

THE VIRTUE OF SIN

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Miriam lives in a desert haven far away from the sins and depravity of the outside world. Within the gates of New Jerusalem, and under the eye of its founder and leader, Daniel, Miriam knows she is safe. Cared for. Even if she's forced, as a girl, to quiet her tongue, Miriam knows that her life is far better than any alternative. So when God calls for a Matrimony, she's thrilled; she knows that Caleb, the boy she loves, will choose her to be his wife and they can finally start their life together.

But when the ceremony goes wrong and Miriam winds up with someone else, she can no longer keep quiet. For the first time, Miriam begins to question not only the rules that Daniel has set in place, but what it is she believes in, and where she truly belongs. Alongside unexpected allies, Miriam fights to learn—and challenge—the truth behind the only way of life she's ever known.

A compelling debut novel about speaking out, standing up, and breaking free.

SHANNON SCHUREN works as a children's librarian at a public library and writes from a cozy she-shed in her backyard. Her short stories have appeared in various journals such as *Toasted Cheese Literary Journal*, *Big Pulp*, and *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*. Shannon has never joined a cult, but might be tempted if they serve gluten-free cookies. She lives in Sheboygan Falls, Wisconsin, with her husband and three teenagers.

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, businesses, companies, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

For every woman
who has ever felt
like she doesn't
have a voice.



1

MIRIAM

BUT BECAUSE OF THE TEMPTATION
TO SEXUAL IMMORALITY, EACH MAN
SHOULD HAVE HIS OWN WIFE AND
EACH WOMAN HER OWN HUSBAND.

—1 Corinthians 7:2

The girls never get a choice.

Recite your Prayers, report for Lessons, respect your Elders. Do unto others and as you are told. Keep your hair tidy and your thoughts to yourself. There is no choosing—not of intentions, not of words, not of spouses. This has always been our way in New Jerusalem.

Sixteen years ago, my father chose my mother at the first Matrimony, on a spring night just like this where the Elders were paired as husband and wife. I know this because it's part of our community's historical record, not because they told me. My parents would never speak of anything so personal. That's between them and God. Well, and Daniel.

Even now, as my mother and I swelter in the Communal Kitchen to finish last-minute preparations for tonight's feast, I know that whatever questions I have about tonight will go unanswered. I know only this: At some point during the night, one of the boys will call

my name, announcing our union. That will be my cue to leave the bonfire and head toward the opening of the lava caves at the foot of the mountain. As a woman, it will be the one and only time I'll be allowed in the Marriage Cave. Afterward, I will be forbidden to talk about anything that happens inside. I can't imagine why. I can only suppose the proceedings are too sacred to speak of, or too profane. My own father is the only man I know well enough to ask the reason behind all the secrecy, but I doubt he'd tell me. If I even see him between now and tonight's ceremony; he only steps foot inside a kitchen if he needs something. Though our Leader says there are no menial tasks, it often seems like the women get stuck with the less noble jobs.

Like the chores I've been assigned today. Soak the beans. Seed the peppers. Wash and peel the potatoes. Tend the fire in the wide oven wall, where the goat has been slowly roasting for the past twelve hours. Bite my tongue and don't complain about the temperature, which has been steadily climbing throughout the day in this long, airless room.

Our eyes meet, and my mother reads something in my expression, because she looks away first, scraping the juicy jalapeño pulp across the surface of the carving table with the dull edge of her knife. "Not now, Miriam." She turns to pull a tray from the bank of ovens that span the width of the room. A tendril of steam escapes a crack in the top of the perfectly browned corn bread.

I've spent the past ten days eating nothing but vegetables and drinking nothing but water, as is our custom before a celebration of this magnitude. Yesterday, I would have clawed someone's eyes out for a piece of that bread, but now the stifling heat and the smell of the charred goat turns my stomach, and all I can think about is the row

of windows that tops the tiled walls and how I'd begged to tilt them open, even a fraction. But Mother says the dust will spoil the food.

"Are Rachel and Delilah as nervous as you?" She dumps the bread onto a cooling rack beside the stove, then uses the back of her wrist to wipe sweat from her forehead.

"I'm not nervous."

My mother raises an eyebrow.

Even if she doesn't believe me, it's not a lie. I'm curious and excited, but I'm not nervous. Delilah and Rachel, though, are terrified. They know just as little as I do about tonight, but perhaps they have more to lose. I have no reason to share their fear. I know which boy is going to call my name tonight; which boy is about to become my husband.

My husband. In just a few hours, I'll be allowed to speak those words aloud. My skin prickles into gooseflesh at the thought.

"My husband." I can't resist. I say it low, under the wet slice of the potato peeler, but my mother still hears.

"I don't know who it will be. And even if I did, I couldn't say," she whispers, though the room is empty aside from us. The others have already left to set up Outside. Only my mother has volunteered us to stay behind to finish up, to avoid leaving the safety of the city for as long as possible. She grew up Outside, without our Leader's guidance, in a faraway place called San Diego. Whatever happened to her there left her tight-lipped and afraid, and more than willing to sacrifice a few moments of freedom for the stifling confines of the Kitchen. Just the few steps she will take through the gates tonight, to witness my marriage, have had her worried and fearful for weeks.

Unlike me, she and the other Elders have been on the other side of the fence, many times. They used to hold all kinds of celebrations,

in the sacred tunnels as well as out in the middle of the desert. But that was before one of Daniel's Children betrayed their faith and broke their trust.

She once told me that being on the other side made her feel exposed. Actually, the word she used was naked. What I didn't tell her was that I've yearned for that same feeling. That secretly, I think I might like it. *That* I would never say aloud. Like many of my thoughts, it's unsuitable and liable to earn me a punishment. The Elders say I'm incapable of keeping anything to myself, but sometimes I manage. Still, it's impossible for me to keep entirely quiet, especially on a day this special.

"Why does everything about tonight have to be a secret? It's in the Bible. 'He who finds a wife finds what is good and receives favor from the Lord.' Proverbs 18:22." I'm allowed to quote Scripture; sometimes it feels as if that's all I'm allowed. For mainly this reason I've retained a great many of the passages we've studied in the classroom, a skill that both delights and frustrates my mother. "And anyway, I don't need you to tell me who he is. I already know."

"What?" She holds her knife aloft, the newly skinned potatoes lying forgotten in front of her. "There's no way you could possibly know that. Unless—" She narrows her eyes. "Has one of the boys tried to speak to you?"

My mother has always possessed the ability to look past my babble and straight into my heart. "Of course not," I say, the words tumbling out in my haste to explain. "No one's spoken to anyone." This is not a lie, and so hopefully will pass her scrutiny. "I just . . . I dreamt of him. There was music, and a bonfire. And we were in the cave—"

Her eyes widen, and she drops the knife to grip my hands. "Who told you this?"

“No one.” I shake loose. “I told you, I dreamt it.”

Her face relaxes into a smile, and she presses her forehead to mine. “I knew it,” she whispers. “I knew you had a gift. He’ll be so proud.”

Her declaration sends a thrill through me that’s almost as good as a gust of cool air. As the reincarnation of the Prophet, our Leader has always been the one to interpret the messages we receive from the Lord in our dreams. But I’d always secretly hoped that one day, God might choose to communicate with me directly. “Who will be proud? Father? Or Daniel?”

“Yes. Both. They both will.” My mother wipes her hands on her apron, moves the clasp on her crucifix to the back of her neck, and adjusts her head scarf, checking for loose hairs with a practiced finger. There aren’t any, of course.

“Did you love him?” I ask.

Her hands still. Her face changes. “Who are you talking about?”

I’ve spent years studying her every expression. She’s taught me to interpret the faintest sign of displeasure, but I don’t need any lessons to read the annoyance in her face.

“Father must have loved you,” I say. “Because he chose you. But on that night, did you know—”

She presses her lips together. “Stop. Do you want to risk a Shaming?”

“Surely you can tell me something. In a few hours, I’ll be a woman, too. What will a few details matter now?”

She turns away to tend the meat, so I can no longer see her face. I watch her hands instead, their choppy quick movements as she uses the poker to stir the coals. “The less you expect, the better,” she says. “Marriage should feel like a gift, not an obligation.”

“After sixteen years, what’s one more obligation?” I toss the potatoes into a bowl, angry at myself as much as her. What did I expect? She lives to obey; in this regard she’s exactly like Rachel. Or Rachel is like her. This may be the one thing the Bible has gotten wrong. Familiarity doesn’t always breed contempt. Sometimes it breeds likeness. After Rachel’s mother left New Jerusalem, my family took Rachel in and raised her. And though they have no blood ties, my best friend is more my mother’s daughter than I am.

Rachel comes in just then, as if I’ve summoned her with my disloyal thoughts. And behind her, my father, trailed by a passel of small children. None of them are his; younger kids just always seem drawn to Father, despite his complete indifference to their adoration. I think it’s his bald head they find unusual.

“What’s taking so long?” He wrinkles his nose as he surveys the necessary chaos that comes from preparing a meal for over one hundred people. “The men are getting hungry.”

“The music has started!” Rachel says, darting over to me. “Can you believe it? It’s finally happening.” She fans herself, sweat already beading on her upper lip. In a few more minutes, her dark hair will be as frizzy as mine. “Whew. It’s hot in here,” she says. “What can I do to help? The faster we finish, the sooner we can go Outside.”

My mother turns pale.

“Ruth. You look tired,” says Father.

Why is it men never curb their tongues? Of course she’s tired. We’ve been cooking in this furnace for the past six hours. Personally, I think Father looks stiff and uncomfortable, the lines on his face more pronounced today. It could be the heat, or the unfamiliarity of the kitchen. Either way, I keep this to myself.

