



BABA CHESSY AND BIANCA

Medieval Mysteries

CAROLYN GREGOV

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By Carolyn Gregov

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Dedication

For Michael of the gentle heart

Description

In the year 1356 a midwife escaped from a witch hunt and made her way to a Dalmatian island, where she found refuge in a sleepy village, hoping to hide from her pursuers, the ecclesiastical tribunal called the Inquisition. For five years she and her cat Bianca lived in solitary seclusion, interacting with villagers only when necessary. The villagers knew nothing about her, and eventually they called her Baba Chessy - Grandmother Garlic - because of the superior garlic she grew in her large garden.

In her fifth year on the island, however, she ventured from her safe haven to help a young girl from a neighboring village whose mother had been poisoned. The story of how Baba Chessy and Bianca learned the surprising truth behind the poisoning is told in the *Bell Poison* mystery.

Little by little Baba Chessy was drawn into the lives of the villagers. In the *Devil Rocks* mystery, she helps a church warden find redemption in an explosive enterprise, and in the *Olive Revenge* mystery she saves a poor olive grower from wrongful death. As she became more and more involved in village life, she found her closed heart opening.

Readers who enjoy the gentler, slower pace of life in books like the Alexander McCall Smith Botswana series, may enjoy this Baba Chessy and Bianca series as well.

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Bell Poison

*A Baba Chessy and Bianca Medieval Mystery
Book 1*



Chapter One

It all started with that timid knock on Baba Chessy's door. No one had knocked on her door since she moved into the run-down hovel five years before, a situation greatly to her liking and one she encouraged with an attitude of scowling surliness whenever she needed to move among the villagers.

The villagers did not know what to make of her. She had one day just appeared among them, stepping down from that boat that came over from the city, carrying two baskets, one in each hand. She said not a word to anyone, only consulted a wrinkled piece of paper that a man standing nearby said looked like a map of the village paths.

Then she began walking on the ancient cobblestone seaside walkway that educated people would tell you was laid down by the Romans. The village people cared not one whit who had laid it down. It was simply there, had always been there. It was what they used to ferry their goods from boat to house or house to boat, or their olives from the groves on the hillside to the press warehouse on the shore, or their barrels of wine from dirt-floored donkey sheds to the small boats for transport to the markets in the city.

The village paths had no names. They were identified by the names of the people on them. "Turn right after Ivan's house." "Go up the hill to the end of old Goran's potato field and go left until you see a house with a door on the second story but no stairway to get to that door." The villagers did not need more. They knew everything about their village.

But then one day they did not know everything about their village. This new person had come among them, and even after five years they knew little more about her than they did when she stepped onto their shore.

Baba Chessy was old. On that the townspeople were in agreement. But there was little else concerning her on which they agreed. If you asked them how old she in fact was, they would shrug and look at each other and mumble, "Old." If you asked them when she was born, or where she came from, they might shrug with an elaborate gesture, or scratch their heads and frown and mutter, "Who knows?" "Who cares?" "Probably with the Turks."

If you asked them what her name was, they did not know. Eventually they themselves gave her a name: Baba Chesniak, Grandmother Garlic, because she grew the best garlic in the village. No one knew why her garlic grew bigger and had plumper cloves and a superior taste when added to soups and breads and fish. They only knew that her garlic made their food taste better, and so they put up with her silent surliness to buy her garlic at the village market, the only thing she ever sold there.

Enterprising villagers would buy her garlic and plant it in their own gardens, expecting to harvest superior garlic. That did not happen. Nosy villagers trying to learn her secrets would

peer stealthily over her garden wall, and they would see that she had planted garlic all around the perimeter of her land, and they would plant garlic next to their own garden walls, expecting to harvest superior garlic. That did not happen.

In the end most villagers simply accepted the fact that buying Baba Chesniak's superior garlic for a few coins was easier than trying to grow their own; and as the months turned into years, she became to them simply Baba Chessy, the garlic grandmother.

One thing they did whisper about, arguing with each other in lengthy gossiping sessions. These sessions never seemed to provide an answer to the fearful question, but they did provide pleasurable hours sitting on benches by the seashore or on old stools in the tavern or at the café with glasses of wine or that new black drink that was becoming so popular, the one the Arab in the market in the city called kahwa.

"She always wears black. Witches wear black."

"All the old widows in this village wear black, stupid."

"She has that black cat that someone heard her calling Bianca. Whoever heard a normal person calling a black cat 'White?'"

"And that cat makes no sound. No one has ever heard it make a noise, not a meow, not a grumble, not a purr, not even a hiss. Now I ask you, is that normal behavior for a cat?"

"Maybe she trained the cat to make no noise."

"Well, it's not normal."

"And she rebuilt that falling down house all by herself. What normal woman could do that? Some of those stones are more than I can lift."

"Don't worry, Frano, a flea can lift more than you can."

"And how come everything she grows is always the best? She must have the devil's help to make things grow like that."

It was always this point that got the villagers most riled up and vocal. How was it possible that she always grew the best garlic, they would ask.

"It's not normal, it isn't. It's just not normal," someone would grumble.

"If you worked your land the way she works hers, maybe you could have the same, you know," someone else would say meekly. But no one seemed to hear that.

And so it would go round and round until someone scolded, "Stop the arguing. The question is, 'Is she or is she not a witch?'"

There would be silence all around. Each time it ended thus. Who really wanted an answer to that question anyway? If the villagers ever decided on an answer, they would not be able to argue about the matter anymore. And they might have to take action, God forbid. And of most concern, their source of superior garlic would dry up.

Then the villagers would disperse and go back to their homes with satisfied righteousness. They had once again done what they could to solve the puzzle of the newcomer Baba Chessy, and their lives need not change. Everything could remain normal.

Months passed, and years passed, and nothing much ever did change in the village of Stari Kamen. The villagers continued to note with jealousy the state of Baba Chessy's garden, what they could see of it in glimpses over the wall here and there. Her figs seemed larger and juicier. The clusters of grapes on her vines seemed bigger than anyone else's. Her vegetables seemed healthier and her herbs more vibrant. And of course, that superior garlic. Always that superior garlic. "How is it that she can raise the best foods?" the villagers asked again and again. That question always gave them the opportunity to engage in their never-ending debate, the one that allowed them to feel the righteousness of effort.

"She must be a witch."

"That must be why all her food is the best."

"You don't have to be a witch to grow good food, dummy. You just have to work at it. If you would spend as much time in your garden dirt as you do dishing dirt at the café, you could have good vegetables and fruits too. You know there were rocks in that garden before she took it over."

"And how could one woman lift out all those rocks? I tell you, that is not normal."

"And where does she get her water when our gardens are wilting?"

And so the merry-go-round would turn again.

There was one thing about which the villagers did agree, however, and that was how they coveted and were protective of that enviable chunk of garden land on which her hovel sat, so level, so free of rocks, so fertile. When wealthy merchants or lords or land agents from the city with large covetous eyes salivated over that parcel of land, so close to the center of town, "so level, so free of rocks, so fertile," the villagers bristled.

"Ah, that garden of hers would be so perfect to build on!" exclaimed one land agent from the city. "Why, you could build three nice houses on that land of hers!"

A wealthy merchant would stand on tiptoe to peak over the wall, mumbling, "Tear down the hideous old stone hovel, turn that whole grapevine area into a patio and cistern – worth a fortune, I tell you, a fortune!"

With that the villagers agreed, but they would always close ranks around old Baba Chessy if any land agent or merchant got too aggressive. Baba Chessy belonged to the village, not to those despised city dwellers. The villagers had, after all, named her, had they not? And where else would they get their superior garlic?

There was one thing the villagers did not know. In the corner of Baba Chessy's garden where two village paths converged and the old grape arbor grew tall and strong with thick vines and leaves so large and abundant, the villagers many years ago had installed on the walkway outside the garden wall a crumbling old bench and behind it several yew bushes sheltering against the wall. Over the years the grapevine grew and grew and now extended out over the wall, over the thick yew bushes, and over the bench and the walkway, creating a shady bower.

Villagers walking the pathway, especially those who were carrying heavy parcels or pushing a loaded wheelbarrow or trying to appease a stubborn donkey, found this bench a perfect comfort for a moment of rest, especially satisfactory if another villager happened to come by ready to appreciate such a haven and spend an hour gossiping.

There, on that comfortable old bench under the shade of the grapevine and with light breezes coming from the bay to cool them, the good villagers would rest for a few minutes or a few hours and chatter happily, unaware that on the other side of the yew bushes and the wall was a similar old bench under the grapevine, this one within Baba Chessy's garden. On this bench could often be found Baba Chessy resting or dozing after her work in her garden, with her cat Bianca curled up on her lap sleeping.

The good villagers would have been quite horrified indeed to learn just how much Baba Chessy knew about them and the shenanigans they got up to.

Baba Chessy called the bower on her side of the wall a grape arbor, but the villagers called the bower on their side of the wall a grotto. It was believed that at one time many years ago, there had been a statue of the virgin installed there, to which villagers could pray. But no one was sure when that was nor if it was even true. Some of the old timers, however, could still be found genuflecting creakily or crossing themselves reverently when passing that corner.

Chapter Two

Baba Chessy had been snoozing in her chair when the knocks came that evening, and her first thought was fear: had they found her after all? Would this be the time she could not slip from their grasp?

But no, if it were the brutes, there would have been no knocks. They would have barged right in with their oaths and stink and uncouth ways, breaking down the door if necessary,

and they would have yanked her to her feet and slapped her for good measure before dragging her out the door.

She remembered to reach into her pocket to be sure the small packet of her deliverance was still there, the packet she carried always with her in case they took her in for torture. That she would not abide. No one ever came out of the torture chamber able to live a normal life. Bones were pulled apart, muscles severed, fingers or hands or feet cut off and crudely seared with the hot poker to prevent the mercy of death. No, Baba Chessy would not abide that. She would take her deliverance and deny the brutes the satisfaction of their beastly cruelties.

She thought she had eluded them, that they would not look for her on this remote island. When she fled on foot that day, carrying only some food and water, rudimentary cooking utensils, her precious seeds and flint and net, and the tiny tortured kitten, plus the meager funds she had earned as a midwife, she had gone west through the forests until she came to the sea, where she found a boatman who took pity on her and agreed to her bargain: in exchange for travel on his boat she would wash and mend his clothes and prepare some meals for him with fish she caught and wild greens she foraged from the hillsides they would pass. The boatman was taking a load of rope coils to market in the city, his entire year's work.

The boat was small and crowded and the boatman too far toward his dotage to be an effective rower, but Baba Chessy was satisfied that each pull on the oar took her farther away from the brutes. The oarsman declared himself well satisfied with the state of his clothes after their passage through Baba Chessy's capable hands, and he opened his eyes wide in surprise at the taste of the fish stew she prepared on a makeshift fire she built each evening on the spits of land where the boatman tied up.

On the fifth day, they left the sea and started up a strait. The city came into view then, a large sprawling thing that Baba Chessy instinctively feared. To her left she spied a lone island sitting several miles offshore, and she said to herself, "Here I may find safety. They will not think to look for me on a lonely island. Here I may be safe to live out my remaining years in peace. I am finished with the evils and cruelties of people, the lying and deceit of churchmen, the greed of merchants who will sell you for coin. Let me find a place on a lonely island to lay my head, free of the meddling of humans."

The island that looked uninhabited on the windward side was in fact not uninhabited on the leeward side, Baba Chessy learned. There was a village there. In fact, as her boatman plied his way further up the strait, she saw several villages on that island. Thinking that the ways in this land were probably like those in the land she had left, she decided her safest way forward might be a visit to a land records office in the city to inquire about buying a parcel of land on that island, so that she would own her property and not be vulnerable to eviction.

This she did, presenting herself to the land records office in the city. She learned of a parcel of land on the nearest island, one she could afford with her coins. It had a broken-down hovel on it, and the land was said to be filled with rocks and debris, reported the registrar. But she saw on his map that it was a good-sized parcel surrounded by walls for her privacy, which meant she could keep people out, and the land would belong to her. This last point cost her more of her precious coins when the registrar slyly told her it was not legal to sell land to a woman. She placed coins into his eager palm saying, "My name is Marco." Her signature on the document would be a large X.

With coins secure in his tunic pocket, the clerk signed and stamped the deed of sale, recorded it in his ledger, and kindly provided her with a rough map of the village pathways before bidding her good day.

The knocking again. Baba Chessy was confused about the hour. She remembered that it was Saturday, and she remembered hearing the faint Vespers bell from the city across the strait, but she did not remember hearing the bell for Compline. It was Bianca who had awakened her by placing one paw firmly on her slipper minutes before the knock.

"What is it, my Little Friend?" she said as she leaned down to stroke Bianca's back. Bianca looked toward the door. "Someone is coming, my friend?"

Soon Baba Chessy herself heard a slight shuffle on the flagstones outside the door to her small house, followed by the timid knocks. She heaved herself from her chair, rubbing one hip gingerly as she walked to the door. When she opened it, she found a slight girl of maybe ten standing before her, visibly nervous and frightened. Bianca had positioned herself close to Baba Chessy's right foot and sat glaring up at the newcomer, who looked at the cat in fear. Baba Chessy said gently, "Bianca will not hurt you, child. What brings you to me at this hour?"

The girl kept her eyes on Bianca and spoke in a whisper. "I am sorry to disturb your rest, good lady, but I am very afraid for my mother and I don't know how to get help for her. I am Bogdana from the next village. My papa is on the fishing boat and I do not know when he will return, and my aunt went to the city to spend the night celebrating her friend's birthday."

"What is wrong with your mother, child?"

"She is lying in bed and will not wake. My little brothers were crying and wanting their supper. I gave them bread and some cheese and put them to bed. I came to you to see if you can help my mother."

"Why would you think that?"

“I overheard some of the women talking in the graveyard one day saying they wondered if you were a healer, that maybe if they had consulted you, you might have helped their dear friend, and their friend need not have died.”

“And this was in your village, the one two miles away near the old ruins?”

“Yes, good lady, Blizu. Can you help my mother, please?”

The young girl’s lip had started to tremble and tears showed in her eyes.

Baba Chessy said to her sternly, “You must not ever call me a healer, for that is too dangerous. I will come with you to see if there is anything that might help your mother, but you must not ever again refer to me as a healer, is that understood?”

The girl nodded mutely, the naked gratitude on her face painful to see. Baba Chessy knew from experience that once an ailment reached the point that the family felt compelled to call for help, it was often too late. But she would try. She would do what she could.

Oh, my. She had thought when she found refuge on this island that she would be free of that world, the ailments of humans, their fears, their pains, their antagonisms and forever bickering, their greed and cruelty, their sad failure to ever recognize and honor the frailty of the human body. Was she now to be pulled back into that universe of pain, sorrow, uncertainty, and sometimes danger?

“I am too old to enter again that murky land of healing,” she thought. “Do I not deserve to live the rest of my life in peace here on the island home I have found?”

But she looked at the small trembling girl, so afraid and yet so brave.

“This child’s courage must be rewarded,” she thought. “I shall not be the one to destroy that small spark of determination she has to take action for a good cause, even when fear raises its hydra head of fanged terror.”

She went to a cupboard in the corner and found a carrying case into which she proceeded to put various items. Then she took up her walking stick and followed the girl out the door and down the path. She carried no candle, because candles might bring unwanted attention. It was the month of August, when the city dwellers flocked to their island dwellings to escape the heat and stink of the city streets. Those city dwellers could be dangerous, too often acting as though they owned the island and all its inhabitants, behaving like ruffians accountable to no one and nothing but their immediate needs and pleasures. The villagers despised them, even as they took their coins for goods and services.

Chapter Three

The moon was at the quarter and low in the eastern sky, with pale light shining off the water. Baba Chessy told the girl to lead the way, knowing the young girl's vision would still be sharp. She cautioned the girl to go slow enough that she could go without noise, and in this way the two crept along the path as it wove in and out of bay leaf bushes and small trees along the shore, sometimes hugging it, sometimes veering up the hill away from the water, sometimes giving wide berth to a house showing a lit candle within. Bianca followed closely on silent feet.

In about a half hour, faint candles and lamps were visible ahead of them, and soon they entered the village of Blizu. The girl quietly led the way to a prosperous villa set among a grove of trees. The path wove through the grove, and Baba Chessy could identify not only olives, but grape vines on trellises plus fig trees and orange trees. Her keen nose detected the smell of chickens and goat. To her right she saw that the large property abutted the bay. "A prosperous villa indeed," she thought, "to be rich with the bounty of the earth and all obviously well cared for."

They came to the back door of the large house, and the girl put her finger to her lips. Baba Chessy followed her to a bedroom in the northwest corner of the house, where a woman lay upon a large bed unmoving except for the faint rising and falling of her chest. Baba Chessy's first thought was, "The woman still lives," and her second thought was "What is my nose smelling?" Bianca also raised her head in the air and sniffed. Vomit. Old vomit inexpertly cleansed.

Baba Chessy went to the bed and watched the woman for a few minutes. The cadence of the chest rising and falling faintly did not change. Baba Chessy said to the girl, "What is your mother's name?"

"Antonia."

Baba Chessy bent over Antonia and said gently, "Hello, Mistress Antonia, how can I help you?" Antonia's eyes started to flicker and her mouth began to open. The girl picked up her mother's hand, kissing it frantically, saying, "Mama, Mama, please come back to us. This kind lady is here to help you. Mama, I love you." Baba Chessy repeated her question. One tear started to leak down Antonia's cheek, and then her body settled into quietness. The girl fell to her knees by the bed and buried her face in the bedclothes, sobbing silently. Baba Chessy patted the girl's head and stood in thought. She leaned over and put her nose very close to Antonia's mouth, which remained slightly open. Then she straightened.

"Bogdana, I need you to show me what your mother has been drinking and eating."

Bogdana used a corner of the bed covering to wipe her eyes and nose and rose quickly. “Yes, please come with me to the kitchen.”

Bogdana showed her the kitchen with its hanging bulbs of garlic and onions and drying herbs, with the bread box, the small barrel of olive oil, the corner that held potatoes and turnips and carrots.

Baba Chessy looked closely at the drying herbs. “Does your mother grow her own herbs then, my child?” Bogdana answered proudly, “Yes, Mama is sort of famous here for her garden, and she is known to be able to grow even those herbs that some of the other mothers cannot grow.”

Baba Chessy stood for some moments lost in thought. “Tomorrow I would like to visit your mother’s herb garden, Bogdana, to admire her herbs, but tonight we must try to help your mother. We need to start with red wine, honey, water, and a small piece of burnt wood from the fireplace.”

Bogdana went swiftly to a cabinet and pulled out a corked bottle of red wine, then to another cabinet to get a covered jar of viscous honey, then to the covered barrel in the corner, where she expertly dipped water into a glass and handed it to Baba Chessy, who had herself retrieved a suitable piece of burnt wood from the fireplace.

“Now I need a large bowl and a very clean cloth.”

Again Bogdana obediently retrieved both.

“Help me bring all these to your mother’s bedroom.”

On the small table near Antonia’s bed Baba Chessy mixed wine, honey, and water together in the bowl, then swirled into that mixture the black dust she crumbled from the burnt wood. Then she twisted a corner of the clean cloth and dipped it into the mixture. She instructed Bogdana to go to the other side of Antonia’s bed and help lift Antonia’s head so more pillows could be put under it. When Antonia was in a half sitting position, Baba Chessy began to drip the wine and honey mixture on to her tongue, trying to get the mixture far enough back into the mouth that an automatic swallow reflex might make Antonia swallow the liquid. The first attempts failed and Bogdana quickly handed Baba Chessy a towel to put under Antonia’s chin.

Baba Chessy persevered, and little by little the liquid started to go down Antonia’s throat. It was a messy task, the black dust soon coating Antonia’s chin and Baba Chessy’s hands. There was silence in the room. Bianca leaped up onto the bed and placed a paw on Antonia’s foot. Bogdana uttered a small cry, and Baba Chessy said quickly, “Do not fear, child. Bianca is wanting to help.”

In this way the hours passed, with the comatose woman clinging to breath, the black cat holding a paw firmly on Antonia's foot, Bogdana kneeling by her mother's side holding her hand, and Baba Chessy maintaining the steady drip of fluid down Antonia's throat.

The sound of the Matins bell came over the water from the city. Baba Chessy leaned back with a slight groan as she stretched her back, then resumed her mission.

As the first cock crowed nearby, there was a change in Antonia. The color of her skin lost some of its pallor. Her breathing became slightly stronger. Baba Chessy continued her ministrations.

The Lauds bell in the village church woke Bogdana with a start and she nearly toppled as she looked up fearfully into her mother's face, whispering, "She is a little better, I think? I think she is a little better, good lady." And she began to cry as she threw herself at Baba Chessy and buried her face in Baba Chessy's apron, heedless of the black drips thereon.

"There, there, little one," whispered Baba Chessy. "You have done well this night. It is nearly dawn now. I need a little more water and I need something to drink for myself and some water for Bianca. Then Bianca will want to go outside for a little and I would like to use your privy."

Bogdana wiped her eyes and bent quickly to her tasks, heaping new twigs on the burnt wood pieces in the fireplace, putting water into the pot hanging there, bringing a clay bowl of water and placing it on the floor for Bianca, showing Baba Chessy to the outside privy. Baba Chessy was gone for some minutes. When Bogdana went to the door to see if Baba Chessy needed help, she found her surveying the herb garden closely.

"Are there any other herb gardens here besides the one near the privy?" Baba Chessy asked.

"No, those are the only herbs my mother raises."

As Baba Chessy watched, Bogdana proudly poured some black grains into the pot boiling on the fire. She looked up at Baba Chessy with a shy smile. "This is that new thing the Arab is selling in the market in the city. My father bought some when he came home from his last fishing trip because a man who buys his fish told him about it. We only use it for special times."

Baba Chessy watched with interest. "What do they call this drink made with the black beans?"

"Kahwa."

Bogdana poured a little of the black drink into a glass and added some goat milk that she poured from a covered pitcher sitting in a clay pot of water, and a little honey she dug from

the honeycomb on the far table. She handed the glass to Baba Chessy, saying, “Will you try this drink, my lady?”

Baba Chessy sniffed the drink and sipped with interest, turning up her nose a little as the sharpness of the beverage struck the back of her throat. “This is very strong indeed,” she said.

Bogdana responded eagerly, “The Arab says that in his country people use this drink for health and energy. My father says it is true that when you drink this drink you do feel less tired. I thought this drink might help you to feel less tired after such a long night.”

“Thank you, my child. You are indeed most thoughtful,” said Baba Chessy. She finished drinking the beverage while Bogdana drank a small glass of watered wine.

When they returned to the bedroom, they found that Bianca had leaped back up onto the bed and placed one paw on Antonia’s hand, and Antonia was watching Bianca with interest.

Bogdana started to squeal but Baba Chessy took her hand, saying firmly, “Do not frighten your mother.”

Antonia turned her head at the sound of the voices, looked at them groggily, looked back at Bianca, then closed her eyes again. Bogdana whispered, “No, no, she must not go back to sleep.” And she started to cry. Baba Chessy said sternly, “Stop that, Bogdana. That is not what your mother needs. Her body is in charge of her healing, and we must honor the schedule her body assigns. It is possible your brothers will be getting up. We cannot allow them to come to your mother screaming or crying. Please go to them, when they wake, help them use the privy and wash their faces and hands as their normal morning routine, take them to the kitchen to have their morning milk and bread, maybe with some figs I saw in a bowl on the table there, if that is their usual morning meal. Tell them that a friend is with your mother helping her, and that if they are very quiet, they may come in to see their mother after their breakfast.”

Baba Chessy resumed her task of dripping fluid into Antonia’s mouth. A short time later Antonia’s eyes opened again, and she watched Baba Chessy. Then she suddenly cried out and tried to raise herself. Baba Chessy hushed her and gently forced her back on to the pillows saying quietly, “Your children are well. Bogdana is helping your brothers, and they will come in to see you shortly.”

Antonia looked at the door, then relaxed on the pillow. When Baba Chessy tried to drip more fluid into her mouth, Antonia said, “I am thirsty, may I please have a drink?” She drank from the glass then, with Baba Chessy cautioning her to drink slowly.

When the children appeared at the door wide-eyed, Antonia beckoned them over. The boys scrambled up onto the bed with wide smiles, and they started jabbering to their mother.

Bogdana's eyes filled with tears, and she was biting her lip and blinking furiously. Baba Chessy took her hand and squeezed it firmly, almost too hard, so that Bogdana flinched. But she regained her strength and went to her mother smiling happily at her.

Antonia seemed to grow stronger rapidly then, as she watched her children greedily and continued to sip on the drink Baba Chessy gave her. Eventually she asked Bogdana to take the boys to the courtyard to play so that she could rest.

Then she wanted to talk with Baba Chessy. With a halting voice and her hand straying frequently and nervously to Bianca's soft fur, Antonia told her story. Her husband was at sea for several weeks now, his return dependent on his success with the fish. Antonia has been feeling ill for nearly two months.

"I do not know what is wrong with me. I am so tired all the time, and some days I have such a fierce headache I think I shall die of it. And many days I feel I cannot eat for fear it will all come back up, because whatever I eat often does come back up. And some days I cannot see well, everything seems to be blurred and yellowish. And often I feel as though my heart is jumping around inside me. And other days I feel like it will stop for good. Were it not for the loving patience of my baby sister I am not sure how my household could have survived, because I had no energy most days to do anything more than lie in bed. It was so difficult. My sister was a saint, helping me uncomplainingly."

"Where is your sister now, Antonia?"

"Her good friend in the city was celebrating her 35th birthday yesterday, and my sister wanted to celebrate with her, so I told her she must go, that I would be fine, not to worry. She was so kind, she brought wine and bread and cheese to me before she left, and she said she would be back in the morning."

"There was no glass nor plate on your bedside table when I arrived last night."

"Yes, Bogdana is such a good daughter. She must have taken them away."

Baba Chessy remembered seeing a glass and a plate on a draining board in the kitchen.

Chapter Four

Just then there was a commotion in the hall and a young woman's voice was raised in a wail, "What do you mean, my sister was very ill last night? What happened to her? What did you do to her? Oh, if I should lose my dear sister I should die! She is all I have in the world."

The wailing woman appeared in the doorway and rushed to the bedside. "Antonia, my sister Antonia, what is wrong? Oh, what has happened to you? I should never have left you! It was so selfish of me to go to the city to celebrate my friend's birthday when you were so sick.

Oh, I am so, so sorry. My poor, dear Antonia! Oh, what can I do to help you?" She flustered around Antonia's bed and suddenly backed away shrieking, "What is this animal doing on your bed? Did this animal try to kill you? Oh, oh, oh!"

The shrieking woman went to grab a broom in the corner as Bianca rose up on four legs with her hair standing on edge watching her. Baba Chessy arrested Giselda's arm with a firm grip, saying, "Bianca is my cat, do not try to harm her."

"But she is hurting my sister."

"Nonsense. Antonia, please tell your sister that Bianca will not hurt you."

But Giselda, for that was the name of the beautiful young woman who had flown into Antonia's room like a violent windstorm, went on in her histrionic way for some time until Baba Chessy asked her if she would like a tisane to help settle her nerves. Giselda answered in a huff that all she wanted was for Baba Chessy to be gone, "and take that devil animal with you."

Baba Chessy assured her she would leave after checking one more time that Antonia was indeed going to continue to grow stronger. Antonia showed herself stronger by heaving herself into a sitting position, which caused her to be so winded she flopped back down helplessly.

"You will continue to be weak for some time, Antonia, from the effects of the poison."

"Poison!" shrieked Giselda, "What poison? What are you talking about? What have you done to my sister?" She continued in that vein until Antonia got unsteadily to her feet and wobbled slowly to Giselda, taking her into her arms and hushing her with loving words.

Giselda threw herself upon her sister, weeping inconsolably and crying, "Who, my beloved sister, oh, who could try to poison you? Oh, I cannot bear it, that someone hates you enough to do this foul thing, you my only beloved, beloved sister, my all, the only thing I have left in this world. You, who are only goodness and love, how could someone try to do this to you? Ohhh, I cannot bear it." She tore herself from Antonia's arms and ran out of the bedroom and up the stairs where they heard her bedroom door slam.

Antonia walked slowly back to the bed with Baba Chessy holding firmly to one elbow. "My dear lady," said Antonia, "I do not know how to thank you for all you have done for me, but my heart is greatly grieved to see my sister brought so low by my misfortune. Must you talk of poisoning? Could you not tell her you were mistaken and you do not know what my ailment is? Please, cannot you provide some relief for her? She is so distraught. My poor baby sister. My mother asked me on her deathbed to look out for my baby sister so long as I have breath. I promised I would do so. I cannot bear to see my dearest sister brought so low with fear and anxiety on my behalf."

Baba Chessy looked impassively at Antonia during this outburst and then seemed to come to a decision. "My dear Mistress Antonia," she said. "It is not my intent to intrude upon the households of others or interfere with their lives. Last night before the Compline bell your daughter Bogdana knocked on my door asking if I could please come to try to help you, that you were lying on the bed and could not be awakened, that she was very frightened, that her father was still away at sea, that her aunt was spending the night in the city and your neighbor was not home. She had no one else to turn to. It is not my custom to visit homes after dark of people I do not know, especially when they live in villages other than my own. But your daughter was so highly distraught and anxious for you that my heart went out to her, and I came here with her and found you indeed unresponsive, with shallow breathing. I wanted to help you. To do that, I needed first to understand what had made you so ill. Your daughter Bogdana was so mature, so helpful, so thoughtful, so courageous. She is altogether a great credit to you."

Antonia's eyes filled with tears. "You speak true. There is at present too much on her young shoulders. I see the fatigue and worry in her eyes."

Baba Chessy continued. "Your symptoms indicated poison, but the tell-tale odors of most poisons were not noticeable on your breath. Only the smell of vomit. Some poisons like juice of poppy leave a strong odor. Bell-flower does not. The symptoms you described to me allowed me to focus on bell-flower. Please hear me out, do not cry 'no, no that is not possible.' Your crying 'no' will not make it so. I am telling you what happened. Please be calm and perhaps you can tell me how the poison came to be within you."

Antonia became quiet but so anxious that her hands would not stop worrying the edges of her quilt.

"Because you could not swallow, Antonia, I dripped wine and honey and water on your tongue until you began to swallow. All night did I continue my ministrations. No, do not look chagrined. I do not tell you this that you should feel embarrassed or that you should feel obligated to me. I tell you this so that you will understand how close you came to death last night."

"Death!" The scream came from the doorway. "How dare you come in here and tell my sister she came close to death last night! It is you, YOU, who took her close to that portal. You! You are the cause of her illness. Oh, I shall call the guards from the city to come to take you away! Oh, how is it to be borne, that a potential killer is now within this house? Oh, Oh, Oh." With each word Giselda threw up her arms, stamped her bare feet, and pulled violently at her hair.

At last Baba Chessy said testily, "Enough! I saved your sister's life last night after you, yes *you*, nearly took it from her. You, Giselda, are the one who poisoned her."

Upon hearing those words Giselda fell to the floor and lay senseless. Antonia reared up in alarm. “Oh no! no! See what you have done! Oh, my poor sister. Please you must leave now.”

“I will leave, mistress Antonia, but before I do, I wish to tell you that you have been poisoned over a period of months with an infusion of the bell-flower plant, and last night you received a larger dose that was probably designed to kill you.”

“That is not possible! There is no bell-flower here. You are talking with madness. Oh, please, please do not say these things that cannot be true.”

“Yes, Antonia they can be true and they are true. I have no idea why your sister should want to poison you, but I can tell you with certainty that you have been poisoned with the bell-flower plant. There is no bell-flower plant in your garden, but there is a pot of bell-flower plants taking the sun on the ledge of the window in your sister’s bedroom, and I could see the stripped fronds from which the little bells had been picked.”

At those words Giselda rose screaming and tearing her hair. “Oh, you wicked, wicked witch telling me I poisoned my own beloved sister, the only one on earth who loves me! Oh, it is too wicked! Too wicked!”

Antonia tried to calm her, but Giselda went wailing out into the street screaming, “This woman accuses me of poisoning my own dear Antonia! How can anybody be so wicked? Oh, how can it be borne that I should be so viciously maligned by this evil woman who tells such horrible lies about me?”

Bogdana and the boys had come to the door, their eyes wide with fear. Baba Chessy turned to them and said clearly, “Bogdana, what I have said is truth. If you wish your mother to live, you must monitor everything that she eats or drinks and your Aunt Giselda must not be allowed to prepare your mother’s food or drink. I will leave you now and I wish you well.”

With that, Bianca hopped off the bed and headed for the door. Baba Chessy took up her bag and followed her out, heading into the nearby woods to avoid the path where Giselda was haranguing her friends.

It was a weary trudge home, without sleep, without food, to have done so much to keep a body alive and then be blamed the way Giselda had laid the blame on Baba Chessy. It was hard indeed. Bianca knew what Baba Chessy suffered. She stayed close, and every once in a while, she put her paw gently on Baba Chessy’s foot in encouragement. They did eventually make it home where Baba Chessy fed them both, washed her dusty feet and soiled hands, and lay down for a well-earned rest, locking the door securely. Bianca curled up near Baba Chessy’s heart and placed a protective paw there.

Chapter Five

Two days later there was another knock on Baba Chessy's door, but this was more a pounding than a knock. It was the City Magistrate. Baba Chessy was being arrested for the murder of Giselda.

She was led to the dock in the small harbor, where the Magistrate's official boat was waiting, two rowers in position. Baba Chessy almost fell as she was manhandled into the boat. As the boat began to leave the dock, a commotion on shore caused the Magistrate to halt the rowers. A young boy came running swiftly toward them, crying out, "Stay, Milord, stay!" The Magistrate ordered the rowers to put back to shore.

When they reached the shore again, a Deputy Magistrate was seen propelling a small donkey cart forward, whipping the donkey to make it go faster. In the tiny two-wheeled cart sat Antonia, her head flopping this way and that as the cart bounced on the cobblestones. It was obvious she was too weak to keep her head up. The Deputy drove the donkey to the edge of the dock, calling out to the Magistrate, "Milord, Sir! This woman is the killer. This woman, not the one in your boat. The bell-flower blossoms, dried and wrapped in a cloth tied with a reed were found under her bed. She poisoned her sister." There was a gasp from the small crowd that had begun to gather.

The Magistrate looked in confusion from Antonia to Baba Chessy as the Deputy called out proudly, "Yes, Milord, good Sir, this woman is the guilty one. Shall I put her into your boat?"

The Magistrate asked, "Where are the flowers?" The deputy thrust a small, wrapped parcel at the Magistrate, who proceeded to open it cautiously and look at the contents closely. "Yes, these are the flowers of the plant of death." With that decision made, he put a hand roughly on Baba Chessy's shoulder and pushed her, telling her to get out of the boat. He beckoned the Deputy to bring his prisoner forward.

The Deputy struggled to get Antonia out of the cart, pulling at her with strong yanks that made Baba Chessy suck in her breath. Finally, the Deputy picked Antonia up and carried her over his shoulder to the boat, panting as he half threw her onto a seat. Antonia toppled over and would have fallen into the well of the boat had a rower not jerked her arm painfully to keep her upright.

Baba Chessy gazed grimly at these proceedings and sent a silent message to Antonia, "You did not do this. I know you did not do this thing. Stay strong."

As though she had heard, Antonia looked up, defeated. Baba Chessy looked at her steadily and brought her hand to her heart where she curled it into a fist. Antonia seemed to understand, for she put her fingers to her lips.

Then there was a delay. It appeared that the law required the Magistrate to have a document signed by a local church warden or priest before any resident of Blizu could be removed by city magistrates. With visible impatience the Magistrate ordered the priest or warden to be summoned. Then he said testily to his Deputy, "I shall not stand here like an idiot waiting. Let us go to that tavern over there and have a drink of wine while we wait. And these cursed villagers will pay for that wine!"

When they were safely inside the tavern, Baba Chessy moved quickly to the boat, saying to the oarsmen, "I mean no harm. Only I beg you to allow the prisoner to tell me how to take care of her children while she is gone." There were several oaths, but eventually the younger rower said, "Be quick about it."

Baba Chessy moved to Antonia's side and whispered, "You did not do this thing. I know that you did not do it."

Wearily Antonia replied, "It doesn't matter. They found the packet under my bed."

"How did they find it?" Baba asked.

Abjectly, as though it no longer mattered, Antonia replied, "My little BoBo, he always used to play a game with Giselda. She would hide something and then if he could find it, she would give him a sweet. When BoBo understood that the Deputy Magistrate was looking for something, he crawled under my bed to the far corner and brought out the packet of bell-flower blossoms, taking it to the Deputy and smiling at him and asking, 'Sweet? Sweet? Sweet?'" Antonia's eyes glazed over with exhaustion. Baba Chessy gently took her hand.

Antonia continued, "Of course, the Deputy did not know what BoBo was talking about and ignored him. My BoBo threw a tantrum and cried and kept asking for a sweet. The Deputy got angry and arrested me. He pulled me through the door and said, 'Let's get out of here. I can't listen to that brat any longer.' BoBo kept crying."

"Oh, my BoBo," wept Antonia. "What will happen to my children? There is no one to take care of them until my husband returns from the sea, God willing he does so. Oh, my poor children."

Baba Chessy quickly embraced her to keep her from falling. As she did so, she thrust a tiny packet into Antonia's hand, whispering, "Antonia, if I am now allowed to return home, and you are taken away to the city instead, I will make sure your children are taken care of until the matter can be resolved and you can return home to them. If things go badly before I am able to find out who poisoned Giselda, this packet is your deliverance. Do not allow the brutes to glory in torturing you so that they can see the agonies on the faces of your children as they recount to them how you suffered. Do not give them this. Keep your children's eyes and minds free of those terrible images. Let your children remember you with love, not suffering."

