

## CHAPTER ONE-IN THE BEGINNING

### The village of Bethany, Israel. 69 C.E.

A piercing scream awoke him, and his heart sank. Joseph knew what that scream meant; he had heard it so many times before, and it still terrified him. It was the primal scream of a human in pain. It went on for several minutes until it suddenly stopped. He knew then that the poor soul had died, mercifully, putting an end to the suffering.

The swell of raucous laughter and shrill shouting rolled in through his window. These were the shouts and laughter of drunken Roman soldiers coming up the road from Jerusalem to his village. He knew that the soldiers were close. According to the candle clock, it was shortly before midnight, the usual time that the marauding started. He was afraid, not for himself, but for his family.

He lived with the terrible expectation they were going to burst into his house tonight, as they had the week before. Then, they had demanded food and wine, terrifying his wife Ruth and their seventeen-year-old son, Simon. Joseph was incapable of doing anything to protect his family. They had cowered in the kitchen while soldiers ransacked their house. They had not had any warning but had been fortunate because the group of soldiers were without a leader and were only intent on stealing food or wine that was at hand. It had been terrifying; Joseph felt useless.

He knew the soldiers were deciding which house they would ransack. When it became quiet, he knew they had selected their victim and murder would follow. It was time to hide and wait. If they were lucky,

these barbarians would pass and seek another unfortunate family. His son Simon appeared at the bedroom door, saying tremulously, "Father, we must hide now!"

"Yes, Simon. Take your mother to the underground mound and wait. Don't be afraid."

His family was relatively safe in the mound. A grass-covered door easily disguised it. Past searches by the Romans had failed to find them, but in mindless frustration, the soldiers had ransacked their house anyway. Joseph's neighbour had not been as prepared. They had refused to give the soldiers their only donkey, and the Romans murdered the whole family. The people of the village found their mutilated bodies the following morning, dumped in a small ditch not far from Joseph's home. The children's arms were missing, and their throats were slit. *We have to leave, thought Joseph. We have to go as far away as possible. My family will inevitably perish if we stay in this place.*

Joseph felt the despair of helplessness. He was dying, and he knew it. Each day he became worse, knowing that his time was coming to an end. If he had been able to get up from his bed and go to the window, he would have seen the glow of fires lighting up the night sky.

These were the fires of Jerusalem burning.

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Joseph of Bethany and his family had been living in fear of the Roman soldiers ever since the Romans had levied taxes on the Jewish people three years earlier. As a result, the Jewish population revolted, taking up arms against the Roman Army. However, it was a one-sided fight with horrific loss of

life, and now, the Romans were intent on destroying Jerusalem.

Joseph and his family lived in a small two-storey house in the village of Bethany to the east of Jerusalem near the burial place of Lazarus. This house had belonged to his father and by his father before him. It had two large rooms and a kitchen on the bottom floor, with two bedrooms at the top of the narrow stairs. The kitchen was a comfortable area, with Ruth's cooking utensils hanging from various hooks. She usually kept their meagre stocks in a large cabinet on the far wall, but Ruth had put most of their food and wine in the underground workshop away from their house. It was only opened when it was safe to do so.

Built on the road to Jerusalem, the house faced west, and because it was on a small rise, looked down to the walled city of Jerusalem. On a clear day, they could see the Temple Dome, and to the left, the Kidron Valley.

Joseph was well respected in Bethany. He was the village leather maker and one of the elders. He had believed his family would be safe in Bethany, far from the unrest in Jerusalem. However, new Roman Legions had recently joined the Roman forces attacking Jerusalem.

They had set up camp to the north of the Mount of Olives, perilously close to his home, and he feared the worst. He had heard much about this new Legion; they were the most professional, fiercest fighting men, and probably the most ruthless Roman soldiers in the whole of the Roman Army. It was now clear that the Romans smelled victory and increased the ferocity of their attacks on the walls of Jerusalem, allowing the soldiers to do what they liked.

