

K.M. DAUGHTERS



ROSE
of the
ADRIATIC



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Rose of the
Adriatic

by

K.M. Daughters

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales, is entirely coincidental.

Rose of the Adriatic

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Dedication

For Mary and Her Son.

Praise for K.M. Daughters

(JEWEL OF THE ADRIATIC) Enables the reader to become quickly engrossed in the story to the point that I read the book in two sittings and was left wanting more of this story and of these characters.

I sincerely hope that K.M. Daughters will follow up with either a sequel or with another work of faith inspired fiction.

Thank you for a lovely reading experience!

~Lisa M. Hendey, CatholicMom.com Webmaster

(JEWEL OF THE ADRIATIC) K.M. Daughters has written a lovely story of faith lost and regained, of love created and blessed by this faith.

~Long and Short of It Reviews

Prologue

Jenna rested in her comfortable first class island—so decadent a means to travel on a humble pilgrimage to Valselo—caviar after the simple meals in the *pansion*. She still harbored guilt over enjoying it as much as she had.

People bumped and scurried around her in the cabin, the floor near the seats littered with crumpled blue blankets and tiny airplane pillows. Jenna reached down for her carry-on and plopped it in her lap. She unzipped it and withdrew Anna's rose, its stem swaddled in a damp tissue. It amazed her that the flower was as perfect today as it had been a week ago when she'd received it after the impossible joy of witnessing an apparition.

She smelled the fragrant blossom, white petals velvety against her nose, and then clasped the rose to her chest. Her scalp tingled, burned, a sensation she mistook for the beginnings of another tiresome hot flash. But the perspiration didn't come. Instead, the sensation mounted and traveled like a blowtorch igniting her head to toe. She gasped, and then must have slept, because in her next conscious instant, the plane had almost emptied.

Depositing the rose back in her case she left her seat and walked trance-like through the snaking

concourse toward passport control. She had been the only pilgrim in her group from Chicago, so she couldn't share last minute remembrances while she waited in line to show her passport.

The process of re-entering the United States flowed like magic. Following a porter who pushed a cart with her huge suitcase, she worried that the rose in her carry-on might be confiscated during customs inspection.

Elated when it wasn't, she hastened toward the terminal where Harry waited for her arrival. He had been vehemently opposed to her taking the trip alone, but she had insisted with more determination than she had ever mustered in their long marriage. He loved her, thank God. She couldn't wait to thank him, prayed that she could somehow relate the marvels that he had made possible with his medical connections.

She burst through the doors and searched the crowd for his handsome face. When she spotted him their eyes locked, his widened huge with alarm. He fell to his knees and she ran to him, terrified that he had had another angina attack.

Jenna touched the crown of his head gently. "Harry, darling are you all right? Harry?"

He clasped his hands around her knees, his upturned eyes streaming tears. "Dear God in heaven!" he screamed. "Jenna, you're walking!"

Chapter 1

Eighteen Months Later

Early by precise calculation, Matt Robbins chose an aisle seat on a first row bench to the right of the wooden kneeler. He wanted immediate access to the visionary when the apparition began.

Matt's bench filled quickly as did all the others, judging from the mounting volume of conversations behind his head. He didn't turn around to look. Less conspicuous that way. He intended to blend in with the faithful. Instead, he passively scanned the front of the room while his brain whirred with investigative zeal.

Nothing appeared unusual about the simple chapel. He noted the shiny aluminum pail of white roses in the far, front corner of the room to the left of the altar, and locked the information in his mind.

If anybody proclaims Mary's supernatural presence because of the signature smell of roses, it won't be hard to dispel that so-called mystery.

Matt glanced down at his doctor's bag on the floor, unlatched, but still pinched closed at the top so as to conceal the partially torn wrappers encasing sterile, small-gauge needles and lancets inside it. He would slide them out noiselessly when the time

came, and science would prevail.

Without apparent provocation, the hum of ambient noise ceased abruptly. Matt glimpsed over his shoulder. A small, lovely woman stood in the center aisle at the back of the room. *Anna. It must be.* Matt had seen pictures of her but they hadn't done her justice—or he had just glossed over the images in search of facts about the visionaries before he left the U.S. Gazing at Anna, Matt was disoriented by her beauty.

She wore white with her long brown-black hair combed away from her face and tied in a tail at the back of her neck. Her round dark eyes stared forward and didn't settle on any of the people in the chapel. Matt shook his head to get a grip. Anna claimed to have daily conversations with the Mother of God and he was here to prove that pure nonsense—nothing more. Still, her humble presence sparked a strange anticipation inside Matt, despite his mission to disprove her claims.

Anna didn't notice him, didn't acknowledge anyone as she began the recitation of the rosary. She prayed in her native tongue. Able to translate some of the Croatian words, it was hardly necessary for Matt. The rhythm and repetition of the *Hail Mary* and *Our Father* were familiar to a Catholic-schooled boy, no matter how many years of flagrant disuse had passed. He did his part to pose as a pilgrim and mumbled gibberish in cadence with the group.

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Matt shuffled sideways on his knees pulling his doctor bag along the floor in front of him. Ecstasy radiated from Anna's features, and it made him hesitate, breathless, wishing for a split-second that *he* had put that expression on her face. Such joy. She emanated pure love. *Focus*. He'd process his conflicting response to her later.

Swallowing his guilt, he swiped the antiseptic down Anna's forearm using his left hand and sunk the needle in her flesh with his right, exerting minimum pressure while he watched her face. No reaction. He dotted the piercing along her arm. Nothing. Using a lancet he extracted from his bag he snagged her right thumb, angled back from her prayer-clasped hands. He jabbed it a couple times, squinting his eyes, his gaze riveted on her face. No reaction other than a few droplets of blood. Maybe a larger gauge needle.

Stirrings began behind him. He was running out of time. He grabbed another needle and inserted it into her arm. Angry raised spots multiplied from his probing that leaked thin rivulets of blood, and pooled into the crook of her arm, spreading blooms of maroon stains on her immaculate shirt. Anna didn't budge or flinch. Matt didn't detect the shimmer of a single nerve ending.

Then, the protests came from behind.

"Hey!"

"What are you doing?"

"Stop!"

“Get him away from her.”

Matt stared at Anna’s face. No irregular dilation of the pupils, eyes darting as if watching something, lips moving with no speech, ecstatic expression, occasional nod, smile. He reached for her wrist to check her pulse and was yanked away from behind and hoisted off the floor.

“Let go of me!” He struggled against burly arms and dug his heels against the tile flooring. It slowed the backward momentum, but didn’t prevent several men from dragging him out of the apparition room. Anna’s peaceful, immobile form receded, the rest of her pilgrims on their feet behind her in a gesticulating mob.

“Stop it. I didn’t hurt her.” Matt bicycled his legs trying to make his feet anchor him to the ground, but he didn’t succeed. They hauled him out of Anna’s house into flower fragrant air polluted by dust swirls from his dragging heels and the shoes of the men.

The back door of a cab swung open ahead of him, and they stuffed him in. With a heavy hand against his breastbone, they flattened him on his back in the seat. His legs dangled outside, and a man’s furious face with lips curled in a snarl hung over Matt.

“Constable. Uh, *policija*,” his assailant said to the cabbie.

“No!” Matt twisted his head sharply to try to see the driver, but couldn’t see beyond the back of the seat. “I’m a doctor. There’s no need for alarm. The visionaries are familiar with the tests I conduct and have submitted to them.”

The man released the pressure on Matt’s torso and stared down at him. “He’s a doctor. Anna knew about it,” he yelled over his shoulder to the angry cluster of men outside the car. “Pardon, doctor, we didn’t know.”

Matt sat up stiffly. “No harm done.” He extended and flexed his left arm, the bicep already sore.

“Looked pretty sneaky to me up there next to Anna,” one of the brutes near the cab door said.

Matt directed a statement to the group, “To be accurate, Anna wasn’t aware of my testing today, but she is familiar with the tests.”

The nearest man shoved him flat on his back again, jammed Matt’s legs into the car, squeezed into the limited space, and slammed the back door shut. The locks of the car clicked.

“Take us to the jail,” the man said.

The car idled.

“Uh, keep... prison...”

Still sat.

“The word you want is *tamnica*,” Matt offered professorially, and then grimaced as the forward motion of the cab slammed parts of him against the door handle.

Wasn’t the first time that his intellectual ego backfired on him. *Stupid of me, but they would have bridged the language gap without my help anyway.* “Is there a U.S. Embassy around here?” Matt asked.

The driver and his back-seat companion laughed as though Matt was the funniest guy in the world.

“Look. I’m Harry Sheridan’s protégé,” Matt said, exasperated.

“Huh,” the cabbie grunted.

The light faded, then extinguished. Anna withdrew from the bright place she adored and returned to her chapel and role—Our Lord’s disciple through the messages of His beloved mother.

She squeezed her eyes shut and spoke the sacred words of the *Our Father* prayer, head bowed, her chin cupped in her hands. “...*Kako na nebu, tako i na zemlji.*”

No multi-lingual recitation of the second half of the prayer came from the people behind her. Something was wrong.

Anna opened her eyes and cringed in alarm at

the faces so near her—in front, at her sides, behind. Close, too close. “Gospa!” she cried, terrified for the first time since she was a child at the onset of visits with Our Lady.

The pilgrims pressed closer, hands touching her, their faces twisted. She didn’t understand. The terror intensified.

Mother, come back. Help me, please.

“Anna, are you all right?”

“Let me see that arm.”

“Don’t be afraid. They took him away.”

She stared, inspecting each face around her. Detecting nothing but concern, she calmed a little. Standing she searched for her interpreter, but couldn’t find her.

English. She’d use English. “Please. What has happened? Where is my interpreter?”

“I think they asked her to come to the jail to interpret for that man,” a lady said. “You were with Our Lady. There was no time to ask you if it was OK.”

“Man? What man? He went to jail?”

“Yes, and good riddance,” a man beyond Anna’s view said.

“Here.” A gentleman offered her his arm. “Come sit.”

Anna sat on a bench, astonished when the pilgrims settled on the floor in front of her, faces upturned, intent on her welfare.

“He hurt you. Look at your right arm.”

She glanced down, perplexed. Dried blood crusted her shirt, streaked her forearm. A dozen fresh “bites” oozed a bit. She smeared blood on the side of her index finger with her thumb.

“I didn’t feel a thing,” Anna said. *Mother, you didn’t tell me of this.*

“My husband went to the authorities with him. He says he’s a doctor,” a young woman stated.

Puzzled, but certain of her faith, Anna assured

them, "Our Lady wouldn't have permitted it if he meant me harm." She stood. "Please." Anna extended her hands toward the group on the floor. "Let me help you up. I'd like to tell you about my meeting today with Our Lady."

The group assembled on benches.

"Our Lady came joyful and smiling," Anna said. "She blessed all of you with her motherly greeting, 'Praise be to Jesus, my children.' She blessed the religious articles you brought with you and prayed over all of you. We talked for a while. A private conversation. And then she asked me to tell you this message..." Anna paused, smiled, and glanced up toward the heavens. *My mother, I guess you did tell me of this after all.*

"Our Lady's message today is, 'Dear children. Thank you for dedicating all to God even now when He is testing you. He loves you and, therefore, He tests you. Just always offer up all your burdens to God, and do not be anxious. Thank you for responding to my call.'"

Anna smiled. "If you have questions, I'll try to answer them for you."

"Will you press charges against that man?"

"Press charges? I don't know what that is."

"Um, will you make sure they keep him in jail?"

"Oh, no." Anna clenched her forearm with her left hand. "It's nothing. I'm sure he was only trying to find his truth. Many tests like these were conducted on all three of us about a year after Our Lady appeared. But I thought they were over."

"It's a sacrilege, that's what it is."

Heads nodded in agreement.

"To touch a holy person like you."

"Oh, no, no. I'm not holy. I'm just regular. Like you. And you. Like all of us. Nothing special."

"Then I'll press charges! We're all witnesses."

A chorus of assent struck up.

"You mustn't," Anna declared. "Our Lord

teaches us forgiveness. In His last breath, He forgave—and this doctor scratching me? This is not such a big thing to forgive. So, we are done with this. Are there no questions about my meeting with Our Lady?”

On the right track after these strange occurrences, Anna managed the Q&A session, proud that her English had improved enough to run without the customary crutch of her interpreter’s assistance.

She fielded questions for thirty minutes before she thanked the group for sharing their time with her. “Before you leave, can you please come to me so I can present you with a little gift?”

Anna turned toward her pail of white roses. “I have a rose from my garden for each of you.”

The pilgrims accepted a flower from her, each in turn, and filed out of the chapel.

Alone now, Anna blew out the tall candles on the altar, used the kneeler again and prayed for guidance. She walked to the back of the room. *I’ll visit the jail in the morning. I forgive this man now, but perhaps it would be OK if I make him wait a while before I tell him?*

She laughed, feeling naughty, and reached her right hand toward the light switch. The skin on her arm was creamy and unmarred, the blood gone.

Chapter 2

Matt sat on the paper-thin mattress, and every scorching inch of the metal frame beneath it seared his seat and the back of his thighs. He swayed back and forth in misery, his face in his sweat-slicked hands, elbows on his knees.

“Hello Matthew.”

Matt snapped his head up. The eminent physician, Harry Sheridan, stood outside Matt’s cell, his imposing body jail-stripped with shadows of the iron bars.

Matt’s cheeks flamed with embarrassment, and he hung his head. “Hi Harry. I’m sorry. I really made a mess of this.”

“If what I heard about your conduct is true, you owe Anna an apology, not me, son.”

Encouraged by Harry’s reference to him as “son,” Matt rose and approached his mentor. “What did you hear?”

“That an American went crazy and attacked Anna and tried to kill her during her apparition.”

“That’s ridiculous!” Matt leaned his head on a bar and pulled it away fast at the singeing metal against his brow. “I wasn’t even trying to hurt her, much less kill her.” He slapped his hand against the bars.

“Explain what happened.”

“I pricked her arm a few times with acupuncture-gauge sterile needles. Swabbed the arm first. Lanced her thumb—I used a sterile lancet. I wouldn’t hurt her, you know that, Harry.”

“I heard she had blood running down her arm.”

“That’s an exaggeration.”

“Oh Matthew. What were you thinking?” Harry pushed his face closer to Matt’s so they were eye-to-eye.

“Obviously I wasn’t thinking clearly. If I were, I wouldn’t be stuck here in this airless cell.” Matt pointed to a rusty pail in the corner. “That bucket over there is the designated restroom.

“And could it get any hotter?” Matt swiped sweat off his face with a bent arm and paced in front of the bars like a caged panther. “My goal was to prove to you that Anna is perpetrating a hoax. Pretty easy, I thought. Then life could go back to normal, and you’d come back with me.”

“Go back to normal? I’m not going anywhere, Matthew. There is no deception here. Anna Babic sees and speaks with the mother of our Lord every day.”

“Stop and listen to yourself. You sound like a zealot. What happened to you Harry?”

“What happened to me? A miracle. How can you doubt for one second that miracles happen here in Valselo and around the world because of these apparitions? Jenna is all the proof you should need.”

Matt remained silent, his tapered fingers curled around the bars.

Harry stared back at him. “Why now? Why did you come now after all the invitations we’ve extended?”

“Because everything is falling apart. We are about to lose the grant. Zero funding, and that means we’re forced to close the lab. Doesn’t it bother you that your life’s work is going down the drain?”

"I like to think that my life's work is here—founding and running *Mir* House. I have never felt more alive or more accomplished."

"Give me a break, Harry," Matt scoffed. "How could anything in this little nowhere place compare to a Nobel Prize? What about our research? We're so close to finding the answers with umbilical cord stem cells. How can you just turn your back on all the years of hard work? I need you. The world needs you." Matt's heart pounded with the passion of his convictions, and tears welled in his eyes.

"A tad bit dramatic, don't you think?" Harry inserted his hand into the cell between two bars. Matt grasped it, comforted by the warm connection with the man he admired most on earth.

"I am not deserting you, son," Harry assured him. "I could never do that. You are part of my family." Harry rubbed his free hand over his wrinkled face. "I won't come back, but I will help you get the money you need to carry on—under one condition."

Hope winged through Matt like a cooling breeze. "I'll do anything to save the lab."

"You stay one week here—with an *open* mind and just observe. Come and work with me at *Mir* House. Put your skills as a physician to work. Monitor the health of the ill and disabled pilgrims who come here with such hope and faith. Review the certified cases with me. There is no scientific basis for the cures attributed to Valselo. You'll see. An international panel probed these cases, and even you won't be able to refute their conclusions, son. At the end of the week, if you still feel the need to go back and continue the research, I will give you a blank check, and you can fill in any amount to keep the lab functioning."

"Will you come back with me and run the lab again?"

"Not part of the deal." Harry grinned, and the

lines in the tanned skin around his eyes made a merry starburst. "I am home. I have never been happier with Jenna or more fulfilled in my work. I hope some of the graces of Valselo will influence your life. If you succeed, and truly keep an open mind, at the end of the week you'll see why I need to be here. Maybe you'll need to be here, too."

Matt shook his head. "Not a snowball's chance, Harry." He wanted another crack at Anna. "Can I continue my testing of the visionary?"

"Only with Anna's permission. She's submitted to testing before. I examined the findings on my first visit to Valselo. Lasers, electrodes, all three of the visionaries were tested repeatedly and no one, I repeat, no one, Matthew, was able to explain the daily euphoric state."

"I know, I know. I read the reports, too." Not convinced. "I want to run my own tests on Anna."

"Of course you do." Harry chuckled. "I know you will not be happy unless you do things your way, but only with her permission."

"Deal. I suppose you won't...ask her permission on my behalf?" Matt widened his eyes, an innocent supplicant.

Harry reared back and belly laughed. "Not a snowball's chance."

"Can't kill me for trying." Matt grinned back at Harry. "Now, if you get me out of here we can shake on all this."

"That, my boy, isn't going to be an easy deal for us."

"Why?"

"You're not exactly in a big-city lock-up. I don't have any experience with law enforcement around here. I've managed to avoid criminality." Harry sighed and cast Matt a poignant, condemning glance. "From what the police told me there is one municipal judge who presides over area hearings. He only comes to the village once a month."

“A month. I can’t stay here for a month. What am I going to do?” Matt slumped onto the cot and eyed the bucket, dismay diving in his chest.

“May not take a month. I’ll find out the last time he was here and see what I can do, but I’m not hopeful I can do anything. You are not popular. Lucky for you, I am, and I have a few connections. I’ll work on it tonight and get back to you in the morning.”

Dismay turned to dread and plummeted from Matt’s chest to his toes at the thought of spending the night in here. Sweat rained off him, and the thick air smelled like gym socks in a latrine.

Matt had no choice but to inconvenience Harry and rely on his help. Guilt sliced him. He had brought this on himself. “Thank you for everything, Harry.” Matt dragged himself upright and slid his arms through the bars toward Harry in an awkward embrace. “I’m sorry for causing you trouble. And please tell Jenna I am sorry for this.”

“Oh, you’re not getting off that easy.” Harry shook his head; a wry grin pursed his lips. “You’re going to face the lady yourself. I just want to be there when you do.”

Harry laughed, tossed Matt a wave, and left him there, his footsteps hollow echoes like the somber tolling of a bell.

Matt shuffled over, laid down on the cot, and wiggled around in an attempt to rest in a comfortable position. Finding that impossible, he settled for the least painful position. Balling the sliver of a pillow under his head, he blocked out the light from the naked light bulb hanging outside his cell with a bent arm over his eyes.

How did I wind up here? I’ve never done an illegal thing in my life.

Testing Anna with the proper precautions to protect her from infection seemed harmless enough and a great idea on the endless plane and bus trips

that finally brought him here.

M.D., Ph.D., Matt Robbins had let his ambition and devotion to his career interfere with his better judgment. He huffed. Doctor, doctor, Matt sure didn't use his high-IQ, superior brain.

It would have been worth it if he had proved that Anna was the sham that he was convinced she was. He hadn't accomplished that. In fact, his only accomplishment in the ill-conceived plan was embarrassing the two people who had been wish-list parents to him—eons more than his blood parents had ever been. He didn't much care that he had made himself *persona non grata* around the village. He didn't much value other people's social opinions of him. Except for Harry and Jenna Sheridan's.

Matt needed to make them understand that they belonged back home in Chicago. He was alone without them. Refusing to take their plans seriously, he had ignored them when they talked about moving here. For selfish reasons, he never believed that they would move to Valselo. He still didn't believe they had left him behind.

There had to be a scientific reason that Jenna was able to walk again. One of the experimental medicines must have finally worked. But Jenna had refused all tests. She wanted to believe that she had experienced a miracle.

Positive that he could refute this preposterous belief, he would prove that nothing special, and certainly nothing supernatural, was happening here. *If I can get out of jail, that is.*

Rolling over, he pitched onto the cement floor that smelled of bleach and was predictably hard and punishing. He groaned and pulled himself back onto the cot.

How could he start his experiments if he was stuck here for a month? Would Anna agree? She had to. He would convince her somehow. Everyone at the lab was counting on him to bring Harry back. In his

bravado, Matt had given them false hope. The great Matthew Robbins would go to Valselo to fix everything. He had the magic touch trouble-shooting when research protocols seemingly floundered. They expected him to deliver. And he had.

What would they think if they could see him now? He had to block out any notion that he could fail them. Sleep. *I need sleep.*

It eluded him. He tossed and turned for hours.

In a dream, Matt stood in front of a waterfall. *Because thou hast seen, thou hast believed. Blessed are they that have not seen but believed.* He didn't hear the words; it was more as though they were planted in his mind.

"I want to believe. I am afraid," Matt whispered.

I know your heart. Let go and believe. You will not be hurt again.

"I can't. I want to, but I can't."

Matt bolted up, teetered imbalanced. *Where am I?* Caught between the dreamscape and reality, he stretched his arms over his head, landed on the floor and sat up with a moan. *Oh, yeah. The Croatian clink.*

A sound like the moo of a cow. Anna pulled back and surveyed the man in the cell from the doorway. Scuffles. Muttering that she couldn't decipher. He picked up a pail, a disgusted look on his face. Assuming his need for privacy, and to protect her modesty, she ducked back into the outer office.

"Anna?" The sheriff glanced at her, alarmed. "Shall I come with you to see him?"

"No, it's fine." She touched the sleeve of his uniform gently. "I need to stay here a minute."

Liquid drummed, rained, trickled. The sounds tapered off. She smiled at the officer. He nodded and went back to his paperwork.

Quiet now. She edged into the doorway again for a glimpse. He sat on the cot, his clothes disheveled,

his curly, sandy brown hair mashed flat to the back of his head making him look a little crazed. He wore shorts and his hairy legs poked out at right angles to the cot. His head bent, she couldn't see his face.

She took a step and attracted his attention. He stared at her, looking chagrined, and then stood. Apparently polite. Tall and pale-faced in the harsh light, his eyes caught her attention most. Round and deep, deep blue, rimmed with a soft fringe of long black eyelashes, his belligerent expression didn't match those innocent eyes.

"Good morning," Anna said. "Dr. Robbins, is it?"

"Who else? Throw many people in jail around here?"

"No." She peered at him, a caged wild animal that posed no threat. "In truth, I can't remember the last time this cell was occupied."

He took a step forward as she did, closing the distance between the bars that separated them.

"Not very comfortable accommodations," she remarked. Anna stood on the other side of the bars. He stared at her a moment too long, spurring a turbulent disquiet inside her.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have come." She turned away.

"No wait. Don't go!" He reached a hand through the bars. "I'm the one who should apologize. I'm sorry, Miss Babic."

Anna turned back, pleased with him, and her hand brushed across his. A sweet sensation flowed from the brief contact, foreign to her, yet strangely welcome. She searched his face, surprised at the softness she detected in his eyes and the hint of an attractive smile. He was much nicer to look at without that quarrelsome attitude.

"I should not have tested you without your permission," he continued. "I'm sorry I hurt you. Next time I will ask you first."

She frowned. "There will not be a next time."

“Why not? What are you afraid of? Are you afraid I’ll prove that there is nothing special happening here? That none of this is real?”

“I have submitted to the scientists and their tests enough. I do not have to prove anything to anyone, especially a rude stranger like you.” A vein pulsed in her throat. She glowered at him.

He stepped back with a jerk, eyes widened in shock.

Good. Her anger simmered as she waited for him to retaliate, sure he would.

“You have everything to prove to anyone who comes here.” He pressed his face close to the bars, scowling. “You can’t play with people’s lives. Harry and Jenna would not be here if it weren’t for you. My life would not be falling apart.”

At his last statement, concern for him doused her anger. Anna studied him. “I am sad for you if your life is falling apart like you say, but how could I be responsible? Would that not be your fault?” she suggested gently.

“Harry and Jenna are here because they were called to do Our Lady’s work,” she continued. “I did not call them, Our Lady did. I live my life. I share Our Lady’s messages with anyone who desires to listen. That is what I have been called to do.”

“You give them false hope with all your messages.”

“They are not my messages. You don’t understand. Gospa is warning the world with her messages of peace and prayer. I am just her instrument. You think you know me; you don’t. I did not come here to argue with you or defend myself.”

“Why *did* you come?”

“To tell you that I am not going to file a complaint. If I wanted to play with people’s lives, like you say, I could keep you in this cell. Our judge was here last week. He will not be back for a while.”

“Harry told me that last night. He was going to

try and spring me this morning.”

“I doubt even my Doctor Harry could convince the police to release you. They are very protective of their own in Valselo.”

“Your doctor Harry?”

She smiled. “We’re also possessive of our favorite newcomers to Valselo. He’s a special man.”

Matt sat on the cot. He sighed. “I sure bungled everything. I never meant for any of this to happen. You don’t know me, either, but I usually think things through more...effectively.”

She noticed how exhausted he appeared, how deflated. A sweet surge of connection came again and brought with it an urge to protect him, make him feel better. “It’s OK. I forgive you.”

Matt opened his mouth as if to speak. She raised her hand to prevent whatever jab he might fling at her. “Don’t put your foot in your mouth again,” she said.

Anna laughed, delighted when he clamped his mouth shut, so innocent with his wide, dancing eyes.

He stood, moved toward her and poked his hand through the bars. “Friends?”

She grasped his hand and shook it. “Yes.”

He stared at her right forearm, turned it, and scrutinized her tanned, unblemished skin, spotlighted by the dangling light bulb.

“What? How?” His tone demanded an answer.

She regarded him calmly. He stared into her eyes. Sharp. Clinical. A very intelligent man.

