

WHEN THE PROPHET OF ISRAEL
REFUSES TO HEAL HER, HANNAH FLEES
JERUSALEM AND IS CAPTURED BY AN
ENEMY WITH A CURSE ALL HIS OWN.

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BRITTON
PROVIDENCE
~HANNAH'S JOURNEY~

Providence:
Hannah's Journey

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Providence

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Dedication

To my family who inspires me each and every day.

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1

Jerusalem, 849 B.C.

Hannah waited mere feet from the prophet of Israel, shaded from the Jerusalem sun by the sprawling branches of a tamarisk tree. Sweat beaded beneath her head covering, a result of the mid-summer heat, her nerves, or both. A crowd hung back, blocking the Horse Gate and lining the city's massive stone walls. They had come to see the man of God heal the lame and the cursed.

Hannah bore a curse since birth. For seventeen years, she had been unable to taste or smell. Her ears were but a flap of skin with no slope, no lobe. Her father said it was a punishment from God for an ancestor's crime. As the chief priest, he should know.

She grasped her father's velvet robe as the prophet's hands slid over a young boy's leg. The boy had lain in his father's arms not two feet from Hannah and her father and brother, his limb nothing but a boiled bone with skin. She shook with anticipation as she witnessed sun-toasted flesh, fat as a baby's cheek, grow on top of the boy's decomposed leg. *What will it feel like when the prophet touches my nose, my lips, my ears?*

"Will it hurt?" she asked, looking to her father.

Shimron, her brother, bent low. "Not as much as our humiliation. Will not everyone hear that the chief

priest's daughter is in need of healing?" Shimron scanned the mass of people. "To think the prophet refused us a private ceremony."

"Hush," her father warned, glancing to see if the holy one listened.

She fought to keep her composure. *I am a disgrace.*

Shrieks of "*Jehovah Jireh*" sliced the arid breeze.

"God has healed me," the boy shouted. He jumped on his re-birthed leg, arms flapping as if to fly away and leave the hardened ground behind.

Hannah stifled a gleeful laugh. She delighted in the boy's ecstatic dance.

The man of God turned toward her. He reached out the same hand that had healed the boy and pointed at her chest. "Come."

She stiffened. Her heart fluttered faster than a startled sparrow. As she shuffled forward, Shimron took hold of her tunic and yanked her nearer to the prophet. "It has been seventeen years," he whispered. "Do not make him wait for the likes of you."

Trembling, she dropped to her knees before the prophet and beheld his weathered face.

His hands rested on her shoulders with a firm, yet gentle press. "What is your given name?"

"Hannah," she whispered, struggling to speak, her tongue dry as linen. "Daughter of Zebula, a Levite—"

"I know of your lineage." The prophet grinned and looked to her father and brother. "Not of your condition."

Hannah hesitated. Her father had forbidden her to speak of the curse. Her hair and head covering had hidden her deformed ears. She glanced up for her father's permission. He gave her a reassuring nod.

Lifting her veil, she revealed the nub of an ear.

"My tongue does not taste food," she began, meeting the holy man's gaze. "My nose breathes, but I cannot smell the world around—"

"She has burned her hem to ashes many times in the cooking fires," Shimron cut in. "She does not eat. Wheat chaff weighs more than my sister."

Her back straightened, but she continued to concentrate on the prophet's aged face.

The man of God ignored Shimron and cupped her jaw. His thumbs caressed her cheekbones, her ears, and stroked to the bridge of her nose.

Hannah closed her eyes. Her body went weightless under the prophet's touch, almost free from her burden. She dreamed of things the warm breeze would blow her way—a woman's perfume, the stench of the unwashed. Things she had only heard of before. But nothing came.

The prophet's fingers stilled. He drew back from her.

Surely she should feel something? A burning on her tongue? A tingling in her nose? A tickling in her ears? She prayed for pain.

"It is not her time," the man of God said, his voice steady, yet quiet.

Stunned, she sat back, bracing herself so she would not collapse further into the dirt.

"But she has been without her senses since birth. And that skin." Her father tried to display the side of her face as he pulled her to her feet and pushed her closer to the prophet. "Surely it is not of her doing. What sin could a child commit to cause this punishment?"

Hannah drew to her full height at her father's declaration of innocence. The attention of the people

centered on her and on her family. Sweat trickled down her arm.

