



## CHAPTER ONE

Rahab tumbled into consciousness courtesy of an impatient nudge. “Stop your laziness, girl. Your brothers and father are almost ready to leave.” Her mother gave her one more unnecessary shove.

Rahab groaned and gave up on rest, forcing herself to rise from her pallet. Every muscle protested the simple movement, and she winced in pain. For two months she had been doing the work of men, waking before daybreak and wrestling the land all day with little food, water, or rest to renew her strength. It was useless—even at fifteen and only a girl she could see that. Their land had produced nothing but dust. Like the rest of Canaan, Jericho was in the grip of a brutal drought.

Though she knew their efforts to be wasted, every day she pushed herself almost past endurance because as long as they stayed busy, her Abba had hope. She couldn’t bear the thought of his despair.

“Child, hurry,” her mother snapped.

Rahab, who had already folded her bedroll and was almost finished dressing, continued her silent preparations at the same pace. She could move no faster if the king's armies were at the door.

Her father entered the room, chewing halfheartedly on a piece of stale bread. His face, pale and drawn, glistened with sweat. Rahab finished tying her sash with a quick motion and snatched a piece of hard barley cake that would serve as breakfast and noonday meal. Giving her father a tight hug she said, "Good morning, Abba."

He stepped out of her embrace. "Let me breathe, Rahab." Turning to his wife he said, "The north and west fields are barren. The only thing growing there is wind. The east field where I planted flax fared even worse. All that remains is the southern field. If I find nothing growing there today, I am giving up."

Rahab sucked in her breath just as her mother let out an agitated wail. "Imri, no! What will become of us?"

Her father's lips flattened into a tight line. Without bothering with an answer, he walked outside. In a haze, Rahab followed him, her gaze glued to his stooping back.

Her brothers Joa and Karem were waiting by the door. Karem stood munching on a raisin cake, a luxury their mother saved for her eldest son. His wife of one year, Zoarah, stood close, speaking in tones too soft for Rahab to hear. In spite of her worry, Rahab smiled at the way they held hands. Theirs had been a love match, a rare occurrence in Canaan. Although she teased her elder brother at every opportunity, Rahab's heart melted at the thought of such a marriage. Sometimes, under the cover of darkness when the rest of the family was long asleep, she lay awake, dreaming of having

a husband who would cherish her as her brother did his Zoarah.

Joa, the youngest at fourteen, slumped against the cracked garden wall, his shoulders hunched up to his ears. Rahab had not heard him string three words together in as many days. It was as if the drought had dried up his speech as thoroughly as it had scorched the earth. His tall frame had grown gaunt, and dark circles haunted his eyes. He had probably left the house with no food in his belly. She reached for the bread wrapped in her belt, tore it in two, and took half to her brother. Insufficient even for her, it would have to do for both of them.

“You eat that, young man.”

Joa ignored her. She sighed. “You don’t want me nagging at you all the way to the farm, do you?”

He glared at her with irritation, then held out his hand. She lingered to make sure he ate, then traipsed after their father.

As they hastened toward the city gates, Rahab noticed that even Karem, who was rarely given to broodiness, had turned ashen in spite of the hot sun. He broke the silence that hung over them. “Father, I went to Ebrum in the market as you told me. He refused to sell me oil or barley for the price you said. Either he has doubled his rates since you last purchased from him or you are mistaken about the price.”

“Send Rahab, then. She negotiated last time.”

“Rahab. You might have said.” A good-natured glint lit up his eyes. “One glance at her pretty face and every thought of sums and profits leaves Ebrum’s flat head.”

“Not so!” Rahab objected, her voice rising higher with annoyance. “My face has nothing to do with the price. I am better at bargaining than you, that’s all.”

“Bargaining you call it? Batting your eyelashes more like.”

“I’ll bat my broom at you if you don’t watch your tongue.”

“Hush,” their father commanded. “You two make my head hurt.”

“Pardon, Abba,” Rahab said, instantly chastened. As if her father needed more trouble. She must learn to subdue her tongue. Father carried the weight of their survival on his shoulders. She longed to comfort him, not become an additional burden.

