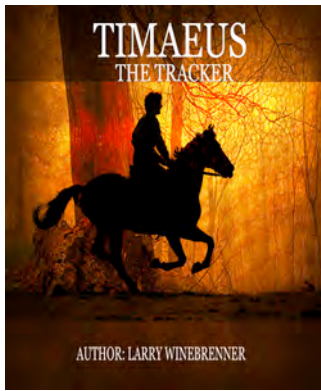


# TIMAEUS

## THE TRACKER



AUTHOR: LARRY WINEBRENNER



*When the most famous private investigator in the Roman Empire was asked by the acting governor of Judea to accomplish an assignment, the Tracker---as all such private investigators of the time were called---liked neither the assignment nor the man who made it.*

*A romantic adventure set in New Testament times. A mystery fans favorite.*

# Timaeus The Tracker

by Larry Winebrenner

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Timaeus the Tracker

by

Larry Winebrenner

**Note:** *Before there were private detectives, before police procedure had been initiated and refined, indeed, before formal police organizations were developed, there were **Trackers**. The best of these was Timaeus.*

*Trackers were investigators appointed by political officials or hired by wealthy merchants to discover who engaged in a particular criminal activity.*

## Chapter 1

### *The Assignment*

**T**imaeus stood almost dumbfounded before the Governor.

“You want me to prove you murdered your brother,” stated the puzzled investigator. “Why don’t you just confess?”

Marconius sat in an oversized throne as if to compensate for his diminutive size. He wielded power like a jeweled dagger. “If you don’t want the assignment, you may go,” he sneered.

Timaeus didn’t like the smell of this assignment. He didn’t like the highhanded manner in which he had been delivered to the Governor. And he didn’t like Marconius. He scratched his right temple. To scrape at the lice crawling there. He shrugged, turned, and started to leave. He had an important message for Lila, anyway.

“Where are you going?” demanded Marconius.

“Hopefully to take a bath,” he replied over his shoulder.

“I’ll bathe you in boiling oil if you don’t come back here,” growled the Governor.

The Governor’s personal guard stood, faces rigid masks. Masks threatening to crack.

Servants eyed each other with frightened semi-smiles.

No one brooked the official’s authority, let alone was impertinent. Nor did Timaeus take threats lightly. They awaited the outcome of this encounter with apprehensive anticipation.

But neither was Timaeus a fool. He was in Marconius’ throne room. Marconius’ guards stood ready to thrust their spears into his rag-covered body. Even if they were amused with his impertinence.

“You said . . .” began Timaeus. His face about to erupt into a grin.

Marconius pounded the arm of his chair.

“I know what I said,” he broke in.

The two men glared at each other for a moment.

Finally, Marconius spoke. “Come sup with me and I will tell you a story—but get cleaned up first.”

He wrinkled his nose.

Turning to a servant, he barked, "Jason! Take him to my bath. And get him a clean robe. Burn the one he is wearing."

"I need the bath," said Timaeus, scratching again to emphasize the point. "I appreciate it. But I need the clothes when I leave here. They are, after all, my disguise."

Marconius seemed to understand. Timaeus continued.

"Have your man set them outside in the courtyard until I leave."

Jason glanced at the disgruntled Governor. Would this be seen as an order? Or a request? The Governor barely nodded. It was a request.

Then Jason led Timaeus away.

Although they were not in the Governor's palace in the capital, this vacation villa was well appointed. The bath was excellent. Hot water filled the ceramic tiled bathing pool.

Slaves rubbed his body with sweet-smelling salve. They washed away the surface dirt Timaeus had applied as part of his disguise. And the lice.

When his body was well scrubbed, they poured clean water over him. They finally rubbed him dry with a large, linen towel the size of a bed sheet. Timaeus felt like a bride being prepared for her wedding night. Or a bull for sacrifice.

The robe provided by Jason certainly was not one belonging to Marconius. The Governor was a runt. Timaeus, one that might be mistaken for a gladiator. As a matter of fact, he had wrestled in the Olympic games. And won. But the robe was smooth and comfortable. Linen? No. Nor silk. Certainly not scratchy wool. Lila would appreciate a garment of this material. He would check this out later. If there was a later.

At the banquet table loaded with food Timaeus and Marconius reclined alone. Slaves and servants stood around to supply their merest wish.

They sipped wine from gold goblets. The sweet fluid coated his throat pleasantly. They nibbled on fresh figs, grapes, ripe olives, apple slices. He loved figs, the crunchy texture, the sweetness on his tongue as he slowly chewed one.

Slices of roasted lamb were available to be speared with daggers, nibbled without touching with their fingers. The smoked fish did make his fingers greasy. It was delectable. His fingers could be washed in a basin that would be provided after eating.

Other delicacies were provided by sumptuously beautiful serving girls.

After they had made their initial forays on the food, Marconius spoke. Timaeus felt his

hostility. Each bite into an apple slice seemed to be an imagined bite into his flesh.

“I know you do not like me. That’s all right. Most of your people hate me. If you were obsequious, you would be useless. I need someone unafraid of me. Someone who will do what he is paid to do.”

Timaeus said nothing. He peeled a grape. He chewed it slowly, savoring the moist flesh, and spitting the seeds into a bowl at his side. Marconius spit his seeds on the floor. After all, what were slaves for?

“I will pay you any sum you name. Any sum. No matter how outrageous.”

Timaeus observed his search for a response in the face of the tracker. Marconius saw only lassitude.

He added, “If you do as I ask.”

He again watched Timaeus carefully. The Tracker simply listened and peeled another grape. This infuriated Marconius. Was this fellow attending his orders?

“Here are my demands.”

It was almost a snarl. Timaeus seemed unimpressed.

“Two conditions. First, there are to be no questions about my motives.”

Marconius glared. Was this commoner getting this?

“Next, you are to report *only* to me,” he enunciated forcefully.

Timaeus decided it was time for some kind of response,

“If I do not want the assignment?” he asked with seeming disinterest.

“You are free to go. But . . . if you ever reveal any aspect of the assignment to anyone, you will be murdered.”

“I suspect I shall be murdered on any account,” observed Timaeus with a smile. “Go on.”

Marconius glared more vehemently at him.

“Perhaps. Here is your task. You are to prove that I murdered my brother. You are to explain how I did it. When I did it. How I disposed of the body so it could never be found.”

Timaeus smiled, as if he were being asked to exercise a tame stallion.

“There must be incontrovertible proof of my direct implication in the act,” declared Marconius.

He paused. Then added the final statement with something of a snarl. “This must be done before the next new moon.”

“That gives me about ten days,” said Timaeus, showing no undue concern. He was a professional. His only question: “If I fail?”

“You will not be paid.”

“That is all?”

“That is all,” assured the Governor.

Timaeus could tell the Governor did not like the somewhat amused manner of the man he was hiring.

“If I succeed?”

“You will be paid.”

Very soon after Marconius detailed his demands, and a handsome price set, the Tracker doffed the fine linen, or whatever, robe and donned the lice-infested rags. No need to rub himself with dirt. Shortly he would rid himself of the rags. And the biting pests.

Timaeus slipped through a hidden gate in the wall, obvious from inside, practically undetectable outside. A fine piece of workmanship he noted.

He melted into the darkness of the alley behind the Governor’s palace. The villa, his destination now, was every bit as fine as the palace he was leaving.

Would he ever be paid, whatever the outcome? He doubted it. He doubted he would still be alive sixteen days hence. If he were not alert.

He began scratching the lice once more as they began to crawl and bite.

The sound of a sandal rolling an unseen rock alerted Timaeus. He was followed. It was a long dark alley with no near exit ahead. Windows on the houses across the path from the wall he hugged were too high to reach. He had been hugging the wall to avoid the filth and rotting garbage in the alley. Refuse thrown from those high windows.

Whoever was following him did the same. Else he would not have heard the sandal and rock.

How many were following?

Why?

Carefully he laid full length on the ground next to the wall. Slowly he rolled out into the center of the alley. Mud. Filth. Rotten garbage. Feces. He felt them cling as he rolled, coating his recently washed body with smelly matter puddled there.

He lay still. He was a dead man. Or a pile of garbage in the unlikely event anyone noticed. The stench of the filth in his hair, on his face, in his nostrils, choked him, stifled him, churned his stomach.

His eyes were now accustomed to the dark. Some limited vision from the reflected light of the waxing moon helped. The nearly full moon, not directly above the alley, provided precious little illumination.

Two figures crept along the wall he had been hugging. They were not pursuing him. Just following. But they had staves—heavy, straight six-foot walking sticks—in their hands. Weapons ready to bludgeon at any provocation.

After they passed, Timaeus pondered his next move. Then, two stave-bearing figures glided along next to the house opposite the wall. Companions of the first? Or were the stalkers being stalked? He lay still until they had passed. He waited anxiously, ten heartbeats, twenty. Silently, he rolled back to the wall, collecting more muck.

There was a street in the direction from which the stalkers had come. It was nearer. He had avoided it earlier because of heavier traffic there.

A drunk covered with the feces and clinging, rotten garbage would be avoided now. Until he reached the seawall. There he would be safe.

There he could revise his plan to visit Lila.

At least the filth had stopped the lice from bedeviling him.



## Chapter 2

### *Lila*

**T**imaeus's villa was on Lake Tiberias, the Sea of Galilee, Kinneret. It had multiple names.

The town of Capernaum, where his villa was located, overlooked the sometimes peaceful, sometimes ferociously stormy sea. On a clear day he could see across the lake. Some irreverent fellows called it a wide spot in the Jordan River. Not so. It was thirteen miles long and eight miles wide. But, true, the Jordan River did flow into the sea from the north. It did provide an outlet in the south. The constant flow of the Jordan kept the water not only fresh, but clean as well. The Jordan was aided by a few other streams from the hills to the east. And from underground springs.

The town of Capernaum, unlike the capital city, Tiberias, to the south, had no hot springs. Neither was it built on a cemetery—a rumor about Tiberias—so people were happy to settle in this smaller city along the sea's northern shore. Thus, it covered some four miles of coast. It reached from the lake, past the imperial Roman road leading to Damascus, for another two and a half miles inland.

