

# TESSA AFSHAR

THIEF OF CORINTH

"No one  
brings the Bible  
to life like Tessa Afshar."

**DEBBIE MACOMBER**

#1 *New York Times*  
bestselling author

# PRAISE FOR TESSA AFSHAR

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“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.”

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

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JOSH OLDS, LIFEISSTORY.COM

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*PUBLISHERS WEEKLY*

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“A riveting and compelling book. . . . Fantastic research and stellar writing make this one you don’t want to miss!”

*ROMANTIC TIMES, TOP PICK REVIEW*



THIEF OF CORINTH





TESSA  
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# PROLOGUE



YOU ASKED ME ONCE how a woman like me could become a thief. How could I, having everything—a father’s love, a lavish home, an athlete’s accolades—turn to lawlessness and crime?

Were I in a flippant mood, I could blame it on sleeplessness. That fateful night, when I abandoned my bed in search of a warm tincture of valerian root to help me rest, and found instead my father slithering out the side door into the dark alley beyond.

He was a man of secrets, my father, and that night I resolved to discover the mystery that surrounded him. A mystery so cumbersome, its weight had shattered my parents’ marriage.

Snagging an old cloak in the courtyard, I wrapped myself in its thick folds and followed him along a circuitous path that soon had me confused. The moon sat stifled under a cover of clouds that night, shielding my presence as I pursued him.

Finally, Father came to a stop. The clouds were dispersing and

there was now enough light to make out the outline of the buildings around me. We had arrived at an affluent neighborhood.

During the day, we Corinthians left our doors open as a sign of hospitality. At night, we shut and latched them, both for safety and to indicate that the time for visitation had passed and the occupants were in bed. As one would expect, the door of this villa had long since been barred.

I hunkered down behind a bush, wondering what Father meant to do. Rouse the household with his knocking? He fumbled with something in his belt and proceeded to cover his face with a mask.

I gasped. Was he playing a jest on the owner of the house? Did he have a forbidden assignation with a lady within? He was an unmarried man, still handsome for his age. I had never considered his private life and felt a twinge of distaste thinking of him with a woman. Now was perhaps a good time for me to beat a hasty retreat. But something kept me rooted to the spot.

My father approached the south wall of the villa and nimbly climbed a willow tree that grew near. I had to admire his agility when he jumped from the tree to the wall. Deftly, he grabbed hold of the branches of another tree growing within the garden and swung himself into its foliage. I lost sight of him then.

I sat and considered the evidence before me. Father's stealthy movements in the middle of the night. The mask. The furtive entry into the villa. The answer stared me in the face. But I refused to believe it.

As I waited, I found it hard to gauge the time. How long since he had scrambled into the villa? An hour? Less? No alarm had been raised . . . yet. I began to fret. What was he doing in there? What if someone caught him? I left my hiding place and, slinking my

way toward the villa, made a quick exploration of the area. The place seemed deserted. Tucking my tunic and cloak out of the way, I climbed the same willow my father had and nestled in its branches. Still I could discern nothing.

I laid my forehead against a thick branch. What should I do? Wait? Go in search of him? Then I heard a noise. Feet running through bushes. More than one pair of feet.

A man cried, "Halt! You there! Stop at once!" My hold on the branch slipped. I thought a guard had seen me, and I prepared to leap back into the street. What I saw next made my blood turn to ice.

Father was running toward me with a large man in close pursuit, his hand clutching a drawn sword. The man bearing the weapon was quickly gaining on my father. I estimated Father's distance from the wall, the time he would need to climb up the tree on one side, and then back down the other. He would never make it in time.

He was about to be caught. Killed, as I watched helplessly from my perch of branches.

Well. You know the rest of that story.

I suppose I could accuse my father of leading me astray that night, of setting the example that ruined my best intentions, for had he not tried to rob that house, I would not have turned to thieving myself.

But the choices that lead us into broken paths often have their beginnings in more convoluted places.

Places like the thousand words spoken mercilessly by my grandfather when I lived in his house—barbed and ruthless words; or a thousand phrases never spoken by my mother, soft and nurturing expressions that would have healed my wounded soul. I could

blame the years in Athens, when I became invisible to my family, a girl child in a world meant for men.

Yet the final blame, as you and I know, dear Paul, rests with me.

It was I who chose as I did. I could have taken the wounds of my early life and turned them to healing. Instead, they became my excuse to do as I wished.

Until you taught me love.

I write you this letter while I sit waiting by a funeral pyre, memories assailing me. The fires blaze and burn the bones of one I failed to love. The smell of ashes fills my nostrils as I remember your words: "*Love never fails.*" And even in the shadow of this conflagration that swallows up its human burden with such hunger, I am comforted to know that there is a love that shall never fail us. A love that covers the many gaps I have left in my wake.

PART 1

## The Discovery



*And if one asks him, “What are these wounds  
on your back?” he will say, “The wounds  
I received in the house of my friends.”*

ZECHARIAH 13:6, ESV



## CHAPTER 1



THE FIRST TIME I climbed through a window and crept about secretly through a house, the moon sat high in the sky and I was running away from home. *Home* is perhaps an exaggeration. Unlike my brother Dionysius, I never thought of my grandfather's villa in Athens as home. For eight miserable years that upright bastion of Greek tradition had been my prison, a trap I could not escape, a madhouse where too much philosophy and ancient principles had rotted its residents' brains. But it was never my home.

