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## The Little Shepherd

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# The Little Shepherd

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*James Calvin Schaap*

## Chapter I

And there were, that night, shepherds in the fields, keeping watch over their flocks, when suddenly waterfalls of light flooded the darkness, a flood opened by a legion of heavenly hosts.

But just before, that holy night was like any other. The shepherds kept one eye peeled on their flocks, the other up and into an inky black night inlaid with a gazillion stars.

Ezra, the boss, was running through assignments just then—who would be the camp tender and who would be herders or lambers in the next few days. But to say that Brother Ezra spotted what happened first that night would be dead wrong because when that choir of angels appeared on the broad black stage, no one could have missed them. No one did. In fact, just a few minutes after the angels had gone away, not one of them could even remember exactly where they came from or how they even appeared. Suddenly—whoosh!—there they were, outfitted in wings glowing as if the midday sun had risen just behind them. Whoosh!—just like that.

No boom, no charge, just a bath of sparkling brightness. For a moment little Jesse thought he might have died and gone to heaven. When he shielded his eyes, he realized he had tumbled to the ground—all of them had; and there they sat, sprawled out as if some monster wind had knocked them all off their pins. The sheer firepower of all those angels made the desert hills shine, night to day. Stunning is what it was, even before those angels spoke, even before they sang. Just stunning.

Little Jesse put an elbow beneath him—the sky was like nothing he'd ever seen. And when the voices came, the words hummed beautifully like some lovely lullaby line. "Don't be afraid," they said.

Just once. Just once, and the music of those words reached into their hearts to calm every last jerking muscle and high-wire nerve in their bodies. That's the way they talked about it later—as if the very words of the angels awakened such joy in

their hearts, joy they hadn't even known was there at all, joy that spread over the hills of Judea with the miraculous and brilliant angelic spectacle.

"Incredible news," the single triumphant voice of the angels told them. "Big news, but it's not just for us or for you guys but for all people," and then they said it again, "—for all people. For everyone."

That booming music erased every doubt they could have had and nearly stole away their minds. There they sat, each of them, bowled over, blind as bats in the astonishing radiance. "Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord."

Not one of those shepherds doubted. There was no question. They should look for a sign, the angels said, a sign they couldn't help but chuckle about just a few minutes later as they picked up their things for the trip. "You will find a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes," the angels had told them, "and lying in a manger."

"A savior—the Messiah!" Old Hadrian had said, eyes starlight bright. "Honest to God, it's the Messiah!" He shook his hoary head, delirious. "And we'll find him in a barn?" He raised both his hands nonsensically. "Glory be," he said. And then again, "Glory be. Thanks be to God!"

The hills above town turned inky dark again once those angels left, but no one doubted what they'd seen because all of them had felt something pour like honey into their hearts. In ten minutes, no more, they had packed their things and were ready to go to the city of David to find this baby in swaddling clothes.

Someone had to stay behind, Brother Ezra thought, and he told them so. "We can't all go," he said, still shaking from what they'd all just witnessed. "Bethlehem's a good hike, you know. Someone has to stay with the sheep."

The moment his older brother said it, Brother Jesse knew he would be it, the youngest of the crew. Just knew it. Couldn't be anyone else. The others had been with the gang for many summers already—and they were men. He was the kid.

He'd be left behind.

The others were mostly stunned, however, by what Brother Ezra had announced. "Surely the Lord will watch over the flock," Brom said, pulling his rucksack over his shoulder. "Surely the angels will keep an eye peeled. You saw them just now." He pulled his rucksack over his shoulders. "This is the Messiah, after all—it is the birth of the King!"

Brother Ezra shook his head. "We can't just leave 'em alone," he said. "We can't take that chance."

"Bring them all along," Brother Brom said. "What do you say? Round 'em up and herd 'em to Bethlehem, the whole flock—every last one of them."

Brother Ezra shook his head. "To try a round-up now—and in this heavy darkness—why, that baby in swaddling clothes could be starting kindergarten by the time we get there. You know how sheep are."

Little Jesse was standing beside the olive tree. "I'll stay," he said. "I'm the youngest. I don't want to stay behind—don't get me wrong," he told them. "But I think my brother is right—someone has to stay with the sheep. They'll need us. When you get back, you can tell me the whole story."

