

THE RESTORATION CHRONICLES • BOOK 2

KEEPERS  
OF THE  
COVENANT

LYNN  
AUSTIN



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To my husband, Ken,  
and to my children:  
Joshua, Benjamin, Vanessa, Maya, and Snir







**T**he Babylonian army conquered the Jewish nation in 586 BC, destroying God’s temple in Jerusalem and marching most of the survivors into exile. For nearly fifty years, the Jews languished in captivity, far from home. Then the Persians defeated the Babylonians, and in the first year of his reign, the new monarch, King Cyrus, issued a decree that allowed the captive Jews to return:

“Anyone of his people among you—may his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem in Judah and build the temple of the Lord, the God of Israel, the God who is in Jerusalem.”

Ezra 1:3

A group of about forty thousand exiles decided to make the long journey back to their homeland, led by Zerubbabel, an ancestor of King David. Most people, however, chose to remain behind in their captive lands.

After a long, twenty-year struggle, the returnees finally rebuilt God’s temple, encouraged by the prophets Haggai and Zechariah who promised a future restoration for God’s people. Meanwhile, the Jews who remained in captivity discovered that the window of opportunity to emigrate had slammed shut once again. For the next generation, still living among their pagan





enemies sixty years after King Cyrus's decree, all hope for restoration has vanished.

THE CITADEL OF SUSAN, PERSIA  
SPRING 473 BC

Haman paced the citadel's rooftop, waiting for the court astrologers to finish their work. He despised his impotence. His destiny should be under his own control, not determined by mere pricks of light, sparkling in the midnight sky. This muttering huddle of stargazers in their night-black robes shouldn't decide his future—he should. But the request he wanted to bring before King Xerxes, supreme ruler of the Persian Empire, was much too important to leave to chance or fate.

Haman paused near the parapet to gaze down at the sentries standing watch at the king's gate. His obsession first began at that gate when an impudent Jew refused to bow down to him. The entire world bowed before Haman now that he'd earned a seat of honor above all of the king's nobles, now that he'd become the second most important man in the empire. He'd spent his entire lifetime in the king's service, yet after everything Haman had achieved, Mordecai the Jew refused to bow.

“Lord Haman . . . ?” He turned at the sound of the chief astrologer's voice. “We have an answer for you, my lord.”

Haman took his time crossing to the waiting astrologers, unwilling to let them see his urgency or the power they held over him. “What do the stars say tonight?” he asked, folding his arms across his chest.

“Tomorrow will be an extremely favorable day for you, my

lord. We see no opposition from the heavens to whatever you plan. In fact, the heavenly bodies all line up in your favor.”

Haman struggled to conceal his relief, his triumph. He had waited weeks for this news. At last, he would be able to put his plan into place. “Good. I have one more task for you tonight. Cast the lots for me and choose a favorable month in the future and then a day of that month.”

“A date for what, my lord?”

“That’s not your concern. Just do it. Now.”

Haman followed the astrologers down the stairs to their shadowy workroom. He watched as an apprentice readied the leather bag with twelve marked clay tiles, one for each month, then a second bag with thirty tiles to represent the days. Of course, the proper incantations had to be mumbled before they cast the lot, and Haman grew impatient as he listened to the chief sorcerer’s gibberish. The tiles clicked like bones as the magi shook the bag. He plunged his hand inside and drew one out. “Twelve, my lord,” he said, holding it up for Haman to see. “The month of Adar.”

Haman nodded, his jaw clenched. Adar was eleven months away! He wanted to implement his plan now, not delay it for so long. But as he waited for the sorcerer to recite the second incantation and prepare to draw the lot to determine the day of the month, Haman decided that maybe the delay would be a good thing after all. It would provide plenty of time for his decree to reach every corner of the kingdom, all 127 provinces. Plenty of time for Haman to prepare for the execution of his enemies.

Day after day, each time that stubborn Jew had refused to bow, Haman’s fury had multiplied until he’d decided not only to execute one man, but every Jew in the empire. Haman knew who Mordecai’s people were—the enemies of his own race of Amalekites. The hatred they harbored for one another traced back to a mother’s womb, where twin brothers had grappled for



supremacy. The younger twin, Jacob, had stolen everything from Haman's ancestor, Esau, who was the older twin and rightful heir. It was time for Haman's people to rid the world of Jacob's descendants, the Jews, and take back what belonged to them.

