

CHAPTER 3: THE MOTHER WHO KNEW



MOTHER'S EYES

Mary watched her firstborn from the doorway, her washing forgotten in the basin. Jesus sat with baby James in the courtyard, the two-year-old's chubby fists wrapped around his older brother's fingers. Where other boys might grow impatient with a toddler's games, Jesus seemed to expand, becoming somehow more himself.

"See?" Jesus was saying, moving James's hands gently. "Pat, pat, pat. Like making bread. Gentle with the dough."

James squealed and slapped his palms against the ground, missing the rhythm entirely. Jesus just smiled and started again. "Pat, pat, pat."

The neighbor women said things, of course. They always said things.

"Such an old soul," Rebecca murmured at the well.

"Never seen a boy so tender," Martha added, not entirely approving.

"He'll grow out of it," Judith assured them. "They all do."

But Mary knew better. Jesus wouldn't grow out of it because he wasn't growing into something—he was growing from something. Something that had been there from the beginning, from before the beginning, from that night when the angel's words had rearranged everything she thought she knew about possible.

"Mama!" James had spotted her and reached out with both arms, the universal gesture of pick me up now.

Mary obliged, settling the toddler on her hip. Jesus stood, brushing dust from his tunic, and for just a moment she saw him as others must: a small boy, dark-eyed and serious, ordinary in every way except for how he wasn't.

"The other boys are playing," she said. "I heard Benjamin calling earlier."

Jesus glanced toward the street where the sounds of rough play echoed. "They're playing war again."

"Boys do that."

"I know." He picked up a stick, examined it, set it down gently. "It makes my chest hurt. The pretending to hurt each other. Even when it's just pretending, something in me..." He pressed a hand to his ribs. "It feels wrong. Like singing off-key."

Mary shifted James to her other hip. How did you respond to that? How did you tell your six-year-old that his body was calibrated to a different frequency than other children's? That what felt like discord to him was simply the sound of a world not yet ready for the harmony he carried?

"Come help me with the washing," she said instead.

They worked side by side at the basin, James playing with the suds. Jesus's hands in the water were careful, thorough. He washed each piece as if it mattered, as if the cleaning itself were a kind of prayer.

"Mother?" He didn't look up from the cloth he was wringing. "Why do you watch me?"

Mary's hands stilled. "What do you mean?"

"You watch me different than you watch James. Or Elizabeth when she visits. You watch me like..." He paused, searching for words. "Like you're waiting for something."

The afternoon sun caught the water droplets on his hands, turning them to tiny prisms. Mary remembered another day, another light—blinding, terrible, beautiful. Do not be afraid, the angel had said. But she had been afraid. Was still afraid, sometimes.

Her hand found her stomach in the old gesture, remembering.

"Do you remember," she said carefully, "when you were very small—barely walking—and you found that injured butterfly?"

Jesus nodded.

"You sat with it for hours. Wouldn't eat, wouldn't nap. Just sat there with it cupped in your hands, humming. I was about to take it away, thinking you'd be upset when it died. But then you opened your hands and it flew away."

"I remember the humming," Jesus said softly. "It felt like the right thing to do."

"Yes." Mary took the cloth from him, their wet fingers brushing. "I watch you because I'm your mother and I love you. But also because..." How much truth could a six-year-old bear? "Because I think God has important work for you someday. And I want to help you be ready."

"What kind of work?"

"I don't know exactly." Not a lie, not really. The angel had been remarkably vague about the details. "But I think it has to do with that feeling you get—the one that makes you gentle with babies and sad at war games. The one that made you hum to butterflies."

Jesus was quiet for a long moment, watching James splash. Then: "Sometimes I dream about light."

Mary's breath caught like a door closing. "Oh?"

"Big light. Everywhere light. And it knows my name, but not the name you call me. Another name. An older name." He looked up at her, and his eyes were too old, too knowing. "Is that the work? Something to do with the light?"

She should tell him. The angel, the announcement, the impossibility of his conception. But looking at his young face, the baby roundness not quite gone from his cheeks, she couldn't. Not yet. Let him be six a little longer. Let him wash clothes and play with his brother and learn carpentry. The light would claim him soon enough.

"Perhaps," she said finally. "When you're older, we'll talk more about the light."

"You already know about it." Not a question.

"Some. Not everything."

He nodded, accepting this the way he accepted everything—with a gravity that sat strangely on such small shoulders. They finished the washing in comfortable silence, but Mary noticed how he kept glancing at her, as if trying to read the secrets written in her face.

That evening, as she tucked him into his sleeping mat, Jesus caught her hand.

"Mother? The important work—will it hurt?"

The question pierced her like a physical blade. She saw for an instant a flash of something—wood and nails and darkness at noon—but pushed it away. Not that. Surely not that.

"All important work costs something," she said carefully. "Love always does. But you won't be alone. Ever. I promise you that."

He squeezed her fingers. "I know. The light told me that too."

After he slept, Mary stood in the doorway watching the rise and fall of his chest. Such small shoulders for such heavy light. She touched her own chest, where the angel's words still burned after all these years:

The Holy Spirit will come upon you.

It had. He had. And now here was the result: a boy who healed birds and felt wood's memories and dreamed of light that knew his true name.

"Protect him," she whispered to the darkness. "Let him be ordinary just a little longer."

But even as she prayed it, she knew it was already too late. Jesus had never been ordinary.

He had only been waiting.

And she—she had been watching. Watching her miracle learn to walk in the world. Watching heaven dressed in dust and childhood. Watching love itself discover what it meant to have hands, to have limits, to have a mother who worried.

Her extraordinary, ordinary son slept peacefully, dreaming perhaps of light that knew all their names.

The ones they wore and the ones they really were.

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