

Extraordinary Women OF THE BIBLE

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MARY'S STORY

Ginger Garrett

~ CHAPTER ONE ~

Mary loved every season in Nazareth except one: wedding season. During the warm months when flowers bloomed and grapevines sagged heavy with fruit, it seemed every eligible maiden stood with her beloved under a wedding canopy, and Mary was just a lonely bystander. Never a bride. Never invited into the story of love.

She frowned as she adjusted her hair yet again, exasperated at the dark curls that continually popped loose, like mischievous toddlers springing up from their beds. How she missed her older sister, who had married last year. Miriam would know what to do with this hair. And today's wedding required that she look her best. Mary's best friend, Rebekah, was getting married. Rebekah was wealthy and would look resplendent. All Mary could hope was to avoid embarrassing herself or her family.

Her mother's poor eyesight limited her ability to help. Looking in the polished bronze mirror next to the bed, Mary forced each curl back down into place. She'd already run out of combs to secure her hair. Only prayer would help now. She didn't mind praying about her hair—she prayed over everything, never even waiting for synagogue or a trip to the Temple in Jerusalem to voice her heart to the Lord.

“Pour out your hearts to him, for he is our refuge,” she sang. She loved the psalms of David, and thankfully, the Lord had blessed her with an excellent memory. Her mind was certainly better than her singing voice. Maybe that was why she was still an unpledged maiden. Eligible men didn't swoon over a girl's memory. Besides, there was only one man she was interested in, and he already knew everything about her.

She reached for the sandals lying near the mat. The room was too quiet without Miriam. It had always been the two of them, working by

day together at the household chores, then whispering secrets to each other at night when the moon peeked in on them from gaps in the stone walls. The sisters were so close, people joked it was impossible to tell them apart. It didn't help that their father had named them both Mary. To avoid confusion, her older sister chose a variation of the name, Miriam, to go by in the village.

The other girls had giggled behind their backs about having to share a name, as if their family couldn't afford more than one name. But the younger Mary was named after a beloved aunt, and Miriam after a beloved grandmother, each on separate sides of the family.

And her father took great delight in both daughters. If he wanted sons, no one ever heard about it. He paraded his daughters through town as if he was a man to be envied. In part, he was. Mary knew that everyone thought her older sister was beautiful. Her eyes were the color of richest fur, and her hair had such a sheen that it looked like water flowing down her back.

But Miriam was living in her husband's house now, and with autumn closing in, Mary would be lonely in this tiny upstairs room—and cold. Her sister had taken the best bed coverings to her new home with her groom, Cleos bar Jacob. All Mary had was the hand-me-down coverings from her beloved older cousin, Elizabeth. Sadly, this covering was for a child who had never come. Elizabeth, in her old age, was barren. The Lord had never answered her prayers for a child. So many had prayed on her behalf too. Hope was gone. All that remained was the shadow of grief for what could have been.

But Elizabeth was so much more than a barren woman, Mary wanted to tell anyone who would listen. She was kind, generous, and faithful to friends, family, and God.

And if it wasn't for Elizabeth's generosity, Mary wouldn't have this lovely robe for today's wedding. Finished at last with her preparations, she stood and twirled in the early afternoon light. Dust motes like a mist

of gold danced through the air.

Suddenly, a nagging fear struck her heart.

Would she ever get married? Did anyone want her? Anyone at all? At fifteen, she was past the age of betrothal. Her father said he had saved for her sister's wedding and needed time to save for one more. Secretly, Mary wondered if the truth was more embarrassing—that no one had shown any interest. Not even the boy she had spent all her summers with, chasing butterflies through the olive groves. Joseph bar Jacob had not sent his father to ask for her hand. He had not even talked to her much recently.

