



THE
PEASANT
KING

A NOVEL

TESSA
AFSHAR

PRAISE FOR TESSA AFSHAR



THE HIDDEN PRINCE

“A fascinating and engrossing read, with a brave protagonist living in a world where the threats are all too real. . . . The ancient world of the Persian Empire comes to life . . . [with] beautifully written characters, who come across as being genuine, human, and easy to relate to. . . . All in all, this is a deeply moving read.”

HISTORICAL NOVEL SOCIETY

“Tessa Afshar combines adventure and romance in a fast-paced novel that kept me turning pages. I loved the way she brought so many historical figures to life. I highly recommend *The Hidden Prince*!”

FRANCINE RIVERS, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Redeeming Love* and *The Lady's Mine*



JEWEL OF THE NILE

“Afshar’s excellent latest follows a young mixed-race woman in the first century CE as she embarks on a quest to find a father she thought long dead. . . . Exquisite plotting and outstanding historical details set this apart. Afshar’s fans will be overjoyed with this tale of love lost and found.”

PUBLISHERS WEEKLY, starred review

“Tessa Afshar’s novels are well worth waiting for and *Jewel of the Nile* is certainly no exception! What a lovely book and what a beautiful message.”

CHRISTIAN NOVEL REVIEW



DAUGHTER OF ROME

“With meticulous research and a vividly detailed narrative style, *Daughter of Rome* . . . is both an emotive biblical love story and an inherently fascinating journey through the world of first-century Rome and the city of Corinth.”

MIDWEST BOOK REVIEW

“This is a lovely slow-burning, faith-filled exploration about overcoming trials and accepting past mistakes.”

HISTORICAL NOVELS REVIEW

“Afshar brings in a thoughtful consideration of whether or not there are behaviors that cannot ever be forgiven, and her intricate biblical setting will engross readers. This is [her] strongest, most complex Scripture-based story yet.”

PUBLISHERS WEEKLY

“Tessa Afshar inhabits the world of early Christians with refreshing clarity. From life under the threat of persecution to domestic details and her characters’ innermost thoughts, she makes early Christianity spark.”

FOREWORD REVIEWS

“Tessa Afshar has the rare gift of seamlessly blending impeccable historical research and theological depth with lyrical prose and engaging characters.”

SHARON GARLOUGH BROWN, author of the *Sensible Shoes* series

“Tessa Afshar’s ability to transport readers into the culture and characters of the biblical novels is extraordinary. . . . *Daughter of Rome* is a feast for your imagination as well as balm for your soul.”

ROBIN JONES GUNN, bestselling author of *Becoming Us*



THIEF OF CORINTH

“Afshar again shows her amazing talent for packing action and intrigue into the biblical setting for modern readers.”

PUBLISHERS WEEKLY, starred review

“Lyrical . . . [with] superb momentum, exhilarating scenes, and moving themes of love and determination. . . . Afshar brings to life the gripping tale of one woman’s struggle to choose between rebellion and love.”

BOOKLIST

“Afshar’s well-drawn characters and lushly detailed setting vividly bring to life the ancient world of the Bible. A solid choice for fans of Francine Rivers and Bodie and Brock Thoene.”

LIBRARY JOURNAL



BREAD OF ANGELS

“Afshar continues to demonstrate an exquisite ability to bring the women of the Bible to life, this time shining a light on Lydia, the seller of purple, and skillfully balancing fact with imagination.”

ROMANTIC TIMES

“Afshar has created an unforgettable story of dedication, betrayal, and redemption that culminates in a rich testament to God’s mercies and miracles.”

PUBLISHERS WEEKLY

“With sublime writing and solid research, [Afshar] captures the distinctive experience of living at a time when Christianity was in its fledgling stages.”

LIBRARY JOURNAL

“Readers who enjoy Francine Rivers’s Lineage of Grace series will love this stand-alone book.”

CHRISTIAN MARKET

“With its resourceful, resilient heroine and vibrant narrative, *Bread of Angels* offers an engrossing new look at a mysterious woman of faith.”

FOREWORD magazine



LAND OF SILENCE

“Readers will be moved by Elianna’s faith, and Afshar’s elegant evocation of biblical life will keep them spellbound. An excellent choice for fans of Francine Rivers’s historical fiction and those who read for character.”

