

CHAPTER 1: THE BROKEN BIRD



The morning dust danced in slanted light through the workshop window, and Jesus sat very still, watching it swirl. Each speck seemed to know exactly where to float. He wondered if dust had thoughts, tiny ones, about where it wanted to land.

"Jesus! Come play!"

Benjamin's voice cracked across the courtyard. The other boys were starting their war game again—Romans versus zealots. Yesterday Jesus had been a Roman and felt sick when he'd had to pretend to crucify Samuel. The pretend nails had been twigs, but something in his stomach had turned over and over, like bread dough being kneaded too hard.

"In a moment," Jesus called back, though he knew he wouldn't go. He rarely did anymore.

Instead, he arranged small stones in patterns on the packed earth. Seven stones in a circle. Then twelve around those. The patterns felt important, though he couldn't say why. Sometimes his hands knew things his mind didn't.

A sound made him look up—soft, broken, like cloth tearing underwater. There, near the pile of cedar shavings, something brown writhed against the ground.

A sparrow. Its wing bent at an angle that made Jesus's own shoulder ache.

He glanced toward the courtyard. The boys were shouting now, their mock battle growing fierce. No one watched him. Good.

The bird's eye, black as a grape seed, fixed on Jesus as he crept closer. It didn't try to escape. Animals never did, not from him. Even the mean dog that bit everyone else would roll over to show its belly when Jesus passed.

"Shh," he whispered, though the bird made no sound. Its beak opened and closed, opened and closed, like it was trying to speak some terrible news.

Jesus cupped his hands around the sparrow. It weighed almost nothing, like holding a warm breath. The broken wing trembled against his palm.

Then it happened. The feeling.

It always started in his chest—a river of warm honey flowing up through his throat, down through his arms, into his fingers. Not hot, not cold, but alive. More alive than anything. Like the morning his little brother James had been born and Jesus had touched the baby's head and felt the whole world singing.

The sparrow grew still. The bent wing straightened with a tiny click, like a door latch finding its home.

Jesus opened his hands. The bird sat there for three heartbeats, head cocked, as if it too were trying to understand what had happened. Then it burst upward, wings beating perfect rhythm, and disappeared over the workshop wall.

He stared at his palms. They looked exactly as they always did—small, slightly dirty, with a scrape on the left thumb from yesterday's splinter. But they felt...different. Full. As if they were cups that had just held starlight.

"What are you doing?"

Jesus spun around. Judas stood in the doorway—not the Judas from down the street, but the older one, the neighbor boy with eyes like chips of flint. He always watched Jesus. Always noticed too much.

"Nothing." Jesus closed his hands.

"I saw." Judas stepped closer. "I saw what you did."

"The bird was just stunned. It flew away."

"Its wing was broken."

"You saw wrong."

Judas smiled, but it wasn't a kind smile. It was the smile of someone who'd found a secret they could use. "My father says your family is strange. Says your mother tells stories about angels."

Jesus felt his hands grow hot—not with the good warmth, but with something else. Anger? Fear? He pressed them against his tunic.

"I have to help Father now," he said.

"Your father's at the market. I saw him leave."

They stood there, the space between them thick with unspoken things. Finally, Judas shrugged and turned away. But at the doorway, he looked back.

"I'll be watching you," he said. "Whatever you are, I'll figure it out."

When he was gone, Jesus sank down beside the cedar shavings. Their scent usually calmed him, but not today. He pressed his palms against the earth and whispered the question that lived always in his throat:

"Why am I different?"

The dust swirled. The light slanted. And somewhere beyond the wall, a healed sparrow sang a song that sounded almost like an answer.

But Jesus couldn't understand the words.

Not yet.

He gathered the stones he'd arranged so carefully and scattered them. Some patterns were better left unfinished. Some questions better left unasked.

At least until you were old enough to bear the answers.

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