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PERCHED on her grandfather's knee, Bathsheba tore off a piece of bread and offered it to him. Laughing, Ahithophel ate it from her hand. "She's becoming more like your mother every day, Eliam."

Her father watched her with a faint frown. "It's hard to believe she's growing up so fast. Eight years old already. It won't be long before I'll have to find a husband for her."

"A mighty man to protect a pretty young maiden."

She looked across the fire at the man who appeared, to her, like an angel from heaven. Tugging on her grandfather's tunic, stretching up, she whispered her heart's desire. "I want to marry David."

He laughed out loud and looked across at the handsome young man sitting across the fire. "David, here is another who has set you upon a pedestal." Heat flooded into her

cheeks as the man she idolized looked back at her grandfather with embarrassed tolerance. Her grandfather kissed her cheek. "Forget David, Bathsheba. He has three wives already, my sweet." As he looked into her eyes, his amusement faded. His expression softened. "Better to be the only wife of a poor man than one woman among many in a king's harem."

"Come inside, Bathsheba!" her mother beckoned. Her grandfather lifted Bathsheba from his knee and set her firmly on her feet, sending her off with a light swat on her backside. When Bathsheba paused to look back at David, her mother caught her by the arm and yanked her inside the tent, flipping the flap down behind them. "It's time for bed." She followed Bathsheba and drew up the blanket as the girl lay down on her pallet. Kneeling, she leaned down and kissed Bathsheba. Troubled, she stroked the wisps of black hair back from Bathsheba's forehead. "Some dreams can only bring heartbreak."

"But I—"

Her mother put her fingertip over Bathsheba's lips. "Hush, child." She leaned back upon her heels and rose gracefully. "Go to sleep."

Bathsheba lay awake, listening to the men's voices rumbling quietly outside. Others had joined them. She recognized Joab's voice and that of his brother Abishai. Both were commanders of David's army, and they often came to talk war with her grandfather, who had earned David's respect for his shrewd tactical advice. He knew a great deal about the Philistines and Ammonites and their

methods of battle. He also knew the land of Canaan as well as the lines in the palm of his own hand.

“Saul was in our hands, David,” Joab said. “You should have killed him when you had the chance.”

Joab’s brother Abishai was quick to speak in agreement. “Yes, you need to kill Saul! God gave him to us in the Cave of the Wild Goats. I would have slit his throat for you.”

“And I told you why I didn’t want him killed,” David said. “He is the man the Lord God anointed as king.”

“He’ll keep chasing you,” Joab said. “He’ll never stop until one of you is dead.”

“It would be better for the nation if you took the crown from Saul now,” another said. Bathsheba heard the rumble of agreement among several other men sitting at her father’s campfire.

“Strike the shepherd and the sheep will scatter,” Joab insisted.

“What am I to do with you sons of Zeruiah?” David said harshly, and she knew his impatience must be directed at Joab and Abishai. “How many times must I tell you I will not raise my hand against the Lord’s anointed!”

She heard footsteps moving away.

“I don’t understand him,” Joab said in frustration. “Speak sense to him, Ahithophel!”

“What would David have gained by murdering the king while he had turned his back to relieve himself?” Her grandfather spoke calmly in the face of the younger men’s hot tempers. “When Saul heard David call to him from the cave, he knew David could have killed him—yet David allowed him to walk away with only his pride injured.

Would a man who coveted his kingdom have done that? Of course not! Every man riding with Saul now knows David is in the right! And they know David was giving King Saul the chance to repent!"

"Repent! The fire in Saul's belly will be back soon enough, and we'll be on the run again. Should we spare a man who ordered the murder of eighty-five priests and their families at Nob?"

"Leave judgment to the Lord. David's course is a righteous one."

"You know as well as I that as long as there is breath in Saul's body, he will hunt David!"

"I know, too, that God will prevail, Joab. It will be by His efforts, not yours, that David will one day be king. The Lord is in command. Every day, more men join us. Why? Because they believe as we do: that God is with David wherever he goes. The Philistines, Ammonites, and Amalekites cannot defeat a man who has the Lord God of Israel as his shield."

"I want to see the crown on David's head!"

"So do we all, Joab. But let it happen in God's time and not before."

The men went on talking. Bathsheba's eyes were heavy with sleep. She dreamed of David dressed in royal robes, holding out his hand to her. Startled awake, she lay still, listening. Men were shouting in the distance. Probably another argument. She heard familiar voices outside. Rising to her knees, she peered between the stitches of the tent seam. David had returned and was sitting in the flickering firelight, talking with her father and grandfather.

“We’ll join forces with the Philistines,” David was saying. “When the fighting turns against Saul, we’ll be in a position to turn the battle in his favor.”

Her grandfather frowned in concentration. “How many do you plan to take?”

“All of them.”

“Who will protect our women and children . . . ?”

Bathsheba gazed at David, her head full of dreams. She loved the way he tilted his head as he listened intently to what her grandfather had to say. She studied every line of his face.

Men shouted again. Her mother moaned softly, rolling over on her pallet. Bathsheba looked out again. David had his head turned toward the disturbance. A muscle in his jaw clenched. “These men are too much for me to manage!”

Her grandfather sat with his hands clasped between his knees. “They are a flock of sheep in need of a strong shepherd.”