Home was my father's villa in Corinth.

I was determined, on that moon-bright evening, to convey myself there no matter what impediments I faced. A girl of sixteen, clambering from a second story window in the belly of night



without enough sense to entertain a single fear. Before me lay Corinth and my father and freedom. As always, waiting for me faithfully in uncomplaining silence, was Theodotus, my foster brother. Regardless of how harebrained and dangerous my schemes might be, Theo never left my side.

He stood in the courtyard, keeping watch, as I made my way down the slippery balustrade outside my room, my feet dangling for a moment into the nothingness of shadows and air. I slithered one finger at a time to the side, until my feet found the branches of the laurel tree, and ignoring the scratches on my skin, I let go and took a leap into the aromatic leaves. I had often climbed the smooth limbs, unusually tall for a laurel. But that had been in the light of day and from the bottom up. Now I jumped into the tree from the top, hoping it would catch me, or that I could cling to some part of it before I fell to the ground and crushed my bones against Grandfather's ancient marble tiles.

My fingers seemed fashioned for this perilous capering, and by an instinct of their own, they found a sturdy branch and clung, breaking the momentum of my fall. I felt my way down and made short work of the tree. My mother would have been horrified. The thought made me smile.

"You could have broken your neck," Theo whispered, his jaw clenched. He was my age but seemed a decade older. I boiled like water, easily riled into anger. He remained immovable like stone, my steady rock through the capricious shifts of fortune.

The tight knots in my shoulders relaxed at the sight of him, and I grinned. "I didn't." Reaching for the bundle he had packed for me, I grabbed it. "The gate?"

He shook his head. "Agis seemed determined to stay sober tonight." We both looked over to the figure of the slave, huddled

on his pallet across the front door, his loud snores competing with the sound of the cicadas.

“I am afraid there’s more climbing in your future if you really intend to go to Corinth,” Theo said, his voice hushed. He took a step closer so that I could see the vague outline of his long face. “Nothing will be the same, you know, if you do this thing, Ariadne. Whether you fail or succeed. It’s not too late to change your mind.”

In answer, I turned and made my way to the high wall that surrounded the house like an uncompromising sentinel. Grandfather had made it impossible for me to remain. I should have escaped this place long ago.

I studied the daunting height of the wall and realized I would need a boost to climb it. By the fountain in the middle of the courtyard, the slaves had left a massive stone mortar that stood as high as my waist. It would do for a stepping-stone. The mortar proved heavier than we expected. Since dragging it would have made too great a clamor, we had to lift it completely off the ground. The muscles in my arms shook with the effort of carrying my burden. Halfway to our destination, I lost my hold on the slippery stone. With a loud clatter, it fell on the marble pavement.

Agis stirred, then sat up. Theo and I dropped to the ground, hiding in the shadow of the mortar. “Who goes there?” Agis mumbled.

He rose from his pallet and looked about, then took a few steps in our direction. His foot came within a hand’s breadth of my shoulder. One more step and he would discover me. Blood hammered in my ears. My lungs grew paralyzed, forgetting how to pulse air out of my chest.

This was my only chance to break away. If Agis raised the alarm and I were apprehended, my grandfather would see to it that I

remained locked up in the women's quarters under guard until I capitulated to his demands. He held the perfect weapon against me. Should I refuse to marry that madman, Draco, my grandfather would hurt Theo. I knew this was no empty threat. Grandfather had a brilliant mind, sharp as steel's edge, and a heart to match. It would not trouble his conscience in the least to torment an innocent in order to get his own way. He would beat Theo and blame every lash on me for refusing to obey his command.

The fates sent me an unlikely liberator. Herodotus the cat came to my rescue. Though feral, it hung about Grandfather's property because Theo and I had secretly adopted it and fed the poor beast when we could. My mother had forbidden this act of mercy, but since the cat had an appetite for mice and other vermin, the slaves turned a blind eye to our disobedience.

Just when Agis was about to take another step leading to my discovery, Herodotus ran across his foot.

"Agh," he cried and jumped back. "Stupid animal! Next time you wake me, I will gut you and feed you to the crows." Grumbling, the slave went back to bed. Theo and I remained immobile and silent until we heard his snores split the peaceful night again.

This time, we carried our burden with even more attentive care and managed to place it next to the wall without mishap.

I threw my bundle over the wall and stepped cautiously into the center of the mortar, then balanced my feet on the opposite edges of the bowl. We held our breath as the stone groaned and wobbled. Agis, to my relief, continued to snore.

The brick lining the top of the wall scraped my palm as I held tight and pulled. I made my way up, arms burning, back straining, my toes finding holds in the rough, aged brick. One last scramble and I was sitting on the edge.

Theo climbed into the mortar next, his leather-shod feet silent on the stone. I leaned down and offered my hand to him. Without hesitation, he grasped my wrist and allowed me to help him climb until he, too, straddled the wall. We sat grinning as we faced each other, basking in the small victory before looking down into the street.

“Too far to jump,” he observed.

On the street, next to the main entrance of the house, sat a squat pillar bearing a dainty statue of Athena, Grandfather’s nod to his precious city and its divine patron. At the base of the marble figurine the slaves had left a small lamp, which burned through the night. I crawled on the narrow, uneven border of bricks twelve feet above ground until I sat directly above the pillar.