“I heal quickly,” she said.

“I’d say.” He dropped her hand, but continued to stare into her eyes. “You have to let me run some tests.”

She shook her head.

He pursed his lips, squinted his eyes. Then he recast his expression—disarming, open. “Please.”

“I will pray on it and let you know.”

She walked away.

“Hey. What about getting me out of here?” he yelled.

“You can let yourself out. The bars don’t have a lock on them.”

She laughed and acknowledged the officer at the desk with a nod on the way out. The sound of Dr. Robbins’ hearty laughter receded behind her.

Chapter 3

Matt forked up some eggs, waiting—at this rate, maybe all day—for his host, Mikhail, to fill his empty coffee mug. Matt sat at a table with seven vacant seats, cheerless and alone amid the good cheer of the other guests at the *pansion*. A Charlie Brown Christmas tree on a lot with a forest of fat, lush pines, Matt would be the last to deserve attention, if they paid him any at all.

Katarina, the hostess, bustled from table to table, all smiles and pleasantries, refilling platters of breakfast food. She didn't come anywhere near Matt. Her husband toted a pot of coffee. Matt needed caffeine like he needed blood in his veins, but it didn't look like Mikhail would be pouring at his table in the corner any time soon. The Lidovics were famous for their hospitality. Seemed to Matt they were more famous for protecting their hometown visionary. And he was the notorious bad guy in these parts.

"Excuse me." Matt angled up a hand, which he resisted waving, suspecting it would be taken as a red cape in front of a bull. "May I please have some coffee, Mikhail?"

The man approached him, his lips pressed in a tight, grim line, his eyes blank and hooded. He

poured, sloshing the brew a bit in the process. Job done, he turned away abruptly.

Matt had had enough. "Mikhail," he said sharply. "I'd like a word, please."

"No." Mikhail faced him, lips tighter, grimmer. "That's the word I have for you."

Matt took a sip of coffee. "This tastes good. Thank you." He smiled his most disarming smile at his reluctant host.

Mikhail still wore that executioner's face, but his famous Christian hospitality was inbred. "You're welcome."

"I didn't hurt Anna, Mikhail."

"I don't want to discuss this. If I had my way, I would have thrown you out on the street. But the women wouldn't permit it." He jerked his head in Katarina's direction.

"I didn't hurt her, and I won't hurt her during any of my planned testing in the future."

"What's this?" Mikhail flattened both palms on the table and leaned his face close to Matt's.

A pleasant, soapy scent off Mikhail, combined with the ambrosia smell from the steaming coffee mug, made it easier for Matt to keep his face square in Mikhail's. "I spoke with her yesterday. She's considering giving me permission to continue tests. She was gracious...and forgiving." Matt hoped the last would penetrate Mikhail's scowl.

It didn't. "Anna's always gracious. Doesn't change that I don't like this testing of yours. I don't like you."

Stung, despite his usual thick skin to others' opinion of him, Matt slumped back in his chair. "I'm sorry I offended you." Matt swung his arm to indicate the room in general. "Sorry I offended the whole town. I'm not a bad guy. My motives are just. I'm trying to find out the truth."

Mikhail squinted. "Mister Doctor, I don't think you'd recognize the truth if it bit you in the behind."

He snorted, a merry, wicked gleam in his eye.

Matt smiled and then laughed. Why not? Always humble in the pursuit of truth, Matt was the first to admit he didn't know all the answers. He hadn't been able to penetrate Anna's trance—or whatever it was. That was a fact that had already bitten him in the behind.

"If Anna permits me to carry on here, can you humor me then, and...agree to feed me?" He grinned.

Mikhail clapped him on the shoulder with a bruising, heavy hand—evidently, the man wasn't above inflicting a little pain. He set down the half-full pot of coffee on Matt's table. "Here you go, doctor. As you Americans say, knock yourself out."

Mir House was not what Matthew had expected. No surprise there. So far, nothing was as he had expected in Valselo—especially not the dreams of Anna turning her smiles towards him instead of a spot on the wall of her chapel. Had his guilt over bungling the test prompted the dreams? *Must have*. Then why did he want to go find her this morning instead of visiting Harry?

Matt sighed and assessed the building in front of him. Sprawling, ranch style, pearly white stucco topped with coral roof tiles, *Mir House* was far from the squat, cinder block, institutional building that Matt had envisioned. More like a villa in Tuscany or a California desert retreat, a welcoming resort for tourists—well-off tourists, at that. More than likely, Harry, or certainly Jenna, had calculated the aesthetic effect of the building—not a hint of scary hospital about it.

Matt opened the door and stepped into rosy light reflected off the peach-tinted walls of the blessedly cool vestibule. Harry stood a few steps away beneath an arched entry. He wore a tropical print shirt and loose beige linen pants, the picture of casual ease

and contentment. Matt's stomach sunk. How would he ever pry Harry loose from this place and get him back to the lab?

Harry grinned at Matt and opened his arms. Matt didn't realize how sorely he had needed to feel welcome somewhere until he accepted and returned Harry's hug.

"I've been looking forward to this day for a long time, Matthew," Harry said. "Welcome to *Mir House*."

"Thanks, Harry." Matt peered past Harry's shoulder at cozy furniture groupings, potted palms and a wide screen TV. "Looks like a living room in there."

"Exactly what we call it. Come in and look around."

Matt followed, a couple steps behind, down a long, wide corridor, and then stopped in front of a framed photo where Harry indicated. "Here's the first, certified miracle of Valselo—Jean Pierre Dupont," Harry said.

Matt scanned a series of bullet points printed beneath Jean Pierre's photo:

Born December 30, 1948, Rheims, France.

Prostate cancer diagnosed 2003 via biopsy.

CT and bone scans indicated Stage IV cancer had metastasized throughout the pelvis, bladder, rectum, ribs, bones, lungs and liver.

Concurrent hormone therapy and chemotherapy administered over a six-month period—subsequent scans indicated lesions active and multiplying.

Discontinued therapy except for pain management drugs and traveled to Valselo March 2004.

Attended apparition at Anna Babic's home. During the apparition experienced a sensation of warmth throughout body.

Immediately afterward, pain had vanished completely.

CT and bone scans one-week post return home ordered by oncologist indicated complete absence of bone, lung and organ lesions. PSA under one.

Healing certified miraculous January 10, 2007 by the Valselo Medical Bureau (VMB) Certification by the CMIL (International Medical Committee of Lourdes) June 2007.

Matt gaped at Harry. "Spontaneous cure? And you have proof?"

"Yes. And there's more." Harry pointed a finger at the line of photographs on the wall. "*Mir* House is the center for the VMB. I founded it and head it. I have a few friends on the Lourdes International Medical Committee—luminaries in the medical field as they like to think." Harry smiled. "The church hasn't officially recognized Valselo like Lourdes, so technically our cases don't qualify yet to present to the CMIL. But the committee is composed solely of secular professionals, not clergy. We're in their slush pile so to speak, but they find our cases interesting, so I have faith they'll keep getting to them. By the way, Jeanne-Pierre is alive and well, tested monthly. No trace of cancer."

Matt inspected the framed photographs and overviews of other "certified" miracles: children and adults formerly suffering from multiple sclerosis, AIDS, spina bifida, cystic fibrosis, a severed spinal cord. "Where's Jenna's picture?"

"She isn't interested in certification," Harry responded in a mild tone.

"Of course not." Matt puffed up with frustration. "When are you going to quit this charade? We both know miracle drugs did the job for Jenna."

Harry laid a hand on Matt's shoulder, right on a throbbing knot. "What I know and you don't will become evident to you if you open that glorious mind of yours and really look at my work here. Will you do that, Matt? As a reminder—you did agree."

Harry chuckled. "But you *were* a captive

audience at the time.” The chuckle turned into a guffaw.

“Yeah, yeah.” Matt didn’t need a reminder of the jail sentence. “Where are the case files? I want to develop a review protocol for them.”

“You can camp out in an office I’ve fixed up for you as long as you want, but I’d like to show you the rest of *Mir* House first. Sound good?”

“Sure. I’m still a captive audience. Lead the way.”

Matt followed Harry to the end of the hall and turned under another wide archway. Matt hadn’t seen any doors on the interior of the house so far, and he concluded that the architectural design considered wheel chair access.

A bluish, rainbow-shaped light created a welcome mat effect on the hall floor. Beneath the arched entry, Matt surveyed what Harry tagged “The Comfort Room.” Painted a deep, grayish blue, fat puffy clouds sailed along the ceiling and upper third of its walls. Along the perimeter about a foot up from the floor, painted rose petals created a baseboard effect all around.

Stepping into the room gave Matt the visual impression that he was wading ankle deep in flower petals. He was so dazzled by the enveloping sky, that he hardly noticed the gaily-clad twin beds beneath simple wall crosses or the host of gleaming white cabinets.

“Wow,” Matt exclaimed.

Harry smiled. “Want to see some of the instrumentation? State of the art. I could probably perform complicated surgeries here if need be.”

“I’ll take your word for it.” Matt turned in a slow circle, his head angled up. “This is really something.” He grinned at Harry.

“All Jenna’s doing. She painted it herself. *Mir* means peace in Croatian.”

Matt nodded. “Knew that.”

“When we were thinking about wall paint during the construction, Jenna asked me, ‘Who says hospital green is peaceful?’”

“I like it.”

They’d shared a lot of success in their work including moments of utter professional elation. But Matt had never seen Harry more elated than now.

“More to see?” Matt asked.

“The Play Room. Then, you’re on your own.”

They turned back into the corridor, and Harry pointed the way down a hallway that veered to the left. “The room is down there. Go have a look, and take your time. The offices are over here.” He gestured straight ahead. “I’ll go get the case files assembled for you.”

Matt sauntered down the hall. He heard the room before he saw it. High-pitched children’s voices and blasts of laughter increased in volume as he approached the archway into the designated Play Room.

Anna stood with her back to him amid a mosaic of moving, babbling little kids. She half-turned and said something to one in a low, gentle voice, her profile backlit with sunshine that streamed through the far window. Her long black hair curtained her cheek, her eyes reduced to just long lashes from Matt’s perspective. It seemed the sunshine passed through her and beamed straight into Matt’s heart.

He smiled, happy to watch her while she was unaware—all intentions to poke at her like a lab rat forgotten. Instead, he wanted to hug her and absorb more of her sunshine. The impulse intensified when she noticed him and turned to face him. Her face transformed from pretty to beautiful as she smiled to reveal pearly perfect teeth and girlish dimples. She enchanted him.

“Hello, Dr. Robbins,” she said. “I’m glad to see you again. You look fit today.”

He walked toward her, his hands outstretched.

His left hand just fell short of clasping hers and pressing it to his lips. He had no idea, and didn't care why he was so drawn to her. "I'd like it if you called me Matt, Miss Babic." Her delicate scent intoxicated him.

"Certainly, Matt. And you'll call me Anna?"

"Yes, Anna, I will."

"I trust you slept well at Mikhail and Katarina's *pansion* last night? You look more rested than the last time we spoke."

The light through the window shifted and dimmed, an apparent cloud in front of the sun—a fitting backdrop to his clouded history with Anna to date. The cooling effect of the shade snapped him back into the purposeful, dogged clinician.

"Last time we spoke you said you'd let me test you," he asserted.

She shook her head. "I said I'd pray for the answer to your request. Let's pray about it together." She extended a hand toward him.

He shrugged and dangled his hands at his sides. "If that's what it will take."

"You don't want to?" Her eyes shone tender, beguiling, the disappointment obvious in her tone.

"I don't pray."

"Ah." She dropped her hands to her sides, his mirror image.

"What do mean by, 'Ah?'"

"Just—ah."

A toddler pulled at the hem of her skirt. Smiling down at the child, those tender, chocolate eyes glistened with affection. She rattled off something in her language, too rapid and probably slang for him to get the drift, but it had a happy effect on the kid. The child beamed at her and sped toward a pile of blocks in the corner.

"You're good with kids," he said.

"I love children. I want a house full of my own some day."

“Really? How do you plan to do that, considering what you are?”

“What I am?” Her brow pinched. “What do you think I am, exactly?”

“A nun, or whatever this deal is you have going.”

She bent at the waist with her burst of laughter—the sound of wind chimes.

“How pleased Our Lady must be with you,” she exclaimed.

Crazy. The woman’s crazy. And I must be crazy—that smile....”Have you undergone any psychological testing?”

She laughed again. “Oh yes. How do you say? The shrinks gave me the once over. Few people are certified as sane as the visionaries of Valselo.”

She scrutinized him, and her eyes flashed calm intelligence and confidence.

Certain that he couldn’t mask his confusion or the insane desire to touch her, he clamped his hands against his legs and stood speechless. Could she be for real? How could he accept that when she defied any definition of reality to him? He was attracted to her, rare enough for him with any woman, but with this one? She had to be delusional.

As if she’d read his mind, she grinned enough to nudge dimples in her cheeks. “I am not pretending to speak with Our Lady every day. She is as real as I am.” With the touch of her hand on his hand, a sizzling warmth traveled up his arm. He would be happy to let her hand linger on his all day.

“I think I like you, Matt Robbins. Perhaps you’ll come to like me, too.” She released his hand. “I need to get back to my work with the children.”

“Harry has some files for me to review.” And he intended to get to them...if he could will his feet to move away from Anna Babic.

“Then you must go help Dr. Harry. I’ll pray about your tests.” A serene smile bloomed on her full lips. “Enough for both of us. Perhaps your prayers

will be answered.”

She waded into the milling pool of children and knelt down at their eye levels. She angled her head up to him. “See you soon.”

“Yes.” Those mesmerizing eyes held him. “See ya,” he stammered. He forced his feet to pivot and leave her sunshine behind.

Chapter 4

Anna slowed as she stepped down the highly polished, tile stairs on her way to Katarina and Mikhail's second kitchen in the *pansion's* basement. She halted halfway down and closed her eyes to absorb the oasis-like effect of visiting this house. The familiar murmur of voices, the slight scent of herbs always filled her with serenity and belonging—the welcome that only a home filled with love could generate.

Grandma Vi had stepped in and provided a similar home for Anna after her parents' deaths—a safe cocoon that helped her deal with the devastating grief of being alone. Then, years ago, when Grandma Vi passed on to everlasting life, the Lidovics enveloped Anna in their warm embrace, making her a part of their family. Anna gained two parents and siblings to play with at a time when she'd believed she had lost everything. What a rare treat for an only child.

Anna entered the kitchen, the true heart of the *pansion*, amid the clatter of dishes, a tangle of conversation and, above all, laughter.

Sinka stood at the stove, her cheeks shiny red apples from the rising steam as she stirred the herb-scented-something-wonderful inside a heavy cast

iron soup pot. Nadia took her turn washing the ample supply of dirty dishes that filled the deep sink; her eyes stared out the window above it, a dreamy, faraway look on her face.

My sisters. Here with them, Anna never felt like an orphan. Deep affection swelled inside her. With their dark hair, brown eyes and easily tanned skin, they all truly looked like sisters who took after their mother, Katarina. Trim, vibrant, naturally attractive women who didn't fuss with cosmetics, they might have sprung from the same mother—except for Nadia. Her blond-tipped cropped hair, stylish clothes and black-lined eyes made her look exotic and spoke to her rebellious nature.

Katarina leaned against the counter top, her bottomless cup of tea in her hand. She smiled broadly when Anna approached and deposited a kiss on both cheeks.

“Anna can you please taste this, and let me know what you think?” Sinka asked, motioning Anna over to the stove. “Mama likes it. Papa likes it. Even Nadia likes it. But I don't know. I think there is something missing.”

“Me? Why Me? I can't compete with your cooking, Sinka.” Anna laughed, picked up a soup spoon and hurried over to the stove.

“I'm trying to cook your Grandma Vi's chicken soup from memory. I can't quite place it, but I think I am missing something.”

“I really regret that I never wrote down some of her recipes,” Anna said with a headshake. “I should have taken more of an interest in cooking the food and not just eating it. I still dream of her walnut cake. That is one recipe I wish I knew how to make.”

She blew on the spoon before putting it in her mouth. “Yum. This is delicious Sinka, just like grandma used to make with the tomatoes and onions. This is so good.”

Anna quit the compliments when she saw the

disappointment etched on Sinka's face. Sinka wanted answers not praise.

"Tell me the ingredients you used, and I will see if it jogs my memory." Anna listened carefully as Sinka rattled off the ingredients.

When Sinka finished, Anna smiled. "I know what's missing. Grandma always floated two basil leaves on the top of the soup as it simmered. I asked her once why always two, not one, not three? Her answer was, 'Did Noah take one animal on the ark? Did he take three? No he took two, and that is why I use two.'"

Sinka poked out her elbow and jabbed her knuckles against her waist, a perplexed expression on her face.

Anna burst out laughing. "I know, Sinka I never understood the reason either."

They giggled together. The swell of love for her family crested. Silly laughter and simple pleasures, few things could compare to that for Anna.

"Papa has some fresh basil in his garden. I'm going to pick two leaves." Sinka hurried out of the room.

Katarina grabbed another mug out of the cabinet and filled it with coffee. She handed it to Anna, added another tea bag and more hot water from the kettle to her own cup, and led Anna to the table.

"So tell me, how are you after the incident with the doctor?"

"I'm fine." Anna gently touched Katarina's hand, pleased with her motherly concern.

"But that crazy man hurt you. Mikhail still wants to throw him out into the road. I told him, not yet. But if Anna says yes then you can give him the boot in the pants."

"You can't throw him out. He really didn't mean any harm."

"No harm? He cut up your arm."

“He just scratched my arm. And it’s fine. Everybody’s way too upset about this. The village is still talking about it, and that embarrasses me. He was...experimenting. Just like all the other doctors.”

“But it was against your will. Or am I wrong?”

“Technically, you’re right. He didn’t know he needed to ask.”

Katarina plopped her mug down on the table spilling tea over its brim. “What kind of a person does this? I think I’ll let Mikhail loose, and we’ll get that man out of here.”

Anna shook her head. “It’s OK, really. He wants to run more tests.” She held her breath and waited for Katarina to react, wanting, needing her guidance and understanding.

“Again honey? After all the other scientists put you through, are you sure, you are up to that? There are books full of proof that you speak the truth. This doctor doesn’t have the right to call you liar.”

“I know. No matter what truths are put before non-believers, they’ll figure out a way to call them lies. If I agree, he will get the same results as the other scientists, of course. But I think I want him to see it with his own eyes. I want him to believe me. There is sadness in his eyes.” Anna sipped her coffee, encouraged by the gentle look on Katarina’s face, and grateful for her apparent acceptance.

“I think he needs to believe in the miracles Our Lord has worked in Valselo,” Anna continued. “When the other scientists ran their tests I didn’t care either way. They could believe or not. I know what is true. But this is different.”

“I see. So your doctor has touched more than your arm. He has maybe touched your heart?”

“I don’t even know him.”

“But you want to?”

A hot flush crawled up Anna’s throat to her cheeks at the prospect of discussing her private yearnings. But she had to talk to someone about

this. Who better than the woman she considered her earthly mother?

“Honestly? Yes, I do want to get to know him. I feel brand new, different, when I look at him. My heart flutters. I can’t breathe. I work hard to dedicate my life to being a Religious, but I want more. I want a husband and children of my own. I want a family.”

Completely embarrassed at her admission, Anna broke eye contact with Katarina. “I am foolish to even be thinking this way.”

“Foolish? Why is it foolish for a young woman to want to have a family?”

“I am different.”

“No, you are not different. You have been given an amazing gift. I am not denying that. You have been blessed beyond words. But it does not change who you are. You are the same as my Sinka who dreams of being a world-renowned chef, or Nadia who dreams of fame and fortune. What are we if not for our dreams?”

“All I’ve ever dreamed of is making a life with a man who loves me, having our children, raising them together...”

“Like me,” Katarina declared. “My one and only dream was always to be a mother. I wanted nothing else in life than to be married and have a family. I am blessed to be living my dream.”

“So you have stopped dreaming then?”

“Of course not. Now my dreams are to see all my little ones living out their dreams.” Katarina reached over and clasped Anna’s hand. “Including you, my Anna.”

Anna smiled, feeling shy, even with this woman whom she would trust with any confidence. “I feel so guilty feeling this way. I don’t want to disappoint Our Mother.”

“Oh dear one, how could you disappoint her? She wants you to be happy. Her Son knows what is in

your heart. You must speak to her. Just like you talked to me. Her mother's heart is as wide as the Adriatic and all the seas and oceans combined. What makes you think our heavenly mother couldn't understand your yearning to be a mother, too?"

"Our Lady encourages her children to center their lives on the Lord. Look at Josip's choice to be a priest."

"And look at Elizabeta's to be a wife. There are many ways to serve the Lord." Katarina squeezed Anna's hands, her gaze earnest.

Anna nodded hoping that Katarina's logic applied to her. "You're right. I must speak about this with Our Lady. Especially now..." Anna dipped her head and looked at her coffee mug.

Katarina chuckled and Anna edged up her gaze to find the older woman grinning broadly. "Now is so special because there's a good looking doctor in town? God bless, Anna. I'll keep Mikhail's boot away from his behind."

Mikhail bounded through the door with Sinka. He stopped short, his face lit with pleasure at them, laughing together at the table. He frowned, though, as he came to Anna's side.

"Little one, are you all right?" He bent down to hug Anna. He smelled like a breeze in early evening. Anna buried her head in his shoulder, protected and safe.

"Yes. I'm so glad to see you," Anna said.

He grinned, satisfied, then stood and bent to give his wife a tender hello kiss.

Wouldn't it be nice if I had a husband to greet me like that?

"Can I throw him out now?" Mikhail bellowed, a twinkle in his sky blue eyes.

Everyone in the room knew to whom he referred.

"No you cannot. At least not yet," Katarina asserted, shooting him a warning look.

Mikhail shrugged, used to deferring to his wife's wisdom. "OK, but just say the word, Anna, and he will be gone."

He checked his watch. "Where did this day go? Enough sitting around, dear ladies. It is time to get dinner ready for our hungry pilgrims. Anna, you cut the bread, Nadia stop pretending to wash the dishes and get them done. Where is Jasna? She can help by setting the table."

The women organized the dinner service preparation, used to deferring to Mikhail when it came to attending the needs of their ever-present visitors.

They worked well together and never complained about the endless chores. Valselo pilgrims carried Our Lady's messages home with them around the world. The *pansion* owners in town were honored to serve them.

"Have you heard from Maya lately?" Anna asked Katarina as she layered flaky dense bread in baskets.

"I received a letter just this morning." Katarina's face glowed at the mention of her oldest daughter. "It was filled with praise for Colin. They are so happy together. And we get to see them soon. They are planning to come home during Easter week."

"I'm so excited!" Secretly, Anna considered Maya her favorite sister. She missed having Maya at her side to translate during her apparitions, a daily togetherness until Maya went to America to school. And then Maya fell in love and made her life far away with Colin.

Anna sighed. She was happy for Maya, and had grown closer to Nadia now that she translated for her. Comfortable speaking English, Anna still needed all the help she could get with romance languages, German and Portuguese.

Snippets of conversation and the sound of

thudding feet pounding down the steps reached the kitchen. The current batch of pilgrims herded into the dining room. Hungry and excited from a day spent on their own in Valselo, they created a din sharing their experiences with each other.

Nadia dried her hands on a towel. "I better get in there and do my duty as a tour guide.

"Thank you for allowing me to bring the group again tonight, Anna." Nadia's eyes were warm with affection. "We are all looking forward to it."

"You are welcome. I will see you later." Anna stepped toward the door behind Nadia.

"Stay for dinner, Anna," Katarina said. "We always have plenty."

"Thank you, Katarina, but I need to go."

"I am here for you, Anna." Katarina winked. "If you need to talk."

"I know that, thank you."

Anna hugged Katarina and angled her head through the arch separating the kitchen from the hallway to check for straggling pilgrims. The area clear, she climbed the steps and proceeded outside.

She needed time alone before her visit with Our Lady. Praying for answers, she hiked the short way home fingering the beads of her rosary bracelet and reciting her favorite prayers.

She spent the time before her meeting with Our Lady in her garden, gathering roses. After she filled her basket with the fragrant, delicate blooms, she carried it into her chapel and lined the stems upright in a pail of water.

The silence filled her and she knelt down on the kneeler. Her thoughts scrambled, raced.

What should I do? Is it wrong to have feelings for Matt, a stranger with pain in his eyes who refuses to pray? She couldn't decide if she might agree to subject herself to his testing to convert him or to get closer to him. Did he care about her, or was she just a scientific experiment to him? The questions danced

through her mind and then disappeared as if they evaporated. Exquisite calm replaced them.

Yes, to Matt's testing, came clear to her. She recognized the sensation as guidance, her prayers answered.

Thank you Mother for always being with me on my journey. Help me to follow your Son's path for me. Help me to serve Him. I want you to be proud of me.

Anna smiled and rose from the kneeler, her eyes riveted on the crucifix on the front wall of her chapel. She left to change her clothes before her apparition, smiling and confident. Just for good measure, she'd ask Our Lady when she spoke to her directly, if she understood the guidance correctly.

Chapter 5

His internal time clock out of sync with Valselo real-time, Matt was wide-awake, dressed and ready for a jog at 5:30 AM. His gym shoes squeaked on the tile floor in the otherwise silent *pansion*—all guests at the inn apparently asleep. The deserted road outside was equally quiet, lit eerily by the pre-sunrise dimness.

Clad in shorts and a thin, threadbare Chicago Bears T-shirt, he was underdressed—at least until the sun rose to super-heat the terrain—and the early morning chill raised goose bumps on his arms and legs. He pumped his legs into a sprint to get his sluggish system aerobically infused.

It took longer than usual for the endorphin rush to kick in. *Ah*. Invigorating when it did. He sucked clean, garden-fragrant air into his expanded lungs, appreciating a healthy normalcy for the first time since he boarded the first plane in Chicago to get him here. He slowed the pace, an easy jog, and relished the own-the-world sensation on the deserted road.

He had no destination in mind and made turns randomly figuring the village was too small for him to get seriously lost. As long as he stuck to the lowland roads and didn't venture up into the hills,

he'd find his way back when he tired of jogging. He let his thoughts fly as randomly as his feet.

He had yet to receive the nod from Anna to proceed with examining her during an apparition, and he needed it. If he had to demand it, he would. He could see no way to explain the purported miraculous healings otherwise. He hadn't been able to find flaws in the medical conclusions of the VMB or the international medical panel. A host of terminal or irreversible disease states had been present and cured with no apparent scientific explanation; and the medical documentation was beyond refute.

