

## Chapter 1



**I, LIKE A BROOK OUT OF A RIVER OF A MIGHTY  
WATER; I, LIKE A CHANNEL OF A RIVER, AND LIKE  
AN AQUEDUCT, CAME OUT OF PARADISE.  
ECCLESIASTICUS 24:41**

The sun rose in the summer sky alongside Anthony as he climbed his favorite tree on the vast grounds of his home. It took some time to reach the top of the ancient cedar, which towered over its surroundings like a great ladder into the heavens. He breathed deeply of the fresh evergreen scent as he stepped in familiar footholds and pulled himself up through the heavy branches spiraling the gnarled dark-red trunk.

When he was more than halfway up, loud chirping drew his attention to a sparrow building a nest in a hollow of the trunk. Anthony crept closer and leaned in.

The bird tilted its head to him before returning to work, using its beak to push a thin strip of scarlet cloth into layers of grass and twigs. Sunlight filtering through the leaves glittered on metallic gold threads embroidered on the cloth and on bits of material already woven in the nest.

Anthony whistled. “That’s some nest, birdy bright. Are you trying to match your

own colors?” Russet patches on the sparrow’s breast and crown stood out against its soft gray and brown feathering. “And where did you get that rich cloth?”

The bird chattered.

“Could you have found the abbey ruins? We’ve been searching for them for years. I’ll watch to see where you go.”

Anthony continued climbing to the top of the tree where he settled himself on a group of branches, holding on tightly as they swayed in the breeze. From this great height, he could see for miles past the stone walls surrounding their family estate, across the rolling hills to a far-off river. The Morning Star, as it was called, shimmered like a ribbon of silver light on the horizon.

“The world opens up from here. I wish I could explore it all, especially now with summer vacation starting. Papa said we’d hike to the river someday and follow it all the way to the sea. But I don’t think he can walk that far anymore.”

Anthony sighed and dropped his gaze. A motion below drew his eyes to where his mother worked in their Rosary Garden, its layout clearly visible from this vantage point. Tall hedges enclosed an inner garden of rose bushes arranged in the oval pattern of a rosary, with every set of ten bushes separated by a bush with a larger space in between. Three rose bushes emerged from a passageway of grapevine-covered trellises and led to the very tree he sat in, the great tree that represented the crucifix of the rosary.

“I should help Mama prune the roses.” Beyond the hedges, his father emerged from his work shed. “And I promised Papa I’d help him too. I’ll just see where this bird goes first.”

Anthony was an only child, as his parents had married later in life. They led simple lives even while dwelling in a vast estate that had been in his mother’s family for generations. Carefree for the most part, Anthony did have chores that were his responsibility, more so since turning twelve. He was supposed to keep up with the

harvesting of fruits and nuts from their plentiful groves, but his love of the outdoors often distracted him.

Suddenly, the sparrow soared out of the tree.

Anthony watched until the bird was out of sight. “It’s headed toward the Martyrs Cliff.”

He descended the branches, sprinted down the gentle hill beneath the tree, and continued through the passageway into the Rosary Garden. “I’ll help you later, Mama. I just want to check something first,” he called out.

“Don’t forget you told Papa you’d help him move the pedestal for the statue today.”

“I won’t,” he answered as he ran through a break in the hedges toward his house. After packing a sandwich into his knapsack, he added bread for the fish that lived in a pool below the cliff. Then he headed down the winding tree-lined path in front of their home, and out the front gates, the only opening in the tall outer walls surrounding the estate.

Climbing and descending over the springy ground, he filled his lungs with pine-scented air. The only sounds were birds calling and the wind stirring the leaves.

Near the cliff, he brushed against silver moss trailing from a grove of stooping oak trees. “If your beards grow any thicker, olden oaks, I’ll have to cut my way through!”

The musical sound of a waterfall reached his ears before it came into view, spouting from a high opening on the cliff face to cascade into a pool below. He descended a gradual slope to the water, where he clambered over a mossy boulder and peered into the rippling surface.

Gold colored fish with long feathery fins swam toward him. Several raised their heads out of the water and opened their mouths.

Anthony laughed. “I salute you too, golden knights of the round pool. And yes,

I've brought your rations."

