

Abinadi

OTHER BOOKS AND AUDIO BOOKS
BY H.B. MOORE:

Out of Jerusalem: Of Goodly Parents

Out of Jerusalem: A Light in the Wilderness

Out of Jerusalem: Towards the Promised Land

Out of Jerusalem: Land of Inheritance

Abinadi

a novel

H.B. Moore

Covenant Communications, Inc.

Covenant

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Published by Covenant Communications, Inc.
American Fork, Utah

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Printed in Canada

First Printing: Month 2008

15 14 13 12 11 10 09 08 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

ISBN 10: 000-0-00000-000-0

ISBN 13:

Praise for H.B. Moore's Books

“In *Land of Inheritance* . . . Moore persuasively renders as must-read historical fiction the rich (and growing) body of scholarship about ancient life in Mesoamerica. I highly recommend this exciting, well-written, faith-centered and faith-enhancing novel.”

—Richard H. Cracroft, *BYU Magazine* columnist, former chair of BYU English Department, and former dean of BYU College of Humanities

“In the first three volumes of her Book of Mormon historical fiction series, Heather B. Moore showed that she could create a view of an ancient world that combines the best scholarship with a lively imagination. She does a fine job of walking the tricky line of faithfulness to the scripture and creative storytelling. She opened up the hearts of her characters in ways both remarkably touching and authentic. In this forth and final volume she does all of that, as well as writing one of the most exciting adventure tales that I have read in a while.”

—Andrew Hall, Reviewer for Association of Mormon Letters

“H.B. Moore may be the most exciting new writer in the LDS genre. In *Out of Jerusalem*, Moore takes characters from thousands of years ago and breathes life into them. I look forward to reading more from Moore.”

—Richard Paul Evans, #1 New York Times Bestselling Author

“Moore takes us into the thrilling world of Lehi and Nephi and brings the women onto center stage with remarkable effect.”

—Peter Johnson, Motion Picture Producer & Director

“A great read . . . H. B. Moore will take you on a journey worth every minute you spend with *Out of Jerusalem*. I highly recommend her series.”

—James Michael Pratt, *New York Times* & *USA Today* Bestselling Author

“H.B. Moore's *Land of Inheritance* lives up to the grand proportions of the scriptural epic tale found in the Book of Mormon.”

—Jennie Hansen, *Meridian Magazine*

“A conscientious researcher, Moore brings to a genre that I usually find heavy and boring a fresh voice and an imagination that creates believable characters and situations that belong to a time and place far removed from our own.”

—Charlene Hirschi, *The Logan Herald*, columnist

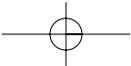
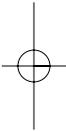
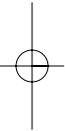
“This last book in the *Out of Jerusalem* series certainly does not disappoint. H.B. Moore brings the Book of Mormon to life through her meticulous research and creative talents. Moore helps us to read “between the lines” of Nephi's account and gives us a stronger connection to early prophets through this compelling book.”

—Dayna Davis, *LDSfiles.com* Staff Reviewer

“H.B. Moore skillfully and engagingly leads us into the group's triumphs and challenges as this small colony struggled to establish itself and to forge a new identity on foreign soil, inescapably far from their beloved Jerusalem. This book is a terrific read.”

—S. Kent Brown, Director of the Laura F. Willes Center for Book of Mormon Studies, BYU

For the women of faith in my life—my many sisters:
Karilynne, Julianne, Shoshauna, Jill,
Melissa, Laura, Amy, Hailee, and Suzanne



Acknowledgments

Just like a manuscript, the acknowledgments are a work in progress—often being added to right before press deadline. That is because many people have a hand in a writer’s work from the beginning to the very end.

I’d like to thank my supporting cast—my husband, Chris, and our four children. They know when I put on my lipstick that I’m off to another speaking engagement or book signing.

Thank you to my taskmasters who don’t let me get away with a comma splice or point-of-view shift—my “enduring to the end” critique group—Lu Ann Staheli, Michele Holmes, Annette Lyon, Jeff Savage, Stephanni Meyers, Lynda Keith, Robison Wells, and James Dashner. Thanks also to Josi Kilpack for her early advice on the prologue.

My parents, Kent and Gayle Brown, were the first readers of my manuscript and offered many helpful insights. Also, I’d like to thank my father for answering all of my pesky emails about the minutest details.

Special thanks to my father-in-law, Lester Moore, who continually supports my work and offers valuable insights to my writing. A special thank you also goes to Karen Christofferson, marketing advisor and champion of my work.

In addition, I readily admit that I am not a scholar in any fashion—although in writing this book I have read certain chapters in the Book of Mormon more times than I should admit. My heartfelt gratitude extends to the scholars of the Book of Mormon and the archaeologists of Mesoamerica for publishing their research. I would not have been able to build upon their expertise and create a story if it weren’t for their lifelong dedication.

My publisher has been wonderful, and I can’t thank the Covenant staff of editors, marketing personnel, and design team enough. I have a hard enough time coming up with a simple title, and they make the finished product shine. Special thanks to my main editor, Kat Gille, for her many

talents, and to managing editor, Kathy Jenkins, for her continual support and encouragement to start a new series. I have been bugging Kathy about a book on Abinadi since 2006, so she is probably glad to finally get it out the door! Also, thanks to the finest editors I could ask for, Angela Eschler and Christian Sorensen, who picked up where my critique group left off. Thanks also goes to copyeditor Jennifer Spell.

I'd also like to thank the readers of my Out of Jerusalem series. I have received many tender thank-you emails and letters, which I save and cherish. Writing is solitary work and takes incredible motivation to move forward bit by bit each day. Without your support and enthusiasm, my dream of continual publishing wouldn't be realized.

Sincere thanks goes to Andy Livingston, my vigilant map designer, and Phill Babbitt, talented website designer. Last, but never least, thanks to my "writing family"—the LDStorymakers.

Preface

Within the passage of Mosiah 11:20 through 17:20, the life of a remarkable prophet emerges. Abinadi steps into the scriptural text with little introduction, evidently a descendent of a small group of Nephites who had returned from Zarahemla to repossess the city of Nephi. Abinadi, known for his martyrdom in King Noah's court, makes a grand stage entrance with his first, and seemingly failed, attempt to call the people in the city to repentance.

