



*the*  
**PHARISEE'S  
WIFE**

*a novel*

**JANETTE OKE**

BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *Love Comes Softly* AND *When Calls the Heart*

## THE PHARISEE'S WIFE



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*The Pharisee's Wife*

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*To you who hold this book in your hands, no matter the time or your circumstances, may you know that I have prayed for you, that in some way, as only God through his Spirit can do, your heart may be touched to meet whatever is your present, personal need.*



*What is the price of five sparrows—two copper coins? Yet God does not forget a single one of them. And the very hairs on your head are all numbered. So don't be afraid; you are more valuable to God than a whole flock of sparrows.*

LUKE 12:6-7



## CHAPTER ONE

# *The Market*

THE SUN HAD NOT YET RISEN above the horizon and already the day felt stuffy from the heat. The market stalls were in full voice, sellers calling out their wares with loud and irritatingly harsh shouts that they hoped would outdo their competition. Bodies, already oily with sweat, pressed against one another as they forced their way past, sharing the same limited space, breathing the same limited air. Smells from the area where the camels and donkeys were tethered were heavy with familiar but offensive odors on the stifling, breezeless air. The young woman wending her way cautiously in and out among the harried and hurried crowd of shoppers lifted a corner of her shawl to her nose.

The nearest vendor did not miss her approach. It was obvious that this girl was not familiar with her surroundings. Perhaps she was not even familiar with markets in general. She looked lost and confused. The vendor felt not only a curiosity but also an interest. She had never seen the young woman before. Was she new to the

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area—or new to her circumstances? She certainly did not look like someone's servant out to purchase kitchen supplies for the day. The shawl she was wearing looked to be of finer material than any servant girl would wear. Yet she wore it casually, or carelessly, not draped carefully over her head and shoulders as a woman of means would wear it.

But this girl could not be classed as one of the wealthy either. Her clothes were not elegant, her manner not haughty. And she walked with an even full stride—not with carefully placed mincing steps.

It made the elderly stall owner curious enough to pause, still holding the fish she had been about to place in the cooler air beneath her table. Suddenly remembering the fish, she leaned over and tucked it in a shaded spot. She hoped for a buyer soon or the fish would be past its freshness.

When she straightened, the young woman was still standing there, her hand lifted to shade her eyes as she scanned the market before her. She was obviously looking for something. It brought the vendor back to her purpose. She straightened to full height and began to call, “Fish! Fresh fish from the Jordan! Fresh fish! Only one left! Get it now! Fish!”

She watched the girl turn and look toward her. “Fresh fish!” she cried again.

The girl changed direction and was now moving closer. The elderly woman reached under the counter platform and drew out the same lone fish so she could display it before her. Perhaps the sale had come in time.

As the girl drew closer, she still wore a frown of confusion. As soon as she got near enough, the woman spoke again. “Fresh fish!” she reminded the girl. “Caught with last night's catch. Ready for the—”

But the girl was shaking her head. “No,” she timidly interrupted.

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Then she caught herself. “No . . .” and she scanned the market around her again. “I do not . . . I did not come for fish.” She looked even more confused.

For some reason impossible to explain, the vendor had a strange wish to help—to protect the girl. For the moment, she forgot about the fish she still held in her hand. “What did you come for?” she asked, but her voice was much lower, softer than the voice she normally used to sell her wares.

“Mother sent me for olive oil. Fresh. She said to be sure it is fresh. And spice. And—and any vegetable that I can find. As long as it is fresh.”

The woman felt disappointment—surprisingly not because the young woman would not be buying her last fish. No, her disappointment came because she would not be able to help the potential customer.

She studied her more closely. She was young. Perhaps no more than fifteen. Her skin was soft and, though tanned from the summer sun, still pleasing. It was obvious that she was not a kitchen servant or a field worker. And she was pretty. More than pretty. Her eyes were big and sharing. If one had the time and the patience, the woman was sure those dark, almost violet, eyes could tell many stories. As she watched, the shawl carelessly slipped away, exposing the full face.

She was not pretty. She was beautiful!

The woman looked around quickly to see if others had noticed the delinquent shawl. To her left stood two men, their gazes passing over the entire market crowd. Pharisees! Why were they here? They certainly never shopped at the market.

Then she noticed that the younger one, likely an apprentice, turned his gaze their way. He was looking directly at the young woman, whose face was totally exposed. What would he think of the young woman’s carelessness?

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“Pull up your shawl,” the elder woman hissed in warning.

The girl just looked at her.

“Pull up your shawl,” she said with more force. “The Pharisees are here.”

With one quick jerk the shawl covered the girl's entire face. Momentarily, even the beautiful eyes, large with alarm, had been hidden. She reached up hesitantly to pull the shawl slightly to one side so she could peer out. Eyes, still dark with fright, glanced around her and spotted the two men off to the side. They had not moved. The older one was continuing to scan the market before him, but the younger one was still looking at her. She pulled her shawl closer again.

“Come in,” said the woman. She reached out a hand and urged the girl to move toward the simple tent that provided a bit of shade. “You never know when they might decide to arrest . . .” She let the words trail away. She sheltered the girl with a gentle arm as they moved quickly toward her tent.



The young woman's eyes darted around. The tent had room for very little. She looked around for a clear space where she could withdraw. *Arrest*. Would they really do that? Over a slipped shawl?

The older woman spoke again. “I need to get back to the stall. You stay here for a few minutes. Maybe they will go away without . . .” The shopkeeper did not finish.

