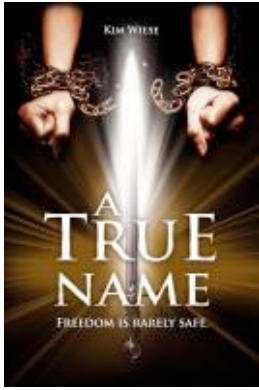


A dramatic black and white image featuring a person's hands in metal cuffs. A bright sword points downwards from the center, its tip directed at the hands. The background is dark with radiating light beams emanating from the sword's tip. The author's name 'KIM WIESE' is at the top, and the title 'A TRUE NAME' and tagline 'FREEDOM IS RARELY SAFE.' are at the bottom.

KIM WIESE

A TRUE NAME

FREEDOM IS RARELY SAFE.



Mara is a slave who longs for freedom but her efforts have led to a downward spiral toward despair and death. Helpless, she sets her hope on the son of the High King to free her, though she has been told he is a myth. When a farmer buys her, Mara is convinced that her lot will get worse. But things are not what they seem. What follows requires all her faith, courage, and love.

A True Name

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A True Name

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First Edition

Chapter One

The Block

Everyone has a story. Most people think their story is extraordinary because they are in it. This is my story, and it is extraordinary – not because it is mine, or because I am in it, but because someone else is.

I used to call myself Mara. I was a slave. My owners called me whatever they saw fit. But when I was a little child, just before I was taken from my mother, I remember another slave calling her “Mara,” a slave’s name, but at the time it was hers, so I held onto it. No one else ever knew. If they had known, they would have scoffed at the idea of me having my own name. All the same, in my deepest heart, Mara was what I called myself.

If I had to pinpoint the moment my life began to change – the first of several tiny shifts that brought me here – it would have to be the day my foot happened upon a slender shank of metal half buried in the ground behind the main house. I glanced around. There were four or five other slaves with me. They were paying no attention. The overseer who guarded us had his back to me. “Hurry up!” he yelled at another slave. He pulled out his whip and snapped it at the ground in warning. While he was occupied, I bent down, snatched up the bit of metal, and concealed it in my shoe. I heard the snap of the whip again just before I felt the sting slice across my back. “What are you doing?” he demanded.

“Pebble in my shoe,” I told him, forcing back sudden tears of pain, and I stood up before he had a chance to use his whip again.

I carried the metal in my shoe all day, enduring the discomfort as a kind of raw hope. That night when everyone else was asleep, I took my treasure out and examined it. It appeared to be an awl snapped off from its handle. The end of it fit in the lock hole of my leg irons. Blessing my good fortune, I began working at the lock.

"What is that?" a voice hissed at me. A quiet clanking disturbed the dark as the slave chained to the bunk next to mine raised up on one elbow to watch.

I put my finger to my lips and held up the awl. After a few more seconds' work, one of the irons fell away. "Want to come?" I whispered to her.

She shook her head. "Not this time." She watched me for another minute. "You know they'll catch you."

I spoke the lie I had been telling myself. "No they won't." And the other manacle came open. I rubbed both wrists, now free of the chafing weight.

"Run," she whispered. "Run as hard as you can. That was my mistake the last time. I didn't get far enough away." I nodded and stood up. "Can I have that?" she indicated the awl. "I might want it later." I handed it to her. "Good luck," she said. I slipped out of the slaves' quarters, went around back, my heart pounding with hope and anticipation, and took off running through the fields.

Other than my secret name, only two, perhaps three things could I call my own: the breath in my body, my secret thoughts, and a ghost who was my constant companion and mirror. The ghost wore my likeness, my clothing, my face. When one of my masters violated me, when he demanded that I shred my soul for him, this apparition stood over me, watching with my eyes—eyes that were by turns accusing and voracious. She trailed me wherever I went. Even when I couldn't see her, I felt her hanging

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just behind my shoulder like some misbegotten nightmare, or a familiar but elusive odor. Invisible fetters bound us together. If those fetters were ever severed, if my ghost left me, I would die.

But just then, my ghost was nowhere to be seen. *I have outrun her.* That thought gave me as much satisfaction as getting out of my chains had done. I had never been alone before. There had always been someone there—another slave, a master, or *her* watching. Always someone watching. Now I had only the pleasure of my own company.

That first night I traveled in the friendly light of a half moon, alternately running and walking to put as much distance as possible between myself and the trackers who would come after me. The sun rose that morning in a blaze of orange and pink. I stopped for a moment, sucking clean air deep into my lungs, staring at the fiery display, determined to remember the first sunrise of my new life as a free woman. At last, with reluctance I turned away, putting delight behind for the sake of pressing on. With the daylight I was forced to move with greater caution. I skirted farms and houses, keeping to hedgerows and the cover of trees. By that afternoon, my initial burst of energy spent, I chose a haystack on the edge of a field and began to burrow into it. Some instinct seized me, forced me to turn around.

And there she was. My ghost had caught up with me. For a long moment my heart stilled, paralyzed and despairing, then in rage I resumed my task. She watched as I flung handfuls of hay in her direction—as if that would hurt her somehow.

“Go away,” I muttered through clenched teeth as I finished my nest. “I don’t want you.” I crawled into the haystack and turned my back to her—choosing for the moment to pretend she did not exist—and slept deeply for a few hours, warm and protected. At

dark we were off again. Hunger made me light-headed but I pressed on, knowing I'd have to wait for daylight to find something to eat. The summer sun rose early, and while birdsong trilled above and around me, I gleaned berries and roots as I walked. I drank from pools and streams along the way, and slept fitfully, only an hour or so at a time now, hidden under bushes and deadfall.

Rather than easing, my sense of foreboding intensified the farther I traveled from my master's holdings. Anxiety gripped and squeezed at my heart. My ghost's presence reminded me that I had never known a slave who had not been recaptured, and of the many times I was forced to witness the crippling punishment that followed. But freedom...ah, freedom! Like a lovely and fretful dragonfly it danced before my eyes, so I pointed my face westward to the setting sun and scrambled after it. If I could just touch it.... If I could reach out and take hold....

I heard them on the evening of the third day, the unmistakable bawling and baying rang out in the valleys behind. They had brought out the dogs. Still, with my blood throbbing in my ears, I ran, blind now to summer's mocking beauty. My ghost ran with me, her eyes wide with terror; she matched me step for step. How did I think I would ever outrun her? I stumbled onto a sparkling river, and without hesitating to drink, I waded in and splashed upstream for nearly a mile, trying to baptize the scent of my fear and despair. The hounds weren't fooled, and their barking and crashing through the countryside grew louder and closer each minute. Over the rasp of my own breathing I heard the shouts and whistles of the trackers as they egged the dogs on.

