

Iscariot

A NOVEL

TOSCA LEE



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For my parents.

EPILOGUE

A dog chokes by the side of the road in Capernaum. He is rabid and manged. He is foul and unloved.

He is more worthy to live than I.

If only I had never left Jerusalem as a child. If only Herod had never died. If only I had never laid eyes on the gaunt man by the side of the Jordan.

The Nazarene.

They will say that I betrayed him, that I reduced his price to thirty silver shekels. That I turned against my master.

They do not know me.

They will not ask themselves if they might have done the same. To even think it is to court the possibility that we may not be so different. It takes away the right to condemn, the comfort in saying, "At least I am not like him!"

My master taught a parable about that, once.

But if they do not know me, neither did they know him. And so the truth goes with me to the abyss.

Judas. It was once a good name, a strong name, the name of our

people: Judah. It is the dwelling place of the Temple, which is the dwelling place of the Lord.

I cannot see the Temple from here in the valley, the marble and gold of her face, or the smoke of her altar, dying at the end of the day. There is only the smolder of trash, the bulging of my eyes . . .

The cut of the noose.

The sun is setting. Sound has left my ears, but I can feel the wind rushing through the valley and past me like a stolen breath, east toward the wilderness as though borne on cloven hooves.

There. The dark light.

And now I am afraid. Because I know that in Sheol no one praises God but ruminates forever on what might have been.

The dark light again. Someone is coming. It is a boy.

It is me.

PERDITION

1

I was six years old the day we fled Jerusalem, and Caesar Augustus was emperor.

I had known nothing but Jerusalem all my life. It was the home of the Temple and navel of the world. Even infected with Roman soldiers and Herod's stadium, God's house was in Jerusalem, and no good man of Israel ever wanted to leave it.

And so I was stunned the day my father, a devout man, announced that we were leaving.

Especially now. Just that morning Father had come bursting into the house with the news that Herod, our king, was dead. I had thought it the happiest day of my life, if only because I had never seen Father so jubilant. He sang that day, one of the hymns of David, as my mother clapped her hands and my older brother Joshua and I went shouting and dancing into the street. We weren't the only ones. Soon all Jerusalem would erupt with joy.

We were still celebrating when Father's friend Aaron came hurrying toward the house. "Where's your father? Simon!" he shouted. "They're taking the eagle down!"

Father came out to meet him but Aaron was too excited to even kiss him in greeting. “They’ve gone to take Herod’s eagle off the Temple!”

Even at the age of six I had heard plenty about this abomination affixed to the great Temple gate, this golden kiss of our king to the buttock of Rome. It was everything a Jew must hate: a graven image, which was an affront to God’s law, and the symbol of Rome.

“Boys, get inside,” Father said. And then he left for the Temple.

For hours, I imagined him on the shoulders of others, tearing the eagle free to the sound of cheers. But when he returned, his jaw was tight beneath his beard.

“Pack what you can carry. Quickly,” he said. “We’re leaving.”

We left that night, bribing the guard to let us out the small door in the city gate.

All the next day we traveled in silence, my mother’s hand viselike around mine, my brother pale and pensive as he cast furtive glances at my father.

I didn’t know what had happened—only that Jerusalem was somehow unsafe and the lines had deepened around Father’s eyes. I knew better than to press him with questions; I would ask Joshua to explain it all to me later. He was brilliant, my ten-year-old brother. Even then everyone knew he would become a great teacher of the law. And for that reason I wanted to become one, too.

But a few hours later, when I realized I was the farthest from Jerusalem I had ever been, I began to worry.

“Father,” I said. “Will we be home in time for Passover?”

It was my favorite holiday, a time when Joshua and I went with him to buy our lamb and bring it to the Temple priests.

“No, Judas,” he said. “Jerusalem is a tinderbox and God calls us to Galilee.”

“But why—”

“No more now.”

That night, in the dank lower room of an inn, my brother lay in troubled silence beside me.

I leaned up on my elbow. A lone lamp somewhere on the floor above cast a dull glow across the stairwell; I could just make out Joshua’s profile staring up at the ceiling.

“Herod isn’t dead,” he said finally. “I heard Father talking with one of the men we traveled with today. It was a rumor. The king’s sick, but he’s alive.”

“But Father said—”

“He was wrong. They all were. The rumor gave men the courage to take the eagle down. Until Herod’s soldiers arrived.” He turned and looked at me. “Aaron was arrested.”

