

ANAMATUS

A Christian Science Fiction Novel

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PROLOGUE: LOST

WHEN ADAM SAW the stacked stones, he knew he shouldn't have taken a shortcut through the deep woods. He was running late as it was, a day later than he told Ahuva he would be home, and cutting through the woods seemed a wise thing to do at the time. Not so wise now, he told himself.

Four stones balanced on top of each other marked the territory of the Lawless Ones, savages with forbidden technology and no empathy for anyone, not even their brethren. They lived in large groups and staked out territory in the deep woods for their use, but they could hardly be called civilized. The stacked stones served as a crude warning—be gone or be killed.

Adam pulled his pack off his shoulders and searched for something to protect himself with. Except for the small knife at his belt, he had nothing he could use as a weapon. One of his hammers might do, though. Most of his metalworking tools were at the shop, but he always took a couple of smaller hammers when he traveled and he pulled one of these out of his pack. What he wouldn't give for an ax or a sword right now. For the moment, he'd have to rely on his intimidating size and his less-than-intimidating hammer to keep him safe. He lifted up a prayer that God would protect him as well.

The deep woods were quiet except for the occasional flutter of wings or scrabbling of claws on bark. The trees reached high into the gray sky, and an explosion of bright green ferns spread across the floor of the forest. Here and there, long tendrils of moss hung down like the brittle beards of old men. Long-dead leaves gave the air a smell of dust and decay.

After a quick check of the sun and its location, Adam shouldered his pack again and headed in the direction of home. He kept a wary eye on the deeper pockets of brush and ferns, and on the burnt out stumps. Any feature that could conceal a man was a concern.

Eventually, he came to a stream. The water tumbled and bubbled over round rocks and rushed down toward more settled areas. Around the slower bends, the stream left low, muddy banks, rich with minerals and clay. Rays of sunlight stabbed down through the trees and lit the area with dappled light.

That was where he found the girl.

She played in the mud, scooping handfuls of the sticky soil out of the bank and adding it to a shape growing near her feet. She had short, blond hair, delicate features and she wore a filthy gown that might have been pajamas at one time. She was barefoot. Adam was no expert on children, but he didn't think she was any older than five.

When he spotted her, he was twenty feet away and he froze. A long examination revealed no one else nearby. The animals had gone quiet, waiting with bated breath. The girl was completely alone. Was she a child of the Lawless? Or one of their wives? He shuddered and dismissed the thought.

Movement near the girl brought his attention back. A tall pile of leaves stirred and shifted. No, wait. It moved! The leaves formed some sort of rough shape, like an animal. He could make out thick legs on a cylindrical body, and a narrow head at the top. As he watched, the animal sat back and wagged its tail. Perhaps it was meant to be a dog.

Something in the leafy animal's posture triggered a thought—this creature seemed to be protecting the girl. It was a crude creation, formed by someone who had only a vague notion of what a dog looked like. Since there was no one else around, the girl had to be the creator. Somehow, she had fashioned this leaf dog and animated it. Perhaps that was her talent—and an extraordinary one at that. She couldn't be one of the Lawless, then.

So far, the girl had been engrossed in her work and hadn't seen Adam. She probably couldn't hear him either, over the burbling of the water nearby. He closed the distance between them and knelt down by her. The leaf dog scooted closer but did nothing more than wag its tail and turn its rough head toward him.

"Hello," he tried. "What are you doing out here?"

She scrambled backward at the sound of his voice, her eyes fixed on him. He knew he was a big man, and it was hard to modulate his voice to sound gentle. He stayed low, trying not to scare her, and he rubbed his thick beard in thought. Maybe it wasn't his voice causing the problem.

"It's okay—I'm not a Lawless One."

Still she looked like she wanted to bolt, but there was no easy way past him except across the stream. He wasn't trying to threaten her, but he was glad she wasn't able to run off. He tucked the small hammer in his belt and held out his hands.

"I'm a friend." Then he had a thought. "Are you hungry?"

At that, the girl unwound just a little and nodded.

"How long have you been out in the woods? What are you doing out here?"

She finally spoke, in a wavering high-pitched voice. Gesturing to the lump of mud, she said, "I can't make the mud men come alive, only the leaf dogs. I've tried all morning."

Adam supposed that answered one of his questions. "But where do you live? Where are your parents?"

“I ran away.” She deflated even more. “I ran away. And now I’m hungry.”

“What was the last thing you ate?”

“I found some berries and some nuts.”

Adam laughed, which came out as a booming sound. The woods fell silent and the girl glanced around, fearful once more.

