Alabaster

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A Carpet Ride to Khiva: Seven Years on the Silk Road

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For my own sisters, Helen and Sheona, and for Aksana and my other sisters in Central Asia.

I still hear the voice of my mother telling me what all women in our village tell their daughters: "Mariam, a woman's honour is as fragile and as beautiful as a butterfly's wings. What is a butterfly without wings, except a worm? Remember this. Guard your reputation, for it is more precious even than a husband or sons."
It's probably a good thing that my mother didn't live to see me now.

Chapter One

I'm floating on a sea of sand, buffeted and thrown by sand waves, and now I've got sand in my mouth and I'm choking, trying not to drown. I wake up coughing as dust and debris rain down from above.

The ground is heaving and juddering beneath us, and I can hear the roof beams creaking overhead and the walls and packed-earth floor splitting and cracking. My mother-in-law and sister-in-law scream. Dried mud and debris from the ceiling cover us and then one of the screams is cut short and turns into a spasm of choking. Someone must have mud in their lungs.

Something sharp strikes my temple and I cry out. If I hadn't realized before, now I know that this isn't a dream; it's real. I try to burrow under the bedding to shield myself. As I do, my husband, Ishmael, lunges from his place on the mat beside me, crying out to his mother. From her sudden sob of relief I know she now clings to him and that he shields her from the falling debris, a hand probably stretching out for his choking sister. I'm left alone on the mat. Blood, warm and slick, dribbles like wax down my temple.

The ground stops shaking. Soon there is only the sound of sobbing and panting and the muffled panic of the livestock in

their stable which shares a wall with our inner room. We all yelp as the ground jerks again, as if it's playing with us and just wanted to lull us into a false sense of security. Then the earth is still once more. Gradually, our heartbeats steady and our breaths become more regular.

"Mariam, don't just sit there, light a lamp!" my mother-in-law snaps. I feel for the wall at the head of my mat and fumble along it until my fingers reach the alcove and curl around a squat clay oil lamp. Keeping my hand to the wall, I edge along, stifling a cry as my bare feet step on something sharp. I feel my way to the door that leads outside to our kitchen area. I have to yank at the door, which has got stuck, and when it comes loose it hangs at a funny angle.

Outside, the stars shine brightly, giving just enough light to see. The moon has already set, so it must be the last watch of the night and close to dawn. The embers from last night's fire have died out. It takes me longer to find the flint and kindle a flame. I toss on a few extra sticks while I fill the lamp with olive oil and twist a new wick which I lay in its spout before lighting it. "Mariam!" I hear my mother-in-law cry out sharply, and hurry back inside. The family are huddled together in a nest of blankets. Shoshanna rocks her daughter, Rivka, as if she were a baby, although she is thirteen and only two years younger than me.

"Is everyone alright?" Ishmael asks. His concerned gaze does not include me. I brush at some hair that has got caught in the clotting blood from my temple. They nod, wide-eyed. Then Shoshanna rouses herself. "We must check the livestock. Mariam?" I make for the lower room where we keep the animals. "No! Light another lamp first. Don't leave us in the dark." I bring the lamp over to her. Its light makes her plump features seem unusually hollow. "And wash your face," she adds, a little more gently. "You're bleeding." The lamplight throws the new cracks on the walls into relief. Ishmael only plastered the walls last summer and now he'll have to do it all over again.

I go back to the kitchen porch and add another few sticks to

the fire, before lighting another lamp and checking on the stable. I'm greeted with expectant bleats, although I haven't brought any fodder. The sheep and goats seem fine. Any debris that fell from the ceiling has disappeared into the straw, and you can't even tell that the earthquake happened.

Not so, outside. I hear panicked voices and the occasional shriek from further down the street, and a stab of fear pierces my heart.

I hurry back inside. "Auntie," I say, keeping my head bowed and using the respectful form of address. "With your permission, may I visit my sister to make sure she is unharmed?"

"And leave us to clean up all this mess?" Rivka pouts.

"It will be easier for me to clean in daylight," I add, cursing Rivka silently.

Shoshanna cocks her head and hears all the noise outside. It won't be improper for a woman to be walking alone at night, given the circumstances. She gives me a curt nod, and then Ishmael gives me that look, and we both know that I will be back before sunrise or I will pay for it.

"Cover yourself," Shoshanna adds, never one to let an earthquake stand in the way of decorum. I cover my head, grab my cloak, pull on my sandals and slip out of our walled compound. The village is dotted with lamp-glow as if it were a feast day. My sister lives on the other side of our village, which isn't large. As I make my way along the street, carefully avoiding a tethered donkey bucking against its rope, I make a mental inventory of loss, based on the sounds that drift from each compound. I hear the keening cry of mourning coming from Yakob's household, and I'm guessing someone was fatally hit by debris. I'll come and wail myself tomorrow, but not until I know if Marta is alright. Most families are dragging their bedding out into their walled compounds or up onto their flat roofs, in case there are more tremors to come. There are plenty of people on the streets, and shouts of relief as relatives and neighbours discover each other alive.

I keep my head down and no one greets me, not that anyone would. The spring rains have come and the paths are muddy. I try to keep near the walls where it's drier and get a fright when I almost step on a roosting chicken. She squawks. I hurry on past the well, which is the centre of our village, squared by shops and date palms. As I pass my former friend Imma's house, I'm tempted to stop and enquire about their safety, even if she hates me. Then I hear her father, Halfai, break into a holy song of thanks in his quavering, tuneless voice, and I know their family has survived unscathed.

I'm breathless as I'm heading uphill. Our house is on the uppermost edge of the village and I can already smell the apricot blossom from our tree. I reach the rise towards the olive hills and clamber up the rocks where Eleazar had once slipped and fallen while we were playing and lay unconscious as I ran home shrieking that I'd committed murder. A little further and I've reached home. Above are the stretching branches of the apricot tree that dominates our small, walled compound. There's no time to breathe in their delicate, heady scent. I need to know that my sister is alive.

The outside door is bolted and there is no light coming from inside. Fear roils in the pit of my stomach and I can taste bile at the back of my throat. I don't even bother banging on the door, but hitch up my cloak and tunic, take a run at the wall and grab one of the overhanging boughs dimly visible. I haul myself up. I can feel the bruises on my ribs from my last beating, but ignore them and scrabble my legs up and then over.

Undignified, I drop into our compound and almost trip over the warp threads of Marta's latest carpet, staked out beneath the shade of the apricot blossom. I barely have time to wonder why she's started on a carpet this early in the year when it's too damp to be hunched over a loom.

"Marta?" I call, and duck into the outdoor covered kitchen area, wishing I'd brought a lamp with me. There are still some

glowing embers in the hearth, which means Marta must have worked late and eaten even later. I light a lamp and hurry inside, slipping off my sandals at the threshold. She's huddled against the wall underneath the alcove of two shelves beside our mother's dowry chest with her feet drawn up, clutching a treasure to her bosom. I breathe out a slow sigh of relief.

Marta looks up, deep circles beneath her eyes. Her gaze falls upon my bare feet. "Don't bother taking off your sandals," she says, dully. "Look at the place. It'll take me all morning just to sweep it clean."

"Marta!" I run over to her, placing the lamp in the alcove. She says nothing for a moment; her chest is heaving. I lean against the wall. Relief that she's unharmed floods through me and I sink down beside her and kiss her cheek.

"It's safe," she says, and lifts the object that she cradles between her breasts, as if to show me a newborn. It is the head of an exquisite jar made from alabaster. It is our most precious possession and also our curse.

"Why did you take out the jar?" I ask. "Did something fall onto the dowry chest during the earthquake?"

"It wasn't in the chest during the earthquake," she says, her voice is flat.

She slaps her face hard with one hand, the other keeping a careful grasp of the jar.

"Marta!" I say. She hits her face again, this time with a fist, and is about to hit herself a third time before I grab her wrist. "What has possessed you?" I ask. There's enough hitting in my life already. She says nothing and we sit silently for a while.

"I took it out two nights ago," she eventually explains. "I just held it in my hands, and oiled it a bit to burnish the alabaster." She tails off for a moment. "Each night I put it up on that shelf and put a lamp beside it and just watched it until I fell asleep. I probably sound like some kind of idolatrous unbeliever, but I just wanted to remind myself to hope."

"Of course," I say, holding her tight and trying to sound like I understand and don't think she's going crazy. "But what were you thinking, displaying it so openly? What if someone had seen it?"

"I know," she says sharply. "I know," softer this time. "When the quaking started, I jumped up straightaway. I knew exactly what was happening and wondered if this was the punishment of God for putting my trust in the jar. I leapt for the shelf. The jar had already fallen on its side. A moment later and it would have rolled and crashed into pieces at my feet. Can you imagine?" She is wide-eyed and grips my shoulder tightly.

"Is it damaged?"

She gently passes the jar over to me. I take it in my hands. Its heft, its weight and its beauty are so familiar to me. The alabaster has been warmed by her body. I gaze at the mottled, translucent surface. How many times have I done this? I used to imagine I saw meaning or even glimpses of the future in the swirls and shapes of this stone, more polished even than marble. Of course, it means nothing.

"Pass me the lamp," I say, and Marta, understanding my intent, raises it a little to cast more light as I trace my fingers over the curved cylinder of the jar, probing for cracks or fissures. It feels smooth to the touch, except for the bands of etched patterns around the top of the jar which are all as they should be.

The alabaster is translucent and it's only when I lift the jar and hold it against the lamplight that I see a crack has worked itself along one side. The surface is still completely smooth and I realize that the crack must be inside, where the perfume is.

"No one will notice it in daylight," I say, laughing a little with relief. "It's still just as valuable." She says nothing. I continue to study the surface of the jar, spitting on one section and rubbing it with the hem of my tunic. No one in my village has ever seen anything like it and none of them know that we have it. It's our secret. The jar is full of almost one pint of pure spikenard and it's worth a fortune. I don't even know what spikenard smells like,

although that's never stopped my imagination. This recipient of all our hopes and dreams almost shattered. I hug the jar to me, and it's as if Marta can read my thoughts.

"How could I have been so stupid, so careless?" she says. She looks up at me. Her skin looks gaunt and sallow; her beautiful curls are lank and uncared-for. "Miri, I don't think I can carry on like this for much longer," she says. I'm holding my breath. I've never heard her speak like this before. "I keep asking myself if this is all there is, or if it will get better."

"Of course things will get better," I say, trying to sound hopeful. "You could start training some weaving apprentices. We could even sell the jar. That would give you enough coinage to open a whole workshop!" I'm pleased with this idea, but Marta looks stung and hurt.

"You think I would part with the jar for a workshop?" she asks. "You mean that I should give up all hope of marriage?"

"That's not what – "

"A withered old raisin someone forgot to harvest, who could possibly want her? Eh? I should let the whole village know about the jar and then we'll see about suitors."

I match her short, bitter laugh with one of my own. "Trust me, that is not what you want."

"Are they treating you badly?" Marta asks, rousing herself and stroking my cheek. And just like that, she is transformed back into her usual role of older sister; the comforter, not the comforted.

"I'm fine," I lie. I don't want her to worry. Anyway, what could she do? "I'm glad he doesn't know about this," I say. "It's one thing he will never get his hands on."

"Here, let me put it back in the chest out of harm's way." She opens the chest and holds the jar tenderly for a moment before burying it at the bottom of the robes, headscarves, tunics, and other remnants of our mother's dowry.

"Do you ever think about how Father got it?" Marta asks.

"Not any more," I lie again. "Does it really matter now?"

It's a secret I carry alone and one she'll never know. I think about it all the time; sometimes I'm left merely heartbroken and other times I have a raging desire to smash the cursed jar and to scratch out the eyes of God with its shards.

It was two years after Mother died and Father had just begun to learn to smile again. I had nothing to smile about: Marta had asked me to help her sift through a whole sack of dry lentils, taking a bowlful at a time and spreading them out on white cloth to spot and remove little stones, "Which could easily end up costing you a tooth," she'd warned. It was a job I neither enjoyed nor excelled in, but Marta had decided I needed training in the wifely skills of homemaking. Eleazar sat in the shade of the apricot tree working on his letters, not doing very well. Happy for the excuse to help him, I went over to read with him, but ended up being impatient and then laughing.