He tossed crumbs to the fish as he looked around for the sparrow. The clear oval pool reflected blue sky, pale birch trees, and lush green ferns. He took off his shirt and shoes before plunging in and swimming toward the center where the water was deepest.

Several fish twirled gracefully around him. "How your armor shines in the sun!" Anthony ran his fingers across their slick scales before somersaulting in turn. They played games as they had for years, especially a favorite jousting game of Anthony's in which they charged toward each other from opposite ends of the pool, turning aside at the last moment. Whenever Anthony floated on his back, several fish raised their heads out of the water and rested on him, opening and closing their mouths until he laughed and went under.

When his arms and legs had grown tired from swimming, Anthony climbed out on boulders at the edge of the cascade and let the cold spray wash over him. He drank deeply of the sweet, clean water, and then sat on a patch of grass to dry in the sun.

Eating his lunch, he watched the mesmerizing patterns of light and shadow made by the dancing birch leaves. His gaze wandered up the waterfall where a rainbow shone in the spray all the way to where the water sprang out of the cliff.

Dropping his gaze to the jagged rocks below, he shuddered as his thoughts turned to the martyrs. "That must be where the monks fell when they were thrown off the cliff. Mama said it was one of our ancestors who secretly buried them, but no one knows where. The medal he saved from the abbot is supposed to be a clue. I wish I could find their gravesite, and their abbey."

Anthony scanned the skies for the sparrow again before lying back to watch the drifting clouds. His full belly, the soothing sound of splashing water, and the warmth of the sun soon lulled him to sleep.

A bird's call woke him. Anthony sat up and rubbed his eyes in time to glimpse a

sparrow fly over the precipice. He dressed hastily, grabbed his knapsack, and raced around the cliff. On this side, the oaks grew closer together, with ivy vines tangling in the moss canopy.

From deep within the thicket came a tuneful call. “Is that you, birdy bright?” Crouching, Anthony pushed his way through the heavy growth.

The bird sang again, leading Anthony to an even more overgrown area where dense bushes grew between the trees. He caught a flash of wings ahead and a glimpse of russet. “Are you toying with me, bird?” When he whistled, the bird whistled back.

Anthony continued struggling through the growth for some time, whistling to the bird and following its responses. Soon, he was covered in scratches. “Hey, birdy! Unlike you, I don’t have wings. I’m going to turn back.”

In a sudden flapping of wings, a sparrow took flight from the brush ahead.

Anthony sprang forward, keeping his eyes on the bird. When his foot caught in some low-growing vines, he tripped. The ground dipped before him, and he tumbled down a long slope before coming to a stop lying flat on his face in the dirt. Raising his head, he gasped at the sight that lay before him.

Spread out in a low clearing were the remains of ancient buildings, covered in ash and open to the sky. He stared wide-eyed for a few moments before unwrapping the vines around his legs and getting to his feet. Then he wandered around gazing at the surreal beauty of the skeletal stone structures. “I don’t believe it! The ruins were hidden before our eyes all along!”

Dead, charred trees were scattered throughout the area. “There must have been a huge fire.” When he laid his hand on a scorched trunk, the tree swayed. He pushed until it toppled over in a cloud of soot, filling the air with crackling sounds as its roots ripped from the soil. A nearby flock of crows flew off in a flash of black wings, cawing noisily. Then everything was quiet and still again.

Anthony headed toward the remains of a long building, divided into sections by

crumbling walls containing alcoves of varying sizes. “These must have been their cells.” Brushing off cobwebs, he wandered through the remnants of arch-lined corridors surrounding a center courtyard with a spacious circular fountain, long since run dry. In the middle of the fountain, a graceful stone fish rose from a pedestal and opened its mouth to the heavens. “It looks just like the ones in the Martyrs Pool.”

Continuing to explore, he came upon the shell of an edifice filled with massive piles of ash. Puffs of soot rose in the air as he used a stick to sift through the layers, uncovering remnants of singed leather book covers, some with metal hinges and clasps attached. In the deepest layers, gold leaf still glinted on the fading decorations and flowing letters of parchment fragments. “I’ll bet this was their library. I wish I could have seen their drawings.”

After dusting himself off, he headed toward a toppled tower, its stone blocks splayed alongside tarnished bells of varying sizes. Striking a large one with a branch, he broke the silence with a deep, resonating knell.

