

BEYOND THE SILENCE

TRACIE PETERSON

—
KIMBERLEY WOODHOUSE



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Scripture quotations are from the King James Version of the Bible.

This is a work of historical reconstruction; the appearances of certain historical figures are therefore inevitable. All other characters, however, are products of the author's imagination, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

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This book is dedicated to and in loving memory of:
JAMES WILLIAM (WOODY) WOODHOUSE

One of the very best men I've ever known.
My beloved father-in-law. For twenty-three plus years,
you called me daughter, told me you loved me, and gave me a
hard time whenever you had the chance.

It was priceless.

Even though you left a gaping hole
(who will I debate and discuss music with?),
I'm rejoicing that you are with our Lord and Savior.
Thank you for all the quiet encouragement
and support you bestowed on me over the years—
telling me you were proud of me and that I “did well.”
Miss you, Dad. Can't wait to see you again.

PROLOGUE

1890

Far-off screams filled the air and rattled six-year-old Jimmy Colton's bones.
Mama?

Jimmy paused to listen again and looked back toward the house. Another scream echoed across the yard. Something was wrong! He dropped his bucket of dirt and took off toward the house as fast as his legs could carry him, following the long path through the olive trees and gardens. Why did he go so far from the house? Mama had told him to stay close, but he'd wanted to chase the butterflies.

He tripped and fell on a tree root. Dirt filled his mouth and his knees hurt.

Another scream split the air and made his heart beat faster. He had to get to Mama. Something bad was happening. Real bad.

He pushed to his feet and ran. Harder and harder.

There. The house was in sight once he cleared the trees. He

raced to the back porch, jumped up the stairs, and yanked open the screen door.

A stitch in his side made him stop and bend over for air. “Mama?”

Silence.

“Mama? Where are you?”

A mean voice from upstairs said something he didn’t understand. *Slap! Smack!* The sounds scared him and urged him forward.

The backstairs door was locked, so Jimmy raced from the kitchen to the parlor and then to the front of the house and looked at the big staircase. His mother lay at the top, whimpering.

“Now, where is it?” The mean voice belonged to a pair of dirty boots that kicked his mama. “You took it, didn’t you?”

Jimmy bolted forward and saw the man. Ugly. Dirty. Big. “Don’t you hurt my mama!”

The man’s head snapped up and squinted down. “Shut up, you little runt. You’re next!” His ugly hands grabbed Mama’s shoulders and then her neck. He forced her to her feet. “I won’t hurt the boy if you’ll just tell me where you hid it.” The ugly man spat on the floor. Then he shook her again and again, raised his fist, and reared back—

“No!” Jimmy couldn’t move. What was happening? He looked down at his feet as a whirring sound started in his head.

Laughter trickled down to him. But it wasn’t nice laughter. “What? Aren’t you gonna come get me?” He dropped Mama to the floor again. “Aw, are you afraid? Cat got your tongue?” The bad man yanked Mama’s limp form up again and lowered his voice. “I’m gonna count to three and then I’m gonna kill your kid if you don’t tell me.” He looked down at Jimmy and snarled. “One . . .”

Jimmy's hands balled into fists at his sides but he couldn't seem to breathe or even move. His chest tightened. The whirring got louder. Where was Papa? Mama wasn't moving. Was she asleep?

"Two . . ."

Slap! The sound shook Jimmy to his knees. But this time it was Mama's hand doing the hitting. She hit the man's face again and then she clawed at him. Blood trickled down from the corner of his eye. She'd scratched him good.

"Run, Jimmy!" Her words were raspy.

"Why, you little . . ." The man's words grew louder until a roar filled Jimmy's ears and blotted out everything else.

Spots danced in front of his eyes as he gasped for air and watched the terrible man throw his mother down the stairs. Jimmy felt himself falling with her. He hit his head hard on the foyer floor and opened his eyes. But he couldn't see.

Mama! Clamping his eyes shut, his head hurt worse than he could ever remember. He tried to open his eyes again. To see her. Was she okay? His breaths were fast but he still couldn't get any air. Heavy thumps sounded on the stairs. The man was coming.

No! Jimmy lifted his eyelids a little and saw Mama. She was on the floor not too far from him. Her face was swollen and red and blood ran from her mouth.

Her hand reached out to his. "I . . . love you . . . Jimmy."

He cried. "I love you too, Mama."

The footsteps came closer. "Now, ain't this special?"

Mama closed her eyes and squeezed his hand. She wheezed, "Run!"