Around dusk they found me. I had scrambled up a hill when I heard a deep snarl. I whirled around. A huge black brute with

glittering eyes crouched and sprang, his forepaws caught me in the chest and drove me to the ground. He pinned me, his jaws clamped on my throat. The rest of the pack circled, howling their victory to the heavens. I moved one hand, and the dog growled and tightened his grip. His hot panting steamed in my ear as his body straddled mine, unyielding and ferocious. His teeth punctured my flesh, and a wet trickle slid down the side of my neck. Startled, I locked eyes with my invisible companion. *His drool?* Her eyes answered, *No, my blood.* I swallowed, and even that movement against his jaws made him growl again.

Cicadas buzzed a warning in the trees above, a warning that grew louder and more insistent each moment. “They’re coming! They’re coming...coming...coming.... There must have been hundreds of them—thousands. Swarms and swarms of them. The drone escalated to a roar, filling my ears, drowning my senses. I was actually relieved when the trackers caught up, but they took their time freeing me from the black dog’s suffocating grip. First, laughing and making coarse jokes, they pulled the other dogs away. I hardly heard them over the roar. The trackers blurred, darkened until they appeared no more than wraiths. My vision went black, and my last coherent thought was, “They are too late.”

The next thing I knew, a shock of cold water doused my face. I opened my eyes, gasping for breath—now that I could—and each of the two trackers grabbed one of my arms. They hauled me to my feet and clapped on the chains. As they did, I looked down, and there on the ground lay the image of myself pinned under the black dog, staring up at me, her ghostly eyes wide and accusing. The slavers spun me around and marched me back to my master and my punishment.

A Holy Man came to see me in the slaves' quarters after I was lashed. I lay on my stomach and blinked at him through a red haze of pain as he pulled up a chair and sat down next to my cot. Shadows pooled in the hollows of his face. His lips stretched thin in a severe expression of controlled contempt as he clucked his tongue at my wounds and patted my head as if I were a child. "I hope this will teach you never to try that again."

I answered through gritted teeth, "I don't want to be a slave anymore." Just the effort of those few words left me breathless and panting.

"There is a better way," he told me, and pulled something from inside his robe. "If you do all the things written here, and do them faithfully, your owner will set you free." His skeletal fingers laid a pamphlet on the cot. As he did, he exposed his bony wrist and the silver bracelet all Holy Men wore, the ones that look like shackles.

I might have laughed but for the pain screaming in my back. "When has an owner ever set anyone free?"

"It is rare," he admitted, "but I suspect you have it in you to make it happen. Read this when you are better. It will tell you what to do."

Several days passed before I was well enough to look at it. The title on the brightly-colored front cover was, "One Hundred Steps to Freedom!" I thumbed through it. Each page contained rules of conduct for slaves—certain ways to bow, to hold a cup when serving it, precise instructions for setting one's foot down when walking, the exact words to say in given situations. I didn't count the rules, but they looked like more than a hundred. The pamphlet concluded, "When you have mastered the Steps, you will be free from your owner."

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"I couldn't master this if I spent the rest of my life." I tossed the book aside. About a month later another slave asked to borrow it. "You can keep it," I told her, deciding I'd had it with Holy Men. They were no help at all.

Now I had a new problem to wrestle with – as if being a slave were not bad enough. My attempt to escape left an indelible memory. As difficult as those few days had been, and though I hadn't really been free, the idea of freedom lingered the way a drop of honey or a sip of wine lingers on the tongue. *Someday, I promised myself, someday I will try again. Someday I will succeed.* Even then I would see my ghost's accusing eyes, and quail in terror. My heart contradicted itself. Hope and fear, chained together hand and foot,肘ed each other for breathing room.

As soon as I could walk again, my owner sold me to the slavers, who clapped me in chains, along with a dozen others, and forced us to walk to the cavernous Warehouse in the center of the country. This was where slaves were always taken and held overnight to be sold, where we lay down, closed our eyes, and chased our futile dreams.

After two days' walking, each of us hunched over with hunger and panting with thirst, we arrived. A pair of slavers removed our chains, while a third ordered us to stand in line – as if we weren't already. The Warehouse loomed like a crouching monster in the gathering dusk, its open door a gaping maw.

"Name?" A slaver blocked my entrance to the Warehouse with a stout cudgel.

I stood shivering as a chill wind sliced through my tunic. *Why do you ask us when you already know the answer?* I dared not claim to have a name. It would not be worth the punishment, so I lowered

my eyes and muttered, "I have no name." The slaver waved his cudgel to one side and allowed me to pass.

Behind me I heard him repeat, "Name?" and the slave who stood next in line echoed my reply. "I have no name."

The stench hit me the moment I stepped inside, and I clapped a hand over my nose and mouth. Despite the size of the room, the air reeked with unwashed bodies and the odor spilling from the latrines. Deciding I had better visit the latrines before I settled down – and before they got much worse – I picked my way between thin pallets that covered the grimy floor. There was hardly a foot's space between them, except for a clear area around the perimeter of the room, and a square of bare floor dead in the center where the slavers stood sentry. Those on the perimeter faced the middle, and those in the center faced out, so that no part of the room escaped their scrutiny.

On my way to the latrine, I paused to look for my mother – as I always did in this place. But would I even know her? My memories of her were few and marked by shadows: the shadowed room in the slaves' quarters where we were confined, shadows of other slaves moving among us, the hopeless purple stains under her eyes. Some overseer had taken me from her as soon as he judged I was able to work. I didn't remember him, but I remember crying. I remember my mother turning away. A handful of women in the Warehouse were about her age, and I searched their faces, but I saw no one that bore a resemblance to her.

I sighed, resigned. This was how it was always going to be. Shackles and whips were my schoolmasters, and I learned my lessons quickly: Serve without question. Accept abuse without striking back. Suffer injustice without hope of retaliation. Keep your mouth shut and eyes averted. I watched other slaves lose the

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struggle, stagger and fall out of life. Time after time I tamped down my rage, slammed a lid on my fear, and plodded on like some oblivious beast to the slaughterhouse.

A pretty girl followed me out of the latrine where we had struck up a conversation. "So who owned you before this?" She asked as we settled down facing each other.

"I was in Nevis' house for two years," I answered.

She twisted a lock of her light brown hair, wove the end of it between her fingers. "Nevis? I was in that house when I was a child. Did you know the cook? A large woman with a mustache and frizzy gray hair?"

"She was there. She had an evil temper unless she liked you."

"Was she well? She must be getting old."

"Well enough," I answered. "Nevis valued her skill in the kitchen. She's probably still there."

"She was like a mother to me."

