

*Joshua*

The night was still warm in the grassy foothills beyond the village of Sycar. Young Joshua lay on his back perched well above his family home gazing into the endless blanket of stars shimmering across the night sky. This was Joshua's favorite time, for only in the stillness of the late night could he truly be alone and dream. Staring at the brilliant heavens filled him with such wonder that it wasn't until the song of a lone bird alerted Joshua to the slowly approaching dawn and the inevitable dreariness of the day ahead.

His thin body ached from head to toe as he made his way downhill to the family homestead. The magic of Joshua's intimacy with the night was long gone as the gloom of a foggy gray dawn enveloped his thoughts as he trudged to the back door of his home. Looking up from the stony Samaritan soil, Joshua saw the sickening sight of his so-called "stepfather" as he cursed and stomped his way toward him. Soon this family intruder who was now unimaginably married to his mother was blocking his path. They were standing face to face, forcing Joshua to abruptly turn his head as Langer's stale wine breath and ripe body odor encased the two of them.

"Where have you been, you little waste of a boy?" croaked Langer, as his watery bloodshot eyes looked down upon Joshua's bowed head. "Three goats broke through the pen last night because you can't build a decent gate to hold them. Were you up on the hill again with your head in the clouds pretending to be more than the worthless boy you are?"

Joshua looked up with his chin shaking and screamed at Langer, "I was hoping for the day you fall down dead and the ravens and worms feast on your rotting flesh." The intensity of his outburst surprised the young boy and his shoulders now tightened in fear.

Langer swiftly dropped to one knee and pulled Joshua by the cloak close to his face and wheezed into his ear, “Watch yourself my dear boy, you just might find a viper sliding down your neck one night while you stare into the heavens. Just like the vipers who struck down your father, they may be coming for you next. They can smell weakness all over this land.” Following his threatening words, Langer shoved the boy away. As Joshua gathered himself, vigorously wiping tears from his face before running to the back door, he heard Langer call from behind, “After your mother’s done treating you like the baby of the house, I expect to see you in the pen fixing the gate that these stupid goats so easily broke through.” Keeping his head down while he ran ahead, a lone thought crossed Joshua’s mind: *What would happen if I left home?*

Joshua was immediately greeted with shrieks of delight from his three younger sisters. The twins, Talia and Tamar, with their baby sister Leah in tow, all fell into Joshua’s arms for a morning embrace.