“Well I think you’d best come home with me. Ahuva will feed you much more than nuts and berries.”

But the girl shook her head, still searching the forest with her eyes.

“What is it?”

“There’s something out there. Something watching me. A Watcher in the Woods.”

“What is it? Did you see an animal?” He hadn’t seen any predators during his travels through the woods, but this deep in, anything was possible.

Once again, she shook her head. “It has red eyes. It’s after me.”

“You’ll be safe with me.” Adam extended a meaty hand to her. “Will you come?”

She glanced at his hand, and then around the woods, and finally at her leaf dog. “Can he come too?”

Adam considered the beast. It was looking thin and wasted, in need of a lot more leaves to make it substantial. And it didn’t warn her of his approach, nor did it look like it could defend her if the occasion called for it. He had to admit it was a clever trick, a unique talent to animate the leaves, but it was of little use to him or her.

“You won’t need him. You’ll be safe with me.”

She nodded and touched the animal on its nose. “Bye, doggie.” The leaf pile collapsed and scattered across the ground, mixing with the other decaying things on the forest floor. The girl reached up and took Adam’s hand, and the

small shiver at her touch could have been either excitement or fear—he couldn't decide which.

ADAM KNEW HIS wife was angry the moment he stepped into the cottage they called home. He had made it back in time for dinner, and he smelled some sort of wholesome broth cooking on the stove. Right time, but wrong day. Plus he had more surprises in store for her, and he wasn't sure how she'd react.

Ahuva, his beloved, stood with crossed arms in the kitchen. She wasn't tall, or big, like him, but she wasn't dainty or fragile either. Her arms were well muscled from countless hours kneading bread, digging in the garden, chopping both vegetables for the stews and wood for the stove, and breaking the necks of chickens for their Sunday feast. Adam was thankful that she was not inclined toward violence. When she saw him, she straightened out her skirt and smoothed down the kerchief holding back her hair.

"It's about time you showed up. I might have gotten worried and sent out a search party."

Adam kept his hands clasped in front of him. "I'm sorry, my love. The business took longer than I thought, and I tried to take a shortcut through the deep woods. I very nearly ran into some Lawless."

Ahuva clutched her midsection as if her stomach hurt. "You didn't."

"Just skirted their territory. But I found something else you might find interesting." Adam reached around behind him and pulled the girl into view. He put her in front of him like a shield. The girl must have smiled or done something, because Ahuva's expression softened and she immediately set to work dishing out a bowl of soup and a slice of bread with butter. Adam urged the girl toward the table next to the kitchen.

“Go on, you. I told you we’d feed you better than fruits and nuts. My Ahuva here is one of the best cooks in the area. Better than the cooks in a Deakon’s manor.”

“Stop it.” Ahuva placed the bowl of soup and plate of bread in front of the famished girl. “Flattery won’t get you out of trouble with me.”

“I was only explaining to the girl—”

“The girl. Does she have a name?”

Adam had the decency to blush. “I—I didn’t ask.”

Ahuva leaned down to the child, put her hand on her shoulder, and asked what she was called.

“Mom always called me Little Karina.”

“There. See?” Adam clapped his hands together. “Her name is Karina.”

After a sharp glance in his direction, Ahuva stalked back into the kitchen, and slammed prep bowls and utensils into the sink to wash. Adam stood there, feeling useless and not knowing how to stem the tide of emotions he knew was coming. He wished things were simple, like the girl taking pleasure in real food after days of living in the woods. Hadn’t he done a good thing? Hadn’t he done the right thing? Lord strike him down if he had selfish motives for his actions.

“Ahuva. Love. I only meant—”

“Have you no thoughts in your head? You see a problem, you see a need, and when a solution comes oh-so-conveniently into your life, you grasp at it without any consideration whatsoever! And I’m sure you believe it’s another part of God’s plan for our lives! The sheer arrogance of it all—you might as well be God the way you go about things!”

The little girl’s spoon clattered to the tabletop. She stared at the two of them as if they had grown horns and fangs. Her hands flew to her ears and a panicked look crept into her eyes. Adam wondered what this girl had suffered to cause her to react like that. Ahuva didn’t waste any time, though, and immediately went to her.

“Don’t worry. Keep eating.” She picked up the spoon and eased it into her mouth. “There now. Don’t worry about a thing. Adam was just going out to split more firewood, so we’ll be set for the night.” She gave him a pointed look and Adam took the opportunity to flee the cottage. Better to leave the girl in Ahuva’s hands for now anyway. It wouldn’t take much for her to warm up to the child.