“Sometimes they behave more like a pack of wolves!” David shook his head and rose. “I guess I should do something.” Sighing, he walked away.

“I don’t understand him,” her father said, tossing a rock into the darkness. “Why is he always coming to Saul’s rescue even when it could mean his own death?”

“Have you forgotten that Saul’s son Jonathan is David’s closest friend? And David’s first wife is Saul’s daughter.”

“Jonathan has chosen sides, Abba, and Michal is defiled. Saul gave her to another man. David lives in hope that everything will change back to the way it was before Saul went mad with jealousy. It will never happen.”

Her grandfather poked the fire. "Joab's advice is shrewd. Saul's death would put an end to this war and place David on the throne. But there would be no blessing for David if he kills the Lord's anointed. Ah, my son, David lives to please God. His passion is for the Lord." He looked up, his face aglow. "If every man among us had the heart David has, what a kingdom God would build for us!" Tossing the stick into the fire, he rose. "Come, let's stand with our friend and hear what the Lord has given him to say this time."

Bathsheba knew David wouldn't shout orders at the fighting men, nor interfere with their arguments. Instead he would simply sit near them and sing. She waited, and after a little while, she could hear the sound of his harp amidst the shouting—a soothing melody played quietly against angry, discordant voices. Already the angry voices were dying down. Pulling at the seams, Bathsheba tried to see more from within the narrow view of her father's tent. Her grandfather always said that God gave David's words and music the power to lift hearts and minds from petty differences to God's majesty and the blessings He had poured upon His chosen people. She had heard David play and sing many times before, and she never tired of it.

Her mother was asleep. What harm if she snuck out and crept close enough to watch and listen? She slipped through the flaps and hastened toward the gathering, staying at the edge of firelight. Hunkering down, arms wrapped around her knees, she sat and listened. Her young heart trembled at the sight of David, his handsome face bronzed in the fire-

light. No one in the entire world could be as perfect as David, her beloved.

“O Lord, our Lord, the majesty of your name fills the earth!” His voice rang out in the night air. His words grew indistinct when he turned away. So she rose and crept closer. One by one, men sat and reclined, gazing up at David as they listened, captivated as he worshiped God more openly than any priest. David stopped in the midst of his men and lifted his head, singing a wordless melody that made Bathsheba’s heart ache. Then lyrics came again to him.

“When I look at the night sky and see the work of your fingers—the moon and the stars you have set in place—what are mortals that you should think of us, mere humans that you should care for us?”

Everyone was silent now, waiting as David bowed his head and plucked the strings of his harp. The sound and words pierced her so deeply that Bathsheba felt he was plucking the strings of her heart. “For you made us only a little lower than God, and you crowned us with glory and honor. You put us in charge of everything you made, giving us authority over all things—the sheep and the cattle and all the wild animals, the birds in the sky, the fish in the sea, and everything that swims the ocean currents.” David shook his head in wonder and looked up at the stars again, his face rapt. “O Lord, our Lord, the majesty of your name fills the earth!” He played a few more chords on his harp and then lifted his hand slowly above his head, offering his words of praise to the God of all creation.

And the camp was quiet—so quiet, Bathsheba could hear her own heartbeat.

“Sing another psalm, David,” her grandfather, Ahithophel, said.

Others joined in his appeal. “Sing to us of the Lord!”

Bathsheba rose and crept in among the gathering, slipping in next to her doting grandfather, seeking his warmth.

“What are you doing up?” he whispered gruffly and put his arm around her, snuggling her close.

“I had to hear, and I was getting cold.” Shivering, she looked up at him pleadingly. “Please, Grandpapa, just for a little while . . . ?”

“You know I can’t say no to you.” He pulled his cloak around her. “One song.”

David sang another psalm, one she had heard many times before. His handsome face glowed in the firelight, and his words poured forth upon her thirsty soul. Unlike so many hearts around her, David’s heart wasn’t turned toward war. He longed for peace. He appealed to God for help and mercy and deliverance from his enemies. What would it be like to live without fear of a pursuing king, of Philistines and Ammonites, of the raiding Amalekites? She looked at her father and saw his eyes were moist as he leaned forward, listening intently. How many times had she heard her papa say God would uphold their cause? God would hide them in the cleft of the rocks and inside the caves of En-gedi and Adullam. God would sustain them with food and water. God would give them victory against every enemy. Why? Because they were with David, and David did nothing with-

out inquiring of the Lord. David prayed his songs, and God listened.

David walked a few steps and stood for a moment with his head bowed. His eyes were closed. She watched his hands move gently over the strings, strumming softly and making her heart ache. He raised his head and looked from face to face. Would he look at her? Would he notice her sitting between her father and grandfather?

“The Lord is my shepherd; I have everything I need. . . .”

When David’s gaze fixed upon her, her heart leaped into her throat. She held her breath, staring back at him, but his gaze moved on, touching each man there as though every one was equally precious to him. She felt crushed beneath the pressure of her love for him, and dejected that he hardly noticed her among his throng of devoted followers.

You are my shepherd, David. You make me want something I can’t even name. You lead us through the wilderness, but I’m not afraid, because you are with us. And I would do anything for you. . . .

