

The background of the cover is a warm, golden sunset over a hazy landscape. In the center, a woman's profile is shown in silhouette, looking down. Her hair and the branches of a tree are intertwined, with the tree's trunk growing from a stone well. The sky is filled with soft, glowing clouds.

# Beyond The Well

A Novel Inspired  
by the Women at the Well

Lauree Brown

# CHAPTER 1

## THE MEETING

Photine arrived deliberately late to the well.

Each morning, before the sun crested the hills and warmed the dust underfoot, the women of Sychar gathered here—just outside the city walls—filling their jars, trading news, and watching one another with the quiet intensity only women long held in roles of obligation can master. Photine had no patience for them. The sideways glances. The whispers that died on lips when she passed. The way they measured her like a garment sewn wrong—too bold, too strange, too marked by past husbands and unanswered questions.

She preferred the quiet. Midday meant heat, yes, but also solitude: no dodging questions, no obligation to smile, no performance of belonging she no longer owned. Better to sweat under the punishing sun than to endure the reminder of what she had lost—each look from them pressed like a finger into a bruise that never healed.

A dove startled from a nearby olive tree, wings skimming the sun-thick air before dropping into the shade. Photine felt the tug of that shade. It meant more than relief; it meant not being seen.

Lately, she measured her days by how long she could move without drawing eyes—how few words she could spend and still get bread.

The strap rubbed the ridge on her collarbone where a hand had bruised her long ago. The mark was gone; the ache remained. She'd left behind a roof, a name spoken too hard, and the kind of help that costs more than hunger. She wasn't just hot—she was emptied. Tired of explaining herself, tired of being weighed like grain and found lacking.

*A well, at least, was honest: you lower the jar, it gives what it has, and it doesn't ask where you've been.*

The thought steadied her. Gravel bit. The jar tugged. Heat rose. A bead of sweat slipped between her shoulder blades, and with it came the old prickle of caution that never quite left when men were near.

As she neared a bend, two men came into view on the path ahead. They hadn't seen her—good. She slowed, lowered her gaze, and shifted the worn leather strap from her shoulder.

They wore linen tunics, sweat-darkened at the collar, cloaks flung back. Locals, perhaps shepherds or tradesmen. It was hard to say at a glance.

“...Josef said he was seen near Mount Gerizim,” said the taller, voice low but urgent.

“If that's true, there will be trouble,” the shorter replied, fanning himself. “He'll not be welcomed here. Not a Jew.”

“Probably just rumors,” he added, as if persuading himself.

“Maybe. But I've heard he seeks followers here in Sychar.”

Photine kept her eyes on the strap joining her water jars, pretending to mend it as she passed, but her mind catalogued every word, tone, gesture. She lingered a breath too long behind the figs, listening.

A shift in their voices told her they had noticed her. Their words grew careless, sun-weary, soaked in bitterness.

She heard her name—half-whispered, half-laughed.

“The well is deep,” one said, “but not as deep as her bed.”

The other snorted, adding something low and sharp, a sound meant to cut through the words.

Their chuckles stretched thin in the late morning light, scraping at her spine.

Photine’s grip tightened on the jar until her knuckles ached. She kept her gaze on the path, jaw set, feet hurried. Turning would only feed them—but she turned anyway, not to offer her face, but to claim her pace. Slow, deliberate, unbroken.

Let them laugh. Let them fill their mouths with dust and stories they did not earn. None of them had ever drawn water with her blistered hands and her raw heart. None had stood beside a grave too small for a dream. None had bargained a piece of her life just to keep the rest alive.

She passed them like a shadow crossing stone, their words still prickling under her skin. The heat pressed down, but the weight inside her pressed harder—and she carried it, as always, in silence.

She walked the worn path alone, dust fanning around her ankles, heat pressing against her skin. The market would be busy by now women bartering, boys shouting, goats bleating like prophets. But out here, there was only wind, stone, and memory. A stray olive branch

lay in the bath ahead of her, its leaves curled and silvering in the sun. She paused, nudging it with her sandal. The clean snap of the brittle stem pulled something loose inside her – an echo she hadn't expected. That was when her father came back to her – Eleazar, kneeling beneath the olive trees, coaxing life from old wood.