Traditional LDS artists, such as Arnold Friberg, depict Abinadi as an aged man, possibly at the end of his years, facing his execution as ordered by King Noah. In my book series, *Prophets of the Promised Land*, I have chosen to portray Abinadi as a young man in his twenties when he receives the first call from the Lord. Before starting to write, my first question was, "Is there any indication within the scriptural text that hints at the age of the prophet Abinadi?"

Scholars such as Robert J. Matthews make it clear that there is no indication in the Book of Mormon text as to how old Abinadi was. "We know nothing of Abinadi's early life . . . whether he was old or young, large or small. What we do find . . . is a man of courage with an agile mind, a profound knowledge of the gospel, and a strong personality" ("Abinadi: Prophet and Martyr," *Ensign*, April 1992, 25).

After starting the first draft, I came upon a painting of King Noah's court called *Abinadi had Testified*, created by Walter Rane. As I studied the characters—King Noah, Abinadi, and possibly the high priest Alma, I noticed something very interesting; Rane had clearly depicted Abinadi as a young man.

I decided to place Abinadi at the age of twenty-seven in the opening scene of this book, with a specific purpose behind it. I wanted to expound on a story—a story that has been passed down from generation to generation—of

a man who sacrificed everything for what he believed in. I didn't want Abinadi to be at the end of his natural life or a man who'd lived a life full of happiness with children and grandchildren. I saw Abinadi as a man who still had many years ahead of him—one who stood a lot more to lose than just his life.

Also introduced in this volume is the high priest Alma. When I first started to characterize him, I considered the swift rise and fall of wickedness within the community he grew up in. Under King Zeniff's rule, the law of Moses was correctly observed and remained upright. The very next generation, almost effortlessly, fell into abhorrent wickedness, ignoring the ten commandments, worshipping idols, and stooping to harlotry in the palace. Alma's internal character arch mimics the rise and fall of the city's changing values, starting with a strong foundation in his childhood, falling into temptation as he serves in the court, then eventually clawing his way back to the truth.

The Mesoamerican culture is complex, colorful, and genuinely engaging. Some of the research information was horrific, other parts simply beautiful. I've detailed elements of the Mayan culture that surrounded the Nephites and Lamanites during the late-Preclassic era (300 BC–AD 250) in the chapter notes at the end of the book.

The Kaminaljuyú area of Guatemala is one favored location for the land of Nephi. John L. Sorenson notes that the Zeniffites, a group of Nephites led by Zeniff, returned to the land of Nephi to find the Lamanites occupying the region (*Images of Ancient America: Visualizing Book of Mormon Life*, 198). The Zeniffites lived under Lamanite rule for some time before fighting and gaining their own independence around 165 BC.

The chronology of this book is patterned after the timeline found in the appendix of *Voices from the Dust*, by S. Kent Brown. This places the coronation of King Noah around 140 BC, and Abinadi's first appearance in 130 BC (Mosiah 11:20).

The prophet Abinadi's teachings were bold and cannot be misinterpreted, not even by a court filled with conniving high priests. Abinadi emphasized the laws of Moses as "types of things to come" (Mosiah 13:28). The Atonement took dominance in Abinadi's speech when he taught the court members that salvation does not come through the law, but through the Lord (Mosiah 13:28). According to Robert Matthews, Abinadi is the "first to speak specifically of the First Resurrection [in the Book of Mormon] and to discuss the general Resurrection in detail" ("Abinadi: Prophet and Martyr," *Ensign*, April 1992, 25).

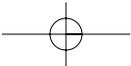
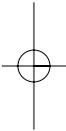
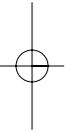
Isaiah declares that "the time shall come that the salvation of the Lord shall be declared to every nation, kindred, tongue, and people" (Mosiah 15:28); we

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see the initially harvested fruits of that prophecy among prophets of the Book of Mormon. Ann Madsen points out that although Abinadi's life was cut short, his influence reached far and wide. On the day of Abinadi's execution, only *one* believed—the high priest Alma. Yet Alma was the one to escape King Noah and write down the words of Abinadi. Madsen notes that “more than 60 years later, Alma the Younger testifies of his father's eye witness account” (“Abinadi Interprets Isaiah,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*, 10:1 [2001], 14). Abinadi's influence was felt far and wide, indeed.

It is with humble admiration and deep gratitude that I present to you the story of a man who patterned his life after the Savior's, even until the very end.



Prologue

Till I die I will not remove mine integrity from me.
(Job 27:5)

128 BC

A rat scurried across Abinadi's legs, and he tucked his feet beneath him, wrapping his arms around his knees. The air inside the prison cell had blossomed into ripe humidity, sending rivulets of perspiration down Abinadi's back. Gazing with effort at his dimmed surroundings, he wondered about those who had been in this cell before. He'd spent only three days here, but he'd heard of those who had been imprisoned for years.

A thin beam of muffled light filtered through the corridor beyond. The absolute dark was softening with the morning. Anxiety pulsed through Abinadi as he anticipated the guard's arrival. He should be here any moment with the next instructions.

The previous night had proved sleepless as Abinadi crouched on the earthen floor, his back against the cold stone wall. There was nothing to lie upon, nowhere to sit except the dank ground. Standing was too exhausting and lying would have made him bait for the two rather large rats occupying his cell—the hard round of bread thrown in the night before had immediately become the varmints' property. Despite his protesting stomach, Abinadi did not care about the food or the spilled vessel of water that darkened the dirt near his feet—courtesy of the rats. His thoughts left his physical surroundings as they replayed the day, little more than two years earlier, when he'd received the call to be a prophet.

He had been only twenty-five years old when the Lord asked him to preach repentance to His people. Abinadi's entire life had changed in that instant. And now, here he was, caged like an animal, awaiting his final sentence. The sounds of his not-so-distant past seemed to fill the prison

walls—his son’s bubbly laughter, his wife’s comforting whispers during restless nights, the voices praising God during Sabbath services in his home. Closing his eyes, Abinadi reveled in the sweet memories and let the salty tears fall.

From the Lord’s first instruction, Abinadi’s wife had understood that he *had* to preach the Lord’s words. Would she understand *this*—that she might have to raise their son alone?

In his heart, Abinadi had already made his choice. He would finish the Lord’s errand with as much determination as he had the day he first received instructions.

