

BOOK TWO



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second touch



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**BODIE & BROCK
THOENE**

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PART I

*He was despised and rejected by men,
A man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering.
Like one from whom men hide their faces
He was despised, and we esteemed Him not.*

*Surely He took up our infirmities
And carried our sorrows.*

ISAIAH 53:3-4

I

CHAPTER

Midnight.
The sixth day of the month of Sivan.
Eighteenth year in the life of Lily.

Outcast. *Tsara*. Rejected. *Chadel*.

Lily, leper of the Valley of Mak'ob.

It was Shavuot. Pentecost. The feast was held each year on the anniversary of the giving of Torah on Mount Sinai. This was the night in which every generation of Jews since that day stayed awake to pray and await the descending to earth of Messiah, Israel's heavenly Bridegroom.

The moon had set behind the canyon wall hours ago, leaving the mist of the Milky Way as a bright streak across the sky.

Lily and Cantor sat shoulder to shoulder on the big boulder overlooking the Valley.

Far below them, in the center of the colony, a light burned in the hut of Rabbi Ahava.

"Look," Lily said. "It glows like a lantern, that house. Light beaming from every crack. Rabbi's awake."

"All scholars in Israel stay awake on Shavuot," Cantor replied. "Reading Torah. Studying. Praying for Messiah to come."

Lily hugged her knees and threw her head back to search the stars. “Wouldn’t it be . . . something? Wouldn’t it, Cantor?”

I’m praying again, heavenly Bridegroom. Are you on your angel horse? Galloping through the sky to gather your people? Scoop us up and fly away? Will you come tonight? Tonight? You know, of all your people . . . all . . . we here in Mak’ob have no hope but you. We’re hoping you’ll come! To save us. We’re watching for you to come!

Her gaze shifted from constellation to constellation as she scanned the cold heavens for a sign of Messiah’s approaching glory.

But stars were stars.

Cantor rattled off their names as if they were old friends. “Arcturus directly above us. Vega. Deneb. There’s The Lion. There, The Bear. See them, Lily?”

“I wish I knew as much as you, Cantor.”

“Learned the names when I was a boy. The old man who tended the goats taught us young ones. I’m the only one left alive of those boys. I was thinking, you know, maybe I should teach the little ones now. The star names. Like he taught me. Children in Mak’ob might forget stars have names when I die.”

Lily frowned. “Don’t talk like that, Cantor. Don’t tempt the evil eye by speaking aloud such a thing. You’re hardly sick.”

Cantor laughed. “Impossible to avoid the subject in this Valley, I’m afraid.”

“Yes. But no . . . but . . . don’t. Not tonight, eh? You’ll spoil it if you do. Keep watching.”

There was a poignant pause.

Cantor spoke first. “What do you suppose it’ll look like when Messiah comes?”

“Lightning. Maybe.”

“Clear sky. No clouds. Crickets in the brush and then—”

“Lightning! Thunder! Maybe tonight.” Lily dreamed. “Maybe tonight it’ll really happen. He’s supposed to come on Shavuot! Descend with mighty power. Like when the Lord descended to the mountain and gave Mosheh the laws! Wouldn’t it be something if . . . if we were the first to see the flash!” A shiver of expectation passed through her.

Cantor hummed with pleasure. “Yes. It would be. Really something.”

“Not impossible, eh? That the Son of David would stop in Mak’ob

and gather us lost sheep up on his way to Yerushalayim? No place in all Eretz-Israel needs a visit from Messiah as bad as Mak'ob."

For a while the two sat imagining what it would be like. If *He* came.

Lily wondered what Scriptures the rabbi was reading.

She thought about her friend Deborah and the baby in Deborah's womb. Would the baby be instantly born if Messiah came tonight? Lily considered that this was a question worthy of discussing with Rabbi Ahava.

At last Cantor spoke. "There's Dubhe. Alkaid."

"You know so much. Everything. I just thought they were stars, that's all."

"The old man who taught us? He said King David learned the names of the stars when he was a shepherd boy. David found this Valley when he was searching for a lost lamb. Years after that he took refuge in one of our caves when Saul was trying to kill him."