Two hundred fifty fishing boats, more or less, plied Galilean waters. Timaeus frequently sat on a patio overlooking the lake. He wistfully yearned for the peaceful life of a fisherman.

Ha! What a foolish thought. His, he perceived, was the finest villa this side of Tiberias itself. Olive trees, grape arbors, walnut trees, fig trees, and date palms grew on his spacious grounds. Pomegranates were one of his favorite, though quite messy, fruits on his estate.

When he surveyed this holding, he often thought, *Garden of Eden*. Was that blasphemous? One day, as a menial servant of the household of Antonius, while in attendance at the synagogue on the Sabbath, he might ask the rabbi.

Of course, to the public it wasn't the villa of Timaeus the Tracker. No one knew where Timaeus holed up when he was not on assignment.

Few knew what Timaeus looked like.

He was tall.

He was bent over and crippled.

He was dark skinned.

He was light skinned like a socialite woman.

His hair was black.

His hair was light as the hair of the barbarians in Germania.

A cloud passed overhead. Was that a symbol? Marconius now knew what he looked like. And that servant, Jason. But did either of them know what Antonius looked like?

Everyone knew the villa on the lake was that of Antonius, the spoiled nephew of a Roman senator's wife. Too many senators' daughters had fallen victim to his charm. The senator had sent his sister-in-law's son into benevolent exile in this backwater province, that peace might return to the capital.

Everyone knew about Antonius, named for the famous general himself. Few had seen him. He held himself aloof from a prestige-hungry social circle. He even spurned an invitation from the new governor himself.

A senator's nephew has certain immunities.

Timaeus now entered that villa. He washed most of the filth and lice from himself as he swam in the lake to the villa. He stole into the wine cellar there. A hidden entrance under the pier where Antonius's barge was tied provided secret access.

The tracker relished the hot bath that soaked the filth from his pores. Deep filth this time. Not surface dirt.

As he had reflected in the governor's villa, his own bath was equal to Marconius's. But he had no slaves. Nor any need for them. Timaeus was quite self-sufficient—even in taking a bath.

He reflected on the night's activities.

The staff bearers surely were Zealots.

When Timaeus's father was still a child, Judea had been a proud kingdom. The Roman general Pompey had swept through the East. He subdued all the kingdoms there, including Judea.

His capture of Jerusalem was a bitter day for the Jews. He rode his steed right into the temple. He entered the holy of holies on horseback. The sacrilege was unbearable. People mourned in sackcloth and ashes for weeks afterward.

Pompey brought all the kingdoms of the East under Roman rule. But he did not completely wipe out all resistance.

In spite of revolts harshly put down, in spite of highways lined with cross-hanging rebels, in spite of all that the mighty power of Rome could do, the hills and deserts of Judea still were alive with pockets of resistance. These Judean patriots were called Zealots.

Those who had tracked Timaeus that evening almost surely were some of these Zealots. The Zealots were famed for their prowess with staves.

Yes, shepherds defended their flocks with staves. He had seen sweet Lila practice with a staff. Woe to the predator, four-legged or two, who threatened her flock.

And, yes, travelers used staves as walking sticks when traveling the sometimes rocky, sometimes sandy roads of Judea.

But staves in the hands of night walkers in dark alleys certainly did not bespeak shepherds or mere travelers.

Why were the Zealots following him? Did they, perhaps, believe he was going to help the Roman governor track them? And how did they know he had been called by the governor? No doubt by the very system prospective employers used to contact him.

Timaeus's ire rose once more as he remembered the way he had been summoned. He was a tracker. Judged by many to be the best in the empire, and if the empire, then in the world. He hired his services to whom he pleased. And refused whom he pleased.

He had to admit, his curiosity had been roused when his contact system indicated the governor had a nonpolitical task he wanted performed. Everything was political with the governor.

He sent word he would hear the governor's case. A password was provided to identify him. He had almost been attacked by the governor's guards when he showed up in his beggar's disguise. When he identified himself by the agreed-upon password, he was violently seized and held as a prisoner until the governor was notified. He was then thrust roughly before the governor and forced to his knees.

That was no way to treat a man whose services the governor coveted.

"I was told you wanted to employ my services," said Timaeus, "not to arrest me and treat me like a common criminal. What will Senator Cullus think when he hears of this?"

One of Timaeus's most famous cases was the rescue of Senator Cullus's son from kidnappers. And Timaeus knew that the governor was aware that nothing going on in the governor's palace went unreported to Rome.

"Release him," the governor had snarled. And then, without apology or preamble the governor had briefly presented the case more fully outlined at dinner.

Timaeus shook off the memory. Anger clouded decision making.

His first task in completing the unwanted assignment was to learn as much as possible about the governor and his brother. To do that he would need the help of Elizabeth, a local harlot.

He had often relied previously on her well-documented information.

As for Elizabeth herself, she was very attractive. Very desirable. But Timaeus had no desire to become one of her well-documented bits of information. His heart belonged to a shepherdess who knew nothing of his fame. Nor of his wealth. Only that he had been an injured traveler in need of her ministrations.

Timaeus formulated a plan for purchasing Elizabeth's information. He would use the Persian to contact the harlot.

At dawn, the day following Timaeus's meeting with the governor, a tall, swarthy guard began his duty at the front gate of Antonius's villa. He was alert. The soldier had the appearance of a brigand. Stab first. Then ask the wounded what he was doing in the villa. That surely was his style.

Who could have guessed the Persian's heart could be filled with joy at the first light of false dawn? It illuminated the outline of the mountains across the Sea of Galilee. Then, rays of sunlight peeped over the mountains. The reflection across the water created a highway of light. It was a sight the man often waited of a morning to see.

An hour after dawn another guard, equally vicious-looking, brought the Persian a scroll and a purse.

He said, "The master said you would know what to do with these."

The Persian took the scroll, tucked it into his tunic, fastened the purse to his belt, and strode off toward town.

Thus it was that the loungers across the road from the villa allowed Antonius to walk away without following.

A short time later, Elizabeth eyed the guard with interest. He was well aware that her beauty stimulated jealousy in every woman who ever saw her. And desire in every man. Almost. Not him.

His mind flitted momentarily back to a mountainside. He lay, semiconscious from a fall. The rock he had grasped to lift himself to the brow of the cliff suddenly gave way. He fell backwards. His mind still dwelt on what he thought were his last thoughts in life. He was going to fail on this mission.

His head hit a small cedar bush struggling to grow out of the side of the cliff. He grabbed at it. Caught it. Was swung into a vertical position. Felt its roots pulling from the tiny crevice. Desperately grabbed for any break in the cliff surface. Any projecting rock. Found one with no place to hold on. Felt his hand slipping. He landed on his back on a flat rock ledge at the side of the cliff.

He lay still, half conscious. The cedar bush in his hand jarred loose on impact. Any move might plunge him the remainder of the distance to the ground. To his death.

He heard a voice. A lad's voice, it seemed to him.

“Don't move, lest you fall. Don't move.”

It seemed hours he lay there. From the shadows on the side of the cliff above, he calculated it a small fraction of an hour.

Then she was standing over him, dressed as a shepherd boy. Clearly a girl. A woman.

He shook off the memory. That lass had no beauty like the woman before him now.

Elizabeth might have been a queen. Her complexion was as ewe's milk. Not swarthy, like the shepherdess's. Her eyes, the color of the verdant hills over Capernaum in springtime after a gentle rain. Not the brown of autumn leaves, like the shepherdess's. Her hair was the raven quality of birds' wings. Or cat fur. Not the dark amber of the sunset's glow, again, like the shepherdess's.

A haunting smile revealed the evenly spaced, pearl-white teeth of the woman now before him. Her legs were standards for a body that should be in a shrine to receive adoration. Her voice was music itself.

But Timaeus saw a decoration, a mere bauble. Not a breathing beauty like his simple shepherdess.

Simple shepherdess? Perhaps she was not as simple as she seemed.

When she had been born, Jesse was displeased. He wanted a son. Before the year was out, he adored his daughter. When his wife died, Lila became both son and daughter.

“You must know how to defend yourself,” he had said to his eight-year-old daughter. He thought of men, for many were attracted to this lovely, bright-eyed child. He spoke of wolves and lions and bears.

“Never show fear,” he counseled. “They can smell fear.” That time he was counseling about wild animals.

He taught her to use the stave. He had learned from his own father, a fine shepherd in the community where he now lived, just a few miles from Capernaum. On several occasions he drove off a wild beast threatening a member of his flock.

One cold morning, when Lila was ten years old, he awoke suddenly from beside the fire he had sought to ward off the chill. Firelight dimmed the vision and shepherds avoided it except for brief visits for warmth. The sheep were never left unguarded, but one guard was usually sufficient

for short periods.

That evening was a clear night with lots of moonlight. Sheep were plainly in view. Jesse had just a little too much wine that night. He fell asleep as he warmed himself.

Something suddenly awakened him.

“Lila!” he cried fearfully.

“Over here, Daddy,” she called back.

He ran to her. She was tending a wounded lamb.

“Lucky he doesn’t have a broken back,” she said.

“Broken back? What happened here?” demanded Jesse.

“I did it with my stave,” she said.

“What? Practicing and hit the lamb? You are always practicing. I told you to be careful. Now look at what you’ve done.”

“But the lion jumped at me, Daddy. I had to hit it.”

“That is not a lion, it’s a lamb!” shouted Jesse, disturbing the flock to their feet.

Lila trembled and cried before her irate father.

“Not the lamb, Father. This lion.”

She had used the formal address. She used her stave to point.

He opened his mouth to shout at her. Her imaginary foes. She was always pretending. She said she had to imagine what they could do so she could make the right move.

He caught his breath when he saw the body. He rushed over to finish off the stunned beast.

“It’s dead,” announced Lila, the bleating lamb in her arms. She wasn’t talking about the lamb.

Jesse fell to his knees beside her, examining her. He saw the blood on her arm.

