

Jewel of the
Adriatic

by

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Dedication

For Mary and her Son.

Chapter 1

Her arrival approached. Maya felt it, familiar, wondrous. It was always the same: a hitch in time and a charge of pulse racing expectation, then a respite, childlike in Mary's presence.

Anna walked forward. She reached the end of the middle aisle and kneeled before the carved wooden altar trimmed in antique white lace, the centerpiece of the family-room-turned-chapel in her home.

Material rustled, wood creaked and soles squeaked against the tile floor as all present knelt on wooden kneelers in the rows of benches behind Anna.

Maya saw the soles of Anna's black sandals, her back a straight line framed by the maple wood of the kneeler she used. She wore a crisp short sleeve cotton checkered blouse, maroon on white, tucked into jeans. Her leather belt cinched a tiny waist. She led the prayer recitation; her voice a velvety alto as she intoned the first half of each prayer in Croatian.

A crucifix hung on the peach-colored plaster wall above the altar in front of her, flanked by a wooden pulpit and three foot tall graceful, painted statues of Mary and St. Joseph.

The group of fifty or so recited the second half

of prayers in a chorus of diverse timbers and native tongues. Maya's trained ear picked out three languages: French, English and Spanish.

Mid-sentence, Anna fell silent which signified the start of the apparition. The group followed her lead, like a collective awestruck intake and hold of breath. The only sounds Maya heard were the click and fan-whir of the air conditioning unit, the occasional rasp of a cough and the rhythm of her own heart beat.

Maya knelt in the last pew. Her group and Anna's other guests formed ten rows of backs, bowed heads, and upturned shoe soles in front of her.

It was a collective experience, but still personal and private for Maya. The exquisite calm of Mary's presence washed over her, bathed her with warmth and love. She absorbed Mary's peace, drank it in like life water. She didn't pray or intone a litany of intentions in her head. Instead she chose to just be in that special place and let her faith revive her.

She had witnessed Anna's apparitions, and those of the other two visionaries since she was a little girl. It was always the same. Their lips formed words but no sound, their eyes cast upward and their faces radiated ecstasy.

A man knelt on the floor to Anna's right and glared at the side of her head. He looked at the visionary as if he wanted to break the spell, crack the code, and debunk the mystery. Maya knew that Anna was impervious to anything other than the words and vision of the Mother of God. Anna's features, pleasant and full of mirth normally, would now appear transformed--ecstatic to disbelieving eyes.

During her daily apparitions, Anna's plain face blossomed into beautiful, unlined purity, perfect in its innocence. For sixteen years, lasers

pointed into her eyes, needles pierced in her flesh, loud noises blasted into her ears had not interfered with these heavenly visitations. Onlookers' unblinking stares changed nothing.

Maya's heart swelled, and then deflated as it always did when she sensed Mary leave--like the flicker of a flame before a candle burned out. Anna's soft voice cut the silence as she picked up the prayer recitation she had cut off when the apparition began. The group recited the response. Anna remained on her knees, her face cupped in her hands.

Maya rose, tiptoed down the center aisle and waited until Anna stood before joining her at the front of the chapel. They stood before the group, Anna near enough for Maya to feel her tremble, a kind of electric static as she rejoined earth and let heaven go.

Maya switched on a hand mic', folded her arms over her chest and held the mic' beneath her chin. She looked at the floor, at nothing in particular, to prevent any visual distractions while she worked. She waited to hear the visionary's words, intending to repeat them exactly.

Anna stammered a bit at first; then gathered subsequent strength after each rest while Maya translated what she said three times to accommodate the composite languages of the group.

Anna's words streamed through Maya, "It is very difficult to speak after the meeting with Our Lady. It is difficult to return so quickly."

Anna looked out at the group, cupped her hand over her chin, and then dropped that arm and let both arms dangle at her sides. "It is difficult to describe in words this meeting and the beauty of heaven.

"I will try to point out the most important from this meeting with Our Lady.