I stared at him in the darkness.

“It was the teachers Judas and Matthias who led the charge to the Temple with their students.”

Father and Aaron both had been students of the famous teacher Judas bar Sepphoraesus. It was partially for him—and for Judas Macabee, the warrior called the Hammer—that I had been named. The lower room was suddenly far too cold.

“I heard Father say that when they got there Aaron pushed right through the mob. He climbed up on the shoulders of one of the students to help pull the eagle down. But Father couldn’t get through the crowd. So he stood back to watch—he said he wanted

to witness for his sons what would surely become known as the first day of the Lord's coming. They had just gotten the eagle off when the soldiers came. No one heard him trying to warn them through the cheering."

"Then he didn't do it!" But even as I said it, I was afraid.

Joshua was silent.

"Will they arrest Father?"

"No. But that's why we left."

"What'll happen to the others?"

"I don't know."

"But what if—"

"Mother's coming. Go to sleep."

But I couldn't sleep. Only after Father came down did I even close my eyes, but not before wishing we had traveled through the night. For the first time since leaving Jerusalem, I wished we were a league away.

I dreamed of soldiers. I was used to seeing them throughout the Holy City, coming in and out of the Antonia Fortress or working along the walls and aqueducts, but that night they came to the room where we slept and dragged my father away. I woke up screaming.

"What's this, Judas? Hush," Father said, drawing me next to him. I could smell the heat of day lingering on his skin. "All is well. Sleep now."

I curled beneath the weight of his arm, my eyes open in the dark, until the soldiers became as fleeting as ghosts and there was only the low rumble of his breath beside me.

WE WERE FIFTEEN MILES from the Sea of Galilee by the time we stopped in Scythopolis. It was nearly Purim, the spring feast before Passover.

Scythopolis was the largest city we had come to since Jericho and there was construction everywhere, including a wide street being paved in perfect basalt squares. We passed a building that looked like a temple and I gaped at the statue of a nude man in front of it, the finely chiseled face and full lips—the naked sex dangling between his thighs like a cluster of grapes. I had seen few graven images and I had never seen an uncircumcised penis.

“Look away,” Father said. “This is not the Lord’s.”

I did look away, but I was already reconstructing the images in my mind—of the nude man and wreath-headed others dancing in naked relief across the temple face behind him.

We found an inn run by Jews and that evening, after changing into clean clothing, began our fast and went to the synagogue.

Right in the middle of the reading of the scroll, my stomach began to growl. Joshua leaned over and whispered, “Maybe our fast will bring God’s kingdom that much more quickly.”

I nodded. I didn’t know exactly what the coming kingdom would look like except that there would be no Romans or Gentiles or Samaritans in it.

Most important, Aaron would not be arrested and Father would be safe.

That night we stayed up late on the roof with the other guests beneath the full moon. At home, my cousins would play games into the night and sleep late the next day, shortening the time until sundown when they could eat at last. But here there were no games, and the little children had already eaten and fallen asleep beside their mothers.

I was by then miserable with hunger, my stomach twisting into a fist. But I knew I must learn to fast if I hoped to be an important teacher like my brother, who listened in on the men's conversation as though he were one of them already. But as the night wore on I began to pray for the comfort of sleep.

"Herod's moved all those they rounded up to Jericho," I heard the innkeeper say. "A merchant brought the news two days ago."

Joshua nudged me and I realized they were talking about the men who had been arrested. Suddenly I was very awake.

Another man, who had walked with us from the inn to the synagogue earlier, shook his head. "There'll be no good end for them. Why must they martyr themselves when, in a few more days, Herod will be dead? May the Lord make it so!"

A round of assenting murmurs.

I stared at Joshua, my heart hammering. I didn't know what a martyr was, but I saw the roundness of my brother's eyes, the grim line of Father's mouth as all the men began speaking at once.

"The Romans will still be here."

"I'd take the Romans over Herod. His own family isn't even safe from him. Caesar said it right that he'd rather be Herod's pig than his son."

"I wouldn't put it past that whoreson to eat a pig."

I rolled forward, arms clutched around my middle.

"Come, Judas," Joshua whispered, motioning me to follow him downstairs. I uncurled in agony to follow him.

He led me to his room near our things in one of the inn's back rooms. After rummaging around, Joshua took my hand and laid a stale piece of bread in it. "Here. If you don't eat, you'll be sick like last time."

