

CHRISTA MADRID

# Virtue's Promise



# **Virtue's Promise**

Christa Madrid

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## *Europe, 1532*

*Charm is deceitful and beauty is passing,  
But a woman who fears the LORD,  
she shall be praised.*

Athalie LeBlanc stepped from the dark, cramped cottage and into the sunshine. Her blue eyes gleaming, she breathed deep, thankful for the fresh air so unlike the pungent odors of the medicinal herbs inside. Once again widowed Mary Corneille had taken ill. Like many times before, her desperate daughter had called for Athalie's care.

"You do wonders for Mama," the bubbly woman had said. "But I know it's more than the medicines. It's your gentle spirit." She had given Athalie a wistful smile and shook her head in marvel. "You are so like your angelic mother. This town wouldn't have survived without her loving care."

Mary's daughter had spoken the truth. The village of Ille, located in the mountains of their tiny, obscure European homeland, would have perished had it not been for a few dedicated women. Led by Athalie's mother, they had worked night and day to preserve the lives of the townspeople from the hungry hand of fever. Some had lost the battle those many years ago, but the remnant that had survived now made up their small, yet strong, community.

Ille had been Athalie's home for her entire life. Even after her parent's death in a destructive flood in the valley, she had never imagined living anywhere else. Quiet and quaint, the village was surrounded by forests and pastureland. Its residents were a giving, peaceable people who needed little in material goods to make them happy. They were family to Athalie, just as they had been to her mother.

Moving from the front step, Athalie strolled down Ille's quiet avenue. She listened to the steady clang of the

blacksmith's hammer, the laughter of neighboring shopkeepers, and the call of children as they played. Athalie smiled softly. She loved to see everyone so happy and content.

Across the street, a slender young woman also stepped out of one of the cottages. Basket on her arm, she headed down the way Athalie had just come. With shiny long black hair, deep green eyes, and the grace of a courtier, Yvette Tronchet was considered the beauty of the village. She was one year younger than nineteen-year-old Athalie, but carried herself as one much older.

Athalie smiled, remembering how she had felt inferior to the girl when she was younger. That she did not share the same outward beauty, brilliant tongue, and outgoing personality had plagued her night and day. Her fear of never being good enough to marry sent her weeping to her mother.

Madame LeBlanc had cradled her crying daughter on her lap, gently stroking Athalie's wavy chestnut locks. Then, as the tears gave way to shaky breaths, she had tipped Athalie's chin to look deeply in her eyes. "Athalie, when you are a woman of virtue, as the proverbs say, you can rest assured that the Father's best will always come to you. You have no need to fear for a loving husband. God will send him, if need be, from the very end of the earth."

Athalie, from that day forward, treasured that wisdom deep within her. It was a promise from above that she would follow all the days of her life.

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## *Montelimar, the capital city*

*Who can find a virtuous wife?  
For her worth is far above rubies.*

Prince Michel leaned against the balcony wall and rubbed his aching forehead. Never had he been so relieved to escape one of the palace's most anticipated festivities. He had simply had more than enough of laughter and music, fluttering banners and clothing, rich foods and twittering ladies. His only consolation was in knowing he could soon shut out the activity by going to bed.

“Where is your companion?”

Prince Michel did not turn at his father's voice but kept his gaze fastened on the merry courtyard below. “She has found . . . other company.”

“You did not like her?”

His son faced him with a look of anguish. “Father, she – she is just like the others. She's beautiful . . . and charming. But there's no depth to her. You know how I yearn for someone who is not given to flirtation and – and petty arguments. Someone who desires the eternal things above the luxuries I can offer.”

He turned back to the wall, his shoulders slumped in defeat. Unconsciously his hand moved to finger his elbow where a dove-shaped birthmark, known to all his subjects since his birth, bore witness to the rank he held. There was no denying the mass of power and wealth he could offer the woman he chose. “Tell me, Father, does such a woman exist? I fear I will go to the throne without the joy of a helpmate.”

The king did not answer immediately. He, too, leaned against the wall and watched the festivities below. Then his gaze moved from the flickering torches, colorful costumes,

and gay musicians to the darkened city and countryside beyond the castle's walls. This was his country – his people. Though he ruled them with authority, he also looked after them as a father looked out for his own. The loyalty he enjoyed was justly deserved, but he knew it would not have been possible without the grace and wisdom of his God. He craved such wisdom at times like these when his children needed his counsel.

King Louis now took hold of his son's shoulders and moved Michel to face him. "Son, tell me, what do you think of your mother?"

Michel looked at him in puzzlement. "I – I think much of her father. She is gracious and kind. She serves God faithfully—"

"So such a woman you long for *does* exist."

"You're right, Father. Forgive me."

"My son, the Holy Scriptures say that a man who finds a wife *finds* a good thing. Perhaps it's time that you stop waiting for the young lady to come parading through the ballroom each time we entertain. Why not go *search* for her."

"Where would I search?" Michel asked, raising his hands in a baffled gesture. "Is there any city where I have not gone that would have what I am looking for?"

The King smiled. "Many of our loyal subjects do not live in cities."

Michel stared at his father. "Are you suggesting I go to the peasants of the country?"

"That, my son, is for you to conclude."

"B-but I have always been under the impression that royalty was to marry royalty."

"Does it matter now?" the King inquired, his face no longer holding a smile. "You have come to the end of yourself. I don't wish for you to be unhappy by marrying someone of lesser virtues than you desire."

Michel's eyebrows knit together as he stared once more into the gardens. Such an idea had never occurred to him. But the more he thought about it, the more it appealed to him. He had nothing against marrying a sweet, innocent peasant girl. He was certain that if she held the godly character he longed for, with a little training, she could become as excellent a queen as his mother was.

Michel at last faced the king. "I find your proposal quite to my liking, Father." He clasped his father's hand with both of his. "I shall do just as you say. The peasants of my country will soon be visited by their prince."

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*Ille*

*She extends her hand to the poor,  
Yes, she reaches out her hands to the needy.*

Francis Richelieu, known as Grandfather to the village, sat quietly at the doorway of his humble cottage, watching a group of frolicking children near his home. Though his beard was too thick to reveal his smile, the bright twinkle in his eyes clearly admitted the pleasure he received in watching them. *One day, he thought, I shall have great-grandchildren of my own.* His thoughts swiftly turned to his only grandchild Athalie. *Such a lovely girl she is. And such a kind heart she has – just like my daughter's. She deserves more than peasant life. Her hard labor since her parent's death has earned her far more than she possesses. Yet, when I look at her, I see only joy and contentment. It's because she has her hope in the only One who can truly provide for her.*

"Uncle Francis! Uncle Francis!"

