



THE
HEART
OF A KING

THE LOVES OF SOLOMON



JILL EILEEN SMITH


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To those who have tasted what is forbidden
only to find it meaningless.
May Solomon's wisdom and the love he
craved show you a better way.

Prelude

The Teacher looked at his scroll, light dancing in little ringlets over the words from the flickering candle at his side. Flickering like the breath of wind. One circling encompassed the word he could not stop writing, could not pour enough emphasis into, though his stylus had scratched the repeated word clean through the parchment.

Meaningless. Meaningless. Meaningless.

Like chasing the wind. Everything was meaningless.

Everything.

A sigh escaped, a weighted thing within his chest. Memories flooded him, both good times and bad. *Yes, everything*, he insisted to his battered heart. No whisper of dawn brought him joy as in days of old. And though three times he had heard God's voice, that too carried no thrill, no fear, no awe.

What had become of the days when he taught his children that wisdom was priceless and a wife's value far above rubies? When had his search for wisdom as something hidden and precious become less than the gift it was?

The Heart of a King

Wisdom *had* been a great gift then. A gift given directly from the mouth of Almighty God. And he had used it well.

Until he hadn't. Until he doubted and tested and questioned and thought too highly of the gift. Until he let the gift displace the giver.

A fool says in his heart there is no God.

He'd never said that. But oh, how he had acted the part.

Sometimes foolishness is overconfidence in one's own wisdom. And pride had changed everything.

CHAPTER

ONE

JERUSALEM, 975 BC

Solomon looked up from studying the temple model in the room his father had set aside for the miniature palatial structure. Footsteps stopped outside the room, and his ever-present guard opened the door. His mother breezed past the guard without a word and came to his side.

“The ambassador of Ammon has arrived,” she said, placing a jeweled hand on his arm. “Shobi has brought his daughter with him.”

“Naamah?” How long it had been since they had spoken. “Undoubtedly she is no longer a girl of ten.”

“I believe it has been five years since they came to our aid in Mahanaim.” Bathsheba touched his bearded chin. “Do you wish to speak with her or shall I keep her occupied? I did once promise her a tour of the city, but I sense she did not come just to see me.”

Solomon caught the slight smile and twinkle in his mother’s eyes. “Are you suggesting something, Ima?” He had been

of marriageable age for over a year, but only one thing had occupied his thoughts since that day when his half brother had sent them running for their lives. His own coronation.

“Only that Naamah was an interesting girl, and you seemed to enjoy corresponding with her for a time.” She searched his face. “I know she is a foreign princess, but Shobi has been a friend and ally of your father for years . . . and you are ready to seek a wife.” She tilted her head, and he couldn’t escape the knowing look in her eyes.

“I am more ready to have my father name me co-regent. You do understand that we are in danger, as is any wife I would take, until my right to rule is secure.” His jaw tensed with the reminder. His mother knew the truth only too well.

She patted his arm. “I am trying, my son. But though your father promised me, he is young enough to live many more years and isn’t ready to think about his heir.”

“His older sons don’t seem to mind thinking about it.” He scowled and rubbed his chin, hating the way the uncertainty made him feel. “Would my father combine a coronation with a wedding? I would feel more at ease to even consider marriage if I knew you and my brothers were safe from Adonijah and my other half brothers.”

Bathsheba’s brows knit and she nodded. “I understand, my son. And I will continue to speak to your father as the opportunity allows. I’m not suggesting you marry Shobi’s daughter, though of course it is something to consider. I’m simply asking if you would like to speak with her. I think that much can be arranged.” She smiled again, and this time he returned the gesture.

“I would enjoy speaking with her, Ima.” Images of the curious young girl of years past flitted through his mind’s

eye. Was the woman Naamah beautiful, as the girl had hinted she would be?

“Good,” Bathsheba said, interrupting his thoughts. “I will invite her to tour with me and then you can meet me in the anteroom and take over. I will beg off my meeting with her until the evening meal.”

“You would leave me alone with her?” He raised a brow.

“You will have the guards.”

