

A Journey of Love and Faith into The Future



THE

ONLY

ONE

Karen Woods

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Email us at admin@LionHearted.com

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Yet, we've become sisters of the heart.
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Chapter One



Colorado Mountains

Sunday darknight, 23 September, 2513

Anna didn't want to be here, but she couldn't stay away. Two young Companions, faces hidden beneath the hoods of their dark blue monastic robes, met her air-speeder as it landed two hours after sunset.

"Daughter, Father Administrator wishes to see you," the female Companion announced firmly, almost before Anna climbed out of the vehicle. "You will accompany us." The Companion held a small hydrogen-beta lamp aloft to light the way and emphasize her words.

Companions simply expected to be obeyed. However, obedience was not, and never had never been, among Anna's virtues. So, Marianna Lara de Rosas Rogers, Ph.D., simply picked up her rucksacks, turned the other direction, and walked toward the tempshack close by.

"Daughter, did you not hear us? Father Administrator wishes to see you," the male Companion called after her more forcibly, but still with a respectful tone in his voice.

"Daughter" was the Companion's title for Anna, due to the fact that she was the last known direct descendant of their Mother Foundress, Saint Lara Remy de Rosas. The Companions had never let Anna forget her pedigree. Who would have believed back in the 21st century that "The Second Coming" would be embodied by a woman—a scientist, a mother and a

wife? Many still didn't believe, even after 500 years of peace.

But the Order of Companions believed, just like centuries before when devoted followers believed in Our Lady of Lourdes and Fatima, they also believed in Blessed Saint Lara. It was a hard act to follow for Anna. She felt all too human compared to Lara's exalted status. Anna also knew the Companions had been watching her for years, and not always from a comfortable distance.

By 'Father Administrator,' the Companions tipped her off that Larry was here. Why wasn't the man at Northwest Pacific where he belonged? The last thing Anna wanted to deal with at that moment was one of her ex-fiance's tirades. She turned and smiled at the pair of speechless Companions. "I don't think so. Thank you."

This entire situation made Anna way too nervous. Sarah, her friend and the head of the dig team, had been forced to—very quietly—petition the Court in Denver for an Order of Exploration under the Antiquities Act. Compelled by the Court Order, the Companions had reluctantly allowed Sarah and the team onto their mountain. That's when Sarah called Anna, begging her to come run interference with the Companions.

Anna supposed it was to be expected that the Companions would be very defensive of the site. If the archeologists had truly discovered the Hescyhate—"the place of stillness"—Saint Lara's private retreat, it could contain secrets the Companions wanted to remain buried. Anna's ancestress had lived out the last years of her life at the Hescyhate in virtual solitude, making the secret location into an even greater mystery.

The team's encampment wasn't quite as primitive as Sarah had said. Anna's fears about what she'd find were greatly relieved. A tempshack stood in the middle of camp. Anna had never been able to shake the feeling that a tempshack would live up to its name, and fall apart in the middle of the night. The temporary structures were simply foam panels, wired together, and covered with a stretched stabilizer. Yet, the inexpensive

shelters were quite warm, and water and vermin proof. Given the smell of snow in the night air, Anna knew the team would soon be needing as much shelter as they could get.

Several H-beta lamps mounted on stands surrounded the tempshack. They lit the entire area nearly as bright as day.

“Anna!” Sarah called out as she exited the structure with another person. “How do you like it?”

Beside Sarah stood a man clad in the dark blue monastic robes of the Companions. Tall, broad-shouldered, his full head of dark hair had just a whisper of gray at the temples. But it was his penetrating, deep blue eyes the color of his robe, and his strong handsome facial features which would draw the attention of females age eight to eighty. He was hard to miss.

Anna’s gaze locked on his. She struggled to regain her breath. Whoever he was, he was just a man—and a Companion at that. A niggling voice in the back of her head told her she was lying to herself. He didn’t seem to be able to drag his gaze away from her, either. It was as if he knew her, but she was positive she didn’t know him.

Jack couldn’t believe it. He had waited years for her to come. Now, she was here! He’d first seen her speak at a physics conference when she was a precocious twelve-year-old. Next, he saw her lecture on 21st Century archeology when she was eighteen. For years he had known she was *the only one*.

Several times during the past eight years he had corresponded with her. Periodically he had invited Marianna Lara de Rosas Rogers to visit Chapter House, but she had always excused herself politely, saying she was too busy to come. Only his duties as Bishop Vice Abbot of the Companions, and his vows of poverty and obedience, kept him from actively pursuing her out In The World.

Jack had relegated all thoughts of ever having Anna in his life to wishful thinking—his own impossible dream. Long ago he had chosen to never write her on a personal level, and had

thus rededicated his life to the Community.

Many times he'd contemplated taking the irrevocable, and final, vow of chastity. Yet, he found he couldn't close that door permanently without at least meeting her.

He mentally cautioned himself to take things slowly and not frighten her away. Much was riding on her presence, on her ability to get inside the Hescyhate, and convincing her to help with all the work which would follow. He had to put the needs of the Community ahead of his own desires.

Yet, he had a difficult time remembering that fact when he looked at her, and realized she was as aware of him as a man, as he was aware of her as a woman.

The last few years had been good to her. The sight of her made his heart race. She was taller than he remembered. A strong, confident woman, but it was her scent he remembered most, a spring garden in full bloom. She looked beautiful even dressed in rough work clothes. He hoped to catch her own unique scent as she grew closer to where he stood. From a distant past encounter he knew her warm brown eyes could sparkle with amusement or blaze with anger. She still wore her long auburn hair in a single plait to below her hips. Jack found himself momentarily caught in his longstanding fantasy of loosening all that hair.

Now, John Joseph Dillon, he warned himself, keep it under control. But control was absolutely the last thing on Jack's mind.

"How do you like the tempshack?" Sarah asked again.

"Looks like it will do the job," Anna forced herself to answer. She broke her gaze away from the tall man. He drew her in a way she had never experienced. She wasn't sure she liked it.

"Thanks really go to Jack, here" Sarah gestured. "When the Companions heard you were definitely coming, he got us the tempshack. So much better than our usual tents. We've just finished putting it together." Sarah added in amusement, "The Companions even loaned us I.S.A.'s for everyone to sleep in,

a couple of space heaters, sanitary facilities, and a Beta-03 generator.”

Anna studied the robed man. *Jack*. Hmm. She’d never known any Companion to go by his Christian name, especially not by a nickname. In her experience, it was Father this or Brother or Sister or Mother that, his or her canonical status followed by his or her apostolate within the Order. Like the habit, it was a way of downplaying individuality and stressing the group identity. Jack’s break with custom bothered Anna.

It wasn’t just his name that bothered her—she found herself reacting to him in feminine ways as ancient as humankind. She couldn’t remember ever being aware of any man as she was of this forty-ish man called Jack.

“The I.S.A.’s will be much more comfortable than sleeping bags,” Anna replied easily.

Sarah smiled. “Oh, definitely. Especially for these old bones. The Companions moved heaven and earth to make the team comfortable once they found out you were coming.”

Anna sighed. Sarah had been Anna’s mentor for her degrees in archeology and it turned into a real friendship. Sarah wasn’t above using people, even friends, to achieve her own ends.

Much, too much, was at stake here. Not just Anna’s academic reputation. She knew from past experience her own life, as well as the reputations and the lives of the members of the dig team, could be at risk. Her experiences had taught her to be cautious when dealing with any Companions. Especially when they were being kind.

“This is an important archeological site. The Companions have a special interest, as it touches upon the life of the Mother Foundress.” Jack spoke for the first time.

His deep timbered voice resonated within her. She looked up at him and sensed he wasn’t lying—but he wasn’t telling the whole truth, either. She didn’t know what to make of him.

“I could use a large cup of very hot coffee,” Anna abruptly

announced, fighting the butterflies in her stomach, all a product of his smile.

“With a wee drop, Lass?” a male voice asked from behind her. She spun around. “Thomas!”

Thomas Cleileinmhor stood a bit taller than Anna’s own above average height. He hadn’t changed much during the last fifteen years, except to have lost a head full of platinum gray hair which he had possessed on their first meeting.

“Aye, Lass. It’s good see you.”

Her friends, Sarah and Thomas, had lived together for almost forty years. His legal wife, Diana, had left him without freeing him from his marriage vows, and shut herself up in a hermitage. Their circumstances might have been the reason why their irregular relationship had been overlooked by civil and ecclesiastical authorities.

Anna wondered if her ancestor, Lara, had really known what would occur when she led the Restoration movement. Of course, such a doubt expressed openly would be sufficient to earn Anna quite severe public penance. And for once, her heritage would not mitigate the punishment. If anything, it would increase the sentence. Anna had learned very early on not to publicly question the legend of Saint Lara.

Still, would Lara have approved of how each succeeding generation had added to the wealth of apocryphal accounts of her abilities and deeds? Like most legends, where did the truth end and the embellishment begin? Maybe this dig, if it were truly genuine, would finally provide some of those answers for Anna.

“Come on, Anna,” Sarah offered. “Let’s get you that coffee and introduce you to the team. I think you probably know just about everyone. Philip is here, doubling as usual as team medic.”

Anna smiled genuinely. Philip Gray was an old and dear friend. They had been in graduate school together. “Is he? I’ve not seen him since the Arizona dig two years ago.”

“He’s looking forward to seeing you,” Sarah stated quietly.

“I always wondered why the two of you never got married.”

“Marriage is a big step,” Anna dismissed lightly. Not for all the world would she betray her friend’s long ago midnight confidence about why he would never marry. Nor could she reveal her knowledge of Philip’s solemn vow of chastity.

“Absolutely,” Jack said with a tight edge to his voice. “It’s a huge step. Not one to be taken without all due consideration.”

Anna looked at him. Tension was tight about his mouth, as well as virtually pouring out of his pores. “Disapprove of marriage on the general principle that everyone should be under a solemn vow of chastity, do you?”

Jack shook his head. “Not at all. Marriage is good and proper. And for your information, I’m not under a solemn vow of chastity.” He grinned.

“I’m sure your wife is glad of that fact,” Anna shot back, still trying to determine what caused him such apparent stress.

“One day, if I gain a wife, I hope she will have those feelings,” Jack responded in a playful tone.

“I thought that if a Companion married, he did so early in life,” Anna said bluntly.

Jack choked back a laugh. “Was that a remark about my age?”

Anna suppressed a smile. “Not exactly. I’m just curious why you haven’t married?”

He shrugged. “A man could ask the same question of you.”

Thomas cleared his throat. “The coffee is waiting, lass. Let’s go inside. Sounds like you two could both use a wee drop.”

Thomas’s promised “wee drop” which laced her coffee seemed to Anna a waste of perfectly good twenty-year-old Scotch. But she wouldn’t hurt Thomas’ feelings by saying anything.

Her old friend Philip sat beside her. They had been talking almost constantly for ten minutes.

Most of the team members and Anna knew one another of old—with one exception. That person was the Companion, Jack.

Anna found him more than merely attractive. Her pulse accelerated whenever she looked at him. And when their eyes met, she found herself speculating on how his lips would feel upon hers, how the lean hardness of his body would feel pressed up against her.

She couldn't recall ever having any man affect her this strongly, let alone this quickly. What was going on here? Why him? He made her more aware of herself as a woman than she could ever remember any man making her feel. Still, she reminded herself, he was a man under a Discipline and Rule of Life which probably precluded his ability to ever be what she needed a man to be.

