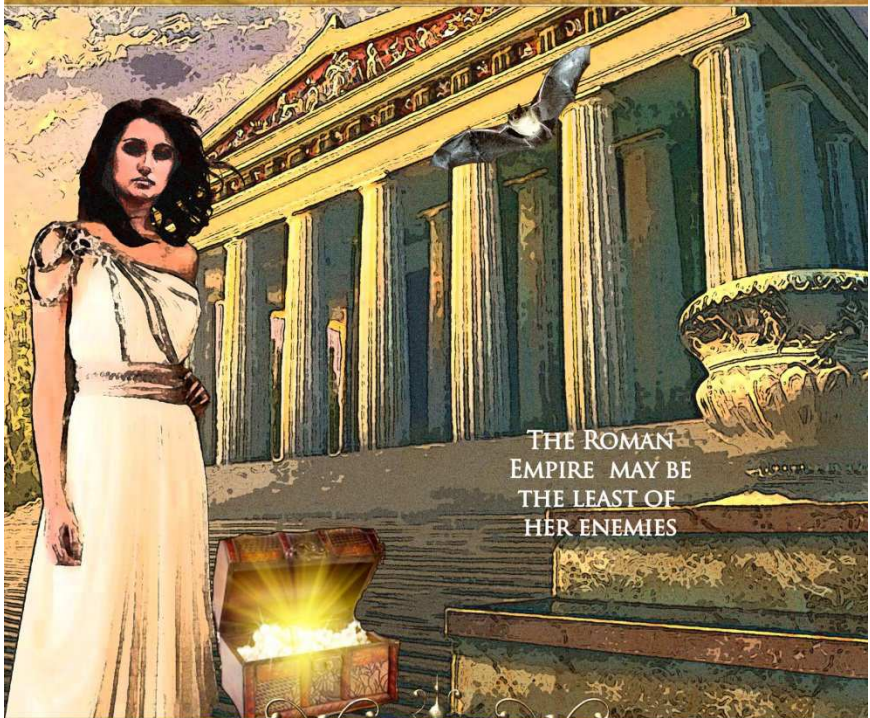


THE DEADLIEST FEVER

A MIRIAM BAT ISAAC MYSTERY IN ANCIENT ALEXANDRIA



THE ROMAN
EMPIRE MAY BE
THE LEAST OF
HER ENEMIES

JUNE TROP

All I wanted was some answers, but she had to get violent...

“Why you filthy, lying whore!” A spray of saliva sputtered from her mouth.

“Wait a minute,” I said, spacing out my words, patting down the air with my palms. “No need to get nasty. Really I’m—”

That was when she pounced on me like a leopard, used her forepaws to grab me, pull me forward, and then shove me against the cabinet. I stumbled backward, knocked my head on the doors, and remembered what Binyamin had taught me. ‘*Watch the feet and measure the reach.*’ I came right back with a fist that caught the left side of her face. ‘*Well done,*’ he’d say. ‘*You are my sister, after all, my twin sister.*’

But the knife under my belt slipped out and fell. When she scrambled for it, a pouch tumbled out of her bosom—jewels all over the floor. I moved in close and doubled her over with a jab to the belly.

A grunt, and then she defended herself with a slow loop to my chin. It didn’t connect.

I threw a hard-and-fast right to her shoulder, missed, hit her upper arm instead. I heard the smack of my fist against her flesh. Another jab to her belly emptied her lungs. The blow reverberated through the bones of my arm. And another hard right dropped her to the floor. ‘*Atta, girl. You did it, Sis.*’

Miriam bat Isaac, a budding alchemist and amateur sleuth in first-century CE Alexandria, is concerned when she learns that the Torah mantle in Alexandria's Great Synagogue has been damaged. She takes the mantle to Judah, a renowned jeweler and the unrequited love of her life. He repairs the mantle but assures her that the gems are genuine. Like Miriam, he is astonished that someone would damage the mantle but leave the gems behind. But Miriam suspects that something is not right. She is even more convinced that something is amiss, a few days later, when an anonymous note arrives, warning that the security at the Synagogue needs to be increased. As she digs for answers, she learns that some of the people she trusts are not what they seem, and she may not survive long enough to uncover the truth...

KUDOS for *The Deadliest Fever*

In *The Deadliest Fever* by June Trop, Miriam bat Isaac discovers that someone has damaged the Torah “mantle” in the Great Synagogue in Alexandria in first century BC. Although her jeweler friend, Judah, assures her that the jewels in the mantle are genuine, and have not been replaced with fakes, Miriam knows that something isn’t right. There would be no logical reason to damage the mantle without stealing the priceless jewels. Is someone who wants to work there vandalizing the Synagogue to persuade them to hire more guards, or is there a more sinister motive? The story is well written, well researched, and the character development is superb. This is an excellent addition to the series. ~ *Taylor Jones, The Review Team of Taylor Jones & Regan Murphy*

The Deadliest Fever by June Trop reunites us with Miriam bat Isaac, an alchemist and amateur sleuth in Alexandria in the first century CE. This time, she becomes alarmed when the mantle of the Torah in the Great Synagogue is damaged, even though the jewels are still there. Convinced they have been stolen and replaced with fakes, Miriam takes the mantle to Judah, a renowned jeweler and the man she secretly loves, who tells her that the jewels are real. He repairs the mantle, but Miriam believes the mischief isn’t over. Someone is up to no good, and she is determined to stop them. *The Deadliest Fever* takes us back in time to when Alexandria was in its prime, its library and Great Synagogue pristine. With her vivid descriptions, realistic and sympathetic characters, fast-

paced action, and solid plot, it will captivate you all the way through. ~ *Regan Murphy, The Review Team of Taylor Jones & Regan Murphy*

ALSO BY JUNE TROP

THE DEADLIEST LIE

THE DEADLIEST HATE

THE DEADLIEST SPORT

THE
DEADLIEST
FÈVER

A MIRIAM BAT ISAAC MYSTERY
IN ANCIENT ALEXANDRIA

JUNE TROP

A Black Opal Books Publication



GENRE: HISTORICAL MYSTERY/WOMEN SLEUTHS

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THE DEADLIEST FEVER

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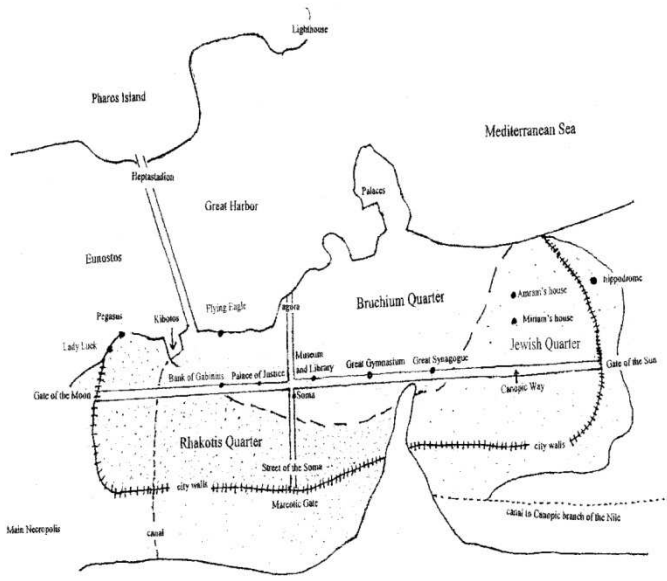
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“All virtue is summed up in dealing justly.”

~ *Aristotle*



Mainland Alexandria

Lake Mareotis



THE SIXTH YEAR OF
THE REIGN OF
NERO CLAUDIUS CAESAR
AUGUSTUS GERMANICUS
(NERO)
MAY 60 CE
ALEXANDRIA AD AEGYPTUM

CHAPTER 1

May 1, Thursday, Almost Midnight:

He waited, listening to the darkness flow into the sanctuary. With the thick drapes blocking the flare of torches lining the Canopic Way, the only light scratching the air was the meager glow of the eternal flame, the *ner tamid* of Alexandria's Great Synagogue.

The coolness of the night had already begun to assert itself. *Just a little longer*, he told himself as his fist closed around the open edges of his long black robe. A few minutes later, as his other hand pulled back the hood over his head, he emerged from his hiding place, his body taut, his legs tingling from having stood in place for so long.

Stretching his cramped muscles, he approached the front of the Torah Ark. His fingers trembled with excitement, his

eyes shining with greed as he drew open the *parokhet*, the curtain that screened the Ark.

“Like a bride’s veil,” he said to himself, amused by the analogy.

With a self-congratulatory nod and a tight satisfied smile, he pulled open the ornate bronze doors and carried the Torah to the Reader’s Table. For a few moments, he gazed at the coveted prize adorning the Torah mantle, three peerless jewels, each set into the bowl of one of the three vessels embroidered in gold on the mantle.

He didn’t need much light. His eyes were already accustomed to the darkness, and his hands had performed this procedure many times before. Taking a few deep breaths to calm the twitch at the corner of his mouth, he removed a slim wooden box from the goatskin pouch attached to his belt, took out his tools, and lined them up on the table: his silver pick, pliers, tweezers, snips, and a double-handled vial of olive oil. Then he undressed the Torah and positioned the mantle so the jewels caught the narrow strip of light from the *ner tamid*.

Oh, Lord! Even in the thinnest light, they spew out their fire!

Half-frightened, worried that he’d uttered the words aloud, he released only a feather of breath.

But hearing no echo, his jaw softened.

He was safe.

Then, hunching over the table, balancing his forearms against the edge, he took hold of the pick and laid his hands on the mantle.

He tried to loosen the center stone, the emerald. The setting was tight. Very tight. He tried again, this time after placing a droplet of oil on each prong.

This is going to take a while.

He shifted his weight and continued.

The silence was absolute save for the occasional sputter of the *ner tamid* and the distant rumble of hooves on the Canopic Way's granite pavement.

Until he heard loudening footfalls ringing out against the tessellated floor, waking the echoes in the corridor's coffered ceiling.

A crease of light swept under the sanctuary's ceiling-high, bejeweled double doors.

He froze and held his breath, as fear prickled down his spine, until the clicking heels receded into the silence. He blinked slowly and released an unbidden sigh. *Just the watchman on his rounds. He won't come in here. He locked the doors to the sanctuary and all the outside doors to the Synagogue hours ago and won't open them again until dawn.*



His fingers worked through the night. Despite the chill, rivulets of sweat trickled down his back and collected under his belt. He straightened up now and then, rolled his shoulders back, and cocked his head as he admired his work.

His mouth curved into a triumphant smile.

Beads of saliva clung to his lips.

By now a pearly grayness was seeping under the doors. He could see the darkness dissolving. Objects in the sanctuary were reclaiming their color and shape.

He mentally ticked off the remaining tasks: *Dress the Torah. Put it back in the Ark. Tuck my prize and the tools into the box. Slide it back into my pouch. Slip out as soon as the watchman unlocks the doors but before what's-his-name...Gershon, that's it, Gershon ben Israel...comes in to check the sacred—*

Oh, Lord, what on Earth is that squeaking sound? Surely not a bird.

A sharp-toothed, leathery-winged bat shot out of nowhere, swooped across the sanctuary, and, wheeling around the *bemah*, took a dive, and nipped the crown of the man's head before disappearing with a shrill screech behind the Ark.

His thin howl—part gasp, scream, and strangled sob—tore through the sanctuary.

Then he heard a pair of boots smacking the tiles.

I gotta get out of here! Where's the—

Dressing it quickly, he shoved the Torah into the Ark, throwing everything else into his pouch.

Except the vial.

The vial. Oops!

Oil everywhere.

Oh, Lord! Not now.

A hasty wipe with the sleeve of his robe.

The rising volume of hammering footsteps.

Now two sets—one close, the other farther away but catching up. Their volume swelled as they turned a corner.

Must be Gershon trailing the watchman.

The jangle of keys. The ping of the latch as the watchman unlocked the doors.

No place to hide. And, Lord, all this blood gushing from my head.

“No, Daniel, no!” Gershon shouted. “The other way. Hurry! The scream came from the library.”

CHAPTER 2

May 2, Friday Evening:

So, you see, Rabbi, how we've modernized the Synagogue in the more than twenty years since the Pogrom. The Egyptian wooden pin-tumbler locks have been replaced with the newest Roman ones with these steel springs. So, they can be locked and unlocked only with a key and from only the outside. And as for the doors themselves, we've restored them all, including the bejeweled doors to the sanctuary."

I was addressing our visiting sage, Rabbi Ehud ben Zechariah, who'd arrived less than a week ago with his daughter Naarah and prospective son-in-law, Omar ben Uriah. Awaiting only Gershon, we were about to welcome Shabbat with our weekly dinner at the fortress-like home of

Amram ben Eleazar, my dear friend, business partner, and the father of my late fiancé.

Four years ago, I would have described Amram as withered and faded like old parchment, his yellow cadaverous face deeply lined, his lips pinched, and his eyes a filmy gray. Too feeble to attend to his affairs, Amram came to be my charge after my own father's death eight years ago. But since I began treating him with my elixir, an extract from the white herb of the mountain, a rare succulent fern brought to me from an open field in Anatolia, he's regained his vigor, his color has brightened, and his spindly frame has filled out. Even his mind has sharpened, though the herb could not restore his once luxuriant Hebraic beard, which to this day remains a tangle of errant whiskers spiraling out of his receding chin.

"Dear, dear Miriam, my family and I are honored to be here, to admire the treasures you safeguard and contribute to the enrichment of your community." Rabbi Ehud's melodic voice had the texture of silk. Although he spoke mildly, his widely-spaced eyes shaded by a single shaggy brow looked out keenly from their blue veiny lids.

"And surely even our late Philo would have been honored to have you here." Despite the ten years since Philo's death, Amram is still quick to refer to him.

One night during the Pogrom when Amram and his late son Noah were attending a meeting to organize an appeal, a gang of thugs trapped his beloved Leah and their daughters in their home, smashed the shutters, and hurled volleys of lit torches through the windows to set their furnishings ablaze.

Their hideous screams and the resounding echoes tore madly through the neighborhood until the smoke suffocated them and the flames devoured them.

After that, Philo led an embassy to petition Caligula to restore our rights and guarantee our safety. My father and Amram would argue endlessly about that, my father ever contemptuous of Philo, blaming him for truckling to Caligula but accomplishing nothing. Finally, my father would remind Amram that we had to wait for Claudius's ascension to have our rights reaffirmed. Still, Amram held fast to his conception of Philo as a great advocate for our people.

"The gems in our Torah mantle are, of course, our most precious possession," continued Amram. "Just imagine six hundred years ago, the Babylonian army stole these flawless jewels from Solomon's Temple during Nebuchadnezzar's siege of Jerusalem, and then some sixty years later, miracle of miracles, King Cyrus the Great of Persia restored them to our people when the Jewish prince Sheshbazzar led the first contingent of Israelites back from Babylonian exile. King Solomon is said to have dedicated these remarkable stones himself, an emerald, sapphire, and ruby, each the most exquisite of its kind."

