

Love's Darkest Day



'Chuza! This is a lovely surprise!' Magdalene rose from her couch in the vinery. 'And John with you! Come through to the atrium.' John had brought Chuza through a side entrance knowing the vinery to be Magdalene's favourite place for rest before the evening meal. 'I think we'll stay here with you under the vines, Magdalene.' Chuza reached for her hands. He stood just slightly taller, confident, but not his usual well-dressed self as an officer of the King. A happy friendship was evident in his smile. 'You'll not want us dripping through your rooms. What a day! I've never seen storms like these here before. It's barely been light all day!'

'Perhaps you should come more often!' Magdalene laughed. 'And bring Joanna with you.'

'I wasn't expecting to stay. She'll be disappointed.'

John took his friend's cloak and explained. 'I've invited Chuza to stay with us. They couldn't get home tonight. There will be no hope of crossing the ford yet and there are many others waiting ahead of us. Battling wind and rain in the unusual darkness reminded me of rough times struggling with *The Abigail* on Galilee. The road was almost impassable where streams were rushing down.'

'Well then,' she motioned to Sarai to take their wet garments, 'I give thanks for the storms. It's wonderful to see you. I do wish Joanna could have been with you.'

'She didn't know I would be staying. She couldn't manage it anyway, but she did want me to drop off a message for you, with the promise of a pleasurable visit to you and your friends soon. I didn't think it would be more than that a 'drop off'. Joanna and I don't seem to have much time between us just lately. I wonder if Jesus knew what busy people, he would make of you both!' I had to come across the ford on an emergency visit to the Palace at Fort Machaerus yesterday. Herod is expecting visitors there. Captains from Rome travelling via Caesarea. He wanted me to arrange a special itinerary and check their accommodation.'

Magdalene refrained from further questions. This must be an important and secret mission for Herod to send his chief steward to supervise the event. Chuza assumed their thoughts. 'All I can say is that I hear the emperor has some new plans for power in Judaea.'

'You're surely not alone.'

'No, Magdalene,' John assured her. 'He has an escort of legionaries. I've arranged with Talmon to see to their horses and steward Hushai is sorting accommodation and meals for them.'

'You are fortunate to have Talmon as gatekeeper and guardian, Chuza said. 'I've seen him before. There would be few at the fort prepared to take him on in a fight.'

Magdalene laughed. 'I shouldn't betray him, but he really is the kindest person I could hope to have in his position. I feel safe when he is with us.'

'I knew him years ago,' said John. 'I wouldn't have employed him then. If you had known him neither would you. He a different man now.'

Chuza chuckled respectfully. 'Don't tell me, John. 'You've persuaded Talmon to become a Jesus follower.'

'Almost,' Magdalene retorted playfully. Joanna and I are working on that. I talk to him, and she prays for him!' She broke the momentary silence. 'Now, Chuza, we must get you some food and wine. I'll call Rebecca.'

Chuza, a little bruised by Magdalene's dismissive response, blurted out, 'Rebecca! I've not met her before. Another convert from the religious elite?'

'No, Chuza.' John intervened to explain while Magdalene went to find her. 'Rebecca is Mother Mary's stepdaughter. They are similar age, but Rebecca was Joseph and Anne's eldest. She's never married. She looked after Joseph and her siblings. Anne was never well, and Joseph was a broken man when she died. Mary was God's gift to him. Now, Rebecca spends time with various family members and chiefly supporting Mother here, and when she's in Jerusalem. Rebecca was like a second mother to Jesus when he was a boy.'

The men looked up to acknowledge Mother's return with Rebecca two women entering. Chuza's gaze lingered over Rebecca who put down wine and cups on the table near them before excusing herself to prepare their rooms and baths. He could barely wait for her to go before commenting, 'Rebecca! She's lovely. I knew her father briefly from visits to his workshop, enquiring about repairs and furnishings at the palaces. 'She's the image of her father!'

'Not just in her looks,' Mother assured him. 'She has the same gentle ways. She wears goodness like a close garment. Joseph taught Jesus that same 'no-nonsense', gentle attentive love.'

'Maybe her stepmother sewed the garment.' John grinned at Mary who smiles, accepting his playful taunt. 'But Chuza, I thought you had a message for Magdalene from Joanna.'

'I'll get it straight away,' Chuza apologised.

John assured him it could wait while they bathed and prepared for the meal, protesting that it had been a whole day since they had last eaten.