His declaration that he wasn't under a solemn vow of perpetual chastity shouldn't be running through her thoughts.

Friendships between seculars and Companions were not particularly encouraged even under normal circumstances. But, somehow, Anna's first impression was that Jack didn't mind contravening regulations, at least not when it suited his purpose. But what was his purpose?

Jack kept a close eye on her. He ached to take her hand in his. Holding him back was the very real fact that she wasn't likely to welcome his touch. He needed to give her time. For once, he was glad for the formlessness of the monastic habit. If he had been in regular clericals, there would have been no disguising his increasing state of arousal.

He had warned himself to take things slowly with her. While he had been in love with her for years, this was the first time he felt her aware of him as a man. It delighted and encouraged him.

Their eyes met again. Yes! Masculine satisfaction flooded his being. "Aware" was very much the correct word. He sensed she would welcome him. He also knew she wasn't used to these feelings. Could he give her the time required for her to come to know him? Accept him? She was being awfully friendly with Philip Gray.

Jack found himself wanting to take her aside, kiss her senseless and make her forget Philip.

Before the team could even begin to talk about strategies for getting inside the structure, several Companions entered the shelter. Larry, the Father Administrator, followed them.

Jack's cover was about to be blown. How would Anna react when she found out who he really was?

Out of curiosity, Anna watched the interaction between her ex-fiance, Larry, and Jack. There was hostility there, at least on Larry's part. Quite a bit of it—masked only on the surface. Larry was seething. She had seen and felt his anger once too often to be mistaken. But there was something besides anger in what he was feeling, something precariously close to fear.

“Vice Abbot,” Larry acknowledged of his superior. “Right Reverend Sir, I didn't realize you were here.”

Anna was stunned. Jack was the Bishop Vice Abbot of the Companions, John Joseph Dillon. She and the Vice Abbot had carried on a lively correspondence over the past seven or eight years concerning their respective publications. With no images of him available, she had assumed he was an elderly gentleman. So much for assumptions!

During the course of their correspondence, they frequently disagreed strongly about certain interpretations of historical events, without becoming too disagreeable. Now Anna couldn't shake the familiar feeling she had seen him somewhere else. She knew she had never actually met the Eminent Servant of God, John Joseph Dillon, C.S.L., B.S., M.Div., J.D., Ph.D., until now.

Of course, he hadn't actually introduced himself. Why hadn't he introduced himself to her? Had anyone on the team realized who he was until a moment ago? Sarah must have. When Sarah called, she had said that one or two members of the upper hierarchy were nosing about the dig.

“Good Evening, Father Administrator. More than a bit out of your assigned apostolate, aren't you, Larry?” Jack asked.

“Not really” Larry responded. “I am an archeologist by training, Right Reverend Sir. When we heard of this at Northwest Pacific, the house decided to send a representative to see that Companion interests were protected. I was elected by my house.”

Jack raised a dark eyebrow in query. “I see,” he said tersely. “And are you imposing on the hospitality of the team’s shelter by right of that election?”

“I have come to welcome the Daughter, Right Reverend Sir. She and I are... old friends.”

Anna nearly choked on her coffee. She coughed forcefully. Philip took the cup of coffee from her before she spilt it on herself.

She forced her anger toward Larry down by closing her eyes and momentarily visualizing the peaceful scene of a summer afternoon spent sitting under the shade of an ancient oak tree.

Philip started to rise from his seat. “You rotten son-of-a-”

Anna put her hand on Philip’s arm, staying him. “He’s not worth it, Philip,” she said quickly, cutting him off. “He’s just not worth it. Don’t dirty your hands in his blood.”

Jack watched with interest. Obviously *old friends* no longer described the relationship between Anna and Laurence Shay. Thank God! However, he wondered what the relationship was between Anna and Philip Gray.

“Would you have a coffee or perhaps something stronger before you leave?” Jack interjected quietly, but authoritatively.

“Just a private word with the Daughter, she’s my former fiance, Right Reverend Sir,” Larry replied, seemingly oblivious to the tension in the room.

“I don’t believe we really have anything to discuss, Larry,” Anna said in a tone which held more than a hint of anger. “We said it all years ago, and nothing’s changed since then. So why waste both your breath and my time?”

“Nothing’s changed?” Larry asked, with something akin to pain in his voice. “Oh, Annie. Nothing? You are still lapsed,

even after all these years?”

Jack met Anna's eyes. Anna bristled as she read the questions there. This was not a subject she wanted to discuss with any Companion. It was too dangerous to her, a fact of which Larry was only too aware. That he had raised the issue at all meant he was playing hardball. His tendency to be a bully had always been one of his least pleasant characteristics. Once, she had simply seen it as a take charge attitude. But, then again, she had also once thought that he had loved her.

“What do you want, Larry? I have no interest in rehashing old arguments. And I won't be bullied by you,” she stated flatly. “So, if you can't be civil, you can leave. Besides, I outgrew 'Annie' a good thirteen years ago.”

“Marianna, give me ten minutes,” Larry demanded. “Then I'll never bother you again.”

Anna looked at Larry and shook her head negatively. “Here's a better offer; go away, Laurence, leave me alone, and I won't petition the courts for an order of protection against you. Otherwise, if you ever contact me again, I'll see you in court.”

Larry shook his head. “You don't mean that, Marianna. You've never been the vindictive kind.”

“That's almost funny, coming from you,” Anna replied with heat in her voice.

Jack didn't like the anger she was clearly feeling. There still existed an emotional tie between her and Father Administrator. No, he didn't like that at all.

“I need ten minutes with you,” Larry told her.

“You need? Take a hike, Larry. Ten minutes is about nine minutes and fifty nine seconds more than I want to give you.”

“Okay, five minutes,” Larry replied with a weary sigh as he crossed the room to stand directly in front of her. He sank down to his heels and looked in her eyes. “Please, Anna?” he begged as he took her hands in his. “It's only five minutes. I'm not asking for a lifetime obligation.”

“Nor would I give it,” she replied as she yanked her hands from his. “And if you ever touch me again, you’ll regret it. That’s your only warning.”

Larry sighed.

Out of the corner of Anna’s eye, she saw Jack frown. The last thing she needed was for Larry to talk about their breakup in front of the Bishop Vice Abbot of the Companions.

Jack hated the degree of emotion, even negative emotion, which still existed between the pair of them. Love and Hate were two sides of the passion coin. Their betrothal had been broken thirteen years ago, on what would have been their wedding day.

To the best of his knowledge, she had not presented herself at the communion altar or within a confessional since that time. He didn’t know what had caused her to turn against the Church, but he suspected it was this man. White-hot embers of rage kindled within him towards Laurence Shay. Jack didn’t know what the man had done to her, but he didn’t care for the possibilities which immediately presented themselves to his mind.

“Marianna,” Larry said firmly.

“Fine. Five minutes. But alone. Walking. Outside. You send your,” she glanced up at the group of Companions, “corps of bodyguards back to the transport site. If they are anywhere within a hundred meters when I step outside—and I will have a scanner—you can forget about this discussion ever happening. Do I make myself perfectly clear?”

“You always have,” Larry replied.

“No. I don’t think so. If I had, you certainly wouldn’t have come within fifty meters of me.”

Larry shrugged as he rose to his feet. “I’ll be by the door.”

“You don’t have to do this,” Sarah said firmly.

“I’m a big girl, Sarah. I’ll try not to kill him.”

Sarah smiled, as did the rest of the team. Unfortunately, Anna wasn’t teasing. She had too much anger stored toward

Larry. She wasn't at all sure that if he provoked her, she would be able to stop herself from physically hurting him.

"Would you like me to come as a chaperone?" Philip asked.

Anna smiled at Philip. Then she shook her head negatively. "I can take care of myself, Philip. Thanks for caring."

"That's what friends are for," Philip whispered.

"You've always been my friend," Anna replied.

"And always will be," Philip pledged.

Jack had moved near Larry standing by the door while Anna put on her coat and boots. In a voice intended to be heard only by the two men, she overheard Jack's words resonate with quiet authority.

"Father Administrator, please convey our thanks for Northwest Pacific House's concern in this matter. However, Chapter House has the interests of the Community at heart and the situation firmly in hand."

Once they were a short distance from the tempshack, Larry stated with something approaching affection, "It's been some time since we were out walking together."

"You've got four minutes remaining, Laurence. Don't waste my time with inanities."

"Look, Marianna, this is important. Pack up and go home. Get your friends out of here. For all of our sakes, I'm begging you."

"Goodbye, Larry. Don't ever bother me again."

"Anna!" He took a bruising hold of her arm.

"You're hurting me!" she protested. He didn't release her. The only thing keeping Anna from striking him was the knowledge that to attack any Companion was an act of sacrilege.

Needing relief from the bruising pressure, she grabbed his middle finger, applied backwards pressure and peeled his hand off of her arm. During the process, she heard a distinctive snap.

He yelled in pain. Larry looked at her in disbelief as he cradled his right hand in his left hand. "You broke my finger!"

“Stay away from me, Larry.”

Larry looked at Anna for the longest moment.

Anna knew he was trying to make up his mind about how to tell her something.

When he spoke, pain colored his words, “I came to warn you. You are in danger if you stay here. Go home. Live your life in the relative safety of academia. Marry Philip Gray, have a dozen kids. Be happy. Just leave, now—before you get hurt or worse.”

“What do you know you aren’t saying? Have the Companions been inside? What’s inside, Larry?”

His finger was starting to swell. She had definitely broken it.

“It’s on your head, now.” He said angrily, then walked away without a backward glance.

Anna returned to the tempshack to say she was going to take a walk down to the dig.

“Would you like someone to walk with you, Lass?” Thomas asked.

“No. I just want time to myself, if you don’t mind.”

“Larry left in one piece?” Sarah demanded.

“Alive, a bit broken, unhappy, but alive. Philip, do you have any arnica in the medkit?”

“Are you alright?” Philip asked, concerned.

“I’m fine.”

“Then why do you need arnica?” Jack demanded as he crossed over to her. “Did he hurt you?”

The expression in Jack’s eyes was almost more than Anna could take. He was upset, more than merely concerned.

“Answer me! You’re holding your arm as though it is tender. Did he harm you? Is your arm broken?” Jack demanded.

“Not broken. Bruised pretty badly, by the feel of it. But it’s nothing that a little arnica and a good night’s sleep won’t cure.”

“Let me see,” he demanded as he gently removed her coat and rolled up her right shirt sleeve. His touch was both gentle and inflammatory. The area of Larry’s hand print was beginning to

purple, as she knew it would.

The contrast between the two men couldn't have been clearer in her mind. She forced herself to breathe as his hands gently, but thoroughly, examined her arm.

"No. It's not broken. He'll pay for this," Jack pledged fiercely. "I promise you."

"I broke his finger while prying his hand from my arm. He'll be feeling that for more than the few hours I'll have this bruise. It's enough penalty."

"Few hours?" Jack questioned, not taking his hands from her arm.

"I heal quickly. By morning this will be gone."

Jack smiled at her as though she were an exceptionally bright child. Then his expression became very serious. "Your actions were strictly self-defense?"

"Of course they were," Anna assured him, with more than a hint of ire. "I was careful not to use any more force than was necessary to break his hold on me. I'm not stupid, Eminence. I wouldn't leave myself open for a charge of willfully harming a priest, a Companion."

