

Gathered

A Novel of Ruth

Lee Ann Setzer



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For Heidi

Prologue

A RIOT OF CUCUMBER VINES FILTERED THE LATE AFTERNOON sun onto the courtyard's paving stones and the half a dozen young servants who were supposed to be scrubbing, baking, and grinding, preparing for the next day's wedding. They kept pausing in their work, though, to watch the interesting spectacle in the corner near the door, away from the animals. On a pole suspended at its ends from the lattice work above, Ruth carefully spread out the sleeves of her saffron-colored wedding robe. The hot air around the garment seemed to glow golden-orange, and the eye sought refuge in a complex pattern of cool green leaves and vines that twined into a thicket on the back. Ruth followed the pattern through its familiar curves until it ended in a half-hidden bird that peered out of the greenery. She frowned at it. "I was so excited to start sewing, I had to do that accursed bird first." She tried to coax an errant thread into place with one fingertip. "I wonder if there'd be time to redo just this part by the cheek . . ."

Her cousin Orpah grabbed her shoulders firmly and gave her a little shake. "There would *not!* You've reworked that bird fifty times. It was perfect before, and it still is!"

"No, look," replied Ruth, her finger following the line of one of the offending threads. "If he's like an egret, these feathers ought to be pointing down, not back, and this one section is looser than the rest, so that—"

"—So that the entire robe is drying in wrinkles, and you'll be up half the night rewetting it, and get married in a damp gown!" Orpah tugged randomly at a sleeve, and Ruth abandoned the bird to hurry over and shake the seam straight.

Ruth smiled gratefully as Orpah's mother, Yazmin, appeared in time to gently pull the other end of the seam for her. "That looks about right," opined Yazmin. "Let's do the top, now—I brought a stool."

As Ruth and Yazmin smoothed each wrinkle with their fingers, Ruth noticed Orpah on the ground below her gazing around the courtyard, and, apparently finding nothing in the wedding preparations to catch her eye, out into the street. Orpah's own wedding robe, completed two years before and washed earlier today, hung ready in her room. As Ruth and Yazmin started in on the back of the sleeve, Orpah sighed and turned around. "You know, in the king's house, you'd have had a dozen servants to do that for you."

"I wouldn't have let them," replied Ruth without taking her eyes off the long crease she was following to the hem. "Sooner hand over my needle."

"That, too! You could have spent two years on nothing but the bird, and they could have done the vines, and the borders, and—"

Ruth climbed down off the stool and glared at Orpah over the sleeve's hem. "Cousin, you make me positively glad of the sheep plague!"

Orpah's eyes darted around, and she abruptly subsided. Even Yazmin looked worried. "Make sure my father's not around before you say things like that!" Orpah eyed a passing maidservant suspiciously, and the girl fled in alarm. "Mother finally convinced him just yesterday not to lodge a formal protest with the king for breaking our betrothal."

"That *is* good news," said Ruth in relief. "If he backs down, my father may also. A protest could get them assassinated."

Orpah rolled her eyes. "Exactly!" she hissed. "So just don't say anything about sheep, or plagues, or princes, or—*anything!* All right?"

Ruth rubbed a shoulder where the bruises from her father's most recent beating over the issue of the wasted wedding robes hadn't yet healed. "All right. I'm sorry."

Orpah's sudden embrace threatened to undo the work of the last half hour. "Dear Ruth! Always sorry! As if every beating you receive is your fault!"

"Oof," said Ruth, disentangling Orpah from another bruise. Orpah busied herself poking at the hem unhelpfully.

All three women worked comfortably together for a stretch. As they debated whether the sleeve needed any more work, Yazmin commented, "I just hope these boys from Jacob's Street recognize the gems they're marrying."

Orpah looked up at Ruth. "Oh, that reminds me, Ruth! Your aunt told me they changed their minds again."

Ruth blew out her breath. "So that means I'm marrying . . ."

"Mahlon, the elder brother, of course! Haven't you even been paying attention?"

"Does it matter?"

"Of course it matters! Now Mahlon gets the needle that queens fought for, and Chilion gets—" She ended the sentence with a dismissing wave across her own face.

Mahogany curls, huge brown eyes, tiny feet, and the courage to look up at a man just so, and get whatever you want. Ruth knew Orpah to be as much a virgin as herself. Orpah saved that look for sellers of spice and dye in the marketplace, but no husband would stand a chance against her.

"I'm just glad the two of you will remain together," said Yazmin. "It's the only thing I'm glad for," she added under her breath.

They had just started in on the second sleeve, hurrying in the dying light, when a servant girl swung open the gate to the courtyard. Ruth's Aunt Sharbat hurried over to them.

Cutting short Yazmin's welcome, Sharbat announced: "They are coming."

With her long, straight hair under a housewife's headscarf and her long, straight body in a middle-aged woman's somber robes, Sharbat, who had kept house for Ruth's father since his wife's death, could deceive a casual observer into thinking her unremarkable. But every woman in this quarter of Kir-hareseth

recognized her as the conduit for their gods, and the two visions that divided her life often warred for superiority when she was excited.

Sharbat was very excited right now. “They’re not here yet. You must come home at once!” She tugged Ruth toward the door.

“But—” stammered Ruth.

Orpah, used to Sharbat after years of living next door to her, waved encouragingly at Ruth. “Don’t worry! We’ll finish up for you!”

Ruth planted her heels. “But—!”

Yazmin walked over to them and put a hand on Ruth’s arm. “Don’t worry, dear,” she murmured. “I’ll send Orpah away and ask little Adah to help me.” Yazmin caught the eye of a serving maid, who trotted over obediently. “She’s got nimble fingers, and she’ll be as careful as I tell her to.”

Flashing a look at Yazmin that Ruth hoped conveyed the full extent of her concern for the precious robe, Ruth allowed herself to be led away.

In the street, she managed to splutter, “But, *who’s* coming?”

Sharbat stopped and met Ruth’s eye for only as long as it took to reply. “Your mother- and father-in-law.” Then she swept away, through the door at Ruth’s house. Ruth hurried after her, to walk into a cloud of dust raised by a serving maid. Sharbat already had the house in an uproar, straightening and polishing.

A hand on Ruth’s shoulder startled her out of her unhelpful daze. Orpah whispered, “My mother ran me off. What’s going on? Who’s ‘they’?”

“Our mother- and father-in-law, she said.”

Orpah’s eyes widened. “Both of them? But, what does *he . . . ?*”

Ruth shook her head helplessly, but Orpah’s mind was already skipping ahead over unpleasant possibilities.

“It’s got to be something about the wedding—something bad, of course, or he’d let Mother Naomi take care of it. Maybe