“Yes. Of course. Always the guards.” He rubbed his beard.

“It is a fact of life for a prince . . . and a king.” She touched his cheek. “You will never escape them, my son, so as always, we make the best of where God has placed us in life.”

“If only God would prompt my father to name me co-regent . . .” He let the sentence dangle at his mother’s look.

She backed slightly away from him. “I will bring Naamah soon. Be ready.”

He nodded as she slipped from the room, knowing that his true wishes were yet again delayed. Something he should be used to by now, but he chafed at the thought just the same.



Naamah’s camel turned at the bend in the road and carried her through the guarded gate to King David’s palace. The sights, the beauty of the place, caused such a hitch in her breath it blocked even the sounds of her father ordering the camels to kneel. Sparkling-white stone pillars held the roof above a grand porch, and gleaming, golden lion’s-head sculptures were mounted on either side of the great wide doors.

She blinked, trying to clear her thoughts and focus on what the guard was saying to her father, but she could not

shake her dazed feeling. What splendor! The palace in Rabbah was nothing in comparison. The realization hit hard. She was no match for King David's son. She could not expect an alliance to be made on her behalf. She was the daughter of a reluctant ambassador and subject of this king, nothing more.

The sobering thought would not abate as she followed the guard to the anteroom several steps behind her father. When at last the guard left them to wait their turn to see the king, she sought her father's ear.

"I did not think the king quite so wealthy." She kept her voice low. "They had so little in Mahanaim, and even the stories you told . . ." Words failed her, and she gave him an imploring look. "I should not have come."

He gave her arm a reassuring pat. "Of course you should have come," he said in his soft, comforting tone. "King David came from humble means, my child. All of this wealth"—he waved a hand over the room rich with tapestries and colorful mosaic tiles in shades of blue and gold and gleaming white—"means little to this king. He is still a humble man, my daughter. You need not fear." His smile helped but a little to overcome her anxious thoughts.

"I will try, Abba." She held her tongue as another guard approached to usher them into the audience chamber.

A golden throne stood at the end of a long room, and tables and additional seats were placed beneath arched porticos on either side of the hall. Scribes and courtiers stood or sat in these areas, their gazes fixed, watching them. Heat crept up Naamah's neck, and she thanked the God of Solomon for the veil that hid her sudden embarrassment.

They stopped at a line of green and blue tiles before the

raised dais and bowed low, but not before she dared a glance in the king's direction. Another chair was to his right, and Solomon's mother sat upon it. She drew in a sharp breath. Bathsheba was more beautiful than she recalled. The woman smiled at her, and Naamah quickly lowered her gaze. Did this kind woman remember her?

But it was Solomon whose form she longed to set eyes upon, yet she had seen no sign of him. Where could he be? Her heart beat faster as thoughts tumbled inside her head. Abba was wrong. She should not have come.

"Shobi, my friend. It is so good to see you again." King David's voice was strong, and when she glanced up at him, she noted the genuine affection in his eyes. "Is this your little daughter?" The king's brow lifted and he offered an approving smile. "Though she is a child no longer."

Her father inclined his head in Naamah's direction. "Yes, my lord. This is my Naamah. She was anxious to see Jerusalem, and now that she is a woman grown, I thought the time was right."

King David glanced at his wife. "You remember Naamah, my love?"

Bathsheba's smile warmed her as it had the day they met in Mahanaim. "Yes, of course, my lord." She smiled at the king, then took Naamah's measure. "She has grown into a lovely woman." She turned her gaze to Naamah's father. "You must be quite proud of her."

"Quite proud," her father said, going on to assure them both that Naamah had exceeded his greatest plans for her, that she was well versed in all matters worthy of a princess of Ammon. The praise caused the heat to crawl up her neck and she hid her eyes from their perusal, studying the tiles

at her feet instead, suffering the unpleasant feeling that she was on display.

“Naamah.” Bathsheba spoke, jarring her attention from the tiles.

Naamah looked her way once more. “Yes, my queen?” Was she a queen? She suddenly realized that the guard had not instructed them on what to say or how to address the king or this obviously favored wife.