Jack smiled at her. "No. You aren't stupid. I'll take care of him," he promised, his eyes flashing retribution.

"I stand on my own two feet, Eminence. Thank you," she replied fiercely. "Stay out of my life. If I need your help, I'll ask for it."

"You should know me better than that after our years of correspondence." Jack told her quietly. "My staying out of your life isn't possible," he added with fervor.

Philip returned with a tube of arnica cream, two arnica tablets, and a glass of water. He handed her the pills and water, then rubbed the cream into the affected area of her arm. "One of these days, I'm going to beat that man's head in!" Philip said heatedly.

"I've told you before, Philip. He's not worth it," Anna replied as she rolled down her sleeve. "Don't do anything rash."

“Rash?!” Philip exclaimed. “Anna, he’s a menace.”

“Are you sure you don’t want someone to walk along with you to the dig, Lass?” Thomas asked, approaching the three of them.

“I don’t need a minder, Thomas. I thought I’d walk down to the site and have a look.”

Sarah shook her head indulgently. “That’s right, you haven’t seen it yet. Be careful. Take one of the small H-beta lamps.”

“*A lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path,*” Anna teased, irreverently, just to see how Vice Abbot “Jack” would take that quote from the psalter.

Jack shook his head and smiled at her.

She followed the directions given her and walked the kilometer or so from the camp toward the underground structure. A pair of photohunters had stumbled across the cave less than a month before. Autumn leaves blowing in the night wind and pine needles crunching beneath her feet were the only sounds as she approached the site.

The dig team had marked off some boundaries on the hillside. Posts and ribbons formed a fairly large rectangle, some thirty meters by twenty. Anna walked around the suggested perimeter of the underground building.

The Hescygate. What surprises would her ancestor’s home, her last dwelling place, hold? What new insights into the century in which Lara had lived would be discovered? What fresh knowledge would be obtained?

The official Companion position maintained that this period of history was a time of such immense pain that it was better to leave it alone, to draw a veil over it, and to simply go on with life. That it was for the best to simply let the scars alone. Many people still agreed with that sentiment. But Anna had never been one of their number.

She had always been driven by her quest for truth. It had taken her head-to-head with the Companions on more than one

occasion in the past. She'd seen how violently they had crushed her friends and associates who dared to oppose the Order. Had it not been for her heritage, she fully suspected they would have crushed her long ago, too. Maybe, in Larry's warped mind, he really was trying to warn her away from the dig and what new truths she might uncover.

The entrance to the Hescyhate appeared as the mouth of a small cave. On first glance, it looked to be a rough, not quite rectangular, hole in natural stone.

About three meters inside the cave, the door to Lara's home came into view. Standing at the cave opening, without a good light, one would never suspect this was anything except a shallow natural cave. The video surveillance camera above the cave entrance, as well as the one at the door to the house, were both small and well concealed by Lara's twenty first century standards.

The door blended so well with the cave interior surface as to be almost a natural occurrence. Anna tapped on it in several places. It did not sound hollow, but solid. It was metal, but in exceptionally good shape, with no evidence of rust. There was no knob, no handle, and no visible hinges. The bottom of the door sat flush on a stone ledge rising a step above the cave's floor. Small well camouflaged microphones dotted the doorway. Unless a person knew what she was looking at, this would not even register as a door, much less as a very secure door.

Anna wondered what Lara had said in order to open the door. It would have been something simple; something she wouldn't have had to think about. Anna laughed softly as the simplest phrase came to mind. An overhead light came on.

Was the circuitry simply reacting to sound? Or had it been specifically her laughter which had activated the light? The light had not come on earlier when she had tapped repeatedly on the door.

Why not? Anna asked herself silently. There's only one way to find out. She backed up a bit and said, "Open door."

Anna didn't really expect it would work. When the door began to slide open, like a pocket-door, she was surprised, relieved, and frightened, almost in equal measures.

"Close door." The door closed. "Open. Close. Light off. Light on. Off light."

This was truly strange. Surely Sarah must have tried something so simple. Or would she? Sarah had said she suspected the door was booby trapped. Or maybe she had tried it and it didn't work for her.

Anna's curiosity was getting the better of her. She wanted to go inside and look around. But that would have been profoundly stupid without having first sent in a probe to verify both structural stability and air quality. For all she knew, there could be some physical danger due to rotting construction, animal infestation, poisonous air, or any of a dozen other ghastly possibilities.

No, it was better to wait until morning, until she could get the team out as backup, just in case there were problems. Yet, the temptation was almost too strong to resist.

"There may have been enough degradation on the circuitry that it accepted your voice," Jack's voice startled Anna as she walked out of the cave entrance. He stood about a meter from her as if he had been waiting for her to discover something. She noticed he hadn't brought a H-beta lamp to light his way. He stepped closer to her.

She looked at him for the longest moment. He didn't look away from her searching glance. Anna didn't think he was lying, just not telling her the whole truth.

"Either that, or all of this is an elaborate hoax devised for some obscure purpose by the Companions. Your Eminence? Any comment?" Anna questioned.

"That's quite an accusation, Daughter," he replied in a flat tone.

"I am many things, Eminence, but I am *not* your daughter!"

Jack bit back a laugh. There was a considerable amount of

male appreciation in his deep blue eyes when he looked at her. “No, you’re not. And believe me, I thank God for that small mercy. Come, it will be snowing soon. I’ll walk you back to the encampment.”

“Alright, I’ll walk with you, if you tell me why you are here,” she demanded. “I can’t imagine why the Bishop Vice Abbot would want to grub around with a bunch of archeologists.”

“You can’t? Ah, so that’s the question—the one you’ve been wondering about all evening? The one you didn’t want to ask?” Jack asked quietly as they walked together.

“It is.”

“The answer is obvious. The building is the Hescyhate. The Companions have known the location since the time of the Mother Foundress. We have not attempted to enter it since her death.”

“Why not?”

“Mother Foundress left instructions that the interior was to be left inviolate for a minimum of three hundred years following her death, until it was discovered by an archeology team outside of the Order.”

“I see. And we all know how well everyone in your Order has obeyed her, don’t we?”

Jack sighed. “Angry. Very angry. Why are you so angry at the Order? Does it have something to do with Father Administrator?”

“Kindly do not suppose that my private life is any of your concern.”

He stopped and took her by the hand. “I’m making it my concern.”

“My personal life has nothing to do with my professional life.”

Jack shook his head. “If that’s true, it’s sad. Know this, I will not rest until I understand your animosity towards him and towards the Order.”

“You wouldn’t like the answers. And I wouldn’t enjoy

supplying them. Neither of us would have any delight in the aftermath. So let's just leave it alone, shall we?"

"For now," he agreed reluctantly. But Anna knew he wasn't about to leave it alone. Part of her mind told her to pack up and get out at first light. Another part was resolute that she could handle this.

"Another question, if I may. Why am I here? I have no doubt all this was orchestrated, including my being invited. Why?"

"You need to be here," he said honestly.

"That's a remarkably obtuse statement, Eminence. I feel you have orchestrated this entire incident—playing with all of us—using all the skill of a master puppeteer. I'd like to know the truth."

"The truth is, this needs to be done. And you are the only one who can do it."

"The only one? What makes me so special?"

"Now you're being obtuse. You've got to have some idea. Think about it."

"Tell me, Eminence, is learning to dance around the truth part of your Religious Formation? Give me a straight answer."

"No. I don't think so. And you aren't ready to hear a straight answer. When you're ready, you'll come to me without anger."

"Why does my anger bother you?"

"Because it clouds your judgment."

"And that is important to you?"

"It is very important, potentially more important than you know. You are the key to this whole situation."

"Me?"

"What is it that drives you, Marianna?"

"Profound curiosity."

"Too quick. I don't care for pat answers."

"I'm at least telling the truth. I am driven by my profound curiosity."

“There’s an ancient proverb, ‘Curiosity killed the cat,’” Jack offered.

“And satisfaction brought him back’.”

“What are you curious about?”

“Many things. First, I don’t like the big blank spot where over one hundred years of human history should be, before, during, and immediately following the Restoration. Those blank pages of history bother me more than I can say. I intend to see answers filled in. That whole period of time remains a puzzle that drives me. And I intend to solve it, even if it takes the rest of my life.”

“And you blame the Companions for trying to keep those years cloaked in shadow?” Jack asked carefully.

“Absolutely. You all know more than you tell.”

“Everyone knows more than they tell, Marianna. Even you in your last article for Scientific Explorations.”

“One can never fit everything one knows into an article,” Anna replied easily.

“Some people could,” Jack responded, mischief in his eyes. “Of course, it wouldn’t be worth reading.”

“I do believe that was a compliment, Eminence. Tell me, were you planning to let me know who you were? Or was I to go on not associating my poison pen pal with the ever so charming Jack?”

“I’ve never written you a poison pen letter,” he protested, not answering her question. Then he smiled at her. “Hmmm. You think I’m charming?”

“Hasn’t that been your goal? To be charming? Just answer one thing, Eminence. Did anyone on the team know who you were?”

“Only Dr. Logan. I asked her not to disclose my identity,” Jack said quietly. “I didn’t want the team to feel uneasy around me—as some seculars do when around ranking members of the Order.”

“So what do you want from me?” she pushed for an answer,

and stopped to face him.

“What do I want, personally? Or what do the Companions want?”

“Is there a difference?”

“Yes. There is a difference.”

“Are you going to tell me what you want from me?”

His hand at her elbow stopped her and he turned her to face him. He took one of her hands in his and looked into her eyes.

“Have you noticed that you tremble when I touch you?” he asked in a smooth low voice. His other hand moved to the side of her neck. “And your pulse jumps in your throat. We’ve known each other as scholars for years, but you’ve never really met me as a man until now. I believe we both want the same thing from one another. Am I wrong?”

She swallowed hard. “But you’re under vows,” she said in confusion.

“I’m not looking for a one night stand, Marianna. By the soul of Saint Cyprian—I am Bishop Vice Abbot.” He bit back his harsh tone and softened his voice. “I always intended to marry, so I never took the solemn vow of chastity—just a simple one binding on my eventual marriage vow, on my fidelity. We were meant for each other. You will be my wife. We will have beautiful children together.”

There was something compelling about the need and certainty reflected in his deep voice. Compelling, frightening, and ringing with truth.

Sighing, she removed her hand from his. “Don’t hold your breath waiting for that to happen, Eminence.” Anna began walking very quickly back toward the tempshack.

“Is there something between you and Philip Gray?” Jack demanded.

Anna stopped again and turned to face him. “That, Eminence, is none of your business.”

“Marianna Lara, when are you going to learn? Everything about you is my business,” he told her gently as he caught up

with her and moved closer to touch her face, again.

“You are certifiable!” she told him strongly as she backed away. He was right about one thing. He made her want. He made her want him. Over the last few years, she had come to know him, to know how he thought. She had come to admire his mind. To even fall in love with his mind. But nothing had prepared her for meeting the real man.

“I’ve been certifiably in love with you for years,” Jack said with conviction.

“I can’t handle this,” Anna told him and resumed walking. He accompanied her for the remainder of the walk, neither saying a word.

“I can see,” Jack’s quietly spoken words frosted on his breath as he broke his silence just outside the tempshack, “it’s going to take time for you to know me, trust me. Go on to bed now. I’ll take care of shutting down the lights and setting the thermostats on the heaters. You have my word that you will sleep undisturbed.”

