

OUT FROM EGYPT • 2

SHADOW *of the* STORM

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BETHANYHOUSE

a division of Baker Publishing Group
Minneapolis, Minnesota

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Published by Bethany House Publishers
11400 Hampshire Avenue South
Bloomington, Minnesota 55438
www.bethanyhouse.com

Bethany House Publishers is a division of
Baker Publishing Group, Grand Rapids, Michigan

Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Control Number: 2016938454

ISBN 978-0-7642-1821-7

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Cover design by Jennifer Parker

Author is represented by The Steve Laube Agency.

16 17 18 19 20 21 22 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

To my beautiful and faithful mother—

Her wisdom teaches me

Her prayers surround me

Her love embraces me

Her heart hears me

Her friendship encourages me

Her strength inspires me.

Although I may not have been born of her body,
I am grateful to be a child of her heart.



When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered themselves together to Aaron and said to him, “Up, make us gods who shall go before us. As for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.” . . . So all the people took off the rings of gold that were in their ears and brought them to Aaron. And he received the gold from their hand and fashioned it with a graving tool and made a golden calf. And they said, “These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you out of the land of Egypt!”

Exodus 32:1, 3–4 ESV

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SHIRA

17 TAMMUZ

4TH MONTH OUT FROM EGYPT

Wild drumbeats rumbled through the ground like distant thunder, pulsing in defiant rhythms and vibrating the hollows of my chest. My fingertips echoed the beat against my knee until a glare from my mother across the tent stilled their dance.

“Shira, finish your work.” Her bone needle resumed its skillful motion as she bent her head to peer at her embroidery. The dim oil lamp highlighted the silvery strands that seemed to thread her dark hair more each day—a trend that had begun a few years ago, when my father died against an Egyptian whipping post.

I plucked at the black goat’s wool in my lap, picking out thorny burrs, specks, and shards of leaves. The fibers snagged

against my thirsty palms. Unable to latch my attention on the tedious chore, I had been cleaning the same batch for most of the afternoon while my mind wandered up the rugged mountain path that Mosheh, our leader, had climbed forty days ago.

I imagined myself standing in his place, leaning on his staff and gazing out over the vast army of tents that flooded the valley floor, surveying the multitude he had led out of Egypt. Countless Hebrews camped here alongside a large number of *gerim*—Egyptians and other foreigners—all reveling in these last three months of freedom since the sea had swallowed Pharaoh's army.

As soon as Mosheh had vanished into the swirling storm that hovered over the summit, rumors began to multiply like flies on a rotting melon. Would he still lead us to Canaan, the land promised to our forefathers? Or had he slipped over the back side of the mountain range to flee south toward Midian? Was the old man even alive? Doubts buzzed around in my own mind, but I swatted them away with a shake of my head. Mosheh would return. He must.

Yet the golden idol standing on a group of boulders near the center of camp argued against my assertion. Aharon, Mosheh's own brother, had been swayed by those who insisted Mosheh was dead and allowed the bull-calf to be lifted up—a blatant disregard for the new laws spoken by Yahweh himself from the center of the fiery Cloud atop the mountain.

From her cross-legged position across the tent, Kiya gestured for my attention with a surreptitious tilt of her head and a darting glance at my mother. My Egyptian friend dared not cross the unspoken order for silence from the woman whose son she would soon marry, but her honey-gold eyes begged me to disobey in her place. The man she loved, my brother Eben, and her own brother, Jumo—both heavily armed—had been gone for hours at the command of the Levite elders.

Compelled by her wordless plea and my own curiosity, I chanced a question. “What is happening out there, *Ima*?”

Although the cadence of her needle faltered, my mother shook her head without looking up. “Nothing good.”

“Must we stay inside all day?” I waved a useless hand in front of my overheated face. “Perhaps we could roll up a wall? Let in some air?”

Shoshana and Zayna, my two little sisters, lent their pleas to mine, begging our mother to let them play outside.

“No,” said my mother, her tone brooking no argument. “You both will stay inside. The elders said to remain out of sight until this foolishness is over.” She gestured for the girls to continue cleaning the mound of wool that sat between them on the rug. My mother’s talent for weaving ensured that our temporary home was carpeted with vibrant designs of every hue, a luxury in this dusty wilderness.

