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RUTH walked down the narrow, crowded streets of Kir-hareseth, her mind and heart in turmoil. Her beloved husband, Mahlon, was dying of a lingering illness that had come upon him months earlier. She fought the sorrow and fear stirring in her. How would she live without Mahlon? She'd dreamed of living a long life with the man she loved, bearing his children, growing old with him. And now, she suffered watching him suffer. She grieved that there would never be children to carry on his name.

But it was the new moon, and her mother was expecting her for her monthly visit. They would drink tea, eat the delicacies of her father's table, and talk about family matters. Ruth dreaded this visit. She couldn't keep her mind from her troubles. And she didn't want to hear what her mother thought was the cause of them.

Poor Naomi! How could her mother-in-law bear another loss? Fifteen years ago she'd lost her husband, Elimelech; and her younger son, Kilion, had died last spring. Would Naomi's faith in the God of Israel continue to give her peace, or would she finally crumble beneath the crushing grief of losing her last son?

Oh, Lord God of Israel, hear our cry!

From the time Naomi had told her about the true God, she had believed because she saw such peace in her mother-in-law. It was a peace that defied circumstances. Ruth had never seen such peace, certainly not in the house of her mother and father. She and Naomi had spoken often of God, especially when questions had arisen in Ruth's heart. And the answers had always come down to trusting God, obeying Him, accepting His will, knowing there was a purpose in what was happening even if they couldn't see it. But sometimes the pain seemed unbearable.

And Ruth was afraid.

Would she be inconsolable like her sister-in-law, Orpah, had been when Kilion died last year, wailing and rocking and refusing to eat until Ruth and Naomi were afraid for her health?

Oh, Lord God, don't let me be a burden to Naomi. Give me the strength to help her.

When she reached her father's house, she took a deep breath, squared her shoulders, and knocked. A servant opened the door and smiled brightly. "Ruth! Come," she beckoned eagerly. "Come."

It was difficult to enter her father's grand house with its expensive furnishings and not make comparisons to the

humble abode of her husband. Here, everywhere she looked was the conspicuous evidence of wealth—fine urns, rugs, beautifully colored linen curtains, low tables inlaid with ivory. She had grown up in this house and taken her father's wealth for granted. Then she met, fell in love with, and married a young Hebrew merchant who was having difficulty keeping the family business going and, sometimes, keeping food on the table.

Her father and mother took great pride in their possessions, but over the years of living with Naomi, Ruth had come to recognize her own parents' poverty of spirit. There was a richness in Naomi's life that had nothing to do with the house she lived in or the material possessions she had.

"Ah, my beautiful daughter." Ruth's mother entered the room and embraced her. They exchanged kisses. "Sit, my love." She clapped her hands, gave quick orders to a maiden, and sat on one of the plump scarlet-and-blue cushions. "Do you notice anything new?"

Ruth glanced around. Was there a new table or wall hanging or rug? When she looked back at her mother, she saw her fingering a gold necklace.

"What do you think? It's beautiful, isn't it? A gift from your father. It's from Egypt."

"He's always been generous," Ruth said, her mind drifting back to Mahlon. He'd insisted she come today, insisted she leave him for a while. His mother was with him. Everything was fine. "*Go. Go and enjoy yourself.*" But how could she? All she could think about was Mahlon and how quickly she could leave this place and go home to him, where she belonged.

A servant entered with a tray laden with fruit, bread, two goblets, and an urn of wine. A second servant set down a platter of cooked grain with bits of roasted lamb. Ruth's stomach cramped at the tantalizing aroma of the well-seasoned food, but she didn't extend her hand, even when her mother pressed her. How could she take a bite when Mahlon was too ill to eat anything at all? How could she enjoy the delicacies her mother spread out on the table before her when her mother-in-law had nothing in the house but bread, olive oil, and sour wine?

"You must keep up your strength, Ruth," her mother said softly. "You're so thin."

"Perhaps in a while, Mother."

"Orpah's mother spoke with me in the marketplace yesterday. Has everything been done that can be done?"

Unable to speak, Ruth nodded. Naomi, insisting there was always hope, continued to pray and beseech God. She and Ruth both prayed. Prayer had become an unceasing habit.

"Oh, my darling. I'm so sorry you're going through this." Her mother reached out and placed her hand over Ruth's. For a moment, she was silent. "What will you do when he dies?"

Ruth's eyes filled with tears at the blunt question. "I will grieve. I will comfort Naomi. Beyond that, I don't know. And I can't think about it now."

"But you must."

"Mother," Ruth said softly in protest and then drew in a sobbing breath as she covered her face.

Her mother rushed on. "I didn't ask you here to cause you more pain. I know how much you love Mahlon. If your

father didn't love you so much, he would have insisted you marry Kasim, and you wouldn't be facing such anguish now. Your father wants you to know that you're welcome to come home. And you know how much I'd love to have you here with me again, even if only for a little while. You needn't stay with Naomi if Mahlon dies. Come back to us."

Ruth dropped her hands into her lap and stared at her mother through her tears. "After all Naomi has been through, could I leave her? My duty is to my husband's household, Mother. You know that."

