

# SPARROW ALONE

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# CHAPTER 1

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Bethphage lay quiet under the crescent moon's silent, arched passage of the heavens. Cobbled streets and dusty alleyways wove silver threads between the dark squares of houses. The entire village seemed asleep, man and beast alike at rest from their long day's toil. One window, however, revealed a flickering glow.

On a stool pulled close to the room's tiny charcoal brazier a young woman bent forward so that her work was lit by the glowing coals as well as by the small clay lamp to her left. Mala's fingers moved mechanically about their familiar task with fabric, needle, and thread, but her mind chased itself about over well-worn, mazelike thought paths.

He was all she had. Each was, in fact, all the other had. And yet, it was enough. At least it had been. But now? Mala poked the embers of the dying fire, urging from it one final burst of warmth against the room's chill. Then she again drew close to the flickering oil lamp, blinking back tears. She had promised this garment—finished—to the Lady Terentia, her most influential Roman client. Mala sighed. Until a few moments ago she had been enjoying her work, exulting

in the shimmering green silk upon the shoulder of which she was embroidering delicate flowers. But then thoughts of Abdon had shattered her peace.

Abdon. His face refused to leave her mind. How she loved him, her brother. He had been her world since their parents—innocent bystanders in a Jerusalem marketplace—had been trampled to death by mounted Roman soldiers quelling a riot. Brother and sister had been forced into instant independence. Just three months before their parents' death Abdon had proudly enjoyed the synagogue ceremony that signaled his manhood. Surely, he had reassured his little sister, Jehovah had thus prepared him for mature responsibility.

Aided only by a teacher in the synagogue, Abdon had supervised the funeral and burial of their parents. But nightmares plagued him from that time on, jolting him awake, tearful and trembling. Only Mala knew how she would race to her brother's sleeping mat, then talk to him gently, holding his hand, until he calmed and slept again.

So brother and sister had become a world unto themselves, refusing various neighbors' halfhearted offers of help. Their mutual bereavement and daily struggle to survive had bonded them strongly. The intervening years that had brought Mala to seventeen summers of life and Abdon to nineteen had been marked by their physical stamina and emotional determination. Recently, however, Abdon's behavior threatened not only their accomplishment, but also their relationship; he seemed increasingly alienated from her.

"Oh!" Mala cried out as she jabbed her needle in frustration at the fabric and instead drove its point into a finger. She stared at the tiny drop of blood oozing from her flesh. How it pictured the hurt of her heart! But she must keep the blood from marring Lady Terentia's garment . . .

"So . . . my sister has reverted to sucking on her finger like a child."

Mala whirled toward the door. "Abdon! How could I miss sounds of your return?"

"You were absorbed in nursing your finger, Sparrow. A merchantman's camel could have come stomping in without your notice." Abdon plopped cross-legged onto the floor close to the brazier's warmth. "Ah, but what of the luxurious garment for Our Lady Nose-in-the-Air?"

"Abdon, please. I enjoy handling these lovely fabrics and threads."

Abdon turned his face toward the dying charcoal; its glow emphasized the new hardness of his mouth. "Enjoy! Why must you only handle these things, Mala? You're more fit to keep them in your hands than is your arrogant Roman patroness!"

Letting the shimmering garment slip from her lap, Mala reached across to place her hand on Abdon's cheek. "Why do you speak with such anger, Abdon?"

"Show me reason for anything else: This place made bare by selling what we had that we might have what we need? Victuals scant for survival? You and I with bodies roughly clothed, hands roughly worked? Looks of disdain from the Romans, pity from our people? Aye, there's abundant cause for anger, Sister. Since you'll not acknowledge it, I've plenty for both of us."

"This isn't like you, Abdon. Yours has been the strength, the hope on which I've leaned these years since we've been alone."

"The strength of patience has betrayed us; hope's vision has proven a mirage. We've waited for a kindly fate, believed in a just God. No more. The waiting, the belief, are not only vain; they're marks of a fool. These hands will wrestle fate and turn his smile toward us. This mind will work its own will, providing those things withheld from us so long—"

“You speak against Jehovah God, my brother! You—who taught me the Psalmist’s words, ‘The Lord executeth righteousness and judgment for all that are oppressed.’ ”

“Words.” Abdon fairly snarled his reply. “Words. That’s all they are—empty words. There can be no more reliance upon vanity. Bid farewell to Abdon the Weak, Sister. And greet Abdon the Strong.”

Mala could not prevent tears spilling from her eyes. “But in saying that, you renounce everything Mother and Father—”

“The filthy Romans took away our mother and our father. These years of their absence I’ve tried with all my heart to walk in our parents’ precepts. The result? This.” He swept his arms wide, indicating the cold, bare room. “Only a fool continues on a path that leads nowhere. I am no such fool.” Abdon rose abruptly. “From this night on I walk a new pathway. And I walk it a new man.” He bent to kiss Mala’s tear-streaked cheek. “Your tears will soon be turned to smiles, Sparrow. You’ll see.” With that Abdon hurried out the door and back into the night.

As silence returned to the room, Mala felt the shaking of an awful doubt. Was Abdon right and she wrong? It did seem that their efforts had wrought little of worth. Each time she had been in one of the great city houses, she’d realized the chasm of difference that lay between the Roman woman’s plenty and her own poverty. But no—she mustn’t entertain such thoughts. She shook herself and blew on her fingers; she rubbed her hands together. But as the chill of her body lessened, that of her heart deepened. Who was this new Abdon? A stranger had replaced the gentle brother she adored.

Drying her tears, Mala retrieved the bright silk puddled on the floor and bent again to her sewing. She must bring her thoughts back to the present, to the work at hand. Her mind must not follow Abdon into the unknown darkness that lay beyond the doorway.