"Imagine. One of our caves! Maybe where I live."

"When he became king, David returned to Mak'ob. His refuge. He set the Valley aside as a city of refuge for the lepers of his kingdom. His lost sheep, he called us."

"Imagine! Him . . . here."

"Ah, look, Lily. There's Antares. Spica."

"Which direction of the sky will Messiah come from, you think?"

"All the light from unseen stars will arrive with him when he comes to Yerushalayim! Blast the earth at once! Light! No north, south, east, or west anymore. Just light. Angel armies filling the sky everywhere we look! Singing! Singing."

Lily imagined it. Smiled. "And you'll sing with them."

"Yes. Yes. I'll sing." Cantor clasped her right hand in his. "You too."

"Yes. Wouldn't it be something if it was tonight?"

I'm praying again, Lord of the Angel Armies! Do the prayers of this Valley reach your home in heaven? If only . . . come tonight! Hear our prayers and gather us in! Don't forget your lost sheep! There are more of us than usual in the dying cave. My heart is shouting to you, Lord of all the Angel Armies. Here I am! Lily, leper of Mak'ob! Do you hear my prayers from where you sit? Don't forget your lost sheep in Mak'ob! We're here because everyone else wants to forget about us. But you! You! Son of David! Don't forget us, Lord. We're all waiting. Hoping! And we who live here and die here . . . we need you more than anyone!



What was the time?

The great city of Jerusalem was only just stirring. A merchant leading a donkey out to water passed by the gardenia bush where seventeen-year-old Peniel, the potter's son, and Yeshua of Nazareth sat together. Unnoticed. Unremarkable. Ordinary.

Yet Peniel knew the truth.

All who sought Yeshua tested Him. When they found Him they sized Him up, trimmed Him to fit their expectations, and tried to force His image into a puzzle of their own making.

But Yeshua did not fit.

Peniel knew Yeshua did not fit.

Peniel needed no miracles in order to believe He Was and He Is and He Will Be and He Can and He Wants To!

Nothing is impossible with God!

Peniel sensed the stars glistening on the night wind when the city was silent, and he *knew*.

Peniel heard the echo of creation in his heart and he *knew*.

The Great Timekeeper lived outside of time. Stepped into time. Just for a moment. Dwelt in *our* time! And Peniel *knew*!

Peniel needed no miracle in order to believe these things. And so, like an unbidden wind, the great miracle had caressed him, stirred him, root and branch, and *he knew*!

Now Peniel had seen The Face and *he knew* the certainty of what had been unknowable before!

The Great Potter!

He who made eyes had seen!

He who made ears had heard!

Wonder Worker. Origin of First Light. Knower of Secrets. He who sang galaxies and crickets into existence with equal delight!

Yeshua! He had stepped from eternity into time and stooped to make Peniel's eyes out of red clay! Paused to finish the creation of an unfinished life! To show one born blind . . . The Face!

And Peniel knew.

Yeshua clasped Peniel's hand in friendship. "This is the first light of a new day, and life will never be the same."

Never the same! Peniel grinned up at the colors of the morning sky.

Never the same! Peniel—no longer a beggar, but a man of Isra’el—stood and walked at Yeshua’s side.

They passed slowly through the early-morning shadows of the city. Yeshua rested His hand on Peniel’s shoulder as Gershon, Peniel’s elder brother, had done long ago when they had walked together toward the Pool of Siloam.

Peniel took in the sights with wonder. He said without regret, “You’ve changed everything in my life, Lord. I’m cast out of the synagogue for giving true testimony of what you’ve done for me. Rejected by my parents. Now the religious rulers will kill you if they can. For giving me sight on the Sabbath, you know? I’m glad you did it. But they want you dead. Healing on the Sabbath and all.”

Yeshua smiled, sharing His secret with Peniel. “They’ve missed finding the pearl because they stoop to grasp a copper, eh, Peniel?”

“Sure. I see what you mean. Yes. Point is, I was blind and now I see. No matter what day of the week it was, you healed me. It’s the best day of my life so far.”