LIBRARY JOURNAL

“In perhaps her best novel to date, Afshar . . . grants a familiar [biblical] character not only a name, but also a poignant history to which many modern readers can relate. The wit, the romance, and the humanity make Elianna’s journey uplifting as well as soul touching.”

ROMANTIC TIMES, Top Pick review

“Fans of biblical fiction will enjoy an absorbing and well-researched chariot ride.”

PUBLISHERS WEEKLY

“Heartache and healing blend beautifully in this gem among Christian fiction.”

CBA RETAILERS + RESOURCES

“An impressively crafted, inherently appealing, consistently engaging, and compelling read from first page to last, *Land of Silence* is enthusiastically recommended for community library historical fiction collections.”

MIDWEST BOOK REVIEWS

“This captivating story of love, loss, faith, and hope gives a realistic glimpse of what life might have been like in ancient Palestine.”

WORLD MAGAZINE



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The Peasant King

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The Peasant King is a work of fiction. Where real people, events, establishments, organizations, or locales appear, they are used fictitiously. All other elements of the novel are drawn from the author's imagination.

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For my dearest Leila:

Kind, deep, caring, clever, beautiful.

You won my heart the first moment I saw you.

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REGIONAL MAP





CHAPTER
ONE

*So David triumphed over the Philistine with only
a sling and a stone, for he had no sword.*

1 Samuel 17:50, NLT

The Eighth Year of King Cyrus's Reign in Persia

War came slinking into Jemmah's world, stealthy and sudden, advancing without regard for the comfort or convenience of those in its path. Having lived through two years of it, and three years of civil skirmishes before that, Jemmah had thought herself inured to its interruptions. Yet when the clatter of horse's hooves startled her out of a sound sleep, she sat up abruptly in bed, pulse thrumming like a tambourine with too many cymbals. Bleary-eyed, she drew her knees to her chest and tried to calm her racing heart.

When she heard a low whinny and the answering whisper of a man's calming voice out in the yard, she scrambled to gaze through the lattice window above her bed. The stocky, broad-shouldered rider dismounted, hand lingering on the neck of his lathered horse, his face hidden in the shadows.

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Jemmah's father emerged into the yard, calling a low greeting to their unexpected visitor. His tone sounded friendly. Jemmah exhaled. A guest, then, and not an intruder.

The lamp Father carried shed its weak light on the rider. Jemmah recognized the haggard profile as he turned to extract a scroll from its leather cylinder. One of Cyrus's couriers.

He had made several stops at their new home in recent months. But this was the first time he had arrived in the middle of the night. Jemmah could hear the murmur of her father's voice as he accompanied the stallion and his master into the stables, where both would be treated to food and a good rest before doubtless leaving on another errand for the Persian king.

Hurriedly, Jemmah pulled her tunic over her head and grabbed an old shawl from the top of a stool, impatient to hear the latest news. Cyrus must be hard-pressed if he was sending midnight messages.

Two years earlier, the young Persian king had refused to pay the compulsory annual tribute to the Medes. That simple act of defiance was tantamount to a declaration of war. A war Cyrus welcomed if it meant freedom from having to surrender the best of his land and resources to Media.

Jemmah's mother said Cyrus was like David fighting against Goliath, except the young Persian king had fewer stones for his sling. As the daughter of Judean parents in a Persian court, Jemmah understood the reference only too well.

Her mother smiled with relish when she made the comparison, as though facing a giant represented some glorious adventure. Jemmah fought a slight shiver whenever she thought of the odds in that story. Facing the Goliath of Media meant that, for months, Cyrus had lived barely one step ahead of disaster.

And the Median king, Astyages, was only just turning his full attention toward Cyrus and his modest territory.

Splashing her face with tepid water from a bowl, Jemmah bent to grab a towel from the foot of the bed. Round yellow eyes stared at her unblinkingly.

Jemmah gasped, taking a hasty step backward.

Slowly she let out her breath. She had forgotten that she had brought the owl into her room before retiring for the night. Zarina had found the injured bird in one of her wild rambles through the cliffs of Pasargadae the day before and brought him home for Jemmah to tend.

“You startled me,” she said to her wide-eyed guest. The owl bobbed his head from side to side.

It had taken Jemmah hours to coax a bit of meat down the owl’s throat. She had wrapped the shivering bird in the folds of a soft blanket, tucked him snugly inside a basket, and left him by her bedside before crawling between her own sheets to fall instantly asleep.

