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MARY'S STORY

A Novel

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The members of MOBS (Midnight Oil Burners), helped tremendously, reading this manuscript numerous times, giving advice.

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To Liesl Hynes, who spent so much time, talent and energy into making the cover a work of art.

To Tom Hendricks, a friend who never gave up on me.

forward

This is a FICTIONAL account of events that could have happened some 2000 years ago.

Since there is no actual diary of Mary's life nor the lives of people she touched, I knew the story must conform with the one related in the Bible as closely as possible.

Research let me in on a few secrets...not nearly as many as I would have liked. My imagination led the rest of the way.

I pray this book offends no one...only that it will show people how Mary and her family lived in those days. I also wished to show her as an ordinary person given an extraordinary job to accomplish.

introduction

Through Mary's eyes, this well-researched novel immerses the reader into the everyday life in Bible times. The author's holy imagination, engaging style and gifted writing present an intimate and enthralling story of the Holy Family. She has created a glorious "what if?" which leaves the reader only wishing it was fact.

Barbara Pugh, Author

I was privileged to see the story unfolding as the author prayerfully and thoughtfully developed it. She truly entered into the personage of Mary to capture the attitude and feelings of this special handmaiden of God. A remarkable and enjoyable work!"

Emogene Marshall

Church Secretary

prologue

As I looked upward, the sun blurred my vision, blotting the terrible sight silhouetted against a cloudless sky. My sister squeezed my shoulders tightly as I wiped dust and tears with a cloth that hadn't been clean since...who could say when?

The sun radiated across the area, baking the earth, though hordes of people appeared to ignore the heat. Leaves on trees shriveled as weeds on the ground became brown and broke into crumbs when walked upon.

From the corner of my eye I caught a glimpse of brilliant red poppies and gnarled limbs of ancient olive trees growing on the hillside of Golgotha. The scent of cedars nearby made me long for the cleanliness of home. I wished desperately to escape the horror that engulfed me and my loved ones.

But I couldn't escape...neither the sun, the hoards, the noise nor my Beloved Son who now hung on the cross.

Sweat dribbled down my face, mingling with tears. If I had my mirror, I'd see a barely five-foot tall woman with hair beginning to grey. At the moment, I knew dark eyes revealed the anger, pain and exhaustion I could no longer hide. Running my hand toward my hair, I felt pronounced wrinkles on my forehead. They were embedded with dirt, then dampened with sweat which reminded me of the mud cakes Jesus made as a child. I knew with certainty my skin was seared a deep copper.

Rocks tumbled restlessly beneath the feet of people hurrying to get a closer look at the spectacle. As they pushed closer, I smelled the odor of unwashed bodies, as well as the scent of blood oozing from wounds of men hanging on a cross.

Suddenly, taunting screams of the restless crowd penetrated my consciousness. Leah released me as I raised my arm and screamed at the rabble, "You're killing your Savior!"

No one heard me over the clamor of the riff-raff shuffling feet and their incessant shouts.

As I looked over the crowd, I saw people whom my Son had healed. They were saying and doing nothing to help the Man on the cross. At that moment I almost hated them. Then partial sanity returned and I asked God for forgiveness. Maybe their apprehension was too great. I knew many were too frightened to help others who had fallen from political favor.

"If you can save others, call upon the Angels to save you," I heard one man roar in derision. Others took up his call. The jeers were magnified, filling the air above Golgotha with hate. Soldiers stood with impassive faces as the mob's raucous screams became ever louder. Others cast lots for His robe. Maybe, being seamless, it was worth a little more than robes men generally wore, but it was worth almost nothing in monetary value.

I know. I made it, never dreaming my Son would wear it on the last day of His life. I wove it without seams so it would be more comfortable. Now, soldiers were...I refused to think of it. The men who hung my Son on the cross between two thieves now hid themselves. I saw one of them slinking through the horde, attempting to run from his murderous acts. I clenched my fists and trembled with fury.

Looking upward, my anger died as my arms encircled the tree which held the most precious person in existence. Trembling legs now barely held me upright. I stood at the foot of the cross and looked up at Him attempting to smile, trying to give Him some of my strength.

Jesus, my beloved first Son. Pain was etched on His face, yet total love shone from His eyes. His grimy body was a mass of criss-cross marks from the beatings he endured. Blood oozed down his face from the crown of thorns. His feet, where nail heads were visible, bled from the rocks he had been forced to walk over, as well as the nails.

Blood pooled at the foot of the cross and I bumped into Leah as I lurched to one side, attempting to side-step the precious fluid.

Earlier, when a hammer hit the nails which tore through Jesus' hands I felt each blow, yearning to be on that cross to take His pain. I'd kissed His bruises and put balm on His scraped knees when He was little. Later, I'd attempted to heal the wounds of the soul when He was unaccepted, even by His family and friends.

My anguish was so excruciating I expected to see blood oozing from my hands and feet. But as I looked at them, not a drop appeared around the nails I felt entering my hands.

How could this happen? I wondered. How could pain be so intense, yet my skin remain intact? From the anguish I felt, the crown of thorns on my Son's head should have drawn blood on my own brow. The taste of vinegar my Son drank had turned my mouth sour with bitterness.

As I watched my Child slowly die, I felt a hundred years old, instead of forty-nine.

Glancing down, fresh blisters on sand-encrusted feet caught my eye. As I moved from one foot to the other attempting to alleviate pain, the blisters broke and a few drops of liquid oozed. It reminded me of the many times Jesus and I bathed our feet with fresh water from the well in Nazareth. Forgetting where I was, I could almost feel that cool, clean water. For a moment, the water of my imagination relieved the soreness in my feet.

A drop of Jesus' blood fell onto my hand. I glanced up. It reminded me of the night He was born. Abruptly, I felt as though I were back in a more lighthearted time . . . the night I first met Gabriel.

That night...ah, that night...the night I learned I was to become the mother of the Son of God beamed in my thoughts as brightly now as the morning sun had that day in Nazareth.

Chapter One

Dawn of that fateful day began as most mornings did for our small town of Nazareth.

I woke, stretched and rose silently. The lowered lamp on the tall stand flickered, relieving shadows along the walls. Smoke rose to the ceiling as a slight breeze from my movements fanned it.

I straightened the short sleep wear and looked at my family. As in most homes, Father's bed stood nearest the door, Daniel and Leah next, mine, then mother's. Our beds had metal frames held together with iron rods. Before I was born, Father bored holes into the bed frames. Mother wove cords which were then threaded through the holes producing a place on which to place our pallets.

I smiled as I looked at twelve year old Daniel sprawled in abandon. His thin arms and legs were thrown from wrinkled bed clothing and his cape was wrapped lightly about his middle. His eyelids fluttered as he dreamed and his nose wrinkled like an animal who has smelled a feast.

Diminutive ten-year-old Leah slept with the trust of a baby. Her mouth curved into a sleep-ridden smile, and dark hair framed a tiny face. Father slept soundly, his head cradled by his muscular arms. As he snored softly, Mother rolled over, knowing instinctively one of her children was moving about.

I yawned, then stretched my arms toward the ceiling. From a nearby table I lifted a robe, slipped it over my arms and walked through the door leading to our largest room. Passing by, I barely noticed the table Joseph had fashioned for my parents. I remembered how, in sunlight, it glistened brightly from my Mother's scrubbing and polishing.

I slipped on sandals and tied thongs around my ankles.

Near the door was a large basket, or bushel, as we sometimes called it, turned up-side-down. A basin of water sat atop the bushel. I washed and dried my hands and face, wiped drops of water from the bushel top, then picked up the water jug. Opening the door to the outside, I stepped onto stones that bordered our home, then softly closed the door.

Looking around, I saw none of our neighbors who normally gathered for a walk to the well. It was a little earlier than usual, I thought, because lately I was too excited to sleep. The days were passing so rapidly I wondered if I'd have time to complete all my chores before the wedding date.

This early in the morning the sun's rays were merely a hint in the heavens as I hurried toward the well. The silhouetted trees looked stark, yet majestic against a grey sky.

Passing by honeysuckle vines, the odor wafted under my nose as I plucked a recently-opened bloom. I sucked the liquid, savoring the nectar. I almost felt like a thief, robbing nectar the bees were, even now, removing. Juice from the flower was sweet and the taste lingered.

Happiness invaded my entire being. My jug swung back and forth as I danced toward the well, smiling at nothing and pirouetting in abandonment.

“What makes you so happy this morning?” A girlish voice interrupted my dance.

“Hello, Sarah.” I greeted my best friend and Joseph’s sister. “How did you ever get here so early?”

She apparently couldn’t contain her happiness either because, like me, she was swinging her jug. “Couldn’t sleep. Much too near our wedding days.”

“Me too.” I grinned back at her.

As close friends, we saw each other daily...not only at the well, but community ovens where women baked bread. Since the announcement in the synagogue of our marriages, Sarah and I seemed to grow even closer.

We smiled and giggled at each other as we made our way to the well. The only site to collect water for our homes was on the outskirts of Nazareth. Leaving the city gates, we strode over rocks smoothed by millions of footsteps. Women had made this journey collecting water for their families and animals for hundreds of years. Although it could be slippery at times, the path was easy to walk on now.

Our journey was usually cool because the limbs of trees formed a canopy over our heads. A slight breeze ruffled the leaves, kissing our cheeks and blowing our hair.

Reaching our destination, I saw that other women had arrived. Maybe I wasn’t as early as I had thought. By now, the sun was peeking over the horizon. Orange streaks exploded across the sky, blending with the grey of night to turn the overhead expanse into mauve, pink and silver streaks.

“Good morning, Rebecca,” I called to a friend. “I thought we were early.”

Rebecca’s plump little arm lifted her jug of water from the well. “Actually, you’re late.” She smiled and shook her head. “Too busy planning your wedding, I suppose,” she teased. Although only a few months older than Sarah and me, she had been married for a year and felt superior to us, because she was expecting her first baby.

The well was about three or four feet high and built of sturdy stones set together with clay. We were told this well had cooled many ancient peoples, quenching the thirst of prophets, their families and animals.

Watching Rebecca plunge her second jug into the well, I could almost taste the purity of the colorless liquid. After bringing her filled container up, she placed it on the rim alongside her other one.

Rebecca picked up both jugs, nodded farewell and was gone.

Sarah and I gossiped with our friends and neighbors as we waited our turn to lower our jugs into the water. “When Aaron dropped by last night, we were talking about how happy we are that you and I were betrothed about the same time.”

“Oh?” I stooped down to write the name of “Joseph” in the sand at our feet. I found myself doing that quite frequently since our betrothal.

“Aaron said now he and Joseph could have families that would grow up together, just as they had played together all their lives.” A smile danced around her generous mouth.

A happy individual, she showed a lightness of spirit that always amazed me. Sandaled feet peeked from beneath a robe dyed light blue. Her large brown eyes crinkled as she rearranged a lock of black hair. Girls our age normally wore hair pinned closely to the head. We either fastened it on top or plaited,

then wound the long rope around our head. Sarah’s, however, always fell out of the pins. The tendrils curled around her doll-like face. Her nose was smaller than mine. I often teased her about having a Roman, not a Jewish nose.

The last woman in line moved from the well, her jug firmly placed on her shoulder. “See you in the morning.” She waved, then went on her way.

I glanced at her, smiled and picked up my jug.

I lowered my jug into the water and began to pull it up. As I looked down into the deep well I suddenly shivered. It was so dark I couldn't actually see the water. But as I raised my pail over the rim of the well, the sun's vivid rays turned the water in my pail blood red.

"Oh!" I said in horror, spilling some of the water.

"What's wrong?" Sarah looked closely at me, then took my jug and placed it on the side of the well.

"I don't know." A feeling of dread I'd never known seemed to infuse my body. "Suddenly, I had the strangest feeling the water had turned into blood."

Sarah grabbed my hand and held to it tightly. "It's all right, Mary. Just anxiety. Everything is going to be all right."

She lowered my jug back into the well and refilled it. As she gave it to me, the liquid dribbled onto my hand and I saw it was the same water we collected each morning. I licked the liquid from my hand. I lifted my filled jug, placed it on my shoulder and waited for Sarah. The feeling of fear dissipated like sun melting a soft mist.

When her jug was filled, we walked toward our homes, talking of future plans. At the crossroads we parted, knowing we would meet later in the day at the ovens.

Returning home over the beaten, rocky path I noted the early morning sun in the nearly cloudless sky beaming down on poppies and carnations. No longer did it give me a feeling of dread. I gloried in the brightness. On each side of the path, numerous plants, shrubs and trees grew close together. Cedar trees spewed freshness into the air.

Dew sparkled on the honeysuckle vines which produced the liquid I'd tasted earlier. Spider webs glistened like tiny beams of light. As I moved toward home, the sun rapidly rose but the heat had not as yet begun to parch the land.

"Good morning, Mother," I smiled as I walked into our home. She sat at the table, head resting on her hands. Glancing at me, her mouth almost curved into a smile. Mornings were not the best time of her day. I placed the jug on one of the upturned bushels.

"I'm glad we have these large baskets." I remarked, not expecting an answer. "It certainly gives us more space in which to store things."

Pouring water into a small container, I sat it in front of her, kissed her forehead, then sat down beside her. Grasping the mug with both hands, she sipped. "Ummm. Nothing like a cool drink of water." She wiped her hands on the side of her robe and peered at me, her smile growing. She looked more like a young girl than the mother of three children.

We measured about the same height; barely five feet. Her round face, skin darkened by the sun, held liquid brown eyes always filled with love and laughter. Almost without wrinkles, her face was, to me, the picture of pure love.

My mother was a quiet, humble woman. She believed in God and loved her husband and children to distraction. An educated woman, her family had believed girls should be taught the Talmud just as boys were. Mother told me once, the neighbors and relatives looked askance at teaching girls to read, but my Grandparents persisted.

"And I'm so glad they did." She said. "I love being able to write letters and read them when they arrive."

She encouraged all of us to love reading and all written words, especially scrolls of the prophets.

"I don't know how you do it," she remarked, pushing a tendril from my forehead.

"Do what?" I asked, then took a sip of water.

"How can you possibly look so fresh and wide awake at this time of the morning?" Her eyes were dewy and sleepy.

“I like the mornings,” I laughed. Mother worked hard at getting her eyes open. Only after Father, Daniel and Leah appeared, could she wake enough to look outdoors at the world.

Usually Daniel and Leah, along with Father, arose early, soon after I left to fetch the water. Father and Daniel strapped their phylacteries on and said their morning prayers. Leah dressed and hurried to greet the animals she loved. Each morning, she milked the goat and brought the milk inside, along with the eggs she gathered. Daniel fed the animals as soon as he finished prayers.

I now twirled as Father’s footsteps sounded behind me. His long cotton shirt was spotless and the sleeveless cloak fitted his muscular body. Sandals he had made gleamed in the morning light as his feet moved across the room.

When he neared, I noticed the crooked prayer shawl where a few inches of his skull cap showed. I stood, reached up and straightened the shawl, then kissed his burnished face. He brushed my forehead with his lips. “How’s my Mary this morning?” he asked, cupping my chin in his large, strong, leathery hands.

“Just fine.” I patted the girdle worn over his shirt and closed the cloak. “Only twenty-five more days.”

His eyes took on the look of sadness I noticed when my marriage was mentioned.

“Oh Father, don’t be so sad.” I tickled him under his beard and he grabbed my hands in his, as a laugh started deep in his throat.

“You love to tickle me,” he accused. His smile broke his almost square face into laugh-wrinkle lines, “don’t you?”

“And you always enjoy it.” I retorted, moving to begin the morning meal.

“Yes, I do,” he acknowledged. “I shall miss you, even though you’ll still be living here in our village.”

“Oh, Father, I shall see you every day of my life...or nearly every day.”

Suddenly I didn’t want our few minutes to end. I looked up into his large, brown eyes and saw tears just below the surface. Thick eyebrows were almost a continuous line from one side of his face to the other. He could look very fierce when he frowned as he did now, but this happened so seldom it was always a surprise. Finishing their chores, Daniel and Leah bolted into the room, shoving each other as usual. “Don’t be sad, Father.” Daniel laughed, hearing the end of our conversation. “She’ll just be down the road. You’ll never get rid of her.”

He reached for a couple of strands of my hair and shoved it toward the top. I grabbed his hand before he could pull. “Stop that, you beast!” I scolded, but one could never be angry with Daniel for long.

He looked a great deal like father and was dressed almost identically. Already taller than mother or me, he towered over Leah, who grinned at her twelve-year-old brother as he teased me. She thought he was perfect.

As the talk with Father and the teasing of Daniel progressed, I saw Mother placing food on the table.

Daniel lowered his hand just as Mother invited, “Come now, the food is ready.”

The morning ritual began. We sat and clasped hands. Father prayed to our God as we felt the closeness that began our days.

After a morning meal of goat’s milk and honey cake, Mother and I stood at the door. We watched Daniel and Leah as they left for school at the synagogue. Daniel complained about the Rabbi and the lessons he gave as they walked out the door. Leah happily skipped beside him, smiling at everyone.

We were rather fortunate in our village. Girls were allowed to go to school at the synagogue, though separated from the boys.

Ten year old Leah was the love of the entire family. Diminutive and dark like Mother and me, mischief danced in her eyes. She and Daniel played together more like brothers than a brother and sister. Never averse to joining him in any adventure, she often thought up pranks of her own.

Father left for his fields to check on progress of the crops. Later, he would visit the fig and olive trees which gave us fruit to eat and oil for cooking. The grape vines that provided our juice and wine were flowering. If the weather continued to cooperate with our vines, grapes would soon appear, grow larger, then turn purple for the harvest.

Mother and I went outside to grind wheat for bread. Some days, locust insects, dried in the sun, were ground into a powder which gave our bread a slightly bitter taste. A plant called locust, as well as honey, was sometimes used for sweetness. We mixed, shaped the loaves, then placed them in the hot oven.

We were luckier than most. There was a shelf built inside our oven, where we could place our loaves. In most towns, women made their bread and placed it on the outside of the oven, where it baked. It had to be watched closely, because when it was completely baked, it fell from the side of the oven into the dirt if not caught before that happened.

Baking odors permeated our nostrils, making us anxious to take the first bite. The weather cooperated today. Sweat only popped out on our faces, but didn't dribble down as it normally did when we gathered around the ovens.

As the bread baked, we gossiped with our neighbors and sang psalms King David wrote many years earlier. Resting from our labors, I saw Joseph's mother coming in our direction. She smiled and kissed me on the cheek. I offered her a drink of our water and she accepted gratefully.

"Where's Sarah?" I asked.

"She's busy with the wash. She said she'd see you later."

Joseph and Sarah's mother was such a merry individual. When she smiled, dark brown eyes glittered in happiness above plump cheeks. Those cheeks were pink from the sun and her dark brown hair fell on each side of that lovely round face.

When she laughed, her entire body shook with the happiness that followed wherever she went.

Joseph and I were promised to each other by our parents when we were quite young. Joseph was four years older than I. He told me the first time he saw me in my swaddling clothes, he knew I was the only one for him.

Living nearby as we grew older, we always cared for each other. Then caring grew ever deeper. Joseph brought gifts almost from the time I could remember anything.

First, it was a flower from the roadside, then sweet, juicy figs. Later, as he learned his carpentry trade, he made small trinkets. There was a box to hold pins for my hair and a looking glass he inserted in a small piece of wood so I could see myself. Each gift was precious. I still kept a flax blossom he gave me. I hung it upside down in the air until dried, then placed it on a shelf so I could look at it. The blue color faded, but the blossom was still almost intact.

My Joseph. He was a tall man; my head only reached to his shoulders. But my heart expanded with joy when he came into view. Like his mother, his love of life filled a room when he entered. His face resembled hers; however, he was tall and thin. I knew he would care for me the rest of my life.

"Mary." I turned, a little embarrassed at being caught day dreaming.

"Yes, Mother." I turned to see her smiling at Joseph's mother and me.

She placed her hand on my shoulder. "We must start on the vegetables, or the evening meal will not be ready before the sun sets."

While I was daydreaming, the loaves had baked to a golden hue and Mother removed them from the oven. I smiled at her sheepishly. "I'm sorry, Mother."

I kissed Joseph's mother. "I'll see you later."

We carried the loaves home in a large basket covered with a shiny, clean napkin from our home.

Sitting under the tree, Mother and I prepared vegetables for the evening meal. The sun threaded its way through the leaves of the tree and dappled the stones as a slight breeze chased some of the heat from our shade.

Sometimes Mother became quite philosophical as we sat and talked.

“I like shelling beans,” She smiled and opened the pods. The beans fell into a bowl sounding like light rain drops falling on a soft surface. “It’s so amazing.”

“What’s so amazing?” I asked, as I picked up another squash, sliced it, then began on the potatoes.

“If I take just one of the these beans.” She held it up toward the sunlight. “And plant it in the earth, it will reproduce many times over.” She shook her head with wonder as she completed her task.

“The meat for the stew is already on the brazier,” I said, laying the vegetables alongside the container of beans. “I’ll put the vegetables in later.”

“Since it doesn’t look like rain, we can cook everything outside.” Mother looked at the sky. “I do so hate to cook indoors, don’t you?”

“Yes. Takes us a long time to get all the odors out, especially if we have onions in the stew.”

“I agree.” Mother laughed, then asked, “Do you think we should have boiled eggs with them?”

“Yes. Father’s been working hard in the fields all day. He’ll be very hungry.”

“So will your brother,” she remarked dryly.

“He’s always hungry.” I smiled at her. “Maybe we should have cheese, bread, butter and wine, as well.”

“I think so.” She started toward the door.

She returned with bread, cheese and fruit, and we spread food for our midday meal on a small table under the tree. After eating, we rested a while.

Our life was simple, but our hands were usually busy in some fashion. We used the distaff and spindle to make yarn or thread from raw wool or flax. We then wove the yarn or thread into cloth. On laundry days, I made many trips to the well so we could have clean clothing.

The roof provided the best place for drying our clothes as well as a number of activities. We often held dances, met friends for gossiping, dried our clothing and ate on the roof of our home.

That afternoon we sat on a bench under the tree.

I worked on kitchen cloths for the new home Joseph was building as Mother continued my education, begun in the Synagogue school.

She and I had been studying David’s Psalms but lately, for some reason or other, she wished to talk about the coming Savior.

“Do you remember any of the passages about the Messiah?” she asked now, as she leaned her head against the tree and closed her eyes.

“I think so. The first time He was mentioned, if I remember correctly, was in the beginning of Genesis. Moses told of God talking to the serpent after Eve was enticed to eat the forbidden fruit.” I pushed thread in and out, hemming the cloth.

“Do you remember what God told the serpent?” Mother wiped the sweat from her brow with a damp cloth, then placed the damp cloth over her eyes.

I looked at her and felt such a welling up of love I could barely breathe. I spoke to her softly. “He said the woman’s seed would kill the serpent, or sin, by bruising or crushing him on the head. The serpent could only bruise Him on the heel.”

“Very good, Mary.” She opened her eyes, removed the cloth and smiled at me. Holding the cloth, she patted my knee, then closed her eyes again.

“Do you understand what that means?” Her voice was low, insistent, somehow.

I laid the linen I was working on in my lap. “It means God will send His son to be born of a woman. His son will crush the evil in this world, but the evil could only bruise His son.”

“I think you have interpreted that correctly.” She opened her eyes and her entire face became one big smile. She nodded. “You are such a pleasure to be with.”

I picked up my sewing and awaited her next statement. An insect buzzed near us as we talked, and the odors from the honeysuckle vine wafted around us.

“You know the Son of God will be born from the lineage of David,” she remarked, again closing her eyes.

“Those are both yours and Father’s ancestors, aren’t they?” I clasped my sewing as I held my breath. Though I knew the answer, I felt I was awaiting more than just the usual answer.

“Yes.” Her sigh was audible and I had no idea what might follow. “We are both from the house of David.” I heard a deep sigh as she continued. “You know Mary, each generation of Jewish mothers watch their growing daughters carefully. We wonder if our child will be the Chosen One.”

“Really?” I asked, in awe. I placed the sewing in my lap. I had noticed Mother watching me since I became a woman, but had thought little of it.

“Yes.” She still leaned against the tree, eyes closed, so that I couldn’t discern her thoughts. “If any woman is better suited for the job than you, I don’t know who it could be.”

I was stunned. “Me, Mother?” I stood, dropping the cloth into the sand. Elation flooded my thoughts. What an honor for my mother to think so highly of me. I looked down at the cloth, picked it up and shook the sand from it.

“Yes, Mary, you.” She opened her eyes and looked at me with an expression I didn’t understand. “My darling.” I had never heard such sadness in her voice. Suddenly, her voice hardened. “I pray it is not you who is chosen.”

She must have seen the look of wonder on my face at the thought that I might be the mother of God’s Son. “But what an honor that would be.” I’m not sure I spoke aloud.

“God forgive me, but I am so selfish,” she mourned, realizing what she said and the manner in which it was related. “I want my children near me and I wish to watch my grandchildren grow up around me.” She swallowed a sob. “Who knows what would happen if you should be chosen?”

She realized what she was saying. “Oh, God! I am a selfish woman.” She clasped her hands in front of her and looked to the sky, as she cried aloud. “Forgive me.”

I gathered her small body in my arms. “You could never be selfish, Mother. You are the kindest, gentlest woman in the world.” I felt as though I were the mother and she the child.

“Come, lie down inside.” We stood and went inside. I felt her trembling as I held her tightly. “Maybe it will be a little cooler and you can sleep for a while.”

Inside, I unrolled her pallet and spread it on the bed. While she slept, I went outside and sat on a bench under the tree. Picking up the cloth I continued hemming it.

The thought of what she said kept running through my mind. The idea was staggering! Would I want that task? But then what about Joseph? He and I were already betrothed. And the Child of God was to be born to a virgin.

Since it was only a few weeks until our marriage, thoughts of being the Chosen One slipped from my mind as plans for the wedding filled my heart. I completed the cloth, bit the thread and picked up another cloth, dreaming of Joseph and my wedding date.

Later in the afternoon I stood outside waiting for Father, Daniel and Leah’s return home. Odors from the stew permeated the air as I glanced at our home.

Like many others, Father made our dwelling with a floor of lime mixed with crushed stone. The floor was trampled smooth, then covered with straw mats. My eyes passed over the one-story building with two small windows in the main room, to give light.

Unlike most homes, Father had erected one room just for sleeping. An adjoining room was used for the storage of extra bowls, jugs and jars, as well as other household goods. I went inside and picked up the eating utensils, which were carved from limestone.

As I turned to leave the house I noticed the small, partially enclosed courtyard built for the animals.

Stirring the stew, I glanced up and saw the late sun twinkling through the leaves of a tree, making lattice patterns on the ground. Bees buzzed around flowers that grew nearby and birds chirruped, flitting amongst the leaves.

The roof only sloped enough so rain ran off easily. Made of brushwood branches woven together, it was laid on rafters then covered with a thick layer of clay. When it hardened, it became as smooth as polished stones. A bird lit on the roof. He slipped, then flew away.

I smiled as I remembered seeing people dancing or gossiping, moving or calling to each other from one roof to the other. People sometimes used the roof for meditation. On hot nights most of the people of our village slept on them. Visitors were invited to sleep there, as well.

Looking at our home, I thought some of our customs about visitors were quite amusing.

Mother told me about one of those customs after we happily saw our visitors of five days on their way. She said, "According to custom, if a visitor stays more than three days, he becomes a member of the household. He is given a broom to start sweeping." Her face lit up with a big smile. "That usually hurries them to their own homes."

We normally ate our meals outside in the courtyard with just our family. However, another custom included sharing meals with passers-by, even strangers. We often did.

The night of my visit from Gabriel was no different.

The sun slipped over the horizon as we completed our evening meal. Although there was still a little light, the end of the day lazily wrapped its arms around us. We chatted about the events of the day, said our prayers and sang psalms to God. Mother and I cleaned food containers, Daniel and Leah tended animals as Father said his prayers.

We settled down for the night. Soon, Leah and Mother's soft breathing sounds wafted toward my bed. Father's snores were barely heard, and Daniel's bed rustled as he moved about.

As in all homes, a fire burned throughout the night. In this manner we kept a fire going without having to borrow a spark from a neighbor. Lying in my bed I watched as a lamp softened the darkness. A whisper of wind caught the light, throwing shadows around the bedroom.

Tonight, I couldn't fall asleep. I felt strange, restless, unsettled. Maybe it was because of the conversation Mother and I had about the coming Savior.

I arose and sat on a bench at the table, my thoughts flitting from Joseph to what my mother said. When I heard the rest of my family breathing quietly in sleep, I listened for sounds from neighbors. None penetrated the thick walls of our home.

Suddenly I felt hemmed in. I wanted to be alone, outside, with the sky as my roof.

As I walked outside, a couple of animals housed in the courtyard lifted their heads to stare at me. They soon settled down as I slowly carried my pallet to the roof. There were few people outside that night. In fact, I only heard voices of one couple. Soon these voices faded as their footsteps led down from the roof.

It was a little cooler than normal. Maybe that was the reason no one was sleeping outside. As I looked around, I saw lights turned low in most houses. It was so quiet, I felt I could hear the stars playing tag in the sky.

Scents from the evening meal of many households crept up the stairs and mingled with the aroma of animals and vegetation.

I wrapped my cloak around me to keep warm and looked up at those stars. They twinkled, moving rapidly across the universe as though they really were playing tag. They made me feel as though I could reach up, catch them and hold them in my hands.

The thought my Mother planted earlier flitted through my mind and I closed my eyes for a moment. Sleep neared, but my eyes refused to remain closed.

One star stood out from the rest.

As I watched, it slowly began to move...not like the other stars that flitted rapidly here and there, with some appearing to fall. This star drifted in my direction and I wondered if I were dreaming. It appeared to fall in slow motion, then hovered over my pallet.

Why, I don't know, but somehow I wasn't afraid. A soft voice, from the center of the star declared, "Hail, favored one! The Lord is with you!"

I sat up on my pallet. No one had climbed the stairs or my father would have heard and come to protect me. I looked around and wondered what was happening. The strange salutation was troubling.

From the center of the star, the voice continued, "Do not be afraid, Mary. You have found favor with God."

I was bewildered, but still unafraid. "What do you mean?"

"You are going to conceive a child," the voice of the angel declared.

"But..." I closed my eyes, denying all the angel said.

"Mary. Listen carefully. The seed is of Thy Lord, not Joseph. He will place His seed inside your womb. You will carry His son to full term when you shall give birth to the son of God."

I turned my head from side to side, without opening my eyes. "My mother told me of this only today and she didn't want me to be the chosen one."

That sounded like a strange statement, even to me, but the voice said. "I know. Your mother will come to understand that you are the perfect woman. She has raised you so you are the best the world has to offer. Now, Mary, listen carefully."

The voice murmured in my ear. "My name is Gabriel. I am an Angel of the Lord. God sent me to tell you that you have been chosen to be the Mother of His Son. You shall call his name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. His Kingdom will have no end."

"How can that be?" I protested. "Joseph and I aren't married." Suddenly apprehensive, I thought my wedding day might never happen.

"The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. Even now your relative Elizabeth has also conceived a son in her old age. She who was barren is now in her sixth month."

"Cousin Elizabeth?" I could hardly believe this. She was a little older than my mother; now she was to be a mother also. I was happy for her, but puzzled because she often stated in her letters how she wished for a child.

"How can that be?"

My thoughts returned to the moment as the angel continued, "Nothing is impossible with God."

"I know that, but..."

"Mary, hear my words."

I thought how strange to accept that God had actually sent an Angel to give me a message. But I found myself believing and accepting without question.

“Whatever the Lord has in store for me,” I whispered, my voice barely audible, even to my ears. “I shall do to the best of my ability.”

“That is one of the reasons he has chosen you. You have always been obedient. You have followed His teachings. God, knowing all things, knows you are the perfect person to be the mother of His child.”

“Can I see you?” I looked around and saw nothing.

“Of course. Just open your eyes.” I thought I heard a soft chuckle. “Do not be afraid, because the miracle that is to occur, will happen almost immediately.”

I didn’t realize my eyes had been almost closed the entire time. I opened my eyes and looked up into the eyes of the most beautiful being I had ever met. I thought it must be a man, but I wasn’t sure. The expression in his eyes was loving and caring. His voice was as soft as a spring wind. His clothing was so white I wondered why my eyes did not become dimmed by the brightness. He hovered just above my pallet.

“Child, go back to sleep. The power of God will descend and you shall become with child. You will be guided in the right direction for the rest of your life.”

“Please...?” Even I could hear the pleading in that word.

“Yes?”

“What about Joseph?” I took a deep breath and trembled with apprehension. “He is my betrothed.” I felt tears forming in my eyes, and my voice got louder as I spoke. “He’ll wonder why I’m with child. He’ll think I’ve betrayed him.” I could barely stand the thought that Joseph could become so angry he would toss me away like a piece of trash.

I stopped speaking and wondered how could I not be ecstatic that God chose me to be his handmaiden?

“What will the neighbors say when my pregnancy is noticeable and I’m unmarried? Will they stone me to death?” I felt tears running down my face and knew I was thinking incoherently; speaking in the same manner, if the truth is told.

“Do not be afraid, Mary. I shall visit Joseph because he will be the father of the child. He will bring this Boy up in the way the Lord has dictated.” Again, I thought I heard a chuckle. “Do you think God would give you His seed and then let rabble-rousers stone you to death? Never!”

“I’m sorry.” Without thought, I clutched my cloak around me tightly. “I guess I wasn’t thinking.”

“That’s understandable.” The caring voice surrounded me with love. “I’ll leave you now.”

Suddenly, the lights in the sky dimmed and I knew that Gabriel was gone.

I looked over the parapet of our home. The animals were still asleep. Not a sound came from the courtyard. Their odors still drifted up the stairs, but the scents of dinner had vanished.

Trees whispered in the slight breeze. Night creatures rustled dried leaves of grass. Soft chirrups of some bird sounded in the distance.

Had the visit from the Angel Gabriel occurred? Did I have a dream? Was it possible it had been real?

As I looked around, the sky was again black and stars twinkled in the distance. Everything was normal, again. I was cool and started to curl up in my pallet.

Then a strange thing happened. There are no words to describe my feelings, but I shall try.

My body became weightless. It left the roof of our house and journeyed rapidly to another life. I felt I was in flight like a bird, but at a much faster speed. Light engulfed me and the sounds of sweet voices surrounded me. I was in the midst of a choir made up of God’s angels.

My body responded to an exquisite touch so light it felt little heavier than a butterfly’s kiss. How long I remained in this state, I don’t know. Suddenly, I was back on the roof of our house.

Later, I realized it was a strange action to take. I curled back on the pallet as though nothing had happened, wrapped my cloak around me and slept deeply the remainder of the night.

Chapter 2

Before daybreak, I opened my eyes to a world that was, for me, very different.

Glancing toward the rim of the sky, I saw the first faint light of day. Overhead, the black was so intense stars sparkled like diamonds whose facets are touched by sunbeams. The sliver of a moon still hung over the hills. There was just enough light to see silhouettes of trees and bushes.

Every sense alert, I felt each drop of moisture in the air; I heard every sound, even a snore from down in the courtyard. I felt as though I could see to the edges of Heaven. I tasted the figs still hanging on the trees without plucking even one. I smelled the odor of honeysuckles which permeated the air. These sensations wrapped me in a cloak of sweetness.

As I looked around at a new morning I wondered if the entire episode had been a dream. Am I really pregnant with the Seed of God? I lightly ran my hand over my belly. I couldn't remember my skin ever feeling so silky smooth. Surely, the entire episode was my imagination. I smiled to myself. Mother would say I was just hungry.

What should I do? Should I tell my Mother and Father? Could I tell Joseph? Would he understand? And how could I know whether I was pregnant?

These questions ran through my brain until I realized what I was doing. I was questioning the angel's visit. Suddenly, I knew. I was pregnant. Gabriel had visited me. I knew God had given me His son to love and cherish.

I shook my head. I was just putting off the inevitable moment. I must admit it to myself as a fact, then tell my family and Joseph. My dear, dear, Joseph.

I raised myself from the roof, stood and pulled my cloak tightly around me. I felt the velvety softness of early dawn on my skin. Suddenly I fell to my knees, praying that God would make these recent events clearer to me. I asked Him to tell me whether I should inform the family. I sat back and looked to the heavens for answers.

A firefly clicked his light off and on above my head. The lights looked like tiny stars twinkling near enough to catch. The coolness of the slight breeze brushed my cheeks and caused my sleep-tousled hair to sway.

As I sat with my eyes closed, a peace I had never known engulfed me. Suddenly I had my answer. I knew I must tell my parents; they loved and cared for me all the days of my life. They would understand.

I arose, looked over the top of the wall, then went downstairs. Not another soul stirred in the village as far as I could tell. I picked up the water jug and walked to the well. I was in a daze as I moved over the well-worn path with its sand and rocks.

Small stones gleamed, polished by many sandals. On the path, shrubs on either side were barely visible in the early morning. As they awoke, birds chattered, chirruped and quarreled, as their multicolored feathers flashed radiant colors in the dimness. Flitting across the ground they picked up small insects and seed, then returned to tree branches.

The mountain ridges hovered over Nazareth like protecting angels, giving a sense of safety and magnificent beauty. I loved those hills. Their colors of dusty amber and tan and brown blended into one magnificent canvas.

I stumbled as I continued to look up at the heavens, instead of the path. I hoped to see the star that visited me last night. But the stars, one by one, twinkled brightly for a moment, then suddenly disappeared.

The quietness of the morning held only the muted sounds of asses braying and the bleating of sheep. The morning call of roosters aroused people as I reached the well. Breezes rustled the leaves at my feet and wafted the perfume of many plants through the air.

When I reached the well, I drew water and placed the jug on the edge. Then I washed my face and hands, feeling the water's cool dampness. I refilled the water jug and turned to walk home. "What are you doing here so early?" Sarah asked. I hadn't heard her arrive.

"Just woke up and decided to be first in line." My voice sounded different; I'm not sure how exactly, just unusual. I attempted to answer her without letting her know what had happened to me. "I might ask the same of you."

Sarah examined me as she placed her jug on the side of the well, alongside mine. "Are you all right? You seem in a strange mood this morning. Has anything happened?"

"I really am well. I just don't feel like talking." I placed one hand on her arm as I held the jug on my shoulder with the other. "Please forgive me. We'll talk later."

"Of course." Her voice held understanding. As life long friends, she and I always understood when the other was unwilling to talk. She knew, eventually, she would learn what was bothering me.

Slowly, I made my way home. I stepped from the path to let friends and acquaintances pass without comment. Dry sand entered my sandals and caused pebbles to become stuck under my toes. I placed the jug on the ground, removed the sandal, emptied it of small stones, then resumed my journey.

Questions filled my thoughts as I moved sluggishly. What can I tell Mother? Will she believe me? How about Father? Will he accuse me of wrong doing? Will he think that Joseph and I have lain together?

I shook my head in denial. Father must not lay any blame on Joseph. That dear man has nothing to do with this. Nothing, that is, except that Joseph is such a good man, God chose him to be the male parent of His Son.

While making my way home, the sun peeked over the horizon. It drew dark silhouettes of houses and trees onto the sky's canvas. Silvery fingers of light poked into the dimness of the Heavens. Scents of early morning dew and vegetation wafted around me. A few homes showed light, and smells from an early meal drifted across my nostrils.

I walked into the house and placed the jug on the bushel. Mother rose and came through the bedroom door as I entered.

"Good morning, Mary. Did you sleep on the roof?" she asked. Her eyes were still half-closed as she neared the table.

"Yes, Mother." My voice must have sounded different even to her sleepy mind.

"Mary," her voice held alarm as her eyes flew wide open. "Are you well?" She looked at me in concern, came near and felt my forehead.

I nodded, kissed her hand and held it. "Yes, of course." I dropped her hand, then placed the jug on the table. Mother sat as I poured, then placed a tumbler of water in front of her.

"Mother," I asked. "Can you please keep Father home for a while today? I mean, after Daniel and Leah leave for school?"

"This is serious, isn't it?" Her voice was low, concerned. She wasn't her usual self this morning. She knew something was amiss with one of her children, so she was wide awake now. Staring into my face, she attempted to discern just what the problem was.

"Yes, it is, Mother. I must talk with both of you." I felt as if I was pleading for my life.

"I'll talk with him. I'm sure he'll stay until we hear what you have to say. Come," She took my hand for a moment, then released it. "Let's prepare the morning meal."

She took bread from a basket, added cheese and figs, then placed them all on the table as I poured water and milk for everyone. When Daniel, Leah and Father came in, Father said prayers and we ate. Everyone was quiet.

Daniel and Leah must have sensed something. They looked from me to our parents. I could tell they wondered what had happened. For once, they said nothing. As soon as the meal ended Mother and I rushed them toward school.

We sat, one parent on each side of me, at the table. Apparently, Mother had talked earlier with Father, though I didn't know when she found the time.

I circled my goblet with both hands and refused to meet their eyes. "Please listen to me. I must tell you something that happened while I slept on the roof last night." I said, and raised my head, looking from one to the other. I prayed they would believe and understand.

As I thought of the results of what had happened, I felt tears sting my eyelids. How could I explain? Who would believe me?

Mother saw the tear and removed one of my hands from the goblet. She held onto it as though I would attempt to get away. Father placed an arm around my shoulder. "Whatever it was Mary, we know you would never do anything wrong."

I looked up into his kind and loving eyes. For a moment, I couldn't speak. My heart filled with love for these two people who had given me life and had so much confidence in me.

I began my story. As I spoke, I glanced at Mother. She and Father were staring at each other, a puzzled look on their faces. They seemed to be asking each other. "Could it be? Could it really be our daughter who was The Chosen One?"

When I completed the story and told them about falling asleep almost immediately, Father lifted me and placed me on his lap. For the first time in many years, I felt like a little girl going to her father for comfort. I burrowed my head into his shoulder, receiving confirmation of the love I knew he had for me.

He held me as though he would never let me go and Mother squeezed my hand even more tightly.

"Blessed be my daughter," she sighed, and I knew she was remembering our conversation of yesterday. "God has truly chosen a righteous woman to bring His Son into the world."

"But..."

"Shhh." Father ordered, quietly. "We are humble that this should happen to one in our family." He stated almost as if it were a prayer. "Mary, whatever happens we are with you for all of our lives. We will be there for you whenever you have problems." He lifted me gently to my feet as Mother released my hand.

"Come." He held out his hand and I placed my small one in his enormous, yet comforting hand.

"We must talk about this, then go to Joseph and talk with him," he suggested.

"What if Joseph won't love me any more?" I cried, releasing my hand from his and striding around the room.

"How can you even think that?" Mother asked.

"Oh, Mother." I stopped and faced my parents. "I just remembered. The angel told me Cousin Elizabeth was with child." Mother stared at me, then gave a deep sigh. She turned to Father who placed his arm around her shoulder. "This proves it was a messenger from God. Only the people in their town knew until a few days ago. As I told Joachim, Elizabeth wrote me. Your friend who leads a caravan brought the letter. She was beside herself that she was finally with child. She was so afraid she would lose it, she only told me after five months passed."

I faced her and from the corner of my eye detected a sliver of sunlight slipping through the door.

"How could this be? She's too old." I looked at Mother and continued. "Gabriel told me about it but I did have doubts."

Mother took a deep breath and continued. “Elizabeth wrote that her husband Zacharias, the priest, was in the temple when Gabriel came to tell him that Elizabeth would bear a child. Because Zacharias would not believe immediately, God struck him dumb.”

I saw Father staring at Mother as though he was now dumb as well, and my face must have mirrored his.

“When he finished his duties in the Most Holy Place,” Mother continued, “he came outside and was unable to say a word. Soon after, Elizabeth became with child. The angel told them their son would be the forerunner of the Messiah.”

“Oh, Mother! Do you think her son could be the man who tells the world of my son?” The thought was staggering. It was difficult to believe. I could understand the questions of Zacharias. I had doubts myself.

“That was foretold by the prophets.” Father said, nodding. I looked from Mother to Father, thankful beyond belief that they retained their faith in me.

“Come.” Father held his hand out to me as he slid his other arm from around Mother’s shoulder to her hand. “Let’s go to the Synagogue. We must thank God for this miracle, then tell the Rabbi the good news.”

Suddenly I had doubts. If I had trouble believing Gabriel, how would the Rabbi react? Would He believe me? Somehow I doubted it. I didn’t want to leave this secure haven...the place that had nourished me with love all my life.

I looked around the home I loved and, though I was only fifteen, somehow knew the next time I entered I would be a different person. As we walked from the house, I felt confused and frightened.

The sun was quite high as we walked along the road leading to the Synagogue. Birds stilled their chatter as we passed. Bees buzzed around the flowers by the wayside. Creatures quietly rustled the leaves as we passed.

I sniffed, and the scents of cedar, honeysuckle and other flowers and trees surrounded us, blending into what I thought must be like a pleasing aromatic incense to God.

What was my life going to be like now? I wondered. Who was this Baby I was carrying? What would He look like? What would my role in His life be?

Walking to the synagogue, I wondered if the Rabbi really would believe me. I had more doubts than Father did. The Rabbi and I had seldom seen eye to eye. When I was in school, he often berated me for knowing more than he did about the day’s lesson. He often stated he hated teaching girls because it was a worthless occupation. He said, “All they’re ever going to do is get married. What do they need an education for?” So, I had good reason to doubt his acceptance of this occurrence.

Then my thoughts turned to my every day life. What would Joseph say when I told him? Would he believe that I had always been faithful to him? What would happen if he refused to marry me? Would I be stoned as had happened to others who became with child without a husband?

No, Gabriel had specifically said that no one would stone me. He even implied I was foolish to think such a thing. And I suppose at the time I was acting foolishly.

What would the neighbors say when they saw my condition and unable to produce a husband? My steps slowed as I walked between my parents. I didn’t see the neighbors who must have looked at us in wonder. Wives, husbands and daughters seldom walked together. They would know something untoward had happened. In my mind I could hear the gossip already beginning. I said a silent prayer. Please God, don’t make this burden too hard to bear. I closed my eyes. Had Father not held me tightly, I would have stumbled over a large rock. Tears rolled down my face and I wiped them away with the back of my hand like a child. I was lonely, apprehensive and fearful.

I cried softly, “God, help me!”

Father held me. “He will, Little One. He will only do what is best for the woman who is to bear His Child.”

“But Joseph...” I felt tears running down my cheeks and knew water was mingling with the dust our sandals disturbed as we passed. I knew sweat and tears had already made streaks down my face where I wiped it with my bare hand.

“My Joseph,” I sobbed and felt my shoulders shake, and knew I could do nothing about it.

Father gathered me in his arms and patted my back as though I were a baby.

“He will believe, Mary. I know he will,” Mother whispered so softly I barely heard her.

Since my betrothal to Joseph, there was seldom a day we did not see each other. As we walked toward the Synagogue, I went back to our betrothal night in my thoughts.

That betrothal night was such an exceptional time for us. Announcements were made earlier, and the day of the betrothal, Mother, Leah and the neighbors polished and cleaned every wall and piece of furniture, then snipped every flower within sight.

Walls of the room were almost hidden. Covered with vines and leaves and blossoms, the vines drooped out the door and onto the courtyard. Scents from purple, red, yellow and blue flowers, permeated the house as green fern and leaves covered the walls.

Food was prepared; special breads and cakes baked. An abundance of vegetables and bright, scrubbed fruit lay on the table. Wine from the jugs awaited the time to be poured into containers for the toasts.

In our second room, as Leah watched, Sarah took each pin from my hair slowly. She was relishing the moment when hair was loosened to fall down my back.

Giggling, she took the last pin and grabbed my hair, splattering it all over my shoulders. As I looked in the mirror Joseph made for me, I knew I looked much different from just a few moments before.

I was ready to be Joseph’s bride. I could barely wait until the wedding took place and we could spend the rest of our lives together.

“Ooh, Mary, you look so beautiful!” Leah clasped her hands together. “I wish I was pretty like you.”

“Oh, my little sister, come here.” She walked over to me and I hugged her tightly. “You are already very pretty, and you will get more beautiful as you grow older.”

Sarah stooped and kissed Leah, then collected the strands of my hair. She combed them neatly around my shoulders and down my back, so it was smooth and tidy. I looked up at her. “We are both women now, Sarah. Let’s be friends the rest of our lives.”

She grabbed my shoulders and squeezed. “I couldn’t live without your love, Mary.”

“Neither could I live without yours.” We hugged each other.

We walked into the front room, arms around each other as Leah trailed behind. We arrived just as the first guests arrived.

Each person brought gifts: baskets, jugs, tools needed for housework and bolts of cloth were deposited at my feet. I could barely believe the gifts. There were so many and of such beauty. I didn’t know how to tell them how much their offerings meant. I knew and appreciated these sacrifices our wonderful neighbors and relatives had made.

When I looked up, there was Joseph filling the doorway, eyes only for me. As I watched, he drew a purse containing the marriage fee from his girdle. The rabbi took Joseph’s girdle and laid it across my outstretched arms.

When the rabbi asked if Joseph brought gifts, he nodded. The gifts were not as much as he wished for, he said, but he came weighted down. He made Father a new yoke for his oxen, and for my Mother, he carved a serving bowl.

For me, he made a special table; small, with poppies carved all around it. He told me he wished me to use this to place the jewels he would give me. Joseph polished the table until it was as bright and shiny as a new dinar.

I gasped at the next gift. He held a necklace in his hands, made of gold. A small sapphire was embedded in the center of a coin attached to the necklace.

He placed it around my neck and looked at me with such love I thought I must melt with the wonder of it. Tears threatened to spill over, but before they could, he turned, stepped outside and lifted a heavy chest.

He had traded his work for a piece of a cedar tree, he told me later. He stripped it of its bark, then made planks of wood from it. He made the most beautiful chest I had ever seen. Then he polished it until it shone so bright one could see reflections of the lights of the room.

“Oh, Joseph.” I could barely breathe, the gifts were so breathtaking. “Thank you.”

He looked into my eyes. “This is for all the pieces of cloth you have dyed and sewed for our home. For the pallets you have worked on so hard and everything that we shall need in the way of linens. For the pillows you made and the utensils you collected.”

I could say no more as we sat side-by-side at the table our family normally used for morning meals. The table was placed in the center of the room so everyone could see.

When the gift-giving ended, the scribe sat so he might write the terms of the contract. Joseph stated aloud he would work for me and honor me. He added that all of his property was now mine.

The children, kept silent and still during the ceremonies were now released. Leah told me she felt she was much too old to be a part of the children’s play, so she stood near Mother, looking on with a smile of pure delight. I wondered if Leah was remembering the times she had been a part of a group of children at other betrothals.

Children squealed and yelled with glee and reached out for nut meats and other sweets. This symbolized that I had kept myself sweet and pure for Joseph. The next event was the placing of the veil upon my head. This signified I belonged to him and my face was his to shield.

This morning, as I walked between my parents, remembering all these things, I wondered if Joseph would still love me. Would he still want to shield my face from the world? Would he believe me when I told him I was with child and that the Father of the child was God?

As we entered the synagogue, it looked the same as when we came to worship each Sabbath. There was a difference, however. I heard the chant of students in the back of the building as they recited their lessons. When I attended and the weather was nice, we often sat under a tree and studied.

Now, I saw the synagogue as an alien place. The seats were in the same position, a screen separating men from women. The Torah was copied on strips of parchment, sewn together and rolled around staves. Wrapped in linen, it was placed in an ark. Today, the ark which held the Torah was just a dark shadow at the back of the room.

The menorah, normally lighting the sanctuary, was a seven-branched lamp stand which now held unlit candles in the dull, silver cups. Walls of the Synagogue exuded many odors...perfume from the women who attended worship, sweat from the men, candle wax and the musty odor of older buildings, permeated everything.

The Rabbi greeted us with a nod.

Father exclaimed, his smile reaching across his face. “Rabbi, we have the most wonderful news!”

The rabbi lifted his razor-thin face to stare with beady, black eyes up at my father. “Just what is this wonderful news?” He attempted to smile, but his thin lips barely moved. His small, rabbit’s nose quivered in anticipation, and his voice sounded like a tinny horn.

Why had I never noticed this before?

“Mary is to be the mother of God’s Son!” My father’s voice trumpeted throughout the synagogue.

The rabbi's smile left his face like a stormy rain washes a stone. "What?" He exclaimed in a voice that condemned me without a hearing. For such a little man, people had often remarked he had a voice that could reach the entire village.

"It's true," my father stated. "She received a visit from an Angel last night." My father's voice softened.

I looked up and saw the hurt in his face at the rabbi's reaction to the news. I knew I shouldn't let myself be angry, but seeing the rabbi hurt my father made me want to strike that pompous, little man.

"That's impossible!" He pranced around like a miniature Arabian horse, a sneer on his pointed face. "The Savior is to be born in Bethlehem." He pointed a long, bony finger. "And she will never go anywhere after she is stoned by the neighbors." He sniffed again and brushed his hands together as though he were wiping them clean of our presence.

He stared at me and in a thunderous voice stated, "your daughter is little better than a whore," he pronounced, even without a trial.

Father took a step toward the rabbi. Mother placed her hand on his arm and spoke softly. "Stop, Joachim."

The rabbi drew himself up to his full height...probably three inches taller than I.

"She has blasphemed God," he roared. "If she continues in this fantasy, I shall denounce her to the entire village. She will be tried, then stoned to death!"

His words penetrated my heart. I could be stoned to death! Oh, God, I cried silently. What will I do?

"To tell the village is your decision," my mother said, sorrowfully. "I shall pray for you."

The Rabbi acted as though he hadn't heard a word, continuing with his tirade. "My God would not choose a lowly girl from such a wicked village to become His Handmaiden!" He stated emphatically, hitting his fist against the palm of his other hand.

"No, I guess your God wouldn't." My father's voice echoed Mother's sorrow. "But mine would." Father placed his arms around me tenderly, then turned back to the rabbi. "May God have mercy on your soul."

The man was still sputtering as we walked from the building. I wondered who would last the longest in the village...the rabbi or me and my family.

As we walked, Father seemed to be in a deep study. Nearing our home he said, "If you would like to visit Elizabeth for awhile, I'm sure she would enjoy your company."

"Oh, Joachim, what a lovely idea." Mother said, turning devoted eyes in his direction.

Father held my hand tightly and I silently took his strength. "While there, you may be able to learn what is in store for you." He glanced down at me as I clutched his hand.

My eyes filled, then overflowed. At that moment I felt such love for the understanding my father gave, I could say nothing.

Mother placed her arm around my waist, holding me closely.

"I'm sure Zacharias can give you insights into why this happened in this manner," Mother stated with conviction.

Father leaned over and kissed my cheek. "I know you were to be married in a few weeks but it will be months before anyone has to know you are with child." He thought and scratched his head as he often did while thinking. "Joseph must be told." Mother walked slowly beside me, holding my hand, saying little. "When you return, we'll have had time to adjust to this wonderful news," she concluded, as a beautiful smile lit her face.

Nearing our home, I remembered the thoughts I had as we left.

I had been right. I was different. I felt as old as the prophets said Methuselah was before his death. "I feel not only old, but weary," I thought. "I'm wary of everyone, even my friends. I certainly don't want to meet Joseph any time soon."

When Leah and Daniel came home from the synagogue and their studies, I knew they were curious as to why I didn't greet them as usual. I heard Mother tell them to begin their studies, she would explain later.

I left the room only to assist Mother in fixing the evening meal. When it was done, Leah and Mother took the food outside while I remained in the house.

Leah's eyes followed every step I took. Could my little sister whom I adored, still believe in me? I prayed fervently she would.

When Joseph came down the path, Father met him. I heard Father. "I'm sorry, Joseph, but Mary does not feel like seeing anyone tonight."

"What's wrong with her?" His voice was deep, concerned. "I should be with her if she's ill."

My father's voice was emphatic. "I'm sorry, Joseph." And the sorrow in his voice made the withheld tears pour down my cheeks. I wanted to see Joseph. I longed to know he cared. I ached to know this would make no difference to him. But for now I couldn't face him or anyone other than my family.

"Why are you not letting me see her?" Joseph sounded angry. "I've been with her each time she's been sick before." "Maybe later, Joseph," Father said, attempting to placate him. "She really doesn't feel like talking with anyone right now...not even you. I'm sorry."

A few more words passed between them, and a disgruntled Joseph left. I spent the remainder of the day in the inner room. I prayed, thanking God for choosing me, but also telling Him I was very frightened. I asked Him to show me the right way to handle this news. I needed desperately to know that it had actually happened. Though elated that God had thought I was good enough to be the Mother of His Son, I still felt apprehensive.

I always tried to be a child of God, but I had made mistakes; I had sinned. If I had sinned, then why was I chosen? Why had God not chosen the perfect woman?

Many tears fell, but even through all the tears, questions and crying, I felt the nearness of God. I knew comfort when I could let myself feel anything other than fright.

Chapter 3

The next day I arose much earlier than usual. I didn't wish to meet anyone, not even Sarah. The moon threw shadows over the landscape just before giving up its dim light to the sun.

As I walked I looked to the sky, wondering why I couldn't see God, the Father of the Son I knew I carried. His sky was unusually beautiful that morning. Mauve streaked His canvas, as well as white and pink, with a tinge of orange that reminded me the sun would rise soon.

This morning was so different I didn't even notice I was ignoring all the odors of the early morning that I usually loved.

Sarah awaited me near the well. When I saw her, I was a little disappointed. I knew Sarah was here so she and I could talk without anyone else around.

"What was the trouble at your house yesterday?" Sarah asked. Her voice was caring, not inquisitive. "I saw your family going to the Synagogue." She glanced at me, but I had no answers. "When Joseph came home, he didn't say a word but he refused to eat." She paused, waiting for a word from me. Still I couldn't speak. "Can I help in any way?"

"Oh, Sarah." I stopped, holding my jug in both arms. "I can't talk about it just now."

"Mary," she set her jug on the side of the well and placed a hand on my arm. "You and I have been together almost from the day we were born. If you can't tell me, then whom can you tell?"

"My dear friend," my voice quivered as my heart swelled. "If I could tell anyone, it would be you." We stared at each other. I swallowed and tried to get my voice under control. "I'm going to visit my cousin Elizabeth for a little while."

“Your wedding is less than a month away.” Sarah protested, and wrinkles appeared in her forehead. “What’s happened between you and Joseph?”

“Nothing, but please don’t ask any more questions now.” I held my jug with one hand and placed the other on her arm. I wanted so much to tell Sarah everything, but I knew I couldn’t...not yet.

Silently, she waited for me to continue. “My cousin Elizabeth who lives in Judea, is going to have a baby. I’ll go help her for a while. When I return, God willing, Joseph and I will marry.”

I moved my hand from her arm, placed my jug on the ground and picked up hers. As I lowered it into the water, I glanced at her. Her face revealed how much she wished to bombard me with questions.

We were taught since birth that a Savior was coming. Ancient scrolls and priests had predicted it almost since God destroyed the earth by water during the lifetime of Noah.

To realize I was the person holding the Seed of God in my body was more than I could comprehend. How could anyone expect a girl who was fifteen years old, like me, to believe that something so momentous could happen to simple people like us?

I felt very old and knew I was now years beyond Sarah.

The meeting with the angel had occurred only two nights ago. I held no doubts I was pregnant, but how could I prove it to Sarah? None of the symptoms of pregnancy were visible yet.

I made the final decision as I brought her filled jug to the top of the well. I couldn’t tell even my dearest friend. Even Joseph didn’t know and at this point, I had no idea what his reaction would be.

Gabriel said he would visit Joseph. True, he came to our house last night but my thoughts were in a turmoil. I simply could see no one. If there were something as important as an Angel’s visit, I’m sure he would have told my father or sent a message.

“Wake up, Mary. You’re day dreaming.” Sarah was shaking my arm.

“Oh. I’m sorry. I was just thinking of the arrangements that must be made before I leave.”

I handed the jug to her, then let mine down into the water. When I brought it back up, I turned. Sarah was looking at me with love and kindness. Were the situations reversed, I would feel the same.

“Your cousin is the older lady who has a priest for a husband, isn’t she?” Sarah asked, placing her jug on her shoulder.

I nodded as we began our walk home over the path we had trod all our lives.

“How long have you known she was with child?”

“My mother just told me yesterday. Cousin Elizabeth wrote her a while ago, but Mother kept it a secret because Elizabeth asked her not to say a word. And you know my Mother.”

Sarah nodded. “Yes. She can be close mouthed.” Her usual grin was missing and her eyes held the pain of my leaving. “How long will you be gone?”

“I don’t know.” Our steps slowed and I felt tears spill from my eyes.

“Oh, Mary.” Sarah said, wiping the tears from my face with her free hand. “You don’t have to tell me what’s wrong. You know I care. And when you wish to talk, I’ll be here.”

I hugged her, wondering if it would be for the last time. This morning I felt I was doing everything for the very last time. And I didn’t like the way I felt.

I knew I should be on my knees thanking God for choosing me to carry His Baby. However, the idea was so new and terrifying, I had only confused thoughts. I did not fear giving birth, but I was afraid of everything else; Joseph rejecting me, Village people castigating me, raising a child I knew nothing about.

I knew how babies were conceived and born. My Mother taught me the facts of reproduction. I lived around live stock each day of my life; our donkey, chickens, sheep and even a goat.

This was different. It wasn't a baby that Joseph and I conceived. Would He be a normal Baby? Or would He be supernatural? My life was turned up-side-down.

It wasn't the life I had dreamed about. It wasn't the happiness I wished it could be. I wanted to go back to two days ago when everything was normal and simple. I wanted to forget the entire episode.

It was impossible.

I released Sarah and we resumed our walk. "I can't tell anyone right now what happened. You know if I could that person would be you."

"I know." She nodded in understanding.

"If you can just let me have a little while, when I return from Cousin Elizabeth's, I will tell you everything."

"Are you sure I can't help?" she asked.

I looked at the love and care in Sarah's eyes and things didn't seem so dreary. "I promise that as soon as I return you shall know everything. It is good news, Sarah. I just have to go away for a few weeks."

"All right." She kissed my cheek. "If I don't see you before you leave, God go with you."

"And with you." We went our separate ways in a sober manner, without the laughter that usually accompanied our partings.

When I arrived home, not only were Mother and Father sitting at the table, but so was Joseph. The look on all their faces told me that few words had been spoken. None of the people I loved was happy with the situation.

"Good morning Mother, Father." My voice was as cool and disinterested as I could make it, as I set the jug of water on the table and turned. "And how are you Joseph?"

"Mary," his voice was low and unemotional. "Why did you let your father lie to me about your being sick?"

"Oh, Joseph." I felt tears welling in my eyes and tried to control them. "I didn't lie." Now he had irritated me and it showed as my voice hardened and the tears disappeared. "I was heart sick. I didn't want to face you with the news I have."

Father offered, "If you two would like, we'll go into the other room."

"No," I said, as I turned toward the door. "Come, Joseph, walk with me to the olive grove. We'll talk there. I must tell you the Good News." I tried to give him my special smile.

He rose, took a step and grabbed my hand. He held it as though he would never let go. But his voice was cold as he said, "I'll listen to what you have to say."

I ignored his thrust and we walked from the room. As I looked back, I saw Father wipe a tear from Mother's face. Then they both looked at me with the love, care and concern that was always there.

I disengaged my hand, not glancing at him.

Walking toward the grove, I had to move rapidly to keep up with Joseph. Dew had fallen during the night and was not completely dissipated, dampening my sandals, feet and legs.

Dry sand swirled, landed, then clung to my damp ankles. Even the birds were quiet as we passed. The only noise was the sound of Joseph's sandals as they displaced small stones and rocks, sending them flying in abandon.

The sun was glaring at the earth as though it would consume it with heat and light. Other than Joseph and me, the only movement seemed to be insects as they skittered across the tawny earth to vanish into small patches of dried grass. Joseph must have been working with cedar trees recently because the odor clung to his clothing.

As we entered the olive grove, I noticed the twisted trunks of ancient trees with their limbs bent in all directions. Green leaves which clung to the boughs stirred in the gentle morning breeze. I often wondered how these trees could produce such fruit with their arms in this condition.

Normally, I would have gloried in the freshness of the air and the beauty of these gnarled limbs reflecting against the almost cloudless sky. I loved the various types of vines curled around some of the limbs. Even the patches of still-dew-laden grass underneath the trees couldn't take my thoughts from the job I knew I had to do.

Now...now, I must tell Joseph my news.

I stopped and looked up at him, attempting to convey my love. His face held a mixture of expressions...love, concern, questions...even a hint of displeasure.

"Please, Joseph bear with me." I pleaded and placed my hand on his arm. "What I have to tell you is unbelievable. I hope and pray you can accept the news." I held his questioning eyes with mine.

His voice was so gentle, my heart wept because I knew that gentleness wouldn't last. "Oh, Mary, you know I will believe anything you say."

I looked up into those dark brown eyes. For the first time I could ever remember, his eyes did not hold unconditional love and devotion. "Please forgive me Joseph but I could not tell you what happened yesterday. It was too new and unbelievable, even to me. I hardly knew whether to accept it myself." I remembered the Rabbi and his disbelief. "The Rabbi thought I lied."

"Don't keep me in suspense any longer, Mary." His voice hardened and his eyes snapped in anger and frustration.

"Joseph," I removed my hand from his arm, then glanced down, not wanting to look into his face as I told him. "I am with child."

The silence was so long I glanced up. His face was a study in confusion, as though he had inhaled a deep breath and could not let it go. From confusion, I saw his eyes begin to spark and knew his anger was just below the surface. He wouldn't look at me and I thought my heart would break with disappointment.

"Joseph," I cried. "speak to me!" I grabbed his arm. He flung my hand away as though it were a detestable fly.

"Who is the man?" His voice was so low and menacing I couldn't believe it was my Joseph speaking. "I will kill him!"

"Joseph!" Where was the understanding Joseph I had always known? Where was the love with which he usually surrounded me? Soundlessly, I lifted both hands trying to touch him.

He shook me off as though I were no more important than a piece of lint. "I'll listen." His voice was stony as he leaned against a tree, crossed his arms and stared down at me. The look was so forbidding I couldn't have touched him even had I wished.

I looked through the twisted limbs and thought how twisted my life had become in just two short days. I shivered in the heat as I realized there was little I could do if Joseph didn't believe the story I was about to tell.

My voice began on a hopeful note. "For thousands of years, we Jews have expected a Jewish girl to be chosen as the mother of God's Son. He will be sent to save the world."

"You're saying you have been chosen?" He interrupted with a sneer, his lip curled in disdain.

I couldn't believe Joseph could speak to me in such a fashion. "I was, Joseph, I was!" I cried. "Gabriel came to me night before last. He told me I was the chosen one. He said I would be the hand maiden of the Lord, that I would bear God's Son!" I was almost shouting in my frustration at his unbelief.

I looked up at Joseph. The disdain was replaced by anger and hurt. "Mary, I know you've always had an outsized imagination, but I never dreamed your fantasy could imagine this." His voice was icy. "Perhaps you aren't as old as I thought." He turned and stared upwards. "Perhaps we should forget the betrothal, return the gifts and live in our own homes for a few more years until you grow up."

“Joseph!” I was now so angry I could barely control my voice. “I hoped that by telling you of the angel Gabriel and explaining what happened, you would believe me.”

He stared at me, his body a stone figure. I turned and strode toward home, then stopped. Facing him defiantly, and in as icy a voice as I could muster, I said, “I thought you loved me enough to want to understand. I hoped things would not be different between us. I love you Joseph, but maybe it would be best if the marriage is called off altogether.”

I stared as his body seemed to melt. He stepped toward me and cried in anguish. “Mary, how can you expect me to believe? How do I know you’re with child? How can I know you received a visit from an Angel? How can you believe you are with child?”

“I don’t have to believe it, Joseph, I know!” My voice was now calm, matter-of-fact. “I don’t have to convince you. I don’t have to get larger in two days to know I am to bear the Son of God.” My voice faltered and I swallowed as though I had an obstruction in my throat.

“I know it won’t be easy.” My voice was so low, I saw Joseph bend toward me to be sure he heard every word I uttered. “I know if you give me up, there is a good possibility I will be stoned...” My voice drifted off, then I spoke louder and with conviction, as I felt my eyes begin to spark with determination. “God is not going to let anything happen to His Son. I shall be safe, whether you decide to become His earthly father or not.”

Joseph walked toward me. “I’ll put you away for awhile and keep you safe, Mary. Just let me think about this for a few days, please.” He was now holding my shoulders and looking deeply into my eyes.