The silence made it perfectly clear he'd be the one.

"Bless you, Jesse," his brother said finally. "I don't know if it's right."

"Just go, Ezra," Jesse told him. "I can take care of myself—and the sheep. Just go to the stable with the manger."

No one moved. Then Brom walked up and patted him on the head, mussing his hair the way he always did. Hadrian punched his arm, then squeezed his shoulder, and Arie pretended to bless him by laying his shepherd's crook over Jesse's shoulder and mumbling something about thanks.

It was, Jesse thought, one of the best things he'd ever done, but also the worst. What they'd seen that night was a vision he'd never forget, and the command had been clear—"go to Bethlehem and see the miracle." There was no question, he thought. Maybe Brom was right—maybe God's huge legion of angels would watch over the sheep while they were gone—why wouldn't they? This was a very, very special night.

But the moment they gathered their things,

the shepherds seemed to forget about Jesse's gift because as soon as they'd turned their backs they were off, not walking either, but running, flying almost, on their way to Bethlehem. In the pale moonlight, all the way down the hill and up the next, he watched them, the whole gang making their own kind of light as they tore along to find the Messiah. The sound of their joy carried over the open fields as if they were only an arm's length away.

Jesse sat on his rucksack and stared out into the deep starry sky and over the fields. Here and there, a lamb bleated, most of them bedded down in little cloudy clumps in the moonlit darkness. Lousy sheep, he told himself. He'd become a shepherd because his father was and his brother was and so many were. He loved the sky and the long hills and the stars all around, loved the end of the day—and the beginning too, the glorious light of dawn. All of that he liked.

Right then, for the first time in his life, with all the other shepherds already out of sight and earshot over the next hill and on their way to town, to Bethlehem, he told himself he'd never really liked sheep all that much. They were needy and silly, and tonight—the night of the Messiah—he was just plain stuck with them. While the rest of the shepherds were looking for a savior, he'd be all alone in the desert hills with nothing but a thousand brainless sheep.

He rubbed the back of his shirt across his face, looked around for the highest spot on the land, and started to climb. Tonight—the most important night in the history of everything—it would be his job to watch the sleepy sheep. He reached up to his eye and quickly wiped away the tear before it would run down his cheek. He'd never been left with them before, never been left alone out there in the deep darkness.

In his heart, he knew volunteering had been the right thing to do, but his heart felt split in two because in his heart and soul he longed to be with the others, on their way to find the King.

Here he was, all alone in the Judean hills and just about a million miles from joy.

## Chapter II

The moon, bright and full, turned a cheerful face on the hills where little Jesse sat alone, listening to the voices of the night. Once the angels had

closed the night's door once more and the shepherds were long gone to Bethlehem, the moon's bright glow opened up over the hills, and the scattered flock, hundreds of sheep, hither and yon, bedded down against stony ridges up high, where they believed they could spot their enemies approaching.

Little Jesse had been around the flocks his whole life, long enough to know their only sure defenses were their senses—noses that made them move into the wind, no matter where they were bound; eyes sharp enough to pick out any quick and dangerous movements.

Maybe the choir of angels kept them quiet right then, he thought. He sat, perfectly alone, at the top of the hill where they'd set camp. Above him were a million pinholes in the nightfall.

He turned east to face a dawn that was nowhere close to arriving, knowing at that moment that his brother Ezra and all the others were well on the way to the city of David. They wouldn't sleep—how could they? And he shouldn't either—after all, his job was to protect the sheep. He'd offered to stay with the sheep, the one who wouldn't be finding the baby King in swaddling clothes. Even though the others had thanked him, he couldn't help but feel abandoned and alone.

He thought about making a quick run back to his home to get his baby brother, but Sammy was too little. Or he could leave anyway, go to Bethlehem, trusting that host of angels to keep watch, even though they'd vanished as if they'd never been there at all.

He was alone in the wide Judean hills. He'd been left behind, and he was going to miss the miracle, the biggest miracle of all. Everywhere he looked, the silly sheep snored away as if this night wasn't the most important night in the history of everything.

Nothing moved in the moonlit darkness. Silence reigned, even if somewhere in town the angels were singing as beautifully as they had right here. He was the lone sentry, and the sentry's job was to stay awake and stand watch, to be sure that nothing would harm the sheep.

