

“When will you make an offer for my daughter? You know I have forgiven you for your harsh words. I would welcome you as her husband.”

Her father’s voice. Miriam halted behind the wall of a shop, careful not to let the basket for her goods brush against anything that might reveal her presence, and caught her breath. Who was he talking to? A flutter of nerves made her heartbeat skip. Father was bargaining for her future. She ached to peek around the corner to see her future husband.

The moment the impact of what he had said hit her like a blow—*I have forgiven you for your harsh words*—she heard Joshua’s voice, low but unmistakable.

“Hophni, I have not changed my mind. I told you then, I have told you times without counting since, I am happy with my wife. I seek no other.” A brief pause, the whisper of movement as if he was stepping away, and Joshua said in a voice that invited no argument, “You will have to find Miriam a husband elsewhere, because I will not be that man.”

It had been nearly three years since that awful day when her foolish younger self stopped at his shop the very day after his wedding to Hannah, his brother’s widow. What possessed her to throw herself at him like that? Her words came back as clearly as if they hung on the air. *I am willing to wait until you can choose another wife without exciting comment. I know you only married her because you had to.*

That was not the only humiliating memory to torment her. No, weeks after that first brazen approach, she had gone to Joshua’s land uninvited. Even though the lattices over the windows were shut, she knew her words could be plainly heard inside. *I have not seen Joshua at his shop for days. I heard of the sickness here, and I simply must be sure he is well.*

Now, years later, Miriam did not know if she intended Hannah to hear, but Joshua certainly had caught every word.

She leaned against the wall, her fingers clenching on the woven-reed handle, squeezed her eyes shut tight, and tried to shove the hurtful memories away. It did not work, the memories flooded back, the feelings of humiliation as strong as they had been that day. Joshua threw her over his shoulder like a sack of grain and walked her across his land in full view of every one of his slaves.

That was not the worst of it. No, the rest of the humiliation came once they reached the village—this village—and the people saw him dragging her along the street. Men pointed him in her father's direction, knowing Joshua was unhappy with both her and her father and eager to help him settle the matter.

She learned a lesson that day. Learned that her behavior was that of a spoiled child, and in trying to get what she wanted, she had hurt an innocent woman and embarrassed the husband.

Her father had not learned the same lesson. And now he was humiliating her again, not by anything she had done but by his own actions. Stopping Joshua in the market, pressuring him to marry her oblivious to onlookers? Unless he *wanted* others to hear? Making marriage arrangements was done in private, or through the marriage brokers, not on a busy day when the whole village could overhear and take sides.

Imagine if they sided with her father and pressured Joshua to make his offer. Bad enough to be a second wife without having the husband resent her, too!

Israel must be full of men looking for a wife. Men who would be happy to accept the daughter of a wealthy wine merchant. Men who did not live in the town where her humiliation was an everyday reminder. Maybe not everyone who whispered behind her back, or the sudden bursts of laughter after she passed, were about her. But it happened too often for her not to cringe each time.

She was tired of the constant reminders, the lingering stabs of guilt.

When she married, she wanted a man to take her away, not someone who lived here. Her father must be determined to keep her near even after she wed to harass this one man so.

There had to be more behind his pressure, though. Joshua made no secret of not wanting a second wife. Everyone knew it. How could her father *not* understand? Joshua's words of a moment ago echoed in her head. *I have told you times without counting since.* Times without counting.

In front of the village each time? No wonder the titters and whispers continued.

Other voices penetrated her misery. No doubt every shopkeeper and every villager browsing through the market overheard her father and Joshua. She could

not walk out and show herself. What would they think? She had made no secret of her pursuit of Joshua before. The logical conclusion would be that she pushed Father into making the offer.

Or rather, the demand.

Perhaps Hannah came with her husband today. Had she been nearby, close enough to overhear? Miriam clenched one hand in the robe over her aching heart, while the rough reeds dug into the other one. She would not have the poor woman exposed to more hurt. Not that Hannah would embarrass her. She never said anything, did anything, to indicate she remembered the time of Miriam's visit—intrusion, more appropriately—into her new life.