"Naomi would be the first to tell you to return to us. Do you think she'll want to stay here when her last son dies? She will go home to her own people where she belongs."

The words cut into Ruth's heart. Her mother spoke as though Mahlon was already dead and Naomi best forgotten. "I must go, Mother." She started to rise.

Her mother caught her hand. "No, please, listen to me. Naomi's husband was eager to adopt our customs and become one of us, but your mother-in-law has always held herself aloof. She still dresses like a Hebrew. She's never set foot in one of our temples nor given a single offering to any one of our gods. Perhaps that's why she suffers so. Our gods are angry with her."

"She has a God of her own."

"Oh yes, and what good is he? What has he given her but poverty and grief?" She made a sweeping gesture. "Look around you, Daughter. See how the gods of Moab bless us. Look at what we have to show for *our* faith."

"But you're never satisfied, Mother."

Her eyes darkened. "I'm satisfied."

“Then why do you always want more? Possessions don’t matter to Naomi.”

Her mother released her hand angrily. “Of course not. Why would possessions matter to someone who will never have them?”

“You don’t understand, Mother.”

“I understand that you’ve turned away from the gods of your own people to worship hers. And what good has come from it? You’re being punished for it. Turn back to the gods of our people, Ruth. Leave that house of sorrow and come home.”

Home to what? Her father and mother had never been content. The more wealth her father accumulated, the more he wanted. Their appetites were ever whetted for increase. Nothing satisfied. In a few days, her mother would tire of the gold necklace she wore, and she would hunger for something new, something about which to boast.

Naomi boasted in nothing but the God of Israel. And she found peace even in the midst of chaos when she went to Him in prayer.

God, oh God, help me! There are so many things I don’t understand. I have no answers for my mother. Can you hear the voice of a frightened Moabitess? I don’t want my faith to die if You choose to take Mahlon from me. My mother’s words are like spears in my heart. Shield me.

She wept.

“We know you must stay with Mahlon to the end, Ruth. And we understand that you’ll want to stay for a few weeks after that and comfort Naomi. Fulfill your duty to her. Then come home to us, my love. Come home where you belong

and where life will be so much easier for you. Everyone will understand. Naomi loves you. She'll want the best for you, just as we do. There's no need for you to live in poverty. You're young and beautiful. You have your whole life ahead of you."

But Ruth couldn't imagine her life without the man she loved or the mother-in-law who had opened her heart to her. How could staying a few weeks fulfill her obligation to Naomi? Duty was not the only bond between them. There was also love. Not just love for one another but love for the God they both believed in.

"I can't leave her, Mother."

"But what about your own family? What about your father? What about *me*? Come home, Ruth. Please come home to us. How can I bear to see you live in such poor circumstances when . . ."

Ruth felt torn between her love for her mother and father and her love for Naomi and Orpah. If Mahlon did die, could she turn her back on them and walk away? Could she go back to living the way she had before, bowing down to the statues representing the gods of her mother and father, gods she no longer believed even existed? The bond she had with Naomi was deeper than a relationship by marriage. Ruth had come to embrace her mother-in-law's beliefs in an unseen God. She had explained her new beliefs to her mother and father, and heard them laugh and shake their heads. "*How can you believe such nonsense? An unseen god?*" She loved her mother and father deeply, but she wouldn't turn her back on Naomi or the truth she had come to realize through her.

“Mahlon, Naomi, and Orpah are my family, Mother, just as Father became yours when you married him.”

When her mother’s face crumpled in tears, Ruth embraced her. “You know I love you, Mother. I’ll always love you. But I must do what’s right.”

“This isn’t right! You’re throwing away your life!”

Ruth saw that her mother refused to understand. Things could never be the same as they had been when Ruth was a child in her father’s household. She was a woman now, with a husband and a mother-in-law and responsibilities toward both. Her life didn’t belong to herself anymore. And even if it did, would her decision be any different?

Oh, Lord, give me strength. I feel like a broken jar with all the oil spilling out.

She had to tell her mother the truth. It wouldn’t be fair to leave her with false hopes.

“I won’t leave Naomi, Mother. You have Father. You have my brothers and their wives and children, and my sisters and their families. If Mahlon does die, who will Naomi have left?”

“She will have Orpah,” her mother said stubbornly. “Let Orpah stay with her.”

Orpah didn’t believe in the God of Israel. She still worshiped idols and burned incense to Ashtoreth. “Orpah is a kind and loving daughter-in-law, but she doesn’t share Naomi’s faith.”

Her mother’s eyes darkened in anger. “How can you persist in believing in this unseen god of hers after all that’s happened? It’s not fair that you give up your life for this ill-fated family! If Naomi decides to leave, *let her go!*”

Ruth refused to be drawn into another argument about whose god had grander temples or the most elaborate and pleasurable worship services. She drew back and stood. "Mahlon needs me. I must go."

Her mother rose with her, weeping again as she followed her to the door. "Please consider carefully what you're going to do, Ruth. I beg of you! Don't throw your life away!"

