

The Thief: A Novel (Living Water Series Book 2)

By Stephanie Landsem

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A Roman centurion longing for peace and a Jewish woman hiding a deadly secret witness a miracle that transforms their lives and leads them to the foot of the cross.

My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?

Nissa is a Jewish woman with a sharp tongue and no hope of marriage. Abandoned by the God she once loved, her only recourse is to depend upon Mouse, the best thief in Jerusalem, to keep her blind brother, Cedron, fed and the landlord satisfied.

Longinus is a Roman centurion haunted by death and failure and is desperate to escape the accursed Judean province. Accepting a wager that will get him away from the aggravating Jews and their threats of revolt, he sets out to catch the thieves harassing the marketplace.

When a controversial teacher miraculously heals Cedron, Nissa hopes for freedom from her life of lies. But the supposed miracle brings only more misfortune, and Longinus, seeking to learn more about the mysterious healer, finds himself drawn instead to Nissa, whose secret will determine the course of both their futures.

Cedron, Longinus, and Nissa are unexpectedly caught up in the arrest, trial, and crucifixion of Jesus. As danger closes in on them from every side, they must decide if the love and redemption Jesus offers is true or just another false promise. How can the so-called Messiah save them from their shackles, when he cannot even save himself?

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Editorial Review

Review
"Nissa's tough demeanor as a cover for her fear and Longinus' desire for a life of peace in his mother's homeland of Gaul are achingly believable. Both characters are truly lost souls brought together by Jesus' act of mercy. Their discovery, through Him, that mercy is the true power that leads to peace is a reassurance Christian readers can appreciate." —*Romantic Times*, 4.5 stars (*Romantic Times, 4.5 stars*)

“Filled with memorable characters, *The Thief* is a tale of hopelessness turned to hope, of high stakes made higher, and ultimate love. What happens when a character at the lowest rung of society crosses paths with the most well-known figure in history? The story of The Thief. I couldn't stop reading.” —Tosca Lee, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Iscariot* (Tosca Lee, New York Times bestselling author of Iscariot)

“WOW! LOVE IT!!! I started reading on my way home from a conference and was so engrossed in the book I almost missed the flight! *The Thief* stole my heart and lifted my spirit. Masterfully told, this story of a Roman centurion and a Jewish girl explores familiar New Testament passages but plumbs new spiritual depths. A powerful message of faith and hope intersecting at the foot of the cross.” —Mesu Andrews, author of *In a Broken Vessel* (Mesu Andrews, author of In a Broken Vessel)

“You know the feeling you get looking at a mountain sunset, listening to sacred music while James Earl Jones reads the Sermon on the Mount? The Thief captures that emotion in an unforgettable story of desperation and beauty.” —Regina Jennings, author of *Caught in the Middle* and *Sixty Acres and a Bride* (Regina Jennings, author of Caught in the Middle and Sixty Acres and a Bride)

“A compelling story and vivid characters immediately come off the page and into your heart as Stephanie Landsem brings ancient Jerusalem to life in her enthralling second novel, *The Thief*. As you run through the streets with the little thief, Mouse, or dip in the Pool of Siloam with the secretive Nissa, a masterful tale full of adventure, heartbreak, and hope unfolds. A must-read for anyone who loves a good book they simply can’t put down.” —Laura Sobiech, author of *Fly a Little Higher* (Laura Sobiech, author of Fly a Little Higher)

"To read *The Thief* is to be completely transported to another time and place. Landsem’s impeccably researched novel moves at breakneck speed toward a climax that doesn’t disappoint." —Rebecca Kanner, author of *Sinners and the Sea* (Rebecca Kanner, author of Sinners and the Sea)

"Powerful and moving, Landsem grabs hold of the soul and never lets go. As compelling a portrait of mercy as I have ever read. Don't miss this one!" —Siri Mitchell, author of *The Messenger* (Siri Mitchell, author of The Messenger)

About the Author
Stephanie Landsem writes historical fiction because she loves adventure in far-off times and places. In real life, she’s explored ancient ruins, medieval castles, and majestic cathedrals around the world. Stephanie is equally happy at home in Minnesota with her husband, four children, and three fat cats. When she’s not writing, she’s feeding the ravenous horde, avoiding housework, and dreaming about her next adventure—whether it be in person or on the page.