*You must wound the tree, he'd said. Cut it open. Only then will it accept something new.*

He had been her first truth-teller, her first question-asker. While the town clung to purity laws and genealogies, he whispered stories of prophets who wrestled angels and lost—yet walked away blessed.

Some said he joined a rebel camp. Others claimed the Romans took him. There were even whispers he had been seen across the border, living as a Jew. No one asked her. No one looked her in the eye and said the word she carried like an unfilled jar: *abandoned*.

Eleazar came from a long line of builders—men who shaped stone for holy places. Their ancestors had helped raise the temple on Mount Gerizim. By Photine's birth, the family's standing had cooled to embers. Shepherding had replaced chisels. Zimri—her brother, stubborn and slow to learn—remained at home. He bristled at her quick tongue and quicker mind, resenting the way their father leaned toward her questions more than his answers.

Eleazar never sat her at a desk to teach, but Photine learned anyway, watching from corners as he instructed Zimri in letters and numbers and the study of men: the twitch of a mouth, the shift of a shoulder. Soon she outpaced her brother. Eventually, her father noticed.

Photine remembered the evenings most. When the sheep were penned and the last light clung to the hills, her father would take her down to the old shed where his tools lay in neat rows, still oiled though seldom used. He would sit on a block of limestone, broad hands steady, and pat the space beside him.

“Here,” he’d say, handing her a chisel dulled by time. “Tell me what you see.”

She would turn it in her hands, tracing the grooves where calloused fingers had held it before hers. “It’s heavy,” she answered once, squinting at the blade. “But the edge is worn—like it’s tired.”

Eleazar chuckled, the sound low and warm. “Not tired, little flame. Tested. That’s how stone teaches you—by wearing down what is too sharp, leaving what is strong.”

She leaned against his shoulder then, small enough that his arm could wrap her whole. “Will you build again?”

His gaze drifted to the horizon, where the mountain shadowed the land. For a moment, he was quiet, then he placed her hand against the seam of a half-built wall at their feet. “Strength hides here, in the places you cannot see. If you learn to feel for it, you can build anything—even if the world forgets your name.”

To her, it felt like a secret pressed straight into her chest. She carried it as proof that she was not invisible, not wasted.

Photine carried her memories as proof that she was not invisible, not wasted. For a moment, the memory was balm—her father’s voice, the steady rhythm of his breath, the promise that strength could be hidden but unbroken.

But memories never stayed kind for long. One thought led to another, and the [wavering heat around her dissolved into darkness. . He disappeared. That night would haunt her more than all the others, for it was the first fracture—the one that taught her how easily love could vanish.

“They came to the well asking about you,” her mother Selah had said, her voice low, edged with worry. “Not Roman. Not Samaritan either. Outsiders—travel-worn cloaks, but their eyes knew too much.”

Eleazar hadn't looked up. He was sharpening a small blade, slow, methodical, the scrape of stone against steel filling the silence. "Did you tell them anything?"

"I told them you were my husband," she answered, stepping closer, "and that if they had questions, they could return in daylight—when the neighbors could listen too."

His jaw tensed. The blade paused mid-stroke. "You shouldn't have confirmed I was here."

"I didn't confirm," she said, heat rising. "I warned. There's a difference." She moved to stand in front of him, forcing his gaze. "What have you done, Eleazar? What have you drawn to our door?"

He met her eyes—reluctantly, then fully. "There was a gathering," he said, each word deliberate.

"North of Tirzah. In the hills beyond the olives. Not soldiers. Teachers. Farmers. Sons of Levites.

They spoke—not of swords—but of justice. Of reclaiming the name stripped from our tongues.

Of worship without fear. Of law not written by foreign hands."

His voice dried and cracked. "I only went to listen, Selah. Just to listen."