A flicker of horror crossed Antonia's haggard countenance. Then it fled as new hopelessness covered her face. "How can they ever find me innocent when they found the plant in my room?" she whispered. "How did it get there? I have no idea, no idea. I just cannot think how it got there."

Baba Chessy said quietly, "It sounds like someone is trying to frame you. Those girlfriends of Giselda's – they were so angry at me and fingered me immediately for the poisoning. But would they also have framed you? Why? What would they get out of it? Just revenge on behalf of Giselda? Could Giselda herself have put the plant in your room? But why, why would she do that?"

"I cannot take as truth that she could do this to me."

"Has anyone talked to little BoBo? I know he is only two years old, but how did he know the plant was there? He must have seen someone hide it there."

Antonia looked up abruptly. "That is true. How did my BoBo know the plant was there?"

"Also, has anyone talked to Giselda's girlfriends? Might they have known anything?"

"No, I don't think anyone talked to them. They were nowhere around when the Deputy Magistrate came."

A flurry among the small crowd of onlookers told Baba Chessy that the priest had arrived. She gave Antonia a quick embrace with whispered words, "Stay strong, Antonia, stay strong for your children."

Baba Chessy faded into the crowd as the three men came out of the tavern to the boat. Standing before Antonia with head high and voice strong with wine and the importance of his position, the Magistrate called out loudly, "I hereby arrest you, Antonia wife of Paulo, for the murder of your sister Giselda, and I remand you to be held in the City Jail until you are brought before the judge for your sentence."

There were small gasps here and there among the crowd, and Baba Chessy used the distraction to walk quickly away until she was out of sight of the dock and its milling villagers. Then she stopped to watch the Magistrate's boat pulling away from the island, Antonia sitting with bowed head between the two burly magistrates, her small form barely visible between them.

Within minutes the sail was raised and the Magistrate's boat sped over the water and was soon only a speck in the distance, difficult to see with the movement of the waves. Baba Chessy became aware that a few of the people who had gathered on the shore were now moving toward her. With brisk steps she walked away, her cane tapping rapidly with her firm strides. She heard one loud voice behind her, "What were you being held for, old woman?" She ignored the voice, and no one pursued her.

Chapter Six

When she reached her house, she bent down to reassure Bianca. “I am back, Little Friend. They have unfortunately taken Antonia for a crime she did not commit. Shall you and I try to help her again? We saved her life once, but how is she to be saved a second time when the evidence condemns her?”

Bianca wound herself around Baba Chessy’s legs, planted one foot firmly on Baba Chessy’s slipper, and looked up at her expectantly. Wearily Baba Chessy said, “Ah, yes, you are right, Little Friend, we do need to help those children. Let us have something to drink and eat for our strength and then set out.”

Baba Chessy followed behind as Bianca confidently led the way to Antonia’s house. Bogdana answered the door with reddened eyes that filled again with tears as she threw herself into Baba Chessy’s arms.

“There, there, child. Let us stay as calm as we can, to be of the best help to your mother. We will do one thing at a time, one thing after the other, and in the order in which they are needed. Can you help me plan the order of what we must do?”

At those words Bogdana pulled away from Baba Chessy, wiping her eyes on her tunic and choking out hoarse words, “Yes, of course. Yes, of course I will help you, good Lady.”

Before they could begin planning, there was a small knock at the door. It was the neighbor woman. Her eyes also were red, and she struggled to keep from crying as she came through the door, moving to embrace Bogdana and saying, “How can anyone think your mother capable of something like that?” Then she spied Baba Chessy and Bianca and stepped back in fear. It took Baba Chessy several minutes to calm her.

Her name was Beyta, and she lived next door and had been gone for a week to help her cousin with a new baby. Prior to that she had been coming to help with the gardens several times a week since Antonia’s sickness began, because Giselda said she had no time for the gardens, what with needing to take care of the children and the inside of the house.

Beyta expressed gratitude for Baba Chessy’s help, and Baba Chessy saw that the gratitude was guarded and forced. Baba Chessy was an outsider here, not to be trusted without good cause. “So it always has been and always will be,” she thought with a silent sigh. “Tribal allegiance is the measure of trust.”

But the two women put aside such complicated territorial issues in their mutual wish to help Antonia’s beleaguered family. With Bogdana’s guidance they set about devising a plan to help the bereft children get through the difficult days ahead. Bogdana had been caring for her brothers throughout the day as best she could, and now the first order of business would be tending to the animals. The goat was bleating piteously to be milked and fed, the

donkey brayed his displeasure, and the chickens clucked irritably for their kitchen scraps and to be herded into the coop for the night. Beyta volunteered to do this.

She proved to be a capable crofter, going about her duties with sure industry. As she tended to the animals and the needs of the kitchen and children, Baba Chessy took charge of Giselda's body. Shaking her head in sad disbelief, she climbed the stairs to Giselda's bedroom and stood at the door surveying everything. Bianca had stopped suddenly at the door, her nose in the air and all her muscles tense and alert.

The bell-flower plant, the one the learned men called foxglove, was not on the windowsill. The room was not disturbed by violence or struggle except the side of the bed closest to the door. On that side, the coverlet was hanging off the bed as though a person had been trying to get out of the bed quickly and had gotten caught up in the coverlet. The bedstand had been pushed slightly askew and there was a small puddle of liquid near it and an empty bottle of wine tipped on its side. A light breeze came through the window, and Baba Chessy recoiled slightly from competing odors: unwashed male body, the unmistakable scent of male/female congress, an animal smell that it took Baba Chessy a moment to identify as goat or sheep, and overriding these, a powerful smell of juice of poppy. Bianca stood next to her with her ears slightly back and her body tensed. "Yes, Little Friend," murmured Baba Chessy. "Something is not right here."

She remembered that Antonia had told her Giselda was found on the floor next to the bed. The Deputy and church warden must have picked up Giselda's body to lay it on the bed. The body lay partly curled in an unnatural way, one arm outstretched above the head.

Giselda was dressed in an embroidered party gown of gold velvet. It seemed to be the same gown in which she had returned from the city on Sunday morning. Her bare feet were dirty and there was a small bit of dried blood on one sole where she must have stepped on a thorn. Her nightdress lay tossed on the stool that sat in front of a small table where elegant little bottles of what was probably perfume or lotion were arrayed. A thick hairbrush lay on top of a small cloth with several long auburn strands of hair wound in it.

On the bedside table were a partly filled glass of liquid and a small plate on which were the remains of pastries. Without touching them, Baba Chessy could see what looked like bits of vegetation in the fillings, perhaps bits of flower petals.

Baba Chessy came closer. Giselda's face was contorted into what looked like pain or anger. Her eyes were open and frightened, with constricted pupils. A small amount of blood, now dried, had dripped from the clenched fist of the outstretched hand. It seemed that the Deputy had not tried to examine Giselda or the room, perhaps thinking the packet of bell-flower sufficient evidence for conviction. In addition, rigor mortis, perhaps at its peak then, would have made opening Giselda's fist difficult.

A quick press on Giselda's arm told Baba Chessy the rigor mortis had passed its peak. She gently pried Giselda's fingers apart and found a small glass vial clutched in that hand, broken and still containing a tiny bit of liquid. Baba Chessy leaned close to smell the contents of the vial. Juice of poppy. Without a doubt it was juice of poppy. The puddle on the floor, which was drying around the edges, must also be juice of poppy, accounting for the strong odor in the room. She collected glass shards from the floor and wrapped all the pieces of the vial in a small cloth she found on the nightstand, then tucked that into her pocket.

She leaned back, surveying Giselda's body. Why was Giselda dressed in the same gown as the one she had worn home from the city two days ago? Her lustrous hair seemed freshly brushed, and a jeweled clip held it back on each side. Had Giselda returned from a party, or was she preparing to go out to a party? Had she had a male visitor? Why had she not washed her feet and tended to the thorn prick? Her party slippers were nowhere to be seen, only a pair of scuffed slippers tossed into the corner with a tunic.

Baba Chessy stood for silent moments, aware of the sounds of the villa around her: the boys playing in the courtyard, the soft voices of Beyta and Bogdana in the kitchen as they stored the day's milk and eggs and prepared supper for the small family, the faint sounds of someone hoeing in a garden in the distance. She became aware of Bianca sniffing at something on the floor at the foot of the bed. It seemed to be a small clod of dirt. Closer inspection showed it to be dung, the pellet shape of sheep or goat. The impression of a leather boot showed that it had been a clod on someone's shoe. Small tufts of white wool were imbedded in it. "This is not the wool of island goats," thought Baba Chessy. "It is more like the wool of the mountain sheep." How had it come to be here in Giselda's room?

"Who killed you, Giselda?" whispered Baba Chessy. "Can you tell me who killed you? It was not your sister. To honor the love a sister feels for sister, guide my hand. Give me a sign where to look to identify your killer." Giselda remained silent and unmoving.

With a sigh, Baba Chessy left the room and went to the kitchen, Bianca following.

"Mistress Beyta, can you tell me about your priest here in this village?" she asked. "Is he generally sympathetic to the needs of all his parishioners, or more favorable to those of wealth and privilege?"

Beyta looked at Baba Chessy suspiciously but said, "Without a doubt our priest is what we call a poor man's priest. He has care for the ones whom fortune forgot."

"Would you then take me to him, to speak to him about Giselda and to arrange her burial?"

"You are not of our village," said Beyta stubbornly.

"That is true," replied Baba Chessy patiently, "and I have no wish to pry into your village's business. My only allegiance is to this young girl who called me for help."

“We shall have to wait for morning because the priest is gone to the far village where he had to officiate at a baptism and a marriage. He told us he will be back late tonight,” responded Beyta.

With Beyta assuming charge of Antonia’s villa and children, Baba Chessy and Bianca bade the family good night and began the walk home. “Beyta does not want me there, Little Friend. Should we forget this matter and return to our peaceful and happy life?” Bianca did not respond, only continued walking purposefully forward on the path to home.

Chapter Seven

On Wednesday morning Baba Chessy and Beyta found the priest at home in the old rectory on the side of the church. As he opened his door and began to bid good morning to Beyta, his eyes landed on Baba Chessy and Bianca in some alarm. Baba Chessy said quickly, “Do not fear Bianca, good father. She will harm no one.” Beyta curtly introduced Baba Chessy as a neighbor helping the family of Paulo in their hour of need.

The priest pronounced himself greatly discomfited to learn of Giselda’s untimely death and the suspicion of foul mischief. He continued to regard Bianca with mistrust and Bianca returned his gaze solemnly. Baba Chessy said, “Bianca goes almost everywhere with me, good Father, and she considers herself my protector. She will cause no harm to you or yours and may indeed offer help in our quest.” At this the priest looked decidedly skeptical but said nothing. He did, however, invite the two women into his small sitting room. Bianca planted herself firmly on Baba Chessy’s slipper.

With an attitude of resigned disapproval, Beyta asked Baba Chessy to tell the priest all that had transpired in the last few days leading up to Giselda’s death. Beyta tsked or sucked in her breath sharply a few times during the telling but was otherwise silent. The priest watched Baba Chessy intently as she told the story.

Then the priest turned his attention to Beyta, and the two discussed Baba Chessy’s testimony, declaring themselves puzzled by some of the facts Baba Chessy reported: Why was Giselda wearing the party gown, where were her slippers, what was the true instrument of death? There were obvious bits of bell-flower visible in the pastry creams. There was also the small vial that contained strong juice of poppy, which could kill. The priest was most uncomfortable hearing Baba Chessy’s testimony about the unwashed male smell and the animal dung. It was obvious he really did not want to imagine how Giselda, supposedly a virtuous Christian unmarried woman, might be entertaining a male visitor in her private quarters. The priest and Beyta looked at Baba Chessy with disapproval.

“Classic kill the messenger,” thought Baba Chessy resignedly.

But above all there was great concern that Antonia was being held for Giselda's death, and her husband was not available to help her. "Antonia could not have done this, Father," said Beyta grimly. "But who did?" he responded with impatience.

Baba Chessy asked the priest if he would return to the house with them to make notes that might help them prove that Antonia did not kill her sister. "You are a man of God," she said to him. "If we learn anything of value, you can go where Beyta and I would not be welcome." The priest agreed to do so. Beyta said she would prefer to be excused from that activity so that she could take care of Antonia's garden, which had been neglected in her absence and where the figs needed to be picked and placed on the screens for drying.

When they were in Giselda's room, the priest noted everything that Baba Chessy pointed out, corroborating her thoughts as she wrote on a piece of paper with the quill and ink she had taken from Paulo's accounting office. All was duly noted.

Baba Chessy suggested that Giselda may have died during the night on Monday night, perhaps after Matins. From the rigidity of the body when it was placed on the bed, rigor mortis had passed its peak and its subsidence was under way but not sufficiently advanced to allow the body's complete pliability. Hence Baba Chessy had found her in the odd curled position.

The priest looked at her sharply. "How come you to know these things, woman?"

With humble attitude Baba Chessy replied, "My husband was a surgeon, Father, and sometimes he would talk with a colleague as I served their meal." What a lie! What a lie. There had never been a husband. All she knew she had learned by herself. But her lie served to placate the priest, and he became less truculent.

With care, Baba Chessy straightened Giselda's limbs, finding the muscles lax and moveable. The priest felt one arm as Baba Chessy said slowly, "My guess would be that she had been dead about six hours before she was found on Tuesday morning, and that it was another four hours before the Deputy saw her and attempted to lift her with the help of the church warden. At that time rigor mortis would be near its peak and the body incapable of being repositioned. Then another six to eight hours passed before I saw the body on the bed and it was obvious that some of the muscles were relaxing."

"All of this would indicate time of death sometime before daybreak on Tuesday, then," said the priest. Baba Chessy agreed.

"Who found her?" asked the priest.

"I have not questioned Bogdana at length, but she said her mother found her aunt," replied Baba Chessy. "I suspect that though still weakened from her own poisoning, Antonia knew that Giselda had been violently upset about my accusations that Giselda had poisoned Antonia, and when Giselda did not come for her usual morning cup of that kahwa drink,

Antonia went up to her bedroom to check on her and found her lying on the floor by the bed as we described. Antonia immediately called for the church warden, as you, father, were down island at another village.”

“That is true,” murmured the priest, “I had a baptism and a marriage to perform there.”

At that moment a piece of paper tumbled out from under the bed, thoroughly startling the priest, who cried out and made the sign of the cross with his crucifix, whispering, “Begone Satan, if it is you who are visiting this room where a foul deed has been done.” His hand was trembling.

But it was not the devil that propelled the piece of paper out from under the bed. Bianca followed it, batting it back and forth. Baba Chessy said, “Ah, my Little Friend, what have you found?” She retrieved the paper, read it quickly, and handed it to the priest, who frowned when he read it. “This is the address of that apothecary in the city that I have heard bad things about,” he said. “He it is who trades in the juice of the poppy flower, ruining the lives of his victims. How has this address come to be here, in this godly house?”

Meanwhile Bianca had started batting around something else that looked like a cloak fastener made of thin reeds wound round each other to form a small ball that could be inserted into a loop to hold the two edges of a cloak together. Baba Chessy picked it up and asked the priest if he had ever seen one like it. He had not, but he gave his opinion that it looked like the kind of fastener the Vlachs who live in the mountains use.

Baba Chessy was thinking rapidly. “This small vial of juice of poppy probably came from the apothecary. That must be the source. But why would Giselda need juice of poppy? She had the vial in her hand as she lay sprawled next to the bed, as though she might have been trying to reach it. And where did the cloak fastener come from?”

Baba Chessy showed the priest the broken pieces of the vial that she had collected. “You see that although the vial is broken, the cork is still in the top shard. Was Giselda retrieving the full vial from her nightstand when she fell? I found a puddle on the floor by the bed, and a strong smell of juice of poppy, as though the vial had been full. You can still see a faint outline of the dried puddle. It does not seem likely that Giselda had consumed any juice of poppy from this vial, and the fact that her pupils were constricted, not enlarged, seems to indicate that she had not consumed any.”

They were silent for some time. Baba Chessy said, “Perhaps it is time to visit the Magistrate in the city and visit Antonia? Would you be able to do those things, father?”

The priest took a breath and straightened his shoulders, remembering the burden of his office and his ecclesiastical role. “I will do that, because I will need to ask Antonia where her sister is to be buried. Antonia’s parents have a crypt in the churchyard. That may be where Antonia would like Giselda to be buried. At any rate, the burial must take place

tomorrow. I will find a farmer taking a boat to the city and find out what I can. If Giselda is to be buried in her parents' crypt, I will need to arrange with the sexton to have the grave opened. Meanwhile, perhaps you ladies can prepare her body for a visitation tonight and the burial in the morning."

It was agreed. The priest would wait twenty minutes for Beyta and Baba Chessy to put together a packet of food and a clean tunic for Antonia, plus a note from Baba Chessy urging Antonia to hold fast to courage.

The two women returned to Antonia's house and found several of the neighbor women sitting on stools in the kitchen with Bogdana, their gifts of cooked meals on the table in front of them. Bogdana had offered them watered wine and some wafers from the cupboard. Her relief to see Beyta and Baba Chessy was pronounced. The women looked with suspicion at Baba Chessy and with fear at Bianca. Villagers can be generous, and they can also be very nosy and intrusive and gossipy and altogether tedious, Baba Chessy reminded herself. Beyta seemed to be of like mind. The visiting women were thanked with tears and escorted to the door.

"Bogdana," said Baba Chessy then, "Good Beyta and I have arranged with the priest to take a packet to your mother. Would you please bring a clean tunic and any small thing you think might comfort her? Mistress Beyta and I will prepare the food."

Within minutes the small girl with the uncommon presence of mind returned with a tunic, Antonia's prayer book, and tiny scissors. She called for her brothers; and when they came in, she snipped small locks of hair from each and put those plus a snippet of her own hair into the prayer book, closing it and wrapping it securely in the tunic before tying the package with a string. Beyta and Baba Chessy stopped for a moment to look at the girl wonderingly. Then Beyta set off to deliver the packet to the priest to take to Antonia. and Baba Chessy went to the garden to collect the herbs needed to prepare the body for burial. She asked Bogdana to boil water.

As Bogdana helped to strip leaves and infuse herbs, Baba Chessy asked her if she knew how BoBo had known the bell-flower was hidden under Antonia's bed. Bogdana stopped what she was doing abruptly, looked up at Baba Chessy with hope, and breathed, "Of course! Someone had to put the bell-flower there, and BoBo must have seen that person." She ran out the door and within minutes returned with a puzzled frown. "BoBo said Aunt Giselda put the bell-flower under the bed. Aunt Giselda. What can this mean?"

"Is BoBo perhaps mistaken?" asked Baba Chessy, but she saw the growing horror on Bogdana's face as her thoughts tumbled about this fact. "I asked BoBo if he was sure it was Aunt Giselda and not someone else and he said petulantly, 'No, it was not someone else. Auntie was always hiding things for me to find, and when I saw her hide that packet, I waited for her to leave the room so I could find it and get a sweet, but then you made me go

to bed and I planned to get the sweet in the morning. Also, she took a broom and pushed the packet into the far back corner, where I would have to burrow under the bed like a worm to get it. I thought that was mean. But then I forgot it until I saw the Deputy looking for something and I remembered the packet Auntie put under the bed.’”

“Oh, Baba Chessy!” breathed Bogdana. “Is this possible?” Baba Chessy shook her head sadly and was silent.

But then Bogdana said with relief, “No, it is not possible, because it is Aunt Giselda who died. She would not have tried to poison herself.” But then her face turned again to confusion.

By the time Beyta returned, Baba Chessy had all in place to prepare the body for burial and the room for the evening visitation. To forestall scandal and dishonor for Antonia’s family, she moved immediately to wash the lower part of Giselda’s body, leaving Giselda’s upper body to Beyta. It would be far better that Beyta not see the sticky remains of male secretion on Giselda’s inner thighs.

The two women worked together in silence with sure movements, pausing only to discuss the clothing in which to dress Giselda, deciding at last to ask Bogdana, who quickly retrieved a gown she assured the women was a great favorite of her aunt. Only Giselda’s old slippers could be found, so they would have to do.

During these proceedings, while Giselda’s head was pushed forward so her back could be washed, her pillow was dislodged and fell to the floor. There was a flash of black as Bianca pounced on something near the pillow. Beyta gave a startled scream and dropped Giselda’s head as she threw her hands to her face in fear.

Baba Chessy placed a gentle hand on Beyta’s arm, saying, “Do not fear, Mistress Beyta. There is no danger here. I think Bianca has found something.” Bianca was batting at something shiny. “What have you found, Little Friend?” murmured Baba Chessy as she picked up a golden ring through which was inserted a small, coiled paper. She removed the paper, read it, and began to pass it to Beyta but halted, thinking at the last minute, “I need to read it to Beyta; it is not likely that she knows how to read. Women are denied education as a matter of course, and unless someone wanted her to be able to read and write, she would not have been taught.” She read the message aloud. It said simply, “Lady Giselda.”

That is strange, thought Baba Chessy. Unless used with affection by close family and friends, the salutation “Lady” was strictly reserved for those of noble blood or married to nobles. What was the meaning of this ring and paper? “Beyta,” said Baba Chessy, “would you agree to my taking this paper with me to compare to a document I saw in Giselda’s hand in the kitchen?” Beyta agreed.

When the body was washed and rubbed with herbs and placed in a peaceful position on the bed, with arms crossed appropriately and the hair brushed and arranged around Giselda's shoulders becomingly, and a book of prayer laid on the coverlet, and the candles set on the night stand ready to be lit, Baba Chessy surveyed their work and said, "The Angelus is upon us, Mistress Beyta. I will leave you now. Since you have offered to stay with the children and help them during their mother's absence, I will return to my home. If you need me, please send Bogdana to get me. Otherwise, I will see you at the funeral tomorrow. At what time does the priest schedule a burial here?"

"Usually at 10:00 in the morning."

Baba Chessy went briefly into the kitchen to compare the writing on the ring paper to that on a provision list she had seen there. The writing did not match; Giselda did not write the words on the ring paper.

On the way home Baba Chessy stopped at the house of the priest to ask about Antonia. "I fear the news is not good," replied the priest sadly. "The Magistrate feels he has an open and shut case because of the bell-flower and he is not willing to listen to any other theories. He wants this behind him as quickly as possible and has convinced the judge to rule on the case tomorrow."

"Tomorrow!"

"Yes, unfortunately the Magistrate and Judge have broad powers in the city and unless a Lord or the Ban intervenes, they do as they please. I doubt a lord will interfere with a lowly case of a village poisoning.

"But it is a travesty of justice! Antonia did not do this!"

Wearily the priest replied, "We know that, but our words count for little."

Baba Chessy told him about the discovery that BoBo had seen Giselda herself put the packet under the bed. Like Baba Chessy and Bogdana, the priest questioned the veracity of the boy, but was convinced by the details that could not have been fabricated. Baba Chessy verified the time of burial in the morning and bade the priest a good day.

Chapter Eight

That afternoon as Baba Chessy gathered figs in her garden, Bianca walked toward the gate. Soon after, Baba Chessy heard the shuffle of small feet, and a timid knock.

Bogdana stood at the gate, breathing hard.

"There is news of your mother?" asked Baba Chessy.

“No, good lady, but I have need of your wisdom.”

She carried a rough envelope made from what looked like butcher’s wrapping paper, from which she tried to extract a paper. The envelope fell to the flagstone. In an instant Bianca leaped away from it with her fur standing on end, her ears flat on her head, and her eyes fierce as she watched the envelope in a crouching position.

Bogdana apologized for her intrusion and explained that she had found the envelope stuck between two slats of their gate. Thinking it might be something important about her mother and knowing that Beyta had gone to the city to get supplies for the family, she decided to open the envelope and then consult Baba Chessy about the strange paper.

“I apologize for what is on this paper, good lady. No decent person should see this drawing, I think, and I would have flung it onto the kitchen fire if I were not so worried about Mama. It is a filthy drawing on the paper, and I cannot at all understand why someone would have put that paper in an envelope on our gate.”

Baba Chessy took the paper and saw on it a large male phallus in upright position, with a coiled serpent next to it. The mouth of the serpent was large and wide with wicked-looking fangs protruding and dripping. Altogether the image was so shocking that Baba Chessy stood for minutes unmoving. She dimly heard Bogdana saying, “Some gray dust fell out of the envelope when I took out the paper.”

In slow motion, as if in a disbelieving fugue state, Baba Chessy watched Bianca tensed to strike, and she noticed that Bogdana was rubbing one hand, and she heard the words about gray dust.

She came to with a start. “Oh, my Little Friend!” she cried. “I have been foolish! Quickly, Bogdana! Come with me! Touch nothing, *nothing*.” She walked rapidly to an outside wash tub still filled with soaking laundry. With frantic motions she scooped the clothes out, tossing them onto the patio, then grabbed the bar of ash soap and pulled Bogdana to the tub, thrusting Bogdana’s hands under the water.

Over and over Baba Chessy lathered the stinging soap onto Bogdana’s hands, whispering to Bogdana to remain strong, mumbling, “I have let down my guard. How stupid I have been. How stupid.”

When tears fell into the tub, Baba Chessy looked up and stopped mid-sentence. “Oh, my poor child! I am so sorry I have been so very foolish! I did not expect this evil. Please try not to be alarmed. I have not lost my wits, nor am I deranged. There was poison on that paper.”

Bogdana’s eyes opened wide in fright, and she started to pull her hands out of the water. Baba Chessy held tighter to Bogdana’s hands saying, “It is a slow acting poison on the letter. Bianca smelled it, and her extreme reaction indicates the presence of serpent. And then I saw you rubbing your hand. I am sorry I have been so slow to recognize it, and I am

even sorrier to have to hurt you with this harsh ash soap. But it is important to remove all the poison from your skin. Please tell me all the things you touched after touching the letter.”

Bogdana quieted, then with thought and care recounted in a halting voice the surfaces she had touched after touching the letter. “Unfortunately, the poison has had time to work on you as you came here,” said Baba Chessy. “That you ran so fast is to the good. We need to stop the invasion of the poison into your skin.” She kept scrubbing Bogdana’s hands.

Eventually she stopped and said, “Now we will wrap your hands in a poultice of this harsh soap. Then you and I will retrace your steps so that I can wash all the surfaces you touched.” Bogdana was grimacing with trembling lips.

Baba Chessy continued, “I know your hands must be stinging and burning, my child, and I fear your tender skin will have some blisters, but we must keep the soap on for a little longer. When we can wash off the soap, I have cream for your hands that will soothe them and take away the pain as they heal. You are a very brave young girl and I wish I could tell your mother how brave you are. But that will have to wait. We must first get rid of all the poison.”

Baba Chessy packed some things into her small carrying case, and in minutes she and Bogdana were walking rapidly down the path to go to Bogdana’s house, with Bianca leading the way.

When they reached Bogdana’s house, Baba Chessy scoured each surface Bogdana had touched after opening the letter. They heard the two boys laughing in the courtyard, and at that normality Bogdana seemed to put her shoulders back a little and her frown eased.

When Baba Chessy removed the hand poultices, she tasked to see that yes, several painful blisters were forming on the young skin. “You are being very brave, Bogdana. I know your hands are stinging and hurting, and now we must hurt them just a little more as we try to rinse all the soap off. I will ask you to do that as I keep bringing you fresh pots of water.”

After five or six fresh pots of water Baba Chessy looked at the skin and felt it gently, saying, “Yes, I think it is cleansed. Let us put on the balm.” With great care and patience she began spreading a smelly unguent onto the wounded hands. She rubbed very slowly and gently, her touch no heavier than what was needed for the skin to absorb the cream.

Bogdana’s labored breathing eventually eased, and Baba Chessy felt the lessening of tension in the girl. “Now I want you to sit here while I make a special healing tea for you,” she said.

Bianca put a paw on Bogdana’s foot and kept it there. There was no sound then except the small crackling of the fire and eventually the bubbling of the water for the herbal tea Baba Chessy was making.

While they sat quietly waiting for the tea to cool, Bogdana looked at Baba Chessy with anxiety. “Someone is trying to kill my whole family?” she whispered?

“My child, I do not understand what is going on in this matter. I do not know that the intent of the letter was to kill. Usually a poison administered to the skin will not kill quickly. Sometimes it is a warning or a punishment. Something is strange here and something is not what it should be, but I do not yet understand it,” replied Baba Chessy.

With a tremor in her voice Bogdana asked, “You will help us try to figure out how to save my family?”

“I do not understand anything at this time, Bogdana, whether there is something to save you from or whether there has been some bad mix-up or misunderstanding. I only know that things are not as they should be. There is poison on that letter. Why?”

She sighed, “I cannot predict what the future will bring. But I shall do what I can to try to help your family.”

To forestall Bogdana’s tears Baba Chessy said quickly, “When Mistress Beyta comes to be with you children tonight you must tell her you burned your hands when you were trying to make tea, that the kettle slipped from your grip, and that you came to me for healing cream and bandages. I will give you cream to have with you for the night. Apply it whenever the pain requires it. Beyta will make supper and do the night chores. Allow her to do that. You need to give your hands time to heal. The more you allow them to heal now on this first day, the faster and better they will heal. I want you to return to me tomorrow afternoon and we will see how your hands are doing.”

Baba Chessy and Bianca returned home. Bianca stood at rigid attention with raised fur and ears laid back while Baba Chessy took an old cloth and carefully wrapped the toxic notice and envelope in it, placing it securely in a corner of the wood box and mumbling to herself, “This is a cat’s reaction to a serpent. Is there a viper’s poison on that letter?”

Then she made a bucket of strong ash soap water and swabbed the patio. Bianca leaped onto an overturned bucket and watched intently. Then Baba Chessy went into her house, made another pot of tea and a saucer of milk for Bianca, and settled into her favorite chair to think.

“It has been a long time since I have had to think evil of my fellow humans,” she said quietly to Bianca after Bianca had cleaned her whiskers and leaped into Baba Chessy’s lap. “It is not pleasant. I do not think I like becoming involved again with humans. They are bad.”

A gentle paw kneaded her leg. “Yes, I know,” said Baba Chessy, “they are not all bad, but I had hoped to live a peaceful life now without having to care about the stupidity humans get up to.”

Bianca continued to knead. “Yes, I know, there are some good ones, like that brave girl who is trying to save her family. How can she prevail against the evil of men?”

Baba Chessy groaned with displeasure.

“Yes, I know we must try to help her, but my dear friend, I am getting old now and my mind is not what it once was.” She felt a strong pat from that busy paw and said in surprise, “Oh, so you do not agree, Little Friend? Well, let us maybe take a nap and see how we feel later.”

This they did.

The distant Vespers bell chimed in the city, waking them. Together they yawned and stretched. Bianca jumped down and walked in stately manner to the door, which Baba Chessy opened for her, thinking the while about a simple supper she could prepare, thinking also, “Oh, it is a bother to have my peaceful life interrupted this way.”

Chapter Nine

Thursday morning Baba Chessy sat eating figs she had collected from her trees. Between bites she talked with Bianca, who was busily grooming her paws. “My Little Friend, how do you feel about what we have got involved in? Did we make a big mistake by agreeing to try to help Bogdana’s mother? Now we are embroiled in a situation like a hydra’s head. We solve one problem and another pops up. The only solution that makes any sense is that Giselda killed herself and tried to blame her sister. But what would she get from that? You cannot reap benefit when you are dead. You and I had a comfortable little life here, did we not, keeping to ourselves and living in peace and quiet. Now that is disturbed, and I fear I have invited unrest and nervous disturbance into this quiet house. Can I get back what we had, Little Friend, or is it too late, the evil genii risen from the lamp and refusing to be put back in? Have I made a big mistake, my Little Friend? What do you advise? What can I do at this moment to help get back our good little life here?”

Baba Chessy had been absently fingering the small gold ring in her pocket. Bianca put her paw on that pocket and stared at Baba Chessy. “Ah, you are thinking the ring is part of this and must be explained? It makes no sense at all, and yet I know that sometimes the things that make no sense are the very things that make the most sense when all is discovered.”

Baba Chessy sat for some minutes rubbing her fingers on Bianca’s head in the exact way she knew to be Bianca’s favorite. Then she looked up and said, “Little Friend, Giselda’s funeral is today. If her girlfriends come to the funeral, perhaps I can talk with them and learn something about this ring. That is good thinking my little friend. Good thinking indeed. I wish I could take you with me, because you sense things I do not. But it would be much too dangerous for you at the funeral. I will leave you in charge here.” With those words she

rose resolutely to change into her best black tunic and scarf and clean her slippers of dust, while Bianca pushed open her small private door and went out into the garden.

Giselda's friends were at the funeral, crying and holding each other and glancing with distrust and fear at Baba Chessy. "Not much to be gleaned from that rocky soil," she thought, quietly surveying the crowd until her eyes found those of a young woman standing off to the side uncomfortably. Her clothes indicated that she might be from the city. Unlike Giselda's friends, she showed no ill will towards Baba Chessy, nor did she flee when Baba Chessy approached her, but she did show increasing agitation and nervousness.

Baba Chessy introduced herself as a friend from the village of Stari Kamen who had come to help Antonia's family. The young woman introduced herself as Marianna, Giselda's friend from the city. She was visibly jittery and uneasy, fingering a small purse she carried on a belt and looking around jerkily as though seeking an exit. Baba Chessy decided speed was of more importance than polite protocol. She took the ring and paper from her pocket and held it out to Marianna. "Can you tell me anything about this ring and paper?" Marianna's eyes grew wide, and she stepped back in fright, moaning and stumbling, "No, no, it is true then? Ohhhh, no."

Baba Chessy took Marianna's elbow and guided her to the nearby low churchyard wall to sit, saying gently, "Marianna, Giselda's sister Antonia, wife of Paulo and mother of three beautiful children, is held in the jail in the city charged with the murder of her sister Giselda. You, I think, know that Antonia could not have killed her sister, whom she loved with the most generous, selfless love a sister could have."

Marianna sat moaning and shaking her head as her breath came rapidly. Baba Chessy grasped her arm and said firmly, "Marianna, it is evident that you know something of this matter. If you do not speak up, an innocent woman will be hanged for a crime she did not commit, and the true murderer will go free. I know that you know something about this. Can you live with yourself if you allow an innocent mother of three to be hanged for a murder she did not do? It seems to me that that is a crime worthy of burning in hell."

Marianna closed her eyes and groaned. Baba Chessy said, "Let me tell you briefly what has been happening so that you can see the importance of what I ask." In concise and orderly sentences Baba Chessy laid before Marianna the mystery of Giselda's poisoning. When she was finished, Marianna said simply, "I will tell you all, for this matter is robbing me not only of my peace of mind, but of my sanity."

The words began to tumble from Marianna then, first in disjointed whispers and moans, then in stronger voice and with greater organization and clarity.

Marianna used to be Giselda's best friend in the city. It was her birthday that Giselda was to help celebrate on Saturday night.

“Before I met her,” said Marianna, “Giselda lived in the mountains with her husband. She told me she was unhappy there and bored. Her husband loved the mountains and refused to leave. One day her husband fell down the mountain and died. Then Giselda came to the city. She became a companion for an old woman who lived in a villa on the seashore. That is what she told me when I met her.

About a year ago she told me she had met a young man in the city who liked to have a good time just as she did. I think she fell in love with him. I was jealous for a while because she was so happy with him, and she no longer spent much time with me. But I got over it. I moved on. I found another friend to go out with.

About six months ago Giselda came to my door one day brimming with excitement and happiness. ‘I want you to know that I am leaving the city to go live with my sister in Blizu on the island to help her with the olives and grapes because her husband is gone so much on the fishing boats,’ she told me.

I said to her, ‘And that makes you happy, Giselda? Won’t you be bored in that old quiet village?’ ‘Oh,’ she said, ‘there will always be something to do, there are three children you know, plus those big gardens.’ I looked at her in astonishment because I had never known her to care about children or gardens. One time she even told me that she planned never to have children because they were all brats. But she did leave to go to the island.

Then about two months ago she knocked on my door and asked me to go to the café with her, that she was in the city shopping for her sister and she wanted to spend some time with me. It was only the middle of the day, but she ordered a bottle of wine. I do not drink much. Soon the bottle was empty and she ordered another. She became very animated and seemed to be vibrating with excitement. ‘Marianna,’ she said to me, ‘you cannot imagine the happiness I will soon have. My sister is not well, and when she dies, I will convince her husband to marry me. That will not be too hard to do since everyone knows I am more beautiful than Antonia.’ I was too shocked to respond.

Then she leaned close to me and whispered, ‘When he goes to sea all the time, I can have my lover to the house.’ And she giggled so merrily that the people in the café watched her with envy, as I looked at her in amazement.

She drank more wine and said with a little pout, ‘If things get too hairy, we all know that the sea is a hungry mistress.’ At that, she laughed out loud so boisterously she tipped over her glass of wine. But the server seemed enthralled with this beautiful girl who enjoyed life so much. He acted like it was a privilege to clean up the mess Giselda had made on the table and floor. I was embarrassed because I put it all down to drunkenness.

When the server left, Giselda leaned toward me in a tipsy manner and whispered, ‘Then I can marry my lover and we will have that big housh - house - by the water and all the

income from the grapes and olives and our lives will be perfect. Just so perfect, Marianna! Are you not beyond happy for me?’