“Let me tend that wound,” he said in a shaky voice. “Are there any others?”

“That’s lamb’s blood. Like the blood smeared on the door posts and lintels on Passover night. The Lord was with me the way David was protected as a shepherd boy. The lion never

touched me. Where is King Saul? I want to go fight Goliath.”

Jesse hugged her. “You’re a girl. A silly girl,” he repeated over and over. He was crying.

“We need to watch the sheep, Daddy,” she said. “Sometimes lions hunt in pairs.”

He let go of her suddenly and stood. He looked around. He ascertained the lion was dead before leading his daughter to the flock that was still skittish. Lila carefully set the lamb on the ground. It got up and walked shakily to its mother.

“Dora, here’s Sam. Take care of him,” said Lila.

The ewe walked over to Lila when she heard the shepherdess’s voice. Lila scratched behind her ear as if she were a dog. The sheep seemed to love it. She rubbed the side of her face against Lila’s leg.

Four-legged animals were not the only ones Lila could ward off. One day, during the day, as Lila watched the sheep, three ruffians approached her. They assumed she was a boy. As they approached, one called over.

“You have a lamb you can give three hungry travelers to cure their hunger?”

Lila was instantly on her feet.

“There are no lambs for sale here,” she called back. “I’m sorry. Move on.”

“Now, is that how you treat travelers? We might be angels like the ones who visited Abraham,” said the obvious leader as he approached closer.

“Or the ass Balaam rode,” she called back.

Closer, he recognized she was a girl.

“Perhaps we’ll have a bit of pleasure with our lunch. You guys catch a lamb while I catch our pleasure,” he said.

They laughed and ran after the lamb. The leader ran toward Lila. Both moves were a mistake. Samson, the lamb she rescued from the lion two years previously, was now a ram. She had cared for him. She taught him to butt attackers on command.

“Samson, butt!” she cried as she cracked the unsuspecting attacker beside the head.

She didn’t want to kill him, merely to stun him. That she did nicely. Her stave cracked the back of the hand carrying a stave. The stave dropped to the ground. Coming to his senses, he charged her. She sidestepped him and walloped him in the back of the head to put him out of action. The other two had fled Samson and were running toward her with staves raised. Samson

kept watch over the flock in case they returned.

She easily sidestepped the charge. There was no finesse in their movements. Merely brute force. So long as she avoided the wild swings of their staves, she was safe.

“Whadda ya do to Asher?” one demanded.

“Put him to sleep,” she said. “Pick him up and you may leave peacefully.”

“Get ’er, Enan!”

“Flatten ’er, Gabinan!”

The two charged her with their staves.

Enan got his shins cracked by her staff and the second, a bump on the back of the head. Gabinan was moving away from her as she cracked him. No serious damage occurred and he swung around to make another charge. She stood ready.

Enan had fallen to his knees when his shins were barked by her staff. He reached for her foot. Just in time she saw him and drove the end of her staff into his reaching fingers, pinning them to the ground. *Crack, crack*, she heard. Two broken fingers. He would be out of the fight.

Instead of charging her with the staff, Gabinan dropped it while she was warding off Enan. He wrapped two muscular arms around her, pinning her arms to her sides. She retained the staff, but couldn’t use it.

“Gotcha,” he said triumphantly.

She dropped her staff and relaxed momentarily. “You’ve got me,” she said. “What you gonna do with me?”

Before he could answer, she butted his face with her head. Then she grabbed his wrists and leaned forward into a somersault. He was off his feet and his face got another smash when it hit the ground. His grip was broken and so was his nose.

Lila rolled on over to her feet. Enan had not given up and was reaching for his staff with his good hand. As his fingers hovered over the staff, she came down on his hand with both feet. *Crack. Crack. Crack.*

She grabbed the staff and said, “You want this? Here.” She conked him on the side of the head enough to make his teeth rattle, but not to put him out.

Gabinan was getting to his feet. She hit him hard on both heels. He collapsed. She stood over him, the end of the staff inches from his throat. One jab would break his windpipe. His eyes



widened.

“Move your hands one finger’s width toward this stave and they’ll be trying to pull it out of your throat,” she warned.

He froze.

“Now as I said earlier, pick up Asher and haul him away and you can go in peace,” she said.

“Some peace,” muttered Enan off to one side.

She kept her eye on him.

“I didn’t start it,” she said.

“All we wanted was a little food,” said Gabinan.

“On the hoof. And me. Well, you got me, but you’ll not get my sheep.”

“We’ll be back,” snarled Gabinan, still on his back under threat of a lost Adam’s apple.

“I wish you hadn’t said that,” she said as she raised the stave another foot.

“We’ll go. We’ll go and never come back,” squeaked Gabinan.

“Promise?”

“I promise,” he said.

She knew his promise was as permanent as a lit wasp. But she moved to one side. She walked over to Enan’s stave and picked it up. Then she got Asher’s and stood away from his body.

Enan was moaning and saying, “I can’t carry him with these broken fingers.”

“Use your good fingers. Or just leave him here. The Romans haven’t crucified a thief for two days now.”

“Put his arm around your neck like me and drag him,” growled Gabinan.

Later that day, when David came to relieve her, he said, “Nice collection of staves. Where’d you get them?”

David was the son of her father’s partner. She didn’t want him nervous as he watched the sheep. Even though she was sure the three would not be back—at least today—she invented a tale. She had a good imagination.

“Well, first of all a wolf came by and challenged me to a race.

“‘What’ll you give me if I win?’ I asked.

“‘Another stave,’ he said. ‘Let’s race to the stream and back.’

“‘But that would leave my sheep unguarded,’ I said. I knew he wanted to lead me away so his pack could attack my sheep.

“‘We raced around the big rock out in the field. He lost and brought me the first stave.’”

David knew none of this was true, but though he wasn’t fond of Lila, he did enjoy her stories.

“Then a lion came to me and challenged me to a climbing contest.

“‘What will you give me if I win?’ I asked.

“‘A fine stave,’ he said. ‘Let’s go to the big walnut tree in the woods.’

“‘That would leave my sheep unguarded,’ I said. I knew he wanted to lead me away so his pride could attack my sheep. ‘Let’s climb to the first shelf on Jacob’s cliff.’

“‘So we climbed to the first shelf on Jacob’s cliff. I won and he brought me a stave.

“‘Then a bear challenged me to wrestle him.’”

“‘You didn’t wrestle no bear,’” said David, forgetting it was just a story.

“‘Were you here?’” asked Lila.

“‘No.’”

“‘Do you know where I got that third stave?’” she demanded.

“‘From a bear?’”

“‘I asked the bear what he would give me if I won.

“‘A nice stave’ he said. ‘Let’s go on the other side of that hill and wrestle.’

“‘Let’s wrestle here,’ I said. I knew he wanted to lead me away so the old she-bear could come attack my flock.

“‘So we wrestled right here and I won. He brought me the third stave.’”

“How’d a little girl like you beat a bear in wrestling?” asked David.

“You wrestle with me and I’ll show you.”

He suddenly threw his arms around her and threw her to the grass.

“No fair. You didn’t warn me,” she said as she worked an arm loose.

“Bear wouldn’t warn you,” he gloated.

“All right,” she said, and she reached under his arm to tickle him. When he let go, she went to work on his ribs.

He roared with laughter and screamed, “Stop! I believe you!”

She stopped and sat beside him for a while. They watched the sheep and listened to the frogs in the woods. Eventually, she turned to David.

“David, do you like me?” she asked.

He looked at her.

“Of course I like you.”

“A lot?”

“Lots and lots.”

“When we were wrestling, did you enjoy holding me?” she asked.

“Of course.” Then he stopped. He looked at her as if seeing her as a girl for the first time. “Yeah,” he continued. “But not like hugging a girl. You know. Like a couple of guys wrestling.”

“You mean you could never love me because you’ve always thought of me as a boy,” she whimpered.

“Now wait a minute, Lila. It’s not that. Liking and being fond of are different. There’s this girl, Anna, in Tiberias.”

She rose to her feet.

“I understand,” she said bravely. “I understand. I’m sorry I embarrassed you.”

She walked away from a very puzzled friend. Of course he liked her. Better than any guy he ever knew.

But not better than Anna. Anna was a girl.

Lila walked into the woods to a stream she often sat by to meditate. To pray.

“Lord,” she said, avoiding the restricted use of God’s name. “Why did you make me a girl? I feel like a girl, but Daddy clothed me in boy’s clothing. Against your strict commands in the Law. Other shepherdesses wear women’s clothes. Did Daddy want a boy so badly he tried to make me into one?”

“Well, Lord. I’m not going to be a boy. I have a girl’s feelings and that’s what I’m going to be, no matter what Daddy thinks.”

By now she was crying her eyes out. She was sobbing with deep sobs.

Jesse had chosen a clump of bushes just the other side of the stream to relieve himself. His daughter’s voice startled him. Then her words startled him. Finally, her deep sobs startled him.

He would ask his partner, Amos, about David. They thought it too early, but the time had come. He slipped away without her detecting his presence. That surely would have been impossible if she weren’t sobbing so hard.

Later, when Jesse entered his hut, Lila was lying asleep on her mat, resting for her first turn on watch that night. Three strange staves lay at her side. One had carved figures that reminded him of someone.

*Asher, Dan’s son! Where did she get it?* And the other two. Just ordinary staves, but useful in the right hands. *But*, again he wondered, *where did she get that rascal Asher’s staff?* He’d ask her when she awoke to go on watch at sundown.

He didn’t ask her. He was asleep when she got up. He had the midnight-to-sunup watch. He and David would relieve Lila and Amos. Two always watched at night. That was one reason he partnered with Amos.

Amos rarely had much to say. Most times she was glad. Tonight, he was talkative.

“David told me you have three new staves.”

“Yep.”

They watched for falling stars. They counted stars. There were too many to count.

“God knows the name of every one of those stars,” she told Amos, daring to use the restricted name in front of him.

“’Twould take a god to know that many names,” he replied thirty minutes later.

Fifteen minutes before their relief, Amos declared, "I'm going to teach you to use a sling. It's more effective at distances."

