

TESSA AFSHAR

*Land of
Silence*

The book cover features a woman in traditional attire, including a long brown dress and a vibrant red shawl, standing in a field of red poppies. She is looking out over a valley where a walled city is nestled at the foot of green mountains. The scene is bathed in the warm, golden light of a sunset or sunrise, with the sun low on the horizon behind the mountains. The overall mood is serene and contemplative.

ADVANCE PRAISE FOR *LAND OF SILENCE* AND OTHER NOVELS BY TESSA AFSHAR

Land of Silence

“No one brings the Bible to life like Tessa Afshar. *Land of Silence* grabs hold of the woman who stole healing by touching Christ’s hem in a way that brings us all to a place where we can recognize that we, too, are daughters of the King.”

DEBBIE MACOMBER, #1 *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR

“Tessa Afshar’s *Land of Silence* is a biblical novel in a category all its own. Moving, believable . . . this inspiring, uplifting story encouraged me at a heart level. A wonderful story—not to be missed!”

JILL EILEEN SMITH, BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *THE CRIMSON CORD* AND THE WIVES OF KING DAVID SERIES

“Tessa Afshar’s captivating and emotive story is about one first-century woman’s pain and struggle. But the hope she describes is real and for you and me today.”

CHRIS FABRY, BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *WAR ROOM* AND *DOGWOOD*

“Tessa Afshar’s novels draw you in so that you’re both captivated and changed by the power of story. *Land of Silence* is no exception. You’re in for a treat with this one—enjoy!”

SUSIE LARSON, NATIONAL SPEAKER, RADIO HOST, AND
AUTHOR OF *YOUR BEAUTIFUL PURPOSE*

In the Field of Grace

“Afshar writes unforgettable biblical fiction.”

ROMANTIC TIMES

“This is one of my favorite books of the year. Beguiling, exciting, romantic, and a much-needed reminder of the Creator’s steadfast faithfulness, even to those the world deems undeserving.”

NOVEL CROSSING

“Once again, Tessa’s seemingly effortless talent breathes new life into this beautiful love story and makes it come alive.”

RELZ REVIEWZ

“Tessa Afshar breathes new life into the old, stale story we think we know and cracks the door wide open for a beautiful story of a tragic life turned upside down by forbidden love and immeasurable grace.”

JOSH OLDS, LIFEISSTORY.COM

Harvest of Gold

“Afshar has created a treasure of a book. Brilliant characterization, adventure, intrigue, and humor coupled with deep emotional impact garner a solid five stars.”

CBA RETAILERS + RESOURCES

“Engaging. Inspiring. Heart-stopping and heart-rending. A fabulous biblical novel that sent me straight back to God’s Word!”

MESU ANDREWS, AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR

Harvest of Rubies

“There is so much depth to *Harvest of Rubies* that readers will happily drown in its message of God’s unfailing love and mercy while diving headfirst into the captivating plot and precarious romance. . . . This is a great read!”

BOOKREPORTER.COM

“Afshar brings readers biblical fiction with mysterious twists and turns . . . that fascinate and claim the reader’s full attention. The story will have you laughing and crying.”

ROMANTIC TIMES, TOP PICK REVIEW

Pearl in the Sand

“This superb debut should appeal to readers who enjoyed Davis Bunn and Janette Oke’s *The Centurion’s Wife* or Anita Diamant’s *The Red Tent*.”

LIBRARY JOURNAL, STARRED REVIEW

“A riveting and compelling book. . . . Fantastic research and stellar writing make this one you don’t want to miss!”

ROMANTIC TIMES, TOP PICK REVIEW

“*Pearl in the Sand* is a lovely story, vividly written, and is sure to please devotees of biblical fiction.”

TITLETRAKK.COM

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Land of Silence is a work of fiction. Where real people, events, establishments, organizations, or locales appear, they are used fictitiously. All other elements of the novel are drawn from the author's imagination.

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ONE



*I have been forgotten like one who is dead;
I have become like a broken vessel.*

PSALM 31:12

WHEN I THINK OF THE RUIN my life has become, the slow wrecking of my dreams, the destruction of every love, I always return to the bee. That one tiny sting, which robbed my place of favor in my father's heart and changed the course of my destiny.

