

Building
Benjamin:
Naomi's Journey

Barbara M. Britton

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Dedication

To Betsy Norman, thank you for encouraging me to finish this book and challenging me to make it better.

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Also Available

Providence: Hannah's Journey

Coming Soon

Jerusalem Rising: Adah's Journey

1

In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as they saw fit. ~ Judges 21:25.

Shiloh, in the land of the tribe of Ephraim

Naomi peeked from behind the tent flap. Girls emerged from scattered booths, illuminated by the flames of the bonfire. The beat of a timbrel echoed over the vineyards while tambourines tinkled in thanksgiving to God for an abundant crop. Naomi's stomach hollowed at the thought of joining in the revelry at the harvest celebration. She had never danced before at the feast in a manner to seduce a husband.

Her palms dampened. It was almost time. Time to twirl and catch the eye of a landowner. With two of her brothers slain by the Benjamites, her father needed a bride price.

Movement in the moon-shadowed vineyard caught Naomi's attention. Had a goat gotten loose among the vines? She squinted into the darkened rows of naked stalks. No leaves shook. No trellis gave way. No bleating rang out. *The smoke is deceiving me.* She blinked and retreated from the open flap.

Cuzbi, the merchant's daughter, came close as if to share a secret. Naomi's reflection widened in the gold of Cuzbi's headband. "Do not worry," Cuzbi

whispered. "Follow me and the men will line up to give our fathers gifts."

Naomi prayed this was not a lie. Cuzbi had danced the previous harvest, and the one before, but Cuzbi's father had not received a single shekel.

Naomi smoothed a crease in Cuzbi's striped robe. "I will dance in thankfulness to God for a bountiful harvest and let my brother and father deal with any suitor. You will be the bride tonight. I hope your father is prepared for an onslaught."

Cuzbi squared her shoulders, growing even taller. She patted her hip. Jeweled rings glimmered on every finger. "Come, Naomi. Stand as if a jar rests on each shoulder. The drape will show your curves."

Naomi's nerves fluttered like a wounded dove. She brushed a hand over her ringlets. A lone braid kept her curls from obscuring her face. Losing her brothers' wages meant more time at the loom and less time adorning her hair. Her dyed sash would have to entice the spectators, for unlike Cuzbi's adorned robe, Naomi's was pale as a wheat kernel.

Before she could check her appearance in her polished bronze mirror, Cuzbi grabbed Naomi's arm and jerked her out of the tent.

"The men will arrive soon from their feasting." Cuzbi's gaze darted about the clearing as she surveyed the ring of virgins who pranced around the fire. Young women in colorful linen swayed to the music. "Ah, there is an opening near the front of the procession." Cuzbi sprinted into the circle.

Naomi raced after her friend and ducked nearer the fire, next to Cuzbi. Dancers bumped Naomi's side, jostling to be seen by their mothers and ultimately the eligible men making their way from the banquet.

Hurry, Father. How much roasted lamb and wine did the men of Ephraim need?

Waving to her mother, Naomi signaled her arrival into the mass of whirling bodies. A bead of sweat trickled from her temple and slithered down her cheek. She swiped it away and raised her hand in praise to God. She lifted the other and pretended to card wool in the wind.

Cuzbi leapt in the air and swung her arms as if they were waves rolling off the Jordan River.

Not ready to leave the hard ground, Naomi kicked up her heels one at a time, careful not to injure any followers. Her stomach balked at any elaborate jumps.

A scream rose above the music. Then another.

Had someone fallen? Been burned by the fire?

From the fields, half-naked men wrapped in loincloths rushed into the circle of dancers. Naomi froze, even though the tempo of the timbrel remained festive. These were not the bathed and robed men of Ephraim coming to celebrate. These were armed warriors. She breathed a prayer of praise that her surviving brother imbibed at the banquet.

A charging intruder whipped a sling her direction. Covering her head, she crouched under the *whoop, whoop, whoop* of his weapon.

