

MADELEINE L'ENGLE

CERTAIN WOMEN



A N o v e l

Certain Women



MADELEINE L'ENGLE



HarperSanFrancisco

A Division of HarperCollinsPublishers

CERTAIN WOMEN. Copyright © 1992 by Crosswicks, Ltd. All rights reserved. Printed in the United States of America. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. For information address HarperCollins Publishers, 10 East 53rd Street, New York, NY 10022.

This work was originally published in 1992 by Farrar, Straus & Giroux. It is hereby reprinted by arrangement with Farrar, Straus & Giroux.

Certain Women is a work of fiction. Any resemblance of the characters to individuals, living or dead, is purely accidental.

Designed by Victoria Wong

FIRST HARPERCOLLINS PAPERBACK EDITION PUBLISHED IN 1993

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

L'Engle, Madeleine.

Certain women / Madeleine L'Engle.

p. cm.

ISBN 0-06-065207-1 (acid-free paper)

1. Fathers and daughters—United States—Fiction. 2. Actors—United States—Fiction. 3. Women—United States—Fiction. I. Title. PS3523.E55C47 1993

813'.54—dc20

92-56136

93 94 95 96 97 CWI 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2

This edition is printed on acid-free paper that meets the American National Standards Institute Z39.48 Standard.

BY MADELEINE L'ENGLE

An Acceptable Time
Many Waters
A Cry Like a Bell
Two-Part Invention
Sold into Egypt
A Stone for a Pillow
A House Like a Lotus
And It Was Good
Ladder of Angels
A Severed Wasp
The Sphinx at Dawn
A Ring of Endless Light
A Swiftly Tilting Planet
Walking on Water
The Irrational Season
The Weather of the Heart
Dragons in the Waters
The Summer of the Great-grandmother
A Wind in the Door
A Circle of Quiet
The Other Side of the Sun
Lines Scribbled on an Envelope
Dance in the Desert
The Young Unicorns
The Journey with Jonah
The Love Letters
The Arm of the Starfish
The 24 Days Before Christmas
The Moon by Night
A Wrinkle in Time
The Anti-Muffins
Meet the Austins
A Winter's Love
Camilla
And Both Were Young
Ilsa
The Small Rain

Certain Women

8

For my grandmothers,

Emma and Caroline



Barbara Cohen first put the idea of a book about King David and his wives into my mind and generously suggested that I try it, and I thank her.

What happened when I started to write was, of course, very different from the original idea. The story in somewhat its present form began on a fifty-foot boat called the P.S., which is the model for the Portia, and my thanks go to Phil and Sylvia Duryee; their daughter, Cornelia; and her husband, Terry Moore, with whom I have spent happy times on the P.S.

M. L' E.

The Two Davids and Their Families

KING DAVID

Michal:	No children
Abigail:	Chileab, Daniel
Ahinoam:	Amnon
Maacah:	2 unnamed boys and Absalom, Tamar
Haggith:	Adonijah
Abital:	Shephatiah
Eglah:	Itream
Bathsheba:	Solomon

DAVID WHEATON

Meredith:	No children
Abigail:	The twins (deceased)
Myrlo:	Billy
Marical:	Everard, Adair, Etienne & Chantal
Harriet:	Jarvis
Elizabeth:	Emma
Edith:	Inez
Sophie:	Louis
Alice:	No children

Certain women made us astonished.

LUKE 24:22

DAVID: *You sound so certain.*

ABIGAIL: *I am.*

Contents

NORMA : 1

BAHAMA : 29

ZERUIAH : 79

MICHAL : 109

ABIGAIL : 147

ALICE : 173

TAMAR : 201

SOPHIE : 227

BATHSHEBA : 243

MARICAL : 263

ABBY : 279

EMMA : 313

Norma



And David said to Saul, Let no man's heart fail because of him; thy servant will go and fight with this Philistine.

And David put his hand in his bag, and took thence a stone, and slang it, and smote the Philistine in his forehead, that the stone sunk into his forehead; and he fell upon his face to the earth.