He started from his reverie and moved toward the voice. To Grandfather's amazement, his nephew Leo ran

down the narrow wagon path from the mountains. Gingerly Grandfather pulled himself to his feet with the help of his walking stick. "Leo! What brings you so far from home? Is everything well with your family?"

"I'm 'fraid not," the stocky adolescent panted, coming to a stop before him. "Mother's ill."

Grandfather steered his unexpected visitor to the shade of the cottage's eaves. "What does she ail from this time? Is there a cure?"

Leo shook his head vigorously. "No, Monsieur. It's her heart. Doctor can't do nothin' 'bout it."

"I – I am sorry to hear it," Grandfather murmured with genuine sympathy. "I wish there was something I could do . . ."

"Oh, but there is!" Leo exclaimed. "Doctor says Mother might live a mite longer if she just had some good nursin'. I've come to ask Cousin Athalie to come and care fer her."

Grandfather looked at him in astonishment. "Athalie?"

Leo shrank back like a timid puppy. "Y–yes, Uncle. No one else in our village can do it. My sisters ain't big enough, ya know."

Grandfather's countenance darkened. He was a kind, generous man, dedicated to the needs of others. Yet his fatherly instinct was still as real as ever. He understood the plight of his younger sister. But he also knew how difficult it would be for Athalie to spend a month or more with his sister's family. They were a large family of eight, and much bickering went on between them. His sister Joan had the worst tongue of the lot. Grandfather was convinced her constant gossip and sharp words were the reason for her steady battle with disease all her life. He would ultimately leave the decision to go or to stay to Athalie. As for himself, he would do nothing to encourage her.

"I will call her," was all he said.

Leo's shoulders sagged with relief as he watched the old man disappear into the cellar nearby. Two minutes later they appeared together in front of Leo.

"Why, Leo! It's good to see you," Athalie greeted, a radiant smile brightening her dirt-smudged cheeks. "Won't you come in?"

"Wait a moment, Athalie." Grandfather laid a tender hand on her arm. "Let him tell you why he's come."

Leo nervously fumbled with his belt. "I . . . um . . . came to ask for yer help, Athalie. Mother's sick again and we need someone to nurse her."

Grandfather watched the look of pity that came across Athalie's face at this news. Immediately he knew Athalie would choose to go. The realization brought both pride and sorrow.

Just as her countenance revealed, Athalie's sensitive heart ached for her suffering aunt. Her mother had taught her to care for everyone, whether they were rich or poor, kind or cruel. "I will go," she agreed. "Give me some time to pack my things. Meanwhile, come in and have a bite to eat."

Leo had no sooner finished his buttered bread than Athalie announced she was ready to begin their five-hour walk across the mountain. Leo was ecstatic. Snatching up her light parcel, he headed for the cottage's only door.

Grandfather, however, pulled Athalie aside and drew her to his chest. "Don't let the strife in their home smother your joy, Athalie. Let the Father be your constant source of strength."

Athalie cradled his whiskered face in her hands. Her loving eyes looked deeply into his. "I will do just as you say, Grandfather. Don't be concerned for me, though I will be concerned for you."

"I have many friends to help me, my dear. Now go. Leo is waiting."

Athalie gently kissed his cheek, and then turned to follow her impatient cousin up the mountain behind them. As Leo spun to lead the way, he collided with the tall build of a young man, dressed in the drab brown costume so common to travelling paupers.

“Good day to you,” the young man greeted with a smile.

Athalie’s head raised at the sound of his rich, cultured voice, and for a moment their eyes met. The man had but an instant to note Athalie’s big blue eyes, long chestnut hair, and creamy skin sprinkled with a few freckles. Leo was at his cousin’s side in a moment, pressing her to keep up.

Athalie gave the man a kind smile and followed as bidden. The stranger, too, continued on his way. He stopped before Grandfather, who still stood on the threshold of his home.

“Excuse me, Monsieur, but is there a place in this village where I could get a bite to eat?”

Grandfather pointed down the street. “Across from the blacksmith you will find a small inn that will serve you.”

“Thank you, Monsieur.”

“You’re very welcome, son.”

The stranger plodded down the street, a soft, happy whistle coming from his puckered lips. Grandfather watched him with curiosity. Not many travelers stopped in their humble village, and none of the few who did were quite like this one. There was a certain air, certain poise, about this lad that made Grandfather want to invite him in.

Grandfather gazed down the lane where his granddaughter had disappeared. Perhaps if Athalie had still been there to make supper, he would have done just that . . . but Athalie was gone.

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“Well, boy,” the stableman called through the stable’s open doors, “I think you’ve earned yourself a rest. Come on down for a bit.”

Michel peered down through the hatch in the loft floor. “Thank you, Monsieur.”

As soon as his employer was out of sight, Michel let out a chuckle. In all his twenty-six years he had never been bossed about by anyone but his parents and nanny. *Never* had he been called “boy.” But Michel didn’t mind at all. In fact, he couldn’t have been happier. It brought him such joy to live among the peasants of his country – living, dressing and working as they did. No doubt was left in his mind that a person could be happy in such an environment.

How thankful he was for the simple garb that hid the mark of his true identity. His plan to roam the mountain villages as a traveling workman was becoming more and more appealing to him. He not only had the chance to experience the peasants’ way of life firsthand but was also able to acquaint himself with generous, kind-hearted folk who would do almost anything to make a stranger feel at home.

Michel slipped down the ladder leading to the loft, a skill he had learned over the last three weeks. It hadn’t taken him long to get a job in this village, unlike the other two he had visited. One had been quite small with no available work. The other had just recovered from a bout of fever, and so was not as concerned for a “peasant” such as himself.

At these times he had been thankful for the knight that followed him wherever he went. This had been his father’s suggestion. This was not only for his protection and guidance, but also for provision, should Michel find himself in want. Even then, Michel kept their meetings as brief and infrequent as possible. He did not want to draw attention to the man in armor hiding all day in the trees. Nor did he want long absences from the village to raise suspicions.

