

Joseph

The Protective Stepfather

From *The Family of Jesus*

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The wild orchids distracted him.

Joseph had been busy that day. He and his dad worked on a new house being built at the edge of town and then this afternoon Joseph finished a food cart and two chairs. Now he was working on the gift no one knew about.

The little prayer table.

For months Joseph had been gathering beautiful pieces of olive wood, and when the day's tasks were done he would cut the pieces into sections and polish them until the beautiful grain shone like glass. The table was assembled now, the joints fastened. Joseph studied his work and smiled.

Once they were married, he and Mary would come together at this table in the early morning before the Lord, reflecting on God's Word and lifting their requests and praises before Him. Four hundred years of silence hung over the Jewish people since the last prophet had spoken on behalf of God. Now all of Israel was waiting. For a sign or a prophet.

For the Messiah.

Joseph imagined sitting at the prayer table with Mary, joining their people by praying for answers, praying for deliverance. He dreamed about the time, a year from now, when he could share that life with her. Joseph tenderly moved the small table to the corner of his workshop. Other nights he might've worked later, but this was Wednesday—the one day each week when he visited Mary. Today would be even more special because of the orchids.

He put away his tools, swept the earthen floor, and then—with the sun just beginning to set—he hurried out to the field behind the carpenter shop. For a moment he studied the spray of purple orchids and he felt a smile take over his face. Mary loved orchids. One day soon he would build her a home with a view of this very field.

So that Mary could have orchids as often as spring allowed.

"Orchids are God's reminder that we can always start over," she would tell him. He brought them to her as often as he could.

Joseph gathered a full bouquet and then stopped at the doorway of his parents' house. "Going to Mary's." He smiled at his mother.

"Give her our love." His mother nodded at him. "And her parents also."

"I will." Joseph was anxious. He looked forward all week to this day. "Be back in a few hours."

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“Son.” His mother stood, and her eyes looked deeper than before. Slowly she came to him.

“Yes.”

“I’m proud of you. If I haven’t said so in a while. Your work . . . your faith . . . the way you love Mary.” She nodded, more emotional, as if she was trying to find the right words. “You’re a righteous young man, Joseph. I’m a blessed woman indeed.”

Joseph lowered the bouquet of orchids. “Thank you. That means a lot.”

“I don’t say it enough.” His mother reached out and hugged him, the sort of hug that could say more than a thousand words. She stepped back. “Now go see that beautiful girl of yours.”

Joseph thought about his mother’s words all the way to Mary’s house. Did she really see him that way—righteous? He was only twenty years old, with nowhere near enough experience to be wise or mature. Still, his parents thought he was a good man. It was the greatest compliment anyone could’ve given him, and Joseph knew he’d remember his mother’s words always.

The street was busy, with men and women gathered in the fronts of various houses sharing the day’s business or the condition of crops in the distant fields. In Joseph’s mind, Nazareth shone brighter than other towns in Israel. The people were closer-knit, friendlier. Children grew up and stayed in Nazareth, sharing in each other’s lives for decades. Joseph knew all his neighbors’ first names, their trials and triumphs, the depth of their faith. Almost as if the entire town were one big family. Nazareth was home. Joseph had loved growing up here, and in the years to come this was where he and Mary would raise their family.

Joseph could hardly wait.

He rounded a corner and saw her house, on a modest lot of land near the edge of town. Often this time of night Mary would be out back, staring at the distant valley, praying to God or dreaming of the days ahead. Joseph walked in that direction and sure enough: she was sitting on a blanket, her long dark hair blowing in the breeze. He walked without a sound, but she must have sensed he was near because she turned to him.

“Joseph!”

He stopped, his feet frozen in place, the flowers at his side. For a long moment, he simply admired her. Her honey-smooth complexion and the fine features of her profile. The way her eyes caught the light from the setting sun. She hurried to her feet and ran to him. Joseph caught her in his arms.

He ran his hand along the back of her head and then carefully distanced himself from her. “I’ve missed you.”

“Me, too.” She looked breathless, her face all lit up. “Seeing you . . . it’s the best part of the week.”

He wished he could hug her again, hold her longer than a few seconds. But that would have to wait. Joseph held up the orchids. “For you.”

Her eyes softened. She took the flowers and breathed in their fragrance. “You always do that.”

“Do what?” He maintained the space between them. He could visit Mary once a week and greet her with a hug. Even hold hands now and then. But nothing more.

“Nice things.” Mary stared at the flowers and then lifted her eyes to him. “For no reason.”

Joseph felt his smile fade. “You’re my reason, Mary. Now and always.”

“Orchids are my favorite.” She smiled at him. “I just wish . . .” She looked to the valley beyond.

“What do you wish?” He started walking back to her blanket in the grass. She fell in step beside him.

Mary waited until they sat down before she caught his gaze again. “I wish we were getting married tomorrow. A year seems so long.”

“Hmmm. For me, too.” He watched her set the flowers at the corner of the blanket and lean back on her hands.

Her smile melted his heart. “If only I weren’t so young.”

She had a point. Custom required couples to wait a year after they were betrothed. And Joseph and Mary had been betrothed only a short while. “It’s our parents’ fault.” He chuckled, teasing her. “They should’ve arranged this a long time ago.”

“I know.” Mary’s sweet laughter joined his. “What were they thinking?”

Joseph took Mary’s hand and worked his fingers through hers. They had known each other forever, as far back as either of them could remember. A little silence between them was comfortable.

Moments like this, Joseph couldn’t help but go back to the beginning. When he was little more than a boy, Joseph’s family had spent time with Mary’s family one long holiday. As the night fell, Joseph found Mary with the other kids near the river. He pulled her aside and took her hand. “I’m going to marry you when we grow up,” he told her.

She had blushed and giggled. “That’s not your choice.”

“Doesn’t matter.” He remembered sticking his chest out. “It’ll happen. I just think so.”

In fact, lots of men Joseph’s age would’ve chosen Mary. But the friendship between Joseph and Mary’s families worked in Joseph’s favor and it became the answer to his prayers. It was really going to happen. He was going to marry the girl of his dreams.

“What are you thinking?” Mary’s voice was soft, like music on the wind.