The echoes from his memory blended with new sounds. *Chanting*. It seemed to fill the entire cavern. Abinadi listened as the rhythmic words grew louder. Somewhere . . . outside . . . people were condemning him. His pulse quickened, and he took a deep breath.

“O God,” he prayed through cracked lips, “with Thy strength I will pass through the valley of death.”

The low chants seemed to envelop him. The heavy door of the cell opened, and Abinadi lifted his head, ready to face the guard. But two men entered instead, their finely woven cotton capes thrown on haphazardly. They were high priests from the king’s court—some of those who had accused him. Abinadi smelled stale wine on their clothing, undoubtedly from a night of indulgence.

“Have you had enough time to reconsider?” one of the priests asked. Abinadi knew him as Amulon. The man was tall; his physical presence alone made him powerful. He wore a coat of jaguar skin and a belt of fine, beaded cloth. In one jeweled hand he gripped a long obsidian dagger.

“I am not afraid of death,” Abinadi said, gazing up into the man’s eyes. “Christ will break the bands of death, and the grave will have no victory.”

Amulon blinked, his face unresponsive.

But the priest next to him laughed. “Everyone knows that if you die you go to the underworld.” He guffawed and slapped Amulon’s shoulder.

“Enough,” Amulon growled at the other priest, then narrowed his eyes at Abinadi. “You are foolish to speak against the king.” He took a step closer, but Abinadi didn’t move. “He asks for your presence once more. If you value your life, you’ll recant your words and ask for his forgiveness.”

When Abinadi didn’t respond, the other priest reached down and grabbed him by the arm, sneering. “I say you’ve had your chance.”

Abinadi stumbled as the men jerked him to his feet, then pushed him into the corridor, steering him along the narrow underground passage. The darkness had lifted, signaling that dawn had come and gone. But that didn’t

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stop the damp settling beneath his skin. He had been here once before, on another mission . . . but that seemed so long ago, another lifetime. As they ascended the stone steps, morning light pierced through the eastern prison entrance. Abinadi blinked against the brightness, and when he emerged above ground, two guards immediately seized him, relieving the priests.

Abinadi's skin tingled in the warmth of the sun while they walked. It was a beautiful day. The stoic trees which lined that pathway to the main temple were reverent somehow, as if something tragic were about to occur.

They arrived at the central plaza, where the revered Ceiba tree stood—some thought it was the center of the universe. It shaded the surrounding area with its leafy, long-reaching branches. Several smaller temples with altars were spread out from the plaza—which created a lively scene on the Sabbath when the priests gathered to make sacrifices. Abinadi nearly tripped as one of the guards prodded him with a staff. Amulon and the other priests followed behind, laughing intermittently. Every step brought him closer to the judgment of the king. According to the laws that King Noah had established, Abinadi *was* guilty of blasphemy, and now he would meet his punishment.

Protect my family, O God, Abinadi prayed, *for I know what I must do.*

He looked about him at the surreal beauty of the early morning, expecting a hollow void of helplessness to consume him. But it did not. His soul was quiet, his mind at peace. The Lord had wrapped His arms about him.

They came to the temple grounds where Abinadi was surprised to see a crowd waiting. It silently and fluidly parted as the guards shoved him along. Abinadi recognized some of them—men he'd worked alongside in the fields and purchased goods from in the market.

He'd spent his youth as nothing more than a simple farmer, paying his one-fifth taxes to the king and trying to provide for his ailing mother. Life had been trouble-free, although filled with hard labor. But he'd been content to move through the days, unobtrusive, unassuming. Until he met the Teacher, a man who led a group of elders in the old ways of their Fathers—Lehi, Nephi, Jacob, Enos . . . It was then that Abinadi started to question the teachings of King Noah's priests. He started to desire more—happiness, freedom, equality.

Abinadi left the sullen crowd and climbed the steps to the temple, sorrowing at the way King Noah had allowed it to be desecrated. Stone idols of nature gods lined the stairs and stood sentry at the entrance. Stepping into the cool interior, Abinadi caught a glimpse of the bright-colored idolatrous murals on the walls as his eyes tried to adjust to the semi-light. He

came face-to-face with the raised platform of judgment seats. The king and his priests lounged upon them—as if a common thief were being brought before them instead of a prophet.

Abinadi stood for several uncomfortable moments, guards on both sides, as Amulon took his place on the right side of the king. The two men leaned their heads together to speak. Amulon was clearly older than the king, but Noah looked haggard from much indulgent living. His skin glistened with oil, and his beaded cowl looked too tight upon his neck. His feathered cape didn't quite cover his girth, and as he tipped his head closer to Amulon, his elaborate headdress slipped. With one hand, Noah righted it, but the perspiration on his forehead caused it to slip again.

The man was so elaborately adorned that he looked like a moving pageant. At least a dozen jade bracelets pinched the flesh of his arms, while the rings on his fingers, alternating between gold and jade, made his gestures cumbersome. The cape over his shoulders had intricately sewn feathers, and his kilt was dyed in the popular turquoise. Two young women stood on either side of him, waving reed fans, although it didn't seem to be helping much.

Finally, King Noah struggled to stand and gazed at his prisoner. "Abinadi," the king said in a loud voice, his smile twisted. "How was your visit with the rats?"

The priests' laughter roared through the room.

The king's eyes glinted with delight, but his voice was harsh. "We have deliberated your case for three days. Because of your blasphemous words against me and my people, you have been found guilty. Your crime is worthy of death."

Although Abinadi expected as much, his body shivered at the words.

Noah rubbed his meaty hands together, his face pulled into a stern glower. "And, unless you retract your destructive words, we will have no choice but to follow through with your punishment. This is your last chance."

Abinadi stared at the king until the monarch glanced uncomfortably away. Then Abinadi looked at every priest, saying, "I will not recall the words which I have spoken, for they are true. I have come here, knowing that I would be punished. I accept death if that is your demand." He knew he *was* willing to be sacrificed in the name of the Lord. With every part of his soul he believed that true salvation came through the Lord. It was true. *All of it*. His mortal life had no great significance in the realm of eternal life with God.

His gaze found the king's again, whose face had darkened, and Abinadi's voice rose almost as a clap of thunder. "But know this, if you slay me, you

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will be shedding innocent blood.” Warmth now surged through his body as he felt the sure presence of the Lord in the room. He spread his arms wide, pulling from the guards who clasped them. “Your deed—my execution—will stand as a testimony *against* you at the last day.” Abinadi’s gaze bore into each person on the judgment seat. “Against *all* of you!”

