

No Stone Cast: Eliyanah's Story

Chapter One

*I will get up now and go about the city,
through its streets and squares;
I will search for the one my heart loves.
~Song of Solomon 3.2a~*

Month of Tammuz
Early Summer, 30 AD
Bethany, Judea

Bet-ani. House of Afflictions. That's what people called her village.

For Eliyanah, it was a place of joy. Of family. Of love.

The place she would marry her best friend and spend her life with him.

From the rooftop of her small, stone and mud-brick house, she looked out over the tiny village of Bethany still shrouded in dusky, gray light. She sucked in a lungful of fresh morning air. The Mount of Olives lay to the northwest, the desert valley to the east. Birdsong filled the air. The fragrance of ripening apple and grape blossoms rode a gentle breeze. Towering date palms hovered over the nearly dry river beyond the village's walls.

Life in Bethany was perfect.

Thank Adonai no one else was awake this early, because Yana could not hide the smile that threatened to burst from deep within and erupt in laughter. Her heart pounded and her breathing quickened.

Her beloved would return to Bethany today.

She jumped up from her mat, silently rolled it up, and laid it against the ledge of the packed dirt roof. Careful not to awaken her *imma*—or Imma's new husband—she climbed down the ladder that led to a large square room below, the center section open to the brilliant blue sky. One third housed their sheep in the rainy season, not only to protect the animal but to add its warmth to cold nights when the family slept inside.

The other two thirds contained a cistern filled with water from the river, sleeping benches built into the wall, and pegs to hold extra tunics. A small beehive-shaped bread oven, unused in summer, sat next to a cold fire-pit.

She grabbed the jar of barley she'd ground yesterday and stepped outside into the courtyard they shared with her *abba's* cousin Simeon and his children. Kneeling by the large common oven, she poked at the embers, stirring them to life. She placed dried grass on top to encourage a flame and then added dung. When a bright orange fire flared, she poured crushed grain into a bowl and added water and salt, forming circular, flat loaves.

As she mindlessly slapped the rounds of dough to the side of the oven, one after another, she tried to keep her mind from focusing on her beloved's soft brown eyes. The feel of his hand in hers. The low voice that sent a chill down her spine when he whispered in her ear.

After removing each loaf when it had cooked to a deep golden brown, she replaced it with another round of uncooked dough, and soon had a stack of hot bread.

She grabbed four of the flatbreads and hurried to the broadroom that ran along the back of the house, where she searched the pottery jars that lined the shelves. She poured out a handful of last year's dates,

then placed them in a sack along with a chunk of sheep's milk cheese, a bunch of fresh grapes, and the bread and tied a string around it.

The sun now hovered fully above the horizon. It wouldn't be long now. She slipped out the door, hurried through the courtyard and headed for the gate.

"Yana!"

Just outside the gate she froze, and suppressed a sigh. She'd hoped to avoid her cousin Miriam. Yana didn't want to explain why she was rushing to meet Miriam's younger brother.

"Going somewhere?" She smiled. Miriam was only a year or two older than Yana, but Yana always felt like a child in her presence.

"I was hoping to catch you. Can you take this to Eleazar as well?" She handed Yana a small package.

"Well, um..." How did she explain this?

Miriam pulled back one corner of the cloth to reveal two handfuls of pistachios, already shelled. "He loves them, but he can't sit still long enough to eat them." She laughed.

Yana frowned. "That's all?" Not a big meal for someone who had spent the last two weeks with the village's sheep and goats, leading them to fresh grass and water.

Miriam smiled. "I thought you'd be bringing him the rest." She glanced down at the bag at Yana's side.

She knew? How did she find out? They'd been so careful.

"You may have kept it a secret, but he couldn't. Sisters notice when their baby brother wanders around the house smiling for no reason whatsoever."

Oh no. Her ears began to burn.

"Everyone knows, though no one has said anything. Even Abba knows. I'm thrilled. I can't think of anyone better for him than you."

Warmth spread from her chest all over her body. "Truly?"

"Truly. I'd be delighted to have you as a sister." She leaned in and kissed Yana's cheek, then spun around and returned to her house.