“Miriam. Haven’t you been helping your mother?” He takes a step

toward me and trips over Delilah's youngest brother. "Damnation, Ezekiel! Why are you always underfoot?"

"I'm Zacharias. And I'm small." He bursts into tears and dives under the table, upending the bowl of potatoes.

Mother holds the platter of meat high, stepping carefully around the errant vegetables rolling across the floor. "Everything's fine, Boaz. Miriam's been a big help. In fact, I'm pleased to see how much she's improving. She's going to make someone a wonderful wife."

He makes a noncommittal noise in the back of his throat and crosses his arms. Mother glances at his gleaming white linen shirt and pants and then looks for somewhere else to set her tray, while I kneel to gather the spilled food, the back of my neck prickling under the weight of Father's stare.

Rachel goes around to the other side of the table to coax Zacharias out. She crosses her pale eyes and wiggles her thick eyebrows, and he giggles through his tears. "I want my mommy," he says, as he crawls into Rachel's outstretched arms.

We all have our talents. Rachel's is mothering. Mother's is cooking. Mine isn't either one. I'm also not going to make just *someone* a wonderful wife. He has a name. But like any woman here, my mother never really says what she means.

"I'll get this," she says. Mother pulls a potato from my grasp and waves me off. "We're nearly done here anyway. Go and help Rachel with the children. It's too hot in here for them, and there's no one in the Medical Shed to treat heatstroke today." Like my mother, the other nurse has been temporarily relieved of her Vocational Duties to help prepare for tonight's festivities.

I hesitate, but freedom tugs at me like the devil's hand. Besides, she's used to cleaning up our messes. It's how she shows her love.

I stand and brush off my skirt, then Rachel hoists Zacharias onto her hip, and I grab the tray of vegetables and corn bread my mother has carefully arranged. Father holds the back door, and as we step out I'm rewarded with a rush of fresh air that cools my heated skin so quickly it makes me shiver.

"Straight to the feasting tables. No dawdling," Father says to me, then turns to the other children. "I need to move the benches from Chapel out to the bonfires. Who wants to help me?"

Some of the older children raise their hands and follow him toward the city center, while the rest scatter, leaving Rachel and me to deliver Zacharias and the rest of the food.

The sun is slipping low in the sky, hovering above the mountain ahead and blinding us, so that we have to make our way to the front gate almost by memory. We cut through the welcome shade of the Pavilion, the open-air shelter where most of our communal Gatherings take place, including our yearly Last Supper and the Epiphany Festival. This used to be as near to the sacred tunnels as we ever got. But tonight, because it is the most important of all our celebrations, Daniel has decreed that the Matrimony will actually take place inside them.

It won't be the first Matrimony—that was the marriage of my parents and the other Elders of the First Generation—but it will be the biggest. This is the first time God has spoken to any of the Second Generation, and the first time He's spoken to so many at once. And most important, at least to me, it's the first time He's spoken my name.

My heart sings with excitement as our feet lead us down the path and through the gates stretched wide to allow the men through as they carry out the tables and benches and other equipment needed for tonight's celebration. Once we cross Zzyzx Road, we are officially

Outside for the first time in our lives. I am overcome by a feeling I struggle to name. This road that stretches on forever, the endless expanse of desert and sky, unblemished by gate or guard—these are the things the Elders have warned against, and yet, here I am. Untethered. Free. At least for one night.

Rachel grabs my arm and points to the flags waving in the distance, stark white against the dark rock of the mountain to mark the entrance. “There it is! The Marriage Cave!” She raises her voice to be heard above the rhythmic blend of harp, reed, and bells streaming from big speakers into the open air—the same sound system that in just a few hours will be used to announce our futures.

We hurry past the girls’ bonfire, skirting a cluster of younger girls playing hopscotch in the sand, and over to the feasting tables. The lavish buffet I helped my mother prepare will soon be set out; until then, the rest of the women straighten tablecloths and arrange bread and sweets into piles. Delilah is here, too, moving a plate from one side of the table to the other and then back again as her mother, Chloe, supervises.

Zacharias bursts into tears at the sight of his mother and squirms to be put down. When Rachel releases him, he runs to Chloe and buries his face in her skirt.

“There you are! Your sister and I have been looking everywhere for you!”

Delilah rolls her eyes heavenward. “I told you he was with Rachel, Mother.”

“And I told you to keep an eye on him,” Chloe says, but she sounds only mildly exasperated.

Normally, Delilah is tasked with wrangling her many brothers and sisters. But today is a special occasion. With no Lessons, and the

Elders preoccupied with Celebration preparations, it's expected that the children should also get a chance to enjoy this tiny taste of freedom. Plus, it's her wedding day.

As Rachel and I hand over the trays of vegetables and bread, another mother, Judith, slips the crying boy a cookie, and his tears immediately evaporate.

"Delilah, move those cookies to make room," Chloe orders.

Delilah wrinkles her nose as she sticks her tongue out at us, her freckles blurring into one sandy cluster, but she does as she's told. Until we serve our husbands, we must serve our parents.

Judith hands us each a cookie and wipes her calloused hands on the apron tied over her dress. The women are all in nicer clothes tonight, the dresses they normally save for Chapel. Rachel and I and the other girls will wear white for the wedding, while Judith and the other Elders are dressed in traditional cream linen. "How are you girls feeling? Nervous? Excited?" she asks.

I'm tongue-tied all of a sudden, and to cover, I shove the cookie in my mouth. Judith is almost as good a cook as my mother, and she's definitely a better baker. Not that she looks it. She's thin and wiry, like she never eats. And maybe she doesn't. With a husband and six sons, maybe the food never makes it to her plate.

"We're excited *and* nervous," Rachel answers for both of us.

Judith smiles. "The boys are the same," she says, waving a hand toward the glow in the distance. "I finally sent Caleb and Marcus away. They were more hindrance than anything."

"Oh, I can't imagine *Caleb* being a hindrance. Can you, Miriam?" Delilah asks.

I choke on my cookie, and Rachel gives me a raised eyebrow and a tiny shake of her head. "What can we do to help?" she asks the

women, too loudly.

“There’s still the meat—” Delilah’s mother says, but Judith interrupts.

“Let them go, Chloe. This is their special night.” Judith winks, and this time I’m sure it’s at me.

Delilah doesn’t give her mother time to reconsider. “Let’s go.” She crams the cookie in her mouth and links her arms through both Rachel’s and mine, pulling us away from the food and the fire and into the darkness of the night desert.

We walk, mostly because we can and everyone else is too busy to stop us, but we’re careful to keep Zzyzx Road and the city fence to our left, while the voices of the women and children fade at our backs. We weave our way slowly between scattered rocks and the spindly Joshua trees with their branches raised toward heaven in prayer, like their namesake at the Battle of Jericho. But what do these trees pray for, I wonder?

Sometimes I imagine they were once people, like us, stuck out here so long they grew roots. A blasphemous thought, I know. I pluck one of the waxy blossoms sprouting from their outstretched arms like pale fingertips and tuck it behind my ear. Unlike other wildflowers, these don’t bloom every spring. Their appearance is the very reason we’re all out here tonight. It’s a sign God has finally called for another Matrimony.

Rachel finishes her cookie and dusts the crumbs from her face. Then she squints into the darkness. “It’s time to go back.”

I don’t ask how she knows. Rachel’s sense of duty is as inborn as the dent in the bridge of her nose, the one she rubs when she’s nervous.

“You two go on,” I say. “I’ll follow in a minute.”

“Or you could just come with us now. We still have to change out of our work dresses.”

I sigh. “I have to pee, Rachel.”

She wrinkles her nose, then massages the dent. “There’s no toilet out here. You can go at the house.”

“I can’t hold it that long. I’ll go behind this tree.”

Delilah’s eyes widen with glee; Rachel’s with shock. “You can’t,” Rachel says.

“Of course I can. The men do it all the time. I’ve seen them.”

At her gasp, I amend my words. “I don’t mean I’ve actually seen them. I mean, I’ve seen my father go off by himself, behind the Pavilion. So why can’t I?”

“Because you’re a girl?” Rachel counters.

“But it’s still pee,” Delilah says. “There’s no difference between male and female pee.”

Delilah has done enough diaper changing to know, and Rachel gives up the fight. “Even so, I’m not going to stand around while you pollute the desert. Come on, Delilah.”

“That’s why I told you to go ahead,” I call after their retreating backs. “And it’s not pollution if the animals all do it.” I don’t actually have to pee, but my argument is still valid.

I walk a bit more until I’m far enough away from the bonfire so that if I squint, the flames are hands holding up a column of climbing smoke as an offering. The sun has slipped all the way behind the mountain now, and above me, stars decorate the sky like thousands of candles lit in honor of tonight’s marriages. The magnitude of all this beauty, all this freedom, leaves me breathless. I know this is the same desert I see every day, but Out here, it’s wild and untended. Here, the ground is unswept, the sand coarse and rocky, the bunches

of yucca and desert paintbrush scattered by God instead of gardener. The farther I go from New Jerusalem, the less evidence I see of any human hand.

I walk until I see the guards. I knew I'd run into them eventually, and that I'd have to stop before they caught me. We were told they would be patrolling during the celebration. Even Outside, there are still boundaries we can't breach. But it doesn't matter, because I've come far enough. I turn and duck behind one of the taller trees, my heart pounding in the stillness. For the first time tonight, I am afraid. Not of being chosen, but of being caught—here, at the boys' fire. Tonight, of all nights, I shouldn't risk this.

But I need to see him one more time.

2

MIRIAM

SCARCELY HAD I PASSED THEM WHEN
I FOUND THE ONE WHOM MY SOUL LOVES.