“And the dig team will also sleep undisturbed in this place?”

“Naturally, they will sleep undisturbed. I am here. There is also a security detail watching the camp. No one will come to harm here. You have my word.”

“That’s convenient. A security team. To protect us. Umm.”

He looked at her carefully. “Why else would it be here?”

Chapter Two



The hour had gone midnight. But Jack hadn't been able to face the utter silence of the Individual Sleeping Area pod. Besides, he had given Anna his word no harm would come to anyone. He owed it to her to be vigilant. That she would have thought the loan of the sleeping pods were a divide and conquer tactic, as she clearly had, bothered him greatly.

Her mind had always fascinated him. What caused her to be so cynical, to expect the very worst of people? Jack became angry with the thought that someone, somewhere, maybe even a member of his Community, had done that to her.

Jack sighed. He had pushed her too hard and too fast tonight. But, having declared himself, he couldn't back down now, even though she looked likely to run from him. But, the Hescyhate would be too large of a draw for her to run away, no matter how much she might want to get away from him. She would stay until the work was done. He didn't like having to play it this way. But all was fair in love and war, as the archaic saying went.

He focused back on the beads in his hands. The final mystery for meditation, the final bead.

“Hail Mary, full of grace...”

His mind had been anywhere but on the all too familiar ancient prayer, a devotion at the heart of the Order of Companions. He hated being so distracted and simply going through the motions. But what else did he expect with her here?

Behind him, he heard the soft sound of an I.S.A. hatch

opening. Anna's. Apparently, she was having trouble sleeping as well.

He blessed himself with the crucifix and refastened the rosary onto his habit's cincture around his waist. Then he looked at her. Bare feet poked out from underneath an oversized long white woolly wrap robe. Her dark auburn hair was tied loosely with a scarlet satin ribbon at the nap of her neck and hung down her back in lightly restrained waves.

His fingers itched to steal the ribbon, untie her robe, and touch her. He took a deep breath and forced himself to calm down. She was nowhere near ready for that.

What else wasn't she wearing? Jack tried not to think about that all too enticing topic—and failed. She should have looked slovenly in a garment so old and loose. Instead, she looked incredibly sexy. Entirely appealing except for the shadows in her eyes. She was afraid! Of him? Of something else? Someone else?

"Something wrong, Marianna?" he asked in concern as he rose easily from his knees.

"Don't let me take you from your prayers, please," she replied quietly as she pulled the lapels of her old woolly robe more tightly closed. If she had known he was awake, she would have put clothes on before getting up. She felt all too naked and vulnerable clad in only a robe with him so close.

Jack crossed the dimly lit interior of the tempshack. He lightly touched her face. "Marianna," he said in low tones, gently, "you occupy my prayers."

She wished he wouldn't say that. As the Bishop Vice Abbot she had corresponded with for years, she felt she knew him to the depths of his mind and soul. But, as Jack the handsome, virile male he drew her like no man ever had. Combined into one physical package, he disturbed her peace. She turned her face into the comfort of the gentle touch of his hand. Suddenly, she wanted someone to hold her.

He'd misunderstand, so she didn't dare ask him for that

favor. She was all already too aware of him, his proximity, his maleness, and her nakedness under her robe. She knew from past experiences that feeling this vulnerable could be dangerous. She stepped back from him.

“What’s wrong?” he demanded softly of her.

She shook her head. “Haven’t you ever had a bad dream?” she asked with feigned lightness.

“Yes. I have. Sometimes dreams can be terrible things,” he said gently. “You could use something hot to drink, couldn’t you?”

“That was the plan,” Anna replied, looking at him suspiciously. “Don’t you have a fixed hour for retiring?”

Jack sighed. “Generally. However, that doesn’t mean I can always sleep.”

Anna nodded. “Oh,” she said her single word conveying volumes of mutual understanding.

“It’s just too quiet here,” he explained.

“Chapter House isn’t quiet?” she answered, disbelief in her voice.

“Nothing is so quite as an I.S.A. pod,” Jack replied tightly.

“They are well insulated,” she acknowledged. “What bothers you about them?” Anna asked, her curiosity getting the better of her. “Are you claustrophobic?”

“Tight places don’t bother me. I just don’t like sleeping alone,” Jack replied quietly.

Anna fought a blush, and knew she lost.

“Now, I didn’t mean that the way you took it!” he protested.

She crossed one arm over her chest and pulled the gapping lapels of her white robe together with one hand.

“Perhaps you should tell me just how you did mean it,” she demanded with narrowed eyes. “You tell me you’re under a vow of Chastity until you marry, and that you aren’t looking for a one night stand—then you make a comment that sounded like a proposition, and a rather crude one at that.”

He sighed as he ran a hand across the dark stubble on his

face and chin. “Most of my life I’ve slept in dormitories. I was an orphan growing up, then I entered religious life. I’m used to the sounds of twenty men sleeping, bunks creaking, and the rattle of snoring. That mixture of sounds is rather comforting to me,” Jack explained. “Silence at night really bothers me. I can’t sleep at all if it’s too quiet. There are some nights I link into the audio of the dorm monitors to fill my room with familiar sounds so I can sleep.”

Anna sighed. That did make a certain amount of sense. She couldn’t imagine that kind of absence of privacy. It was in many ways the exact opposite of the privileged existence she had led all her life. Oddly enough, she found the matter of fact way he explained himself endearing. “I think I should let you get back to your prayers,” she said quietly.

“Doesn’t matter,” he dismissed. “It’s one of those nights when I have too much on my mind to pray.”

Anna yawned. “But you stick with it,” she observed.

“Yes, I stick with it. Prayer is hard work. It doesn’t happen easily. Sometimes it doesn’t happen at all,” he stated. Then he offered, “Come, let me get you a cup of hot cocoa or herbal sleep tea to relax you so you can get back to sleep. Which is more comforting?”

“You don’t need to mother me, Eminence!”

Jack blew out his breath. “Mothering you is the last thing on my mind, woman,” he told her meaningfully, his gaze dropping to where her hand held the robe lapels. “But, I’ll settle for taking care of you tonight.”

“All I want is a nice hot cup of tea and to go to bed.”

He grinned at her and chuckled. “Now who’s offering veiled propositions?”

“ALONE!” she protested.

He looked at her carefully. “Marianna, I was teasing you.”

“Well, don’t, okay? I’m in a really weird mood,” she warned. “I’m likely to take your head off and hand it to you on a platter. So don’t say you haven’t been warned.”

“Alright,” he assured her. After a brief pause, he asked, “Do you want to talk about the dream? Often talking makes the images much less frightening, puts them in perspective, and lets people move past them. I’m said to be a very good listener.”

“I’m sure you are,” she replied, her tone sharper than she meant it to be. “It goes with your vocation. But, I’d rather be left alone just now.”

“I don’t think that’s wise. Why are you afraid to talk about it?” he demanded in a soft tone.

Oh, but she did want to talk about it. It was just that she couldn’t. The dreams themselves eluded her. That was incredibly odd. Until recently, she always remembered her dreams, particularly when she did not care to remember. Instead, with this series of nightmares, she was simply left with a feeling of impending doom and a growing fear. But she wasn’t about to tell him that.

Anna sighed. “In legend, St. Lara had special gifts of healing, including the gift of the ultimate healing in the resurrection of the dead. For those gifts, her leadership of the Restoration movement, and the reputed holiness of her life, the Church saw fit to name her Saint.”

Jack nodded. “Was your dream about the Mother Foundress?” he asked lowly.

She shook her head negatively. “No. There are just times I would give anything to possess even a tithe of Lara’s legendary talents. I’d use it on myself to remove the lingering fear from my mind.”

Jack lightly touched her face. “You are afraid. Don’t be. What makes you think you don’t have some of her talents?” he asked her quietly. “Every descendant, direct or collateral, has had something of her special abilities.”

She looked at him. She really didn’t want to get into this with him. “I’ve never seen any overwhelming evidence of it in myself,” she denied. “Maybe I’m a changeling.”

Jack smiled. "Oh, I very much doubt that."

"What do you doubt?"

"That you're a changeling, and that you've never seen any evidence of the talents in your life," Jack told her.

"Let's just say I've never seen an abundance of evidence that I am particularly gifted as a Reader."

"Haven't you?" he asked pointedly in disbelief. "Haven't you really?"

She drew a deep breath. She had never talked about this with anyone. Well, not with anyone who was still alive. Was he simply guessing? It wasn't a topic she was comfortable discussing.

"I can't talk about it," she finally said tightly.

"I see," Jack replied, his voice thoughtful.

Anna sighed. How could he understand something she herself did not?

"Did yesterday's encounter with Father Administrator bring on this nightmare of yours?" Jack asked with far too much control in his voice.

He was angry, Anna realized. Profoundly angry at Larry. More than that, angry because Larry had hurt her. Anna bit her lip. She closed her eyes and sighed.

"No," she replied wearily. "Do you want a cup of tea, as long as I'm making it?"

"No, thank you," Jack answered quickly. In response to her questioning glance, he added, "I can't. It's after midnight and I'm celebrating the Liturgy in a few hours."

"Fasting," she observed.

"Naturally," he replied lightly.

Anna shrugged. "Excuse me, then."

Jack went with her to the camp kitchen area. "The teas are here," he offered as he opened a portable metal kitchen box. "There's a good selection of regulars and some herbal blends I'm not familiar with."

"Thank you," she said as she picked up a small tea container

of the herbal sleep blend.

“Marianna,” he began as he watched her pour hot water from the reservoir into a cup.

“Look, Eminence,” Anna said, her patience fraying, “I just want to be alone with my tea. Please.”

Jack was still watching her as she returned to her I.S.A. pod with her cup of tea. “Gentle dreams, Marianna,” he wished her.

“From your mouth to God’s ear,” she replied tightly as she climbed back into the I.S.A. She secured the hatch behind her and set the security lock. But, sleep was a long time coming.

When she awoke again, it was long before dawn.

Four inches of pristine snow sparkled in the first rays of light. The air was crisp, but not particularly cold. Anna went through her Tai Chi Chuan exercises outside, in an area she had swept clear of snow. She attempted to find through the exercises a sense of both mental peace and physical release.

She needed the crispness of the air and the discipline of the exercise to clear and focus her mind. But, even this didn’t help to rid her of the lingering aftereffects of the nightmares. She just wished she could remember the dream.

Jack stood outside the tempshack watching her. Even in baggy work clothes and clunky boots, it was clear she possessed both physical strength and grace of movement. Her clothes should have made her look sexless. But, they had the opposite effect on him. The way her trousers gently hinted at the curves beneath made him uncomfortably aware of the benefits of the Sisters wearing formless habits. She took his breath away.

“Do you find tranquillity through the Eastern expressions?” he asked Anna quietly when she finally turned to him.

Anna hadn’t heard Jack come out of the tempshack. For such a tall man, he moved with an almost feline grace. But, she had felt his gaze on her for some time. She had sensed his puzzlement and something else, something much warmer.

What was she going to do about him?

“Frequently.”

“But not this morning?”

“No, not this morning. Are you a Reader, your Eminence?”

Jack shrugged, “Some call it being fey. And to a very limited extent, I suppose I am. Either that or I just understand people very well. Take your pick.”

“Great,” she muttered under her breath.

“How’s the arm?” he asked in gentle concern.

“Fine. Arnica and a little time does wonders.”

“Let me see,” he demanded.