The guards recoiled, and the priests fell quiet as if they, too, could feel the sudden power pulsing through Abinadi. No one spoke. No one moved.

Noah shrank back a half step, his expression one of mixed astonishment and fear. For an instant, he appeared bewildered. He turned toward Amulon, who rose and deferentially whispered in the king’s ear. The priest on Noah’s other side, rising energetically to his feet, also bowed slightly and whispered to the king.

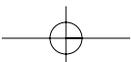
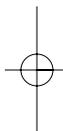
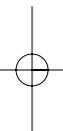
A spark of hope ignited in Abinadi’s chest where none had burned before. Maybe Noah would recant his sentence and Abinadi would see his wife and son again. Perhaps this was a test—like Abraham’s of old.

At the far end, two of the priests broke from their trance and stood from their chairs, one shouting, “He has reviled our king!” The other lifted a fist and yelled, “Kill him!”

The horrible words pierced Abinadi’s heart, but he kept his gaze on the king. Noah nodded to the two priests at his side, his eye growing bold again. Amulon moved away from the king, his arms crossed, a sneer on his face. One by one each of the priests stood and joined the chanting. “Kill him! Kill him!” Their voices thundered in the temple, reverberating against the walls.

After what seemed an eternity of jeering chants, Noah lifted his arms for silence. In the sudden quiet, it appeared that even the once-holy walls held their breath.

King Noah’s voice was calm, clear, and full of authority. “Let it be done.”



CHAPTER 1

And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thine heart.
(Deuteronomy 6:5)

THREE YEARS EARLIER

A breeze ran like a tremor through the green stalks of maize, bending the matured plants in the heat of the sun. It was as if they bowed to acknowledge the melancholy sound of the conch shell announcing another marriage for King Noah.

At least the sound was melancholy to Abinadi. He thought about all of those women for King Noah's court alone . . . a Nephite girl born beautiful and noble had little choice in her destiny. Abinadi lifted his gaze and stared across the neat rows of crops planted in the field at the northern edge of the city of Nephi. This was his homeland. He had been born here, four and twenty years ago, during King Zeniff's reign.

His family had once owned this parcel of land under Zeniff's rule, but when the king's son Noah took over the kingdom, the people were so heavily taxed that eventually most sold their homesteads to the king just to survive. Abinadi focused once more on carrying his load up the path. A bundle was strapped to his head, held in place with a band that stretched across his forehead. The bundle was packed with ripened maize, ready to be sold at the market. But first he had to stop at the king's treasury to pay his one-fifth part in taxes.

On the way to the treasury he would pass *her* house—a young woman whose beauty exceeded most of the ladies already at court. Moving forward at a labored pace, Abinadi's pulse involuntarily quickened beneath the heat of the sun. Whisperings throughout the town said that she was close to becoming betrothed, so Abinadi was relieved to hear the king's new wife was a different woman. The king seemed to marry at least twice a year—the

number of his wives totaled a healthy dozen already. At least for now Raquel was saved from the greedy king.

Raquel. The name hovered in his mind, although he dared not speak it. Just saying it aloud might somehow ensure that another might discover his thoughts. He had watched her from afar over the past year. Although she was outwardly beautiful, he was drawn to more than her appearance. He'd seen her wander the market, stopping to help an elderly person or young child. It was as if her beauty and kindness radiated from within and she couldn't help but share it.

If only he had a chance to make his feelings known . . .

Abinadi scoffed at himself, stopping in his path. How could he entertain such a possibility or expect a woman like Raquel to do so? He had nothing. He labored in the fields day after day, with no wealth to show for it, only food on the table for his elderly mother.

And his home was a lonely one. His two sisters had long since married and moved into their in-laws' homes. His older brother, Helam, lived in a secluded settlement organized by a group of elders—former priests in Zeniff's court. His brother preferred seclusion, for his face made many uncomfortable. When Helam was twelve, he and his father had cleared a field for planting. They'd burned the debris, but the intensity of the fire went out of control—Helam was surrounded by the flames and suffered severe deformities. Usually Abinadi helped with burning crops too, but that day he'd been ill. He thought if he'd just been there to help, he might have prevented his brother's injuries somehow. Their father never recovered from the guilt and abandoned both family and the city of Nephi, never to return—leaving Abinadi with an equal burden of guilt.

Abinadi's thoughts returned to somewhat less painful subjects, settling, of course, on Raquel. She lived in close proximity to Noah's court in a stately home, her father a high priest and military commander. But Abinadi was far below Raquel's class and her family would never take an offer of marriage seriously. What was he next to a military commander or a high priest? Just a quiet, poor farmer . . . no one significant.

"Abinadi, the Teacher sent me to find you."

He turned to face the young boy who ran toward him along the dusty path. Abinadi smiled as the lad came to a swift stop. "The Teacher knows I'm selling at the market today, Ben."

The boy's breathing came heavily, and his thin chest expanded and sank with each gasp. He glanced quickly about him, then whispered, "There's a meeting tonight among the elders from the city, and the Teacher wants you to discuss the plan."

Abinadi nodded and placed his sweaty palm on the boy's shoulder. "I'll be there," he whispered back. The boy took his task very seriously, and Abinadi was grateful for it. Though he couldn't help but smile at Ben's enthusiasm for keeping a secret, Abinadi also knew that there was real danger if the meetings were ever discovered. Every month the "Teacher"—an elder named Gideon—came from his secret settlement to the city in order to meet with the elders who still lived within the land of Nephi.

Abinadi handed the boy an ear of maize and received a gapped grin in return.

"You've lost more teeth?"

"Two more." A grave look passed over Ben's face. "But I can still eat this." He waved the golden vegetable in front of him.

"Very good." Abinadi refrained from laughing. "Be on your way, then."

With haste, Ben turned on his heel and ran back in the direction he'd come. It seemed the boy had another message to deliver—with equal discretion and enthusiasm.

If only everyone could be as pure and eager to learn as Ben, Abinadi mused. He'd heard stories from his mother about how things used to be, before the reign of King Noah. People like his brother, Helam, would not have become outcasts. The poor, the ill, and the crippled were taken care of under Zeniff's rule. Perhaps, if that were still the case, his father would have stayed. *Perhaps.* Yet, as Abinadi neared his twenty-fifth year, he had an increasingly difficult time understanding how his father could desert his family—guilt-ridden or not.

