

**THE MAGDALENE CHRONICLES
CHAPTER 1**

by

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FICTION

Story Word Count = 2497

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Chapter 1

My name is Mary, sometimes called the Magdalene. I am the companion of Jesus, the one some call the Messiah and I call Teacher. He asked me long ago to write down this story, which would not be except for him. He is truly my savior and I have been in his debt since that day a lifetime ago when my mortal fate was stoning for the sin of adultery. A sin I had enthusiastically committed with a man I passionately loved and whom I believed loved me.

Circled by a crowd of angry men demanding the vengeance owed God, I lay in the dirt at the feet of the Teacher. The Pharisees had demanded the judgment of Jesus, who had long preached forgiveness, not the vengeance of the Torah. They would see if this forgiving prophet had the moral righteousness to keep God's Law.

Weeping in fear of death, mud from the tears sticking to my face, I waited for the first impact.

As the Teacher sat silently and drew figures in the dirt, the crowd grew tensely quite. Only then did he look at me and in a soft voice said to the men, "He among you who is without sin, cast the first stone."

There was a hushed pause. Bracing for the pain, I flinched as I heard the first stone strike the ground. Yet the pain never came. One after another, stones fell to the earth from conscience opened fingers and the departing feet of my would-be executioners kicked up a cloud until, finally, there was only silence, drifting dust and the Teacher.

He spoke to me then, saying, “Woman, where are those accusers of yours? Has no one condemned you?”

I looked at him from muddy eyes. My mouth was like cotton and at first I could not reply. Finally, I managed to croak, “No one, Lord.”

He smiled then and, rising, helped me to my feet saying, “Neither do I condemn you. Go and sin no more.”

But, I did not go. I stayed with him and cared for him and learned from him for the remainder of his time on Earth. And I died a thousand deaths as life drained from him on the cruel cross of the devils from Rome and now I die daily in my loneliness in his absence.

Teacher, I miss you so!

We were inseparable and joyful in each others company, and our love grew. Yet, I was a newcomer to his circle of disciples and our love was not acceptable to some. The time of his I took had belonged to others before and jealousy was soon apparent. Our eventual marriage was a disgrace to many. My carnal reputation could not be undone and my lack of virginity was a constant topic of gossip and innuendo.

Yet, the Teacher ignored it all, never doubted me and brought me into his deepest confidence. Soon I was discoursing and disputing with the other disciples and began to be known as a teacher myself.

Our daughter, Sarah, was conceived only weeks before Jesus’ execution and he was pleased, saying, “My seed for the future has taken root. The Son of Man becomes the Father. With this obligation fulfilled, I am ready for what comes.” I, however, was not.

One night he pulled me close and said, “Mary, our time together is short. Where I go, you will surely follow, but not now. I need you to do a thing of great difficulty but even greater necessity. Before your body returns to this earth in death, your task is to write your story of our time together and what you have learned, and leave it for the future.”

I looked at him with mouth agape. My body quivered. He smiled and kissed my nose. “Never fear,” he whispered. “You will not fail.”

He lay back down in silence. My mind was awl. “But Teacher,” I gasped, “What shall I write?” His eyes were closed and, with sleepy voice, he said to me, “When the time comes, just write. You will know what to say.” His gentle breath told me he was soon in deep slumber.

I slept not a wink.

The unrest in Judea grew worse after the Teacher rose. The Romans answered with violence and oppression. Animosity grew towards the disciples, particularly those closest to Jesus. After the stoning of Stephen, Joseph of Arimathea came for me and we fled to a Jewish enclave in Egypt. I was heavy with child and in Alexandria, Sarah was born. We were immediately accepted into the community and she was doted on by a hundred grandmothers. My parental tasks were eased and questions soon began concerning the Teacher. I answered joyfully and the curious few soon grew to multitudes. Once again, I was teaching. Here, I wrote my own Gospel of the Teachers public ministry, but not the story of his private teachings to me. Still, I knew not what to say. Life was very good, but, again, it was not to last.

Rumors spread that factions had grown up among the followers of the Teacher, that wildly varying opinions about the meaning of his ministry were everywhere. The power of love was giving way to the love of power and I could not bear it! Somehow, the truth had to be

restored and I resolved to return to Judea. When we left Alexandria, Sarah was a maiden of thirteen years.

My return was not welcomed by the other Apostles. Though they could not agree on everything, a consensus was developing amongst them about the content of the teachings. While the truth was certainly there, it was obscured by references to earlier material and slanted toward a paternal viewpoint, elevating the authority of men and marginalizing the role of women. Struggles developed among those who felt destined to take the Teachers place, as if that was even possible. A woman's perspective was not desired and the more I tried to reason with them the more I was despised and even accused of contending myself to replace the Teacher.

A few saw things as I did, wanting to keep the teachings pure and simple and available to all and, unwittingly, we became another faction. The most outspoken of us were my siblings, Martha and Lazarus, Maximin, our friend and Baptizer, and Cedon, the blind disciple whom the Teacher had restored to sight. The tension became nearly unbearable and finally, predictably, it erupted into violence.

In the dark of night, as we conferred in the house of Martha, our door was rent asunder and armed and angry men abducted the five of us, along with Sarah and our handmaiden, Marcella. Bound and gagged, we were conveyed to the port, deposited in a merchant ship destined for parts unknown and, before the light of day, set adrift far from land in a small boat without oars, sail or rudder.

In the early afternoon, a vessel hove-to to windward and drifted down upon us. The ship belonged to Joseph of Arimathea, who had himself set out to find us, guided by Providence alone.