Joseph grinned. “How great God is, letting me have you for the rest of my life.”

She looked down at her lap, her smile lifting her pretty mouth. When she caught his gaze, her innocence shone brighter than the setting sun. “God is so great, Joseph.” She looked at the valley again. “I love talking to Him. Seeking His will.” She found Joseph’s eyes. “I’ve done that since I was a little girl.”

Joseph took a deep breath and admired Mary. Everyone knew about her faith. More than any of the young women in town, Mary loved God, and the proof showed in her eyes. He ran his thumb along Mary’s hand and breathed in deep, enjoying the clear spring air. “I feel God has something big for us, Mary. Right here in Nazareth.”

“Like what?” She angled her head, admiration bright in her expression. “A bigger carpentry shop?”

“Maybe.” Joseph narrowed his eyes and watched the streaky sky. “I don’t know. I just feel it.” It was getting late so he helped her to her feet. “Whatever God has ahead, as long as I’m with you, I’m ready.”

Mary didn't say anything. The look in her eyes told him she agreed with every word and whatever God had planned for them, they were ready.

They would face it together.

Joseph wasn't sure when the trouble began. Had he said something that offended Mary or scared her? Either way she was gone to Jerusalem, to her cousin Elizabeth's house in the hill country of Judea. She had left just one very clear instruction.

Tell Joseph not to follow me.

That was three months ago. Three long, unbearable months.

It was late afternoon, the day's work done, and Joseph paced the carpenter shop, kicking up dirt from the floor. Every time he passed the window he stopped and stared out. The orchids had faded in the scorching summer heat and now only a few of the purple flowers dotted the fields and valleys around Nazareth.

Joseph looked at the prayer table. It was finished now. Ready for the future. The only reminder of that awful Wednesday when he'd walked to her house and found her gone. Her mother had cried when she gave him the news. Mary wasn't home. She'd joined a caravan from Nazareth and headed to her cousin's house, not far from Jerusalem.

"She gave no explanation." Her mother had clearly been confused. "Of course I trust her. Mary has never given me a reason to doubt." She paused. "But I have no answers. I'm so sorry, Joseph."

The earth might as well have opened up and swallowed Joseph whole. Jerusalem was a five-day walk from Nazareth. Mary had been fine the week before. Why in the world would she leave? And why hadn't she wanted him to follow her? Why hadn't she told him?

Joseph had been worried sick over her absence every day since. Not only that, but after so much time, people in Nazareth were beginning to talk. Like him, they wondered why Mary would go to Jerusalem, alone. Why hadn't she told Joseph about her plans, and what had she been doing these past three months?

He paced again and stopped at the open door. *Dear God, where is she? I love her more than my own life.* He waited, listening. A summer storm approached on the horizon, but he heard no voice of God, no assurance that Mary still loved him or wanted to marry him.

No certainty that she was even alive.

Father, please . . . protect my Mary. Keep her safe as she's so far from home.

Please, God. Joseph didn't care about the talk around town. Sure, he took a few questionable glances and yes, people whispered more when he walked down the street. Never mind any of that. All he cared about was Mary. Knowing that she'd arrived safely at her cousin's house . . . holding out hope that she'd come home soon.

He walked slowly back to the corner of the shop and ran his hand over the prayer table.

His fingers traced the swirly grain of the wood, the glossiness of the surface. He was about to pray once more for Mary's safe return when he heard someone yelling. Joseph thought he recognized the voice. He ran to the door and saw a young boy running toward him, his sandals slapping hard at the road beneath his feet. Joseph knew him immediately. He was the youngest son of the family who lived next door to Mary.

Joseph hurried to meet the child. “What is it? What happened?” he called out, his tone desperate.

“Mary!” The boy’s grin stretched across his face. “She’s back! She just came home! My mama told me to come tell you!”

And just like that, Joseph felt his world right itself.

Mary was alive and she was back. He would go to her and they would talk and she would explain everything: why she left and the reason she was gone so long and how come she didn’t want him to follow her. In a few hours it would all make sense.

As soon as he could talk to Mary.

Joseph didn't quit running until he reached her house, but the moment he saw her he stopped cold. Mary was sitting on her favorite blanket behind the house, facing the distant fields and valleys. Even from here he wanted only to take in the sight of her, his heart pounding out his relief, his legs trembling. He had missed her every day, every hour.

Now, finally, she was home. She was here.

And she was his.

Before he could hurry the rest of the way to her side, he caught a glimpse of her profile and in the time it took to breathe in, something happened. Doubt rained over the moment. She was changed. Her expression or her posture. As if she’d aged a decade in three months. A shiver of fear ran down his neck.

Whatever had happened since the last time he saw her, Joseph had the feeling the news was going to change their lives. The closer he came to her, the more sure he was about the change. Her eyes were different. Guarded, or maybe deep with resolve.

“Mary . . .” He held out his hand but she didn’t take it.

“Sit with me. Please.” She slid over and nodded to the empty spot on the blanket. “I have something to tell you.”

Joseph’s heart beat so hard he could barely breathe. He sat down and searched her eyes, her face. “I missed you.”

Her expression softened. “I missed you, too.” Mary drew a slow, deep breath, never breaking eye contact. “Joseph . . . I’m pregnant.”

The world stopped spinning.

Joseph could feel himself falling . . . falling someplace dark and deep and otherworldly. What had she said? Mary was pregnant? No, that couldn’t be it. But those were her words, and now . . . He managed to stand and walk to the edge of the bluff. *Breathe, Joseph. You have to breathe.* She couldn’t be pregnant unless . . .

Shock flooded his veins, rushed at his heart, but already another emotion was rising to the surface. A sort of pain Joseph had never known before. He hung his head. What was he supposed to do next? How could he—

“Joseph.” She had followed him, her tone urgent. She took gentle hold of his shoulder. “There’s more. Please . . .”

He took a step closer to the edge of the bluff, away from her touch. There was more? He turned to her. If only she didn’t look so beautiful. Even now, when she was breaking his heart. “What?” He shrugged. “What else is there?”

“It’s not what you think.” Mary had never looked so upset and so at peace, all at the same time. “I was . . . visited by an angel.”