## CHAPTER 2

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Dawn streamed through the eastern window and across Mala's sleeping form, touching the rough blanket with color. The girl stretched, yearning to turn again to sleep after the night's scant rest. But she must be up, must deliver the finished garment to Lady Terentia. She left her bed, hurriedly straightened the blanket, dashed cold water from a clay ewer onto face and neck, and shivered into her tunic. She leaned from the window, noting the length of the morning shadows. She must hurry! She knew that early delivery of a garment on the promised day pleased Lady Terentia, made her less loathe to part with payment.

Mala shrugged into her aba, sorry that the chill morning made the coat necessary. Scrupulously clean, as was each item of her clothing, the aba nevertheless fairly screamed its age. Wrapping her veil about her head, Mala caught up the silk dress in one hand, a bit of parched corn in the other. Then she hurried into the dawn-laced street.

The village of Bethphage still lay mostly asleep. Only those, like her, who had early business in the city were about at this hour. Her sandals moved quickly over the familiar cobbles. She turned onto the

dusty road outside the village just as she finished eating the final bit of corn.

“Mala! Ho—a slower pace might win you company for your journey . . .”

Mala stopped and turned. Tahath’s familiar square form hurried toward her. He led a donkey dwarfed by the bundles it bore. The perpetual sadness of the animal’s face contrasted with that of his smiling master. The girl felt some of her tension depart. Tahath always had that effect on her. Although he was the same age as Abdon, Tahath’s cheerful practicality somehow lent him an air of greater maturity. Mala silently thanked Jehovah for sending her friend on this particular day. “Good morning, Tahath. I would welcome company into the city. Only necessity takes me there! Bethphage’s quiet is much more to my liking.”

“I know that, Mala. It has been so since our childhood.” His voice took on a teasing note. “It seems to me that a considerate brother should make this trip for you.”

“I . . . Abdon can’t . . . he isn’t . . .”

Tahath’s expression sobered. “Forgive me, Mala. I didn’t mean unkindness to either Abdon or you.”

“I know. You’re a true friend to both of us.” Mala struggled over the decision to share or withhold her sisterly concerns. A quick glance at Tahath’s strong profile against the lightening horizon quelled her reluctance. “Though I try not to be, I’m fearful for Abdon. He is . . . changed. Perhaps I’m foolish, but it frightens me.”

“Foolish you’ve never been. May a friend know your concern?”

They were walking side by side now, the donkey’s hooves whispering *pockety-pocket* behind them in the dust. Mala blinked back tears of gratitude. She knew that anything she told Tahath would be

kept confidential. She also knew him to be wise beyond his years. “Abdon’s . . . change . . . has not come suddenly. For months now he has talked less, . . . smiled less, . . . stayed at home less. I’ve sensed a terrible something growing inside him. I confess to cowardice, Tahath, in ignoring the signs. Thinking, . . . hoping, . . . trusting it to be a passing phase young men experience. I am much at fault. I didn’t—couldn’t—confront my brother, nor could I even petition Jehovah, lest voicing my fear might somehow make it a horrible reality.”

Mala kept her eyes fixed on the roadway at her feet. But she felt the strength of Tahath’s gaze as he replied, “A loving heart hesitates to acknowledge the cloud that might shadow its joy. While that hesitation cannot banish the cloud, neither does it *create* the shadow. But what—beyond increasing silence and lessening joy—is there in Abdon that rouses your fear?”

“The answer is an ugly word, Tahath. An ugly spirit. And how unlike the Abdon we both know. But I can put no other identity to it. It is . . . hatred.” Mala bit her lip.

After a thoughtful silence Tahath queried, “What or who stands as the object of Abdon’s hatred? Has he said?”

“He hates . . . he hates everything! He scorns our house. He resents the necessity for our labors. He rails against our food, our clothing. He upbraids the Romans for their tyranny, but also our own people for their accommodation. This awful thing within him lashes out at all he formerly accepted, at everything he mocked through the years, assuring me that one day it would be different.”

Tahath spoke softly. “The kicked dog.”

“What did you say?”

“The kicked dog. That’s what your description reminds me of. Remember our seeing stray dogs as we grew up, Mala? Boney and



pathetic, seeking whatever scraps they could for survival, allowing themselves to be kicked . . . and kicked again. But only so long as they could run away. When cornered, with no way to escape the abuse, they become ferocious: snarling and biting, attacking their attacker, fighting with all the pent-up fury of months and years.”

Mala nodded. “That’s . . . vivid, Tahath. I hurt to liken my brother to a dog, yet the picture is apt. But why? Why would Abdon suddenly feel himself cornered? Made to fight?”

“That I can’t answer. Perhaps there’s no single event or cause, but rather an accumulation of life’s small cruelties.”

“How long will he stand at bay? What good can he accomplish, what change can he force? And when, oh when, Tahath, will he again become my gentle Abdon?”

“No one but Jehovah Himself can answer such questions. None but Jehovah Himself can bring Abdon back into his rightful self. It is to Jehovah we must appeal, Mala. I pledge my help for you in that appeal.”

“I’m grateful, Tahath. You’re a kind, a good friend.” Lengthening her stride and putting a spring into her step, Mala breathed, “Ah, see how the day lightens! And so should my spirit. If one’s trust in Jehovah be true, then gloomy thoughts should be passing things, as night’s darkness gives way to the day. Tell me now how matters go in your metals workshop.” The two continued in comfortable conversation for the duration of their journey.

Soon they entered the city. She felt, as always, rising tension as they moved into already-crowded streets. Most people seemed drawn to the noise, bustle, and excitement of Jerusalem. Not she. She would have been content to stay forever within the quiet of Bethphage. Only financial necessity ever brought her here.

