



Turn Your Eyes
Upon Jesus

TARA JOHNSON



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By Tara Johnson

*Are our hands off the
very blossom of our life?
Are all things - even the
treasures that He has
sanctified - held loosely,
ready to be parted with,
without a struggle, when He
asks for them?*

-LILIAS TROTTER

Chapter 1

Lilias

February 4, 1865

London, England

“Ashes to ashes, dust to dust...”

The minister droned on endlessly, his voice as monotonous as the hum of a hundred flies. Pesky, annoying, and deafening.

Amid the throng of family and business acquaintances from Coutts Bank gathered at the muddy cemetery, twelve-year-old Lilias stared at the gleaming coffin that held her father’s remains, or so she had been relentlessly told by Great Aunt Millie.

“Your father’s remains are there, Lilias.” The woman had pointed a knobby finger in the direction of the parlor where Mother insisted he be laid out so mourners could pay their respects. *“You must help your mother in greeting guests. She is barely able to stand, so deep is her grief. Do not be such a selfish child.”*

But despite her pious family’s insistence, Lilias could not bear to darken the parlor’s entrance. Her beloved Papa with his scratchy brown beard and roaring laugh was now silent. When he’d collapsed and the doctor has been summoned, Lilias had listened in the hallway as Mother wailed.

“I’m sorry, Mrs. Trotter. Your husband has suffered apoplexy...”

She had peeked in the bedroom then. Father was too still, his complexion the color of cold fireplace ash. And his fingers...bruised and swollen as they rested limply atop his trim stomach.

“Alexander’s gone. I’m sorry.”

Lilias had fled to her room, her mind racing between aching sorrow and numb disbelief. It couldn’t be. His presence had filled every inch of their massive house. The scent of his shaving cologne yet lingered in the air. And his laughter—such joy—was now absent. It seemed as if the nightmare would soon vanish and she would hear the cheerful greeting he’d given her each morning for as long as she remembered. “Well, happy day to you, Lily-bell! Isn’t it a beautiful morning?”

She didn't want to help mother greet people who didn't love him as she had. The sympathetic gaze and pitiful clucking of matrons, the sour expressions of fellow bankers and businessmen...how could they know what it was like to have death snatch her light away? Liliias didn't want to see her father so quiet and still, with his swollen limbs and unmoving mouth. She wanted to remember him as he had been...booming, big, smiling.

At least now he was hidden in the casket, free from nosy neighbors and prying eyes.

If only Liliias could hide the same way.

Mother stepped close and squeezed Liliias' shoulders as the minister spoke the final scriptures.

"...and so shall we ever be with the Lord."

"Amen." The crowd echoed the single word with a finality that sent shivers down her spine.

Was Papa truly with God? Or was heaven just a myth grown-ups and preachers made up as a way to comfort the weak and vulnerable? Mother would be scandalized at her thoughts but she didn't care. All she wanted was her father...and no one else would do.

God, if You're there, show me how to live without him.

###

*June 10, 1872
London*

Liliias dabbed another blob of white across the canvas reflecting the landscape outside her window. Blue skies and the bright pink bloom of the crab apple tree needed only a few clouds to contrast against the brilliant hues. She wiped the excess from her brush with a rag and stepped back to study the painting in the fading light of dusk.

Almost. There was still something missing.

She tilted her head and frowned. The paint strokes bore a remarkable resemblance to the glory outside her bedroom window, but still, it lacked something indefinable. A spark.

Sighing, she put down the paint brush and wiped her soiled fingers against her smock. If only she could capture beauty the way she beheld it in her mind...pure, ethereal. Her best attempts never quite matched what she envisioned. And although her work was highly praised among Mother's society friends, she yearned for more. To be more. Liliias just didn't quite know how to take that step from amateur to world-renown artist.

Someday, she vowed, her work would matter.

Shouting boomed from outside. Peering her head out the window, she watched a woman cowering in front of a middle-aged man who was chastising her, his face round and red. The woman's dark hair had slipped from its knot, and she clutched a threadbare shawl around her thin frame. Liliias frowned. Why was the man so angry, and why was the stranger lingering around their home?

A knock sounded upon Liliias's door. It creaked open with a soft squeak. Mother's face appeared.

"Are you ready, Liliias? We don't want to be late for the preaching service."

"Nearly." Pulling her attention from the window, she tugged the dirty smock over her shoulders and tossed it into a basket near the easel. Mother took a step inside and smiled at the canvas.

"Oh, it's lovely."

Liliias sighed. "I love the colors well enough but it's not done." She moved to her vanity, checking her appearance in the mirror for wayward smudges. Clean. A small wonder, that.

Mother chuckled. "You always say that. And each painting is more stunning than the last. You have a gift many would envy."

More shouting ensued from outside. "What on earth?" Mother moved to the window. Liliias joined her. "That angry man is scolding that woman down there something terrible. What do you think is wrong?"

Her mother shrugged and moved away from the scene. "Likely just some poor creature who wandered too far into Montague Square." She shook her hair and patted her golden curls tucked safely into pins. "It happens. You know how some folks are about ruffraff milling about."

"Even so, there's no need to shout so."

"Come." Her mother moved toward the door. "We don't want to be late. I hear the crowd is expected to be enormous. Reverend Lessey was nearly dancing with delight to know the great D.L. Moody is preaching in London."

"A dancing minister." The thought caused a giggle to burst from Liliias's chest. "Now that is worth seeing."

Mother arched a golden brow. "Don't be saucy." She winked, belying her feigned reprimand, and shooed Liliias out the door. "The sooner we arrive, the sooner you can repent for mocking a man of the cloth."

###

Lilias squeezed into the packed pew with nary an inch to spare. Carriages and wagons clogged all the roads leading to Christ Church. The building was swollen with people—somber men, fanning women and squirming children—and the crush of bodies made the heat nearly unbearable. Why, she and her mother had nearly had to return home, so enormous was the throng crowding inside. She muttered near her mother’s ear as the congregation stood. “No chance of Reverend Lessey dancing. There’s no room.”

“Hush.” Mother turned her attention to the balding man requesting everyone to stand and sing “There is a Fountain”.

The worshipers’ voices rang out.

*There is a fountain filled with blood
Drawn from Immanuel's veins
And sinners plunged beneath that flood
Lose all their guilty stains*

Lilias shifted her weight, trying to ignore the pinch of her boots. Her mind wandered to the painting in her room waiting to be completed. Her fingers itched without a paintbrush to hold.

Before she realized it was over, her mother was tugging her skirt to urge her to take her seat. Cheeks warming, she sank onto the unforgiving pew.

A stodgy man with dark hair, beard, and piercing eyes slowly walked to the pulpit, his Bible in hand. After lifting a prayer, he stared at the congregation and boomed.

“Consider this, my friends! Moses spent forty years thinking he was somebody. Forty years learning he was nobody, and forty years discovering what God can do with a nobody.”

Lilias straightened, her focus sharpening on the preacher. Wasn’t she thinking earlier that she longed to be a somebody? Her soul shrank.

“Turn with me to Exodus.” After reading the passage of God calling Moses to return to Egypt, Moody nostrils flared. “Whatever we love more than God is our idol. Moses spent years running and gave God excuse after excuse. He was comfortable. He didn’t want to do the hard work he knew it would require to follow Jehovah. But let me tell you this,” his eyes glinted, “there will be no peace in any soul until it is willing to obey the voice of God.”

Lilias squirmed in her seat. His words were alarming...convicting. Her mind raced to that day seven years before when she’d watched her father’s casket lowered into the earth. She had asked God to show Himself, and for the most part, she had been content to ignore Him. Except for moments like this one. Where her heart’s motivations were laid bare.

Moody spread his arms wide. “Everybody wants to enjoy heaven after they die, but they don’t want to be heavenly-minded while they live!”