The rabbi acknowledged his host's comments with a modest bow of his enormous head before folding his wing-like arms across his narrow chest and long, gray-threaded beard.

"Wait. I hear footsteps," said Amram, rising from one of the dining room's three couches, each padded with brightly colored silk cushions.

Flanked by marble stands bearing Jerusalem clay lamps filled with olibanum for Shabbat, the couches surrounded a low square table covered that evening with a bleached Indian cotton cloth. The cloth was set with matching napery, a crater filled with a mixture of Palestinian wine and honey-sweetened water, six crystal goblets, and a ladle to fill them. Amram's servants had also arranged a stack of Syrian glass plates, knives of various sizes, and spoons, some of carved ivory, others of gold with long handles to dish out the many sauces.

Myron, Amram's narrow-eyed, wooden-faced doorkeeper, had taken Gershon's himation and was conducting him past the atrium's marble columns, its pool of floating lotus blossoms, beds of dark blue irises, and rows of alabaster statues bearing lamps of aromatic oils. Gershon must have declined to have his Roman boot-like shoes—his *calcei*—removed, his feet washed, and then fitted with a pair of slippers because straight away, I heard Myron's ursine steps leading him to us.

Those very footfalls hurtled me back to that Shabbat dinner at Amram's four years ago when we'd also been waiting, then for my twin brother, Binyamin. So now, instead of Gershon's loose-limbed strides, my mind's ear heard my slain brother's quick firm tread, his deerskin *calcei* and the jingle of their silver buckles coming toward me.

My imagination dressed Binyamin as he had been that evening in a tunic of the finest Scythopolitan linen worn girded at the waist with a heavy leather belt studded with Alexandrian glass beads. But his face and body were free of the

scars of violence and the tattoos that identified him as the property of the most famous *ludus* in the empire, the gladiatorial school in Capua founded by Julius Caesar, the very one that owned Spartacus more than a hundred years ago. The marks from that *ludus* still ignited young women's erotic fantasies and young men's dreams of glory, but my image of Binyamin without those marks corresponded with the wishes I had for him when he was only a step away from liberty and a life at home with me.

That evening we were celebrating my brother's safe return to Alexandria after ten years in the arena. Shiny with ambition, Binyamin had come home for what was supposed to be his last bout. Instead, that evening ushered in a horror—one that I sensed too late and recalled now only with a shudder. And so, the strokes I made writing these lines looked like the spidery scratches of a crone.

I recalled his irreverence, his mock humility, and his insolence that evening, but his words came back to me in a gentler tone. Perhaps the passing of these last eight months eased my own guilt for having sent him back to the arena where death claimed him in the Amphitheatre of Pompeii. An instant later, a green fly buzzing around my head yanked me back, somewhat startled, to the company around me.

Ready to receive his old friend's kiss, Amram stood at the entrance to this, his oval and more intimate dining room, its walls silvered by the light of a rising moon and its breath scented with the spicy, slightly lemony fragrance of the olibanum. I expected to see Amram's athletic friend, an Alexandrian businessman and importer of Palestinian wine, glide

across the onyx-tiled floor with his usual grace and broad shoulders. Instead, I saw the forward stoop, wobbly knees, and engraved face of an old man lumbering toward us. As always, he was fastidiously groomed, his dense cap of nearly-white pearlescent curls freshly oiled and styled in the latest Roman fashion. He was meticulously dressed in a scarlet, almost effeminate silk robe that trailed in his wake. But the ruffles of skin that draped his jowls and the dewlap that hung from his chin were more pronounced than ever, perhaps because his head was bowed, his eyes downcast.

“Good Shabbat,” murmured Gershon, hardly lifting his head.

“Come, sit here,” invited Amram with a false heartiness. A plume of verbena drifted in as Gershon sagged into the seat next to Amram. Naarah and I shared the couch to their right, Rabbi Ehud and Omar to their left. But as soon as Gershon had plucked the skirt of his robe to lie back, he began lacing and unlacing his impossibly long fingers.

“What is it, Gershon?” asked our host. “You seem restless.”

“Am I what?” hollered Gershon, cupping the flange of his ear. “What? Upset did you say?”

I was startled by the loudness of his voice until I recalled that years ago, the desert’s Khamseen winds, those hot south winds that choke us with their dust in the spring, had burned out much of his hearing.

“You seem a little agitated,” said Amram, this time louder.

“Yes, I am upset, very upset.”

Amram contracted his brows and flashed me a knowing look before aiming his gaze at the crater, his signal to Rho (for Rhoemetalces), his burly, olive-skinned servant, a Thracian with Asiatic features, to serve the wine. One of his other servants, Taharqa, a gangly wild-haired Nubian with skin more bronze than ebony, then followed with the Egyptian dates, shelled walnuts, and olives on a silver tray from atop the curved citron sideboard, the only other furniture in the room, and placed it on the table.

“I am very upset. The Fates dealt me a very distressing blow this morning.”

The rabbi leaned forward to face Gershon. I thought I saw a cunning expression flicker across Omar’s face as if he knew something that gave him an advantage over everyone else, but he never took his thickly lashed, coal-black eyes off Naarah. While he drained his goblet and smacked his shiny lips, a rill of wine trickled down his chin. Resting his goblet on the table, he wiped his chin with one huge hand. Then he thrust the other into the walnuts, which he scooped up and stuffed into his mouth several at a time.

Across the table, Naarah peered into the tray, fished out a stray olive, and nibbled around its pit. Then she stroked the napkin with her fingertips, and pinching the stem of the goblet with her dainty thumb and forefinger, she took a genteel sip of wine.

What a curious match, I thought. Only a nascent double chin and an asymmetry about his mouth kept Omar from being classically handsome. I could imagine women captivated by his oily magnetism following his muscular frame with

their eyes and gossiping about him behind curved palms. Naarah, on the other hand, was an anemic young woman with a congenitally twisted spine as if she alone bore the burdens of the world on her hunched back. Still, her heart-shaped face with its refined pointed features and frame of curly flaxen hair radiated a childlike sweetness.

Gershon, too, sampled the wine and, as a connoisseur, nodded his approval. Then he trained his gaze on the rabbi and in an unwonted imperious tone, began his story.

“As the *neokoros* of the Great Synagogue, you know, it’s both my honor and my duty to check the sanctuary every morning.” Despite his piercing voice, he still spoke with the dignity of an aristocrat. “If I remember correctly, aside from the watchman, of course, I’m the only one with a key.”

“Gershon, Rabbi Ehud also has a key.” Amram corrected him in a powerful voice and with a timbre that’s replaced the feeble echo he had before taking the elixir.

Tilting his head back against a cushion and stroking his jaw with his thumb, Gershon frowned in concentration until a flicker of understanding smoothed his features. “Oh, forgive me, Rabbi. Yes, I remember now. I gave you a key so you could prepare your Shabbat homilies in our library whenever you wanted. Not even Amram, a time-honored member of our Council of Elders, has a key.”

An uncertain silence hung in the room. I remembered hearing only the sputter of the oil lamps until the *whoosh* of Gershon’s robe broke the stillness as he crossed, uncrossed, and re-crossed his legs.

“So, what was I saying?”

“That you’re upset.” coached Amram.

“Yes. Very. As soon as I entered the Synagogue, I heard this earthshattering scream in the library with the watchman, you know, what’s his name—”

“Daniel,” inserted Amram.

“That’s it, *Daniel*, with Daniel running like a madman in the opposite direction, toward the sanctuary.” Gershon’s fingers kept mashing his seat cushion as he spoke. “I redirected him, but needless to say, by the time we reached the library, any source or sign of mischief was gone. Absolutely gone. Of course, Daniel had already unlocked all the doors—that’s how I got in—so whoever it was must have heard us coming and bolted.”

“I don’t understand,” said the rabbi, cocking his head and combing his arthritic fingers through the springy mass that hung from his chin. “When does Daniel lock and unlock the doors?”

Gershon stared at the floor as if he were studying the tiles.

“Gershon knows the routine, but let me explain,” assisted Amram, who realized his friend’s mind was whirling in an uncontrolled orbit. “Daniel arrives in the early evening. As soon as the craft meetings and the *bet din* (the rabbinical court) have adjourned and everyone has gone, he locks the entrances and all the interior doors. He passes most of his watch guarding our treasures in the library and offices, but every few hours or so, sooner if he suspects trouble, he makes the rounds with his lantern. Then at dawn, as activity in the Synagogue resumes, he unlocks the doors and leaves.

“Isn’t that right?” asked Amram, turning toward Gershon and nodding once.

“Yes, yes, but you’ve interrupted me yet again. That’s four times now,” he said in a shrill voice and with an impatient slap of the air.

A stunned silence gripped the room. When I recovered my own senses, I noticed that Naarah’s hands were clamped against her open mouth with only the lightest wind escaping from her lips. Amram had paled till he was as gray as ash. Rabbi Ehud had folded his lips over his teeth as if to check any impulse to speak while Omar, a smirk twitching at one corner of his mouth, admired the hairy backs of his manicured hands.

Only Gershon seemed oblivious to the tension in the room.

“Oh, that dreadful, dreadful scream will surely haunt me to the end of my days. But I’m not done. Here comes something even stranger. After that terrible scream, when I finally got to the sanctuary to attend to my duties, I saw gushes of blood and splotches of oil all over the *bemah*, smears on the Reader’s Table, puddles on the floor, stains everywhere. You can’t—you just can’t imagine,” he said, looking down, pinching his lips in distaste, and shaking his head.

Then, leaning back on the couch, Gershon ground the heels of his palms into his eyes as if to rid himself of those gruesome images.

“But you know what really bothers me?” asked Gershon, albeit rhetorically as he sat forward on the couch again, this

time shooting his forefinger at Amram. “Our watchman. Daniel. Daniel what’s his na—”

“Ben Tobiah.”

“Yes, ben Tobiah. Now I remember. Here we’ve entrusted this man to guard our most precious possessions: our Torah, our ritual objects, our archives with Lord knows how many documents—contracts, wills, deeds, genealogical lists, all irreplaceable—to say nothing of the monies, the funds for our sacred causes, our taxes to Rome and the Temple in Jerusalem, and don’t forget, the funds to maintain our very building.”

By now, Gershon was on his feet, taut with rage, threads of anger burning in his eyes as he launched into a full-blown tirade. With a new, unfamiliar set of lines and wrinkles about his face, he whipped his eyes from one of us to the other, bellowing with enough rage to freeze us all in place, finally fixing a metallic gaze on Amram.

“And where was Daniel? I’m asking you. Sleeping. Sleeping on the job, I tell you. Useless, utterly useless. He couldn’t even tell me how the blood and oil got there. I tell you I have no confidence in him, none whatsoever, certainly not when I’m responsible for protecting our sacred treasures.”

“But Daniel’s been with us for years—”

“I know! I know! A waste of twenty years!”

Amram put down his goblet and threw up his hands. “Yes, we hired him shortly after the Pogrom. But surely we didn’t expect him to protect our rights and shield us from

being crucified, scourged, drawn and quartered, immolated, and butchered.”

Amram kept going, his voice thickening with rage or grief. I couldn't tell.

“And surely we didn't expect him to prevent our businesses from being razed and our homes—” He had to swallow to finish. “—our homes from being gutted. May we never again know the sound of those flames hissing like serpents as their tongues licked the air, winding into our homes and consuming our loved—”

Amram's face crumpled at the recollection of the fire that gripped his home in a wreath of smoke and silenced the cries of his loved ones. With his shoulders drawn in and his chest struggling to breathe, his eyes filled with tears. Feeling the prick of my own tears, I rose and held him in a rocking embrace. The stray hairs of his beard clung to my face until the wave of grief ebbed, and he pulled away. When I took my place, I saw Naarah gazing down at her slender white hands, blinking away her own tears.

“Gershon, I'm sure we can rely on Daniel to safeguard our artifacts, our records, our very building. That's why we hired him, and he's done well.”

Did anyone else notice the arching of Gershon's silver-tufted brows?

“So, who is this Daniel?” asked the rabbi.

“His name is Daniel ben Tobiah—”

“He's a hayseed,” Gershon shrieked. “Take away his twang, and he's still a hayseed. He came with a letter from some rabbi or other in Capernaum, no one I've ever heard of.

Anyway, you get a quick smile from this Daniel, but that's about it. A smile. I say, 'Send him back to Capernaum, where he belongs, where I wish he'd stayed.'"

While Gershon and Amram exchanged withering glances, I could see words forming on Amram's lips, but instead of responding, he half closed his eyes and slid his gaze toward the rabbi. "Ehud, he's the son of a tenant farmer from a once-proud family of olive growers along the Sea of Galilee. They, like a lot of our brethren, have had to sell off the land they've owned for generations just to stay solvent."

"Oh, Lord, yes, the new economy, a disaster for our peasants. No longer self-sufficient on their small, family-owned farms, bartering their surplus for the little else they need, they've suddenly had to subsist in a money-based economy."

Amram, punctuating the rabbi's explanation with nods, added, "And then in the wake of the Roman tax collectors, their land is seized and bought up by wealthy city dwellers who consolidate the farms into massive commercial estates. In no time, our proud peasants are working for a pittance on the very land they used to own. So you see, our Daniel would have nothing to go back to."

"Indeed. And with false prophets and healers roaming the land, gathering a following from those desperate for any promise of hope, the times are a challenge for our religious institutions as well. Let's face it, rebellion is in the air—fueled, some say, by robbers and bandits, others say by liberators and freedom fighters. But whatever you call them, their

reliance on violence made even our own Caesarea too dangerous for us to stay.”

Gershon, frowning deeply, was shaking his head, unable to disguise his exasperation.

“So, dear friends, we sailed for Ephesus and then, when you invited us, we were able to book passage on the *Thalia*. Thank the good Lord, the winds were so favorable we were at sea hardly five days. It’s hard to believe we left Ephesus only nine days ago, but with your hospitality, it seems in some sense—I should say in the best sense—as if we’ve been here forever. Still, we hope that after our sojourn with you, we can return to Caesarea so Naarah and Omar can get married and raise a family there.”

Naarah lifted her chin and smiled at the world.

But that moment of serenity was short-lived.

Gershon smacked the table with a heavy blow, jangling the utensils, rattling the glassware, and spilling the olives. I couldn’t resist counting them as one by one they rolled onto the floor.

“Well, I see my opinion is not welcome here.” Lurching to his feet, the legs of the couch groaning against the floor, his knee bumping a corner of the table, he limped toward the doorway before raking Amram with his gaze. “That you, our most trusted elder, should put some yokel ahead of the security of our Synagogue even after the Pogrom—” A choking spasm ripped through him, forcing his throat to close.

“Gershon, please sit down. Miriam is about to light the Shabbat candles. We’re just talk—”

Wiping a string of spittle from his chin and muttering something I couldn't quite catch, Gershon left the dining room accompanied by the furious rustle of his silk robe. If my ears served me correctly, he then shoved past Myron only to knock over a lamp, and foregoing his himation, he stomped out and slammed the thick, iron-studded door.

