

Chapter One



Dawn had yet to appear when 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 Rahab one more unnecessary shove.

Rahab groaned and gave up on rest. Bleary-eyed and sore, she forced herself to rise from her bedroll. 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, "I've made a decision. If I find no sign of a crop today, I'm 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 shrugged and walked outside. Apparently his season of denial was at an end. He was admitting defeat. In a haze, Rahab followed him. She knew this day would be no different from the others. The thought of her father's wretchedness made her cringe.

Her brothers Joa and Karem were waiting outside. Karem munched 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 bit off a smile 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 in the cover of darkness when the rest of the family was long asleep, she dreamt of having a husband who would cherish her as her brother did his Zoarah. Lately, however, her thoughts had been too consumed by worry to leave room for pleasant daydreams.

Standing as far off as their tiny garden allowed, Joa, the youngest at fourteen, gazed at nothing. Rahab had not heard him string three words together in as many days. It was as if the drought had dried up his speech. She noticed dark circles under his eyes, and his tall frame seemed gaunt. 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 brought it to Joa. 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 it, then traipsed after their father.

Their pace was brisk as they walked toward the city gates. Rahab noticed that even Karem, who was rarely given to broodiness, appeared ashen with anxiety. Finally 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,” Karem drawled, a good-natured glint lighting 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. “It has naught to do with my face, thank you. 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 impulses. He carried so much care on his shoulders she wanted to be a comfort to him, not an additional burden.

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 farm, they examined row after row of planting, looking for signs of life. Other than a few hard-shelled beetles, they found nothing. By noon, Rahab was too dejected to continue, so she sat while the men finished their careful inspection. When they returned, her father was muttering under his breath, “What’s to be done? *What’s to be done?*”

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

At the house, she swept aside the ragged curtain that served as a front door and dragged herself in. Her mother shooed her out with a wave. “Give your father and me some privacy.”

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? Anyway, 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 cleaned the pen. A putrid stench assaulted her senses—an apt background for her roiling emotions, she thought. Her parents 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.



“Your mother and I have been discussing your future, Rahab,” her father began the next morning as Rahab rose from her bedroll. “You can help your whole family, daughter, though it will be hard on you. I am sorry—” he broke off as if at a loss for how to continue.

He didn’t need to finish his words. Horror seized her so tightly it nearly choked off her breath. With rising dread she realized 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 into prostitution. 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.

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! But she knew it would be useless. Her father had made his decision and would not be swayed by her entreaties. So she swallowed every word. She swallowed her pleas and her hopes. *You'll never be my Abba anymore*, she thought. From the time she had learned to speak, she had called her father *Abba*, the childish endearment that demonstrated her affection for the man closer than any person in the world to her. That childlike trust was shattered forever. 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. Even so, the commonplaceness of her father's choice did not calm Rahab. There was nothing mundane in the realization that she was expected to live the life of a harlot.

Her father's breathing sounded shallow and quick. "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!" her father yelled. Then shaking his head, he gentled his voice. "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, my father. 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, and he dropped his gaze. He knew what she was talking

about. The year before, Rahab's older sister Izzie had given her first child to the god Molech. That baby had been the joy of Rahab's heart. From the instant her sister knew 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 one untainted 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 pleaded that they 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 change their minds. Nothing she said moved them.

Her nephew wasn't the only baby sacrificed that day. There were at least a dozen. 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 prayers. 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 sister's precious boy 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 good-bye. The baby screamed when rough hands wrenched him from Rahab's arms, but nothing like his final shriek as the priest reached the raging fire . . .

Rahab stumbled back into Gerazim and found Izzie already slumped there.

That was the day Rahab promised herself she would never bow her head to such gods. She hated them. For all their glittering attraction,

she had seen them for what they were. They were consumers of humanity.

Now Izzie and Gerazim's land was as wasted as Imri'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.

"Father, please. I don't know if I will be able to 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 behavior, but then remembered reassuring 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. She'll 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 a job? An inheritance from a rich uncle we knew naught 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 and unborn child 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 sank to the floor, unable to check her tears. Imri moved to the opposite side of the room and sat in a corner, staring into space. All discussion ceased as their unspoken words separated them. In that silence, Rahab felt a wall rise up between her and her father that was as impregnable as the walls of their city.

It occurred to Rahab that they were both mired in shame. He because he had failed her as a father—a *protector*—and she because of what she was about to become. She felt numb with his betrayal. A sense of loneliness darker than anything she had ever known closed in over her heart like the seal of a tomb.