I nodded. Finished with her weaving, she tucked the lock behind one ear and looked up as another slave approached, a blonde woman. She sat with us as we continued to exchange stories and information about the masters we had served. Presently a few others joined our group, and we talked, all the while keeping one eye on the slavers.

Before long, a young man on my left leaned in close. "Some of us are getting out tonight. Anyone want to come?" An escape. Every time I came to this place to be sold again someone tried it, usually someone young. My back was an aching mass of scabs.

There was no way I was going to try to escape from the Warehouse. "No thanks," I told the Youth.

None of us discouraged him from trying, but no one volunteered to join him either. He shrugged. "Your loss. I'm getting out of here."

The Pretty Girl's eyes darted toward the slavers. She leaned toward the Youth. "You ought to wait. I've heard that the Prince has been in this area. He might show up tomorrow."

I had heard the rumors, too. They were embedded in my earliest memory, whispers among us that the King's son was acquiring slaves and setting them free. Some of us believed it, more or less, depending on the need. Of course, the story had its detractors.

"The Prince!" an older man scoffed. The corners of his mouth turned down in a bitter scowl as if he had eaten something nasty. "There is no Prince. He died a long time ago. Even if he was alive, you think he'd go around buying slaves just to turn them loose? What a load of dung! If you want to know what I think, I think he was dreamed up by the slavers to keep us quiet. Prince!" he sneered. "I'm sick of hearing about your bleeding Prince!"

"Hold your voice down!" the Blonde hissed. "You want *them* to hear you?" I glanced furtively at the slavers, but they ignored us.

The Older Man got up abruptly and left, and the rest of us regarded each other uneasily. "He's probably right, you know," the Blonde murmured. Her hardened eyes cried foul in a young face. She gingerly touched a swollen, blackened area high on her left cheekbone. "I've heard the story...well, all my life, but I've never seen the Prince. Never so much as a glimpse."

A hulking middle-aged man with skin as smooth and dark as creamed coffee ran one hand over his close-cropped hair. "Are you sure you'd know him if you saw him?"

The Blonde coughed once, a wracking bark that made me flinch. “Well, I think so,” she replied and frowned. “I mean, why not? He’d have the look of a prince, wouldn’t he? Fine clothes and all?”

The Dark Man answered, “Maybe, maybe not. I think if I were the Prince, I’d disguise myself just to see how people really are. They’d behave differently toward a common man, wouldn’t they? I could know for sure how they were on the inside, find out what was in their hearts.” He dropped his eyes to his enormous hands and repeated, “I’d want to see how people really are.”

“You don’t get enough of that already?” the Youth snorted. “We see how people really are all the time. If I were the Prince, I would dress like it, look like it, and make sure everyone knew who I was. I’d want to be treated like royalty, to have people serving me for a change.”

“That makes you no better than they are,” the Blonde observed, referring to the owners.

I thought the Youth would take offense at her words, but he shrugged. “Why should I be better? My father was one of them, even if my mother was a slave.”

“You know who your father is?” I asked, incredulous. Few slaves had any knowledge of who sired them.

The Youth shook his head. “I don’t know which one he is, but I was told he was an owner.”

The Dark Man, still staring at his hands, said, “I believe in the Prince. I know what he does isn’t logical, but some days it’s the only thing that keeps me alive. I’m not getting any younger or stronger.”

A strangled noise erupted from the Youth, who then stood up and stalked off. The Dark Man had broken etiquette. He had touched the awful truth at the center of who we were. We were

judged and sold primarily for our looks and our strength, though some slaves acquired skills that added to their value. Time was another oppressor, another owner. No matter how valuable we might be now, inevitably our worth diminished as youth ebbed away.

Choosing to ignore an ache gathering strength at the base of my skull, I took stock of myself. I was still fairly young by a count of years, but earlier in the latrine I had made the mistake of noticing my reflection in one of the mirrors. What I saw there didn't surprise me much, but it dismayed me, all the same. My face, lined with anxiety and haggard with hunger and fear, bore a heavier burden of time than my age should have allowed. The wounds on my back were slow to heal, and I'd been weakened by a lack of food and loss of blood. To make matters worse, I was filthy. On the way to the Warehouse, one of the slavers had seen fit to toss me in a reeking pig wallow. I was no dirtier than many of the others, but my matted hair and crusted skin assured I would not be chosen this time for a bed slave. I'd probably end up working hard labor in the fields. That was the top of a downhill slide to an open grave.

The Blonde grimaced and went looking for a vacant pallet to sleep on, and the Pretty Girl saw someone across the room she recognized, so she excused herself and walked off, leaving only the Dark Man still sitting with me. "Do you really believe the stories about the Prince?" My voice had lowered to a whisper, now that the others were settling down to sleep.

He gave an almost imperceptible nod. "I believe. Do you?"

A tear from each eye, hopeless twins, slid in hot tracks down my cheeks. They were the first clean water my face had known in days. "Does it matter? If he exists, it is without my faith. If he doesn't, all the wishing in the world will not make him so."

Another nod. His reply came quiet and low. "That's true, but he only comes to the ones who believe in him and want him."

"It has to be both?" I protested. "Isn't it enough just to want him to be real?"

A handful of Holy Men and Women wandered among the pallets, stooping at times to talk to the slaves. One approached us, a woman with iron gray hair and cold, hard eyes. The Dark Man looked up at her and growled, "Be gone."

Her eyes widened, either in shock at his abrupt words, or in fear. She turned on her heel, picked her way between the pallets as quickly as she could, and hurried past the slavers and out the door. They let her go without so much as a glance.

The Dark Man regarded me again with deep, steady eyes. "The slavers and the owners believe in him. They know who he is, but they don't want him."

"Why not?" I asked, glancing toward the slavers. "Aren't they his subjects?"

"It's a long story for another time," the Dark Man answered. "There's a song that speaks of it. It says, 'Their hatred of him runs swift and deep, an ancient river fouled with blood.' On the other hand, plenty of slaves want him without believing. Same thing as wishing. They wish the stories were true. They wish they could be free, but not enough to take that final step."

I had never heard anyone speak of the Prince with such assurance. It was as if he knew the Prince personally. I asked, "So what is the final step? How does a person go from wanting to believing?"

His gaze intensified, and he leaned toward me with the faintest smile. "Say it."

"Say what?"

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“Say the words you already have hidden in your heart.”

Words hidden in my heart? Did anything exist in me besides impotent rage and persistent fear? Was hope buried deeper still? I groped for understanding, searched for some treasure entombed in the rotting despair of my soul. I tried to speak, but no words came. I knew what I wanted to say, didn't I? But I was struck dumb. My thoughts no longer had communion with my tongue. Did I really believe after all, or was I doomed to die wishing? Was it possible to make myself believe anything so absurd?