When I heard the clang of the door echo against the walls of the atrium, I couldn't help but feel something was about to happen that none of us were prepared for.

CHAPTER 3

May 9, Friday Morning:

Two sharp knocks on the double doors of my study shredded the stillness. I recognized the pounding as coming from Minta, my keen-eyed housemaid, a whirl of energy under even ordinary circumstances. But that morning, the urgency in her plea yanked my attention away from my workbench where I'd been crushing a fresh supply of fern leaflets, an early step in the preparation of my elixir. The glassware on my workbench tinkled displeasure when I sprang up from my stool and strode across the mosaic floor to open the ceiling-high mahogany doors.

Adding the workbench along the study's eastern wall and replacing the ledgers stacked on the shelves above it with my reagents, flasks, and distillation apparatus were the only changes I dared to make when I inherited the room from

my father. Oh yes, and I got rid of that life-size bronze of my mother. He'd commissioned a sculptor to fashion that statue shortly after her death as if the sculptor could resurrect from the grave this woman I never knew but the one he expected me to become, this woman he said I looked just like. So, when I saw my reflection, I wondered whether I was also looking at her, except that my hair was chestnut whereas Papa said hers was blonde, and my eyes were the blue of lapis lazuli, whereas he said hers changed color like the Mediterranean.

My poor father. He never did stop grieving for my mother. Following two still births, she'd become pregnant again, this time with my twin brother Binyamin and me. But then, after my parents arranged for a community celebration in honor of our birth, childbed fever claimed her life and any tenderness in my father's soul.

Even with the few changes I'd made, I continued to feel like an imposter in my father's room. My shame-filled memories would flash before me like a forgotten nightmare, pitching me back to when I'd have to stand before his swarthy, heavy-featured face and endure the reprimands he'd deliver from across his massive ebony desk. To this day, I can see his thick hairy forearms resting on the desktop, that image framed by the purple tied-back drapes that skirt the floor behind the desk and separate the study from the peristyle. And I can recall how I'd have to fortify myself for each confrontation. But once I'd see the set of his jaw in the late-day sunlight streaming in from the courtyard, my shoulders would droop anyway along with my resolve.

And so, I was too intimidated to make any other changes. I kept his pretentious desk, as dark and oily as it was, along with his bronze pen, antique marble abacus, and the staring asp cut into the glass oil lamp on his desk, the only thing that ever frightened Binyamin. Only when I had to impress upon my brother that I, not he, was head of this household did I finally accept ownership of this small square room off the atrium, desk and all.

“Yes? Minta. You startled me. What is it?” A prickle of fear roused the soft hairs at the back of my neck when a needle of morning sunlight poking through the peristyle showed creases of concern on her milk-white face.

“It’s Mr. ben Israel.” She lowered her voice, a high warble, and tunneled her whisper through cupped palms. “He’s beside himself.”

We blinked at each other while she nibbled on her upper lip and I tried to guess why he’d come.

“What makes you say that?”

She gripped my wrist like a vice. “It’s his face, Miss Miriam. It’s as pale as a fish’s belly. And his eyes, there’s a fright in them like I’ve never seen before.”

“Bring us some tea—something to calm him—and I’ll show him in.”

A quick nod and she disappeared before I could thank her.



I caught a glimpse of my visitor through the doors Minta left slightly ajar. Standing among the planters of white chamomiles and yellow field marigolds, he was gazing at the vaulted ceiling, his back to me as he stood behind the teak bench beside the pool. His left hand grasped the top of the bench. His right trembled as he smoothed the folds of his fine, bleached wool himation.

“Come in, Gershon,” I shouted as I beckoned him with a wave of my hand.

I slid into the cushioned armchair behind the desk, drew in a jagged breath, and squared my shoulders. If Minta hadn’t alerted me that Gershon was in a state of panic, I’d have been duly irritated by his intrusion. But whatever it was that compelled him to come to me, after last Friday evening, he could hardly have gone to Amram. Even that next day in the Synagogue, despite its being Shabbat, the set of Gershon’s mouth defied any attempt at reconciliation.

Minta hadn’t exaggerated, but it was his mask, a mask of shock—no, more horror than shock judging by the rigidity of his face and the glaze of moisture on his brow—that told me he’d confronted something grotesque, even heinous.

“Gershon, what’s happened to you?”

He looked at me blankly.

“What’s wrong?” I repeated loudly.

“First, it was that high-pitched howl—like an astounded animal—”

His breath coming so fast, his words rushed out in clumps.

“—its echo circling around and around—ringing against the walls of the—the walls of the corridor, and then that revolting”—he gagged—“that revolting mess in the sanctuary, but just as I feared, those defilements were only—I tell you, only the beginning. Listen. When I took the Torah out this morning—I’m talking this very morning—I still can’t believe it—you know it’s my duty to maintain the Torah and every Friday—”

That imperious tone again.

“—to get the Torah portion and the reading from the Prophets ready, ready for Shabbat— to distribute the scrolls—”

He swallowed hard and then pitched his gaze over my left shoulder into the peristyle, at its hanging baskets of lush ferns and cascading ivy. When his attention finally drifted back to me, he was blinking rapidly, like a cave dweller in broad daylight.

“Wait. Didn’t I tell you that already?” He leaned his head back against the chair and stroked his jaw. “I do that before every Shabbat, you know—get there early on Friday—take out the Torah—”

I couldn’t help it. I myself was starting to panic. One minute he’d be staring mutely into space, and the next, he’d be babbling, off on some tangent. So, rolling my hand in impatient circles, I asked, “What happened at the Synagogue this morning?”

“It’s the Torah, the mantle, the embroidered filaments have been twisted, bent out of shape, those fine chains broken—what a desecration! I had a premonition about this.

Didn't I tell all of you that the violation of our building would portend disaster—”

He was squawking with indignation now.

“Gershon! Tell me about the mantle.”

“The vessels. Surely you know about the vessels.”

I nodded even though I had no idea what he was talking about.

A moment later, I heard Minta's sandals clicking against the mosaics and then the faint tap of her fingers against the door. I had no chance to respond to her before she scurried in carrying a silver tray with napery and two goblets of steaming tea, cannabis for Gershon and mint for me. She laid out a linen square on a corner of the desktop, set our drinks upon it, and once again disappeared before I could thank her.

Bending his face toward the goblet, Gershon stared into its mouth perhaps to examine the color of the tea or feel its fragrant steam smooth his pinched brow. Then he curled his fingers around the stem but set it aside without taking so much as a sip. On the other hand, with the chill of dread creeping into my bones, I grabbed the goblet and like a desert nomad, gulped down the brew until I could feel its heat explode in my stomach and flower throughout my body.

Embarrassed by my excess especially in the face of his dismay, I brought my napkin to my lips eager to renew our conversation.

“The mantle, Gershon.”

“The mantle is adorned with three vessels, each embroidered in gold and set with one of the stones from—”

“—And?”

“The vessels symbolize the wineglasses in Solomon’s Temple, three for each altar: the altar of burnt offerings, the altar of incen—”

“—No, I meant tell me about the damage.”

“The gold threads on one of the vessels are ruined.”

“Which vessel?”

“Huh?”

“You said there were three.”

I picked up my goblet of tea, but it was empty.

“I’m not sure, but I think it was the center one, the one with the emerald. None of the others were damaged.”

“And the stones?”

“They looked all right to me,” he said with a shrug.

“Well, when do you think this could have happened?”

He looked down. We both watched him lace and unlace his fingers while sunlight gathered on the facets of his amethyst seal ring and flashed sparks into the eyes of my desktop asp.

“Sometime since last Shabbat. That’s all I know. Of course, Daniel vehemently denies knowing anything.”

“I don’t understand. Why would anybody damage the embroidery? And how did they get in to do it?”

“That’s just it!” he shrieked. “It’s Daniel. He’s a madman. And nobody, absolutely nobody believes me!”

A mouthful of sour tea rose up into my throat.

“Look,” I said as I stood up, “bring me the mantle, and I’ll take it to Judah. I’m sure he’ll be able to fix it.” *But would he be able to tell how and why the embroidery was defaced?*

CHAPTER 4

May 11, Sunday Afternoon:

Yes, Gershon, I'm sure. I'll get the mantle back to you soon. I promise."

That poor man once again stood among my planters of chamomiles and marigolds, gripping the bench, his knuckles now swollen into bloodless knobs. With the afternoon sun streaming into the atrium and moments of brilliant light colliding with the wrinkled sacs that now hung from his jowls, he looked years older than he did even last Friday. And there, clutched to his chest, was a blue linen envelope.

Gershon's mouth opened in silent protest as I drew the envelope from him. I tried to soothe him with a few nods and a mechanical repetition of "soon," but all I could think about was seeing Judah again, of adding to my mental gallery another image to spark a fresh bedtime fantasy.

Despite the smudge of fourteen years, I could still awaken the exquisite pain that pierced me on my first encounter with Judah. I was sixteen when Papa said it was time I learned the investment business and sent me on the calends to collect the payments from his and Amram's mortgagors in the agora. When I walked into Judah's shop and he raised those thickly-lashed lids, I felt a sweet stirring in my belly, a yearning I'd never known before. Later, as I was leaving, he leaned toward me to hand me his payment, close enough for our air to mingle and for his hand to brush against mine. That memory of him—the nearness of his well-chiseled muscles, broad shoulders, narrow waist, and the virility in his high-bridged nose, rugged cleft chin, and thick black curls—would ignite my private adventures in solitary love for the years to come.

But Papa had forbidden me to see Judah. He'd say, "He's just another bastard with no future." Judah's mother, a silversmith orphaned when her parents were crushed under the chassis of a precariously loaded oxcart delivering ice to their butcher shop, had no dowry and was therefore ineligible to marry. So, Judah was reared without the respectability of a father's name.

Second, unlike the members of my family who generations ago purchased Roman citizenship, a privilege that was hereditary but only when both parents were citizens, Judah was neither a Roman citizen nor a member of any other privileged class. So, he was not only denied redress in the Roman courts, but he was subject to the most onerous taxes and services, among them the *laographia*, a humiliating tax on

all accountable males between the ages of fourteen and sixty, slaves included. With no protection against tax collector greed and intimidation, a single misfortune could reduce him to poverty, even slavery.

What was more, as if those weren't reasons enough, I'd been betrothed since infancy to Amram's son, Noah. Could you imagine if Papa also knew that Judah was a member of and had introduced me to a secret league of Jewish artisans! They called themselves alchemists, these men who studied how to transmute base metals into silver and gold. If his membership in that league was ever discovered, he'd be accused of attempting to debase the emperor's currency and summarily crucified. As a citizen, I at least would be entitled to a trial and, upon conviction, could only be beheaded.

"You're certain, absolutely certain, you'll get the mantle back to me?" he asked with the look of fear in his eyes. "It's all I think about—"

"Yes, I'm sure."

"But how can you be so sure of this—what did you say his name was—Judah?"

"Yes, Judah. He is a jeweler, very talented—I'm sure he can do the job—and very successful too." I almost said *very handsome too*. "Besides, he's an old friend. In fact, you met him yourself. Remember?"

Gershon's eyes clouded over while he stroked his jaw.

"In Caesarea. He's the one who greeted us at the harbor and guided you to your host's estate." I paused a moment to sort through the jumbled closet that was my memory. "Bas-

sus, that's it! Your host's name was Lucius Didius Bassus. On the *Cardo Maximus*."

"But he could steal the gems. I'm sure he has clients—"

"Who, Judah? Yes, he could, but he wouldn—"

"But how do you know?" His voice creaked like the wheels of a rusty cart.

"Look, I'll stay close to Judah and watch his every move." An easy enough promise for me to keep.

"Oh, I just don't know what to do," he said in slow motion, dropping his sunken eyes to wring the tail of his himation with those long fingers.

"*Gershon, please go home,*" I begged but only with my eyes. All I wanted was to push him out the door where his twin Nubian giants, Wasi and Wedu waited in their white linen tunics and pigskin boots to shuttle him back home in the polished bronze litter parked at the curb. Their forearms were like battering rams, and their thighs were like tree trunks, but one was disfigured by a rope-like scar that puckered his left cheek and pulled at the corner of his mouth. So, although I could easily tell them apart, I still got their names mixed up.

Searching for a way to signal it was time for him to leave, I said, "I understand" and a moment later added, "Oh, I hear your bearers fuss—"

But I didn't have to follow through with my fib. As soon as I said "understand"—or maybe he hadn't even heard that—he shifted his weight and with a hopeless shrug, doddered toward the door. The glint of light on his himation was the last I saw of him before closing the door, perhaps too

quickly, and calling for Calisto to dress me for the agora. If anyone could calm me, my shy sloe-eyed maid could.

Calisto knew to take extra care with my grooming that day. And so, I relaxed as her cool hands bathed me, anointed me with Arabian fragrances, and rubbed my face with a pumice stone to remove the stray hairs around my eyebrows and upper lip. After that, she plaited my hair and heating the *calamistrum*'s metal rod, set ringlets around my face and along the nape of my neck. Then she dressed me in a sleeveless white linen *tunica interior* and over that, a matching chiton that pooled to my ankles in soft folds. Finally, she clad my feet in ankle-high *calcei* and draped me in a light woolen himation, which she fastened at the shoulder with my mother's fibula.

Ordinarily, I'd have walked the three miles to the agora to delight in the fresh breeze and let its edge raise some color on my face. But given I'd be carrying the mantle and trusting they could act as my bodyguards if necessary, I called for my bearers, the intrepid Orestes and phlegmatic Solon, to prepare the sedan chair. My father bought the pair ages ago to transport him through the city in a chair commensurate with his status as a promising young investment banker. Despite the passing years, both bearers have remained strong, top-heavy men with huge, veiny hands and thick, ropy necks. When not in our outbuilding buffing the chair's richly-oiled leather cushions or waxing its carved mahogany supporting poles, they're available to me as handymen or bodyguards. And when Papa was alive and Binyamin was home, they also served as their menservants.

While leaning over the edge of the bench to check my reflection in the pool's silver skin, I could hear Orestes's swift light steps pacing back and forth under the portico as he waited for not only me but Solon as well. Time flowed more slowly and without strain for Solon—if, in fact, it flowed at all. I nibbled at my lips and pinched color into my cheeks. Fluffing the ringlets already sticking to the back of my neck, I reminded myself to check them again before entering Judah's shop. As I joined Orestes, we caught sight of Solon, his tunic flapping in the breeze as he ambled up from our outbuilding to announce the chair was ready.

Rather than jostle through the maze of rutted byways and graffiti-scarred alleys that hug the agora's East Gate, I opted for the safer albeit longer route south through the Jewish quarter, west along the Canopic Way into the heart of the *Bruchium*—Palace—quarter, and finally north on the Street of the Soma.



