




MAGDALENE

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*God of forgiveness,
do not forgive those murderers of Jewish children here.*

—ELIE WIESEL AT AUSCHWITZ, JANUARY 1995



*Wilt thou forgive that sin where I begun,
Which is my sin, though it were done before?
Wilt thou forgive those sins, through which I run
And do them still: though still I do deplore?
When thou hast done, thou hast not done,
For, I have more.*

—JOHN DONNE, "A HYMN TO GOD THE FATHER"

CHAPTER ONE

SILENCE, AS HEAVY AS DOOM, wraps itself around me as two guards lead me into the lower-level judgment hall. When I fold my hands, the chink of my chains disturbs the quiet.

My judge, Flavius Gemellus, senior centurion of the *Cohors Secunda Italica Civum Romanorum*, looks up from the rolls of parchment on his desk, his eyes narrow. I don't blame him for being annoyed. I am not a Roman citizen, so I have no right to a trial. Besides, I have already confessed and am ready to die.

My appearance in this dimly lit stone chamber is a formality, an exercise in Roman diligence before the application of Roman justice.

The centurion's eyes flick automatically over my form, register my sober tunic and veil, then return to an unfurled parchment in his hand. "State your name for the record."

"Mary," I say, using the Greek form for the scribe's benefit. "But my people call me Miryam. Miryam of Magdala."

My judge looks up again, his eyes raking my face. "You are . . . Syrian?"



"I am a daughter of Isra'el. From a territory called *Galil*, or Galilee."

He nods. "Galilee is part of the Syrian province. So detail your crime."

"You want me to begin at the beginning?"

The surly centurion is apparently in no mood for small talk. "If I had my way, you would already be in the arena. But since the emperor insists that we record the history of every condemned prisoner, give us your story."

I lower my gaze to collect my thoughts. The flagstone in this dank chamber is wet and streaked with mud; a rat scuttles into the shadows beneath the scribe's table. Roman citizens undoubtedly stand trial in better surroundings, but I have no complaints. I am here of my own volition . . . and I'm ready to meet my Lord.

At the thought of entering eternity, a weary smile crosses my face.

"You have nothing to smile about." The guard at my right brandishes a flail in my direction, but I doubt he'll use it. I am an old woman, worn to a nub by my wearisome journey to Rome.

"I am called many things," I say, deliberately letting my mind run backward, "but because Miryam is such a common name, most people call me the Magdalene. I grew up on the shores of Lake Kinnereth, which you know as the Sea of Galilee, where my father arranged my marriage to Yaakov, a fine man. HaShem, the Holy One, favored us with two fine sons—"

The centurion lifts his hand to catch the scribe's attention. "Wait—I've never heard of this God. Who is HaShem?"

I lower my gaze in respect, but not for the Roman. "The God of Isra'el, whose name is too holy to pronounce. *HaShem* means 'the name.'"

"Fine. But we don't need your life history. Speak of your crime, woman. That's all we need to record."



I hold his gaze without flinching. “But you cannot understand my crime unless you understand my history.”

The scribe lowers his stylus and frowns at me from beneath a fringe of graying hair. Clearly he’d rather send me to the lions than transcribe my story, but I have an important tale to tell. The apostles have been sharing their stories for years; this is *my* chance to bear witness to all that transpired in Eretz-Yisrael when Pilate governed Judea.

I return my attention to the centurion at the desk. His distinctive helmet sits on the edge of the table, its red-plumed crest before me like an open eye. The officer’s dark gaze studies me from shadowy circles beneath brown hair generously flecked with gray. Though I have not even begun to explain my presence in this horrid place, he glares at me like an avenging angel.

I wonder at the source of his anger—does he hate me or my people?

The barrel-chested guard moves toward me. “She’s stalling. She’s afraid of what waits for her in the arena.”

“I’m not afraid of anything out there.” Again, an unbidden smile tugs at my lips. “I’m afraid for you. All of you.”

The centurion snorts with the half-strangled mirth of a man who rarely laughs. “Why would you say that? We’ve broken no law.”

“Rome—and Romans—have broken the laws of the one true God, the maker of heaven and earth. But you are not alone. I have broken them, too.”

The guard opens his mouth to protest again, but my interrogator silences him with a look. The centurion glances toward the door behind me, then crosses his arms and leans back in his chair. “Take your stations by the door; we will let her talk. She might prove interesting.”

Grateful for this small miracle, I close my eyes. “My story begins in Magdala, a city by the sea. . . .”

A decorative header featuring a repeating geometric pattern of diamonds and stylized floral motifs in a light gray tone.

CHAPTER TWO

I SHOULD HAVE KNOWN better than to journey to the market in the heat of the day. When the sun climbed directly overhead, anyone with the sense of a goat took cover beneath a shady tree or ducked indoors. But that morning Binyamin had almost crawled into the fire pit beneath my dye pots so, after scolding him and wiping ashes from his drool-covered fingers, I delayed my departure for the market to thank the Holy One, blessed be he, that I'd turned in time to stop my younger son from burning himself.