As I dangled down the outer wall, I took care not to knock Athena over, partly because I knew the noise would rouse Agis, and partly because I was scared of the goddess’s wrath. Dionysius no longer believed in the gods, not as true beings who meddled in the fate of mortals. He said they were mere symbols, useful for teaching us how to live worthy lives. I wasn’t so sure. In any case, I preferred not to take any chances. Should there really be an Athena, I would rather not draw her displeasure down on me right before starting the greatest adventure of my life. She was, after all, the patron of heroic endeavor.

“Excuse me, goddess. I intend no disrespect,” I whispered as I placed my feet carefully on either side of her, balancing my weight before jumping cleanly on the street.

Being considerably taller, Theo managed the pillar better. His foot caught on the goddess’s head at the last moment, though, and smashed it into the wall. I dove fast enough to save her from an ignoble tumble onto the ground. But her crash into the

plaster-covered bricks had extracted a price. Poor Athena had lost an arm.

“Now you’ve done it,” I said.

Theo retrieved the severed arm from the dust and placed it next to the statue on the pillar. “Forgive me, goddess,” he said and gave an awkward pat to the marble. “You’re still pretty.” I caught his eye and we started to laugh, half mad with the relief of our escape, and half terrified that the goddess would materialize in person and punish us for our disrespect.

“What are you doing?” a voice asked from the darkness, sharp like the crack of a whip.

I jumped, almost knocking Athena over again. “Who is there?” I said, trembling like a cornered fawn.

The speaker stepped forward until the diminutive lamp at Athena’s feet revealed his face.

My back melted against the wall as I made out Dionysius’s familiar face. “You scared the heart out of me,” I accused.

“What are you doing?” he asked again, his gaze taking in our bundles and my unusual garments—his own cloak wrapped loosely about my figure, hiding my gender.

I swallowed hard, struck mute. I was running away from my mother and grandfather. But in escaping, I was leaving behind a beloved brother. Dionysius was Grandfather’s pet, the son he had never had. I think the old man truly loved him. He certainly treated him with a tenderness he had never once demonstrated toward Theo or me. Grandfather would not stand for Dionysius leaving. He would follow us like a hound into the bowels of Hades to get him back.

My escape could only work if my brother remained behind.

I told myself Dionysius loved Athens. He fit perfectly into the

mold of the old city with its rigorous intellectual pursuits and appreciation for philosophy. Athens suited Dionysius much better than the wildness of Corinth. I was like a scribe who added one and one and tallied three. I lied to myself, twisting the truth into something I could bear.

Dionysius had a more brilliant mind even than my grandfather, a mind that prospered in the academic atmosphere of Athens. But he had inherited our father's soft heart. The abrupt separation from Father had wounded him. To lose Theo and me as well would cut him in ways I could not bear to think about. Not all the glories of Athens or Grandfather's affection could make up for such a void.

I had not told him of my plan to run away, convincing myself that Dionysius might cave and betray us to the old man. In truth, I was too much of a coward to bear the look on his face once I confessed I meant to leave him behind. The look he was giving me now.

Theo stepped forward. "She has to leave, Dionysius. You know that. Or the old wolf will force her to marry Draco."

My brother shifted from one foot to the other. "He is angry. He will cool."

I ground my teeth. Where Grandfather was concerned, Dionysius was blind. He could not see the evil that coiled through the old man. "He threatened to have Theo flogged if I refuse to marry the weasel. One stripe for every hour I refuse."

"*What?*" Theo and Dionysius said together. I had not even told Theo, worried that he might think I was running away for his sake more than my own, and refuse to help me.

"He has no scruples when it comes to Theo. Or me."

"Mother—"

“Will take his side as she always does. When has she ever defended me?”

I rubbed the side of my face, where the imprint of her hand had left a faint bruise, and winced as I remembered her iron-hard expression as she hit me.

Two days ago, Draco and his father, Evandos, had come to visit Grandfather. After drinking buckets of strong wine, the men had crawled to bed. The wind had pelted the city hard that evening, screaming through the trees, making the house groan in protest. The rains came then, sudden and violent.

I had risen from my pallet and slid softly into the courtyard. I loved storms, the unfettered deluge that washed the world clean. Within moments, I stood soaked through and grinning with exultation, enjoying the rare moment of freedom.

An odd sound caught my attention. At first I dismissed it as the noise of the wind. It came again, making me go still. The hair on my arms rose when it came a third time, a tortured wail, broken and sharp. No storm made that sound. My heart pounded as I followed that unearthly wail to a narrow shed on the other side of the courtyard. I slammed the door open.

He had brought a lamp with him, and it burned in the confines of the shed, casting its yellowish light into every corner. My eyes were drawn to the whimpering form on the dirt floor, lying spread-eagle. In the lamplight, blood glistened, slick like oil, staining her thighs, her face, her stomach.

“Alcmena?” I gasped, barely recognizing the slave girl.

“Mistress!” She coughed. “Help me. Help me, I beg!”

I turned to the man standing over the slave, his face devoid of expression. “You did this?”

He smiled as if I had paid him a compliment. “A foretaste for

you, beautiful Ariadne. I look forward to teaching you many lessons when you are my wife.”

“Your *wife*? Get out of here, you madman!”