Pale-bellied and speckle-backed, the owl’s torso now emerged from his cocoon, turning to follow Jemmah’s every move.

“I suppose you would like to join me,” she said, stroking the silky feathers. “Come then, Master Curious.” She lifted the basket with gentle hands, careful not to jostle the bird’s injured wing.

In the rectangular chamber that served as a dining room on one side and a comfortable reception area on the other, Jemmah found her parents, already dressed for a day that had started closer to midnight than dawn. At the dining room table, her mother’s ink-stained hands were making quick work of a missive.

“What’s happening?” Jemmah said by way of greeting.

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Her mother ignored the question. “Did you have to use my best blanket for your owl, dear?” She laid aside her bronze stylus long enough to give Jemmah the look. It had been quite effective when Jemmah had been nine. At twenty, it was more adorable than fearsome.

She grinned. “It’s not my owl. Zarina found it.”

Her mother, who had seen an endless procession of needy, broken creatures—not to mention people—come and go through their doors since Jemmah had learned to walk, was not fooled. Sighing, she returned her attention to her letter. It did not escape Jemmah’s notice that her mother had deliberately ignored her question.

Jemmah’s brother, Johanan, was leaning against the wall, his arms crossed, his brows lowered in a knot. They were twins and, having shared a womb for nine months, had somehow learned to read one another like a scroll. Without a word passing between them, Jemmah now sensed the ball of apprehension that her normally coolheaded brother was trying to hide.

She followed his gaze to a spot on the scarlet carpet and felt her eyes widen. Next to her mother’s feet sat an open travel chest. She had not had time to pack properly. But at the bottom lay her mother’s sky-blue shawl, neatly folded. Her mother had a firm attachment to that shawl, which had been the first present their father had given her. Jemmah often teased that she protected that thin piece of cloth as though it were a newborn babe.

In a world of arranged unions and practical marriages, her parents had made a love match, and their devotion to one another had only grown with time. Her mother would certainly not pack that treasured love token for just any trip. She would never risk losing it. If the shawl was going, it meant either her

mother believed she would be gone a long while—which, considering the size of her diminutive chest, seemed unlikely—or she felt anxious and needed extra reassurance.

“Who are you going to visit, Mother?”

Her mother sighed and laid down her stylus a second time, looking like a warrior who had dropped his sword as a mark of surrender. “I have received a letter from the king.”

“And here I thought we had gathered for midnight refreshments,” Johanan said dryly.

Jemmah picked up the abandoned stylus and twirled it absently. “I saw the messenger in the yard. The king has summoned you?”

Mother recaptured the stylus and tapped its pointed tail on the table in the quick succession of a drumbeat, making the owl look at her with alarm. “I beg your pardon,” she murmured to the bird and laid down the writing implement. She turned to Jemmah. “The king bids me to Anshan. I must meet with . . . an old friend.”

Early in the course of his uprising, Cyrus had moved some of the residents of the Persian capital, Anshan, about two days’ ride northeast, and settled them in what had been little more than a village. Once the ancestral home of Cyrus’s clan, the Achaemenids, Pasargadae made up for its lack of grandeur by the unique advantage of being ringed by mountains. Their sharp peaks and crests provided a steely wall of protection more defensible than any bulwark in the capital. An important advantage lest Astyages should descend upon them with the full force of his army.

Cyrus had entrusted Jemmah’s father, Jared, with the task of looking after the civilian population as they settled in Pasargadae. He had grand plans for the place. “I will make these

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plains my new capital,” he had promised, green eyes hard with purpose. “Once I have dealt with Astyages, Persia will need a better fortress than Anshan.”

Jemmah’s father had set about his new tasks with his usual efficiency, rationing stores of food, digging wells, building homes, and gaining detailed knowledge of the topography so that in case of battle, the women and children could be carried into the safety of the mountains. Over the past two years, they had built the rudiments of the city that would one day serve as Cyrus’s new capital. They had constructed houses and even dug the preliminary foundations of the king’s palace.

Until now, the king had kept Jemmah’s mother safely tucked away in Pasargadae, using her immense talents as a scribe to establish a network of lightning-fast communication centers across the far-flung hills and mountains of Persia. Here in Pasargadae, her mother trained scribes before sending them off to new posts, enlarging an already-impressive information hub the likes of which even Babylon did not possess.

