

MARK OF THE LION ◊ BOOK III



AS SURE



AS THE **D**AWN

FRANCINE
RIVERS



Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.
CAROL STREAM, ILLINOIS

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As Sure as the Dawn

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Rivers, Francine, date

As sure as the dawn / Francine Rivers.

p. cm. — (Mark of the lion)

ISBN-13: 978-0-8423-3976-6

ISBN-10: 0-8423-3976-0

1. Church history—Primitive and early church, ca. 30-600—Fiction.

2. Rome—History—Empire, 30 B.C.-476 A.D.—Fiction. I. Title. II. Series:

Rivers, Francine, date Mark of the lion.

PS3568.I83165A9 1995

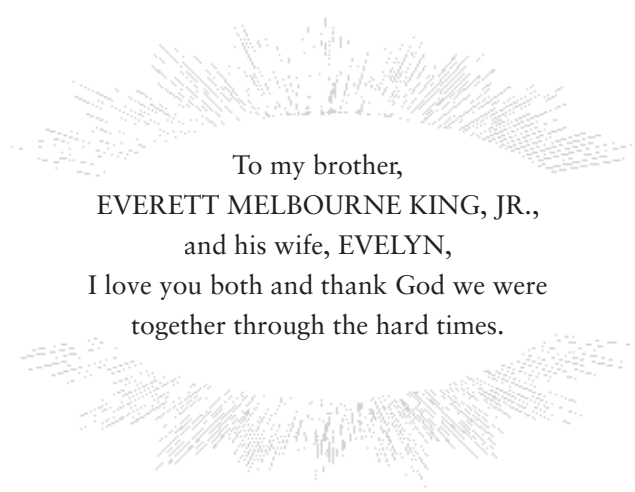
813'.54—dc20

95-1034

Printed in the United States of America

14 13 12 11 10 09 08

27 26 25 24 23 22 21



To my brother,
EVERETT MELBOURNE KING, JR.,
and his wife, EVELYN,
I love you both and thank God we were
together through the hard times.

C O N T E N T S



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F O R E W O R D

In 1992, Tyndale House made a conscious decision to begin publishing excellent fiction that would help us fulfill our corporate purpose—to “minister to the spiritual needs of people, primarily through literature consistent with biblical principles.” Before that time, Tyndale House had been known for many years as a publisher of Bibles and of non-fiction books by well-known authors like Tim LaHaye and James Dobson. We had dabbled in fiction before “Christian fiction” became popular, but it was not a major part of our publishing plan.

We began to recognize, however, that we could carry out our purpose very effectively through fiction, since fiction speaks to the heart rather than to the head.

Fiction is entertaining. Well-written fiction is gripping. As readers, we’ll stay up until 2:00 a.m. to finish a good novel. But Tyndale has a greater goal than simply entertaining our readers. We want to help our readers grow!

We recognize that authors have something of a bully pulpit for communicating their worldview and values to their readers. But with that opportunity comes a danger. Just what worldview and values is an author communicating? At best, most contemporary novelists present a squishy worldview. At worst, they sow negative values and unhealthy attitudes in the hearts of their readers. We wanted to set a whole new standard for fiction.

So we began looking for novelists who had a heart message that would help our readers grow. And we met Francine Rivers.

Francine had been extremely successful as a writer of romance novels for the general market early in her career. But when she became a Christian, she wanted to use her

talents to communicate faith values to her readers. One of her early projects was the Mark of the Lion trilogy.

When I read the manuscript for the first book in the series, *A Voice in the Wind*, I was blown away by the power of the story. I was transported back to the first century—to Jerusalem, Germania, Rome, and Ephesus. I lived with Hadassah as she struggled to live out her faith in the midst of a pagan Roman household. I felt the terror of the gladiator as he faced his foes in the arena. Above all, through their experiences I learned lessons in courage.

We are proud to present this new edition of the Mark of the Lion. I trust it will speak to your heart, as it has to mine and to hundreds of thousands of other readers.

MARK D. TAYLOR

President, Tyndale House Publishers

P R E F A C E

When I became a born-again Christian in 1986, I wanted to share my faith with others. However, I didn't want to offend anyone and risk "losing" old friends and family members who didn't share my belief in Jesus as Lord and Savior. I found myself hesitating and keeping silent. Ashamed of my cowardice and frustrated by it, I went on a quest, seeking the faith of a martyr. *A Voice in the Wind* was the result.

While writing Hadassah's story, I learned that courage is not something we can manufacture by our own efforts. But when we surrender wholeheartedly to God, He gives us the courage to face whatever comes. He gives us the words to speak when we are called to stand and voice our faith.

I still consider myself a struggling Christian, fraught with faults and failures, but Jesus has given me the tool of writing to use in seeking answers from Him. Each of my characters plays out a different point of view as I search for God's perspective, and every day I find something in Scripture that speaks to me. God is patient with me, and through the study of His Word, I am learning what He wants to teach me. When I hear from a reader who is touched by one of my stories, it is God alone who is to be praised. All good things come from the Father above, and He can use anything to reach and teach His children—even a work of fiction.

My main desire when I started writing Christian fiction was to find answers to personal questions, and to share those answers in story form with others. Now, I want so much more. I yearn for the Lord to use my stories in making people thirst for His Word, the Bible. I hope that reading Hadassah's story will make you hunger for the real Word, Jesus Christ, the Bread of Life. I pray that you will finish my book and pick up the Bible with a new excitement

and anticipation of a real encounter with the Lord Himself. May you search Scripture for the sheer joy of being in God's presence.

Beloved, surrender wholeheartedly to Jesus Christ, who loves you. As you drink from the deep well of Scripture, the Lord will refresh and cleanse you, mold you and re-create you through His Living Word. For the Bible is the very breath of God, giving life eternal to those who seek Him.