After I wrestled with myself for several frustrating minutes, the Dark Man laid a gentle hand over mine. “Go ahead.”

At last my tongue found its purpose, and I closed my eyes and whispered, “I believe in the Prince. I believe he is real....”

“Go on. Say it.”

“I believe he buys slaves and sets them free.” I swallowed and uttered the deepest longing of my soul. “I believe someday he will come for me and set me free.” As I spoke the words, they took root, and all at once I *did* believe. Hope came alive, bloomed in the light of faith. I opened my eyes and met the Dark Man's gaze. My lungs expanded, took in a deep draught, as if for the very first time. The fetid air of the Warehouse suddenly tasted like a summer breeze rolling off a high hill. I let out my breath by degrees and realized I was bone weary.

The Dark Man chuckled when I yawned. “You need to rest now.” He stretched his considerable form out on the pallet next to mine.

But questions still plagued me, and the Dark Man seemed sure of his answers. Having a care for my wounded back, I laid down on my side facing him. He was more substantial somehow, more

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solid than the rest of us. I sensed that he had more, that he *was* more. "Do you have a name?"

"Daniel," came the quiet reply.

Daniel. A reluctance to pry, learned from years spent in slave quarters, kept me from asking if he'd always had that name, if he chose it for himself, or if someone chose it for him. Another thought struck me. "Daniel, you said you believe in the Prince. If the Prince comes to those who believe, why are you still here? Why aren't you free?"

His teeth flashed white in a grin that lit up the dim room. "I am free. Look for me tomorrow on the block. I won't be there." When I rose up on one elbow, he whispered, "You'll understand soon, I promise. Now go to sleep, little sister."

I did sleep, more deeply than I had in a long time. But screams shattered my peace in the middle of the night and ripped me back to consciousness. Dull thuds followed, the sound of something hard striking flesh. My eyes flew open. The slavers had caught the Youth trying to escape, along with three others, and dragged them into the middle of the Warehouse. The Youth was apparently the ringleader, and the slavers were out to make an example of him. They kicked and beat the others, but they used a club on the Youth. I only watched for a moment, then turned over on my pallet, turned my back. I had seen it before and knew what they would do.

When I was younger I witnessed these beatings, and tried cramming my fingers into my ears to muffle the screams and the pounding blows, but it never worked. The slavers forced us all to take part of the Youth's punishment. My own body flinched with every blow as if I were the one being beaten. His screams

hammered at my head; his shrieks were iron nails that pierced and gouged, and they were echoed and magnified by the screaming inside me. *Stop it...stop it...no more please...finish this...stop screaming...stop it...I hate you....* The slavers wielded their horrible clubs. *I hate you....* The Youth screamed, and my heart cried in reply, *I hate you...I HATE YOU....* but I could not watch, would not see.

Before long, the slaves who lay nearest the center of the room began to exclaim with dismay as the Youth's blood spattered them, but by then he was no longer screaming, and at last the blows stopped. The others with him wept and groaned, and presently I heard the distinctive sound of dragging as the slavers forced them to haul the Youth's body away.

When things got quiet again, I realized I was staring into Daniel's dark eyes. We each lay motionless, hardly breathing, as if we weren't real, as if we were statues. Statues with tear-streaked faces.

The next morning, my eyes opened to an empty pallet. Daniel was gone. Our conversation of the night before seemed like a disjointed dream, or half-remembered vision. Did it happen? Did I declare faith in the Prince? I felt my face go hot as I recalled my words and the struggle I had getting them out. What a fool I was! What a simpleton! How could I speak such a thing out loud? The Youth was beaten to death just a few yards away from where I lay. *That* I could believe.

Just as I convinced myself that none of what I had said was real, a condemning little voice, the familiar whisper of my ghost, told me that now I was truly lost, that my doubt of this morning had swallowed up my declaration of faith, and that the Prince would

have nothing to do with me. Even if he did come, he would look into my eyes and discern the truth, and turn away. Daniel had said the Prince only showed himself to those who believed. It was over. The only hope I might have had was now gone.

I sat up with deep reluctance to face the day. Daniel was nowhere in sight. "He must be in the latrine," I told myself, choosing to ignore that he told me he wouldn't be on the block. But though I looked for him that morning, I never did see him. Everyone else was there, except the Youth, of course. After a meager breakfast of thin porridge, the slavers chained us and led us out to the block. We climbed the steps to the platform, obedient and stupid as sheep, and arranged ourselves to wait.

I lifted one shoulder and hissed through my teeth to keep from crying out. (I wouldn't give them that satisfaction, the slavers and buyers arrayed below like a flock of vultures.) One of the stripes on my back opened again, and the coarse wool of my tunic rubbed against it. I silently cursed the overseer who lashed me. The wind swirled dust around our heads, making my nose itch and burn. I sniffed, unable to rub it. The shackles on my wrists were attached to those on my ankles with a short chain. In order to bring my hand to my face, I would have to bend over at the waist, but the press of bodies on the block was too close to allow any movement but the slight and necessary shifting from one foot to the other.

After the first few terrifying times, being on the block is nothing but boredom, hunger and discomfort. None of us jostled for room. There wasn't any. Unlike the night before, no one looked at anyone else or spoke, save those few, lost in the deepest dungeons of isolation and encroaching madness, who muttered to themselves. Perhaps misery loves company, but the deepest miseries abide no one. By this time, my belief of the night before was gripped in a

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vise of hopelessness, and I stood paralyzed and broken—afraid of my faith, and ashamed of my doubt.

From the corner of my eye, I caught movement below. The slavers, who had been standing in a knot, broke up and took positions across the front of the block. Sale would begin soon. I spared hardly a glance at the buyers. They were all the same. Before the end of the day, I would be sold. I would be walking in the footsteps of another master.

“If the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed.”
John 8:36

Chapter Two

Passover

I know when someone is staring at me. I have a tingling awareness, an alarm that creeps up my spine and radiates to the tips of my fingers. It makes me want to go still the way some animals do when they're stalked. Many people claim to have this sense, but in slaves it's fine-tuned. We learn early to recognize it, to pay attention.

I was about seven, maybe as old as eight, when I got my first lesson in this. I was sweeping the floor of my owner's entrance hall. My stomach cramped and growled with hunger. I wouldn't be allowed to eat until I finished, but I didn't dare hurry. My owner, Atemia by name, an old lady with the eyes of a hawk and the temper of a wild pig, had already boxed my ears a number of times for missing a speck, a bit of leaf, a blade of grass. On this day I took extra care. I had gone over the corners and edges three times, and was now slowly sweeping the center. At the same time I pondered what one of the other slaves had told me the night before.

