

Israel My Beloved

A Historical Novel

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Chapter One

Sarah wouldn't look back. That she had determined. And when Sarah made up her mind, that was it. She was a strong-willed woman, to say the least—stubborn as a donkey.

Her husband, who watched from their bedroom window, knew her intent. The straightness of her posture, the rigidity of her thrown-back shoulders might seem like nothing more than good poise to a passerby. But he knew his wife. Her determined defiance was more than practiced posture. It was her final statement to him. Sarah wouldn't turn around for one last look even if her life depended on it. Although she had come crawling back after the last several flirtatious encounters, he knew this time it was different. She'd never return of her own accord.

"I know he's at the window watching," Sarah muttered as she walked briskly. "It's just like him. He won't take no for an answer!" Her words were tainted with a bitter haughtiness. "He always thinks he's right. He thinks he knows everything. Well, if he does, he ought to know I'm sick of being married!"

The issue was settled in *her* mind. This was it. No more. The thrill, the joy, and the happiness Sarah felt in the early years of their marriage was gone. What had once shone brilliantly had, with the passage of time, become lackluster. The daily routine of married life had dulled the sense of anticipation and wonder she experienced when their relationship was new. The awe of being married to someone more than capable of meeting her every need had turned to complacency, then to dissatisfaction.

He, however, had remained the same—loving, devoted, consistent, never-changing. Sometimes it made Sarah angry that he was *so* perfect.

"I've changed," said Sarah firmly, keeping up her quick pace. "I tried, my husband, I really tried! But there's too much out there in that wonderful world— too much that I want to know, taste, touch, experience." Somehow hearing the adamancy of her words justified and strengthened her actions. Their passion stirred her own passion.

"I want to mingle with Assyrians, Egyptians, Babylonians. I want to know how they live, how they worship their gods. I want to walk through their lands, taste their food, sing their songs, sleep in their beds. And I don't want a narrow-minded husband warning me of their ways—preaching the dangers of such liaisons. I want to make my own choices and not feel condemned. I want to be free to roam. And free I will be! Free to live, free to love ... whom I want, when I want."

Presently her love was Meshach—wonderfully sensual Meshach. A seductive smile came across Sarah's lips as she pondered this Chaldean's reckless zest for life. The very thought of his touch awakened feelings long dormant. Meshach loved life; he lived without the restriction that rules bring. "I'm determined," he said, "to taste life to the fullest before death extinguishes all feeling and my body returns to dust." She thought that strangely poetic.

The tinkling of Sarah's ankle bracelets—an effect she had learned by mincing her steps—matched the tingling of her body. The sound brought attention to her long olive legs—legs Meshach often commented on. As she hurried her pace the merry tinkling increased. In her mind, the sound somehow distanced her from her husband's watchful eyes, which felt like guilt nipping at her heels.

As Sarah drew nearer to the high places of Jerusalem, where she would meet Meshach, the splendor of the home her husband had built blazed before her mind's eye instead of diminishing behind her back. Sarah knew she'd never live in a house like that again. Even the most extravagant of the homes lining the path of her exodus could not compare with what she was leaving. Nothing she had ever seen could compare.

"Enough of this ... enough! What difference does a home make when you're not happy?" Sarah stopped abruptly; shut her eyes, and shook her head. She didn't want this moment spoiled by the vision of what she was leaving. After taking a deep breath and renewing her resolve, Sarah picked up her pace again.

"A house I can't take with me," she rationalized. "These I can," she said aloud as she reached down, patted the bag hanging from her shoulder, and tucked it under her arm to relieve the weight of its heaviness. It was filled with jewelry lavished on her by a devoted husband. "Nothing but precious stones of the rarest quality set in the purest of gold and silver are suitable for your adornment," he had said. She winced as a spasm of guilt unexpectedly tore at her conscience.

"With these I can buy anything I want ... anything!" Sarah said, spinning her deluded web of rationalization, talking to her husband as if he was just a few steps behind her instead of standing at the window watching her become a speck on the horizon of her new venture. "It's only right that I take these with me. They're mine. I earned them as your wife. Besides, if I left them, they'd just be a painful reminder of me every time you look at them."

Sarah knew her husband would never sell the jewelry. He needed no money. A slight pout brought out the fullness of her lips as she reasoned, "They'd just go to waste—unappreciated,

tucked away in a box waiting for someone who is never coming back. The cattle on these thousand hills are yours. What are these jewels to you other than painful reminders of me?"

At that moment, in her rebellion, Sarah despised his faithfulness. "You don't need these. You don't need anything. *You* are self-contained. Why then do you demand such total devotion? Why do you want me? Why won't you just let me go? Why do you have to be so grieved—so hurt that I'm leaving?" she said with a mix of anger and sarcasm. "I hate it!"

The anguished look in his eyes. The remembrance of his words. She hated them both! Sarah's back stiffened even more, making her appear a few inches taller. She was going to have what *she* wanted for a change. She would be like the women she had heard about—the royal women of Egypt. She didn't want to be set apart from the nations; she wanted to be part of them.

As Sarah quickened her pace, purposely looking down at the road, she noticed her shadow wasn't running before her. Could it be that the heat on her back was from the burning of his eyes rather than the warmth of the sun? Sarah didn't want to know. She wasn't going to look. She began taking longer strides, eager to increase the distance between her and her husband—distance that would put her out of his sight.

If Sarah had turned back for one last parting look, she would have seen his shadow half hidden in the window. A shadow that belied the true strength of her husband. Tears rested on his strong cheekbones as he moved back the curtain a little more and watched the love of his life walk away.

His heart was heavy; the pain in his chest crushing. His words, unheard by his wife, resonated with omniscience. "Oh Sarah, I know where you are headed. I've known it from your youth, and I have loved you anyway. How I wish you had listened to me, believed me. I wish you had been content with my love. This rebellion, my love, is going to cost you more than you can ever imagine."

He paused and sighed deeply. "Someday, you'll come back. But until then you will walk through the fires of hell ... fires that will threaten to consume you."

He blinked, trying to see through his tears. Sarah was out of sight, yet he continued to look out the window. The linen curtain, caught by the breeze, flicked at his face and stirred his attention back to his surroundings. As he reached up to catch the curtain and bring it back inside where it belonged, his eyes fell on the palm of his right hand. The curtain, like a veil, covered the covenant mark in his hand—a mark he had put there to reassure Sarah of his unconditional love. He looked up again at the deserted road. Then, leaning out the window, he shouted into the wind, "The day is coming, Beloved, when you will say that I have forgotten you ... forsaken you. But I won't. I won't. I can't. I've engraved you on the palms of my hands...."