Hard as she tried, she could think of no words that would console him. Instead, following instinct, Rahab reached for her father’s hand and held it. For a moment he seemed unaware of her presence. Then, turning to gaze at her with an unfocused expression, he registered her proximity. She gave him a reassuring smile. He pulled his hand out of hers.

“You’re too old for hand-holding.”

She flushed and hid her hand in the folds of her robe. Her steps slowed and she fell behind, walking alone in the wake of the men.

At the southern parcel of their land, they began examining rows of planting, looking for healthy seedlings. Other than a few hard-shelled beetles, they found nothing. Although Jericho’s natural springs had not dried up over the past months, the water they had carried from the city wells by the bucketful dried up almost as soon as it touched the heated soil. They needed a river to save their harvest; the handfuls of water they managed to feed the ground simply evaporated in the unrelenting sun before the young seedlings could drink enough to survive.

By noon, they had finished their careful inspection. The

southern field lay as ruined as the rest of their land, swallowing their seeds and spitting up death.

“What’s to be done? *What’s to be done?*” Father muttered under his breath.

Rahab looked away. “Let’s go home, Abba.”

Before she could step over the threshold of their house, her mother shooed her out with a wave. “Leave your father and me to ourselves.”

Rahab nodded and walked back out. She sank down against the crumbling mud wall, alone in the lengthening shadows. She longed to find a way to help her family, but even Karem and Joa had been unable to find work in the city. Jericho, already bursting with desperate farmers in need of work, gave them no welcome. How could she, a mere girl, be of any use? The sound of her own name wafting through the window brought her distracted mind back into focus.

“We should have given her to Yam in marriage last year instead of waiting for a better offer,” her mother was saying.

“How were we supposed to know we’d be facing a drought that would ruin us? In any case, the bride price he offered wouldn’t have seen us through two months.”

“It’s better than nothing. Talk to him, Imri.”

“Woman, he doesn’t want her anymore. I already asked. He’s starving right alongside us.”

Rahab held her breath, not willing to miss a single syllable of this conversation. Under normal circumstances the thought of eavesdropping wouldn’t have entered her mind, but something in her father’s tone overcame her compunction. She flattened herself like a lizard against the wall and listened.

“Imri, there will be no going back if we do this.”

“What else can we do? You tell me.” A heavy silence met her father’s outburst. When he spoke again, his voice was softer, tired sounding. “There’s no choice. She’s our only hope.”

Rahab felt her stomach drop. What was her father scheming? Their voices grew too soft to overhear. Frustrated, she strode to the end of the garden. In a dilapidated pen, two skinny goats gnawed on the tips of a withered shrub, already stripped to bare wood. With the men and Rahab working the fields every day, no one had found time or strength to clean the pen. A putrid stench made her eyes water, and Rahab covered her nose with her fingers.

She frowned as she considered her parents’ conversation. They had been referring to her as the means of the family’s salvation. But it wasn’t through marriage. What other way could a fifteen-year-old girl earn money? Taking a sudden breath, Rahab put her hands to her face. *Abba would never make me do that. Never. He would rather die.* This was nothing more than a misunderstanding. But the knot in her stomach tightened with each passing second.



With a sigh, Rahab shoved the blanket aside and rose from her pallet. The world lay shrouded in darkness, the dawn still a long way off. But she could not sleep. In the dim light of the single burning lamp, she began to fold her meager bedding.

“Leave it.”

Startled by her father’s unexpected voice, Rahab dropped the blanket. “Abba! You are up early.”

“Your mother and I have been discussing your future, Rahab,” her father said. “You can help your whole family, daughter. Help us survive this drought. It will be hard on you. I am sorry—” he broke off as if at a loss.

The silence stretched, full of monsters. Nausea clawed inside Rahab’s belly. She shook her head. Her father cleared his throat.

“You have to . . . you have to earn some silver, Rahab.”

“How?” she said, her throat dryer than their land.

“The way of women. The way of our gods. You understand my meaning?”

She understood too well. Horror seized her so tightly it nearly choked off her breath. She shook her head again. “You can’t mean it,” she said, her voice a broken croak.

Her father exhaled a long breath. “There is no other choice.”