"What help would I need from you?" he spat. He always reminded me of a hissing kitten when he got cross, and I just laughed again. "What does a girl know of reading? Might as well teach a donkey the alphabet." This was no longer funny. I grabbed at him but he wriggled away and was up the tree and over the wall in a moment.

"Father, did you hear that?" I asked as he emerged from the unclean place in one corner of our compound.

Father sighed. "Could you pour water for me?" He soaped his hands, squatting beside the fragrant herbs Marta had planted next to the unclean place to mask its smell, while I poured water over his hands from a jug. It was still early in the day but already the heat was palpable.

"Come on," he said. "We need to separate you two. You come with me to water the saplings, and Eleazar can stay here with Marta."

"You mean, we should work while Eleazar goes off swimming all day?"

Father said nothing, but managed to sigh, smile ruefully and

look up at me with his large brown eyes, and I was mollified. I knew Father was worried that the heat would bring on one of the summer fevers which had killed Mother and still sometimes affected my brother. Marta just looked up, shook her head at me in absent-minded despair and lost herself in her lentils again.

Later, as we trudged up the slope of the olive hill towards our grove, I was still unwilling to let the matter drop. "It's not fair. I managed to learn letters much faster than him when I was his age. Even if I don't understand the holy language much, why should he get to sit at Holy Halfai's feet and not me?"

Father smiled. The donkey panted between us, heavily laden with two large, seeping water-skins strapped on either flank. Father adjusted one of the leather straps. "You shouldn't call Halfai that," he said. "It's not respectful."

"But why shouldn't I study?"

"I didn't make the rules," said Father.

"Yes, but still…"

Father ran a hand over his brow and his face, drawing the sweat down his beard and then wiping his hand on his light robe, which was already clinging under his arms. I liked his smell because it was his, even if it was a little strong that day. My father was a master at speaking without words and this simple gesture managed to convey: "It is hot, we still have a way to go before we reach the grove, and there's nothing I can do to change the situation. How will further fights help?"

We walked on without speaking, our panting blending with the donkey's rasp, against a background hum of cicadas. My hair was damp under my headscarf and I could feel rivulets of sweat beneath my tunic dribble all the way down my back and into the crevice of my buttocks. Although our house was at the top of the village, nearest the olive hills, our land was also furthest away and it was midday before we arrived there.

There was no obvious border, but we both knew exactly where our land started. I think olive trees are like clusters of women at

a well. A stranger to our village would see only women in shabby robes, tunics and headscarves, water jars balanced on their heads or tucked into the crook of a shoulder. Me? I know each, I know who has patched her robe well or badly, the gait and preferred carrying stance of each individual, the shape of each figure – even beneath their robes – and that's before they even turn around and I can see their face. It's the same with our trees. I may forget the ages of the oldest trees but I can tell you which prophets were alive when they were mere saplings. Each is different, whether a slim and graceful sapling or a squat, swarthy ancient. I know each bulge, each severed limb, the holes where owls roost, their twists and turns, which ones give the best olives. Each is like a woman from the village. They could all survive a whole summer of drought, except for the row of saplings Father had planted the previous year up on the rocky bluff in front of the ravine. This was where we were heading.

As we passed the largest of the olive trees, I spotted what looked like a large pile of discarded rags under it.

"Someone's left their old clothes here," I said.

Father's brow furrowed.

"Wait here with the donkey." He handed me the rope and went nearer. The rag pile moved slightly and moaned.

The donkey sank down to the ground, exhausted. I knew we'd have a job getting him back up again. I dropped the rope, following behind Father.

"Are you hurt?" Father asked, bending down to the pile. There was another moan and I leant over Father's shoulder. We could tell from the ragged turban that this must be a man, but the end of it covered his face so we couldn't see anything more. Father lifted it and we both recoiled in horror.

He looked like a man made from the oldest of olive trees. Instead of skin, he was covered in brown, cracking and fissuring bark. His face bulged with growths in unexpected places, the largest above his left eye, swelling it shut and making it look as

if that side of his face was made of wax and had melted. Where his nose should have been there was a stump out of which oozed something resembling sap.

I gagged but managed not to vomit.

"I'm sorry," the olive man managed to whisper. It clearly took effort to speak, as if the insides of his throat had also turned to bark. He fixed his one remaining eye, milky blue with cataract, on Father. "Is this your land?"

Father swallowed and when he spoke his voice was strained. "Yes, it is. You're welcome to rest here."

A raspy sound came from the man's throat, which might even have been laughter. Whatever it was, it dissolved into a bout of weak coughing and he panted and rasped, trying to get more air.

"Mariam, what are you standing there for? Fetch our guest some water," said Father. I hurried back to the donkey and untied the small leather skin filled with well water and not water from the brook, and carried it over to Father. He cradled the man's head, lifting it so that he could pour a trickle of water down the man's throat. I recoiled at the foul, rotting stench coming from his mouth, but Father didn't seem to notice.

"Mariam, step back. Give our guest some space," said Father, although I was already keeping my distance. It took time for the man to be sated as he was only able to drink a little at a time. Eventually he waved his hand feebly and Father stopped.

"Thank you," rasped the man. "I am sorry to have inconvenienced you."

"Are you sick?" I asked, realizing how stupid the question was as soon as I asked it. "Father, I could run back to the village and call on Aunt Shiphra. She might have a balm or something."

"No. There is no need. It is far too late for that."

My eyes widened, and I tried to mouth silently to Father: "*Is he a leper?*" Father gave an almost imperceptible nod and then turned to the leper whose head he cradled.

"What is your name?"

"Name?" The leper seemed puzzled. "I have lost much but that was one of the first things to go. Names are for people."

"Would you like some food? I apologize, we seem to have forgotten our manners," said Father, and I turned to fetch some bread and cheese from the saddlebags.

The leper wheezed and shook his head. "It is too late for that, too," he said. "I can't eat any more."

"Is there anything I can do?" Father asked, his voice catching with emotion.

"Do you sing?" asked the leper. "*For I have eaten ashes like bread, and mingled my drink with weeping.*"

Father recognized the holy song and began it at the beginning, his voice deep and sorrowful.

I drew closer but Father shook his head and waved in the direction of the donkey. I walked back and listened as Father sang. Once he had finished one holy song, he began another, rocking the man's head tenderly. He was interrupted briefly when the leper had another coughing fit and again when the donkey brayed because I was forcing him to his feet.

I dragged the donkey up to the ridge, keeping away from the ravine on the other side and found some dried scrub for him to graze. Loosening the leg of one of the water-skins, made of an entire goat, I poured water into a small clay jar and then tied the skin shut and watered the nearest sapling.

I kept this up into the afternoon, and soon my tunic clung to me with spilt water and sweat. All the time I could hear Father's voice drifting up. It was too hot to think and it was only when the last of the water had been poured onto the last sapling and I'd dragged the donkey under the shade of the nearest tree that I began to consider our predicament. I didn't know much about the law but I knew that it was illegal to bring a leper into the village, and that we were now sullied and would need to wash ourselves completely before we could return home. I also knew that lepers were dangerous and that their disease was contagious. I wondered

how long Father had been sitting beside this diseased man and whether he would be infected.

Fear clutched at my heart and I hurried back to the large tree, following Father's voice. He had taken his linen shawl and tied it the overhanging boughs to give further shade. The leper seemed to sleep. Father looked up and although his voice did not waver, I saw tears coursing down his cheeks. He sang until he had finished the last line of the holy song, and then he said quietly, "He is gone, Mariam. I think his last breath was during the song before this one."

"Oh, Father," I cried, and rushed towards him.

"No," he said sharply. "Keep back."

I stayed where I was as Father gently laid the head to rest on the earth and eased himself out from under it. "What do we do now?" I asked.

"We spoke," he said. "In between the singing, there were things he needed to tell me."

"Like what?" I asked.

"Much was only for my ears. He knew that we could not leave his body on our land. Not with the sickness still within it."

I looked up at the row of saplings. "Together we could drag him up to the ridge and then roll him into the ravine."

"No, there must be a better way."

"Like what? We won't be allowed to bring the body into the village or to any of the tombs, and anyway, it's too far and the donkey is exhausted."

Father thought for a moment. "I don't want you coming near the body or touching it," he said. Untie the water-skins and we'll see if between me and the donkey we can drag the body up to the ridge."

As it turned out, under all those rags, the leper was so shrunk and desiccated that soon the donkey was dragging the corpse behind him, Father lifting the body where he could, as if worried at its discomfort. At the ridge we paused and Father sung prayers

over the leper before he rolled him over and we watched the bundle of rags tumbling and bouncing down the ravine until it came to a halt behind one of the larger boulders.

"It doesn't feel right," said Father quietly.

"You sung for him, Father, in his last hour," I said.

"At least his suffering has ended," Father muttered. He picked up the ropes and led the donkey back to the large olive tree so we could collect the empty water-skins.

"What should we do with his staff and his bell and his bag?" I asked. They still lay in a bundle under the olive tree.

"Don't touch anything," said Father, stretching into the branches to untie his linen cloak. "It is all sullied."

He picked up the bell and the staff and the bag and nimbly climbed back up to the ridge where I saw him throw them into the ravine. This gave just enough time for the thought I had been batting away like a persistent mosquito to land and settle: *Father, if it's sullied, then why are you touching it, and what if you catch this disease?* My stomach felt queasy and I found myself rubbing my hands against my sweat-soaked tunic as if that would clean them.

When Father came back he was holding something in his hands. Even though he motioned that I should keep my distance from him, I could see that it was some kind of container made of something much finer, more delicate and intricate than anything of clay or of anything I had ever seen before, even in our house of prayer.

"What is it?" I asked.

"I'm not sure," said Father. "He said that it was a gift for me, a token of gratitude."

"Can I hold it?" I was mesmerised by the swirling patterns of the alabaster, so polished and gleaming, it looked more like gold than stone.

"No. It must be cleansed first." Father slipped it into the saddlebag and we turned towards the village. We hadn't eaten midday meal, but Father said that we must leave the bread and

cheese behind for the birds, as it might have been tainted by the sickness.

"Thank you for your help with the saplings," he added, after a while. "You did the work of a grown man today."

I beamed, because hearing my Father's approval was perhaps as precious to me as whatever our bulging saddlebag contained.

"Father," I said as we neared the village. "Could we have caught leprosy from the man?"

Father smiled tightly. "If God wills it, but I doubt it. You didn't even come into contact with him."

"I know," I said quietly. "But you did. Why didn't you just leave him? It's not worth the risk, and anyway, we broke the law. You should never have touched him."

Father stopped in his tracks, tugging on the donkey as he did so. "Mariam, look at me. If God allowed this man – not just a leper, but a man – in need to rest on our land, to be our guest, then we have broken no law by treating him with hospitality and kindness. Do you understand me? That is how I've raised you."

I couldn't help it, I started to cry. "But Father, what if I ever lost you?" I blubbed.

Father was about to embrace me but then remembered to keep his distance. "Come now, Mariam, let's have no more of that talk. When we get back to the village, you can go home and collect fresh clothes and soap, and I'll take the donkey straight down to the brook and meet you there. We'll soon be clean again."

I sniffed and wiped my nose on my sleeve.

"Let's say nothing of this to Marta or Eleazar," said Father. "They'll only worry."

"But how will we explain about the jar?"

"We know nothing about the jar ourselves. When we do, we can tell them."

Back at the house, Marta looked hot and fractious and failed to notice my inability to look her in the eye. "It's not enough," I said, as she carefully cut a small nub off our block of olive soap.

"It's plenty, Miri. You're not the one who has to make it."

I explained that we were unclean. "We'll have to wash our clothes too. There was a dead body, and we had to move it and throw it into the ravine."

Marta made a face. "What was it? A jackal?"

"Something like that," I said, and turned before she asked me anything else. The sun was slanted and golden by the time I set out for the brook, near the bottom of the village, with two clean changes of clothes. I overtook one of the shepherd boys whom my best friend, Imma, had nominated as the best-looking boy in our village.

"Hey, Ishmael, are you going to the brook?" I asked. He nodded. "Could I give you this for my father?"

I passed him soap and clothing, and as we neared the brook I walked towards the tall reeds where women can wash in seclusion. Ishmael spotted our donkey grazing beside the brook in the men's area and headed there.

I dawdled to watch him for a moment. He flexed his shoulder with confidence, shrugging off his clothes, and then looked in my direction as he reached down to slip off his linen waist cloth as if he knew he had an audience. I ducked away, blushing, and heard the splash as he plunged into the brook.