Was the human brain powerful enough to cause spontaneous elimination of disease? If the brain *believed* the body was cured, could it happen? Was Anna a hypnotist, planting this belief in the minds of the "healed"? Was she hypnotized herself? If so, by whom?

Matt was within yards of the woman before he became aware of another jogger. Resentful and unwilling to share the pre-dawn tranquility, he would have to follow and give up solitude, or rev up his short supply of energy to pass her. Debating, he gauged her sure movements. Resentment turned into entertainment.

Their footfalls thudded in four-quarter time: his, hers, his, hers. Her trim figure in the snug high-cut shorts and form fitting white tank top outpaced him with each stretch of her toned, long legs. Her bent arms pumped elbow bones back toward him in succession. Her dark ponytail beneath a baseball cap pendulum-swayed like the hair was attached to the rear of a galloping horse. Captivating. *Anna*.

A surge of male interest spurred Matt to accelerate. Not easy, but he caught up with her and attempted to control his panting. She had a dainty, aristocratic profile. He couldn't see through her huge, black wraparound sunglasses. Instead, he saw

his tiny, blurred reflection in them, hopping up and down.

“Morning...” he huffed out. And she didn’t seem winded at all. “May I join you?”

“Sure, Matt. I’d like that.” She turned her head toward him and smiled.

That gorgeous smile. Matt’s male interest hiked up a notch. “Anna, I’m glad to see you.”

“Shush.” She touched her lips with the tip of an index finger. “I don’t want to be recognized.”

Matt surveyed the area with a few quick head twists. “Nobody around but us.” His lungs were stretched to the limits.

“Can we slow down a bit?” he begged. The jogging motion and his distorted, reflected image in her glasses made Matt dizzy.

Anna’s cheeks dimpled. She slowed from what Matt considered a sprint and tucked a stray lock of hair behind her ear—a graceful move that riveted Matt’s attention. He stumbled a few steps, but quickly corrected his gait.

“Thanks.” He grinned back at her and they settled into a brisk walk.

“I love this time of day, the feeling that this whole beautiful place is mine,” she said.

“And it’s cooler,” Matt added.

“It is. Do you jog at home?”

“Every morning or evening depending on what’s going on during the day. Need those endorphins for neurological health.”

Pretty bell tones rang in Anna’s hearty laugh. “My English isn’t perfect but I think you just said it makes you feel happy.”

Matt nodded.

“I like the fresh air and the fact that no pilgrims are out this early,” she said. “I can just be me and forget for a while that they set me apart from them.”

Matt quit jogging. “Explain that.” He pursed his lips and concentrated on Anna’s face when she

halted. “Could you please take your glasses off a minute? It would help if I could look into your eyes.”

Anna slid the glasses off the bridge of her nose, hooked them into the top of her shirt and faced Matt. She crossed her arms into a tuck over her waist, pinched her brows and pursed her lips, mimicking his expression. “People either look at me like I’m an oddity—like you’re looking at me now. Or they look at me like I’m a saint, some sort of star, or worse—someone they should pray to. It’s very hard to...what’s the word? Relate.”

“Hmm,” Matt responded. “I think I can understand that.”

Matt had asked her to take off the glasses, so he couldn’t blame Anna or anyone but himself for his reaction. Her soft, brown eyes melted his cool clinical assessment of her like a pool of clear lake water where frank honesty and pure innocence shimmered. This woman wasn’t capable of lying; he’d stake his reputation on it. She was a pawn in the apparitions scam; she had to be. He itched to get to the bottom of the thing.

A riff of muffled conversation sounded. Matt turned in its direction and saw two people down the road. Anna slapped on her glasses. “I’d like a little more peace before my duties begin today,” she said. “Would you like to see one of my favorite peaceful places?”

“Of course,” Matt responded, eager to pick up any puzzle piece he could and to spend more time in Anna’s company.

Unfamiliar with village roads, they approached the front of Anna’s house before Matt recognized the way leading to it. Instead of walking up the gravel drive toward the front of the house, Anna gestured for Matt to follow her around the side.

A slate patio extended in an arc away from the cinder block foundation at the back of the house. A patch of vivid green grass beyond the patio created a

bridge effect in front of a seven-foot high, stone wall that stretched around the rectangular perimeter. Matt estimated it encompassed about a half acre of land.

Anna reached down and dug at the inside heel of her running shoe, producing a key. She unlocked an iron door, swung it open and ushered Matt through it into an Eden-like, open-air green house. A forest of white roses bloomed on bushes that covered every inch of ground except for a ribbon of white pebbles leading to a central stone bench.

“Why don’t you have a seat in my garden, and I’ll go get us some coffee? Do you like coffee?” Anna asked.

“Addicted to it,” he said.

“Me, too.” She smiled. “How do you take it?”

“Black.”

“I’ll be right back.”

Matt sat amid hundreds of blooms, the only male in a sea of femininity. He appreciated the beauty of the garden, but sitting in one with the sole purpose of admiring flowers? For girls. But. The sweet fragrance, so rich he could taste it on his tongue, and the unnatural perfection of the roses themselves, loosened the knot he kept tied tight inside.

He exhaled and savored the new sensations: peace, contentment, and total relaxation. Loved. He felt loved, and had the heady inclination to stay in Anna’s garden forever, especially when she came back into view.

Anna carried a tray with coffee mugs and a plate of pastries, sufficiently encumbered that he sprang up and hurried over to her.

“Let me take that,” he said.

She smiled and gave him the tray, a sunny glint in her smoky brown eyes that shot sparks deep through him like electric charges. She led him back toward the bench with unassuming grace in her

every movement. Without the baseball cap she had worn earlier, her brown-black hair now fell straight down her back, shimmering in glossy swirls as the breeze played through it.

Her tanned skin, still nicely exposed in her shorts and tank top, and that dark mane of hair contrasted sharply with the snow-white flowers around her. Another new sensation filled Matt—the desire to charm her as she charmed him.

“You look so pretty with your hair down like that,” he said, his gaze intent on her face.

“I...” Her eyes widened, her cheeks colored a pretty pink. “I do?”

She plopped down on the far right side of the bench. He set the tray in its center and took a seat on the other side.

“You do,” he reiterated, pleased that she seemed to enjoy the compliment. “Very pretty.” He surveyed the tray between them. “This looks good, too.”

She picked up the plate and offered it to him. “These pastries are delicious. I’m so spoiled. Katarina bakes them for me almost every day. Try one.”

He arched an eyebrow as he selected a gooey doughnut with chocolate icing. “Katarina can’t stand me.”

Anna chuckled. “She’ll be fine. She doesn’t trust you, and she’s been like a mother to me since my family died.”

He held the doughnut suspended in front of his mouth. “I’m sorry about your parents,” Matt said. “Was it recently?”

“No, no. I was a child. They were killed in the Croatian war.” There wasn’t a hint of sadness in her voice, which surprised him.

He took a bite of the sugary confection, followed by a sip of delicious coffee as he scrutinized Anna’s face, her expression as serene and peaceful as her

garden. Matt's parents were hardly the *Ozzie and Harriet* ideal, but he theorized even he would register a lot more emotion discussing their demise.

"You seem to have..." he worked to choose a diplomatic word, "...adjusted well to your loss."

"Oh, I was inconsolable at first. It was a terrible time in my country. 10,000 people died before the United Nations stepped in." She sipped from her mug. "My grandmother took me in and then died before I was full grown. She was very old and tired of this life. But then I found out they're with Our Lady and Our Lord. So happy. And I became the property of Valselo."

"I want to know more about this property concept, but first, how did you find out they're with Our Lady, as you say?"

"She told me. And once they came with her. Not Grandmother, but Momma and Papa." She beamed at him, angelic.

Slowly her smile dimmed, and her lips met in a line as he stared at her. Apparently, his internal "you've got to be kidding" transmitted to her telepathically.

"You don't have to believe me," she said, shaking her head to punctuate the clipped words. "But you do have to stop looking at me like that if you want to stay here with me in my garden."

Matt glanced down at the dirt considering how to handle her. And himself. Drawn to her on two levels: as a woman *and* a scientific curiosity, he was dealing with unaccustomed confusion. He wanted to know more about her, but he wasn't sure why. Because he wanted to prove his belief that her heavenly conversations were illusions? Or because he wanted to believe her?

She made it easy for him. "I've decided to allow you to proceed with medical testing."

"You *have*? What prompted this?"

"Our Lady told me to permit it."

He had to stare, hard, at one of the rose bushes to freeze his eyes' motion and prevent the impulse to roll them. "OK, good. That's good. Thank you," he managed.

Eyes locked on the bush heavy with blooms, Matt focused on one of the flowers, then another, on around their network of stems. Each rose, opened to the max, not a single brownish blemish or insect-riddled petal marred its perfection. He scanned other bushes and didn't detect any buds. Chilled or thrilled, he couldn't sort out which, he asked, "Can I test a rose, too?"

"You are a strange man, Doctor Matthew."

He snorted. Couldn't help it.

"Come back tomorrow evening and bring your testing equipment," she said as she rose and placed her mug on the tray. "I'll give you a rose after my meeting with Our Lady, and you can do whatever you want with it."

She held the tray in his direction. He deposited his mug on it and then took it out of her hands. He followed behind, but her features blurred in motion. His mind flew far away from Anna's garden, designing his testing protocol.

Chapter 6

The next afternoon dragged for Anna. She read for a while but couldn't concentrate on the book. The words on each page blurred and instead, she saw Matt's sea-blue eyes peering at her as if she were an experiment in a Petri dish—or gazing at her softly, appreciatively as if she were his heart's desire.

She abandoned her book and dusted an end table. When she realized she had dusted the same table twice already, she tossed the rag into the cleaning bag and headed out the door. She needed a distraction.

Outside, the noonday sun drilled heat into her scalp. If only she had remembered her hat.

“God Bless you, Anna,” a woman said as she passed.

“Thank you. And may He bless you, too,” Anna responded with a pleasant smile, praying that she could keep the exchange to a simple greeting. Already others in the road had begun to scrutinize her with over-eager interest. She could use her hat *and* her dark glasses.

She smiled at the pilgrims as she moved forward, pleased that it apparently sufficed to meet their expectations of her.

Continuing down the dusty road towards *Mir* House, she bent her head, eyes downcast, partly to

appear inconspicuous, but mostly absorbed with her concerns about the evening apparition. How would Matt react to his findings? Would he believe she conversed with Our Lady and that the messages she conveyed through Anna represented motherly advice about knowing and loving Jesus, Our Lord? How could he not? Would a prayer touch Matt's heart tonight?

She hoped so.

What exactly will Matt do to me with his shiny, sharp instruments? Not that it mattered. Our Lady would protect her from harm, and nothing on earth could prevent or interrupt her meetings with Gospa.

Thank the Lord on high for that. Anna waited for the daily time spent with Our Lady in a state of spine tingling anticipation, a hundred times more than the awaited arrival of St. Nicholas as a child. This impossible gift of knowing the mother of God was the treasure, the center of Anna's life.

If only Matt could understand what it was like to be with Our Lady. How could she ever put into words the all-encompassing love, peace, and tranquility that emanated from Jesus' mother?

At her destination, Anna stopped at the gate of the white, wood fence that surrounded the playground behind *Mir* House and observed the children. They scampered around with two ladies and laughed at the grown-ups' attempts to keep up. The village kids and *Mir* House visitors played together with energy and seeming good health, even though some of the children were as bald as newborn babies.

Anna identified with their joyous innocence—the same child-like sensations she experienced every day in Our Lady's presence. When she was with Mary she relaxed, comforted, embraced by her Mother's love. How difficult it was to wait all day for that reprieve from every day life.

The children noticed Anna, and their faces lit

with glee.

“Anna come play with us.”

“Yes, play.”

“OK. What game shall we play?” Anna asked. She opened the gate and nearly fell over in the collision of little arms and legs converging on her for a group hug.

The children chose tag. A little girl swatted Anna’s arm and declared her “it.” Her daily jogging hadn’t conditioned her to keep up with under-ten runners.

Laughing, as the kids managed to evade her taps to make someone else it, Anna made eye contact with the two women who now slouched against a tree, undone by charges half their size.

Soaked with perspiration, Anna bent over at the waist, held up a hand to the wiggly crew. She breathed deeply a minute. “How about story time?”

Glad that the suggestion appealed to the kids, Anna spent the rest of a wonderful afternoon reading them countless books, changing her voice to suit the characters and occasionally play-acting the action. The children expected nothing of her except her loving companionship—a rare no-strings gift in her celebrity-like life full of speaking engagements and prayer groups. She could simply love the children and accept it when they loved her back.

Here she could truly be herself.

Her love of children had always convinced her that she would be well suited to the life of a Religious, perhaps in a teaching order or a church orphanage. Early in the onset of the daily apparitions, when it was common for the three visionaries to speak with Our Lady together, they had asked her what she expected them to choose as their life’s work in adulthood. Our Lady clearly preferred that they seek out the religious life to perfect their relationship with God. After all, this life is nothing more than preparation for eternal life

with the Lord.

But, Our Lady was always clear that they, like all mankind, were born with free choice. And had echoed Katarina's belief that there were many ways to serve the Lord. Anna enjoyed teaching other people's children, but in her heart she had always longed to have children of her own, a family, a husband.

"You look so pretty...." Matt had said. Anna couldn't get the statement out of her mind—couldn't get him out of her mind and didn't want to. Unaccustomed to daydreaming about a man, guilt pinched. *Could she marry and still remain in Our Lady's favor?*

For the first time in her life, she doubted the path she had taken. She actually looked forward to seeing him this evening even if he would probably only peer at her as if she were a specimen in a Petri dish.

Matt worked in a comfortable room inside *Mir* House, which Harry had provided him as a temporary office—all the while insinuating that Matt could work here permanently if he ever, "came to his senses and recognized the hand of God inside the case files."

Matt had the desk cluttered with papers and books he had opened and then tossed aside. He rubbed his burning eyes and inspected an enlarged photograph again. Taken by an Italian scientist, the snapshot captured the three visionaries, Elizabeta, Josip and Anna, eyes directed toward the sky, reportedly during an early apparition.

Matt checked the date stamp. Anna was seventeen when the photo was taken. Her figure already womanly, Anna looked sweet and saintly in the picture.

Matt had considered it ridiculous that some thought extreme beauty could take the breath away,

but staring at Anna's lovely face aglow in apparent ecstasy seized his breath as if the air had been suctioned out of the small room.

What's happening to me? Rattled by his own subjectivity, he forced himself to look with an objective eye at the documentation scattered in front of him. He had to stay focused. So much rode on it. The future of his team and lab was at risk, and he didn't have time for personal interests.

He picked up an Italian medical journal and jotted down notes on a pocket-sized pad as he read the translated article entitled, *Ocular Anomalies During Visionaries' Trance*.

Visionaries permitted ocular examination by international team—medical specialists—no time constraints

Daily tests—group apparitions—2 week period

All three focused on the same spot simultaneously within less than a second of each other

Prayer recitation ceased at differing points in the prayers concurrent with group focus on same spot

All kneeled concurrent with group focus on same spot

All eye movement ceased during trances for periods varying between 10-45 minutes

That's impossible. There had to be a faulty protocol or inexact measurements. If not, maybe the visionaries practiced their movements, or passed signals between them that the scientists missed.

Matt flipped pages and read, "None of the three blinked during apparitions, regardless of length."

Not possible. Their corneas would dry out. Matt continued reading. "Cornea sensitivity to varying pressures completely absent."

How was this feasible? The more Matt read, the

more confused he became.

And there was much more data. The extent of examinations and the impossible results continued to flabbergast him. But he couldn't afford to be dissuaded from trying to disprove these results, no matter how flawless they appeared from a scientific standpoint, how compelling they were—or how compelling he found Anna Babic to be.

Matt didn't have the equipment to recreate all the tests but that wasn't all bad. He had to figure a way to create a new test—one that would get him to the scientific explanation that had eluded other experts. Matt had to believe he had the ability to find the proof.

Anything less was unthinkable to him. What would happen to him if faced with a true mystery? How could he go on without documented order and solid fact?

Matt wouldn't consider the possibility that miracles could occur and prayers could be answered. *Prayers answered? That's ludicrous.*

God wasn't listening, at least not to him. Matt had learned that fact when he was eight years old. If he had experienced any "miracle," it was that he still hadn't discounted God's entire existence. *But I might.*

Matt stood, put the notepad in his back pocket and lifted the heavy crate filled with the equipment he needed. He wanted to get to Anna's house early and set up in the chapel before anyone entered—and perhaps snoop around to uncover what had to be some sort of séance-like subterfuge. Maybe there'd be time to speak with Anna privately and soothe his conscience about the invasive tests he planned to conduct.

His misgivings weren't just a matter of conscience. If he succeeded in disproving Anna the visionary's claims, as he knew he would, he had no hope that Anna the woman would ever speak to him

again.

A whirl of the fan and a jumble of whispers stoked Matt's hyperaware state, as he sat poised on the edge of a front row pew as though he hung over a pool, ready to dive.

Anna had prepared the guests at her home for what would come next. Matt wanted to conduct these tests privately, had begged Anna to permit him that. But she had insisted that Mary's messages did not belong to her, but to the world—they required witnesses.

"Besides," she had told him, while she stood passively watching him rig electrical cords, "I would think you'd want witnesses when you prove whatever it is you think you'll prove with all this."

She had further insisted that he stand with her while she addressed her group. "This is Dr. Matthew Robbins from the United States. He is with us today to conduct some tests while I visit with Our Lady," she had said. "No one is to stop him, no matter what he chooses to do. Please know that I permit this freely after consulting with Our Lady. Any questions?"

When the assembly posed none, Anna had returned to the back of the room and had begun reciting prayers.

The crate on the floor by his feet housed his instruments. Matt had noticed his hosts from the *pansion*, seated in the back with other villagers, his unpopularity apparently spreading.

The skin on the back of his neck prickled. So many eyes focused on him. Coiling on the white tiled floor, the electrical cords were ugly black snakes. A sharp stab of guilt pierced his resolve.

Then Anna's voice drew nearer, and nothing else mattered. The slow cadence of the rosary, her soft intonations in Croatian, which were answered in an English/Croatian chorus, sounded like a soothing

chant. She stood at Matt's side refusing to make eye contact, but he experienced a connection to her—a weird sensation considering his original intention to get this behind him and go back home. *Now when I'm back home in a few days, I'll miss Anna.*

Matt refused to let it matter and waited, alert to her every movement.

Anna lowered slowly onto the kneeler in front of the room, her rosary beads dangling loosely in her right hand. She cut off a prayer in mid-word and her face radiated ecstasy as she focused on a spot on the upper front wall.

Matt sprang up, stood in front of Anna and stared at her face. He shined a penlight in her eyes and erratically tracked it back and forth. He detected no eye movement and no closure of the cornea. *No blinking yet.* He tossed the penlight in the crate and picked up a flashlight. Its blinding 1000-watt bulb should have reduced her pupils to pinpoints and made her reflexively shield her eyes. Didn't happen. Still hadn't blinked, either. *She should blink. Why isn't she blinking?*

He grabbed an air horn out of the crate, positioned it next to her ear and pushed the lever. The sound blared. The audience squealed, clapped their hands over their ears, and set up a furious racket. Matt was vaguely aware of Katarina restraining Mikhail.

How could she stand the loud noise so near her ear? His ears hurt even with the precautionary earplugs.

Not much time left.

Matt pulled the algometer out of the crate. He had hoped he would not have to use it. When touched to the skin the pressure device could cause a lesion or skin burn. He did not want to cause her such pain. But he needed his answers, his proof that she hadn't elevated to some celestial plane and that she was part of a grand hoax. He'd deal with what it

implied about Anna's character once he had what he was after.

Matt held his breath and touched the algometer gently as he could to her arm. A blister bubbled underneath the tender, sun-burnished skin. No reaction. *Anna, please react. Don't make me hurt you.*

The overpowering smell of roses in the confined space of the chapel made him nauseous. Or did his own behavior make him nauseous?

A sweet joy-filled smile remained on Anna's peaceful face, and her wide, unblinking, doe eyes radiated wonder. Defeated, Matt sprayed the angry burn on her arm with antiseptic spray, covered it with a bandage and plopped down on the hard pew. There were other tests he could recreate, which the Italian scientists had performed, but he was afraid he would only be able to mimic their results and couldn't see the point. *Didn't need all those snake-like electric cords after all.*

Anna's lilting voice filled the tiny room as she picked up the prayer exactly where she had cut it off before her trance began. Slowly she stood up in front of the group. She didn't acknowledge him or the white bandage on her arm.

She spoke a few minutes in Croatian and then she said in English, "Our Lady came tonight smiling, her arms outstretched. She blessed all of you with her motherly greeting. 'Praise be to Jesus my children.' She blessed the religious items you brought with you, and she prayed over all of you. Her message tonight was:

'Dear Children! Pray with me to the Holy Spirit for Him to lead you in search of God's will on the way of your holiness. And you, who are far from prayer, convert and, in the silence of your heart, seek salvation for your soul and nurture it with prayer. I bless you individually with my motherly blessing. Thank you for having responded to my call.'

"Are there any questions?" Anna smiled and

focused directly on Matt.

He shook his head. He had questions, but he wouldn't voice them in front of this group. He would wait until they could be alone. The message Anna had recited was too convenient... downright blatant. Anger coiled in his chest and he clamped his teeth together. Anna expected him to accept that Mary of Nazareth knew he refused to pray and had given him a personal message?

Matt sat, every muscle knotted in denial. A metallic taste spread in his mouth from grinding down so hard on his tongue.

Anna dismissed the group and waited for the room to empty before she sat down on the bench next to Matthew. Afraid to break the silence between them, she twisted her rosary bracelet around her fingers.

"I am sorry I hurt you," he said, his voice barely more than a whisper. Head bent, he stared at the floor.

"It will heal." She glimpsed at the bandage, positive that whatever wound it covered was already disappearing. She studied his profile. "Whatever you did to me didn't hurt. I honestly didn't feel anything."

"I am sorry I put you through all that." He turned toward her then, and their gazes locked. His blue eyes, the color of the ocean, moved like the sea with waves and swells of emotion beneath the surface that she couldn't read.

"Did you find your answers?" she asked, still fiddling with her bracelet's beads.

"No."

His hands were molded into fists in his lap, and the sharp glint in his eye pained her. "Talk to me. What are you feeling?" she implored.

She stared at him, and her heart raced. She had the urgent need to confirm that his skepticism was

over. *It must be.* “Do you believe me now?”

“I don’t know what to believe.”

“I only saw Our Lady while you tested me. Surely, you know that now. Gospa said to seek salvation for your soul. She spoke for your sake. Did you listen? Did you feel her blessing?”

“You want me to believe that Mary knew I was here and had that special message just for me? Please Anna how stupid do you think I am?”

His face pinched with his sarcastic tone, and the disdainful expression infuriated her. “What do you mean? Did I call you stupid? Do you think that I made that up? Would I dare to put words in Our Lady’s mouth? No!” Her voice boomeranged off tiled floors and wood panels.

She jumped up and paced in front of the altar. “I let you run your tests, doctor,” she punched out his all-important title with her own sarcastic inflection, “but I will *not* let you call me a liar. It is one thing to doubt. It is another to accuse. I’m leaving. You get out.”

Eyes wide, Matt grasped her hand as she moved past him. “Anna, wait.”

She tugged against his hold desperate to flee from Matt’s disbelief, his lack of gratitude for the precious gift Our Lady had bestowed on him.

“Stop. Really, Anna I’m sorry. I wasn’t calling you a liar.”

“What then?” The pain in his eyes, the vulnerable expression on his face rooted her to the spot.

“I don’t know how to process this. I’m a scientist. I only trust facts. Proven facts. Without proof, I can’t believe that you see what you claim to see. I can’t believe that the Mother of God uttered a personal message for me.”

He pulled gently on her arm, and she let him steer her back to the seat next to him convinced that his confusion was genuine, suspecting he wanted to

believe but couldn't. He buried his head in his hands.

She laughed.

He raised his head and peered at her. "What's so funny?"

"I remember the first time Gospa spoke to me. I saw her with my own eyes—heard her speak with my own ears. I couldn't believe it, either. Was I crazy? I knew I wasn't. So she had to be real. But I was so afraid. I hid in my room. I could not sleep for days. Why me? Why was I chosen? My parents took me to church, of course, but I was a child. I never even paid attention in church." She laughed again. "Maybe now you can relate to how I felt."

"Shocked, stunned, dazed..." He slumped his shoulders.

Anna nodded. "I think you are—what is the expression? Walking a mile in my shoes now."

She stood and patted his shoulder. "I'll leave you with your questions here in my chapel. You can stay as long as you like. Maybe you'll get your answers." She grinned. "Or maybe you'll lose sleep tonight."

He grasped her hand tenderly. "Will you come to *Mir* House tomorrow so I can finish the tests?"

Still more tests, my doubting Matthew. She should refuse this futile nonsense. How thick was this man's skull anyway, that he didn't know the truth by now?

But her hand tingled clasped in his, a warm, exciting sensation that quickened her pulse in anticipation of their next meeting. "If you wish to do more tests, I agree. I will see you tomorrow."

Reluctantly she withdrew her hand from his and stepped toward the door.

"One more thing," Matt called.

"Yes?"

"Why didn't you give out your roses tonight?" He glanced over at the corner of the room where she usually kept the pail of flowers.

“I was running late after playing with the children this afternoon. I didn’t have time to cut any so I didn’t bring the roses with me tonight. Good night Matthew.”

Chapter 7

Anna stood beneath the doorframe, her hair loose around her face, the burnished black ends touching the shoulders of a starched white blouse. She wore a long peasant skirt and sandals, more suited to enjoy a lazy summer picnic instead of a stint in the “hot seat” Matt had planned for her. He’d much rather pack up some food and head out for a picnic with her, and was at the verge of suggesting it when he realized what he was thinking.

His clothes rumpled, his hair hastily combed and beard stubble on his chin—by comparison to Anna’s cheery freshness, he must look like the mad scientist, and he was starting to think he was. “Right on time,” he greeted her, abandoning the temptation to sweep her outside and enjoy the day.

“Yes, good morning.” Anna smiled, a quizzical expression on her kind face. “Did you sleep well last night?” She came into the office and stood facing him, her arms relaxed at her sides.

“Not one second.” Matt swiped his hand over his stinging eyes.

“Why’s that?” Her quizzical expression intensified.

“A lot on my mind, I guess.” He gestured to the high-backed, cushioned chair he had dragged into

his office from the living room so she'd be comfortable. "Are you ready to begin?"

