



PROLOGUE

IN THE NIGHT

This story begins in the night. There will be a dawn, I promise. I will also tell of mornings when I didn't want to wake and noons full of harsh light and judgment. Sometimes there will be shade and ease in the afternoons, camaraderie and rest, even pleasure.

There will be passion, I promise. Morning, noon, and night, season after season. Passion that breaks time open wide so that you can taste the mystery inside.

This story begins in the night. It begins in the middle of the story. In the middle of the night. When the thief comes, when the bridegroom comes. When the bride has long since given up hope. When the foolish virgins are snoring. When only a whore is awake.

The last stranger has gone home. That's what we call the men who seek the priestess-whores at Temple of Isis Magdala—Temple Magdalen for short a.k.a. the hottest holy whorehouse in the Galilee. Magdala is the place for nightlife on Lake Gennesaret, The Lake of the Harp, as it's called because of its shape. Many of the towns along the shore are fishing towns, but Magdala, sitting pretty under the cliffs of Mount Arbel, is right between two opposing worlds—the swanky new Roman spa city Tiberias and Capernaum, a Jewish stronghold. Romans come to Magdala to slum; Jews come to get out from under the noses of upright neighbors. Native gentiles from the region of the Gerasenes across the lake find their way here, too. Magdala is the place where all the clashing elements in this country of crossroads mix it up. A honky-tonk

town full of juke joints, bars, and street brawls. Where else will you find Roman soldiers and Jewish guerilla fighters gaming together?

At Temple Magdalen, on the outskirts of town, we welcome them all, because we remember what most religions teach but people prefer to forget—the stranger could be a god or an angel.

Now the last stranger is gone for the night. Reginus has barred the gate. We need time to rest in these times of unrest. The priestess-whores are heading for bed. There's a storm rising on the lake. I decide to go to the roof of what I call the tower. I lived so many years inside high narrow walls, I love the roof and sleep there every night I can. It's too wild tonight to stay out, but I will watch for a while. The huge living darkness of the lake moves below me. Mount Arbel has my back. Even through the wind I can just hear the sound of our spring rising and flowing through the Temple towards the lake—the spring that called me to this place so far from the tiny island where I was born.

"Red!" Reginus calls up the stairs. "There's someone at the gate. I told him we were closed for the night, but he won't go away."

"Is he a suppliant?" our other term for the stranger who comes seeking the goddess (even when he thinks he's just looking for a whore).

"No." Reginus climbs the rest of the way up. "He says he has a sick man with him. That's what makes me suspicious. It could be a trick. They might be robbers. It could be even an ambush. It's so dark tonight I can't tell if the thing slung across his donkey is a man or a sack of grain."

"I'll go speak to him," I say.

"*Domina*," says the man at the portal, using the Latin word for lady, but he is no Roman. "I have a sick man. Near death."

The man is a Samaritan, I am guessing by his accent.

"Why do you seek help at Temple Magdalen?" I ask in Aramaic.

"Please, there is nowhere else. I found the man naked and bleeding on the Jerusalem-Jericho road. He'd been beaten and left for dead. What was I to do? I couldn't leave him there. I've been traveling for two days now, but no one will take him in. They don't know who he is—a Jew, a Samaritan, an outlaw, a demoniac? I can't keep caring for him myself. I don't have the skill or the time. I'm just a merchant on my way to Tyre to meet a shipment. I've heard you welcome the stranger here. I've heard there are healers here."

"If it's a trick, it's a trick," I say to Reginus. "We'll have to risk it. What you have heard is true," I say through the portal. "In the name of Isis who welcomes all, I welcome you."

Reginus and I open the gates, and the merchant leads his burdened donkey inside. It is a man and not a sack. That much is clear by the torch in the wall.

"Help me, both of you. The rain hasn't started yet. I want to examine him first by the spring, and wash his wounds there. The water has healing properties," I explain to the Samaritan. "I'll get a lamp while you move him. Carefully."

Even though I am a seasoned healer, I am taken aback by what I see. This man hasn't just been beaten. He's starving. I can count all his ribs. He is covered with sores; his hair is matted and thick with dust. The Samaritan has done his best to bind the man's wounds, but he has bled through the bandages. I kneel down and place the lamp at his head, so I can get a better look at his face.

His face. My heart knows before my eyes; my eyes know before my mind. All I know is I am lost. There are lines here that go on for miles, for years. I am looking at his face, and what I see are his feet, brown as earth, beautiful, lost. I see the sun wheeling out of control, and the stars trying to find him. The moon flinging the ocean after him. And he is lost. No, I am. We are. From each other.

"Maeve, we are lovers," he pleaded on another shore in a terrible dawn after a long night long ago.

"You are lovers," said the old woman, "but not just of each other, you are the lovers of the world."

"We can't love if we're apart," he said.

"We can't love unless we part," I answered him.

I didn't know then what I meant. But now here I am, here we are in this moment, and all the loss is lifting, changing, like leaves turned by the wind before the storm.

"Red, honey," says Reginus. "Why are you crying? What's wrong?"

"Whore's tears," I say. "Cure anything."

I soak them up with the hem of my garment, and begin to wash his wounds.

And my own wounds.

By our wounds we are healed.

Here is the story, of my lost years and what I found, of our found years and what we lost. Stories unfold in time, backwards, forwards, every moment changing the meaning of all the others. This is a passion story—my passion, his, ours, yours. Passion breaks time open.

Come. Taste the mystery.