“What’s the best day to show mercy, Peniel?”

“Every day, I think, Rabbi.”

“Well spoken.”

“You know what I think. I’m glad you didn’t turn away from my affliction because I’m poor and it was Shabbat.”

“Not poor, Peniel. Just without . . . things.”

“I live among the broken people, Lord. Castaways. Waiting without hope. They’re left to pick through the rubbish heap beneath the viaduct.”

“Who will care for them?”

“I asked myself that same thing. But . . . nobody. Nobody.”

Yeshua gave Peniel an enigmatic smile, then abruptly changed the subject. “Today is Shavuot.” Yeshua glanced up toward the light gleaming on the golden peaks of the Temple. “Today the heavenly Bridegroom comes to Yerushalayim. What do you think? Would you like to hear a story about a mighty king who prepared a wonderful banquet for his son’s wedding?”

“You know me. I’m Peniel. I love a good story.”

They walked.

“So. The king sent his servant to the prominent men in his kingdom to tell them that everything was ready. They should come to the

wedding feast. But all those important fellows were too busy. One had bought a field and sent back the message that he had to go see it. The other had a new yoke of oxen to try out. Another had just got married and so sent his apologies. But apologies were not enough to the good king. He told his servant, 'Hurry up! Go out into the streets and alleys of the city! Bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind, the lame! Carry them on your back if you have to, but bring them!' When this was done there was still room in the palace so the good king sent his servant out again. 'Go out to the country roads and lanes. Make them come in so that my house will be full! I tell you, not one of those important men who were too busy to come will get a taste of my banquet.' ¹

A few paces more.

Peniel digested the meaning. "Point taken. Well spoken."

"Who will go out? tell them? carry those who can't walk? bring them in? fill my Father's house?"

"But, Lord, the rulers. They'll try to kill you, Lord, and yes . . . maybe kill me too. Though I'm not so worried about myself as you. They'll try to put out the light. But why?"

"They prefer the darkness to light, Peniel."

They walked in silence for a time as Peniel wondered how anyone could choose blindness over sight.

"Morning has broken." Yeshua spoke at last.

"Yes. I feel it. I hear it! Listen! Listen to the cock crow!" Then Peniel followed Yeshua's gaze to a ragged beggar sleeping in a deserted doorway. A leper, judging by the stink. What was such an outcast doing here? Was he dead? "So . . . this is what the world looks like in the light."

"Darkness is a comfortable place. The candle of Adonai illuminates suffering which most would rather not see."

A chill of apprehension coursed through Peniel. "Beneath the viaduct where the paupers take shelter, I heard their moans. I smelled the lepers outside the camp. So hungry. So alone. I dreamed a dream that Mosheh, the lawgiver, spoke to me. He said I would be sent to tell them . . . tell them . . . something. It's not clear to me now. I always try to remember my dreams. But then I wake up and they fade away."

"The answer will come back to you. When you need to know."

"My ears saw their misery. Oh!" Peniel thumped his hand against his chest to indicate his pain. "I'm afraid, Lord. Afraid of what my heart'll feel now that I have eyes."

Yeshua paused and searched Peniel's face. Sad smile. Yeshua, like a father seeing himself in the expression of a son. "You have *my* eyes, Peniel."

"Who am I to do anything?"

"It's not who you are."

"So many, as you say. All around, I mean." Peniel shook his head.

"Yes. Seeing requires something, eh? That's all the Law and the Prophets. Summed up."

"So many men know the Scriptures. And still there's the viaduct. The rubbish heap. People who exist in the long, dreary waiting, like animals locked up and forgotten." How well Peniel knew this truth.

"Easy not to be bothered. Easy to follow the letter of the Law. Make a great show of keeping the Law. But men forget the true intention of the Law." Yeshua did not avert His eyes from the bundle of rags in the alcove, but neither did He slow His pace as they strode toward the Pool of Siloam. "And by turning away from those who suffer, they miss great blessings from heaven. Maybe the one they refused to help was an angel in disguise. Thus ends the lesson. Now, Peniel, practice what you've learned."