In the end, Imri could not refuse his daughter's one request. Rahab's refusal to enter the temples put her parents in a quandary, however. How were they supposed to find customers for Rahab? At the temple things were straightforward. But doing things Rahab's way meant none of them knew how to go about it.

"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 that 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 ears. "Perhaps that is not the best plan."

"You are ever 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’ll probably cheat me? If the intention behind this enterprise is to earn enough money to see us through the year, we can’t afford a dishonest 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 wife. He would have asked her father already. But she was willing to bet he would pay well for the other. And she intended to make him pay 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, and her devotion to her family remained absolute. But she determined never to place herself under his protection again.

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

Imri didn’t answer her. He dropped his eyes, mopped his head with the back of his hand, 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 the reflection 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. “Can 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 but him. She didn't care for his touch, but she would prefer being the consort of one man than the plaything of many. But 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. Suddenly she felt cold. She laid her head on her knees, 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. But for 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.

Through the thin curtain separating the rooms she heard her parents' muffled voices as they spoke. "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 felt choked with fear as she thought about her future—about all the Zedeks that would walk 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. Finally, exhausted from crying and the strain of loss, she shut her eyes and lay on the cool floor. In the midst of her hopelessness a thought occurred to her. 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 when Zedek was finished, they would be happy to replace him.

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 to compare to you," they whispered in her ear.

Some days such words put a smile on her face, though it was a shallow joy that never lasted. In her heart she believed that any of those 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 good-bye, 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. It's not that she loved her family any less than before. Often in her little inn, she was lonely for them, but found that being with them only made her lonelier. So she increasingly 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 welcome 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. The wall remained an exclusive dwelling place in Jericho, and in spite of the inevitable diminutiveness of the residences and establishments built into it, they 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.

Chapter Two



The first time Rahab heard about Israel, she was entertaining. Sprawled under a carelessly flung linen sheet, she watched through half closed eyes as her lover, Jobab, paced about. His brow was so knotted it reminded her of a walnut shell. She could see he was agitated, but waited with patience until he was ready to speak. Men admired women who kept quiet at the right times. When he finally tired of striding about like a trapped lion, he spoke.

“Rahab, the Hebrews defeated King Sihon and his sons last night. The great king of the Amorites was routed by a band of nomads. Now all of Canaan is in danger.”

“What are you talking about?” she asked, pulling the sheet around her and sitting up. “Sihon can’t be defeated.” Sihon, one of the great kings east of the Jordan River, ruled like an eagle over his kingdom. She had heard men call him undefeatable, his kingdom secure forever.

“He *was* defeated, I tell you. By the Hebrews. Their leader, an old man named Moses, sent a message to Sihon requesting permission to travel the King’s Highway in peace. Sihon not only denied

them passage, but he mustered his army and attacked them at Jahaz. He must have thought it would be an easy victory. However, it didn't take long for the Hebrews to turn the battle." Jobab stopped speaking and stared at nothing in particular as if words had failed him. "They're fierce. They don't even have proper armor. So when Sihon's army started to run—"

Rahab sat up straight. "Sihon's army *ran*?"

"What am I telling you? They were pulverized. And those not killed immediately ran. But the armorless Hebrews ran faster and caught up with them. They even killed some with slings. Sihon's glorious capital, Heshbon, brought down by slings. Who shall sleep safe in their beds after this?"

Rahab's mouth dropped open at his words. To her, as to all who first heard of these events, they seemed outlandish. Impossible. "Who are these Hebrews? I've never heard of them. How do they wield such power?" Her voice sounded shrill in her own ears.

"That's the wonder. They are nobody. A bunch of runaway slaves." Jobab sank down to the floor and slumped against the wall. "Forty years ago they ran away from Egypt, and they've been wandering in the wilderness ever since. They have no cities, no walls, no fields to plant or plow, no vineyards to harvest. Everyone has ignored them."

"What you say makes no sense. How could an army of slaves run away from Egypt? As if a pharaoh would ever allow it. This is an empty rumor." She looked at him, her fears reined in. Crossing her arms, she leaned back against a pillow.

Jobab raised his arms in exasperation. "Rahab, you're just too young to know about it. There was a great revolt in Egypt among the Hebrew slaves, led by this same man, Moses. He claimed his god wanted Pharaoh to free the Hebrews. Pharaoh refused at first, but so many plagues befell the Egyptians at the hands of the Hebrew god that Pharaoh *had* to let them go. Egypt was in ruins. Then, at the last minute, he changed his mind. As the Hebrews were leaving, Pharaoh mobilized his army and pursued them."

“Don’t tell me the slaves brought Pharaoh’s chariots down with their slingshots.” Rahab smirked.