—*Song of Solomon 3:4*

Their fire is built close to the mountainside, and they gather round it, dark shapes that move and ripple in the light of the flames. My skin tingles at the sound of their laughter. Girls aren't allowed to speak in the presence of boys, and because we're always separated, they rarely speak in ours. The only time I see any boys for any length of time is at Chapel. And at Chapel there is no speaking unless Daniel invites us to respond. That's a rule even I have never broken, though going a whole day without talking is the worst form of torture.

But these boys—they're so loud! As they jostle and play, they seem more alive than the girls I talk to every day. I taste jealousy, sour and hot in the back of my throat, at their easiness with themselves and one another. At their right to speak their thoughts aloud. I'll never know that.

And then I see Caleb.

He is illuminated, his skin bronze against the white of his shirt, his blond hair shining as the others fade until they are but a gray fuzz and only he remains. We were friends, up until the age of Separation,

which was when Daniel decreed the oldest of the Second Generation must begin Lessons. Before that, we all used to play together, though I don't remember Caleb making me feel like this. Mostly, I remember him as quiet. And determined. Once, when the chain kept coming off an old bike Rachel and I shared, he'd fixed it. Even after my father told me it was my own fault, and that seven was too old for riding bikes. Caleb had waited until my father went to a meeting at the Council House, and then he'd squatted in the dirt at the foot of the driveway and worked on it until it was done. I still remember him like that, holding my handlebars with muddy hands, a big smile on his face. "I cleaned out the links. It should work fine now."

That was the last time we spoke. It was also the last time I saw the bike. Father said it was time for me to put away childish things and gave it to one of Delilah's brothers.

Caleb turns to say something to the others, and his deep voice carries through the darkness, wrapping me in its warmth. I should feel guilty for listening, but it's only fair. He has heard me speak since the Separation. A few months ago, Rachel and Delilah and I were lingering outside the girls' schoolhouse after Lessons, in an effort to avoid going home to our chores. I was last to leave, and as I turned to go, I saw him around the corner of the building. I don't know where he was supposed to be, but I'm sure it wasn't standing there, spying on us.

When he knew I'd caught him, he didn't blush or bolt. Instead, he smiled. Then he bent down, traced something in the sand with his finger, and pointed at me before he slipped around the other side of the building. By the time I rounded the corner, he was gone. But he'd left me a message, written in the same language we use for Bible Study. A heart, an ear, and a mouth with sound waves coming from

it. I love to listen to you speak.

Even now, months later, the memory makes me shiver with some thrilling emotion I can't name. I should have felt obligated to report his infraction, but I didn't. Instead, I stared at those precious symbols until they were burned into my memory. Then I erased the evidence and kept his secret.

Will he keep mine?

He stares into the darkness where I'm hiding for a long moment, his body still as the others move around him. His gaze is drawn to mine like a magnet, though he can't see me here. Can he?

Then the corner of his mouth curves upward, like the crook of a finger. It isn't just a smile, it's an invitation. The tether between us grows ever stronger; the heat that infuses my body far greater than the desert sun. Surely this must be love. Has God sent him dreams of me? Will I finally know what it's like to speak to him? Hear his secret thoughts? Touch him? Be touched—

"Aha! Caleb. I knew it!" a voice calls from behind me.

"What are you doing out here?" I whisper, though I want to shriek.

"Running away." There's no whispering for Delilah.

"What? Why?" I peer behind her into the blackness. "Running away from who? Where's Rachel?" If we get caught out here, especially on this night, our punishment will be severe. And Delilah's pale skin glows in the moonlight, a beacon for anyone who looks in our direction.

But she's oblivious to my concern as she flops down beside the tree. "I'm teasing. I followed you. I didn't believe your pee story for a minute. You're trying to get a better look at the boys, aren't you? Why didn't you invite me?" She picks up a stick and traces a pattern in the

dirt. She's always doodling—in her notepad, in the sand. Even on her clothing. About the only place I've never seen her draw is in her Bible.

As I crouch beside her, I see this isn't just any doodle. It's a circle with an arrow pointing out the top. Husband.

Caleb left me this symbol, too, just last week. Right after the Matrimony was announced. Along with another circle with the curlicue tail—choose—and the circle above a cross—wife.

"Don't worry," she says, still drawing. "Caleb will pick you. I've seen him watching you at Chapel. He likes you." She moves her hand, and I see she's made the jagged scribble for fear. Does she know about our secret communications? Has she noticed me scouring the sand for evidence of his interest?

She brushes her hand across the sand, smoothing it out. "I just wish there was another option."

There are nine girls taking part in the Matrimony tonight, and of all of us, Delilah is the least interested in marriage. She's also the youngest, 14 to most of our 16, so she's had two less years of her mother extolling the virtues of the institution. Rachel and I are the eldest of the Second Generation. Some of our Brothers and Sisters are too young for the responsibilities of marriage. Privately, I think Delilah is one of them. But she has bled, so the Lord has determined her worthy of a husband; she must go forward tonight.

"What other option would there be?" I ask. "The Lord wants us to be wives and mothers."

"I don't know. A vessel for knowledge, maybe? We could be teachers. Like Phoebe."

It's only because I love her so well that I don't remind Delilah of the shame Phoebe endured before becoming a teacher. She says we are all her children, but none of us really believes that. "I think even

Phoebe would rather be a mother.”

“That’s not true,” Delilah argues. “Phoebe says knowledge is the most important gift.”

“She has to say that. She’s a teacher. Obviously, the gift of life is the most important.”

Delilah rolls her eyes. “There are plenty of smart women in the Bible who didn’t marry or have babies. And don’t tell me you’ve never wondered what it’s like Outside.”

I can hear Rachel’s voice in my head, a firm never, leaving no room for doubt.

But I have.

Oh, I know all about the dangers. The rest of the world does not live as we do. Only when we’re locked inside the gates are we safe. Outside, people do unspeakable things to one another. My secret shame is that I’ve tried to imagine these things. But all I can ever picture is this vast desert, stretching on and on. Sometimes I dream of others, faceless people out beyond the mountains, their bodies contorted in something other than prayer. But the images are hazy and jumbled, and they fade when I wake, because I have nothing concrete to compare them to. Though I’ve been taught all about the dangers of sin, no one wants to tell me what it looks like.

“I’d rather go Out there than be chosen by a Faithless man like Azariah,” Delilah says.

Azariah was Phoebe’s husband. He betrayed her with another woman and then ran away, leaving her behind, childless and alone, to live with the shame.

“But . . . that would never happen to us.” Would it?

“How can you be so sure? What if I get picked by a husband I can’t love? Or what if he decides he doesn’t love me?” She tosses her

stick aside. “This is it. We can’t be chosen twice. If they betray us, we’ll be forever Stained. Just like Phoebe.”

Before I can think of a response, the world goes dark. Someone’s doused the boys’ fire. I look for Caleb one last time, but he’s hidden behind the cloud of hissing smoke. Then the music cuts out on the speakers above, and a sharp squeal reverberates off the mountain walls.

Delilah bounces to her feet, her hands pressed against her ears.

“We have to get back,” I say. “If we’re late . . .” I don’t finish. Like everything else about this night, I don’t actually know what will happen if we’re late. Will we be Shamed? Held in Contempt, our names forever excluded from the Book of Truth? All I know is there’s no time for keeping to the shadows. I take Delilah’s hand in mine and break into a flat-out run, the rocky sand dragging our stride and chafing inside my yucca-leaf sandals.

I slow to skirt an outcropping of dark boulders. I think we’re safe from punishment now that we’re within view of the gathering; the clumps of Joshua trees have thinned enough that we can see the dark silhouettes of the women and girls as they move in and out of the torchlight near the mouth of the cave. But I don’t see the boy until it’s too late.

I trip over his body and go down hard on my knees, the coarse sand scraping my bare legs with granules sharp as glass.

“For heaven’s sake—” The rest of the words die in my throat at the distinct and deadly sound. I know the night amplifies everything, but the snake’s rattle is still impossibly loud. It comes from everywhere at once, and fear puckers my skin like a thread pulled tight at my neck. Hours pass in a matter of seconds as I bite my tongue and try to gauge how likely a target I am to the unseen reptile. I’ve

lost a sandal, and my skirt is twisted about my knees, leaving a good expanse of ankle and calf exposed. My muscles twitch, urging me to run, but movement will only tempt it.

"It's moving away." Delilah's voice is low, for once. "Give it a minute." She must be standing behind me, though I don't dare turn my head to look. Instead, I watch the boy who lies beside me, eerily still. He may be dead. The thought hits me sudden and hard, like the rock that struck Goliath.

"Are you all right?" The words slip off my tongue before I can catch them back. The sand is cold, which must be why my hands tremble as I reach toward the shock of blue-black hair. I turn toward Delilah. "It's Aaron."

"The Outsider?"

"He's not an Outsider anymore." The words are more my father's than my own. As a member of the Church Council, he is constantly reminding me of our obligation to welcome new members into our fold. And it's been many months since Aaron's family renounced sin and joined our community. They are family now, or so I'm told.

"Are you alive? Can you talk?" I press my fingers against his neck, and relief warms them as I feel the fluttering of his pulse. "Do you need help?" I move my hands along his arms and then down his legs, searching for the wound. "Where did it bite you?"

"My . . . foot."

His hand clutches mine. Thankfully, the night conceals my blushing as I lean toward his foot. There. In his heel. Two tiny pin-pricks, each oozing a dot of blood.

"Poison?" His voice is muffled. "Will I . . . die?"

"Lie still," I say, though he hasn't moved anything except his hand since I fell over him. I pull my scarf from around my neck and

wrap it around his ankle—snug, but not so much it cuts off his circulation. I hesitate only a second before I press my mouth to the bite.