A round of amens peppered the statement. “Darkness cannot coexist with light, nor can sin abide with holiness. To live a life that matters, to make our days count, we must take up our crosses daily and follow Jesus. Before we pray that God would fill us, I believe we ought to pray for Him to empty us.”

Her heart pinched. That was the problem, wasn’t it? She had filled her days with her own pursuits, her own desires, but still, she ached for something more.

“God will not accept a divided heart. He must be absolute monarch. There is not room in your heart for two thrones. You cannot mix the worship of the true God with the worship of any other god more than you can mix oil and water. It cannot be done. There is not room for any other throne in the heart if Christ is there.”

###

Lilias and her mother were giddy with excitement on the drive home. When Reverend Moody had asked all those to stand who wished to give their lives to the Almighty, both of them rose, clutching each other’s hands. An indefinable peace had flooded Lilias’s heart ever since.

As the coachman opened the door for them in front of the house, Lilias heard weeping. A female, if she wasn’t wrong. She turned to her mother. “Go on inside. I’ll see what’s happening.”

Stepping through the shadows lining the west side of their two-story home, Lilias jumped when a woman gasped at her presence. It was the same woman she had seen outside her bedroom window hours before. Her dark hair was mussed and her eyes were puffy with tears.

“I’m sorry to have startled you. May I help?”

“I’m just—lost. Forgive me.” The thin woman turned to leave, but Lilias tugged her hand.

“Don’t go. What can I do?”

“I just—” She wiped the tears from her cheek with the back of her hand. “I can’t live this way any longer. I have no idea where to go.”

“What do you mean?”

The woman looked up and winced. “I’m a doxy.”

A prostitute? Lilias nearly recoiled with horror but kept her face a mask. “You look hungry. Are you?”

The woman nodded.

“What’s your name?”

“Rose.”

Reverend Moody’s admonition from only an hour ago reverberated through Liliias’s mind with the strength of a hammer on an anvil. *There are many of us that are willing to do great things for the Lord, but few of us are willing to do little things.*

Starting today, her life would be different. Liliias smiled.

“Well, Rose, it’s lovely to meet you. Come inside. We have more than enough food to share.”

Chapter 2

Helen

July 20, 1875
Ellis Island, New York City

I clutched the rails of the *Liberator*, relishing the salt spray tickling my nose and the whoosh of breakers pounding against the hull as our ship sliced through the water. New York City loomed ever closer and the majestic woman in green beckoned us with fire and an expression of determination.

From somewhere behind me, Mother laughed and clutched her flowered hat to her head. “What a sight that is to behold! Lady Liberty.” Mother squeezed close and brushed my shoulder, wisps of her dark hair toyed by the breeze. “What do you think, Helen?”

Staring at the massive statue, a thrill course through my chest. “It’s wonderful.”

“Yes, indeed.” Father stepped to my other side, wind lifting tendrils of his sandy hair. “A place of refuge for the oppressed, that’s what America is. We’ll have a good life here, my loves. Honest work, with many souls ripe for harvest.”

I looked up into my father’s face, noting the lines that now looked more pronounced around his eyes and mouth. The trip, and his constant battle with nausea, had aged him...or was that from the trouble we’d left behind?

“Will Americans let you preach in their country, Father?”

Looking down, he winked, his blue eyes twinkling. “Aye. I’ve been told there is a great need here.”

Mother huffed, the lines of her mouth pressing into a firm line. “There was a need in England too. And Scotland before that.”

“Now, now, Anne. Not everyone is receptive to the Good News.”

A glimmer of mischief lit Mother’s green eyes. “Perhaps it was not so much the good news as it is your stance of the second coming of our Lord.”

“Be that as it may,” Father shot her a mild look of scolding, “I hear people of this land are much more inclined to listen.”

How I prayed Father was right. I was weary of moving from place to place. Perhaps that's why music was such a comfort. It never changed. The hymns I had learned as a wee child I yet sang with the same abandon as a girl of twelve.

Mother bent down and murmured in my ear. "Our first order of business should be to teach you patriotic songs of America, yes?"

I grinned. "I would enjoy that. Could I sing them at revival meetings?"

Father hesitated. "Perhaps we ought to save sacred melodies for those occasions, but who knows?" He laughed and wrapped me in a hug. "Perhaps you'll be known in America as the great singer of patriotism!"

I giggled at the silly thought. Still, as my gaze returned the fierce woman standing guard over this new world, I straightened. The Almighty had given me the gift of song. Who was I to say how He might use it?

Chapter 3

Lilias

*February 8, 1876
London, England*

Blinking away the grit coating her eyes, Lilias's gaze swept Victoria Station, looking for women of ill repute. Day after day she came, beckoning them to learn a trade, find shelter in the safe lodging house her mother had graciously provided, give their lives to Jesus. Some listened. A few responded. Most turned away.

Tugging her woolen coat tighter around her torso, she walked the length of the depot as a bone-chilling wind swept between buildings. Cold air slithered up her skirts and her chest tightened with the ever-present ache that refused to leave her be. She longed for her warm bed and a steaming cup of tea, but until she could give just one more girl a bit of hope, she would not leave.

A slip of a woman with bright red hair stepped from the main building. Judging by her painted lips and provocative stare at a group of burly men talking in idle chatter, this was the very person Lilias needed to see. She quickened her steps, boots clicking against the cobblestones.

"Excuse me. You there!"

The red-headed girl had just slipped her arm around a grinning man of no more than thirty. She stopped and blinked at Lilias's approach.

"Might I ask your name, miss?"

The woman smiled though her brows pinched in apparent confusion. "It's Emma, love."

"Emma." Lilias smiled. "Might I speak with you for a moment?"

The woman thrust her chin forward in a show of defiance. Lilias dug a coin from her reticule and held it up in the air. "A shilling for your time."

"Of course." She patted the man's arm and stepped close, snatching the coin and dropping her voice to a whisper. "What is it? I got work to do."

Lilias grasped the woman's hands, infusing warmth into her cold fingers. "I'm here to help. Jesus loves you. If you tire of this way of life, there is a place you can go for shelter and food. A woman's lodging house on Lower Thames. My mother and I work there to provide girls like yourself new skills. A new life."

Emma snatched her hand away and lifted her chin. "Who says I'm wantin' your help, eh?"

"Please." Lilias bit her lip. "I met a woman just like you several years ago. Her name is Rose and working like this brought her a melancholy that nearly destroyed her. But now she's happy, employed in the very place I told you about. Even better," she smiled, "Rose is now being courted by a gentleman. Her future is bright, filled with hope. Please say you'll think about it."

After a long hesitation, Emma nodded curtly but quickly returned to the man who had claimed her attentions. Lilias's heart tugged as she watched Emma walk away.

Nearby church bells gonged loudly, signaling the hour. Seven in the evening. Mother would be livid if she stayed out any longer.

After hailing a cab, she returned home at half past and trudged up the front steps, smiling wearily at the housekeeper who made haste to take her coat and scarf.

"Going to catch your death, you are." Bertha clucked like an agitated hen as she scurried around. "Go in the parlor and put your feet up, love. I'll bring you a spot of tea and some soup in two shakes of a lamb's tail."

"Thank you."

When Lilias stepped into the parlor, Mother whirled from pacing in front of the crackling fire.

"There you are! Heavens, you gave me a fright." Mother moved to her side and touched her cheek. "You're pale as cream."

Lilias waved her away. "I'm just weary, that's all." She sank into the settee with a sigh of gratitude.

Mother frowned. "You push much too hard. I'm worried about you, dear."

Lilias's chest squeezed again, the nagging pain pinching her heart. She rubbed her temple. "I know, but how can I sit idly by knowing there are so many girls like Rose who need to be rescued?"

