

JUST
THE WAY
You ARE

K.M. DAUGHTERS

GOSPA JOURNEYS, VOL.2

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Just the Way You Are, Gospa Journeys, Vol 2

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Dedication

For Mary and her Son

Praise for K.M. Daughters

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 Reviews

Selected as Book Of The Month, Catholic Mom's Book Club,"The story is light, fun and quick paced...I read the book in two sittings and was left wanting more...Thank you for a lovely reading experience!"
Lisa M. Hendley, Webmaster, Catholic Mom.com

"Jewel Of The Adriatic is beautifully written."
Readers Favorite, Hawkesville, KY

ROSE OF THE ADRIATIC:

4 1/2 STARS, "Fantastic, A Keeper" from Romantic Times Books Reviews: "Miracles really do happen in this character-driven story by the writing team behind Daughters. The strength of faith and love prevail in this well-crafted book. Matt and Anna will capture your heart."

5 Hearts, The Romance Studio, 2009 CAPA Nominee: "This tale is deeply spiritual while still being an excellent romance and well told story."

"KM Daughters creates riveting and wonderful character driven stories that prevent you from putting the book down. This is one author who NEVER disappoints and is on the top of my reading list." New York Times Bestselling Author Brenda Novak

Prologue

Two Years Earlier

“What will it be tonight? Calorie conscious or guilty conscience?” Noelle assessed the contents of her nearly bare freezer. “After the day I had in the classroom, deep-dish pizza it is.” She withdrew the pizza from the freezer compartment, worked the cardboard lid off the aluminum pan and placed the pie on a cookie sheet. Carrying the tray over to the kitchen counter nearest the stove, she tapped the buttons to preheat the oven to 425 degrees.

“I’ll share a piece with Mr. Jarvis when it’s done. Even though he won’t appreciate it. The miserable old coot doesn’t have the words, thank or you, in his vocabulary.” Amused, she grinned. “And I’ll stop talking to myself now.”

Pacing across the tiny galley kitchen to the dainty, ice cream parlor table in the corner, Noelle slid a packet of papers out of her briefcase to grade before dinner. The oven beeped and she retraced her steps back to the stove, placed the cookie sheet on the middle rack, set the timer and carried it with her down the hall to her bedroom. Soaking in a bubble bath seemed a far more attractive use of pre-dinner time than extending her workday in evaluating the results of the pop quiz that had her students in an uproar that

afternoon.

The half hour she allotted for relaxation flew. As Noelle tugged on her favorite sweatshirt and leggings the smell of smoke spurred her to race into the kitchen.

Grabbing an oven mitt from a drawer, she turned the oven off, yanked open the door and lifted a perfectly cooked pizza off the rack. Puzzled, she placed the tray on a trivet.

Although she couldn't detect the source, the pungent aroma of a grease fire increased. Digging inside her purse, she located her cell phone, and then slid open the patio door. Cell phone in hand, Noelle scanned the area outside her ground floor condo. No plumes of smoke curled from autumn bonfires near the street, and the tree-lined property appeared tranquil and undisturbed. But acrid fumes pinched her nostrils. The hair on the back of her neck stood signaling imminent danger.

When Noelle noticed a thin stream of black smoke snaking from under her neighbor's door, she dialed 911 and ducked back inside the kitchen. Shrugging her right shoulder up to balance the phone against her ear, she stuffed papers and her laptop inside her briefcase and then slung the strap over her shoulder.

The call connected while she was in motion towards her door. "911. What is your emergency?"

"My name is Noelle Walker. Smoke is issuing from my neighbor's condo. Four-sixty-four Ogden Avenue, unit number seventy-five, Naperville. Please send help immediately. My neighbor is handicapped and is confined to a wheelchair." Noelle's voice quavered in squeaky bursts as she flung open her door.

"Stay calm, Ms. Walker. I'll alert the fire department and police. They should be there soon."

"Thank you." Noelle disconnected the call, dumped her briefcase against the baseboard in the outer hallway, and sprinted to her neighbor's front door.

"Mr. Jarvis, can you hear me?" Terrified, she pounded on the door. "Mr. Jarvis!"