Ruth's emotions warred within her. Love . . . grief . . . impatience . . . confusion. She turned and embraced her mother quickly. "I love you," she said in a choked voice. "Tell Father I love him, too." She released her hold, turned away, and hurried out the door.

As she sped along the narrow city streets, she covered her face with her shawl so those passing would not see her anguish.

+ + +

Grief is deeper when the sun goes down and memories rise up with the moon and stars. The streets of Kir-hareseth were deserted now, everyone home and asleep, but Naomi's mind was whirring as she sat at the end of her pallet, her back against the cold stone wall of her small house. She felt alone, even though her two beloved daughters-in-law lay sleeping within a few feet of her. They were worn out with sorrow. Each had lost a husband, Orpah first and then Ruth. But they would never experience the deeper grief of losing their children, for they had none.

My sons are dead! My sons, oh, my sons . . . Naomi wanted to scream out her pain, but for the sake of the young women sleeping nearby held it in instead.

It was dark now, so dark the night closed in around

Naomi, bringing with it fear and doubt. She tried to pray, but her whispered words seemed to bounce off the ceiling and land back in her lap unheard. And she began to wonder. Had God ever heard her prayers? Had the Lord ever listened to her pleas?

Like the approach of locusts ready to feast upon her faith, the silence hummed inside her head. She pressed her hands over her ears and clenched her teeth. Why was the night like this? Sometimes the darkness was so still she could hear her own blood rushing through her veins. The sound was like a heavy rain washing open the doors of her mind, flooding her with memories she wanted to forget.

The room echoed with her dead husband's voice. "We're going to Moab whether you like it or not, Naomi! There's no famine there."

"But, Elimelech, we mustn't leave Bethlehem! It's our home."

"Our home is turning to dust!"

"If we trust and obey God, He will provide."

"Are you blind? Look around you, woman. God has abandoned us!"

"Because you and others bow down to baals!"

"I bow down to Baal because he's the lord of this land!"

"Moses told our fathers the Lord is God and there is no other!"

"And what good has God done for us lately?" Elimelech argued. "How long since rain last fell on our land? When was the last time our crops produced even a little more than what we need to fill our own stomachs?"

“But you are saying it yourself, my husband. The Lord has provided what we need to survive.”

“I’m sick of hearing you say that! *I’m* the one taking care of us, Naomi. *I’m* the one working my flesh to the bones on this rocky ground and watching my crops die! Don’t tell me God is taking care of us! Look at my hands! Look at the calluses and tell me it’s God who takes care of you and our sons. God stands far off and watches while everything I own turns to dust. He’s abandoned us! You’re just a woman. What do you understand of these things? I’ll do what’s right in my own eyes.”

That same day, Elimelech had mortgaged the land he’d inherited from his father. He’d come home, packed their possessions on two donkeys, and taken Naomi and their sons, Mahlon and Kilion, away from Bethlehem. She’d barely had time to bid good-bye to her friends and few remaining family members. Elimelech had been so certain he was making the right decision! What man wanted to hear the constant dripping of a nagging wife? So she did what she felt she could do: she kept silent with her doubts and she prayed.

She prayed in the morning when she first awakened. She prayed throughout the day as she worked. And she prayed when she lay down upon her pallet at night. She prayed and prayed and prayed—and watched her life turn to ashes.

Elimelech found work in Moab at Kir-hareseth. He cut off his locks of hair, shaved off his beard, and donned Moabite clothing to make his way easier. There were other Israelites sojourning in Moab and living in Kir-hareseth. They, too, had come to wait out the famine in the Promised Land, and

they, too, quickly embraced the ways of the people around them and forgot the Law of Moses and the promises of God.

It was summer when Elimelech died.

"I just need to rest." He'd come home complaining of pain in his chest. "I'll be fine in the morning." He'd sat right where she was sitting now, rubbing his arm, up and down, up and down, grimacing. "Naomi?" The strange catch in his throat had brought her to her knees before him.

"What, my love?" She took his hand and covered it with her own, wanting to comfort him.

"Naomi," he said again, the sweat beading on his forehead. He'd looked terrified. "I only did what I thought was right." His lips were blue. She'd wanted to comfort him. She'd held him in her arms and tried to soothe him. But nothing had helped ease his torment.

Even now, after fifteen years, the grief rose up in her again, renewed by Mahlon's untimely death, just as her grief had been renewed and deepened last year when Kilion died. There was no escaping the pain, no hiding from it, no pushing it down deep inside her anymore. She remembered everything so acutely, especially her unanswered prayers. She'd prayed so hard that God wouldn't take her husband from her, prayed that God would have mercy upon him, and kept praying even as she watched the light ebb from Elimelech's eyes. Then she prayed for mercy and saw death take him.

Her sons had buried their father among Moabites. At first, she could scarcely believe Elimelech was gone. She kept thinking she would awaken from this nightmare and he would be there, complaining as always. When full realiza-

tion had sunk in that she would never see him again, she had become angry with him. But that, too, passed. She had been too busy helping her sons put food on the table.

