

## CHAPTER XXIII MALACHI'S CHILD

The familiar call of Naomi carried into the kitchen. Mary put aside her bowl of broth and walked through the animal shelter. Chickens squawked and scattered as the ponderous Naomi passed through the gate. She plodded toward the shade of the house and plucked at the front of her robe to release heat. When Mary appeared, she paused and wheezed as though it were her final breath.

"I have brought you fish cakes . . . they will make you feel better."

Behind Naomi, two horses raised a plume of dust.

Mary put her hand on the old woman's shoulder, sniffed at the covered urn. "Smells good. How do you find time to cook for me?" Pounding of hooves drew her eyes back to the road.

Naomi made a dismissive motion. "Just leftovers." She turned to see what was attracting Mary's attention.

The horses reigned in near the entrance to the courtyard. The smallest of the riders, wearing the attire of a servant and covered with dirt, pointed toward the house. The other dismounted and walked the horses, lathered and blowing, through a cloud of dust into the yard.

The man striding toward them wore only a breech cloth and a scabbard strapped to a body rippling with long muscles thick as rope. The broad girth of his neck and shoulders made his head appear small. A long, thin mustache framed his mouth and hung below his chin. On his chest he wore the tattoo of a snake curled around the legs of a naked woman. A sword hung from his waist and a dagger was strapped to his left leg.

Mary pushed Naomi back and held her against the wall of the animal shelter. Joseph's warning against living alone flashed through her mind. Feigning bravery, she asked, "What do you want?"

Her words did not slow the man. He strode to within arm's length and for a long moment stood silent, eyes moving casually from her breasts to her face. "You are Mary, daughter of the stonecutter?"

The odor of sweat and death caused Mary to recoil. An icy chill passed through her. "What do you want?"

Dust encrusted the hair in his flared nostrils. He whipped his sword from its scabbard and placed the point against Naomi's stomach. "Answer, or I will show you what this fat woman last ate."

Through bloodless lips, Naomi muttered, "Let him kill me. Tell him nothing."

The Scythian's eyes told Mary he would enjoy carrying out his threat. "I'm Mary," she said.

"The stonecutter's daughter?"

"Yes."

The Scythian turned to the second rider still mounted and shouted, "Get off."

The girl slid from the saddle and collapsed to the ground. To Mary he said, "Mount!"

*What in God's name does he intend to do?* Her voice broke, "Who . . . who . . . are you and what do you want with me?"

"King Herod has summoned you to Jerusalem. We will leave *now*."

"You must be mad," she screamed. "Herod knows nothing of me. I'm not going anywhere with you." She spun and took a step, but his hand twisted in her hair, and he yanked her head back with such violence her neck popped. With her cheek against his, he hissed in her ear, "Mount, or I kill the old woman."

"Please," she said, "I can't ride." A woman at the well had told her that riding could harm an unborn child.

"You will learn. Now mount!"

"That isn't what I mean . . ." But there was no use explaining. The barbarian's eyes were as cold as a winter wind. She prayed that God would protect her baby. "I will ride," she said, "but I can't mount with this robe."

The Scythian's sword flashed and split the robe from her crotch to the ground. He grinned. "Now you can mount."

Naomi threw her weight at the horseman. With his free hand he brought the hilt of his sword around and smashed her face. Blood spurted and she staggered back against the house. The food she had carried scattered about the yard. Chickens darted about pecking the unexpected meal. The Scythian touched the point of his blade against the old woman's neck. "Come near me again, and I will cut your throat."

"Stop!" Mary screamed. "Leave her alone." She struggled to go to Naomi, but the Scythian held her hard against him. The other rider, who, since dismounting had been sitting stone still in the dirt, suddenly threw her hands to her temples. "Do as he says or he will kill us all."

The Scythian's lips touched Mary's ear. "I said, mount!" He pushed her toward the horse. She took the reins of the lathered steed and lifted her foot, but the animal, hot and spirited, shied.

The Scythian laughed, lifted Mary by the waist, and set her in the saddle. "It's a pity those legs of yours are not wrapped around me instead of that horse." He took the reins. "Now we shall ride." He leaped into his saddle, and dug his heels into the horse's flank. Outside the wall, with dust boiling beneath the hooves of the anxious mounts, he drew Mary abreast and shouted, "You are to run that noble steed into the ground. Now go!"

The horses bolted and disappeared into the dusk.