Silence fell over him like a quilt in the cool night air. His eyes grew heavy. He shook himself awake once, twice, three times, but heard nothing anywhere—no sound from the hushed hills. His mind painted images before him—a brand

new baby in swaddling clothes, a child bathed in heavenly light, the shepherds all around, falling to their knees in prayer, their joy beyond measure.

The music of the angels still played in his mind, and he saw them again, an entire chorus of shining brilliance—"Glory to God in the highest"—like nothing he'd ever heard or seen before, music so joyful it still made him smile. When it replayed in his mind, he knew it would be stuck there forever.

He jumped awake quickly when he realized he'd almost fallen asleep once again, the hillside so quiet that his having to be there seemed silly. Who cared about sheep when the King had been born? Really, he wasn't needed here. He sat back, spread his legs out to lie down, and soon enough let himself go, falling asleep with bright ribbons of angel music that kept playing in his soul.

"Jesse, the crook! Grab your crook."

He rubbed his eyes. A robed man stood with his back to him, looking west, a white bandana around his head. It wasn't Ezra, wasn't Brom, wasn't any of them, but he knew his mind was foggy with sleep. Big shoulders, loud voice—someone who called him by name, someone who knew he'd been napping. "Where?" Jesse said. "What's happening?"

"Something's out there—the sheep are moving. I can't see where, but I can hear it—listen!" the man said.

He tried to shake himself awake. A low rumble rose, a low humming he hadn't heard before he'd fallen asleep.

"Come with!" the man whispered and pointed to Jesse's crook, then took off, Jesse behind him, crook in his hand, sandals slapping over the sharp grass on the hillside.

It wasn't long, it seemed, before the man in the bandanna stopped and put out a hand to signal Jesse to stop running. There the man stood, quiet, still as a statue, looking at the rear quarters of a small flock of sheep, obviously rustled up from sleep, scared of something, but unaware of little Jesse and the bandanna man behind them.

The man leaned into a crouch and signaled Jesse to do the same—and he did, just an arm's reach behind him. And that's when he heard a hushed gurgling coming from the darkness, from behind a spiny oak cut in black silhouette against the night sky. A growl. Sure it was. A wolf.

Probably two, maybe more. Wolves mostly came in packs.

The stranger crouched stock still as the dozen sheep kept budging their way backwards toward them, more and more scared, it seemed, snoots up against each other's flanks as they surged down the slope in reverse to keep the wolf in front of them.

"Behind the tree," the man told whispered. "You take him, and I'll wait to see where the others show up." He pointed with his own crook.

His brother Ezra had taught him what to do when a wolf came, but he'd never stared one flat in the eyes, not alone anyway, not until now. Jesse pointed with his crook at the tree as if asking where to go, even though he knew.

The stranger nodded and pointed again. "Go on," he said. "That one may be the leader. If we run him off, the others may scatter—wherever they are."

The sheep kept staring at the shadowy oak, all the while backing down the hill toward him.

"Just run?" Jesse asked.

"You've got to scare him more than he scares you," the man told him, nodding his head once more toward the tree. "He's got to know he's not going to tangle with you."

The whole world seemed to disappear into the shadow created by that single oak tree before him. The low gurgling growl meandered toward them from somewhere out there, somewhere from behind the tree.

"Run! Go right at him!" the man said.

So Jesse did. He gathered every bit of his courage into the tightest fist he could and took off, circled the flock to the left and ran directly at the tree, his crook in his hand like a sword, until he came close enough to see him. There that wolf was, even bigger than he'd been in his imagination, gray and dark and wide across the face with bright and shiny eyes that seemed to glow with devil's glitter as he crouched but didn't move—not a muscle, as if he wasn't scared one bit of little Jesse. When he didn't move, Jesse stopped a crook's length away so the two of them stood there, frozen in time, staring wildly at each other.

"Just scream!" the man in the bandanna said, yelled, from the other side of the petrified flock. "Swing that thing in your hands and scream!" he said.

But Jesse couldn't raise his arms, the monster wolf's eyes glowing like embers from a fire. Then that growl grew into something fierce, and the wolf deepened that crouch as if he was about to take a flying leap. Jesse imagined his own body dragged to the ground by the awful wolf. He felt its razor-sharp teeth in his legs, his shoulders, just as if he were a sheep.