Whether it was an excuse to get rid of him, or an actual plea to cut firewood, Adam thought it best he set himself to the task. He pulled the ax from the tool shed and tossed a stack of wood over to the splitting block. He also needed a lantern, as the sun was dipping below the horizon, and he had no idea how long he would be banished for. With a deep sigh, he relaxed into the work, letting the wariness from his trek through the forest fall away.

He was glad to have an outlet for his own pent-up emotions, and glad he had shed his tendency for angry outbursts long ago. Instead, his energy could be directed toward something useful. It seemed much of his life was spent gathering and splitting wood, not only for the fireplace and the kitchen stove, but also for the forge in his workshop. His craft took a lot of well-cured wood to get the job done.

When he’d been at it for an hour and the sky had turned a deep, deep blue, Ahuva came out of the cottage and stood at a distance. He finished with a few last pieces, stacked them on the tender, and returned the ax to the shed. Slow in approaching where she stood, Adam tried to puzzle out her mood from a distance. The light from the lantern didn’t give him enough detail to tell.

He cleared his throat. “How’s the girl?”

“She is sleeping. I put her on the couch for now, tucked in with plenty of blankets.”

“And what do you think?”

“What do I think?” She shook her fists at him. “What do I think? I won’t even start with you being late, and what

it feels like when you have no idea if your husband is alive and well, or is lying in a ditch somewhere with his throat cut by Lawless. Or maybe has been waylaid by Adjudicators for some minor offense. I won't tell you what it's like to contemplate a future without a husband, like poor Widow Thoms. At least she has her children for company, and for a reason to live. But what do I have? What's my consolation?"

Adam couldn't stand it anymore. He moved toward her, his hands spread. "I'm still here. I'm safe. You're fine."

"No! Keep back." She lifted a finger to fix him in place. "Tell me what I have! Where are my children? Where are the blessings of our marriage? Be fruitful and multiply, the Lord says. But where is my quiver full of sons and daughters? God has cursed me—cursed us—as a childless couple!"

"There is still hope. You are not old." Adam continued advancing, even as Ahuva backed away, clutching her middle as if something were eating away at her insides. "Trust in the Lord."

"Don't you speak to me like that! Even you don't trust God and you prove it by bringing home that child, that stray—"

"Her name's Karina." She could not have forgotten the girl's name already.

"You brought her home because you gave up hope! You think a stray can substitute for our own children? How dare you! She already has parents, didn't you hear? Did you miss that? How can you take away someone else's joy, someone else's flesh and blood, to satisfy your own need for a child? It's cruel! Heartless! For shame!"

"She told me she ran away—"

"Even worse! Her parents are surely looking for her now! If I were her mother, I wouldn't rest until I found her. I would die before I gave her up."

"I don't think she ran away." Adam stopped, letting his hands drop to his side. "No, I think something else happened

that she won't talk about, something tragic. I can read it in her eyes—a deep dark story is written there.”

“Don't be ridiculous! You have no idea what happened to her or her parents. She's simply a stray, and whether she wandered off or ran away, someone will be looking for her.”

“All right, all right. I can ask around the area. See if any of the neighbors know if someone is missing a child. I can make a trip to Bryce Meadows and do the same. Word will get around, and if her family is looking for her, they will turn up. Will that make you happy?”

Still clutching her middle, Ahuva shook her head. “What if we do keep her? What if we raise her only to discover in six months—or six years even—that her parents are alive and still looking for her? How could we let her go then? I could not do it. I won't take her in, care for her or—” She choked up for a moment. “—or love her, only to give her up when her real parents show up. I just couldn't.”

“Should we turn her away then? Search for someone else to take her in?”

“No, of course not. But, we can't... it's not fair to her or to us... we can't get too attached.”

Adam eased up to his wife and put his thick arms around her. “I'm sorry. You're right, my love. Until we know more about the girl, we'll simply feed her and let her sleep here. Keep our distance. No attachments, no worries.”

The deep cool night air swirled around them, and Adam raised his eyes to the heavens. Stars by the multitude shone down upon them, twinkling eternally, steady in their courses. Adam prayed he could be steady for Ahuva, and that he could give her what she desperately wanted. But this child... how could he untangle his feelings toward her? Ever since the moment he saw her in the woods, her little life began intertwining with his. But for his wife's sake, he would let her go.

“Yes, love,” he repeated. “To us, this girl is just a stray. Nothing more.”