He stared at her and no words came. None at all. He had to be dreaming because nothing made sense. “An angel, Mary? Really?”

“Yes.” She paused. “Joseph, you have to believe me.” A calm came over her. She stood a little straighter, her expression set. “I haven’t been with a man. I love only you.”

The hurt was so great he had to remind himself to exhale. “You were gone three months.”

“I left after . . . after the angel talked to me.”

Joseph was too dazed to do anything but stand and listen. Maybe if he gave her a chance to tell her story a clap of thunder would sound and he would wake up. He folded his arms and braced himself.

The breeze caught Mary’s hair and she squinted, her eyes locked on his. “It was the night after you brought me orchids. I was out back, behind my house down the valley.” She caught her hair with one hand and held it. “I know you tell me not to go too far away from the house alone, but the stars were beautiful and I needed to pray. Down in the valley, that’s my favorite place. Just God and me.”

Her story picked up speed now that he was letting her talk. “I sat on the big rock, and just as I started to talk to the Lord, this . . . this angel man appeared.”

Joseph shook his head and stared at the ground. When he looked up he saw tears in Mary’s eyes. The first time he’d ever seen her cry. He tried to keep his hurt and anger in check. “What did this . . . angel say?”

She dabbed at her eyes, her voice steady despite her obvious sadness. “I’m not making this up, Joseph. You have to believe me.”

“I’m trying.”

“Okay.” Mary sniffed and breathed in. “He told me the craziest thing I’ve ever heard. He greeted me and told me he was the angel Gabriel. Then he told me I was highly favored. He said the Lord was with me.” She looked back at the blanket. “Please . . . can we sit down? I’m tired.”

Joseph fought off his hurt. He followed her to the blanket and as they sat, he faced her, leaving more space than usual. “Go on.”

“I was scared to death, of course. I mean, he was real, Joseph. Like a man only all dressed in white and he, I don’t know, he . . . sort of glowed.” Mary shook her head and stared at the valley beyond. “I thought I would pass out or my heart would stop.” She looked at Joseph. “But he told me not to be afraid. Then he said it again—that I’d found favor with God.”

One thing was certain. Mary believed the story. Joseph could see that much in her eyes.

“What he said next . . .” Her voice fell, and she looked nervous for the first time. She seemed to gather her strength. “He told me I was going to conceive and give birth to a son. I’m supposed to call him Jesus.”

“Jesus.” Joseph blinked.

“Yes. Jesus.” She put her hand on her stomach, protective. “The boy—my baby—the angel said He would grow to be great, and that . . . He would be called the Son of the Most High.” Her tone filled with awe. “Son of the Most High, Joseph. The child inside me.” She hesitated. “The angel said God would give this boy the throne of His father, David . . . and that He would reign over Jacob’s descendants forever.” Her voice dropped

to barely a whisper, her eyes wide. “He told me Jesus’s kingdom would never end.”

Again Joseph wanted to run or shout or find some way out of this insane conversation. Mary had never acted like this, never talked this way. Whatever had happened over the last three months, he couldn’t begin to make sense of it.

“I know . . . I didn’t understand, either.” She folded her hands in her lap and lifted her eyes to the sky. “I asked the angel how any of this could be. I told him I’m . . . I’m a virgin.”

Joseph clenched his jaw, struggling.

“But he said the Holy Spirit would come over me and . . . the power of the Most High would overshadow me.” Her breathing picked up some. “This is the hardest part. He said . . . this baby boy would be the Son of God. Those were his exact words.”

That was all Joseph could take.

He stood and stared at Mary for a few heartbeats. Then he turned and walked to the edge of the bluff once more. The Son of God? Only one deserved that title: the Messiah. The Savior. The one the Hebrew people had waited hundreds of years to see.

Was she serious? Mary wanted him to believe the baby in her womb was the Son of God? He felt sick. Shocked, and hurt, and angry. He needed to get away from here, away from her. When he turned around she was there, standing a few feet away, pain and heartache written across her face. He shook his head. “I need to go.”

“I’m telling the truth.” Tears filled her eyes again. “After that, the angel told me . . . about Elizabeth. My cousin. The angel said she was going to have a child, too. And that she was six months along.”

He controlled his emotions. “Your cousin?”

“Yes. The last thing he said was that no word from God would ever fail.”

Joseph felt a ripple of fear. “You know what you’re saying, right? You’re talking about the Messiah. That’s not something to make up.”

“I . . . am . . . not making this up.” For the first time Mary sounded upset. Almost angry.

“Okay.” From the depths of his heart Joseph felt the slightest compassion begin to stir. If he wasn’t dreaming, whatever had happened with Mary, she believed it. Absolutely. Maybe she’d lost her mind, but she believed the crazy story. Even if it bordered on blasphemous. “That’s why you went to Judea? Because the . . . angel told you Elizabeth was pregnant?”

“Yes! Exactly!” She stood straighter, hopeful. “I mean, I told the angel that I was the Lord’s servant. I said, ‘May your word to me be fulfilled.’” She blinked, clearly overwhelmed by the experience. “Then he left. He was gone as quickly as he appeared.” She stared at Joseph, right through him. “I had to go to Elizabeth. First, before I talked to anyone else. Because if it was true about her being six months’ pregnant, then . . . well, then everything the angel said had to be true.”

“And?” Joseph’s tone was more in control, but the shock hadn’t let up.

Mary took her time, as if her next words were sacred. “It was just as the angel said. Elizabeth was pregnant and . . . when I walked in she said her baby leapt in her womb.” Again she put her hand over her flat stomach. “She already knew . . . she called me the mother of her Lord. Really, Joseph. I’m serious.”

He'd heard all he could take. But for all the heartache and disbelief flooding his heart, he knew this—he couldn't be angry with Mary. She was pregnant and she believed her strange, unreal story. Both things would forever change the plans they'd had three months ago. Joseph steadied himself. No matter what had happened he loved her too much to be angry, too much to use harsh words or disdain.

Joseph took a step back. "I need to leave."

"But . . ." Fresh hurt darkened her eyes. "I want to tell you about Elizabeth and John, about my time there."