Rahab staggered and sank down, her knees hitting the hard floor with a loud bang. She felt as if she had been pierced with one of Jericho’s iron-tipped spears. Her chest burned. Her worst fears had come to pass. The nightmare she had dismissed as a misunderstanding the night before *was* real. Her father meant to sell her. Sell her as a harlot. He meant to sacrifice her future, her well-being, *her life*.

“Many a woman has had to do it—younger even than you,” he said, his face turning red.

Rahab threw him an appalled look. She wanted to scream. She wanted to cling to him and beg. *Find another way, Abba. Please, please! Don’t make me do this. I thought I was your precious girl!*

“*I thought you loved me!*” The words emerged a broken whimper, accusation and plea and desperation entwined in a mangled jumble.

“Love won’t fill your belly, girl,” her father growled.

“I would rather go hungry!”

“It’s not your choice.” Her father’s eyes narrowed. “This family needs you.”

Rahab felt chilled as she stared into those eyes. Stone-hard implacability stared back at her, unblinking. Unyielding. And Rahab knew in that moment. Every hope, every dream, every childish expectation for happiness was about to be wrecked at the hand of the man she loved most in the world.

Her face turned marble-cold as something deep within cracked. She swallowed her pleas and her hopes. She swallowed every word.

*You’ll never be my Abba anymore,* she vowed.

From the time she had learned to speak, she had called her father *Abba*, the childish endearment that captured her adoring affection for this man. But her Abba was gone. In his place stood a stranger. A betrayer. The sorrow of this realization was almost more overwhelming than the reality of having to sell her body for gain.

As though hearing her unspoken words, he snapped, “What choice do I have?” Rahab turned away so she wouldn’t have to look at him. The man she had cherished above every other, the one she had trusted and treasured was willing to sacrifice her for the sake of the rest of the family.

This was not an unusual occurrence in Canaan. Many a father sold his daughter into prostitution for the sake of survival. Yet it made her father’s choice no less of a betrayal. She tasted ashes and ground her teeth until her jaw ached.

Her father rubbed a trembling hand over his scalp. “In the temple, you will receive honor. You’ll be treated well.”

Rahab gasped as if he had struck her. “No. I won’t go to the temple.”

“You will obey me!” he yelled, his voice echoing in the small chamber. Shaking his head, he gentled his tone. “We need the money, child. Or else we’ll all starve, including you.”

Rahab strangled a rising scream, forcing herself to sound calm. “I am not refusing to obey you. Only, I won’t go to the temples. If I have to do this, let’s not bring the gods into it.”

“Be reasonable, Rahab. You’ll have protection there. Respect.”

“You call what they do there ‘protection’? I don’t want the respect that comes with the temple.” She turned and looked him squarely in the eye. He dropped his gaze.

He knew what she was talking about. The year before, Rahab’s older sister Izzie had given her firstborn child to the god Molech. That baby had been the joy of Rahab’s heart. From the instant her sister announced she was pregnant, Rahab had felt a bond of kinship with him. She’d held him minutes after his birth, wrapped tightly in swaddling, his tiny, perfect mouth opening and closing like baby kisses intended just for her. Love for him had consumed her from that moment.

But her sister wanted financial security. She was tired of poverty. So she and her husband Gerazim agreed to sacrifice their son to Molech for the sake of his blessing.

They paid no heed when Rahab begged them to change their minds. They were determined. “We’ll have another baby,” they told her. “He’ll be just as sweet. And he’ll have everything he wants rather than be brought up poor and in need.”

Rahab went to the temple with them on the day of the sacrifice. She went hoping to sway her sister, hoping to make her see

reason. She pleaded, begged, prayed. Nothing she said moved Izzie and Gerazim.

Her nephew wasn't the only baby sacrificed that day. There were at least a dozen children. The grounds were packed with people watching the proceedings. Some shouted encouragement to the priests who stood before enormous fires, covered from neck to ankle in white, offering supplications. Rahab recoiled at the sight, wondering about the nature of a god who promised a good life at the cost of a priceless baby's death. What kind of happiness could anyone purchase at such a price?

