

FIVE

Nobody else is at the well. Ruth has already filled her vessel with water, but is not in a hurry to get home. The ribbons of light and shadow chase each other through the streets, find her hand, and dance up the dark skin of her arm. Dust motes in the sunbeams look more alive than the early risers yawning and shuffling their feet.

“Orpah won’t be here until much later, but Mother said I had to go now—Father must be in one of his moods,” Ruth puckers her forehead in worry at the thought. Orpah is Ruth’s only friend, and their meeting place is the well. Two six-year-olds doing a woman’s job because Orpah’s mother is always pregnant or nursing, and Ruth’s mother tries to keep Ruth away from her father. So, the youngsters meet at the well twice every day with jars small enough for them to carry even when they are heavy with water.

Orpah loves to talk—when her eyes are open, so is her mouth, at least that’s what her brothers tell her. Ruth loves to listen to Orpah’s chatter and laugh with her—a sound that is seldom heard at home. Going to the well is not a chore for Ruth—it’s a gift of free time that her mother gives her.

Ruth lingers, watching the sunbeams slowly establish their claim on the open area around the well, and wonders what made her mother so nervous this morning. She woke Ruth early, quietly with a hand over her mouth and a whisper in her ear. “I have to go back and see what’s going on. Surely Father has left for the market by now.” With that thought, Ruth balances the jar on her head and sets off for home taking the long way through the alleys to avoid the temple square. Her father’s stall is there, and this is his busiest time of year.

When Ruth steps into the courtyard, her mother jumps and drops the shuttle. By the time she pours water from her vessel into the large standing pot, Mother has dropped it two more times. Ruth frowns in concern and looks around warily as she thinks. “This is our peaceful time of the day, when Father’s gone selling cloth in the temple square. What is going on?” Usually her mother’s fingers are flying at top speed across her loom as Ruth sits beside her carding wool and spinning thread. It’s the only time of day that her mother smiles and her little sister sings.

But Mother isn’t smiling today, and her hands are shaking as she tries to untangle the knot created by the last fumble of the shuttle.

LESS THAN A WIDOW

“Where’s Durha?” Ruth drags the basket of fiber close and settles herself on the mat. Mother doesn’t answer, doesn’t even seem to hear her.

“Durha, come here, silly girl,” Ruth calls, trying to match her tone to the late winter sunlight rather than her mother’s gloom. “I need my best helper.”

“Let her be,” Mother voice is shrill. “I told her to stay inside.”

“Is she sick?” “Maybe that’s why Mother is acting so strangely,” Ruth muses.

“Want Ruthie.” From the doorway two-year-old Durha talks around a mouth full of thumb.

“Durha! I told you to stay put until I came to get you.” Mother stands quickly.

“Want Ruthie. Don’t like dark.” Durha puts her chubby arms around Ruth’s neck and leans on her back.

Mother doesn’t answer; she is focused on the street and pulls Ruth to her feet at the sound of approaching footsteps. Pushing her daughters, she hisses at Ruth. “Hide her.”

Knowing that tone demands instant action, Ruth grabs Durha and wriggles into a narrow opening between the round oven mound and a wall, pulling her sister along with her. Pushing back as far as she can, Ruth collapses into the corner and pulls Durha close, covering both of them with her head scarf. “Shh, baby, don’t talk,” she whispers.

“Woman, fetch your daughter.” Father is using his run-and-hide voice, and Durha tries to bury her head in Ruth’s stomach. Survival tactics are learned early in this family.

“I, um, she’s not here. Ruth took her along when she went to fetch water this morning.”

Ruth feels guilty about leaving Mother to face him alone. “Maybe if I distract him, he’ll hit me, but I can run away and hide,” she thinks guiltily. Durha pants her fear, and Ruth realizes she has to stay with her, hide her, protect her—it’s what Mother wants.

Father’s rings flash in the sun as he gestures to the slave behind him. The slave dips his hand into the water jar and lets the water trickle through his fingers.

Father throws back his head and laughs. “You really think I would fall for your puny lies?” With Father, laughter is bad.

“Where is she?”

“I don’t know,” Mother gasps. “I don’t know where they are.”

“Don’t lie to me or I’ll sell you back to the Egyptian slave traders where I found you!”

Mother cries out as Father shoves her.

“Please, don’t let them sacrifice my baby.”

“The fault is yours—you only give me daughters, so I must find some use for them. If I give Durha to the priests for sacrifice, she will fill my purse instead of emptying it.”

Pulling her scarf from her head, Mother shakes her long dark hair loose, approaches Father, and puts her arms around his neck. “Then, let’s couple and make a son,” she whispers in his ear. For a moment as he pulls her to him and caresses her hair, she thinks her plan will work. But Durha moves suddenly, and the sound of her foot hitting the hollow oven echoes through the courtyard.

Grabbing Mother by the hair, Father flings her to the ground, and she cries out in pain.

“Om’ee!” Ruth claps her hand over Durha’s mouth, but it’s too late. Father reaches behind the domed oven and pulls the little girl from Ruth’s arms.

“Leave her alone!” But his foot hits Ruth’s stomach, and she can’t breathe. Gasping and pinned in an impossible position, Ruth tries to wriggle out of the narrow opening.

“Chemosh will smile on us now.” Father rubs his hands together. “The priests are waiting.” He turns on his heel and struts out of the courtyard. “Bring her.”

The slave slings the little girl over his shoulder, head dangling at his back and follows Father. “Want my om’ee!” Durha’s crying fades as the men make their way toward the temple square.

Ruth manages to crawl out from behind the oven, but has to lean on the wall to stop her head from spinning and get her eyes to focus. Durha wails again, “Om’ee!” and Ruth runs after her, bumping into people, still too dizzy to run in a straight line. They curse and push back, but Ruth knows where the men are going, and runs, walks, crawls toward the temple square. Beyond the market stalls, Father ascends the steps of the temple of Chemosh; his slave follows with a now-limp child-shaped bundle slung over his back.

“Come back!” Ruth picks up a rock and throws it, screaming, “Bring her back!” But the men disappear into the gloom of cruel Chemosh’s bloody temple. “I hate you,” Ruth’s screams echo unheard, and the rock she hurls falls far short of the mark, bouncing harmlessly down the stairs. She throws another stone and another until merchants come out of their stalls brandishing clubs.

Dodging and twisting, Ruth escapes through the tangle of booths and shoppers, ducks down an alley and into a shadow in the courtyard of Father’s house.

Mother is still on the ground rocking and moaning, blood oozing from a cut by her eye. Ruth dips a corner of her scarf into the water jar and gently wipes away the blood from her mother’s face. When she doesn’t respond, Ruth hugs her close, but her mother still doesn’t react or open her eyes.

“I’m sorry, Mother,” Ruth sobs. “I couldn’t stop them.”