She was about to lift the flap of the tent when a grizzled man ducked in the opening. He was shaking his head even as he entered. He nodded briefly toward the unexpected guest, then turned back to the older woman.

She spoke. “There are a couple Pharisees out there. Noticed this girl here with her face uncovered. I brought her in—”

But he interrupted. “I think they got more on their minds on

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this day than a young woman's misplaced shawl. Don't know why they feel they have to go snooping around—"

She stopped him. "What do you mean *more on their minds?*"

"Didn't you see him?"

"See who?"

"That teacher—Jesus—from Nazareth."

"He's here?"

"Don't know if he's still out there or not, but he and a few of his followers appeared to be shopping for some victuals."

The older woman seemed uncertain whether to retreat farther from the unwelcome Pharisees or run back out to check if the teacher still remained. Which would prove greater? Her fear of the Pharisees, or her curiosity concerning Jesus the Nazarene?

"Wish I had known." She opted to remain. "I've been wanting to see him. See if he is as they say he is. Or if it's just stories. Wish I'd spotted him. Did you see him?"

"Plain as day. Looked like an ordinary man to me."

She moved toward the tent opening, then turned back. Her eyes flashed with anger.

"So that's why they sent their spies! They learned he was here. I heard he can't go anywhere without some Pharisees—or Sadducees, or both—showing up to watch and question him."

The man chuckled. He brushed a gnarled hand over his greyed beard, then lowered himself to the room's only stool, running the hand over his sweaty face. "Hear they weren't successful in trapping him yet. They say he twists their questions right around to make them look a bit foolish. Bright, they say. Bet that's hard on their pride! Mere carpenter knowing more about the prophets and the Holy Scriptures than any of them do." He chuckled again.

"Hullo," a voice called from outside. "Anyone here?"

The shopkeeper ducked through the tent opening and hurried out to answer the call. The girl could hear the bargaining from

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where she stood. It seemed that the woman was trying hard to sell the last fish.

The man turned to her. "You seen him?" he surprised her by asking.

She shook her head. "I—I do not have any idea of whom you speak," she replied, her voice still shaky. She personally knew nothing of this teacher. She had heard plenty of stories about Pharisees and their strict code of conduct. There had not been Pharisees to bother them in her little village. But the stories concerning them often reached the villagers' ears—enough for her to fear their presence.

Her thoughts suddenly shifted. The man—the other man they were watching. The teacher. Why was he being watched? And why were the Pharisees so interested in him?

Then her thinking did an about-turn. Was this possibly the man of whom her father had spoken? Was he the reason they had left their village to travel to Jerusalem? Her father had referred to him as a prophet. Or was it a rabbi her father wished to see, as his eyes lighted with some unknown hope? No, she was quite sure her father had said *prophet* because her mother had sharply declared that prophets were a thing of the past. Was it possible he was here—now—instead of in the ancient city that was still some miles away?

Her mother had scoffed. Why were they taking this fool's journey away from their safe home just because her crippled father had heard some nonsensical gossip from someone about a strange prophet who could heal? With just his words. "Foolishness!" her mother had ranted.

The debate had been going on for months. The young woman was more than tired of it. She hated the spats, the tension, and even more, the long, hot, dusty trip by caravan to get to the city that was said to have had visits from this magical rabbi-prophet

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who claimed to have some kind of authority and power. She was weary of the entire mess and its disruption of her life. But she would not have dared to say so.

She jerked suddenly back to attention. She needed to get back to the rented room where she and her parents had resided for the night. But she still had not found the items her mother had sent her to purchase. And her mother was not a patient woman.

She shook her head and moved toward the door of the small tent. Just as she reached for the flap, the older woman's hands brushed it aside.

"Well, that is that," she said with satisfaction. "Finally sold that fish. I'm done for the day." She sighed deeply as though the thought brought great relief.

Then she turned to the girl. "And you? You said your mother needs olive oil."

"And fresh vegetables and—"

"I can take you right to the stall for that. Ruth has the best goods, and her prices are fair. She has all the things you need. Come. I see she hasn't closed up yet. Still a few customers there."

The shopkeeper led the way from the comparable coolness of the protecting tent out into the glare of the fully risen sun. The girl followed, lifting her shawl over her face so high that she almost covered her eyes.

The woman nodded toward the scattered vendors still at the market tables. Then her eyes traveled around the area. "I think the Pharisees have finally left. Everyone is breathing a bit easier."

It was true. Many of the stalls had already closed. But there were still a few shoppers who moved about, now with seeming freedom.

"What did you say your name was?" The question was direct and unexpected.

The girl knew that she had not said. She did so now. "Mary."

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“Mary.” The name was accepted without further comment.

“It’s okay now,” the woman assured her. “No need for worries now. If they were about to arrest you, they would have done so while they were here. Just noticed you as a stranger and were curious, I think. But remember—always keep your shawl in its proper place. You never know . . .” Her voice trailed off. When she spoke again, she was muttering to herself. “So—looking for the teacher, were they? Sure wish that I could’a seen him. Been hoping . . .” Her voice silenced as though she realized that her thoughts had been spoken aloud. She shook her head. “Just wish . . .”

They reached the woman with the olive oil, and without a word the older vendor gave Mary a friendly nod of parting, then turned away, still shaking her head and muttering to herself about her deep disappointment. Mary was not even sure if the older woman had heard her simple words of thanks.