Why, Peniel wondered, did Yeshua not stop and heal the ragged man? He could have done so in an instant. Yet Yeshua walked on. The leper would never know how close he had been to his salvation.

Yeshua said, "There's much you won't understand until all things are complete, Peniel. The road ahead isn't easy."

They walked on, unspeaking, as Peniel attempted to reason out all that Yeshua had told him.

There were few other travelers abroad. Shops were mostly shuttered; the Lower City at the foot of the Temple Mount slumbered in the embrace of its shadow. Pentecost morning, the sixth day of the month of Sivan, in the seventeenth year of the Roman emperor Tiberius, was thus far serene.

Peniel shut his eyes and listened to the creak of hinges, the clatter of breakfast plates within still-barred doors. The trumpets of the morning sacrifice had not yet sounded, nor had he heard the Levite-led psalms ring down from the Temple Mount.

From first light until now? Such a tiny fraction of a life, and yet fuller in the company of Yeshua than any span in Peniel's memory. Had less than two hours passed? It was inconceivable.

Peniel opened his eyes again, reveling in his view of the translucent, pale blue sky and the glistening white marble of the Temple framed by it. It was as if the pillar of shimmering cloud by which the Almighty led His people in bygone times rested again atop the Holy City.

Peniel's gaze darted everywhere, eagerly sorting and cataloging. The dark green leaves of an orange tree hung over a garden wall. Its verdant foliage cooled the warm honey tones of the sandstone blocks.

A shaft of light lanced through a gap in the Temple structures overhead. The beam caromed off a bright brass candle sconce in a second-story window, ricocheting to dazzle Peniel's sight.

More people emerged from their homes; the city came to life as Peniel watched. Today was a holy day when no unnecessary work was to be done. A gaggle of yawning Torah schoolboys, having no doubt been up all night meditating on the five books of Mosheh, was herded along the street by their instructor.

The colors of the clothes, the objects the passersby carried, the myriad variety of gaits and postures—all these delighted Peniel.

But chiefly it was their faces that most fascinated him. Some were fresh, bursting with energy, like newly opened gardenia buds. Some were stiff and leathery, the passage of many sunrises and sunsets imprinted on their brows. Some were brittle as thin pottery, concealing inner turmoil, as if their lives were apt to shatter if examined too closely.

And this was merely the beginning, Peniel thought. After seventeen years of blindness, less than one day had passed since Yeshua of Nazareth had given him his sight. Peniel drank in the visions like one who came to a fresh spring after wandering the desert of Moab.

Peniel turned to study the Teacher. Slender of build, with brown curly hair and smile lines imprinted around his eyes, perhaps Yeshua was merely commonplace in His appearance. But not to Peniel. He stared openly at his benefactor, determining to memorize every single feature . . . and was caught in the act.

Peniel ducked his head, embarrassed, then raised it again at Yeshua's laugh.

They reached the entrance to the Pool of Siloam, where yesterday Peniel had been sent by Yeshua to wash away the clay that had covered

his sightless eyes. Peniel had emerged from the portico able to see for the first time in his life.

The city gate, leading out into the countryside, was a few yards beyond them. Yeshua stopped there and looked back the way they had come.

“Yerushalayim! Yerushalayim!” Yeshua murmured as He took in the lofty towers. He let His gaze slide down the walls to linger on the multitudes moving up the street. “You kill the prophets and stone those sent to you.” He winced as if some painful memory had struck Him. “How often I longed to gather your children together like a hen gathering chicks under her wings. But you weren’t willing! So. Your house is left to you . . . desolate.”²

Silence. It was as if the tumult in the city came to a halt in that instant. No one moving. Breathing. Speaking. Frozen. Then Peniel heard a distant rumble like thunder, only deeper, more penetrating, as Yeshua opened His eyes. The blue sky flashed bright white as if lightning had struck out of a cloudless sky.

And life resumed again.

Had anyone else seen or heard what Peniel saw and heard?

“You’ll come back some day, Lord?”

“Yes. I promise. Soon. And what will you do with what you’ve been given?”

