



DAWN  
of GRACE

*Mary Magdalene's  
Story*

Jill Eileen Smith

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# DAWN of GRACE

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*She Walked Before Us*

DAWN  
of GRACE

*Mary Magdalene's Story*

Jill Eileen Smith



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*To those who long to be healed and set free from physical, emotional, mental, or spiritual bondage. May you find hope in the gracious touch of Jesus our Messiah, who loves you more than you can begin to imagine.*

# PART ONE



The Twelve were with him, and also some women who had been cured of evil spirits and diseases: Mary (called Magdalene) from whom seven demons had come out; Joanna the wife of Chuza, the manager of Herod's household; Susanna; and many others.

Luke 8:1–3



# *Prologue*

————— AD 21 —————

**I**t's this way, Mary. Come on!" Susanna shouted above the noise of the wind whipping off the lake. Her long legs had already carried her several paces ahead of me. I couldn't keep up with her with the storm coming, no matter how hard I tried.

"I'm hurrying!" I yelled, the wind whisking my words from me. I placed a hand on my head to keep my scarf from flying away, lifted my robe with the other hand, and ran harder. Why had God made me so uncoordinated and spindle-legged at eight years old when Susanna was able to do anything at the same age? It wasn't fair.

"Why do we have to run?" I stopped, bracing against a sudden gust. The waves of the Sea of Galilee churned a short distance from us, and the wind forced me to catch my breath.

Susanna stopped and waited. I half ran to meet her.

"Why did we have to come today? I want to go back!" I shivered at the dark sky. Thunder rumbled. I raced ahead to the copse of trees and clung to one of the trunks.

"Stop worrying. It's just a little wind. Besides, if it's still there, it will protect us." Susanna gave me one of her know-it-all looks.

“If what’s still there? I don’t like this, Susanna. What are you talking about?”

“Stay there while I look for it,” she said around a mouthful of scarf the wind had shoved across her face.

I laughed at how she looked, but she didn’t pay me any mind. She knelt in the dirt near the palm tree next to mine and began digging. The sprinkle of raindrops reached me through the trees, and I smelled the fresh earth mingling with the fishy scents of the sea. I loved watching the sea when it was calm. But I feared its unpredictable, violent waves. I wanted to go home.

“Here it is!” Susanna pulled a small object from the ground, brushed it off, and held it up. “It’s a figure of one of the gods.”

*The gods?* I stared at it, and my heart pounded. Abba’s voice quoted the Torah in my mind. “*You shall have no other gods before Me.*”

“You shouldn’t have that,” I whispered.

Susanna gave me a strange look. “Don’t act so silly, Mary. It’s only a carved stone. I found it at the water’s edge near the rushes the other day and buried it until I found a place to keep it at home. Come on!”

I didn’t move, despite my intense longing to run. “What if it’s real?”

Susanna walked on, staring at the object. Had she heard me above the wind?

“Susanna!” I shouted.

She turned and looked at me. “What? Come on before we’re soaked!”

“Put it back first,” I insisted. “You know what the priests say.” Little bumps crawled up my arms.

“We aren’t going to worship it. No one is going to care if we have it.” Susanna lifted her chin, her look determined.

“My abba will care, and he’ll be angry. Your ima will too.”

We both went to synagogue every week, and my abba was a respected member of the community. I would be in a lot of trouble if he found out I'd looked at an idol. But Susanna's abba was Greek, though her ima was Jewish. Susanna did a lot of things I thought wrong, but what could I say when her abba didn't care and her brother Marcus filled her mind with Gentile things?

"It's pretend, Mary. Like a doll. We can play with it," Susanna said, pulling me out of my thoughts. "Now come on!" She grabbed my arm and tugged.

I followed to escape the storm, running to keep up with her again. "I don't want to play with it," I shouted.

"You have to play with it. I've already named her Hedia," Susanna yelled back.

Rain came in a burst as though the clouds would no longer hold it. I held my scarf against my neck, and we both ran down Magdala's streets and ducked into one of the market stalls. The awning did little to keep out the rain, but it let us stop and breathe.

"You can't call it that. Hedia was my savta's name. I don't want you to use that name." I was angry and cold and cross. "Use *your* savta's name!"

"Fine! We'll call her Livia." Susanna crouched beneath the table, which held loaves of fresh bread, the smell making my stomach growl. I knelt beside her.

The streets were muddy now, and if we ran home, we would slip and fall and be covered in mud. The merchant did not pay attention to us as he spoke with a customer who also waited out the storm. He had at least pulled his awning over the tables to protect the bread. Storms like this might be long or short, so the merchants were prepared.