Michel settled himself onto a pile of hay and withdrew a carrot from his pocket. Silently he munched as he thought on the evening ahead. Several families in the village had taken a liking to him, but one in particular seemed to enjoy his company. What delighted Michel the most was that they had a lovely daughter named Yvette.

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“We are so glad to have you join us for our humble meal, Pierre,” Monsieur Tronchet welcomed Michel to their house. “If I do say so myself,” he continued, turning Michel’s face to the candle light, “I think you’ve gotten yourself a tan to match our own.”

Michel grinned at the older man. “The sun has done me good, I’ll admit. Life in the city had deprived me of one of God’s greatest creations.”

“Ah, what an eloquent tongue you have,” Madame Tronchet noted as she passed him on the way to the dinner table. “I can tell you have spent time with those aristocrats in the city. Is that not so, Yvette?”

“You are quite right, Mama.” Yvette smiled from her place at the hearth. “You’d think he was royalty.”

For a moment Michel was taken aback. He studied Yvette for a moment before concluding that she was only teasing and knew nothing of his real identity.

“Come, come,” Monsieur Tronchet beckoned. “Sit down everyone. I’ll say grace and we’ll partake of this feast my lovely wife and daughter have made.”

The conversation at the table was filled with banter and village news. Michel, known to the family as Pierre, watched Yvette carefully throughout the meal. He was pleased with her graces and witty tongue. She held herself

with dignity, yet was liberal with her smiles and laughter. It delighted him to see her eyes so bright and joyful.

As Michel became acquainted with this fine European family, a flicker of hope began to light within him.

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*Who is he? Grandfather wondered as he pulled his blanket up to his chin. What is such a man doing in our village?*

The same questions Grandfather had been asking himself all month had yet to be answered. There was something very different about this young man, giving him reason to watch him so closely. Pierre, as he had heard him called, had made himself quite a reputation among the villagers. Older women adored him for his caring ways. The men applauded him for his hard work and steady wit. The children clamored for his teasing and quick feet in their games.

This was not all that captured Grandfather's interest. Since the first day of their meeting, Pierre's fair skin had not gone unnoticed. Neither had his smooth hands or gentle gait gone undetected. He also had an eloquent way of speech and manners so uncommon to their community. Again, what would such a unique man have to do with a village such as theirs?

"I don't understand it," was all Grandfather could say. "There's something so peculiar about him that I cannot keep my mind from it."

But slowly, as the moon rose high in the night sky, Grandfather was overtaken by gentle slumber . . .

*Like a receding ocean tide, the mist rolled away from the mountainside, allowing the sun's rays to permeate everything in their path. The sky was as blue as any villager*

*could remember – a good omen to the celebration taking place in the center of the village.*

*The square in the village had never looked lovelier. Great arbors surrounded the area, covered in thick blooms from gardens and meadows. Long tables bore a bountiful feast of roast lamb, fresh vegetables, and an array of homemade breads and sweet delicacies. This was only the beginning of a daylong celebration with music, games, and dancing . . . all to commemorate the union of a beautiful young couple.*

*As the laughter of the wedding guests surrounded him, Grandfather turned to smile at the couple just a few yards away. The bride and groom stood with arms linked, tenderly talking to one another as the birds twittered overhead. Pierre stood tall in a navy groom's costume, while Athalie looked like an angel in the shimmering pink gown.*

*They were meant for each other, Grandfather thought. May they always know God's joy in their marriage . . .*

Grandfather's eyes flew open and he lay for several minutes, trying to puzzle through what he had just seen. It had only been a dream, yet it had seemed so real.

“Oh, Father, what shall I do?” he prayed softly. “Shall I receive this as a brief vision of the future?”

A calming peace came on the old man. “Yes, yes. I know what I must do. I will have a visit with the young man. I will find out more.”

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“Hush now, Deborah,” Michel crooned. “There's no need to be frightened.”

Michel ran his hand down the horse's neck, speaking softly to calm the scared animal. Deborah was a frequent visitor to the stables. Her master came twice a month to

trade lamb's wool for his family's necessities. Michel, however, had yet to earn the trust of his only horse.

Grandfather found Michel thus a few minutes later. He approached the young man from behind, his presence made known by the tapping of his walking stick on the ground.

"Why, bonjour, Monsieur," Michel greeted. "What can I do for you?"

Grandfather leaned on his staff. "I'm Francis Richelieu - 'Grandfather' to most. I've come to extend an invitation."

Michel's eyes lit with recognition. "I have heard of you, Monsieur, and seen you on occasion. My name is Pierre."

The elderly man shook Pierre's strong hand, now callused by hard work.

"Would you, Pierre, be interested in visiting my home tonight for supper? It won't be an elegant meal, but you'll be welcome."

Michel had heard many wonderful things concerning this man and his family. The stories went as far back as Madame LeBlanc before her death eight years ago. He had even heard tales of her daughter, Mademoiselle Athalie, whom he understood was gone to care for a sick aunt. It intrigued him and he had wanted to learn more of this revered family. "I would be delighted, Monsieur."

"Then I will expect you soon after the stable closes."

"Agreed."

As Grandfather began to leave, a feminine figure appeared in the doorway. It was Yvette Tronchet.

"Bonjour, Grandfather," she said sweetly, leaning to place a kiss on his cheek. "Have you come to visit Pierre as well?"

"Yes, I have, my dear. Are you doing well?"

Yvette's eyes twinkled as she glanced at Michel. "Very well, Monsieur."

Grandfather patted her shoulder. “Do greet your family for me, Yvette.”

“Of course, Grandfather. Come visit us sometime.”

“That I will.”

Grandfather exited the musty stable, but before shuffling down the street toward home, he glanced back inside the building. Yvette stood talking amiably to Pierre as the young man continued with his work. For a moment he felt alarmed. Though beautiful on the outside, Mademoiselle Tronchet was not at all as innocent as she appeared. Not many knew it, but she and her mother had a bitter relationship. Grandfather had lost track of the number of young men who had been the focus of her flirtation. The young woman spent much of her time pining to be away from the childhood home she thought too confining and slow-paced for her adventurous spirit.

“It’s in your hands, Father,” Grandfather whispered, then returned home.