Francine Rivers, 2002

A C K N O W L E D G M E N T S

I want to thank my husband, Rick, for his continuing support and encouragement to stretch my wings and fly. I also thank God for my children, Trevor, Shannon, and Travis, who have taught me many invaluable lessons about life and love.

I also thank my editor, Karen Ball, for the use of her talents and expertise in fine-tuning ideas and improving my work. More important, I thank God for leading me to an editor who shares my vision and has faith exceeding my own.

“A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants, so that they did not bear grain. Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up, grew and produced a crop, multiplying thirty, sixty, or even a hundred times.”

Mark 4:3-8, NIV

“Jesus replied . . . ‘I tell you the truth, unless a [seed] falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds.’”

John 12:23-24, NIV

P R O L O G U E

A.D. 79

The guard of the lower dungeon threw the bolt and led the way. The sound of the Roman's hobnailed sandals sent Atretes back to Capua. As he followed the guard, the smell of cold stone and human fear made the sweat break out on his skin. Someone cried out from behind a locked door. Others moaned in despair. Then, as they kept walking, Atretes heard something coming from the far end of the dank environs—a sound so sweet that it drew him. Somewhere in the darkness a woman was singing.

The guard slowed, tilting his head slightly. "Have you ever heard a voice like that in all your life?" he said. The singing stopped, and the guard walked more briskly. "She's been in here for months, yet it doesn't seem to affect her. Not like it does the others. A pity she's going to die with the rest of them tomorrow," he said. He paused before a heavy door, then threw the bolt.

Atretes stood on the threshold and looked from face to face inside the dim room. A single torch flickered in the mount on the sidewall, but the huddled forms in back were cast in shadows. Most of the prisoners were women and children. There were less than half a dozen old bearded men. Atretes wasn't surprised. The younger men would have been saved for fighting in the arena.

Someone said his name and he saw a thin woman in rags rise from the mass of filthy captives.

Hadassah.

"Is that the one?" the guard said.

"Yes."

"The singer," he said. "You there! Come out!"

Atretes watched her as she picked her way across the room. People reached up to touch her. Some took her hand, and she smiled and whispered a word of encouragement before she passed by. When she reached the open doorway, she peered up at him with luminous eyes. "What are you doing here, Atretes?"

Unwilling to say anything in front of the Roman guard, he took her arm and drew her out into the corridor. The guard closed the door and set the bolt. He opened another door across the corridor and lit the torch, then went to stand at the end of the corridor.

As Atretes followed Hadassah into the room the guard had opened, he listened to the sound of the hobnailed sandals on stone and clenched his fist. He had vowed never to enter a place like this again, yet here he was—and by his own choice.

Hadassah turned to him and saw his torment. “You must hate this place,” she said softly. “What brought you here to me?”

“I’ve had a dream. I don’t know what it means.”

She felt his desperation and prayed God would give her the answers he needed. “Sit with me and tell me,” she said, weak from confinement and days without food. “I may not know the answers, but God does.”

“I’m walking through blackness, a blackness so heavy I can feel it pressing against my body. All I can see are my hands. I walk for a long time, not feeling anything, searching for what seems forever, and then I see a sculptor. And before him is his work, a statue of me. It’s one like those they sell in the shops around the arena, only this one is so real it seems to breathe. The man takes a hammer and I know what he’s going to do. I cry out for him not to do it, but he strikes the image once and it shatters into a million pieces.”

Shaking, Atretes rose. “I feel pain, pain like I’ve never felt before. I can’t move. Around me I see the forest of my homeland and I’m sinking into the bog. Everyone is standing around me, my father, my mother, my wife, friends long dead. I cry out, but they all just stare at me as I’m being sucked down. The bog presses around me like the blackness. And then a man is there, holding out both hands to me. His palms are bleeding.”

Hadassah watched Atretes sink wearily down against the stone wall on the other side of the cell. “Do you take his hand?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” he said bleakly. “I can’t remember.”

“You awaken?”

“No.” He breathed in slowly, struggling to keep his voice steady. “Not yet.” He shut his eyes and swallowed convulsively. “I hear a baby crying. He’s lying naked on the rocks by the sea. I see a wave coming in from the sea and know it’ll sweep him away. I try to get to him, but the wave goes over him. Then I awaken.”

Hadassah closed her eyes.

Atretes leaned his head back. “So tell me. What does it all mean?”

Hadassah prayed the Lord would give her wisdom. She sat for a long time, her head bowed. Then she raised her head again. "I'm not a seer," she said. "Only God can interpret dreams. But I do know certain things to be true, Atretes."

"What things?"

"The man holding his hands out to you is Jesus. I told you how he died, nailed to a cross, and how he arose again. He's reaching out to you with both hands. Take hold and hang on. Your salvation is at hand." She hesitated. "And the child . . ."

"I know about the child." Atretes' face tautened with barely controlled emotion. "He's my son. I thought about what you said to me that night you came to the hills, when I told you to let the child die, that I did not care." He paused, then went on. "I sent word I wanted the child when it was born."

Seeing Hadassah's startled look, Atretes stood abruptly and paced restlessly. "At first, it was to hurt Julia, to take her child from her. Then I truly wanted him. I decided I'd take the child and return to Germania. I waited, and then word came. The child was stillborn."

Atretes gave a broken laugh filled with bitterness. "But she lied. The child wasn't stillborn. She ordered it left on the rocks to die." His voice choked with tears, and he raked his fingers through his hair. "I told you if Julia laid him at my feet, I'd turn and walk away. And that's exactly what she did, isn't it? Placed him on the rocks and walked away. I hated her. I hated myself. God have mercy on me, you said once. God have mercy."