The sorcerer held up a second tile. "The thirteenth day, my lord."

Haman couldn't suppress his smile. His lucky number. Born on a thirteenth day, he had come to power on a thirteenth day. Yes, the thirteenth day of Adar would do very nicely. "Thank you," he said with a nod and strode from the workroom.

Haman didn't bother going home to his bedchamber and his wife, Zeresh. He would never be able to sleep. Instead, he went to the king's council chamber and sat down to compose his edict. Even with the stars lining up in his favor, Haman needed to plan cautiously, choose his words wisely. Every Jew must die—young and old, men and women, children and infants. But Haman couldn't come right out and propose such a bold plan. He needed to use veiled suggestions and innuendoes to guide the king into reaching that conclusion, leading him there the way a hunter uses carefully placed bait to lead his prey into a snare.

When the chamberlains arrived after dawn, Haman ordered them to prepare the throne room, opening windows to let in the fresh spring air, lighting braziers to take the chill from the stone floor, arranging torches for light, plumping pillows and cushions. Everything must be perfect. Haman stood before a polished bronze mirror as he waited, composing his facial expression to show deep concern without a trace of the anticipation and elation he felt.

In due time King Xerxes arrived, ushered in by servants and pages to take his seat on his ivory throne. "Your Majesty—may you live forever!" Haman said, bowing low before him. When he rose again, Haman sat down in his seat at the king's right hand. "I trust you rested well last night, Your Majesty?"

Xerxes gave an impatient wave as if to say that his sleep

habits weren't important. "What business must we accomplish this morning, Haman? How many petitioners?"

"A room full of them, Your Majesty. But before we begin, may I speak to you in private about a matter of extreme concern to me? It has to do with the stability and peace of your entire kingdom."

"This sounds very serious. Of course you may speak."

Haman waited as the pages and chamberlains scurried away, aware of the heavy thudding of his heart. "It has come to my attention, Your Majesty, that there is a certain race of people dispersed and scattered among the provinces of your kingdom whose customs are very different from all your other subjects. They worry me, Your Majesty, because they don't obey the king's laws. It's not in the best interests of your kingdom to tolerate them."

"Have they openly rebelled?"

"Not yet, but the potential is very great because they have never assimilated into the kingdom the way the other subject nations in your empire have. They don't see themselves as part of your kingdom at all, but stubbornly insist on maintaining their ethnic identity and customs. Most worrisome of all, they refuse to worship the gods of our great empire."

The king grunted. "They refuse, you say?"

"Yes. Even when threatened with punishment and death. Should we risk angering Persia's gods? Gamble on incurring their wrath?"

"Certainly not."

"There is nothing to be gained by keeping these people as subjects. There is no benefit they provide that outweighs the harm they cause." Haman paused, watching the king's reaction, trying to assess his every gesture and expression.

"What's your recommendation?" Xerxes said after a moment.

Haman wiped his palms on his thighs. "If it pleases the king, let a decree be issued to destroy this potential threat, so these

people can never harm you and your empire. In fact, I feel so strongly about the danger they pose that I'm willing to put ten thousand talents of my own silver into the royal treasury to pay the men who will carry out this decree."

"That's a great deal of silver, Haman. Are these people truly that dangerous?"

"I believe so, my lord. Especially since they are dispersed throughout your kingdom like a deadly plague that could multiply and bring destruction."

The king stared at the floor, playing with the signet ring he wore on his finger. Haman held his breath, planning what he would say if Xerxes asked for proof of these accusations, or for the name of this menacing group of people. But the stars were in his favor, Haman reminded himself. He would prevail.

At last the king spoke. "I've decided to trust your judgment, Haman. If you say they are a threat to me, then I want them taken care of." He pulled off his signet ring and handed it to him. "Keep your silver . . . and do whatever you think best with these people to eliminate the threat."

Haman closed his eyes in relief and victory, clenching the king's signet ring in his fist. Once his decree went out, it could never be rescinded. Every Jew in the empire would die. "Yes, Your Majesty. I'll attend to your wishes right away."



A decorative arch frame with intricate scrollwork and floral motifs, framing the central text.


# Part I

*Dispatches were sent by couriers to all the king's provinces with the order to destroy, kill and annihilate all the Jews—young and old, women and little children—on a single day, the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, the month of Adar, and to plunder their goods.*


ESTHER 3:13

A decorative flourish consisting of symmetrical scrollwork and floral elements, centered below the text.