"Later." He closed the distance between them and touched her shoulder for a brief moment. He still loved her so much. "I have to get back." He felt the sadness in his expression. If she'd committed adultery, the penalty was too great to consider. He exhaled, defeated. "I have a lot to think about, Mary. About us . . . about what happens next."

She hung her head, broken, and for a few seconds he wondered if she might admit the truth about the pregnancy. Something more believable than an angel and the Son of God. Instead she lifted her eyes one last time. "Go." A new strength seemed to resonate from her soul. "I will pray that God shows you the truth."

Joseph nodded. And with a final look, he turned and walked home from Mary's house, down the main street and past the fields of fading orchids. The whole time he was consumed with just one thought.

His betrothal to Mary was finished.

Joseph couldn't eat or sleep. His parents asked him about Mary, but he could only shake his head. "I need a few hours. I'll talk then."

He went out back and took the trail behind his house to the valley floor. Maybe here he could somehow gain understanding. Joseph found a smooth ledge, sat down, and stared straight ahead. If an angel were going to visit him, this would be a great time. But he heard only the summer breeze and utter silence.

The facts stood like armed soldiers, swords drawn and aimed straight at his heart. Mary was pregnant. After being gone three months without warning she was home and she was going to have a baby. Rather than come out and say what happened, whom she'd been with, or how the guy had wormed his way into her life, she'd come up with a story no one would believe. What was he supposed to do? Stay with her? What would their friends and family think? His reputation would be destroyed right alongside hers. And if Mary tried to use the angel story to explain herself, things would get worse.

He and Mary would be unrighteous *and* crazy.

Why had she turned her back on him and their dreams? How could she have been with another man when she had always loved him? Only him. The valley walls felt as if they were closing in around him. If he called her out, if he reported her, then she would face a certain ending.

She would be taken to the city limits and stoned.

The love of his life. His Mary.

He wasn't dreaming. Mary was pregnant and despite her nonsensical ramblings, one thing was true: he wasn't the father. She had to be out of her mind, because the Mary

he knew would never have betrayed him. Never. Joseph put his hands over his face and for the first time since he heard the news, he let the tears come.

Angry, desperate, heartbroken tears. No matter what Mary had done, regardless of the reason, he still loved her. He couldn't bear to see her stoned to death. They might as well stone him, too. The sobs shook his shoulders and made it hard to breathe. What was he supposed to do? He wiped his face with the back of his hands and stood, looking one direction and then the next. As if there might be some way out. But there was none.

None except one.

Joseph lifted his eyes to the hills, his jaw clenched. "Where does my help come from?" The broken cry filled the air. He pushed on, determined. "My help comes from the Lord." He gritted his teeth even as hot tears made their way down his cheek. "The Maker of heaven and earth."

Yes, the psalmist was right. Joseph had known the words to the Holy Scriptures since he was a boy. They had never meant more. "Help me, God . . . You neither slumber or sleep. Help me now."

The breeze kicked up a spray of loose dirt and it turned to mud on Joseph's tear-stained face. He wiped it with his shirt, clearing his eyes. When he could see again he raised both hands to heaven. "Why, God?" His sides heaved. "Help me!"

The sun was setting, and Joseph knew better than to be here alone after dark. Leopards and hyenas would smell him and sense his vulnerability. He looked across the valley floor and to the sky once more. No angels here. A numbness came over him and gradually his eyes dried. He climbed the hill. He couldn't really feel his feet.

With every step the reality hit him again.

Back at the house he found his father. Joseph must've looked awful, because his dad stood slowly and came to him. "Son, what is it?"

The story took most of an hour to sort through. Joseph's father was quiet, the weight of the situation heavy around them. After a long time, Joseph clenched his fists. "They can't kill her." His head hurt and he ached from the hole where his heart used to be. "I can't let them do it."

Sadness replaced the shock in his father's eyes. Slowly he nodded and took a deep breath. "Do you have any ideas? What to do next?"

Joseph was desperate for a way out. Suddenly an idea came to him. "I suppose I could . . . I could file a divorce decree quietly, without bringing attention to it . . . And maybe the religious leaders would think the two of us separated before this . . . before she . . ."

"I understand." The older man seemed to know that Joseph couldn't finish the sentence.

The pain of Mary's unfaithfulness would remain until his last breath. But Mary's life might be spared if the idea worked. Joseph nodded. "It's a good plan. I'll try it."

Joseph had never felt more exhausted. He dragged himself to bed, but before he fell asleep he pictured her again. Mary. The only girl he'd ever loved. He rolled on his side and stared into the darkness. *I trust You, God. But I never imagined this.* He closed his eyes. Tomorrow he would file the divorce decree. He would do everything in his power to keep it quiet. He closed his eyes. What he really needed was a miracle, that

tomorrow morning he would wake up and all of this would be nothing more than a bad dream. Mary would be pure. She would be home.

And she would be his.

Joseph was in the deepest sleep he'd had in ages when a light fell around him. He was still sleeping. He knew that. But the light grew brighter, more brilliant than anything Joseph had ever seen or imagined. Terror gripped him and the overpowering light blinded him. Before he could move or speak, a voice called out, "Joseph, do not be afraid."

Joseph's heart slammed against his chest and he shielded his eyes, barely squinting into the light. "Who . . . who are you?"

"I am the angel of the Lord." The voice was strong and sure, full of peace.

Terror seized him. What was this? His body began to shake and gradually his eyes adjusted. He could see the angel standing beside his bed. He sat up a little straighter, his teeth chattering. He could barely focus above the sound of his pounding heart. "What . . . do you want from me?"

"Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit."

The Holy Spirit? Joseph felt the hair on his neck stand up. That's what Mary had said. Her words exactly. The baby in her was from God alone. He blinked a few times and nodded. "Mary told me that."

A look of utter truth shone in the angel's face. "She will give birth to a son, and you are to give Him the name Jesus, because He will save His people from their sins."

Before Joseph could speak, the angel was gone and it was morning. Joseph woke up and climbed out of bed, breathing hard, his heart pounding. Whatever had happened during his sleep, he knew one thing: God had sent the angel as an answer to his prayers.

