

Chapter One



SIX YEARS LATER

The Rab was dying. Everyone in the small village of Ziph waited in hushed expectation, anticipating the loss of their most venerated citizen. A large number had gathered in the courtyard of the Rab Shageh's house. Periodically, Ailea of Damascus, the Rab's daughter-in-law, brought news of his condition, which had steadily worsened over the last several days. The rest of the time she spent trying to comfort the other family members, who kept a silent vigil in the corridor outside the dying man's chamber, waiting to be called to his deathbed.

Ailea felt bereft at the thought of losing the Rab, who had been her only friend when she had first been brought to Ziph as a captive bride. Her father-in-law had been a buffer between her and his son, Jonathan, during the first tumultuous months of their marriage. He had taught her about Adonai, the God of Israel, whom she had come to embrace as a result of the Rab's patient teaching of the Torah.

She felt an almost uncontrollable urge to go to the Rab's side. But Jonathan, his only son, deserved these private moments with his father. Ailea knew that Jonathan would call the remainder of

the family to gather around the Rab when the end came. She waited patiently, fighting the urge to wail her grief as loudly as a child. Once in a while she would relate an amusing or touching story about her father-in-law. The others keeping watch seldom commented on her stories, but that wasn't important to Ailea. She just needed to talk about Shageh.

The Rab's daughter, Ruth, who was two years older than Jonathan, sat on a three-legged stool on Ailea's right, wiping an occasional tear from the corners of her eyes. When her father had taken ill, she had come from the nearby village where she lived in order to help. She was not a person of strong emotion or many words, but there was no doubt she was already grieving the loss of her father.

Jerusha, Jonathan and Ailea's young daughter, had certainly not taken after her aunt. She felt all her emotions strongly and was never hesitant to share them with others. Whether angry, happy, frightened, or sad, Jerusha never left any doubt as to how she felt. Now she sat on her brother's lap and sobbed brokenly.

"It isn't time for grandfather to leave us, Micah. He has hardly begun to teach me from the Torah. Oh, how I wish I had gone to the teaching rock with him last week instead of taking the sheep to feed in the hills. Now I may never have another chance to learn from him, and no one else would bother to teach it to a girl," she cried. Micah stroked her hair with his large hand and held her close, not denying her words, which he knew were true.

The Rab was truly a unique and irreplaceable teacher. Micah remembered his grandfather's response when one of the men of the village questioned him about his willingness to teach the girls of the village as well as the boys. "The Law of the Lord brings light into the life of the one who hears it. What man of reason would want his wife or his daughter to remain in darkness?" That had effectively silenced his critic.

No one would have guessed that Jerusha and Micah were siblings. She was delicate and her hair was black as pitch, while he was muscular, with brown hair streaked with golden highlights.

Though he was a dozen years older than his sister, even a casual observer would have noticed their deep affection as Micah comforted Jerusha, and her complete trust in him as she poured out her grief.



Inside the room where the sick man lay propped up on a mountain of pillows to ease his breathing, Jonathan held his father's bony, parchment-like hand and spoke in low, soothing tones. The gentleness he showed the old man was incongruous with his fierce countenance and huge stature. As one of the *Gibborim*, or mighty men of King David, Jonathan ben Shageh had earned his status as one of the greatest warriors of Israel. Though he had recently turned fifty, few men in the kingdom could equal his strength, cunning, or strategic grasp of war.

But at this moment Jonathan was not the feared warrior of Israel's victorious armies. He was the son of the most beloved and respected man in the hill country of southern Judah, and he was remembering the times his father had held him, taught him, gently reproved him, and judiciously praised him. As he remembered, his eyes misted with tears. Soon, he must call the remainder of the family in. The time had come for the Rab, the wise man of Ziph, beloved father and grandfather, to utter his last words and give his final blessings to those he would leave behind. But it was hard, so hard, to let him go.

"I will call the others, Father," Jonathan said softly as he leaned over the old man.

"Just Micah. I must talk to Micah first."

"But Ruth will want to . . ."

"I will say my good-byes to my daughter afterward, but I would see Micah before I grow any weaker. There is . . . much I . . . need to tell him." The Rab's chest wheezed with difficulty, and Jonathan worried that he didn't have enough breath left to talk to his grandson, much less his other loved ones who waited

in the hall. But he reluctantly went to fetch Micah. Few people failed to disregard the wishes of the Rab; certainly not his only son.