Jobab sighed. “Nothing so ordinary. Their escape route brought them to a dead end against the sea. Behind them came Pharaoh’s invincible army. Before them lay a body of water impossible to cross. They were doomed. And then their god parted the sea.”

Rahab raised an eyebrow. “Come now.”

“He parted the sea, I tell you! Divided it right up the middle. They walked straight through to the other side on dry ground with the water piled up all around them. Then, when Pharaoh and his army tried to follow, the waves came crashing down on top of them. Every single one of them perished.”

Now that Jobab was rehearsing the story, Rahab remembered hearing about the mysterious death of one of the Egyptian Pharaohs and his army. It was when her parents were young. Egypt had not yet recovered its great strength after that loss. What kind of god wielded so much power? If this was all true, who could stand against such a god? She began to understand the scent of fear that clung to Jobab.

Bending, she picked up her shift from the woven rug on the floor and pulled it over her head. “Do you wish to stay the night? I can cook you supper if you want.” Better she focus on her own menial tasks than the workings of kings and gods. What had she, a mere innkeeper, to do with such great events?

But she couldn’t get Jobab’s stories out of her mind. In the morning the soldiers at the gate confirmed what he’d said, at least about the destruction of Sihon. Heshbon had fallen to the Hebrews. Surely that was frightening enough without bringing magical powers into it.



Along with everyone else in Canaan, Rahab soon heard more distressing news about the Hebrews. In the months following the defeat of Sihon they triumphed in other astonishing battles. They

besieged and captured the walled cities of Nophah, Medeba, and Dibon, killing all their inhabitants. With every defeat Canaan grew more petrified. Rumors abounded. The Hebrews were giants. They were numberless. Their weapons were forged of a metal no one could break. They had winged horses. They grew larger than life with every victory.

Rahab disbelieved these exaggerated accounts about the Hebrew people. She recalled Jobab's words as he told her about the destruction of Sihon. They were nobodies. No sophisticated weaponry, no armor, no land, no riches. This was the true picture of the Hebrews, she believed. And yet they were vanquishing town after town, army after army. What was it about these people?

Even Jericho, sophisticated Jericho with her ancient walls and well-trained army, grew pensive. Canaan boasted many walled cities, but none to compare with Rahab's home. The walls of Jericho were a marvel. They were so thick that people built houses and places of business into them. In the land of Canaan, when they wanted to make a point about someone's strength, they said he was built like the walls of Jericho. But even the people of Jericho were unnerved by the astonishing victories of the Hebrews east of the Jordan River.

Sacrifices increased in those months as people sought protection against the threat of this terrifying new enemy. Rahab could smell the burning flesh from the temple fires a league away. The priests grew slack-jawed and grey from lack of sleep. People poured into the temples and high places at such a rate the king finally appointed soldiers to keep order. Rumor had it the temple prostitutes were kept busy day and night. Rahab pitied them. She hoped they were too exhausted to think or feel anymore.

The desperate idolatry of her people did not attract Rahab. The more she saw their faith in practice, the more she reviled it. Not even fear and desperation would drive her into the arms of Asherah, Baal, or Molech.

Her life went on despite the upheavals outside her walls. She left Jobab, and for a long season her inn and her bed were empty. Fewer

people traveled those days for fear of marauding foreigners. She had enough gold saved up that the temporary lack of income didn't worry her. Her father's land could always use an extra pair of hands, and she spent her days in the fields, doing the hard work of farmers. Her skin grew brown and her nails ragged. *Not good for my trade*, she thought, examining their rough edges one afternoon under the hot sun. The realization made her smile. Though she would eagerly have chosen this at fifteen, she knew she couldn't earn a living off manual labor. The life of a farmhand was short and far from sweet, and she hadn't the strength.

One evening she received an invitation to a feast thrown by a distant cousin of the king. Through the years, she had become a favored guest at receptions given by influential men who desired sophisticated entertainment away from their wives. She went to the feast knowing she could not afford by her continued absence to be forgotten among such wealthy circles.

Rahab chose a dress in flowing cream silk edged in silver embroidery. Her clothing never marked her as a harlot. She dressed as any fashionable lady in Canaan might, leaning toward simplicity rather than high style. She found that the curves of a woman's body, when displayed with clever modesty, provided far more drama than any outrageous garment might. Unlike current fashion, which demanded that women curl their hair into elaborate tiny tendrils on top of their heads, Rahab preferred to leave her hair loose down her back. She wore long dangled earrings and matching armbands on her bare arms. She did not intend to stay long, but merely to make an impression.