I stepped out of my sweat-sodden clothes and squatted amongst the reeds, checking over my body for any of the tale-telling white marks that would indicate leprosy, even though I knew it took time before the disease showed itself. I could hear Ishmael and Father talking together. To stop myself thinking about the shepherd, I imagined the jar which Father would carefully remove from the saddlebag and scrub once Ishmael had left. Even back then, I somehow knew that it would change our lives forever, although if I had known what the future held, I would have taken the jar and smashed it against the rocks into a thousand pieces.

Chapter Two

We walk down the street; three mourning women. Our hair and headscarves are grey, covered in flecks of soot and ash, our throats sore from wailing, our eyes puffy from weeping, and our cheeks still red where we've been slapping ourselves.

"Wait," wheezes a voice from behind us as our plump neighbour, Ide, catches up. She limps from her club foot and always seems out of breath. "Have you seen Crazy Mariam?" There are several Mariams in our village, but only one was born crazy. "She managed to get out of their house while Cyria was at the funeral. Cyria checked the street and with the neighbours but no one has seen her."

"How many times has this happened?" Rivka sighs in disgust. "When will that woman learn to lock her daughter up if she has to go out? Do you remember the time they found her naked by the well, wanting to jump in?"

"Rivka!" says Shoshanna, and Rivka rolls her eyes but says no more. "No, we haven't seen her. Poor Cyria."

"May God have mercy," Ide says, tutting her tongue. "Well, we may as well walk back together." What she really means is that

she'd like to discuss the funeral and enjoy a good gossip with my mother-in-law. I doubt Crazy Mariam or her mother will get much of a mention, as all the possible sins Cyria could have committed to be cursed with a crazed daughter have been discussed to the point that even these women are bored. I sometimes wonder whether it has ever occurred to Ide that her gossiping friends might be discussing the sins of her own mother for birthing a cripple.

"Poor Marta," Shoshanna shakes her head mournfully. This isn't my Marta she's talking about; it's old Marta, Yakob's wife, who was struck fatally by a falling beam during the earthquake last night.

"Do you remember what a beauty she was when we were young girls?" says Ide, and they both smile. "She could walk to the well with her water jug on her shoulder wearing a faded old robe, but when those hips swayed, half the men in the village petitioned their mothers for a match. Hah!"

"It will be hard for old Yakob. Marta always thought he'd be the first to go," said Shoshanna. "Thank God she was the only fatality last night."

"Did the earthquake reach the city?" asks Rivka, which I have to admit is a good question. Although our village is small and conservative, it only takes half a day by donkey to reach our cosmopolitan, walled capital. I've never been, but I've heard about it from my cousin Lukas. I expect their huge stone buildings barely creaked, but what do I know? Rivka's question is ignored. More important for the two neighbours is the correct apportioning of blame for Marta's death last night.

"I wonder why she was singled out. Was there something she did that none of us knew about?" says Ide.

"I'm sure that hers was not a wandering eye, at least not in old age," says Shoshanna, and they both savour the possibility that in her hip-swaying days this might not have been the case.

"Did you notice anything unusual about her?" says Ide, and they begin a tedious inventory of potential sin.

"Of course, it could be that God wishes to punish Yakob by smiting his wife," Rivka adds, bored with the conversation. "Or perhaps it was one of Marta's children who sinned?"

This opens several potential new lines of enquiry, but by now we've reached home. Ide is clearly waiting for an invitation to join us. Shoshanna is about to ask her in, when Rivka interrupts, saying, "I'm exhausted; first the earthquake and all that clearing up, and then the funeral. I'm sure you must be tired, too, Aunt Ide."

"Yes, yes, of course," says Ide, crestfallen, and heads further up the street to her own compound.

At least once a day I picture Rivka dying or me killing her. In the fantasy that now flits through my mind, Rivka tosses her head and marches into the inner room and then the entire house collapses on her and, just like that, she's no more. Of course, I say nothing, even though I was the one who did all the sweeping before dawn. Shoshanna also knows not to antagonize her daughter. Rivka has such a propensity for malice that she would even allow her family to be shamed if it meant wounding someone she hated. And she knows everything and could ruin what little reputation I have left, forever. We both try not to get on the bad side of her. We are held hostage by our secrets.

"Mariam, you must be exhausted," says Shoshanna, yawning. "Rivka will prepare midday meal."

I light a lamp and close the door of our windowless inner room, muffling the angry clatter in the kitchen porch outside where, for once, Rivka is actually being made to work. I unfold a sleeping mat from their pile on top of the chest and lie down, curl up and remember my worst funeral.

Mother had laboured with the fever for four days. Marta and Father took turns to sit by her bedside, and they moved her out of the inner room to the covered kitchen porch area. "Please, I want to see the sky," she had said, when she was still lucid on that first day. She went from sweating and arching her back in feverish pain,

to shivering and shaking in her drenched bedding. We took it in turns to lie down beside her during the shivers, warming her with our bodies, and then wiping her down with inner-gourds dipped in cool well water during the fevers.

Aunt Shiphra came and went, bringing salves of honey and mashed ginger and cleansing bowls of hyssop water. Our neighbours were also kind to us. The men offered up prayers at the prayer house and the women cooked extra portions and brought them round.

I should have realized when they started lighting lamps at her head and her feet and reciting holy songs that Mother was dying. I was asleep at the end when she stopped breathing. "You were exhausted, and I didn't want to wake you," Marta said tenderly, when I awoke the next day to the sound of my aunt's keening. Marta's face was as ashen and drawn as the corpse beside us. She held me and stroked my hair as I wept, and then circled her arms around me when I threw myself on mother's cold and stiffening body. Father just sat staring at nothing. I could hear Eleazar laughing next door where he'd been taken to keep him distracted. He still didn't know what had happened.

It was Marta who called on Holy Halfai to come and read over Mother. Aunt Shiphra and the neighbours helped organize food for the mourners and Halfai, whatever I might think of him now, organized everything else. He didn't ask for any money upfront, realizing Father was incapacitated with grief, and procured enough salt for Mother's body to be laid upon, as well as the linen shroud, and the oils and spices needed to prepare Mother's body.

Marta insisted on washing the body herself, even though Shiphra and others offered. I remember it all through a blur of tears, somehow feeling numb and also as if my heart would tear inside me because of the pain, all at the same time. I rocked and wailed with the other women of the village, and tore my favourite robe, tearing out clumps of my hair and slapping myself until my face bruised. The physical pain felt good and when I scratched my

arms and blood came out, it felt as if I'd found a way of letting the pain out. In the end some neighbours had to restrain me from going further.

The men knocked on the compound door with a bier, having come for the body. I flung myself over the shrouded corpse, who until yesterday had been my rock. "No, you can't have her," I screamed, and the neighbour ladies had to restrain me, never holding it against me that I bit, punched, scratched and swore at them as I writhed to escape.

Marta stood up suddenly as if she, too, would launch herself as the bier was carried out the compound door, but instead she collapsed in a heap and soon the women were fussing around her, calling on each other to give her space, fanning her and offering sips of water.

It never occurred to me that the kindness of these same women might translate into gossip and speculation over my mother's character and God's punishment once they had left our home and were free to talk.

Thankfully, I can hardly remember the next few weeks. I know that Father took us all to see the tombs out on the barren hill; caves in the sand and rock. Marta explained to me and Eleazar that our family tomb had been sealed with mud and rocks but that we would come back next year, unwrap the shroud and place Mother's bones into an ossuary to rest with our grandparents.

I remember that Father seemed dead inside, even though he still breathed and walked and went about his daily tasks. It was Marta who cared for me and Eleazar. She tried to sing us the lullabies Mother used to sing, or make our favourite dishes, but this just made us cry, so she stopped. I never saw her cry in front of us, although she remained gaunt and I don't think she slept much.

One night I woke determined to ignore my need to relieve myself, but eventually crept outside. Lamplight spilled from behind the dusty curtain that screened off the unclean place and I

could see the bent silhouette of my sister holding her stomach as if it cramped. She sobbed as quietly as she could. I squatted beside the apricot tree, reasoning that she'd rather I'd pass water there than interrupt her private grief.

Mother's only brother, an uncle I'd never met, came to mark the fortieth day of mourning, bringing his son Lukas with him. Lukas sat on an extravagant saddle like some sort of prince, with his father walking beside him. It was only once they were inside our compound and Uncle Yosef lifted him down that I realized that Lukas was a cripple. "Careful of my clothes," said Lukas, as we prepared cushions and a seating mattress for him, "It's cotton, from India," he added to me, as I touched the hem of his soft, white robe. I'd never seen cotton before, as we grow our own flax and had our own sheep in our village, and I had no idea of the place he talked of. I helped Marta prepare platters of lamb, cheese and fruit for Holy Halfai and the other village elders who had also joined Father in remembering our mother.

"Father, isn't it interesting the way they sit on floor mats and eat from a floor cloth rather than recline at a table?" said Lukas, as the village elders bristled silently. Mother's loom had been cleared away and they were seated under the apricot tree, a state which Lukas also felt the need to comment upon, wondering why we had never completed the upper room. I waited for his father to cuff him for insolence but nothing was said.

After the meal, Uncle Yosef wanted to visit the tomb, leaving Lukas behind to annoy us. Father had explained earlier that Uncle Yosef had left the village to go north, selling dates and olives. This wasn't that uncommon, but Yosef was somewhat of a family disgrace, having chosen to remain there and marry a Westernized wife.

"Of course, living so close to the Great Lake, we would never eat salt fish like you do. We buy them fresh," Lukas explained to Marta, as we stepped over and around him, trying to clean up the detritus left from the feast.

"I think I can finish up here by myself," said Marta irritably, brushing hair from her forehead with the back of her hand. "Mariam, why don't you take Lukas and show him the village?"

"From what I've already seen, that shouldn't take long," said Lukas, pleased with himself.

I saddled our donkey and was soon walking Lukas down to the well.

"There's not much else to see," I shrugged, after we'd walked around the well and Lukas had made several disparaging comments about the stalls around it and the size of our prayer house.

"But what do people do?" asked Lukas. "I mean, there's no place for discussing ideas. There isn't even an arena."

"What need would a cripple have for an arena?" We turned. It was my cousin, Yokkan, Aunt Shiphra's son. He was the same age as me and Lukas, but was already wiry and muscular and had cultivated the beginnings of a decent beard and the overbearing nature of a young man.

"Er, this is my cousin Yokkan, son of my father's sister," I said, wishing Yokkan could be nice for once. "Yokkan, meet my cousin Lukas, son of my mother's brother. It's his first time in our village."

I gave Lukas a pleading look to be quiet but the stupid boy ignored it. "I was just asking Cousin Mariam what people actually do here."

"We work and we pray. We work hard and we pray hard. Do you know anything about work or prayer?"

"Well, I study and I can speak three languages."

"We study the holy language if there is time between work and prayer."

"But what about the world beyond this village? In my town Westerners and locals meet for debate and discussion of ideas. I mean, you're only a day away from the Holy City."

Yokkan stared at Lukas with contempt. "A donkey that makes pilgrimage to the Holy City is still a donkey. A cripple who talks a

lot is still a cripple. Talking is for women and men who don't work and pray." He turned without acknowledging me and left.

"Can we go back now?" Lukas asked, and I nodded and then looked away so I wouldn't see Lukas trying not to cry.

"Father warned me it would be like this. 'The village mentality', he called it," said Lukas, as we plodded homeward. "I'm glad we're leaving tomorrow. I only came because Father promised that we could visit the Holy City. It's still full of people like your cousin, but there are Westerners as well."

Lukas and his father left the next day and never came back. We pride ourselves on our hospitality, but we're not very good with strangers in our village.

I thought of Lukas two years later when we were given the jar. I was sure that he would know what material it was made from and, more importantly, what it contained and how much it was worth. I pestered Father about the jar whenever we had a brief moment together alone, which wasn't often.

"I'm not taking it to the capital," he said. "If it's so valuable, then I run a high risk of getting robbed. We'll wait until the olives have fermented and when I take them to the capital I'll make enquiries."

I agreed, reluctantly. "And one more thing, Miri," he added. "Keep checking your skin when you bathe, just to make sure."

"And you?" I asked.