Delilah inhales sharply, and Aaron's foot jerks, but I hold it firmly and suck a mouthful of blood from his heel, careful not to swallow before I spit it onto the ground beside us. My heart pounds with fear, and my tongue tingles from the venom, but I keep going, sucking and spitting, as I mentally count my sins. I shouldn't have spied on the boys. I shouldn't have spoken to *this* boy, much less touched him.

"Miriam?"

The sharp, imperious voice isn't Delilah's. Delilah would need more than three syllables to convey that kind of superiority. No—someone else has seen us. Of all the people to witness this, did it have to be Susanna? Her willowy beauty, though the envy of us all, masks the heart of a viper. Though that probably won't keep her from being chosen first tonight.

"Did you just *touch* him? With your *mouth*?" Susanna steps around the rocks, her words coming out in a hiss, as if by whispering in his presence she will manage to avoid the punishment I am certain to receive. But she's right; I definitely shouldn't have put my lips on any part of his body. "What is the quote from James? 'The tongue is restless evil, full of poison?'"

I spit one last time into the sand and wipe my mouth. "His foot is full of poison," I counter. "And you're forgetting Proverbs. 'Death and life are in the power of the tongue.'" I don't even have to search for the quote; it comes as if by magic. There is a buzzing inside my head, a hum with no rhythm. My hands shake and my heart pounds and I am aware of everything at once: the cooling sand beneath my knees, the moon rising behind us like a spirit, the blood flowing through the foot that still lies in my lap. I hastily push it aside and spit again.

Maybe I've been poisoned.

"I wonder what Daniel will have to say about your tongue?" asks Susanna.

Delilah wrinkles her nose. "Aaron was bit by a rattler. Why are we still talking about tongues?"

"Confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another so you may be healed." Susanna's voice is mocking now. "How can you heal, Miriam, if we don't confess this incident?"

I shake the sand from my missing sandal and pull it back onto my foot. "What was I supposed to do, let him die?" But we all know there's no denying I've sinned. If Susanna shares what she knows, I'll be punished for sure.

"Brothers and Sisters!" Daniel's voice cuts through my threat. He does see all, even in the dark.

"People of New Jerusalem!"

My heart stutters. Our Leader is speaking through the sound system to everyone. Not just us. I haven't been caught. Yet.

Muted cheers waft toward us, and then the crowd quiets to hear his message.

"Tonight, we join in celebration, as the first members of our Second Generation—" Louder cheers this time, and he waits for them to quiet before continuing, "take the next step on their journey to Righteousness!"

Aaron scrambles to his feet, though I'm not sure if it's our bickering or Daniel's words that shock him into mobility.

"Slow down," I say. "You're going to spread the poison otherwise. You need to lie back and elevate your foot."

"Stop talking to him," Delilah pleads. "We need to hear Daniel's Word."

“As you know, the world Outside has become a dark place,” Daniel continues. “The dreams I had in my first lifetime, they are all coming true. People worship at the feet of false idols instead of their One True God. Nations fight wars, driven by great beasts of leaders who’ve been corrupted by the horns of power and greed.” He pauses, and I can feel the crowd hold its breath.

“The world is doomed. And I dreamt it all. And then I wrote it down. I shared it with the world, in the Bible, as the Book of Daniel, all those years ago, so that many could be saved. It became Gospel. But what happened? They looked, but did not see. They heard, but did not listen. They read, but did not believe. And so the Lord asked me to return. He granted me visions once more and ordered me to gather my flock of dreamers, my True Believers. To build a new city, a new beginning, a New Jerusalem. A sanctuary in the desert. A second chance at Salvation. Seventy years until the Tribulation! Seventy years to save our souls!”

Another pause. More cheers. It’s a story we’ve all heard many times, the history of how our community came to be. Tonight, with Daniel’s voice echoing hollowly off the mountain, it makes me feel small. Scared. Like everything else, his words are easily swallowed by the vast Outside. But maybe that’s the point.

“In New Jerusalem, do we fear the Tribulation?”

We all join the chorus of “no”s, Susanna most fervently.

“Of course not!” Daniel agrees. “Why would we? For though we know that the world is destined to come to a terrible end, the Children of Daniel shall be spared! Through our dreams, God has called us to Salvation!”

The crowd grows louder, more excited at this news that isn’t new.

“You share with me your dreams, and I alone interpret His word.

All dreamers worthy shall have their names written in the Book of Truth. And all in the Book shall be delivered! Tonight, let us add the names of these couples to the Book!”

The crowd erupts into screams and cheers.

“Is that true?” Delilah asks. “Once we’re married, we’re in the Book? Phoebe never said that.”

“There’s a lot they don’t tell us,” I say.

Aaron meets my gaze and bobs his head in silent thanks. Then he bolts, sand churning in his wake as the darkness swallows him whole.

“He’s stalling,” Susanna says, finger-combing through her lustrous hair.

“Looked like he was moving pretty quickly to me,” Delilah says.

“Too quickly,” I add. He’s probably worried about being late for the Matrimony, but he should be looking for one of the nurses. There’s no way to know now if I got all the poison. If I didn’t, running will only spread it faster.

Susanna smirks and shakes her head. “I wasn’t talking about Aaron.”

But before we can ask what she means, the microphone squeals a second time, and another voice booms out across the desert. “I choose Susanna.”

Exclamations drift from the darkness, though I don’t know why anyone is surprised. Delilah rolls her eyes, but Susanna’s face is curiously blank as she says, “He will pay for that.”

“Who will? You recognize the voice?” I ask. “How? And why will he pay?”

“Keep faithful, *girls*.” She leans hard on the last word, an unnecessary reminder she is the first of us to become a woman, before

leaving us to head toward the cave in the distance.

“She makes me so angry, I just want to—”

“Don’t say it.” Delilah curls slender fingers around my fist. “Don’t let her goad you into sin. Trust me, it’s not worth it. Besides, what are the odds she’ll remember to report your breach, on a night like tonight?”

I wish I could believe her. Delilah may be willing to burden herself with my secrets, but Susanna will be under no such obligation. Still, that isn’t why I’m mad. Clearly, Susanna knows something about tonight she hasn’t shared with the rest of us.

We trudge back toward the warmth of the fire. From this distance, I can see the gathered crowd of our friends and family, though I can’t make out any one individual. I halfheartedly scan the sand, looking for evidence of Aaron’s passage. “Do you think he found help?”

But Delilah isn’t interested in his well-being. “What was it like? Touching him?”

“I only did it to save him. I didn’t *enjoy* it,” I say, scrubbing at my lips again, trying to remove any last traces of sand or memories of his skin against mine. I’m glad the darkness hides my face. Because truthfully, a part of me did like it. Not just because he was a boy, or because I saved his life. But because it was my decision to do it. I chose to sin, and I enjoyed it. What does that say about me? About the state of my soul?

Another strange voice bounces off the mountain, distorted by the echo and the amplification, this time calling Rachel’s name.

I grab Delilah’s hand and squeeze. “Who do you think he is?”

Delilah’s shoulders hunch further. “How would we know? Maybe if we knew what order they were choosing in,” she says.

“Do you think it’s random?” But we both know that’s unlikely. Nothing about our lives is ever left to chance.

As we come up to the back of the crowd, Phoebe squeezes between us and unclasps our hands, taking them in both of hers. “Girls. Where have you been? And why haven’t you changed?” Even her look of worry as she scans our dusty work clothes can’t mar our teacher’s perfect features. I’ve always thought Phoebe must resemble the Virgin Mary. Only with shorter hair. And minus the virgin part.

“There was a rattler,” I whisper back, trying to brush the sand and dirt from my apron.

“We’ve been here in the back the whole time.” Delilah speaks over me, silencing my thoughtless confession.

“Never mind.” Phoebe pulls us close. “I’ve been trying to find you. I wanted to pray with you. One more time.”

“Did you pray with Rachel?” That was rude, but I’m honestly curious. Phoebe has never liked Rachel, more because of Rachel’s mother and father than anything Rachel has done.

Red spots appear on Phoebe’s high cheekbones and she ducks her head. “There wasn’t time,” she says, her voice clipped. “I didn’t expect her to be chosen so early.”

Delilah chokes back a laugh.

“That’s not what I meant.” Phoebe squeezes my hand. “Do you have any questions? Before—”

“Phoebe.” My mother pushes her way through the crowd. She’s shorter than Phoebe, and her covered head next to our teacher’s bare one makes her look a decade older, but she carries herself with a grace that makes up for the rest. “Surely you weren’t about to . . .” She stops without naming Phoebe’s sin, which somehow makes it worse. “You know better.”

Phoebe bites her lip. “I’m not sure about any of this.”

Before my mother can respond, before I can ask Phoebe what she means, another voice ripples over our heads in a wave and crashes into the mountain, shattering the calm of the night. “I choose Miriam.”

Caleb is big, but his voice is smaller than I expected. Soft. Hesitant. My mother’s words echo back at me: *The less you expect, the better*. Serves me right. My heart pounds furiously as I squeeze Delilah’s hand in goodbye and prepare myself for my future.

The crowd surges, pushing me forward. My mother grabs my hand, briefly, to help me up over the black jumble of rock, but then she slips away from me and I’m alone, the dark hole of the Marriage Cave yawning at my feet like a mouth that will swallow me whole. I’ve never been this close to the edge of anything.

A ladder rests at the lip of the pit. I grab the top rung and swing my leg around, but my skirt twists at my ankles and I miss. The crowd buzzes above me as I dangle, the damp clawing at my feet. A sickening sense of familiarity comes over me as my hands slip and I fall into the abyss.

I’ve had dreams like this.

Strong arms catch me before I hit the ground.

