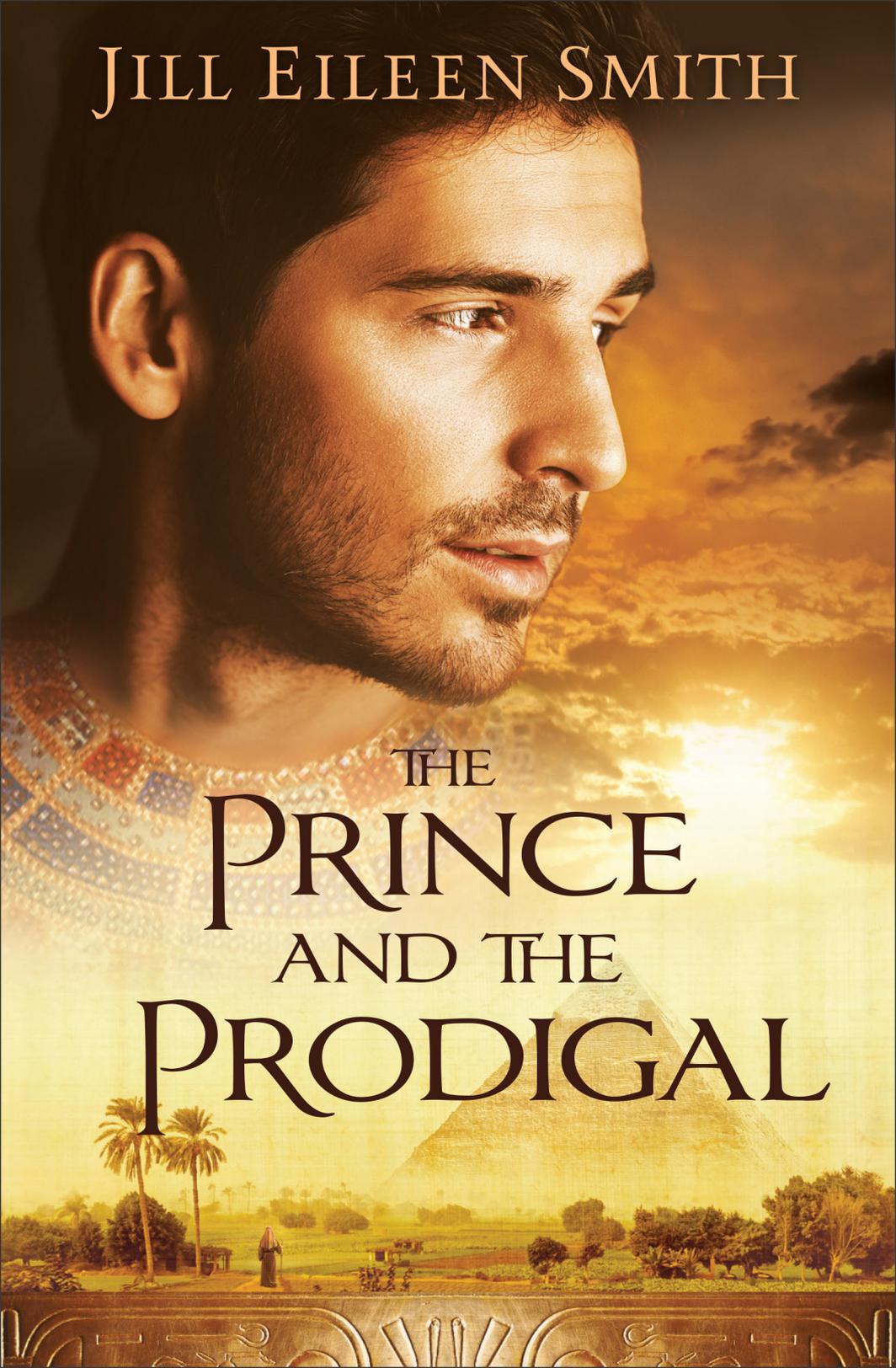


JILL EILEEN SMITH

A close-up profile of a man with a beard and mustache, looking towards the right. The background is a warm, golden sunset over a landscape featuring palm trees, a small figure in the distance, and a large pyramid. The overall tone is dramatic and historical.

THE
PRINCE
AND THE
PRODIGAL

Praise for *Miriam's Song*

“An inspiring and uplifting read about hope, faith, and perseverance. . . . To be captivated by such a compelling story, so much so I did not want to put it down, attests to the writer’s storytelling ability.”