“I will be but a moment,” Jonathan promised before slipping from the room. As soon as he opened the door his older sister came to him. She was in her late fifties, but her excellent health had always made her appear much younger than her actual age. Not today. Jonathan noticed the dark circles under her eyes. The lines in her face were prominent. Ruth looked old and haggard. Jonathan heaved a sigh. He supposed he looked old as well. Why were they all so stricken when they had expected this for months now? After all, Shageh was ninety years old!

“He still lives?” Ruth’s eyes held a mixture of hope and anguish. When Jonathan nodded, Ruth started past him to the door of their father’s room. He stayed her with a hand on her shoulder.

“Wait a bit, Ruth dear. He has asked to speak to Micah first.”

“But I’m his daughter,” she wailed in an almost childlike voice.

With a glance down the hallway at the other family members, Jonathan lowered his voice to a whisper. “And he is asking for you, but he has something to say to Micah first. This will be harder on the boy than on any of the rest of us,” he reminded his sister, hoping her love for her nephew would allow her to put his interests first. She did not disappoint him.

“Yes. That is true. Of course, Micah must go in to him first. I will wait. But do you think he might die before . . .” She couldn’t finish the sentence, and Jonathan hastened to reassure her.

“You know the Rab, sister. He has willed himself to live until he has bid us all good-bye. He won’t disappoint us.” He gave her a sad smile, and Ruth returned a wobbly one. Then Jonathan motioned to his son and Micah joined him at the doorway.

“He wants to speak privately with you, but don’t take too long. He is very weak, and the others will be heartbroken if they don’t get their chance to visit him once more.” Micah nodded grimly and closed the door. Crossing the room to his grandfather’s bed, he noticed that the Rab’s eyes were closed. He

leaned over and kissed each of the old man's wrinkled cheeks. "I am here, Grandfather."

Shageh opened his eyes slowly, as if they were very heavy, but managed a smile for his grandson. "Sit," the old man commanded, motioning weakly for Micah to sit on the bed beside him.

"I would give you my blessing, Micah, before I leave this earth. You must not grieve long at my death. I will always be with you, Micah. You will remember the things I have taught you when you are tested. There is much of me in you, as well as much of your father, and you will learn to reconcile the two natures as you grow older." The dying man's voice had grown stronger as he spoke his last words to his grandson, as if he knew how important they were to Micah.

The long fingers of the dying Rab clasped his grandson's with surprising pressure, and Micah grasped at this false hope. "You will get better, Grandfather. It is not time yet for you to leave us. We need you too much."

The old man gazed directly into his grandson's eyes, which were the same clear amber as his own. "No, Micah, you do not need me any longer. You are a man now. You have been a man for several years, and you will be greatly used of Adonai, for you have a heart for him. I want to talk to you about the vow you made to me when you were a lad. You know the one of which I am speaking."

Micah nodded and clasped the old man's hand more tightly. "I vowed I would never strike or harm another person as long as I live."

"It was a good vow you made, in many ways, Micah. But it is not one that is possible to keep for all time in all circumstances, so I release you from it."

Micah's frown revealed his confusion. "Grandfather, I'm not sure I want to be released from my promise. It has served me very well for all these years."

"Micah, you are about to enter a new season in your life, and for that you need to be free of all that would hold you back. I

allowed you to make the vow to me, and not to Adonai, so I could release you from it when the time was right.”

“I remember you stopping my words with your hand over my mouth and telling me that I must never make a vow to Adonai in the heat of the moment, or out of guilt, or pride, or anything else. You said that a man must make vows to the Lord most sparingly, but that you would allow me to vow it to you, and you would hold me accountable to keep it.”

“That is right, Micah. A man should only vow to Adonai to serve only Him, to care for his wife and family, and very little else. Now you are at a crossroads, and need to decide the path your life will take. You must only follow the same path your father has chosen as a warrior if it is the right path for *you*. Speak honestly with Jonathan about your doubts. Never deny what you are, Micah.”

“But that is the problem, Grandfather. I don’t really know what I am—Hebrew or Aramean, warrior or teacher.”

Shageh opened his mouth as if to respond, but his words subsided into a low, rasping wheeze, as though the very breath of life had begun its final journey across his lips. He closed his eyes and rested his head on the pillows.

Alarmed, Micah pleaded with Shageh not to die, but the old man only shook his head weakly and told him to call his Aunt Ruth. As Micah went to summon his aunt, he knew he had spent his last hour with the Rab.

