



Ruth – A Love Story by Barbara Booker

They put the sleeping bundle of life into my arms and as I gazed upon him through aged eyes, I remembered...

I remembered another baby a long, long time ago.

I, the new mother, had placed my son in another pair of old arms; and I remembered how Naomi's face had glowed with joy at the sight of him, my little Obed.

And now, much greater in years than Naomi had been, I, Ruth, widow of Boaz, held my seventh great-grandson, David... and... I remembered...

1 CHAPTER 1

Naomi had told me that the trip from Bethlehem, in the land of Israel, to the country of Moab had been a long and arduous journey. They had been a family of four in those days: Elimelech, Naomi and two sons, Chilion and Mahlon. Times had been bad in Israel —there had been drought followed by famine, and disease and death had come close behind. Bethlehem in Judah, known as “the house of bread” in the past, had become as dried up as an old crust of bread. Men sat at the city gate discussing the situation, day after day. No longer did they spend busy days in the shops or the fields. Women went to the well, once filled with cold, pure water, and returned home with just a small quantity of the precious liquid. The children, too, were changed by the conditions — there were no longer joyful, noisy trips to the fields to help with the planting or harvesting; they didn't seem to have the energy to play very long in the streets any more. The old and the very young were the first to die. The rest lingered on — growing thinner and weaker by the day. Parents saved their meager portions of bread and water or dried fruit for the children. And after a while they remembered Moses' words:

For I command you today to love the Lord your God, to walk in his ways, and to keep his commands... then you will live and increase, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land you are entering to possess. But if your heart turns away and you are not obedient, and if you are drawn away to bow down to other gods and worship them, I declare to you this day that you will certainly be destroyed. I will set my face against you... I will punish you for your sins seven times over. I will break down your stubborn pride and make the sky above you like iron and the ground beneath you like bronze. Your strength will be spent in vain, because your soil will not yield its crops, nor will the trees of the land yield their fruit.

Had not every man and woman been doing that which was right in his or her own eyes? And now God was doing what was right in *His* eyes. But He did not leave His people without hope. He constantly called to them to return to Him so that *He* would return to them. If only they would listen! Yes, life in Bethlehem was coming to a halt, just as it was in other parts of the land. There was no joy and gladness, nor voices of bride and bridegroom, nor grinding of the millstones here.

So, the family of Elimelech did as many other Israelites had done. They packed a few belongings, said goodbye to friends and family, and left their comfortable home for the unknown life in neighboring Moab. Israel had been warned of God through the great prophet and leader Moses that they were to have no friendship with the surrounding nations when Israel gained their homeland.

But now people in Israel were starving. Travelers brought the news that other countries to the east of the Jordan River had bountiful crops, fast-flowing streams, and work. Elimelech and Naomi had spent many restless nights in the muggy heat discussing the problem. The land of Israel was where they belonged... but the land of Israel was now struck down by drought and famine. What should they do? Where should they go? Indeed, *should* they go? Had not father Abram gone to Egypt during famine? And Jacob? He too, had moved all his family to Egypt during another time of famine. Sleep brought little refreshment and each day the problems grew worse.

And so, eventually, the near empty vessels in the house and two hungry, growing boys forced Elimelech's decision: they would leave for Moab immediately.

As I've told you, the trip was long. The sun beat down from a cloudless blue sky. Villages lay shimmering in endless heat, with few sounds of life. Crops were blasted with desert winds. The earth was parched and cracked. Vultures circled on hot, dry wind currents — black, forbidding prophets of doom. They, of all God's creatures, could always find food. The family trudged northeast and down to the Jordan River where they easily crossed the shallow waters. Here where once Joshua and Israel had seen the deep waters rolled back by God's power, they now walked with the trickle of water splashing at their ankles. On through the arid Israelite territories of Gad and Reuben, then south into lush Moab, which seemed now to be the true land of milk and honey.

It didn't take long for them to settle into a new village with a new house and friends. They did miss the trips to Shiloh, to the Tabernacle with its feasts and sacrifices. The Moabites also worshipped one god — but it was the idol Chemosh. The God of Israel was unknown to them except for “legends” they had heard long ago — about the Mighty God who had brought Israel out of Egyptian slavery after sending terrible plagues upon the Egyptians, about the crossing of the Red Sea and of various wilderness happenings —“legends”, of course. The Moabites could see no

problem: Moab and Israel had one god each; it wasn't important which one was worshiped — life was to be enjoyed!

There were more than a few Israelites in the area, and they would meet and talk about the old days in their homeland. Feast days were kept as best they could be... but it was not like the former days. Word spread about continued hard times in the land of Israel. People no longer talked of returning. They were comfortable in Moab. Some had new, prospering businesses; some built larger homes and barns; crops and water were plentiful; babies were born; and older children turned into young men and women. There were weddings, feasts and happy times for Israelite and Moabite together.

It was at one of these weddings that I met the Israelite family of Elimelech. My friend, Orpah, was marrying Elimelech and Naomi's son, Chilion. The festivities and the ceremony were conducted after the Israelite way of life....and an interesting service it was! The bridegroom was compared to the God of Israel, and His people — the whole of Israel! — were His bride! The young couple was reminded several times of the importance of their vows and of faithfulness till death alone should part them. How old-fashioned, I thought....at first. But later I could reflect upon the beauty and depth of such attitudes and instructions.

But let me continue with my story: The bridegroom's brother, Mahlon, was plainly enjoying the music, dancing and companionship, but he also took time to serve the many guests. As I reached for a piece of sweet raisin bread from the tray which he carried, our eyes met for the first time. His arm brushed lightly against my own. I, Ruth a Moabitess, and this man, Mahlon, son of Israel, were suddenly and instantly drawn together. Throughout the festivities our eyes would meet time after time, and in unspoken words we knew that one day there would be another such wedding. How does one know such things? Even now, after so many years, I cannot really explain it.

And so it was that, from week to week, he would come to visit my brothers — but he always found more time to spend with me. We would talk about his family, his dreams, his work and his beliefs — for he was very devoted to the special God of Israel. He told me much about what he called the "One True God", and about His covenant with Abram. He told me also of the serious decision his parents had made some years before to leave his homeland and how they yearned for the time to return, when Israel once more would receive the blessings of rain and produce the food they needed. Yes, all these things and more Mahlon told me, and to my amazement I discovered how reasonable the Israelites' worship and way of life really was.