His wife spoke into his chest, the words barely escaping. But he still heard.

“No. Her name is Karina.” And then she burst into tears.



ABANDONMENT

Twenty-five years after the initial landing of the colonists on Bier-sheva, the supply ship from Earth inexplicably dropped all communication and left orbit. With their limited technology planet-side, the colonists could only speculate as to where the supply ship, named the Michael, had gone and why. This event became known as The Abandonment, and marked the beginning of a dark time for the colonists.

MY ADOPTIVE PARENTS were in the kitchen discussing names. I had just come into the cottage from a walk, the two bantams I'd made out of fresh grass following closely behind and struggling to hold themselves together in the fickle spring breeze. With the windows rattling, Adam and Ahuva hadn't heard the front door open and close, hadn't heard me come in. I wonder if our futures would have been different, had they the time to break the news to me gently. As it was, I stood near the door, shook bits of leaves and chunks of pollen from my long hair, and paused when Ahuva said:

"I feel like the Biblical Sarah after waiting so long." The clatter of dishes punctuated her statement. She must have been putting together dinner and cleaning up after herself, as was her custom. I could smell something savory in the air,

reminding me of potpie or game hen.

A stool scraped along the floor. Adam spoke in his deep, rumbling voice. “You want to name it Isaac?”

“That might be appropriate, but no.” Ahuva sounded practically giddy. In all the years I had lived with them, as their only daughter, I had never heard her so pleased about something as she was then. “What about Gilbert? Or Samuel?”

Adam snorted. “Not Gilbert. Karina might make fun.” Both fell quiet. I slipped off my soft boots and thought how ridiculous it was to waste time picking a name for their new cow. Adam had returned from Bryce Meadows two days before with a milking cow. After seeing how much work he put into feeding and caring for the animal, not to mention having to milk it twice a day, I didn’t think it was worth the effort. But the milk was good, and I’m sure Ahuva couldn’t wait to incorporate fresh cream and butter into her cooking.

Adam finally offered up another name. “How about Elijah?”

Unable to stay quiet any longer, I rounded the corner into the kitchen and plopped down onto the stool next to Adam. The two grass bantams pecked at imaginary bugs on the floor at my feet. “Why are you worrying about a name for the cow?” I saw a bowl of carrots and snatched one. Ahuva must have made potpie after all. “Why not just call it Bessie like everyone else does?”

My questions brought silence to the room. After a moment, Adam cleared his throat and shifted toward me on his own stool, not an easy task for someone his size. He smoothed down his mustache and chops with both hands, and ended with rubbing his bare chin.

“Karina . . .” he began.

“It’s not a name for a cow,” Ahuva said. “It’s for a baby.”

I still hadn’t caught on. “A baby? Whose baby?” Fourteen years old that year, and I practically flaunted my foolish and ignorant nature.

Adam looked to his wife, she dropped her gaze and cradled her belly with her arms, and all the pieces fell into place.

I bolted off the stool, upsetting both bantams, and stood in the middle of the room, not sure what to do. The walls of the cottage were closing in on me and the air had become difficult to breathe. There was only one door, only one way out, and all I could think of was escaping this trap. I heard pounding, somewhere in the distance, but perhaps just in my head. At my feet, the bantams shivered and tried to hold together, but as I backed away, they dissolved into nothing but grass. I turned and dashed for the exit, knocking over one of Adam's sculptures. It clanged on the floor at the same time I grabbed the latch and yanked open the door.

"Karina!" Ahuva called after me.

"Let her go," Adam said, and his dismissal stung as much as the news about the baby. After nine years, I thought he understood me and accepted me—flawed as I was—but at that time it seemed he was finally done with me. They both were. They would soon have a child of their own to raise.

I paused only to reach down and grab my boots once more, and then ran barefoot out into the yard. The cottage stood in the center of a collection of smaller buildings and fenced areas—Adam's shop, the potting shed and garden, the tool shed, the well and windmill, the chicken coop and yard, and the shelter and corral for the cow. Spring grass sprouted in the open areas and clumped like fungus near the base of the buildings and fence posts. It all felt stifling. I ran across the carpet of grass until I reached the edge of our holding. Pulling my boots on, I wondered if Adam would change his mind and come out to find me, tell me they were joking with me, that the baby was not real. But I knew this was no prank, and once I was shod, I ran out the gate and down the dirt road toward the river.

Our nearest neighbor was the Widow Thoms and her

umpteen children, who lived a mile down the river from the cottage. I had been there countless times, but I was never sure if she had twelve or thirteen children. They never seemed to congregate in the same room at any one time for a proper count. It didn't help that so many of them were twins or triplets, who rarely answered to their own names.