“What do you think of this storm, Livia?” Susanna whispered loudly.

“Shh . . . don’t talk to her,” I hissed. I gave Susanna a stern look.

“You worry too much, Mary.” Susanna held the idol out to show me. I recoiled. “She can’t hurt you. Touch her.”

“No!”

“Are you scared?” Susanna was my friend, but sometimes she was so bossy and mean.

I looked away. “It’s wrong.”

“You *are* scared! Don’t be silly, Mary.”

Why was she taunting me? A flutter in my middle told me to ignore her and run out into the rain. Flee. But another part of me was curious. Would it hurt to *look* at it?

I didn’t want to, but I couldn’t help myself. I glanced at Susanna’s open palm where the piece of stone lay. It was shaped like a grown woman with no clothes on. Was that all? A carving of a person? Who would want to worship such a thing?

“I told you.” Susanna gave me a smug smile.

“We should go,” I said, angry to think she’d gotten the better of me.

“It’s still raining. No one will miss us yet. Let’s talk to her.”

“No.” But I couldn’t make myself leave.

Susanna ignored me and knelt, facing the idol she’d now placed in the dirt. “Oh, Livia, what can you tell us to make Mary smile?”

I tossed a look behind me, but the merchant was talking to the customer. Still . . . “Don’t talk so loud,” I hissed.

Susanna laughed. “Oh, Mary, you’re such a baby! Marcus says idols are nothing but spirits are real. We aren’t praying to her. We’re pretending, remember? If a spirit like your savta or mine speaks to us, that’s real. Why are you always so worried?”

I drew in a breath and looked at the piece of dirty stone. It didn't glisten or draw me to it in any way. Maybe it was a doll. I touched it, then pulled back. The cool stone was smooth beneath my fingers. Of course it wasn't real. Stone couldn't talk to me. Just because someone had shaped it into a woman didn't make it real.

A piece of the fear drained away, and I gave Susanna a small smile.

"There. That's better. Livia made you smile." Susanna laughed and tucked the idol into her pocket. The rain had slowed to a few sprinkles. "Time to go home. Next time maybe she can get my savta's spirit to talk to me. Marcus said we can."

"I don't think your brother should say those things."

I had been promised to Marcus since I was born, despite the fact that his father was a Gentile. I'd asked my abba why, but he would not explain it to me. I was too young, he said. His mother was Jewish, and what his father was didn't matter. But why?

I didn't understand my abba or his religious ways.

"I'm going home." I pulled away from Susanna and her idol.

Susanna grasped my hand before I took a step. The rain stopped and the merchant began to lift the coverings over the bread.

"Don't be scared, Mary." Susanna leaned next to my ear. "Marcus says it's all in fun. We aren't *really* talking to people who have died like our savtas. But don't you wish it was possible? At least, we can *pretend* they're talking to us. It makes missing them easier."

I did miss my ima, or rather what I imagined of her. She had died giving birth to me. My savta had raised me for a few years, but she had died last year, leaving me in the care of our housemaid, Darrah, and Abba, though I rarely spent time with

him. I had no idea what it was like to live in a normal home like Susanna did. So why did she need to talk to her savta when she had her ima?

“Don’t you?” Susanna asked again, pulling me out of my thoughts. “Miss your savta, I mean?”

“Sometimes. I guess so.”

“So you won’t mind pretending with me?” Susanna linked arms with me, and we stepped around the bigger puddles, making our way back to our homes.

“I guess not.” Susanna would keep at it until she persuaded me.

“Maybe tomorrow?”

“Or the next day.” My head was too full of strange new thoughts. Could people talk to those who had died? What would I ask Ima if she spoke to me?

We reached the street, where we parted.

“Promise to meet me tomorrow?” Susanna squeezed my hand.

“I’ll try.” I refused to give her more, and before she protested again, I ran until I reached the gate to my father’s house. Until I was safe.

# ONE

————— AD 26 —————

**T**he Hebrew letter *aleph* formed in the clay beneath my stylus. I smiled, at last happy with the result. My father's scribe would be pleased. I studied the dappled light coming through the high windows in the small room where I worked. I dug my feet into the Persian rug. One more word and I would be done for the day. At least as far as I was concerned.

"Why do you need to learn to read, Mary?" Susanna often asked me. While she was busy learning to spin and weave and stitch patterns on cloth, I was stuck in a dismal room, stylus in hand, pressing Hebrew letters into clay.