She held her precious nephew in her arms for as long as she could, cooing to his wriggling form. He smelled like sweet milk and honey cakes. Rahab nestled him against her one last time as she kissed him goodbye. The baby screamed when rough hands wrenched him from Rahab's arms. She stumbled back into Gerazim and found Izzie already slumped down. The sound of the baby's final shriek as the priest reached the raging fire still haunted Rahab, a nightmare that never quite faded.

That was the day Rahab promised herself she would never bow her head to Canaan's gods. She hated them. For all their glittering attraction, she had seen them for what they were. They were heartless murderers. Thieves of joy.

Now Izzie and Gerazim's land lay as wasted as her father's. So much for Molech's blessing. She would never seek it. No, the temple wasn't for her.

"Rahab," her father pleaded, biting an already ragged fingernail. "Think of the life you'll have outside the temple. You're young. You don't understand."

It wasn't that she felt no fear. Life for prostitutes outside the

temples was hard, risky, and shameful. But she feared that life less than she feared serving Canaan's gods.

"Please, Father. I will not survive temple life." Daughters were expected to obey their parents without question. Her objections and pleas could be construed as disobedience. Her father could take her to any temple by force and sell her, and she would have no recourse. She told herself her father would never stoop to such means, but then remembered assuring herself only the night before that he would never ask her to prostitute herself either. The very ground under her feet had been shaken. Nothing seemed secure anymore.

Karem, who had walked in halfway through this exchange, burst out, "Father, you can't do this to the girl! Her life will be ruined."

Imri slashed the air with an impatient wave. "And you have discovered a way to support the family through the winter, perchance? You have arranged for a job? An inheritance from a rich uncle no one knew about?"

"No, but I haven't tried everything yet. There are other jobs, other possibilities." Rahab's heart leapt with hope at her brother's support. But the hope died quickly with her father's response.

"By the time you realize your confidence amounts to nothing, your pretty bride will be dead of starvation. Rahab is our only sure means of survival. Our only means," he repeated with brutal assurance.

Karem dropped his head and did not speak again.

Rahab pulled her knees to her chest, unable to swallow her tears. Her father moved to the opposite side of the room and sat

in a corner, staring into space. Unspoken words rose between them like a wall. A wall as high and impregnable as the walls of their city.

Loneliness, vast and cavernous, slithered inside Rahab and settled into her bones.



In the end, Imri could not refuse his daughter's one request. Rahab's unwillingness to enter the temples placed her parents in a quandary, however. How were they supposed to find customers for Rahab? At the temple the rules were straightforward. But doing things Rahab's way meant none of them knew how to procure a well-paying clientele.

"There's a woman who lives round the corner from us; she used to train the temple girls," her mother said. "Now she helps girls who are on their own."

"I know the one you mean," Imri whispered. "She seems hard."

"I know her too." Rahab had seen the woman slap one of her girls until blood spurted out of the girl's nostrils. "Perhaps that is not the best plan."

"You are always contrary to my suggestions," her mother said, her voice trembling with reproach. "Do you know how much this hurts *me*? Do you know what it does to a mother's heart to have to bear her child's pain?"

"No, I probably do not," Rahab said, her words stiff as wood. She thought it politic to swallow any obvious references to her own pain. That would only set her mother off on another attack

of guilt and suffering, and Rahab did not feel up to comforting her while grieving her own shattered dreams.

“Look, why should I give half my profits to a woman who will mistreat and cheat me? If the intention behind this enterprise is to earn enough money to see us through the year, we can’t afford a greedy partner.”

“Rahab, we don’t know how to . . . how to manage this affair,” her father said, banging his fist on the wobbly table.

The taste of bile rose in her throat. Ignoring it, she rasped, “Take me to Zedek the goldsmith. He’ll know what’s to be done.” Her father ran errands for Zedek now and again. He was a rich man, goldsmith to the king, and well connected among the aristocracy of Jericho. For the last six months, every time Zedek saw Rahab on the street, he stared at her with an intensity of desire that even she couldn’t mistake. She knew he didn’t want her for a wife. He would have asked her father already if that had been his intention. But she was willing to bet he would pay well for the other.