As I neared the Thoms home, the dogs began to bark warnings. The dogs I could count, as there were only four of them. They were all friendly sorts, once they knew you and were satisfied that you weren't after the sheep. The first Mr. Thoms had been a sheep farmer, and his oldest sons had taken on that burden when he died. The Widow didn't talk at all about how the first Mr. Thoms had died, only saying that it was a stupid accident. "Up and went, and got himself killed, he did." That was before I had come to live with Adam and Ahuva. The second Mr. Thoms, a dour man who had his own surname even though no one used it, had drowned in the river. The younger set of children were his.

Rambling and patched, the Thoms house sat low on the top of a small rise like a pumpkin that had rotted and deflated. Outside, a few of the younger Thoms played in the riot of wildflowers to one side of the house. They spotted me and charged over to say hello.

"Karina! Karina!" one little girl of six or so tugged on my skirt.

"Hello Marla," I guessed.

"I'm not Marla, I'm Maggie!"

Struck out again. I didn't bother with greeting the two boys with Maggie. I wouldn't have gotten their names right, and they would have lied about them anyway. They approached, then grabbed my hands to pull me the rest of the way to the house. With my entourage of three Thoms and one of the dogs (still barking), I hardly needed to knock to be admitted into the residence.

Inside was cozy, if a bit dim. I stayed near the door, still

feeling hemmed in and wanting to escape back outdoors. But I needed to see Trevor.

Maggie played the part of my herald. “Mam! Mam! Someone’s here!” She went off in search of the Widow.

Meanwhile, the two boys stood by and rubbed their noses. “Did you bring anything to eat?” the one asked. His name might have been Bill, but I couldn’t be sure. Bill was always hungry.

“No, not today.”

The Widow Thoms bustled into the room, primping herself until she saw who it was. I can’t imagine who she expected it to be—none of the holdings out here were very near each other, and visitors from Bryce Meadows, or anywhere else for that matter, were rare. But the Widow was dressed in layers of silk and even wore a wide-brimmed hat that bobbed as she walked. Clearly she wasn’t dressing up for a visit from me.

“Karina!” she nearly shouted. She snatched the girl at her side and shook her by the arm. “Maggie, for heaven’s sake, why didn’t you tell me it was just Karina Wright.”

“You said you were waiting for a ‘special visitor.’”

“Good heavens, not her.”

I was feeling less wanted by the minute. First my adoptive parents, and now the Widow Thoms. Who else would be rejecting me today? “I just wanted to say hello to Trevor,” I said.

The Widow plucked the hat off her head and smoothed down her hair. “He’s not here.” She turned away from me, retreating to the back rooms. “He’s off fishing.”

Another young girl, who must have been Marla, entered the main room and tugged on the Widow’s sleeve. “Charity is coughing again. Bad this time.”

“All right, all right. I’ll come along in a moment.” With one last glance at me, the Widow said, “You’d better go, Karina. Tell your folks I said hello and I won’t be needing Adam’s

help with the new millstone after all.” She disappeared into the back.

The two boys stared at me, until I retreated out the door. So many of the Thoms children were odd, I wondered how Trevor turned out the way he did. I headed toward the river, scanning the banks for my friend and thinking of the first time we’d met.

I must have been six at the time, which made him eight or nine. Adam had let me outside to play and had promised Ahuva he’d keep a close eye on me. Of course, something in his workshop distracted him, maybe pumping the bellows to keep the fire going, or picking up stray tools and putting them where they belonged. Whatever it was, I remember there was a point where he was no longer with me. I wasn’t worried. He’d found me once, in the deep woods, and could find me again if I wandered off.

The river lay a hundred yards from the cottage, and it sparkled with the sun, like a bright silver ribbon flashing for joy. I finished my little creations—in those days, I made a lot of field mice out of leaves and grass—and bade them to follow me down to the water to get a drink. As I approached, I saw a boy downstream, lying flat on his stomach with his hands dangling in the water. I didn’t understand what he was doing, and marched over to him.

“Can’t you get a drink?” I said. I thought he was most of the way there, with his hands in the water, but didn’t know why he had stopped.

He glanced at me, a little blond girl in a skirt, as if I knew nothing about anything. “No, I’m catching fish.”

“That’s not how you catch fish. I’ve seen my Papa do it. He uses a pole.”

“You’ll see.” He flicked his eyes sideways, spotted my field mice. “What are those?”

