

K.M. DAUGHTERS

ROSE
in the
DESERT

a novel

THE STRENGTH OF FAITH AND
LOVE PREVAIL IN THIS WELL-
CRAFTED BOOK.

-RT BOOK REVIEWS
ON ROSE OF THE ADRIATIC

★★★★★ 4 ½ STARS

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Desert

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Rose in the Desert
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Cover Art by *Nicola Martinez*

White Rose Publishing, a division of Pelican Ventures, LLC
www.pelicanbookgroup.com PO Box 1738 *Aztec, NM * 87410
Contact Information: titleadmin@pelicanbookgroup.com

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Publishing History
First White Rose Edition, 2020
Paperback Edition ISBN 978-1-5223-0252-0
Electronic Edition ISBN 978-1-5223-0251-3
Published in the United States of America

Dedication

For Mary and her Son.

What People are Saying

4½ Stars... "Fantastic, A Keeper."

~RT Book Reviews on Rose of the Adriatic

Miracles really do happen in this character-driven story by the writing team behind *Daughters*. The strength of faith and love prevail in this well-crafted book. Matt and Anna will capture your heart.

~Donna Brown

Part I.

The Parchment

Prologue

Valselo, Croatia

Anna pursued the exuberant toddler down the cobbled walk that bisected the lush, back lawn. Fit from daily jogs, her rapid pulse owed more to nerves than exertion.

“*Dragi jedan*, dear one, wait for Momma!” she shouted.

The little girl giggled in response as she dashed headlong toward the stone perimeter wall surrounding Anna’s rose garden.

“*Ruža*, please be careful.”

Her daughter approached the eight-foot-high wall at full tilt and leapt catlike directly at the obstacle in her path. Wedging chubby fingers and rubber-tipped sneakers into the stones’ crevices, *Ruža* clung to the slippery surface like a sunny-haired lizard child.

“I climb wall,” she declared as she stretched a tiny arm high above her head and lifted one leg upward, scrabbling her shoe on the stone façade for a foothold.

Her heartbeat drumming in her ears, Anna

plucked the intrepid Ruža off the wall and clasped the baby in her arms. The anxiety plaguing Anna since she had awakened that morning approached panic. Trembling, Anna shifted Ruža to ride on her left hip and unlocked the iron garden gate with a shaky hand.

Freeing the baby to romp along the pebbled path that meandered between the forest of exquisite, white rosebushes in bloom, Anna sank down on the stone bench, vigilant and uneasy. Overheated, although dressed in a light sundress on the mild summer's day, Anna couldn't shake the nagging, unnerving foreboding. *Mother, why am I so fearful?* No answer came from her heavenly mentor. Anna's inner mounting anxiety ballooned like rising dough.

"Oh!" Ruža hollered as she spun around and sprinted back to Anna.

Alarm pierced Anna at the frightened expression on Ruža's face.

"The bee buzzed my ear."

Relieved, Anna sighed and gently brushed silken curls away from the two-year-old child's ear. "He didn't sting you, did he?"

Ruža wagged her head and accepted her mother's gentle kiss. "I go play."

Watching her baby's antics while meditating in the miraculous rose garden, lush with undying blooms, usually comprised the serene highpoint of Anna's days. That special place epitomized peace, love, healing, and divinity to her. There the Marian visionary, to whom pilgrims from all over the world fondly referred to as the "Rose of the Adriatic," had prayed, dreamed, offered heartfelt gratitude, and counted her many blessings.

Unable to do anything but worry, Anna grappled

with the utterly foreign sensation. She had received daily communications from the Mother of God since she was a child until Our Lady had imparted seven secrets concerning the fate of the world, and then the daily visits ceased. Thank God, Our Lady still returned to her each year on her wedding anniversaries. During thousands of conversations, Gospa had graced her with the absolute truth of God's love and salvation through His Son. Anna had lived her adult life devoid of fear, having the Queen of Heaven as her guide and protector.