Someone gripped her shoulder tightly, startling her. “Bathsheba!” her mother whispered angrily.

“So you’ve been caught again,” her grandfather whispered, unfurling his cloak from around her back and shoulders. Scowling, her mother scooped her up and carried her away, setting her on her feet when they were halfway back to the family tent. “You’re lucky I don’t take a rod to you!” Lowering her eyes, Bathsheba followed her mother through the darkness. Her mother swished the tent flap back. “Get inside!” Once past the opening, her mother gave her a swat on her behind. “Since I can’t trust you to stay where you

belong, you'll sleep beside me until your father returns." Her mother drew her close. "You know better than to disobey."

Bathsheba sniffled. "I'm sorry, Mama. It's just that I love him."

Her mother sighed. "I know you do. We all love David."

"Not like I do. I'm going to marry him someday."

Her mother's arms tightened around her. "Oh, my sweet one. Every girl among us wishes for the same thing. You must listen to me, Bathsheba. What you hope for is impossible. It's the idle dream of a child."

"Why?"

"Because David is too far above you."

Her throat tightened. "He was a shepherd."

"He still is a shepherd, but not in the way you mean. You must understand. David is destined to be *king*, and as such, he will marry the daughters of kings. You're only the daughter of one of his soldiers."

"Abba is a warrior, one of David's *best* warriors, and one of his *closest* friends. And Grandpapa . . ."

"*Hush!* Remember, David is still married to Saul's daughter Michal, even though Saul gave her to someone else. And David is also married to Ahinoam and Abigail."

"Abigail isn't the daughter of a king," Bathsheba said stubbornly.

"No, but Abigail kept David from committing a great sin. He was grateful for her wisdom. And she is very beautiful."

"Do you think I'll be beautiful someday, beautiful enough—"

"Someday, you'll be very beautiful, and wiser than you

are right now, I hope. At the very least, wise enough to understand that some things are not meant to be. Your father will find a good husband for you, and you'll forget you ever thought yourself in love with David."

Never! Never, never, never! Bathsheba blinked back tears and turned her head away.

"When you grow up, my love, you will understand the wisdom of worshiping God and not a man."

Bathsheba lay still until she heard the sound of her mother's deepened breathing. Then she eased out of her arms and crawled to the other side of the tent to peer into the night once more. Her father and grandfather had returned to the fire, and David had joined them once again. They spoke quietly of battle plans. Bathsheba closed her eyes and listened to the sound of David's voice. Content, she fell asleep.

+ + +

When she awakened the next morning, Bathsheba found herself on her pallet, under her blanket. Her father snored beside her mother. Bathsheba rose quietly and left the tent. David would be up by now. He was always up before everyone else, and he always went off by himself to pray. She had seen him several times coming back from the stream, so she hurried toward it now. Her heartbeat quickened when she spotted David kneeling by a rippling pool, washing his face, arms, and hands. Her father and grandfather always did the same thing before they prayed.

Her footfall caused a soft cascade of pebbles to spill down the slope. David turned sharply, eyes intent, hand on the hilt of his sword. When he saw her, he relaxed.

"You're up early, Bathsheba. Aren't you a little far from camp?"

Her heart hammered as she came closer. "I came to get water."

"Then you have a problem, little one."

"What problem?"

He smiled. "You have no jug."

Heat surged into her cheeks. When he started to turn away, she spoke quickly before she lost all her courage. "Could we talk awhile, David? I came all this way to see you."

He turned and looked at her. "You shouldn't be so far from camp. It's dangerous. Go on back to your tent where you belong."

"But—"

"You know your mother wouldn't be happy you strayed so far. I don't think she'd be pleased if she had to come searching for you a second time."

Crushed by his reprimand, Bathsheba bolted up the slope, ducked behind some rocks, and sat down heavily. Trembling, she put her cold palms against her burning cheeks. Then she took a breath and peered out from her hiding place. David was still standing by the stream, his hands now on his hips. "Go home before you're missed! And don't leave the camp again!"

Sucking in a sob, Bathsheba clambered up and ran all the rest of the way back to her father's tent, thankful no one was awake to see her tears—or ask the cause of them.

+ + +

Word came that the Philistines were going out against Saul. Bathsheba's grandfather and father laid out their armor and

weapons. Bathsheba helped her mother prepare parched grain and raisin cakes for them to take with them. Her mother was silent, as she always was before the men left. So, too, was Bathsheba as she listened to them talk.

“We go tomorrow and join the ranks of Philistines,” her grandfather said. Bathsheba remembered the plan she had overheard David talking about. His men would only be pretending to help the Philistines. Really, they were waiting for a chance to help King Saul defeat this enemy army.

“Surely they’ll suspect David’s offer as pretense,” her father said tightly. “It’s only through God’s mercy that we haven’t been caught raiding the Geshurite and Amalekite villages these past years.”

“We’ve timed our raids carefully and left no survivors.”

“Rumors spread . . .”

“David wants to be in a position to help Saul. If the Philistines reject our offer of aid, there’ll be nothing we can do.”

“Saul’s fate is in God’s hands already, and I don’t like leaving our women and children on their own.”

As the sun rose the next morning, Bathsheba watched her father and grandfather leave camp with David. As soon as they were out of sight, her mother went inside the tent and wept. She was quickly herself again. She sat in the shade of the tent carding wool and sent Bathsheba off with the sheep.