Sensing her unease, Tahath asked, "Would you mind first going to the marketplace with me? I can leave Belshazzar with one of the stall boys, then I'll be free to go with you to your patroness."

Mala's heart lifted. "Of course. I'd be grateful for your company. Thank you."

Now well within the city itself, Mala and Tahath grew quiet; the surrounding noise discouraged further conversation. Jerusalem's every characteristic assaulted Mala's senses. There seemed to be numberless narrow, winding streets. Crowds of people were everywhere: most of them hurried along in swirling currents, some were isolated in knots of conversation, and yet others shouted at one another, hands windmilling. Heavy ox carts vied with Roman chaises borne by ebony slaves, their mistresses lounging within gossamer curtains. Beggars of every sad description called out in querulous voices to heedless passersby. Housewives gossiped loudly from one window to another above the street. With Tahath's reassuring presence, there was a degree of safety from the waves of human activity that threatened to drown her. Glancing at her companion's face, Mala was surprised to see a reflection of her own feelings. Could it be Tahath didn't relish the city either? Abdon so constantly disparaged Bethphage that Mala had come to feel herself alone in preferring village life.

Feeling her gaze, Tahath turned his face briefly toward her, rolling his eyes upward and pulling the corners of his mouth down into a comic expression of dislike. Mala laughed, ridiculously pleased to recognize Tahath's understanding and his shared response. She reached back with one hand to stroke Belshazzar's nose. He plodded stoically along behind them, though his overhanging burden was often bumped and buffeted, sometimes nearly knocking the little donkey off his feet.

So the trio continued to the marketplace. Activity there was at such height one would have thought it noonday rather than early morning. Stalls crowded against one another as far as Mala could

see. Each was being dressed for the day in its respective offerings. Merchants piled fruits and vegetables in great baskets. They hoisted newly-slain carcasses of sheep and calves onto meat hooks. They stacked live chickens and ducks in cage upon wooden cage. Several stalls displaying fabrics caught Mala's eye. She was pleased that none seemed to offer as fine a quality or color as that in the garment she carried carefully under her aba.

Tahath gestured toward a stall on the opposite side of the street. They crossed cautiously, rushing the last few steps to avoid oncoming Roman soldiers. Even Belshazzar voluntarily broke into a trot. Once safe, Mala turned to stare, mesmerized, at the mounted figures. She shuddered involuntarily as she pictured similar figures as they must have been on the day of her parents' death, moving into the crowds, horses rearing with flailing hooves, riders yelling, slashing haphazardly with their swords.

"Mala. Mala . . ."

Startled, she dragged her eyes away from the retreating Romans, made herself answer Tahath. "Yes? Oh . . . uh . . . I'm sorry . . ."

"I said we're finished here. We can go now to the Roman section. We'll come back this way later to collect Belshazzar." So saying, he began breaking the way through ever-more-crowded streets. Mala remembered how many times, when alone in Jerusalem, she had become lost trying to find the home of some Roman patroness. There would be no such complications today. Tahath moved confidently and quickly.

The character of the city changed as they neared the Roman section. Voices were self-consciously muted. Jews in the streets moved furtively. Mingled fear and hatred hung in the air like smoke. The buildings, too, were different. Massive edifices proclaimed the Romans' grip upon the land and their intention to keep it. As she did each time she entered the Roman quarter, Mala renewed her heart's

prayer for the promised Messiah who would free her people from Roman oppression.

Familiar landmarks brought her mind back to the present. "It's not much farther now, Tahath. Just after the next turning."

When they arrived at the great house, Tahath insisted upon waiting outside for her. A thin servant girl ushered Mala into Lady Terentia's presence, bowing as she announced, "The seamstress with your completed garment, Mistress."

Lady Terentia rose on one elbow among the rich cushions of her couch. Carefully curled and varnished-looking hair framed painted cheeks, aquiline nose, and a pinched mouth whose infrequent smiles never reached the pale, bulging eyes. "Ah. You're early in delivering my order. That pleases me. Now hold it up there where you stand so I can see if the lines of the garment are right." Mala obediently shook the glistening fabric from its folds and held it by the shoulders. She willed herself not to tremble. How she dreaded this awful moment—when a capricious patron might refuse her work . . . and the payment for it. But she relaxed as she noted the smile that came to Lady Terentia's thin lips. "From this distance it appears satisfactory. Step forward now, that I may inspect the workmanship." Mala did so with confidence, knowing her meticulous handwork could seldom be surpassed.

The Roman woman inspected the seams, hem, and finish work. Then she swung her legs off the couch. Holding the chiton against her plump body, she asked, "It suits me, does it not?"

Mala bowed slightly as she replied, "Indeed, Mistress. The color enhances your own."

Obviously pleased, the Roman woman caressed the silk, watching it catch the light. Mala idly wondered what it would be like to live amid the luxury of marble, servants, and silk; to have everything and anything one wanted simply by giving an order. But no envy rose in

response to the thought. Her visits to this great house and others like it had made her aware of underlying dissatisfactions and boredom within their splendid walls.

Lady Terentia reclined again. "Here, Challa." She held the garment toward a servant girl. "See this is put away carefully. Perhaps later today I'll have you summon the cobbler. A new belt and sandals of gold would do nicely to complete the costume. And send Hodesh with payment for the seamstress. I shall add a bit to what we contracted for because I am pleased with your work, Jewess, and with your promptness."

Mala inclined her head as she responded, "Thank you, Mistress." With that, she was waved out of the room. She waited near the front door for the servant Hodesh, whose entrance she heard before she saw.