Peniel considered the gifts Yeshua had given him. Vision. Healing. Hope.

“I know Yerushalayim well,” Peniel said at last, hoping this was the right answer. “Every corner. Every beggar. Every blind man.”

“Yes. You’re blessed.”

“Can’t say as I’d call it a blessing yet. We’ll see. But I’ll do what I can.”

“I’ll be in the north.” Yeshua searched Peniel’s face for some sign of fear. “Use your head. Be wise. They’re wolves, these fellows.”

“I know. But why would they bother with the likes of me? A blind man?”

“You’re not blind anymore.”

“Oh. Yes. Point taken. Well, you must stay clear of Yerushalayim. They hate you. I saw it in their faces at the meeting yesterday. They’ll try to kill you.”

No reply. Yeshua placed His hands on Peniel’s shoulders and made a *b’rakkah* for parting. And then He melted into the crowds.



First light streamed through the high window of thirty-seven-year-old Simon ben Zeraim's bedchamber at his Bethany estate. He snuffed out the lamp that had burned on his study table through the night.

From twilight till dawn Simon had performed the Shavuot obligation of reading through the five books of Moses.

Legend held that during the long, dark hours of study, the heavens open for an instant. In that moment the Lord would hear and answer any prayer.

Any prayer?

How fervently Simon had prayed!

Every breath had contained a reminder to God of Simon's faithfulness, his righteousness! Where was the answer?

Simon held up his hands to the light. He clenched his fists and moaned.

So. Heaven had not heard his supplication.

With difficulty now he performed his final duty of piety.

Sunrise on the day of Shavuot marked the marriage between Messiah as the bridegroom and Israel as His beloved bride.

Simon rolled up the Torah scroll. Haltingly, he recited the *ketubah* of marriage between Messiah, the heavenly Groom, and His bride, the nation of Israel:

"On this day appointed by the Lord for the revelation of the Torah to his beloved people . . . the Invisible One came forth from Sinai. The Bridegroom, Ruler of all Rulers, Prince of Princes, said to his bride Israel, 'Many days will you be mine and I will be your redeemer. Behold, I have sent you golden precepts through the lawgiver Mosheh. Be my mate according to the law of Mosheh and I will honor, support, and maintain you and be your shelter and refuge in everlasting mercy.'"

Simon paused. "Mercy." He muttered the word bitterly and shoved the *ketubah* to the side of his desk.

No bridegroom had descended with the golden dawn to redeem the nation of Israel. Today would be like every other day, Simon mused. A day when false messiahs, blasphemers, prophets, and rebels polluted the landscape, insulted the authorities, endangered the government, and duped the common people.

Simon's head throbbed. Shoulders ached. Eyes burned. He felt no

enlightenment from his obligatory study of the Torah. The answers to his agonized questions remained elusive, even though he had been faithful in the performance of duty.

How long could he keep his secret? How long before he became an object of public humiliation and condemnation?

The stirring of servants seeped beneath the bolted door.

Simon's wife, Jerusha, had already been up for hours decorating the house with roses for the holiday.

Jerusha. Her gregarious youthfulness had blossomed and ripened over the years until now, at thirty, she was a beauty. The one thing in Simon's life that made sense. Their marriage had been arranged as an alliance between two prominent families, and yet Simon had loved her from the first night.

The political aspect of their union had gone sour after a fierce argument over the legitimacy of the high priest in Jerusalem. Jerusha had not seen her father in nearly fifteen years. Simon had forbade her any contact with her parents. Now her mother was dead. Only the old man remained. Young Jotham had never met his grandfather.

Through the fog of his despair Simon heard Jerusha's voice, her careful footsteps. He sensed her presence as she paused outside his threshold.

Had she spoken his name?

A whisper. "*Why, Simon? For sixteen years I shared your bed. Bore your son. Why, now, have you locked me out, Simon?*"

Had he heard her question? Or only imagined it?

The smell of baking bread brought him around. He raised his eyes. The quiver of new arrows, a gift from thirteen-year-old Jotham, hung unused on the rack beside the unstrung bow.