"God protect me," she prayed.

Music stopped. Wailing started. Naomi looked up. A raider scooped Cuzbi off her feet. He slung her over his shoulder as if she were a small child.

"*Regah.* Stop!" Naomi screamed.

The strong-armed man vanished into the surrounding vineyard with her friend.

Another assailant plucked a virgin from the scramble of dancers. Naomi reached to grab hold of the

girl's outstretched hand, but a bear of a man blocked her rescue. His weapon whirred in flight above his head. Naomi dove to the side and crashed to the ground, careful to avoid the flames.

Crawling like an asp over a flat-topped boulder, she headed for the fields. A raider grasped at her sleeve. His nails scraped her skin. Pain sizzled down her arm as if embers from the fire had embedded in her flesh.

"*Kelev. Kelev katan.*" The high-pitched insult grew closer. Naomi glanced backward. A scowl-faced boy ran toward her attacker.

Her young savior slashed a pointed stick at the assailant, snaring the leather sling. She had seconds to escape. Praise be to God!

She fled into the harvested rows of vines—in the opposite direction from where Cuzbi had been taken.

Racing along the rows of plants she'd played among as a child, Naomi's heart lodged in her throat, strangling each breath.

Curses trailed after her. Curses about her speed. Curses in...Hebrew? Her own tongue?

Banking right, she panted as if these bandits had also stolen the night air. She sprinted toward the broken trellis, needing a shortcut through the barricade of vines. If she made it to the olive grove, hiding would be easy among the trunks and branches. Had her sole remaining brother been lazy? Or had he replaced the worn trellis before his revelry? She prayed he'd forgotten his duties this once.

Her hand hit the cracked wooden rod. Splintering, it gave way. "*Selah,*" she exclaimed under her breath, for this one time, her brother's laziness was praiseworthy.

Ducking under the greenery of the grape plants, she darted toward the station of olive trees. Her sandals *thapped* against her heels. Certainly the raider would hear her flight, but slowing her pace would put her in peril. Oh, where were the men of Shiloh? Her father? Her brother? And why were these warriors invading a religious celebration?

She passed one olive tree. A second. A third. A fourth. With trembling hands, she beat at the shoots from a tree and buried herself amidst the leaves. She listened for her follower. No footfalls. Good. Her chest burned, greedy for air.

Leaves rustled.

She stilled, but couldn't silence her breaths. In and out they rushed, sounding like a saw on cedar. Old-growth trees were not far away. She scrambled down another aisle for better cover. Grabbing an olive branch, she propelled herself behind a trunk. She hit something hard. The bark? Her forehead ached as though a rock had pelted her skull. Flickers of flame dotted her vision.

When she went to massage her temple, someone seized her arm.

Her stomach cramped. "Leav—"

A palm smothered her lips. The taste of salt and soil seeped into her mouth. Her back struck the prickly growths from the tree. Protests lodged in her throat. Darkness surrounded her, but she kicked at where her captor's legs should be. Banishing the dainty kicks of the dance, she thrashed to do damage. Her attacker did not turn aside. He pinned her to the trunk and held fast.

Lewd taunts grew closer. Her pursuer from the vineyard was in the grove.

Oh, God, do not let me be defiled by one man, let alone two.

"Answer me quietly. Are you one of the virgins?" Her captor's command came forth in Hebrew. He lifted his hand from her mouth, leaving barely enough space to answer.

"Let me go." Her breath rushed out as if it too were fleeing these raiders. "I will slip away. I promise not to alert my people."

"Shhh." Her captor pressed his warm palm over her lips.

"Virgin. Step forth."

Instantly, she was pulled to the ground. Her captor pinned her hips to the dirt with his weight. He lifted her robe. Cool air bathed her knees, sending a chill throughout her body.

She fisted his hair. "Spare me." Even with all her strength, she could not remove him from her body. Her heart pounded louder than a ceremonial drum.

He caged her in the dirt and sent his lips crashing into hers.

