulders and guided me toward the village. After a few paces, my narrowing vision cleared, strength returning to my limbs.

“I’m fine now. I’ll be fine.” I dropped his hand, but he kept an arm about my shoulders until I wrenched myself free and moved a few paces ahead of him.

“I see the rumors are true. You’re as obstinate as a mule.”

Rumors? What else had he heard?

Whirling, I gaped at him, lips ready to utter a defense, but the mocking disdain so evident on Elazar’s face was nowhere to be found in Kadmiel’s expression.

“There’s no shame in needing help.” He raised a brow.

“I know. I’m . . . sorry.” Swallowing hard, I turned away. “I’m accustomed to taking care of myself.”

I also disliked appearing weak in front of anyone—especially someone like Kadmiel, someone prominent and praised.

Long after other boys had left school to learn their fathers' trades, Kadmiel had continued in his studies. "*Exceptionally bright*," his teacher said. So bright, in fact, that at fifteen years of age, he was soon to enter the tutelage of a rabbi. He hurried now to catch up to me.

"I'm fine," I protested. "I don't need—"

"I'll walk with you anyway."

With a huff, I resigned myself to his presence. In truth, I was anything but fine, for the image of Noy lying limp on the ground was haunting me. My hands trembled at the memory. I clasped them together and glanced at Kadmiel to find him studying my face, gaze snagging on my eyes. He must think them unsettling the way so many others did.

"Why were those boys mocking you?" The question was gentle, but I winced.

"I'm sorry. You don't have to talk if you don't want to."

I paused, but the words gushed out anyway. "I'm not like other girls, and that upsets them for some reason."

Kadmiel didn't say anything, and for a while we walked along in silence.

"I'm sorry they were mean to you," he finally said. "Sometimes boys poke fun because they don't know how to say what they really feel."

"They were clear about how they really feel," I muttered. "This isn't the first time they've mocked me. They were hateful."

"There's no excuse for hatred. I'm sorry."

Kadmiel's soothing words continued to loosen my tongue. "The other day a woman at the well said I was far too wild and would never secure a husband. When boys run off, climb trees, and pick fights no one calls *them* animals, and yet when I—"

“I’m not sure boys or girls should be shirking duties and picking fights,” Kadmiel interrupted.

“I’m not picking fights!”

Kadmiel spread his hands wide in a wordless defense.

“Well, yes . . . I suppose I’m picking a fight right now,” I admitted.

Kadmiel laughed, and then I was laughing too, and the tenseness between us lifted.

“I know I can be quick-tempered. When people poke and prod without cause, you learn to fight back in order to survive.” I hugged myself.

“That sounds lonely.”

“It’s necessary.”

“You stand out because you’re different.” Kadmiel paused to scrape a rock loose from the ground, then tossed it from one palm to another. “I know what that’s like.”

“You?” I couldn’t help the surprise that tilted my tone into a squeak.

Kadmiel grinned, casting a sidelong glance at me. “How many great scholars do you know from Bethsaida, hmm? How many esteemed rabbis come from Galilee? Especially now, after the rebellion and with Sepphoris still wreathed in smoke—” His grin disappeared as his gaze dropped to the rock. Abruptly, he chucked it, and we watched it cut through the air in a wide arc.

No one looked to our region for learned men, not with the rise of Judas of Galilee and his bandits. With the death of Herod the Great, Judas, son of the famed insurrectionist Hezekiah, had seized control of the large Galilean city of Sepphoris until Rome had marched in and burned it to the ground. Two thousand crucifixions had followed. No one had forgotten it. How could we? Judas certainly hadn’t, for he still roamed Galilee, inciting unrest.

“We are nothing but ignorant revolutionaries in Rome’s eyes and in the eyes of our own brethren. But I can prove their assess-

ment of us wrong.” Breathless, Kadmiel bent to scrape another rock free. “Why shouldn’t I aim high?” He let the second rock loose in an even longer arc. “It’s those who are different who will leave a mark upon our world.” Kadmiel turned to me, and a frightening thought tore through my mind.

He’s beautiful.