Her adamancy piqued my curiosity again. “What will Mosheh do when he discovers Aharon made that idol?”

She scowled at me, her eyes dark as obsidian. “Aharon will regret such a reckless decision.”

“Surely he won’t let it get out of hand. He said the festival would be for Yahweh—”

“It already is more than out of hand. That abomination should never have been made.” She punctuated her words with a resolute jab of her needle into the fabric and a pointed drop of her chin. There would be no more questions.

I flicked an apologetic glance at Kiya, but she had plunged into the distraction of her weaving. Her deft fingers danced across the handloom, lacing together a striking pattern of blue and white, a belt that would be presented to my brother Eben on their wedding day in three weeks’ time.

Kiya resembled her mother more every day: the golden eyes, the sheen of her straight black hair, the easy laughter

and graceful move of her body. Nailah's legacy to her daughter had been a rare beauty that made her the envy of every woman—including me.

I was plain. Pale for a Hebrew, plagued by freckles, and with a body more like a child's than a woman's. I smoothed my woolen shift over my narrow hips, reminded again of their utter lack of promise. Arching against the dull ache in my lower back, I pressed a disobedient curl into my waist-length braid and my barren future into the back of my mind.

As lurking shadows deepened in the corners and the pile of clean wool grew in the basket at my knee, the revelry took on a different attitude, a more feverish tone. The pitch and sway of the music became more rhythmic and less melodious. By nightfall, shrieks, provocative laughter, and chanting rode on the breezes, sounds eerily reminiscent of the depraved temple worship back in Egypt, sounds that proved my mother had been right—Aharon had lost even the veneer of control.

As Kiya lit another oil lamp, I tugged at the neckline of my sleeveless gray shift. Although our small indoor cookfire had died out, its sharp smell lingered. The walls seemed to press closer with every smoke-laden breath. I longed to toss aside the wool in my lap, burst free of the suffocating tent, and reward my lungs with fresh evening air.

The drums stopped.

Deafening silence whooshed into the empty space, and my scalp prickled. I shivered in spite of the stifling heat. My mother's needle halted. My sisters had long since traded the sweltering boredom of our woolen prison for sleep; their slow breathing was the only intrusion into the menacing stillness.

"What happened?" I whispered to avoid waking the girls.

My mother shrugged, tight-lipped, as if reluctant to breathe.

Still and silent, the three of us focused on the far wall, as if the jutting black peak of the mountain were visible through the

tight weave. The ear-splitting bray of a shofar sounded close by, echoed by others that returned the pattern. Although a familiar ring of communication, these calls were urgent, pained. Every hair on the back of my neck rose in response.

A call to arms? Or had I misheard the summons of the ram's horn?

The girls startled awake, their cries of confusion melding with an uproar that began to swell near the foot of the mountain. Something had put a swift end to the celebration.

Had Mosheh returned? What would he do? I struggled against the instinct to dash outside and see for myself. My mother gestured for my sisters to lay their heads on her lap. Her fingers stroked their dark curls, a steady outlet of nervous energy, as her eyes darted to the glint of the common fire through the slit of the door flap again and again.

The woolen wall billowed as someone ran by, the distended silhouette of a drawn sword in his hand. The hasty scuffle of his sandals against the pebbled ground dissipated into the night. I could hear little else over the stuttering pulse in my head as a thousand imagined outcomes flickered through my mind, stretching suffocating minutes into hours.

Would Mosheh leave us after such blatant disobedience against the edict not to bow to a graven image? Would Yahweh? Aharon may have declared the golden bull-calf an intermediary to the God who had rescued us from Egypt, but it resembled the sun-crowned god of fertility and strength that my Egyptian mistress had forced me to polish every day for four years. Apis.

Suddenly, just as on our last night in Egypt—the night all the firstborn sons were sacrificed for our freedom—keening cries lifted over the camp. My mother, Kiya, and I gaped at one another, mute with terror.

The cry of death.

Dreadful wails rang through the enclosed valley, echoing

against the granite cliffs, overlapping one another like endless waves on the shore. Dizzy and disoriented, I clamped my hands over my ears, bent forward like a broken reed. Would we all die tonight? Would the fearsome Cloud of Fire that had led us out from Egypt consume us all?