The day after the men left, Bathsheba was bringing water up from the stream when she heard yelling and screaming. Dropping the skin, she ran up the bank. Amalekite raiders were charging into the camp while women fled in a dozen

directions, grabbing up their children as they ran. Defenseless, they were quickly rounded up like a scattered flock.

When Bathsheba saw a man knock her mother to the ground and try to tie a rope around her flailing hands, she shrieked and ran at him in a fury. Jumping on his back, she clawed his forehead and yanked his hair. "Let her go! Let my mother go!"

With an angry shout, the man caught hold of her hair and hurled her over his shoulder. She hit the ground hard. Gasping for breath, she made it to her hands and knees, but someone looped a rope around her neck. Rolling over, she grabbed it and kicked the man. He uttered a harsh groan and bent over, his face going white while one of his company called out a laughing insult. "Is that little flea too much to handle?"

Enraged, the Amalekite gave the rope a hard yank. As she choked, he dragged her up by her arm and shook her violently. "Fight me and I'll drag you to your death!" He sent her flying into the line of women and children.

Sobbing, her mother quickly loosened the rope and clasped her close. "Bathsheba! Oh, Bathsheba!"

Bathsheba coughed violently and wretched and dragged in a full, painful breath. "David will—" Her mother clapped a hand over her mouth and shushed her. She'd never seen terror in her mother's face before this day.

The Amalekite guard turned on her. "*No talking!*"

The women and older children were tied and led away. Younger children were carried. The band of raiders and captives walked for hours, the midday heat bearing down hard upon the women and children, who were given only

enough water to keep them going. They stopped as the sun was setting. Most of the women collapsed, too tired even to whimper. Each captive was given a handful of parched grain.

Bathsheba ate ravenously, but her stomach still ached with hunger. Her neck was bruised and burned from the rope. Her throat hurt from the hard yank she'd received early that day. Her feet were raw from walking across dusty, rocky ground. Her body ached all over. When she began to cry, her mother pulled her close and shared her body warmth as the moon and stars appeared and the temperature plummeted.

"I'm afraid, Mother." Bathsheba cried softly.

Her mother stroked her hair back from her sunburned face. "It does no good to cry. We need to save our strength for whatever lies ahead."

"David will come looking for us, won't he?"

"We will pray that he and your father return quickly."

She held Bathsheba tighter. Bathsheba felt her mother trembling and asked no more questions. "Pray, my daughter. Pray hard."

And Bathsheba did. *David, oh, David, come and find us. Come and save us!*

The Amalekites kept the women on the move, hastening them toward a future of slavery, prostitution, and death. Exhausted, the women and children collapsed each night, too bone weary to cause their captors trouble of any kind. After the first two nights, they were left unbound while the men sat around the campfire, drinking and laughing. No

guards watched over them. There was no need after so many miles of travel.

When the sun rose and set on the third day, hope waned.

+ + +

Bathsheba awakened abruptly to the sound of battle cries. The air around her reverberated with shouts and screams. Confused and terrified, she tried to rise, but her mother grabbed her. "Stay down!" She pulled her back and down as a nearby Amalekite grabbed for his sword. He fell back with a scream, his arm severed, and then his head as well. Horrified, Bathsheba looked up at the attacking warrior who jumped across the lifeless body. Her father's friend Uriah! Shouting his battle cry, he charged on. If Uriah was here, surely her father was also, and her grandfather.

"Abba!" Bathsheba screamed. "*Abba!*"

The Amalekites fell back and tried to run, but they were cut down without mercy by avenging fathers, husbands, and brothers. Bathsheba saw Ittai the Gittite hack, from shoulder to sternum, the guard who had choked her. The roar of battle was terrifying. Israelites cried out in wrath; Amalekites screamed in terror. The clash of swords and thunder of men's feet were all around her as she cowered against her mother.

And then it was over. As quickly as it had started, it ended, and the silence was a shock. The bloodied bodies of the Amalekite raiders lay sprawled around the camp, while the men left standing were no less terrifying in their stained garments, their hands and arms and weapons splashed with red.

Bathsheba heard David call out, "Ahinoam! Abigail!"

Other men cried out names as well, searching for their wives and children.

“Here! I’m here!” women cried back. All was still in confusion.

“Eliam!” Her mother let go of her and ran into her father’s arms, sobbing against his chest.

“Bathsheba,” he said raggedly and held out his arm, but she couldn’t move at the sight of him covered in blood. His eyes were so fierce he looked like a stranger. “Come, Daughter,” he said more gently, still breathing hard. “Come to me. I won’t hurt you.” Trembling violently, she looked away and saw the carnage around her.

Her grandfather was there suddenly, catching her up in his arms, holding her close. “You are safe, my little flower.” Over his shoulder, Bathsheba saw David speaking with Ahinoam and Abigail. She lost sight of him again when her grandfather put her back on her feet, his hand firmly upon her shoulder, keeping her against his side. “War is always worse for the children,” he said gruffly.

“I didn’t think you’d be able to find us,” her mother said, her arms still around Bathsheba’s father. “Oh, Eliam, you would’ve been proud of your daughter.” She told him about everything from the day the Amalekites had raided the camp.

