

# *Temper the Wind*

## CHAPTER 1

Ammon, 1173 B.C.

The rock was not large enough, but there was no time to look for anything better. She was too far from the city already, almost at the midpoint of the armies, the small separation that kept them apart. They were still far away, though, the sea of men spread out before her, swordpoints catching the sunlight at the smallest movement. Leather shields mingled with the ones made of copper and iron, those held only by the mightiest of the warriors.

The very air seemed to hold its breath as the two armies faced each other, the men of Minnith on the hill, the men of Israel in the shallow valley. Not even the armor jangled.

She could not get close enough to make out faces.

Taleh's heart hung suspended, hardly beating in terror. Somewhere in that crowd of men at the top of the hill stood her father. He did not know she was here. She wondered for a moment if her mother had missed her yet. She could not explain what drew her, why she even cared, why she wanted just one more look at him.

If only she could find a better vantage point! But the stillness oppressive in the very air held her in place, afraid to breathe.

The air exhaled on a mighty shout, and the two armies swelled and surged. Taleh did not, could not, see who moved first.

A scream of pain cut through her, the first ugly sound from the battle. Taleh bit back her own cry of horror as one scream blended with another, piercing cries that should never come from a man. Dead and dying, the men dropped, to be stepped on as the battle swept past. The blades flashed, not so brightly, and stained in red.

Taleh kept her eyes on the men of her city, hoping, praying to any god that still cared enough for her to listen, that her father would appear, whole and strong. But the armies blended into a waving mass, and the sounds were terrible, ringing in her ears, filled with pain and the crunch of men falling, dead men, more and more.

She could not see him. The scene before her blurred, but she fought the sobs. This was not the time! She would miss seeing him if she could not stop.

With sudden shock, the men were there, fighting around her, swords swinging and arrows twanging and cutting as they hit. Taleh cried out, her voice shrill above the din.

A man, a big man with a sword to match, an Israelite from the beard, glanced down. Taleh saw his eyes widen. The sword behind him ripped downward, shaking the air. She screamed again, seeing his death coming, not knowing why she warned him. He whirled away, catching the oncoming blade with his own. A red line opened on the other man, his eyes widened, and he fell at her side, spilling gore.

She shoved with her feet, back, away, against the rock, away from the man whose eyes were dead and staring, and the red pool that crept across the dry ground toward her feet.

The big man flashed a startled, questioning look down at her, but whirled and met the next blade.

And the battle moved away again, like a wave on a lake.

She stumbled to her feet, and ran, hoping her secret entrance to the city was still open.

## *His Brother's Wife*

### CHAPTER 2

“You should set judges and officers for yourself inside all your gates . . . and they must judge the people with righteous judgment.”

Deuteronomy 16:18

Hannah watched the merchant count the fresh-picked early figs carefully in the basket. Her mouth watered as the sun-warmed scent reached her. She could almost taste them. Just one. . . But, no, she did not dare. Levi might be waiting for her, and he would never allow such a luxury. He would check the coins and ask for prices, and the numbers had to match. If even one fig were missing, he would know.

He always knew. Hannah suspected him of following her, but if he did so, she could never find him, no matter how quickly she turned to check.

“One more,” the man muttered, and reached down into the pile. The scale in his hand swayed gently from side to side and found a balance.

The merchant had not met her eyes since the first startled look when she walked up.

Hannah pulled her long sleeve down and tried to hide the ugly wrappings she had managed to fasten around her aching arm. She struggled to ignore the heat as the sun beat down on her over-dressed body. The day was too hot for the robe and wrappings, but what choice did she have?

It had been three days since this last beating. She would not have come today, but her food supplies were low and she could not take the chance Levi would notice how boring his meals had become – and find her.

Maybe she would heal just enough to endure before that happened.

The merchant handed her back her purchase. He still did not meet her eyes. Hannah looked at the basket’s handle, and willed her other arm, the one less injured, to move. It had been hard enough to hand the basket over empty. Such a small measure of figs to cause such pain. Her

arm, her shoulder, her back, pain streaked like fire as she lifted the basket and its load over the seller's cart.