Orestes took the lead. I watched him set the pace, his sinewy legs slicing the air like scissors, Solon's boots scuffing the cobbles behind me while the street rolled past beneath me. Soon we'd near the Canopic Way, or as we locals call it, the Way. Fringed with marble colonnades, stone sphinxes, and arcaded galleries, its one-hundred-foot-wide pavement of granite rectangles was a dazzle of light and a bustle of activity. With the bearers' skill, the columns, statues, and porticoes flashed by with hardly a list. Orestes

steered our course, eluding a camel caravan, maneuvering through a drove of pigs, and sidestepping a platoon of soldiers on horseback, their red-crested helmets an ever-present symbol of the power of Rome. But even Orestes couldn't shield me from the plumes of dust, the stench of raw meat, and the wall of noise that Papa used to call the breath of civilization. Nor could he shield me from recalling that day so many years ago soon after Binyamin entered ephebic training, the Great Gymnasium's physical and academic preparation for young men of privilege.

I still closed my eyes whenever I passed the Gymnasium's grove of marble columns just to the west of the Synagogue, my way of trying to obliterate the memory of Binyamin's first bout of *pankration*. This strenuous combination of boxing and wrestling ended only when one competitor was either unconscious or dead, unless he managed to surrender first. But my palms dampened any-way.

At first, Binyamin and his opponent seemed well matched: The fair husky Titus hammered my brother's face with a few left jabs. A thread of blood squiggled from Binyamin's eyebrow, Titus drove his fists into Binyamin's midriff, and Binyamin pounded him with some solid body punches. But then Binyamin caught him with a sudden left hook to the jaw, a straight right to the nose that snapped his head back, and a strangle hold that sent him to the mat. Permanently. My father's foam-flecked lips twisted in horror, and Binyamin's face froze in numbed disbelief when a mass of oozing wounds was all that remained of his schoolmate.

Opening my eyes when we had to stop for a magistrate's litter at the Street of the Soma, I caught a glimpse of our ever-present tourists, wreathed in silver and gold, flashing the stunning colors of their native garb, and peppering the breeze with their foreign tongues. They were lined up on my right in front of the Great Library and the adjoining Museum, our academy for scholars, hoping perhaps for a peek at Hero or one of the free-roaming exotic animals in the researchers' private zoo.

In the first months after Binyamin's death, I'd find his face everywhere and nowhere, among the shoppers in the agora, the tradesmen on the street, and the customers enjoying their favorite mid-afternoon snack in every cookshop and *kapeleion*. No place spared me from his image. Sure enough, that day, among the crush of tourists in front of the Museum, he materialized as a child with that boyhood scar wriggling across his left cheek. His eyes bored into me like gimlets. As he drew his brows together, he fixed me with the icy stare of someone who never forgave or forgot. Then, with a shrug, he turned his withering gaze at a girl, who ran to bury her face in the layers of her mother's skirts. A brittle moment later, he scalded me with a last viperish look and disappeared.

Was my brother still angry with me, or was I confronting my own guilt?

On my left, scores waited in a snaking line to enter the Soma, the sacred walled precinct Ptolemy II built to entomb and worship the divine Alexander. But whatever might fascinate the tourists, that day I'd have to be satisfied with the whisper-thin scent of warm stone radiating from the impres-

sive façades of the Way's limestone, granite, and marble buildings.

At last, we turned north onto the Street of the Soma, a broad avenue with a legion of palms marching down its center, their wide fronds fanning the sky while the breeze made eddies of their fallen comrades. Across on both sides, sculpted hedges, iridescent fountains, and the flat roofs of townhouses spooled past as Orestes whisked us toward the horizon. The raw scent of the sea charged my lungs. The side streets narrowed and curled toward the inns and saloons, the grain bins and lumberyards, and the dockyards and warehouses of the Great Harbor. I sat forward hoping to see some curiosity to report so as not to have to stand tongue-tied when Judah's eyes met mine. Nothing, only a knot of toothless drunks throwing knucklebones in a tenement-fringed lane.

The agora, our marketplace, is both the heart of the city and its cloaca of gossip. Like the legendary agoras in the Greek city-states, ours consists of a series of *stoas*, the long low buildings that face the central plaza and house a row of shops. Fronted by a portico for protection from the elements, each *stoa* and its cluster of adjoining buildings might also shelter an industrial workshop, inn, or *kapeleion*.

Crowding the central plaza are the moneychangers' tables, the *mensa publica*, and the portable stalls, tents, and awning-sheltered barrows of the merchants who must vie each day for a good location. Sometimes they have to call on the governor's official to settle a territorial dispute. And so, you can buy everything and anything imaginable there, from

a custom blend of imported aromatic gums distilled into your own personal fragrance to the wares of our potters, weavers, glassmakers, and jewelers.

Judah's shop is well situated in a *stoa* just east of the central plaza. Since we were approaching the agora from the Street of the Soma, I asked Orestes to drop me off at the West Gate but also to keep his eye on me until I reached the shop. I knew I'd be there a while, especially if Judah could fix the mantle right then and there. So, digging into the leather drawstring purse secured at my waist, I dropped a few copper coins into Orestes's cupped palm for him and Solon to take turns enjoying a snack in one of the several *kapeleia* while the other guarded the chair and watched for me.

As soon as I passed through the gate, the vigor of the agora set my head awlirl. Men and women of every class, the foreigners in their turbans and robes and the Greeks in their light tunics, bustled about. But with the linen envelope secure in my satchel and the knowledge that Orestes's eyes were tracking me, I elbowed my way confidently toward Judah's *stoa* until I caught sight of my drooping curls in the polished bronze mirror of a textile shop. And that's when I felt a fever rise in my cheeks. Here Gershon had entrusted me with our people's most valuable possession, and I was treating the occasion as an opportunity to ignite my own universe.

I accepted the self-reproach with a sigh, and then, standing at the threshold to Judah's shop, I called to him through the heavy oak shutters to unlock the wrought iron grille.

CHAPTER 5

May 11, Sunday Late Afternoon:

Is that you, Miriam?" Preparing to re-open his shop for the afternoon, Judah was still holding the broom he must have used to sweep out the morning dust.

I listened for any excitement in his voice, even the gentlest vibration. Unlike me, he didn't censor his speech. It simply flowed unguarded like cascading water. But I heard nothing, not even a slight catch when he spoke my name. He simply exchanged the broom for the long wooden key that hung from a hook near his workbench and as if I were an ordinary customer, crossed the white tile floor with unhurried grace to open the shutters, unlock the grille, and wave me into his shop.

When Judah squinted into the swathe of afternoon light that framed him in the doorway, I could see that new lines

had sketched a fan between his brows and at the outer corners of his eyes. Or perhaps my memory had smoothed his face since I'd last seen him at Binyamin's funeral. And his curls shimmered with silver at more than just his temples now. The willful wisps along his hairline and the luxuriant skeins that spilled from the crown of his head had quietly grayed as well. Perhaps my memory had also darkened his hair during the past eight months. After all, I'm thirty now, so he must be close to forty.

But I hadn't been to his shop in several years. Well, maybe three—no, almost four—when I had to get Amram's seal ring repaired. My heart races at even that recollection: Amram so sick, flushed with fever and gasping for air as if staring into the face of Death and his will missing from his drawer in the Public Records Office inside the Palace of Justice. And just then, when I might need his seal to authenticate a new one, the hoop of his ring split at the bottom and broke off from its shoulders leaving me no way to dip the stone into a puddle of wax. Who else but Judah would have reset the agate for me in just one day? And so, I hoped he could help me again, this time soon enough to keep Gershon's yellow bile in balance.

As I looked around, my mind registered the changes in his shop, somehow both bigger and smaller than I remembered. He'd added display cases of citron wood, rosewood, and acacia, each crammed with silver, gold, brass, and bronze presentation pieces. Among them were trays and craters, platters and bowls, ladles and carving knives, statues and busts, vases and figurines, censers and primitive masks,

most of them garish, even bizarre, surely from his brother's collection. In fact, I recognized the candelabrum from Eran's study, each of its arms a coiling snake gripping a candle in its expanded jaws, and also from his brother's shop, a pair of goblets, their bases curved like the talons of a raptor.

But then I saw the familiar row of display cases, the ones with the personal pieces he created and arranged so artfully: the signet rings, each with an intaglioed stone; the bejeweled chains, amulets, cuff bracelets, and pendants in silver and gold; and the brooches with their complex mosaic designs, all elegant expressions of Judah's taste and craftsmanship. I was admiring a black agate cameo ring depicting Rachel at the well, her features delicate, her neck lissome, and her smile ambiguous, when Judah brought me to the point of my coming. "What can I do for you, Miriam?"

I might have forgotten had I not been clutching the satchel straps so tightly that my hands ached.

"What's in the satchel, Miriam?"

"A Torah mantle," I said as I released the straps, opened the satchel, and slid out the linen envelope. "From the Great Synagogue. Gershon brought it to me earlier today. Some of the filaments of embroidery have been twisted, even broken."

"How did it happen?"

"I don't know." I shrugged. "But Gershon's sick over it. Do you think you can fix it?"

"Well, let me see," he said, raking his fingers through his hair before taking the envelope from me.

As if struck by the holiness of its contents, he carried the envelope in the flat of his palms. Then, following his shadow to the rear of the shop, in front of the scrim that curtains off his living quarters, he placed the envelope on his workbench. Sitting on the stool, resting his sandaled feet on the tiles, his calloused hands slid out and unrolled the mantle. A moment later, he reached for a Herodian oil lamp, fire steel, and the glass globe of water he keeps on the tower of shelves alongside the scrim.

He paused to light the lamp.

“*Tsk, tsk, tsk.* How could this have happened?” he muttered, gazing at each of the three vessels through the globe and then concentrating on the middle one.

I shrugged my shoulders.

True to my promise to Gershon, I stood close enough for Judah’s scent, a creamy sandalwood, to wrap around me like a mist. At the same time, for the images I’d treasure later, my eyes outlined the contours of his body beneath the folds of his *colobium*, his coarse, short-sleeved workingman’s tunic. I made sure, of course, to look up now and then as if casually surveying the shop so he wouldn’t feel my stare.

“Yes, I can fix this. It’s really not so damaged. Just do me a favor. Go into my cubicle and bring me a cotton sheet so I can protect the rest of the mantle while I work on this area around the emerald.”

That’s when a blush raced up my neck. Didn’t he remember when I’d last been behind that scrim? Only the most humiliating day of my life, the one I’ve re-lived over and over, each time dragging myself back into that abyss of

shame. That was the day he offered to show me the samples of deadened copper he'd so ingeniously prepared by adding a seed of silver to the mercury bath. That was the day, with my senses reeling, my heart hammering, and my breath quickening, I fell into his arms and felt his heat pulse through me. And that was the day he stepped back and told me to go home because if he did what he wanted to do, I'd have to bear the stigma on my wedding night. So, that was the day I stumbled out of his shop with tears of mortification stinging my eyes.

Despite his precious inventory and reputation as a noted jeweler in cities as far away as Jerusalem, I saw that he's continued to live in Spartan simplicity. A puddle of light trickling through the single, louvered, east-facing window revealed the mud brick flooring and sparse furnishings I remembered: a covered sleeping couch, a washstand and basin, and a table and chair. Hanging from a hook on the underside of a raw pine shelf was the silver chain and the amulet of a bird in flight his mother made for him shortly before she died. He once explained to me that the amulet symbolized the lessons she'd taught him: to live unencumbered and free of conventions, prejudices, and clutter; to respect himself and the value of his labor; to choose economy and simplicity; and to make commitments sparingly.

At the time, I figured he was warning me not to expect anything from him. And maybe he was. In those days though I daydreamed of nothing but sharing my life with him. Ironically now, when he had the respectability of a father's name and the status of a master craftsman, we no longer had any-

thing in common, not the business of his mortgage, our collaborative study of alchemy, nor the meetings of the league. So, a distance had grown between us.

I paused to cup the amulet in my palm and imagine it a gull wheeling high above the harbor.

If time flowed, I was unaware of it until I heard Judah call.

“Miriam, where’s the sheet?”

A staccato of footsteps, a swish of the scrim, and he was beside me, near enough for me to feel his breath on the back of my neck.

And then more softly, “Miriam, look on my sleeping couch.”

My sleeping couch. That’s all he had to say.

My desire for him sharpened to a spike.

I let go of the amulet and, turning to face him, saw a high color on his cheeks, and felt a wave of heat, whether from him or me I could not say.

A moment later, without knowing how I got there, I was clinging to him, my face buried in the crook of his neck, our bodies finding each other, fitting together, his stirring to life, mine turning to a liquid nothing could contain.

And then another set of footsteps, clicking rhythmically across the tiles, the jingle of bracelets coming closer.

“Hello! Anybody here?” A pause and then an uncertain, “Judah?” Those hoarse vowels could belong only to my apothecary, Aspasia, the frail-boned old woman who’d been Judah’s late-father’s landlady.

Her voice struck me like an arrow, but I kept perfectly still as if to freeze or even reverse the flow of time.

But Judah did not.

Lifting his shoulders and pulling away, a finger to his lips, he smoothed out his tunic.

The moment of intimacy was lost.

I could still feel the warmth of his embrace as he disappeared through the scrim into the shop.

I tiptoed toward the scrim in a plume of resentment, standing behind it to listen for the nature of Aspasia's errand lest its urgency overshadow my business with the mantle. But all she wanted was to pay him for a pendant he'd made for her, similar I gathered but somewhat larger than one she admired on someone else. Still, that and the exchange of polite conversation took long enough for the meager light in his cubicle to shift a little. In the meantime, I stood there like a common thief, holding my breath, a hand clamped over my mouth, wondering which of my behaviors was more outrageous: throwing myself at Judah or leaving the mantle unguarded on his workbench.

Then, as soon as I heard Aspasia leave, I picked up the sheet and crossed into the shop.



I watched Judah work in the quiet afternoon light while a comfortable silence filled the air. He'd shake his head occasionally with what looked like incredulity. Other times he'd look up and rake his fingers through his hair before div-

ing back into his work. Don't ask me how long I stood beside him. It might have been a few minutes, an hour, or even longer. I couldn't say. Only that nothing else mattered. I was with Judah.

At last, he got up and showed me the mantle.

"There. How does it look?" he asked, raising the corners of his lips.

"Oh, Judah, it looks great. You'd never know there'd been any—But listen, before I forget, I want to pay—"

He brushed away my words as if I'd written them in the air.

"Well, I know poor Gershon will be so relieved. By the way, what can you tell me about it?"

"Right now, only that the craftsmanship is superb, the goldsmith's techniques, centuries old."

"No, I meant about the damage."

"Only this, strange as it may sound: The defaced area is well defined. In other words, the links around it, as delicate as they are, show no stress at all. So, I don't see how this could have happened accidentally."

"Oh, Lord! What are you saying?" Fear lapped at my feet like the incoming tide.

"I'm saying the damage was done deliberately by someone with a jeweler's tool. But I'm absolutely baffled as to why. None of the gold links were taken, and the gems themselves are genuine. I'm certain of that."