Then the day came that we had dreamed and talked of: Mahlon and his father came to speak to my father and brothers to ask for me in marriage. The dowry was paid, announcements made, and I, Ruth, was betrothed to Mahlon!

Preparations began. The groom-to-be and his father built a house and the furnishings. When the house was finished, Mahlon took me to see it. It was an ordinary one-room home, made of sun-baked brick. On the outside a stairway led up to a flat roof, which had a railing around the edge, in accordance with God's laws. This "upper room", as we called it, could be used for many things: cooking, sleeping and visiting.

The furnishings in the lower room were simple but adequate: there was a table with bowls, spoons and clay lamps upon it. A water jug stand contained two large jars and a small drinking vessel. One of the large jars was the "vessel of honor" — it would hold pure, fresh water; the other large jar was the "vessel of dishonor" — its contents would be the stale, used household water. Rolled up in a corner were several woven mats for sleeping. One large earthenware container held a gift of precious olive oil for our lamps and for cooking. In the center of the room was a grinding mill and a cooking pit. Pegs on a wall held baskets and new skin bottles filled with new wine. Everything was in readiness for a new couple. And best of all: we would soon be moving in!

Meanwhile my mother and sisters spent extra time weaving, spinning and sewing my special wedding garments. The months passed in a whirlwind of activities, daydreams, laughter and the usual wedding worries and concerns. We were young, my Mahlon and I, but we were deeply in love, and after our wedding we would be together always. Ours would be a happy home, filled with the laughter of many children. Our little ones would be a godly seed, raised in a loving home, raised under the laws and love of the God of Israel. We would teach our children about His ways as we sat with them in our house, and when we walked along the village paths. We would say our morning and evening prayers together.

Yes, it was our prayer too that we could teach others, especially my family, of His ways. Not for us, Mahlon and me, were the ways of Chemosh. Our children would not be sacrificed to the huge fiery idol, Chemosh. I had first seen this done when I was a young girl, and the horror of the sight, and the wails of the baby and the cheers of the crowd haunt me yet. Mahlon had told me that God had promised a special son, one who would heal all the hurts brought on in the garden of Eden....a son who would bring life. Some of the old Hebrew writings indicated that God would choose the tribe of Judah, Mahlon's tribe, to be the royal tribe. Would it be (what a glorious thought!) that Mahlon and I might be the parents of this special one: the one destined to be king of all Israel?

Our wedding day dawned with the pale orange and gold light of the sun. Doves cooed softly in nearby olive groves. Somewhere a dog barked, and our village slowly came to life. Before the sun would rise again I would be Ruth — wife of Mahlon, son of Elimelech and Naomi, children of Israel. Meanwhile there was work to be done and, as the day progressed, the noise and bustle increased. The house had to be tidied; the last of my belongings had to be packed; my dress needed some final stitches; supplies of food and wine should be checked; and arriving friends and family had to be greeted. Then suddenly it was evening....and time — time for the bridegroom and his friends to arrive. Near midnight the cries were heard:

“Here’s the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!”

The glow of their lamps brightened the dark night. The bridegroom’s procession arrived at my parents’ home and I was presented in my bridal array to my husband.

All accompanied us to our new home where there was feasting long into the night. Our life as husband and wife had begun. The days flowed together in endless happiness and joy. All was well: spring and fall rains arrived as expected, harvests were rich and plentiful, and I was content in my new life.

I was also blessed to have such a mother-in-law as Naomi — she was always available to listen and to work with me. And she spoke of many beliefs, beliefs which I now treasured also. Over and over she told me of God’s great plans and miracles. Stories of creation, of the flood in Noah’s days, of the sign of the rainbow, of the call of Abram and Sarai and of their names being changed to Abraham and Sarah.

Naomi told me again and again of God’s covenant with His friend Abraham — and of special promises of the land of Canaan for an everlasting inheritance to Abraham and his children (and all this when Abraham and Sarah had no sons or daughters!). She told me that God had promised to Abraham and Sarah their own child, and also a special “son” or descendant in future years. She told me that from Abraham and Sarah kings would come and that one day, through Abraham, all families of the earth (even the idolatrous Moabites) would be blessed.

And in those few years we had together as husband and wife, Mahlon and I hoped for a son or daughter to be born to us. But month after month passed and no baby filled our empty arms. Naomi was a comfort here, too, because she would remind me of how Sarah and Rebekah had waited for many years. So we waited too — confident that our Father would bless us in His own time.

Then one day our real troubles began. Mahlon came home from the fields to tell me that Elimelech had been taken home ill; he was complaining of dizziness and a severe headache. Supper was for-gotten. We ran the short distance to Naomi and Elimelech’s home. Naomi’s eyes were filled with concern. We sat there with her for long hours (there was little else we could do), and, as the evening deepened into night, our Elimelech’s sleep deepened into death.

In the hours and days that followed, we, his children, went about our tasks with unfeeling bodies. Our family head had been taken from us so quickly, and without any warning. Naomi alone was a pillar of strength. She fully believed that God’s people would sleep the sleep of death for awhile and that one day He would awaken them in a resurrection, at the last day. She knew that the righteous were taken away from the evil to come....and so we wondered what the future held for us, the living.

Naomi filled her hours with tasks at Orpah and Chilion’s home and at our place. She knew she could live at either house, but chose to remain in her own home, her memories of Elimelech surrounding her. As the year came to a close, sorrow and calamity struck us again. This time it was an accident. Chilion was buried under heaps of rubble as an old barn collapsed while repairs were being made. Our grief was felt by our entire village. Why had this happened to us? First Elimelech and now Chilion — Mahlon only was left to carry the family name. Somehow we survived another funeral.

The new year brought little joy or hope. Of late I had noticed changes in Mahlon and I was secretly alarmed. But who could I tell? I watched him grow weaker until finally he could no longer attend to his work. As his condition became known, our neighbors helped us with crops and chores. Naomi was with us, constantly hovering over her only son. She would talk of their home in Bethlehem, and of happier times they had had there. She talked also of how our God had given Israel a good land — a land of springs and hills; a land with wheat, barley, fig trees, and honey....a rich land.