“While your father and the king discuss their business dealings, I would like to show you around the palace. Would you like that?”

She nodded. “Yes, my queen.” Though she wished it was Solomon who had asked the question. Would they meet him in the halls? Should she ask after him?

“Very good,” Bathsheba said, rising from her gilded chair. “Come with me.” She descended the steps and walked toward a side door Naamah had not noticed before.

Naamah glanced at her father. At his quick nod, she knew she should not linger. She bowed low before King David once more, then stood and walked with graceful steps toward the door the queen had entered.

As she stepped into a smaller but more private antechamber, she stopped short. Bathsheba stood talking with someone that at first she did not recognize. By his resplendent robes she knew him to be royalty, but when he turned to look her way, she found it difficult to breathe. There was no mistaking the resemblance to his mother and father. And though she had not seen him in five years, she would never forget the intensity in those dark eyes or the twinkle that accompanied his approving smile.

He glanced at his mother, then strode to Naamah’s side.

“Naamah?” He bowed at the waist, and she did the same, unsure at that moment what to do with her hands. She clasped them together to still her sudden nervousness.

“Solomon?” She smiled, though he could not see it behind the veil.

“What a pleasure to see you again,” he said. “Father told me he expected your father to arrive today. I am glad you chose to accompany him this time. I had hoped you would come one day, and here you are.”

His smile seemed to hold genuine kindness, though his words were probably said to be polite, because what else could he say to a young woman who begs her father to travel with his caravan?

She realized how shameless it must look for her to be here at all. What other ambassador would bring his daughter on such a trip? But she ignored the uneasiness that thought evoked. She was here now, and the man of her many dreams stood before her.

“Thank you, my lord,” she said, glancing from him to her sandaled feet. “I am glad to be here.”

He didn’t respond immediately, causing her to look up. He exchanged a look with his mother, but she could not make sense of his guarded expression or their silent communication. When he returned his attention to her, he smiled. “My mother has allowed me the privilege of escorting you on a tour of the palace. That is, if you would like to join me?”

She studied him a moment, aware of the slight strain in the pull of his mouth and the fine lines hidden beneath the heavy dark bangs across his brow.

“I would enjoy that very much.” She glanced at his mother. “I hope you will join us, my lady?”

Bathsheba stepped closer and shook her head. “I will look forward to meeting with you before the evening meal. If you don’t mind, I have a few things I need to attend to first.”

Naamah forced herself to remain calm and dignified as she had been taught, though she was suddenly unsure of herself. Five years had changed Solomon, but she could not tell if he was simply wary or worried. When he offered his arm, she gladly took it.

“Though my father has not yet declared it, I am his intended heir,” he said, leaning close to her ear as he led her through the antechamber. “Unfortunately, his hesitance to say so publicly puts me and my mother at risk.” He indicated the guard that followed at a discreet distance. “Thus the guards.”

“It seems to me,” she said, feeling that sense of understanding they had shared so briefly as children return to her now, “that you were in the same predicament when we met five years ago.”

He leaned away to better look at her and chuckled. “So it would seem.”

The hall led to a private door, which he opened without pause. “What is like vinegar to the teeth and smoke to the eyes?” he asked as they stepped into the grandeur of the king’s gardens.

She squinted as she had that day when she was ten and he had first posed the riddle. “A sluggard,” she said, laughing.

He laughed with her. “You remembered.”

“It was not something I would easily forget.”

He smiled and settled her on a bench beneath a large terebinth tree, then sat beside her. He fingered the veil at her temple, gently brushing his hand against her cheek. She

flushed hot, tingling even beneath the veil. “Five years ago, we did not have this between us. I enjoyed the ability to look on your face, to easily read your expressions.”

She lowered her gaze, her senses heightened and attuned to his nearness. “I don’t suppose I have to wear it the whole visit,” she said, though she knew her maid, Inaya, would scold her for days to come if she removed it now.