I looked from him to the bread, thinking. I should give it back. I should throw it down.

“You are very zealous,” Joshua said. “But you are young and not expected to go without food.”

“But the coming kingdom—”

“A piece of bread will not make the Romans leave or Herod die any faster. I’m your older brother, aren’t I?”

I nodded, tears welling stupidly in my eyes. I ate the bread in quick bites as I followed Joshua back up to the roof.

I was just swallowing the last of it when a surprised shout broke the night—followed quickly by another and the shrill sound of a woman’s voice.

We ran back to the roof to find everyone on their feet staring at the sky. And then I saw why: The moon, so full and white when we had gone down into the house, was partially sheathed in shadow.

“It’s an omen!” someone said. “A sign!”

I blinked at the sky, at the moon half-covered as though with a black lid. Would it go out? What evil could do that?

And then I knew.

I began to tremble, my skin having gone cold and then hot at once. A wail filled my ears. It came from my throat.

“Shush, Judas!” My mother pulled me to her. But as she did, my stomach lurched and I doubled over and vomited at her feet. It was only a little amount, the bread having come out in pale bits shamefully illuminated by the light of the disappearing moon. I began to cry, the acrid taste in my mouth and nostrils, as my mother gathered me up and carried me past the mess to the corner. I was by now beside myself, shaking, hot tears tracking down my face.

"It's my fault!" I cried.

"What?" My mother said.

"The moon—I did it." As Eve with her fruit, I had ruined the moon for the sky.

"Ah, my dove, no you did not—what is a little bread to God? I told Joshua to give it to you so you wouldn't get sick. Hush now," she said, starting to clean my face. "This is not about you, Judas."

But as shouts sounded from other rooftops and the men began to argue about what it meant, I knew better. The world could be ruined by the smallest of actions. For striking a rock, Moses had never entered the Promised Land. And now I had been the sky's undoing.

I jerked away from my mother, ran to the clot of men, and found my father. I grabbed his sleeve.

"Judas! What's this?"

I fell down to my knees, and he hauled me up under my arms.

"It's my fault!"

"This? No, Judas, it's a portent, a sign. Don't be afraid. The Lord winks at us. See?"

I cried harder, hiccupping now. He didn't know the grievousness of my sin. "I ate and see what happened!" I wouldn't blame my mother or Joshua—I alone had eaten the bread.

He blinked at me in the darkness, and then chuckled. It had not bothered me so much that my mother did not understand, but hearing this from my father—and in the face of such obvious disaster—I felt more alone than I had ever felt in my life.

"Do you think you've caused this, little Judas? But there—see? The moon is emerging again."

I followed the line of his finger. Sure enough, the shadow had

moved a little bit away. I watched as it began to retreat, my fear subsiding the tiniest increment.

He patted my back. “The Lord won’t reject you for being a hungry boy. But if it will make you feel better, we will immerse tomorrow.”

The next day I immersed in the synagogue mikva three times to the bafflement of my father and the empathetic observance of my brother. Not until the third time did I feel any measure of relief, and even then not until I went outside that evening and saw that the moon was whole once more.

THE NEWS CAME BEFORE we left Scythopolis: Herod had died the night of the eclipse—but not before burning two of Jerusalem’s great teachers and forty of their students at the stake in Jericho. My father broke out with a great cry and tore his clothes. Joshua did likewise.

I simply cried.

The students who said they had not instigated the taking down of the eagle survived, and I hated them for it. I hated them because I knew Aaron was not among them—Aaron who would have condemned Herod until the last of his life for sheer love of the law. And then I cried harder because I wished he had not loved the law so much.

For nights to come I shivered beneath my blanket and dreamed of the students burning in the fires.

THOUGH I THOUGHT I shouldn't love Sepphoris, I did. I shouldn't, because it was far from Jerusalem, and her fortress seemed to inhabit a world that knew no such thing as the holy Temple. And I should not love it because it was Herod's, and even though Herod was dead, his sons were eagle-kissers just like him who wanted everything Roman—down to the scraps of power the empire threw them like crusts to dogs.

But I loved it because Father was safe. Nothing could touch us here.

I came to know Sepphoris by its sounds. Voices of children my own age wafted up from farther down the hill where the farmers kept their houses and tended their vineyards. Roosters crowed throughout the day. At times I could hear one of the distant shepherds playing a flute. And always there was birdsong.