It had been fifteen years since Elimelech died, and still the grief would rise up unexpectedly. It was never as sharp as those first weeks, but it never fully dulled. She had thought the pain of losing her husband was the greatest of all, but that was before she had lost sons. Now, she was drowning in a sea of sorrow.

She couldn't even pray anymore. She had always had a glimmer of hope and a sense of God's presence. Now she felt God was beyond reach, His mercy not meant for her. All her prayers were like smoke blown away by an angry wind. Every one of them. Perhaps Elimelech had been right after all. God was standing far off, watching her suffer.

God, where are You? How do I find You?

She wanted to defend herself against His judgment. Hadn't she pleaded with her husband to stay in Bethlehem? Hadn't she begged him to trust in God? Hadn't she prayed that God would change Elimelech's mind and they would go home? Hadn't she wanted to return to Bethlehem when Elimelech died? When God had taken Elimelech, hadn't she tried desperately to convince her sons that they should go back to the land God had promised them? But Mahlon and Kilion had been old enough by then to decide for themselves.

"What is there for us, Mother? This is our home."

Their hearts had been turned away from God and the Promised Land years ago. Their home in Bethlehem was nothing more than a bad memory to them, a place of hardship and heartache. Their father had never said a good word

about it. Why should her sons want to return? They knew little of Hebrew customs and laws, for Elimelech had neglected his duties. He'd never taught his sons the history of the Israelites, the Law of Moses, the way of righteousness. Her sons had watched how Elimelech lived and done as he had done. When their father died, they listened to the elders of Kir-hareseth. They listened to the priests of Chemosh. They listened to their own desires and thoughts and did as they pleased, even unto taking Moabite wives for themselves. Oh, the grief her sons had caused her!

Nothing she had said to them had mattered. They loved her, but she was just a woman. What did she know? So they said. So they'd been taught to believe by their father before them.

Naomi looked at her daughters-in-law sleeping nearby. How strange that they were her only consolation now, these young women she'd grieved over when first she heard about them. Foreign wives! The shame of Israel! Oh, how she had despaired. Yet she'd managed to put on a smiling face when Mahlon brought Ruth home, and Kilion brought Orpah. What else could she do? She could not bring herself to risk losing the love of her sons. And she'd hoped to have some small influence upon their young wives.

Now they were widows like her, and as dear to her as if they had come from her own womb. *Nothing brings people closer together than shared suffering.* She remembered in the beginning, she had accepted them and tried to build a relationship with each of them in order to keep peace in her house. And secretly, she'd prayed that Ruth's and Orpah's hearts would be softened toward the God of Israel. If she

could teach them about the Lord, perhaps there would be hope for the next generation. But now her last hope for the future was lost.

A sudden fever had taken Kilion last spring. Then a lingering illness had brought Mahlon down. Kilion had died in the space of a few days, suffering little discomfort, but poor Mahlon had received no such mercy. When he fell ill, the suffering went on and on. She could do nothing but watch her eldest son, the firstfruit of Elimelech, be eaten alive by disease. She'd prayed countless times for God to ease his suffering, for God to put all the sins of her husband and sons upon her, but the days wore on and on. Poor Ruth, poor faithful, loving Ruth. How many nights had the girl sought to ease Mahlon's pain and ended up weeping over her helplessness? Sometimes Naomi wished she could escape the city and run out into the fields and scream and tear her hair and throw dust over herself. She had wept when Mahlon looked up at her with the eyes of a wounded animal in agony, hounded by terror.

Her own grief had almost consumed her during those long, terrible months, but she had spoken to Mahlon often and gently of the mercy of the Lord. *Mercy!* her heart had cried within her. *Mercy! Lord God, mercy!* While Ruth had ministered to her husband's physical needs, Naomi sat by and told him about the signs and wonders God had performed in Egypt and in the wilderness, and in the land of Canaan. He couldn't resist her now, but was he ready to repent and seek the Lord? She told Mahlon how God had delivered the Israelites from Egypt, not because they deserved it, but because He had chosen them to be His

people. She told him about Moses and the Law and how the people were stubborn like Elimelech and rebelled. She told him about the blessings and the cursings. And she told him about the promises. When he slept, she bowed her head and prayed. *Oh, Lord, Lord . . .* she couldn't find the words. *Oh, Lord, search my heart. . . .* She prayed and prayed and prayed.

And still Mahlon had died.

Ruth had been sitting with him and holding his hand when he died. She let out a long, anguished cry when he stopped breathing, then wailed and covered her head.

Had it been only twenty-two days ago?

Orpah had tried to comfort her and Ruth by saying Mahlon would be at peace now; his pain was over. Naomi wanted to believe these words, but they seemed hollow, without foundation. What did Orpah know of God?

Naomi's sorrow was so deep that she felt paralyzed by it. All she could do was wait for the sun to rise so she could go on sitting in this dusty, dank corner and listening to the rush of people going past her door. How dare life go on as it always had, when her sons were dead! She resented the laughter of neighbors outside her door. She was embittered by the changeless activity. Were her loved ones so unimportant they might have been mere grains of sand cast into the Dead Sea, leaving hardly a ripple? Only Orpah and Ruth shared her anguish.