Now he had to find Mary. Never mind that the sun was barely up, Joseph dressed quickly and hurried through town to get to her. He reached her house and again found her outside, staring at the distant valley, sitting on the same blanket as the night before. She probably hadn't slept. She must've been deeply hurt by Joseph's reaction, afraid of all she might face if he didn't believe her.

She stood as he walked up and this time Joseph didn't hesitate. He hugged her, a desperate sort of hug. "The angel," he told her as he drew back, "he visited me, too. Everything you said, it was true."

Mary hesitated, as if she needed time for his words to reach the depths of her heart. "Really?" Joy dawned gradually in her eyes and her smile spoke of how desperately she needed him. "I told you."

"Our family . . . our friends." He searched her eyes. "They'll never believe us." "No. But we have each other." Sadness colored her expression, even as her smile remained. "And one day generations will believe."

Generations. Joseph felt the weight of the responsibility. His voice fell to a whisper. "You're carrying the Savior of the world, Mary. The Messiah. The One our people have been waiting for."

"It's all I can think about."

He took hold of her hands. "None of this will be easy. You know that."

She nodded, her eyes lost in his. “I have you.”

“Yes. Always.” Love and loyalty and a fierce protection welled up in Joseph. “I will stay by your side every step of the way. Whatever happens, I will be here, Mary. Nothing will harm you and the baby, not as long as I am living.” He looked deep into her eyes, “You will never be alone.”

“Never.” Tears filled her eyes. “We’ll get through this together.”

The whispers around town started when Mary was in her seventh month. At least their parents believed them—reluctantly, but still, Mary and Joseph had their support. The same wasn’t true for the rest of Nazareth. At first it was just a murmur from a few shopkeepers as Mary walked by, but quickly the news spread through all of Nazareth. Joseph hated the way even the young girls whispered and pointed at Mary. He went to her early one morning. Again they met in the field behind her house. Joseph took her hands. “I can’t stand this. We have to do something.”

From the first day Mary returned from Judea she’d had a supernatural peace about her. But in that moment she looked scared to death. “What if they . . . stone me?”

“I talked to my father about that. If I don’t press charges, then no one will think you’ve been with another man.”

“But they think you and I . . .”

The breeze off the canyon played around them for a few minutes. Neither of them spoke. Finally Joseph drew a deep breath and straightened his shoulders. “I don’t care what they think about me. It’s you, Mary.” He took her in his arms and ran his hand along her back. “You don’t deserve this.”

Her cheeks were wet when they drew back. “God chose me to carry the Savior.” She dabbed at her tears. “No other girl can say that.”

Joseph looked at her, and then with the gentlest touch he placed his hand alongside her face. “You’re so brave, Mary. I love you more than ever before.” He paused. “I think it’s time you stay inside more. With your parents. Until the baby comes.”

The fear in her face eased, but a desperate concern remained. “Will you . . . come to see me still?”

“As often as I can . . . without harming your reputation.” He allowed himself to be lost in her innocent eyes. “God will help us survive.”

The hours passed slowly, painfully. When Joseph couldn’t stand the whispers and gossip, he went to the religious leaders and told them the truth. The whole truth. Clearly the men were shocked, stroking their beards and nodding in disbelief. They didn’t call Joseph a liar, but they asked a hundred questions until Joseph had repeated himself too many times to count.

In the end the meeting didn’t help at all. The conversation with the religious leaders never became fact on the streets of Nazareth. If people got wind of the story, it only fanned the flames of gossip. Not only was Mary pregnant out of wedlock, but she and Joseph had cooked up some insane idea about the baby being the Messiah. Joseph could practically hear the townspeople as he passed them on the way to Mary’s house.

The pain and humiliation continued until a distraction came along.

It came in the form of a decree passed randomly and without notice by Emperor Augustus. The decree called for a census of all of Israel, which meant every man was to

report to the city of his birth to be counted. For Joseph, that meant a weeklong trip by donkey to Bethlehem. Of course there was one problem.

Mary was days away from delivering.

The contractions had been coming off and on for two days. Joseph liked to think he could care for Mary and protect her on a journey like the one to Bethlehem. Instead, problems began their first day out. The nights were colder than he anticipated, and their food supply was questionable. Mary felt sick most of the time and their pace was only about half what it should be—especially with the baby almost here.

Joseph kept his eyes straight ahead, the donkey's lead rope wrapped around his hand. They had to clear the mountain pass before they could bed down for the night.

"Joseph! Another!" Mary cried out.

"I'm here." He kept hold of the rope and ran to Mary's side. He took her hand. "Squeeze my fingers. Hold on!"

She breathed hard, her eyes shut tight. "Pray! Please."

"I will." Joseph steadied her with his other hand. "Father, be with us!" he cried out. "We can't have a baby out here. Please! We need Your help, God. Right now!"

Mary's grip on his hand eased and she slumped against him, clearly worn out. "I'm not sure . . . I can do this."

"You can." He refused to let fear spill into his voice. "God is with us. He knew there would be a census. We have to believe that."

For half a minute Mary didn't move or speak or do anything but hold onto him, her whole body trembling. Then, gradually, she took a few deep breaths and sat up straighter. "The pain's gone. We can keep going." Her lips lifted in a half smile, but her eyes showed her weariness. "I'm ready."

"You're sure?" Joseph would carry her in his arms all the way to Bethlehem if he had to. "You're strong enough?"

"I am." She closed her eyes for a moment. "Just . . . a little dizzy."

Joseph looked at the back of the donkey. "You see the cross? On his back there?" All donkeys had the marking of a large black cross high on their backs. Something they were born with. This one was no exception.

Mary nodded. "I see it. Of course."

"Just focus on the center of the cross and hold on. That way you won't fall."

She did as he said and an hour passed as they climbed the mountain with the rest of the caravan headed to Bethlehem. Joseph could credit only a miracle from God that no more pains seized Mary. She remained well even as Joseph prepared their separate tents. A few campfires burned around them, and Joseph led Mary to one of them where he heated up a pack of smoked fish, some bread, and olives.

On their walk back to their tents, Joseph put his arm around Mary. "How are you?"

"Fine." She smiled up at him. "Really."

"God is good." He felt himself relax a little. If they kept their pace they'd be in Bethlehem in two days. "Maybe we'll make it after all."