'Or washed!' Chuza added.

Magdalene assured them she could wait for Joanna's message. Chuza agreed. 'If it's what I think she has to say you will all be interested'.

'A mystery!' Mother laughed.

'Not really, but I think you will all be interested.'

'I shall lose no time getting ready then.' Mother was ready for Chuza's teasing. Whatever the news it could surely not be serious. 'I shall hurry Sarai on my way.

Sarai returned well ahead of the family and guests to prepare a low table at the dining end of the atrium.

Those partaking now could choose their own seating and places, although when the 'family' were together it was usual for John to sit at the head of the table with Mother at his side. Others sat or reclined in ways which best suited them and enabled conversation.

Sarai made several journeys to and from the kitchens, bringing jars of wine and some ornate Grecian-design cups. Bowls of fruit followed – grapes and pomegranates, dried figs, olives, and slices of melon. Now came dishes and spoons plus a very large bowl and ladle.

'Well,' said Chuza in anticipation. 'That smells like good Hebrew stew.' He was more used to a wide variety of Mediterranean dishes at the palace.

'Mutton, beans and lentil stew,' Sarai announced. 'And a variety of fresh herbs. There's more wine on the table by the door and honey-water if you prefer your wine sweetened.' She assumed Chuza was teasing her. A wry smile from Magdalene assured her.

In a few moments, Sarai and Mother came into the room again together, followed by Rebecca.

Chuza had come to love Mary's presence. He felt warmly comfortable when she was among these people who were all one family to her. He was accepted like a believer, as were almost all other guests and visitors he had met here. Joanna said, it was just the same with Jesus. He would make everyone welcome. Mary's face beamed motherly as she looked to each of them. They could all feel like 'family'. Chuza was well used to a wide variety of greetings, but Mary's was so different. Silently he noticed the peaceful grace about her bearing, even though she had become more stooped of late. 'If Jesus was truly a 'son of God', he mused, whatever that really meant, was it surprising that his mother carried an 'other world' aura about her. His thoughts turned to Magdalene. She had dressed in a long sky-blue robe which accentuated her height – equal to his own, and her captivating mature beauty. She wore her hair long, over her shoulders this evening. The auburn dye which Joseph had brought her from one of his eastern journeys suited her deep Galilean colouring. Younger than mother but older than Joanna, Chuza could see how she had gained a reputation for turning many hearts.

Conversation flowed freely during their meal. When they had eaten, they stayed at the table, waiting while Rebecca brought a small platter of bread. She gave it Mother who then looked to Chuza. 'You'll share grace with us?'

'Yes. Joanna has made it a part of the meals we share together.'

Mary broke a piece of the bread for herself and passed the rest around the table. When all held a piece, they heard her strong, low voice – '*Jesus is here with us!*' *He is with us!* they all replied, including Sarai. Every guest was included. Jesus would wish it that way. Not wanting to draw further comment, Chuza, remembering Joanna's message again, rose and, hand over his heart in apology, gave a small reed scroll to Magdalene who motioned to Sarai to clear the table and bring water and cloths for their hands before they dispersed to make themselves more comfortable.

Mother Mary had her special reclining couch beneath an open arch which looked out across to a valley studded with pines and larch framed by a few oaks below rugged hills. The others placed seats around her and once they were suitably settled Magdalene broke the seal on her letter to read the contents. In a moment she gave a controlled cry of surprise. 'It's tribune Licinius! He's leaving the Jerusalem garrison!' Chuza nodded. 'I thought that was what she wanted to tell you.'

'Why? Has he been promoted Chuza?'

'I don't think so. From what I hear it's his own choice. Of course, he is of age to retire. His family have estates in Cilicia close to the river Cydnus and the port of Tarsus. Barnabas knows the city well and has trade connections there Joanna tells me.'

'Home of that young Pharisee, Saul.' John broke in with an unusual harshness in his voice. He's made life so difficult for our people, searching their homes and dragging believers off to prison Word came from Damascus that he has had a blinding conversion experience. We are waiting to hear more. It could be just a manoeuvre to help him penetrate our fellowships.' Mother had noticed John's tone and openly corrected him. 'We must trust God's ways and plans, John, even when they seem strange to us. It took you a while to understand Jesus, remember.'

Chuza continued. 'Joanna has heard rumours about the tribune. They say he has not been himself since Jesus' death. He's had several short leaves recently.'