A few minutes later, after her special time with her father, Ruth motioned the entire family into the room. “Come near, Little One,” the old man rasped. His eyes were fastened not on Jerusha but on her mother. “Little One” had always been his pet name for Ailea.

As she leaned close to the dying man, Ailea could not keep the tears from flowing, and the Rab reached up with a shaking hand to brush them away. “Hush, Little One. I am tired, and it is time for me to join my fathers. You are strong and will continue to be. The God of Israel will be with you. Do you remember

your first prayer to him, and how amazed you were when he answered it?"

Ailea smiled through her tears. "I asked him for a friend and he sent me Judith. I remember how anxious I was to tell you about it. I thought it such a wondrous thing. But you weren't surprised at all when I told you."

The Rab's lips curved into a smile. "I am never surprised at the power and lovingkindness of Adonai, Little One. That is why I am happy to go to him. Do not grieve too much. You have given me great joy because you give joy to my son. And you have given me my heritage in Israel, my precious grandchildren. They may struggle, or falter, but be assured. . . ." He gathered his remaining strength. "Their righteousness will shine as the stars. . . ." The Rab's voice trailed off and he became very still.

Jonathan laid his hand over his father's heart, expecting to find it had ceased beating. But though faint, its pulse remained steady. A few minutes later, the old man opened his eyes once more and whispered his granddaughter's name. In her typical, impetuous way, Jerusha climbed up on the bed, cupped her grandfather's face in her small hands, and planted several kisses. "Your heart is brave and your spirit is free, precious one," he told her in a surprisingly clear voice. "Guard you heart carefully and commit your spirit to Adonai. Do not let it turn to rebellion. If you do these things, the Lord will reward you."

As Jerusha enveloped her grandfather in a warm embrace, the Rab's eyelids fluttered and he fell into a deep sleep. Sensing the time was near, the family slowly moved back into the outer rooms.

Several hours later, Jonathan made his way to the courtyard where most of the villagers were keeping a vigil, though darkness had fallen, necessitating the lighting of torches. His announcement that their beloved leader was dead started the process of mourning that would last for many days.

EIGHT MONTHS LATER

Micah awoke early. He had to make the journey to Jerusalem today. He didn't want to go back, but his father couldn't make the trip himself—or so he had claimed. He had insisted that Micah must go in his place.

It had come as somewhat of a surprise to Micah that Jonathan would choose him as his representative. After all, just a few weeks ago Micah had been sent back home to Ziph in disgrace—dismissed by Joab, the general of Israel's army, accused of cowardice and under suspicion of treason. It must have been a blow to Jonathan's pride as a military man that his son had failed as an army recruit.

Despite his grandfather's dying words instructing him to tell his father that his heart was not in it, Micah had enlisted in the army at twenty, the age the Law specified a young man to be eligible for the draft. In David's kingdom, however, there was no need for a draft; the volunteer army had won victory after victory during his reign, and now all the surrounding kingdoms had been brought under the domination of Israel.

Jonathan had pointed out to Micah that during peacetime it would not be unpatriotic to choose to stay home, gradually taking over the spiritual leadership of Ziph and the other small villages in the southern hill country, teaching young boys the Torah as Shageh the Rab had done.

But Micah was convinced that his father was wrong. He felt he had to prove himself first as a warrior before the people would accept him as leader. Despite Jonathan's stature among the most loyal and powerful warriors in the kingdom, Micah had never been completely trusted or accepted. After all, he was not a full-blooded Israelite. His mother was an Aramean from Damascus, and though the villagers had eventually accepted her, they still treated her and her children with the polite restraint that marked them as outsiders.

Micah felt he had something to prove, not only to the village, but also to his father, whom he admired above all men. He wanted to prove himself as a warrior to make his father proud, even

though his father assured him he would not be disappointed if Micah did not choose a military career. Besides, life in the village was not the same without the Rab, and Micah had felt that maybe a change would help him deal better with the grief of losing his grandfather.

Micah had gone to Jerusalem to train directly under Joab himself. His father had been uneasy about that. There was no love lost between the general and Jonathan. Never had been. Jonathan had warned Micah that the general would likely be more demanding, more critical of him because he was Jonathan's son. But in truth, the general had been scrupulously fair.