"Please," Hannah said as the holy one started to leave. "I have asked forgiveness."

Shimron grabbed the prophet's arm. "Heal her," he demanded. "My family has sacrificed for her sins."

"And so you should," the prophet answered. He glanced at Hannah.

She clutched her brother's hand and withdrew it from the man of God.

"You healed the boy," she said with rushed breaths. The prophet's anointed-one stare twisted her stomach into a weaver's knot.

"The power and timing do not belong to me." The righteous man turned from her. His regal gait parted the crowd. Trailed by a servant, he headed away from Jerusalem.

The muttering of the crowd grew louder. Hannah's cheeks warmed as if she were bending over a cooking fire. She noticed all the curious people studying her. *They know something's wrong with me.* How could her mother deny the gossip with all these witnesses? Hannah turned to find her father and brother discussing her, their faces close, their words terse.

The crowd shifted forward to hear the conversation between the angry, insulted priests. Their glances condemned her. Their judgments slandered her mother. Her composure crumbled. She lifted the hem of her tunic and raced toward the city gate.

"Do not touch her," a man yelled. "She is unclean."

"Leave me be," Hannah cried. She pushed a woman out of the way and fled down the nearest

street.

Her sandals thudded against the dirt lane as she dodged oxen and carts and merchants. Her chest burned as if the dust particles she breathed were embers from a blacksmith's fire. Her father should not have taken her to the prophet. He should have accepted her fate. She was cursed. A vessel of sin birthed from the past.

She looked over her shoulder to see if anyone pursued her. *Selah!* No one did.

Linens hung by the side of the road, drying in the heat. She slipped behind a cotton shield strung between two buildings, creating a small alcove. She hid by a fat rain barrel and tried to calm her breathing, but the pressure behind her eyes caused her chest to cave even deeper. Supported by the wall of a stranger's home, she buried her face in her knees. What would her mother say to the holy man's refusal?

Footsteps crunched against the ground, coming closer to the linen wall. Was it her father? She wrapped her arms around her knees and pulled her legs tight to her body. The curtain whipped back. Sunlight blinded her. Blinking, she focused on a young man, his turban barely able to contain his wild, curly black hair. His eyes widened and he rubbed his bearded jaw line, giving himself an imaginary shave with his finger.

Hannah leaned backward into the clay bricks of the wall. "Don't touch me," she warned. Her throat tightened from the run and the erratic beat of her heart.

He squatted down in front of her. His height and muscular body dwarfed her tiny hide-out. "Why? Are you sick? Hurt?"

"No." She shifted further from the man, not wanting to explain about the prophet. "Can't you leave

me be?"

"A young woman sits where I lie—"

Hannah shot to her feet. "This is not a bed." Her gaze darted around the alcove. Her heart wrestled with her ribs. "You do not expect me to believe you sleep here?"

"Mostly here." The man rose slowly and pointed to an area between the barrel and some crates stacked in the corner.

"Not inside?" She glanced up the stone wall to a window above them.

"Only when my fath...my mother's husband is away."

Hannah's spine flattened against the wall. She surveyed the dark-haired intruder's face in case she would need to recall him later. He looked not much older than she. Dark brown mischievous eyes stared back at her, sparkling as if he had captured the glow of the moon he slept under. Did he think she had money to steal? Or worse, would he take her virginity? She glanced at the sheet billowing in the breeze, hiding them from sight. Could she race fast enough back to the street? She slid a ruby bracelet under her sleeve. It was to have been a gift for the prophet when he had healed her. There was no need to tempt this man with gold and gems.

"Are you hungry?"

"What?" The hospitable offer of food shattered her thoughts of escape.

He rummaged inside a sack tied to his belt and offered a pomegranate. "Sit and share with me. Looks like you could use some." He carefully removed a carving knife from the woven bag and sliced off a piece of the honeycombed fruit, revealing bright red berries.

She ignored his insult and watched his blade, anticipating any move in her direction.

He skillfully sheathed the knife with one hand and shoved it back into his sack.

"Go on, take it." He inched the fruit closer to her mouth.

"I have nothing to trade." Hannah crossed her arms and burrowed them against her waist. "And I do not want for food."