"Rahab!" her host exclaimed as he spotted her walking in, his long face wreathed in a smile.

She removed his hand from her hip and made a graceful curtsy. "Your servant."

"I wish you were."

She smiled into his eyes. "Your villa sparkles this evening, my lord."

“Now that you are here, it certainly does.”

She laughed. “The dangerous royal charm.” Any distant cousin of the king liked being referred to as *royal*, she knew. The royal hand was snaking too close to Rahab’s lower back and she stepped quickly away, bumping into a hard body. Turning around, she exclaimed, “Your pardon.”

She knew the man by sight. He served as a high general in the army—one of Jericho’s leading men of war. What was his name? Debir, she remembered.

“Evasive maneuvers,” he said straight-faced. “I understand.” Small laugh lines crinkled around his eyes. Rahab flushed and turned her head for a quick look. Her host had moved to another conversation.

“A friendly skirmish,” she replied.

He grinned. “I am Debir.”

“I know. Your reputation precedes you, my lord. I am Rahab.”

“I know. Your reputation also precedes you.”

She inclined her head. “I suppose it makes for entertaining conversation.”

“Alas, I find I do not enjoy empty chatter.”

“Nor do I. I prefer intelligent conversation, but there is not much of it in my profession.”

“Nor in mine.” They both laughed. A mutual understanding bordering on respect sprung between them that night. Within the first hours of his acquaintance, Rahab decided to accept Debir as her lover.

For his part, he was delighted to become her companion. Rahab knew that he came to her not out of lust or sentimental affection, but out of a simple desire to be relieved of responsibility for a few hours. Even a steady man like Debir needed a place where he wasn’t continuously pestered for decisions and judgments and wisdom. Everywhere Debir walked, he shouldered the weight of endless expectations. His three wives and numerous children relied on his guidance as heavily as his troops in the king’s army. So Debir came to Rahab simply to be.

Unlike her other lovers, he appreciated Rahab's wit and enjoyed conversing with her. As a result he would often speak to her about matters of state, something the average man of Jericho considered above a woman's comprehension. He never shared state secrets. There was too much soldier in him for that. But he would talk to her about the wars that raged around them, and of the change that was settling over Canaan.

"It seems the Hebrews have besieged Og," he told her one night, the planes of his face smooth and curiously expressionless as if he hadn't just proclaimed the most devastating news to reach Canaan in a hundred years.

Rahab gasped. Og, the king of Bashan, was reputed to be a giant both in stature and in ability. His iron bed was considered one of the wonders of the world, so wide and long it was. No Canaanite could imagine anyone having the temerity to march against Bashan. "Now they'll *certainly* be destroyed," she said.

Debir raised an eyebrow, but said nothing.

"You don't agree?"

"Let's say I don't think it's a foregone conclusion."

"You don't think Og can beat them? You think they can overrun the city of Edrei?"

"Edrei is a different matter. It's protected by a gorge on the one side and a mountain on the other. Nestled right into the side of it. Militarily speaking, Edrei is impenetrable. I can't see how even Moses and his magician warriors could get in."

"So? Isn't that where Og is?"

"For now, yes. He's settled in, and all he has to do is sit tight and wait the Hebrews out. It will be a long and grueling siege, and the Hebrews can't afford to loaf about and do nothing for that long. They'll need food, water, and fresh grazing land for their cattle. Eventually, they'll have to give up and leave."

Rahab frowned. "I thought you feared Og might lose. Now you're telling me he doesn't even have to fight to win."

Debir walked over to the window and gazed out at the plains and

hills leading to the Jordan. His smile didn't reach his eyes as he turned back to face her. "It's mighty hard on a king's pride to hide rather than fight. He may not lose, but he also doesn't win. Og is a warrior, and he has enough pride to match the size of his shanks. It will take a great deal of sense to keep him sheltered in Edrei."

"And you think he has more pride than sense?"

"Let's just wait and see."



Og chose to march. Like the proud fool he was, he took his whole army out to meet the Hebrews in battle. One soldier survived long enough to tell the story, and a passing merchant brought it to Jericho. Edrei had been attacked by swarms of hornets. The city was thick with them. They drove the horses wild, and there was no escape. Their stings were so bad they killed the very young and old. Even their strong men howled with pain and cursed with vexation. Og could not bear it. To be imprisoned in your own kingdom by an inferior enemy was bad enough, but the added indignation of being stung by hornets was too much for him. Was he a slave that he should cower in his own domain, hiding from mere vagabonds? So he marched out together with his sons and his army to engage the Hebrews.