Because she couldn’t exercise freely when encumbered with a coat, she had left her outerwear inside the tempshack. She rolled up the sleeve of her heavy cotton flannel shirt and silk thermal undershirt to show him her arm: completely healed and looking normal.

He studied Anna for a long moment. There was something he obviously wanted to say; something he desperately wanted to know. She suspected it was something about her unusual rate of healing. He touched her arm. His fingers were light and gentle against her skin as he examined her arm again.

Anna drew a quick breath. He wasn’t trying to do anything except examine her. How could such a simple touch do so much to her? His touch continued to amaze her. He continued to amaze her. And she didn’t like it. Their eyes met.

“Don’t tell me you don’t feel this,” he warned quietly. “I know better.”

She stepped back and rolled down her sleeve. “And I know better than to believe in something as ephemeral as feelings of desire. They don’t last and they aren’t trustworthy.”

He shook his head and sighed. “Who made you distrust yourself, Anna? What man? Father Administrator? Or someone else?”

“My personal life is none of your business!”

He stepped closer and touched her face with such tenderness

her knees went weak. “Anna, open your heart. You know that isn’t true,” he corrected her gently as he took her chin in his hand. “Trust me. Don’t fight this magic between us. It happens like this only once in a person’s lifetime. Deny anything else, but don’t deny this.”

His warm lips covered hers before she could jerk away. She tried to ignore the wave of sensation, of enticement, of desire, which spread through her. But, it was too strong. It swept her away. Her hands came to rest on his chest. She felt his heart beating heavily beneath her palms. Summoning up her remaining will, she pushed at him. She knew when he stepped back it wasn’t due to her pushing, but to his not wanting to take anything she didn’t want to freely give. That much was painfully obvious to Anna. And it touched her deeply.

“Why can’t you just leave me in peace?” she demanded.

“If you are looking for peace, why don’t you come with me? I have to return to Chapter House for Mass this morning.”

“No, I don’t think so. Thank you, anyway.”

He smiled. “Come on, now. The Chapel roof won’t fall in if you come to Mass.”

“I never said it would,” she replied tightly. “I go to Church on both Shabbaos and Days of Solemn Obligation, as well as giving alms to the poor and paying my tithe to the Church. I keep the Commandments and most of the Precepts of the Church. I say my prayers, do my Lectio, and try to stay in a state of grace. That’s all that’s really required of me.”

“Assisting in the Liturgy this morning will do you good,” he insisted.

“I don’t think so. Thank you, anyway,” she said with exaggerated patience.

He smiled. She didn’t like that smile. It was entirely too full of power. “Back at Chapter House, the library has a volume of the Mother Foundress’ journal, in her own handwriting, from the time she and her husband built the Hescyhate, before the Great Devastation. You might want to read it, strictly as

background information. I'll make it available to you, if you come to Mass this morning."

"Do you really think that you can bribe me?"

He smiled broadly. "You're committed to this project. And you would take any reasonable action to get information which would be useful to your work." He paused for a moment, then added, "So, yes, I do think I can offer you an incentive."

She sighed and shook her head. "Well, in this case, you're right. I don't particularly like what that says about me. But, I do want to get a look at that journal, and any others of my ancestress' that you might have."

"Then shall we go? After Mass and breakfast, you can study this journal to your heart's content."

"And the others?"

His only reply was a shrug.

The Chapel at Chapter House was designed along the ancient Eastern Orthodox pattern. It was big and without pews. A tall iconostasis with three doors, one by which the altar was visible, separated the sanctuary from the rest of the chapel.

The Chapel was occupied by blue-robed adults and children of all ages when Anna arrived. But, no one seemed to notice her. Even so, she stayed towards the back. A quick head count said there were over two hundred adults in the room. She didn't count the numerous children. Yet, this crowd filled less than a quarter of the large room.

The Mass, when it began, was nothing like any liturgy Anna had ever attended. According to the service book she picked up on her way in, the words were a modern translation of the Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom, the music ancient Greek and Russian.

The hour and a half liturgy was an eye-opener regarding Jack. His earnestness revealed that he was either very serious about his religion, or that he was one very fine actor. Anna wasn't sure which. His sermon moved her with the images he

drew about the nature of the relationship between faith and action when he preached on the parable of the Good Samaritan. Around the chapel, Anna saw heads nodding in agreement. At the consecration, there were four priests at the altar. Clouds of sweet incense drifted overhead. Then, all four priests were on their faces, prostrated before the consecrated elements. Most of the congregation dropped their faces in worship.

One little boy who couldn't have been more than fourteen months old obviously thought this was a game. He began climbing all over his father. Anna watched as the child's mother gently removed him from the father's back. She couldn't hear what she said to him, but she saw the love which flowed between them. She couldn't help but feel a little envious of that closeness.

When it came time for communion, Anna did not go forward to receive, or to get a piece of the unconsecrated "holy bread" to which all were welcome.

After the dismissal, an elderly woman led the procession out of the chapel. She stopped when she reached Anna. "I am the Mother Abbess, Barbara," she said with a serene smile.

This woman looked genuinely happy to have Anna there. The welcome couldn't have been warmer if she had physically embraced Anna.

"Welcome to Chapter House, Daughter. Will you come in to breakfast with me?" the Mother Abbess asked.

"Mother Abbess, I would be honored."

"The honor is all mine," the old lady continued as she held out her hand. "I've read your monographs. You have a fine way of making history come alive, of making people care about those whose lives you've studied. It's a rare talent, child."

"Thank you."

The dining room filled quickly. Each of the Companions seemed to have an assigned place. The Abbess invited Anna to take the place at her right hand. Yet they remained standing.

The Abbess addressed the group. “My sons and daughters, we are honored to have among us this morning Doctor Marianna Lara de Rosas Rogers. Marianna is the last direct descendant of the Mother Foundress. As it is our custom with all special visitors to Chapter House, we extend the courtesy of allowing her to ask the blessing on our meal.”

The thoughts which went through Anna’s head were decidedly uncharitable. But, since she didn’t want to cause a scene, she crossed herself and offered an ancient blessing, anyway: “Bless us, O Lord, and these Thy gifts which we are about to receive from Thy bounty. Amen.” The Amen was echoed by all before Mother Abbess took her seat as a signal that everyone should sit.

Jack came in as the meal was being served. He sat beside her. “Well?”

“Please note the chapel roof didn’t fall in,” Anna teased.

He smiled at her. “I’m so very glad you noticed. We’ll be seeing you at services more often now, won’t we?”

Anna looked at Mother Abbess. “The man is impossible. Give him an inch and he takes ten miles.”

The older woman choked back a chuckle. Anna could see it in the Abbess’ eyes. A grin, however, escaped the older woman. “That’s one of his most endearing traits, Daughter.”

Anna rolled her eyes. “I wouldn’t call it ‘endearing’. But, I did discover that particular trait during the years we exchanged letters.”

The Abbess smiled genuinely, a flash of understanding passing over her face. “And what else did you notice about our dear Vice Abbot as a result of those years of correspondence?”

“A remarkable degree of innocence, of faith in people,” Anna replied quietly. “A true strength of character. A genuinely fine mind. A willingness to admit when he has made a mistake. And the ability to demand and to get no less than the very best from people.”

The Mother Abbess’ smile broadened considerably. “That’s

quite an astute analysis of his character, Daughter. And you, Eminence, what have you learned of her through the years of your correspondence?"

"That she is brilliant, stubborn, jaded, afraid to believe in people, that she expects some men to act in the lowest of possible manners out of the very worst of motives," Jack said quietly, thoughtfully.

"How flattering," Anna replied.

"Not particularly, but true." Jack stated dryly. "Although on the plus side, I have to say you have also shown yourself to be quite willing to re-examine your assumptions and biases. You're a loyal daughter to the Church, even though you are lapsed. Perhaps we will be able to remedy that situation while you're on the holy mountain."

"I wouldn't hold my breath if I were you," Anna replied tightly.

"My dear," Mother Abbess Barbara said quietly, "I was lapsed for several years when I was a teenager. But, that was such a heart-felt blessing you offered for this meal. I can't believe you lack faith."

"The grace I offered was an ancient formulary, Mother Abbess. Besides, my lapsing is not a matter of a lack of faith." Anna sighed. "It's merely a matter of discipline."

The curiosity in Jack's eyes drew her. It was clear he wanted to know what Anna had meant by *discipline*. But, she had already said more than she intended to say. If he was actually a Reader, her unguarded thoughts of yesterday would have already told him the whole, unpleasant, story. On the odd chance he really was a Reader, Anna had not dropped her mental guard since before Mass.

"Now, tell me, aren't you glad you resisted the temptation to preach on the prodigal son this morning?" Anna teased.

He smiled broadly. "I wouldn't have deviated from the lectionary that far. So the temptation wasn't as great as it might have otherwise been," he responded gently as he took the platter

of waffles from the young Sister who was waiting tables.

After breakfast, Anna sat in the library, looking at the journal. She had seen her ancestress' handwriting before. The handwriting on the cover was of the old style. Hardly anyone knew how to read it, anymore. Fewer people, yet, were skilled enough with the old style pens to be able to use them to make any sort of lines, let alone the complicated series of connected swirls which had been known as handwriting several hundred years ago.

Of course, the rarity of people being able to read the old style handwriting is the reason that Anna opted to keep her personal journals written on paper instead of stored in a bank of computer memory. It was worth the considerable expense of acquiring bound blank books of low acid paper in order to maintain some additional measure of her privacy.

She opened Lara's journal carefully, and began reading. After each page, she scanned it into her notebook, for later study.

As she read, she came to know Lara much better. Lara spoke of building the structure, in her words, "as our vacation hideaway." And then Lara detailed the precautions they had taken to keep the location secret—from renting equipment under the name of a dummy corporation, to timing and accessing the world security satellites and uplinking false images of the area in which they were working in order to hide the fact that construction was ongoing, to doing all of the work themselves.

The Saint spoke in detail about the floor plan of the house, about the systems and subsystems implemented there in order for the home to be completely self-sufficient.

Lara spoke of her arguments with her husband about the degree of protective devices to install both in the house and around the perimeter, and of her steadfast refusal to allow any anti-personnel devices to be installed, a refusal brought about by her fear for the life and safety of the child who was then in her womb.

She spoke of her love and passion for her husband; their first meeting, their whirlwind courtship, and marriage while he was trying to keep her from being killed by a deranged fellow who had been systematically murdering scientists. She spoke of the love she held for the child whom she was carrying. She spoke of the great violence of the time in which she lived. Then she spoke of her new research into eliminating the radiation threat from the spent fuel of nuclear power plants.

Anna knew this work Lara was describing was the Flash Process which would later win for Lara that most esteemed scientific prize of her day, the Nobel.

Lara spoke of her father, Joseph Remy, in the most derogatory of terms, with a resigned anger coming through her words as she wrote that her father “used his children as little more than glorified lab rats to prove out his pet theories.”

Then Lara spoke of her resolve to be a good mother, in spite of the scars both physical and emotional that she bore as a result of her upbringing.

After a little more than an hour, Anna looked up from the journal. The Brother Librarian had just come into the room with two cups of coffee. “I thought you could use a break. Reading the old style handwriting is not an easy thing under the best of conditions.”

“No, it isn’t, and I could use the break,” Anna agreed readily while she marked the journal with a ribbon, gently closed the book, then powered down her notebook. “Join me?”

The elderly Brother sat across the table. “Be delighted. Relatively few people can still read the old handwriting, Daughter.”