Even lower that wolf crouched, and growled even deeper.

"Run him off!" the man yelled from behind him. "You hear me, Jesse? Run him off!"

Little Jesse took the crook in both hands and pulled it back behind his head. All he could do was do all he could do, and when he swung that stick, he swung it with such force that he almost lost his footing before the crook of the stick thudded into the wolf's ribs and that wild beast yelped like a puppy—yelped like a puppy and scrambled off into the darkness, limping along, his right front leg hobbling.

"And don't you ever, ever come back, you hear?" Jesse screamed.

He'd done it. A wave of something good came over him. The beast was gone.

And when he turned around, he saw the sheep had vanished too, scared off just as the wolf had been. He stood up straight, his nerves flashing through his arms and his hands so wildly that he couldn't even hold that crook straight. He wiped the sweat from his face with the back of his arm and looked into the darkness. The wolf had disappeared.

"He was alone?" he asked the stranger, without looking back.

There was no reply.

He turned slowly. The sheep were gone, but so was the stranger, so he was all alone on the slope of the hill. He looked back again, stepped back from around that spiny oak tree where the wolf had crouched, and tried to see once more into the darkness to be sure that it had gone. Then he listened, once again, to the sounds of nightfall, trying to hear any more sounds coming from the broad and hidden hillsides. No sound—nothing at all.

"He's gone," he announced as if the stranger were there beside him. "I ran him off. I whacked him with my crook, and he took off. He was huge—did you see him?"

No one said a word, nothing at all behind him but a bare hillside—no sheep, no stranger.

But he knew he'd bested the wolf, the one he'd faced down. He knew the wolf was gone—at least for now. The truth is, he'd been scared silly, but he'd done it. He'd gathered all of his strength and dared to run at that beast, and when he did, he'd saved the sheep.

But he had no idea where they'd gone—or where the stranger was for that matter, the man in the bandanna who had awakened him to all the danger.

### Chapter III

Jesse wished the others had seen the way he'd taken care of that big, ratty wolf. He wished he could tell them, but then, maybe they wouldn't care right now, after following the angels into town for the baby King in swaddling clothes. Those fierce yellow eyes of the wolf had made him nearly forget where they all were.

If it hadn't been for the stranger, there would be a different and very sad story to tell; for no matter whether that wolf was alone or in a pack, he certainly would have feasted on a lamb or two, maybe ten, and then left them there, bloody and dead, maybe still dying. When his brother and the others returned, even more full of joy than when they'd left, it would be terrible for them to find dead, mangled sheep, terrible because losing sheep was always bad, but also because the men would be so full of joy. After all, the baby in swaddling clothes was the Messiah, the angels had said.

Real live angels, too. Right in front of them, filling the sky. Hours had passed now, and with every minute it seemed harder to believe that what the angels had proclaimed could be true. He looked up at the sky, at the darkness. He hadn't forgotten. How could he ever forget?

Those angels must have visited other people too, not just stopped for a bunch of farm-boy shepherds—he had to smile to think of the angels breaking the night sky all over Judea, in towns, too, telling them all the wonderful news, singing and glorifying God. It was one thing for them to stop out in the middle of nowhere, but he could only imagine what it must have been like to hear that heavenly concert in town.

But who was the stranger who'd appeared out of nowhere? He stopped walking and let the

silence fill in around him, thinking that if he'd stand perfectly still, he could hear the stranger's footfalls. Nothing. He kept walking until he reached the shepherd's camp, then sat down again beneath the fig tree at the top of the hill.

Thanks be to God, he'd run off that wolf, done the job he'd been left behind to do. There would be that to say anyway when the others returned.

In the city of David, the whole world will be out in the streets, he thought. Standing room only—the magistrates and their women in best robes, merchants and townspeople, and his own good friends, despite their dusty sheepskins. "Be not afraid," the angels had said. Shepherds were never afraid, not even of wolves, whole packs of them.

He looked out into the darkness, then listened for stirring. No sound. He wished the stranger in the white bandanna would show up again because he needed to thank him for so much—for waking him, for helping him face the wolf. Besides, there was so much to talk about and no one to talk to.