News was beginning to reach our village of better times in Israel and some families talked of returning. But for us returning was impossible. Mahlon was much worse, despite rest and medication. His were long pain-filled days, and nights spent tossing in feverish sleep. I lay beside him, wondering how much longer his suffering would last and remembering him in other, healthier days. I wondered too how I would live without him. How would Naomi, Orpah and I live without our men?

Finally, the inevitable end came. It was a farewell I had never, ever expected to say. But at the very last it was almost a relief. Now we three were left....alone. Once so full, happy and content, we were now so empty, dressed in widow’s clothing, and near-ly destitute. The God of Israel had given....and had taken away. I clung to this thought and therefore I had hope: because of the Lord’s great love we had not been consumed, for His compassions never fail. They were new every morning, in many little ways. So I said to myself: The Lord is my portion; therefore I will wait for Him. The Lord is good to those whose hope is in Him, to the one who seeks Him. And so I encouraged myself: Why are you downcast, my soul? Why are you so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise Him, my Savior and my God.

Mahlon’s last days, as I told you, had been long, painful ones. Now my days were long....and my nights even longer. At morning I wished for evening. At evening I wished for morning. Sounds would revive happy moments: the barking of a dog, as on my wedding morn; the crying of a baby, which reminded me of the little ones we had hoped for, but never had. A sunrise or sunset would stir up sweet memories....and for a fleeting moment I would find happiness. I longed for Mahlon’s strong arms to hold me and to assure me that all was well....that I had just had a bad dream. But there was no Mahlon... only the bad dreams... and so much emptiness in my life.

Naomi, too, seemed crushed with the three losses. As for Orpah, she was withdrawn and spent much time with her own family. Bit by bit she was drawn back to her old way of worship. Neighbors were well meaning, but the kind invitations to visit and the gifts of food soon stopped. People had their own, more immediate concerns and problems, and no one could blame them. We were forced to sell as much of our property and possessions as possible, in order to live. Naomi and Orpah moved into my home. The joyful women's conversations at the well grew quiet when any of us approached. And there was always silence... too much silence...for grieving, remembering and wondering ... what if... or... if only... or.....

One evening around a humble meal we three came to a decision: we would go to Naomi's homeland. She had been longing for her former home, her friends, her own life in her own land — the land promised to the fathers. And so we began to bring to a close our lives in our village. My home would be taken over by newlyweds. Mine and Mahlon's first and only home (so carefully and lovingly built by him, Chilion and Elimelech), once filled with so much happiness and hope, now awaited a final parting from me, and another newly-married life would begin within its walls.

The morning of our departure arrived, and a gray, dismal day it was, perfectly in tune with our aching hearts. We had joined a small group of families who were returning to Israel, but we hardly noticed their presence. Our minds were heavy with memories and grief. Our bodies were heavy with personal belongings over our shoulders. Silent tears streamed down our faces. All our goodbyes had been said. Ours was a lonely farewell. As we left our town a light rain began to fall. The village was still quiet... it was a good morning to stay snuggled in a blanket, with family securely settled within a warm house. But off we started, unmindful of the rain and unmindful too when it stopped.

The sun rose slowly and faintly in the eastern sky. As we passed an unknown town we could see and hear the familiar sounds of nature and households waking up. Birds began to chirp; roosters crowed and dogs barked at us in passing. Women followed by sleepy girls walked barefoot to a well; men and boys, bread in hand, walked along time-worn paths to the shops and fields. Ah, yes, life was returning to this village. But none of this for us, Naomi, Orpah and Ruth, widows and travelers. Onward we trudged. Suddenly Naomi stopped, put her burdens down and turned to us. Her face and body seemed weary and her words came slowly:

"Go back, each of you, to your mother's home. May the LORD show kindness to you, as you have shown to your dead and to me. May the LORD grant that each of you will find rest in the home of another husband."

Then, with tears streaming down her face she kissed us... and we, widows of Israel, wept together. We would not leave her — not Orpah and me. We loved each other — we were family — in happy times, in sad times... in all times. But she persisted:

"Return home, my daughters. Why would you come with me? Am I going to have any more sons, who could become your husbands? Return home, my daughters; I am too old to have another husband. Even if I thought there was still hope for me — even if I had a husband tonight and then gave birth to sons — would you wait until they grew up? Would you remain unmarried for them? No, my daughters. It is more bitter for me than for you, because the Lord's hand has gone out against me!"

And we all wept again. But then something strange happened: Orpah kissed Naomi... and left! She left her widowed mother-in-law and me... and walked back along the pathway we had just traveled — back to her family and their gods.

Then it was Naomi and me... alone. Then Naomi spoke:

"Look, your sister-in-law is going back to her people and her gods. Go back with her."

But I would not leave this mother-in-law of mine — this, my only family — to return to the ways of Moab, to the worship of Chemosh. So I told her what my heart felt, the words tumbling out in a quiet desperation:

"Don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely, if anything but death separates you and me."

When she saw that I was steadfastly minded to go with her, Naomi stopped asking. And as we picked up our possessions to rejoin the caravan, we looked back to see Orpah disappearing over a hill. Then we turned, and faced forward to unknown pathways, to an uncertain future.

Then we saw it... a rainbow arching across the blue-gray clouds in the fresh morning air. At the sight of it, Naomi and I were filled with joy at the reminder of our Father's love and concern for all of His creation. The weight of the past months, the pain and sorrow, seemed lifted and our hearts rejoiced in the God of Israel. For indeed *He* would *never* leave us. He had walked with us through the valley of the shadow of death, and now He would lead us onward to a safe and secure dwelling place. He had restored our souls. Gone now were the heavy hearts, the silent tears of despair and the slow steps. Now our spirits were lifted high with hope and trust, and our feet were eager to stand in the Promised Land. We started off once more.

It took us several days to travel north to the Jordan River. The children in our group chattered constantly: "Are we there yet?"... "When will we get there?"... And then "I'm tired", or, "I'm hungry", or, "I'm thirsty." Our route was along the king's highway — where once Moses and Israel had walked. Our minds traveled back in time to the wanderings of the children of Israel: of their complaints...of their hunger... of their thirst and of our Heavenly Father's blessings. Even though it was springtime the air blowing across the Salt Sea was hot and dry, with a peculiar odor. It was here that Naomi told me the story of Lot and the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah — a destruction which had changed the area around the sea from a veritable garden of Eden to a scene of total desolation, and the sea itself from life to death. In contrast, Moab's countryside was fresh, green and alive with crops.