"Oh, Judah, that's what Gershon keeps saying, that it's the deliberate work of a madman."

“Well, tell Gershon he can relax now. The mantle is fixed. The problem is solved.”

But I wasn't so sure.

CHAPTER 6

May 11, Sunday Evening:

Miss Miriam? *Ahem*, Miss Miriam, Mr. ben Israel is calling for you.”

I was in the courtyard enjoying the spicy coolness of the evening, serenaded by the fountain’s babble, and absorbed in the wrath of Achilles when Minta dragged me back from the Trojan War.

“Do you know what he wants?” I asked, rubbing the weariness from my face. I hadn’t expected to see him until early tomorrow morning when I planned to go to the Synagogue to return the mantle.

“I don’t know, ma’am, but he’s carrying a pouch.”

“How does he seem to you?”

“Well, like he’s been lately, I guess. Maybe a little worse.”

“Okay.” I rolled up the scroll as I shifted my legs and planted my feet on the tiles. “Please light the lamp on my desk and show him into the study.”

I left *The Iliad* on the chaise with a sigh, stood on my momentarily stiff legs, and wondered how he knew Judah had already fixed the mantle.



One look told me Gershon was more troubled than ever. From the armchair behind my desk, I asked in that phony singsong I used whenever I wanted to sound more cheerful than I felt, “Gershon, how are you?” Instead, I sounded like someone who’d had too much to drink.

His own voice was as dry and thin as a sheet of papyrus. “Can I sit—Is here okay?”

“Yes, Gershon. Please do.” I was so startled by his appearance, let alone that he was here at all, that I’d forgotten my manners.

Despite his bloated face, he looked cadaverous as he shuffled toward the desk, gripping its edge before dropping into the chair with a groan. *Too much black bile*, I thought. And then, rather than the lemony scent of his oil of verbena, I detected about him an insistent acidic smell.

“I have good news.” *Oh, no! Not my false cheerfulness again.* So, I took a deep breath and flattened my tone as if I were a bad actor reading a worse script. “You’ll be glad to know the mantle is fixed, absolutely perfect. No one will ever be the wiser. I was going to bring it to you tomorrow, but

let me show it to you now.” I was talking too fast, but I couldn’t help myself. His appearance unnerved me so. Anyway, he probably hadn’t heard a word I said. So, I started again, this time with thunder in my voice. “Look! I’ll be right back! I have a surprise for you.” And just in case he hadn’t heard that, I held up my hands, palms out.

But his nod told me he’d understood.

I’d stowed the mantle in the library, on the lowest shelf of the mahogany hutch in the cubby Papa had once given me for my primers, notes, and souvenirs. I got up to fetch it when Gershon thumped on the desk.

“No!” The unnatural loudness of his voice scraped the inside of my ears. “Not the mantle—something el—I’m here about something else.”

Good Lord, what now? I sank back into my chair as alarm hammered in my chest. Then I rocked forward to listen and bit down on my tongue to stifle any inclination to interrupt him.

“Late this afternoon, my secretary handed me a note. He admitted first seeing it on April thirtieth—Oh, Lord, that’s almost two weeks ago—no, three—whatever—but he dismissed it as worthless—a scrap of used papyrus, nothing more. ‘Must have ended up here by mistake,’ he said. You see, it was written on a torn, rumpled scrap—”

I rolled my hand in a circle, impatient for him to get to the point, but the pauses between his words only got longer.

“—I’ll show it to you in a minute—written on a torn, rumpled scrap of papyrus.” He paused to scratch the back of his neck. “Wait. Didn’t I tell you that already?”

I gave an exasperated nod of my head.

His face puckered with confusion, but he continued. “And aside from that, the penmanship was so cramped my secretary couldn’t be bothered deciphering it. That’s what he said anyway. ‘Certainly not the work of any self-respecting scribe I know. None of the curves and flourishes you’d expect from an expert.’ But then today, before discarding it, he had the patience and, yes, I suppose the curiosity to read it.”

Dead silence.

I watched Gershon’s gaze wander off into the peristyle and his thoughts get tangled up in the foliage.

The study became so still I could hear the lamp hiss.

“Gershon, let me see it,” I said, bringing him back to the point of his visit.

He jerked his head and then, after a long moment, threw up his hands in a gesture of bafflement, slid the scrap out of his pouch, and handed it to me across the desk.

The triangular slip fit neatly in my palm.

Although my eyes had to struggle to decode the message—the prose was schooled, but the penmanship crude with a smudge running through most of the legible words—the substance was clear enough. Signed “a friend,” it urged Mr. ben Israel to increase the security in the Synagogue immediately.

I looked up to see a deep vertical furrow cutting into Gershon’s brow. We shared an edgy silence while he nodded and blinked simultaneously as if trying to make sense of the warning.

“What does it mean? Is that Capernaum hayseed trying to get us to squander even more money on his useless services? Some watchman! Outrageous, utterly outrageou—”

“No, it couldn’t be Daniel. April thirtieth, you say? This message was written before the *bemah* was desecrated.”

“So, who could be behind this wickedness?” he asked, tilting forward, spraying the air with sparkles of saliva.

“Look, if the writer was trying to disguise his handwriting—for the moment, let’s assume it’s a man—he must have been afraid you’d recognize it. Does anything look at all familiar? Think, Gershon.” I clenched my hand into a fist and pounded the desktop. “Who else—” *Thwack*. “—penned you—” *Thwack*. “—a letter—” *Thwack*. “—or anything for that matter?”

Propping his elbows on the desktop, he cradled his head in his hands and rubbed his temples. “I’m not sure. Perhaps something’s familiar in those round letters. I’ve seen that before...well, maybe...on an agreement. Let me see. *Hmm*. Yes, I can see it in my mind’s eye. It’s a contract, a contract written on vellum. And I bet I still have it.”

The blood pounded in my ears like a sledgehammer. “Look, let me take this scrap and the contract, if you still have it, to my friend Bion. He can tell a lot from a sample of handwriting, and if I also have the contract, he’ll know whether they were penned by the same hand.”

“I don’t know, Miriam. I really don’t want to make public what’s been happening—the Synagogue—the vandalism—the *bemah*—the mantle—and certainly not to a gentile. Who is this Bion anyway?”

“You practically know him, Phoebe’s husband. You met her on the *Orion*. Remember the trip to Caesarea? She was my servant then, but I freed her about four years ago. Please, Gershon. For the sake of the Synagogue, we need to get to the bottom of this.” I wanted to add for the sake of Daniel, but I didn’t. Anyway, I was talking too fast again, and again, I couldn’t help it, this time because I was so exasperated. “I know Bion can help us, and I can trust him to keep our business confidential.”

“Are you very sure?” Pitching his half-closed eyes into the distance, Gershon stroked his jaw but then turned toward me with a nod of acquiescence.

“You won’t be sorry. I promise. Send over the contract as soon as you can. Which reminds me, I want to give you back the mantle.” And then as an afterthought, I asked, “By the way, whose contract was it, the one with those round letters? Do I know him?”

“Yes, you do.”

“So, who was it?”

“Our sage, Rabbi Ehud.”

CHAPTER 7

May 12, Monday Afternoon:

Despite the unusually hot weather, a perfect day to sit in the atrium, face the pool, and sip ginger tea, I was in my study filtering from its waters the tangled veins of my fern's crushed leaflets. Then, just as I was about to pour the waters into shallow drying dishes, Minta knocked on my door to announce that one of Gershon's bearers was here to deliver a package. So, I got up from my workbench and passed through the atrium, where Orestes and Solon were trudging in and out fetching water from the well to fill the pool and keep the air circulating.

When I opened the front door, I saw in my squint an elegantly dressed ebony statue. Sliced by the sharp western light, its brilliance igniting that rope-like scar on his cheek, he calmed the skirt of his tunic before handing me a sheath.

“Thank you, Wedu.”

The tight smile that lifted the right corner of his mouth stretched his scar unit it spanned the left side of his face.

Lucky guess, I thought, either that or he was used to being called by his brother’s name.

He hinged at the waist so deeply I thought he’d scrape the crown of his head on the tiles.

A moment later, he was bounding through the air, his liquid arms swinging, his feet barely meeting the pavement.



On another day, I might have walked to the agora. After all, I wouldn’t be carrying anything heavy or valuable, just the contract and the scrap of papyrus Gershon had left with me. But given the heat, I asked Orestes and Solon to take me. Still, while waiting for them to put away their buckets and bring out the chair, I couldn’t resist taking a few minutes to examine the contract myself.

I slid it out of its sheath, unrolled it on my desk, and tried to apply Bion’s methods. I figured he’d study the calf-skin first. To him, each piece was unique based on its quality and processing. Next, he’d inspect the handwriting. At least that’s what he did in Caesarea when I asked him to determine the provenance of an alchemical scroll from one of its panels. He inspected the ink and from the strokes on the papyrus, inferred the kind of pen the writer used.

So just as I had relied on him years ago, I knew he could establish whether Rabbi Ehud could have authored that

anonymous note, a notion that seemed as groundless, inflammatory, and absurd as Gershon's claim that Daniel had deliberately mutilated the mantle. How could Gershon have so carelessly accused Daniel and Rabbi Ehud? Had he forgotten that during the Pogrom for accusations even more specious, our people were dragged into the theater, stripped and scourged, or bound to the wheel and mauled like the vilest criminals? Still others had been hauled into the marketplace to be stoned, pummeled, torn limb from limb, or burned alive. Their properties were razed, their corpses were desecrated, and their women—under threat of torture—were forced to eat the flesh of swine.

As expected, the document was a contract between Rabbi Ehud ben Zechariah, born in Beit She'arim and residing in Caesarea, and the Most Trusted Servants of the Great Synagogue of Alexandria for the rabbi's services, accommodations, and compensation from the spring of the sixth year of the reign of our Emperor to the fall of the following year. Beyond that, I could have made some guesses about the vellum, but knowing next to nothing about that, I jumped right to the handwriting. Because of its overall refinement, I figured it must have been the work of a scribe, but probably a young, inexperienced one because of the conspicuous rounding of the letters.

Okay. So far, so good.

But before I had a chance to examine the ink, Minta knocked on the door to tell me the bearers were ready to take me to Bion's shop. To this day, whenever I thought of him, I

marveled at how much he'd achieved since Phoebe first met him twenty years ago.

At that time, he was a public slave repairing precious scrolls for the Great Library. Phoebe would encounter him whenever she brought Papa's scrolls to his workshop. As a sideline, he repaired privately owned scrolls to earn the money to buy his freedom. Soon enough, a friendship developed—Phoebe would insist it was a crush. She'd meet him afternoons under a portico in the central plaza of the agora where they'd share a platter of fruit and pastries at a *kapeleion*, walk along the Great Harbor past the warehouses, cross the *Heptastadion*, the causeway that connects the city proper to Pharos Island, and then take a litter back. But before he could save the money to buy his freedom, the director sold him to a Jewish craftsman, a wealthy sandal-maker from Caesarea, who needed someone both literate and skilled with his hands.

Unlike the Romans, the Jews strictly regulated the treatment of their slaves. Bion was permitted to work no more than ten hours a day, six days a week, which meant he'd still have time to repair scrolls for his master's friends and earn the money to buy his freedom. Moreover, according to Jewish Law, the sandal-maker couldn't keep him longer than a year unless Bion agreed to be circumcised. Once he accepted the mark of the Jews, Bion was regarded more as a member of the family than a servant.

And then, his master was required to liberate him after six years. But that wasn't all. Along with his quitclaim, his master endowed him with a gift sufficiently generous for him

to open a shop in Caesarea for repairing and selling rare scrolls. With his connection to the Great Library and recommendations from the sandal-maker and his friends, Bion prospered. Soon enough, he was able to diversify his stock, hire clerks, and expand his business to a prime location opposite the Forum.

Bion closed his shop in Caesarea when the city started “vomiting blood.” That’s how he described the strikes and revolts, terrorism and banditry, assassinations and ambushes. He couldn’t get the goods he needed, not even papyrus from the banks of the Jordan, never mind the silky sheets from our factories along Lake Mareotis. “Besides,” he said, “No one had any money, certainly not the peasants pouring in through the city gates, worse off than ever, having sold their land to pay their civil taxes.”

And so, Bion moved back to Alexandria and opened his shop here in the agora where he also carried the manuscripts of our contemporary scholars like Thrasyllus of Mendes and engineers like our very own Hero. Still, his liveliest trade was in writing supplies: the ink, inkwells, bronze and reed pens, sharpening knives, and styli along with the wax tablets, sheets, and scrolls of papyrus, and the parchment for the myriad of clerks, students, and scholars who flock to our city.

As soon as Orestes seated me in the chair and adjusted the awning to shade me from the long swathes of afternoon light, we left for the agora. Rather than head south, we took the shorter and shadier route, angling north into the sea breeze and then west through the side streets of the Jewish

and then *Bruchium* quarters. I preferred this route, despite the reek of fried grease and the geysers of dust that blighted the backstreets along the agora's eastern edge.

Before that though, I could greet the marble, granite, and limestone townhouses that framed the paved lanes, their entrances guarded by mythical topiary, their gardens carpeted in rose petals, their emerald lawns dappled by the rustling crowns of plane trees. And along the way, I could call to my favorite crooked pine tree, perhaps even spot a brown-necked raven in its crotch. If not, I could still listen to the caws of gulls, the clang of buoys, and the voices of distant ships. But I was also afraid that at the shoreline, I'd see or fancy I was seeing Binyamin as a child frolicking in the water, cutting through the foam, or tunneling under the waves, as if my grief had been waiting in ambush for just such an opportunity to churn the guilt that burrowed into my heart like a maggot.

But no, rather than focus on the bathers, I leaned forward, shaded my forehead, and swept my gaze along the harbor to a *corbita*, a wide sailing ship with a rounded, big-bellied hull very much like the *Orion*, a ship belonging to my father's cousin. I remembered Papa arranging for Phoebe and me to have special accommodations on that ship from Alexandria to Caesarea. Most of the passengers, a never-ending stream of bankers, merchants, ship owners, government agents, public couriers, and tourists, camped with their servants, sharing a tiny tent on the deck. But Phoebe and I were assigned to one of the lavishly appointed cabins in the deckhouse, the raised afterdeck for the captain, owner or his

agent, and any special guests. A deckhouse offered the luxury of a banquet room, cabins, promenades, and lounges, the *Orion's* with mosaic floors depicting scenes from *The Iliad*. It was on that voyage that we met another guest, Gershon ben Israel, the very same Gershon ben Israel who, I had to admit, had been straining my patience to the point that when I saw him, I tasted metal on my tongue.

The *corbita* moored here, her gangplank lowered, had probably been carrying luxuries from China and India destined for the governor's palace. And all the while, as I watched a procession of bare-chested stevedores unload the goods, Orestes and Solon cut a clean line around the pot-holes, sparing me the lists and jolts of a less skilled pair of bearers before swaying to a halt at the East Gate.