Stones rattled beneath the hooves of some poky animal coming up the path, but when a snorting blast leaped out of the darkness, Jesse knew it had to be Boaz, the big old ram who always kept his distance from the flock—Boaz, the proud field general of all the sheep. "Not to worry—that big ugly wolf is long gone," Jesse told the old ram. "The whole bunch of you are going to have a quiet night now, I'm sure, even after all that music."

Boaz took a few sheep steps toward him and nudged at his leg, looking for attention. The first time he'd seen Boaz, the old grandfather had come flying at him, knocked him down so flat that all Jesse saw from beneath him was thick wool. But he had known enough about old rams to understand that you can't let 'em get the best of you, so he swung and swatted until the old guy let him up, then turned around and walked away. Ever since that day they'd been friends, special friends, even though Boaz loved to butt him that way, all in play. Jesse dug his fingers into the wool behind the old guy's ears and scratched, just like he always did.

"You see 'em, Boaz?" he asked the old guy. "Did you see all those angels up there in the sky?"

Boaz nodded his hoary old head as if he were answering, then pulled away quickly.

Jesse got to his feet and stood for a moment, staring back into the darkness at the sheep close



enough for him to see.

He wondered what his brother Ezra was finding now, in Bethlehem, in the middle of the night. They'd be looking for a barn—not that there were that many in town. They were looking for a baby wrapped in rags and lying in a manger. Put all that together, he thought, and it shouldn't take long—a King in a manger, he thought. “You ever hear of such a thing, Boaz?” he asked his old friend. “How crazy is that anyway?—a king in a barn, a dirty old stall? You're a king—how'd you like it, born in a stall?”

Boaz snorted as if he wished he could answer. He turned his head back and gave Jesse a blank stare as if he hadn't heard a word.

“Course, you're a sheep,” Jesse told him. “I wish I were there, you know—who wouldn't want to be there? I still want to go,” he said, but the wolf had made it clear that big brother wasn't wrong about someone having to stay behind.

Boaz snorted a little, then stomped off, stopped, looked around, bleated a couple of times as if answering, then kept going again, halfway into the darkness.

“You got something to show me?” Jesse asked, and Boaz nodded his woolly head, took a few steps farther down the hill, and then turned back again. “You're wanting me to follow you, aren't you?” Jesse said.

He caught himself yawning, but he could feel sleep creeping back into him once more. Boaz seemed to want to tell him something, to show him something he needed to see. Once more, little Jesse looked around, hoping to find the man in the bandanna, at the same time wondering how long it might be before the men returned from town to tell him what great things they'd seen.

Then Boaz turned on a dime and charged him, came up the path at him as if he wanted to knock him off his feet. But instead of charging him, Boaz drew up right in front of Jesse, face-to-face, as if to tell Jesse that he'd had enough of the boy's foolishness. Then he turned around again and trotted off into the darkness just far enough to be seen, lifted his big head and bleated, loud and low and long.

“Okay, okay,” Jesse said, and started after him beneath the dark blanket of stars.

Not far either—just down the hill a bit and towards some rocks, but always in the moonlight and never in the darkness. Jesse stepped along

carefully through the sharp grass and stones, wishing he were as nimble as Boaz, who, old as he was, was still, after all, a sheep. The old ram's shoulders rocked as he walked, anxiously, as if Jesse was a burden he had to carry.

The ewe lay on her side, almost motionless, in a dusty circle where she'd tried to create a bed. She looked as if she were dead. When he came up beside her, Jesse knelt down and put his hands on her stomach to be sure she was breathing. What had happened was clear. She had just now had a baby or maybe even two. He looked around to find the lambs, but there was only one, lying there in a puddle of blood and afterbirth, and very dead.

Beneath his hands the ewe's rib cage moved ever so slightly with her few faint breaths. She was still alive. Jesse looked up for a moment. He'd been around for dozens of birth, dozens and dozens, but he'd never seen an ewe quite like this before because there was no terrible bleeding. The lamb had probably been born dead, but it didn't look as if its mother had suffered greatly. Still, it seemed as if she was dying.

“What must I do?” Jesse said to Boaz, but the old ram simply stared at him—and then at the mother. “I don't know what to do,” he said. “She doesn't seem to be in trouble—it's almost as if she wants to die. Is that it? What must I do? Good Lord,” he said, I don't know what to do.”