CHAPTER  
1



BABYLON

**T**he door to Ezra's study burst open without warning. Startled, he looked up from his scroll and saw his brother Jude on the threshold, breathless. He still wore his leather potter's apron, and streaks of dried clay smudged his arms and forehead. "You need to come right away."

Ezra held the pointer in place on the scroll to mark where he'd stopped reading. "Can it wait a few more minutes? We're nearly finished with this Torah portion, and it's a particularly difficult one."

Jude strode across the room and snatched the pointer from Ezra's hand, tossing it onto the table. "No! It can't wait. If the rumors are true, our people's lives are at stake, and your Torah studies aren't going to matter in the least!"

"I'm sorry," Ezra said to the other three scholars. "I'll be back as soon as I see what the problem is."

"All of you need to come," Jude said, gesturing to the men at the study table. "This involves all of us."

"But our work—"

"This is more important." Jude tugged Ezra's arm, pulling him to his feet. "Come on."

Ezra would chide his brother later for bursting in on him and his colleagues and not even allowing him time to put away the scrolls. Jude was thirty-one, four years younger than Ezra, and his temper could burn as hot as the kiln where he and their younger brother, Asher, fired their pottery. “Where are we going?” Ezra asked as Jude hurried him and the others from the room.

“To the house of assembly. The elders have called an emergency meeting.”

“Can you give me the gist of the problem, Jude? We have important work to do.” His brother didn’t understand the seriousness of Ezra’s scholarly work, studying and interpreting God’s holy law, putting it into practical terms so laborers like Jude could apply it to their everyday lives. The God of Abraham had called His people to live holy lives, and Ezra’s work would ensure that they didn’t repeat the failures of the past, which had led to their current captivity in Babylon.

“I know all about your important work,” Jude said as they strode through the narrow streets. “Why do you think Asher and I support you and give you a place to live?”

“That doesn’t give you the right to interrupt me and order me around—”

Jude halted, still gripping Ezra’s arm, and swung around to face him. “Did you hear what I said, Ezra? Or was your head in the clouds with the angels? This news concerns our people’s lives.”

“You can let go of my arm,” he said, pulling free. “I’m coming with you, aren’t I?”

Ezra seldom participated in community councils, preferring his life of scholarly isolation. But he sensed the urgency of the meeting as soon as he and Jude pushed their way into the packed assembly hall. Men from every strata of society had left work to gather here. *Rebbe* Nathan, the leader of Babylon’s exiled Jewish community, stood on the *bimah* calling for quiet. Beside



him stood an elderly Babylonian man, dressed in the robes of a royal sorcerer, looking out of place in this Jewish house of prayer. The stranger gazed around as if looking for an escape—as if the crowd might pull him limb-from-limb any minute. The mere sight of a Gentile, standing so close to where the sacred scrolls were kept, infuriated Ezra.

“What is that pagan shaman doing in our house of prayer?” he asked Jude. “It’s a desecration—”

“Shh!” Jude elbowed him. “Will you forget all your holy rules for once and just listen?”

“Quiet! Please!” Rebbe Nathan said. “Everyone needs to listen!” When the men finally quieted, he turned to the elderly Babylonian. “Tell them why you’ve come. Tell them everything you told me.”

The sorcerer stared at the floor, not at the crowd as he spoke in a halting voice. “Years ago, as one of the king’s young magi in training, I was honored to know the man you called Daniel the Righteous One—may he rest in peace. Because of my great admiration for him, I wanted you to hear about this royal dispatch immediately.” He held up an official-looking document. “Couriers delivered it from the citadel of Susa. King Xerxes sealed it with his own ring. It will be translated into every language and sent to satraps, governors, and nobles throughout the empire, announced to people of every nationality. The king’s edict is an unalterable law in every province—” The old man paused as his voice broke. He passed the document to Nathan. “Here, you read it . . . and may the God you serve have mercy.”

Rebbe Nathan cleared his throat. “This is an order to destroy, kill, and annihilate *all* Jews, young and old, women and children, in every province in the kingdom. . . .”

Horrible murmurs swept through the crowd. Ezra shook his head as to erase the words he’d just heard. *Kill all the Jews?*

“The massacre is scheduled to take place on a single day

later this year,” Nathan continued. “On the thirteenth day of the twelfth month.”

