

CHAPTER 1



...and the daughter of Caleb was Achsah.

— 1 CHRONICLES 2.49

“*I*’m a *prize*? What do you mean I’m a *prize*?” Achsah’s throat burned as she fought to keep the tears from spilling. How had this day turned upside down so quickly? The sky closed in on her as she stood on the open roof of her home. She struggled to breathe, couldn’t pull in enough air.

Her *abba* folded his arms across his broad chest and clenched his jaw. “You are my only daughter. I intend to see you are protected. And since you can’t seem to make this decision yourself, I felt I had to step in.”

“My *imma* never would have allowed this.”

Pain clouded his eyes. “Your *imma* would have seen you married by now. Perhaps I have been too indulgent.”

“How do you know ...? But what if ...?” Thoughts swirled, too many and too fast for her to complete one. “*Abba*, why?”

He uncrossed his arms. “Achsah, you know I love you dearly, more than life itself. I have talked to Yahweh about this. I have talked to Leah....”

Acsah's gaze shot to the woman standing next to him. Why would her aunt betray her like this? "You agree with him? How could you?"

Leah neared. "Because I love you like a daughter. This way, Yahweh Himself will choose your husband. And he will be brave, strong, a true warrior." She stretched out her hand, but Acsah backed away.

"I don't *want* a warrior! That's the last thing I want!" Her traitorous hot tears finally had their way, coursing down her cheeks. She raced from the roof, down the stairs, and through the house. Outside, she ran past the wide gates of Hebron and into the countryside beyond. Was there no way out of this deal her abba had made for her?

Breaking into a sweat, she passed Abba's golden wheat fields and sprinted up the rise leading to the enormous threshing floor beyond. Reaching the flat, packed ground at the apex of the hill, she stopped, chest heaving. She bent at the waist, her hands on her knees until she caught her breath, then collapsed on the hard ground.

What kind of old, scarred monster would she end up with? How ugly would he be? Would he be cruel? Demanding? She buried her head in her arms on her knees, sobbing until her tears were spent.

Drying her wet cheeks on her headcloth, she scanned the verdant hills of Hebron, resplendent with the fragrant flowers of early summer. The fertile land mocked the emptiness in her heart.

She surveyed the abundant grain waving in the seemingly endless fields. Being the daughter of Israel's mightiest warrior Caleb may have locked her into a marriage she did not want, but it also brought her innumerable advantages. She rose and adjusted her clothing. The time for despair had passed. There was work to be done. People depended on her.

She strode back to her house and filled a small bag with grain. As she walked along along the main road that fronted the outside circle of houses, she tucked the pouch into her sash. She crossed one of the many smaller streets leading from the ring road into the center of the city. Judith's house sat on the corner.

Acsah opened the courtyard gate and let herself in. "Judith? I've come to help with the bread."

Three older women sat in the common room of their modest home near a small oven. Each sat before a large, flat-topped, stationary stone

called a quern, with a smaller handstone they moved back and forth over the grain to turn it into flour. “We were beginning to think we wouldn’t see you today,” said Judith.

“I’m so sorry. Just a talk with my abba. Nothing to worry about.” She joined their circle, sitting before an empty quern.

“How is Caleb? Such a good man.” Naomi patted her arm.

Acsah ignored the comment. She removed a handful of wheat from the bowl in their midst and began crushing the kernels. As flour was produced, she added it to another container and then began again.

Their chatter drowned out the scratching, crunching sounds of turning wheat berries to flour, and the flour into bread. Hours had gone by before the task was accomplished.

“I’ll take the bowls back for you. You rest for now. If you’ll pass me that, Miriam?”

Acsah balanced the bowl the widow handed her on top of the first one, leaving the stack of flat, round loaves that would feed the women for the rest of the day. She carried them to the storage room at the back of the house and set them on the table. Before she left, she emptied the contents of the small bag of grain she’d brought into the widows’ larger jar to replenish what they had just ground, and returned with a small bowl of dates and raisins.

“Time for me to go, *savtot*. I’ll be back tomorrow.” They weren’t truly her grandmothers, but since she had none by blood, and they had no relatives nearby, they all enjoyed the special relationship Acsah nurtured among them.

On the way home, she thought more about Abba’s pronouncement. She simply had to persuade him to change his mind. As soon as the idea formed, she knew it would never happen. She’d never known him to change course. He made decisions slowly, deliberately, after examining all the facts. After much counsel and prayer. Then he did everything possible to see his decision was carried out.