“You will have all the time you need, Joseph.” I flung his hands from my shoulders. “I’m leaving in a few days to visit my cousin Elizabeth. She is going to have a baby. The angel Gabriel also told me that. When he matures to manhood, the child she is carrying will be the man who announces that the Son of God is now upon the earth.”

His face held a stunned expression. “Are you sure? Isn’t your cousin Elizabeth quite old?”

“Yes she is, but nothing is impossible with God. I know I will carry the child of God to fruition. He shall be born to me. Your decision is yours alone! I can’t or won’t help you with this one.”

We stood there, looking at each other. I was exhausted. My life was filled with people who decided my fate...the angel, the rabbi who refused to believe when we went to the temple yesterday and even my well meaning parents who did not question my statements. I expected, or hoped rather, that Joseph believed and would give me a shoulder to lean on.

I had had enough. Now I knew I had God and myself to lean on.

I turned and walked away, leaving him behind. Over my shoulder I said to him, “I shall see you when I return from Elizabeth’s.”

“Mary, wait...” His voice was pain filled, a cry of frustration and loneliness.

Chapter 4

Since Nazareth is on a trade route, many caravans come through our town. Situated in the lower valley of the Lebanon mountains, we often saw these caravans as they snaked around the mountains and down into our village.

Looking East, travelers were miniature people as they moved through the mountains of Gilead across the Jordan valley. Soldiers rode Arabian horses down the highways that ran east to Jordan. Most people however, went south to Samaria, Jerusalem or Egypt through the Plain of Australian. Seeing people head toward the west, we knew they would probably meet a ship at the Mediterranean Sea. Most travels north led to Damascus.

My Father frequently sold his fruits and vegetables to many of them. Jeremiah owned a caravan and purchased goods from my father. Over the years they became very good friends.

As we talked after our meal that night, Father said, "I heard today Jeremiah would be here soon. He's on his way to Jerusalem. I know he'll be happy to take you with him."

"He's a nice person. I remember the last time he was in town, he ate with us. Isn't he the one who brings gifts for Mother?"

"Yes, and if he weren't such a good friend, I could find myself becoming jealous." Father picked up Mother's hand and grinned at her.

"Oh, Joachim, how you do run on." Mother smiled at him as she removed her hand and patted his arm. "I won't be apprehensive at all if Mary is in his care."

So it was decided I would leave as soon as Jeremiah arrived.

Until then, Sarah was the only person allowed into our home to visit. I still couldn't talk with her about what happened. I knew our trip to the synagogue caused brows to raise and questions to be asked.

I also knew gossip was a familiar pastime in Nazareth. Shame hovered over me as I knew had it been another girl I might have been tempted to be a part of the gossip.

Though God did not approve of anger, I was furious with the Rabbi. The hurt Joseph caused was even worse. I cried so much my emotions were as wrung out as the clothing on wash day.

Soon after my visit from the angel Jeremiah arrived. Father asked if I might accompany him to Cousin Elizabeth's home.

After two days of preparations, I was kissing my family goodbye.

"Now, Mary, are you sure you have enough food?" Mother was anxious; she hated my leaving. "Here, take this honey cake, and the pickled eggs."

"Mother," I said, and tucked them into the side of the straw bag. "I have more than enough for five days. You've given me a whole mutton ham." I laughed and held up the bag. "I'll be big as the donkey if I eat all this."

Daniel added. "Don't forget the cheese you packed, Mother. It'll feed her for days." Daniel could not understand my hasty departure, but he was trying.

"And I packed dried figs, dates and raisins." Leah's lips quivered as she tried to smile. I hugged her and she clung to me tightly and asked, "Oh, Mary, why do you have to go away?"

"I told you, my little sister. Mother's cousin is going to have a baby. I'll stay with her and help for a little while."

"Three months?" she wailed. "You'll forget what I look like."

I grabbed her and laughed aloud. "Oh, Leah, you are much too precious. I could never forget you. Besides, you'll be so busy helping Mother, you won't have time to miss me. I'll be home almost before you know I'm gone."

"I miss you already," Her lips trembled as tears slowly coursed down her cheeks.

I wiped tears from her face, wanting to give in to mine. "I must go. They can't hold the caravan for me any longer." I hugged and kissed her, then lifted her chin so we could look into each other's eyes. "You take good care of Mother and Father."

"I will, but I don't want you to go." Her chin trembled.

"I know, but Cousin Elizabeth needs me right now. I promise, I'll be back soon." I turned before she could see the tears dribbling from my eyes and down my cheeks.

Although Daniel and Leah were young, they too understood life. They also understood birth and death. They had seen Mother when she lost a baby a few years earlier. They knew women should be cared for when they were about to have a child. So my leaving was understandable, but not a very happy one for them.

It was difficult for Mother, Father and me, as well. I had never been away from my family. It seemed I was leaving everything I held dear...my family, my home, Sarah and, yes, even Joseph. Suddenly, I felt tossed about like a tree discarding limbs in a storm.

I was leaving, but my heart would remain with my loved ones.

Father carried my bag and the goatskin filled with water as we walked silently to the place where the caravan was forming. Never had I felt so alone as when he rapidly kissed me, gave me the bundle of food and water, then turned abruptly as I joined the caravan.

I knew I couldn't dwell on his leaving or my departure from my family and all I had known my entire life. I looked around to discover my interest was rapidly replacing my loneliness.

There were animals laden with I knew not what. People milled around as though there was no destination.

Hump-backed camels were lashed four or five together so the owner could control all of them with just one thong. They, like we humans, now stood patiently waiting for something to happen.

Children chased each other, played tag, teased one another, then became interested in the animals joining the throng. Mothers attempted to control their families, but soon ignored them and let them play.

Fathers watched animals, helped where needed in packing supplies and aided in getting animals and people in order so the journey might begin.

Leaving Nazareth, I attempted to see everything. When the journey began we traveled through a landscape of different colored greys and browns...creams, tans, terra cottas and beige. I particularly noticed the camels as they walked slowly and deliberately, their nostrils flaring toward the sky. I now understood why they were called "ships of the desert." When they walked, their entire bodies rolled from side to side like ships I had seen sailing on the sea of Galilee.

These animals were laden with goods for every use and from every part of the world.

I wondered aloud where all this merchandise came from. A young boy overheard me and said, "carpets and spices come from the Far East."

Another chimed in. "Mr. Jeremiah told us some of the camels carried jewels from India."

"Really?"

"Yes." His little gap-toothed mouth grinned up at me. "He said they sparkled their way across the seas."

What a nice turn of phrase, I thought.

The group listened, laughing in delight.

A lady said. "Usually, silks of every color make the long journey from China."

"Who can afford to buy such expensive goods?" I asked, amazed at what I was hearing.

She said, "They'll be purchased in Jerusalem by rich people." She looked around to make sure she had an audience. "People who work in palaces or who own businesses can sometimes afford these riches. They buy products much higher in price than you or I could." She grinned at me, as we walked side-by-side.

One little girl chimed in. "We even got fish."

"Fish?" I was astonished fish could be transported.

"Yes, they preserve them in oil." She preened herself as she spoke. "Mr. Jeremiah told me."

Another lady who hadn't said a word since the trip began remarked in a soft voice. "They even have papyrus on this caravan."

It was almost more than I could assimilate. "I had no idea Jeremiah carried such valuable wares."

Later, I discovered some of the goods the camels carried would be deposited in Jerusalem. Others were loaded on boats and taken by sea to many parts of the world. I had no idea where the caravan originated and didn't know just where some of the merchandise went.

I was finding out how small my world in Nazareth really was. I had certainly heard of the Far East but I had no idea where China was, in relation to Nazareth. I knew Jerusalem was...south...but I didn't know how far it was.

Men, women and children walked behind the camels. At that time, I wondered at their destinations. Some wore robes that covered their entire bodies. Women showed me that placing the cowl from my robe over my head was essential. It prevented dirt and sand from blowing in my face.

Rocks embedded themselves inside our sandals and we stopped frequently to remove them. The caravan never halted. Only people with problems halted and later rejoined the group.

Heat ricocheted from the heavens to our little group, now walking toward Jerusalem. The sun burned its way through any cloud that ventured to show itself in the sky. We wet cloths with our sweat and placed them on our heads.

Women and children herded a few goats in the center of the caravan.

"Why would you carry live animals on the caravan?" I asked, bending over to remove a pebble from my sandal.

One of the women spoke. "They're here because food could become scarce."

"But why?" I glanced up at the sky, wondering if I would survive the heat of this day. "I understood the trip would only take about five days."

"Sometimes there are storms or a caravan will be attacked."

I laughed. "Right now, a storm would feel good, I think."

She agreed and smiled. "If it becomes necessary a goat can be slaughtered, then cooked for food."

"Do they also kill the sheep?"

"Oh, no. They're brought along to become burnt offerings in the synagogues and temples of Jerusalem."

We walked, and occasionally grasped the arm of another as we skipped along on one foot while we cleared our sandals.

I stopped abruptly and the child behind bumped me. I turned rapidly and grabbed him before he could fall. "I'm so sorry. I'm not used to traveling."

He grinned up at me. "It's all right. I do it all the time."

I turned back to my traveling companion. "You mean people take their animals to the temples to sell to someone who has no offering?" I was amazed.

"If you look closely," She pointed at the sheep. "You'll notice these animals are young and tender and will bring a good price." I hadn't noticed how young the sheep were, until that moment.

Tawny-colored mountains in the distance caught my eye. They appeared to climb to the heavens. Often, there was a black spot in these hills. I was informed these were caves where shepherds, as well as travelers and different animals made these holes their homes.

I looked to the head of the caravan.

The leader and some of his men rode Arabian horses. Before we began our journey, the animals' coats had been rubbed to a high gloss. Of course, it didn't take long for the sand to accumulate in the horses' hair and become tangled. Whatever happened to their coats, these horses stepped high, their heads held proudly, almost regally.

Jeremiah the leader, frequently looked back to see that the entire caravan was moving along with few or no problems.

Our leader was a man about the same age as my father. However, his nose was large and proud looking. When he stepped from his horse, I realized he was almost six feet tall. His dark brown hair was thinning on top and the hair of his magnificent beard covered most of his face. His snapping brown eyes disappeared in crinkles when his belly-laugh roared through the caravan.

The smile he bestowed on everyone made each of us want to do his bidding. He stopped now to talk with women and children. "Are you keeping up all right?"

"Oh, everything is fine," An older lady said. "No problems for the moment."

His eyes crinkled. "Not even with Mary?" He particularly singled me out I thought, because he and my father were friends.

"No, she's doing fine," the lady stated and smiled at me.

"Mary, I forgot to ask before we left. Did you bring enough food for five days?" I was thankful for Jeremiah's concern.

"Yes. In fact, I filled my skin with water just before we left this morning."

"Good." He wheeled his horse around and slowly rode to the end of the caravan, checking on each person.

Mother and I had prepared food to last for about four or five days. I wasn't too concerned about water, because our leader insisted every stop be made at a caravansary. Before we left, I asked my father why the leader insisted on stopping at a caravansary and not out in the open.

"Little Mary," he answered. "Frequently travelers are attacked on the roads."

"Yes, I heard about that happening."

"In stopping at a caravansary, besides the protection of the men who work with Jeremiah, there are walls. Thieves seldom attempt to climb these walls."

"Oh."

"That's one of the reasons I was delighted it was Jeremiah you were traveling with."

As I walked and sweated and grumbled about the heat, I was so entranced with all the new happenings, I gave little thought to stopping for the night.

We walked up and down hills. The hills were covered with grass and flowers of every description. The brilliance of red poppies that survived in the mountains overshadowed everything else. They twinkled amongst the grey, wrinkled slate of the hills.

Near the pathway where we walked, white flowers, with blossoms measuring as wide as a man's hand, grew in abundance. Flowers of pink, blue and purple dotted the countryside. The sky blue of the flax plant looked delicate against the harshness of the hills. Yet the fiber of the plant itself was so strong it was used to make fine linen.

The beginning of my journey must be the beginning of the drought season, I thought. This first day, even with the cowl covering most of my face, I felt I ate enough dust and dirt to grow a garden. My throat was constantly dry but I tried to save my water until I was extremely thirsty.

The children began the day running, playing and chattering alongside their parents. Soon they ventured away to meet the rest of the children of the caravan.

We didn't stop for a meal in the middle of the day. The women of the caravan produced bread and fruit as we walked. They fed their children, then ate themselves as they put one weary foot in front of the other.

The smaller children tired and their steps lagged. Mothers picked them up and carried them. I even picked up a little girl and carried her for some time. She napped on my shoulder as we walked along. Her entire body became wet with perspiration, and wisps of hair curled around her face. I ran my fingers through her hair, attempting to let a little coolness touch her head. I wanted to squeeze this child as though she were mine.

I wondered if this love and closeness I had for this baby was how a mother felt when carrying her own sleeping child.

Protection of this tired little body who rested against me in complete trust was my primary concern. Every once in awhile, she opened her eyes as I stumbled, then again settled in sleep, her arm around my neck.

The heat of the sun finally abated a little. Children awoke refreshed and began their play. My arms ached from holding the little girl, but I knew I was beginning to really believe I could be a mother.

Just at dusk we stopped at a caravansary, the first I had ever seen.

I noticed high walls built of sun-dried brick as our entire caravan went through the gates just before the sun set. Gates were locked for the night to keep everyone who entered safe from marauders.

As we walked through the gate, I looked around. In the center of the courtyard was a well. What a welcome sight for weary travelers. We hurried to wash our faces and hands and refill our water containers.

While I waited my turn to get a drink of water, I noticed the yard. At one side of the wall was a two-storied building. There was no floor on the bottom story. I was told animals ate and slept there. The small upper rooms were rented to travelers who could afford such small comforts.

Since I carried no money to rent a room or even a cot, I laid my pallet out in the open with the other women. We gathered a few sticks of wood and built a small fire. As we ate figs, bread, cheese and dried grapes, we drank water from the goat skins and sat around the fire, talking.

A breeze started, blowing wisps of sand across the courtyard. I didn't mind the sand, I thought, the wind feels so wonderful.

As the night grew closer, the children went to sleep but the women and I talked, becoming acquainted with each other. When they learned Elizabeth was my cousin, they became excited.

"Did you hear about Zacharias?" A plump Rebecca asked. I realized she was the older lady who had told Jeremiah I was fine.

"I just know he can't talk," I answered.

"I was there that day," she barely whispered as though to speak too loudly would make God angry.

"You were? Please tell me all about it."

Though she had slumped over in exhaustion, Rebecca drew herself up straight and her energy appeared restored. Her face was burned a deep brown and wrinkles only added to her loveliness.

Her voice was deep and intimate as she said, "We were in prayer outside the temple of the Lord when someone noticed Zacharias had stayed in the temple much longer than normal."

She drew in a deep breath. Letting it out, she said, "when he came out, he had the strangest look on his face you have ever seen."

The other women in our group around the fire had already heard this story many times. However, they were attentive and quiet as she continued.

"The men in the group asked why he had remained in the temple so long and what had happened to him. He looked at them, opened his mouth to speak and do you know what happened?"

I could only shake my head.

"He couldn't say a word."

"Really?"

She nodded. "We didn't know why. His face was as white as if he had seen a ghost. He tried to talk, but not a sound emerged. He looked at all of us with a very strange expression. Then turning, he walked rapidly toward his home."

“No one has heard him speak since.” One of the other ladies remarked.

“That is strange,” I said. “Maybe an angel visited him.”

“Aw, come on.” Rebecca smiled in derision. “I’ll believe that when I see an angel myself.”

“Did you know my Cousin Elizabeth is going to have a child?” I asked quietly.

“She’s too old,” a chorus of voices stated with conviction.

“Apparently God doesn’t think so! My mother received a letter from her and she is going to have a child. She’s already carried the baby for almost six months. That’s why I’m going to visit her.”

I didn’t tell them the angel Gabriel told me that Elizabeth was with child before my Mother confirmed it.

They looked at each other in disbelief. “You don’t say? It can’t be! Why, she’s an old woman!” Their exclamations told me they weren’t sure if they should believe me or not.

“That may be, but I’m going to stay with her and help her as much as I can for the next few weeks.”

“You know,” Rebecca said, thoughtfully. “I haven’t seen her for quite some time, and she usually visits among the sick at every opportunity.”

“I haven’t seen her either,” another lady remarked.

The others shook their heads as though they hadn’t seen or heard about her either.

Our voices quieted as we heard some of the men praying. We prepared for the night.

Here in the hills, we knew it would be getting cool as night descended so we draped our heavy cloaks over us and settled down for a good night’s sleep.

At last the sounds of talk hushed and I tried to rest, but my thoughts troubled me. The sounds of camels and the occasional bleat of a goat accompanied the braying of an ass. Children turned over in their sleep, mumbling through their dreams. The almost-full moon threw shadows across the courtyard.

Looking above the walls of the caravansary, the hills held dark holes where I knew caves abounded. Silhouetted against the sky, they reminded me of the mountains so near Nazareth, where my family awaited my return. Suddenly I was so lonely, and tears slid down my cheeks.

Restless thoughts swirled through my head like birds circling over the mountains of my homeland. I missed climbing to a special spot I loved near the foot of the mountains. I could sit and look over the landscape, down to the edges of Galilee.

Everyone appeared to be asleep.

As I looked up at the stars, the visit from Gabriel became foremost in my mind. I knew it was no dream. I knew it was real because in less than a week, I felt my body begin its change. The stars were so close I knew God was looking down, caring for the woman who would bear His child. I felt He was protecting me from any harm that might come.

And Joseph. What of Joseph? What was he going to do when I returned? Would he want me as his wife? Or would he put me away? Hide me some place until my Son was born? Or would he divorce me? According to Jewish law, he had a perfect right to divorce me, which could lead to my death by stoning.

I turned over and tried to put Joseph and my pregnancy from my mind. I finally slept for a few hours but was still exhausted when I awoke.

The early dawn found us moving over small hills and through shallow valleys. There were large and small stones hindering our progress. The camels and other animals appeared to float over the rocks with no problem. We humans stumbled, caught ourselves and moved upright a few more feet before another boulder slowed our progress.

Sheep grazed in the hills. A shepherd sat on a promontory, a crook stuck in the ground. The staff was ready at a moment's notice should the need arise. There were trees near us and as far as the eye could see. Again, we saw flowers of every color; red and blue and purple. The children ran to pick a handful, then brought them to their mothers, offering them as something precious indeed.

One little boy and girl brought some of these flowers to me. I clasped them to my breast, then kissed the children's fresh, beautiful faces. I brought the flowers to my nose. The pollen made me sneeze and the children laughed. I smiled, happy to be in this place, alive with the joy of children.

The head of the caravan came back often to check on us. The women who traveled this route frequently told me it was rare for an official to look after women and children. I was grateful for the few minutes of respite and the fresh water he brought. He even stopped at a fig tree and picked ripe fruit, bringing them to us in a basket.

Juice dribbled down the children's chins, and they laughed and wiped their faces with fat, sticky little fingers. I was grateful for each mouthful of the cool, sweet, tasty fruit.

By the end of the fourth day, I was exhausted. I felt getting up the next morning would be impossible. Yet the journey was ending and my prayers were more heartfelt than normal. As soon as our evening meal ended, I flung down my pallet and crawled onto it. I pulled my cloak over my body so the cool of night would not chill me. Even the children were tired and went right to sleep. The women were grateful that tomorrow would be the end of the journey for them, as well. We all went to sleep soon after we stopped for the night.

Early the next morning, I was awakened by sounds of a trumpet coming from afar. "It's the sounds of Jerusalem," the women said.

I was enthralled. To be so near Jerusalem and the end of my journey seemed impossible. But the trumpet sounds from the City of David made me know I had been right in coming to this place at this time.

"God always has a purpose," I thought, "even if I don't know what it is. Thank you God, for bringing me safely."

I picked up my cloak, folded it and the pallet and prepared to move out.

The nearer we got to Jerusalem, the more people we met. Soldiers and Jews on the way to the temple, I supposed, overtook us, passed, and became little more than specks as they traveled more rapidly than our caravan.

Caravans going in the opposite direction passed with hand waves, smiles and the ever present odor of animals. Sounds of creaking leather from saddles, and the bleating of sheep were scarcely heard.

There were so many people going in both directions, I turned my head rapidly, I became dizzy. Small groups of people moved, stirred dust, making a cloud that almost swallowed the entire human tide.

As we neared our destination, Jeremiah rode to meet us. "Mary, your father asked me to see that you were taken to your cousin's home. Your destination is between Bethlehem and Jerusalem, so it's just a little farther to the west. Rebecca said she and her husband know the location well. They'll show you the way."

"Thank you so much, sir. I appreciate all you have done for me."

"It's been my pleasure. If I'm anywhere around when you decide to return home, just send word to the gates of Jerusalem. The men will know where I am and will inform you of when I shall be going in the direction of your home."

"Again, thank you." I reached my hand to clasp his for a moment.

He wheeled his horse and was gone to speak with others and then to head the column as we came near the gate.

Rebecca, the woman who had talked of Zacharias around the campfire said, "Come, Mary. We will meet my husband at the gates. He will turn his camels over to someone else to lead. Then we shall be on our way to your Cousin Elizabeth's."

We met her husband and began our short journey. Her husband, a rather tall, thin individual, took such long steps I could barely keep up with him. When he saw my difficulty he slowed his pace. By now, I was so exhausted I felt this last part of the journey was the longest. He kindly offered his arm and I clung heavily.

We moved slowly as I struggled over rocks and through ruts toward the small village in the hill country of Judah. Rebecca encouraged, “just a little farther.”

Holding Rebecca’s hand, I asked, “where are those famous roads the Romans were supposed to build?”

She laughed. “Actually, they have begun the roads a little closer to Jerusalem. When you go there, you will see.”

The sun was at its highest peak when we entered the village where Zacharias and Elizabeth lived. The street was narrow and the sun reflected off the houses made from white stones. Tops of many of the houses sported roofs made from tiles. We approached the largest house and the man knocked on the street gate.

As we awaited a response to his knock, I looked around. The gate opened onto a garden where trees, flowers and shrubs bloomed in abundance. There was a fig tree near the gate, with the limbs of an apricot and almond tree peeking over the roof.

I wanted to rush through the gate and bury my nose in the fragrance. It would certainly help replace the dirt, sand and unwashed body scents that accumulated during the long journey.

The servant smiled as she opened the gate. “May I help you?” she asked. Though approximately my size and age, she greeted us more as potential friends than strangers. Her eyes crinkled at the corners as the smile seemed to encompass her entire face.

The man introduced me. “This is Mary, the cousin of Elizabeth. Would you please inform her?”

The girl nodded and turned as I heard Elizabeth speaking to someone. Her voice held a lilt I remembered from a visit she made to our home when I was a small child.

“Please ask them in, Deborah. It’s so hot, we shall give them fresh juice, then water to cleanse themselves.” Elizabeth’s voice was low and soft, though easily heard as she approached the door leading to the garden.

“We thank you,” the man said to Deborah. “But we must get to our home.” He smiled and stepped back. “Have a good visit,” he said to me.

“Thank you so much for bringing me here,” I clung to Rebecca’s hand for a moment. “You were so good to me during the journey. I can never tell you how much I appreciate it.”

Then I turned toward the door where I beheld Elizabeth.

“Hello, Cousin Elizabeth,” I said.

The couple looked at Elizabeth and started to speak. Their words stopped as though hit by a stone wall.

Elizabeth took one look at me, swayed, then placed her hand on her stomach as though she were already caressing the baby growing there.

Chapter 5

“Elizabeth, what is it?” My voice rose in alarm and I rushed through the gate to stand by her side.

Elizabeth’s hand remained on her stomach, rubbing it gently. It was almost as though she were holding the baby.

“Blessed among women are you, and blessed is the fruit of your womb!” Her voice held awe as she spoke clearly, staring straight at me.

The couple who accompanied me to this house stood like the walls of a caravansary as Elizabeth continued. “Why should this happen?”

“I don’t know what you mean.” My puzzlement was total. Why would she react this way at my appearance?

“How has it happened that the mother of my Lord should come to me?” She sounded as though she were chanting, like prophets of old sang psalms. “When your greeting reached my ears, the baby leaped in my womb for joy.”

Awe radiated from her beautiful eyes as she gazed at me and smiled.

I was so astonished at her words and the look on her face, I had no idea how to respond. “I-I came to see you because it was so unpleasant in Nazareth right now.” I stammered, bewildered at the happening. “Maybe God brought me here for a purpose.”

“I’m sure of it.” She reached for my hand and held it tightly as tears streamed down her face. “My little Mary. Blessed are you who believed there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to you by the Lord.”

Suddenly, I realized she was speaking of me. I looked at her in amazement. “You know what happened to me?”

She nodded. “Yes. Oh, I don’t know the details, no. But I do know that you are the woman chosen to be the Mother of God.”

“But how?” I stood as still as the statues of idols I’d read about.

She patted her stomach tenderly. When she again spoke, it was in her normal tone. “Mary, I don’t know how I knew. I don’t know why I greeted you with the words I did. But I do know, without a doubt, that you are carrying the Child who is to save the world.”

Only my family, Joseph and the Rabbi at home had been told of my vision from Gabriel. Neither Joseph nor the Rabbi believed. The Rabbi threatened me with death by stoning and Joseph, who should have loved and believed in me, doubted.

I glanced at the couple who silently stood, turning their heads from Elizabeth to me. Their presence hardly registered, for my mind was filled with the wonder of God and the fact that Elizabeth knew of my visit by the angel, as well as my subsequent pregnancy. She not only knew, she believed.

Suddenly, I joined Elizabeth in praising God in the way of old...antiphonal chants, which we Jews have used from the beginning of time.

“My soul exalts the Lord and my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior.” I murmured, “For He has regard for the humble state of His bond slave. Behold,” and my voice became louder as I continued to speak.

“From this time on all generations will count me blessed.” My voice lower on the last words, I breathed deeply and glanced heavenward.

Suddenly and unaware of the words spewing from my mouth, I continued. “For the Mighty One has done great things for me: And holy is His name. His mercy is upon generation after generation toward those who fear Him.”

Suddenly, I felt as though I had just returned from a visit with God and my chanting stopped. The transition of my feelings was so rapid, it was difficult to adjust.

“Come, let us go inside,” Elizabeth urged me forward. “We must get you a bath and some clean clothing, as well as attend to your feet.”

I turned to the couple and again thanked them; this couple who had so graciously brought me to this wondrous household. As I entered the gate, I saw Elizabeth press a coin into their hands, and was thankful for her thoughtfulness.

They bowed low, turned and walked away, their heads filled, I’m sure, with everything said in their presence. I was positive they would marvel and tell others of the strange afternoon.

The servant girl picked up my belongings and followed us.

As we walked down the passageway, I barely noticed the pots where rich blossoms flourished abundantly on flowers.

For some reason, I couldn't seem to quit praising God. It was as though words sprang from the well of Heaven.

"He has done mighty deeds with His arm; He has scattered those who were proud in the thought of their heart. He has brought down rulers from their thrones and has exalted those who were humble. He has filled the hungry with good things and sent away the rich, empty handed. He has given help to Israel His servant in remembrance of His mercy. As He spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and his offspring forever."

I walked in a daze further into this home, where strange things had already occurred.

Zacharias came forward, hearing the last words I spoke. He gathered my hands in his and kissed both of them. His smile lit his homely face and he attempted to say something to me, but no sounds emerged.

"He is welcoming you to our home, Mary." Elizabeth explained, after introducing us.

"Is it true," I asked, "that you cannot speak, dear cousin?"

Zacharias nodded, then looked at Elizabeth. The love in that glance was awe inspiring. Then he returned his attention to me.

Though I knew he was older than my father, I don't think I realized it before now. Not only was he older, but was thinner and taller. His hair was almost white and very thin. His beard, however, made up for it. Though it too was white, it was thick and luxurious. His black eyes glowed with good humor. There were only a few lines in his forehead to reveal his age.

The silk prayer shawl he wore over his skull cap contained many colors. His robe reflected the deep red hue in the pattern of the shawl. It drooped over the shoulders of his rich looking robe. His girdle held a purse attached to it and when he moved I heard the jingle of coins.

"This inability to speak happened when you were in the Temple?" I asked.

Again he nodded, and Elizabeth caught my arm. "It is true Mary, he cannot speak but he and I communicate. He usually uses a slate to write his thoughts."

Again she took my hand. "Come, let us fix your bath. It will refresh you after such a long journey."

As I followed her, my soiled sandals made dirty footprints in the wool carpets. I was embarrassed because my feet and sandals were so dirty, but she said, "It's all right. The soil is only on the top and can easily be removed."

I reflected that I had had no chance to look at Elizabeth before. My arrival had been too emotional. Now, I did. She was older than my mother but she was the most beautiful woman I had ever seen.

She was tall; at least five or six inches taller than me. She had not adopted the new style of dying her tresses and her hair held traces of grey mixed with black. She used jeweled combs to catch the luxuriant hair on top of her head. Her eyes were not as dark as Zacharias, but they too, held humor and love. Elizabeth's almost unlined face was lightly dusted with cosmetics.

Her deep, purple tunic was made of the finest of linens. She draped it so her pregnancy was barely visible. However, when in her presence for just a little while, one knew that what she carried below her heart was the most important being in her life, after God. She was constantly rubbing her stomach, or patting it or just laying her hand on it, I realized. The touch was so light and tender it brought tears to my eyes.

Each movement of the baby caused a look of awe to cross her face. As she moved her hand over her belly, the jewels on her wrist and hands sparkled. In her ears were rubies larger than I had ever seen; but all this wealth seemed unimportant to her.

I glanced out a window; I was amazed! It was the first time I had ever actually seen glass. We, of course, had heard of it, even in the small village of Nazareth. But to actually see glass was a miracle to me.

One could sit inside and have the outside also, with these wondrous things...windows! I sighed as I stared at palm trees, tall reeds and lower grasses planted around the house. Colorful flowers bloomed in abundance.

There were paths leading through the luxurious garden with benches on which one could rest and admire the beauty.

“Come, my dear Mary. I’ll show you to your room, then you can take a bath. After that, maybe you should rest for awhile.” She took my hand and held it lightly. We walked down a corridor whose walls held tapestries made of the most costly wool. She led me to a room that looked as though it had been prepared for a princess.

There were murals painted on all the walls. Each wall held a part of the painting. Slowly turning around, my imagination made me feel as though I was in the center of a body of water. Trees of every description surrounded the blue water of the lake. I turned ever slower, reveling in the cool feeling this room gave me.

Extending from the ceiling was a brass chain. It split into three chains and held a hanging lamp. The lamp was round and the artisan had lifted the edge in three places. The metal was quite thick and smoke curled from the center of it. What miracles this house contained!

There was a bed with legs. The bed wore a white coverlet so dazzling it hurt my eyes. The pillows on the bed made a rainbow and I thought of butterflies with their many wondrous colors. I looked longingly at a small table which held combs and brushes. I couldn’t wait to use them on my sand encrusted hair. On the wall above the table hung a mirror.

“Cousin Elizabeth...” I began, when I could again breathe normally. “How beautiful this is.”

“Thank you.” Turning, I saw her holding out a hand to me. “Come, Mary, I’ll show you the toilet.” She held my hand lightly as she led me to a small room where a toilet was installed. There was a lavatory in the corner of the room and running water was available for cleanliness.

“Elizabeth...” I could barely believe what I was seeing. “I don’t understand all of these miracles. I had no idea such luxuries existed.”

She laughed. “I do understand your bewilderment.” As she continued to speak, I gazed at wonders I never imagined. “When the Romans first came we hated them, but they have done so much to improve our sanitation systems, sometimes I wonder...” Her voice trailed off, then she resumed. “What am I thinking? Of course I hate them being our conquerors, but they have improved living conditions.”

She lightly brushed my cheek with her finger. “I’ll leave you for the moment. When you finish, come back and I’ll show you where you may take a bath.”

I discovered later that the cesspools underneath houses were cleared by carts at night. The drainage system for the homes and businesses was quite intricate. Wherever the Romans traveled, they introduced their form of transportation, roads and sewage systems. Since their arrival in Jerusalem, these conveniences were added to the wealthier homes.

As I slowly turned, I could barely believe what I was seeing. A special room just for sanitation.

Elizabeth left, closing the door softly.

Wondering what I would discover next in this amazing house, I used the amenities, then opened the door to find Elizabeth awaiting me.

She leaned down and kissed my dirty face. “Come, my dear. Let’s get you to the bathroom so you can soak the journey away. Then you shall rest.”

As we walked down the passageway, I glimpsed ahead to the room where one bathed. In the center was a large tub built into the floor and filled with water that was still steaming.

I gasped at the wonder of such a thing. “How can you have a tub with hot water in the center of your home?” I asked, gazing at the steam which curled over the tub.

“Oh, Mary, so many things happened after the Romans came. As I told you earlier, they accomplished marvelous feats. About 30 years ago, a man by the name of Sergius Orata came up with the idea. He worked on his invention until it performed to his satisfaction. Now, many people have these.”

“How is the water heated?” As tired and dirty as I was, I couldn’t rest until I discovered the secret. “Is it brought in here from the kitchen?”

Elizabeth ran her hand across her stomach and answered. “Under the floor where the tub rests, is a hot air chamber which keeps the water hot for baths.”

I could almost feel the water on my dust-weary body as I stared in amazement, first at the tub and then at Elizabeth. She smiled that angelic smile of hers and said, “I’ll leave you now and Deborah will come to assist you.”

I removed my dusty clothing and slid into the tub of hot water. I had never felt anything as warm and relaxing. I bathed with scented soap, which left a floral odor to my skin. Then, I lay back in the hot water and closed my eyes.

“Are you about ready to get dressed, Miss Mary?” I hadn’t heard Deborah enter, I was so nearly asleep.

“Yes, of course.” I reluctantly stood, but before I could reach for the drying cloth, she wrapped warm material around me. She offered a pair of sandals made from lambskin for my feet, then led me back to my room, where the covers on the bed were turned down. My clothing had disappeared and different robes were lying on the bed for me.

“Miss Mary, if you would like, Madam Elizabeth said to tell you to rest for awhile. She will come wake you later.” Deborah said.

“Thank you, I am rather tired.” I answered. Exhausted, I dropped the cloth as she held a robe for me to slide into. I sat on the bed, then pulled my feet under the coverlet. Such richness was unbelievable. The material felt as smooth as the silk Jeremiah brought to our house once to show us. Yet, it was as warm as an animal’s skin. Before I could reach for the coverlet, Deborah pulled it under my chin.

“Please rest now. It’s been a long journey,” she smiled.

“Thank you so much, Deborah, for everything.”

My eyes closed almost before she could slip from the room. By the time I awoke, darkness covered the sky and Elizabeth was kissing my forehead as I slowly opened my eyes.

“Come, Mary. Your food is ready.”

I stretched luxuriously and looked up at her. “I’m not sure I want to move, even to eat.”

She smiled. “I know how great it feels to get a bath and rest after a long journey. But since the servants have prepared the food, we do need to dine before it’s too late.”

“Oh, I’m sorry.” I was so ashamed. I wasn’t used to being waited upon and hadn’t realized I might inconvenience anyone.

She stooped and kissed my cheek. “It’s all right. We just try to keep on a schedule most of the time.”

As I dressed in the robe she left for me, I couldn’t believe the colors...blue and gold and purple. The material was silky and as light as a sleeping baby’s breath. I felt quite rich when I slipped my arms into the robe. I twirled and looked at myself in the mirror. I couldn’t believe it was really me in this magnificent garment.

I quickly followed her to a room I hadn’t seen before. A table was filled with so much food I thought she must be having a party.

Zacharias sat at the head of the table. He smiled and offered a chair on his left. Elizabeth sat on his right. We bowed our heads as we each thanked God for this bountiful food.

Even more important than food for the moment was a blue vessel sitting in front of me. It was about 5 inches high and had a thin stem holding it up. A flat piece of...what? was attached to the bottom to balance the weight.

“It’s beautiful,” I barely breathed as I examined it without picking it up.

“That’s a goblet,” Elizabeth explained. “It’s like the windows, except it’s blue instead of clear.” She picked up a small bunch of grapes. “In the beginning, only the Egyptians knew how to make this glass. It was so expensive few could afford it.”

She plucked a grape from the stem and munched as she watched me gazing at the object.

I couldn’t take my eyes off it.

“We drink our wine, juice or water from it,” she said.

Just then, Deborah brought juice and spilled some into each goblet. I gently picked mine up and sipped. Fresh grape juice drunk from a vessel so delicate it looked as though it would break if breathed upon. Would wonders in this home never cease?

The rest of the table contained bowls and platters of so many sizes and beauty I could barely take it all in. They were filled with meats and vegetables, as well as fruit and breads.

We ate our fill, then Elizabeth and I strolled slowly through the small garden for a short while. “Come Mary. I know you are exhausted. If you’d like, why don’t you go to your rest. We can talk in the morning.”

“I think I shall.” I stretched and kissed her on the cheek. “Thank you so much for welcoming me.”

She hugged me and I looked up at her just as I felt her baby leap in her womb. That strange, wondrous expression lit up her face. “Oh, Mary, I’m so glad you are here.”

She patted my shoulder. “Now go, get some rest. I do hope you will stay with us for a long visit.” She kissed me, then I walked slowly to my room, wondering how anyone could live in such a palace and manage such a place.

Chapter 6

This was the prelude to the three months I spent with Elizabeth.

The trumpets of Jerusalem woke me each morning. Instead of rushing to get water from a well, water was brought as soon as I awoke. Clean robes, each more beautiful than the day before, awaited me. Bountiful amounts of food were already prepared. Zacharias and Elizabeth reclined on couches by the side of the table. Zacharias conveyed his greetings by a big grin and welcome in his eyes, Elizabeth with a kiss and a sweet smile.

The entire household was quiet. So quiet in fact, it sometimes bothered me. After all, my home life teemed with people and animals. Children always fought or played near our home. Gossiping or quarreling women met at the well. When we baked bread at a communal oven, women socialized as we gathered. My brother would noisily tease me or Leah cling to me, asking a million questions. It was so quiet in Elizabeth’s home, I began to miss the arguments of Daniel and Leah. I especially missed the noise my father made as he came in from the fields with loud songs or praises.

I found myself missing the donkey Father used for plowing. He always brayed when he neared our home. Chickens clucked outside our door and other noises of animals sometimes annoyed me. Now I missed them.

Here, servants attended our every need.

Sometimes I felt guilty having someone cater to my every whim. Elizabeth explained why they had servants. “Mary, please don’t feel bad that you are waited upon. We give these people jobs. Deborah has a mother and father who are quite old and unable to work. Without her employment with us, they would not be able to eat, except through charity.” She laughed. “And you know us Jews. We love giving to charity, but we hate having to receive it.”

I laughed with her. I must admit we Jews were a proud people. Work is taught us at an early age. Now, I understood why she employed so many servants.

Two months flew by. We spent our days sewing clothing for the babies. She taught me intricate embroidery stitches as well as how to use dyes. Each day she and I took a walk. The midwife informed her that walking would keep her healthy and make the birth of her child easier.

From Zacharias' home, we could see Jerusalem set among golden hills. Sometimes I walked outside and looked to those hills. When the sun caught the reflection of the many houses built at different levels, I wondered how people climbed to the top.

Could it possibly be as beautiful as it looked from here? Surely there were poor people there, as in other parts of the world. Probably dirt and sin reigned, too. Standing a distance from the city, it gave off a magical quality. It was more beautiful than anything I could have imagined.

All Jews long to visit Jerusalem. When we pray, we even turn our faces toward the city of David. Pilgrims make the journey to pray in the most holy of temples.

Elizabeth and I often spoke of Jerusalem and its history.

“Did you know that the city was mentioned almost 2000 years ago in Egyptian records?” Elizabeth asked as we sat and watched butterflies flitting through the flowers.

“I had no idea it was so old. Has it always had walls like it does now?”

She laughed. “Walls have been built, then brought down by wars, then rebuilt by so many different nations, it's a little hard to remember all the times Jerusalem has been rebuilt.”

“It seems impossible that so many generations of our people have visited or actually lived there.” I picked up a small garment and began embroidering it.

“They even have different names for the valleys,” she laughed. “One is called the Valley of Cheese makers.”

“It will be my joy to visit one day.” I laughed.

My wish to visit that valley was almost overwhelming. However, Elizabeth was so advanced in her pregnancy, I never mentioned my desire. Being so far in her pregnancy, I knew it would be impossible for her to walk so far.

One morning as I met Zacharias and Elizabeth for our meal, she said with a smile. “We've made plans for a visit to Jerusalem today.”

Though it was a journey I longed to make, I protested. “Oh, no, you can't go, Elizabeth.”

She and Zacharias laughed. “Of course, I can't go.” She reached over, kissed my forehead, and continued. “No one should come so close to Jerusalem and not visit it. Deborah and her husband will accompany you.”

Leaving the house, we entered a world so hot it felt like an oven. Deborah and I immediately scooped cowls over our heads.

We rode the short distance to the gates of Jerusalem in a cart pulled by a donkey. Deborah's husband kept the animal moving at a steady pace, but nothing helped to cool us.

The heat poured down as if the sun was testing its ability to bake. Rays of the sun shimmered atop the road, making dancing ghost-like images. Palms at intervals gave little shade, and I doubted they would do much to ease the heat.

When we passed olive groves, I longed for the shade these trees provided. But the trip wasn't long, and I knew we'd find some kind of shelter in the walls of the city.

Odors from who-knows-what enveloped us. Scents of wilted flowers mingled in the still air. Dust, with its myriad aromas hung in the stillness, then moved about by numerous travelers. Animals deposited dung, leaving a pungent odor behind. Bodies passing in both directions left their own particular scents.

As we neared Jerusalem, the gates were so enormous, there was no way to describe their size. It seemed everyone in the world, as well as all their animals, were entering or leaving by these gates at the same time.

The cart and donkey were left in care of a servant brought for this purpose. I was so enthralled with the sights, I almost stumbled over a child. We both would have fallen had Deborah not taken my arm. The child scampered away, running to catch up with her parents.

I stared at Romans dressed in heavy metal helmets and vests. "They must be terribly hot," I said in a low voice to Deborah.

"I'm sure they are," she spoke softly. "But you will never have one smile at you or even recognize you as a human being."

The noise and activity of the street we entered was fascinating. There were beggars in bright shawls sitting just inside the gates. "Don't give them anything," Debra cautioned, pulling me further into the throng.

"I don't have anything to share," I said, and turned my head to look at more captivating activity.

Camels and donkeys loaded with bundles caught my eye. I wondered if they held jewelry or perhaps preserved meats or cheeses or exotic foods...maybe even purple dye.

"What could possibly be in those bundles?" I really didn't expect an answer, I was so enthralled.

"Look out!" Debra grabbed my arm and pulled me rather roughly, I thought, away from the handlers.

"Why did you do that?" I caught my breath.

"Mary, look at the way the owners are throwing their whips around. You could have been hit."

"Oh." Then I noticed others. People moved carefully around the handlers because the drivers flung their straps into the air without any thought of who they might hit. "Thank you so much, Deborah. I could really have been hurt."

I couldn't turn my head fast enough to see and hear everything.

The sound of people speaking loudly and in dozens of different languages and dialects assaulted our ears. I recognized a few phrases and words of some of the languages because Nazareth was on a trade route and we'd been exposed to people whose speech was different from ours. Hands were clapped to draw attention to a particular product. Drums were also pounded to bring customers into shops, which only added to the din.

Fires burned outside cave-like shops. Cooks offered food of every description. There were roasting pieces of meat: goat, sheep and fowl. Although my morning meal had been more than sufficient, odors from the meats, as well as different types of baking made me wish to sample everything.

There was bread with holes in it. Debra told me people stuffed meat or vegetables in them. Flat, round, thin pieces of bread were browned, then sold. Scents of distinct foods we smelled were so unlike anything I knew, I wanted to stop and try each offering.

"Mary, please don't eat any of that."

"Why?"

"You don't know how clean it is," Deborah said, as she gently pulled me along.

Some of the streets were covered with brightly colored canvases to give protection from the sun. As we walked a few feet down the street, we were in the midst of a tunnel carved from the mountain.

Removing our cowls, we breathed a sigh of relief. The coolness of being inside a mountain was such a contrast from the searing heat of the outside, I never wanted to leave.

What a strange place Jerusalem was!

As we walked from street to street, we saw people who sold every imaginable ware. Now I knew what happened to some of the merchandise Jeremiah carried on his caravan.

Silks, jewels, spices and perfumes abounded alongside lamps and carpets. Ivory was carved into settings for rings, bracelets and necklaces. Different colored dyes were displayed near the spices.

I had never seen so many articles for sale. When I saw the toys, I simply had to pick up the tops my brother would love to send spinning. There were dolls Leah and the rest of the children of my village would treat like live babies.

The article I wanted most was a checker board for my father. Checkers were pieces of tile carved with tiny figures in each space. The tiles were painted two different colors so the players could distinguish their checkers from the opponent's. I passed them quickly, knowing there was no money for such a purchase.

In the shops which held cooking and eating utensils, I saw the perfect bowl for my mother. Made of glass, I knew she would treasure it all the days of her life.

Again I passed them by, but I made a promise to myself. If I were ever fortunate enough to be able to return to Jerusalem, I would purchase gifts for my entire family.

We walked a little further, again entering the sunshine. Our cowls were replaced as we gazed.

Riding toward Jerusalem, we saw the tops of buildings standing above the gates. Viewed from a distance, I hadn't realized how large and beautiful these structures really were.

"There's one of Herod's palaces," Deborah pointed. "It's been in the building stage for a good many years"

I noticed men swarming around the grounds, ropes attached to a huge square boulder. Other ropes led to men who looked like ants, as they clung to the sides of the building. They pulled, the rock moved an inch or two as I asked, "It isn't completed yet?"

"Sometimes I wonder if it ever will be," Deborah remarked dryly. We moved closer.

People as far away as Nazareth knew of Herod's cruelty, but I could still appreciate the beauty of his palace. Other palaces and homes caught my eye too, but none were as large and ornate as Herod's latest.

We left the palace to move closer to the Temple. Entering the gate, we walked through outer courtyards. There were palm trees with green, yellow and brown fronds as well as myriad flowers, their riotous colors exquisite dots of beauty.

Then we moved up the steps to the Temple. How magnificent! I felt David near me and his Psalms seemed to fill the air above my head. I was saturated with the goodness of God and the miracle that happened to me. As we climbed ever higher, I felt I was moving into the heavens. Many prophets surrounded me, chanting, worshiping God, making me dizzy.

I must have swayed, because Deborah caught my arm, bringing me back to earth.

"Mary!" She eased me down onto a marble bench. "You're faint! Here, sit awhile."

She fanned my face with a palm frond while her husband opened the goatskin of water and poured a cup. Finally, I felt cooler and not quite so dizzy, so we moved down the steps.

"Maybe we should go home, now," Deborah suggested.

I was so ashamed I almost fainted, I didn't even protest. We made our way back to the outer gate, climbed into the cart and were soon home.

The feeling that I was with David and the prophets persisted for many days. Sometimes I caught Elizabeth looking at me strangely, but I couldn't bring myself to explain what happened at the temple.

I visited with Elizabeth almost three months before my homesickness became almost unbearable.

I wasn't sleeping well because dreams of Joseph and the last time I saw him disturbed me. The look he gave me when he thought I had betrayed him haunted me. The uncertainty was quite evident as he stared at me. Did he believe me yet? These questions hammered through my brain constantly.

Though my mother wrote often, she talked of everything and everyone. That is, everyone except Joseph.

By this time, Sarah was married. Mother wrote every detail, thinking I would be pleased to know. But it only made me sad, because I knew my absence hurt Sarah.

The date for my marriage arrived.

Elizabeth didn't feel well and spent most of that day in bed. I didn't remind her it should have been my wedding day. All I could think of was Joseph and the happiness today could have brought. Now I wondered. Would he even want a wedding? Would he ever want me again? Although the angel Gabriel told me Joseph would be told, I still did not know what Joseph thought.

After my wedding day was just a bitter memory, I accepted my fate. Whatever God planned I would do to the best of my ability. Meanwhile, deep loneliness for Joseph and my family consumed me. I made a conscious effort to learn the many things Elizabeth taught me.

The midwife visited and gave lessons in how to prepare for the birth of our babies. She told us about the baby and the cord that held him to his mother, then demonstrated how to cut it. She showed us drawings of how the baby would be born and what should be done. She taught us how to swaddle a baby properly and how to care for ourselves. I absorbed as much information as possible.

To this day, I don't know if I had a premonition I would need this particular knowledge.

One afternoon as we sat on a bench in the garden outside her home, tears welled so near the surface I wondered if I could keep them from sliding down my cheeks. We were making tiny stitches in minuscule garments for our babies.

It was nice and cool there, again made possible by Roman ingenuity. Fountains made in the form of statues spewed water into the air. The water then fell back into the base to begin its cycle again. When the wind blew, water produced a vapor, cooling us.

Elizabeth and I spoke often of the two children we carried beneath our hearts. "Sometimes I wonder how I could have been so blessed after so many years without children," she said, laying her sewing in her lap.

"I am so fortunate to have the love of the good man who is my husband." Her voice became dreamy as she stared into space. "After all these years, I am carrying his baby. And this child was chosen by God to have a special role in life."

Her face was angelic as she spoke of the baby. "I shall be thankful as long as I live. To have a child after having been childless when others my age were mothers many times over, is indeed a miracle." She again picked up her work.

Our conversation continued, but it branched off into why we were chosen; why God selected us to carry these special children. Over the next few weeks, we spoke many times, wondering how these two children could change the world.

Because change it they must, or it would not have been foretold in the Scriptures and God would not have given us advance notice.

Our attitudes were quite different, however.

I didn't know what to say when she praised God for the blessings he bestowed on her. I knew God blessed me because the angel had told me I was blessed among women. However, I was lonely and very frightened. What if Joseph didn't want me when I returned? What would I do? At the moment, I was having trouble waiting for the answer I was sure God had.

"You know, Mary," she said. "You're being here has been such a help to me. I've listened to you and can almost feel your mother beside me. You are so like her when she was your age. She was kind and considerate, loving and knowledgeable. She and I loved each other when we were growing up. Over the years, I have missed seeing her dreadfully."

"She misses you too," I answered. "She said writing to you was one of the joys of her life. Hearing about your life, knowing you were happy made her happy as well."

Elizabeth sighed. "So many people objected when I wished to marry Zacharias. I knew I loved him and that he would be good to me. My father would never have given his permission if he thought I would be unhappy." She smiled and glanced toward the door, where she could see him studying the Talmud.

"The only mar on our happiness was that we had no children." She laid her hand on the kicking stomach and her face lit up as though a light suddenly appeared. "Now God has even given this to us. Our life is a blessing, dear Mary." The tone of voice she used was so like a prayer I had no answer.

I smiled at her, but the smile must have been a little wavy, because she asked. "Mary, will you please tell me what happened?"

I wanted to tell her, but at that moment I felt I could say nothing.

"I know you're with child. I know this Child belongs to God. However, there is a sadness about you sometimes that bothers me. Can you tell me?" Her needle went in and out of the tiny gown she was making.

"Oh, Elizabeth," I cried, and the tears I refused to shed, now pressed at the back of my eyes. "Joseph doesn't love me."

She laid the garment in her lap. "That can't be, my dear. Your mother tells me he has loved you all your life."

"I know." I slid the needle inside the linen and stopped stitching. "When I told him God planted the seed he didn't believe me!"

"Oh, my dear Mary," Elizabeth murmured, laid her sewing aside and pulled me into her arms. "Maybe just for the moment he felt that way. Maybe he was afraid to admit it because the idea was so unbelievable."

"It's possible, but..."

"How do you feel?" she asked, placing her chin on my head. "You've spoken very little about it. You stated you were happy God chose you, but afraid you wouldn't be able to do the job."

I stuck the needle into the material, thankful for the moment she held me. I looked toward the blooming lilies, the thicket roses, and marigolds. Other plants caught my attention as I tried to think exactly what to say.

"Elizabeth, I honestly don't know how I feel. I'm frightened because I don't know if I can raise the child as God would have me do."

She released me, tilted my chin up so my eyes met hers and said, "Mary, He would not have chosen you had He not known you would be the perfect mother for His child."

"I do know that, but I feel so unworthy." I looked into the beautiful face sitting beside me. "I loved Joseph so very much and he wanted to divorce me because of my pregnancy." I swallowed a sob. "I can understand why he might have doubts as to how I became with child, but Joseph has known me all my life.

Doesn't he know I would never do anything like that?" Suddenly, tears flowed.

Elizabeth again took me into her arms and held me tightly. "Mary, I don't know the answer to your question. At the time, it must have seemed strange you would say something like that." She released me, then took a beautiful cloth and wiped my eyes.

"But he really hurt me," I sobbed.

"Of course he did. Out of the hurt you gave him, he gave hurt back." She patted me as though I were a small child. "I know you didn't mean to hurt him...you meant to bring him good news. Unfortunately, he couldn't understand at that moment."

I snuffled like an injured child.

"After you told him, Mary, how long before you left home?"

"A few days. After we talked, he didn't even come to see me again." Tears fell from my eyes like a waterfall. "He didn't even come to see me," I repeated. "If he loved me, he would have believed me."

I sobbed and she held me tightly. When I could no longer cry, she wiped my tears away. “Dear, I know that Joseph must still love you. He could not quit loving you, regardless of what he thought at the moment. He knows you would never betray him.”

“But he said he was going to put me away so no one would know of my infidelity.” Another burst of tears threatened.

“Hush now, darling. It will be all right. I know it will. God would not give you such a gift as His son, then leave you unmarried to face a scandal.”

“Elizabeth, I’m so confused.” I said, trying to sit straight. “Of course, studying the Scriptures I knew there was to be a Savior born. I didn’t even think of how or when or where or to whom. The day this happened to me, my mother said all Jewish mothers watched their daughters carefully. She said each mother wondered if her daughter would be the one chosen.”

I stood and faced her. “You are so happy with your child.” I stated. She smiled broadly and patted her abundant middle.

“And here am I, so unhappy.” I walked to one of the fountains and dipped my fingers into the water, then brought the water to my lips. “The God who made this water, also planted the seed inside me. I know the Baby is growing. I do feel humble that God chose me, but Elizabeth I’m so frightened I don’t know what to do.” I turned and ran, kneeled and placed my head in her lap. “And I miss my mother,” I cried.

As long as I cried, Elizabeth ran her fingers through my hair, soothing me, talking to me as though I were a baby. When the tears finally stopped, I raised my head and looked into her loving eyes. She gently wiped my face with a linen handkerchief. I was humbled by the look of love she held for me.

“Oh, my darling Mary, I had no idea you were so very homesick,” she said.

“Oh, I’m not.” I objected. “How could I be? You and Zacharias have been like my own parents. You have given me so much it is impossible to thank you. You have treated me as though I were your own daughter.”

“When I first came to Judea,” Elizabeth said. “I missed the Galilean hills. I missed the earthy odor. I missed the trees that grew everywhere. I missed the animals that made their own distinctive noises. I missed everyone I knew. You see my dear, I love Zacharias. And there is the difference.”

“You were homesick?” I asked.

“Of course. It’s only natural. My mother was dead, but yours is still alive and writes to you quite frequently, I notice. You must be very close.”

“We are.”

“You are very young. This strange occurrence has made you feel vulnerable. Normally, you’re a person who is very strong and controls most of what happens in your life, I think.”

I nodded.

“You can’t control these events. You are going to have a child, and it isn’t even the child of the man you love. Oh, I don’t mean you don’t love God, but you wanted your children to be the children of Joseph. This child’s conception was completely out of your control.”

Again I nodded and looked deeply into her eyes as she spoke. Her voice was low and intimate and full of compassion.

“Mary, my dear Mary. It’s all right to be homesick. It’s all right not to be in control all the time. If you can just learn to leave this situation in God’s hands He will take care of it for you.”

“Oh, Elizabeth, you are so wise.” I said, moving to the bench beside her.

“I’m not wise, Mary, just older than you. I do know how you feel, having a miracle happen to you. I was blessed. There was a miracle for me, also. I was so thrilled I couldn’t thank God enough.

“However, you are so young to have your faith tested. I know you will make a good mother for the Son of God. I also feel you will have many troubles from all this. There is just one other thing that I know better than I know my own self. You are the person God chose. Therefore, you are a much better woman than any who have gone before and any who will come after.”

“I am so frightened, Elizabeth,” I protested. “Sometimes I wake at night and wonder why I was chosen. Why me? Why not others who are much better than I? I didn’t ask for this!” I cried. Then I realized what I said. “Oh, my God, forgive me!”

“Hush.” Elizabeth held my hands tightly. “There is nothing to forgive. Don’t you know that God understands how we feel? It doesn’t make any difference whether you say it aloud. God knows. He also knows you are special or He would never have chosen you. He had the entire ages to look through.

“Every girl who was ever born belonged to Him. He chose you because you possess the qualities needed to raise His son. You have the strength to withstand the special trials that will come to you. He knew what He did. Don’t ever doubt for a moment.”

We stared at each other. It felt as though she were giving me strength to go on; to do God’s will; to be the person God believed in. I knew I was weak; I prayed silently that I would be able to live up to God’s will.

I made my decision.

“Elizabeth, you and Zacharias have been so good to me, but I must go home. I have to see Joseph. I miss my mother and father.” I laughed as I realized my voice held a plaintive quality I didn’t even know I felt. “I even miss my brother and sister. Their fighting and laughter and teasing is part of my life.” I smiled. “I miss Sarah, my best friend who is now married.”

“Of course you must. It’s almost time for my baby to be born, as well. And you know it isn’t seemly for a girl as young as you to be in the house when a baby is born to another.”

I nodded.

“Tomorrow, Zacharias will send a message to the gates of Jerusalem. The leader of your special caravan will be told that you are ready to go home on his next journey to Nazareth.” She stood and tugged at my hand. “Come, we shall tell him now so he can start his writing.”

We stood and the plans for my return home began. Elizabeth talked with Zacharias and he wrote his answers to her. What a joyful couple they were. They would be very good parents to the son who was to be born to them, I thought.

I would miss them. The conveniences they enjoyed had been a revelation and joy to me. I realized, however, I preferred our two-room home and the freedom of those hills in which I roamed.

It was strange, but I was even beginning to miss getting up early in the morning and walking to the well to get water for the day. I missed the chirruping of birds in the trees. The slap of a bare foot on the polished stones of the pathway was as familiar as life itself. I missed the laughter and gossip of the women at the well, also.

I longed to smell that special odor of baking bread at the communal oven almost every day. Lately, when I heard the servants grinding grain for bread, it was another reminder of the things I missed.

I hadn’t even realized I was homesick. Now that I knew, the time crawled. It was only three days later we were told the caravan would leave Jerusalem the day after the Sabbath.

My heart sang.

I was so anxious to leave, I could barely be still. Yet, I hated leaving two people who had been so good to me. The two who had taken care of me all these months, who gave me a visit to Jerusalem, who saw that I was always comfortable and as happy as they could make me.

Two days before the Sabbath, I began to pack. Where had all these parcels come from? When I arrived, I only had the clothing I wore, sandals, two extra robes and the straw basket for carrying food.

Now, there were parcels all over the room in which I slept. “What will I ever do with all this?” I said it so low and had no idea anyone listened.

With a smile on her face, Elizabeth entered the room. “You are going to take all this home with you.”

“But I can’t do that. In the first place, you and Zacharias have been too good to me...”

“Yes?”

“You have given me so much. You fed me exotic food...”

“Some of which you didn’t like...or didn’t like you.” She said dryly.

“I’m a country girl, remember? Just meat and vegetables.” I grinned, remembering the dried fish served one night. I ate it and promptly got sick.

“Elizabeth, if you remember, you kept buying clothing for the Baby.” I picked up a large parcel that held the baby’s swaddling clothes, as well as gowns and other necessities.

“You’ll need them.”

“Maybe, but that isn’t all. Here are packages I don’t recognize. What are they? Are you sure I should take them home with me?”

“Oh, definitely.” A secret smile played around her mouth, but I didn’t dare ask what was in them. I was afraid I might hurt her feelings in some way.

“Elizabeth, I do thank you for everything, but there is no way I can walk so far carrying so much.” I looked at all the things I was to take and waved my arm to encompass the entire mound. “I’ll barely have energy to make it home.

She grinned happily. “You won’t have to. Zacharias purchased a donkey for you to ride.”

“Oh, he shouldn’t have.”

“Yes, he should. And before you leave, food will be prepared so you will not have to think of it for the entire trip.”

“But, Elizabeth...”

“Hush, child. We can do so little for the mother of the Savior of the world; please let us do this.” She stacked another parcel on the growing pile of articles to be carried home with me. “You will be doing us an enormous favor if you take them to the family of the closest friend I have ever had.”

I knew there was no point in arguing. “How can I thank you?”

“There is no need for ‘thanks.’” She walked over to me and hugged me tightly. “Your visit, your carrying the Savior of the world, your love for Zacharias and me is more than enough to repay what little we are giving you.”

Chapter 7

Before daybreak on the day we were to meet Jeremiah outside Jerusalem, Rebecca and her husband arrived at Elizabeth’s home. The donkey was brought around to the front of the house and servants carried parcels from the house. Others began tying them to the donkey’s back.

When everything was completely packed, Elizabeth handed my straw bag to me. “Here’s some food. It should last you until you get home.”

Tears ran down my face as I took the bag. Much heavier than when I started from home, I placed it at my feet until we were ready to leave. “Oh, Elizabeth...” and I grabbed her to me and hugged tightly. “I thank you so much for what you gave me and what you taught me. I do hope we meet again.”

A tear trickled down her cheek, as well. “Please come back.”

Again, she put her arms around me. As she pulled me to her, I felt the baby kick. She moved one hand to her stomach and, as I looked at her, I saw that her face was suffused with love.

“Oh, Mary, I’m so glad he did that.”

“I am too. Now I can tell him when he visits that I knew him before he was born.”

“So you can,” Elizabeth said. With that, she kissed me, then walked into her home without looking back.

I didn’t know I would never see her again.

As we began our journey, I looked back at the house where I had lived for three months. Ferns sparkled with dew and trees held their limbs to the sky, leaves gleaming with the early morning moisture. Flowers appeared to have blossomed over night.

Their scents wafted toward me...or was it my imagination?

We moved rapidly down the road. The donkey walked as though it were a pleasure to be outside, even though he was laden with gifts Elizabeth and Zacharias gave me.

The sun was glowing, but air was quite pleasant. We passed the olive grove, then noticed hills around the countryside. As we neared Jerusalem, the sun caught the gate, turning it from white to gold.

As we neared the group, I saw it was much smaller than before. There were fewer camels and horsemen. A very small assembly of people waited. There were no children and few women. Jeremiah’s friendly smile fell on everything and everyone.

“Glad to have you back, Mary.” He greeted. “And I see you have a donkey to ride. Good. We shall be moving more rapidly on our return trip to Nazareth.”

The first day I was so happy to be striding along I ignored the weather. It could have been as hot as the middle of summer or as cold as a snowy day and I wouldn’t have minded. So, instead of walking slowly as I did on strolls with Elizabeth, I felt released from prison.

It felt so good to move rapidly; so rapidly, in fact, the donkey was not happy as I led him along. However, he soon learned we must move fast to keep up with the caravan. Most of the journey that day consisted of walking between the mountains and the sandy desert.

Our steps lagged after passing the first caravansary. We then camped out a few miles beyond Gophna. Guards were posted each night of our journey. Notification of the small value of the caravan was circulated before our start, so Jeremiah stated he didn’t expect trouble from thieves.

One day as we strode rapidly along, Jeremiah rode alongside me. “May I ask why we are in such a hurry?” I asked.

“I’m supposed to meet another caravan in Nazareth.” As he looked to the front, then the end of the caravan, he dismounted and walked with me. “I was having trouble getting a load of merchandise to go north, so I’m almost a day late on my schedule,” he said.

He gently guided his horse’s head forward, instead of to the side of the road where green vegetation looked inviting to the animal. “If I’m late, the caravan in Nazareth will leave for Ptolemais, carrying its valuable cargo with it.” He shrugged, his expressive face containing a look of worry. “If that happens, I’ve no goods for the return journey to Jerusalem.”

“Then I shall walk as rapidly as possible,” I said, as he mounted, threw me a small salute, then rode away.

So we rushed.

The second day of our journey, I rode the donkey part of the way, then walked. I still couldn’t get over the freedom I felt. We went up and down the hills with few problems. Since there were no children, there was scant delay. We only stopped at the caravansaries along the way to replenish our water supply.

Rebecca and I talked at night as we rested from our journey. "I am so glad to be going home," I said, the first night we wrapped our cloaks around us and sat near the fire.

"You must be. It's been quite awhile, hasn't it?" She stretched her legs in front of her and bent to touch her toes. I looked on in amazement.

"Why are you doing that?"

"Oh. It helps your entire body rest when you stretch like this." She laughed. "Being on these caravans as much as we are, we had to learn the best ways to conserve our strength."

I sat up straight and tried to touch my toes. Impossible. I looked at her and joined in her laughter. "Takes awhile, but you'll be able to do it," she encouraged.

"May I ask you a question?"

"Of course." She reached for her toes again.

"Why do you and your husband travel so much? Do you carry merchandise to be sold, like Jeremiah?"

"Oh, no," she answered. "My husband works for Jeremiah. He helps to load and unload the goods. Too, he takes care of the animals and keeps an eye out for trouble along the way."

"Oh. Do you always go with him?"

"Not always." She sat up straight, moved her shoulders and answered. "Sometimes Jeremiah asks that I come too, so I can make sure enough food is prepared for all the workers." She gave me her shy smile. "He pays me as well as my husband, when I travel with them."

"What a nice way to be able to be near your husband and make a little money at the same time." I again tried to touch my toes. They had moved further away, I felt. But the stretching did feel good.

It began to cool after sunset. Soon, we wrapped our cloaks around us tightly because we knew it would get much colder before dawn arrived.

"Good night," I called softly, listening to Rebecca as she slowly finished her stretching, then lay down.

I stared at the sky as I often did when outside. The stars twinkled and cavorted across the expanse. As the partial moon rose, one star flashed across the sky as though running from a foe. The night sky was something I had missed while at Elizabeth's, because we retired so early.

The animals snorted quietly, then settled. Rumbings of snores were heard as the moon swam over the horizon. It lit the vegetation at the side of the road. Trees swayed in the slight breeze now moving down from the mountains.

Closing my eyes, I was asleep almost immediately. Awakened by shouts of men moving the caravan into position for traveling, we hastily collected our possessions, drank water and ate our food as we moved along in the shadowy lights of daybreak.

Ginae, where we stopped the third night, sat on the edge of the Plain of Esdraelon. By the end of that day I was weary, but more anxious to get home every minute. Early the next morning before the sun arose, we began our journey across the Plain. This plain, with its lush vegetation, gave me such a feeling of joy I could barely contain myself.

The familiar hills were visible from the Plain and I was so happy to see them, tears formed. As we moved closer to these hills, I spied caves seen on our earlier journey. Animals were sheltered there when bad weather approached.

So anxious to get home, I scarcely felt the fatigue that pulled at my body. I couldn't wait to feel my mother's arms around me, to tickle my father under his beard and to laugh with Leah and Daniel. Thinking about my family made the distance seem farther and farther.

And Joseph? I refused to think of the reception I might receive from him. Knowing Joseph, the furniture for our home would be almost finished, whether we shared it or not. Also, being so familiar with his personality, I was positive he would be thinking of the decision he must make very soon.

Trudging over damp grasses and under trees, thoughts of how well I knew Joseph persisted. Stopping abruptly, the donkey bumped into me. I took another step and pondered. Had I really known him? If he loved me as he said, how could he have distrusted me? Knowing me as well as Joseph did, how could he even think I would let another man near me?

The sky barely peeked through the overhanging tree limbs as I pondered the fact that Jewish men had laws to protect themselves from harlots. I was no harlot, yet those same laws could condemn me. Twisting a leaf from one of the trees, I chewed on it thoughtfully as I tugged at the rope of the tired donkey.

I forgot Joseph and my problems as we neared home. I felt I remembered each rock we passed and each turn in the road. I again led the donkey rapidly. In my excitement, I skipped down the road. I became much too impatient to sit on his back.

I could have run the rest of the way. I saw the well that was as much a part of my life as life itself. The cool water would have felt glorious on my dirty body. Missing the bathroom at Elizabeth's was a certainty, but home...Ah, home! There was never a sweeter word.

Moving so rapidly, we barely had a chance to speak to our fellow travelers. I knew no one, other than Rebecca. I waved to Rebecca and Jeremiah, then turned onto the road leading home. The donkey seemed to sense we were nearing a place of rest because he walked more rapidly, with little persuasion.