At first, I looked at her with an indulgent, disbelieving smile, thinking she was drunk and joking. But then she showed me that ring and the words on that paper, and I saw she was not joking. My amusement turned to horror which I struggled to hide because I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. She could not really mean that, I kept thinking. She *must* be joking. The wine has loosened her tongue and she is having fun with a daydream. And even if there were any truth at all to what she was saying, I chose to believe that she had to confide her plan to somebody, and now that it was confided, that would be that. I tried to forget it all.

The memory of her words and that ring lingered in my mind, however, surfacing at odd moments and causing me anxiety. But I convinced myself it was all a story Giselda told for her amusement. I told no one. I did not see her after that, but I think now that she maybe did put her plan into action.”

Marianna trembled and blinked back tears. “Had I taken her seriously, could I have saved her life?” she moaned. “Or prevented Antonia’s ordeal?”

Baba Chessy squeezed her hand and said, “That we will never know, Marianna. There is more of a puzzle here, however. Who is the young lover? Did he give her the ring and paper? If so, is he a noble, that she expected to be called Lady Giselda with the ring on her finger? Did the young lover play a part in the poisonings? And very much to the point now, if that young lover was behind the plot to get Paulo’s land, is Paulo and his whole family at risk of harm?”

Marianna gasped and put her hands to her face and moaned. “Harm? This is awful beyond thinking. What is to be done?”

Baba Chessy replied with thought, “More information is needed, that is certain. Do you know anyone else here in the city who might shed light on our questions?”

Marianna looked out at the pine trees circling the churchyard and said “Giselda took me one time to the house of one of her party friends. I would not have remembered her except that I saw her here at the funeral today. Her name was Sura, I remember.”

“Is she still here?”

Marianna got up and scanned the churchyard. “No, I don’t see her.”

“Might she be in the church?” asked Baba Chessy.

Together they wound their way among the mourners and climbed the steps to the church. Suddenly Marianna cried out, “Sura! Hello.”

A young woman with dark hair and a kerchief around her head stopped with a frown. “Do I know you?” she asked.

“My name is Marianna. Giselda brought me to your grandmother’s house one time, maybe eight months ago.”

Sura frowned and started to descend the steps to go past us, saying, “I don’t go with her crowd anymore.”

Marianna said quickly, “Nor I, Sura. For a year now Giselda has had little time for anyone but her mysterious lover and his friends.”

At that Sura stopped. “What do you want of me?”

Marianna explained that her companion, Baba Chessy, would like to help get an innocent woman released from jail before she would be hung for murder, and that she was trying to find out more information to convince the Magistrate of the woman’s innocence.

Baba Chessy interrupted. “If you both can spare a half hour for a pastry in the café, I would like to treat you to that and talk to you both to see if we three together might discover information to sway the Magistrate.” Both young women agreed.

Baba Chessy chose a table on the patio of the nearby café, where the gentle lapping of the water against the rocks below the walkway, with a slight breeze off the water, did much to relax nerves. With small glasses of that sweet cherry drink in front of them and a plate of pastries in the center of the table, the stage seemed ready for something important to happen, thought Baba Chessy.

She was not wrong. Something important did happen. The information Baba Chessy learned from Sura turned the mystery of the poisoning toward a new direction.

Sura began her story immediately, as though an old anger and discontent were propelling the words out of her mouth. “Orlando, or so he calls himself, is the young lover you seek. He was born Dragone, son of Dragone the cobbler, but got his name changed legally to Orlando after he moved to the city. My grandmother lived in Blizu before she relocated to the city. She knew Giselda’s family and Dragone’s family from her time on the island.

After she moved to the city, I was staying with my grandmother for a while then, and it was during that time that I met Giselda. I think she had just come to the city. The story was that she had lived with her husband in the mountains and after he died, she returned home to the family villa in Blizu to recuperate from her ordeal in the mountains. And then she had come to live in the city. My grandmother felt she had wheedled money out of her sister to come to the city.

I met Giselda one evening when I was walking idly with my friends in the market. She was with a young servant girl and asked to join our group, and she was so beautiful and gay that

we all agreed to have her join us. The young girl with her was unhappy, but Giselda said laughingly she no longer needed an escort for now she had three escorts.

As the weeks passed, I spent more and more time with Giselda, for I was young and heedless then, chafing at the restrictions that ruled my life; and I found freedom in Giselda's carefree ways. Wherever we went, she was the center of attention, and I was proud to be with her. One day after she had come to my grandmother's place to get me, my grandmother met her.

When I returned home later that night, my grandmother was waiting for me, and she forbade me to go out any more with Giselda. 'I have asked people about this new friend you have found, Sura, and the information I have learned and the information I already knew makes me take this action.' My grandmother told me what she knew.

Giselda was the second child of island villagers who lived on a large piece of land near the water. They were hard-working people and had cleared their land of rocks and planted olive trees and grapevines and they grew prosperous. Their oldest child, Antonia, followed in their footsteps as a hardworking, industrious woman of strong moral character.

But the second daughter, Giselda, developed an affliction of the throat one winter after she was caught out in the bura. They say the girl nearly died, and from that day, the mother coddled her and spoiled her with attention and gifts. She was not required to work the land or take care of the house or the animals. Most days she lounged with sweets on the patio or took leisurely walks along the seashore. On one such day she was noticed by a young man who was overcome with longing when he gazed at her ethereal beauty. She was fourteen then, slim with the young curves of first blush, with glossy black hair, and eyes that reflected the deep blue of the sea."

Chapter Ten

Sura continued her story. "The young man's name was Antun, son of a village fisherman. It is said that Antun hated the sea from childhood when he was tossed into it to learn to swim, which is the way the villagers teach their children to swim. Antun wanted to live far from the sea and determined he would go to the mountains to seek his fortune.

He spent hours telling Giselda how he would become rich by finding jewels in the mountains. In time, she became convinced that he would indeed become rich by finding jewels in the mountains, and when one day he asked her to go with him, she told him she would.

That night they left together, telling no one their plans. Several days passed before the villagers accepted the truth that Antun and Giselda had eloped. Giselda's mother was heartbroken, and her decline began then. She died within two years. Antonia was by then a

young woman of nearly twenty, and she took her mother's place to help her father manage their land. As her father began to decline with the sadness of his daughter's disappearance and his wife's death, Antonia agreed to marry Paulo, a local fisherman. That is how Paulo and Antonia came to own that large piece of land by the water in Blizu.

Meanwhile, as we learned later from Giselda herself and some of her girlfriends that she confided in, she quickly grew disenchanted with the harshness of mountain life, living in a leaky hovel, through whose thin roof the winter rains came down and whose trembling walls the winds battered. Food was scarce. Some days Antun was so engrossed in digging that he refused to hunt for the mountain hare that was their staple. He grew silent and taciturn in his fever to find jewels. Giselda could no longer stand his stink nor his scratchy beard and spent her days roaming in fear near the hovel or sitting morosely on a tree stump in its doorway. Some days he did not come back to the hovel, continuing his frantic digging.

There came the day a passing stranger knocked at her door, terrifying her. He was carrying on his donkey the body of Antun. Antun's head had a gaping wound, and his face had been partly eaten. Giselda vomited.

Some of the vomit landed on the rough slipper of the stranger and he cursed and dumped Antun from his donkey and left. Giselda looked in horror at the body of the young man she thought she loved. She felt faint.

The thought of her face being eaten like Antun's became a bolt of energy like a bura inside her. In minutes she stripped the clothes and leather shoes from Antun and put them on herself, gagging at their stink. She grabbed the last of the dried hare strips and began her journey down the mountain.

She refused ever to talk about that journey down the mountain or what she did to stay alive. One day she simply appeared at the family villa, where Antonia embraced her in wild disbelief, crying and thanking God for such a gift as the return of her sister. Giselda took the deaths of her parents in stride and soon settled into a comfortable life of indolence. Antonia's gratitude for her return made it impossible for Antonia to ask anything of Giselda.

When gossiping villagers questioned her virtue, Giselda told them haughtily that the village priest at the foot of the mountain had performed the marriage ceremony and she was indeed Antun's widow. She did not, however, want anything to do with Antun's family. She wanted only to live with Antonia and Paulo in their beautiful villa.

Within several months Giselda began to make trips to the city, convincing Antonia that something was needed in the villa and wheedling coins from Antonia. It was on one of those visits that she learned of an old woman in the city who needed a companion. Because the woman was rich and had servants, Giselda's only tasks were to amuse the old woman, sing to her, and read to her. This last thing Giselda did haltingly, for, unlike her sister Antonia, she had never put much store in the need to learn to read and do numbers

to manage a household. But her beauty and her charm made up for her deficits. She spent a happy year in the employment of the old woman, her only frustration the lack of funds to buy the beautiful gowns she coveted.

It was during this time that I met her and fell into her net of high living. She made me feel like she loved only me, that no one in the world was as important to her as I was. Then one day as she walked in the market with the servant girl, she was spotted by Dragone/Orlando, who was instantly smitten. He began courting her with gifts: a small jewel, a box of sweets, a silk scarf. His gifts quickly grew more extravagant under the skillful guidance of Giselda, who knew exactly what things would make her happy. When she was happy, Dragone/Orlando was happy. Almost immediately, Giselda dropped me, having to hand different excuses as to why she could not keep plans we had made together. I was heartbroken.”

“And that,” broke in Marianna excitedly, “Is pretty much what happened to me too. From the things Giselda told me that day in the café, I think it was not too long after she met Orlando that they hatched their plan. They spent more and more time together, and I think that is when they were making the plan for Giselda to return to the island and get control of Paulo’s land.”

Baba Chessy said, “Now we must decide how they put their plan into action. It is quite certain that Giselda began poisoning Antonia slowly with bell-flower. Where did she learn about the bell-flower?”

“Maybe from Orlando? I have learned more about him,” said Sura. “Some time after he changed his name to Orlando, a new lord moved to the city, one Lord Orsini. We heard that he was from Padua, and it was whispered that he had been driven out of that city. But he seemed rich and was always the best dressed lord in the city here and he had wonderful parties. I heard that Orlando sought employment with Lord Orsini and became his cupbearer.”

“His cupbearer!” exclaimed Marianna. “Only the most desperate choose that dangerous occupation. Did he not fear his death?”

“Who knows? It is said he is so besotted with his own person and the beauty of his clothes and jewels that he has little thought for much else. At any rate, he kept his job as cupbearer for over a year and was never poisoned. Maybe he was just lucky.”

“Or so stupid he was clever,” replied Marianna. “There are some people like that, you know.”

“At any rate,” continued Sura, “I think it was probably his time as cupbearer when he learned about poisons, how they act in the body, where to get them, how to manage them skillfully.”

“That makes good sense,” said Baba Chessy. “Bravo my wise women. I think we make good progress. So we have Orlando the expert on poisons guiding Giselda’s poisoning of her sister. But when I discovered the poisoning after young Bogdana came to me for help, Giselda’s plans were disrupted.”

“That is probably when she decided she would pretend to poison herself and frame her sister,” said Sura. “If her sister were arrested, because of how frail her sister had become under the effects of the poison, Giselda may have reasoned that Antonia would die in prison.”

“But Giselda, ever impetuous and impatient,” added Marianna, “did not take the time to learn from Orlando the importance of doses.”

“Plus,” added Sura, “I heard that she had started drinking wine heavily with Orlando, and it may be that she drank wine that night.”

“She did,” contributed Baba Chessy. “I found the wine bottle near her bedstand. It was empty.”

“So it must be that with the wine in her system, she took more bell-flower than she should have, and that killed her,” said Sura with satisfaction.

Baba Chessy remembered the vial of juice of poppy. She brought the small packet from her pocket and laid it on the table. “Why would Giselda have been reaching for this vial of juice of poppy?”

There was silence from the two young women. Sura broke the silence. “Juice of poppy is used to relieve pain. Above all, Giselda did not abide pain in her life. Is it possible that the bell-flower had caused more pain than she expected, and she wanted relief?”

“That may be the answer,” replied Baba Chessy. “People who truly know poisons would not do that. The priest knows that apothecary where this juice of poppy was bought. Perhaps the apothecary can shed light on the matter.”

She continued, “The facts or near facts we have so far are these:

- Giselda met a lover who introduced her to poisons and who promised her she would become a Lady.
- Together she and her lover plotted to get control of Paulo’s land.
- Giselda poisoned her sister with bell-flower over several months.
- Two days after she was found out, she herself was found dead of bell-flower poisoning that may have been self-administered. She was found with a broken but probably unused vial of juice of opium.”

“So it seems we have two tasks ahead of us,” she continued. “To talk to Orlando and to talk to the apothecary. Is this something we can do?”

The young women looked at each other nervously. “I want to help in this matter,” said Marianna, “but I confess that I do not relish the thought of trying to talk to either one.” Both young women were fearful.

Baba Chessy took from her pocket the cloak fastener to show the girls, saying, “And we have one more puzzle. This cloak fastener was found in Giselda’s room. Where might it have come from?” The girls had not seen one like it.

As they sat thinking, a man hurried past reeking of the smell of fish. His clothes were stained, he was unshaved, his face was haggard as though he had not slept in days. He lurched as he walked. It seemed obvious he was trying to hurry but that his body was too exhausted to cooperate. Marianna whispered, “I think that is Paulo.” Soon the man disappeared around the corner.

Baba Chessy said, “If it is indeed Paulo, God is merciful. My dear companions, your information that you shared with me today may help Paulo save his wife’s life. If that man is Paulo, he will be able to talk to Orlando and the apothecary. Perhaps our work here is done. Thank you, my dear new friends. I will return to Antonia’s villa. The women rose and left, embracing briefly.

Chapter Eleven

As she walked toward Paulo’s villa, Baba Chessy ruminated, “My head is full, and my purse is empty. But is there time to save Antonia?”

She felt suddenly tired and defeated. It was all too much.

There was a bench along the walkway, and she sat down. “I am too old to be getting involved again in the wickedness of humans,” she thought.

But sitting on the bench brought something to mind, the name Orsini. “I have heard that name before,” she thought, “but where?”

Then it came to her. She had been sitting in just such a way on the bench in her grape arbor, drowsing in the afternoon heat with Bianca on her lap. A phrase brought her out of her reverie: “this big piece of land behind us here. I told him this will suit him fine. It is even larger than his minimum specifications and it is free of rocks. The old woman saw to that since she came here. The soil is fertile; she seems to grow everything as though by some magic. And no one will miss her if she disappears. She is old and will die soon anyway.”

“But it does not have access to the water. Lord Orsini wants water access. He wants to have a private dock.”

“Well, he can buy water rights and still have his private dock.”

“He wants his guests to be able to walk from their boats to his house.”

“So what now? There is no land like that in the village anymore.”

“But I have found a perfect piece of land in the next village, Blizu. It is just a little smaller than what he wants, but it has a long water frontage that makes up for everything, I think, and if you get rid of the houses for the donkey and the goat and the chickens, there is plenty of room on the land for all his needs.”

She remembered the voices of the two young men, how excited the one became when he talked about the land in Blizu, the land that sounded much like Paulo’s land.

When she came to the villa and knocked quietly, she heard excited voices from within. Bogdana came to the door with shining eyes saying, “Papa has returned, good lady, Papa has returned. Now he can help save Mama.” Bogdana was still wearing bandages, but her color was good, and she assured Baba Chessy that her hands were healing.

Beyta was placing before the disheveled man Paulo, for yes, it was Paulo, a hasty meal of wine with cheese and bread plus a soup of vegetables. He ate ravenously, hugging his children fiercely between bites. Baba Chessy stood silently on the side of the room waiting, cautioning Bogdana with a hand on her arm not to introduce her until Paulo had finished his meal.

When he had finished, Bogdana pulled Baba Chessy forward to meet her father, proudly telling him that Baba Chessy had saved her mother’s life. He looked at Baba Chessy with eyes glazed with fatigue and red-rimmed from too many days on a sun-glazed sea.

Baba Chessy said quickly, “Good sir, I have much to tell you about the current situation. When you are ready, I will be happy to lay the facts before you.”

Paulo asked Beyta to take the children out to the courtyard.

Soon Paulo and Baba Chessy sat together at the table with small cups of kahwa before them, which Bogdana had prepared. Paulo gave his news first. The situation was dire. The judge that morning had pronounced Antonia guilty and sentenced her to be hung on Saturday. Paulo looked around nervously. “I do not want my children to hear this.” Baba Chessy quietly closed the door.

She recounted to Paulo everything that had happened since Bogdana had knocked on her door Saturday night. She produced the juice of poppy vial and the ring with the small paper. “There is yet more we must learn, Paulo, to influence the Magistrate. Two people have important pieces of this puzzle I think, Orlando and the apothecary. When you have rested, those will be the two people to talk to.”

Paulo agreed. It was now the middle of the afternoon. “I have been rowing furiously for two days to get back, ever since by chance I met Doron going out to sea and he told me about

my wife. The sea has been becalmed and the sail worthless. I have had to row back and have not slept that entire time. If I am to talk with Orlando and the apothecary, I must have my wits about me. I shall sleep for three hours and then go to the city. Please have Beyta wake me in three hours.”

“Do you want the priest to go with you?”

“No, this is something I will do better alone. I will stay the night in the city.”

He called Beyta to come into the villa and told her his plan. The children came with her, and at their father’s words there was a brief outcry from the boys that they wanted their father to stay home. Beyta and Bogdana skillfully hushed the boys, telling them that their Papa was going into the city to bring their mother home.

“God willing,” thought Baba Chessy as she walked back to her house in Stari Kamen, weary but satisfied. Bianca was waiting for her on the stoop and gave her several full body and tail-around-the-legs embraces.

The next day was Friday. Everything now depended on Paulo’s success. This was the last chance to convince the Magistrate that Antonia was innocent.

Chapter Twelve

Baba Chessy spent her day in her garden harvesting more figs for drying and taking several comfortable naps with Bianca curled by her side. After she heard the faint Vesper’s bell from the city, there was a knock on her door. It was Bogdana and Paulo, both with shining eyes and smiling lips. Paulo had bathed and shaved and was wearing clean clothes and leather slippers. Bogdana held his hand proudly.

Paulo said, “I have come, good lady, to share with you the excellent news your work helped make possible. I was able to take to the Magistrate today the proof of my wife’s innocence, and she was released to me shortly after the Angelus. I have brought her home. She wanted to thank you in person, but I convinced her to remain at home under Beyta’s care to begin her recuperation from this horrendous ordeal. My daughter Bogdana, who has been so much a part of all of this, wanted to come with me to thank you.”

The tears came then to Baba Chessy’s eyes, and she waved her visitors into her house blinking and frowning. Bianca, who had been staring hard at Paulo, immediately embraced Bogdana with a body and tail hug. Bogdana in turn proudly introduced Bianca to her father, telling him the important part Bianca had played in discovering the apothecary paper and the ring. Paulo bent down and held out his hand for Bianca to sniff. Bianca did so, then continued to sniff his hand with interest. “Ah,” laughed Paulo, “She smells my occupation!”

“Next time I come,” he said to Bianca, “I shall bring you some fresh fish.” Bianca looked up at him and placed one paw on his slipper before returning to Bogdana to embrace her once more.

With glasses of watered wine in front of them, Paulo told the story of the apothecary and Orlando. Both men proved stubborn and secretive until Paulo showed them the document that he was under the protection of Lord Josip Subic, one of the most powerful of the city lords. Each man caved.

The apothecary did indeed remember the vial of juice of poppy. He said a beautiful young woman had come to him about a week ago asking if there is something you can take if you have been accidentally poisoned by bell-flower, something that would take away the pains that bell-flower brings on. He sold her the juice of poppy, telling her that it brings almost instant relief to any pain.

“Therefore,” said Paulo, “My opinion is as yours, dear lady. I think Giselda drank wine for courage, took too much bell-flower, was seized by the severe stomach cramps that can bring on, and was reaching for the juice of poppy to get relief from the pain when she fell out of bed. By that time the bell-flower had found its way through her system, however, and nothing could change the course of it.”

“Orlando,” he continued, “is a weak fop who could not talk fast enough when he thought his neck might be on the line. His story is very interesting. You are correct in your surmise that he had hatched a plan to get his hands on my property. Giselda was to marry me when Antonia died, then I was to meet with an accident at sea and she would be the legal owner of my property. Then she would marry Orlando and he would become the legal owner of my property, and he would give it to Lord Orsini, who had let it be known that the man who made it possible for him to own my property would receive the title of a Count and a bag of gold that would set him up for life.”

There was stunned silence for a few minutes. Baba Chessy just shook her head in disbelief.

“Well,” continued Paulo, “his plan will come to nothing. He goes before the judge next week.”

“But why did Lord Orsini want only your property?” asked Baba Chessy.

“What I understand is that Lord Orsini, new to the city, had set his eyes on establishing a villa on this island that would be the most lavish anyone in the city had ever seen. And each weekend throughout the summer he would invite all the city’s elite to party and gamble. He would be irresistible to the ladies, and he would have his pick of all the beauties in the city. He wanted to be known as the man who knew how to live life to the fullest, a Roman senator with a penchant and purse for orgy. He wanted all the other lords to be jealous of him.

My land was chosen for its size and its fertility, but even more, for its long sea frontage. He planned to build a private dock for his boat and the boats of his friends from the city who would visit him. He did not care how my property came to be his, only that it would be his. It was Giselda who hatched the plan to poison Antonia, according to Orlando. That does not ring true, of course. He was the one who knew about poisons because of what he had learned as cupbearer to Lord Orsini. No matter how hard I pushed him, though, he would never admit to being the mastermind of the poison. With poor Giselda dead, there is no one who can prove him guilty of the poisoning. There is one strange thing that I did not find an answer to. I saw Giselda's party slippers in his apartment, sitting on a small table. He claimed he knew nothing about how they came to be there, that Giselda must have left them there accidentally."

"Ah," exclaimed Baba Chessy. "The Superstition of the Slippers."

Paulo and Bogdana looked at her with puzzled faces.

"There is an old wives' tale," she explained. "It is believed that when a girl wants to marry the man she loves, the certainty of the marriage will be assured if she leaves her best slippers in his house and they remain there undisturbed until the next day. She must return home barefoot and continue to wear all night the same clothes she was wearing when she left her shoes at her lover's house. This may explain the party gown Giselda was wearing. I think that last Saturday when she said she was going to the city to celebrate her friend's birthday, she spent that time with her lover, changing into her party gown at his apartment. The superstition says she must wear the gown all night, and I think she planned to change into other clothes to return home. But Giselda being Giselda, thinking only of marriage to Orlando, forgot to change and she returned home in her party gown. The boatmen she engaged would not feel shocked. They would only wish they had been partying with this beautiful woman who was still woozy with the wine of the night before. Giselda's head would be full of the wonderful life she would have when Orlando became a noble and she would become Lady Giselda. Is the writing on the ring note Orlando's?"

"Yes," replied Paulo thoughtfully, "It is. That all makes sense."

"Giselda died wearing the same gown in which she had returned from the city," continued Baba Chessy. "She had carefully brushed her hair and put jeweled clips into it, but she did nothing to tend to her feet. This is a puzzle to me."

Paulo said, "Would that be in her mind part of the Superstition of the Slippers, that she had to leave her feet untended until she retrieved the party slippers? Retrieving the slippers was not at the moment possible because Orlando lived in the city."

"That I have not heard," replied Baba Chessy. "But the superstitions often change over time and vary from place to place, so your explanation may well be the correct one."

Paolo said thoughtfully, "What must have happened was that when you discovered the bell-flower and saved Antonia's life, Giselda planned her own fake death. She would not die, she thought, but her sister would be arrested for attempted murder. Antonia is too fragile to survive long in a jail, especially when she would be faced with the truth that her baby sister tried to kill her. I think Giselda thought that she would take enough bell-flower to become sick and everyone would feel sorry for her and then Antonia would die in jail and Giselda would have her dream life. The problem is she did not take time to find out more about bell-flower doses."

"I am still puzzled about the party dress, though," he continued. "She had on the golden party dress on Saturday night and came home in it on Sunday. Did she wear it all day Sunday and Monday as well, that she was found in it on Tuesday morning? I understand that she was found in her party dress with her slippers missing. Had she been out drinking wine with her lover and then gone home and taken too large a dose of bell-flower? If she drank a bottle of wine and then ingested more bell-flower than she planned, surely she would become very sick. Would she die? Perhaps that is what happened. Giselda was that way, very impetuous, very impatient, always expecting everyone to love her and make exceptions for her because she was so beautiful and vivacious and always the life of the party. She could not be bothered with details."

Or was there, thought Baba Chessy with a start, a second lover, a Vlach who lost his cloak fastener in Giselda's room? Oh my.

Like Baba Chessy, Paulo was uneasy about the poisoning on the letter.

"I think it is powder of the asp viper," said Baba Chessy. "I have heard of such a thing, but I have never seen it. What I heard is that the poison of the asp, the viper that killed Cleopatra in Egypt, is collected by holding the asp behind its jaws and getting it to bite into a glass. When enough venom is collected, the venom is dried and then spread on something like paper. It is said that because of its potency, touching the powder can kill a person if the powder remains on the skin for a long enough time. The powder becomes activated when it is exposed to moisture."

"That is why it started to attack my hands!" exclaimed Bogdana. "My hands would have been a little sweaty."

"That is correct, young friend," replied Baba Chessy. "While it remains dry, the poison does not do great harm unless you breathe it. An additional concern is that in its dry state the powder can last a long time."

"But where could that letter have come from?" asked Paulo. "Surely Orlando would not have risked such a move in the middle of an investigation."

Baba Chessy agreed. After Paulo and Bogdana left to return home, she talked at length with Bianca about the new puzzle. “Could there be another person in this matter,” she asked Bianca. “That would explain the cloak fastener. Did Giselda dress in her golden gown Monday night, and brush her hair, to meet a lover other than Orlando?” Bianca did not respond except to continue to march daintily forward with her head held high.

Chapter Thirteen

Saturday morning, the day that for a while seemed destined to be Antonia’s last day on earth, was a joyful one in Paulo’s household. Baba Chessy was invited to participate but declined the invitation except to take the family a gift of a prize bunch of kohlrabi and spend a little time with Antonia, who was weak and pale and grieving for Giselda.

“Ah, Little Friend,” said Baba Chessy to Bianca as they later left Paulo’s house together, “It is often thus. People who have wronged us leave such a morass of confusion and guilty feelings behind that we grieve them far more than they deserve to be grieved.”

She saw some of Giselda’s girlfriends gathered on the walkway whispering together. They seemed to be waiting for her. One of them became their spokesperson and asked Baba Chessy to walk with them to the churchyard to pay a visit to Giselda’s gravesite. They were careful to stay well away from Bianca, who paid them little heed.

“Good lady,” said this spokesperson when the small group stood around the crypt, “my friends and I feel we need to tell you something, even though you are not from our village. We like Paulo and Antonia. They have been good to the people in this village. All of us have benefited in some small way from their generosity, Paulo giving us fish now and then, and Antonia giving us garden produce when she has a large crop. And both of them help as good neighbors do. They truly are good neighbors. My friends and I would hate for something bad to happen to their family. We think we know who poisoned Giselda. My mother heard about Bogdana’s hands, and even though Bogdana insists her burns are from the teapot, my mother saw her burns and said they are not like teapot burns. My mother thinks they are from something that got on Bogdana’s hands that burned them. My mother is a suspicious person, it is true, but perhaps she is correct when she thinks it is some kind of poison. Could it be?”

Baba Chessy sucked in her breath sharply. Oh, my! What to tell these inquisitive girls? Finally, she said, “I have not heard that it is so. Perhaps the Magistrate is still investigating that?” One of the girls scoffed. “Him? He couldn’t solve a problem like that if it bit him!” The other girls hushed her. Their talking gave Baba Chessy time to plan what she should say next.

“I do have something I would like to ask you girls if I may,” she said to them. She showed them the cloak fastener, asking if they knew what it was. One of them gasped and said, “That must be Rowan’s!”

“Who is Rowan?” asked Baba Chessy.

The girls looked at each other excitedly. One of them said, “You might as well tell her all. It is the best way to help Paulo and Antonia. And maybe she would find out on her own.”

One of them said haltingly, crossing herself nervously, “Giselda, God rest her soul, had a Vlach lover. His name was Rowan. Rowan the Vlach. She used to talk about him sometimes, especially when she had had too much wine.”

“‘Oh, girls!’ she would giggle. ‘You have no idea how heavenly it feels to have that big thing inside you and him squeezing and biting your tits and kissing and biting your mouth as though he wanted to eat you. Oh, he brought me to the portal of heaven so often that I did not care if I ever went to the Christian heaven. I have my heaven right here on earth!’ And she would laugh that infectious, gay laugh that made everyone around her laugh. You know how she laughed.” They all nodded soberly.

Baba Chessy asked if Giselda ever invited him to her room in Paulo’s house. “Oh, yes,” they chorused.

“Rowan brought his sheep wool to Blizu every Monday to sell at the market,” said one girl. “His people raise sheep in the mountains on the mainland, you know, and every Monday he could be seen carrying the wool on his back going from market to market here on the island. He and Giselda had a secret code, I think, so that on those Mondays when Paulo was gone, Rowan would know the way was clear for him to visit Giselda in her room. Mistress Antonia slept soundly because of how hard she always worked, and after she started to become ill, she was too weak to get out of bed. Also, Giselda used to tell us how Rowan could walk in complete silence if he wanted to, as though his feet did not touch the ground. I guess the Vlachs know how to do that.”

“To me he looked scary,” said one of the girls with a shiver, “so tall and strong with those arm muscles that are so huge, and he walked like he owned the world. And handsome! I think there is not another man on earth who could match him. Coal black hair that gleams blue in the sun, black eyes that seem to shoot sparks at you, and he never smiles. I would not want him to be my enemy.”

“And she used to laugh about how he would swallow her screams,” said another girl. “That is the word she used. ‘When my Rowan brings me to the pinnacle of the mountain and I cannot do other than scream and moan in pleasure, he puts his mouth on mine and swallows my screams so that we do not wake my sister. You cannot imagine how my

senses are heightened when I cannot breathe,' she would say with a laugh. 'Sometimes I begin to faint for lack of breath.'”

“I told Giselda she was playing with fire,” said another girl. “That is what I told her several times. The Vlach are a proud and vindictive people. They believe they were the first people to live in these parts. They call themselves the true Romans, the original Illyrians, whatever that is. But I told Giselda that I think Rowan would be a jealous lover and she is playing with fire.”

“And he was a jealous lover!” cried another of the girls. “One night when I was returning home very late after sitting up with my sick grandmother, it was after the Matins bell had rung, I remember, and when I came round the corner of the churchyard, I saw two figures near the wall. I stepped back into the bushes in a fright, thinking I would be attacked. But in the moonlight I could see it was Giselda and this Rowan. He seemed angry, but she was laughing. Suddenly his arm shot out and he slapped her across the face, hard. She would have fallen except that he grabbed her arm and pulled her to him and sort of snarled at her, ‘You are mine, do not forget that.’ And he seemed to crush her to him and I saw that they were kissing violently. Suddenly he pushed her back against the wall and raised her gown and started thrusting into her with such force that I feared for her. But all the while she clung to him and sort of moaned and when he finished with one last hard thrust, she gave a small cry and fell upon him, smothering him with kisses until he took her again roughly. When he was finished, he pushed her away from him and said in a menacing voice, ‘Do not ever forget who you belong to.’”

“Did he know about snake poison?” asked Baba Chessy.

They looked at each other in surprise. “We heard it was bell-flower that poisoned Giselda,” one of them said. “We thought Rowan poisoned her out of jealousy. Well, I don’t think there are too many snakes in those dry mountains where the Vlachs live, but they trade with everyone, including the Egyptians and Arabs, so it would not be hard for them to know about snakes, I think.”

Baba Chessy said, “A letter was put into the slats on Paulo’s gate sometime on Wednesday morning. Did any of you see who put it there?” They had not. One of them said, “Little Giorgiu sometimes hangs around the market waiting to see if anyone needs a message delivered. You might ask him.”

Baba Chessy thanked them for their help and their honesty. As they left the churchyard, she sat for a while thinking, stroking Bianca’s sleek fur, then rose and made her way to the market. Mindful of the suspicious stares of the stallholders and their fear of Bianca, she stopped at one of the first stalls and bought a small bouquet of flowers, then made her way down the market looking over the offerings, all the while keeping lookout for a boy who might be looking for business. She found him toward the end of the market lounging against

a low wall, his keen eyes scanning the market for anyone needing a message sent. Baba Chessy drew near and said to him, "Hello, young man. Do you mind if I sit to rest a moment on this wall? I am feeling a little tired."

The boy shrugged and motioned for her to sit.

After a few minutes she said to him, "I wonder if I should send a message to my nephew to come to the market and walk me home."

The boy turned to her eagerly. "I can take that message for you, good lady. I know where every house is in the village and I never make a mistake."

"And are you prompt in your service, or do you sometimes get waylaid playing with your friends?" she asked.

A small flush appeared on the boy's face, but he blustered, "Oh no, good lady. I deliver my messages right away."

Baba Chessy said, "The reason I ask, young man, is that I think one of your messages got delayed this week. Could that be true?"

The boy's eyes grew wide with nervousness, and he stammered, "No, I always deliver the messages immediately." Then he put his chin out and said stubbornly, "Always."

Baba Chessy continued gently, "Except there was this one time I think that did not happen. You seem like a very intelligent and enterprising young man. If I told you that the letter you delivered Wednesday morning to Paulo's house should have been delivered on Tuesday morning, would I be correct?"

The boy stared at her belligerently.

"And if I asked you if Rowan the Vlach gave you the letter to deliver, would I be correct?" Baba Chessy continued.

The boy stared at her in horror. "How did you know that?"

She said, "You have a keen mind and I think have learned to read people. If you can tell me how Rowan the Vlach acted when he gave you the letter, I will give you this coin and you need not move from your comfortable spot right here." She held out a small coin.

The boy looked at her, then glanced around quickly and said, "Rowan seemed extra angry on Tuesday morning. He is always very stern of course and never smiling, but on Tuesday morning he was sort of fierce. He is never in the market on Tuesday, only Monday. That was the first strange thing. He gave me the letter and an extra coin, which was the second strange thing. It made me happy, though, to have an extra coin, and I was planning how I would spend it. He said, 'And you know exactly where Paulo's house is, the house where lives Giselda, the sister of Paulo's wife? And you know the sister, Giselda? I do not want this

letter to go to any house other than Paulo's or to any person other than Giselda, the sister of Paulo's wife. This letter must be given only to the sister of Paulo's wife.' That was the third strange thing. Everyone knows that I know every house in this village and every person in this village. Why did he have to treat me like I am an idiot? But I wanted the coins, so I told him I would take the letter to Paulo's house and put it into the hands of Giselda, the sister of Paulo's wife."

Then Giorgiu stopped and took a deep breath.

"Right after he left, my friend Goran came by. He was very excited because part of the Venetian fleet was coming down the strait and he wanted me to go with him to see if they would turn in at Stari Kamen."

"But aren't you boys supposed to stay far away from the harbor when the Venetians come? asked Baba Chessy. "Once they take you on board you don't return."

The boy looked around sheepishly, then said belligerently, "Well, at least it would be different. Nothing different ever happens in this old place. Get up, work the land, catch fish, go to bed, get up, work the land, catch fish, go to bed. At least you get to see something different if you go with the Venetians."

Baba Chessy shook her head sadly but brought him back to the conversation. "So you went with Goran."

"I told myself it would not matter if I delivered Rowan's letter now or in an hour. I put his letter behind a box in my mother's stall and ran with Goran. Two of the Venetian warships did stop at Stari Kamen, and when we got there it was so exciting that I forgot all about the letter. That boy who is slow, you know the one? Well, he was starting to walk up the plank to get into the ship when his mother came running and screaming and she managed to get hold of his arm and pull him back, and the two Venetian guards tried to pull him into the ship, but then others from the village came to help pull him back. And the Venetian guards were mad and cursing but they finally let go and everybody fell down. Then like in two seconds the ship pulled away and was out in the sea. How do they go so fast is what I want to know. How is it possible for a ship to go that fast without sail?"

"And so the letter remained behind a box in your mother's stall?"

"Yes, the next morning my mother made me work in her garden, and when I got to the market in the late morning, the whole market was like buzzing, everybody talking about how the sister of Paulo's wife was dead and Paulo's wife had been taken by the magistrates and would be locked up in jail in the city for poisoning her sister. Then I remembered the letter and I ran as fast as I could to take it to Paulo's house. But how could I give it to the sister if she was dead? I heard crying in the house and I didn't know what to do, and I was afraid the magistrates might come back, so I just stuck the letter in between some slats in

the gate and I ran back to the market. I don't want to be involved in anything where there are magistrates."

"You have been honest and helpful, Giorgiu. I thank you for that. Spend this coin well, and please stay away from the Venetian warships, for your dear mother's sake, who loves you and does not want to lose you." Giorgiu snatched the coin, bowed quickly with a triumphant smile and raced away.

Chapter Fourteen

With a resigned but satisfied sigh, Baba Chessy walked home, thinking over the events of the day. "I think we can stamp 'finis' to the puzzle of the poisoned letter," she said to Bianca. "Jealous Rowan had been suspicious of Giselda for some time and may have seen proof of her infidelity at some visit. He probably brought the letter with him to the island on Monday night, leaving it at his favorite place in the market, hoping he would not have to use it, hoping his suspicions were not correct.

But when he visited her, he saw something that confirmed his suspicions. Maybe it was that her party shoes were missing; maybe he saw that her feet had not been washed; maybe his keen nose smelled another man on her; maybe somehow he had even found the ring under her pillow. He found something to confirm her infidelity. Giselda would have been in a nervous state. Had she babbled to him anything of her plan to get control of the villa? What do you think, Bianca?"