Sorrow came to me on a beautiful afternoon, with the sun shining and just enough heat in the day to warm the skin without scorching it. Wildflowers were abundant that year, and the hillside where Joseph and I had come to pass the hours was covered in a blanket of yellow and pink. I remember the scent of them tickling my nose and filling my lungs, making me laugh for the sheer beauty of the world.

Joseph ran amongst the soft stalks, piercing the leaves

with his make-believe sword, playing Roman soldier. He knew better than to play the game with our parents around. They were staunch Jews whose lineage in Jerusalem went as far back as the days of Ezra. Romans may have been generous patrons of my father's wares, but they were still dangerous enemies. My parents certainly did not consider them a matter for fun and games. But Joseph was four, and he loved the Roman horses, their uniforms, their rectangular painted shields. He wanted to be one of them. And I let him, seeing no harm in a little boy running wild and pretending to be something he could never become.

"Elianna, come and play," Joseph called over his shoulder and thrust his invisible sword in my direction.

"Hold a moment," I said. "I will come soon."

I was distracted, sitting on the coarse felt blanket I had brought, twirling a pink flower, trying to fathom a way to leach out its color and use it for dye on linen. A large shipment of flax had just been delivered to our workshop and we would have plenty of fibers for weaving. My father traded in luxurious fabrics. He even had a small but brisk business in purple, the lavish dye that was derived painstakingly from sea snails and remained more expensive to produce than any other color. It was a measure of his success that he could afford this particular trade.

Joseph had been left in my care that afternoon because everyone in the household was busy working on the flax. Even my mother, who rarely participated in my father's business, had been drafted to help.

My father bought his flax already steeped and dried, with

the seeds separated from the stems and discarded, and the stalks beaten to pull out the fibers. His workers were left with the task of combing out the fibers, making them ready for spinning. The stalks of this particular harvest were thick, which produced coarse linen, and would be used for weaving towels. With Romans and the new Jewish aristocracy so fond of their baths, towels were in high demand throughout the main cities of Judea.

I was twelve years older than Joseph and more than capable of caring for him. My mother, suspicious of my passion for my father's trade, and looking for ways to distract me from my fascination, had given me charge over Joseph for the afternoon. Her plan worked to double advantage: it got my exuberant brother out from under the busy feet of the adults while at the same time withdrawing me from direct contact with my father's work, lest it feed my obsession with the secrets of his trade.

"Leave that to the men," she always told me, thrusting some feminine task into my lap before I grew too enraptured with the mysteries of creating a better grade of dyed fabric.

"Elianna!" Joseph's voice bellowed from farther down the hill. "Come. Now! You promised when you brought me here that you'd play with me."

I grinned. My little brother could be imperious. No one had expected the birth of another child to my parents at their advanced age. When Joseph was born, we were all a little dazzled with his mere presence in the world and became instant slaves to his charm. Add to that the reality that he was a boy—the son of my father's dreams—and, well . . . even a

burning seraph could be excused for being a little spoilt under the circumstances. If he seemed bossy, the fault belonged to us. By nature, Joseph was so sweet that the overindulgence of a hundred adults could not render him tyrannical.

“You better hope I don’t catch you,” I said as I rose to my feet. “My sword is a lot sharper than yours.”

“No, it’s not. I’ll defeat you.” He let loose a fearsome bellow and began to run up the hill, his short legs pumping under his hitched-up tunic at a speed that made me flinch. I needed my whole strength to keep up with that boy.

“Hold fast,” I cried, catching up with him at the top of the hill, thrusting my pink flower forward as if it were a deadly weapon. Joseph doubled over, giggling.

“That’s not a sword! That can’t even cut thread. You’re such a girl, Elianna.”

“You dare insult me, Roman dog? I shall have your head for that.”

Joseph rushed toward me, his imaginary sword pointed at my abdomen. “No, you won’t. My horse will eat you for breakfast.” He did a fair imitation of a parry and then followed with a quick thrust, his little fist hitting my ribs. I grabbed my side as if in pain.

“You will pay for that, young man.” With a quick motion, I reached forward to untuck his tunic from his belt. Distracted, he looked down, and I shoved my flower in his face, leaving a powdery yellow stain on his nose and forehead.

I laughed. “You still need some practice, Roman.” Just behind him, I noticed a lone sheep chomping on a bush. I looked around, trying to locate the shepherd or herd to

which it belonged. It seemed to be alone. I walked over to examine it for any hurts. A shepherd somewhere must be missing the fat fellow.