Bertha hurried in, carrying a silver tray filled with a bowl of soup, a chunk of bread, and a simple tea service. As the two women hustled to serve her a meal, Lilias brooded. The same

questions that haunted her after meeting Rose were the same ones that refused to let her rest. How could any woman come to be in such a condition, and why had no one told Rose about God?

Tuning out the two women's constant scolding, Liliias picked up the cup of tea and sipped the steaming brew. Ah, chamomile. Heaven.

“Are you listening to me?”

“Yes, Mother.” Liliias replied automatically but her mother was not fooled. She stood there staring, arms crossed, an impatient tap-tap-tap of her booted foot against the floor.

“You need a rest.” Dropping her arms to her side, she sighed. “In three days' time, we will leave for a holiday in Venice.”

“But the women's lodging house! It will—”

“Be fine.” Her mother finished with a firm press of her lips. “You cannot do one speck for anyone if you become ill. No arguing.”

If there was one thing Liliias had learned, it was when her mother made up her mind about something, there was no changing it. To Venice, they would go.

Chapter 4

Helen

June 15, 1881
Whitewater, Wisconsin

“If ever I loved Thee, my Jesus ‘tis now...”

I held the last note of the hymn a tad longer than necessary, but something about the moment just felt *right*. A woman coughed near the back, and I opened my eyes to study the congregation crammed into the large, white canvas tent. Whitewater’s tent revival meeting had been going strong for a fortnight and each evening, masses of rattling buggies, horses, men, women and children crowded inside the enclosure for an evening of music and Father’s fiery sermons.

At the last note, a chorus of bone-rattling “amens” filled the air. I breathed a sigh of relief and returned to the simple benches local men had fashioned out of planks. Sweat plastered my bodice to my skin, not so much from the summer heat but from nerves. My knees were watery, but still, I had done what little I could to contribute. Father preached, Mother taught, and well, I could sing and play pianoforte. I had few other talents.

Father moved to stand at the front of the congregation and lifted his Bible high into the air. “If you have God’s Holy Word, please open to John 9.”

“Help me!” A man shouted from the back of the tent.

My skin prickled. I turned, along with everyone else, to see a thin man hobbling up the side of the congregation. Though young, he was hunched over and walked unsteadily. Drunk?

Perhaps. I winced, uncomfortable with thinking such things but the stranger’s gate and demeanor was altogether strange...like a puppet who refused to obey its strings. Greasy dark hair hung over his eyes and he wrung his hands, wailing. “Help me!” I had never heard such desperation before.

Clenching my skirt fabric with white fingers, I exchanged a nervous glance with Mother. Her dark eyes widened but she offered a nearly imperceptible shake of her head. Whispers peppered the air, but everyone was watching carefully to see the drama unfold.

Father moved to speak with the staggering fellow, his words soft. After a long moment, and after the stranger nodded vigorously several times, Father's eyes closed and prayed over the agitated man. A congregant near the back of the room belted out "What a Friend We Have in Jesus", and the crowd joined in, singing softly. I dipped my head and prayed. *Lord, help him...*

After long moments, Father straightened, a smile stretching his mouth wide. "My friends, we have a new brother in Christ! Welcome, Daniel Young!"

Shouts of joy rumbled the ground. Daniel smiled shyly, his previous agitation evaporated, leaving a humble man in its wake. Twisting his hat between his fingers, he blinked, his clouded eyes now clear, if glassy.

"Thank you, Reverend Howarth. I've spent my life chasing all the wrong things. My heart has been hurting and empty for years. But after I heard that young lady sing," he bobbed his head my direction, "I decided I want the same kind of peace she has."

More shouts quivered in the air but I froze, my booted feet rooted to the dirt. Me? My heart squeezed and a dozen emotions washed over me. Amazement, gratitude, wonder...how could a simple song have made such an impact?

Mother squeezed my hand and I offered a wobbly smile in return. Whatever this feeling was, I never wanted it to end. Eternity had been impacted by one simple act of obedience.

After Father opened his Bible and read from John 9, I bowed, praying silently.

Lord, whatever the path, whatever the road, I promise I will always use my voice for You.

Chapter 5

Lilias

*July 1, 1876
Venice, Italy*

Lilias tilted her head, studying the watercolor with a critical eye, and flicked a stray drop of water from the edge of the textured paper. The exotic lavender flower against a backdrop of gray held an exquisite movement...bending to the right, it nearly looked real. Still, oughtn't she add more color? Or was the single blossom enough?

Were all artists like this—never satisfied—always looking to perfect what they saw in their mind's eye?

Setting down the palette, she stretched and rose, moving to the window of their room in the Grand Hotel to watch the blue-green water lazily swirl down the street canal. A white heron swooped in the distance, no doubt angling for a fish or other creature to dine upon. Her mother had been right...she'd needed this holiday more than she'd realized. Her senses, dulled by fatigue and worry, were now alive, taking in the beauty of Venice. Her fingers couldn't paint fast enough to capture all she saw.

Yet her mind continually roved back to the fallen women of London. Why couldn't she let them go?

The door rattled and Lilias turned with a start. Mother burst in, scuttling through the room in a most unladylike way, her eyes ablaze with excitement.

"Oh my darling, you'll never guess what has happened."

"Mother, what on earth—"

"Look!" She shoved a letter into Lilias' hands and bit her lip. "I couldn't resist writing him, and now, I can't fathom it!"

"Slow down." Lilias grinned her mother's uncharacteristic outburst. Isabella Trotter was always the perfect model of etiquette and decorum. Not today. She danced on tiptoe, anxious for Lilias to read the missive's contents.

"Who did you write?"

“John Ruskin.”

Lilias’s pulse ricocheted. “Wait...*the* John Ruskin? Famous art critic?”

“One and the same. Georgia Worthington dined with me yesterday and told me he was enjoying holiday at the Grand Hotel this month too. So I took the liberty of having the hotel staff send him a note as well as several of your watercolors.”

“Mother, you didn’t.”

She lifted her chin, eyes narrowing in challenge. “I most assuredly did. And a good thing too. He wants to meet you tonight for supper in the dining room.”

Ruskin wanted to meet her? Why? Bile crawled up her throat and she pressed a trembling hand to her middle. “But—but I’m not a real artist. He’ll laugh at me. Ridicule my work. I’m not ready. I—”

Placing her slim hands upon Lilias’s shoulders, her mother peered into her face and offered a gentle smile, lines deepening around her sky-blue eyes. “I seriously doubt a man like Ruskin would waste his time to tell you you’re no good. He obviously sees what I’ve seen for years. You have a gift, my dear.”

“But what will I say? What shall we talk about?”

Mother shrugged and dropped her hands. “Art. Nature. Venice. Any number of things. You need only be yourself.”

Lilias grimaced. She’d never had confidence in her artistic abilities, nor in making societal small talk. And in the presence of a man like John Ruskin, she doubted that would change.

###

Smoothing the pale green silk of her skirt, Lilias pressed her lips flat, her courage fleeing as she and her mother stepped into the hotel’s dining room. Multiple archways and Greek columns with delicate scrollwork framed the space. A crimson runner led the way inside and thick, potted palms swayed as a man in a black suit rushed past, carrying a silver tray high in the air.

“I can’t do this.” She turned to leave, but her mother grabbed her arm with an iron grip, refusing to let go.

“He’s not the Almighty, sweetheart. What’s the worst that could happen?”

A stone sink in the pit of Liliias's stomach. "Humiliation. Degradation. The loss of my dreams." But mother tugged her forward, unrelenting.

Before Liliias could protest again, a middle-aged man wearing a white linen suit stood, his expression unreadable. Sandy brown hair with threads of silver and red contrasted with his pale blue eyes. Bushy side whiskers framed his rather attractive face and Liliias' unease grew.