Bathsheba closed her eyes, but even then she couldn’t block out the picture of the slaughter around her. She was cold and couldn’t stop shaking. She understood now why her mother cried every time her father left camp with David.

“The Philistines turned us away,” her father said. “If they

hadn't, we might not have been able to track you so quickly."

Her mother frowned. "Saul?"

"He's outnumbered."

"What will David do?"

"The only thing he can do. Nothing."

On the way back to camp, some of the men argued over the share of spoils they'd taken from the Amalekite camp. They were not willing to share with those who had been too tired to cross the river. David commanded that the spoils be divided equally among all the men, with gifts to be sent to the elders of Israel's cities.

And so it was done, but not without grumbling.

+ + +

An Amalekite came into David's camp, bearing news of Israel's defeat. Bathsheba was listening when he told David that Saul and his son Jonathan had been killed by the Philistines at Mount Gilboa. Their bodies were hanging on the wall of Beth-shan, while Saul's weapons had been placed in the temple of Ashtoreth. When the messenger stepped forward and stretched out his arms, murmurs issued from David's men, who stood by, watching. The Amalekite smiled broadly, triumphant, as he offered David Saul's crown.

David looked at it and began to shake with rage. Bathsheba wondered why he was so angry. David took the proffered crown. "How do you know that Saul and Jonathan are dead?" he demanded.

The man's eyes flickered. Perhaps the Amalekite sensed something ominous in David's tone. "I happened to be on

Mount Gilboa," he answered. "I saw Saul there leaning on his spear with the enemy chariots closing in on him. When he turned and saw me, he cried out for me to come to him. 'How can I help?' I asked him. And he said to me, 'Who are you?' I replied, 'I am an Amalekite.' Then he begged me, 'Come over here and put me out of my misery, for I am in terrible pain and want to die.' So I killed him," the Amalekite told David, "for I knew he couldn't live. Then I took his crown and one of his bracelets so I could bring them to you, my lord."

Even from her vantage point, Bathsheba could see the blood drain from David's face. "Were you not afraid to kill the Lord's anointed one?" he cried. As the man shifted his weight, David said to one of his men, "Kill him!" So the man thrust his sword into the Amalekite.

"You die self-condemned!" David spoke into the impaled man's face. "For you yourself confessed that you killed the Lord's anointed one." He yanked the sword from the Amalekite and watched him crumple to the ground.

David must have felt the eyes of all upon him, for he looked around at the silent men, women, and children staring at what he'd done. Bathsheba longed to understand, to share his grief. His emotions burst forth and he cried out, "Your pride and joy, O Israel, lies dead on the hills! How the mighty heroes have fallen! O King Saul!" He sobbed, dropping the sword and holding his head. "Oh, Jonathan! Jonathan, my brother!"

David's grief infected the entire camp as everyone mourned the death of King Saul and David's best friend, Jonathan. David sang songs of tribute to them, reminding

the people of the good days when Saul had loved the Lord and served Him.

And when the period of mourning came to an end, David obeyed the Lord and moved his army to Hebron.

+ + +

It was at Hebron that Bathsheba watched David marry Maacah. Through the years she watched him marry Haggith, Abital, and Eglah, and with each wedding, she heard he made important alliances. He needed allies, for despite Saul's death, the house of Saul continued to wage war upon David. "He has an eye for beautiful women," she heard her grandfather say. Amnon was born to Ahinoam, Kileab to Abigail, Absalom to Maacah.

Messengers came from Abner, commander of the army of Saul's son Ishbosheth, proposing an alliance. Bathsheba's grandfather advised David to be cautious and test Abner's sincerity and strength. So David sent word that he would not agree to anything unless his first wife, Saul's daughter Michal, was returned to him.

"He must love her very much," Bathsheba said. She still could not look at David without feeling a quickening inside her, but she was more clear-sighted now that she was almost grown than she had been as a small child. She no longer clung so tenaciously to her fantasies of marrying the man of her dreams.

Her mother shook her head. "Love has nothing to do with it. What rightfully belonged to David must be restored. He will take Michal into his house, but she will never have children."

"All of his other wives have had children. She will also."

“Your grandfather will advise against it. She’s been defiled by adultery. King Saul gave her to another man years ago, when you were just a baby. Besides that, should David beget a child by her and build the house of Saul? May it never be! David will listen to your grandfather. He will provide for Michal and protect her, but he will never touch her again.”

Bathsheba felt pity for Michal. “It would have been kinder to leave her with the other man.” And David would have one less wife, one less beautiful woman in his household.

“Perhaps,” her mother said quietly. “I heard that the man followed her for miles, weeping and wailing. Abner had to order him away. But David is a king, Bathsheba. He is not an ordinary man.”

“No one could ever have called David ordinary, even before he was king.”

Her mother looked at her solemnly. Bathsheba smiled. “Don’t worry, Mother. I know I am only the daughter of a humble warrior.” Something flickered in her mother’s eyes. Bathsheba turned away. “If David will never have children with Michal, why is it so important she be returned to him?”

“He must prove himself strong. A king who cannot keep possession of the women who belong to him cannot hold a kingdom together.”

Bathsheba knew David was strong enough. What strength he lacked God would provide. She looked toward his tent. “Do you think she loves him?”