I could never abandon the ones I love, no matter what the reason. He pushed forward again, stretching his neck against the weight of the bundle. The activities he'd participate in tonight would be another deterrent to someone like Raquel. If the secret meetings were ever discovered, Raquel's father would be the first to prosecute Abinadi.

I might as well forget about her now. But it was too late for that. As he rounded the final stretch of maize, he saw the outer courtyard that belonged to her home. Since it was late afternoon, he assumed she'd be inside, far away from his curious eyes. Yet he couldn't help but wonder what she was doing inside those walls. Then his step slowed, and he nearly lost his footing.

She sat in the courtyard, alone, working at a freestanding loom. Her back was to him, but he knew it was Raquel. Her ginger-colored hair spilled over her shoulders, intermingling with the delicate iridescent blue and green feathers that adorned her exquisite cape.

Abinadi didn't know whether to creep past her without a sound or to increase his pace and rush by. Before he could decide, he heard her

humming. It stopped abruptly as he neared, and he glanced over at her, just catching a glimpse of her profile. Her lashes were lowered over her dark eyes—eyes that contrasted with her golden skin. She did not lift her head, but continued her methodical weaving of the fine cottony thread from a Ceiba tree.

Abinadi's stomach tightened at the sight of her slim fingers deftly working the loom. He wished he could perch on the outer wall and simply watch her.

Since she gave him no acknowledgment, he continued silently, knowing it would be impolite to interrupt her work with a greeting. Raquel was stoic as he passed, not even casting a wayward glance in his direction. It was as if he were as invisible as he felt. He focused his gaze on the path as he leaned forward and put more strength into carrying the bundle.

This is the last time I'll pass by this place. Raquel was likely to be betrothed before the end of the year, and his heart would need to be well turned from her when it happened.

"Farewell," he mouthed. But he still couldn't bring himself to utter her name. *Farewell, dear . . .*

* * *

Raquel kept her head down until Abinadi passed. She hoped he hadn't noticed the tremble in her hands as she wove the shuttle through the kapok threads. When he was a good two dozen paces away, she raised her eyes. She could only see the back of him now, but that didn't change the memory of his face in her mind—the deep, sorrowful eyes, amber-colored complexion, heavy eyebrows, and angular chin. He was tall, far taller than her father and other men who came around the house. And he was younger, probably in his mid-twenties, than those men who continually cajoled her as she explored the herbs at the market.

She'd heard the women discuss him at the well in the center of town, but she'd always kept quiet. He was not the most handsome man in the city, but he had a commanding presence, one strangely combined with humility. Yet he was so quiet that Raquel couldn't recall ever hearing him speak. She knew without asking what her father thought of him. He was associated with the tribe of elders, a dying breed who had been part of King Zeniff's court, and although Abinadi was much too young to have advised Zeniff, any association with the elders immediately put a black mark upon a man in her father's eyes.

Late at night, she'd lain awake listening to her father's plans to discover the elders in some act of defiance or treasonous activity toward King Noah.

Then they would be hauled off to the court. Only one punishment was handed down to the treasonous: death by fire. They would burn for their beliefs—beliefs that were contrary to the laws of the land. Beliefs that made Raquel think more than she should. But whenever she asked her mother about God or about their ancestors' beliefs, her mother quickly reprimanded her by saying those were things only the high priests knew about.

Raquel's aching hands slowed their pace, and she realized that she'd been absentmindedly working for several moments. "Oh no," she muttered, looking at the threads she'd missed. She'd have to undo part of the weaving.

From her position in the courtyard, she heard occasional joyous shouts and equally joyous singing. King Noah had taken another wife today—Maia, a girl younger than Raquel by a full year. Not that Raquel was old at seventeen, but most of her friends were at least discussing marriage with their mothers. Raquel could never bring herself to mention such a thing, although she knew her parents talked about it when she wasn't in the same room.

That could only mean one thing, she knew. They would choose someone she didn't like—someone old or short. Or even a man who had a brood of children but no wife to care for them. *It would probably serve me right*, Raquel thought. She hadn't exactly been the devoted daughter that she should be. Maybe in deed, but not in mind. She wondered if any other daughter in the city felt so disgusted with her surroundings.

With a tug, Raquel tightened the shuttle and began weaving again. She knew she was ungrateful and spoiled. She wore luxurious clothing, ate the finest food, and had servants to do the heavy chores. In fact, her mother didn't even like her weaving, but Raquel insisted that it was better than embroidery. She never could get her clumsy hands to cooperate with a small bone needle and such thin thread. Fortunately her mother didn't bother her if she was weaving or spending time in the garden cultivating the herbal plot—though that was also something her mother thought a waste of time. Growing and collecting herbs had been her grandmother's passion, and now it was the only way Raquel could hold onto her grandmother's memory. The herbal practices were said to be handed down from woman to woman all the way back to one of the daughters of Father Lehi.

This is why Raquel visited the market to ask questions of the Kaminaljuyú tribal women who came to sell their herbal remedies. They had solutions for everything from a painful tooth to childbirth pains.

During the afternoons when Raquel wasn't in the garden, she sat in the courtyard, mindlessly weaving blocks of fabric. She didn't know where they went when she finished, and she didn't care. But it gave her peace and quiet

away from the household to think about her secret. The secret that she knew she could die for, no matter who her parents were.

* * *

That evening, when Abinadi slipped out of his childhood home, his mother had been asleep for quite some time. He moved silently through the fields that led to the city.

In the distance, torches blazed, surrounding King Noah's expansive home. The palace sat upon a hill near the reconstructed temple that had been built so long ago by their ancestor Nephi. The newer walls topped the crumbled ones. It was a scene of contrasts: the wicked had survived and flourished; the righteous had fallen into decay, almost forgotten.

Almost.

The thought sent Abinadi scurrying across the final path, and he breathed a sigh of relief as he reached the last rows of maize. As on many previous nights, he found it easy to blend in with the crops—easier than trying to fit in with the people of Noah.