The fellow offered a gentlemanly nod and reached for her mother's hand. "Isabella Trotter, I presume? I am John Ruskin."

Mother offered her gloved hand as Ruskin brushed a chaste kiss against her glove. He straightened and smiled slightly, his gaze shifting to Liliias. "And this must be your lovely daughter."

Mother beamed. "Indeed. This is Liliias Trotter, the joy of my life."

"Charmed." He grasped Liliias's hand and bowed a moment too long over her. Liliias longed to tug away from his grip but managed to school her body into obedience.

"It's lovely to meet you, sir."

Ruskin waved his arm toward the table behind him. White linen covered the space. Pink peonies filled a vase, and glistening China plates and gleaming cutlery winked in the gas chandelier lights.

As they settled into their chairs, Ruskin focused intently on Liliias. She resisted the urge to squirm.

"Thank you for meeting with me, Miss Trotter. Your mother passed along several of your watercolors and I requested to meet you immediately."

Liliias held her breath, waiting. Ruskin's smile vanished. His mouth thinned into a line as he reached for a steaming cup of coffee and sipped for what seemed like an eternity. Nausea threatened to erupt from her throat. If he didn't speak soon, she'd toss her accounts right here.

Mother poured herself a cup of tea from a rose-patterned tea pot. "And? What did you think, sir?"

Ruskin placed the cup on its saucer but fingered the handle absently, his thumb stroking the delicate China. "I have always maintained that, other than in the most minor ways, women could not draw or paint."

Liliias's heart hammered wildly, even as her shoulders sagged. The disappointment cut deeply.

Looking up, he fixed her with a stare. “I most solemnly admit that in the case of your own work, I was woefully wrong.”

Her heart pounded in her ears and she released a pent-up breath with a whoosh.

Ruskin smiled, white teeth flashing. “After taking in your lovely paintings, my dear, you have convinced me that only a woman could have captured the beauty of the world with such exquisite grace.”

Heat flooded her cheeks. “I—thank you.” She looked across the table. Mother’s eyes twinkled with delight.

“Tell me, Miss Trotter, if a career in art were denied to you, whether because of your gender, social standing, or some other misfortune, would you paint?”

She puzzled over his question for only a second before nodding. “Yes, sir. I am helpless to stop. I could no more cease painting than I could cut off my own arm.”

Ruskin smiled fully then, lines crinkling at the corners of his eyes. “Well said. And such is the mark of a true artist. I must say, your work has made me ecstatic. The movement, the color, observations and delicate interpretation of the world around you...well, I marvel that you have had no lessons.”

“No, sir. As far back as I can remember, a paintbrush was ever in my hands.”

“And what is your age now?”

“I am but a score and three.”

“Hm.” He grunted and took another sip of his coffee. “You are young. Very young indeed.”

What could she say? She longed to ask for his forgiveness, for youth was often linked to immaturity and ignorance, yet she had no control over the day and year of her birth. Instead, she remained silent.

“In your mother’s letter, she mentioned your imminent return to London. I often spend my days there as well.” Putting down his coffee, he leaned forward, pinning Liliás with a hard stare. “I would like to mentor you, Miss Trotter. Sharpen the immense skills already bequeathed on you by the Almighty.”

The room spun. Mentoring and taught art by John Ruskin? Liliás longed to pinch herself but it was all too real.

He smiled then, and his sandy brows lifted. “What say you?”

“I say...” She swallowed before a tremulous smile curved her mouth. “Yes.”

Chapter 6

Helen

March 12, 1910
Berlin, Germany

“Ach, Mary Helen Howarth, you must *feel zee* music.”

I stood inside the parlor of my vocal instructor, Herr Kurt Schmidt, and clutched the edge of the grand piano. For years my parents had saved to provide the best voice training in the world, and had ultimately found it in Germany in the instruction of Herr Schmidt, yet the man was exacting. He would not bow to mediocrity.

I inhaled through my nostrils and nodded.

“Ja, Herr Schmidt.”

He pursed his lips, sagging jowls quivering as he slowly paced the length of the ornate parlor, his shiny shoes sinking into the Turkish carpet. “Again. Sing “Gretchen am Spinnrade” once more.”

From his place at the piano bench, my accompanist, William Lemmel, winked and delved back into the haunting music of a German maiden wistfully longing for her true love as she spun wool. His fingers danced across the ivory keys. As I prepared for the high G, I curled my toes inside my boots, let air expand into my abdomen and rolled my shoulders back. “Und ach sein Kuß!”

“Aha!” Herr Schmidt grinned, clapping his hands together. “Das gut! Very well done, Miss Helen. You supported correctly. Vonderful.”

I blew out a breath and smiled at his delight. My gaze drifted to William, who was grinning. Something about the intimate light in his eyes caused my stomach to flip.

Focus, Helen.

Herr Schmidt consulted his pocket watch and clicked it shut. “That is all for today. Come back tomorrow and we will perfect Gretchen, ja?”

“Yes, sir.”

I gathered my reticule and silk shawl before offering a slight curtsy to my instructor. The man brooked no nonsense but had transformed my voice into a golden instrument. What would Mother and Father say when I returned home in a month? Had I changed much in the past four years? Would they still hear the innocent sound of girlhood in my voice or had Herr Schmidt transformed it completely?

William stood and scooted the piano bench closer to the massive instrument. “Here. Let me walk you to your boardinghouse, Miss Howarth.”

“Thank you.”

William had walked me home every day for the past three months, but warmth still bloomed in my cheeks at the request. My roommate Volga insisted the pianist was smitten but I wondered if he didn’t think of me as a chum instead.

As we strolled down the cobbled walkway, cool March wind tugged at a curl that had escaped my chignon and tickled my cheek. I brushed it away and watched a woodlark flutter from tree to tree. Winter had long ago given way to spring.

“What are you thinking?”

I cast William a sidelong look. He was tall, trim, and broad-shouldered with honey gold hair and a chiseled jaw. A man like him could pursue any woman he chose. I’d best remember that and ignore what could not be.

“Springtime. Home. In only a few short weeks, it will be time to return.”

“Mm.” He grunted and shoved his hand in his pockets as a carriage rattled past, marring the beauty of the moment. “Did you think how strange it is that both of us are from the states, yet we didn’t meet each other until we both came to Berlin to study music?”

“It is odd indeed.” I offered a smile and tightened the shawl tighter around my shoulders. “Are you looking forward to returning home?”

He shrugged. “It will be good to see my parents and siblings, of course. But...” He tugged my hand, pulling me to a stop. “There are others whose absence will cause my heart to crumble.”

My pulse thrummed erratically as his thumb stroked the inside of my wrist.

“I’ve been thinking...” He began and licked his lips.

“Yes?”

“What if I don’t return to New York?”

My breath hitched as he stepped close. “Wh—where would you go?”

His gaze dropped then lifted to capture mine. “I was thinking Milwaukee.”

Stars above! William wanted to follow me home? My tongue turned to cotton.

“I—I think I would enjoy that very much.”

The ghost of a smile tugged his lips and his Adam’s apple bobbed as he swallowed. “And I wondered, since we’re both going the same direction, if we might not just...marry.”

Spots danced before my eyes. “You’re asking me to marry you?”

William pulled me close, the warmth of his hands encircling my waist. “I want you, Helen. I want to build a future with you. Please, say you’ll be my wife.”

Heavens, Mother and Father would be floored. Happy, yes, but what about my plans to eventually teach music? What about helping Father with worship in his church? What if William longed for different things?

Staring into his hazel eyes, I knew we could overcome every obstacle together. Peace settled my tumultuous thoughts.

Biting my lip, I nodded, tears blurring his handsome visage. “Yes, I’ll marry you.”

He laughed and pulled me close before claiming my lips. The world fell away and it seemed God Himself was smiling down on us.