"Everything is fine," he smiled, and I could tell that he meant it.

We didn't talk about the jar again until a few months later as I helped Father with the olive harvest and, surprisingly, so did Marta, who had usually preferred to stay at home. It soon became clear why she was so keen. Annas, son of the widower Yonah, was harvesting his own olives just down from our grove and we started sharing midday meal together. Marta seemed to glow in his presence. . Annas was broad with a hearty laugh and an appetite to match, and Marta soon discovered his preference for green olives

and sheep cheese, supplying him plentifully with both.

Nor was Marta the only one to be thinking of love. It was just after dawn and I was walking back from the well with my best friend, Imma, when Ishmael came towards us. He was herding his flock but his eyes were not on the sheep. He stared at us brazenly, his gaze fixed as he passed us towards the well, even though he had to turn his head.

"Mind you don't fall in," I called to him, and he finally turned away.

"I can't believe you said that to him," Imma hissed and we both giggled.

"Did you see the way he was staring at us?" I said. "I thought he was supposed to be devout."

"Staring at you, you mean," said Imma. "Oh, those raven eyes and that tall graceful neck!"' she added in a mocking version of a love-struck Ishmael.

"No, he was staring at *you*. Oh, those dark-honey locks and ripe breasts!" I retorted, playfully tugging her hair.

"Stop it!" she squealed, as our laughter attracted disapproving glances from the older women back at the well.

"Come on," I said, and we adjusted our water jars and walked off.

"Do you really think he was looking at me?" asked Imma quietly. "I was sure he was staring at you." She turned to me. "He seems so sure of himself and what he wants."

"And he's not the only one," I said, giving her a nudge.

After that day of harvesting, Marta sent Eleazar to the well to fetch water. We would still hear him protesting about women's work from the street outside as I wondered whether gossip about my contact with Ishmael had reached Marta's ears already.

"I need to start teaching you more dishes," said Marta. "I want you to watch carefully how much dried hyssop, sesame seeds and thyme I mix with the olive oil. I'm not going to be around forever, you know." Once mixed, she smoothed the paste expertly over

flat rounds of dough which she tossed carefully onto the baking stone, surrounded by glowing embers, where they puffed up and crisped.

"Are you talking about Annas?" I asked. "Has his mother asked officially yet?"

Marta shook her head and tried to suppress her happiness. "No, nothing official and there's no rush. Anyway, it's good for you to learn."

There *was* a bit of a rush, though. Marta was eighteen and most of her friends were already married, and soon people would begin to click their tongues in sympathy at her.

Late afternoon the next day, when Annas came up to our grove, ready to walk back down to the village together, I asked him to accompany Marta and Eleazar, explaining that Father and I still had a little work to do.

"Eleazar, you can run on ahead, if you like, but make sure you wait for us before you get to the village," said Marta, keen to avoid gossip, but excited to have some unchaperoned time with Annas. She cast a grateful look in my direction as they left. Once they were out of earshot, Father looked at me enquiringly.

"We can't wait for the olives to ferment," I said. "Don't you see what's happening between Annas and Marta? His mother could visit any day with a formal request. That jar could pay for her whole dowry."

Father thought for a moment. "Will you be alright continuing the harvest without me for a day?"

I beamed. "Why not go at dawn tomorrow?"

"How will I explain to Marta?" he said.

I thought for a moment. He could take one of Mother's carpets, but the idea of parting with something she had made was unbearable.

"Ishmael has our sheep. Why not take them to the capital and sell them?"

"Usually he does that for me."

"This time you've decided to make a trip. You don't owe him any explanation."

He left at dawn the next morning and didn't return until after we were asleep that night.

At breakfast I gave him a look that said, "Well?" which he returned with a blink and a nod that said, "I'll tell you later. Wait."

"Annas," said Father, as we trudged up towards our groves together. "I have a particularly large tree I wish to harvest tomorrow, and I need someone tall to help me beat the olives out of it. If I loan you Eleazar and Marta for the day, could you come and help me tomorrow?"

"I can help you now," said Annas, but Father insisted on the trade.

Once we'd left the others and arrived at our grove alone, Father turned to me, laughed, and lifted me up, swinging me round and round.

"It's good news, then?" I asked, trying to keep my voice down. "Tell me everything."

"I will, but first there's something I must do." We climbed up to the ravine and looked down at the mouldering pile of rags. A bone or two had been pulled out and gnawed by a jackal or fox, but what little flesh had been on the bones had dried and disappeared. Father began a song of thanksgiving, lifting his hands and eyes to the heavens.

"First I sold the sheep," Father said, once we were seated under an olive tree. "I see now why it's better to let Ishmael take them. He knows people in the market and he gets a better price than I managed. Still, that doesn't matter now. Once I had some coins in my purse, I went to the apothecary street. I started at the cheaper stalls, looking for jars made of alabaster."

"Alabaster?"

"It turns out that's what the jar is made from. There's a whole section of the bazaar selling the jars, full and empty. I found a much smaller, cheaper-looking jar and asked about it. He said it

was an alabaster jar of musk. I worked my way up to the more expensive stalls. The merchants could hear from my accent and see from my robe that I'm not from the city. They tried to shoo me away, but I persisted, explaining that I had a dowry to buy and shaking my bag of coins as if they were gold.

"Eventually I ended up in the largest of the shops, surrounded by shelves and shelves of stuff. I don't even know what it was, but medicines and perfume, all in vials of glass or clay and some even in alabaster jars. My head was dizzy from smelling the scented oils and musk which the trader kept presenting me with. I feigned interest in the small bottles of perfume. 'Which is most costly?' I asked, and the merchant showed me."

"What did it smell like?"

"I don't know how to describe a smell, Miri, but it was amazing. He told me that it was spikenard from the mountains beyond the East – a perilous journey across rivers and deserts which takes over a year to make. I don't know if that was just his sales pitch or if it was true. I couldn't have bought even the smallest bottle with the money from our sheep. Then I asked him, 'Is spikenard what's in those alabaster jars?' I pointed at the larger alabaster jars stacked carefully behind other merchandise. 'No,' said the merchant. 'These jars are too large to hold such a quantity of nard. It would be too expensive. You can tell from the markings and patterns. There is only one large jar of pure spikenard in this shop and I'd never risk putting it on display.' I asked him if I could see it, just so that I could impress my daughter who has never left our village. He looked me over and then unlocked a chest and drew out a jar of pure spikenard. It looked identical to ours!"

"Did he say how much it was worth?"

"I didn't want to ask straightaway, so instead I asked him how the jar opens. 'There is no opening, which only adds to its value,' the merchant said. 'It is like an egg, there is no door in or out and yet it contains a golden treasure.'" I had never seen Father so animated and I laughed at his impression of the merchant's voice.

"What happened next?"

"So I asked him, 'How do you open it? They must have got the nard in there somehow.' The merchant smiled at me indulgently. 'It is a secret which even I do not know. All I can tell you is that the only way to release even one drop of nard is to break the jar.' My eyes must have widened which was what the merchant was after. 'I know,' he said. 'Impossible to believe! Who could afford such extravagance? A gift for a mighty king. More than a year's wages poured out in such extravagance.' He was happy to boast of the price to an ordinary villager, knowing I would never actually be his client. We talked a little more and then another customer came and I thanked him and left. I waited until I was back on the main street again and then I couldn't contain myself, I just started laughing and thanking God. People must have thought I was mad."

"More than a year's wages?" I flung my arms around Father and we laughed and cried at the same time.

"Miri, do you know what this means?" he asked, holding me and kissing my forehead. "When we sell the jar it will give us more than enough for both your dowries, with enough left over for Eleazar to ask for any girl in the village."

"When are we going to tell Marta about the jar?" I asked, my eyes shining.

Father thought for a moment. "We'll tell her tonight, after Eleazar is asleep. I don't want us to mention this in front of Annas. When he asks for her, let it be for love."

I climbed the olive trees and beat them with a lightness in my spirit; the patter of falling olives seemed like the sound of blessing falling from heaven. We joined the others for midday meal, and even Eleazar noticed that something was up and asked, "Why is everyone so happy?"

Father and I looked away, smiling, not wanting to catch each other's eye. After midday meal, Annas insisted on helping Father with his biggest tree. Father protested that it would

be too hot in the heat of the day, but both men were in high spirits and headed off together. I lay down next to Eleazar, who was asleep, but knew that a nap was impossible. My head was buzzing with Father's news. God had rewarded my Father for the kindness he had shown a stranger in need. I imagined what Yokkan or some of the other militants would have done, hounding the dying man off their land rather than risk being defiled or made unclean.

Once Eleazar had woken up, we trudged up to the largest olive tree in our grove. Father and Annas had stripped down to their grubby linen waist cloths, tucking them between their legs to preserve modesty for those below. Marta and I began gathering the olives littered around us. Both men were covered in sweat, leaves and bits of twig. "I know it's early, but I don't think the donkeys can carry more than we've harvested," said Annas, and called over to Eleazar, "How about a swim to cool off?"

Father grinned and nodded and both men swung down from the branches, beaming like boys. Marta offered Annas his robe, averting her eyes modestly. I held up Father's for him to shrug into. "Can you de-leaf me a bit first," he said, and I picked up one of the empty olive sacks and wiped him down.

Eleazar whooped ahead of the group, keen for a swim, and the men walked on together with Annas's donkey, both carrying full shoulder bags of olives. Marta and I followed behind with our own donkey.

"Is everything alright? You've suddenly become very quiet," said Marta.

"Yes, it's fine. I'm just tired," I lied. I wasn't fine at all. I would have to wait until that night, once I was sure everyone else was asleep, before I woke up Father and beckoned him up onto the roof. I hoped lamplight would be enough to put my fears to rest. I had to see his shoulder again. As I'd wiped away the leaves and twigs, I thought I'd seen something on his back, just out of his line of vision. Perhaps it was nothing – I only saw it fleetingly.

Perhaps there was a perfectly good explanation for that small, white patch I thought I saw; something that would calm the fear that sat like a stone in the pit of my stomach.

Chapter Three

Muffled and irritated bleating comes from the stable where the sheep and goats are penned in on this sunny spring day. I know how they feel. Today is our weekly holy day and we are expected to rest – even though for me it means more work later. On days like this, our compound never feels big enough. We're all cooped up together with no chores with which to escape interaction. I suspect Marta has forgotten what day it is and is losing herself in her weaving. She's always managed to immerse herself in everyday tasks so completely it's like she's in a trance. I envy her.

In our compound, Shoshanna is napping inside while the rest of us sit in the shade of the kitchen area. Rivka is braiding her hair. I don't know why; she'll only have to undo each braid before Shoshanna wakes up, otherwise she'll get an earful about fallen women and stoning.

I'm helping my husband learn by heart another chapter of the law. He's been allowed to borrow a scroll from the prayer house. Holy Halfai is grooming Ishmael to sit at his feet and become an official apprentice of the law. I'm not happy about this, as it will mean he'll see more of Imma, who still hasn't forgiven me, even

though she has no idea about what really happened. Ishmael has about as much talent for reading as my brother. My reading is much better but I bite my tongue except to praise. I'm trying to keep on Ishmael's good side and he hasn't hit me for a while. The text is written in the holy language, not the language we speak every day. I can more or less understand it, but I have to concentrate.

"This word here looks complicated," I say, pointing at the word *atonement*. I wait patiently as he mouths each syllable. When he eventually succeeds I whisper, "You'll have Holy Halfai sitting at your feet soon enough."

"You shouldn't call him that, it's not respectful," he says with a smile, and I feel as if I'm wobbling on the edge of an abyss, because for a moment he sounded like my father. I look down at the text, forcing my emotions to shut down. I don't even realize what Ishmael is reading aloud until a slow smile spreads over Rivka's face. Ishmael is so caught up in the memorization of each word that he hasn't realized either.

It's too much for Rivka to remain silent. "Ishmael, why don't you get Mariam to read aloud that last part a few times to help you really commit it to memory?" He nods, his brow furrowed as his lips silently echo each word.

I read, "*And the leper in whom the plague is, his clothes shall be rent, and his head bare, and he shall put a covering upon his upper lip, and shall cry, Unclean, unclean.*"

"Do that last bit again, about the covering," says Ishmael, as Rivka smirks.

"Come on, Ishmael," says Rivka, "I expect Mariam memorized this bit ages ago."