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The Thief

Chapter 1



MOUSE DARTED THROUGH the crowded streets of Jerusalem. His name suited him. Small and drab, he fled from one street corner to the next as though stalked by an unseen predator. Dirt and ash streaked his face, and the tatter of wool covering his head was no less filthy. Both his worn tunic and the cloak over it looked like they had been made for a man twice his size.

Not a head turned as he zigzagged around caravans, street vendors, and plodding donkeys. He was invisible—poor, dirty, worthless. Just another half-grown boy in the lower city whose parents couldn't afford to feed him. If a Greek trader or a Jewish woman noticed him at all, that's what they'd see—just what Mouse wanted them to see.

Mouse skirted the Hippodrome, built by Herod the Great to show off his fastest horses, and moved like a trickle of water past slaves carting oil jars and women haggling over the price of grain. He didn't stop to admire the trinkets laid out under bright awnings. He couldn't be late.

There had been no food in his house for days, and the rent was due. Another week and the landlord would throw them into the street.

Thou shalt not steal, the commandment said.

A familiar voice whispered in his mind, dark and compelling. You don't have a choice.

He'd seen the mark on the wall this morning, just across from the Pool of Siloam. Scraped on the bricks with a chalky stone, the straight line down and one across had made his heart race and his fingers tingle. It meant Dismas would meet him in the usual place when the trumpets blew. After, Mouse would have enough silver to satisfy the landlord and his empty stomach.

Mouse bounded up the Stepped Street toward the temple. The drone of prayers and the odors of incense and burnt animal flesh drifted on the afternoon breeze. The Day of Atonement had brought throngs of pilgrims to Jerusalem to witness the sacrifices of bulls and goats—atonements for the sins of the Chosen People. Soon these tired, hungry pilgrims would swarm the upper market. Easy targets for talented pickpockets.

Three trumpet blasts rang out across the city. The sacrifices complete already? He wasn't even past the temple. He pushed by a pair of loaded donkeys and broke into a run. A stream of pilgrims poured out of the temple gates like a libation, flooding the street. Mouse plunged into the packed crowd. He'd be late if he couldn't get through this river of pious Jews. And Dismas wouldn't wait.

The high priest, Caiaphas, led the procession with a goat beside him—the scapegoat, on which he had laid the sins of Israel. Pilgrims followed wearing sackcloth, their faces and hair covered in ashes. They sang songs, begging for mercy from their sins, as they processed toward the Jaffa Gate to drive the goat out of the city and into the rocky northern desert.

Guilt pressed upon him as firmly as the bodies crowding on every side. His father came from the seed of Abraham, just like the priests and the pilgrims. And Mouse had fasted today, just like the men in sackcloth and ashes. But his father didn't offer sacrifice anymore, and his fast wasn't by choice. The scapegoat won't atone for my sins.

Mouse broke through the crowd and skirted the procession, picking up speed as he reached the bridge that stretched over the Tyropoeon Valley. He couldn't afford to worry about sins and the law like the rich priests and Levites. The Day of Atonement would end tonight at the first sight of the evening star. Jews were already hurrying to the market for food to break their daylong fast. And that's where he and Dismas would be, ready for them.

A frisson of anticipation tingled up his arms. He slipped through streets flanked by high walls. Beyond them rose fine homes with cool marble halls, quiet gardens, and rich food, but here the air was thick with dust and the odor of animal dung and unwashed bodies.

A labyrinth of streets crisscrossed the upper city leading to the market that sat just south of Herod's magnificent palace. Mouse turned into an alley hardly wider than a crack and slid into the meeting place—an alcove between the buildings, shadowed and scarcely big enough for two people. His breath sounded loud in the close space.

