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## *Samuel*

Samuel's slow, lopsided pacing across the common room did not ease his worry or anger. "Baal's Blood. If I had set aside my pride and taken the extra silver, Mara and I would have been planning our betrothal." He turned toward his parents. "Look at me." Pain drilled like an auger into his stiff knee. "I am a cripple now and may be forever."

Abba took a fig from a wooden bowl on the table. "Let us reason together."

Ima stopped kneading the dough, wiped her hands, and drew near. She lowered herself onto the bench next to Abba and sighed. "What is done is done."

His father covered her small hand with his comforting one. "We can only pray Achor will withdraw his offer. The high priest did not seem pleased. Perhaps he will have some sway?"

Samuel sat and pressed his throbbing temples. "None of the high priest's sons seem to afford him the respect due a father."

## A Certain Man

Abba tugged his beard. “Surely the elder brothers will not want Achor to sire the first son who may become the favored heir.” Samuel knew that tone. Abba always saw the good, the hopeful. He was trying to reassure himself.

Ima clicked her tongue, shook her head. She was the one to worry. “The high priest’s wife was a righteous woman. Perhaps if she had not died mere days after Achor’s birth, he would not have been so coddled.”

As if a yoke had been lowered onto his neck, Samuel struggled to find hope from any quarter. “What of the high priest’s mother?”

Ima leaned in and pushed the bowl of figs closer to him.

“When I was drawing water at the well this morning, gossip shot through the air—a volley of poisoned arrows. The high priest’s mother came with her handmaids. I was standing far off, but she seemed to weigh the mood of the women. I pray she will speak with her son against Achor’s marriage.”

“And...” Samuel gestured with a beckoning hand.

“Not one woman was in favor of a forced marriage. When Mara arrived, they not only embraced her, but offered advice.”

Abba turned to Ima. “What could they possibly suggest?”

Ima’s face brightened. “One told Mara to over-salt and burn-to-black every meal she served Achor during their betrothal. Another suggested she leave her clothes among the hens at night so she will reek.” Ima’s lips pressed back a laugh. “The most bold proposal was that Mara turn her back to Achor every time he approached her in public.”

“Women can be very cunning.” Abba grinned. A grin that hinted he had been the target of at least one cunning woman.

Ima flushed and lowered her eyes. “Yes. Woman can be ruthless.”

“Did you hear something that could save Mara?” Samuel longed for a way to deliver Mara from a loveless life.

## Linda Dindzans

“One foolish girl pulled Mara aside, but I overheard.” His mother fisted her hands, knuckles white as bone. “She offered to bring Mara a pagan potion to stave off her moonblood.”

“Such a potion exists?” Samuel balked at the eagerness in his tone.

Abba pulled at his silver-flecked beard. “Wife, perhaps the potion would be a means to bide time. Mara is so young.”

Ruth crossed her arms. “It is a dangerous practice used by pagan priestesses to banish babies from their rightful wombs.” She shuddered. “Wombs that are often left barren for life.”

Samuel pushed back from the table. “Mara loves children, she would never—”

“Not today. Not tomorrow.” Sadness seeped into Ima’s voice. “But alone and desperate? Without a mother’s wisdom or warning?”

Samuel’s stomach twisted, and a sour-sick taste rose in his throat. “You must keep that vile girl away from Mara. How does someone so young learn of such evil?”

“Is it any wonder when for generations our men took pagan wives and gave their daughters to other nations in Babylon and beyond? She learned from her mother, and her mother’s mother, and all the mothers of all her generations.” Ima headed to the threshold. “The sun is high in the sky. I will go to Mara.”

“Please tell her no matter what happens today, my heart is hers. Always.”

“Have faith, my son.” Ima arranged her veil, gazing at him with such tenderness. She opened the door, walked to the path, and stepped wide around the half-open sack of silver that remained in the dirt. Coins covered with filth. Filthy money.

Samuel turned to Abba, determined to save Mara, heedless of the consequence. “Before Mara is betrothed, we could run. We should run.”

## A Certain Man

“Never.” Abba leapt to his feet. “I forbid it.”

He shook a warning finger.

“You are lame. You would be caught before the next sunset and accused of adultery.” His face was as red as the blood of a Passover lamb. “Both your lives would be in the balance. Even if you denied coupling, Mara would be forced to consummate the marriage with Achor without delay. And if your lives were spared, Mara would be set aside. Shamed. Divorced.”

“I would take her to wife.”

“No.” Abba grabbed Samuel’s arm. “Mara’s father would be enraged at the loss of his yearly allowance. He would declare her a disobedient daughter and drag her to the stoning pit.”

Samuel dropped his head into his hands. A grindstone of sadness weighted his shoulders and crept onto his chest, binding his breath.

“The ways of HaShem are not our ways. We must trust Him.” His father’s deep voice was filled with grief. “To run is to die.”

Samuel looked up. “To stay is to die slowly.”

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### Mara

Mara swept the packed dirt floor of the hut she shared with Tobiah and looked through the front window. The morning was as gray as her spirit. Tobiah, fury contorting his face, knocked the broom from her hands and herded her into a corner with a shepherd’s staff. She pressed her back against the rough wall, hands behind her back, ready to push off and dodge the blow.

## Linda Dindzans

“Daughter, you will obey me as the Law commands.” His words were blurred from his early morning barley beer.

“I will never go willingly to the house of Achor.”

Tobiah raised the staff.

Heart racing, Mara took a deep breath and slowly rose onto her toes.

“Willing or not, you will go.” Tobiah swung the staff.

Mara pushed off, darted under his arm, and the staff swished past her ear. Defiance pulsed through her veins.

Tobiah turned and lifted the staff again, rheumy eyes glinting with drunken madness.

