

For
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&
E T E R N I T Y

ALLISON
PITTMAN



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For Time and Eternity

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Designed by Jacqueline L. Nuñez

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FOR MY PARENTS, DEE AND DARLA HAPGOOD.

Thank you for keeping Jesus Christ
in the center of our home.

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PROLOGUE

I never stop to ask myself if I should have done anything different. After all, how can you look at the assembled pages of your life and decide which should be ripped out and which should remain to press the treasures of your memories? Seems to me the greatest joy comes out of the pain that nurtures it, and you cannot keep one without the other. So I am forced, here at the end of it all, to fold every leaf together and say, as God did of his early people, that I did the best I knew how. I lived according to my conscience. He alone can forget the depth and breadth of my sin, and I claim the blood of his Son, Jesus, to all others who would judge me. I have lived now nearly forty years with my choices, and sometime hence I will die in his grace. That is the hope no man can steal from me.

Not again.

EXCERPT FROM "ESCAPE FROM ZION: THE SPIRITUAL JOURNEY OF CAMILLA FOX (NÉE DEARDON)," *Ladies' Home Journal*, July 1896.

CHAPTER 1

DEARDON DAIRY FARM, NORTH OF KANESVILLE, IOWA

June 1850

I could hear them singing in the darkness.

“There’s more out there tonight.”

“Come away from that window.” Mama came up behind me, took the curtain out of my hand, and drew it across the glass. “Have you finished your reading?”

I hadn’t even started, but Mama must have known that because the Bible was sitting on our table, closed. The strip of blue velvet still marked the chapter I read the night before.

“You’d best get to it before your father gets home.” She

paced the length of the room and finally busied herself putting away the dishes drying on the sideboard.

I turned up the lamp, stretching Mama's shadow near up to the ceiling, and drew the Bible closer to me. Last night I finished the book of Ruth, so tonight would be the first chapter of 1 Samuel. I thumbed through the pages. Thirty-one chapters. One whole month. It would be the middle of summer before I made my way to Samuel's second book.

"Now there was a certain man of Rama—Ramathaim—" Eight words in, and I was ready to give up.

"Ramathaimzophim." Mother spoke over my shoulder.

". . . of mount Ephraim, and his name was Elkanah, the son of Jeroham, the son of . . ." I looked up. "Honestly, Mama, I don't see why—"

"One chapter a night, Camilla. No matter what it says. Continue."

So I forged on, verse after verse, filling our kitchen with the rivalry between Hannah and Peninnah, Hannah's prayer, and the baby Samuel. None of it was new to me. I'd been reading a chapter of the Bible out loud every night since I turned seven. That was nearly nine years ago. This was the third time I'd read this story.

"What does this chapter teach you about being a better Christian?" Mama asked when I'd finished. She asked the same question every night. During my first year reading, she just asked if I understood what I read. I always said yes, even if I didn't. But by the second time around, I had to be prepared for this.

"It teaches us that God will answer our prayers if we ask him with a faithful, sincere heart."

"Mm-hmm." She was distracted now, back at the window. "And what does it teach you about being a better woman?"

This second question started with Genesis 1, where, after a little prompting from Mother, I learned that my purpose on earth was to bear children. I'll never forget the sadness in her voice when she shared this truth with me, her only child. It haunts me to this day.

"Camilla?" Her voice was more impatient now. Sharp. Still she stared into the night sky. "The lesson for being a better woman?"

"A good woman will pray to have children?"

She turned to me, letting the curtain fall again. "A woman realizes that her children are a gift from God. And just as he gives them to her, she must trust him with their care."

"Still," I said, trying to ease the tension in the room, "I'm glad you let me live here instead of dropping me off at the church. The pews aren't nearly as comfortable as my bed."

She rewarded me with a warm smile. "You should know. You've fallen asleep enough during the sermon. Now choose your verse and quickly. You've dawdled enough as it is."

I left the lamp on the table and ran upstairs to my room. No need for a light. There it was, right on top of my bureau. My journal. The binding was real leather with a red ribbon stitched to the cover. Back downstairs Mama had set out the ink and pen.

My eyes grazing across the page, I untied the ribbon and dipped the pen into the ink.

"And don't just choose the shortest one," Mama said as she did every night since we instituted this ritual last summer as a way to keep up my penmanship practice when school was not in session.

"I know." But I certainly wasn't going to choose the *longest*, no matter how appealing the truth. "I'm choosing the eighth verse."