Yana placed the pistachios in the bag and hurried along the village's only road toward the northern edge of the village.

She reached the common sheepfold that lay just beyond the last house in the shadow of the tree-covered mountain. In the dry season, all the animals remained together outside the village, and younger girls and boys took turns leading them to the green pastures and cool water in the hills. Eleazar could have given up his turn years ago, but he loved the time alone, wandering in the hills.

She waited, pacing, moving the bag from one fist to the other while keeping an eye on the dirt path that led to Jerusalem.

She heard the sheep before she saw him. She adjusted her head cloth, tucked a stray strand of hair behind her ear, and smoothed her tunic.

And waited.

Finally, his lanky form sauntered down the path, crook in one hand, the sheep following behind him.

Her heartbeat doubled, and she started down the road toward him.

Eleazar's face lit up as she approached. He paused, the flock parting and swooshing past on either side of the couple toward the fold.

She halted before him. "Good morning, Ezi."

He smiled softly. "I love it when you call me that."

When she'd first moved here with Imma, he was eight or nine years old. But she'd only begun to talk, and she couldn't get her tongue to pronounce his name. To her he became Ezi, and even now she rarely called him by his proper name. "Did you sleep well last night?"

A sly grin crossed his face. “Of course. I dreamed of you.”

Her cheeks heated. “You can’t say things like that.”

“Why not? We’re going to be married, aren’t we?”

“Not unless you speak to Lemuel.” She grinned.

“I should probably bathe first, don’t you think? I just returned from two weeks with the sheep and goats.” He laughed. “I’ll do it tonight, I promise.”

He glanced quickly at the empty landscape surrounding them, then leaned nearer, his warm breath caressing her cheek. “I missed you.”

“I missed you too. I’m glad you’re home.”

He grabbed her hand and they strolled back toward the village. Just as they reached the last house along the road, Simeon stopped them, his face twisted.

Ezi halted. “Abba, what’s wrong?”

Simeon fixed his eyes on her. “Yana, I’m sorry to tell you. Your abba—”

“He is *not* my father.” She tried to keep her voice respectful, as difficult as it was.

“I know, but he is your imma’s husband, and according to the Law, he has an abba’s authority over you.”

“And?” Ezi’s voice was sharp.

“He has betrothed you to a man in Jerusalem.”

The words ripped through her soul like a flood coursing through the desert.

She tried to understand what Simeon had told her. The message was simple—only a handful of words. But no matter how hard she tried, no matter how many times she turned the sentence over in her mind, it didn’t make sense.

Lemuel knew she loved Eleazar. He knew Simeon approved of the match.

“But why?” She searched Simeon’s eyes, seeking an answer. An explanation. A reason.

“I’m so sorry, Yana. Your ab—Lemuel has decided. There is nothing I, or anyone, can do.”

Ezi turned to her, agony written on his face. “What about your imma?”

“You know exactly what she will say. She would never contradict him.”

Life, as she knew it, as she had always expected it to be, was over.

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Yana let the courtyard gate slam behind her, and marched toward her house on the left side of the courtyard. let the courtyard gate slam behind her, and marched toward her house on the left side of the courtyard.

“Yana! Back so soon?” Imma stepped out from the broadroom, a jar in hand. Her hair, though still soft and thick, was nearly completely white now. Her skin was wrinkled, her lips thin.

“You *knew*! You knew and you let me go to him. How... Why? Why didn’t you tell me?”

Imma blanched. “Who told you?”

“Simeon.”

Her face clouded. “He should have waited. It was not his place to share our news.”

“He did it because he cares about me! And Ezi.” She stomped around the lower floor.

“I care about you too. More than you realize.” She reached for Yana’s shoulder, but Yana recoiled.

“Then why make me marry someone I’ve never met? Never heard of? When you know Ezi and I’ve been talking about it.”

Imma’s brows furrowed. “You know I had no say.”

“I know you could have a say if you wanted. But you’re so afraid he’ll leave us. Like my abba did.”