*HaShem, help me.*

Mara’s mind stilled. She needed a clear path to the door.

He swung the staff again.

She faked the same dodge but sidestepped the other way and broke for the door, rushing headlong into Ruth.

Her father grabbed her shoulder from behind.

“Tobiah, you attacked your own daughter.” Ruth’s glare could have scorched stone. “The staff is meant to rescue a lost sheep, not beat it to death.”

“Woman, do not meddle with a father’s discipline.” Tobiah brandished the staff.

Ruth curled her hand around the staff and edged Mara behind her back. “If you mark her, Achor will take back his silver.”

Her father slowly surrendered the staff and shook a fist at Mara. “If you do not obey me, you will be stoned.”

Rage erupted from deep in Mara’s soul. “Then I would be happily dead, freed from the torture of a loathed wedding bed.”

Ruth gasped and wrapped Mara with a motherly embrace. “Child, never despise the life HaShem has given.” She stroked Mara’s hair. “HaShem has promised one day the ashes of mourning will be traded for joy.”

## A Certain Man

Mara let hopeless tears spill down her cheeks. Today she was a captive. A captive to Achor's lust. A captive to her father's greed. And a captive under the Law of the Lord. But one day, the Taheb, the Promised One, would appear. One day, He would set every captive free.

"Tobiah." The high priest's shout rang across the village center.

Tobiah pushed past Mara and Ruth and ran outside. "I come. Let us confirm the marriage contract."

The high priest rode his donkey up to the sack of silver, now tainted with dung. He glanced toward his sons, who walked beside him.

Tobiah scuttled up to them.

Mara veiled her hair and lower face. She and Ruth went outside. The heat was scorching, windless. Mara felt she drew breath through a burial face cloth. She searched for Samuel. He stood behind his father but had not crossed the threshold of his home.

The crowd gathered quickly, still as death.

Ruth touched her arm. "My son is no coward. We have commanded him to stay inside. For his safety and yours. His rash words or deeds would only bring disaster."

The high priest raised a hand. "Tobiah, you have had the night to consider. What say you?"

Mara's chest tightened, her hands trembled, and her heart tripped over its racing rhythm. "Please, father." She threw herself at his feet and clung to his robe.

He kicked her in the side, yanked free, and looked up at the priest. "Let the wedding contract be signed."

Abram stepped forward. "Priest, what think you of the dung clinging to the silver offered for an unwilling bride?"

The high priest seemed to study the coins glinting from the dung heap. "It is peculiar."

## Linda Dindzans

Abram moved even closer. “Do you think the dung is an evil sign?”

Mara’s stomach twisted around a kernel of hope. She rose and Ruth squeezed her hand.

Achor snorted, lifted the coin sack by its strap, and shook it free of the dung. “There is no evil sign—merely a sign someone nearby owns a goat.”

Nervous snickers came from the skittish crowd.

“We will sign the contract one hour before sundown.” Achor glanced toward Samuel, bounced the bride-price sack in his palm and raised an arm, gloating in triumph. “The whole town is invited to a feast this very night. We will rejoice.”

The crowd murmured. Some offered hollow blessings. Others slung quiet curses.

*Samuel.* Mara watched him try to plow past his father. Ozri, Abram, and two others held Samuel back.

Achor approached Mara and lifted his fingers toward her face as if he would unveil her. “Until sunset.”

Mara stepped back and sniffed. “The smell of dung has clung to you.”

Achor’s look changed. His eyes flashed cruelty and his lips pulled back revealing perfect teeth. Bone-white teeth. Sharp teeth. The bared teeth of a dog gone mad.

She glanced at the sun, past its peak.

At sunset she would be forced to surrender a lifetime with her Beloved. A lifetime filled with laughter and love, exchanged for a lifetime with Achor. A life of days serving a cruel man. A life of nights at the mercy of his lust.

Samuel’s righteous bloodline would have been blessed.

Achor’s bloodline of bad seed would be cursed for generations to come.

Shadows cast by the sinking sun stretched toward her like the talons of a circling vulture.

## A Certain Man

Mara trembled.

The looming shadows closed in, darkening the edges of her sight. The sun was sinking fast—and suddenly, so was she.

Ruth rushed to Mara's side and put an arm around her waist, bolstering her knees turned-to-water. "Come *Tamara*, you must rest inside, out of the scorching sun." Ruth angled toward Tobiah's hut.

Mara pushed away. "Tobiah has sold me like a slave. He is no longer a father. And I am no longer a daughter."

Ruth clicked her tongue. "Shh. To be overheard is dangerous."

Mara's father was dead to her. Slain by a demon of drunkenness. She was an orphan without name, without protection, without hope.

"Tamara, my *sweet* date palm." Ruth drew comforting circles on her back. A touch Mara always craved. A touch that never failed to calm her.

Until now.

"Be at peace, my Tamara."

Mara pulled away from Ruth's comfort.

"Your *sweet* Tamara is dead."

Any sweetness in her had been killed by a bitter root planted in her bones when her father sold her to her attacker. A bitter root that spread through her veins and threatened every tender shoot that might sprout from her heart.

Mara heard sounds of a struggle. She turned.

Samuel broke free of his restrainers and ran toward her. "My Mara. *Mami*, my sweetness."

She halted him with an upraised palm. "Do not call me *Sweet*. For I am not yours. Call me *Bitter*."

Samuel fell to his knees and beat a fist against his heart.

"Call me Mara."

Achor stepped between Mara and Samuel.



## **Linda Dindzans**

“Mara.” Achor’s tone was a sickening sneer. “Until sunset.”  
His look was an ugly leer.

Until sunset.

Until the end of the light of day.

Until the dawn of an unending night.