He got down on his hands and knees beside her and rubbed the mother's head. He lay his arm around her and felt the slight heaves through her body when she grasped for breath. She wasn't fighting, he thought. It was almost as if she didn't want to breathe.

He slipped his feet from under him so that his body would be close to hers. Boaz watched him closely as he lay there beside her.

“You're doing it right,” a voice said, a voice he knew right away was the stranger's. “Don't get up. Just stay right there—you're doing the right thing.”

The man with the bandanna was behind him now, but Jesse listened because the man had been so right before.

“Just stay there—you hear me?” the man said.

He could feel the stranger's presence behind him, heard his feet come up close, felt him kneel down.

“I don't know what to do,” Jesse told him.

"Her baby is dead—you see her there?"

"Let me take care of that," the stranger said.

"Her lamb must have died when it was being born, but there's nothing here that makes it look like it was an awful delivery—not even much blood."

"Listen to me," the man said. "You're doing the right thing. Stay right there. What that mother needs is you beside her—you hear me? That's what she needs."

"What can I do?" Jesse said.

"You can bring her peace."

"I don't want her to die," Jesse told him. "I want her to live."

"Whether she lives or dies, you're doing the right thing," the man said. "I'll take care of everything else, you hear me? The thing you can do now is stay with her, just stay put—all night even."

It seemed strange to Jesse that this sad ewe could be needing him. "She's only a sheep. What does she need of me?" he asked.

"Every living thing needs comfort—every living being needs love," the man said. "Now listen—I'll get this little one out of here. That'll help." Jesse could hear him get back to his feet. "Promise me you'll stay right there until morning because she needs you—whether she lives or dies, she needs you."

Just on the other side of the mother, Boaz folded his feet beneath him as if to let Jesse know that he too would keep up the vigil.

When he felt her ribs again, it seemed they were barely moving.

"Things are going to be just fine," little Jesse told her, his voice trembling. He'd talked to Boaz before, he told himself—why should he feel it so strange talking to this mom? She felt so weak, so powerless. "Everything is going to be fine," he said again.

#### Chapter IV

Jesse didn't hear his brother and the rest of the shepherds return that morning, even though they were singing as they came up the side of the hill, even though they were full to the brim with rejoicing, even though they were merry as children. But little Jesse was sleeping.

It had been a long night for him on the hills, and once he fell asleep beside that troubled ewe, he didn't wake up until he felt his brother's toe in

his ribs.

But his big brother Ezra was in no mood to scold him for falling asleep. "I'm so sorry," Ezra said, looming over Jesse almost mournfully. "I was out of my head last night after the angels came." He slapped his forehead. "I should not have let you stay with the sheep—that was my job. I should have let you go with the others because what we saw, Jesse, my little brother, what we saw in the city of David was something you should have seen."

"The King?" Jesse said quickly.

"The same—in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger."

"Just a baby?"

"And yet a king—and yet to be a king." He shook his head. It was not to be believed. "You hear me? In a manger, wrapped in scraps, yet to be a King—our King."

"Praise God," Jesse said.

Ezra's face was bright red in the morning light, as if he'd been looking into the sun all night long. A smile wide as the Judean hills swarmed over his face.

"How did you know it was him?" Jesse said, pulling himself up to his knees.

"The angels were there—the angels, but this time in reverent silence, just as we were—all of us, even his mother, Mary. Just a girl, too, Jesse. Mary seems not much older than you. The king is the child of a child."

"And you were there?"

Ezra wiped the sweat from his forehead. "When we got there, his mother had him in her arms." His curly hair fell over his shoulders when he shook his head in awe. "There were only rags around, nothing for him because. . ." he couldn't help but laugh, ". . . because they were in a barn—in a barn, Jesse."

"And how did you know? It seems impossible..."

"It was just as the angels said." With his shepherd's crook he pointed at the sky, now nakedly blue. "Right there, wasn't it, where he said 'Glory to God, glory to God?'"

"How could anyone forget?" Jesse said.

Brother Ezra took a deep breath. "I should never have let you stay. You're too young—there are things you don't know yet—you're just a kid." His dusty robe danced beneath his long hair when



he shrugged his shoulders. "But I wanted so badly to be there at the birth of our King."

"No, no," Jesse said, "it was a good thing that I stayed..."