Three sentences spoken by Amos were unheard of. Lila accompanied him with joy to their houses when Jesse and David showed up to relieve them.

When they arrived at Lila's hut, several paces from Amos's hut, she asked, half in jest, "Would you like a cup of wine to relieve your throat? It must be parched after all that talking."

He paused for a moment. "No." She gave him a quick hug. He moved on. As she entered her hut she thought, *At least he doesn't reject me.* Then she lay down on her mat and cried herself to sleep.

The next morning, before she went to relieve David, Jesse said, "One of those staves looks like one I've seen Asher Bardan carry. And two more."

"They gave them to me before they left the hillside we're using to graze our flock." She started to leave.

Jesse laid his hand on one shoulder.

"Is there something you want to tell me?"

If she had given them their pleasure, he wanted to know before he heard it from some gossiping neighbor. Surely, Asher, and others who accompanied him—for she had three staves—would not keep their mouths shut. He would leave his sheep with Amos and take her to a distant relative's house in Samaria.

She looked at her father for a long time. His heart trembled for his innocent daughter. Was she innocent?

"Father." The formal address. What did it mean? "Why is it that ruffians lust after my body, but decent men like David only think of me as another man?"

"Did a *ruffian* take advantage of you?" he asked, his voice quivering.

"Not one. Three," she said. His heart sank. "Or, at least they thought to. I cracked their skulls and gave them something else to think about."

"Daughter!" he shouted. "They didn't just stand there and let you crack their skulls." He now was confused.

"Indeed not. But they were no match for me."

"You fought three men?" he asked in disbelief. "And beat them all?"

“Well, I only had to fight two. I knocked Asher out before Enan and Gabinan rushed me.”

“Enan and—you fought them both? You couldn’t beat both at once.”

“Then how did I get their staves?”

“Are you sure you got them by *fighting*?” Suspicion dripped from his words. He wished. But he just couldn’t believe.

“Enan didn’t get two fingers on one hand and three on another broken making love. And Gabinan didn’t get a broken nose and smashed face lovemaking. And Asher did not get a knot on his head and have to be carried away by his buddies through taking his pleasure from me,” she ground out defiantly.

“Who helped you?” he demanded.

“God!” she said, using the restricted term.

She stalked away, holding her staff upright.

Amos couldn’t help hearing the conversation. It had not been carried on in whispers. He walked over to his old friend.

“You are a fool. I’m going to teach her how to use a sling for the next time they show up. What are you going to do?”

Amos was becoming a talking fool.

The morning was spent slinging rocks. She caught on to the technique quickly. One placed a rock in the pocket between two lengths of strong cord. It was twirled once or twice. At the proper moment one cord was released. The rock was propelled from the sling pocket. The secret to accuracy was letting go of the cord at the proper moment. The secret of distance was whirling the stone faster and faster before releasing it from the sling.

The Writings spoke of seven hundred left-handed slingers in the days of the Judges who could sling a stone at a hair and not miss. One of the readers in the synagogue in Capernaum had read that passage one Sabbath. Lila now told Amos the story.

“But the slingers were Benjaminites protecting those wicked men. Protecting the men who raped the woman so that she died. They deserved what they got!”

She slung a stone at a flying duck. They skinned it, instead of plucking, and roasted it over a fire. They put it on a spit and turned it every few minutes for an hour. Fat dripped from it, causing little flames to shoot up briefly. Jesse arrived as the duck was done.

"I came to apologize to Lila, but get fed instead," he said.

"Who said you're getting fed?" said the talkative Amos.

Jesse was taken aback at this uncharacteristic outburst of his friend.

"Who got the duck?" asked Jesse.

"I did," said Lila.

Amos nodded.

Jesse suddenly sat.

"You're going to tell me you knocked it out of the air with a sling," he chortled.

Amos nodded.

If Jesse hadn't been sitting, that would have seated him.

"You been practicing?"

"All morning," said Lila.

"Well, if you can thrash three thugs with a stave, I guess you can knock a bird out of the sky," he said. "That's why I came. Three young men in the village are badly battered. Everyone is wondering if another gang beat them up. I hid the staves."

"Why?"

"If I didn't believe you could beat them up, who in the village would believe it?"

"Me," said Amos.

"Shut up. You talk too much," said Jesse.

Lila nodded her head, though. "I see," she said. She realized it was not very ladylike to beat people up with a stave. But what *was* ladylike? No one had ever taught her. And she had no mother.

Then, one day, God smiled on her. The Lord threw a man off a cliff to her, practically at her feet.

Timaheus didn't know any of that yet any more than the treachery of the woman standing before him.

“I generally do not entertain mere commoners,” Elizabeth told him. She weighed the bag of coins in her hand.

“That’s exactly why Timaeus asked me to seek you out.”

Her eyes widened.

“You are Timaeus’s man?” she demanded. “Every time he sends me someone new. Why does he never come himself?”

The Persian ignored her questions. He said, “He wants to know everything possible about the new governor—family background, other family members, how he received this appointment, and especially any information about his siblings.”

“The usual pay?” she asked coldly.

“The usual pay, except . . .”

“Except?” she snarled fiercely, spraying his face with droplets of spittle.

He stood, like a statue, ignoring her outburst, her shower of saliva. He continued his errand calmly. He was a Persian. He spoke quietly, distinctly.

“No pay after thirteen days. Double pay in ten days. Triple pay in five days.”

She surveyed the minion before her. A talking statue.

“What if I give you the information today?” she asked with a sly smile.

The guard considered her for a brief second. Grudgingly, he said, “Nothing more than five days was mentioned. He seemed anxious.” He calculated her greed and added, “I would guess you could shake him down for fourfold.”

“Fivefold and a free tracking assignment for me. I’ll give him the information tonight. He must come to me for it.”

She was all business, a merchant selling a rare pearl.

She knew how to negotiate prices with men.

“Don’t set a price when the man comes to see you,” she told her stable of whores. “Delight them. Entice them. Promise them. But don’t deliver until they are great stallions seeking mares in heat. Then demand half again as much as you think they will pay without arguing. If they accept the price, fine.”

She smiled at the women. She looked into their eyes, as if trying to seduce them.



“You have made a good deal.”

She let that sink in. Good training could not be rushed.

“If they hesitate, make a slight concession. Gentleness. Return again to the demand. Because, you will tell them, you like them, want to satisfy them. After that, do not argue.”

She paused again. That was a very important tactic. Arguments built walls of resentment.

“Explain that you are required to serve a certain number of men each night. The time allotted for you to satisfy him is almost gone. You have to go to the next man waiting to be satisfied.”

She taught her women to negotiate with men. She used her negotiating skill now with the big, dumb Persian standing before her. Oh, to negotiate with Timaeus directly. That would be joy.

Little did she know how soon she would be doing exactly that. For his services, not to give hers.

“If he agrees,” the guard told her, snapping her out of her reverie, “I will return an hour before sundown and take you to him. He will not come here.”

“You are sure?” she asked.

“I am sure. And if he does not agree, I will come for the information in five days with triple the normal amount.”

### Chapter 3

#### *The Zealots*

**H**e turned and walked away. She glared after him, then weighed the bag in her hand and smiled.

The guard went from her house to a local tavern. The trip was one he had seldom made, but he knew the place. He knew it by reputation. He knew it by reconnaissance.

Few folk were in the streets he trod. The sandy streets caused his sandals to become gritty, uncomfortable. The sand stuck to his sweaty feet.

Wayward beggars avoided the Persian. They feared he would as likely give them a slit throat as a shekel. Children did not play in his presence. If mama was close by, they ran and hid behind her skirt.

The street was not devoid of people. There were beggars, really poor beggars as willing to accept a few grapes as the meanest coin. Places in need of repair housed desperate widows who drank up charitable donations rather than purchasing food for equally desperate children. The neighborhood was the school for beggars, rascals, and thieves.

The Persian detested visiting the area, but there was purpose to his presence. The inn was away from the more traveled paths. It certainly was not near the Imperial Highway, which passed through the city and to Damascus. That was a paved road, one of Rome's prides. This inn was not sought by travelers. But it was the inn the Persian wanted.

He flipped a copper into the basket of a beggar woman. The dry rustle of metal to straw drew other beggars. They appeared out of nowhere.

"Off with you," he commanded. "I know a person in need. I know slackers full of greed. Go find work."

The whining voices quieted. The basket-toting ranks melted into the surroundings as rapidly as they appeared.

"I hate smart chunks like him," he heard one of the fakers say. He smiled a grim smile. He spit into the dust.

The tavern appeared. He paused when he arrived. There was only an innkeeper inside. The man draped his carcass on an empty wine cask. The owner? A hireling? It mattered not. He wasn't the Persian's prey.

The guard sauntered in. His feet walked over the sticky, cobbled floor. Stale beer and cheap wine assailed his nostrils. Mustiness, dredging up images of sweaty men, horny with desire, and

women in heat, permeated the room.

The guard lowered his bulk on a bench at an empty table. It sat in one corner, facing the entrance. No business disturbed the fetid silence so early in the day. A couple of flies crawled over the gummy sweetness of spilled wine on the heavy, plank table.

The proprietor walked over. With a handful of dirty rags, he swiped at the table. The flies flitted away. When he stopped rubbing, they settled back again.

“Wine,” mumbled the guard.

The innkeeper set a clay cup with evil-looking fluid before his lone customer, not carefully. He sloshed some of the wine on the table. The Persian took the cup when it was delivered. He held it, contemplated it like some rare gem. He waited.

Soon a woman who frequented such places came in and sidled over to him.

An Elizabeth she was not. Her breath smelled of garlic; her dark, black hair, of the sheep’s-wool oil she had rubbed on it to hold it in place. Her body smelled of unwashed lovemaking. Her clothes, too, needed washing. Her fingernails were bitten to the quick. Her dark, brown eyes showed circles in spite of the thick coating of makeup designed to hide them.

She had no sense of negotiation. She used the direct approach. One generally effective with common soldiers.

“Hi, soldier,” she said.