And the Hebrews killed every single one of them and took possession of their land.

"It won't be long now before Moses sets his eyes on Jericho," Debir said after telling Rahab the story of Bashan's defeat. He was lying on his back, staring at the ceiling. "We are the first great city west of the Jordan, and if he understands anything about warfare, he'll make us their next target."

Her mouth turned dry at this pronouncement. "Well, for pity's sake, don't open the gates and rush out to meet them if they come. We'll be safe inside our walls."

With his thumb and middle finger, he flicked a fly that had set-

tled close to him. He had faultless aim. The fly pitched over in death. Turning toward Rahab, he said, "They crossed the Red Sea, you know. When they ran away from the Pharaoh. The sea parted for them and collapsed over the Egyptian army."

Rahab flopped down on a feather-filled cushion and leaned back against a scarlet trimmed tapestry. "Don't tell me you believe in that nonsense?"

Debir looked at her from beneath bushy brows. "I do believe it. I have believed it for almost forty years since I first heard about it. Their god is mighty beyond our experience."

Her smile was tinged with sarcasm. "Another bloodthirsty god. Excellent. Just what Canaan needs."

He shook his head, his eyes sparkling with amusement. "You have the strangest notions, Rahab. It's a wonder the gods don't strike you down."

"I leave them alone and they return the favor. Why do you believe this nonsense about the sea parting and the Pharaoh drowning, Debir? It's not like you to credit rumors."

"It's no rumor."

"You saw this with your own eyes?"

Debir ran a hand through his hair. "No. But I saw it through the eyes of someone who *did* see it firsthand. One of the Hebrews."

Rahab bolted upright. "You know one of them?"

"Forty years ago I did." Debir rose from the mattress and came to sit near her. "I met him just before my military training. If I hadn't been so young, I would have recognized him for the spy he was. At the time though, I believed him to be a merchant like he told me. He saw me at the gate and gave me a week's wages to give him a tour of the city."

Her eyes widened. "Why didn't they attack us back then? Why wait forty years before starting their campaign?"

"I don't know. This Moses must be getting on in years. He was their leader back then too."

"Maybe he'll die before they come against Jericho."

“I have a feeling even that wouldn’t stop them. The man I told you about, he said their real leader is their god. It was this god who sent Moses into Egypt to free them from slavery. He told Moses He had seen the affliction and misery of His people and was concerned about their suffering. He wanted them released from Pharaoh’s yoke.”

Rahab frowned, her mind racing. Words like *concern* were not in the gods’ vocabulary. Yet if Debir was correct, here was a god who had compassion on human suffering. The thought of a god of compassion did something to her heart. A longing came upon her that almost brought her to tears. A longing for someone to look upon her suffering and care enough to rescue her.

With ruthless precision, she squelched the traitorous desire. “Well, he wasn’t very compassionate to the Egyptians if he drowned the lot of them. Is it only the Hebrews he cares about? Didn’t he consider the weeping wives and mothers back in Egypt?”

Debir lifted a fat curl lying on her shoulder and pulled it softly. “I wouldn’t have shown the Egyptians any compassion if they had treated *my* people as they did the Hebrews. Incredibly, the Hebrew god gave the Egyptians plenty of opportunities to release his people without bloodshed. He gave them warning upon warning. But their pride was too great. They wouldn’t bend to his will. If they hadn’t chased after the Hebrews, they wouldn’t have drowned.”

Rahab pulled her hair free from his hold. “What else did this man tell you about their god?”

Debir shrugged. “He sounds very odd. He allows no statues to be built of him so you can’t see or touch him. He claims to be the One True God, at once everywhere and over everything. It would be laughable if it weren’t for the power he seems to display.”

“A god you can’t see? What would be the point? How are you supposed to believe in what your senses tell you isn’t even there?”

“I don’t know, but the Hebrew spy told me he did not find this an impediment. He claimed there were other ways to experience god apart from images.”

Rahab leaned on her elbows and pinned Debir with a steady gaze. “Such as?”

“I didn’t become a follower, Rahab. I’m no expert at this. I can tell you he is ridiculously strict. For example—and you’ll find this interesting—he forbids prostitution even as part of worship. One of the places I took the Hebrew was a temple. He covered his eyes when he saw the prostitutes mating with the worshipers and told me that according to Hebrew Law, they would have been stoned.”

“*Stoned?*”

“You would make a very bad Hebrew, eh, Rahab? Or a very dead one.”

She swallowed. There was a flagon of wine sitting next to her and she poured some into an ornate silver cup for herself, forgetting to offer any to Debir. It tasted like dust.