'Do you think I could meet with him before he leaves?' asked Magdalene. 'Perhaps Joanna and you could arrange it? I will write a note for you to take back to her.'

Chuza was puzzled. He was no stranger to unusual reactions among his *Jesus friends*. 'What would you want to see him for? I imagine he's the last person on earth to interest you. You must hate him!'

It was an unguarded moment for Magdalene. She responded thoughtfully, yet with quiet urgency. 'On earth! Yes. On earth, before it's too late. I want to tell him I forgive him.' She lowered her head to brush a hand across her eyes.

Mother crossed to Magdalene and knelt beside her, taking her hands in hers. There may be tears. 'Only explain if you wish to. John and I know what is in your heart.'

'No mother. If no-one minds, I would like to tell my story again. I want to tell it often to everyone who will listen. I want to tell it for Jesus. There may be tears, but they will be healing tears.'

'Joanna has told me how Jesus healed her and you,' Chuza smiled feeling somewhat apologetic for raising the issue, but Joanna linked them 'She did say you would prefer to tell me the whole story yourself when the time is right.'

'It is right, Chuza. There's much more to it.'

'Perhaps John and I could help,' mother suggested.

Sarai half rose, 'May I stay?'

'Of course, but would you see to the lamps for us first. The light is beginning to fade. It is good to have light at the end of such a dark day. It has been strange. I've been reliving the cross and thinking how dark it was that noon at Skull hill. I had been thinking about tribune Licinius too - just before you came.'

Magdalene waited for Sarai. Chuza noticed her wet eyes as the first flames rose. Now he gave her a questioning glance to which she responded. 'Yes, he's been part of my story from its beginning. My first sight

of him was on what I thought was to be one of the happiest days of my life. It seems ages ago. John here was barely shoulder height to his brother James and a good friend to Hazael who was like a special uncle to him.'

'Hazael. *One favoured by the Lord,*' Mother whispered.

'And he was!' Magdalene interjected fiercely, steadying emotions which Mother brushed out with further thoughts ... 'We did not know him well. We had only recently moved into Galilee. It was after Joseph died and when John was baptising near Aenon.'

Magdalene resumed her story. 'The start of that day across the waters of Galilee was as bright as this morning was dark. Haz and I had been walking together along the beach beyond the washing and salting sheds. Just a brief time together before Haz began to get the salting team together. We were both so excited. This was the day when our two families were meeting to arrange our marriage. Of course, we were longer away than expected. When we returned, we heard voices raised. The tribune stood in the open yard with several soldiers. They were there to talk about increased taxes – again. Haz oversaw the finances then and straight away joined in the workers' angry comments.'

Magdalene paused to smile at John, 'Haz could be as fiery as the Zebedee boys when roused. Jesus called you *'sons of thunder'* remember. The soldier in charge said he was not there to bargain. Taxes were taxes and had to be paid. He followed that with abusive racial shouting about Jews and Galileans. Haz was true Galilean and talk like that had to be answered. God had favoured him, yes - with the gift of words. More workers gathered around them. One of them cursed the Emperor and all Romans. The soldier drew his broadsword preparing for trouble. I ran to Haz, grasping his arm to pull him away. The soldier waved his weapon in my direction and shouted dirty, abusive words about me. I can't repeat what he said. Haz was angry now. I pleaded with him to come away and as I did, the necklace he had given me that morning broke. Shells fell to the ground. Haz bent down to retrieve them. The soldier mistook his action, thinking he had a weapon concealed about him, and thrust out his sword just as Haz straightened up, hitting him high between his ribs. He fell to the ground bleeding profusely. I got

down on my knees to stem the flow with my shawl. Looking up to the tribune who had dismounted I shouted, 'Help him!'`

'He won't last.' The soldier said to the tribune.

'Give him a chance' someone called from the crowd. 'Let's help him.' And some of the men came forward.

The soldier could see more trouble coming. He looked up to the tribune who simply nodded and gave that gesture which means 'finish it!' I screamed and fell to hold Haz. In a moment it was all over – Haz's life, our life together, my future, everything' Friends carried Haz away and the women joined me in tears. Their mourning shrieks could be heard all over Magdala.

There was no more talk of taxes. The tribune and his party made a quick exit as every man there searched for a weapon.