Hadassah rose and went to him. "Your son is alive."

He stiffened and looked down at her.

She put her hand on his arm. "I didn't know you'd sent word you wanted him, Atretes. Had I known, I would have brought him directly to you. Please forgive me for the pain I've caused you." Her hand fell limply to her side.

He took her arm. "You said he's alive? Where is he?"

Hadassah prayed God would make right what she had done. "I took your son to the apostle John, and he placed him in the arms of Rizpah, a young widow who'd lost her child. She loved your son the moment she looked upon his face."

His hand loosened and fell away from her. "My son is alive," he said in wonder, and the burden of pain and guilt fell away from him. He closed his eyes in relief. "My son is alive." His

back against the stone wall, he slid down it, his knees weakened by what she told him. “My son is *alive!*” he said in a choked voice.

“God is merciful,” she said softly and lightly touched his hair.

The light caress reminded Atretes of his mother. He took Hadassah’s hand and held it against his cheek. Looking up at her, he saw again the bruises that marked her kind face, the thinness of her body beneath the ragged, dirty tunic. She had saved his son. How could he walk away and let her die?

He stood, filled with purpose. “I’ll go to Sertes,” he said.

“No.”

“Yes,” he countered, determined. Though he’d never fought lions—and knew there was little chance he would survive—he had to try. “A word in the right ear, and I’ll be in the arena as your champion.”

“I have a champion already, Atretes. The battle is *over*. He’s already won.” She held his hand firmly between her own. “Don’t you see? If you went back into the arena now, you’d die without ever fully knowing the Lord.”

“But what of you?” Tomorrow she would face the lions.

“God’s hand is in this, Atretes. His will be done.”

“You’ll die.”

“Though he slay me, yet will I trust him,” she said. She smiled up at him. “Whatever happens is to God’s good purpose and for his glory. I’m not afraid.”

Looking upon her, Atretes felt an aching hunger for a faith like hers, a faith that could give him peace. He searched her face for a long moment and then nodded, struggling against the emotions raging within him. “It will be as you say.”

“It will be as the Lord wills.”

“I will never forget you.”

“Nor I you,” she said. She told him where to find the apostle John, then laid her hand on his arm and looked at him, peace in her eyes. “Now, go from this place of death and don’t look back.”

She went out into the dark corridor and called to the guard.

Atretes stood holding the torch as the guard came and unbolted the cell door. As he opened it, Hadassah turned and looked up at Atretes, and her eyes shone with warmth.

“May the Lord bless you and keep you. May the Lord make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you. May the Lord

turn his face toward you and give you peace," she said with a gentle smile. Turning away, she entered the cell.

A soft murmuring of voices greeted her, and the door was closed with a hard thud of finality.

THE SEED



“A farmer went out to sow his seed. . . .”

1

Physically exhausted, pride bruised, Atretes had had enough. His patience was at an end.

As soon as Hadassah had told him his son was alive and that the apostle John knew where to find him, he had begun making plans. Because the mob adored him, he couldn't enter the city of Ephesus at will, but had to wait for the cover of darkness. And so he had. Finding the apostle's house hadn't been too difficult—Hadassah had given good directions—but even in the dead of night the man of God had been about his business, comforting a sick child and then hearing someone's deathbed confession.

Atretes had waited for John and then been told after hours of doing so that the apostle had sent word he was going directly to a dawn worship service along the riverbank. Angry, Atretes had pursued him, arriving just after a great crowd had gathered to hear John speak of Jesus Christ, their risen God. A carpenter from Galilee? A god? Atretes had closed his ears to the words being proclaimed and retired to a quiet place beneath a terebinth tree, resolved to wait.

Now, however, he would wait no longer! Dawn had come and gone, and still these worshipers sang praises to their heavenly king and told their stories of personal deliverance from disease, heartbreak, habits, and even demons! He was sick of listening to them. Some, fully clothed, were now being dunked in the river! Had they all gone mad?

Getting up, Atretes walked down to the back of the crowds and prodded a man. "How long do these meetings go on?"

"As long as the Spirit moves us," the man said, giving him a cursory look before singing again.

The spirit? What did that mean? Atretes was used to the discipline of training schedules and regimes, to dealing with solid fact; the man's answer was incomprehensible.

"Is this your first time hearing—"

"And my last," Atretes cut the man off, eager to be gone.

The man glanced back at him, and the smile fixed on his face. His eyes widened. "You're *Atretes!*"

A jolt of adrenaline flooded Atretes, stiffening his muscles. He could flee or fight. Mouth set, he stood his ground. The first choice went against his grain; the long night of waiting had made him ready for the latter.

Fool! he berated himself. He should have kept silent and waited unobtrusively beneath the shade of a tree rather than draw attention to himself. But it was too late now.

He made excuses for his mistake. How could he guess people would still remember him? It had been eight months since he left the arena. He had thought he would have been forgotten by now.

Apparently, Ephesians had a long memory.

Others turned at the mention of his name. A woman gasped and swung around, whispering to those near her. News of his pre-sence spread like a wind riffling dry leaves. People glanced back to see what the stir was about and spotted him, head above the rest, his accursed blonde hair serving as a beacon for their attention.

He swore under his breath.

“It *is* Atretes,” someone said, and the hair on the back of his neck rose. He knew it would be wise to leave as quickly as possible, but stubbornness and the fiercer part of his nature took control. He was no longer a slave of Rome, no longer a gladiator fighting in the arena. His life should belong to him again! What was the difference between the walls of a luxurious villa and those of the *ludus*? Both imprisoned him.

The time has come! he thought in frustrated anger. He would find out what he needed to know and leave. Any man who tried to stop him would have grave cause to regret it.

Shoving the still-gaping man aside, he began pressing his way forward through the crowd.

