

## CHAPTER 2

**Judea. Mount Calvary outside the walls of Jerusalem.  
A.D. 33.**

Mary trembled and leaned into her friend for comfort. She watched the Roman soldier bring down the hammer once again. It clanged hard against the metal spike that nailed her son to his wooden cross. Those who stood around the hill closed their eyes and fell silent. The only sound they could hear above the strong breeze was the hammer and the cries of the three condemned men.

“Come away, Mary,” John said to her.

She resisted his attempts to spare her this torment. “No,” she said. “I cannot leave my son. If he can endure this, then so can I.”

He held her tight when the sound of the hammer echoed again. “No mother should have to see this.”

Mary pressed her head against his chest. She could no longer fight the tears. Her nails dug into his arms as she tried to find the strength to remain on her feet. “How can they do this to him?” she gasped. “He has harmed none of them.”

Other friends of his lingered close by. They too shared in her pain. The torment of seeing the suffering of the one they so cherished was too much to bear. None of them could look, save one.

“They are twisted and cruel,” another woman said. “That is how. They are less than men, and they shall burn for this. Our maker sees all.”

John looked across to see Mary Magdalene there. If any of the others had heard her they did not show it. She took one of Mary’s hands and held it tight within her own. All the time she kept her eyes trained straight ahead. She watched another of the Romans grab the feet of Mary’s son.

He held them firm and tied them just above the ankles to the strong wooden beam. Then he brought down the hammer on a long ugly-looking spike that pinned both feet to it. A jet of blood shot up into his face. He wiped it away with his bare wrist before striking it a second time.

Mary moved away from John and reached out with her free hand. “Jesus!” she cried, dropping to her knees.

John did the same behind her and cradled her in his arms. She fell back against him, her anguish etched hard into her features. His friends all stood only a few feet away. They had to stand and watch the Romans nail the man they had followed to two pieces of wood. It was as much as some of them could stand. Luke and Mark surged forward to try and end this madness while they still could.

Still the hammers drove the spikes in deeper. The soldiers hoisted up the two other condemned men for all to see. They had their legs broken for a quicker death. A scuffle broke out below them, which neither could hear nor see. The Roman guards acted fast and drove the onlookers back.

The centurion walked over. He had a face as hard as the rest of his body. “Stay back!” he warned them. “Lest I shall have you all removed from this hill.”

Tears filled the eyes of each of the men. There was nothing they could do. They stepped back knowing full well the officer meant what he had said.

Mary’s son turned his head their way. His whole body trembled with shock. He sucked in a deep, but laboured breath. “Rest easy, mother. This shall all end soon.”

She tried to offer him a smile. He was so brave. But she was still going to lose him, her sweet boy who had grown into the finest of all men. The reality of that

ripped her heart in two. She fell forward with her face pressed down against the ground, sobbing long and hard.

The others cried with her. They all loved him. Her son turned his head away again.

He stiffened as the soldier struck the spike in his feet one last time, his eyes rolling up in his head. The pain covered every last inch of his broken body. A black wave passed over him though the agony of his wounds kept his eyes open. The agony of hands and feet nailed to the wood beneath him. Of ribs and a back that burned from flesh torn away by the spikes on a whip. His long hair was matted and thick with blood. It oozed from a crown of thorns the soldiers had driven into his scalp.

His vision became a blur. Each time he tried to focus a jolt of pain passed through both his eyes. For a few moments he could not see. The dark blue of the afternoon sky turned grey and then black. He felt a sudden jolt as the soldiers began the task of hoisting him up. The spikes tugged hard at his hands and feet. Again it caused him to cry out, but the shock of it restored his vision once more.

The outline of a helmet met his eyes. He turned them slowly to see the image of a grinning Roman. The man said a few words in broken Aramaic. It was the latest of many insults, but he was long past caring about such things. All he knew was the agony that every laboured breath brought him. And it made him wish each one could be his last.

An old man stood back from the crowd. Balthasar was one of three kings who had travelled to this land from Persia long ago. They bore gifts and came to pay homage to a new-born child. His had been myrrh. He felt it a small token for such a privilege. For he had gazed upon the one who would save mankind from himself.

Thirty-three years had passed since then. A month ago he returned, though this time to Judea. Word had spread far and wide of an incredible young man. One who spoke of love and of forgiving your enemy. On his first visit he had used a bright star to guide him here. Now he needed only the hope that radiated from this man.

Yet, he felt only despair all around him. The anguish was clear from the crowd gathered there. For them, all sense of hope was fading fast. He did not need his eyes to see it. They had long since failed him. His ears told him all he needed to know. A great sadness filled him and yet he did not despair like the others. His vision extended well beyond theirs. He possessed the wisdom that this was only the beginning, not the end.

The old man sensed the presence of another close by. Again he did not need his eyes to know who it was. The black aura was strong enough to anyone who had "the eye" for such things to see it.

