

LOVE AMID  
*the* ASHES

MESU ANDREWS

*a Novel*



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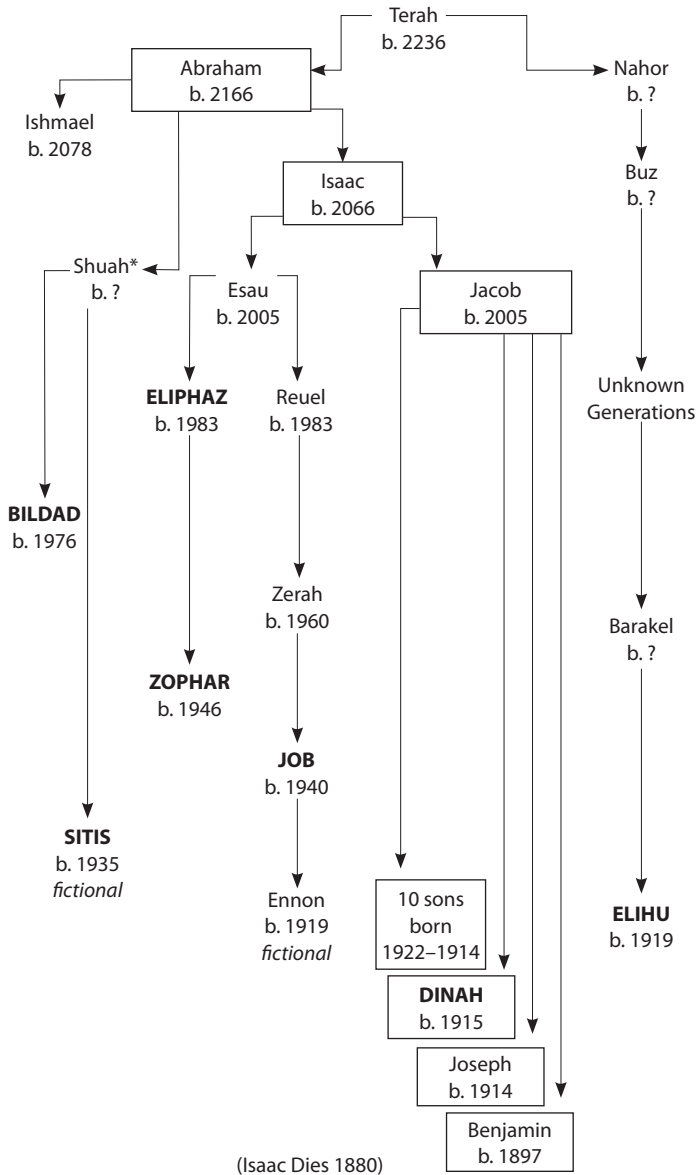
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This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

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Dates are approximate and dependent on the author's best interpretation of scholars' commentary. All dates are BC. **BOLD/ALL CAPS** names are major characters in the novel. All characters listed above can be found in Scripture unless designated *fictional*. **SAYYID**, **ABAN**, and **NADA** are fictional characters of unspecified Ishmaelite lineage. An additional fictional character, **NOGAHLA**, descended from a mixed Egyptian and Cushite (today's Ethiopia) lineage. Bela, son of Beor, is of an unknown Edomite lineage.

Boxes denote the line of inheritance for God's covenant promise to Abraham.

\*Denotes Abraham's son Shuah was adopted by Ishmael (adoption fictional).