Hodesh, pink-cheeked and harried, puffed her way toward Mala. "Here, girl. Here's your pay." The serving woman moved closer to Mala and lowered her voice. "Little enough by my measure. But Her Ladyship is not generous toward any but herself, I can tell you. By the looks of you, you could do with something extra, and your fine work's certainly worth it! So thinking, I've here a bit of parchment directing you to one who'll not only rightly appreciate but also richly pay for your needle's artistry. The house is nearby, and I've sent one of the scullery girls to let them know of your coming."

"Oh, thank you! I do need more work—"

Hodesh snorted. "It's more *payment* that you need! Hurry along now. You may not be going to your fortune, but you'll certainly come into better than you get here."

"Hodesh! Hodesh, where are you? Come in here at once." Lady Terentia's rasping call carried sharply into the entryway, making a lie of the gracious marble interior.

“Coming, Mistress,” Hodesh called. As she turned to go, she shrugged and sighed.

Mala stuffed the coins of her payment into the small leather purse at her waist. Then she hurried into the street, inspecting the parchment scrap Hodesh had given her. Tahath appeared at her side. “That didn’t take long. Was Her Ladyship pleased with your work?”

“I don’t believe *pleased* is a word that applies to Lady Terentia. Temporarily mollified perhaps, but never pleased. Her payment is scanty, as usual, though slightly more generous than for earlier garments. But see—her chief maid of the household gave me this, telling me to go right away to another Roman lady who is, she says, more agreeable.”

“Aha. That sounds promising. Let’s move on to make the proof of it.”

“You’re kind, Tahath. But you need to return to the marketplace. Now that the time with Lady Terentia is past, all ahead must be better. And I managed getting out of the Roman quarter better than coming into it.”

“There are more than enough sellers at the stall. They’ve made it plain that it’s my goods they want, not my help. And of course Belshazzar relishes his relaxation, miserable beast that he is.”

Mala chuckled, knowing Tahath’s disparaging term poorly disguised his affection for the little donkey. “All right then. Again, I’m glad for your company.” She glanced once more at the parchment, with Hodesh’s hastily-drawn map, then turned left down the street. Tahath’s comfortable presence insulated her against the bold stares of Roman men who lounged in doorways or rode over the cobbles on tall horses.

As they waited for a heavy horse-drawn wagon to pass, Tahath said, “May I ask what you plan to do with these latest earnings?”

Mala answered thoughtfully, "I'll try to redeem something from Old Bartholomew. If I can begin replacing our household pieces, Abdon may come to feel more contented."

"I think Abdon's hoped-for contentment is less important at the moment than a new aba for you. Your present cloak must poorly keep out the chill."

Mala frowned. For the second time that day someone was implying that she looked ragged—first Hodesh, and now Tahath. She defiantly lifted her chin. "I don't need your advice about how to spend my wage, Tahath!"

"I meant no insult, little friend. I'm just concerned, that's all. Now lower your nose lest you stumble." Tahath's tone was gentle and teasing.

"Well . . ." Not able to think of an appropriate rejoinder, Mala relaxed from her haughty bearing. The two soon reached the location indicated on the parchment. As Mala hesitated before the door, Tahath patted her on the shoulder with one hand and reached for the great brass knocker with the other. Then he quickly stepped aside so he'd not be seen by anyone answering the door.

As Mala waited, she nervously rolled, unrolled, and rerolled the bit of parchment. Then one of the double doors opened. She looked into the face of an aged manservant. His eyes crinkled more deeply at the corners as he asked, "Yes, miss?"

"I . . . uh . . . I was told at Lady Terentia's house to come here. Hodesh told me. She gave me this." Mala held out the parchment scrap, but the old man waved it aside.

"You're the Jewess who's a seamstress, I take it?" Mala nodded, and he went on, "If you're half the wonder I heard that maid describe, my mistress will be happy to meet you indeed. Come in, child."

## CHAPTER 3

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Mala passed into the cool marble interior as the servant stood aside for her. He closed the door, then moved ahead to show her the way. The pace of his spindly, gnarled legs gave her time to examine the house through which they moved. The atrium fountain splashed gently amid carefully tended shrubbery. As the servant opened another door, Mala heard a plaintive melody. Advancing into the room, she saw two young dark-skinned servant girls. One played a small stringed instrument; the other, a flute. Mala hesitated, but the old manservant took her gently by the arm and moved with her toward the room's occupants.

"Mistress Diana . . ." At the sound of the servant's voice, the young musicians lowered their instruments and turned curious dark eyes toward Mala. They stepped to either side of a marble chair. "The seamstress spoken of has come." The old man bowed to his mistress as he spoke, then he quietly exited.

The chair's occupant lifted her gaze from a piece of needlework in her hands. As the face came up in its framework of loose golden curls, Mala was startled to find the mistress of the household barely older



than her servant girls. Lady Diana's face was the perfection of natural beauty and her sweet expression unlike anything Mala had thought possible in a Roman.

Diana handed her needlework to the servant girl on her left, then reached toward Mala as she said softly, "Welcome. Recommendation of your talents has literally raced into our house. May I ask your name?"

Mala had difficulty finding her voice. In all her months of sewing for Lady Terentia, she'd been called nothing but 'Jewess.' "My name . . . my name is . . . Mala, Your Ladyship."

Diana reached out to clasp both Mala's hands in hers, pulling her close to the chair. "Mala," she repeated. "That's a lovely name, and it suits you. Zikhi, take her cloak and head shawl." She interrupted herself to say to Mala, "Forgive me for my presumption. Do you have time to visit a moment?" Mala nodded dumbly. Her hostess indicated that the servant girl should lay the worn garments aside. She continued, "Yes, your name suits. How lovely you are!" Mala felt hot blood rush to her face. She had never been called lovely, in fact she couldn't remember anyone referring to her appearance at all. "Mikiah, bring a chair for our guest, please."

