

Mary

CALL
ME
BLESSED

PATTY FROESE NTIHEMUKA

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DEDICATION

To my husband, Jean,
my love and my life,
and to our beautiful new boy,
Jean Claude

PREFACE

Two thousand years ago in the land of Judea what the modern world would consider an unwed mother gave birth to a prophesied baby.

It doesn't matter if the girl lived in ancient Judea or in modern North America—an unwed mother attracts attention! Who was she? Who was her family? And how did her community react? Because everybody knows that a baby changes everything.

As I worked on this story—researching the writings of Josephus, an ancient historian, and looking into the social customs of ancient Judea—I discovered that I myself was pregnant. And as I write this, I am still pregnant—experiencing the miracle of a baby's development for the first time. I also realize, in a very real way, that a baby changes everything.

My body is changing. My emotions are reeling. My husband is ecstatic! And suddenly I feel that I understand Mary just a little bit better. She wasn't a saint—she was terrified! Nor was she perfect—she was vulnerable. And she wasn't an icon—she was an unwed mother in a society that would kill her because of that fact.

You see, a baby changes everything.

Two thousand years ago a baby did change everything! And it is because of that baby born to an unwed mother in Judea that I am not afraid to face bringing my child into the world. Because I am not alone. Neither is the baby inside of me.

Glory to God in the highest! And peace and good will on the earth!

CHAPTER 1

Rather any sickness than sickness of the bowels; rather any pain than pain of the heart; rather any disorder than a disorder in the head; rather any evil than a bad wife.

—*From the Mishnah*

Nasim pried her son's sticky hands off her hair and flipped him around to face the kitchen. An oven stood just outside the door in the courtyard, but for the time being she was finished baking and cooking. That could not be said for many hours out of the day. Tall clay jars lined the walls, and her son reached out to grab at some herbs that were drying near the window, but instead managed to snag another handful of her hair.

She felt irritated. This was not what the family needed, and she felt more annoyed than anything with the entire situation. It was an embarrassment—that's what it was!

"Oh, stop it!" she said, tugging her hair free from the baby's grasp a second time. Her son screwed up his face and tensed his body as if to wail, then, thankfully seemed to change his mind.

"I don't know what our father is thinking," her brother James grumbled, shaking his head. Arms crossed over his chest, he leaned against the wall.

"She's only two years older than you are," Nasim pointed out. "Why couldn't he have found a sensible widow?"

James fingered some of the herbs hanging nearby. He still got the same expressions on his face that he had sported as a small boy. Seeing him chew the inside of his cheek made her smile, and she shook her head. At least he had come when the home was neat as a water-polished stone. She wouldn't have him believe that her housekeeping was not as good as their mother's had been! But keeping up with a baby was

harder than she'd ever imagined. Caring for her younger cousins had never been like this.

The house had two stories. The bottom level consisted of one room, segmented off into two sections—a kitchen storage area and a living area. The cooking fire was outside in the courtyard facing the neighboring homes, and unless Nasim wanted the entire community to hear about their family issues, discussions were best held indoors. The upper level was more of a loft, with a ladder for access. It was where the family slept, with straw pushed under their sleeping mats for comfort. Her husband was a younger son, and since his father's house was filled to overflowing with his eldest son's family and his unmarried daughters, his father had helped him to settle in a small home of their own close by.

Nasim found it lonely being separated this way. She was used to a bustling house with brothers and sisters, two parents, two grandmothers, and a cousin all under one roof. Time moved on, however, and after the death of her mother, both grandmothers also passed away. Then she and her sister had married and moved out of the family home, leaving their father and her newly married brother in the old family quarters.

"What does your wife think of it?" Nasim asked.

"Hannah thinks that it would be *fun* to have a younger woman about the house with her," James replied with a pained expression. "Obviously her interests are not with this family, but her own. If it were her father doing this, she'd have other opinions, I'm sure."

Shrugging, Nasim couldn't blame the girl. A daughter-in-law was always on the outside, something that she had learned firsthand. She acutely felt the slight of not being included in her father-in-law's household.

"I suppose he wants her for her beauty," James said after a moment. "Mary is beautiful, you have to admit."

"I have to admit nothing of the sort!" Nasim said with a sniff. "She's pretty, I'll give you, but to call her beautiful is a stretch."

"She has nothing on you, of course," he said, giving his sister an amused smile. "You have Mother's well-bred looks."

Wrinkling her nose at her brother, Nasim deposited her son at her feet, where he stretched his fingers toward the bristles of a nearby broom.

“Father has always been so sound in his judgment,” Nasim continued. “Maybe it is the grief that has affected him. We can’t be angry at him for wanting to remarry . . .”

“No, of course not,” her brother agreed, but his tone betrayed the lie in his words.

Nasim brought another plate of dried dates and sat down next to her brother. They were silent for a few moments, both lost in their own thoughts.

“It seems like a betrayal to Mother,” she finally broke the silence.