Lucifer knew the old king was aware of him, but he did not care. His eyes focused straight ahead on the lonely figure nailed to the Cross. Gasps rang out from the crowd as the soldiers stood the crucifix up. It sealed the fate of the young man hanging from it. There would be no reprieve now.

He struggled against the spikes that held him there. The ropes around his shins and arms burned into his flesh. With both feet he pushed down so that his lungs could suck in a breath of air. Had the Romans broken his legs he would not have been able to breathe. Death would have come quicker. But they did not want that for him. He would hang there until he no longer had enough blood in his veins to carry the oxygen to his brain.

Balthasar could feel the hate coming from the Dark One. The man who hung from the Cross above them stood against all that he did. He knew this was the last thing Lucifer could have ever wanted. “You did not think he would do it, did you?”

The Dark One ignored him. He rarely got involved with the mortals, unless to strike a deal or to claim a soul. His reason for being there was to try and put an end to the events before him. He did his utmost to make eye contact with the dying man, but he had no joy.

The old man did not let it deter him. He knew God had blessed him with this gift for a reason. Perhaps it was for this moment. “So what shall you do? You are finished in the world of men. A bad memory that should soon be gone. A puff of dust to blow away in the wind.”

He knew his words had struck a nerve. In giving his life, this young man stood to undo all the work of the Dark One. Lucifer knew it too.

Some of the others glanced across at the old man. None of them knew him, but for one. Mary managed a faint trace of a smile. This man had brought gifts the night her son was born. He had aged much, but she knew who he was.

Balthasar sensed that she had noticed him and bowed his head to acknowledge her. He could not even begin to imagine the pain she was going through, though his senses could feel it.

One of the group thought he was speaking to the one they loved. He took offence at once to the words the old man spoke. “What are you saying, you old fool! Do you even know who that is you are insulting?”

Mary had to act when he broke from the rest. “Be still, Thomas. He is a friend.”

Thomas gave the old man a steely look. He mumbled under his breath and joined the group once more.

Balthasar stepped back a few paces, a little unnerved by the outburst. He hoped now he might be out of earshot of the rest.

Lucifer knew the old man wanted to talk, though he was none too keen to engage with him. “Go away, blind man,” he warned, in a low growl.

“Your threats are lost on me. I do not fear you.”

“You do not want to incur my wrath.”

“What would you do? My time is close at hand. You would only begin my journey to paradise sooner than I had hoped.”

He knew Lucifer still had his eyes on the young man on the Cross. “I held him in my arms the night he was born. You can be sure I shall be with him after he leaves this world too. You are only here because he has undone all of your work. Yet you can do nothing to stop it.”

“What would you know of it?”

“I know enough. This is the end for you.”

It was all the Dark One could do to contain the rage building inside. “You are beginning to vex me, old man. Move away from me before I send you on the journey you so desperately crave.”

“As I said, I am going nowhere.”

“I could rip him down from there any time I please.”

“We both know that is not so. Or you would have done it.”

“What makes you so sure of that?”

“He is doing this of his own free will. Not even God can stop it. The truce you agreed upon renders you both powerless to stop this event. He shall die today, as a man.”

The old man was right. Lucifer could not interfere with the free will of any man, least of all this one. If he did so, then God would strike him down. He did not have the power to stand up to that. There was only one other thing he could do.

He stepped closer to the crowd. His eyes remained fixed all the time on the one he loathed. "I can take away your pain," he said. "Ask me to cut you down."

The young man did not look at him. He wanted it to end, but not that way. The pain of his ordeal was more than any man could endure. For a whole day the Romans had beaten him to a pulp. They had lashed him with the whip and driven a crown of thorns into his head. Then they nailed him to this Cross.

He gritted his teeth to take another agonising breath. A loud gasp escaped his lips as he did so. There was not a part of him that did not hurt. His hands and feet had turned black both from the hammer and a lack of oxygen to them. Yet still they pained him. He could think of nothing better than for another to cut him down. But he had come too far for that. He had to see it through to the end.

The battle for souls was running close. Lucifer had caught up fast in recent years. Man had turned bad and cared little for God. It left Him with no choice. He had to send a son to save this species He loved so much. Not a son He had crafted with His own hand, but one born of this earth, as a mortal man. It was His deep love of man that had started the first Great War. Too much had passed to let it all go. He could never allow Lucifer a route back to Heaven. To do so would signal the end for those He so cherished.

"Let me spare you this torment. Ask me and I shall grant it to you."

"It is no use," the old man said. "There is nothing you can do here."

"Stand at my side! Bow to me as your one true lord! I can give you power beyond your dreams! I can take away all your pain."

The young man looked past those he loved. His eyes fell on his great enemy. The skies turned ever darker and a strong wind blew about the hill. It was such that the people clung to their robes. The Romans too moved away to find shelter from it. As they did the first drops of rain began to fall.

Balthasar stood firm. The change in the weather did not faze him as it did the others. He knew at last the reason this land had drawn him back. It was his task to speak for the young man on the Cross. "Your words are wasted. You are the false prophet; the Prince of Lies. His power far exceeds yours."