Jerking away from his gaze, I focused on the ground, startling when he lightly tapped my shoulder. “I didn’t intend to chastise you.”

“It’s okay.” I shrugged, still unwilling to meet his gaze.

“I’m sure you’ll make a fine wife and mother someday, no matter what anyone else says. Even if you *are* as stubborn as a mule.”

My face was blooming into a flush that I quickly hid behind grimy hands, embarrassment bubbling up as laughter. “I doubt that very much, but thank you.”

He was being kind, and I didn’t have the heart to tell him that motherhood was someone else’s future—not the destiny of the wild girl with the glowing eyes. A lump swelled in my throat and stuck. We were close to the village now, and all I wanted to do was run across the remaining distance.

Kadmiel had gone still, eyes peering forcefully into mine. “You really do have . . . unusual eyes.” His gaze deepened.

My already-warm cheeks burned even hotter as my throat dried out and a tickle formed, causing my “unusual eyes” to water. “I can go the rest of the way alone.”

Before he could detain me, I fled. Lifting my sopping wet tunic in both hands, I tore through the field on bare feet, toward home and away from this confusing boy.

TWO



My head needed stiches—just a few, but it hurt, and I bit the inside of my cheek until it bled to keep from crying aloud. I sat on the workshop roof with knees tucked beneath my chin and allowed Naysa to minister to my needs.

With pinched lips, Naysa applied a poultice to my stitched head, fingers lingering at my temple before slipping to my face, where she cupped my cheek with a weathered hand. Her sigh was long and deep. “Jacob.” She pushed to standing, nodding for Abba to follow her downstairs into the workshop. She kept her voice low, but my ears were sharp.

“I’ve offered before, but now I insist. She’s getting out of control. Surely this isn’t what Miriam would have wanted. Please, Jacob. Let me take her in. Let me raise her alongside my Leah.”

Abba was responding, but I didn’t want to listen. I scrunched my eyes tight, ducked my head between my knees, and hummed one of Imá’s songs.

After what seemed an eternity, the front door groaned shut. Abba’s uneven tread sounded on the stairs and then his fingers were slipping into my hair, which was still tangled and damp from the lake. “My daughter.” His voice caught, squeezed into silence. I dared to look up at him and saw tears.

“I’m sorry, Abba.”

“You could have been killed.”

“It’s only a scratch. . . .”

“This time, but what if you’d landed directly on that rock? Or the current had taken you out deep into the lake and you drowned?”

Sniffing hard, I blinked at the ground, registering my filthy feet and dirt-encrusted fingernails. Elazar’s words landed upon me in a new way. “*You’re an animal!*”

“Here, drink this. It will soothe some of the ache.” Abba slipped a fragrant cup into my hands. Fennel—the tea he often drank after a long day on his feet.

I took a tentative sip, allowing the earthy scent to envelop me. He’d cut the bitter edge with honey, a special treat and one he never enjoyed himself. A lump formed in my throat at the small gift.

With a groan, Abba sat by my side, which wasn’t easy with his foot. I gave him a steadying hand as he settled on the ground and stretched out his leg.

“When your mother died, it nearly destroyed us both.” He held my hand, squeezed it. “I’m afraid that I’ve allowed you too much freedom in your grief.”

“You sound like Naysa.”

“She isn’t *always* wrong.” He smiled. “Only sometimes,” he added with a laugh. “In this, I think she might be right. You’re twelve, Salome, and must prepare for womanhood.”

“Naysa sees everything I’m not.”

“She sees everything you could be, all the big things bundled up in here.” Abba pressed a finger to my chest.

I studied the cup. Abba had made it from limestone he quarried himself. Tracing its smooth edge, I considered his words.

“It wouldn’t be *so* bad, would it?” Abba bumped a shoulder against mine. “You could still spend your nights here with me but spend your days with Naysa’s family.”

This conversation—we’d had it on and off for years. Abba would gently push, and I would harden like stone, immovable. This time, however, something in me shifted as I recalled the boys’ mocking words and Kadmiel’s kind ones. *“I’m sure you’ll make a fine wife and mother someday.”*

“Maybe you’re right,” I whispered.