Interviews & Reviews

“I really loved the story and the writing style of Jill Eileen Smith. She is a master storyteller of Bible stories and really keeps the reader captivated.”

Life Is Story

Praise for *The Heart of a King*

“Smith uses poetic intervals to infuse the narrative with the sensuality and beauty of the ancient culture.”

Booklist

“*The Heart of a King* was an intriguing, gripping look into the life of one of history’s most famous kings.”

Interviews & Reviews

Praise for the Daughters of the Promised Land Series

“Readers will appreciate that Smith infuses this well-known story with emotional depth and a modern sensibility not typically seen in historical novels.”

Publishers Weekly on A Passionate Hope

“*A Passionate Hope* is a wonderful novel rich with historical detail about real people who suffer the heartache that comes from stepping out ahead of God, and the miracle of grace that comes when we cry out to Him.”

Francine Rivers, bestselling author of *Redeeming Love*,
on *A Passionate Hope*

“Smith’s fresh retelling of the story of Ruth and Naomi portrays these strong biblical women in a thoughtful and reflective manner. Her impeccable research and richly detailed setting give readers a strong sense of life in ancient Israel.”

Library Journal on *Redeeming Grace*

“Rahab’s story is one of the most moving redemption accounts in Scripture. *The Crimson Cord* perfectly captures all the drama of the original, fleshing out the characters with care and thought, and following the biblical account every step of the way. Jill’s thorough research and love for God’s Word are both evident, and her storytelling skills kept me reading late into the night. A beautiful tale, beautifully told!”

Liz Curtis Higgs, *New York Times* bestselling author
of *Mine Is the Night*, on *The Crimson Cord*

Books by Jill Eileen Smith

THE WIVES OF KING DAVID

Michal

Abigail

Bathsheba

WIVES OF THE PATRIARCHS

Sarai

Rebekah

Rachel

DAUGHTERS OF THE PROMISED LAND

The Crimson Cord

The Prophetess

Redeeming Grace

A Passionate Hope

The Heart of a King

Star of Persia

Miriam's Song

The Prince and the Prodigal

When Life Doesn't Match Your Dreams

She Walked Before Us

THE
PRINCE
AND THE
PRODIGAL

JILL EILEEN SMITH



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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.

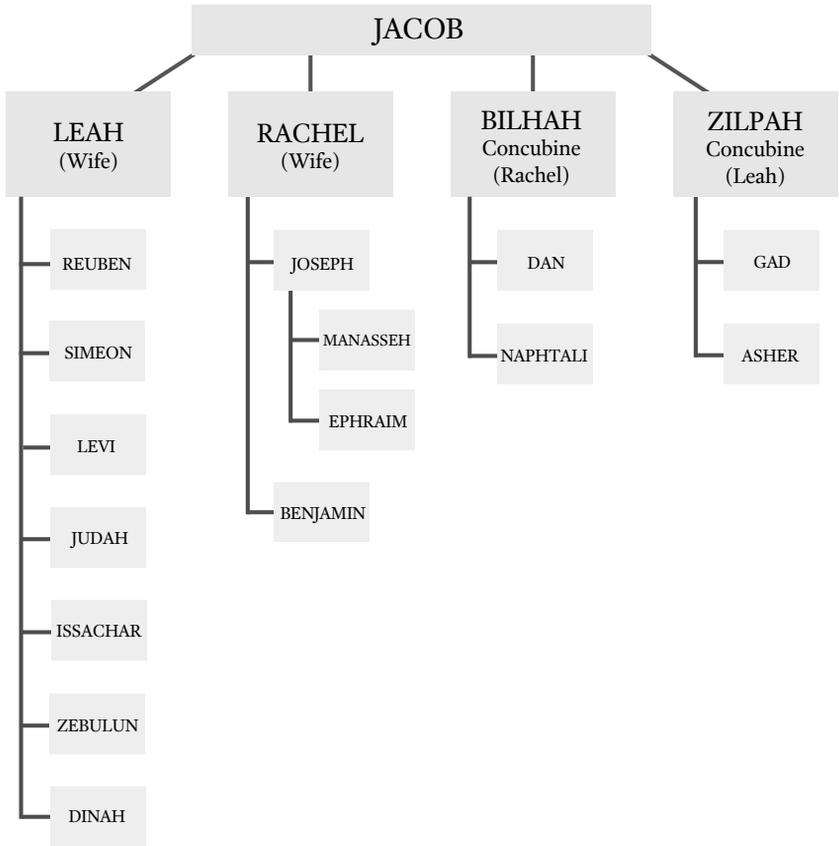
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To all those who long for reconciliation,
restoration, and redemption, remember—
the God who loves you wants them too.
Forgiveness is only a willing heart and a prayer away.
May this story give you hope in the God who redeems
even the most impossible situations.

