



**W**hen I was five years old, our ewe gave birth to a lamb. He was white and had eyes as black as olives. Shona and I named him Timba. Two weeks later my eldest brother Joshua held him down, and Papa slit his throat.

The place was Galilee, the fertile northern province of the land of Israel, and spring was in the air. It blew in from the deserts to the east to dry the mud beneath our sandals, and gave life to the sudden profusion of wildflowers blanketing the rolling hills. In the valleys, geometric plains stretched as far as the eye could see. Soon the grain harvest would begin and Israelites of all but the highest stations would swarm—babes strapped to their backs, sickles held high—across the fields. They would reap and gather the browning sheaves of barley, oats and wheat





until the last shard of sunlight fled from the sky, then fall to their knees to offer praise to God.

In the hilltop village of Nazareth, grapes ripened on the vine and in the groves nearby, visible from the roof of our house, figs, apricots and almonds swelled like expectant women on the boughs of ancient trees. In the months that followed, we highlands people would join the ingathering, filling woven baskets with fruit, nuts and olives before the rains of winter fell again.

It was a time of promise: of warmth and plenty after the hungry wet. A time of temporary truce as the Galilean resistance fighters, dug into a hill shaped like a camel's hump in the nearby town of Gamla, crawled from their caves. Tired, hungry, in need of a woman's love as well as a bath, the rebels slouched towards their homes in the upper and lower reaches of Galilee. They would linger there for weeks, joining the work of the harvest; later, they would travel with the other men of the village, their kin and clansmen, to Jerusalem as God commanded they do for the Passover Feast. The Roman legionnaires, relieved at the break in the Jewish rebellion, withdrew too—to Caesarea, their Mediterranean capital in our occupied land. There they would promenade on the boardwalk of the majestic harbour, recline in the healing waters of the bathhouses and cheer on the champions who raced, wrestled or fought to the death in the newly built Forum.

It was a time of prayer and purification, as my mama sanctified her soul by baking tiny loaves of bread and lighting candles to cleanse the hearth of leavening for the coming Passover. A time when Papa hurried to complete orders at the woodshop before the pilgrimage to Jerusalem intervened. It was a time when my eldest brother Joshua still took me on his knee and





told stories of Jewish trials and triumph. Tales of the strongman Samson, who lost his strength when his woman betrayed him by cutting his hair; of the prophet Daniel whose faith in God saved him from the lion's den. And the wondrous tale of my papa's ancestor King David, the shepherd boy who killed the giant Goliath with a single stone from his slingshot. I liked that one the best.

It was a time, for a child, when the texture of life in the small farming village of Nazareth was still filled with the wonder of surprise: the piquancy of food after fasting, the throb of the new-moon drum in my breast, the dance of the oil lamp's light against our whitewashed walls as we lay down to sleep on Sabbath eve.

It was a time, so many years ago now, when I learned in no uncertain terms what it meant to be a girl.



'Quick, Shona, hurry! The mother ewe! It is time!' I shook my elder sister awake. It was late at night. Moonlight streamed through the uncovered window of our mud-brick house, its back end snuggled into the hillside like a sleeping cat, its tall face overlooking the square. Dutifully, my sister made haste to rise, then paused.

'Rachael,' she began, 'you mustn't. You know what Mama said.'

I knew. My eyes darted to my mother but she, Papa and all five of my brothers were asleep on their mats. Buried beneath several threadbare blankets, my mother's short, slight figure looked like a corpse. I returned my gaze to my sister and



shrugged, eyes wide with innocence. Helpfully, from below in the stables, the ewe bawled again, her pitch making clear that the matter was urgent.

‘Come on,’ I ordered my sister. She stood and, with a resigned sigh, submitted her hand to my outstretched one.

With one last backward glance at my mother, I began picking my way through the sleeping bodies, leading my sister down the run of stone steps that led to the lower floor of our house. There, in the low-roofed, straw-scattered space we called the *oorvah*, the animals were stabled. Beside the ewe were a cow, two goats and a handful of chickens. Alarmed at the ewe’s bleating, the cockerel clucked and strutted while the hens flapped about the room. The cud-chewing creatures turned to us, doe-eyed and panting. As I strode across the floor, towing Shona behind me, they shifted and murmured, then parted like the sea to let us pass.

The sheep’s liquid eyes were dark and wild. Her grey sides heaved. When she saw us, she tried to rise despite her bulk and desperate condition, but the tethers held her fast.

‘Oh!’ Shona was dismayed by the ewe’s suffering. She sank to the labouring one’s side, smoothing her white nightdress beneath her knee, and placed her ear against the ewe’s belly, listening. Then she beckoned me towards her and pulled me on to her lap.