Naomi hated Moab and Kir-hareseth more with each day that passed. She hated these foreign people. And she hated herself for hating them. It wasn't their fault Elimelech, Kilion, and Mahlon had taken up ways displeasing to God.

Men decide their own path, but it is God who judges, God who prevails.

The sun rose, and Naomi wished she could close her eyes and die. Instead, she found herself alive and aware of what was going on around her. She could hear Orpah and Ruth weeping together and talking in soft voices so they wouldn't disturb her. She ate when they asked her to do so and lay down when they pleaded with her to rest. But she felt lost and angry and hopeless and afraid.

She wallowed in memories, thinking back over the early years of marriage with Elimelech. Oh, how they'd laughed together and dreamed of a fine future brought by hard work and dedication to the land. Naomi, his merry one, he'd called her. She remembered the joy when she found she was with child, the anticipation, the celebration when a son was born—first one, then another. She had sustained them with her body, nursing them until they were able to walk. She had rejoiced in their childish exuberance, laughed at their antics, relished their presence. Life had been full then. She'd felt God's presence in every blessing.

What do I have now? Nothing! I will never know joy again.

Things had been bad in Bethlehem, but everything got worse when they left. She'd tried—and failed—to have influence over Elimelech. She had wanted to raise her sons in the ways of the Lord, but Elimelech felt the Laws of Moses were too rigid, too intolerant. "Our way is not the only way, Naomi. Look around you and see how the Moabites prosper. Those in Bethlehem are still reduced to scraping out a living from the earth." In her heart, she'd

known Elimelech was rejecting God, but she could never find the words to convince him he must turn back.

Is that why I'm being punished? Should I have been more determined in reasoning with Elimelech? Should I have gone to the elders for help instead of being too ashamed to admit what was happening in my home? Should I have gone to his brothers? I should have found someone he respected who might have been able to dissuade him from leaving the land God gave us! Perhaps if I'd refused to leave Bethlehem, everything would have turned out differently. Perhaps if we'd stayed, my husband and sons would still be alive.

How she tormented herself wondering if she could have done things differently, worrying that she had failed those she loved so much.

Oh, why didn't I teach Kilion and Mahlon the importance of the Law? I should have been a better mother. I should have made them sit down and listen. I should have worried less about losing their love and more about losing their souls. And now I've lost them forever. I've lost my sons . . . oh, my sons, my sons . . .

She didn't speak the words aloud, but she was scourged with self-recriminations day after day and night after night.

Father, forgive me. I was weak. I was foolish. I took the easy way and followed Elimelech because I wanted peace in our family. I didn't want to be a contentious wife. I wanted to support him in his endeavors. I wanted to be his helpmate. But You warned us of the cursings to come if we were unfaithful. Oh, Father, I wanted to be faithful. I tried to be faithful. Every day, I felt torn, my husband on one side and You on the other. I didn't know what else to do but pray in silence and hope in

secret and walk alongside Elimelech and then my sons. I hoped and prayed every day they would come to their senses and we'd go home to the land You gave us. Oh, God, I've prayed and prayed all these years, and not one prayer has been answered. My husband is dead. My sons are dead! You have stripped me bare! You have poured me out! Who is left but You, Father? What do I have to cling to now but You?

She rocked back and forth, moaning.

Ruth rose and put her arms around her. "Mother, I'll take care of you." The girl's tenderness broke Naomi's heart. She wept in her daughter-in-law's arms, allowing herself to be held and rocked like a baby. But it was no comfort, for other thoughts rushed into her tortured mind and made her cry all the harder.

There would be no children to carry on the names of her sons. It would be as though they never lived at all. *Their names will go down into the dust along with them. No children . . . there will be no children. . . .*

+ + +

Seventy days passed before Naomi went outside the door of her small house. The sunlight hurt her eyes. She was weak from grieving, having wept enough tears to fill a cistern, and it was time to stop. Crying would not bring the dead back to life. She must think of the living. Ruth and Orpah were young women, too young to spend the rest of their lives mourning over Mahlon and Kilion, or taking care of an old woman whose life was over.

She sat on the stool outside her door and watched someone else's children. They raced down the street, their laughter echoing back as they rounded a corner. Children were

life, and hers were no more. But there was still a chance for her daughters-in-law, if she did what she knew she must.

If she remained in Kir-hareseth, Ruth and Orpah would continue to live with her. They would spend their youth looking after the mother of their dead husbands. How could she allow these sweet girls to waste their lives on her? She loved them too much to continue to see them begging for a handful of grain from strangers or living off charity from friends and relatives. But if she left Kir-hareseth and Moab, her daughters-in-law could return to their families, who would welcome them. Naomi had no doubt their fathers would find husbands for them quickly, for they were young and beautiful. Then Ruth and Orpah would have the joy of children. Naomi wanted that for them more than anything.

As for her, she wanted to go home to Bethlehem. She didn't know if any of her relatives or friends remained there or had survived the famine, but she had heard that the famine had finally ended. Perhaps the Midianite raids had also come to an end. Even so, what did it matter? She longed to go home, and she was willing to accept whatever she found when she reached Bethlehem. If she must be reduced to spending her last years as a beggar, so be it. At least she would feel the Promised Land beneath her feet again. At least she would be where others worshiped God as she did.