“I’m not a soldier,” he said. “I’m a guard for a villa.”

“Hi, guard,” she said. “Would you like some company?”

The heat from her body radiated against his bare arm. He eyed her a moment with distaste. Then made a decision.

“I’ll buy you some wine. We will talk, but I have to get back soon. I’m on duty. Sit down.”

She slid onto the bench next to him. She slid close. She rubbed a hot hand over his thigh. He glared at her. She removed her hand.

She picked up the cup the proprietor had brought. Even in the dark cup he could see it was watered-down wine. He’d be expected to pay full price for it.

“I was just trying to be a little friendly,” she pouted.

“That kind of friendliness can get you stoned in this part of the world.”

She moved away from him some more and turned. She stared at him for a moment.

She asked, "What part of the world are you from?"

He didn't answer. He started to get up, then changed his mind. He turned and looked at her.

"You meet men from lots of different places?" he asked.

"Yeah. Rome. Greece. Egypt. All these backwater towns around here, too. Why?"

"You notice differences in them? I mean the way they act, not the way they look."

"Sure," she answered. "Jews are Jews. Greeks are Greeks. Romans are Romans. I can tell whether they are clothed or naked. What are you?"

It was obvious she wondered where this was leading.

"And how about their occupations? Are merchants different from soldiers, soldiers different from religious officials?"

She looked at him a long time.

"I don't ask men what they do."

He gave a mirthless chuckle.

"Obviously. You didn't know me from a soldier."

"Wait a minute," she spouted. "I'm not stupid. You're wearing a uniform. I just assumed . . ."

"And if a man were to walk around carrying a dagger in his teeth you would assume he were a Zealot?" he challenged.

"Zealots don't carry daggers in their teeth. They hide them and sometimes carry a stave . . ."

She stopped. Her mouth was still open. She started to get up. He grabbed her arm.

"Go on," he ground out. "Zealots sometimes carry a stave. What else?"

"Let go. You're hurting me. I don't know anything else."

"What do you know about Zealots?" he insisted. He had an image of four men tracking him—men carrying staves.

“Let her go,” said a quiet, malevolent voice behind him. He turned his head slightly. A very tall man stood there. He was carrying a stave.

Timaeus turned slowly. The stave was not raised, but he had no illusions about the speed with which it could be employed. He was an expert with the device himself. His hand was still on the woman’s arm, but he was no longer squeezing it.

“Do all Zealots carry staves?” he asked no one in particular. “Is everyone who carries a stave a Zealot? Can a Zealot attack a soldier of the Imperial Roman Army in broad daylight and live to brag about it?”

“You said you were a guard,” she spat. She yanked her arm from his grasp, but did not flee.

“I lied,” he said, keeping his eyes on the biceps and triceps of the stave bearer.

“I’ve attacked no one,” said the tall man. “I simply asked you to let her go.”

It was true. The man had not raised his voice. He was not belligerent.

“And I was not trying to hurt the girl,” said Timaeus. “I was merely interested in knowing more about the Zealots. She had mentioned the Zealots.”

“Why don’t you ask me?” said the man.

“Fine. Sit down. I’ll buy you a cup of wine.”

The tall man dexterously folded onto the bench opposite the Persian and waved at the proprietor for a cup of wine. He turned to Timaeus.

“My name is Paulus. Why do you want to know about the Zealots?” he asked.

Paulus! A leader of one of the most active Zealot groups. *Maybe I’m in luck*, Timaeus thought. His heart picked up a beat faster. If anyone knew why Zealots were following him, it would be Paulus.

But he’d have to be careful.

“I’m a Roman soldier. I want to know my enemy.”

“Bah. You’re no Roman soldier. That’s not the uniform of Rome. You don’t smell bad enough to be a Roman soldier.”

*If he had only smelled me last night*, thought Timaeus. Then an idea struck.

“I smelled a drunk on the street last night who stunk enough to be a Roman soldier.”

Paulus showed no interest.

“He came stumbling out of the alley that runs behind the governor’s palace,” added the tracker.

Paulus stiffened.

“That was no drunk!” he exclaimed. Then, voice dripping venom, he growled, “He was a stinking spy. How did he . . . ?”

“I don’t know if he was a spy,” said Timaeus with a smile, alert. “But you’re right about the stinking part.”

“He’s working with Marconius to find our base,” muttered the Zealot leader to himself.

*Aha. One question answered,* thought Timaeus.

“But that’s all right,” continued the stave bearer, as he remembered he had an audience. “We’re going to get him tonight.”

A chill went down Timaeus’s spine as he realized what Paulus meant. Elizabeth was in league with the Zealots. She obviously had no loyalty except to her treasure chest. She sold her services to the highest bidder.

*Just like me,* thought Timaeus.

The smile was still on Timaeus’s face as he spoke. “Why are you telling a stranger like me all this?”

“Because I am going to kill you,” said Paulus pleasantly.

Without warning, Timaeus heaved the heavy table up into Paulus’s face, before the giant could lift the stave. The force of the table made Paulus fall backward. The bench overturned. The table landed upside down across his prone body. Timaeus lunged forward and did a handspring across the upset table to the other side of Paulus just as the breeze of a stave in the proprietor’s hand swept past his neck.

Paulus was struggling to get the table off him. The proprietor jumped quickly before Timaeus. He stood between Timaeus and the door. He wore a look of murder in his eye. He clutched the promise of death in his hand.

Timaeus raised his arm and shouted, “In here, comrades!” as he stepped on the table once more, driving Paulus into the floor. He leaped forward to greet his “comrades in arms.” The proprietor turned just enough to see the ruse.

Timaeus knocked the staff from his hand. With a bound he was out the door. He joined a company of a Roman patrol passing by.

“Did you call us for some drinks?” one asked hopefully.

Timaeus glanced back and saw the proprietor and Paulus just inside the door. They seemed to be deciding whether to fight or fly. They were well within earshot. Timaeus answered the soldier.

“No, no. I said, ‘*Don’t* come in here.’ I was just trying to warn you about how awful the wine is in there. Tell your friends to stay away.” He gave a mock salute to Paulus. He flipped a coin to the innkeeper. He strolled jauntily down the street.

He was anything but as jocular as he looked. It had not been an hour and Elizabeth had already alerted the Zealots. Was she not only interested in the money she could get from the Zealots? If so, she might have negotiated with Timaeus. No. She was in league with them. This was most dangerous.

What did Elizabeth know? He had to find out what she knew—if anything.

He couldn’t go to her, either as the swarthy guard or as Timaeus. Else he would be in mortal danger. Half the day gone. Nothing had come out as he planned. Except now the riddle of the men in the alley last night was solved.

Or was it?

He straightened himself, stood tall with a military bearing, and marched back to Antonius’s villa. The loungers were still across the road. Still waiting for Antonius to emerge from his villa. They would then scamper off and tell those who were paying for the information.

Timaeus smiled to himself as he passed through the villa gate. Enough game playing with local idiots. He had to plan what he would do to extract information from a very clever woman. Clever and dangerous. His pulse raced with anticipation.

## Chapter 4

### *The Harlot's Report*

**A**n hour before dark a crippled beggar with a hunched back and a dirty rag tied over one eye showed up at Elizabeth's house.

He was not permitted to enter the building. His high-pitched voice insisted he had a message for the mistress of the house. The guard at the door shoved him back. The hunchbacked old beggar fell to the ground. He turned his head to the side. He put his arm up to ward off the blows he knew would follow. What a pitiful sight he was.

He kept whimpering, "Don't hurt me. Don't hurt me. I am but a messenger. Given a couple of coppers to deliver a message. It's my life if I don't deliver it. A lady called Elizabeth must have it before sundown."

Elizabeth emerged through the door.

"Who sent the message?" she demanded.

"A big, dark soldier. Bigger than your bully there. And meaner than a dog with a bone."

"What is the message?"

"He said, 'Tell her it's a deal, and bring her to me.'"

Elizabeth glared at him suspiciously. She hissed to herself, "So he can abduct me?" Then, to the human refuse on the ground, "Where is he?"

The hunchback struggled to his feet. He kept Elizabeth between himself and the guard.

"He said you'd say that," whined the beggar. "The meeting place he showed me is in the open. He said you could bring guards." The messenger glanced nervously at the bully who had pushed him. "You will see. He is alone."

Four of her guards accompanied her and the hobbling beggar. She kept the little cripple close by. She had to keep urging him to keep up. He whined and complained. The guards flanked her front and back.

The group traveled the lake path, next to the wall where fishing vessels sold their catch daily. The boats were not there now. They were out night-fishing. The grounds were deserted and barren.

Then she saw him. He stood next to the wall a hundred paces ahead. But he was different . . .



She started to give her guards an order. The beggar grabbed her. They both toppled over the wall into the cold water of the lake.

Strong hands pulled her into a boat. Oarsmen pulled at their oars. The boat sped from the wall. As feared, she had been kidnaped.

A warm wrap was placed on her shoulders. She was placed in a seat facing the beggar. He now wore a cloak. A large hood hid his features.

A voice quite different from the one she had heard at her house issued from the hood. "I'm sorry you were brought here so roughly. The fivefold fee and the free tracking assignment should be some recompense for your trouble."

"You . . . you . . ." she sputtered.

"Yes. That and more. But my time is very short. Please give me the information you promised. The boatmen will then take you back and put you ashore near your house."

"I have no information," she spat.

"That's what I told the Persian when he told me of your offer. Very well. I just had to be sure." To the crew he said, "Take us along the lakeshore to—"

Elizabeth saw her fee slipping away. She would never be able to deliver him to the Zealots. She had a few paltry coppers she had mistaken for gold to show for her trouble. Gold in the bag the Persian had handed her. That was wicked—sewing lead into the lining of the bag to make it heavy like gold.

"Wait," she interrupted. "I know a few things. I will tell you. You decide their value."

"Fair enough," replied Timaeus.

Her now-wet blanket was replaced by a warm, dry one. The wet cushion was replaced by a dry one. A cup of warm, honey-laced wine was placed in her hands.