I continue, "*All the days wherein the plague shall be in him he shall be defiled; he is unclean: he shall dwell alone; without the camp shall his habitation be.*"

Ishmael manages to repeat this back to me without a single mistake and nods in quiet satisfaction at his success. Rivka looks satisfied too. I keep my face a blank mask. I won't let her hurt me.

Instead, I imagine that I have the same terrible power as one of our prophets of old. "Be defiled forever," I declare dramatically in my head, and white, crusty bulges break out all over Rivka's face as she shrieks, falls to the ground, tearing at her hair and rending her garments, scraping at her face with broken shards of pottery. It almost makes me smile.

At sundown we eat together and I'm finally allowed to do all the chores that have built up over the day. It's late by the time I blow out the lamp. Rivka, Shoshanna, and Ishmael all appear asleep, but as I lie down next to him, I feel Ishmael's hands reach down the hem of my tunic, tugging it up. I never feel ready for his approaches, and try not to tense as it only makes his entrance into me feel more uncomfortable. He is like a farmer eager to sow his seed and digs deep in order to plant it. I hear him labouring on top of me, his mouth so close to my nose that I can smell the remnants of fish we ate for supper. I try to listen out for Rivka and Shoshanna's steady breathing, to reassure myself that they're still asleep. Then I try to think about something else. My mind wanders towards my brother, Eleazar, but thinking about him will only make me tense up more. Instead a memory surfaces from early childhood. I'd woken up in the middle of the night, thirsty for water. I could hear sighs and groans in the darkness, followed by a breathy chuckle. I didn't feel scared by the noises because whoever was making them sounded happy.

"Mother," I cried out. "Mother, I'm thirsty."

There was sudden silence and then the shuffle of clothing being adjusted, and I heard my mother's voice, a little strained, whisper, "Hush, Miri. Don't wake your brother and sister. I will fetch you water."

I felt her approach me in the darkness, patting me and then pressing a clay cup into my hands. I drank deeply and lay back, not quite satisfied because I knew that I had curtailed something secret and special.

Ishmael labours faster and then his whole body convulses, and with a strangled moan, he slumps on top of me. I'm relieved it's over. This is the only part I sort of enjoy, when he suddenly seems weak and vulnerable, as I bear his weight, and he doesn't bat my hand away if I caress the curls on the back of his head. It lasts just a moment before he withdraws, gets up and goes outside to cleanse himself. I'm about to follow him when I hear my mother-in-law whisper, "Let his seed settle in you and take root. You can cleanse yourself in the morning." Rivka lets out a loud, irritated sigh.

Grateful for the darkness, I lie there in silence, and think about the many ways a person can be rendered unclean. Inevitably, my thoughts turn to Father.

I'd woken him in the night and we'd gone up to the flat roof. He'd seemed puzzled, but followed me silently. Then I lifted my lamp and asked him to remove his tunic. I held the lamp up against his back, close enough that he flinched from its heat. It was there; a pale white lesion with crusty edges and a leathery surface.

"Well?" Father asked quietly. I swallowed, unable to speak. "Miri?" Father turned and looked at my face and then he knew too.

"I would never have noticed it, if I hadn't been wiping your back. No one needs to know. We don't have to tell anyone."

Father, his eyes shining with tears, was about to embrace me and then remembered and stopped. He paused in thought for a moment, his head bowed. "Yes, we could probably live like that for quite a while. The mark would grow bigger and possibly others would start, but for a while longer we could hide it." He glanced up. "Until one day it would be me raising my lamp and checking you or Marta or Eleazar and finding marks on you as well. Miri, this uncleanness will spread, not just over me but to others as well. How can I stay here and endanger you all, along with everyone else in our village?"

"I don't know. Maybe it's something else? We don't even know if it's…"

"I will present myself to Halfai tomorrow," said Father. "He will know."

We sat for a moment in silence. I tried to keep my voice steady. "Why is God punishing us? You were just trying to help that man."

Again Father reached for me and then stopped himself; a habit he would continue over the next few days with heartbreaking regularity. "Miri, I trust in him with all my heart, my mind and my strength. I don't understand this, but I'm not trusting in my understanding. I'm trusting in his."

I began to weep and Father watched, unable to take me in his arms. Then he, too, started to cry. I reached out for him. "No," he said, drawing back. "Please, Miri, you must keep your distance. Now go and wash your hands."

And that was the moment that I began to understand the true evil of this disease.

It felt like I didn't sleep at all that night until Marta shook me awake in the morning. "Where's Father?" I asked.

"He left without eating breakfast," she said. "He wouldn't say where he was going. Miri, is something wrong?"

I'm not very good at lying first thing in the morning, but was saved by the sound of one of our neighbours with three cows, who was walking the street with her milk pail, calling out for customers. Marta grabbed a jug and a few coppers and hurried outside.

I was still eating breakfast when Father returned, his face ashen.

"Marta," he said, standing back from us. "We have visitors."

Halfai, his wife, Heras, and a gaggle of the village elders entered the compound, keeping as close to the door as possible. Marta quickly roused herself, bowing to the guests and hissing at me to fill a basin with water to wash their feet.

"No," said Halfai to her. "That will not be necessary. We are

not staying long." He looked around the compound. "Where is Eleazar?"

"I think he's playing with some of the other boys," said Marta. "Why, has he done something wrong? Father, is Eleazar alright?"

"I can go and find him," I said.

"No," Halfai was abrupt. He turned to one of the elders who, with a silent nod, left in search of my brother. "You may not leave," Halfai said, turning back to us.

"I don't understand. Father?" Marta looked to Father but his head was bowed, his hair obscuring his face.

Clearing his throat, Halfai then announced, "This household is quarantined for seven days. For this duration you may not leave. At dawn, a water jug left outside your compound door will be filled with water. Likewise you may leave coins for any items you need to purchase. Heras will ensure that you have what you need."

"Quarantined?" said Marta. "Has someone died?"

Halfai ignored her and continued. "Marta and Mariam, daughters of Shimon, you will disrobe and present yourself to Heras for inspection. If there is any white spot upon you, it will be examined in seven days. If still present, you will become unclean to all others and you will be exiled from the village."

"Are you talking about leprosy?" Marta asked. "Why would we be at risk? I can't remember there being any lepers in our village for years."

Halfai and the elders prepared to leave. "No, you should stay here, Shimon," said Halfai to my father.

"But if my daughters must disrobe?"

"You may turn your face away until their examination is completed."

Marta and I glanced at each other and then at Heras. She was a plump, browbeaten woman who looked at us both with a blend of sympathy and wariness. She bolted the door after Halfai, and my father turned to stare at the trunk of the apricot tree.

"Must we disrobe here? Can't we at least go into the inner room?" asked Marta.

"The inspection must be done in sunlight. My husband knows about these things," said Heras. We began to undress, suddenly self-conscious, although we had bathed together many times. I tried to cover my breasts but Heras shook her head and mimed the position we were to take, with arms outstretched and legs apart. She began with Marta, running her eyes over every part of her body, but careful not to come too close or to touch us. "And now lift your heels, one at a time," she said. Then it was my turn.

I stared straight ahead, feeling goose pimples break out down my back, due to scrutiny, not cold.

"You may clothe yourselves," she said, once she was done. "You are both clean."

I glanced over at Father and saw his shoulders slump a little and his head tip back in a silent prayer of thanks.

As we slipped our tunics over our heads, we could hear Eleazar coming up our street. "Why do I have to come with you and not the others? I haven't done anything wrong."

"Eleazar," Father called out, still facing away towards the tree. "That is no way to speak to an elder. Wait outside until honourable Halfai invites you to join us."

"Why? What's going on?" Eleazar whined.

"Eleazar!" Father shouted. I had rarely heard him raise his voice like this.

We dressed hurriedly, and once our headscarves were on, Heras went to the door, unbolted it and hurried out, clearly relieved to be leaving. Halfai entered, followed by a fuming Eleazar.

"Shimon, son of Hillel, and Eleazar, son of Shimon, you will disrobe and present yourselves before me," said Halfai formally. "Marta and Mariam, you will avert your gaze."

"What? I'm not – " Eleazar's voice was cut short by a look from Father. Marta and I turned to face the apricot tree as Father had done. "Will this do?" Marta asked. I glanced round and caught

a glimpse of Eleazar's face as anger was replaced with confusion and fear. We stared at the tree. My hands began to sweat and my chest tighten.

"Raise your arms like this, and spread your legs," said Halfai. After what seemed like an age, he said, "There is no mark upon you, you are clean."

Hearing this, I almost released my bladder in relief, but then a moment later he said, "Now you, Shimon," and I felt my stomach clench again. This time the examination took longer. I glanced at Marta. Her jaw was clenched. She wouldn't look at me, keeping her eyes fixed on the tree, just as she'd been told.

Halfai sighed. It was not a quick sigh of exasperation but slower and filled with sadness. "Shimon, son of Hillel, there is a white mark upon you."

I felt dizzy and wondered if I would pass out.

"It may be a temporary affliction. If it is gone within seven days, then you need only fulfil the purification rituals and return to your usual life. If, however, the spot remains, then you will be exiled from this village and may never return without warning those around you, declaring – for as long as you are able to do so – the words 'unclean, unclean'."

Marta gave a small cry and turned, forgetting that our father was still naked, and then quickly turned back again, struggling to breathe. We clung to one another, still facing the tree.

"You may robe yourselves," said Halfai, with a note of sympathy in his voice. "I will return in seven days."

We heard him leave and the door shut. "Fetch soap and fragrant spices, I must cleanse myself," I heard him say to his wife out on the street, and we heard their words of sympathy and pity grow distant as they walked away. Eleazar bolted the door. We turned around, and rushed to Father.

"No!" he cried, backing away. "You mustn't touch me. You can never touch me again."

Marta fell to the ground, dragging me with her, as Father

backed away towards the ladder leading up to the upper room and the roof. "I'm so sorry," he whispered hoarsely.

"I don't understand what just happened. Does this mean I have to stay here for a whole week?" asked Eleazar. For a moment I just stared at him, incredulous. Then I hit him as hard as I could across his face.

"Miri, please," Father sobbed, as Eleazar threw himself at me while Marta restrained him.

"I hate you!" Eleazar spat at me. "Why was I cursed with sisters?"

I wanted to hit Eleazar again and again and not stop. I saw Father step forward to separate us, and then step back when he remembered that he couldn't touch us.

"I'm sorry," I said, looking at Father and not Eleazar.

"This cannot be happening," said Marta, dazed, looking over at the carpet she had been working on a day ago when our world was still intact.

"Why can't it be you?" Eleazar hissed quietly at me.

"Please," said Father. "We cannot fight. Let's pray that this mark is just something temporary. God has shown mercy towards whole cities who turned to him. Marta, I will pray in the upper room. It's best I keep away from you all. Could you bring some bedding up?"

"But you can't sleep there. It's not finished," said Marta, ever practical.

"No, but it will have to do. It's only for a week," said Father.

"What if it isn't?" Marta asked. "If the spot is still there next week…"

"Not now," said Father, nodding towards Eleazar. "Miri, if you bring the bedding out and leave it here, I can carry it up the ladder."

"Wait," said Marta, "I'll sweep the room first and check for scorpions. We can also put a carpet down, and try to make it a bit more like home."

Father nodded. "I will be on the roof, praying," he said.

I was going to get the bedding but Marta put a light hand on my arm. "Please, let me," she said, because this was how Marta could show our Father how much she loved him.

This meant that I was left in the compound with Eleazar. "You can't make me stay here," he spat.

"Do you think I want to be stuck here with you for a week?" I asked. "By all means, climb the tree and go swimming. How long will it be before Halfai sends his men after you? What do you think they'll do when they find you, eh?"

"I wish you had leprosy and had to be banished," Eleazar whispered.

I resisted the urge to punch him hard in the face. "What do I care of your wishes?" I said evenly. "Now go and study your letters."

Over the next seven days we each faced our quarantine more or less in isolation. Marta, who was happy to spend all day in the compound anyway, busied herself preparing Father's favourite dishes and working on her latest carpet whenever she had a spare moment. Father stayed praying in the upper room, coming down only to relieve himself. Eleazar, much to our surprise, sat in front of his wax tablet, his face furrowed in concentration, and learned more that week than in the past several months combined.

"Is there anything I can do?" I asked Marta, who just shook her head.