Nearing home, I peered through the twilight toward home. Father and Daniel sat at the outside table, talking. Looking further, I saw Mother come out of the door of our home holding a pot. Reaching the table, she looked up as though expecting someone or something.

When she recognized me, the container she carried landed on the table with a bang. She didn't even notice. She was running, her arms outstretched.

As we met, her arms encircled me and tears of joy flowed down our faces. "Oh, Mother, I am so happy to see you," I hugged her tightly. I hadn't seen Leah, but she was at Mother's heels. Now she flung herself at me. I squeezed her tiny body. Oh how good it was to be home.

"I thought you would never come," Mother cried. "It's been so long." She moved back and wiped some of the dirt and tears from my face with the corner of her robe. Leah clung to my hand as though she would never let go.

By this time, Father and Daniel were there. Standing in the middle of the road we held each other tightly. When Father kissed me, I felt a dampness on his face he tried to conceal. Leah finally released my hand as we moved apart. I looked closely at Daniel.

"You've grown so much!" I exclaimed. "You don't look like a little boy anymore." He really had changed in the short time I was away. Where had his baby look gone? Did I detect a fuzz growing under his nose? How could that happen so rapidly?

"Well, I'm not a little boy anymore."

What a glorious homecoming!

Soon, I was surrounded by friends and relatives. Sarah, her husband and parents were not present. They lived a couple of streets over and probably hadn't heard the commotion.

Daniel, Leah following, took the donkey's lead rope from my hand. They led him to the table. Leah moved the bowl Mother dropped to the side of the table, then wiped a few spots of stew. She and Daniel began unloading parcels. "I can't believe you have so much on this poor animal. What's in here, Mary?"

"I don't know. One of the servants packed everything, so I have no idea what is in there."

“You don’t know?” Mother asked.

I shook my head.

“Where did you get them?” Mother asked.

“Elizabeth and Zacharias asked that I bring each of you a small gift.”

“Doesn’t look very small to me.” Daniel stated as he removed yet another bag to place on the table.

Such beautiful gifts! When they unpacked the checker board for Father, his eyes again were suspiciously bright. “Oh, Mary. How did they know what I longed to have?” The grin that reached from the corners of his mouth to his eyes told me all I needed to know. I only wished my dear cousins were there to share this homecoming with me.

As the gifts were placed on the table, I knew Deborah had told Elizabeth about my wishes. There were spinning tops for Daniel and a doll for Leah. She took one look, clasped the doll to her and hugged tightly. Tears sparkled in her eyes as she thanked me.

I unpacked the bowl I had wanted to purchase for mother. Placing the bowl on the table, I said, “it’s for you.”

“Ooooh! How beautiful!” Mother exclaimed, not daring to touch it. “I’ve heard of this glass, but I’ve never seen it before.”

I looked around at the faces of our neighbors. They were as enthralled with the bowl as Mother. Their eyes glowed and expressions of wonder appeared on each face. People I had known all my life were now as surprised at the wonder of glass as I had been when I arrived at Elizabeth’s.

This bowl would make a lot of interesting conversations for many in our village, both male and female.

I picked it up and gently placed it in her hands. “Mother, it isn’t that easily broken. Elizabeth and Zacharias drink from goblets made from glass at every meal.”

“Every meal?” Leah exclaimed.

“Every meal.”

“And you actually drank out of them?” Daniel was as enthralled as everyone else.

“Yes. We usually had juice each morning and we used these containers to drink from.”

I noticed Mother’s hands clutching the bowl tightly. “It won’t break so easily. You don’t have to hold it so tightly.” I encouraged.

She loosened her grip, then held it lightly to her breast. “How can I ever thank Elizabeth?”

“Mother, you will never know what your letters mean to her. She is alone much of the time because Zacharias is at the temple. She told me your letters are the things that bring her the most joy.”

“Then I shall write tomorrow and attempt to let her know just how much this gift means to me.”

When Leah saw the swaddling cloths she could now believe I really was going to have a baby. She held them next to the doll she carried. “These are so tiny, I thought they might fit my doll.” She smiled at me as though she could barely wait to put the clothes on a real, live baby.

The baby’s robes were larger than a newborn wore. We made them large, Elizabeth had stated, “because they stay little for such a short time.”

Included in the gifts were new robes for all of us. When I unwrapped a small package, I saw it contained three smaller containers. There was a set of gold combs and a necklace for my mother and a bracelet and necklace for me. For Leah, there was a ring and necklace. In another small parcel, Elizabeth had sent Father and Daniel new skullcaps with gold threads running through them.

After the gifts were examined closely, talking primarily of the bowl, our visitors wished us good night. They left us, saying, “so you might eat without feeling you must offer food to us.” Laughing, they teased Mother about spilling so much there wouldn’t be enough to feed all of them anyway.

She smiled, recognizing their thoughtfulness in leaving for what it was...a chance to spend time with the daughter who had returned after a long absence.

“Come, you must eat.” Mother exclaimed. “We shall enjoy our gifts after the meal. Mary, there’s water just outside the door if you’d like to wash.”

I stepped into a container of water near the door of our home and cleansed my feet for the first time in days, then went inside to my beloved home to wash my hands and face.

As I looked around the room at the tables and bushels and lamps, I felt wrapped in a warm cocoon. Home. I said silent prayers of thanks to God for bringing me back to my beloved home.

As in most Jewish homes, we women ate with the men when there were no guests. Returning to the table, I noticed Mother fussing over the stew.

“Oh, I just know it’s too cold to eat.” My mother cried. “I should reheat it.”

“Sit, my dear,” Father ordered, with laughter. “We can eat cold stew once in awhile. It isn’t every day our daughter returns to us.”

We held hands, as I thought my heart would break from the happiness of being one of a circle with my family again. Especially fervent prayers of Thanksgiving were given for my safe return. The food was blessed and we dipped our bread into the stew. How wonderful it tasted. To eat my mother’s stew again was better than all the fancy dishes I tasted at Elizabeth’s.

I was afraid to ask about Joseph and decided to wait until morning. We sat and talked for so long the braying of the donkey made us realize he was hungry too. Daniel and Leah jumped up and led him to the cave for food and water.

“Don’t say a word until we return,” Daniel instructed.

I laughed. “I won’t.”

By the time they returned the night had fallen, and father lit a lamp. A half moon peeked through the tree overhead splattering the table with prisms of light. Leaves whispered, insects rustled through fallen leaves and a night bird softly called.

The weather was pleasantly cool as we sat around the table to talk of my journey.

I began by telling them of the bathroom. Daniel’s eyes widened with wonder and he accused me of teasing them. I finished by telling of the sanitary facilities. They refused to believe that a room in a home was used for such. Finally, I could talk no more.

We stayed up much later than usual and I was weary. I hadn’t placed my pallet near my mother and father since I was a child, but tonight I needed to feel they were there.

As they settled down, Mother’s quiet, even breathing was a prelude to Father’s snoring. I closed my eyes, but I was too weary and troubled for sleep. There was so much thinking to do. Now that I was home, problems must be solved.

Before I even realized I was falling asleep, daylight crept into the house. I awoke and rose as quietly as possible. I picked up the ewer and walked outside.

The sun was inching its way over the horizon and I knew others would be up soon. The familiarity of our street made me feel I was finally home. For now, the peace and quiet was so wonderful I wanted to move slowly and enjoy that serenity. I knew that soon the village would come to life.

I smiled as I remembered the many years I woke to these particular sounds of our village. The women roused their children and husbands. The sound of prayers came from some of the homes. Orders for the day were given and children fought, sang, laughed and played on their way to school. Husbands hitched plows to their animals. They then made their way to the fields, whistling or singing or just talking.

As I walked over the familiar path to the well, I felt I remembered each stone. Every tree sang especially to me this glorious morning. The air was filled with the odor of my favorite vine, the honeysuckle. Other vines, flowers, shrubs and trees added their own particular scents.

I looked toward the mountains and saw the mist that hung there like a veil over a woman's face.

When I took the last turn in the pathway, there was Sarah. Dear, dear Sarah. We dropped our jugs and clung to each other, weeping for happiness.

"I heard you were home." Her voice quivered. "I've missed you so much. You missed my wedding and..." Tears were streaming down her face, mingling with mine as we clung to each other.

I pushed the black hair from her doll-like face.

"Oh, Sarah, I wanted to be with you." I cried. "On your wedding day, I was so lonely. I knew you thought I had abandoned you. I couldn't."

She drew back and looked at me. What she saw there must have reassured her. She knew I hadn't changed. She also knew my problems weren't solved.

"Oh, Mary, will you ever tell me what the problem is?" Her eyes, as well as her voice, pleaded.

At just that moment, we heard other women arriving and knew we could not talk further. As the newcomers neared the well, many spoke of the gifts they saw the night before. Others asked if they could come to see them. They were invited, of course.

Meantime, Sarah picked up her jug, washed the sand from it, filled it and placed it on her shoulder. "As soon as my husband leaves for the fields..."

"It sounds so strange to hear you speak of a husband," I said, then laughed and grabbed her hand. "Come to my house. I'll explain everything."

I picked up my jug as she agreed, "I will."

I cleaned the sand from my jug, too. I filled it, placed it on my shoulder and realized just how out of practice I was at doing this. Some of the water even spilled on my shoulder.

She was watching and laughed. "Clumsy you," she teased, turned and walked away.

I didn't try to catch up with her. I needed the few minutes alone on the way home to get my thoughts in order. The other ladies were still talking around the well as I walked slowly in her footsteps, my head lowered to watch where I stepped.

"Mary." The quiet voice of Joseph startled me so I dropped my jug and all the water spilled.

"Now see what you've done!" My voice held more annoyance than I could control. "I'll have to get more."

We weren't supposed to meet like this. I hadn't planned it this way. I kept my eyes on the ground as I stooped.

"Please, Mary. Look at me." His voice was low, but I could tell by his tone of voice he was hurting as much as I.

"Joseph," I said, my voice not quite steady. "I have to get more water." I picked up my jug and stood erect.

As I rose, he caught my arm. "Mary, you can't just go off like that. I must talk with you." His voice was ragged.

I lifted my eyes to meet his. Tears glistened and threatened to roll down his cheeks. I had seen him angry, stubborn, yelling and stamping his feet. Over the years I had never seen him with tears in his eyes. My resolve broke.

“Oh, Joseph.” I wanted him to hold me. If we had not been standing in the pathway of several women watching the scene, I would have flung myself into his arms. We parted to let the women walk between us.

They stared at the both of us, then walked on, their heads close together. I knew they were talking about us, but for once I didn't care if I was the target of their gossip.

Joseph asked, “Mary, when and where can we talk?”

“As soon as the men leave for the fields, Sarah is coming to our home. Why don't we meet at the olive grove after the noon hour? Mother has her afternoon rest at that time.”

He held out his hand and grabbed mine. “I'll be there.” He said. I pushed his hand away, turned and retraced my steps to the well. For the second time that morning, I washed and refilled my jug.

When I arrived home, I felt I had not been away for almost three months. There was Mother, sitting at the table, waiting for her morning cup of fresh water. “I noticed the jug gone, so I knew you were up early again,” she remarked, with a smile.

I poured a cup of water, set it on the table in front of her, then hugged her tightly. “You don't know how good it makes me feel to be able to get fresh water for you.” I leaned over and kissed her.

After our morning ritual of seeing to the morning meal, Leah and Daniel reluctantly left for school and Father walked to the fields. Mother and I cleaned the table, rolled up the mats and put them away. I then returned to the well to bring extra water to wash our clothing, especially mine.

As we finished getting them placed in the sun to dry, I said. “Sarah's coming soon. We'd like to go for a walk. Please wait until I return before grinding wheat today.”

“Oh, Mary. You don't have to worry about that. Some of the women and I shared our grinding, and now we have flour for a few more days. Please, visit with your friend. You've missed each other, I know.”

I washed myself, changed clothes and talked with Mother until Sarah arrived.

Chapter 8

We walked from the house, exchanging bits of happenings since the last time we were together. She told me of babies born, those who were sick, the old people who died while I was away. She spoke of young couples who were beginning to have an interest in each other.

With enthusiasm I grabbed Sarah and hugged her as we walked toward the hills. She laughed and before we knew it, we were back to the closeness we always shared.

As we climbed the hills, Sarah said, “We've been climbing over these rocks all our lives, haven't we?”

I nodded. “Remember how we used to have to pull ourselves up to the next rock because our legs were too short to step up?”

We both laughed at the memories which stretched back to our babyhood. “Do you remember how our mothers used to spank us when they discovered we were up here again?” Sarah asked.

“Yes. When I think of it, I still have problems sitting for a while.” We both laughed aloud at the memories. “These hills never change, do they?”

“Never,” Sarah agreed.

As we climbed the familiar stones to get a little higher, I noticed, probably for the first time, the way the earth was layered between rocks. With a little imagination, one could see that someone placed large rocks on the ground. Mud was slapped on the rocks, then other rocks were placed rather crookedly atop the first ones.

Mud between the rocks became earth where flowers grew to give color to the wrinkled greyness of the boulders. Then there was another, smaller boulder, ever higher, like they were stairs leading up to touch the clear blue sky.

When we finally stopped for a moment to rest, I looked out over the expanse, so incredibly happy to be home and in the hills I loved so dearly.

Coolness of the night still lingered. We both kept our cloaks on, enjoying the unseasonable weather. The clearness of the sky made us feel we could see forever. In the distance, the stillness of the Sea of Galilee was evident by boats whose white sails were limp. Not one whitecap ruffled its surface.

The sun was now higher, but it produced very little heat. Looking over the hills, we saw a group of men and animals moving on the road, around and down toward Nazareth. Suddenly, Soldiers appeared from behind a large boulder, then marched rapidly around men and animals. The uniformed men moved so rapidly they looked as though they were running.

We sat, enjoying the slight breeze and the clear sky overhead. "Sarah, you would never believe the things I saw."

She looked at me with an expression that said, "well, tell me, then."

"Would you believe in my cousin Elizabeth's house, they actually have glass from which to drink?"

"The Rabbi mentioned it one time but said it was impossible for anyone to have anything like that in a home...maybe in the temples, but never a home."

"Well, Elizabeth and Zacharias have them."

"That's awfully hard to believe." Sarah shook her head from side to side. "How do they make things like that?"

"I don't know how they do it. They started making glass in Egypt a number of years ago. Now, there is one man in Jerusalem who makes the container."

"I wish I could see him do that."

"I saw him."

Astonishment filled her voice as she stared at me. "You did?"

"Yes. It was the day I went to Jerusalem. He took some kind of sand, and other ingredients, then heated it in an oven until the fire glowed so hot it was almost a purple color. He placed a little of this mixture from the oven onto the end of a long pole. The pole had a hole in it. I discovered this because he blew into the other end. He kept turning the pole around and around and blowing and shaping the glass. When it gets to be the size and shape he wants, he breaks it from the pole."

Sarah rose, then stepped up to the next rock. "Mary, you're teasing me." She stopped, turned and looked down at me from the rock where she stood.

I moved onto her rock. "Honest." I said. "I don't think I would have believed it either, except that's what we drank from at every meal." I found myself sighing as I remembered the cool fruit juice we sipped each morning. "Most of it was a blue color."

"You're serious!" she exclaimed.

"I really am. You wouldn't believe some of the objects I saw. They even make this stuff so thin they put it on windows so you can see outside."

"Mary, that's too much to believe." She laughed. "I suppose you'll even be telling me it keeps the flies out of the house."

"It does," I insisted. "I'll have to tell you about some of the other things one of these days. Oh, Elizabeth sent a bowl made from glass to my Mother."

"You mean there's actually a piece of glass in Nazareth?"

"Yes, there is. You can see it when we go home."

We found a rock we liked, and sat where we could see everything around us. As we glanced about, we saw the small caves I viewed when we crossed the Plain. There were goats and sheep grazing on the hillside.

“Look!” Sarah exclaimed, as she had been doing all our lives. “There’s a caravan.” It seemed to move at a snail’s pace at the foot of a mountain far away. Some days, when the air was clear enough, we could see snow on the top of Mount Hermon.

Flowers were strewn as though someone stood in the center of a field and tossed handfuls of seed in the air. White and red and blue and pink flowers as far as the eye could see. I breathed in the scent of flowers and grasses.

The wrinkled canvas of hills and mountains reminded me of the wrinkled skin on the camel’s feet.

“How wonderful to be home!” I exclaimed and picked up a limestone rock and tossed it into the air. Rather than trying to catch it, I let it drop. I listened as it hit a larger rock, then bounced on down. Sarah and I looked farther down the mountain as we had so many times in the past.

Since farming was done on terraces, we saw men plowing their fields. “They look like little toy men with their toy donkeys attached to the plows,” Sarah remarked.

We could even see some of the tall trees that grew in the Plain of Sharon.

I didn’t know how to begin.

“Mary, I’m waiting.” Sarah said, quietly. “You know you can tell me anything. We’ve always trusted each other. We mustn’t stop now.” She placed her hand on mine.

I looked directly at her so I could see her eyes when I told her. “Sarah, an angel visited me…” I began and told her the entire story; my telling my parents, their acceptance; my telling the Rabbi, his unbelief. Then I told her of Joseph, and he not believing. She didn’t interrupt.

“Oh, Mary, it’s so hard to believe. However, I know you would never lie, especially about something as important as this.”

She believed!

“Oh, Sarah!” My breath left my body with a sigh. It was as though I had held it the entire time I was telling my story.

We clasped hands as we did as children when we felt it was she and I against the world. “I can’t believe that brother of mine!” Her irritation was visible. “He is usually so sensible.” “Don’t be too hard on him, Sarah,” I begged. “I was hurt that he could think I could commit such an act.”

I still remembered the brutal pain of his disbelief. “I have to realize it’s very hard for people to believe in miracles. I know I’ll face a lot of gossip and maybe even threats in a few months when my condition becomes clear. I do know God is not going to let anything happen to His Son.” Unconsciously, I placed my hands on my belly, almost like Elizabeth frequently did.

Sarah’s voice was thoughtful as she said, “We Jews have waited for hundreds of years for this event. We thought it would be with trumpets and a crown and everything that goes with a castle.

“But we forgot to believe the scriptures when they plainly stated he would be born of woman. A virgin, at that. Remember, Mary? When we studied about the Prophet Isaiah. We were too young to understand what a virgin was.” Her face was thoughtful, remembering how we had considered the subject and eventually decided it wasn’t worth discussing.

“I do remember, Sarah. Isaiah said, ‘Therefore, the Lord himself will give you a sign: Behold a virgin will be with child and bear a son, and she will call his name Immanuel.’” She turned and looked directly at me, her voice full of wonder.

“I remember it all now. Why shouldn’t it be you? Who’s more qualified?” Sarah answered her own question. “No one.”

“I don’t know about that.” I slipped my hand from hers and stood. “Enough about me. Now, tell me all about your wedding. When are you going to have a baby, or are you yet?”

She laughed. “Not yet. The wedding would have been wonderful but you weren’t here to take part in it. That was the one missing ingredient.”

“Believe me,” I said. “I thought of you all that day and wanted so very badly to be with you. I wanted to see the beginning of your happiness. I missed so much while I was gone.”

My voice must have held a note of sadness because Sarah took my hand while we stood and looked over the hills and mountains in the distance as we had done a thousand times.

“Look, the wind’s blowing. The sails on the boats are now billowing.” I exclaimed. “Oh, how I missed everything and everyone.”

“Mary,” Sarah said. “You missed very little. The adventures you had, the help you gave your cousin, what you saw and learned must have been God’s plan.” Her voice was positive. “He would not have told you of Elizabeth and her being with child if He had not wanted you to go.

“I did miss you, though.” She grabbed me around the middle. “You aren’t a bit bigger than you were,” she said in astonishment.

“Well, Sarah,” I laughed, “I’m only three months. It usually takes about four or five months to notice when someone is going to have a baby.”

“Then you and Joseph must marry right away,” she stated with conviction. “Come on.” She started down the hill, moving from one rock to another like a gazelle. “We must plan.”

“But I don’t know if...”

“Oh, he’ll do it. He loves you too much. He’s been beating himself to death ever since the day you left.”

I walked a little more gingerly than she. I knew I carried something precious under my heart. I must take care of it. Besides, I was getting very tired. “Sarah, slow down.” I called.

“Oh, I’m sorry.” She twirled around and around, as girlishly happy as a fifteen year old could be, married or single. “We’ll both slow down. We’re old married women now, or you will be soon.”

When we arrived home, Mother placed a meal on the table. She asked Sarah to eat with us, but Sarah stated she must get home. She was making a robe from a piece of the material that was a gift at her betrothal. She wanted to finish it very soon. She gave me a secret look, grinned and left.

Mother and I talked as we ate our meal. “Mother, Joseph is coming over soon after we eat.”

She remarked quietly. “We saw very little of him while you were away. I felt I shouldn’t write anything to you because I knew you two would work out your problems when you returned.”

She bit into her bread as I remarked. “I was hurt when I heard nothing from him. I wondered if he ever realized I was telling the truth.”

“Honey, I don’t know. He nodded when he passed us going to and from the carpentry shop he and his father have. He never stopped to chat.” She sipped her water, then dried her lips. “He did ask your father about you a few times.”

“I would like to have heard from him.” I picked up my cup. She continued as though I hadn’t spoken. “We prayed about the situation a good deal and wondered what God intended to happen. We knew we would always be there for you, but we also knew you needed something or someone else in your life.”

“Oh, Mother,” I said. “You don’t know how good it is to be home ...to be able to talk with you...to see that rascally brother and little sister of mine.” I grinned at her and she gave me one of her sweet smiles. “And it was so wonderful to greet Father when he awoke this morning.”

She took my hand. “He has truly missed you, Mary. You are his sunshine, you know.”

I squeezed her hand, then held on tightly. "I don't know what Joseph has in mind. I only know he wants to talk with me. Whether he has decided to marry me, I have no idea. At this point, Mother." I let her hand go, stood and began cleaning the table. "I'm confused, but I'm not afraid I'll be stoned."

A pained look crossed her face and she said, "No!"

"Mother," I placed my hand over hers and gave it a small squeeze, attempting to make her fears vanish. My voice was low and filled with the love I felt for her and the confidence I was trying to nourish. "I am carrying God's Son, so it is a little difficult to believe He would allow me to be stoned...but it has entered my mind."

"How very brave you are," she said, and I wondered if it was awe I heard in her voice.

"Not brave. I had a great deal of time to think about this, and to talk with Elizabeth. Do you know the first words she spoke when she saw me?" I covered the containers that held the cheese, fruit and bread with cloth so the flies could not get to them.

Mother shook her head with a smile. "I never know what Elizabeth is going to say or do."

"She stated she knew I was the mother of the Son of God. She knew!" I stated with conviction. "And yet Joseph, who has known me all my life refused to believe. I think that bothered me more than anything else. The fact that he knew me and doubted."

I wiped the last drops of spilled water and bread crumbs from the table, then hung the cloth across a bushel to dry.

Mother stood and put her arm around me. "Mary, whatever happens today, do try not to get too upset." She reached up and kissed me.

I held her tightly for a few minutes. "I'll try not to, Mother. I just don't know what will happen." I turned. "Come, let's get you settled. I must go and meet him and find out what my fate is to be." I tried to laugh, but it was more a sob, than a laugh.

"My darling girl." Mother's voice was filled with pain.

We took the food inside, and I rolled out her pallet. I kissed her, she lay down and closed her eyes. I knew she wouldn't sleep; she cared too deeply for me.

"God go with you, my child." Her voice was a whisper.

Chapter 9

Delaying the inevitable, I combed my hair then twisted it into one long tress. I pinned it to the top of my head, then washed my face and hands for the third time. Suddenly, I stood straighter, walked from the house and down the road to meet Joseph.

I looked to the heavens, wishing I knew how the meeting would end. I stumbled over a rock, lost my balance and would have fallen, but I grabbed a low bush beside the road. Straightening up, I glanced around to make sure no one had seen my embarrassing near-fall. I then removed sand from my sandals and watched where I stepped.

Brilliant sunshine sparkling on the path hurt my eyes. I shaded them and looked toward the groves. "Good," I said aloud, "Joseph isn't here yet. I have a few more minutes to get myself calm."

Entering the olive grove, I noticed sunlight netting shadows and light underneath each tree. It appeared strange to me that trunks of these trees should all bend one way. In contrast, the gnarled limbs grew in all directions. Orange blossoms attached to green vines curled around brown limbs, adding color to the grove.

At first, I didn't see Joseph.

I moved farther into the grove and Joseph stepped from behind a tree, startling me. I felt strange as he watched my approach without saying a word. His face held no expression and I couldn't tell what he was thinking.

I stopped a few feet in front of him.

“Hello, Joseph.” I kept my voice as toneless as possible. “You wanted to talk?”

“Yes.” He answered, his voice low, urgent. “We must.”

“I’m here. Whatever you have to say, I’ll listen.” My voice was noncommittal.

“Mary, please look at me.” He spoke softly, though his voice was intense and pain filled. “I’ve been miserable since the morning you walked away from me.”

My face turned upward, meeting his eyes. “You hurt me too, Joseph. More than I could ever have believed possible.” I retorted in a cold voice, lowering my head.

“I’m sorry, Mary.” He held out a hand, but I ignored it. He let it fall to his side. “You gave me such a shock when you told me you were with child. All I could think of was that you were going to bear another man’s child. My heart was torn into a million pieces.” His face contorted in agony.

“After you left,” he spoke softly. “I stayed in my room or came here to sit under these olive trees. I felt closer to you here because this was the last place I saw you. I asked God to show me what to do.”

I felt his eyes on me. “I knew you were sinless, Mary. I knew in my heart you could do nothing wrong, yet I drove you away. You were so far I couldn’t tell you or ask your forgiveness.” His voice was low and intense. He picked up another stone, then let both fall, dust puffing the sand where they landed.

“Under the Law, I could give you a bill of divorcement. Should I choose that way, you would be stoned when you returned. The idea drew my heart from me.” Joseph picked up a hand full of pebbles, then threw them aside.

His voice was quiet and thoughtful as he continued. “I couldn’t do that.” I felt his glance, but I continued to look at everything except him. “I knew I could marry you and hide you away until the baby was born. People would then think I was more than an honorable man. That too, would have been hypocritical.” He wrung his hands as though he didn’t know what to do.

“I loved you then,” he stated, his voice hoarse with emotion. “I have always loved you.”

I turned to him, still very upset. “And what about me? Didn’t you consider how you would make me feel?” I shouted as I strode back and forth in front of him. I stopped, turned, and lowered my voice. “I have loved you forever, Joseph. When I needed you so desperately, you had the nerve to accuse me of dishonor.” I stopped, took a deep breath and continued. “It was impossible to believe you would do such a thing to someone whom you said you loved.”

I strode away from him, then turned back.

He had not moved, and I watched as the creases on his face deepened. I suddenly knew what he would look like when he grew older. I hated what I was doing to him, but I couldn’t seem to stop. “When I arrived at Elizabeth’s house, I didn’t even have to tell her. Her baby moved and she said she knew I was carrying God’s child.”

“Mary...” Joseph pleaded. “Let me say something.”

“Not yet!” I yelled. “She hadn’t seen me in years. She knew nothing about me except I was my Mother’s child, yet she believed.” I stumbled over the words. “She believed, and you didn’t.” A sob caught in my throat. Suddenly, I was standing still, looking up at the man I loved, and tears flowed as though they would never stop. “She believed.” I whispered.

“Oh, my darling Mary,” Joseph said, and held out his arms. I almost succumbed. When I didn’t, he again dropped his arms to his side. “I can never ask your forgiveness enough. This has been the longest three months of my life. I’ve lived with the knowledge that I drove you away. I’ve called myself every name I knew. I prayed to God that you would forgive me for not believing you.” He said. “And yet...”

I cut him off. “And yet, you can stand there and say you were hurting. When did you decide to believe me? After you resolved that, as a good Jewish man, you should put me away?” My voice cut him and I sharpened it more.

“Or was it when you decided you would do the honorable deed and marry me to keep people from stoning me to death?” The sarcasm must have hurt him deeply, because he flinched.

“Or,” my speech slowed as I looked him straight in the face. “Did God send His angel to tell you to marry me?” He didn’t have to say a word; his face revealed the answer.

The Earth didn’t stand still, trees didn’t explode or fall but I knew, in that moment, I had the answer to my question.

My stomach rebelled. I ran a few steps and doubled over. Suddenly I retched and was so sick I fell to my knees. He gently picked me up, then wiped my face with the cloth he always carried in his pocket. “Oh, Mary.” His voice overflowed with contrition and love and sorrow. “Can you ever forgive me for having doubts?” He held me in his arms.

I trembled. Gulping, I struggled to move from his arms but he held me tightly. “Mary, please say something. Say you forgive me.” His voice was now low and intimate.

“I don’t know what to say, Joseph.” I knew I hurt him, but the anger in me raged like a storm. At that moment, I didn’t care if I hurt him. “Let’s sit and you can tell me about your visit with Gabriel. I’ll try to believe you,” I said, reminding him he hadn’t believed in me.

He released me and we sat under one of the trees. I noticed the sun had barely moved since we arrived. It appeared frozen, like my hopes and dreams. Yet I felt I had aged at least ten years from having discovered the reason he now believed me. That belief came from nothing I said, but because God’s messenger paid him a visit. I wanted to curl into a tiny ball and let the world pass me by.

Flitting about, bugs and insects made noises, and wind in the grove made swishing sounds as leaves rubbed against each other. Birds chirruped, flew from limb to limb, then dove to the ground to scoop up a bug or seed.

I’m sure there were odors from the trees and vines that twined themselves around these gnarled limbs, but I didn’t notice. All I could smell was the residue of my vomiting. I suddenly wondered how he could stand to be so near.

I pulled up a weed I knew had a minty odor. I crushed the leaves and attempted to wipe my robe. These leaves, and I didn’t know the weed’s name, helped to alleviate the smell a little.

Sweat stood out on his forehead and I noticed his robe had wet spots. He didn’t look at me as he picked up a small pebble and tossed it from hand to hand.

I barely heard his whisper. “While I was stewing about what to do, Gabriel did come to visit.”

I heard his words, but at that moment they meant little to me. I was still too upset to absorb everything he said. Tinkling far away, I heard a sheep’s bell and glanced in that direction. I didn’t want to see an animal, I just wanted to get away.

“That night I stayed up later than usual to work on our house.” He turned to look at me. “I decided to sleep on the roof. I missed you so much, Mary.” His voice broke, he swallowed, then continued. “As I was falling asleep, I heard a voice in my dream. ‘Joseph, son of David,’ it said, ‘do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife. That which has been conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit.’”

I felt him staring at me. I knew he wanted my help in telling his story but I was too hurt to respond. I refused to meet his eyes.

“Mary, I didn’t know if I was awake or sleeping. The voice filled the sky as it continued, ‘And, she will bear a Son. You shall call His name Jesus, for it is He who will save His people from their sins.’” Joseph took a deep,

ragged breath. His voice was shaky as he spoke. “When I awoke the next morning, I sat on the roof and looked at the sky. I was so ashamed of the way I had treated you.” His voice dropped to little more than a whisper.

I jumped as he abruptly stood and shouted. “Mary! Say something! Don’t just sit there as though I were no more than a lump of clay.”

“And just what do you want me to say, Joseph?” I didn’t try to curb the sarcasm.

“You could say something. Anything would be better than this silence. I have apologized. I don’t know what else to say or do. I love you more than my own life; yet I treated you so badly. How could I do that to you?” The last words revealed his deep longings to be understood.

“Joseph,” I said, my voice noncommittal. “You know I’ve always loved you. Right now I’m too hurt to think about us.” I stood and my voice was as angry as I felt. “To think you waited for someone else to tell you I was an honorable woman makes me furious.” I glared at him.

Suddenly, I was so exhausted and dirty, all I really wanted was to go home, bathe and sleep.

He stood and reached for my hands. “Please Mary, marry me now. According to our Laws, you’ve been my wife since the betrothal. I would like the entire community to be a part of our marriage ceremony if it’s all right with you.” He pleaded with me as though my answer would either make his life content or unhappy.

“Joseph, I suppose it’s what we have to do.” My voice didn’t sound charitable, even to my ears. “The Baby will come sooner than normal.”

“I know. That’s all right with me. Let the neighbors think what they will. Let them think we didn’t wait for the marriage to consummate our love. We don’t have to tell them anything.”

Here was the answer I wanted, but was it? How much damage was done to the feelings I formerly had for Joseph? Could I ever love him the way I did before? Could I become his true wife after God’s baby was born to us?

I realized marrying him was the only answer. Since the Angel told Joseph he was to name the baby, then so be it. “When would you like the wedding to occur?” I asked, trying to get some enthusiasm into my voice.

Joseph pulled me to him. “Mary, I love you. I don’t know how to let you know how much I really do love you. I shall try to be a good husband and provider for you. I shall take care of you for as long as I live.” The words, as he spoke them, sounded more like a prayer than a declaration of love. Then, he stooped and kissed me.

“Come,” he said. “Let’s go tell your parents, then set a date for the wedding to be as soon as possible.”

Our families were elated. His parents visited us the next day, when all the wedding plans were made. A year had elapsed since our betrothal, so any date was now permitted for the wedding.

The dowry was settled the night of our betrothal. I knew that only a small amount was paid. It was little more than a token, to carry on a tradition. The legal and financial arrangements, as well as vows, were concluded when we were betrothed.

The night of the wedding arrived. The entire day was one to dream about. Breezes kept the temperature from being scorching hot. Leah and Sarah brought so much water from the well, I had more than enough to bathe in. I then used the oils and essences Elizabeth gave me.

At the end of the day, after bathing and dressing, I glanced out the door. Stars twinkled in the vast sky. The moon was almost full and glowed like a giant lamp. It cast its light on the trees in the courtyard. The leaves looked like millions of tiny diamonds, and the stones of the courtyard glowed as though polished.

I waited for Joseph to be escorted to our home by his friends. He would then lead me to his father’s house for the wedding feast.

My bridesmaids, one of whom was Leah, waited with me. Leah looked grown up in her new red and white robe Elizabeth sent. Her hair was plaited with strips of linen the same color as her robe. Her dark eyes glowed with happiness. Her straight little body was so adorable I wanted to stop her growth right now. I hugged her tightly and wondered if I would ever have a daughter as lovely as she.

Sarah and I walked into the back room to talk and do my hair. “Are you nervous?” she asked as we stood, looking out at the starry sky.

“I don’t know,” I said. “I feel numb. It reminds me of a dream.” My voice sounded far away, even to me. “I feel in a little while I’ll awaken and the entire matter will be only my imagination.”

“Oh, Mary.” Sarah hugged me, then pleaded. “Please be happy. I want you to be as happy as I am. I know Joseph betrayed you but can’t you please forgive him?”

“I have forgiven him, Sarah,” I said. “It’s just that I wish it could be a real wedding where we were going to...”

“Going to what?” She stared at me as her forehead wrinkled.

“Sarah.” I held her arm tightly. “This baby is mine and I love Him already.”

“Then what’s wrong?”

“According to Isaiah, I must be a virgin when the baby is born. That means that Joseph and I...” My voice trailed away, and I loosened my grip.

“I didn’t think.” She squeezed my shoulder. “It’s only a little while longer, Mary. Just think what you are giving to the world.” Her eyes glowed with an incandescent love for me and the baby I was carrying.

“Sarah,” I laughed in delight. “You are the best friend I could have. You always set me in the right direction when I go off like that.”

“You’re as silly as those donkeys.” she scolded. “Come, we must comb your hair. You know it’s the only time you can let it down and keep it that way. Believe me, it’s a wonderful feeling. Enjoy it.”

I playfully slapped her hand as she pulled the pins and combs from my hair. It fell almost to my waist. I hadn’t realized how such a simple act could free a woman to be herself.

“You are beautiful, Mary.” Sarah murmured, as she ran a comb through my hair, letting it cascade down my back. She reached down and kissed me on the cheek. “Come, I hear the bridegroom and his friends.”

She clasped my hand as I rose to meet my groom. When he saw me with loosened hair framing my face and body, he gasped. The look on his face was one of adoration. “Come, Mary, let’s go to our feast.” And he held out his hand for me.

Music preceded us as we paraded through the street from our house to his parents’. Escorts carried palm and myrtle branches before us. Others threw grain at random. At some weddings, coins were tossed, but our people owned little money to live on and none extra for throwing around. As neighbors came out of their homes with lamps lit, they followed us to the wedding feast.

By the time we reached Joseph’s home, I was in a daze. I knew I should have been ecstatic. My problems were now solved. I had a husband to care for me and my son. I owned the home I dreamed of. I would be loved and cared for as long as Joseph lived. And yet...and yet, I felt a fear inside me that was impossible to explain.

The toasts at the wedding feast extolled my beauty and virtues. I wondered vaguely what these same people would think when they discovered I was carrying a baby on my wedding day. Even worse, what would they think if they knew the baby did not belong to Joseph?

Suddenly, I felt Joseph had been cheated. And yet, who was I to question the plans of God?

Through dozens of toasts, massive amounts of food consumed and uncounted wine skins emptied, my body became tired and my patience grew thin. How I managed the smiles and thanks to everyone for the gifts and toasts and blessings, I’ll never know.

At last...at last, just before dawn, the final guest departed and Joseph and I walked the short distance to the home he had prepared for us. As he opened the door, he picked me up.

I placed my arms around his neck and held on as he carried me gently inside and closed the door.

“What a wonderful way to introduce me to our home, Joseph.” I said, as I looked around.

A lamp was lit on each of four shelves he had built into the wall. The table he gave me for our betrothal sat in a corner with the jewelry box on top. A larger table was in the center of the room. He had fashioned benches on either side of the table where we could sit in comfort while we ate. In the back of the room, a fire glowed from a brazier.

He carried me into another room where he had built a bed on the same order as the one at Elizabeth’s home. Set on four legs, linen covered the pallets. “Joseph! When did you do this?”

“Your mother told me about the bed after she received your first letter. I knew we must have one so you would feel as loved as I could possibly manage.”

On each side of the bed there was a projection from the wall. Both of these were made from smooth stones that Joseph carefully placed. They held a lamp and other, smaller articles, if needed.

“Put me down, Joseph.” I ordered, with a smile.

“You are now my wife.” He said, with his teasing grin. “I shall hold you as long as I wish.”

I looked around the room. There was the chest he made for me to hold our wedding gifts and the many pieces of linen my mother and I made. “Oh, Joseph, how thoughtful you are.”

He put me down, but still held me tightly. His voice was husky as he said, “Mary, my love, though we cannot become as one this night, we shall be as one in God’s sight for the rest of our lives.” He kissed me tenderly on the lips.

I have never felt, before or since, so wrapped in the warmth of total love as at that moment.

Chapter 10

Though we retired almost at dawn, we only slept a few hours. Lying beside Joseph, I looked at him. He was returning the look. Love in his eyes glowed like the sun at mid day. “Good morning, my beloved wife.” He leaned down and lightly kissed me.

“Oh, it’s late! Some kind of wife I am, lying abed like this.” I tried to rise, but Joseph held me back.

“Stay.” He slipped his arms around me as I snuggled close. “Let me hold you just for a moment. There’s no rush in getting up. We have all day with nothing to do except enjoy each other.” He pulled me close. His voice was so low and filled with emotion, I could barely hear him. “Oh, Mary. I love you so very much. Please don’t ever leave me.”

“I shall never leave you, Joseph. Like Ruth said a long time ago, ‘whither thou goest, I shall go, and where thou lodgest, I shall lodge.’” I looked into his eyes that were so close to mine. “Joseph, it won’t be too long and we can truly be husband and wife.” I brushed his hair back and patted his mustache smooth.

He held me so he could look into my eyes. “Mary, we are truly man and wife, now. After our Son is born is time enough for us to become intimate.”

My heart sang. He said, “after OUR son is born.” He emphasized our. My heart was so full, I could barely breathe as tears dripped from my eyes.

“Oh, Joseph.” I clung to him as I had dreamed of doing for such a long time.

He wiped my tears, kissed me, then arose. “Stay there for a while longer,” he ordered, with a smile. “I’ll be right back.”

He left our bedroom and soon returned with a cup of yellow fruit juice. “I purchased an orange from a man who was leading a caravan a few days ago. I squeezed it special for you.”

I sat up in bed, took the cup and sipped. “How heavenly this tastes. You must have half, Joseph.” I placed the cup against his lips and he sipped. When he leaned over to kiss me again, I smelled the sharp, pungent odor on his breath. “Here, take the cup.” I offered.

He took it and placed it on a table beside the bed. As he did, I arose, straightened my clothing and started to place my hair on top of my head. “Not today. At least not for a little while.” He ran his fingers through my hair. As he released the tresses, they fell against my back like drops from a waterfall settles on wayside bushes.

I buried my face in his chest. “I do love you, Joseph.”

He hit my bottom. “Enough, woman. Get me some food.”

I carried the remainder of the precious orange juice as we walked into our other room. As Joseph watched, I placed bread and cheese on a dish. Next to it, I poured milk from a sheepskin into small earthen chalices. Figs were added and we had a breakfast feast.

During our meal, we drank every drop of orange juice from the container. I thought orange juice was what I would long remember about our first breakfast together as man and wife.

He said prayers and we chatted as we ate.

That day was the most relaxed I could remember. We walked into the hills and talked. Though we had climbed these rocks many times together, today felt so very special. We were man and wife for as long as we lived.

I lay down on a rock and placed my head in Joseph’s lap. He ran his fingers through my hair softly scrubbing my hair, as I gazed at the sky. A fleecy cloud slowly floated by, its shape changing from a tree to a bush, then breaking into bits and finally dissipating as I watched.

I reached up and fingered Joseph’s beard. I wondered what it would look like when we were both old. Suddenly, I shivered. Somehow, I couldn’t picture Joseph’s hair or beard turning grey.

I sat up and we perched on a rock overlooking our town, with roads caravans often moved on. Fields and groves were spread out before us. He held my hand as we talked.

“Mary, God had the entire universe to pick two people to raise His child.” He said in a dreamy voice. “I wonder why He chose us.”

Looking up at him, seeing his strong chin and handsome face, I replied. “I don’t know, Joseph. It really frightens me sometimes to know you and I have the entire responsibility for God’s Son.”

“When Gabriel visited you, did he tell you how this baby should be raised?” The wind blew, scattering my hair about. He pushed a tendril of hair from my face, leaned over and kissed me.

“No.” I glanced at him, then at the blue sky which encircled the earth. More wispy clouds drifted across the enormous expanse. I knew God listened and, being human, wondered if He knew just how fragile we felt.

“I’ve prayed about this Mary, and I’ll continue to pray. However, I don’t know how to rear God’s Child, or any child for that matter.” He raised his hand and swept the heavens. “He rules all this and we’re just two little people with no experience.”

“Oh, Joseph,” My voice held uncertainty. “I’ve prayed too, and I can’t come up with any answers. I suppose we’ll just have to let God lead us as we go. We’ll try to let Him have complete control of our lives. We’ll follow His will as much as it is humanly possible.”

I reached up to smooth the lines that were in Joseph’s brow.

He picked up a dried weed. It crackled as he squeezed his hand closed. “Another thing bothers me, Mary.”

I looked up at him and smiled. “Just one?”

He pulled a tress of my hair and grinned at me. “How is the baby going to be born in Bethlehem if we live in Nazareth?”

I stared at him in astonishment. “Joseph, I had forgotten Micah’s prophecy.”

“Now don’t you worry, Mary. I’m sure God has a plan.”

“He must.”

We stared down the hills at the terraces where men would soon harvest their crops. I saw a man strip an ear of corn from a stalk, open it, then check its growth. We saw others bend, stoop, then stand upright, as they checked their crops, as well.

“Look, Mary.” Joseph pointed. “You can see the Sea of Galilee today.”

I stood. At that moment, large white sails caught the wind and billowed above the tiny fisherman’s boat. “How beautiful! My day’s complete.” I sat down and Joseph took my hand, his face solemn.

He asked. “What will we do when we have other children? Will they be different from Jesus? Will I treat this Baby any differently from our other children?” The questions were the same ones I had asked myself many times.

“I don’t know, Joseph. I think we must wait to see what kind of child He is. It bothers me to think He may know who He is when He’s born. He might not need us when He scrapes a knee. What if He isn’t like other babies? What if He already knows everything there is to know?” My voice got louder and louder.

“Shhh.” Joseph placed his finger over my lips. “It will be all right. I’m sure, since God wanted the baby to be born in the normal way, this One will be just like other babies. I think we’ll have to feed him and teach him to feed himself. We’ll have to teach Him to walk and talk.” His voice was strong and positive. “I’ll do my best to bring him up in the Jewish faith; to follow the teachings God handed Moses on the Mountain.”

“Do you think He will know He came from God?” I was suddenly terribly frightened. I grabbed Joseph’s hand and clung to it. “What if He...”

“Mary.” Joseph’s voice was firm. “Stop, honey. There is no use in trying to determine what kind of child He will be. We won’t be able to do it for our others, either. We’ll take Him as He is; love Him, care for Him. I will teach Him my trade. We will rear Him as though He were just another son of ours. No more. No less.”

“You’re right.” I looked in his eyes. “Joseph, you know I get carried away sometimes...”

He laughed, and kissed the palm of my hand. “I know.”

“You’ll just have to settle me down. Promise?”

“I promise.” He said. “Come woman, you are starving me. Let’s go home and eat.” He pulled me to my feet.

“We have to be sure you eat properly now.” He patted my stomach as we stood side-by-side. “You’re carrying a very important person inside you. Our Son.”

We walked down from the hills, Joseph not letting me run and jump as happened formerly.

From then on, each morning I went to the well to get water, Joseph shaved and said his prayers. It only took a few moments to prepare our morning meal; bread or cake, fruit and milk. Occasionally I added a boiled egg. We ate in silence; then he went to join his father at the carpentry shop.

I cleaned our home, then usually walked to Mother’s where we ground wheat and made bread. One day, as we worked, she told me she received a letter from Elizabeth. In fact it lay in her lap, as we sat grinding wheat kernels.

“Elizabeth had her baby.” Mother smiled happily at me. “Her letter sounds as though she is the happiest woman in the world.” A few kernels thudded into the grinder as I turned the handle.

“Oh, Mother, that’s wonderful. Are she and the baby all right?” Mother fed more grain into the mill. Wheat kernels were crushed and flour poured into a bowl beneath the grinder.

“They’re fine, but the strangest thing happened, Mary.” My Mother said, her hands resting in the pan of seed. “When they took the baby to have him circumcised, people naturally assumed he would be named for a dead member of the family.”

“And..?” I asked as she hesitated.

“‘His name is John.’ Elizabeth said.”

“During my visit she told me his name was to be John and I didn’t question her.” I remarked.

“The people continued to bother her because it’s the custom to name a son after a dead relative,” Mother said. “Zacharias then took a piece of slate and wrote, ‘His name is John.’ Elizabeth said the Holy Spirit immediately filled Zacharias and he began prophesying.”

“Zacharias spoke?” My astonishment was so great, I stopped moving my hands on the grinding stone.

“He picked up his son and began prophesying.” Mother nodded, then leaned back to rest. She suggested, “Let’s stop this for a moment, Mary. I’ll read Elizabeth’s letter to you.” She picked up the letter and began where Elizabeth told about Zacharias.

“Zacharias Blessed the Lord for the redemption for His people. He thanked God for sending salvation from enemies and fulfilling his promise to Abraham to send a savior.”

“That’s amazing.” I shook my head in disbelief. “The last time I saw that dear man he couldn’t speak.”

“There’s more,” Mother said, further unrolling the scroll.

“Zacharias said John was the prophet of the Most High. He said he was to be the one who would go before the Lord and prepare His way.” Mother stopped for a moment as we both thought on these miraculous events.

Then she finished. “Zacharias said John would give people knowledge of salvation before the Sunrise from on high should come in His Glory. This Being would shine on those in Darkness and the shadow of Death and He was to guide our feet into the way of peace.”

Mother made the papyrus into a cone, holding it tenderly.

“I wonder what it means.”

I sat back from the stone and looked at her. “When I was there Elizabeth told me Zacharias wrote that John was to be the prophet for my Son.” My voice was tremulous.

The letter Mother read made me more aware of the responsibility I carried. “Oh, Mother, I’m so frightened.” I leaned toward her as she put her arms around me. She drew me close and kissed my hair.

“Mary, please don’t be afraid. God will take care of you. He will see that you raise His child as He should be.” She lifted my face and kissed me. “My darling girl, don’t ever for a moment doubt yourself. If God hadn’t thought you were the person to raise His Child, He would not have chosen you.”

“I know. But ...”

“Shhhh,” she soothed me as she had when I was a child. “Everything is going to be all right. You’ll see.” She laughed, a shaky laugh at best. “Come, we’ll never finish this in time to bake, if we don’t get back to work.”

That afternoon I told Joseph of my visit with Mother. We both prayed we would be worthy of the task God gave us.

Many days I prepared something for Joseph’s midday meal and carried it to him at the shop. I loved going there. The odor of freshly cut lumber was clean and aromatic from the different woods. The tools were so fascinating, I talked Joseph into telling me what each one was and the job they did.

“I use the axe for chopping down trees.”

I laughed. “Even I knew that.”

He grinned back at me. “Father and I shape the wood with the adz.” He picked up an iron saw. “And this is so we can cut it to precise sizes.”

“How very smart you are.”

He showed me drills and bits that made the precise holes needed in wood.

I started to pick up the stone headed hammer for driving nails and almost dropped it on my foot.

“Mary!” Joseph exclaimed, taking it from my hand. “Be careful! I don’t want you hurt.” He placed it back on his work table.

“Joseph, there are so many tools.” I said, on another visit. “Where did they all come from?”

“Most of the collection has been in this shop for many generations. My great-grandfather owned the wooden mallet for pounding or hammering wooden surfaces together. He also purchased the iron chisels and files for shaping and carving. The awls are used for putting small holes into wood or leather. They belonged to my grandfather.”

Joseph then picked up a plane and showed me how he used it to make the wood smooth. After placing it back in its holder, he said, “As my ancestors taught their sons the carpentry trade, so I shall teach our sons.”

“Oh, Joseph, you are a good man.” I reached up and patted him on the face. “You will make a very good father.”

One day as I entered, he hurriedly shoved something into a corner. “What are you working on?” I asked.

“A surprise.” The grin that appeared on his face was so broad, I knew it was something special.

“Can I see it?” I teased him by running my hand under his beard and kissing him on the chin.

“Stop that, Mary.” He scolded. “You’re an old married woman now. You shouldn’t tease your husband.” His voice was stern, but he grinned, which convinced me he loved the teasing.

“Come on,” I pleaded. “Show me.”

“All right,” he said, giving a big sigh. “Close your eyes.”

I squeezed my eyes shut and heard movement. Then he said, “Now open.”

As I opened my eyes, I saw a cradle he was working on. I caught my breath. “Oh, Joseph, it’s beautiful!” I patted it as though it contained a baby as he smiled down at me.

“It isn’t finished,” he grumbled good naturedly. “I wanted to save it for a surprise.”

I hugged him. “Oh, Joseph, it is a surprise. What a wonderful man you are. No wonder I chose you for a husband.”

“Go home, woman. I have work to do,” he ordered as he kissed me on the brow. “I’ll be home a little late. I’d like to finish this. And Mary...”

I turned to walk away. “Yes?”

“Please go home and lie down. You must have your rest.” His eyes and words conveyed so much concern and love. I felt I must be the happiest woman in the world.

“I promise.”

Since our home was near his parent’s, we saw them most evenings after Joseph and his father returned from work. They were as much a part of our family as my father, mother, Leah and Daniel.

Sometimes we ate at home; other times, we ate at his parents. Joseph and I visited Sarah and her husband as well. They came often and we spent precious time talking of the Baby we were awaiting. Sarah suspected she was in the family way and, I think, happy about it.

She promised, when I told her about my being pregnant with God’s child she would tell no one. I knew she never would.

At the beginning of my fifth month, my pregnancy could no longer be hidden. Joseph and I had been wed less than two months. I suspected that when I went to the well in the mornings people talked. Too many times when I appeared, talk abruptly ceased. Sarah tried to protect me from the gossip, but I knew it was inevitable.

I was so proud of this Baby I wanted to shout it to the Heavens. It still hurt, however, to know there was gossip. I wanted this baby to be loved and cared for as we loved and cared for all the children of the village...no matter who their parents were. I could do nothing about the gossip except pray that God would give me strength to either ignore it or bear the pain of disgrace.

During this time, Joseph was especially thoughtful and kind.

The day was grey, making my whole world feel flat. Dusky clouds hovered over our village. Homes that normally sparkled in the sun now looked drab and forlorn. Limbs of trees drooped as rain dribbled and water slid from leaves onto the earth.

I'd been inside almost the entire day, other than going to help Mother bake bread.

She and I were chatting merrily, waiting for the bread to brown when my heart was broken by one of our neighbors. I still don't know why I said nothing when the neighbor spoke so hatefully to me.

Instead, I ran home, leaving bread, Mother and my pride.

When Joseph returned from work I was lying in bed instead of bustling about outside as I normally did, even in inclement weather.

"Mary, what's wrong?" He gathered me into his arms. "Don't you feel well?"

"Oh, Joseph," I said, burying my face in his neck. "Today we were baking bread and one of the women said horrible things about me."

"What horrible things?" He held me close. When I said nothing, only clung to him, he coaxed. "Please honey, tell me."

"She said I was no better than a whore to have intimate relations with you before we were married. She said I was a slut and should be stoned." I ran my words together. "I was so frightened I ran home and didn't even bring any bread for our meal."

I looked up at him, tears dribbling down my face. My horror was mirrored in his eyes and he held me tighter. "It's all right, my love. We can handle this. We must. This is part of the job God gave us."

He patted me on the back as though I were a baby. "We must learn to ignore people like her. God's Child is much more important than any malicious gossiping woman."

It wasn't easy to face the rest of the village after the way the woman treated me. Statements she almost shouted were loud enough for the entire village to hear.

The next day I held my head high as I went to the well for water. No one said anything in my hearing. I met Mother, Sarah and her mother in order to bake bread with the rest of our group. The first few days, some of the women looked at me with half closed eyes, judging my reaction. By ignoring the comments and looks, laughter and gossip became as relaxed and happy as before.

I was getting bigger all the time and it was becoming more difficult to get around, so Joseph and I enjoyed our evenings without the families. We usually sat outside for our evening meal.

The sun was low in the sky and shadows from the pomegranate tree near our door covered the table. Birds chattered as they flitted from branch to branch. Occasionally, one hopped to the ground, picked up a seed and flew rapidly to a limb.

Scent from various herbs and flowers drifted on the soft air. As I looked around our courtyard, my happiness was complete. I said a prayer of thanksgiving for the many blessings I had received.

I was blessed with a thoughtful, loving husband, a snug home and plenty of food. The Baby, soon to be born, was an added blessing.

The bread was still warm as I served stew into bowls after Joseph asked a blessing. I broke a piece of bread from the loaf, crumbling it into the stew. During this time of waiting for the baby, Joseph and I had often discussed the men who rebelled against the Herods.

“Joseph, last Sabbath, when we were at the synagogue, the Rabbi told us about the new taxes and people having to register for the census at their birth places.” I scooped a spoonful of stew into my mouth and chewed.

Joseph ate silently, glanced at me, then waited.

“This morning, some of the women at the well were talking about people in the hills planning a rebellion against having to register.” I sipped water and placed the goblet back on the table.

“I heard about that, too.” He chewed thoughtfully.

“Most folks were more angry at the registering than they were at the latest increase in taxes.” I broke a piece of bread and crumbled it into the stew. “Does that make sense?”

“I don’t know if it makes sense or not. I heard about the rebellion a few days ago. Seems Judas, whose father fought against Herod the Great, is now leading a rebellion against the present Herod.” Joseph spooned stew into his mouth.

“But what can a little band of people do against a leader like that?” I held my spoon over my stew, awaiting his answer.

“Actually, I think there is little they can do. It seems the first Judas joined with Zadok, a Pharisee.” As an aside, he said, “they’re part of a group consisting of the Sadducees and Essenes, as well.”

I nodded and chewed, thinking of what Joseph said. “Are those the people they call Zealots?”

He put down his spoon, took a sip of wine and said. “I think so. They were teachers of the Torah, as well as being very patriotic.”

“They were teachers?” I was astounded.

“Yes. They hated Roman rule and rebelled at every opportunity. They believed paying taxes to Rome was the same as slavery.”

“Everyone has to pay taxes.” I protested, as a bird lit on the table and swiped a crumb of bread before I could scoot him away. We both laughed, as he flew to a limb and fussed at me.

“To answer your question, honey. These zealots refused to pay taxes.” Joseph remarked and resumed eating.

“What happened after that?” I was fascinated, and forgot we were eating.

“Eat, Mary.”

I picked up my spoon as he continued speaking. “They believed God was on their side and would give them victory. They hid out in caves in the eastern mountains. When wealthy Jewish collaborators, officials and small detachments of soldiers came along, Judas and his band attacked.”

“How awful!” My food was gone. I placed the spoon in the bowl, wrapped the bread in a cloth and asked, “What happened to Zadok and Judas?”

“After a time, they were both killed.” Joseph said, as he took the last bite of his chicken stew and placed his spoon in the bowl.

“Had enough?”

He patted his stomach. “Oh yes. A very good meal.”

“If Zadok and Judas were killed, why are their people still fighting?”

Joseph leaned against the tree and spoke. “Apparently, their sons didn’t learn anything. They are now following in their fathers’ footsteps.” He picked up his cup and drained his wine.

“And all because of taxes,” I stated, then rose to clean the table. When I returned, I brought an extra cup, poured a small amount of wine for me and then refilled Joseph’s cup.

He leaned back, holding the cup loosely. Taking up the subject where we left it, he said. “Not all because of taxes, Mary. You have to understand the rebels’ thinking. They feel signing for the census is a snare. Once the Romans have a name, that person is always liable for taxes. These taxes are raised whenever the Romans wish.”

I reached across the table and held his hand. Just then the Baby kicked. I must have winced. Joseph smiled. “Giving you a hard time?”

I laughed. “Sometimes He really does, but this isn’t bad.” I glanced at Joseph. The look of wonder and awe in his eyes was very dear to me.

The baby settled and we resumed our conversation as I picked up my cup and sipped.

“Joseph, will you have to register?” I stared at him in apprehension.

“I don’t know.” He took a deep breath and looked around at our home, the vegetables and flowers I’d planted, the birds skittering in and out of the branches of the tree that was here long before either of us was born.

We sat quietly for a few moments enjoying the scents of mingled food and wine, as well as roses, now in bloom. Sounds from other families were muted. Suddenly, a cricket chirruped, disturbing the tranquility. Joseph and I both laughed.

Joseph broke our silence. “Today at the shop, men said that Roman Soldiers are on their way to Nazareth.”

“Why would they come here? We have so little in the village.” I just didn’t understand why a peaceful little place like ours should warrant soldiers. “As a matter of fact, your shop has less work lately than in a long time, doesn’t it?” I held my cup between both hands, sipping occasionally.

“The work has been slow.” Joseph agreed, and picked up his cup and drank. “Father’s hoping it will pick up soon. If not, I don’t know what we’ll do.”

I reached over and held his hand a moment, trying to take his mind from the recent lack of work.

“Do you think the soldiers are coming to make sure that everyone registers?”

“I don’t know.” He sighed. “Probably.”

We sat chatting for awhile until I yawned. Joseph and I entered our home as the night swiftly dropped its curtain.

Soon after our conversation concerning registration, when I was nearing my eighth month, I was outside, preparing our meal.

I looked up at the overcast sky, hoping we’d finish our meal before the rains came. Glancing up, I saw Joseph hurrying home from work, much too early. The look on his face frightened me and I flung myself into his arms.

“What’s happened, Joseph? Are our families all right?”

“They’re fine, Mary,” he said, and disentangled my arms from around his neck. He pushed the hair from my forehead and kissed me. “I must talk with you.”

He washed his face and hands in the container I kept inside the door. He then dried them on one of our new linen cloths. I brought him cool water and we sat outside. The stools with backs on them made sitting at the table very comfortable.

The sky seemed to have brightened, I noticed. Maybe the wind would blow most of the clouds away, though we could always use the rain.

“Do you remember we recently talked about having to be counted?” He sipped his water.

“Yes.” I trembled as I remembered our conversation.

“The Rabbi and some of the men were talking about it today when they stopped by the shop. In our conversation, they reminded me that counting Jews is against our Law.”

“It is?”

“Yes.” Then Joseph asked a rhetorical question. “How can we go against Roman law and not register?”

“I don’t know. Will our people be arrested if they don’t?”

“I don’t see that we can do a lot to protest. The Romans know we have no choice in the matter, so the guilt will be added to the rest of their sins, I’m sure.” He said, then sipped from his water container.

I could say nothing, wondering what we should do.

Thunder sounded so far away I knew it wouldn’t rain for awhile. Just to be perverse, a few drops of rain immediately fell, hitting leaves on the tree. The water dripped onto my head, reminding me to check on the food.

I quickly stirred the lamb. It was cooked enough, so I removed the pot from the brazier and placed a top on the container. Then I sat back at the table, hoping the heavy rain would hold off for just a while longer.

“I saw Roman soldiers arriving today. They posted edicts to the affect that we would register.” Joseph’s voice held a dead quality.

“I still don’t understand their need to count us.” I rose. As I stood straight, my hand went to my back. A pained expression must have crossed my face, because Joseph quickly asked. “Are you all right?”

I smiled at his concern. “I’m fine. My middle is getting so large it pulls at my back muscles sometimes.” I reached over and patted him on the shoulder. “I really am fine.”

“You’re sure?”

I nodded.

“Mary, to go back to your question. I guess they want to count us so they will know exactly how much to tax.”

“Joseph, they’ve done that before. You pay taxes. I know. I heard you men discussing it.”

“That’s true, Mary, but since Quirinius became governor of Syria, there hasn’t been a census.”

“Well,” I remarked dryly. “the numbers certainly haven’t changed since the last time they counted. Every time a baby is born, he is added to the rolls of the local tax collector. When someone dies, he’s removed.”

We both sat a few moments longer and the rain stopped. The breeze began, and leaves shook water onto our shoulders.

Joseph shook his robe. “Mary, I think the Romans want to know if we have enough people to become organized and cause trouble.”

“What kind of trouble?”

“Maybe with a large enough population, there could be a leader like Zadok who would emerge and be able to overthrow the Roman Government.”

“That is quite silly, Joseph. We Jews aren’t usually a fighting people.” I laughed. “Well, not since David and all those kings who always seemed to find someone to kill.”

“The Romans are so suspicious of everyone they think others are like themselves and wish to cause trouble.”

“Since we’re sitting, I’m going to dish up the food. Let’s eat while we talk.”

Joseph placed his head tiredly in his hands as I filled his bowl with vegetables and meat, then gave him bread, boiled eggs and a piece of honey cake on a small dish. I fixed the same for me, only much smaller portions.

“Today, Mary,” Joseph said and picked up his spoon. “Caesar Augustus sent out a decree. Everyone must go to their own city to be registered.”

“Our own city? Nazareth is our city.” I protested. “This is where we were born.”

“What they mean, Mary, is we must go to register in the city where our ancestors lived.” Joseph’s voice was as puzzled as I felt. He hesitated before he added, “The city of David.”

“That means we must go to Bethlehem.” I picked up my spoon and filled it from my bowl.

“Yes, that’s true.” He agreed, looking at me closely. Suddenly, I knew what he was trying to say.

We looked at each other, astonishment reflected from his face to mine. “And He shall be born in Bethlehem.” We repeated Micah’s prophecy together.

“Mary...” He stood and reached for me as I also stood and gladly went into his arms. He held me tightly as we both considered what we had just realized. God had taken care of the problem of a reason for going to Bethlehem.

“Well then, we shall go,” I said, sitting back down at the table. “When do we leave?”

Joseph began eating again. “I wish I could leave you at home.”

I laughed. “Silly. How can our Son be born in Bethlehem if I’m here?”

He grinned, then his face became sober as he took another sip of water. “We can’t start registering for at least another month...maybe more. We must wait for the orders to arrive.”

“It’ll be all right, I promise you.” I picked up his work worn hand and kissed the knuckles. “God is going to take care of all three of us. You just wait and see.”

“Yes,” but his voice wasn’t too convincing.

The skies lightened and the clouds billowed away from our sky. Trees swayed and birds returned to their skittering through the leaves, onto the ground, then back to their perches.

The air smelled fresher and cleaner, though we’d had only a few drops of the precious fluid.

Long after our food was gone, and the table cleaned, we discussed Bethlehem and how the history of the town played such a part in Joseph’s ancestry.

“Wasn’t that the city Naomi returned to, after her husband died?”

“Yes, it was,” he said. “When she started home, Ruth asked to go with her.”

“She was a Moabite, wasn’t she?” I asked.

“Yes. Naomi was the mother-in-law of Ruth and her sister. When Naomi’s husband and two sons died she chose to return to Bethlehem.”

“When she and Naomi arrived in Judea, Ruth gleaned in the fields of Boaz. He fell in love and they married.”

Joseph must have noticed how tired I looked. He helped me take the food inside and we prepared for bed.

As I lay next to Joseph that night, my thoughts kept me awake. We now knew the reason for going to Bethlehem at that particular time. I knew the journey wouldn’t be easy.

I knew I would not be with my family when the baby was born, but I felt it would be wrong to worry them...especially Mother.

Should they remember the prophecy, I hoped it would be after the baby was born. I snuggled close to Joseph and slept.

Chapter 11

As my pregnancy advanced, the heat abated and fall arrived. Leaves on many trees changed from green to a kalidescopic canvas...wine, brown, tan, yellow and red. Some green leaves clung tenaciously, refusing to fall.

I lay beside Joseph one night as I planned our journey, knowing God would lead us every step of the way. I knew the days would be fairly warm but we could expect nights to be cool. In fact, it was getting cold in many parts of the country we would travel.

I prayed we could find a place to sleep and that there would be a place for the baby's arrival. God would provide, I kept telling myself. Most of the time I believed that with all my heart. Sometimes, however, small doubts crept in.

Thinking of the journey I'd made recently, actually only a little more than five months before, I knew what to expect. I dreaded the trip because we would not be part of a caravan with a qualified leader.

I could almost see us as rocks caused us to stumble and sand filled our sandals. Dust would swirl around the feet of individuals going to pay their taxes. I knew moving along the trail could be harder than before because of my condition, and I dreaded it. I also knew I must go.

Shepherds, with their flocks out in the open during the day, would take them to caves to keep them safe as the weather became colder. Most of the flowers would have gone to sleep for the winter. The landscape would still contain a few clumps of grass to relieve the browns, tans, yellows and grey of the rocks.

I was glad I had had the experience of traveling the road and knew what to bring...and what to leave home.

Joseph and I discussed it late one evening as we sat at the outside table after our meal.

"There will be many who are making this trip for the first time, won't there?"

"Yes, I'm afraid so."

"They won't know what to do, will they? I mean what they need to take in the way of clothing or food?"

"No, they won't. I wish there were some way everyone who was going would be able to bring what they need. I know each time we've gone to Jerusalem, there have always been some who needed either clothing or food along the way."

"I honestly don't know what to do about it, do you?"

Joseph picked up my hand and held it tightly. "Mary, the only thing I can suggest that we take more than we need. That way, we can share with those who don't bring enough."

I looked at Joseph, leaned over and kissed his cheek. "You are such a loving, giving man, Joseph. How was I ever lucky enough to get you?"

He smiled. "You didn't get me. You always had me." He rose, still holding my hand and pulled me up, then toward him. "This belly is really standing in our way now, isn't it?" He laughed down at me. "Let's go to bed."

Lying in bed long after Joseph slept, my thoughts returned to the imminent journey.

There would be no leader to schedule our stops or starts. I was particularly concerned we might have little order to the group.

The morning we left, Daniel insisted we take the donkey I'd given him on my return from Elizabeth's.

"What a wonderful brother you are!" I exclaimed, and tried to hug him. His face turned as red as the setting sun. I laughed and tweaked his chin. "Now, don't go growing a beard while we're gone these two weeks," I chided.

"I won't, Mary, and stop teasing." He had grown so much, he was rapidly becoming a young man. It bothered me to see him so grown up. Daniel recently attended his Bar Mitzvah, and the bit of white fuzz under his nose when I returned from Elizabeth's had thickened.

Occasionally, his voice couldn't decide if it wanted to go up or down. Then, his embarrassment caused him to turn red in the face, especially if there were girls anywhere near.