That spring when it rained, water trickled from the roof into the channels of the cisterns below. It was a good sound, the sound of water. Moss clung to the stones of the houses, so that even on sunny days the air near any house seemed to smell of rain as pines rustled overhead.

We stayed with my father's cousin, Eleazar—a priest who helped place Joshua and me with a teacher who was so impressed with Joshua's early abilities that he called him "little rabbi."

I saw how everyone looked at him with ready fascination, as though such a boy might be proof that God had not forgotten us, but planted in the soil of this generation the mustard seed of a greatness unknown by the last. And though I knew I would never be Joshua's equal, I didn't care. People would say, "There goes the brother of Joshua bar Simon. What is his name? Ah, that's right—Judas." And that would be enough.

That year was the first that I did not go to the Temple for Passover. Instead, we watched the families that left together, my heart full of jagged envy as they sang their psalms out the city gate.

Eleazar had fallen ill weeks before and been unable to leave with the rest of the priests. I saw the way his wife, old Zipporah, covered her face with her hands when she thought no one was looking. It made me afraid for Eleazar, whom I had grown fond of, and I prayed for him. I immersed so often that my brother got angry with me and told me that even the Pharisees didn't wash that much, nor the Essenes, who were so extreme as to not move their bowels on the Sabbath. Was I going to keep from that as well?

I did briefly consider it, but I knew better than to rely on my stomach to do what it was told.

We celebrated Passover in the synagogue and at the home of Eleazar, who had recovered in what seemed like a miracle, claiming it was Mother and Zipporah's good lamb stew.

Then, a few days later, the first pilgrims began to return.

Too early.

We had just gathered for the evening meal when Eleazar's nephew came into the house, tearing at his hair.

"They slaughtered them with their sacrifices!" he shouted.

"What's this?" Eleazar demanded, rising from his seat.

"The new king sent his guard to the Temple the day before the feast—a guard of foreign mercenaries. Some of the pilgrims started throwing stones at them in protest. The king retaliated by sending in his army. They massacred the people. Pilgrims—men, women, children. Thousands dead!"

Father staggered, the color gone from his face. The house that night was filled with Mother's and Zipporah's weeping and the

groans of Eleazar, who sounded less like a weathered old priest than just a broken old man.

Three thousand died in the massacre that Passover. The tinder-box had exploded.

It was only the beginning.

2

With Herod dead and his son Archelaus barely on the throne, rebellions sprang up across the country. That summer, news about the movement of soldiers came like lightning strikes, closer and closer together: Romans, arriving on the coast. Legions, marching down from Syria . . . Soldiers camped outside Jerusalem itself.

We tried to ask Father about it, but he was often gone on some new business and we might not see him for days. When he returned, he was silent, tense, and tired.

Eleazar was by then miraculously healthy. So when his priestly course was selected for Pentecost duties in the Temple, he left for Jerusalem with another priest and a local carpet-maker who wore the tefillin of the Pharisees strapped so tightly to his forehead and arm that they seemed practically embedded in his skin.

With Eleazar gone, I noticed my father's increased absences more keenly than ever and began to cling to Joshua. He was eleven now, nearly a man, and interested in the latest news to the point of obsession. I felt completely deserted, and scowled at him one afternoon when he came running into our teacher's house after having been missing

all morning. But instead of sliding into his seat in the courtyard, he shouted, “Jericho is burning! A rebel named Simon has proclaimed himself king!”

We raced together to the market.

It was there, in the bustle of the stalls, that I first saw him: a broad-shouldered man moving through the crowd. He was tall, which was what first caught my eye. But it was the way he passed among the people like water that caused me to stare. His mantle was up over his head so I knew nothing about his face, but I saw the way others responded to him with silent nods and tilts of their heads. Was he a teacher? Men noted his movement with their eyes as though standing aside for him without moving. And several vendors he passed pressed food or even a small jug of wine into his hand, and turned away as though the transaction was done before they had accepted payment.

“Who’s that?” I said, my gaze fixed on him.

Joshua pulled me to the edge of the street. “Never say to anyone what I’m going to tell you. And stop staring.”

I nodded, desperate to gain back my brother’s confidence, which felt so recently removed from me. When I tried to locate the man again, he was gone.

“That . . . was Judas bar Hezekiah,” he said with a strange smile.