He turned his gaze to the nearby shell of a once majestic building, now fallen for the most part and open to the sky. Stepping over the threshold, he craned his neck to gaze at the remaining columns and archways, some at their original towering heights. “And this was their church.”

He crossed the spacious floor, where sparse plants poked between the stones. The sun blazed off a tilted metal cross protruding from the top of a circular mountain of rubble. “This pile must have been the dome.”

Going around the mound, he spied a large altar at the far end of the church and clambered over collapsed pillars and debris to make his way there. The sides were crumbling, but the center portion still stood, covered in layers of ash and dust. A dead-looking thorny shrub grew from the rubble and hugged the pale marble.

Anthony climbed the altar steps to examine a carving visible amid the fissures on the front face. “A Chi-Rho.” His father had once shown him the symbol on a

tombstone in the old part of the cemetery, explaining that it was a monogram for Christ.

At the sound of flapping wings, Anthony turned and spotted a sparrow disappearing into a pile of stones. It soon emerged with something in its beak before flying off.

“It was you, birdy bright!” Anthony scrambled over and peered into a gap between the stones. He caught the sweet scent of cedar as he spied wood. Stretching his arm into the opening, he managed to move it slightly. “It’s a cabinet door.”

After trying unsuccessfully to move the heavy pile of stones, he used a stick to prod inside the cabinet. It seemed empty except for a piece of cloth he maneuvered out.

Darkened by age, the scarlet silk square was embroidered in shiny gold thread with an intricate image of Christ crucified in a tree, encircled by a garland of roses. One edge was frayed.

“So, this is what the sparrow used for its nest. Won’t Papa and Mama be surprised!” He slapped his forehead. “I was supposed to help Papa move the pedestal to the garden today.”

He looked at the sun, now low in the west and tinting the horizon red. “I must have slept longer than I thought.” He packed the cloth in his knapsack and hurried home.

It was almost dark when he found his parents in the Rosary Garden. Joseph stood on a stepladder on the center mound, attaching a pulley to scaffolding set up over a wooden pedestal. Anne was busy transplanting white lilies over the mound.

Anthony doubled over to catch his breath. “Papa, I’m sorry I’m late. I lost track of time. Why didn’t you wait for me to help you? That pedestal must have been heavy.”

“I used mortar to set it, and I wanted it to dry before mounting the statue in place

tomorrow, on your name day feast.” He spoke haltingly between breaths. “I’ll definitely need your help for that.”

Anthony read aloud the words carved on the front of the pedestal base: “*Ad Jesum per Mariam.*”

“To Jesus through Mary,” Joseph explained, “the words on the back of the abbot’s medal.” He slowly climbed down and peered at his son. “What happened to you?”

Anthony grinned as he brushed soot from his clothes. “You’ll never guess what I found—the abbey ruins! They’re in a low valley not far from the Martyrs Cliff. And look at what I found there.” He brought out the cloth.

Joseph’s mouth dropped open. “How could we have missed them?”

“The ruins are surrounded by thick brush. I followed a sparrow and sort of stumbled in.”

“Our prayers to Saint Anthony have been answered on the eve of his feast day, your name day!” Joseph said.

“And the day you erect a statue modeled after the very image on the abbot’s medal!” Anne examined the cloth. “How exquisite! It’s a chalice veil. I’m surprised at how well it’s preserved.”

“It was in a cedar cabinet under the rubble. Maybe the stones shifted and opened the door. The sparrow I followed was tearing off pieces to build its nest.”

“Perhaps I can repair the damage and return it to the Church.” Anne’s eyes shone as she gazed at her son. “After so many generations, God has guided you to the long-forgotten abbey ruins. Maybe next He will guide you to the martyrs’ burial site!”

Joseph also studied the cloth. “The roses are arranged like beads on a rosary. It reminds me of our Rosary Garden.” He beamed at his son. “I can’t wait to explore those ruins!”

Anne patted her husband’s shoulder. “You look tired, Joseph. Let’s pray our



Rosary and turn in.”

They walked together from one rose bush to the next as they did every evening, the blooms filling the air with their varying sweet scents. As twilight descended, the moon rose and cast a silver glow over the garden. Cricket choirs joined their soft chorus to the family’s prayers, carried on the summer breeze into the heavens.