Caleb holds me, the two of us bathed in a pool of moonglow from the opening above. This isn’t a dream. It’s real. This is his body pressed against mine, his arms strong around me, his hands hot on my back. But there’s no smile on his face. And suddenly I realize—positioned here, at the bottom of the ladder, he can’t have spoken my name. My head spins. My mouth goes dry.

What has happened?

“I wanted . . .” These are the first words I’ve ever spoken to him in years, but my throat is too tight to finish.

The desperation in his eyes mirrors my own. “Me too,” he whispers, and an electric jolt surges through me at the sound of his voice.

Then I’m pulled from his grasp, from the protective alcove where we stand and into a dim, low-ceilinged cave filled with men. My father escorts me, disappointment flickering across his face, or perhaps it’s a trick of the light? The rest of them swim past on waves of heat and confusion, or maybe it’s me who is moving, shoved away from the rock walls scorched by the tongues of a thousand fires and into the center of the cave, where the latest still burns low in a pit.

Our Leader stands on a flat rock at the far end of the cavernous space, casting a long shadow across the wall and completely obscuring the boy beside him. Daniel is like the sun; the source of all light. He holds out his arms to me, and though I don’t intend to move, I’m drawn like a thirsty traveler to water. His voice washes over me like warm rain, though the thunderous beating in my chest drowns out the words. When I step up to meet him, he pries my hand from my neck and joins it with the boy’s, pressing them tightly together within his own. Fingernails gouge my palms; they could be mine.

“God has sent you a vision of your wife?” Daniel asks.

“He has.”

“And which woman does he wish for you to take?”

“Miriam.”

And just like that, Aaron and I are married.

Another man steps forward and holds out a basket. I take it automatically, staring in confusion at the tufts of angora wool and the glittering instruments stabbed between them.

There are so many things I didn’t know about this night, so many questions my mother wouldn’t answer, and perhaps this is the biggest surprise of all. Not only have I been given to the wrong husband, but

I've been assigned the wrong livelihood as well.

Fat tears spatter the wool.

I am a terrible weaver.

3

CALEB

I am supposed to marry Miriam.

This knowledge is a certainty, as much a part of me as my blood and bones. So when Aaron—the *Outsider*—speaks her name, I think I must have misheard. The cave is crowded; his voice is muffled. But then she is in my arms; we speak, and just as quickly, she is gone. Taking vows.

With Aaron.

This is a nightmare. Why can't I wake up?

I've done everything right. I've obeyed all of Daniel's laws. And God's. I studied. I dreamt. I prayed. It should be me standing next to her. Me, shielding her. Me, touching her, instead of all the rest. Their fingers on her shoulders, her hair, her face. She's a married woman now, and I know this is part of the ritual—wives do not have authority over their own bodies—but it bothers me. Aaron is supposed to assert his power as her husband and stop them. So why isn't he trying? Miriam twists away, and my heart does the same. I clench my fists and try to push through the crowd. But just as my fingers graze her thick curls, Daniel takes a single step forward and everyone else falls back.

Finally! He prayed with me. He knows God intended me to call her name tonight. I'm not sure why he let this go on so long, but I

know better than to ask stupid questions. Daniel will stop this.

But he doesn't. Instead, he cups Miriam's chin. "May this union be blessed."

I both wish and fear she'll say something. Deny Aaron as her husband. Daniel doesn't like women to speak. Even when spoken to. But surely this is an exception? Someone needs to do it. But she only shakes her head, back and forth. I know the feeling. This is all wrong. "Miriam."

The whispered voice is Boaz, her father. I don't know what he wants to say, because he doesn't speak again. And even though every cell in my body is screaming at me to do something, I can't. No one interrupts Daniel.

Shadow flames dance across Daniel's face as he studies Miriam's . . . Aaron. But Aaron's face gives nothing away.

"Marriage is a journey," Daniel says. "There is no mercy for those who stray from the Path of Righteousness. I suppose only time will tell."

"What?" Miriam asks, her voice shaky. "What will time tell?"

Daniel presses three fingers against her mouth, silencing her, until she winces.

I don't know if I should laugh or cry. It isn't Miriam who's strayed. Can't he see that?

He removes his hand, and she must agree, because she whispers, "Where is my mercy?"

But Daniel isn't feeling merciful. He turns his back as Boaz squeezes her hand and pushes her and Aaron into the shadowy mouth of the tunnel that leads back to the city.

"Caleb." I don't know how long Father has been standing beside me, or if he understands the disaster of what's just happened.

He snaps his fingers in my face. “Daniel is waiting. Step up to the podium and choose.”

So, no. Father has no idea that Aaron has just married my wife. He spent many nights questioning my older brother on his choice, but never asked about mine. I wanted to believe it was because he trusted me to make the right decision. But most likely he only asked Marcus because he only cares about Marcus. “I can’t,” I say, trying to sort out what I should do. “Aaron—”

He puts a hand to my shoulder, as if to shove me, but stops, maybe remembering I’m bigger than him. Ever since Daniel offered me a place on his Security Council and advised me to begin strength training, Father hasn’t raised a hand to me. Tonight would be a bad time to start again.

“You’re embarrassing me,” he hisses, his jaw clenched. “Go to the podium.”

He is still my father, and I am still an obedient son. I move as if in a dream, though not a good one. Not like the one where Miriam and I . . .

“Caleb.” Daniel holds the microphone out to me, and his words are both an invitation and an order. “Be a man. Choose your wife.”

He’s asking me to join their ranks, and I’ve never wanted anything more. To make decisions. To be taken seriously. To stand beside him and Father as equals. But that’s exactly why I can’t choose. Can’t Daniel see that? A man does the moral thing. Miriam is already someone else’s wife. If I were to say her name now, would that make me an adulterer? Adultery is punishable by Banishment.

What does Daniel expect me to do? It feels like one of our Lessons, where we must decide who is righteous. I almost never get those right. Even now, I feel like the other brother in the story of

the prodigal son. Where was his reward? *I* am the faithful. *I* am the righteous. *I* am the son of a Council Member. Aaron is none of these.

I'm not saying I'm perfect. I shouldn't have spoken to her, not even those two small words. It's against all the rules. But when Aaron said her name, I was in shock. And when I heard her voice—*I wanted*—so soft, yet so earnest, it was like someone else took over. I wasn't a Seeker of Wisdom, or strength trainer, or devoted pupil of our Leader. I was just Caleb. And I wanted her.

So maybe this is my punishment. Maybe Daniel knows, somehow. Maybe I'm supposed to choose another wife to show my contrition. Except I'm not sorry. Instead, I regret not saying more. Why didn't I talk to her, instead of leaving those stupid messages in the sand? Surely that punishment couldn't be any worse than the pain I feel right now.

I could have told her how I've loved her since before the time of Separation. Back when we were still allowed to play together, and Marcus liked to give us biblical riddles and then show off how smart he was when we couldn't solve them. I was usually the slowest, and I took the brunt of his teasing. But Miriam never laughed, even when the others did. In fact, once she stumped Marcus with a riddle of her own. He'd just given me one: Who came close enough to Heaven to kiss the gate, but ended up in Hell? The answer was Judas, though I hadn't guessed. In the midst of everyone's laughter, Miriam had spoken up. "Who broke every commandment?"

Marcus had snorted a laugh, so sure he was right. "That's easy. If you're going to play, Miriam, at least try to come up with a riddle that doesn't have the same answer as mine."

But he was wrong. "It's Moses," she'd said, making sure he got it before she'd looked at me. "He dropped the tablets. Broke the

commandments. Every single one.” Then she’d hopped on her bike and ridden off, her hair blowing behind her.

I love her hair. I should have told her that. It’s like a spring of coiled energy that can’t be contained—just like her. I love her voice, too. My family sits in front of hers at Chapel, and I can hear her voice above everyone else’s. It’s like a kind of prayer. Or I could have told her about the way her laugh makes everything inside me tingle. Or that I’ve dreamt of her. That I meant to choose her.

I should have tried harder. I don’t know how many of my messages she got, or if she even understood them. It took me a long time to figure out how to say I love the way you sing with just a stick in the sand. I settled on a heart and a music note. I dreamt you were my wife was just a cloud and a circle-cross. I’m not good with words. Even less when I’m limited by symbols meant for godly worship instead of forbidden love. Though it wasn’t really forbidden. I was supposed to choose her. I just wasn’t supposed to let her know.

Now I’ll never get the chance. Especially not if I marry someone else.

“Caleb,” Daniel says again, his voice even more commanding than his magnetic stare. “Choose.”

“I can’t.” I drop to my knees. “I will do anything, any sort of penance, if you will just—”

“God has a message for us,” Daniel says, stretching out an arm as his voice carries across the cave. “Brothers, close your eyes, so that He might better communicate.”

The men obey.

Daniel presses his thumbs over my eyelids. “You too, Caleb. Listen for His instructions.”

I kneel in the dirt, my eyes pressed tightly shut. So faint is the

voice of God as he whispers in my ear, “Delilah.”

Delilah? The redhead? She’s the same age as one of my younger brothers, a child. I shake my head, once, then more firmly. “No,” I say, opening my eyes and struggling to my feet. And then, “I won’t choose.” I say it louder, into the microphone this time, my denial echoing off the cave walls. It worked for Aaron, when he spoke Miriam’s name aloud.

And so it must for me, because though Daniel’s gaze burns with a dangerous light, he merely tilts his head. Then he says, “So be it.”

I barely feel Father’s hand as he pushes me into the tunnel. Alone. I don’t know where I’m supposed to go now or what will become of me.

The reality of what I’ve done is as cold as these suffocating walls. I’ve defied Daniel. And God. I’ve refused to take a wife. No man in New Jerusalem, other than our Leader, has ever gone unmarried. I’ve never felt so scared, or so lost.