"No, I was wrong." Brother Ezra crouched beside him. "It was good of you to volunteer, but I failed you as a leader and as your brother." He reached out a hand. "And that's why I want you to go now, by yourself, back to Bethlehem, to see for yourself," he said. "My little brother needs to see the King."

"Now?" he said. He could hardly find the words. "You're asking me to just take off now?"

Ezra shook his head. "Telling you," he said, helping him up from the ground. "Go," he said. "With your own eyes, you must see what the angels wanted us all to see."

Jesse stood. His heart was hammering—he could feel it beating so hard he thought it might jump right out of his chest.

There was so much to tell Ezra—the wolf, the stranger, the ewe who was dying. He looked around and quickly realized that sad mom sheep was no longer beside him. Maybe what had happened had all been a dream. No, it really did happen, he told himself.

"So why were you way over here?" Ezra said.

"There was an ewe here," he said. But he realized it would be a long story, too long. "A baby lamb died, Ezra—and the mother..."

Once again he looked around. There was no trace of anything anywhere near. "I was with the mother," he said. "I was lying here with the mother because the man..."

There was so much to say, but no stories so important as the Bethlehem king. "I was here with the mother." He stopped and stuttered because an explanation seemed impossible. "Here," he pointed, "because the baby, the little lamb, was already gone."

The dusty earth around him was thick with tufts of sharp desert grasses, but there was no mother and no baby.

"Never mind, never mind," Ezra said. "Go and see what has given all of us such joy." He reached into his rucksack and took out some jerky and berries, then bent down, and Jesse felt his brother's kiss on the top of his head. "To us a child is born, to us a King."

The hills seemed to fall away beneath him,

little more than the smooth surface of the sea. He ran when he could, slowed to get his breath when he had to, climbed the hills like a goat, and streamed down the other side as if he were aboard a wave, the wind at his back.

In his mind, he'd hidden away the map his brother had drawn in the sand, so he knew exactly where to go.

When he arrived, he slipped his arms out of his rucksack, wondering how one entered the palace of a king, even if the palace was a stable. The doors were closed. Was he supposed to knock? Should he remove his sandals?

He licked his hand and pushed back the hair from his face, tried to look clean, not just a lowly shepherd boy from the hills. There he stood, at the door, listening for anything, even the cry of this baby, the King. Nothing. No sound at all.

He looked around. Bethlehem was moving along as if nothing at all had happened, merchants already opening their shops, mothers milling about choosing what they needed for the day. There were children playing behind him in the streets, and old men in gray beards sat on benches, leaning on their canes, pointing into the hills from which he'd come.

He knocked on the loose barn door, first politely, then with the heel of his hand. "Bang, bang, bang"—the pounding couldn't have been mistaken. He waited.

His brother's face had changed after what he'd seen in the stable. He himself had seen the angels, heard them, their voices still ringing—"Be not afraid," they chanted, over and over, so he lifted the latch slowly, an inch or so, then waited.

Still no sound from within. He stood there, the door partially opened, a long shaft of light from the crack he'd made, running along the floor. No one there. He opened the door wider, and light fell in all around and behind him. Nothing but a manger in the very center of the stable, an empty manger. No one was there.

Up from the emptiness of his heart, just then, flowed something so huge he couldn't breathe, a murky cloud of sadness came up and squeezed and squeezed until he knew the tears were wrung from his own broken heart. No child who'd become a mother. No angels. No king. No savior. The manger stood alone in the center of the stable, clean and bright in the broad wave of light from

the door outside.

"He is not here, but he is not gone," a voice said, a voice from the silhouette at the door behind him. "Don't be afraid—he is safe, he is a child, and he is a king. But he is not here."

"Where have they taken him?" Jesse said quickly, running back toward the door. "My brother sent me here to see the baby, to see the King."

Against the bright sunlight, the man's face was guarded and dark. But in a moment, in a flash that came to him like a vision, Jesse knew the man in the bandanna was back. He watched as the stranger took a guarded look up and down the streets outside, then came in and shut the door behind him. The cracks between the slats ran in long lines of sunlight through the stable and over his body.

"You were with me last night," Jesse said. "You're not a dream, are you? You were beside me, all the time."

The man nodded. "I wish you could have seen him," the stranger told him. "But when King Herod heard of him, his parents thought it best to leave—they've gone to Egypt."