"Mmmm." They reached the tents and Mary turned to him. "I like this."

"What?" It was the craziest thing she could've said. "The journey?"

She laughed. "Well, not that." Her eyes held his. "The people around the fire, on the caravan. They don't know us. No one's pointing or . . . whispering."

“Aww, Mary.” Joseph took her in his arms. “I’m so sorry. All you’ve been through . . . I would’ve done anything to spare you a minute of it.”

“I know.” She drew back. “I couldn’t do this without you, Joseph.”

“Come get me if you need me. No matter the hour.” He touched the side of her face.

She smiled. “No woman ever loved a man more than I love you.”

Mary meant every word. Joseph could see that in her eyes. When he turned in that night—despite the chilly air and two days’ travel ahead, despite Mary’s delicate condition and every wild uncertainty about the future—he fell asleep filled with joy for one reason.

Mary loved him.

They made it to Bethlehem just in time. The pains were regular now, close enough that Mary said she knew the baby was coming. After all, she’d just watched her cousin Elizabeth go through childbirth. They had an hour, maybe two, but now they had another problem—one Joseph had never expected.

Because of the census, the town was packed. People were setting up tents in the city street. But that would never do for Mary, not in her condition. They made it to the inn and he led Mary on the donkey straight to the front door. A man answered, upset, bothered. “What is it?”

“My wife . . . she’s about to have a baby. Please, sir. We need a room.”

The man peered around Joseph at Mary. At the same time another pain took hold of her. Joseph ran to her side and held her until it passed. “Sir, please!” he yelled. “We have nowhere to go.”

“We’re full. The census. Every room in the city is taken.” He gave a sad shake of his head and shut the door.

Panic coursed through Joseph. What was he supposed to do? His hands shook as he led the donkey away from the inn. Maybe one of the residents had a spot in his home. Joseph started down the street, knocking at the doorway of each house he came to. And each time he would explain: “My wife is in labor . . . the baby could come anytime. Please . . . can you rent us a room?”

Some people closed the door before Joseph finished speaking. Others suggested neighbors or businesses. But after six hours of searching the answer was the same. There was no room for Mary and Joseph.

Night lay heavy over Bethlehem when Mary cried out louder than before. “I can’t do this, Joseph. I can’t go another moment. Please.”

He ran to her side, but this time she seemed different. Her body and face were tense and she couldn’t sit upright. Joseph’s heart slammed around in his chest. She couldn’t have the baby on the side of the road. Joseph stared at the starry sky and whispered, “God, don’t You see us? We need You! Please, Lord!”

At the same moment something caught his attention. A stable in a cave not far from them. A covered room. He gritted his teeth. “Hold on, Mary. I have an idea.”

She lay collapsed over the neck of the donkey as Joseph eased the animal across the field toward the stable. He opened the door and stepped inside. Cobwebs stuck to his face and the smell nearly made him gag. A few cows had already entered and were bedded down for the night.

Joseph felt the animals watching him as his eyes adjusted. Then he saw something that might help. An animal trough. A manger. Near it was an area of hay. “This’ll work,” he muttered to himself. He spread his cloak over the hay and helped Mary to the spot. “How are you?”

She was damp with sweat, her body limp as her eyes met his. “I’m scared. It hurts so much and I—”

Another pain seized her. Joseph knelt by her side and stroked her hair, held her hand. *Help her, God . . . please help her.* Eventually the pain let up but it was followed by another and another until finally, mercifully, the baby came. His cry filled the stable, strong and healthy. Joseph wrapped him in the rags from his pack and placed him in Mary’s arms.

Her smile gave him permission to relax for the first time in days. They were in a barn, yes. But the baby was here and he was healthy and most of all, Mary was okay. They were going to make it.

“Look at him. He’s beautiful.” Mary couldn’t take her eyes off the child. “Isn’t he beautiful, Joseph?”

“He is.” For a long moment they stared at the child. “The Savior of the world lies in your arms. It’s more than I can understand.”

“Me, too.” Their eyes met and a knowing passed between them. In all the world only the two of them knew that hundreds of years of silence had been broken. The Messiah had come and he now lay in the arms of his teenage mother.

For a while Mary rested. Flies buzzed about and the smell hit Joseph again. He lifted his eyes to the cracks in the barn roof and tried to see a glimmer of the night sky. *I believe You, Father. I do. But sometimes I wonder if I’ve missed something along the way.* He glanced at the manger. A feeding trough? For the King of the world? Bugs and animals and flies? Joseph wasn’t sure what he had expected for the child’s birth, but he hadn’t expected this.

As his silent questions continued, a knock came at the stable door. Mary opened her eyes and Joseph scrambled to his feet. Had someone found them? Were they going to be kicked out of even this lowly barn? Joseph tried to feel strong and brave as he walked to the door.

When he opened it, a new kind of shock came over him. A group of plain shepherd men stood on the other side, their eyes wide with wonder. “The angel told us where to find Him! The Savior has been born! Please, can we see Him?”

“Yes.” Chills ran down Joseph’s arms. “Yes, you’re right. He was born tonight.”

The shepherds entered the barn and told of the miraculous thing they’d seen. An angel of the Lord had appeared to them and the glory of the Lord had shone around them.

“To tell you the truth, we were scared to death.” One of the shepherds smiled. “But the angel told us not to be afraid. He had good news of great joy for all people.” He looked at his buddies. “Even us.”

Another shepherd nodded. “He told us where to find the baby. Here . . . in a manger.”

The first shepherd was looking at Jesus. “Before long an entire heavenly host appeared. It was most amazing thing in all our lives.” He seemed frozen in place. “We had to come. And now we have to go tell everyone.”

The shepherds stayed a little while longer and then they left. Different men from those they'd been that morning.

Alone again, Mary fed Jesus while Joseph watched. "You've never looked more beautiful."

"My heart is full. I can't explain it. Of all the people the angel could've told tonight, he told them. Everyday people." Her eyes welled with tears. "Like us."

"What's happened . . . only God can explain."

"I love you, Joseph." Mary smiled at him. "Whatever's ahead . . . I can't do it without you."