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Grandfather placed a bowl of stew before Michel and took a seat across from him. He noted with pleasure that the younger man appeared completely at ease sitting with an old man such as himself.

“Tell me, Pierre,” Grandfather queried as he cut bread for both of them, “how long do you intend to stay in our village?”

Michel was quite familiar with this question. “As long as the Lord directs me to stay, Monsieur.”

“Then you are a believer?”

“Since I was a child.”

“Is there any specific reason you have come?” Grandfather smiled. “We are not used to strangers staying

for so long. Of course, you are not a stranger any longer. It seems you have become as one of us."

Michel's heart gave a leap of gratitude. "Thank you, Monsieur. I – I have never experienced such hospitality before coming to these mountains."

"Where did you come from?"

"Montelimar."

"Do you have any living family?"

"Yes, Monsieur. My father, mother, and older sister are still living."

"Also in Montelimar?"

Michel couldn't remember answering so many questions at once. "Yes, Monsieur."

Grandfather eased out of his questioning. Dipping his spoon into the bowl, he began to speak of recent events in the village. When at last they had finished their stew, he rose from his bench to get the kettle.

"Allow me, Monsieur," Michel offered, springing to his feet.

The kettle Grandfather sought hung from the rafters above their heads. Deftly Michel reached to unhook it. As he did, his sleeve slipped from his wrists to his upper arm, revealing a darkened patch of skin near his elbow.

Grandfather's eyes widened and it was all he could do to withhold an exclamation. The birthmark! Since the birth of their king's only son, every citizen of his country knew that the prince bore an unusual birthmark. The crude shape of a dove was unmistakable.

"Here you are." Michel set the kettle before the man. Then seeing Grandfather's shaking hands, he inquired, "Are you all right, Monsieur?"

Grandfather swallowed hard and gripped the edge of the table. "Yes . . . I'm fine. Could you perhaps fill the kettle with water? I'm feeling a little weak."

"Of course." Michel cast a concerned glance over his shoulder before going outdoors to fetch water from the well.

Once he was out of sight, Grandfather covered his face with his hands. He was entertaining royalty! The whole village had been entertaining royalty for the past four weeks . . . and no one knew it.

“If it is truly him, why is he here?” Grandfather murmured. “I must know. I *must*.”

A moment later Michel returned with a full kettle of water, observing Grandfather closely. “Are you sure you will be all right, Monsieur?”

“Yes, yes. I’ll be fine. Just put the kettle over the fire to boil, please.”

“Perhaps I should go now and let you rest. I’m sure you’ve had a busy day.”

“Oh . . . yes, of course. Thank you for coming . . . Pierre.”

Seeing that Grandfather seemed to be steady on his feet once more, Michel gave a courteous bow. “Have a good night, Monsieur. Thank you for your hospitality.”

“Thank - thank you for joining me.”

Michel was soon lost from sight down the street. Grandfather moved to reenter his home. As he did so, he caught a glimpse of an armored man among the trees. For a moment, the light from his house glimmered off of the shiny metal. Grandfather stepped down from the threshold and moved closer. By the time he had reached the edge of the brush, the figure had disappeared.

Grandfather stood silently near the trees, listening closely. Not a sound was heard besides the steady rush of the mountain creek several yards away. Grandfather knew he had not just imagined the figure. He was convinced all the more that someone very important dwelt among them.

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“You called for me, Grandfather?”

The old man motioned for one of his closest friends to come nearer to where he sat in the shade of a tree. Obediently the younger man crouched at his feet and waited for instructions.

“Have you met Pierre, Jacques?” Grandfather asked.

“I have,” Jacques affirmed. “He seems to be a very learned young man.”

Grandfather nodded. “I have my suspicions about him.”

Jacques eyed Grandfather in surprise. “You don’t believe he’s the man he seems to be?”

“No, I don’t. However, his character is not what concerns me. It’s *who* he is that I question.”

“What do you want me to do?”

Grandfather leaned forward, and with the authority of an elder said, “Jacques, I want you to visit Montelimar and find out all you can about him.”

Though curious at the odd request, Jacque agreed. The next day he departed for the city, but it was two weeks before Grandfather heard from his friend again. The thirty-year-old man had willingly gone to Montelimar to investigate the whereabouts of a missing member of the royal family. Grandfather was not given to worry, but time was short. Pierre’s trips to the Tronchet home were becoming more and more frequent. Though the young man had not asked the father for permission to court the lovely girl, Grandfather feared it could be any time.

Grandfather often wondered if Pierre would have noticed Yvette at all if Athalie had been in the village. She, however, was still across the mountain caring for her ailing aunt. He had received several messages from her throughout the month and a half she had been gone. Joan seemed to be doing better, according to Athalie. Despite her kind notes, Grandfather sensed that his granddaughter was lonely and tired. He wished he could persuade her to come home, but

Athalie was adamant. She would stay until her nursing was complete.

“It’s in Your hands, Father,” Grandfather would often say. “Your will be done in your timing.”

A few days later, his patience was rewarded. As he pulled water from their well one afternoon, two bare-foot children dashed up to him, excitedly pointing to the stables.

“Grandfather, Jacques is back! He’s at the stables.”

“Jacques?” Grandfather exclaimed with delight. “Well, lead the way, children. Lead the way!”

He snatched up his walking stick and rushed with the two boys down the street. His heart pounded with suspense at the news he might hear. Who was the man Pierre? Was he truly Prince Michel, son of their revered king? Or was the birthmark simply a coincidence, a weak similarity of the true birthmark?

“Jacques, here’s Grandfather!” one of the boys shouted into the stable.

Jacques sprang to his feet, leaving the bucket he was filling with feed on the floor. “Grandfather! I have much to tell you.”

Grandfather grasped the man’s shirtsleeve. “Who is he, Jacques? What have you found?”

Jacques glanced behind him and Grandfather saw Pierre for the first time, carefully polishing a saddle in the corner. He watched the pair with his head cocked in curiosity.

“I – I can’t tell you here, Grandfather,” Jacques whispered. “But come and I’ll tell you all.”

Jacques steered Grandfather out into the sunlight and into the woods a good distance from the stable. He seated Grandfather on a stump and crouched at his feet, as was his habit.