Onward we walked, step after step, village after village, across fields, through vineyards and over streams. Travel was always dangerous: besides the unpredictable spring weather there was the possibility of robbers. But we believed the hand of our God was upon us for good and He would go with us through all situations. Nights were spent in the open fields, under the twinkling stars, listening to the sounds of the awakening earth. We could lie down and sleep, for the angel of the Lord encamped around us.

Daily now, Naomi seemed renewed. She spoke again of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob — of God's covenant to them, of the sufferings of Joseph, of Moses the mighty prophet and lawgiver, and of the hope of a Savior to come. As we trekked northward through the plains and mountains of Moab we passed Mount Nebo, where Moses had viewed the Promised Land. With what mixed emotions we passed that lonely mountain! Moses had viewed God's special land, but we, Naomi and I, were entering it. We rejoiced that one day, Moses would live again, this time to enter the land promised to the fathers and to all who loved and obeyed the God of Israel.

So, onward our little band of travelers went — up through Moab's mountains and down a steep road to the Jordan River. Naomi talked of years ago, when as a family of four they had crossed this way. For a moment she withdrew into her memories. I wiped tears from her cheeks and reminded her: I was with her and the God of Israel was with us. We *would* find rest in her town of Bethlehem, and God's goodness and mercy would follow us.

As we approached the Jordan I was aware that we were leaving an old way of life, the way of Moab with its idol worship. All that I had ever known was now behind me. I had a new life, new situations and a renewed faith ahead of me. For this was truly the beginning of all things — this was the Passover season. Israel, also, had crossed here and had its first Passover in the Promised Land.

Now we two hurried along, for Naomi had hoped to be in Bethlehem for my first "real" Passover. I felt like a small child just starting on life's great journey. It was exciting, it was thrilling... it was also, I must admit, a little frightening. Just as Joshua the new leader and a renewed Israel had entered the Promised Land in this same territory many years ago, so now we, Naomi and I, crossed over in faith. We must be strong and of good courage, for our God would never leave us. I knew He would maintain the cause of the afflicted, and the right of the poor.

It was in this area that our caravan divided. Some went north, some west and yet others turned southward. But they all were going home. As we passed Jericho's ruins Naomi recounted how God had given the city to Joshua and Israel. Once again I heard of the faith of the woman Rahab, and how she had married into Elimelech's family.

We continued up the steep incline, onward to the southwest. We must go by the larger city of Salem or Jebus. Some now call it Jerusalem — "city of peace". But it has never been peaceful around Jerusalem. Naomi says that when the special son, promised to Abraham and Sarah, comes, he will bring peace, not only to Jerusalem, but to all the world! After what seemed like an endless climb that left Naomi panting for breath, we did see Jebus. It stood high on a series of valleys and rocky heights — a city of Canaanites in a land of Israelites. No wonder the Israelites had had difficulties conquering such a fortress!

Naomi told me that long ago father Abram had visited with the great king-priest of this city. Indeed the king, Melchizedek (Naomi said his name meant "king of righteousness"), had been so impressed with the character of Abram that he, Melchizedek, had blessed Abram. But that was long ago. And the God whom Melchizedek worshiped was now forgotten by these Jebusites.

Now we had to turn south past Jebus towards Bethlehem. It was springtime, the time of harvest for the barley and wheat crops. The fields yielded one hundred fold — and Naomi marveled at the contrast to previous crops when drought had ravished the land. New life was all around us, and the very sights and sounds urged our weary footsteps onwards. At last the end of our journey was in sight. The sun was setting like a crimson ball in the western sky as we slowly walked into Bethlehem.

2 CHAPTER 2

The sights and sounds, though now of Israel instead of Moab, were much the same. Village life in these areas changes little from nation to nation or from generation to generation. Men and women were hurrying home for the night; evening meals were being prepared; restless children calmed; older children, still full of energy, played just one more game in the dusty streets.

Women made a final trip to the town's well which was by the gate — how many times had Naomi longed for a drink from this well! This was when they saw us — two dusty, tired women... coming home. I was the first to hear the

whispers:

“Is this Naomi?”

“But who is her companion?”

“Elimelech? and Chilion and Mahlon — where are they?”

Naomi answered them, forgetful for a moment of my presence:

“Don’t call me Naomi — call me Mara, because the Almighty has made my life very bitter. I went away full, but the Lord has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi? The Lord has afflicted me; the Almighty has brought misfortune upon me.”

Her grief had been called to remembrance and for a brief moment some bitterness showed through. But my mother-in-law was a strong woman and she quickly regained control of her emotions. Friends and relatives, so overjoyed to see us, surrounded us with questions, kisses, hugs and invitations. Yes, we *were* home! For tonight we would sleep in a relative’s house, but in the morning, God willing, we would search out our own home.

Thus it was that I was in Bethlehem for my first “real” Passover, as Naomi always called it. After resting I sat quietly with Naomi, watching the Passover preparations being made. When all was in readiness we joined some of her relatives around the table, listened to the children’s questions, and then to the responses of her cousin, the head of the family, as he recited the history of that special night so long ago. Finally we partook of all the special dishes and wines.

By the time it was completed I was extremely weary, as was Naomi. It seemed like forever before all the family departed. Naomi and I then excused ourselves and helped each other up the outside stairs to the “upper room” where we would sleep. And sleep we did — a deep, peaceful sleep under Israel’s starlit sky.

Village life was starting again for Naomi and me. Early the next morning she took me through the streets, introducing me to everyone she saw, visiting with old friends, catching up on news and checking at the city gate to see who was settling which dispute. Here too, at the gate, she inquired about her old home — was it vacant? Had anyone lived there in her absence? “Yes” came the reply, the house was vacant. And “No” — nobody had lived in it.

So we set off for the home she had longed for — our new home. Past the shops already noisy and busy with trade we went until finally we turned a corner onto a quiet lane. Her house was at the end of this lane. It looked very neglected and at the sight of it Naomi broke into tears and sobs. We trampled our way through grass and weeds and then pushed on the door. It opened readily, as though it were expecting us. Sunlight streamed into the house through the open door — the first sunlight to enter in years.

