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MARY sat alone beneath a mustard tree, her hands covering her face. Did all brides feel this way when the contracts were signed, gifts given, and futures sealed by the will of others? She trembled at the prospect of life with a man she hardly knew, other than as a man admired and befriended by her father upon his arrival in Nazareth three years ago.

“He’s of our tribe, Anne,” Joachim had announced after meeting Joseph at the synagogue. “And descended from the royal line of David.”

“Is he married?” Her mother cast an eye toward Mary.

Thus had plans for her future been set in motion, for her father was quick to find out that Joseph was looking for a wife from the tribe of Judah, a descendant of David, a young woman of unquestioned virtue and faith. Mary knew

their ambitions. Mary's older sister was married to a Nazarene, and her parents hoped to marry their younger daughter to another man of their own tribe. And of course he must be devout, kind, and able to provide a good home for her and any children she might give him. So they invited the carpenter to their home frequently, and Joseph was receptive to their hopes.

"Why did he not seek out a young woman in Bethlehem?" Mary had asked her mother once.

"Why ask such questions?" Her mother had been impatient. "Just accept that God sent him here to Nazareth."

Her father had been less inclined to believe that God would be intimately involved in the personal life of a humble carpenter or a poor man with failing health and a daughter soon of marriageable age. "Joseph needs work like anyone else, and Sepphoris is growing. Carpenters and stoneworkers can earn more money there than in Bethlehem."

The men had begun to discuss a match, but when her father died, Mary's future was left for her mother to settle. And she intended to settle it sooner rather than later.

"Your father wanted to give you more time, Mary," she had said, "but time can be an enemy. You are ready to marry, and, considering our circumstances, there's no time to waste. I've already spoken to Joseph, and he has agreed to take you as his wife. All will be well now, Mary. We will not be left to fend for ourselves."

Now, sitting beneath the mustard tree, Mary buried her face in her arms. Would they have been left to fend for themselves? God promised to care for those who put their faith in him. Mary believed the Lord's promises.

All she had ever wanted was to be close to the Lord. Her heart yearned for him. She longed for him as a deer panted for streams of water. How she wished she'd been among the people delivered from Egypt. How blessed they'd been to see God's miracles, to hear the Law for the first time, to see water spring from a rock, and to taste the manna from heaven. Sometimes she almost wished she had been born a man. Then she could have gone to the desert cliffs of Qumran and dedicated her life to God.

Was it youth that made her restless? Her deep thirst for the Lord frustrated her. How could she love the Lord God with all her heart, mind, soul, and strength if she was to be given to a man? How could she love God fully and still give proper honor to her husband?

And yet she understood the practicality of marriage. Women were vulnerable. How often she heard the hoofbeats of Roman soldiers approaching her little village of Nazareth. Countless times she had seen them at the well, filling their waterskins. Then they took whatever foodstuffs they needed from the resentful, downtrodden citizenry. Sometimes they took young women as well, leaving them abused and ruined. Life could become unbearable for an unprotected woman, especially a young one. Mary's mother had taught her to run and hide when she heard the sounds of horses or marching feet. Her heart squeezed tight with anxiety, for she could hear them coming closer now.

Pax Romana had brought anything but peace to Israel, for Mary's people fought Rome's control. Wouldn't it be wiser for her to remain unwed rather than to marry and bring children into such a world? Many Hebrews fought against

Hellenistic influences with all their being, nursing their grievances, fanning their hatred into violence. Others turned traitor, rejecting the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and adopting the customs of their conquerors.

Where was God in all this? Mary knew he was as powerful now as he had been when he created the world. Was she disloyal to wonder if her people had brought this wretchedness upon themselves? She knew the history of her people. She knew how God had disciplined them in the past in order to make them turn back to him. Why must Israel repeat her cycles of disobedience, generation after generation? And how much longer would it be until God once again sent a deliverer?

For as long as Mary could remember, she had heard her people crying out for rescue from Roman oppression.

Someday the Lord would send *the* deliverer, the one promised after Adam and Eve's fall from grace, the one who would make all things right, all things new. The Messiah. Every day Mary prayed for him to come . . . as she prayed now, sitting beneath the shade of the mustard tree, struggling with questions beyond her ability to understand. Torn by the turbulent world around her as well as her own now-settled future, Mary cried out for a savior.

Oh, Lord, when will you send us a deliverer? Rescue us from the foreign oppressors who carry golden idols, arrogantly proclaiming their capricious emperor a god!

She must cease this struggling. She would be wed to Joseph. The matter was settled. Mary honored her mother and would obey.

