

PART I


Now Samuel died, and all Israel assembled and mourned for him; and they buried him at his home in Ramah. Then David moved down into the Desert of Maon. A certain man in Maon, who had property there at Carmel, was very wealthy. He had a thousand goats and three thousand sheep, which he was shearing in Carmel. His name was Nabal and his wife's name was Abigail. She was an intelligent and beautiful woman, but her husband, a Calebite, was surly and mean in his dealings.

1 Samuel 25:1–3

1

Maon, 1017 BC

“Rumor has it David is in the area not far from here. If you but say the word, Father, we could leave Simon for good and join him. I hear he has women and children in his company now. Mother and Talya and Abigail would not be out of place.”

Abigail nearly sloshed water over the sides of the bowl as she stood in the courtyard straining it through a cloth for tomorrow’s washing. Her brother’s oft-repeated plea shouldn’t surprise her. She’d heard it many times in the past two years since the king’s son-in-law had run off and surrounded himself with disgruntled men. So why did the thought cause her heart to beat faster and her limbs to tremble now?

“Ah, Daniel. Always you bring my failures before me.” Her father’s exaggerated sigh carried to her from the roof, where her parents, Daniel, and his wife Talya sat talking in the early light of the moon. She could imagine the slight shrug of his weary shoulders, the look of defeat in his eyes. Why did her brother insist on pushing his point? If he wanted to run after David so much, then go! But leave her father, leave all of them, in peace.

“You have not failed, Judah. You are a good husband, a loving father.”

“Yes, yes, you need not appease me, dear wife. Every day I watch my Abigail grow lovelier, and do you not think I regret what that man will do to her spirit once she lives under his roof? Ach! You mustn’t tempt me, Daniel. To run away . . . It is far too appealing.”

Silence followed the comment. Abigail sucked in a breath, disbelieving. Was Abba actually tempted to do as Daniel suggested? He’d never indicated such a thing in the two years since her childhood betrothal to pay off her father’s debt—a betrothal made before she had reached her full maturity, before her womanhood had come upon her. She fingered the sash at her waist, her heart thumping an erratic rhythm. The change had been late in coming, but six full moons had passed since then. Six months of knowing her betrothed could come at any moment.

“But Father, if you know things will only get worse when Abigail marries that fool, why let her? Surely there is a way to stop this, to undo the damage before it is too late.” Daniel’s voice dropped in volume, and Abigail strained to hear. She crept closer to the stairs leading to the roof and placed one foot on the bottom step.

“There is nothing to be done. Don’t you think your father would have gotten out of the agreement if he could?” The voice of her mother, Naamah, was stern as always, giving Abigail a measure of hope. Her father would not give her to Simon’s son Nabal if he truly feared for her future. He would have gone to the elders, found some other way to pay Simon off—*something*. “But I’ll admit, David would be a far better master than Simon of Carmel.”

Her mother's admission, so unprecedented, sent a chill down Abigail's spine. She gripped the wall for support, her limbs suddenly unable to continue the trek to the roof. Why were they talking like this? Nabal could come at any moment, even this night. How could they even speak of running away? What would become of her?

"Perhaps I could take the case to the elders . . ." Her father's voice pierced her in its stark uncertainty. Never had he suggested such a thing. "They may agree to a termination rather than a divorce . . . Abigail would carry the stigma, though, and I cannot provide for her forever."

"I will provide for her." She barely heard Daniel's declaration above the pounding in her head. Divorce? No man would want her again. She would remain alone and barren, her life wasted.

And what of Nabal? Sudden doubt assailed her. Brash, deceitful son of Simon. The picture of kindness at their betrothal—but if her brother spoke the truth, the man carried an impulsive, explosive temper. Hadn't she sensed it in the look he gave her when he took her aside into the privacy of the grape grove at the community wine treading? She pulled in a steadying breath, remembering the flush of shame—and pleasure—she had felt in the moment of his possessive kiss. What began as a tender, heady feeling of love's awakening had turned aggressive and harsh. She pressed two fingers to her trembling lips.

She couldn't deny it. Nabal was an attractive man. Of medium height, his muscles were not strong like Abba's or thick cords like Daniel's, and his hair was darker than her chestnut tresses, black as a goat's skin, his eyes the color of an onyx stone. Sandwiched between his mustache and beard, his smile

brooded something dark, mysterious. She'd heard the way the virgins giggled at his princely manner and flirtatious looks. If she had not known he belonged to her, she might have wondered if he had set his eye on one of them. And the knowing, the realization that he was bound to her, had made her proud. Someday he would come for her and carry her off on a jewel-bedecked camel to share in the wealth of his estate, to share the intimacies of his love. Intimacies he had already hinted at . . . if she had not pushed him away that day.

She grasped at the fringe of her shawl, cinching it tight, shivering more from the flash of anger she recalled in his eyes than the night's damp, cool breeze. She'd almost ducked and run from him, but his grip on her arms had held her secure. He wouldn't have slapped her for refusing him, would he? He would wait for the proper time, until she was truly a woman as she was now. He knew all he need do was come for her. He wouldn't force her among the grapevines.

She shook her head, determined to clear it of the disturbing thoughts. Father may entertain traitorous ideas of annulling her marriage, but how did she dare? She had already allowed too much . . . and Nabal would collect on her father's promise one way or another. Of that she was sure.

Lord, help me.

"If we run after David, how will that improve a thing? His enemies are around every corner. We would never know peace again." Her mother's words stilled the restless pounding of her heart. Yes, this was what they needed—wisdom—to talk sense into her brother, whose own logic was tainted with living under the oppression of Simon's employ. And her father whose weariness grew greater with every passing day, his regret palpable.

“Your mother is right, Daniel. I’m too old to live my life on the run, not to mention what it would do to your mother. We would only slow David down.”

“You are far from old, Father. The freedom alone would renew your strength.”

“Would you have your child born in a cave, my son?” Her mother’s severe tone returned. “Talya is better off here, until she is safely delivered.”

Abigail released her grip on the wall and stepped back onto the stones of the courtyard. The discussion would turn to other things now. Too many infants lined the crevices in the burial caves near their home—brothers and sisters she and Daniel should have shared. Daniel wouldn’t chance his future or Talya’s health after such a declaration. Their mother knew how to get her way.

Abigail’s sandals trod softly across the court and into the small house, and she eased the door shut behind her. Two years she had waited since her betrothal, and now at fifteen summers since her birth, she was ripe with longing for a home of her own. At three and twenty, surely Nabal longed to marry, to procure sons.

When, Lord? When would her bridegroom come for her?

She brushed a strand of hair out of her eyes and pushed aside Daniel’s comments of Nabal’s churlish behavior. When they married, things would be different. She would help Nabal see the error of his ways, gently point out how people lost respect for men who were rude or unkind, help him change.

Things would be better. They had to be.

With a heavy sigh, she glanced about the dark room, then settled onto her mat, listening to the muffled voices of her

family on the roof. Uncertainty niggled at the back of her thoughts. Everything had seemed so possible until now. Until she had heard her father's doubts and her mother's agreement. Until the possibility of annulment seemed a reality. Until running away to join a band of outlaws sounded more appealing than marrying her husband.