Chapter 7

Lilias

*May 30, 1879
London, England*

“Most of art is learning to see. Wouldn’t you agree, Miss Trotter?”

Lilias lifted her skirt, stepping lightly over a particularly wide puddle as she and John Ruskin strolled the length of Hyde Park. A recent shower left a glistening landscape of glitter and green as the sun peeked between gray clouds. The locale had been a particular favorite of them both during the past three years she had been taught by the famed artist.

Butterflies fluttered in her stomach once more as she considered what she must say to her tutor, benefactor, and friend. Indeed, no teacher could have treated her better.

“Miss Trotter?”

She looked up to see Ruskin staring at her, his brows lifted.

“Oh, forgive me. Just a bit muddled in thought today. Yes, I agree. Observation is key to creating.”

A sideways smile tilted Ruskin’s mouth as they strolled side by side at a leisurely pace. “When Annette died, I thought I would never learn to see again. The world had been muted into shades of gray. But you, my dear—” he stopped mid-stride “—you have restored the hope to my heart. The world is yet full of splendor to be enjoyed, to be painted, sculpted and admired.”

Heat crept up Lilias’s neck at his praise. Since losing his fiancé years before, Ruskin had been at a loss. He often spoke of his former pupil and sweetheart with profound sadness, yet never shied away from sharing the melancholy that plagued him. Over time, his intense pain had melted into sweet, if somewhat sad, remembrance.

Which is what made what Lilias had to say all the more difficult.

He resumed their stroll, unaware of her troubled thoughts.

Gesturing toward the southeast section of the park, he led them further toward the Buckingham Palace Gardens. “Tell me, Miss Trotter, were you old enough to remember The Great Exhibition?”

“No, sir. I’m afraid I had not been born when The Crystal Palace was erected.”

“Ah, yes. I forget you are much younger than I.” He chuckled, his expression suddenly pensive. “You have the entire world laid out before you, ready to be savored and enjoyed. I, however, am approaching the autumn season of my life.”

She shook her head. “Don’t think in such terms, sir. Only God knows the number of our days.”

He smiled, lines creasing around his eyes. “True, yet wisdom and awareness grow with years.”

“For some.”

He threw back his head and laughed. “Fair enough. But you are far wiser than most, especially for one so young. After these three years tutoring you, I am more convinced than ever that if you devote yourself solely to art, you will be the greatest living painter in the world. You will do things that will mark you as an immortal.”

Lilias bit her lip and looked away. “And what if that is not my desire?”

Ruskin paused, pulling them to a stop, and pinned her with a stare. “What are you saying?”

Lilias faced him, burning tears threatening to rise and spill. “I believe the Almighty is calling me to something more.”

His brows lifted. “More than being immortal? More than acclaimed and famous? More than a household name?”

Lilias turned to gaze over the rolling green hills of Hyde Park. “Of late, whenever I pray, God presses the words ‘North Africa’ into my soul.”

He snorted. “North Africa? Well, I suppose you could travel there and paint as well. Exotic lands and wildlife. Perhaps He is directing you to paint from a new perspective.”

“No.” She shook her head, hating to disappoint her mentor, but she would not lie. “He wants me to teach and disciple. Lead the lost to saving knowledge of Him.”

Ruskin frowned, his mouth puckering. “I don’t understand. You already spend so much time with the fallen women of London, helping them with food, shelter, and teaching them employable skills. Is that not enough?”

“No, sir. It is not. I must do what the Almighty calls me to do.”

Shoving his hands in his pockets, a thundercloud built upon her teacher’s face. “Where is this coming from?”

Lilias sighed. “My heart has been troubling me for years. My chest often pains me with tightness and unease.”

“Likely exhaustion.”

She smiled thinly. “So said my physician. He wants to perform surgery. All of this got me to thinking about my life, the significance of each day.” She forced her words to be gentle, not wishing to hurt this dear man for anything, but longing to share her heart. “I want to do more than paint for myself, pursue my own gifts. Truly, what greater art can there be than to transform a soul for eternity?”

“One could argue your art does that now.”

She arched a brow. “It may help others appreciate beauty or communicate truth, but it does not lead people to salvation. Art is a gift from God but it is not my god.”

He stepped close, his voice low. “I could give you the world.”

A knot swelled in her throat. “I do not want it.”

Ruskin looked away, a muscle bobbing in his throat. “You have decided then?”

“Yes.” She took a step closer and placed her hand on his arm. “No teacher, tutor, or friend could have been greater to me than you. I will carry your words and friendship with me always.”

Ruskin nodded slowly, his eyes downcast. “I cannot say I’m not deeply grieved and disappointed. I fear you are making a horrendous mistake, but...” He swallowed. “Pursue your heart.”

“Thank you.”

Ever the gentleman, he grasped her hand, bowed over it and brushed a kiss to her skin before rising. His eyes were glassy. “May your God watch over you. Goodbye, Lilias.”

Lilias turned to watch him leave, his shoulders hunched. Only then did the tears fall. She had wounded him.

Worse still, she feared she would never see her beloved mentor again.

Chapter 8

Helen

*December 10, 1915
Chicago, Illinois*

I swung my booted feet lazily as they dangled from Dr. Spencer's examination table. The illness that had ravaged my body the past few weeks had blessedly vanished, leaving exhaustion in its wake. I shivered from the cool air permeating the room but William seemed not to notice. He was too busy pacing silently in the small space.

He had been nothing but kind while I lay in my sickbed week after week, but shadows rimmed his eyes. His handsome face was drawn, weary. And he'd been strangely preoccupied. I swallowed, twisting my fingers in my lap. My illness had been just as trying on him as it had been on me.

Rubbing my irritated eyes for the hundredth time today, I focused on the melody of a new hymn that tugged my heart while sick in bed. It had been weeks since I'd been able to write, countless days since I had been able to teach music to my students at Moody Bible Institute. Thankfully, Professor Gray had stepped in and administered semester exams, as well as tabulating grades. I owed him much.

Pushing away from the black misery, I hummed the new melody, attempting to commit it to memory. As soon as this miserable exam was over, I would go home, sit down at the piano, and capture it. What lyrics best suited it? Secular? Sacred?

"Please, Helen."

I looked up. William was massaging his temple, though his visage darkened in my eyes. He was blurry and it appeared that pieces of his strong form were missing.

"Pardon?"

"The humming." Scrubbing his fingers down his face, he sighed and offered a tired smile. "Forgive me. I suppose I'm at loose ends."

I shrugged, attempting to dismiss the sting of his rebuke. “We’re both tired. I understand. Thank you for caring for me these past weeks. I know you are exhausted beyond measure.”

Offering a thin smile, he stepped close and grasped my hand. What would I do without William’s strength? He had been unable to do any performing for the past two months, tied as he was to me. A performer who could not perform was a miserable creature indeed.

The door opened and Dr. Spencer stepped inside. He looked over the top of his spectacles but his usual smile was missing. He nodded curtly as both of us. “Mrs. Lemmel, Mr. Lemmel.”

William stiffened, his hold tightening on my hand. “What did the tests reveal, Doctor? Will Helen recover?”

Easing himself into a wooden chair, Dr. Spencer looked over his notes, his lips pressing into a firm line. Plucking the spectacles from his nose, he rubbed his eyes. “Overall, yes. Her body is rebounding from the bout with German measles. Nasty business, but you will soon recover from the weakness and fatigue.”

I nodded. Just a bit more time. That was all I needed.

William leaned forward. “And her vision?”

Dr. Spencer frowned. “Measles are dangerous, and though permanent damage is relatively rare, it can happen. Based on Dr. Salinger’s very thorough eye examination, it appears the measles have caused damage in both retinas.”

A clamp twisted my middle. “What does that mean?”