Oh, Lord God of Israel, I don't understand these things. Is it

wrong to want to belong to you? My soul longs for you. Help me to be obedient, to be a proper wife to Joseph, for you are sovereign and must have chosen this man for me. Make me a woman after your own heart. Create in me a clean heart, and renew a right spirit within me.

A strange tingling sensation spread over her skin. Her hair prickled as she raised her head and saw a man standing before her. Heart thumping with terror, she stared at him, for she had never seen anyone like him before. Was it merely the sun at his back that made him look so terrifying?

“Greetings, favored woman! The Lord is with you!”

Trembling, she sat still and silent, wondering at his words. She shut her eyes tightly and then opened them again. He was still standing there, looking down at her with kind patience. What did his greeting mean? Were not all God’s chosen people favored? And why did he say the Lord was with her? Was he the Lord? Fear filled her, and she closed her eyes again, for surely anyone who looked upon the Lord would die.

“Don’t be frightened, Mary, for God has decided to bless you!”

A sob welled up inside her throat, catching her off guard, for she wanted nothing more than to please God! But the Lord knew how undeserving she was. She blushed, remembering that only the moment before, she had resisted the idea of marrying Joseph, though he loved God as much as she. And now, this man said precious words that filled her with joy!

The stranger drew closer, his head inclined toward her.

"You will become pregnant and have a son, and you are to name him Jesus."

Jesus. The name meant "the Lord saves."

The angel was still speaking. "He will be very great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give him the throne of his ancestor David. And he will reign over Israel forever; his Kingdom will never end!"

Mary swallowed, her mind whirling with the implications of his words. He was telling her she would bear the Messiah! As soon as the words were uttered, she felt attacked by a chorus of dark voices.

You? Why would the Lord choose anyone so low? The Messiah will not come from some Nazarene peasant girl. What evil is this, that one so unworthy should dare imagine she could bear the Messiah! Ignore this madman. Look away from him! Reject what he says. Close your eyes! Say nothing!

Yet another voice spoke, a quiet voice, a voice her heart recognized.

What is your answer, Mary?

She stood, tilting her head as she looked up at the angel. "But how can I have a baby? I am a virgin."

The angel smiled tenderly. "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the baby born to you will be holy, and he will be called the Son of God. What's more, your relative Elizabeth has become pregnant in her old age! People used to say she was barren, but she's already in her sixth month. For nothing is impossible with God."

Mary drew in her breath with a smile and clasped her hands. Oh! She knew how Elizabeth had always longed for

a child. Nothing was impossible with God! Elizabeth would be like Sarah, who bore Isaac in her old age. She would be like Hannah, dedicating her son to the Lord. The news made Mary's faith leap. She wanted to race to Elizabeth and see this miracle for herself, but the angel stood in front of her, silent, waiting for her answer.

If she said yes, she would become the mother of the long-awaited Messiah. Why the Lord had chosen her to be part of his plan she couldn't even guess. She was uneducated, poor, and lived in an obscure village that most Jews disdained. Yet she also knew from listening to Scripture readings in the synagogue that God often used the most unlikely and unworthy to fulfill his purposes. It didn't matter who she was. God would accomplish his purposes in his way. The angel of the Lord was asking her to be part of God's plan. And everything within her heart and soul cried out a joyous yes.

Do you really think you can be the Messiah's mother? Do you think you will know how to rear God's Son to be king over Israel? The dark voices again.

No. I won't, her heart answered. *But God will.*

Gathering her courage, Mary looked up. "I am the Lord's servant." She spread her hands. "And I am willing to accept whatever he wants. May everything you have said come true."

As soon as she made her decision, the angel was gone. She uttered a soft gasp of dismay. She would have thought she imagined the entire episode had not the air still trembled around her. Shaken, she clutched her hands against her chest until she remembered the angel of the Lord had said

not to be afraid. Letting out her breath softly, she knelt and lifted her face to heaven. She lifted her hands, palms up. *Lord, your will be done.*

Her skin tingled strangely as she saw a cloud coming down. She placed her hands over her heart as she was overshadowed. Closing her eyes, she breathed in the scent of spring flowers, earth, and the heavens. Her skin warmed as her body was flooded with sensation. She drew in her breath and held it. For one brief space in time, nothing moved; no sound was heard as all creation paused.

Within the womb of a poor peasant girl from an obscure village in Galilee, God the Son became one with the seed of Adam.