Excited whispers rippled through the sea of people as he moved through it.

“Make room! It’s Atretes. He’s going forward!” someone called out, and those at the front stopped singing praises to turn and stare.

“Praise the Lord!”

Atretes’ mouth set as the buzz of excitement surrounded him. Even after ten years of fighting in the arena, the German had never become accustomed to the furor his presence inevitably brought to any gathering.

Sertes, editor of the Ephesian games and the man who had

bought him from the Great Ludus of Rome, had reveled in the mob's reaction to his prized gladiator and exploited Atretes at every opportunity, gleaning gold for himself. The Ephesian had accepted bribes from wealthy patrons and brought him to feasts to be pampered and petted. Other gladiators enjoyed such royal treatment, taking whatever pleasures were offered, relishing their last hours before they faced death in the arena. Atretes ate and drank sparingly. He intended to survive. He had always stood aloof, ignoring his hosts, glaring at the guests with such ferocity and contemptuous disdain that they had walked a wide circle around him.

"You behave like a beast in a cage!" Sertes had complained once.

"As you and the rest have made me."

The memory of that time only fueled his anger now as he forced his way through the crowd beside the river. Hadassah had told him to go to John the apostle. These gaping, mumbling fools were no longer going to stop him from doing just that.

The drone of excited voices grew. Despite his greater height, the warrior still felt the crowd pressing in on him. People touched him as he pushed his way forward. He tensed instinctively, pushing them back. He waited for them to grab or tear at him like the *amoratae* who had often pursued him through the streets of Rome, but these people, excited at his presence, only laid hands on him to urge him forward.

"Praise the Lord . . ."

"He was a gladiator . . ."

". . . saw him fight once before I became a Christian . . ."

The people closed in on him from behind, and his heart began to drum heavily. Cold sweat broke out on his forehead. He didn't like having anyone behind him.

"Make way," a man said. "Let him through!"

"John! *John!* Atretes is coming forward!"

Did they already know why he had come to this meeting of the Way? Had Hadassah somehow sent word ahead?

"Another! Another for the Lord!"

Someone started singing again, and the swell of sound rose around him, raising gooseflesh down his back. A passage opened before him. He didn't wait to wonder why, but strode the remaining short distance to the riverbank.

Several men and women were standing in the water. One was

being dunked. Another, sopping wet, was throwing water into the air and crying and laughing at the same time while others waded in to embrace him.

An old man dressed in a woven tunic and striped sash helped another person rise from the water, saying as he did so, "You've been washed clean by the blood of the Lamb." The singing grew louder and more joyful. The man waded quickly toward friends. One embraced him, weeping, and the others surrounded him.

Atretes wanted desperately to be gone from this place, to be far away from this gathering of crazed men and women. "You there!" he shouted at the man who wore the striped sash. "Are you John? The one they call 'the apostle'?"

"I am he."

Atretes waded into the river, wondering at the eruption of excitement behind him. Sertes had once said John the apostle was a greater threat to the Roman Empire than all the frontier rebellions put together, but measuring the man standing before him, Atretes saw nothing to fear. In fact, John seemed singularly unremarkable.

However, Atretes had learned never to assume that things were what they appeared; grim experience had taught him never to underestimate any man. A coward sometimes had more deadly cunning than a man with courage, and even someone who was seemingly defenseless could inflict wounds too deep to heal. Hadn't Julia ripped his heart from him with her treachery and lies?

This man held one weapon against him, a weapon Atretes meant to take from him. He planted his feet firmly, his face and tone hard as stone.

"You have my son. Hadassah brought him to you about four months ago. I want him back."

"Hadassah," John said, his expression softening. "I was concerned about her. We have not seen our little sister in several months."

"Nor will you. She's among the condemned in the dungeons below the arena."

John let out his breath as though he had taken a blow and then murmured softly under his breath.

"She said you gave my son to a widow named Rizpah," Atretes said. "Where do I find her?"

"Rizpah lives in the city."

"Where exactly?"

John came forward and put his hand on Atretes' arm. "Come. We will talk."

He shrugged the man's hand away. "Just tell me where to find the woman who has my son."

John faced him again. "When Hadassah came to me with the child, she said she had been commanded to place him on the rocks to die."

"I gave no such command."

"She told me the father didn't want the child."

Heat poured into Atretes' face. His mouth set. "The child is mine. That's all you have to know."

John frowned. "Is it because she brought the child to me that Hadassah now stands condemned?"

"No." Hadassah's act of disobedience in not placing the baby on the rocks would have been enough to condemn her, but it hadn't been for that reason that Julia had sent her to die. Atretes was sure of it. As far as he knew, Julia wasn't even aware that her child still lived. But then, Julia could have condemned Hadassah for any whim that struck her fancy. He only knew one fact regarding what had happened to Hadassah.

"One of the servants told me Hadassah was commanded to burn incense in honor of the emperor. She refused and proclaimed your Christ the only true god."

John's eyes shone. "Praise God."

"She was a fool."

"A fool for Christ."

"You are pleased?" Atretes said in disbelief. "She will die for those few words."

"No, Atretes. Whosoever believes in Jesus shall not perish, but will have eternal life."

Atretes grew impatient. "I didn't come to discuss your gods or your belief in life after death. I came for my son. If it's proof you want that I fathered him, would the word of his harlot mother satisfy you? I'll drag Julia Valerian here and put her on her knees before you to make her confession. Will that suffice? You can drown her, then, if you want, for the harlot she is. I might even help you."

John met the barbarian's wrath with gentleness. "I don't doubt you are the father. I was thinking of the child's needs, Atretes. This is not a situation without grave consequences. What of Rizpah?"

“What needs has a babe but to be fed and kept warm? As for the woman, give her another child. Someone else’s. She has no right to mine.”