“Elianna!” Joseph called. “Come back. I am not finished. . . .” And then, inexplicably, he swung his arm in a wide arc. “Go away. Go away!” His voice emerged high-pitched and shaken. He made a half circle around himself, his hands flapping about him in frantic motion.

The sheep had my attention, though, and I ignored Joseph’s cry. Up close, I could see that it was well cared for, its wool healthy and clean. I knelt down and ran my hand over its back. “Where did you come from, little fellow?”

From the corner of my eye I could still see Joseph flapping around. Then he cried out, “Make it go away, Elianna!”

I thought it was a fly at first until I saw the flash of yellow, heard the angry buzz. “Don’t fret so. Stay calm, and it will go away of its own accord.” I didn’t want to leave the lost sheep, in case it wandered away and became even more lost. Joseph was old enough to deal with a buzzing bee. Really, we had overindulged him. I tried to make my voice soothing. “Calm yourself, brother.”

My words had no effect on Joseph. The creature was buzzing with fierce intention around his head, and he panicked. He flapped his arms harder and started to run. “No! No!”

I threw my hands up in the air and came to my feet reluctantly. “Joseph, it’s just a bee.”

I understood the source of his unreasoning fear. The year before, he had been stung on the ankle. He had broken out

in hives and his entire leg had swollen to the size of a young tree trunk, and he had been in terrible pain. He had never forgotten the experience. But in my mind, that had been an anomaly. We all had to contend with bees. It was part of life. I watched in frustration as he ran himself ragged for a few moments.

Finally, I caught up to him and reached out my hands to flick at the bee, although I could no longer see it. Without warning, Joseph let out a piercing wail that made my belly lurch. He rubbed at the side of his head, and then I spotted the insect caught in the hair near his temple. I grabbed the bee in my palm and squeezed. Half-drunk from having released its venom, it was easy prey in my violent, clenching fist. I dropped it to the ground and knelt before Joseph.

Fat tears squeezed out of his eyes. He was crying so hard that he began to wheeze. I cuddled him in my arms. "I am so sorry, Joseph. It will be well. I've gotten rid of the little monster. You can stomp on him, if you wish."

"Hurts." He took a breath that shook his chest.

"Where, dear heart? Where do you hurt?"

He pointed to his temple, and I saw that it was already swelling. I gave it a light kiss. "Is that better?"

His gaze brimmed over with accusation. "No." He pushed me from him. I noted a red welt on the back of his still-chubby hand. "Did it sting you twice?" I frowned as I stared at the raised mark, spreading like spilled dye on his baby skin. Joseph shook his head. Hives, I realized with a wince. Just like last year.

He took another breath that shivered down his body. He

sounded as if every inhalation was an effort. I thought it was fear lingering in him, robbing him of breath, and tried to calm him. But with each moment, he seemed to grow worse. His wheezing became harsher and unremitting. Confusion caused me to delay. He had had no difficulty breathing the last time he was stung. Was this panic?

I should have helped him sooner, come to his aid at the start, when the bee first began to pursue him. And then it occurred to me that the bee might have been attracted to the scent and powder of the flower I had pressed on his face. Perhaps it would not have come near Joseph at all if not for my silly prank.

I saw that he was growing worse and picked him up in my arms. "I am so sorry, Joseph. I'll take you home. You can have a honey cake, and Mother will make you an herb potion to soothe your pain." Against me, I could feel his thin little chest battling for every breath. I began to run. Somewhere down the hill, my sandal came off, caught on a stone protruding from the ground. I stumbled, then righted myself and kept on running without tarrying to retrieve the lost shoe.

"Sick," Joseph said, his voice weak. Before I could turn him, he threw up, soaking my shoulder and my chest. Normally I would have groaned with disgust. But terror had seized me. I sensed that against all reason the bee had caused my brother's tiny body inexplicable damage. It was as though the poison in that accursed bee somehow robbed him of the very air. I was desperate to arrive home, to give him into the care of my parents, who would know what to do.

I barely stopped to wipe his befouled mouth, only shifting him to my other shoulder so I could start my race again. He was heavy, too heavy for me to carry all that way. My heart pounded in my chest like a metalsmith's anvil. The strain of holding on to his sagging body made my arms tremble. "Joseph! Joseph, speak to me!"

