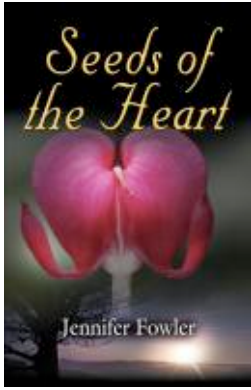


*Seeds of
the Heart*



Jennifer Fowler





Kara has learned the dark secret of her twisted homeland but she is sure that love will save her...that is, until her family is destroyed and she must run for her life. She has only one question. She knows who betrayed her. Now she must learn why. This is a touching story of the struggle to forgive, and a journey to bring hope to a broken nation.

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“ Six ”

The sun edging over the top of the mountain awoke me. I slipped away to bathe in the stream while my companions slept.

The water was frigid, so my wash was fast but invigorating. The others were just stirring when I returned.

Matthew and Jonas, the younger ones, were assigned to prepare breakfast while the other three went to wash in the stream.

“Are you sure we can’t have just a small fire?” asked Matthew. I agreed that the mush they were making would be better warm, but I didn’t think we should chance an open, smoking flame. Smiling at their youthful disappointment, I dug into my bag and pulled out a jar filled with wax and wood chips. I offered it to them, explaining, “This makes a very small flame over which you can heat the pot. It is slow though, and the mush will probably only come out lukewarm.”

Jonas lit the jar and we took turns holding the pot over it. By the time the others had returned the mush was actually bubbling, much to my surprise. I pointed out a bush with edible berries nearby. We sprinkled these on top, and the breakfast was quite good and filling.

Matthew sat beside me while we ate, and he offered to carry my bedroll when we set off. “I need it to keep my bag soft against my back,” I said in amusement. We set off through the woods with me leading the way. The morning passed uneventfully as we followed crossing animal trails and dodged low branches on our way down the mountain. The temperature rose as we descended and brought out the tangy smell of the trees.

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Matthew stayed close by me the whole time, trying to make small talk and offering to hold my arm at the slightest incline. I decided to redirect his thoughts and asked him if he had a particular girl at home. He blushed and said there was a girl but it was nothing serious. He wanted something more out of a relationship. Now if he could get a girl like me....

The conversation had taken a wrong turn somewhere, I felt. It was time to dampen things. "There are no girls like me," I said.

"No," he agreed. "You are one in a million. Just look how you scaled that cliff, for one thing."

"That's not what I meant," I continued firmly. "There are no girls like me because by the time they become like me they are no longer girls. They are women. Practically old women," I exaggerated to make my point. "You need someone closer to your own age."

"You can't be more than three or four years older than me," argued Matthew, "and besides, I'm mature for my age."

"You are in your early twenties, aren't you?" I asked.

"Kind of," said Matthew hesitantly.

"Well, I'm not a day under thirty-five," I said. He looked at me in disbelief.

We walked along quietly, and then without fanfare, Matthew stepped back to walk beside Jonas. However, I could still feel him watching me as we walked, and when we stopped for lunch I had to look resolutely away to avoid his brown admiring eyes.

Natuke whispered quietly to me when we started off again, "I overheard your conversation with that young one. Is it true you are thirty-five?"

"No," I said with a twinkle.

"I thought not," he said.

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“Actually I’m thirty-nine, but I try hard not to admit it,” I finished.

He was quiet for a time, then he asked, “How do you look so young?”

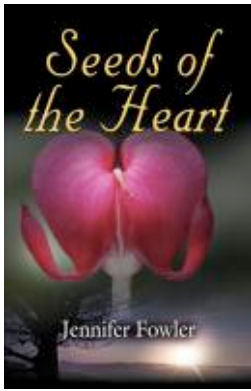
I shrugged. “I’ve always been very active. Maybe that helps.”

“And no children to give you gray hair,” he laughed.

I forced myself to smile at his unintended sting.

By nightfall we had crossed the foothills. Before us was a small stretch of forest, then a wide river, and beyond that the road to civilization.

Tonight we would spend our last night of relative safety.



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