And she intended to make him pay very well. If she had to go through this horror, she would gain a little something besides her family’s bread for the drought year. She would free herself from her father. She loved him still, loved her family. But she determined never to be dependent on their protection again.

“What has Zedek got to do with it?” her mother asked.

Imri didn’t answer her. He mopped his head and said, “As you wish.”

Rahab snuck into the garden to weep in private.



“How much will it take to feed us for a year?” Rahab asked her father as they walked toward Zedek’s shop. Her legs shook with each step, but she refused to give in to the fear that strangled her from the inside out.

“Why?”

“Ask for that much. Plus a gold necklace, earrings, and bracelets for me.”

“Girl, you’re pretty, but not that pretty. No man in his right mind would pay that much for one night, not even for you.”

Was she attractive enough to tempt Zedek to part with his fat purse? She knew she’d been drawing men’s eyes for the past two years, since her body had blossomed and her hair had lost the wild wiriness of adolescence and settled into soft curling masses of deepest red and brown. Would she do for Zedek? “Not one night,” she replied absently. “Three months. He gets to have me while I’m still young and fresh . . . before anyone else . . .” Her voice trailed off. She couldn’t bear the thought of facing this thing one night at a time, with different men spinning in and out of her life. A steady lover might become tolerable with time.

“I’ll ask, but don’t expect him to accept.”

“It’s a good bargain. He’ll accept. Mind you, three months and not one day more.” Her father looked at her like he’d never seen her before. Perhaps he hadn’t. She hardly knew herself.

Zedek was a well-fed man with protruding front teeth. He dressed richly, ornamented with gold from his beard rings to the dainty bells on his woven shoes. When he saw Rahab and her father walk into his shop he came straight over, shoving the hireling aside. “Good day, Imri,” he said, staring at Rahab.

In his dark irises she could see tiny reflections of her own face—thin nose, full lips, large hazel eyes puffy from tears. She had washed her hair for this visit, and now it peeked from under its veil, an unruly mass of bright chestnut coils surrounding her face and cascading down her back. Recalling the reason behind that washing she blushed with shame and desperation—and held Zedek’s gaze.

Her father cleared his throat. “May we speak with you, my lord? Privately?”

Zedek haggled hard, but Imri, to his credit, did not budge. Zedek stared at Rahab, fingers rubbing his lips, and threw out one last sum. When Imri shook his head, the goldsmith walked away. Rahab took her father’s hand and rose to go. He shot her an agonized look, but Rahab pulled hard and he stood. Zedek, perceiving their determination, came back and accepted their offer. Rahab noticed that her father looked astonished. She schooled her features into a bland mask, covering her own surprise. Like her father, she could hardly believe that Zedek was willing to pay so much for her.

For three months, Zedek was her master. He liked that she knew nothing. He liked that for the first week she cried every time. He liked comforting her afterward too. He wasn’t cruel to Rahab. He never beat or abused her. And if a disgust of herself and of him settled into her stomach, she never let him see it.

When the three months were over, Zedek gave Rahab a bag full of gold. He threw in a pair of anklets in addition to her original demand, and when she tallied the coins, she found he had overpaid her as well. She assumed a mistake. “My lord,” she said, “you gave me too much.”

“My little Rahab refusing money?”

“I don’t cheat my customers.”

“Customers?” He rolled his eyes. “You’ve had but one. And you aren’t cheating me, girl. I’m giving it to you.”

Rahab bowed her thanks and clutched the money, half hoping that Zedek would ask her to stay longer. He was right. She hadn’t known any man other than him. She didn’t care for his touch, but she would prefer being the consort of one man than the plaything of many. Zedek showed no interest in continuing their association. Clearly he had had his fill of her.

She returned home and handed the bag of gold to her father. “From Zedek. Payment for three months.”

Her father peered inside the bag and gasped. “So much! I never thought he would give so much!”

“That’s the last of it. He’s finished with me. He doesn’t want me anymore.” Rahab blinked back the tears.

“What did you expect?” Imri threw her a quick glance before returning his attention to the bag. “It’s a wonder he stayed with you as long as he did, Rahab. He’s a man of the world. He’s accustomed to the best.”