Oh, Lord, make it be so. Bring me safely home before I die. Oh, Father, have mercy on me, for I'm alone and in deep distress. My problems go from bad to worse. And I want to do what's right in Your eyes. Help me!

Neighbors greeted her as they passed by. She smiled and nodded her head while her mind raced on. *Why am I sitting*

here? Am I waiting for God to speak to me audibly as He did to Moses? Who am I that God would speak in such a manner? Do I expect Him to write a letter to me on that wall over there telling me what to do? I know what I must do! I will repent and return to my homeland.

Naomi put her hands on her knees and pushed herself up. Lowering her shawl to her shoulders, she went back into her house. Ruth was kneeling, flattening bread dough and laying it over the metal stove, while Orpah was mending a garment. Both young women glanced up and smiled at her. She paused, gazing between them, trying to find words to explain, and failing. She turned away and began gathering her few things.

Ruth rose. "What are you doing, Mother?"

"I'm packing."

"Packing?" Orpah said. "But where are you going?"

"I'm going home."

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Naomi had known that Ruth and Orpah would insist on accompanying her to Bethlehem. Impetuous youth. She didn't argue with them; she knew they would soon understand the immensity of leaving Moab and their families behind. She was sure they would be ready to go home again by the time they reached the Arnon River. It would be far easier to dissuade them at the boundary of their country than to waste her breath arguing with them now. She would enjoy their company awhile longer and then send them home. She didn't want to ponder the fact that she would never see them again after they left her. She would never

forget them, and she would pray for them every day for as long as she lived.

As they prepared to leave the house, Naomi wondered if they would even make it down the hill with all the things Orpah had decided to bring. The poor girl. She couldn't bear to leave anything behind. She was loaded down with everything she had accumulated during her marriage to Kilion, including a small stool. Orpah moaned in distress. "Oh, I wish we could bring the table and rug . . ."

Ruth, on the other hand, had only a pack full of colorful sashes she'd made, a skin of water, and enough grain and raisin cakes to last for several days. "Where are the rest of your things, Ruth?" Naomi asked her.

"I have all I need. Let me carry the cooking pan, Mother. It's too heavy for you. We'll travel farther today if I carry it."

Naomi had spoken to the family next door, telling them Orpah and Ruth would be returning in a day or two. She wanted to be sure no one bothered what was left in the house. When the young women returned to Kir-hareseth, they could sell everything, including the house, and split whatever came of it. Naomi didn't care about any of the belongings she was leaving behind. She preferred the plain things of her people to the finery of the Moabites, Philistines, and Egyptians. It was Elimelech who had placed such importance on the gifts he gave her, and they would be out of place in Bethlehem.

She suspected that Ruth would give everything to Orpah. Dear Ruth—she had such a generous heart, not to mention a wealthy father who would want her to return to his house. Naomi knew him well enough to suspect that he already had

another husband in mind for Ruth, a rich merchant's son or an official in the king's court. Her heart sank at the thought of Ruth married to someone other than her son. Curious . . . the same wasn't true of Orpah.

Perhaps it was because Ruth had responded to her teachings about the true God. How Naomi had rejoiced as she watched the slow budding of the girl's faith.

"Did you see your father and mother yesterday, Ruth?"
Ruth shook her head.

"Why not? They should know you're leaving the city."

"They will know that I'm with you."

"Do they know I'm going back to Bethlehem?"

"My mother said you would, and I told her that even if you did, I belong with my husband's family."

Naomi said no more about it. She started off, carrying only a small sack of parched grain, a skin of water, and a leather bag in which was a sandalwood box containing crystals of frankincense. She would give it to the priest when she reached Bethlehem, an offering for the Lord.

She felt a sense of relief as she walked through the gates of Kir-hareseth and saw the road before her. Whatever hardships came, at least she was on her way back to Canaan. She didn't look back. Orpah did look back, weeping softly, but Ruth merely smiled and gazed off toward the King's Highway to the Dead Sea. "It's a good day to begin our journey, Mother."

The day wore on and the sun rose, hot and oppressive. Naomi felt despair creeping into her heart. Soon she would say good-bye to these daughters. *Lord, give me the strength to place their needs ahead of my fear of being alone. Father,*

bless them for their kindness to me. Take them safely home, and give me the courage to go on alone.

At midday they stopped to rest beneath a terebinth tree. Naomi accepted the raisin cake and cup of water Ruth offered, but Orpah declined food. She was quiet, her eyes downcast. Ruth sat down and wiped the perspiration from her face. She looked weary but was more concerned about her sister-in-law than herself. "Are you not feeling well, Orpah?"

"I'll be all right after a rest."

Naomi knew what was wrong, but the knowledge gave her no satisfaction. She must send them back now. There was still time enough for them to be safely back inside the city walls before nightfall. She finished eating quickly and rose, lifting to her own back the bundle Ruth had insisted upon carrying to this point.