In the thin light of the moon, Abinadi made his way through the rows. The breeze had cooled enough that he drew his cloak about his waist and fastened it with a sash. In his mind he went over the new things he'd been taught over the past several moons—specifically the plan of salvation. It made more sense than any doctrine he'd heard from Noah's priests. And tonight he would recite it for the elders. A shiver traveled along his arms. He knew that the words of God were true, but he wished he didn't have to speak in front of others. Helam was the one with the gift of speech—but he rarely appeared at public meetings, preferring to study alone or with the elders only. He also remained hidden in the elders' settlement, away from curious stares. But the few times Abinadi had heard his brother teach had been astonishing.

Abinadi's own belief in God was personal, sacred, quiet. He'd rather toil in the fields all night long than preach in front of other people about what was most dear to him. Abinadi moved quicker, as if running faster would calm his nervous heart. As he reached the edge of the maize field, he moved upward along the sloping hill. He hurried as fast as he dared through the agave vineyards, not wanting to attract attention from the guards. Noah valued his agave wine so much that he'd positioned guards day and night around the spiked plants. But no guards were in place tonight—a rare occasion possibly due to the marriage celebration.

The smell of the sweet honeylike nectar of the agave accosted Abinadi's senses. For an instant, he nearly sympathized with Noah's passion for abundant

wine. The sweet aroma made Abinadi want to languish among the plants and let the night slip away uninterrupted. But he pressed forward and soon cleared the heady vineyard. When he entered the line of trees he breathed a second sigh of relief. He was now well out of view of any guards or the odd soldier on the king's errand.

He slowed when he neared the cave entrance that wasn't noticeable to the casual observer. But Abinadi knew what he was looking for, so he soon spotted the outline of the narrow opening through the foliage. Quietly he moved to the entrance. Then he picked up a pebble and threw it into the long shaft—the customary announcement of his arrival. He waited for the small rock to be thrown back, a sign that he could safely enter.

A minute passed, then two. Abinadi's heart started to pound as he thought of reasons why there would be no return pebble. He picked up another and tossed it into the interior, hearing the reverberating of the rock against stone. But no return signal came.

Straining to hear any sound or movement, Abinadi waited several moments, wondering if they'd left. Or perhaps he was early. His pulse drummed as he thought about the final possibility: they'd been discovered and ambushed. What if one of the elders was injured with no one to help?

With his heart thumping against his chest, Abinadi took a few steps into the cave. The sudden cool was expected, but tonight it prickled his skin, seeming to seep into his bones. He spotted a crumpled head covering. Picking it up, his stomach twisted. Someone had fled this cave quickly. He moved forward again, and a half dozen paces ahead, the walls glowed with firelight. He hoped he was wrong and they just hadn't heard his signal. With a more confident step, he continued forward, thinking the elders had moved to the blessings. That would explain the delay in signaling him to enter.

The cave was more of a vault, said to have been originally constructed by Fathers Nephi and Jacob to conceal the Liahona, sword of Laban, and the brass plates. Since then, the vault had been widened into a cavern that could hold several dozen people—perfect for secret meetings. Each time Abinadi entered, he felt as if he were somehow walking on hallowed ground.

As he rounded the bend that opened into the cavern, Abinadi stopped short. A small fire crackled in a pit in the center of the room, but the chamber was empty. Various mats surrounded the fire pit as if they were waiting for their occupants to return. Abinadi spun around, searching for clues.

Abinadi circled the fire, glancing around the empty room, trying to understand where everyone had gone. He crouched against the ground and studied the footprint patterns, seeing nothing unusual. Then he saw a spot of color on the other side of the fire pit. A brilliant green feather lay on the

ground. None of the elders or the apprentices wore anything as costly as feathers, which meant that it belonged to an outsider—a wealthy Nephite or . . . a Lamanite.

Abinadi snapped his head up at the realization, then he retrieved the feather and tucked it into his sash, out of sight. With swift strokes he kicked dirt over the fire, then feeling his way through the new darkness, he moved out of the tunnel toward the fresh night air.

He exited the cave, finally straightening his tall frame outside the low opening. A thud echoed in his ears, and he felt a tremendous pressure against his neck, squeezing so hard that he gasped for air. It took him a second to realize that a pair of strong hands was choking him. He brought his own hands up in defense and tried to wrench away from the assailant. A voice hissed in his ear. “Make another sound and this blade will cut out your heart.”

* * *

Raquel knew she shouldn't do this week after week, yet as she tied a turban over her head, covering her hair and part of her face, excitement coursed through her. She wore a rough-sewn tunic common to the young boys of the city. She tied a pouch to a rope around her waist—just in case she came across any useful plants. Once a week, Raquel joined the group of shepherds who tended her father's flocks. Thinking she was just another hired servant, none of the shepherds ever bothered her. And when they spoke to her, she merely answered with a masculine grunt.

It was her one escape from the mundane lifestyle she had to endure day after day. Only her cousin Seth knew her secret. He was the one who'd made the suggestion in the first place after growing tired of hearing her complaints. Her father's flocks grazed the land just north of King Noah's vineyards. Typically the flocks required only two or three shepherds to watch, but since a recent raid by the Lamanites, the number of shepherds had doubled. Seth had been called in to help, and Raquel went with him. The threat of the Lamanites only made the adventure more exciting, she decided. Spending time with her younger cousin on a quiet hillside wasn't nearly as thrilling as listening to the shepherds' stories of past battles. And now, with the added danger, the shepherds spent most of their time predicting what might happen.

Seth had warned her against coming tonight because of the celebratory nature of the king's court—the streets would be filled with drunken and brazen men. But Raquel was sure that none of them would bother her if she

were dressed as a shepherd boy. A smile, concealed by her scarf, widened across her face as she moved through her parents' courtyard. All she had to do was make it to the road and no one would be able to tell from where she'd come.

Before leaving the house, she crept through the rear garden and stopped at a small hut that housed the tools for gardening and her herbal collection. She pulled open the reed door, splashing moonlight and illuminating the baskets and jars filled with dried herbs and plants. Raquel's practiced eyes scanned the contents to see if she was low on any one particular herb, evaluating the groupings of dried hibiscus, apple leaves and magnolia tree leaves, dried papaya, and leaves from the sour orange plant. She peered inside the jar of willow bark. Only two strips left. She'd have to remember to search for more of the pain-relieving bark along the way. Listening for any stirring within the house, she quietly slipped through the garden, around the house, and into the courtyard.