"She did once. She even saved his life. But that was years ago."

"I don't think he loves her anymore. I don't think he's ever given his heart to any woman, not completely."

"Oh, my dear." Her mother sighed heavily. "It is wiser for a woman to fall in love with a poor man who can afford only one wife." Bathsheba's throat closed hot, and she blinked back tears as her mother rose and came to her, turning her around and tipping her chin up. "You became a woman a month ago. I spoke with your father and he says someone has already spoken to him regarding you."

Bathsheba's heart pounded with trepidation. "Who?"

Her mother smiled. "A good man. A strong one."

"Who is it?"

"I won't say until it's settled, but if it comes to be, you will have a husband you can respect."

"Respect, but not love."

"In time, love, too. If you allow it."

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Bathsheba's father and grandfather accepted the bride-price from Uriah the Hittite, and all, in their minds, was settled. Her mother, in an effort to encourage her, explained their many reasons for choosing him. Uriah had saved her father once in battle; Uriah was counted among David's thirty mighty men; Uriah had proven himself valorous and dependable in hard times. Ahithophel had seen Uriah charge into the hottest battle without fear in order to defend David. He was admired and respected by all, and a friend of the king. Such a man would be able to protect her and provide for her and the children she would give him.

“He’s a courageous man, Bathsheba, and he’s loyal. He’s been wise with his possessions. Unlike others, Uriah hasn’t squandered the spoils he gathered in battles against the Philistines and Amalekites.”

“But he’s so much older than I am!”

Her mother looked her in the eyes. “He’s a year younger than David.”

Bathsheba sat heavily, covered her face, and wept in defeat. She was a woman—albeit a young one—and had no say in the matter. The decision regarding whom she would marry had never been hers, and she’d always known in her heart that David was as far beyond her reach as a star in the heavens. She was nothing but a foolish, earthbound child clinging to her dreams, but, oh, how it hurt to have them wrenched from her. Years ago, David had been chosen by God and anointed by Samuel to one day be king of Israel. Who was she to think she was worthy to be his wife—or even his concubine? What wretched misery to fall in love with a man who was a king!

“If only he’d been an ordinary shepherd . . .”

Her mother stamped her foot. “*Enough of this foolishness! Enough dreaming!* I will not have my daughter act like a selfish child! You should thank God David is more than a shepherd! Where would our people be if he’d never left the pastures and his father’s flocks? Even if you were the daughter of a king and worthy to marry him, what then? Could you bear to watch him take more wives and concubines? A king must build a strong house and preserve the kingdom. You would have to put your own desires aside for the sake of a nation that depends upon him.”

Her mother grasped her shoulders tightly. "Your father has chosen a fine man for you. Uriah is good and decent, and you will be his *only* wife. David has never so much as glanced at you, Bathsheba, but Uriah looks upon you as though you were a pearl of great price. You will be his most prized possession."

Bathsheba felt ashamed. "I have nothing against Uriah, Mother. It's only that I . . ." Tears streamed down her face. She knew it was useless to say another word. Could she change the inevitable?

Her mother let go of her abruptly and moved away. "No one expects you to love Uriah right away, Bathsheba. In time, you will—if you give him a chance." She turned and looked at her. "But for now, you *will* show Uriah the respect and obedience he deserves as your husband. If you don't, I will take a whip to you myself!"

Bathsheba raised her chin. "I will marry Uriah, Mother, and I will show him the respect and obedience he deserves. But love cannot be commanded."

For as long as she could remember, her heart and soul had belonged to David. And she knew that would never change, no matter what others demanded of her.

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Bathsheba never expected David to come to her wedding. When she saw him through the colored gauze of her veils, she almost wept at the pain, knowing he had come not to see her become a wife, but to honor his friend, her husband.

Uriah was dressed like a king for the ceremony. Even then, her husband paled in comparison to her true sovereign lord, who wore a simple tunic and leather girdle. David

outshone every man at the ceremony! And even though he placed a groom's crown upon Uriah's head, there could be no comparison between them. There was a nobility about David that proclaimed his place among men. No one was more handsome and graceful. No one could surpass his gifts of music and dance. No one held a position of greater power, nor had a more humble, tender heart. David asked for no special treatment, but everyone deferred to him out of love and respect. God had blessed David in every way.

The wedding feast proceeded with Bathsheba in a haze. She was relieved when Uriah left her side to greet David. They laughed together and shared a goblet of wine while she sat on the dais and watched. It was David who drew her husband back to her side. It was David who took up a pitcher and replenished Uriah's cup and then filled hers. She brushed his fingers with her own as she took the goblet, sensing his surprise. Did he think she was bold?

"May the Lord bless your house with many children, Uriah," David said grandly, and in a voice loud enough to carry. He raised his cup high. Bathsheba raised her eyes and looked into his, and for an infinitesimal moment, she felt something change between them. Heat spread over her skin. "And," he continued, "may all your sons and daughters look like your wife and not like you." He looked into her eyes as he sipped, his own strangely dark and perplexed.