I cannot tell how many days and nights I wept and walked the shoreline of the lake. I was desolate. I could not be comforted. I know now, that was the beginning of my sickness, or as many neighbours would have it 'the day my demons came knocking at my door.' Grief consumed me. I was angry with everyone. Even with God. Especially with God! Why had he chosen that moment so close to happiness? I was bitter towards every Roman I saw, cursing military or civilian. Why had they come to spoil our land and my happiness. I felt I wanted to join the rebels in Judaea. That brought me here searching for them. The family co-operated and let me come to look after some of the family business here.

God surely did not hold my anger against me because he brought John before I found the rebels. Jesus' second cousin, the Baptist, was here with him and Andrew, Philip and Nathanael. They were listening to his preaching and sharing in the baptisms. Folks from all over came to sort out their hearts and their lives and look for new beginnings with God, ready for life in his new Kingdom. Then, even though I thought I needed a baptismal cleansing, repentance was the last thing. What had I to repent of? I had done no wrong. It was all so unfair. My whole life felt twisted and withering like a diseased vine. Friends found no pleasure in my company. At work I could not be trusted with words to foreign travellers and even my own people were not spared abuse, impatience,

coldness, and thoughtless, unkind responses. I understand now how they thought of me as 'possessed'. I was physically twisted inside and out. My manner matched my thoughts.

Magdalene paused long. Mother's arm drew them together. 'Be still, my daughter. Grief is a horrible and dangerous enemy, but beyond it are to be found new life-treasures. You know that. Things are different now.'

'Of course!' Magdalene tightened her grip on Mary's hand. 'Jesus changed all that although it took a while for him to sort it all out for me.' She looked at Chuza. 'Joanna helped with that. We have been friends since childhood. She had had troubled times too. Jesus helped her sort herself out, as you know. Then she came here to get involved with the work of John Baptist and Jesus. Mother here had even then gathered helpers to give practical support to pilgrims and believers. Joanna tried so hard but could not persuade me to let Jesus talk to me.

'Well, that's a new thing!' Chuza laughed out loud. 'My wife is the epitome of persuasion. Certainly, as far as I'm concerned.'

The touch of humour was shared and eased Magdalene into more of her story. 'No, it was my good, trusty other childhood friend here, John. He arranged a private interview with the Master at Bethsaida. I was very unsure. I don't think I could have gone to him myself, but in his usual gracious way, Jesus came to me, before John's arranged visit. My family had persuaded me to take over the business here. There were less memories here and with effort I could pretend to be the person they had known previously.

One siesta hour I was alone in the vinery and suddenly I looked up to see him smiling, as he stood at my side. 'Magdalene,' he said gently, 'I believe you have things to share with me.' Suddenly, in his presence I felt that wave of compassion which we knew so often in his company. First the first time since Haz I was able to open the shutters to my inward self.

At first it did not seem right, but soon, relaxing with wine and oatcakes, that amazing afternoon rushed past. It was late when we finished talking. Refusing an evening meal, he stayed for the night and was gone before first light next morning. He had such a special

way of putting people at their ease, so they were ready to talk, ready to open their hearts, ready to trust him. That was with people in need, like me. And I was ready'.

'It could be different with some of the pious Pharisees and Temple-worshippers.' said John. 'There were times when his very presence was a threat to them. Far from making them feel easy, he could set their teeth on edge and leave them feeling far away from him.'

'At first I did feel far away, but not like those super-pious temple worshippers,' Magdalene said, and I don't suppose they felt it as I did.' Magdalene said, 'No-one suggested they were possessed by evil. 'I was very unsure what I should say.' He sat on a couch to the side of me. I noticed how tired he looked as he leaned forward to touch my hand. 'Just tell me your whole story,' he said. He must surely have heard most of it from others, or more likely it was that way he always seemed to know our thoughts.

When I had told him all about Haz and my grief and everything which had followed, he leaned forward again, his eyes fixing me in an amazing compassionate gaze. There was such love in those moist eyes. He held my attention for a long time, searching me, and then spoke direct. 'Magdalene. Are you able to forgive?'

'Who?' I asked him.

'Your enemies. Those who have hurt you so badly. All the things and people who have spoiled your life.'

'I recoiled, hurt, angry, feeling I wished our meeting had never been arranged. These were the last words I expected to hear. Was he chiding me, blaming me? Who did he really mean, the tribune, the soldiers, all those friends who couldn't have understood and who had withdrawn from my unpleasant new self, from my hurtful explosive words and actions.'