“Mice, silly. I make them out of grass and bring them to life. They don’t last all day, though. Only if I’m thinking

about them.”

Again, the sideways look from him. “Magic?”

“No. My Mama calls it a talent. Something special from God. She says we all have one, and it makes us all different. Do you have a talent?”

“Come look.” He had his hands further in the water, getting his rolled-up sleeves wet. As I crept closer, I saw the water between his hands tremble, and a second before he moved his hands, I saw a creature swimming in the water. Then Trevor snatched it and threw it at me. A fraction of a second later, something thumped against my chest, something cold and wet and thick, and then it fell to the ground. The thing stared at me with one unblinking eye and gasped in the open air.

“It’s a fish!” Trevor said. I had figured that out already.

I picked up the wet and slimy fish by the tail and proceeded to beat Trevor with the poor thing. He rolled and raised his arms to protect himself, protesting all the while for me to stop. I would have none of it, and called him a stupid boy and a mean brat and every kind of ridiculous name I could think of at the age of six. Eventually, Adam came down to the water and broke up the slaughter. That was how I met Trevor.

There was no sign of him along the banks near the Thoms home. I backtracked toward our cottage, keeping an eye out for him, but I knew where I might find him. Half a mile downstream of the cottage, two tributaries joined together, and an old shack reigned over the junction. The fishing shack had submitted to the inevitable decay of all old buildings, and the only decent parts left were three stone half-walls. Several thick beams rose from the stones, but they were mostly rotten to the core. A tall oak tree sprouted from inside the shack and provided shade in place of the roof.

We had often speculated about how old the shack must be, as the oak seemed at least a hundred years old and the shack had to have been abandoned when the tree began its

life. Nothing on Biersheva was older than two hundred years, at least no man-made structure. The first colonists had arrived 197 years ago and had lived in very different structures at that time.

I crossed the footbridge over the stream and headed toward the shack. I found Trevor at the edge, leaning back with his feet in the water. Spreading out my skirt, I tucked my legs under me and sat nearby. A nagging agitation tickled my thoughts. Something was not right. Ah yes—I was missing any sort of companion, didn't have my little creatures. I found some dandelions nearby and a bird feather, and used bits of both to assemble some bees.

"What are you doing out here?" I said. "You didn't even bring your fishing pail."

"Nothing." Trevor swirled his foot in the water. I didn't have to look to know there were at least three or four fish swimming there, mesmerized by his toes. At least someone found him fascinating. "Just thinking."

"You must be the most boring person on Biersheva, do you know that?" I said. "If you searched the whole planet and talked with all the people and asked what they were doing, you wouldn't find anyone more boring. You ought to get a prize for being the World's Most Boring Person." I finished one of the bees, and breathed on it, willing it to life. Even though I'd tried for years, I had only just learned how to make flying creatures. It took more willpower than aerodynamics to keep them in the air.

"Sorry."

"That's all you can say? Sorry? We should add World's Most Tongue-tied Person to your list of accomplishments. Come on, you need to grow a spine, Trevor."

"What's bugging you?"

"You. Your family." I pulled more dandelion fluff from the nearby stems. "My family." I smashed the fluff into a ball. "Ahuva is pregnant."

“So?”

“So! Is that all you have to say? You know what this means, don’t you? They’ll get rid of me now. They kept me for nine years because they had no children of their own. Ahuva couldn’t have kids, and that was the whole reason they agreed to keep me. Now with their own baby, their real child, what will they do with me? For all I know, this is only the first in a whole line of babies. I know Ahuva always wanted a large family, just like the one she grew up with.” I ran out of steam and focused on the second bee, who was turning out a bit on the chubby side, more like a bumblebee.

“You should be happy for them.”

“Happy? Happy that Ahuva won’t have any time for me, and will probably stop trying to school me and show me how to cook and—”

“I thought you hated that stuff anyway.”

“Well. Maybe she’d make me do chores all the time. I’d be their live-in slave. Sweeping up, cooking the meals, feeding the chickens, laundering the clothes, all of it. After all, I’m just the adopted orphan foundling girl—who cares how they treat me?”

Trevor flicked a pebble into the water. “Better than being ignored.” He would know. Middle children in a normal family were typically ignored. As the middle child in a family the size of his, he was lucky his parents had bothered to name him.

“What would you do, then, if you were in their position?” I said. “If you were Adam or Ahuva and had to make these kinds of choices, how would you decide?”

“Don’t know. I don’t think there’s much to decide. And I’m not sure I’d ever be there.”