She gave him a half-nod and sat. "What is all this?"

Leaning to the left, she scrutinized the equipment he had laid out on the desk.

"It's a polygraph," he replied.

"What's that?" She settled back in the chair, composed and patient.

Matt dragged a hand through his hair. *What is the matter with me? She'll flip when I explain this. She looks so innocent...so pretty.* "Uh..." He closed his eyes and prepared to take whatever outrage she spewed. "It's commonly known as a lie detector."

Anna jumped up, and he took a defensive step back.

"Let me see!" She scurried to the back of the desk and peered at the computer monitor.

"Where is the thing that makes squiggly lines? I saw this on the television once." She seemed delighted; a broad grin brightened her face, an impish gleam in her fudge colored eyes. "This is so cool."

"It is?" *This woman is anything but predictable.* "Well, yes, I guess it is. Shall we?" He swung an arm toward the chair.

She sat obediently, still grinning at him.

"OK." He picked the cuff off his desk. "First, I'll put a blood pressure cuff around your left arm."

She nodded, placing her forearm on the desk.

Taking that as permission, Matt wrapped the cuff around her bicep and attached the Velcro. "I'm going to put these finger plates on your right hand. Just rest it in your lap during the testing."

She extended her hand toward him, and he clasped it gently. A surge of imbalance rocked him. He assumed his sleepless night was taking its toll. Matt positioned the finger plates and eased her hand into the soft cotton nest of her lap. Another dizzy

wave hit him, not enough to hamper him, but it made him hesitate.

He picked up the pneumographs and held the rubber tubes in his hands, frozen in place, as he considered the pure white blouse she wore. The mental image of the black tubing wrapped around her chest and abdomen, and the thought that he'd have to do the wrapping, prompted a stab of guilt. "Just a minute, OK?"

He hurried out of the room and into the hall. "Harry!"

"What?" came Harry's booming retort.

"Can you come to my office a minute?"

"Sure." Harry emerged from his office further down the hall and rambled toward him. He stared askance at the tubing in Matt's hands. "What in the world...?"

"I need your help in here." Matt went back into his office, and Harry followed.

Harry frowned as he took in Anna and the scene.

"Hello Harry," Anna sang out.

"Anna, you don't have to do this." Harry squared off with Matt. "You've gone too far, son. You're not even qualified to administer a polygraph. I find this completely distasteful."

"I took a course on the net..."

"I think this is cool," Anna interrupted Matt.

"See, Harry?" Matt asked sheepishly. "Can you just put the pneumographs around her for me?"

Harry yanked the tubing out of Matt's hand and complied.

All the while, Anna smiled.

"Do you want me to stay here with you, Anna?" Harry asked.

She consulted Matt. "Do you need a witness or anything, Matt?"

"No, no." *Why do I feel so miserable the more she cooperates?*

“Get this over with,” Harry ordered Matt and then stalked out of the room.

Matt sat down behind the desk and drew the laptop closer to him. He turned towards Anna. “Before we begin, there are a few instructions.”

Anna nodded.

“I’m going to ask you some questions, and your answers will provide some control questions. Once I tell you to begin, I’ll ask questions, and you say either yes or no. Say it, don’t nod or gesture. Don’t move during the test at all. And breathe normally. No deep breaths. Is that clear?”

“Yes.”

“I’ll write your answers down.” He picked up a pen. “How much do you weigh? How tall are you? What month were you born?”

Matt leaned over a pad.

“52 kilos, 1.6 meters and August.” She leaned over and jutted her face near the pad, watching him write.

“Are you comfortable? Just lean back and relax, OK?”

She wiggled her bottom in the chair and waited.

“We’ll begin with the control questions, and I want you to pick one at random and lie, OK?”

“OK, I’m ready.” She smiled.

“Is your name Anna Babic?”

“Yes.”

“Do you weigh 52 kilos?”

“Yes.”

“Were you born in August?”

“No.” She thrust forward, angling toward the computer monitor. “That was a lie! What did it do? Did it make squiggles?”

Matt huffed, frustrated. “It uses algorithms. It... Just sit still.”

She rested back in the chair.

“Were you born in August?”

“Yes.”

“Were you born in Valselo?”

“No.”

“You weren’t?” He took his eyes off the monitor.

“No. Is it OK to tell you a hospital in Dubrovnik?” She furrowed her brow, adorably serious. Already he was making a mess of this.

“OK. I got off track there,” he said. “We’ll resume.”

“Is your name Anna Babic?”

“Yes.”

“Do you have visions of Mary of Nazareth?”

“Yes.”

He stared at the screen. “Has this woman you see identified herself as Mary of Nazareth?”

“No.”

His mind raced to phrase the question correctly. “Has this woman identified herself as the Mother of God?”

“No.”

Her perplexing response was consistent with truthful answers to the control questions.

He shifted his eyes from the monitor in an unspoken question.

She widened her eyes in response.

“Just tell me,” he said.

Anna gave him a satisfied smile. “She said she’s my mother and her son is Jesus.”

Matt took a deep breath. “OK, then. One more time for the record. Has this woman you see identified herself as your mother and the mother of Jesus?”

“No.” She lurched forward. “That was a whopper! What did it do that time?”

“Anna, you’re making me nuts. Let’s take a break for a minute. Don’t take that stuff off yet. I want to put a fresh bandage on that arm, and we can start again in a minute.”

Matt opened a bottom, desk drawer and fished in his doctor bag for antiseptic ointment.

"It's fine, Matt, you don't have to change the bandage..."

Matt already had loosened an edge of adhesive tape off her skin with his thumbnail. He grasped it and yanked the gauze and tape off with one swift tug. He stared at the unmarred skin for a few seconds before he raised his eyes and searched hers deeply.

Disbelief ballooned inside him as Anna stared back at him, her eyes wide, her expression serious and contained. "We need to talk about this," he said, his voice shaky.

"OK," she said confidently.

"Can I test it?"

She nodded.

"Do you have the ability to heal?"

"No."

The truth. "Did you have a nasty blister on that arm just last evening?"

She seemed alarmed with this question. "I'm sorry I can't answer yes or no," she said. "I never looked under the bandage until now."

Matt leaned his elbow on the desk and cupped his forehead in his hand, exhausted, frustrated. Her fresh feminine scent permeated his funk. He tried to label the emotion that swelled inside him. Wonder? Amazement? Appreciation? He lifted his head to examine her and put his previous skepticism aside. Her gentle eyes were heavy with concern. She certainly had approached this whole fiasco openly and honestly. Any reservations were on his side of the equation, not hers.

"You know what?" He slapped his palm down on the desk and Anna jerked at the sound. "We're done with this."

"No, wait. One more question? Please?" Anna implored. "If I write it down, will you ask?"

"Sure." Matt handed her the pad and pen.

She wrote and passed it back. She leaned back

in the chair and stared at the wall in front of her.

Matt hesitated as he read the unanswered question that had kept him up all night. His teeth automatically clenched. He'd ask the question, all right. "Were there roses anywhere inside your house last night?"

She turned, looked directly in his eyes and answered, "No."

Matt didn't need to look at the monitor. He stood up, ripped the Velcro free on the pressure cuff and slid it off her arm. He unfastened the fingerplates, and reached behind her back to disengage the tubing around her torso. The softness of the material of her blouse, warmed by the skin beneath it filled him with pleasure, and he didn't fight it.

Unsure about where his head was at that moment, Matt *was* sure that he was done testing the Valselo visionary. "Let's get out of here," he said.

Still suspended in the whirlwind of the day, Anna hung over her cooking pots trying to make sense of it all. Matt had accompanied her everywhere during her crowded schedule of appointments.

He had climbed Gospa Hill while she led a tour group in praying the rosary. He had sat in the audience while she gave a talk on the history of the apparitions. Her eyes drew to him frequently as he had slumped in a folding chair, unreadable—perhaps untouched by her presentation. Who knew?

He had drawn the line at remaining in her house while she hosted a tea for visiting clergy, opting instead to go to her garden. She assumed he was still there now because he had accepted her impromptu dinner invitation. What was he doing out there all this time? Probably tramping around digging up things to test. Maybe he was trying to figure out how to give a lie detector test to a rose? She giggled and stirred the pot.

I should go out and check on him.

“Hi.”

Startled at the sound of his voice, she dropped the spoon onto the floor. Bending to pick it up, she encountered his face inches from hers as he also stooped to retrieve the spoon. They held there, bent over, so close their breath intertwined. The undertow in his ocean blue eyes swamped her with longing. Almost near enough for her lips to meet his, she pulled back slowly and stood, her face flaming.

A quick flash in his eyes told her he enjoyed her reaction.

“That smells good.” He approached the stove, the side of his arm brushing hers. He stayed, with his arm pressing against hers, her cooking pots the transparent excuse to cause her discomfort. Feeling prickly and overheated, she had no intention of revealing how he affected her.

Anna dipped her spoon into the thickening sauce. “I’m making Chicken Moskva.” She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear with her left hand. “Sometimes the humidity doesn’t let the sauce thicken right, but no matter. I pour it over the chicken anyway, and it tastes great.”

He didn’t move and remained close enough that she felt his heartbeat. She stirred the sauce with unnecessary vigor. “The plates are in the cabinets to your left,” she said with a flick of her head in that direction. “Maybe you could set the table?”

“Sure,” he said.

What am I doing alone with this enigmatic man? Mother, be with me.

When the food was ready, she served him, while he sat there seeming much more relaxed than she. A sensation like a wire knotted to the inside of her skull pulled all the way to her toes.

She sat at the table, placed the napkin on her lap, picked up a fork and steadied her racing heart.

Matt smiled and went through the same motions

before he sampled the food. "This is delicious. Thank you for preparing this meal for me, Anna."

His smile soothed her and eased the tension. She bowed her head, closed her eyes and said grace silently, and then dug into the food.

She ate, her gaze steady on her plate, not really tasting her food, her mind tumbling with conflicting excitement and shyness.

"Tell me about you," Matt said.

With his chin cupped in his palm, his elbow on the table, she saw genuine interest in his round, soft blue eyes.

Unused to talking about herself, another wave of shyness bit her. But Anna wanted desperately to be seen as a woman, very much grounded on earth no matter how often she touched heaven.

"Well," she said placing her utensils on either side of her plate. "I like to cook, although I'm pretty average at it. Maybe below average. You know I love to jog—so freeing. I read books for fun. My favorite is love stories." She smiled at that admission, her cheeks inflamed.

"I love to dance, although I don't get to do that often. I sing. Sometimes in a choir at Our Lady of the Roses Church. And I haven't been on holiday since 1992, when Our Lady first came to me."

"What?" Matt did a double take. "You've got to be kidding."

"I'm not. Oh, I've been to Dubrovnik from time to time with tour groups. Different from the every day, but still only as a visionary, not as Anna."

"Wow," he said. "I'm so sorry."

"Oh, don't be. What could be more important in my life than to try to be a disciple? It is my pleasure."

Matt reached over and grasped her hand. Their gazes met and held. *Did he feel this, too? This current that sparked through their fingers straight to the heart?*

Enjoying the connection, she didn't look away or try to withdraw her hand. Seconds later, he eased back, a natural motion that encouraged her that he was comfortable there in her pretty yellow kitchen...with Anna, not with the visionary of Valselo.

"Tell me what you meant when you said you're the property of Valselo. Is that why you don't get to have vacations?"

"In a way. After my grandmother died, I inherited this house." Anna waved her right hand in a circle. "But because of the daily messages, there was total conversion in the village. Everybody goes to church every day. The village unanimously voted to support me. Part of the donations to Roses Church puts this food on my table. I sew my own clothes, but I don't have to buy the materials with my own money. I don't have any money. Everything is provided for me. So I repay them by dedicating my days to serving God by telling the world the messages."

He furrowed his brow.

"It's no hardship, really. Josip is a priest. Elizabeta is married and her husband provides for her. This is what I'm called to do for now. Our Lady will guide my future.

"Enough about me. I'm very interested in your work as a doctor," she said. "Do you see patients in the hospital?"

"Not anymore. I was on staff at Chicago Regional for a while after my Residency. In the emergency room, until I finished my Ph.D. Then, I met Harry, and he recruited me to work with him in groundbreaking, medical research. He more or less stranded me in the lab when he came here."

Delivered in a conversational tone, Anna detected no bitterness in Matt's last statement. She chewed her food while he devoured his. This evidence that her cooking was at least adequate

filled her with pleasure. “What do you do in this laboratory?”

“I work with stem cells extracted from umbilical cords. The medical possibilities are endless, the science is fascinating.” His entire body became animated with his obvious passion for the subject.

Anna smiled. “I admire you, Matt. Curing disease and healing people? Such a wonderful way to use God’s gifts to you.”

About to bite a mouthful of food off his fork, Matt put it down on his plate instead. His discerning expression put her on guard. “Do you heal people, Anna?”

“Me? No.” Anna took a sip of water and leaned back away from her plate.

“What about that pressure blister on your arm? Explain that...please.”

“I don’t know what you mean,” she said evenly.

“Yes you do.”

Anna had refused to speak about the healings of Valselo in the past—especially since Harry established *Mir* House. Her role in the miracles was insignificant in her opinion, so she had preferred to distance herself from these occurrences as if she had no part in them at all. But now the healings were more personal.

“You know that miracle healings have occurred here, Matt. You’ve seen the files.”

“I have. I’ve also seen injuries I’ve inflicted on you myself heal with a snap of the fingers. That’s what I’m asking you to explain.”

“I can’t,” she said simply.

“Not that I deserve it,” Matt said with a rueful expression, “but I wish you’d trust me.”

“I do. I think I’m supposed to. Nothing like this has ever happened to me personally before. If I fell down and scraped my knee or came down with some illness, I healed or recuperated just like any other. *I* don’t heal people here, Jesus does. And I certainly

can't heal myself."

Anna dropped her gaze, away from his intense stare. She had pondered the significance of her two "magical" healings, too. It occurred to her then that Matt's involvement might be the key.

She smiled at him. "This happened to me when you came here. These healings are for you, Matt. So that you have faith and believe."

"Uh..." Matt gulped, so hard it was audible. Anna couldn't decide if the impact of the truth produced his stricken expression, or if he still floundered in disbelief.

He shoved back from the table.

Anna stood, too. "Are you going so soon? I have a lovely *kregli* for dessert. Plum pudding..."

He stunned her as he grasped her hand and drew her into a dancing posture, his left arm encircling her waist. She stared up at him.

"You mentioned you love to dance. May I have this dance, Anna?"

She nodded, speechless.

He led her in a waltz, the drumming of her heart the only instrument in the orchestra. His utterly unexpected behavior struck her as silly at first, and her legs were stiff, her feet blocks of wood as she continued to allow him to sway her around. Perhaps she should speak, put a halt to this dancing in the kitchen, talk a bit more about his faith—or lack of it.

But his arms comforted and thrilled her. She didn't feel the least bit shy or silly anymore, but light and free as if she floated in time to music only they could hear. She dared to smile up at him, her heart opening like a bloom in her garden. The tender smile he gave her in return was all she needed to believe the angels sent this man to her.

He stopped, his arms loosely circling her waist. She poised to receive her first kiss, her head angled upward. His head dipped, and she closed her eyes

instinctively.

Anna opened her eyes at the touch of his fingertip on her bottom lip.

“I think I should go now, Anna,” he said softly, his eyes wide and earnest. “Thank you for dancing with me.”

“You’re welcome.” She hung dreamily within the circle of his arms.

“And thank you for dinner.”

His arms remained in place, a light pressure on the back of her waist.

“You’re welcome again.”

He relaxed his hold around her and they parted, smiling. Then, he gave her a light kiss on the cheek and left.

Chapter 8

Matt balanced a plate of plain bread on his crossed knee and sipped hot strong coffee, choosing to sit in a quiet nook outside the noisy dining room. Easier to grab breakfast and eat it here alone, than to be the perpetual odd man out on the Lidovic's guest list. They had softened toward him some, but the vibes that they'd be happier if he packed his bags and left were obvious.

The three framed pictures of the visionaries hanging on the wood-paneled wall held his attention. What should he do? He needed to go home, find the funding for the lab, get as far away from Valselo as he could, but then he would have to leave Anna. He viewed her photo and his lips curled in a smile. Could he leave her? Did he want to? Was she getting too close for comfort? With her, he kept letting his defenses down.

He had never been spontaneous with women. In general, wasn't much of a dater. Perhaps he had been too consumed with research to give much thought to a social life. He smiled as he took another sip of coffee. Dancing in the kitchen. The woman turned him to mush, made him forget his purpose here—his quest to bring Harry home and restore their life working together.

Warmed by the rich coffee and the sweet memory of holding Anna in his arms, Matt considered whether life before meeting Anna was worth restoring.

He glanced at his watch. *Maybe I'll go knock on her door and see if she's free to take a walk with me.*

"Mama! Papa!" Feet pounded above and then down the stairs behind him. "I have a letter from Maya!"

Sounds like the youngest Lidovic daughter.

What would it feel like to be treasured by your family, for someone to receive your letter with such excitement? *I'll never know.* No one waited for Matt, not a brother or a sister, and he doubted his parents were waiting by the mailbox hoping to hear from him.

A scream echoed off the enclosed staircase raising the hair on Matt's arms. He whipped his head around. The girl fell down the long row of steps, tumbling, ricocheting off the sidewalls. She landed headfirst with a loud thump. The sound of that impact of her fragile skull against the tile floor hushed the pilgrims who had run out of the dining room, alerted by her scream.

Matt shoved his plate and cup aside, spilling hot coffee in a scalding spray over his wrist, as he sprinted to the bottom of the staircase. He stooped next to the motionless girl.

Katarina rushed out of the kitchen, her face drained of color. "Mikhail! Mikhail! Come help our Jasna!" she hollered.

Mikhail emerged from the dining room on a run. The tray of dishes he carried clattered to the floor when he saw his wife and daughter.

"Jasna," Matt said in an even tone. "Jasna. Can you hear me?" Matt ran his fingers along her body checking for broken bones. Then, he gently lifted each eyelid.

"Mama? Papa?" The girl opened her eyes.

"We are here baby." The Lidovics kneeled on the floor, crowding Matt.

"She is so beautiful," Jasna said, her glazed eyes cast upward. "More beautiful than Anna described."

"No, no," Katarina begged. She pulled on Matt's arm with surprising force. "You must do something. Do something! She's slipping away." Tears streamed down the woman's cheeks.

"Call an ambulance." Matt barked the order, assuming someone would pick up on it.

"Done," came a male voice. Matt turned toward the man and acknowledged him with a nod.

Matt was worried. When he had lifted her lids, her pupils were fully dilated. He was afraid her brain was swelling. Minutes counted. Her eyes were hooded now, and she grunted unintelligible words.

"Get me a blanket," he demanded as he lifted her thin, tiny wrist feeling for a pulse.

"Hail Mary full of grace," the pilgrims prayed in hushed voices that echoed eerily in the small space, "the Lord is with thee."

Matt tucked the blanket supplied by another Lidovic daughter around Jasna. Dread mounted while precious minutes passed. "How far away is the nearest hospital?" he asked the Lidovics.

"An hour at least," Mikhail answered.

"We'll take her to *Mir* House. Harry said he has sophisticated equipment. We don't have time to take her anywhere else," Matt asserted.

"Nadia, quick go to Anna's. Tell her to meet us at *Mir* House," Katarina told the girl who had brought him a blanket.

Matt released his breath at the wail of the distant siren. Finally.

It took too long to load the stretcher into the ambulance. Katarina and Mikhail both wanted to be in the back with their daughter, but there was room for only one.

"You go. I will follow in the car." Mikhail said to

his trembling wife.

“No you go, I will follow.”

“Someone get in,” Matt said gruffly. “We’re leaving now with or without either one of you.” Matt reached for the door as Katarina rushed in next to the stretcher. If a look could literally slice him, Matt would be bleeding at the daggers Mikhail threw his way.

He ignored Mikhail’s antagonism, slid in next to the driver and picked up the walkie-talkie. “Does this patch into *Mir* House?”

The driver fiddled with the console and then nodded at Matt.

“Harry? It’s Matt.”

“I’m here Matt.”

“Female child about the age of eleven.”

“Anna called on her way over here and told me about Jasna. She’s thirteen.”

“Correction. Young woman age thirteen. Fell approximately ten feet, closed head trauma, conscious and responsive immediately after fall, slipping in and out now, semi-conscious. Stable, but I suspect the brain is swelling.”

“We will have the CT scan ready.”

“Thanks Harry. We’re almost there.” Matt laid the walkie-talkie on the console.

The ambulance screeched to a halt. Matt and the driver plunged out the side doors and converged at the back of the vehicle. The driver flung the doors open and jumped inside toward the head of Jasna’s stretcher. Matt waited outside to handle the other end.

“Yes Mother,” Jasna slurred. A beatific smile spread across the girl’s pale face.

Katarina clenched her daughter’s hands, her face painted with tear tracks that streamed unchecked. “Yes honey. I am here.”

“I am so lucky to have two mothers. I am coming.”

Katarina gulped air. "Don't go baby. Don't go. Stay with me!" She screamed in anguish.

Katarina's hands pulled away from Jasna's as Matt and the driver slid out the stretcher. On a full run, they navigated it toward the front door of *Mir* House. Harry waited inside beyond the threshold and ran next to the stretcher with Matt through the dim cool hall toward the Comfort Room.

Harry had readied the room to receive a head trauma, judging from the array of equipment around a surgical-type table. He had also assembled a team there, ready to perform the neurological tests.

Matt looked back through the archway as Mikhail surrounded his trembling wife with his arms. They would need each other tonight. The doors flew open behind the couple and Nadia and Anna rushed in. Anna's eyes locked with Matt's, a single perfect rose clutched in her hand.

"Please Anna, help us. Help Jasna," Katarina implored.

They moved toward Matt, but he held up his hand. "Wait here. Let us get this under control first."

Anna nodded, her eyes turbulent with worry. She shepherded Jasna's family back into the hallway.

The CT scan confirmed brain swelling. Matt ordered an ICP catheter.

"Intracranial pressure elevated. Harry?"

"We'll have to drill a hole to relieve the pressure."

"No! Not my baby," Katarina shouted directly behind Matt. "Anna, do something!"

Matt turned around and encountered them all inches away from the surgical theatre.

"*Out,*" Matt drilled the command at them.

Harry laid his hand on Matt's arm and shook his head. "Let them stay. The brain is still swelling. There's nothing we can do for her now but pray."

"Hail Mary full of grace," came Anna's melodic

voice, shaky with emotion. "Please come and be with your child. Please intercede with your Son.

"If it is His will please bring his servant Jasna back to us." Anna prayed while she placed her rose in Jasna's limp hand.

Shocked when Jasna opened her eyes, Matt and Harry stepped back so the family could gather around the stretcher.

"Thank you Mother," Jasna said, staring straight at the ceiling. "Yes I am ready. I love you." She closed her eyes and expelled a long, sighing breath.

A brief, stunned silence, and then Katarina collapsed across the stretcher.

"No baby no! Don't leave me! Please Mary, don't take my baby! Anna, stop this! Stop this *now!*"

Anna clasped her rosary, head bent, as tears rained down her cheeks.

Uncontrollable sobs wracked Katarina's slight frame, convulsing through her like punches. Mikhail pulled his wife off his daughter's body and held her tightly in his arms, her face buried in his chest.

Katarina swiveled her head and leveled an accusing stare at Anna. "How can you just stand there and let my baby die? You do for strangers. You do nothing for Jasna? The girl you call sister? We took you into our family! This is how you repay us?"

Anna rocked in the wake of Katarina's assault. "All I can do is pray. There is never anything else I can do," she said, arms extended toward Katarina, palms up in supplication.

"Well that's not enough," Katarina hissed.

"I am sorry." Anna rushed out of the room.

Matt's heart ached.

"Go after her," Harry urged. "We have done all we can here. Anna needs you." Harry nudged Matt towards the door.

"OK, Harry."

Matt faced the Lidovics. "I'm terribly sorry we

couldn't prevent this," he said gently. "We used all our medical training to try to save her. My sincere condolences to you all."

He hurried after Anna.

Matt expected to find Anna in the chapel, but when he didn't, he went outside toward her garden. The door was ajar, and he swung it open. He spied her sitting on the bench. She lifted her head at the creak of the gate as he closed it. Her red-rimmed eyes drilled through him.

"I want to be alone, please."

He ignored her request and sat down next to her. He wrapped his arms around her quivering shoulders and held her tight. She pressed her face against his chest and sobbed.

"I'm so sorry Anna. There was nothing we could do to help her. There was no way to stop the brain swelling."

"Katarina is so angry with me. I failed her when it was most important," she lamented.

"Failed her? How?"

"I didn't help Jasna."

"I'm the doctor. I'm the one who failed. She should be mad at me. There was nothing that you could do to help the situation. Unless you have medical training that you haven't told me about?"

"You don't understand." Anna lifted a woeful gaze. So fragile, injured. He continued to hold her in the circle of his arms. Close, where he could protect her.

"You're right. I don't understand. Explain it to me," Matt entreated.

"I have a mission as a visionary," Anna held the back of her hand to her nose. Matt produced a handkerchief from his back pocket and handed it to her.

She smiled and used it. "My mission is to bring healing," Anna continued. "But I don't have any say

about who is healed. God heals. I don't. I pray and bring my roses. My roses are miracles, but you know that already."

"I do?"

"Yes. Jenna must have told you about her rose. And of course her miraculous healing."

Matt bit his tongue, kept his expression neutral. She had calmed down, and he didn't want to stir her up again.

"But you don't believe that do you?" She asked, shrugging out of his hold and inching further away from him on the bench.

"No," he rushed out, "but give me credit for being honest."

He couldn't read the look she shot him. "Unlike you, Katarina does believe, but when she does not get her miracle, her faith disappears," Anna said sadly.

"Faith is easy to have when it is not being tested," Matt remarked.

"What do you know about tests of faith?"

"When I was small, I was an altar boy. I had faith then—unquestioning perfect faith. But when I needed God's help, I didn't get it. I prayed with the innocence of an eight-year-old child but received nothing but pain in response. Prayers are not answered."

"What happened to you?" She moved over and trembled against his arm.

"You're cold," Matt said. "Let's go inside." Rising, he helped her off the bench. He held one arm around her shoulders and steered her through the garden and yard, up the back stoop into her kitchen.

"Would you like a cup of tea?" Anna asked, sniffing.

"You go sit on the couch. I'll make the tea for you."

"Really? You cook?"

