

Lost And Found In Prague

by Kelly Jones

Chapter One

The quiet woke her as it did each morning when the dreams faded. Claire lay, taking in a deep breath, aware that she had been given another day, forcing herself to be grateful for this. She rose, her knees creaking as she grasped the edge of the bed and lowered herself to the hard, cold floor for her morning offering. "O my God, my sweet Infant Savior, I offer thee my prayers, works, and sufferings," she began.

After a silent Amen, she crossed herself, slowly unfolded her aging joints as she stood, and stepped to the narrow closet. Laboriously she tugged the night garment over her head, slipped on the dark brown tunic, the panels of the scapular, followed by white wimple and black veil, a ritual she had performed each morning for the past seventy-six years. She smoothed the covers on her small bed and sat, rubbing her feet together to encourage the circulation. The barefoot order of the Carmelites, she mused, though sandals had always been part of her habit. Today she would need a good pair of stockings to protect her toes from the early morning chill. She worked the warm wool over her feet, pulling the socks up around her plump calves, and then nudged the sandals from beneath her bed and slipped them on, bending to secure the straps, a simple task that had become more and more difficult. Before leaving her room, she wrapped a frayed knit shawl around her shoulders.

In the darkness, she shuffled down the hall, through the kitchen, past the pantry. After retrieving the keys from the box near the door, she dipped her fingers into the dove-shaped holy water font that hung on the wall, offering her day for a second time to the Infant Savior.

Silently, she crept down the stairs, counting each step with an aspiration—my God—step—and my all—step—my God—step—and my all. Sixteen total. Making her way along the hall, she disturbed no one. She unbolted the heavy wooden door, pulled it open slowly, crossed the small courtyard, unlatched the iron gate, and stepped out onto the square. April's dampness hung in the air, intensified by the silence, the absence of others. Sister Claire wrapped the shawl tighter and reached for her rosary. She knew exactly how long it would take to walk the short distance to Our Lady Victorious. One rosary. Twenty-five aspirations. As she grasped the small crucifix fixed to the beads, touched it to her head and heart, left, then right, she realized she wasn't sure what day it was. This happened often now, and her greatest concern this morning was her uncertainty over which mysteries to contemplate. She decided on the Joyful to combat the feelings that had invaded her for the past weeks and months. The Joyful mysteries were designated for Mondays and Thursdays, and she thought it was Thursday.

She encountered no one as she walked. The first light of morning had yet to rise over the golden-tipped spires of Prague. The bakers, whose

delicious scents would soon fill the pastry shops in the neighborhoods of the Malá Strana, had just begun to rub sleep from their eyes, and it would be hours before the vendors, whose wooden wagons bumped early each morning with an uneven rhythm over the cobblestones, would offer fresh fruits and vegetables from the stalls at the open market.

Claire felt an energy in her prayers as if with each step, each word, she was nudging a soul closer toward heaven. She finished her rosary and kissed the cool metal of the cross, her lips pressed against the ridge of the nail piercing Christ's feet. "Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned," she whispered.

She had no permission to walk alone from the convent to the Church of Our Lady Victorious, though she was sure the prioress knew she often rose and moved about in the darkness, unable to sleep more than a few hours each night.

Later, she would return to her cell as she did each morning, then emerge once more in timely fashion, joining the other nuns in the chapter room for their silent procession into the convent chapel.

She recited the twenty-five aspirations, counting them off on two and a half decades of rosary beads—four more years' indulgences. At times she thought she could feel and see the souls being lifted heavenward, greeted by the Father. She chided herself for such pride, thinking that she, a humble servant, could be an instrument in delivering these waiting souls to their eternal reward.

With the last aspiration, she arrived at her destination and in the darkness her fingers searched for the lock on the door. She slid the key in and entered. Immediately she sensed a foreign presence had infused the interior of the church. A faint vibration pulsed along the floor, and the glass chandelier above quivered with the slightest tremor. Yet, such movements were not unusual in themselves. The church was over four hundred years old; often she sensed spirits from the past still lingered, lurking in the crypt below, hovering in the attic above.