The smoke detector alarm blatted within her neighbor's condo. She grabbed the spare key off the top ledge of the doorframe and unlocked the door. A curtain of black smoke obscured her field of vision. *Dear God. Please help me.* Wrenching the waistband of her sweatshirt to cover her mouth and nose, Noelle barreled through the smoke into the apartment.

"Mr. Jarvis! Mr. Jarvis, answer me!" Her eyes stung and watered, heightening the nightmarish disorientation.

"Over here!" came a guttural cry.

She located the man, who sagged in his wheelchair, head in hands, outside the kitchen's entrance. Noelle lightly tapped the wheelchair's handles to make sure they weren't scalding hot. Then she grasped them firmly and shoved the chair toward the door.

His hands clutched the wheels, braking abruptly. "I can't find Trudy," he sputtered. A fit of coughing shook the chair.

"Let go, Mr. Jarvis. I have to get you out of here," Noelle rasped, her throat burning.

"Her chop meat...on the stove..."

"It will be all right. Just let me get you outside." She shoved and met resistance as he clenched his hands harder on the wheels. "I'm not leaving without Trudy."

Let go you impossible old man! The smoke alarm

continued to bleat a discordant racket. Woozy, every breath searing, she leaned over attempting to disengage his hands. "I'll come back for her. We need air now!"

"Promise?" he wheezed.

"Yes!"

He folded his hands and Noelle propelled the chair into the hallway, nearly colliding with Liz and Jim Munson who lived on the other side of Noelle's condo.

"Here." Noelle let go of the chair handles. "Take him outside. I have to go find his dog."

"No, wait for the firemen!" Liz yelled as Noelle spun on her heel and reentered the smoke-filled apartment, determined to keep her promise.

Crouching, Noelle scanned the floor hoping to spy the dog under the furniture. Flames consumed the kitchen curtains, flickering torches oozing jet-black smoke. Crawling down the hallway toward the bedroom Noelle hollered, "Trudy! Here Trudy!"

Please God, let me find this sweet animal. The smoke is too thick. I can't see. Please lead me.

The floor plan here was identical to her unit, and Noelle instinctively maneuvered down the hallway to enter the bedroom. Flames danced on the drapes. The hem of the bed skirt quivered. Flat on her stomach, Noelle reached under the bed encountering the trembling body of the miniature Boston terrier. She reached out. "Come here little one. I am not going to hurt you."

A warm tongue lapped her hand and then the dog scooted out. Noelle captured the wiggly animal and cuddled her in her arms. Lifting the dog as she rose, a flaming cloth fell onto her right shoulder. Intense heat

seemed to swallow her as the bedclothes ignited. Noelle lunged from the flames, sent up a quick prayer, and blindly skittered in a low crouch toward a way out, the dog tucked under her arm.

Light. Stomping thundered in her ears. Cold air filled her lungs as she gagged against the piercing pain. The dog yelped. And then a smothering blackness. Rolling, rolling. An awful smell of roasting meat. Weightlessness and then a jarring landing. Something hard covered her nose and mouth.

“ Thank you.” Mr. Jarvis’s phlegmy voice.

Screams. Who’s screaming? Incessant howls. God, please help whoever is screaming.

1

Although he might have sailed by all his fellow airplane passengers twenty minutes ago, first class, priority, boarding pass in hand, Shane delayed embarking until the final call. Experience had taught him that his long legs ached less at arrival if he strolled the airport concourses before long stretches of confinement on international flights. Shane couldn't avoid the lengthy travel time from Chicago to Frankfurt, that went from an overnight stopover, on to Split, and then a rumbling ride onboard the bus to the remote Adriatic village that was his destination. He was eager to arrive in Valselo.

"All aboard, Dr. Thompson," Celia called. She was one of the many gate attendants Shane knew by name.

Passing through the plane's cabin door with a bent head to shrink his six two frame for clearance, Shane found his usual seat: starboard, second row, aisle, and away from the portholes. Hopefully, the woman who already occupied the window seat would cooperate and share his preference to close the window shade immediately after take-off.

Ensclosed in his first-class pod, Shane toed off his boots and kicked them alongside his duffel on the floor. He accepted a flute of champagne, dewy with condensation, from the flight attendant and then

offered it to the lady across the aisle.

“Miss, would you care for a glass of champagne?”