“The Lord intervened on your son’s behalf. If not—”

“*Hadassah* intervened.”

“It was no coincidence that she brought the child to me at the moment she did.”

“*Hadassah* said herself that had she known I wanted the child, she would have brought him to me!”

“Why didn’t she know?”

Atretes clenched his teeth. If not for the crowd watching, he would have used force to get the information he wanted.

“Where is he?”

“He’s safe. *Hadassah* thought the only course to save your son was to give him to me.”

Atretes’ eyes narrowed coldly. A muscle jerked in his jaw as heat poured into his face. He tried to hide his shame behind a wall of anger, but knew he had failed. Only one person had ever looked at him as though she saw beneath his skin, into his very heart and mind: *Hadassah*. Until now, that is. For now this man did the same.

Memories flooded Atretes’ mind. When the slave girl had come to him and told him that the child *Julia* carried was his, he’d said he didn’t care. What assurance did he have that the child was even his own? Despite *Hadassah*’s assurances, Atretes had been raw from *Julia*’s betrayal with another man and too angry to think clearly. He had told *Hadassah* that if *Julia Valerian* laid the baby at his feet, he would walk away and never look back. He would never forget the sorrow his words had brought to the slave girl’s face . . . nor the regret that had flooded him even as she left. But he was Atretes! He would not call her back.

How could he have expected any woman to be so unfeeling about her child as *Julia* had been? No German woman would think of commanding that her baby be abandoned on the rocks to die. No German. Only a *civilized* Roman woman would carry out such a deed.

If not for *Hadassah*’s intervention, his son would be dead.

Once again he focused on the present, on the man standing so patiently before him. “The child is *mine*. Whatever I may or may not have said before no longer matters. *Hadassah* sent me here, and I will have my son.”

John nodded. "I'll send for Rizpah and speak with her. Tell me where you reside, and I'll bring your son to you."

"Tell me where she is, and I'll go for him myself."

John frowned. "Atretes, this will be very difficult. Rizpah loves the child as her own. It won't be easy for her to give him up."

"All the more reason I go. It'd hardly be wise to allow you to warn this woman of my intentions ahead of time so she can leave the city."

"Neither I nor Rizpah will keep your son from you."

"I've only your word on that, and who are you to me but a stranger? And a mad one, at that!" he said with a telling glance at the worshipers. "I have no reason to trust you." He gave a sneering laugh. "And even less reason to trust any woman."

"You trusted Hadassah."

His face darkened.

John studied him for a moment, then told him how to find Rizpah. "I pray your heart will be moved by the compassion and mercy God has shown you by sparing your son's life. Rizpah is a woman of tried faith."

"Meaning what?"

"She has endured many tragedies in her young life."

"This one is not of my doing."

"No, but I ask that you lay no blame upon her for what has happened."

"The fault was with his mother. I lay no blame upon Hadassah or you or this widow," Atretes said, relenting now that he had the information for which he had come. "Besides," he added with a wry smile, "I've no doubt this widow of yours will feel much better when she is generously recompensed for her trouble." He ignored John's wince at his words. Turning away, he saw the crowd had grown quiet. "What are they waiting for?"

"They thought you came to be baptized."

With a sneering laugh, Atretes strode up the hill, not sparing another glance at those who gathered at the river.



Atretes returned to his villa by way of the outer road and waited again. It would be safer to enter the city after dark, and there were other matters that, in his haste, he had neglected to consider.

“Lagos!” His booming voice echoed up the marble staircase. “*Lagos!*”

A man ran along the upper corridor. “My lord!”

“Go to the slave market and buy me a wet nurse.”

Lagos hurried down the stairs. “A . . . wet nurse, my lord?”

“Make sure she’s German.” He strode through the courtyard toward the baths.

Lagos followed, distressed. He had had several masters, and this one had by far been the most mercurial. Lagos had been greatly honored to be counted among the slaves belonging to Atretes, the foremost gladiator in all of the Roman Empire, but he’d never expected the man to be on the verge of madness. During the first week he’d spent in this villa, Atretes had smashed all the furnishings, set fire to his bedroom, then disappeared. After a month, Silus and Appelles, two gladiators Atretes had purchased from Sertes as guards, had gone out looking for him.

“He’s living in the hill caves,” Silus reported upon their return.

“You must bring him back!”

“And risk getting killed? Forget it! You go, old man. Not me. I value my life.”

“He’ll starve.”

“He’s eating the flesh of animals he hunts down with one of those bloody *framea* Germans use,” Appelles informed him. “He’s gone *feri* again.”

“Shouldn’t we do something?” Saturnina said. The slave girl was clearly distressed that her master had reverted to a barbarian savage and was living like a wild beast.

“What would you suggest we do, sweeting? Send you into his cave to improve his mood? You’d have better luck with me.” Silus said, pinching her cheek. She slapped his hand away and he laughed. “You know you’re secretly happy the Lady Julia spurned your master. If he ever regains his mind and comes back, you’ll be waiting in the doorway.”

While Silus and Appelles lolled around, drinking and talking about old battles in the arena, Lagos had taken charge of the household. All was kept in order and readiness should the master regain his mind and return.

Which he had, without warning. After being gone for five months, he simply strode into the villa one day, threw off the furs he was wearing, bathed, shaved, and donned a tunic. Then

he sent one of the servants for Sertes, and when the editor of the games came, they were briefly closeted together. The following afternoon, a messenger came telling Atretes the woman he sought was in the dungeon. Atretes left as soon as it was dark.

Now, he was back asking for a wet nurse. A *German* wet nurse, as though they grew like grapes on a vine! There was no child in the household, and Lagos didn't even want to contemplate his master's reasons for the demand he was making. He had one main concern paramount in his mind: survival.