I went into the inner room and lay there in the dark, crying. By the time I awoke it was late afternoon. I was woken by the sound of breaking pottery. Wandering outside, I saw Marta smashing the shards from one of her favourite cooking pots with a rock from her herb border.

"What are you doing? That pot was Mother's," I said.

Marta was crying. "It's my fault," she said.

"What's your fault?" I asked. "Did you drop it?"

"No, it happened a week ago," said Marta. "It was raining and I'd left the pot outside to collect water. Then the next morning I saw that a gecko had drowned in it. I knew what I should do but I just fished the gecko out and poured the water away and scrubbed the pot clean."

She looked at my bafflement, and sighed in exasperation. "Miri, don't you know the law at all? The pot had been rendered unclean. I should have smashed it immediately but it was Mother's and one of my favourites," her voice trailed off. "Now God is punishing us," she whispered.

"You think leprosy is a fair punishment for a pot? What would God's punishment be on my cooking?" I asked, almost managing to make her smile. "This is no one's fault."

I heard what sounded like a stifled sob and looked up at the window frame in the upper room, but there was no one there.

That evening, while Marta had taken food up to Father, the first of our visitors came knocking. I went to the compound door and explained to whoever was there that we were quarantined and not allowed to let anyone in or out.

"I know," a voice hissed back. "The whole village knows."

"Aunt Shiphra!" I leant against the door and we talked through the crack.

"How is your father?" she asked.

"I don't know. He just wants to be by himself and pray. I've been too busy keeping Eleazar out of trouble."

Shiphra gave a knowing laugh. "Yokkan seems to be missing his young shadow, with no one to impress. I've made a bowl of balm for your father. He needs to apply it morning and evening, after prayers. Here, I'll pass it over."

I looked up and the balm appeared over the mud-brick wall. "Thank you, Aunt Shiphra. Father will really appreciate this."

"And," there was a short pause but long enough for me to notice. "There's no need to return the bowl."

"Thank you, that's very kind of you," I said, with a lump in my

throat. "Give our greetings to Yokkan and Mara."

The next visitor was Imma. "I've been trying to find excuses to leave the house all day, but Mother's kept me busy. She knew I'd come straight here. I've brought water for you. I'll fill up the jar."

I hadn't realized that Marta had already placed a jar outside the compound as instructed. "What have your parents being saying?"

"Father is praying for your father now during the evening prayers. Mother wept when she told me the news and I've decided to start fasting from tomorrow. So have some of the other girls. Miri, don't lose heart. I know your father will be better."

I tried to speak but words wouldn't come.

"Miri, are you still there?"

"Yes," I sobbed. "Thank you, Imma. I don't know why I didn't even think of it. I'm going to fast too. Imma, what happens to Father if – "

"Don't think like that," said Imma. "God willing, everything will be alright. Everyone in the village loves your father. I'm sure God will heal him."

"Thank you, thank you so much, Imma." I wiped my nose on my sleeve.

"I saw Ishmael on my way here."

"Were his eyes on his sheep or on you?"

Imma laughed and then she told me the latest village gossip, determined to cheer me up. For the first time that day, even though I was talking to a door, I felt normal.

A little later there was another knock and a voice from outside. This time it was Annas for Marta.

"Come, Eleazar," I said. "We'll finish supper and leave Marta to talk in peace."

Eleazar's anger had fizzled on and off for most of the day but was now replaced with such a deep despondency that even I felt a bit sorry for him. If this had been a rest day he would at least have been able to go outside again now that it was past sundown.

"Is Father going to die?" he asked, as we sat down in the covered kitchen area.

"We're all going to die at some point," I said, not really sure how to answer him.

"But what if Father really is a leper?"

"He won't be. When I was chatting to Imma, she told me that everyone on our street is praying and fasting for him."

"But what if that doesn't work? What will happen to him?"

"It will work. If you want, you can fast as well."

"Are we all going to fast?"

"Except Father, he needs to stay strong."

Once Eleazar was in bed, and with Marta squatting by the door whispering to Annas, I went up to Father to collect his plate and cup and to give him the balm made by his sister.

"They're all praying for you and fasting; the whole village. The spot will go away, I know it."

Father sighed and rubbed his back against the unplastered mud-brick walls as if he could scrape away the spot. "Father, I've been thinking," I said. "And I have an idea." He looked up and I squatted down beside the ladder. "We could sell the jar. I could pass it on to Aunt Shiphra and then Cousin Yokkan could take it to the city. He could find a doctor there or a healer; someone who will come and make you better."

Father smiled sadly as I petered out. "Remember who gave me the jar, Miri? If a doctor could have cured him, don't you think he would have sold it already? No, the jar is not for me. I've saved it for my children; for your dowries. Listen, if I'm not around – " I moved towards him instinctively but he shook his head. "Miri, I don't want you wasting the jar on some so-called doctor. There is no cure for leprosy. If that is what I have, then it's more important than ever that you keep the jar safe."

"Should I tell Marta?"

"Let's wait and see what this week brings," said Father.

"Father, what if – "

"Do you know why so few lepers come through our village?" Father interrupted. I didn't see why this was relevant. "You know it is our religious duty to give them food and alms, but the youths of the village, playing in the brook near the main road to the capital, they've always kept one eye on that road for undesirables. When I was not much older that Eleazar, three women came, in rags and with their bells, calling "unclean, unclean" and begging. We threw stones at them. They cursed us but we didn't stop until we had driven them back towards the capital. That's what I did."

"But Father, you were just young and stupid like Eleazar."

Father almost smiled. "It's what I did, Miri. I cannot describe the shame I feel."

"Are you saying that you think God is punishing you, because remember how you helped the man on our land – "

"No, I'm not saying that. If God wished punishment, he would have given the whole group of us leprosy." Father sighed. "What I'm trying to say is that if I saw those women now, I would give them the jar." He looked up. "That jar is your futures, Miri. You must take good care of it."

I nodded, picked up Father's plate and cup and carried them down the ladder.

"Don't forget to wash your hands afterwards," Father called out.

That night I waited until Marta and Eleazar were asleep, and then opened Mother's chest as quietly as I could. I removed the jar, wrapped it in a torn piece of burlap sacking, and in the light of the moon, dug a hole for it under the fig sapling Marta had recently planted, and buried it there.

Chapter Four

On the third day of every week, our village hosts a market. Makeshift stalls are set up around the well, joining the permanent ones, and the village teems with people. Although the capital can be reached in a day, people from smaller villages and settlements nearby prefer our market, as prices are cheaper. A few wholesale traders from the city come to buy olives, figs, and dates.

A month ago a new seller arrived. It was one of the first warm days of the year and she wore a tunic that barely covered her shoulders, with no robe. Although she wore a headscarf, it barely covered the braids brazenly visible beneath it. She set up a stall full of bright bolts of finely woven cloth, so different from our own homespun. The young men of the village developed a sudden interest in fabric, buzzing around her stall like flies on meat. As for the women, the wealthier clucked over each bolt of cloth, marvelling at the vibrant colours, while the poorer women tutted and shook their heads, bemoaning the corrupting influence of the West.

Despite these mutterings, the seller did brisk trade and returned the next week, even after Halfai denounced her during his holy

day sermon. Now, respectable women lured to her fabric could only glance furtively from a distance before dispatching one of the loitering children to make the final purchase. Then, last week, Halfai, Ishmael and some of the other more religious men waited for her at the main road. As her heavily laden donkey came into view, they threw stones at her until she returned to the city. "Learn your lesson!" they shouted after her. Ishmael told me.

Today is market day and although I'm not particularly late fetching water from the well, the market is already in full swing; everyone wants to finish their trading before it gets too hot. I wait my turn and have just finished filling my water jar when I hear a flurry of exclamations and turn around. Around ten horses are trotting up towards us. Riding them are Western soldiers. They glance down at us in distain. I notice that riding with her arms clasped shamelessly around one of the soldiers, is the seller. She hasn't brought any cloth with her.

The horses trot around the well until they've encircled it. "We now collect tax," says a soldier, speaking our language badly.

There are indignant comments from some of the stallholders, and cries of, "Our tax has already been paid" and "Someone fetch Halfai". I don't know what to do, as I'm hemmed in. Those on the periphery of the square melt into the shadows, wary yet curious. The soldier who rode in first stands watching as the other soldiers dismount and begin to collect all the takings from each stall. They don't count; coins just get thrown into cloth bags which are soon heavy. No one says anything or puts up resistance. We're not stupid. The only one to stay mounted is the female trader, who surveys the scene.

"He's not here," she says to herself. Then she says loudly, "Learn your lesson. Tell that to your holy man."

The soldiers begin to mount and I think it's all over, but then the one who speaks a little of our language points at me. "You," he says. "Drink."

I look down at my water jar, flustered. It's too heavy for me

to pour slowly without water going everywhere, and if this idol worshipper drinks from it, then the jar will be unclean and I'll have to smash it. The soldier gives a nasty smile and points at the wooden bucket. I send it down and draw water for him. He comes over and drinks deeply from it.

"Again, for my friends," he says. The bucket is still almost full. He knocks the bucket into the well and I hear it ricocheting against the sides before it splashes down. He makes me draw a fresh bucket for each soldier. The rest of the village watches, aghast. For the first time in my life I'm grateful to Rivka, as she's given me plenty of practice in masking my emotions. The soldier clearly understands enough of our culture to know that each soldier is ritually polluting our only source of drinking water. We are learning our lesson.

When the last of them has finished, I put the bucket down. I'm sweating and it has the sour smell that comes from fear. I straighten my back and I think they're about to go, but then the same soldier looks at his friends and smirks. Then, in front of me, in front of us all, he urinates into the well. He's uncircumcised. He finishes and then looks up at me innocently, holding out his hands and gesturing for me to pour water on them. I pour the last of the water out. He flicks the water off, derisively, and then mounts his horse and, kicking up dust, they gallop out of the village.

"It's not your fault," says a woman behind me, putting a hand on my shoulder. I nod. I'm shaking.

"Where is Halfai?" someone shouts.

One of the village ladies selling dried figs is wailing. Judging by her empty baskets, she sold a lot today and now her earnings are gone. There are several women waiting with water jars who look at each other, shrug helplessly, and wander back to their compounds. I look down at my full jar and consider myself rather fortunate. When I get back, I tell Shoshanna what happened, and then she goes next door to fetch our neighbour, Ide, and I have to tell the story all over again. Even Rivka listens intently.

"This is Ishmael's fault," Rivka says at the end. "If he and Holy Halfai hadn't tried to stone a woman just for dressing well, we wouldn't be left drinking piss-water."

Shoshanna glowers. "Must you be so vulgar?" she asks, although she can't disagree. We begin a discussion about alternative sources of drinking water which is interrupted by a pounding at the compound door.

"Halfai wants everyone out by the well, even the women," a stout neighbour pants, before hurrying on to knock on the next door. Ide, overwhelmed by the sheer joy of this drama, is torn between going home to change her headscarf and the fear that she might miss something if she doesn't head to the well right now.

We trot down breathlessly together, Ide limping but just managing to keep up. I remember the last time the whole village turned out, but I manage to shake the thought from my head and look around. Ishmael and Young Shimon – not to be confused with Shimon my father – are dragging a chest from the sandal and saddle stall. Halfai directs them to place it beside the well and then he climbs on top, ensuring that despite his short stature, everyone can see him.

"We are surrounded by enemies," he begins, without any formal introduction. "By Westerners and those seduced by them; occupiers of our land, enforcers of ungodly laws; corrupters of our youth; by whores who think they can come to our market under the pretence of selling something other than themselves."

Ishmael and Young Shimon clap and cheer him on, and soon the same villagers who were complaining a moment ago punctuate each statement with a cry of fury. Halfai raises his voice, spittle spraying upon Ishmael and Shimon like blessing. "They dare to come here, on our own land, stealing from us, from our neighbours, our relatives!" I see one of the merchants who sells olive oil actually weep tears of rage and punch his fist in the air. "And what will we do about it?"

Someone shouts, "Holy war! We must rise up!"

This is greeted by excitement or alarm, depending on whether you're a stupid young man or a wiser woman. Halfai sees that he has whipped us up into a frenzy and is in danger of losing control. "I will tell you what we will do about it," he cries out. He pauses so that the crowd grows silent in anticipation. "Firstly, we will never forget. We will continue to support our young men who fight for our liberation and freedom. We will also take care of those who have been stolen from today. I call upon you all to give. Even the poorest of you must have a coin you can spare."