TRIBES OF ISRAEL



PROLOGUE

MAMRE, 1842 BC

Jacob paused at the outskirts of Mamre near Hebron, taking in the familiar hills and fields where he had spent the early years of his life. Memories filled him, along with an ache in his heart over the news that his mother had long ago passed into Sheol. Why had he been forced to stay away nearly thirty years? He closed his eyes against the glare of the setting sun, remembering his mother's tenderness, her way of speaking, her smile. If only things had been different. He should never have allowed his uncle Laban to keep him away so long. He should have been here for her.

His heart skipped its normal rhythm as anxiety flared with the memories. Would his father welcome him now? Isaac had spent years alone without wife or sons, with none but his servants to care for his flocks, his fields, his needs. Jacob should have been here for both of them. The moment he had wed Rachel, he should have made plans to return. But Laban had tricked him again and again, and the regret he felt gave way first to anger, then to acceptance. He had done what he had to do. There was no use in trying to change the past.

He slowly pushed his staff into the dirt and limped closer to the encampment, which spread far and wide before him, a testament to his father's wealth.

"Are you all right, Abba?"

The voice of Rachel's firstborn, seventeen-year-old Joseph, caused Jacob to turn and smile. How often had he thanked God for Rachel's oldest son? Every day was not often enough, but every day the thought of Rachel surfaced, and Joseph was his memory of her. He was so like her in looks and in spirit. So unlike his brothers. A better, wiser son.

Jacob patted Joseph's hand where he had placed it in the crook of Jacob's arm. "I am fine, my son. It has been a long time since I have laid eyes on my father. He will not see us coming, but he will hear us. And he will know my voice." He hoped. "My father will be pleased to meet you. Come. Let us not delay lest the sun sets before we arrive and the servants think we are strangers come to harm them."

Joseph glanced behind them, and Jacob turned his gaze as well. Their caravan of sons, wives, children, and animals would need more room than Isaac now possessed. Jacob would do his best to include Isaac in their home—to give him a family again.

He picked up his pace despite his apprehension and moved toward the black goat-hair tents, spotting the largest one in the center, right where his father's tent had been when he left it for Paddan-Aram. God had promised to be with him when he left, and now He had brought him home again. How fitting.

The thought pleased him more than he expected. And to know that he had finally set things right between himself and his brother still filled him with awe. God really could do the impossible.

He looked at Joseph once more, marveling again that Rachel had borne him after so many years of longing. Yet why did God

take her upon Benjamin's birth? And why did Joseph's brothers so often look on his favorite son with disfavor?

Jacob shook the thoughts aside. "Come," he said again. "There is my father's tent. It is time for you to meet your grandfather."

Joseph followed obediently, and Jacob said no more as they reached the tent, where the flaps were lifted. Isaac sat in the doorway upon cushions with a young servant girl close by.

"Father." Jacob could barely choke out the word, and emotion suddenly overtook him. He knelt with difficulty due to his bad leg, drew up beside Isaac, and carefully touched his knee. "It is I, Jacob."

Isaac turned his head toward Jacob, his eyes unseeing. He cleared his throat. "Is that really you, Jacob, my son?"

"Yes, Father. It is really I. I have come with the wives and children and flocks that the Lord your God has given to me. I have come so that they can know you, Father." He paused, swallowed hard, and felt the strong grip of his father's hand in his. "I have come home," he said, this time letting his tears flow.

He leaned closer, and he and his father embraced as though they never wanted to part again. Isaac's tears wet Jacob's robe, and they wept together for all that had come between them. For all of the loss they had both suffered. And for the joy of coming home again.

1

1841 BC

Joseph walked the ancient path from the fields near Hebron to his father's tent beneath the oaks of Mamre. The shepherd's staff rested in his right hand, but his gait felt weighted, despite the brilliant colors of the setting sun and the cool whisper of the breeze in the trees above him. He wasn't sure he wanted the role his father had placed upon him. His brothers certainly would not approve.

The scent of roasting lamb wafted to him, and a moment later the cry of a child met his ears. He hurried closer as Dinah emerged from his father's tent, carrying his brother Benjamin.

"You are back," Dinah said, smiling above his brother's wiggling body. The boy was nearing his first birthday and did not often like to be held except by Joseph, though he seemed to tolerate Dinah above the other women in the family.