He seemed to think on that as he used to do when they were young. At last he shook his head. “No. Keep it on.” He smiled in that lazy way that must make every woman in Jerusalem love him. “You are temptation enough with it.”

She did her best not to fidget with the belt at her waist.

“How was your trip from Ammon? I am sorry I have yet to visit your town.”

“It was longer than I expected. At times I can still feel the camel beneath me.”

He laughed, revealing straight white teeth. She caught the hint of mint on his breath. “I prefer the horse to the camel. They are such proud, powerful creatures.”

“They are prettier than a camel, I daresay. And not as ornery.” She clasped her hands to force her nerves to still. Being so close to him after all these years brought on a headier feeling than she had imagined. “Horses would not make the trip as easily, though,” she said. “Some of the terrain we traveled was better suited to a camel, and the ride was slightly less bumpy than a horse could be.”

“You are right, of course. But a horse is far better in battle. Any nation that would be great needs a strong military might. That means a great number of horses and chariots.”

“You have put much thought into your future reign,” she said, hoping he could hear the admiration in her voice.

He shrugged. "I am observant. And I have been sitting on my father's court most of my life. I would simply choose what is wise for the kingdom."

"You will make a fine king someday." In that moment, she realized that as king, he would not want to be saddled with a foreign wife. Would he?

Before she could pursue the thought, he changed the subject to other topics, to riddles and worship and the political intrigue he could not escape.

"May I ask you something?" she said when their conversation lapsed momentarily into silence. He seemed far away in that moment, and she yearned to know why.

He leaned into the bench, his gaze curious. "Ask whatever you like, Princess."

Her face flushed at the look in his eyes, but she determined not to allow herself to be flustered by disobedient emotions. "Why did you stop our correspondence? Not a single word came from you once I turned thirteen." She looked at her hands, suddenly embarrassed at her boldness. "Did I somehow offend you, my lord?"

Silence followed her question, and she feared that if she had not offended him before, she certainly had done so now. But a moment later he touched her arm. She looked up, meeting his gaze.

"It was not proper to continue to write to a princess of marriageable age. Not without declaring some kind of intentions." His voice showed little emotion, but as she held his gaze, it was he who finally looked away.

"I understand," she said at last, feeling the loss of something she had savored for too long. He did not want her. He had not spent the past five years pining for her as she

had for him. Suddenly she felt utterly foolish for coming to this place.

“Naamah,” Solomon said, coaxing her chin up with the slightest pressure of his fingers.

She lifted her head, too aware of the moisture filling her eyes. What a fool she was!

“I’m glad you came,” he said, his smile relaxed, as though trying to put her again at ease. “I have thought often of you in the past few years, but I have been caught up in finishing my father’s plans for the temple model, the temple he wants me to build one day. And there is the constant worry that though he acts as if I am his heir, he will not name me so. The tension of waiting and the threat that is always there from my older brothers has been immense.”

She touched his hand, losing herself in the vulnerability of his smile. “I’m sorry. I must sound like a petulant child. It is only that I missed hearing from you. There were so many questions I wanted to ask you—about Adonai.”

He leaned back and studied her. “You have come to believe in Him.” It was not a question. Could he read her faith in her eyes?

She nodded. “Molech no longer holds me captive. But I have often longed to hear more of Adonai from your lips.”

He squeezed her hand and smiled. “I would have enjoyed such a conversation,” he assured her.

Their words grew less awkward after that. The sun moved past the halfway point, and still they talked as though time had never separated them. Her stomach grumbled, and they both heard it. He laughed and she joined him.

“I think we have missed the midday meal,” he said, standing. He offered his hand. “But I know where we can find

some almonds and dates to still the hunger until the banquet this evening.”

She allowed him to help her rise, grateful to move her limbs after sitting for so long. “And I suppose we should take that tour of the palace you promised me,” she said, casting him a coy look. She glanced quickly at the guard, who stood watch near the door to the gardens.

Solomon laughed, and the musical ring to it melted her heart. She was in love with this man, as she had been since her youth. She just prayed that she would be able to convince her father that Solomon was in love with her in return.