What was Rebekah's charm? Every boy in town had made mooneyes over her when they were younger. They still did! Of course, Rebekah's betrothal to Phillip bar Micah had been official for over a year. And Rebekah was, by law, as bound to her future husband as any legal wife. If she even flirted with another man, Phillip could have her stoned. Or at least flogged. But Rebekah was so wealthy that Phillip would probably overlook that offense. Rebekah was forgiven much on account of her father's wealth. She always had been.

Mary carefully navigated the ladder to the kitchen below. Her mother was at the table, counting out coins for the week ahead. At least with Miriam gone, it was easier to stretch their market money. Mary pecked her mother on the cheek and walked out, just past the kitchen door.

Sitting in the sunshine, she examined her nails. She loved helping her mother in the herb gardens, but it meant her nails usually looked terrible. She found a fragment of dried flax stalk to clean the nailbeds and tidy the cuticles. Even if she had the hands of a servant, fresh herbs in the bread were worth the trouble.

Nazareth was abundant with herbs and good produce. If one knew what to plant and how to care for it, one could feast like a king. Or at least how she imagined a king might feast if a king ate only from a garden.

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Today's wedding would be a feast too, for all the senses. Rebekah, adorned in her bridal finery, would be a vision of happiness. Just the thought of seeing Rebekah under the wedding canopy at last made Mary smile.

Mary decided she would not waste a moment of her friend's day. She might never be a bride, but she would make a joyful companion. Her joy would be her gift. That was the richest gift she could bring, she thought wryly, because it cost her dearly.

She stood and squared her shoulders, vowing to soak up every bit of happiness the day offered.

Even if none of it would ever be hers.

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The sun stood like a sentinel of fire above the green hills. Mary pinched the edge of her robe and fanned it, hoping for an autumn breeze from the hills. Rebekah and her groom stood sheltered under a canopy as they recited their vows. The guests sweltered. At least the herbs would have longer to stay green, since the afternoon sun remained so strong despite the month.

"Let's hope the vows are short."

A familiar voice caused her to giggle.

She cut a glance behind her. Joseph bar Jacob sat behind her in the grass. His forehead was dotted with beads of perspiration.

"They still must exchange gifts," she whispered.

Joseph feigned falling backward, earning a stern look of rebuke from Mary's mother. Even without good eyesight, her mother recognized his voice. Joseph had been a childhood friend of the sisters. His older brother had married Miriam, and for weeks, Mary had felt painfully awkward around Joseph. The match between them would seem inevitable, but they were not at all attracted to one another.

That was what Mary told herself. The truth was, Joseph had shown no romantic interest in her. It was easier to pretend it was mutual. Less painful too. If she ever married, she would wish to marry Joseph.

With the vows exchanged, the gifts began. Rebekah was already wealthy. The gifts from her new husband's family were more for the crowd's benefit than Rebekah's. But each family's reputation had to be maintained. Mary sighed, prepared to watch Rebekah gorge herself with gold and finery.

"How are Cleos and my sister?" Mary asked. They had moved into the family home and would not attend social events for some time yet. "Definitely more comfortable than we are," Joseph complained softly.

Mary shook her head in mock aggravation, knowing Joseph would laugh.

Cleos and Miriam's wedding had been short and pleasant. Cleos was a good man. A bit hot-blooded at times, as all his tribe could be. What else could anyone expect from descendants of King David? Yes, Saul had slain his thousands, but David his tens of thousands.

Over the next hour, Rebekah's father presented her entire mohar—her bridal price—plus a rich field and several female servants. The groom gave even more elaborate gifts that everyone exclaimed over.

Mary closed her eyes, partly to escape the temptation of jealousy. She was grateful that next month she would leave to visit Cousin Elizabeth, who was more like an aunt than a cousin. Elizabeth promised to teach her how to weave. Mary had wanted to try creating prayer shawls to sell in the market. She had so many ideas for designs! Elizabeth relished these visits from little Mary.