Bianca kept walking steadily on. "Yes, Little Friend, some answers we may never know. I think she did not tell him because she did not know quite how she was to pull everything off. I think her hazy plan was to get rid of Antonia, marry Paulo, and then be able to bring her lover home when Paulo was at sea. I think that is as far as her plan got in her mind. And yes, her lover was not Orlando as we thought. I am quite sure now that it was Rowan. She was addicted to him and his exciting, dangerous presence and his violent physical passions that made her feel more alive than she had ever felt. The person who has been coddled in life and not had to be tested by challenges and the need to struggle for survival often develops a feeling of ennui, a lassitude wherein life becomes tedious beyond endurance. A diversion must be created, the more explosive and dangerous, the better. It may be that sometimes when Giselda was with Rowan, she felt an energy within her reach a fever pitch, a feeling of intense engagement unlike any other, and she could not live without it. I have known people like that.

Her ultimate goal, however, was to become Lady Giselda. She needed to marry a noble to pull that off. Would she do that through Orlando? The only way Orlando could become a noble was to get Paulo's land for Lord Orsini. The plan was that Paulo would die, Orlando would marry Giselda and get control of Paulo's land legally, then he would deed it to Lord

Orsini, in exchange for which he would become a Count and Giselda would become Lady Giselda. But where in this scheme was there a place for Rowan?

Or would Giselda perhaps double-cross Orlando and deal directly with Lord Orsini, somehow maneuvering to become a titled single Lady, a rich lady with funds to do as she pleased. In this scheme there would be a place for Rowan, because Giselda would be a free woman. But would Rowan want to be part of that scheme? Probably not. Vlachs are proud people.

If, in her nervous excitement Giselda confided some part of her plan to Rowan on Monday night, he would have understood instantly that it involved other men, that it was not Rowan that she wanted, but the riches and title of the nobility. This knowledge would sit ill with his pride.

However much or how little she told him that night we will never know. But I remain of the opinion that Rowan truly loved Giselda and did not wish her dead, only taught a lesson. Do you agree, Bianca?"

Bianca walked on steadily.

"Yes, I think that is correct," said Baba Chessy. "Rowan left her that night determined that she needed to be taught a lesson that she belonged to him. One good lesson should be enough to bring her into line, he would think. She would handle the card with the snake venom, soon find her hands burning and stinging, and realize with a shock that he was putting his mark on her even as he put his mark on his sheep, that she was his. In his fierce anger, Rowan might even have laughed to think that Giselda might kiss the card as she loved to kiss his member. Vlachs are a hard, vindictive people when they feel wronged, Bianca."

"Yes," she repeated as she stepped over the threshold of her own little house, "Rowan did not know of Giselda's bell-flower plan. She ingested that poison only after he left her. In the end, it was her impetuous passions and nature that killed her. Rowan never intended that Giselda should die from his viper poison. That poison would scare her, but not kill her. Now that Giselda is gone, there will be no more viper poisonings and the island will probably never see Rowan again. He will find other places to trade, places where he cannot be connected to the death of a girl, places where he can in time forget Giselda. The family of Paulo and Antonia need not live in fear. Do you agree, Little Friend?"

Bianca curled her tail around Baba Chessy and laid one paw on Baba Chessy's slipper.

"Excellent!" said Baba Chessy. "Then we are in agreement, and we can put our efforts into eating a nice supper and relaxing in our nice chair before going to sleep in our nice bed."

And that is what they did. However, as Baba Chessy lay in bed that night, she did have one worrisome thought that flitted around in her mind like a restless bee: there is one last piece

of the puzzle that has not been solved. What might Lord Orsini do to get his hands on Paulo's land?

Chapter Fifteen

This matter resolved itself in the following weeks when Paolo went to the city. It was his practice to set up a stall in the fish market when he brought in a fresh catch. He had a special knack for catching langostini, those succulent little lobsters that are not really lobsters but taste like lobsters even though they look like prawns. Paolo had discovered them in the warmer waters of shallow coves in the sea, and that is where he would find them. He made efforts that no other fishermen should find his secret places.

In time his stall became known as the place where you could buy fat, fresh langostini. One day several years ago the cook for Lord Josip Subic found his stall and told him of his lord's taste for langostini. "If you will save me ten kilos each time you bring your catch in," he said to Paolo, "I will pay you double your usual rate. That is how much Lord Subic craves these little critters."

"Of course," continued the cook with a smug smile, "the secret is in how I prepare them."

From thenceforth, Paolo had faithfully saved his best catch of langostini for Lord Subic's cook and Paolo had received a letter stating that he was the purveyor of langostini for Lord Subic.

Like everyone, Paolo had heard the gossip about the feud between Lord Josip Subic and Lord Orsini. No one was quite sure what started it, but it had something to do with how Lord Orsini had driven a small merchant into ruin so that he could buy his property for little money. That merchant's family was a very old one in the city, and it is said there was friendship between that family and the Lords Subic going back over a hundred years. No Lord Subic would look kindly on an Italian newcomer ruining an old family acquaintance and taking over land in a city that the Lords Subic felt was their turf.

On Friday of that week there was said to be a great stir in the city, the news of which dribbled back in bits and pieces to Baba Chessy's ears. She did not need to travel anywhere to learn the details of all the brouhaha, because sooner or later all the city and village gossip would be discussed at length as the villagers passed to and fro on the walkway near her garden or sat in the grotto on her corner.

It seems that a handbill had been posted on all the usual handbill posts and building corners in the city. It read, "Know by this Writ of Governance that the entire island known as Gora is from henceforth a Subic Protectorate."

Knowing from long experience that gossip keeps a village afloat and villagers become most skillful at pulling every last bit of juicy meat from the feeble claws of truth, Baba Chessy did spend then, it must be confessed, many pleasurable hours on her own reconstructing how the gossip waxed and waned.

- “A Subic Protectorate?! What is that?”
- “We never had that before!”
- “Who knows what it even is?”
- “Is this a prank?”
- “But what IS it?”

When the residents of the city and the island finally came to an understanding of just what a Subic Protectorate was, there was an even fiercer outcry of consternation, confusion, fury, dismay, glee and general disgust and unrest. What came to be understood is that no land or property on the island of Gora could change hands without the approval of Lord Josip Subic. The villagers were up in arms.

- “WHAT?”
- “How DARE he?!”
- “Who does he think he is?!”
- “This cannot be legal.”
- “But it’s signed by the Judge alright.”
- “But it can’t be legal. We own our land and have the right to decide what to do with it.”
- “You can’t just throw around your gold and get the Judge to do what you want him to do.”
- “But that is always their way, stupid. What did that Lord Orsini do since he got here except throw around his gold and get everything he wanted by hook or by crook.”
- “Well, it’s not right.”
- “Oh, get off it. When have those Lords ever let that stand in the way of what they want!”

All the wealthy merchants and the lords other than Subic lords were so incensed it was said they fairly foamed at the mouth.

- “He thinks he can tell us what we can and cannot buy?”
- “I was looking to buy a nice piece of land on that island myself, to build a summer villa.”
- “How much did he pay that Judge?”
- “This is not legal no matter how you slice it or dice it.”
- “It’s time to force some sense into that lord’s head.”

- “It’s time to force a general congress to let these lords know they cannot walk all over us.”
- “It’s time to get the Ban involved.”
- “Forget the Ban! It’s time for WAR!”

The flurry in the marketplace and the city was likened to that of a hive of angry bees when someone has taken a stick to it.

Lord Orsini was noticeably silent during this uproar, and it was felt that he was keeping a low profile because it was now known that it was his protegee Orlando who was somehow involved in the village girl’s death. Orlando had been arrested and was released to Lord Orsini’s recognizance and house arrest to await trial.

Orlando’s death by poison within days of his release was seen by most good citizens to be more than a little too suspiciously convenient. Yes, Orlando was Lord Orsini’s cupbearer and it was the duty of cupbearers to taste all wine intended for the lord’s lips, and yes, sometimes cupbearers did die. But Orlando’s death was just a little too convenient, everyone agreed.

Then there was that pesky servant who whispered that he saw Lord Orsini himself add something to the bottle of wine that would be given to Orlando to taste. But no one wanted to finger a Lord. They often did not live long. That servant was said to have fled.

After a month of uproar and threats by merchants and lords to take Lord Subic before the Judge for infringement of personal rights, it became known one day that Lord Orsini had quietly decamped from the city. His servants said that he had gone south where he had heard of an island that would welcome his gold.

“Well,” breathed the residents of the city, “Goodbye and good riddance.”

The following week there appeared a new handbill on all the usual places in the city. “Know by this Writ of Governance that the island known as Gora is no longer a Subic Protectorate.”

The writ was signed by the Judge. It was legal.

Then there was much laughing in the city and pounding friends on the back in the taverns as the import of the new Writ became clear. Wealthy merchants and lords could again buy land on Gora without the approval of Lord Subic. Things would be back to normal again. Was it all a joke? Was it all a hoax? Who cared, really. Things were back to normal.

Paulo was not a gossip, and he shared with no one the fact that it was his land that Lord Orsini wanted, and it was his land that Lord Subic was protecting from Lord Orsini.

The villagers on the island were not as thrilled as the wealthy merchants and lords to have their lands again put into play for the highest bidder. They did not want to be told how they could dispose of their lands, as under the Protectorate, but they also did not want to again

be fair game for greedy merchants and lords who held out the lure of city gold to islanders who usually lived on the edge of poverty. Large houses for the wealthy often took prime land and then sat empty eight months of the year, a blight on the landscape and a source of irritation to the islanders.

The more philosophical of them reminded each other, "Always it has been thus. Those with the gold get, and those without the gold give."

But the villagers consoled themselves that at least the island would be theirs in the winter. When the violent bura blew down from the mountains and across the sea, and the cold rains dripped day after day and the sun did not show its face, and the misery of living on the island kept everyone around a small stove with morose faces, the city folks would stay far away.

And there was, thought Baba Chessy, something very right about that. People should be free to live lives of their own choosing. All people. It is not for anyone else to pass judgment on the wisdom of choices that people make unless those choices infringe on the rights of others.

In addition, she thought, the city dwellers will never know the utter sweetness of those first days of spring when the winter has been survived once again and the bura has not blown for a week and the sea is calm and the seeds planted in December and January are now filling the gardens with tender green growth and the light breezes whisper in the tops of the pine trees as little wavelets tap the rocks on the shore and you take a deep breath of the new soft air and you know that this is where God created His heaven. The city dwellers will never know that.

"And there is something very right about that," said Baba Chessy to Bianca, who agreed by leaping into Baba Chessy's lap and curling up for a good nap.

The end.

Devil Rocks

*A Baba Chessy and Bianca Medieval Mystery
Book 2*



Chapter One

Not much of note ever happened in the village of Stari Kamen on the island of Gora. It was small as villages go, less than 150 people, not including the wealthy nobles from the city across the strait who built summer homes on the island and swarmed in like a flock of vultures for three months of the year. The villagers loathed them, even as they accepted their coins. The greatest concern was that the voracious visitors would use all the precious water in the public cistern and the villagers might die of thirst before the winter rains came to refill those cisterns.

It was bad enough, the villagers would grumble, having to put up with the aggravation of the troops in the fortress at the top of the high hill behind the village, the one called Mount Damianos, where a fortress had been built over a thousand years ago as a lookout to protect the city. The Venetians and the Hungarians were always fighting over that fort.

When the Hungarians were in control, they wanted fish and olive oil and wine and vegetables from the villagers. They did pay, and handsomely, so there was at least that. When the Venetians were in control, the villagers had to put up with their tramping noisily and disturbingly through their village and their olive groves to ferry supplies from the city to the fortress. Most of the time the Venetians were in control of the city, so they would get their supplies cheaply there. "Probably for nothing by threatening conveniently," thought the villagers sourly.

The villagers had to work hard to survive on this arid, rocky soil, with the strong devil wind that came from the northern mountains in the wintertime, barreling down the sea and taking their fishermen and sickening anyone foolhardy enough to venture outdoors while it blew.

Life was not easy on the island, thought the villagers, but at least it was normal.

Then one day everything changed in Stari Kamen, and nothing was normal anymore. Those small gripes that fed the gossip mills so nicely became of no more importance than the bite of a flea. How could any of the normal complaints have any meaning when the villagers had to deal in the span of one month with six dead bodies and the visit of a bishop and an archbishop? Their village would never be the same, the villagers all agreed. How could anything ever be normal again?

It started when a body washed up on the northeastern tip of the island, where it had snagged on an exposed root of an ancient pine tree. "That pine tree," said the old villagers wisely and importantly, "probably sent its roots down through the limestone and ancient Roman ruins 200 years ago to find secure footing against the bura." The young people looked at the oldsters politely but thought to themselves, "And just what does that have to do with this dead body?" They wanted to know who the dead body was.

Eventually the body was identified as Crazy Lupo. No one knew Crazy Lupo's real name. He had always just been Crazy Lupo. The old-timers remembered that his father's name was Gordo and that at one time many years ago the family owned about one quarter of the northernmost part of the island, from the village of Blizu all the way to the rocky tip known as Devil Rocks. Over the years the family sold off one parcel after the other until the only land remaining to the family now was the rocky spit of land at the very northern tip of the island.

This bit of land, everyone agreed, was a most inhospitable place because it was nothing but rocks and ended in a high cliff that dropped straight down and fell abruptly into a cauldron of roiling, foaming water where high waves beat constantly at huge rocks. The pounding surf day and night was said to be deafening except on the calmest of days when the great sea lay like a sheet of glass.

The villagers remembered that as a young man, Crazy Lupo had gone to the Greek island of Kalymnos and become a sponge diver. He was successful at that occupation but returned to Stari Kamen with what the villagers called a strange mind. It was generally felt that his mind was affected by his times in the depths of the sea, when he would go for long minutes without taking a breath. "That is why his mind is so strange," the villagers decided. "That is not normal."

Now it is well known that the villagers are highly wary of and frightened by anything that is "not normal." Eventually Crazy Lupo got so tired of the villagers' stares and fear that he decided he would move to the spit of land his family owned at Devil Rocks. There he built a lopsided stone house with a roof of shipwrecked timbers and lived his life without ever seeing another soul. So the villagers claimed, anyway.

After Crazy Lupo's body was found and identified and the City Magistrate determined that he had died of natural causes and old age, his body was buried in the family crypt in the churchyard of Stari Kamen. Some of the villagers scratched their heads and said, "Most people who die of old age don't end up in the sea. But maybe 'natural causes' would cover all other bases as a cause of death?"

A few days after the funeral, a city advocate appeared in the village looking for a man named Mario. It seemed that the original land deed for the northern tip of the island stated that the land there known as Devil Rocks would always remain in Crazy Lupo's family so long as there was a male to take ownership. Mario, Crazy Lupo's nephew, was now the designated owner of that rocky and barren spit of land on the northern tip of Gora, a spit no larger than the city square.

Mario had his own house in the village, with a small piece of land on which he grew his vegetables, so he had no need of another house. Also, it was a three-hour walk from Stari

Kamen to the northern tip of the island. It could not be said that his inheritance caused him any elation.

But perhaps of most importance, there was bred in the villagers a lasting fear of and superstition about Devil Rocks. It was said that someone had been killed there generations ago, and that his voice could be heard crying for vengeance. Some skeptical villagers wondered, though, how his voice could be heard above the roaring of the waves crashing into the rocks under that high cliff.

Compounding that fear was the phenomenon the islanders called Devil Wave. The Devil Wave was not someone's imagination run wild. It was a real thing that so terrified fishermen that they would stay far, far away from Devil Rocks. For no known reason, the sea, even a sea that was relatively calm, would suddenly rear up as it came closer to the cliff, just as though a monster of the deep were surfacing. It would rise up and up as a giant wall of water with a curled snout and then suddenly collapse with a roar, destroying everything in its path. It was generally agreed that Devil Wave activity was greatest in the winter when the bura blew.

Chapter Two

A few weeks after Crazy Lupo was laid to rest, a second body washed up very near the tree where Crazy Lupo had gotten snagged. For a while the excited gossip that flew around Stari Kamen was that the new body had snagged on exactly the same tree and on the very same root as Crazy Lupo! That indeed was reason to cross oneself and huddle in fear that the devil himself had now come to the island and was living at Devil Rocks. "What else could this mean?" the villagers asked one another in fear. "There is no other explanation."

But it turns out there was another explanation. The new body was a male and was from the village of Stari Kamen and was none other than Tomo, famous for the amount of wine his belly could hold and for the big fists with which he pounded his wife Jorka when he was angry about the way life was unfair to him. It was known by the women and ignored by the men that Tomo regularly beat his young wife.

In Stari Kamen everyone knew that when a husband beat his wife, you should not interfere. It was a matter between husband and wife only. The men in the village could be counted on to ignore the incident completely unless they were close friends of the husband, in which case it was expected they would raise a glass to him in the tavern. The women in the village could be counted on to remain silent and extra quiet, minding their own business and creeping to the wife's aid if the beating had been particularly brutal or there were small children needing care.

This was often a tricky matter, for the men in the village would not tolerate any interference in the domestic affairs within their homes. In this matter the priest was their staunch supporter, spending whole sermons on the importance of honoring God's ordinances for the management of the home. "The man," preached the priest, "Is made in the likeness of God. Just as God is in charge of the whole world, so men are in charge of their individual homes and all who dwell therein. It is the man's Christian duty to maintain a Christian household, and God Himself has ordered men to take up the whip if necessary to drive demon energies out of the home, just as did Jesus Christ drive the Pharisees from the temple. The man who fails to maintain an orderly and God-fearing Christian household has failed in the eyes of God."

So it had always been in the village, and so it would always remain, was the prevailing thought.

When Jorka's little boy would show up at a neighbor's house asking for food because he was hungry, the good wives of the village would go together to Jorka's house when Tomo was at the tavern, and they would minister to her, washing and bandaging her wounds, straightening and binding a broken bone, bringing her tisanes and broths to drink through her broken teeth, picking up the shattered clay dishes.

The village women had gone to their priest several times asking him to intervene with Tomo before Jorka was killed by his vicious fists. The priest, who everyone knew was afraid of those fists, said piously to them, "Good wives, the Holy Word tells us that God has ordained that men are responsible for saving the immortal souls of their wives. If necessary, they must beat their wives to ensure that their wives remain holy and able to enter heaven upon their death. Furthermore, the Holy Word tells us that women must be punished for the great sin of disobedience they committed when they ate of the Apple of Good and Evil, which Almighty God had forbidden them to eat. Because of this sin that females committed, all men are banished from Heaven and from the presence of God. Women must be punished for this great sin. If necessary, they must lay down their lives as Jesus Christ Himself did, for the salvation of mankind."

The good wives would go away grumbling and muttering angrily about how the good father would change his tune if he were on the receiving end of those fists. "God grant that someone will turn huge fists upon him and Tomo," they agreed. If entrance into heaven is assured by a good beating, then they themselves would be happy to take up the cudgel against men like Tomo.

So there was astonishment in the village when Tomo's body was found washed up and snagged by a root that Monday, with a good number of bruises on his body, including one particularly nasty wound on his head. The head wound looked like a giant had taken a heavy staff and bashed in his head so that a part of the squiggly yellow brain was showing under the broken bone.

“Somebody really hated Tomo to hit him that hard,” said some villagers.

“And who hated him more than the wife who had patiently borne his beatings for over three years?” asked others.

“But is she strong enough to bash his head in like that?” asked still others.

“Well, she’s a slight little thing, it is true, and meek and quiet, but I think she is quite strong. I have seen her pushing that huge wheelbarrow of olives to the pressing house, and I have seen her hoist those heavy vats of oil to the market to sell,” said one man.

One of the women muttered, “And if your child were starving because your husband drank all the money meant to put food into your child’s belly, you might be able to do even more.”

It was decided that the village priest needed to take charge of the body and the proceedings. He quailed at the task laid upon him and valiantly sought a way out of it, all the while complaining to God that he was called to follow in the footsteps of Peter to save souls for Jesus Christ, not to intervene in something as sordid as murder. “I have never had to do anything like this before,” he grumbled. “How can I get out of this responsibility?” He hit upon the idea of calling on the bishop in the city on the mainland.

The morning after this decision, he found a ride across the strait and went to the bishop’s house, where he fortunately found the bishop free to meet with him immediately. Upon learning of the current difficulty in Stari Kamen, and impatient to be rid of the village priest so that he could attend to important affairs of the churches in the city, the bishop referred the priest to the civil authorities, specifically the City Magistrate.

Thus it was that the surprised villagers watched a grim-looking man disembark from a boat that afternoon and ask for the house of Tomo the dead man. The village men had brought Tomo’s body to his house and laid him out on a hastily erected table made of a board set upon two stones, because Jorka lay injured in the couple’s bed. Unfortunately, the two stones had never been called upon to form the legs of a table and were not particularly suited to that purpose. The makeshift table wobbled precariously if the balance of the body were disturbed.

During the Magistrate’s examination, the body nearly toppled twice, causing a cascade of creative invective to fall from the Magistrate’s mouth. When the examination was complete, the Magistrate stood up with a frown firmly in place and his mouth in a determined line and intoned, “This man Tomo has died of being hit on the head by a very large and heavy item. He is now dead and has been evilly murdered with intent of will. Now I will investigate this murder. All the villagers must gather in the church where I can question them.”

The priest was so relieved to have a competent person take charge of this sordid affair that he did not complain at such a desecration of God’s holy premises.

“Hurry it up!” yelled the Magistrate. “I want to get home to my good supper and my own bed tonight. Stop gaping and stop dawdling. Move!” The villagers cowed and scrambled into the church, stumbling up the steps. Within minutes all were assembled and the Magistrate started asking his questions about where the body had been found, what was the suspected murder weapon, who were the suspects who hated Tomo enough to do this foul deed upon his person, and “for God’s sake stop mumbling. I want to get back in time for supper!”

It could not be said that the Magistrate held in high regard the intelligence of the villagers. “Anyone who remains living on this island in the wintertime is an idiot,” was a favorite saying of his.

During the course of the questioning, the matter of Tomo beating Jorka was divulged. Upon hearing that, the magistrate ordered that Jorka be brought to the church so that he could question her. Two men went to Tomo’s house, lifted Jorka from the bed, carried her to the church, and placed her before the Magistrate. It was noted that the younger man gagged a bit after he saw Jorka’s battered face and he resolutely avoided looking at her face thereafter.

Jorka was too weak to stand, so she knelt helplessly at the feet of the Magistrate as he questioned her, disdain and disgust on his face. When she admitted that Tomo beat her regularly and she did not like the beatings, the magistrate seized upon his way forward. “In the name of the City Council I arrest this woman Jorka for the murder of the man called Tomo,” he yelled. “Take her immediately to my boat so that we can leave.” Then he turned on his heel and strode away with rapid steps. The astonished villagers gaped after him until several men said, “We had better do as he said, or he will be back to arrest *us*.”

So saying, the strongest man in the group picked Jorka up from where she lay and threw her over his shoulder and started down the church steps. Several women began wailing, and soon the women were huddling together crying and repeating, “She did not do this thing. Jorka did not do this. She is not a murderess. How in holy heaven could anyone think that a woman who cannot even stand can bash in a man’s head like that?” Several of the men told the women to shut up. “Better one of us go than many of us. Christ himself was a sacrificial lamb, right? So shut your mouths and get about your business.”

Chapter Three

The women glowered and muttered and threw angry looks at the men, but some of the women gave in and began walking down the church steps and toward their homes. The remaining women argued about what they could or should do, some of them filled with anger and purpose and wanting to write to the Pope, some of them despairing and

despondent about the possibility of doing anything at all, some of them just listening quietly.

“We must not let this travesty go! We all know Jorka did not do this! We cannot let her pay for this deed. For over three years she has suffered the brutality of his fists. Are we now to allow her to lose her life because of those fists?” asked one woman.

“That is true. She did not do this. That we know. But who did?” asked another.

“You know she did not kill him,” said another.

“How could she when she is too weak to stand upright after that last beating?” asked another.

And so it continued.

“But who else was angry enough to do that to him?”

“Who says somebody had to be angry at him?”

“But why else kill him?”

“And once the Magistrate finds her guilty, isn’t it too late for any help?”

“Well, when have we had a murder before? Can you think of any other person who might help us? No man will, that is for sure. They all just want Jorka to be guilty so that none of them might be fingered. But what if it is one of them?”

“Which one of them might have the will to harm Tomo that way?”

“Bah, who might *not* have the will? Tomo was not exactly the village’s favorite hero. Yet his small circle of drinking buddies is fiercely loyal to him, I think. They will probably be pushing for speedy hanging for Jorka.”

There was a harsh intake of breath.

“We *cannot* let that happen. Think, my friends, think!”

“And who will take care of little Tomislav? Poor poor lad, only two years old and now without parents.”

“Hush, do not speak so! Jorka is not dead yet, and it is up to us to save her. Do not be a coward.”

A man passing by must have heard some of this conversation, for suddenly he yelled at the women, “Let her hang! I tell you let her hang! Get that Magistrate off our backs! Who needs the attention of those bastards in the city!”

One of the women turned on him in fury, “Yes, imbecile, for five minutes of excitement watching her hang, you will ensure that you yourself will burn for all eternity in hell for killing an innocent woman. You *know* she could not have killed him. She could barely walk! I am amazed that beating did not kill her.”

“Better it should have. Saved us from all this mess and attention from the Magistrate. Once he starts snooping around, where will it stop? What will he find?”

“Honest people need not fear the Magistrate, Turgo.”

“Well, you said Jorka was honest, and look what the Magistrate did to her.”

“Because of people like you who are too lily-livered to stand up for what is right.”

“Leave it off, you two. We have got to do something quickly before the Magistrate takes Jorka before the City Council and Judge and they condemn her to hanging.”

“But what to do? Who can help us?”

“How can we find out who did it? We need to find out who did this if we are to help Jorka.”

“But how can we find that out? What can we do? I cannot see that there is anything we can do. I know my husband will not let me do one thing. He will beat me.”

Many of the women nodded their heads soberly.

“Would it be better for us all if we just prayed for her and then took care of our own families?”

That is when the two girls stepped forward with their question. It all started with those two stubborn girls asking that question, the villagers agreed later. The girls’ worried mothers were angry, and the village women were afraid of what their husbands might do if they heard such a thing said.

The two girls Margarita and Gordana had stood at the edge of the crowd for some time listening as the conversation seemed to lean more and more toward hopelessly doing nothing. That is when they stepped forward and asked their question. “If no one will protect us from the fists of our husbands when we are married, why should we agree to be married?” they asked.

Why indeed, thought some of the women wearily.

Boldly the girls said, “We need to get a physician to examine Jorka in the city jail and testify to the bishop that Jorka was too badly beaten to be able to inflict deadly injury on Tomo. Then the bishop will tell the Magistrate to reopen the case. It would be better to have a man engage the physician and go to the bishop. Is there a man in the village who would do this?”

One woman said timidly, “Maybe Mario?”

“Everyone knows he is sweet on her. He even took a couple beatings from Tomo’s fists when he tried to stop Tomo from beating Jorka.”

“And whenever she brings her olives to the warehouse, he hurries to take her heavy load from her.”

“But will that work against him?”

“Well, who else is there who might do it?”

There was silence.

“Then we will ask Mario,” said the two girls decisively.

Shamed by the courage of these two girls 13 and 14 years of age, two of the women stepped forward to go with them to Mario’s house that evening, when he returned from his work in the warehouse.

Mario was a quiet, thoughtful man of few words. He listened to the women’s report and their request, and he said simply, “I will go to the city tomorrow to find a surgeon.”

Mario was successful. He found a surgeon who examined Jorka in the city jail and pronounced her incapable of inflicting a wound such as that sustained by Tomo’s head. Together the surgeon and Mario visited the bishop’s house, where they had to wait several hours for an audience. The bishop listened to the surgeon’s testimony and sent for the Magistrate.

The Magistrate, of course, did not take kindly to being called before the bishop on a matter over which he felt he should have sole jurisdiction. However, he knew that in the convoluted politics that had ruled this city forever, the bishop had far more power than the Magistrate. With surly demeanor he presented himself before the bishop and learned that he must release Jorka immediately and look for another murderer. He gave a curt bow that was just short of being insolent and stomped out of the bishop’s receiving room.

Mario returned to Stari Kamen quietly triumphant, with Jorka leaning heavily on his arm. As they walked slowly to Jorka’s house, enduring the astonished happy cries of the village women, they found the two girls waiting there, where they had waited all day, determined to get help for Jorka. Upon seeing her, their happiness was so innocently and jubilantly victorious that even quiet Mario was brought to smiling and laughing, ducking his head in embarrassment at their high praise.

Chapter Four

The happiness of the villagers was short-lived. The following day the Magistrate appeared in the village again. His face was fierce and angry, and the villagers gave him wide berth. He

went directly to the church steps where he ordered the church warden to ring the bell calling the villagers together. The earliest ones to come reported later that the Magistrate's anger was so hot it seemed that his head was steaming.

When most of the villagers were in attendance, the Magistrate bawled, "Bring before me the man named Mario."

Mario stepped forward hesitantly.

The Magistrate pronounced in a loud yell, "In the name of the City Council, I arrest this man Mario for the murder of the man named Tomo. Guard, put his arms in ropes and take him to my boat."

Mario submitted quietly as the horrified villagers stood silent. The two girls were too astonished to say anything.

Later, however, after Mario had been taken away on the Magistrate's boat, the villagers had much to say as they met each other throughout the day, much of it along the same lines as what they had said concerning Jorka: Mario could not have killed Tomo. Mario was a quiet man with no violence in him. Even when Tomo was beating him, Mario tried to ward off the blows but did not retaliate. It would have been impossible for him to have committed so hateful a crime, even on someone who had so cruelly beat Jorka.

However, some of the villagers were uneasy. Could Mario have reached a boiling point where he decided that Jorka's beatings must stop?

At last, it was learned that the church warden Bruno had told the Magistrate that he had heard Mario threaten Tomo, saying to Tomo, "If ever again you beat your wife Jorka, you will pay for it with your life." The villagers were aghast. No one else had heard Mario say that to Tomo. Did the warden really hear that? But he is the church warden, and surely he could not lie, especially about such a serious thing as murder, thought the villagers.

The next day some of the men asked the church warden if he really thought Mario had killed Tomo. The warden soberly replied that it was not his place to judge, only God could do that. All he knew was what he had heard. Then he fidgeted nervously and said in a whisper to the men, "I did not tell the priest, because I like Mario, but several weeks ago, the holy day paten for the church went missing, the small golden plate the priest uses to elevate the Sacred Host. Because I had seen Mario leaving the vestry one day, I went first to him. He confessed that he had taken it and planned to sell it in the city because he needed money. He gave it back immediately and begged me not to tell the priest or anyone else because he was so ashamed."

What to make of it all? The village was reeling with unrest and stories that grew wilder the oftener they were told.

All these things and many more did old Baba Chessy hear as she sat in her grape arbor day after day, absently stroking her cat Bianca while taking a rest after a work session in her garden. The grape arbor was in the corner of her garden where two village paths converged. On her side of the garden wall the old grapevine made a shady rest area for Baba Chessy; and on the other side of the wall that grapevine, said to be several hundred years old, had grown massive and now extended out over the wall and the village path and created a shady bower for walkers to rest a moment on their journeys.

The villagers called this lovely spot on their side of Baba Chessy's garden wall a grotto because at one time a villager had installed a statue of the Virgin there, but that had been gone many years now. In its place someone had planted two yew bushes and set out an old stone bench that provided a perfect place to sit and rest and gossip. Between the wall and the yew bushes and the grapevine, the villagers thought their conversations were private, allowing them to indulge freely in the pleasures of talking about everyone else. They had no idea, of course, that Baba Chessy was often to be found on her side of the wall after working in her garden. It might be fair to say that Baba Chessy knew more about the villagers' lives than they themselves did.

Baba Chessy, it must be admitted, (and she would be the first to admit it,) took perhaps a little more pleasure than strictly necessary in fabricating imaginary conversations among the villagers. She had an excellent creative talent for taking snippets of conversations and turning those into lengthy gossip sessions that allowed her to chuckle and giggle. Bianca seemed to especially enjoy a giggle if she were sitting on Baba Chessy's lap and it started to jiggle.

When Baba Chessy heard the gossip that the villagers were trying to decide whether to ask her for help, she made up a particularly juicy gossip session.

"I think maybe we should go to old Baba Chessy. Maybe she can help. She knows how to heal, I think, and she grows that superior garlic."

"Which is why the villagers call her Baba Chesniak, grandmother garlic."

"But what can she do? Besides, I am a little frightened of her. She seems like a witch sometimes."

"No, that is only that black cat that seems like a witch. Never a sound out of the critter, neither meow nor purr nor hiss nor any sound at all. Who has ever seen such an animal before?"

"But maybe Baba Chessy can help us discover who killed Tomo."

"Why should she do that? She's never done that before."

"Well, when did we ever have a murder before?"

“I think we should go to Baba Chessy. What if she can help us?”

“Don’t ask me to go groveling to that witch. She herself should be on the pyre, for as sure as I am standing here, she is a true witch.”

“Watch your fool mouth, you idiot! That woman saved your grandson who was trying to come into this world butt-first. You have a memory as short as your pizzle stick! Bah!”

“Watch your mouth woman before I stuff it with my fist.”

“Without Baba Chessy’s help your son that you are bragging about all the time would have strangled on the cord and your precious wife may well have died from the bleeding and you would have two less children and no wife. Have you no sense of shame, to talk thus about the woman who saved your bloodline?”

“Well, why does she have to be a witch?”

“She is not a witch. You call her thus only because she knows more than you do. The way you talk now, my opinion is that even that donkey standing over there knows more than you do.”

“Hold off what you say you vampire woman. I will convince your husband to beat you.”

“Try, please do try. It would please me greatly to see him beat you up.”

“Come, come, you two. Stop it. Time is wasting for us to save our poor Mario. So, who then should visit Baba Chessy?”

Then Baba Chessy would giggle and say to Bianca, “Ah, Little Friend, I would have been successful on the stage, don’t you think?” And she would giggle some more, to Bianca’s delight.

Baba Chessy would learn later that it was those two young girls who stepped forward to make the decision to visit Baba Chessy. Both their mothers tried to restrain them, pleading, “Margarita and Gordana, you are too young to do this. Please! You have barely started your courses.”

But the two stubborn girls stood their ground. With quiet dignity Margarita said, “I ask you again, Mama, is there any reason for us to look forward to life as married women and mothers when we know our townsmen will not stand up for us if our husbands decide to be wife-beaters? If we allow innocent Mario to be blamed for Tomo’s death, are any of us women safe hereafter? Will not the men who rule our lives feel even freer to do as they will with us, even to beating us to death? Better we take our chances with Baba Chessy and her black cat, I think.”

The women turned away uncomfortably, and a few hung their heads. One said quietly, “These two young girls shame us. Let us go together to see Baba Chessy and ask her help.”

Chapter Five

And so it was decided. On Saturday morning a delegation of three women and two girls was seen knocking carefully on the gate to Baba Chessy's garden and then proceeding to the door of her house with timid but determined steps. One of the women darted quick glances left and right, on the lookout for a leaping black cat with claws extended. This delightfully fearful idea was first put forth by pranking boys and, astonishingly, was still believed by a few of the more gullible villagers. But no cat appeared as this delegation made its way to Baba Chessy's door.

The women and girls were surprised to find that Baba Chessy seemed almost to expect them. She invited them in and offered them small glasses of wine. The two girls took the lead and explained their mission. Baba Chessy listened to their testimony carefully.

When they were finished, she asked if they would be able to look at the paten that the warden accused Mario of stealing. They looked at her dumbfounded. The paten? Why on earth was she asking about a paten?

She was serious. After much consternation and discussion, it was decided that Barta, who cleaned the church sanctuary and sacristy and took care of the priest's vestments, might be able to do that. "The paten is locked in that small cabinet with the monstrance," she said, "but I know where the little key is to open that cabinet."

Baba Chessy instructed her to look at the back side of the paten and make note of anything that was etched there, like initials or dates or symbols. Barta said proudly, "My son goes to school in the city now, staying with my sister there. I can get a piece of his paper and some of his chalk and I will record on the paper anything that is on the back of the paten." Baba Chessy congratulated her for this excellent plan.

One of the girls asked, "And this paten might help us free Mario?"

Baba Chessy replied, "Nothing in life is certain. The most we can do every day is do what we can."

That was not altogether satisfying to the women, but they thanked Baba Chessy and left.

That afternoon the women returned to Baba Chessy, and Barta proudly displayed her work, saying "This is what was on the back of the paten." On the paper she had drawn "SMM MCCI." Baba Chessy looked with interest at the letters and Roman numerals. Then she said, "Is there in the city a church called Santa Maria Maggiore?" The women nodded enthusiastically. Yes, there certainly was, and it was the most important church in the city. "Then," said Baba Chessy slowly, "I think this paten belongs to that church." There were many exclamations of surprise, shock, and disbelief. "But how can that be possible?" "Who could have taken it?" asked the women.

“I don’t think anyone took it now,” said Baba Chessy. “I think it was taken from that church over a hundred years ago.” Again, there was a flurry of exclamations of surprise and disbelief. “How can that be? How did the paten come to be here in Stari Kamen? Do you think someone from our village stole it many years ago?”

When the flurry died down, Baba Chessy said, “I do not know how the paten came to be here in Stari Kamen, but one more thing I will ask of you, Barta. “Do you think the paten you looked at to get these initials is the same paten our priest usually uses on holy days?” Barta said immediately, “No, it is not. I remember thinking as I picked it up last Sunday that it seemed heavier than the one the priest uses on our holy days, and there was a design around the edges of the paten on the front side, sort of like waves following one another. It was definitely a different paten, but I said nothing to the warden because it is not my business to comment on something like that.”

