

Sinners Reconciled

Prologue

...Joseph, being a just man, was not willing to make her a public example...

Harry Tillotson barrelled through the church door and up the aisle, wiping his runny nose on the back of his torn jacket sleeve.

It was just three weeks to Christmas, and they had been learning all about the coming of the Christ child in Sunday school. Mary was going to have a baby, but it was not her husband's, Reverend Byatt had said.

And some of the older boys had sniggered, and looked at him, and on the way home, they had begun to make nasty remarks about his mother. He had tried to make them stop. But there were too many of them. All of them thinking they were better than him, because they had a proper ma and pa, most of them married in this very church.

Harry glared up at the stained glass window where a glowing Madonna smiled serenely at the baby on her lap. Reverend Byatt had said God sent a baby at Christmas time to show He wanted to forgive sinners.

So why wouldn't anyone forgive his ma for having a baby? For having him? When she was the kindest, and cleverest, and hardest working of all the mothers in Barstow?

People in the bible, he sniffed, angrily dashing a tear from his mud and blood caked face, just weren't like real people at all. Take that Joseph the carpenter, Mary's husband. He had somehow known he wasn't the baby's real father, but he hadn't gone round telling everyone Mary was wicked, then gone off to war and got killed! No, he had stayed and looked after her.

"Why couldn't ma have married someone like Joseph?" His words burst from the misery deep inside, startling him as they rang out through the empty church.

You weren't supposed to talk in church. Only to say your prayers.

He whipped off his cap, clasped it between his hands, and bowed his head in a penitent attitude.

But his voice was still throbbing with resentment as he muttered, "She should've had a husband who would stick by her no matter what. Then nobody would ever have known she had done anything wrong. And the other boys wouldn't think they have the right to make my life as horrid as they can, just because I've never had a proper father! Nor they wouldn't call my ma those names either. I do try to stick up for her, but," he hiccupped, remembering the crowd who had circled him, taunting and jeering not five minutes earlier, "I'm too small!" Another tear ran hotly down his face to soak into his collar.

"The Reverend said you sent Jesus to get born in a stable, to prove you wanted to reach the poorest and lowliest and forgive their sins. Well," he complained, "*everyone* looks down on us. So that makes us the lowliest. And Squire Jeffers says my ma's the greatest sinner in these parts. So I should think you'd jolly well want to send us a man like Joseph to make things right for us, and then," he lifted his face defiantly towards the high altar, "I might believe there's some point in having Christmas!"

A sudden shaft of sunlight pierced the Mary window and lanced down to strike the floor right in front of his scuffed boots.

He flinched, guiltily acknowledging he shouldn't have shouted at God.

A hell-born brat, that's what Squire Jeffers said he was. Even though Reverend Byatt argued that *nobody* was beyond God's forgiveness.

Harry turned on his heel and pelted back down the aisle. He wasn't sure which of them had it right about him, but one thing he did know. He had to make it back to the one place he knew he would always be welcome, even though he *was* a bastard.