I’ve also never been this angry. With a roar that comes from deep inside, I beat my fist against the rock wall. Pain winds from my blood-slick knuckles up my arm, and I’m glad. It pushes out all the other feelings, at least for a second.

Daniel says my temper is my weakness. Tonight, it feels more like Aaron’s problem.

4

MIRIAM

OR DO YOU NOT KNOW THAT YOUR
BODY IS A TEMPLE OF THE HOLY SPIRIT
WITHIN YOU, WHOM YOU HAVE FROM
GOD? YOU ARE NOT YOUR OWN, FOR
YOU WERE BOUGHT WITH A PRICE.

—1 Corinthians 6:19–20

My skin still burns from the feel of their hands on me—my arms, my shoulders, my head. Every man I know took a turn. Once I was married, they are allowed to touch me, so they did. It's actually one of the few things I knew would happen tonight. Phoebe told us in Lessons, after swearing us to secrecy. She said she wanted us to be prepared, but I didn't realize how belittling it would be.

What else have I neglected to consider?

Aaron stumbles, and I reach out to steady him automatically, before I remember what he's done. His skin is sallow, and beads of sweat line his forehead. I don't know him well enough to tell if his discomfort is pain or something else, and though Church law states that since we're married we can speak, for the first time in my life I can't find the words. Instead, I study the tunnel we've been shunted into.

Every Child of Daniel has been taught the importance of these

tunnels. Many years ago, after Genesis but before the birth of Christ, lava flowed beneath the earth in certain, sacred spaces. When the lava cooled and drained, it left behind tunnels. Their existence was foretold to Daniel in a dream, and they are the reason New Jerusalem was settled here, at the base of the Soda Mountains, away from the rest of the corrupt world. The tunnels and the Marriage Cave are sacred spaces, and before tonight, I'd never been in either. Now that I'm finally here, the damp, craggy space lit by flickering candles is yet another disappointment in this nightmare I thought would be a celebration. Maybe the reason none of the Elders talk about this night isn't that they want to keep the memory private, but that they'd rather forget.

Aaron sags against the tunnel wall, eyelids fluttering. "How bad is it?"

I kneel to examine his heel. It's red and puffy near the wound, but the redness hasn't spread past my scarf, which is still tied around his ankle. My fingers itch to snatch it off, to turn and run. But then I remember the handwriting. As in the Bible, the hand of God wrote a coded message on the wall of the tunnel for Daniel, giving him directions for forming our community. This is my first and only chance to see it.

"Look, I know you're pissed." Aaron pushes off the wall. "And you've got every right to be. But just tell me, am I going to be okay? Shouldn't I go to a doctor or something?"

"Pissed?" I don't know this word that sounds like steam escaping a kettle.

"Okay, super pissed." He throws his hands in the air and bumps the candleholder, and only then, in the sputtering light, do I see it. The handwriting of God. Aaron has been leaning against it.

I shove him aside, both so he won't deface it any further and so I can read it.

But I can't. And it feels like yet another mistake in a night of many. Though I've been taught the message is a code only Daniel can comprehend, deep down I always imagined when I saw it, I'd understand it. But this is just a bunch of drawings and scribbles. Caleb's messages are easier to decipher than this, and they are mere scratches, easily erased by a footstep or a soft breeze.

Aaron watches me run tentative fingers over the stick figures and shapes.

"You act like you've never seen them before. They're petroglyphs."

I glare at him, and he holds up his hands in supplication, more careful of the flame this time. "Or maybe not. What do I know?"

"Nothing." I pinch my lips together and manage to hold back my tears. How foolish of me to assume that once I was married, my husband could teach me. Now I'm married to an Outsider who knows even less than me.

"Let's go," I say. "My mother is a nurse. She can take care of your foot. Although you should have done that earlier." If only he'd gone for medical attention, maybe Daniel would have halted the Matrimony and we wouldn't be here now.

"A real nurse?" he asks.

"What other kind is there?"

When he doesn't answer, I keep walking and he limps behind. The silence is broken only by the occasional crunch of rock beneath our feet, until the path grows steep and the walls narrow, and we emerge into the city from a rocky outcropping wedged behind the guard shack. The old wooden door that normally blocks this tunnel has been rolled away, and as I step into the cool night air, I choke.

New Jerusalem is bigger than the cave or the tunnel, but the fence is impossibly high and the floodlights perched atop it blindingly bright and I'm suffocating. I turn back—to run, though where would I go? But my mother steps forward and holds out her hands, and I force myself to breathe. One breath. Then another.

“Mother. What are you doing here?”

“I'm here to welcome you home,” she says. “You left here tonight separately, as children. But you return as husband and wife.”

The words sound flat, rehearsed. She's adopted a mask of serenity, but I have had years of practice, and I know her tells. The thinning of her lips as she surveys my dingy work dress means disappointment. The wrinkles in the corners of her eyes convey worry. Does she know this marriage is a terrible mistake? Does everyone? Or is this how every wedding night begins? Maybe she isn't concerned about the Matrimony. Perhaps it's the night to come that worries her.

It certainly worries me.

“Miriam?” she asks.

“Aaron's been bit.” I point to his foot.

“In the tunnel?” Her mouth puckers, and the wrinkles spread to her forehead.

“No. Before . . .” He doesn't finish.

She kneels beside him, and he lifts his foot and pulls off his sandal, her fingers lingering on the fabric knotted at his ankle. She must recognize the scarf; it's my favorite, the same shade of light purple as the Mojave asters that grow wild along the fence. Aaron winces but doesn't protest as she moves it aside and probes the heel with expert fingers.

I think of the men, back in the cavern, with their grasping fingers. How does he like it? Has he ever been touched by a woman

he barely knows? But if he feels anything other than pain, it doesn't show.

"I think you got lucky," Mother says, standing and brushing dust off her long skirt. "It must not have been poisonous."

"Really?" Aaron grimaces as he shifts weight back onto his injured foot. "I was sure it was a rattlesnake . . ." He trails off.

She gives me a sharp look and waits a beat. When I don't speak, the creases in her forehead deepen. "About one in four rattlesnake bites are dry—they don't inject venom. We should keep an eye on it, of course. Miriam can help. She knows all about first aid. Apparently."

Can Aaron hear the suspicion in her voice, or is it only me? Surely she knows I couldn't leave him to die. No matter what his gender.

"Why don't we get you two settled in your apartment? Get you off your feet."

As we walk past the front of the guard shack, Aaron glances back at the mouth of the tunnel. "I didn't realize . . . is that the only way in?"

My mother pauses, turning her back on the gates, which still stand ajar. "No. There's also the cave."

He ducks his head. "Oh. Right. I'm just . . . a little turned around."

Maybe Mother is wrong about the bite, and the poison has spread to his brain.

Mother begins walking again, toward the newly renovated Cooperative Dormitory. It used to be a motel, many years ago, when New Jerusalem was a health facility for the spiritually unwell, but that was before our time here. For most of my life it was an empty shell, waiting for a purpose.

"Every new couple has been allotted a dwelling space," she tells us, as if we don't already know. The boys helped fix and furnish the

dilapidated stucco building. As for the girls, my friends and I snuck over many times to wander the open-air corridors that ring both stories of the building. We tried to peer in the darkened windows and ran our fingers over the corroded brass numbers on the doors and argued over who would be lucky enough to get the apartments overlooking the lake. But mostly, we talked about what we thought marriage would be like.

I never imagined it would be like this.

“It’s been furnished with everything you need to start your lives together.” My mother trips over the last word. “That way, you can spend time getting to know each other, without the worries of daily life intruding.”

That strangling feeling comes over me again, and I cling to the iron railing as she leads us up the stairwell. Daily life? I don’t want to think about one day with this man, let alone a life with him. Everything is happening so quickly, and I don’t know how to stop it. I can barely remember how to breathe.

Once we’ve entered the building, we pass Susanna’s mother, just leaving, on our way up the stairs. Are Susanna and her husband, whoever he is, already settled in to their new home? I open my mouth to ask, but Lydia nods at my mother, glances at Aaron, and then scowls at me, so I snap my mouth closed. The woman shares her daughter’s warm personality.

“Someone will be bringing by your meals for the time being,” my mother says as we walk down the outside corridor until we’ve reached the door to our apartment. Her smile falters for only a moment, and she almost catches her lower lip between her teeth. “Myself or one of the other Council Members’ wives. These first few days you’ll be free from Lessons and Vocational Duties. There will still be Prayer, of

course. Thrice daily. More, if you wish. It helps with the . . . adjustment. That and talking. I imagine you have much to say.”

This is directed at me, but for once it sounds more like a plea than an admonishment.

She opens the door and leads us inside. It’s smaller than I pictured. There will be no room for me to avoid my new husband here. Our “house” is essentially one room, broken only by a half wall. My mother switches on a table lamp, but the light does nothing to improve my view. The window beside the door looks out over the corridor we just left. On the wall to my right, there is a couch and an end table with the single lamp. Centered above the couch hangs a large portrait of Daniel. To our left, a small table and two chairs, and behind it, a door I fervently hope leads to the bathroom. In the far corner, a short countertop juts from the wall, partially obscuring a small refrigerator and cooktop.

The double bed lies just beyond the half wall in front of us.

“Daniel will come by soon. To . . . visit,” my mother continues, stepping around me to pat at the couch cushion.

Aaron sinks down on the couch with a grimace. “How soon? Tonight?”

Her teeth try to grab her lip again. “Probably not. Maybe tomorrow. He will talk with you about your new Lessons. And your duties.”

“What kind of duties?” he asks.