"And someone saw you?" she asked.

He nodded, weight settling like ash across his shoulders. "They see everything. I didn't stand. I didn't speak. But one of the loud ones recognized me from the temple days. Now it doesn't matter what I did. Only that I was there."

The blade lay flat on the stone. His eyes darkened like storm-washed earth. “I’m marked. Not for violence. Not for heresy. For hope. For remembering who we are.”

Selah’s face softened, but her spine held. “And what does that make me? What does that make our children?”

He closed his eyes. “The reason I can’t stay.”

“They think you’re stirring rebellion?” she asked, quieter.

“They think anyone who speaks too clearly is a threat.”

She gripped his arm. “You have a son and a daughter who need you; I need you. We’ve already lost too much. Don’t let the fire in you burn down what little we’ve built.”

“I won’t be silent,” he whispered. “But I’ll be careful. I’ll go to Arumah. There are friends there—ones who still believe we can protect what’s sacred without bloodshed.”

“And then?” Selah asked.

He looked down at his hands. “Then I vanish for a while. Until they forget to look for me.” Photine stepped from behind the curtain before Selah could answer—chin lifted, eyes hot. “Then take me,” she said, planting herself between him and the door. “You said the road is safer in pairs. I can walk. I won’t slow you.”

He was startled—only a flicker—and set his hand on her shoulder to turn her aside. She didn’t move. “I’m not a jar to leave in a corner,” she pressed. “If you’re hunted, I’m hunted by your shadow anyway. Better to keep together.”

“Photine,” Selah warned softly.

“No.” Her voice didn’t rise; it hardened. “You taught me letters so I could speak for myself. I am speaking: I won’t stay here to count rumors while you vanish.”

His grip gentled, then firmed. “The road south is no place for a twelve-year-old girl. Men are taken for less. Girls are taken for nothing. If they catch me, they bargain with you.”

“Then teach me how not to be caught,” she shot back. “You taught others.”

He looked past her toward the lintel and the strip of sky, measuring a weight. At last: “I will send word from Arumah—hidden in the reed basket at Haggai’s stall, where we buy salt. I’ll write only your name. You’ll know it’s mine by the small nick at the edge.” He pressed his seal—a carved shard of olive wood—into her palm. “Keep this. If anyone comes naming me, ask to see its twin.”

She curled her fingers around the seal, fury sparking at the feel of it. “Bits of wood and promises,” she said, voice shaking. “You fill other men with courage and leave me with tokens.”

“I leave you with your mother and your brother. With a roof. With a name.”

“My name is yours,” she answered. “And you are walking away from it.”

That landed. He closed his eyes. When he opened them, his voice was low. “If I take you, I endanger you. If I stay, I endanger all of you. There is no clean choice.”

She shouldered past him to the chest, yanked out a shawl, tied it hard around a bundle with nothing in it but anger. At the threshold, he caught the knot, held it. The donkey stamped once; the oil lamp guttered.

At last, he loosened the cloth and, with a father's care that felt like an insult, retied it softer and set it back. "When I am gone," he said, "lock the back gate. Go to Hannah if soldiers come. Do not answer questions you are not asked."

"Coward," she said, barely above a whisper—hating him for making her say it, hating herself for meaning it.

He didn't defend himself. He cupped the side of her head with his rough palm, a blessing he had not used since she was small. "Live," he said. "That is the bravest thing I can ask of you."

He left before her knees could give way.

She stood in the doorway long after his steps faded, the seal cutting into her fist. Then she went to his table and slid a narrow sheet of papyrus from beneath the weights—a fragment he'd been annotating, his neat hand in the margins. She tucked it under her tunic as if it were armor. That night, she cried silently behind the woven curtain, fists clenched around the stolen parchment—the only thing of him that felt like a voice.

Twelve.

Alone.

Abandoned.

The day her father left, Photine stopped believing in safety. Her world cracked under the weight of his absence. No body. No witness. No justice. Only silence. Only the echo of his promise to vanish "until they forget to look for me."