On this cold January night, it was obvious to Ruth and Simon that Joseph was nearing death. He was so weak he could not rise from his bed. Every time he coughed, he produced a froth of bright red blood. He knew he was near death, and at forty-five years of age, he didn't think that he would die a happy man. The happiest times had long gone, and his family's future now looked bleak. Joseph had fallen in love with Ruth the first time they met, in the small village church. He still loved her dearly. Now he was going to leave her in the most difficult of times, and he feared for her life.

A single event that had brought him the most joy, apart from meeting Ruth, was the birth of his son. The birth was traumatic, and Ruth had almost died. Joseph was with her as the delivery progressed but was distressed at her pain and the massive loss of blood. Neither he nor the midwife could stop the bleeding, even after Ruth had delivered an apparently healthy boy. Joseph had watched helplessly as Ruth bled onto the already blood-soaked sheets beneath her. Their efforts seemed futile. After the birth, Joseph felt despair overwhelm him and left their bedroom. He sat at the edge of the road and put his head in his hands.

He thought to himself, *I must be strong, I don't want Ruth to die, but I feel so useless. I don't know what to do.* Joseph remembers what happened next most vividly. When he finally drew himself up, breathed deeply, and turned to go back into the house, his heart began to beat rapidly, and his head seemed to expand. In front of him, he saw a shimmering image. He was startled and rubbed his eyes. He instantly thought of the Crown of Thorns that had lain hidden in his house for the last eighteen years. He rushed into the house and removed several floorboards in the kitchen.

Staring into the cavity beneath the floor, he could see that the Crown's leather case, the same case he had made for the Crown when he had brought it home as a boy, was glowing softly around its edges. He had seen this glow before; it was the same soft, warm light that he had seen when the soldiers crucified Jesus. He lifted the case out of its resting place, blew off the dust, and opened it with care. The Crown of Thorns lay on the cream silk cushion that he had made for it at the same time as he made the case, so long ago. The Crown was the source of the soft glow. He lifted the Crown, expecting to have his hands pricked by the thorns, but they were not. He felt lightness wrap itself around him, and he knew instinctively what he had to do. He closed the case, went upstairs to the bedroom, and laid the case containing the Crown of Thorns on Ruth's stomach. Ruth's bleeding stopped, and colour started to come back to her face. He couldn't believe it. Despite what he had just witnessed, he was afraid. The midwife was in awe at what she had just seen and gazed at Joseph adoringly.

“Joseph, you have done a wondrous thing! Ruth has stopped

bleeding and is well.” At that, she fell to her knees in front of Joseph and grasped his robe.

He looked down at the midwife and said, “Please, my dear lady. I am no healer. Ruth has overcome the bleeding herself and is now well.

Please, get up off your knees, as Ruth needs you.” Nevertheless, Joseph was in awe himself. *How could this be?* He looked at the case still glowing in his hands and clasped it to his chest.

Joseph went downstairs to the small kitchen and sat down. He seemed to be in the middle of a bright

haze that didn't come from any particular place; it was just there. His body shook, not from fear, but from an expectation that something was going to happen. He opened the case with trembling hands to see the Crown glowing brighter than before. In fact, it seemed to float on the silk cushion. *Why didn't the Crown do this before, particularly when I made the case all those years ago?*

Joseph felt an overwhelming compulsion to write, yet no words came to him. His mind was full of the image of an angel. The persistence of the image stubbornly put itself in front of his mind, now swaying from side to side. It occurred to him that he should capture what he saw in his mind's eye. He quickly drew the image of the angel as it faded from in front of him. It was then that the words came. They weren't his words, but he couldn't stop writing. As he started to put the words down on a parchment sheet, he realised that they weren't from his mind; it appeared as if it was some other entity guiding his hand. Eventually, his hand stopped writing; the glow dimmed, and he sensed that there was no more. Joseph was exhausted and sweating profusely, but the trembling in his hands had stopped. He picked up the parchment and read the words written by his hand. It was a warning that also described instructions to whoever possessed the Crown. Joseph was perplexed by the message, but he was also anxious to return to his wife, so he put the Crown back in its case and walked slowly upstairs to Ruth.

Ruth had suffered. She was exhausted and weak from the loss of blood. The midwife took the newborn child and wrapped him in his swaddling clothes, placing him at the full breasts of Ruth. She

smiled weakly at Joseph and said, “Joseph, I have borne you a son. Are you pleased?”