He was a handsome, dark young man with a large nose and a mouth that grinned a lot. Arms and legs didn't quite match the rest of his body at times either. He sometimes had the look of a young colt. Often, he couldn't decide whether to walk like a man or romp like a boy.

As I kissed Leah, I was reminded she was becoming a young lady. Curves were still just a hint on her body. She was much shorter than Daniel who treated her like a special little doll. Her dark curly hair framed an elfin face. She stopped going to the synagogue for school and Mother now taught her about the prophets as she had taught me. Leah loved learning as much as I had, so Mother's job was easy.

Daniel and Leah packed food into baskets and filled goatskins. When Joseph and I packed, we carried the necessary clothing for each of us. We knew the Baby would arrive while we were on the journey, so swaddling clothes and other essentials were added for Him.

"Just something I hope you won't need." Leah said, as she handed me a gift. I spread it out to look at it. She had made the baby special robes and a tiny girdle. Tears swam in my eyes as I hugged and kissed her.

Though Mother had protested my going earlier, she finally accepted the inevitable and made sure we had everything we might need.

Both families were up early, bidding us farewell. We hugged all members of both families, with each mother giving individual instructions. We all laughed at both of them.

Sarah held my hand a moment and when she let go, there was a shekel in my hand. "Oh, Sarah..." Tears threatened as I looked up at her, knowing how precious this coin was.

"Don't you dare cry, or I will too," she ordered. "Just hurry and get back home." She wiped a tear from her eyes and squeezed me again. "You must not have that baby until you return, either," she ordered. "I want to be the first to hold Him."

Sarah's husband placed his arm around her and explained. "She wants to practice holding babies."

"Are you..?" I asked.

She nodded, that beautiful face of hers beaming.

"We'll hurry home." Joseph promised. "If we don't get started however, we'll never be able to get back."

We walked down the street and out to the countryside, holding the donkey on which our goods were strapped.

The day was overcast and colder than normal. We had packed an extra robe in case the weather turned even wetter and colder. As we left, six of our neighbor families joined us. Leading the donkey along the road, we saw other families appear from low hills, groves, and paths that seemed to begin behind large boulders. The first day, though cloudy, the lively group talked, sang, praised God and got acquainted.

Older men and women had trouble keeping up as we moved over the hills. Younger people slowed and helped the elderly with their belongings. A few children were present. They were thrilled to be allowed to take a journey for the first time. They ran, played, fought and soon tired. Then, any of the group whom the child knew, picked up the smaller ones.

Older children assisted with keeping animals under control. Donkeys were few, but two or three families brought a goat or a sheep or two. These people and their animals walked in the center of the group as on the caravan.

Walking along, leading the donkey, I marveled at the number of people filling the roads. Many were on their way to Jerusalem, we learned. However, I noticed there were almost as many people going in the opposite direction. Someone said they had already registered and were on their way home. Some would proceed to Bethlehem, like us. We all hoped there would be friends or relatives we could stay with.

Our friends gave us a list of names of relatives where we might stay. Others mentioned acquaintances should there be no room with relatives. We weren't exactly worried and knew God would provide. However, looking at the number of people traveling in our direction I thought we might have a problem finding a sleeping place.

The different groups of people on the road were many. Merchant caravans, soldiers and Jews on their way to the Holy City passed by rapidly. We were too crowded to ever become lonely, I thought.

We moved through the Esdraelon Plains rapidly and onto low hills where desert-like conditions existed. Late in the evening of the first day, one man assumed control and we became better organized.

Some of the travelers were lucky enough to find lodgings with people who lived along the route. Most, however, were like us. They stayed with the group. We spread our pallets or cloaks on the ground, then slept fitfully. Joseph tried to give me his cloak, but I refused. I knew, before our journey was complete, we would both be exhausted and he needed to be as warm and rested as possible, too.

That first night, the men agreed on who would stand guard for each hour of the night, so we all felt relatively safe.

Our new leader agreed we would leave earlier in the morning and move faster if possible, so our journey might be shorter.

Along the way, each of us shared food, water, gossip and news. We all grumbled because we were compelled to make the journey. It was especially difficult for many, because the men needed to be in the fields, or to plan for next year or in the mountains to tend their herds.

However, so many had never seen Bethlehem they looked forward to viewing their ancestral home. Conversations usually centered around the city and its history because Jewish men and women were steeped in the lore.

We were especially happy on the second day when a Rabbi joined our caravan. He was a learned man who knew most of the stories of our ancestors. He told us stories of Bethlehem and entertained us with the love story of Boaz and Ruth.

He informed us Boaz was his name. Whether we knew the story of Ruth and Boaz or not, he loved to talk so much he kept the children entertained. He began their education on the subject and most listened.

“Bethlehem was originally called Ephrath. Rachel, the wife of Jacob gave birth to Benjamin on the way to Bethlehem. She died and was buried there,” he informed us. “Many years later,” he continued, “a man, his wife and two sons went to Moab because there was a great famine in Judea. After a while, the man and his two sons died.”

As we walked, we listened. The stories helped fight boredom.

“This left the Mother, Naomi, and two daughters-in-law, Ruth and Orpha. Naomi tried to persuade the two women to stay home and find new husbands. Orpha stayed. Ruth felt there was nothing left for her in Moab and, during the time of her marriage, she had come to love Naomi dearly. So she talked Naomi into taking her to Bethlehem.”

About this time, we stopped for a break during the midday so we could rest for a few moments. We ate our meager rations and drank water from the oasis where we stopped, conserving our water in the goatskins as much as possible.

The weather did not improve as we moved nearer our destination. Rain feathered down at first, then fell harder. We stopped for a short while as some put up tents as a respite from the weather. Sitting under a tent where as many as could crowded in, we all prayed there would be no snow.

Soon, the rain stopped and a pale sun peeked through the clouds. Joseph helped take the tent down and we attempted to dry our clothing as we walked.

When we resumed our Journey, Boaz continued his story. “When Naomi and Ruth arrived in Bethlehem, Naomi had a relative whose name was Boaz. He owned large fields of grain. Ruth, with Naomi’s permission, went to the fields to glean. Boaz saw her and eventually married her. They had a son whose name was Obed. Obed was the father of Jesse and Jesse was the Father of David.” At hearing the name David, the children clapped and began to sing one of his songs. The Rabbi continued the stories until he came to the last of the ancestors. He

ended, stating that the prophet Micah had foretold the coming of the savior of the world. Micah said, “But you, Bethlehem, too little for the clans of Judah, will be the birthplace of the ruler in Israel. His goings forth are from long ago, from the days of eternity.”

The little Rabbi continued. “Therefore, He will give them up until the time when she who is in labor has borne a child. Then the remainder of His brethren will return to the sons of Israel.”

Through the rest of the day, the children entertained each other by retelling the story. Often, they sang various songs of David.

As the third day passed, we walked up hill and down, over rocks and pebbles, stopping at caravansaries when possible to fill our skins and to water the animals. Each time we stopped I wondered if I would have the energy to start again.

As we arose on the morning of the fourth day, I was so weary I wondered if I would last the day. My belly poked out so far it seemed I would never see my miserably tired feet again. As we moved uphill, I leaned backwards in order to balance myself. It was such a precarious position, I felt each moment I would fall. I just knew I’d become a ball and roll back down the hill like the roly bugs we had played with as children.

Joseph noticed my stance and sat me on the donkey. He refused to let me walk farther.

Though we had made good time on our journey, it was the fifth morning before we arrived at the gates of Jerusalem. Many of our fellow travelers left us and turned toward the city. They were so excited, feet that had barely been able to take a step just moments before now almost flew over the pebbly field. Their gestures and the pleased, excited faces told the entire story. Their happiness that the journey was ended, the idea that they finally had a chance to see the city they had dreamed of all their lives, was overwhelming to many.

Some stood in awe and stared at the magnificence. Others walked through the enormous gates, gawking at the masses of traders and their wares. We heard children scream with delight as we wearily made our way onward.

Some members of the group going to Bethlehem and farther south stopped to admire this most glorious sight. Those who had never made the journey before stopped to see a part of the city.

We moved slowly past the travelers who stared at the tremendous gates of Jerusalem. Their gazes swept to the mansions and temples that rose above the gates and walls of the city. Inching along, we heard them exclaim in astonishment at the sights of the various races of people selling everything under the sun.

We only had a few miles to go before reaching our destination, but near the mount of Olives, we stopped and Joseph fixed our meal.

“Joseph,” I said softly as he ate. “Did you hear the Rabbi?”

“I wasn’t listening, Mary. I was thinking of you and how worried I am about you.” He chewed his bread and cheese, then swallowed wine.

“I really am fine, Joseph. We discussed the fact that I’m supposed to be here, in this place, in Bethlehem. Remember?”

He nodded, but the worry crease in his forehead remained until I reached up and smoothed it away.

We knew we must get to Bethlehem because we might have problems finding a place to sleep. Though a little past noontime, the sky was grey with just a tinge of orange and yellow. The weather was a little cooler and the wind was blowing slightly.

I was too exhausted to think of food and was grateful Joseph didn’t notice that I wasn’t eating. Suddenly, a slight pain began in my lower back. It didn’t get any worse, so I ignored it.

Soon, Joseph fed the donkey and I repacked our food and the wine, then sat, waiting for the donkey to finish eating.

Sitting upright, I must have dozed off because the next thing I knew, Joseph was shaking me. “Mary, we’re very close to the town. You must get up. The weather doesn’t look good and I want to try to find a place for us to sleep tonight.”

I sat up, feeling as old as the hills we had traveled through. I rubbed my back. “Does your back hurt?” Joseph asked.

“It’s just a little uncomfortable.” I looked up at him. He was holding a small container of goat’s milk and a small hunk of bread with cheese. “Here, eat this. It’ll give you strength.”

I could only eat a few bites, then gave the rest back to Joseph. He took my hand and helped me rise. He sat me atop the donkey and we were off on the rest of our journey.

As we moved slowly toward Bethlehem, a few clouds floated across the expanse and I was thankful when the sun emerged, if only for a few moments.

Everything bothered me today. “Will we ever get there?” I complained, after hanging onto the donkey for what seemed like hours. The sun had finally managed to stay out for awhile, warming all of us.

“Just a little farther.” Joseph pointed. The donkey wasn’t interested in moving rapidly, so it was late in the day as we neared Bethlehem. I barely noticed the green fields and lush olive groves. I was so weary, I would have been happy to lie under one of the trees and stay there. I knew I couldn’t rest, however.

My pains had begun and we must find a place to rest.

I didn’t want to say anything to Joseph because he was worried enough already. Finally, I simply had to tell him about the pains and let him know in such a way he wouldn’t be too worried.

“Joseph,” As we moved, I held fast to his hand. I looked up at him and said. “You know my time for delivery is near.”

“I know.” He answered. “You aren’t having any symptoms, are you?”

I smiled. “Don’t get excited, but the pains have begun.”

“What?” He stopped and held my hand so tightly, I thought he might break a few bones. The donkey protested when we stopped. He apparently sensed the end of the journey.

Before he could say anything else, I added. “They aren’t bad yet, but I think we have to find a place to have the baby. We need a midwife too, if possible.”

“Mary, if you can tell me what to do, I can do it, but…” his voice trailed off.

I laughed. “Joseph, it won’t come to that, I’m sure. We’ll just pray and God will provide for us.”

His look of relief was so serious I almost laughed aloud.

After reaching the city, we went from house to house, to find lodging. There were too many arrivals to register for the census. None of our friend’s friends had room for us.

We finally agreed we should spend the money Sarah gave us for a room at an Inn. We checked each inn we found. There was not a spare inch for anyone to lie down. At the last inn we visited, the man said, “You’ve told me the inns you’ve visited. There is only one more in Bethlehem. I doubt he will have space either, but you can check with him.”

Joseph thanked him and we trudged wearily in the direction he pointed. As I looked toward the sky, I felt something wet on my face. Raindrops. I didn’t mention it to Joseph, hoping he would not notice.

Walking a little farther we heard music and laughter. “It has to be the one he mentioned, Joseph.”

Joseph tied the donkey to a stake, then said nothing as he helped me up the steps. I saw that the building was erected by stones fitted together. The work looked pretty sloppy to me, and I wondered what Joseph thought about it.

We stood on the top step, looking in. The doors were open and the noise was deafening. Glancing through the door, I saw a huge room. There were so many people mingling...talking, singing and dancing...I couldn't keep up with it all.

The walls of the room were crude and one could tell the carpentry work was not the best. There were spaces between the boulders where the weather could enter...hot, cold, or rainy.

As we entered the room, no one even looked in our direction.

There was a bar across the entire end of the room, with various containers of liquid visible. Food was displayed on the counter and people were constantly going to the bar, eating a few bites, then returning to their groups.

Joseph approached the Innkeeper who was almost as big around as he was tall. A short man with a fierce mustache, his tiny little eyes were almost swallowed with fat. They were merry, however, as he kept his eyes on those who were eating and drinking.

The closeness of the room only made the odors of the wine, unwashed bodies and food more pronounced. I became nauseous. I swallowed and took a deep breath as I stood beside Joseph, waiting for what was to happen. When Joseph asked about a room, the Innkeeper shook his head.

"None?" Joseph asked, putting his arm around me.

"Nothing," the owner said.

"As you can see, my wife is with child. She is about to deliver." Joseph's voice was getting louder. "We must have a place for her to lie down."

"I'm sorry, sir. There is not one bed and certainly not a room." The Innkeeper seemed to be a compassionate man and his voice showed concern. "I hope you can find a place. Should you need a midwife, my wife practices. I'm sure she'll try to help in a situation such as this."

What a blessing. There would be a midwife available and Joseph wouldn't have to deliver this child. The pains still were not hard, but they were becoming steady.

Every Jewish girl knew how to assist in a delivery. The midwife at Elizabeth's taught me a great deal about the birthing of a baby, as well. Now that it was happening to me, I remembered nothing of the lessons.

Just then, the Innkeeper's wife came from a back room with a tray of empty cups in her hand. She took one look at me, and saw the pain cross my face. "Here, Matthew," she ordered, and gave the tray to him. "Are they looking for a place to rest?"

"Yes. His wife is about to deliver, but we don't have another inch for someone to sleep, much less a room for privacy." His voice was kind, but that didn't help.

She looked at me, thoughtfully. "We have a place where she can lie."

Joseph and I looked at each other and smiled. God had provided.

"The place where our animals are kept is warm, dry and clean," she said, facing us. "Would that do?"

"Yes, that will be fine. Thank you very much." We were used to being around our animals at home, even sleeping with them when the need arose. Besides, she had said it was clean.

She led us around to the back of the Inn, as icy rain drops continued to fall. I thought I detected a snow flake or two mixed with the rain. Attached to the Inn was a small building made from clods, with a roof of mud and boughs. We stepped into the warm space where animals were already bedded down for the night. It looked so cozy and inviting, all I could think of was my desire to lie down and sleep.

As Joseph led our donkey through the door he brayed, greeting the donkey that was already in the room. There were a few sheep, as well as a goat. An ox stood, chewing, looking at everything without interest.

Enormous feeding troughs were filled with straw. The lady checked the trough manger farthest from the door and remarked. "This will do fine for a place to sleep."

She started to return to the Inn when I let out a moan. My pains had begun in earnest. She flew back to me as Joseph stood with a stricken look on his face.

“Come, sir. Let me take care of her. I’m a midwife.” She turned to Joseph. “I’m sorry I don’t have a birthing chair. I loaned it to a friend a few days ago.”

Joseph helped her make a pallet on the straw. She told Joseph to unpack our animal and tie him so he would be out of the way.

Joseph rushed to get everything unpacked from the donkey. He placed them where he was instructed, near the manger. Tying the donkey, he stood, looking at the midwife, wondering what to do next.

“Sir, if you will be so good as to step outside, I’ll take care of your wife and child.”

He came to me, kissed me softly and whispered. “Mary, my love, I will be right outside. I love you.”

“I love you too, Joseph. Please get something to eat and then rest.” I watched as he walked from the room, looking back at me. When I knew he was gone, I turned to the lady. “Please, what is your name?”

“It’s Ruth.” She smiled and it lit up her entire thin face. “I heard him call you Mary, so you and I shall work together to bring this little one into the world. For now, I must go get my pack. It will only take a minute. Will you be all right?”

I nodded as a pain hit rather hard.

Chapter 12

When they were both out of the room, I could let myself succumb to the fright that threatened to overwhelm me. Suddenly, intense pains began in earnest. I was so frightened I could barely think. When the pains occurred, I pounded the make shift bed as tears coursed down my cheeks. I wiped tears from my face with the back of my hand, leaving a residue of tiny bits of straw.

I suppose I was feeling sorry for myself, but I felt like a child as I sobbed. I wanted my mother. I had never, even in the three months I was visiting Elizabeth, missed Mother as much as I did at this moment. She should have been here to hold my hand, to lead me through the birthing process.

I was in the midst of strangers. They were good, kind and compassionate strangers, but strangers, none-the-less. I was homesick. I needed my Father. My brother and sister as well as Joseph’s parents and Sarah I missed dreadfully. In my despair, I realized my only needs were for my home and family.

Instead, I was in a distant place, surrounded by animals with a stranger who would assist at the birth of my child. Joseph looked so lost and lonely as he left the hut where the baby was to be born, I wanted to comfort him. I sniffled, wiped my eyes, but the tears would not stop.

I felt a warm cloth pressed against my face. “Go ahead and cry. It’ll make you feel better.” Ruth stated, her voice calm and caring. “Let me wipe your face.” She had entered the room without my knowledge.

She was as thin a woman as her husband was fat. Dark eyes displayed love and compassion. Her hands were slim and work-worn. Though about the age of my mother, wrinkles on her face were barely discernable. Her smiles as she worked with me brightened her entire face.

Watching her, I knew God sent her to care for me. She bustled about, spreading knife, string, salt and clean cloths onto a bushel. This basket was upturned and made into a table, just as we did at home. She brought a container of water and set it to one side.

“I asked your husband to bring a few more skins of water.” She smiled at me in a conspiratorial manner. “That will keep him busy for a while.” She stooped down beside me. “Mary, can you raise yourself a little? I’d like to place clean cloths beneath you.”

“Of course,” and I raised myself from the pallet. She spread quite a bit of hay, then the cloth on top. She removed the pallet and had me lie back down.

The cramps...no...it was more than cramps. The agony came in waves. I felt like my body was tearing to bits. Once, I felt I left the earth. I saw myself floating over the stable, watching what happened below.

My belly became a huge pulsating knot as the Baby moved to get out of His warm cocoon. He pushed against my ribs so hard I wondered if they might crack. The mound moved down and, for a moment, the pain subsided.

It was then I noticed how quiet the animals were. None had made a sound since my labor intensified. I looked around at them. They all seemed to be watching, waiting for something to happen. It was almost as though they knew a momentous event was occurring and they understood.

I wanted to scream...cry out, but I knew Joseph was just outside. I didn't want him to hear me. Once, I almost wanted to curse God who had given me this burden to bear. So much pain, so much travail just to bring His Son into this world. Was it worth it? I asked myself.

I twisted and turned, trying to move away from the torture. In spite of my efforts, it followed wherever I turned.

Ruth stayed near, holding my hand as I squeezed hers so tightly I felt I was breaking her bones. She encouraged me to breathe as the animals did when they were giving birth. It gave a little relief from the torment. She told me to scream if I felt like it; for many reasons, I felt I couldn't.

"It would frighten Joseph to death if I screamed." I tried to laugh, but was barely able to smile. "He is so sensitive."

"I'm sure your husband knows what happens when birth occurs. He expects to hear you. Don't try to hold those screams in. They sometime help to relieve the pain." She wiped my face with a fluffy cloth, her voice murmuring softly. "Just let go."

"Joseph isn't the only reason I can't let myself cry aloud, Ruth." A small pain hit and I panted, trying to go with the pain as she had shown me. It subsided. "You have customers in the Inn, entertaining themselves. I can't intrude on their celebration...whatever it is they're happy about."

Jealousy hit me and I raged silently that anyone could enjoy themselves tonight when I was in so much agony.

I gasped as anguish shot through my body. This pain felt like it was an enemy, tearing bones from flesh. I gasped at the intensity.

Ruth grasped my hand, "Go with it, Mary. Push."

I pushed, attempting to rid my body of this horror. When the pain finally subsided, I took a deep breath as I clung to her hand.

I stared up at this lovely woman. "I can't make noises, Ruth. On possibly the busiest night of the year, your husband is taking care of all the work in the Inn while you're with me. I couldn't make a disturbance and run some of your livelihood away."

She smiled as she wiped my face. She bent down and kissed my cheek. "Honey, those people won't hear you. And it won't matter if they do."

"There are the animals, too. Smelling blood is bad enough, but they might really get upset should I begin to scream. It isn't fair to them." Another pain hit as water poured down my face, sweat mingling with tears.

She wiped the sweat and tears from my face and cleansed my body frequently. The soiled cloths and straw were often replaced. When this happened, the sweet smelling straw killed the odor of the blood I was spilling.

The pain hit me like a cart slamming into the side of a building. I couldn't take any more. "Oh, God," I moaned. "Please let This Child of Yours be born soon." I twisted. I turned. I panted. I breathed with a rasp. I clutched Ruth's hands.

Finally, in the darkest part of the night I felt my insides give way. Something slipped from my body. I rested. I was so exhausted I barely knew the Baby was born until I heard His soft cry.

"It's a beautiful little Boy, Mary." Her voice was tender.

I rested as she cut the umbilical cord, tied it, then cleaned the baby. She wiped his entire body with salt, to keep any potential infection at bay. She then wrapped him in swaddling clothes. She laid him in my arms as the after-birth spewed from me. Then she cleansed me, and I lay back on fresh straw, with a clean pallet beneath me.

I barely heard her tell Joseph to enter. I knew he was there when he stooped down beside us. He tenderly moved a tress of wet hair from my forehead, then kissed me deeply. "Oh, Mary," and I saw tears in his eyes. "The pain you endured to bring this Little One into the world must have been terrible. I wish I could have shared it with you." His voice was tender and oh so soft. "May God bless you always."

He reached out a large, frozen, work worn finger and gently touched the tender skin of our new born. "How beautiful He is." I sat up and Joseph helped me to my feet, as I held Jesus. I turned and laid Jesus in the manger on the sweet smelling straw. Could any child be more wonderful, I asked myself. And knew that when I had other children I would feel differently, no matter how hard I attempted to show no favoritism.

I lay down beside the Baby and closed my eyes as Ruth covered us both with a cloak. Joseph stooped near us and held my hand. "Rest," he said, kissing me on the forehead. His steps were quiet as he left me. When he opened the door, I heard the reveling still going on in the Inn.

I rested, nestling Jesus in my arms, dozing. I heard Joseph when he returned. I didn't wake completely, but I could feel him hovering, protecting us.

Soon, I heard Ruth return and opened my eyes. There were snowflakes on her shoulders, but her face held a puzzled expression. "The strangest thing has happened. There's a huge star standing right over this hut." And she pointed upward.

I started to rise. "Stay, Mary," Joseph cautioned. "I'll see what it's all about."

When he returned, he led a group of shepherds into the room. The older man said, "I'm Abraham." And he ducked his head in greeting.

He was a tall, thin man, with wind-burned complexion. His twinkling brown eyes missed nothing as he glanced around. He rubbed his hands together to alleviate the coldness. The thatch of grey hair which covered his head and hung over his ears held tiny flakes of snow, softly melting onto the ground. His mustache was thick and grey, but neatly combed. Sandals covered long, thin, sand encrusted feet and his cloak was dusty, but wrapped around him tightly. On his bony arm he carried a crook. Two younger men entered behind Abraham. "These are my sons," Abraham swept his hand toward younger men as he began introductions. "They are Jeremiah and Amos."

Jeremiah stepped forward, bowed a moment, then stepped back as two boys entered. "These are my boys, Obadiah and Saul."

I noticed these entrants were quite young. As they crowded in behind the men, they reminded me of my brother. They were at once graceful when bowing and awkward as they shifted from one foot to the other. Maybe they were old enough for their Bar Mitzva, I thought, but barely. They looked around the rough building, noticing each animal, then on to the mangers, as well as the few tools visible.

"And this is my son, Jonah," Amos said, stepping forward. I thought Jonah must be no more than 10 years old. He was shy and stared at me in awe.

As I looked closely, it was obvious they were all part of the same family. They were tall, thin men, wearing robes which I'm sure their wives or mothers made. Each had brown eyes that twinkled at some unknown, unheard joke. Each wore a girdle and a camel's hair cloak.

Each also wore a head veil pulled back, which partially covered their thick black, straight hair. Though the odor they brought was as bad as most sheep herders, it didn't seem to matter.

"We have come to see the babe that was born." Abraham stated in his deep voice.

I hurriedly picked up Jesus, holding him too tightly. Alarmed, I stared from Joseph to the shepherds as Jesus squirmed.

“How did you know about a baby?” Joseph asked, his voice abrupt and harsh. “Who told you?”

“The Angels told us,” Abraham replied in a hushed, reverent voice. “We were out on the hillside watching our sheep...”

Jeremiah interrupted. “We’ve been having troubles with animals who prey on our sheep and we were keeping an especially close watch...”

Amos exclaimed. “Suddenly this bright light appeared above us...”

Obadiah flung his arms in the air, the crook nearing the animals, causing the donkeys to stamp their feet and bray in alarm. “And I have never been so scared...”

His enthusiasm subsided as Jeremiah spoke sternly, “Obediah!”

Jonah could contain himself no longer. “It was an Angel.” He declared, with an emphatic nod of his head. “It stood right in front of us, like we could reach out and touch it. It said it was the Glory of the Lord and the light shined all around us.”

“We sure was scared.” Obadiah repeated.

“It was the brightest thing I ever saw.” Saul said, his voice filled with wonder. “That Angel brought a whole bunch of Angels with them and they...”

Abraham had let the others tell as much of the story as he intended and began again. “This first Angel told us not to be afraid. He said he had brought great news and a lot of joy to all people.” He shook his head in bewilderment. “We didn’t know what he meant, but the Angel just kept on talking. He said that in the city of David...” He nodded to himself, then looked at us. “That’s Bethlehem, you know.”

We nodded back when he again stopped. “The angel told us there was a Savior born who is Christ the Lord.” His voice became quiet with reverence as he talked.

Amos took up the story. “The angel told us this bright star and the angels appearing were signs. And then he said there was a babe wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.”

Saul interrupted. “And when that Angel got through talking, a whole other bunch of Angels appeared and started singing...”

Amos’ eyes looked as bright as stars themselves, as he concluded. “They sang, ‘Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to all men with whom God is well pleased.’”

Jeremiah said, his voice hushed. “Suddenly it got dark, except for this very big star shining right over us. As soon as we could get the sheep into the cave, out of the weather and safe from animals, we followed it here.”

“And there that babe is,” Saul sang out, pointing to Jesus, who was sleeping.

The old man spoke in a reverent voice. “It is a wondrous thing that has happened.”

They moved nearer to Jesus, but held their distance. They fell down and worshiped the Baby, saying prayers to God. When finished, they stood, looked at Joseph and me, then nodded in unison and without another word, left the stable.

Ruth stayed in a corner of the hut while the shepherds were there. I could tell by her face she was wondering what had just happened. It was impossible to explain to her. She could not know she was the instrument God used to help bring His Son into the world.

She walked over to me. “Mary, I don’t know why a star came and stood above this cave. I don’t know what happened with the shepherds, and I’m not sure I believe what they said. I’m not even sure I want to know.”

I placed my hand on her arm. “Ruth, I can never thank you enough for what you’ve done this night. Somehow, Joseph and I will pay for all your labors and the kindnesses you have shown.”

She hugged me closely. "Maybe I've seen a miracle, but I don't know how or why. I do know I've never participated at a birth when I felt so in touch with God." She walked over to the manger and looked at Jesus who was awake.

"The only pay you owe is to bring Him to visit if you return to Bethlehem."

"I will," I promised, as I readied myself to feed him.

"Come, Joseph," Ruth suggested. She picked up the dirty clothes as well as the rest of her materials. "We'll get food for Mary. She must keep up her strength." They left the cave, Joseph looking back at his family with a proud smile.

Later, I heard many listened as the story of the shepherds and a star was told. Few believed. Those who had been dancing and dining and having a good time in the building where the star appeared, said little. Later, I heard there was quite a bit of talk in Bethlehem and surrounding areas.

I kept all these happenings in my heart, wondering at the behavior of the shepherds. Would there be more events to remember and ponder?

As Jesus pulled at my breasts, I knew that never had a sensation been as wonderful or as fulfilling for a woman. Her child must depend on her for his total well-being.

This was what God put woman on earth for, I thought. She was to nurture her newborn and give sustenance to her husband. She was to be a handmaiden to the Lord and to lead her family in the right way. Now, I had a tiny bit of knowledge as to what being a mother meant.

This realization frightened me more than anything ever had. As Jesus ate, I wondered. How could I be so much to so many different people? Was I capable? I didn't know. Was I capable of leading this Jesus, whom I had just given birth to, in the way His Father decreed? Could I be a loving wife to Joseph? Could I be a good mother to any other children I might birth? I didn't know. I said aloud, "God will lead me."

I unwrapped Jesus' swaddling clothes and examined him from head to toe. His little fingers were long and slender. They curled around my finger, holding on tightly. Brown eyes stared up at me as though he could really see.

When a cow lowed softly Jesus turned His head, then swiftly returned to eating. As He ate, I looked around at this poor place where He had been born. True, it was warm and clean. I hoped and prayed if we had other babies there'd be a bed for them. I also prayed we'd be home around our people so they could rejoice with us.

Jesus' entire body was beautifully made. His skin was as soft as a new born lamb. My fingers stroked the down on His head, then I leaned over and kissed the softness.

When He stopped eating, I picked up the swaddling cloths. I held Him tightly for a moment then kissed His button of a nose. I was rewrapping Him as Joseph returned with a tray for me. He placed the tray on a bushel as I swaddled Jesus, then laid Him back in the manger.

Standing near the manger, I drank the soup Ruth prepared. It was hot and tasty and served with steaming bread. I knew I was gorging myself, but couldn't seem to stop.

"Slow down, honey." Joseph admonished with a smile. "You'll be sick."

I grinned at him. "Joseph, I've never been so hungry in my entire life. I hope having babies won't always do this to me or I'll be as fat as Father's favorite ox."

Placing the bowl on the tray, I said, "It would be nice if we had the cradle you made."

I put the last bite of bread in my mouth and chewed.

"He'll have the cradle soon." Joseph promised. "We'll be on our way as soon as we go to Jerusalem to the Temple."

"I had forgotten that. We must find a place to stay for forty days, until my time of uncleanness is over."

“Yes, and we must get Jesus circumcised and make a trip to the temple so you can make sacrifices and I can redeem Jesus.”

“I can’t wait,” I said, my impatience showing. “That donkey sure is a blessing.” I then walked across the cave to check on Jesus.

Joseph caught my arm, stopping my forward movement.

“Mary, slow down.” Joseph said. “I want to say something and I want you to listen.”

“What is it?” I stopped and looked up into his eyes that glowed with love and something else...reverence?

“I know what you went through must have been torture.” His voice was so tender I could barely hear him. “It would have been all right to scream. Don’t you know I understood what was happening?”

“Joseph,” I reached up and kissed him.

“Oh, my darling little Mary,” He took me in his arms. “Don’t you know men feel the pain their wives are enduring?”

I thought about that a moment. “I honestly didn’t know that.” I put my hand in his and held on tightly. I knew Joseph was sensitive, but I didn’t understand until that moment just how sensitive he really was.

I laughed at him. “Next time I’ll scream, I promise.”

I loosed my hands from his as he walked to the manger. He stood looking at Jesus, then picked Him up. As he stared at the Baby, tears formed in his eyes and he held the Child tightly. It was almost as though he could never let anything hurt this Infant. I knew in that moment Joseph felt this was as much his child as any he would ever have.

Soon after Jesus’ birthday, we decided to stay in Bethlehem longer than planned. It happened this way.

The next morning I awoke to a soft mewling sound. I turned on my bed of straw and looked at the perfect little face looking back at me. As I fed him, Ruth entered.

“Please come and have a meal with us. We would really like to get to know you.” She grinned down at Jesus and patted His face. “Besides, I can’t let Him go home yet.”

I looked at Joseph and he nodded. “We’d like that very much.”

When Ruth left, Joseph brought water and I bathed the baby and myself.

As we stepped from the hut, I shivered and made sure Jesus was covered warmly. Though the sun peeked behind a playful cloud, and there was no snow this morning, it was still cold.

“I wonder if all the people have left the Inn,” Joseph remarked, as we both noticed the lack of people milling about. It was so quiet I couldn’t believe it was the same Inn we entered last night.

Looking at the building, we could tell it needed repairs. “I wonder if I could work to repay them for their kindness,” Joseph said quietly, as we walked toward the open door.

The soft, gentle sway of almond trees outside the door scented the air. There was a puff of wind and a few pink and white blooms dropped to the ground. We hoped they hadn’t bloomed too early so the nuts would not grow and mature. A small limb from a shrub, possibly broken by a visitor, swept across the yard.

Entering the room, the odors of food and drinks tantalized our appetites. I looked around as we entered, being unable to fully appreciate it the night before. Now, only Ruth and her husband sat at a highly-polished table.

“Come, sit with us.” Matthew invited, a smile lighting up his thin face. “There’s hot tea and bread, as well as juice. The honey cakes will be done soon. Please help yourselves.” He stood and held out his hand to shake Joseph’s, then leaned toward me. His soft hand reached tenderly toward Jesus. “So this is the little one who was born in our barn.”

I showed Jesus off as Ruth poured tea. She then reached to take the Baby, now clean and fed, to cuddle Him. I picked up my cup. "It sure is quiet, isn't it?" I said, then sipped the tea.

"It always is after everyone leaves in the mornings." Matthew said. "Last night was really momentous, though. We're happy to sit and breathe for a few minutes."

The caravans had earlier resumed their journeys. The visitors, animal and human, who stayed at the inn overnight had departed. People who came to Bethlehem to register were on their way home, as well.

There was barely a sound, except the grunts and other noises emanating from Jesus.

As we sat around the table, Joseph noticed a large splinter hanging from the side. "Do you have an axe or knife I can cut this splinter away?"

Matthew nodded. "Anything else?"

"If you have a plane, then I can smooth it so it doesn't hurt anyone." He suggested. "I'm afraid the next person who sits here just might get hurt."

Matthew was studying Joseph as he worked with the splinter. "Are you a carpenter, Joseph?"

"Yes," he replied. "and I'm happy to fix this. It's the least I can do after the way you and Ruth cared for us." He bent the piece of wood back and forth until he could do the repairs.

"Joseph, I'll get whatever tools you need if you and Mary will stay with us awhile. We need an enormous amount of work done in this place," he stated, as he waved a hand to encompass the entire inn. "We've needed repairs for quite a long time, but it's impossible to hire a dependable worker."

Ruth laughed and patted Matthew's hand affectionately. "Poor Matthew can't pick up a tool without bruising, or cutting his hand or something even more dramatic."

His thick jowls jiggled as he grinned, nodding in agreement. "Incidentally, Ruth and I have discussed ways to make our place into a really good caravansary. We'd like to build more rooms and furnish them better." He looked around the room as though he could already see his dreams fulfilled. "But we could never find a carpenter who was dependable."

Joseph looked at me, but I could not give him an answer. "Matthew, will you let Mary and me discuss this before we decide?"

"Of course."

"I have to tell you Matthew, we must go to Jerusalem so Mary can offer her sacrifices. I must also pay to redeem our Son at the temple."

"Of course. If you and Mary decide to remain in Bethlehem, you'll have a place to stay, with work for as long as you wish." He poured more grape juice into our cups. "I have enough work for many months. I also have friends who would be happy to hire someone they can trust."

Later, while Jesus slept, with Ruth watching Him, Joseph and I walked around. In the distance, mountain tops sparkled with snow. Lower down, we saw splotches of green, scarlet, amber and tan. Nearer to us, clay of the road running by the Inn glowed red in the sunshine. We wore robes with cowls to keep as warm as possible.

"What do you think, Mary?" Though the sky was beginning to threaten rain or worse, dust from the courtyard flew in little swirls around our feet as we walked. Small pebbles lay underfoot as well. I saw where Ruth had tried to grow flowers. Stalks were brown from the cold. With so many people arriving each day, very few plants survived. The survivors wilted in either the cold or the heat.

"Should we stay in Bethlehem or go home?" He stooped and picked up a rock as he used to do in the mountains around Nazareth.

"Joseph, I don't know." I stopped and lifted my foot. Joseph held my arm as I removed a pebble from my sandal. "This job may be perfect for us right now. You said work was getting very scarce at home, didn't you?"

As we walked, we talked about conditions back home. “Yes. Remember, Joseph, since Herod sent soldiers to Nazareth, people are saving their money. They know taxes will increase. Some are afraid they may have to flee their homes.”

We stopped and Joseph looked in the distance as though he could see all the way to Nazareth.

“Matthew told us we’d have a place to stay Joseph, and though we’ve just met, I really like Ruth. She’s such a nice person and treats us like family.”

“It’s all right with you if we stay?” I loved Joseph for taking my feelings into consideration before making a decision.

“I can’t abide not being home with our families, but we must do what we think is best for us.”

When we told Matthew and Ruth we were staying, they took us upstairs to a room furthest from the dining area.

“I know this isn’t the best room in the world, but it will be quieter than the rest.” Matthew’s voice held hope as he asked, “Will this be all right?”

“Don’t you rent this every night?” Joseph asked.

I looked around the room. There were no furnishings. The room was merely a bare floor and walls. However, two windows gave quite a bit of light in the daytime. It was quite large and had glass on the windows.

Looking more closely, I felt it had a great deal of potential. The walls and floors were clean, the glass panes were a plus as far as I was concerned.

“People furnish their own pallets when we rent it.” Matthew said, “If we hire you, we can save money by paying you a smaller salary.” Matthew slapped Joseph on the back and his belly shook as he laughed.

Joseph smiled and they shook hands. “We’ll take the job and the room. That is, if you don’t mind if I make a few pieces of furniture for it.”

“I’ll even give you the wood.” Matthew said and he and Joseph went downstairs. I stayed for a while, envisioning what could be done to make the room livable.

The first job was to build a table. Joseph had it completed before the day was over. As he worked on the table, I wrote mother to inform her of our decision. The next caravan heading in the direction of Nazareth would take the letter for us.

That night as we lay on our pallets, Jesus between us, I looked toward the sky. I smiled as Joseph’s muted snores sounded. Millions of stars twinkled as I watched the half-moon rise.

Was this what God wanted for us? I asked myself. Where was Gabriel tonight?

A hyena screamed and a jackal barked. I glanced at Jesus. His breathing was slow and regular. He smiled in his sleep as I moved him to my other side and snuggled closer to Joseph on our pallet. Still sleeping, Joseph placed his arm around me and rested his head on mine.

A few weeks later Jeremiah, Father’s friend, the caravan leader, brought mother’s answering scroll. When I unrolled it, my hands shook. I was so happy to hear from home.

Mother wrote:

“We’re so disappointed you won’t be home soon, we can hardly wait to see our Grandson. Of course, you and Joseph, as well. We understand why you’re staying. There’s little work here at the moment because people still don’t know what Herod will do.

“If Joseph has a good position we all agree it will be better for you and your family to stay there for awhile.

“Too, when you begin your journey home, travel will be easier because Jesus will be older.

“We are taking care of your house with help from Joseph’s family. They talk with us frequently and miss not being able to run in to see you both when they desire.

“Sarah’s little belly is rounding out, but it’s still quite a while before the anticipated birth. All in Nazareth send their love and blessings on the three of you.”

I read the scroll so many times Joseph said I would wear it out. I finally tied it with a piece of colored string and placed it so I could see it when I became homesick.

Chapter 13

After eight days, Jesus was circumcised.

I could not attend because, according to the Law, I had to remain separate from all religious rites for 40 days after giving birth. In fact, for the first seven days I was considered unclean.

Now, we must travel to Jerusalem for the rites of purification and sacrifice. We left our donkey at the Inn as we began our short journey.

Though the day was bright and sunny, it was cold when we left the Inn. I wrapped Jesus snugly knowing he would stay warm. Wispy clouds played games across the sky, painting pictures of animals, buildings, forests. Though the temperature was cooler than I liked, it made walking comfortable.

Joseph and I strode happily, chatting, enjoying freedom from work for the day.

Holding tightly to Jesus, we joined a small group of people also headed for the City of David. Some walked rapidly; others rode donkeys; many walked slowly so as not to tire too rapidly. We planned to return to Bethlehem before nightfall, so we outdistanced most of the people, leaving stragglers behind.

Many of the women looked at Jesus. Comments flew. “How beautiful He is.” “What a good baby He is.” “How lucky you are to have Him.”

We said little, only thanked them.

We stopped once, away from the crowds. The shade of a tree on the Mount of Olives gave me the privacy to feed Jesus. Soon, we rejoined rapidly-increasing crowds.

We moved rapidly. Sweat popped to the surface of our skin. Rocks and pebbles found their way inside our sandals and we shook them loose as we continued.

Large oak trees in the distant hills caught our eyes. Sycamores, with their spreading limbs were a common sight. As we neared Jerusalem, the fronds of palm trees drooped since there was not a breath of air stirring.

We ignored most of the cold-injured vegetation along the road. We were too intent on our pilgrimage.

Suddenly, I looked up. “Look, Joseph, the Temple!”

Over everything...the enormous gate, one of Herod’s Palaces, his arena and other buildings...stood this magnificent edifice. Erected of white limestone boulders, there was so much gold inlaid, it looked as if it were completely made of the precious metal.

We stood completely still as we contemplated the beauty. “I read some place that one of those stones can weigh over two thousand pounds.” I remarked.

“That’s true.” Joseph agreed. “They do. The last time we visited Jerusalem, one of the priests told us about them.”

I held Jesus tightly with one hand while I attempted to shade my eyes with the other.

I looked up at Joseph as he reverently said, “The building is truly magnificent.” He took my hand. “There is so much in Jerusalem to see, each time we come for a feast, it’s like viewing it for the very first time.”

“I’ve only seen a small part of the city.” I said. I gawked in all directions, attempting to view the tops of city palaces and public buildings inside the strong walls.

“Joseph, these walls were built as a defense of the city many years ago, weren’t they?”

“Yes. Someone is always building another wall to encompass a new part of Jerusalem that springs up.” He paused to shake a pebble from his sandal. “People build houses outside walls, Jerusalem becomes bigger, so they build walls to encompass the more recent inhabitants.”

“Maybe that’s why there are so many gates.”

“It could be.” Joseph continued. “Too, Herod built so many new structures, he’s erected walls to enclose all his holdings.”

We entered the Golden Gate with a throng of others...Jews, Arabs, Greeks. Living in Nazareth on the Trade Route, Joseph and I both had a fair knowledge of a number of different languages. In this city though, there was a babble of foreign languages, accents and dialects we didn’t understand.

And the merchants on the narrow street...

The last time I saw and heard them was when I visited Elizabeth. I was still enthralled. I remembered the market places in the narrow, stone-lined streets where tables held displays of trinkets and fine goods.

Some of the sellers erected tents to shade their goods. By the time we reached the city, we were so warm with our extra clothing, that when we passed beneath one of the tents it felt like a cool breeze touched our skin. I checked to see if Jesus was all right, then let my gaze wander again.

Haggling merchants and customers made talk all but impossible. Loud clanging of cymbals and beating of drums, waving flags with accompanying yells, braying of asses, and the strange noises camels make added to the babble. We noticed sheep and goats standing in small herds, their plaintive cries adding to the din.

Scents emanating from cooking food and perfume didn’t entirely mask the odor of unwashed bodies and animals’ offal. We covered our noses with the corner of our robes and attempted to take in all the color and noise at once.

Joseph looked down at me and smiled as we side-stepped a farmer selling fruits and vegetables, dodged merchants who sold domestic animals for sacrifice, and avoided slaves who bought items for their masters as we strode toward the Temple.

Watchful eyes of soldiers never left the crowd funneled in from smaller streets to wider ones.

Striding along in the shimmering sun beating down on the road, I stepped in a crevice cut in the stone. I teetered and thrust Jesus at Joseph as I grabbed for my husband’s arm.

Joseph attempted to hold Jesus and stand still as I worked to remove my foot. I slipped my foot from the crevice, stood straight and moved my foot around.

“Are you all right?”

“Just fine. Shall I take Jesus?”

“I’ll hold him awhile.”

Looking down, he said, “Those slits in the stones sure don’t make walking easy. I wonder why they do that.”

“Deborah told me soldiers frequently ride over these streets so deep slashes are made to keep horses from slipping.”

“I didn’t know that,” he leaned down to hear what I said. “It sure is noisy, isn’t it?”

“Yes.” I laughed and shouted back. “I thought my ear drums would burst when Deborah and I came that day. I felt I’d never be able to take it all in, there’s so much noise. The colors and so many different peoples only add to the confusion.” When we arrived at the outside of the temple, we stopped and stared. Though we had seen the top of the temple from the road, nothing compared to the impact it made on each of us.

The Temple was embellished with marble colonnades. Golden gates and multicolored hangings acted as a backdrop for palm trees, waving in the sudden breeze.

Poppies, anemones and daisies were a kaleidoscope of colors growing around the grass-dotted grounds. Pomegranate trees preened themselves with scarlet flowers, while nearby the gnarled limbs of olive trees became mere dark blobs against the landscape.

I shaded my eyes, looking upward. “It almost hurts your eyes to look at those white walls, doesn’t it?”

He shifted Jesus in his arms and made sure the sun did not get in His eyes. “Yes.”

We paused to gawk at the tallest building. As our crowd thronged through the gate, we saw courtyards so large our town of Nazareth could be set in them many times over. There would still have been extra space.

Others as fascinated as we stared at people conducting businesses in this most holy place of worship. The place was not nearly as noisy as the streets we originally entered.

Everywhere I looked there were people: musicians, treasurers, sacrificers and paid priests. Staring at ordinary people, priests, and others, I asked, “Joseph, are all these people needed to run God’s house?”

“The musicians play so people will pay to listen to them.” Joseph returned Jesus to me as we ambled along. “The sacrificers, of course, must get paid to kill the beasts; and treasurers take care of the money and the priests...ah, the priests.” A note of sarcasm crept into Joseph’s voice. He who never spoke ill of anyone or anything, had only contempt for these men.

“They charge for everything.” He shook his head in sadness. “Charging is permitted, but the prices they ask for their meager services is enormous.” He reached over, patted Jesus and concluded, “I’m sure this Little One will have something to do with changing that.”

Suddenly, I felt a cold shiver and knew I would never revere the Temple again. In this bright sunshine, I felt only darkness. I was selfish enough I didn’t want my tiny Baby to sacrifice Himself to get rid of people like these.

God forgive me for my thoughts, I prayed silently.

As we entered the temple, we were stopped by an old man.

“My name is Simeon,” he said, gazing at Jesus. “The Holy Spirit told me I would not die until I had seen the Redeemer. May I hold Him only a moment?” He held out his skinny arms.

I looked closely at him. He was as thin as a wheat stalk and the hair on top of his head was almost nonexistent. His beard was so white and thin his darkened skin glowed beneath it. Wrinkles deepened in grooves on his entire face, but I noticed eyes that glowed with happiness.

Joseph nodded.

With misgivings, I released Jesus.

He gazed at the Child in awe as he held him tightly. He prayed aloud, “Lord, I have seen the Redeemer. Now let me go in peace. My eyes have seen Thy salvation which Thou hast prepared in the presence of all peoples. He is a light of revelation to the Gentiles and the glory of thy people, Israel.”

He gently lifted Jesus and kissed His cheek, then looked directly at Joseph. “Bless you, young people.” Turning to me, he said, “Behold, this Child is appointed for the fall and rise of many in Israel. A sword will pierce even your own soul...to the end that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed.”

He looked deeply into the eyes of Jesus, then handed the Baby back to me. He appeared to drift, rather than walk down the corridor.

Joseph and I looked at one another in astonishment while this episode took place. Who was this man? How had he known this was the Savior?

Soon, we moved farther into the temple. Walking down the corridor, a tiny, wizened creature, her bird-like eyes glowing with an inner light, stopped us. “My name is Anna.” She shoved a thin knot of hair to the top of her head, then her skinny arms dropped to her side as she said. “I’m a prophetess. May I see the Babe?”

How strange to be stopped by another who knew of Jesus.

“Of course.” I lowered Him so she could look on His face.

We knew prophetesses fasted and prayed constantly in the temple. Now, she clasped her hands before her as she stared at Jesus, her lips curving into a smile. “I’m 84 years old and I’ve waited for this moment all my life.”

Joseph and I stared at this kind, tiny, ancient woman, not knowing how to respond.

“I thank God,” she said, in a tinny voice. “I have seen the Savior.”

She reached her hands toward Jesus, blessed him and turned from us.

Later, we heard what she did after our departure. She told of the Baby who held the redemption of Jerusalem in His tiny hands.

Today, I was required to offer sacrifices to the Lord for my Son, so Joseph purchased two doves in the courtyard of the Temple. As we waited for our doves, Joseph said, “When God slew the first born of the Egyptians at the time of the Exodus, He spared the Israelite’s first born.”

“I know.”

I took the doves and Joseph held Jesus. We pushed ourselves toward a low wall that surrounded the inner courts of the Temple. We walked on toward the Nicanor Gate in the west wall.

“Don’t forget the shekels in your inside pocket, Joseph,” I reminded him.

He smiled down at me. “I won’t. If I did, I couldn’t redeem Jesus.”

I left Joseph and walked up the fifteen steps leading to the Court of Women. Three gates opened onto this court. I walked into the first one. A Priest waited, ready to make a sacrifice for me.

He was rather a large man dressed all in white, except for a long girdle with a silvery sheen. Bare-footed, he wore an ankle-length, seamless tunic of white linen with the tied girdle reaching to the floor. I was later told he wore this over white linen underclothing.

As I handed the doves to him, his black beard moved, revealing the whitest teeth I had ever seen. His mustache was rather sparse, but it reached the beard on either side of his mouth.

After giving him the information he sought I turned when a timid voice spoke. “Mary?”

“Deborah!” I turned and stretched my hands to her. “How are you? What are you doing here? How are Elizabeth and Zacharias?”

She laughed, clinging to my hand. “First, I’m fine. Second, my sister just had a baby and we are here for her husband to redeem him. Third, I just left Elizabeth and the Priest this morning. They are so happy with John, it is incredible. I’ve never seen parents so totally absorbed in a child.”

“I thought they would be.”

Voices around us were raised in good humor, almost drowning out our conversation. Women were meeting friends, since this was known as a social assembling place.

“You had your baby, Mary?”

We moved a little apart from the others so we could talk. “I had a Son. His name is Jesus and Joseph and I are here for my purification rites, as well Jesus’ redemption.”

“I’d love to see Him.” Deborah knew of Jesus. She had witnessed my arrival at Elizabeth’s home and seen Elizabeth’s reaction. John’s birth and his destination was common knowledge to her.

“This is the first time I’ve been here, Deborah. I know I can’t go any farther in the Temple, but there is so much to see I don’t think I’d be able to absorb more, anyway.”

“You didn’t get to enter the Temple the day you and I came. You became dizzy or something, didn’t you?” Deborah asked.

“Yes.” I thrust that memory from me. “I thought this Court was just for women. Why are those men here?”

She pointed. “It isn’t just used by women. People come from everywhere, talking of the Messiah. They know they can discuss any subject they like without repercussions. We have scribes and scholars that meet here regularly.”

A group of children ran through the crowd. “Children, too?” She grinned. “Children, too.”

I pointed. “What are those four walls for?”

“Each corner has its own wall. One they use for storage and inspecting wood.”

“They inspect wood?” It was unbelievable.

“It’s because the Priests can’t use wormy wood in the altar fires.”

“That’s strange. I didn’t know there was a special kind of wood needed.”

She nodded. “The second wall holds wine and oil which the Priests use for the separate services.”

“The third one?” I asked rather timidly, because I saw a man appear at the door of this one. His body unnaturally stooped, his nose appeared to be about half the size of a normal nose and his hands had fingers missing.

“The third one is for lepers who think they’re cured of this dread disease. They’re inspected by a Priest. If they are cured they purify themselves in a mikveh. Then they must make a burnt offering for the time they were unable to do God’s work.”

“Those men I saw enter the forth wall. Who are they?” Most of the men I’d seen earlier had burnished complexions as if they spent most of their days in the desert. These men looked as though they barely saw the sun. They wore the longest, most tangled beards I had ever seen, and dodged away from anyone who came near.

“They’re Nazirites.”

“Oh? Are they the people who are called the “dedicated” or the “consecrated ones?” I stared at the door to this wall, but there was no one now in sight.

“That’s who they are. They aren’t allowed to come in contact with dead people, at all. God told them what to do in case that ever happened, but I forget what it is at the moment.”

“Are they the ones who can’t drink wine?”

“That’s the group, yes. They can’t even go near a grape vine or eat a grape. It’s against their teachings.”

I shook my head. “There sure is a lot I don’t know about our laws and the different sects.”

“I don’t know them either. I doubt anyone knows all of them. Come, I’d like you to meet my sister.”

I spent a very pleasant time visiting with many of the women. Some I’d met on my journey with Jeremiah, some had visited at Elizabeth’s while I stayed there. I was just a little disappointed that Joseph returned so soon from his making the sacrifice to redeem Jesus.

We were both tired when we left the Temple. Though Jesus had been really good Joseph told me, by the time we reached the road that led to Bethlehem, he was starved.

We stopped under a palm tree and I unwrapped his swaddling clothes. My cloak enclosed us both as I fed him. He kicked, wiggled and waved his arms like a miniature whirlwind. When he finished eating, I wrapped Him again.

Neither Joseph nor I felt like talking on the way back to Bethlehem.

So much had happened lately. I needed time to absorb it all. Walking silently toward Bethlehem and our temporary home, I wondered. Why had the scriptures decreed that Jesus was to be born in Bethlehem?

Where had The Star come from? Why shepherds? If Jesus was to be a surprise to the world, why had we met people who knew who he was? Why were we stopped by an old man in the Temple? Why did he hold my son so tenderly, then prophesy of his life? Why had an ancient woman, a prophetess, halted us to look at our Son?

I treasured each moment. I needed to think of them without people around. I needed time to store all these happenings in my heart before we started our journey home with a new born babe. Now that Joseph had a job, I would have that time.

A few weeks after returning to the Inn, I hung dyed linen across the middle of our room so we felt we now had two rooms...one for dining and the other for sleeping. With Joseph's first salary, I purchased dye and lightened the color of our walls. We slept on pallets with Jesus between us and continued to have meals downstairs with Ruth and Matthew.

In the ensuing months I helped Ruth with cooking, cleaning and washing. It wasn't too long before she hired another person to take care of the cooking. Their business grew as the weather warmed. Flowers blossomed, their animals produced young and our happiness knew no bounds as we all worked hard.

Ruth helped take care of Jesus in addition to her myriad duties as overseer of the kitchen and bedrooms. Matthew kept the accounts, as well as conferred with Joseph about the various tasks that needed to be accomplished.

Joseph worked on tables, chairs and hanging doors, enclosing rooms for the caravansary. He built pieces of furniture for us and made beds for the now enclosed rooms.

The first thing he made for our home was a bed for Jesus.

"Oh, Joseph, how beautiful," I crowed, as I gazed at the tiny piece of furniture. The bed had legs and boasted tiny slats of wood all around, so Jesus could not fall out. Many times I blessed him for Jesus' bed.

"I thought it would be easier to pick up Jesus if it were built off the floor."

"How very thoughtful you are, Joseph." I kissed him and moved close, hugging him to me.

His strong arms encircled me and we stood for a moment, enjoying the nearness and the quiet.

His next projects were a bed and a couple of tables. Next, he built a larger table for our meals. The benches he fashioned were the height one needed to sit comfortably while eating. We had almost forgotten the habit of reclining as we ate. We found it much more comfortable to sit upright; then we could eat or talk, facing our companion.

Seldom did the noise of the Inn keep us awake.

Jesus awoke early, as did Joseph and I. The first few weeks of His life were a miracle to me. Taking care of Joseph's needs, then the needs of our baby, was a joy.

Every day or so, Jesus performed some marvelous deed. Smiling...Ruth said it was a gas attack. Or moving his arms and legs so strongly when I removed the swaddling clothes. She laughed at my pride. He turned his head when he heard Joseph or me approach, which Ruth told me was merely normal. His actions were no more marvelous than other baby's activities I'm sure, but they were very special to me.

He was miserable when he cut his first teeth. He developed a fever and whimpered. I worried and cried with him. In a few days, the teeth blossomed from pink gums and smiles returned. He skinned His knees when he crawled too rapidly, but seldom cried.

The next year was such a happy one. We watched Jesus grow into a beautiful, happy individual. Joseph worked, making pieces of furniture for the Inn, as well as for us.

We received letters from Mother quite often...or as often as we could expect. She kept us informed on the events in Nazareth.

There was still little work, but conditions were improving. Many who worried about Herod's edict of counting people, appeared to become more complacent. Few soldiers remained in Nazareth.

Sarah was now expecting another baby. They saw Jeremiah on an irregular basis. She said the next time she saw him, she'd tell him where we were, so he could look us up.

We missed the families and home dreadfully. As long as Joseph had work he enjoyed, and was making a good living for us, we felt it better to remain in Bethlehem a little longer. I wanted desperately to take Jesus to meet all four grandparents.

Especially now that he was walking. Actually, he seldom walked. I think He began running the day He discovered feet held up His body. As soon as the night's visitors left in the early mornings, Jesus followed Ruth or Joseph or Matthew everywhere. He was like a bubbling brook. He sang, laughed, played happily and entertained all of us from morning to night.

One day, watching Jesus follow Matthew across the yard, I said. "Joseph, I don't think I'll ever understand just how smart children are."

Joseph smiled. "What do you mean?"

"Since Jesus learned to crawl, then walk, I can't keep up with Him. I don't dare leave Him alone a moment, especially upstairs. He can almost reach the latch on the door." I could feel the worry lines in my forehead. "I'm afraid He'll open the door, and fall onto the ground."

"I'll make a gate so he can't get out." Joseph said. "Think that'll work?" He looked down at me and grinned.

I took his hand. "How smart you are, Joseph." I turned his hand over and touched the callouses that were again part of his hands. "Did you get a lot done today?"

"We finished hanging doors on the last room upstairs. Now, people can really have privacy when they pay for a sleeping room."

"What about the kitchen? Is it finished?"

"Just about. I've built more tables and chairs since we enlarged the dining room. The kitchen needed another table on which to prepare food. I think that's all the work needed for awhile."

We stood in contentment for a moment, watching Jesus and Matthew. Matthew stooped and picked up Jesus. He looked in our direction, grinned and waved. We waved back.

"Today I met the people Ruth hired to help in the dining room." Joseph surveyed the Inn that had become a caravansary.

Due in large part to his contributions. He had repaired everything that needed repairing, in addition to making extensions onto the original. Furniture now filled the dining room and kitchen, as well as the bedrooms upstairs.

"Are the people nice and do they seem energetic?"

"Seem like industrious people, to me."

"Joseph, I must get back to my weeding. Since we had those few drops of rain the other day, I can't keep up with them."

"I'll go get Jesus and get him down for his nap while you're digging."

"Why, thank you, Joseph. Aren't you a sweet man?" I reached, lifted my head and kissed him on his chin, then ran back to my weeding.

Since Ruth wouldn't let me help in the kitchen, I worked in her yard. I planted palm trees and worked at getting Ruth's flowers to grow and bloom.

I bent, pulled weeds and discarded them. Suddenly, the clip-clop of a horse's hooves interrupted the quiet. Since it was early afternoon, I wondered why someone would come to the Inn so early.

As I stood and peered at the rider I recognized him.

“Jeremiah!” I exclaimed, wanting, but because I had dirt encrusted hands, not daring to hug him tightly as he swung from his horse. He picked me up, clasped me to his chest, then plopped me down.

“So, Little Mary has a baby.” He was the same Jeremiah who looked after me on the journey to and from Jerusalem. My Father’s friend...and mine.

“Yes, and you must see this perfect human being.” I grinned and glanced up at him. He was smiling at me as though he were my father. I felt so warm and loved, it was almost, but not quite, as nice as being with my father.

“Come, let’s go to our home. I must clean my hands and I’d like you to meet Joseph. Then, you may meet our son, who’s name is Jesus. He’s asleep at the moment, but I’m sure he’ll be awake soon.”

One of the boys of the caravansary appeared and took the horses’ reins.

“Wait!” Jeremiah ordered kindly. He plucked a small bag from the saddle. “Please feed and groom him for me,” Jeremiah requested.

“He’ll be ready when you are, sir.” And the boy led the horse away.

We walked up the stairs, chatting. We entered our room and Joseph rose. I introduced them, and Joseph invited, “Please sit. Would you like a cup of wine?”

“I’m a little thirsty, and I’d like some wine, but I’d rather see the baby first.”

I had washed my hands and now poured wine. I placed bread and cheese on the table along with a small knife to cut the cheese as Joseph rose and gently swept back the curtain. He and Jeremiah walked to the small bed. Jeremiah gazed at Jesus, without moving for what I thought was a long time, but could only have been a few moments.

As he turned, he said, “He is a fine looking young man.”

Sitting, he took a sip of wine. “Your parents asked me to look in on you, Mary. I had no idea you were here or I would have found you sooner.”

“We’ve been in Bethlehem almost two years now. But this isn’t the only reason you came, is it?”

Jeremiah had the grace to look quite abashed. “No, it isn’t. Actually, I’d been told about the furniture at this particular caravansary. When your parents told me you were here, I knew I had to come see the furniture, as well.”

“What about the furniture?” Joseph asked.

Jeremiah turned to Joseph. “You built it, didn’t you?”

“Yes.” He hesitated. “Yes, I did.”

“I especially like the bed you made for Jesus. It’s quite a unique design and very well made.” He stopped, took a sip of his wine and continued. “How would you like to make some of these to sell?”

Joseph was astonished. “Why...why, I don’t know. I never thought of selling them.”

Jeremiah broke a piece a bread, cut a sliver of cheese and placed it on the bread. “I’d like to take them to other cities and see what we can do with them, if you don’t mind.” He bit into his food.

Joseph stared at me as though he couldn’t believe what was happening. “I’d like that very much.”

Jeremiah rubbed his hand on his robe and reached for Joseph’s hand. “Then it’s a deal. The next time I’m through here, I’ll stop by and if you have any made, I’ll be happy to take them.”

He turned to me as he slid a bag from a pocket in his robe. “Here, Mary, are some seeds you can plant.”

I took the small packet from his hand. “What are they?”

“Seeds from an orange.”

I couldn't believe it. Oranges were so scarce, it was seldom one ever heard of one. In fact, few people knew what they were. As I poured, I gazed at seven seeds in my palm.

“Oh, thank you Jeremiah.”

“You'll have to have a lot of patience, Mary. You might not have fruit for five or more years.”

I gazed at the precious seed as though they were gold. “It's all right. I'll wait. In fact, I'll keep them until we return home and plant them there.” I sighed, longing for home. “I remember the taste of the orange juice Joseph gave me on the morning after our wedding. I've longed for more since that day.” I couldn't sit still any longer. I placed the seed back into the packet and hugged them to my chest.

“Every time I have a drop of orange juice, I shall think of you, Jeremiah.” I bent and kissed the burnished cheek.

Soon, he rose. “I must get back to the caravan. They're waiting for me, and I'd like to get to Hebron before dark, if possible.”

We walked downstairs, he and Joseph chatting as though they were old friends. The boy brought his horse. Jeremiah gave the boy a coin, swung into the saddle. Then he leaned down, kissed my cheek, shook Joseph's hand and was gone.

Chapter 14

Soon after Jeremiah's visit, another miracle occurred.

The weather was beginning to turn cool again. Rains were sporadic, but so far, we had had no snow. I hoped we wouldn't. I missed my family and Joseph's as well, but we enjoyed each day with Ruth and Matthew who had become close friends and substitute grandparents to Jesus.

Jesus always played so hard he fell asleep early and I always left the curtain open to keep an eye on him.

This particular night, Joseph and I sat at the table talking, sipping hot tea. As shadows became longer, I lit a candle from our lamp and placed it in the center of the table.

I refilled our cups as night descended rather abruptly. The candle glowed, casting light into all corners of the room. It flickered as a soft puff of wind entered the not-quite-closed door. We glanced outside and down at the courtyard.

Ruth's flowers drooped right now, but I felt they would bloom profusely in the spring. Small shrubs and bushes rustled in the slight breeze. Fronds of palm trees waved slightly.

Scents from the kitchen rose in the air to enter our door. A lamb was roasting. Garlic, onion and other herbs mingled with the odor of meat. The subtle aroma of wine floated on the air, as well as a waxy scent from the lone candle.

Suddenly, the sky brightened. “What's happening?”

Joseph quickly stood and opened the door further. I blew out the candle and joined him.

As we stared, a light appeared. It was so bright it lit the entire courtyard. As bright as the star that brought shepherds to the manger, it hovered over the end of the building where we lived. Shadows in the far reaches of the courtyard looked like gray ghosts hovering.

It reminded me of the two other stars that preceded miraculous events. There was the star that appeared the night Jesus was conceived. The next episode was the star that stood over the manger when Jesus was born. This same star led a group of dirty, smelly, yet gentle shepherds to see the new Baby.

I turned to Joseph and asked the question without saying one word.

“I don't know, Mary. I don't understand either. Surely the angel hasn't come to visit us again.”

Joseph held my hand as we worried and wondered. Suddenly, there was a clatter on the stones of the yard of the caravansary. Standing at the open door a tumult from the many people staying overnight reached our ears.

We heard people murmur as they moved as close to the walls as possible, attempting to hide from the light. They sheltered children behind them and pulled their animals near. The animals stomped their hooves, brayed, baaed, and neighed, in fright. Faces reflected in the light exhibited fear, concern and distrust.

As we looked, the gates opened and we saw what looked like an entire army entering. People scrambled out of the way of the men and their horses. These individuals were dressed in uniforms that gleamed in the brightness of the star. They made two even lines, then stood perfectly still as camels loaded with goods entered behind them. The rest of the entourage followed and the gates were closed for the night.

I clutched Joseph's hand. "Joseph, are those Herod's men?"

"I don't think so," he said. "Surely, they have no reason to be in this tiny city. Besides, why would they bring laden camels to a place so near Jerusalem?"

We continued to stare. The Soldiers dismounted, then sent their horses for food and currying. The camels were led away by young boys Matthew had hired to accomplish this particular job each night.

We studied the men as they wearily climbed the stairs and entered the Inn. They didn't look around before the door closed. It seemed all they could think of at the moment was getting to a stopping place.

People began to settle for the night. They pointed, but we couldn't see what they did. They moved back to their pallets, the animals grew calm as an eerie silence descended.

Knowing Ruth was very busy, I asked. "Do you think I should go help her with these people?"

"No, Mary. You know she wouldn't let you leave Jesus anyway." He placed his arms around me as we walked back into our home and he closed the door. "She has more help now that their Inn has become a caravansary."

We started to get ready for bed. I checked to see that Jesus was all right, then closed the curtain. Joseph sat on the side of the bed and untied a sandal.

Suddenly, there was a knock. So frightened I could barely breath, I watched as Joseph retied his sandal and walked with trepidation toward the door.

A rather cold whiff of wind entered as Joseph opened it. Standing in the doorway were three very large men.

They were a little short of breath from having climbed the stairs. All wore silk robes of different colors...green, blue and purple. The robes were trimmed with tassels and exorbitantly expensive furs. Sashes of golden material marched around the middle of one of the men. The other two wore their robes loose.

Jewels adorned their necks and hats. Their hats were like none I had ever seen before. Looking more like the crowns of kings and made from costly furs, linens and silks, they fit so tightly that even when they bowed, the hats remained on their heads. Embedded in them were jewels that sparkled in the light of the star.

One man carried a long crook, whose wood was polished until reflections from the star made it shine. Another carried a metal rod that resembled a scepter even taller than he and the third kept his hand on a sword embedded in its sheaf.

I might have become more frightened, but their expressions were the most benevolent I could imagine.

They looked around at our humble dwelling and one of them said, "My name is Gaspar, this is Melchior and this is Balthasar," as he pointed to his companions. "May we come in?"

Joseph's face turned red in embarrassment. "Please forgive me. Of course. Mary?" He turned to me, but I had already placed water at the doorway so their feet could be cleansed.

