

Outside the Gate



David Edgren

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Chapter 1

Child Slave

As I dry the last dish from lunch, I hear a knock and a shout at the gate. I throw the towel at the edge of the basin and go out into the courtyard.

Walking across the middle of the compound, I pretend I'm about to meet someone new, who might be my friend. Someone my age. I begin my usual make-believe conversation. "I'm not sure what you do, but I'm a servant girl from the John Mark Estate."

That's how I've been taught to introduce myself: "A servant girl from the John Mark Estate." My real job is to do the tasks the mistress of the house asks me to do. It's usually a standard set of chores: clean, dust, cook, wash up.

I don't really have any friends. I just work. I've never been to school. I get to learn a bit when John Mark receives private tutors in his study. That room used to be his father's office.

I walk past the gardener's hut and see the gate a few steps ahead. Almost there.

Although my mistress is the oldest person in the house, it is called by her son's name. John Mark is his full name, but everyone just calls him Mark. I like to say "John Mark." I think it sounds dashing.

The house is in John Mark's name because his father died. That happened before I was purchased, so I never knew him. I've been a slave since I was five or six. I'm not sure. I don't know how old I am. Maybe 11 or 12. It doesn't really matter; I don't get birthday parties. As if I'd have anyone to invite!

Oh, my name is Rhoda! I so rarely get to use it. I'm not that important. I'm just a child. And a slave.

I can see through the boards of the gate. Two people stand on the other side. I like to try to recognise people before I let them in. If I do, I greet them by name and act as if we are old friends.

I recognise John and Andrew, two of Jesus' closest friends—part of His inner circle. John looks uneasily down the road one way and then the other.

“This needs much prayer,” he says to Andrew.

I unfasten the latch and pull the gate wide. Smiling, I say, “Welcome to the John Mark Estate. My mistress awaits you in the colonnade.” It's what I've been taught to say—not because she is actually in the colonnade but because they are to go there and wait.

They walk past me, looks of concern on their faces. Something is clearly upsetting them. They say nothing to me. I watch them walk towards the house with short quick steps, their shoulders tense.

I'm more setting than character. I learned that line in one of Mark's tutoring sessions on story writing. I like thinking of myself that way—

a fly on the wall, listening to all the stories. I like hearing stories. And I love telling them.

A child slave. That sounds worse than it is. I mean, it is unfortunate, and I am lonely, but I'm not abused or anything. I do what my mistress tells me to do—chores around the house and shopping trips into town. In return, I am fed, clothed and given a place to sleep. Many people are worse off than I am.

I close the gate and latch it, shaking it back and forth to make sure it has closed properly.

My father was in debt and was going to be sent to prison to work it off. He needed to be free. We needed him to be free. Mother, me and my brother would have become homeless if Father went to prison. We would have been cast out of the city to live with the people who survive off scraps dropped over the city wall. We needed Father to stay home and work. I was the next best option. It was hard to go, but I knew I was saving my family. I wanted to help. I hope they are at least as warm and well fed as I am.

The house of John Mark is not like the home I remember. We all lived in one room with a door and a window. A mud hut. This place—this compound, as they call it—is a wealthy home. There are multiple rooms on two floors. The front entrance of the house connects to an open area bordered by columns that reach up to the roof three floors above. That's the colonnade.

Surrounding the house, there is a big courtyard and the small gardener's hut. All within the private compound walls. And at the far end of the compound, beyond the worker's hut, there is a gate. That gate opens onto one of the main streets of Jerusalem. Everyone who goes in or out of the compound goes through that gate.



Chapter 2

Sweet Aroma

I'm back in the kitchen putting together the bread and wine for the Holy Supper. When visitors come to the John Mark Estate, we have Holy Supper.

Preparing the wine is easy. We buy thick, gooey grape syrup from a farmer outside the city who sells it in jars. His workers harvest the grapes, stomp on them to make juice and then reduce it to syrup by boiling it. All I need to do is mix some of the syrup with water.

And the bread isn't so hard either. Just flour, salt and water. We don't add yeast to this bread like we do with all other bread.

I push my hands into the newly formed dough, mixing the ingredients.

I can remember my mother saying, "The night before our people fled from Egypt, we ate bread like this. Bread without yeast. Because we had to run! There was no time to wait for bread to rise!"

These people—the disciples of Jesus—talk about it differently. They say, "The night before the Messiah died, we ate bread like this. He said it was His body broken for us. We didn't understand what He meant then. But we do now."

I pick up the dough ball and sprinkle a little flour on the table. I

End of product sample

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