

CHAPTER ONE



*A*ndrew sat under his favorite olive tree that grew in the center of town. He could not believe his eyes—caravans of people had come from everywhere with their mules and camels packed with their belongings. Why they had come to his little town, he did not know, but eleven-year-old Andrew was happy. His father owned an inn on the outskirts of town, and with all these families coming into Bethlehem, some would surely find their way there when the other inn was full.

Yes. His father would be pleased.

But his father would not be pleased if Andrew did not get home to his morning chores. Andrew stepped from the cool shade of the two-hundred-year-old olive tree and brushed the dry earth off his knee-length white tunic. A gentle, humid breeze played with his curly black hair. Up and down the street were one- and two-story stone and brick shops, where merchants stood under canopies, trying to sell their goods to the newcomers. Chatter from the many people buying supplies and seeking shelter filled the air as Andrew started home.

He wove himself through the masses as he crossed the road, but Andrew's steps halted upon seeing four men on horses, in full gallop, charge up the hill into town.

“Make way for Herod’s appointed!” cried the lead horseman.

Behind them came a covered four-wheeled carriage drawn by two stallions. Andrew had never seen such large horses—they stood almost as tall as two men. Muscles rippled under their polished black coats, their eyes were wide with madness, and their nostrils flared with each guttural breath. As though no earthly force controlled them, the creatures bore down on the spectators, slowing for no one and no thing. The carriage sent people scrambling in all directions—it knocked over abandoned carts, sending clothes and clay pottery crashing onto the dust-covered road.

Men and women grabbed their children, pulling them out of harm’s way. One man, in his haste to rescue his daughter, unintentionally shoved Andrew to the ground and directly into the path of the approaching carriage. Andrew hit the ground with such force that his breath was knocked from him. Stunned and gasping for air, he looked up and saw the horses drawing closer. Women screamed and turned their children’s heads away. Andrew had time to do only one thing. He squeezed his eyes shut—and prayed. He prayed that his mother and father knew how much he loved them, and he asked God to take care of them, for he was their only child—his mother could have no more.

And Andrew prayed really hard that it would not hurt to die.

There was no more time for prayers. He could hear

nothing but the sound of the horses' hooves upon him. Andrew screamed as his arm was caught up in the air, lifting his body off the ground with a violent jerk. His ribs were crushed against his chest, expelling the last bit of air his lungs contained.

Then he felt nothing. No more pain pierced his body. Andrew knew he must thank God when he saw Him, because death did not hurt that much.

Andrew opened his eyes and found himself in the arms of God. He looked into the lightest of brown eyes, which overflowed with tenderness and love. But Andrew did think it strange that God's breaths were short and quick, and that his forehead was sprinkled with sweat. And he never imagined that God wore a brown-striped tunic and white headdress. But then, God could wear anything He wanted.

"Thank You, God," Andrew said, once his breath returned.

"Thanks be unto God, indeed," God replied, gently lowering Andrew to the ground.

Andrew reached behind his back and was disappointed—he thought all angels had wings. Andrew was further confused when he saw that he was standing on the main street of Bethlehem, not looking down from heaven. Andrew looked up at God. "Am I not dead?"

God laughed kindly. "You are very much alive, little one."

"I do not understand," Andrew said. "I felt the wheels of the carriage crush me as they ran over my chest."

"I believe you felt my arms about you as I lifted you out of the horses' path. I hope I did not hurt you."

Andrew thanked the stranger for saving him; he was grateful that his mother would not be grieving his unfortunate death.

Not far from where Andrew stood, the horses that had almost killed him neighed and reared, straining against their reins as they came to an abrupt stop in front of the main inn of Bethlehem, which was reserved for the more affluent travelers. The lead horseman dismounted. He was clothed in a linen tunic, with a corselet of curved strips of metal tied at the shoulders by leather straps. A sword hung by his side. The Roman soldier approached the inn's double wooden doors, lifted the brass ring, and slammed it against the door repeatedly, not stopping until Shemer, the aged innkeeper, opened it. Shemer's eyes betrayed his fear upon seeing a captain of Herod's army at his door, but he attempted a smile. "Welcome to my inn," he said. "How may I serve you?"

"Taval, the census taker, requires all your rooms." The man's voice resonated over the crowd, who dared not move. "You will be well paid for your services."