With Binyamin tucked in a sling, I blinked in the sting of a hot wind and wound through the mostly deserted aisles of the marketplace. After passing the stalls of ironworkers, woodcutters, and bread bakers, I found Rachel, my pregnant daughter-in-law, leaning against a stack of folded fabrics.

Because ours was the only stall covered with a thatched roof, three other women had taken advantage of my absence to crowd into the rectangle of shade. I recognized them as I approached: the tall



one sold figs; the old one, oil; and the lame one, wine. The lame woman, Deborah, once sold me a bottle of bitter wine. I hadn't ventured near her booth since.

"*Shalom aleikhem*, Miryam," the tall woman called as she struggled to rise. "And peace be with your daughter-in-law for taking pity on us who were about to melt."

"Peace be with you." I gave them a tight smile and patted the sling in which young Binyamin rested. Hospitality required that I invite them to stay, but I had no time for idle talk. I needed to speak to Rachel, and the spot of shade was not big enough for all of us.

"Good trading to you." I bowed as each woman reluctantly vacated our booth. "May the Holy One of Isra'el, blessed be he, make you prosperous."

When the last interloper had moved away, I knelt on the woven mat and untied the sling knotted at my shoulder. "Has the Roman woman come?"

Rachel's dark eyes danced. "Not yet, but she sent a servant to tell me she would arrive at midday. She probably wants to avoid the crowds."

"Ah."

I didn't know much about Romans in those days, but everyone in our village knew that the women who traveled with Roman soldiers weren't—how shall I say this?—proper *wives*. The legionnaires of Rome, my Yaakov once told me, weren't allowed to marry lest they be distracted from their duty to the army. Of course, that didn't stop the centurions from keeping their mistresses nearby. Bands of harlots frequently followed companies on patrol, so even the lowliest Roman soldier could indulge his desires . . . though not with any sort of woman I'd welcome into my home.

I didn't care what the soldiers did when they weren't terrorizing



our people. Romans were *goyim*, or Gentiles, and Gentiles were heathens; everyone knew that.

I placed my younger son on the mat and looked around the quiet square. The women in the next booth had covered their baskets of salted fish; the woolworkers had settled linen sheets over their stacks of wool. They would return when the sun slipped toward the west; then goods and money would again be exchanged in the Magdala marketplace.

“Miryam.” Rachel nudged me and held out her arms for the baby. “Behind you—the Roman woman.”

I turned my back to the approaching litter for a last-minute check of my bright blue tunic. Fortunately, Binyamin had not spilled anything on me. I ran my fingers along the edge of the veil covering my head, tucked a few straggling hairs out of sight, then turned to greet my visitor.

The pretty lady who traveled in the company of a Roman centurion had been in Magdala only a few days. Apparently she had spotted my exceptional wares through the curtains of her litter as she traversed the marketplace; in that hour she had finally come to buy.

The litter bearers halted and a white linen curtain lifted. A dainty face, framed by a riot of black curls, smiled out at me. “You are the dyer of wool and silk?”

The woman spoke perfect Greek, so I answered in the same tongue. “I am. And you are?”

“The lady Carina.” She swung her feet out of the conveyance and stood, her red sandals a stark contrast to the beige dust of our market square.

My eyes lifted to drink in the details of her costume. All sorts of foreigners came through Magdala, but rarely had I seen a woman as beautifully dressed. My prospective customer wore a tunic of a



splendid yellow silk bordered with golden fringe. She had chosen to cover this with a blue *palla*, folded lengthwise and fastened at each shoulder with a golden clasp. To protect her pale skin from the hot sun, she also wore a short cape over her upper arms.

I was studying my visitor's apparel so intently that I missed her next comment, but another nudge from Rachel broke my concentration. "I'm sorry; what did you say?"

The young lady smiled, so perhaps she was accustomed to being openly admired. "I asked if I might know your name."

"I am Miryam." I imitated her smile, wanting desperately to appear as competent as whatever dyer had provided her current garments. "Wife of Yaakov, mother of Avram and Binyamin, mother-in-law to Rachel—if you should ever need to ask for me."

The woman's pale hand drifted toward a covered stack. "May I?"

"Certainly."

I whisked the protective linen away, exposing several lengths of wool and silk. The silk came to us from elsewhere for dyeing, but workers in Magdala spun and wove the fine wool. Our town was known for two things—no, three: salted fish, expertly dyed fabrics, and corruption. I'd heard it whispered that the religious authorities in Jerusalem thought Magdala's virtue had been spoiled by too much trafficking with Gentiles, but no city in Judea opened her gates to more foreigners than Jerusalem.

The lady knelt. Her hand caressed the wool, then fingered the silk. "I wonder . . ."

"Yes?"