The women watched Barta with exclamations of surprise and a dawning fear. “But what could that mean? How could that be possible?”

Baba Chessy said, “Do you remember the stories your grandparents told you about when the Venetians plundered the city and stole all its treasures?”

The younger women were perplexed, but some of the older women were nodding.

Baba Chessy continued, “That was over a hundred years ago, in the year 1202. Do you see the date that is etched on the paten, ‘MCCI’? That is the year 1201, the year before the city was seized. The Roman Numerals for 1201 are MCCI. The paten has the year MCCI etched on it, which means that it was made and gifted to the church the year before the Venetians plundered the city.”

“So the paten was part of what was stolen from the city?”

“And how did it get here, to Stari Kamen?”

Baba Chessy replied, “Do you also remember the old timers talking about how one of the Venetian ships taking the plunder to Venice was said to have sunk at the northern tip of our island? The stories I have heard say that the captain of that ship wanted to be first back to Venice to get the glory of the plunder, and that when he came out of the city harbor, instead of going south around our island as all the ships do, he went north, thinking to take a shortcut around our island.

But you all know that the waters around the northern tip of our island are so treacherous that no boat or ship ever dares them. It is said that the Venetian ship was overloaded and rode so low in the water there was thought that a small storm could swamp it. It is possible that when it rounded the tip of our island it was hit by a sudden bura. We all know how those come up out of nowhere sometimes.”

The women nodded solemnly.

“It is also possible that it got hit by one of those waves called Devil Waves. I have never seen one, but I have heard them talked about, how they, like the bura, seem to come out of nowhere, that it is as though the sea suddenly erupts into a mountain of water like a vicious monster that curls inward and destroys everything in its path. It is said they are at their peak during high bura seasons.

I have also heard that many people over the years have believed that the treasures of that Venetian ship are sitting at the bottom of the sea off the northern tip of our island, but that to try to retrieve the treasure means sure death because no one can escape the seething sea as it crashes endlessly against the rocks there. But now I wonder. This paten must be proof that someone has braved those waters and found at least this one piece of treasure.”

The women were so staggered by the import of this news that there was complete silence for long moments.

Finally, one woman said, “What do we do now? Does this prove Mario innocent or guilty of the theft of the paten? And how is it connected to the charge of murder?”

“Those are all excellent questions,” murmured Baba Chessy, “and they are the correct questions. Unfortunately, we have no answers to any of them at the moment. I do not want to make any move that will bring danger to any innocent person. For example, there could be questions about how you got the etching, Barta. There would be even more questions about how the paten came to be in the possession of the church at Stari Kamen.

I would like to take a day to think about all these matters. What I would like you to do is find out news about Mario. How quickly will he be taken before the judge? Is he being given food and drink?” The women promised they would tend to that.

“There is one more thing I would like you to do, Barta,” said Baba Chessy. “Tell the church warden Bruno that you would like to polish the holy day paten and the monstrance if he will please remove them from their cabinet. When he removes them, pick up the paten slowly, like a good actress, and exclaim about how it cannot be the right paten, that the holy day paten has no designs and no etching on the back. Please watch his face carefully and be ready to report to us his words and behavior.”

“Oh,” she exclaimed, “I know I can be a good actress! That part will be fun!”

“Be careful, Barta,” said Baba Chessy sternly. “This is not a game. Cornered humans, like cornered animals, are dangerous. I am not saying that Bruno is guilty of anything, but at this time we do not know anything, so we must take all precautions.” Barta assured her she would be careful. “I will go to Bruno after the Sunday service tomorrow,” she said.

After her visitors left, Baba Chessy sat in her favorite chair thinking about everything she had heard over the past days and weeks. The villagers have been concerned about “poor, poor Bruno” for weeks, that he is not himself, that he has lost weight, that his color is off, that he has developed twitches, and most worrying of all, if someone startles him, he jumps and screams – very strange behavior indeed. When they ask him if he is ailing, he dismisses their concerns, telling them he has a slight sick stomach. “This is not a sick stomach,” the gossipers would say, shaking their heads. “Something is bothering Bruno very much.”

Chapter Six

Late Sunday evening after the Compline bell had rung in the city, there was a quiet knock on Baba Chessy’s door. She was already in her nightdress and in bed, lying with Bianca curled around her. Suddenly Bianca raised her head, ears pointed. She leaped out of bed and bounded to the door, her fur on end, her ears back, and her body tensed in the crouch position.

Baba Chessy’s first reaction was fear. Had the brutes found her after all? Even after all these years had passed, must she still live with the fear of them and their accusations, their brutishness, their wish to torture and punish?

She took some deep breaths as a second quiet knock came. “One moment,” she called out. She pulled the wick a little higher in the clay burner, noting how she must soon add oil. She lit the lamp, tied the black kerchief around her head and flung her cloak over her shoulders.

She paused at the door and said, “Who are you that you come at this hour of the night?”

The response was quiet but firm. “I am Bruno, church warden of the church in Stari Kamen, Mistress. I apologize for coming at this hour. I mean you no harm. May I come in?”

Baba Chessy unlatched the bar and unlocked the door. Bianca remained in attack position, but she relaxed when she sensed that the newcomer paid her no heed and had about him an attitude of dejection too strong to allow for any other emotion.

It was indeed Bruno, church warden, standing there, but a Bruno greatly changed. There was both desperation and acceptance written on his face.

Baba Chessy indicated that he should sit at her table. She offered him wine, which he accepted but did not drink. He asked her if she had paper and quill to write. With surprise in her voice, she responded that she did. Then he told her his mission.

“I have come to understand that you can read and write in Latin, Mistress, and I wish to have you write my confession. I am prepared to pay you well for your work. It was not my

good fortune to be sent to school, and though our priest thought to help me learn when he gave me the position of church warden, he wanted me to learn the church tongue, the one in the church missals that the people use and the language he uses when he says the mass.”

“Yes,” said Baba Chessy, “I am familiar with it, but I do not know it well. They call it Glagolitic.”

“Yes,” said Bruno, “That is the one. But I do not want my confession in that tongue. I want it in Latin, so that it can be taken to the bishop in the city, so that he may believe me, for what I have to say is strange.”

Baba Chessy retrieved paper, quill, and ink and poured half a glass of wine for herself, to which she added water. To her surprise, Bruno asked her to add water to his wine as well, saying, “I have no more need of strong drink, Mistress. I know the cost of the juice of the grape. As I prepare to meet my maker I will go with clean body as well as mind.”

Baba Chessy looked at him in alarm.

“Do not worry good lady. I do not plan to take my life. I know, however, that my life has come to an end, and I wish to make right those things I have made wrong. I have always considered myself a good man until the three brothers got their claws into me. Today Barta asked me about the paten, and I knew that today was the day. I knew my story must come to an end, and I wanted to make right the wrongs that I have done this past year. Time has run out.

And the larger part of me is grateful. I have made too much a mess of things. But if I can do the one thing that I now wish to do, my life will not have been in vain, and young people will have a safer world. That is what I wish to do with the life I have remaining. I want to get rid of a little evil and make the world a little better place.

If you can help me write my confession, I will take my document to the bishop tomorrow, telling him of its urgency so that Mario will be cleared. Then I will carry out the plan that I hope will help make the world a little safer. One of the women who still believes in me as a good man told me how you identified the paten, and I understood that you might be the one to help me. That is why I come to you now. My story must end. I will honor the belief of this good woman and all who still believe in me.”

He took a sip of his wine and a shaky breath. Suddenly Bianca leaped onto the table and sat directly in front of Bruno in her classic Sphinx position, staring at him, ears erect, tail moving slowly back and forth. Though he was startled, Bruno did not flinch. “Bianca has come to help him,” thought Baba Chessy. And indeed, that proved to be the case, for Bruno’s shoulders relaxed a little, and he thenceforth kept his eyes on Bianca’s as he told his story.

“My name is Bruno, church warden for the village church in Stari Kamen on the island of Gora. I am 42 years old and have been church warden for six years. I do not have a wife nor child. About a year ago I was walking on a street in the city, admiring some painted cards on a table. The young man tending to the table told me the artist was Dariole, an Italian painter who lived now in the city and painted the scenes of the city and the islands. The cards were not inexpensive. It must have been obvious on my face that I liked them very much but felt I could not spend so much money on them.”

Baba Chessy took up her quill and transcribed his words into Latin. There was silence in her house then, only the voice of Bruno and the steady scratching of the quill.

“A man had joined me at the table there and he commented to me that he agreed the cards were indeed very excellently painted and would be a pleasure to own. We talked for a few minutes and looked at the cards. Suddenly the man said to me, ‘You seem like a good and worthy man, my friend. I know of a place where a man such as you might take a chance to procure enough money to buy one of those beautiful cards.’ I protested, but he was so skillful, and by that time I had become so inflamed with wanting a card, that I soon found myself in the back room of one of the small stores on the street. There were men sitting at several little tables in the room, and the only sound was the constant rolling of what sounded like small rocks being tossed onto the tables.

My new friend led me to a chair at one of the tables and introduced me to the man who seemed to be in charge of the little rocks. As I observed them, I noticed that they were not just any rocks, but were small cubes of carved marble on which black dots had been painted, a certain number of dots on each side. As I watched, the dealer, as he was being called, invited each man at the table to put down a coin or two, shake the marble cubes in his hand, and toss them onto the table, where they rolled and came to a stop. The numbers on top when they stopped rolling determined whether you lost or won your game. As I watched, one man at our table won a small coin and continued to play. Another man lost his game and rose from the table to leave. Another won his game, and the dealer pushed a pile of coins his way. A pile of coins! More than I would earn in a month! Was it indeed so easy to earn money, I thought?

My new friend urged me to place one small coin on the table, only one coin, he said, to try it out. ‘It cannot hurt if you only take one small coin to try it out, can it?’ he asked. I agreed and put my coin on the table. To my delight, my throw earned me two coins. I smiled with pleasure and sat unsure what to do. My new friend said, ‘This seems to be your lucky day, my friend, since you earned yourself a free coin, why don’t you put both your coins into play and see what happens?’

I did so, and to my astonishment, a pile of coins was pushed my way that would more than pay for a card. I whooped in pleasure and said to my new friend, ‘My card! I have enough to buy a card! I thank you, good sir, for introducing to me this wonderful game!’ I rushed out

and returned to the table of cards and bought my favorite one. Seeing how much pleasure I took in the card and seeing that I had extra money in my hand from my new earnings, the young attendant offered to give me two cards for the money I earned with the marble cubes. I left the city beaming with happiness at my good fortune.

How often have I thought of the words I uttered on that day! How bitterly have I reproached myself for those words that doomed me: 'thank you for introducing me to this wonderful game.' For it was in this way and on that day that my downfall was assured. The establishment where I was ensnared was called the Three Brothers, and it was indeed run by three brothers, the most nefarious and evil men it has ever been my misfortune to meet.

Over the next months I returned to the city and to that evil place as often as my schedule would allow. I was too slow to see how I was being reeled in. At first, I would play cautiously, putting on the table only a set number of coins. Only now do I understand how cleverly the three brothers managed me. If they saw me excited and upbeat, they would encourage me to increase the number of coins I laid down. If they saw me sad or disappointed, they would encourage me to wait, telling me that my luck would change.

And it seemed my luck always did change. They kept giving me new rocks to throw, which they told me was to increase my luck, and to this day I do not know if those rocks were rigged so that I would sometimes win and sometimes lose. I know only that I seemed to win and lose more or less steadily and evenly, as it seemed. But as the weeks passed, my tally at the end of the month would always be in the negative. Instead of that being a warning to me, it only inflamed me. I was in a fever to earn back the money I had lost. The more I lost, the more inflamed I became to play again to recoup my losses. Today I cannot imagine how I could not see this happening. It is as though my mind were taken over by a demon and I was helpless.”

Chapter Seven

The hours passed. Baba Chessy paused to get another candle because her eyes were getting tired.

“Much of the past year exists in my mind in a kind of fog,” said Bruno. “There became for me only one reality: the small white rocks. I do not know when it happened, but the day came when I no longer played the rocks to recoup my lost money; I played the rocks simply because I felt compelled to play them. I could not stay away. My hands seemed to itch for the feel of those cold little cubes and the clicking noise of their bouncing on the table. That became my food and drink, the first thing I needed in the morning and the last thing in my mind as I tried to sleep at night.

Of course this must take a toll. My health has always been excellent, but about four months ago I began to have night terrors and sweats and I started to be unable to eat and I lost weight. Sometime around that time I slid into heavy drinking. I have never been one for the taverns, but I found them then, and soon my monthly wages could not keep up with my need for wine. There came the day several weeks ago when I even drank the church wine intended for the consecration. That was of course a big problem, but I managed to convince the priest that I had failed to order a new bottle. Each day it seemed my lies compounded, trying to cover up the lies of the previous day.

And always there was the gaming table and the little devil rocks. On days I won, I would take my earnings and vow to never return, to clean up my life and be again the Bruno my mother could be proud of. But by then the dual demons of wine and devil rocks had their claws into me too deeply. 'You cannot get away from us,' they seemed to snarl. I tried to drown out their nastiness by drinking more wine and playing the tables more recklessly.

One day one of the dice players who was a regular came in. I had not seen him for a few weeks, and I was horrified to see what had happened to him. His face was a patchwork of yellow/black bruising, his arm was in a sling, and he walked with a cane. He sat at his usual table and brought out coins with a trembling hand. Everyone in the room saw him but pointedly ignored him. The man on my right whispered to me, 'They got him, poor devil.'

In the coming days I learned what had happened to him. When he could not pay his gambling debt, the brothers hired a gang of ruffians to beat him up to make him pay. When he recovered sufficiently from his injuries, he sold his land to raise the money to pay the brothers. His wife and three children then were homeless, so he sent them to the country to live with his sister. He took a room for himself in the city so that he could be nearer the gaming tables, determined that his luck would change and he would buy back his land and get his family back.

I noticed that his betting became sort of frantic. At times he would lay down what I considered staggering sums, which were always lost. I noticed that the only times he won were when his bet was small. How could he, how could I, not understand that the games were rigged?

The man lost weight, the trembling in his hand turned to shaking, and one day about a month later he seemed to lose his senses. He started screaming, 'They are cheating me! They are cheating me! I am being robbed! They are cheating me and taking all my money!' He went on in that crazy way until two of the brothers manhandled him to the door and told him to get lost. He tried to come back in, but they barred his way and repeated that he needed to get lost. The next morning, he was found stabbed on the street, dead.

Even this terrible story did not stop my need to feel those small cold cubes in my hand, the cubes that had sent that man to his doom. Not even that terrible story could stop me."

Bruno took a shuddering breath and made a visible effort to pull himself together. Bianca put a paw on his clenched fist. He looked at her, shook his head sadly, and continued his story.

“Today I am astonished that I did not recognize the foul play of loaded dice. I knew that I had never been a stupid man. I knew that my quick mind was why the priest chose me to be the church warden. Yet in this matter of the dice, I acted like an imbecile. It is truly a great mystery to me how my mind was so mired in the need for the devil rocks that I could not recognize something so obvious as foul play. It is just as incomprehensible to me today to understand that nothing, nothing at all could stop my need for those rocks.

My tally at the end of each month grew. I would pay down some of it and vow to play no more until I paid it all off. At those times one of the brothers would commiserate with me and tell me I was making the right choice, that it would be good to stop playing until I could pay off my debt. And then he would say to me, ‘Just to help you feel better while you are staying away from the tables, I am going to raise your debt ceiling so that you will know that you are not so close to it that it scares you. You can always tell yourself, “It is not after all, as bad as I think it is. See, I could still borrow this much more if I needed to.”’

It would not be long, of course, before the temptation of all that extra money I could borrow would be more temptation than my weakened will could withstand. I was soon back at the table, with higher sums in play. My debt increased, and it increased again, and there came the day when I knew I could not pay the debt and would never be able to pay that debt. That was the day my path to hell became truly paved.”

Bruno took a deep breath and sat for some minutes before taking a sip of wine. Baba Chessy did so as well. Then he continued.

“You have no doubt heard the strange story of Mario’s uncle, the one they called Crazy Lupo, and the land he owned at Devil Rocks on the northern tip of the island. As you know, when Crazy Lupo’s body was found a few weeks ago and Mario came into possession of the property, Mario started to travel up there occasionally to see what he should do with the property.

Last week Mario came to the rectory to show the priest something he had found in his uncle’s house. It was a beautiful paten that he found in the stone house. Our priest was gone that day to the city because the bishop was having a meeting.

When my eyes fell on that paten I could think only one thing: here is my salvation. I immediately saw my opportunity. I took our best paten from its cabinet and replaced it with the paten Mario had brought. Then I went to the city to give my paten as payment for my debt. To my dismay the three brothers laughed at me and said it was a fake and would pay almost nothing of my debt. But they kept it, telling me to get real money to pay my debt. But

I know our paten was real gold and worth a lot of money. But I was helpless. How could I go to the Magistrate when I had stolen the paten? In this way I was in deeper than ever.”

Here Bruno interrupted his story to ask Baba Chessy if she were familiar with the place called Devil Rocks and with the thing called a Devil Wave. She said to him, “I have not seen these things in person, but, like everything else that is talked about in Stari Kamen, these are things that I have learned about by listening to the villagers.”

He looked at her strangely. “No, I do not eavesdrop on them, Bruno, nor do I spy or use magical means. I simply sit in my grape arbor sometimes to rest after I have worked hard in my garden. As you yourself are probably aware, gossip is the lifeblood that keeps the village alive, and for good or ill, the corner of my land is a favorite place for people to spend time gossiping. I do not seek to know what they are gossiping about, but I cannot help hearing what they say.”

Understanding dawned on Bruno’s face. “That is how you knew about the paten?”

“Yes, Bruno, I heard the girl tell her friend there was something strange happened to the best paten. That is also where I heard the whispers about you, about how people were worrying about you, that you did not seem like yourself anymore, that you looked ill, that you seemed terribly nervous about something, and then there was that problem about the missing wine, and then the paten that you accused Mario of stealing, and then someone whispered that he wondered if the rocks had got you. And as I heard all these things and thought about them, I began to wonder.”

Bruno was shaking his head sadly.

Baba Chessy continued, “The question, of course, is where did that paten come from? The great scandal of the sacking of the city was over 100 years ago, as you know, but it was such a fearful and evil thing that it is sometimes still talked about today as though it had happened only yesterday. I think the reason it is still so much in people’s minds is that the puzzle of the lost Venetian ship has never been solved. That is what the people talk about most, how there must be so much gold and silver treasure down there at the foot of the Devil Rocks cliff, and how no one has the courage to try to get at it because it means instant death from the waves and rocks.”

Bruno continued to listen, and his hand stole to Bianca, giving her fur a gentle stroke.

“My surmise from my studies of history,” continued Baba Chessy, “is that that Venetian ship was probably struck by a Devil Wave, or a combination of a Devil Wave and bura. They often go together, as you know. It is said that all of Enrico Dandolo’s ships were overloaded with treasure, and that they rode so low in the water that even as they left harbor, there were people who wondered if they would make it to Venice. I think that one of the ships chose to go north in the strait after leaving the city, hoping this way to save time and thus be the first

ship back to Venice where the captain would be first to get best prices for some choice pieces that he knew Dandolo would never miss.

But he did not know what the villagers knew, that the northern edge of the island was called Devil Rocks because of the violent currents that swirled there as the sea had to split to go around the craggy misshaped edge of the island of Gora. On that December day a hundred years ago, that Italian ship rounded the corner to turn west into the great sea and something happened. A sudden vicious bura may have come down from the mountains. The ship was overloaded, riding low in the water with too much pillaged bounty. One violent huff of the bura and the ship would have crashed into Devil Rocks and gone down in minutes, taking all with it. Perhaps there was a Devil Wave with that bura or even a Devil Wave by itself. Either would be able to tip over an overloaded ship with ease. This is what may have happened.

No one has ever dared to look for the riches in the hundred years they remained on the sea floor because the currents are a death trap, and there grew up around Devil Rocks the belief that anyone who tried to find the stolen gold would die.”

“That is all true,” broke in Bruno. “But Mario’s uncle did go looking and did find some of the treasure. It might be that the uncle discovered part of the treasure by accident after one fierce bura storm, and then he dived repeatedly looking for more treasures. Or it might be that he started diving not long after he moved up there. He would have heard all the village gossip just like everyone else. I have heard that he was a clever man, that he could remember things everyone else forgot, and that he could remember dates and happenings just like they happened yesterday.

At any rate, the only way the paten could have gotten into his stone house is that he found it, either following a storm or diving for it. He lived alone at Devil Rocks for years. What did he do all the time, is what I wondered. He was a successful diver in Greece, and I think if anyone could be successful getting that treasure out of the sea, it would be Crazy Lupo. I think Tomo also thought that.”

Bruno continued, “I did not kill Tomo. I did wrong when I told the magistrate that I had heard Mario threaten Tomo, which was false, and I did doubly wrong when I accused Mario of stealing the paten. But all I was trying to do was buy time to postpone my day of reckoning with the three brothers. Some of what I did then makes no sense to me now. I think I was half crazy. When Mario came to tell the priest that he had found small chests with church vessels in them, all I could think about was that if I could get at them, I could pay my debt. But I did not kill Tomo. I suppose it could be said that my words doomed Tomo. But is there a court in the land that will convict drunken words?

This is what happened. I had gone to the tavern last Sunday night to try to drown out my fear of the three brothers. Tomo was there, drinking with that sort of fierce anger he gets

sometimes. I did not know that he had beaten his wife Jorka the day before. Men in the tavern don't typically talk about anything like that. As the evening wore on and we bought each other more drinks of wine, we both got drunk, and at some point I found myself blabbing about what Mario had told me about the treasure. I really paid no attention to whether Tomo was listening or not because I just thought that the two of us were too drunk for any rational discourse.

Today I think that Tomo was not as drunk as I was, and that he must have listened closely to what I rambled on about concerning the treasure at Devil Rocks. I think he must have gone by himself to try to get it, and he fell into the water and rocks below. He probably crashed his head on a sharp rock and that caused that deep hole that the Magistrate thought was from a weapon."

Baba Chessy nodded. "That makes the most sense."

"When Tomo was found and Jorka was taken to jail," continued Bruno, "I thought little of it. Maybe she did kill him, for he was an awful brute to her. But then when Mario was arrested, the frantic anxiety of my own impending doom made me think up a diabolical plot: If I could keep Mario locked up long enough, I might be able to get enough of the treasure that I could find a goldsmith to melt down the gold so I could give it to the three brothers. In my crazed state I don't think I ever thought about the fact that Mario might hang for the murder of Tomo. I had no thought except my need to get the money to pay my debt. Mario has done nothing wrong. He is innocent, and he is a good man."

Bruno took a sip of wine and asked, "If you feel well enough, Mistress, may we continue the letter?"

It was a long story. Baba Chessy was still writing when the first cock crowed the next morning, having to stop frequently to be certain she had heard and interpreted correctly the things Bruno was saying. At times his voice became so inflamed with hatred for the Three Brothers that he became incoherent, and she hesitated to write anything at all. However, they persevered, and in the end the document was written well enough to be put before the eyes of the bishop.

"Today I will take this letter to the bishop so that Mario will be released," said Bruno then, "and from there I go directly to the three brothers to arrange with them to go this afternoon to get the treasure from the cave."

Baba Chessy brought out bread and cheese for Bruno, urging him to eat, that he would need his strength. She folded the letter and dripped candle wax on the fold to seal it with the imprint of Bruno's ring. Baba Chessy found it difficult to look at the resigned sadness in Bruno's eyes as he said, "The three brothers will meet their deaths at Devil Rocks today. I will not kill them. I will not imperil my soul that way. But if there is a merciful god, they will meet their deaths at Devil Rocks today, through no cause of mine."

Baba Chessy embraced him briefly and gave him the kiss of peace on both cheeks, saying, “You are a good man, Bruno, and God will be merciful.” He broke down then and began to sob. Bianca put her paws around Bruno’s clenched fists and held them there until he became composed. Then she jumped from the table, going to the corner where she kept her treasures. She returned to the table with a white feather in her mouth, which she laid before Bruno. He put the feather into his pocket, resting his hand on her head as he said, “Thank you, little friend.”

Then he brought out coins to pay Baba Chessy for her work. She declined them, but he left them on the table saying, “Use them then for good. I have no further use of them.”

Chapter Eight

Over the next days and weeks the village of Stari Kamen was alive with the story of what happened at Devil Rocks that Monday afternoon. There were almost as many versions of the story as there were people in the village, thought Baba Chessy as she sat resting in her grape arbor listening to all. One version reported that there were two boats; another version reported two Devil Waves; another version reported four men in the capsized boat; another version swore that at the moment of destruction the face of the devil appeared on the cliff; another version said no, it was the face of God; and so it went.

It was the two fishermen who first told the tale. They were coming down the strait, returning from their day’s work, when they noticed strange activity at the base of Devil Rocks. There seemed to be a boat bobbing in the high waves and a man on that boat trying to reach a rope ladder on the cliff.

The fishermen were dumbfounded and thought their eyes deceived them. One said, “Let us lower the sail until we see what is happening on Devil Rocks.” The other one said, “No, do not stop! It must be the devil himself trying to lure us to our death. Do not stop.”

But both men’s curiosity overcame their fear, and the sail was lowered, bringing their boat to a slow forward movement. They sat transfixed, watching the activity at the base of Devil Rocks; and they were, indeed, the only ones who witnessed the strange happenings there that day.

As they recounted their adventure over and over in the coming days, the tale seemed to take on a life of its own, and it became more difficult to tell truth from exaggeration and embellishment, the latter two coming not from the fishermen but from their audiences who later gained importance by retelling the story. The basic story as it came from the lips of the fishermen was the first one to come to Baba Chessy’s ears and is the one that rang true for her. The simplest version is often closest to the truth, she decided.

“We disbelieved what our eyes were telling us. A boat was bouncing around at the foot of the cliff and a man on that boat seemed to be trying to catch a rope ladder that hung against the cliff. The ladder was flying this way and that as the waves hit it. Try after try, the man could not grab onto the rope, and it looked like at any moment he would fall to his doom.

There were three other men on that boat, dressed in fine clothes, and though they looked healthy and strong, they could not keep their boat under control because the waves seemed to swirl first one way and then another, and the men were using oars to try to keep their boat from hitting the huge rocks.

We could not imagine anyone foolhardy enough to try to manage a boat among those high waves and all those rocks. Insanity it was, complete insanity.

Eventually the men maneuvered their boat closer to the cliff and there found a little respite from the mad swirling. Their boat was then directly under the rope ladder; and the man trying to reach the ladder suddenly succeeded in grabbing it. He swung wildly back and forth, banging against the cliff. How could that man keep his hold of the rope? It looked like at any moment he must lose his hold and go plunging to his death.

The three men on the boat seemed to be calling to the man on the rope. Were they telling him to return to the boat? But he was climbing up, not down. He went slowly and looked around now and then, gazing out at the sea. Did he expect to find the waves lessening, or was he looking for another boat, perhaps a rescue boat? But he kept climbing slowly, one foot after the other. He seemed very weary. Was he too tired to climb more? But no, he put another foot up and reached up for a higher rung on the ladder.

The men in the boat were looking up and continued to shout at him. The man on the ladder looked out to the sea again and kept looking until suddenly his one arm shot into the air and just then a freak ray of the sun struck his face directly, and his face was that of God! His face looked like the face of God. It was glowing, and he seemed to be smiling, and it was altogether so strange that we knew we were seeing a vision; and we thought that the devil was tricking us.

Then suddenly the sea under Devil Rocks seemed to rear up as though a monster animal were rising out of the sea. We knew it for what it was, a Devil Wave.

The wave lifted the boat high, higher still, until the boat had reached the level of the climber on the rope and some of the men were reaching out to try to grab hold of the rope or the climber, but just as suddenly, the body of the great wave collapsed under the boat and the boat started tumbling end over end down and down and suddenly there was something like an explosion as the boat hit a rock, and then things were flying in every direction, as though a giant had slammed the boat onto the rock, breaking it into splinters. We saw things flying,

but it was all so fast and chaotic that we could not see if the flying things were pieces of the boat or were people.

Then the climber caught our attention. The lip of the wave was upon him. He turned his body to face the sea. He let go of the ladder, extended his arms wide, and leaped.

In a matter of minutes, as we watched in fascinated horror, there was nothing under Devil Rocks but the relentless waves pounding the rocks and some wooden debris riding the mad waves. We raised our sail quickly and let the wind take us swiftly down the strait.”

When the villagers heard the story, they had much to say. “No! No! Bruno would never have leaped! He would never have done that! He was the church warden and would never have done something like that! It would jeopardize his immortal soul.” No, no, the villagers were certain. He had simply lost his hold on the rope, poor man. How could he have kept hold of that rope when it was banging around wildly against the cliff, and especially after that Devil Wave came up. And of course, it was a certainty that the Devil Wave had ripped his hands from the rope and caused him to fall and so he was tumbling down into the cauldron of water and rocks. Of course that was how it happened.

Baba Chessy would listen to all this day after day in the weeks and months to come, and she knew the villagers needed to make the story fit their idea of a correct world order. But she knew the truth because she felt the truth. She knew that when Bruno saw that wave coming, and he saw the giant lip of it curling at him to tear him from the ladder, he saw death coming for him and he leaped into its embrace. There is something very noble in that, thought Baba Chessy.

She could imagine how Bruno’s last moments brought him the exultation that would indeed transform his face into the face of God or an angel. He was triumphant! He had triumphed over the evil of the three brothers, who would ruin no more lives.

And when her mind in the years to come might land once more on the story of Bruno, her heart would give a little leap of happiness, knowing how Bruno had soared in his last hour. What joy, what jubilation, what triumph he must have felt as he saw that wave coming! What gratitude he must have felt to an all-merciful God for granting to him this last vision of his earthly life: the righteous end of a great evil. The three brothers would not have the opportunity to ruin anyone else. “Of course his heart soared!” Baba Chessy would exclaim to Bianca. “Why should not his body soar also?” And each time she thought of this, Baba Chessy would extend her arms out wide and imagine the bliss of Bruno’s last moments; and Bianca would regard her solemnly.

Chapter Nine

There was, as could be expected, a great to-do in the villages on the island after Bruno's confession came to be known. On Tuesday Mario suddenly appeared in Stari Kamen, a free man. He seemed dazed and shaken by his ordeal, but otherwise unharmed. He had not been beaten nor tortured to gain a confession. It was noticed with interest by the women that even before Mario went to his own house, he went to Jorka's house to inquire about her. "He is a good man," said the women to each other, smiling.

Mario's job at the olive press warehouse was waiting for him, and work was interrupted for a while as the men crowded around him asking about his experience in the city. Eventually the foreman called out that the presses needed to stay running, and it almost seemed as though things would return to normal. But that could not be, not after Bruno's confession.

On Tuesday afternoon the first body washed up on the northeastern shore of the island, very near to where the previous two bodies had washed up. It was taken to the priest's house to await transport to the city. By evening two more bodies were found, and the Magistrate was notified that the three brothers were ready to be taken back to the city for burial.

The Magistrate arrived on Wednesday morning in his boat, with his deputy and a guard. He accepted the testimony of the two fishermen. His orders from the bishop were that no investigation was necessary since the men had brought about their own doom. When the Magistrate's boat was loaded with the three bodies, it rode so low in the water that he spent some minutes wondering if he should try to make two trips. He surveyed the strait and decided that there were not too many white caps, and he would probably arrive safely in the city.

The villagers breathed in relief to have the three men removed from their village. In the villagers' minds the three men were cursed. They had lured one of Stari Kamen's fine men to his doom, and they were evil.

On Wednesday afternoon Bruno's body was found. There was a white feather in the tunic pocket, reported people in wonder. Baba Chessy smiled to hear this.

Bruno's body was brought to the church and laid out in splendor befitting a bishop, said some. He was dressed in the special clothes he wore when he functioned as church warden, and his bier was wreathed with flowers and herbs and small gifts. The white feather had been placed in his hands.

Unlike the other bodies, Bruno's body showed no major bruises. On his face was a look of such peace that the villagers marveled. It did not take long, of course, for a rumor to begin spreading that a miracle had occurred on the island, that Bruno had been spared the

pummeling of the Devil Rocks because he had helped to return to Mother Church the sacred liturgical vessels that had been stolen from her over a hundred years ago. “He is a saint. He is a saint,” was the cry then among the more pious. Some of the villagers even began to pray to him in the church.

This seemed excessive to the priest, of course, but he had little time to think about it because Bruno’s confession had set off a major chain of events that would certainly strain the peaceful existence of this humble village priest.

The next day Mario was called out of the warehouse to meet with the Magistrate from the city. With the Magistrate were three burly guards with pikes in their hands and sheathed knives hanging from their tunic belts. They ordered Mario to go with them to his land on Devil Rocks. The bishop had sent the three men to remain on guard at Devil Rocks until the arrival of the archbishop. The Magistrate was strangely subdued and quiet, noted the villagers. “Ah ha!” they said to one another. “Bigger fish swimming in the waters now.”

They were correct. It was learned later that the document now being called Bruno’s confession had indeed stirred up the waters. Even the implacable bishop, always so serene in the assurance that he was the authority on all things to do with his city or the island, had been so shaken by the enormity of the discovery and happenings at Devil Rocks that he had called upon the archbishop, who was said to be currently traveling to the city to take charge of the discovery at Devil Rocks.

That evening after the Vesper’s bell had rung in the city and its voice carried gently across the waters on the easterly breeze, Baba Chessy had another visitor. It was Mario knocking at her door this time. He had come to thank her. “I understand, good mistress, that it is to you I owe thanks for my freedom. Without your understanding of the inscription on the back of the gold paten, I may today have been facing the hangman’s rope instead of sitting here enjoying your wine and the warm welcome of your cat.” They both laughed. To the surprise of Baba Chessy as well as Mario, Bianca had leaped up onto the table shortly after Mario sat down, and she waited expectantly for a soft stroke or two from him.

Mario told Baba Chessy about the guards now stationed at Devil Rocks. “That small spit of land carries problems much larger than itself,” he said. “And there may yet be more problems. The Magistrate is excessively close-mouthed about everything, but what I understand from the little that he would say is that the matter is now in the hands of the bishop and the archbishop.”

“The archbishop!” exclaimed Baba Chessy.

“Yes, your ears do not deceive you, Mistress. It seems the matter is deemed so important that only the archbishop has authority to handle it. I wish he would take that cursed spit of land off my shoulders while he is at it. I never wanted the land and have no use for it nor any need of it, but I was informed that the land was suddenly now mine after my uncle’s death.”

“That spit of land has seemed to cause a great deal of trouble for you, Mario, but it has also provided redemption for one I know, so I can never consider it to be evil land. Do you know how it came to be that the paten was found there?”

“Yes, I can certainly tell you that, for it was I who found it. About a week after my uncle’s funeral, I thought I should go there and see if he had left anything on the land that needed to be taken care of. The Magistrate declared cause of death old age and natural causes, which made no sense really. People who die of old age and natural causes are seldom found in the sea. But I accepted that verdict along with everyone else because I thought, what does it really matter? As far as I knew, Crazy Lupo, as they called him, had no children, and I understood, as everyone else did, that he owned nothing in this world but his odd stone hut on that barren point of land. He wanted only to be left alone, and the villagers did leave him alone. I have never heard that anyone ever went to see him except boys daring each other to ‘brave the dragon in his lair,’ as they say.

I had never a thought about what my uncle might have been doing with his time, day after day, alone in that stone house with the roar of the surf day and night. Occasionally I would think of him, but knowing he wanted to be alone, I never felt comfortable going to visit him. When I went there after his funeral, I was shocked to find that paten sitting on a flat rock that looked like he had been using it as a table. The paten had marks of grease or oil on it, so it seemed he had been using it as a plate.

The house itself was amazingly small, I thought, more like an animal’s burrow except tall enough that I could stand up in it. But from side to side it was no more than the width of my arms, and no longer than I could walk in six good strides. It was a wonder to me that he spent his entire life in that hermit’s cell, for that is what it seemed like to me. There was at the far end a pile of branches on which were masses of dried moss and a crumpled and tattered blanket of sheep wool. He must have used the moss as a mattress and as a cover.

The chinks between the stones were also stuffed with moss. Once I was inside the house and sheltered from the wind coming off the sea, I knew it would be almost warm in the wintertime. All of this was a great astonishment to me. I had never taken the time to wonder how my uncle might be staying warm. From those conjectures I began to wonder how he survived with food and drink.

It was obvious that he cooked his food in a circular area outside the door, a sort of pit lined with blackened stones. Driftwood and branches were piled nearby for fuel. The cleverest thing of all was his solution for drinking water. At various places near the hut there were driftwood boards laid as though for a small floor. I removed one of the pieces of wood and was amazed to find that he had created cisterns by chiseling out deep depressions in some of the larger rocks, to catch the rainwater. He would have removed the pieces of wood when it was raining and then replaced them when it was not raining, to protect his water

from animals and debris. I also saw a metal contraption in the corner inside the hut that I could see was probably a metal cone to get fresh water by boiling sea water.

There were lines strung between two trees where I saw a few fish still hanging, drying. He probably ate dry fish much of the time. When I later walked the perimeter of the land, I saw that although everyone thought that Devil Rocks was inhospitable and unable to support life, I found on the western side of the land some old olive trees and grapevines. I saw also on the western side that my uncle had made a crude stairway that would take him down to sea level. He probably fished there and swam in good weather. I wondered briefly if that would have also been his launching place for diving. But after I found the chests, I decided it was not. The chests would not have been where they were if he brought them to land on this western side.