“Your grandfather promised me your hand in marriage. We drank on it earlier this evening.” He stepped toward me. His gait was long and the space narrow. In a moment, Draco towered over me. He twined his fingers into my loose hair and pulled me toward him. The smell of the blood covering his knuckles made me gag. Without thinking, I fisted my hand and shoved it into his face. To my satisfaction, he staggered and screeched like a delicate woman. “My nose!”

“I beg your pardon, Draco. I was aiming for your mouth.”

He rushed at me, hands clenched. I screamed as I stepped to the side, missing his bulk with ease. I had good lungs, and my voice carried with eerie clarity above the howling gale.

He faltered. “Shut your mouth.”

I screamed louder.

The muscles in his neck corded as he hesitated for a moment. Then he lunged again, and I braced myself for a shattering assault. It never came.

Dionysius and Theo burst through the door, causing Draco to skid to a stop. My brothers seemed frozen with shock as they surveyed the state of Alcmena. Relief washed through me at the sight of them, and I sank to my knees next to the slave.

“What have you done?” my brother rasped, staring at the broken girl who could not even sit up in spite of my arm behind her back. “You brutal maggot. You’ve almost killed her.”

Theo placed a warm hand on my shoulder. “Are you all right?”

I nodded, crossing my arms and trying to hide how badly my fingers shook.



Grandfather sauntered in, my mother in tow. “What is all this yelling? Can’t a man sleep in peace?” He wiped his bristly jaw.

“Draco hurt Alcmena,” I said.

My mother had the grace to gasp when she saw the slave girl, though she said nothing.

“He asked my permission to take the girl, and I gave it.” Grandfather tightened his mouth when Alcmena doubled over and retched painfully. “You must have drunk too much, boy. Go back to your father.”

Draco bowed his head and left without offering an explanation.

“He is crazed,” I said. “He claims he will marry me. That you made an agreement with him earlier this evening.”

“What of it?” Grandfather said, his voice hardening.

I expelled a wheezing breath. “You can’t be serious! Look at what he did to the girl.”

“The boy is a little hotheaded. Too much wine. Things got out of hand. Nothing to do with you. I have made the arrangement with my friend Evandos. It is done.”

“Grandfather!” Dionysius cleared his throat. “I think we should ask Draco to leave the house.”

“We shall do no such thing. If an honored guest wants to abuse your furniture, you must allow him,” Grandfather said. “She is my slave, and the damage is to my property. I say it is of no consequence.”

“She’s hardly a woman. Younger than I am,” I cried. “What do you think Draco will do to me if he gets his hands on me? You should be ashamed of yourself for even entertaining the notion of my marriage to such a man.”

Calmly, my mother raised her arm and slapped me with the flat of her hand, putting the strength of her shoulder into that

strike. I tottered backward and would have fallen if Theo had not caught me.

“Don’t be rude to your grandfather. Now go to bed.”

*Furniture.* That’s what the poor girl amounted to in the old man’s estimation. And I was not far above her in his classification of the world. In the morning, Grandfather insisted that my betrothal to Draco would stand. He expected me to honor his precious word by marrying Evandos’s brutal son. My mother watched this tirade, eyes flat, as her father bullied me. She expected me to obey without demur as any good Athenian girl would.

With effort, I pushed away the memories and returned my attention to my brother. “Mother informed me yesterday afternoon that she had started to work on my wedding garments.”

Dionysius blinked. In the flickering light of the lamp his eyes began to shimmer as they welled with tears. I knew, then, that he would not hinder us. Knew he would cover our departure for as long as he could, regardless of the pain it caused him.

I encircled my arms around him. Grief shivered out of us as we tried to make the moment last, make it count for endless days when we wouldn’t have each other to hold. I stepped away, mindful of time slipping, mindful that we were far from safe. Theo and Dionysius bid a hurried farewell, locking forearms and slamming chests in manly embraces that could not hide their trembling lips.

Grabbing my bundle, I threw one last agonized glance over my shoulder at my brother. He stood alone, blanketed by shadows save for a luminous halo of lamplight that brought his face into high relief. I swallowed something that tasted bitter and salty and entirely too large for my throat, and stumbled forward.

Theo and I started to run downhill through the winding streets of Athens, our initial excitement dampened by the grief of leaving

Dionysius behind. Before the sun began to rise over the hilltops, Theo came to an abrupt halt. “You should cut your hair now, Ariadne, while it’s still dark.”

We had decided that a young girl traveling with a boy, even a boy as large as Theo, would attract too much attention. Instead, we had concluded that we would travel as two boys. Dressed in Dionysius’s bulkiest tunic and cloak, with my chest bound tightly beneath its loose folds, I looked enough a boy to pass casual inspection. Except that my hair remained long and uncut, a fat braid hanging to my hip.

I pulled out a knife from my bundle and handed it to Theo. “You do it,” I said, trying to sound indifferent. I was vain about my hair, which was thick and soft, like a river of chestnuts.

Theo took a step back. “Do it yourself. Your father would skin me alive.”

I threw him a disgruntled look but had to concede his point. Theodotus was courting untold trouble for agreeing to accompany me on this desperate escapade. Grandfather’s outrageous threats aside, my mother would have him whipped for encouraging me, if she could get her hands on him. My father, I hoped, knew me better. If ever Theo and I were embroiled in trouble together, he would realize who had led that charge.