“I looked for a job in Montelimar the first day I was there,” Jacques began. “I got one at a blacksmith’s shop and stayed on for about four days. I asked many questions of the

town folk, but the best news came by accident. One day two workmen from the palace came into the shop. They were talking about the king and his family.”

“What did they say?” Grandfather pressed.

“They talked about the long absence of the prince. They hadn’t seen him at the stables and some of his other favorite haunts around the castle. Other family members and officials had even asked the king about him. The king is saying nothing. Even the common folk in the city know the prince is missing. So I decided to offer my work at the stables in the palace. God’s favor was with me. The very day I applied, I was hired. I worked there for a week until I was visited by the king and his knight.”

Grandfather’s eyes took on a sparkle. “You spoke with the king?”

“No, but I was instructed to prepare the knight’s horse. As I did, they walked a few paces away and began to talk about the prince. Their voices were hushed, but I could hear nearly every word. The king gave instructions to the man to watch Michel closely. Then His Majesty asked if Prince Michel had found a bride yet, but the knight said no. Then they came for the knight’s horse and left.”

Grandfather gripped his walking stick and stared into the trees. The prince *was* living in their village! Prince Michel was looking for a bride!

“Jacques, tell no one of what we have just spoken about,” Grandfather instructed in a quivering voice, “especially the Tronchet family.”

“My lips are sealed, Grandfather.” Jacques smiled. “If I haven’t misjudged you, I would say you have someone in mind for Prince Michel.”

“You read me well, Jacques.”

“Is there anything more I can do for you?”

“Yes, you can go to my sister’s home and bring back . . .” He gripped Jacques’ arm. “No, no. I would like you to

ask Prince Michel to come to my house this evening. I have a mission for him.”

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*Give her of the fruit of her hands,  
And let her own works praise her in the gates.*

The donkey nudged at Michel’s shoulder in impatience. Michel stood still, gazing down the village’s main street. This place, much smaller than Ille, was the location of his assignment. Somewhere nearby lived Mademoiselle Athalie and her kin.

Fingering the scroll of paper in his hand, Michel thought back to the conversation that had brought him here. A man named Jacques had come to the stables the day before, relaying a request from Grandfather to speak with him. Michel had left his work that evening and immediately walked the short distance to Grandfather’s house. He hadn’t known what to expect, though he had been curious, to say the least.

Once in the tidy little cottage, Grandfather had seated Michel and sat to face him. “I have a request to make of you.”

“Yes, Monsieur?”

Grandfather leaned on his stick and peered at Michel from beneath bushy white eyebrows. “You see, I have a granddaughter in a village on the other side of this mountain. She is caring for my sick sister. However, I feel it is time she came home and I need someone to fetch her.”

Michel hadn’t expected anything like this. “I – I see.”

“It is a five-hour hike from here. You could make it there and back in a day if you wanted to. Of course, Athalie will not be expecting you, so she may want a day to rest and pack her things before you leave.”

“I do not know your granddaughter, Monsieur. Do you think she will assent to go with me?”

Grandfather nodded. “I’ll send a message with you. She’ll come.”

Michel still hesitated. He didn’t understand why he, a near stranger to this family, would be asked to be an escort.

Seeing his reluctance, Grandfather said, “I don’t wish to take you away from your job, Pierre. I’m willing to pay you well for it, and I will provide food for the journey.”

“I have no concern for the money, Monsieur. I only wonder why you would entrust me with your greatest possession. I am not as familiar with your family as most people in this community.”

“True, true,” Grandfather agreed, “but I have watched your conduct, Pierre, and feel I can trust you to be a gentleman to my granddaughter. My greatest concern at this time is getting her home safely.”

“You need not fear for her safety, Monsieur. I will treat her with utmost care.”

“Then you will go?”

“I will go.”

At noon the next day, Michel had bid farewell to Grandfather. The old man gave him a donkey to aid him on his journey then sent him on his way. Three hours later, Michel had arrived in the village high in the mountains.

“He’s such a wise old man,” Michel now whispered to himself as he gripped the message from Grandfather. “Oh, God, may Mademoiselle Athalie trust and accept me. May I not return only to disappoint Monsieur Richelieu.”

Squaring his shoulders, he started down the street. Before he had gone two steps, a voice stopped him.

“Who are you? What’re you doing here?”

Michel looked down at a little boy, perhaps ten years old, standing a few feet away. The boy’s hands rested on his hips as he studied him suspiciously.

“My name is Pierre, young man,” Michel replied. “I have come in search for someone.” He paused and took a step closer to the boy. “Perhaps you could help me. I’m looking for the residence of Athalie LeBlanc.”

“She’s my cousin,” the boy snapped. “She won’t see you. She’s sleepin’.”

“She lives at this house?”

“Yes.” The boy squinted at him. “You don’t look like anyone around here. Where ya from?”

“Ille,” Michel answered. “Your uncle has sent me to bring your cousin home.”

“Ya got proof?”

Michel held up the scroll that bore Grandfather’s message.

“Lemme see it,” the boy demanded.

“Marcus,” came a sleepy voice from the doorway, “watch your tongue. That’s no way to speak to a visitor.”

Michel spun and found himself before a the young woman had seen briefly the day of his arrival in Ille. Her shoulders drooped with weariness as she peered at him through sad eyes.

“But he’s a stranger!” Marcus argued.

“That doesn’t matter,” the lady said softly. “Now go into the house. Your father wants you.”

Marcus stuck out his bottom lip in a pout and stomped his way into the cottage.

The young woman sighed and faced Michel. “I’m sorry for the unpleasant welcome you received. The family is quite distraught right now. They buried their mother yesterday.”

“Think nothing of it,” Michel said. “I – I’m sorry to hear about their mother. Would it be Joan?”

The woman looked at him sharply. “You know them?”

“I know *of* them. From Monsieur Richelieu in Ille.”

The woman gasped and held out a hand to him. "You know my grandfather? How is he?"

Michel lowered his pack to the ground. "I do know him and he is doing fine. I assume you are his granddaughter Athalie."

"Yes – I'm Athalie."

"Then I have a message from your grandfather for you."

Athalie accepted the scroll and carefully unrolled it. Her hair fell forward to hide her face for a brief moment as her eyes scanned quickly over the message. When she raised her head, tears trickled down her cheeks. "I – I am so grateful he sent for me. The family has been so . . ."