An idea crept into her mind. Miriam brushed away the wetness on her face and straightened her shoulders. The only one who could put a stop to Father's pressure was herself. She would find a husband on her own, who would take her away from this village, from the constant reminders of her foolish, feckless younger self and the ongoing humiliation of her father's meddling.

Somewhere there had to be a man to take her away from the village.

She still needed spices, and flour, and figs for her cooking. Somehow she would have to go back into the marketplace, make herself mingle, and hope she would not be seen by either Joshua or his wife. One deep breath and she would step out from her hiding place.

If only Mother had lived! She would have been able to guide her through the difficult days when Joshua first caught her young and foolish eye. And maybe even control Father's constant efforts to get her married to the man.

Footsteps drew near. One quick swipe under her eyes, a lift of her chin, and she forced herself to walk back around the shop and into that end of the marketplace, carrying the basket over her arm as though she had not a worry.

For a space of a breath, she thought every eye in the market was fixed on her. Miriam looked at the faces looking back at her. Some turned away as if expecting to see someone else, a few nodded, but most did not even seem to realize she was there, and her breath rushed back as relief eased her tense muscles. The marketplace went back to a place of business instead of the site of her humiliation.

Maybe no one else had overheard her father's insensitive pressure.

Awnings stretched over the stalls, leather ones, woven ones, some striped, some with fringe and blue thread like the law required for the bottoms of robes. Potters, leather-makers, metalworkers with their finished goods sparkling in the sunlight, sellers of grains, and nuts, of dried fruits from last year's harvest, their individual shops going down the street and around the corner. The dusty-wood smell of the nuts, the bite of dried apricots, the heavy sweetness of dates, the pungency of olives perfumed the air. Weavers worked on large looms in the back, the rhythmic clack of the sheds forming a heartbeat to the movement and voices.

"When will the weaving of my fabric be finished?" "What weight of almonds did you say?" "If you want a taste of my dried apricots, you must buy. I do not give away my produce." "Making date cakes? How many do you need?" The conversation swirled around her as she moved into the crowds in front of the stalls. People turned to see who brushed past as she tried to squeeze around the groups before returning to their own bargaining.

For a moment, she could not remember what it was she needed. Spices, and what else?

The mound of figs reminded her, and she headed over to that stand. These were the early figs, the main harvest would not come for several weeks, but these first figs had the very delicate flavor she wanted for the cakes. Cakes! That reminded her of the grain for her hand mill. There was something else . . .

The sudden frantic cry of a child stopped the activity in every stall. The shopkeeper behind the stand of figs leaned over the baskets of fresh fruit and peered down the street. The cries built, as if the poor little one was really suffering, but no adult came running.

Miriam let her gaze drop down. After all, this was a child, and a young one at that. She would certainly not see it looking at her own height. Still nothing appeared out of the ordinary, so she left the fig-seller's stand and walked down the street following the increasing volume. Halfway down the street, a small crowd began to gather around a pile of baskets, the adults leaning over and doing the kind of crooning one does to a baby.

Through the legs, she saw a young one, no more than two or three years, dark, curly hair sticking to a sweaty face, mouth open and some truly impressive noises coming out. One of the people in the cluster straightened, and turned. Miriam recognized the man. It was the weaver, the one who owned the large loom in the shop right across from the fruit-seller. "I do not recognize this child." He looked around the crowd, no more than six or seven people, she realized. "Does anyone know who this child belongs to?"

Heads shook. "Not I." "Never seen him before." "Is it a boy or a girl?"

Now that the towering adults had stopped staring at him, the baby's crying lessened. Miriam squeezed through the people, and crouched down, setting her basket aside. She kept her hands on her knees rather than do any moves that might alarm him—or her—further. "Hello."

The mouth opened, and the child took a deep breath.

"Not again." She watched enough mothers in the market struggle to control their children. This was not her child, but until the parents showed up, someone had to do something. In a firm voice, like the sternness she often heard, she said, "Enough of that."

The little mouth closed, and the eyes went wide with alarm.

Just in case those eyes presaged another screaming fit, she said in that same firm tone, "No." Now what? Softening her voice into a croon, she asked, "Where is your mother?"