“I’ve had a classical education.”

“We’ve become far too used to the output of computers,” the old man said in a resigned tone. “It’s made us lazy.”

“And the use of auto transcription hasn’t helped.”

“Too true. Do you write, as well as read?” the old man asked hesitantly.

“My hand is not always as fine as I would like for it to be. But, I have several different styles in which I can write,” Anna told him.

He smiled broadly. “Calligraphy?”

Anna shrugged. “Some. I’m still developing those skills. I’ll probably be working on it for the rest of my life. I wouldn’t call myself more than a rank amateur in the field. But, I do enjoy the artistic end of it.”

“Is this the first time you’ve seen the Mother Foundress’ handwriting?”

“No. I have some documents from her personal research before the Great Devastation. They are highly mathematical.”

“I would like to see those. I’ve rarely seen that side of her,” the old man said wistfully. “What are they about?”

“I have several of her original research notebooks from before the Devastation. Some cover her original work on the Flash process.”

“You do? Where did you get those?” Brother asked in clear surprise.

“From my father. They’ve been handed down in the family.”

“A treasure beyond words.”

“I will see that you get copies of them for the collection here,” Anna offered.

The elderly man smiled broadly. His faded eyes lit up with joy. “I... that would be wonderful. I’ll look forward to viewing those documents and placing them into the collection. Thank you.”

“I’ve received a glimpse of her through this journal that I’ve never known before. I’ve never really thought of her as a young wife in a demanding job with a need to keep a low profile for the sake of her husband’s security. I know very little factual about her husband, Raul de Rosas. He has become a matter of legend, just as she has. There are stories, probably most of them apocryphal.”

“We have some source documents concerning him. He was

an International Security Service operative. But, you knew that. De Rosas, according to the source documents, was a fine investigator. He had one of the highest solution ratios of any of his contemporaries. We have his annual service reviews and some of his own case files. He was assigned the toughest cases. Technically, he was the head of the North American region of the ISS, but he still went out into the field.”

Brother Librarian rose from his seat and walked over to a large file cabinet. He pulled out a drawer and retrieved a thick binder.

“Ah, here it is,” Brother said quietly as he found the passage for which he was searching. “One of his subordinates, a Henry Kinneson, said of him, ‘Everyone else may breathe air, not de Rosas. He eats, drinks, and breathes crime. He needs a puzzle to solve the way the rest of us need air to breathe. The more impossible the crime, the better he likes it.’”

“May I see that?”

“Certainly.”

Anna took the documents from him and quickly read through them. “This is a transcript from a trial.”

“Yes. It is the trial of a gang leader who had launched a series of truly bizarre murders of scientists. Kinneson is being questioned by the defense attorney who was trying to cast aspersions on the intensity of Raul de Rosas’ investigation of the crimes.”

“Was this related to the investigation he was conducting when he met Lara?”

“Same investigation, yes.”

“Was Lara involved?”

Brother smiled at her with the smile one would bestow on a particularly bright child.

Anna was getting sick of that particular smile from the Companions.

Brother Librarian continued, “Only on the periphery. Several of the scientists who were murdered were co-workers of hers.

As they discovered when the plot was shattered, Lara was on the list of scientists to be murdered. Raul literally saved her life. I think that the danger they experienced together probably colored the rest of their married life.”

She handed him the folder containing the document and watched as he filed it away. Anna would have liked to have had time to study it more thoroughly.

“Tell me more about Raul de Rosas.”

“The facts we know are in agreement with the legends. He was an Argentine National, but he had lived most of his adult life in North America. Raul de Rosas was a number of years his wife’s senior. In fact, at twenty five years her senior, he was easily old enough to have been her father. He was, by all accounts, a good husband and a loving father, doting on his daughters. He died at the time of the Great Devastation. I don’t think she ever truly forgave herself for that,” Brother replied.

He looked at her for the longest moment. “There is an old photograph in the collection of the Mother Foundress wearing that very same expression,” Brother Librarian said thoughtfully.

“She was about your age in the photo. It would have been taken just before the Great Devastation.”

“You have images which immediately predate the Devastation?”

He smiled broadly. “My dear, we have many things you would not think we have. I have been in charge of the collection for more than forty years. And I was assistant curator for ten years immediately prior. There is no one who knows the collection half as well as I do.”

“Someday I will have to spend considerable time here.”

“I’m certain you will find yourself welcome.” He took the empty cups from the table. “I do have tasks to which I must attend. You know, Daughter, you bear a very strong resemblance to Mother Foundress. You may find the more you read her journals, you will understand her as well as you do yourself. I think you and she are very much alike.”

“High compliment indeed.”

“Just a simple observation, Daughter.”

“I wish she had recorded the year she wrote this entry.”

“It is often difficult to place exact years of her writings. This one we are able to place because it was written during the first year of her marriage, about twelve years before the Devastation. Now, I do have duties to attend to. I’ll leave you here to finish the journal.”

Anna finished reading the journal about the construction of the house. Then she scanned it into the memory of the notebook so it could be studied at more leisure. While she had read the journal, several statements raised questions in her mind, or had cast a new light on a subject. The journal was a detailed account of that period of time. But, then, Anna had expected it to be.

Lara had been an academic. Part of her training, like Anna’s, was to be thorough and to document everything.

Anna was beginning to understand Lara’s feelings about this house in the mountains. Her husband had been the head of an anti-terrorist organization. The location secrecy had been essential. He had possessed too many real enemies and false friends. Lara accepted that. But, she still wanted to feel as though she wasn’t confined. She had wanted to maintain some illusion of freedom, even though she knew it was precious little more than a fantasy.

But, Anna had to admit she was puzzled about the relationship between Lara and Raul de Rosas. What had attracted Lara to him? What had kept them together? Was it gratitude for his having saved her life? Was it hero worship? Since he was so much older was it some sort of need for a loving father figure? Or, was it true love?

They seemed mismatched. But, maybe not totally so. Both of them were driven by the need to understand. For him, it was a need to solve crimes. For Lara, it was a need to solve problems.

Were the two ventures really different from one another? Lara's love for him came through clearly in her writing. Anna wondered if he had loved Lara with the same intensity. There was probably no way to know. From what little Anna knew of him, he didn't seem to have been the sort of man comfortable talking about his emotions, even on paper.

What also came through clearly in Lara's journal was a picture of a world in which evil became so prevalent that people accepted it as normal. Anna wondered if Raul ever thought it useless to sweep the streets of terrorists when his whole society was coming apart at the seams?

Anna couldn't imagine living in a world in which she had to be afraid every moment that a man whom she loved would be killed in the line of duty, where fear could numb into an acceptance which colored all of her actions. Yet, Lara had lived that way. Was this part of why Lara was who she was in later years? And what did Lara mean with that reference to her father using his own children like lab rats?

Joseph Remy, Anna thought. She knew his name. But that was about all she knew about him. He was, according to legend, either a biologist or a psychologist. No one seemed to know for sure. For all her searches, she'd never found any record of his work. Of course, that's not surprising. Many of the old paper records from the period had been destroyed, one way or another.

Anna returned the volume of the journal to Brother Librarian.

"Do you have any further volumes of this journal?"

Brother Librarian smiled. "Several, Daughter."

"I should like to read them."

"You would have to have permission from either Mother Abbess or Vice Abbot for that. I was directed only to let you have access to this particular volume."

"I don't suppose you can tell me where I might find your Vice Abbot?"

“That I can do. He just came in.”

Anna turned around. Jack smiled at her. “Are you ready to go back to your camp?”

“Sure. Now that I know about the construction of the house and the floor plan, it should make the logging of the contents that much easier.”

“See? I can be useful to your work.”

“But what price will I have to pay for your usefulness?” Anna asked of him.

Jack sighed. “You’re a little cynic!”

“I prefer to think of it as being a realist,” she replied firmly.

He said gently, in a tone that one might have used to calm a frightened child, “Yes, I suppose you would.”

Chapter Three



The air-speeder settled to a halt just outside camp. Anna started to climb out. Jack took her hand. “I want to be with you when you enter the structure.”

“As long as you don’t get in the way of the scientific team, I see no problem with that,” she replied quietly.

“You still have no idea, do you?”

Anna looked at him in puzzlement. That was the second time that he had said something like that to her. “What is it that I am supposed to know?”

He shook his head negatively.

“Don’t put me off. What is it that you so desperately want to tell me, but can’t quite bring yourself to say? If it is something related to the safety of the team, I suggest that you tell me now. If one of the team is injured or killed because of something which you could have prevented. I swear I will...”

“The tigress in defense of her cubs,” Jack cut her off, his voice held warmth and amusement.

“I feel responsible for these people. So why don’t you just tell me now what it is you think I should know.”

He shook his head. “No. When the time is right, you’ll come to me for confirmation. Until then, you wouldn’t believe me anyway.”

“I don’t understand you, Jack.”

“That’s the first time that you’ve actually called me by name.”

“Don’t let it go to your head, Eminence.”

“You have no idea how much I love you, do you?”

“You don’t even know me.”

“Oh, but I do know you. You throw most of who you are into your work. I’ve read everything you’ve ever published. And that is quite a volume of work for a thirty-two-year-old woman.”

“And you’ve rarely agreed with anything I’ve written,” Anna offered.

“Not entirely. You have a large streak of mistrust in your constitution. I’ve never faulted your scholarship, just your outlook. What happened to you to make you so incredibly cynical?”

“I suppose you would want everyone to be open and trusting all the time under all conditions?” she offered. “Wouldn’t that be lovely?”

Jack shook his head negatively. “No. Caution is sometimes indicated in dealings with people.”

Anna looked at him for a long moment. “Like how you’re dealing with the dig team?”

Jack smiled broadly. Then he sidestepped the issue. “Did you know I have heard you speak at several conferences? The first one was when you were twelve.”

“That’s twenty years ago.”

“Yes. I was twenty one. I was in my last year of law school.”

“Precocious, were you?” Anna asked.

Jack shrugged. “One uses the gifts one is given, as you well know. I had just arranged to enter the Order. Then at the university there was a notice that you would be speaking. Curious, I crashed the seminar.”

“And?”

“You were adorable as a child, and absolutely brilliant. But, I had heard that you were.”

“Did you understand my presentation?”

“Oh, yes. You were quite clear. My roommate was a doctoral candidate in physics. He was quite impressed with you.”

“You’ve been in the Order for a long time then, if you entered at twenty one.” Anna remarked quietly.

“Almost twenty years. Nearly half my life,” Jack answered.

“No regrets?”

“I don’t know anyone without some regrets,” Jack said lowly. “My biggest regret is that I didn’t approach you at the World Archeology Conference Fourteen years ago in Peru. You had just turned eighteen.”

“You were there?”

“I was. I thoroughly enjoyed your speech.”

“Were you at the reception, too?” she asked hesitantly, recalling the painful incident.

“I was making my way across the room to rescue you from that middle-aged lothario who was groping you and giving you a hard time when you decked him. I decided then that you were one woman who could take care of herself.”

Anna blushed at the memory. “He was the chair of the WAC that year and had consumed far too much Champagne for his own good.”

“By the time I reached the scene, you were sitting on him reading him the riot act about making passes at girls younger than his own daughters. I don’t think I’ve ever seen anyone more magnificent than you were in your righteous anger at that moment.”