The heat of the pavement baked through my *calcei* and roasted the soles of my feet as I approached Bion's *stoa*, just to the east of Judah's.

"You just missed her, Miss bat Isaac," said Thoth. He welcomed me at the threshold of his master's shop with a slight bow of his lopsided head, just enough for a beam of light to bronze his bald pate. "Miss Phoebe just left to do her errands but promised to bring us back some cheese pastries and honeyed pistachio nuts from her favorite *kapeleion*."

I recalled Phoebe's indulging in them in Caesarea after completing what she still proudly called her "covert mission to protect a secret that could have toppled the Empire." That

was Phoebe, stubbornly girlish with a flair for theatrics. She began her life with our family as the day-old Greek foundling my mother rescued in the *Bruchium* quarter and trained to become our household slave. But Phoebe became much more than a beloved servant. Five years my senior, she became my big sister: the arbiter of my manners and dress, the officious critic of my behavior, the faithful keeper of my secrets, and the unshakable optimist in my uncertain romance with Judah.

What was more, like a tigress with her cub, she became my protector, like the mother I never knew. Then two years ago, in anticipation of her marriage to Bion, Phoebe agreed, at last, to her manumission so their children would be free. I still had trouble squaring this new stylish Phoebe with my lingering image of her in the coarse gray woolen tunic that marked her status as a slave.

Bowing his head again, this time more deeply, Thoth brought me back to the present.

“Sounds wonderful, but I’m really here to see Bion.”

“Of course, of course.” Another bow, slight this time. “He’s in his offi—”

Bion must have heard me because, with a cry of delight and then a “Miriam-what-a-surprise!” he burst through a scrim and sailed down the center aisle toward me, maneuvering his paunch with the skill of a sea captain as he looped around the swarms of shoppers chirping, droning, and buzzing about the counters, tables, and shelves laden with manuscripts and stationery supplies. He stocks the usual commodities as well as items found nowhere else in the city, like

the wooden dowels to make a papyrus scroll and the powders and pastes to smooth and remove the grease from a piece of parchment.

How contented he looked, the same as ever, just his face a little more set. His body was a tad plumper judging by the heavily tooled leather belt girding him where his waist used to be and the pearls of flesh spurting out between the coin-like bronze buttons that fastened the sides of his heavily embroidered linen tunic. Still, the same smile split his cherubic face, reddened his cheeks, and swallowed up his gold-flecked eyes.

“Phoebe didn’t tell me you were coming today. She’ll be back this even—”

“Actually, I’m here to see you if you have some time to spare—”

“Right this way.” Without a moment’s hesitation, he beckoned me toward the back of his shop with a wave of his upturned palm.

I felt my shoulders sag with relief and realized how tense I’d been. Even my neck ached. *But what if Bion concludes that Rabbi Ehud could have written that anonymous message? What happens to my relief then?*



Two Herodian oil lamps on the marble-topped cabinets framing the lone window in Bion’s office were the only challenge to the afternoon shadows. Each throwing a hoop of

golden light, they sputtered a greeting in the rush of air as we passed through the scrim.

“How good to see you, Miriam. I hope you’re well. Do know that Phoebe and I continue to grieve for your loss.”

“Thank you. Phoebe has been a great comfort to me.”

He motioned for me to take a seat across from him at the long rosewood table that dominated the center of the room, the one where, in Caesarea, I’d see him and Phoebe sitting with their hands intertwined and their faces serene as they planned their future. I absorbed the elegant simplicity of his office while, his palms resting on his knees, he waited for me to speak.

“First I must apologize for bursting in without an appoint—”

He waved his hand to brush away my words.

“—ment. My only excuse is that the answer is important to the reputation of one, perhaps two innocent men. Second, I ask that the substance of this meeting be kept confidential, for the moment even from Phoebe, who’d only worry I was getting involved again in something dangerous.”

He nodded.

“And finally, I apologize for stressing the need for discretion. You more than anyone proved your trustworthiness in Caesarea.”

His eyes sparkled with pride. Then, fitting his palms together, he steepled his forefingers and pressed them against his rosebud lips.

“Besides, I have a question only you can answer.”

“Sounds important,” he said with a wry smile.

“I have two documents. I need to know whether they could have been penned by the same man, and if so, what you can tell me about him.”

The shadows painted blotches on the table and splashed the oriental carpet with ragged pools of darkness. As I reached into my satchel for the scrap of papyrus and the contract still in its sheath, Bion brought over the lamps to spread a skin of light across the table. Then he slipped the contract out of its sheath. Hunching over the table, his forearms balancing on its edge, he eyed both documents.

“Before I examine them with the globe, I want to get an overall impression of each document. They’re very different, of course. The contract was written on the flesh side of the skin of a stillborn calf. I can tell by the fine white appearance of the vellum, which contrasts so strikingly with the ink, not that the ink is unusual, just a blend of lamp-black, gum, and water. No indication of the ink running so the skin must have been treated, maybe with pumice or lime. I just can’t tell...”

While giving a running account of his observations, his speech began to slow, his diction to slur until he was speaking only to himself, his voice hardly a mumble before it dribbled into silence.

Words of impatience burned in my throat, but surely his silence couldn’t have lasted as long as it seemed. Minutes later, once he picked up the scrap, his voice stirred again as it rolled out from his throat.

“On the other hand, this scrap comes from a sheet of papyrus, and, by the way, not from Egyptian papyrus—it’s too

coarse—probably from one of the huge beds along the Jordan. The writing is on the recto side—”

He looked up to explain that the recto side was the front side of a sheet of papyrus, the preferred side, so the writing ran parallel to rather than across the grain.

“—but the piece has been washed and re-used. The erasure is never complete, you know. I’d be curious to...”

I appreciated Bion’s thoroughness, but my heart was kicking against my chest. I just wanted to know whether Rabbi Ehud could have written that note.

Shifting his weight, Bion picked up both documents and one of the lamps, pivoted out of his chair, and scooted over to the workbench along the northern wall of his office. Planting first the lamp on his workbench and then his feet in an isosceles stance astride the stool, he reached to the shelf above him for a globe like Judah’s so he could systematically examine the contract and scrap of papyrus.

Nibbling at my cuticles, I otherwise posed like a statue, barely breathing, leaning forward, perched on the edge of the chair, my heels supporting my weight, my knees flexed, my free hand gripping the edge of the table. The wait seemed interminable, but when I looked down, none of the carpet’s pools of darkness had shifted.

All the while, Bion took turns stooping over the workbench, his nose almost touching the globe, then leaning back, lifting each document to catch a sliver of light, pursing his lips, wiping his hands on the belly of his tunic, creasing his brow, drumming his fingers, biting his lower lip, rubbing the

back of his neck, and scratching his head. Finally, nodding decisively, he put down the globe and looked up.

A chill stippled my skin. And a needle pricked my innards. Neither of us spoke.

And then he turned to me. “Look, based on the handwriting, I’d say the contract was written by a man well past his youth using the finest quality *calamus*, probably bronze, and as you yourself have noted, his letters are too round, certainly not what I’d expect from a profess—”

“But couldn’t the scribe have been an apprentice just learning his craft?”

“I don’t think so. With the globe, I can see a slight tremor in the writer’s hand, at least a hesitation. Besides, the vellum was quite expensive. So, if the signer was going to hire a professional, he’d likely have paid the price for an expert.”

“What about the note, the papyrus?” My breath was coming at a frantic pace now, as though I’d been running, but the more I tried to compose myself, the more breathless I became.

“Same hand. Despite the cramping, the letters show the same odd rounding. Besides, the tremor on the broad strokes is even more pronounced here. The writer was either nervous or in a hurry, maybe both. He used a reed pen, one that needed to be sharpened, which confirms my impression he was in a hurry.”

With a deep inhale, Bion squared his shoulders and resumed his report.

“Yes, I’m sure he was in a hurry. Look at the gray splotches on the scrap. He must have washed the sheet and

couldn't wait for the papyrus to dry fully. So, while I cannot, of course, tell you who penned these documents, I can say with reasonable certainty that they were written by the same man, an older man, learned, but definitely not a professional scribe."

My mouth suddenly dry, my breath coming in snatches, I knew I'd stepped into the most bizarre crime I'd ever investigated.

CHAPTER 8

May 12, Monday, Late Afternoon:

The sun was still entangled in the treetops when I uttered a few high-pitched sounds Thoth could interpret as a respectful good-bye. I'd forced my mouth open, but only the hard consonants could tunnel through the panic rolling up my throat.

As I emerged from the shop, a brisk sea breeze whiffing through the trees flapped the edges of my himation and buffeted the curls along my forehead. With that rush of sweet air, I decided to dismiss Orestes and Solon and charge over to Judah's. Maybe he could help me make sense of why the rabbi would send such a note, anonymously at that, and how it came to be so prophetic.

I found Solon at the counter of a *kapeleion* near the East Gate where he was sipping his henket through a straw. As I

watched him, I could feel the thick cold brew coat my own throat. When he raised his chin and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, I waved and signaled that he and Orestes were free for the rest of the day. He welcomed the news with a salute.

The heat had drained out of the afternoon. The agora was awake again with the squabbles of pigeons and the harangues of street philosophers; hucksters; impromptu orators; and those peddling watered fig juice, boiled elephant beans, and baskets of fish buzzing with flies. I sidled through the crowd to Judah's shop as if through a thick liquid, the shoppers streaming from *stoa* to *stoa*, stall to stall, and barrow to barrow amidst the high aroma of tethered animals and their droppings.

The blade of light that accompanied me into Judah's shop infused his face with an amber glow as he looked up. He must have just finished with a customer because he was putting some signet rings back in the display case. Spilling over with my yet-to-be-confirmed but spiraling suspicions of Rabbi Ehad, I brought Judah up-to-date about Gershon's secretary and the anonymous note, showed him the slip of papyrus, and reported Bion's conclusions while expressing my own bewilderment.

"So, what do you want to do?" he asked as he raked his hands through his glossy curls.

"Well, I just have so many questions. I think we should ask the rabbi directly: What danger to the Synagogue did he foresee? Did he anticipate the desecration of the Torah mantle? And the mess on the *bemah* as well? And why did he

feel he had to make his recommendation for increased security anonymously? After all, he'd been here barely a few days when he wrote that." I clenched my hands into fists so the bite of my nails into my palms would slow me down, but the words kept tumbling out anyway.

"Besides, I want to know who committed these despicable acts. And why. And is the danger over?" I paused to get my breath back. "But I suppose these questions can wait until he answers the first ones. So, let's go to his house and ask him. As simple as that."

"Both of us?" He arched his eyebrows as if to say "You can't be serious."

"Of course, both of us," I said with more certainty than I felt. "When are you free?"

He folded his arms across his chest.

I countered with a scowl.

He drew his brow down low.

I raised my chin.

He shrugged to concede defeat, nodded, and then I heard a smile in his voice. "I can close the shop for a couple of hours tomorrow. Let's try the middle of the afternoon. That's when business is light anyway, and we're likely to catch him at home."

"Great. I'll be here at one."

CHAPTER 9

May 13, Tuesday, Early Afternoon:

Judah was ready when I reached his shop. He was just rewinding a spool of wire and storing the metal scraps in an earthenware *cantharus*, the two-handled, bowl-shaped drinking cup he keeps on his workbench. Rather than his usual *colobium*, he wore a sleeveless, knee-length tunic of Indian cotton, the color matching his luminous green eyes, the sash at his waist emphasizing his trim build. I wanted to believe he'd dressed up for me, but we were after all going to the home of a scholar from the Holy Land, even if it was just to question him about the anonymous note. Watching the tunic brush the contours of his body as he checked beyond the entrance to make sure no potential client was approaching, I was stirred by the fluidity of his movements.

“So, what are they like, this scholar and his family—you never told me—and where are we going anyway?” Judah emphasized the *we* while closing and locking the wrought iron grille and securing the heavy wooden shutters across his entrance.

I’d forgotten he’d never been introduced to them, although he must have at least heard the rabbi’s lectures on Shabbat. So, omitting my aversion for the prospective son-in-law, I gave Judah an otherwise faithful version of my impression of our modest sage’s little family: his daughter, the dainty Naarah and her fiancé, the magnetic and muscular Omar.

“And they’re staying on a side street in the *Bruchium* quarter, around the corner from the Synagogue. Amram and Gershon rented the apartment for them from Baruch ben Ezekiel’s son. Remember him?”

“The son?”

“No, the father, ben Ezekiel.”

“Yes, of course. Blessed be his name.”

No one could forget our beloved, most senior elder, how during the Pogrom, he was crucified outside the Gate of the Sun near the Hippodrome, how he was left there to suffer the *summum supplicium*, the most extreme punishment after which there could be no burial, no lamentations, no peace—only the wandering of his soul and a jackal’s marks on his scattered bones.

“Now, in addition to getting answers to my questions, I want to snoop around for other samples of the rabbi’s hand-

writing. Could you distract him with the questions while I poke around?

“Me? No, Miriam, you need to do the asking. You know the questions, and you know him better than I do. You can watch his face, judge his answers, and follow up on what he says. I’m here just to be your second set of ears. Agreed?”

This time I was the one to shrug.



We walked southeast through the shaded parks and gardens of the *Bruchium* quarter. Our pace eased as we followed the curves of the crushed stone walkways perfumed by blankets of roses, populated by statuary and topiary, and bordered by sunlit lawns, the grass rippling in the occasional gust. From time to time, we would shield our eyes from the iridescent spray of the fountains, but neither of us was willing to litter the air with words. I listened instead to the gentle crunch of the stones beneath our feet, the trill of songbirds, the gurgle of cascading water, and the sigh of the breeze through the trees.

If I could for a moment have forgotten the seriousness of our mission, I would have pretended that Judah and I were going on a picnic rather than investigating a crime. Instead, the thought kept poking me that our sage was somehow involved in the desecration of our Synagogue. I dared not mention my suspicions, not even to Judah, lest they reach forward to become the reality I feared.

We turned left onto a lane paved with mica-flecked cobbles and lined with a serried rank of three-story, flat-roofed townhouses, most of them limestone. Only then did Judah speak:

“Are we getting close?” Another emphasis on *we*, albeit slight this time, and with a hint of humor in his voice.

I turned to look at him, daring to let my eyes linger so I could store in my memory and dust off for my daydreams the fans at the corners of his eyes and the silver nimbus that wreathed his face. “Yes, they live on the second floor of that corner house,” I said, pointing to the one facing south.

We crossed the pavement to the sunnier side, pulling our shadows up the narrow walk, a mixture of sand, shells, and pebbles. Mounting the few shallow steps, we welcomed the shade of the portico and the scent of rosemary flowering in the pots on either side of the metal-studded, sun-bleached oak door. Like the door to a fortress. Like Amram’s door. No wonder. The fear of another pogrom waits like a coiled spring in the bowels of those who lost so much. Judah and I each took a full chest breath and stood up straight, his feet spread slightly apart, as I raised my arm and knocked.