Ezra turned to his brother, hoping this was a mistake or a terrible joke, hoping he’d misunderstood. This couldn’t be true. They would all be slaughtered in a few short months? Jude, who had a wife and two young daughters, had tears in his eyes.

“But . . . why?” Ezra asked aloud. “Why kill all of us?” What had been the point of all his years of study, all his knowledge of the Torah, all the work of the men of the Great Assembly, if their lives ended this way? Why would the Almighty One allow it?

“What’s the reason for this decree?” someone shouted. “What did we do wrong?”

Rebbe Nathan wiped his eyes. “No explanation is given.”

“We don’t have enemies here in Babylon,” another man said. “They wouldn’t kill us here, in this city, would they?”

“The order allows our assassins to plunder our goods,” Nathan said. “Even those men who don’t hate us will join in the killing to take everything we have—homes, businesses . . .”

“And since this decree comes from King Xerxes himself,” the Babylonian sorcerer added, “many in his kingdom will rush to obey it in order to win his favor. You’ve been declared the king’s enemies.”

“We have to flee!” one of the elders said. “We have to get our families out of Babylon now!”

Ezra had the same thought. He needed to race back to his study and pack all the priceless Torah scrolls, the historical accounts, wisdom literature, the scrolls of the prophets, and take them someplace safe.

“There’s no place to go,” Nathan said, his voice hoarse with emotion. “The executions will take place simultaneously throughout the empire. In every province.”

“Oh, God of Abraham . . .” Ezra covered his mouth. He leaned against his sturdy brother, sick with horror. Panic and fear swelled like thunderclouds throughout the hall.

“What are we going to do?” someone moaned.

“Our wives . . . our children . . . we can’t let them die!”

“God of Abraham, why is this happening?” Wails of grief filled the hall.

“Why not just kill us now, if that’s what they want?” Jude shouted above the weeping. “Is it part of the torture to make us wait eleven months so we have to watch the angel of death slowly approach?”

Nathan held up his hands again to silence the commotion. He turned to the Babylonian sorcerer. “Please, can you help us get an audience with the government officials here in Babylon? Maybe if we begged them for mercy—”

“They’ll never agree to speak with you,” he replied, shaking his head. “They fear King Xerxes and his chief administrator, Haman, too much. In fact, I’m risking trouble myself by coming here and associating with you. I need to go.” He tried to step down from the bimah, but Nathan stopped him.

“Wait. Who is this Haman?”

“He sits at King Xerxes’s right hand, second in power only to the king.”

“Do you know his full name or anything about him? Would he show us mercy?”

“I don’t know . . . maybe his full name is there in the decree, somewhere,” he said, gesturing to the scroll. “Look for yourself. I have to leave.”

“Isn’t there anything we can do to stop this? Do you know anyone who would give us refuge or a place to hide? We’ll travel anywhere, no matter how distant.”

“If I knew I would tell you. I don’t want to see this happen, either. I came for Rebbe Daniel’s sake, but I really must go now. I never meant to stay this long.” Nathan helped him step down from the platform, and the crowd parted to let him through as he hurried away.

“How can this be?” Ezra tugged his hair and beard, the pain

a reminder that this was real and not a nightmare. How could every Jew in the empire be under a death sentence, without hope, without an escape? The God of Abraham would never do this to them. They'd suffered destruction and exile before, but God promised through His prophets that a remnant would survive, that His covenant would endure. Were the prophets wrong?

Ezra looked up and saw Nathan perusing the king's decree, murmuring the words aloud as he read it. The crowd hushed to listen. "There's no other way to interpret it," Nathan said. "The decree is final, signed and sealed with King Xerxes' authority . . . and witnessed by Haman son of Hammedatha, the Agagite."

Ezra moaned. "Oh no. There's our reason."

"Does that name mean something to you?" Jude asked. Ezra could only nod, overwhelmed by the truth of who this powerful enemy was. "Tell all of us, Ezra," Jude said, pushing him toward the front. "Listen, everyone! My brother has information. Let him speak!"

"You know this man Haman?" Nathan asked.

"No, I'm only a scholar. I've never traveled beyond this city." Ezra climbed the bimah, his steps heavy. "But I know the Torah and the history of our people, and believe me, the man behind this murderous decree—this Haman the Agagite—is our enemy."

"Tell us what you know."