I struggle to keep the desperation off my face as I wait for her answer. Please, let her mean the weaving. I don’t want to think about my other duties. Not with him.

She pauses to prop Aaron’s foot on a pillow, then says, “I’m told you will both be apprenticing in the Woolen Mill. Daniel will also answer your questions about . . . other things.”

Aaron collapses back into the cushions and closes his eyes.

I'd scream, but panic has taken my ability to both breathe and speak.

In a moment, my mother will leave, and we will be alone. And then what? I'm not naïve. We do our own work in this community. I've seen the barn animals. I know the basic premise. I have also studied scripture. *But if they cannot exercise self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to burn with passion.* 1 Corinthians 7:9.

Why have I never noticed the passage is exclusionary? Can the two not exist together, passion and marriage? I have allowed myself to imagine what both might be like. Cooking dinner in my own kitchen while I hum softly to myself, no one there to quiet me. Walking to Chapel in the middle of the city, hand in hand in hand with our children. Waking up next to Caleb, the sunlight stretching warm fingers across his chest.

But only Caleb. Never have I pictured another man, and certainly not this near-stranger.

My mother kisses my forehead, then hesitates before she kisses Aaron's. "I have to go help Rachel settle in to her new home."

The pang of longing is so sharp I almost cry. How I wish I were with Rachel, back in the bedroom we've shared since we were babies, instead of here in this unwelcoming apartment.

"Where is Rachel? Who did she marry?"

"Phoebe escorted her, so that I could come with you," she says, not really answering either of my questions. So that much hasn't changed.

"Phoebe?" I pray Rachel's been chosen by a more suitable husband than I have. If not, if she has doubts like me, Phoebe is the last person she'd want to share them with.

Mother knows this, too. "I should go to her and leave you to get

acquainted.” But she doesn’t. Instead, she hovers near the door. What is she thinking? Is it difficult to leave her daughter with a man she doesn’t know? This is our custom, and I’ve never questioned it. Not until this moment. But she also once sat in a strange room with a man she had never exchanged so much as a single word with. That man became my father. She must know this panic welling inside me. So why doesn’t she console me?

To calm myself, I think about what Daniel would say.

He would tell me to keep faithful. That we are the Children of Daniel. That Aaron isn’t a stranger, he is my Brother, in the way we are all Brothers and Sisters of God. And now, he is also my husband.

Aaron is silent, maybe from the pain. Or maybe he’s asking God for forgiveness. It’s a little late for that. I turn my back on him. My mother’s eyes are shut, too, but her lips are moving. She is praying. I take her hands, and her eyelids flutter open.

“You need to watch over him tonight. If you see signs of—”

“This is a mistake,” I interrupt, the words finally free. I grip her hands as tight as I can. “I can’t stay here. Help me fix this before . . .” I don’t finish. We both know what “before” is.

“There are no mistakes.” She starts to hum a song she used to sing when I was a child, about love giving us strength to try “once more,” whatever that means. I don’t plan to try at all.

Maybe she understands, because she squeezes my hand quickly and releases it. Takes a deep breath. Straightens her back. “This is a sign, Miriam. God must have wanted this union.”

“Why?” I ask.

“Only He can answer that. You must get down on your knees and ask Him.”

“Mother, wait. I have to know. Did you . . . you and Father. Did

you know he was going to choose you?”

She pinches her lips together and looks down at the floor. Her face is a mixture of warring emotions—love and anger; fear and resolve. Without meeting my gaze, she nods, once, and then she is gone, the door clicking shut behind her.

I don’t know when I’ll see her again, or if I’ll be able to forgive her when I do.

She knew. Just like I did. The difference is that she was right, and I was wrong. She married the man she knew she belonged with. I have married . . . someone else. I stand for a long time with my hand pressed against the door. When I turn, Aaron is still lying on the couch, dark eyelashes fluttering against his pale cheeks.

“Why did you choose me?” It’s a reasonable question. I’ve earned the right to ask. I’m his wife, after all. But my words come out pointed and sharp, and his eyes fly open.

He shrinks back into the couch so I have to lean forward to hear him. Even so, I can hardly believe what he says.

“I was late. And I panicked.” He looks away toward the window, which holds no view at night, only our distorted reflections. “It’s been a long time since anyone’s been nice to me.”

His stupid answer only fuels my anger. “Nice? You picked me because I was nice? What about God? Your dreams? Isn’t that how this is supposed to work?” I don’t actually know how it’s supposed to work. But Caleb’s messages . . . he dreamt of me. And I of him. That must mean something.

Aaron plucks at the textured fabric of the armrest. “I never thought . . .” He leans forward and digs his knuckles into the corners of his eyes. “I screwed up. It wasn’t supposed to happen this way.”

“What ‘way’ was it supposed to happen?”

"You saved me back in the desert. With the snake. I had to choose, and your name just popped out. I'm sorry I messed up your plans."

"My *plans*?" I ask. "As if my marriage, my . . . my future were just an outing I'd been looking forward to and had to cancel?" I pound my hands against my thighs until they ache, though it's nothing compared to the pain in my heart. "You need to undo this. In the morning, you must go to Daniel and tell him you've made a mistake."

Aaron drops his head into his hands, and his shoulders shake. At first I think he's crying, but when he looks up he is laughing. "God, Miriam. Do you really think it's that easy?"

"It has to be. There has to be a way."

"Tell Daniel I messed up." He swallows convulsively. "Does he strike you as a forgiving kind of guy?"

"*God* forgives. Daniel leads us to repentance. We need a firm hand to guide us, not a soft one."

"Well, soft is definitely not a word I'd use to describe him. Harsh, maybe? Punitive?"

"He is the Prophet, reborn. Who are you to insult him?"

Aaron tilts his head to the side, as if he can't grasp what I'm saying. As if I'm the strange one. "The prophet Daniel. Like in the Bible." He makes a choking sound deep in his throat. "How do you know that? Because he told you? Where's his proof?"

"He doesn't need proof!" I don't think I've ever been this angry before. I clench my fists and back away until I bump up against the bathroom door. There's nowhere else to go. I'm trapped, married to a man I don't know, a man who blasphemes our Leader as easily as he might talk about the weather.

"Keep your foot elevated," I finally say. "If it looks like the redness is spreading, you may need to have it amputated."

Then I leave him alone in our living room with his swollen foot and his empty apologies. I won't speak to him again tonight, and I surely won't share a bed with him. But since married women are allowed to speak, I refuse to waste the privilege any longer. I take my Bible into the bathroom and turn to Song of Songs.

“On my bed by night I sought him whom my soul loves; I sought him, but found him not.” I read aloud until my voice goes hoarse and the night sky turns a dusky gray, the stars fading into oblivion.

5

CALEB

Two guards are waiting as I exit the tunnel. Abraham, Aaron's father, steps in front of me when I turn toward the dormitory.

"The apartments are for married couples," he says.

He's shorter than me, but solid. The faint scar across his cheek is evidence of at least a passing knowledge of violence. He's one of the few men here I don't think I could beat in a fight, though tonight I'm itching to try.

Maybe he can tell, because he grabs a gun from the wall and holsters it. The other man, Thomas, points his flashlight at me. "Daniel says you're to go to the Council House."

It makes sense. It's where Daniel lives, along with Phoebe, the only other unmarried person in the community.

"Caleb." My mother's soft voice is the last I expected to hear. She's standing in the shadow of the guard shack, near the road. My youngest brother, Matthew, is perched on her hip, his sleeping face buried in the curve of her neck. The others must still be at the celebration.

"Mother." I don't want her here to witness my act of defiance. While she would never punish me—that is Father's duty—her disappointment will almost be worse.

"Let's go." Thomas waves the flashlight toward the road. "I'll take you."

“Of course.” Mother bows her head and turns to follow, but falters when I don’t move.

“I know the way.” I’m keeping my temper in check, but just barely. “And I don’t need an escort. I’m a member of the Security Council. Just like you.”

“Are you, though?” Thomas asks.

Matthew squirms in Mother’s arms, and she shushes him as she shoots a nervous glance between Thomas and me.

I stand taller, careful not to let them see my fear. The boys were all assigned their Vocational Duties last week. Tonight was to be the official announcement, but that’s just a formality. My marital status has nothing to do with my job on the Security Council. Does it?

Abraham claps Thomas on the shoulder. “I think they’ll be all right.”

Thomas glares at me as he flicks the flashlight off and on and then off again. Finally, he shrugs off Abraham’s hand. “Fine. Go on, then.”

I should be grateful to Abraham, but I’m not. Most of this is his fault. He brought his family here, after all. He’s also the one responsible for the new apartments, along with all the added work and the renovations that followed. Sure, Daniel had already been concerned about where the newly married couples were going to live. Abraham wasn’t even the first to suggest that we renovate the old motel. But he was willing to do more than talk, and that lit a fire under the Council. Soon after the vote to accept his family, we had received deliveries of paint and lumber, along with a new van to haul it all.

Miriam is probably in one of those apartments, right now. With a man who isn’t me. I scan the terrace, and the lighted windows beyond, aching for a glimpse of her. Until Abraham clears his throat. When

I look back, Thomas has gone inside the shack, but Aaron's father is standing in the doorway. Watching me.

"Caleb," Mother calls softly.

She starts down the road and I follow, feeling Abraham's gaze on my back long after we're out of sight.

We pass the now-darkened Medical Shed and the Gymnasium and the Kitchen before Mother speaks. "Why did you do it?" she asks. "You can't live on your own. Without a wife. Who will take care of you?"

Her voice seems unnaturally loud in the empty streets, but it can't be, because Matthew doesn't stir. Still, I hear the admonishment. In what she says, and in what she doesn't. How could you be so foolish? Why would you make a decision like this without thinking it through? What did you think would happen?