She sighed and would not go on. "I'm sorry we don't have room for you to stay the night here, but I do know of someone who will take you in. Do you mind?"

"Don't concern yourself about me, Mademoiselle. I am well able to sleep under the stars."

"No." Athalie shook her head firmly against the idea. "You will not sleep under the stars. Please follow me."

Michel picked up his pack and reached for the reins about the donkey's neck. Without another word he followed Athalie down the trail to a little shanty. Outside sat an elderly couple, enjoying the late afternoon sun.

"Marie, Philippe, this is . . ." Athalie's voice trailed off and she looked to him for forgiveness. "I'm sorry. I don't know your name."

"Pierre," he replied.

"This is Pierre," Athalie went on. "He has come to take me home. Would you have room for him tonight?"

The old woman rose and hobbled over to them. "You're welcome, young man. Though I don't care for the idea of you takin' Athalie away. She's such a dear, and has done so much for her family." She touched Athalie's face affectionately. "If there's anyone more deserving of goin' home, it's her."

“I will return her to her grandfather as quickly as possible, Madame.”

“Then please come in. And you, Athalie, go tell your family they can spare you one evening. Come have supper with us.”

“Thank you, Marie.”

Athalie slowly walked back to her aunt’s home. The three watched her departing figure, not missing her dragging gait and slumped shoulders.

Marie clicked her tongue. “In my humble opinion, she shouldn’t ever come back. They worked her like a slave, and she’s got the thin, worn-out body to show for it.” She shook her head in wonder. “She served them faithfully, and kept the woman alive for a good four weeks longer than expected. She even got some manners into the youngin’s.”

Michel said nothing and continued to gaze thoughtfully down the lane.

“And you listen to me, young man,” the old woman continued, drawing his gaze to herself. “There ain’t no one more fittin’ for a king, not even some handsome, sophisticated lass in the city. No, Monsieur. She’s got the makin’s of a princess.”

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*She opens her mouth with wisdom,  
And on her tongue is the law of kindness.*

Michel forked hay through the stable’s loft floor to the horses below. His mind wasn’t focused on his work, however. He hadn’t been able to concentrate on much of anything or anyone since his arrival back in the village a month earlier. Anyone except Athalie.

“Father . . . thank you for bringing us together,” Michel prayed quietly, leaning on the pitchfork he held.

“Thank you for speaking to Grandfather and guiding him to unite us. I pray for your favor as I take the next step. May everything be done in your timing. Everything, Father.”

“Bonjour.”

At the sound of a feminine voice below, Michel thrust his pitchfork into the pile of hay. “Be with you in a moment,” he called down.

He crossed the creaky floor and climbed down the spindly ladder leading to the loft. He turned to greet the visitor and was pleasantly surprised to find Athalie standing in the doorway. She smiled shyly as she held a plate of steaming spice cake and a pitcher of apple cider.

“Welcome, Mademoiselle LeBlanc!”

She took a few steps into the dusty building. “I was preparing Grandfather’s favorite desert and thought you might like to sample it.”

Michel rubbed his soiled hands on his britches and hurried over. “Gladly!”

Athalie chuckled at his eagerness and handed him the plate. A moment after he had popped the first bite into his mouth, his eyebrows rose in a look of delight. “Most excellent, Mademoiselle! You’re a fine cook!”

The young woman’s face broke into a smile. “I’ll pour you a glass of cider, if you’d like.”

Michel unhooked his wooden mug from the wall and handed it to her. “Use the cup you brought and join me, won’t you?”

“I’d be happy to . . . but I must go home and start supper preparations.” She looked at him with expectancy in her soft blue eyes. “That is, if you’ll join us tonight.”

Michel’s heart gave a leap. “I would be glad to come, Mademoiselle LeBlanc.”

“Athalie,” she corrected softly.

“Of course, Athalie.”

“Until tonight then,” she said, gently taking the empty plate from his hands.

“Until tonight.”

Michel watched her departing figure and silently sent up a prayer of thanksgiving.

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*She also rises while it is yet night,  
And provides food for her household . . .*

In Michel’s opinion, Athalie made the most adorable hostess he had ever seen. She had plaited her long tresses and twisted them around her head, making a natural crown. Her cheeks were flushed from the heat and her eyes shone with the joy of entertaining. Michel found his gaze returning to her again and again.

“You did well, dear,” Grandfather complimented Athalie at the end of the meal.

Athalie met his eyes and found a deep love. “Thank you, Grandfather.”

“And now, Pierre,” Grandfather rose from the table, “would you care to join me for a walk outside?”

“Happily, Monsieur.” Michel stood and followed him to the door. Before stepping across the threshold, he gave Athalie an appreciative smile.

They had only gone a few steps before Grandfather said, “I think you have something to speak with me about, do you not?”

Michel marveled at the man’s perception, not doubt refined through years of living closely among his countrymen. “Yes, Monsieur . . . I do.”

“I’m ready to listen.”

Michel squared his shoulders, sending up a prayer for courage and wisdom. “First, let me say that I respect your honored position in this area, which is much deserved.”

“Thank you, son.”

“Knowing I have not lived here long to prove myself, it is an honor to receive your hospitality, kindness, and trust.”

Grandfather received the compliment with a nod.

“What I am about to ask may seem a bit rushed, and I would understand if you denied me for a time.” Michel faced the old gentleman. “My request, Monsieur, is that I should be granted the honor of courting your granddaughter.”

“Before I respond to your request, young man,” Grandfather said, stopping to look him in the eye, “let me reveal a secret of my own.”

“Of course.”

Grandfather picked up the pace again, leading them through the quiet village. “Several weeks ago I sent a friend of mine to Montelimar. His name is Jacques. You may recall the day he arrived home from his journey.”

“I do.”

“Jacques’ mission was to discover the true identity of a certain young man in our community. A man who called himself Pierre.”

“Pierre, Monsieur?”

“Indeed. The result of this mission was that this young man was not Pierre at all, but rather the heir to the throne.” Grandfather stopped and looked at him. “Tell me, Prince Michel, why have you come to our tiny village, so far from the luxurious home you are accustomed to?”

For some reason, Michel was not at all chagrined about being found out. Instead, he felt a pleasant feeling of release to be the prince he was. “Monsieur, I have wanted to marry for several years, but I have found the women of our court to be . . . disappointing. None of them possess the virtues of the godly woman I long for.”