“Uh... Sure.” She raised her head from the book in her lap and focused on Shane.

When her huge green eyes met his, his heart somersaulted and his breath caught in his throat. Shane had seen the rolling, verdant hills in Ireland, painted in green hues so bold and brilliant he could almost taste the rich color on his tongue. The Emerald Isle paled in comparison to her eyes.

His hands went clammy as he handed her the plastic flute and plucked another from the tray the flight attendant suspended near his ear. Unable and unwilling to tear his gaze from hers, he smiled and extended his glass forward for a toast.

Interpreting the overture, she tapped her glass against his, those enchanting eyes upturned beneath long bangs. Glossy auburn hair curtained her cheeks.

Either shy or quizzical.

“To a safe journey,” Shane declared as he gulped a swig of the effervescent drink. He set the glass on the console that separated them. “I sincerely hope you and I are heading to the same place, although I highly doubt it.”

A tiny frown line creased her brow as she abandoned her untouched drink. “I’m just going to read for a while if you don’t mind.” With a swing of silky hair she turned back to her book.

Then Shane noticed the pocked pattern of scar tissue on her right cheek extending up around the eye socket and under a rim of bangs. Similar scarring continued down the right side of her face and neck where a soft, jade green sweater skimmed the too-taut skin. Registering the balled, right hand curled within a

smooth, unmarred left hand, Shane surmised a fire or chemical's path of assault on this lovely woman's flesh. He noted the surgeon's telltale tracks, too. *Not bad skin grafts, overall. But I could eliminate all visible puckering.*

Nothing, however, detracted from those exquisite, soulful eyes or the mystical magnetism she exuded, seemingly unintentionally. Her gaze now flicked in his direction, and then away with an apparently irritated clench of her jaw. Perhaps she'd observed his clinical assessment.

The flight attendant swiped the champagne glasses off the consoles.

"Flight attendants, prepare for departure," barked the Captain through the intercom.

The engines revved, and the plane propelled forward, jettisoning Shane backward in corresponding motion. The exhilarating, gravity-free sensation as the wheels left earth was similar to the heady spontaneity he experienced in this woman's company.

Since the age of understanding language, Shane had listened to the one-look-in-her-eyes- and-it-was-all-over legend about how his father had fallen in love with their mother; Pops had never tired in relating it to his children. Since Shane and his five siblings' parents had remained gooey-eyed sweethearts ever since their famous one-week courtship before marriage, he knew such things of the heart could occur.

First-hand? Not even close. Dad's opinion of Shane's single status at age thirty-five: "You're either too busy or too blind to see the love of your life in front of your face."

I'm not blind, Pops. And I'm sure not busy, right now. Shane glimpsed sideways. *Still hanging over that book.* *Hmm.* Reflexively he drummed what had to be an

annoying cadence with his fingers on the console, but still didn't gain an iota of her attention.

World renowned maxillofacial surgeon, Shane Thompson who had traveled the globe performing restorations deemed miraculous, and had slipped off the hooks of his fair share of husband-fishing women in the bargain, didn't know how to capture the attention of the woman with the maybe-it's-all-over-for-me eyes.

When the engine roar toned down to the ever-present white air sound of air travel, the flight attendant... *What's her name again? Oh yeah—Doris...* bustled around in the forward galley. Shane picked up the printed menu for something to do while an urgency to know this woman who continued to ignore him ballooned in his chest. The nine-hour flight to Frankfurt suddenly didn't seem so protracted anymore.

Shane leaned towards her. "Can I start over again?"

Her head snapped up and she stared at him.

He smiled pleasantly, he hoped, as he extended his left hand toward her for a shake. "Hi, my name is Shane Thompson."

Now she fixed her stare on his hand as if debating for a few beats, and then she awkwardly sent her left hand towards his, lightly grazing his fingertips.

A ridiculously steamy sensation coursed through Shane with the brief contact.

She kept her injured hand curled in her lap. "Noelle Walker...um...nice to meet you," she mumbled.

"I'm delighted to meet you, Noelle. You have the most beautiful eyes."

Those beautiful eyes widened, surprised, or maybe alarmed. "Are you *hitting* on me?"

"I guess I am," Shane confessed. "Do you mind?"