"My abba wants me to learn how to take over for him one day when he goes the way of the earth." Though I said the words, I never allowed myself to dwell on them. I had already lost my ima and Savta Hedia. I was certain Abba resented and blamed me for Ima's death, but how could an infant cause someone to die? I never thought it fair to be blamed for such a thing.

Worse, my father never tried to make up for the loss of my mother. I needed a woman who loved me, and all I had was my servant Darrah—an old woman, in my opinion—who made

sure I was fed and had clothes to wear but never gave me the affection I craved.

I held the stylus over the clay, carved the letters for “Shalom,” and pouted. Why couldn’t Abba love me? Whenever I tried to embrace him, he took hold of my shoulders and gently stepped back. If I tried to kiss him, he turned his head, refusing the greeting he accepted from others.

A knot formed in my middle as I thought about things I was not able to forget. I set the stylus on the table and pushed away. I didn’t want to be here. I tiptoed to the door, opened it, checked the hall for servants, and, finding it empty, slipped out of the room.

I walked on silent feet down the stairs, aware of every sound. No one would miss me once I was gone, I reasoned. No one cared what I did, so why should I sit in that room all day?

I ran to the back door to avoid being noticed and entered the cook’s herb garden. Scents of cumin, coriander, dill, and mint filled my nostrils. I loved the various gardens my father kept. My stomach rumbled, longing for a piece of Chana’s dill bread, but I didn’t want to risk being seen. So I hurried away from the house to the gates of the estate.

I slid past the iron bars meant to add a layer of protection to the grounds. I think they were meant more to keep me in than to keep people out, but maybe that was because Darrah allowed me so little freedom. My father didn’t care.

I took the back streets to Susanna’s house and entered her father’s equally imposing gates and walls encompassing his estate. Our fathers were wealthy in comparison to everyone else, except for the religious leaders and Romans who lived nearby. I should count myself privileged, Darrah said often enough, but I didn’t. I wanted a normal family, even a poor one where love was, rather than a wealthy one without it.

I sighed, passed through Susanna's gardens, and knocked on the back door.

Susanna exited quickly, grabbed my hand, and pulled me away from the cooking rooms to the far edge of the wall.

"Why are we running?" I asked when we finally stopped where the gardens ended and trees bordered the brick enclosure. The house was on a rise, but the wall ran along the creek that bordered their land.

"I have news." Susanna placed her hand on the bricks and caught her breath. "I'm glad you came."

"I couldn't stay in the learning room one more moment. Besides, if they check on me, they never ask where I've been. Only Darrah gets upset if she catches me, but she's a servant." I shrugged. "I don't have to listen to her."

"That's all going to change soon." Susanna's dark eyes gleamed. "I have a secret." She laughed.

I smacked her arm. "Tell me!"

She laughed again. "My father and Marcus are coming to your house tonight. They are going to ask your father to sign the ketubah and make their agreement official." She jumped up and held her hands to her heart. She loved knowing things before I did. "Isn't it wonderful? We'll be sisters!"

I stared at her. "I'm only thirteen. I can't marry yet." It was no secret between us that I was not a woman yet, but no doubt Marcus didn't know that because most young women my age were nubile. He would expect to be able to wed soon.

"You will no doubt be able to in a year. The wedding won't happen before then, and besides, you don't have a choice." Susanna lifted her chin.

"I can say no." Defiance rose within me. I crossed my arms over my flat chest.

"Mary. Your father promised you to Marcus when you were

born, and our fathers have been friends forever. He's not going to let you say no." She gave me the knowing smile I detested. "Besides, Marcus likes you. And he can't wait forever. He's nearly twenty!"

"Far too old for me," I insisted. But men often waited for marriage, while women married as soon as they were able to bear children.

"Be glad he isn't an old widower," Susanna said.

I hated when she was right. There were several old widowers in Magdala, and my father might have promised me to any one of them in my early childhood. Marcus was the right age to protect me and not make me a widow before any sons I had could care for me. On the other hand, he was Susanna's brother. I would never love him like *that*.

"Just be prepared because your father might ask you. Make sure you say yes." Susanna touched my arm. "The spirits told me this is a good thing, Mary. Trust me."

I pulled away from her and searched her face. I wrapped my arms about me, suddenly wary of the wild gleam in her dark eyes. "You shouldn't listen to them. Why did you ever let them in?"

Susanna's interest in idols and spirits had never waned. Not since the day she had introduced me to one when we were eight. The spirits made her unclean, according to the rabbi, but she hid her uncleanness well.

"You know why, Mary. They tell me things no one else knows. They are powerful. They protect me . . ." Her voice dropped off.