She had only begun her shopping. Hannah looked down at the basket and its little load of figs, and tried not to think how heavy it would be on the long walk home. She refused to cry. It helped nothing, and when she got back home, how would she explain her tears?

"Fresh lamb's meat," a voice pealed out. "Slaughtered this morning! Fresh!"

Hannah glanced over at the booming voice. A display of copper pans stopped her cold. The face that stared back at her, distorted and orange, had dark shadows around each eye. One was swollen almost shut. A large, ugly splotch puffed out one cheek.

She gasped. No wonder the fig seller had been so uneasy! If only she had known what she looked like before she came! Levi did not permit her to have mirrors in the house. It was hard to get a good look in the wavy image of a hammered copper pot anyway, so she had worked by touch alone, trying to arrange the headdress to cover the worst of the sore spots.

What a poor job she had done.

She lifted her sore arm, unburdened by the basket, awkwardly pulled her headdress further forward to hide her cheek, and glanced around at the crowd. No one was looking her way. A woman in a green robe busily checked the edges of a length of linen. Another counted something in her own basket. Children shrieked in play.

"You had your thumb on that scale!" The sudden shrill complaint, loud and directly at her elbow, startled Hannah into a jerk of surprise. White heat burned down her spine and around her ribs.

"Never! I run an honest business!" The anger coming from the stall made Hannah's wounded muscles tighten.

Hannah left the fruit display, and stepped toward the vegetables. Her legs were stiff, every movement forced and stilted. She had abandoned her bed in the fresh hay in the sheepfold yesterday because the friendly sheep poked their curious noses into bruises and bumped into her, piling new pain on old, nudging her aside as they sought their own comfort, so she had found another last night, under the empty sacks in Levi's own shed. Why he had not looked there yet surprised her, but she was grateful. She would have to find a different place tonight. Three days was a frighteningly long time to go without being caught. She watched for Levi each time she had to venture out to make another meal, peeking out from her hiding place, creeping carefully into the house only when she knew he would be far away.

Why Levi had not come inside the day Joshua had heard her still surprised her, but perhaps it was simply his brother's presence. Joshua had even called her name, and yet Levi had remained outside. He could have strode boldly into that room and pinched and twisted in all the places that would cause pain, all the while crooning the most loving of words for Joshua's listening ears, but he had not. She would not count on such mercy happening again.

Under the spreading awnings that drooped between their support poles at each seller's stall, huge woven baskets sat on wooden tiers, their tempting display sending fragrance into the air. The rich soil of the hills of Gilead produced abundantly: grains, fruits of all kinds, from the common figs, fig-mulberries and olives, to pomegranates, apricots and citron, and vegetables, carrots and beans, onions, peas, leeks and lentils. Her garden produced the common foods, but Levi always found a way to ask for what it did not grow, seeds he would not buy for her – radishes, cucumber, spinach, turnips and eggplant.

So many ways to punish.

Hannah stared at the rich display before her. She had wept and pleaded with God, made endless bargains for the child that would spare her Levi's abuse, but God had not heard her, or if he had, he had not answered, and she had no place else to turn.

She went to set the basket down carefully, trying not to bend. It slipped from her fingers and landed with a soft thump on the ground. She reached across the piles of vegetables for the spinach at the back of the tiers of produce, so far away. The basket at her feet teetered. She leaned down to catch it, too quickly.

"Ooo-oo!" The moan burst out.

No one noticed. Children still played and yelled and ran through the market. Metal clanged from the metalworker's cart. A donkey brayed. Laughter echoed around her. People called back and forth. The woman still complained about the merchant's cheating, attracting a small crowd.

It was a slow process filling the large basket one-handed with things she needed to please her husband. She hesitated over the garlic that scented the air. Should she get some, and add it to her own bowl of stew? Would that keep Levi away from her?

The urge for subtle revenge passed, squashed by the reminder of Levi and the power of his anger. When had she become this cringing creature? How many beatings had it taken?