All in all, I could see that my uncle would have been able to survive quite well in so simple a manner.”

Chapter Ten

“At any rate,” Mario continued, “when I saw the paten on the table, I became fearful. What was the meaning of such a thing? Was my uncle a thief, stealing from churches? Somehow, I could not believe that. But where could that paten have come from, I thought. As I stood outside his house listening to the booming surf below the cliff, I saw a thick rope extending from a large rock toward the cliff. The rope had been tied around the rock. I followed it toward the cliff and went nervously closer to the edge, where I saw that the rope was attached to a strong bar made from a stout branch, and from that bar hung a rope ladder.

What an astonishing thing! Surely my uncle did not descend the face of the cliff with that rope ladder! But then I started thinking about the paten, and how strange that was, and I started remembering the old wives’ tales about treasure being buried under the cliff at Devil Rocks, and I started to wonder if my uncle had somehow found some of that treasure. But how would it be possible for him to survive in the roiling sea here? I wondered.

I remembered then that he had gone to Greece as a young man and was a sponge diver in very deep waters for years. Would he have learned there how to survive treacherous waters and be able to dive under Devil Rocks for treasure? It seemed that I must descend that ladder if I were to find out. Lying on my stomach, I eased myself toward the lip of the cliff and peered over. From that vantage point I could see that the ladder stopped about halfway down the cliff and its end was anchored to a rock jutting from the face of the cliff. There was a narrow, jagged hole behind the jutting rock that might be a cave.

If that were a cave, I thought, that might be where my uncle would bring any treasure he found, as a way station before bringing it to his house. With his suspicious mind, he

probably thought he should not bring his treasure to his house in case anyone trespassed and entered his house.

Something on the ladder about halfway down caught my attention. I peered closely. It looked like a slipper caught on a rung of the ladder, with leather thongs dangling and swaying slightly in the breeze. Might this have been my uncle's slipper? Had those leather thongs binding it to his feet come loose and the slipper somehow snagged on the rope and caused him to fall? The more I thought about that, the more likely it seemed to be.

I could not find my courage to go down that ladder that day, and I decided I would go home and think about things. I took the paten with me to take to the priest and tell him what I had found. I did not want a sacred thing like a paten to be in my house. A paten! The liturgical vessel the priest used for the Consecration of the Sacred Host! I did not want that in my house.

But when I went to the priest's house, I learned that he was in the city for a meeting with the bishop and was not expected back for several days. Bruno offered to keep the paten in the church safely until the priest returned. You can imagine how shocked I was to learn later that he had accused me of stealing our church's paten. I felt like I was losing my mind. I could not understand how Bruno could say that."

Mario stopped talking then, shaking his head. Baba Chessy said, "Are you familiar with Bruno's story and how it came to be that he accused you?"

"Yes," replied Mario, "today I forgive him, of course, but at the time I felt only the grossest injustice and despair. Not only had I been accused of a murder I did not do, but now I was labeled a thief of church vessels. It was so unthinkable that I really did wonder if I were losing my mind."

There was silence for a few minutes as Mario gently stroked Bianca's fur and she butted his hand for more stroking. Then he continued.

"I did find my courage the next day. That morning, I got up before cock crow and walked to Devil Rock. I would go down that ladder and make finished this business that was so upsetting. I wanted nothing to do with sacred church vessels, and the sooner I could put my mind at rest about the matter, the better, I thought.

With extreme gratitude I found there was only a slight easterly breeze that day, and the surf was only half what it normally was. With my heart in my throat, I lay on my belly, grasped the bar tightly, then slid my body into position at the cliff's edge, inching backward until my legs hung over the edge and first one foot and then the second found purchase on the rope ladder. Slowly I let go of the bar one hand at a time and found that the rope bore my weight well. I took a deep breath and sent a prayer skyward, and down I went, wondering how my uncle, older than I, had found the courage to dangle on a free-swinging rope or ladder over

that cauldron below. It was terrifying enough to climb slowly down a ladder that hugged the cliff and stayed in position. I should certainly die of fright if I found myself dangling on a rope free to swing as it pleased.

Near the end of the ladder I saw a shelf hidden by a sharp protruding rock. The shelf seemed to extend into the cliff. Holding fast to the ladder with one hand, I grabbed hold of the jutting rock and put one foot gingerly on the ledge. It felt solid enough that I put down my second foot, careful to keep my eyes firmly to the front of me and not dare to look down into the cauldron. I let go of the ladder completely then, bent into a crouching position and crept forward on the ledge, climbing over a knee-high rock into the large crack that did indeed open into a cave.

It was not a large cave, but I pulled myself up and found I could stand within it. The cave was empty except for large rocks and small boulders scattered here and there. I noticed that near the far wall, some of the rocks formed a kind of second wall. Could the lashing of waves have pushed them into that formation? I wondered. Then I noticed there were scrape marks on the lichened green floor of the cave. No, I decided, those rocks were not put into that formation by waves. A human did that. It must have been my uncle.

I went around to the left of that wall and peered behind it. There I stood open-mouthed. Behind those rocks and boulders in that cave there were indeed small old chests.

I was shocked into stupefaction and could only stand still and stare, unable to even think of what my next step should be. I went slowly toward them as a man in a dream might walk to his doom. Today as I tell this story it is hard for me to let go of the fear and strangeness I felt that day, as though the whole world had shifted and I was now living in a different world.

The chests had been pushed one after the other into the space between the wall of rocks and the wall of the cave. I went close to the nearest one. It was made of wood and leather with rope thrust through rusting grommets and bound round the chest. The wood was warped and the leather was cracking, as though both were drying out after long immersion in water. The light was dim at the back of the cave, but I was sure I counted five chests.

I decided that it would be foolish to assume they held more church vessels just because of that one paten. I would need to open a chest to find out. I pulled the first one carefully toward me and with equal care unwound the rope that bound it. The latch had rusted and was gone. It took some strength and some pulling before I was able to lift the lid of the chest.

As the lid fell back, I nearly fainted in fear and shock. It was full of gold and silver church vessels: chalices, patens, monstrances, ciboria, all the vessels used for the sacred liturgy. How could this be? Was this the work of the devil? I closed the chest and sat for long minutes thinking what to do.

Then my eyes, adjusted now to the dimness of the cave, saw in the corner of the cave nearest the opening another rope ladder. This one seemed longer and was secured by tying it around a heavy rock. That must mean that my uncle used that rope to descend into the cauldron. How could he brave it?

I regained my courage and crawled to the edge of the cave to look out at the sea and dare to look down into the cauldron. Then I could see that it would be possible to do as my uncle must have done. On a calm day like the day I had then, you could see a place directly below the ledge where there was a small sandy beach under shallow water surrounded by giant rocks. On a calm day a courageous man might descend to that tiny beach and from there explore the seabed around the rocks and then dive into the deeper waters that fell off that shelf. The longer I surveyed the situation, the more certain I became that it could be done, and that my uncle had done it.

Now it was left to me to dispose of this treasure. I wanted nothing to do with sacred church vessels. They must be returned to the church. I decided I needed to tell the church warden Bruno as soon as possible. I secured the chest I had opened and made my way back to the ledge and from there up the ladder to the safety of land, pausing to untangle my uncle's shoe from the ladder and take it with me to leave in his hut.

I returned to Stari Kamen, where I went immediately to Bruno to tell him of my discovery, that he would be able to tell the priest. The next day I was asked to go to the city to get help for Jorka, and the day after that I was arrested."

Chapter Eleven

There was a pause.

"And now I am a free man, thanks to your knowledge, good mistress. My gratitude will remain my debt that I would be honored to pay if your future would bring that opportunity."

"Thank you, Mario," said Baba Chessy. "I am very curious about the next steps the bishop and archbishop will take. Is there any news about that?"

"All I know at this time," he replied, "is that our good priest is in quite a tizzy about everything. I guess it has never been known that the archbishop would come to our island. He almost never makes his way to even the city, much less to our poor little villages here. I do feel anxiety on behalf of our priest. He wants so badly to do things right and gain credit in the eyes of the world. Yesterday we had to all gather at the church so that he could teach us how to kiss the ring of the archbishop."

"Kiss the archbishop's ring?" Baba Chessy struggled to contain a small giggle.

“Yes, someone said that during the archbishop’s installation by the pope, all the bishops and priests were required to kiss the new archbishop’s ring, one after the other.”

“But this is not the installation of an archbishop.”

“I agree with you. I do not know why we are to do this. But we all had to practice. The priest stood at the steps to the altar, and we had to line up one after the other and approach him and kiss a ring on his hand. He was very particular about how we did that, too. You were supposed to genuflect on the right knee, not the left one, which confused many people who had been used to genuflecting on their left knees. Then you had to lean forward without touching the priest and place your lips on the ring. Several of the people lost their balance and fell over trying to do that. The bishop told them to use a stout stick if they could not stay upright.”

Mario tried to smother a laugh. Baba Chessy felt no such inhibition. She laughed outright, saying, “You are a talented storyteller, Mario. It is no wonder Bianca gives you her full approval. I have always suspected she loves stories.”

They both laughed then, and Mario used his other hand to scratch under Bianca’s chin, which pleasure must have so met her approval that she shamelessly stretched full out on the table inviting a belly rub.

Mario continued. “Well, it was a sort of long ordeal, but eventually everyone had had a go at kissing the ring. Then the priest instructed us on how we were to address the archbishop. Some of the people were certain he was to be addressed as ‘Your Highness’ but the priest was very sure that was not true. ‘No,’ said the priest, ‘you address the archbishop as “Your Excellency.”’

‘But isn’t that for the bishop?’ asked someone.

Then the priest seemed to be confused.

Then some of the people started to get a little silly. This whole thing was running into a longer ordeal than anyone expected, this getting ready for the archbishop, and I think everybody just wanted to get on with their day. They started throwing out names to call the archbishop.

‘Your Majesty.’

‘Your Royal Majesty.’

‘Your Royal and Majestic Highness.’

‘Your Serene and Noble Something or Other.’

One small boy piped up with ‘Your Royal Poopiness’ before collapsing with laughter.

The priest pulled himself together and said firmly, ‘You are to address the archbishop as “Your Excellency.”’

One woman called out, ‘What are we to wear?’

The priest answered in some astonishment, ‘Well, clothes. You don’t have any cassock or chasuble or anything like that. Wear your best clothes.’

Another woman asked, ‘Are we to wear black kerchiefs?’

Again the priest was confused. ‘Umm. Well, just wear your best clothes, I guess.’

“I thought that was funny,” said Mario, “because the priest should know that many people have only one set of clothes that they wear until those are worn out and they need a new set. But it seemed to satisfy the women, because there were no more questions, and we were released. And that is how things stand now.”

Baba Chessy continued to chuckle as she poured a little more wine into Mario’s glass. He drank it with a smile, gave Bianca a last fond rub, and took his leave.

Several days after this conversation, the church bells started ringing. At first the villagers were startled, thinking there was a fire or someone had died. But the word spread that the archbishop’s boat had been spotted on its way to the island. Excitement ran high in the village. As the huge boat came closer and closer to the island, the villagers all gathered at the harbor and watched the boat in awe. It was larger than four of their boats, and instead of the one sail their boats had, the archbishop’s boat had five sails of varying sizes. “Five sails! What a thing!” said the villagers. “A boat with five sails!”

There were many people on board, at least twenty, it seemed. And horses! Two horses were standing on the deck among the people. Some of the villagers had never seen a horse and were filled with amazement. The word spread that the archbishop traveled by horse when on land.

As the boat came closer to the island, the sails were lowered, and the boat slowed. Then it came to a complete stop. Everyone watched breathlessly to see what would happen next. There was no sound but the constant ringing of the bell. It seemed that the priest had instructed the bell-puller to start ringing the bell when the archbishop’s boat was spotted and to keep ringing the bell until the priest told him to stop. This he did, and the bell rang and rang.

There was shouting from the boat, and some frantic arm waving, and the priest watched anxiously, unsure if this were some kind of new ritual and he was expected to know about it and participate. Then one of the men said to him, “I think they are trying to tell us to stop ringing the bell.”

“Stop ringing the bell? Why?”

“I don’t know, Father, but I think that is what they are shouting.”

The priest sent a boy to the church instructing the bell-puller to stop ringing the bell.

When there was silence, a man on the boat put a horn-like thing to his mouth and roared into it, “Your harbor is not deep enough for His Excellency’s boat. This is as far as we can come. Where is this place Devil Rocks?”

There was consternation on shore. What now? The plan was for the archbishop to come on shore at Stari Kamen and then travel to Devil Rocks with Mario and the priest.

During this conundrum several of the men got a bit silly again.

“I guess we have to swim out there to kiss his ring? I am not sure I can manage a left knee genuflect in the water.”

“Right knee. Right knee. Not left.”

“Well, either one sounds pretty impossible to me.”

Then the villagers saw a boat being lowered over the side of the archbishop’s boat. What a thing! A boat carrying a boat! It was amazing. Only the big ships that traveled on the great sea carried small boats.

When the little boat was in the water, two men climbed down a rope ladder and got into it and began rowing toward the village. As they came close, they threw a rope to some of the men on shore to pull them in.

When the two men got out of the boat, some of the women on shore started to curtsy, which was confusing to the two rowers. They looked behind them to see who might have followed them. Finding no one, they continued forward. The priest came up to them hurriedly, welcoming them to Stari Kamen. The men were very abrupt, however, and said simply, “We are to bring back to the archbishop the village priest and the man known as Mario, owner of the land known as Devil Rocks.”

In a matter of minutes, the priest and Mario were bundled into the little boat and rowed back to the archbishop’s boat. The villagers watched avidly as Mario and the priest climbed the rope ladder and the little boat was hoisted up and into the big boat, which then started retreating from the village and raised its sails.

Chapter Twelve

The villagers stood around uncertainly for a while, watching the ship move north up the strait, getting smaller and smaller.

“Well, so much for all our preparation,” said one man.

“Are they going to try to go directly to Devil Rocks and land there?” another one asked.

“Impossible,” said a third.

“I think they will land a little before Devil Rocks. There is that piece of land that extends out into the strait, you know, where the bodies washed up. There is deep water around that,” decided a fourth.

That is, indeed, what happened.

The large boat came close to the jutting peninsula of land, and with the rowers keeping the boat steady, a long ramp was lowered on which people began to leave the boat. The bishop and the archbishop were carried down the ramp on open palanquins.

There was a brief pause for a consultation about how to proceed. The decision was made that the path to Devil Rocks was too rough and dirty for the church prelates to walk, and therefore the palanquin bearers must continue to carry them.

The procession to Devil Rocks commenced with the village priest and Mario leading the way, followed at a certain distance by the archbishop’s flag bearer in the lead, proudly carrying the banner. It was said that this particular flag bearer was inordinately proud of his position and would not tolerate anyone preceding him in a procession. Therefore, he followed at enough distance from Mario that it was clear to all that it was he, not Mario, who led the procession. He was followed by two candle-bearers holding aloft tall tapers that refused to stay lit, then the priests from all the churches in the city in the order of their importance, perceived or otherwise, then the bishop on his palanquin, and finally the archbishop on his, flanked by two of his guards and followed by his secretary.

When the procession arrived at Devil Rocks, the archbishop’s secretary came forward and announced that His Excellency would perform the liturgical Rite of Purification to cleanse the premises. One of the candle bearers set down his candle and took up a thurible, expertly lighting the incense within it, so that in a matter of minutes there was a wreath of incense smoke around the gathered company.

After a hurried consultation between the secretary and Mario, and some arm gesturing, a new procession advanced across Devil Rocks toward the point. This time the bishop led, followed by the archbishop, the incense bearer, the candle bearer, and all the priests, with the flag bearer and guard bringing up the rear. The three guards at the point saluted smartly as the procession stopped. The bishop and archbishop then engaged in the recitation of the purification ritual, their words faint against the backdrop of the pounding surf.

It was a solemn moment, and it would not be surprising if some among the group half expected to see a miracle of some kind, perhaps an indication that the devil had released his hold on this spit of land. Nothing unusual occurred, however, and the two prelates proceeded toward the edge of the cliff to sprinkle the holy water of the aspergillum on the

waters there. That did not noticeably reduce the pounding of the surf, but it did provide what might be called the scare of the day.

As the two prelates came to the edge of the cliff, the archbishop suddenly cried out and would have fallen forward over the edge had not the bishop grabbed firm hold of his arm. Some pious people later said that the archbishop had seen the face of the devil and that caused him to cry out. Most people, however, had a simpler explanation: he stepped to the edge of the cliff, looked down, saw the cauldron below him and lost his nerve. At any rate, he did not fall in, to everyone's relief.

When the prelates were once again a safe distance from the lip of the cauldron, the secretary called Mario to take the guards to the treasure. Mario explained for the second time that they would have to go over the edge of the cliff and down the ladder to the cave. The two new guards looked at him in some disbelief but, loathe to display any lack of courage in front of their esteemed employer, they went to the edge of the cliff gamely and prepared to follow Mario down the ladder.

"One by one on the ladder," Mario told them. "It has held me, but I think we should not test its weight limit." One of the guards, the portly one, immediately stepped back, saying, "I think I may be carrying more weight than this rope can bear." The secretary sniffed and ordered one of the other guards to replace him.

Mario demonstrated how best to get onto the ladder, then disappeared over the edge. There was no sound except the pounding of the surf until he called up that he was safely on the shelf and the first guard should come down. The two prelates sighed in relief.

The first guard was visibly trembling and trying to contain his fear. As he flopped clumsily onto his belly and inched backward toward the abyss, there was so much apprehension in the group watching that it was like a palpable thing in the air. Somehow, that guard managed to hold tight to the bar and then the ladder and make his way down, where Mario instructed him how to get his feet onto the shelf.

Mario called up for the second guard to descend. This one fared better, having the courage of knowing two men had done this successfully and he would not be shown to bad advantage before his superiors.

Mario took the guards into the cave and showed them the five chests. Their immediate reaction was much as had been his: stupefaction and a feeling of unreality. Then one of the guards called to the secretary that there were indeed five chests. The secretary called back to him that the guards were now to carry the chests up. At that instruction, the two guards looked at each other in astonishment.

First, they were angry. "He expects me to carry one of those things on my back while trying to climb the ladder from hell?"

“Let him come down and try his luck!”

They looked at Mario and burst into laughter. “You knew all of this, didn’t you?” they said. “I heard you telling them they had to bring ropes.”

Mario smiled and shrugged. Then the older guard yelled up to the secretary, “There is no way to get these chests out of here without a rope to pull them up.”

Silence. The secretary conferred with the prelates, and soon two of the guards were speeding back to the boat to retrieve ropes.

There was nothing to do then for a half hour except wait. The two guards began to relax and invited Mario to play a game of dice with them. “And what is your coin?” he asked them. “These small rocks,” they responded, picking up loose tiny rocks from the floor of the cave.

At about the same time, the archbishop suggested that the clergy up above should spend their time chanting the Vespers of the Holy Office, since it was already past that time.

And this is how it came to be that an astounding thing happened at Devil Rocks that day. A game of chance with small white devil rocks was played in the cave on the cliffside while a bevy of prelates and clergymen above them chanted the holy liturgical office and a booming surf below them accompanied them all as though it were a giant drum keeping time.

What a strange, strange world, thought Mario.

Eventually the guards returned with the ropes, lowered them carefully to Mario and the guards below, and one by one the precious chests were hoisted up to the top. When they were all safely retrieved and moved to positions far from the edge of the cliff, the two guards ascended the ladder. Mario followed, and the cave was again left to the wind and the waves.

All the chests were opened, and the prelates and clergy swarmed over them exclaiming and marveling. Mario sat off to the side with the village priest watching. The priest seemed sad. “Father,” said Mario, “I wonder if your best paten is still at the place known as Three Brothers. If the three men had not taken it to be melted, they probably stored it somewhere on their premises.”

The priest perked up. “That is a great idea, Mario. I confess I am a little lost without Bruno’s expert help.”

Suddenly the priest said, “Would you like to be the church warden, Mario? I would be honored to have your help.”

Mario hesitated. “You honor me by asking, Father, but I do not think I am qualified to be the church warden. I have not been schooled in liturgy or doctrine or any of the things I think a church warden must know.”

The priest said eagerly, “I can teach you those things, Mario.”

Mario replied, “Good father, the honor you do me is great. I do not think I am suited to that position. I think I am suited to the life I am living now. Thank you for your kindness and the great honor you show me.”

Chapter Thirteen

About a half hour later, as the sun fell far into the western sky and sent its rays through the pine trees to shine brilliantly on the sea of gold above Devil Rocks, the clergy had mostly claimed for their churches whatever vessels had been etched with markings for their churches. A quite enormous pile of glitter lay before the priest of Santa Maria Maggiore, and it might be said that his expression was one of humility trying in vain to cover smugness.

The vessels that were not etched were to be taken by the bishop and archbishop. A few of the priests had nothing. At a whisper from the secretary, the bishop was seen offering a vessel to each of those priests. Not to be outdone in generosity, the archbishop quickly did the same. A good secretary, everyone knows, is worth his weight in gold when it comes to politics.

Most of the prelates were able to carry their booty back to the archbishop’s boat. The guards helped those priests with too much to carry. Soon the procession back to the boat was in progress, and it was certainly not the orderly one it had been hours before. It was a ragged jumble of happy prelates exclaiming in excitement as they stumbled over old tree roots and made their way over the rough path. The village priest and Mario had bid their goodbyes to the bishop and archbishop, and when the rag tag procession disappeared from their view, they began the long trek back to Stari Kamen.

They had hardly begun when a guard came running back toward them, calling out to them to wait. He informed them that the body of Bruno, the man responsible for this day’s outcome, was not to be buried yet. It should be taken to the city. The priest of Santa Maria Maggiore had secured permission from the bishop to inter Bruno with the clergy and dignitaries in the crypt of his church. There would be a formal procession through the city to carry Bruno’s body to the church and a High Holy Mass celebrated by the archbishop, culminating in the reading by the archbishop of a copy of a letter that would be sent to the pope informing him of the blessings God had bestowed upon the city through the restoration of the churches’ sacred vessels.

“Bruno will be buried with the priests and bishops in the church crypt?” asked the villagers in wonder.

“He will be carried in a great procession in his honor?” they exclaimed with awe.

“Our Bruno, our church warden, is to be treated like royalty?” they asked with amazement, crossing themselves.

So great was this honor, that for the villagers in the years to come, Bruno’s elevation to such high status would eclipse everything else about the strange month they had endured. Somehow it almost seemed right that something so unprecedented, so unexpected, so altogether beyond the pale of the normal, should close this chapter of their lives in the village of Stari Kamen, a chapter which was, the villagers all agreed, definitely not normal.

There was one further thing that happened, however, that was also definitely not normal, and that nearly toppled Bruno’s honor from its first-place status in the gossip mills. This new thing was a sermon that the village priest gave one Sunday morning several weeks later. In the sermon, he preached that women are the mothers and nurturers in the home and must be protected by their husbands. “It is the husband’s God-ordained duty,” preached the good cleric, “to take care of and protect his wife and children, as though they are his most precious possessions.”

So astonishing were these words that after the service the men left the church in silence with dazed expressions on their faces and the women lingered behind looking at each other in disbelief, unable to trust what their ears had heard.

“Did I hear that right, what the priest said?” asked one woman fearfully,

“I don’t know,” replied another. “Is it a trap of some kind?”

“Well, it is certainly not normal,” agreed everyone.

As Baba Chessy pondered all these things over the coming weeks, she smiled to think how very unpredictable and irrational human behavior is. The women seemed unable to accept their new status as nurturers needing the protection of their husbands. Their skepticism and confusion ran so high about something that was not normal, that Baba Chessy wondered if any change could come about in the village.

“However,” she thought, “so long as there are girls like Margarita and Gordana in the village, the chance for change is high, I think. Their threat to refuse marriage has alarmed the priest. It is his primary duty to increase the membership of Holy Mother Church. If girls refuse marriage and motherhood, how can he succeed in this fundamental duty?” And she would giggle.

The villagers noticed that at odd moments in the coming months their priest might break out in a sweat or begin to tremble, and they wondered if he were coming down with a fever.

It was noted that when that happened, his sermon the following Sunday would be particularly forceful, about how women and girls needed to be taken care of and protected.

“Strange. Strange indeed,” thought the villagers.

But as the months passed, there did come to Stari Kamen a change in what was normal. Wife beatings became rare indeed. There was not a noticeable difference in men helping their wives in the gardens, however. Men considered that beneath them. Their jobs were fishing and drinking in the tavern. “Well,” thought the women philosophically, “I guess it is too much to expect them to become saints overnight.”

And Baba Chessy would smile again as she listened to the women. Yes, humans are strange and unpredictable, she thought.

There was that other strange matter, Bruno being honored for getting the church vessels back into the hands of the churches. “But it was not Bruno who did that,” Baba Chessy would say to Bianca. “That honor belongs to Mario and his uncle. Mario’s uncle had found the treasures and brought them up from the seafloor, with heroic effort, it must be imagined. Mario was the honest man who informed the church of their existence. Yet there was no praise or adulation for them, nor even a thank you. Mario did not seem to want or expect it, and his uncle was beyond needing or wanting it. Yet the lack of it does not seem right, does it, Bianca?” Bianca would look up at her with her silent Sphinx gaze.

“It was the excitement and drama of Bruno’s daring feat that captured the imaginations of all,” reflected Baba Chessy. “People need a hero, and sometimes they do pick strange ones. The thinking person would recognize that while Bruno’s strategy did rid of the world of three evil people, there were, it seemed, many times more such people waiting in the wings for their turn on the world’s stage of evil.”

“Always has it been thus with humans,” thought Baba Chessy as Bianca leaped into her lap and began her gentle kneading.

Nevertheless, in the years to come, whenever Baba Chessy thought of Bruno and the magnificence of his final gesture, something inside her would soften, something, she thought, very much like love.

There was, she thought, something profoundly sad and profoundly sublime about Bruno’s life and death.

And there was also, she decided, something very right about that.

The End

Olive Revenge

*A Baba Chessy and Bianca Medieval Mystery
Book 3*



Chapter One

There is an island off the Dalmatian coast where several sleepy villages cling to the hillsides and the villagers walk on the cobblestone paths and roadways the Romans laid down over a thousand years ago. The villagers did not really care who had laid down those roads and paths; they only knew the roads had been there when they were born and would be there long after they had died.

The villagers also kept the stone walls those Romans built, those lines of two-foot-tall barriers that crisscrossed the island hills, separating one piece of land from the next. The walls were to keep peace among the fractious villagers. The Romans wanted the excellent wine and olive oil produced by the villagers, and they said to themselves, "If the best way to get the villagers to stop squabbling over land and focus on producing excellent oil and wine for us is to mark clearly who owns what land, let us put up these stone walls so they can stop fighting among themselves." This they did.

So it was that the stone walls in the villages were still being used 1000 years later, long after the Romans had married the natives, been killed off, or simply hightailed it back to Italy. For some reason that nobody ever tried to figure out, none of the villagers ever argued with or about the stone walls. All remained quiet and peaceful in these sleepy villages. Usually.

In one of these villages, the village of Stari Kamen on the island of Gora, lived the girl Marta and her father, Ante, an olive grower whose wife died twelve years ago giving birth to Marta's brother, who also died. Marta helps her father in the olive grove, tilling the soil, pruning the trees, and taking the olives to the olive press warehouse to turn into golden olive oil to take to the city to sell.

It is hard work, and Ante is very particular about the quality of his olives. He tends his trees with care and vigilance, demanding of his crop quality over quantity. Many in the village focus on quantity, and they have surpassed him in wealth. He remains a poor man even after nearly twenty years of hard toil. But he has his land, his olive grove surrounded by protective walls that say to the world, "this is Ante's land," and he has his daughter Marta. When he produces the superior olive oil for which he is known, he is satisfied.

The girl Marta inherited the comeliness of her mother and became at age 14 one of the village beauties. She seemed to pay little attention to her looks, however. She wore her rough muslin tunic and skirt and heavy woolen stockings and wooden clogs day after day, changing into her second set once each week when she took her clothes and her father's clothes to the cove on the seashore to wash them with the homemade soap made of oil and ashes.

Marta's days were busy from the time she rose before sunrise until she went to bed. When she heard the sound of the compline bell from the city across the strait, she put aside her

sewing or her knitting, covered the old clay lamp to extinguish its flame, and climbed the steep wooden stairs to the loft, where she changed into her nightdress and lay down on her cot to sleep. Her father would be asleep at least an hour earlier, on his cot in a corner of the sitting room. He usually rose before she did and would already have had a drink of watered wine and taken his bread with him to eat on his way to the olive grove.

In this way their days passed by one after the other, with both Marta and her father satisfied with their lives, both thinking that their normal lives would go on in this comfortable way indefinitely.

But that is not the way of things, of course, whether we like it or not. Things do change. What changed for Marta and her father was not of their doing, and not something they chose, nor something they foresaw coming. It crept up on them, and neither of them noticed it until they were forced to do so.

The fact is that Marta was becoming beautiful. After she passed her thirteenth year and began her fourteenth, a new person seemed to be sprouting from the inside out. Her tall, lean form began to change from boyish muscles into softer curves. Her gangly long limbs so helpful for reaching high to pick choice olives, started filling out. Her flyaway and unruly hair that she kept bound tightly in a kerchief, began to take on a black luster that gleamed and shimmered when touched by the sun. She and her father seemed oblivious of these changes, but the young boys and men in the village were not. Their eyes followed her with longing.

One day last December toward the end of the olive harvesting season she was helping her father pick olives, and she saw how weary he was, forcing himself to keep working. The olive crop had been particularly bountiful that year and his olives were large and fleshy, and her father knew it would be a good season to help them buy new clothes and things they needed. He had been working from sunup to sundown for two months already. She saw the utter weariness in his movements and insisted that he go home to rest, that she would finish picking the tree they were harvesting. She insisted.

He did as she wished, walking down the hillside on legs so weary they trembled a little. Marta watched him go, concerned by the way the years seemed to be manifesting in him this season.

The moon had risen and made a straight path on the water from their island to the city across the strait. She stood for a moment to revel in the beauty of the peaceful scene, watching the small ripples in the water moving and rearranging the path the moon had carved. What a beautiful sight it was, she thought, and how lucky she was to see special things like this.

She took a deep breath and bent to her work, filling the burlap bag to put into the wheelbarrow to take to the press. The weather had already turned a little cold, and she

shivered in her thin tunic, looking forward to finishing the picking so she could put on her heavy woolen cloak.

She heard a slight rustle in the tree behind her. As she turned to look, she was seized and thrown to the ground. A strong hand silenced her mouth and another strong hand lifted her skirt and forced her legs apart. Then there was a searing pain. She tried to push the heavy body off her, trying to escape, writhing in vain. Suddenly there was a bucking above her and a muffled groan, and the body on top of her leaped up and disappeared.

She lay stunned for some time, unable to understand the violence that had been done to her. Then on shaky legs she rose and used olive leaves to wipe what was dripping down the inside of her legs. She brushed her skirt of leaves and debris, then did her best to find the olives that had spilled from her burlap bag when she was attacked. She added her bag of olives to the wheelbarrow and started down the hill.

Several times she stumbled as the chipped wooden wheel of the barrow caught on a clod of dirt. She went slowly, unable to bring herself to her usual pace. It hurt to walk, and her legs wanted to turn inward in a funny way. Something terrible had been done to her. She did not know what it was, but she felt that her life could never be the same again. She felt stunned and as though she had fallen into a black pit.

The protective walls had failed.

As her thoughts churned, she decided she could never tell this thing to her father. Instinctively she felt that it would harm him. "One thing I am grateful for," she thought as her feet found their way down the path. "No one has seen this terrible thing."

But that was not true. Someone had seen it. One of the village boys whose eyes lived for those moments he could catch a glimpse of Marta, had seen Marta's father leave the grove, and he had crept close to the wall of Ante's land to watch Marta. He was silent and stayed in the shadows. He jumped in surprise when he saw the other boy creeping toward Marta, but he knew he must stay quiet. The other boy was tall and well-muscled and he gloried in his ability to beat up every other boy in the village.

But the village boy had seen what happened, and he became scared and sad. He watched Marta make her slow way down the hill. She walked with a sort of painful lurch. Tears came to his eyes. But he knew he would never say anything about what he had seen.

Chapter Two

By the time the winter rains had come, and the gardens were swelling with vegetables, and the easter celebration had come and gone, Marta saw the change in her body. She was aware of animal couplings and how a donkey's belly swelled after, and how a swollen belly

eventually brought forth a baby donkey, a foal. And she understood that she was carrying in her belly the seed of the boy who had violated her.

There was no one she could tell, no one she could talk to. She could not bear the shame her father would feel. Day followed day. Her father noticed her sadness. She told him only that she sometimes had a headache. He insisted she rest. "After all," he said to her, "the olive season was so good this year I have been able to buy a new wheelbarrow wheel and muslin cloth for you to make new garments, and leather strips so you can even make leather slippers if you wish. Wouldn't it be fine if you would be able to wear leather slippers to church instead of your usual clogs?"

Marta would try to be cheerful for him and exclaim with happy pride about how well their lives were going. Day followed day and her belly continued to swell. With the new muslin cloth, she sewed a larger tunic that draped loosely around her belly. But she feared the village women. They would spot something, and then she would be the focus of all the gossip in the village, and she thought that if that happened, she might die because of the shame she would bring to her father.

She stayed in their house or their garden, making excuses for not going to the market, asking her father to make those trips because "the turnips need hoeing, the potatoes need hilling, the lettuce needs to be weeded, the beans must be put onto a trellis, she was sewing a new tunic for her father," - always there was something she needed to do. So her father went to the market to buy the few things they needed.

But there came the day when her father, returned early from the market, stood in the door of their small house watching her weeding the beets, and he saw her put her hands on her back and stretch, and he saw the belly that should not be on his daughter, and he cried out, dropping the loaf of bread he had been carrying.

Marta heard his cry and leaped up with effort to rush to him thinking he had been hurt. But as she came up to him and saw the devastation on his face, and the way his eyes found her belly, she knew that he knew her secret. She fell to her knees and clutched his slippers, sobbing. He started to pull his feet away from her, and she let go, clutching her belly as she rocked back and forth on her knees.

Her father went into the house. Marta found her way to a corner of the cistern and sat there with her eyes closed and her head hanging low, clutching her belly and moaning.

Eventually her father came out. He stood before her and whispered angrily, "Who did you lie with? Who?"

She said nothing, only continued to rock and moan. Ante slapped her face. It was not a hard slap, but it was like a bomb to both of them because never in her 15 years had her

father raised a hand to her with anything except love. Her father gave a low moan of anguish. "Who did you lie with? You must tell me."

Finally, she looked up at him with tear-stained face and said, "I did not lie with anyone, Papa. Last December when I stayed late in the olive grove because I wanted you to go home to get some rest, I heard a noise and someone clamped a big hand on my mouth and ..."

She moaned and rocked and the tears fell.

And her father understood. He stumbled backward as he remembered the days of sadness and illness she had tried to hide, always having an excuse, to spare him.

He pulled himself together, took her hand gently and said, "Come into the house, daughter, that we might plan what to do."

Together they walked sadly into their little house. Her father poured them each a small glass of wine. "I have been a fool," he said. "I was so busy making perfect olives that I failed to see that my daughter had become a woman. My regret is enormous. I am a foolish man. Foolish, foolish man!"

He stumbled to the wall of the room and leaned in and pounded his head against the stone. "Oh, my dear wife, my own Maria, how could I have let this happen to your daughter?" He pounded his head until Marta tried to pull him away from the wall. She said to him, "Papa, do not do that. Mama would not want you doing that and blaming yourself. It is not your fault nor hers that God took her with my tiny brother, who was not able to breathe. It is not your fault, and none of this is your fault. Mama would be very unhappy to see you blame yourself."

Ante shuffled back to the table as though he had aged ten years.

"I have no one to turn to, I cannot go to my sister, she will only call you a harlot. My own dear Marta!"

He said fiercely, "I will never let them say that, never! I will kill the person who calls you that! Oh, Maria, my Maria, you who have been taken from me, please, please tell me what I should do."

He sat down heavily in his chair and put his head into his hands.

Marta rose from her chair and gently rubbed his shoulders, saying, "Papa, do not blame yourself. You did not cause this. You have been to me the most excellent mother and father anyone could ever have. The wickedness of others is not your fault."

He raised his head and said, "Yes, you are right of course. Do you know who he was?"

Marta hesitated, then said forcefully, "No, Papa, I am sorry I do not."

Her father caught her hesitation. “If you know who it is, you must tell me, Marta.”

“No, Papa, I am sorry I do not know. It was dark and he came upon me without my knowing and I do not know who it was.”

But Marta did know. She had felt the big ring on one finger of the hand that clamped her mouth; and when that hand was removed, she had seen the insignia on the stone. But to tell Papa would be to ruin him.

Chapter Three

With her father she counted the months and days and decided that her baby would be born in late August, nearly three months away. To try to soothe her father, Marta said that since he was tending the olive grove and had finished the pruning and tilling, it might be possible for her to remain at home and tend the garden, and perhaps no one in the village needed to know the true situation. Her father was skeptical of this plan but had no other.

A problem that presented itself soon was attendance at Sunday Mass. So far Marta had been able to hide her condition by wearing a large cloak. But the warmer weather now would make that suspicious. She sewed a larger tunic, but her belly continued to grow.

One Sunday when she tried to leave the little church early, Ivana, one of the village women who gossiped the most, followed her and said, “Marta, your table must be plentiful because your belly shows your enjoyment of its bounty.” Marta smiled and said, “Thank you, Mistress, God has been good to my father and me that we have good foods to eat.” Marta walked swiftly away, but the woman continued to watch her.