Susanna had been hurt by a friend of her father's when she was seven. I shuddered at the memory of her tears. The man had made her promise not to tell anyone, but she had told me. I'd never forgotten, and I was glad Barukh, my father's scribe, and the other men my father dealt with paid me little mind.

I didn't want what Susanna had, even if the spirits did make her feel she had some kind of power over her circumstances. I didn't want to have that need.

"Please tell me you'll say yes," Susanna pleaded, snatching my hand between both of hers and squeezing.

I yanked my hand back, but her grip held. "You're hurting me."

She released me. "I'm sorry. I just want you to agree."

I looked beyond her. I loved Susanna despite the spirits. And I liked Marcus. "I guess so," I said at last. "I don't suppose there is anyone else."

"And you have to marry."

I nodded. Most women married. The few who were unmarried had legitimate, lucrative businesses or were prostitutes. Though I didn't understand what that word meant, I understood Darrah, who had warned me it wasn't a good word or a good thing to be.

"I'll say yes," I said. Susanna stepped closer as if to hug me, but I moved back and held up a hand. "If they ask me. I have to go home."

She glanced at the sun's place in the sky. "You should wear your best robe."

I laughed, though it sounded strange to my ears. The realization that Susanna was stronger, truly stronger than I, and we would one day live under the same roof—unless she married first—unsettled me. "It's a betrothal, not a wedding. Besides, my father might not ask me to come into the room when they sign the ketubah."

"You should be there in case." Susanna motioned for me to follow her along the creek, past the gardens, and toward the gate. "Don't mess this up, Mary."

Her warning added to my wariness as I walked away, worried. How could I mess up something over which I had no control?

I did not hurry back to my father's property, despite Susanna's urging. I shook out my hand and rubbed it where it still ached from her hold. If Susanna could hurt me so easily for something so insignificant, what else could she do—might she do—to me if I didn't comply with her wishes?

I'd gone to visit her to have some fun. I didn't want to learn letters in Hebrew or talk about marriage or think about her spirits. I also didn't want to go home. What I really wanted, I didn't have. I wanted someone to love me. But I highly doubted Marcus was my answer to that longing.



I wandered about my father's gardens later in the afternoon. I had not returned to studying Hebrew, nor had I gone into the house. There was no place to go without Susanna. I didn't feel like walking along the Sea of Galilee alone, and I had no money to purchase anything at the shops in the market. I suppose it should have troubled me that I had no friends except Susanna, but none of my father's friends had daughters my age.

I sat on a bench beneath the shade of an almond tree and picked at the petals of a nearby poppy plant. The sun angled toward the west, creating shadows along the walk.

"Mary! Mary? Where are you?" Darrah called from inside the house.

I didn't want to answer her. I didn't want her to tell me about my father's plans for me this night.

"Mary!"

I stood but took my time, kicking stones along the path toward the house. I opened the back door, removed my sandals, dipped my feet into the water bowl meant for feet washing, then rubbed them on a towel. I moved toward the main area of the house.

“I’m here, Darrah,” I called, catching a glimpse of her on the floor above me, no doubt about to check the room where I should have been.

She swung around and came down the stairs to meet me. She brushed stray strands of hair from my face. “Where have you been, child? I’ve been looking for you.”

“I was in the garden. I’m here now. What do you want?” I didn’t mean to sound irritated, but nothing had gone right this day. It hadn’t helped that I’d awakened in an unhappy mood.

Darrah placed her hands on her hips and tsked. “Really, child, you need to listen better and do the things your father asks of you. He doesn’t require much. You should work to please him.”

I studied my feet. I almost asked why but held my tongue. “Is there something you need of me?” I looked up at her.

Darrah lowered her arms and touched my cheek in a kind gesture. “We need to get you fed and cleaned up. You are having visitors tonight.”

“Who?” I wanted to confirm Susanna’s words. I still hoped she was wrong.

“Doron is coming with his son Marcus. They are going to sign the ketubah for your hand in marriage to Marcus.” Darrah gave me a rare smile. “He is a good man. You will be well cared for.”

I nodded, but hearing it confirmed did nothing for me. “Why does my father want this so soon? Marcus is *old!*” I pouted, knowing Darrah would not appreciate my attitude.

She placed a hand on my shoulder. “Come. I’ve had Elazar warm the water for you. After you are washed and dressed, you can eat. I don’t want you looking like you’ve rolled in the dirt when they come.”

Why hadn’t Darrah answered my question? I glared at her as I followed her into the small room off the cooking area where I

bathed. It wasn't a mikvah but similar. My father had installed it for my ima, though we all used it.