"You're late." A tall shadow parted from the gloom.

The scent of peppermint oil and cloves tickled Mouse's nose even before Dismas stepped into a dim shaft of light. He wore a tunic and robe like the Jews of the city and spoke Aramaic, but his accent betrayed his Greek heritage. Mouse spoke enough Greek to barter with merchants in the marketplace and understood even more, but Dismas didn't know that. There was much Dismas didn't know about Mouse.

Dismas's face was narrow, with deep grooves curving on each side of his mouth. The afternoon sun picked out glints of gray in his dirt-brown hair and short beard. How old he was, Mouse couldn't guess and didn't ask. Old enough to have a wife and a flock of children, maybe even grandchildren. But instead of a family, he had a slew of fallen women, if his stories could be believed.

"Maybe you couldn't find me?" Dismas's grin showed crooked teeth the color of a stag's horn.

Mouse bristled. He hadn't gotten lost in the upper city for months. "I just followed my nose until my eyes watered."

Dismas let out a bark of laughter. "At least I don't smell like a tannery." He flicked a long finger at Mouse's dirty tunic.

Mouse lifted his shoulder and pressed his nose to it, sniffing. He did smell bad. Maybe he'd overdone it a little. He bounced up and down on the balls of his feet, his chest cramped with tension. It was always like this before they started, but once they reached the market, he would be focused and calm.

Dismas rubbed his beard. "Settle down, Mouse. The gods will smile on us today."

The gods? A knot tightened in Mouse's belly. Maybe Dismas's Greek gods smiled on what they were about to do, but the God of Abraham surely did not. "Let's just go."

Dismas raised his brows. “What’s the first rule?”

Mouse huffed out a breath. “You get half.”

Dismas’s deep-set eyes scanned the street. “And the second, boy?”

“Do whatever you say.”

The tall man nodded and shifted past him into the street. Mouse counted to ten, as Dismas had taught him, and followed.

The upper market, stretching before Herod’s palace in a chaotic maze of stalls and tents, resounded with clamor and babble. Donkeys brayed, their feet clattering on the stone street. Greek and Aramaic voices rose in heated debate over the price of oil and the quality of wheat. Merchants haggled with loud-voiced women over pyramids of brightly colored fruits and vegetables.

Dismas pushed through the crowds, his head visible above the bent backs of patrons looking for their evening meal. He glanced over his shoulder, caught Mouse’s eye, and winked.

Mouse’s taut anxiety lifted; his mind cleared.

Dismas stepped in front of a portly Greek woman weighed down with a basket of bread and dried fish. Her arms jingled with gold bangles. Mouse bumped her from behind, spilling the basket.

“Watch where you’re going!” She bent to gather the bread.

Mouse mumbled an apology and fumbled to help her, dropping more than he gathered.

“Just let me! You’re filthy.” She brushed him off and hurried away.

Mouse shoved the gold bangle up his sleeve as he caught up with Dismas at a stall selling gleaming jewelry. A well-dressed Jew haggled with the merchant over a jade-and-ivory necklace.

The Jew shook his head. “I wouldn’t pay more than a drachma for that.”

“Robbery!” The merchant swept away the necklace.

Dismas eased up to the men. “You judge well, sir.” He nodded to the Jew. “I know a shop down the street with better quality at half the price.”

The merchant grabbed Dismas by the neck of his tunic. “Mind your own business.”

Dismas pushed back, protesting in Greek. Passersby stopped to watch. The scuffle was short, but long enough for Mouse to do his job and melt back into the crowd. Dismas backed off with a bow and an apology.

A coin here, a brooch or bangle there. Mouse pushed the treasures deep into the pocket of his cloak. He pushed his guilt even deeper.

You don’t have a choice.

As the setting sun cast a golden glow across the marketplace, Dismas glided past him. “Last one.” He jerked his head toward a Pharisee speaking to a burly shopkeeper. His striped tunic was made of fine wool, and its deep-blue tassels lifted in the evening breeze. A fat purse peeked over the folds of his belt.

