

LIVING
TABERNACLE

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A.D. 64

chapter 1

DOOMED CITY

Powdery white dust rose in puffs from Sharon's sandaled feet as she hurried homeward with her sister. Along the narrow village street, small houses of sun-baked bricks crowded close together.

As the sun dipped lower in the western sky, many other workers hastened along the street, wanting to reach home before the swift darkness fell. It was the month of Elul, and the grapes were ripening fast in the vineyards outside Ashbaroth. Every able-bodied man, woman, and child in the village was needed to harvest the crop. The bunches of tender fruit were at their prime for only a few weeks and had to be gathered as quickly as possible.

Glancing to her left, Sharon could see across the valley. Lush grapevines clung to the terraces up and down the slopes. High on the far rim of the valley stood a sprawling white mansion, now touched with gold from the rays of the setting sun.

"I still find it hard to believe," Sharon mused to her sister, "that our very own mother once lived in that mansion."

Twenty-year-old Rachel nodded. "It is hard to imagine, isn't it?"

“Even though Mother knows what it’s like to be rich, we never hear her complaining about the way we live now,” Sharon said. At fifteen years of age, she could not help wondering what such a life of luxury would be like. Imagine having dozens of servants to do all the work! Imagine eating fancy meals every day!

As though guessing Sharon’s thoughts, Rachel sent her a shrewd glance. “Now don’t you go wishing we could live like that. For the lowly followers of Christ, it would never do. Besides, I’m not even sure that rich people such as the landowner’s family are any happier than we are.”

Sharon did not reply. Father and Mother always talked that way too. They said true happiness comes from faith in Jesus, not from having many possessions.

But Sharon wasn’t so sure. Being poor meant working in the fields from dawn to dusk. Sometimes it meant hardly having enough to eat. Rich people surely had life easier. They did not have to work unless they wanted to. After all, poor people like herself did the work for them!

When Mother was a girl, her father Simeon had owned much of the land around Ashbaroth. And Sharon’s father Eli had worked for Simeon. Eventually, when Simeon and his family were baptized into the church of Christ, he had given up his large estate. Grandpa and Grandma had died several years ago, but they had lived out their last days in a humble mud-brick home.

Sharon quickened her steps. She could see her home now. Mother had lighted the olive-oil lamp; its warm rays spilled out over the doorstep. “I wonder if Adam is home already,” Sharon said to her sister. “He left the vineyard long before we did. Do you have any idea why?”

“He said he was going home to talk with Father,” Rachel replied.

“Oh? That’s strange.” Like a dog eagerly sniffing out its quarry, Sharon persisted, “What did Adam want to talk about?” Lately, her seventeen-year-old brother had not seemed like himself at all. Sharon felt sure he was doing things she knew nothing of.

Rachel began guardedly, “Well, I think it had something to do with—” Then she stopped herself. “Actually, I know very little about it.”

“You know more than you’re telling,” Sharon muttered. She resented it when the family kept secrets from her—as though they considered her too young to understand.

At least there was one less secret in the family now. Rachel had announced her betrothal to David bar Aaron. They planned to be married in the month of Kislev. All summer, Rachel had been keeping secrets. But Sharon had guessed them anyway. So why did people bother to keep secrets?

But with Adam, Sharon could not figure out what was going on. She and Adam used to have so much fun together, whether working or playing. Now it seemed he barely talked to her anymore.

Nor to anyone else, for that matter. Most of the time he seemed morose, even angry. Whatever could be wrong?

Just as Sharon turned in at the gate, loud words erupted from inside the house. “I still don’t see why I can’t go! I tell you, this is my last chance!”

Sharon drew back in alarm. “That was Adam,” she whispered to Rachel. “He and Father must be angry at each other again.”

Rachel whispered back, “Father isn’t angry. You know that. He doesn’t get loud like Adam.”

“No, but Father—well, it seems he’s often against Adam’s ideas. And he’s always so sure that he is right and Adam is

wrong.” Sharon stopped short, surprised at herself for saying that. Was she starting to see Father through Adam’s eyes?

“You are letting Adam influence you,” Rachel rebuked her, albeit still in a whisper.

“He needs *somebody* to be on his side,” Sharon retorted.

Just then a tall shadow loomed above them. Flinging himself out of the house, Adam brushed past the girls.

Sharon’s heart sank as she watched him striding away in the dusk. “Where is he going?” she asked anxiously. “It will soon be dark.”

“He can take care of himself,” Rachel said. “Come. Let’s go in. Mother will have supper ready.”

In the light of the sputtering little lamp, Father’s face looked strained and sad. A scroll lay untouched on his writing table. Well over fifty years old, Father suffered much pain in his legs and could not do manual labor anymore. Though he used to enjoy working in the fields, he was now a scribe and spent his time copying manuscripts and letters for people.

Mother stooped over the smoky brazier, stirring the soup. She smiled at the girls, but Sharon detected the sadness lurking deep in her eyes.

“Did you pick lots of grapes today?” Mother asked brightly.

“I guess so,” Sharon replied without enthusiasm.

Mother carried the soup to the low table and sat down on one of the rugs. When Rachel sat down too, Sharon asked incredulously, “Are we going to eat without Adam?”

“I don’t think Adam wants supper tonight,” Father answered in a low voice.

Reluctantly, Sharon took her place, and Father asked the blessing. Using his chunk of dry bread as a sop, he dipped it into the pot and began eating.

Slowly, Sharon broke her bread. Even though hungry after a day in the vineyard, she did not feel like eating. Questions churned inside her. Timidly, she broached the one uppermost in her mind. "Is it safe for Adam to be out in the dark alone? There are so many thieves these days."

"Adam spoke of going to the House ben Abraham," Father explained.

Sharon caught her breath. Abraham's family still observed the old Jewish law—as did most of the village families. There were only a handful of Christians left in Ashbaroth. "Why is Adam going to the house of an unbelieving Jew?" she wondered.

Glancing at Mother, Father hesitated. "It seems he is friends with Lucas bar Abraham."

Sharon knew Lucas. Along with other husky young fellows, he often worked the winepress, treading out the grapes. But why would Adam make friends with Lucas? Christians and old-style Jews spoke very little with each other. Of course, Adam was not a baptized Christian yet . . .

Sharon had just opened her mouth to ask another question when a voice filtered in through the door. "Shalom! May we come in?"

"Shalom! Yes, come in," Father called.

Sharon's heart leaped. Had that been her brother-in-law's voice? But no, her guess was wrong. In walked Alpheus and his wife. Alpheus was the only minister still remaining in the church at Ashbaroth. The others had all moved away.

Peering into the pot, Father said, "I see there is still some soup left for you."

"No, no, we have had supper," Alpheus protested. "It seems we came a little too early. We thought you might be finished eating."