"I don't know," I mumble, kicking a chunk of rock, and then another. She wouldn't understand, even if I were allowed to tell her about the dreams, about the hours spent in prayer with Daniel, waiting for a sign from God. The farther into the city we go, the more alone I feel, which makes no sense. Mother and Matthew walk beside me. We're inside the gates, safe. Headed to Daniel's house, the holiest of places. Usually, the thought of Daniel is enough to calm me.

Not tonight.

It's like there is an invisible rope pulling at me, tugging me back toward the apartments. To Miriam. It's so strong, I know that if I follow it, I will be able to find her. I want, no, I *need* to see her.

It would be so easy to go back. To find Aaron. Punch him. There's a physical pain inside me that won't be appeased until I do. But Daniel ordered me to the Council House. He must want to talk to me. I should do the right thing and keep walking there, all the way

up the path. It's the wrong thing that got me here.

Mother stops at the walkway leading to the Farmhouse and turns to me. "Come inside. Let me make you something to eat. Daniel will understand, won't he?"

Part of me wants nothing more than to run up to the Farmhouse, just like normal. Follow Mother inside. Let her make me tea and brown-sugar toast.

But I don't belong here anymore.

"Thank you," I say, kissing her cheek. "But Daniel is expecting me. I shouldn't keep him waiting."

"I know," she says. "It's just . . ." She blinks back tears. "This path you're on . . . can you really make it on your own?"

Past the barns and grazing pasture, the path to Daniel's house winds steep and potentially hazardous in the dark. But this isn't the path she's talking about.

"I'll be fine." I turn away so the darkness hides my lying face. "You go on home. Put Matthew to bed." And because I'm a man now, she does what I say.

The Council House is Daniel's home, a three-story, gleaming white building topped with a domed roof. It sits on a hill in the far corner of the city, opposite the front gates, so that he can keep watch over the whole community.

I stop to catch my breath at the bottom of the steps. The pillars stretching above me always make me feel small. They represent the angels from Daniel's visions, the ones who urged him to lead his followers away from sin and depravity. The dome on top is an almost perfect sphere. It's left over from the first settlers, who used it for

something called radio, which Daniel says is an ancient technology no longer in use. Marcus says it reminds him of a soap bubble, but it reminded Daniel of the firmament in Genesis, so he built his house around it.

I push open the tall doors and step into the dark foyer. I've never been here at night. Only during the day, when sunlight streams through the tall windows and shines on the marbled floor. Now, everything is black. Even when I flip the light switch, shadows still blanket the staircase that climbs the wall on the left to the second- and third-floor balconies.

Abraham told me to come here, but he didn't tell me what to do next. What would make Daniel angrier? Waiting for instruction? Or taking initiative and choosing my own room? Be a man, they said. So I will.

The first floor is taken up by Council business in the left wing and Daniel's personal rooms on the right. There is a small kitchen in the back. I climb the staircase. The second floor is where Phoebe lives, alongside several other unoccupied rooms. I'm not sure it's appropriate to share a floor with her, but taking a room on the third floor, so far from Daniel, feels cowardly, and I can't give in to fear. I've already given up too much. I choose an empty bedroom to the left of the staircase, separated from Phoebe by the balcony that runs the full width of the foyer. That should be acceptable.

It's furnished with only a bed and a desk, which don't offer much distraction. I circle the plain room, muscles tense. What I need is to move, to push myself, to feel the burn as I struggle against the weight machine. That struggle I know I can win. I've worked hard to hone my body, though as Daniel reminds me, my strength is a necessity and a gift from God and should never be viewed with prideful eyes. It

doesn't matter tonight; my weights are back at the Farmhouse.

I drop to my knees on a threadbare rug and begin a set of push-ups. I try to lose myself in the rhythm, but the blankness won't come. Every time I close my eyes, I'm back in the cave. The flickering light, the bodies pressed tightly together.

Newcomer. Must. Choose. First.

Each word a thought. Each thought a hard, upward thrust.

Why?

Don't. Question. Daniel's. Word.

But. Aaron. Is. Late.

Then. Marcus.

He pushes his way to the front. Climbs the podium. Takes the microphone.

Even from far in the back, hidden in the shadowy pit near the ladder, I can tell by the set of my brother's shoulders that something isn't right. When he says Susanna's name, Daniel moves forward. As if to stop him.

My arms cramp. I've lost count. Forty? Forty-five? I keep going, keep pushing on. Marcus has loved Susanna forever. Surely God knows that. So why did Daniel seem surprised? Speaking your wife's name is the first step. Pronouncement. Marriage. Consummation. It's the only Path to Righteousness.

My arms go slack.

I should be starting down my own Path tonight. With Miriam. Instead, Aaron has somehow laid claim to her. So I'm here, alone. Unmarried. What will happen to me? Will my name be stricken from the Book? Somewhere on the other end of the city, Miriam is lying in a strange apartment. In a bed just like mine. With Aaron.

That thought pushes me to my feet. I want to break something,

to hurt something. Feel something other than this twist in my gut that's like a tight muscle I can't loosen.

"Caleb. The disciple whom I love."

Daniel's voice interrupts my thoughts. He stands at the door, and my heart swells, edging out a little of the anger. No admonition for the room choice. For once, I've made the right decision. And now he will make this better. The way he does everything. I may be imperfect, but he still loves me. He just said so.

"What happened tonight?"

He knows what happened. But he wants to hear it from me. "He must have misinterpreted . . . somehow." I catch myself. *Daniel* interprets. It will do me no good at all if he thinks I'm laying blame at his feet. "Why would God send us dreams of the same woman?"

"Misinterpreted? Are you suggesting for even a moment that he didn't know exactly what he was doing? This was no accident. This was deliberate."

Deliberate? Why would he . . . ? "Are you saying he *ignored* God's word? And chose Miriam instead . . . instead of . . . ?"

Daniel cocks his head. He does this in class sometimes, when one of us has said something very intelligent. Or very stupid. I have no idea which I've done.

"You're referring to Aaron."

"He chose Miriam. *I* was supposed to choose Miriam. You told me that was what my dreams meant." The anger boils again, my skin going hot. I'm think I'm even madder than Daniel . . . Wait. "Who are you talking about?"

"Are you suggesting," he says, pressing his fingers together as he paces the room, "that somehow I am at fault here? When the rest of your Brothers and Sisters are happily married? While you and

Delilah remain stubbornly unwed?” His peppered hair skims the collar of his purple ceremonial robes. He came here directly from the cave without stopping to change. I’m not sure if I’m flattered or terrified. “You claim that Aaron stumbled. But what about you? God spoke to you, did He not? Called on you to choose a wife? You yourself told me you were ready. Worthy. Yet when the moment came, you refused. Why do you see the speck in your Brother’s eye but not the log in your own?” His eyes blaze with something other than the fervor he usually carries. This looks a lot like rage, an emotion I know well. Maybe we’re not so dissimilar, Daniel and I.

It shouldn’t surprise me, the swift shift of blame. I’ve seen him do it to others. I’ve watched my Brothers talk themselves into corners—and worse—too many times to defend myself now. I refused to name a wife only because I thought it was the right thing to do. Because the dream God sent me was of Miriam. And I couldn’t choose a woman who was someone else’s wife. Or a wife I couldn’t love.

But none of that is what Daniel wants to hear now. This is ever my problem: I always know what not to say; rarely do I know the right thing.

“I just want to fix this. I’m supposed to be with Miriam.”

His voice sharpens to a flinty edge. “Have you spoken to her about this?”

“No.” I squeeze the answer out the way I push out another rep on the bench press. It isn’t a lie. He’s asking about after. “I haven’t spoken to anyone since the Matrimony, other than the guards. And my mother.”

My answer seems to calm him. “Supposed to be.” He chuckles. “There is no ‘supposed to be.’ There is only what exists.”

“What exists are my feelings for Miriam,” I say. I’m not great

with words, but these come easy. They're the truth.

Daniel manages to look sad, even as he smiles. "What you need to remember, Caleb, is that each of our actions causes a ripple. And enough ripples cause a flood. Like the one that brought about the end of nearly everyone in Ur."

I have no idea what he's trying to tell me. He's referring to the story of Noah and the ark, but after that I'm lost. Does he want me to build a boat?

"What would you have me do?" Daniel says. "Tell our brethren you're unhappy with your choice? And then what? Perhaps you think it better if I say the entire evening was in error." He spreads his arms. "But who will believe that? That I allowed Matrimony between all the wrong people?" Tiny lines feather out from his eyes like arrows. "Does that seem like the kind of mistake I would make?"

"Of course not," I say, the words automatic. Daniel doesn't make mistakes. But neither does God, so . . . what is tonight, then? If all that is real is what exists, that means Miriam and I were never meant to be together at all. And that can't be true. My head begins to pound, and my body shakes.

Daniel puts a firm hand on my neck as he guides me to sit on the bed. "Since you cannot live with the married couples, I'll allow you to stay here. For now. What choice do I have? But you will be responsible for your own meals and your own housekeeping. After all, this is not your mother's burden to carry. Nor is it mine." His voice is warm in my ear, strong, when he says, "Your refusal to marry is the mistake, Brother. A sin. And one I'm not sure you can recover from."

Once again, I've managed to do the wrong thing. I bow my head. "I'm sorry."

"Oh, it's not me you need to beg for forgiveness. This is between

you and God. I hope for your sake He's feeling merciful. Because there's no room for the Faithless here. Not in my community."

I'm not Faithless! I want to scream it, but he is already gone. And maybe he's right. I have sinned. Willfully. I ignored God's voice. I refused Daniel's orders. How can I expect forgiveness? I'm lucky to still have a roof over my head.