Mala sank gratefully into the delicately carved chair the servant girl placed for her. Her knees felt weak. She must be dreaming this courtesy! She was in a Roman house; there could be no doubt about that. But here was warmth, and . . . yes, genuine welcome. The gentle voice of her hostess sounded again.

"You look faint, Mala. I fear you must have come far—and on foot?"

Mala tried to rally her scattered senses. "Yes . . . No . . . Not too far. My home is in the village of Bethphage."

Diana smiled, the blue eyes sparkling. "I know the place. My husband has driven me about some of the outlying villages. Bethphage is lovely. How wonderful it must be to live in such a place of quiet."

Heartened by the sincerity in Diana's voice, Mala's confusion ebbed. "I've lived in Bethphage since my birth, and I hope to do so always. My brother mocks its smallness, yearning for the excitement of the city."

Diana shook her head. "Yours is the wiser preference to my way of thinking. My own home village outside Rome is much like yours. Ah, but we must not think sadly."

The two servant girls were instantly beside Diana, compassion evident in their eyes. "Mistress, shall we play again for you? Zikhi has composed a new melody. We've practiced, and—"

Diana gestured the girls away. "There's no need for music right now. Later I'll gladly hear the new song."

Mala's wonder increased as she watched Diana's treatment of the servant girls. This golden young woman defied everything Mala had ever known of Romans.

As Zikhi and Mikiah moved apart to sit on large floor pillows, Diana again focused her attention upon Mala. "You and I can rejoice over similar background settings. I wouldn't have sadness creep into our visit. It's only that the longing for home at times becomes so strong."

Mala nodded. "I feel such a longing each time I come to Jerusalem—which is only a short distance from Bethphage. How much worse it must be for you with weeks of travel between you and your own country. Are you to stay in Jerusalem long?"

"Our tenure is uncertain. My husband Dolphus is a legate, serving as the emperor's agent in Jerusalem. His reports have met with favor, and there are rumors of his duties being expanded. By all accounts, that might mean many more months—even years—here."

The Roman lady's openness moved Mala to similar honesty. "But surely . . . I mean . . . we Jews view the city's occupation as a happy thing for you the conquerors. I never thought . . ."

"That a *conqueror* could be unhappy?" The wry note in Diana's voice was unmistakable. "We Romans do possess, indeed, both wealth and power in our occupation of your people, your land." Diana leaned forward, speaking softly so the servant girls could not overhear. "But Mala, appearances are surface things. Oh, surely, many of our number revel in the tyranny we're encouraged to wield. But underneath it all lies the fact that this is *your* land; these are *your* people. We Romans are aliens. We're obeyed and feared, of course, but all the while we're hated. So it is that conquerors can live richly in possessions but poorly in peace."

Mala could frame no fit response to Diana's confession. She simply held the gaze of her lovely hostess, knowing there was no need to drop her eyes in subservience. Slowly, a smile came to each face; woman's heart had spoken to woman's heart.

Suddenly Mala remembered Tahath. "Lady Diana, forgive me, but there's a friend waiting outside for me."

Diana straightened in her chair. "But of course. I've been thoughtless to keep you so long. Are you, as Terentia's maidservant indicated, willing to construct a few clothing items for us?"

"I'd be happy to do so. If you would see a sample of my work . . ."

Diana shook her head. "I need no sample. The recommendations that preceded you are enough. Added to those are the impressions of your person. I have every confidence in you. I'd like to commission several things, for Mikiah and Zikhi as well as for myself. Are you prepared to take our measurements now?"

The remainder of her time in Diana's house went quickly. Forever afterward the scene remained vivid in Mala's mind: quick measuring

and instructions for the servants' garments, then the jolt of distress Mala felt when, approaching to take Lady Diana's measurements, Zikhi and Mikiah stepped ahead of her . . . took, each of them, one of Diana's arms . . . raised their mistress to a standing position. She was crippled! This beautiful, sweet aristocrat was crippled! Seeing Mala's distress, Diana forestalled her embarrassment or apology. "Don't hurt for me, Mala, though I thank you for your sympathy. These lower limbs of mine are useless, but they're without pain. Matters could be far more difficult, could they not?"

Filled with jumbled emotions, Mala completed the various measurements, took the leather purse Diana held out to her, and eventually found herself again outside the great front door. Tahath spoke to her, studying her face with piercing concern.

"Mala, what is it? Was she unkind to you? If she hurt you in some way—"

"What? Oh, forgive my distraction, Tahath. No. There was nothing unkind in Lady Diana—or in her entire household. Just the opposite. I don't . . . I can't . . . understand. Let me tell you."

Mala and Tahath walked slowly back to the marketplace deep in conversation. Though Tahath made thoughtful responses, Mala still could not comprehend what she had seen and sensed in the Roman dwelling. Once in the noisy marketplace, Tahath asked her to wait in an out-of-the-way corner of the metals shop while he handled some business matters with the owner. Glad for the chance to sit a moment and think specifically toward fabrics to be purchased for Lady Diana's order, Mala decided she needed to learn how much she'd been given for the purchase. With her mind on possible colors and weights of cloth, she loosened the drawstrings of the small leather money pouch. She stared at its contents in disbelief—stared at more money than she had ever seen at one time in her life. It was not the gold itself that held her motionless. Rather, it was the trust and confidence the coins represented. Mala shook her head, trying to clear her mind. Lady

Diana's gold put upon her a great weight of responsibility. Closing the money pouch and fastening it securely at her waist, Mala felt exhilaration, tension, and determination.