“So you’ve come in search for a bride in our humble village.”

“I have.”

Grandfather turned his head away. He remained quiet so long that Michel feared he had offended him.

“Monsieur, have I said something, done something that has brought you grief?”

Grandfather’s shoulders began to tremble. “No, son,” came his hushed reply. “I’m only awed that someone of your rank would find it within yourself to grace us with your presence. To even consider one of us to be fit for court.” At last he looked up into the prince’s face, tears trickling over his beard. “The Lord be praised for such a godly young man as you.”

Prince Michel held the old man by the shoulders. “Monsieur, it has been my pleasure and honor to live among you. God led me here for more than a bride. He has shown me that excellence does not only reside in court, but in the simple things as well. I now know who I will one day rule, and I will rule better because of it.”

Grandfather gripped his hand. “The Lord be praised!” Then he fell to his knees, weeping softly.

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*Her husband . . . praises her:  
“Many daughters have done well,  
But you excel them all.”*

A smile pulled at Athalie’s lips as she sat mending one of Pierre’s shirts by the fire, warming her hands from the winter chill. The bubble of love she felt inside was unmistakable. The last few months had been such a joy as she and Pierre became better acquainted through walks in the countryside and pleasant dinners beneath the trees. Again and again she had sent thanks to the heavens for this gift of friendship, slowly and gently blooming into romance. Even Yvette’s

cold stares went unnoticed. Her joy was far too great to be blighted by the resentment of others.

“I’m so happy, Grandfather,” Athalie whispered. “Pierre is such a good man.”

Grandfather looked at his granddaughter from his place beside the fire. It brought him such happiness to see his only grandchild so happy. Though Michel’s identity was still hidden from Athalie and rest of the townspeople, their relationship flourished with each passing day. Their blossoming love for each other was evident to those around them.

“You are more than good,” Grandfather said. “You complement him in a way no one else could.”

Athalie dropped her hands to her lap, letting them lie in the folds of Michel’s shirt. “Grandfather . . . at times I feel I’m so inadequate. He’s so wise and – and cultured. I am none of those things.”

Slowly Grandfather hobbled over to stand before his granddaughter. He gently lifted one of her slender hands in his. “My dear, it’s not who you are or aren’t, what you can do or can’t do, that makes you acceptable to him. It’s your character – your godly virtues – that set you apart to be his helpmate. Never underestimate who your Heavenly Father has made you to be.”

Athalie took his hand and pressed it to her cheek. “If there is anyone good, Grandfather, it’s you.”

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Michel stood at the edge of Monsieur Richelieu’s yard and watched as Athalie crouched among the growing spring plants in their garden. Unsuspecting of his presence, she labored diligently to rid the plot of its weeds. Her hair was braided up away from her face, just as Michel liked it. The

crown about her head reminded him of her impending position as Princess Athalie, his wife.

Smiling to himself, Michel recalled the many evenings he had spent with this dear young woman and her grandfather. They had been the most joyous year he had ever experienced. He had grown to love Athalie with all his heart. The thought that God would grant him such a jewel brought renewed awe and thankfulness.

Quietly Michel moved forward till he stood a few feet from her. "Athalie," he called softly.

Athalie spun, nearly toppling into a patch of potatoes. "Pierre!" she exclaimed. "Whatever are you doing here so early? It's only eight."

Michel crouched before her and took her hand. "I dared not go before seeing you once more."

Athalie searched his face. "Is it today?"

"Today," Michel affirmed as he pressed her hand. "Within the hour."

Athalie sighed and fought back the desire to let tears fall. Michel had told her several days before of his upcoming departure. He hadn't told her the full reason for his trip, but she knew it was important. She hadn't tried to persuade him to stay, though she'd miss him terribly.

"I – I guess I had forgotten it was so soon," she admitted, giving him a brave smile.

Michel grasped her hands and drew her to her feet. "Come, let's take a walk. It will be my last time to enjoy your mountains for a while."

"I'm sad to see you go," Athalie admitted as they followed the well-worn path they had come to know so well. "You must know that."

Michel stopped in the middle of the path and faced her. "I, too, hate to leave. The reason for my departure, I pray, will be well worth my absence."

"When will you return?"

"Before the end of June, if all goes well."

“A month,” Athalie mused, cocking her head to the side. “I believe I can endure that long.”

Michel reached for her other hand. “You are precious, Athalie. A special treasure from Heaven.”

Athalie smiled up at him and found herself being wrapped in a warm, tender embrace.

\*\*\*

*Her husband is known in the gates,  
When he sits among the elders of the land.*

King Louis, hands clasped behind him, paced the rug before a crackling fire in the conference room where he met with his advisors. He had just ended a meeting with a few of them, and as tradition had become over the last few weeks, they had inquired again of his “missing” son. He had evaded their questions as best as he knew how, but they had been as persistent as ever. Finally, in exasperation at their prying questions, he had thrown up his hands and bellowed, “Messieurs, if there was anything I could tell you at this time, I would.”

That had done the trick. The King was not given to outbursts, and to see him react in such a way was enough to startle them to silence.

“If only Michel would return,” he murmured now to himself. “It has been nearly a year since we’ve seen him!”

“Louis?”

At the tender resonance of Queen Charlotte’s voice, His Majesty felt some of the pressures of the day slip away. He extended a hand to his wife, bidding her to his side.

“Are you worried, dear?” she asked, wrapping her arm through his. “Is it Michel?”

The king sighed. “Yes. Yes, it is. It has been so long since we’ve seen his face.”

“He’ll come soon – I’m sure of it.” The queen rubbed his back to ease the tension built up over worry for his son and the pressure of his meeting. “You know he’s not alone.”

“He has the best of guards,” he agreed. “Both visible and invisible.”

At the sound of clanking armor and hurrying footsteps down the corridor, they both whirled. Soon an armored man appeared in the doorway. “Your Majesties,” he said, bowing low.

“Monsieur France!” the king exclaimed. “Michel . . . Where is Michel? Is he with you?”

“Indeed he is, Your Highness. He asked me to ride ahead and tell you of his coming. He was just entering the gates when I came up here to speak with you.”

“He’s come,” Queen Charlotte said softly, a light of joy leaping in her eyes. “Oh, I wonder if he found . . .”

