

LEGACY OF LOVE

By Kaitlyn Krispense

The stench of blood, mingled with the odor of sweaty bodies crammed together, filled my senses. Bile burned in the back of my throat. My eyes stung—whether from the tears that simmered just below the surface, or from the dust that coated every surface in a thick cloud, I couldn't say. Everything in me screamed to turn away. I couldn't watch them murder him.

But I *had* to watch. As much as I didn't want to, I owed him that much. Because it was my fault, too.

A thousand voices rose together in a deafening roar, and I slapped my hands over my ears. It did little to keep the shouts at bay. For the first time, I wished my hearing hadn't been restored.

“You should be dead already!” A shriek, somewhere off to my right.

“You make a mockery of us!” This from behind me. A man, voice hoarse and rough, scraping against my ears like a piece of broken pottery.

Couldn't they see what they were doing? Didn't they understand?

No. Of course they didn't. Some of them didn't even know the name of the man they mocked. The fact poured rage, red-hot and boiling, into my veins. A scream clawed at the back of my throat. I had to make them understand. I had to make them see the carnage they were creating.

As if they cared.

Their bloodlust made my stomach roil.

Blood and sweat mingled on a face twisted in agony, plastering his hair to his skin. His fingers twitched of their own accord—his entire body spasmed in pain. His mouth opened in

silent cries, swollen tongue slowly running along cracked and bloodied lips. My stomach churned, and my knees buckled, but the crowd pressing around me held me upright.

I'm sorry. The words silently whispered didn't begin to scratch the surface of what I wanted to say. But my mouth couldn't even form the two simple words. Squeezing my eyes against the tears, they stubbornly made traces down my face anyway. I tried to pull myself together, tried to show him that I could be strong—for him.

But he knew as well as I did that without him, my strength was gone.

We had followed as the soldiers took him through town, parading him as nothing more than a common criminal. Dirt.

A woman had hurled a stone with the very arm he had cleared of infection. It hit him in the shoulder, and he stumbled.

The boy who had been wrenched from the edge of death only a few days before, caught up in the excitement, shouted for blood.

The cripple kicked him with feet that moved because of him.

The blind man laughed with glee at the sight.

The mute woman spewed curses at his face.

And what had I done? I stood by and watched it happen. Listened to their cursing with ears that could hear because of him.

He had done *so much* for them that they didn't even realize, and now...now, they called for his life with a chant of defiance.

He had told us that this day was coming. He hinted at it more than once. He had known that it would end up this way, had tried to prepare us. But how, walking along behind him, watching him heal the sick, the lame, the blind...how, after seeing the way everyone adored him,

was I to know that it would come to this? I had just barely begun to scratch the surface of learning who he was. Was it all a waste?

The injustice of it all sprouted a seed of bitterness in my heart, blossoming into something akin to hate. It burned in my stomach like a fire, spreading to envelop my entire being. How many times had he said to turn the other cheek? To forgive them?

But now, he was *dying*. I struggled to find sense in it all, but sometimes...sometimes you just *can't*.

"I'm sorry," I managed to force the words past the lump in my throat this time, though they were so quiet that even I couldn't hear them. Once upon a time, I might have joined in the taunting. I was no better than them. But if only they knew what I knew now. If only they *knew* what they were doing. If only...

My shoulders shook, a throb starting behind my eyes. *I can't take this.*

"*This hurts Me more than it hurts you.*" The voice whispering inside broke my soul wide open. *God, You can stop this madness. Make it stop. Please, make it stop.*

"*Trust Me. This isn't the end.*"

I blinked and rubbed my eyes to clear my vision. As I watched him die, his eyes roved the crowd gathered in front of him. I was standing so close to him, I could see the emotions flashing across his face—pain, heartache...love.

Those tears have to burn. I wanted to reach up and wipe them away from the gashes on his cheeks. Wash the grime and blood off his feet as he had washed others'. Show him that somewhere in this madness, people still believed.

His lips moved, and I strained to catch the words.

Lightning flashed, thunder crashed overhead. As one, the crowd fell silent.

“Father, f-forgive them,” he said as loud as his weak lungs could muster. Each breath was a struggle, his chest rising and falling beneath the bruises and torn skin. Body mangled beyond recognition, yet his eyes remained the same: full of love, full of peace. “They know...not...what they...d-do.”

Storm clouds covered the sun. Wind whipped my hair into my face.

Lord, I trust You. I don't understand why it has to be this way, but—my chin quivered—You know what You're doing. Even in the madness, even when all hope seems lost...

I looked up at the body hanging on the crossed beams before me. *If Your own Son can forgive them, then so can I.*

I wept.