Judas son of Hezekiah?

Joshua waited a beat and then said, as though I should have known: “His father was the most famous bandit in Galilee. Come.” He tugged me toward home, his need for news apparently satisfied. But I noted that he glanced back, once, over his shoulder.

That evening Father prepared to leave with some men who came to the door to fetch him. When Joshua asked to go with him,

he hesitated before nodding and motioning for him to hurry. I leapt up as well, but Father shook his head.

“No, Judas.”

I was hurt as he crouched down in front of me. “Joshua is eleven, nearly a man. It’s fitting he should go. But you—keep your mother and Zipporah company. Enjoy your boyhood, Judas, while you have it.”

I turned and ran into the other room.

Sometime that night I felt Joshua lie down beside me, but instead of curling against him as I often did, I pretended to be asleep. When he said, very softly in the darkness, “Judas?” I refused to answer.

I woke with a hard shake that rattled my teeth. “Judas!”

Mother.

She tugged me up along with the mantle covering me. In the distance, thunderous sounds. The faint smell of fire wafted through the house from somewhere outside.

I clung to her as she carried me out the back room and down the steps carved into the bedrock beneath the house. Joshua came after us with a lamp, the flame seeming to bob in the darkness.

Zipporah was the last one down. I could barely make out her wiry form as she stood with Mother on the narrow stair, pulling something across the opening, encasing us in darkness. Cold.

“Joshua?” My voice sounded too loud in the man-made cavern.

“Quiet!” Zipporah hissed from the stairwell.

“I’m here,” he whispered. I reached for him, accidentally knocking the lamp in his hand so that the wick came out of it and sputtered on the dank floor.

“What’s happening? Where’s Father?”

Joshua started to speak, but Mother said, “Hush now. Your father is seeing to things.”

That night, Judas bar Hezekiah took Sepphoris.

“His bandits have taken the palace and looted the armory!” Joshua cried, running into the house the next morning. I felt I should be excited, but all I could say was, “Where’s Father?”

“He’s at the palace.”

“With Judas bar Hezekiah?” I said, confused.

“No, Judas has gone on already to Jerusalem.” His eyes were alight. “Don’t you see? If he controls the capital here, he controls western Galilee. And now he’s going to the Holy City.”

He came and laid his arm over my shoulders. “Judas bar Hezekiah is the Messiah and our father is a hero!”

My heart sailed with pride for my father. Of course he was a hero. I had known all along—even as I felt desperate jealousy at the realization that Joshua had known what was happening and shared something with Father that I had not.

Father returned the next night before the coming in of Sabbath, somber and silent, so that I did not throw myself at him or even ask him questions. But he was there, which was enough, though he had brought with him something I had never seen on him before: a sword. He put it away from us in the corner of the front room, his gaze warning us to let it be.

Late in the day, as Zipporah and Mother fixed the Sabbath meal, he drew me onto his lap so that I felt the strong circle of his arms.

“I know these days have been hard for you, Judas,” he said, his beard against my cheek smelling of fire. “I will explain everything in time and these things will all make sense. But for now,

remember that I love you, and what I have done, I have done for you and Joshua, and for your sons, so that one day they may be free.”

WE CELEBRATED PENTECOST AT the synagogue. It was the first time Mother and I had ventured out in days. All of Sepphoris was on nervous edge, like a cage of doves shaken on the way to market.

“When Eleazar returns, we should think of leaving,” I overheard Father say a few nights later. I was in bed with Joshua in the next room, unable to sleep. By the sound of his breathing, I knew he was awake, too.

Mother’s voice registered alarm. “What? Why have we come if only to leave again? Unless you mean we’ll return to Jerusalem . . . ?”

“No. Every army, would-be king, and messiah is on his way to the Holy City. It’ll be a miracle if the city withstands the day.”

“Then we should stay. We are safe in Sepphoris and you are a man of importance here. Now that Judas bar Hezekiah has taken the city—”

“Judas bar Hezekiah has lived too long in the hills. Men flock to him for his zeal and because his father was a hero. But he doesn’t know how to run a city or to protect it!”

“He has men like you!”

“Men like me are not enough. I fear what may happen to us here. I’ve only exchanged one tinderbox for another!” His voice broke and in the ensuing silence I knew Mother had taken him into her arms.

I had never heard Father like that before. But when I pushed

up from my mat to go to him, Joshua grabbed me by the arm and held me back.