The epitome of a warrior. A commander.

She had no more chance of avoiding this marriage than the walls of Jericho had against Joshua seven years ago.



Othniel's head was so full of competing thoughts he barely noticed the lush green fields he walked through. The road from Hebron to Bethlehem was usually calming and enjoyable, but so far he'd missed most of it.

Caleb's report after his scouting mission to the nearby city of Kiriath-Sepher echoed—especially that one unbelievable statement: “I offer my daughter Acsah as a bride.”

Uncle Caleb was wealthy. He had land and silver. He had influence. He could offer anything, make anyone's life easier, better. He could set a man up for life. Why in the world would he offer his only daughter?

Not that Othniel objected. To the contrary. He would do almost anything to make her his. His heart beat faster at the idea. He thought back to their life on the other side of the Jordan River, back to when they'd been children. Acsah had been not only his cousin, but also his best friend. Days of chasing rabbits and building fortresses blended into picking berries and sitting under trees, dreaming of what life would be like in Canaan.

Then they crossed the River. Her tenth summer, his fifteenth. After that, things got complicated.

He hadn't seen her in four years. What did she look like now? Surely she'd grown even more beautiful. She was a woman now—more than of age. Why hadn't she married yet?

Why hadn't he?

Because every woman he'd thought about marrying, he'd compared to her. And none of them measured up. None had her flashing eyes. Her pink cheeks. Her wavy, dark brown hair, which was so dark it was almost black....

That would all be over as soon as he conquered Kiriath-Sepher.

But first, he needed to talk to Salmah. Salmah had been with Caleb nearly every day of the wars until they came home. He hadn't run like Othni had. He'd had no need to.

Would Caleb even talk to Othni now?

Winning Acsah's hand was the only thing in this world that would make him risk disappointing Caleb again.



Acsah paced in the courtyard in front of their home, the sweet fragrance of pomegranate blossoms drifting on the air. Bright red flowers, the shape of ram's-horn trumpets, dotted the trees. The colors and scents, which normally invigorated her, crowded her space.

Maybe she could talk to Aunt Leah first, enlist her help in persuading Abba to change his mind. Acsah moved to the side of the house where Leah and Uncle Jonah's rooms were attached. She peeked through the door into their central room, but Leah wasn't there.

After rehearsing a number of things she might say to attempt to change Abba's mind, Acsah finally settled on two or three. She had to try, though it was probably useless. She spun on her heel and returned to the wide, open room that occupied the right two-thirds of the lower floor of their home. The stone pillars that held up the roof loomed larger than usual this morning.

She leaned over the low stone barrier to her left and rested her head on Donkey's nose, rubbing his neck for a long moment. "You don't have to worry about getting married, do you?" She scooped out some grain from the feedbag in the corner and held it out to him. His lips tickled her palm as he nuzzled her hand. "Not that you could have any babies if you did." Too bad her life couldn't be so simple.

Acsah headed for the stone stairs in front of the storage room that ran across the back of the house. Reaching the top, she inhaled a deep breath. If only she could suck in courage as easily as air. Maybe she could duck into one of the two sleeping rooms that took up the back part of the roof.

No, she might as well face him now.

Abba and Aunt Leah sat on a round leather mat, and Acsah lowered herself to the floor next to him. "Abba, may I talk with you about what you said this morning?"

"Yes, *motek*." He grinned. "But I won't change my mind." He could call her *my sweet*, but underneath his smile, his will was as hard and sharp as the bronze in his sword.

She glanced at Leah, then back to her father. "Why must I marry a soldier? Can't I marry someone else? Maybe one of the others?"

“You’ve already turned down five men.” He frowned at her and held up a hand, fingers spread wide. “Five.”

She squirmed. “I know, but...”

Aunt Leah touched her arm. “Tell me what was wrong with them. Why did you always say no?”

Acsah shrugged. “I don’t know. Baruch was too old. Aviel wanted to move to Lachish. So far away—I’d never see you. Gershom ... Gershom ... he ...” She sighed deeply. “But Abba, I can’t marry *anyone*.”

“Why ever not?” He widened his dark eyes, his bushy brows disappearing under his crop of gray hair.

“Because ... because ...” She chewed on her bottom lip.

