

# CHAPTER 1



Countless summers have been and gone since the day that changed my life. Even so, the shock of finding the bearer of half my soul caught in the twisted thorns still hits me every time I picture his face. Though some memories have faded over time and the outlines of his features have grown indistinct, that image remains: those beautiful eyes turned lifeless.

I had known something was wrong; I had felt it in every fibre of my being long before I found him. Not just because both my older brothers were unaccounted for, but because I sensed a part of myself was missing. Havel and I had been entwined since our conception; we knew everything about each other, and there was nothing hidden between us. We had rarely been apart for more than a few days, the only exception being those weeks when he had tended the sheep on the northern plains, the winter before this tragedy happened. Those weeks had been miserable for me, but they were nothing compared to the torment to follow.

When Kayin was condemned at the sacrifice and fled, I – along with everyone else – had searched everywhere I could think my eldest brother might be. As dark settled in, Havel and I had collapsed together in the hut, but after a short bout of restless sleep I woke to find Havel missing. Setting out with Chayyim, we had walked as far as the forest together before splitting up. Chayyim entered the woods while I continued towards the fields.

Havel would not give up looking until he found Kayin, I knew that instinctively. Yet there was no sign of either of them. When the weight in my chest and stomach grew so intense that I could barely walk without it dragging me down, I fell to my knees and cried out for Elohim to have mercy; cried out for Him to show me where Kayin and Havel might be.

As I lifted my tear-stained eyes, a ray of sunlight shone through the haze, lighting up a section of tall grass in the distance. I ran as fast as my weak legs could carry me, stumbling over ditches in the ground and treading through thistles in my desperation to get to the light before it faded. Upon reaching the general area of grass where he lay my soul guided me the rest of the way – drawing me irresistibly to its other half.

Part of me wishes I had never prayed that prayer, and that Elohim had continued to protect me from a sight that would forever wound me. Yet

finding Havel alone gave me precious moments with him that I would not have had if someone else had brought his slumped body home. If Elohim hadn't led me to the spot, I doubt we would have found him before his body had begun to rot in the dust. That would have been a far worse sight and I would not have been able to cradle him and weep for him as I did in those moments. So, the better part of me was grateful for the answered prayer.

When I first found Havel I couldn't believe what I saw. Even though I had known something was desperately wrong, even though I already felt the hollow of loss, nothing could have prepared me for the sight of it.

His face was so different without the vivacity that had always characterised his being. I threw myself beside him, opening his eyelids wider, striving to find him, yet there was no sparkle there, no joy and no fire. Lying in the thorns was a body that used to hold the one I loved, yet I knew that my brother was somewhere else. Suddenly, he was lost to me. He had left me. He had gone as swiftly as the wind blows through the trees. My soul ached at his betrayal.

I set about untangling the thorns from his body, desperately thinking that somehow, if I released him, he might come back to me. I started with those thorns piercing his brow. His lifeblood had dried in drips down his face, some settling on his eyelids, some on his cheeks. Some had run down and filled the cavern in his ear before drying out. His soft, brown curls were stuck in clumps to his ears where they had mingled with it. His body was now hard and stiff, and, despite the earth's heat, cold. His coldness mirrored the chill in my bones.

Once he was free from the thorns, I tried to move his body away from them. Wrapping my arms around his chest, I dragged him towards me, into a patch of grass containing fewer weeds. Then, allowing his back to rest upon my knees, I moved one of my arms to cradle his neck.

By then, my tears were flowing and blood was seeping from my own torn hands. As he again failed to stir, I begged him to return to me. My tears fell onto his face and mixed with his blood, causing it to run further. Deep, wretched sobs convulsed my entire body as I sank my head into his neck and squeezed. I could not let go; how could I ever let go?

Time passed in a haze until, when the sun was beginning to set again, I heard someone shouting in the distance. I knew I had to move; I had to let them know I was there, for I would never be able to carry Havel's body alone. So, I gently eased Havel to the ground. This was easier now as I noticed the stiffness in his limbs had strangely softened since I first held him. I stood and waved my arms in the air at the figure silhouetted against the setting sun. As he neared, I recognised Abba. When he saw my face, his own instantly changed.

'It is Havel,' I said. When my father looked down and saw his beloved, lifeless son he fell to his knees and cradled the body to his chest, crying in loud wails. I joined him, putting my arms around my abba, breathing his earthy scent, feeling his living warmth, and praying to Elohim that He might offer us another miracle: that Havel might re-join his body. How could we ever be a family again without the one who had held us all together?

At length, my abba began to speak in broken tones. 'Where is Kayin?' he asked.

In my torment over Havel, I had completely forgotten about Kayin. 'I don't know. I have not seen him,' I replied.

He drew Havel's body away from his chest and studied it all over. He put his fingers into the wounds created by the thorns and gently touched the bruises on his neck. Then, stroking his son's hair, he kissed his bloodied brow.

'Is this where you found him?' Abba asked.

'No, he was stuck in the thorns – just there.' I pointed to the spot a few strides away. Abba looked at it, drew his brows together, and then carefully put down Havel's body. He began to examine the surrounding area, brushing away some of the grass and studying the ground. He picked up some of the thorns and moved them around. He rubbed grasses between his fingers, touched areas of dirt and even smelt them.

'What is it, Abba?' I asked after I could stand watching him no longer. He turned and looked at me. The pain in his eyes seemed to have intensified – if that was possible. I could see he was hesitating before answering.

'There were two people here, Awan. Two track marks beside your own, two scents.'

'What do you mean, Abba?' I asked.

'I hope I am wrong, but I fear that Havel has died at the hands of Kayin.'

'No!' My hand shot to my mouth; I could not believe it.

My father stumbled back over to me and placed a gentle hand on my shoulder. Then he stroked the bruises on Havel's neck.

'A man's hand did this. See the shape of his fingers.'

I looked again. The imprint was clear, but my mind could not comprehend it.

'Couldn't it have been a serpent? Kayin had similar markings after he was attacked.'

'Similar, but not the same. And there is no sign of a bite.'

'It could be hidden in the thorns—'

'Awan, I don't want to believe it either, but Kayin is missing and... It is not the first time.'

'What do you mean?'

‘Kayin once attacked Shimon in the fields. In the end, he did not hurt him, but the look in his eyes... I think if Chayyim and I had not been there, it could have gone differently.’

I shook my head and pushed my father’s hand away. I could not bear the thought that my beloved Kayin would do such a thing. ‘I have never heard this story,’ I protested.

‘Havel asked me not to tell you.’

I began to pace away from my father.

‘Awan, it is true,’ he called out behind me.

‘No, Abba! Don’t say it again. There must be another explanation. I cannot accept it.’

He rushed to me and grasped me. I fought him for a moment, but he did not let go. I began to shake as he held me.

‘I cannot, Abba...I cannot...’

‘I know, my beautiful girl,’ he soothed, holding me and stroking my hair as tears streamed down his cheeks. I relinquished my fight and allowed him to cradle me as together we gave in to the devastation of his discovery.

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