*Meaning she was not the best.* Rahab slumped on a cushion. Her father’s words hammered home a truth she hadn’t dared admit to herself. Once a man really came to know her, he would not want her anymore. She must be undesirable or insufficient in some way. Her father knew it. Zedek knew it. Now she knew it.

She felt cold. Laying her head on her knees, she wrapped her arms around her legs, and began to rock. Her father went into the next room to show her mother and brothers the gold. If not for the occasional gifts of wheat and oil from Zedek, their

family would have starved by now. This gold would see them through the rest of the year and buy seed for the following year's harvest.

She heard her parents' muffled voices as they spoke in the next room. "Imri, what's to become of her now?" her mother asked, her voice thin and reedy. "Can't you persuade Zedek to keep her?"

"How am I supposed to manage that? He's bored with her and that's that."

"What are we to do with her, then? No one will marry her now."

"You knew the answer to that from the first day, woman. She'll have to make the best of it. We all will. Her looks will serve her well. There must still be men who want her. For a season anyway."

Rahab curled deeper into herself and swallowed a moan. Without thinking, she took a fistful of the lavish silk of her dress in each hand, bunching the fabric the way a scared infant might cling to a blanket. She choked as she thought about her future—about all the Zedeks who would spin in and out of her life. Her bed.

She mourned the dreams that would never be, the destiny she would never have. She mourned the choices lost to her. A loving husband. Children. Her own family. Finally, exhausted from crying and the strain of loss, she shut her eyes and lay on the cool floor. A shaft of sudden clarity pierced through the haze of misery.

She did have one choice. Though she was reduced to selling her body for money, she could choose her own lovers. She could begin and end every liaison according to her own desire.

She had tasted rejection from Zedek and it was too bitter to swallow. This bitterness, at least, she would avoid. She would be master of her own heart. She would let no one in, and she would cast each one out before they realized, as Zedek had, that she was unlovable.



During the months Rahab had been under Zedek's protection, she had met other influential men of his acquaintance. Several of them had hinted that they would be happy to replace Zedek if given the opportunity.

Rahab chose carefully, and only one lover at a time. She was stinting in her acceptance of men. Her clients were few, but generous. Her unusual selectiveness enhanced her popularity among men of the higher classes. Each wanted to be chosen over the others. Rahab became the competition they sought to win.

"Rahab, you are the most beautiful woman in Jericho," more than one man told her. "Even the king doesn't have a woman in his household who compares with you," they whispered in her ear.

Some days such words put a smile on her face, a shallow joy that never lasted. In her heart she believed that these men who claimed her to be incomparable would tire of her inside of three months and discard her like bones after a feast.

Sometimes after being with a man, she would curl on her mattress and shake, unable to stop. There were days when she would kiss her lover goodbye, smile at him as though he were

the center of her world, close the door, and vomit. She hated what she did. But she did not stop. She believed she had no alternative. What else could she become after what she had been? Her life was locked into this destiny.

By the time Rahab was seventeen, she had enough silver to purchase an inn on the city wall. Leaving home came easier than she imagined. Two years of absent nights and shamed days had taught her to distance herself from her family. Her body followed where her heart had long been. She did not love her family any less than before. Often in her little inn, she was lonely for them. Yet, she found that being with them only made her lonelier. Increasingly, she gave her time to the demands of her inn.

Most innkeepers in Canaan were also harlots, so much so that the terms had become interchangeable. Rahab, however, separated her professions. Not everyone who stayed at her inn was welcomed to her bed. She made certain that her inn gained a reputation for simple elegance and comfort. Decorating it with woven tapestries and rich carpets, she avoided the gaudy ornamentation common among other inns.

The location helped. Jericho was nestled behind the protection of a double enclosure of walls. The outer wall with its stone base and impossible thickness contained a number of businesses as well as military towers. Those merchants fortunate enough to live in the outer wall enjoyed the benefits of a constant parade of patrons. As a result, the outer wall had turned into a fashionable address, and in spite of the inevitable diminutiveness of the establishments built into it, represented some of Jericho's most desirable properties. By the time Rahab

turned twenty-six, her inn was as popular as she herself, though like her body, it often remained empty. It was that very exclusivity which made it a sought-after destination.