“Why?” His voice was firm, his eyes narrowed.

This was not how the conversation was supposed to go. She folded her hands in front of her, squeezed them together until her fingers ached. “Because then you will be alone. And no one should be alone.” She pulled her knees to her chest and dropped her head onto her arms.

Her father’s strong hand rested on her head. He waited, smoothing her hair until she stilled. “Acsah?” His gentle voice soothed her raging nerves.

She raised her face to his, drew in a shuddering breath.

“Why are you afraid to leave? What do you think will happen?”

“I- I don’t know. I just know I can’t.”

He reached for her and took one of her hands between his rough ones. “But motek, you must. It is the way things have always been, the way Yahweh intended. Daughters grow up and leave to marry. I assure you, I will be fine.”

He didn’t understand. How could he? He hadn’t been there that day. A thought occurred to her, and she tilted her head. “Why did you never marry again?”

He shrugged. “At the time, I only wanted to care for you. And there were wars to be fought, and then time went by, and here we are.” He aimed his penetrating gaze at her. “Would you feel better if I were married? If I had someone here with me?”

It would.

But it didn’t change the fact that she would never wed a warrior.



Othniel winced. Rahab had worked hard to prepare an abundance of delicious-looking food, and he couldn't remember having tasted any of it. Had he even spoken to her, or to Salmah, during the entire meal? He put on a smile and swallowed the last of his bread, then drained his drinking bowl.

Rahab reached to fill it again then set the pitcher on the mat spread in the courtyard of their Bethlehem home. She scooped a toddler off Salmah's lap, set him on the brushed dirt floor, and stood. "Come, Simeon. Let's let Abba talk to his friend."

Instead Simeon settled onto Othniel's lap and tugged on his beard. "You are Abba's friend?"

"He is a very good friend."

"Then why have I only seen you a few times?"

Rahab gasped. "Simeon!"

Othniel chuckled, dislodging the child's fat fingers. "I have been fighting in other places."

"My friends don't go far away." Simeon frowned.

"Your friends are little boys, not soldiers."

"Oh." The boy shrugged and clambered off Othniel's lap.

"Simeon, we are going inside. Now." Rahab shook her head and picked him up.

"He doesn't live up to his name very well, does he? He who hears and obeys?" Othniel laughed as Rahab carried the four-year-old inside.

"We keep hoping he'll grow into it. The *hearing* part he gets. It's the *obeying* part he still needs to work on." Salmah's hearty laugh rumbled deep in his chest. "Just wait—you'll see someday. Anyone you have your eye on?"

"That's why I'm here."

Salmah leaned forward, grinning. "What can I do? I have no daughters for you. Only one tiny, disobedient son."

"You know Caleb is planning to attack Kiriath-Sepher."

Salmah picked a ripe fig from the bowl and peeled it. "It's one of the only cities left."

“He wants help.”

“No surprise. He was injured so badly, I’m amazed he wants to take part at all.”

Othniel winced at the mention of Caleb’s injury, then shoved it from his mind. “Amazed?”

“I guess not. I’d be more shocked if he were willing to stay behind.”

“He’s looking for a commander. He’s offered an ... incentive.”

The older man raised a brow. “Silver?”

“No. He has offered Acsah as a bride to whomever conquers the city.”

Salmah let out a low whistle.

“He did what?” Rahab’s sharp voice came from the doorway. She’d been listening?

Othniel spoke over his shoulder, repeating what he’d told her husband. “I’m not sure why he would do that.”

Rahab returned and sat next to Salmah. She rested her chin on her hand and pursed her lips, but said nothing. Next to Salmah’s husky build, her tall, slender frame was even more striking.

“Well?” Salmah eyed his wife.

“I know she has refused others.”

“You’ve talked to her about that?” Othniel knew Rahab and Acsah had been close when the Canaanite woman first came from Jericho years ago. Before she’d married Salmah, she’d lived with Caleb’s family. But they’d stayed that close? Then again, he’d been up north, so how he would he know?

“I see her often. She’s found no one she wishes to marry, although I saw nothing wrong with any of the young men.” She drew circles in the dirt. “I’m not really sure what she’s looking for. I’m not surprised Caleb finally stepped in. She’s nearing an age when most men would no longer consider her.”

“She’s not as old as you were when I married you.” Salmah winked at his wife.