'Again, he seemed to hear my deeper thoughts. 'Yes,' he said firmly. I stood, ready to leave him.

'Magdalene', he said. 'I can heal you, but it's better you help to heal yourself. We need to talk some more.' I found the words I'd been searching for 'How? Why should I forgive them? What have I done wrong?'

'Does the law say you should hate your enemies?' He didn't wait but answered his own question. 'No. That's an assumption which has gained authority over many years, even though the prophets have taught otherwise. But the Law does say 'love the Lord your God. And love others as you love him. Can we really love God while we are filled with hatred for the people he loves?'

'You're not saying he loves all these people?'

'Yes. I am. Enemies too! I'm not saying that negates their thoughts and actions any more than yours, but he is the true Father of all people and loves every one of them. Like the best father, he is broken-hearted about all you have suffered, and all that people have done to hurt you, but you are all his children. Hatred only makes the matter worse.'

'Something broke inside me. I dissolved into more tears. I did not really understand, but I had to believe him. He drew me closer to him.'

'Magdalene,' he said as he took my hand. 'I could feel the tingling so many others have experienced – his spirit-power – his all-embracing love. I wanted to resist. I wasn't ready. I had such muddled thoughts, but his spirit held me. He went on talking softly. 'I have been able to bring my father's healing into many lives.' He always spoke of God as his Father. It made me feel somehow at home with spiritual things. He made them homely, comfortable. That deeper world was real. He often said how sad he was that the Pharisees and Sadducee's turned the simple truth into divisive debates and arguments.'

'And crosses.' Chuza mumbled, really to himself.'

Magdalene paused, uncertain of his meaning, but at a nod from John she went on.

'Jesus then said, 'In so many cases the healing begins with forgiveness, putting relationships right with the Father and with others, just as entering the Kingdom does.'

'Repent and be baptised.' It was John who spoke now. 'Both the Baptist and Jesus began preaching with that same message.'

'Yes,' Magdalene went on, stronger for John's encouragement. 'The master said that any bitterness

or hatred towards another of the Father's children was really like a sword-thrust to Him. Jesus talked on for a while and very gradually, tenderly, he took me through my experiences and subsequent attitudes and actions. One by one he peeled back those 'demons' which were crippling me, gripping me so tight. I felt like a desert snake surrounded by shed skins which were too tight, stupefying my living and now no longer needed or wanted. He showed me above all else, how I was sinning, against other people and against God, like a little revengeful child wanting to hurt them for hurting me. I knew as he continued with familiar stories of our kings and prophets, a miracle was happening in me. But there is much more to a miracle than just what happens once in time. A personal change of heart can be long, drawn out. So much needs cleaning and renewing - especially relationships. The beggar must find ways to express gratitude to those who helped when he couldn't provide for himself. The people and customers I had offended walked through my thoughts. I must offer to restore their trust, rebuild friendships. That may still take a long, long time. It will test their trust in me. Apologies have to be proved. Even now I'm having to work to complete Jesus' work - God's love-miracle in me, but he doesn't give up helping me.'

John interrupted again. 'Magdalene, you must tell the rest of your story.'

'Of course. It's getting late and you two will want an early start tomorrow. I'm sorry. I'm still really at the beginning. Today's darkness took me back to that darkest day of all days, just before Passover. You were right, Chuza. It did all lead to a cross - his Cross!

I still find it hard, at times to speak of that day, and yet at other times I feel I want to tell everyone how wonderful it was when my miracle was completed, and Jesus changed everything. Mother and John were there. You remember how we came together with Salome and Mary, Mother's daughter-in-law. She's Clopas' wife. We caught up with the gruesome procession at Gennath gate. We had slipped through side-streets close to the High Priest's house where it looked as though half the Sanhedrin Council had turned out. We came to Barnabas' town house where John and Salome had waited for us. While the others went on, I slipped in to see what news they had about

the rest of the disciples. Mark who works for the Temple confirmed that there had been no more arrests, but the streets were not safe for them to return. I caught up with the others close to Skull Hill where crucifixions were currently taking place. Then we were delayed further by congestion at the gates. Pilate was obviously expecting trouble. The Gennath gate, as you know is at the junction of the Joppa and Samaria roads. Many pilgrims were coming into the city. Pilate had ordered lines of legionaries along the roads. Superstitious, like his wife, he was worried that Jesus really was Messiah, even Son of God, and if that was true the heavens could open with a divine act of judgement for Passover.