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Joseph glared at Mary. "How can you expect me to believe such a story?" All his hopes for a bright future were demolished. He would never have thought a girl like Mary—so young, so sweet, so devout—could betray him in so foul a manner. *Pregnant!* He was attacked by emotion, shaken by it. He shut his eyes, fighting against the violent thoughts filling his mind: *Denounce her! Cast her aside! Report her to the rabbi! Have her stoned!*

"No!" he cried out, putting his hands over his ears. He opened his eyes and saw Mary's mother, Anne, cowering and weeping in the corner.

Only Mary was calm. "You will believe, Joseph." She looked up at him, her dark eyes innocent. "You will. I know you will."

How could she appear so calm when, with one word, he could have her killed?

"There is only one way a woman conceives."

"For God, anything is possible."

"And God would choose *you* to bear the Messiah?"

She laughed at his sarcasm, her face filled with joy.

"Hasn't God always chosen the weak to confound the strong? Oh, Joseph." She clasped her hands, excitement radiating from her. "Think of him. God never chooses as man would choose."

"I can't believe this. *I can't!* It defies all reason!" He had to get out of this house. He couldn't look at her and think clearly.

"Joseph!" Anne rose and came after him. "Joseph! Please!" She cried out as he went out the door and left it ajar behind him. "*Joseph!*"

He ducked around the corner and walked quickly away, heading up a narrow street toward the end of town. He didn't want people noticing he was upset and asking questions. He had to think!

Out of sight of Nazareth, he wept. What should he do now? Forget she was the daughter of a man who had befriended him, a man who was of his own tribe? Could he ignore the fact that she was pregnant with another man's child? She had committed a sin of abomination! She was unclean! If he married Mary now, people would point the finger at him. Both their reputations would be ruined. The gossip would circulate for years to come. And when the child was born, what then? Everyone would know he was conceived before the wedding ceremony, and would whisper behind their hands as he passed.

Why were women such weak vessels, so easily deceived?

He kicked the dirt angrily. Who could have done this to her? Who would dare take advantage of an innocent, fatherless girl? And why would she concoct such a ridiculous, outlandish lie to cover up her sin? He grimaced. An angel came and told her she was to bear the Son of God! What man in his right mind would believe such a story?

When Joachim had offered Mary to him, Joseph thought he'd been offered a future and a hope. Now, he held disaster in his hands. If he exposed her, he would have to stand by and watch the daughter of Joachim stoned to death for the sin of fornication. And the child she carried would die with her.

Yes! Do it! rasped the dark foreign voice. *Why shouldn't she die for betraying you and her father? Why shouldn't she be cut off from Israel for rejecting the Law you live by? Kill her! Kill the child!*

The violence in his thoughts frightened Joseph and he cried out, "Oh, God, help me! What should I do? Why do you throw this catastrophe at my feet? Haven't I tried all my life to do right? to live according to your law?" He sat, dragging his fingers through his hair. Gritting his teeth, he wept angrily. "Why, Lord? Make me understand!"

The sun set, but he was no closer to an answer. Weary, Joseph rose and walked back to town. The streets were empty, for it was late and everyone had returned home. He entered his workshop and sat at his worktable. He'd never felt so alone. "Where are you, God? Where are you when I need your counsel?" He considered going to the rabbi for advice, but rabbis could not always be trusted to keep confidences. Joseph wanted no one else to know about

Mary until he had decided what to do. He ran his hand over the yoke he had been carving, then picked up his tools. Perhaps work would ease his mind.

Who was he to condemn Mary?

Joseph followed the Law, but he knew in his heart that it was only on the surface. Beneath the dutiful hours in synagogue, the giving of tithes and offerings, his heart was rebellious against the yoke of Rome, the yoke of corrupt rabbis, and the weight of the Law itself. How could any man help it? Sin taunted Joseph every time he saw a Roman soldier mocking a woman at the well, or a rabbi haranguing some poor widow for her tithe, or a rich patron who ignored what was owed for work rendered, or a beggar who cursed him when he had no money to give. Though Joseph had taken countless lambs to the Temple in Jerusalem for sacrifice over the years, he had never felt completely cleansed of sin. The blood of the sacrificial lamb covered it over, and then he'd sin again. He wanted to do right, but he found himself failing again and again.

