

I'm stuck helping Aunt Martha . . . again. This time we're preparing for some fancy-schmancy dinner.

I don't know why she keeps inviting people to her house. The other day she had a big dinner party for Uncle Lazarus. Aunt Martha likes to think of herself as "the perfect hostess," and this time she's going all out.

Which, unfortunately, means so am I.

I've been in the courtyard grinding grain all morning and it's still not good enough for Aunt Martha. "The perfect hostess grinds her grain like dust, Salome, not sand," she says. "Keep grinding."

My arms ache. I want Aunt Mary's job of tending the goat meat. That can't be hard — rub spices into the meat and watch it cook over the fire.

*Aunt Mary's just turning a spit*, I grumble to myself as I pound the flour.

By the time the loaves lie rising in the afternoon sun, I'm ready to join them. But no.

Apparently the perfect hostess must serve her specialty, which in Aunt Martha's case is her famous lentil stew. That means someone has to fetch and fill the cooking pot with water, chop the herbs and shell a huge bag of lentils.

I should have known that someone would be me.

"Salome," she calls from inside the house, "hurry up with those lentils, and ask Mary for some meat. The perfect hostess puts her best meat in her stew."

I head across the courtyard to Aunt Mary. She stops turning the spit for a moment and wipes the sweat

off her forehead. Her fingers are blistered from tending the fire. Perhaps her job isn't as easy as I thought.

"You've been such a help to us, Salome," she says smiling. "I know my sister gets carried away at times. But tonight really is important."

"Honey bread, meat stew and a roast?" I say. "Even Uncle Lazarus didn't get that feast. Aunt Martha must be expecting the king himself!"

Most nights at my house, which is right next to Aunt Mary and Martha's, we eat nothing more than cheese, olives and maybe some broth.

"Who is coming anyway?" I ask.

"Jesus," Aunt Mary says, eyes sparkling. "Jesus of Nazareth."

I've heard of Jesus of Nazareth. Word spread that He healed a man of leprosy, raised a boy from the dead and even calmed a storm.

"What's burning?" Aunt Martha pokes her head out the window. "Salome, is something burning?"

"Just me," I mutter, leaning over the fire to slice the hot meat.

Yeah, everybody's heard of Jesus, the one who fed 5,000 at Bethsaida. Too bad He's not cooking tonight.

By the time Jesus and His friends arrive, poor Aunt Martha is spinning like a top and taking me along with her. "Salome, light the candles. Salome, pour the drinks. Salome, find more bowls."

"Here, Salome," she hands me a jug. "A perfect hostess keeps the cups full."

I make my way through the crowded room, filling cup after cup. The jug, heavy in my tired hands, wobbles as I pour. I'm just about to drop it when a strong hand reaches out.

It's Jesus.

"Thank you, Salome," He says, holding the jug steady.

I should be worried that Aunt Martha might see her guest of honor pouring His own drink, but I'm not. Something about Him, just being near Him makes everything OK. Peace pours out of Him like water into His cup, filling me right to the brim.

"Lord!" Aunt Martha yells as she bursts into the room, her good robe dark with soot, her eyes dark with anger.

She smells like a burnt goat, the goat Aunt Mary is supposed to be turning and basting.

*Uh oh*, I think, noticing Aunt Mary relaxing by Jesus' feet. *This can't be good.*

The whole room goes silent. Even I know the perfect hostess does not freak out during supper.

"Lord!" Aunt Martha continues, red-faced. "Don't You care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me."

*By herself? I think. What am I? Chopped lentil?*

Martha looks as though she might explode.

But Jesus smiles at her and says, "Martha, Martha. You are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed."

He holds out a hand, inviting her to join in the party.

Surprisingly, she does.

When the last guest leaves, Aunt Martha sighs.

"What a wonderful evening," she says. "You know I decided two things tonight. What really matters isn't *doing things right for Jesus*, but *being there right with Jesus*."

Aunt Mary smiles. "And what's the other thing?" she asks. "That you're not the perfect hostess?"

"No," Martha laughs, throwing a towel at Aunt Mary. "That you're doing the dishes." ■