"First," she began, "there were two brothers in Caesar's army, the one that marched to conquer lands in the Gaul. Also, to quell rebellion there. One centurion and all his troops were ambushed in that war. They were slain while on reconnaissance."

She paused for effect. She sipped the wine.

"Only those two brothers returned alive."

She lapsed into a storytelling mode, a role she filled with ease.

“An ambush attacked the group they were part of. As the brothers reported later, they fought back-to-back. They defended each other from the barbarians. Their comrades, the reconnaissance group, also fought valiantly. They fell, they were killed, one by one. Suddenly a cow’s horn sounded. The barbarians retreated. The brothers didn’t know why.”

She took another sip. Timaeus waited. The story was not yet over.

“Mumbling spread through the ranks. Caesar questioned the brothers. He was satisfied with their report.”

She tried to get a look at Timaeus’s face, gave it up, and continued.

“Both to reward their valor and to remove them from the ranks of dissatisfaction, he appointed them to posts on the far eastern border of the empire.”

Her voice changed cadence, pitch.

“Their father was very wealthy. He was a strong supporter of Caesar in Rome. Some say that is why Caesar did not condemn them in the first place.”

Timaeus noted a tone of awe as she mentioned Caesar.

“At any rate, one son was made governor of Judea.” She smiled slightly at Timaeus. “A position made open by the removal of a tax-evading governor. The other was given a special mission to the general in charge of the Army of Mesopotamia. He was to remain there until another governor position opened.”

Timaeus marveled at her storytelling ability. She said “governor” with a disapproving huskiness and, as noted, “Caesar” with a touch of childish awe. Having seen Caesar in person, he himself was not so awed. And he didn’t miss the reference to Valerius Gratus, whom she had helped Timaeus unseat.

“Second,” she continued, “the boys’ father, Caesar’s supporter, is a very hard man to please. Caesar didn’t want to alienate him by giving the choice post to the less favored son. He considered letting the father make the decision. Then, for political reasons, decided he should not take that step. He settled on a rather brilliant scheme.”

She smiled a scheming smile.

“He told the brothers to decide between themselves who was to have which post. The stronger, he judged, would get the best post. That was the way he wanted it. The father was satisfied with this arrangement. The brothers left Rome, still arguing about who would do what.”

“You gather information rather quickly,” suggested Timaeus.

“Bah. I could have told you all this the day the new governor arrived. I knew they were on their way before their ship landed at Tyre. I make it my business to gather information on political figures.”

“I will examine what you have told me. Before sundown tomorrow the gold will be delivered to you. I am now employed with an assignment. But, you have my word: as soon as my present assignment is completed, I will place my services at your disposal.”

“Gold? Or copper in bags with lead sewn into the lining?”

Timaeus laughed. “That was a joke. I never planned to cheat you. After all, you did not provide your services for that Persian ape. But I got many a chuckle thinking of how your face would appear when you discovered my little deception.” He laughed again and promised, “I will redeem that little joke, no services required, with real gold—twofold.”

“And how would you know what my face looked like? Uh. Twofold, you say? That reminds me. The brothers are twins.”

A piece of the puzzle suddenly fell into place.

## Chapter 5

### *Elizabeth*

As Elizabeth soaked the chill out of her bones in a hot bath after her meeting with Timaeus, it reminded her of how her business had begun. It was in Tiberias that she had her beginning.

Her father had moved the family from a small village in Galilee to Tiberias. He took advantage of Herod Antipas's offer to build a house for any tradesman who moved to his new city.

"Bah," her father had answered when neighbors told him it was said that the city was built on an ancient cemetery, making it unholy. "Show me a spot in Galilee where some person has not been buried. Since the time of Abraham! Every time you dust your feet to be washed. Every stroll you take. You walk on ancient graves."

People shivered at the thought. Those from her home village said that was why he died of a fever. "Not even there a full year. Him leaving a widow with three children. He learned to transgress holy law," said the gossipers.

"They are jealous of our fine house," said Mama.

Even so, it would have been easier to receive help back home among family and neighbors. A few wild berries to bite the tongue. To stain the fingers, the lips, the front of their garments. A few olives under the trees, dropped after the reapers were gone.

A house was fine. But one needed food. There wasn't even a fig tree. And clothes—not even hand-me-downs.

And other things. For example, one day a jar holding their congealed fat was accidentally knocked off the edge of the cooking stone where it rested. It was not easy to replace that jar, let alone the fat collected over many weeks.

Mama baked loaves. Elizabeth sold them in the marketplace. Mama had developed the knack of baking just the number of loaves for any particular day. Rarely did they ever have to eat stale loaves in their house. But even stale loaves were soft and chewy. A bit of congealed lamb fat spread over the loaf made it delectable. More likely they ate little or nothing in the evening.

Elizabeth was at the market selling bread the day her life was changed forever. There was a sudden downpour of the coldest rain Elizabeth had ever experienced. The raindrops were the size of lemons. And as cold as sleet. Everyone was covering wares harmed by water. Elizabeth was hiding her loaves quickly in a large, covered clay pot she had brought them in. Luckily, she had a sun shelter made of oiled cloth that momentarily kept water off the loaves.

A man stood under an overhang watching Elizabeth. She did not see him, though she would

have recognized him. He visited the market every day, carefully examining clay pots and homespun garments. Near noon every day he bought a loaf from Elizabeth. If she had one as the market closed, he would buy another

“To eat at home,” he would murmur.

Not that day. Everyone was rushing for shelter. The sun was shining and the rain seemed to come out of nowhere.

“Beelzebub is beating his wife!” cried one old woman mouthing a common superstition. No one laughed. They were in too much of a hurry to find a dry place.

Elizabeth had gotten her loaves safely in the pot. The cover was in place; the oilcloth was draped over it. Suddenly, someone bumped her stand. The jar went crashing to the ground. It broke to smithereens. The offender kept going.

Elizabeth stood in the freezing rain looking. She watched the loaves become soaked. They tore apart in the rain as she watched.

How could she tell Mama? What would she tell Mama? They had saved almost a year to be able to tell the potter exactly what they needed. And today Mama had used all her ingredients—flour, salt, spices, goat’s milk, and Mama’s secret ingredient that made her bread demanded above all others: olive oil. Even the last of their splinters had been used for the fire under the cooking stone.

A cloak was placed around her shoulders, repelling the rain. It was the man she hadn’t noticed.

“My house is not far from here. We need to get you out of this cold rain,” he said softly.

Gently, he led her to his house. It was only a quarter hour away. Hers was close to an hour. She was grateful for his generosity.

Almost immediately, upon entering the house, she was placed in a chair. One woman toweled her as dry as possible, using a large, cotton towel. Another woman was washing her feet.

*Women’s feet don’t get washed, she thought. Besides, if ever my feet didn’t need washing, it’s now,* she thought, a bit amused. But the man’s feet were also being washed. It was a matter of custom, of courtesy, not simply of need.

Even though she was dried as well as possible, she still shivered in her wet clothes.

“There is a hot bath prepared for me,” he told her. “You can use it now. I’ll have one later.”

“Hot bath?”

“Yes. I had this house built at a hot spring so I could have a hot bath daily.”

Tiberias was noted for its hot springs. It was said that was why Antipas insisted on building a city here. On an ancient cemetery.

“Daily?” she asked in a little child’s voice.

He smiled at her. A rather large, older woman led her into another room.

“This is just like a Roman bath,” the woman said as she began to remove Elizabeth’s garments. “Hot water flows through the tub all day long. That small room over there is really a steam room. There are seats there to sit and enjoy the steam.” All of Elizabeth’s clothes were off. The older woman surveyed her like an artist viewing a statue.

“My name is Hannah. If you need anything, call me. You may use either the pool or the steam room. Or both, if you like.”

“Are you . . . are you his slave, uh, his . . . ?”

“The master has no slaves. Nor a wife. She died a year ago of a fever.”

*Like my father*, thought Elizabeth.

Hannah continued as she urged the shivering woman into the pool.

“He doesn’t believe in owning people. He says they are not pets like dogs, nor work animals like donkeys, though at times he accuses me of working like a horse.”

Elizabeth was drawn to this older woman. She treated Elizabeth like an equal, yet more than an equal. The young woman realized that for the first time in her life she knew what it was like to be respected.

Hannah left her and a few minutes later the man entered the bath.

“Don’t worry,” he quickly said. “I will not seek to look at you or hurt you. I would like to talk to you.”

He found a stool to sit on. He did not exactly sit facing Elizabeth. He faced more obliquely to one side so he could talk with her without looking directly at her. The steam from the pool surely would dampen his clothes, but he didn’t seem to mind.

“Why did you bring me here?” she asked.

“Why? To get you out of the rain.”

“But the pool? The, uh, steam room. Are you going to ask me to sit in there with you?”

Naked?”

He was mildly amused, but did not laugh at her.

“My name is Ishmael. I will not ask you to do anything you do not want to do.”

“I don’t want you to sit in here and talk while I’m bathing,” she asserted.

“I didn’t say you could tell me what to do.” He was patient. His voice was kind. In a matter-of-fact tone he said, “You may leave if you like. But I warn you, it is still raining. The sun is now behind the clouds. And the wind is blowing.”

*Not a very good prospect*, she thought. But she needed to test him. What were his intentions? She was past marriage age. No one came or sent a matchmaker to her house. Who wanted a woman with no dowry?

“What would you do if I got up out of this bath? Got dressed. And left?” she demanded.

“Sadly watch you with interest and let you go.”

“You are a liar!”

“Try me.” It was the gentlest of comebacks.

She was quiet for a while, letting the chill bleed out of her bones. She was almost asleep when next he spoke.

“I have a proposition for you. Today was not the first time I observed you.”

“I know, my lord. I have often seen you in the marketplace. What is a proposition?”

He did not laugh at her question. Neither did he answer it. He scratched an itch and continued what he had come to say.

“You were always honest. Always fair. Quick to help the needy, though you obviously were needy yourself. You were not enthralled by wealth and splendor. You showed more than native intelligence. You showed you were clever and alert. I developed a fondness for you. That’s why I wanted to help you in distress. I have decided to make you a proposition.”

