

CHAPTER-2: THE DONKEY GAME

"You have to kick it HARDER!" Thomas shouted, dancing from foot to foot like he needed the toilet. "It's a Roman ball! Kick it like you're kicking Caesar!"

Jesus looked down at the leather ball—really just old rags wrapped tight and tied with string. It didn't look particularly Roman. Or kickable. It looked sad.

"I don't want to kick Caesar," Jesus said. "I don't even know Caesar."

"That's not the POINT." Thomas grabbed the ball and demonstrated with a wild kick that sent it flying into Miriam's garden. A squawk of protest from the chickens confirmed its landing.

"Thomas bar Jacob!" Miriam's voice came sharp over the wall. "That's the third time this week!"

"Sorry!" Thomas called back, not sounding sorry at all. He turned to Jesus with a grin. "See? Perfect kick. Now you get it and try."

Jesus sighed and squeezed through the gap in Miriam's fence. The chickens scattered, except for the big red hen who stood her ground, fixing him with one beady eye.

"I'm not here to steal eggs," he told her.

The hen clucked skeptically.

The ball had rolled under the cucumber vines. As Jesus reached for it, something made him stop. There, by the water trough, the old donkey everyone called Methusaleh stood with his head hanging low. Too low.

"Thomas," Jesus called. "Something's wrong with—"

"Just GET THE BALL! Before she comes out with the broom!"

But Jesus was already walking toward Methusaleh. The donkey's breathing sounded wrong—wet and rattled, like stones in a bucket. His left front leg trembled with each breath.

"Hey," Jesus said softly. "Hey, old man."

Methusaleh's ear twitched but he didn't lift his head. Up close, Jesus could see the problem. The leg was swollen from hoof to knee, hot to the touch even through the fur.

"JESUS!" Thomas's head appeared over the wall. "What are you—oh."

The wet breathing got worse. Methusaleh made a sound that wasn't quite a bray, more like a sigh that had given up halfway through.

"We should get someone," Thomas said. "My father maybe, or—"

But Jesus wasn't listening. That feeling was back—the warm river in his chest, the one that had come when Ruth fell, when the bird couldn't fly. Only this time it felt different. Bigger. Like it had been feeding on all his held-back moments.

He placed both hands on the swollen leg.

"Jesus, don't. If he kicks—"

The warmth rushed down his arms so fast it made him gasp. Not like water this time—like lightning made of honey, bright and sweet and terrifying. The donkey's leg pulsed under his palms, and Jesus felt—

Pain. Days of it. A cut from a sharp stone that went bad. Infection spreading like ink in water. The donkey's simple confusion about why his body had turned against him.

"Stop," Jesus whispered, not sure if he was talking to the infection or the river or himself.

The warmth poured out anyway. He felt the poison drawing back, the swelling deflating like a punctured wineskin, the heat leaving—

"WHAT IN THE NAME OF ABRAHAM'S BEARD—"

Miriam stood in her doorway, broom in hand, mouth hanging open.

Jesus jerked his hands back, but it was too late. Methusaleh lifted his head, shook it like he was waking from a long nap, and took a solid step forward on his perfectly sound leg.

"I—he was—it's not—" Jesus backed away, his hands tingling like he'd been holding nettles.

Thomas had gone completely silent, still hanging over the wall with his eyes wide as plates.

Miriam looked from Jesus to the donkey to her broom, as if wondering which one to hit first. Then Methusaleh complicated things by braying—loud and joyful and decidedly un-dying—and trotting to the water trough with the energy of a donkey half his age.

"You." Miriam pointed the broom at Jesus. "What did you do?"

"Nothing! I just—he looked sad and—"

"That donkey," she said slowly, "has been lame for a week. I was going to have Samuel look at him tomorrow. And you're telling me you did nothing?"

Jesus's mouth opened and closed like one of her chickens. The tingling in his hands was fading, but the memory of the donkey's pain still echoed in his bones.

"Maybe he was just... tired?" Thomas offered weakly from the wall.

Miriam's look could have curdled milk. "Tired. The donkey was tired. And now he's dancing like it's Purim."

As if to prove her point, Methusaleh kicked up his heels and pranced—actually pranced—around the garden.

"I should go," Jesus said, edging toward the fence.

"Oh no you don't." Miriam grabbed his shoulder. Not hard, but firm. "You're going to explain exactly what—"

"MIRIAM!" Her husband's voice boomed from inside. "THE BABY'S INTO THE GRAIN AGAIN!"