Mouse shook his head. The crowds were thinning. Too dangerous.

But Dismas was already gone. He approached the man with his head down, knocking into him. “Excuse me, Rabbi!” he said in loud Greek as he righted the man, both hands on his shoulders. As the Pharisee shouted about defilement, Mouse sidled by, snagging the purse and slipping it into his pocket with one smooth movement. He’d done it dozens of times.

A thick hand closed hard around his wrist.

“Little thief!” The words rang out in the marketplace and echoed off the palace walls. The shopkeeper snagged Mouse’s other arm in an iron grip.

Mouse wrenched forward, pain shooting through his shoulder. “Dismas!”

But Dismas had disappeared like the last rays of the sun. Mouse struggled, the third rule goading him into panic: If there’s trouble, every man for himself.

A ring of angry faces closed in around Mouse. Hooves clattered on stone, and the angry men turned toward the sound. Two Romans on horseback—both centurions—parted the gathering crowd. One of them jumped from his horse. His polished breastplate glinted over a blood-red tunic. A crimson-plumed helmet sat low on his forehead, and curved cheek flaps covered most of his face. “What’s going on here?”

Fear weakened Mouse’s legs. Dismas had been wrong. No gods smiled on him today.

The crowd loosened. Some of the men faded away; others started explaining.

The Roman pushed the remaining men aside. “It takes two Jews to hold this little thief?” His Aramaic was heavily accented, but good by Roman standards. He pulled off his helmet to reveal a shock of hair the color of fire. Blue eyes narrowed at Mouse. He grabbed Mouse by one arm, like he was holding nothing more than a sparrow, and motioned to the crowd with the other. “Clear out.”

Mouse’s heart hammered. I can’t let them take me. He twisted in the centurion’s grip. In an instant, both his arms were wrenched behind his back. Pain brought tears to his eyes. He kicked out at the Roman’s shins but hit only the hard metal greaves that protected them.

“By Pollux, you’re a fighter.” The centurion smacked him across the head—a light slap for a soldier, but it made Mouse’s ears ring and his eyes water. He blinked hard.

The Pharisee drew himself up. “That worthless boy has my purse.”

With one hand, the centurion gripped both Mouse’s hands behind his back. He patted the other over Mouse’s chest and midsection.

Mouse gasped. Heat surged up his neck and into his face.

The centurion found the deep pocket in Mouse's cloak, and out came the purse. He threw it at the Pharisee. "Take more care with your money, Rabbi." Then he shoved his hand back into the pocket and drew out a gold bangle, a brooch of jade and ivory, a Greek drachma, and two denarii.

He showed them to the other centurion, still seated on his horse. "See that, Cornelius? It was a lucky day for this boy . . . until now." He pocketed the stolen pieces and pulled Mouse sharply toward him. "Now he'll see how Romans deal with thieves."

Mouse's mouth went as dry as dust. Thieves were scourged, that he knew. But he was more than a thief. If he didn't get away—now—they would find out everything. The Romans wouldn't have to scourge him because he'd be stoned by his own people.

Despair and fear rose in his throat, choking him.

As the centurion dragged Mouse toward his horse and his companion, a shadow shifted in a doorway across the street. A heartbeat later, the Roman's horse whinnied and reared. A stone pinged off armor.

"Mouse! Go!" Dismas shouted.

The redheaded soldier reached one hand toward his shying horse, and Mouse saw his only chance. He wrenched, twisted, and ripped his arms from his cloak. He ran, leaving the soldier with nothing but a billowing cloak and a skittish horse.

Mouse sprinted away from the market. He glanced behind. The second soldier whirled his horse toward the shadow with a shout. Dismas ran toward the palace, the mounted Roman pounding after him. The redheaded centurion was gaining ground on Mouse.

Mouse veered into a side street. The centurion's hobnailed sandals skidded on the smooth paving stones of the square. A shout and a Latin curse echoed down the narrow passageway.