The young man squinted hard, but kept his eyes trained on the Dark One. As a man he did not have the strength to speak. Yet he wanted Lucifer to know that the old man spoke for him. He would never give in, despite his mortal pain.

Lucifer knew he was losing this battle and was close to despairing. "Look around you!" he implored him. "They are not worth a single drop of your blood! For all you are doing for them, they still spit on you! Man is a cur! Let him die! It is as much as he deserves!"

Balthasar walked right up to him. At once Lucifer noticed a change in the old man. The one who would ruin his work was indeed about to speak.

"It is time that you left," the old man said.

Lucifer shot him a sharp glance. The voice he spoke with was that of the young man on the Cross. It was rare that he ever felt unsettled, but this was such a time. The Son of God had thrown down the gauntlet.

His temper got the better of him. He shot across to where the Romans had crouched down. Their eyes remained fixed on the one they had crucified. More than ever they wished he would die. They did not want to spend another moment on this hill.

He cast his eye over the group to select the right one for his purpose. Once he had chosen the man he wanted, he jumped into his body. The Roman stood up, no longer bothered by the wind and rain. His fingers closed around the spear he held in his hand.

“What are you doing?” one of the others asked, when he moved away.

The legionary ignored his comrade. He walked around the small clusters of people to find the perfect spot. The young man knew what was to come. He looked the Roman right in the eye to show his resolve would not break.

The others got up to follow him when he did not respond to the question. They feared he might do something foolish. His actions could then spark a riot. Such an event would not please Pilate, the governor.

The centurion worried about this most of all. He did not need this now. All he wanted was for this to end so they could return to barracks. But if it did happen he needed his men to be on their guard. “Stand down!” he shouted to his soldier. “I command you!”

The Roman did not look around and he did not obey the command. Even the sound of the centurion drawing his gladius did not deter him. He carried on until he stood right in front of the young man. They stared each other out for a moment. The young man tried to ignore his pain. A fresh flow of blood trickled down from his forehead and into his eyes. He wanted an end to this too and gazed at the Roman, as if daring him to throw his spear.

The people standing around saw it too. Those loyal to the young man ran to try and stop the soldier. With a shove of his hand he knocked two of them down. He then gripped the spear hard and hurled it through the air.

Time seemed to stand still. Everyone on the hill stopped and waited with bated breath. Their eyes turned from the Roman to the man on the Cross. The young man cried out as the spear ripped through his left side. That and the loud thud of iron on wood broke the brief lull. Blood gushed from his new wound and down his thigh, some of it dripping in a torrent onto the ground below from where the leg bent at the knee.

His mother fell down, distraught at the image before her. “No!” she wailed. “Why do you do this to him?”

John tried again to comfort her. Other than that no one moved. The Roman looked on as the young man dropped his head. Even now, he was not yet dead though all could see the moment was close.

The sky turned completely black while the wind and rain picked up at an alarming pace. The Roman walked right up to the Cross. Blood trailed down the young man’s thigh and knee and splattered off his chest armour. He grinned as he looked up. “If you want so much to die, then die you shall!”

He reached up and with both hands and the use of all his weight, he pulled the spear out. The young man screamed this time, the horror of the moment draining the very last of his strength. His body stiffened again from the shock and his vision grew cloudy. He felt the last remnants of his life begin to ebb away.

A brilliant white light shot down from above. It filled the Roman with fear and forced him to step back. He dropped to his knees as Lucifer left his body, all the energy sucked from his limbs.

The beam of light fell on the dying man. He took one last breath and raised his eyes. “Father, into Your hands I commend my spirit.”

His head dropped for the very last time. Those who loved him knew he was gone. As one they broke down and cried, some of them choking in their grief.

The soldiers tried to run to the aid of their comrade. Suddenly the whole of the hill began to shake. The ground opened up between the young man and those who had witnessed his death. Each of the Romans fell down and lay on the ground fearing their own deaths were close at hand.

Lucifer still lingered not too far away. He stood at the back again to watch events unfold. The death of Jesus had erased the sins of man. Countless souls were lost to him and it weighed him down as though he were wearing a coat made of lead. When the ground began to shake even more violently he saw these same souls rising from the earth and ascending to the heavens. It left him with nothing; all his hard work undone. He would have to start over.

But in that moment he did not care. He had struck out at God's beloved son, his one great act of defiance. The people around him screamed as the earth tossed them about. Still he waited there. He had to see if God would strike back.

The spear he had thrown now glowed a fiery red. It lifted into the air and came straight at him. He dived to one side just in time, the air feeling heavy around him. The spear hit a rock behind him and split it in two.

Balthasar stood over him. He gazed down with eyes that were no longer blind. "Get from this place!" the voice inside him advised. "Whilst you still can."

Lucifer got to his feet. There was nothing else here for him now. He gave the old man one last icy stare and then disappeared into the night.