She closed her eyes, muttered something that might have been a prayer or might have been words mothers weren't supposed to know, and released Jesus.

"Go," she said. "But boy—"

Jesus was already squeezing through the fence.

"—BE CAREFUL!" she called after him. "GIFTS LIKE THAT DRAW ATTENTION!"

He ran. Thomas ran beside him, the ball forgotten in Miriam's garden. They didn't stop until they reached the old olive tree at the village edge, both panting.

"That," Thomas wheezed, "was the most amazing thing I've ever seen."

"You can't tell anyone."

"Are you JOKING? You just healed a donkey by TOUCHING it! Do you know what this means?"

"Thomas—"

"You could heal EVERYTHING! My grandmother's bad hip! The baker's curved spine! Oh! And Rebecca's baby who won't stop crying—maybe something's wrong with her that you could—"

"THOMAS!" Jesus grabbed his friend's shoulders. "You can't. Tell. Anyone."

Thomas's excitement dimmed slightly. "But... why? You could help everyone. You could—"

"I don't even understand it!" The words came out harsher than Jesus intended. "I touch things and they... change. Or heal. Or I feel what they feel. And I don't know why or how or when it will happen next!"

"But that's incredible! You're like... like Moses! Or Elijah!"

"Moses was eighty when God talked to him. Elijah was old. I'm six. And I just want to play ball without accidentally performing miracles!"

Thomas was quiet for a moment. Then: "That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard."

"What?"

"If I could heal donkeys with my hands, I'd never play ball again. I'd heal everything. I'd be the most famous person in all Galilee! Maybe all Judea!"

"I don't want to be famous."

"Then you're stupid." But Thomas said it gently, the way friends can call each other stupid and mean I don't understand you but I still like you.

They sat under the olive tree as the sun started its downward slide. In the distance, they could hear the other boys still playing. Judas's voice rose above the rest, organizing teams, making rules.

"He's going to find out," Thomas said quietly. "Judas. He notices everything."

Jesus picked at the bark. "I know."

"He already doesn't like you."

"I know."

"Because his father compares you two all the time."

"I KNOW, Thomas."

They sat in silence again. Then Thomas punched Jesus's shoulder, not hard.

"Well, I think it's amazing. Even if you are stupid about it."

Jesus almost smiled. "Thanks."

"Want to go back? Get the ball?"

"Miriam will kill us."

"Nah. She's got baby troubles. We could probably steal all her cucumbers and she wouldn't notice."

"We're not stealing cucumbers."

"You're no fun for someone who can do miracles."

They walked back toward the village, arguing about whether healing counted as a miracle or just a "really weird thing" (Thomas's position). Behind them, the olive tree's shadow grew long, reaching toward the village like fingers.

And from another shadow, someone watched. Not the traveler from yesterday—someone smaller, younger. Someone whose father owned the big house with the red door.

Judas stepped out from behind the wall where he'd been listening. His face wore an expression too old for his nine years—part triumph, part fear, part something harder to name.

"Miracles," he whispered to himself. Then louder, practicing: "The carpenter's son performs miracles."

He thought of his father's morning lecture about proper Torah memorization. Of the way the rabbi praised Jesus's questions while frowning at Judas's stuttered responses. Of his mother's sigh when she found him struggling over the simplest prayers.

A donkey. The strange boy had healed a donkey with a touch.

Judas looked at his own hands—soft, uncalloused, good for holding scrolls he couldn't properly read. What would his father say if Judas could heal? Would he finally look at his son with something other than disappointment?

But no. That gift belonged to the carpenter's boy. The one who didn't even want it.

"Stupid," Judas muttered, echoing Thomas. But when he said it, the word had teeth.

He turned toward home, his mind already working. His father had friends. Important friends. Friends who worried about false prophets and wild claims and the delicate balance Rome allowed them to maintain.

They should know about this. They needed to know.

After all, Judas reasoned as he walked, wasn't it his duty to protect the community from deception? From danger? From boys who might upset everything with powers they couldn't control?

He was doing the right thing. He had to be.

But his stomach hurt as he walked, and his hands shook slightly, and somewhere deep in his chest, something small and hurt whispered: *Why him? Why not me?*

By the time he reached the red door, Judas had buried that whisper so deep even he couldn't hear it anymore.

All that remained was the story he would tell.

And the watching he would do.

And the waiting for his moment to matter.

That night, Methusaleh slept standing for the first time in a week. In his simple donkey dreams, a boy made of sunlight touched him and said, "Better now." And it was.

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