"Yes," he said, dropping the staff and reaching for Benjamin, who now tried to fling himself into Joseph's arms. "There you are, baby brother!" Joseph held him high above his head until Benjamin squealed with delight. They played their little game until Joseph finally set Benjamin in the dirt and held his hand to help him walk toward their father's tent.

"How did it go?" Dinah asked before he could walk away. "I

know it has not been easy for you of late. Our half brothers—and my own brothers, for that matter—seem to consider you a pest more than the grown man you are.”

Joseph gave her an appreciative look. He lowered his voice and leaned closer while trying to keep Benjamin from tugging him away. “It’s nice to know that someone understands. I fear our father does not stop to consider that having me report to him on their behavior will not help their feelings toward me. He already favors me overmuch because I’m Rachel’s son.”

“Abba loves you, Joseph. He does not see clearly where you are concerned—or that he puts you in difficult situations.” She touched his arm. “Perhaps I can speak to him about this sometime.”

Joseph shook his head. “No. Don’t worry yourself over it. If I have too much trouble, I will talk to Father.”

Dinah lifted a brow, her expression dubious. “Sometimes he listens to me better than to any of you. Keep that in mind if you need me.” She turned, then tossed him a smile and walked off to her mother’s tent.

Joseph chuckled as he led Benjamin to greet their father. Jacob was sitting among his cushions just inside his large goat-hair tent. The sides were up to let in the breeze, and Jacob smiled as he saw them coming.

“Greetings, Abba. Did you rest well?” At over one hundred years, Jacob often rested in the heat of the day. He no longer had the strength to shepherd the flocks as he once did. Rachel’s death seemed to have aged him, despite the joy Benjamin brought to both of them.

“I did, my son.” He motioned with a veined hand for Joseph to come closer and sit beside him. Joseph did as he was asked. “Tell me, how did it go in the fields today? Have the sons of my concubines returned with you?”

Joseph glanced at Benjamin, who had picked up a wooden stick and was attempting to put it in his mouth. Joseph took the stick from him and offered him a small wooden toy he used to play with. He looked once more at his father. “They are taking the flock to greener pastures and staying in one of the caves tonight. They did not wish to return to camp just yet.”

Jacob straightened, and his brows knit in a frown. “Was there good reason to travel away from the camp? Why not set out for greener pastures tomorrow? Did the sheep not find enough to eat throughout the day?”

“The sheep found plenty of green pasture to eat and rest in today. I told them we should bring the sheep to the pens tonight and set out elsewhere tomorrow, but they did not listen.” Joseph did not enjoy bringing such a report to his father, but he withheld the things he suspected his half brothers were really intending to do this night.

“If they will not listen to you, send them to me. I will see to it they listen to you, my son.” Anger filled his voice but quickly abated as Joseph held his gaze. “My son.” He reached for Joseph’s hand. “You always do what I ask. I never have to wonder or worry about you. What a gift from God you have been to me in my old age.”

Joseph patted his father’s hand and nodded. “Thank you, Father. I desire to please you, as I know this also pleases our God.” Hadn’t he known at his mother’s knee that God watched over them, that it was God who had given Joseph to her after years of barrenness? That it was God whom they were to serve and obey, for He had created all things?

“You are a good son,” Jacob said, attempting to stand. Joseph jumped up and helped his father, offering him his staff to steady him. “I smell something good—roasting lamb? Let us go now and meet your grandfather and let the women serve us.”

They walked toward the tent door, Benjamin toddling unsteadily ahead of them.

“Do you know if Leah’s sons will be joining us?” his father asked.

“I have not seen them. Perhaps they will send a servant to tell us.”

Leah’s sons rarely joined the family at mealtimes, even though it was one of the few times they had to spend with Isaac. They often took the flocks too far to return to camp in one day. He supposed Zilpah’s and Bilhah’s sons just did as they saw Joseph’s other brothers doing. Though they often argued, they seemed to get along better with each other than they ever had with him.

Jacob led Joseph and Benjamin to the center of the camp, where stones were placed about a fire. “They always came home when we lived in Shechem. They should not stray so far here. How do we know the Canaanites will always be friendly toward us?”

Joseph sat beside his father and pulled Benjamin onto his lap. “I don’t think you need to fear for Leah’s sons, Abba. They are grown men, and so far the men of Canaan have never troubled us.”

“They are young and foolish,” Jacob spat, scowling as if remembering things Joseph wished they could all forget.