As they dried their feet and replaced their sandals, I placed a skin of wine and cups on the table and relit the candle.

Joseph said, pointing to our table where benches lined both sides. "Here is wine. Please refresh yourselves."

They moved further into the room, then looked around until they spied Jesus, lying in the little bed Joseph made. They ignored Joseph's offer of wine and walked toward Jesus. Somehow or other Joseph was instantly between them and Jesus.

"Praise be to God!" Gasper exclaimed, gazing around Joseph. "We have found the Child." At that, all three dropped to their knees in front of Jesus' bed. He awoke and looked at them with an adult expression I could not describe. It was almost as though He were blessing them.

How could that be? I asked myself, then shut my eyes tightly. When I opened them, I looked directly at Him. His expression was, as always, pleasant and happy. I must have imagined he blessed these men.

As the three knelt, they praised God for having sent a ruler who would govern His people. Joseph and I looked at each other in astonishment. We were even more astonished when, as the three arose, Balthasar spoke, "May we leave gifts for the Child?"

Joseph and I looked at each other. What was there to say?

Joseph nodded and each took a gift from his voluminous robe.

Gaspar left a large, ornately embellished, golden goblet. I'd seen work like this on Matthew's caravan. He told me it came from Persia. When Balthasar placed a container of frankincense near the bed, I knew it must have traveled from either Arabia or Africa. Lastly, Melchior tenderly added a vial of myrrh to the gifts, an expensive gum used in perfumes and...I refused to think of the other use for myrrh.

"Come, refresh yourselves," Joseph offered. "Or would you prefer to go to the dining room?"

They sat at the table as I placed food on it. They ate bread, cheese and figs dripping with sweetness. A few honey cakes were placed in the center of the table.

I started to close the curtains so Jesus would not disturb them if he again awoke.

"Could you please leave those open? We've traveled a long way to see this Child." I don't know who spoke.

"Of course."

Sipping wine, they often looked at Jesus, who now slept soundly.

"Do you mind telling us from where you've come and why? How did you know about Jesus?" Joseph's voice was quiet, but firm as though he expected an answer immediately.

Looking directly at Joseph, Melchior explained. "We all study the stars, attempting to discern what is to happen."

"But how can stars tell of coming events?" Joseph asked. "That's a very difficult question, my friend." Melchior answered. "Since Time began, there has been talk of a Savior to be born who will save the world from its follies. We study the heavens and sometimes find answers."

Gaspar reached for a piece of bread. "Though we're from different countries...I'm from Persia...all of us study the stars. We reached the same conclusion and began our journeys from separate countries."

Balthasar continued the story. "I'm from Arabia. We met many months ago in Babylon. We decided we should travel together."

Gasper roared with laughter. "He means we're together because it's cheaper." He bit into one of the honey cakes as we all laughed.

We instantly became sober as Gaspar continued. "We have looked far and wide for this Child." He sipped his wine, then continued. "Soon after we met in Babylon and decided to look for the child together, the star appeared before us."

"Our countries are far away to the East," Melchior said. "While studying the heavens, a star appeared up there. We instantly knew the Savior was now born." He picked up a piece of bread, tore off the corner and dipped it into his wine.

Balthasar took up the story. “Each of us traveled for a very long time, following our individual stars. When we met in Babylon, three stars appeared to fuse and become one star, brighter than any of the others had ever been. “Finally, last week we arrived in Jerusalem. We asked everyone we met if they knew where we would find the Babe.”

As the men ate, their hands moved constantly, from food to mouth, then to cloths to wipe their mouths. “Some heard of the star that covered the Heavens more than a year ago. Some had even talked with the Shepherds.”

“People still refused to believe a Savior was alive.” Balthasar said in contempt.

As the men moved, the stars in their sapphire rings caught the light from the candle, making tiny prisms dance around the room. I have never been so fascinated by anything as these three men.

“Unfortunately, Herod heard of our search and sent for us,” Gaspar again spoke. “When we went before him, we could tell immediately he was a very frightened man. He kept looking over his shoulder. It was as though he were afraid this tiny baby was going to get out of His bed and depose him immediately.”

“How very silly the man is.” Joseph stated, sipping from his wine goblet.

“No, not silly.” Balthasar said in a very serious voice, looking directly at Joseph. “A very desperate man. He has always been able to crush every foe. You know his history, I suppose.”

“A little.”

“Well, His mother, Cypros, was Arabian. His Father Antipater is Idumaeen. Neither was of royal birth, so Herod is just a commoner.” Balthasar’s voice held a faint tinge of contempt as he reached for another fig.

“I didn’t know that.” I spoke without thinking. All four men looked in my direction, as I stood holding a goatskin of wine.

They smiled at my interruption and one of the men, I forget which, asked me to please sit with them. As I sat, I placed the skin on the table within easy reach. The men continued to eat: cheese, figs, bread, wine, cakes.

Gaspar proceeded with the story. “Herod’s father managed to get him appointed Prefect of Galilee. Herod fled to Egypt when the Parthians invaded Palestine, then came back to Rome. He was declared king of the Jews by Octavian and Antony.” Gaspar picked up his chalice and drank, the pearls in his bracelet shining. “He invaded Palestine the next year. Years later, he drove out the Parthians and established his kingdom.”

He wiped his mouth and hands, then sipped wine as we waited for his next words.

“Herod can be very clever. He married a Jew. When there was economic hardship, he gave back to the people some of the tax money that was collected earlier. He melted down various gold objects in the palace to buy food for these same people.”

“He would then become more acceptable to some of the people, wouldn’t he?” Joseph asked.

“Oh, very much so. He did a lot of good. He rebuilt Samaria and erected the port city of Caesarea. He then enlarged the cities of Beirut, Damascus, Tyre, Sidon and Rhodes. He even built Masada, a large fortress on the top of a hill.”

Melchior spoke. “As Herod’s power grew, he ordered a number of men put to death without trial. The Jewish Sanhedrin was called together. They were about to pass sentence to put him to death, when the matter was postponed until the next day. During the night one of the judges, Simeas, helped him escape.”

Melchior took a deep breath, rubbed his stomach and smiled, then nodded at me as he continued. “Herod was so jealous, suspicious and afraid for his position and power, he had his brother-in-law, Ariostobulus drowned. With great pomp, he provided a magnificent funeral.”

In between bites of food, the men dipped their hands into a bowl of water I’d placed on the table. They then dried their hands and continued eating as they talked.

Balthasar continued. "He has become a very wicked man. He loved his wife deeply and she bore him sons. Once, there was a tiny bit of gossip about her. He had her put to death. He was so insane he ordered his servants to go around the palace calling her name as though she were still alive. I understand he left her room the same as when she was killed." Balthasar shook his head in disbelief.

Gaspar spoke. "It's pretty common knowledge among the servants that he goes into her room and talks with her when he has a problem as though she were still there."

I shivered and Joseph took my hand.

"A few months later," Balthasar continued, "he had his mother-in-law killed and then two of his sons."

Joseph and I looked at each other in horror.

"What kind of man is this," Joseph asked. "To kill his own family?"

"He is an evil and depraved man. His family had converted to the Jewish faith, but of course Herod never kept any of the laws. His court is filled with pagan excesses...sodomy, incest and adultery. He is one of the cruelest beings to have ever lived."

Melchior said, "We discovered after we asked of the Child that Herod went to his scholars for information. They could tell him little. He then sent for the most important Priests. He wanted to know where the Baby was born. He was told the prophets said the Christ would be born in Bethlehem."

Joseph and I looked at each other and he clasped my hand so tightly, I must have grimaced, because he loosened his grip. I could tell he was as frightened as I.

"Just before we left Jerusalem, Herod called us to him," Melchior continued. "When we arrived at the palace, he urged us to search diligently. He told us that when we discovered the whereabouts of the Child we were to let him know." Melchior curled his lips in derision. "He said he wanted to come and worship the heir to the Jewish throne."

The other two nodded their sage heads. I thought their hats might fall off, but they stayed intact, the jewels in them glittering in the light.

"Oh, Joseph," I cried. "The baby." I hurried to His bed, picked Him up and held Him so tightly, He whimpered. I kissed Him as the men looked at us with a benevolent expression.

"Mary," Joseph soothed. "It's all right. Please put Jesus back to bed. Let Him get His sleep."

"Of course you're right, Joseph," I said, and laid Jesus down. I patted His bottom until He settled down and slept. As I turned to walk back to the table, I noticed that each of the four men were smiling at me.

"We have taken too much of your time," Melchior said, and prepared to rise.

"Oh, no. It's been our pleasure." Joseph said.

"Of course we will not journey back through Jerusalem." Gaspar nodded at the other two. "There are many other routes we can take to find our way home."

The men rose from their seats and washed their hands again then dried them.

Gaspar continued, "We brought many camels loaded with trading material so we have a good excuse to go other routes to sell our goods. We will send word to Herod that we have new markets and must travel a different route.

"Herod wouldn't dare stop us anyway. Our soldiers are some of the finest in the world. They would protect us with their lives."

They turned as Joseph asked, "Won't you stay the night with us?"

"Oh, no," Melchior replied. "We already have lodgings just down the passageway. It's one of the nicest rooms we've encountered since we began our journey."

Balthasar added. "It has a door...a very rare thing, for a caravansary. But thank you for your kindness." They walked silently back to the bed, stood looking at Jesus for a very long time, then turned.

They all nodded to both of us and walked from our home.

Other mysteries for me to ponder.

I rose from the table and walked to where Joseph watched as they strode down the corridor and turned into a room. I shivered, whether with the cold or fear, I didn't know. Joseph closed the door and put his arm around me.

"Who were these men, Joseph? Why would they spend such a long time on a trip to look for a baby? Why would they leave such fine gifts for Jesus? And what shall we do with them?"

"Mary," Joseph turned toward Jesus and put his hands on my shoulders, looking directly at me. "Slow down."

"Oh." I looked up at him.

He was smiling, but the strain around his eyes was evident.

"I'm sorry, honey. I don't know the answers to your questions. Maybe someday God will tell us." He slid his arms down, around my waist. "Did you know a gift of gold signifies kingship?"

"No, I didn't know that."

"Frankincense is a symbol of divinity." Joseph's voice sounded almost reverent. "We knew He was divine, but how could these three from so far away have known?"

I just shook my head, as baffled as he.

Joseph tightened his arms around me, holding me so close I thought I would lose my breath. "Joseph, what's wrong?" He was staring at the myrrh.

"Oh, nothing," but the sounds he made were like the heartbroken sigh of a turtledove. He lifted my chin so he could see into my eyes. "Mary, you know that myrrh is used to perfume the body when someone dies."

If Joseph had not held me tightly, I would have fallen. "Oh, no." My cry was only a whimper. I felt as though someone had hit me repeatedly because I suddenly remembered the voices of the prophets. They had forecast not only Jesus' birth, but his death.

His voice was comparatively calm as he said, "Come, Mary, we must get rest and prepare to leave soon."

•••

I heard nothing, but Jesus must have. He roused me by saying words I couldn't understand, as though He were meeting an old friend.

I opened my eyes to see an Angel hovering just above Joseph. Joseph's eyes were closed, but he was nodding his head. He understood what was being said. Jesus laughed aloud as Joseph awoke and looked around.

"Mary? Are you and Jesus all right?" Joseph asked with concern.

"Yes, of course," I said, sitting up, checking that Jesus was indeed all right. "Joseph, what was the angel telling you?"

"Did you see him?" I nodded, as Joseph closed his eyes and wiped his hand across his brow. He then opened his eyes wide and looked at our Son. "What was Jesus trying to say?"

"The Angel and Jesus were communicating, I think."

Joseph looked at me with a rather strange expression.

"He was, Joseph." I insisted. "When the Angel appeared, Jesus woke me by talking a strange language. Just before the angel left, Jesus laughed aloud."

“Are you sure?” Joseph’s voice was shaky and uncertain. “Yes, of course, you’re sure.” He hesitated, then asked. “Did you hear what the angel said?”

“No. Was he again giving instructions?”

“Yes.”

“What do we do now?” I couldn’t believe how noncommittal my voice was. It was as though I was ready to accept anything that would save our Son. I lay down and closed my eyes not waiting for an answer.

Joseph shook me. “Mary.”

“What?”

“We can’t sleep tonight. We must prepare to leave immediately.”

“Why?” I knuckled my eyes like a child, trying to awaken.

“He said Jesus was in danger from Herod. He told me to take you and Jesus and leave immediately.” He swung his legs over the side of the bed, rose and reached for a robe.

“Are we going home?” I still felt half asleep.

Joseph took my hand, “No, Mary. The angel said I must take you and Jesus to Egypt and he would tell us when we could return home.”

Chapter 15

We managed to escape Herod’s grasp.

When Joseph told me of the visit and our destination, had our house fallen, I would not have been more surprised. Egypt? My mind refused to accept that. I wanted to go home. I recalled a wonderful dream I’d often entertained.

Mother would hug us tightly, cry for happiness and kiss her Grandson. Father would hold me in his arms, then welcome Jesus and Joseph. Daniel would tease me and let me know he loved me without saying the words. Leah would grab Jesus and refuse to let anyone else hold him.

Sarah and I would hug each other tightly, not letting go until other members of the family interrupted our homecoming. We would admire our children, gossip about members of the village, and stare at each other to make sure we were truly together again.

Those dreams shattered as rapidly and surely as the morning would arrive with us on the road to Egypt.

I watched from the bed silently as Joseph opened our door slightly. Most of the visitors for the night were settled, but a light shown from the dining area, so we knew Ruth and Matthew were awake.

Joseph proceeded downstairs and asked our friends to please come to our home as soon as possible.

During Joseph’s absence I began the task of deciding what to take and what to leave. The gifts from the Magi were carefully wrapped and placed on the dining table. The scrolls Mother wrote while we lived in Bethlehem must be taken. Essential clothing was the next task. Wine skins for water, a basket for food, drinking and eating utensils were almost last. Orange seeds went into the pocket of my robe. I would treasure them. They were a reason to struggle, if struggle I must, in order to get back home.

On top of everything, I placed Jesus’ favorite toys.

I felt tears glittering as I looked around our home. This was the second one we had to leave. When we turned toward Bethlehem, we thought it would only be a short time before we returned home. Almost two years were gone.

“Please, God, be with us,” I prayed while I prepared bundles. Joseph retrieved our donkey from the cave where Jesus was born. He made trips up and down the stairs taking our possessions, then securing them onto the donkey. He then made a tiny saddle to hold Jesus.

Though Jesus was walking quite well, we knew He wouldn't be able to walk far. We certainly could not carry him all the time, either. He had just grown too rapidly.

Joseph had barely finished tying the bundles to the donkey's back and returned upstairs when Ruth and Matthew arrived, their faces red from the cold air.

"What's happened?" Ruth asked, as they removed their outer robes.

"Please sit," Joseph said, trying to mask the terror he felt, as I placed cups of wine on the table.

"Is everyone settled for the night?" I asked.

"Yes." Matthew laughed. "If you could hear the snores coming from all around, you could understand." He rubbed his hands together as though he was trying to warm them.

"We must leave before daybreak." Joseph began. "The Three Men you sent to our door are Wise men who have traveled from countries far to the East, looking for a Baby." Joseph began.

Matthew asked. "The three we rented the room you just completed?"

"Those are the ones," Joseph answered. "Incidentally, they complimented you on your accommodations." He smiled, remembering the compliment concerning the door.

"They must be very rich." Matthew said. "They didn't balk at the price I quoted for the entire group." He sipped his wine, then asked. "Who are they? What did they want?"

Before Joseph could answer, Ruth asked. "What message did they bring that compels you to leave so abruptly?" Ruth's voice held the fear we all felt.

"Do you remember soon after the birth of Jesus when strange happenings occurred?" I asked.

She nodded. "The bright star and the Shepherds?"

"Yes. Many times since then I've tried to explain that Jesus was born to be the Savior of the world."

"The one the Prophets spoke of in the Scriptures?"

"Yes," I stated simply.

"Mary, I couldn't believe a tiny baby was supposed to be King!" She objected. "I thought He should come in a blaze of glory and wipe all the wickedness from the earth." She shoved tendrils of hair from her forehead, then picked up her cup.

"I know it's difficult to believe, but God did send Him as a tiny Baby, born in Bethlehem." I placed my hand over hers. "And you were the instrument God used to help His Son enter this world."

"That's what you meant that night when you said, 'hurry and let this Child of Yours be born.'" The pensive remark was one of final understanding.

I nodded. "Until tonight, we felt very safe, living here with you and Matthew. We thought no one would discover who He was."

"When the Magi arrived," Joseph said, "They told us Herod was looking for Jesus."

The horrified "Oh, No!" was spoken by both at the same time.

"Yes. When they stopped in Jerusalem to ask where the Babe was, Herod told them to come back and inform him when they found Him. Herod wanted to worship Him, as well."

A sarcastic, "I doubt that," from Matthew said it all. We picked up our cups of wine and sipped.

"Anyway," Joseph continued. "They told us they would go home another direction and not return to Jerusalem. They believed, however, Herod would begin his search soon."

"We lay down but were barely asleep when an angel told Joseph to take us to Egypt," I remarked, hearing the forlorn sound of my voice.

We stared at each other and there is no way I can describe the looks on all our faces...fear, sadness, longing for what we had had and a tremendous amount of love.

We all left the table at the same time. Ruth and I met and hugged, tears flowing freely. Matthew and Joseph shook hands, then hugged, though men seldom hugged another man.

Ruth and Matthew moved toward Jesus and stood, looking as though the Baby they considered their grandchild was already out of their grasp. Matthew took Ruth's hand and walked toward the door.

Ruth looked back. "I'll fix food for the next few days. Take as much of everything as you can. You may need it."

"We can't take much," I said, attempting to smile. Trying to assuage the misgivings I had, I was finding it difficult to hold my tears in check. "Joseph has already packed most of the necessities."

"We're planning to leave just before dawn so we can become part of a group, if possible. We'd travel at night but it's too dangerous," Joseph said.

"Please be careful," Matthew entreated. "Incidentally, anything you can't take Joseph, we'll buy."

"Matthew, you paid me for the time I worked and even furnished much of the materials for furniture, so please keep everything, with our blessings." His laugh was pretty shaky. "Just have our room available when we return for a visit."

"Whenever you come, it will be here for you...even if we have to kick someone out for the night." Matthew's jowls jiggled as he and Ruth threw robes over their shoulders and walked from our home.

We watched as they maneuvered down the steps, knowing we would miss them tremendously. The saddest truth; we didn't know if we would ever see them again.

Joseph's arm circled my waist as we looked around our home, tears flowing from my eyes and Joseph looking as though he'd like to cry, as well. It was the place we enjoyed talking, laughing, getting acquainted as husband and wife and watching Jesus as he played, learned, ate, then slept peacefully. We hated leaving the beds Joseph made, as well as the tables, benches and other pieces of furniture.

I hated leaving curtains I'd made for our windows, the cloths I sewed for decoration; even the ones I'd sewn to clean our home. Most of all, we both hated leaving Jesus' bed.

Visitors to the caravansary were still sleeping as Joseph and I finished our preparations.

The weather was cooler than when we went to bed. Now, the sun struggled through mist, diffusing the light, blurring outlines of the buildings, walls and gates of the Inn. Little evidence of trees or plants was visible.

Matthew and Ruth joined us. They insisted on paying for the furniture and furnishings, so we began our journey with an additional bit of money. Ruth gave us the food and Joseph attached it to the donkey as I held Jesus.

In the cold, early dawn, they both held the sleeping Child a moment, kissed Him, then reluctantly returned Him to me. We bade them a hurried, teary farewell and were on our way.

Before the sun squinted through the clouds, we joined a group of people. Being so early in the morning, few felt like talking.

The day was dreary, with intermittent drops of rain. The weather warmed a little later and we removed the outer robe from Jesus. The sun broke through the clouds triumphantly. It shone on all of us like a benevolent God.

We stopped for a moment under olive trees that reminded us of our journey to Jerusalem not quite two years before. We stood a moment, letting Jesus run as we ate bread and cheese, then drank clear, cool water from one of the skins Ruth had filled. She had also given us one with goat's milk for Jesus, who promptly emptied the cup, giggled and ran around a tree, playing hide-and-seek.

I packed the remainder of our food and Joseph again attached it to the donkey. We tied Jesus into his tiny saddle. He smiled at people, waved, pretended he was riding a prancing horse. The game soon grew tiresome.

“Wanna’ walk.” Jesus was as insistent as almost-two-year-olds could be in doing what He wanted to do when He wanted to do it. Also, He’d had four adults to spoil Him all His life.

Joseph put Him on the ground and he began running. People around us smiled as He grinned back at them and us. He turned, flew back to Joseph who caught Him in his arms, then swung Him around. Neither of us spoke as Joseph squeezed Him a little tighter than normal.

We encountered caravans going in both directions. I wished one had belonged to Jeremiah. Our eyes and ears were attuned to anything or anyone who might be looking for us. We closely watched for soldiers and leaders of any group we felt might be suspicious.

The sun dimmed soon after we stopped for our noon meal and a short rest. As we walked, thunder was heard in the distance. Everyone looked toward the sky, praying the rain would not reach us. Only a few drops occasionally hit our cowl-covered heads as the clouds veered farther toward the south.

Just before the pale sun set, we discovered a young Jewish couple and their very young child in our midst.

She must have been about fifteen...at least two years younger than I. Her wide, expressive dark blue eyes smiled down at her baby, then at me. She was a little taller than me, but also a little rounder. Quite a beautiful girl, I thought.

“Are you going to Nazareth?” I asked.

She didn’t answer, but her face became guarded, uncertain, as she glanced at me, then looked at her husband.

The young man, a little taller than she, could almost have been her brother, except his hair was black and hers was a light tan. He looked around, almost as though he were petrified with fear. “We’re on our way to Egypt,” his voice so low, he was almost whispering.

“Any special reason?” Joseph asked, his voice quite reasonable.

The boy, because that was the way I thought of him, was appalled that we might not have information we needed. “Haven’t you heard what Herod is doing?”

“No.” Joseph said, holding onto the donkey’s head, as we walked together. “Nothing would surprise me, but just what is Herod doing now?”

The boy leaned closer to Joseph, and I barely heard him. “He’s having all the babies under two years old killed.”

Had there been an explosion, it could not have sounded any louder to me than those simple words.

“What? Why?” I interrupted. I couldn’t believe anyone could be that cruel. I held onto Jesus tightly as He tried to squirm from my arms.

The young man looked at Jesus. “How old is he?”

“Not quite two years.” Very slowly, Joseph answered, then asked. “Why is Herod doing this?”

“Some very rich merchants came to Jerusalem, I heard. They were looking for a special Baby. This Baby is supposed to be the Savior we’ve waited for all these hundreds of years.”

Joseph and I looked at each other as the young man took a deep breath and continued.

“When they asked questions about this Baby, Herod heard and sent for them. They told Herod a baby had been born in Bethlehem and they were searching for Him.” The young man looked around to be sure no one was listening. “When they left, Herod expected the men to return. Instead, he received a message from them this morning. He then sent his men into all the near-by provinces to look for the Child.”

I didn’t know how one could stand and talk with this young man with the noncommittal expression Joseph wore.

“They didn’t find Him?” I asked, rather timidly.

“No. When he received the message, Herod issued a new edict that said all Jewish babies under two years old were to be killed.”

People surrounding us as we walked didn't notice my face had suddenly gone pale and lifeless. I picked up one foot, put it down and placed another in front, as I thought even the blood in my body had stopped moving. I'm not sure I breathed.

Deep inside I knew God would take care of His son, but for a few moments, I panicked. Herod really was looking for my Baby. He really was going to kill my Child. I took deep breaths as I clung to Jesus and looked at the hills surrounding us.

The sun glanced off glistening pockets of snow in the higher elevations. The rest of the rocks, trees, even bushes and grasses remained the same as when we approached. No leaves stirred as I gazed at the sameness...yet not the same...of everything. How could they appear such when my entire world had just exploded?

Finally, I got my emotions under control and released Jesus. He ran around me, clinging, peeking out one side, then the other, grinning at the young man's wife. She clutched her baby tightly.

I asked. “Did your husband say you were going to Egypt?”

“Yes. Since Herod began his rule, large communities of Jews now live there. We intend to join them until we can return home.” She looked down at Jesus and smiled. “Your little boy is a sturdy little fellow.”

Jesus was standing near her, looking up at the baby. She stooped to show Jesus the child. He reached a pudgy finger and touched the soft skin of the sleeping baby. “Pwetty,” He said.

“Yes, he is Jesus, but don't hurt him.” I cautioned.

“I not,” he stated simply as he touched the baby. “Soft, like lamb.”

The girl-mother smiled at Jesus. “Yes, he is.”

At that moment, the young man waved a farewell to Joseph. “Maybe you should consider going to Egypt, too.”

“Maybe we will,” Joseph said. “If we do, we'll look for you.”

We exchanged names and watched as they walked away. Those two young people were gone, but there were groups of people who stayed together and ignored strangers such as we. As we walked, we moved away from the bulk of the people. Joseph let me rave at the injustice of the rulers of the world to get it out of my system. When I stopped, he took a deep breath. “Feel better?”

I looked up at him and smiled sheepishly. “Yes. Thank you.”

“Maybe we should have gone with those people, Mary.”

“I wondered why we didn't, but I didn't want to say anything until I knew what your plans were.”

“Honestly, I don't know why we didn't, except something seemed to tell me we should be alone at the moment.” His voice trailed away, as though he weren't sure if what we were doing was right or not. “I just felt we would be safer to go over the mountains instead of traveling south.”

“Then, that's what we shall do.”

Shadows lengthened and the sun hid behind hills. Coolness was slowly returning but since we had warm clothing I wasn't overly concerned. My arms tightened around Jesus as we trudged toward the mountains.

Thinking of the young people we met, a prophesy burst in my mind. It echoed, then re-echoed...like a drum beating a staccato rhythm.

“Jeremiah said, ‘A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they were no more.’”

I shook off the prophesy, but not the feelings it evoked as I said, “Joseph, what will happen to John?”

“I don’t know. He’s older than Jesus. Maybe he was old enough to escape Herod’s edict.” We moved further without comment until he again spoke. “I’m sure Elizabeth and Zacharias had ample warning. They probably took him to the wilderness.” He stopped, shook pebbles from his sandals and continued. “Didn’t you tell me Elizabeth still had relatives among the wandering tribes?”

“I think that’s what Mother said. I pray it is so.” My thoughts returned to the prophecy. Jacob’s wife Rachel, who had died in childbirth and was buried near Bethlehem came to mind. She could have been the mother of any of these Jewish sons who, even now, were being killed.

My heart broke to think of the parents tonight and the next few weeks, who were or would be weeping for the slain children who would be no more. Slain, because they had the misfortune to be born less than two years before...and knowing the evilness of Herod, I’m sure his men would not stop if a child looked younger than his age.

My heart wept for these parents...and guilt flooded my being. I knew God would protect Jesus, but these other children were not under the same warranty. They would be killed. Mothers would cry out, fathers would rail against the leaders, others would escape.

And Jesus? I didn’t know where or how or what we would do, but I did know Jesus would be safe.

I put Jesus down and held His hand. He was ready to run down the road and would have if He were allowed His freedom. I grabbed at Jesus as He suddenly twisted from my grasp and ran.

“Here, Mary, you take the donkey, and let me carry Jesus for awhile.” I took the halter of the donkey and Joseph lifted Jesus to his shoulders.

“Go,” Jesus called, and grinned as he held on to His Father’s head.

We laughed up at him, took a deep breath and continued our journey.

As we walked, my thoughts accompanied me. My child would become a ruler. Looking at Him happily pretending His Father was a donkey, I wondered how I could ever give Him up.

In my heart, I knew He would be the kind of leader the world awaited. As the mother of this special child, it was impossible to believe He could be anything else.

I had no idea how or when God would place Him on the throne. I wondered if Jesus would have any trouble taking over the leadership of the world. Would He have to fight other kings or leaders? With what would He fight? Would there be bloodshed? Would armies fight each other just so He could set up a Kingdom? I couldn’t believe that.

God wouldn’t have sent His Son if he intended him to rule with armies of men draped with special clothing and with war weapons. All of a sudden, I really did wonder what kind of Kingdom God planned for His Son.

I was still selfish enough to want Him for myself. Just let Him stay a little boy for a while God, I prayed silently. Please keep Him safe.

As the day turned gray with evening shadows, we decided to sleep underneath the overhang of rocks. It was away from the small caravan who joined our group, yet near enough if we needed help we could call.

I laid out our pallets and Joseph poured water so we could wash some of the dust from our faces and hands. We ate from one of the baskets and then lay down on the rocky ground with Jesus between us. We were so tired, we immediately slept.

Chapter 16

We awoke as the sun peeked over the horizon, painting the sky a pale yellow. I arose and stretched in the freshness of the morning air. Leaves on cedar trees above us stirred, wafting their clean, fresh scent around us.

As I opened the basket I had woven in Bethlehem, the small caravan that stopped near us began to stir. Faint noises reached us...people discussing the day, a child’s laughter, donkeys braying...as they prepared for the day’s travel.

Yellow and orange of the sky turned to a light pink. Colors bounced off the slate grey rocks that reached upward into a cloudless expanse. Gnarled shapes of olive trees in the grove below were little more than dark blobs.

Jesus slept on, curled into a tiny, precious ball.

Though we could see no dwellings, somewhere over the hills a cock crowed. Our donkey stamped his feet lazily, then settled down as Joseph gave him food and water.

I looked into the basket to determine what our meal would be. I spread bread, cheese and figs onto a cloth I'd placed on a large rock. I then poured milk for each of us into small containers.

Joseph returned to my side as he looked around anxiously. "Where's Jesus?"

My heart stopped as I looked around. No Jesus in sight.

"Jesus," he called loudly.

"Look me, Father," a happy little voice said from above us. We spun and stared upward. There was Jesus silhouetted against the sky. He sat on a large rock about fifteen feet above our heads, his tiny legs swinging out over the open expanse. The silvered slate of the hills was a background for the brilliance of the early blooming flowers and the kaleidoscopic colors of the morning sky.

"Stay very still, Jesus." Joseph's voice was unusually calm. "I'll come get you, like I would a little lamb who is too far out on the edge of a rock." Joseph began slowly moving up the path that led to this overhanging rock.

"Pwetty." Jesus said. He held a red poppy in His tiny hand. A blue bird lit on His shoulder and Jesus giggled aloud. "He wikes me, Muver," Jesus called, as He leaned out over the expanse. His voice held delight and wonder.

My panic was almost more than I could handle as I said to Jesus, "Father will get you in a moment. Just stay very still and watch the bird."

He straightened and grinned at his Father as Joseph neared him.

I stared upward and held my breath. It seemed an eon before Joseph reached a long arm and drew Jesus to him. Joseph held Him tightly, his eyes closed in thankfulness. Jesus wrapped His arms around Joseph's neck, crushing the poppy against Joseph's robe. Joseph walked slowly down the slope. I wasn't sure if he was giving me time to get my nerves calmed or to get strength back into his own legs.

He placed Jesus in my shaky arms, then held both of us tightly. My tears of happiness flowed as Joseph thanked God for our son's safety.

We sat on a rock and talked as we ate. Jesus got quite a bit of the sweet syrup from the figs all over His face. When He grinned, His four front teeth shone brightly through the black syrup around His mouth.

As we ate, Joseph said, "I'm so sorry we can't go home to Nazareth right now." His voice was calm, but as I looked at him, I could tell he was only holding himself tightly to keep me from falling apart.

It seemed the only thing I had done since we awoke was cry and I felt tears again coming to my eyes. I swallowed them, though it didn't stop the thoughts which cascaded through my mind.

I felt a lifetime had elapsed since I saw my mother, and I needed her desperately. I needed my Father to tell me everything was going to be all right. I needed Daniel who was now almost grown. And Leah. My little Leah was becoming a young woman. I hated missing that. Mother wrote that a couple of boys were already interested in my sister, though she was only eleven years old. I didn't want her to grow up so rapidly.

I also needed Joseph's mother's wisdom to guide me.

And Sarah. How I missed her. She now had a little girl, mother wrote. They named her Elizabeth they said, to honor my Cousin who had waited so many years to have a child. I missed going to our well each morning. I missed the home Joseph built for us and the bed we slept in and the peacefulness of our former lives.

It took a moment, but I straightened and resolved inwardly I was now a woman, not a little girl. I should act like one. "Whatever we must do to save our child, we will do." I wiped Jesus' face, then reached for Joseph's hand and squeezed it. "My dear, I'm as homesick as you are for Nazareth and I know we can't go home now, but God will lead us home as soon as possible."

I packed our left-over food and began rolling up our pallets as Joseph watched Jesus. "We will get out of Herod's reach, even though we must journey to Egypt," I said emphatically.

"Thank you for making it easier," he said, as he tickled Jesus on the bottom of his foot. Jesus giggled happily and Joseph smiled at Him.

"I'm not making it easier. Maybe we'll be lucky enough to meet people as nice as Ruth and Matthew."

Joseph stood, picked up the mats and retied everything to the back of the donkey as Jesus watched. Joseph said, "Maybe we'll even meet that nice, young couple again."

I nodded my head. "I'd like that."

I picked up Jesus as Joseph strode toward the leader of the caravan. We decided to join the caravan for a short distance.

As we walked, I thought of the journeys I'd made before and knew this was not like any of the others.

The trip to Elizabeth's was one of pleasure amongst strangers who became friends. The experiences were enlightening. It could have been a perfect trip, but I was too concerned about my relationship with Joseph.

I enjoyed the return trip, because I was on my way home. I felt free and happy as I strode over the familiar roads, hills and valleys. Even the journey to Bethlehem to register for taxes had not been all bad. Joseph was with me. He cared for me. The trip was a blessing because it resulted in Jesus becoming a part of our family.

It also resulted in our getting to know Matthew and Ruth. I was terrified when we realized we must leave Bethlehem to protect Jesus. Now, we must move even farther from home. It was essential we leave our own country and become aliens in another land.

This trip...who could say what would happen? Could we evade Herod and get out of the country before discovery? I hoped and prayed the young couple we met earlier managed to escape. That was such a dear, sweet baby.

I railed silently at a ruler who was so wicked he would put tiny babies to death. This already ill, very evil man was still afraid someone would replace him. How sad.

Thinking of him, I wasn't angry at Herod any more. He was a poor, pitiful creature who lived with hatred. He would meet God in the future and have to answer for his sins.

That was not my worry.

When Joseph talked with the leader of the caravan, he asked for directions over the Judean Mountains to Egypt. The leader drew roads and pathways for us to follow on papyrus.

Before leaving the caravan, we purchased bread, cheese, dried fruit and extra goatskins so we would have enough food for a few days. As the sun rose higher, we walked with the small group, attempting to avoid any troops that might be on the main route. We offered thanks to God for leading us to the man who showed us the way.

At the oasis, we filled all the skins with water, then turned off the main caravan route toward Abdullan. Our safest destination, we felt, was the great sea.

As we looked across the plain we saw a solid line of hills we must cross, each higher than the other. In the clean morning air, every object...low bushes, as well as a few trees...was etched against a cloudless sky. As we neared these hills, we discovered stones of every size, from pebbles to boulders. The smaller ones got into our sandals and the larger ones obscured our sight from around turns in the meager path.

The sun climbed higher and I made sure Jesus had a cloak over His face so His tender skin wouldn't burn. Joseph led the donkey, with Jesus riding most of the time. He felt very grownup riding all by Himself, talking to the donkey who seemed to understand what Jesus was saying.

I walked beside them when possible. Often the trail was so narrow and stony, I fell behind. I watched to see that Jesus did not fall. Joseph barely stopped to drink water when I insisted.

We passed small, mean cottages with tiny gardens hacked from the stony ground. Sprigs of green dotted the slopes of the limestone hills. Many times, only scrub and thorn bushes grew. We walked up and down steep gorges and narrow defiles until we were weary beyond words.

By late afternoon, I was exhausted, Jesus had fallen asleep on the back of the donkey but Joseph made no motions that we should stop, so I followed. Our feet slogged through the rocks and dirt. Sweat poured and dampened our clothing.

Suddenly, something caught my eye. Joseph stumbled. I knew it was time to stop and feed my family. I walked rapidly past the donkey and touched Joseph on the arm. He was in such a daze, he didn't even feel my touch.

I shook his arm and said, loudly. "Stop, Joseph!"

It was as though he was coming out of a deep sleep. "Huh? Mary? What's wrong?" He stopped the donkey, who was stumbling along as though he were in a daze, as well.

"Nothing is wrong Joseph, except you are about to pass out from heat and exhaustion. You must stop. Jesus has been sleeping for a long time. I tied him in the saddle so he wouldn't fall, but you must have rest." I took his arm. "Come, sit down. Let me get you some water."

I pulled the donkey into a shady rock overhang where we would be out of the cruel sun. Joseph sat on the side of a stone, then slid down, sitting in the sandy soil. I opened a skin of water and held it to Joseph's mouth. As the coolness touched his parched lips, he looked at me as though he had just now recognized me.

Suddenly, he tried to stand. "Oh, Mary, what have I done? Is Jesus all right? Are you all right?"

I placed my hand on his shoulder. "Sit, Joseph. I'm going to get Jesus from the donkey and we'll eat something. Then, we'll rest until it gets cooler."

As we ate, we all began to revive. Joseph had been concentrating all his energy on moving us to safety as rapidly as possible. He had used all of himself to save his family. I resolved right then to be more alert and not let either of us get too exhausted again.

We drank as much water as we needed to replace the moisture lost in sweat, then ate bread, cheese and dried grapes. We finished our meal with a few precious drops of the wine Ruth gave us.

Joseph sat silently for a little while, then said. "Mary, we've passed caves on our trek up here. There might be one a little further on. If you don't mind, I think I'll just go around this hill and look. If I don't find one very soon, I'll be right back."

"No, Joseph..." I stopped protesting and took a deep breath. How silly I was to protest. "Of course you should go and look. If you find one and I pray you do, we can rest in a cool place."

He was back in only a few minutes. "I found one, Mary." His voice was quiet, but there was excitement in his eyes. "I'll carry Jesus and you can lead the donkey. It's just a little farther up the hill."

As we moved into the cave, Jesus awoke and we all looked around. It was quite dark. There was enough light, however, so we could see all the way to the back. The cave was made from huge boulders. It was almost as though the center rocks had been removed to provide a temporary home.

We heard a rustling and I was sure there were all kinds of creatures inhabiting this dark space. I wasn't going to complain, however. At the moment we were out of the sun and that was the more important consideration.

The cave had a musty, mildewy odor. Pale, fan-like things grew from the rocks. I wasn't sure I wanted to sleep inside this grotto. I hastily pulled our pallets from the back of the donkey and laid them on the pebbly ground. Joseph stumbled, and I persuaded him to lie down and rest.

Jesus wasn't ready to settle down since He had slept earlier, so I played with him for a few minutes. He ran around, examining each pebble. We tossed rocks back and forth for awhile. Then, He found a stone that glittered. He held it a moment clutched tightly in His fat little fists. He then hurled it so it hit the back of the cave. When the noise echoed, Jesus clapped his hands and laughed aloud. A few more rocks, a few more throws and he was again tired.

I watched silently as he lay down next to his Father, who was already asleep.

I rested near the door of the cave, but I couldn't sleep. I wondered what Egypt would be like. Would the people be friendly? Would we find other Jews to live nearby? My thoughts turned to our ancestors who had fled to Egypt so many years before.

The brothers of Joseph were jealous because his Father loved him best. These older brothers sold him to an Egyptian. When famine struck, these same brothers journeyed to Egypt to buy grain. They then discovered their very lives were dependent upon the brother they had sold. Joseph forgave them and he was again united with his Father.

Later, the Babylonians captured Jerusalem and many of the Jews traveled to Egypt for safety. The prophet Jeremiah was among the people who migrated.

Startled, I sat up. "Wake up, Mary. I think it's time we moved on." Joseph was shaking me. I roused and looked up at him. "Jesus and I have already eaten," he told me. "You should eat too. I've fed the donkey and he's all packed. I left out food and water for you."

"How sweet you are, Joseph." I said, as Jesus noticed I was awake and ran to me. He leaned over and gave me a sloppy kiss. "Muver. Wake." He ordered.

I sat up and Joseph handed me water. "What a sweet pair of men I have." I gazed at Joseph and held Jesus on my lap as I ate. I placed the last bite of food in my mouth and we were about to leave when we heard a voice.

"Anybody in here?" The voice sounded friendly...not challenging in any way.

We froze in position. Joseph held the donkey's mouth to keep it from making a noise. I placed my hand over Jesus' mouth so He wouldn't cry out.

Thrust through the opening of the cave, was a log with fire on the end of it. Joseph and I cowered, as the light struck our faces and the man saw us.

"Ho, ho," He said, and laughter seemed only a moment away when he spoke. "Come, let me look at you."

We moved closer to the door. There stood the tallest man I had ever seen. He was at least three or four inches taller than Joseph. His arms were muscular and from the looks of his body where his robe touched, he was in good physical condition. He seemed to be about the same age as Joseph. His hair and beard were dark brown.

I couldn't see his eyes, but his brows were bushy and his nose quite prominent. His mouth tilted in a huge smile as he shoved the cowl from his head and stuck out his hand to Joseph.

"My name is Abner." He introduced himself. "I'm on my way to Egypt." He shoved the lighted log into the rocky sand and doused the light. "I have goods on my donkeys to sell."

"Oh." They shook hands. "I'm Joseph, this is my wife Mary, and our son, Jesus. You startled us."

"I'm sure I did. I'm good at that." Abner said, his face splitting into a grin. "I don't mean to frighten people by moving so quietly, but somehow I always do."

He moved into the cave and looked around, though there was nothing to see except the limestone walls and our little family.

“We were just leaving,” Joseph informed Abner. “If you’d like, the cave is all yours. We have a long way to go.” And he started to lead the donkey around the man.

“It’s almost dark. You’ll not find another cave to spend the night in.” Abner protested. He carried himself with the assurance of a much older person.

“That may be, but we must move on. We have family expecting us.” Joseph said.

“In that case, I won’t hold you.” He moved out of the way as Joseph led the donkey past him. “I was hoping you might accompany me on the journey.” Barely stopping for breath, he asked. “Have you ever crossed a desert or mountains or sand dunes?”

Joseph halted the donkey, looked back and shook his head.

“Company makes a journey much more pleasant, don’t you think?” Abner’s voice was quite friendly.

I carried Jesus as we walked through the door of the cave.

When I emerged, I stopped. “My goodness!” The expression was out of my mouth before I could stop it. Jesus clamored to get down, but I held Him tightly. I saw a dozen or more donkeys tied together with one tether. Each was loaded with packs filled almost to overflowing.

“How do you manage to get all these animals fed twice a day by yourself?” Joseph asked, as astonished as I. “Do you unload them each night?”

Abner chuckled. “No. I don’t unload them every night. I can’t. Of course if I find someone to help me on my journeys, I pay for their labors.” He looked at Joseph, a thoughtful expression on his face. “Would you care for the job?”

Joseph stood very still, suddenly unable to decide. “Come,” Abner’s voice was persuasive. “If you can wait until morning, I’d like you to join me in a meal. Then you can help with the animals.”

“We have eaten, but since it’s late and if it’s all right with Mary, we will wait.” Joseph turned to me and I nodded. I was grateful we were going to wait until morning. I was still exhausted.

“I’ll gladly help with your asses, sir.” Joseph offered. “It will be my pleasure.” And he turned our donkey around and led him back inside.

Jesus and I went back into the cave. I again removed the pallets from our donkey and laid them in a corner. As Abner and Joseph brought the rest of the animals into the cave, they unloaded, then fed them. They placed each of the packs on top of each other, leaving plenty of room for all of us to sleep.

Abner took one pack off, opened it and laid food out on a clean cloth placed on the ground.

“May I help you?” I offered.

“You sit,” he said, not ordering, but as though he wished to do the honors. “I can see you’re a tired little lady. You can serve me tomorrow.” He opened containers that held tiny pieces of dried fish, olives; black and green. There was also yogurt, curds, different kinds of cheeses and bread. One type of bread had a hole in it, like the bread I saw in Jerusalem. Vegetables or meat could be stuffed in it, then held in one’s hand. What a feast!

Then he opened a skin that held wine of such a delicate odor I was wondering how it would taste. He poured milk from a wineskin into a tiny silver goblet and handed it to me to let Jesus drink. Then he drew three larger goblets from a pack and placed them on the cloth.

“Come, we shall eat.”

“But...” Joseph began.

“I know you said you had eaten. But this food is different. Please do me the honor of joining me in the meal.”

We sat on the floor of the cave and Abner asked God’s blessings. I tasted everything. We ate and talked until it was completely dark outside. Jesus was put to bed and was sound asleep. I went to our corner of the cave and settled down, as Abner stood, looking out.

He turned to look at Joseph who stood near him. “Is that the boy Herod is looking for?”

I grabbed Jesus, waking him. I held Him so tight, he cried out. I released my hold on Him, then talked softly, patting and kissing him, to put Him at ease. The question the stranger asked still echoed in the cave. I felt dead with fright. What would he do?

Joseph looked at Abner, an angry, worried expression on his face. “What do you mean? Is Herod looking for a boy?”

“You know he is. That’s why you’re fleeing to Egypt.” Abner’s voice was in a conversational tone.

“What gave you that idea?” Joseph was working very hard to keep his voice calm.

“God led me to you.” The stranger said. “I’ve been looking for days. Three wise men with whom I trade, stopped at my home. They told me about the two of you and Jesus.”

He turned and looked directly at Joseph. “Herod has men all over Judea looking for you. If you will permit, I can show you a way that will keep them from finding you. It won’t be an easy task. We do have enough animals, food and water so we can travel longer each day than normal. We can ride when we tire, eat as we move along and rest when it becomes absolutely necessary.”

“But...” Joseph interrupted. “We didn’t know when the Wise Men visited just what we were going to do. How did you know we would head for Egypt?”

“The four of us talked almost all night.” Abner said. “We tried to decide where you might have gone. We heard Herod was sending soldiers to Nazareth and decided you would hear, as well.”

“So you thought our alternative would be Egypt.” Joseph stated dryly.

“Before we reached a decision, someone remembered a prophecy that stated the Savior would come out of Egypt. We reasoned you had to go there before Jesus could come out of that particular country.”

“I had forgotten the prophecy.” Joseph said. “Yes, you’re right, Abner. God is leading us. He sent an angel to warn us about Herod. He told us to go to Egypt.”

Abner looked at Jesus with awe, took a deep breath and said,

“There’s a group heading for Egypt. We shall catch up with them in the next day or two. In fact, they’re caring for three of my camels. If you’re in the middle of a group of people, there’s less likelihood you will be found.”

“Why would you do this thing for us?”

Abner’s voice was so quiet I could barely hear him. “I’ve waited all my life for the Savior to free our people. Now that He is here, we must all protect Him.” He looked at Jesus with the fervor of a religious zealot. “I thank God I have a chance to help in this matter. But come, we must sleep for awhile and be on our way early in the morning.”

Joseph returned to the pallet, and I never knew when he or Abner slept. I felt I had just put my head on the ground when Joseph shook me awake. We packed the donkeys, eating as we worked. I picked up Jesus as we left the cave to begin our day’s journey.

It was still quite dark in the mountains. A tinge of light was seen in the sky...more a hint, than a reality. As the sun slowly rose, it played with the hills, making them look almost golden. These mountains were higher, and small rocks made it more difficult to walk. We watched the animals to make sure they made it around the narrow pathways without stumbling.

I’ve barely mentioned how Jesus was taking all this change. He was the finest baby imaginable. He never feared anything or anyone. Each happening was a happy experience for Him. It was just something new in His life. He acted as though everyone should love Him and take care of Him.

When He had the chance, He played. If He had to ride the donkey He did, with pleasure. When He wanted to walk, I held His hand and we struggled for awhile until He tired. I picked him up occasionally, just because I needed to feel His tiny, loving body next to mine.

He talked to me with words I could barely understand, but I loved each utterance. He called to Joseph, who walked with Him on his shoulders. Even Abner insisted he take care of Jesus while we led his donkeys. He amused Jesus by telling him stories about various animals. The only difference in the way Abner told stories...he made sounds that sounded like animals.

We stopped only when necessary. Near the end of the second day, we rounded a rock. There, preparing to rest for the night was the group of people Abner told us about. They welcomed us into their midst. Most, like us, were fleeing from the laws that strangled Jews tighter and tighter each day.

We all agreed, since Abner had more experience in leading people on a journey, he should be our leader. He made the rules and we followed. His rules were simple. We moved fast, made as much time as possible, and avoided Herod's men.

Everyone agreed.

Small settlements were scarce and villages non-existent. We traveled over mountains, avoiding huts made with stone or any trace of humans. Our mouths watered when we saw chickens scratching around one or two huts as we ate dried bread.

We struggled through heat-seared noontime, watching that each of the party drank enough water to remain well. We ate as we walked, until all were merely stumbling along. We were going to a safe place to protect our children. We complained little, until we entered the desert.

Coming from the mountain's foothills, we spied the whiteness of the sand. None of the party except Abner had ever seen such whiteness. We didn't know what to expect, but dread set in as we neared that expanse.

The desert was the worst enemy any of us could imagine...much worse than the mountains. The sun shimmered over the undulating sand, making it look like a white ocean with waves slowly moving into shore. We thirsted constantly, slogged our way through this enemy and prayed God would help us complete the never-ending journey. Our cloaks kept some of the searing sun from our faces, but we all wondered if we would live to see the end of the journey.

With our energy at an all time low, in the midst of the desert, someone screamed, "A sandstorm!" We stared at the on-coming phenomenon.

Abner halted and yelled. "Hurry! Help get wet cloths on the faces of the animals!"

We all rushed, glancing up at the distant storm. I poured water from the goatskins, other women held the cloths, and the men rapidly tied them around the heads of the asses and camels. "The cloths will prevent the animals from straying during the storm." I heard Abner tell one of the men.

We then tied the animals together and the men held on to the ends of the ropes.

As I glanced at the storm I wondered, since the sand was so white, why did this spiraling phenomena appear so inky? I looked back as the forbidding storm moved nearer. The sound was merely a murmur, like a group of children whispering. Then, as it twirled closer, the sound became louder...whispers became a cacophony of sound hitting our eardrums like drum sticks.

Abner was everywhere...giving orders, showing us what to do, telling us everything was going to be all right.

"Now," Abner ordered. "Wet your cloaks and capes, then get into a circle. Stoop down as low to the ground as possible."

We made everyone's clothing as wet as possible, then draped them over our entire bodies. After wetting the children and their clothing, we placed them in the center of our group and made a tent-like affair over them. We huddled together, our bodies stooped over the children as the blowing sand neared. The wail of the wind almost deafened us. It reminded me of a waterfall hitting rocks...only becoming louder as it neared. It clamored like a

storm's wind howling down the mountain. We stood in that half-stoop, half-sitting position, waiting for the sand to blow entirely over us. I tried to look around the circle. Even the person next to me appeared ghostlike as the sand embedded our clothing, turned our black hair to white and left us looking like sand statues.

As we held hands the sand pelted us so hard I felt it was hurled from the sky like huge balls. As it struck our bodies, tongues of fire licked us. We attempted to protect the children from the more violent sandy wind, but I knew some would have sand burns from this...if we survived.

The wind drove sand through clothing, into mouths and ears. We closed our eyes, then covered them with our wet cloaks. Nothing kept the driving sand from them. How we managed to clasp hands through the entire storm, I don't know.

The circle our bodies made moved back and forth in a grotesque dance. We fought desperately to keep our positions during this horrible nightmare.

Once, I glanced around and saw an animal fall. The others attempted to move away from him, but they were so tightly tied together, it was impossible. I hated to think of the agony that poor animal was enduring, but no one dared move from the assigned position, though the braying cut through the wind sounds and battered our senses.

Finally the winds abated and sand slowed its swirling. Bits of leaves, sheepskin, papyrus...even a bone, fell from the cone and was deposited near us. The storm lost its anger and moved across the desert, its strength rapidly ebbing.

Bruised, battered and confused, we watched as the hellish storm disintegrated as though it had never been.

There was no more storm.

We slowly removed the cloths from our faces. Our children were reluctant to leave the safety of their human tent. We coaxed them out, holding on to them as tightly as possible. I'm sure the other parents felt as I did. They needed the comfort of these little bodies held closely, as much as they needed our arms around them.

After reassuring our children, we all stumbled in a daze to care for the animals. Fortunately, we only lost the one animal.

After seeing that no one was seriously injured, Abner stated quietly. "We must go off our route for a while."

No one asked why. We could see that some of the animals needed special care. He turned the group around and headed for an oasis. I've never understood how men of the dessert could unerringly head for those green havens. There are no obvious marks to point the way. Especially after a storm such as we had just endured.

We stumbled along, hardly knowing we were moving. Finally, someone said, quietly. "There it is."

As we looked, a bit of green came into view. Fronds of the few palm trees swayed in the unfelt breeze. To us, the grass appeared to be the garden of Eden. The water, though not a sky blue color as I had expected, was the most beautiful sight I had ever seen.

Each of us stumbled to the edge of the water and stared. It was almost as though we were afraid to touch that welcome pool. Some of the children were not so shy. They plunged into the edge, wetting themselves from head to foot, which seemed to release the adults from their lethargy.

As the children cavorted, we cleansed the animals, then watered them. We treated them with a special ointment Abner carried. Made with oil extracted from the mustard plant, it helped relieve bodily aches.

We bathed our children and ourselves. Where the sand struck our bodies, we had suffered torn skin. Ointment was rubbed in, giving almost instant relief.

After making sure that each person and animal was cared for, Abner suggested we stay over an extra day. He said we needed the rest to regain strength pulled from us by the storm.

As I looked at faces around me, I knew we had reached the edge of complete exhaustion. Most were on the verge of collapse. I checked Joseph and Jesus for cuts and bruises. They had only a few scrapes. The ointment soon took care of that. I knew, without looking in a mirror, I looked as bad as everyone else.

After prayers of thanksgiving, Abner removed food from the donkeys. We were all so weary, few felt like eating until we watched our children gobble their food. When they had their fill, we readied them for the night.

Soon, we adults sat in a circle, enjoying Abner's food and wine. After we ate, we unpacked the donkeys and camels, then drifted toward our pallets. I kissed Abner on the cheek and silently thanked God for leading Abner to us. We knew without Abner's help we would never have made it.

Instead of staying one day as Abner originally suggested, we decided two days would be much better. The skin of most of the animals was beginning to heal. The people were completely refreshed, so on the morning of the third day, we resumed our journey. We moved rapidly, trying to make up for time lost.

Only once, just before we arrived in Egypt did we have a scare from Herod's men.

We stopped near Azatos. That night, grouped around a fire, we talked and watched our children who were fast asleep. The tiny waves of the oasis lapped at the shore, lulling everyone into a feeling of safety.

We were so near our destination, we felt safe. The night was wrapped around us like a warm, friendly cloak. Stars so brilliant they looked like flashing diamonds, danced across the sky. The almost full moon played with the landscape, picking out small hills and palms and bushes.

Our senses had been so battered by our journey and the storm, it was a blessing to smell the cleanliness of the pool and the faint scent of palms.

Joseph and I saw that Jesus was asleep with the other children. "Let's go sit by the water, Mary. It's been such a long time since we were alone."

I put my hand in his. "I'd like that."

We sat close together, then talked of our future. I yawned and it wasn't too long before Joseph was doing the same. "I think we'd better get back," Joseph stood, then reached a hand to pull me up.

We returned to the group where a cool breeze caressed our bodies. The palm trees were swaying as though they were reading a special piece of music. We all relaxed, preparing to sleep.

Suddenly, we heard horses neighing very near us and held tightly to each other, barely breathing. We had not heard them approach on the silent sand.

As they neared, we watched in terror as a group of soldiers rode into our midst. The captain motioned for the men to alight, water their horses and fill their skins.

We glanced at each other and wondered what was going to happen. Joseph clutched my hand so tightly I thought he would break my fingers, but I didn't want him to let go.

It was too dark for the uniformed men to see the panic registering on each face. We watched silently as the soldiers filled skin after skin of the precious liquid while their horses drank their fill.

Abner stood and greeted the men as though they were long, lost friends. "What can we do for you, Captain?" He asked.

"Oh, Abner, it's you." The captain leaned down from his horse and peered at Abner, then looked at the rest of us. "You have a larger group than normal, I see." He said.

"Oh, yes." Abner replied. "I had so many more donkeys and camels I needed extra help with them." I felt he was toying with the officer, as the moonlight caught a wicked smile on his face. "They have merchant friends whom I'll sell goods to when we reach Ascalon and cross Gaza."

"You're the luckiest trader I know. You always find people to help in any endeavor you begin." The captain took a goatskin from one of the soldiers, poured a drink of water into a small container and drank.

We all held our breaths as he brought the container from his mouth and handed the skin back to the soldier. Then he looked back at Abner. "Do you have any boys younger than two in your group?"

“We didn’t unless that storm blew one in on us.” Abner replied with a laugh. “We do have a few small girls. Will they do?” Abner turned to look at the sleeping children. “Would you care to see them?”

I held my breath. I knew there was only Jesus and one other small boy whose parents were fleeing Judea. They were attempting to save their son, as we were Jesus. The other boys were older than two and not important to the Roman soldiers.

The Captain saluted Abner. “Not this late at night. You’d never forgive me if you had a problem getting them back to sleep.” He grinned in friendliness. “I know too, you’d never bring me another skin of your special wine if that happened.”

Abner reached into one of the bags, removed a goatskin and gave it to the Captain.

“Thank you.” The Captain nodded to Abner, then to his soldiers. They pulled themselves into their saddles. The Captain wheeled his horse, gave orders to his men and they were gone.

After the soldiers left, none of us could sleep. We were too tense. We sat or stood and held our children closely.

Abner asked that we all gather around the fire. “That was very frightening and I know how you all feel. I know also, it will be a while before you can go to sleep. Why don’t we just sit in a circle and talk?”

He stirred the embers while we quietly sank onto the white sand. Abner asked. “Have any of you ever been to Egypt?”

There was a general shaking of heads. We had all left Judea and the environs because of our living conditions...primarily political ones.

He said. “Alexandria is a very beautiful, very large city. No one knows exactly how many Jews live there. However, it is known there are about a million Jews in all of Egypt. You will certainly find people who have your same life styles.”

“Are there any small villages of Jews as in Nazareth?” Joseph asked. He held Jesus over his shoulder as He slept soundly.

“Joseph, there are as many villages as there are different types of people. Just inside the borders of Egypt, there’s a very small town. That might be the answer to what you and Mary are searching for.”

Joseph thanked him as one of the men asked. “Can you tell us more about Alexandria? My wife and I are from Jerusalem and I don’t know how we would ever be able to live in a small village.”

“I can’t explain Alexandria to you. It’s a very beautiful city. If you’re used to living in a large city, then you will probably be able to find the same accommodations there.”

We talked for quite awhile. People slowly left the circle. I lay down and listened to the soft voices. I must have dozed because I barely remember Joseph sliding in beside me.

The next day we passed the city of Gaza. In the next few days we walked across stony ground, sands and wadis. We crossed the Egyptian River on rafts.

A few days later, we entered Egypt. Jesus, Joseph and I left Abner and the group and turned toward our new home.

Chapter 17

I held Jesus as Joseph and I walked side by side. “Joseph, where should we live?”

“After Abner talked about Alexandria, I know I don’t want to live there.” His voice was so serious, I had to laugh.

“You don’t like big cities?” I teased.

He grinned. “You know I could never be comfortable with so many people around. Every time we go to Jerusalem it’s almost more than I can endure. Before you and I were there very long, I was more than ready to leave. That city is too busy and there are too many people.”

I transferred Jesus from one hip to the other. “I don’t want to live in a large city, either.”

“Here, let me have Him.” Joseph took Jesus, who was almost asleep. Jesus draped his arm around Joseph’s neck, sighed, then slept.

“Mary, what did you think of the village Abner told us about last night?” He leaned his chin on top of Jesus’ head in a protective and loving manner.

“It sounded good to me. If we can find a small place where there’s work, I’m sure we would both be happy.”

He looked around, leaned over and kissed me, just before the trail narrowed and we had to walk separately.

We walked toward a town Abner had told us was fairly close. We stopped for awhile during the middle of the day to rest, eat a small meal and let Jesus run and play.

As we traveled over the terrain, there was little to see. A few mean-looking trees vied for the sparse moisture. Sand and small stones created no resistance as we walked. The sun played with wispy clouds drifting by.

The sun rose higher. Our steps slowed as heat intensified, and sweat oozed from our exhausted bodies. Clouds evaporated as though they were never born. Few hints of vegetation were visible and the little we saw was brown and crushed. It rustled as we walked near.

Suddenly, we entered a district about the size of our village of Nazareth.

The quiet was eerie. Not even a bird sang in the still, hot air. Our footsteps resounded on the stones of the courtyard where homes appeared to be well-kept.

“Where is everyone?” I whispered.

Jesus slipped in Joseph’s arms. “Probably trying to cool off.” Joseph spoke aloud as he scooted Jesus back on his shoulder.

We abruptly entered the street of artisans and I was horrified. The few people who were in front of their shops seemed to be in a stupor. Heat emanating from sandy soil helped me understand the miasma. Every shop appeared to be in need of some type of repair.

“Are you sure you want to stay here?” Joseph’s voice held as much doubt as mine.

“I don’t know.” I reached for the Baby. “Let me have Jesus. You’ve carried him long enough.”

Jesus woke as he was being transferred and wanted to walk. It was a relief because he was really getting heavy.

We watched Him carefully as He marched in front of us, His short, fat legs pumping furiously.

Joseph remarked, “Every door frame is sagging and the roofs are in desperate need of repair.” As he hit one of the supporting small tree trunks which had held up a roof, it swayed. He caught it, straightened it, then looked at the remaining bolsters. “They look like they’re engaged in a drunken dance.”

Our heads swivelled from side to side. “Joseph, these frames are about to collapse.” I glanced up and caught the eyes of a tin-smith who sat beside his wares. I smiled.

He nodded, then appeared ashamed as he looked back at his dusty, dented wares sitting on wooden frames that leaned aslant.

The entire street appeared to have expired without telling its inhabitants. A musty, lifeless odor pervaded everything; reminiscent of a dying earth.

Sand swirled at our feet as we trudged through the narrow street. When we passed, a few shop owners nodded. Jesus grinned at everyone. Sometimes, the men returned His smiles. When we reached the end of the short street we saw a carpentry shop.

As I stood outside the door holding Jesus, I drank in the clean odor of cedar. Maybe there is hope for this place after all. Joseph entered the shop and spoke with a man at work.

Soon, they both emerged. I saw a slender, older man whose hair and beard were completely white. His snapping black eyes glowed. His smile was infectious and the laughter wrinkles at the corner of his eyes and mouth told his life story. Truly a contented, happy man. Looking at him closer, he didn't appear to be much older than my Father.

He clapped Joseph on the back, pointed down the street, then reentered his shop.

"What was that all about?" I asked, holding tightly to Jesus' hand.

"He has a very small house we can rent." Joseph said. "If it's all right with you, we can use it for now." He pulled at a reluctant donkey.

"Anything would be a blessing," I said, fanning my face with my hand. Sweat dripped over my cheeks as I tried to wipe it away.

Leaving the Street of Artesians, we walked down a lane that was so much like Nazareth, I almost felt I was home. We entered a courtyard that could have been the one we formerly lived on, it was so familiar.

Twisting through tiny streets, we arrived at the house. Part of the roof was missing. We both looked at the sky and knew it wouldn't rain tonight, so maybe a missing roof wasn't that important at the moment. A roof was easy enough to replace.

The outside stones were beginning to chip and some needed replacing. A post sat in front of the house where an animal could be tethered. Joseph placed the donkey's rope over the post and opened the door. As we entered, our surprise was total.

"It's clean!" Joseph exclaimed.

When we walked into the one room dwelling, we saw a small table in one corner, two chairs tucked under the edge. There was a lamp, still dimly glowing, on a shelf and a brazier in the corner. A platform, about two feet high, jutted from one wall. Like many houses, animals must have lived with the family. We saw further evidence in a manger hung on a wall. I wrinkled my nose in pleasure at the clean smell of hay which permeated everything.

Going back outside I brought one of the bundles from the donkey. I placed a pallet on the platform. Joseph laid Jesus down on it, then covered Him with a robe which I unpacked. He was almost instantly asleep.

"Joseph, I must go to the market and get something for our meal." I said. "If you'll bring our belongings in and watch Jesus, I'll fix a meal."

He nodded. "While you're gone, I'll also feed the donkey. There's still enough grain for tonight, I think."

I started out the door, a goatskin in my hand, then stopped. I turned to Joseph. "Did he tell you where the well is?"

Before Joseph could answer, I was tapped on the shoulder. I turned so rapidly, I almost hit her. A little water spilled from her pail, wetting my foot. "I'm so sorry," I apologized.

"That's all right," she answered. "I was just bringing water for you." Her smile was so beautiful, it was like walking from the darkness into sunshine. "Benjamin said you would be needing water." Her flashing black eyes belied the fact she was as old as my mother. She shoved the cloak from her black hair which held many strands of grey. The cloak was colored like a rainbow, emphasizing her dark skin and whiteness of her teeth.

I took the pail from her. "Oh, thank you so much. Please come in."

"There are a few goblets in the chest by the brazier," she said, pointing a long thin finger. "And there's a bowl you can use to wash your hands."

As she stood back looking at Jesus, I found the bowl, poured water and washed my hands. "My name is Mary," I said. "And this is my husband, Joseph. The baby's name is Jesus."

"I'm Naomi, and Benjamin is my husband."

“The carpenter is your husband?” Joseph asked as he came forward to meet her.

“Yes.” She smiled as though she were greeting a long lost friend. “He sent word that someone had rented our house.”

I asked, “Is this your home?”

“For many years, yes. A few months ago, Benjamin said it was time we had a larger home. We moved across the courtyard into a house where there are three rooms, one on the rooftop.” She was delighted with her new home. Every gesture confirmed it. “I’m sorry the house is in such disrepair, but Benjamin hasn’t had time to fix it.”

“Is he the only carpenter in town?” I asked.

“Yes. And I’m so glad your husband will now be working with him. Maybe I’ll get to see him more often.” She smiled with pleasure in the thought.

“You’ll eat with us tonight.” She continued. “Tomorrow’s soon enough for you to have to worry about food.”

“Joseph?” I looked at him, wondering how he felt about accepting a meal from strangers.

“We shall be happy to come.” His voice sounded so tired, even more exhausted than I felt. “It’s been a long journey.” He picked up Jesus, who roused, looked around Him and announced He wished to walk.

Joseph put Him down, but held His hand so He couldn’t run. During our journey over the hills and deserts, Jesus walked longer periods each day. Now, he was running almost every step He took, so we had to watch Him constantly.

“What a dear little boy,” Naomi almost cooed, as she stooped so she was eye level with Jesus. She held out her hand. “Let me hold your hand, please.”

He released His hand from Joseph’s and took hers in complete trust. We followed as Naomi and Jesus walked from our new home.

That began our stay in Egypt. Joseph worked with Benjamin in the days ahead. He helped build furniture and farm equipment, just as he had at home. In the evenings, he worked to repair our home.

Then, he began working on shops along the Artisan street. As he worked, the merchants improved their shops. Though Joseph never charged, they paid him. Slowly, the street revived. A few months after our entry, it became a busy street, with village women meeting to gossip.

The next morning, Naomi showed me the well. Later, she introduced me to women who lived in the courtyard. She also accompanied me to the best markets to purchase food. I discovered the village was much larger than we had originally thought.

Jesus and I spent our days exploring and marketing. As I became acquainted with the women, I teamed up with one or another to grind grain. I discovered the Arabians used many more locusts in their flour than was our custom. They dried the insects, mashed them into flour and made entire loaves of bread. The bread was eaten as a delicacy. Some loaves were dipped in different sauces and some of the flour was made into cakes.

Naomi taught me to make other dishes used in our new country. I vowed I’d take these new ideas home.

Though Naomi was a Jew, she had lived in Egypt so long she knew the different patterns the Egyptians used in making their clothing. She taught me to weave these patterns into cloth. Most were brightly colored. She even taught me to make many of the dyes used in the fabric.

One day, after we had pounded pomegranate skin to make a yellow dye, she said, “If you think this is hard work, you should be one of the people who make purple dye.”

“Is it much harder than doing this?”

She laughed. “Actually, only men make that dye. First, they must trap murex snails in the sea.”

“Snails to make dye?”

She nodded.

“How can they trap them? Do they use special traps?”