I opened my journal to the next clean page and painstakingly copied the words:

*Then said Elkanah her husband to her, Hannah,
why weepest thou? and why eatest thou not? and
why is thy heart grieved? am not I better to thee
than ten sons?*

I managed to have only three large blots of ink, and I wrote *Elkanah* in printed block letters instead of script to be sure I spelled it correctly. When I finished, I blew gently on the page to dry the ink and read the verse back to Mama before closing the book.

“And why did you choose that verse?”

“Because he loves her. Like Papa loves you even though I know he wishes he had boys instead of me.”

“Nonsense, Camilla. You know your father loves you very much. You are his treasure.”

“But I’m not much help on a dairy farm.”

Before Mama could answer to that, our dog, Bonnie-Belle, jumped up from where she was curled up on the rag rug in front of the stove and stood at the door. Her tail made a *thump*, *thump* against the wall.

“There’s your father now.” She took one more look out the window, then moved quickly to the door and pulled back the big iron bolt at the top. With Bonnie-Belle right at her heels, she moved over to the stove and opened the oven, pulling out the plate of supper that had been warming. “You need to put those away now.”

“I’ll keep them out until he comes in,” I said. “So he knows I finished my chapter and verse.”

Normally I would have been chastised for my lack of obedience, but tonight she barely seemed to hear me. She lifted a

wedge of corn bread left over in the pan and put it on Papa's plate along with a dish of butter and a jar of honey. She was just pouring a glass of water when Bonnie-Belle gave two happy barks, and my father walked through the door.

He was a big, barrel-chested man and bald as an egg. We had a neighbor once joke he looked more like a man who'd raise poultry than run a dairy. Papa laughed about it at the time, but it was a grim, polite laugh that made everyone standing around laugh, too, just hoping to make it funny. Truth is, most people were afraid of Papa to some measure, and for good reason. He might give his smooth scalp a good-natured rub and smile to everyone's face, but he turned away angry, vowing never to have a single chicken on his property. And indeed we never did.

"Ruth," he said before he crossed our threshold, "what did I tell you about keeping that door latched while I'm gone?"

"I didn't open it until I saw that it was you, Arlen." Her voice had a soothing quality, like fresh cream on a spring morning. "We've been safely tucked away all evening."

I was still at the table when he sat down, so when he bowed his head to bless his meal, I bowed mine, too.

"O Lord, for the bounty of this table we give thee thanks. Did you read your chapter?"

My eyes were still closed when I realized he was speaking to me. It wasn't like him to forget *amen*.

"Yes, Papa. I did. First Samuel, chapter 1. God answers Hannah's prayer by giving her a son, whom she dedicates to him by leaving the child at the house of the Lord."

He nodded, his mouth full of stew.

"I was just about to put these away," I said, gathering up the books. He nodded again, and I went into the parlor to put the Bible on the little table in front of our threadbare sofa. That's when I heard Mama ask about the meeting in town, and

she was asking in that hushed tone that meant I wasn't supposed to hear, so I stayed in the dark room, holding very still so I wouldn't miss a word.

"Not much longer," Papa said. "They're heading out west. They don't want to stay here any more than we want 'em to."

"I can't imagine." I wasn't sure if Mama was surprised or frightened.

"I can't imagine any of it. Bunch of heretics."

"Arlen." Mama's voice dropped so low I had to strain to hear at all. "You don't think we're in any danger, do you?"

"They had ten of their men representing at the meeting tonight, and Mayor Scott made it very clear. We will pose no violent threat to them as long as they remain peaceful in their camp. They can trade with our businesses, but they may not assemble in town."

"My goodness, it sounds like a kind of wartime peace treaty."

"Mark my words," Papa said. I looked through the door into the kitchen and saw his shadow cast against the wall. He gestured and pointed with his fork. "This is nothing less than a spiritual battle, and if we as a town will comport ourselves as Christians, we will emerge victorious both here on earth and in eternity to follow."

Something in Papa always wanted to be a preacher, and this was one of those times he seemed to be working himself into a sermon. I could be trapped in our parlor for an hour before he exhausted this speech. So I crept out, hoping to make my way back to the stairs before he'd notice.

"Camilla?" Papa's voice stopped me in my tracks. "Did you hear what we were talking about?"

"Yes, Papa." I'd learned long ago it was best not to lie. "About those people camped by the river. The Mormons."

“That’s right.”

“Only I can’t see that they’d start any trouble. I see them on my way to school every day, and they seem peaceful enough.”

“And Lucifer was the most beautiful of all the angels.” He spooned honey onto his corn bread and took a bite, not losing a single drop.

“I know.” The verse was written in the journal I clutched close to me.

“See to it you remember.”

With those words and a kiss from my mother, I was dismissed.