I held out my braid with my left hand and started hacking at it with the knife, wincing with pain as the strokes pulled on my scalp, until the long rope of my hair sat in my palm like a dead pet. With a grunt, I threw my feminine treasure into a ditch and we resumed our journey toward the Dipylon Gate, Athens’ double gate on the west. I remembered to make my steps wide and swaggering, imitating Theo’s athletic gait.

There were two ways of getting to Piraeus, the seaport for

the city of Athens. One was through an ancient, walled corridor, which led from the Pnyx hill straight into the seaport, and the other, by means of an open road, which led southwest. We chose the open road, reasoning that if our absence were discovered earlier than expected and Grandfather sent men to find us, we would be able to hide better in the surrounding fields than the confines of a walled avenue.

To our relief, no one followed us. Save for a few inebriated men weaving through the winding streets, Athens seemed deserted, and we made our way into Piraeus unmolested.

The Aegean Sea greeted us with deceptive decorum, its aquamarine beauty muted in the predawn light. The air tasted of salt and fish. My mouth turned dry. The outlandish plan that I had hatched in the wake of the furious exchange with my grandfather never accounted for all of the obstacles we were bound to encounter in Piraeus. How could we find an honest captain who would not try to cheat us or, worse, conscript us into forced labor? We had no sealed letter from a recognized official to lend us legitimacy and were too young to travel abroad on our own.

I looked about, trying to find my bearings in the large seaport. There were three different harbors built into the port, two of them strictly for military use, and the third for commercial business. That is where we headed. The sprawling harbor was dense with ship sheds, where vessels could take shelter from bad weather. We found the port stirring with activity in spite of the early hour. Ships were getting ready to sail, bustling with sun-browned sailors stocking their ships and getting their cargo ready for transport.

“Let me do the talking,” I said.

“How would that be different from any other day?”

I asked a sleepy man in respectable clothing which ships were

sailing to Corinth that day. He named three and pointed them out in the harbor.

“What do you think, Theo?” We studied the ships in silence for some time. One was a narrow Roman trireme, sleek and fast, transporting soldiers. The second, a massive Greek merchant ship, bulged with amphorae of imported wine and vast earthenware vessels of grain. Hired mercenaries as well as passengers crawled all over its deck. Our eyes lingered on the third ship, which stood out in the harbor for her dark-colored wood and an elegant design that contrasted with her huge, odd-shaped sails. Her sailors had skin the color of a moonless night and laughed good-naturedly as they worked.

“That one.” Theo pointed his chin at the odd ship. “They are small enough to be happy for a bit of extra income. No soldiers or passengers to ask awkward questions, either.”

I nodded and surreptitiously wiped my damp palms on my clothing. We approached the captain. “We want to buy passage on your ship, Captain,” I said, my voice an octave lower than its normal pitch.

“Do you, now?” He looked me up and down, his hand playing with the hilt of the dagger that hung from his waist. “What brings two fine fellows into the sea so early in the day?” His accent lilted like music.

“We are looking to make our fortune,” Theo said.

The captain laughed. The sound came from deep in his belly and flowed out like a drumbeat. He loosened his hold on the dagger’s hilt. “Fortunes cost money. How much do you have?”

For my sixteenth birthday, my father had sent me a gold ring domed with a red carnelian, along with a modest purse of silver. If he had sent them in the usual way, my mother would have apprehended both ring and silver before I ever caught sight of them. But

he had dispatched his gifts by means of a friend who had delivered them to my brother in person.

I wore the ring hung on a strip of leather under my tunic. The purse would pay for our passage.

I haggled until the captain and I settled on the price of our passage, which left us with a few pieces of silver for food and emergencies should we run into trouble before finding my father in Corinth.

“How long does the passage take?” I asked.

“Five hours if the wind blows right.”

“Is it blowing right today?”

The captain lifted his face and sniffed the air. “Right enough.” He told us to sit in the bow of the ship while the crew readied for departure, out of the way of the sails. We sat quietly, hoping the sailors would forget our existence. Hoping the captain wouldn’t change his mind.

We discovered that the Kushites called their ship *Whirring Wings*. They told us that the ships in their land were all called by that name.

We found out why when we set sail an hour later. As those tall sails, so awkward-looking at rest, unfurled fully, they looked like wings, stretching out from our hull. For a moment, I wondered if we would take off into the air like an osprey. Once we left the shelter of the harbor and found our way into the Saronic Gulf, the other part of the ship’s name began to make sense. Something about the fabric of the sails caused them to flutter and shiver in the wind, sounding like a thousand birds in flight. The noise was deafening, making our attempts at conversation futile.

The vibrations wormed their way into your ears, into your head, into your heart, and it became impossible to hear anything

but their noise. I found the experience strangely familiar. In a way, this was how life had felt at Grandfather's house for the past eight years. The whirring wings of everyone's demands, the noise of their expectations swallowing my voice, drowning out life and desire and dreams, so that only they could be heard. Once in Corinth, there would be blessed silence and I would live again.

We had sailed for two hours when dark clouds whipped across the sun with sudden ferociousness. A fierce squall shook the hull of our ship. Lulled into sleepy stupor by the calm of our passage, I snapped awake as a huge wave rolled over us, followed by another. Wind gusts snapped at the sails viciously, and before the sailors could pull them down, the largest tore in half.

Another wave broke over us, raising the ship as high as a two-story building, and flinging it back down into the restless sea with such force that Theo, who was sitting near the stern, flew bodily into the air, and to my horror, was thrown overboard.