He bit off a chunk of pomegranate and swallowed. "The cost doesn't matter. I gleaned it."

"Then I shouldn't take it from you if you are allowed to glean with the poor," Hannah said. *This may be the only food he has all day.*

He shook his unruly hair and dropped his satchel near her. "I am not poor. I offer protection during the harvest. And I can tell by the weave of your tunic and your ruby bracelet, you are not in want."

Hannah glanced at her wrist. Scarlet gems sparkled at the edge of her sleeve. The bracelet hadn't stayed hidden. Why couldn't anything go right today?

In an instant, he reached out and brushed the pomegranate against her lips.

Flinching, she bumped her shoulder bone against the wall.

"You touched it. Now eat." He tilted his head and grinned as if he dared her to challenge his hospitality.

She hesitated, rubbed her arm, and accepted the fruit.

Slumping next to his bag, he leaned into the wall and kicked out his legs. His fingertips pursued the pomegranate's berries.

Hannah eased down the wall and sat near him. The man's closeness caused a tingling along her side

and in her belly. It had been years since a stranger ate next to her, touching her, sharing food. She let the fleshy seeds roll on her tongue. A squirt of juice washed over her taste buds. It might as well have been water.

"Sweet, huh?" he asked.

She nodded and smiled to encourage his generosity. No need to explain her condition.

He furrowed his brow and laughed. "It is a tart one. You jest."

Embarrassed, Hannah did not return his gaze. She fished out another red seed. "What is your name?"

"Gil. Gilead when my mother has need of me and calls down the street." He mimicked his mother's voice.

Her mouth fell open at his silliness. "Stop. She will hear you."

"No, she won't. Her ears are dead to my voice."

"But your father? He will scold, or worse."

Gil dipped his chin and beheld her with wide eyes. "I am more concerned with your father." He cocked his head. "I do not know your name."

"Hannah!" The boom of her brother's voice rattled down the lane.

She jumped up, heart racing. For a brief moment she considered staying put, but then thought better of it.

"That is my name." She crept along the wall, steadying herself with her palm as her fingers still clutched the fruit. "My brother calls for me. Shimron *ben* Zebula."

"The priest?"

Hannah nodded and then dodged around the linen barrier.

"There you are. Have we not suffered enough today?" Her brother clamped down on her wrist and noticed the piece of pomegranate in her hand. "Where did you get that?"

A shiver shook her arm. "From—"

"Me," Gil said, stepping forward. His arched back broadened his shoulders.

Her brother's glare raked over Gil. "He is filthy. Has he kept the ceremonial laws?" Her brother shook the fruit from her hand. Dirt coated the saliva-soaked peel.

Gil bent to pick up her piece of pomegranate. He drew to her brother's height and bested it. "You cannot judge me."

Hannah cut off her brother's reply. "Gilead showed me hospitality. We owe him better."

"Not much," her brother jeered.

Pain pulsed down her arm from her brother's grasp. He hurried her up the street. When she looked back, Gil had started after her. There was no more moonlight in his eyes.

She whipped around, broke free from Shimron, and ran toward Gil. Her family did not need another scene in the streets. "Do not pursue us," she whispered. And louder, "*Shalom*."

Gil glanced at her brother and then handed her the dropped fruit.

Shimron flanked her side. "She is not worth your concern."

Hannah met Gil's questioning gaze. No denial formed on her lips. Her boldness withered under the burden of her shame. *If I was healed, I would be worthy.*

"Is she of no concern to God?" Gil's voice grew too loud. "Does He not provide for the weak and the

widow?"

"Of which she is neither." Shimron stomped forward, grazing Gil's toes. "Do not pretend to know the Law as well as I do," Shimron spat. "Some followers deserve their fate. I will you show you the punishment in scripture."

Her brother turned and took hold of her anew, pushing her up the street, chastising her for being disobedient.

"Can God not choose mercy?" Gil called out. "If she deserves it?"

Does he mean me? She hesitated and nearly stumbled. Flailing a hand behind her back, she tried to keep Gil silent. *Please listen. Do not add to my misery.*

Gil did not follow.

