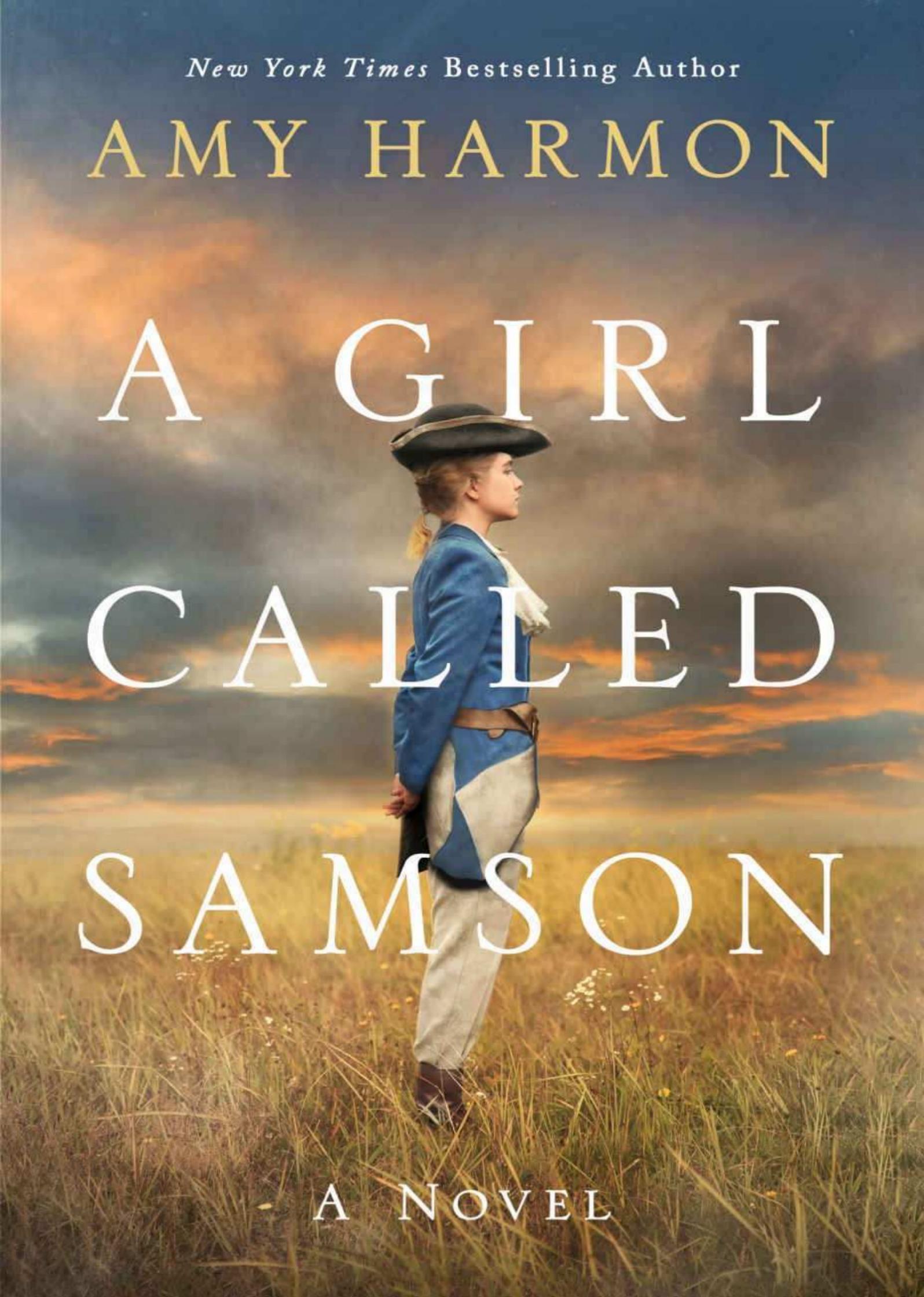


New York Times Bestselling Author

AMY HARMON



A GIRL
CALLED
SAMSON

A NOVEL

A GIRL
CALLED
SAMSON

ALSO BY AMY HARMON

Young Adult and Paranormal Romance

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The Queen and the Cure

The First Girl Child

The Second Blind Son

A GIRL
CALLED
SAMSON

A NOVEL

AMY HARMON

LAKE UNION
PUBLISHING

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For my daughters

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Strength and honor are her clothing; and she shall rejoice
in time to come.

Proverbs 31:25

January 3, 1827

Dear Elizabeth,

You have not been far from my mind today. It is a new year, though I suspect it will be my last. I find myself lost in thought more than I am present, and though I've told parts of my story, I've never written it all down from beginning to end.