"I would hardly call boiling water cooking, but in

answer to your question, of course I cook. I live alone. I get hungry. I know how to measure. I just don't understand why people act like cooking is such mystery. Now go sit down."

The candles she had lit while he fixed the tea filled the living room with the light scent of vanilla. Matt carried two mugs, placed them on the coffee table and sat close to Anna on the faded floral couch. He wiped a tear off her petal-soft cheek with his thumb.

"None of this is your fault, Anna."

"I know that, but I have never seen Katarina so angry. I wish I could have done something to help Jasna."

"It was out of your hands."

The silence between them dragged. Then, Matt blurted, "He hurt me." He fisted his hands in his lap against the vivid memory. Twenty years rewound in a flash and he was back in the darkened classroom.

"Who hurt you?"

"Our parish priest."

She gasped. "No!"

"I was only eight, my first year as an altar boy. My mother was so proud of me one day and then ashamed of me the next."

"Why would your mother be ashamed of *you*? You were a little boy."

"She didn't believe me. She accused me of lying about Father Jacoby. I was a bad little boy who was going to hell for telling lies about one of God's servants."

"Oh Matt. I am so sorry."

"I quit being an altar boy that day and refused to go to church anymore. She forced me, and my father went along with her. I stopped praying. She couldn't make me do that no matter what she threatened me with. I learned the hard way that prayers are not answered."

"Very few things make Our Lady cry as much as

the wrong-doing of one of the Lord's priests. They are supposed to be above reproach. Most are, but those who aren't cause so much damage to the Body of Christ. What happened to him?"

"Nothing as far as I know. I left that town as soon as I could and never looked back."

"Our pope has pledged to rid the church of these people, this scandal. He is deeply ashamed of these men."

"Yeah, well. I'm familiar with shame."

"Oh no, Matt. You have nothing to be ashamed about. He wounded you physically and spiritually. Robbed you of your faith. The shame is his alone, and God knows it."

She threw her arms around him, tapped soft pats on his back.

Comfort streamed from the gentle contacts, filled Matt with peace. She shifted back and smiled at him, heightening the serenity, making Matt happy.

"What about your family?"

"I have a very distant relationship with my parents. I speak with them every few years. I have not seen them in over three years."

"Don't you miss them?"

"No."

"I miss mine every day. I feel so alone."

"You are not alone. You are surrounded by people who love you." He kissed the top of her head.

"Thank you for trusting me enough to tell me what happened to you."

Her smile melted his heart. She snuggled next to him laying her head on his chest, her hand over his heart and fell asleep in minutes.

Light and free, Matt sat with this remarkable woman in his arms, her breathing a soft fan against his shirt. She believed him. No doubts, no questions.

"Thank you for believing me, Anna," Matt whispered.

He gently laid her head on the couch, blew out the candles and left the room.

Outside, he turned toward her garden instead of out into the road. *Please God. Take care of her.* He sat down hard on the bench and unchecked tears rolled down his cheeks. *How can I leave now? How can I stay?*

Chapter 9

Matt pushed the play button on the VCR and squinted at the screen. Stretched in the chair, legs fully extended, his foot brushed the duffel bag he had stowed beneath the desk. He hoped Harry or Jenna would pop in soon, so he could beg a room at *Mir House*.

That morning, he had been stunned by his face in the mirror as he hastily washed up at the sink. He had expected to see blood-shot streaks in his eyes and lines of exhaustion etched on either side of his mouth—the usual all-nighter look. Despite his sleepless night, he had appeared well rested, healthy and renewed. His sagging spirit, however, was anything but.

If he had been the town bad guy before, now he was the pariah. A pall of grief hung thick as the wool drapes at the inn, suffocating him and making him feel guilty that his rusty skills had resulted in a catastrophic loss for the family. Did he do enough to treat Jasna's trauma? Did Harry? Maybe if they hadn't lost precious minutes squabbling over which Lidovic rode in the ambulance?

Another layer of guilt blanketed Matt. He had packed his bag and fled here instead of pitching in with the other guests to prepare breakfast. Better

that way, he reasoned. Undoubtedly, he would have inflamed Katarina into fury if she had encountered him in her kitchen.

Matt clicked the stop button on the VCR down and pushed rewind. He had spent hours holed up in his office sorting through the data. He had been so convinced that his findings would debunk Valselo's ridiculous, supernatural claim, he hadn't considered it a theory, but a simple matter to prove methodically as fact.

"Ha," he muttered sarcastically. *Who's ridiculous now?*

He scrubbed his hand over his scalp and then down his face to encounter a two-day growth of beard stubble. He hated the feeling of losing control. *Nothing computes.* He pushed the play button.

He viewed the footage of the apparition and winced at the glare of the bright light he had shone into Anna's unblinking eyes. The insult of the air horn flattened him against the back of the chair.

She doesn't hear anything, see anything, feel anything. No fits, no seizures and impossibly, no blinks. Nothing other than an ecstatic state takes place.

He riffled through papers on the desktop, read his notes for the twentieth time. *No mental illness or dementia. She isn't lying.* He fast-forwarded to the recording of the polygraph session.

"...so cool." Anna's delight with the whole business made Matt grin. *Look at her. Open like a flower and twice as beautiful.* "That one was a whopper!" Anna exclaimed.

Matt switched off the machine and laughed. He had a big methodical pile of nothing in front of him. No right-minded scientist could conclude otherwise, and he hoped he at least still had his mind. *But at this point, I wouldn't bet on it.*

She goes somewhere during these trances. But that doesn't mean she's talking to God's Mom.

“Hi, Matthew. What are you up to?”

“Just the lady I’m looking for.” Matt stood up and greeted Jenna Sheridan with a hug. “You’re looking pretty today.”

“Thank you. Flattery will get you anywhere.” She smiled at him, prettier still with her white, even teeth and a half-moon of laugh lines framing each of her green eyes. The loving expression in those emerald eyes had never failed to warm Matt, smooth over his rough edges.

“Looking for me for any particular reason?” Jenna tilted her head.

“Yes...” Matt hesitated. He didn’t want to impose, but he didn’t have a choice. “Under the circumstances at the Lidovics, do you have a spare room I could use here?”

“Of course.” Jenna’s smile faded and she shook her head. “My heart goes out to Katarina. This must be torture.”

Matt nodded. “Having me around can’t be good for her. I’m only going to be here a few more days anyway. I won’t get in your way.”

“You couldn’t.” She touched his arm, the smile he loved and needed, directed toward him. “I miss you, and it will be great to have you here.”

“Any chance I could get something to eat?”

“You haven’t had lunch? It’s almost three.”

“I haven’t had breakfast.” Matt laughed. “Or dinner. I’ll eat anything.”

“I’m surprised you haven’t fainted. Come on. I’ll fix you something.”

“Hold on.” Matt reversed, burrowed under the desk, grabbed his duffel bag and hitched its strap over his shoulder.

Matt and Jenna strolled through double doors into a wing of the house Matt hadn’t entered before. “Our room is in this section of the house,” Jenna said. “We have a guest room with its own small bathroom next to ours, and you can use that. Would

you like to see our room first? It's so pretty. I love it."

"Sure."

Matt turned through the doorway Jenna pointed out and looked around. The walls painted sunflower yellow, the room emanated a lemon glow. "Must seem like the sun's out in here even when it rains."

"It does. And I love that window seat Harry made me." Jenna pointed toward it. "I can read there, or pray. It gives me such peace."

"That's nice." Matt spied a white rose in a small vase on a dresser. "From Anna's garden?"

"Um hm," Jenna responded. "*The* rose from her garden."

Her poignant look bored through Matt.

"What do mean *the* rose?" A chill crept over his skin. He suspected what Jenna would say next and the implications made his heart race.

"Anna gave me that rose eighteen months ago. I brought it home in a damp tissue. It didn't lose a single petal. Hasn't changed. Smell it."

He did, not needing to. He already knew that it would smell like the heady fragrance of Anna's garden, Anna's chapel. "It's alive," Matt ascertained—not for the first time today, he was forced to certify the unreal, real.

His curiosity soaring, he grabbed the vase off the dresser and spun toward Jenna, clutching it in his hand. "Let me test this. *Please*, Jenna. If I can prove this rose is something other than a rose... It has to be. If I can prove it's supernatural, then *that* would be a scientific discovery."

"Put it down, Matt," Jenna said wagging her head. "That rose is blessed by Jesus himself. Through Him, I was cured. It's...everlasting. Like God's love, God's power."

I have to get through to her. "Jenna, don't you see? The science here could be more boundless than even stem cells. Hasn't Harry told you that? Doesn't he want to test it? The man's mind is leagues ahead

of mine, but boy, this gets me juiced. Anna has plenty more roses. Let me have this one.”

Jenna stepped toward him and plucked the vase out of his grip. She set it back in place and then took Matt’s hand. “Let’s go get you something to eat. This discussion is closed.”

“But...”

She yanked on his hand and he reluctantly moved along with her. “No buts. Closed.”

Anna has plenty more roses. Of course. “OK,” Matt agreed pleasantly. He really was famished.

Anna bypassed the kitchen straight to her back door, departing from her customary habit. She usually warmed something for dinner this time of day, or if energetic, she’d prepare something from scratch. She hadn’t stayed behind in her chapel to pray on Our Lady’s departing words to her during their private conversation, either. “I will prepare you to be his bride.”

A bride of Christ? A Religious? Was that Gospa’s meaning? It wouldn’t surprise Anna knowing Our Lady’s heart when it came to the visionaries. But Elizabeta hadn’t lost favor with Our Lady when she married. She could choose. Could Anna?

Dejected, Anna took the garden gate key off its hook by the door and went outside. She had known before tonight’s apparition that Jasna was with God and didn’t need Our Lady’s confirmation, although she had received it. What troubled her most was Katarina’s anger and rejection. How could Anna survive between visits with her heavenly mother without Katarina’s motherly love?

Anna should have been surprised to find Matt beyond her locked gate, but she wasn’t. It somehow fit that he stood there, his back to her. Tense, the exposed backs of his arms and calves of his legs beneath Bermuda shorts bulged with defined muscles. The sunset colors streaked gold and orange

in his sandy hair. Surrounded by her roses that reflected the same colors in their velvety petals, he seized her heart with yearning. How could that be if she was supposed to be a Religious? *"I will prepare you to be his bride," Our Lady had said. Matt's bride? Oh, Mother, please say yes.*

Heat blazed in her cheeks at the surge of attraction that swept her.

The rusty metal door had squealed as it always did when she had entered the garden, but he hadn't turned at the sound right away. She sensed that he knew she stood behind him. But they remained frozen for minutes, their purposes for being there hanging unexplained between them.

He turned and showed her his face, darkened with stubble, dangerous, challenging.

"How did you get in?"

"Jumped the wall."

"Huh." She studied his face, his eyes, but he gave no hint of his intentions. "You don't know how to pick a lock?" She smiled.

"Never learned. Do you?"

"I don't...how do they say it on TV? Break and enter."

"About that..."

His now remorseful expression gratified her. "Why?"

"I came to steal roses."

She arched her eyebrows. "That makes no sense. Why would you steal something freely given?"

"I don't know. Stupid." He turned his palms upward, a helpless gesture. "Jenna wouldn't let me test hers, so I figured maybe you'd fight me on testing yours."

"I see." She pursed her lips and then said, "I wouldn't have. You can take one and do whatever you want with it."

"Really?"

"I told you before. Go ahead." She waved her

arm back and forth. "Shut the gate behind you. Unless you'd rather climb the wall."

He grinned. "Could you point me towards the miracle roses and save me some time?"

She burst out laughing. "They're just roses, Matt. I want you to test them so you stop this..."

Her voice caught and tears welled. She couldn't hold back the sobs and bent over with the weight of her misery. Vaguely, she was aware of the circle of his arms, the warmth of his nearness and his clean familiar smell. But the comfort of his embrace didn't penetrate her sorrow. "She hates me," she sputtered.

"Nobody hates you, Anna, it's impossible."

"Katarina hates me, and I love her so much."

"Shush." His hand rubbed tender circles on her back. "Look at me, Anna."

He pulled her upright. "That's better." He tucked her hair back behind her ears.

She sighed while tears continued to sting the corners of her eyes.

"It will be all right," Matt assured her, clamping a hand around each of her shoulders. "Katarina will grieve and over time, she'll get...the right perspective. You're not to blame and she doesn't really blame you. She just doesn't realize that yet. She'll figure it out and blame me."

He laughed contagiously and caught Anna up in it. The pressure of his hands on her shoulders increased, drawing her closer to him, until she was only a breath away. Dreamlike, she let it happen, their lips touched; the sweet, dizzying softness overtook her. Her heart swelled, joyfully connected to this man in her garden, her favorite place on earth. Her soul soared. The only similar sensations she had ever experienced that came close to this were experienced when speaking with Our Lady.

The kiss ended, and like the withdrawal from that shining place with Gospa, Anna descended to earth reluctantly. But Matt's sky blue eyes were

heaven on earth to her. And in them, Anna saw prayers answered.

“I’m sorry, Anna. Was that wrong of me?”

She tipped his lips with her index finger. “It was right of you. Only right.”

His lips stretched into a smile beneath her fingers. She dropped her hand away and returned the smile.

“Can I buy you dinner?” he asked.

“Oh, that would be lovely. Yes, please.”

“Any place you recommend?”

“Alf’s is a silly, fun place. You know that TV show with Alf from the United States?”

He shrugged. “Must have missed it.”

“They serve American pizza.”

“I’m pretty sure that’s an oxymoron coming from Chicago.”

“What?”

“Never mind.” He put his arm around her waist and they approached the gate.

“Wait. You forgot your rose,” Anna said.

“Changed my mind.”

Anna rested her head on Matt’s shoulder and happily left her garden on her way to her first date.

“What would you like?” Matt peered at Anna over a sheet of paper that served as Alf’s menu.

“There’s pizza. And there’s pizza.” Anna laughed. “You choose. I’m not fussy.”

“Let’s get a garbage pie. Bound to have something we like on it.”

Matt pointed to the item on the menu for the waiter’s sake and then focused his attention on Anna. *Sweet, beautiful Anna*. She looked at him as though he hung the moon instead of someone who skulked around her garden intent on robbery.

“Want to choose some songs to play?” Matt glanced over at the jukebox.

“Oh yes.”

She jumped up, excited, innocent as a girl and accepted the quarters that Matt dug out of his pocket. One slim arm resting across the top of the antique machine, she scanned song titles. Change clinked in the slot as she punched buttons and then returned to the table. Matt's senses scrambled at her enticing fragrance and adorable behavior.

Anna hummed along with a Presley tune, *Fools Rush In*. Across the table from Anna Babic, Matt understood why Elvis "couldn't help falling in love."

He clasped both of Anna's hands, and she stopped humming, widened her eyes and looked at him expectantly. "Don't stop. You have a really pretty voice," Matt remarked.

"Thank you." Her smile warmed her brown eyes with honey glints. "Did you ask me out because we're celebrating something?"

"Yes, I think we are."

"Really? What?"

"No more needles or lie detectors."

"You're done testing? That's wonderful. You believe in Our Lady's presence here now."

"Well," Matt hedged. "Let's say I believe further testing will be inclusive."

Anna giggled, her hands linked in his tickling her laughter up his arms. "You are, as they say, a hard study Dr. Robbins."

Again, she bestowed him with her warm, loving smile. "I don't deserve for you to look at me that way, Anna."

"What? Of course you do. You are a very good man who deserves nothing but kindness." Her voice escalated in volume with her conviction.

"No I'm not." *Am I? Could I possibly hope she sees me this way after all I've put her through?* "I don't take anything at face value. I doubt just about anything that has to do with God or religion."

"Jesus loved Thomas just as much as his other disciples even though he needed proof. You're too

hard on yourself, Matt.”

He hung his head over their entwined hands. Neither had let go during their conversation. He had never enjoyed a simple connection more. “I do believe in God, you know.”

“Yes,” she said softly, “I know.”

“I just stopped talking to Him after...”

“Yes, I know that, too, Matt.” She squeezed his hands. “It’s all right. I know He understands. And I believe you’ve been listening to Him. That’s what counts.”

He raised his head and searched her eyes where formless answers shimmered. “You are irresistible, Anna. Thank you.”

She gave him a delighted smile as they sat back and made way for the waiter to place a garbage pie in the center of the table.

Chapter 10

Church bells pealed a doleful sound that brought tears to Anna's eyes. Her hands tightened around the mug of steaming coffee. Soon the service celebrating Jasna's entrance into eternal life would begin. Anna longed to attend but feared she wasn't welcome.

Instead, she had chosen to go to the sunrise service. Although usually crowded, today Anna had sat alone in a pew, the villagers obviously intending to go to Jasna's funeral service. The Lidovic family was well loved.

As Anna had traveled along deserted streets on foot, away from Our Lady of the Roses Church, she had noticed scribbled, handwritten "closed" signs in every shop window. The village came to a respectful standstill, mourning the loss of one of their own—and Anna no longer belonged.

At home, even more isolated than at church, Anna didn't bother to light the candles in her chapel and sank down on a bench. *Why do I lose everyone I love?*

She set her mug down on the seat next to her and noticed a Bible, left behind in the pew. She picked it up and opened it at a dog-eared page. Her eyes alighted on a scripture passage. "After that, we

who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever.”

Like a slap of cold water, the import of the passage hit Anna. *Why am I sitting here feeling sorry for myself? Where is my faith?* Although unbearably sad to lose such a young child, Jasna’s time on earth was over. She was with the Lord forever. Given the gift of certainty by Our Lady, Jasna’s death didn’t test Anna’s faith. But the possible loss of Katarina’s love did.

Katarina’s faith is strong. After the shock lessens, she will realize that her baby is with the angels. And then she’ll forgive me.

Anna knelt down. *But what if she never does, Lord? How will I live here without Katarina?*

Anna clasped the cross on her rosary bracelet between her right thumb and index finger and prayed the rosary, soothed by the feel of each bead and the recitation of prayers Our Lady so favored.

When she finished, Anna gazed at the statue of Our Lady, contemplating life, and prayed for Jasna. *May the choir of angels come to greet you. May they speed you to paradise. May the Lord enfold you in his mercy. May you rejoice in eternal life. I will miss you sister but will see you again.*

Anna stood with newfound determination. She knew where she belonged. *Not here by myself.* She needed to be with her family.

Grabbing her mug, she hurried out of the chapel towards her kitchen. She dumped the cold coffee in the sink and rummaged through a cluttered drawer until she found a packet of papers covered with her grandmother’s handwriting. Leafing quickly through them she smiled when she found the recipe she sought. *Sinka will be so excited to have Grandma Vi’s recipe for walnut cake.*

What did Matt say? Cooking was just a matter of measuring. *I’m certainly capable of measuring.*

She lined up all the ingredients on the table and carefully added the flour and sugar into the large mixing bowl. Cracking eggs posed a minor problem, but she was fairly sure she had fished all the pieces of eggshell out of the batter. With the cake in the oven, Anna dried the last dish.

Someone knocked on the back door. It opened before Anna reached it.

"Maya!" Anna flung her arms around her sister. They hugged tight together, shaking, each cradling the other's head against her shoulder.

Anna drew back to look at Maya, so pretty, so dear, so missed. She swiped tears away and Maya did, too. "Come in. Come in. It is so good to see you."

Anna closed the door. "We can sit at the table," she suggested. "Would you like a cup of tea?"

Maya laughed and held her hand up in front of her face to ward off the notion. "Please, *anything* but tea. You know Momma. All she has done since I got home is refill my teacup."

Anna swept flour and sugar aside with the edge of her hand and dusted off the chair's seat with the dishtowel so Maya could sit down. Anna rounded the other side of the table and took a seat across from her.

She reached over and clasped Maya's hands. "I am so sorry about Jasna."

"I can't believe she's gone. This is all so unreal, a nightmare. I miss her so much." Tears brimmed again in Maya's eyes, spilled down her cheeks. She bent her head, soundlessly sobbing, the table registering tiny tremors from her shaking.

Heart aching, Anna squeezed Maya's hands.

Maya calmed slowly and raised her head. Her normally dancing, mocha-colored eyes glazed with the sheen of tears affected Anna. Regret twisted inside her.

"You were missed this morning," Maya said.

"You must know I wanted to be there, but I

didn't want to make it any harder on your mother."

"Momma sent me here. She says she's so sorry, even embarrassed about the way she treated you. Honestly, I don't understand what this is all about."

"I didn't help Jasna. She expected me to heal her, and when I didn't, she...reacted. I wanted to with all my heart and soul but..."

"No one blames you, Anna."

"Ah," Anna said. "I'm doing a good job blaming myself. Even though I know that it is God's will to take Jasna, no matter how much I want her here with us."

"Momma said this morning that she feels like she has lost two daughters, not one. She needs you. She told me not to come back without you."

Anna covered her face with her hands, relieved and absolved. After a moment, she smiled at Maya. "Thank you for this. It means everything."

"Sitting all alone in the chapel this morning I realized that I did belong with the family today no matter what. I planned on bringing cake over to the *pansion* as soon as it's done. I'm so glad I'll be welcomed."

"It smells wonderful in here. When did you take up baking? Did any of the flour get into the cake?" Maya laughed, pointed to the front of Anna's shirt and gestured around the flour-smearred tabletop.

"They make it look so easy on television."

Maya giggled. "While we wait we have time to visit."

"Oh, yes," Anna warmed to the subject. "I want to hear all about your exciting life married to a star."

"It really is exciting, Anna. But not because he is a star, even though he's been nominated again for the Emmy award. This year, I just know he will win it. But he is so much more than an actor. Colin is the most thoughtful, loving man. I couldn't have dreamed a better husband. It is just so exciting to wake up every morning and see him on the pillow

next to me.”

“Doesn’t hurt that he is good to look at either.”
Anna widened her eyes appreciatively.

Maya laughed. “We are happy.”

“And when is the baby due?”

“What? How did you know?”

“Somehow I knew the minute I saw you at my door.”

“We just found out. I haven’t even had a chance to tell Momma and Papa. What a day that was. Papa called and told us about Jasna. I hung up the phone, bent over hysterical, Colin trying to hold on to me. The phone rang again and Colin picked up. It was the doctor’s office telling us we were going to have a baby. Talk about the range of emotions. We cried, and then laughed, and then cried some more all night long. We’ll probably tell everybody tonight. Just trying to find the right time.”

“Anytime will be right. They will be so happy. They need some happy news.”

“Yes, I hope so. How are things going with you? What is this rumor I hear about our Anna and her doctor?”

“Who told you that?”

“That doesn’t matter. Who is he? Is he good enough for you?”

“You sound just like your father.” Anna laughed. “I wouldn’t call him my doctor, but maybe I wish he was.”

“Oh, now talk to me.” Maya’s keen eyes blazed. “This sounds very interesting.”

“He came here to prove I was lying about seeing Our Lady.”

“What?”

“He did some tests, but of course he couldn’t disprove my visions.”

“He is an unbeliever?”

“Sort of. He doesn’t realize it but he was called here to heal. I can’t go into his personal demons, but

suffice it to say I think the iceberg around his soul is slowly melting.”

“He’s very cute.” Maya grinned at her.

“Yes... How do you know? Did you see him?”

“At church this morning. He was there with the Sheridans.”

“I haven’t seen him since we went out for pizza. I’ve had many appointments and have hardly left the house. Did you talk with him?” *I’ve missed seeing him so much.*

“He was very polite paying his respects to Momma and Papa. But they didn’t really see him. They couldn’t take their eyes off the casket.”

More tears. *When a soul flies to God, why can’t we celebrate instead of mourn? It hurts so much to be left behind.*

No words necessary between them, Maya and Anna vented their sorrow, hands clasped over the flour-crusted table. Angled sunbeams through the window spotlighted dancing dust motes. Warmth radiated from the oven and buttery cinnamon scents filled the air.

Several minutes passed before Maya said, “Back up a little. You went out for pizza?”

Anna grinned. “To Alf’s. It was so much fun. We put quarters in the jukebox, and I ate until I ached. He’s a wonderful dancer.”

“You danced at Alf’s? There’s hardly enough room to walk between tables.” Maya giggled.

“No, we danced here.” Anna sighed. “He drew me into his arms and waltzed me around the kitchen. I didn’t even have any music on.”

“Is he a good kisser?” Maya asked.

Anna’s jaw dropped open and Maya laughed. A blush burned Anna’s neck and crept up to her cheeks.

“I think that look on your face says it all,” Maya said. “You’re in love with him aren’t you?”

“I don’t know. He kissed me, and the world

drifted away. I wanted to stay in that moment for always. Is that love? But how can I love him? He will be leaving soon, and I will be left here alone.”

“If you are meant to be together, Anna, you will be. Look at Colin and me. Did you think we would get together? It will all work out as planned.”

“But I always thought I’d be a nun, enter the religious life—like Josip.”

“Has Our Lady required that of you?” Maya asked her brows furrowed.

“No. But she does favor it. She is so beautiful, so gentle. She never demands anything of the three of us.”

“Well then you’ll be like Elizabeta, not Josip. Married to your soul mate.”

Anna chuckled. “I’d love nothing more.” With the statement, now-familiar guilt stabbed her. Was this desire forbidden to Anna the visionary?

“Then the handsome doctor is perhaps your Colin?”

“Oh Maya. I daydream about him. Those blue eyes, so expressive. He’s gentle and funny even though he thinks he’s so serious about everything. His faith has been sorely tested. He thinks he doesn’t have any faith at all, but I know it’s there. God is with this man. God sent him to me.”

“Yep, you’re in love. You’ve got it bad, sis.” Maya beamed at her.

“How wonderful. I love Matt. My goodness.” Anna pressed a hand against her midriff. “I can hardly breathe saying that.”

Anna grasped Maya’s hands. “But Maya. I love the Lord more than I could ever love Matt. I’m so confused.”

“Oh Anna, don’t be. I love the Lord more than Colin, too. But we entered into holy matrimony, and the Lord is with us in our marriage. As it’s supposed to be.”

Anna nodded. *There are many ways to serve the*

Lord. Our Lady herself sets the example. “Yes, of course. Thank you. I feel better.”

The oven timer buzzed and Anna took the golden cake out of the oven.

“That looks picture perfect, Anna.”

“Let’s just hope it tastes as good as it looks. I am going to leave it in the pan and let Sinka take it out.”

“Chicken.”

“Yes.”

Brushing flour off her shirt Anna slung her purse over her shoulder. Using the oven mitts, she carried the steaming cake out the door with Maya close behind her.