She followed his speech, unembarrassed by his praise. Though she had never experienced respect from others, she always respected herself. She did not ask what the proposition was. She asked a different question.

“What is a proposition?”

He did not laugh at her silly question. He took it seriously. He answered with a simple

illustration.

“Let’s say you sold your loaves for three leptons each.”

“Oh, we’d never sell them so cheaply. Even three leptons are less than a tribute penny.”

“Yes. Yes,” he interrupted. “This is only for an example. *If* you sold them for three leptons each and I said, ‘If you’ll sell them two for five leptons, I’ll buy a dozen—’”

“That’s thirty leptons a dozen. Then I’d say I couldn’t afford to sell them two for five leptons, but I’d let you have a dozen for thirty-five leptons. That would save you a lepton off the regular price.”

He smiled.

“You are very good at figuring. I knew you were sharp. I wonder if you can read.”

“To what purpose?”

The only readings she knew about were the holy scrolls. The Scriptures—Law, Prophets, Writings.

“I was only thinking to myself,” he explained. “But you have turned my proposition into a negotiation. A proposition is an offer. A yes-or-no offer. One accepts or rejects a proposition. I will give you a gold shekel if you accept my offer.”

A gold shekel! That was more than their family earned in two years. It would make the day’s food and jar destruction look like a pittance. She would do anything for a gold shekel. Anything.

As if reading her mind, he said, “And I’d replace your broken jar with another and purchase the bread you lost today.”

This time, instead of asking, What is a proposition? she asked, “What is the proposition?”

He sat a long time before answering. He stared at the floor as if he were not going to answer. As if contemplating. Finally, he spoke without looking at her.

“I don’t want you to misunderstand what I’m going to say. You do not have to answer immediately. Think about your answer. I want you to sleep with me.”

She stood up in the pool and exclaimed, “What?”

He turned to look at her. He stared, transfixed by her beauty. Her skin was as beautiful as a doe’s milk. Her body, more beautifully shaped than the finest statue. Her hair hung from her head like strings of gold and lay in her crotch like a skein of fine gold thread. Her hips were slender, but



that added to her beauty. And he thought of the Song of Songs when he viewed her breasts:

Your breasts are like two fawns,  
like twin fawns of a gazelle  
that browse among the lilies.

He caught his breath as she strode along the bottom of the pool to the side, stepped up, stomped, splashing the steaming water as she left the pool, and went to where she had been disrobed.

“Where are my clothes?” she asked with something just a shade under a snarl.

“They have been taken away to be washed and dried. Another tunic and cloak will be brought if you wish to leave in this storm. Why don’t you return to the bath and soak up some warmth to prepare you for that ordeal?”

It was said so gently and kindly, Elizabeth found herself slipping back into the warm waters.

“What shall we talk about?” she asked.

He moved the stool closer, but still did not sit directly facing her. She noted his consideration and appreciated it.

“You can sit facing me,” she suddenly told him. “You’ve already seen everything there is to see. No man has ever seen me naked. I am sorry I imposed myself on you, but I do not feel invaded by your presence.”

He smiled one of his beautiful, old-man smiles.

“I apologize for staring, but you are so very beautiful I could not help myself,” he assured her.

She knew she was going to have to give herself to this man. He was so gentle. So kind. He would never be brutal with her.

“Your proposition—do you mean one night, all the time, whenever you desire me? When?” she asked.

“There you go negotiating again,” he chuckled. “I will tell you my entire proposition later. Let’s not talk about it now. First, let’s get to know each other.”

She washed her face with the hot water. She felt dirty. He looked at her face. Into her eyes. He did not try to see her through the water, though that was entirely a possibility. She didn’t want to appear dirty to this man. He was more accepting than her father had been.

Her father never talked to her except to say, "Bring me more goats' milk," or, "I need another cup of wine," as he ate while her mother, her sister, and she waited for the men to finish their meals. Waiting was fine. That was the custom. Not talking to the women, save his wife, was the custom, too.

But, oh, there were so many things she would like to ask him.

"Tell me what you would like to talk about," he said.

"I am curious about the proposition, but you want to talk about something else. So, tell me about your wife."

"She is dead."

There was finality in his response.

"I know. Hannah told me. I like her. But what was your wife like?" she coaxed.

He sat so long she thought he was not going to answer. So long she wondered if she should request the tunic and loincloth. Her fingers were beginning to wrinkle from being in the water so long. Then he spoke.

"My wife was like the sea. Beautiful and calm at times. Giving. But sometimes a raging storm. I don't mean she became abusive. I would not have tolerated that."

"You would have divorced her." It was a statement, not a question.

"The storm was in her blood. She was passionate. Demanding. In months before she caught the fever I was unable to satisfy her. I don't mean not provide enough lovemaking. I mean, I could not perform at all."

"I'm sorry," she whispered. "I'm sorry I asked. This is so . . . so personal."

"You are open to learning. You are a very smart woman. I had to tell you this in any event."

He had called her a woman.

They both were silent for a time. Then he continued.

"She understood. She was not angry. I knew her passions. I even thought of buying her a slave to satisfy her."

"You loved her deeply. More than I can imagine."

"Yes. Our love was deeper than you can imagine. For months I wished I had died with her.

Do you know what she did?"

Elizabeth could think of nothing to say as he paused. Finally he continued.

"She hired prostitutes to come sleep with me. To—"

"I am not going to be a whore," she ground out.

Ishmael ignored her interruption and kept speaking even while she was making her statement.

"—rejuvenate me. To see if they could arouse me sufficiently that I might make love to her. She brought harlots from Jerusalem, Damascus, and Egypt. I was enticed by the finest prostitutes in the world. One even arrived from Rome a month after her death. I sent her home."

He was quiet after that. She came out of the water, unashamed of her nakedness, not feeling that before him she was immodest. She walked over and kissed him on the cheek.

"I'm ready for my garments now," she said. "But I will not leave until you have stated your proposition."

He walked out.

In a few minutes Hannah came in with a tunic, a covering, a loincloth, a sash, and a headdress. She also had a necklace of gold.

"You made a favorable impression on him. Accept his offer. You will never be sorry. And the necklace is from me."

"But, Hannah, this must be worth several denarii."

"Never mind. I can afford it. One day you will wonder why such a little thing can bring such awe. This is the least of my dowry which will never be used in my old age."

In the main room there were chairs. In Elizabeth's home there were wooden platforms built to be used as benches or beds. In her home in the village, they slept on mats on the floor. There was a stool for their father, but mostly he and everyone else sat on cushions on the floor.

"We can talk as we eat," said Ishmael.

Elizabeth almost said, But women don't eat with men, but bit her tongue. She had no concept of how the wealthy lived.

"If it offends your—" he started.

"No. No. No," she interrupted. "Whatever you say is fine."

He appraised her a long time. She was beginning to fear she had made a mistake, when he spoke again.

“That’s exactly how my wife used to say it. ‘Whatever you say is fine.’”

Elizabeth didn’t respond to this. She didn’t know how. They went into another room. How many rooms did this house have anyway?

They sat at a small table on chairs. She wondered if the rich sat sprawled on the floor around a low table as villagers did at wedding banquets. Village men. Women were more sensible. When the men were gone, they sat cross-legged facing the table.

Hannah served them. First, wine in gold cups, and fruit cut into bite-sized pieces. Whole olives and figs were in bowls. There was a bowl at her place and one at Ishmael’s. Hannah started to lean over, but Ishmael moved his head just the least bit.

It might have been just a normal tightening of the neck muscles and relaxing them again. But Elizabeth saw it out of the corner of her eye. Hannah was looking directly when he did it. Hannah’s bend became a kind of straightening the fruit as if that were her original intent.

They ate roasted lamb, vegetables Elizabeth had never seen but found delicious, bread (not anywhere as delectable as her mother’s), and a fabulous baked dessert she would have to tell her mother about.

Her mother. She had thought of her mother twice during the meal. Was she wondering how to explain all this to her mother? How would she? And if she slept with this man, would she be breaking the seventh law, even if she did not have sexual intercourse with him? And if she did it against her mother’s wishes, would she be violating the fifth law?

“Not hungry, my lovely beauty?”

“I was thinking of something Hannah said.”

He gave a slight start.

“Hannah? Is it a secret? Or can you tell me?”

“She told me to do anything you asked.”

“Hannah.”

It was not a loud call; simply a low summons. She might have been waiting at the door, so quickly she came.

Ishmael stood. He took the older woman in his arms and hugged her. He turned to

Elizabeth.

“Elizabeth, meet my wife’s mother.”

Elizabeth stood.

“I apologize for my thoughts. I thought she was your lover, that perhaps I was replacing her.”

“Esau, another chair,” commanded Ishmael. Then to Elizabeth, “I find it amusing to have my great ancestor’s twin brother working for me.”

Esau placed a chair at the table, helping Hannah be seated.

“I find it amusing that my greatest ancestor’s rejected son finds me amusing,” said Esau.

“Leave us before I thrash you,” chuckled Ishmael.

“Yes, master,” said Esau, mimicking a slave’s tone exactly.

“We never behave like this in public lest conservative Pharisees or Scribes were offended at our lack of respect for custom.”

“The Pharisees and Scribes, plus priests, would be offended at much you do in private,” she told him, thinking of him walking in on her in the bath.

“Tell her,” Ishmael instructed Hannah, as he speared a bit of roasted lamb.

Elizabeth tried to replicate his mode with an ivory pick provided for the purpose. A setting seemed magically to appear at Hannah’s position.

“Let me show you, dear,” she said, and instructed her in the technique, which wasn’t quite a matter of stabbing the tidbit. As she worked, she said in a low voice, “Your bath was a test. If you had run, it would have been over. Ishmael would likely have paid for your loss with no obligation on your part.”

Ishmael wanted to tell her how well he felt she had done, but he had given the task to Hannah. He did not interfere. Hannah was superb at the task.

“I will teach you to be a fine lady. I will teach you everything you want to know.”