That night I lay awake long after my parents ceased their quiet and strained coupling in the next room and the sound of Father's—and Zipporah's—snores had filled the dark house.

I didn't like the idea of leaving, even if Sepphoris wasn't as safe as Father had thought—especially now that the soldiers and tax collectors were gone.

But what disturbed me more than the thought of leaving was the crack in his voice. The brokenness of it. I didn't want to hear that in my father, whom I regarded as greater than any bandit king.

WITHIN DAYS PILGRIMS BEGAN to return from Pentecost, all telling the story: fighting in the streets. Blood in Jerusalem's gutters. Fire in the Temple so that even the marble burned. The Temple nearly destroyed.

After hearing the news, something happened to Joshua. He barely spoke, but I knew by the tight pull of his brows that there was no quiet inside his mind. When I tried to talk to him he just shook his head, as though he couldn't hear me through the din.

"Joshua," I said, shaking him. "What is it?"

His eyes darted to me, wide and wild, as though my words were a jackal in the house. "What does it mean," he said strangely, "if the Lord resides in the Temple, and the Temple burns down? Why does the Lord not defend his own house? What does it mean? Has God abandoned us?"

I didn't know what was more alarming—the line of these

questions, or that they came from him. Something shuddered inside me.

“But no, Judas. Don’t remember I said that. It is our sin that allowed the Romans to exile us in our own land, as it allowed Israel to be exiled to Babylonia—the prophets said it. We will repent and God will restore us.”

He threw his hands up over his face. As he prayed the Shema, I didn’t need to see his expression to know that it was twisted beneath his fingers.

Hear, O Israel, the Lord is One . . .

But as I recited the words with him, I was shaken.

Joshua was the best boy that I knew. I could never hope to be as good or perfect as him. He would grow up to be a better man, even, than Father. If Joshua should worry about repentance, what did that mean for me? For all the rest of Israel?

The next day, Malachi, the priest who had gone up to Jerusalem with Eleazar, came to the house, his face streaked and dirty, his tunic ripped. At the sight of him Zipporah dropped a vessel of oil on the floor and fell to her knees. A great moan escaped her as though it were her very life.

“There was such a fire,” Malachi cried. “Eleazar stayed back to usher as many as he could out the gate. But before he could come out, a beam from the portico crashed down on him when the balcony gave way.”

After a few more days, we stopped looking for returnees from Jerusalem, and no more came.

We were forbidden from going to the city gate or the marketplace, but no one could contain the news that came next. It was practically shouted in the streets: The Jews had attacked the Romans.

Jews attacking Romans! This was the end of Roman rule, some said. Others feared retaliation, swift and decisive, and blamed the Samaritans for joining with the Romans against us, calling them dogs and sons of whores. Varus, the Syrian governor, was gathering a new force, one man said. Soon he would return with legions of soldiers to quell every outburst in Judea, where a common cry had risen in Jerusalem: Freedom for Israel! Death to Rome.

“We’re leaving,” Father said a few days later. “We’re going to Kerioth, to the house of your mother’s sister.” It was midsummer and we had been in Sepphoris just over three months. The city had swollen in population as people came from every hamlet and village to seek shelter. Everyone was afraid.

Mother pleaded with Zipporah to come with us, but she was like the tree that grows up through the courtyard of a house and becomes a part of it. She had seemed old to me before, but in the days since Eleazer’s death, she had grown ancient.

I had no roots in this place, but I did not want to leave either. The Jerusalem I had loved no longer existed. Here, my father was known as a conspirator of Judas bar Hezekiah, who called himself king and others called Messiah. I saw the way other men nodded at him, the way they stood aside and inclined their heads.

Even as we packed our things I prayed to God to keep us here, to delay us even a little while.

That evening Judas bar Hezekiah returned to the city. The first thing he did was send for Father. By the time he came home the next afternoon, he was more haggard than I had ever seen him.

“Good,” he said, looking around at the things packed and ready to leave. “Tomorrow Judas is going out of the city again. I have promised to stay until he returns.”

“What?” Mother cried.

“Only until then. And then we will go.”

He lay down on his mat and fell asleep, his arm over his eyes.

As Joshua continued to struggle with those questions only he was wise or tortured enough to ask and as Zipporah grew ever more silent, I begged God again that we would not have to leave.

I would regret that prayer the rest of my life