"The High King has a son, and sometimes he buys slaves and sets them free." This slave was a girl about three years older than I, and had taken it upon herself to educate me on the politics of the household and on life in general.

"Have you ever seen him?" I asked her.

"I never have," she admitted, "but the horse boy says he knows a man who was set free."

I wanted to believe her, but even at my tender age, the story was too fantastic to simply accept. I didn't argue with her — she was

bigger and stronger—but I mulled the story over that night and was still considering it as I swept.

I felt, rather than heard the footstep behind me, but awareness came too late. Atemia slammed her fist against the side of my head. “What are you about, you little good-for-nothing?” she shrieked. “You show proper respect! When I come in, you turn to face me. Never, “ she punctuated her words with more blows, “*never* turn your back to me, do you hear me?” I heard her, all right. Between her bludgeoning fists and her rasping, screeching voice, I heard the air wheezing and hissing in and out of her like steam from a broken pipe. Her foul breath forced itself into my lungs. “No food for you today.” She landed a final blow before she turned and stalked away. Both my eyes were blackened, my chin and lower lip split and bloody. It was the first of many lessons, and I learned them well. Before I was sold from her house, every nerve in my body was attuned to her presence. It was a lesson I carried with me everywhere.

So as I waited on the block, I suddenly knew someone was watching me, but it couldn’t be the Prince. Dozens of buyers clustered below the platform, arrayed in gaudy silks and satins, but I recognized many of them, and there was no royalty there. They reminded me of peacocks, both in dress and in the sheer volume of the noise they made. They shouted to each other, engaged in coarse banter and dirty jokes, each trying to outdo the others in crassness and audacity. In this way they strove for power, to establish or maintain a pecking order they alone understood.

But someone had singled me out. I didn’t have the courage yet to raise my eyes. Maybe if I didn’t look, he’d turn his attention to another. I didn’t want to be chosen from the crowd so early in the day. What if the Prince did come, and I was already gone?

Finally I lifted my head to scan the faces of the buyers, and after a few seconds, I spotted him. He stood alone, apart from and slightly behind the others. Unlike them, he wore work clothes—a light-brown homespun wool tunic over darker breeches. The tunic and the plain shirt underneath were held together with a wide leather belt. The toes of his shoes were scuffed and plain, unadorned with buckles or fringes, or any of the other embellishments buyers favored. He carried a sturdy canvas pack slung over one shoulder, and he appeared to be about my age, within a year or two. His gaze met mine with frank, direct appraisal, not the usual leering or contempt.

Overseer? I asked myself, sizing him up. *Maybe he's looking for field slaves for someone else.* But he didn't have the arrogant manner of an overseer. *A farmer, then. Small holding. Not a lot of money to spare.* His clothing, while rough, was clean and in good repair. *What in the world could he want me for? I'm not strong enough to pull a plow, or comely enough that he should desire me.* Daniel's assurances of a Prince who would come and set me free now stung with cruelty, and I shuddered to wonder what manner of abuse would soon be mine.

The Farmer cocked his head in a gesture of curiosity, and one corner of his mouth played with a smile. In the next moment, with quiet determination, and speaking to no one, he shouldered through the crowd and approached the slaver at the front of the block. He spoke so softly I couldn't hear what he said, but when the slaver turned and saw it was me the Farmer wanted, he made no effort to hide his contempt. He laughed and pointed. *"That one? Are you sure?"* They argued a while, the slaver shouting into the unperturbed countenance of the Farmer, as he tried to talk him into acquiring someone more suitable (and more expensive). When the

Farmer answered with an emphatic shake of his head, the slaver shrugged. He turned back and stabbed his finger at me, gesturing for me to come down.

This took a while. I had to squeeze my shoulders and hips between the close-packed bodies of the other slaves, while trying not to brush my sore back against anyone.

The Blonde stood near the front, and as I eased around her, she whispered, "Bye."

"Good luck," I murmured in reply, half for her, half for myself.

I had to give my attention to safely negotiating the steps to the ground, no small feat in short chains. I managed to make it down the first three by turning sideways and leading with my right foot, but as I reached the last step, the slaver grabbed my arm with an impatient yank that nearly sent me sprawling. The wounds on my back tore open with a searing explosion of pain as he roughly righted me, and I bit my lip till it bled to keep from screaming.

"That's enough," the Farmer commanded. "Let her go and strike the chains."

"Strike the chains?" The slaver guffawed in disbelief. "She'll only run away. Better to keep the chains on till you get her home, hey?" He gave me another shake.

"I said that's enough." The Farmer never raised his voice, but his glare burned into the slaver, forcing him to release me.

"Aw, I was only having a bit of fun with you, sir." His lips stretched over a row of discolored teeth in a grin, but the smile did not touch his eyes, and his face had gone florid with anger. "You know it's better to leave the chains on..."

"I told you to strike the chains," the Farmer interrupted. "I've already paid for her, so she's no longer any concern of yours."

Kim Wiese

He already paid for me? Without inspecting me close up? He didn't even ask to look at my teeth, or between my fingers. And when did he pay? I saw no money change hands. I wondered what he would do next, but only for a moment. Blood trickled down my back from the places that had just torn open, and I had to concentrate to remain upright. *I will not faint.* I gritted my teeth, steeled myself not to fall. The cold clank of chains reached my ears before I felt them drop from my feet. The slaver took my wrists, none too gently, and unlocked the manacles before giving me a shove toward the Farmer, who caught me as I stumbled, and steadied me on my feet.

He asked, "Can you walk?"

I had learned from my times on the block that making a good first impression on a new master was of utmost importance. It set the tone for everything to follow. This was especially true in the matter of strength, as weakness invited abuse. So I lifted my chin and squared my raw, bleeding shoulders. "I can."

The Farmer gave me a solemn nod. "Come, follow me." Without a backward glance to see whether I obeyed him, he turned and began to push his way through the buyers. I went after him, pulled along in the wake of his authority.

One of the owners stepped in front of my new master, halting him. When I recognized his brutal, handsome face, my heart sank in misery. Sair was his name. He was tall, with an athletic frame that moved easily under flowing robes of scarlet and purple. He wore his dark curling locks to his shoulders, and kept them carefully oiled. He'd owned me a dozen years before, when I was little more than a girl, and he had been the worst. Seeing him again in his splendor brought out the one crumb of pride I had left. I cringed to think how I appeared to him, and prayed he would not remember me.

“Now what do you have here, friend?” he boomed at the Farmer. “Could there possibly be a woman under that muck?” Several owners around us snickered.