The older man met my gaze, his expression sympathetic, yet somber. “Helen, I’m afraid you’re going blind.”

My heart hammered against my ribcage. Blind? Tears pricked my eyes and William released his hold on my hand as he sucked in a breath through his teeth.

“Blind? How can this be?” His neck mottled red as he funneled his fingers through his sandy hair. He whirled to me, eyes ablaze. “We should have never joined that blasted performance tour through Egypt! You convinced me it would be a lovely holiday from work during the fall break. And now look at what has happened!”

His blistering tirade numbed to a drone in my ears. Blind...I would soon be blind.

Dr. Spencer rose and stretched to his full height. “Enough, Mr. Lemmel! What’s done is done. What Helen needs now is your support, not your blame. Disease can be caught just as easily in the states as in any other country.” He softened his tone. “The coming months will bring many changes. You must both lean on each other.”

A single tear escaped, leaving a warm trail down my skin. I would be burden to William, to everyone. And what of my students? My music?

Stepping close, Dr. Spencer clasped my hand, his fingers imparting what strength he could offer. “You are a strong woman, Mrs. Lemmel. The Almighty will see you through this, and I will do everything in my power to help.”

I nodded dumbly, his words distant. He tucked a piece of paper into my hand. “Here is the name of a colleague of mine. He specializes in retinal abnormalities and has many resources available to those suffering with conditions like yours.”

Resources? I was interested in nothing unless it could restore my vision. Another sob scraped for release. All I knew of blindness was a poor beggar woman I had seen on the streets of Berlin so many years ago. Her skin was paper white, eyes cloudy and she clutched a walking stick in her hands as she begged for whatever scraps the locals would dole out. Panic clawed my throat, but I remained silent, thoughts tumbling like brittle autumn leaves through the air.

As we left Dr. Spencer’s clinic, William said not a word. Nor did he speak all night. And that terrified me far more than the diagnosis.

###

Warmth tickled my cheek, and I stretched against the smooth sheets, senses slowly awakening to the call of dawn. Pale sunlight streamed through the window over the bed but my bleary eyes only grasped it in shimmering glimpses.

Blind. Soon I would no longer see the beauty of dawn, drink in the violet silky petal of an iris, or even behold William’s handsome face with his strong jaw and piercing eyes. My world would be darkness.

Emotion welled and I rolled over, anxious to feel his presence next to me. But the bed was cold, empty.

I pushed up and blinked. The room was in perfect order, not an item out of place, and yet I sensed a horrible chaos hovering in the air.

I rose, my bare feet slapping the wood as I spied an envelope propped against my vanity mirror. My name was written in William’s looping scrawl.

I forced my breath to remain calm as I punctured the seal and tugged out the single sheet of parchment. The news yesterday had been horrid. William had likely left for an early walk to clear his mind, or even strolled to the Chicago Symphony’s rehearsal hall to inform the conductor of my diagnosis. There was much to be done, much to consider. I unfolded the missive and my heart froze.

My Darling,

After much soul-searching and agony of mind, I have come to a horrifying conclusion: I cannot bear the weight and responsibility of caring for an invalid wife. My artistic sensibilities are too delicate, my passion for my own dream far too important to relinquish to a cruel twist of fate. I am leaving you, my love. How it pains my heart to write it! How permanent it feels. I never dreamed this would be our story. I longed for us to pursue our music hand-in-hand, but that is not to be any longer. I wish you nothing but the best, nothing but every happiness, and I will treasure our time forever in my heart.

I will send you funds to begin anew anywhere you'd like. Divorce papers will soon be forthcoming.

*With deepest affection,
William*

Chapter 9

Lilias

December 17, 1887
London, England

“Miss Trotter, I must warn against this.”

Lilias met her physician’s stern-eyed gaze with a lift to her chin. “I shall not be deterred.”

“Lilias!” Dr. Meade raked his hands through his salt and pepper hair with an uncharacteristic huff of frustration. “I fear you do not understand the gravity of your condition. Your heart is weak. Alarmingly so. Were you not the one who told me your own dearly departed father died of apoplexy when you were but a child?”

Slowly, she nodded.

“These conditions are oft passed down from parent to child.” The doctor dropped his hands against his hips in exasperation. “And despite the precarious condition of your health, you insist upon traveling across the world to a place without one iota of medical care.”

Although his concern was warranted, Lilias could not repress a smile. “Algiers is hardly the ends of the earth.”

“It is for a woman with a heart condition.” His lips pursed. “Heavens, Miss Trotter. What would your dearly departed mother say?”

Mother. Her passing months before had been difficult. She had gone on to her eternal reward, severing the only thing tying Lilias to London. Isabella Trotter was now worshipping at the feet of Jesus with Father. But what about herself? With this heart condition, would she soon be joining them? In truth, she was no longer needed here. Her work with the fallen women of London would continue with all the safe houses and employers she and her mother had put into place a decade ago.

Lilias stared down at her fingers calmly tucked in her lap. “Ever since attending the Moody Sankey mission meeting, the Almighty had impressed one goal on my heart: to reach the poor and lost Arab tribes of North Africa.” She lifted her gaze to meet her doctor’s worried frown. “If He has called me to this, He will provide what I need for each day, each step. And that

includes my health. After all, He is one who numbers our days, not calculations in a medical journal.”

All the fight siphoned from Dr. Meade’s shoulders. “Is there nothing I can do to convince you?”

“None at all. The Lord asks only for each of us to give Him our weakness so He can show Himself strong.”

Dr. Meade rubbed the bridge of his nose. “Truly if God needs weakness, He has it.” Blowing out a breath, he grabbed his note pad and hastily scribbled. “Here. Before you depart, make sure you visit the apothecary and stock up on this medication. It will help align your heart into proper rhythm during bad episodes.”

She took the script he proffered and smiled. “Thank you, sir.”

Smiling sadly, Dr. Meade grasped her hand. “Godspeed, my friend.”

###

*March 8, 1888
Algiers, North Africa*

Lilias grasped the handle of her bag as she stepped off the dock and onto the paved road running along the bay. A gust of briny wind tugged her hat loose and she clamped it against her head with her free hand as she stared over the teeming streets of Algiers. Wagons filled with heaps of fish clattered past. English women with their white embroidered blouses, dark skirts, and smart boots mingled with the traditionally garbed women of Africa, all of whom wore long, billowy *karakous* and *foutas*. Although she knew it had more to do with their Islamic beliefs than the weather, Lilias thought the clothing was wise. It was not yet mid-day and it was scorching. Surely such garments allowed for protection from the blistering sun.

Men boasting straw boaters and white linen suits haggled with merchants wearing baggy trousers and *fez*. Activity thrummed like a hive of bees.

Her two companions stepped close, clutching their own bags. Both were financially independent and ready for adventure. Sweet, dark-headed Maria Lovett had never married and yearned to do more with her life than become a spinster in London Society. Blonde, fearless, widow Blanche Haworth studied the scene before them, her spine straight, drinking in every detail, her eyes missing nothing. Maria was as serene as Mary of Bethany, and Blanche as formidable as Martha. And Lilias? Well, she imagined herself somewhere between the two.

Working as one unit, they would do their utmost for the kingdom.

“Look, ladies.” Lilias smiled, watching two small children playing tag around their father’s legs as he chatted with a merchant. “This is our battle field.”

“I feel as if I shall faint.” Maria pressed a hand to her middle. “We know no one. Not a soul. Nor can we speak a word of Arabic.”

Blanche pursed her lips. "Yet we shall learn." She turned and studied Liliias, one blonde brow arching. "You said our accommodations have been made?"

Liliias nodded. "Yes. The North African Missions have arranged for us to stay at a quaint boarding house in the French Quarter of Algiers. They have also graciously made arrangements for a tutor to teach us the language each week."