As they left the metal seller's stall, it was clear that Tahath knew the entire marketplace well; he exchanged friendly greetings with many of the vendors. He guided Mala to several merchants he considered the best sources for the fabrics she sought. The purchases did not take long. Mala's instincts for quality and beauty were strong. She chose delicate colors in soft but sturdy weave for Zikhi and Mikiah. For Lady Diana she selected a fine woven linen of sky blue. Its subtle sheen would compliment its wearer's eyes, and its considerable body would disguise her withered legs. Completing her transactions with Tahath's help in bargaining, Mala insisted on carrying the parcels herself as they returned to the metals stall. Behind it, Belshazzar stood tethered, head and ears drooping, eyes closed.

Mala laughed at the donkey's exaggerated reactions to Tahath's lashing the bundles of fabric to his empty pack harness. "Belshazzar, you're akin to the mimes who come to Bethphage; you use no words, yet your meaning is clear! One would think to look at you, that these few light bundles were the very weight of the world!"

Tahath joined Mala's laughter. "True. What a wretched fellow!" So saying, he fondled Belshazzar's ear. The donkey leaned his head against his master's caressing hand, his expression now blissful.

The trio was soon on its way, joining the many who were leaving Jerusalem. Mala smiled across Belshazzar's head at Tahath. "To think it is evening! I've never stayed in the city a full day. And yet the time has seemed neither lengthy nor difficult. Thank you for helping to make it so pleasant, Tahath."

Tahath answered with an elaborate shrug. "Accompanying you made my day pleasant as well, Mala. Pleasantness will end abruptly, however, if we don't eat something."

At the mention of food, Mala's midsection rumbled emptily. But she shook her head at Tahath. "I brought no food . . . thinking, of course, that I'd be home before midday." She didn't want Tahath to guess that there had been no food to bring.

Tahath cheerfully began untying a bundle from Belshazzar's load. "I'll not have you collapsing before we reach Bethphage. I have plenty of smoked fish as well as bread. And see—here's the water jug my noble beast has guarded for us all day!"

Mala gratefully accepted Tahath's offer, forcing herself to disguise the intensity of her hunger by eating and drinking slowly as they walked along.

When they came to the edge of Bethphage, Mala spoke. "Now, Tahath, this is far enough for your kind escort. I'll take my parcels."

"Belshazzar and I had planned all along to see you home."

Mala shook her head. "You have spent enough of your time easing my way. You've more than earned your freedom and rest."

Tahath sighed. "I know you too well to argue, Mala. So here are your day's purchases. I wish you well in working for your new patroness."

"Thank you." Mala settled her bundles in one arm, paused, then reached out with a light touch on Tahath's hand where it rested on Belshazzar's head. "I do thank you, Tahath. For today, yes, but for more. King Solomon wrote of a friend's value. Friendship for Abdon and me is rare. Hence, it is treasured indeed. And now, shalom."

Mala quickly moved away into the twilight. Tahath watched her straight, slim back. It fairly shouted independence and determination.

## CHAPTER 4

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A fortnight had passed since the day in Jerusalem with Tahath. Mala had used most of Lady Terentia's payment to purchase a few essentials for the house. There had not been enough left to redeem anything from Bartholomew, the village moneylender. Nevertheless, her evenings of sewing for the new patroness, Lady Diana, were enhanced by the fact that there was now sufficient charcoal to keep evening's chill at bay.

As she worked, Mala fixed her mind determinedly upon what she was doing and upon those in the Roman household for whom she was constructing the garments. She would not allow herself to think of Abdon, of his failure to come home, of what his continuing absence might mean.

Then all at once one midafternoon he was there again. He burst in upon her with a bellow. "Ho! Sparrow! See? Your brother keeps his word and brings provision for your shabby nest!"

Mala whirled, nearly dropping a newly-baked loaf of bread. "Abdon! At last you've come."

Abdon stood tall, his legs uncharacteristically widespread. "I have come indeed. Hold out your hands." Mala obeyed slowly, dazed by her brother's brittle exuberance. "Here are some crumbs for my Sparrow. See how they glitter?" So saying, he dropped a handful of coins into her cupped hands.

Mala stared, dumbfounded, at the coins. Her voice alternated between a squeak and a whisper. "So much? Where? Where did you? How?"

Abdon's answering laugh was over-loud. "For shame, Sparrow. Don't question the hand that so richly meets your needs. Simply accept. And rejoice."

Mala shook her head. "You've only been but a fortnight. How could you earn so much . . . and your clothing . . . by its appearance?"

Irritation glinted in her brother's eyes. "Questions. Nothing but questions. Are there no thanks, Mala, for what you hold? Is there no kiss for the brother whose love has brought it?"

Mala swallowed over the fearful uncertainty lumping in her throat. "Could you hold . . . these . . . this . . . for a moment?" Handing the coins to Abdon, Mala removed the sash from her waist, held it open for Abdon to pour in the money, then brought its edges together around the coins. Carefully, she laid the bundled riches on a stool. Then she turned and rose to her tiptoes, throwing her arms around her brother's neck. "Forgive me, Abdon. Of course I thank you. It's just that the surprise of your coming . . . of . . . of all this . . ." She indicated the bundled gold. "You are too good to me, dear brother."

Abdon returned Mala's hug, crushing her to him, burying his face in her hair. "Tell me that my gift pleases you, Sparrow, that it will ease life's hardness."



She drew her head from Abdon's chest, and looked up into his eyes. "Of course. Thank you for wanting to provide for my . . . for our . . . needs here. You're home to stay, aren't you? You'll let me cook for you."

Abdon squeezed Mala, then he held her slightly away, cupped her chin in his hands, and smiled down into her eyes. "The very smell of your fresh bread draws me to stay. It's very nearly irresistible." But then Abdon released his sister, moved away to the room's small window. His voice took on again the strangeness Mala sensed in everything about him. "I would I could remain here. But that's impossible. At least right now. I . . . there are friends who've helped me . . . I must stay there . . . through obligation to them . . ."