Stretching out on his pallet, Joseph flung his arm over his eyes, still undecided what action to take regarding Mary. The Law was clear, but his heart was torn. He closed his eyes, hoping sleep would enable him to think more clearly in the morning. But his sleep was tormented by nightmares. He heard angry voices and a girl screaming. He cried out, but when he tried to run, his feet sank into sand. As he struggled, darkness surrounded him and someone spoke from it. *Kill the girl. Kill her and the spawn she carries!*

"Joseph, son of David," came another voice he'd never heard before, but knew instantly. A man in shimmering

white stood above him. "Do not be afraid to go ahead with your marriage to Mary. For the child within her has been conceived by the Holy Spirit. And she will have a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."

Joseph absorbed the words, his soul trembling with delight. All his life he had heard people talk of the coming Messiah. Since the time of David, the Jews had waited for another king to triumph over Israel's enemies. And more than that, the promised Messiah would reign over all the earth. Now the time had come, and God was sending the Anointed One. And Joseph would see him. He would stand at the side of the Messiah's mother and protect the Chosen One as his own son.

You, a simple carpenter, stand as guard? Dark laughter surrounded him, and Joseph moaned in his sleep. I will kill them. And you, if you stand in my way.

Joseph groaned again and rolled onto his back. He opened his eyes and felt the darkness around him. Fear gripped him, until a whisper pierced it.

He will save his people from their sins. . . .

Joseph's longing for righteousness welled up in him like the thirst of a man lost in the desert. And he remembered the words of his ancestor, David, whispering them into the darkness: "Those who live in the shelter of the Most High will find rest in the shadow of the Almighty. . . . I will *not* be afraid of the terrors of the night, for God will order his angels to protect his Son. The Lord himself will guard him."

The darkness rolled back, and Joseph saw the stars

through his window. He stared at them for a long while. Smiling, he went back to sleep.

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Anne wept in relief, but Mary seemed not the least surprised by Joseph's decision to marry her quickly. In fact, she crossed the room and put her hand on his arm, surprising him with a demand. "I must go to my relative Elizabeth."

Her mother protested. "Why would you want to go there? The hill country is a hard journey—"

"Oh, Mother, it doesn't matter. Elizabeth is with child!"

"Don't be ridiculous! She's long past her time of bearing children."

"The angel told me she's with child."

"And what do you suppose people will say when you suddenly marry Joseph and then go off to the hill country of Judea?"

"What does it matter what people say if it's the Lord's will I go?"

Joseph saw how the journey could solve several problems. The angel had said nothing about announcing to the citizenry of Nazareth that Mary had conceived by the Holy Spirit and would give birth to the Messiah. What if the news did get out? What sort of dangers might present themselves to the child? When Mary's pregnancy became apparent, there would be gossip. However, if they went on this journey together . . .

"As soon as we are married, I will take Mary to visit her relative."

"People will talk," Anne said.

Yes, people would talk, but the condemnation would be aimed at him rather than Mary.

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When Mary's pregnancy became apparent, some in Nazareth thought they now understood the reason for Joseph's haste in marrying her. Women whispered at the well while the men shook their heads and clucked their tongues in the synagogue. What did anyone really know about Joseph, other than that he was a carpenter come from Bethlehem? Poor Joachim. The man had trusted the carpenter because he was a relative, a descendant of David. Surely Joachim's bones were crying out now that it was evident Joseph had taken conjugal rights before those rights were due. Some went to the rabbi and insisted the couple be disciplined so that other young people wouldn't think such behavior was condoned in Nazareth! The rabbi said Joseph had acted within his rights under the contract, gifts having been exchanged and documents signed.

A voice came out of the shadows at the back of the synagogue. "*Will you not destroy the evil among you?*"

The rabbi raised his head from the Torah. "Who speaks?"

"*Does Scripture not say the Lord hates haughty eyes and a lying tongue?*" The voice was deep and dark and familiar to many. "*We must destroy the wickedness among us.*" Men glanced at one another and voices began to swell as the accuser remained in the shadows. "*Who is this carpenter who defies the Law? Who is this girl who plays the harlot?*"

A man stood, face flushed. "He's right!" Others joined in agreement.

Chilled, the old rabbi raised his hands. "The Law also says there shall be two witnesses. Let them come forward."

A low rumble moved through the gathering of men, but no one moved. Men looked about. Trembling, the rabbi rolled open the Torah. "The Lord also hates a false witness who pours out lies, a person who sows discord among brothers." He spoke quietly, but the words carried.

The accuser departed.

Soon after, all gossip regarding Joseph and Mary died when Roman soldiers arrived in Nazareth carrying a decree from Caesar Augustus. A census of all who inhabited the earth was being taken. Men cried out in dismay. Did this Roman "god" realize what chaos his decree would create? For the order was that everyone must return to the village of his birth in order to be counted.