“That’s enough. Lemuel will leave for his vineyards any mo—” Imma shot a glance toward the ladder.

Lemuel already stood at the bottom, arms crossed. He was an imposing man, taller than most, with broad shoulders, thinning hair, and dark eyes that never seemed to smile.

He glanced from Imma to Yana then back to Imma.

“You told her.”

Imma took a step back, her hands up. “No. I wouldn’t. You know—”

“But she somehow found out.” He glared at Yana.

“You know there is no such thing as a secret in this village.” She held his gaze. No use trying to be nice to him anymore, trying to be polite and respectful so he’d allow her to marry Ezi.

He shrugged. “So you know. Saves me telling you.”

“But—”

“No!”

Yana cringed at his shout.

He shook a long, thick finger at her. “There will be no discussion. He is my kinsman and I’ve already begun the negotiations. Besides, he is better than you deserve.”

The words hit her like a slap in the face. Better than she deserved?

“I’ve taken care of you for the last six years. Longer than your own abba stuck around.” He snorted. “What do you think would have happened to you and your imma had I not married her? Do you think anyone else would have done what I did, marrying a divorced woman with another man’s child to raise?” He sneered. “Of course not. One man had already left her. There must have been a reason. No one else would take that chance.”

Yana watched Imma’s face as he ranted. Imma hung her head. She believed every word this man said. She always had.

“So you will do as you’re told. It’s your duty to do what is best for the family. This match will help us all.”

“How? How does this help us *all*?”

“He is a powerful, respected merchant. He has ties with the priests, with other merchants. He has a spacious house with many servants. He is quite wealthy, and he will see that you are well provided for.”

“And how does this help *you*?”

“That is not your concern.”

“Enormous bride-wealth? Is that how it benefits you?”

He stepped nearer, stopping an arm’s length away. His dark eyes glared down at her.

Perhaps she had gone too far.

“Yes, he is gifting us with a *mohar* beyond what someone like you could ever expect.” His voice was low, controlled. “But even I, as any good abba would, will give most of it to you for your dowry.” He turned and left, heading to check on his vineyards.

Imma sat on the sleeping bench built into the wall and patted the space beside her. “Eliyanah, sit down. I need to explain something to you.”

Imma’s face was calm, but her words frightened Yana. “Imma?”

“Please, just sit.”

Yana did as she was told.

“When your father left us, when he *abandoned* us after moving us here from Galilee, my dowry should have remained with me. Although a dowry is meant to be kept by the woman, the husband is allowed to use it as he sees fit, as long as it can be returned to her should he die, or divorce her without cause.” Imma took her hand. “But your abba had lost ours. We had nothing. You know what could have happened to us. To me. We only survived because his cousin helped us.”

She knew. Widows and divorced women led precarious lives in Israel. Those with no family support

could easily end up in prostitution. Had it not been for Simeon...

Imma cupped Yana's cheeks with wrinkled palms. "If Lemuel had not married me—" She smiled weakly. "He does care for you, in his own way."

Perhaps. As long as it didn't hurt *him*.

"I want you protected. I don't want to be worrying about you when—" She clamped her mouth shut. "When I'm old and unable to do anything about it."

"But Ezi..."

"My precious daughter, it's rare when a woman can marry for love. Those of little means marry for survival, of themselves and of the family. Even daughters of kings and priests marry to form alliances, to enhance the status of their family." She shrugged. "This man is one of the most successful merchants in all Jerusalem. He could be very useful to Lemuel, and it's important to him to make these connections. What's important to *me* is that you are protected. This man can do both."

Any hope she had of changing Imma's mind flickered and went out. "Yes, Imma."

Imma rose and began to pace. "This man—his name is Oded—is willing to gift us with bride-wealth far more than anyone else could, and more than we have a right to expect. Otherwise I would have nothing to give you."

Yana shook her head. "I don't care about that. I am very happy as we are."

"But I care. I don't want you to struggle as I have, ever."

It seemed there was nothing she could do to change Imma's position on this. She saw this marriage as a means to a good and secure life for Yana. She firmly believed she was doing what was best for Yana.

Perhaps she was right.