Inhaling, she wondered if the scent that clung to the air, a smell she knew but could not name nor retrieve from the proper pocket of her mind, was the source of this uneasiness and confusion. Memories, like pennies stored in a pouch riddled with holes, slipped out so easily now. Despite her misgivings, she approached the main altar and bowed—no longer able to lower herself for a proper genuflection—then continued to the sacristy where the cleaning supplies were stored, determined to complete the task for which she had come. She checked the altar alarm and found it had been turned off. Had she done this the day before? Forgotten to reset it? She gathered the plastic pail, inserted the whiskbroom and dustpan, gripped the shears, and stepped back into the church, realizing with a touch of relief that the perplexing, yet familiar, smell was that of incense. A remnant of last evening's services, it perfumed the air, mingling with the aroma perpetually clinging to the marble altars and ancient stone. But this relief coupled with the recognition of a recurring uncertainty. What was happening to her mind that she could not remember from day to day what had come and gone the day before? Today wasn't Thursday. Yesterday had been Thursday. Holy Thursday. Today was Good Friday. There were no flowers to refresh, no dried blossoms to pinch or stray vines to clip. The altars were bare. How had she made such a terrible mistake? Today she should have contemplated on the sorrowful mysteries, meditating on the Passion of Christ. Today was the day Christ died for the sins of all mankind.

Again she felt a presence. A voice. “Accomplished with ease.” Was this merely her mind playing with her once more?

Then another, far away, near the door, the words carried on the air of a familiar melody, a distinct timbre. “A well-played plan. My reasoning correct. He is with us, guiding the way as surely this would not have been so accomplished without.”

Then words, unspoken, a familiar voice, spinning about her, yet only within. The melody, the verse she’d often heard and pondered:

Under the wing of peace we march in gentle revolution
to claim our cherished life and freedom
The salvation of the world
to be found in the human heart

She stood, hands trembling, tightening her grasp on the shears. Lingered in the shadow of the altar of Saints Joachim and Anne, she listened. A click of the door? Nothing now. The voices had stilled. The church was quiet. Claire heard only her own breathing.

Moments later, deciding that the voices—which, together with the thieves of memory, had become her personal cross—were only imagined, she made her way down the side aisle. Again, she stopped and listened. Nothing. She was alone in the church.

She proceeded on quiet feet to the altar of the Prazske Jezulatko.

At one time she had been allowed to dress the Infant, but this task has been handed over to the younger nuns, Sister Agnes, Sister Ludmila, and Sister Eurosia. Claire knew she could still do it without difficulty. Her mind and hands had memorized every curve of the precious little body. She knew how to enclose the small figure in the metal shell for protection. She was aware of the scent and texture of every garment, the history of each. Tomorrow the younger nuns would remove the Infant from his position high on the altar and prepare him for the glorious day, dressing the little King in the colors of the resurrection.

She bowed before the Infant, suddenly aware of another scent, similar, though distinct from the spicy smell of incense. The voices could deceive her, but this smell, layered upon stone and incense, she easily identified as the residue of tobacco. No plumes curled in the air, nor invaded her nostrils, yet she knew someone had been here, and she knew the odor, a scent that would cling to a body, leaving a distinct trail long after the flame had been extinguished. She did not imagine this. Someone had been in the church.

Instinctively, she tilted her head up toward the altar. A knot tightened in her chest. For the briefest moment she felt something—a swish of warm air against her face. Then a sensation of empty air. A void. Something missing. Gone. The sharpness circling her heart increased, the weight of her body pulling her down as a deep sting cut into her cheek, warm and wet. The clatter of her plastic pail, dropping to the floor, dustpan and whiskbroom rattling out. Another voice gently calling. “It is time, my faithful servant.”

Claire’s own voice, humble, but strong, “Not yet, my Lord.”