I lunged after him, and at the last moment was able to grab at his ankle. By then, half of my own body had sailed overboard and I dangled into the stormy sea, salty water spurting into my eyes and nose. Both my hands held on to Theo's ankle with a strength I did not know I possessed. To let go of him meant losing him to the storm. But with my hands thus occupied, I had no way of securing myself. The force of Theo's weight pulled on me, and I slipped over the edge.

There is a thin line between courage and stupidity, and I crossed it with a frequency that pointed to a lack of wit rather than a surfeit of bravery. I did not know how to swim, not even in calm waters. I certainly would not survive a dunking in this tempest. I tried to anchor my feet into the edge of the ship's railing and found it a losing battle. One deep breath, and my head sank into the waves.





# ONE



*I have been forgotten like one who is dead;*

*I have become like a broken vessel.*

PSALM 31:12

WHEN I THINK of the ruin my life has become, the slow wrecking of my dreams, the destruction of every love, I always return to the bee. That one tiny sting, which robbed my place of favor in my father's heart and changed the course of my destiny.

Sorrow came to me on a beautiful afternoon, with the sun shining and just enough heat in the day to warm the skin without scorching it. Wildflowers were abundant that year, and the hillside where Joseph and I had come to pass the hours was covered in a blanket of yellow and pink. I remember the scent of them tickling my nose and filling my lungs, making me laugh for the sheer beauty of the world.

Joseph ran amongst the soft stalks, piercing the leaves with his make-believe sword, playing Roman soldier. He knew better than

to play the game with our parents around. They were staunch Jews whose lineage in Jerusalem went as far back as the days of Ezra. Romans may have been generous patrons of my father's wares, but they were still dangerous enemies. My parents certainly did not consider them a matter for fun and games. But Joseph was four, and he loved the Roman horses, their uniforms, their rectangular painted shields. He wanted to be one of them. And I let him, seeing no harm in a little boy running wild and pretending to be something he could never become.

"Elianna, come and play," Joseph called over his shoulder and thrust his invisible sword in my direction.

"Hold a moment," I said. "I will come soon."

I was distracted, sitting on the coarse felt blanket I had brought, twirling a pink flower, trying to fathom a way to leach out its color and use it for dye on linen. A large shipment of flax had just been delivered to our workshop and we would have plenty of fibers for weaving. My father traded in luxurious fabrics. He even had a small but brisk business in purple, the lavish dye that was derived painstakingly from sea snails and remained more expensive to produce than any other color. It was a measure of his success that he could afford this particular trade.

Joseph had been left in my care that afternoon because everyone in the household was busy working on the flax. Even my mother, who rarely participated in my father's business, had been drafted to help.

My father bought his flax already steeped and dried, with the seeds separated from the stems and discarded, and the stalks beaten to pull out the fibers. His workers were left with the task of combing out the fibers, making them ready for spinning. The stalks of this particular harvest were thick, which produced coarse

linen, and would be used for weaving towels. With Romans and the new Jewish aristocracy so fond of their baths, towels were in high demand throughout the main cities of Judea.

I was twelve years older than Joseph and more than capable of caring for him. My mother, suspicious of my passion for my father's trade, and looking for ways to distract me from my fascination, had given me charge over Joseph for the afternoon. Her plan worked to double advantage: it got my exuberant brother out from under the busy feet of the adults while at the same time withdrawing me from direct contact with my father's work, lest it feed my obsession with the secrets of his trade.

*"Leave that to the men,"* she always told me, thrusting some feminine task into my lap before I grew too enraptured with the mysteries of creating a better grade of dyed fabric.

"Elianna!" Joseph's voice bellowed from farther down the hill. "Come. Now! You promised when you brought me here that you'd play with me."

I grinned. My little brother could be imperious. No one had expected the birth of another child to my parents at their advanced age. When Joseph was born, we were all a little dazzled with his mere presence in the world and became instant slaves to his charm. Add to that the reality that he was a boy—the son of my father's dreams—and, well . . . even a burning seraph could be excused for being a little spoilt under the circumstances. If he seemed bossy, the fault belonged to us. By nature, Joseph was so sweet that the overindulgence of a hundred adults could not render him tyrannical.

"You better hope I don't catch you," I said as I rose to my feet. "My sword is a lot sharper than yours."

"No, it's not. I'll defeat you." He let loose a fearsome bellow

and began to run up the hill, his short legs pumping under his hitched-up tunic at a speed that made me flinch. I needed my whole strength to keep up with that boy.

“Hold fast,” I cried, catching up with him at the top of the hill, thrusting my pink flower forward as if it were a deadly weapon. Joseph doubled over, giggling.

“That’s not a sword! That can’t even cut thread. You’re such a girl, Elianna.”

“You dare insult me, Roman dog? I shall have your head for that.”

Joseph rushed toward me, his imaginary sword pointed at my abdomen. “No, you won’t. My horse will eat you for breakfast.” He did a fair imitation of a parry and then followed with a quick thrust, his little fist hitting my ribs. I grabbed my side as if in pain.

“You will pay for that, young man.” With a quick motion, I reached forward to untuck his tunic from his belt. Distracted, he looked down, and I shoved my flower in his face, leaving a powdery yellow stain on his nose and forehead.