"The other day I glimpsed a lovely scarlet fabric here. I glanced away, but when I looked again, the material had changed to a deep purple. Did I see two different kinds of cloth?"

My heart sang with delight. "You saw a fabric so unique it can only



be purchased in this booth. Not long ago I discovered that by combining a red dye with blue I could create a silk that shimmers scarlet in one light and purple in another. The secret process is long and involves several dyes, but I'm sure you'll agree the effect is worth the effort."

A knowing smile dimpled her cheek. "I do agree. A miracle, surely, that a cloth can vary in color."

"Miracles are of the Holy One, blessed be he," I corrected her. "The cloth is merely the product of a highly skilled dyer."

"A dyer who must command a very high price."

"A woman with such an eye for color demands a high price indeed. So high that common people cannot afford such cloth. I have been saving that fabric for a customer with discernment, an exalted station, and the beauty to complement it."

"I'm sure you have." Her gaze trailed lightly over a stack of blue and green silk, but I could tell she wasn't interested in those colors. Her mind had filled with purple and scarlet. She lifted her gaze. "Would you mind if I examined it?"

"Of course not. I have it safely put away, to protect it from dust."

I stepped over Binyamin, who played silently, and reached into the calfskin bag hanging at the back of our booth. I pulled out a generous length of the shimmering silk and nearly tripped over Binyamin as I moved forward to spread the fabric over our other goods.

The Roman lady caressed the silk and brushed it against her cheek, then smiled as she pulled it into the sun. Draping the material between her fingers, she shifted the folds and laughed as the crimson deepened to a purple as intense as any cloth that ever graced a caesar.

"The fabric—" I knelt and pulled a lower edge into the shade—"begins crimson; do you see? But the heat of the sun brings out the purple hues."



She clutched the cloth to her chest and closed her eyes. "I must have it. How much?"

In truth, I had not set a price, knowing that few people in Magdala could afford such luxury. But this was a Roman centurion's woman, so perhaps I should set my hopes high. . . .

"Ten denarii," I told her.

Her eyes flew open. "Silver?"

I laughed. "Gold. Ten gold denarii."

She drew in a quick breath. I expected her to counter with an offer of one or two denarii, which I, after pretending to be insulted, would answer with a price of six. If all went well, I might sell the remarkable fabric for five denarii, half the price of a small house in our town.

But the lady surprised me. "You will come to the inn and pick up your money," she said, gathering the fabric into her arms. "Tonight."

I shook my head. I knew she wouldn't understand, for Romans go where they will and think nothing of it, but no respectable daughter of Avraham would enter a Gentile home, even a temporary abode. And Yaakov would bar the opening of our courtyard before he'd let this woman into our house. I caught a silken edge and held it tight. "You will send a servant to my house with the money. When your servant comes, my husband will give him the silk."

She pressed her painted lips together, then nodded. "It shall be as you say." She let the fabric fall; I reeled it in and thrust it into Rachel's arms for proper folding.

We stood, each of us satisfied with our half of the bargain. The Roman lady climbed back into her litter and murmured a command to her slaves, but not before casting one last longing look at the crimson-and-purple bundle in Rachel's embrace.

AN INTERVIEW WITH ANGELA HUNT



Q: *Don't you find it a little intimidating to write a novel where you're putting words into Jesus' mouth?*

A: Absolutely! That's why I tried to use his actual words, or slight paraphrases, whenever possible.

Q: *Okay—I have to know. Mary Magdalene was a real person, and of course I recognized the names of the disciples, but what about all the other characters? Which are fictional and which are real?*

A: The challenge of a historical novelist is to flesh out the story world with fictional characters and events while not contradicting the historical record. So yes, Mary Magdalene is real, as were the other women around Jesus, the disciples, the emperors, and several other names you'll recognize from the New Testament, including Claudius Lysias. Incidentally, Peter did have a wife who traveled with him, so she must have been one of the women around Jesus. Which one? I chose Susanna, but I could be wrong.

The fictional characters? Of the major figures: Atticus, Flavius, Gaius, Quintus/Binyamin, and Hadassah.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR BOOK GROUPS



1. What did you know about Mary Magdalene before you read this novel? Did the story shatter any of your previously held ideas?

Think about this—when Peter protested after Jesus talked about dying, the Savior replied, “Get away from me, Satan! You are a dangerous trap to me. You are seeing things merely from a human point of view, and not from God’s” (Matthew 16:23). With that example in mind, what do you think Jesus would have said to any woman who tried to tempt him to sexual sin?

2. Did you begin to read this story with the eyes of a twenty-first-century Christian? Did you stop to consider that the people of Jesus’ day didn’t know who he was in the beginning? First-century Hebrews were firmly sold on the concept of “one God and only one God.” If Jesus had proclaimed himself as God from the outset of his ministry, how do you think he would have been received?
3. Before reading this, did you realize that Jesus’s many references to himself as the “Son of Man” pointed to Daniel 7:13-14? Why would this have been significant to a Jewish audience?

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