"What are you doing?" Ruth said, rising as well.

"I'm going on alone."

"No, Mother!"

Orpah came to her feet and joined Ruth in protest, weeping profusely. "Don't go! Please don't go."

Naomi's heart broke, but she knew she must remain firm. "Go back to your mothers' homes instead of coming with me. And may the Lord reward you for your kindness to your husbands and to me. May the Lord bless you with the security of another marriage."

Ruth wept. "No." She shook her head. "No, *no* . . ." She stepped forward. "We want to go with you to your people."

"Why should you go on with me?" Naomi said, striving and failing to keep her voice from becoming strident with

restrained emotion. "Can I still give birth to other sons who could grow up to be your husbands? No, my daughters, return to your parents' homes, for I am too old to marry again. And even if it were possible, and I were to get married tonight and bear sons, then what? Would you wait for them to grow up and refuse to marry someone else? No, of course not, my daughters! Things are far more bitter for me than for you, because the Lord Himself has caused me to suffer."

Ruth and Orpah wept harder. Orpah embraced her. "I shall never forget you, Naomi. May you have a safe journey home."

"Nor I you," Naomi said and kissed her. "And a safe journey to you as well!"

Orpah took up her bundles and started back toward Kir-hareseth. She paused after a little way and looked back, perplexed. "Aren't you coming, Ruth?"

"No." Ruth shook her head, her eyes awash with tears. "I'm going with Mother."

Orpah dropped her things and ran back to embrace her. "Are you certain, my sister?"

"Never more certain."

"Please . . ."

"No. Go back without me. I will go on with Naomi."

With one last look back, Orpah started off again. Naomi watched Orpah walk quickly away and then looked at Ruth. She stretched out her hand and pointed toward Kir-hareseth. "See. Your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods. You should do the same."

Tears slipped down Ruth's face, but she didn't move.
"Don't ask me to leave you and turn back, for I won't."

"But how can I not tell you to go?" Naomi came closer.
"You heard what I said, Ruth. Should I take you back to Bethlehem with me so you can have the same bitter existence I'll have? Should you grow old without a husband and children? Go after Orpah! Return to your mother and father!"

"No," Ruth said, weeping. "I *won't* leave you. Make me your proselyte."

Naomi's heart squeezed tight. "Oh, my sweet one, think of what you're saying. The lives of my people are not as easy as what you've known. We're commanded to keep Sabbaths and holy days, on which we may not travel more than two thousand cubits."

"I will go wherever you go."

Naomi knew she must speak the truth, even if it hurt Ruth's feelings. "We're commanded not to spend the night with Gentiles."

"I will live wherever you live."

"We're commanded to keep over six hundred precepts!"

"Whatever your people keep I will keep, Mother, for your people will be my people."

Naomi kept on. "We are forbidden to worship any strange god. Chemosh is an abomination!"

"Your God will be my God."

Naomi spread her hands. "We have four sorts of deaths for malefactors, Ruth: stoning, burning, strangling, and slaying with the sword. Reconsider your words!" When Ruth said nothing, she went on, beseeching Ruth to see the many

ways their people were different. “Our people are buried in houses of sepulchre.”

“Then let it be so for me as well, Mother.” Falling to her knees, Ruth wrapped her arms around Naomi’s waist. “I will die where you die and will be buried there.” When Naomi tried to press her back, Ruth clung more tightly. “And may the Lord punish me severely if I allow anything but death to separate us!”

Weeping now, Naomi placed her hands on Ruth’s head and stroked her hair. Naomi looked up at the heavens. She had never hoped for this, never expected that this young Moabitess would be willing to give up everything in order to go with her. She looked down again, stroking Ruth’s head absently. “You will never see your mother and father and brothers and sisters again, Ruth. Do you realize that?”

“Yes.” Ruth raised her head. Her face was streaked with tears.

“Your life will be easier if you return.”

“Oh, Naomi, how can I go back to my old life when you hold the words of truth?” Her arms tightened again as she began to sob. “Please don’t plead with me to leave you. Don’t lead me into temptation. I’m going with you!”

“Your God will be my God.”

How could Naomi say no to such words? Hadn’t she prayed that Ruth’s heart would be softened toward the God of Israel? One prayer had been answered, one prayer among thousands. “Be at ease,” she said gently and loosened Ruth’s arms from around her waist. Cupping Ruth’s face, she smiled down at her. She smoothed away Ruth’s tears. “As God wills. Whatever comes, we’ll face together.”

Ruth's eyes shone as she smiled in relief. "I will heed your every word, for I know you'll teach me what I need to know."

"Everything I learned at my mother's knee I will make known to you. All I have is yours. I give it to you with pleasure." For Naomi knew now there was more than marriage to her son that had grafted this girl into her life and heart. And now she would pray that Ruth would be grafted in among her people as well.

You have not forgotten me, Lord. You knew I couldn't make it home alone. You have not abandoned me.

"Come," Naomi said, taking Ruth's hand and helping her up. "We must make a long journey before we reach home."