"I'm here, Mary. I'll never leave." Joseph took her hand in his. Deep in his soul something stirred. He felt a sense of love and protection stronger than any he'd ever felt. "I will never let anything happen to either of you. I will spend my life protecting you, loving you. I promise."

Through the night the promise consumed him, while he kept watch over Mary and Jesus, and while he prayed to his Father in heaven. His prayer was simple and profound: That as long as he drew breath, God would help him protect the woman he loved.

And the Christ child God had entrusted to them both.

The confirmation of God's divine plan continued as the baby Jesus grew. Joseph moved his family out of the stable and into a small house in Bethlehem. Every time Joseph had even the first doubts about God's plan or why He'd chosen Joseph, the Father would send a reminder.

One of those reminders, something Joseph would never forget, came with another knock at the door. This time there were three Magi from the Middle East. They came complete with their wealthy caravans, an entire parade set up outside their home.

The wise men came in and shared their story, and Joseph could only listen in awe and wonder. "We followed a star to the place where you live," one of the men said. "We wanted to see the Messiah, and now we have seen Him."

The men smiled at Jesus, asleep in Mary's arms. "We brought gifts," another man told Joseph.

As long as he lived Joseph would never forget seeing the stately wise men and their entourages gathered at his small house. The sight of the kings on their knees holding gifts for little Jesus. It was one more reminder.

God really had chosen Joseph and Mary to raise the Savior.

Another reminder came soon after the Magi left Bethlehem. This time an angel warned Joseph in a dream that Jesus was in danger. "Get up," the angel said. "Take the child and His mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill Him."

Joseph remembered his prayer—that he might protect his family. He packed up their belongings and the three of them headed out before sun-up. Africa was a long and difficult journey from Bethlehem, but every step of the way Joseph was convinced. This was God's calling on his life. He had been born to protect Mary and Jesus. And so Joseph went.

The horror of what King Herod did to destroy the children of Galilee in the season that followed was unspeakable. Herod had ordered the murder of all baby boys two years

old and under. All in a search to destroy Jesus. News reached Mary and Joseph and they dropped to their knees, praying for understanding and comfort for all of Israel.

That night Mary held Jesus as He slept. She looked long into Joseph's eyes. "Thank you. For hearing God's voice. For rescuing us."

Joseph took her hands. He had never loved her more. "You are my life, Mary. You and Jesus. The promise I made to you will remain my purpose as long as I live. But the rescue comes from God alone. Always from Him."

In time King Herod died and Joseph heard the voice of the angel in yet another dream. This time he was told to leave Egypt and settle with Mary and Jesus in Nazareth. Not long after it was time to take young Jesus to the temple.

The rite of passage for every firstborn son in Israel.

"We'll see Elizabeth and Zechariah and John." Mary was excited about their time together.

When they reached Jerusalem Joseph stood by and watched as Mary and Elizabeth hugged and talked and cried. The toddlers seemed to connect instantly, as if they'd never spent a day apart. Joseph watched, amazed. The connection between Jesus and John went beyond human understanding. And no wonder. Since John would one day prepare the way for His cousin.

Joseph could hardly wait for all that lay ahead.

One day Mary and Joseph were walking with Jesus in the temple courts when an old holy man approached them. His eyes were bright with the light of the Holy Spirit and despite the crowd he singled out Mary and Joseph as if he'd known them all his life.

"My name is Simeon," he told Joseph. "Please, may I hold the child?"

Joseph sensed he had nothing to fear from Simeon. He carefully handed Jesus over. What happened next would stay with Joseph and Mary forever. With Jesus in his arms, the old man stared up at the sky and proclaimed that he could die in peace now because his eyes had seen the salvation come for all people.

Joseph put his arm around Mary and the two of them marveled over Simeon's knowledge—further proof that God was with them, that Jesus truly was His Son. But then, Simeon turned to Mary. His eyes shone with tears, and grief filled his expression.

"This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel and to be a sign that will be spoken against—so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed." He hesitated, choking on the words as if they were coming to him bit by bit. "I'm sorry." He reached out to Mary. "A sword will pierce your own soul, too."

A soft gasp fell from Mary's lips but she said nothing, gave no response. Joseph took the baby back from Simeon and wished him well. As the man left, Joseph turned to his wife and pulled her into his arms. "Mary, I'm so sorry you had to hear that."

She looked stricken. "What does it mean? A sword will pierce my soul, too?"

"I don't know." Joseph stroked her hair, the baby Jesus safe between them. "But I'm here. Nothing will harm you or baby Jesus. Nothing." He stood a little straighter. "God gave me this job and I will spend my life doing it." He put his hand on her cheek. "I love you. I will always love you."

"I love you, too." She rested her head on his shoulder.

The crowds passed around them, but Mary and Joseph and Jesus stayed unmoving,

huddled together until Mary was ready to move on. As they neared the outer edges of the temple court they were approached again—this time by a prophetess named Anna. The woman was old like Simeon, and like Simeon, she knew Jesus.

Despite the crowd, and all the chaos and confusion, she knew Him.

She touched the child's head and smiled into Mary and Joseph's eyes. "This is the Savior of the world," she whispered. "Thanks be to God for saving His people!" And then with all the happiness of the greatest celebration ever, Anna turned to the crowd around them and shouted with joy, "This is the Savior of the world! Thanks be to God! Thanks to our great and mighty Father!"

The happy moment was another sign from God, reassuring Joseph that all was well and that the Lord was with them.

Both the baby in their keeping, and the Father above.

After that, every year when Joseph took Mary and Jesus to Jerusalem for Passover, Mary would bring up the words of Simeon. And every year Joseph would remind her of his promise. Nothing would happen to the child as long as he was alive.

Nothing.

The Feast of the Passover was important to Joseph, as it was to all those who loved God and followed His ways. It was a time to journey from Nazareth to Jerusalem, a time to meet up with Mary's relatives—Elizabeth and Zechariah and John.

A time to draw closer to the Lord.

Usually Joseph and his family stayed several days before returning home, and that was the case the year Jesus turned twelve. As with every other year, Joseph and Mary and Jesus traveled in a caravan of people trekking to the city for the holiday. The visit and celebration had been wonderful. But they were a day into the journey home when suddenly Mary realized the impossible.

Jesus was not with them.

