

CHAPTER 2: SAWDUST PRAYERS



Joseph's hands moved across the wood like a blessing. Back and forth, the plane peeled away curls of cedar that fell to the floor like tiny scrolls of unwritten law. Jesus tried to copy the motion with his own small plane, but his shavings came off jagged, breaking apart before they could curl.

"Steady," Joseph said without looking up. "The wood will teach you its rhythm if you listen."

Jesus paused, palm flat against the plank. There—he could feel it. The grain running like underground rivers, the hard places where branches once grew, the soft spots that would yield easily. But there was more. Always more.

This tree had stood on a hillside facing east. Eighty-seven summers. A fire had scarred its north side in its fortieth year. Birds—he could feel where birds had nested. And once, during a storm, lightning had come so close the whole trunk had hummed with almost-death.

His hand had stopped moving. The plane rested against wood that remembered fire.

"Jesus?"

He blinked. His father was watching him with that look—the one that wasn't quite worry but wasn't quite peace either.

"You were somewhere else."

"I'm sorry, Father. I was just—" What? Feeling the tree's memories? Hearing its stories? "I was thinking about the grain."

Joseph set down his plane and came to stand beside him. His hand, heavy and warm, rested on Jesus's shoulder. "Show me."

Jesus traced a finger along the wood. "Here, where it's darker. Something happened here. Something hard."

"A knot. Where a branch grew."

"But before that. When it was still part of the tree. Something..." Jesus closed his eyes. "Fire. There was a fire."

The hand on his shoulder stiffened, just slightly. When Jesus looked up, Joseph's face was carefully blank.

"Many trees survive fires," Joseph said finally. "The scars make the wood stronger. More beautiful, some say." He squeezed Jesus's shoulder. "But we're making a simple bench today, not reading stories in the grain."

They worked in silence for a while, the only sounds the whisper of tools against wood and the distant bleating of goats. Jesus forced himself to focus on the surface, only the surface. Push forward. Lift. Pull back. Don't think about what the wood remembered. Don't wonder why he could feel it.

"Father?" The question escaped before he could catch it.

"Mmm?"

"Did you always know you would be a carpenter?"

Joseph's hands never paused in their rhythm. "I thought I might be a scholar once. When I was young—younger than you—I could memorize whole passages of Torah after hearing them once. The rabbi said I had a gift."

"What happened?"

"My father died. Someone had to feed the family. Hands that might have held scrolls learned to hold hammers instead." He glanced at Jesus, and for a moment, Jesus saw him differently—not just Father, but Joseph. A man who'd had dreams, who'd made choices, who'd given up one life for another.

"Do you miss it? Being a scholar?"

Joseph's smile was soft. "Sometimes. But then I think—if I'd become a scholar, I wouldn't have learned to build. Wouldn't have met your mother. Wouldn't have..." He paused, and Jesus heard what he didn't say: Wouldn't have you.

"Do you think," Jesus set down his plane carefully, "that everyone has something they're meant to do? Even if it's not what they planned?"

This time Joseph did stop working. He turned to face his son fully, and Jesus saw something in his eyes—knowledge, maybe, or fear, or both mixed together like oil and water that won't combine.

"I think," Joseph said slowly, "that God whispers to each heart what it needs to hear. Some hear early. Some hear late. Some hear so clearly it frightens everyone. Even themselves."

Jesus felt his throat close. "I don't mean to frighten anyone."

"Oh, my son." Joseph pulled him close, and Jesus breathed in the familiar scents of sawdust and sweat and safety. "You don't frighten me. You fill me with wonder. But wonder and worry often walk hand in hand."

They stayed like that for a moment, then Joseph released him. "Come. Let's see if you can cut this board straight. Measure twice—"

"Cut once," Jesus finished.

They worked until the sun reached its peak, and Jesus kept his touches light, surface-only. But even so, he could feel the stories humming underneath. Every piece of wood a library. Every grain a gospel.

When they stopped for water, Joseph watched him over the cup's rim.

"That bird yesterday," he said carefully. "The one Judas mentioned at the well this morning."

Jesus's hands went cold.

"Birds heal sometimes. On their own."

"Yes, Father."

"But not always."

"No, Father."

Joseph nodded slowly. "We must be careful, you and I. Not everyone understands that some gifts are meant to be unwrapped slowly. Do you understand?"

"I think so."

"Good." Joseph handed him a piece of bread. "Now tell me—what do you feel when you touch this?"

Jesus almost dropped it. Was this a test? A trap? But his father's eyes were kind, waiting.

He closed his eyes and let himself feel, just a little.

"Wheat," he whispered. "From the field near the old well. The one that floods sometimes. And..." This was stranger. "Kindness. The woman who baked it was thinking about her daughter. Hoping she would visit soon."

When he opened his eyes, Joseph was smiling—a sad smile, but a real one.

"Martha's daughter is coming next week," he said. "She told your mother yesterday." He took the bread back gently. "Eat now. And remember—some gifts are best kept wrapped until the right moment comes."

Jesus ate, but the bread tasted like questions. In the corner of the workshop, a pile of shavings caught the light. Each curl a tiny scripture he couldn't quite read.

Yet.

That night, when they prayed together, Jesus added a silent line to the ancient words:

Help me understand why You made me this way. And help me know when to hide it and when to let it shine.

The oil lamp flickered, making the shadows dance. And somewhere in those dancing shadows, Jesus thought he saw the shape of wings.

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