“Will you teach me to read?” asked Elizabeth, testing her appointed tutor.

Ishmael almost choked. He controlled it well without making a scene.

“I will hire a scribe to teach you if you like,” said Hannah without a pause. “If you are

capable,” she added.

Elizabeth took this as a challenge and decided to learn to both read and write, even if she were the only woman in the empire so able. Capable? Bah! She would take the proposition, whatever it was.

After dinner Ishmael said, “Let’s talk about my proposition now. You have seen something of how I live. It is a pleasant lifestyle. And this is my small home in the capital. I prefer my villa in Capernaum. You will, too.”

“You still have only told me you want me to sleep with you,” Elizabeth said. “You claim it is not for sexual purposes, but once you get me into your bed, anything can happen. Is this an elaborate scheme simply to get me into your arms without a fuss? So far, it’s only been talk.”

“And a dinner,” laughed Hannah. “And you may keep those clothes.”

Ishmael was not laughing.

“You may leave at any time. You must trust me if you are to accept my proposition. You may leave now, if you don’t trust me. The rain has stopped. My chariot driver will deliver you home. Do you trust me?”

Elizabeth felt she did trust him, but long experience in the marketplace had taught her to suspect seemingly trustworthy offers. She put her thoughts into words.

“Ishmael, I want so deeply to trust you, but my many months of haggling in the marketplace have taught me to be suspicious.”

“Would you trust me more if I told you I loved you?”

“I could not want more to trust you. I desire it so deeply that I could not want it more if you asked me to marry you.”

“I am not going to marry you, nor ever ask you to. This is a proposition, not a wedding proposal. I’ll never ask you to do what you don’t want to do. But you must do everything you agree to in the proposition. The proposition is until I die. Or until you do. It is built on trust, not love.”

Ishmael was the first and last man she ever fully trusted. His proposition was for her to sleep with him every night the rest of his life. The only exception was if he contracted a fever. He did not want her to get it. But if she got a fever, she still had to sleep with him.

“If you die, I want to die, too. I don’t want to go through what I suffered in the death of my wife again,” he told her privately.

To the world she was his private servant. She attended him at home. She attended him on business trips.

“I will not marry you, because I want you to be able to marry when I die. If you have a wedding dress, give it away. I’ll buy you the most beautiful wedding dress in the world,” he said.

“Rachael will die of delight,” she told him. “She has often broken the tenth law as she looked at my dress.”

Mama never found out Elizabeth slept with him. She was told by a servant that the pot had been broken and a rich, crippled man had seen it and taken pity on her. He was in need of a personal attendant and offered her the position. She agreed only if her wages were given to her mother. He was moved by her ordeal and sent the future wages in the form of a gold shekel.

She never saw her mother again. Mama took her children back to the village they came from and lived there comfortably. She received a gold shekel each year until she died three years later.

The first night they slept together, Ishmael kissed her goodnight. She thought, *All right. Here it comes.*

The kiss was passionate. She gave herself to it, waiting for his move. They both were nude, bare body to bare body. What would she do? Fight him? She had agreed to the proposition, but was she ready to fulfill a part he assured her was not part of the contract?

The feeling began in her back, just inside her hips. It surged through her body. She rubbed her bare breasts against his breasts. She felt herself moisten and spread her legs, expecting him to take advantage of her. No, she would not fight him. She wanted him.

He finished his kiss, rolled over, and went to sleep.

The next day she broached the subject. She came to a point where she confessed, “I wanted you.”

He looked at her a long time with love—and regret—in his eyes. Finally, he said, “I wanted you, too. But I could not take you. I can teach you every love-enhancing wile my wife’s tutors taught me.”

“I don’t want to be a whore,” she told him. “If I can’t be your wife, I at least want to be your lover.”

“You will be a wife to someone someday. Don’t you want to be the lover he will never leave for another? One who will have him come begging you instead of finding a harlot?”

“Yes,” she said immediately. “Yes. I want to be that wife.” *Your wife*, she thought.

That night he said, “The first thing you must learn is that you must make your lover lust after you, no matter how you lust after him. If you give him what he wants with no struggle, he will leave you and go from woman to woman until he meets one who is a challenge every time he meets her. That is not done physically. You must learn the art of tantalizing. Of promising to promise. Of not making the destination too easy to reach. Yet, you must not drive him away. He must always feel you are in reach. That conquest is possible.”

“When my husband comes to me, I push him away?” she asked in disbelief.

“No. You make him feel you desire him more than any man on earth, that you are available, but that you must be aroused. Only he can arouse you. You want him more than anything. Will he help you get it?”

And so it went for an hour—her practicing the wiles of a wanton woman, him explaining. At times, she thought he was really a woman at heart. He understood women. She wanted to have union with him.

Some six months later, she had been with him every night. Some nights merely sleeping, because he was an old man. He tired easily. Other nights so full of desire from his instruction she felt she would explode. Then a spectacular event happened in her life.

A young merchant—a Greek god on earth—was negotiating with Ishmael. No offer Ishmael made could satisfy the man. In the afternoon, after a hearty midday feast, they each retired to nap and rest from the negotiations. Ishmael fell asleep immediately.

Elizabeth suspected the younger man was deliberately wearing her master down to take advantage of him. As Ishmael slept, Elizabeth went to the young merchant’s room. He sat up on the bed when she entered and placed his feet on the floor. Women weren’t supposed to enter a man’s quarters alone. He obviously expected a trap.

“You are a wicked man,” she charged. “You are trying to take advantage of my master because he is old.”

“And are you a wicked woman come to entice me into making a bargain?”

“You are wicked for saying that,” she told him, and turned to leave.

“Wait,” he said. “That was foolish of me to say that. So why are you here?”

Maybe it wasn’t a trap. Did this woman want him?

“I am only a servant girl he took pity on when a rainstorm washed away my livelihood. He was kind to me and I don’t want to see him hurt.”

“And have you been kind to him?” he asked with a smirk.



“Not the way you think, you wicked man. No man has ever laid with me.”

“Oh. A virgin,” he mumbled to himself, wondering if this young, beautiful, inexperienced girl—

“And one who knows the laws and lives by them.”

Oops. Maybe not so innocent. One who quotes the Law is often one who breaks the Law. Look at the Pharisees.

“What would you do for your master?” he asked.

“Perhaps put a dagger in your heart as he sleeps.”

“But that would break the sixth law.” He smiled. “Isn’t there something less drastic you can do for him?”

“Tell him you tried to entice me. He would tell you to pack up and leave,” she said.

“But that is bearing false witness.”

“What would you suggest?”

“Perhaps we could discuss something privately,” he said.

“I thought this was private,” she pointed out.

“I mean privately, closer.”

She moved closer to him. Close enough for him to smell her perfume. She watched him. He was beginning to stir.

“Sit beside me,” he said, patting the bed.

She hesitantly moved toward him. She looked around. Her fear was real. It was as if he could smell her fear as clearly as her perfume.

And he smelled her perfume. It clawed at him.

She sat.

“Would you give a kiss to help your master?” he asked.

“What would you give for a kiss?”

“A kiss isn’t much,” he said. Whispering into her ear.

“No? Sample my kiss and see what you have to say.”

She kissed him on the lips and gently slid the tips of her fingers over the back of his forearm, near the wrist, twice.

He reached for her, to draw her to himself, but she wasn't there. She had quickly slid from his grasp.

“No, no,” she said. “I only promised a sample.”

He was astounded. One cry and half a dozen men would rush into the room to see what was happening. He was risking his very life here, and he didn't care.

Sample after sample aroused his desire so he was ready to risk anything to deflower this virgin. Or to experience the pleasures of the embrace of this wanton woman.

When she said, “Let's see how the trading goes tomorrow. We will try going a bit further,” he knew “further” could only mean a sexual embrace.

The following day he practically gave his merchandise away. He was very wealthy. He could afford to dispose of everything. His only regret was the black stallion. It was not a cheap gift.

“Perhaps your wife or a favorite servant would appreciate it,” he suggested.

“I know who you mean,” said Ishmael. “My personal attendant will appreciate the gift.”

The trader wondered if the old man knew about the trade, but Elizabeth jumped for joy and kissed the old man and knelt before him in praise so exuberantly that he decided not.

After the trading session Ishmael took Elizabeth aside into a private room.

“Is this the choice you want to make?”

“What?” she asked.

“I'm old, Elizabeth,” he said. “But I'm not an old fool. This man is wealthy. Young. Single. You could get him to marry you as easily as go to bed with you.”

She caught her breath.

“You know, then.”

“Yes. I have to know everything that goes on with my servants. And if you want to do this thing, I won't stop you.”

“I’m just a servant, then?” she asked.

“No. You’re the wife I’ve never married. But I do for you what I wanted to do for my wife.”

“I’m no boiling kettle, full of desire,” she said.

“Oh, yes you are. I’ve laid in bed many a night, bemoaning the fact I could not satisfy that passion. Now go find satisfaction. It would be better to entice him into marriage.”

“I promised to spend the rest of my life with you. If I give him his way with me, do you still want me?”

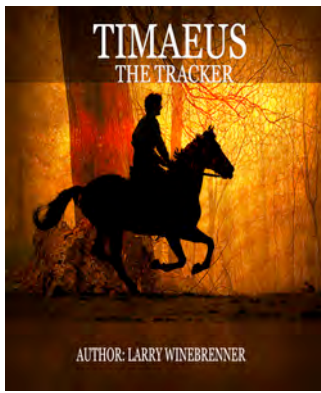
“You are my wife.”

She gave the merchant the best sexual experience of his life. He kept saying, “You were a virgin. Marry me.”

“I am married,” she said.

Six months later Ishmael died. He gave each of his servants a gratuity that left them set for life. He gave his daughter his properties in Tyre, where she lived. His business in Jerusalem he gave to one son, who immediately moved to Jerusalem. To the other son he gave his properties in Caesarea, Roman capital of the Judean Province. Everything else was left to Elizabeth, his wife.

His villa in Capernaum became her home, the school for harlots, and the most desirable house of ill repute in Galilee.



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