Naomi moved quickly about her little home, opening windows, barred and locked by Elimelech before they left for Moab. Dust was everywhere, but she was soon busy sweeping. And as she swept she remembered and she talked. This was a piece of furniture that Elimelech had made for them... this was where Chilion and Mahlon had been born... this was where her boys had learned to crawl, to toddle, to run. This was where they had cried and laughed together. This was home. It wasn’t long before friends appeared in the doorway, bearing gifts. There were clay lamps, with fresh olive oil, new blankets and mats, fire for the oven, fresh fruits and breads. We were indeed blessed — our cup was running over.

Like Naomi, I too had my memories. I tried hard not to think of my first home with Mahlon; that seemed so long ago and so far away — so much happiness, despair and sorrow had flashed through my life in these short years. But here we were, with a new life ahead. If this new life were to continue, then we must find food and provide our own clothing and necessities. Gifts would not last forever — we knew that from the past. Naomi talked of selling the remaining family field, but that would require some time. Meanwhile, our food supply was running low, as was our money. Food was measured out meal by meal; not a crumb was wasted.

The reality of poverty was setting in, here in this Promised Land, this land of milk and honey. How carefully we counted and recounted our coins before market day. We had learned to wait to avoid being observed when making our humble purchases. We had also learned that, by waiting till near the close of a market day, we could get some bargains. Overripe fruits, day-old bread and fish were still fresh enough for our table. I watched and waited while others shopped — and I must admit, there were times when my eyes would scan the ground beneath the stalls as I sought, like a child, for lost coins. I did not always see forgotten coins, but I did see the pitying looks of shop owners and friends alike. I felt the sting and shame of poverty, and my cheeks burned with embarrassment. It was not something I could talk about with Naomi, for she suffered her own private shame with this new situation.

We were not the only poor in Bethlehem, I told myself... but we had not always been poor... it took time to adjust. I prayed fervently and often. I knew that God chooses the poor in this world — *if* they are rich in faith. I prayed for neither poverty nor riches — I would be very content with just daily bread. But I must not become so poor that I would be tempted to steal and so dishonor the name of the Great God I had chosen to serve.

I lay awake at night considering how to tell Naomi of the decision I had made. I would become a gleaner, foraging in the already-worked fields for a bit of food. With such a bountiful harvest there would be ample grain left in the fields

for the poor, the widows and the strangers. Naomi and I were indeed in these situations! When I told her my decision, she expressed disapproval of this type of work for me, but we really had no choice. If I didn't work, we wouldn't eat — and so I would work!

I did not have to travel far for gleaning. Fields on the edge of town were rich for harvesting, and the reapers were singing and talking noisily at their work. Behind the reapers I saw women and children gleaning what had fallen from the reapers' hands. The corners of the fields had been left untouched; that was where I began to glean. The sun became hotter overhead, but a constant breeze eased the work — just a little. I was not used to this type of labor — it had always been done by others. How quickly the back and legs ached! I stopped from time to time to stretch my sore body, but there was nothing to be done for my hands, which had quickly been torn by the crisp husks. But I must continue.

And so, hour after hour, and day after day, I bent over the fields. I would rest under trees at noon and eat the bread and cheese Naomi had wrapped early in the morning for me. There were days when my bread and cheese went to feed a hungry child, for there were others in Israel who were as poor as I.

Early afternoons were rest times for all laborers and gleaners, for the sun was at its hottest. It was during these quiet hours that I made friends with the other women. They did not treat me as a stranger — they had heard all about me, as life in a village has no secrets. Indeed when we talked of the blessings we had in the promises to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, they realized that I, too, had even embraced the faith of their fathers. I, with them, was an Israelite hoping for the time when one special child would be born to relieve the sufferings of the poor and needy — a time of plenty, a time of righteousness — a time of rest.

But for now, there was work. My body was growing used to the hours in the field, and my labor produced sufficient grain for Naomi and me to live comfortably. I knew that there were other crops growing in the area throughout the summer and fall seasons, therefore I would probably have enough work to last till winter. Winter! I tried not to think of the winter coming. God would provide. My labor and concerns must be only for each day. I looked upward to the birds of the air, and downward at the lilies of the field. All were cared for by my Heavenly Father. Naomi and I were also under His sheltering wings.

One day in some new fields there was a great deal of excitement among the reapers. I looked up to see a well-dressed man, followed by several servants, striding through the field. The reapers spoke to him with respect. He was the owner, a friend told me, Boaz, a wealthy and generous man. He had been away from Bethlehem for some time, so he had spent this morning with his chief steward reviewing his accounts. Now he was going about to check on his various fields and vineyards. As he walked through his fields he would stop and visit with his laborers — he knew each one of them and their families. He also took time to check on the gleaners — many of the women and children he called by name. Me, he did not recognize. When he inquired of a reaper he was told that I was the Moabite woman who had returned with Naomi. How odd....I had not thought of myself as a foreigner for a long time. The reapers had not heard my discussions with the women, so to them I was a Moabite, a stranger from the covenants of promise, having no hope, without God in the world.

I listened without hearing. My mind sought refuge in silent prayer. The head servant was explaining further:

"She is the Moabite who came back from Moab with Naomi. She said, 'Please let me glean and gather among the sheaves behind the harvesters.' She went into the field and has worked steadily from morning till now, except for a short rest in the shelter."

And I watched, heart pounding, as this great landowner crossed the field toward me. What was he going to say? What would he do? Would he tell me to leave his fields? My friends had said what a kind and generous man this Boaz was... surely he would not send me away! But here he was, standing before me. I heard his words as though from a great distance, because my heart was beating so loudly:

"My daughter, listen to me. Don't go and glean in another field and don't go away from here. Stay here with my servant girls. Watch the field where the men are harvesting, and follow along with the girls. I have told the men not to touch you. And whenever you are thirsty, go and get a drink from the water jars the men have filled."

I fell on my face and bowed before him in gratitude. Somehow I squeezed the words from my trembling lips:

"Why have I found such favor in your eyes that you notice me — a foreigner?"

Boaz continued:

"I've been told all about what you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband — how you left your father and mother and your homeland and came to live with a people you did not know before. May the Lord repay you for what you have done. May you be richly rewarded by the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge."

Arising, I thanked him for such kindness:

“May I continue to find favor in your eyes, my lord. You have given me comfort and have spoken kindly to your servant — though I do not have the standing of one of your servant girls.”