“So, you do know me—from a distance. You’ve seen the intellectual, physics and archeology sides of me—plus one of my most embarrassing public moments. I’m sorry, but I don’t remember seeing or meeting you.”

“We didn’t really meet. I was one of the Blue Robes that helped scrape the guy off the floor and dragged him out of the reception hall. By the time I returned, you were gone.”

“Oh.” She stretched her mind to remember, but all of the Companions had been a blur of blue robes. She wondered what might have been if they had met each other that night. “I guess it was probably for the best we didn’t meet that night.”

“Fate has a funny way of catching up with you. I don’t know if it was for the best, but I fell in love with you at that second conference.”

“I don’t want to hear this.”

“I know. You are going to be hearing a good many things that you don’t want to hear before this little adventure is over.”

“You sound remarkably sure of that.”

“Believe me, I wish that I weren’t.”

“I’ve asked you before. But, I’ll ask again. Do they give lessons in cryptic statements as part of your religious formation?”

He suppressed a laugh, but there was more than a hint of sadness underlying the amusement. “Come on. You’ve kept the dig team lingering long enough.”

Sarah cleared her throat. “So, what you are telling us is that Lara and her husband built this place as some sort of vacation home before the Devastation?”

“Wild, isn’t it?”

Anna smiled.

“It makes sense. Wasn’t he some sort of peace officer?” Thomas questioned.

Jack answered, “International Security Service. It was more than just a branch of police. They were the anti-terrorist arm of the international legislative body. Their powers were virtually unlimited, their word accepted without question, and their officers viewed with a mixture of utmost respect and total fear.”

“You know a lot about them?” Thomas asked quietly.

“The ISS was the topic of my doctoral dissertation. You could say that I know a lot about them.”

Thomas looked at him curiously. “I thought you were a lawyer. Are you also a historian? Is that why you were assigned to this?”

“Not exactly. The twenty first century fascinates me, but I’m not a historian as such. My Ph.D. is in the Administration of Justice. I also hold a Juris Doctor.”

“Those aren’t your only degrees,” Anna stated.

“I have others: a B.S. in History, a Master’s in Divinity... But, law and law enforcement, both secular and Canon, are my specialties. And for the team’s information, I wasn’t assigned here. I begged to be allowed the privilege. Mother Abbess was only too happy to grant permission.”

A young team member, Clara Johns, ran a hand through her functionally short hair. “Okay. Let’s assume that we all have a right to be here. Where do we go next?”

“That seems pretty obvious. We go down to the structure with a couple of A-3000’s and see what we can find,” Anna offered.

“Alright!” Clara practically shouted her endorsement for that idea.

“Did anyone try giving a voice command for the door to open before you called me?”

Sarah nodded negatively. “We didn’t want to risk it.”

“Just to satisfy my curiosity, I want several of you to try to open the door.”

“You think that is wise?”

“Her journal doesn’t mention booby traps on the door. In fact, she specifically said she had vetoed any sort of anti-personnel devices.”

Sarah sighed as they continued walking. “Alright. We’ll try.”

Yet, in the end, Anna was the only person who could open the doors: Anna or the recordings of Lara’s voice.

Anna wondered why. Had the circuits degraded? Had Lara’s equipment possessed such low resolution? If so, why could Anna open the doors but no one else in the group? Sarah’s voice wasn’t all that different in timbre or pitch from Anna’s.

“I told you that you were the only one who could do this,” Jack said quietly as most of the members of the team went to prepare the probes.

Anna sighed. “So you did,” she agreed. “How did you know, I wonder?”

“The similarity between you and the Mother Foundress is uncanny,” Jack replied easily.

Again, Anna was left with the feeling that while he was telling the truth, he wasn’t telling her the whole truth.

“Don’t the Companions have recordings of Lara’s vice?” Anna asked.

“Many,” Jack informed her.

“Then you could have used those to open the door. You didn’t need me,” she offered.

“But we do need you. Getting in is only the beginning,” Jack asserted. “There’s a lot of work to be done for which you are uniquely qualified.”

Anna couldn’t help wonder with trepidation, what kind of work?

The team sent in the probes, left the doors open slightly, and stood well back on the path watching their progress on the monitors as the images were recorded for later study. The air quality was good, according to the analysis displayed on the screen. The light inside the building was good. There were no life forms within the house.

Anna paid close attention to the furnishings in the home. Everything seemed remarkably free of dust. But then, if the air filtration and recirculation system still worked, and it seemed to be, there wouldn’t have been huge quantities of dust present.

What fascinated Anna was the large number of bound books which appeared to be in perfect condition. Three of the walls of the main living area were covered from floor to ceiling with built in bookshelves: shelves two and a half meters high, running for almost forty meters along the perimeter of the room. This had to have been one of the biggest single private collections of bound books Anna had ever seen. Cataloging them would take weeks. Reading them all would take years, if

not decades.

She knew from Lara's journal that the house had been designed with a large great room which served as kitchen-dining-living area, four bedrooms, a bathroom, a large pantry area to be used as both a work area and a food storage area, a room containing the utilities, air filtration and humidification, light channeling, water purification, etc., and an area for the joint storage of weapons and the housing of communications equipment.

One of the probes went through the kitchen into the pantry. There was equipment for drying and smoking of meats, for the irradiation of foods, for vacuum sealing of food, as well as three machines that Anna had no idea what they would have been used for. And there was a small still. The storage shelves held empty jars. There had been no food left behind.

Anna could understand the lack of food. If Lara intended for this place to be empty for three hundred years, then she would not have wanted to leave food behind. It would have offended her innate frugality to have wasted food. However, a few jars of food would have told the team quite a bit about the diet at the time.

After leaving the pantry, a probe went into the utility room. There was a shelf of binders which Anna saw from the handwriting on the spines contained the documentation for the machinery. The probes went carefully over and around each piece of machinery. Anna couldn't believe how well preserved the utilities were. Everything was museum quality, yet it was all still functioning.

Another probe went into the master bedroom. The room contained the biggest bed that Anna had ever seen. The neatly made bed easily measured three meters wide by two and one half meters long. It brought unbidden images to Anna's mind of two people making love.

Night stands flanked each side of the bed. On top of one was a large photograph in a wooden frame. Two small girls

and a bald, smiling, man. The man had a large scar, as from a knife fight, running down the side of his face from just under his eye almost to his chin: a permanent reminder of the violent times in which he had lived. His nose was crooked in the way only an untended broken nose can be. There were several other scars. Yet, he was far from a homely man. Even after all this time, a sense of the man's strength came through. The photo had to have been of Raul and the children. Anna focused on his lined face. There was a cynicism in his eyes and a hardness about his expression which wasn't quite erased by the love which he clearly felt for the two girls who flanked him. He wouldn't have been a comfortable man. Lara wasn't in the image. She had probably been the one behind the camera. Raul's face told quite a story. He would have been a hard man to love. And a harder man from whom to accept love. Yet, Lara had loved him with all of her strength, all her heart.

The other night stand held two bound books and a loose binder. The probe hovered over the books reading the titles: *Electricity and Magnetism* by Lara de Rosas, and the *Arrest Policies and Procedures of the ISS*. The binder was labeled—in Lara's own handwriting—*Basal Metabolism*.

Basal Metabolism. That would contain Lara's reproductive cycle charts. It seemed like the ultimate invasion of privacy, yet, Anna knew she would study everything, including the intimate look at Lara's conjugal life. It was almost more than Anna wanted to know.

One probe focused on the closet. One side was filled with a man's clothes: police uniforms, rough work clothes, some formal and business attire. A name tag on one uniform said "de Rosas". The other side of the closet contained women's clothes of the immediate pre-devastation period. The saying, "*everything old is new again*," danced through Anna's head—with very little changes the clothing could pass for current styles.

A single, neatly made bed, was in the next room. Also present was a desk containing a computer from Lara's era.

Children's stuffed toys lined the lower shelf of a corner cabinet. The closet of the room was slightly open. The probe cast a light inside to reveal it full of children's clothes. A similar situation was found in the third bedroom.

The fourth bedroom held a surprise, however. The bed there was just barely big enough for one person. Flanking the bed were a pair of night stands stacked with several books: The Bible, The Exercise of Holy Dying, The Proceedings of the Ecumenical Council of Restoration, A Statement of Religious Unity, and The Rule of Life. The closet stood empty except for two long blue hooded habits. A small lace-covered table stood along one wall. It held a crucifix and two icons flanked by two unburned wax tapered candles in lead crystal candlesticks. A kneeling bench stood in front of the table. An ancient fifteen decade wooden bead rosary joined with gold wire and a gold crucifix lay draped over the bench's armrest.

Anna wondered if Lara had even gone into the other rooms after the devastation, everything was so intact. The fact that they were undisturbed and pre-dated the Devastation made these rooms of immeasurable value for study of the immediate Pre-Devastation age.

The door to the weapons room was firmly closed and locked according to the information from the other probe. But, the probes could scan through the thinner interior door. No life forms were present.

Both probes then exited the dwelling.

There had been conversation all throughout the exploration. Anna had tuned it out, concentrating on the images that she was seeing. "Close door," she said quietly.

Anna knew she was wearing a silly, stunned grin when she turned around to face the rest of the team. She felt as though she had just been handed the equivalent of the Rosetta stone.

She didn't know if any of them had noticed, but there were several volumes of Lara's Journal in the book cases. She didn't get a real good look at all the books, but she recognized the

same binding as the one she had seen today at the Chapter House. They contained Lara's handwriting on the covers. Anna made a mental note to study the probe recording in more detail, by herself, later.

The machinery in the utility room was a treasure beyond price. Still functioning. Anna couldn't believe it. But, she knew she had to get a look at both the equipment and their manuals.

The first face she saw was Jack's. His deep blue eyes met hers with an intensity, a curiosity, from which she found it difficult to break away.

"Was this what you expected?" he asked.

"I didn't know what to expect," Anna replied truthfully.

Sarah smiled broadly. "I take it you aren't disappointed?"

"Not hardly. Let's take the recordings back to the tempshack and plot strategy for cataloging the contents."

Jack took a gentle hold of Anna's arm as she started to bring up the rear of the group. He nodded negatively. "You don't want to go back yet. Come on."

They stood inside the cave entrance to the house. "Light on," Anna said quietly.

"You want to go inside, don't you?"

"Yes."

"Then do it. I'll come with you."

"I shouldn't. The team will want to review the records and plot strategy."

"This is your dig. They know it."

"It's not my dig."

"Yes. It is. This means more to you than it could ever mean to any of them, and they all know it. You are the only one who can get through the lock. And if you are honest, you hate the idea of letting any of them inside. You want to do the work by yourself."

"You do know me well. I'm not sure I'm comfortable with that." Her voice held a good deal less force than she intended.

He smiled at her. "Come here," he said roughly just before

he pulled her into his arms. His lips closed over hers before she could protest. But his kiss held such sweet, gentle persuasion she had no desire to protest.

She found herself kissing him back, taking the caress far beyond sweet. Tasting him as he was tasting her. She couldn't help responding to his maleness and need. It was as if a wildness suddenly took her. She was hungry, too hungry, for a man's touch. Or that's what she tried to tell herself. But she knew, even from her limited experience, that it was just this man, not any man, who caused her response.

She'd been kissed before. A woman can hardly reach the age of thirty-two without having been kissed. It had always been a pleasant, but not earth shattering, experience. But, no one had ever created anything near this degree of need now driving her. Passion. Need. She had heard those words, read descriptions of them—yet they had not been part of her experience, so she had tended to dismiss them as fantasy used by people to justify their actions.