"I know I saw Him." Mary clung to Joseph, her face filled with fear. "He was with John when we left. He wouldn't have stayed in Jerusalem, would He?"

Joseph's heart beat hard, his breath jagged and uneven. "We'll find Him. Come on." Together they searched the entire caravan, but Mary was right. Jesus was not with them.

Terrified and begging God for answers, Mary and Joseph turned around and traveled as quickly as they could back to Jerusalem. They found Elizabeth and Zechariah first. Mary's relatives were still in Jerusalem and John was with them. But none of them had seen Jesus.

Three long days passed and finally Joseph was out of answers. Never had he been so scared and confused. This time no angels spoke to him, no strangers came up to them to tell them things they didn't know about their son. He was simply missing.

Finally, on the third day, Joseph ran with Mary to the temple courts and there—sitting among the teachers—was Jesus. From a distance they watched, relieved and frustrated. The teachers seemed mesmerized by Him. He asked questions, but more than that, He provided answers. Tears filled Mary's eyes as she watched their son. "Why would He do this?" she whispered. "Make us worry?"

"Look at Him." Joseph held Mary close, still at a distance from Jesus. "The teachers are amazed at His under- standing."

Mary listened quietly. “Yes.” Her frightened eyes turned to Joseph’s. “But three days?”

Jesus must’ve known they were there. He finished His conversation and then hurried over.

“Son, why have You treated us like this?” Mary gathered Him in her arms, clearly as relieved as she was upset. “Your father and I have been anxiously searching for You.”

Jesus looked from Mary to Joseph and back again. “Why were you searching for Me?” His face looked as innocent as summer. “Didn’t you know I had to be in My Father’s house?”

The words stabbed at Joseph’s heart. Though he loved Jesus with his whole being, this was the first time he truly understood his place. He was Jesus’s stepfather. Nothing more. Though Jesus returned with them to Nazareth, and though He remained obedient, His words stayed with Joseph. Never mind the rescue from Bethlehem or Egypt. It didn’t matter what Joseph had done to protect Jesus or how much he loved Mary. Forget the reality that Joseph had been there from the beginning. Joseph would never be Jesus’s father.

That role belonged to God alone.

“He has a different purpose,” Mary said to Joseph one night after they returned to Nazareth. “He does not belong to us. I understand that better now.”

“Yes.” Joseph pulled her into his arms.

“It scares me, Joseph.”

“Me, too.” He eased back and looked past her eyes to her heart. “The time is coming when the world will know.”

“And when that time comes”—Mary put her hand over her heart—“every moment we have shared with Him will be here. Inside my soul.”

“And you, Mary.” He kissed her forehead. “You will forever be in mine.”

Joseph did what he could, raising the Savior, loving his mother, picking wild orchids for Mary when she needed a reason to smile. Some seasons and years he felt too small for the task. Not brave enough or wise enough or strong enough. But then Joseph would remember the journey to Bethlehem or the one to Egypt. The times when Jesus was too small and Mary too weak. God had chosen him to protect the Savior and His mother back then, and Joseph would continue to do so as long as the Lord allowed.

The years blended, one into another, and Jesus grew strong. The townspeople knew Him and loved Him. He helped Joseph in the carpenter’s shop and He cared for Mary better than any son in Nazareth. He was the best big brother their other boys could’ve hoped for.

When Joseph began to cough late one winter, Jesus took on most of the work.

“I’ll be fine,” Joseph told Jesus one morning. “But until I recover, I need You, son. Thank You for Your help.”

Jesus promised to do anything He could, and while He took over in the carpenter’s shop, Mary tended to Joseph.

“You’re so thin.” Mary sat at his bedside, fear in her eyes. “Your cough sounds worse.”

“I’ll be fine.” He held out his hand. “Stay by me, Mary. You make me feel well again. I think I’m getting better.”

Instead, as the days passed, Joseph grew worse. Finally it became clear that their prayers would not be answered with a healing. The miracle would be something else, something still to come.

“I don’t want you to go.” Tears spilled down Mary’s cheeks as she sat with him late one afternoon. “I can’t live without you, Joseph. You’re the only one who really knows me.”

“My love.” Joseph struggled to his feet and held Mary until he could no longer stand. “I will be with you always. In your heart. Remember?”

The sobs came over her, making it impossible for her to speak. But her eyes said everything her words could not. Soon people would know their Son. He was the Messiah. But no one would know Him the way Mary and Joseph had. No one would share a bond as intimate as theirs.

Joseph’s eyes fell on the small prayer table, the one he had made for Mary before they received news about Jesus. Their marriage had not been what they had planned. The simple life, the small-town existence and normal family they had imagined never materialized.

But what they did have was richer than life.

That night Joseph grew weaker still and finally he asked for Jesus. With Mary at one side of his bed and Jesus at the other, Joseph turned his eyes to his oldest Son. “Your time is coming, Jesus.”

“Yes.” Jesus took hold of Joseph’s hands. “And yours.”

Joseph nodded. His life was slipping away. He could feel it. He looked at Mary, at the love of his life, and then back to Jesus. “Please . . . take care of her. She needs You.”

“You have My word.” Jesus’s eyes filled with tears. “You have done everything right. You were the best human father I could’ve had.” He reached across the bed and took Mary’s hand. “Don’t worry. As long as I am alive I will care for My mother.” Sadness and finality hung in the air around them. “I’ll see that she is cared for . . . if it’s the last thing I do.”

With that, a peace filled Joseph such as he’d never known before. He turned his eyes to Mary. “My love . . .” His vision blurred with tears. “How have the years gone so quickly? I don’t want to leave you.”

“You never will.” She leaned close and held him. “I will keep you with me, Joseph. Every kind thing you’ve ever done. Every loving word and moment.”

“We will be together again one day.”

“And all our questions will be answered.”

Joseph could feel his heart slowing, his breathing growing more shallow. He nodded and managed the slightest smile. He wished he could have one more day, to walk along the hill- side out back and pick wild orchids for Mary. As he’d done so many times before. But he was leaving her. He couldn’t stop it. As darkness closed in around him, he didn’t look away. The last thing he saw this side of heaven was the thing he loved most in all the world.

His beloved Mary.