There would be no talk of betrothals and babies. Elizabeth would make sure of that, for such talk could be as painful to her as to Mary. Elizabeth was married, true, but she knew how bitter disappointment could be. Just because a girl was faithful to God did not mean life un-

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folded as she pleased. In Elizabeth's wise and compassionate company, though, Mary would be free to be a girl again, without a care for her future.

At long last, the wine flowed. Joseph accepted a cup from Rubin, who clapped him on the back before Joseph could take a sip. The wine spilled from the cup, staining Joseph's tunic. Mary winced to herself. Joseph had worn his best tunic today, just as she had. Neither of them had much money. Joseph caught her staring in dismay at the stain. He turned abruptly as if she had offended him. Her heart sank. He had known exactly what she was thinking, but she hadn't meant to injure his pride.

Rubin caught Joseph by the arm. Rubin chuckled and whispered something in Joseph's ears. Poor Joseph, red in the face, excused himself.

Mary had an idea what Rubin had said. Everyone knew Joseph and Mary were childhood friends, and if marriage didn't bring them together soon, they would be parted forever. They would find spouses in other villages. The fathers seemed reluctant to make the match when neither could offer anything beyond his child. Worse, the awkwardness between the fathers had often made talking with Joseph an exercise in frustration. She couldn't say anything that could be mistaken for flirting. He couldn't say anything that could be construed as a promise.

The friends who once ran through the hill country flushing birds into the air, cradling abandoned young rabbits, bringing flowers home to their mothers... Well, Mary sighed, at least she had the memories. She might not have Joseph, but she had those years. He was seventeen now, and while some Jewish families waited to marry their sons off, the village knew it was time for Joseph to start his own family. His father had to make a match, and soon.

Mary wrapped an arm around her mother's shoulders, escorting her to a bench where she could sit and enjoy the festivities. Mother didn't have the stamina she once had. Old age was moving quickly, attacking

her mother's every defense, even her joy.

Mary felt the unknown future wrap around her like a heavy, damp shawl and shivered. It wasn't in her nature to be afraid, but lately strange fears had repeatedly, relentlessly tempted her to worry. Often when she was tired, or hungry, or even simply kneading bread, her mind would wander to fearful and dreadful outcomes. What if her mother died before Mary was married? What if she never married at all? What if she never had children?

What dishonor she would bring to her family! If no one wanted her, what would she do?

She shook herself free from such silly imaginings.

Rebekah appeared at her side and led her away from her mother and the bench.

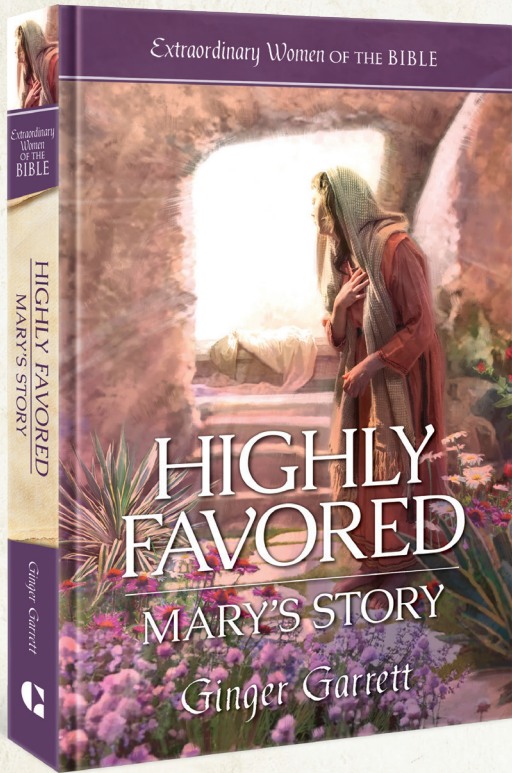
Mary wrapped her arm around Rebekah's waist. "I am so happy for you, my friend. I pray God blesses you with many children, and that you know happiness in every way."

"We will always be friends?" Rebekah asked, her eyes growing misty.

"Of course, silly girl. What could ever part us?"

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