She squirmed. Her stomach lurched. Her lungs ached. She needed a breath. She needed a savior.

His weight pressed against her belly. Though he did not take her hem above her thigh. And he did not take her virginity.

"*Argh.*" A roar split the night sky. "Eliab, what are you doing?" The bear-man stood over them, huffing from his pursuit.

Her captor finished his kiss. "Lie still." His words rumbled against her ear. The side of her face prickled from his stubble.

"You mean what *have* I done?" Her captor's body continued to cover hers. "I have taken a wife."

He had not! This man, Eliab, had rested upon her, but he had not joined with her. Although if her father or brother caught him atop her, they would beat him until he claimed her as a wife, or offered a hefty sum. She was not about to call Eliab a liar with her pursuer from the fire crouched over them, staring wickedly. Why had Eliab lied? Was he a friend to the tribe of Ephraim? A friend to a tribe of Israel?

"Go on, Gera." Eliab rose, bearing his weight on his forearms. "Find another. We must leave at once. Hurry. Or do you care to look upon another man?" Eliab's question shot out like a well-aimed arrow.

Gera hesitated. He spat at Eliab's feet and retreated toward the bonfire.

Her spine sank into the ground. Thanks be to God. She reached to right her robe.

Eliab gripped her wrist tighter than a gold band. Realization of his intent sent her heartbeat on another gallop. He had not been a brute, yet he held her prisoner, and he did not seem set on releasing her.

"I am in debt to you. And you will be in debt to my father if he finds you touching me." She tugged against his rigid arm. Her cheeks warmed like stones near a fire pit. "Let go."

"I cannot deny a fellow Benjamite a wife and then fail to claim her for myself." With a jerk, he coiled her into his chest.

Naomi stiffened. The thud, thud, thud in her ears grew louder. "You are a murdering Benjamite?"

"One of the few that remain after the slaughter." His words were sharp as a blade.

Naomi picked up her feet in hopes Eliab would be pulled off balance. He remained rooted to the soil.

"Have you come for revenge?" She grunted her

question while struggling to free herself. She squinted into the vineyards. No legion of rescuers ascended the raised beds. Did the men of Shiloh believe this raid a hoax? "There cannot be enough Benjamites left alive to stand against one tribe of Israel, let alone all the tribes."

"I risked a raid for my survival. Benjamin will not be cut off from God. Our women and children have been slain. Our men ambushed in battle. Are we to have no heirs?" The anger simmering in his reply caused a shiver to rattle her bones.

She thrashed like an unruly child. Eliab held firm. "You were kind to spare me from your Gera. Now double that kindness and let me be on my way."

"Gera's kinsmen brought destruction on our tribe. If a name is to suffer extinction, it should be his, not mine." Eliab yanked her off her feet and heaved her over his shoulder. Her temples pulsed as blood rushed to her brain. Fainting would only make his escape easier. She closed her eyes and concentrated on the darkness.

He cinched his hands around her calves and ran. Fast. His shoulder bludgeoned her belly with every jump and jolt. Her stomach spewed up manna and grapes, burning her throat, and muffling her screams.

When his collarbone was about to impale her side, he righted her next to a mule hidden from sight among the brush. She slumped to the ground.

"If you steal me away from my father, God will punish your sin." Vomit welled in her throat. She swallowed hard. "I did not finish the harvest dance."

Eliab crouched in front of her. His eyes were dark as a clouded night sky and held no mercy. "If I do not take you, one of Israel's tribes will cease to exist. God has more to be angry about than a missed seduction."

Tears blurred her vision. She swung a fist at him, but he dodged her attack. She clawed at his tunic. At least she did not have to fear loosening a loincloth like those scantily clad attackers near the bonfire. "How dare you rip me from my home? Benjamites killed two of my brothers. Do not take the daughter of a grieving man."

He pried her fingers from his garment and pulled her close. "And what will your father do if he believes you are no longer a virgin?"