Abba relaxed at my admission. “You’ve been cut from the mother rock and are searching for your new place.” He tucked my hair behind an ear, thumb rubbing a loving pattern on my cheek.

“I think I’m scared.” My own words surprised me. Yes, I was scared, terrified that I couldn’t become what I needed to be—not without Ima. This confession of fear would have shamed me had it been delivered to anyone other than Abba.

“I understand the future feels bleak and uncertain without your mother. But you and I must trust the future to Adonai.” Abba moved his hand to my chin, catching it between finger and thumb. “You can trust Adonai to form you into who you need to be.”

I set down the cup and buried my face in his shoulder. He shifted and, with great effort, scooped me into his lap, even though I was far too large for such things anymore. I melted against the broad expanse of his chest and sighed with deep contentment. Oh, I loved him. I *loved* him.



After an exhausted nap, I felt much better. Abba had left a pitcher of water by my side as I slept, and I was finishing a makeshift bath when someone pounded on the door. A masculine voice mixed with Abba’s, but it was the sharp, distinctive whine that stopped me.

“Noy!” I was barefoot with undone hair and clad in nothing but a tunic, but I hardly cared as I flew down the steps and into the cramped workshop.

“Look who found and returned Noy.” Abba stepped aside to

reveal Zeb in the doorway with Noy in his arms. “Zebedee, you are a good man.” Abba clapped a hand on his shoulder.

“I thought he was dead!” Tearing across the workshop, I cupped Noy’s ragged face in my hands.

“Let him inside.” Abba chuckled.

Zeb entered the room with stumbling steps, lowering Noy onto the ground, where I crooned and fussed over him.

“He must have come to and staggered off,” Zeb explained. “I found him roaming the field north of town.”

“And those boys?” I asked.

“They won’t be bothering you—at least not for a while.”

Only then did I notice the bruise that darkened his jaw. This wasn’t the first time Zeb had stepped in when hurtful words flew my way. Gratitude overwhelmed me as I surged to my feet and launched myself at him. “Thank you!”

Zeb grunted as I made contact. He was tall and thin, and my head barely reached the middle of his chest as I squeezed him hard, pinning his arms to his sides.

“Don’t crush the man.” Abba laughed.

“I’m glad you’re all right.” Zeb attempted to pat my back, but I squeezed him so tightly he couldn’t move. “You’re strong.” He shifted his feet. “You could haul in a dragnet full of fish with these arms! Here—I brought you something.”

With great exaggeration, Zeb wriggled free and pulled a handful of almonds from the pouch at his waist. “I know how you like them. Thought it would distract you from . . .” He glanced at my head and suppressed a grimace. “Ah, Salome, I’m sorry.”

“I’m fine.” I waved a hand.

“Of course you are.” He grinned and yanked on a tendril of my hair as he often did. “It would take more than one tumble to crack that hard head of yours.”

“A gift *and* an insult.” I shot him a glare as I nabbed the almonds from his hand.

He chucked my chin, and I couldn't help the resulting smile that spread my lips wide. "Thank you."

Zeb scrubbed a large hand behind his neck. "Promise me you'll be careful whose tree you climb next time."

"I will. I promise." I nestled some of the almonds back into his palm. When he made no move to accept them, I plucked them up and popped them into his mouth. "You worry too much."

Shifting the almonds into his cheek, Zeb gave me a lopsided grin. "You're worth worrying over, Salome." He tapped me lightly on the nose. "Let me know how Noy recovers."

Tossing an almond into my own mouth, I promised him that I would before returning to Noy, who was resting comfortably. I would nurse him back to full health and make sure that he stayed far away from boys with sticks, rocks, and spiteful words.



On hot summer nights, Abba and I spread our pallets on the roof, with nothing between us and God's stars. I loved falling asleep in the night air beneath the sound of Abba's voice as he recited portions of the Torah. Tonight, however, I was determined to sleep by Noy's side in the workshop.

"Are you sure you won't be too warm?" Abba questioned as he draped a thin blanket over me.