Young Shimon places a flat wicker bread basket in front of the chest, reaches into a pocket of his robe and pulls out three silver coins, dropping them ostentatiously into the basket. Ishmael does the same, and I glance over at Imma, who is nodding her approval. He is followed by Halfai, who ensures his gold coin flashes in the sun before he deposits it. I see stingy old Zechariah heading home saying he needs to fetch his coin, but we all know we won't be seeing him again today.

In our village, merchants are generally considered the richest and laziest, but who can refuse to come forward? The whole village is watching. Halfai calls representatives from each compound forward. I see Marta redden as her name is called, and drop five copper coins into the tray. *What is she going to live on now?* I wonder, knowing she's nowhere near finishing her latest carpet, and needs every coin to feed herself. I glower at Halfai. My sister must pay for his stupid mistake. I will bring Marta food from our table tonight. I don't care if Ishmael beats me.

Finally, everyone has given. Halfai announces that the spring will be impure for seven days and that all drinking water must be collected from the sheep spring. That man has clearly never attempted to carry a water jar, much less scramble up the treacherous path frequented only by sheep. If this had happened in summer when the spring dries up, I don't know what we'd do. Halfai then announces that for the next seven days well water may

be drawn for the purpose of watering our vegetable gardens. After that he will perform purification rituals over the well and the water will be fit to drink again. That's another problem with Halfai; he thinks everything can be sorted out with a seven-day delay.

For us, the seven days of quarantine merely allowed our lives to fall apart a little more slowly. Marta and I fasted for most of it. Nor were we alone. Each evening, Imma came and delivered well water and we talked together through the closed compound door. She'd try to encourage me by telling me of another villager who had joined in the fast for my father, or who was planning to give her dried fish or fresh figs to bring us, usually in cheap, hastily woven baskets which I soon learned not to offer to return.

When she asked me how Father was, and I would say, "He values your prayers, keep praying!", what I really meant was that Father had checked again that morning and that the spot was still there and that nothing had changed.

The food brought to us by the village robbed Marta of the distraction food preparation might have brought her. Anyway, only Father and Eleazar were eating, so we actually had more than we needed. Instead, Marta busied herself at her loom. I even joined her one afternoon, but after my sixth or seventh mistake, as she worried loose one of my knots in the wrong colour while sighing and blowing a strand of hair out of her eyes, I got the message and left her alone.

Eleazar also refused my help. He had taken to studying his letters with religious fervour and was determined to learn them by himself. When I asked what had motivated him, he looked up briefly and said, "I want to know the law. I want to know how to be clean."

I was left aimless. I prayed, although my mind wandered, partly due to hunger and partly because I wasn't sure who I was praying to, except that I repeated over and over again, "Let him be well, let him be well."

You'd think I would have cherished a whole seven days of Father's uninterrupted attention; that we would have sat together in the upper room talking and trying to keep each other's spirits up. Instead, the disease lodged a barrier between us which neither of us could breach even if we wanted to. Father constantly worried about us coming too close to him or touching something he had come in contact with. I felt guilty at how angry I felt that he wasn't getting better – as if he somehow wasn't trying hard enough.

On the last night of the quarantine, Father removed his tunic and I peered at his back, holding the lamp as close as he'd allow me to get. There was no change.

"Miri, we need to talk," he said calmly.

"Father, there's still tonight. We're all praying for a miracle. Let's not waste our time making plans until we have to."

"That time has come," he said. "Perhaps the Lord will prevail at the last hour, but we must still make plans."

"Should I call Marta?"

He shook his head. "I want you to know that I'm sorry."

"Don't." I felt pain in my chest and my eyes blurred with tears.

"I should have been more careful with the man. I shouldn't have come so close to him or touched him. I should have thought about my children and what it would be like for them to be orphans."

"Stop, Father, you don't need to do this."

"Do be patient with Eleazar. I know he can be difficult, but he needs you. Be strong for Marta. Let her care for you. She needs that. Use the jar to find yourselves loving husbands, and start new lives for yourselves. Promise me?"

I said nothing, and just nodded.

"And the jar. Is it safe?"

"I buried it."

"Good. I'm trying to remember the cleansing laws. They may have to break every pot in the house."

"Father," I tried to swallow the lump in my throat. "I don't

think we can do this. How can we cope without you?" Tears began to roll and Father made to embrace me and then stopped himself.

"I will visit," said Father. "As long as I stay outside the village and approach from the main road where I can be seen, I can visit. How could I ever be parted from you? I would die of a broken heart. How could I live without seeing you, the light of my eyes?" His voice broke with emotion. I sat, huddled. "Seeing you will keep me alive."

The next morning Father climbed down the ladder and informed us that the mark was still present. "Marta, I will need my travelling tunic, and a blanket and light sleeping mattress – nothing too big to carry – and some provisions." Marta nodded and wept silently as she prepared Father's request.

Then Halfai and Heras arrived with the elders. It was the same routine as the week before. Father and Eleazar faced the tree while Marta and I stripped. Heras supervised us and then examined us. She left and Halfai entered and Eleazar and Father were next. Father didn't have to strip this time, he simply removed his tunic and stood there in his waist cloth. I was facing the apricot tree but heard the collective intake of breath and knew that Halfai and the elders had seen the white mark.

Once they were dressed again, Halfai opened the doors to our compound. A growing throng of villagers had collected outside and some of the boys were on the shoulders of their friends, staring over the mud-brick wall.

Halfai intoned sentence, and Father tore his tunic as instructed. A basket spilling ash was placed on the ground before him and Father took a handful and scattered it over his head. A bell was placed in front of him with instructions to ring it wherever he went, to warn others of his presence, and he was instructed to tie a cloth over his mouth, lest his breath infect those around him.

"We will all accompany you, as you make your final journey from our village," said Halfai. The crowd outside parted, careful to avoid touching the village leper, as Father stumbled outside.

"Keep your distance," shouted a voice at one of the youngsters who jostled too close to Father. The women from our street began to wail and keen as if Father was dead. A group of youths pushed their way through the crowd. They were Eleazar's friends, faces tear-stained. Eleazar froze for a moment, staring back at them. Then he turned and sprinted in the opposite direction, up towards the olive groves. The elders looked at Halfai questioningly, but he simply shook his head as if to say, "Let the boy go."

As Father watched his son abandon him, his face scrunched up and then he began to wail, beating his chest with his fist.

Marta and I dropped the sack we had prepared for Father to take into exile, and ran to him, but hands held us back.

"Let go!" Marta cried. I heard someone shrieking and then realized that it was me. I was being held by Elisheba, a woman from the other side of the village who had been friends with Mother. I tried to elbow her, but she drew me into a vice-like embrace, weeping but whispering soothing noises in my ear as Father began to walk forward.

Friends of Father walked behind him, weeping, and throwing ash over their heads and tearing at their tunics. Most of them were wearing their best tunics, and this honour they showed my father hurt like the twist of a knife. For a moment, I saw Auntie Shiphra and Marta clinging to each other, buoyed up by our neighbours, all of them keening and throwing ash over themselves and slapping their faces, and then with the jostling they were lost from view.

The whole village followed Father to the well and then out of the village, past the brook to the main road that led to the capital. Halfai was weeping as he laid a large pouch of coins on the ground before Father. "This is a collection from all of us. I wish I could embrace you. You will be missed," he said. I could only see the back of Father's shoulders, which were shaking. "The colony is two days' walk south. Follow the dried riverbed."

"Let me through!" I screamed. "Let me through!" Elisheba released me and I pushed forward. "I'm going with him," I

declared wildly, wiping away snot with the back of my hand. "You can't stop me. He needs someone to take care of him."

"Please, don't do this," Father whispered, backing away.

"I don't care about the disease, I would rather die with you," I said, stepping forward.

"No," Father stumbled back, looking at me pleadingly. "Miri, don't do this. Don't make me throw stones at my own daughter. I will if I have to."

"Please, Father," I sobbed. "Let me come with you. Don't leave me here." Elisheba came up behind me and took me in her arms.

"I have her, Shimon," Elisheba called out.

"Please, take care of my children," Father said, addressing the village.

I heard Marta begin to scream. I had never heard her raise her voice like that before. Elisheba loosened her grip and I pushed through the crowd to her. We clung to one another, weeping and shrieking as Father turned, hoisted a bulging cloth sack onto his back, and trudged off alone into the wilderness.

Heras and the other elder wives waited patiently as Marta and I huddled sobbing beside the road as the rest of the village returned to their usual activities. Two of the women left and returned later with our donkey (which Halfai had minded during our quarantine) and three other donkeys, all laden with bundles.

"Come," said Heras, gently but firmly. "It's time for the cleansing."

We were led, numb and stumbling, down to the brook. Eleazar was already there with Cousin Yokkan and another of his friends who held up a sheet to screen him from us. We could see Eleazar's freshly shaven head above the sheet and the silhouette of Halfai flicking something at him. Eleazar then walked down to the water and bathed behind the sheet.

We waited as he scrubbed alone and had dressed in a new tunic behind the sheet, and then he was led off. One of the elder women

stationed herself near the path to keep men away. The others, including Imma, unloaded the donkeys and began unwrapping cloth bundles of carpets, bedding, tunics, robes and headscarves. These were all tipped into the brook, letting the current wash through them before they were to be tackled with soap.

"Whatever we found in the upper room where your father stayed has been burnt," said one of the women. That included one of Mother's best carpets. Heras pulled out a sharpening stone and a set of shears and began sharpening them, telling us to strip as two women shielded us with the sheet. Everything we wore was thrown into the brook.

Marta's beautiful curls soon lay in heaps on the ground, ruffled by the evening breeze. Mine followed. Heras took out a sharp knife and a bowl of heated water and began to shave our eyebrows and then all of our body hair, finishing by shaving our scalps.

The absence of eyebrows left us expressionless, which probably mirrored the numbness we felt. We were both shivering from cold, exhaustion, and lack of food. Suddenly Marta's body was splattered with blood and then mine was too. It was still warm.

Heras continued to flick us with blood from a small bowl with a sprig of hyssop, wrapped with scarlet wool, whispering prayers over us as she did so. I hadn't noticed the two doves. One had just been beheaded, the other struggled in Imma's hands. When Heras had finished with us, she also flicked the live dove with blood.

"Pass it to the girls," she said, and the bird tried to beat her wings against us. "Now, release the bird to freedom."

We let go of the dove and it flew off.

"Now bathe," said Heras, and gave us both a piece of spiced soap.

We scrubbed ourselves and it did feel good to be clean, even though by now our teeth were chattering.

"These new tunics are a gift," said Heras softly, as we emerged from the water. "And there are also new headscarves. They will hide your baldness and your shame."

Our clothes and bedding were still being washed as we were escorted back into the village. "Your home is being cleansed," Heras explained as she led us to Aunt Shiphra's compound. Inside, Mara – Yokkan's older sister – squatted over a pot by the hearth preparing lentil stew and puffing flatbread on a hot stone nestled in the embers.

We refused to eat but Mara insisted we try a ladleful each. The soup warmed through my body, and in the end I ate two bowlfuls.

After we finished, Auntie Shiphra, still red-eyed from weeping, pulled us to her ample frame. She rocked us for a few moments and then led us into the inner room. Eleazar was already asleep, his back to us. I lay down, and within moments I fell into an exhausted sleep.

Chapter Five

If I make it to the spring in one piece, it will be a miracle. This rocky sheep path was a challenging climb before, but after six days of constant use – with women skidding and slipping in the mud and spilling their jars – it is truly treacherous. I hold my empty jar with my right hand, nestled into the crook of my right shoulder, leaving my left hand free to balance or grab onto boulders. The thyme and mint which grows along the path sides is doing well with all this extra watering, and the path is too populated by women for any sheep to graze it. At my feet are the shattered pieces from a jar that was dropped.

I stop to let some other women pass with their jars full. They place their free hands in mine as I help them down this steep part. This makes me feel happy, because right now they are only focused on getting home without breaking anything and think nothing of touching a leper's daughter.