The centurion was fast, but Mouse was faster. He wove through the back alleys. He darted down a side street, then dove into another that looked like a dead end—to someone who didn't know better. A muffled shout sounded behind him. His pursuer was losing ground. After a quick corner, he ducked through the narrow back door of a wineshop, pushed his way through the crowd of drunks, and sprinted out the front door.

Mouse kept running, his heart pounding faster than his bare feet. Dismas broke the third rule.

Mouse circled the upper city and slunk back on the north side of the market. Long shadows darkened the streets. The Jaffa Gate and the meeting spot weren't far, but was it safe to go there?

He stopped, holding his breath to hear something other than his own labored gasps. No hobnailed Roman sandals on the street. No pounding horse's hooves or shouts of pursuit. He approached the gate, staying close to the walls.

What if Dismas had been caught? Dismas knew almost nothing about Mouse, other than that he was an excellent thief. He didn't know Mouse's secret—or even his real name—so he couldn't send soldiers after him. Mouse was safe, but Dismas would be scourged. He might die.

A shiver of dread crawled up Mouse's back. He checked the street behind him. Empty. He crept into the cleft between the walls. Empty. He leaned his hot cheek against smooth stone and closed his eyes. Dismas had been caught. He shouldn't have come back for me.

At a whisper of wind and a breath of peppermint, Mouse's eyes flew open, and relief poured through his limbs. Dismas had entered the meeting spot like a wisp of smoke.

Mouse released his held breath. "I thought they'd caught you."

Dismas clapped his big hand on Mouse's shoulder, grinning like he'd just won a game of dice, not run through the city for his life. "They'll never catch me. Did you see that Roman dog's face?" Dismas shook with laughter but kept his voice low. "And you! You were fast, Mouse. I'll give you that. You were made to be a thief."

Mouse slumped against the wall. They'd done it. They'd gotten away. Dismas was right; he was good at this. Good enough to escape a Roman centurion.

Dismas reached into his pockets and pulled out an amber necklace, two silver drachmas, a shekel, and a handful of figs.

"Not bad," he said, popping a fig into his mouth. "How'd you do?"

"The centurion took it all." Mouse's shoulders drooped. How would he pay the landlord? Buy food?

Dismas chewed and leaned a shoulder against the wall. "Too bad. That means I don't get my cut."

Mouse studied his dirty feet. That had been the deal they'd made almost a year ago when Dismas had found him picking pockets in the lower city, rarely pinching enough to buy a handful of food. Dismas had offered to teach him to steal more than copper coins. With Dismas's help, Mouse pocketed silver, jewels—plenty, even after Dismas took his cut. But tonight, Mouse hadn't held up his end of the bargain. And Dismas had almost paid the price.

Dismas straightened and popped another fig in his mouth. "Don't worry about it, Mouse. We're partners."

He slapped the rest of the figs into Mouse's right hand, the silver shekel in the other. "Take this. I know your people don't trade in graven images." The shekel was stamped with a sheaf of wheat, the drachma with the face of Athena.

"But—"

"Shut up and take it, Mouse. I won't offer again." Dismas shoved him in the shoulder, but a smile lurked around his mouth.

Mouse closed his fingers around the coin. He chewed on the inside of his lip. "You broke your rule."

Dismas folded his arms over his chest, his smile gone. "Next time, I'll leave you."

Mouse shoved the coin into his pocket and a fig into his mouth.

Dismas elbowed Mouse aside and peered out into the street. He glanced back over his shoulder, his dark eyes serious. “You aren’t worth dying for, Mouse. Nobody is.” He faded into the shadows of the city.

Next time? Mouse chewed his lip until he tasted blood. Tonight had been close—too close. If he was caught . . . if they found out who he was, what he was . . . he’d have more to fear than a Roman centurion.

No. He was done stealing. Dismas was safe, and Mouse had enough silver to keep the landlord quiet for a month. He would find a job—anything that would bring in the money they needed.

This time, Mouse vowed, he would stop stealing for good.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Mary Chapa:

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