She laughed, “Actually, they put cockles inside a basket, which is a snail’s preferred meal. When snails try to get the cockles the cockles stick out their long tongues and trap the snails.”

By this time I could picture that crazy scene and was laughing so hard I could barely dip the thread in and out of the yellow liquid we made from pomegranates.

“The men break open the snail and remove the gland which produces only a tiny droplet of liquid.”

By this time, my hands moved slower and slower as I listened.

“It takes thousands of these tiny snails to produce enough for one small batch of dye. They even crush the smaller snails.

Then the whole mess is soaked in salt for three days.

“It’s thinned with water and simmered in lead vats. After nine days of cooking...”

“Nine days?” I interrupted.

“Nine days.” She nodded. “Then it’s strained to remove all impurities. Because all this smells so bad, it’s not even allowed to be done in the city.”

I stood listening, enthralled, as Jesus played with other children nearby.

“When they test a piece of wool, it turns yellow.”

“Yellow?”

“Yes. Then they hang it in the sun, which turns the wool to a deep shade of purple.”

“That’s the most fantastic thing I’ve ever heard,” I said, as I reached for the last batch of thread we were to dye.

Even all these chores did not completely fill my time while Joseph worked.

I felt fortunate my mother had believed the Mishna. It stated a Jewish girl might have an education in the Law, if she desired. Many women I met in my travels were very well educated. Some owned lucrative businesses. They owned shops where other women wove materials, then made garments. These were sold by the female owners.

Others dyed material or thread. Still others baked loaves of bread and other foodstuffs to be sold.

Though scribes were usually men, I was particularly happy I could read and write because I became a scribe for a few people in the village. Mother had taught me to make pens from reeds. One split the reed, cut it cross-wise, forming the nib. The ink was made from ink black and diluted gum.

While in Egypt, I began writing psalms on small scrolls of parchment and giving them as gifts. I also used my gift of writing and reading to teach Jesus.

During these months He absorbed knowledge as though His brain was a sponge. Each day I tried to read from the Scriptures. I even taught Jesus some of the psalms David wrote.

I hoped and prayed we would be home for Jesus to begin serious studies before He reached the age of five. The Mishna states a boy should begin to learn to read by studying the Law and the Prophets at the age of five. He should learn the Mishna at ten. At thirteen, he is bound to the commandments and at fifteen he begins the study of the Talmud.

Though we were far from home, Joseph was content at his work. My life with friends and Jesus was full. However, the pain of missing my family and friends in Nazareth was always present.

We were not unhappy in our courtyard. In fact, after we were there about nine months, I knew a baby was on the way.

The night I was sure of the pregnancy, a special meal was prepared. When Joseph came home from work, I tried to look my best. Though we had discussed my not becoming pregnant in over two years, since Jesus' birth, we never questioned God's reason in the matter.

I cleansed my hair that day and tied it on top with a bow. My robe was my prettiest one. It was made with bright colors that brought out the color of my eyes and made them shine. Chicken stew with onions, potatoes and other vegetables I found in the market were ready when he arrived.

Boiled eggs, which Joseph especially liked, as well as hot bread awaited. Thin cakes, with ripe figs spread on them, sat at the side of the table so we could have those later.

I purchased a bottle of wine. It sat in a bowl of water to cool. On the table I placed a clean cloth and small bowls so we could eat from individual containers. Goblets sat on the table.

When he came in the door, Jesus attacked him as usual. When they finished their welcome home game, Joseph swatted Jesus on His bottom and told Him to play for a while.

Jesus ran back to his toys as Joseph looked around. "What's this? What's happened?"

I flirted, smiling at him. "Can't I fix a special meal without your being suspicious?" I went to him, raised up on tiptoes and kissed him.

"Mary," he chided, moving away from me. "Something's happened, so you might as well tell me."

"You get your bath" I ordered. "We'll eat, then I'll tell you." He could see by my face it was good news. He kissed me and was back very soon. As we ate, we spoke of his work. We discussed Jesus' accomplishments and our friends in the courtyard.

Jesus could barely contain himself. He overheard Naomi and I talking about it and was overjoyed he was going to have a brother or sister. I finally told him if He said nothing until after we ate, He could tell Joseph.

Finally, we finished our meal, and bowls were removed. "Now, tell me." Joseph's eyes crinkled in merriment.

I looked at Jesus and said, "You can tell him."

"We're going to have a baby!" He shouted and scrambled to sit in Joseph's lap.

Joseph looked at me with a stunned expression. "Is it really true?" His voice was almost a whisper.

I nodded, rose and came around the table. Joseph grabbed me, squeezing me so tightly I thought he would crush the baby.

"Not so hard, father," Jesus protested.

Joseph relaxed his hold on both of us, but still held tightly. "Oh, Mary, I thought it would never happen." And his eyes were bright with unshed tears.

"It's all right, father," Jesus said, patting Joseph on the face. "Muver will give us lots of babies, so you don't have to cry."

Joseph laughed. "I'm crying because I'm so happy, Jesus. Wouldn't you like to go play now while I talk to mother?"

Jesus scrambled down from Joseph's lap and went back to his toys.

"Mary, how can I show you how much I love you?"

"You do, every day of the week." I said. "But I must clean the table, then get Jesus to bed."

After that night, the only thing that marred our happiness was the fact we were not in Nazareth with our families and friends.

Abner came to see us twice that year. He had a scroll from my mother each time, which kept me informed of the gossip at home. On his last visit, he spoke of Herod and his health.

We sat around the table that night after eating. Abner had brought us exotic food, as usual. “Abner, you are spoiling me. I shall have a hard time learning to eat normal food when we do get the chance to go home.” I laughed, as I used bread to mop up the last bite of juice from the stew he had prepared with wine.

“I would like to be able to cook for both of you more often.” He said, a special twinkle in his eyes. “And you just may be able to go home sooner than you think.”

“What do you mean?” Joseph asked, stopping the bite of bread that was nearing his mouth.

“Herod is very ill.”

Joseph placed his bread back onto his dish and stared at Abner in disbelief. “Can it be?” His voice was so hopeful, I realized he had been as homesick as I. “Will we be able to go back?” He picked up his goblet, sipped his wine.

Then, in his deliberate fashion, Joseph continued. “His son will then be ruler. What kind of person is he?”

Abner ignored his questions for the moment. “Here, Joseph, take a sip of this wine. It’s a very special kind I think you will enjoy.” He poured a small amount in the goblet. “Now, I shall try to answer some of your questions. You know Herod has been a very sick man for quite some time.”

Joseph nodded as he sniffed, then tasted the wine. He raised his goblet and silently toasted Abner.

“He’s lying in his latest house so ill he cannot leave his bed. In fact, he may be dead by now.” His voice was calm. “I can assure you the world will not be sad when he is in his tomb.” He raised his goblet and toasted.

“I agree.” Joseph said, picking up his bread and continuing his meal. “It certainly raises questions for Mary and me.”

“How so?” Abner asked, pouring a bit of wine into a silver goblet for me.

“Mary is going to have our child.” Joseph spoke softly, but the grin on his face was so big, Abner knew how happy Joseph truly was.

“Then we shall have to see that you get back home so this baby can be born in Nazareth.” Abner said.

The next day he went on to Alexandria to sell some of the jewels the Wise Men sent from the Far East. He frequently picked them up from caravans he met in Jerusalem, then marketed them in the teeming Egyptian city.

Two weeks later, Abner was back. He told us he had arrived in the city in the early afternoon. He stopped at the caravansary and made arrangements to have someone care for his animals while he visited with us.

When he knocked on our door, Jesus saw him and ran to his friend. “Uncle Abner,” He called.

Abner scooped him up, talking about how big he had grown, and how much he had missed Him. He gave Jesus a ball he bought in Alexandria. They played outside with the ball until Joseph arrived from work.

I baked a cake made with locust flour to add to the meal I had already prepared. The flour had the sharp taste Abner particularly liked, so I always tried to fix one when he visited.

When Abner entered, he looked like he had a secret he wanted to tell. Even with teasing, he refused to say anything until we ate and Jesus was in bed.

Abner praised my meal as I cleaned the table. He and Joseph sat chatting companionably. After He received more kisses and hugs than usual, I put Jesus to bed.

Then we sat, sipping delicious wine Abner always brought.

“All right,” I stated. “We’ve waited long enough. Tell us your secret.”

Abner grinned at both of us and said, “Well, good friends,” He announced with a laugh. “You can now go home.” He slapped the table to emphasize his words.

“What do your mean?” Joseph asked.

“Herod is dead!” He exclaimed as he picked up his wine and lifted it in the air, as though he was giving a toast.

Joseph sat back in disbelief. “Can it be true? How do you know?”

“Word reached Alexandria while I was there. Jewish neighborhoods in the city are in an uproar. People are talking about moving back home. They wonder if they should go and what to take with them. Ultimately, they must decide if they want to leave the life they have made for themselves in the City.”

Joseph nodded. “I can certainly understand their dilemma.”

“I’m sure you can.” Abner looked from Joseph to me. “The same thoughts and questions are running through your mind right now, aren’t they?” Abner looked from Joseph to me.

I hardly knew what to say or think or do. I twirled my goblet of wine, never raising it from the table. I barely had the strength to pick it up, I was so stunned.

“Well, Joseph. What do you think? Will you go home?”

“I don’t know,” Joseph answered. “God sent an angel to tell us to leave Judea and not return home. We must wait until we are sure Jesus is no longer in danger.”

Now it was Abner’s turn to look stunned. “You never told me that before.”

“I know.” Joseph held the wine goblet with both hands and his voice was quiet as he continued. “We, Mary and I, kept it a secret because few, if any, believe.”

“I would have.”

“I know,” Joseph said. “Sometimes the keeping quiet is easier.”

“Because Jesus is the Messiah?” Abner asked.

“Yes.” Joseph answered and looked into Abner’s eyes. “You knew that anyway, from the first time you saw him.”

“Yes, of course I did.” Abner agreed. “The Magi told me. That’s why I searched for you so diligently. After finding the three of you, I fell in love with your entire family.” He took a sip of wine. “I have no family. I hope you don’t object if I adopt you.”

I reached out and took his hand. “Abner, I had no idea you were alone. We shall be pleased to be your family.” I laughed. “I designate you official Uncle.”

Joseph sat there, laughing with us. Then his face became serious. “Abner, we must wait to see what the Lord wants us to do. Of course we want to go home. I get so homesick for our land at times...” He took a deep breath, then continued. “We can only leave when we are instructed.”

“I’ll be around for a few days.” Abner stated as he rose. “In case you decide to go back with me to Jerusalem, I’ll be glad to have the company. There are a few other families who are now clearing up their businesses and packing. They’ll be joining me soon, so I won’t be alone. You know you’re welcome to travel with us.”

After Abner left, I busied myself around the room, checking on Jesus, cleaning the table, washing the goblets and putting them away. I would soon have my nineteenth birthday and wanted to be with my family when the next baby was born. I wanted my mother and father so badly, it was like a physical pain.

I started to scream at Joseph that I wanted to go home. I caught myself just in time. It wouldn’t have been fair to do that. I glanced at him as he stood at the door, leaning against the jam. I knew he was trying to decide what would be best for his family. I walked to him and he absentmindedly put his arm around me.

We looked into the starry sky. I hoped each time I looked up, one of the stars would be Gabriel. I prayed He would come to tell us to go home. The weather stayed hot most of the time. I thought it would be heaven to be able to dip my hands into the cold water that ran down the mountain into the well at Nazareth.

The slight breeze rushed the odor of honeysuckle past our faces and left the sweet smell behind. There was barely a sound as the village and its people settled for the night.

“Come, Joseph, it’s getting late. We must go to bed.” I put my arms around his middle. He bent and kissed me on top of my head.

“Mary, what shall we do?” His voice was strained.

“Joseph, I don’t know.” I said, snuggling close. “As much as we both miss Nazareth and our families, we must wait until it is the right time. I love the people here and shall miss them when we do go. But this isn’t home.”

“No, it isn’t.” His face looked as though he could see as far away as the Galilean Hills. “I too, shall miss Benjamin and Naomi. They’ve been very good to us. It seems everywhere we go, people are always helping us, Mary. I wonder why.” We were standing close to each other but I could barely hear what he was saying into my hair. “I’m sure God leads us to the people we need, in order to make a good life.”

I removed my arms, moved back a step and looked up at him. “He probably is,” I stated as calmly as possible. “Joseph, maybe the other reason people are good to us is because you’re a wonderful person. You help others...”

“So do you.”

“I try, but these women who helped me along the way had no children. They’ve treated me almost as though I was their child, so it’s been easy to be nice to them. But you...” I said, reaching up on tiptoes so I could kiss his chin. “You are always nice. You made a special bed for Naomi. You fixed a chair that was broken for Benjamin. The street is now a business district because you worked so hard to improve the buildings. You’ve made this house a real home, with the repairs.”

I looked out at the starry night and longed desperately for home. “Joseph, sometimes I wonder how you can be such a good person.”

He denied it by shaking his head as I continued.

“You visit anyone who is sick. You play with all the children in the courtyard making them feel important. How could anyone not love you? Maybe people are kind to us because you are the most generous person alive.”

He brought me next to him and held me tightly. “I love you, Mary. How wonderful you are, not to complain at all the moves we’ve had to make.”

“Not wonderful, Joseph.” I contradicted him. “I fight every inch of the way. When I finally know we must obey God in all things, I try to accept them. I hated going to Bethlehem, but I learned to love Ruth and Matthew.”

I took a deep breath of the clean night air. “When I discovered we had to leave Judea, I was furious at a God that sent me even further from home. Then, we met Abner and I knew God sent him. He was again taking care of us. I learned to love Abner and appreciate his fine qualities.”

“So do I, Mary. He’s the best friend we’ve ever known.”

I nodded. “This is a pleasant little village we chose...” I looked skyward, “Or did God choose it for us?”

Joseph shook his head. “I don’t know.”

I continued. “Meeting Naomi and Benjamin was like a miracle, but I really didn’t want to be here.” I looked up at him and in the dark, could barely distinguish his features. “I hated the heat and being away from our families. Naomi and Benjamin have treated us as though we were their children. How could I not love them? How could I not learn to, if not love this place, be content here?”

Joseph squeezed me tightly. “Come, my dear wife. Let’s go to bed. You must get your rest.”

The next morning I waited for Joseph to tell me the Angel had visited, but he didn’t. Abner stayed for three more days. He visited us the night before he was to leave early the next morning. As we ate, he talked. “The others have arrived and are at the caravansary tonight. We shall leave before sunrise in the morning.” He looked at both of us expectantly, hoping we would have changed our minds.

“Oh, Abner,” I cried. “We do want to go so very badly.” I was so homesick, I thought I would sob aloud. “We must wait for word from God. We have His Son. We can’t do what we would like. We can’t take the chance that Herod’s son is as bad as his father.”

I kissed Abner on the cheek as tears rolled down my face. Joseph shook his hand, then said, “Please, Abner, remember us in your prayers.”

Before he left that night and after he had kissed a sleeping Jesus, we prayed together. We asked that he have a safe and good journey, and he wished happiness for us until he returned.

We stood at the door until we could see him no more, both of our hearts breaking.

I don’t know how long I slept, but Joseph was suddenly shaking me. It was so dark in the room, I could barely make out his face. “What’s wrong?” My voice was in panic. Joseph quickly put his hand over my mouth.

“Shh,” he ordered, quietly.

“Is Jesus all right?”

“Jesus is fine.” He hugged me closely for a moment. “We’re going home!”

“What?” I stood and picked up the lamp from the shelf. I then turned the wick up so we would be able to see each other.

“Mary, I had a visit from Gabriel!” His voice was so excited, I could hardly believe it was my Joseph who was speaking.

“But Joseph...?”

“He said to take Jesus and go home.” He lightly hit me on the backside. “Hurry, Mary. We have to pack. We must tell Naomi and Benjamin. There are a thousand things to do. If we don’t hurry, we’ll miss Abner.” He was running his words and sentences together.

“Sit, Joseph.” I ordered, perching on the side of the bed. “It’s the middle of the night.”

“I know.” He strode back and forth, as though he was unable to stand still.

I saw he couldn’t stop pacing, so I said, “now, tell me everything that happened.”

“I don’t know why that angel can’t come see me in the day time.” He complained, shaking his head.

“Please, Joseph.” I was very impatient.

“Oh, sorry. I woke up and he told me it was now safe to take my family home.” Joseph’s voice had a quality I thought might mean he wasn’t sure this had really happened. “Just like last time, He and Jesus woke me as they talked. I couldn’t understand a word they were saying, but they were communicating.”

“But Jesus is sound asleep.” I said, glancing over at Him.

“I know He is. I know too, Mary, I wasn’t dreaming. It was Gabriel and He and Jesus did talk.”

“Honey, I believe you.” I stood in the middle of the room, turning in circles, wondering what to do first. Suddenly, I said. “Joseph, you must go to the Caravansary and see Abner. While you’re gone, I’ll begin packing. I’ll decide what we must take and what we’ll leave. Hopefully, Naomi and Benjamin will accept what we leave behind.”

Joseph pulled on clean clothing I’d placed at the end of his bed. We knelt down and thanked God for His message.

In only a few minutes, Joseph was on his way to keep Abner from leaving us. As in Bethlehem, I packed only essentials for the donkey’s load. Poor donkey, I thought. You have really been in a lot of places. You’ve helped us so much, there is no way we can ever show our appreciation.

The blackness of the night just before dawn was evident when I looked outside, hoping I could see Joseph. Did I hear a distant clip, clop? I knew it was my imagination. I carefully packed the gifts from the Magi and awaited Joseph's return so he could place them on the donkey.

The sounds of an animal's hooves became louder. I glanced out and saw one of Abner's donkeys. When Joseph walked in the door, he explained. "Abner said to take all we can so we'll have something to begin life with in Nazareth."

He fed both donkeys and I turned to look around the room. I wondered aloud if I had forgotten anything. I knew I wanted to take the bowls Joseph made. Now I could. There were other possessions that meant a great deal to both of us. How sweet Abner was to think of lending us a donkey.

Joseph had left the door open and I could see the faint outline of the dawn. A sliver of a moon hung just over the rooftops. Stars winked off like one had pulled a chain to turn them off, one at a time. The breeze inched into the room, cooling my face. I poured milk and set bread and fruit on the table.

Jesus awoke and sat up on his pallet.

"We're going home, Jesus." I said, and I could feel the smile that I couldn't seem to turn off.

"I know," He said. His voice was as full of conviction as any almost-three-year-old could muster.

Joseph asked, "And how do you know, Son?"

"You saw me talk to my friend, Gabriel." His voice was serious, with a tinge of hopefulness that we would understand.

Joseph picked Him up, kissed Him and held Him tightly. "I did hear you talk, Son." He sat Him at the table. "Our journey begins very soon." Joseph said a prayer of thanks and we ate.

I finished the packing as Joseph tied the parcels on the two donkeys. The gifts from the Magi were again tied carefully, as well as the scrolls from my mother. The orange seeds were so tiny, we didn't have to worry about a place for them.

We left space on one of the donkeys to provide room for Jesus to ride when He became tired. I didn't realize it then, but I would need room to ride, as well.

As soon as we felt Naomi and Benjamin would be awake, we walked to their house. Benjamin opened the door, already dressed for the day. "Come in." He greeted us, then looked at Joseph's face.

"This is the day, isn't it?" Suddenly, his voice was full of sadness.

I walked into Naomi's arms. "Oh, Mary, we shall miss you and Joseph and Jesus so very much. I'm glad you warned us earlier that you might be leaving soon."

"Naomi, how can I possibly leave you?" I could feel tears coursing down my face as I held her tightly. I couldn't seem to stop them. "And how can I stay?"

She held me a moment longer, patted me on the shoulder and told me to sit at the table. She poured a cup of tea, a beverage I had never tasted before coming to Egypt.

As I sipped the hot liquid, she talked. "Now Mary, you know you must go home. Yours and Joseph's parents have never seen your baby." She shook her head sadly. "He isn't a baby anymore, either. And now, you're going to have another."

"Yes, but not for awhile." I said.

"Leaving now gives you plenty of time to get home before the next baby is born. You'll have help from all four grandparents." She sipped her steaming tea. "Someday we may get to Nazareth. We do go to Jerusalem every few years for the Passover, you know. When we do, we shall let you know. Maybe you can meet us there."

I squeezed her tightly. "We'll meet you, if God is willing."

They walked back to the house with us, Benjamin carrying Jesus. Again, Joseph gave our friends the furniture he had made. We thanked them both for the love, concern and care they'd given us while we lived in their house.

We hugged each other as she said, "We shall miss you as though you were our own." Benjamin placed Jesus on one of the donkeys and our journey began.

Finally, we were on our way. Happy to go, but very sad to leave very special friends.

Chapter 18

The happiness I felt should have been reflected in the color of the sky. It should have exploded in brilliant colors of red, mauve, orange and pinks. The sun should have been a blaze of color from beginning to end of the horizon.

It wasn't.

The morning blew in with a soft breeze. There was a shadow of a half-moon in the dove-gray, feathery lightning of the horizon. The stars were mere dots, winking on and off.

I reached up, patted the horse I had come to love and followed, as Joseph led the halter of one donkey in his hand. I fairly skipped down the road, holding onto the donkey Jesus was riding. The animal had been exercised little since our arrival in Egypt, so he was frisky and ready to walk smartly behind me.

A half sun peeked over the horizon, turning the clouds into pink and gray fluffs as we passed the sparse weeds and grass outside of town. We stumbled over pebbles and disturbed the sand so it swirled around our ankles.

We were so excited about going home, our steps were rapid. It took little time to meet Abner and company at the caravansary. When we had passed it upon entering Egypt, it was merely a small gathering place, with walls tumbling down. Now, it seemed so much larger and much better maintained.

"Look, Joseph."

Joseph grunted. "I heard someone was working on it. The last time Abner was here, we were discussing it...how travel and trade had caused many places to grow and prosper. This place seems to be one that definitely prospered."

"Do you think it was because so many of our people came to Egypt?"

"It could be."

I looked around. There was an enormous building with a wall enclosing it. As we neared, the hustle and bustle of travelers was evident. A group of men with loaded camels left by the gate, disturbing the sand as they turned west, another group turned north, while another was ready for departure.

We recognized Abner in the last group.

He welcomed us with open arms as though he had not seen us just the night before. "Thank God, you've come," he greeted us. "I could tell last night, you both needed to go home." He kissed me, then walked to the front of the group.

He turned to all of us and spoke. "We shall move along quite briskly. If any of you have a problem keeping up, please let me know. We'll make arrangements to help each other."

He looked directly at the women and children who had grouped together. "It won't be an easy trip. But we do hope it will be easier than it was when you traveled to Egypt. It was much more difficult then because you were running away from a tyrant. Now, you're going home."

Happiness etched itself on each face as he continued.

"I know it would be a much easier trip if we could travel north without going across the mountains. However, many of you left homes between here and Jerusalem and this is the shortest route. Mountains are not as difficult to cross as the others were. We are attempting to get everyone home as rapidly as possible, so we must travel

across the desert. Thank God it is not one as large as the one Joseph, Mary and others traveling with us had to cross.

“We will make as good time as we can. Most of the goods have been packed atop camels, so children can ride the donkeys when they tire.”

Parents were particularly happy about this arrangement.

“We will all work together, eat together and even watch the children together. In that manner, no one will get too exhausted doing one job. Now, are you ready?”

“Yes!” the group said, together.

We all bowed our heads as Abner said a prayer, asking God to watch over us. As he said, “Amen,” the sky exploded in a fiery display. The reds merged into orange and gold and yellow. God’s paint brush outdid itself as clouds became smears of color.

Abner called, “let’s go!”

There were twenty people in our caravan, including Abner and his two assistants. The five couples and seven children followed like a duck leading her chicks to water.

Joseph and I recognized the couple we’d met just before we began our journey when we all fled to Egypt. I thanked God silently we all survived Herod’s edicts. I grinned as I noticed the baby teetering along on unsteady fat legs, clinging to his mother’s hand.

“It’s the baby!” Jesus exclaimed, looking up at Joseph.

The young man offered his hand to Joseph. “We didn’t introduce ourselves when we fled our homes.”

Joseph clasped his hand and said, “I’m Joseph, this is my wife, Mary and our son, Jesus.”

The young man grinned. “My name is Joshua, my wife is Esther and our son is David. We’re finally on our way home, thank God.”

With that, David broke from Esther’s hand, took a few steps, plopped down and looked astonished. We all laughed as Jesus raced to him, held David’s hand and lifted him.

We watched as Daniel took small steps as Jesus held him upright. “Can he ride?” Jesus asked. We all nodded and Joseph strapped both boys into the saddle.

The men of the group helped Abner’s assistants lead the animals, and we women watched the children. When we stopped at night, women prepared enough food for the following day. Abner had traveled this route many times and knew exactly what we should prepare. The meals were not nearly as exotic as the food he fixed the night Joseph and I met him in the cave. But it was wholesome and plentiful.

There always seemed to be an abundance of wine to accompany our meal, however. Packets of dried meat, fish, fruit and vegetables were added to our bread and cakes. When we passed near a settlement we bought milk, knowing it would usually spoil within a day. We also added fresh fruits and vegetables as often as possible.

It was a different journey than the one we made coming to Egypt. The last trip was made as rapidly as possible with eyes always looking back, as we hurried to our destination. On this trip, we traveled rapidly, but in the open. We felt we had been released from prison.

I, along with most of the women, danced down the roads with the children. When we climbed mountains, we pretended to be goats, helping the children make the journey with as little trouble as possible.

The desert was bothersome, but there were no storms, for which we thanked God. When we stopped at an oasis, we drank our fill. The children romped in the coolness of the date palms and the men enjoyed sitting around, talking. The best part of an oasis was that we could bathe.

We were returning to Judea a different way. When we reached Ascalon, we took a less traveled road to Hebron. Traveling by this route, we discovered the mountains were not so high as before. We saw plenty of Riverine

grass and forest, as well. There were trees to give us shade. All of us felt better for being out of the burning sun and sand, as we walked under the trees. The animals were happy to have green grass to eat, as well. Birds accompanied our steps with their different calls. We often saw them flitting in and out of tree branches, falling to earth to pick up a seed or a worm, then back into the foliage.

It was also much cooler moving under the trees.

Walking through these forests, I noticed the sun frolicking through the leaves. They shimmered and danced like they had just been cleaned, then dressed for an important party. The low mounds of green plants were a welcome relief from the stark emptiness of the deserts we crossed on our earlier journey.

Unfortunately, I grew tired much more rapidly than before. I hated it when I had to mount the donkey. I felt I was losing my independence. The first time I fought the weariness, Joseph saw how exhausted I was and insisted I get on the animal.

“Mary, this is foolish. Why won’t you get on the donkey?” he asked, his voice sounding exasperated. “You must realize that you are not a super woman. You must take care of yourself.” His voice was more firm than I had ever heard it before.

“But Joseph...” I protested. He wouldn’t let me finish the sentence.

“No buts about it. You are with child,” he said very low so no one else would hear, “and you certainly don’t need to push yourself. I love you and this baby too much to take a chance on losing either of you.” He looked down at me, and I saw the love reflected in his face. “Mary, please.”

When he looked like that, how could I refuse? Besides, I was so exhausted I could barely take another step. I nodded and he removed Jesus and placed him on the ground. Jesus clapped his hands with delight. Joseph then helped me on the donkey’s back, picked up Jesus and placed Him on his shoulders. Jesus clasped fat little hands around Joseph’s forehead, then bent down and gave Joseph a sloppy kiss on the top of his head.

“Looka’ me,” He called. “I’m riding on my donkey too.”

“Yes, you are. And it’s the most wonderful donkey God ever made.”

I didn’t have to ride often, but when I did, I blessed Daniel for keeping this donkey. I especially blessed him for making a gift of him when we began that long-ago trip to Bethlehem.

This journey was so pleasant, it hardly seemed any time had passed before we approached Hebron. It was mid-afternoon and I was glad we were near and could rest. Many had left our group at various spots to walk the short distance to their villages or towns. The last couple and the baby left us that very morning. Jesus wanted to take the baby with us, but we convinced Him the couple needed their son.

Their families lived in Bethsura and we knew it would take only a little while for them to be home. Since it was a short distance from Hebron, they continued their journey home that day. We hated to see each group leave. We had become friends and only God knew if we would ever see each other again. Abner suggested we stay overnight in Hebron and rest. Stopping there prolonged our journey by one day, but neither Joseph nor I complained.

Knowing Abner would leave very early the next morning, I said, “we’ll get the donkey unpacked and you can take him with you.”

“No. That is my gift to you for adopting me into your family. Besides, I need a reason to visit you in Nazareth.”

I moved toward him, opening my arms. “You never need an excuse to visit us. How could we not want a favorite relative to see us often?”

He squeezed me tightly, saying, “I do get to Nazareth once in awhile. I’ll find you.”

“Please do, Abner. I can never tell you what you’ve meant to Joseph and me. Thank you so much.”

He turned and shook Joseph’s hand as smiles passed between the two friends. “Take care of your family, Joseph.”

“I will. God go with you.” He called as Abner walked toward his space in the caravansary.

Though rather warm, the next morning we were so exhausted, we slept very late. Abner had already departed. We ate the last of our cakes, drank our water, gave Jesus the last drops of milk, then took a much traveled road leading directly to Bethlehem.

Crowds multiplied like peas in a pan. We had forgotten just how crowded Bethlehem was. People swirled around us as though we were at the center of a circle. Jesus’ eyes were at once leery of so many people, yet excited at the activity.

The noon sun was shining hot and bright. Sweat poured from our bodies, drained our energy and wet our robes. Even Jesus, riding one of the donkeys, was lethargic from the heat.

Stony earth was dry and sand danced around our feet. A small cloud of dust surrounded us as a caravan of camels, people, carts and donkeys left the entrance to the caravansary.

“Look, Ruth is trying to keep our tree alive.” I pointed to the tree I had planted. The dark green leaves glistened in the hot, searing sun. The flowers I planted were long dead and Ruth had planted more. Wilted by the sun, I hoped they would revive later in the day.

The donkeys’ hooves clotted over the sparkling stones making a loud clatter. Even with this noise, no one appeared to hear our approach. I knew Ruth was probably cleaning or supervising the cleaning of the rooms and Matthew was bustling about, making sure there were sufficient supplies for the Inn.

We were much too early for travelers to stop for the night.

“I know it’s silly, but I thought Ruth and Matthew would be standing, waiting for us to enter the gates.”

Joseph laughed. “It would be nice, but it would also be impossible for them to know we were even on our way.”

My sigh was inaudible. “I must say I’m a little disappointed, though.”

Jesus was looking around as though he recognized the Inn.

Joseph and I looked toward our former apartment at the same time.

“It’s still there.”

“Sure feels like home, doesn’t it, Mary?”

I nodded as my eyes tried to take in everything at once.

There were no animals in the stalls or people on the walkway outside the upstairs rooms. I turned to look at the rest of the caravansary and noticed there had been a few changes since we began our journey to Egypt.

“Mary!” A figure came flying out of the door of the second floor and down the stairs. Before I could take a step in her direction, I was engulfed in Ruth’s arms. Oh, how I had missed her. We squeezed each other tightly, tears of joy running down my dirty face.

“Why you crying?” Jesus asked, his face looking sad, as though he might cry at any moment, too.

“Oh, Jesus,” I said, as Ruth released me. “This is Ruth, who knew you when you were a tiny baby. I’m crying because I’m so happy to see her.”

He was content sitting on the donkey, until he saw me cry. Now, he wanted to be held. He needed to be reassured everything was really all right. I lifted him from the donkey and introduced him to Ruth.

Matthew was pounding Joseph on the back and Jesus just looked from one parent to the other, wondering if we were mad.

“So this is Jesus.” Matthew said, an arm around Joseph and one around me as they looked at the small boy. “He has certainly grown a great deal in the past year.”

“Jesus, will you please come to me?” Ruth asked, as she held her hands out to him.

He looked at her long and hard as though he were trying to remember if he knew her or not. Then he giggled and leaned toward her, his arms outstretched. She took him in her arms and squeezed tightly. They chattered at each other as we followed them into the shadowy, cool, eating room.

Matthew and Ruth gave us a light meal. We were so exhausted we could barely move. Ruth said, "Come, you shall have your old apartment. I'll have food and wine sent up for your evening meal."

"But..." Joseph began.

"Don't argue. You're the reason we've made so much money on that apartment. It's so grand, people don't mind paying more. And we owe it all to the way you two fixed it up before you left. So it's yours, whenever you come to Bethlehem."

Joseph kissed her on the cheek as I took Jesus.

Matthew called one of the boys who lifted the packets from the backs of the donkeys and walked in front of us up the stairs. After placing them on the floor, he turned and skipped downstairs.

We entered our former home. "It feels like we're home, Joseph," I said as I put Jesus down. "There's our bed and Jesus' bed you made."

Jesus ran to the little bed and peered at it. "Mine?"

"Yes, Jesus," I said, "Father made that for you when we lived here a long time ago."

"I like it." He said and tried to climb over the rails to get into it.

"Wait," Joseph called. "We'll help you. All right?"

Jesus nodded, then went exploring. He ran his hand over the table and the benches Joseph built long before. "I like." He said.

"I do too." We helped him get to bed. In only a few minutes, he was sound asleep.

When we awoke, the late afternoon had arrived with Jesus still sleeping, and coolness had entered our home. We opened the outside door. The sky was now a dusty gray with pale streaks of pink and mauve moving up the blackening horizon.

In the cool dimness, we heard clattering hooves of animals and the feet of many people in the courtyard. We glanced at the crowd.

"The Inn has really increased its business, hasn't it, Joseph?"

He nodded, stretched, and reached his arms toward the ceiling as Jesus moved between Joseph and me. Joseph picked him up. "Awake?"

Jesus nodded and we stood and listened to the noises.

A cacophony of sounds blew up the stairs. Voices with different languages intermingled. Laughter erupted, the clap of a hand against a donkey's flank as a boy took him away. Music sounded from the dining room as the door opened.

A group of men rode through the gates, the horses' hooves clattering loudly. One of the group slid from his horse and ran toward our home. I was so frightened I hurriedly took Jesus from Joseph and squeezed Jesus tightly, who clutched my neck. Suddenly, I was again running from Herod. I looked hastily around, wondering where we could escape to.

"Mary!" A voice called.

I turned slowly, then recognized Jeremiah as he loped up the stairs.

"Oh, Jeremiah." I was so weak I would have fallen if Joseph hadn't caught Jesus and me.

Jeremiah hugged me as though he'd never let go. Jesus whimpered because Jeremiah was clasping us so tightly. "Oh, sorry, little one," Jeremiah said, and moved onto a lower step.

I introduced Joseph and Jeremiah, explaining to Joseph how I met the older man.

Jeremiah said. "Saw your Father last week, Mary."

"Oh, how is he?"

Before he could answer, Joseph said, "Why don't you come up with us and we'll talk?"

"I'd like to. First, let me get cleaned up and eat, then I'll be up."

"Good, we'll see you then." Joseph said, as I danced through the doorway, swinging Jesus from side to side. Joseph watched as Jesus laughed with delight.

A young girl with a tray knocked on our door. Joseph took it, thanked her, then placed it on the table.

As I put food from the tray onto the table, I looked at Joseph. "I've missed this so much. And yet, I can hardly wait to get to our home in Nazareth."

Joseph hugged me tightly. "Me too." He leaned down and kissed the top of my head as Jesus tried to squirm between us. We laughed and moved a little apart, including Him in our circle.

We put Jesus to bed after he had eaten, and he was again asleep almost before we had him covered.

Jeremiah bounded up the stairs not long after and stopped at our door. "My, how beautiful!" He exclaimed, as his eyes glanced over the entire apartment, furniture and all. "It looks just like it did the last time I was here."

"They didn't change it at all while we were gone." Joseph remarked, looking around almost as though he were seeing it for the first time.

Jeremiah swung his arms to encompass the entire room. "All this furniture. We talked about your making furniture to sell, but that had to be postponed because of your journey to Egypt." He was especially looking at the tiny bed where Jesus slept.

Joseph nodded. "Well, yes. We had very little when we moved in and needed everything. I drew the plans, then made each piece of furniture."

"Come on in, Jeremiah," I interrupted, "let me pour some wine."

We sat at the table, talking until very late.

"You said you saw my Father last week?" I asked, barely able to wait to hear the answer.

"He's fine. He was telling us he heard from you about a month ago and you didn't know when you would be able to come home." He continued to look at the beds.

"We heard Herod was dead and it was now safe to return home," Joseph said. "So we packed up right away. Abner told us he was coming back to Jerusalem, and invited us to become a part of his group." Joseph's face brightened as he spoke.

"I'm glad you came with Abner. He's a good man." Jeremiah continued to thoughtfully look around the room. Suddenly, he asked, "Joseph, have you changed your mind, or would you still consider making furniture for me to sell?"

Joseph looked at me, astonishment on his face. "You're still interested?"

"Of course. Many people would give a great deal to have some of these pieces." Jeremiah remarked. "You don't have to say anything right now. I'll be through Nazareth every few weeks. If you decide you'd like to do something like that, you only have to say something to Mary's Father."

"Thank you. That's very kind." Joseph said.

"Not kind at all. I'll be making money too." And he smiled at Joseph as though they were old friends.

Later, as Jeremiah started to leave, he said. "I'll be going to Nazareth in two days. I must go to Jerusalem tomorrow and arrange for the rest of the caravan, as well as the goods we'll be taking north. We have a larger group than normal, but we'd like to include you if you'd like to travel with us."

He looked at me, smiled and said, "I'd like to be the person who took Mary back to her family."

Joseph and I looked at each other, happiness pouring from our faces as we said in unison, "Yes!"

"Then I shall be expecting you in Jerusalem the day after tomorrow, very early in the morning."

"We'll be there," I said, as Jeremiah hugged me, then kissed me on each cheek.

Two days later, we bid Ruth and Matthew farewell before daybreak and walked to Jerusalem. We met the caravan just as it was moving from the gates. Jeremiah welcomed us. "An old friend of yours is here," he said.

"Who?" I asked.

"Rebecca and her husband. He's helping me this trip."

"I'm looking forward to seeing her."

Jeremiah wheeled his horse around and rode to the head of the column as I looked for Rebecca.

"You certainly know a lot of people." Joseph commented, dryly. "Everywhere we go, we meet someone you've known before."

I looked at him, not certain whether his voice held a note of jealousy or not. "Oh, she was on the caravan when I went to visit Elizabeth. In fact, she and her husband took me to Elizabeth's house. Without them, I could never have found my way. She also led me back to the caravan when I started home."

Joseph held Jesus' hand and I led one of the donkeys as we became a part of the caravan of asses, children, men and women. Soon after we left Jerusalem, Rebecca found me.

Though I hadn't felt we were particularly close friends, we fell into each other's arms. "I'm so glad to see you, Mary. I've thought of you often."

"You've been in my thoughts too, Rebecca." I said. "I've wondered if you were still walking up and down these roads."

"Oh, yes. I get much too bored staying home when my husband's gone, so I just come along." She had changed little since last I saw her.

"Tell me, Rebecca, have you seen Elizabeth?" I asked, looking around at the now familiar countryside.

"Oh, yes." She stopped and held my shoulder as she poured stones from her sandal. "She was gone for a few months, you know."

"No, I didn't know. What happened?" I looked into the foothills and saw shepherds sitting, watching their flocks. Caves were dark holes in the red of the hills. Suddenly, I wondered if I could see the cave where Joseph and I had met Abner.

"When Herod was killing those babies, she heard about it and fled to the desert with Baby John."

"Who did she stay with?" I had wondered about that for a long time and prayed the three of them were all right. "And how did she escape without getting John killed?"

"Zacharias had cousins who lived in the desert just outside Judea," Rebecca told me, striding along as though she were a young girl. "He sent Elizabeth and John to these people who took care of them until Herod died. She's just returned in the past few days."

We trudged along. I felt I remembered something about each step I took. The crooked olive trees whose leaves hid green fruit. Red poppies colored hillsides, blending with the green grass and weeds. Blue flax reminded me of the cloth we made from the plant. Patches of gardens near small farms clung to a hillside.

I had missed all these things. “Rebecca, how is Elizabeth? At her age, how did she manage to survive such harsh living conditions?”

“I saw her the other day. I’d visited Deborah and she told me her mistress was now home. Elizabeth doesn’t look like she feels good, Mary. She and Zacharias have aged greatly since the fright of Herod’s vileness of killing babies.”

“I am so sorry to hear that.” I said aloud, then asked in a silent prayer for God to care for them. As we walked, I remembered the couple who was so very good to me. They had shown care and love at a very precarious time in my life and I loved them dearly.

Just then, Jesus pulled on my robe. “Muver, hold.”

“Who is this?” Rebecca asked, in her abrupt, yet kind manner.

I picked the baby up and said. “This is Jesus, our son.”

“Mary,” Rebecca, with fear in her voice said, “Herod was looking for children his same age. How did you keep him from getting killed? Is it safe to come back?”

“It’s all right, Rebecca. We fled to Egypt and lived there for about a year.” I held on to Rebecca’s shoulder as we stopped to remove a pebble from my sandal. “We heard Herod died, so we can now go home. I’m sure that’s why Elizabeth felt it was safe to return, as well.”

The rest of the journey flew by. Joseph and I awoke before the rest of the caravan every morning, so anxious to be on our way home we tried to hurry the others.

That last day as we crossed the Plain it was almost more than I could manage to harness my impatience. We fairly danced through the vegetation and I felt I remembered every cave on the mountains in the distance. Far off, I heard the slight tinkle of a bell on a sheep. I pointed out familiar land marks to Jesus, who was as tired as Joseph and I.

As we entered the last row of trees, I felt my body could fly. I wanted to run. I wanted to soar down the paths that led to my mother’s home. Joseph said he felt the same way. Like the adults we were, we managed to stay with the caravan until Jeremiah bade us farewell.

Then we quickened our steps, Joseph holding Jesus as I led the donkeys. Not long after we entered our courtyard, Mother spied us.

“Mary!” We both stopped and stared. I dropped the lines to the donkeys and ran, holding out my arms to her as I had as a child. She clasped me to her as I hugged her tightly. We moved from each other and stared in delight.

“Mary, what a wonderful surprise!”

“I’m so dirty, I don’t know how you recognized me.”

“Oh, my Mary. Though you’ve grown from a little girl into a woman since you left, I’d recognize you in the dark.” Her eyes filled to overflowing. “I’ve dreamed of this moment since the day you left for Bethlehem.”

We cried, laughed and hugged each other.

Then she turned to Joseph. “Oh, Joseph,” my mother exclaimed, hugging him as fiercely as she had me. “How happy I am to see you.” I don’t know when Joseph had put Jesus down, but suddenly, He was peering from behind Joseph’s legs.

She looked at Jesus and the smile became wider. Not wishing to frighten him, she placed her face near his and said. “I’m your grandmother Anna, Jesus. May I hug you too?”

He nodded and held out his arms; she picked him up as I saw Father, Daniel, Leah, and Joseph’s family, coming to greet us.

When I was a child I often wondered how everyone knew what was happening to everyone else almost before the deed was done. I still did. Before I knew it, it seemed the entire village was at our home.

What a welcome! Gone only three years, it seemed like an eternity.

Before I could move to hug anyone else, I glanced around at our loved ones. Father. A little grayer than when we left, but so dear, so wonderful. And how I loved him. He took me in his arms and squeezed gently. "It's been a long time." There was a catch in his voice and I looked up in time to see a tear drift down his wrinkled face.

"Oh, Father. I've dreamed of this moment for so long." I then squeezed him so tightly, I felt I could never let go. I glanced over his shoulder as he released me.

There was Leah. My little Leah. Now twelve years old, she walked as though she were a princess. Her hair was thick and luxuriant. She had braided it, then pinned it to the top of her head. Her eyes snapped with excitement. She could barely contain herself as she flew into my outstretched arms. She was still thin and had grown only an inch or so since we left on our journey to Bethlehem.

We kissed each other, still embracing, saying nothing. Just holding one another for a very long time.

Finally, there was Daniel. A very grown-up Daniel. "I missed you," he said, grabbing me in a bear hug. "I'm so glad you're home." He released me and stepped back, looking down at me. "Mother and Father told us all about Jesus. We're very happy you were chosen."

I gloried in his embrace. It was the first time he had ever hugged me in that manner and from that one gesture, I knew my little brother was now a young man.

"My, how grown up you sound. No more up and down on the musical scale?" I smiled up at him, remembering how his voice couldn't decide which pitch to use.

He smiled broadly as he shook his head. I looked closely at his face and saw the beginning of a beard. "And how often do you have to shave?" I teased.

"Almost every day." His voice was so serious, I wanted to cry. "It's so black, it really is pretty hard to wait a couple of days."

He looked at Mother with Jesus in her lap. "Jesus is a fine looking boy." He let me go, but still stood near. "I'm looking forward to taking him into the hills. We can take care of the sheep."

"He'd like that, I know," and turned to greet Joseph's Mother and Father. They were almost as dear to me as my parents. I'd seen them almost every day of my life until we left to pay taxes in Bethlehem.

Mother and Joseph's mother bustled about, bringing food. They placed it on the table outside my parent's home as Joseph and I went inside and attempted to wash what felt like layers and layers of dirt from our bodies.

I walked to the table and sat. As I looked around the circle, I noticed that Father had more wrinkles than I remembered. Mother's hair was a little grayer. Of course, all I could see were the roots. It was clear she dyed it and was about ready for another treatment.

Joseph's mother was still as large and jolly as ever and his father was still as tall and slender. He and Joseph still had very little resemblance, one noticed as they embraced affectionately.

Here's Sarah! Ah, my Sarah. We clung to each other and cried, turned each other loose, then hugged each other again.

Of course, she and I had to compare babies. Her little girl, who she introduced as Beth, named for Elizabeth, looked more like a doll than a living child. Beth was younger than Jesus. She had glowing black eyes, red fat cheeks and dimpled legs and arms.

Sarah was already beginning to increase in the middle with her second child.

"Sarah, can you get away a few minutes tomorrow? Will your mother take care of Beth?" I asked.

"Of course. And how about you?"

"I'll get Mother to keep Jesus. I must talk to you. Oh, how I've missed you." I said, grabbing her again.

Our relatives, friends and neighbors joined us later in the evening. Joseph's mother said she and my mother had taken turns keeping our house clean. If we chose, we could go there for the night. By the time relatives and friends left, Joseph and I weren't sure we could make it to our home.

Joseph picked up Jesus, who had fallen fast asleep in my Father's arms. "Come on, Mary. You can make it. We've waited a long time for this. We only have a few steps more."

We left our donkeys at my parent's home and only took what was needed for the night.

I kissed my parents good night and Joseph's parents accompanied us home. His mother got a lamp from her house and led us inside.

Home. What a simple word. Only the word "love," is more beautiful. As we entered the door, the first thing I noticed was the cradle Joseph made for Jesus. Now, Jesus was too big to sleep in it. Soon we would have another baby who'd use it. I had a feeling it would get lots of use over the years.

Our bed looked so inviting I was afraid I wouldn't be able to wait to get Jesus to bed before falling into it. How wonderful it looked! "Oh, Joseph," I cried. "It's even more beautiful than I remembered."

He smiled; that same gentle, pleased smile that was so dear and comforting.

Joseph placed Jesus on our bed to sleep between us. We bade his parents good night. I flung myself into bed and barely knew when Joseph turned the lights down.

Chapter 19

The next morning Joseph and I awoke with Jesus asking for food. We knew we had brought none in the house last night. However, when my eyes finally opened, I discovered bread, cheese, figs, milk and fruit juice on the table. Someone had entered earlier and left fresh water for us, as well.

"Oh, Joseph," I said, turning to where Joseph was now standing, stretching. "Isn't it wonderful to have family near again?"

"Yes," he agreed with a smile. "I must say my prayers and bathe. Can we wait to eat for a few minutes?"

"You and I can, but I'm afraid Jesus will die of starvation if He doesn't eat right away." I tickled Him under his chin as I sat him on a bench. "Hungry?"

"Uh,uh," He nodded, and picked up his milk.

As Joseph strapped on his phylacteries, I looked around at our house we'd lived in for such a short time.

I couldn't wait to see...really see...our home again. Last night, I could barely find the door as we entered. Now, I looked around. Only one lamp flickered from the four shelves Joseph had built. What I called my betrothal table sat in a corner with the jewelry box still sitting on top, just as we'd left it almost three years before.

Jesus and I sat on benches at the large table. I slid my fingers along the highly polished surface. "Oh, Jesus, don't you like our table?"

He nodded and grinned through a milk mustache dotted with bread crumbs. Jesus was eating much too rapidly but I wouldn't worry. I was sure He would run it off soon.

As Jesus ate, I walked to the bedroom. In the center, I ran my hand over the beautifully constructed head of the bed. Joseph had made our bed like the one I slept on when I visited Elizabeth.

Now, I straightened linen covers and looked around at the love and care Joseph put into this room.

There were two stone projections built into the walls. Each held a lamp with room on the shelves for small articles. The chest he made to hold wedding gifts and many pieces of linen my mother and I made resided along one wall. I wiped my finger across it. Not one sign of dust on anything.

I breathed a tired, happy sigh. I was truly home where relatives kept a house spotless as though you would return in a few hours.

When I heard a knock at the front door, I hurried. A soft breeze blew in the opened door as my parents entered, Mother's eyes shining brightly.

"Good morning," I kissed both of them. I noticed sun beams inching themselves over the courtyard and sniffed honey-suckle-scented air. How I had missed that. I heard the chatter and laughter of women returning from the well. Some voices I recognized, others I didn't and wondered if they were new neighbors or just voices I had forgotten.

"When did you start getting up so early, mother?"

"Since my Grandson arrived," she said, sitting on one side of Jesus. Father sat on the other, helping Him with His bread and figs.

"Grandfather?" Jesus looked at me but pointed His bread at Father.

"Yes, Jesus, you have finally seen the Grandfather you heard so much about."

"Grandmother?" and he pointed at my mother.

"Yes," she said and hugged him, getting figs on her robe.

"Here, mother." I handed her a damp cloth. "Someone brought fresh water early this morning. Whoever came was so quiet we didn't hear a thing."

"Oh, that was Sarah." Mother informed me. "She told us last night she'd bring an extra jug for you and your family."

"What a sweet thing to do," I said, as Joseph entered the room and sat across from Father.

When asked if they had eaten, Mother nodded. "Yes."

I brought Joseph's breakfast and listened a few moments. He and Father were discussing Nazareth and various events that happened while we were away.

I barely heard them as Mother and I chatted until Father said, "We were frightened for you when we heard what Herod decreed. We knew you, Mary and Jesus were in Bethlehem. We had no idea how you could manage to avoid Herod's men." Father picked up a small piece of bread and bit into it. "We were very relieved when we finally received your scroll, telling us you were in Egypt."

Joseph picked up a loaf of bread, tore off a corner and reached for a piece of cheese. "Even before the edict was given, the Magi told us Herod was looking for Jesus. We packed up and started home. Then," He sipped water, swallowed, and continued. "The first night of our journey, an angel appeared and told us to go to Egypt. He said we would not be safe in Nazareth."

I interrupted. "As we started through the mountains, Abner found us in a cave."

"He's a dear man," Mother said. "He brought us the first scroll and kept us as informed as possible." She turned to Joseph and laid her hand on his arm. "I'm sorry we interrupted, Joseph. Please continue."

At that moment, Joseph's parents knocked, then entered. We greeted each other as though we hadn't been together just a few hours before. We told them what we had been discussing, then Joseph continued.

"I know Mary wrote you what we felt was safe to tell." He took a drink and continued. "At that time, we had no way of letting anyone know our destination. We were afraid the message might fall into the wrong hands."

Mother nodded. "We understood, Joseph, as soon as we heard what that evil man did. One of the neighbors who was in Jerusalem at that time told us she heard that about a dozen little boys were..." She couldn't finish, she just hugged Jesus so tightly, I thought He might cry. But He didn't. He seemed to understand what was said. He was also in his glory. He not only had a mother and father to love him, but four grandparents.

"You know most of the rest of our story." I said. "Our stay in Egypt was interesting. We met the nicest couple. I do hope they will be able to visit some day."

“I worked almost from the day we arrived,” Joseph remarked. “Their carpentry work is about the same as ours, repairing carts and just about anything that broke.”

We all sipped our drinks...milk, water, juice, whatever...and just enjoyed being together.

Joseph turned to his father, Jacob. “How is the carpentry business now? Any better than when we decided to stay in Bethlehem?”

“Business has improved and I’m glad you’re home, because I could use help. I’m just not sure there’s enough work to support both families.”

Joseph looked around the group with a smile on his face. “I might have news that will make you feel better.” Joseph sipped his juice and continued.

“What?” Jacob asked. He broke a small piece of bread, then placed it in his mouth.

“Your friend, Jeremiah,” he looked at my father. “He asked me to build cradles and baby beds for him to sell.”

I had never seen Joseph’s father’s grin so big. Suddenly, he roared in laughter. He placed his hand on Joseph’s. “This news is truly a blessing. It’s the best news I’ve had, other than your arriving home.”

His mother, Martha, asked. “When did he see a baby bed or cradle?”

“He’s never seen a cradle,” Joseph answered. “When we were in Bethlehem, just before leaving for Egypt, he came to visit Mary.”

I interrupted. “That’s when he saw Jesus’ bed.”

“He asked me then if I would make some for him to sell.” Joseph sipped his juice. “However, we all know what happened next. On our way home, we stayed a few extra days in Bethlehem. Jeremiah ran into Abner who told him we were at the caravansary.”

I looked around the table, thinking how much I loved all the people here and how very fortunate I was to have them.

“He visited us and again saw the bed. He asked if I was interested in producing the articles for him. I didn’t know how busy you were, but I told him to be sure and look us up when he came back.”

There were smiles around the table. “What very good fortune, Joseph.”

“And now, we have another bit of news for you.” Joseph picked up my hand and squeezed.

Everyone seemed to hold their breath, not knowing what to expect. “We’re going to have a baby.” It was a triumphant sound, proud, happy, glorious.

The grandparents could barely contain themselves. The joy around that table was almost more than I could handle. We had been without family so long, and now we were surrounded with loved ones again.

For a moment, I was a bit pensive. As much as I was looking forward to this next baby, I wished everyone could have been with us when Jesus was born.

Then, Joseph’s mother picked up His hand. I’m sure He sensed what we all needed. He took my mother’s, and in a few moments, we were all holding hands, even Jesus. As we bowed our heads, Joseph said a prayer of Thanksgiving that we were finally home.

After the parents left, taking Jesus with them, we unpacked our belongings.

The last parcel untied were the gifts belonging to Jesus.

“Joseph, what shall we do with this?” I asked, showing him the packet.

He laid down the packets of scrolls he had just picked up and came to me. He lifted my chin so we were looking directly at each other. “What do you want to do with them?”

“I don’t know, Joseph.” I said. “I feel they are for a very special reason. I just don’t know what that reason could be.”

“I don’t either,” Joseph took the package and stared at it. “Maybe they are to show respect for Jesus. Further than that, I don’t know.”

We sat on the side of the bed as Joseph placed it there, between us. “Mary, since we don’t need anything, maybe they were meant to help Jesus in His later life.”

“That’s possible.” I picked it up. To be so valuable, it certainly didn’t weigh much. “Why don’t we just hide it and forget we have it?”

“That’s a good idea. Since I haven’t been able to fill your jewelry box, why don’t you put it in there?”

I leaned over and kissed him, took the gifts to the other room and placed the package inside the box. “There, now. We have our fortune, if we ever need it.” I went back to the bedroom.

He rose, took me in his arms and said, almost as though it were a prayer. “I pray we never have to use it.”

I agreed.

•••

The following years were the happiest of my life.

James was born six months after our return home. He was as good a baby as Jesus, though full of energy from the day he was born. Jesus took one look at James and said he was His baby and He would take care of him. Being such a little thing himself, it was surprising to me that when James cried, Jesus came running to see what the problem was.

Of course, we were once again surrounded in love by our families. There was immediate family, as well as distant cousins and friends. I thanked God every day that He brought us back home safely.

I knew people said Nazareth was a rough place to live. They even said there were few good people. That wasn’t true. There were a few bad people. Primarily, there were good, honest, law abiding, God fearing people. We loved the inhabitants of Nazareth. Most of us worshiped God and followed His teachings to the best of our abilities.

We went to the synagogue and kept the Sabbath. When my mother gave me candlesticks, and I placed them in the center of our table for dinner on the sixth day of the week, I finally knew this was my home.

Our life was as normal as a family’s can be. Joseph went to work each morning with his Father. Their primary work consisted of working on farm equipment...plows, hoes, scythes. They also made carts for oxen to pull. These were often used when gleaning in fields.

Another carpenter had moved into town during our absence so when Joseph began working with his Father there was not enough work for the two of them. Repairing and building farm equipment didn’t keep them busy enough to make a living, so Joseph and his father talked of Jeremiah’s suggestion.

Joseph’s parents ate with us one night. After the meal when Jesus was in bed, we talked.

Jacob asked, “Joseph, are you about ready to begin making the beds and cradles?”

“I’ve thought of it, but it will cost to purchase the materials we need.”

“That’s true, but unless you spend a little, you’ll never be able to have a business.” Jacob spoke quietly.

“I had no idea you felt this way.”

“I do, and your mother and I discussed it. We have a little set aside, and we’ll be happy to contribute some.”

“Joseph,” I exclaimed. “We still have the money you made when you repaired various articles for different merchants.”

“I thought we were saving that for something special.”

“I can’t think of a thing that is more special than your spending a little money to make much more.” I said.
“Didn’t Jeremiah tell you he was almost positive he’d have no trouble selling them?”

Joseph picked up my hand. “I’ve wanted to, but I was afraid we might need it worse some day.”

“Then it’s settled. You go purchase the materials tomorrow. I know you can do it.” I leaned over and kissed his cheek.

Joseph worked on baby beds and cradles when he had time.

A few weeks later, Jeremiah stopped in Joseph’s shop on his way back to Jerusalem.

“Got some work for me to sell, Joseph?” Jeremiah asked as he walked into the door of the shop.

“A few things. I hope you like them.”

Jeremiah picked up one of the cradles. “I can just see the mad rush we’re going to have with these. Make lots of them, Joseph. I’ll sell all you make.”

“Are you sure?”

“Never been more sure about anything in my life.” Jeremiah placed the cradle down and inspected the baby bed.
“These too.”

He took all the completed articles. Soon, Joseph had more orders than he could fill.

Later, they received orders for tables, benches and adult beds, as well. The baby beds and cradles Joseph made were especially in demand.

With so much work, we were able to replace the money we used for the first supplies, then saved in case we ever needed money for emergencies.

When Jesus was four, his sister Hanna was born. Then Joses peeked into the world when Jesus was five. Our house became so filled with children, Joseph added more rooms on our roof.

That was also the year Jesus began his formal schooling at the synagogue with the Rabbi.

Our old Rabbi, the one who accused me of being a whore, was replaced the year before. This young man was steeped in the Law and the Talmud, but interpreted both with more heart than the last Rabbi. Now, I had no objections to Jesus attending school.

That first day, I thought my heart would break.

He greeted Joseph as he made his appearance, then the other children awoke. James was a flighty child. He was never still for a moment. The only time he sat was when Jesus told him a story. We laughed and called him our “darter.” He was always darting here and there for one reason or another.

Hannah stumbled into the room, rubbing her dark brown eyes. A small duplicate of Joseph’s mother, she was a chubby baby. Her legs looked too fat to be able to carry her, but she had walked before she was a year old. Her little hands had dimples at the end of each finger and she was about as big around as she was tall; but the sunniest, happiest of all.

Joses was still sleeping peacefully because I had fed him earlier.

As we sat at the table, Joseph said our prayers, then began talking to Jesus. “Are you excited, Son?”

“Oh, yes, Father.” Jesus answered, then took a sip of milk. “There’s so much to learn about the world. I’m glad mother taught me to read. Now, I can get right into my studies.”

“Are you in a hurry to learn everything there is to know?” Joseph asked as he slathered figs onto a piece of bread for James.

Jesus’ face was so serious when He answered, I caught my breath. “Yes, Father. I don’t have a hundred years, you know.”

Joseph and I looked at each other and it was as though the world stood still. We knew this Son had a job that was beyond comprehension. And we had no idea how to help him.

“None of us do, Jesus. Just take your time, Son,” Joseph said, patting him gently on the back. “You will learn everything you need to know for whatever job you have.” His voice was full of care and concern for this very special Son. I could hardly breathe for the love that flooded my entire being.

Jesus grinned as he looked up at his Father, wiped the milk from His mouth and jumped up from the table. “Hurry. I have to go so I won’t be late.” He ran into the room where we all slept, to begin dressing. Joseph followed Him much more slowly. When they returned, I could tell Joseph had helped Jesus comb His hair. I knew he also helped with His skull cap and robe, because Jesus looked so neat.

“You’re a fine looking son, Jesus.” I heard Joseph say. He leaned down and kissed him as they walked out the front door.

Tears flooded my face. I watched the tall man and the small boy walk down the pathway, hand in hand.

“Are you hurt, Muver?” James asked, slowing down as he ran through the room.

“I’m fine, honey. I’ll miss Jesus away at school, is all.”

“Me too. Can I go to school, too?” He stopped long enough to give me a hug and kiss, then ran outside, not waiting for an answer.

The years flew by.

When Jesus was seven, Judas was born and Jesus began helping his Father in the carpentry shop after school. Another little girl, Rachel, came to us when Jesus was nine. She looked exactly like my mother, tiny, dark and beautiful.

The next year Simon, our last, put in his appearance.

The children grew in spiritual values from their Father, in agricultural values from Father and Daniel. They each, even the girls, learned how to work in the carpentry shop.

From the two grandmothers, I watched as the girls learned how to weave, card and sew. They prepared food for cooking, then learned how to take care of a household of people.

The boys learned to treat women with respect and love. I was humbled, knowing the grandparents took time to teach our children the true values.

Our lives were so full it almost took my breath away when I thought of the happiness we had. First, my wonderful husband, then seven loving, obedient, beautiful children. Our relatives lived near us. Our parents were of course getting older but were still in good health.

My Father went to work in the fields. He, along with Daniel, frequently took one of our children with them. They were allowed to ride the animals or dig holes to plant seed. Father and Daniel helped them learn the different plants they cultivated. Later, they showed them how to reap grain and other vegetables.

The children learned to harvest grapes from vines, and figs and olives from trees. When they were old enough, they became a part of making wine. They learned how to squeeze olives for oil and how to dry figs.

Daniel refused to attend a higher school. He said it was foolish to go on to school, when all he wanted to do was grow things. He did study ways of making the fields produce more. His innovations made the productivity of my Father’s farm increase dramatically.

He finally met a girl who was much like Ruth, the bride of Boaz. Beth was a fourteen year old orphan who came to his fields to glean when he met her. Her parents had moved to Nazareth just the year before, but they contracted a disease of the lungs and died soon after. Beth lived with an aunt who was rather old and unable to care for her properly.

When Mother heard of Daniel's interest in Beth, she insisted she talk with the aunt, and asked me to accompany her. The Aunt only lived three courtyards away, so it only took a few minutes to arrive at her door.

Since it was such a short distance, I barely had time to notice what a beautiful day it was. A soft breeze gently moved leaves on the trees we passed. Bees buzzed around the blossoms of flowers surrounding various homes. Some of the flowers had begun to wilt, but, with the nightly dew, would revive the next morning.

Her house was smaller than either of our homes, but she kept the space around it as clean as possible. Not a leaf from the tree whose limbs covered her roof were on the bricks of the courtyard. No sand swirled.

There was a pail of water outside the door in case a visitor needed to wash his feet.

"How thoughtful," I said. "What an industrious person she must be when she is in such poor health."

"I agree," Mother replied as she knocked on the spotless door.

We had met earlier at the Synagogue, so introductions were unnecessary.

"I'm so happy you've come to visit. Please enter." And Nora opened the door widely.

We stepped into an immaculate room. There were a few dust-free tables, as well as chairs sitting around a table used for eating. Glancing around, I noticed dyed material with a needle stuck into it. She apparently sewed, as well as other jobs.

As we munched delicious cakes and drank fresh water, we chatted...about the weather, children, crops, whatever. I could tell Mother had to bring Beth into the conversation soon or she would burst with impatience. She sipped her water. Placing her cup on the table nearby, she said, "Beth is such a wonderful girl. You know she and Daniel are interested in each other."

Beth's aunt nodded.

"We'd really like to get to know her better. I understand it isn't easy raising a young girl alone."

Nora laughed. "Especially at my age." Her face creased with worry. "I know I'm not able to give her the training she needs, however much I'd like to. Her mother tried, but she just didn't live long enough to see that Beth learned what she needed to know."

"If you don't mind, I'll be more than happy to help." Mother offered, a smile on her face.

"I thank you from the bottom of my heart." A tear slid down her worn face. She wiped it away with a hand that was gnarled with swollen joints. How she must suffer, I thought. "I love her so much and I can do so little for her."

Mother patted her hand. "It will be our pleasure to do what we can. I do thank you for letting me have a part in her education." Mother grinned wickedly. "I can even teach her how to treat her mother-in-law."

She and Nora exploded with laughter.

Soon, Beth was staying with my family most of the time. Mother taught Beth housekeeping, as well as other activities a girl normally knew, growing up in our village. Leah and Beth became inseparable...almost closer than Leah and I.

When they married two years after meeting, Beth and Daniel were as happy as Joseph and I. They were seldom apart. When their first child was born, Daniel was ecstatic.

Leah was another story. She decided no boy was quite good enough for her. She said she had no plans to marry. Maybe when she got old...after she became twenty. Leah took all the flirting and teasing in stride, driving the boys crazy, Mother told me. She talked with boys, but kept them at a distance. She had more interest in an older person or a small child in need than in boys.

It was so difficult for me to believe my little brother was all grown up and had a family of his own. Sometimes, on our yearly trek to Jerusalem for the Passover, I marveled at how large our family had become.

Sarah and her husband had five children. Sarah remarked that since their youngest was now seven, she didn't think she would have any more children. She told me one morning she really hoped she didn't. She was tired of babies.

Looking at my brood, I agreed with her.

When Jesus was twelve, we made our regular journey to Jerusalem. The children had made the journey so many times, they weren't as impressed by the noise and dirtiness of the city as Joseph and I had been. They did like going away from home and loved visiting Ruth and Matthew. Visiting the temples and seeing the changes also intrigued them.

Of course, each time we made a trip, the children appeared to become more interested in rites of our religion. They loved knowing reasons for the celebrations of different feasts. Their love of God increased in proportion to their knowledge of the history of their faith. As they aged, they realized just how involved God was in every walk of their lives...from the moment they were born until the day they died.

With our family as well as Joseph's, in addition to others from Nazareth, we all looked after one another's children. Arriving in the area, we by-passed Jerusalem, and walked on to Bethlehem. No matter how many times we visited, our children loved hearing the story of how we met Ruth and Matthew.

We never told them about the shepherds' visit or the Magi. They never found the gifts of the Magi either because they discovered, at an early age, the penalty for opening Mother's jewelry box.

After staying at the caravansary at night, we walked back to Jerusalem for all the rituals, prayers and sacrifices. When the week ended, everyone gathered to begin the journey home.

We started out very early, happy, but tired. We checked to see that all the younger children were accounted for. The weather was beautiful. Trees swayed in the slight breeze and as I stared at the hills around us, it seemed these same flowers had bloomed the first time I made the journey...soon after I became pregnant with Jesus.

As always, the younger children began the day running, playing, arguing, then settled down. Young boys, after their Bar Mitzva, noticed girls. Most of that age group stayed together.

It seemed Joseph and I had been walking these roads all our lives. Part of them now had stones, and rocks weren't quite as bothersome as on earlier trips.

As we walked, Joseph and I talked. "Did you hear what Ruth said about Zacharias and Elizabeth?"

"A little. How sad that they should die within a week of each other. What happened?" Joseph asked.

"Apparently, it rained almost continuously for a week or more." I told Joseph. "Zacharias and Elizabeth went to the desert to visit the cousins who cared for John and Elizabeth all those years ago." I held onto Simeon's hand as Hannah carried him on her back in a sling Joseph made.

Joseph looked around to check on the children, and I continued. "It seems on their way home, they were caught in a heavy downpour. By the time they arrived home, they began to cough. The next morning, the physician was called for both of them. Their fever was very high and in a couple of days, both were gone."

"Poor John. What will happen to him now?" Joseph asked. "We could take him in with us, you know. We have room."