Steeling himself, he gathered his courage and opened his mouth to make his master aware of certain unavoidable facts. "It may not be possible, my lord."

"Pay whatever the going price is. I don't care how high it is." Atretes tossed his belt aside.

"It's not always a matter of price, my lord. Germans are in great demand, especially if they're blonde, and the supply is sporadic. . . ." He felt the blood draining from his face at the sardonic look Atretes gave him. If anyone knew these facts, he would. Lagos wondered if Atretes was even aware that a new statue of Mars had been erected, and its resemblance to the gladiator who stood looking at him so impatiently was remarkable. Statuettes of Atretes were still being sold outside the arena. Just the other day, at the marketplace, Lagos had seen idolmaker shops selling figures of an Apollo that looked like Atretes, though it was slightly more well endowed than nature made any man.

"I'm sorry, my lord, but there may not be a German wet nurse available."

"You're a Greek. Greeks are resourceful. Find one! She doesn't have to be blonde, but make sure she's *healthy*." He stripped off his tunic, revealing the body that countless amoraetae worshiped. "And have her here by tomorrow morning." He stepped to the edge of the pool.

"Yes, my lord," Lagos said grimly, deciding it was best to work quickly rather than waste time trying to reason with a mad barbarian. If he failed, Atretes would no doubt eat his liver like the raven that feasted perpetually upon the god Prometheus.

Atretes dove into the pool, the cool water a relief to his feverish mind. He came up and shook the water from his hair. He would go back to the city tonight. Alone. If he took Silus and Appelles with him, they would draw attention. Besides, even

two trained guards were no match against a mob. It would be far better if he went into the city by himself. He would wear commoner's clothing and keep his hair covered. Thus disguised, he should have no difficulty.

When he finished bathing, he roamed through the house. Restless and tense, he strayed from room to room until he came to the largest on the second floor. He hadn't set foot in this chamber since setting it on fire over five months ago. He glanced around, seeing that the servants had taken it upon themselves to remove the charred furnishings, wall hangings, and shattered Corinthian vases. Though they had certainly scrubbed the marble, there was still physical evidence of his rage and the destruction he had intended. He had purchased this villa for Julia, intending to bring her here as his wife. He had been well aware of how Julia reveled in luxury and remembered how proud he had been when he had furnished it with the most expensive things. They would have shared this room.

Instead, she had married someone else.

He could still hear her crying out her lies and paltry excuses when he came to claim her a few months after he had gained his freedom. She said her husband was a homosexual with a catamite and had no interest in her. She said she had married him to protect her financial independence, her *freedom*.

Lying witch!

He should have known what she was from the beginning. Hadn't she, with a heart of pure cunning, gone to the Artemision dressed as a temple prostitute in order to capture his interest? Hadn't she bribed Sertes in order to summon him from the ludus any time she wanted? As long as it didn't interfere with Sertes' training schedule for him, the time had been granted. Ah, but like a fool, he had gone to her at the mere crook of her bejeweled finger. Besotted by her beauty, craving her wanton passion, he had gone—and she'd slaughtered him.

What a fool!

When he'd taken Julia Valerian into his arms, he'd thrown pride to the wind and self-respect into the dust. He had embraced shame. All during the months of their clandestine affair, he'd return to his cell in the ludus, depressed and discomfited, not wanting to face the truth. He'd known her for what she was, even then. Yet he had allowed her to use him, like everyone else had used him since he'd been taken prisoner, torn from his beloved

Germania. Julia's soft, silken arms had been stronger around his body than any chains that had ever held him.

The last time he'd seen her, she'd cried out that she loved him. Love! She'd known so little about love—and about him—that she had actually thought her marriage to someone else would make no difference. She'd thought he would gladly continue to come to her whenever the mood suited her.

By the gods, he knew he could wash for years and never get the taint of her off of him! Now, looking at the barren, devastated room before him, he swore no woman would ever have that kind of hold on him again!

As the sun set, Atretes donned a woolen cloak, tucked a dagger into his belt, and left for Ephesus. He headed northwest along the hills, using a path he knew well before seeking the road. Small houses dotted the countryside, but grew more numerous and closer together as he came nearer the city. Wagons laden with goods traveled the main road toward the gates. He walked unnoticed in the dark shadows of one, seeking cover from the growing throng.

The driver noticed him. "You there! Get away from the wagon!"

Atretes made a rude hand gesture.

"You want a fight?!" the driver shouted, rising from the seat. Atretes laughed derisively, but said nothing. His accent would be noted—Germans weren't common in this part of the Empire. He left the darkness and strode by the torches and Roman sentries. One soldier glanced at him and their eyes met for the briefest second. Atretes saw a quickening of interest in the Roman's eyes and lowered his head so his face wouldn't be seen clearly. The guard spoke to a comrade, and Atretes moved in among a group of travelers, then ducked down the first available street. He waited in the darkness, but the sentry didn't send anyone to follow.

Atretes started off again, thankful the moon was full enough to reflect off the white stones inset on the granite slab road.

John had explained that the woman who had his son lived on the second level of a rundown *insula* in the poor district, southeast of the complex of libraries near the Artemision. Atretes knew he could find the right building if he went through the heart of the city.

As he neared the temple, the crowds increased. Following a

maze of alleyways in an effort to avoid them, he stumbled over a man sleeping against a wall. The man groaned, cursed, pulled his cloak over his head, and curled onto his side.

Hearing voices behind him, Atretes hastened his steps. As he rounded a corner, someone from a third floor window poured night soil down into the street. He jumped back in disgust and shouted up at the open window.