Anna stood behind Maya in the *pansion’s* front doorway. Beyond it, she could see the family gathered in the living room of the Lidovic house. Her stomach fell.

Katarina sat tiny and swallowed up by the overstuffed chair. Her eyes met Anna’s and held. “Finally my daughters are here. What took you so long?” she asked.

“We were waiting for Anna’s cake to finish baking,” Maya responded.

“Anna you baked?” Sinka left her seat on the floor next to Colin and took the cake from Anna.

“I was afraid to try to take it out of the pan.”

“What kind of cake is it? It smells delicious.”

“I found Grandma’s recipe for the walnut cake. I have a copy of it in my purse for you.”

“I can’t wait to see it. Thank you.”

Katarina stood, shaky on her feet. “Anna and I will take the cake into the kitchen and cut it up for everyone.”

Sinka handed the cake back to Anna who followed Katarina into the kitchen.

“I am so sorry for the way I treated you,” Katarina blurted. “I was wrong to yell at you. Can

you ever forgive me?"

Anna trembled as tears streamed down Katarina's face. "You don't owe me an apology. I am sorry I wasn't able to help Jasna."

"I know. It was not God's will. I have gone to so many funeral Masses in my lifetime. I sat next to grieving families and told them that their loved ones were in a better place. What a hypocrite. My faith was tested, and I failed."

"No..."

Katarina held up her hand. "Don't disagree, Anna. I realize how wrong I've been. I was so unfair to you. Please forgive me. I love you. You are one of my daughters."

"Nothing to forgive, but if you must hear it—I forgive you. I love you, too."

"Thank you." Katarina hugged Anna, the warm flow of affection between them a salve to Anna's spirits.

"Now let me see to this cake," Katarina declared. "Look at how pretty it is. Great job. I'm proud of you."

Katarina ran a knife around the edge of the pan and shook it with both hands to take the cake out. It didn't move.

"Hmmm. Did you butter the pan, Anna?"

"No. Was I supposed to?"

"No spray or anything?"

"No. There was no measurement for that."

Katarina laughed, a pretty sound that Anna imagined hadn't filled the house in days.

"No problem," Katarina said. "We will just give everyone a hunk."

Katarina did the best she could, in Anna's opinion, to get the cake out of the pan and sliced the hunks into portions. She tasted a piece.

"It is delicious. No one will notice."

Anna took the ribbing about the "stuck" cake with grace, happy to be restored to her family again.

Life went on and to prove that Maya and Colin stood up together.

Not given to jealousy, an emotion very like it swelled near Anna's heart. The look of adoration that flashed between Maya and Colin spurred a deep yearning inside her. For love. For babies, family. *Matt, Matt*. His name spun in her mind like a lovely secret.

"Momma. Papa. Today has been so hard and nothing will ever relieve the pain of losing our sister, but we have some news that we hope will give you some joy."

Maya linked hands with Colin and the loving expressions on their faces brought a smile to Anna's lips, knowing the sweet words that Maya was about to pronounce.

"Momma what do you want our baby to call you, *baka* or *baba*?"

"I always thought I'd like *baba*, but you know that Maya." Katarina looked at Mikhail quizzically.

He lifted his eyebrow in response and winked at his wife.

"Oh my heavens. Praise the Lord. You are going to have a baby? When? How did it happen?" Katarina jumped up and engulfed her daughter and grandchild-to-be in her arms.

"Well, Mom, that's a little personal isn't it?" Colin's blue eyes sparkled.

"You embarrass me, son." Katarina playfully tapped Colin's arm and then hugged him tightly.

Everyone stood, hugged each other and cried.

"The circle of life. God is so good to us. And this baby will have a special advocate in heaven. We will miss you everyday for the rest of our lives Jasna, but we will be together again. I have faith," Katarina proclaimed and then burrowed in Mikhail's strong arms.

Chapter 11

Matt looked up, a long way up, the craggy slopes at the white cross atop Mt. Spasenje. From that perspective, it seemed inches tall, but its lofty position above him dwarfed the huge concrete cross. He intended to “visit” it, prompted by Harry Sheridan’s nudging and some other vague compulsion that escaped Matt’s analysis.

“You’ve dissected that data for almost a week now. You’re leaving tomorrow, son. Haven’t you seen enough documentation yet?” Harry had asked.

Resigned, Matt had admitted that he had indeed seen the documentation “to death.” That admission was all it took for Harry to jump on the Valselo soapbox.

“Instead of reading about the miracles of the cross, son, why not climb up there yourself?”

The miracles of the cross. The phrase was Biblical, ancient and associated with the crucifixion itself. But that wasn’t what Harry had referred to. Matt had reviewed the “miracle data”—a compilation of photos and testimonies about the mammoth concrete cross disappearing, strange dancing lights above it with no explanation, the word *mir* formed in fire above the cross—visible to hundreds, and glowing alabaster images of a veiled

Madonna next to it on supposedly barren land. Invalids ascended and descended the slippery rock-strewn slopes of Spasenje or Salvation Mountain without assistance.

How is that possible? Matt wasn't sure he could climb the thing without assistance. He surveyed the terrain. Might as well be a Himalayan peak to a Midwest bred man like him. He shrugged and figured he'd get up there a step at a time.

The sun was still low in the sky, but its blazing effect on the rocks burned Matt's feet through the soles of his running shoes. Jagged edges bit his toes and Matt grunted with exertion as he scaled boulders.

There was no path to follow. Matt had purposefully bi-passed the popular starting-off point at the base where clumps of pilgrims congregated around multi-lingual tour guides. On his still determined scientific expedition, he wanted to be a solo explorer.

Whether his muscles loosened after an hour or so of "warm-up" or Matt's active mind stole the focus away from muscle strain, he now climbed with steady rhythm despite his kaleidoscopic thinking. Just when he brought one mental picture into focus, everything shifted into a new puzzle of images.

Only one image remained constant in the perplexing labyrinth—Anna Babic at the center of the maze. Her lovely face, simple ways, and infectious laugh teased him to forget his mounting questions and just accept what he couldn't prove or disprove.

He hadn't meant to deprive himself of her company today, but he admitted that he did feel deprived as he trudged steadily upward. The necessity to save the lab, his work, his life had pressed ever harder on him as time had slipped away. He might have enjoyed another meal with her. Another kiss.

How had the woman who embodied a fatal threat to his life's work become the only reason he didn't want to go back to it? She had believed his truth without a moment's hesitation. Why couldn't he believe hers? And what was he doing climbing a mountain alone when he could be sitting in a crazy forest of roses with her or having bad pizza instead in a restaurant named after a long-cancelled American sit-com?

Ah, yes. More miracles to discount.

Despite the taxing work, about two-thirds of the way up, Matt began to enjoy the climb. Closeted in his office repeatedly sifting through the same stuff had drained him more than he'd realized until now. Suspecting he'd descend Spasenje as unenlightened about miracles as before, at least he could relish the sense of physical well-being from hours of aerobic exercise.

Scratchy rustling in the dry brush, and an inky blur of movement in the peripheral vision of his right eye, deflected Matt's attention downward. In the same instant, pain shot up his leg as if twin ice picks dug in above his heel.

"Ow!" Bent at the waist, he turned his calf to inspect it and threw off balance. Teetering on the steep incline, he staggered and pumped his legs rapidly to regain solid footing. His right leg throbbed as if branded red-hot.

He grabbed an overhanging branch and jammed both feet into the rock-face. A fury of rustling beneath his feet brought ice pick jabs on both feet. Matt sat down hard and yanked off his shoes and socks. Fang marks—puncture wounds with different circumferences, the first pair on his ballooning right calf already purple. Hard to say if any venom was pumped into the smaller bites, but poison was definitely in his blood stream. *Not good.*

Unprepared, Matt didn't have a snakebite kit or even a water bottle to wash the wounds. Reacting in

the moment, he hadn't a clue what species of snake had attacked him, either. Hopefully doctors in this area stocked the necessary antivenin to counteract whatever poisonous snakes were indigenous to the region. If he could get to a doctor.

He propped both legs against a boulder to elevate them, uncomfortable in the awkward position, but necessary. He dug in a pocket for his cell phone and yanked it free from the material of his shorts. Gratitude flooded him at the glorious sight of three reception bars on the screen.

Matt dialed 112 with another surge of gratitude that he had read every word of the Croatia travel guide on the plane.

“*Potreba?*” asked a female.

“Yes emergency. *Da*. Dr. Matt Robbins. I'm on Mt. Spasenje. Snake bite, uh, *zmija*. Bite, bite. Um—I'm sorry I don't know the word. Call Harry Sheridan. Valselo. Please, *molim...*”

The phone slid out of his sweat-slicked hand and skittered down the rocks. Another too near, crackling sound shot a cascade of adrenaline through his veins and vamped up his heartbeat so it pounded in his ears. The blood surge stoked the searing pain in his legs. “Uh...”

Matt's head fell back and conked against granite. “Ow.” He rubbed the beginning of a lump at the hairline of his neck. “Calm. Stay calm.”

Glancing at his legs, he was discouraged by the black fringe of necrosis around the fang marks in his calf. His left leg had swelled purplish, too. *I'm in trouble.*

He debated attempting to stand but couldn't focus enough to reason logically. He relaxed his head, carefully this time, back against the stone pillow. Sunrays beat his eyelids down. *Must be around noon now. Have to keep track of time for EMS when they get here. If they get here.*

Matt shaded his eyes with his hand and peered

down the mountain willing help to arrive. His head swam, and the scene smeared in a blur. He rubbed both eyes with his fists and strained his eyes downward again, but the blurred vision increased.

His lips and tongue tingled and even in a sitting position, he feared he'd fall. "My God, please..."

His teeth clamped together vise-like and his body convulsed, scattering pebbles. The excruciating pain in his legs abated in blackness.

Her long hair fell toward him, a veil around her face. Her clothes were the same color as the sky, so her hair and an oval of pale skin seemed to float above him.

"Matt."

She knew his name. Good. Her voice sounded like wind chimes.

"Matt. I'm here."

His legs a bonfire, his tongue so thick in his mouth, it filled it, choked him. He strained to cry out, but nothing came.

"Sweet Jesus, hear my plea. Holy Physician heal him."

The gentlest touch against his swollen bursting legs. Cool water on the fire.

"Lord of all, please hear me. He is a physician, like you. You gave him the gift to heal, heal him. Don't take him away. I love him. Please. Holy Father, please."

Silky hands traversed his legs, soothing, cooling. A zillion matches ignited his scalp and burned downward like his body was kindling.

A shout. "Thank you my Lord, my God! Thank you!"

"Matt? Matt, come back to me."

Matt blinked and stared into Anna's eyes. *I'm dead. I must be.*

"You're OK." Her voice caught on the word, and she threw her head back, her hair a glossy sun-

streaked sweep away from her face. She laughed softly, louder, booming echoes off the mountain until her body shook.

Matt swiveled his head and saw sky, clouds, steel-colored rocks, and thorny tree branches. Anna stood in front of him and hung an outstretched hand toward him. He grasped it, stunned and hoisted to his feet.

He gaped at his unmarred bare feet and the backs and fronts of his legs. “Anna. *What?*”

She threw her arms around him and pressed her head into his neck. Her warm tears bathed his skin, and her sweet-scented hair tickled his nose. He clasped her against him, numb with wonder and weak with gratitude laced with disbelief.

They remained linked together for minutes, breathing as if they shared one pair of lungs, alive as if they shared one heart. When Matt gently released his hold on her, he could only stare into her eyes. He had no words to formulate questions—he could only hang them in his eyes and search hers for answers.

“They called me after you dialed 112,” Anna said. She blushed. “People are calling you ‘Anna’s doctor’. So they called me. I only knew snake bite on Mt. Spasenje. I don’t know how I found you.”

She closed her eyes, bowed her head and then gazed up at him expelling a shaky breath. “Can we sit?”

He nodded, and they perched on a boulder next to each other. Matt stared down at the verdant valley suspended in this unreality. “You healed poisonous snake bites with a touch?”

“I didn’t, no.” She shook her head.

“Did you bring a rose?” He turned sideways and leaned forward to see her face.

Her eyes direct, glowing with affection, she answered, “I didn’t, no.”

“But you healed me?”

“You were healed.”

“Then it’s not about roses.” Matt struggled to grasp the answer just beyond his reach. “You’re the healer. It’s you.”

Anna smiled and goose bumps prickled Matt’s arms. “Only God heals. The roses, I think, are symbols. Our Lady’s presence in Valselo brings many graces, and we’ve been blessed with miraculous healings. These come through me, but they’re not me. I never know if it will be God’s will to work a miracle or not. By the grace of God you are healed.”

Standing she spun, her hands raised to the sky. “And my Lord I thank you for this miracle.”

She pulled at Matt’s hand. “Stand with me, Matt.”

He obeyed, docile as a child. She took his hand, and he let her raise it up even with hers.

“We thank you our Lord for this miracle.”

“Yes.” Matt said. “Yes! Thank you.” He sat back down, shaken to his somehow uninjured feet. He gawked at Anna, dumbfounded.

“Would you like to climb up the rest of the way with me?” Cocking her head, her brown hair swung prettily to the side. “We could pray by the cross. It’s a stunning place of peace. Very special.”

“OK.” Matt said. “I can do that.”

Chapter 12

“Harry do you have a minute?” Matt leaned against the doorframe of Harry’s office, his duffle bag slung over his shoulder.

“Of course. Come in and sit down. Want some coffee? You look like you need it.”

“I do need it, thanks.”

Matt sat on the chair next to Harry’s desk and shoved the duffle between his feet while Harry poured coffee into a mug from a thermos.

“What’s with the duffle bag?” Harry asked as he handed Matt the mug.

“Time to go home.”

“You’re still going back?”

“I leave tonight. The week is over. I have to go.”

“Nothing happened on the mountain to convince you to stay? I rode with EMS yesterday. We fanned out around the base of Salvation Mountain and did the climb. We couldn’t find you. I called your cell repeatedly. A couple hours after your call we were about to get a search helicopter in the air when Anna called me. She said she found you semi-conscious. Maybe you had fallen or were dehydrated. But the snakebite was harmless.” Harry’s wry expression told Matt he hadn’t bought a word. “Anything you want to talk about, son? Nothing to

tell me?"

Matt shook his head and rubbed the back of his leg. Sleep deprived and more confused than when he had first stepped off the plane, his brain rejected what he couldn't explain. *Will Harry think I'm crazy if I tell him what really happened? Why wouldn't he? I would if our roles were reversed.*

Matt had prayed with Anna at the cross. Prayed. The whole thing was literally an out of body experience. After they climbed down into the valley without a word between them, he had returned to *Mir* House alone. Anna's day had been filled with obligations.

He had spent the rest of the day and night mystified, constantly replaying the series of events that had brought him to his bed without a scratch after he had stumbled into a viper's nest. He had seen the before and after with his own eyes, had "documented" his own miracle file for the VMB. *Now he couldn't trust his own eyes? I think I'm crazy.*

"Nothing to add, Harry. I was so out of it when Anna found me, her report is more reliable." Matt hated being evasive with the man, out of respect...and love. He had no choice.

"I have to get back," Matt stated with more conviction than he felt. "The week's up, and that was our deal."

Harry opened his desk drawer and produced his checkbook. He tore out a check, signed it and pushed it across the desk towards Matt.

"Here's the check I promised you. Fill it in with whatever amount you need for the lab."

"It kills me to say this, but I can't accept it."

Harry beamed. "Ah, so you do believe in Valselo miracles now? You believe in the apparitions?"

"Yes. Well, no. There are things here that... I can't explain. The apparitions? I can't prove they're not happening. I didn't earn this."

Matt pushed the check back across the desk.

"I knew it!" Harry grinned, victorious.

"*But.*" Matt punched out the exception, and Harry's expression grew serious. "I can't prove they *are* happening, either, and without that, I'm sorry, Harry. I don't believe Our Lady of the Roses is anything other than a figment of the imagination of three admittedly special and well-intentioned people. I'm going back to try to get the grant renewed. Our research has to go on. We're so close to finding the answers we have been searching for. I might need your help. Will you back me?"

"You know you can count on me. I'll help in any way I can, but are you sure, Matt? The research can proceed without you. We've seeded the lab with talented people. I would love to have you on board here at *Mir* House. We need good doctors in Valselo. You're an excellent researcher, but I wouldn't have hired you if you weren't a gifted M.D. I wish I could make you change your mind."

"I'm confused here, Harry. Maybe if I go back, put some objective spin on all this, I can sort it out. You might not believe it, but I'm tempted to stay. I bet you never thought you would hear me say *that.*"

"I'd be surprised if you didn't. Valselo has a way of getting under your skin. You're not immune to Valselo's call. Or am I way off base? Is there another reason you feel drawn to stay? Anna, perhaps?"

"Anna." Repeating her name evoked the memory of her lovely face swimming in a blue-sky haze above him while pain consumed him. And then the pain disappeared. How could he relate that? She saved his life, or did she? How?

Matt wasn't ready to tell anyone what happened on the mountain. It was too personal, too fantastical to be believable.

Jenna poked her head in the door.

Harry's eyes twinkled. "Ah, here is my lovely bride."

"Hi, Darling. Hi Matthew. Just wanted to

remind you, honey, I'm going to see Elizabeta."

"I'll say goodbye before you go, Jenna." Matt stood open-armed.

Jenna stepped into Matt's hug, and then looked up at his face. "Good bye? You aren't going already? Why? Can't you stay? Easter is only a few weeks away. You don't want to miss the sunrise service. We're expecting thousands this year. You have to stay."

"I can't. I really have to get back to work."

"Make him stay Harry." She smiled lovingly at her husband.

"I tried, love. His mind is made up."

"Well then, you have to come back in time for Easter."

Smiling, Matt shook his head. "I'm not making any promises. We'll see."

"What are you doing now? Are you ready to run out the door?"

Matt checked his watch. "The bus doesn't leave for another four hours. I'd planned to wander around a bit."

He avoided eye contact with either of them. "Maybe get a chance to see Anna again before I leave."

"I've hardly spent any time with you since you arrived, and now you're leaving," Jenna said, her lips caught up in a pout. "Come with me this morning. I'll make sure you still have enough time to say your goodbyes to Anna."

"Where?"

"To a chapel where Elizabeta, one of the visionaries, will have her special monthly visit with Our Lady."

"Her apparitions are only once a month?"

"No. She has daily apparitions, the same as Anna, but once a month Mary comes to a tiny chapel on the fringe of town. We can talk on the way."

"I'd like to go with you." Matt turned toward

Harry and held out his hand. "Goodbye, Harry. Thank you again for everything."

Harry clasped Matt's hand and pulled him into a hug. "You're welcome, son. But I won't say goodbye. I have a feeling you'll be back very soon."

Matt stowed his duffle in the back of Jenna's two-seater convertible and then slid into the front. She patted the steering wheel like a cherished pet.

"Nice car," Matt said.

"Isn't she a beauty? I love this car. When I could walk again, Harry asked me what I wanted to celebrate, and I said a sports car. He surprised me with this. He spoils me."

"It suits you. You look cute behind the wheel."

"Thanks." She gunned the car, face lit in a satisfied smile at the engine's throaty growl.

"How about a little history on Elizabetha?" Matt asked. "My original intention was to test all three visionaries if I could pull it off. I was certain I could prove they were involved in a big hoax."

"And now?"

"And now." Sweet air fanned his face. The sun's warmth bathed him in light. Moving along the valley floor, Spasenje loomed ahead. "Anna changed my life, Jenna."

"For the better?"

"Definitely."

"I can see a difference."

"Really? How?"

"You're not so..."

"Geeky?" Matt suggested.

Jenna laughed. "I was going to say not so hard, so focused. I can't put my finger on it. You're softer somehow."

Matt chuckled, appreciating the irony. "I'm soft in the head. My brain's gone to mush." He stared at the mountain. "I'm actually grateful. I owe a lot to Anna."

“I thought so.”

He couldn't escape the reality of that mountain. He stared at the cross. “She saved my life yesterday.”

Matt checked Jenna's reaction. Her expression was interested, not the least shocked.

“You don't seem surprised,” Matt said.

“Nothing surprises me here. Miraculous Valselo. Don't misunderstand. I saw miracles happen in Chicago, too—everyday miracles in God's blessings. Like your work with Harry at the lab. But here? God wants us to pay attention to what He's saying here. He's going all out.”

He sure is. Maybe if Matt said it aloud, laid it out logically, logic would prevail. “I was alone on the mountain when a snake bit me. It must have been protecting its nest, because I stumbled straight into it and had multiple bites to contend with. I knew they were toxic because of the condition of the wounds. I called for help and then lost the phone. I was virtually helpless.”

Matt relived the firebrands of the wounds, the sting of the sun's blinding rays in his eyes as he continued. “I think I passed out, the neurotoxins... I was dying, Jenna. Then I prayed, and Anna came. She came and prayed over me. It all disappeared. Completely. The only thing I know that could have done that is antivenin. And even then, there would certainly have been irreversible tissue damage, maybe even nerve damage. Why me? I'm not special. Why did I deserve this grace?”

Tears slid down Jenna's cheeks. “Thank God, Matt. His power is awesome. And you *are* special. In His eyes and in mine.” She reached over, grasped his hand and squeezed.

“Honestly, Jenna, this scares me. Anna scares me.”

“There are two ways to look at fear. You can think why me, and hide or run. Or you can think

what am I supposed to learn, what is the message in this? What path do I take to use this extraordinary gift? Maybe going home now is running?"

"Maybe. But I need to put this all in perspective. I thought I was on the right path with my work. Maybe staying here would be running from that."

He needed a change of subject. "Tell me something about Elizabeta?"

"Sure," Jenna agreed. "Elizabeta travels around the world sharing her apparitions. She's married." Jenna winked at Matt. "Her husband is quite a bit older, and her stepchildren are not much younger than she is. She lives half the year here in Valselo and the other half of the year in America. She has daily apparitions with Our Lady, but on the tenth of every month she receives a special message to share with the world on the Internet."

"On the Internet? Why have I never heard about it?"

"Not nearly enough people hear about the miracles happening around the world daily. You'd think visitations on earth by the mother of God would get media attention." Jenna huffed out a sigh. "The pilgrims who have experienced Mary's peace, have listened to her messages to return to God, perhaps have witnessed miracles, are charged with the mission to spread the word."

Jenna pulled the car into a field and parked. "We'll need to walk from here."

Inside the chapel, Matt and Jenna found seats near the back. Jenna pointed out Elizabeta seated in a front row pew next to a man dressed in a tailored suit, relaxing with his protective arm behind her. They made a striking couple.

Matt waited, ready to be a spectator rather than an investigator. He had no agenda; instead, he'd remain open to...whatever. He sat back, cleared his mind and closed his eyes.

Matt opened his eyes again at voices around

him. Elizabeta's alto voice led the rosary and the gathering responded with the second half of each prayer. The visionary stood, advanced to the kneeler set up in front of the chapel and sank to her knees. As one, the congregation knelt, and fell silent when Elizabeta cut off a prayer in mid-sentence.

Joy filled Matt. Hope and peace calmed him, enfolded him, blanked his mind, and held him in a thrall he had never known before. A command took form. *Go to her.*

When Elizabeta resumed praying the rosary, Matt joined in the responses, surprised at how natural it seemed to pray aloud with the group.

Elizabeta faced the crowd and appeared confused. Matt remembered the same look on Anna's face as she came back from wherever she went at the end of an apparition. Elizabeta's interpreter stood a few feet behind her translating what she uttered haltingly into English, Spanish and Italian.

"Our Lady came joyful this morning, happy to have so many of you responding to her call. She extended her hands and prayed over you, blessing you and the items you brought with you. Our Lady said, 'Dear children! Also today, I call all of you to grow in God's love as a flower, which feels the warm rays of spring. In this way, also you, little children, grow in God's love and carry it to all those who are far from God. Seek God's will, and do good to those whom God has put on your way, and be light and joy. Thank you for responding to my call.'"

Elizabeta did not take questions afterwards, unlike Anna. She marched rapidly up the aisle on the arm of her husband.

Grow in God's love and carry it to all of those far from God. The words rolled through Matt's mind. He was ready. He wanted to grow in God's love.

Matt followed Jenna out the chapel door, and the sunshine momentarily blinded him. They ambled back to the car in companionable silence, Matt's arm

draped around Jenna's shoulder.

"Thank you for taking me, Jenna."

"You're very welcome."

They took their seats in the car and Jenna turned the ignition key.

"Can I ask a favor?" Matt asked.

"Anything."

"Can you drop me off at Anna's?"

"Of course I can. Are you still going home?"

"Yes."

She frowned and then the crease between her eyebrows disappeared as her face brightened with a smile. "You'll be back."

Jenna drove the short distance to Anna's house and then smoothly pulled up in front, parking near the garden gate.

Matt got out of the car, leaned over the driver's door and hugged Jenna. "Thank you for everything." He hoisted his duffel out of the back of the car.

"You are so welcome, Matt. Or should I say, 'Anna's doctor'?" She grinned, delighted. "See you soon."

Two toots on the horn, and she was gone. Matt stood facing the street as the taillights of Jenna's spiffy convertible disappeared.

Anna's doctor. What can I say to her? Will she understand why I want to go? Do I want to go?

He couldn't shirk his responsibility to the staff at the lab. They counted on him to keep the research going. He had promised them. A scant week ago, the only thing that had meaning for him was his research. How could he forget his world changing work?

Now, his world utterly changed, he stood at a crossroad between roses in an Adriatic village and stem cells in a Chicago laboratory.

Anna emerged from the house and stepped gracefully toward the gate. She used the key and opened it—for him—smiling as she swung the iron

door.

I'm in love with her. It hit him like a cannonball in the chest. *Nothing seems real. All I want to do is kiss her, hold her in my arms and never let her go.*

"I have been waiting for you," she said. Her voice sounded like wind chimes.

I have been waiting for you my whole life. He pulled her into a hug, unable to speak, afraid to say goodbye.

Matt's arms around her, Anna savored the perfect fit of her head against his shoulder, the comforting nest where she could fly to rest. *Anna's doctor.* How lovely if that were true. Always practical, she knew the embrace for what it was: the last. The duffel bag hanging from Matt's shoulder bumped against her back. Goodbye.

Matt let go and stood silhouetted by the road behind him, Mt. Spasenje in the distance and the cloudless blue heavens above him. His eyes the color of those heavens held everything she wanted but apparently wouldn't have.