The accusation of cowardice had come from the ranks of Micah's unit, where he had been challenged from the first day. Certain other recruits had mocked and goaded him from the very beginning. Because of his size—he was taller and heavier than any man in his unit, perhaps in Israel's entire army of nearly one hundred thousand—he had been taunted almost daily to fight some fellow who wanted to prove himself. Because of his sanguine nature and tendency to negotiate rather than fight, some had branded him a coward, mistaking his peaceful nature for weakness. They secretly feared him, but covered their fear with animosity. When they saw that Micah had chosen to live a chaste life, they taunted him constantly about women.

A warrior in the standing army was guaranteed to be sought after by women, and most of the young men took full advantage, with little concern about impurity. They would chide Micah as they left the barracks for a night of debauchery. "When will you be old enough to go with us, son of Jonathan? Are you yet a lad?"

"Aye, he's a lad. Not full grown yet," someone else would respond. They would all laugh mockingly, but Micah laughed right along with them until they gave up goading him and went their way. Even when they made veiled hints that Micah was somehow unnatural because he wasn't licentious, he didn't retaliate.

Their fear and guilt remained a barrier to his acceptance. Still,

his ability with weapons of war, in which Jonathan had tutored him well, and his sheer size made Micah a candidate for leadership, and Joab had appointed him a squadron. The men followed his orders well enough until one day when their assignment was to chase a group of desert bandits during a training mission in the Transjordan.

Many of the men were anticipating their first taste of victory in battle, ready to spill the blood of the outlaws. Instead, when the robbers were surrounded, Micah did not allow his squadron to use their swords. He ordered his men to simply confiscate the stolen goods and let the bandits go.

Micah's show of mercy angered his men, and some complained directly to Joab. Micah was called before the commander and asked pointedly whether he had let the outlaws escape because they were Aramean, and thus had greater claim on his loyalty than the king. Micah flushed at the insult and clenched his fists in anger. He knew why the general had asked the question.

His parents had told him many times how Joab had opposed Jonathan's marriage to Ailea when he had brought her back to Israel as a captive. Joab had suspected her of spying for her brother, Rezon, who had become a raider and a guerrilla fighter against Israel after the defeat of the Aramean alliance more than twenty years ago. The general had never trusted Micah's father after his marriage to Ailea, and now he thought the worst of the son.

Micah patiently explained the incident to Joab. "Those raiders were not Aramean, though if they had been, I still would have let them go. They posed no threat to Israel. They were from a poor village near the Jordan and were only raiding to feed their families. I confiscated their booty and sent them home."

"Is it true that you sent your own unit's food rations with them as well?" Micah admitted he had sent enough bread to feed the tiny village for a week. Joab shook his head in disgust and mumbled something about it being a pity that a giant as big as Goliath should have a heart as soft as a woman's. He gruffly

ordered Micah to return home while he contemplated whether he was worthy to be trained as a soldier.

Micah groaned at the memory and rose from his bed. He stretched, able to flatten his hands on the ceiling of the room, so great was his height. Micah ben Jonathan certainly did not look like a man who was either soft or cowardly. The truth was, Micah did not fear anyone, but not everyone knew that—including, apparently, Joab.

Micah shook off his unpleasant thoughts as he walked to the window, opened the shutters, and gazed out on the prosperous village of Ziph. “Oh, Grandfather, I wish you were still here.” Micah’s grief over the loss of the Rab had hardly abated over the past months. In order to escape it, he had joined the army only one week after his grandfather’s funeral. But his homesickness in Jerusalem only made him sadder. His grief had been particularly acute when he had come home in disgrace and had to confess to Jonathan that he had been at least temporarily suspended from the army.

Though Jonathan had been angry on his son’s behalf, he showed no sign of being ashamed of him. Still, Micah couldn’t help but feel he had disappointed his father sorely. Grandfather would have understood how he felt.

Micah turned from the window to a small table nearby. He picked up a scroll tied with a scarlet cord. It was a copy of the Torah, a gift to the Rab from King David years ago. Upon Shageh’s death, it had passed to Micah, who had not once failed to follow his grandfather’s instruction to read it daily. After reading a passage, he prostrated himself in front of the window and began to praise and thank Adonai for life, for material blessings, for his family and health. He prayed for forgiveness of his sins, and finally, for wisdom. His devotions finished, he felt up to facing the unpleasant journey before him, and went to break his fast. It took a lot of food to fuel the massive frame he had inherited from Jonathan. But his other characteristics were the legacy of his grandfather, especially his height and his clear,

amber eyes. Shageh had towered six inches above his son's six-foot height. So did Micah.