# PROLOGUE

~Job 1:6, 8–11~

*One day the angels came to present themselves before the LORD, and Satan also came with them. . . . The LORD said to Satan, “Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one on earth like him; he is blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil.” . . . Satan replied, “Have you not put a hedge around him and his household and everything he has? You have blessed the work of his hands. . . . But stretch out your hand and strike everything he has, and he will surely curse you to your face.” The LORD said to Satan, “Very well, then, everything he has is in your hands, but on the man himself do not lay a finger.” Then Satan went out from the presence of the LORD.*

# 1

~Genesis 35:28–29~

*Isaac lived a hundred and eighty years. Then he breathed his last and died and was gathered to his people, old and full of years. And his sons Esau and Jacob buried him.*

Dinah's leaden feet left no print in the sun-baked soil of Grandfather Isaac's Hebron camp. He had fought death's pale rider for many days, but his aging lungs finally lost the battle for breath. He was gone. Her sun and moon and stars, the only man who had seen beyond Dinah's shame and loved her after Shechem. Her heart felt as desolate as the dwindling wadi, where she knelt to rinse the rags with which she'd washed and anointed Grandfather's body.

"Mistress."

A small voice rippled over Dinah's shoulder, barely louder than the water's flow. Startled from her contemplations, she dropped the cloths into the running waters. "Oh no!" she

cried, crawling along the bank to retrieve the myrrh-scented rags. Rocks scraped her knees, and the muddy waters churned with each attempt to snag the cloths.

An agile, dark form jumped in front of her, rescuing the floating treasures. “I’ve got them, mistress!” A young servant girl from Grandfather’s camp stood in ankle-deep water, hand lifted victoriously above her head, raining drops onto her mossy, short-cropped hair. Her rich black skin and angular cheekbones bespoke a Cushite heritage. Dinah had noticed her among the camp’s servants, but the long hours at Grandfather’s side kept Dinah sequestered in the family tents.

“Why do you call me mistress?” Dinah asked, reaching for the dingy, dripping rags. “We’ve never even spoken before, child, and I’m no better than a servant myself.” She squeezed out the cloths and laid them in the basket slung over her arm.

“Master Job told me that I was now your handmaid—since you’ll be marrying his son.”

Standing to full height, Dinah towered over the girl and mimicked Abba Jacob’s thunderous declaration of the past week. “Just because Job is the greatest man in the East, doesn’t mean he can walk into Grandfather Isaac’s camp and start shouting orders.”

The girl’s countenance drooped like the drought-weary grasses of Hebron’s plains.

Regretting her harshness, Dinah placed a comforting arm across the girl’s shoulders and began the short trek toward the tents. “It’s just that I’m not a part of Master Job’s household yet.” She paused, her heart wrung out like the rags in her basket. “I’m not really a part of any household,” she whispered, staring at the tents ahead. They walked a few more steps in silence. “Job shouldn’t promise things that Abba

might not fulfill.” Glancing down at the girl beside her, she saw disappointment mirrored on her face. Dinah wished she could offer reassurance, but how could she comfort another when she felt lost and alone? Besides, this little Cushite was Grandfather’s serving maid. The way Abba Jacob and Uncle Esau were fighting over Grandfather’s possessions, who knew how the inheritance and servants would be divided?

“I’m sorry, mistress.” The girl sounded rather distracted. Dinah noticed she had begun a little game, taking giant leaps and tiny steps to avoid the cracks in the dry earth. “But may I pretend to be your handmaid until your abba says differently?” She hopped to the next small patch of smooth dirt, balancing precariously on one foot.

Dinah steadied her with a hand on her shoulder. “Only if you stop calling me mistress.” With an arched brow, she waited for the girl’s nod before resuming their journey toward camp.

The girl fell in step beside her, a full span shorter than Dinah, and continued to chatter. “Abraham was a great prince among his people, and your Grandfather Isaac as well. So should I call you princess?”

“Ha!” The bitter laugh broke through the stone wall of grief, surprising even Dinah. But the smile that lingered for this wide-eyed, innocent girl was heartfelt. “No one has ever called me a princess, little Cushite. You may simply call me Dinah.”