We waited. The cow lowed and shifted, dancing candlelight across the room. The cockerel, rebuffed by each of the hens, withdrew sulking to his perch. The sheep bucked and thrashed, her ears twitching as my sister whispered words of comfort. But no matter how many times Shona looked, the folds between the ewe’s legs remained sealed.

I wriggled with impatience. Laying a hand on my sister's arm I spoke solemnly. 'We must hasten her trial before she loses heart.'

Despite her unease, my sister smiled. My words, their cadence, were unmistakably my mother's; but when she replied it was with Mama's words too. 'It is not in our power to save her, Rachael. If she is deserving, God will deliver her. If she is not, He will cast her aside.' She stroked the sheep's side and gave a sigh at the weight of her helplessness. 'There is nothing to do but wait and pray.'

*Wait. Pray.* Even on their own, these words vexed my spirit. Taken together, they made me feel like I'd been chewing sand. I stood and stamped my five-year-old foot on the stable floor. 'I hate waiting! I hate praying!' I declared. 'Why can we not *do* something?'

My beautiful sister Shona. Heart like a split melon, back ready to bend, robes wafting the cinnamon-scent of her skin. Though six years my senior she was a follower by nature, not a leader. She had never sought to thwart me, but admired my wit and spirit. Her willing submission throughout my short life had encouraged me to trust my instincts; to step forward and assume command.

Now she turned her gaze to me. Her eyes were velvet brown and wide, fringed by lashes thick as fur. 'What would you have us do, Rachael?'

And, somehow, I knew precisely what to do to save the lamb's life.

'Sit there Shona, by the ewe's head,' I commanded, and assumed my own place at the sheep's hindquarters. 'Now hold her head still, as still as you can.'

I pushed up the sleeves of my nightdress and took a deep breath. Then I plunged my hand deep into the sheep's birth canal. Paying no heed to the blood and spongy membranes, I took a few moments to explore the terrain. I could feel bone and sinew, flank and cartilage but, it seemed to me, all in the wrong places. At the end of the passage, where there ought to have been a head, two cloven hoofs and a damp fetlock were wedged instead. The lamb was stuck.

Crying out to Shona to comfort the ewe—Talk to her! Sing!—I sought to ease the newborn's way. Scrabbling for purchase on the straw, I wrestled with the tiny body, rolling shoulder and arm this way and that to obtain leverage. I pushed and slid and tugged and eased while the ewe bucked and mewled, and Shona, hanging on to the poor creature's neck, did her best to hold her until at last the errant limbs gave way. Working quickly, I pushed them into position and reached for the lamb's head, tugging it into place. I gripped the tiny muzzle, braced myself and dragged it towards the light.

The ewe's shriek would have been heard in Jerusalem. But with it came a torrent of blood and water and, finally, the pleasing bump and weight of a sodden lamb, still tethered to a pulsing membrane.

Shona was jubilant and threw her arms to the heavens. But this was no time for praise. The newborn had yet to draw breath; it was still and sallow. Lifeless.

Without thinking I bent to the lamb and sucked the muck from its nose, spitting it to the ground like a curse. I laid my head on its flank to listen. Grabbing a tiny leaf-shaped ear in my fist, I shouted into it, then cupped my lips around the muzzle and offered several of my breaths. When this failed to draw a

response, I placed both hands on the body and rocked it, gently at first and then harder. Nothing. I looked at Shona helplessly, at a loss about what to do next. My usual wellspring of ideas and plans was exhausted. My sister gripped my hand and squeezed it and we both turned back to the lamb, hearts pounding, breath trapped in our throats. We waited.

Finally, the lamb's tail twitched. It sneezed—once, twice—then began flipping like a fish to escape its caul.

My sister and I rejoiced. 'You did it, Rachael!' Shona exalted, throwing her arms around me. She kissed each of my cheeks over and over while repeating her words of praise. 'You did it! You did it! You did it!'

But the ewe could not be saved. Her body leaked blood in waves that would not stop, soaking the straw and the hem of our nightdresses. Horrified, I looked at Shona, then myself. We were covered in it.

'Oh no!' Shona cried, throwing herself on the animal's neck. 'Don't die! Don't die!'

But she did die. Touching her tongue to Shona's nose, she twitched her tail and was gone. Shona threw herself into my arms and wept. The lamb, heedless of the sacrifice that had blessed it with life, shook free of its caul with a satisfied bleat. It flicked its ears and began the work of standing.

He was perfect. Frankincense-white, unblemished, male: everything the Law said a Passover lamb must be. Mama would be so pleased. He bawled and teetered towards me, exploring the blood and brine on my outstretched fingers, his suckling causing something wonderful, terrible, to bloom in my breast.

'We shall call him Timba,' I proclaimed and Shona, her face streaked with blood and tears, nodded and said, 'Yes.'