“This evening Our Lady came joyful and happy. She greets us all with her motherly blessing, ‘Praise be Jesus my dear children.’

“After that Our Lady prays with her hands extended over all of us. She prays especially over those who are present that are sick. She prays especially over the clergy that are present here.

“And then she blesses us all with her motherly blessing and blesses all the religious articles you brought here to be blessed.

“I prayed for your needs, your families and I presented them to Our Lady and she will place them before her Son.

“After that we prayed for a while for peace for the world and then I spoke to her privately. A conversation between the two of us.

“And then I prayed with her the Our Father and Glory Be.

“And then she prays over all of us. She leaves with the light and the sign of the cross. She said, ‘Return your hearts to my Son. Thank you for responding to my call.’”

Entrenched in the stop and tri-part cadence of her work, Maya felt out of sync when Anna fell silent. Maya looked up at her to check if she was done, then out at the audience.

They sat, most of them poised at the edge of their seats, eyes wide. Some streamed tears. They looked dazed. They grinned at her, expectant. She wondered how many were first-time witnesses to a Marian apparition.

She was so young her first time, it was a dim memory. But she could still feel the wonder, the overwhelming sense of privilege that she could be rooted on earth and still touch heaven.

“Anna thanks you all for coming here this evening.” She patiently repeated the tri-lingual message.

Last she said in English, “If my group could

please stay behind a few minutes? Thank you.”

After the room cleared with a cacophony of shuffles and overlapping conversations, Maya announced to her charges, “Anna will answer your questions now. Just call them out, and I’ll translate them for you.”

“What does she look like when she comes?” came the loud, female voice.

“First I smell roses--powerful, filling my whole head with their perfume.” Anna closed her eyes and took a deep breath that angled her head back, her face full of pleasure.

Anna looked out at the audience again. “Then I see a bright light, and Our Lady appears in front of me. She wears a gray dress, white veil. She has blue eyes and dark hair. She floats on a cloud and has a crown of roses, more gorgeous than any on earth. Her beauty is impossible to describe.”

English to Croatian to English was much less difficult than her earlier interpreting. Maya handled the discourse fluently, and she settled in to an easy rhythm back and forth.

Anna smiled. “We asked her one time, Mother, why are you so beautiful?”

“Gospa said, ‘I am beautiful because I love. If you love you are beautiful, too.’”

“Does she ever talk about the power of evil in the world?” the minister asked.

Anna nodded her head. “So many messages directly and indirectly. She calls us, ‘Dear children. I am with you. I come to you because I want to help you. I want to bring peace to the world. But I need you. With you I can accomplish peace.’”

Anna’s eyes sparkled, her cheeks colored. “Something most powerful Our Lady is calling us to do.”

She raised her voice in vehement punctuation. “Pray, pray, pray. Truly if we stop praying our spirits die. Like the flowers you see outside.

Without water and light they vanish and die. It's the same with a woman's or a man's soul and heart. Prayer is the water and God is the light."

"Does she appear to you life-sized?"

"I see her the same as I see you. I talk to her the same as I talk to you. I talk to her easier than I talk to you. I can touch her. Sometimes on my birthday or Christmas she hugs me."

"Ahhhh," the ladies crooned.

"Have you seen heaven?"

"Yes."

"Can you describe it?"

Anna laced her Croatian words with laughter.

Maya laughed with her and converted the joke to English, "When and if you get there, you'll see."

Anna laughed again and turned toward Maya to share the fun.

"Heaven is very difficult to describe," she continued. "It's a vast space. People are happy and joyful. All the same age. They wear purple dresses. Long robes. When you get there, you'll see."

Anna nodded at Maya and she picked up the cue. "That's all the questions for now. Do you all remember the way back to my parents' house?"

She was satisfied by all the head nods she saw.

Anna tapped her shoulder and smiled as their eyes met. "You must bring Colin O'Reilly," she said.

Maya knit her brows and stared at Anna. "I don't recognize that name. Who is he?"

"I didn't ask her, but she wants him to come."