Moments later, Isaac’s servants helped him walk to the central fire and settled him on a wide rock. A servant sat beside him to help with his food.

“Greetings, Sabba,” Joseph said. He rose with Benjamin and walked over to kiss Isaac’s cheek.

“Ah, my son Joseph. I know your voice. You smell of the sheepfolds.”

Joseph chuckled softly. “That I do. I spent the day with the flocks, but now I am here.”

“And you are well?” Isaac’s voice sounded thin and reedy as though passing through little air.

“I am well, Sabba. And hungry!”

Isaac laughed. “Then I will not keep you from eating.”

Joseph moved back to the rock beside his father and allowed Dinah to take Benjamin again. He listened to his grandfather and father speak for a few moments, until Leah stepped from her tent and brought food to Isaac. Bilhah and Zilpah also emerged from the tent and served Jacob, Joseph, and Dinah, who fed Benjamin from her plate.

Joseph smiled at his father, then wrapped a piece of lamb in flatbread and took a bite, grateful for the silence. He did not miss his brothers. The only one he longed to see daily was Benjamin. Though they had left his grandfather Laban and endured the death of his mother, coming back to Mamre had not brought the peace his father expected. Or Joseph had hoped for. The only thing he had found here that brought him joy was the chance to learn more about the God of his father from Jacob and Isaac. Both men had told him the tales of their encounters with the God of Abraham and repeated the history of their people. Even the deceit of his father and God’s overwhelming grace afterward were not withheld from Joseph.

Joseph found great comfort in the stories. And in times when he lay awake upon his mat and stared at the tent above him, the comfort of knowing that God cared for him too kept him believing that one day things between himself and his brothers would improve.



The bleating of sheep met Joseph’s ears as he climbed the low rise to the vast pens where his father’s sheep were kept. Reuben and Judah called the sheep to follow from two of the

pens, while the other four sons of Leah came behind, making sure none strayed as the men led the ewes with their young to the lush green pastures just over the rise.

Dan, Gad, Naphtali, and Asher took the goats and headed in the opposite direction without a single look at Joseph. Joseph tapped his staff into the dirt as he followed behind, wishing again that his father had not asked him to report on the actions of these sons of the concubines. Did they suspect his change in roles?

He glanced at the cloudless heavens, the place where God lived, grateful for the gentle breeze that offset the heat of the rising sun. His turban protected him from the glare as he searched ahead of him, where his half brothers seemed in a hurry to put distance between them. They were going to ruin the goats at that pace. The young could not travel quickly. As he watched, Asher struck one of the goats for lagging behind.

Anger flared, and Joseph picked up his pace. He hurried to Asher's side. "Why did you strike him?"

Asher waved Joseph away as though his words meant nothing. "You worry too much and have obviously not spent enough time with these ornery animals to know they need a firm hand. Forget about it."

"Our father would not appreciate you mistreating the goats." Joseph straightened, but Asher still towered over him and laughed at his concerns as if Joseph were a child to be coddled.

"It was merely a tap. The animal needed to keep up." Asher walked away, still laughing, as though their exchange was nothing more than a humorous spat.

Joseph stood still a moment, assessing the situation. His father had put him in charge of these sons because he did not fully trust their work. But they didn't know his position, and he didn't like telling tales on them. If only they acted as they should so that there would be nothing to tell!

He followed his half brothers again, determined to watch them and the goats, whether he spoke to them again or not. He felt the sacks at his side and the sling tied to his wrist.

When they came to a large field, Dan and Naphtali went in one direction while Gad and Asher went in another. Joseph knew neither group welcomed his presence, so he spent the day moving from one to the other.

He finally stopped where Dan's herd had settled and leaned against a large oak tree. He pulled a handful of almonds from one of his sacks and slowly chewed as he looked from one end of the field to the other. Dan and Naphtali were not together now—only Dan was visible against the rising sun's glare.

Joseph moved about, trying to locate Naphtali, but he had disappeared from view. Puzzled, he strode the length of the area where the goats had spread out. He walked toward where Asher and Gad had gone, but there was no sign of Asher either.

He glanced from Dan to Gad, debating whether to stay with them or continue his search for Asher and Naphtali. They couldn't have gone far. Or had they planned to go to the city or some other place all along?

He looked at Gad still sitting beneath a tree and occasionally looking at the animals. Frustrated, he looked back toward Dan, but he was no longer there. When Joseph came to the low rise in the field, he found no sign of Dan, and the goats were moving away from him. Where were they going?