She grinned. “Yes, but you’re smarter than most men.” She turned to Othniel. “You still find her desirable?”

He nodded. “And beautiful.” Her face drifted though his mind. “Salmah, will you help me plan an attack on Kiriath-Sepher? You went

with him the first time, so you must know everything I need to know, yes?”

Salmah nodded.

“I *must* take this city. Many heard Caleb’s offer. Groups of men huddled up right away, starting on their plans. They have Caleb’s ear.” He didn’t need to expound on Caleb’s opinion of him. “I need all the help you can give me. I love her. I always have.”

Salmah searched his face. “I’ll help you. And I’ll go with you.”

Othniel’s gaze darted to Rahab. Her eyes closed for a moment, perhaps contemplating yet another battle for her husband. She opened them and smiled at Othniel. “You will both be in my prayers, and in Yahweh’s hands.” She returned to her son.

Othniel watched her leave. “Her faith is amazing. Especially considering she’s a Canaanite.”

“I think that’s why it’s so strong. She had to trust Him for her very life, before she even knew Him.” Salmah played with the seed from the fig. “Here’s what I learned about Kiriath-Sepher. For the Canaanites, it’s a royal city. Bigger, and more important than Hebron was, at least to them. The walls are higher and thicker than Hebron’s, and about as high as four or five men. They’re made of enormous stones, perfectly shaped to fit together without mortar of any kind. There is an earthen revetment outside the walls, going up about two-thirds of the wall and not quite as wide. There are many towers, and there are gates on all four sides.”

Othniel blew out a long breath. “A direct attack would never work.”

“I think the only way is by a protracted siege or by trickery.”

“Like Joshua took Ai? Or Bethel?”

“Not Bethel.” Salmah waved away the suggestion. “We’ll certainly never find a traitor there.”

He nodded. “True. Which leaves a siege or a ruse.”

“Or someone, somehow, getting in and opening the gates.”

Othniel frowned. “If the giants built the walls and the gates, wouldn’t the locks be much too high for one of us to open?”

“Also true. So that’s probably not our best option.”

Othniel reached for a date. He ripped it in two and removed the stone, then put one half in his mouth. The fair-complexioned giants

of Hebron invaded his memory. Twice as tall as Othniel, thighs as wide as his body. Joshua's armies had expelled them once, nearly six years ago after Israel first conquered Jericho. But as Joshua and his men moved on, the *Anakim* moved back in, and Caleb was forced to defeat them again in order to claim the city Moses had promised him.

"Let's see." Othniel tore the other piece in half again. And again. "A siege will deplete our resources as much as theirs, maybe more. But if we attack and then fake a surrender, we can send in a good number of men, perhaps with gifts, hide more men—armed men in baskets. It's been done before."

Salmah shrugged. "It has. And if we hadn't been at war with every other city around here, and if they weren't giants, that might work. But I think it's far too risky here."

"What if we attack, then retreat and draw them out ..."

"That might work better. Or we could trap them between two forces."

He nodded. "We have to see how many of them there are. They can defend the city with very few as long as they're inside. Once we draw them out, we have the advantage."

Salmah grasped his shoulder. "You might make a good commander yet."

If Othniel wanted to win Acsah, he would have to make certain Caleb finally could see that as well.



Othniel had left Salmah's house as soon as the sun peeked over the eastern mountains in order to make the long walk back to Hebron before the evening meal. A hearty meal, a good night's sleep, and perhaps he'd have a decent chance to impress his uncle.

The next day, the would-be commanders gathered in Caleb's massive courtyard to present their plans one by one. Othniel watched as man after man was sent away after failing to meet Caleb's expectations.

One young man—barely a man—flailed his arms like a baby bird

trying to fly the first time. “But it worked before. We march around once a day for six days—”

Othniel did his best to suppress a laugh. He glanced around and noticed several others hiding chuckles as well.

“We are not doing as we did at Jericho.” Caleb’s face reddened, his hands splayed at his sides. “Go.” Eyes closed, he growled the word.

The young man slunk out through the courtyard.

An older, chubby man advanced. “If we gather men from all of Judah, we can attack them with full force. With Yahweh’s help this will work. We can use battering rams—”

“Battering rams will never be successful,” Caleb said, “against the stones in Kiriath-Sepher’s walls.”

The man looked baffled.