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Ruth didn't dwell on what hardships she and Naomi might encounter when they reached Bethlehem. Each day of travel was enough trouble to bear without fearing what might come when they reached their destination. Ruth had lived in fear all during the months of Mahlon's illness, and it had accomplished nothing. She'd loved her husband, but she couldn't save him. All her efforts to make him better had failed, and the fear of losing him hadn't prevented death from coming anyway. Nor had fear helped her face the difficulties of surviving without a man to provide for the household. After Mahlon's death, she decided she would never again allow her mind to dwell on things beyond her control. The future was one of these things. She would face whatever came and do the best with whatever life God gave her.

Naomi often comforted her without even realizing it. "The Lord will take care of us," she'd said last night, and Ruth

had lain awake on the hard earth, staring up at the stars and thinking about those words. *The Lord will take care of us.* After all Naomi had suffered, she still clung to her faith. Ruth was comforted by Naomi's strength. *The Lord will take care of us.* She chose to believe it because her mother-in-law said it was true.

From the time she had entered Mahlon's home, Ruth had known there was something different about Naomi. First there was the outward sign: her clothing. Even after years of living among the Moabites, her mother-in-law continued to dress as a Hebrew. She didn't do so with an air of pride, as though she was better than those living around her. It was simply who she was. Ruth had also seen her deep faith in God. At first, she'd worried that Naomi's long silences meant she didn't like Mahlon's choice of a wife. But Mahlon had said that wasn't so.

"She's just praying," Mahlon had told her with a shrug. "She's done it for as long as I can remember. Don't let it upset you. It doesn't do any harm. Just ignore her."

But Ruth hadn't ignored her mother-in-law. She could see that prayer meant a great deal to Naomi, and Ruth wanted to understand more about it. So she had surreptitiously watched Naomi. Sometimes her mother-in-law would look so peaceful when she talked to her god, and at other times, anguished. Every morning, often at midday, and always during the evening hours, Naomi would draw her shawl over her head, sit in the corner of the house, and become still and quiet. Ruth asked her once what she prayed about, and Naomi had smiled and said, "Everything." Her eyes had grown sad. "Mostly about my sons." She'd reached out and

put her hand over Ruth's, her eyes softening. "And my daughters."

The kind words had brought tears to Ruth's eyes. Naomi's good opinion had mattered very much, for Ruth admired her greatly. Naomi was kind and pleasant, fair in her division of chores, and she always worked as hard as everyone else. She loved both of her sons deeply and equally, and despite their cultural differences, she embraced Ruth and Orpah as daughters. Love was a gift Naomi had in abundance. And though Mahlon seemed unimpressed, Ruth sensed a deep, abiding knowledge and wisdom in her mother-in-law, knowledge and wisdom she longed to share.

Yet Ruth sensed her sorrow as well. Naomi was never quite settled in Kir-hareseth, never quite at ease with the world around her. It had to do with her God. Ruth had been afraid to approach Naomi and talk with her about it. So she approached her husband instead.

Mahlon had never had much to say about the God of his people. In fact, he seemed to know very little about Him. "Why are you so interested in God?"

"Shouldn't I be able to teach your sons about Him?"

"Teach them about Chemosh if it pleases you. It doesn't matter to me. I'm sure my mother will teach them about Yahweh. The important thing is for them to be tolerant of all religions. That's the only way they're going to succeed in Kir-hareseth."

In Mahlon's eyes, one god was no better than any other, but Naomi could not compromise. She was respectful, never disdainful of others' beliefs, but she held to her faith in Yahweh with quiet tenacity.

Ruth looked at her mother-in-law now, curled on her side, her head resting on a stone for a pillow. She'd fallen asleep within minutes after eating the bread Ruth prepared for her. The sun was down and the air was cooling quickly. Ruth rose and carefully draped her shawl over Naomi. The journey was already very difficult for her mother-in-law. She had eaten very little during the weeks following Mahlon's death. Ruth had feared that Naomi would waste away in grief. So she had prepared savory stews in an effort to entice her mother-in-law's appetite. Now it was the physical exhaustion that dampened Naomi's appetite. She was so tired after walking all day, she could barely keep her eyes open long enough to eat anything. It was strange, but Ruth felt as though they had traded positions. Naomi had become the child, and she the caring mother. "But I don't mind," she whispered, leaning down to kiss Naomi's cheek. She smoothed the tendrils of black hair back from her mother-in-law's sunburned brow.

Ruth rose and hugged her arms close to her body, shivering slightly. Mount Nebo stood in the distance. Naomi had told her this morning that Moses had gone up onto that mountain and died there after putting Joshua in charge of God's people. They had crossed the Jordan River soon afterward and claimed Canaan. She loved it when Naomi talked about what God had done for the Hebrews. She felt a strange stirring within her as she learned of His mighty feats and His unfailing love.

She closed her eyes and lifted her face to the heavens. "Lord, help me to take care of Your servant Naomi," she whispered. "It's because of her that I've come to believe in

You. Please guide our steps and bring us safely home to Bethlehem. And, Lord, if it isn't too much to ask, let there be old friends to greet Naomi upon her return, people who loved her in days gone by and who will continue to love her in the difficult days ahead."