Ezra needed a moment to catch his breath. "Agag was the king of the Amalekites—a tribe of people who descended from Esau's grandson, Amalek. If Haman calls himself the Agagite, then he must be from their royal family. He's their king—and now he's in a position of power over the entire Persian Empire. Of course he would want to use that authority to destroy us." Ezra had to pause again, horror-struck by what he was saying.

"The Amalekites have long been the enemies of our people. They attacked our ancestors as soon as we escaped from Egypt with Moses. They didn't care that we were unarmed or that we traveled with women and children."

“Cowards!” someone shouted from the crowd.

“That’s exactly right,” Ezra said. “The Almighty One commanded our first king, Saul, to completely destroy all the Amalekites. When Saul disobeyed, his kingship was taken away and given to David. We’ve been at war with Amalekites throughout our history. These descendants of Esau believe that if they destroy all of the descendants of Jacob, they’ll inherit the covenant blessings from God that rightfully belong to us.”

“Do we have to sit by and accept this?” Jude asked. “Why not arm ourselves and fight back?”

Nathan bowed his head for a moment before looking up again. “The King will use the Persian army to enforce this decree. Even if we tried to fight, we couldn’t possibly win. When the thirteenth day of Adar comes . . .” He couldn’t finish. He leaned against Ezra as if about to collapse, weeping.

“Get a bench!” Ezra shouted. “He needs to sit down.” The men passed one up to the platform, and Ezra helped the elderly rebbe sit on it. “Are you all right?” he asked. Nathan didn’t reply. He continued to weep, his body bent double, his head in his hands.

“Isn’t there anyone in the government who can help us?” one of the elders asked. Ezra realized that the man was addressing him. Everyone was looking to him to take Nathan’s place.

“None that I know of,” he replied. “Daniel the Righteous One was an advisor to the king when he was alive, but we no longer have an advocate in Babylon or Susa or anywhere else. Even if we did, the king sealed the decree, and the laws of the Medes and Persians can never be changed.”

Sounds of mourning filled the hall again. “I refuse to accept this death sentence!” Jude shouted above the cries. “There must be something we can do besides sit around waiting to die!”

“We can fast and pray,” Ezra said. “We can wrestle with God the way Jacob did at the Jabbok River as he prepared to face Esau.” He spoke the correct words, giving the response that a

man of faith would offer, but in that moment, Ezra's faith was so shaken, his heart and mind so engulfed by the rising river of hopelessness, that he didn't know how God could possibly save them. They were all sentenced to death.

"Do you think this is God's punishment?" someone asked. "Is it because our fathers remained here instead of returning to Jerusalem with Prince Zerubbabel?"

"It can't be," Jude said before Ezra could reply. "Isn't Jerusalem under the same death sentence we are? Every Jew in the kingdom will be annihilated!"

"We need to pray," Ezra repeated.

"What good will that do?" Jude asked.

Ezra couldn't answer Jude's question, nor did he want to argue with him in front of the entire community. "I need to go back to my study and—"

"Ezra! For once in your life, put away your scrolls and join the real world!" Jude said. "Do you think you'll be allowed to go on studying while the rest of us are slaughtered?"

"My scrolls may not help, but neither will shouting," he replied. "There's nothing any of us can do for now, except pray. Maybe God will tell us why this is happening or show us a way out. In the meantime, someone needs to take Nathan home. . . . We all need to go home." Ezra stepped down from the platform, desperate to reach the nearest door. He couldn't stay here a moment longer, listening to questions he couldn't answer, defending a God he didn't understand. The fear in the hall had become paralyzing, and he needed to escape it while he still could walk.

But when Ezra reached his study and sank onto his stool, he could only stare in stunned disbelief at the Torah scroll lying open where he'd left it. "How can this be?" he asked aloud. "God of Abraham, how can you let our enemy triumph this way? How have we angered you?" In spite of all Ezra's knowledge and learning and his ability to interpret the finest details of the

law, the Almighty One seemed unknowable at that moment. Ezra lowered his head to the table, resting his forehead on his folded his arms. “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, so far from the words of my groaning?”

The door opened. He looked up, expecting to see his brother, but it was one of his Torah students, a young man named Shimon. “Rebbe Ezra, I don’t understand—”

“Neither do I!” His words came out harsher than he intended, but he wanted to be left alone. Instead, Shimon took a step closer.

“Rebbe, you said God’s punishment and exile ended when our people were allowed to return and rebuild the temple, but this decree—”

“This decree came from Gentiles, Shimon, not God.”