The voices fell silent, but he heard movement in the darkness of the alleyway behind him. Turning, he narrowed his eyes. Six shapes came toward him, moving stealthily. He turned fully, ready. Realizing they had been seen, the stalkers' manner changed to boldness. Several made mocking sounds meant to frighten him. Spreading out, they came on, circling the front of him. One was clearly the leader, for he motioned and the other five moved into carefully plotted positions intended to block a victim's escape.

Seeing the glint of a blade, Atretes smiled coldly. "You will not find me easy."

"Your money pouch," the leader said. From the voice, Atretes knew he was young.

"Go home to your bed, boy, and you might live through the night."

The youth gave a derisive laugh, still advancing on him.

"Wait, Palus," one said, sounding nervous.

"I don't have a good feeling," another said in the darkness. "He's a head taller—"

"Shut up, Tomas! There are six of us and only one of him."

"Maybe he has no money."

"He has money. I heard the coins jingle. Heavy coins." Palus stepped closer. The others followed his lead. "The pouch!" He snapped his fingers. "Toss it to me."

"Come and take it."

No one moved. Palus called him a foul name, his young voice shaking with enraged pride.

"I didn't think you'd do it," Atretes said, scraping his attacker's pride again. The youth with the knife lunged at him.

It had been months since Atretes had fought, but it didn't matter. All the training and finely honed instincts came back in an instant. He moved sharply, dodging the thrust of the dagger. Catching the boy's wrist, he drew the arm down and around, snapping it from the shoulder socket. Palus went down screaming.

The others didn't know whether to run or attack, until one fool did the latter, and the rest followed. One of them punched Atretes in the face, while another jumped on his back. Atretes slammed his full weight back against the wall and kicked the one in front low and hard.

Atretes took two punches in the side of the head as he brought his elbow up sharply and connected a blow to an attacker's chest. The thief dropped, gasping for breath.

In the scuffle, Atretes' mantle came loose and fell back off his head, leaving his hair to shine blonde in the moonlight.

"Zeus! It's *Atretes!*" Those still able scattered like rats into the darkness.

"Help me!" Palus cried out, but his friends had deserted him. Moaning in pain and cradling his broken arm against his chest, Palus scooted backwards until he was against the wall. "Don't kill me," he sobbed. "Don't kill me. Please! We didn't know it was you."

"Boy, the least in the arena had more courage than you." He stepped past him and headed down the alleyway.

He heard voices ahead of him. "I swear! It was him! He was *big* and his hair was white in the moonlight. It was Atretes!"

"Where?"

"Down there! He's probably killed Palus."

Swearing under his breath, Atretes ran down a narrow street that took him in the opposite direction from where he wanted to go. Jogging along a street between insulae, he turned up another avenue and came around a corner that put him back on track. Ahead was a main thoroughfare not far from the Artemision. He slowed as he neared it, not wanting to attract attention by his haste. He drew the mantle up over his head to cover his hair again and lowered his chin as he entered the evening bazaar.

The street was lined with booths and street vendors hawking their wares. As Atretes wove his way among the crowd, he saw miniature temples and statuettes of Artemis, trays of amulets, and pouches of incense. He came to an idolmaker's shop and glanced at the counter laden with marble statuettes. Someone bumped into him and he stepped closer, pretending interest in the wares on display. He needed to blend in with the crowd of evening shoppers. Visitors from every part of the Empire milled around, looking for bargains. Atretes froze as he looked at the detailed statuettes.

The merchant thought him interested. "Take a closer look, my lord! These are replicas of the new statue just erected in honor of Mars. You won't find better workmanship anywhere."

Atretes stepped closer and picked one up. He hadn't imagined it. It was *him*! He glared at the offensive idol. "Mars?" he said in an accusing growl, wanting to crush the marble into dust.

"You must be new to the city. Are you making a pilgrimage to our goddess?" The vendor produced a small statue festooned with breasts and wearing a headdress punctuated with symbols, one of which was the rune of the god Tiwaz, whom Atretes had once worshipped.

"There he is! Over there by the idolmaker's shop."

Atretes glanced around sharply and saw a dozen young men pushing their way through the crowd toward him. "I told you it was Atretes!"

"Atretes! Where?"

People on the left and right of him turned to stare. The idolmaker stood, mouth agape, staring at him. "It is you. By the gods!"

Sweeping his arm across the table, Atretes grasped the edge and upended the table. Shoving several people aside, he tried to run. A man grasped his tunic. Uttering an enraged shout, Atretes hit him in the face. As the man went down, he took three others with him.

Excitement erupted up and down the street. "Atretes! Atretes is here!"

More hands fell upon him; voices cried his name out feverishly.

Atretes was unaccustomed to real fear, but knew it now as the furor in the marketplace grew. In another moment there would be a riot, with him at the center. He plowed through half a dozen clawing bodies, knowing he had to get away. Now.

"*Atretes!*" A woman screamed, flinging herself upon him. As he shook her off, her nails scraped his neck. Someone else yanked out a hank of his hair. The mantle was torn from his shoulders. People were screaming.

Breaking free, he ran, knocking people aside as they got in his way. Amoraetae shouted and followed him like a pack of wild dogs. Ducking into the narrow avenue of shops, he knocked over another table. Fruit and vegetables spilled across the walkway. He upended another counter of copperware, scattering more

obstacles in the mob's path. There were cries behind him as several went down. Leaping over a small cart, he turned sharply and ran down an alleyway between two insulae. When he saw it was a dead end, he came nearer to panic than he had in his life. He had once seen a pack of wild dogs chase down a man in the arena. When the dogs caught him, they'd torn him apart. These amoratae, in their frenzied passion, might well do the same to him if they caught him.

Turning frantically, Atretes sought escape. When he saw a door, he ran to it. It was locked. Ramming it with his shoulder, he broke it open and ran up a darkened passageway of steps. One floor, then two. Stopping on a landing, he waited. Catching his breath, he listened.