I laughed. “You still need some practice, Roman.” Just behind him, I noticed a lone sheep chomping on a bush. I looked around, trying to locate the shepherd or herd to which it belonged. It seemed to be alone. I walked over to examine it for any hurts. A shepherd somewhere must be missing the fat fellow.

“Elianna!” Joseph called. “Come back. I am not finished. . . .” And then, inexplicably, he swung his arm in a wide arc. “Go away. Go away!” His voice emerged high-pitched and shaken. He made a half circle around himself, his hands flapping about him in frantic motion.

The sheep had my attention, though, and I ignored Joseph’s cry. Up close, I could see that it was well cared for, its wool healthy

and clean. I knelt down and ran my hand over its back. “Where did you come from, little fellow?”

From the corner of my eye I could still see Joseph flapping around. Then he cried out, “Make it go away, Elianna!”

I thought it was a fly at first until I saw the flash of yellow, heard the angry buzz. “Don’t fret so. Stay calm, and it will go away of its own accord.” I didn’t want to leave the lost sheep, in case it wandered away and became even more lost. Joseph was old enough to deal with a buzzing bee. Really, we had overindulged him. I tried to make my voice soothing. “Calm yourself, brother.”

My words had no effect on Joseph. The creature was buzzing with fierce intention around his head, and he panicked. He flapped his arms harder and started to run. “No! No!”

I threw my hands up in the air and came to my feet reluctantly. “Joseph, it’s just a bee.”

I understood the source of his unreasoning fear. The year before, he had been stung on the ankle. He had broken out in hives and his entire leg had swollen to the size of a young tree trunk, and he had been in terrible pain. He had never forgotten the experience. But in my mind, that had been an anomaly. We all had to contend with bees. It was part of life. I watched in frustration as he ran himself ragged for a few moments.

Finally, I caught up to him and reached out my hands to flick at the bee, although I could no longer see it. Without warning, Joseph let out a piercing wail that made my belly lurch. He rubbed at the side of his head, and then I spotted the insect caught in the hair near his temple. I grabbed the bee in my palm and squeezed. Half-drunk from having released its venom, it was easy prey in my violent, clenching fist. I dropped it to the ground and knelt before Joseph.

Fat tears squeezed out of his eyes. He was crying so hard that he began to wheeze. I cuddled him in my arms. "I am so sorry, Joseph. It will be well. I've gotten rid of the little monster. You can stomp on him, if you wish."

"Hurts." He took a breath that shook his chest.

"Where, dear heart? Where do you hurt?"

He pointed to his temple, and I saw that it was already swelling. I gave it a light kiss. "Is that better?"

His gaze brimmed over with accusation. "No." He pushed me from him. I noted a red welt on the back of his still-chubby hand. "Did it sting you twice?" I frowned as I stared at the raised mark, spreading like spilled dye on his baby skin. Joseph shook his head. Hives, I realized with a wince. Just like last year.

He took another breath that shivered down his body. He sounded as if every inhalation was an effort. I thought it was fear lingering in him, robbing him of breath, and tried to calm him. But with each moment, he seemed to grow worse. His wheezing became harsher and unremitting. Confusion caused me to delay. He had had no difficulty breathing the last time he was stung. Was this panic?

I should have helped him sooner, come to his aid at the start, when the bee first began to pursue him. And then it occurred to me that the bee might have been attracted to the scent and powder of the flower I had pressed on his face. Perhaps it would not have come near Joseph at all if not for my silly prank.

I saw that he was growing worse and picked him up in my arms. "I am so sorry, Joseph. I'll take you home. You can have a honey cake, and Mother will make you an herb potion to soothe your pain." Against me, I could feel his thin little chest battling for every breath. I began to run. Somewhere down the hill, my sandal came off, caught on a stone protruding from the ground. I

stumbled, then righted myself and kept on running without tarrying to retrieve the lost shoe.

“Sick,” Joseph said, his voice weak. Before I could turn him, he threw up, soaking my shoulder and my chest. Normally I would have groaned with disgust. But terror had seized me. I sensed that against all reason the bee had caused my brother’s tiny body inexplicable damage. It was as though the poison in that accursed bee somehow robbed him of the very air. I was desperate to arrive home, to give him into the care of my parents, who would know what to do.

I barely stopped to wipe his befouled mouth, only shifting him to my other shoulder so I could start my race again. He was heavy, too heavy for me to carry all that way. My heart pounded in my chest like a metalsmith’s anvil. The strain of holding on to his sagging body made my arms tremble. “Joseph! Joseph, speak to me!”

He moaned. I staggered to a stop, unable to continue my haphazard run, and fell to my knees with him still in my arms. My head swam with a wave of dizziness when I saw his face. His eyes had swollen shut, and his lips had become an unearthly blue. His whole mouth had turned into a tender, purplish bruise. I bit down on a scream and hefted him up again, forcing my legs to run, faster than before.

*Pray*, I thought, my soul frantic with the horror of what I had just seen. *Pray something*. But all I could think of was *Eli, Eli*, the first part of my own name. *My God! My God!*

When I saw the large wooden door to our house, I loosed the scream I had swallowed for the past hour. My voice emerged as a broken croak and no one heard me. “Help me! Father, please help me.” Joseph had gone limp in my arms. I knew he had fainted some time before, fainted from lack of air.

I kicked at the door with the last of my strength and fell against it. One of the servants pulled the door open and I slumped backward, Joseph still held tight in my grasp. The woman cried out, and before long we were pulled inside together. I was still clutching him, his face pressed to my shoulder. My parents came running.