He moaned. I staggered to a stop, unable to continue my haphazard run, and fell to my knees with him still in my arms. My head swam with a wave of dizziness when I saw his face. His eyes had swollen shut, and his lips had become an unearthly blue. His whole mouth had turned into a tender, purplish bruise. I bit down on a scream and hefted him up again, forcing my legs to run, faster than before.

Pray, I thought, my soul frantic with the horror of what I had just seen. *Pray something*. But all I could think of was *Eli, Eli*, the first part of my own name. *My God! My God!*

When I saw the large wooden door to our house, I loosed the scream I had swallowed for the past hour. My voice emerged as a broken croak and no one heard me. "Help me! Father, please help me." Joseph had gone limp in my arms. I knew he had fainted some time before, fainted from lack of air.

I kicked at the door with the last of my strength and fell against it. One of the servants pulled the door open and I slumped backward, Joseph still held tight in my grasp. The woman cried out, and before long we were pulled inside together. I was still clutching him, his face pressed to my shoulder. My parents came running.

I saw my father's face as he pulled his son out of my arms.

He turned white. My mother started to scream. I didn't think I could feel more fear. But her cries—shrill, unnatural sounds that pierced the courtyard—filled me with a chilling dread that robbed me of speech. Why wasn't she helping my brother? Why did she stand there, screeching, pulling at her veil, pulling at her hair?

My father collapsed, Joseph held against him. His head drooped over the unmoving child. "My son," he moaned, rocking to and fro. "My boy."

I turned in shock and saw my younger sister, Joanna, sitting against the wall, sobbing quietly into her hands. The servants wept. My father, shaking and silent, convulsed around the inert body of my brother while Mother's screams continued to fill every corner of the courtyard, piercing me like jagged shards of broken glass.

That's when I knew. My brother was dead. The bee had killed him.

I reached out to cling to my father, in disbelief, in horror, in desperation, hoping for a miracle, seeking comfort. He looked up and the blank despair in his eyes lifted for a moment, only to be replaced by a coldness I had never seen there before. "What happened? What has done *this* to my child?"

I stepped away from him. "A bee . . . It stung Joseph. On his temple." Perspiration dripped down my sides and with a trembling hand I wiped my brow. "It was my fault. We were playing . . . And I . . . I shoved a flower in his face; I think the bee was drawn to its scent. I should have come to his aid sooner, but I was distracted by a lost sheep." I remembered

that I had merely thrown words at Joseph, as if my instructions were enough. I owed Joseph the truth no matter what punishment I faced. He deserved that much, at least.

My father swept the hair away from Joseph's swollen flesh with tender fingers. I flinched when I saw his beautiful face, distorted by the obscene hand of death, and swayed where I stood.

"But you knew how sick he became last year, after he was stung. You knew how scared he was. Why didn't you just swat it away? He was a little boy. He was helpless." My father moaned. "My little boy!"

"I should . . . I should have . . ."

His words grew iron-hard and sharp. "You were supposed to look after him. What did you do? Just stand there and watch it happen?"

"No! It wasn't like that, Father! I did help. But I was too late. I was too late!"

"This wouldn't have happened if you had watched him better."

I was struck dumb with guilt. He had grasped the heart of my failure. I had not tried to get rid of the bee from the start. "Father, please . . ."

"Be silent!"

I closed my mouth. Swallowed my excuses. He was right. I had failed Joseph. I should have taken better care of him. I should have wiped the pollen from his face, swatted the bee sooner, come home faster. I should have saved him.

"Get out of my sight." My father's voice emerged scratchy soft and bitter as gall.

I gasped. With broken movements, I forced myself to stand, to walk. I went inside the house, leaving a faint trail of blood with every step where I had cut my foot on the jagged stones during my flight home. Huddling in the corner of the room where I slept with my sister and Joseph, I finally gave vent to the tears that I had quenched earlier. Joseph's blanket was neatly folded in a corner. I grabbed it and, pushing my face into its folds, breathed in the scent of him and knew that I would never hold my precious brother again.

And it was my fault.