Many of the things I will write, you already know, but this record will be for your children. And mine. And for generations of little girls who have not even been born.

A newspaper columnist named Herman Mann—he calls himself a novelist—interviewed me at length for a book, and I had hopes that he would write my story as I conveyed it to him. But I find some things are impossible to express, especially to a stranger. The pages he has shared with me bear little resemblance to the tale I lived, and one must

understand my history to understand my choices. It is better that I write it myself, even if it shocks sensibilities.

I am accustomed to that.

The records I kept during the final years of the Revolution were scant and insufficient, but the events are burned into my memory, and I relive them in my sleep. It seems like another life, though the remnants of that life are with me still, in my flesh and in my posterity.

I thought nothing could be worse than the small, painful existence I was living. I also feared the war would end, and I would miss my only shot at deliverance. As it turned out, I saw all the bloodshed I could bear. I watched boys die and grown men weep. I saw cowardice reign and bravery falter. And I witnessed what dreams cost, up close and personal.

If I'd known, I might have avoided it all, the pain in my leg and the price of independence—my own and that of my country. But then I wouldn't have met him. And I wouldn't have come to truly know myself.

People ask me why I did it. Mr. Mann kept returning to that question, and I had no simple answer. Such a question demands the entire story. All I know is that once the desire took root in me, it grew and grew, until to deny it would have choked the hope from my breast. And hope is what keeps us alive.

Had I been pretty and small, I might have had different dreams. I've pondered on that many times. Our aspirations are so often influenced by our appearance. I wonder how mine might have changed me.

I was named after my mother, who was named after the biblical prophetess Deborah. But I didn't want to be a prophet. I wanted to be a warrior like Jael, the woman who slayed a mighty general and liberated her people from the fist of oppression. Mostly, I wanted to free myself.

At five years old, I was alone in the world. At eight, I became a servant to a widow who treated me like a dog. At ten, I was indentured to a farmer until I turned eighteen.

It is impossible to describe how it feels to have no say in one's own life, to be at the mercy of others, and to be sent away. I was only a child then, but being bound out marked me deeply and lit a rebellion in my veins I have never quelled.

Maybe that was the moment I became a soldier.

Maybe that was the day it all began.

THE COURSE OF HUMAN EVENTS

March 15, 1770

Winter had begun her retreat, but summer was still a long way off, and the horse we rode picked his way over the thawing, gouged road with a bowed head and an uneven gait. The man in front of me shielded me from the bite of early morning, but I huddled in misery behind him, ignoring the crouching countryside and the bare branches prodding the sky for signs of spring. My legs bounced against the horse's flanks, and I tucked my skirts more securely around my knees. My dress was too small, my wool stockings too large, and a patch of skin between the two was being rubbed raw. I wore every piece of clothing I owned and carried a satchel across my back that held a blanket, a hairbrush, and a Bible that had once belonged to my mother.

"Can you read, Deborah?" Reverend Sylvanus Conant asked. He tossed the question over his shoulder like crumbs for a bird. He hadn't spoken since we'd set off, and I considered not answering. On the occasions he had visited Widow Thatcher, he had been kind to me, but today I was angry with him. Today he had come to take me away. Widow Thatcher no longer needed me, and I would be moving again. I would not miss her slaps, the harsh criticisms, or the endless tasks that were never done to her satisfaction, but I had no confidence that my new situation would be any better.

This time, I would be living with a family. Not my family. My family was gone, tossed into the wind and scattered. My brothers and my sister were all in servitude somewhere to someone. Mother couldn't provide for us. She could barely provide for herself. I hadn't seen her in ages, and I would see her even less living in Middleborough.

"Yes. I can read very well," I relented. Conversation was preferable to stewing in my discontent. "My mother taught me when I was four years

old.”

“Is that so?” he asked. The horse that carried us whinnied in disbelief. I shifted, trying not to cling to the man, but I was not accustomed to riding thus, and the ridge of the old mare’s back made an uncomfortable seat.

“My mother said reading is in my blood. She is the great-granddaughter of William Bradford. Do you know William Bradford? He was aboard the *Mayflower*. The people made him their governor.” I felt the need to defend my mother if only to defend myself.

“I do indeed. It is a heritage you can be proud of.”

“My father is a Samson. There was a Samson aboard the *Mayflower* too. Henry Samson. Mother said he came to the New World all alone.”

“He must have been very brave.”

“Yes. But my father is not brave.”

Reverend Conant did not disagree, and I sank into shamed silence, embarrassed by my admission.