As he turned to leave, Boaz invited me to join the reapers for the noon meal. To my surprise, he, too, joined the reapers. Boaz gave thanks for our food and all of us echoed the “Amen”. The men’s mood had changed from the usual loud, boisterous talk of idle men to a serious tone... as that of students and teacher. Boaz talked of many things that he had seen and heard while travelling in Israel. He spoke of the farming conditions, and how there was no smith in the land — all farm implements had to be taken to the Philistines to be sharpened. He spoke of the military movements of neighboring countries; of the lack of swords and spears in Israel. And he mentioned the spiritual conditions of his nation. There were, Boaz said, rumors of unrighteous priests at the house of God in Shiloh.

He had also heard whispers of some wanting a king. A king, so Israel could be like its neighbors! Has Israel forgotten her real King, Boaz asked? The problem was, he continued, every man was doing what was right in his own eyes... did not Israel realize yet that man’s ways would lead to death? Had not God warned Israel many times that, if they chose to walk in wrong ways and to serve other gods, He would hide His face from them? Had not our great leader Moses told the people to hold fast to the God of Israel, for He is life and the lengthening of our days?

Boaz was very disturbed with conditions in his country. He talked on... and his reapers listened intently. Between conversations, he passed me roasted grain and bread. One time as our hands touched and our eyes met each other in awkward silence, I remembered... I remembered another similar time. I remembered Orpah and Chilion’s wedding and how my eyes had first met Mahlon’s, and how we had momentarily touched. I remembered the happy, dreamy days and months thereafter as we fell in love. I remembered our wedding and that special first home. Then a memory of his long painful sickness... and finally his death flashed through the thoughts.

My mind was brought back to the present and I saw myself now: Ruth... a widow in widow’s garments, a stranger to some, penniless... a gleaner, with rough hands and a tired body, sitting with a group of men. All of a sudden I was embarrassed. I blinked back tears as I gathered up the remnants of my meal and hurried back to the fields to continue my gleaning and to escape the past.

Unknown to me, Boaz watched me go and watched my efforts in his field. Something of my loss, and of my sadness, must have touched him, because — as I later learned — he commanded his reapers to let grain fall and remain available to me, and to let me glean even among the sheaves — not a normal procedure. The rule in most fields was that the gleaners were welcome to what was left only after the sheaves were bound and set up.

Meanwhile my women friends were curious as to why I, Ruth, had been invited to eat with Boaz and the men. I had no answers to their questions. I, too, was confused by the morning’s events. My circumstances were the topic of field conversation for the rest of the day. I knew, too, that by evening the talk around the village well would be of me. I was aware that the reapers now had special notice of me... and I felt uncomfortable. I was aware of the women’s smiles and the teasing comments... and I worked on. And as I worked through the field I thanked my Heavenly Father for having shown mercy to me in the sight of this Bethlehemite, this Boaz.

I worked till evening and threshed out the fruit of my labor. Thanks to Boaz’s instructions to his reapers there was a larger amount than usual to take to Naomi. My veil held another surprise for her: I had saved some of my noon meal for her — she would enjoy the roasted grain while I talked of this unusual day.

And talk we did! When Naomi saw the results of my day’s work, she immediately wanted to know where I had been gleaning and if someone had helped me. I told her that the wealthy farmer’s name was Boaz. I saw a stunned look cross her face and heard her whisper:

“The Lord bless him! He has not stopped showing his kindness to the living and the dead.”

And then in a firmer voice, she added:

“That man is our close relative; he is one of our kinsman-redeemers.”

I was also pleased to report to her that Boaz had insisted that I remain with his reapers in his fields throughout the rest of the barley and wheat harvests.

So it was that day followed day in an ordinary pattern. Life was simple, our needs were simple, and we clung to each other in the firm belief that our Heavenly Father knew those needs and would supply them all.

3 CHAPTER 3

While I was in the fields I could let my mind wander to the past, and sometimes I even smiled at the thought of a future. Would I always be one of the poor?... a gleaner, *always*? Would I someday remarry?... because at times now I could think such a thought. At other times it was still too painful to consider... but I could tell that the grief was

healing, slowly. Naomi's companionship was itself a healing balm and bond... but there were times when I longed for a home of my own again, some simple household tasks, a loving husband, and yes, I even dared to dream again of little ones. There were many young men in Bethlehem, but I saw little of them. My main contact with men was limited to Boaz's reapers, who would acknowledge my presence with occasional comments on the weather or inquiries as to Naomi's health.

As for Boaz, he visited his fields daily and spoke to me, as he did to his laborers and the other gleaners. And so, I would dismiss my daydreams with the thought that all things were in my Heavenly Father's capable hands, and He would provide for me in all my concerns, in due time. For now there was work to be done, by me.

I suspected that Naomi worried about my safety from time to time. I would leave home as the gray dawn appeared, and return only when the sun was setting. But I would tell her in words that she had often spoken to me:

"The Lord is my light and my salvation — whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life — of whom shall I be afraid?"

Little did I realize that Naomi was concerned for me in ways other than my safety in or near the fields!

Thus it was quite a shock when one evening she said to me:

"My daughter, should I not try to find a home for you, where you will be well provided for?"

I sat staring at her... my mind was a whirl of confusion. I felt light-headed. She was speaking... she was speaking of marriage for me! And not just to someone I did not know... but of marriage to Boaz, our wealthy relative... the man for whom I gleaned! She continued:

"Tonight he will be winnowing barley on the threshing floor. Wash and perfume yourself, and put on your best clothes. Then go down to the threshing floor, but don't let him know you are there until he has finished eating and drinking. When he lies down, note the place where he is lying. Then go and uncover his feet and lie down. He will tell you what to do."

I heard my own voice replying:

"I will do whatever you say."

I moved about our little house in a numb condition. How strange all of this seemed! So sudden! I was not in love with Boaz...or with anyone else! What a contrast to my courtship with Mahlon — we had had many visits, fallen in love and dreamily made plans. Then his father and he had visited my family, paid the dowry, and made the announcements. There had been the busy preparation time before the wedding — he, his father, and his brother had built and furnished our home; my mother and sisters and I were occupied with wedding garments and other arrangements. But now — ? Was Naomi sure of this custom? It was something of which I knew very little — and evidently a law very seldom observed in Israel. What if servants discovered me with Boaz? What if he refused to marry me? I had learned much of Israel's laws. I knew that when she talked of seeking rest for me, Naomi meant finding me a husband to care for and shelter me. I was to ask Boaz to spread his garment over me — thus I was asking him to protect me — to marry me.