The following Sunday Marta pretended to be ill and asked her father to attend church without her. He was immediately concerned, but she reassured him that it was mostly a headache and she would be better soon by resting with a cup of herbal broth.

The Sunday after that, she quailed at the thought of facing that nosy woman, and again she convinced her father that she had a headache. And again he went without her. This time the nosy woman confronted her father, asking if his daughter were ailing and needed someone to help her in the house. He thanked her and assured her that was not necessary.

But he became anxious and uneasy, and their happy home was no longer a haven of contentment and peace for Ante and Marta. The worm of discontent and fear invaded the house, and neither Marta nor her father knew how to expel it.

On the third Sunday, which was a hot day in July, Marta again stayed home from church. But after the Mass, a delegation of five of the village women appeared at Ante’s door insisting there must be something wrong with Marta and they were there to help her. Ante

tried to shush them and make them leave, but Ivana said, “Ante, something is going on here. What have you done to your daughter, Marta?”

Ante was paralyzed with horror that they thought he had done something to Marta. Before he could think of any reply, however, Marta herself flew out from behind the olive barrel where she had been hiding and she screamed at the women, “My father did nothing to me, you nosy bitch! Take your vile thoughts and your vicious tongue and leave this house! My father is the best father the world has ever known, and nosy bitches like you are not worthy to clean his shoes.”

The women stepped back in fear, but all their eyes were riveted on Marta’s belly. “Yes,” she spit at them angrily, placing her hands around her belly, “This, THIS, is what happens to innocent girls when beasts cannot control themselves. This is what you can gossip about now. You can gossip until eternity, but it will never undo the damage that has been done to me. Take your nosy bodies and go back home and leave me and my father in peace.”

Four of the women turned and left sheepishly, but the fifth one said with quiet sympathy, “I am so sorry this has happened to you, Marta. You did not deserve this. Your father did not deserve it. Would you like to have anyone do anything about it?”

Marta was silent and just shook her head stubbornly. The woman continued, “Rape is wrong, Marta, and that is what has been done to you. The man or boy who did this should be held accountable. If you want to name that man or boy, we could confront him and make him take responsibility for what he has done to you.” Marta was shaking her head and mumbling “no no no no please leave, please leave.”

The woman turned to go. “If I can help you, Marta, please send for me. This is too much for you to carry on your young shoulders by yourself. Your father is a good, good man, but there are things about bearing a child that a man cannot help with.”

Marta said angrily, “But a man can force himself on a woman and plant his seed without her permission.”

“Yes, I am so sorry, Marta.”

Within hours the news spread throughout Stari Kamen that Ante’s young daughter had been violated and was with child.

All these things and more did Old Baba Chessy hear as she sat in her grape arbor resting after another morning of work in her garden. Her black cat Bianca sat next to her busily cleaning her paws. Baba Chessy’s grape arbor was in a far corner of her garden where two village paths converged, and the old, gnarled grapevine, thought to be over a hundred years old, made a shady arbor on her side of the garden wall and a similar but larger shady bower on the outside of the garden wall. This bower the villagers called a grotto because at one time it had held a statue of the Virgin. But now it held only an old bench that was the

perfect resting place for the villagers toiling along the path, especially after the two yew bushes were planted, creating privacy.

The villagers were unaware that Baba Chessy might be sitting on the other side of the wall, however, and could hear all their gossip. They would be quite astonished indeed to know how much of their secret business Baba Chessy knew.

She was saddened now to hear how Marta had been violated at her young age, and how her life would change. "How completely unfair life is sometimes," she said to Bianca, who looked up at her briefly and then continued to wash her paws.

Chapter Four

It was the middle of summer by now, and the island was, as usual, overrun with the city nobles who had fled the heat and stink of their city streets for the cooler and cleaner air of island living. The large villas these nobles built on the island, and the annual influx of these rapacious city dwellers were despised by the villagers, who could do nothing about them.

With feelings of anger running high in the village, there was, of course, soon a rumor that a village noble had violated Marta. Many hours of gossip were consumed trying to determine who the noble might be. And even more satisfying hours were spent conjuring appropriate punishments for such a person.

Around this same time, three of the Venetian soldiers from the garrison in the fort on the high hill Mount Damianos behind the village had disregarded the agreement between the village and the garrison and transgressed on a villager's garden, walking right through it on their way to the harbor to take a boat to the city for provisions. The heavy marching boots of three big men caused more than a little damage to the lettuce and peas and onions that were growing in that garden. There was, of course, a great outcry in the village and a demand for redress. The outcry was even greater than usual because the garden was that of Boris, the olive press warehouse owner.

So, tensions were high in Stari Kamen as summer temperatures rose. There came to be two factions in the village then: those who were certain that a city noble had violated Marta, and those who were equally certain that a Venetian soldier from the garrison had done so.

It was not helpful to either faction that Marta and her father remained completely silent. Day after day they refused to engage with either side, keeping only to themselves and being of no use to the gossip mills. This frustrating affair also came to Baba Chessy's ears. She smiled and said to Bianca, "Good for them."

But the new outrage by the Venetians was the last straw, it seemed. The warehouse owner Boris decided that action must be taken. He and some of his friends held a meeting and

determined that they would take the girl Marta to the garrison and have her identify the soldier. No one was exactly sure what would be accomplished by this, but at least the villagers would be taking action.

Boris took a delegation of three men to visit Ante and Marta one evening, and he informed them that they would take Marta to the garrison to confront the man who had violated Marta.

The high agitation and alarm this caused in Marta were dismissed by the men as evidence of her shy and retiring virtue. The warehouse owner said to her, "I know this is a difficult thing for a girl like you, Marta, to confront these men who have done this to you. But we need to do it."

Marta said weakly, "No, please, they did not do this. Please, no. Do not make me go to the garrison." Boris conveniently heard what he wanted to hear, which is that she did not want to go up to the garrison. He said soothingly, "We will help you go up there." With a glance at her large belly so visible even under the shapeless tunic, he said, "We can even get a donkey cart to carry you there. How about that, men?" The other three men agreed.

Marta's father said nothing, only saw his daughter's anguish and did not know what caused it. Did she fear confronting the man who did this? She said she did not see him. How can she identify the man if she does not know who he is? Ante was very confused and troubled. Boris, used to bossing around not only his warehouse workers but everyone in the village, concluded the meeting by saying, "Then it is settled. We shall go to the garrison day after tomorrow, when I have a slower day at the warehouse." The other men accepted his leadership, and the four men left.

Marta turned to her father in anguish. "I cannot do this thing, Papa! I cannot do this thing. What can I do? Those soldiers did not do this."

Ante looked at her sharply. "But you said you did not know who did it."

She started to cry. "I know, Papa, I am sorry. So sorry. I don't know what to do."

Ante said wearily, "I don't think we have too much choice. You know that when Boris decides on something, he becomes a bully until he gets his way, and he has the money and power. If his warehouse shuts down or he refuses to press olives, all the villagers will suffer. I don't think we have any choice except to do what he wants us to do."

Marta looked at her father with fear and sadness, but she said, "I will do as you think best, Papa."

When the delegation came two days later to take Marta to the garrison, she seemed terribly frightened and again begged to be spared. The men thought only that she was a shy girl. They had brought a small donkey cart, into which her father helped her.

They had not thought to put a cushion into it, however, and the donkey had barely started his long, laborious climb up the olive groves hill when Marta wished she could walk, to spare her bones the bouncing and pain. She changed positions as she could, sitting on her hands when possible, but by the time the delegation crested the olive groves hill, she ached all over. She asked her father if they could please pause a little. Boris was visibly unhappy at this delay, but he remained silent. Marta whispered to her father, asking him if he might pull some old, dried grass from next to the walls and bring that to her to sit on. This he did, and when they started down the tall hill, she did find some relief from the pain and jostling.

At the bottom of the hill there was a spring and creek, which presented a barrier. Boris cursed briefly and walked along the small creek looking for a good crossing. He found a narrow section, and the men were able to leap across the creek. The donkey walked slowly across, but when the cart wheels fell into the creek, they sank nearly to the wooden cart itself. Boris yelled at the donkey to pull. He slapped the donkey hard on its flank. The donkey brayed and gave another effort, but to no avail.

Marta called out, "Stop, please stop. I will get out and walk across the creek." She endeavored to do so, clinging to the cart, but her clogs sank into the mud. She gave a small cry of dismay, then stood for minutes fumbling her feet in the murky water trying to find the clog that had come off her foot. When she found it, she went slowly hand over hand along the cart until with great effort she pulled herself out of the creek and onto the land.

She was, unfortunately, quite wet and muddy. Her skirt dripped water and mud from its hem, and her clogs carried slimy pieces of grass. She looked at herself and wanted to sit down and cry.

But she could not shame her father. She stamped her feet to release some of the mud, then began to climb back into the cart, now on dry land. Her father hurried to help her. Then it was up the steep hill called Mount Damianos to the fortress high above.

An hour later the delegation finally got to the garrison steps, where they were met by two grim guards who demanded their business. Boris said they needed to see the Commander on village business. One guard started up the old stone steps and the other guard continued to scowl at the delegation.

Ten minutes later the first guard returned and motioned for them to follow him. Boris led the men up the steep stairs. Ante took Marta's arm and took the first step up. Marta tried to raise one foot, but the weight of the wet, muddy skirt and her protruding belly made it impossible to raise her leg the height of the step, which was just under a foot.

She let out an involuntary sob as her foot fell back to the path. Her father was in anguish about how to help her. At Boris's word, two of the men came back down the steps and started to drag her up the step. The sharp pain of their wrenching her arms made her start

to fall in a faint. Her father rushed forward with an oath as he caught her, staggering. He said angrily to Boris, "She cannot do this, Boris. It is unchristian of anyone to demand this of her."

Boris swore, then said to the guard, "Our business with the Commander is about this girl. Will you ask the Commander if he will come down the steps to meet us?"

The guard left. Ante helped Marta sit on the step, where she breathed heavily and put her hands around her belly, her head down and eyes closed.

Chapter Five

The Commander eventually came, a grave man with a stern countenance. His secretary had told him that the girl waiting to see him claimed she had been raped by one of the soldiers in the garrison. The Commander had told his troops repeatedly that the village women were off limits for their randy pursuits, that they were to go across the strait into the city for their needs, that anyone disobeying these orders would be court-martialed. He was not happy to see before him what looked like proof that his orders had been disobeyed.

The nobles didn't seem to care that they were being accused of the rape, but when the Commander of the garrison learned that his soldiers were being accused, he did care. Unlike so many of his predecessors in the rotating fortunes of garrison command, this Commander was a Christian man of higher moral fiber than Venetians usually aspire to. He was determined to find out who committed the rape, and he planned to subject that soldier to a court martial and send him back to Venice in disgrace.

He listened to the island village men, then ordered that all the soldiers in the garrison line up in a row so that the girl could identify her assailant. The soldiers were summoned and soon came clattering down the seventy steps. The Commander waited with arms crossed, staring out across the valley floor as though asking of it how he had come to be garrisoned in such a god-forsaken spot.

When at last all the soldiers were lined up in a row in front of her, Marta raised her eyes in fear, looking frantically from one face to the other and back again. She moaned and said, "I don't know. I don't know. Please, I don't know."

There were angry mutterings from the soldiers. "I think she is lying," said one.

Another one said, "None of us are that stupid. Why should we want this dirty tart in her ragged clothes when we can go across the water and have the whores in perfumes and silks? She is lying."

The Commander became angry. He said to her sternly, "These are all the men here in the garrison. Do you or do you not see before you the man who forced you?"

The girl quailed, finally shot her arm out, pointing vaguely, "Him." Her aim wavered so wildly that she seemed to be pointing at three people. The Commander asked those three men to step forward.

"You say it is one of these three men. When did this happen?"

In a quavering voice Marta replied, "I don't know."

The Commander looked at her incredulously. "You don't know when this happened?"

"I ... I am not sure. I ... last December."

"Last December? What day in December?"

"I don't remember."

"My soldiers and I took control of this garrison the day after Christmas. Surely you would remember if this happened at Christmas time?"

"I don't know. It must have been another time."

Even the villagers were getting uncomfortable about her vague and unsatisfactory testimony.

Finally, the Commander asked her in a gruff voice, "Were you or were you not assaulted by one of my soldiers?"

She started sobbing and started to fall to the ground, but her father quickly held her up.

"No, No," she cried then. "No, I was not assaulted by any of these men." She started to crumple in moaning, but her father held her firmly.

The villagers were angry and uncomfortable. The Commander dismissed his soldiers but was visibly relieved that he would not have to mete out harsh punishment.

Boris saw the Commander's relief and decided to press his advantage to ask the Commander in humble voice. "I apologize for this silly girl's actions, sir. She is obviously but a whore. I hope you can forgive her. There is one thing I would like to ask you. It has come to our attention that your good soldiers have found a new path through our village to go to the city, and that path unfortunately cuts directly through several of the gardens of the villagers, ruining their crops. As you know, the villagers are poor and depend on these crops to ensure their survival. When their crops are ruined, they will starve. Might I ask, sir, that the soldiers return to using the old paths and avoid the gardens of the villagers?"

The commander turned to his secretary and gave the order for the soldiers that henceforth they would no longer walk through any villagers' gardens but would take the paths they used to take.

Boris bowed deeply, thanking the Commander, who immediately started up the steps, followed by his secretary. Two of the village men followed Boris's lead and bowed belatedly, then turned and followed him down the path away from the fort.

The last village man came to help Ante hold Marta between them as they turned to leave. Ante was seething with embarrassment and anger at Boris for forcing this issue. When he heard Boris and his companions muttering about how the girl was obviously nothing more than a slut, Ante would have done something he had never done in his life: attack another man. Only the knowledge that if he did not continue to support Marta she would fall, kept his arm in check. The man with Boris said, "Yes, a slattern and a slut! To bring shame on us like this! Nothing but a whore she is."

Ante's muscles tightened and he started to remove his arm from Marta, but she cried out and clung to him frantically, "No Papa, please do not fight anyone on my behalf! The burden I carry now would be tripled should I be the cause of harm come to you." Ante clenched his jaw and kept silent, but he continued to support Marta back to the cart, where he helped her to climb in.

Chapter Six

When they returned to the village, the faction that was sure Marta had been assaulted by a nobleman were triumphant. "See!" they cried. "It is a nobleman. We told you it was!" So saying, they set forth to prove it. That was easier said than done.

At first it seemed easy because as they began their investigation, one name came to the fore, Lord Frankodor. In fact, it would not be an exaggeration to say that he presented himself to them, bragging proudly of his sexual prowess. "Of course she threw herself at me," he preened. "The girls cannot resist me. If they throw themselves at me, should I deny them the pleasure of my interest?"

A delegation of five men went to Lord Frankodor to demand retribution for Marta. "Retribution?" he snorted. "Surely you must be joking! She needs to pay me for the honor of coupling with the likes of me. Simpering around me, showing off her tits, as though I have not seen and enjoyed tits ten times finer than hers! Bah! A little slut she is, nothing but a slut. Then she takes herself off to the country like that to try to get her aunt to claim ownership of the brat! Well, how stupid does she think everyone is? I ask you, how stupid does she think everyone is?"

At this point, several men in the delegation were feeling quite uncomfortably stupid themselves. Lord Frankodor could not be talking about Marta, who was certainly not in the country with an aunt but was right here in the village. When asked the name of the girl who went to the country, Lord Frankodor said airily, "Oh who knows? All those whores have the

same names. They might just as well all call themselves Whore and get it over with. Whore 1, Whore 2, Whore 3, and so forth.” He hooted with laughter at his own wit.

One man in the village delegation remembered that the previous year his wife and daughter were gossiping about a “poor girl” who had to go to her aunt’s house in the country on the mainland because she had got a bun in her belly by a nobleman.

This man decided to investigate the story.

He learned that yes, a young girl called Ruzitsa had indeed gone to live with her aunt; but when he visited the aunt, she became very upset and angry at him. “How dare you insinuate that my niece is not a virtuous girl. The child you are trying to convince yourself is hers is actually mine. My child. When I became with child last year, I asked my niece to come to live with me to help with my household duties. Like the good girl she is, she came immediately. The result is that I was able to carry my child successfully and give birth to a healthy little girl, the toddler you see at my feet right now. It is obvious she is my child! If you cannot see the resemblance, you are indeed blind and stupid.”

The man regarded the child dutifully and only nodded his head. He could see no resemblance to anybody. That child looked just like all children looked, he decided. A child. But when he returned to the village, he did report that the child Lord Frankodor thought he had sired was not sired by him after all.

When the good lord learned of this, it must be conceded that his pride was a little offended. Even with deflated pride that could have benefited from a good dose of proven virility, Lord Frankodor seemed to know nothing about Marta, and even the overstretched imaginations of the investigators could not bring the hoped-for pointing finger into play.

So the situation remained as the weeks passed. Then the day came shortly after the Feast of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary that Marta’s baby was ready to come into the world, proven paternity or no.

Marta did not want to have any of the village women help her. Ante was frantic. “I have lost my beloved Maria this way,” he said to himself. “I cannot lose my beloved Marta this way.”

And so it was that Baba Chessy heard a gentle knock on her door after sunrise one day. It was Ante, the father of the assaulted girl. Baba Chessy invited him in and gave him a small glass of wine.

“Thank you, Mistress. My name is Ante. I do not know if you know of my daughter, Marta?”

“Yes, Ante, I have heard about the unfortunate thing that happened to her.”

“Yes, well. It is her time now,” said Ante. “All night she has been curled up in pain, and she refuses to have any woman come to help her. I lost my dear wife Maria when she tried to

bring forth my son, and I lost both of them. I cannot lose my Marta as well. I just cannot. Can you help my Marta?" Ante looked at her with pleading eyes.

Baba Chessy replied simply, "I will come to help her, Ante." Relief flushed his face. "Thank you, thank you good mistress. I shall pay you. Whatever fee you would like."

"Let us put our first efforts into helping this child come safely into the world, Ante, and making sure that mother and child are well. All else shall follow."

Baba Chessy and Bianca followed Ante down the lane to his small house. They found Marta still curled on her bed in the loft, moaning in pain. Baba Chessy went to her, took her hand, and said gently, "Marta, I am here to help you have your baby."

Marta looked at her with bleary eyes and said in desperation, "This baby does not want to be born. It is shamed by the act of its father, and it refuses to come into this world."

Baba Chessy said quietly, "Your baby is innocent of all wrongdoing Marta, as are you. You have done nothing wrong, nor has your child, who started life as a little seed that did what seeds do. It grew and blossomed into being. Your little one has done that and is now ready to come to us."

Bianca had jumped up onto the coverlet and placed a paw on Marta's hand. Marta startled and croaked a muffled scream.

"Do not fear Bianca, Marta," said Baba Chessy. "She has come with me to try to help you. She is especially good at helping new mothers relax. I think she has a real knack for that. If you feel like petting her, she would enjoy that."

Marta's hand stole to Bianca's head and gave it a soft pat. Bianca butted her hand, making her laugh. Marta straightened a little and Bianca moved up so that she was curled around Marta's belly. Marta kept rubbing Bianca's head and smiling.

She began to groan as another pain came. Bianca put her paw on Marta's belly and held it there as the contraction tightened it. Then Bianca kneaded Marta's belly as the contraction eased. Marta breathed in relief. "The pain was not so bad that time, Mistress."

"Yes, Bianca is skilled in helping people relax, Marta. I don't know where she learned her skill. But there is no one better."

Chapter Seven

Baba Chessy talked with Marta about the pains, learning how far apart they were and how intense they were. She asked Ante to boil water and boil a sharp knife and a cord and bring those and clean cloths to the loft. "Also, if you have an old piece of soft sheepskin, bring that," she said. He left the loft eagerly to do her bidding.

Baba Chessy said, “If you will permit me, Marta, I would like to examine you to see how far along your labor is. Try not to be embarrassed. I know you are a virtuous girl and have never allowed anyone to invade the privacy of your womanly parts. But it will help the birth go faster if we work with the baby, and to do that we need to understand how far the baby has come and what it would like help with right now.” Marta agreed.

Baba Chessy went to the wash basin and washed her hands well, holding them out to dry them. Then she asked Marta to lie on her back and pull her legs up if she can. Bianca moved immediately to take up a new position directly on top of Marta’s rounded belly. This made Marta laugh out loud, and she gave Bianca a long stroke down the length of her back all the way to her tail. While she was doing this, Baba Chessy made a quick examination and said to Marta, “You can lower your legs if you like, Marta. Your little one is knocking at the door but needs a little more time. What I would like you to do is walk with me now, to give your little one strength.”

Marta was surprised, but she got out of bed on shaky legs and clung to Baba Chessy as they began to walk round and round the small loft room. Ante was astonished to find them thus when he returned with the things Baba Chessy instructed him to bring.

Marta seemed to take courage from her father’s presence, and she straightened a little as she told him about Bianca. He blinked a few times but said nothing, only smiled at Marta in relief. Baba Chessy said to him, “Ante, what I would like you to do now is prepare a nice soft bed for your grandchild to come into the world. Take the sheets off Marta’s bed and bring in clean straw. If you have no donkey, ask for straw from a neighbor. You will want to cover the bed with straw, lay the old sheepskin on top of that, then a clean cloth on top of that. That will be the bed to make the little one comfortable.”

Ante seemed shocked but so eager to comply that he bumped into a chair on his way out. Baba Chessy said quietly to Marta, “Men get very nervous in the presence of the miracle of birth, Marta. The time of birth is when women must be the ones in charge and the ones who are strong. Do you feel strong now, to bring your little one into the world?”

The concept was so strange to Marta that she looked at Baba Chessy in bewilderment.

Baba Chessy said, “Yes, my dear. Bringing a child into the world is such a special kind of difficult that men cannot do it. Only women are strong enough to do it.”

Marta took a deep breath. “Strong. I am strong? . . . Yes, I am strong. I am. I know I am.” She smiled with a radiance that cheered Baba Chessy.

“Then let us help your little one on its journey. We will keep walking until you feel pressure down low, as though the little one has decided to move lower in your belly.

This Marta did. When Ante returned, they were still walking, and Marta paused for another drink of water. Bianca had leapt up onto the chair and sat watching everything. Baba

Chessy instructed Ante how to arrange the straw and the sheepskin. She cautioned him to touch only the corners of the clean cloth, saying, "Unclean hands carry mother and baby away." When all was as Baba Chessy wanted, she instructed Ante to bring watered wine and a jug of drinking water and another jug of clean water for the basin for her to wash her hands.

When Marta began to complain that she was getting too tired to walk, Baba Chessy told her to wash her hands carefully and then turn around so that Baba Chessy could wash her behind and her front where the baby would be coming. Marta was so embarrassed she trembled lifting her skirt.

Baba Chessy said firmly, "This baby wants to live, Marta. It is up to us to help it do so by making sure it comes into a clean place. Now I will help you get up onto the top of the clean sheet. Up you go, a little higher, excellent. Now if you will give permission, Bianca will jump up behind your head so that she can knead your head when the pain is the worst. Women tell me that helps them so much they cannot believe it."

Marta agreed with a scared nod. Baba Chessy took a clean small cloth, wrung it out in the new water, added a little wine, and gave it to Marta. "Some women find it is very helpful to clamp their teeth on a cloth like this when the pains come," she said. Marta took the cloth silently.

Ante returned to the room and was nonplussed to see Marta now in the bed on top of the sheepskin, with a white cloth hanging from her mouth and with the black cat kneading Marta's head. He put down his jugs and asked helplessly what else he could do. Baba Chessy reached into her tunic pocket and pulled out a packet of herbs, telling Ante to boil water and soak the herbs in the water to make a special tea for after the baby is born, to strengthen Marta.

Ante turned sharply in alarm as Marta moaned loudly and gasped with the new pain coming. She was breathing rapidly. Baba Chessy said firmly, "Ante, go now to the kitchen to make the tea and do not return up here until you hear the cry of your new grandchild, who is soon to be born." Ante stumbled quickly from the room and clattered down the steps.

"Now, Marta," said Baba Chessy, "we are ready. Your little one will soon make his or her appearance in this world. What an exciting time. I know the pains are getting fierce now. They will keep getting a little fiercer yet. If you feel like pulling your legs up and leaning back on your elbows, do that. If you feel like kneeling up on the bed to help your little one come, do that. I can help hold you steady whatever way feels best to you."

Marta lay for while panting and moaning as the pains came, biting the cloth as Bianca kneaded her head. Then Marta suddenly jerked forward and said, "I need to kneel. I need to kneel!" Baba Chessy quickly helped her get into a kneeling position with her legs apart.

Baba Chessy said, “Marta, you are doing so amazingly well. Your little one’s head is starting to come. There is black hair. Black hair like yours.”

Marta moaned, “Oh, Oh.” The cloth fell from her mouth and she was sobbing, “Black hair.” Then a fierce pain hit, and she wanted to double over but Baba Chessy held her up. Suddenly Marta grunted and leaned far forward with a long moan. And then there was a wriggling under Marta, and Baba Chessy saw the child, fully born, throwing its arms out. “Marta, your little one has come,” she whispered. “He is here. Can you hold yourself up and I will bring him up so you can see him?”

With expert hands she picked up the slimy, squirming little body, and gently brought him up so that Marta could see him. Marta cried out, “Oh! A boy? Oh!” and she started to crumple on her trembling legs, but Baba Chessy said, “Hold firm, Marta, do not let down just yet. I will place your little one safely near you and then I will massage your belly so the afterbirth comes out nice and clean.”

This she did. When she was satisfied that all was well, and that Marta was not bleeding abnormally, she helped Marta lay back on the sheet and she brought the baby to Marta’s breast. “Now I will cut and tie the cord while you get to know your little one, Marta.”

Marta did not move except to bend her head far down to look at her baby. Her baby. This wriggly tiny little thing was inside her just minutes ago and was now outside her, lying here on her belly that was suddenly so unlike her belly. She was used to the belly that puffed out so far she could not see her feet. Now suddenly her belly was nothing more than a large flabby dish holding this wriggly little being.

Baba Chessy brought a clean cloth to the bed and gently washed the baby, paying special attention to the baby’s nose and eyes. “Your little one is so happy with you, Marta, that he is not even wanting to cry at his strange surroundings. I will need to call Ante to come to meet him.”

This she did quietly. She took a clean sheet and draped it over Marta’s legs to spare Ante the sight of the blood.

Chapter Eight

Ante came in on tiptoe, clumsily, a look of such awe and relief on his face and tears dripping down his nose that Baba Chessy found tears in her own eyes. Marta had no tears. Her face was glowing with happiness as she stroked the baby’s tiny limbs and marveled at the little pearl fingernails. “My own little one,” she breathed, “my own little one. Oh Papa, is he not a miracle? His name will be Ante, Papa. His name will be Ante.”

Then she cried and pressed the baby to her breast so tightly that he squirmed and protested with a small squawk. Marta giggled and cried then, and her tears came so plentifully that Ante took her in his arms and stroked her hair saying, "There, there child, it is all right. You are all right. There, there daughter. You have brought such a gift to our house, such a gift. How proud, how very proud your mother would be." And he swallowed and gulped to try to stop his tears.

Marta said decisively, "He will have a second name. His second name will be Lucia after my mother. He will be Ante Lucia, Ante bright ray of light."

And that is how little Ante came to be Ante Lucia, which got shortened by childhood friends to Ante Luka, and all his life he was then to be known as AnteLuka. And few would remember that he was named for both his grandfather and his grandmother.

Baba Chessy said, "Ante, Marta will need help for a while. The birth has gone well, mother and baby are perfect. But Marta is a new mother. Is there someone who can help her for a few weeks?"

Ante's mind returned to the woman in that delegation of five, the woman who had said to Marta, "If you ever need me, child, please call upon me." He struggled to remember her name. Dragitsa! Yes, that was it. Mistress Dragitsa. "I will go now to find a woman to help Marta," he said.

Baba Chessy put some cream on the stump of the baby's cord and wrapped a cloth around it. She helped Marta drink most of the herbal tea Ante had made. Marta lay back down with a sigh. Bianca jumped onto the bed and settled behind Marta's head, which she proceeded to knead. Marta sighed again and struggled to keep her eyes open.

Baba Chessy said, "You have labored magnificently, Marta, and you have earned a rest. Your baby as well. You have both worked hard this day and can now rest, knowing you have both done so well. Little Ante Lucia is already asleep in your arms, and what I will do is place him here next to you so that you also can sleep if you wish to. I think your father will be able to find a good woman to help you, so I am going to gather my things and will leave when he returns with the woman. May I give Ante Lucia a kiss before I leave?" Marta smiled sleepily and proudly, nodding her head.

Baba Chessy leaned over to kiss the baby's head, then leaned farther over and kissed Marta's cheek saying, "What a brave girl you are, Marta! How proud is your mother, and how lucky is little Ante Lucia to have such a one as you for a mother. Sleep well now."

Baba Chessy busied herself packing her bag. Ante soon returned with the woman called Dragitsa. She came in the door and went straight to Marta's bed, where she stood watching the new mother and child with her hands at her mouth as though praying. "Oh, Ante, what a blessing. What a blessing."

There were tears in her eyes as she turned to him. She saw Baba Chessy then and stopped short. When she saw Bianca she stepped back unsurely. Ante said quickly, “Mistress Dragitsa, this good lady has helped Marta bring the young one into the world safely. I will always owe her a debt of gratitude that I did not lose my Marta.”

Dragitsa turned to him then and said “Ante, not only did you not lose your Marta; you have a new son in the family.” Ante’s eyes glistened and he blinked and swallowed.

Dragitsa turned to Baba Chessy. “Thank you for giving Ante this great gift, Mistress. I also am in your debt that he is so blessed.”

She did not smile as she spoke these words, and Baba Chessy understood the hurt that she felt, that Ante would call upon a stranger before calling upon her. Baba Chessy said quietly, “Mistress, Ante came to me as a last resort because Marta was refusing help from any village woman. I think it is her shame and embarrassment at what has happened to her. I was happy to be of help for so courageous a young woman, one whom the whole village can be proud of.”

At these words, Dragitsa’s face softened, “Yes, she is a wonder. I am so very, very happy for her that it has ended this well. Thank you, Mistress, for your help.” Baba Chessy told her briefly how the labor had gone, what was in the herbal drink she had, and that the baby had not yet been put to the breast.

Then she bowed, “I take my leave of you both now, and again my congratulations to you, Ante, for your new grandson, whom I know you will love and cherish and bring up to be the man you are.” She smiled. Dragitsa looked at Ante beaming.

As Baba Chessy and Bianca walked home, Baba Chessy said to Bianca, “Ah, Little Friend, Ante is blind, it seems. I wonder if little Ante Lucia will be the cupid’s arrow that opens his eyes.” And she chuckled.

Baba Chessy knew that Marta was in good hands with Dragitsa and she did not visit the new family. About a month later, however, she answered a knock at her door and found Marta standing there, holding little Ante Lucia in her arms, swaddled. She was beaming. “Mistress, see my little Ante Lucia. Is he not the most beautiful baby you have ever, ever seen? Look at his little hands and chubby fingers, and his sweet little cheeks and his blue, blue eyes. Oh, Mistress, how is it possible for a baby to be so beautiful?”

She kissed his cheek with a resounding smack and laughed gaily.” Would you like to hold him, Mistress? I cannot believe how heavy he is getting already. The only problem is,” and she looked down at her tunic front with chagrin, “each time I think of him, I start leaking milk. So of course I put his little mouth there to catch it, and he does love it so! He holds me between his little pudgy hands and looks up at me with those angelic eyes and I really think

I have died and gone to heaven, Mistress. Honestly. It is so, so amazing.” Baby Chessy took the baby reverently in her arms and looked down at him. He gazed at her solemnly.

“Yes, little one,” she said to him, “You were a very, very good little boy. You did not give your mother any problems. You were so good to her.” He continued to gaze at her solemnly. Then he suddenly scrunched his face and gave a little fart. This sent Marta into paroxysms of laughter. “He does that sometimes. I think it is so adorable!” Baba Chessy smiled and smiled.

After they left, Baba Chessy walked in the garden with Bianca, checking her lettuce. “Little friend,” she said quietly, “Those eyes. Those eyes are very unusual.”

Chapter Nine

She was not the only one to notice the baby’s unusual eyes. By the time the baby was two months old, those eyes were part of the gossip mill that waxed and waned in the grotto outside Baba Chessy’s garden.

“Those are *his* eyes! Nobody else has eyes like that.”

“Hush your mouth! That would mean that *he* attacked her. You can’t go around saying that!”

“But where else did those eyes come from? And she will never say who it was. Why won’t she admit who it was? Is she sweet on him?”

“Sweet on Bully Blaz? Not likely!”

“But what if it was Blaz?”

“Not our business. So hush up.”

Then there came the October day at the beginning of olive pressing season when Marta was helping Ante unload olives at the olive press warehouse with little Ante Lucia strapped to her back. Boris’s wife Ivanka was in the warehouse on some business with her husband. When she saw the baby strapped to Marta’s back, she walked to the unloading dock to see the baby. She bent down, and the baby looked up. She uttered an exclamation, “Oh,” stepping back with a stumble, breathing, “Blaz, my Blaz.” She turned and walked quickly away.

The gossip mills seemed to go into overdrive then, and Marta and her father grew anxious. One day he asked Marta, “Was it Blaz?” She looked at him steadily and said, “Papa, I told you I did not see him.” He had to be content with that unsatisfactory answer.

Then there came the fateful day of the warehouse accident. To facilitate the olive pressing, Boris had installed a pulley system about five years ago that transported the olives from the receiving platform to the crusher. Large wooden trolleys would be loaded on the platform, raised by ropes to a platform under the warehouse ceiling, and from there pulled by rope to another platform above the crusher, where they would be unloaded directly into the crushing mill.

On this October day, Boris's son Blaz was standing on the warehouse floor giving orders to the foreman. Suddenly there was a strange creaking sound followed by a loud snap and a whoosh of air as a trolley plummeted from the pulley rope. Blaz was talking loudly to the foreman and did not hear the warning. The foreman tried to push Blaz out of the way, but the trolley landed directly on both of them.

The warehouse erupted into shouting and yelling as men struggled to stop the presses and the pulley. They were not sure how to get Blaz and the foreman out from under the trolley without harming them further.

When Boris arrived and saw that it was his son under the trolley, his only son, his only child, he went berserk, roaring obscenities, lashing out with his fists, kicking at people.

A group of men decided they would do the least damage by trying to pull the trolley up and backwards off the bodies. This they did, and some of them gagged to see how one wheel of the trolley had mangled the foreman's arm and it was a pulpy mess hanging from one crooked shoulder, blood pumping out. The foreman was still alive, however.

Blaz was not. One corner of the heavy trolley had hit his head and crushed one side of his face.

Boris became maniacal, blaming everyone, threatening to send everyone to jail. He truly went berserk, the villagers said later. Finally, some of the men brought him some rakija and got him calmed down. He kept thrusting his fist into the air ranting, "Someone will pay for this, someone will pay for this!"

One of the men saw the foreman's arm bleeding in spurts. He tore part of his tunic off and tied a tourniquet around the arm to stop the blood flow. Two of the men offered to take the foreman to a physician in the city. Others stayed with Boris and Blaz's body until the priest came.

The priest was badly shaken, and his hands trembled as he leaned down to administer the rites of the dying. Boris was drunk and incoherent by then and he came rushing at the priest, roaring, "Get away from my son! Get your filthy hands off my son! Get away, Get AWAY! NO ONE will touch my son!" There was spittle coming from the corners of Boris's mouth. The priest jumped back in fright and walked away quickly.

Boris let it be known that his son would never be buried on “this cursed island.” Boris would take his son to the ancestral burial grounds, where Blaz could rest with his noble forefathers in a great mausoleum Boris would build for him.

Late that afternoon the villagers watched nervously as Boris’s boat moved away from the island and raised the sail, carrying Boris, Ivanka, several of their servants, and the body of Blaz wrapped in a golden shroud that scandalized the villagers when it was whispered to be the priest’s holy day cope.

When the boat was out of sight, the village men gathered at the warehouse and tried to decide what to do.

“Boris’s people are from the north. Even if they sail day and night, it will take them at least three days of travel.”

“They can’t travel at night! It is too dangerous when you can’t see the rocks.”

“Well, Boris always does what he wants to do.”

“We cannot do anything to help Boris or the family right now. I think we need to try to figure out how to keep the presses running. We have only started the olive harvest, and it has been a good growing year. Are we to let all these olives rot?”

There was consternation and muttering among the men.

“I think we should try to repair things and keep the presses running.”

“And when he gets back, will he thank you for daring to use his warehouse?”

“And who of us has the coin to pay for a new rope? Those things are very expensive.”

Mario spoke up. “Before Boris installed the pulley system, we used to haul the olives in wheelbarrows to the crusher. It takes longer and it is harder work, but that is the way we used to do it.”

“And we can do that again,” chimed in another man. “We don’t need to interfere with Boris’s new-fangled pulley system. We just have to use our muscles as we always did.”

Chapter Ten

So it was decided. The men got busy cleaning up the mess from the broken trolley and the sea of olives that had spilled onto the floor. There were minutes of discussion about whether to try to salvage the olives, some men being of the opinion they had to be thrown away because they were probably bruised, some of the opinion that if they were crushed immediately the bruising would not have had time to damage the taste. In the end they agreed to wash and crush and press the olives and sell the oil at reduced price to villagers.

When this news reached Baba Chessy's ears, she decided she would be one of the villagers to buy the reduced-price olive oil. "So much olive oil do I use, that I will mix the reduced-price oil with other oil and I am sure I will never notice the difference," she said to Bianca.