Joseph made it clear that returning to Judea was out of the question and that Egypt, too, was no longer safe, so we set sail to the northwest. After many days, we arrived in the south of Gaul and a large Jewish community of the Diaspora. Joseph had relatives there; leaders of the people. Life again became very good as I taught the Gospel daily. Sarah grew to womanhood and married the son of the ruler, becoming a princess of her people.

The years passed and one day a messenger arrived with news that John was bringing Mary, the mother of the Teacher, to Ephesus. The travel would be hard for her and I knew a familiar face would be welcome. I determined to go to meet her and was welcomed with open arms and a warm smile. As women will, the talk was incessant and our spirits soared. It was wonderful to see her and we felt blessed and in the presence of the Teacher.

As the stories rolled off our tongues, I recounted my charge from Jesus. Mary grew quiet and her eyes misted. I, too, became still, wondering what I had said. Soon, she looked at me and said, “My child, there is something you need to know. Something that must be added to your writing. A secret I determined never to reveal, but now I must.

With eyes wide, I stammered, “Of course, Mother. Please. What must be added?”

Mary smiled. Her eyes were bright and her face glowed. With a strong clear voice, she began.

“When I was a young woman in Galilee, recently betrothed to Joseph, there was a Roman garrison nearby. The garrison sometimes used our spring and one evening, when I was drawing water, a young officer approached and asked for a drink. I was stunned that he spoke to me and afraid of the reaction of my brothers and father, for I was not accompanied. I began to leave when he again asked for a drink and it dawned on me that he had spoken Aramaic, not Greek. I

had never heard a Roman speak our language and I was intrigued. I turned back and offered my jug to him. He was handsome and friendly, not like the brutes I often encountered around the town. He had his drink, thanked me and walked away. I watched him go and then returned home.

“Over the next few months, he would often come to the spring in the evening and ask me for a drink. We started to talk a bit and I began to trust him. I was very naïve, and he was patient with my questions. To avoid gossip, we began to meet in a stable nearby. I would bring him a drink and we would talk.

Then, one evening, everything changed. I brought him water as usual, but it became apparent that he had already slaked his thirst with strong drink. I decided to leave, but he grabbed my arm and told me to stay and talk with him. I was afraid to cry out, since I could not explain why I was there, so I stayed and tried to talk, but my nervousness seemed to make him angry. He pulled me into the hay and covered my mouth with his and had his way with me, all at my most fertile time. As I lay there in shock and mortification, he began to cry and to apologize, unable to confront what he had done. He left me there and I was sure my end had come, for I could not live with the shame. I looked about the stable for a way to end my life and was amazed to see a beautiful woman standing before me. I felt a wave of incredible love and joy pass through me as she spoke, saying, “Mary, blessed art thou amongst women!” Somehow, I knew I was in the presence of an angel of the Most High.

I was told that my son would be a savior to all mankind and the method of his conception would be a reminder that the greatest of men can rise from the humblest of beginnings. She spoke with me for a long time.

I told my Joseph everything and he was deeply troubled. He sent me home so he could contend with these revelations alone. I spent the night in fervent prayer and on the morn he came to me and tearfully begged my forgiveness for doubting. We married soon after, but my early pregnancy was the topic of choice among our neighbors for many years and a burden for Jesus his entire life. Joseph swallowed his pride and was the most gracious and loving of husbands. Truly I was blessed beyond understanding.”

For a moment, I stared at the mother of the Teacher, struck dumb. My thoughts were awhirl and my love for the Teacher and for Mary and Joseph and particularly for the Most High soared to new heights and suddenly, my love for myself and for my fellow humans grew as well. For the first time, I knew, really KNEW, that God’s love did not have to be earned, but was freely given. I knew that what was condemned by men as unforgivable sin was accepted by God as faltering steps along the road of life. Suddenly, I recalled a conversation with the teacher and realized my ears had been stopped by the gauze of my own prejudice. This conversation would begin my story.

I rejoiced, for finally I had ears to hear! And, I now KNEW what I would write and that the time had come.

Then a thought came to me and I asked, “Whatever became of the Roman officer?”

In a soft voice, she replied, “Many years later, he had a servant whom he loved. There came a time when she became deathly ill and he feared for her life. My daughter, that Roman officer was the Centurion who came to Jesus to plead for his servant’s life, admitting he was not worthy to invite his own son into his house, while acknowledging his divine power to heal from

afar. Love triumphed that day for it drove the one to overcome his shame and plead for help and the other to demonstrate his forgiveness and restore life.”

Once again I was stunned mute, but before I could collect my thoughts, Mary said, “There is more, my child, but much harder to bear.”

My blood ran cold. “What, Mother?”

“As Jesus hung in his final agony, sundown was approaching. The Romans wanted the dead taken down before then, hoping not to further antagonize the people gathered for Passover, but crucifixion alone was too slow. You know their solution.”

“Yes,” I breathed, “they break the legs of the crucified, making it impossible to take breath.”

“An unbearable thing to watch and to experience,” sobbed Mary. “The Centurion knew all of this and though he could not prevent the death of Jesus, he decided to place himself in charge of the execution party, not to torture his son, but to try to end his agony quickly. It was the same Roman officer who gave Jesus his earthly life that took it away by piercing his side with a spear. Soon after, the legs of the others were broken and the ordeal came to an end.”

Mary sank down on her stool, unable to speak further. We wept together for a long time.

I was amazed and humbled at the intricacy of the web of these relationships and was anxious to begin writing.

Mary, too, was inspired and helped me acquire the needed materials and, most importantly, a quiet place.

With a hug, she left me. I sat down on my stool, picked up my brush and began to write.