The unearthly, perfect roses blooming in the garden perfumed the air with heavenly aroma. Their beauty and purity reflected the qualities of the celestial gardener who tended Anna's miracle flowers. Our Lady of the Roses, Gospa, the Blessed Virgin, had gifted Anna with the garden. From the harvest of "immortal" roses, the Lord had bestowed hundreds of miracles of conversion, as well as physical and spiritual healings.

"Papa!" Ruža shouted, drawing Anna's gaze toward the garden gate.

Matt emerged through the entryway, beaming at his girls.

"How's my rosebud today?" he boomed as he squatted down, open armed.

Ruža's comical, trundling gait prompted Anna's smile. *Matt is here. Everything will be all right.*

Matt swept the baby off her feet and stood, cradling her in his arms and nuzzling her neck.

Anna rose off the bench to greet him, warmed by the loving gleam in his sky-blue eyes. However, his soft kiss and the strong arm that drew her into his embrace didn't fully comfort her and failed to allay her

mysterious disquiet.

"You're tense, love," he said, narrowing his eyes. "Something's wrong."

At the risk of upsetting their daughter, Anna hedged, "Perhaps." She chuckled and then added, "Ruža scared me when she tried to climb the garden wall. Didn't you, dear one?"

Unperturbed, Ruža trained innocent, wide brown eyes at her father. "I climb now, Papa?"

Matt tossed back his head and let loose a delighted hoot. He bussed a kiss on the baby's cheek and set her down. "No climbing the wall, rosebud. You might fall and get hurt."

"OK, Papa."

A chill coursed through Anna. *Is Ruža's safety the reason I'm so nervous today? Dear God, please send Your angels to guard and protect my baby.*

Matt clasped Anna's hand and led her to the bench. "She's speaking English today? My poor Anna, you're outnumbered in this family," he teased.

"For three days in a row now, she abandons Croatian. My English has improved since I married my American doctor and became a mother."

Matt brushed the back of Anna's hand with a soft kiss. "Your English is perfect."

His penetrating gaze was clinical, characteristic of his acute intelligence, his M.D., and Ph.D. degrees. "Doctor-Doctor" Matt Robbins never missed a thing.

"But you're not yourself today, love. I don't think I've ever seen that expression on your face. What's troubling you? Did our little rose really scare you that much?"

"No...yes..." Anna shook her head. "Everything confuses me today. I was frightened and a little

amused, too. Seeing her try to go up the wall made me think of your first visit here. Remember how you climbed the garden wall to steal a rose, so you could analyze it and prove that I was a big liar?"

Matt chuckled. "I do remember every second with you." He smiled sheepishly. "I poked and prodded and tested you. You passed the lie detector test with flying colors."

"Colors fly?"

He gently rotated her hand and kissed the palm. "That means you weren't a liar, and I was a skeptical scientist. I confessed what I was up to that night before I resorted to thievery. And, *eventually*...I believed."

"Yes." The heaviness around her heart lightened, remembering all that led her to fall in love with the man who made her dreams come true.

"And I married the most extraordinary woman on the planet and have been graced beyond measure. Just look at our little miracle," he said, grinning from ear to ear.

Ruža sat in the dirt, inspecting a smooth stone. She peered at the rock and spun it around in her hands as if deciphering its composition.

"She is so like you," Anna remarked.

Matt smiled, his eyes twinkling as he gazed at their daughter. "Maybe in some things. But, thank God, she looks just like you. Beautiful. Those soft brown eyes melt me every time. And she has your shiny, honey-blond hair. We'll have to beat the boys off with a big stick when she's grown."

"I don't understand," Anna said. "You'd strike her suitors?"

He turned his attention to Anna and gazed deeply into her eyes. "I love you," he said.

Anna's spirits lifted, thrilled at the expression in her husband's sparkling eyes that mirrored their abiding love. "I love you, too."

Giving her hands a squeeze, he asked, "Feel better now?"

More at ease, she replied, "Yes, thank you. I feel foolish."

"Good."

She knitted her brows and he chuckled.

"Good that you feel better...not that you feel foolish," he clarified. Stretching out his legs, he relaxed on the bench. "Aren't you going to ask why I'm home in the middle of the day?"