She never told anyone what she knew. She carried the truth like an ember—hot, secret, consuming. Her father fled lest he be taken. Not by accident. Not by nature. By men and a system that deemed

Samaritan minds dangerous. She blamed the Jews and the officials who served them. She blamed a world content to let it happen.

Her father had been gone nearly two years. The house still carried his absence like a shadow—tools untouched, ledgers missing his careful hand, their mother thinning a little day by day.

In his absence, Zimri tried to become the man of the house—tried to run the business, tried to keep their mother from fading into shadow. But Zimri was driven more by pride than wisdom. At sixteen, he had a man's frame but not yet a man's steadiness. Photine, precocious at fourteen, had already memorized the ledgers, tracked the weight of wool against the seasons, and mapped who cheated measures and who paid late but loyally. Eleazar once said she had the head of a banker and the hands of a weaver. Zimri, by contrast, struggled to read more than a line without sighing.

Still, he was the son. The man now. Each suggestion she offered registered as a challenge; each correction, a threat.

The trouble announced itself at the scales.

Zimri set the bronze pans on their frame, eager to appear competent, and nodded to a trader from Tirzah with sacks of raw fleece. The man laid down his "weights"—smooth river stones painted black to look official. Zimri didn't notice.

Photine did.

"Four measures," the trader said.

"Four," Zimri echoed, reaching for the reed pen.

"Three and a half," Photine said, stepping between them.

Zimri reddened. "Photine, move."

She lifted one “weight,” tossed it lightly, then tapped it against the post. It clacked—wrong. She produced their true weight from the ledger box, set it on the pan, and the fleece rose like a liar caught in daylight.

“Three and a half,” she repeated, calm and cutting. “And the half is charity.”

Men snickered. The trader blustered about road-damp fleece and girls meddling in men’s business. Photine’s smile thinned. “Even the lamb knows when the scale is light,” she said. She scratched an X into the fake stone with her knife and dropped it into the reject jar.

“Inside,” Zimri hissed.

She didn’t move. She counted out the coin, set it down, wrote the line in her neat hand, and slid the tablet toward him. “Sign.”

On the walk home, he erupted. “You shamed me—again. In front of traders. In front of men.”

“In front of thieves,” she shot back. “If you could read a scale, you wouldn’t need me.”

His hand flashed, catching her wrist. She wrenched free, fury bright as noon. “Let go. Or I’ll tell

Mother, you let a stranger’s stone stand for law.”

They stared each other down, the street empty but for a sleeping dog.

“You think you’re better than me,” he said.

“At numbers? Yes.”

Beyond the Well reimagines the life of the Samaritan woman from Scripture, beginning where the Gospel is silent: her life before meeting Jesus at the well.

Through love, loss, and social judgment, Photine navigates a patriarchal world shaped by Samaritan-Jewish division and Roman rule. Among the women of the well, where whispers carry both cruelty and courage, she struggles to define herself beyond the roles assigned to her.

Her story unfolds through hardship, resilience, and quiet defiance, leading to a moment of divine encounter and a deeper awakening of identity, agency, and forgiveness.

Rich in historical texture and emotional depth, Beyond the Well explores womanhood, shame and redemption, and self-discovery. It invites readers to see a familiar biblical figure not as a symbol, but as a fully human woman reclaiming her voice and her worth.

## About the Author



Dr. Lauree Brown is a writer and scholar with a PhD in metaphysical theology whose work centers women's voices long overlooked by history. Drawing on her academic background in psychology and anthropology, as well as her own experience of overcoming trauma, she writes women as fully realized individuals: intelligent, resilient, and shaped by the worlds they inhabit.

In *Beyond the Well*, she reimagines the Samaritan woman as a complex human being navigating power, loss, and survival in a patriarchal society. Her storytelling is grounded in historical research and emotional realism, devoted to restoring depth, dignity, and voice to women whose inner lives were never recorded but whose courage still echoes.

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