My heart throbbed when I saw the cross uprights already in place. Those were protected by a centurion and soldiers who were to carry out the work and all was overseen by a mounted tribune who stayed well apart, safe from the spectators. I noticed he came and went several times.'

'Giving and receiving orders from the Governor,' muttered Chuza. 'I'm not surprised at such a military presence with it being Passover. It's a special occasion for all the rebels in Judaea to take their chance.'

'We stayed close for a while. Some of the crowd soon realised our position there. There is often respect for family and friends. The stripping and the sight of those mutilated bodies was too much. We drew away a little. At first Jesus spoke in a whisper, but he was able to notice where we were, and his slow, pained voice strengthened for us to hear.'

Magdalene turned to, Mother who renewed her embrace. 'I'm sorry mother, I must tell more... It's important.'

'Of course, daughter.' Mary replied. 'I know, and telling it again helps ease the pain, yours, and mine. Every time I hear a hammer sounding my heart empties, or perhaps I should say, overflows with the healing pain of our love.'

'It's not just that sound', Magdalene resumed, her tears flowing free, 'or those three bodies torn, strained, and gasping for breath. The sounds still wake me at night. In my dreams I hear those ignorant bystanders and the priests, incensed by Pilate's cross-inscription for Jesus, '*King of the Jews*' jeering and

shouting abuse. The victim to the master's left responded with curses for them and for all the world's injustices. His companion was different. He turned to Jesus and asked for his help and hope of justice beyond death. He believed in the Kingdom! In true form Jesus found breath to reply, *Trust me. Today you'll be in paradise.... with me!*

Then Jesus spoke again. It was a prayer, *'Father,'* he called. I was glad. Even in that moment he was close to God! There was new strength in his rasping voice. *'Father, forgive them. They don't know what they're doing.'* I was amazed. My whole body seemed on fire. They were the same words he had used when we had talked, and my healing began. Now, I felt that in some way it was all connected. My life was really being mended and what he was going through was part of the healing.'

'He spoke other words, mostly from the psalms. He cried out at one point with those words from a psalm, *'My God! Why have you rejected me?'* I didn't understand what he meant then, but John has explained since. At his last words every part of me felt released. It was not an ending but completion. Everything about life, mine, and I believe about everyone's life, was being given a pardon. He cried out, one last time. *'It is finished,'* and followed it with a prayer, *'My Father. I commend my life into your hands.'*

'We waited in that shroud of afternoon darkness. Much of the crowd had moved away, allowing us to draw closer. It was just before his last words, he turned his head and with great effort, spoke to Mother and to John. It was his wish that from then they would care for each other as mother and son. Even at the last he was loving and caring for others. I longed to be able to run forward and clasp those feet which once had been washed with my tears and dried in my hair.'

Magdalene paused, then, as though she had forgotten something important said, 'There is more, but it will not take long. When Jesus cried *'Father, forgive them'* I felt his eyes were on me and immediately, painfully, at the same time, his head turned to look above and behind me. I automatically followed his eyes. The tribune had returned and was mounted behind us. Horrified, unbelieving I saw then that it was Licinius! I'm couldn't say if he recognised me. He ordered the

centurion to move us further away. He spoke to the centurion. *'The Passover Sabbath will be starting soon. We must be clear of here by moonrise.'*

'The middle one's gone already', the centurion said.

Licinius rode away to get his orders from the Governor. He soon came back to say Pilate was surprised. Then he gave an order to break legs.'

Choza spoke. 'It sounds horrible, and it is, but death follows quickly then.'

'The centurion was not too happy with irregular orders. He called, *'What about the Nazarene?*

'Your sword. Just to be sure!'

'Our sobs grew louder as we held each other. The tribune drew back beside us and as I looked more closely. It was Licinius and he raised his arm to give that same hand signal as he had for 'Haz'. 'Finish him!' A thousand muddled images flooded my mind.'

'Jesus surely gave us the strength to stay to the end. I don't know how else we could have endured it. I thought about his words. They built up like a Galilee wave flowing all through me, challenging my mind and heart. *'Father, forgive ...?'* All in a moment we had lost a son, a friend, a lover, a teacher, and a Saviour – the Christ!'

Licinius went past us as though he was desperate to be away and quickly, I think, just for my ears he muttered, *'I'm sorry.'* !! It was from that moment I knew I had somehow to see him and tell him Jesus' word of forgiveness was for him – from both of us!'