I let Darrah help me, allowing her to wash my long dark hair. It had never been cut, so it fell to my waist, though most of the time I kept it tied up. It took hours to dry, but we had time.

When I was cleaned and dressed, I reclined on the cushions and ate the food Chana set before me. No one ate with me, as the servants ate at a different time and my father never joined me. I hated the loneliness. What would it be like to be married? Would I share meals with Marcus, or would he be like my father and keep me at a distance? Would he expect me to do things Susanna had learned, like weave and spin and stitch patterns on cloth?

A knock sounded on the great door in the center of the house, jolting me out of my thoughts. Voices I recognized drifted to me. So, Susanna and Darrah were right. The men spoke their greetings, but as their footsteps echoed on the tile floors and they entered the room where my father conducted business for his land holdings, I shuddered.

Darrah poked her head into the dining area, where I sat picking at a fresh date. "They're here."

"Yes." I avoided her gaze. "Do you think they will want me to join them?"

She moved into the room. "Maybe at some point. They will work out the conditions of the agreement for the ketubah. Barukh will write them down, and they will press their seals onto the goatskin. Then they might call you."

"So they won't ask me if I want this." I closed my eyes, wishing all of this would go away.

"Your father is going to Rome on business in a few months. He wants to secure your future before he goes." She came and

knelt beside me. “I realize it’s not what you want, child.” She touched my chin, coaxing me to look at her.

A rush of emotion rose within me, and my eyes filled with tears. I blinked, embarrassed.

“Don’t fear, Mary. I will be with you until the wedding, and I will stay on afterward if you want me to.”

“I want you to,” I said, surprised at how much I needed her. I didn’t want to enter Marcus’s home without her, even with Susanna and their mother there.

“Marcus may want me to stay here.” Darrah looked beyond me and let her hand fall to her side. “But he will understand your need of me.”

I would have to obey Marcus once we were wed. I had no idea if he would be kind to me or not. He’d acted like an older brother on the few occasions I’d been with him, but most of the time he left me alone with Susanna. Why did he want me to be his wife?

“Mary?” My father’s voice came from across the house. “Come here.”

I jumped up from the cushion and smoothed my robe, then looked at Darrah. “What do I do?”

“Whatever he asks of you.” Darrah patted my shoulder. “Come along.”

She walked with me to the room where the men sat on chairs in a circle. Barukh sat near the wall at a table, an ornately designed parchment spread before him.

“Mary.” My father motioned me toward him. “Doron has come with Marcus because Marcus is ready to seal your betrothal. I have stipulated he must maintain you for five years. You will wed about a year from now.”

I gave my father a quizzical look. “What do you mean?”

“If you should be displeasing to Marcus, he may not divorce

you for five years.” My father’s brows drew down. “Make sure that you do not disappoint him, my daughter.”

I swallowed. “I won’t, Abba.”

Rabbis taught that a man could divorce his wife if he didn’t like the way she cooked his food. It seemed so wrong, even to my young heart. But no one disagreed with it, so I should have been grateful my father wanted me to be protected until I was old enough to take over his estate should something happen to him.

“And my estate will remain yours in the event of my death. It is your inheritance,” he said, jolting me.

I couldn’t speak, so I nodded my understanding. I didn’t want my father to die. He was all I had.

“Are you ready to set your seal to the ketubah?” my father asked Doron.

“Yes.” Doron and Marcus stood, then Doron and my father moved to the table, took their seals, and pressed them onto the parchment.

They hadn’t asked me if I wanted this. I stole a glance at Marcus, who looked at me with interest. Why did he want someone so much younger than he was?

But my father was wealthy, as was his. Wealthy people married people of like means. I supposed Marcus didn’t have many options in Magdala, though there were other cities nearby where he might have found a better bride.

I dared a look into his eyes.

He smiled at me. A warm, inviting smile.

I let out a breath I didn’t realize I was holding. Marcus liked me well enough to live with me as his wife. So be it.

He stepped forward and placed a ring of gold with small rubies on my first finger. “Behold, by this ring you are consecrated to me as my wife according to the laws of Moses and Israel.”

Then he draped a finely woven shawl over my head, the golden threads sparkling in the lamplight.

“Thank you,” I said, feeling my cheeks heat at his gentle perusal. I could not hold his gaze, though I knew this giving of gifts, the mohar, was part of our custom. Marcus’s gifts were a show of his father’s wealth.

I glanced from the ring dazzling on my finger to the spark of delight in his eyes. I smiled. This would be a good marriage.

When my father dismissed me, I left the room with a lighter heart. In any case, I had a year to prepare. Until then, I didn’t have to think about it again.