I learned that the Law provided for a brother or next of kin to take his relative's widow as his wife. I learned, too, that the firstborn of such a marriage would be in memory of the deceased — with all legal rights and properties belonging to that child. I wasn't sure I was ready for all this. True, I had thought of remarrying... someday... but this was so sudden, so unusual. What would Boaz think of such a forward young woman? Would he, like others, see me as a Moabite — to be shunned forever? How was I to say the words? The thoughts tumbled together in my mind... and remained so as I followed Naomi's instructions. She was my mother-in-law, my parent... and I dutifully obeyed her. She had my wellbeing always in her mind — my physical and spiritual concerns were hers. But... what if?... No!... I must not doubt! Prayer after prayer went through my confused mind. This God of Israel had looked after me for some time now — I had to leave it all to Him. There was no turning back.

It was dark as I slipped nervously into the quiet streets of Bethlehem and moved on toward the edge of town. My feet knew the pathway, even if my mind was unsure. As I approached the threshing floor, I could hear Boaz bidding a good night to some guests. They had had a meal together, with a fair amount of wine, and some seemed a little unsteady on their feet. I remained in the shadows, watching, listening. Then Boaz's chief servant came to see what final tasks his master might have for him. But Boaz dismissed him for the night, and in just a few minutes he lay down at the end of a pile of grain.

I waited, nervously, till the last sounds of human life in the area were gone. Sounds of the night were all around. Crickets chirped softly in the warm earth; an owl in a nearby tree hooted repeatedly, and overhead the moon and stars twinkled in a black, velvet sky. I could hear Boaz breathing deeply and regularly as he drifted into heavy sleep. It had been a busy, tiring day and he slept well. Yes, the sleep of a laborer is sweet. Still I waited... was there no other way? None, it seemed. I must continue with the plan, and I must continue to believe that all would work out well.

Softly I crept over to him — and with trembling hands I lifted his blanket and slipped under at his feet. I lay there minute after minute... hour after hour... afraid of a servant coming, afraid to move lest I wake Boaz... and yet

knowing that my quest could only be finished if he were awake. I shivered as the warm evening turned to a cooler night, but was it the night air, or was it just my very anxious mind and body anticipating the dawn? At some point in the night, Boaz stretched and turned in his sleep. And it was at this time that he was suddenly aware of another body near him. He awoke with a start and, as we both sat up, he realized that a woman was with him. All the anxieties of the previous hours were now concentrated on this single moment. Now was the time. I must speak as Naomi instructed me. And now, I spoke first to my Heavenly Father, quickly, and then to Boaz, who had asked:

“Who are you?”

“I am your servant Ruth. Spread the corner of your garment over me, since you are a kinsman-redeemer.”

I heard him gasp and then there was a long silence. How my poor mind raced with regrets. Why had I let Naomi talk me into this? How would I bear the shame of his refusal? Where would I go? How would we live? So many questions flashed through my head. After what seemed like many minutes, he spoke:

“The Lord bless you, my daughter. This kindness is greater than that which you showed earlier: You have not run after the younger men, whether rich or poor. And now, my daughter, don’t be afraid. I will do for you all you ask. All my fellow townsmen know that you are a woman of noble character. Although it is true that I am near of kin, there is a kinsman and redeemer nearer than I. Stay here for the night, and in the morning if he wants to redeem, good; let him redeem. But if he is not willing, as surely as the Lord lives I will do it. Lie here until morning.”

And so I lay back down at his feet, but sleep was impossible. Was this really true? Or was I dreaming? The reality of the grain-covered ground, hard under me, the smell of the threshing floor and Boaz’s light breathing nearby, assured me that I *was* awake — and that, yes, I had indeed accomplished my task. Boaz would marry me. But first he had to see if the nearer kinsman wanted to marry me instead. I wondered who that was — what was he like? Did he already have a wife and children? Would he want a “Moabite” for a wife? Boaz would attend to all the details in the morning, he had said.

I was just drifting into an exhausted sleep when Boaz gently awakened me — it was near dawn and time for me to leave so no one would see us together. Before I left he filled my veil with barley to take home to Naomi. And then we parted — Boaz went toward town to attend to our business, and I went home. Naomi was up and waiting. (Had she ever gone to sleep? Had she spent an anxious night like I had?) As I entered, she eagerly greeted me —

“How did it go, my daughter?”

I told her everything. Then Naomi said,

“Wait, my daughter, until you find out what happens. For the man will not rest until the matter is settled today.”

Thus we sat down to await what this new day would bring... this new day which followed such a strange night for me, Ruth, widow of Mahlon, an Israelite. For me there was no rest... just waiting.

As we waited, I remembered. I remembered so many times of waiting in these past years. I had waited daily, hourly, for Mahlon’s visits. I had waited for a wedding announcement. I had waited for a wedding, for a new home, for a new life, for a child born of new love, new hopes and dreams... a child which had never come. I had waited beside sick beds; I had waited beside the dying; I had waited for prayers to be answered. I had spent so much time *waiting*.

And now I waited again for my future to be decided at a town gate.

4 CHAPTER 4

Boaz had gotten to the gate early — too early really to expect any action regarding legal matters. He had paced back and forth, listening to an awakening town... and waiting. He watched mothers and children drift towards the nearby well. He tried not to notice the curious look several women had. Why was Boaz ben Salmon so early at the gate? What important matter was there to be heard and judged at such an early hour of the day? As for Boaz, he impatiently watched for the relative, a cousin, who was needed in this case. A few more of the town elders came along the streets, greeted Boaz and sat down. But the relative — why was he so long in coming on such an important day? But, then, Boaz mused... his cousin did not know it was a day any different than any other. So he waited... until finally, Boaz could see the man coming around a corner. As he approached, Boaz called to him:

“Come over here, my friend, and sit down.”

Boaz then called several other men and, when a total of ten had assembled, he cleared his throat and began to speak. Facing the relative, he explained the reason for the assembly:

"Naomi, who has come back from Moab, is selling the piece of land that belonged to our brother Elimelech. I thought I should bring the matter to your attention and suggest that you buy it in the presence of these seated here and in the presence of the elders of my people. If you will redeem it, do so. But if you will not, tell me, so I will know. For no one has the right to do it except you, and I am next in line."