Not only did Micah resemble his grandfather physically, but everyone said his personality was uncannily like the Rab's. Both of them had a great reverence for Adonai, and for all creatures that he had made. Each had a calm, contemplative nature, and a disconcerting way of assessing people that saw beyond their facades. They had been as one in spirit, and although he loved his parents dearly, he was convinced that no one would ever understand him like Shageh had.

As he left his room, Micah heard someone moving about in the courtyard. He knew it would be his mother, drawing water from the cistern for the day's needs. She had already fired up the oven, and he smelled the enticing aroma of baking bread. Micah smiled as he remembered all the times his father had insisted that his wife had no business tending to such mundane chores.

Jonathan was a wealthy man, after all, and had provided his wife with several household servants to see to such things. But Ailea always rose before anyone, even the servants, and had much of the household work underway before anyone else could help. Micah always suspected that Ailea did this to irritate his father. The tiny woman seemed to revel in any opportunity to stand up to the mighty warrior she had married. It was possible also that his mother wanted to prove to the other women of Ziph that though she had been raised in the privileged home of Eliada, a powerful general in the city of Damascus, she did not think herself above them. The respect they accorded her had been hard won.

Ailea smiled at her son as he entered the courtyard, craning her neck to look up at him. People often remarked how amazing it was that tiny Ailea had borne this giant of a son. After greeting him and motioning for him to sit, she brought him crusty bread and goat's milk and commanded him to eat. When he sat, she still wasn't quite at eye level with him.

"I baked early so you would have fresh bread to take on your journey."

His response was interrupted when his scrap of a sister appeared. The girl was the exact image of her mother and the apple of her father's eye. She was also a handful, as stubborn as a goat, shunning the attributes of a proper young lady for the freedom of the hills as a shepherd girl. This seemed to scandalize their provincial little village, but Habaz, the chief shepherd, could hardly protest. Jonathan had provided him with most of the stock for his herds.

She was barefoot, as usual, and in the process of wrapping her hair up in a haphazard turban. Somehow her green eyes looked twice as large without her hair framing her face. "Is that bread almost done, Ahmi? It smells wonderful! Do you mind if I take some for Reuben? And the cheese as well?"

Micah knew the answer before his mother spoke. She had a soft spot in her heart for old Habaz, raising his grandson alone. The boy's mother had died giving birth to him, and his father had died of a fever not long ago.

Micah brought his thoughts back to the moment at hand. "Thank you, Mother. You take good care of me—of all of us."

"You are the joy of my life," she answered simply.

He watched her bustling about, and thought with pride that she was as beautiful as a young girl, with her long black hair that had hardly a sprinkling of gray. Her form and energy were that of a much younger woman. She often drove her husband to distraction. Jonathan's father had warned him teasingly never to marry a woman a decade younger than himself, else she would run him ragged. Micah knew that his father's complaints were made affectionately. Jonathan loved his wife more than anything.

"Good morning," a voice boomed, and Micah looked up to see his father descending the steps that led to his parents' rooftop apartment. Over the years, Jonathan had improved and added to the compound until it was now twice the size of any other home in the village. "I see you are ready to travel," Jonathan commented as he accepted food and a kiss on the cheek from his wife.

“Are you certain you want me to go?” Micah asked again, as he had over the past several days.

“You know I do. I want to send you to the feast in my stead so everyone will know I am proud of you and count you worthy to receive this honor on my behalf. You have done nothing to be ashamed of, and the sooner you go back to Jerusalem to face these groundless accusations, the quicker everyone will know that.”

“Some of your friends in the army wouldn’t agree,” Micah commented as he bit into another piece of the fragrant, rich bread. He remembered the mumbled comments and sly remarks that had circulated in the barracks in Jerusalem, both from officers and recruits.

“Those who are my friends would agree. Those who don’t are no friends of mine. When you return, I will demand to know the names of any who would dare slight you.”

Jonathan’s eyes took on a hard, cold look, and his brows beetled together as he spoke. “Father, you can’t come to my rescue. It would only make matters worse. We’ve spoken of this before.”

Jonathan growled his reluctant agreement. “Just don’t forget that the king is our friend. Appeal to him directly.”

Micah shook his head. “I will appeal first to Joab. I know you don’t trust him, but he is giving me the benefit of the doubt, even though he thinks I acted foolishly. But I will compromise and ask that I present my case to Joab in the king’s presence. I am partially guilty of the accusations. I did allow the bandits to go free, but certainly not because I believed them to be Rezon’s men. Joab really had no recourse but to send me home after several men asked not to serve in my unit because they didn’t trust me.”