“I am full of joy, my dear Ruth. You’ve indeed given me a son, and I shall cherish him all my life.”

Despite the joy of Ruth being well and the miracle of the birth of his son, Joseph was troubled by the message he had received. It was clear to him that the words and the Crown belonged together. It seemed that the proper place was to carve the words on the floor of the case, and the image of the angel on the lid. Joseph knew that the task of inscribing words on leather would take some time, but he had time.

After satisfying himself that Ruth was comfortable in the hands of the midwife, he rested until it was past the midnight hour by the candle clock. Joseph then set about carving the words on a square piece of leather, almost the size of the floor of the case, which he would affix to the floor when it was completed. The message was quite lengthy, and it took him several hours of meticulous work to complete. When it was finished, he held the case up to admire his work, and in front of his eyes, the carved words rearranged themselves into a meaningless jumble.

The angel he had carved on the lid also turned from his crude flying angel into a standing angel, with her wings folded around her and her head bowed in supplication. Joseph couldn’t believe his eyes. He picked up the parchment to assure himself that the words he wrote were the words he had carved – they were. Something or someone, had changed them, but why? He read the first words that he had written, ‘To he who holds the Crown, know that this is a gift from the Lord...,’ confirming that he had carved those very words. Joseph thought, this is a mystery, which only

God can answer. It is beyond me, a mere leather maker, to understand the working of the Lord.

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Now that he was near death, Joseph did not want to die without sharing with Simon the secret power of the Crown. He called Simon to his bedside. Grasping Simon's right hand, he said quietly, "My son, I am nearing my end. You know I love you, and you know how proud I am of you and your skills as a leather maker. You have grown to be a man that I am proud of, and because of that, I shall leave this life a happy man." Simon could feel his father's love and pride, and he tightened his grip. "But I am concerned that the Roman soldiers will wipe out our village with their methodical stealing and killing, and both you and your mother will die at their hands. You must take your mother away from this place and seek a safer haven in the west." Simon nodded. He knew his father was right.

"Father, I also love you for the life we have lived. You have kept us safe from the scourge of the Romans and provided food for our table. We owe you everything. I will do as you say, and I will set off with Mother for the west."

Joseph smiled weakly and drew a long breath. "Simon, you know in your heart that I am going to die, so please ensure that you make preparations to leave this house. It was my duty to keep you safe and provide food for our table. But before I die, you must know, I have carried a secret these past years. A secret and responsibility that I must now pass on to you, for this is a gift from God." Turning to his left, Joseph pulled out a beautifully tooled leather case from under the blanket. The case was box-like, measuring nine inches by nine inches and two inches deep, with a top cover secured to the side by leather hasps. Carved into the

leather lid were a Christian cross and an angel, with the words: 'Jesus, Son of God, ' inscribed below. Joseph pressed the soft leather strap into Simon's hands. "What is this thing, Father?" Simon said. He held the leather case far away from his body.

"You have no need to be afraid, my son. The case will bring you no harm."

Simon wasn't so sure. The case seemed to be alive. He could feel it. "Be aware, Simon, that this case holds the Crown of Thorns. The very Crown of Thorns that had been placed on Christ's head at his crucifixion. Know also that the Crown has the power to heal. During the last seventeen years, I have only used it twice. Once when your mother was giving birth to you, and the other when I healed our donkey's broken leg."

"Father, if it can heal, why can't it heal you?"

"Because, my son, I have learnt that it does not heal the possessor, nor can it bring a person or animal back from death."

Joseph presented Simon with a scroll. "Simon, this scroll has the message that I carved on a square of leather that you will see sits on the floor of the case. For reasons that I do not understand, the words rearranged themselves into nonsense as soon as I finished. I can only think that these nonsense words are to stop whoever has the Crown from exploiting it, but someone must be able to read it." Simon took the scroll and opened it.

He quickly scanned the words then put it down.

"I shall read it later. I am more concerned about your well-being at the moment."

"Simon, please sit beside me, as I have a story to tell you," Joseph said as he started to cough loudly

and began breathing rapidly. Simon placed the leather case at the end of the bed and sat beside his father feeling anxious.