Muted sounds of voices came from outside on the street. "He must have gone in one of the insulae."

"Look over there!"

"No, wait! This door's been broken in."

Hurried footsteps headed up the stairs. "He's in here."

Atretes ran along the corridor as quietly as he could. Even with tenement doors closed, the place reeked of humanity. A door opened behind him and someone peered out just as he ducked up a narrow, dank passageway. He reached the third floor and then the fourth. Still shouting, his pursuers were awakening everyone in the building. When he reached the roof, he was in the open with no place to hide.

Voices came up the stairs.

Seeing only one way to escape, he took it. Running full-out, Atretes took a flying leap across the yawning distance to another building. He hit hard and rolled. Coming to his feet, he scrambled across to another doorway, dove into it, and hid in the shadows of another stairwell just as a dozen people spilled out onto the rooftop from which he had just leapt.

Atretes drew back sharply, heaving for air, heart pounding.

The voices receded as one by one, they ran down the stairs again, searching for him in the dim environs of the insula. Atretes sank back against the wall and closed his eyes, trying to regain his breath.

How was he going to cross the city, find a widow with his son, and get the child and himself out of the city without losing both their lives in the process?

Cursing the idolmakers for making him a graven image to

these idol-hungry people, he closed down his mind to anything else but getting out of the city in one piece. That accomplished, he would find another way to get his son.

He waited for an hour before venturing down the stairs and hallways into the insula. Every sound made him flinch. When he reached the street, he kept close to the walls, using the veil of dark shadows for protection. He got lost. Using up precious hours of darkness, he found his way like a rat in the maze of alleys and narrow streets.

He reached the city gates just as the sun was coming up.

G L O S S A R Y O F T E R M S

- amorata (pl. amatorata):** a male or female devotee, or fan, of a gladiator
- alimenta:** a portion of money set aside to aid the poor
- Aphrodite:** Greek goddess of love and beauty. Identified with the Roman goddess Venus.
- Apollo:** Greek and Roman god of sunlight, prophecy, music, and poetry. The most handsome of the gods.
- atrium:** the central courtyard of a Roman dwelling. Most Roman houses consisted of a series of rooms surrounding an inner courtyard.
- augury:** the practice of divination; using a sign or an omen to determine meaning or actions
- aureus (pl. aurei):** a Roman gold coin equivalent to twenty-five denarii and weighing between five and eleven grams
- baritus:** a fierce war cry used by German warriors. It was made by holding their shields in front of their faces and yelling into them while banging on them with their weapons.
- Batavi:** a tribe from Gaul that fought with the Chatti and Bructeri against Rome
- bibliotheca:** library room of a Roman dwelling
- brassard:** a piece of armor that covers the upper arm
- Bructeri:** a Germanic tribe that fought with the Chatti against the Romans. The Bructeri apparently warred with the Chatti before being united with them against Rome.
- calidarium:** the room in the baths that was nearest to the boilers and thus was the hottest. Probably similar to a Jacuzzi or steam room of today.
- cassis:** a metal helmet worn over the galea that often had runes engraved on it
- centurion:** an officer commanding a century (a subdivision of the Roman legion)
- Chatti:** one of the Germanic tribes
- cingulum:** elaborate leather belts made for members of the Roman army and served as badges of office. The apron of decorated leather strips protected the soldier's groin in battle
- civitas (pl. civitates):** a small city or village
- consul:** a chief magistrate in the Roman republic. There were two positions, which were elected annually.
- corbita:** a slow-sailing merchant vessel
- cubicula:** underground chamber; nucleus of a family crypt
- denarius (pl. denarii):** a Roman unit of money equivalent to one day's pay for a common laborer. (See also *aureus*, *sesterc*, *quadrans*.)
- El Elyon:** God Most High

DISCUSSION GUIDE

Dear reader,

We hope you enjoyed this story and its many characters by Francine Rivers. It is the author's desire to whet your appetite for God's Word and His ways—to apply His principles to your life. The following character study is designed for just that! There are four sections of discussion questions for each of the four main characters:

- Character Review—gets the discussion going
- Digging Deeper—gets into the character
- Personal Insights/Challenges—gets you thinking
- Searching the Scriptures—gets you into God's Word

When writing this story, Francine had a key Bible verse in mind: “Dear brothers and sisters, be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to get angry. Your anger can never make things right in God's sight” (James 1:19-20). Notice the order: First, listen—and be quick about it. Speech is to come slowly, after listening; that is, after getting all the facts. Anger is—or should be—an afterthought. How often do we reverse the order? With this in mind, let me encourage you to get together with some friends and discuss your favorite scenes, characters, and personal insights from this novel. May your insights never end.

PEGGY LYNCH

HADASSAH

CHARACTER REVIEW

1. Discuss how Hadassah was perceived by those in the arena prison. How did Atretes see her?
2. Examine Hadassah's role in Atretes' life.

DIGGING DEEPER

1. Recount the information and advice Hadassah gave Atretes. How effective or persuasive was she?
2. What do you think made this conversation with Atretes so intense for Hadassah?
3. In what ways have you been persuasive or effective in intense situations?

PERSONAL INSIGHTS/CHALLENGES

1. In your opinion, what stands out the most about Hadassah?
2. Do you think Hadassah's sense of peace was realistic? How does your own sense of peace measure up?
3. "Dear brothers and sisters, be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to get angry. Your anger can never make things right in God's sight" (James 1:19-20). Describe how Hadassah exemplifies this passage of Scripture.

SEARCHING THE SCRIPTURES

As you recall Hadassah's patience and courage, look up the following Bible verses. They may give insight to the source of her effective life and challenge you as well.

COLOSSIANS 4:5-6

1 PETER 4:12-13

PSALM 27:14