"There was no union." She beat his chest for emphasis. Her knuckles bruised, yet he barely moved.

He pressed his thumbs into her palms and stilled her assault. "No one will bless a union with a Benjamite. No one will give us their daughters. We are left to kidnap Hebrew women. Since I stole you, your father will be held blameless before the elders of the tribes." He stood and yanked her to her feet.

"My father needs a bride price to buy land." Her words rushed forth. She grabbed his arm. "You have lost family and so have I. Have we not both suffered? Leave me here and be on your way."

"Others may not have been rewarded with a mate tonight. Shall I send you into their bed and disappoint my father?" No joy rang from his words. He did not seem giddy like a bridegroom in a marriage tent.

She stepped backward. Could she outrun him in the darkness? She had to. This was her home. Her land. Her tribe.

He caught her wrist and wrapped it with rope. Stray strands scratched her skin.

"Please." She tensed her muscles and pulled against his weight to no avail. Tears wet her cheeks as he bound her other wrist. "My family—"

"Most of my family is buried in a mountain." He unhitched the mule and snapped the reins.

Her body stilled as if encased in clay. Eliab wasn't listening to her hardship.

Distant shouts echoed from the vineyard.

"Father." Her voice squawked like a strangled pigeon.

Eliab stifled her shouts with a rag. "You can ride the mule or I will drag you behind it. Decide. Now." He turned toward the road. "Hoist the nets."

Was he going to trap her kin like wild beasts?

In a blur, he mounted his ride, still holding the rope as if she were a wayward goat.

How could she leave Shiloh? Leave her mother? Leave her father? Her legs trembled as if the ground shook. She did not take a step.

The mule trotted forward.

With no arms for balance, she fell on her side. Her jaw ached from the gag. Coughing, she tugged on the rope and struggled to rise. If he kicked the animal, she would be dragged through rock and dirt.

Eliab dismounted, swept her into his arms, and sat her sideways on the mule. He had caught her and now he caged her with reins at her back and reins at her chest. His body imprisoned her. He leaned into her arm and slapped the mule's rump. "Hah."

She grabbed the animal's mane, weaving her fingers into the coarse hair for balance.

How could the tribe of Benjamin thief wives from the tribe of Ephraim? Where was their honor? Where was their shame? And where was God? The feast this night was in His honor.

While Eliab was intent on the terrain, she worked a silver band from her finger and let it slip down her

leg, down the mule's withers, to the ground. She would leave a trail for the men of Shiloh.

For what was lost could be found.

2

Naomi's back bowed, unable to hold her upright after hours on an undulating animal. After leaving Shiloh, Eliab had abandoned the road for the hills. The crags and cliffs offered cover but challenged their mule's footing.

Eliab dismounted in a small cavern. A few of his thieving tribesmen waited, huddled in talk. Sobs came from a nearby cave. The black-as-a-starless-night opening kept Naomi from seeing what was happening inside. Naomi slid from the mule and headed toward the entrance. Eliab caught her arm. She thrashed against his hold, unwilling to ignore a tribeswoman suffering at the hands of a wicked Benjamite.

"She is not your concern." Eliab tugged her toward a stone backrest.

Digging her heels into the dirt, she resisted his pull like an ornery goat. He yanked. She squatted. He jerked. She fell. His strength won. She slumped to the ground and sat against a flat-sided rock.

Eliab removed the rag from her mouth and unbound her hands. He seemed confident that she wouldn't run into the desert alone without provisions.

He offered her water from a skin. "I do not mean to be harsh."

"And yet you are." Water dribbled from her mouth as she drank. She would have sworn her cheeks had stretched thin like pulled dough. She handed the

skin back to him and then rotated her wrist to ease the numbness.

"I do not know your name." He smoothed a hand over the stubble of a beard. "You know mine because of Gera's rebuke, but we were not properly introduced."

"I believe you are to blame for that."

He crouched, waiting for an answer. In the dim light, his hair seemed lighter than her brown locks, which were almost the shade of a raven's feather. His intent gaze never left her face, and his stoic features made it seem as if he could see her soul.