Sticking to the side paths, Raquel hurried along, enjoying the freedom that the lightweight men's tunic gave her. Her beaded and feathered clothing left at home, she felt as if a burden had been lifted. She only wished that her hands and feet were calloused like the shepherds'. As it was, her feet throbbed with blisters, which she would carefully tend to by applying her homemade guava paste when she returned home from the fields.

Loud laughter rang out a few paces ahead, and Raquel came to an abrupt stop. She hesitated, wondering if she dared pass by the two people who seemed to be embracing. She turned right and made her way through a narrow passageway between two houses. This part of the city was known for its riotous living. She had overheard stories from the servants, and now she marveled to herself, thinking about what her mother would say if she were caught.

"Come inside, young man, I have something special for you."

Raquel whirled to face the speaker. She was startled to see a tall, beautiful woman standing in front of her. An easy smile crept to the woman's face.

"Ah, you are inexperienced." The woman's eyes took in Raquel's appearance. "Tonight will be my gift to you."

Raquel opened her mouth in shock then closed it quickly. She managed to mutter in a deepened voice, "N-no thank you." She hurried past the woman, her pulse wild with fear. It wouldn't take much for her identity to be discovered—and to be found in such a place would anger her parents. She shuddered, grateful that the woman didn't pursue her or send someone after. Raquel started running, passing the sounds of laughter and music coming from the surrounding buildings.

She nearly vowed not to take this chance again, but still she did not turn for home. If this was her last time out, she'd make it worthwhile.

CHAPTER 2

I have gone astray like a lost sheep.
(Psalm 119:176)

Music from the flutes, panpipes, and drums pulsed through the throne room, causing the hanging drapes to sway as if keeping time. Alma stared at the surroundings and soaked in every detail. An elaborate bamboo cage housed a fine collection of quetzal birds—some larger than he'd ever seen. In the center of the room, King Noah sat with his new bride as a troupe of magicians displayed their latest tricks. The king's laughter boomed over the music, and the wedding crowd echoed his laugh. Against the walls, low tables held varied dishes of spicy food—meats, tamalitos, quail eggs, pears, nuts—piled high on silver and gold platters.

Alma smiled, hardly believing he, a simple carpenter, was here in the center of the king's weeklong wedding festivities. He was only twenty and had been invited as a personal guest of the king. If his parents had been alive, they would have been truly shocked. They had been a part of Zeniff's court, but after the old king died, everything at court changed. Alma's father, Cephas, had been Zeniff's intellectual advisor, a meticulous scholar. But now a new king was in power, and the old ways of the previous king had been put to rest.

Alma gazed about the room, seeing that there was nothing intellectual going on in this festivity. He looked at his hands, strong and hardened through his occupation. Crafting furniture could never compare to his father's scholarly abilities.

Trying not to let the memory of his parents ruin the evening, Alma focused on the new bride. No one could argue against her beauty. Her dark hair shimmered like copper, even in the dull glare of the torchlight. Her skin was flushed, yet it had no blemish or dark spot of any kind. But it was her melodic voice that had entranced Noah when she'd first come to sing at court.

Alma smiled. On that day, a few weeks earlier, it seemed every man had fallen in love. Alma had just delivered a newly constructed judgment-seat to the palace when the singer was led into the throne room. Her voice carried throughout the halls, and Alma hovered in the entryway, listening in fascination.

The mere fact that Alma was Maia's distant relative had brought Noah's attention to him. And suddenly, he was the favored citizen—the man to secure the betrothal. It hadn't been hard, at least not after he'd presented the bride price to her parents. The young virgin had urged her parents to take the gold and silver. They would be able to live the rest of their lives in comfort, and the only cost was for their daughter to marry the king.

The chance of a lifetime.

And now at the wedding, Alma tapped his foot in time with the rhythm. The final magician created a haze of smoke and disappeared. Noah clapped loudly, and Alma joined in with the others, bringing his calloused hands together. Then everyone grew quiet as the young bride stood. Maia cast a smile upon her king—now husband—then gazed over the audience. For an instant, Alma's eyes locked with hers. He was surprised to see not delight and gratitude, but a deep melancholy just beyond her thick lashes. However, the impression was quelled in the next moment as she opened her mouth and sang.

The beautiful words of a traditional wedding song seemed to fill his entire being. The melodic prose was haunting and soft, soon growing in strength and power.

*The most alluring moon has risen over the forest;
it is going to burn suspended in the center of the sky to lighten all the earth,
all the woods—shining its light on all.
Sweetly comes the air and the perfume.
Happiness permeates all good men.*

The girl smiled as she sang the sweet words about a man and woman's joyous coming together. Alma smiled in reply, although he knew the girl sang to her new husband. While the singing was beautiful, the lyrics left him unsatisfied in a strange way. He lifted the jeweled goblet to his lips and drank heartily of the free-flowing wine. As the sweetness coursed down his throat, it became easy to ignore the sense of the girl's sadness and to believe in the good fortune that any girl had in marrying a king. He watched her smile at her new husband, and Alma decided that Maia had made a good future for herself. When she finished, the gathering broke out into another song.

A hand reached through the crowd and squeezed Alma's shoulder. He turned to see Amulon, a giant of a man, already staggering with drink. His

chest was bare, but over his shoulders hung a coat of jaguar skin. Jewels dotted his fingers and earlobes. The elaborate headdress he usually wore was replaced with a band of gold. The man was at least forty, but his muscular physique made him look younger than their thirty-five-year-old king. Amulon slung an arm around Alma and gave him a friendly embrace. "You are on the record, my friend."

"What?" Alma asked, not sure he'd heard correctly over the singing. He'd had enough wine himself not to be offended by the man's foul breath.

"The king's record. We discussed your name last night." Amulon jabbed Alma with an elbow. "This union—this marriage," he held his goblet in the air, sloshing wine over the brim, "is all because of you. And the king doesn't forget those who help him."

What's the record for? Alma wanted to ask, but Amulon had joined in the bawdy singing that made speaking impossible. A young boy sidled up to them and refilled their wine goblets. *I've had enough*, Alma thought. He looked around, seeing that everyone else continued drinking, not seeming to care how much they consumed. He took a few more gulps as the song finished.

"And now, my new friend," Amulon said into his ear, "the female guests leave, and the real entertainment begins."

Alma craned his neck to see a group of ladies lead the bride out of the room. The crowd thinned as the other women also took their leave. Alma's heart thudded in anticipation. One part of him said that now would be a good time to slip away, but the other part was too curious. After all, he was a personal guest of the king.