The men around them laughed, Uriah loudest of all. David blinked and then laughed as well, slapping Uriah on the back and saying something to him that was lost in the din surrounding her. Uriah nodded and looked at her proudly,

his eyes glowing. David's eyes met hers again, and her stomach fluttered strangely. The moment was both enticing and terrifying. When Uriah looked at her, she felt nothing. But David's look made her cheeks burn and her heart hammer. She lowered her eyes, startled by the powerful feelings surging inside her. She glanced around cautiously, wondering if anyone had noticed the effect David had upon her. She was trembling. Afraid, she looked at her mother, but she was dancing and laughing with the other women, and her father and grandfather were drinking with the men.

Turning her head shyly, she encountered David's stare. It shook her deeply, for she instinctively understood its meaning. Exultation was overwhelmed by despair.

*Why does he look at me as a woman now, when it's too late?
Why couldn't he have noticed me a new moon ago?*

Uriah came and sat with her upon the dais. He took her hand and kissed it, his eyes bright from admiration and too much wine. "I am blessed among men," he said thickly. "There is not a man here, including our king, who does not envy me such a beautiful young wife."

She smiled back tremulously, embarrassed by his impassioned compliment.

The wedding feast wore on until she was emotionally exhausted. She forced a smile until her cheeks ached. She pretended to be happy, pretended she wasn't drowning in a sea of sorrow. Twice more, David looked at her. And twice, she looked back at him, fighting against the tears. He always looked away quickly, as though caught doing some-

thing that made him ashamed. And that made her suffer all the more.

Oh, David, David, what a wretched woman I am. I love you! I'll always love you the same way I have since I was a little girl. Do you remember how I followed you to the stream of En-gedi and watched you pray? I was just a child, but love caught me and held me tight in its grip. Nothing can kill it. And now I'm married to a man I can never love because I gave my heart to you years ago!

When David rose and left, she was almost relieved.

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Uriah was a man hardened by years of fighting the Philistines, Amalekites, and King Saul, but Bathsheba found him surprisingly kind as well. "I don't know anything about women, Bathsheba. I've spent my entire life training for battle and fighting alongside David. And that won't change. My allegiance will always be to David first, for he is God's anointed. But I promise I will take care of you. And if anything should happen to me, you will have enough so that you will always have a roof over your head and food to eat." His hands were callused from using his sword, and he shook when he touched her. "Please don't cry."

She wept because Uriah deserved to be loved, and she had no love left to give him.

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As the months passed, Bathsheba gave up her dreams and fulfilled her duties to her husband. She carried water from the well. She washed, cooked, cleaned, and carded wool. She wove cloth and made garments for her husband. She

did everything she knew how to make her husband's life comfortable and pleasant. And though she did come to respect him, she could not *will* herself to fall in love with him.

Uriah spent most of his time with the other mighty men, training David's army, sparring, talking, and planning late into the night. Sometimes he brought soldiers home with him. He told her to keep her face covered so the men wouldn't stare when she served them. He told her to cover her face when she left the house. "There are rough men among David's army, men who have no respect for women."

"I've known such men all my life, Uriah. No one has ever bothered me before."

"Before, you were a child, Bathsheba. Now, you're a beautiful young woman. And you are my wife. Obey me." He tipped her chin and looked into her eyes. "It is always wise to avoid trouble."

Uriah and the other mighty men talked freely while they ate and drank, and by listening, Bathsheba learned much of what was going on in Canaan. She knew within hours that Joab, David's commander, had murdered a man in vengeance. She heard how furious David was, and how he mourned the murdered man. She was among the people when David condemned Joab's actions as evil. She was afraid for David because Joab was a powerful man, and a proud one as well. Why would David retain Joab as commander over his army?

Nothing came of David's reproach, but soon more news changed the course of Bathsheba's life. Ishbosheth, son of

Saul and heir to the throne of Israel, was murdered. The men who came with news of the assassination thought David would be pleased to have his rival removed. Now the way was clear for David to assume his rightful place as king over all of Israel! They even brought the head of Ishbosheth with them to prove their foul deed. Rather than rewarding them, though, David had them executed. He ordered their hands and feet cut off and their bodies hung up beside the pool of Hebron.

Many of the men Uriah brought home were violent, more comfortable in war than in peace. Her house was constantly filled with stories of intrigue surrounding David. Why was there such cruelty in the world? And if David was ever crowned king over all Israel, would there be those who would try to assassinate him, just like Saul and Ishbosheth before him?

Often, she would remember her mother's words: *"The life of a king is never easy. . . . Better to love a poor man . . ."* It was not easy to be the wife of a warrior either, for she never knew from one battle to the next whether she would be left a childless widow. "I live in fear every day, wondering if I'll lose your father," her mother admitted when they talked at the community well.

What would happen to Uriah's household if he died now? Bathsheba had no children, but not for want of trying. She wondered if her husband was disappointed in her, but if he was, she saw no sign of it. Two years had come and gone since their wedding feast, and he still treated her with kindness.

All the tribes of Israel gathered at Hebron, appearing

before David and declaring that he was God's anointed. "We are all members of your family," the high priest said to him before the people. "For a long time, even while Saul was our king, you were the one who really led Israel. And the Lord has told you, 'You will be the shepherd of My people Israel. You will be their leader.'"