“What do you mean by that? Not sure you’d ever have an adopted daughter, or are you not sure you’d have children at all?”

He shrugged. Trevor really had a way with words.

“You’re really not sure of anything, are you? You need to stretch your imagination a little more. Do you even think you might get married some day?” I focused on the bee in my hands, and sent him along with another puff of air. I immediately began working on another.

“I might.” He picked up and flung another pebble into the water. The fish swam off, spooked by the disturbance. “Some-day. When the right person comes along.”

“What if you’ve already met that girl? What if you knew that girl from when you were both young? What if love crept up gradually, where you never even realized you were madly in love until that moment when you can’t live without her? Do you think that could happen to you?” I was rambling and I knew it. Toying with him, not caring what the consequences.

But he didn’t take the bait. “I don’t think so.”

I stuck my lip out, much farther than necessary. “But I thought you liked me,” I whined. My bees hovered around him and took turns bumping into his arms and chest.

“Karina, stop that.” He swatted at the bees and missed. “You’re too young. And you and I are like fire and water. You know we don’t go well together.”

“You’re right about one thing. You’re the water, and you’re a real drip.” I blamed the bad news of the day for my treatment of Trevor. Normally we got along fine. There was one awkward time about a year ago, when he really opened up and spoke passionately about fish and the myriad ways to entice fish into his hands. Then he turned and kissed me. I told him I didn’t like fish that much, and that was the end of that. Several weeks of embarrassment followed, during which he stayed away, but then we were friends again.

I decided to try a little fishing of my own and asked him: “But there must be someone who’s caught your eye.”

Something in the water suddenly fascinated him, and I knew I had set the hook. Was that a blush on his cheek? Who

was it who had captivated him so? An ache gnawed at my gut. Had I also been replaced as Trevor's friend? I launched another bee and sent them all to buzzing circles around his head. "Who is it, then? Tell me who has mesmerized you so."

Trevor leaned back and swiped the bees from his face. If only my bantams had survived, I could have assaulted him with both the birds and the bees.

"Come on, Karina! Enough!"

The bees flew off, out over the water, and formed a loose group there. The squadron awaited my pleasure, ready to deploy once again if Trevor refused to answer. My threat clearly displayed, I waited. A brief gust of wind brought the brackish scent of still water, as well as honeysuckle, from somewhere nearby. It made my nose itch.

"Well?" My bees bobbed above the water, shivering in readiness.

"Okay . . . uh. Do you know the family that owns the hunting lodge?"

I knew the lodge. It was a log structure one mile upstream, perched atop a hill and hovering over the rest of the houses below, like a noble's manor lordling over its plebeian neighbors. Behind it was a large expanse of deep woods, a dark backdrop for the activities of the lodge. As for the family, they rarely visited. If they did, it was only to bring guests to hunt in the woods and grasslands around us.

With a shrug, I told Trevor: "I don't remember their names, but I've seen them around. They own a large house in Winding Wend too, don't they? How they can afford both is beyond me." I paused. "What about them?"

"They have a daughter, and . . . uh. Well she's a girl."

"Daughters usually are."

"Her name is Angeline."

"So? A rich family owns the lodge and has a daughter. This is the girl you're stuck on?"

He swirled his toes in the water again. Finally, he said, “She’s heavenly.”

I burst out laughing. I couldn’t help it. Trevor and I had known each other for eight years, and I had seen almost all of his moods. Granted, these expressions, while surely stimulated by genuine emotions, were drawn from a limited palette of responses. But I had never seen him so . . . moony.

“What?” he sputtered. “What’s so funny?”

“You,” I said. “And her. ‘She’s heavenly!’ What would she want from you? Fish? She’s sure to have seen plenty of hunters come through, proving themselves with bow or sword, and what could you offer her?”

He blushed almost crimson and pulled his feet from the water. “It wasn’t like that. We just talked. She told me they’d be back and staying for the summer. She . . . she made it sound like I should come and visit.” He studied the water. “I thought I could bring her flowers or something.”

“Does she even like flowers? Or is she only after your fish?” I laughed again, but cut short my mirth when a trout jumped out of the water and ate one of my bees. “Hey!”

Trevor kept his head down. “I don’t know. Maybe I should just watch her first, see what she likes or doesn’t like. Make sure she doesn’t have someone else.”