At that moment, Michel entered the room, still clad in his peasant garb. “Bonjour, Father, Mother.”

The two rushed forward to meet him. Michel grinned as they fell upon him with hugs and kisses.

“We are overjoyed to have you home,” the king said. “Tell us, did you find her?”

“Was it in the quaint village of Ille?” the queen pressed.

“The answer is yes to both questions,” Michel laughed. “Yes, I have found her, and yes, she is from Ille.”

“Tell us all about her.”

“She is of excellent character,” Michel began, “and has the sweetest, most giving nature of anyone I have ever met.”

“And her name?”

“Her name . . . is Athalie LeBlanc.”

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Grandfather entered their cottage after an afternoon of fishing at the mountain stream. It had been a prosperous day. Three nice trout dangled at his side as his prize for his hours of patience.

“Athalie, you will be pleased,” he said, placing them on the table. “This will give us . . . Athalie, dear?”

Athalie jumped at the sound of her name. “I’m sorry, Grandfather. What did you say?”

“I have brought us back three very fine trout, my dear. Do you wish to clean them now?”

“I – I . . .” Athalie had to stop and think. “Could you just hang them outside for now, Grandfather? I must finish peeling these potatoes.”

Grandfather’s gaze fell on the heap of potatoes at her elbow. His eyebrows rose in question.

Athalie flushed and smiled sheepishly. “Yes, they are the same I was working on at lunch, Grandfather. I just kept getting distracted and had to go on to another task. Rest assured they will be done for our supper meal.”

“I have no doubt they will,” Grandfather said. “May I inquire to what caused your distraction?”

“Pierre, Grandfather.”

“Ah.” Grandfather nodded knowingly. His granddaughter hadn’t quite been the same since the prince had left. He had caught her daydreaming too many times to count, and her daily chores seemed to be getting more difficult for her to complete in full.

“Oh, Grandfather!” Athalie cried suddenly, losing her calm demeanor. “What if he doesn’t return?”

“He’ll return, Athalie. Have no fear.”

Athalie clasped her hands together and looked out the window once more. “Sometimes I do fear, Grandfather. That the man of my dreams has at last come to me often seems too good to be true.”

“You must trust, Athalie,” Grandfather gently admonished, “and pray for the courage and patience to wait.”

Athalie turned a fond gaze to him. "You are so wonderful, Grandfather."

"And you, dear Athalie—" Grandfather stopped and tilted his head toward the door.

"What is it, Grandfather?"

"Don't you hear it?" Grandfather hobbled toward the door. "It sounds like a carriage . . . and horses."

Athalie followed him to the threshold. To their astonishment, a fine enclosed carriage, led and followed by four soldiers, came rolling into the village.

"Why, what could this mean?" the old man questioned. "I've never seen such . . ." Slowly the light of understanding dawned on his face. He knew.

"Come, Athalie." He took her hand and led her outside to join the rest of the curious citizens gaping from their yards.

The two stood silently as the carriage continued to come closer to their home. Athalie gasped when it stopped directly in front of them.

"Grandfather?" she whispered. "What does it mean?"

One of the soldiers dismounted and hurried to open the carriage door. A young man descended, dressed in a drab brown tunic and trousers.

Athalie gave a gasp of delight. "Pierre!"

She rushed to him and threw her arms about his neck. Michel laughed and twirled her about before placing her back on her feet.

"You've come at last!" Athalie cried. "So much sooner than I expected."

"I accomplished my business swiftly," he replied. "Now I—"

He stopped when he saw that Athalie's gaze was not on him. She slowly began to pull away, realizing the carriage that had borne him was adorned with the emblems of royalty. Her eyes flitted from the soldiers to the carriage and back to

Michel. Never had Michel seen such confusion and wonder all wrapped up in one expression.

“I – I don’t understand,” she faltered. “Surely you are not . . .”

“Athalie,” he said quietly, retrieving her hand. “I *am* your Pierre, but I am also Prince Michel, heir to the throne.”

Athalie stared at him, unbelieving. Yet as she looked once more at the carriage and soldiers, uniformed and bearing the king’s crest, she realized it was true. Slowly she sank to her knees. “Your Majesty.”

Michel could have cried at the sight of his soon-to-be wife crumpled at his feet. Gently he lifted her and tilted her chin so he could look into her eyes. “I am still the same person, my dear Athalie. Nothing will change the love I have for you.”

Tears began to spill down Athalie’s cheeks. “I – I am baffled and overjoyed at the same time. What shall I do?”

“Simply be yourself – the young woman of virtue I have come to love.”

With the whole village looking on, Prince Michel leaned forward and softly kissed God’s gift to him.

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

The prestigious citizens of Montelimar and countryside beyond were gathered in the expansive gardens of the palace. All were dressed in the finest: flowing silks and satins, lace and gems, tailored suits and crisp white blouses. Feathers and fans fluttered in the afternoon breeze, and the scents of fine perfumes and powders lifted into the air.

Before them a grand staircase curved up to the palace’s third story, its banisters adorned with satin draperies and

bouquets of the garden's finest flowers. Candles were lighted among the pots of flowering topiaries and rose bushes. The pure loveliness of it all left the attendees with the feeling of expectation for what was to come.

Only minutes later, the orchestra began to play the national anthem, and the mass of people stood as one to welcome the approach of their king and queen. Also adorned in their finest, His and Her Majesty walked before the people to two ornate seats to the left of the staircase, followed by the priest in his grand robe and headpiece. Prince Michel followed several steps behind, his handsome face aglow with the joy that awaited him.

With a stirring diminuendo the song ebbed away. The people remained hushed as three stringed instruments and a flute welcomed the bride. All eyes lifted to the top of the staircase. There, in a flowing white dress and veil, stood Athalie.

With the grace of a woman bred in the chambers of the king, Athalie descended the staircase to join her grandfather, who waited to escort her to Michel's side. Her heart swelled with a happiness she had never known before. Such gratitude and awe filled her entire being.

*Father, you have given me more than I could have ever dreamed. I thank you – with all I am – for this love you have given to me. You have been more than faithful, O God. I shall ever serve you in the virtuous ways of your Word.*

Amid her prayer and eyes full of tears, her Grandfather's hand reached out to draw her to his side. They turned and faced the people . . . and the fulfillment of a promise.