Noah commanded his priests to join him in the center of the room. Cushions were brought in by servants, and the men took their places around the king. Amulon grabbed Alma's tunic and pulled him along. "You're invited, too."

"I'm not a priest," Alma started to protest.

"Don't worry about that, my friend," Amulon said with a hearty laugh.

They pushed through the crowd, and when they reached the king, Alma suddenly felt the excess agave wine rebel in his stomach. His vision wasn't as clear as usual, and his head felt like it floated above his body. Noah smiled at the two of them and waved them over to a pair of cushions. Amulon settled next to Alma. "See what I told you? You'll be made a priest soon enough."

Priest? A priest of King Noah? Alma could hardly believe the words. His besotted mind tried to mull over the changes it would bring to his simple life. Everything would change. He stared at the goblet in his hands,

watching the varying color of wine illuminated by the flickering torchlight. Being a priest meant duty, power, honor, residence at court . . . *gold*. He would be equal to his father at last . . .

An image flashed through his mind—the face of his father and a clear picture of his disappointment as Alma served an impious ruler.

Wild clapping caused Alma to look up from his goblet and shake his reproving thoughts away. His parents were long buried and no longer held any power over him. This was another time, a different king, and altered rules. Blinking rapidly to clear his vision, Alma stared at the scene in front of him. Several veiled women had entered the room. They slowly danced, circling the king and each priest. Apparently they weren't aware that Alma wasn't one, because he received a good deal of attention. Somewhere from the other side of the room, he heard low music, but his senses focused on the girls.

What would Noah's new wife think? Alma wondered, realizing at the same moment why she'd been taken out of the room. Did she know what was going on here? Alma's stomach rumbled loudly, capturing his attention. The lightheadedness returned as one of the girls moved very close to him. Close enough to touch. He kept his hands gripped on the goblet, noticing that the other men didn't refrain from touching the women. Some of the priests stood and moved with the women as the others shouted encouragement. Alma glanced at Amulon—the man's eyes were glazed in pleasure, perspiration beaded on his face and torso.

Instinct told Alma to leave the room and get away from this carnal scene. The stories he'd heard of King Noah's court were now confirmed.

But then a feather touched the back of his neck, and he turned. He looked into the large, beautifully painted eyes of a woman. She took his hand and pulled him toward her. He reluctantly stood, feeling embarrassed. But the others didn't seem to notice his hesitation. His face heated as he thought of excuses for why he couldn't dance with her. Amulon's laughter cut through his uneasy thoughts, his voice sailing over the pulsing music. "Relax, my new friend. Enjoy your success."

Alma's mind reeled as the woman's hands caressed his arms. She guided him into sensual movements, and he found himself following. He closed his eyes, thinking maybe it would all go away like a strange dream. But the music continued, and the dancing continued, and the wine . . .

Oh no, Alma thought as his stomach pierced with pain. He tried to mutter an apology to the woman before dropping to his knees. In an instant, all that he'd eaten or drunk that night was lost.

Abinadi

15

* * *

Everything hurts, Abinadi thought. There was probably not one part of his body without a bruise. Even so, he was grateful to still be alive. He stared into the darkness at his surroundings. The attacker had left him in a clearing with several other victims. Some of them weren't moving at all, and he heard pitiful moaning coming from one nearby. Even with his arms and legs tied, Abinadi was able to struggle into a sitting position. In the moonlight, he barely made out the groaning man's features—and the clothing that identified him as a shepherd.

Scooting closer, he said softly, "Are you all right?" When the man turned, Abinadi saw that he was young—perhaps twelve or thirteen.

The boy said, "I'm better off than the rest." His eyes shone with unshed tears. "It's my cousin I'm worried about. She planned to meet me at the fields tonight."

"*She?*"

"Yes. It's dangerous enough for her to go against her father's wishes, but now I have no way to warn her." His pleading gaze met Abinadi's. "They killed some of the shepherds already."

"Who did?" Abinadi asked.

"Lamanites," the boy said, his face registering surprise at the fact that Abinadi didn't already know. "They've been closing in on the borders for weeks. But I didn't think they'd attack us."

Abinadi nodded, his questions falling silent. He'd known about the extra military force along the borders of the land, but for Lamanites to come as far as the grazing fields was unheard of. "What part of the city are you from?"

"South of the king's palace. My name is Seth." He looked around as if worried someone might overhear. "I'm not really a shepherd. I'm just helping with my uncle's flocks."

So he's not a commoner like me if he lives south of the palace. "I'm Abinadi."

"I thought I recognized you," Seth said.

Abinadi stiffened, wondering if that were good or bad. He had never seen this young man before.

"I've seen you with Ben," Seth added.

It was as if a knife pierced Abinadi's chest as Seth spoke the name. He'd forgotten that the boy should have been at the meeting too. He inhaled sharply as myriad thoughts passed through his mind. "Yes, I know Ben," he finally said, wondering how much he should reveal. Nothing that wasn't

necessary. "He was supposed to meet me tonight. Have you seen or heard anything about him?"

"No," Seth said, "I doubt the Lamanites would bother a young boy."

I hope he's right, Abinadi thought. Ben was only eight years old, but he had the intellect of a much older boy. Abinadi prayed the child was smart enough to stay clear of the enemy. He looked at Seth again. "How much time do you think we have before the Lamanites return?"

"Not long. I think they're probably raiding the wine presses," Seth answered.

"I hope they'll drink themselves into a stupor."

Seth nodded. "Except they might be even more ill-tempered then." He scooted to Abinadi's side and peered at him closely. "If you know Ben, you're probably one of *them*."

"Who?" The hairs on Abinadi's arms stood. Such a statement had never led to anything positive.

"The religious ones—I don't know what you call yourselves—but the king keeps a close watch on your leader . . . what's his name? Gideon?"

Abinadi's heart sank. This young man knew more than he should. The Teacher was in fact Gideon, but not many knew that. "How do you know him?"

Before Seth could answer, the piercing cry of a howler monkey cut across the clearing.

They're coming. Adrenaline sliced through Abinadi as he waited for the first appearance of the Lamanites. The dozen or so living captives instinctively edged toward the center until they became one mass. It probably wouldn't make a difference, but for a brief moment, it gave them a small sense of security.