

FIRST FRIDAY (afternoon)

### ***CHAPTER 3: FIRST MEETINGS***

"And it [the boundary of the Tribe of Benjamin] passed along to the side over against the Arava northward, and went down unto the Arava." (JOSHUA 18:18)

The Arava bus slowed to a halt beside the stark sun shelter. Behind, on the right, a strip of tarmac cut into a nondescript *wadi*—one of the myriad dry watercourses that are a defining feature of the Negev. We had reached Qetura Junction. Several passengers looked over their shoulders to see who would alight in such desolate isolation. The rear door groaned open and I descended the steps. The heat engulfed me. My nasal passages seared. I squinted to shield my eyes from the dust and the blinding sun.

Twice before I had come to the Negev during August. Both times I had taken the central road, not the eastern road that follows the Arava. The central road winds through the heart of the Negev—beginning in Be'er Sheva, twisting through the great crater of Makhtesh Ramon, crossing the Wilderness of Paran, brushing the Egyptian border, and finally dropping almost due south to the resort port of Eilat. In those previous years, the impact of the outside temperature had at first felt overwhelming. Here, in the depths of the Arava, more than a thousand feet lower and degrees hotter, it felt even more so.

No one was waiting. I pulled my duffle bag from the luggage compartment of the bus, settled onto the dust-covered bench beneath the sun shelter, and began to contemplate my missing pick-up. The bus lumbered back onto the empty road and receded into the distance. I sucked the remaining drops of water from the second of my two canteens and cursed myself that I had not refilled them at the Dead Sea rest stop an hour and a half before. While punctuality generally matters little in the Middle East, a desert rendezvous is sacred. Dehydration quickly fells even the strongest.

I had little chance to contemplate further. A grime-covered white Land Cruiser, Toyota's copy of the legendary British Land Rover, emerged from the *wadi*. Within 20 seconds it

squealed to a stop in front of me. The driver, wearing only an undershirt above his waist, got out, muscles rippling easily across his chest and shoulders. His dark red hair was pulled into a ponytail, framing a strong, freckled face. Red hair several shades lighter spread over his sun-darkened torso and arms.

He offered an embarrassed smile over the roof of the Land Cruiser. "I'm sorry I'm late. I stopped to watch a herd of gazelles up the *wadi*. They usually don't let people come so close." His voice wavered, as if he were asking my permission to be present. He walked awkwardly around the vehicle and hesitantly reached out his hand. "I'm Tomer. In Hebrew it means the male date palm ... It has no use. It can't produce fruit."

My jaw dropped at this strange and seemingly incongruous introduction. I felt a curious but guarded confusion. I hesitated, groping for a reply. "That's not so," I sputtered. "For the female to bear, she must have a male."

Tomer's smile broadened. The sadness behind it became palpable.

"Are you a Cohen?" I queried. In Jewish tradition, the *Cohanim*—the Priests of the ancient Temple and their descendants—have red hair.

"No," Tomer answered. "The Christians say that I look like Jesus. The Jews say I look like David. I think I look like Esau."

Again, Tomer's response gave me pause. Esau, the grandson of Abraham and son of Isaac, was the twin brother of Jacob and the first-born. As Genesis 25:24–34 relates the story, Esau "emerged [from the womb] red, like a hairy mantle all over," while Jacob was born smooth-skinned. "Esau became a skillful hunter," while "Jacob was a mild man who stayed in camp."

The narrative tells that Jacob was preparing bread and lentil stew, when Esau returned from the hunt famished. So great was Esau's hunger that he traded his birthright to Jacob for the food. With that, he would lose his father's first blessing and receive instead his father's second, "by your sword you shall live."

I had no time to think further. Tomer nodded toward the Land Cruiser. I hoisted my duffle bag, dropped it into the back, and climbed in. With a deft motion, Tomer cut the steering wheel, arced the vehicle around, and turned into the *wadi*. We drove for a minute in silence. Then, unsolicited, Tomer began to unfold his story.

He spoke softly, as if trying to contain himself. Yet his words rushed in a torrent. They poured out as we followed the tarmac west, driving up the *wadi* onto the starkness of the Negev

Plateau. They flowed as we swung south into the emptiness of the Ovdah Valley. They continued as we curved east onto a spur of narrow tarmac into Wadi Shacharut. As we climbed upward, barren hills took form around us. Only then did Tomer's words ebb, as if restrained by the confines of the converging *wadi* walls.