"But, Abdon—"

He raised his hand, silencing her protest. "We both must be strong . . . must sacrifice for a time, you and I . . ."

Mala shook her head, mutely appealing to her brother for an explanation.

"We already know the meaning of hardship, Sparrow. This is but another of its faces. This face, though, will be softened—as none has been before—softened by the gleam of gold."

"Oh, Abdon, I would gladly forfeit any gold—and all gold—if we could be together again."

"No!" Mala was shaken by the anger in his shout. He strode to the door. "There is no other way. This thing to be done must be done apart—in order that we might eventually be together. Together and happy and rich! You'll no longer be thin and shabby, like a sparrow. You'll be plump and gorgeous, like a . . . like a peacock!" He went out into the night. The door slammed shut, punctuating his words.

Mala stood unmoving, caught fast in a sense of unreality. Abdon must surely return, must tell her it was a mistake . . . a dream . . . a jest . . . a . . . anything but truth. At last she tore her gaze from the door and moved numbly across the room. She picked up the sash-bound coins. The actual weight was slight, but it burdened her soul. This was wrong—all wrong. Her heart knew certainty, though her mind could not discern a definite shape to the wrong. Abdon's mysterious riches must not be spent. Of that she was sure. Even to touch it was unseemly. But she must hide it. Oh, that neither its glitter nor its frightening, questionable source had ever entered her world!

What place would serve? In her mind she walked through the three small rooms of the house, dismissing one possible hiding site after another. It would have to be here in the main room, bare as it was. Then she knew—only one place would do. And it would do well indeed. She worked slowly and meticulously making the necessary preparations. When all was in order and the gold safely hidden, she went outside and seated herself on the small bench beside the door. She drew in slow, deep breaths of the fresh air. Evening shadows descended, soon to be replaced by full darkness. Feeling neither hunger nor the passage of time, Mala sat in silent misery. At last she re-entered the house, went to bed, and fell into exhausted sleep.

Sleep gave no respite from Mala's mental turmoil, but merely changed its form. Her dreams were peopled with formless, threatening presences that swooped at her, sending her staggering backward toward a yawning abyss. She attempted to ward off the attack, to shield herself, to scream—but still she was pushed back. Mala woke before dawn, trembling and perspiring. She lay unmoving, relieved to find the night's threat unreal, yet burdened with daylight's renewed heartache for Abdon.

Despite her dogged efforts, midmorning found her lagging in her planned sewing schedule. Nothing went well. She repeatedly caught herself sitting with hands idle and eyes fixed, unseeing, on the cloth in her lap. With a sigh she would resume her work. In order to put

thoughts of Abdon out of her mind, she relived her happy time in Jerusalem with Tahath. His image came readily to mind. Of middle height, he was stockier in build than Abdon. As playmates in their younger years, the boys' wrestling matches had usually ended with Tahath the victor. While he seemed more mature than her brother, Tahath at the same time evidenced his less than twenty years in his open, pleasant facial expression and his energetic bearing. Mala was thankful that childhood's special friendship was continuing so strongly into this time of troubling youth.

Then her thoughts moved on to Lady Diana. Having met her, Mala's hatred of Roman occupation had been complicated by recognition that among the oppressors there were individuals—likable individuals—who struggled with difficulties on their side of the situation. How long would foreigners occupy the country, experiencing self-exile from their own people and lands? How long must her own people suffer under Roman rule? When would come the Messiah so long ago promised to them? When were Jehovah's people to know freedom and prosperity and peace?

Her thoughts were broken by a knock at the door. The rarity of such a thing in her lonely existence sent a tiny shiver of fear over her. Mala rose stiffly, carefully laying aside the garments on which she was working.

The sight of Lady Terentia's maid standing on the stone step quieted Mala's heart. "Hodesh!" she exclaimed. "Lady Terentia has never sent you before. Surely you didn't have to walk the distance from the city."

Hodesh accepted Mala's gestured welcome into the house. "Better I had walked than to have ridden in that jouncing horse-drawn contraption out there! My very teeth must be loosened." She deposited her considerable bulk on the bench Mala indicated. "Ah well," she added, "perhaps the jostling will have loosened some of my excess self as well."

“May I give you something to eat or drink?”

“Nothing to eat, but a bit of water would be welcome,” said Hodesh.

Mala moved to the scullery corner and poured water from its large clay ewer, then returned and handed the water to the Roman woman.

“Thank you.” Hodesh took three swift swallows from the cup and smiled, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand. “Ahh. That makes me feel this morning’s trip less grueling.”

Mala’s brows drew together in a puzzled frown. “But why did your mistress choose to send you? Always before her requests have come by one of the lesser house servants.”

Hodesh snorted. “Requests! Lady Terentia doesn’t make requests. She only gives orders—gives them to one and all. But that you’ve observed on your own. This particular charge she wouldn’t entrust to any of the other servants. She carried on at great length about the unreliability of all who serve her! That was no compliment to me, I assure you; I simply represent the least in her disfavor at the moment.”

Mala could think of no fitting response, so she remained silent.

Draining the last of her water and setting aside the empty cup, Hodesh spoke again. “But now to the business for which I’ve come. Lady Terentia would be furious could she know how I’m dawdling. Hidden here upon my person is a fabric she commissions you to make up for her before the new moon.” So saying, Hodesh carefully drew a length of fabric from under her broad sash.

As she watched the process, Mala at first found it hard to restrain her laughter, for the considerable bulk of hidden material, once removed, barely diminished Hodesh’s generous girth. Then as the Roman woman shook out the fabric, the girl’s mouth dropped open.