“Do you know your Bible?” he asked, as if offering me redemption.

“Yes. And I have memorized the catechisms.”

“Oh?”

I began to prattle off the questions and answers outlined by the Assembly of Divines.

“My goodness, child!” he interrupted after several minutes of recitation. I was not finished, but I stopped. Widow Thatcher had been unimpressed by my achievement. She’d scolded me for my pride. I expected the reverend to do the same.

“That is highly commendable,” he said instead. “Very impressive.”

“I can keep going,” I proposed, biting my lips to hide my pleasure. “I know it all.”

“And can you write?” he asked.

I hesitated, slightly deflated. Reading was easier than writing, and Widow Thatcher had wanted me to read to her, sometimes for hours on end, but she hadn’t been keen on me scratching away at my letters.

“I can,” I said. “But not as well as I read. I need more practice.”

“It is one thing to read another man’s thoughts. It is another to express one’s own. And paper is expensive,” the reverend said.

“Yes. And I have no money.” I was surprised that he’d even asked. I was a girl, after all, and a servant, but his queries made me hopeful.

“Do you think the Thomases might allow me to go to school?” I asked.

It was his turn to hesitate. “Mistress Thomas is sorely in need of help.”

I sighed, unsurprised. I would not be going to school.

“But I will bring you books, if you like,” he offered.

I came close to toppling from my perch behind him.

“What kind?” I blurted, though I hardly cared. The Bible, the catechisms, and a collection of maps and journals that had belonged to Reverend Thatcher were the only books Widow Thatcher had in her house. I read them all out loud to the old woman, even the journals, though they were filled with sermons and little else. The pages my mother had copied from the records of William Bradford were much more interesting, but I dearly wanted something new.

“What kind of books would you like?” the reverend asked.

“Stories. I would like stories. Adventures.”

“All right. And I will bring paper and ink as well so you will have the means to practice your writing. You could compose letters.”

“Who will I write to?”

He didn’t respond immediately, and I feared I’d been impertinent. Widow Thatcher often accused me of such, though I’d always performed every task to exactness and only spoke when spoken to.

“I would like someone to practice with,” I explained. I was hungry for a friend. I’d spent the last five years with old women who were spent and weary. “Perhaps Mistress Thomas will allow that.”

“Perhaps.” He said no more on the matter, and I did not allow myself to hope that he would do as he promised.

“The Thomases live about two miles from town. It’s a good stretch of the legs. Nothing more. They have a farm, a pretty place. You might find it very agreeable.”

I looked beyond my misery enough to take in the day around me. The mud of early spring slowed our journey, and the earth sucked at the horse’s hooves, but the morning sky was turning blue, the sun had begun to warm my back, and the breeze stirred my pale hair. I’d spent too many days shut inside, hovering near Widow Thatcher so her every command could be attended to. The world beyond those stifling rooms and stagnant air had called to me, and my limbs and lungs had longed for speed and motion. If I’d thought the reverend would allow it, I would’ve asked to be let down so I could run alongside the horse. I loved to run. But the road was churned up from travel, and I had no confidence that my wishes would be considered, so I swallowed them.

The first time I got a glimpse of the house in the middle of forest and fields, I felt a glimmer of hope. It was well kept, and the windows made a friendly face with the front door and the little gate that separated the yard

from the road. The door flew open upon our approach, and a woman, her skirts in hand, ran to greet us, a little black-haired boy on her heels. A burly man, a hat on his head and his sleeves rolled as if he'd just stepped away from his labors, called out to the reverend as we drew to a halt.

"Don't be afraid, Deborah," the reverend said gently. "You will not be mistreated here."

Boys tumbled out of the barn and came in from the fields, boys of all sizes, though most appeared older than me. Reverend Conant seemed to know all their names and greeted each one, but I didn't know which name belonged to whom. There were so many, and I had very little experience with other children, especially boys. They watched their father help me down from the mare, though it was not an inability to disembark as much as trepidation that had kept me rooted to my seat instead of sliding to the ground.

Deacon Jeremiah Thomas wore two frowns, one on his brow and one on his lips, but his wife, Susannah, a woman who barely reached his shoulder, was his opposite in every way. His soberness, I would come to find, was not cruelty. He was not jolly, but he was just, which was a far better quality in my opinion. Susannah Thomas smiled at me and grasped my hands.

"Sylvanus did not tell us you were so grown. You are so tall for ten and already a young woman."

