

## PROLOGUE

I once was a goddess who led a prince to Yahweh. Now, I'm an exile living out my life in Babylon, knowing Yahweh's words will be fulfilled. Thousands of Jews—as we are now called—have grown strong in Babylon. Someday we'll return to Judah. Yahweh promised. Jeremiah told us. "Seventy years," he said, and Jerusalem would be rebuilt.

I heard him say it, but I also saw the walls fall down. Doubt shadowed my heart for years. My journey hasn't been an easy one. May I tell you my story, how life can feel hopeless, a heart embittered, but God . . .

Yes, with those two little words, all hope was restored. *But God...*

For we who believed, those words mended broken hearts, turned the tide. Lives were changed. Wanderers found purpose. Those who loved much, lost much. Yet we who trusted Yahweh, allowed Him to step into the void and fill our emptiness.

Only Yahweh chooses a broken woman to heal a wounded man. Only Yahweh uses a pagan prince to offer truth to a foreign empire. And only Yahweh can use my story to change your life.

You may think change impossible—*but God* . . .

## Chapter One

*“In the ninth year of Zedekiah king of Judah, in the tenth month,  
Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon marched against Jerusalem with his whole army  
and laid siege to it.”*

### **Jeremiah 39:1**

*Merari*

*February, Jerusalem – 588 B.C.*

The strings of my harp felt like rods of iron in the cold mix of sleet and rain, while I played David’s Shepherd Song in Jerusalem’s empty streets. Eyes closed, my mind wandered through the valley of the shadow of death. How would I feed my sister and my son if I couldn’t sell my harps? King Zedekiah’s royal prophets had proven false and my husband’s cousin, Jeremiah, had been mournfully accurate. Babylon laid siege to our city two weeks ago, and even the elite here in the upper city bought only food in the market.

You couldn’t eat a harp.

But I could at least provide a measure of peace and joy. Swaying to the gentle rhythm of

my music, I opened my eyes and noticed the sandal-maker's wife packing up her wares. We were the only two merchants brave enough—or insane enough—to keep our booths open when both weather and Babylon threatened. I hadn't sold a harp in six months, but I'd rather be here than fighting with my sister at home.

A trumpet blew. Then another. The ground beneath me shook with the thunder of horses' hooves. The sandal-maker's wife and I exchanged a fearful glance, and she ran toward her home around the corner without a goodbye. More trumpets sounded, and now rams' horns joined them from atop the walls around our city. The market began to fill with noblemen and soldiers, rushing past me on their way to the palace.

One man took his time, strolling past my booth with eyes as hungry as a jackal. "Your cousin Jeremiah has proven to be a false prophet, little Merari. Did you hear? The Babylonians are withdrawing. The siege is over as the other prophets said." Jehukal, the chief of forced labor, peered down at me over a rotund middle, wiping sweat from his brow on a wintry day. "But I could speak in Jeremiah's favor if you agree to meet me after the council meeting."

I smiled sweetly, suppressing a shudder, still strumming my harp. "I'm honored by your persistence, my lord, but as I've mentioned before, my son requires my attention at home." I stilled my harp and hoped to glean information to share with my husband's cousin—my cousin. "Have all of Nebuchadnezzar's armies withdrawn or only some?"

"Changing the subject can't quench my fire, but I'll play your little game." He glanced right and left. No one was listening to our hushed conversation. "My personal guard told me Nebuchadnezzar took the mercenaries as well as his Babylonian troops. I suspect the Egyptians have honored our treaty and drawn him away, but I'll find out more at the council meeting." Tracing his finger along my jawline, his eyes raked me with ungranted familiarity. Withdrawing

a coin from his waist pouch, he tossed it into the basket at my feet. “I’ll give you more information and three more pieces of silver if you come home with me after the meeting.”

I ducked my head, feigning shyness to hide my revulsion. “You flatter me with your attention, Lord Jehukal.” I nodded at my harps on display. “If you purchased one of my harps, I could spend less time in the market tomorrow and offer your wife lessons—so she might please you with the same songs I play.”

His bawdy laughter drew the attention of the growing crowd. “If I wanted a harp, Merari, I would buy one from the Babylonian merchants. Your harps are pretty little baubles, but when Nebuchadnezzar took our best soldiers and artisans, I stopped buying anything in Jerusalem.” He walked away laughing, and my cheeks burned at the smirks from onlookers.

Furious, I began wrapping my *pretty little baubles* in thick blankets and placing them in my small wagon. That fat nobleman had no idea what craft and skill were involved in carving, drying, and stringing a harp. He was an imbecile. A fool.

Like our King Zedekiah. Did he really think Egypt could save Judah from King Nebuchadnezzar’s minions? When the siege began, market gossips talked of six nations fighting with the Babylonians. Edomites, of course. They found any excuse to harass us, still bitter generations after Jacob cheated Esau out of his birthright. Arabs, Persians, Scythians, Medes, and Syrians also joined the threat, all anxious to curry the favor of Nebuchadnezzar, the man who had conquered the invincible Assyrians. But Babylon’s king possessed something far greater than mercenary armies and more valuable than his military mind. According to Yahweh and His prophet Jeremiah, Nebuchadnezzar was God’s designated instrument of wrath on Judah. He held God’s favor, which meant he could not fail.

I placed my last harp in the wagon and a commotion near the Temple gate drew my

attention. Jeremiah. A temple guard dragged him by the neck toward the palace.

“Stop!” I ran toward them, leaving my wagon. “Stop! What are you doing? He’s done nothing but speak truth.”

I realized the guard was Irijah, brother of Jehukal. “He was deserting to the Babylonians.” He pulled Jeremiah backward such that he couldn’t get his footing.

“No.” Jeremiah croaked, scratching at the arm cutting off his airway. “I wasn’t.”

“At least let him stand.” I tugged at Irijah’s arm, trying to loosen his grip. “You’re choking him!”

The guard shoved me aside. “The council can decide, but I know what I saw. He deserves death.”

A shiver worked up my spine as he dragged my cousin up the palace steps. Would Irijah finally have his vengeance? Five years ago, a priest on the king’s council falsely prophesied that Yahweh would deliver Judah and its king from Babylon’s yoke of oppression. The priest’s name was Hananiah—Irijah and Jehukal’s abba. Jeremiah issued Yahweh’s judgment on Hananiah for his false prophecy, and within two months he was dead. His sons never forgave Jeremiah, and today they would no doubt seek to repay him.