A big tear rolled down one cheek, and hiccuping sounds, like lungs deprived of air too long, started. Obviously mentioning a parent was the wrong thing to say. If the parents were not coming to the child, the child would have to go to them. If she wandered around the market, at some point she would find someone to claim their baby. "Come here." She held out her arms, wondering what she would do if it did not respond.

Wondering what she would do if it did. Was she really going to walk around the town with someone else's child?

With surprising speed, the little one clambered to its feet, shoving its little bottom in the air before standing the way babies did, and launched into her.

Miriam almost lost her balance as she caught the child with one arm, keeping herself upright with the other. Tiny fingers dug into her robe.

She looked at the basket. No one would take it, and she could come back later. Right now, the child needed to find his parent. Now that she saw him up close, she could tell that he was a boy.

It took a bit of balancing, and a tighter grip with that one arm, but she got herself upright. She looked around at the faces, and felt heat rush up her cheeks at the knowing smiles.

No doubt everyone saw her with the baby and thought the same thing: It was time for her to marry.

As her gaze went around the small group, a familiar face appeared behind the cluster. Taleh, the still-beautiful wife of one of the village elders. Her youngest child was about four now, but she had lots of experience with babies. Besides, she was one of the village midwives. Miriam did not know the woman well. They were of two different generations, but she had always been kind despite knowing—Miriam was certain—the cruel things Hannah overheard her say in the early days of the marriage. The wince came as it always did when her own words echoed in her mind, the eager hope that perhaps Hannah would not survive and Joshua would come to her.

She would have to ask the woman. No one in this group knew the child. Taleh's husband was a respected elder; she might know people Miriam did not. Besides, as a midwife, surely the other woman would recognize a child she helped be born. Did midwives keep a count?

"Excuse me." She edged her way around the group, and crossed the space to where Taleh stood. "Do you know who this child belongs to?"

Taleh tilted her dark head, and squinted. "No . . . perhaps." She chuckled the baby under the chin, to be rewarded by a toothy smile before two chubby fingers went into the mouth. To Miriam's surprise, the baby rested his head on her shoulder, and sucked vigorously on those fingers.

"Ah." Taleh's gaze went past Miriam, and a smile tilted her lips. "I think the father has discovered his child is missing."

Miriam turned around, so see a thin man with sunken cheeks standing in the middle of the street, his brown hair on end as if he had been running his fingers through it, or perhaps trying to tear it out.

Taleh took her arm, and started down the street toward the distraught man. As soon they got close enough to be heard, Taleh raised her hand in a tentative wave. “Kemuel?” Her voice held hesitation. “I have that right?”

He turned around, and his knees buckled. Miriam caught her breath, afraid he would collapse, but he straightened them with effort, his arms reaching out toward the child. “Abdi! Thank God, Abdi!”

Miriam almost dropped the baby—Abdi—as he lurched forward, reaching out his little arms toward his father. “What happened? How did he get away?” She heard the edge in her voice, but where had he *been*?

The man—Kemuel—took the child. He was shaking, she could see the tremors running down his arms. Miriam took a sharp look at his face again. Those sunken cheeks, the pronounced bones of his face, the thin arms, the legs that nearly collapsed—it was not just relief. He had been ill.

Her mind returned to the sickness that spread through Joshua’s farm. It started in the slaves, and one woman was already dead. Word spread to the village that Hannah had nursed the slaves, picked up the contagion, and no one knew if she would survive. Was this the man who had given her his illness?

Looking at him, she was abruptly certain that he was the one. Which meant that instead of Joshua losing his wife, Kemuel was the one bereaved. And now he had to raise his—their—child alone. There was no one else to watch over the little one, keep him close, while he did his shopping.

When would she learn to think before she spoke?

Kemuel looked at her over his son’s head. “He moves so fast. I had him at my side, I was buying new sandals, and when I looked down, he was not there.”

“I am sorry.” She must learn to say those words. She seemed to need them, because despite her best efforts, her mouth still ran ahead of her thoughts. “It was wrong of me to be so critical. I am sure it is difficult to be a parent.” The words came hard, but it was a relief to know she could say them.