Just then the high-pitched keening of mourners began, and Dinah searched the path over the horizon between the poplars. As suspected, she saw Grandfather Isaac’s wrapped body jostling in a cart on its way to the burial cave at Mamre, north of Hebron. His sons, Jacob and Esau, followed the cart,

their hatred sparking like flint stones. Jacob's eleven sons walked behind stoically. But from Esau's bountiful clan, only two paid homage to the patriarch. Esau's great-grandson, Job, mourned as if his own abba lay in the burial cart, and Esau's firstborn, Eliphaz, comforted him. The numerous other Edomites had been rumored to worship Canaanite gods and had little respect for Isaac, the son of Abraham, Yahweh's covenant bearer.

"Come." Dinah swallowed hard, holding back the wave of sadness threatening to drown her. "What should I call you, little one?"

"I am Nogahla." Her lilting voice almost obscured the mourners' wails.

"Come, Nogahla. I have no need of a handmaid, but I would appreciate your help packing my supplies for the journey to Uz." An amiable agreement. No more words. The air was too full of grief, uncertainty, and the mourners' echoes.

They reached Grandfather's camp, arranged in circular tent rows around a large central fire and ovens. Paths like spokes in a wheel joined the tents of family members to servants. The tents closest to the fire identified the highly esteemed guests and relatives, while the servants occupied the outlying dwellings. Dinah and Nogahla moved past the outer realms and family tents, shooing stray herding dogs and nodding greetings to servants. They arrived at the central ovens, where busy hands baked bread for Esau's soon-departing caravans and for the relatives and servants who would remain in Hebron.

Three tents were always at the center of camp. Grandfather Isaac's was closest to the fire, Abba Jacob's on its west side, and Uncle Esau's on the east. Dinah stopped, eyeing the dwell-



ings. Grandfather Isaac's massive black tent lay empty now, fronted by a great canopy. It had once been a busy gathering place for visiting merchants and dignitaries who sought an audience with the great son of Abraham. Abba Jacob's tent stood austere, functional, and precise—much like her abba, the calculating twin son of Isaac. Uncle Esau's dwelling was crudely fashioned from various animal skins and rough-hewn wood.

The twins' tents were as opposite as the brothers themselves—a constant battle between conniver and hunter. Though almost one hundred years had passed since Abba Jacob bought Esau's birthright with a bowl of soup, and nearly fifty years since Abba stole Esau's covenant blessing, the brothers' rivalry had grown stronger with each passing year. Thankfully, they seldom visited Grandfather Isaac at the same time. Abba Jacob spent most of his time pasturing flocks and herds in Beersheba, while Uncle Esau tended his large clan in the Seir Mountains.

Passing under Grandfather's canopy, Dinah ducked through the tethered flap on her own little tent. Her prominent location at the center of camp had been a source of contention when she'd arrived fifteen years ago, but Grandfather had settled the matter, citing his need for immediate access to medical care. Dinah knew it was simply one of the ways he chose to honor her.

Nogahla entered the dimly lit enclosure, and Dinah heard her soft gasp. "Mistress! You are a physician of great wisdom."

Determined not to chafe at the unearned adulation, Dinah tried to imagine her little home through Nogahla's eyes. The myriad vials of herbs and potions, perched on her rough-hewn cedar shelves, stung the nostrils with heady scents of cori-

ander, aloe, and myrrh. Abba Jacob's speckled and spotted wool rugs graced the floor with only a center aisle of dirt separating her sleeping area from living space. She owned two robes, four tunics, and three head coverings, which probably seemed extravagant to a Cushite servant. The rest of her tent was filled with herbs, unguents, and potions in every form and fashion.

Dinah's needs were basic and her lifestyle simple. She seldom left the confines of the central fire and small area between her tent and Grandfather Isaac's. This was her world, her home. But no more.

For fifteen years she'd felt secure, capable, and useful as she cared for Grandfather Isaac. Now she wondered what truly belonged to her and what greedy Uncle Esau would seize for himself. When the men returned from the burial cave, she would be expected to obey Isaac's command—to marry Job's son.

"Why would you say such a thing?" Dinah whispered to the grandfather who had loved her.