Maria laughed, though the sound was thin. "Which language? French or Arabic?"

"Both."

The three of them sobered and looked over their new city. No, home.

"And so it begins." Liliias heaved a deep breath and forced her feet forward into a new world.

If they lasted a week, it would be a miracle.

Chapter 10

Lilias

May 5, 1917
Slums of Algiers

“You have more pictures to show me, yes?”

Lilias smiled as little Tiziri clutched her hand, her big brown eyes pleading. Every time Lilias visited the slums where Tiziri’s family lived, the girl would run out, her mischievous smile wide, and beg for more Bible stories.

Reaching into her bag, Lilias pulled out a handful of watercolors bearing Biblical images—David challenging the mighty Goliath, Queen Esther facing her husband king, and Jonah thrashing in the sea—and Tiziri gasped with delight.

“Tell me!” The child tugged Lilias’s hand. With a chuckle, Lilias eased to sit beside her in the middle of the filthy alley. After years working in Algiers, the poverty no longer shocked her as it once had. Tiziri climbed into her lap as she told the wee girl all about the shepherd boy who wanted to defend God’s honor. The small mite clapped her hands with delight when Goliath crashed to the ground. Lilias smiled and hugged her close. *Lord, may this child come to the saving knowledge of You. Draw her close to Your heart.*

Tiziri twisted around and stared up into Lilias’s eyes. “I love your stories.”

“They are not mine, sweet girl. They are the stories of my God. He is mighty above all.”

Tiziri bit her lip. “I’m not sure if I should tell you this, but...”

Lilias patted her thin shoulder. “What is it?”

She looked down in her lap, folding her fingers together. “My brother Nissam heard you telling your story last week. The one about your God’s Son dying and coming to life again?”

Lilias nodded. “Yes, I remember.”

Tiziri curled her knees up to her chest, absently tugging the fabric of her thin dress over her limbs. “Nissam told Abi he wants to learn more of your God.”

“I see. And what did your abi say?”

Tiziri blinked back glassy tears. “He said if Nissam chose this path, he would be cast from the family and doomed to punishment by Allah.”

Lilias’s heart squeezed. Christian converts in Algeria suffered greatly. Many of the ones she and her friends had led to the Lord during the past twenty years had been banished, beaten, poisoned, and even killed. In a way, she rejoiced to see them pass into their eternal reward where they could no longer experience such pain and turmoil. But would the Lord require suffering of one so young? Nissam was not yet twelve.

She swallowed and stroked Tiziri’s glossy, black hair. “And what about your *om*? What did she say?”

Tiziri offered a shy smile. “She says you long only to bring peace. Om told Abi that a kind woman like you, who constantly brings food and coin to the poor and suffering, must certainly worship a God who is the same. We resemble who we follow.”

Lilias’s eyes slid closed with thanksgiving. For months she had been reaching out, encouraging, teaching, and loving Tiziri’s sweet mother, her *om*, and perhaps now her heart was soft toward the Lord. Looking down into Tiziri’s sweet face, Lilias’s heart thudded. What if the entire family came to know Jesus? They could be the spark to ignite all of Algiers for the gospel.

Lilias offered the child a gentle squeeze. “Try not to fret, little one. My God is watching over you and Nissam even now.”

The girl smiled. “Tell me a second story?”

With a laugh, Lilias dug out another watercolor bearing the nativity scene. Mary knelt beside Jesus’s manger. A star shimmered overhead as angels glided above the sacred moment.

It was certainly not her most stunning work of art. It was far too simple, hastily painted. Her old mentor Ruskin would have fussed about her technique and chided her for the sparse shading and perspective. He had envisioned her art to fill the galleries of Europe. Yet she sat in the slums, using it to teach a child about Jesus.

She found the latter far more gratifying.

###

After spending the day teaching in the slums, feeding the elderly, and checking on three new missionaries who had arrived from the states, Lilias slogged into her apartment in the heart of Algiers. Pushing through the dented door, she blew out a weary breath. Empty. Blanche and Maria had left to teach a Bible study with a small group of women on the city’s eastern side. It was a rare moment of quiet in their little abode.

Dropping her portfolio of paintings on the rickety table closest to the door, she hastened to the kitchen to put on a kettle of tea. Once the stove was heating, Liliás stretched her aching back and mentally rehearsed all she still had left to finish for the day: mission reports requesting prayer and financial support, prepare notes for her upcoming lecture in Scotland, and finish the illustrations for the mission's newest gospel tract. She rubbed the bridge of her nose. The work was endless, but truly, she would be bereft with anything less.

The tea kettle whistled and she hastened to remove it from the heat. Since arriving in Algiers twenty years ago, she and her friends had been plagued with every hindrance imaginable. Persecution, intense heat, disease, sandstorms, exhaustion, worn nerves, and even hatred. All of it was compounded by the daily pain from her heart. Liliás placed her hand over her chest. Yet it still beat, if only by God's hand alone.

Pouring herself a steaming cup of tea, she moved across the room and eased into the chair next to her simple desk, staring up at the fading maps of Algeria and Tunisia she and Blanche had affixed to the wall when they'd first arrived. Gentle Maria had tacked a simple reminder above the map: "Take heed to the ministry which you have received in the Lord that you fulfill it."

A sobering admonition.

It had been too long since Liliás had taken time to rest. To recharge. Memories of Ruskin floated through her mind once again. How he would stand over her easel, his brows pinched as he studied her canvas. "No, my dear. It's not quite right. There are moments when we can hear the snow speak. We can hear the whisper of the ocean. We can sense a change in the fortunes of our loved ones before we ever witness the worry in their expression. The glory of sunrise, the majesty of a valley strewn with wildflowers. To live in the Maker's presence, we must learn to see!"

Learn to see.

Pushing her to-do list from her mind, Liliás grabbed a blank sheet of paper and a pencil from the desk and sat in the quiet of the room. She closed her eyes and focused on her earliest memories. Mother's gentle touch, Father's boisterous laughter, the way the fourth step of the grand staircase squeaked, the aroma of coffee and bacon each morning when she arose, and the small meadow behind the house flooded with dandelions each spring. How she missed those happy days of old.

She would run barefoot through the dewy grass in her pinafore, blowing the wispy white down across the slope of lawn, running her pudgy fingers over the buttery yellow blossoms. Yes, those dandelions were sunshine, a picture of the unrelenting joy and hope surrounding her.

Picking up her pencil, she wrote every thought, every reflection ruminating through her heart. Minutes slipped into hours. When she finished, she pushed back and picked up the filled sheets of hastily scrawled words and phrases, her heart settled.

Maybe God would use these simple words one day to encourage another.

Perhaps.

Chapter 11

Helen

*October 5, 1918
Seattle, Washington*

“By golly, Mother, I believe the Germans have been whipped.”

The exuberance in my son Laurance’s voice made me smile. I hadn’t heard him so jubilant since the Great War had begun nearly four years ago. Worry shadowed every home, every worship service, every gathering. It was as if the entire globe waited with bated breath.

I glided in my rocker, enjoying the soft crackle of the fire as the chair squeaked. This was my favorite time of each day, when Laurance would swing by on his way home to his sweet wife Katherine. With my daughter-in-law expecting their first child, our routine would soon change. But with change came great blessings.

Life had taught me that much in spades.

That day so long ago when I had received my dreaded diagnosis and William had shredded my heart to bits, I thought life was over. But a month after I had been abandoned, God gave me the most beautiful gift...the realization I was carrying a baby. And what a joy Laurance had been to me ever since. Even while I navigated the final loss of my vision, his bubbly spirit had been my light. He played quietly when I gave voice lessons in the parlor, helped clean the house and read to me in the evenings. Even after he’d grown and begun his own family, he was attentive, kind, and thoughtful. My son and I...we laugh often. Our fellowship is sweet.