"I am Naomi *bat* Heriah." Her throat grew tight as she recalled her father's name. "And you are Eliab, a Benjamite bandit who stalks dancing virgins."

"Ahh." He chuckled. "You do know of me. We are not strangers."

Strangers? He touched her as a husband. But he did not force his will on her in the grove. Other men may truly have made themselves her mate. The continuing cries from the cave reminded her of her vulnerability.

She wrapped her arms around her waist and rubbed her wrists against her indigo sash. "Where are you taking me?"

Eliab stood. "Near Gibeah."

"Gibeah?" The name rushed forth. Her brothers had been killed trying to seize the wicked city. "Is it not in ruins?"

"We have settled due east."

Would her brother and father find her outside the city? Did her tribesmen even know where the Benjamites had settled, or that they were the ones who had raided the feast?

Another Benjamite called Eliab's name. He motioned for Eliab to join a group of raiders. Her captor uncoiled the rope from his belt.

She tucked her hands behind her back. Her skin itched at the thought of being bound again.

"Go to your band of thieves. Where would I run to?" His absence meant she'd have time to gain her bearings and leave another trace.

As Eliab joined the Benjamites, a woman was helped off a donkey on the far side of the huddle.

Naomi recognized the height of her friend. Praise God, for Cuzbi was alive. *Selah!* She stood and held out her arms. "Cuzbi, my sister."

Benjamites hushed her greeting.

Cuzbi strolled forward and bestowed a brief hug on Naomi before planting herself on the ground near the worn stones. Her long legs sprawled out before her as if this were a gossip-filled chat in a remote tent. "I fit better on a stallion than on an ass."

Naomi squeezed Cuzbi's hand. Eliab had shown restraint this night, but her friend may not have been afforded the same regard. "You are well otherwise?"

Cuzbi tilted her head upon the boulder as if it were made of linen. "My backside is still riding that animal even though Ashbanel stopped so I could rest. They're half-brothers, your husband and mine." Cuzbi indicated the Benjamite that had summoned Eliab. "Ashbanel is the eldest son of Berek."

How could Cuzbi talk as if this was a normal betrothal among brothers? Naomi placed her hands on Cuzbi's cheeks. No fever could be felt. "Does he have you under a spell, sister? We will not be in the company of these Benjamites much longer. We need to leave something behind for the men of Shiloh to

discover." Her heart drummed as she scanned her friend's jewelry. Naomi tried to loosen a gold band from Cuzbi's finger. "One of your rings?"

Cuzbi fisted her hand. "I will not leave a mark. What do I gain if my father comes? Ashbanel is an elder of his tribe. He can claim land and livestock. Soon we will have servants. That is more than I could have hoped for from the men of Shiloh."

How could Cuzbi accept one of these thieves as a suitor? Naomi's ears buzzed like a swarm of locusts as she contemplated her friend's betrayal.

"If this man is an elder, then he is to blame for the murder of our tribesmen and for the massacre of his own." Naomi's voice warbled as she thought of her family's loss. "My brothers are dead. Do you not care that this Ashbanel robbed you from your mother and father and sisters? He is too foul to have been given a wife."

Cuzbi curled her knees under her robe. "Hush, sister. My father would have arranged a marriage soon enough. Who is to say my husband would have stayed in Shiloh?" Cuzbi's voice lowered to a raspy whisper. Her eyes glimmered in the meager moonlight. "Ashbanel saw me come from our tent. He said he knew I was the woman God had chosen for him. If that is true, how can I leave him for an uncertain future?"

Naomi's jaw fell open. "You assist your father in the marketplace. You barter with the best. How can you be wary of an offer of marriage?"

"This was my fourth year to dance at the feast. I've waited long enough." Cuzbi wrapped her arms around her waist as if a breeze had chilled her flesh. "I don't want to wait anymore."

Naomi stood and balanced herself against a