How much longer could she endure?

Out of the corner of one eye, she saw Joshua, Levi's brother, tall and dark-haired, standing at another stall. She turned her head away quickly, praying he had not seen her. He was tall enough to see over the heads of most of the villagers, he could easily spot her. And if he came over for a friendly greeting and asked about her face, she could hardly tell him the truth, he would never believe it, and she did not feel up to lies. The fig seller had guessed without being told, she was certain of that, but Joshua? Never!

A hand touched her shoulder. Hannah went as still as death, afraid even to breathe.

"Hannah?"

A woman's voice. She took a breath, easing her burning lungs. The buzzing in her ears went quiet.

## *Warrior of the Heart*

### CHAPTER 1

So they commanded the men of Benjamin: "Go and set an ambush in the vineyards. And when you see the young women of Shiloh come out to join in their circle dances, each of you should come out from the vineyards and seize a wife."

Judges 21:20,21

It felt good to sing. The bitter, ugly war was over. It had been a while since she had felt she could laugh, and even now Aksah had to shove the sad thought aside, lest it taint this bright moment. She had spent months grieving, but they were in Shiloh, and the Ark of the Covenant was here. The harvest was over and it had been a good one. It was time to celebrate.

And time to forget.

Laughter rose from the circle of young women as they began to move in the steps of the dance. Aksah hung onto the hands of the maiden in front and the one behind, as she too began to pick up the familiar moves. Left foot over right, a hop and then right foot over left, they all let go for the twirl, hands reached and clasped again in the giant circle, two graceful steps to the right and the movements repeated themselves, faster now, and the songs and laughter soared. Nearby, someone played a harp, and someone else played the flute, nearly drowned out by the happy calls of the circles of dancers.

The women moved in toward each other, the circle tightening, their hands raised as if to grasp a piece of the sky, the sun bright on their faces and then the steps took them back again, the ring widening, their arms stretched as far as they could go and still remain linked. The circle began to move again, their laughter and song a cheerful thing.

No doubt there were others here who hid their own sadness behind the smiles. Aksah did not know most of the girls in her circle, might not see them again for a year, but today they would laugh and dance. It was not so easy to recover, but this was a start, and she would learn again to be happy.

*Do not think about your brother, she told herself, do not think of his wife and little children widowed and orphaned for such a foolish war. Dance now, and be glad you are here in Shiloh, where the Ark is, and where God's favor resides again.*

She made herself listen to the notes, the plinking of the lyre and the trill of the flute, like the birds soaring in the sky overhead. Flute and birds, singing together. The low hills flashed around them as the circle moved, gaining time in the joyous songs, white rocks poking up from the green, the brown tents of the travelers for this once-a-year celebration, tents that dotted the valley and climbed the lower levels. Soon the summer heat would come and the flowers would fade, but today they were all in bloom.

Aksah let the colors replenish her as they flashed past, pinks and purples and whites melding into a quilt of springtime.

The circle slowed, and the colors took shape, bushes being bushes again instead of a wash of green, flowers turning into clumps instead of streaks of brilliance. Her eyes were filled with the brightness, the floating music seemed to lift her heart with her feet.

She watched groups of people climb along the tiered hills of grapevines that surrounded Shiloh. Brightly colored robes appeared with each spin of the circle. Men and women, children, wandering through the rows, each turn putting the little families in a different place.

In the distance, the tabernacle curtain came into view, then went out of sight, then back again as she twirled and moved in the dance. Israel's holy house, the very reason they were here, the grey smoke of the sacrifices rising to the blue sky like the music.

The circle wound around again, each scene filling her eyes fresh, untainted by the war's woes. Aksah clapped with the music and whirled again, hardly needing to count in the so-familiar steps.

Near the hill's top, between the rows of staked vines, shadows moved. She lost them as the dance continued, but there they were again, ahead of the small groups climbing up the terraces.

Shadows in the grapevines, vines in places tall enough for a man to lurk, and to spring. Men with the right to capture a virgin, and steal her away.

Men who had shown utter disregard for women.