Caleb hadn’t revealed much about Kiriath-Sepher in his speech to Hebron’s men, but he undoubtedly would have told anyone who’d asked anything they wanted to know. That would be just like him, to see who would gather the information they needed before formulating a strategy.

The mighty warrior took a deep breath. “The stones in those walls are as wide as the height of two men. They are far too heavy to be dislodged by a battering ram.”

“But we have Yahweh—”

“And we must also use common sense.” Caleb pounded a fist into his palm. “Yahweh’s power is not an excuse to be foolish. Next.”

The portly man left, and a tall man Othniel had seen talking to Caleb the day he made the announcement—obviously a favorite—sauntered over. Othniel’s chest burned. What made that man so special? He was tall, sure, but not that good-looking, at least not to Othniel. Hair too straight. Nose too big. Laughed too loud.

Caleb’s weathered face brightened. “Enosh. What is your plan? I’m sure you have thought it out well.”

Enosh puffed out his chest. “I suggest a siege. It’s the only reasonable option. We cut off their water supply. They get all their water from the two wells nearby—one north of the city and one south. Without water, they cannot survive.”

“Won’t they have supplies in the city? Water? Food?” Caleb arched

a brow, accentuating the scar that ran from above his right eye to the corner of his lip.

“Cisterns full of water, I’m sure. But how long can that last?”

“Wait over there.” Caleb pointed his chin toward the largest pomegranate tree in the courtyard.

Enosh’s smirk as he passed fanned the fire in Othniel’s chest. Why was he so cocky? Did he know something the others didn’t? He was the first Caleb had asked to wait, so maybe he did possess some secret information.

“Othniel.”

Snapping to attention, Othniel turned to the soft but firm voice. “Uncle.”

“I’m surprised to see you here. A little young, aren’t you?”

He fought a sigh. “I fought in Hebron, Gibeon—”

“That didn’t work out so well, did it?”

Othniel clenched his jaw. “I’ve fought for Benjamin the last four years, in Mizpah, Ramah, Beeroth, more. Did you speak to the commanders there?”

Caleb tilted his head. Was that a smile? Surely not. “What’s your plan?”

Othniel repeated everything he had discussed with Salmah.

After an almost imperceptible nod, Caleb gestured toward the tree. “All right, wait with Enosh.”

Caleb dispatched the last two men quickly. His limp was slight as he joined the pair in his courtyard. “You two have the best plans. I shall need to consider them further.”

Movement inside the house drew Othniel’s vision.

Acsah. His heart beat faster, and heat crawled up his neck. How beautiful she was—full lips, cheekbones set high against her dark eyes, a touch of pink on her cheeks. He hadn’t seen her since ... when? Since before they left Gilgal to defend Gibeon.

She accepted a platter from a young girl, probably a servant, and stepped into the courtyard with bread and cheese and a pitcher of juice. Locks of her long hair slipped out from under her scarf, and she tossed her head to get it out of her face. She neared them and set the food on a pedestal.

Caleb beamed at her. “Thank you, motek.”

“Would you like anything else, Abba?”

“No, thank you.”

“Thank you, Acsah. How very thoughtful of you.” Enosh touched her arm and grinned.

Othniel tensed, his teeth grinding together.

Not that he had any more right to her than Enosh. In fact, Enosh probably deserved her more. He lived here in Hebron, likely saw her every day, knew her.

But he hadn’t loved her his whole life, like Othniel had. Spent the last four years trying to earn the right to ask Caleb’s permission to marry her.

Acsah smiled weakly at Enosh, glanced briefly at Othniel, and retreated. She didn’t recognize him—at least she didn’t appear to. He’d grown a cubit or two, added a good bit of muscle and a beard. He was no longer a boy.

“Anything else either of you’d like to say?”

Neither Enosh or Othniel spoke.

“I’ll have my decision tomorrow morning. We’ll leave the next day.” He turned toward his house and Enosh strutted from the courtyard, as if he had the command in hand already.

Othniel snatched a piece of bread and trudged toward the street.

Caleb’s voice stopped him on his way out. “Othniel, may I speak with you a moment?”

“Yes, Uncle.” He ripped the food into pieces as he stared south toward Kiriath-Sepher.

In the morning Caleb would decide who would lead the attack on the Canaanite city—which in turn would decide who would marry Acsah.

For Caleb, an important decision, of course.

For Othniel, nothing less than his entire future was at stake.