The late afternoon and evening before Anna had trod through the orders of the moment weak with gratitude, shaken with the magnitude of God's power in Matt's life through her. She had never understood why she had been chosen to know Our Lady as she did—why God's urgent messages and attention-grabbing miracles involved her. She had just accepted her role, a privileged innocent whose heart belonged to Jesus and His loving mother.

When she had found Matt on the mountainside, she had raised up her whole heart to her Savior in supplication to save Matt. Our Lord had answered her plea. For that, she would always be grateful. But now she had to find a way to accept that He had saved Matt for her to lose him.

Anna smiled at Matt despite the inner knowledge that when he said goodbye, smiles would

be impossible. "Do you have time to sit with me?" she asked.

When he nodded, Anna gestured toward the bench. They sat, unspeaking, as the breeze stirred white roses free of their perfume. Unperturbed by Matt's silence, preferring it, Anna struggled to settle her racing heart and whirling mind.

During her private conversation with Our Lady last evening, Anna had begged Gospa to reveal whether love for Matt was foolish or futile, wrong or displeasing.

"It is never wrong to love," Our Lady had replied.

"But, Mother," Anna had persisted. "Could Matt be my husband? Will he stay here with me? With him, could I be a mother, too?"

"You are well loved, and you bring me joy," Our Lady had said. "My son will guide you on your path to Him and everlasting happiness, even though there will be sorrows in your life. I will help you through sorrow."

"I came to say goodbye," Matt said softly.

Anna's breath caught with a fierce stab of pain. She had suspected this moment was what Our Lady referred to last evening. As prepared as Anna thought she was, it still caught her off guard. She bent her head. Tears came, and words eluded her. *Are there words to make him want to stay with me?*

Matt took Anna's hands in his and shifted next to her, leaning over to see beyond the drape of her hair that shielded her face.

He crouched in front of her, tilting her chin up with one hand, forcing her to look into his eyes. "Please don't cry, Anna. I have to go. People rely on me."

"I know," she managed to reply. "I understand. It's just...I don't know why I'm crying...maybe the mountain. I..." She gave up and gave in. Anna lowered her head again and cried. *How many*

pilgrims have I said goodbye to? This should be no different.

"I didn't even intend to stay this long," Matt said. "I made a deal with Harry to save the lab."

"What?" He had her full attention.

"If I agreed to review the VMB files and stay the week, he agreed to write me a blank check..."

"This was about *money*?"

"No..."

"You reviewed the files, and still you are unchanged? You lived your own miracle and you talk to me about *checks*?"

She shoved him away and swung her legs to one side. Jumping up from the bench she paced.

He followed her, "Anna..."

"You think I'm a liar..."

"No, I..."

"I'm a, a, weird one, odd..."

"Of course not..."

"How do you explain those snake bites, Matt? Huh? I'm a magician, am I?"

"Anna!" He grasped her shoulders. "I think you're the woman I love."

She blinked. "You do?"

He knit his brow so hard that his eyebrows seemed to meet in the middle. "Yes, I do. I think I'm in love with you."

Matt's expression softened. "I know I'm in love with you."

Elation burst inside her. "I feel the same."

Just as quickly, Anna's mood darkened again. "Then why are you leaving me?"

"I need to sort out some things. Figure out what to do with the lab. And, just for the record, I refused Harry's money."

Anna sank onto the bench, Matt's hands still attached to her shoulders. "I see," she said, even though she didn't. "You'll come back then?"

As the question flew from her lips, Anna's brain

registered a wonderful truth. *He is called here.*

His face a mask of confusion, he crouched in front of her again. "I don't know. Maybe. I..."

He stared at her, a helpless expression. She saw his intention to kiss her in his crystal blue eyes before his lips neared, met hers and lingered.

Anna's spirit soared. Surely, this love pleased the very angels themselves. Not the last hug. Not the last kiss. Not the last goodbye. *He'll return to me. He is called.*

He drew his lips away from hers gently, a telling sweetness in his eyes. "Thank you, Anna. For putting up with me."

"Thank you for coming here. I'll wait for your return."

She shushed him with a finger over his lips to prevent his contradicting her. Rising from the bench she moved to the edge of the pebbled path and picked up a pair of clippers from the ground. She snipped a rose and handed it to Matt.

"Please." Anna folded her hands around his, a vase for the lovely bloom. "Take one of Our Lady's roses home with you. A present. With my love."

Chapter 13

Matt held the envelope in his hand afraid to open it. Time had crawled since he had put this thing in motion. Every day before he had eagerly checked the mail, only to be disappointed, and now that he finally held the answer in his hand, he froze.

He glanced at the glass on his desk that held the single white rose—perfect in its splendor, fresh as if just picked. *Anna. So much rests on the verdict in this envelope. I miss you.*

Matt tore open the envelope and scanned the official letter. He smiled and let out the breath he had held since the letter was delivered. Reaching over the files on his desk, he touched one of the soft rose petals. *Thank you God.*

“Mildred? Are you out there? Can you come in here for a minute?” he called.

“I’m here. Give me a minute,” came her reply through the open door of his office.

Matt leaned back in his chair, laced his fingers behind his head, and grinned as he waited for his assistant.

As Mildred Moore rushed into his office, her white lab coat flying behind her, he schooled a more officious expression so as not to ruin his surprise. She pushed her glasses on top of her head and stood

in front of Matt's desk shifting nervously from one foot to the other. "What's up boss?" she asked tentatively.

"Sit down, Millie. I need to talk to you about a few things."

She plopped down in the seat next to his desk, her shoulders hunched. "Doesn't sound good. Something wrong?" She eyed the letter Matt held in his hand.

"On the contrary." He let the smile loose and held out the letter towards her. "Something is definitely right."

She read a few seconds, screeched and threw the paper in the air. Whipping around Matt's desk, she launched at him and swallowed him in a hug. In the soft collision with him in his desk chair, they swayed precariously back.

"Whoa," Matt said, thrusting forward to compensate, which popped Mildred upright.

"Sorry, sir," she stammered. She stepped back, her cheeks scarlet.

"No apology necessary." Matt grinned at her.

"You did it, sir. You really did it. I can't believe it. You got the grant renewed. I didn't believe it would happen. This is just fantastic. What are you waiting for? Let's tell everyone the good news."

Matt laughed with affection for Mildred the "human tornado." "We'll tell them in a few minutes. Did you read the letter?"

"Of course I did."

Matt leaned down, picked up the letter off the floor, and handed it back to her. "Read it to me."

She looked at him instead of the letter. "Why?"

"Humor me."

"OK." She shook her head with a slight roll of her eyes, plucked her glasses off her head and put them on.

"Dear Dr. Matthew Robbins, I am pleased to inform you that the Board of Directors of the

Whitfield Foundation has approved a two year grant of ...Oh Matt, I can't believe it. It says two million dollars!"

"I know, keep reading."

"OK, OK...two million dollars to support the continuation of your research in the study of stem cells derived from umbilical cords. This work is to be carried out under the direction of your Project Director, Mildred Moore, MD." She paused, stared at Matt wide-eyed and then down at the letter.

"Mildred Moore, MD," she repeated. "That's me. Project Director? I don't understand."

Matt stood and extended his hand to her. "Congratulations, Dr. Moore. It's official. You are now in charge of this lab and the research project."

"Me?" Mildred stood and clasped his hand. She shook it, her eyes huge. "I'm in charge? You are kidding me."

"I couldn't be more serious."

She sank down into the seat, still clutching the letter. "What about you? Why aren't you still in charge? Are you leaving?"

Matt sat, too, his hands folded over his midriff. "I am. I have a few loose ends to take care of, and then I'll leave the lab and the research in your capable hands. Probably by the end of the week."

"Where are you going?"

"To work with Dr. Sheridan."

Mildred did a double take. "No way." She propped her elbow on his desk, leaned her chin on the back of her hand, and scrutinized him as though he were a lab experiment. It made Matt smile.

"Is there something in the water in that place...where is it exactly?" she asked.

"Valselo. It's in Croatia, near the Adriatic coast."

"I don't get it. What is so special about Valselo?"
Matt's first instinct was to gloss over his astounding reasons for returning to Valselo.

Grow in God's love, and carry it to all of those

far from God.

“Three visionaries claim they speak to the Virgin Mary on a daily basis. Miracles happen there.”

“You don’t believe that do you?”

“I’ve been witness to a miracle, yes.”

“Is this about Jenna walking? What exactly does Sheridan do there?”

Matt knotted his hands and tipped pointed fingers under his chin. *How do I explain?* “An array of medical and psychological tests has been conducted during the visionaries’ ecstatic states. Harry has a whole archive of medically inexplicable cures. There is no scientific explanation for what is happening. I guess it’s just a matter of faith.”

“I don’t know what to say.”

“Say that you will accept the position.”

“Of course I will. It’s everything I have been working towards all these years. But I don’t know if I can do the research without you.”

“Of course you can. I have total confidence in you and your team. Let’s go tell them your good news.”

Her gray eyes misted. “I’m going to miss you, sir. I hope you’re making the right decision.”

“I have never been more sure of anything in my life.”

She stood. “Then I am happy for you.”

Matt’s cell phone rang.

“Go ahead and tell everyone your good news. I’ll take this call, and I’ll be right out. Tell everyone dinner at Malnati’s is on me tonight.”

“Great,” Mildred said from the doorway. “Love their deep dish pizza.”

Matt tapped the answer button on the touchpad. “Hello.”

“Hello Matthew.”

“Hello Mom. Coincidence that you called, I was going to call you tonight.”

“So you heard the news?”

“News? No, why?”

“Is something wrong? Why would you call me today if you didn’t know?”

“Just to say hello.”

“Really?” Her voice caught.

Uh-oh. What kind of news? “Is Dad OK?” Matt asked urgently. “Has he had another MI?”

“What’s an MI?”

“Myocardial...heart attack, Mom. Has he had another one?”

“Dad’s fine. Out walking every day, eating right, following his doctors orders.”

“Good. I’m glad to hear that,” Matt said, relieved.

“The reason I’m calling is...well...” Her voice cracked.

Matt sat up straighter in his chair.

“Father Jacoby was arrested this morning.”

His stomach dropped. Blood rushed from his head leaving him dizzy and nauseous, the humiliation and fear as immediate as if the priest were looming above him in an empty church.

Matt forced air into his paralyzed lungs. *Dear God, please be with me. Help me.* He breathed, in, out, the most normal thing in the world under any other circumstances. He labored to gain control focusing on his surroundings where he was safe, was away from empty churches and fast-talking priests. Eventually his hands quit shaking. He closed his eyes comforted by praying. Matt marveled at the change in him. Prayer came naturally since he had been back home.

“Matthew? Are you still there?”

“Yes, Mom. I haven’t hung up on you...yet.”

“All the news stations have been running commentary all morning. He was arrested for child molestation. Young men have been coming forward accusing him of unspeakable acts. But I guess,” she

sniffled, "I guess you know about that."

Angry tears burned the corners of Matt's eyes.

"Matthew." She sobbed.

"What," he said dully, his tongue thick in his mouth.

"Can you ever forgive us?"

Mute, Matt let her cry in his ear, resisted feeling anything through the rock-hard wall he had built stone by stone to keep her out since he was eight.

"We are so sorry we didn't believe you."

His father said something muffled in the background.

"We were so wrong to side with Father Jacoby against you."

Matt didn't speak.

"Please say something Matthew."

"What do you want me to say? You expect me to forgive you now that somebody else's kid is saying the same thing about that man that I told you all along?" His chest heaved, and he thought he might hyperventilate.

Matt closed his eyes, tears caught in the lashes swimming beneath his eyelids. He huffed a sigh, opened his eyes and stared at the wall in front of his desk. "I was a little boy. I only knew he hurt me, and he was bad," he said, his voice quivering. "When I came to you for help—to stop him—you hurt me even more."

"He was our *priest*," she said defensively. "We were taught priests don't lie. What were we to think when you came to us?"

"You could have believed me. I wish you had had some faith in *me*. Why would I lie to you?"

"Little boys have over-active imaginations. You were always precocious."

"Huh," Matt snapped disdainfully. "I had no experience to imagine up *that, Mom.*"

"I know, I know..." She cried harder. "Please forgive me. Please."

"I think it's more important for you to forgive yourselves," Matt said in a monotone.

"No. I will never forgive myself for not trusting you."

Matt's father said, "Me, either."

Does it matter anymore? It's too late to rewrite the past. Forget it. Move on. Start fresh. How?

Matt closed his eyes and envisioned Anna's chapel, her melodic voice pronounce a purported Marian message:

"Dear Children! Today I invite you to decide for peace. The fruit of peace is love and the fruit of love is forgiveness. I am with you and I invite all of you, little children, that before all else forgive in the family and then you will be able to forgive others. Thank you for having responded to my call."

With Anna's love, I can do this.

"Mom what happened ...happened. Nothing you say will change it," Matt said, his tone gentle.

"I know. I wish there was something I could do."

"There is something you can do."

"Anything."

"Pray for me. Pray that I have the strength to forgive you and Father Jacoby. I'm making a whole new life for myself—giving up my job at the lab and I'm moving. To the village of Valselo. It's a special place near the Adriatic Sea."

"You *are*?" She rushed out the next, "I know all about Valselo. I read about Our Lady's daily visitations. The ladies at church are trying to put together a pilgrimage to Valselo. Dad and I are saving up to go. Why are you moving there?"

"You remember my boss here at the lab, Dr. Sheridan?"

"Of course I remember him."

"He runs a kind of hospice in Valselo now."

"He gave up his research?"

"I thought he was crazy, frankly," Matt said. "I went there to convince him that the apparitions

were a hoax. I didn't. I met the visionary Anna Babic. She saved my life."

"You met one of the visionaries? You are so blessed."

"I didn't think so at the time, Mom. I do now. She helped me to find my way back to prayer. If you had called me a month ago with this news, I would have hung up the phone. Anna showed me that I hadn't lost my faith; I had just let it be silenced. I believe now that prayers are answered."

"Matthew I am so thankful to Anna for showing you the way back to God. Come home and spend Easter with us this year."

"I plan on being home for Easter this year."

"Oh, Matthew!" Her voice squeaked. She sniffed. "That's wonderful."

"Sorry, Mom. I'm not coming to Cleveland. Valselo is home. I belong there."

"Oh." She sniffed again. "I wish we could be together, but I understand. Call us when you get settled in?"

"Sure."

"If our pilgrimage gets organized maybe we'll see you soon."

"I hope so, Mom." He meant it.

"We love you Matthew."

"I love you too." He meant that, also.

Matt hung up the phone. Changed forever, as though he had been given a new heart. He left his desk and rummaged in the closet. He took out a cardboard box, some bubble wrap and tissue paper. He lifted Anna's rose out of the glass on his desk and carefully placed it in a bed of tissue paper and then bubble-wrapped it. Before he sealed the box, he wrote a short note.

Mom, I hope you and dad will be able to come to Valselo soon. Until then, please accept this rose from Anna's garden. I pray it will touch your lives as it has touched mine. Wishing you a blessed Easter. I

love you, Matt

Matt tossed the note inside the box and sealed it. He stepped over to the wall, took down framed diplomas and stacked them in the crook of his arm.

Chapter 14

“Time to earn your keep, son.”

A soft cotton bundle landed over Matt’s face. He swept it aside with his arm and squinted up at Harry.

“What kind of hours do you keep around here anyway? Didn’t I just get to bed?” Matt propped up on his elbow. “So to speak...”

Matt surveyed the narrow futon. Jenna had made the “bed” when he arrived after dark last night—a strip of thin foam rubber under the sun-colored sheets.

“I’m so, so sorry, Matt, but this is the best we can do for a couple days,” Jenna had told him ruefully. “I can’t believe you’re here to stay. This is an awful way to greet you.”

“I don’t mind,” he had assured Jenna. Holy Saturday in Valselo apparently meant “no room at the inn.” He had been relegated to sleeping quarters in the living room along with at least twenty other inn-mates.

Matt glanced at the folded clothes that had blanketed his face moments before—Harry’s signature tropical print shirt and khaki-colored linen pants. Matt unfolded the clothes and held the shirt out at arm’s length. “Is this my uniform?”

“Yep. Get up; we have a lot of work to do and very little time.”

Matt ambled toward the washroom where he checked his watch. Couldn't believe his eyes—4:00 AM. *Give me a break, Harry. Doesn't anybody ever sleep in this place?* After he dressed, he went to find Harry.

Matt wandered back into the living room. Empty. He retraced his steps and checked each of the common rooms in succession. Puzzled, he opened the door in the playroom that led outside and stepped into the yard. Beyond the playground equipment and fenced enclosure, floodlights showcased an amazing convocation.

A multitude, a parade, of *Mir* House-uniform clad people pushed occupied, adult-sized prams through the doors of a huge outbuilding on the property. The infirm, the invalided, the guests of *Mir* House, rode down the winding driveway toward the lane, which was nothing more than an indistinguishable blot of darkness beyond the spotlights' glare—as if they were pushed into nothingness. The oversized wheels of the vehicles held buggy-style seats topped with jutting vinyl canopies to protect the riders from the non-existent sun.

Harry motioned Matt over and pushed an occupied pram in front of him. Matt took hold of the handle and followed the line ahead pushing his passenger toward the esplanade around Our Lady of the Roses Church. He moved with the flow until he had to stop in the midst of a traffic jam in Valselo.

He honed in on the bluish light bleaching the night sky around the church property in the distance and leaned forward under the carriage's canopy to address its passenger—a woman, probably younger than he was, without a hair on her head. “OK if we go off road?”

“You bet,” she said.

He broke line and veered left. Bumping along he asked his charge, "Doing OK?" every few minutes, until he reached pavement, tilted the carriage back on its rear wheels and deposited the pram on the concrete esplanade. Rolling as far forward toward the tent over the open-air altar as he could, he engaged the brakes on the wheels. He checked on his passenger, and she assured him she was fine.

"I'll stand right over here." Matt gestured to a spot on the edge of the concrete apron.

She nodded and he stepped away.

Strobe-like flashes in the corner of his right eye drew Matt's attention. A thousand flickering lights approached the church, floating in the hands of candle-bearers, an achingly beautiful sight made more glorious by voices raised in song. *Jesus Christ is risen today. Alleluia...* in the languages of the world.

The visionaries of Valselo dressed in purple—Elizabetha and Anna in robes, and Josip in priestly vestments, led the procession.

Candle glow surrounded Anna like a halo. Matt hadn't seen her since his return to the village late yesterday, and he wanted to run to her—his angel and future wife, if he had anything to say about it.

The procession advanced toward the altar and fanned out to cover every square inch of earth in the vicinity. The three threaded through the assembly and climbed up two steps to a church pew on a raised platform above the crowd, below and directly in front of the altar. The gathering hymn played through a network of outdoor speakers, the cantor singing Croatian words to a melody familiar to all—*Morning has broken....*

Dead ahead, Salvation Mountain loomed silver-lined, purple, blotting out the orange tendrils of impending dawn that shimmered on the Adriatic now that Easter morn had arrived. Matt haltingly repeated the responses with the congregation, rusty,

unused to speaking the words that hadn't changed since he was an altar boy.

Now, his faith was new as this morning, ushered in by light, renewed by the miraculous resurrection of Christ and the miraculous conversion Matt had experienced. Christ is the way to everlasting life. He who believes in me will not die. Matt absorbed the sermon, heeded it.

Humbly, Matt partook of the Eucharist, awed by the feeding of the masses by phalanxes of priests that streamed off the altar and dispersed through the crowd like ants on a picnic blanket. After Communion was served, the three visionaries stood together and approached kneelers in front of the altar table, Matt's eyes riveted on Anna's profile.

In unison, the visionaries prayed the rosary, a slight reverberation through the audio system. As one, they silenced. Some knelt, those who couldn't, bowed their heads, some remained standing. From his knees, Matt stared at Anna's face, transfixed by her expression. He longed to go to her, watch her ecstasy up close—not to disturb or probe or investigate, but to share her vision of joy although he couldn't see.

The gathered masses remained silent until the visionaries' voices piped up again. Then a soft drumming played atop Matt's head. He reached up with his fingers and touched his crown and came away with a handful of rose petals. Petals rained from the sky—white, red, pink, yellow, pastel colored pieces of flower confetti dusted the tops of prams, the tops of heads and slid down the steeples of Our Lady of the Roses Church. Anna, Elizabeta and Josip turned around smiling, prayer-clasped fingers pointed heavenward while petals pooled at their feet.

Matt thrust his arms skyward in triumph, reared back and turned his face up to receive the gentle deluge. He laughed, released from doubt,

released from skepticism and elated that not even he could ever question God's presence in Valselo again.

The rain of roses ended as the sun rose, every dawn a miracle.

Matt pushed forward but couldn't get more than a few feet nearer to the altar. Surrounded by clamor: wide-eyed people laughed hysterically, cried, gesticulated and proclaimed the Lord holy. An electronic shriek through the sound system quieted the crowd as Elizabetha called for order through the interpreter, one of the Lidovic sisters.

"We are blessed today like we were blessed when we first saw Our Lady. Then only the three of us were witness to the rain of roses. Praise be to Jesus for sending us Our Lady!"

"Praise be to Jesus," the crowd shouted.

"Our Lady came resplendent today dressed in gold, glowing like the sun. She is joyful at the celebration of the resurrection of her son after the agony and suffering of the crucifixion. Alleluia, He is risen!"

"Alleluia."

"As is her custom, Our Lady gave us a message for the world today. She said, 'Dear children! Also today, I call you to personal conversion. You be those who will convert and, with your life, will witness, love, forgive and bring the joy of the Risen One into this world, where my Son died and where people do not feel a need to seek Him and to discover Him in their lives. You adore Him, and may your hope be hope to those hearts who do not have Jesus. Thank you for having responded to my call.' Anna, Josip and I wish you all a Blessed Easter. Praise be to Jesus and his beautiful mother."

The visionaries stepped down and moved forward as people made way for them. Matt stretched his neck to get his head above the crowd, straining to get Anna's attention. *Impossible, there are thousands here.*

But she must have sensed his presence somehow because her eyes darted, then settled directly on his, her lips curved in a smile. She broke ranks with the other two visionaries and pressed forward with more energy.

“Excuse me,” Matt said as he pushed through the crowd careful not to barrel over people. “Excuse me.”

“Anna’s doctor,” someone mumbled.

“Anna’s doctor,” said another, and another...

Laughing Anna and Matt met in an embrace. Matt clasped her to his heart, lifted her off the ground as he reared back, propelled by the sea surge of gratitude inside him. He couldn’t let go, wouldn’t let go of her. He put her down and still circling her with an arm, gently touched his fingers under her chin and raised her lips to his.

“Whoa,” came a spectator’s voice.

“Hey,” said someone else.

Someone whistled.

Matt didn’t care. He let Anna break the kiss. If it were up to him, he’d kiss her for hours. She smiled up at him, “I knew you’d come back to me.”

“I’ll never leave again. Anna I have something to ask you.”

“Yes. Yes! I’ll marry you,” she sang.

Clapping, catcalls, more whistles from the crowd.

“I didn’t ask yet.” Matt lowered to one knee, holding both her hands in his.

“Our Lady told me of this today.” Anna slid her hands from his hold and cupped his face with soft, silky fingers. “She said to rejoice in the Easter of Our Lord. ‘And in the marriage of our Anna. The doctor has responded to my call.’”

“I can’t believe it!” Anna circled him with her arms, his face pressed against her waist. “Maybe Josip will marry us. We have to talk to a priest.”

Impossible that he’d actually say, “I’d love to

talk with a priest as soon as possible.” Glad that he had, especially at Anna’s delighted reaction, Matt regarded her tenderly. “I love you, Anna. It will take more than a lifetime to show you how much.”

“I love you, Matt. You are my miracle.”

Matt stood up within Anna’s arms like thread through the eye of a needle. They beamed at each other, in no hurry to leave the esplanade, Our Lady’s rose petals under their shoes.

Chapter 15

A married lady...Mrs. Robbins. That will be me in one week!

Anna stretched her arms overhead on her pillow. Lemony streaks of sunlight fell across her comforter. The sheer white curtains billowed in front of her open window. She contemplated all that was left to do before her wedding.

“My wedding.” Pleasure filled her from saying it out loud.

She should get up, but she snuggled deeper under the soft linen sheets anyway. *Just a few more minutes.*

God of my life, I welcome this new day. It is your gift to me, a new creation, a promise of resurrection. I give you my heart God. Use it, as you will. Thank you for all your blessings.

A noise downstairs startled her. *A knock on the door at this hour? I must be hearing things.* Another knock, this time louder.

Not bothering with slippers, she grabbed her robe, threw it on and dashed downstairs. The loud banging continued. Breathless, Anna opened the door.

“Good morning Anna.” Katarina stood with her hand poised to knock again, a shopping bag looped

around her arm; a box balanced in her other hand.

“Katarina what’s wrong? Why are you here? Why are you all here?” Anna peered over Katarina’s shoulder. Village women lined up behind Katarina, smiling and giggling.

“I don’t understand. Did I forget something?” Anna questioned the group.

“No silly.” Maya peeked around from behind her mother. “Surprise. It’s your bridal shower. It’s an American tradition. You’re gonna love it.”

“At...” Anna glanced at the marble clock on her mantle. “Eight o’clock in the morning? And Maya what are you doing here? Katarina told me you flew home.”

“Home? And miss my sister’s shower and wedding? Never.”

“Excuse me. These are getting heavy.” Sinka, wearing a practical dress-size apron like the older women, tottered forward, weighed down by a coffee urn and a huge platter. “Can I please come in and put these down?”

“I’m sorry. Of course. This is wonderful.” Anna stood back, tugging her robe tighter around her middle as apparently the entire female population of Valselo passed through her door.

Katarina took charge and organized everything in minutes. Folding chairs filled every available space in the living and dining room.

“Come sit, Anna.” Katarina led her to the seat of honor in the middle of the room. Anna tugged at her sleep-crushed hair and hid her bare feet under the soft flannel of her robe. Sinka had the coffee perking on the buffet and a tray of homemade breads and cakes on the dining table. She passed a plate of warm walnut bread; its nutty spicy fragrance filled the room.

Maya sat down on the floor by Anna’s feet, her face upturned. “We have something special for you.” A large box wrapped in white satiny paper topped

with a huge white bow traveled hand to hand up to Maya, who presented it to Anna.

Shyly, her fingers shaking, Anna unwrapped the gift and, gently brushing aside the tissue paper, revealed the contents of the box.

"It's exquisite." Anna held up the white silk robe trimmed with lace, intricately embroidered with white thread on the bodice and cuffs. Next, she held up the matching gown. "I've never seen anything so beautiful." She beamed at Maya. "Is it yours?"