Cloth of gold! She had heard of its existence, but never had she actually beheld any. She was speechless as Hodesh tried to place the material in her hands.

“But I . . . it is too fine . . . too beautiful. And so fragile! I can’t do it, Hodesh. My skill is insufficient. I would fear keeping something so valuable here in the house.”

Hodesh heaved a great sigh. “Such practical matters don’t come into consideration with Lady Terentia. She has *requested* that you make the garment following the same pattern as the green silk you most recently completed for her.”

Mala shook her head vehemently. “It’s an impossibility. I’d be mad to accept such immense responsibility!”

Hodesh rose and placed a chubby hand on Mala’s shoulder. She spoke quietly but firmly. “You would be mad to refuse Lady Terentia. Believe me when I say that it would mean disaster for you. You’ve heard of Roman cruelty. Don’t ask to experience it. Within my mistress there lies a heart immeasurably cold. The slightest provocation can result in this.” Hodesh drew up the hem of her tunic, exposing to the knees her sturdily muscled legs. Across them lay great, long welts. The scars’ varying hues told their relative age; many had grown white—obviously years old—, others were a paling pink, still others were red in their newness with darkly bruised edges.

Mala’s face drained of color; her voice rasped. “She . . . Lady Terentia . . . did that to you?”

Hodesh let her skirt fall again. “Oh, yes. And those were for minor irritations. My back chronicles my worse offenses—as, for instance, when I didn’t supervise the cook closely enough, or the seasoning of a pheasant displeased her, or the time—”

“But how could she?”

“This is the point you must understand, child: Lady Terentia not only could and can vent her cruelty at the slightest provocation; more, she delights to do so. Should you refuse her wishes regarding the cloth of gold, she will see to it that you are suitably punished—with suitability dictated by her twisted mind. You dare not deny her.”

The two women faced each other silently as Hodesh held out the glistening fabric. Slowly lifting her hands to receive it, the younger woman was swept with a sickening dread. The silence stretched on until Mala at last found her voice. “As awful as the fear and threat this one moment and its commission means for me, your having to endure such things—and unjust punishment as well from your mistress—is . . . is beyond imagining.”

“There are better owners, indeed. But as long as my work is fast enough and my demeanor lowly enough, duty to Lady Terentia is survivable. Besides, only weeks remain before I will have earned my freedom.”

“And what will you do then? Return to Rome, I suppose, since that is home to you.”

Hodesh picked up the empty water cup and turned it slowly in her hands. “Rome? No. My people, of course, think me unbalanced, but I would prefer to remain here.”

“In Judea?” Mala could not contain her surprise. “But surely—”

“Lady Terentia’s bitter rantings against Judea are constant, and most of our countrymen echo her sentiments. Yet service here has given me years of opportunity to observe Judea and you Jews. This land and its people are unlike Rome and Romans. Of course there is cruelty, suffering, and hatred here as in my homeland. But somehow those things don’t predominate. It’s as if there’s an underlying depth of . . . of quietness or patience or . . .” Hodesh ended by shrugging her shoulders.

Mala nodded. "I'm grateful you feel that quietness to be a positive thing. We're often derided as spiritless and cowardly. Those charges are made not only by Romans, but also by some of our own people who would have us rise up in rebellion. My parents, though, looked differently upon our subjugation and your Roman rule. They pointed out again and again that our two peoples' contrast both in national essence and in social power has a single source—our differing *worship*."

"Worship? How so?"

"My father said that the spiritual focus of a people ultimately determines everything about that people. He pointed out examples at every opportunity. You Romans are ever striving, reaching out in all directions to gain, to conquer, to achieve. Roman religion gives rise to all those by the character of its many gods and by what those gods demand of their followers."

Hodesh nodded. "It's true that most of our gods are themselves striving and angry. So of course it's necessary to please and placate them."

"But isn't it wearisome to be always struggling—whether in political conquest or in personal worship?"

Hodesh's answer came slowly, thoughtfully. "Wearying. Though I never thought of it that way, you may have a point. So then the greater . . . quietness . . . of your people, which has become a thing to keep me here in Judea, has its source in your religion?"

"Yes. We *rest* in the belief that there is but one God, Jehovah. He is a God of love, and He calls us in love simply to obey Him. That point marks cause for our differing social positions with you Romans as rulers and we Jews as your subjects. My people have failed to obey Jehovah, and we are suffering the hard consequences our prophets foretold."

# A SPARROW ALONE

ALICIA PETERSEN

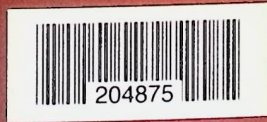
**M**ALA WALKED TO THE FAR EDGE OF BETHPHAGE—THE END OF THE VILLAGE THAT LAY FARTHEST FROM JERUSALEM. AS SHE HAD DONE A NUMBER OF TIMES THROUGH THE YEARS, SHE LEFT THE BASKET AND ITS CONTENTS FOR THE NAMELESS ONE. HE WAS BETHPHAGE'S ONLY BEGGAR: A DARK, LARGE BUT PHYSICALLY TWISTED MAN. HE DARTED FROM INSIDE, CONVULSIVELY SEIZED UPON THE BASKET, AND DRAGGED IT INTO HIS LOW HOVEL.

*Two Jewish orphans living in a small village attempt to earn their livelihood in Roman-occupied Jerusalem. Mala sews for the wives of wealthy Roman aristocrats and watches in dismay as her brother, Abdon, becomes deeply entrenched in a life of crime. Then, suddenly, the whole village is rocked by the transformation of one of its residents—*

*and the name that seems to be on everyone's lips.*

  
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