A house slave answered the door. Looking so much like Agrippina the Younger that I had to suppress a gasp, she led us across the sleek onyx floor of a marbled atrium lightly redolent of lilies. Sunbeams came through the *compluvium*, the unroofed space over the pool, and fractured into a thousand beads of light before glinting off a nest of rosewood tables, two benches inlaid with jasper and ivory, and paneled walls frescoed with swirling vines and flowers. I wanted to

nose about, but before I could finish uttering the rabbi's name, "Agrippina" was hustling us past a pair of ceiling-high, purple tied-back drapes that curtained a peristyle and up a sweeping, lantern-lined marble staircase to a mahogany door that smelled faintly of polish.

I knocked, waited, and knocked again.

Judah shifted from one foot to the other as if ready to protect me.

At first, I thought no one was home. That's how long it took Naarah to answer the door. I'd forgotten the difficulty she must have walking and felt a spasm of guilt for that second, more insistent knock. I could see now that her left leg was shorter than the right, which exacerbated the curve of her spine.

She gripped the door jamb for balance as she greeted me in a breathy voice, and I introduced her to Judah.

"Come in," she said, her sentence turning up at the end as if she were asking a question, "and please sit down." Despite the lemony scent of her fragrance, I caught the odor of alarm in the perspiration that was pearling on her forehead and wondered what she'd been doing when we interrupted her.

She ushered us into a cluttered, cramped, colorless room. A wash of sepia light sifting in from the courtyard through the narrow north window settled on the curve of her back as she hobbled toward a square, stool-like *sella* opposite two bronze-finished dining couches. The cushions were worn and the fabric frayed. She waved us toward the couch-

es, which headed at right angles into the far corner of the room.

Judah and I each perched on our own couch, his eyes cast down as if he were studying the spider-web cracks in the mosaic floor.

“Can I offer you some tea?”

“I don’t mean to trouble you. We’re actually, here to speak with your father.”

When I wasn’t held by her feathery voice, smooth brow, and luminescent alabaster skin, I imagined myself hunting for samples of the rabbi’s handwriting. First, I was rifling through the polished rosewood floor-to-ceiling cabinets that covered the east wall to the foot of my couch.

Their bowed shelves were crammed with cubbies piled high with scrolls, waxed tablets, stacks of papyrus, and sheets of parchment. Then I was peeling back the cushions on the couches, upending her *sella*, and slipping behind the wicker partition that screened the west wall. That partition likely hid the rabbi’s sleeping couch and most important of all, his desk.

“He’s not here right now. He went to the agora.”

Again that same inflection, ending her sentences with a rise.

“And Omar?”

Her chin quivered at the sound of his name so much so that my heart ached for her.

“He’s at the library. He goes most days, you know. A student of ancient Greek pottery. The vases, I mean. Has been for years. Well, several anyway, I think.” Her tapering

fingers picked at the threads of her tunic as she spoke. “Studies the decorative figures on the finer vases, you know, to understand their lives, their civilization.”

“Sounds fascinating,” I lied. Truly, I couldn’t wait to get out of that dim, melancholy room. So, I murmured an I’m-sorry-to-bother-you-thank-you-very-much and dragged Judah out with my eyes.

“So now what?” he asked as the fortress clanged shut. “I guess we’re at a dead end.”

“Not exactly. I’m going back to the agora to look for him. And you may as well walk with me if you’re going back to the shop. You’ve already lost enough time on this fool’s errand. But look, we still might see him on his way home. I figure our best chance would be to take the Canopic Way and then the Street of the Soma. Or I might encounter him after I drop you off. Anyway, I’m sorry I wasted your time.”

Whoops, another lie.

“Oh, well,” he shrugged. And then as an afterthought, “But what if you do meet up with him? You can’t just start questioning him in the middle of the plaza.”

“Don’t worry, not much chance at this hour of encountering anybody.”

Wrong again!

CHAPTER 10

May 13, Tuesday, Mid-Afternoon:

I roamed about from *stoa* to *stoa*, the agora practically deserted in the mid-afternoon drowse; the shops empty; the tents, wagons, moneychangers' tables, and awning-sheltered barrows closed against the blazing sun. I heard only the whines of feral dogs, the scrabbling of rats, and an idler's phlegmy snores bubbling out from the far corner of a polygon of shade. Only after a gasp, did I manage to right myself when I tripped on his walking stick, as short as it was.

My hair wilting, my shoulders sagging, and my feet dragging, my hopes were draining out of me when I heard a series of taps against the pavement. The rhythm of rapid footsteps overtook me as a deep, resonant voice called out to Zemirah. I looked around for the owner of that familiar

voice, the only one who'd ever called me Zemirah, namely Nathaniel ben Ruben, the pot-bellied dwarf who, while staying at The Pegasus, helped me four years ago to crack the locked-room murder case there.

“Blessed be His Name! Can the fair maiden before me be my long-lost Zemirah, or have I joined the World-to-Come?” Lifting his right hand from his heart to his lips to his forehead, he bowed from the waist with a flourish.

“Mr. ben Ruben, the pleasure is mine,” I said, looking down into the toothy grin that split his brown weathered face and now pure-white Hebraic beard. “What brings you to the agora at such an inhospitable hour?”

“Well, Zemirah—”

“Miriam—”

“Ah yes. Miriam. I'm here for the usual—toiletries and pastries. Food's a disgrace at The Flying Eagle—”

“The Flying Eagle?”

“Where I'm staying now, another crippled waterfront inn, dirty enough for the likes of smugglers, swindlers, and pickpockets. You know—well, I guess you don't, and why should you? Near the *Heptastadion*. Better neighborhood—so they say—but the riffraff's the same, and that includes me! Anyway, food's worse than The Pegasus. So, I supplement, but this time, I overdid it. Ate every last tart.” And just in case he thought a further explanation was necessary, he shrugged his shoulders and added, “Couldn't help it. They were oozing cheese and apricots. Just wanted to catch the overflow.” His rueful smile turned into a soft laugh. “At first, that is.”

The shrug of those substantial shoulders reminded me how I'd trailed behind them in The Pegasus. With him as my cover, I'd slunk up its narrow spiral of warped steps to the room where the murder had taken place. There I was like a common whore in that sleazy, rat-infested inn following a man half my size and twice my age up a staircase reeking of urine and desperation.

For a moment, when he chuckled, I thought he was remembering that too.

"But then," he continued, "an unshakable drowsiness took me by surprise."

Sweeping the agora with his gimlet eyes, he might have noticed the maze of shadows that had swallowed up the plaza because his mouth fell open. "Goodness! Must have slept for hours."

But something else must have interrupted his thoughts when he shifted his gaze back to that polygon of shade and furrowed his brow. "Wait! My toiletries! Where're my toiletries?" He slapped his forehead in disbelief. "Is there no compassion among thieves?"

Hearing the exasperation in his voice, I scoured my brain for a standard topic, hardly anticipating the outpouring of dread my question would unleash.

"Have you been staying at The Flying Eagle long?"

"Couldn't stay at The Pegasus. Look, if it weren't for you, I'd have been charged with that murder. The Romans might have treated me to *damnatio ad bestias*, in which case the lions would have feasted on gobbets of my tender flesh while flooding the air with a crimson fog. Or the authorities

might have preferred a simple crucifixion, in which case the drone of black bottle flies would've accompanied my soul to eternity while my bones bleached under a scorching sun.

“Believe me, the thought of being arrested still gives me nightmares, *if* I can actually sleep, mind you. The case was never officially closed, remember?”

Remember? How could I forget? But I'd given my word to keep that secret unless someone else is charged.

“Last night, come to think of it, I'd hardly been asleep when a soldier on horseback, red-crested helmet, leather skirt and all, faceless, instead a block of granite for a head, slipped like a wraith into my room—what they call a room—more like a second-floor cage, cramped with a lumpy cot.” His right hand flew to massage his lower back. “Obscene graffiti on its walls. Even I, been crossing the sea my entire life, felt ripples of shame as if I'd written those ditties. Got a single front-facing window but they cheated me on the candles.” One corner of his mouth twitched in a slight smirk before he banished the thought with a flick of his hand.

“But it was the soldier's horse rearing up and snorting—and the stench—like a slaughterhouse but stronger—roused me—roused me *in* the dream, not *from* it—and rattled the chamber pot beneath my bed.

“‘Who are you, and what are you doing here?’ I asked, as if I didn't know.

“‘Don't play games with me.’ He spoke in a coarse whisper, you know, the kind meant to be heard. ‘I know you've been waiting for me, hardly closing an eye since you bashed in that slave's skull.’

“It took me a while to find my voice.

“No, no. It wasn’t m—’

“So you say. If you’re so smart then, who was it?”

“Don’t know, b—but honestly—’

“By now, screams of innocence were foaming out of me like breakers, but nobody heard a thing, like I was *merda*—Sorry, Missy—like I was uh, uh... never mind.

“That’s when the cursed light from his cuirass blinded me. Pure gold it was. But before I could pinch myself awake—Oh, I tried, believe me, I tried—he dragged me to the dungeon, where sick with misery and fear, I joined the manacled souls inside its moldy walls.”

His hot, jagged breaths were soaking through my bodice.

“But even during the day, every soldier snared me with his gaze and darts flames of suspicion at me. *Tsk, tsk, tsk.*”

Another shake of his head, this time with his palms out.

“You know I’m an itinerant, right? Carry valuables from city to city? But not to Judea anymore, not Caesarea, certainly not Jerusalem, too unstable, too dangerous. Displaced farmers, escaped slaves, pitiable beggars, and anyone else with nothing to lose are eager to prey on the likes of me. Alexandria’s my hub now. The Flying Eagle. Stay there a lot more than I ever did at The Pegasus. Travel to only Cyprus, Rhodes, and Ephesus.”

Then, saying nothing for a while, he drew in his lower lip and gazed out at the harbor. “Just came back from Ephesus—”

“Ephesus?”

“Not two weeks ago. Well, let me see.” He fanned out his sausage-like fingers and moved his lips as he tapped the air with each in turn. It took him three rounds and a brooding lower lip till he nodded with certainty. “Fifteen days, sailed on the *Thalia*. Quite a voya—”

“The *Thalia*?”

He nodded more slowly this time but looked at me with a question in his eyes.

“I’m looking for someone,” I answered. “Like you, he sailed from Ephesus on the *Thalia*. In fact, that’s why I’m in the agora right now. He was supposed to be here—well, sort of—and maybe he was, but I must’ve come too late. Might you know him?”

“Maybe. You know I mingle. My business depends on making contacts. Nathaniel ben Ruben at your service.” Again, he bowed from the waist with that same flourish. “That’s me. So, describe him. But first, Missy, if you don’t mind, I could use a cool drink to wash the dust out of my throat.”

“Oh yes, of course. Forgive me for not inviting you sooner. Please, and you must be my guest. There’s a *thermopolium* over there, near the Gate.”



“So, who lured you here on this wild goose chase?” he asked while levering himself onto the chair with his walking stick. Then he laid the stick across his lap, secured it under the shelf of his belly, and kicked the air with his stubby legs

as he wriggled into the chair. Finally, he rested his palms on his thighs.

We were sitting at a table behind a bowed cabinet stacked with nested cookware in the empty dining room at the back of Cato's, a *thermopolium* that opened onto the porch of a *stoa* near the West Gate. The proprietor, presumably Cato, a swollen man, all gut and jowls with purple threads fanning across his cheeks and wriggling up his hatchet-shaped nose, had already brought us a crater of water mixed with an indifferent wine from the Delta and ladled it into our goblets. We were waiting for only a platter of cucumbers, forest mushrooms, and fish livers with onions. I could smell them cooking and hear them sizzling over the charcoal-burning furnace, which was recessed into the marble-topped counter that separated the eatery from the porch.

Mr. ben Ruben bent his face to his goblet and swallowed a few gulps.

"Well, actually, he doesn't know I'm looking for him. His daughter just told me he'd be here, and I wanted to ask him some questions. But now I just want to know if you remember him."

"What does he look like?"

"A rabbi. Narrow frame. Hebraic, with a lavish beard turning gray."

"Can't say. So many Hebraic-looking men. Traveling alone?"

"With two others, his daughter, a pale young woman with a twisted spine, and—"

“Yes,” he nodded. “I remember her, gentle, hair like sunshine, lovely voice. Traveled as a threesome with her father—slope-shouldered, widely-spaced eyes, liver-spotted hands—and another man, handsome but with an edge. First noticed her in the Square Agora—center of commercial life there—because like me, she lives with a deformity and the stings of mockery that go along with it.”

This time when he reached for his goblet, he took just a sip and grimaced.

“Anyway, the three of them were inseparable. Kept to themselves. Didn’t see much of them on the ship or in Ephesus. They stayed in the Slope Houses. I rented an attic *cella*—floor tiles chipped, windows greasy, reminded me of a stable with its bare walls, wooden benches, and competing odors—in a block of cramped apartments, commercial district, noisy, mostly workmen, some artisans...”

While his recollections meandered through the various neighborhoods of Ephesus, my mind spun in another direction so I can’t report all of what he said—something about the State Agora, which is a precinct of government buildings rather than a marketplace—but eventually I seized my chance to probe when he mentioned seeing the threesome again aboard the *Thalia*.

“I think you were about to say it was quite a voyage. Am I right? I’m curious. I heard the winds were steady enough.”

“Nothing wrong with the sea or the winds, even the sky for that matter, but passengers jittery just the same as if some dread lurked in the bowels of the ship. I felt it too, a worm crawling inside me. Gambling got rowdy, rowdier than usu-

al, plenty of fights, but no, not because of the sea. Stolen jewels. The Temple of Artemis—”

I remembered my tutor, Hector, telling me that Antipater of Sidon named the Temple of Artemis one of the seven wonders he’d seen during his travels throughout the Eastern Mediterranean. Hector said it’s one of the largest of all Greek temples with a forest of 127 lavishly decorated, stone columns towering to the sky.

“Jewels?” I asked as a chill washed over me. “Stolen when?”

“Probably during the local festival of Artemis—”

“No, I mean while you were there? While the *Thalia* was in port?”

“Yes, while we—and the whole world—everybody was there. Never saw so many tourists.”

I must have looked at him blankly because after noticing a speck floating in his goblet, fishing it out, and wiping his finger on his tunic, he explained. “Look, Artemis is the essential deity to the Ephesians, born locally before even the Greeks arrived. To Greeks, she’s the goddess of the hunt, but to Ephesians, she’s much more: the protector of the dead and the goddess of fertility. That’s what her festival is all about: fertility, girls looking for a husband, boys looking for a wife.”

A young woman—probably Cato’s daughter, judging by that same fleshy body and hatchet-shaped nose—lay the table for us with linen napery, tin dishware, and mismatched carved, wooden-handled knives and spoons. A few minutes later, she brought over a basket of pita, a Syrian glass plate

of our vegetables garnished with olives, and the fish livers with onions still spitting oil in their bronze platter.