"I ... I ... I only have two rooms available." Andrew never knew Shemer to stammer. "The others have already been acquired."

Speaking slowly and in a deeper tone, the Roman said, "Do you not hear, old man? Taval *requires* every one of your rooms, whether he needs their use or not. The rooms that are occupied—empty them."

"Captain, I implore you—"

"Or would you rather answer to Herod himself?"
the officer said with deadly calm.

Shemer protested no further, even though he was a good man and a fair man who would not throw honorable people out into the streets. Andrew started toward Shemer but was held back by a firm hand on his shoulder.

"Stay put, little one," his savior said.

Andrew could do nothing but watch as Shemer summoned his servants to do the Roman's bidding.

From behind him, Andrew heard a familiar voice sing in his ear. "Blessings, Andrew."

Andrew swung around. Shemer's nineteen-year-old daughter stood beside him, balancing a basket laden with fresh fruit on her hip. She had been at the market and was unaware of what was transpiring.

"Alma," Andrew said softly, directing her attention up the street with a turn of his head.

Her back arched, straightening her spine. "What business do Roman soldiers have at my father's door?"

"They want him to rid the inn of all the tenants for the census taker."

Andrew had heard that Alma's dark emerald-green eyes could, in a matter of moments, turn to the blackest black when she was angry, especially when it came to defending her father. She had lost her mother at childbirth, and she was not going to let anything happen to her sixty-five-year-old father.

Andrew watched as the black of her pupils

gradually invaded the emerald-green orbs until Alma's eyes went black. She turned to the stranger at Andrew's side and held up her basket of fruit. "Would you be so kind?" Not waiting for an answer, she thrust it into his arms, raised the hem of her skirts, and stormed toward her father, leaving behind a wake of dust.

"I think you may soon have to rescue someone else," Andrew said to his new friend.

"Your friend Alma?"

"No. The Roman guard."

Alma reached her father's side just as the other three soldiers dismounted.

"Father," she said, kissing his cheek. "I see we have visitors." Shemer pulled his daughter to him, attempting to whisper in her ear, but Alma broke free. She turned and faced the captain with a forced smile on her face. "I understand you wish my father to vacate the inn."

Andrew could see that although her voice was not strained, her fists were clenched at her side and at her right temple, a throbbing vein appeared.

"My business is with your father," the Roman said.

Alma's eyes narrowed, but she kept any ire within. "You have no authority in Bethlehem to throw our guests out into the street."

"Alma!" her father cried.

"Who are you to speak to Herod's elect in that manner?" demanded the captain.

Alma proceeded without caution. Lowering her head, she calmly stated, "I am but a mere humble Hebrew

girl who dares to stop you from doing an injustice."

"Get it done, Captain Theodosius! Now!" came an impatient cry from inside the covered carriage.

The Roman took two steps toward Alma until there was only space enough for a shallow breath between them. Towering over her, he said, "In Rome, orders are obeyed without question."

With sarcastic politeness, Alma said, "Look around, Captain. We are not in Rome."

Gasps as well as suppressed chuckles were heard throughout the crowd. Andrew shook his head. Men did not desire such brazenness in their wives. Alma would remain unmarried for another season.

The Roman stepped back and reached for his sword. "Out of my way, girl!" he commanded.

Alma—and her black eyes—remained steadfast. "Captain, have you ever heard of Marcus Octavius Caelestis?"

"All of Judea knows him!" he barked.

A curt smile appeared. "If you toss one of the most beloved senators in Herod's court into the street," Alma said, "what words would you desire be given your widow?"

The Roman removed his hand from his weapon. Looking over Alma's head, he addressed her father. "The senator Caelestis is here?"

Shemer nodded, sweat falling from his brow. "An old friend. He leaves for Jerusalem tomorrow."

"He travels with his wife and children," Alma

added. "Along with their servants, they occupy several rooms."

Andrew noticed the captain did not appear as tall as he once had.

"I offer a compromise," Alma continued. "My father and I will transfer our belongings from our home to the inn. You may have full use of our house where our servants will be at your command, and you can conduct your business in private."

Regaining his stature, the Roman responded, "As I would have demanded."

Alma tilted her head slightly to the left. "No doubt, Captain." A smile of satisfaction appeared on her face.