The spring itself is heaving with women. Some wait impatiently, staring angrily at the trickle which takes so long to fill just one jar. Others have settled themselves on the large rocks around, leaving their jars in a queue beside the spring. I put my jar at the end of the

line. Elisheba, the older woman who was kind to me on the day my father was banished, is sitting with some of her neighbours, and beckons me over.

"Come, sit with us," she says. I notice a nervous exchange between two of the neighbours, who shuffle up the rock, allowing me more space than I actually need. These older ladies can sit with their legs sprawled in whatever position feels most comfortable, but I am careful to sit with my legs together. "And all this fuss because your husband and the other zealots didn't like the way a woman dressed," she says with a rueful chuckle. I redden and keep my gaze lowered. "Of course, I'm not blaming you, child. Look, men are like merchants, buying up rules as if they had all the money in the world, then it's we women who are the camels and have to carry the load for them." The neighbours chuckled.

The women talk easily with each other, occasionally pointing with their chins at the queue of jars. As the youngest I move our jars forward. I don't say much, but it feels so good to be included. Conversation inevitably moves towards matchmaking.

"He's a hard-working boy, even if he's a little on the short side," the first neighbour says, referring to her nephew. "And he has a thing for your sister-in-law," she adds, nodding at me.

"Rivka?"

"How many sister-in-laws do you have?" says Elisheba, and the others laugh. "Well?" she says, "You live with her. What do you think? She's always seemed a little stuck-up to me."

"My sister-in-law has been bred for royalty," I say, with a shy smirk. "She is never troubled with domestic duties and is merely required to wait until the king hears word of her."

The women slap their thighs and cackle. I can't help grinning myself. Usually I'd be careful with a comment like this – you never know when it will come back and bite you – but in the easy presence of these women, I forget about caution for a moment.

"The 'princess', that's what we'll call her," says the aunt. "I'll tell

that nephew of mine to start learning to cook and fetch water!"

I worry that I shouldn't have said anything, but then we're called because their jars have reached the front of the queue. "Please, let me fill them for you," I say, and they don't argue. I help hoist a brimming jar onto each shoulder.

"Sisters, you go on," says Elisheba, "I want to talk with Mariam."

The women scrutinize the slough that was once a path, sigh, and then pick their way down. We return to Elisheba's rock. "How long has it been, now?" she asks.

I know she means since my Father was exiled. "Around two years," I say.

"And Eleazar?"

"Please, Auntie Elisheba, I don't want to talk about my brother."

Elisheba nods sympathetically. "Hillel, my son-in-law, leaves tomorrow for the north. I'll get him to ask around and see if he can find out anything." I thank her and we're silent for a moment. I sense that there is more Elisheba wishes to say. "Mariam, one of Hillel's colleagues returned from the capital yesterday with news."

I hold my breath.

"It's probably better that you talk to him yourself. He said that the authorities have begun a new campaign against the nationalists, the militants, and the insurrectionists. He said…" She pauses and swallows, and then lowers her voice. "He said that they've nailed up prisoners all along the road leading into the northern gates of the city. He said that they've spared no one. Young and old were nailed, whatever their age."

She puts an arm around my shoulder. I say nothing.

"I can introduce you to him if you'd like to hear more," she says, and I shake my head.

"What good would it do?" I say. "And please don't mention this to Marta or Mara or Aunt Shiphra. It'll just make them worried

and there's nothing we can do."

Elisheba nods. "About your father," she says. "Hillel says that everyone in the north is talking about the new doctor. There is no sickness he cannot cure, they say."

I'm about to ask more, but one of the women shouts at me. It's my turn at the spring. I thank Elisheba and turn my attentions to my water jar. I angle it under the trickle of water from the spring above, and as it slowly fills, I ask myself silently how I feel; sometimes it's the only way I'll know, as no one else asks. I feel numb. If Eleazar was nailed or not, what difference does it make? As far as I'm concerned, my brother is dead to me. It's just me and Marta left.

After Father's banishment, Eleazar spent more time at Auntie Shiphra's compound than at ours. His devotion to Yokkan had grown even more since Yokkan had beaten up the first boy to make a joke about Father, and the first boy who tried to stop Eleazar from swimming with them in the brook in case he polluted the water. Auntie Shiphra also shared some of the stigma, being a leper's sister. It was hardest, though, for Marta and me. So many people in the village had prayed and fasted for a miracle and we were a living and constant reminder that those prayers had failed. I even hated myself for it.

Marta rarely left the compound, pouring all her energies into carpet-weaving. Whenever I suggested that she come and help up at our land with the olives, she found some excuse or simply said that we needed the income from the carpets she wove. Annas stopped calling round.

Nothing was spoken because the engagement had never actually been formalized. I don't know whether it was his choice or pressure from his father, but either way, who wants to take a leper's daughter into their home? Marta refused to talk about it but sometimes I'd hear her get up in the night to go outside, and I knew it was to weep in privacy. I bumped into Annas on the street

a few times on my way to the well or returning from the market. The first time he opened his mouth as if about to ask after Marta, but then stopped, nodded awkwardly, and hurried off. After that, whenever we met we would both nod to each other but leave it at that.

Eleazar and Yokkan began to sit at the feet of Holy Halfai and to learn the law. Eleazar burnt with an insufferable new religious zeal, and during the times he was actually home, he would recite long sections of it to us. Marta would nod encouragingly, her hands busy with cooking, cleaning, or weaving.

He became increasingly obsessed with purity laws. Marta was told off one morning in winter for huddling under her woollen shawl. "Don't you know it's a sin to wear wool and linen together?" Eleazar demanded, quoting that passage about not mixing fibres. He was also hard on himself. One morning I caught him slicing a nub of soap with a change of clothes draped over his shoulder.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

He reddened a little. "I must purify myself," he said. "I'm going to the brook to bathe and to wash these sullied clothes."

"El, are you mad? It's winter. You can't go swimming," I said.

"I'm not swimming. I'm washing. It is the law." Then clearing his throat and avoiding eye contact, he quoted the passage in the law that deals with semen emissions.

As he left, I looked at his broadening frame and realized that my little brother was growing up. I didn't like who he was growing into.

Soon the washing line was permanently hung with his drying waist cloths, and then he started enquiring about our menstrual cycles. "It's none of your business," I snapped.

"I am the man of this house," he replied. "And it is my duty to ensure that we keep our holy laws. If you and Marta are bleeding, then you shouldn't be sleeping in the inner room, you should go up on the roof, and wash your bedding afterwards."

"What an expert you've become," I glowered. "If you're so

concerned, then you can sleep on the roof. Or go and sleep with Yokkan. You spend all your waking hours together."

Eleazar stalked off and we didn't see him for over a week.

While Marta wove carpets and Eleazar studied the law and issued orders, I was left to manage our olive groves, to fetch water, and to go to market. At first I tried to drag Eleazar with me to the olive groves, knowing it wouldn't be appropriate for me to be alone up there as a woman. This precaution soon appeared unnecessary.

You see, there is something more contagious than leprosy that people fear catching through contact with the sufferer, and that's misfortune. Wherever I went I was accompanied by tongue clicks of pity, and whispers of "poor girl" and "shame", but never enquiries as to how I was doing, or even a hand on my shoulder. The girls with whom I used to joke and gossip so easily would now offer me their place while waiting at the well, and I would be offered cheaper prices at the stalls around the well. I learned to accept pity and distance.

Throughout this, Imma was the only girl who still talked and interacted with me as if I were a normal person. In fact, the first distancing of our closeness was not because of my father but because of Eleazar.

"I'm sick of him," I told her, as we sat under the shade of a large fig tree near the prayer house. "He and Yokkan do nothing but recite the law and tell us what we're doing wrong. Ever since they started sitting at the feet of – " I tailed off, realizing how insensitive I'd been.

"You mean, ever since they started sitting at my father's feet?" she said.

"I'm sorry, it's not your father's fault. He's our holy man. But these boys strutting around issuing orders…"

"I think it's good that Eleazar is studying under my father. He needs men in his life to show him the right way to live, and we need young men willing to fight for our nation."

"Yes, but you don't understand – "

"No, Miri, you don't understand," said Imma, and got up and left.

The hardest times during that first year of Father's exile, and the times I would long for, were when someone would come knocking at our compound door to let us know that lepers had been spotted out near the main road.

Marta would always press a few coins into my hand and tell me what to buy. I would run down to the market, make the purchases as quickly as possible, never haggling, and then head for the main road. Marta wasn't far behind, always keeping ready some of Father's favourite dishes, which she would wrap into fig-leaf parcels. Sometimes Aunt Shiphra and Mara would join us. Yokkan even joined us briefly once. Eleazar never did, managing somehow to absent himself every time. It just made me hate him.

Father was never alone. He explained on his first visit how lepers travel together, partly for protection from stone-throwers, but also because they lose the sensation of pain in their skin and rely on each other to spot injuries.

"Usually whoever's healthiest leads the way, which right now is me," Father explained during his first visit. He was squatting under a date palm while we kept the required seven paces from him, shielding our eyes with our hands from the glare of the sun. The other two lepers squatted further away from us in the scanty shade of another date palm, giving us a little privacy. One was once a handsome young man; now a lesion grew down his chin and the left side of this throat. The other was an older, stooped woman, in the advanced stages of the disease. "Auntie Demarchia has developed lesions on her eyelids, which means she scrapes her eyes every time she blinks, and now she's losing vision and needs me or Malchus to guide her," said Father. "She comes from a wealthy family in the capital and shares generously with us whatever they give her."

"What about the bag of coins the village gave you?" I asked. "Surely that will last you for a while."

Father smiled. "Don't be angry with me, girls," he said. "The colony is its own village; like a big family. The sickest people can no longer go out and beg, and so we all agree to help each other."

"We're still your family," said Marta gently. "I'm glad you've helped others."

"It's really very interesting," Father continued, trying hard to stay positive. "We operate like a village but with different rules. It's acceptable, for example, for men and women who are unrelated to travel together. Rich and poor live together; leprosy makes us equal."

"How do you know all of this?" I asked. "You've only been there for a few weeks."

"My new friend, Gamaliel, runs our colony. Under his leadership, we've improved our tents and the permanent hovels. There's a better system for burying the dead and deciding who gets their bed. He's even planning on getting the colony some chickens."

"It sounds much better than I thought," I said. "And you look well?" I couldn't keep my voice from inflecting a question.

Father nodded. "The mark on my back is bigger, but it seems to grow slowly. Malchus washes it carefully for me each morning. I'm alive, and today I see my beautiful daughters! Just looking at you is nourishment for my soul."

"Father, when I do this," I said, hugging my arms around myself, "It means that I'm embracing you."

"And the same when I do it back to you," said Father, smiling, his eyes shining with tears. "And how is El?" he asked, trying to keep his tone bright and his eyes from leaking.

"Oh, you know El," I said, "He's always off playing with the other boys. He's become Yokkan's shadow and we don't see much more of him than you…" I tailed off.

"Well," Father coughed, and wiped his eyes. "I'm sure he's very

busy. Tell him I love him and that I miss him."

"I'm sorry about El," I said.

Father shook his head. "Don't be hard on him, Miri. He's still young. He's just a boy."

We talked about general village news and passed on greetings from everyone.

"When will you come again?" Marta asked, after Father had called the other lepers over to eat with him.

"There is a system for everything in the colony," Father said. "No matter how much a village or town weeps and wails as it casts out its lepers, no matter how much they were loved or how high their social standing, no community wants to be visited by lepers. The most they can tolerate is about once a month. If I came more often, then instead of running to fetch you, the village boys will run to collect stones."

"But Father, you're one of us. You're from the village," I said.

"Trust me, Miri, it's always the same. I've learned a lot from Gamaliel."

And so, every month, Father would return. I soon sensed that he was right. Although friends of Father's and some of our distant relatives would press coins upon me when they saw me in the street, saying, "For the next time you see your father," no one outside our family ever came to see him.

Perhaps because we saw Father so infrequently, we were more aware than he was of the steady hold on him the disease took. I remember the first time he dropped a basket containing a large, baked red-belly fish from the Great Lake, a special delicacy. "It's alright," he'd laughed, peeling off the baked skin, now covered in sand, and blowing on it. "The insides are still nice and clean." His hands were becoming clawed.

"Mind, it's piping hot," said Marta, as Father tucked in anyway. I wondered if he was losing sensation in his mouth. Oil from the fish dribbled down his arms, and he rolled the sleeves of his robe