“American forces have been in Argonne, striking the Huns amid the stretch of France’s largest forests and along the Meuse River. The Allies have captured over 10,000 German soldiers and the numbers keep climbing.”

The warmth of the fire warmed my toes as I listened to him rustle the newsprint. “What does this mean?”

“Hopefully the end of the war. If the Germans realize they are beat, they will surrender. And listen to this...” he paused dramatically, “British and Canadian Corps forces struck a decisive victory in Cambrai. It’s been held by the Huns since 1914.”

“Let us pray this will be the final turn to bring our boys home for good.”

“Amen.” His warm fingers patted my hand. “You miss your students, don’t you?”

Nearly all of my male singers had enlisted, and many of the female soloists had volunteered as nurses, or were busy with various war efforts. Paying for voice training was not the world’s priority at the moment, leaving my days much too empty. “I miss them all terribly, but,” I smiled, “the quiet has given me abundant time to write my songs.”

He grunted softly and flipped another page of the newspaper. “How many hymns have you composed now? Four hundred?”

“At the least.” I chuckled. “I fear I drive dear Paul to distraction.”

Laurance laughed. “He enjoys it. Or should I say, he enjoys spending time with you.”

I waved my hand in dismissal. “I’m just an old woman with too much time on her hands. I wouldn’t know how to manage without him recording the songs when they are finished. Without a way for me to mark the notation, I worry my memory will fail someday and all those little nuggets of inspiration will disappear.”

I heard Laurance’s body weight shift as his lips brushed my cheek in a soft kiss. “Your mind is sharp as a tack. No fear there. And as long as you have your keyboard to play, you won’t forget. The melodies are as much ingrained in your fingers as in your mind. By the way,” his warmth faded as he rose, his voice looming over me, “I found this tract at the church’s library last week. It quite impressed me. Thought you’d enjoy it.”

I leaned forward, anxious to hear more. “Who wrote it?”

“A female missionary named Liliias Trotter.”

I searched my memory for recollection but failed. “I’ve never heard of her.”

“Me either.” Paper rustled as he cleared his throat. “This piece is called ‘Focused’.

I settled the thin blanket around my legs to chase the slight chill from the room and gave my son my full attention. His baritone filled the cozy space.

“It was in a little wood in early morning. The sun was climbing behind a steep cliff in the east, and its light was flooding nearer and nearer and then making pools among the trees. Suddenly, from a dark corner of purple brown stems and tawny moss there shone out a great golden star. It was just a dandelion, and half withered - but it was full face to the sun, and had

caught into its heart all the glory it could hold, and was shining so radiantly that the dew that lay on it still made a perfect aureole round its head. And it seemed to talk, standing there - to talk about the possibility of making the very best of these lives of ours.”

Her words were poetic. I could picture every scent, every color. Laurance continued.

“For if the Sun of Righteousness has risen upon our hearts, there is an ocean of grace and love and power lying all around us, an ocean to which all earthly light is but a drop, and it is ready to transfigure us, as the sunshine transfigured the dandelion, and on the same condition - that we stand full face to God.”

“What a lovely thought.” I cupped my hands over my knees, swallowing with a strange well of emotion.

“Isn’t it? Wait until you hear the rest.” The paper crinkled as he turned to the next page. “Will it not make life narrow, this focusing? In a sense, it will - just as the mountain path grows narrower, for it matters more and more, the higher we go, where we set our feet - but there is always, as it narrows, a wider and wider outlook, and purer, clearer air. And in the narrowing and focusing, the channel will be prepared for God’s power - like the stream hemmed between the rock-beds, that wells up in a spring - like the burning glass that gathers the rays into an intensity that will kindle fire. It is worthwhile to let God see what He can do with these lives of ours, when ‘to live is Christ’.”

My heart thundered. Who was this woman? This zealous believer whose words pierced my soul?

“Turn full your soul’s vision to Jesus, and look at Him, and a strange dimness will come over all that is apart from Him...for He is worthy to have all there is to be had in the heart that He has died to win.”

A bittersweet joy swept through my spirit. Each day I groped in darkness, but I could see in all the ways that mattered. Jesus was my light, my hope, my crown. My vision.

Turn full your soul’s vision to Jesus...

Turn and look...

Turn your eyes upon Jesus.

A soaring melody swept through my body, eliciting gooseflesh to shiver down my arms.

Turn your eyes upon Jesus

Look full in His wonderful face

And the things of earth will grow strangely dim

In the light of His glory and grace

A tear streaked a warm trail down my cheek.

“Mother?” Laurance’s hand cupped my shoulder. “Are you well?”

A shaky smile curved my mouth. My chin trembled. “Yes, dear boy. I am well in all the things that matter.” I cleared my throat. “Will you call Paul? I have a song that must be captured immediately.”

Epilogue

Lilias

*August 27, 1928
El Biar, Algiers, Algeria*

“Take a sip of water, Miss Trotter.”

Lilias pushed away her secretary’s efforts to have her drink once more as she lay in her bed. “I’m fine, dear girl. Mercy.” She smiled weakly and sunk back into her soft bed. “I’m already dying. No need to drown me.”

Belle Patrick bit her lip as tears welled in her brown eyes. “Don’t say such things, Miss Trotter. We will all be lost without you.”

Lilias closed her eyes and shook her head as her heart pinched with all-too-frequent pain. “You don’t need me, sweet Belle. If you have Jesus, you have everything.” There were but a handful of tasks yet to complete and her race would be run. “Did you finish my letter to Amy Carmichael?”

Belle nodded and set the glass of water on a nearby table. “Yes, miss. I finished the dictation you gave me and have already dropped it in the post.”

“Good, good.” Lilias closed her eyes again, fighting for breath. Why was it hard to breathe all of a sudden? “Are Blanche and Maria here?”

Belle nodded. “Yes. They are waiting just outside, along with at least ten of the missionaries you trained to take over the Algiers Mission Band.”

Lilias exhaled but her breathe was not right. Her heart twisted, writhing with a suffocating sensation. “You can—let them—in.”

When she reopened her eyes, she was surrounded by tear-streaked faces, all of them precious. Blanche, whose blonde hair had grown liberally streaked with white, Maria with the deep laugh lines around her eyes, dark-skinned women she had led to the Lord, a handful of young girls filled with zeal, their eyes bright...what a lovely gift God had given here in these final moments on earth.

“I love—you all.”

“And we love you, Liliias.” Blanche leaned down and brushed her forehead with a reverent kiss. Maria smiled, though it was wobbly. “Shall we sing?”

Liliias nodded and allowed her eyes to close again. Daima, Iman, Barika, Maria and a handful of others lifted their voices as one.

“Turn your eyes upon Jesus. Look full in His wonderful face, and the things of earth will grow strangely dim in the light of His glory and grace.”

A marvelous peace siphoned through her chest. Sweet of them to remember the song Mrs. Lemmel had sent her. That hymn had found instant popularity in the states and Liliias pondered with awe the miraculous things God could do with a nobody like herself.

She opened her eyes, but the room had vanished. Swirls of color, of light and shimmering splendor surrounded her. Six white horses with muscled legs and snow-white manes glided through the air, carrying a chariot behind them. Who was the one with blazing eyes riding with them?

She sucked in a breath. “I cannot comprehend it. I cannot...oh, Jesus.”

From some distance, she could hear Maria’s voice choked with emotion. “What are you seeing, Liliias?”

She smiled, every fiber of her body rising from the bed. “Many beautiful things.”

The earth slipped away. Radiant light. Music. The world exploded with color. And then, Father stood before her, happier than she’d ever seen him, his hands outstretched, waiting to wrap her in his arms.

“Well, happy day to you, Lily-bell! Isn’t it a beautiful morning?”