A rock got caught in my sandal and I would have fallen but Joseph held me. I clutched his hand even tighter as I said. "John was sick too, but he was well within a few days. By that time, cousins who live in the desert arrived. Elizabeth and Zacharias were buried the day they died, you know. However, the relatives took John back with them."

"So he's going to become a man of the desert as they are?" Joseph asked, striding along, yet watching the children.

"I don't know. Elizabeth said before he was born that he had been a gift from God as Jesus was. She didn't know his role in everything that was to come to pass."

Joseph stumbled, then sighed loudly.

“What’s wrong, Joseph?” I grabbed his arm “Are you all right?”

“Mary,” he said, “most of the time I forget Jesus belongs to God and not to us. I forget He has a special mission, though we don’t know what it is. When I realize this, it bothers me a great deal.” He squeezed my hand tightly.

“Me too, Joseph.” I clung to him. He was my rock. “What would I ever do without you?”

He laughed. “Don’t ever try to get away.” And he hugged me tightly.

We walked a little further and I returned to our conversation. “We’ve had no signs that Jesus is different from our other children, Joseph. I don’t understand exactly what His mission is or when it will start. I just don’t know!” My voice must have held the fright I was suddenly experiencing. Joseph held me so tightly I thought I would quit breathing, but I needed his arms around me.

“I don’t know either, my dear. We will just have to wait and trust God.” He loosened his arms as our children started teasing him for hugging their mother.

“Joseph, we must have a talk with Jesus. We must tell Him what we know.”

He nodded. “I agree. I’m sure He’s old enough to handle it, since He will have his Bar Mitzvah next year.”

We prepared to stop for the night at a clearing, and the entire group gathered around.

The stars skittered across the sky, surrounding the full moon. Light from the moon brightened the landscape until it seemed almost like day. Trees in nearby hills stood straight, silhouetted against the sky.

We ate, sang psalms and hymns, and thanked God for our good fortune. When we prepared to spread our pallets for the night, we checked on all our children.

Jesus was missing!

As we talked with a member of each family, we discovered no one had seen Him all day. Joseph and I became frantic in our search. Where could He be? Where could He have gone? He was a good boy. He would not disobey His parents. He would not cause us undue worry. Not Jesus.

The relatives informed us they would continue their homeward journey. They offered to care for our other children until we found Jesus. About midnight, after getting the other children settled for the night, Joseph and I turned our faces toward Jerusalem.

Walking almost alone, we were apprehensive of thieves, as well as wild animal predators such as jackals, leopards and hyenas, but nothing would stop us in searching for our Son.

We arrived at the gates of the Golden city at dawn. The buildings resembled solid sheets of gold. They glittered in the sunlight, hurting our eyes. Entering the shaded streets was a relief as we hurriedly looked through each street, each shop, each byway...always searching...never finding.

After three days, a very weary Joseph asked, “Why don’t we try the temple? Maybe He stayed there.”

Sleeping in cat naps and grabbing just enough food to eat from the vendors, we were so exhausted I would have agreed to anything.

“Yes, lets.”

Joseph took my hand as we entered the temple. We ignored the myriad people cluttering the halls...workers, musicians, priests, worshipers and money changers. After wandering around, we entered one of the gates of the Court of Women. At this gate, many people often became separated, we heard.

As we asked acquaintances about Jesus, we heard others asking of their loved ones, as well.

Then we stepped through the door to the Court of Women where Priests, prophets and preachers spoke and argued with each other about the merits of their various religions.

Suddenly, my knees buckled and I would have fallen had Joseph not held me tightly. “It’s Jesus!” I whispered.

“What can He be doing in the midst of those learned men?”

“I don’t know. Let’s move closer.” Joseph edged me nearer. A large group of priests sat at a table. Their eyes were red rimmed and looked like they hadn’t closed them in days. The weary priests slumped over a table, but all were staring at one person.

Sitting in the center was our Son Jesus, expounding on a point of the Talmud. We stood at the door and listened, unable to believe this young boy understood the questions and answers.

As we entered, one of the priests had just concluded a statement and looked in our direction. “Yes?”

“Jesus,” I cried, running to Him. “Son, why have you treated us this way? Your Father and I have searched all over, looking for You. Didn’t you know we would miss you and worry?”

As he looked at us, His face was full of compassion and love. It was almost as though He were a man, instead of a boy of only twelve. “Why is it you were looking for me? Didn’t you know I had to be in My Father’s House and about His business?”

I clasped Him in my arms, thanking God we had found Him. Soon after, we left the temple. Jesus was weak and pale from having eaten so little in the past days and having little rest. We bought food and juice for him before leaving Jerusalem. We wanted to stop so He could rest, but He insisted we continue our journey. He felt so badly already that He had delayed us. We tried to slow our footsteps, but Jesus hurried to catch up with the caravan. As He said, “I’ve delayed the trip home already. I don’t want to be responsible for holding them up any longer.”

Jesus tried to explain why He became so engrossed in His discussions with the Priests but Joseph and I needed no explanation. Subconsciously, He knew what He had to do and we now had to give Him freedom to follow the path chosen for Him before He was born.

By walking day and most of the nights, we spied the caravan the day before they would have arrived in Nazareth. Jesus was happily greeted by his brothers and sisters. Though a million questions were asked, we never explained further.

Chapter 20

The next year, at Jesus’ Bar Mitzvah, the entire village came to our home after ceremonies at the Temple. Even we had no idea how much our relatives and friends loved Him. Soon after all the festivities, laughter and happiness, Joseph and I discovered jealousy in our family.

As we walked from the synagogue that day, surrounded by friends and family, I was incredibly happy.

The day was bright and sunny. Light feathery clouds skittered across the sky obscuring the sun, then uncovering it rapidly. The mountains protectively watched our town.

In an earlier time, boulders on the mountains had been flung about, bouncing, finally settling, leaving caves and hollows for man and animals in bad weather.

Today, as I looked up, I noticed the dark brown trunks of cedar trees clinging to the sides of hills. Sprigs of feathery green leaves played amongst the darker green of older leaves. Lacy flowers of various colors swayed atop green grass, covering some of the doors to the caves.

“What a glorious day!” I thought as I joined the others in singing our psalms.

Our family was now so large the adults all walked sedately, as nearly together as possible. The children straggled along, playing, laughing and talking. All except James. After the festivities that day, Joseph and I attempted to talk with our son, but he refused to discuss it. We simply did not know what else to do.

Joseph told me somewhat earlier he was concerned about how quiet James had become. “It started around the time we made plans for Jesus’ Bar Mitzvah.”

I thought about his statement for a moment. “He couldn’t possibly be jealous, could he, Joseph?”

“It could be, I suppose. Sometimes he looks at Jesus and the expression is almost one of hatred.”

“Hatred?” I was horrified.

“Maybe that’s not the word I’m looking for,” Joseph said. “I’m just not sure what his problem is.”

Through the years James never stopped his darting from here to there. Joseph had trouble keeping James’ mind on one job long enough to complete whatever he was making in the shop. Mid-way through repairing a plow, he’d dart from the shop, going no one knew where.

A few days after Joseph and I talked, I visited them at work. That was the day Joseph’s patience ran short. I still enjoyed the scents of the different woods and gloried in watching a tree become a cradle, a bed, a table or chair.

As I entered, James was working on a plow. He’d grown into a sturdy ten year old. He still moved too rapidly to let a pound stay on his body. His hair was dark and of rather a coarse texture. But his eyes. When he was happy, they were the most expressive, beautiful dark brown eyes ever seen. He could make you cry or laugh or smile, with one look.

Today, those eyes glared at me as I came through the door. “Hello, James.” I stooped and kissed his brow. He jerked away and went back to repairing the plow.

Joseph raised his head to look at James with a puzzled expression. Suddenly, James put down his hammer and walked from the shop.

Joseph spoke in a firm, loving voice. “James, you come back here!” He laid down the saw he was using.

James slunk back, stopped and leaned against the door. “Yes?” His voice was belligerent.

I looked from Joseph to James, not believing the recent difference in our son’s attitude.

“Tell me son, exactly what your problem is.” His voice was emphatic as Joseph moved closer to James, looking directly into his face.

“I don’t have a problem,” James said, running his sandal across the floor in front of him, then back again.

“Something is bothering you, son.” Joseph ignored the belligerence in James’ tone of voice. “You know you can talk to me about anything.” He waited a few seconds and when James said nothing, Joseph asked. “Now, why don’t you tell me?”

“You really want to know?” He stared at Joseph as though he were an enemy. There was so much anger in that voice I wanted to spank James myself.

When he answered, Joseph’s voice was calm and caring. “Yes, son, I really want to know.”

“It’s that Son of yours.” James yelled. “He’s so high and mighty. He gets everything He wants. His Bar Mitzvah was so grand, we’ll never be able to afford one like it for the rest of us.” It appeared once he got started, he couldn’t stop. “He thinks he knows everything there is to know in this world. He orders all of us around like he’s our parent.”

I thought for a moment he was finished, then he raised his head and looked directly at his Father. His voice was very low, and full of venom. “Sometimes, I think I hate Him.”

Joseph took one step. James must have thought he might get hit, because he ducked. Instead, Joseph gathered him into his arms. When he did, James began to cry. “Oh, Father, I’m sorry.”

Joseph held his ten year old body close to him. “James, it’s all right. Son, I love you with all my heart.” He held him tightly. Only he and I knew that James really was his first born.

When the sobs turned into sniffles, Joseph removed his arms from around James and led him to a bench.

“Come, sit down. Let me tell you a story. All right?”

James nodded and followed his Father. “James, when you were born we were so very happy. Jesus was three years old and we thought we might never have any more children. Then you came. You were very precious to

us. You were sunny and cheerful, always running here and there. You were like a bright star that flashes across the sky.”

James looked at his Father and gave him a teary smile.

“Jesus claimed you the minute He saw you. You were always His baby, He said. Maybe we did neglect you a little because Jesus took such good care of you. He really doesn’t have any more than the rest of you. Think about this, James. As you get older, your needs change.”

“They do?” James asked, looking into his father’s eyes.

“Yes.” Joseph said, and held his son’s hand. “When you start shaving and growing taller, you need more clothing, and other accessories I can’t even think of now. You will also need money when you find a girl you like. You’ll want to give her gifts.”

James shook his head. “I’m not going to get a girl.”

“You’ll change your mind.” Joseph smiled at him. “As to Jesus having a bigger Bar Mitzvah than the rest of you, if God is willing, you shall all have the very same type party after your Bar Mitzvah.”

He looked over at me. At times, Joseph and I communicated as much without words as with.

I nodded as Joseph continued. “Your Mother and I are putting a little money aside. We’ve saved it for your special days. It isn’t much, James. However, if God is with us there will be enough for all. We shall do our best for your Bar Mitzvah, your betrothals and your weddings.”

“I didn’t know.” James voice was quiet and his body was more at rest than I had ever seen.

“No one else knows. Just you.”

“Not even Jesus?” A faint smile lit his large brown expressive eyes as he looked up at his father.

“Not even Jesus.” Joseph said.

James kissed his Father, waved happily to me and darted from the shop. Joseph and I just looked at each other. We were thankful another storm was passed.

“I hope that will be the end of it.” I said.

“It might not be, Mary.” Joseph said, picking up his saw. “As he gets older, we know Jesus will be different. He is already. All we can do is let the children know we care for each of them, just as they are.”

“You’re right, of course.” I walked to him, raised on my tip toes and kissed him. “I must get home and get our meal prepared.”

I waved at him and left the shop. I had no way of knowing the jealousy was not dead. It would resurface later, when I was less able to handle it.

•••

The next year, as the heat of summer bore down on us, so did the insects. Lethargy gripped the entire city.

One moved when that movement was essential. Sweat kept our bodies wet. With the sweating, more water was needed. Someone was either going to or coming from the well constantly.

Talking with other mothers, I discovered their children were as unhappy as ours. They quarreled, picked fights, stomped out of the house in anger. Our only answer was to keep them as busy as possible.

Now that our children were older, Sarah and I sometimes rose early to get water for our homes...pretending, I suppose, we were still 14 years old. Actually, it gave us a few moments to pretend we were childless. Since our days were so full, it also gave us an opportunity to visit with each other.

“I don’t think I’ve ever known the weather to be so hot,” Sarah complained, swiping damp hair off her forehead as we trudged toward the well. Over the years, she had changed little. Maybe a little rounder, and her hair contained a few strands of grey, but she was still the same Sarah I’d loved all my life.

The path looked much as it had all those years ago. Trees had grown and today, we both wished the leaves didn't hang so still and lifeless. Bees moved so slowly around the drooping honeysuckle we felt they must be as lethargic as we. All other blossoms either sagged or dropped to the arid ground.

"These stones are so hot, if I didn't have sandals, my feet would be one big blister," Sarah complained.

I casually hit one of the shrubs. The dust lazily lifted, then settled more firmly. It was so thick the leaves were more grey than green.

I batted at an insect as it caromed around my face. "These insects are driving me crazy!" I complained loudly.

When we arrived at the well, Sarah plunged her jar into it, brought the container up, then abruptly poured almost half the contents onto her hair. She giggled like a little girl as water cascaded, wetting everything from hair to sandals.

I screamed with laughter. "Bet that felt good."

"It sure did," she grinned and flung the rest over me. That water felt better than any I could ever remember.

At that moment, we heard other women nearing. "Guess we'd better be grownups again?" She straightened her robe, then bent to hit an insect on her ankle.

"Probably. I'm glad you did that." We grinned at each other, filled our containers and went home. As we passed our friends they good-naturedly teased us about being children.

A few days later, one of the older people near our courtyard became sick with high temperatures. When I offered help, the lady was so wet she looked as though she'd just had a bath, yet her skin felt hot and damp. Soon, she developed a cough. Within a few days, she was dead.

The village people thought it was just a normal occurrence.

Then, more people became sick and we realized we had an epidemic. The physicians had no idea what caused the illnesses. We all worked to help those who were sick. We changed clothing, as well as bed clothing. We kept the sick ones as cool and comfortable as possible. Nothing helped. We made soup and tried to get sick ones to eat. Prayers in the synagogue were continuous, but the weather continued to be breathlessly hot as insects took up permanent residence.

Physicians, as well as the rest of us were puzzled at the outbreak. Usually, when an epidemic hit, it was for a certain age limit. Now, the fevers hit every age group, from the oldest to the youngest. Some older persons who were not particularly healthy overcame the fevers while younger, stronger people died. Knowing the laws of God, and the cleanliness He ordered, we became even more conscious in the cleansing of our hands and bodies. We ate only foods that were washed thoroughly. We did everything possible.

Nothing stopped the tide of illnesses.

Simon and Hanna woke up one morning so ill they were unable to get out of bed. Never have I prayed and worked as hard to save my children. After a week of sleepless nights, little rest and worry, their fevers broke. They woke up hungry. I thanked God with all my heart then prepared soup, and went to bed.

Two weeks later, Joseph awoke one morning and was unable to arise. I sent two of the boys to the well to get extra water and began bathing Joseph. I sent for the physician, knowing he had nothing to give Joseph to keep his fever from climbing.

Joseph's family came. My family came. The house had visitors around the clock...people wanting to help. Children hovered near the door and barely left the house.

On the fourth day of Joseph's illness, my family took the children to their home. While Joseph's family cared for him, I sat outside the house, trying to breathe in the unbearable heat. I heard a muffled footstep and looked up. Jesus walked around the corner of the house. I don't think I've ever been so happy to see anyone as at that moment.

Only 14, Jesus had grown into a rather nice-looking young man. He would never be what one called 'handsome.' But then, he didn't have to be. He was as tall as Joseph, with almost black, unruly curly hair. His prominent nose was almost hidden by facial hair. He had long, expressive hands that told stories as easily as his voice.

His voice...How could I possibly describe it? Almost like an ancient prophet, He could thunder at people who caused an injustice, or scold a sibling for disobeying parents. Then, at other times, a whisper showed His intense love to a child. To an older person, love was shown by a chuckle, a swift kiss or just a pat on the shoulder.

"Jesus, what are you doing here? I thought you were with the grandparents."

"I went to the shop and worked awhile, but I thought you might need me." His eyes were the most compassionate I had ever seen. With them, he reached out to everyone, especially those who needed love.

"You knew I was hurting, didn't you?" And I raised a hand to Him.

He took it, squeezed it tightly and said, "Mother, I felt your hurt. I wanted to help if I could."

"Come, sit beside me." As we sat, I reached over and kissed his cheek. "I always need my children, Jesus, especially you." For quite some time not a word was said. I don't think I have ever been so comforted by anyone's presence.

I sent the children to stay with my parents. Each morning as I opened the door, there they all stood, waiting...not saying a word. Only their eyes spoke volumes. I tried to comfort them. All I could do was tell them about their father's condition and hug each. It broke my heart when I sent them back to Mother's for the morning meal.

I barely slept for the next few days. I bathed Joseph, attempted to feed him, prayed, and made him as comfortable as possible. I held his hand and told him over and over how much I loved him. I begged him to fight to live.

I fed him small sips of chicken soup his Mother made. Once, we thought he was going to get better, but in the early morning hours before daybreak, his fever climbed higher and ever higher.

When I touched his skin, it felt like I had placed my hand in a baking oven. I bathed him, keeping Jesus and the other children on the run to the well to fetch more water. I wrapped him in cool, wet covers. Nothing helped.

That night, I sent everyone home with our children. I think all we adults knew if Joseph made it through the night, it would be a miracle. And we all prayed for miracles. Each went to his bed, kissed him and told him how much they loved him, though I'm sure he barely heard them.

Tears fell on already wet cheeks as his Mother, Father and Sarah left. They knew, without admitting it, this was probably the last time they would see Joseph alive.

Not a sound disturbed the room...except those of Joseph's coughing and labored breathing.

In the small hours of the night, he awoke and motioned me to move closer. I picked up his hand with skin so translucent it had little more substance than a sunbeam. "Mary, I don't want to go, but God has called." His voice was weak and raspy, yet emphatic.

"Oh, my darling," I could feel the tears flowing down my face. "Don't leave me," I begged, letting his hand go in order to hold his body tightly. "I need you so desperately."

His voice weakened as he continued. "Take care of our little ones. Jesus will always help, you know."

I nodded. "I know, but I need you."

"Mary, I always loved you. Never forget that."

His body was torn by damaging coughs until suddenly, in the midst of a cough, he stopped and took a deep, sighing breath.

My Joseph left me forever.

For awhile, as his body cooled, I held him, not wanting to share him with anyone else. I couldn't let him go. We had been together most of my life. How could I live without him?

As the morning light crept in, I looked through the window toward the heavens. I saw Joseph clearly. He was smiling, as though he had met a Friend.

Almost before the day was fully grown, our home and courtyard was filled with friends and relatives. They brought food and cared for the other children. They cleaned the house and saw to Joseph's body.

First, his body was washed and rubbed with oil by friends. As the odor of oil reached me, I remembered when Joseph told me that myrrh was often used as a burial oil. Of course, we had only that which was a gift to Jesus. I knew Joseph would be angered I even considered using it for him.

Then, he was wrapped in the grave clothes with fragrant spices packed between his body and the cloth. Finally, I wrapped his dear head in a linen napkin, kissing him just before his face was completely covered.

A drizzling rain began soon after dawn, wetting everything in sight. Though I heard people thank God for the rain, I could only think of Joseph going to his final resting place.

As we walked through the streets, taking Joseph's body to the burial grounds outside the city, I felt as dead as Joseph.

Somehow, I could see my body moving, following Joseph, hearing the mourners, but I was not part of this ceremony.

Water wept from the sky, dampening everything around.

We reached the rocky caves where the dead of our village were laid to rest. I saw that someone had been there earlier, making the burial cave ready. The rock was slid back so it was opened, ready for Joseph's wrapped body.

When his body was taken into the cave, my body and spirit came together again. The pain I felt was almost more than I could bear.

"Why have you taken him from me, God?" I ranted. "I needed him. Your Son needed him. We all needed him. What have you done?" I collapsed and would have fallen to the ground, but Jesus held me.

"Come, Mother, we must go home." Jesus said.

I screamed. "I can't leave him. He'll be alone."

"Mother." His quiet voice penetrated. "Come, Father would have wished you to be brave." He gently took my arm and I don't even remember going back to the home Joseph and I shared for all too few years.

As friends and relatives arrived for the ritual meal, they shook rain from their bodies. It was still falling, but it was a gentle, healing rain. I couldn't eat. All I wanted was for people to go home, leave me alone so I could grieve for the man whom I had loved all my life.

But that was not to be.

Ours was a bereft household. The next period of time was worse than any nightmare. In fact, only a few hours after Joseph's burial, I realized I had mountainous problems to face.

There were seven children to raise without a husband and little money to feed and clothe them. I knew Jesus and the other boys were capable of making some of the pieces of furniture Joseph designed. I also knew Jeremiah would sell everything they made. Money was essential, but would it be enough?

The children could barely believe their father was gone. Their fears were enormous. They were afraid God would take them, too. They feared we would starve if he wasn't there to care for us. Their fears that no one would love them if they had no father was very real to them. They almost never left my side. I wondered why we didn't drown in a sea of tears.

The first few nights, I awoke to my children sobbing. I was up most of the night getting them back to sleep. I tried to stay on the schedule we had lived by all their lives. I sent them to school, knowing they had no interest in it but, it was a beginning.

One day, grouped around me, I caught the strangest look from all of them...one of love and apprehension. Suddenly, James came closely, placed his hand on my forehead, then turned and smiled at the rest. They grinned back and went outside for the first time.

I realized they had been afraid I would also become sick and leave them. After this episode, I thought the children could make it...not without scars, but they would eventually be all right.

Occasionally, I was able to get away for a few moments to find a little peace. One day, I felt I couldn't stand people any more. I don't know how, but I slipped from the house without anyone seeing me. Moving toward the olive grove where Joseph and I often met to enjoy a few moments of privacy, I noticed the weather was cooler than it had been only a few days before.

I made my way through the grove to the tree where we stood so many years ago discussing our marriage. I threw my arms around a gnarled limb with its thick, brown, scaly bark. Clinging to the tree I sobbed, begging God to let me know what to do. "How can I ever raise these children without Joseph?" I asked, not expecting an answer.

Birds chirruped nearby, seeming not to be disturbed at my presence. Insects skittered through the fallen leaves, making tiny noises. I looked upward through the ancient trees to the blue of the sky, trying to find the God who had taken Joseph from me. I wanted to ask Him "why," and receive an answer.

A dove flew by, its wings sighing. I sighed as well, waiting for answers that would never come.

"Mother?" Hanna, dear Hanna, was there.

"Hanna! What are you doing here?" She was such a beautiful ten-year-old. Slim, like Leah, her smile was breathtaking. Her hair curled around her round, doll-like face. Gazing at the world as though it were her special jewel, she never saw the ugliness of life...only the beauty of God.

"I saw you leave. I wanted to give you a few minutes alone, but not too many." She smiled up at me, shyly.

I put my arms around her and drew her near. "I'm so glad you came."

"I am too," she said. "But I always wondered. Why do you come to just this tree and no other?"

We stood for a moment as I considered what to tell her. "Here, let's sit for a minute and I'll try to answer your questions."

We sat on a soft clump of greenery. I picked a grass stem, stuck it in my mouth and looked closely at her.

"When your father and I were very young, we had a grave misunderstanding and we almost decided not to marry."

"Mother!" She clung to my hand. "That can't be. You always loved each other. We all knew that."

"That's true, but we did have our moments, you know." I smiled and looked down at her. She grinned back at me, nodding.

"Honey, parents often have places that are special where they feel closer, where they can talk without anyone else around. This was the place your father and I often came when we found a moment to be alone." I stopped and it was almost as though she were holding her breath, waiting for me to continue.

"Hanna, it's nothing special...just a tree. However, to us it was special. That's why I come here...to feel closer to your father. It will always be special for me. When you get older and meet the man you wish to spend your life with, you will also have a special place. Maybe a hillside, a valley or even an ancient tree."

"I understand," she said. Jumping up, she grabbed my hand and pulled me up. Holding hands like two very young girls we hurried home, my heart's burden lighter.

I needed that respite, because Sarah had become a troubling part of my daily worries. She withdrew from her family, God, the world. She was inconsolable. Everyone talked, commiserated, prayed with her. Nothing helped.

I barely knew how I faced each day. How could I help Sarah and her parents? I had no idea, but I knew I must do something to bring our families back to life. But what?

I prayed as I never had before.

The next morning, I rose much earlier than usual. When I knocked on Sarah's door, she was still in bed. I opened the door and looked around. I couldn't believe the house. There were dirty cooking containers; eating dishes weren't cleaned.

Clothing was filthy and strewn across the floor as though no one lived in the house. Sarah's husband Aaron, stumbled from the bedroom, bleary-eyed.

When he saw me, he just stared. He looked as though he wanted to cry as he grabbed me around the waist and clung tightly. "Mary, what am I going to do? I don't know how to care for the children. I don't know how to cook. My family is dying and I'm helpless."

His body shook with sobs that tore him asunder. When his crying ceased, I held him for a moment. "I don't know what we're going to do, but I do know God and I will do something today."

"Father?" One of the children, I forget which one. "I'm hungry. What are we going to eat?"

"I don't know, son, but we'll find something in a few moments."

By this time, all the children were awake, standing like statues, waiting for their father to fix something to eat or tell them what to do.

"Aaron, don't worry. I will do something...I don't know what. Please don't let the children get upset if you hear noises."

I took a deep breath, looked toward heaven and walked into the bedroom. Suddenly, I yanked Sarah from her bed. She plopped onto the floor like a sack of grain. "Sarah, I'm tired of this. You've got to help me!"

"Whaa?" She struggled to grasp the side of the bed so she could pull herself back under the covers.

"Get up from there, Sarah." I screamed at her. "I can't believe what you're doing to your family." I was furious. In all our lives, I had never been as angry as I was at this moment. "I'm so ashamed of you I'm glad Joseph isn't here to see you like this."

She yelled back. "How can you say that? Did you ever love him? How can you act like this when he's just died?"

I shouted back. "I have to act like this because everyone else is so tied up in their anger and hurt, I don't have anyone to listen to mine." And my sobs fell before I could stop them.

I wiped them across my face.

"Your children need food. Your mother and father are really hurting, your husband is trying to be mother and father to your children while you lie in bed and neglect all of them."

"Mary...?" Her voice sounded as though she were awakening from a deep sleep.

"Oh, Sarah." And I put my arms around her, helping her to stand. When she was upright, she grabbed me and held me tightly.

"Oh, Mary, how can you ever forgive me? What have I done?"

She started tossing clothing on. She stopped and looked around the room. "When did I let this get into such a mess?"

I didn't answer.

“I know my babies are hungry. I know Aaron hates me. What am I going to do?”

I smiled secretly and thanked God He had shown me the way to awaken her.

She hurried to the other room, where her family gazed at her as though she were a person they didn't even know. She walked to Aaron and placed her arms on his shoulders. “Can you forgive me?”

He grabbed her, lowered his head to her unwashed head and raised his eyes to heaven. “There is nothing to forgive. You were just heartbroken.”

She straightened, opened her arms to her children and hugged them tightly. Then she glanced in my direction. “Let's go get water so I can fix food for my family.”

She kissed her husband and children, giving each a special word of love. Then she and I went to get water.

Life seemed to have fled from Joseph's parents when he went to God. Now that Sarah and her family were on the road to recovery, I must turn to his parents, I told myself.

They were heart broken and nothing appeared to appease their suffering. Jesus encouraged His grandfather to go to the shop with him. This helped. For a time, I was more concerned about Joseph's Mother than anyone.

She appeared to roam into another world. Sometimes, it was all we could do to bring her back. Finally, Jesus left the shop early one day and went to see his Grandmother.

When He entered our front door, His face was pale and His clothing wet with sweat. He held onto the door frame, gasping deeply, as though he had run a long race.

“Jesus, what happened?” I ran to Him, took Him in my arms, alarmed at His appearance. He stumbled as I led Him to the table. When He sat, I offered Him a glass of milk. Sweat continued to wet His clothing almost faster than I could dry it. I insisted He drink water as well as His milk, soothing Him as though He were a child.

“Mother, I don't know what happened.” He looked up at me with an expression I couldn't describe. “It was the strangest sensation I've ever known. I took Grand Mother's hand. It felt dead. She had stopped eating, you know.”

I nodded. “I know. I've tried every dish I know. So has Sarah. She won't eat a bite. We are so worried.”

He picked up his glass and sipped. “She's lost so much weight she looked almost dead to me.” He shook His head from side to side, his voice full of compassion. “I held her hand and told her that God was with her and that Father was now with God.”

“Something in my voice must have reached her because she looked at me rather strangely.” He shook his head from side to side, holding his milk tightly. His eyes were haunted and his cheeks sunken.

He raised his head and looked directly into my eyes and continued, “Grandmother held me tightly and said, ‘you've seen Joseph in God's arms, haven't you?’”

I felt my body shrivel. I knew what this meant. I knew He would have to be told, and I didn't know if I had the strength to do that job or not.

“At first, I didn't understand what she meant.” He twisted his glass of milk and picked up a cake. “I told her ‘yes, I had seen Father with God.’ She nodded and suddenly, her eyes began to shine like always. I left her soon after because she was in much better spirits. She even asked if we'd like to come and eat with her tomorrow.”

“Why did it take you so long to get home?”

“I left Grandmother and went for a walk. I went into the hills, trying to find an answer. I had to know how I had seen...actually seen, my Father Joseph, in the arms of God.”

He looked at me with a quizzical expression. “Mother, how did I know...really know, that Father was with My Father in heaven?”

He didn't know what He had just said.

Joseph and I had talked with each other about this situation many times. We agreed Jesus was learning much more than He was taught at the feet of the Rabbi. We also discussed ways to let Him know He was God's son. Like most people who face the unknown, we continued to postpone the day we must tell Him.

"Jesus, tomorrow you and I will go into the hills and I will talk with You. Joseph and I should have told You long ago." I reached over and took His hand. "Can you wait until tomorrow when I can get someone to stay with the other children?"

"Yes, it's just that..."

I patted his hand. "I know, Son. I know how confused You are at the moment. We don't have time to talk now. Simon will awake from his nap soon and he'll be running in."

"Jesus?" A tiny voice called from the bedroom, then footsteps ran into our large room. "I thought I heard you." And Simon flew into Jesus' arms.

Chapter 21

The next day, after the children were in school and the others with Grandparents, Jesus and I walked toward the hills. As we climbed, I prayed God would put the right words into my mouth. We stopped on the hill where Sarah and I often met and talked.

We looked out over the horizon. Hills climbed like stair steps into the heavens. Wispy clouds blanketed the tops, then floated away and dissipated. The sun rose majestically, splattering the rocks and boulders with light.

Tinkling of a bell reminded us that sheep were grazing nearby. Looking down toward the bottom of the mountains, we saw men following donkeys as they plowed.

The weather had cooled somewhat, so we were able to enjoy a slight breeze which flitted around, ruffling blossoms and leaves of flowers. The brightly colored blooms bowed, straightened, then shook, reminding one of dancing children.

"Come, Jesus, sit beside me." I patted a rock that looked as though millions had sat on it at one time or another. He sat, his long legs drawn up almost to his chin, as we both gazed around us.

The beauty of red poppies and yellow and white daisies looked like an artist had been at work with his paints and brushes on a giant canvas. The flowers were bright splotches of color against the green of the grass and the slate grey of the hills.

Trees clung to the sides of the mountains, displaying their different shades of greens. Looking out toward the East, the Sea of Galilee reminded me of a looking-glass painted sky blue, it was so smooth.

"How beautiful!" I exclaimed.

"Yes, it is." Jesus said, but I knew His mind was not on the beauty of the flowers, the mountains or even the sea, but on what I would tell Him.

After we made ourselves comfortable, I took his hand and said. "My dear Jesus, I hardly know how to tell you this. Joseph and I tried so many times to make you aware of your situation..."

"What situation?" He interrupted.

"I'm getting to that. We tried to tell you, but we simply did not know how."

"Mother!" He was getting a little impatient and I really didn't blame Him.

"I'm sorry." I looked to the heavens. "Jesus, You are the natural Son of God."

Jesus looked at me as though I had lost my mind, removed His hand from mine and said, rather shortly, "Of course, I'm God's son. Everyone is."

"No, my dear Child, You don't understand." This was much more difficult than I thought it would be. I took a deep breath and my hands shook. "You are God's natural Son. I carried you in my womb, Jesus, but God planted that seed."

“But how...?” His voice trailed away as he ducked his head in confusion. I could tell my fourteen year old son was very embarrassed that He should be speaking of such matters with His Mother.

“Jesus, you must listen to me.” I reached up and gently turned his head so I could look deeply into His eyes. “Don’t let anything else intrude.”

He stared at me as though He saw into my very soul.

“One night, when I was just one year older than you are now, I was sleeping on our roof. An Angel, Gabriel, came to me. He told me I had been chosen to be the Mother of God’s Son.”

Jesus looked at me rather strangely, then stared out over the valleys below. “I’ve always thought I was different,” he stated uncertainly. “I just didn’t know how different.”

He picked up my hand, rather as if it were His lifeline. “Will you tell me everything?”

I related the entire story, omitting the fact that Joseph had not believed me. I told about the trip to Elizabeth and her pregnancy with John. I sloughed over the way the villagers gossiped about me.

I then told him of our trip to Bethlehem.

“Just like the prophecy that said God’s son would come out of Bethlehem,” he stated in such a low voice I could barely hear.

“We discussed, months before your birth, about the prophecy that stated the Savior would be born in Bethlehem.”

We both stared at a farmer tilling his soil and watched the sun glittering on the sea which now showed small white caps. He sat as still as the stones of the hills. I didn’t know what was going through his mind and I certainly had no way of knowing how He would or could accept this information.

A bird tweeted above us. Our thoughts interrupted, we both looked up for a moment, then stared toward the Sea as I continued. “After your birth, Benjamin and Ruth offered Joseph a job at the caravansary. We decided to stay because financial conditions were so bad in Nazareth.

“We were happy while we lived there, but almost two years later, three men, called the Magi, came to visit you.”

“I don’t understand.”

“They’re wise men who live in Eastern countries.”

“I’ve heard of them,” Jesus said. “They study the stars, the prophets and the sacred word.” His voice was low, as though he were thinking aloud. “But why come to visit me? How could they have known about me?”

“They had studied the scriptures all their lives, and had studied the stars since becoming astrologers. Apparently, they always looked for a sign that the Son of God was born. All three apparently reached the same conclusions at the same time in different parts of the world.”

Jesus was stunned. “How did they get to Bethlehem together, if they were from different countries?”

“The all met in one city...how, I don’t know, but they decided to complete their journey together.”

“So they found me. What did they do?”

“They fell down on their knees and worshiped you...”

“Oh, no,” He wailed, His voice filled with despair.

“They brought you Gold, Frankincense and Myrrh.” I took a deep breath, then added, “Jesus, I have it put away for You in a safe place. When You need those gifts, they will be waiting.”

The lines in Jesus’ forehead deepened, making him look more like an old man than my young son. “Why would they bring gifts to me?”

“Because You were the Son of God.”

He nodded in understanding.

I wanted desperately for Him to look at me, but He continued to stare into the distant hills. Birds flitted nearby. A sheep’s bell tinkled and leaves rustled at our feet. An animal, I forget what, stopped his running, looked at us, then went on his way.

Softly, He asked. “Is there more, Mother?”

“Yes.” I too, looked out over the expanse. I saw only the timeless hills and the trees. They swayed in the slight breeze that caressed our faces, now and then. A couple of ships were now on the Sea of Galilee. They must be fishermen, I thought.

“The Magi warned us that Herod had heard about You and wanted You dead.”

“Why would Herod want a Baby dead?” Jesus turned His head and stared at me in confusion.

“Because he thought You were going to take over his throne.” I attempted to make my voice as noncommittal as possible.

“A baby?” Jesus was appalled. “A baby take over a throne?”

“Apparently, he’s always been a little mad. You’ve studied about him in school.”

He nodded.

“By the end of his life, he was more than a little mad. Most think he was totally mad. Anyway, he was very frightened that You would take over his throne, so he ordered you killed.”

“That poor man,” Jesus said. “He must have been the most unhappy man alive.”

I nodded. I had no idea Jesus would take this attitude.

We sat in stillness, I barely breathing, Jesus thinking deeply. Suddenly, He took my hand in His and held it tightly. “Oh, Mother, I’m so sorry you had to go through all that for me.” And His voice held so much care and concern, I was humbled.

“You were worth every pain, physical and mental.” I leaned over and kissed him lightly on the cheek, then continued. “Going back to the story. We started home from Bethlehem but the angel came to Joseph that night.”

Jesus looked at me with a strange expression. “I remember now.” His voice was distant, almost as though he were dreaming rather than speaking aloud. “I talked to Gabriel. All these years, I thought it was just a dream.”

“Yes, you did talk to him.” I held Jesus’ hand tightly, wanting to never let go. “He told us to go to Egypt...to get out of Herod’s reach. As much as we wished to go home, we left Bethlehem and began our journey to Egypt. That’s when we met Abner.”

“Good old Uncle Abner.” His voice was full of anguish. “I really wish we could have let him know about Father.”

“I do too, Jesus.”

“He has always been so good to us. Almost like he was one of the family.”

I laughed. “He told us one time he had no family of his own, so he was adopting us.” I looked at Jesus who was staring, unseeing across the expanse. “He did love your Father, Jesus, and I know he will be heartbroken when he returns.”

“I’m glad he adopted us. We always seem to need him, don’t we?” The irony in this young man’s voice astounded me.

“We do need Abner. He is a wonderful man, whom your father had a great deal of respect for.”

Jesus was silent for a few moments, then said, “Did anything else happen?”

I nodded. "Quite a lot, in fact."

"Why did we come home?" He looked toward the heavens, a dreamy expression on His face.

"When Herod died, the angel again came to Joseph and told him we could return home."

Jesus voice was low and he spoke slowly. "I remember talking to Gabriel then, too."

"Yes, You did." Remembering, it seemed only yesterday when we lived in Egypt and Gabriel visited us. "You had the most delightful giggle each time the two of you communicated."

Jesus smiled, the first smile I had seen today. It was so beautiful I wanted to weep, but I continued. "Soon after we reached home, James was born. You decided You would take care of him and all the babies that came later."

His smile was one of almost parental pride at the thought of the children He was helping to raise. "And I shall take care of them from now on, Mother."

"Son, you must have a life of your own." I protested. "So many young ladies already have their eyes on you."

"I have too much to do to consider marriage, I think." Anguish broke my heart.

He stared toward the Jesreel Valley, which lies at the bottom of the hills. "I now understand how I could dispute with the Priests in Jerusalem. At the time, I wondered how I knew so much. Since then, I've tried to forget what I knew." A bird's song broke the silence and Jesus smiled...the first happy smile I had seen today.

"Now, I can learn everything possible and not be ashamed."

"Oh, Jesus," I cried, kissing the hand I held. "I want you to have a normal life. I want to see you happy. I want to see you marry. I want to be a grandmother to your children."

He stood, then smiled down at me and the sun, silhouetted around his head resembled a crown.

"Mother, it's not to be." Suddenly, He sounded like the adult. "We shall speak of this another time." My fourteen year old son pulled Himself even taller and looked into the Heavens. The expression on his face turned to one of anguish. "God, why?" He cried aloud. Tears ran down his face. "Why?" He flung Himself into my arms, weeping loudly, gasping for breath at the enormity of His knowledge.

I clasped Him to me and my tears ran into His thick dark hair. "The day you were conceived," I said quietly. "My mother said she hoped I would not be the girl chosen as the Mother of the Savior of the world."

His sobs quietened and he put his head in my lap, stretched out onto the rock and looked at me. "Why would she not want you to be My Mother?"

"Jesus," I wiped a splotch of dirt-filled tears from his cheek. "Mother wanted her daughters to have a normal life. She wanted to be able to be a grandparent to all her grandchildren for as long as she lived. She didn't want us to leave home." I picked up a blade of grass struggling to grow on the hillside and placed it in my mouth.

"And you had to go so far away she couldn't even be with her First Grandson when He was a baby." Jesus stated in a sad, dispirited manner.

"No, but she has enjoyed you every day of your life since that time."

"I love her dearly." He lay looking at the heavens as though He could see clear through everything to His Heavenly Father.

I had no idea what He was thinking, until He said, very quietly. "Mother, I'm so frightened! How can I endure what I must?" He twisted in my lap, his eyes staring up at me...fright, anger, anguish. Many more expressions than I knew how to describe crossed his wonderful, caring face.

"What do you mean, Jesus?"

"I've read the scriptures. We have copies of King David's Psalms. I've studied them for years." He abruptly sat up, then stood. As his head turned toward the sky, His voice was so quiet I could barely hear him as He spoke.

"I know what is going to happen to me."

I grabbed his hand and pulled myself up beside Him. “What do you mean, Jesus?”

“I know I will die on the cross.”

“No, Jesus!” I cried aloud to the heavens. “No! I’ll take you away like we did when we went to Egypt.”

“Mother.” His voice was as deep as an adult’s. “You know we can’t run away from God.” His speech slowed, then resumed. “He’s My Father. My work was given to me before I left Heaven.”

“Oh, Jesus, I love you so much.” I held Him tightly, wanting to stop the inevitable.

Quietly, but firmly, he disentangled Himself from my arms.

“I think I’d like us to pray now, Mother.”

As we prayed, we held each other and my tears mingled with His. He prayed for the strength and wisdom to do what God had sent Him to earth for.

We quietly walked back down the hills to our home, where everything was changed...for Him and for me.

•••

Abner and Jeremiah were heartbroken when they found out about Joseph. After that, neither came near Nazareth without visiting us. They never knew how much we enjoyed their company and waited impatiently for their next sojourn.

They eventually combined their routes by Jeremiah working in the north sector of Samaria. Abner’s route ran south, through Jerusalem to the Great Sea. They met in Nazareth to exchange goods.

In this manner, each made fewer journeys but the goods transported became even more exotic.

Once, I asked them to explain some of the goods they transported. The three of us sat in the courtyard after a large meal, with excellent wine Abner provided. Streaks of pink, gray and silver looked like a master artist had swiped his brush across the sky as the end of day neared.

Looking up, the limbs of the pomegranate tree were silhouetted against that spectacular sky. Trees emitted odors which mingled with drifting honeysuckle scents. It was so pleasant I felt wrapped in a cocoon of safety.

“Well, Mary,” Jeremiah remarked. “You’ve tried some of the different types of food we carry.”

“Yes, the artichokes and pickled fish. The pickled fish didn’t impress me too much.” I wrinkled my nose and laughed, remembering when they brought those for our family to try. None of the children ate them, either.

“I liked the Balm, perfumes and spices, though.” I said.

“You would,” Abner remarked dryly. “We send those to other parts of the world from Judea, Arabia and India.” He picked up his wine and sipped. When he set the goblet back on the table, he continued. “That purple dye was made from sea snails.”

“I know,” I said. “When we were in Egypt Naomi told me all about it.”

Jeremiah laughed. “Transporting the dye is one of our most lucrative products. Another is the Ivory you saw on our last trip.”

“I almost envy both of you.” I lifted the wine skin and refilled our containers. “You don’t go to as many exotic places any more,” I remarked, “but you’re able to bring the new products into our part of the world anyway.”

The sun lowered to the edge of the horizon and only a haze of different colors...grey, pink, blue...lingered in the sky. Darkness came to Nazareth rapidly after the sun went down. “Yes, we’re very fortunate.” Abner agreed, then yawned.

“Are we keeping you up?” I teased.

Jeremiah rose. “We’ve both stayed much too late.” He placed his goblet on the table. “I must get an early start in the morning. “Coming Abner?”

“Yes.” He rose and stretched as the children converged on the table.

Both kissed me lightly on the cheek, then bid farewell to the children. I went inside, thinking what a blessing it was to have such dear friends to watch out for us.

The following year, I noticed Jesus especially. He had become quite paternal toward his brothers and sisters. Most of them relied on him much as they would have Joseph. There was another reason I noticed Jesus a little more closely, too.

Hanna’s girl friend, Miriam, was a happy-go-lucky creature that laughed at everything as though life were her play-ground. She was rather tall and willowy with long, expressive hands. Her dark brown hair surrounded a face with a small nose, large, wide-set blue twinkling eyes and a generous mouth. Darkened skin was as smooth and flawless as the silk cloth Jeremiah brought from the far east.

Miriam decided Jesus was the man she needed for a husband and went after Him with quiet determination. She seldom flirted, but there was no way He could ignore her.

Since her knowledge of the scriptures was almost as extensive as Jesus’, she often debated Him. Soon, he started conversations with her when she visited. His brothers and sisters teased Jesus about her, and He never seemed to mind, but He also never asked her to go for a walk.

One day, when He left the house soon after a meal, she quietly followed. Looking toward the hills, I saw the two of them talking. Jesus bent toward her and she said something as she wiped His chin. He threw back his head in a hearty laugh and grabbed her hand. They skipped over rocks, laughing like small children.

I smiled, hoping Jesus had been wrong when He said He would never be interested in a girl or marry.

They were together constantly. One night He told me they were going for a walk. I was thrilled, but said nothing.

When he arrived home a little later, I wondered what happened.

“Jesus, are you all right?” I called from the doorway. He was slumped over the table outside, his head on his arms. Walking out the door, I noticed the moon had cast a glow over the entire courtyard. Stones looked as sleek as a newly sheared sheep. The movement of leaves was so faint, they made no sound.

He raised His head and I saw newly dried tears on His face.

“What’s wrong?” I tried not to show my distress. “How can I help?” I sat at the table with Him, waiting.

“I had to tell Miriam I couldn’t marry her.” He raised His head and looked straight at me. “She is so beautiful and I love her so much. I wanted to take her in my arms.” His voice was ragged as a tear welled in His eye.

“I’ve never fought temptation like I did tonight. I wanted to ask her to become my betrothed.”

“I don’t understand, Jesus. If you love her so much, why didn’t you ask her? We would love having her in our family.”

His eyes were sorrowful as he looked at me. “Mother, when we had our talk, I told you I couldn’t marry. God has much more important tasks for me to accomplish.” His voice ended in a quiver, and He dropped His head on His arms as sobs shook His body.

“My dear child.” I gathered His head in my arms and held Him as sobs eventually quietened. He raised His head and I wiped tears from His face.

“Mother,” his voice shook, but was under control. “I do love her, but I have to give her up in order to do the work I was sent to do. I pray she will be happy with someone else.” His voice ended in the most sorrowful note I’ve ever heard.

Long after, we went inside. I’m sure He didn’t sleep for many nights because I heard Him tossing in His bed. I know I slept little, because there was nothing I could do, except pray for Him.

•••

The children continued to build as many of the pieces of baby furniture as possible for Jeremiah to sell. As long as we had money to live on from their regular salary working in the shop, then I refused to take any from the pieces of furniture they sold.

They foxed me, however. One day, when we were having our evening meal, they laid money in front of me. “What’s this? Where did you get this money?”

James said. “We had a meeting and decided since you will not take any of the money from the extra sales, then we will have to give it to you. We tithe to God, therefore, we feel we owe you the very same amount.”

I started to protest.

“Mother, we are all going to need many things before we leave home,” James said. “We also know you have few savings left from Father’s work.”

Hannah spoke. “We want to be sure there will be enough for every boy to have a Bar Mitzvah. Our brothers said they want Rachel and me to have a dowry, as well as nice betrothals and weddings. If you keep the money, we know it will be there for all of us.”

I could barely believe my children were as wonderful as they really were. I raised my eyes, clasped my hands and said, “Thank you, God, for the most wonderful children in the world.”

“When the dishes aren’t done very well Mother, remember that.” Rachel remarked dryly. She grinned, breaking the seriousness of the talk.

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The entire family still journeyed to Jerusalem for the Passover. Jeremiah, as well as Abner, accompanied us to Bethlehem where Ruth and Matthew always had room for us.

Since our family was now so large, Ruth and Matthew closed the rooms they normally rented. They made sleeping arrangements for the family, however many arrived. Therefore, after greeting each other, we talked for hours.

This year, as I sat in the large room of the caravansary I felt as though Joseph should walk in and begin hammering or sawing or cutting something to repair or build anew. What wonderful memories remained here.

“What do you hear of John?” I asked.

“He’s become a member of a religious sect, the Nazirites.” Matthew said. Though his hair was greying, he was still a roly-poly man with laughter wrinkles around his eyes.

“Exactly what is that?”

“It’s a very restrictive group. The members are only allowed to join by dedicating themselves solely to the Lord.”

“John has some strange ideas, from what I hear,” Ruth said, pouring hot water over tea leaves Jeremiah brought from the Far East. “He isn’t allowed to eat or drink anything from vines at all.”

“No juice?” I blurted.

“They don’t even use vinegar,” she said, handing me a cup of tea. She sat at the table, then continued. “They can’t eat the skin or even the seed of the grape.”

“I think Joseph spoke of that sect once.” I said, suddenly remembering the discussions we’d had of different religious groups. “Isn’t that the group Sampson was a part of?”

“I think so. They can’t shave, they can’t cut their hair, and they aren’t allowed to go near a dead person.” Ruth sounded like she was reciting. “Apparently, he became quite vocal in his denouncing of anything not of a religious nature.”

I shook my head and held my cup. “It’s so strange to hear that Elizabeth’s son joined a group like that. He’s sixteen now, three months older than Jesus, you know.”

“I didn’t know exactly how old he was,” she said, holding up the pot of tea, asking silently if I’d like more. I shook my head and sipped the hot liquid as Ruth continued. “It’s clear he became a solitary person while living in the desert. His relatives saw to his Bar Mitzvah, then he left their tents. He went into the hills of Judea, where he apparently met a group of these people.”

Matthew interrupted. “Whether it was the abruptness of his parents death or just what turned him in this direction, no one knows. He became enchanted with following God in every little jot and tittle of the Law.”

“Poor John. I do hope he’ll have a happy life, however he sees fit to live it.” I felt saddened by what I heard. “His parents were such wonderful people.” I sipped my tea. “I remember Mother said something about Zacharias. He couldn’t speak because he questioned God when he was told that he and Elizabeth would have a son. But as soon as John was born, then named, Zacharias began talking.”

Ruth nodded.

“He then prophesied as to what John would become.” I shook my head, trying to recall what Mother said. “I just don’t remember her words exactly. I’ll have to ask when we get home.”

“How are your parents, Mary?” Ruth asked, looking around the room to see that everything was in readiness for the next onslaught of customers.

“They’re doing very well, as old as they are. It’s such a long journey here, they don’t try it any more. I’m happy knowing they’re home, taking care of each other, and resting.”

The next four years flew by.

Naomi and Benjamin met us in Bethlehem one year. We then walked to Jerusalem for the Passover Festivities. They decided to return to Nazareth with us. They never had children and fell in love with my family. I talked with them about settling near us. They were getting older and I wanted to be able to take care of them, if they needed anything. They eventually decided to sell their home and move to Nazareth permanently.

Jesus became the Father of the family. He tried to teach the other boys how to do the work of the carpentry shop. He attempted to teach them how to repair everything made from wood.

All the boys seemed to soak up the knowledge and especially loved working in close proximity with their grandfather, except James. When he reached fifteen his resentment reached a level more pronounced than at any time since his and Joseph’s talk.

Seldom a week passed when he didn’t bring some story home of how badly Jesus treated him. He resented any instruction Jesus gave. James felt Jesus had no right to tell him, James, when he made a mistake.

Finally, it all exploded one afternoon.

I was outside sewing clothing for the children. I had been busy since daybreak and was very tired. James came down the path from the shop with a stormy look on his face. I knew my day was not going to end happily.

The sun bore through the trees, causing the stones of the courtyard to become so hot I felt I could almost bake our bread on them. Not a breath of air stirred the leaves. Even the birds were silent.

Before James reached me, he began. “Do you know what that Son of yours did?” His arms were flailing and the look in his dark eyes would have made a sandstorm look calm.

“Why don’t you get a drink of water, then tell me about it?”

“I don’t need any water.” His tone of voice was resentful as he flung himself on the bench and began. “I had just fixed a plow. Well,” and here he rose, his anger too much for him to sit still. His sarcasm was heavy as he spoke. “That precious One said it would not hold together because I hadn’t used new nails.” He darted to the door of the house, then back to the table.

“Was he right?”

“How should I know?” and he sat back down very hard. “Ask Him. He knows everything.” His tone of voice was belligerent.

I made a supreme effort to keep my voice calm as I shoved my sweat-dampened hair back. “James, I’m not asking anyone but you.” I picked up his hand and held it. “Would the plow have held together with the nails you used?”

His voice was sullen. “Probably not, but I was trying to save money.”

“Do you think we need to save money?”

“Well, we sure don’t have any. You’re always saying we have to be careful with our money.”

“James, look at me.” He turned his head slightly.

“Wasn’t your Bar Mitzvah just as nice as Jesus?”

He looked at me with a strange expression on his face. “I had forgotten. Yes, it was.”

“Have you ever been denied anything you truly needed?”

He shook his head.

“Then why are you so worried about money that you would try to fix someone’s plow with used nails?”

“Mother,” his voice was full of disgust, and he removed his hand from mine. “Have you forgotten that Hannah is fourteen?”

I shook my head. “No, and I haven’t forgotten that you are fifteen, either. I also remember you have been keeping company with that lovely young girl who lives in the next courtyard.”

“Then how can you say we don’t need money?” He was finally standing still, not darting around.

“I didn’t say we didn’t need money. Everyone needs money to live on.” I paused, trying to get my thoughts in order. “Do you remember your Father talking to you about the money we had saved?”

“Well, yes, but since he’s been dead so long, I thought it was surely gone.”

“James, we don’t have as much as we wished to have, because your Father died so young. You and the others have given me money from each piece of furniture you sold. Somehow, we will manage to organize a Bar Mitzvah, betrothal and wedding for all of you.”

He must have heard the ‘end-of-the-rope’ expression in my voice.

He hung his head and mumbled. “I’m sorry Mother, for getting so upset. Sometimes Jesus makes me so angry. Here he is, eighteen years old and he’s supposed to be married.” He stood and strode back and forth. “After Miriam, He never even looked at a girl. It makes me feel guilty when I want to get betrothed in a couple of years. Jesus isn’t making an attempt to see a girl,” he repeated.

Suddenly, I understood his problem. I picked up my needle and began another seam. “So this all boils down to the fact that you want Jesus to get a wife and move out, so you can be the oldest son. Is that it?”

He slowed his darting then stopped in front of me. His voice held a thoughtful note as he said. “Maybe that is the problem. Plus the fact that He’s always right.” The corners of his mouth turned up slightly.

I laughed up at him, and he returned the smile. “James, He isn’t always right. He does feel He must look after all of you. He has always felt you were His children. Remember we told you that?”

“Yes, I remember. Somehow it just doesn’t seem fair that He should be a father, as well as a brother, to me.” He picked up the cup, dipped it into a pail of water and drank deeply.

“Those are the facts James, whether we like them or not. I can assure you, as long as Jesus sees a responsibility to all of you children, He will not think of himself.”

James leaned over and kissed me. “Mother, forgive me for being such a bother.”

“There’s nothing to forgive. We all need someone to talk with sometimes.” I patted his arm. “Whenever you need to talk, I’ll try to be here for you.”

“Thanks, Mother.” He turned, grinned and waved at me. “Back to the shop, so I can repair that plow right.”

“Good for you.” I smiled my approval. “See you tonight.” I picked up my sewing, but concern with James’ attitude did not subside. He appeared to be in good humor when he left, but I knew the resentment could resurface. I hated to think of the result.

When James reached eighteen, he married the girl he had been seeing for the past years. He loved working with wood. His greatest love, however, was going into the hills to find a very special tree. He found trees that eventually made beautiful wood. His love of fine wood led him to make different, quite expensive pieces of furniture.

Hannah married the year she was sixteen. And now Joses was sixteen and betrothed. He decided he wanted to become a farmer like my Father. He spent a great deal of time with Father and Daniel.

Judas was only fourteen when he decided to become a shepherd. He had little interest in girls so far, but I knew that would change.

Since Leah had finally found a man whom she could not control, they were married. Soon after, they moved to Cana, leaving Mother terribly lonely.

Now, however, Rachel was a lovely twelve-year-old who was the joy of my Mother’s life. She spent more time with her Grandmother than she did with me. But that was all right. My life was so full with the other six children I was glad she worked with her grandmother. Rachel had no interest in a young man yet, which made me happy. She was much as Leah had been.

Simon was our youngest. He looked so much like Joseph it sometimes took my breath away when I caught a glimpse of him. At the age of ten, he was already as tall as me. More than that, however, he had the characteristics of Joseph. He was loving, good and kind. Should he hear of anyone who was old or poor or sick, he rushed to help. His greatest love was working in the carpentry shop with Jesus and Joseph’s father.

My children. How I loved them. I was so blessed.

Chapter 22

The following year I had a marriage proposal.

Though Abner had been around for many years, he never tried to make any advances in my direction...or any other direction, for that matter. We always thought he was a confirmed bachelor and teased him about it sometimes.

Jesus was nearing his twenty-second birthday and still not married. I often wondered if He had been right when he told me He never would.

It was a beautiful afternoon. Fluffy clouds rolled rapidly across the sky. The breeze played with flower petals, wafting sweet odors around us. Abner and I sat at the table under the tree eating our mid-day meal. During the meal, I noticed Abner was unusually silent. Every once in awhile, I caught him staring at me intensely and wondered what was bothering him.

When we finished, I cleaned the table, then asked if he’d like to go for a walk.

We strolled in the quiet olive grove, talking softly of nothing. Birds twittered, then flitted to the ground, searched for food and flew to another tree.

He suddenly stopped and stood as though he were a statue. I looked up at him in surprise. He had the most intense expression I had ever seen.

“Abner, what...?”

“Mary, I have to say this fast,” he blurted. “Will you marry me?”

I was dismayed more than shocked, and I didn't know how to handle this. I leaned against one of the gnarled tree trunks, almost unable to stand without support.

"But, Abner..." I honestly didn't know what to say.

"I know I could never take the place of Joseph. He was such a good, kind, gentle man." He took a deep breath, swallowed, then continued. "Mary, I have enough money to see that your family would never have to worry about finances again." He lowered his head and moved his sandal, making marks in the sand like a young boy. "And I have loved you almost since the day we met." He spoke quietly, looking directly into my eyes.

I didn't know what to say. I had never thought of Abner as a possible husband. "Abner," I stood straight and placed my hand on his arm. That same arm that helped Joseph and me over mountains and through deserts. The same arm that held Jesus when I was so exhausted I felt I couldn't hold Him another moment.

"Abner," I repeated, and removed my hand. "I don't know what to say. I've been alone so long, I can't even think of getting married again."

"I know you couldn't love me the way you did Joseph," he said. "I couldn't ask you to do that, but I would be good to you."

"Oh, Abner. I know you would." I moved away from him. When I turned, his head was bowed. I implored. "Please look at me."

He raised his head and his eyes met mine.

"Abner, I can never marry anyone else. It wouldn't be fair to you or any other man I might meet. I loved Joseph as long as I can remember and that love has never died."

He started to say something and I shook my head. "Please let me finish. I know what a good person you are. I've loved you as a friend for so many years." I took a deep breath. I had to say this in a way that would not hurt him. "I also know it would be unfair to you for us to marry."

"Oh, Mary." He cried, moving away. "Can't you see I could never ask you to forget Joseph?" His eyes held misery. "I just want to help make your life a little easier. I know it's very difficult raising these children alone." He stopped, then glanced at me with the most loving look I'd ever known...even from Joseph. "I've wanted to ask you for a very long time."

I said nothing as he turned and looked around the grove. His voice was so low, I strained to hear every word. "I've seen you work-weary and worried about one of the children. I've watched you planning for Bar Mitzvahs and betrothals and weddings all alone, and I want to help."

I walked to him and laid my hand on his arm. "Abner, I thank you for all the kind statements. You don't know how much you have helped, coming to see us so regularly. I've leaned on you more than I should, probably." And it was my turn to move away from him. "But I simply cannot marry anyone."

Something in my voice must have told him there was more. He said, his voice very concerned. "Does it concern Jesus?"

"Yes. I might possibly consider your proposal, but I know what's going to happen, Abner. I just don't know when. I've been studying the scriptures and David, the same David that gave us so many beautiful psalms, also told of the death of Jesus. I have to be there for Him when He needs me. I can't expect a husband to allow a wife the freedom that I'll need."

I could feel the tears flowing down my face and Abner reached over and wiped them away. "I don't know why I was chosen to be His Mother." I was weary beyond words. "I still have a very large job to do and I'm so afraid I won't have the courage needed."

Abner took both my hands in his. "I'll help in any way I can. You know that. If you should need me, wherever I am, will you write or send a message to me?"

“Yes, Abner, I will.” I leaned over and kissed his leather-like, sun-burned, loving face. “Thank you so much. I can never tell you how much you’ve meant and will always mean to me.”

Soon after, he left on another journey. He returned often and it was many years before the subject of marriage was mentioned again.

A few months later, I almost regretted turning his marriage proposal down.

Jesus came home early one day and asked if we could talk. He and I communicated better when we were in the hills, so I left orders for the others. We went to our favorite place in the low hills. It had changed little since the first time we climbed here and I told Him who He was.

That memory never left my mind. It was as fresh today as when we talked so many years before.

When we sat, He said abruptly, “Mother, our money is gone.”

As He aged, He took care of our finances. He doled it out when needed but I knew He would keep me informed. Now, the inevitable had happened.

After paying for the Bar Mitzvah for James, Joses, and Judas, the betrothals and wedding feasts for James and Hannah, the money was almost gone. I knew that but tried to ignore the inevitable. Now we were facing the betrothal of Joses.

“I know Jesus. I’ve been worried and I simply didn’t want to say anything. I don’t know what to do.” I clasped my hands tightly together. “It seems more money goes out than comes in.”

“It is.” He answered. “The shop isn’t making as much money as I would like. Profit from the furniture sold must go to the families of the boys. James must have enough money to support his family and Simon needs some compensation.”

“And what about Jesus?” I asked, knowing He would never take money for Himself.

“I have my home with you,” He turned to me and smiled that beautiful, beaming smile of his. “You feed me very well and I have enough clothing, so I need for nothing.”

“Oh, my dear Son, how very blessed I am to have You. I must disagree, though. You do need certain items for yourself.” I protested.

“Mother, should I ever need anything, I’ll let you know.”

We looked across the hills where we could see a caravan moving at a snail’s pace way below us. I thought one of the people I saw plowing in the far away fields must be Joses. But I couldn’t be sure.

I looked at Jesus when He asked, “Mother, those gifts the Magi gave me so many years ago, where are they?”

“In the jewelry table at home.”

“We must sell them. That will give us enough money to see the rest of the children grown, married and in their own lives.”

“I wanted to save those for You.” I protested.

“Don’t you understand Mother? This is for me. If there is money, then I don’t have to worry that my family is not taken care of.” He looked up at me. “I know the sale of these items will give us enough until they are all settled.”

“What about you, Jesus? What are you going to do?” I turned and looked closely at Him.

He shook his head, that long, dark, curly hair that clung to his scalp with sweat. “I don’t know yet. Sometimes I feel I’m about to burst. Something will happen, but I don’t know what it is, or when.” His voice grew quiet.

“Sometimes, when I come to the hills alone, I feel all this knowledge pouring into my brain. I feel like it will explode with everything crammed into it so rapidly.”

“My poor Child.” I said, taking His hand. My heart felt as heavy as if the world were sitting at the center of it. I yearned to take His burden.

“After one of these sessions, I sometimes walk over to the sea of Galilee.” He held tightly to my hand.

“I know.” I said, and turned to Him with a smile. “We usually enjoy fresh fish when You do.”

“Well...” He had a sheepish look on His face.

“Does it help to go to the sea?”

“I think so. Sometimes, I feel that will be where I begin whatever it is I’m going to do.” He released my hand and turned to look at me. “I met a fisherman the last time I was there. His name is Peter. He’s a big, gruff man with a heart the size of the sea he fishes in.” The memory made Him smile. “We talked quite awhile.”

“About anything in particular?” I asked.

“No. We talked about God and the waiting for Him to send someone to save His people.”

“Did you...?”

“No, Mother. I didn’t tell him, because I’m not sure how or when the ministry will begin. We just discussed a lot of different subjects. I was surprised at how informed he was on religious matters.”

“So you liked him.”

“Yes, I did.” He stood and a breeze ruffled his hair. He shoved it back with those expressive hands, then stretched toward the Heavens. His look at the cloudless sky was intense, almost as though He were trying to see God.

Suddenly, he grinned. “Peter is so wonderfully emphatic about everything.” He grinned. “He has an incredible family. His wife is a dear who mothers me almost as much as you do. And his mother-in-law thinks Peter is the best man her daughter could have chosen. I hope you meet him some day.”

“I’d like that. He sounds like a fine man.” I wriggled around and tried to find a more comfortable seat.

He leaned over and kissed me on the forehead. “I love you, Mother.” He sat back down, his hands clasped around his knees. “I wonder sometimes when my mission, whatever it is, will begin. I look into the heavens and see nothing. I wonder how I came from there and not remember more than I do.”

“I guess God will let us all know when He wants You to begin Your work.” I turned away so He wouldn’t see the tears. “I dread that day. I know You will be hurt, and I can’t stand the thoughts of that.”

“Mother, please don’t worry. I know you love me more than you do the others...” He looked at me as He made the matter-of-fact statement.

“Yes, I do. I can’t seem to help myself. Maybe it’s because You’re my first born. I don’t believe that’s the reason. I think it’s because You’re the person You are.” I stood. “Come Jesus, we must plan to get in touch with Jeremiah or Abner. The next time they’re through Nazareth, we’ll have them sell Your gifts,” My words slowed. I turned to Him. “Are you sure, Jesus?”

“I’m very sure I won’t need the money. We do need it now to see the rest of the children grown.”

We started down from the hills. I hated the idea that the inevitable had finally happened.

Not long after, the money from the sale of the gifts was put aside for emergencies.

Joseph’s father, Jacob came in from work one afternoon and before the day was out, he was dead. Even that didn’t seem to be enough for God. His mother, Martha, followed soon after. That cheery, bright, lovable woman who had given so much to me and the children. We missed her terribly.

Sarah seemed to accept her parent’s deaths more easily than she had Joseph’s. She told me she knew they couldn’t live forever, but she thought Joseph just might, because of the job God assigned him.

So I didn't have to worry about her. I did try to spend as much time as possible with her and we often met at the well in the mornings. I felt as long as we did that, there was a continuity to our lives. Besides, we could keep up with the gossip of the village and our various family members.

My Father worked fewer and fewer days in the fields. He often visited Jesus and talked with Him for hours at a time. I never knew what their conversations were about. Rachel continued to stay with my Mother and finally, at the age of seventeen, met a young man who she felt was suitable.

By the time Jesus was twenty-nine, the others were all married and had their own homes. Their children visited our home any time they wished. Mother and Father were now sixty-five. We relished each moment we were able to spend with them.

Those were years of transition. Jesus spent more and more time in the wilderness. One day as we sat talking at the table, He said, "Mother, I'll be leaving you soon, I think."

If the heavens had opened and flooded the earth with a mighty drum beat and choruses of angels, I would have been satisfied at the terror I felt. But it was quiet. Even the buzz of bees and birds in the bushes and trees was muted.

How I kept my voice noncommittal, I don't know. I sipped tea, put the cup down, and asked. "Where are you going?"

He had the strangest expression on his face. His eyes had a faraway look. It was almost as though He could see straight through to Eternity. He carried His body straight, as though he dared not let it sag one inch. I felt He was afraid to let go of the supreme discipline He possessed.

I noticed also, lately, His steps slowed. He appeared to be in deep thought most of the time. He had begun to take less care of his hair than normal, too. It was long and unruly a good deal of the time.

He shook His shaggy head. "I don't know. I have a very strange feeling at times." He looked at me with the saddest expression I could imagine. "I feel I'm being led to a certain point in my life. Sometimes," He looked off into a distance I couldn't see. "it feels as though I have the weight of the world on Me." His voice held the anguish of a tortured soul. "And I don't have the strength to carry it."

His shoulders slumped as I rose and took Him in my arms. I could feel tears slide down His face, soaking my robe. His body shook with unspeakable pain as I held Him. My tears mingled with His.

"Jesus." I said, softly. "Can I help with the load you carry?"

He gently moved from my arms and looked up. "No one can go where I must go." The sadness of His voice was almost more than I could bear. "My Father is calling me to begin the work He sent me here for."

"Oh, Jesus," I clasped his hands in mine as I cried. "I love You so much. How can I bear to see You suffer?"