I saw my father's face as he pulled his son out of my arms. He turned white. My mother started to scream. I didn't think I could feel more fear. But her cries—shrill, unnatural sounds that pierced the courtyard—filled me with a chilling dread that robbed me of speech. Why wasn't she helping my brother? Why did she stand there, screeching, pulling at her veil, pulling at her hair?

My father collapsed, Joseph held against him. His head drooped over the unmoving child. "My son," he moaned, rocking to and fro. "My boy."

I turned in shock and saw my younger sister, Joanna, sitting against the wall, sobbing quietly into her hands. The servants wept. My father, shaking and silent, convulsed around the inert body of my brother while Mother's screams continued to fill every corner of the courtyard, piercing me like jagged shards of broken glass.

That's when I knew. My brother was dead. The bee had killed him.

I reached out to cling to my father, in disbelief, in horror, in desperation, hoping for a miracle, seeking comfort. He looked up and the blank despair in his eyes lifted for a moment, only to be replaced by a coldness I had never seen there before. "What happened? What has done *this* to my child?"

I stepped away from him. "A bee . . . It stung Joseph. On his temple." Perspiration dripped down my sides and with a trembling hand I wiped my brow. "It was my fault. We were playing . . . And I . . . I shoved a flower in his face; I think the bee was drawn to its



scent. I should have come to his aid sooner, but I was distracted by a lost sheep.” I remembered that I had merely thrown words at Joseph, as if my instructions were enough. I owed Joseph the truth no matter what punishment I faced. He deserved that much, at least.

My father swept the hair away from Joseph’s swollen flesh with tender fingers. I flinched when I saw his beautiful face, distorted by the obscene hand of death, and swayed where I stood.

“But you knew how sick he became last year, after he was stung. You knew how scared he was. Why didn’t you just swat it away? He was a little boy. He was helpless.” My father moaned. “My little boy!”

“I should . . . I should have . . .”

His words grew iron-hard and sharp. “You were supposed to look after him. What did you do? Just stand there and watch it happen?”

“No! It wasn’t like that, Father! I did help. But I was too late. I was too late!”

“This wouldn’t have happened if you had watched him better.”

I was struck dumb with guilt. He had grasped the heart of my failure. I had not tried to get rid of the bee from the start. “Father, please . . .”

“Be silent!”

I closed my mouth. Swallowed my excuses. He was right. I had failed Joseph. I should have taken better care of him. I should have wiped the pollen from his face, swatted the bee sooner, come home faster. I should have saved him.

“Get out of my sight.” My father’s voice emerged scratchy soft and bitter as gall.

I gasped. With broken movements, I forced myself to stand,

to walk. I went inside the house, leaving a faint trail of blood with every step where I had cut my foot on the jagged stones during my flight home. Huddling in the corner of the room where I slept with my sister and Joseph, I finally gave vent to the tears that I had quenched earlier. Joseph's blanket was neatly folded in a corner. I grabbed it and, pushing my face into its folds, breathed in the scent of him and knew that I would never hold my precious brother again.

And it was my fault.

## A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR



OVER THE PAST YEAR, fans have been asking me for a book they could share with friends who are not practicing Christians. I wrote *Thief of Corinth* mostly for them. I wrote it, also, because I wanted to tell a lighthearted story that still managed to grapple with a few important issues.

If you are a student of the Bible, then you know there is no Ariadne there. She is my own invention. Her brother, Dionysius, however, appears in Acts 17. I was intrigued by this man of learning and influence, who, unlike most of his contemporaries, chose to follow Christ. According to church tradition, Dionysius went on to become the first bishop of Athens.

Some of the minor characters in the book are also historical. Lucius the Butcher really did have a shop in Corinth. And Iuventus Proclus actually was president of one of the Isthmian Games in the first century. According to an inscription from Delphi, that year a man named Hermesianax entered his daughters into the

Games for athletic events, including running (Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, *St. Paul's Corinth*).

The treatment of Galenos's broken leg is based on *De Medicina*, a first-century medical treatise by Celsus. For my research, I used W. G. Spencer's translation of *De Medicina* (book VIII, chapter 10). Having now written a number of scenes set in ancient times in which medical treatment is necessary, I found Celsus's almost-modern approach to setting bones fascinating (and a relief!).

The name *Whirring Wings* is derived from Isaiah 18:1. Some biblical translators understand this to be a reference to ships.

The land we now know as Greece was called Hellas by its original inhabitants. I thought that term might be confusing to readers. However, *Greece* is a relatively modern term. So I settled for *Graecia*, the term used by the Romans.

While the butterfly bush is considered a weed in modern Britain, I have no idea if that was the case in the first century.

When Dionysius quotes Paul as saying, "There is a world of difference between knowing the Word of God and knowing the God of the Word," he is actually quoting Leonard Ravenhill in *Why Revival Tarries*.

One final note about Theo: I love him too much to leave him like that. That's all I will say for now!

The Bible provides profound inspiration for novels like this. However, the best way to study the Scriptures is not through a work of fiction, especially one this flawed, but simply by reading the original. This story can in no way replace the transformative power that the reader will encounter in the Scriptures. For Dionysius's story and the account of Paul's first visit to Corinth, please read Acts 17:16–18:21. You will find Paul's thesis on love in 1 Corinthians 13:1-8.