“It does,” he agreed quickly, looking at her with an expression of relief.

“Do you remember how she used to sing that song to us when we had bad dreams? How did it go?”

“God bless you, God keep you, God grant you sweet rest,” James sang softly. “God hold you, God love you, for you are His blessed . . .”

“It always made everything better, somehow,” she commented, glancing fondly down at her son. “I sing it for him sometimes, too.”

“Mother always used to tell me that a good wife was the daughter of a good woman. And one day, when I was a small boy, she pointed out Hannah, and said, ‘That would be a good wife for you, son.’”

“You two were betrothed before she died. Perhaps the families were already discussing your marriage then.”

“I wouldn’t doubt it,” he said with a wry smile. “But she was right about Hannah.”

Nasim nodded. “Mother taught us well. I was ready to care for a home of my own at the age of 12. Of course, there are too many things in marriage that I was not prepared for . . .”

“You always have us. Don’t let your in-laws make you too upset.”

His sister just smiled. It was not her problems with her in-laws that she was thinking of. No, she was considering the difficulty of getting to know this man she must live beside. A brother was easy to deal with in comparison to a husband! Even a teasing, difficult brother! Someone you had known from childhood and shared memories with. It provided an established relationship already there to help cushion the bumps along the way. With a husband, the only cushion was the role she must perform . . . a new role that she had only watched from the outside. And now there was the baby . . .

“I have to get back to help Father in the shop,” James said, pushing himself to his feet. “But I wanted to see you.”

“Have you seen Yafit? I think she looks pregnant.”

“Praise God!” he exclaimed. “Be sure to tell me as soon as she tells you.”

“Of course,” Nasim said with a wink. What was family if not an intricate network of gossip? Besides, Yafit was their sister and being informed about her life was not gossip so much as their right. Her other brothers would be glad for the news, too, and she could only hope that she could be the first to relay it.

James kissed his sister’s cheek and ruffled his nephew’s sparse hair.

“God be with you, brother,” Nasim said affectionately.

“And with you,” he replied as he walked to the door.

“Don’t worry. Father will realize that this betrothal with Mary is not a good plan.”

James didn’t answer, but as he turned away, she felt that surge of frustration. If she were a man, she would find something to beat until she had exhausted her irritation. But she was a woman. She chose the next best thing—she kneaded the bread with the ferocity of a warrior in battle.



Joseph ran a work toughened thumb over the edge of a plank he was planing. It was straight and smooth, and he made a satisfied sound in the back of his throat. As his son worked behind him, the sharp sound of hammer on nail rang cheerfully through the air. James was a good craftsman. He always measured twice and cut once—the golden rule of their trade.

The perfume of shaved wood and the breeze carrying the scent of the white blossoms of myrtle trees filled the small shop. It was actually one room of the lower part of his house, and on fine, hot summer days such as today, they opened the door wide and moved the work outside under a tarp for shade.

It was hard not to be in a good mood on a day like this. Joseph tucked his thumbs into his leather belt and looked back at his son’s work. He felt younger than his 35 years. Married at 17 and five chil-

dren in quick succession—he'd done well for himself. He had an heir to take over the business. His daughters were both advantageously married. The community recognized him for his skill in carpentry, and with all the building that Rome was doing in the surrounding cities, his business was thriving. And he was about to be married again.

"Fine work, son," he commented.

James wiped his moist forehead with the back of his hand and shot his father a smile that reminded Joseph of the young man's mother. Joseph's wife, Hadas, had died two years earlier from a fever.

"Thanks," James said absently, his attention still focused on the work in front of him.

"You're looking more and more like your mother, son," Joseph said in a low voice that the rasping sound of James' saw drowned out.

Hadas . . . she'd been a good woman. Joseph remembered the day that he married her. He'd never seen her before in his life and he'd been sweaty-palmed and dry-mouthed wondering what kind of woman his father had provided for him. Only 16 at the time, Hadas had not, like most girls, arrived crying at her wedding. The groom and the male members of his family collected the bride during the night, and it was very rare for a girl not to be sobbing her heart out as she was carried to the house that her new husband had provided for her. But Hadas had been dry-eyed and solemn, as if approaching her doom.

Joseph chuckled now at the memory. Both of them had been so young, without a pinch of foresight or experience. They had been utter strangers to each other, and in the course of one honeymoon week were expected to get to know each other to a tolerable degree that would allow them to put a good face forward to the village. Practical and a good homemaker, Hadas cooked well, but tended to overspice the stew, something that drove Joseph's own mother up the plastered wall of their house and down the other side. Hadas would always manage to add more spice behind his mother's back, and there was no end to that struggle.

Luckily, Joseph's parents had been still alive, and the family lived together in one house. His parents provided both a buffer for the new couple and an example of how to behave in a marriage. He learned to behave correctly toward his new wife, something that consisted of what felt like exaggerated politeness. But his father was right—the overdone