Thus, she made her way to the warehouse the following day, carrying two empty bottles with her, Bianca walking sedately next to her as usual. When she entered the warehouse, she was a little dismayed to find so many of the village women waiting there. "Well," she said quietly to Bianca, "Let us get in line. If we are lucky, we might get reduced-price olive oil, and if we are not lucky, we will know that we tried."

So they stood in line. The spilled olives had been shoveled up from the floor, washed in several large wooden tubs, and lay spread on burlap sacks lying in rows, drying. Men were already picking up the sacks by their corners and dumping the olives into wheelbarrows for transport to the crusher. Mario was the man on the hastily-erected platform bending down to receive the olives and then throwing them into the crusher. The noise that close to the crusher must have been deafening, thought Baba Chessy, watching the four donkeys going round and round pulling the great mill wheels. "What men must do to earn coin to take care of families," she thought gravely. However, as one hour crept into another, she noticed with relief that another man had replaced Mario and was now doing the work of lifting and dumping.

Then there was a shout of triumph as word spread that the first oil had now come through the crusher, screens, and press and was flowing into the large barrel to be siphoned into bottles for sale. The first women started moving forward, bringing coins from their tunic pockets. Soon the warehouse was filled with the wonderful smell that only fresh olive oil can give, sort of tangy and bitter and smooth and golden and altogether something you cannot describe. "What a blessing it is to have this gift of the earth," thought Baba Chessy.

When she reached the head of the line, she did indeed get one bottle filled. The men had seen the number of women waiting to buy and had wisely limited every sale to one bottle. Baba Chessy watched her bottle being filled and she smiled, and the world was a little brighter. She paid her coins and put the precious bottle into her old burlap sack and turned to go.

She noticed that Bianca was no longer standing quietly beside her. Her quick alarm turned to relief when she spotted Bianca over by the side of the warehouse batting something around, playing with it as was her custom. Baba Chessy walked over. "What have you found, Little Friend?" she asked.

It was a long, thick piece of rope that had been pushed to the side of the warehouse, obviously the rope that had held the ill-fated trolley. The end that Bianca was playing with was as thick as Baba Chessy's arm and was badly frayed, jute strings separating into straggling pieces, some longer and some shorter. Baba Chessy was astonished that such a

thick rope that looked so strong should have frayed and snapped. Was the rope inferior? Had the quality of the jute been inferior because it was not cured well? “What an unfortunate thing to happen,” she thought sadly as she walked away with Bianca. “Because someone failed to take enough care, one man has lost an arm and another man has lost his life.”

The warehouse continued to function during Boris’s absence, but slowly and with effort. The men kept working doggedly, hoping that Boris would be pleased to find they continued to enrich him even in his absence. Marta and her father, like all the olive growers, hoped that the olive season might yet be saved.

Two weeks later Boris and Ivanka returned to the island. Even in the softer light of late afternoon, it was shocking how much they had aged. They spoke to no one, not even each other, it was noted. Nor did Boris come to the warehouse. The villagers were uneasy.

The next morning Boris’s boat was seen leaving the island and tacking to the city. After the Angelus bell had rung, his boat returned, and from his boat stepped the city Magistrate and two guards, followed by Boris. The four men walked directly to the olive press warehouse. They stood silently in the large open doors, and Boris surveyed his domain, his grim face noting the men carrying on the work of the olive pressing without the help of the pulley. He seemed to be looking for someone. He spoke briefly to the Magistrate and they left.

The nervous and uneasy villagers watched them walk to the church. Soon the church bells were ringing. What could this mean? The alarmed villagers knew there was no fire. Was the Magistrate here to arrest someone for the accident that had killed Blaz? They walked with anxious steps to the church and stood tensely waiting. Many of the growers were on the hillside picking their olives. Ante and Marta were among that group. It was over twenty minutes before all the villagers were assembled in the church.

Then the Magistrate rose and said in a loud voice, “Let the olive grower Ante come before me.” Marta’s eyes grew wide with fear, and she took little Ante from his sling, where he rode on her back as she helped her father with the olives.

Ante went forward. The Magistrate called out, “I arrest this man Ante for the murder of Blaz, son of Boris. This man Ante cut the pulley rope out of evil revenge. Guards, bind him with rope and take him to my boat.” Marta cried out, “No, no!” and her cry startled her child, who began to wail. Some of the village women surrounded Marta in concern, but everyone remained silent.

Ante did not resist. In minutes the guards had bound him and were hustling him down the church steps. Marta clutched her baby and wailed. The women held her up and patted her back helplessly.

There was anger and fear among the villagers. The men left immediately to return to work, but some of them spit contemptuously as they muttered among themselves. The women clustered around Marta and tried to soothe her. “Everybody knows your father had nothing to do with this, Marta. Do not worry. The Judge cannot find him guilty when he has done nothing.”

But Marta knew that was not true. Those with many coins can buy what they want in life. “Stay calm for your sweet little one, Marta,” said the women. “See how upset he is to see you crying this way?”

It was true, Marta said to herself. I must think now of someone besides myself. I need to do what is best for this helpless little person who counts on me for everything.

Dragitsa came forward with another village woman to accompany Marta to her house. “But I need to keep picking the olives,” Marta cried. “No,” Dragitsa said firmly. “You need to take a small rest for you and your little one. The olives will be there later and tomorrow and the day after that. Now you must drink and eat for the sake of your little one and stay calm so your milk does not dry up. You need to stay calm for little Ante Lucia, Marta.”

Those words rang true for Marta, and she took them to heart, saying to her little Ante Lucia after the women left, “Yes, my precious little ray of light. I must stay calm for your sake, and I know I can do this, because I am doing it for you.” She gave him a kiss and placed him on his favorite blanket on the bed while she found food and drink for herself. She would remain calm, she was determined.

Chapter Eleven

But Baba Chessy would not remain calm. She felt within her a righteous wrath that she had not felt for many years. She walked from the church directly to the warehouse and asked for Mario. He was impatient to be called from his work because without the pulley, the pressing was falling behind.

Baba Chessy took him directly to the side of the building where the long pulley rope still lay. Baba Chessy showed Mario the frayed ends of the rope, telling him the rope could not have been cut, that it must have been inferior rope and had frayed and broken. A horrified dawning came over Mario’s face, followed by anger and resolve. “I will take this rope immediately to the bishop and ask for justice for Ante,” he said.

It was no easy task to get the heavy, cumbersome rope coiled and tied so it could be transported. Mario borrowed old Jure’s donkey to carry it and Jakov volunteered to take him on his boat.

After they left, the men tried to continue to work, but feelings were high, and the work did not go smoothly. There were some among the men who had received preferential treatment from Boris, and they were vocal in their support of him. There were some men, though, who usually did not participate in the gossip mills, who remained shocked by the accusation that Ante had cut the rope if indeed he had not cut it.

“Why would Boris accuse him of that if the rope had not been cut?” they asked.

“Boris is off his head with grief over his son, and he wants someone to pay. That wife of his is off her head, too, I think, because she keeps calling Marta’s baby ‘My Blaz.’”

“So she is as much as admitting that her son was the one who attacked Marta? How stupid is she?”

“Well, her husband must think the whole town is talking about that and he thinks that Ante wanted revenge. Now he wants *his* revenge.”

“Well, the whole town wasn’t talking about that. At least I had not heard it. But I have learned that some people have been talking about it a lot, saying that nobody in the whole village has eyes the color of Blaz’s eyes, and now this baby has those eyes. I have heard that the women were saying that the baby’s chin is exactly like Blaz’s chin also. I think they are a bunch of biddies to gossip about stupid stuff like that, but that is the talk all over the village, I guess, and has been for over a month now, they say. How Blaz was the attacker who planted his seed in Marta.”

“So the two of them think that their son was the attacker, and yet they will not offer reparation to Marta?”

“But why didn’t Marta say so if it was Blaz? Why has she remained silent all this time, no matter how many people have tried to get her to tell who did it?”

“Well, that is not hard to figure out, my friend. If Marta accused precious Blaz of such a thing, how long do you think Boris would allow Ante to bring his olives for pressing?”

“Ah.”

“Ah is right. And if Ante cannot press his olives here on the island, he must transport them by boat to the city. He has no boat, and the city olive press rates are not good for the grower. By the time Ante gets his olives to the city, if he gets them there – you know how the bura comes down now that the weather is getting colder – anyway, if he gets his olives to the city, he will have far fewer coins in his pocket.”

“And he has never been a wealthy grower, always wanting to put quality before quantity, poor fool.”

“So, what can we do to help Ante?”

‘What *can* you do for him? They’ve got him in their clutches now.’

But the men were heartened that Mario had found the frayed rope and would be taking that to the bishop. Some of the men, that is. Some of the men were angry and saying loudly, “Why is he butting in? Poor Boris has lost a son, his only son. Shouldn’t someone pay for that? His only son! And that girl was a slut. Why else did she get into this trouble? A slut and a whore she was.”

Some of the men frowned to hear that, but they kept their mouths shut to avoid an argument. The men who supported Boris were known to be loud and eager for a fight. “Who needs a fight when I need my hands to bring home coins for my family,” the other men said to themselves.

For the rest of that day and the next day the Boris faction threw around vile and nasty things about Marta, calling her offensive names and then laughing loudly and boisterously.

Mario did not come home that night, which was a most troubling thing for the villagers who worried about Ante. What can it mean, they asked themselves. The olive picking went poorly, and the men at the warehouse were so out of sorts and surly that the processing went poorly as well.

Then suddenly the next afternoon Mario and Ante stepped off Jakov’s boat. The news spread in a flash, and many of the villagers came to surround them as they walked from the harbor. Ante was in a great hurry, wanting only to get to his house to check on Marta and the baby. But Mario stopped on the walkway to satisfy the villagers.

“The situation,” he said, “was this. The bishop wanted to talk to the man who sold the rope. Jakov and I found that man, and that man remembered when Boris bought the rope, over four years ago, because it was a large commission. He had never before had to make a rope quite that thick or long. But he engaged a rope maker who agreed to do it.

The man who sold the rope said, ‘I visited the rope maker one day and saw that because the order was so big, he did not have enough cured jute fiber, so he was using some odds and ends from other jobs. I told him that would not do, that the rope would not hold with inferior fibers. He answered that the thickness of the rope was more than sufficient to bind the arms of Hercules. Those were his words, bind the arms of Hercules. He also said that he would have to charge more to use other fibers because when he took the commission, he did not understand exactly how much fiber would be required, since he had never made a rope that thick. He wanted more coins to make a different rope. He said, “This rope will be fine. Or else get me more coins.”

But I was not happy. I sent word to Boris about the situation. I told him that we should wait until the rope maker had sufficient cured fibers. But Boris was angry. He said, “Do you think I am stupid? Everybody is always wanting to cheat me. I paid for the rope I wanted, and I

will get the rope I wanted, and I will not pay one coin more! Get out!” So I delivered the rope he wanted, and I took my coins and paid the rope maker the agreed upon price. But I was uneasy about that rope. I worried it would break. Each season I would listen to talk to try to find out if it broke, and it seemed that year after year it did not break. But now, in the fifth year, it did break, and my fears were confirmed.”

Mario continued, “The ropemaker agreed to go with me and Jakov to the bishop, who listened gravely and then called for the Magistrate, telling him that the rope was defective because Boris himself had refused to pay for stronger rope. The Magistrate was to release Ante. And so we brought Ante back to Stari Kamen.”

Boris was at his house, but several of his friends from the warehouse came to him to tell him the news. They found him sitting morosely at his table with a half bottle of rakija in front of him. He looked up at them blearily. They gave him the news. He became then so livid with fury that he was incoherent, and his friends quickly left.

“Poor devil,” they said, “poor devil.”

Chapter Twelve

Then two things happened in Stari Kamen, one very ugly and one very unfair, most of the villagers agreed. The men who were Boris’s friends began a smear campaign against Marta, claiming that she had lain with every boy and man in the village and even in the city. They got so carried away in their ranting that even some of them stepped back and said, “This is quite stupid. She did not lie with me or my son, I can state that as a fact, and I have never heard that she went to the city even one time.”

The outrageousness of their accusations became too much for many of the villagers. One day as Baba Chessy visited the market looking for a new knife, she heard two of the older boys talking together. The one called Davido was tending the market stall for his father, and his friend Gorko was slouching there with him to pass the time.

“That is unfair what they are doing to Marta. She doesn’t deserve that.”

“How do you know?”

“I know. I saw it.”

“What do you mean you saw it?”

“Shh, that old woman behind you will hear us.”

Gorko looked quickly behind him. “Her? She’s just an old witch. She is probably deaf. She is nobody. Tell me, what did you see?”

Baba Chessy picked up each knife one after the other as though testing their heft and feel and sharpness. The boys glanced at her.

Davido whispered, "That old biddy can't make up her mind. As though the knives are all so different. My father sharpens them all perfectly. She does not need to test every single one!"

"Never mind her. Tell me what you saw."

The boy's whisper was loud enough for Baba Chessy's keen ears. "I had followed Marta that night because that was when I could not stop watching her. She was so beautiful and she just did not know that. I saw her tell her father to go home to rest and she would finish picking that one tree they were working on. He did go, and she was watching him go, and then she was sort of looking out at the sea, you know how pretty it is when the moon makes its path on it as though we could walk on the moon path to the city?"

"But what happened?"

"While she was standing there, I saw somebody creeping up to her. I was so surprised I might have even let out a little yelp, but either he did not hear it, or I imagined my yelp. I think he did not hear it because he was so focused on what he was going to do. He jumped her, grabbed her mouth and threw her onto the ground and then he held on to her mouth while he jacked up her skirt and pushed himself into her. I was so shocked I could not move. Then suddenly he was done and he jumped up and ran away. It was Blaz. I was so scared. You know you cannot cross Blaz or your life is never peaceful. I felt sad, and I was a coward. I did not even go to help Marta. I just slunk away, and I have felt bad so many times since then about how I did nothing to help her. But what they are doing to her now is wrong, so wrong."

"Are you sure you saw everything right, Davido?"

"Of course I saw everything right, stupid. I was right there! The moon was bright enough that I even saw the drippings on her legs when she tried to use olive leaves to wipe between her legs. I know what I saw, stupid!"

"OK, OK. Never mind. Why didn't her father protect her better? You know my mother sends my sister to the country every summer when the nobles come."

Davido said fiercely, "I would really like to take a knife to those nobles who think our pure girls are their playground. *Our girls!*"

"But it was not a noble who did this to Marta."

"I know that stupid, I was there. I would still like to jack a knife into some of those nobles."

"Some people say Marta knew all along who did this to her."

“Why didn’t she say anything? Nobody could ever get anything out of her.”

“Why do you think? Do you think Boris would ever let Ante use the mill and press if Marta accused Boris’s precious Blaz?”

Baba Chessy spoke up meekly. “Young man, I think I have selected the knife I want. Can you tell me the cost of this knife?”

Davido told her, impatiently. She fumbled in her tunic pocket looking for coins and saying quietly, as though to no one in particular, “Sometimes the cost of things is a surprise, isn’t it? Things you think should cost very much do not, and things you think have little cost end up costing very dearly. I have noticed that in life.”

The two boys were looking at her as though she had no wits.

She continued, “Yes, I have noticed that when we know we should do something, that it is in our power to do something that will right a wrong, if we do not do that thing, it seems to haunt us for ever after, making us pay a very dear price of guilty shame, over and over and over. Yes, I have noticed that in life. I have also noticed in life that when someone becomes brave and finds the courage to do what he thinks is right, that gives such a good feeling that his days are much lighter and happier, and he often feels like a real man when he does the right thing. Yes, that is probably what it is. When you do the right thing even when it is hard, you know that you have become a real man. A real man. Well, I think I have found my coins, young man. Here they are and I thank you.”

She walked away with Bianca, the two boys staring after her.

Baba Chessy heard later about how Davido and Gorko went to the warehouse that afternoon and Davido told his story and Gorko backed him up. It was a great scandal, everyone agreed, and the gossip mills did not stop.

Boris’s friends were sullen but silent.

This was the ugly thing that happened in Stari Kamen. The unfair thing was that Boris now would not allow Ante to bring his olives to the warehouse to be pressed. Ante would have to take them to the city.

Ante asked to borrow old Jure’s ancient flat-bottomed craft to do so. It was heavy and it had a small old sail, but it would have to do. He pulled the boat up onto the shingle near the harbor, leaving the stern in the water. Then he started bringing his olives to the boat, dumping wheelbarrow after wheelbarrow of them into the well of the boat. As the boat filled with olives, he pushed it back a little farther in the water, so that soon it was entirely in the water. He tied it to a piling and went to his grove to bring one last wheelbarrow of olives.

When he returned, he found the olives in the boat floating in water. The boat had a leak! What a disaster. He could not understand it.

But Ante was a practical man, and he knew that before he figured out what went wrong, he needed to save his olives. He waded into the water with a burlap bag and filled it with olives, then took the bag to a safe place on the shingle, where he gently dumped the olives. It was slow and laborious work and took him nearly two hours to empty the boat. Then he tried to pull the boat completely out of the water but found that it had become too filled with water and was too heavy.

He sat in the shingle with his head in his hands, exhausted and unsure what to do next. “What have I accomplished going up against Boris and all his wealth?” he thought in despair. “Now my daughter is ruined, and I cannot get my olives pressed, and my family will starve.”

It was here that Marta found him. She understood instantly what had happened. “Papa, let me help you,” she said. She had been on her way to the public cistern to get water and she had with her two wooden buckets. She took little Ante Lucia from the sling on her back and laid him down tenderly in the nearby shade, then together she and Ante dipped their pails into the boat and tossed the water out until the boat was light enough to bring up onto the shingle.

Almost immediately Ante spotted the problem, a blackened circle in the bow of the boat. He had not noticed it earlier, but now that the boat was wet, the black circle stood out in sharp relief. It was the exact size of a poker. “Someone has taken a hot poker to this boat and burned and pounded a hole in it!” he exclaimed, sitting down suddenly on the ground, heedless of the sharp little shells. “They burned a hole in old Jure’s boat because they heard that I had asked to use it! Marta, this is evil. This is pure evil!”

Marta’s voice was hard, “Yes, Papa, this is evil, and we will not let it go unrecognized.” She stalked up the shingle to where she had left little Ante.

“Child, child, stop. What can you do? Will they kill us next?” cried Ante.

“No, Papa, they will not! This will stop because we will *make* it stop.” She grabbed up little Ante and stomped away fiercely.

Chapter Thirteen

By this time, the testimony of the boys Davido and Gorko had started to do its work, and even among Boris’s supporters, there was no longer to be found much sympathy for Boris.

So when suddenly that day a very angry Marta appeared at the warehouse carrying little Ante in her arms and with fire in her eyes, the men listened. The fiery young woman was determined to be heard, and she was heard. There were many exclamations of surprise and disgust among the men as she reported the hole in Jure’s boat. Even Boris’s supporters

were ashamed. Boris had gone too far this time. A boat is a man's fortune on this island, just as are the olives a man's fortune. When you have tried to take those from a man, you have gone too far.

Mario and two other men went immediately with Marta to the harbor, where they found Ante trying to pull the boat out of the water. They helped him do so, then examined the boat. "Yes, it is a hot poker that has done this," exclaimed one of the men. "In fact, this hole is the exact size of the poker in the warehouse that is used when olive oil barrels need to be smoothed a little."

They went back to the warehouse, got the poker, brought it back to the boat and found a perfect fit. "This is too much," they cried. "This is too much!"

A group of ten men from the warehouse went to Boris's large house, where they were denied entrance. However, the men were so incensed by this time that they shouted their demands. It was only the coolest heads among them that kept them from breaking down the door and bringing Boris out to beat him up.

The next morning the whole village of Stari Kamen was in a fit of agitation. Boris had been seen leaving the island in his boat late the night before and had been seen that morning in the city boarding the ship that went to Italy. His boat was tied up at the dock in the city. The ticket master reported that the man they described as Boris had bought a one-way fare. And no, there was no woman with him. He bought only one ticket. A visit to Boris's banker confirmed that his accounts were empty. "Flew the coop, he did," exclaimed the angry villagers.

But there was more. It was found out later that he had sold his house in Stari Kamen to a city merchant and had tried to sell the warehouse but had been blocked by the old island law that islanders generations ago had gotten signed by the Judge: the olive press warehouse, no matter who owned it, could not be sold without the approval of the islanders. Thanks to those smart villagers generations before, the olive press warehouse could continue to press olives.

Two of the men agreed to bring Boris's boat back to Stari Kamen. "Better someone in the village has the use of this boat than let these greedy city dogs have it for free, a nice boat like this," they agreed.

Several days later the news of Boris absconding was eclipsed by even more momentous news: Marta's baby had been taken and it was said that Boris's wife Ivanka had taken it. She was seen boarding Boris's boat with packages and trunks and one maid. At first the villagers could not believe it.

"A child? She stole Marta's child?"

"Boris's wife Ivanka? She stole Marta's child?"

“Impossible,” said the villagers. “She is old, what would she want with a tiny baby? She couldn’t even feed a baby. There has to be some mistake.”

But there was no mistake. A child standing at a second-floor window in a neighbor’s house had seen Mistress Ivanka’s little maid, the scared, mousy one with the curly hair, go into Ante’s garden where Marta was weeding. As she always did, Marta had put the baby on a blanket while she worked her garden rows planting seeds. “When Marta’s back was turned,” reported the child, “the maid snatched up the baby quick as a wink and ran out the garden gate before Marta knew anything was wrong. When Marta turned around to look at her baby, she found him gone, and she screamed and screamed.”

The villagers came running.

“A baby!” they exclaimed over and over. “A baby! That is wicked and evil. That is truly wicked and evil!”

“There cannot be anything more evil!!”

“We must stop her!” they cried. “We must stop her!”

The news spread within minutes, and village life came to a stop. The men conferred quickly and determinedly. Ivanka’s boat had been seen out in the strait heading north. A neighbor thought Ivanka was probably going to her sister’s house, the one who lives in Novi Grad. They should sail north in the strait.

Jakov, the village’s most skillful sailor, brought his boat around. Ante, Marta, and Mario boarded it, Ante and Mario taking up the oars. In minutes they left the land and Jakov raised the sail. Then it was as though they were flying as he tacked into the wind.

The island’s second-best skipper, Stepan, followed immediately in his boat, with Luka and Franjo rowing.

Ante marveled at the way Jakov seemed to read the wind and waves, tacking with an uncanny feel for the water and air, so that their boat seemed not to sail *on* the sea but to be part of it. Jakov watched each wave intently and played his lines into it. No energy was lost or wasted. Within ten minutes Ante could see Ivanka’s boat already parallel to the northern tip of Gora. As he watched, he saw the boat jerk and pull to the right sharply, but the skipper managed the sail and brought the boat back under control.

“They caught a gust of wind as they rounded the tip of the island,” said Jakov.

Mario had been watching the sky and commented quietly, “I do not like the look of that cloud that is hanging over the Velebit.”

“I agree,” said Jakov. “I can see ahead of us that the waves are beginning to crest higher. That fool who is sailing Ivanka’s boat should know he needs to turn around and head back to port.”

“It’s probably, Josip,” said Ante. “His harvest was not that good this year, and he is probably wanting to earn coin however he can. I am sure he would have nothing to do with taking the child.”

Mario said, “If you are willing to continue, Jakov, for the sake of rescuing the baby, I am in favor of continuing.”

“Aye,” said Ante. “I do not want to put anyone’s life in danger, but if you are willing to continue, Jakov, I shall be forever in your debt.”

Marta sat with clenched hands, blinking furiously to keep the tears from falling. She looked behind her and saw that Stepan’s boat continued to follow them.

For several minutes Jakov seemed to weigh his options. Then he came to his decision. “I have sailed through a bura before. It is not pleasant, and when it was over I went down on my knees to thank God I had survived it. If we continue, we may find ourselves in a bura. However, if we do not continue our pursuit, it is almost a certainty that that baby will die because Josip is not a skilled sailor on bad seas. Prepare for rough water. Marta, get down into the well. Ante and Mario, check that the oars are firmly in the oarlocks. And above all, Ante and Mario, mind your heads and watch that boom. If a high gust of bura hits, it may be ripped out of my control.”

Jakov put his energies then into watching the waves and directing his boat to dance with them, so it seemed to Marta.

Chapter Fourteen

When they came parallel to the tip of Gora they were indeed hit with a blast of wind from the west, but Jakov was prepared. He set his boat into it at an angle and used that wind to send his boat flying even faster to the north. Ivanka’s boat was soon only a stone’s throw in front of them. Marta looked behind her and found that there was a mist shrouding the air, making visibility lower. But it seemed that Stepan, too, had safely come past the island’s tip.

“Yes, we are in for it,” yelled Jakov. “All the waves are short with high crests now, and we are heading into thick sea smoke. Be ready.”

Marta felt tiny drops of water hitting her face, and she realized this is what men meant when they talked about sea smoke. It was not smoke at all. It was tiny drops of water whipped up by the wind and making it hard to see. She wanted to cover her face, but she

wanted even more to see the boat that carried her little Ante Lucia. She blinked and swiped, trying to clear her vision.

Then suddenly, Ivanka's boat was immediately ahead of them and Jakov was lowering his sail and ordering Ante and Mario to row hard to bring them abreast of Ivanka's boat. The waves seemed to be getting higher and Marta thought it would be impossible to bring the boats together so that they could board Ivanka's boat to get the baby. As one boat rose on a wave, the other boat seemed to slide into a trough of water. The whistling of the wind increased.

On Ivanka's boat, Josip was struggling to lower and reef his sail, but Ivanka was screaming at him to leave the sail up and keep going.

Eventually Jakov was able to bring his boat close enough that Mario could reach out, grab hold of the rail of Ivanka's boat, and try to pull the boats together. "He will not be able to do this!" thought Marta in fear. "He will be pulled under."

But then Ante was at the rail and grabbing hold as well, and then in minutes, Jakov as well. The muscles of the men's arms bulged under wet tunics with the strain of trying to keep the boats together. Stepan's boat had come near, but Jakov yelled at him to stay clear. Three boats tied together were too dangerous for the one in the middle in crashing waves.

Ivanka kept screaming at Josip to "Keep going, keep going!" Little Ante on her lap was crying in terror. Ivanka's maid, Mia, sitting in the stern of the boat, slid down into the well, screaming in fear.

Then Mario suddenly leaped from Jakov's boat into Ivanka's boat, unsettling both. Marta's arm shot up as though in reflex and she grabbed hold of Ivanka's boat to replace Mario. With a strength she did not know she had, she pulled at Ivanka's boat to help bring the two boats back together at the stern.

Ivanka started screaming at Marta, "Marta, you are a woman. You understand the needs of a woman. Little Blaz is all I have! He is all I have! Do not try to take him from me! Please be merciful. Be merciful. You are young and can have more children. I cannot. Little Blaz is all I have. Please, Please!" She was wailing, her scarf blew off, and her hair flew around crazily.

Then her tone changed as she yelled, "Ante, I have many coins. I will give them to you. It is a certainty you can use them. Order your daughter to release little Blaz to me. Order her now! Do you hear me, Ante? You are nothing but a poor olive grower. With me, little Blaz will have the life of a prince. Order your daughter now, Ante. Order her!"

Then suddenly Ivanka's face took on something ugly. She stood up, stumbling from one foot to the other to keep her balance, her skirt and tunic and cloak flying around her wildly. She held the terrified baby aloft and roared in violent desperation, "If I cannot have this child, no one shall have him. Do you hear me? NO ONE!"

With that, she threw the screaming child overboard. His piercing cries were joined by those of everyone on the two boats except Ivanka, who looked around her with fury and hatred as she kept stumbling from one foot to the other.

However, Mario had been watching the viciousness seep into Ivanka's face, and by instinct he understood even before she did what she would do. He crouched at the rail of Ivanka's boat, and as little Ante Lucia left Ivanka's hands, Mario leaped, catching the child in midair, both going down into the roiling waves.

With a roar of snarling hatred, Ivanka picked up a small box of olives that was to be a gift to her sister, and she threw that at Josip. It bounced off the boom and flipped over the edge of the boat with olives flying everywhere.

Josip lost his hold of the rigging at the same moment that Mario's leap had tipped one side of the boat, with the result that the heavy wooden boom swung wildly free, coming around with a lurch and striking Ivanka with a thud, sending her flying over the rail. Her scream of terror was drowned out by the shrieking of Mia and the bellows of Ante as he jumped into Ivanka's boat and threw himself at the rail trying to see Mario and little Ante.

Then it was chaos. Josip struggled to get his boom back under control. Jakov and Marta tried to hold the two boats together. Everyone seemed to be screaming, and the wind threw water everywhere.

In minutes Ante saw Mario's head, then little Ante's head. Mario was fighting the waves with one hand and keeping the child's head above water with the other. The baby no longer cried or screamed, its head hanging loose as a doll's. Ante picked up rigging rope and tossed it in Mario's direction. After several tries, Mario was able to grab hold. Josip came quickly to Ante's side, and the two pulled Mario and the baby to the boat.

With one arm Mario held the baby up to Ante, who grabbed it and stumbled across Ivanka's boat to the other side to pass the baby to Marta in Jakov's boat. The two boats were pulling apart. Ante half fell onto the railing and stretched forward as far as he could, holding the baby over open water. Marta leaped to the rail, snatching the baby with hands that seemed to turn into iron claws. She clutched little Ante so fiercely that later she would find bruises on his tender skin.

He began to scream. With a backward lurch Marta fell into the well of Jakov's boat, cradling the baby and groaning with the pain in her elbow that had taken the brunt of her fall. She pressed the baby to her fiercely, moaning and crying, "I have you my little one. I have you safe. I have you." Her tears joined the salt spray on her face, and she vowed in that awful moment that she would endure any pain on earth before she would part with her child. She nestled him under her wet tunic, where he found her breast and was comforted, though he continued to judder and hiccup his fear. His entire body was shaking with cold. She bent

forward so that the heat from her body might warm the infant, and she sat curling her body around his, rocking and crooning and crying.

Jakov gave up the struggle to keep the two boats together. The waves pulled them a boat length apart, and they rocked and twisted.

Ante turned his attention to helping Mario get out of the sea and into Ivanka's boat. Mario was being bumped against the boat with almost every wave, and the cold water was sapping his strength. Together Josip and Ante got their hands under Mario's armpits and heaved him aboard. The boat rocked and lurched, and they all went down in a heap on the deck, Ante crying out sharply in pain.

As the trio righted itself, Ante's right arm dangled strangely and he was moaning in pain. His shoulder bone stood out at an angle. Josip, who had served as a soldier when he was a young man, came behind Ante, put one hand on Ante's arm and the other on his shoulder bone. He gave a quick, strong wrench, grunting with effort. There was a bellow of pain from Ante, and then silence as he gulped for air.

With his good arm he pulled himself to the side of Ivanka's boat, seeing in desperation the wide gulf that now separated the two boats. He yelled to Marta, asking if she and little Ante were safe. Clutching the child to her chest to cover its ears she yelled as loudly as she could, "Yes, Papa, we are safe."

Ante sat down clumsily in the well of Ivanka's boat then. He tested his arm gingerly and found that his fingers worked, and he could bend his arm. He breathed heavily and sat dazed.

Then an eerie calm seemed to descend on the boats. They still rocked wildly in the high waves, but the whistling wind died as suddenly as if it were a giant blowing air and the giant's windpipe were throttled.

The sea smoke evaporated.

Only the waves continued to rise and fall, slapping at the boats, which rocked crazily and freely.

Green olives from the broken box floated freely on the waves also, bobbing on them with unknowing and uncaring ease. There was no sign of Ivanka. Jakov would report later that he had seen her surface once after she went into the waves, her face a mask of terror. Then he did not see her again.

Jakov and Josip returned to their positions at the helms of their boats. They made a final sweep of the waters in case they might have missed Ivanka. They decided she was gone, and the three boats headed back to Stari Kamen.

It was Stepan who later told the story of this impossible rescue, for he had seen it all. As the villagers listened, they nodded wisely. “Yes, that is just the way the bura works. There is no logic to a bura. It is willful and can come up to roaring intensity in a flash and just as quickly die, leaving only destruction and fear in its wake.

Chapter Fifteen

The first order of business now was to resume the olive harvesting. The foreman had returned to Stari Kamen from the hospital in the city minus his right arm but with his mind unaffected, the villagers noted in relief. He assumed the leadership of the press operations and within days had restored some order. It was hard going, because the men had grown used to a certain rhythm using the pulley system, and now that everything needed to be done by hand, there was confusion. Olives were spilled, causing a stumbling hazard for the mill donkeys. Arguments broke out when two growers insisted on the old order of preference under Boris. But the growers kept bringing the olives, and in the end the villagers tried to cooperate, knowing that their work at this important time would assure the welfare of the village through the harsh winter.

As the smell of new olive oil once more permeated the warehouse, tempers calmed, and the villagers remembered how grateful they were for nature’s gift of the olives. A bumpy peace stole over the village as everyone tried to get used to a new order of life, one without Boris and Ivanka and Blaz.

Two weeks later a visitor stepped off his boat onto their shore. The villagers regarded him with contempt and then ignored him, thinking he was on the island to look at properties so that he could buy land.

It was true that this well-dressed visitor was on the island to look at land, but it was not to buy land. It was to look at land he already owned. This visitor was indeed the merchant who had bought Boris’s house and property when Boris sold it at a cut-rate price to raise quick cash to take with him to Italy.

Nikola was the name of this merchant, and in later years the villagers would reflect back in some chagrin about their initial surly attitude toward him. For it would turn out to be he, Nikola, who would invest in the olive warehouse to improve it and would help the villagers sell their olive oil at better prices in the city. His proposal was simple, and probably, the villagers said later, possible only because he had the mind of a merchant. It was a profitable proposal.

Nikola would invest in a new and better pulley system for the warehouse, and in a more efficient grinding and separating mill, and he would use his large barge-like boat to transport olive oil to the city. His barge could take as much olive oil in one trip as five

smaller boats, and more safely. He would also eliminate the middleman that most of the villagers used to sell their oil in the city, thereby increasing by 20% the profit the villagers would make.

In return, all olive oil produced on the island would be sold to him and pass through his city warehouse to be distributed.

The village men discussed at length the pros and cons of Nikola's proposals after he returned to the city.

"That means he has complete control of our market. I don't like the idea of one man having that much control."

"Boris had complete control, didn't he?"

"Well, yes and no, but he was an island man. He lived here with us."

"Nikola now owns Boris's house. Is he planning to live here?"

"I doubt it. I heard that he has a large Italian-style villa in the city. If he lives here, it would probably be only in the summer as the rest of the rich people do."

"20% is a lot. I might even be able to buy that donkey I would like to have to get my olives down the hill to the press."

"And I might be able to send my young son to the city to school. He is brilliant, and I would like to see him have the chance to be educated."

And so the men continued their discussions. In the end the vote was to ask for Nikola's proposal in writing so the men could take it to an advocat in the city for review. The advocat would be able to advise them of their rights and obligations or any risks they might be taking if they agreed to Nikola's proposal.

This was done. The villagers were satisfied, and within several weeks the milling and pressing at the warehouse was halted one day to allow the installation of the new pulley system. A new grinding mill had been ordered from the north but probably would not arrive in time for this season's harvest. Nevertheless, the villagers were surprised and gratified with the speed with which the merchant could get things done.

Within a month, the higher wages came into the villagers' pockets, and there were satisfied smiles all around.

It was noticed one day that each time Ante's olives came to press, the bottles of his oil were tallied and set on the side. The foreman had been instructed to have those bottles delivered to Nikola's house, formerly Boris's house. Those bottles did not join the rest of the olive oil going to the city.

When questioned about this strange fact, the foreman would say only, “Nikola likes Ante’s olive oil and wants it for his family and friends.”

Though there were a few frowns and some jealous grumbling among the growers, most recognized that Ante’s oil was indeed superior in taste, so it was fair that that fact should be recognized.

“And,” said Baba Chessy to Bianca with a smile when she learned of the destination for Ante’s olive oil, “there is something very right about that.”

The end

About the Author

Carolyn Gregov, Ph.D., entered the convent at age 14 and left after 9 years, following a two-year crisis of faith. She reentered secular life in the heady atmosphere of 1960s New York City, where she earned a Bachelor of Science in Philosophy degree from Columbia University and met her husband, a Croatian immigrant who introduced her to cultures other than American. This led to her life-long need to learn about other lands and people, a need that has taken her to 103 countries on all the continents.



With her husband she raised a family of five children and owned and managed a 350-seat restaurant for 20 years while earning a Ph.D. in Educational Psychology from Kansas State University. She spent the next ten years in post-doctoral studies in Public Health at the University of South Florida while teaching nutrition education and pesticide prevention to at-risk pregnant women before transitioning to the University of Florida outreach extension program. She ended her working career at age 72 as a University of Florida County Extension Director, after which she began to travel seriously, going on months-long immersion trips. Many of the experiences she had on these travels appear in her humorous travel blog *RoadRockingGrandmas* featured on her website roadrockinggrandmas.com, which she launched in her 85th year.

Dr. Gregov has written five books of medieval historical fiction in the series called *Lady Nephele's Devilry*, which are available as eBooks and paperback books on Amazon/Kindle and as PDFs on her website. She has also written two family heritage cookbooks and eight family genealogy books including the large book about her paternal grandmother called *This Was My World, Little Dear One – Mathilda's Scrapbook*, which is available free on her

website under “Pioneer Travel.” *Baba Chessy and Bianca* is her new medieval mysteries series published in 2024. Dr. Gregov continues to write mysteries for that series and blog posts for her website RoadRockingGrandmas.com. She can be reached at carolyngregov@gmail.com.