In the shadowed atrium there came one of those moments which neither tears nor silence can fill. Mother rose, went back to her couch, picked up her lyre, and in her beautiful, clear alto tone which had become an essential part of their prayers together she sang the psalm.

The Lord is tenderness and pity, slow to anger and rich in faithful love; his indignation does not last for ever, nor his resentment remain for all time; he does not treat us as our sins deserve, nor repay us as benefits our offences. As the height of heaven above earth, so strong is his faithful love for those who fear

him; as the distance of east from west, so far does he put our faults. As tenderly as a father treats his children

Putting down the lyre, she stood. Rebecca and Sarai took their cue from her. Love flowed with wisdom from her words as it had through the years. She still possessed the commanding, disciplinary ways which had held together a family with the Son of God among them. She turned to John and Chuza. *'Now don't stay long you two. You will be rising with the dawn. There's fresh wine on the table.'*

The two men sat either end of a long couch. The early night air had cooled the room. Bats flew around, journeying home to their rock caves. Chuza was first to speak.

'John. I believe the Spirit of Jesus has touched me,' he said. *'This whole idea of forgiveness? My mind is wrestling with it. I was always given to understand that we forgive our friends, but not our enemies. An infantryman doesn't go into battle forgiving the enemies he wants to slaughter and who hate him as much as he does them. Joanna has tried to explain, and we have argued much. She says it was just as Magdalene says. Jesus turned it all around. But, how? Why should we forgive our enemies? That isn't just! How shall we maintain justice without punishment or retribution Even if a friend offends us and then apologises, we may say, I forgive you, but we do it with a feeling that we have made him a sort of gift and he owes us for it. Forgiveness comes with a price.'*

'It does.' John gave Chuza a long, pained look *'Jesus proved that. Before the events which led to his condemnation by Pilate and the people, we all shared the Supper together. He tried to explain what he was doing. Much of it still did not make sense to us. He said, 'A person can have no greater love than this, to lay down his life for a friend.'*

'I get that,' Chuza nodded. *I've heard of many acts of friendship in battle which bind two people as friends for the rest of their lives. 'But enemies too?'*

'Yes,' said John with his simple logic, which Chuza dismissed. *'They wouldn't be enemies anymore!'*

'And what about 'an eye for an eye'? I know you will say we can't afford to live in a half blind, toothless world, but enemies are not forgiving of each other, surely!

'Jesus was!' John spoke vehemently. *'The master wanted everyone to know how the Father forgives and longs for us to be like him. You heard Magdalene say how Jesus cried out from his cross, 'Father, forgive them.' I suppose most bystanders would assume he meant his accusers and torturers.'*

'What courage!' Chuza was visibly overcome. *'Forgive them. While they stood there clutching the iron tools which had just driven nails through his hands!'*

'And feet', John added. *'Magdalene did not mention it this evening, but she has often recalls how she had anointed and wept over those feet in gratitude for all Jesus did and means for her. He once said to her, 'You're preparing me for my burial!' On the cross he managed to turn his head to look at the two either side of him and then as far round as he could, even to those who were deriding and cursing him. Mother believes he was offering forgiveness to them all, to the whole world, every sinner, thief, adulterer who would believe and accept it and be changed by God's love.'*

'But for what purpose?' Chuza asked. *'How could they know? They didn't know they have wronged him! How could the world of divided families, races, people live like that?' Can you just dismiss all the hurt, the bitterness, the cruel words*

'I don't know,' John replied. *'But I believe it and I'm trying to live like that. More and more Jesus' Spirit in us helps to change our thoughts ... and how we live. It will take me the rest of my life, but I intend it to work at being more like Him. You see, Chuza, you and I are not starting from the same point. I believe Jesus really was who he said he was – the Christ. God's Son'*

'That's another thing I can't understand, any less than some of you. I understand believers like Thomas and Philip had difficulty at first, and then Simon Zelotes ... and Judas Iscariot! They struggled to believe. It was so novel! The Christ!? Conquering the world with an army of fishermen, taxmen, local tradespeople, and farmers. And backed by their womenfolk!' His attempt at humour met with an expected muted response.

'But wait Chuza. John continued. 'There's more to Jesus than that. We really believe he was and is Son of God! He conquered death and is alive in the Spirit!

