

CHAPTER-3: THE BIRD AND THE WHISPER

The dead sparrow lay by the well like a dropped prayer.

Jesus found it during the quiet hour when most of Nazareth napped. He'd come to draw water for Mother, but the tiny body stopped him mid-reach for the rope. Brown feathers ruffled by wind. One wing stretched wide like it was still trying to fly.

He knelt in the dust. The sparrow weighed nothing in his palm—less than nothing, as if death had stolen even its small substance. Its eye, half-open, reflected the noon sky.

The warm river stirred in his chest.

No, he told it. Not here. Not in the open.

But the river didn't care about careful. It rose like flood season, pressing against his ribs, flooding down his arms toward his cupped hands. The sparrow's stillness pulled at him the way Ruth's broken body had, the way Methusaleh's pain had. Death was just another kind of wrong his hands wanted to make right.

"Please," he whispered, not sure if he was asking the river to stop or the bird to live.

The tingling started. His palms grew hot.

Then—footsteps. Multiple sets. Coming fast.

Jesus closed his hands around the sparrow and stood, the river crashing back into his chest so hard it made him dizzy. Benjamin and his brothers rounded the corner, their voices carrying complaints about the heat.

"Jesus!" Benjamin called. "What are you doing here? Everyone's sleeping."

"Water." His voice came out strangled. The sparrow's body was so light between his palms. So wrong. "Getting water."

"Us too. Mother says we drink like camels." Benjamin's younger brother, David, peered at Jesus's closed hands. "What've you got?"

"Nothing."

"Doesn't look like nothing." David stepped closer. "Is it a lizard? I caught a huge one yesterday. Want to see?"

"No, I—"

"Let me see!" David grabbed for Jesus's hands.

Jesus stumbled backward, clutching the sparrow tighter. Too tight. He felt tiny bones shift under his fingers and wanted to cry out.

"Leave him alone," Benjamin said, but he was curious too. "Though seriously, Jesus, what—"

"It's dead!" The words burst out. "It's a dead bird and I found it and I was going to bury it because that's what you do with dead things, you bury them so they can rest, but you came and—"

He was crying. When had he started crying? Fat tears rolling down his dusty cheeks while three boys stared at him like he'd grown a second head.

"It's just a bird," David said slowly. "They die all the time."

"I know that."

"So why are you crying?"

Jesus didn't have words for it. How could he explain that he felt the sparrow's interrupted flight in his bones? That his hands knew exactly how to restart its tiny heart, realign its neck, call back whatever spark had fled? That holding this small death while denying his gift felt like drowning in reverse?

"Because," he said finally. "Because it was flying and then it wasn't."

The brothers exchanged looks. The kind that said *the carpenter's son is being weird again*.

"Well," Benjamin said awkwardly, "we could help bury it. If you want."

"No." Jesus wiped his face with his shoulder, hands still cupped around the bird. "I'll do it."

They filled their jars in uncomfortable silence. As they left, David whispered something that made his brothers snicker. Jesus didn't catch the words, but he heard the tone. The same tone the village boys used when talking about Crazy Ezra who lived in the caves and claimed angels spoke to him.

When they were gone, Jesus opened his hands.

The sparrow lay twisted now, truly broken. His desperate grip had finished what the fall had started. A fresh wave of tears came—not for the bird's first death, but for this second one. The one he'd caused by trying too hard to hide.

"I'm sorry," he whispered. "I'm so sorry."

He found a spot behind the well where the earth was soft. Dug with his hands until he had a hole deep enough. As he placed the sparrow in its tiny grave, the whisper started.

Not the warm river. Something else. A sound just behind his ears, like wind through spaces that didn't exist. Like someone calling from very far away or very deep inside.

Jesus froze, hands full of dirt. The whisper grew—not louder, but clearer. Still no words, just... presence. Recognition. Like being known by something that had always known him.

"Who are you?" he asked the empty air.

The whisper swirled, almost amused. As if to say: *You know. You've always known.*

"I don't understand any of this." He covered the sparrow with earth, patting it down gently. "The healing. The feeling. Now voices that aren't voices. Why is this happening to me?"

The whisper softened. If it had words, they might have been: *Not to. Through. For.*

"For what? For who?"

But the presence was already fading, leaving only ordinary afternoon silence and a small mound of fresh earth.

Jesus sat back on his heels. His hands were dirty. His face was streaked with tears and dust. He'd failed to save the sparrow, scared the village boys, and now he was hearing whispers that spoke in riddles.

"I'm not very good at this," he told the tiny grave. "Whatever I'm supposed to be. I'm not good at it."

A shadow fell across him. Jesus looked up to find Ruth standing there, her favorite doll tucked under one arm.

"Mama says come home," she announced. Then, tilting her head: "Why you talking to dirt?"

"I buried a bird."

"Oh." She plopped down beside him, arranging her doll's hair. "Was it the brown one?"

"How did you—"

"Saw it when I came earlier. Tried to make it fly but it wouldn't." She gave him a matter-of-fact look. "Things die, Shesus. Mama says it's 'cause the world is broken."

"But what if you could fix them? The dead things?"

Ruth considered this seriously. "Then they'd just die again later. Maybe sadder."

"Sadder?"

"'Cause they'd know what dying felt like twice."

Jesus stared at his little sister. Sometimes she said things that seemed to come from somewhere else, somewhere older than her three years.

"Ruth? Do you ever hear... whispers? When you're alone?"

"You mean the light people?"

His breath caught. "What?"

"The light people. They talk but not with mouths." She demonstrated by opening and closing her mouth silently. "Like that. But you hear them anyway."

"You hear them too?"

"Sometimes. Mostly in dreams." She went back to playing with her doll's hair. "They say you're not ready. But I think that's silly. You're six WHOLE years old."

"Ready for what?"

She shrugged. "Dunno. They talk in puzzles. Like that story about the king who had to guess the name." She stood, dusting off her bottom. "Come on. Mama made bread and if we don't hurry James will eat it all."

Jesus followed her, mind spinning. Ruth heard whispers too. Called them light people. Said they thought he wasn't ready.

Ready for what?

As they walked, Ruth slipped her small hand into his. "Don't be sad about the bird," she said. "Last night I dreamed it was flying again. But different. Brighter."

"That's just a dream, Ruth."

She gave him a look that was pure Mary—patient and knowing and slightly exasperated. "Shesus. Sometimes dreams are more real than real."

They walked home hand in hand, leaving the sparrow in its grave. But that night, Jesus dreamed too. Of a bird made of light, flying through spaces between stars. It turned to him with eyes like tiny suns and said in a voice like wind chimes:

Not yet. But soon. Be patient with becoming.

When he woke, the whisper was there. Stronger. Waiting.

And somewhere in the darkness, Ruth sat up on her mat, eyes wide.

"The light people say the bird says thank you," she announced to the sleeping house. Then she lay back down and was snoring within seconds.

Jesus stared at the ceiling until dawn, wondering if everyone heard voices they couldn't explain, or if madness ran in families, or if—just maybe—something larger than understanding was trying to speak to those small enough to hear.

The whisper hummed agreement.

Or maybe that was just the wind.

But wind doesn't know your name the way this whisper did.

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