The Farmer met his eyes, his face set hard with an expression of weary anger. “Let us pass.”

Their eyes locked only a moment before Sair’s flinched away, unable to hold the Farmer’s gaze, as if in fear of him. I wondered at this. How could a powerful man like Sair be quailed by a simple farmer? But my former owner wasn’t finished. “Patience, good man!” He took the Farmer’s arm and pulled him close. “Now listen. I’ve had this one,” he nodded toward me. “She has some talent, but she’s stubborn. You need a strong hand with her, or she won’t obey.”

As hooting laughter erupted around us, my face flamed hot with shame. Sair did recognize me. I recalled too clearly the perversions he once subjected me to, and how he beat me when I resisted.

The Farmer shook off his restraining hand, and in a low voice answered, “See to yourself. Now let us pass.”

As he moved forward again, the crowd peeled away as if they also feared him, but however daunted they may have been by the Farmer, they didn’t hesitate to hurl insults at my back. “What is that *smell*?” one owner whined. “Worthless slut,” another muttered just loudly enough for me to hear. An owner with more bravado yelled, “Filthy pig!” and pitched a small stone, which missed me and hit an owner across from him. The wounded one bellowed in aggrievement, elbowed through to the offender, and planted a fist in his face. A full-scale fight was underway before we got free of the crowd. Even so, other owners continued to damn me, calling me similar names—and far worse—until we were out of earshot.

I felt little relief when we were away, for I knew the Farmer heard every insult, every curse. I deserved them. I earned every one. My first few minutes with a new owner, my only chance to make a decent impression was irreparably spoiled. Now he knew the kind of person I was, and I shuddered to guess what he might be thinking. I noted his silence and the set of his back as he strode ahead of me, and thought, *He is disgusted with me.* Experience told me that now my treatment from him was likely to be harsher from the outset. My stomach rumbled, and I pressed a hand to it to silence its demands, wondering if I would even be fed that day, dismissing the thought as unlikely.

He led me through town, never saying a word, never looking back, and onto a road winding east into the countryside. It was mid-summer, the earth warm and blooming, but I plodded heedless behind my new master, seeing nothing but the stones at my feet. They bruised me through my flimsy shoes, but I welcomed the discomfort, a less malignant pain than the one picking at the scabs on my heart. *Last night was a lie, I told myself. Daniel was incredibly cruel.* Then I thought, *No, he was crazy. I've seen other slaves go mad. I bet Daniel isn't even his name. He just made that up. Didn't he say believing in the Prince was all that kept him alive?* I cursed myself for buying into the Dark Man's insanity.

My mind wandered back to the time Atemia beat me, how that evening I sneaked off to find the Holy Man who lived in her house. He was just finishing his dinner, and the aroma of food still hung in the air, assaulting my nose, making my insides twist with want. "Excuse me, sir. May I talk to you a minute?"

He took a sip from his goblet, set it down and belched. "Why certainly, child. How can I help you?" His jowls waggled with

every word. Afraid I would offend him by staring, I lowered my eyes to his hands—pudgy and dimpled as a baby's.

"Well, two things," I answered, and my stomach let out an audible growl. "I'm terribly hungry. Do you have any food left?"

"It just happens I do," he said, "but are you being punished?"

My face went hot with shame, and I hung my head. "Yes sir, I am."

"I'll tell you what," he looked around and leaned forward with a whisper, "you can have it if you won't tell on me."

"Oh no, sir," I promised. "I won't tell."

"Well, that's fine." He winked and handed me the tough, dry end of a bit of bread that lay abandoned on his plate. I snatched the morsel, hardly more than a mouthful, and hid it behind my back. "Now, I believe you said there were two things."

"Yes sir," I answered. "Yesterday somebody told me that the High King has a son, and that he sometimes buys slaves and sets them free. Is it true?"

The Holy Man straightened up and visibly flinched when I mentioned the High King. Now he patted my arm, and his lips lifted a smile as if it were a heavy burden. "You'll hear such stories again and again," he told me. "Pay no attention to them, child. The Prince died some years ago."

My fingers squeezed at the bit of bread. It was like squeezing a rock. "What happened to him? How did he die?"

The Holy Man hauled in a deep breath, as if preparing to tell a long story, but he only said, "He was executed. He broke the law." He leaned forward again. "Never mind about him. Let me tell you a little secret. All the freedom you'll ever need is here and here." He touched my chest and my head. His silver bracelets glimmered in the candlelight.

"I...I don't understand."

He pulled away, dismissing me. "You will when you're older."

I don't know how long we walked, perhaps an hour or more, before the Farmer turned off the lane. Only then did he glance back. "This way." I trailed him through the tall grass and brush into a forest of stately elms and oaks. We followed a path through the trees and undergrowth for a mile or more and came to a halt at the edge of a rushing river. He stood there on the bank a few minutes, his hands on his hips, staring into the water. I pulled up a step or two behind him, and stared too, mesmerized by the swirling current. Would that I could dive in and never surface, and just be swept away and away! I had nothing to lose but my pain and gnawing hunger.

The Farmer turned, quietly regarding me. "This looks like a good place. We will stop here for now." He dropped the pack from his shoulder, and as he bent down to remove his boots, he said, "Take off your garment. Let's get you cleaned up."

Ah, now it begins. I braced myself mentally for whatever abuse he had in mind for me. My body had always been someone else's property, and never belonged to me.

I was merely caged in it. So I huddled in one corner of that cage, vainly resolved not to let whatever he did to me touch beneath my skin.

I managed to pull my arms out of the sleeves and into the garment, but I could not raise them over my head. To complicate the matter, the tunic had soaked up my blood, which was now dry, and the whole mess adhered to my wounds. My instincts and training commanded me to show no weakness, but every time I

pulled at the tunic, the lacerations opened again. I finally groaned, "Master, I cannot."

"Let me see." He went behind me and I heard a wordless exclamation from him that I would have taken for sympathy—if he had not been an owner. "The water will soften this," he took my arm. "Come get in the river."

He led me to the water's edge, and there I balked. My arms were trapped inside my tunic. The Farmer had a firm hold of my left arm through the fabric, but if I slipped, would he be able to hold me up? "It looks cold," was all I could bring myself to say.

"It's warmer than you think." Then he answered my unspoken thoughts. "Don't be afraid. I won't let you fall."

Still, I hesitated. I no longer cared to live, but I was afraid to die. I gritted my teeth against my fear of the swift current flowing at my feet, and flinched as he began to speak, expecting him to curse my cowardice.

"Will you trust me?"