'And that puzzles me even more, John. One thing I do understand is why he was not popular with religious authorities. Many times, Joanna and I have stayed up late while she tries to explain it all to me, and all that happens is that I wake in the morning with a sore head.'

'Not this morning I hope, but you know Chuza, puzzling and arguing doesn't always help. I think we all do too much of that. We must accept it first, and then work it all out. We need to trust him. It's just a starting point. If Jesus is somehow God in a man, then all the things he did were demonstrating God's actions. His words are God's thoughts in his mind. We say that God is The Word, the wisdom, the Spirit who called the whole creation into being. Just think, Chuza, how important all this is. Everyone through us who believe the master can hear God speaking, as he did through the prophets, can see God's love commands for real - in everyday actions. I know how hard it must be for you to accept that, but I believed him before, and now even more since his Spirit came. He floods our minds with the truth. That confirms all we heard and believed about Jesus in his life; about his cross and his risen presence with us. Everywhere he went he brought change, forgiveness, healing, reconciliation, peace. We are already sharing that in a bigger field. Oh, Chuza, I feel like Jesus did. If only I could wake up the Temple authorities to see how, once again, they have fulfilled the ancient prophecies. They are rejecting their God whom they and their whole world have been waiting for!'

Chuza yawned. 'Be careful John. Your Stephen lost his life for trying to tell them that. John, I feel I am wading through a flood for the second time today. I want to talk further about it - to know as you do, but not tonight. We must rest. I promise you, I want to understand. You've excited my visions. I've seen armies come and go through these lands and like others I despair of war and conquest ever coming to an end.' He paused. *'I try to imagine how it could be. But where would we start?'*

'You'll find that even harder to understand,' John replied. If Mother was here, she would say Jesus' answer would be *'with the children!'*

'I know, Chuza sighed a weary yawn. 'Joanna has tried to tell me that as well. 'Grown men and women becoming childlike! No more now John. My mind is exhausted'.

John took Chuza's arm as they rose to their feet. 'Mother will explain it more simply and clearly than I can. Jesus had so much more to say about the need to forgive and being forgiven. Come again soon, with Joanna. We must talk often about these things though it's more than talking. It's believing. You must start with Jesus and what he said and learn to live the way of the kingdom of God.'

'I will, John. I really want to believe. Every time *I hear Joanna praying and singing, I really want to share what she and you have.'*

John smiled at his friend. *'You remind me of a man over in north Galilee. I had met him at times. Reuben is a very wealthy man who always made a grand entry into synagogue on a Sabbath. He too had glimpsed the possibilities of God's love-Kingdom for all people everywhere. He made no pretence when he sought us out one morning to ask Jesus how he personally, could become part of the Kingdom. Jesus explained that it wasn't like joining a political or military group. It was a matter of genuinely understanding and practicing God's commandments in a real way. 'I do!'* Reuben protested. *'I do, he repeated in a haughty, hurt tone, like a youth telling his teacher.*

Jesus said, 'Reuben I know you do. You're not far from being in God's Kingdom. In fact as close as believing and doing it.'

'So, what else is expected of me?' What am I not doing?

Jesus said, 'Reuben. In your case what about leaving all your wealth, your earning power, and becoming one of my disciples.'

Reuben just turned away. He looked embarrassed. May I say he was not unlike you, Chuza? You know what it would cost to go back to Herod's Palace and say you have decided to resign your important position to work for Jesus.

'There are followers in the palace.' Chuza hadn't noticed John's meaningful grin. *'They're like a secret society but Joanna says when you have the Spirit's baptism you can't hide it. It's a different way of living. You know, they do their work as though they're doing it for God before Herod or me.'*

'Chuza. You look as sad as Reuben did that day, but I tell you could look never as sad as Jesus did. He would say again – to you. 'Chuza, you're at the door to the Kingdom, or more likely, 'The door to the Kingdom is in your heart waiting for me to open it!

Chuza looked puzzled again. *'I know. Maybe I need more time to find the key!'*

'You don't need a key Chuza. 'It's just a matter of you knocking at God's door and pushing it open. The Father keeps his doors well-oiled and free. We simply need to push – ever so gently!'

They went together to their rest. John's arm was around Chuza's shoulders. *'We will continue to talk, I'm sure,' said John, 'these things will be discussed until Jesus' Kingdom comes. Then his Spirit will give us Love's understanding.'* John felt sure that their friendship could be the finest oil for those heart's door hinges.