Bathsheba's heart swelled with pride as she stood among the crowd and watched David make a covenant with the people and be anointed king of Israel. He was only thirty years old, and yet the elders of all the tribes bowed down before him. And Uriah stood nearby, one of David's bodyguards and closest friends, raising his hands to heaven and shouting in exultation.

And then David went to war again, Uriah at his side.

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Bathsheba waited with the other wives to receive word about the battle for Zion, and when it came, she cried out in joy with all the rest.

"They've taken Jerusalem!"

But neither David nor Uriah came home to Hebron. Instead, they sent a contingent of warriors to bring the families to the newly conquered mountain stronghold. Building commenced all around the City of David, strengthening Zion for defense. Walls were built. Hiram, king of Tyre, sent cedar trees and carpenters and stonemasons to build a house for David. And Uriah chose a stone house near the site of the king's palace.

Still, peace was elusive. The Philistines gathered against David, spreading out across the valley of Rephaim. And

once again, Uriah was called away to war. Bathsheba cried this time, for she had come to care very deeply for him.

“Don’t fear for me. The Lord is on our side!” was his parting exhortation. His words were of no comfort to her. She had no son to carry on Uriah’s name or to take care of her when she was old.

Word returned that the Philistines were defeated at Baalperazim. When Uriah came home with an idol, Bathsheba protested. It was the first time in their marriage that she dared argue with her husband. But she knew how detestable idols were to the Lord God. “Would it please God to know you have set that loathsome thing in our house?”

“It means nothing. Everyone carried something from the field of battle. It’s a memento of our triumph. Nothing more.”

“David wouldn’t bring something unclean into *his* house. You should’ve destroyed it!”

His eyes darkened with the fierce pride of a victorious warrior. “Don’t tell me what I should’ve done! What are you afraid of, woman? It’s nothing but clay. Did it save the man who owned it?”

“It’s a thing of evil, Uriah!”

He tossed his armor aside and glared at her. “Do you think I don’t know there is only one God? It’s the Lord who has given David victory on every side! And you’ll leave that idol where it stands as a reminder of a battle *I* fought alongside my king, the battle *I* helped win!”

Ashamed of having spoken out so forcefully, Bathsheba said no more.

The Philistines regrouped, and again, Uriah was called

away to war. The Philistines were like a plague that lingered. The Lord gave David victory again, and the Philistines were struck down from Geba as far as Gezer. But Bathsheba knew it would never be over. Men's hearts seemed bent upon war. Uriah's most of all.

Uriah didn't return home. It was her mother who told her that her father and Uriah had gone with David to Baalah of Judah to bring the Ark of God back to Jerusalem. Bathsheba ran down the road with the other women and wept in relief when they returned. Her joy was quickly dampened by their manner, for the Ark was not with them. David looked neither to the right nor to the left as he rode by on his mule. His face was dust-covered and tense. When she spotted Uriah, Bathsheba kept pace with him along the road. An air of defeat hung over them. David gave orders to disperse the men and went up to his house and his wives.

Uriah came to her then. She'd never seen him so tired. She lowered her shawl from her face and searched his eyes.

"What's happened, Uriah?"

"David's afraid to bring the Ark to Jerusalem."

"David's never been afraid of anything."

His jaw clenched. He took her arm and turned her toward home. "He's afraid of God. We all are. Uzzah, the priest's son, is dead. He laid hands on the Ark when the oxen stumbled, and the Lord struck him down. I've never seen a man die so fast." His hand loosened. "He went down as though hit by a thunderbolt."

"Where's the Ark now?"

"At the house of Obed-edom of Gath, where it will stay until the Lord tells David otherwise."

With Uriah home, the house became a gathering place again as soldiers came often to pass time with Bathsheba's husband. Sometimes they lingered late into the night. They could talk of little else but the continuing reports of how God was blessing the household of Obed-edom. After three months of such tidings, David summoned his mighty men and went down for the Ark. Uriah was among them.

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From a great distance came the sound of trumpets and shouting, announcing the return of David's mighty men. Women swept out into the street and ran to meet the procession. Jubilant, Bathsheba raced down the mountain road with them. Sunlight shone off the Ark and she thrilled at the sight of it. Each time the men who were carrying it had gone six steps, they stopped and waited so David could sacrifice an ox and a fattened calf. Trumpets sounded. And David danced with all his might. Men, women, and children sang and wept. Stripping off his outer garment, David continued leading the procession, dancing in his tunic. The people caught his zeal for the Lord. Men sang out praise after praise to God as women joined David in dancing.

The hard years were over at last. God had protected David and given him victory on every side! God had made him king over all Israel! The nations could not stand against him because God was on his side! The Lord had strengthened him and built an army of mighty men around him, and now the Ark would rest upon the mountain where Abraham had once been ready to sacrifice his only son, Isaac, to God!

Bathsheba's racing blood sang with joy. She could not

stand still and watch. If she didn't cry out in praise and dance, she would go mad. Laughing and weeping, she tore away her shawl, lifting it high like a canopy over her head as she twirled, dipped, twisted, and was caught up in the ecstasy of the moment.

Peace would reign at last! No enemy could defeat them.

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Yet, crouched at the door was a greater enemy than those who camped around Israel. And a greater battle was coming—one that could tear a nation to pieces. The battle would not take place in the mountains, valleys, or plains of Israel. It would take place in the wilderness of the human heart.