I nodded but did not smile. I expect I looked rather fierce too, though I was simply afraid. She introduced me to her sons, oldest to youngest. Nathaniel, Jacob, and Benjamin were eighteen, seventeen, and sixteen. All three were midheight and slim with dark hair and freckled noses, which they wrinkled at me. I don't know what they were expecting, but I was clearly not it. Elijah was heavier set with lighter hair and an easier smile. He was fourteen, and thirteen-year-old Edward was his mirror image, as if Mrs. Thomas had birthed her sons in sets, whether they were born at the same time or not.

Twelve-year-old Francis and Phineas were actual twins, and the dark hair and sparer frames of their older brothers reemerged with them. I was taller than both, and the one named Phineas scowled when his mother cooed over my height. David and Daniel were twins as well, and ten like me, with curly brown mops that needed grooming. I was a sight taller than them too.

Jeremiah was the youngest, at six, and the only one who didn't seem to have a double. I was hopeful, for Mrs. Thomas's sake, that the six years after Jeremiah meant she wouldn't be having any more.

“We will try not to overwhelm you, Deborah, though we are very excited to have you here. It will be good to have another female in the house. You will help civilize my sons.”

Someone snorted at that, though I could not be sure who. Mrs. Thomas turned and looped her arm through Reverend Conant’s and announced that supper was ready.

“Wash and come inside, boys. Deborah, bring your things. I will show you where you’ll sleep.”

Mrs. Thomas turned her attention to Reverend Conant, and they walked into the house, chatting like old friends. Deacon Thomas was already leading the horse to the trough, and I hoisted my satchel, hiked my sagging stockings, and prepared to follow. The Thomas boys had fallen into quiet conference, and I froze, my back toward them, straining to hear.

“She’s plain as a fence post.”

“Shaped like one too.”

“And her hair is the color of straw.” Whoever was speaking snickered. “Maybe she could stand in the field and scare away the birds.”

“Her eyes are pretty. I don’t think I’ve ever seen eyes like hers.”

“They’re creepy! We’ll have to set up a watch each night, to keep her from slaying us all in our beds.”

I laughed at that, the bark of mirth surprising us all, and I turned to flash a wicked grin in their direction. Better they fear me than dismiss me.

“Her teeth are good,” someone muttered, and I laughed again.

“She’s downright peculiar,” the oldest brother said, but the boy named Phineas had begun laughing too, and one by one, the others joined him.



I did not civilize the boys.

It might even be said that they radicalized me.

They slept in the big loft above the great room in berths built into the slope of the roof. Only David and Daniel, the youngest set of twins, slept in a regular bed, and it was hardly big enough for the two of them. They slept with their heads on opposite ends, their feet tickling each other’s noses.

I was given a room of my own. It was but a closet, separated from the kitchen by a thin wall and a door, but it was big enough to hold a narrow berth, a pair of drawers, and a table a foot deep and two feet wide. And it was mine. I had my own bed, my own space. Being a female in a house

full of sons had its benefits, even if one occupied the position of servant.

In the early days, the Thomas brothers kept their distance, eyeing me like I was a thief or a leper. It was Jeremiah, the littlest one, who warmed to me first. Perhaps it was that we were both loose ends, but he latched on to me quickly and made me his cohort. We were even born on the same day. I turned eleven the day he turned seven, and Jeremiah took that as a sign.

“Will you be my twin, Deborah?” Jeremiah asked, looking up at me with mournful eyes. “I have no one.”

I laughed. “You have nine brothers, Jeremiah.”

“But I’m the runt. I have no one who belongs to me. And you don’t even have a ma or a pa or sisters and brothers.”

“I do . . . somewhere.”

“Well, what good is that?”

“Not much good, Jerry. Not much,” I agreed, and my heart was oddly lighter for speaking the truth of it.

“So you can be my twin.”

“And what do twins do?”

“A twin is the person you love most. Do you think you could love me most?”

“That will be easy.”

“It will?” His toothy smile made my heart swell.

“It will.”

“I love Ma an awful lot, but loving Ma is kinda like loving God. She’s not really a person.”

“Jeremiah!” I gasped. “She is too.”

“I just mean . . . that she belongs to all of us. I want someone who just belongs to me,” he repeated.

“All right. But I will try to love your brothers too, because that is what Reverend Conant says I must do.”

“Even Nathaniel?” He looked doubtful. “And Phineas? He’s mean. He told you no man would ever have you.”

“No man will ever have me because I won’t have him. And I won’t need him.”

“I’ll have you, Deborah.”

“You won’t, Jeremiah. You’re seven years old. And we’re twins now, remember?”

“We don’t look like twins . . . but that’s okay, isn’t it?” Jerry was small and dark, and I was tall and blonde, as different as night and day.

“Looks don’t matter at all if your hearts are the same,” I declared,