My father made up my name when I was born, putting together two Hebrew names: *Eli*, which means *my God*, and *Anna*, which in our tongue signifies *favor*. When he first set eyes on me, my father said, "*My God has favored me*," and that became my name, for my birth was a sign of God's favor and grace to my parents.

For eight years after they were married, he and my mother had remained childless. I came when they had given up on physicians and their useless potions. I came, but I was a girl. Still, my parents were too happy to have a child at last to complain about my gender. Three years after I was born, my sister arrived, long-limbed even at birth, with wide eyes that seemed to cover half her face. Then when no one thought it even possible, Joseph burst into our lives with his lusty cry and his irresistible smile.

It wasn't as if my father loved me less when his son was born. It was only that he loved Joseph so much more. More

than my mother or my sister or me or his business. More than life. Joseph was the light of his heart.

Until now. Until I caused his death. I felt as though I had destroyed the greatest treasure the earth had to offer.

Hours passed as I sat unmoving in a fog of disbelief. Death had swallowed me up along with Joseph. In taking him, it took me, too. Though I breathed and my heart beat with strong regularity, my wound was incurable. The thought of what my parents must be feeling made me wish it had been I who had died instead of Joseph.

The sound of the wailing of mourners penetrated my distracted thoughts. I became aware that a great crowd had gathered downstairs. They must already be preparing Joseph's body for his burial. I could not bear the thought.

The exuberant boy I had adored for four years, the child who had made me laugh and hope and rejoice, was gone and we would never have him back. I pressed my hands against my ears, trying to drown out the sounds of wailing. I felt lashed by their sorrow, guilt eating at me with voracious hunger.

"Elianna." Gentle hands took hold of my wrists and pulled them away from my ears. "Elianna," he said again.

Ethan.

My betrothed. The man I had loved since before I became a woman.

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR



THE ONLY TIME Jesus addresses a woman as *daughter* is in the story of the woman with the issue of blood (Matthew 9:20-22; Mark 5:25-34; Luke 8:43-48). There are no throw-away words in Jesus's vocabulary. He selects each term with profound intention. We can therefore assume that he has a significant purpose in addressing this nameless woman in such a tender and intimate fashion.

Three out of the four Gospels tell this story, and it is a breathtaking as well as a strange one. Why would Jesus delay an urgent procession to save the life of a little girl in order to find out who had touched him? Why would he take time they did not have to call a destitute woman *daughter*? The story line of *Land of Silence* revolves around these questions. We know this for certain: Jesus healed her body. I believe, with his words, he also healed her soul.

There is very little we actually know about our main

character. Her personal story outside the sickness she suffered is a blank canvas, one which I filled with a fictional account. No one knows with certainty what caused this woman's condition in modern medical terms. There are several possibilities. I described her illness assuming she had a severe case of uterine fibroids, complicated by a few other problems such as endometrial polyps. Most of the medical treatments mentioned in this novel are based on extant historical documents.

Although Philo and several other rabbinic texts suggest that the life of women in first-century Palestine was very limited, archaeologists have discovered some evidence to the contrary. For example, we have recovered inscriptions from that time period that refer to women as synagogue leaders. Clearly, there was some complexity to the role of women at this time. I have tried to capture that reality in Elianna's life.

We don't know how the Jewish purity laws were enforced on a daily basis in Jesus's day. Although we have the biblical directives regarding the uncleanness of a menstruating woman, we don't fully understand how these laws were lived out practically. So some of the conclusions in this novel are educated guesses.

As I often enjoy doing, I have quoted another writer in this book. Merab's assertion that "it is a woman's business to get married as soon as possible, and a man's to keep unmarried as long as he can" is a quote from George Bernard Shaw.

Jesus's words welcoming little children were actually spoken after the section that tells the story of the woman with the issue of blood and, one assumes, at a later date. I have taken the liberty to include it out of order.

The character Gamaliel is based on a historical figure who plays a role in the book of Acts (5:34-39). According to church tradition, he and his son became secret followers of Jesus. Chuza and Joanna are also based on biblical characters (Luke 8:1-3). Joanna was one of the women who followed Jesus and supported his ministry. There is no evidence that she was related to the woman with the issue of blood. That was my own invention.

While the Bible provides profound inspiration for novels like this, the best way to study it is not through a work of fiction, but simply to read the original, the way Jesus himself would have done. This story can in no way replace the transformative power that the reader will encounter in the Scriptures.