Arching her eyebrows, she gave him a half-smile that fell short of symmetrical on the right side of her face. Still, Shane warmed to this gorgeous woman.

"Where are you headed, Noelle? Frankfurt?"

The former Noelle might have relished the overt, avid interest of a man like Shane who radiated confidence and virility. The Noelle forged by fire sat stupefied in the magnetic spell of this stranger's undivided attention. Shivers ran up and down her spine as she clenched the impaired hand in her lap. Despite her chronic shyness, now better described as terror, and her seeming amnesia in the art of flirting, Noelle desperately wanted to respond in kind to Shane. *This can't be happening. Is he blind?*

"I don't mean to be rude," she stammered. "I'm not comfortable with this."

"Of course. Why would you be?" He hesitated a couple seconds. "What can I do to make you comfortable?"

The flight attendant stood next to Shane's seat, pad at the ready to take dinner orders.

"Doris will vouch for me." He flashed a dazzling smile. "I'm a nice guy, right, Doris?"

"He's an *extremely* nice guy, Ms. Walker." With a grin at Shane, Doris regarded Noelle. "You could trust this man with your life. Have you made your entrée choices yet, or shall I come back later?"

"Oh..." Noelle stared at her menu dumbly.

“Later, thank you, Doris,” Shane directed, then turned back to Noelle. “Are you heading to Frankfurt for business or pleasure?”

“Actually,” Noelle uttered, pleased that her voice sounded normal despite fluttery butterflies inside. “Frankfort marks the beginning of connections to Croatia. I’m booked on a tour called Gospa Journeys.”

“What an amazing stroke of luck! I’m going to Valselo, too!”

Delight blossomed like an inward sun rising after the blackest of nights. Could this attractive man, or any man, really look past her deformities? Until now, Noelle hadn’t harbored any hope. No matter how hard she had prayed, she’d yet to accept her own imperfections.

Noelle had embarked on this pilgrimage to Valselo at Mr. Jarvis’s expense for one reason: to entreat the Lord in a place where miracles reputedly happened, to grant her the miracle of self-acceptance. The agonies she had suffered were over. The surgeries she had undergone had not made a difference. Before the fire, she had never considered herself beautiful. In the aftermath...how wrong!

Confined inches from an intriguing man, Noelle trembled while mustering the courage to connect with him. Impossibly he seemed to find her intriguing, too. *Maybe Valselo miracles happen on the plane?*

“I can’t believe the coincidence,” she said. “Will you be staying at the Lidovic *pansion*?”

“I will!” Shane smiled again, a blood-stirring affirmation of his genuine interest. “They’re the dearest friends. Please...” His hand curled around her “good” hand, a memory-jogging blast of how amazing it felt to be touched tenderly, reverently. “Please agree to have

dinner with me while we're there. I'll be volunteering for a week at Mir House—the medical facility. But I'll work my schedule around the tours—if you'll permit me."

Noelle's head spun at the notion. But if she would ever regard herself in the mirror and not bow her head in shame at her reflection, she would have to accept the God-sent, outstretched hand provided along the way.

"I'd like that...a lot."

He pecked the back of her hand with a soft kiss, a mind blanking, electrifying sensation. "Good. Now you can read your book."

2

Noelle slid into her aisle seat on the second flight of her long journey. Still jubilant after her easy, interesting conversation with Shane Thompson late into last night, in between courses of surprisingly delicious food, she didn't regret that she hadn't read another single page on the overseas flight.

The memories of listening to Shane describe his sky warrior life and globetrotting as a volunteer for Doctors Without Borders warmed her. He had told her about his family, too—a tight knit clan who loved get-togethers and joking camaraderie. She had shared funny anecdotes about her students. She hadn't once mentioned fires, or burn units, or isolating disfigurements...and neither had Shane.

Stowing her leather carry-on at her feet, she enjoyed a short-lived moment relishing the private space on this flight and the heady anticipation of the promised dinner date with Shane in Valselo. When she noticed the flight attendants' fixed gazes on her face she fumbled with her seatbelt. She managed to click the buckle in place and pointedly stared toward the small, cloudy window attempting to ignore their invasive, unspoken curiosity, while embarrassed tears welled.

Would she never conquer this agony of self-