Widening her eyes, she joked, "Because you missed me too terribly to bear it."

He beamed a smile and replied, "There's that. But...Anna you won't believe it. All five terminally ill patients at *Mir* House were spontaneously cured! It was magnificent. I wish you had been there to see it. Harry and I are left with nothing to do."

An obscure dread colored Anna's elation at the unprecedented, wondrous news. Her thoughts whirled as she considered this event's possible connection to her lingering apprehension all day.

Matt's voice muted in her consciousness.

"There's a procession up Gospa Hill planned this evening," he said. "I thought we could hike up Salvation Mountain now for reflection and thanksgiving. Just us three..."

"Anna. Come."

The sweet, beloved voice she knew so well blotted out earthly reality, and Anna shot off the bench.

"What? Anna!" The shock in Matt's voice penetrated the haze.

Breaking into a run Anna shouted, "Our Lady comes. Matt. Quick. Bring the baby. The chapel..." Her breath ragged, Anna raced out of the garden on a bead for the back door. The baby squawked from behind her, apparently protesting her father's depriving her of playtime, as Anna flung open the screen door. Continuing to run, Anna sped through the kitchen toward the little apparition chapel in her home. Nothing mattered except the coming communion with her Mother. And surely, she would receive an explanation of the undiagnosed fearfulness that had gripped her throughout the day.

Panting, Anna bumped into the kneeler at the front of the chapel and fell to her knees on the red vinyl cushion. She raised her eyes, focused on the wall of the chapel above the carved wood crucifix and began reciting the rosary. Brilliant white light radiated in front of her eyes, and all other physical sensations receded as if she were transported beyond earth. Anna fixated on a spot above the altar, rewarded when Our Lady of the Roses appeared, smiling. Joyfully beaming and indescribably beautiful, Our Lady floated on a puffy cloud. Anna's spirit soared.

But confusion and trepidation tarnished her usual ecstasy during apparitions. Anna mouthed the inaudible query, "Mother, are you angry with me?"

"My dear child, at our last meeting, I told you I would come on your next anniversary. Do not think that you have done something wrong that requires me to visit you today. You have accepted with all your heart the plan that my Son and I have. Be happy because I am your mother and I love you with all my heart. Anna, thank you for having responded to my Son's invitation, for persevering and remaining close to

Him until He completes that which He asks of you."

"Oh, Mother. It has been my greatest joy. I have missed you terribly. Thank you so much for coming to me sooner."

"I have told you during our years together about the secrets, dear child."

Anna's pulse raced, remembering the details of the prophesied, monumental, world occurrences that Gospa had entrusted to her. "Yes, Mother. You have spoken of the wishes of The Most High."

"It is time, Anna. I have prepared you for your role, and I will be with you. The Most High will reveal his plan for the world as I have instructed you, Elizabeta, and Josip. Make preparations. You must travel to inform my Son's shepherd, the priest. In three days, this priest shall bear testimony that I have spoken for the Most High, foretelling the forthcoming universal sign, and the events to follow."

"Are the spontaneous healings at Mir House today related?"

"Nothing is impossible for our Lord. What follows will be far more indisputable."

Anna gasped as terror seized her. "Mother, I'm so afraid that I'm unworthy to be your emissary. What if I fail and the chastisement results?"

"You have nothing to fear, my dear, dear child. My Son and I will never leave you. I love you. Thank you for having responded to my call." The brilliant light surrounding Gospa dimmed and then extinguished.

Anna stared numbly at the spot on the pastel-colored wall of the chapel where moments before Our Lady was visible. Shuddering, Anna covered her face with her hands and burst into tears.

Matt's hoarse sobs and Ruža's wails permeated her

trance. She raised her head and trained tear-filled eyes on her husband and daughter.

In the last row of pews, the crying baby strained toward her, wriggling in Matt's lap. Open-mouthed, her husband stared straight ahead as tears streamed down his face.

Petrified, Anna raced toward him, her arms outstretched. "Matt, what is it?" she shrieked.