“But you know you are neither a traitor nor a coward, Son, and so do I.”

“No, but my reasons were just as bad in the eyes of some warriors. I’m afraid I don’t have the stomach for slaughter. I can

fight to defend myself, and I will gladly attack in battle for my king, and for Adonai, but even then the killing haunts me.”

“You are much like your grandfather, Micah, and that’s nothing to be ashamed of. Do not think that because I am one of the *Gibborim* you must follow in my steps. In truth, there are nights when the eyes of those I have slain haunt my dreams, and on some days, when your mother puts her soft hand in mine, I feel unworthy because these hands have shed blood. No, I would be just as happy if you decide that the military life is not for you.”

“But *look* at me, Father. Has not Adonai expressed his will in how he made me? You know that one such as I will never be accepted as anything but a warrior. Both my size and my Aramean blood proclaim that I must be a warrior to prove my worth. You don’t know how many times I have wished I were as short as Perez next door. He has more friends than he can count because no one either fears or envies him.”

“You will come to peace within yourself, Son. Do not worry. I am proud of you, no matter what you do. Go to Jerusalem and offer your services to the king. As peaceable as the kingdom has been in recent years, it is possible that David may send you as his emissary on a diplomatic mission.”

Jonathan often forgot to speak of the king in formal terms. After all, he had joined David’s band when Israel’s sweet singer had been a fugitive from King Saul, hiding in the caves of Adullam. Jonathan had earned the position of Mighty One when barely into manhood. Now, decades later, he still served on active duty as one of David’s war counselors, making trips to Jerusalem several times a year to train new recruits and lead forays to the border between Israel and the Philistines, to make sure they stayed close to their coastal cities of Ashdod and Ashkelon.

“Father, I wish you would at least come with me. You and Mother haven’t been to Jerusalem for some time, and you deserve the honor the king will bestow on you. I have done nothing to deserve recognition. Are you not afraid that your name as a great warrior will be sullied by bringing attention to a son deemed

unworthy?”

Jonathan's eyes flashed in anger. "You are not unworthy. I have instructed you to go in my stead so that all may know that I believe in you. I will not go with you. I will not embarrass you by intervening in these ridiculous accusations that have been made against you. I know I would not restrain myself if someone slighted you, and it would wound your pride if I came to your defense.

"And your mother! Well, you have not had as many occasions to have her fury unleashed on you, but believe me, if someone were to offer insult to her only son, she would attack immediately, whether in the streets of Jerusalem or inside the palace itself. Unless you wish to witness such a scene, I suggest you leave the two of us here and head to Jerusalem alone. Of course, you are welcome to take Jerusha with you."

The look of horror that crossed Micah's face caused Jonathan to double up in laughter. Micah soon joined in. Ailea, who had overheard the conversation, complained, "You two may think it's amusing, but you both have to help me do something about that child! She is running completely wild."

"I will help, Mother, I promise, as soon as I return from Jerusalem."

"It might not be such a bad idea to take her, Micah. She needs to see that there is more to life than these hills and the animals she loves so dearly."

Jonathan chuckled again at the look of dismay Micah gave his mother, and took pity on him. He patted Ailea's cheek. "Her love of animals she got from you. I remember sleeping with a smelly goat a few times when you thought the weather was too wet for your pet to stay outdoors. We will take Jerusha to the city for Passover, but Micah has too many distractions to look after her this time."

Ailea gave her husband a disgruntled look. "Amal wasn't just another goat, Jonathan, and you know it. I haven't had another pet since he died."

Jonathan laughed. “Well, I know he wasn’t just another goat. He was trouble. That’s why I named him ‘Trouble.’ And even though you haven’t had a pet of your own since he died, you have seen to it that Micah and Jerusha have always had one. Let me see if I can remember them all. There was the badger, the ferret, the owl, not to mention a handful of sheep and goats that avoided the oven by currying favor with either you or the children.”

“The sheep and goats provided us with milk and wool! And as for the other creatures, what was I to do when the children brought home abandoned or wounded animals—break their hearts by telling them the creatures had to die?”

“Father is only jesting, Mother. He was as fond of those pets as we were. He only feared it would make him appear less fierce if he showed it, and thus weaken his position as a warrior.” Micah took the last bite of bread, drained his cup of milk, and stood. “I had better start my journey, or else I’ll arrive in Jerusalem too late to find lodging.”