Startled by his kindness, I locked eyes with him, something I rarely did with an owner. What manner of man was he? He met my stare—more than met it. His gaze bored into me, into the heart of who I was. He took in my shame and despair, the memories I tried to hide from myself, the things I did attempting to please my masters, every word spoken, and every thought, every cry of pain. I couldn't bear such intimate scrutiny for long, and ducked my head. The water beckoned, and I suddenly longed to be clean. I wanted it more than safety, more than my life. I swallowed, and against my instincts, against everything I knew, I trusted him.

We stepped into the current together. The river's energy swirled and danced around my ankles, and soon to my knees. A hundred cool fingers lightly caressed my skin, welcoming me, inviting me to

go deeper. How could I resist the chuckling ripples, the healthy joy that washed my fear away as easily as the dust clinging to my legs? As I waded in, I discovered that the footing was surer than I'd anticipated, and my master's grip held me steady. The water ran clear as the finest glass. When it reached my hips, I looked down, surprised to see my legs completely clean. *Were they ever dirty?* I bit back a laugh at the ludicrous turn of my thoughts.

A submerged flat rock squatted in the center of the stream. "Sit down here," the Farmer directed me. I did, and found myself up to my shoulders in the cool water. After a few minutes, he began working at the tunic stuck to my back. He took his time, and was so careful, so gentle as he peeled the filthy mess from my lacerated skin. I braced myself against the pain that would surely follow, but none came. Little by little he worked the tunic off my back. Where pain should have been, I felt only a mild stinging that quickly turned into a tingling sensation. I lifted one shoulder—nothing. The river received my pain, swallowed it up. Before I knew it, he pulled the tunic over my head and discarded it, and I watched the river carry away my hurt and the last vestiges of my slavery.

"All right," I heard him say. "Now I want you to lean back into my hands and let me put you under the water."

By this time, I was willing to do whatever he told me, so I took a deep breath, tilted my head back, and then my shoulders. His hands met me and lowered me fully into the current. He held me under for several seconds, but I now had no fear of him or of the water. I opened my eyes and looked up through the streaming river. His form sparkled in the sun and the stream as it bent over me. One hand supported me, the other gently stroked the top of my head. At that moment, my heart burst open like a new flower. I wanted to belong to him forever.

A True Name

How can I describe my feelings when he raised me up? I wasn't merely clean, I was new. It was as if the woman I had been was carried away in the current with my filthy rags. New feelings washed through me, feelings so foreign I had no way of knowing for sure what they were. I wanted to fling my arms toward the sky and laugh aloud. I wanted to skip and dance right there in the middle of the river. I wanted to dive in and under, and swim, and become like the fish, one forever with the water.

But the horrid little voice intruded—the slave-ghost's scolding and mocking for the emotions bubbling up in my heart. My training held me still, and that nagging voice shamed me. I was a slave. I had no right to joy. I trembled with pent-up emotion and energy, and tried to stamp it down. These feelings would not, could not last. And when those feelings left me, my fall back into despair was going to be deeper and harder than anything I had experienced before.

"Come," came the quiet words behind me. "Let's get you dried off and dressed." He took my hand and led me up out of the river. Once we reached dry ground, he released me and left me standing on the bank. I gazed back into the water. How I longed to never leave it! But the Farmer was already pulling a white towel out of his pack. He wrapped it around me, and turned his attention back to the pack as I dried myself off. He lifted out another length of cloth, a tunic, brand-new by the look of it, spotless, almost blinding white. He shook it out and put it on over my head. I raised my arms to the sleeves, amazed to feel no pain in my back, just some tightness.

Again, it was as if he read my thoughts. "You will always carry those scars, but they will no longer trouble you."

His gentleness and his quiet way were outside my understanding. I had no idea what to expect from him, or what he expected from me. As he wrapped a blue belt around my waist, I said, "Sir, may I ask you a question?"

A smile preceded his answer. "Ask."

"Have you bought me for yourself, or for someone else?" I could hardly stand the thought of him handing me over to another.

"You are mine," he told me, and tied a knot in the belt. "I bought you for myself."

I smoothed my hands down the fine, soft fabric of the tunic. "Sir, will you please tell me who you are?"

His smile broadened as he straightened up and put his hands on my shoulders. "You don't know me?"

Bewildered, I searched my memory. He'd never owned me before, had he? Of course not! I would remember *him*. But I didn't recall ever seeing him in any of my other master's houses. "I...I don't, sir," I admitted, afraid of angering, or even disappointing him.

He chuckled, "Last night you told Daniel you believed in me." Before I fully grasped that statement, he added, "You're hungry. Let's eat something before we go on." He moved away to retrieve his pack, leaving me to stare open-mouthed at him.

The Prince! Could he really be? For an instant, my heart railed at the cruelty of his jest, until I realized he could not know about Daniel unless.... My heart pounding, my breath sucked away, I took two steps toward him. When he turned back to me, my knees gave way. I fell at his feet and bowed my head. "Sire, forgive me," I stammered, though I could scarcely speak. "I...I didn't know. I didn't realize...."

His hand rested lightly on my head. "You know me now. That's all that matters."

Elation made the blood roar in my ears like a thousand waterfalls. Could he not hear the thunder? But at the same time, shame pierced me through – shame for what I was. I did not deserve him, but here he was, just the same. Hot tears scalded my eyes and coursed down my cheeks. Powerless to stop them, I sobbed, "You came!" and covered my face with my hands. "You came," I repeated, rocking back and forth on my knees. The stories were true. Daniel was right. This was real—my deepest desire. I had been chosen! I raised my head toward him, blinded by sunlight and the blur of my tears. "You came for me."

He went down on one knee and took my face in his hands. Callused and gentle, his fingers brushed my tears away. "I came for you," he affirmed as he kissed my forehead. "And I will never leave you." Before I knew what I was doing, I surged forward and wrapped my arms around his neck. He returned my embrace, pulling me closer, holding me warm and safe in his strong arms.

I had never known love. Even the memories of my mother carried little of affection in them. She bore me, and cared for me because she had to. Then she gave me up—because she had to. But though I had never experienced it, I knew that this was what my heart was created for.

He held me that way until I was able to release the embrace. I think now he would have gone on holding me forever if I'd needed him to. When I sat back, and the Prince smiled and turned away, I realized that there was a burning sensation on my forehead where he had kissed me. I gingerly touched the place. It was hot, but it didn't hurt.

He pulled a packet of food and a flask from his pack. I was famished when we first came to the river, but now all thoughts of hunger were replaced by questions. My head was bursting with them. *Where are we going, and what will he have me do? What about Daniel? Why was he in the Warehouse last night, and where was he now? How does the Prince know I came to believe in him? Did Daniel tell him? What about the doubt that followed? Did that not make any difference? Is it true that his slaves are free, never to be sold again?* A hundred such questions spun themselves into a snarl, and I wondered if I'd be able to untangle them enough to pull out even one and ask.