How proud Jotham had been of the dozen beautiful arrows he had presented to Simon three months ago. Jotham had collected and set the hawk feathers into the straight shafts of seasoned wood. Sharp iron tips imported from Alexandria guaranteed good deer hunting for father and son.

Yet days and weeks and months had passed since the gift had been presented. The bow remained untouched. The arrows untried.

A whisper. "*Why, Father? I'm a man now. At my bar mitzvah you promised we would go to Lebanon before Shavuot. Promised we would hunt together. Why, now, do you threaten to send me out of your presence when I*

mention your promise? Why do you say you're too busy when the fields are plowed and the seed is sown and lambing season is done?"

Had he heard the accusation of Jotham yesterday in the barn? or merely seen it flash in his eyes? Resentment tempered by fear clouded the face of Jotham these days.

Simon studied the fingers that had once confidently grasped the bowstring and sent an arrow flying to the heart of its mark.

No more! No more!

A soft rap sounded on the door. "Simon? Shavuot tov! Will you eat with us?" Jerusha called him to breakfast. Even this brief message managed to pile guilt on him and rouse his resentment.

"I'm praying," Simon lied.

"We'll wait."

"Don't wait."

He knew he had hurt her. Knew she felt the sting of his rejection. Her passion for him was fierce. It was obvious in her glance—the way she moved across the room, looked over her shoulder, inviting him. In the way she leaned close to him to light the lamp at his table. He longed to take her in his arms. But at night he locked the door, keeping her out. And he could not tell her why. Why . . .

He rose slowly and fumbled for his clothes.

Removing the lid from the black onyx urn on his dressing table, Simon recited the prayers of purification. With the *antelaya*, the ladle, grasped in his right hand, he dipped pure water from the urn and poured it over his left hand until it was immersed. Lifting his hand heavenward, Simon allowed the drops to stream past his wrist before setting aside the *antelaya* and rubbing both hands together in the bowl.

How long had he kept himself spotless? Simon mused. How many years? The washings at rising, before meat, after meat, between courses. The first waters, the second waters . . . no one had been more scrupulous than he.

Dumping out the contents of the bowl, Simon ladled it full again and once more scrubbed. His final posture, like a supplicant, a beggar, ensured the fresh water completely carried away the polluted first washing, running down his arms even to the elbows.

Hoping . . . *hoping* . . . the Eternal took note of his piety.

Though he was not required to do so on a feast day, he tied phylacteries onto his forehead and then his forearm. The leather straps

twined around his fingers like the jesses holding a captive falcon onto its master's fist. By obeying the commands of Torah, Simon kept his sanity from flying away. Each terrible new day he said the prayers and clung desperately to the outward image of what he was. Proud, arrogant, rich, an expert in the law and in the enactment of Pharisaic ritual, Simon ben Zeraim was among the most respected men of Israel.

No man imagined Simon's terror at what lay ahead.

None of his illustrious colleagues here in Jerusalem or in the region of the Galil suspected the truth.

Simon was sure that Jotham did not know.

If Jerusha guessed, she did not speak of it.

If his servants wondered at his reclusive behavior, they feared to mention it. After all, the downfall of their master could mean the end of the House of ben Zeraim.

Day by day, in performance of religious obligation, by outward display, Simon held his inevitable destruction at bay.

But for how long? Summoned to nearby Jerusalem by the keen-eyed high priest, or *cohen bagadol*, Caiaphas, Simon wondered if he could conceal his secret from him. Simon was anxious to pack up his family and return to the security of his Capernaum home.

He turned toward Jerusalem, toward the Temple of the Most High, and began absently to mutter the prayer: "Blessed are you, O Lord, King of the world, who forms the light and creates the darkness, and in your goodness day by day and every day renews the works of creation."

He spoke the words, though he no longer believed them. No longer believed in God's goodness.

Now only the formula remained.

Simon donned loose lambskin gloves. These provided an additional barrier between his flesh and the uncleanness of the earth. With this final step Simon ben Zeraim, would-be Pharisee of Pharisees, unbolted his door and emerged from the self-imposed exile of his room.