Tears welled in her eyes. She fisted her hand and thought of the miracle she had witnessed, of a boy frolicking in the dirt. She wanted to be free from the scorn of her family. To enjoy a meal with a welcoming neighbor. To pull her hair into a braid and dangle earrings from perfect lobes. The prophet had to return to Jerusalem soon. Surely he was needed at the temple. And when the man of God returned, she would seek an end to her curse and her humiliation. A humiliation the prophet had made public.

2

Hannah wilted from the heat of the cooking fire, but she would rather be in the secluded courtyard at home, than facing mockery from citizens on the streets. She skimmed burnt paste off the top of her stewed figs and tried to salvage some of the fruit. As the sole daughter of Zebula, the chore of preparing supper lay at her feet. *Oh, why couldn't the prophet have healed my nose?* She handed a spoon to the wife of her brother Shimron. "Can you taste the ash?"

Her sister-in-law, Rebekah, wrinkled her nose. "If you do not tell, perhaps they will think it a new spice."

Hannah groaned. She had already made one trip to the well in the heat of the day. Now she needed more water to start over. At least the afternoon sun kept the whisperers away. Three Sabbaths had passed since the prophet's refusal to heal her. Three Sabbaths and the prophet had not returned to Jerusalem. Three Sabbaths and the people remembered her shame, even if they did not know its origin.

Pulling her head covering low to hide her face, she walked several streets until she reached the well. As she neared its round, stone wall, a woman hurried off, sloshing precious water from her jar. Had she too, been at the gate that day? Hannah carefully wrapped her hand in white cloth before hoisting the bucket. She filled her jar, lifted it onto her shoulder, and used it as

a shield from the curious eyes of the street dwellers.

When Hannah returned home, her aunt sat in a shaded corner of the cooking courtyard, rubbing Rebekah's rounded belly.

Hannah greeted her aunt with a kiss on the cheek.

"I will come to help birth Rebekah's baby," her aunt said.

Hannah poured water into a fresh pot and began serving the remainder to her aunt and sister-in-law. "I will also care for the babe."

Her aunt took a generous sip. "What about Azor's children? Will you not care for them in Hebron?"

Hannah's pulse quickened. Her stomach plummeted into an imaginary well, coming up empty. She looked to Rebekah for a glimpse of understanding. Hannah's fingers trembled as she held a cup of drink out to her sister-in-law. "Why would I mother Azor's children? I am not his wife."

"You will be." Her aunt spoke in pronouncement of a well-known truth.

Hannah clutched her waist. Surely, her father had not arranged a secret betrothal. To Azor no less. A priest twice her age with children as old as she. "Father has praised Azor's service. He is a respected priest, but no word has come to me of his interest in another wife." She held her voice steady, willing her words to be true.

Her aunt's eyes narrowed. "Your father has not spoken of the widower?"

Hannah shook her head. Her stomach churned at the thought of being bound to an old, shriveled stranger. What did Azor have to offer her? Nursemaid? Servant? Hannah's breaths caught in her chest. "My father and brother have been receiving offerings at the

temple. There has been no mention of my—”

“Soon,” her aunt stated in the definite tone of an elder. “You will do what is chosen.”

Hannah shivered as if a locust had crawled down her back. She turned away from her aunt and Rebekah. The throb in her forehead made reasoning difficult. How could her father accept an offer of marriage for her from a man so aged? A man whose own sons had taunted her in the temple? Her father would have refused Azor if she was not cursed.

Water boiled in the pot, waiting for new figs. She shut her eyes and prayed. *Give me wisdom, Lord. If Azor is my future, why do I only dream of Gil? He showed me kindness and treated me honorably.*

She stirred the figs and thought of her future, of the alley, of Gil. If she was to be healed and open to other offers of marriage, she would have to seek the prophet on her own. But how? The man of God had not returned to Jerusalem. Her father and brother grumbled at the fact that the prophet remained in Mahanaim, in the home of a wealthy landowner.

Traveling north to the border without an escort would cause more scandal to her reputation, more so than her curse. If indeed her father was entering her into a marriage contract with Azor, none of her family members would dare challenge his decision and help her escape. Only one man was bold enough to stand up to her brother. Her blood pounded through her veins as she recalled Gilead's strength. Was Gil brazen enough to help her flee the city? Would he travel with her to Mahanaim? Would he brave the scandal for her?

With a rag-draped hand, Hannah lifted the pot from the fire.

The harvest was ending. Gil would not be needed