“Our souls complete each other, Marianna. We're both incomplete without the other,” he whispered into her ear a few long moments later. “I know you, and you know me. There is no one else for either of us. You have to know that.”

She stepped away from him. “I don't know anything of the sort,” she protested.

“Don't you?” he demanded as he, without resistance, pulled her back into his arms. “Don't you really?”

“Jack, please, I don't think this is a good idea,” she murmured, desire burning for this man.

“You're right. It's not a good idea. I want you more than can be satisfied with a few hot kisses. All I can think of is going inside, and laying you naked on that big bed of Lara's and Raul's. I want to make love with you all day, all night—time and time again, knowing that no one will be able to get in unless we let them. I want to hear you call my name in passion. I want to see you come apart in pleasure. But, we can't do that.

Not yet.”

“No,” she told him breathless as she stepped out of his embrace. “We can’t do that.”

“You want me just as badly as I want you.”

“I never deny the obvious.”

He smiled broadly. “Come back to Chapter House with me. We’ll be married in an hour.”

Anna could only stare at him in disbelief. He had told her of his love, but somehow she had simply passed that off, tucking his declaration into a deep corner of her heart for future, cold, lonely nights. But he was serious.

“Married?” the word came out as little more than a squeak. “Married?” She croaked a stronger response. “You can’t marry me.”

“I don’t see any impediment.”

“I’m not a Companion.”

“You don’t have to be. The Rule does not require it. Generally, Companions who marry do so within the order. But it is not required.”

“I’m lapsed.”

“That is a problem, but one which can be solved easily. I can hear your confession. Or if that makes you uncomfortable, there are plenty of priests at Chapter House who can do this for you.”

“I can’t do that,” she told him painfully. “Jack, I can’t.”

“Can’t? I’m going to assume you aren’t indulging in hyperbole, and you really consider yourself unable to be restored to the Church. Tell me why, Anna?” he asked gently.

“Just trust me. It’s impossible,” she told him raggedly, hating the anger and frustration and pain revealed in her voice.

He looked at her for a long moment. She could feel his confusion.

When he spoke, his tone was gentle. “What’s weighing so heavily on you that you can’t even bring yourself to go to confession? There’s nothing that can’t be forgiven.”

“If one honestly repents,” she replied sharply. “But, I haven’t and I can’t. I won’t endanger my soul even further by making an incomplete confession, or by making a false statement of contrition. I simply cannot do that.”

Jack looked at her, then nodded. “That’s what you meant about your lapsing being a matter of discipline.”

“Yes,” she told him flatly.

“How long have you been without the sacraments?” Jack asked her in a gentle tone.

“Does it matter?” she replied, anger coming into her voice again.

“That long, huh?” Jack said in a forced light tone.

“Just know that I can’t marry you, Jack. Even if I wanted to.”

“Do you want to?” he demanded.

“It doesn’t matter. It’s not possible, Jack.”

“You were engaged to Father Administrator a few years back—are you still in love with Laurence Shay?” he asked in a strained voice.

“That’s been over for a very long time,” Anna told him flatly.

“Has it? You still feel something or you wouldn’t be so angry with him,” Jack stated in a tone which revealed pain and curiosity.

“Oh, I feel something for him: profound contempt and utter loathing. The man—and I use that term loosely—is little higher than pond scum on my emotional awareness scale.”

“Love and hate are often flip sides of the same coin,” Jack offered in a low voice.

“Not this time. Larry... he burned his bridges with me rather thoroughly, beyond all forgiveness.”

“Is he the reason you can’t go to confession?”

Anna sighed. “Don’t pry into my past, Jack. There are things there that you wouldn’t want to know about. Things that I really don’t want to tell you.”

“I love you. You could tell me anything without it jeopardizing my love for you.”

“You say that, and it’s tempting to believe you. But, I would have to trust you a lot more than I do. I haven’t trusted anyone in years.”

“Your body trusts me. It wouldn’t have taken much for us to take our passion to completion. We both wanted it, still want it, very badly.”

“So to soothe your body, er... conscience, you want to marry me? Why not just go to Confession? Thirty minutes silent meditation, and two hours scrubbing toilets in penance for unchaste thoughts.”

He laughed in genuine amusement. “I’ll have to remember that one as a way to reduce the noise and improve the cleanliness of the house when we host retreats for adolescents. Maybe we ought to go back to camp. Your face is starting to turn red from the cold.”

But it wasn’t the cold making her face turn red. And she knew he knew that only too well.

“Yes, Eminence. We had better get back,” she sighed and nodded tightly.

He took her hand and looked at her. “Am I too late, Marianna? Are you in love with Philip Gray?” he demanded.

“Are you making Philip your business, too?” she snapped.

“Are you in love with Philip Gray? Tell me. I’ll walk away and never bother you again.” His voice held deep pain, but resolve.

She signed. “Philip is one of the best friends I have ever had.”

“Friends? Is that all? Sarah thinks you two should be married,” he added quietly.

Anna cleared her throat. “Sarah is a romantic at heart. She wants to see everyone married—probably because she can’t marry Thomas.”

“Thomas could have had his prior marriage annulled. There were, and still are, adequate grounds. He chose not to do so. Instead, Sarah and he have lived in concubinage. Thomas

had a choice—he chose not to dishonor his wife in that way. We all have things in life we can chose to change, and things we can't.” Jack said, his tone gentle.

“I cannot change my love for you, Marianna. Even if you were to chose another for your husband. I will always love you. In that I have no choice.” He turned and walked away a few steps. “Are you coming?”

She could barely breath, much less make her legs move. “Yes, I’m coming,” she nodded and whispered.

In a bit stronger voice she said, “Light off.”

On an impulse, just outside of the entrance to the dwelling, she reached down and grabbed a handful of snow and rubbed it on her flushed face.

She scooped another handful into a ball. In spite of a twenty year hiatus in throwing snowballs, Anna managed to hit Jack squarely on the back of the head.

He turned around with the most incredulous look on his face.

“Did you mean to hit me in the head with a snowball?”

“No. I meant to hit your back. But, your head was a much larger target.” It felt good to tease him, to break the heavy emotional mood.

He bent down to scoop up some snow of his own.

Anna took off running and laughing. The virgin snow crackled under her feet when Anna veered off the path. He circled around and tackled her, forcing her down on her back, with truly little effort. Anna laid beneath him, snow creeping down her neck, for a long moment. Her laughter stopped as she looked into his eyes. His intent was clear. And it took her breath away.

He kissed her with shattering absorption. She wanted him to never stop. He deepened the kiss. His hands went from cradling her face, to caressing her neck and then roamed lower. Instinctively she adjusted her body to accommodate his weight by moving her legs apart. He groaned and broke the kiss, but

didn't move off of her.

"Woman, you know we are meant for one another. If we wouldn't end up with frostbite, I'd prove it to you right now." He reluctantly rose to his feet and pulled her up with him. "But, neither of us would care for the public shame. The first time we come together will be on our wedding night."

To Anna's embarrassment, her knees buckled. He laughed, a very masculine laugh of satisfaction as he took the opportunity to sweep her up into his arms. She was mortified.

"You are certifiably crazy, you know that?" she told him quietly as he stood there with her in his arms.

"Crazy about you. Certifiably," he stated without hesitation. "I've loved you half of my life, Marianna Lara. I intend to marry you, and soon."

She sighed. This was useless. It wouldn't work between them. Too much stood in the way. Someone was going to get hurt.

A young female Companion on skis stopped about a meter from them. "Is the Daughter injured, your Eminence?"

"Well, Anna, are you injured?"

"Only my pride," she muttered.

The young woman looked at Anna with open speculation in her eyes. "Then you don't need me?"

"We're perfectly fine, Sister," Jack assured the young woman and shifted Anna in his arms. "Thank you."

The young Companion skied off.

"I'll say it again, you're crazy!" Anna told him. "Put me down. I can walk."

"I'm not the one who started throwing snowballs," he protested with a laugh and set her down. They trudged through the snow, Jack keeping his arm about her waist.

"Just being gracious, your Eminence?"

"I'm keeping you warm and upright, aren't I?"

"True. But we could be even warmer. Race you," Anna suddenly said as she broke free of his grasp.

“You have an advantage.”

She turned around and jogged backwards while he caught up. “Skirts getting in your way?”

“Feeling frisky, are we?”

Anna laughed as she turned about and began to run in earnest, or as much in earnest as one can do in the snow.

The team sat around reviewing the recordings of the house. At the end of the recordings, Sarah sighed. “You know, we are going to be tripping over one another in Lara’s dwelling. There is nothing here that needs any of the rest of our expertise. This is all basically within your realm, Anna. The interesting part of this structure is right up your line with technology.”

“I’m afraid you’re right.”

“Do you want to break the news of the find?” Sarah asked.

“No. I would rather that all publicity be kept to a minimum until we can work through the place and get everything documented. The last thing I want to do is give some anti-historic disclosure group time to set up protests.”

Sarah nodded. “I think that’s wise.”

“When we are ready to disclose, I want you to have primary credit for the find.”

Sarah smiled as she shook her head negatively. “Thank you, but you will be doing the work. The credit should be yours.”

“I feel guilty about taking over your dig.”

“I invited you here because this is where you need to be. And I was ready to give it over to you. After all, now that the Companions have corroborated that it is the Hescyhate, it’s really yours by right and title.”

Clara smiled. “Hey, we’re all just along for the ride. But, Sarah is right. You don’t need us here. The building is structurally sound. There are no life forms to contend with. It’s just a matter of going in, sifting through the materials, cataloging them... It’s a one person job. Any more laborers than that will

get in each other's way, possibly destroying evidence in the process."

The other members of the team agreed without hesitation.

Anna sighed. What could she say, they were right. This was a one woman job at this point.

Anna wondered if she really had the courage to pursue this. It was one thing to dream about doing something significant. But, it was another thing entirely to actually take hold of the opportunity when fate presented itself.

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Karen Woods

Twenty years ago if anyone had told me I would be making my living as a fiction writer, I would have told him that he had the wrong woman. Oh, I had stories and characters dancing in my head clamoring to get out. Writing, however, was something I did strictly for my own amusement, as I had done since I had written my first short story at the age of five. I simply had plans for my life other than writing. I was quite happy teaching college computer science courses. But I realized I could and did write tales that were as good or better than the ones I read in my leisure time.

I've burned great bonfires of rejection letters from publishing houses. It's extremely difficult to break into publishing. I only recommend pursuing a career as a writer if your Muse simply won't leave you alone.

This particular novel, *The Only One*, was rejected by the science fiction houses because it was too Christian, by the Christian houses because it was too Catholic, by the Catholic houses because it was “heretical,” and by romance houses because it was “too weird for words.” It's simply speculative fiction, an exploration into “what-if.” Once you've read it, please tell me what you think.

As for me at this stage of my life, I tease that I live a quiet life. Well, maybe it's quiet in comparison to a Category Four hurricane. My house is often filled with the sounds of young people, friends of my youngest child. My firstborn is a college student, no longer a child, and not quite an adult. I'm exceptionally proud of both of them.

It's a very good thing to make a living doing what you would do for fun, anyway!

You can visit my site at www.karenwoods.com, and email me at karen@karenwoods.com.



Karen Woods

“A thought provoking, extraordinary read about a not so far away future, about humanity and the power of love.”

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