“What kind of stupid romance is that? What kind of girl wants to be spied on, followed around, and drooled over?” I stood up and pulled up some nearby cattails, tucking them into a bunch. “No, here’s what you do. Pick a day, go out and gather flowers, and go right up to the lodge. You can knock on the door and profess your love to her, give her the flowers and see what develops. What’s the worst that could happen? She might not remember you. Or she might tell you to go away, or maybe laugh at you. Or—” I tossed the cattails to him. “Okay, forget the worst stuff. Think about the best that could happen, and think about what you would miss if you don’t even try.”

A part of me wondered why I was helping Trevor pursue this girl. Perhaps I knew it was doomed, and perhaps I wanted to see the sparks and witness the catastrophe. Or perhaps I really did want Trevor to stretch himself and grow a little. I might have been a little jealous, but I knew we weren't right for each other and there had to be someone out there for him. Mostly, I felt like I was creating something new, something more alive and yet more fragile than my grass bantams and dandelion bees, and I was sending this new creation out into the world. I couldn't wait to see what it would do.

"I can't do that." He stood, skittish as a deer, the cattails spilling across the ground. "I just can't do that."

"I didn't think you were so wishy-washy. Can we add World's Biggest Coward to your list of accomplishments?"

"Stop that. Stop saying that."

Out of the corner of my eye, I spied another fish jump out of the water and swallow my bees.

"Hey!" I shoved his arm and pointed out to the water. "Did you do that? Did you make the fish eat my bees?"

"No, but it serves you right. You shouldn't make fun. You could hurt someone's feelings." He shouldered past me and headed toward the footbridge.

"What, like *your* feelings?" I grabbed his arm and pulled him around. "Do you have feelings, somewhere in there? Or are you all cold and slimy inside, like the animals you love so much?" I wanted to yank him down to the water and shove him in.

"Karina!" Adam lumbered over to where we stood.

I let go of Trevor's arm.

The big man huffed at us, his lungs working like the bellows in his shop. "What foolishness are you two about?"

After a long look at both of us, the truth of the matter must have come to him. He clapped Trevor on the back, nearly knocking him to the ground. "Run along now. I've got her."

Once Trevor had dashed off, Adam motioned toward

home. I don't know if I was ready to return, to face Ahuva and her good news, but I had little choice. I would endure it, just as I would endure the long uncomfortable walk home with Adam. With an exasperated sigh, I trudged over to the footbridge and crossed it.

Adam followed, creaking the wood on the bridge with his weight. I never met anyone so large and yet so graceful. Delicate. Some of the things he created in his workshop, you would think were made by a pasty-faced jeweler, instead of this ruddy man with hands the size of badgers. With such size also came confidence, and I had never seen him scared of anything. Yet it took him a long time to broach the conflict between us, and he put his arm around me first, as if afraid I might run again.

“About the baby...” he began.

“I know what it means.”

“No, you don't, Karina.” He blew out air, the bellows of his lungs heaving again. “This changes everything. After all these years, God has blessed us with a child. It's something Ahuva and I prayed a long time for. What else will He bring about in our lifetimes? Who is this child that comes late in our season? Will he be something special? Something touched by God himself, like Samuel? Even if he's only meant as a blessing to us, things will be different.”

“Yes, it changes everything,” I droned. It was just as I feared. When the baby came, I would be ousted. I was the cuckoo, stealing the comfort and nourishment that belonged to the rightful children. Now I would be the one kicked out of the nest.

Adam continued, “We'll have a while to prepare, but it will be different than when we got you. You were already five and pretty self-sufficient. Not like an infant. We'll have to learn how to care for a baby and what he needs.” He squeezed my shoulder. “You can help with all that, if you'd like. We can learn how to change diapers together!”

How could such a man be excited at the prospect of changing a baby's diaper? I had some experience with the matter, having been coerced into helping at the Thoms home years before, but never found it to be a joy.

"Ahuva is beside herself," Adam said. "She's already started knitting outfits and hats and socks. As if the baby will freeze to death the moment he's born! We think it will arrive at the end of summer, by the way, so no danger of that. I asked her how she knew what to knit, and she suspects it's a boy. A boy!" He was nearly beside himself. His hand still rested on my shoulder, but his thoughts were only on the life to come.

I tried one last time. "What about me? What will happen to me?"

Adam blinked, puzzling over my question. "You'll still be with us. You're a part of the family, but things will be different. That's what I'm trying to say. A baby like this changes things."

He spoke not a word of love, only of change. Around me, the wind picked up again, chilling me. Spring had thrown off the shackles of winter and was making everything new again, but I wasn't feeling it. I looked to the future and saw only misery. Adam was right—everything changes.