"Shhhh." He said, almost as though He were talking to one of the babies of the family. "If you had not been the strong, good woman you are, God would not have chosen you to be My Mother." He looked straight into my face. "I know when I leave Nazareth, I shall see you as often as possible. I don't know when that will be or how often. I shall miss being with you, our talks and your advice."

He rose, stretched, then asked. "May I refill your tea?"

I nodded.

He filled the cup, took one for Himself and sat back, facing me. "I heard that John was in the vicinity the other day."

"John? Elizabeth's John?" The news surprised me. We had heard nothing from him for years.

"Yes. Someone came into the shop and said he was preaching. He told everyone who would listen, that they must be baptized." He refused to meet my eyes.

"Is that all, Jesus?" I asked quietly.

“No. John stated he is the forerunner of the Savior of the world.” The face of My Son was composed, and I might have thought this was just normal conversation. However, only one glance into his eyes and I knew the anguish He felt.

He was about to start the ministry He had been sent to earth for. But He didn’t wish to hurt me by letting me know the time was very soon.

My heart went out to Him. How I wished He were back in the cradle He never got a chance to use. Or beginning school or any other age than the one He now was.

“Oh, no.” My cup of anguish spilled over as the tea did, when I dropped my cup. “Not yet, Jesus, not yet.” I cried, my voice as steady as I could make it.

“Yes, Mother.” He patted my hand, then picked up my cup and placed it back on the table. “The time is almost here. I know it.”

He looked at me with a very strange expression. “There is something else I haven’t told you.”

“Can you talk about it now?”

“I want to, but I’m not sure you’ll understand.” He ran His fingers through His hair. “I’m not sure I understand.”

“Why don’t you tell me? Maybe we can both make sense from it.”

“I visited old Mr. Elijah who lives on the other side of town from us.”

“He’s the one who had an injury years ago and can’t walk, isn’t he?”

“He couldn’t walk. He can now.”

I sat up straighter and looked in surprise at Jesus. “Whatever do you mean?”

“We were talking and I asked if he’d like to pray with me before I left. He said ‘yes.’ Well, I took his hand and we prayed. I asked that God be with him, and make his pain as bearable as possible.” He stared intently at me. “Suddenly, he groaned, put his hands on the arms of his chair and stood up.”

“Jesus, are you sure we’re talking about the same man?”

I knew we were, I just blurted the question, without thought.

“I’m sure.” Jesus answered.

I reached over and patted his arm. “Of course, you’re sure.”

“I was as astonished as you look at this moment.” And he grinned at me. “I’m sure I had little to do with it.”

I laughed back at him. “I know that poor man couldn’t believe what happened.”

“He couldn’t. He thinks he finally got through to God, and I agree.”

I shook my head in thought. “Your time really is near, isn’t it?” I felt such overwhelming sadness, I wanted to cry. Of course, I couldn’t. It would hurt Jesus too much.

“I think I will begin teaching the lessons My Father sent Me here for, very soon.”

I bowed my head, wishing I could let Him go without feeling as if my very soul was shrinking. Remembering the years we shared, I could hardly bear the pain of separation...and the inevitable death on the cross, which the prophets foretold.

“My son, My son.” I murmured. “May God give us both strength to face what we must.”

We bowed our heads and Jesus prayed aloud, asking His Father to take care of me, never asking anything for Himself.

Each day He was still at home was, for me, a blessing.

Soon after this conversation with Jesus, Leah wrote that her oldest daughter was being married and asked us to attend. The entire family...children, grandchildren, and great grandparents journeyed to Cana for the happy occasion.

Since so many people attended the wedding, many kinds of food were at a premium. We managed to feed everyone, however. At the height of the festivities, I noticed the wine was getting dangerously low.

I called to Jesus. "Jesus, the wine is running out. What can we do?"

His look was penetrating. "Why should you ask me a question like that?" His voice was almost angry.

"They can't afford any more wine. Can you please help?" I hated asking Him to do something like this. I simply couldn't let my sister and her family become embarrassed if something could be done.

"You know My time isn't yet," He accused.

"I know." I agreed, and nodded. "Please Jesus, just this once, help me."

He took a deep breath and said. "Have the servants fill the large casks with water."

When they were full, Jesus dipped a goblet into the water. When I tasted the wine, I felt like the person who tasted it next.

This man said, holding his goblet high. "What a good idea. Most people serve their best wine first. When people are drunk, they serve the worst. But this...ah, this is wine fit for a king."

I never asked Jesus to perform another miracle.

Chapter 23

We heard of John occasionally. He preached in the Wilderness and had quite a following. On one of Abner's visits he told me about a strange occurrence, involving John.

Jesus began taking trips into the hills. Then I heard nothing from Him for days...sometimes a week or more. I worried but there was nothing I could do. We both knew His time was near and I tried desperately to accept what I knew I never could.

I had prepared food, with Abner bringing a delicious wine. We finished our meal and were sitting in the courtyard in front of our house. These trees grew so much during the years that they now provided shade over the entire table.

It was early evening. Swaying tree limbs cooled the air. A few wispy clouds danced across a blue sky. Bees buzzed lazily in and out of honeysuckle blooms that sweetened the air. Pomegranates hung from the tree as dusk enveloped the earth.

Abner changed little over the years. He had gained weight, and his hair was now almost white. He retained his generous smile and his eyes still glowed with the happiness of youth. A few wrinkles sketched his sun darkened face.

After we greeted each other, I looked around, hoping none of the grandchildren or children would visit. I wanted to enjoy Abner alone. He always discussed the most interesting subjects. Today his conversation was even more unusual than normal, I discovered.

He poured us a small glass of wine and said, "Have you heard from Jesus?"

"Not for awhile," I said. "He came to see us a few weeks ago. But He told me He felt a need to go away." I took a sip of wine and continued. "Abner, sometimes when He comes home for a few hours or a few days he looks so exhausted. It breaks my heart."

"I know." Abner patted my hand. "I don't think I'm going to make you feel any better, either."

"Why? What have you heard? What's happened? Is Jesus all right?" My voice rose as fear filled me.

“Mary.” He patted my hand, then held it loosely. “I think Jesus is fine, but I heard that John was preaching near the Jordan River. I knew you would be interested so I went to see for myself. His preaching is very unusual.”

“Unusual? What do you mean, Abner?” I turned my hand over so I could hold onto his.

“He looks like my idea of a Prophet of old. He’s fiery of speech and thunders at his followers as though he were calling the wrath of the Lord down on them.” Abner laughed. “He called the people a brood of vipers and asked them who told them to flee the anger that was to come.”

“Oh, my goodness. He gets quite carried away, doesn’t he?” I slid my hand from his and pushed the hair from my face. The roll loosened from the pins and was falling.

“He told the people they should be baptized to be saved.” I was puzzled. “Saved from what, Abner?”

“Apparently from the wrath of God.” He sipped his wine and placed the goblet back on the table.

“Go on.” I urged. I had never heard of anything remotely concerning baptism.

“John told them if they owned two tunics, they should give one to someone in need. He also said the same about food.” “I’ll bet the people weren’t too happy to hear that.” I picked up the bottle of Abner’s special wine and poured a little more into my goblet.

Abner drained his. I refilled it. He said, “The entire event was quite strange, Mary. A tax collector asked if he could be saved. John told him yes, but he was allowed to take in taxes of the amount owed, not any extra for himself.”

“That must have made the tax collector happy.” I dryly remarked. I remembered the conversation Joseph and I held before we made the journey to Bethlehem. Tax collectors always took more than necessary.

“I don’t know about that.” Abner shook his head in bewilderment. He took a sip of wine, swallowed, then continued. “Soldiers then asked if they could be saved.”

“Soldiers? The same people who put others to death on the cross whether innocent or guilty?”

“The same.” Abner said.

“What did John say to that?” I swirled the wine and watched it climb the side of the goblet, then settle into a quiet, red liquid.

“John told them they were forbidden to take money from anyone by force. They were not allowed to accuse anyone falsely, and they must be content with their wages.” His voice became quiet, almost reverent. “If they did these things, they could be baptized.”

“Those are strange messages, Abner. Do you know what they mean?”

“Not really.” Abner stretched his arms above his head, then rested them back on the table.

“How does he look?” I was still concerned for John.

“You haven’t seen him, have you?”

“Never. We always miss each other.”

“He’s a big hairy man. He looks almost as though he belongs with the animals.”

I still felt I owed Elizabeth and Zacharias for all they had done for me. If I could do something for their son, I would be pleased. “Is he getting enough to eat?”

“I don’t know about that, Mary.” Abner looked at me with a strange expression on his face. “Apparently, he eats only locusts and wild honey.”

“He lives on insects?” I was appalled that a relative ate such to survive.

Abner laughed. “No, Mary. Not insects. There’s a locust tree which grows beanlike pods. When they’re green, they’re very sour. As they ripen, the pods fill with a honey-like syrup that’s used to make sweets.”

“Oh.” I felt foolish. “But he really lives on those bean pods, or whatever they are, and wild honey?”

“That’s what I understand.”

I was slightly mollified. “What about clothing? Does he have enough to wear?”

“His cloak is made of camel’s hair and he wears a leather belt around his waist.”

Abner stopped speaking for such a long time I looked at him closely. I clasped my hands together, suspecting I was about to hear something even more strange. “Go on, Abner.”

His voice quietened as he spoke. “John said he baptized with water, but someone was coming after him who would baptize with the Holy Spirit.” Abner looked at everything around the courtyard except me.

“Tell me, Abner.” I knew before he spoke that my heart would ache at the information he imparted.

“Not too long after he finished, Jesus arrived at the Jordan.” Abner picked up both my hands and held them tenderly. “John took one look at Jesus and cried, ‘He is the one who is greater than I. I am not worthy to tie his shoe laces.’”

“Oh, no.” My cry of anguish escaped.

“Then Jesus asked John to baptize Him. They both went down into the water of the Jordan.” He squeezed my hands as though he wanted to never let go, and continued. “When John lifted Jesus from the water, the Holy Spirit, in the form of a dove, descended upon Jesus and a voice came out of the heavens. ‘THOU ART MY BELOVED SON, IN THEE I AM WELL PLEASED.’”

I dropped my head and held tightly to Abner’s hands. The most consuming sorrow I had ever known filled me.

The Son I gave birth to and raised was now acknowledged by His Father. I should have been happy at God’s pleasure In Jesus. I wasn’t. I was incredibly sad. The time for his death drew nearer and nearer.

“Oh, Abner.” Sobs overcame me. I could say no more.

He stood, drew me to my feet and held me. He patted my back as though I were a child. When my sobs quieted he moved me away from him. Very softly, he said, “Mary, there’s more.”

We sat back at the table and I looked up at him. My eyes were swollen from sobbing. I could barely see his face. “More?”

“Yes. Jesus left the area as soon as He was baptized. He told John the Holy Spirit was sending Him into the wilderness.”

“And?” I didn’t want to know, but I also knew I must hear.

“That was two weeks ago. No one has seen Him since.”

I stood up, then paced around the table. “Where is He, Abner? Do you have any idea?” I couldn’t sit or stand still. I felt a need to move or my entire body would shake into small pieces and fly into the air.

“Someone said He left for Jebel Quruntul.” Abner stated quietly.

My hands flew to my mouth with the horror I felt. “Oh, no, Abner. That place is horrible. There are only barren rocks. What will He eat? What will He drink? Whatever can He do in such a place?”

I pleaded with my eyes for Abner to tell me good news. Not this. I picked up the goblet and sipped the wine.

“I don’t know, Mary.” His voice cracked in sorrow. I heard him swallow a sob. He had known and loved Jesus almost His entire life. Abner hurt almost as much as I.

Sitting at the table I tried to speak in a quiet, controlled voice. “How long will He stay?”

“I don’t know, Mary.” He again picked up my hand. “I wish I did. I would follow Him if I could.”

“I know you would Abner, but He must go alone.”

“Yes.” Our voices were so quiet, they could not be heard even a few inches away. A visitor would only have seen tears glistening in our eyes. I slid my hand from Abner’s.

I clasped my hands together in sorrow. “Oh, my poor baby.” Though Jesus was now 30 years old, He would always be my baby.

Abner looked deeply into my eyes. “Mary, please let me take care of you now. I could help you cope with what is to come.”

“I can’t do that to you, Abner.” I looked into his kind and wonderful eyes. “I know Jesus will begin His ministry soon. He and I talked about it. When He does, I shall be with Him as much as possible. It won’t be frequent, but I must spend as much time with Him as I can. It wouldn’t be fair to you.”

“Let me be the judge,” he said, pleading with me.

“I can’t Abner. I must be available for Him. God gave me a job thirty years ago. I don’t think it’s complete.”

“Poor Mary. You’ve always given to others. You never think of yourself. I shall always love you, Mary, and,” he smiled, “I shall never stop trying to marry you.” He kissed my forehead, then passed a hand over my chin so softly I wondered if I had imagined it.

“Thank you for that, Abner.”

We stood and talked a few moments more before he walked back to the room he rented for the night.

My life came to a standstill. I talked with all my children two or three times a week. None of us heard from Jesus...not even rumors.

James came over one night. He ranted about how inconsiderate Jesus was. He said “Jesus should let someone know where He goes and how long he will be gone.” James still bore a grudge against Jesus. The other three boys said little. They never mentioned their Brother except in a caring way.

My daughters, Hannah and Rachel loved Jesus. They felt He could do no wrong. They seldom said much around James because he had become so overbearing and obnoxious when we mentioned Jesus’ name. I ignored James’ ranting as much as possible, but I wondered how his lovely wife, Marianne, put up with it. I treated her with special care. I kept their children frequently so she had time for herself. I even cooked occasionally to give her a break.

My parents died very quietly one night while Jesus was absent. One day they were with us, the next they were gone. Some said they tired of living. Others said they lived long enough and wanted to be with God. Still others thought Jesus caused them to worry themselves to death.

I knew Mother and Father were getting old and tired. I also knew they were both bothered with shortness of breath. This condition worsened as time passed. Mother and I had talked almost every day since Joseph and I returned from Egypt.

The day before they died, I carried stew like Mother and I used to make and bread that Father loved so much. I ate while they pushed their food around. They both remarked how tired they felt lately. When I left, Mother and Father kissed me and hugged me to them tightly.

I didn’t know it would be for the last time.

The next morning Rachel went to visit Mother. She and Father lay in bed holding hands, a smile on their faces.

Rachel notified Leah immediately. She arrived home in time for the burial.

Rachel was desolate. She and Mother were even closer than Mother and I. We were saddened about Father, as well. All of the children went to the fields with him, rode his oxen, learned to plow, plant and harvest with his help. All, even James, realized just how dear to us the two of them were.

After we buried them, Leah and her family returned to Cana. Our lives became somber. Now, both sets of grandparents were gone. We children were parents and our children were growing up. The others had their own lives. I tried to live without depending on them.

I rather enjoyed my freedom. Sarah and I left our never-ending friendship aside while our families grew up. Now, we again became close. We saw each other almost every morning when we drew water. Later, if we wanted company, we visited each other. We talked of Jesus many times, and worried about Him.

One day, Sarah and I shared our midday meal at her home. Jesus was our primary conversation. We both worried and wondered where and how He was. So many rumors floated around us, but no one saw or heard from him for weeks.

This day, soon after eating, a strange intuition told me something would happen. I shivered.

“Something bothering you?”

“I don’t know.” I said, and looked off in the distance. “I feel so strange.” I rose and picked up dishes to take into the house. “Sarah, I must go home.”

“Leave those. Go,” she ordered. Her love touched me. “I’ll be over later to see how you fare.”

“Thanks.”

As I walked home, birds in the trees fussed at me. They must have young ones nearby, I thought. The sun overhead cast a haze over our courtyard.

When I arrived home, I fixed a goblet of water and went outside to read the scriptures. I felt closer to Jesus when I read of God and the prophets. No one had heard anything about or from Him in a month and a half. I felt sure that prayer and reading the scriptures were the only reasons I stayed sane.

Something made me look up. In the distance, a stranger stumbled toward me. His thin body lurched from side to side like a drunken man. His entire body and the rags that hung on his skeletal frame were filthy. His hair was long and matted. His skin had burned, blistered, then reburned. His lips were almost a continuous sore. His sandals barely hung on His scratched and bleeding feet.

Then I recognized Jesus. I ran and put my arms around Him. He leaned on me as though he could barely take another step.

“Come, Jesus. Let’s get you something to eat.” I said, taking a wobbling step as He leaned on me. “First, we must get you cleaned.”

“I’m all right.” He mumbled, but His eyes were barely slitted.

I sat Him at the table. He braced his elbows on the table and bowed his head onto his hands. I quickly returned with a pan of water, soap and soft cloths to wash Him. I cleansed only His face and hands. I tried to clean the open sores without causing too much pain.

I stooped and untied the remains of His sandals. The stench from his feet was terrible. I brought another pan of water and cleansed His feet as He sat, still and silent.

“Come, Jesus. Can you walk inside?”

He nodded and tried to pull himself up. I helped get Him in an upright position. He leaned on me as we stumbled through the door. I insisted He drink milk and eat a piece of bread with cheese. He could barely stay awake long enough to consume the food. He fell asleep once or twice as He chewed.

After eating a small amount, His head fell onto His filthy chest. Somehow, I woke Him enough to get Him into a bed. For three days, I stayed by His bedside, praying He would heal. I cleansed a little more of Him each day, then applied a balm given to me by the physician.

Word of His arrival swept the village like a fast moving broom. Friends and family gathered, wanting to catch a glimpse of Him. I refused to let them stare.

When His brothers and sisters arrived, they were horrified at His appearance. Even James showed concern and tried to shave Him. Jesus' face was in such dismal condition that James gave up. I cut some of His hair but it was such a curly, dirty mass, I finally left it alone.

Each of his sisters and brothers worked at making Him comfortable. They moved Him enough to change the linens, then washed his body as much as possible. There was little they could do, but they brought food, hoping to tempt Him when He awoke.

On the third day, I arose early and brought fresh water back from the well. When I opened the door, Jesus sat at the table, a big smile on His face. I placed the jug on a bushel and said, in relief, "Feeling better?"

He nodded, then smiled, that dear wonderful smile. "How long have I been here?"

"Three days." I poured water for us to drink and asked. "Hungry?"

"Starved." He looked just as He had all the years He lived at home. The only apparent differences were healed sores and his too-thin body.

I placed cheese, bread, figs, and milk on the table. Even suspecting how hungry he was, I was surprised at the food he consumed. He talked little while eating. Finally, He asked, "Who cleansed me?"

"I did, at first. Then your brothers and sisters cleaned as much as possible."

He looked at me in surprise. "How could a tiny person like you ever get me in bed?"

I smiled at Him. "You woke up enough so I could get you over there. I had to leave your robe on, but the rest I managed to remove and get you as clean as possible."

He ran his hand over his beard. "Ugh. I must get cleaned up and see if I still have clothing." He looked down at himself. "I think I got thinner while I was gone."

"I'd say you did." I remarked dryly.

He smiled and reached for my hand. "Oh, Mother. I'm sorry for the heartache I've caused you. Please forgive me."

"Jesus, there is nothing to forgive. If You feel You can, please tell me where you were and what you were doing."

He let my hand go and picked at a bread crumb from the table. "I hardly know where to start."

"The beginning," I said. "Maybe at your baptism by John."

"You heard about that?" And He looked at me in surprise.

"Yes."

"After John baptized me, the angels came down from Heaven. I saw and heard My Father as He said He was well pleased with Me." He reached for his milk, a shy smile lighting His face.

I didn't say anything as he sipped his milk, then began talking again. "As I left the Jordan, I started up the mountains into the Wilderness to fast and pray. Mother," He said, looking directly at me. "Those mountains are so barren even birds have trouble finding food."

"How horrible for you to live there, even for a short time."

"There are animals there, though. Birds and serpents and flocks of goats. The vegetation is sparse, but they manage to eat tufts of grass growing between rocks." He sipped water, then continued. "There are spindly shrubs that have a few leaves. The animals aren't fat, but they survive."

I reached over and took His dear hand into mine. "Why did You go?"

"I don't know." It was evident He was bewildered. "I was led, I suppose. I stayed there for 40 days and nights. All I did was pray. I neither ate nor drank." His voice became a drone, without inflection, as though he were

reciting words. "At the end of 40 days, I knew I must get back home to you or I would die. I picked myself up from the dull white chalk of the mountain and took steps to come down."

I said nothing, waiting for His next words.

"The Devil himself came to me, Mother. I was famished. The Devil said if I worshiped him, he'd turn the stones into bread for me. When I looked at those rough stones, they appeared to be just like the loaves you bake. I knew he could do it." He paused a moment. "And I was tempted."

"Oh, my poor child."

"My Father told me what to say, I'm sure. I told the devil that 'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.'"

I don't know how I felt. Outrage that my Son had to endure such treatment. Sorrow that I couldn't be there to help. Bewilderment that His Father required him to endure so much. "He didn't stop there, Mother." Jesus looked at me as though He couldn't understand why anyone would do this thing. "He took me, or my mind took me, to the pinnacle of the Temple of Jerusalem, overlooking the Kidron Valley. He said if I jumped, angels would catch me and bring me safely home."

I was so fascinated by all this I couldn't speak. I knew that valley held the worst stones. Many have died, falling from the mountain.

"I again turned him away with scriptures." Jesus continued. "I told him not to tempt God."

"And then?" I asked.

"I was suddenly back on a high mountain. The Devil showed me all the kingdoms of the world. He told me if I worshiped him, I could have it all."

He shook his shaggy head as though He wondered why anyone would want the entire kingdom of man anyway. "I told him to get out of my sight. I wanted no part of him. That's the last I remember until the angels came and helped me down the mountain. They took care of my immediate needs. Then, I found myself at the foot of the mountain, making my way home to you. I knew if I could get here, you would care for me."

I arose, picked up his hand and squeezed it. "Always."

The next few days were blissful. His brothers, sisters and friends came often to talk with Jesus. They were thankful He was home. He told none of them where He had been or of his experiences. Neighbors brought food He liked. He walked in the fields with the men, and talked with women at the well. He played with children as He always had. He visited every sick or old person He knew. Some of them were healed, but He refused to acknowledge His role in the healing.

There was an aura around Him. None of us understood exactly what it was. He was with us in body, but He also seemed far away at times. The next few days were peaceful.

I had no idea our peace was about to be shattered.

On the Sabbath, He entered the synagogue and stood up. The book of the prophet Isaiah was handed to Him to read. He read, "The spirit of the Lord is upon Me, because He anointed Me to preach the Gospel to the poor. He has sent Me to proclaim release to the captives. And recovery of sight to the blind. The down-trodden shall be set free. He sent me to proclaim the favorable year of the Lord."

He closed the book, then gave it to an attendant. The eyes of everyone in the Synagogue were turned toward Him. Then Jesus said, "Today, this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

Even knowing He was the Son of God, it was difficult for me to believe He was actually telling these people who He was. He was telling friends and relatives who had known Him all His life that He was the Savior of the world. His brothers looked at Him as though He had lost His mind. The two girls who sat on either side, looked at me with pity.

There was a collective gasp from the congregation. The horrified look on their faces as they contemplated what Jesus said was almost more than I could handle. Compassion for my sons and daughters was foremost in my mind, knowing the anguish they would endure from the attitudes of their friends and neighbors.

He continued to speak to the congregation until the angry roar from the crowd obliterated His words. They became so angry at Him for saying He was the Son of God, they threatened to cast Him from the city. They wanted to take Him to the brow of the hill so they could throw Him to His death.

Just as God helped Joseph and me elude Herod with Jesus thirty years before, so too, did Jesus escape.

Then, Jesus' ministry and the end of His life began.

Of course, all my children and their families came to my house after the service at the Synagogue. All were quite vocal as we walked home. The spouses and grandchildren were so quiet, one hardly knew they were there.

This was the most excitement in our village, ever. Neighbors lost no opportunity to let me know how they felt about it. They told me they had always known Jesus was crazy. He had never been much help to anyone, that He was as unfeeling as He had always been, making me suffer the consequences of His crazy talk.

I tried to ignore them, as I had when I was pregnant with Him and they called me horrible names. But it wasn't easy.

Before we entered the door of my home after services, James started. "I knew something like this would happen one of these days. You know He's crazy, don't you Mother?"

"Of course He isn't crazy, James." I answered, trying to place food on the table. I only hoped I had enough to feed all these people.

"Just what do you call it?" James still darted here and there as he had for his entire life. He flung his arms about as he strode from one end of the room to the other. I suddenly wondered if maybe he were the mad man.

"James, if you will sit down, I will tell all of you a story." I handed cheese and bread to someone to take outside. "Whether you choose to believe this or not is your decision. First, I want you to put food on the table outside and let the older children take care of the younger ones. We can then talk without interruption."

James looked around like a child who had been reprimanded. The children settled outside, we closed the door and my grown children sat around the table inside. They looked at me expectantly as I stood at the end of the table and began my story.

"One night, thirty years ago, I was sleeping on the roof when I had a visit from an angel..."

No one spoke until I finished my story. Then all six spoke at once. I raised my hands. "Please, you have heard it all. You know your Brother is also the Son of God. That is all I can tell you." I arose and said. "I want every one of you to finish your meal and take your children home."

"But, Mother..." James rose angrily.

"James, I'm tired. I don't want to hear or to say another word. You have the knowledge. Whether you choose to believe it or not is your business."

I picked up and covered bowls of food that my family ignored during the story. "I love all of you. You know that. But I would appreciate it if you would go home." I spoke quietly, unemotionally. "Please give me a little time alone."

My children filed from the room, each one hugging and kissing me. They collected their children and left.

Chapter 24

Soon after that event, I traveled to Cana to visit Leah. We had seen each other so little since she married, I was ashamed I had neglected her. Her children were, like mine, grown and had children of their own. Today, we gloried in our freedom from our families.

We sat outside, enjoying a cup of tea. As I looked over her yard, I was envious of the Lebanon Cedar growing in the center of the yard. It shaded everything. Little grew underneath, because few rays of the sun penetrated. However, green sprigs of grass sprouted in patches. As we sat at her table beneath the tree, we could pretend we were young girls again. I discarded my sandals and stretched my toes, glorying in the feel of grass between my toes. She wiggled her sandals as well, grinning at me as she slipped them from her feet.

“Mary, have you heard what’s happened to John?”

“No.” I said. “The last I heard anything about him was when he baptized Jesus. I don’t even know where he went after that.”

“Then, you don’t know what’s happened to him,” she stated.

“No.”

“About ten months ago, Herod Antipas had him arrested.”

“Why?” I exclaimed, placing my cup on the table with a resounding clatter. “Preachers aren’t normally arrested, are they?”

Leah looked directly at me. “I heard that John’s following was so large, Herod saw John as a threat to his power. He’s been in jail ever since his arrest.”

“The last time I saw Jesus, He didn’t say anything about John’s incarceration.”

“Do you hear from him often, Mary?”

“Not as much as I’d like, but often enough, I suppose. Jesus said in His last letter that He received a letter from John. John wanted to know if He, Jesus, was the One who was to come.”

“Did Jesus answer the letter?”

I toyed with my sandals as the cool breeze blew around us. “Jesus sent word by others to tell John what his messengers saw and heard. ‘The blind see, the lame walk, the sick are cured, the hungry are fed.’

“Did that satisfy John?” she asked.

“I don’t know. When Jesus was home last, He told me there was room for both kinds of messengers. The hot, fiery kind like His relative John, and Jesus’ type... quiet, loving but emphatic.”

“John must have been in jail when he wrote.”

“Was he?” I sipped my tea. “I didn’t even know. Is there anything I can do for him?”

“Mary, John is dead.” Her voice was so quiet I thought I hadn’t heard correctly.

“What?” I sat up straight and stared at her in astonishment. “How did that happen?” I had always wanted to do so much for him, and I could never do anything.

Suddenly, I felt such a tremendous loss I wanted to scream, cry...anything. “But why would Herod do such a thing?”

“He accused Herodias, Herod’s wife, of being an adulteress.” Leah clasped her tiny hands around her knees, rocking back and forth.

“She was.” I stated. “Everyone knows that.”

“I know, but one doesn’t go around saying that about the ruler’s wife.” Leah spoke emphatically.

“I guess if you’re John, you do.” I ran my toes through the cool grass, bent over and picked a short leaf. “Can you tell me what happened?”

“There was a party at Herod’s house. Salome...you know who she is?”

“Herodias’ daughter,” I answered, dryly. “She’s no better than her Mother.”

“True.” Leah agreed, then continued. “Salome did quite a sensuous dance for Herod. He was so entranced he told her she could have anything she wanted.”

“And I suppose she wanted John dead.” My heart was broken for this man who was the prophet for My Son.

“Not only dead, but her Mother told her to ask for his head on a platter.”

Astonishment is a mild word for my feelings. “Can that be true?”

Leah nodded emphatically. “It’s true. Herod was reluctant, but he had made the promise. He had John beheaded and the head brought to the banquet on a platter.”

“Oh, Leah, where is it going to end?” I cried.

She took my hand and held it tightly as a tear slid from her eyelid. “Mary, you and I both know how it will end and it breaks my heart.” I hung onto her hand as though it were my lifeline.

“Oh, Leah, you always were the realist.” I squeezed her hand, then dropped it. I spoke very slowly. “I don’t know if I can bear it.”

“You’re my big sister.” Her voice was artificially bright. “You can handle anything or God wouldn’t have chosen you.”

“I don’t know about that,” I murmured. Silence would have enveloped us, but birds twittered in the tree branches, bees buzzed among the flower blossoms and insects hopped in and out of grass.

“You know,” I said, looking through the intricate web of leaves, toward the sky. “The angel Gabriel told me the night Jesus was conceived, that I was blessed above all women. Sometimes I wonder.”

“You wouldn’t be quite human if you didn’t, Mary.” Leah stood, reached out her hand and pulled me up to stand beside her. “I’m sorry you’re going home in the morning. I’ll miss you.”

“I’ll miss you, too. I wish we had more time together.” And I hugged her to me tightly.

“So do I.” She laughed. “Well...in our next life.”

I seldom saw Leah because of our individual families, though we corresponded frequently.

In the next three years, I saw Jesus only a few times. Each time, I knew it might be the last, so I enjoyed those moments to the fullest.

A couple of times, when He was preaching in nearby Synagogues, all the children and I went to see Him. When we arrived, I told the man at the door who we were and that we’d like to see Jesus. He left the door open and we watched as he gave Jesus the message. Jesus glanced at us, his lip lifted in a faint smile and He said to the congregation. “Who is my mother? Who are my brothers and sisters?”

When James heard that, he was livid. He was ready to enter the synagogue and start a fight. I held his arm. I was so angry had he been young, I would have spanked him.

“James, what is your problem?” I really worked at controlling my exasperation.

“Didn’t you hear? He rejected us...totally.” Surprisingly, he kept his voice low as he flung his arms about, fury etched on his face.

“James, when will you ever learn?” I was so annoyed with James I hardly knew where to start. “Use your head. He used us to teach a valuable lesson to those people.”

“And just what did He teach?” James’ voice was sarcastic.

“He was teaching them that everyone in the world is your mother, brother and sister and that we should all look out for each other.” I glared at James, who had settled down somewhat. “He’ll be out to see us as soon as He is finished with the lesson.”

It wasn’t too long and Jesus was in the midst of his family, greeting, hugging, kissing...very, very happy to see all of us. James was thoughtful as he contemplated what Jesus said.

Later, so many things were reported to me. I heard of the people He healed and the ones He brought back to life. People informed me of the blind whom He made to see and the lame who walked after Jesus blessed them. I heard of Mary Magdalene whom he cured of demons that possessed her body.

I kept those things in my heart, along with the memories of the Shepherds and the Magi. I remembered clearly the Angel talking with Joseph and me. The gifts from the Magi were a blessing. The money from their sale had aided me in rearing my children.

During the years, I managed to stretch the money Joseph and I saved, as well as the gifts of the Magi. Combined with the money the children contributed until they married, it lasted until our last child had a home of her own.

Since that time, Jesus gave the money he earned in the shop to me. He said he wanted to ensure I was cared for when He left. There was enough to live on for awhile, but I knew it couldn't last forever.

I became so independent, I hated to think I might have to depend on my children for my livelihood.

Soon after Jesus began His ministry, I discovered a talent that brought in a little money...enough that I could support myself, I hoped.

Since childhood, I loved writing letters. Over the years I wrote to my Mother when I was away from home. I wrote to Elizabeth for awhile, then Ruth and Matthew as well as Naomi and Benjamin. Others...family and friends who had moved away received letters, verses and scriptures from me occasionally.

I loved the scriptures, especially the Psalms and Proverbs. I wrote similar verses when we lived in Egypt and gave them as gifts. Now, I wrote more and more. Since I had little money, I gave these as gifts for birthdays, and other occasions. After awhile, people asked me to write something for them to use as a gift. I complied. I didn't charge for them, not realizing they were a commodity.

One day I was working on my verses when Abner appeared. Scrolls covered the table.

"What's this?" He asked, picking up a verse I had composed for a young man's Bar Mitzvah.

"Just something I enjoy doing." I answered, attempting to straighten the mess and clean the table so he could sit.

"What do you do with them?" He asked.

When I told him, he got a thoughtful look on his face. "Could you write some and let me take them with me?"

"Whatever for?" I finished the verse and looked up at him.

"I might be able to sell some for you."

I was so astonished I hardly knew what to say. Since that time, he had sold many verses for me. The verses brought in little money, but I kept it and only used what I needed for sustenance. I stored the rest.

Jesus traveled for almost three years. He preached, and healed who knew how many people? His trips home were so infrequent, each was a joyous occasion. I treasured them more than any precious stone.

Once when He came, we walked toward the olive grove. This was the place Joseph loved. Jesus and I felt near Joseph whenever we walked here.

This day, the sky was gloomy and overcast. Usually, the gnarled limbs of the olive trees were like old friends. Today, they just seemed like appendages of a misshapen, ugly, ancient dead tree. The earth was stilled, and I shivered. A few insects moved occasionally but the birds must have found a haven from a storm I felt was near.

Jesus told me something of his travels. "Mother, do you remember many years ago when I told you I met Peter?"

I nodded, glancing at the sullen sky.

"He and his family treat me as one of their own. They make me feel very special."

"Oh, Jesus, it isn't right you can't stay home and carry your message from here." I was so distressed. "I hate it that you are more welcome at Peter's home than you are in Nazareth."

He nodded. “Isn’t it true, Mother? No one is welcome in his own home town...especially if he’s different.” He looked at me as if He were expecting an answer...and I had none. I was too ashamed of my people.

I stumbled over a rock hidden in the arid sand. He grabbed my arm. “Are you all right?”

“I’m just fine, Jesus.” I straightened my robe, which had pulled up when I stumbled. “It makes me sad to know people here feel You are a danger to them.”

“I probably am.” He said, bending and picking up a twig. “When I go into a town, there are always Pharisees or Priests who throw difficult questions at me.” He laughed, a touch of bitterness in His voice. “Sometimes, they threaten to throw stones.”

“What do you do when they ask impossible questions?”

“So far, my Father in Heaven tells me what to say. Or maybe I knew it from long ago. I just don’t know.” His voice hardened. “Sometimes I feel so very human...angry, tired, sad, hurt, disgusted.”

“Shouldn’t you be allowed those emotions?” I searched His dear face. “Isn’t that why You were sent? So you could understand MAN?”

He stared into the distance. I knew He saw much further than any human ever could. His voice was low, intense. “I know I’m a part of God. I know I should throw off the shackles of being human and become more than human...” His voice trailed off into silence, until finally He said, with deep sadness. “It’s so incredibly hard.”

I took his hand, squeezed it and held it tenderly.

“You know You will though. Don’t you?” I kept my voice as quiet and noncommittal as possible.

“Yes.” His head bowed and I could barely hear as he continued. “It won’t be long now, Mother. My time is very near.”

Before I could stop myself, I cried, “Oh, No.”

He took me in His arms as though he were the Father and I the child. “Mother.” He tilted my face so He could look directly into my eyes. “I can never tell you how much I appreciate what you’ve done all my life on this earth. I hate the hurt you must endure because you do love Me so much.”

“Oh, Jesus,” I fiercely clung to Him.

“But I must return Home.”

A flash of lightening rent the sky and thunder roared in the distance.

“I know.” Incredible sadness engulfed me. I said, moving out of those protective arms. “I know You have to go. I know how You will go, but my dear Son, I shall be with You as long as I can.”

“My pain will be less because you’ll be there for me,” He said, as the first rain drops fell. He glanced toward the sky, grabbed my hand and we walked rapidly toward home.

Each day after that was a blessing, yet a curse...His time was drawing so near and I couldn’t stop it.

•••

One day, when Abner visited, we climbed into my beloved hills. As we sat I felt we could see to the ends of the earth. The Sea of Galilee glistened far below, where sails were busily bobbing up and down. The tinkle of a sheep’s bell was near and a shepherd raised his voice in song.

The sky felt so near it seemed I could pluck a fleecy cloud from it. The scent of a pine tree wafted around us as we chose our favorite spot to view the world.

As we made ourselves comfortable, he told me of being on the edge of the Sea of Galilee when he saw a miracle. Jesus and His disciples were in Peter’s boat when a storm arose.

“Mary,” Abner said, “that was one of the worst storms I have ever seen. The water was still and quiet. All of a sudden, the wind came up. Black and grey clouds covered the sun. Those clouds rolled around like devils playing in the sky. A black arm snaked out of the cloud, almost touching the waves, then flew back into the mass. Lightening split the clouds, and thunder rolled.

“It frightened me terribly, but I knew there was nothing I could do for those fishermen. The boat rolled as though it could not stay on top of another wave. Suddenly,” and he looked at me as he helped me over a rock, then stopped. “the storm ended as abruptly as it began. The sun came out and all the clouds disappeared, almost within the twinkling of an eye.”

“How strange.”

“That isn’t the strangest part, Mary.” Abner said, as we reached the rock we usually sat on. “I looked at the boat and Jesus stood on the bow with His arms raised. He had stopped the storm.”

Neither of us spoke for a moment. I tried to assimilate yet another miracle. Abner hardly believed what he saw. Suddenly, we heard a lamb bleating. Soon a shepherd heard also, and came to rescue the animal. He saw us, raised his hat, picked up the sheep and moved to rejoin his flock.

The green of the grass in this springtime was thick and succulent. Poppies rose here and there, throwing red over the landscape. Thistles bloomed, their white lacy blossoms almost ready to be blown by the wind. A few trees stood amongst the rocks, spindly and crooked. But the sun winked through the limbs of the trees, an artist putting light and dark on the canvas of rocks.

I pulled at a grass sprig beside the rock, removed it and stuck it in my mouth. “Abner, the more I hear, the more I know Jesus is nearing the end of His life.” I fought tears, not wanting Abner to see them. Abner reached and turned my face toward him. He wiped a spilled tear from my cheek.

“Mary, I can be there for you when it happens. We’ve been friends for so many years. Friends stick together when there’s a need.”

I reached out and caught his hand. “What a dear man you are, Abner,” I said. “I wish we could be more than friends, but it isn’t to be.”

“I don’t think so either.” He held my hand a moment, then looked far off. “Mary, look over there, toward the Sea.”

It was almost as though by talking about a storm had caused one to materialize. “We’d better hurry,” I said, “or we’re going to get very wet.”

He held my hand as we rushed down the mountain. We ran and barely reached my door when the deluge began.

I warmed the chicken stew from the night before. Vegetables were getting a little soggy, but they were still good. Bread made with locusts which Abner liked so well, was cut, awaiting us. He asked God’s blessing and we again talked.

We sat in the safety of my home, ate our mid-day meal and watched the storm rage outside.

“Abner, it’s only two weeks until Passover. I’m going to Jerusalem this year.” I ladled more of the stew into his bowl. I placed it in front of him, then sat.

“You haven’t been for three years. Why now?” He asked, then dipped bread into his bowl and brought it to his mouth.

“I have a feeling this is the time of Jesus’ death. I must be there for Him.”

“Why do you think this, Mary? Any special reason?”

The rumble of thunder was directly over my house. The crack of lightning preceded it, sounding as though it hit one of the trees in the courtyard. We barely glanced out the door, we were so absorbed in our conversation.

“I don’t know, Abner. I just feel compelled to go. Is there a caravan going any time soon?”

“Why do you want to leave early?” He chewed thoughtfully, awaiting my answer.

“I don’t know. I don’t want to go with the rest of my family. I don’t feel like being in a crowd of people.” I looked at Abner and asked a very sincere question. “Abner, I have neglected my other children for Jesus, haven’t I?”

“I don’t think so, Mary.”

“Be honest, Abner. I sometimes feel as though I’m not a normal Mother or Grandmother, for that matter.” I broke off a piece of bread. “I don’t sit waiting for the moment a child or grandchild comes to my door. When they visit I’m happy. I love all of them dearly, but I like being alone or with people of my choice.”

“I don’t think that’s such a bad thing. You’re a person too, Mary. I think that’s one of the lessons Jesus is teaching. Many of the people who follow Him are women. They are welcomed, whether they are sinners or not.”

“Yes, I heard about Mary Magdalene.”

“Do you approve of what Jesus did?” Abner asked.

“Of course. Like He also said one time in my hearing, ‘I didn’t come to save the righteous, but the sinners.’ So I definitely approve of His idea that women are equal with men. There is only one area He felt women should not lead.”

“What was that?”

“There were so many areas of His work a women could do. He felt men should always lead the religious services.” I toyed with my bread, not wanting any more food.

I looked at Abner, wanting to know the truth. “But this isn’t answering my question. Have I neglected the others? Should I be on call for them every minute of the day and night? Or should I be a person of my own?”

“You shouldn’t have to be sitting and waiting to do something for the children to feel useful. You probably do more for the rest of this village than any other person who lives here.”

“Just visiting and taking food to people who need it really isn’t much.” I smiled at him, though he knew I meant each word. “You know I guard my privacy with tenacity.”

He laughed as he chewed a mouthful of stew and bread. He swallowed, then said. “Mary, you gave all you had to each child, when they were young and needed you. When they grew up, married and moved out of your home, your job was finished. Whatever else they may get from you...time, wisdom, work...is just added joys for them. They should expect no more.”

I reached over and patted his hand. “Thanks, Abner. I needed a little reassurance.”

He shoved back his bowl as the thunder rumbled in the distance. I glanced out the door. The rain had almost stopped, but dripped from every tree and bush. Air entered the door, cool and refreshing. I rose and cleaned the table, then we walked to the door.

“To answer your question,” Abner said. “I’m leaving in the next few days with a small caravan. It isn’t mine. I just stopped off to see how you were. I know you would be welcome if you care to join us.” He tweaked my cheek with his finger, then drew it across my jaw line. “You are still a beautiful woman, Mary. You will never get old.”

“I’m forty-nine, Abner. That is old.” We walked into the courtyard. “I shall be happy to leave with you after I have a grand argument with James.” We both laughed.

Suddenly, the most serious look I had ever seen crossed his face. “Mary, do the villagers talk of you and me?”

“Of course,” I laughed. “It’s given them something to gossip about for years. What would they talk about had you not come to help me so much?”

He shook his head as his eyes twinkled. “Better get ready. Two days. You’re staying with Ruth and Matthew in Bethlehem aren’t you?”

“No. I’m going to Jerusalem. I hope to find a place to stay when we arrive.”

“I’ll see you have a room, Mary. Don’t worry about that.”

The next day, I explained to the children why I wished to go to Jerusalem early. To my surprise and delight, they gave their blessings...even James. But then, they knew they would arrive in the city for Passover and we’d see each other soon.

I packed and was ready to leave early on the morning of the second day. We arrived in Jerusalem five days later, little more than a week before Passover.

Chapter 25

Abner talked with his landlady. A friend of hers had a small apartment for rent. I was delighted to have it. Passover was very soon and Jerusalem would be filled with visitors.

The apartment held a large room and a smaller one for sleeping. It also had an enormous courtyard, where we spent happy hours.

Fortunately, the house wasn’t too crowded with furniture, so when I had visitors, we made room for everyone.

As soon as I was settled, Abner spread the word. Jesus heard and was there the next day, with a few of His disciples. As I met each one, I saw in them the embodiment of the lessons Jesus taught.

There was Peter, Jesus’ friend, a fisherman from the Sea of Galilee. He had chosen this big, burly man to become one of His followers. When he walked in my door, I knew immediately who he was. “You are definitely Peter,” I greeted him.

He literally picked me up, grinning all the time. “What a little thing you are, to have such a Son.” Peter’s muscles barely bulged as he kissed me on the forehead, then placed me quite gently back onto the floor, his eyes grinning down at me.

Dark brown hair thickly covered his scalp, with a mustache and beard even darker, almost black in color. But the open mouthed grin between those two bushy splotches of hair was wider than the earth.

What a delightful man, I thought, and invited. “You must be thirsty. Help yourself to a goblet of wine.”

“First, I must introduce my brother.” He grabbed a man who could almost have been his twin, except he was not quite as tall and had fiery, red hair. His mustache bristled as though he was about to explode with anger...and yet, Jesus told me he was the mildest of men.

“His name is Andrew, but he’s not pretty like me.” And Peter promptly threw back his head and roared.

“You must forgive my big brother,” Andrew said, his blue eyes crinkling in good humor. “He simply will not learn how to behave himself, in spite of all my training.” The sweetest smile engulfed his face, making me feel warm and safe.

“Please have cakes and wine.”

The sons of Zebedee, James and John, followed. They were fishermen, as well. Their skin, though parched, was smooth and young. They hesitantly moved into the door. They looked as though they felt much more at home on the sea than in a house.

I picked up a plate of cakes, offering it to them. They hesitantly took one. “Please get something to eat and drink.” I welcomed.

These were just the first four of Jesus’ disciples I met. Soon, all twelve men made this house their haven from the rigors of the learning they were undergoing, as well as their travels.

Later, I met Mary Magdalene and the mothers of some of the disciples who followed Jesus. Most had been cured of horrible diseases by Jesus and felt they could not do enough to repay Him.

They purchased food, cooked it, then washed clothing as often as possible. They used balm to heal blisters on feet, cut hair when it got too shaggy, placed bandages on cuts when necessary. They did what they could to make these men comfortable as they traveled from place to place, never asking anything for themselves.

They were also an influence in helping women followers to understand what Jesus was attempting to tell them...that they were equal in God's sight to men. That men should love their wives as themselves, not use them as slaves. They also taught women they should love and care for their husbands, to have a truly happy life.

Many times they helped these same women with their children in various ways...bandaging wounds, cleansing a dirty face, giving food when there was a crowd and little food available.

Primarily, they taught women how to live a better, more productive, happier life and to look forward to the next one.

That week, the disciples kept me informed of Jesus' whereabouts. I walked to wherever I heard He was preaching, not only to see and hear Him, but to be near in case He needed me. Once or twice He acknowledged my presence by a turned up lip or a fast glance.

When He could get away from the crowds, we spent golden moments together. I treasured each one.

Once, He brought all the apostles, as well as the women, to my rented home. We were quite crowded and spilled over into the courtyard. The love, camaraderie and conversation made a memorable evening. Laughing and talking, Jesus preached to his followers without them aware of the lessons He taught.

I hated when the night ended. Fortunately, the weather was comfortable. Most found a place to lie down in the courtyard or on the roof of the tiny house, wrapped in their cloaks.

A few days later, as Abner and I sat talking, a loud knock resounded. I hurriedly opened the door and there stood the apostle John, the man Jesus called, "Beloved."

His face held such an agitated look, I knew it had begun.

"Come in, John." I invited, attempting to keep back the horror I felt.

He stumbled through the door. His rather short, slim body was erect, almost as though he were made from granite. His green eyes filled with tears that threatened to overflow. Small hands clasped each other so tightly I was afraid they might crack from the strain.

I grabbed his wrists, separating his hands and demanded. "Tell me, John." I felt Abner move close behind me. He gently disengaged my hand from John's arm.

"Jesus is in trouble." His words were softly spoken, but I would have heard them had he merely mouthed the words.

"Sit here." I took a long, deep breath and let it out slowly as I pulled a chair from the table.

Abner placed a skin of wine in front of him as I got goblets for all of us. Then, I removed the cloth from a fresh loaf of bread. Cheese, cakes and boiled eggs followed.

"Begin at the beginning, John." I said, much more calmly than I felt. "Leave nothing out." I ordered. Abner and I sat on a bench on the other side of the table, facing him.

He reached for bread and cheese, then chewed silently for a moment. "Are you sure you want to know everything, Mary?"

"Very sure." My voice was emphatic, though I gripped my hands together tightly, wondering if I would be able to take the news I was about to receive... yet knowing I must.

"We went to a man's house who had prepared our meal for Passover. As we were eating, Jesus suddenly said, 'One of you is going to betray me.' We couldn't believe something like that could happen. We looked at each other suspiciously, then asked who it was."

John broke a mouthful of bread, chewed, then drank wine. "I'm sorry to be so slow, Mary."

“That’s all right, John.” I patted his arm, then took another deep breath. “Did He tell you who would betray Him?”

“He said that whoever dipped his hand in the bowl with Him was the one. We all stared at the bowl. Judas had his hand in the bowl with Jesus.”

“The treasurer?” Abner interrupted.

“Yes. Even with that sign, we couldn’t believe one of us could do such a thing, so we ignored it. A few minutes later Jesus took a loaf of bread, broke it and said, ‘Take. Eat. This is my body.’”

“What did he mean?” Abner asked.

“We didn’t understand either, but He poured a cup of wine and said, ‘Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for forgiveness of sins.’” Abner and I waited impatiently as John drank more wine, placed his goblet on the table and continued, “He said, ‘I’ll not drink of this fruit of the vine from now until the day when I drink it new with you in My Father’s kingdom.’”

I knew now, the end was upon us.

John continued. “We sang a song, then went out to the Mount of Olives, where we prayed, as Jesus went farther from us. I’m so ashamed, Mary, but as the night lengthened, we fell asleep.”

I wanted to hit him for leaving My Son alone.

“When Jesus returned after leaving us the third time, He forgave us. We heard noises that sounded like a throng of people. When we looked up, there was Judas leading a crowd with swords and clubs. He said, ‘The one I kiss is the one. Seize Him!’”

I couldn’t take my eyes from John as he continued.

“Jesus stood still as though he had been waiting for Judas.

Judas came to Jesus and kissed Him. The soldiers arrested Him and took Him away.” John hung his head as though he could never raise it in pride again.

“We were cowards. One of us, I don’t know who, cut off a soldier’s ear, but Jesus told him that the scriptures had to be fulfilled, so He simply replaced the ear.”

“Then...?”

John told us of Jesus’ three trials during the night...each far apart. “Jesus was shackled, then led from one place to another. Each of the trials produced its own form of abuse, from scourging to mockery to debasement.

“They took Him to Caiaphas, the high priest. They accused Him of saying He was The Son of Man. Jesus agreed that He was, indeed. Of course, they accused Him of blasphemy and said He must die.”

I wrung my hands, saying aloud, “Oh, my God!” Despair engulfed me, but John wasn’t finished.

He spoke slowly. “They beat Him, and slapped Him and spat in His face.” John’s face crumpled in tears as he related the events of that night. He gulped, swallowed and took a deep breath.

“Then what happened, John?” Abner asked quietly, gripping my shoulders tightly.

“They then tied Him and led him to Pilate the governor. The Governor asked Him, ‘Are you the King of the Jews?’ and Jesus said, ‘It is as you say.’”

“He didn’t try to save himself at all, did He, John?” My voice was quiet, matter-of-fact.

“No, Mary, He didn’t.” He took my hand and held it tenderly. “That isn’t all. Pilate wanted to release Him, but the crowd yelled they wanted to free Barabbas.”

“That horrible man?” I slid my hand from John’s.

John nodded. “The governor was a coward, of course. He asked for a pail of water, washed his hands and said, ‘I am innocent of this man’s blood.’”

John swallowed wine, wiped his mouth and continued. “They took Jesus and scourged him...”

I winced and Abner gripped my shoulders ever more tightly. “Oh, God,” I moaned.

“Then the soldiers took Jesus into the Praetorium. They stripped Him and put an expensive robe on Him. They wove a crown of thorns and put it on His head, placed a reed in His hand.”

I didn’t think John even noticed the tears that flowed from my eyes as he continued talking. “They kept beating His head and spitting at Him, and knelt before him and mocked Him.”

“His sentence?” Abner asked quietly.

I knew from the Prophets, crucifixion was the method of Jesus’ death, but when John told me, I lost my breath, slowly slid from the bench onto the floor, gasping.

Abner tenderly picked me up, holding me tightly. He then laid me on a couch and John brought a dampened cloth for Abner who wiped my sweat and tear-soaked face. I took deep breaths, attempting to calm myself. I knew I would need calmness to handle the trials ahead.

“John!” Abner ordered. “She cannot take any more.” His voice showed such anger and helplessness, it didn’t sound like Abner.

I sat up on the couch. “Don’t you two understand?” My voice was so quiet and calm, it surprised even me. “I knew Jesus would be crucified but I continued to hope His Father would save Him from such agony.”

“I know you’ve told me before,” Abner said. “You knew how He would die. But you didn’t tell me how you knew. Did God send an angel this time?”

I looked up at John who was staring at the both of us.

I shook my head as I stood. “No, there were no angels.” I took a deep breath and continued. “David, who wrote the psalms, tells of the death of Jesus. I’ve studied all those psalms, hoping I could find something to tell me He would not have to die in that manner.” The last words were from a tormented voice I barely recognized as my own. Tears welled in my eyes and spilled over. I could no longer control the anguish I felt. “Also, Abner, Many of the prophets foretold His demise.”

Abner’s voice held anger, hurt and bitterness, as he held me in his arms. “Oh, my God!” He whispered as sobs tore through my body. I cried until I was so weak I could cry no more.

Finally, I became calm. I arose, staggered, more than walked, back to the table. We sat and I said, “Tell me the rest.”

“Are you sure?”

“You must tell me. I have to know everything.” My voice sounded ragged, even to me. “I promised I would be with Him as long as I was allowed.”

Reluctantly, John took a deep breath. As he spoke, he crumbled a piece of bread onto the table. I barely noticed as he continued. “They took the robe off him and put his own robe back on and led him out of the palace. They placed the crossbar of a cross on his shoulders and began leading Him through the streets of Jerusalem.”

“Oh, God,” I moaned. “This is the day I have dreaded since the day He was born. I must go to Him.”

I stood, shaking off Abner’s hand from my shoulder. “Where is He, John?”

“They were in the city when I left, on the street called ‘Straight.’ The crowds are so thick I don’t see how you can get through to Him.”

“I will.” I was determined. Nothing or no one would stand in my way. I picked up my cloak, wondering if my children had made it to Jerusalem. I started to open the door when another knock sounded.

I quickly opened it and there stood Leah, the most welcome sight of my life, I think. “Have you heard?” she asked, as we clutched each other tightly.

“John just told us.”

Abner and John stood behind me. “Can I get you some wine or water or something, Leah?”

“Nothing, Mary. We must go at once. They are nearing Golgotha.” She looked closely, then wiped tears from my eyes with her small cloth. “I know you want to be there for Him. We’ve talked about it often enough.”

“I was just on my way out the door.”

As we left the courtyard, we heard noises in the distance. Entering the Street called Straight, we saw a crowd of people as thick and busy as a beehive, moving toward us. I had never heard such a clamor in my life, yet as we neared the multitude of people, the pandemonium was worse. People were running here and there, shouting, “crucify Him!”

We entered that turmoil and moved with the crowd, my face dirty, tear stained and ravaged. We ignored everything and everyone. We shoved, pushed through the mob, determined to get near my Son. Jostling their way through, Abner and John opened a spot for Leah and me.

As we reached the street called Straight, we saw a crowd of people. Expectant looks on their faces made them appear to be watching a circus. I wanted to hit each of them, inflict some kind of misery, for enjoying the pain of My Son.

As the noise became overpowering, I saw the crowd turn toward a parade of soldiers.

Then, I saw Him.

It was now the third hour of the day. The walking, the scourging and sleeplessness had left Jesus incredibly weak. A six foot wooden beam weighing possibly 125 pounds was on His back. The newly-cut tree was still green and heavy with sap. As He moved, the crossbar rubbed open wounds and blood dribbled down His back.

When He was opposite me, He stumbled over the rough stones. I tried to get near to help with His burden, but Abner, John and the soldiers held me back. Again and again, He stumbled.

Soon it was apparent, even to hardened soldiers, Jesus was unable to carry the beam. Soldiers noticed a tall, heavily muscled man with skin almost black. His deep brown eyes glittered as he stood, watching the spectacle. From the look on his face, he appeared to wonder what this was all about.

I found out later he was Simon, a Diasporan Jew from North Africa.

“Here,” one of the soldiers commanded. “You’re a hefty man. Take this man’s cross and bear it for Him.”

As they placed the crossbar on the man’s shoulder, he almost collapsed. His legs buckled for a moment. Soon, he walked alongside Jesus, attempting to help Jesus walk as well as carry the cross.

Jesus looked up at him, thanking him with his eyes. I watched both stumble through the streets .

Jesus fell three times on his way to Golgotha. I could barely stand the pain of My Child falling, especially since I was not allowed to pick Him up. I was small, but I knew I could find strength to help if I were allowed.

The crowd closed around me. I couldn’t see my Son! Panic enveloped me but John talked quietly to me, as he, Leah and Abner led me toward a hill.

Many people surrounded us...those who condemned Him and the women who had followed and ministered to Jesus for a long time. These women wept for the Man whom they knew was pure and holy. Many others were already on the hill when the crowd, Jesus behind the soldiers, finally arrived.

We reached the top of the hill.

I felt debased as Jesus was stripped of his garments and knocked to the ground. I thought by this time, I had run out of tears. But when they took his hands, held them down and pounded long spikes into His wrists, I found

more tears. If I live to be a thousand years old, I shall never forget the pain that erupted in my body as each slow pound of the hammer drove those nails ever deeper.

When the nails were through His hands, blood seeped around them. Two soldiers then picked up Jesus and the crossbar He carried. They climbed a ladder almost to the top of the stationery pole and attached the cross bar.

As Jesus hung suspended by ropes attached to the cross bar in mid air, His arms were stretched across the beam.

I left John and Abner on the edge of the crowd to stand beneath the cross. Suddenly, Leah's arms wound tightly around me and she held me as though she would never let go. Mary Magdalene, who loved Jesus was there as well as Mary, the wife of Clopas. They came to give me support. They were as devastated as I, that our Dear One was dying in such agony and disgrace.

Golgotha.

The hill in the shape of a skull.

My mind wandered. I could not accept My Son's torment...the betrayal of a friend, torture, the trials, debasement, the agony of being nailed to a cross.

I looked everywhere except at the three crosses silhouetted against the cloudless blue of the sky.

Olive trees grew nearby. Their twisted limbs caught the rays of the sun, giving them a form and texture of exquisite beauty. Vines, with purple blooms, grew at the foot of the rock. These vines turned the limestone to a bright green. There were pine trees whose needles hung onto small limbs, shading a part of the boulder. Shrubs with their deep green, shiny leaves gleamed in freshly scrubbed splendor.

To me, it was indecent that the red poppies Jesus loved for their delicate petals and bright color, should bloom on such a day. Then I remembered. They were the color of the blood dripping from my child's hands and feet.

This brought me back to the moment.

I'll never know how I stood there, hour after hour, praying for the release of my Son's soul.

During those long hours, my Son said few words, "I thirst," were two of them. He was given vinegar on a sponge and my mouth cringed from the taste. Jesus was offered wine with myrrh, a sedative, but He refused.

Myrrh, the gift the Magi brought to Him so many years before. It seemed everything that happened in His life had led to this moment...to his death, between two thieves on that horrible cross.

In His agony, He also remembered me and asked John to care for me.

About the sixth hour, darkness slowly began descending over the land. People looked at each other in fright. There was a stillness I had never felt before. It became so still and quiet, the crowd seemed to hold its collective breath.

Near the ninth hour Jesus wailed, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"

The frightened crowd gasped in unison, then almost stopped breathing. Silence engulfed the entire hill. There was no shuffling crowd, no taunts, no sighs. One woman sobbed aloud; then there was no more sound.

Soon after, crying out with a loud voice He said, "Into thy hands I commit My spirit." He closed His eyes.

I said a silent prayer, thanking God that Jesus hung only a relatively short time on the cross.

Suddenly, everyone and everything on the hill trembled. The sky darkened to almost a pitch black. Trees swayed. The earth shook with loud tremors. Finally, the curtain of the Temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. Stones from the Temple exploded in the air, then tumbled to the earth.

The crowd scattered like a handful of peas thrown in the air, their screams almost as loud as the thunder engulfing everything.

I heard later that some Jews went to Pilate and asked that the prisoner's legs be broken and the bodies removed from the crosses because the next day was the Sabbath, a high day.

Pilate complied.

The soldiers climbed the ladder of the man on Jesus' right hand. This same man who had spoken with Jesus earlier in the day. When I heard the crack of the bones in his legs, I thought I would collapse. However, I stood there, numb, looking at my Son, whom I knew was already dead. The soldiers climbed down the ladder, then up the ladder on the left side of Jesus. He was still breathing, but barely.

As the bones of his legs snapped, his body jerked and only a low moan escaped from his lips, as he drew his last breath.

They then climbed the ladder to check on Jesus. Since Jesus was dead, I thought nothing else could happen to Him.

I was wrong.

Seeing that he was already dead, one soldier, whose eyes burned with frustration at not being able to break Jesus' legs, took his sword and pierced His side. Blood and water flowed. The streak of dirt-encrusted tears had already made a path from my eyes to my neck. Now, at the piercing of Jesus' side, I jerked as though the sword had entered my side. The pain was so intense I thought I would be unable to bear it. I looked down, expecting to see blood erupting from my robe.

Then, a hazy memory of long ago returned. Joseph and I carried Jesus to the temple in Jerusalem soon after His birth.

An old man introduced himself as Simeon. He looked at me with sorrow in his eyes and his voice penetrated to the depths of my soul as he said. "Behold, this Child is appointed for the fall and rise of many in Israel, and for a sign to be opposed. And a sword will pierce even your own soul...to the end that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed."

As the memory faded, I knew I should feel differently. I should have been able to say to God, "Thy Will be done." But I couldn't...not at that moment. I was a bitter woman as I watched them take my Son from the cross.

So much happened so rapidly. Spices and herbs, such as the ones the Magi brought, were used. Jesus' body was then wrapped in cloths that reminded me of the swaddling clothes I used to wrap His new-born body.

A convert of Jesus, Joseph of Arimathea, offered his newly-hewn tomb to bury the Savior of the World.

After Jesus' burial, Leah, Abner, and I went to my home. Jeremiah and my children all newly-arrived in Jerusalem, stayed with me. We talked. We prayed. We sang songs to His glory. Then we wept for our loss. The bitterness finally lifted. I retained many precious memories of the love He gave all His life. And I knew He would be with me as long as I lived.

On the first day of the week, knocks on my door awoke me. "Jesus is alive! He is risen!" Never have I heard such glorious sounds.

These words echoed throughout the land during the days before He ascended to Heaven. Each time I saw Him, each time he visited, added precious memories.

I could now praise the God who loaned me His Son for so many years. What glorious years they had been. How blessed I really was, as Gabriel had promised, so many years before.

epilogue

Each time Abner came to Nazareth, he asked why I didn't write the story of my life. I thought it was quite presumptuous to think anyone would be interested. It seemed such an ordinary life, except I had been blessed to be the Mother of Jesus.

After Jesus died and was resurrected, I journeyed back to Nazareth with my children and grandchildren. I drifted through each day, wondering what God planned for the rest of my life.

One day, I made the decision which would have an impact on my future. When I visited Sarah that day, I discussed it with her. She agreed it might be the answer I searched for.

I started home, then decided to visit James and his family. As I neared his home, I noticed all my family grouped around a table, deep in discussion.

Since I came from the path behind the house, no one noticed I was near. Without shame, I listened.

“I’d like to tell you something.” James, now thirty, sat at the head of the table. He spoke softly. “My family and I were baptized last week.”

“Thank God,” Rachel said. “But why?”

James’ face, for the first time in my memory, was peaceful. “I knew even before Jesus died, He was the Savior. I refused to admit I was wrong. My pride was in the way. When He died, I felt He forgave me for all the wounds I gave Him. Then, I knew I must be baptized and spread His word.”

Many remarks of happiness came from all the family. James was the last of us to voice his belief. His brow was wrinkled and his voice was unsure as he stated. “I’d like to begin preaching. Do any of you object?”

It was very difficult to believe what I was seeing and hearing. James, quiet? James, sitting still? James, wishing to become a minister of the Gospel?

“May I interrupt?” I asked, moving forward and clasping him in my arms. “Oh, James, I’m so proud of you. You were the first baby after Jesus. He always claimed you as His own.”

“I know. He was so good. I knew I could never reach His perfection so I was filled with jealousy.” He turned to the others. Tears of happiness glistened in their eyes. They sat at the table, awed by the transformation of James. “I hope everyone will forgive me for the wrongs I did to all of you.”

We chatted, closer than we had ever been.

I sat in the midst of them at the table and knew I should make my announcement. I looked around at my children. Through the years, I loved, cared and sacrificed for them. I had done the best I could for all of them.

Now I was ready for a new life.

My announcement came with more difficulty than I expected. “I hope no one will mind too much,” I said. “I’ve decided to move to Jerusalem.”

They were stunned into silence.

“I want to be there because I feel it will be the center of the Movement.” I stated.

“But Mother, how will you live?” Rachel asked.

“I know all of you saw me writing on scrolls, at one time or another.”

They nodded.

“Abner has been selling them for years. I’ve saved a little money. I can support myself.” Suddenly, though this was my decision, I felt so alone. I continued. “If you have no objection, I’d like to sell our home.” They looked at one another and waited for me to continue. I smiled at all of them, loving them all so very much. “I shall expect all of you at Passover each year, and visits in between, as often as possible.”

•••

As the mother of Jesus, friends and relatives alike have asked me repeatedly to write the story of my life with Him. Though I knew the task would not be easy nor painless, I agreed to pray and meditate on the matter.

At the age of 55, I’ve felt the inevitability of my death. Should the story ever be told, I must begin. I know much has been and is presently being written about Jesus. Most authors are telling the story from the perspective of His ministry.

However, no one knows better than I the life Jesus and I shared...from the night He was conceived until the morning He returned to Heaven to be with His Father...God.

•••

I moved. When I left the house Joseph and I shared for such a short time, happy memories sustained me, though my heart felt an incredible sadness.

With the money I received from my home, I purchased a small apartment outside of Jerusalem. The apostles come to see me when they pass through. They tell me of Paul and their fear when he first became a member of their group. I hope to meet him soon.

Abner retired from his travels. He comes to visit almost every day. His presence in my life has certainly been a blessing.

One day, when he was visiting, Abner read my story. He then asked. "Why didn't you tell more of Jesus' ministry? Why have you avoided telling of His travels and the people He met? And what about the people He healed? How about his resurrection? You've barely mentioned that."

I laid my hand on his arm. "Abner, some of the disciples are writing of those days. They were more intimately connected with Jesus during those years than I. There are other accounts. This is my story...my life with Him." I looked at him, hoping he understood.

"I see your point, Mary."

"I hope others will. Jesus was, and is, a part of my life. He watches over me. However, I wish people to understand what it was like to be the mother of Jesus. I'm not sure I've been able to tell it as well as it should be told."

"I think you've been very accurate. You and I shared most of those years. I'm happy to be a part of the story of your life."

Since James began preaching in and around Jerusalem, he stays with me frequently. His family comes. So do the rest of my children and grandchildren.

I have a full life. I write my verses. I read the letters the apostles write to churches all over. I see the difference in people who accept Jesus' Word. I know His message is going all over the world. Frequently, I hear from people who tell me what He did for them.

And here, somehow or other, I feel closer to my First-Born who died such a cruel death.

I never felt I was worthy of the task God gave me. I still wonder why He chose me as the Mother of His Son. I know someday when I meet God, Joseph and Jesus in Heaven, God will tell me why I was chosen.

I can't wait.

About the Author

Mother of 4, grandmother of 5 and a great-grandmother of 3, at 77, Billie Matejka has been writing most of her life. Hundreds of her short stories, poems and articles have found their way into print in magazines and newspapers across the nation. Matejka has written and directed a 13-week radio show, developed and written a Puppet Program and edited MSS for various publishing houses, including two cookbooks sold to raise funds for a Pregnancy Center in the business of saving babies.

Billie enjoys writing, painting, reading, friends and family. 3AD-Mary's Story is her first novel.

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