Jemmah chewed her lip. Though Anshan lay only two days’ ride to the east, travel in these war-torn times was never safe. While Astyages kept the bulk of his army to the north, small Median search parties had been seen roving through Persian territory. A trip to Anshan was more dangerous than it sounded. The thought of her mother riding through those passes sent a chill down her spine.

“Will you also be going, Father?”

Her father adjusted the leather patch that covered his left eye. He had lost the eye in an accident in his youth. He never spoke of the incident, nor had Jemmah ever known him to complain of the loss or of the occasional headaches it caused. “Cyrus will not allow it.”

Father did not look happy about the king's decision. But they all knew Cyrus needed him here in Pasargadae. Jemmah felt torn between relief and alarm. "Who will go with you, Mother?"

She rubbed her eyes. "Cyrus has promised two of his personal guards. They should arrive before dawn."

Jemmah exhaled. Cyrus's men, though few, included some of the best soldiers in the world. The most talented were assigned to the king's imperial guard and formed the backbone of Persia's standing army. An elite group, Cyrus had named them the Immortals, because as part of their training, they learned to step into the empty spot an injured or dead man left behind during combat, giving the impression they were indestructable.

That the king had spared two of his finest warriors to ensure Keren's safety was a mark of his regard for her. As well as a sign of the danger inherent to this mission. The king could hardly afford to spare two of his best fighters while facing a much larger force a few days' march from Anshan.

"Why does Cyrus not dispatch one of his generals on this mysterious errand?"

Her mother sighed. "Because this is something only I can do."

Having served as Cyrus's chief scribe since he had been a lad of eleven, and as his teacher before that, Jemmah's mother had received her share of delicate assignments. But none had entailed travel during an escalating war.

Jemmah chewed her lip. Whatever the risks, her mother would face them willingly because she believed in the utter necessity of Cyrus's undertaking. She would go where she was sent and do her best to accomplish her task.

Jemmah could either make her mother's going easy or make it hard. She could act as a brace or become a barrier. If she obeyed the needling voice of anxiety, she would only prove an

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obstacle, blocking the way with questions and objections. She sighed. Worry was a self-serving taskmaster. And while Jemmah could not keep its sharp fangs from sinking into her own soul, she could at least keep its venom from spilling into those she loved.

She wrapped her arms around her mother. “You keep those Immortals in line. We’ll muddle along in your absence while you are saving the kingdom.”

For a moment, her mother’s eyes glistened. She gave Jemmah an approving nod. “You always know how to bolster my heart.”

Zarina padded into the room, her face splitting into a feline yawn. “Why does your heart need bolstering?” She gazed into the half-packed chest. “What’s all this? Going somewhere, Keren?”

Although she had lived with them as a daughter of the house for eight years and been repeatedly invited to call Keren and Jared *Mother* and *Father*, she had never accepted the invitation. Perhaps her memories of her father remained too vivid. She had been seven when Jemmah had found her in the baggage train of vanquished Saka warriors, half-dead from starvation and thirst. Her father had died fighting the Persians, not realizing that his little girl had sneaked to hide amongst the baggage before he had set out for battle.

The sick child of a conquered enemy would, in the normal course of things, have been left to die. But Jemmah had nursed the little girl back to health with her parents’ help and come to love her as a sister. “Mother is going to Anshan,” she explained.

Zarina’s exotic eyes with their slight tilt at the edges, which she had inherited from her mother, lit up. “Can I come?” she cried.

“No!” Keren and Jared said in unison.

She threw herself sideways on a chair. “I am never allowed any fun. I bet there will be a sword fight.”

“I hope not,” Jemmah’s mother said, sounding appalled. She had a peculiar sensitivity about swords, though she knew how to wield them well enough.

“But if there was, I could fight for you. I could keep you safe.”

She probably could, at that, Jemmah thought. Zarina was almost as good as Father with the bow and terrifyingly accomplished with a sword.

Come to think of it, Jemmah’s whole family had exceptional gifts. She was the only ordinary person amongst them. Sometimes it gave her a headache.

Her father mussed Zarina’s silky black hair. “How about you keep *me* safe? I hear Astyages is planning to bring his army south.”

Jemmah’s belly tightened into a knot. Her father had spoken lightly. But the information in that quip was accurate enough. Whether they stayed or went, danger shadowed them.