

# CHAPTER 1

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## **Jericho, summer of 3789 (29 AD)**

Mara takes a deep breath as she escapes through the open door and slips out into the courtyard. She feels somewhat guilty, but she cannot help herself. She simply has to escape from her sister Rachel's marriage feast.

The loud, rhythmic bursts of music and the strident voices of the wedding guests seem to be in competition with each other. And the air inside, already unbearably hot, has become thick and stuffy from the smoke of the oil lamps. If only Rachel's marriage could have been celebrated in Jerusalem instead of down here in Jericho! Up in the hills, there might at least have been a breeze.

In the light of a nearly full moon, Mara looks out across the flat, arid landscape skirting the western side of Jericho to the rocky hills where the road back to Jerusalem awaits her. She is eager to escape Jericho's stifling heat, but not at all eager to leave Rachel behind. Mara can hardly imagine her life back in Jerusalem without Rachel's peaceful smile and helping hands. From now on there will be no one to deflect their mother's ceaseless demands for help. Only Mara will be at hand—Mara,

who would far rather be reading and discussing the Torah with her father than doing housework.

If only she were a boy. Then her interest in the holy books would be encouraged and respected. As a girl, all that lies ahead for her is marriage to someone she may not even like—and then children who will take up every moment of her time that is not spent keeping house.

At least Mara can be thankful that today is Rachel's wedding day and not her own. But sixteen-year-old Rachel, only two years older than Mara, is marrying later than many girls do. How long can Mara hope to postpone her own wedding? It astounds her that Rachel seems so contented with her lot. It must be because she actually cares for Matthias. For that she may have their father to thank. He had been exceptionally kind in turning down two reasonable marriage proposals for Rachel before accepting the one from Matthias. Few brides are so fortunate. Mara wonders whether he will be as patient with her.

Her musing ends abruptly when a tall robed figure emerges from the house. It is her father, Eleazar. His craggy, bearded face looks almost forbidding in the moonlight until he is close enough for Mara to catch sight of his kindly eyes.

“So, Mara, what brings you out here?” he asks. “Your mother and sister are worried about you. I, of course, know you better.” And he grins at her—rather boyishly, she thinks, for a man of such dignity.

“I do not see how people can bear it in there,” Mara replies. “It is far too hot and stuffy for *me*. Besides, this whole day has given me a great deal to think about.”

“So, what has been the object of your thoughts, dear Daughter?”

“I was just wishing I were a boy,” she confesses. Then, looking up into her father's eyes, she asks, “You have always wanted a son, haven't you? And HaShem gave you only Rachel and me.”

“Make no mistake, Mara. I would not exchange either of you—not even for a son.”

“I know that, Abba,” she assures him, “but I also know that Ima will need my help now more than ever. When will I have even a moment for our Torah studies?”

“Ah, so then you would really miss them?”

“Oh, Abba, you *know* that!” she shoots back in exasperation.

“I always thought you were just looking for a good reason to stay away from the kitchen.”

Mara glances up at him in disbelief. Yes, there is just a hint of a smile. “That is certainly what Ima thinks,” she says. “Besides, she is convinced that Torah study is suitable only for men and boys.”

“And many women would agree with her,” Eleazar observes.

“But what do *you* think, Abba?” asks Mara, gazing expectantly into his eyes.

“Well, Mara, I must confess that ten or fifteen years ago I would have agreed with her, too,” her father admits. “But then a small miracle happened under my own roof. I knew from the day of your birth that I would probably never have a son—that your mother could bear me no more children. To me it meant that the holy books to which I had devoted my life were never to be shared with a child of my own. It saddened me, but I was resigned to it. Till one day ...”

“Was it the day you read me the story of how the waters

parted and Moses led the children of Israel across the Red Sea?” Mara asks.

“It was,” Eleazar replies. “And then you wanted to hear more stories from the Torah and from the histories of the kings. Soon you were able to read them yourself, so we spent more and more of our time discussing them ... just as I would have with a son.”

“Yes, I have always loved those stories about our people,” Mara reflects, “but since last year I have also come to love the *laws* HaShem has given us. Think how lost we would be without them in a world ruled by these Romans with their graven images!”

“Very true. So you would like to learn more?” There, once again, is that whisper of a grin.

“As if you were not aware of that!” Mara retorts. “But what about Ima and all the work that Rachel will not be able to do for her anymore?”

“I suppose your mother and I will just have to reach an agreement,” he replies. “I will permit you to be a daughter to her so long as she permits you to be a ‘son’ to me. It seems only reasonable.”

He puts an arm around her shoulders and shepherds her back toward the door she had escaped through only minutes before. The room is still hot and stuffy and noisy, but somehow it no longer feels like a prison.