"To Egypt?" Such a thing seemed impossible.

"He is still the King," the man said. "Fear not."

"But I wanted to see him—I wanted to see the baby."

"There will be time," the man said.

"My brother said it was the best thing he'd ever seen."

"You will too," the stranger told him. "I know you will."

"Not here?"

"Not here, but instead in all his glory. He will return, Jesse," the man in the bandanna said. "You will see him yourself—I know you will. He will return."

"Not as a baby."

"Not as a baby, but never as anything less than a King." He took a deep breath, put a hand out, over Jesse's shoulder. "Now, go back to the hills—go back to the sheep."

Still, Jesse had to wipe back tears. "I don't want to go back—I want to see the King," Jesse told him. "I want to serve the king."

"The sheep are his, my son," the stranger said. "The sheep you love belong to the King. You will serve him as you serve them—as you did last

night. When you keep them from wolves and help them mend their broken hearts, you love them, just as he does. They are his, you know."

Then he bent down and looked into Jesse's face, his hand still on his shoulder. "You want to know a secret?" he said. "You promise to tell no one, ever, Jesse, and I will tell you something that only you will know." He used his thumb to wipe back little Jesse's tears.

"About the baby?" Jesse said.

The stranger nodded. "I tell you the truth, and you will know yourself that it is the truth when, someday in the future, you hear it yourself—the words the King will speak from his own lips."

Jesse's breath was coming in windy gusts. "What is it?" he said through his tears.

"Someday the King will tell the world that he is the good shepherd," the man told him. "Believe it! The King himself will say he is what you are, what you showed yourself to be just last night when you cared for his sheep. He will say it and you will know."

"And how will I hear it?" Jesse said.

"You will hear him here," he said, pointing at his ear, "and here too," he said, pointing then to his heart.

"And I will see him?"

"Face to face, I swear." He took his hand off Jesse's shoulder. "And now it's time for you to go back to the hills, to the sheep—you hear me? There will be a sign, too. It's time for you to be what the King wants you to be—a good shepherd."

"There will be a sign?" Jesse asked.

The man in the bandanna nodded.

"You're an angel, aren't you?" Jesse said. "You're one of those who came to us on the hill, out of the darkness—you're one of those who sang. You're one of those who told us to go to the city of David for Christ, the Lord?"

Just like that, the stranger was gone, slipping out somehow, disappearing into the half-darkness of the empty stable.

The hills had never seemed to steep, so high when Jesse returned. He would find it difficult to tell his brother Ezra that no baby lay in the stable, that the King had been hurried away because King Herod wanted to find him. He wished he'd seen the King.

The sun stood up above the hills like a huge, golden shepherd, but the air was cool and light,

and while the hike went slowly, he kept hearing again the promises of that angel, the angel who'd brought him through the night, kept hearing those promises in chorus, just as he'd heard them—as they'd all heard them—when the heavens threw back their curtain of darkness and the heavenly hosts had appeared, glorifying God the glorious night before.

The rucksack was heavy, as if he carried a yearling over his shoulder. He remembered hardly anything of the trip to Bethlehem, but coming back, following the path his brother and friends had taken up the slopes and down seemed drudgery until finally, just a hill away, finally their own flocks began to appear.

And then he saw Boaz, the old grandpa ram who'd awakened him last night. Just as if nothing had happened at all, Boaz started out toward him, gathered his gait into a run, then came galloping down the side of the hill straight toward him, his face up into the wind, and didn't stop for

a moment, but ran right into him, knocking Jesse down the way he loved to do, then stood there beside him, grinning. He was back to his old tricks.

And just at that moment, he saw there beside Boaz that mother who'd lost her lamb last night, the ewe who'd wanted so much to die. Right there with Boaz was the ewe he himself had tried to comfort, to keep alive.

She was. She'd made it. She was alive. There she stood beside Boaz.

"There will be a sign," that angel had told him.

When Jesse looked into the eyes of that mom, he knew she was the sign the angel had promised. It wasn't a dream—nothing that happened last night was a dream. That he himself would see the King was true too. He would hear him speak, would hear the King say—and this was his own special secret—that he was, like Jesse, the good shepherd.

Thanks be to God, he told himself. Thanks be to God.