The Prince unwrapped a good-sized piece of bread, a wheel of cheese, some olives, and a cluster of purple grapes. His flask contained a fine, red wine. I looked for cups, but there were none. We would pass the flask between us. When everything was laid out, he broke the bread in half and said, "This food was supplied by my Father." His gaze lifted toward the sky. "Thank you for your bounty, Father, for this, our daily bread."

I glanced up, half-expecting to see the High King's throne suspended overhead, but only fluffy clouds rode the wind. Now questions about the King added themselves to the jumble in my head. *Where does he live? What is he like? Will I ever get to see him?*

Before I framed a coherent thought, the Prince handed me half of the bread and asked a question of his own. "What is your name?"

I swallowed and answered, "I call myself Mara."

"Mara." He picked up the flask of wine and took a sip. "Mara is a slave's name, and it doesn't describe who you are." His eyes met mine. "It never really belonged to you, did it?"

"It didn't," I admitted, feeling a flush of embarrassment rise to my face.

The Prince bit off one end of an olive. He smiled and answered, "You will have your own name now." He lowered his head and grew still and quiet, as if listening. I wondered what he saw in me, and cringed at what I knew was there. I glanced over toward the river, and there stood the ghost of myself at its edge, dirty and trembling. The river had washed me clean, but it hadn't expunged my memories. I shuddered. Would she haunt me forever? I was clean on the outside, and the Prince had set me free, but did that change who I was?

His words, quiet and low, broke my reverie. "You will be called Katherine."

Katherine? No slave I'd ever known had been called that. "What does it mean, Sire?"

"It means pure, washed clean."

I shook my head in denial. "Pure" was exactly what I was not. If he knew what had happened to me, the things I'd done... "Master," I protested, "you mistake me. I am far from innocent."

"Innocence and purity are not the same thing," he replied. "You were robbed of your innocence at an early age." Now he glanced away, his jaw set with the same hard expression he wore when he talked with Sair. When his eyes met mine again, they softened, and he embraced me with his gaze. "Purity can be restored, as I have restored yours. The scars on your back will always be there, but they won't hurt you anymore. So it is with your heart. You bear scars, but if you will continue to look to me and trust me, they will no longer cause you pain."

I glanced back at the river, seeing nothing now but the sparkling water and the golden summer afternoon.

He leaned forward and put a hand on my shoulder. "You are pure. I have made you so. The name belongs to you, and no one can take it away. It is who you are."

As we headed away from the river (I walked by his side this time, not behind him) everything looked different and new, as if the whole world had been washed clean, not just one female slave. The sky shone a clearer blue than I'd ever seen it; the grass fairly blazed, verdant and bursting with healthy life. Multi-hued flowers nodded as I passed, in recognition that I was now part of their world, a world where things were right, and pure and wholesome.

The Prince retraced our steps through the forest and back onto the main road where he continued for the rest of the afternoon. For the first hour or so I wasn't inclined to talk. I simply basked in the joy that was now mine, joy the Prince bought for me. For once, the scolding little voice in my head was silent. I owned the moment, but pride had no place in it. Every good thing I had, from my clean hair to my sturdy new shoes, and every bit of change within was a gift. I mulled these things over, shaking my head at my sudden change in fortune. Nothing would be the same after this.

Finally I broke our companionable silence. "Sire, will you tell me about Daniel?"

He glanced at me with a smile. "What do you want to know?"

"Was he a slave like me? Did you buy him, too?"

He nodded. "I bought Daniel from the block four years ago this summer."

"Why was he in the Warehouse last night?"

"I sent him there."

Here was a puzzle. It made no sense. Why did the Prince put one of his own people in danger? The Youth's screams still echoed

in my ears. The slavers wouldn't have hesitated to do the same to Daniel if they caught him. They would never tolerate one of the Prince's own among us. And as big as he was, Daniel would have taken a long time to die. A very long time.

The Prince, watching me, added, "I sent him to find you."

"To find me?" I echoed, mystified. "Sire, why was he looking for me?"

"The High King knows when a slave is ready to believe," he replied. "When that happens, we often choose someone to go where that slave is and help him so he can be set free."

I felt like I'd been punched in the stomach. "You chose Daniel."

He nodded, "He is one of our bravest."

All the breath in my chest vanished, leaving me to stagger. It was one thing to know that the Prince came for me, bought my freedom. It was quite another to think of someone risking his skin, perhaps his life for mine. "How...how can Daniel be free?" I gasped out, my voice now hoarse and appalled as tears again threatened to spill over. My steps faltered until I halted, oblivious, in the middle of the road. "He told me he was free, but if you sent him there...."

The Prince stopped and faced me. "Daniel didn't lie to you. He is free. We chose him, but he could have refused to go." He smiled. "When he talked to me last night after he left you, he was dancing. His joy then was no less than yours just now at the river."

So the Prince *had* heard my heart's thunder! Was there anything about me he didn't know? Scattered droplets sparkled in my eyelashes. I drew an unsteady breath, shattered by a love I could not begin to understand. "Sire, will I ever see Daniel again?"

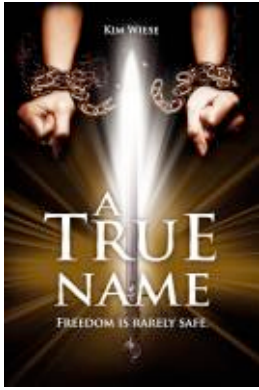
The Prince put an arm around my shoulder and drew me to his side. "It's possible." He added gently, "You aren't responsible for Daniel, or for the risks he took for you. He is mine, just as you are."

Kim Wiese

The responsibility rests on me.” He glanced off down the road. “We should go on. I want to get there before nightfall.”

I wondered where “there” was, but didn’t ask any more questions. The answers to my last ones left me humbled and bereft. I couldn’t imagine a love big enough or strong enough to put itself on the line for a stranger, and I knew that kind of love didn’t exist in me. Yes, I loved the Prince. Every bit of my small strength was set to love him. For him I’d be willing to give everything—but for anyone else? My life had just begun. Was it wrong to hold on to it? I thought, *Maybe someday. Sometime in the future, I will have that kind of love in me.* The notion didn’t touch my heart with any sense of reality.

*"Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth."
John 17:17*



Mara is a slave who longs for freedom but her efforts have led to a downward spiral toward despair and death. Helpless, she sets her hope on the son of the High King to free her, though she has been told he is a myth. When a farmer buys her, Mara is convinced that her lot will get worse. But things are not what they seem. What follows requires all her faith, courage, and love.

A True Name

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