"I just thought you must be a fine physician to have so many medicines." Nogahla's bright eyes shone even in the low light of the tent, undoubtedly believing Dinah had spoken to her.

Suddenly reeling with regret, Dinah wished she were alone. She needed time to consider Grandfather's shocking command. He'd given no inkling of his wishes to see her married at this late stage in her life. Thirty-five was well past "honey and cream" and dangerously close to "curdled milk." *And why would he condemn me to marry a man in Esau's clan?* But she knew the answer to that question. Because Dinah was Jacob's daughter, Grandfather had said her womb would be

the “garden of promise” in which Esau’s descendants could share in the covenant blessing Jacob had deceitfully stolen.

“Ha!” A bitter laugh escaped, but this time Nogahla seemed to realize Dinah wasn’t pondering herbs. “Men do not look at me as a ‘garden of promise,’ Nogahla. Men see me as dirt.”

The girl patted her shoulder gently. “Master Job does not look at you as dirt.”

Dinah shrugged off her hand and reached for a myrrh pot and piece of fleece to wrap it. “Master Job only offered his son because Uncle Esau refused any other Edomite—even when Grandfather was drawing his last breath.” Tears clouded her vision. “So Job, the jewel in Esau’s crown, the golden man of the East, stepped forward to do the righteous thing. He offered his firstborn, Ennon, to marry me, Jacob’s tainted daughter.”

“Master Job’s eyes are clear and good.” Nogahla’s head was bowed, her voice barely a whisper. “I don’t believe he would have offered his son if he thought it would harm either of you.”

*Oh, what innocence,* Dinah thought. *All men eventually harm you.* She needed to blame someone for her fate, and she refused to blame Grandfather. He had loved her too well for too long. She wanted to hate Job. She tried to think his wealth and success made him prideful and pompous. But Nogahla’s hope—though utterly unthinkable—seemed well placed. Job had been kind and compassionate, tenderly caring for Grandfather in his dying days, gaining nothing for himself. The best one to blame would be Uncle Esau. That hairy red mountain of a man had always been the target of Abba Jacob’s hatred, and he seemed well fitted for the offering.

“Mistress, I’m sorry about Master Isaac.” Nogahla’s voice was as soothing as balm to Dinah’s heart. “I know you loved him.”

A single tear wet Dinah’s cheek. She wiped it quickly. “Let’s get started packing. I don’t know which supplies will travel with me to Uz and which will go to my abba and Uncle Esau, but we must wrap each vial carefully.” Emotions knotted her thoughts and more tears threatened, but she refused to release them. “I wonder if the blossoms look the same in the mountains of Edom?” She reached for a second pot of myrrh and a scrap of fleece to cradle it.

A gentle hand halted her restless arm, dismantling the thin veil of control. “I listen well, mistress.”

“Evidently you don’t listen well, or you wouldn’t be calling me mistress!” Words and emotion tumbled out. “My future has been sealed like a worthless mule sent to market, and Grandfather Isaac is gone!” Dinah hurled the myrrh pot at the center tent post, and the pungent scent of the broken pot filled the air, causing her head to swim slightly. Just one more sign that the sleepless days and nights had left her physically and emotionally spent. Examining the shards of pottery on the rug, she met Nogahla’s shocked gaze. “Just like my broken life.”

The girl reached out, leading her by the hand to a pile of speckled and spotted rugs. Dinah sat numbly. “You’re right, mis—Dinah. Your life *is* like that beautiful, shattered pot. It has just been broken open, and the lovely scent that’s been locked inside your heart is about to be shared with Master Job’s son.”

Nogahla paused, her eyes begging for a response. When none came, she picked up the pieces of pottery and retrieved

a chipped clay vial from a shelf. Wrapping both the shards and the vial in old sackcloth, she said, “Let’s say this little pot is my life. Something tells me that if we pack our lives together, they’ll turn out better.” A tentative smile lifted her cheeks. “Rest your head, mistress. I’ll pack your things. You must rest before the men return from the burial cave.”