We rounded a slight curve and a small, flat-topped ridge emerged a quarter of a mile before us. A broad, level area, the head of Wadi Shacharut, formed at its foot. As in previous years, a dozen or more 500-pound bales of hay lay piled in the middle. Around them, browsed a half dozen camels, at first sight looking like evolutionary aberrations—giraffe necks, llama heads, ostrich legs, and lion tails attached to the bodies of misshapen buffalos. As the Land Cruiser approached, they lifted their heads to gaze at us quizzically. Another half dozen camels penned in a rough wooden corral to the left turned their necks to stare. A crude pole shelter covered with weathered palm fronds stood between the bales and the corral. Next to it lay a decrepit shipping container, now serving as a shed. We had reached Camel Riders, our destination.

The tarmac continued to the right, curving upward until it reached the top of the ridge. There, perched on the precipice overlooking the Arava, a menage of two dozen trailers and modest houses built of cement blocks huddled around a water tower. They formed an incongruous island of green in the otherwise sun-scorched desert. A handful of stunted trees grew bleakly among the dwellings, half smothered by the five to six months of dust that had accumulated since the last rain. This was the settlement of Shacharut.

From my visits of previous years I knew that couples and children, or in several cases single men, occupied these dwellings.

The settlement constrained the physical and psychological space of its inhabitants. Only those who shared a strong bond could endure such confines. Not infrequently couples would split. When this happened, the women and children almost always departed, leaving the men to their isolation. Eventually, the men might leave as well. New couples would come and reoccupy the abandoned dwellings. And so, the population of Shacharut remained constant, projecting a false face of stability.

I wondered at what dreams brought people here and how, among those who left, those dreams had failed. Perhaps the driving force was a search for community, a sense of belonging. I knew the futility of such a search. To find comfort in others, one must first find comfort in

oneself. I recognized the disquiet of my own spirit and wondered whether I could live in this environment.

A graded dirt road climbed to the top of the opposite ridge. Tomer turned toward it, down-shifted, and pressed the accelerator. Within a minute, we reached the height, a cloud of dust billowing behind us. We stepped from the Land Cruiser and stared at the expanse before us.

We stood atop the western wall of the Arava. A series of broken hills fell away from us, ending 3 miles or more distant and 1,500 feet below. Twelve miles across stood the Mountains of Edom, the highest rising almost 6,000 feet and forming the Arava's eastern wall. I could trace the peaks 30 miles north and south, until their outlines faded into the late afternoon haze. Qetura Junction lay obscured somewhere to the north.

The Arava is the northern continuation of Africa's Great Rift Valley, more formally known as the Syrian-African fault. Formed by an ongoing separation of the earth's crust, the rift extends from the heart of East Africa to the Anatolian Plateau of Turkey. Millions of years from now, as the separation continues, the Arava will become a sea—a spur of what is today the Gulf of Aqaba.

To an observer standing on its rim, the Arava looks like a mammoth trench, cut 1,000 to 2,000 feet deep and extending as far as the eye can see. The Grand Canyon of the Colorado, which carves a tortuous twisted channel as much as 5,000 feet below the surrounding plains, is many times deeper and incomparably more majestic. Yet, the straight line of the Arava conveys its own sense of awe. One can imagine that it was gouged by the finger of God.

In the southern Arava, four playas have formed. These are shallow, undrained basins, often saline, not uncommon in deserts. They become lakes when the runoff from the rare winter storms collects. Three playas on the Israeli side of the border—Eilot, Avrona, and Yotvata—have been reclaimed by *kibbutzim*, Israeli communal farms, and now support date palm plantations. The fourth in Jordan remains desolate.

With the exception of its high salt content, the soil of the Arava is well suited for agriculture. In contrast to the bare rock of the Negev Plateau, much of the Arava is characterized by loess, a tawny mixture of silt and sand deposited by the wind. Runoff seeps in slowly and, more importantly, evaporates slowly. This characteristic enables desert flora to survive and provided the basis for primitive desert agriculture.

The roots of desert plants may penetrate deep into the soil or spread widely just beneath

its surface. Either type of root system effectively captures the limited moisture. This enables the Arava to support a relative abundance of plant life. Acacia trees—African thorn bushes—dot its landscape. Bands of thick brush fill the paths of the runoff. These give the Arava an almost savannah-like appearance, even in the heat of summer, belying its less than 2 inches of direct rain a year. Herds of up to 40 gazelles still roam. Within living memory, these herds were the prey of cheetahs, until the last were hunted down by the *Bedu* in the mid-20th century.

Given its springs, and its location at the juncture of Arabia, Egypt, and the Levant, the Arava was a crossroad of major trade routes from antiquity to beyond the Age of Steam. These were the trails over which I would journey in the following weeks.