"I'm sure." I yawned. "I want to be close in case he needs me."

"I'm thankful Zebedee found him. He's a good boy—already more of a man than his father."

"What do you mean?" I frowned. "Because of Jonathan's temper?" Zeb's father was a burly man with a loud presence and a demanding nature.

Abba sighed. "I shouldn't have said that. It does me good to see a young man like Zeb, especially after how those other boys treated you."

I quieted, thinking of the latest painful blows that had found chinks in my armor.

“Those boys were cruel,” I whispered.

Abba grew still. “How so?”

I laced fingers through Noy’s matted fur, focused on working loose a stubborn knot. “They called me an animal. They made fun of my eyes. . . . People often do so as if I’m something . . . unnatural.”

Abba groaned and settled onto a nearby stool. His foot was bothering him, but he hid the wince by running a large hand across his face. “I didn’t realize you were still taunted so much over your eyes.”

“They said our family was cursed. Do you think they’re right? Ima’s death and your accident and my eyes . . . like an evil mark . . .”

“No!” Abba’s resounding reply was chisel to stone, driving hard to release the truth. “No, my child. Adonai taught us to trust His words and works alone—not to be ensnared by superstition. We are not cursed, but . . .” His face twisted with regret. “But our actions do come with consequences. Look at our own King David, a man after God’s own heart, who, although forgiven, reaped the consequences of sin for the rest of his life. If there is blame to be shouldered, it is mine alone.”

Swallowing hard, I glanced at his foot, remembering it too clearly—how he’d started every day bleary and angry, returning late at night, intoxicated, stumbling through the door and onto his bed, rising the next day mad at the world once again. That’s when I’d started to run, to stay far away from the man I no longer recognized.

There was an abandoned quarry not far from Bethsaida. I’d begun going there at night. It was far from safe, but the danger soothed my scattered mind. The external fear of dark rocks and night animals quieted the internal fear—for a moment.

In the end, Abba's carelessness had cost him his foot. While cutting a large ashlar from limestone, he'd fallen along with the loosened stone, which crushed him. The man who'd risen afterward was humble and kind, quietly shaping black stone in his workshop, providing for his daughter, who was still prone to run. I'd never once heard him complain.

"Abba." Love swelled like a current, lifting me up to his side, where I laid my head on his knee. "You know I don't blame you. The accident doesn't change how I see you."

"Neither do these"—he lifted my head and rested his fingers at the corners of my eyes—"define you."

When I was six months old, my true eye color had shown—a golden yellow that contrasted sharply with my dark hair and skin. Some days I convinced myself it was a warm brown, but then someone would stare, point, or mutter, and I knew how unusual the color was. What I wouldn't give for Leah's deep brown eyes or even Deborah's lighter ones. Anything but my bright and glowing eyes that I couldn't change or hide.

"Did I ever tell you what your mother said when this color first emerged?"

I settled my head back against his knee and peeked up at him. "Yes. Many times, in fact."

He chuckled. "Well, let me tell you again. She took one look at you and gasped with delight. She said, 'Look at this, Jacob! She has paradise in her eyes!'"

A sigh eased from my body as I relaxed into the familiar story. Ima had indeed loved my eyes. Had loved every part of me.

"Salome." Abba lifted my chin to study my face. "An ordinary name for an extraordinary girl. Adonai has good things in store for you, never doubt it."

He'd said similar things to me before, which I'd always brushed aside. But something in his face tonight checked my usual response. He was so serious. So . . . *certain*.

“I thank God for you, daughter.” His voice shook. “I don’t think I would have survived—” He coughed, tears lodging in his throat. “You are full of passion and hungry for justice. These are good things when placed under Adonai’s control. Receive my words over you and release the hateful words of those boys who cannot see what a gift you are.”

He held back tears, but mine dripped off my chin and into his cracked hands as I allowed his words to seep into my battered heart. His face was blurry behind my tears, but I could still see his smile as he gently tapped the corner of one eye and then the next.

“Your mother was right. You have paradise in your eyes. As if you’ve seen God’s very glory.”