Mr. ben Ruben, keen on the food, tucked his hand into the basket, grabbed a round of pita, and spooned some fish livers over it. He pawed a few mushrooms and slices of cucumber from the platter and spread them over his creation. Then, as he chomped through the layers, he hammered the air with his spoon to signal he had more to say.

A lobe of fish liver flopped onto the table. He snatched it up, sucked it into his already full mouth, and smacked his oily lips.

“Enjoy,” I said to cover my embarrassment. I speared a slice of cucumber with my knife and nibbled at the skin. Questions gathered in my throat while I waited for him to swallow.

“Festival goes like this: Solemn procession, long, like the Canopic Way—”

A pearl of spittle and a speck of cucumber landed on my check when he said the word “Canopic,” but I pretended not to notice.

“—Priest carries this statue of Artemis through the city to her Temple in a park about a mile outside the city. Acolytes with other sacred objects follow in a parade of torches, baskets of incense, horses, dogs, and hunting equipment. But then comes the best part, what every tourist and resident is there to behold: The girls, virginal but splendidly dressed to attract a lover, are followed by all the young men.”

Mr. ben Ruben dropped his eyes and smiled as if recollecting the face of his own youthful love.

“Once the tail of the parade reaches the park, the whole crowd enters the Temple for a sacrifice, and then the mingling begins, men with the women, boys with the girls.”

“So why are you so sure the theft occurred during the festival?”

“The wealth of Ephesus, including its gold and jewels, has been stored in the Temple treasury for hundreds of years. But during the parade, for a brief period anyway, the Temple is deserted. Now some time after the men and women had begun to circulate—by then most of the tourists had left—the priests went to put away the sacred objects. That’s when they discovered the lock to the treasury had been smashed. After that, during the confusion that followed, the herald announced the *Thalia*’s immediate departure, mind you, hours earlier than expected.”

“Did the passengers believe the thief could be aboard?”

Mr. ben Ruben rested his elbows in a slick of fish liver oil and leaned toward me. “Yes,” he whispered in a brassy hiss. “Mostly we were afraid of a search. Suppose the thief under threat of exposure planted the jewels in someone else’s bedding? What then? Besides, who among us,” he asked, the pitch of his voice climbing as he jabbed the air with his forefinger, “has nothing to fear from the authorities?”

At this point, Phoebe would have warned me not to pepper him with any more questions. So, I loaded up another round of pita with the last lobes of fish liver, piled on the remaining slices of cucumber along with the mushrooms and onions, and handed it to him on one of the tin plates.

Without looking up, he devoured the second portion as greedily as the first. When finished, a bit of onion still hanging on his lower lip, he reached into the basket for the last round of pita. He ripped off a hunk and wiped his plate until it shone. Then, the bread chewed and gone, he leaned back, licked his fingers, burped, and rubbed his belly with a sigh of satisfaction.

As for me, I couldn't have eaten a thing. I picked up the last olive, but all I could do was wonder whether the theft in Ephesus might have something to do with the damage to the Torah mantle. Both involved prized gems and occurred when the traveling threesome was present. But I still couldn't figure out why the mantle had been marred. Not then.

Want to read more? Get the full version of
The Deadliest Fever by June Trop
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Author's Note

Rabies has been with us since earliest times (Wasik & Murphy, 2012). Aristotle noted that rabies affects dogs and any animal the afflicted dog bites. The virus that causes this deadliest fever kills almost 100% of its hosts, whether human or animal. And it is relentless. Rather than coursing through the bloodstream, it travels through the nervous system at the rate of two centimeters (about four-fifths of an inch) per day from the location of the bite to the brain. Once inside the brain, the virus continues to work slowly but diligently to increase salivation, warp the mind, and melt away inhibitions until the infected creature is in the throes of madness.

Rabies has also been draped in superstition since earliest times. The very name of the pathogen, the *Lyssavirus*, derives from the Greek concept *lyssa*, which means wolfish rage. *Lyssa* is personified on Greek vases as a woman “wearing a dog’s head as a cap” (Wasik & Murphy, 2012, 16). Her name derives from *lykos*, meaning wolf. In Attic Greek, *lyssa* literally means rabies. And so, the medical and the metaphorical came to be forever linked into something terrifying and violent.

The fear of rabies is so primal because the disease challenges the boundary between humans and animals. The legends of werewolves and vampires, which continue to haunt the Western imagination, likely originated from this same fundamental fear of being transformed into a mad animal by its bite and then savagely seeking to transform others.

Had Miriam been called in to treat Omar when his symptoms first appeared, she might have cut his lingual frenulum, where, based on the position of salivary glands under the tongue, rabies was thought to originate. But other folk remedies abounded in her time, including a potion derived from the skull of a hanged man.

The best-known cure of Pliny the Elder, a Roman philosopher and naturalist contemporaneous with Miriam, was to take the hair from the tail of the dog that inflicted the bite, burn it, and insert the ashes into the wound (Wasik & Murphy, 2012, 34). This recommendation—alas, no more effective than the others—lives on in our expression the “hair of the dog” as the remedy for a hangover.

Thus, rabies came to be my choice for this novel. It’s been recognized, even feared, since ancient times, it’s deadly, and its incubation period, usually from three weeks to three months, can vary from a few days to several years depending on how close the bite is to the brain. Accordingly, this deadliest fever gave me the freedom to develop the story along my own timeline. Finally, based on the recommended treatments of the period, Naarah could have reasonably believed that Miriam could save her beloved’s life.



I continue to rely on the scholarly works cited in my earlier Miriam bat Isaac novels. Here are some of the additional references I used for writing *The Deadliest Fever*.

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Moreover, I continue to be indebted to my academic mentor, Professor Jean Lythcott, for introducing me to the study of chemistry from a historical perspective and inspiring me to create Miriam bat Isaac in the image of Maria Hebraea, alchemist extraordinaire and the most celebrated woman of the Western world for 1500 years. I have felt Jeannie's

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And I thank my friends old and new for buying my books; inviting me to present my work at their book clubs, luncheons, and community fundraisers; and otherwise sharing their enthusiasm for Miriam's stories. But most of all, I thank my husband Paul R. Zuckerman. He is always here for me. He believes in me, brags about me, and embraces my every goal as his own.

Finally, I hope that Maria Hebra, whoever she was, whenever she lived, and wherever she is, forgives the liberties I have taken with her life. May she recognize my profound respect for her spiritual quest and scientific accomplishments.

Glossary

aba: (Hebrew) father

ad Aegyptum: (Latin) literally “by Egypt,” meaning that Alexandria was not considered part of the Roman province of Egypt. Instead, Alexandria belonged to only the Emperor.

aporia: (Greek) an expression of perplexity

bemah: (Hebrew) the platform approached by steps for Torah reading during services in a Synagogue

bet din: (Hebrew) the rabbinical court

Bruchium quarter: (Greek) The palace quarter of Alexandria, the most magnificent portion of the city

calamistrum: (Latin) curling iron

calamus: (Latin) a pen made from bronze or more commonly from a reed cut at an angle and then split

calcei: (Latin) shoes worn outdoors, had covered toes and straps extending to the ankles, calves, or knees

cantharus: (Latin) a two-handled drinking cup shaped like a bowl

Cardo Maximus: (Latin) the main north-south thoroughfare in a Roman city or military camp, in this case Caesarea

cauponaria: (Latin) the female innkeeper of a low-class hostelry serving carters, sailors, and slaves

cella: (Latin) a garret room or mean apartment

colobium: (Latin) a coarse, short-sleeved, workingman's tunic

compluvium: (Latin) the unroofed quadrangular space over the atrium of a Roman home through which rain falls and collects in the pool

corbita: (Latin) literally means "basket" but refers here to a wide sailing ship with a rounded, big-bellied hull for cargo

damnatio ad bestias: (Latin) literally "condemnation to the beasts," refers to a form of public execution for common criminals in which the condemned was thrown to the wild beasts

dekadrachmae: (pl.) (Greek) large silver coins, each worth ten *drachmae*, roughly 500 dollars in US currency today

didrachm: (Greek) a silver coin worth two *drachmae*, roughly 100 dollars in US currency today

drachma: (Greek) a silver coin worth roughly 50 dollars in US currency today

dulcia domestica: (Latin) a chilled dessert made from pitted dates soaked in wine and stuffed with dried fruit, nuts, cake crumbs, and spices

Heptastadion: (Greek) the causeway connecting the city proper to Pharos Island and dividing the harbor area into two well-defined bays

instita: (Latin) a Roman-style border or flounce on a lady's tunic

kapeleion: (sing.) (Greek) a snack bar providing cold snacks and beverages, *kapeleia* (pl.)

Kibotos: (Greek) literally means "box" but refers here to the small, square artificial port in the western harbor that connects to a canal across the western section of the city

laographia: (Latin) the poll tax levied on all males fourteen to sixty years of age, except those belonging to a privileged class, e.g., Roman citizens, priests, scholars in the Museum, and non-Roman, high-ranking officials

leprosy: (pl.) (Latin) those inflicted with leprosy

ludus: (Latin) a training school for gladiators

mensa publica: (Latin) literally means a “public table” but refers here to a table in the agora where a moneychanger determines the value of various coins and other valuables and exchanges currencies for a fee

merda: (Latin) a vulgar word meaning dung or excrement

neokoros: (Greek) the temple warden responsible for guarding and maintaining the sacred objects

ner tamid: (Hebrew) literally means “eternal flame” and refers to a light that hangs in front of and above the Ark to symbolize the light of Truth

pankration: (Greek) a strenuous sport that combines boxing and wrestling

parokhet: (Hebrew) the curtain that screens the Torah Ark

prutot: (pl.) (Hebrew) the ancient copper coins from the Hasmonean dynasty. Ten could buy a loaf of bread.

sella: (Latin) a stool or chair, usually with no back or arms

Septuagint: (Greek) the primary Greek translation of the *Old Testament*, it is also called the *Greek Old Testament*.

stoa: (sing.) (Greek) a long, low building with a columned porch facing the center of the agora, *stoas* (pl.)

stola: (Latin) the traditional, boxy outer tunic married women wore

summum supplicium: (Latin) the most extreme punishment

thermopolium: (Latin) a Roman-style cookshop or fast-food café serving both hot and cold foods

Tishrei: (Hebrew) the first month of the civil year and the seventh month of the ecclesiastical year on the Hebrew calendar

tunica interior: (Latin) a knee-length undergarment women wore under a chiton

Early Roman Emperors
(The Julio-Claudian dynasty)

Augustus ~ reign :27 BCE to 14 CE

Tiberius ~ reign: 14 CE to 37 CE

Caligula ~ reign: 37 CE to 41 CE

Claudius ~ reign: 41 CE to 54 CE

Nero ~ reign: 54 CE to 68 CE

Characters in *The Deadliest Fever*

“Agrippina the Younger”: the house slave at the home of Rabbi Ehud ben Zechariah. She looks like Agrippina the Younger, the late mother of Nero.

Amram ben Eleazar: Miriam’s dear friend, business partner, and the father of her late fiancé, Noah

Aspasia: Miriam’s apothecary and Judah’s client

Aunt Hannah: Miriam’s aunt, sister of her father, Isaac ben Asher

Baruch ben Ezekiel: senior elder of the Great Synagogue who was crucified during the Pogrom of 38 CE. His son lets an apartment to Rabbi Ehud.

Binyamin ben Isaac: Miriam’s twin brother, a gladiator recently killed in the arena

Bion: Phoebe’s husband, the prosperous owner of a bookshop and stationery store in the agora

Calisto: Miriam’s sloe-eyed, serene housemaid. Miriam’s other housemaid is Minta.

Cato: proprietor of a restaurant in the agora

Circe: Cato's daughter, she waits on tables in her father's restaurant.

Daniel ben Tobiah: watchman at the Great Synagogue

Eran: Judah's half-brother, a jeweler in Caesarea

Fabia: hostess at The Pegasus

Gershon ben Israel: friend of Amram ben Eleazar and keeper of the sacred objects in the Synagogue

Hamilcar: captain of the *Thalia* and Fabia's lover

Hector: Miriam and Phoebe's childhood tutor

Isaac ben Asher: Miriam's late father

Judah: Miriam's heartthrob, a jeweler in the agora

Kastor: a public slave brutally murdered in The Pegasus

Khukare: Gershon's houseboy

Minta: Miriam's energetic housemaid. Miriam's other housemaid is Calisto.

Miriam bat Isaac: alchemist and amateur detective, main character in series

Myron: Amram's doorkeeper

Naarah: Rabbi Ehud's daughter and Omar's fiancée

Nathaniel ben Rubin: Miriam's friend, a dwarf who helped her solve Kastor's murder

Neftali ben Baruch: son of the blessed martyr Baruch ben Ezekiel and brother of the man who lets an apartment to Rabbi Ehud. Neftali dies of rabies after being bitten by a small mammal.

Noah: Miriam's late fiancé, Amram's only son

Omar ben Uriah: Naarah's fiancé

Orestes: Miriam's bearer along with Solon

Philo: a wealthy Roman citizen, influential Jew, and statesman for the Jews of Alexandria

Phoebe: Miriam's best friend and former servant now married to Bion

Pytheus: the man who participated in the jewel heist in Ephesus

Rabbi Ehud ben Zechariah: the sage invited to the Great Synagogue, Naarah's father

Rho: Amram's household servant along with Taharqa

Ruth: Judah's late mother

Shafat: counterman at the street-front bar of The Pegasus

Solon: Miriam's bearer along with Orestes

Taharqa: Amram's household servant along with Rho

(The) Fox: the informal leader of a group of sailors drinking at the street-front bar of The Pegasus

(The) Spider: The Fox's female companion at the street-front bar of The Pegasus

Thoth: one of Bion's store clerks

Wasi: Wedu's twin, Gershon's bearer along with Wedu

Wedu: Wasi's twin, Gershon's bearer along with Wasi

Yocheved: Miriam's late mother. She died shortly after giving birth to Miriam and Binyamin.

About the Author



June Trop and her twin sister Gail wrote their first story, “The Steam Shavel [sic],” when they were six years old growing up in rural New Jersey. They sold it to their brother Everett for two cents. “I don’t remember how I spent my share,” Trop says. “You could buy a fistful of candy for a penny in those days, but ever since then, I wanted to be a writer.”

As an award-winning middle school science teacher, Trop used storytelling to capture her students’ imagination and interest in scientific concepts. Years later as a professor of teacher education, she focused her research on the practical knowledge teachers construct and communicate through storytelling. Her first book, *From Lesson Plans to Power Struggles* (Corwin Press, 2009), is based on the stories new teachers told about their first classroom experiences.

Now associate professor *emerita* at the State University of New York at New Paltz, she devotes her time to writing The Miriam bat Isaac Mystery Series. Her heroine is based on the personage of Maria Hebra, the legendary founder of Western alchemy, who developed the concepts and apparatus alchemists and chemists would use for 1500 years.

Trop lives with her husband Paul Zuckerman in New Paltz, where she is breathlessly recording her plucky heroine’s next life-or-death exploit.