"I will redeem it," he said.

Boaz continued:

"On the day you buy the land from Naomi and from Ruth the Moabitess, you acquire the dead man's widow, in order to maintain the name of the dead with his property."

The relative, Boaz told me, looked perplexed. He shifted uncomfortably from one sandaled foot to another; he coughed; and then without raising his eyes toward Boaz, he blurted out:

"Then I cannot redeem it because I might endanger my own estate. You redeem it yourself. I cannot do it."

Boaz could not believe his ears. Was this man afraid of Ruth? Was this really what he was saying? He wanted the land, but not the widow. Was he afraid Ruth would bring him and his family poor fortune because of the three deaths in her family? Those deaths were not her fault. This was incredible! Had not this young woman proven herself a daughter of Abraham and Sarah, by her faith and her actions? Could not the people of Bethlehem see past the label "Moabite" and see a true daughter of Israel? Boaz snapped back to the situation when he heard his cousin say:

"Buy it yourself."

And buy it Boaz would... the land, the young woman Ruth, the old woman Naomi and all that was theirs. For Boaz knew the Law — the Law of the kinsman-redeemer. But first his cousin had to remove his sandal and give it to Boaz, thus showing that he gave up all claims to Ruth, Naomi and their properties. For so said the Law. Boaz accepted the sandal in sight of all the elders and witnesses at the gate. For by now, there were many villagers passing by who were listening intently to the proceedings. Then in a clear, loud voice he announced to all:

"Today you are witnesses that I have bought from Naomi all the property of Elimelech, Chilion and Mahlon. I have also acquired Ruth the Moabitess, Mahlon's widow, as my wife, in order to maintain the name of the dead with his property, so that his name will not disappear from among his family or from the town records. Today you are witnesses!"

Then the elders and all those with them replied:

"We are witnesses. May the Lord make the woman who is coming into your home like Rachel and Leah, who together built up the house of Israel. May you have standing in Ephrathah and be famous in Bethlehem. Through the offspring the Lord gives you by this young woman, may your family be like that of Perez, whom Tamar bore to Judah."

Boaz's waiting was over.

My waiting was continuing. I had begun to walk in little circles within Naomi's humble home. Naomi busied herself with some spinning... and she waited also. We both saw him as he strode quickly down our lane, followed now by others. What would he say? To whom would I become a wife? What of Naomi? My heart was beating wildly. I felt numb. When he knocked Naomi arose slowly, putting her spinning to one side. We glanced at each other... my body was unmoving... so I waited for Naomi to open the door. As he came into the house, Boaz smiled, gently took my rough hands within his and told me our news. My wait... our wait was over.

Once again I prepared for a wedding. This time our betrothal period was very short — only a few weeks. There was much to be done in such a short time. Boaz had many friends and relatives to be invited to the festivities. Naomi and Boaz's servants busied themselves with the preparations. Naomi seemed totally revived with the anticipation of a fresh start for both of us... for she was included in our plans. She would leave her little house and move into the larger home of Boaz. She took great pleasure daily in passing on to all her friends the details of "how it happened", and in telling of the extensive wedding preparations.

Thus it was that before the end of harvest, Boaz and I were wed. There were days when I marveled at the sudden contrast in my life... from a position of gleaning in Boaz's fields... to that of his wife! Never again would I want for anything of this world's goods. Gone were the shabby widow's clothing, the hoarding and counting of a few coins, the shame that a life of poverty brings. Suddenly I had menservants, maidservants, riches... and above all, a husband who loved me. My heart was overwhelmed many times during these early days and weeks of betrothal and marriage. I repeatedly thanked my Heavenly Father for removing my sackcloth and clothing me with joy. Thus my heart sang to my God day after day and would not be silent. I would give Him thanks forever.

The joys I had hoped to share with Mahlon would now be shared with Boaz. The past grew dimmer and I grew to love Boaz in ways different from my first love, my early love for my Mahlon. Naomi was happy with us; for her too, the

past grew more distant and less painful.

Many times Boaz told me of his family and of his hope to have a son who might be the promised seed. He knew how desperately Israel needed a Savior appointed by God. I think I also learned why, Boaz, unlike our relative, had been unafraid to marry a "Moabitess": his own mother had been Rahab... the woman of Jericho that Naomi had told me about. Boaz's father, Salmon the prince of Judah, had heard of her faith and belief in Israel's God and had taken her to him as wife. My Boaz was born to this remarkable couple.

A few months after our wedding I found that I was with child. Boaz was delighted at the prospect of fatherhood. He hurried to the gate to spread his news. Naomi also joyously made her way to the town well to spread her share of the happy tidings... although I think everyone between our home and the well had heard her before she got that far! And me? I arose daily with praise on my lips, glorifying the Lord. He had been mindful of the humble state of His servant and had not left me without the child we prayed for. The months seemed to pass so slowly as I waited, yet again, and prayed and prepared for the little one soon to be ours.

He finally arrived one day a little more than one year after our wedding. I felt the first pains of labor very early in the morning. It was a long struggle, and the late afternoon sun — very hot for that time of the year — was streaming in the windows when the midwife said "You have a son", and the first cries of my baby boy resounded throughout that large, waiting home. Yes, "Obed ben Boaz" came into this town of Bethlehem with a piercing wail. And with him he brought tears from me — tears of joy, relief and thankfulness. This was he... the son for whom we had prayed. Within minutes, Obed was passed from my tired arms to the strong welcoming arms of his father. We both checked his fingers and toes — exactly ten of each! Then we washed him and wrapped him in swaddling clothes as the custom has always been, so that his limbs would grow straight and strong.

I prayed with all my being that just as we were binding his limbs for strength, so might his heart and life be bound up in the ways of his Creator, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel.

And then it was I who placed him in those old arms of Naomi — those arms reaching out, spanning many years of joys and sorrows, now to hold my son, my Obed

I remember it all — now as I gaze upon this new bundle of life, this my latest great-grandson, David...

David, son of Jesse, son of Obed, son of Boaz and Ruth, son of Salmon and Rahab... son of Abraham... and son of Israel!

And I have the strange and powerful feeling, at what must be nearly the end of a very long and full life, that something fresh and new and wonderful is just beginning.