I SAMUEL 17:32, 49

THE PORTIA, a shabbily comfortable fifty-foot boat, was tied up at the dock of a Haida Indian village a day's sail out of Prince Rupert. Emma Wheaton perched on the side of the bunk in the pilothouse, where her father lay propped up on pillows.

"I see Death as somewhat like Goliath," David Wheaton said, "but I am not allowed even a slingshot as I go to meet him." The old actor's voice was still clear and strong. He looked at Emma; at Alice Wheaton, his wife, sturdy in jeans and a red flannel shirt; at Norma Hightree, regal, over six feet tall, seated on the revolving chair by the wheel. Even seated, Norma nearly reached the brass rails installed under the ceiling for use when the sea was rough and the *Portia* was rolling. "King David is a role I would dearly love to have played."

Norma spoke, her voice calm and deep. "You have more than a slingshot, David. You have your entire life."

"Eighty-seven years." He nodded slowly. "Full years. Full of my work. I have been a good actor."

"You *are* a good actor, Papa." Emma regarded her father. Despite his age and his loss of weight, he looked like an actor, with his tawny hair still not completely white, his dark green eyes, his fierce nose.

"That is one pebble," David said. He reached out a hand to Alice, who turned slightly toward him, her blue eyes crinkling

into her warm smile. "I have been unwise in love—except at the end. All those wives—one more than King David—all my children—and so few left."

He shook his head. "Enough of looking back. It's been an interesting script if nothing else, and I've had the joy of ending my career as King Lear, with my daughter as Goneril—" Now his hand reached toward Emma's, and she took it. "A young Goneril. How old are you?"

With all his children, Emma thought, no wonder he can't keep track of our ages. "Not that young."

"You're a fine actress."

"It's all I know how to do." Her voice was level.

"We're good, the two of us," he said with satisfaction. "Very good. Perhaps that's another pebble."

"Lots of pebbles." Emma squeezed his hand lightly.

"But I never had a chance to play King David. Nik never finished the play."

Niklaas Green. Emma's husband—that was. "No." Emma looked out the windows to the soft wrinkled grey of water, past a couple of weathered fishing boats, one with large black eyes painted on the prow. Her gaze moved on to the land where a small beach was brooded over by great dark trees rising into the cloudy sky. An eagle sat on a high branch, looking down at them.

"Sorry, Em, but it's the only role I've longed to do that never worked out. King David lived a long life, too, and he had more wives than a man should have, and he made every mistake anyone can make. But he danced with joy before the Lord and he made being human a rich and splendid endeavor."

Norma said, "As you have, David."

"Ah, Norma, you know only the best of me."

Norma shook her head slowly. "Oh, no, David, I have a good idea of the worst of you, too."

David's laugh boomed out, still strong, the famous, joyous laugh that had charmed audiences for decades.

Norma rose, looming large in the small pilothouse. "Goliath is only a monster who mimics death, David. You need not fear him."

David looked up at her. Smiled. "I know, Norma. I am not afraid. I have some work still to do, and I hope I will be given time to do it."

"I'm going now," Norma said. "I will see you again."

In the soft light of afternoon David's fine bones pushed sharply against the skin. "That is hardly likely. You know that."

"I will see you again," the Indian woman repeated. She held up her hand in a gesture that could be either greeting or farewell, gave Alice a quick, fierce hug, then took Emma in her arms. "You are good, you and Alice. Good women." She turned and went down the steps to the main cabin and out onto the dock.

Alice's younger brother, Ben, who ran the *Portia*, met Norma there and walked with her along the dock toward the island. Alice followed them. Emma stayed in the pilothouse with her father.

"I know very little about Norma's life in her village," he said. "Only that she is a personage of great importance. She knows little of my life as an actor. And yet we are close friends. We cut through what we do to who we are."

Emma knelt by the bunk. "I'm glad." She had met Norma Hightree and her husband, Ellis, many years earlier when she had first come to spend a week with her father on his boat, between the end of school and the beginning of summer camp. Ellis had been even taller than Norma, and heavy. They made a formidable pair. They had taken Emma late at night up the mountain that rose behind their village to a lookout where they showed her the stars, brilliant against a black sky. They had pointed out the star that was her guardian, making her feel incredibly protected. When Ellis died, Emma's father continued his friendship with Norma, and whenever Emma was with him on the *Portia* she looked forward to seeing the Indian woman.