"Yes. I'm so glad you like it. I had them all crazy at Intimate Whispers. The rush of all rush orders."

Anna carefully refolded the peignoir and returned it to the box. "Thank you so much. I will feel like a princess on my wedding night."

"What's next?" Maya asked.

Anna regarded her blankly. "Don't you know? Isn't this your party?"

"Yes." Maya laughed. "But we're all here to help you with your wedding plans, too. What still needs to be done?"

Anna widened her eyes. "I'm not sure."

Maya grabbed Anna's hand and gave it a reassuring squeeze. "OK. What have you done so far?"

"I asked Josip to marry us and he said he would. So, a week from today I am getting married." Another burst of elation exploded in Anna at the prospect.

Everyone applauded and filled her house with delighted laughter.

"Good start," Maya judged. "Where's your dress?"

"I think I will wear my mother's wedding dress, if it fits. It's somewhere in the attic."

Maya clutched her chest and pretended to faint. "One week 'til your wedding and you haven't even tried your dress on?"

Maya jumped up, sprinted toward the stairs and

bounded upward, hollering over her shoulder, "I'll find the dress. Mom, ask her about the reception."

"I haven't finished with the plans for the reception," Anna addressed Katarina.

"What do you have planned so far?"

"I was hoping you and Mikhail would come to lunch and maybe Matt will ask Harry and Jenna. Also Elizabeta and Jacob and Josip, of course. Do you think a quiet lunch in the garden would be nice?"

Katarina hugged Anna around the shoulders. "Don't worry about a thing, dear. We will take care of everything.

"Ladies, we have our work cut out for us," Katarina announced.

Maya took the bottom two steps in one jump and neared Anna with the white lacy dress in hand. She held it up in front of Anna, lining the shoulder seams to Anna's shoulders. "It only falls to mid-calf." Maya frowned, assessing the drape of the gown.

"Mama was shorter than me," Anna said, chin down, looking toward her feet.

"No problem. Marta, bring the lace," Maya directed. "We'll fix the hem."

The women swarmed around Anna.

"Not here, upstairs. Let's slip this dress on and measure." Maya directed the Valselo lace-makers upstairs to Anna's room.

Maya scanned the bedroom where Anna stood pinioned in place by the ladies who fussed with the material below her knees.

"You and Matt will live here, right Anna?"

"Yes, of course."

"Where do you plan on sleeping?"

Anna laughed, glancing in the direction of Maya's pointed finger to the twin bed. "Cozy isn't it?"

"You're seriously going to use that bed?"

Anna laughed harder at Maya's shocked face. "No. Maybe someday this room will be the nursery.

Wouldn't that be wonderful?"

Maya smiled, touching her still flat midriff.

"We'll sleep in grandma's room," Anna said. "I'll show you. May I, Marta?"

Pins in her mouth, Marta nodded. Anna slipped out of her wedding dress, chose a skirt and blouse from her closet and dressed. She faced the mirror and brushed the tangles out of her hair before she led Maya across the hall to her grandmother's room.

This room was as sparsely decorated as Anna's own, but it was larger—fitting for a couple, Anna thought. A queen size bed with a simple chenille bedspread dominated the room, small tables flanked each side of the bed and a dresser topped with a mirror lined one wall.

"Mom. Can you please come up here?" Maya hollered.

Katarina appeared, took an instant to survey the room and called in some of the women. The troop followed her orders, "Strip the bed and take down those curtains. Sinka, bring in those bags."

Apparently, Anna had thought wrong.

"Hello anyone home?" Matt called from downstairs.

Anna sighed, relieved. "Excuse me," she said, not that any of the women paid attention when she left the room.

Halfway down the stairs to greet Matt, Anna hesitated at what she saw below. Matt wasn't alone. Mikhail was with him and so were a few other men who struggled carrying something bulky and obviously heavy covered by a blanket.

"What is that?" Anna asked.

"A surprise," Matt replied.

"I don't know if I can take any more surprises today."

Matt took the stairs up to Anna two at a time and surrounded her with his arms. The chaos in her home disappeared as his lips met hers, replaced by

the joyous chaos of being lost in Matt's kiss.

"If you two love birds could move, we would like to carry this upstairs," Mikhail boomed from below her.

Matt and Anna obliged him by climbing the stairs and plastering themselves against the wall on top, so the men could pass.

"Be careful. Don't bang it," Katarina directed from the doorway of grandma's room. "Bring it in here, darling."

Anna cast a questioning glance at Matt who shrugged his shoulders and smiled mysteriously. He held out his hand and she linked hers inside it.

They followed Mikhail and his men into the bedroom. Mikhail stood in the center of the room, his "surprise" leaning against the foot of the bed.

"Everybody, pay attention." Mikhail smiled at Anna and Matt. "I want to present you with our wedding gift." He put his arm around Katarina's shoulders and pulled her close to his side. "I hope you like it."

He tugged at a corner of the blanket and swept it away to expose a wooden headboard. Garlands of roses were carved along the top and sides. "Roses for our rose."

Anna clasped her cheeks in her hands, her eyes welling.

"It is so beautiful. You made this for me?"

"Well, technically it's for both of us." Matt commented, his arm circling her waist. "Thank you both very much. You're an excellent carpenter, Mikhail."

Anna thrilled at the proud smile Mikhail bestowed on Matt. Probably the first time Mikhail had regarded Matt with anything but hostility.

"How can I ever thank you for such a special gift? I, we will treasure it always," she vowed.

Anna hugged and kissed her "adopted" parents. She lovingly trailed her hands along the smooth

wood and then made way for Matt and Mikhail so they could position the headboard while the other men removed her grandmother's and then left the room.

"Mikhail I have something to ask you," Anna said.

"What dear?"

"I need you to do something for me," she continued.

"Anything for you Anna, you know that."

"It's an American custom for the father of the bride—I would like you to give me away."

"Anything but that. I can't give you away." He shook his head.

Dismay and disappointment clenched Anna. Mikhail was the man she considered her father. *Aren't I a daughter to him?* Her cheeks burned and she could barely continue to look at him.

"I will circle your neck with pearls, walk you down the aisle and be the proudest man on earth to escort such a beautiful bride," he said.

"But?" Confused, she waited for him to explain.

"I will let Matt borrow you for the rest of your life. I'll never give you away."

His eyes twinkled and he caught Anna up in a bear hug.

Katarina wiped away tears. "OK, that's settled. You men leave now. We have woman's work."

Anna followed Matt to the front door. His sapphire eyes held nothing but glowing affection for her now, the skepticism gone. Gone, also, was the deep well of pain that God had removed with His healing majesty. Her heart soared.

"I miss you," she said, as she laid her hand against his face. "I haven't seen you in two days."

"I'm sorry. Things have been crazy at *Mir* House. I'm still disorganized. Why don't you come over later for lunch? I want to ask Harry if he will be my best man."

"This is so exciting isn't it?" She gazed dreamily into his deep blue eyes. "We are so blessed."

"I still can't believe that in a week you'll be my wife."

"And you'll be my husband. I love the sound of it."

"Anna, say good-bye. We're ready for you." Maya waved to Matt from the top of the stairs.

"Until later, love." A quick parting kiss, and her almost husband left.

Maya and Katarina remained after Anna had opened more presents and her bedroom was transformed into a honeymoon suite. Amazing that a new bedspread and curtains could change the look of an entire room.

"I am overwhelmed with gratitude," Anna said.

"This is what a mother does for her daughter when she gets married," Katarina asserted.

"And a sister does too," Maya chimed in.

Anna fingered Maya's gift again. "This is so luxurious." Anna had never dreamed of owning one of Maya's creations. Or having a wedding night to wear one.

"It's one of our best sellers and my personal favorite. This is the negligee I modeled in the magazine that drove Colin crazy."

"I hope it drives Matt crazy." Anna flung her hands up and covered her eyes. "I can't believe I just said that."

Katarina and Maya laughed so hard, tears rolled down their faces.

Anna strolled over to *Mir* House reliving the morning in her mind. The ladies had given her so many gifts. Her idea for a simple garden luncheon had turned into a tent-covered reception for the village to be held at the field behind the church. Katarina had dubbed Sinka in charge of the food and she had doled out individual assignments to the

women before they had left Anna's house. Maya cried when Anna had asked her to be her matron of honor.

Her mother used to say that special memories were pearls for her necklace. This, a pearl of a day.

She found Matt waiting for her under the tree in front of *Mir* House. He wore beige pants and a colorful print shirt. With sandals on his feet and the noonday sun streaking his hair, he had lost the look of a foreigner. He belonged in her village—with her.

"You look so happy," he greeted her, his hands outstretched.

She slid her hands in his, palm to palm, a casual contact that thrilled her. "I had the most marvelous day. Thank you."

"I didn't do anything."

Anna nestled her head against his chest, under his chin as his arms wrapped around her. "Yes, you did," she said. "You asked me to marry you."

"I am still shocked you said yes. I'm the one who's thankful. I had a pretty great day so far, too. I couldn't wait, I asked Harry to be my best man."

"What did he say?"

"He said that he would be honored to stand up for me. And... I sent an express letter to my parents inviting them to our wedding. I don't know if they'll take me up on it, but I enclosed a check in the envelope to cover airplane tickets."

"That is truly wonderful." *Another pearl.*

"It's a start. The ball is in their court now."

"Ball? Court? You sent them a ball?"

Matt chuckled. "It's an expression. It means it is up to them now to make the next move."

"But what do you want? Do you want them to come?"

"I am leaving it in God's hands. If they come, then it was meant to be."

"You have changed, my Matthew."

"For the better I hope."

“Oh yes for the better.” She giggled. “I know another expression. You could only go up?”

“I’m crushed.” He ruffled the top of her head with his knuckles.

Anna arched her back to see his face. “Will you come to the chapel tonight with me? I want you next to me while I listen to Our Lady. Why the frown? Do you still not believe?”

“I’m working on it love. Just give me a little time. So much has happened...snakebites, petals showers. I’m not sure where I am with this...if I believe in Our Lady of the Roses.”

His intake of breath held and linked close to him, Anna felt his pulse accelerate. Worry lines creased his face.

“It’s OK, Matt,” she reassured him. “We have the rest of our lives. All you need to believe right now is that I love you with all my heart and soul.”

“For now and for always.” Matt bent his head and gently kissed Anna’s lips.

Chapter 16

Same but different. The same half prayers recited in Anna's bell tones from behind him, but now Matt answered with the second half of the recitation along with other pilgrims in the chapel. The same rose perfume permeated the air, but it didn't make Matt nauseous this time. Nor were roses physically absent today. The aluminum pail set near the far wall held dozens of white blooms.

Anna's voice drew louder, approaching the kneeler, another *déjà vu*, but he wasn't armed with probing devices, adrenaline coursing through his veins.

His heart hammered, though. *Am I afraid of the existence of the supernatural? Still unwilling to accept that this enormous thing really happens every day? Flesh and blood people really converse face to face with the mother of God? And not just any people—my Anna, my bride?*

Anna took her position on the kneeler a foot away from Matt, her voice steady, her presence by his side soothing. Anxiety gave way to anticipation when her voice quieted and she regarded the invisible with upturned, ecstasy-filled eyes. Matt glanced at her face, smiled.

He faced forward and drew inward. He didn't train his eyes more than a few seconds on the spot on the wall where Anna fixated to see if anything there was worthy of fixation. Besides the wall. Giving up his last remnant of investigative curiosity, he blanked his mind.

Peace. No random thoughts planted. He didn't utter intentions or supplications with his inner voice. Instead, he opened—his heart, his mind. Two silent words took shape inside him: *thank you*. Did he direct them to the virgin mother? Christ? What did it matter? His soul burst with gratitude and he believed God received it.

An incongruous sound broke his meditation. Whimpers. Matt jerked his head in Anna's direction, horrified by her posture and the expression on her face. She gripped her hands together in apparent agony, swayed, and writhed in her kneeling position. Her still unblinking eyes streamed tears. Anna threw her arms out, pleading with her entire body. Her voice pierced his heart, "No! No! Please!"

Anna hung over the rail of the kneeler like a cloth doll; her body jerked with her sobs. Matt rushed to her, leaned over and enveloped her in his arms. His mind reeling, her weeping shook him body and spirit.

"Please, no." She wrenched away from him. "Let me go. I must go."

Anna stood and let loose a barrage of Croatian words on Nadia that Matt couldn't understand. Anna, her eyes wild, faced the interpreter. When she finished, she tore out of the chapel leaving Matt to waffle between the impulses to tear after her or stay there, gaping and listening to Nadia's explanation of Anna's behavior—gain some sense of how to help her.

The general unrest created by Anna's sudden stunning departure took form among others in the chapel with nervous whispers, eyebrows raised like

question marks.

“Ssh,” Nadia requested. “Anna wishes to apologize, but she received difficult news from Our Lady today. Our Lady imparted the seventh and last secret to Anna and told her that her daily visits end today. Our Lady will not speak with Anna tomorrow.”

A din arose as Matt stood there, open-mouthed. Gathering his wits, he told Nadia, “I’ll go to her.”

She nodded assent and called for quiet again. “Thank you. There is a brief message for you all. Our Lady....”

Matt rushed out of the chapel to find her. *Either her room or the garden. I’ll check outside first.*

Passing the hook on the kitchen wall where Anna usually hung the key to the garden gate on a run, Matt noticed the key was missing. Outside, the iron door leading to the garden hung open. He dashed through it and found Anna sitting on the ground, her torso draped over the stone bench, her head hidden by her arms.

“Anna, my love.” Matt squatted down and stroked her hair, her back. “Please, don’t cry. I’m here. It’s all right.”

She turned toward him and groaned, almost wailed. He eased backward and sat on the ground, carrying her with him. He cradled her in his lap as she cried as if she’d never recover.

“It’s OK, it’s OK...,” he repeated over and over. “I love you. It’s OK.”

“I can’t,” she sputtered, her mouth near his shoulder. “I can’t live without Our Lady.” Anna’s body shook with her outpouring of grief. “She said our daily visits are over and she won’t be back tomorrow.”

“I know, Anna. Nadia told the group.” Matt continued to stroke her silken hair. “Please calm down, sweetheart. We can move up on the bench. You’ll feel better. Yes?”

She nodded, docile and sniffling. Matt helped her up and they sat down together on the bench.

“Feel better now?”

“A little.”

Her head bowed, Matt hurt for her. She seemed so injured, so fragile. “Isn’t it for the best, though, Anna?”

Her head popped up and her brow furrowed as if he had uttered insanity. “How can you say that? I can find nothing good in this.” Her eyes brimmed with tears.

He took her hand, placed it in his left hand and stroked it gently with his right. “I’m actually...a little relieved. Now we can have a normal life.”

She flew upright and glared at him. “Normal? How can you say this to me? I don’t want a normal life. I don’t want any kind of life without her. I want to die. And then I can see her every day.” She whipped around and showed him her back.

“Anna, you can’t mean that.” Matt stood up. “Anna, look at me. Please.”

She faced him. He cringed at her accusatory expression. “She’s left me because of you. She’ll find another girl to talk with who isn’t distracted from service to God’s wishes.”

“She said that?”

“No. She said she loves me and like a true mother, she will never leave me. But I won’t see her every day. It has to be because...” She turned her back on Matt again. He touched her shoulder, but she swatted his hand away.

“Go away, Matt. The wedding is cancelled.”

His heart aching, he pleaded, “No, Anna. You must be wrong. She blessed us, somehow led me back to you. It has to be meant. I won’t cancel the wedding. I love you.”

“I can’t speak of love now. I must beg Our Lady to reconsider. I’m sorry Matt, I can’t marry you.”

Anna ripped away on a bead toward the back

steps. Surrounded by Our Lady's miracle roses, his miracle slipped away from him as she shut the back door and shut him out of her life.

Chapter 17

Matt closed the folder, added it to the growing stack on his desk, rubbed his neck and picked up another. Distracted, he didn't hear Harry enter his office and was startled to see him take a seat across the desk from him.

"Still working, son?"

"Just trying to catch up on the charts. So many people come here literally expecting miracles. What am I supposed to say? I'm a doctor. I can tell them their prognosis, but miracles? Not an expert on that subject."

"Hardly expect you to be, son. We're here to serve, to enable access. Who's to say that everybody who comes here doesn't receive a miracle? Maybe not a spontaneous healing, but a miracle just the same."

"I'm out of my depth on the subject of miracles, Harry."

"You're working with me for a reason. God will guide me and He will guide you, too. Have faith. He will lead you."

"I'm trying."

"I know you are and you're doing a fantastic job already. Speaking of jobs what do you want me to do tomorrow?"

"Katarina is running everything with military

precision. We just have to be dressed and at the church by five.”

“So the wedding is still on?”

“Of course it is.”

“Jenna heard rumors that Anna cancelled the wedding.”

“She did, but she was so distraught, she wasn’t thinking straight. We’re meant to be together. You’ve known me a long time, Harry, and I have never been more certain of anything in my life. I have faith. Anna and I will be husband and wife by this time tomorrow.” He grinned. “Can you believe it?”

“Did you convince Anna to reconsider?”

“Not yet. Katarina and I have talked each day and she agrees with me, the wedding will go on as planned.”

“That’s good enough for me. I’ll be dressed and ready at five. If you need anything last minute, just call.” Harry stood and patted Matt’s back. “Get some sleep. Tomorrow is a big day.”

“Thanks, Harry. If it weren’t for you I would never have met Anna.”

“I wish I could take credit, but you were called just like all the other pilgrims. You would have found your way to Valselo on your own. Good night, son.”

“Night, Harry.”

Matt worked for another hour, closed down his office and went to his room—the last night of boarding at *Mir* House. Exhausted, he kicked off his shoes and lay on the top of his bedspread, fully dressed. The church bells chimed twelve as he closed his eyes. *It’s my wedding day.*

Anna huddled under the covers, her eyes scratchy from frequent crying. She rubbed her breastbone with her hand. Useless to massage the dull ache in her center that would never go away.

Her love for Matt must be selfish. Why else would she deserve this?

She turned the page in her Bible, searching for solace, answers in God's own words. "*Blessed are you that hunger now, for you shall be satisfied. Blessed are you that weep now, for you shall laugh.*"

Anna couldn't imagine ever laughing again.

Church bells rang the hour and Anna glanced up from the page.

"Come. She is calling."

Anna froze, the words as clear as if the speaker were across the room. She threw off the covers, bolted out of bed and rushed down the stairs into the chapel. Breathless, she knelt on the familiar kneeler.

"Oh Mother I am here, please come. Hail Mary full of grace, the Lord is..."

Gospa appeared before her, radiant, smiling. Unbridled joy replaced the misery Anna had experienced all week.

"Thank you Mother for answering my prayers."

"Come. She is calling."

"What?" Groggy, Matt sat up in bed. "What Harry?"

The dark room was empty. *I must have been dreaming.*

Disoriented, he lay back on his pillow.

"Come now. She is calling. She needs you."

Matt jerked back up. He swung his legs over the side of the bed, rubbed his hand briskly over his face and slipped his shoes on. Anna needed him.

He hurried through the moonlit fields and entered Anna's house, through the side door, never locked. *Still can't get used to that.*

Instinctively he went to the chapel, not surprised when he found Anna there. Silently, he slipped into the last pew.

A vision in white, Anna wore a simple cotton shift and knelt before the altar, her bare feet

anchored to the floor behind her by the tips of her toes. Her hair fell loosely around her shoulders.

Matt positioned so he could see her face and it took his breath. Her face gorgeous, he was transfixed as Anna smiled, ecstatic. Her lips moved, but no sound accompanied the motion.

Then her voice came, "Thank you Mother. Thank you. I love you. I will."

She stood up and sat in the front pew, her head bowed.

"Anna."

She swiveled. "Oh, Matt!"

Anna sprang up and ran back to him. She flung her arms around his waist, her upturned eyes streaming tears.

"Our Lady came to me again. She told me she loves me, she loves you, all her children, unconditionally. That I have been faithful to God's will for my life. I suffered so much missing her but no more."

She trembled locked against him.

"She said, *'Satan is tempting you and in the smallest thing, your faith disappears. Pray and through prayer, you will have blessings and peace. I will be with you during times in your life of great difficulty. And I will visit with you, my child, on this day every year. This day of your wedding.'*"

"Oh Matthew. I called off the wedding."

"I know. It's OK."

"I am so sorry."

"Don't be. *I* didn't cancel the wedding. I told Katarina to just keep the plans going. I know deep in my soul that we are meant to be together. I had faith that you would change your mind."

"Thank you for believing in us."

"Thank you for showing me the way."

"I love you."

"I love you too, Anna. I can't imagine my life without you."

He dipped his head and kissed her.

“You have to leave.”

“What?”

“You have to leave now. It’s bad luck for the groom to see the bride before the wedding.”

Matt hugged her close. “I adore you.”

“No sweet talk. I mean it. You have to go.” She pushed against his chest and giggled.

“OK if you insist.”

With obvious reluctance, he let her loose and moved towards the door. “But after tonight I will never leave you again. That’s my promise to you.”

Chapter 18

Mirrors don't lie. Anna gazed at her reflection, but still had difficulty accepting the truth. She didn't think it possible to consider herself beautiful. But the mirror image couldn't be denied. Her raven hair loose over her lace capped shoulders, the fit of the dress snug around her waist and cascading to the floor, the touch of lipstick, mascara and blush that Maya had expertly applied, added up to the beautiful bride she encountered in her grandma's mirror.

"You take my breath away."

Anna smiled at Mikhail's reflection that appeared behind her in the mirror.

"Thank you." She turned around. "I'm so happy, Mikhail."

"I know little one. I'm so happy for you." He planted a kiss in the middle of her forehead. "Good thing I listened to the women and didn't boot that boy out of my house when he first came to the village."

The bells of Our Lady of the Roses church pealed, a joyous beckoning that brought tears to Anna's eyes.

Mikhail bent his arm and Anna linked her hand in the crook of his elbow. "Time to go marry your

doctor," he said.

Anna's doctor. My husband. A zinger of elation brought the widest smile to her lips. She took the pure white rose she had picked in her garden earlier off the dresser. Surveying the bushes, her hands on her hips, this particular bloom had caught her eye—seemingly the most perfect flower for a bride to hold. Katarina had tied a sprig of rosemary around its stem with ribbons: rosemary to symbolize welcome to their guests and Our Lady's rose to keep Anna's heavenly mother near.

Anna now understood her public role in Our Lady's purpose in Valselo, the messages, the imparting of the secrets and what would unfold through the remainder of Josip's and Elizabeta's daily apparitions. In her private life with Matt, she would receive the blessing of children. Jesus would be the heart of their family and they would become witnesses of love in this world by loving Him and everything that is holy.

Holding Mikhail's arm, Anna and her little wedding party left Anna's house. The next time Anna entered it, the house would belong to Matt, too.

They walked down the road, lined with shouting villagers blowing noisemakers and horns to mark their passing, toward Roses Church. No rascals tried to impede Anna's progress, the usual tradition in the village. Katarina had spread the word that such silliness would *not* happen to one of Gospa's visionaries. *A good thing to be a village celebrity.*

Across the esplanade fronting the church, up the steps and through the central double doors, Anna's party halted at the head of the aisle: first Maya in a peach satin dress, next further back toward the door, Anna and her "father."

Katarina kissed Anna's cheek and went to her seat in the front of the church. A couple, the woman dressed smartly in a burgundy suit, the gentleman

in gray with a burgundy tie, approached Anna with halting steps. The lady's sky blue eyes confirmed that Matt's parents had used the airplane tickets and had come to their son.

Tears welled in Mrs. Robbins eyes, "Anna, I'm Eileen Robbins." She touched her husband sleeve, "And this is Matt, Sr."

Anna hugged each in turn. "I'm so glad to meet you."

"Welcome to the family," Matt, Sr. said.

"It's a miracle," Eileen said. "To have my son back and now a daughter, too." She dabbed at her eyes with the handkerchief her husband handed her.

"Yes it is a miracle for me, too. I'm honored to be part of your family."

The organist played an etude and the Robbins left to take their seats.

Mikhail reached into his jacket pocket and brought out a string of lustrous pearls. With a sweet smile, he fastened them around Anna's neck.

"My Katarina and Maya wore these on their wedding day. Today, for you, Anna."

She covered the necklace with her palm; the pearls warm beneath it. "Thank you. I'm honored." Tears brimmed. "I seem to be honored at everything today."

Anna waited, her eyes fixed on the huge arched alcove that housed the altar. A door opened to the right. Josip, Matt and Harry filed front and center, faces turned toward her. She noticed Josip as no more than a flash of gold vestments. Her eyes on her groom, nothing else was in focus. Approaching Matt on a swell of organ music, the love in his eyes and the love in her heart winged towards heaven.

The Mass was glorious, had never been more sacred and meaningful to Anna. Even for a girl who had touched angels and embraced the mother of God, her wedding day competed with heaven itself. Our Lady had told her once that her life on earth is

as fleeting as a flower. *How miraculous that this fleeting life will be spent loving Matt.*

The vows repeated, the rings exchanged, Josip announced first in Croatian, and then English, "Anna and Matt now will honor Gospa with prayer as a married couple."

Matt clasped her hand and drew her with him to the statue of Our Lady of the Roses to the right of the altar. Anna lovingly placed her bridal rose at the base of the statue. They kneeled and spent a few minutes praying together while the cantor sang *Ave Maria*.

They returned to their place in front of Josip, Anna's heart full to overflowing with joy, touched with a little sadness that she just talked to Our Lady like everyone else now, and would continue to do so, except on the anniversaries of this day.

Josip proclaimed, "Ladies and gentlemen. May I present Mr. and Mrs. Matthew Robbins. You may take a kiss, now."

Matt's lips warmed hers, the promise kept, their vows sealed. She gazed into his heaven-blue eyes and detected something huge shift in them, as if she could see his razor sharp mind hit on an enormous discovery.

He gave her a knowing smile and said in a booming voice, "Our Lady of the Roses, pray for us."

AUTHOR NOTE

This is a work of fiction. We were inspired, however, by historic and contemporary Marian apparitions around the world. Places like church-approved shrines in Fatima, Portugal; Lourdes, France; and yet to be approved Medjugorje in Bosnia-Herzegovina captured our imaginations and deepened our faith.

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3. Get the family to stop bugging her about getting married.
4. Figure out what to do with the rest of her life.

It doesn't include falling for her brother's high school friend or his two motherless children. Greg's in town for the summer and he wants to see Kathy, but just "as friends." Can Kathy keep this agreement or will she end up with a broken heart when summer ends?

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