"And I offer a word of caution," the soldier said. "Should you come to Jerusalem, you would do well not to cross my path."

Alma respectfully bowed. "I shall obey that order, Captain. For I would not like your men to see you bested again by a mere humble Hebrew girl from Bethlehem."

This time Theodosius' own men had cause to laugh. The Roman turned sharply on his heels, silencing their laughter. But Andrew thought he caught a hint of a smile on the Roman's face, which hardened when he ordered his men to assist the census taker from the carriage.

When the carriage door opened, a stout man, more wide than tall, emerged. His double chin shook with each shuffling step. Over his white tunic, he wore a red coat bound at the waist by a belt that was decorated with rubies set in gold—the dress of a man of importance. *He*

must be the one called Taval, Andrew thought.

Two of Shemer's servants appeared at the carriage and unloaded Taval's baggage. Shemer directed them to take the visitors through the inn and across the inner courtyard to his home. Shortly, Alma and he would come and move what they needed into the inn. Following the servants into the inn, Taval then brushed past Shemer without a word. One other man exited the carriage, carrying handfuls of scrolls. Before he and Taval's assistant disappeared through the doors of the inn, Taval informed the captain that he would send word for him to return, once the census was completed.

Captain Theodosius ordered his soldiers to mount their horses. From atop his steed, the Roman sought out Alma's still-black eyes. "By the way, there would be no words for my 'widow'; I am not married." The horses roared to life, causing the crowd to retreat inside shops or behind trees. Andrew stood a little closer to his rescuer, who put a comforting arm around him.

As Herod's men left, the heaviness in the air ebbed away and was replaced by reserved laughter and chatter as everyone gathered their things and continued on their quest for lodging.

Alma returned to Andrew's side through cheers of praise for her stance against the Roman, although some scorned her foolishness. Thanking Andrew's friend, she reclaimed her basket of fruit and rejoined her father but not before Andrew noticed that her eyes had regained their usual green hue. And a sparkle appeared in them

that had not been there before.

“Andrew!” a voice yelled over the noise of the crowd. “Where have you been?” His father was soon at his side.

“I was on my way home,” Andrew answered. “This kind man saved me from being run down by Roman horses.”

His father was not sympathetic. “What were you doing in the road?”

“Your boy was pushed into the street accidentally,” Andrew’s rescuer said. “But all is well.”

“You do not need to defend my son.” Andrew’s father reached for Andrew’s hand and addressed him sternly. “To home with you.”

Andrew turned back to his savior. “Thank you again.”

“God’s will be done.”

“I hope we meet again,” Andrew called out as his father dragged him away. “My name is Andrew!” he yelled from halfway down the street.

* * *

Joseph straightened his brown-striped tunic as he watched father and son disappear into the multitude of people. He turned and walked across the street to his wife.

Joseph loved Mary. From the moment they were betrothed, he knew he would be her protector. And her protector he had become. When Mary returned from

visiting her cousin, Elizabeth, she was three months blessed with the child God had placed within her. Joseph insisted their marriage be quick. And he knew that they had to leave Nazareth; a healthy nine-month-old child born after only six months of marriage would cause people to call Mary a name that God would not want placed upon her. There was only one name she should be called: Holy Mother. With the census came their opportunity to travel to Bethlehem. Long after Mary's child was born, they would return home, knowing everyone would think Joseph the father—until it was time for the world to know the Truth.

Joseph kissed Mary's forehead. "How are you feeling?"

"Blessed, my love."

"Come. Let me find you somewhere to lay your head."

Although Mary was seven months with child, Joseph lifted her with ease, setting her upon Uriel, the donkey. Joseph gathered up their meager belongings in one hand and placed the other on the nape of the donkey's neck. The animal proceeded with great care, as if aware of the precious cargo it carried. During the nine-day journey from Nazareth, Joseph had watched Uriel avoid rocks and crevices on the road, making Mary's ride as smooth as possible.

Mary and Joseph passed numerous people who knocked on the doors of shopkeepers and people's homes, asking for a room. As the city was overwhelmed with so

many, prices rose steeply for even a small corner.

But Joseph led his small party toward the only part of town in which he could afford to stay. He would search for an inn on the outskirts of the city of David in this little town called Bethlehem.