Emma took Norma seriously when she said that she would see David again. But how? They would be leaving the village in a few minutes, going north. David was dying.

Emma rose and turned down the volume on the two radios constantly broadcasting on both the Coast Guard and the open channels, and to whose static-filled buzz her father was addicted.

Alice could let the noise slide off her; she had been communicating from island to boat to mainland by radio for most of her sixty-plus years. Emma could not tune out the repetitive sound. "Bald Eagle, Bald Eagle, Bald Eagle," the radio summoned. "Greenhigh Sound, Greenhigh Sound, channel six eight." On and on it went, constant messages from boat to shore to boat. Occasionally there came a "*M'aidez! M'aidez!*" or May Day, as it was more commonly thought of, and her father's eyes would brighten. Half a dozen times over the years the *Portia* had been in the vicinity of the call, and once had even rescued a careless teenager from his overturned sailboat.

The *Portia* looked more like a fishing boat than like a yacht, and was more welcome in villages like Norma's than a yacht would have been. Over the years David Wheaton had made many friends with the inhabitants of the various islands and coves in the Pacific Northwest waters the *Portia* plied.

The old man's hand, still strong, but thin, stripped of flesh so that it looked like an eagle's claw, came down over his daughter's.

"Papa, do you need anything?" Papa—the childish pronunciation, Poppa.

"Just to know that you are here."

Emma folded her hands so that the ring finger of her left hand was covered. She knew that her father had noticed the absence of the rings, but for these first few weeks on the *Portia* he had said nothing, and she was not yet ready to talk about Nik, or why she had taken off his rings.

Ben had noticed, had shyly spoken. "Something wrong between you and Nik?"

"Oh, Ben, that's the least of my worries right now, with Papa—he's already so much weaker—my own problems are unimportant."

"Em, if you need me, I'm here for you. You know that."

"Yes, Ben. I know that. Thank you."

But she could not talk about Nik to anyone yet.

Alice returned to the pilothouse with a prepared hypodermic needle. "Time for a shot."

"The pain's not bad."

"Good. Remember, it takes far more medication if you wait till the pain's intolerable. Better to keep on top of it this way, so that you remain alert and your own curmudgeonly self."

Alice was a physician, trained at Johns Hopkins in the States, but her practice until she married David Wheaton had been in northwest Canada, her patients mostly loggers, natives (Alice had known Norma long before David had), or fishermen like Ben, her brother. It was because of Alice and Ben that the old actor could have this summer on the *Portia*.

Emma saw Ben untying the boat. "I'll go help," she said, and went out to the narrow deck. Ben threw her the line and she secured it. When Ben had the little boat safely in deep waters and Alice was at the wheel, she returned to the main cabin. It was time to start dinner. Methodically she rolled flounder in bread crumbs she had seasoned with onions and herbs. Preparing dinner was familiar, understandable.

On the counter was a basket of eggs and a batch of wild greens Norma had brought them. Under the windows of the port side were a worktable, a wood stove, the undercounter fridge, the stove, a sink, and a cupboard. The galley was part of the main cabin. Under the starboard windows was a long, padded seat where, this summer, Ben put his sleeping bag. In front of the seat was a table that could comfortably seat six, maybe eight. Emma and Alice slept in the forward cabin under the pilothouse, where they could hear the old man when he snored, coughed, occasionally moaned. Alice knew when to get out of her sleeping bag to go to him, and when to leave him alone. Emma was unutterably grateful to her stepmother. Alice was far more to Emma than her father's latest wife, Alice with her shock of curly hair which still glinted with touches of gold despite the predominant grey. Her eyes were bright and young in a face finely wrinkled by wind and weather.

Emma stood by the galley watching as the *Portia* slid through the water, away from the village. She had taken over the cooking when she joined her father and Alice and Ben on the *Portia*,