

CHAPTER-1: THE WEEPING WOOD

The sawdust made Jesus sneeze three times in a row, each one louder than the last.

"Bless you, little storm," Joseph said without looking up from his plane. The curl of cedar peeling away from the wood looked like a tiny scroll, and Jesus tried to catch it before it hit the ground. Missed.

"Why does wood smell sad?" Jesus asked, pressing his nose against the fresh-cut board.

Joseph's hands paused for just a breath. "Wood doesn't smell sad, son. It smells like cedar. Like trees. Like good hard work."

"But this one—" Jesus ran his small finger along the grain, and something cold touched the inside of his chest. Like drinking water too fast. "This one remembers something bad."

"Trees don't remember." Joseph's voice stayed patient, but Jesus heard the careful sound underneath. The same sound Mother used when he asked about the dreams where light sang his name. "Come, help me measure. Remember what we say?"

"Measure twice, cut once." Jesus took the measuring rope, but his hand stayed on the cedar board a moment longer. The cold feeling spread up his arm. Fire, his body whispered. This tree knew fire.

"SHESUS!"

Ruth's voice exploded through the doorway, followed immediately by Ruth herself—three years old and covered in what looked like flour. Or dust. Or possibly both.

"Ruth! You're supposed to be napping." Jesus dropped the rope and caught her as she barreled into his legs.

"No nap. Play." She grabbed his hand with sticky fingers. "Come see! I maked you something!"

"Made," Joseph corrected automatically. "And Jesus is helping me work."

"Pleeeeeeease?" Ruth turned her enormous eyes on Joseph. She'd learned that look from watching the neighbor's cat beg for scraps. It worked about as well. "I maked—made—him a present!"

Jesus glanced at the cedar board. The cold feeling was fading, leaving only the memory of something he couldn't quite name. "Can I go, Father? Just for a moment?"

Joseph sighed, but his eyes crinkled. "A moment. Then back to work. And Ruth—no more flour."

"Wasn't flour," Ruth said, pulling Jesus toward the door. "Was dust from the special jar."

"What special jar?" But Ruth was already dragging him into the courtyard, where indeed, Mother's grinding stone was covered in... something.

"Ruth, is this—"

"LOOK!" She pointed proudly at the ground where she'd used the grinding flour to draw wobbly circles. "It's you!"

Jesus tilted his head. The circles looked more like sick sheep than anything human, but Ruth's face glowed with pride.

"It's..." He knelt beside her creation. "Why is my head so big?"

"'Cause you think lots." She poked his forehead with a floury finger. "Mother says your head is full of questions. So I made it bigger for all the questions to fit."

Something warm replaced the cold in his chest. Different from the cedar feeling. This warmth felt like sunrise, like bread just out of the oven, like—

"RUTH BAT MARY!"

Mother appeared in the doorway, and the warmth in Jesus's chest immediately mixed with the very familiar feeling of uh-oh.

"Was accident?" Ruth tried, hiding behind Jesus.

Mary surveyed the destruction—grinding flour everywhere, her good stone dusted white, handprints on the walls where Ruth had steadied herself. Her jaw worked the way it did when she was counting to ten in her head. Maybe to twenty.

"Jesus, take your sister to wash. Ruth, you will help me clean every grain of this later."

"But I maked—"

"Made. And yes, I see you made... something. We'll discuss it after you wash."

Jesus took Ruth's sticky hand and led her to the water basin. Behind them, he heard Mother muttering something about "forty years in the wilderness sounding better each day."

At the basin, Ruth splashed more water on herself than in it. "Shesus?"

"Mmm?"

"Why you make that face when you touch the wood?"

Jesus paused, water dripping from his hands. "What face?"

"The hurting face. Like when I falled off the big rock but tried not to cry."

"I don't make a face."

"Do too. Your eyebrows go like this—" She scrunched her tiny face into an exaggerated frown. "And your mouth goes like this—" She turned her lips down dramatically.

"I do not look like that."

"Do too. Ask Thomas. He says you look at things like they're talking to you in secret words."

Jesus dried her face with the edge of his tunic, maybe rubbing a little harder than necessary. "Thomas talks too much."

"He likes you though. Says you're weird but nice-weird." She grabbed his face between her wet palms, forcing him to look at her. "I think you're nice-weird too."

The warm feeling came back, stronger. Ruth's hands smelled like flour and childhood and something else—like she'd been picking the wild jasmine behind the house again even though Mother told her not to.

"Ruth," he said carefully, "Do you ever... feel things? When you touch stuff?"

She tilted her head, considering. "I feeled squishy when I touched the mud yesterday."

"No, I mean... inside. In your chest."

"Oh!" Her face lit up. "Like when baby Micah smiled at me? Made my tummy feel like butterflies?"

"Maybe? But from things, not people."

Ruth's forehead wrinkled in concentration. Then she shrugged, already bored with the question.

"Dunno. But one time I touched the mezuzah and my fingers felt tingly. Mother said it was 'cause I

needed to wash my hands."

She wiggled free and ran back toward the house, calling over her shoulder, "Come on! Before Mother counts to MORE numbers!"

Jesus followed slowly. As he passed the workshop doorway, he saw the cedar board leaning against the wall. Just for a moment, he let his fingers brush it again.

Fire. Definitely fire. But also... after the fire, rain. Years and years of rain. And new growth. And birds—

"Jesus!" Joseph's voice, gentle but firm. "The measuring rope?"

"Coming, Father."

He picked up the rope, but something made him glance back at the road beyond their courtyard wall. A man stood there, traveler-dusty, leaning on a walking stick. Nothing unusual—many passed through Nazareth.

But the man was looking directly at Jesus. Not at the workshop. Not at Joseph. At him.

Their eyes met for one heartbeat. Two. The man nodded once—small, like acknowledging something privately confirmed—then continued walking.

"Who was that?" Jesus asked.

Joseph looked up. "Who was who?"

But the road was empty. Only dust swirling where footsteps had been.

"Never mind." Jesus turned back to the workbench. "Where should I measure?"

As Joseph showed him where to place the rope, Jesus felt something new. Not cold like the cedar's fire-memory. Not warm like Ruth's flour-portrait. Something else.

Like a tiny hum, just behind his ears. So quiet he might have imagined it.

But that night, as he lay on his sleeping mat with Ruth curled against his side like a flour-scented puppy, the hum was still there.

Waiting.

The dove carved itself in dreams he wouldn't remember. Not yet.