“But the Almighty One allowed it, didn’t He?”

Ezra didn’t reply. He propped his elbows on the table and covered his face, hoping Shimon would leave.

“Why do the Gentiles hate us, Rebbe?”

“Because we follow God,” he said, his hands muffling his reply. “Men who worship false gods want to wipe out all remembrance of the one true God and His moral laws, and so they attack us, the keepers of His Torah.”

The stool scraped across the stone floor as Shimon sat down across from him. Ezra lowered his hands, resisting the urge to shout at him to go away.

“Rebbe, this decree reminds me of Pharaoh’s order to throw our baby boys into the Nile. I know the Holy One spared one of those babies, Moses, but many more must have died. I asked you once why the Holy One allowed it, why He didn’t save all of the babies, and you said He allowed it for a time because it served His greater purpose. You said God wanted to show the Egyptians His power, and rescue *all* of us.” Ezra watched Shimon through his tears, unable to recall ever saying those words. “Could this decree be part of some greater plan, Rebbe?”

Do you think the Almighty One wants to show His power to the Persians the way He did to the Egyptians?”

Ezra couldn't reply. Maybe he would arrive at a place of understanding someday, but not today. Today he was too shaken, his mind too numb to do anything but cry out in grief. He didn't want to die—not this way, not at the hands of the Amalekites, not after striving so hard all his life to study and obey God's law.

At last he found his voice. “Go home to your family, Shimon. They surely need all the comfort you can offer. I'm going to do the same.” He pulled himself to his feet and wrapped the scroll in its covering. Shimon rose to help him, but Ezra waved him away. “I can finish. Go home. There won't be any classes today.”

When he had put everything away, Ezra returned home to his room in Jude's house. He didn't want to talk to anyone, but Jude's wife, Devorah, stopped him in their courtyard before he could slip past her. He saw fear in her dark eyes and knew Jude must have told her about their death sentence.

“What's going to happen to us?” she asked. “If we fast and pray to the Holy One, He'll surely save us, won't He?”

Ezra glanced at his two small nieces, babbling as they shared a bowl of dates, and his brother's words from earlier that morning pierced his heart: “*For once in your life, put away your scrolls and join the real world!*” The king's edict wasn't another Torah passage to wrestle with and interpret but a decree that affected flesh-and-blood people. His people.

“Tell me, Ezra, please! You know the Almighty One better than the rest of us—”

“No, Devorah. I don't. You know Him as well as I do. Maybe better because you have children. You understand the need to discipline them when they do wrong, but you also understand mercy. I've watched you pull your girls into your arms and love them after you've punished them. I may know God's law and the history of our people, but I don't think I truly understand His mercy. And right now, we need to plead for His mercy.”



The door from the inner rooms opened and Jude came out. He stared at Ezra as if surprised to see him. “You came home?”

“I’ve put away my scrolls. I’m joining what you call the real world. Tell me what you want me to do. How can I help?”

“We’re going to need a new leader. Nathan is . . . well, you saw how upset he was. He fell to pieces after you left.”

“You expect *me* to take his place?”

“You have more wisdom than the rest of us put together. And that’s what we need right now—wisdom and . . . and guidance.”

“I’m a scholar, not a leader.”

“I know! I know! An expert on the God of Abraham and His Torah!” Jude’s temper, always volatile under pressure, threatened to explode. “Tell us why this is happening. Why God is doing this to us, and what we can do about it. Give us answers!”

“I don’t think—”

Jude stepped closer. “You asked me how you can help, and I’m telling you. We need a strong leader, a man of faith. Our faith has been shattered by this decree.”

“And what makes you think mine hasn’t?” Ezra raised his voice for the first time. Jude’s two small daughters froze in place, clutching their bowls as if the loud voices had frightened them. Devorah bent to lift the baby, then prodded the older child to her feet, leading her inside.

“Pray about it,” Jude said. “Study your scrolls. Find out what we’ve done to deserve this. Then, if you still refuse to lead us, pray that the Almighty One will send someone who will.”

“I can do that,” Ezra said quietly. “I can pray. And I can see what the law and the prophets have to say.” He would start today. And he wouldn’t stop searching the Scriptures until he found the reason for the decree—and the solution. But to become the leader of his people in Rebbe Nathan’s place? Ezra couldn’t promise such a thing.