Irritation spiked at the thought that they were purposely trying to avoid him or play some spiteful trick on him. To what end? What could they possibly be doing that they must keep secret?

He dug the staff into the dirt and hurried down the slight hill, shading his eyes to look in all directions. Had Dan known where Asher was and joined him there? They would weaken

the herd and kill the young if they did not take care to go at the animals' pace. They knew this. Every shepherd knew this.

After a lengthy jog, Joseph found the goats near a row of caves. Naphtali was there as well, but this time Dan was missing. Joseph closed his eyes, telling himself to remain calm. They were toying with him, trying to upset him. Obviously they did not want to include him as they once did. But why? Did they not care what their father would say to them when he heard of this?

Suddenly Joseph wished he were anywhere but here. He did not want to care for the flocks with these brothers, with any of his brothers. They refused to treat him as their equal, and while they might have tolerated him in his youth, they had grown more frustrating with each passing year.

He walked toward the caves in search of a place to escape when he heard laughter coming from within. Female laughter. He stood still, listening. The distinct voice of each brother interrupted what could only be a liaison with women.

Disgusted, Joseph returned to the goats and approached Naphtali. "Is this how you care for Father's flocks and herds? By meeting with women and ignoring the animals?"

Naphtali shrugged. "What are you going to do about it? Run to Father and tell tales? We will deny what you say, so don't trouble yourself."

Naphtali waved him away as Asher had done, as though he were a troublesome gnat. Joseph looked him in the eye and then turned and walked off. He hated to disappoint his father, but watching his brothers was a waste of time. Surely there was something else he could do to help. Obviously he was not wanted here.

Of course, there was no way he could keep his brothers' actions from his father. They would soon like him even less than they did now. But what else could he do?



“You slept with women in caves while you were supposed to be watching my sheep?” Jacob’s nostrils flared, and his voice rose so loud in the tent that Joseph was certain the whole camp could hear him.

Naphtali and Asher stood before their father, their heads bowed in proper respect. They did not even glance Joseph’s way.

“We were with the goats,” Asher said, his tone slightly sarcastic.

“That’s what I said,” Jacob bellowed. “You were supposed to be with the goats, but now I see that you paid no attention to them at all! You were hiding in a cave, sleeping with foreign women, ignoring my animals. They could have been attacked by lions in the forest or wandered off and gotten caught in the brambles. It is no wonder their skin is covered in scratches. If you had taken care of them all along, my flocks would be flawless, all capable of being offered as a sacrifice to the Lord my God. But *you!* You have done everything you can to ruin me!”

Joseph forced himself not to wince at his father’s vehemence, and he worried more for his father’s health than the animals in that moment. Veins showed in his father’s neck, and his face darkened with rage.

Naphtali and Asher took a step back, obviously shocked by their father’s harsh anger. They had taken their jobs as shepherds lightly, not caring that Jacob depended on these animals not only for milk, wool, and meat but to trade for things they could not make or grow themselves. Jacob’s wool and goat hair brought a high price when his sons weren’t mistreating his flocks.

“We are sorry, Father,” Naphtali said, ignoring Asher’s sullen expression.

“Sorry is not enough. You will listen to Joseph from now on.

There will be no more staying away overnight with the flocks. I will expect an accounting daily, and I myself will inspect the animals you return to my folds. I will not have you making a mockery of me!” Jacob crossed his arms and leaned back against the cushions, his gaze moving from one son to the other. “Do you understand me?”

“Yes, Father,” they said in unison. They waited respectfully for Jacob’s dismissal, which quickly came. “See to it you start obeying me today.”

They said nothing more but merely nodded. Jacob waved his hand for them to leave, and they hurried from the tent. Joseph lingered, not sure whether to follow them to hear what they might say or to see if his father was going to be all right.

“Joseph, my son,” Jacob said, motioning him closer.

“Yes, my father.” He knelt at Jacob’s side.

“It was right for you to tell me these things. Your brothers should be punished, but I see no way to do so. I cannot lock them away somewhere, and I need them to do what they are supposed to do.” Jacob patted Joseph’s hand.

“It is all right, Father. I am glad your God allowed me to discover the problem before more of the animals were harmed or lost. Shall I go now and follow after them?”

Jacob nodded, his expression suddenly sorrowful, as if Joseph’s leaving brought him sadness. “Yes, go, my son. But come to me as soon as all of you return. Let us hope this evening’s report is better than last night’s.”

“Yes, let us hope so.” Joseph kissed his father’s cheek and left the tent.