"I..." He lifted Ruža up into her arms, his penetrating, stricken expression filling her with terror.

Pressing her daughter to her chest, she hung over Matt.

His eyes huge, Matt blurted out, "How have you stood it all these years?"

Anna sat next to Matt and roved her gaze over his body from the top of his head to his shoes, investigating a physical cause for the pained expression on his face. Satisfied that he wasn't injured, she secured the baby on her lap with one arm and touched her free hand to his knee. "Tell me what you mean," she urged.

"I saw her." He wagged his head. "Dear God, I saw her."

Stunned, she exclaimed, "You did? Did you hear our conversation?"

"No. But she spoke to me." He inhaled deeply and then huffed out a breath. "She said, 'You must show Anna the way. She knows nothing of the world beyond the village. She is safe with you, dear child. And you are safe with me. Remember, I'm your mother. Thank you for responding to my call.'" He shifted in his seat and faced her. "Anna, I can't fathom this. How have you stood it all these years?"

"I..." She frowned. "I love her..."

Matt rounded his eyes. "Oh, I know. Now I know fully. What I mean is how can you stand it when she leaves?"

Smiling, Anna nodded her head. "Ah. It's easier now. Because I have you."

Matt brushed a hand over Ruža's silken crown and then cupped the side of Anna's face tenderly. "I must show you the way. I don't know what she means."

"We're going to the desert. In America," Anna retorted.

"All right." He dragged a hand through his curly crop of sandy hair. "Why?"

"The secrets. I wrote them on a parchment. Now I have to deliver the parchment to a priest Our Lady has chosen. He will bear witness that future occurrences and the signs in the desert were foretold." Anna rose unsteadily, hefting her child in her embrace.

Matt stood and encircled his strong arms around her waist.

She gazed up into his eyes and smiled. "First stop is Chicago. Maybe we'll have time to visit with your parents."

1

Chicago Suburbs

Three Days Later

Susie Mulligan twisted her long hair behind her head and lifted the damp ponytail away from the nape of her neck. With her nose inches from the oscillating fan on her desk, she closed her eyes and spent a few frustrated seconds hoping for a cooling effect. Pathetic. The open window hadn't done a thing to lower the temperature in the room either, and the humid air hung heavy and smothering—an annoying steam bath.

I don't know why the old cheapskate won't break down and buy an air conditioner. None of my friends have to sweat like me.

Releasing the hank of hair, she wagged her head and freed a cascade of raven curls down over her shoulders. She squinted at her reflection in her makeup mirror and continued outlining her eyes with a smoky black kohl pencil. She plucked a tissue out of the box, blotted sweat off her upper lip, and then applied dual, generous smears of pink, cherry-flavored gloss to her

full lips. Clenching her teeth, she jack-o-lantern grinned into her mirror, checked for pink smudges on the enamel, and then tossed the gloss into her backpack.

She held her breath listening for her parents' stirrings. Silence at last.

I didn't think they'd ever go to sleep tonight. I'm sixteen years old and they still treat me like I'm ten. I have every right to go out at night.

All her friends had cool parents who let them date and stay out until midnight, but not her strict, dinosaur parents. They deserved her sneaking around behind their backs.

And, thank goodness, at least they're heavy sleepers.

The rhinestone-encrusted iPhone vibrated on the bed's purple and pink striped comforter. Scooping up the phone, she read, "Jail break tonight?" She laughed at Spike's text.

"Oh, yeah. Give me 15," she typed in response.

"Pick u up usual place," came his reply.

"C U there. Flash lights."

She stuffed the phone into her backpack and checked the side pouch. Good. She had a lighter and cigarettes. Pulling out the pack, she counted its contents. Only three left. She added the two she had snatched after dinner from her father's stash. He never missed one or two.

Although it was tempting to nab an entire pack, she had wisely resisted. He had grounded her for a month after a pack went missing from his carton, and he had figured out that she was the only possible culprit. That stung.

After she cast one last glance in the mirror, she eased open her bedroom door and stepped gingerly