

BLOOD ON THE WHITE ROSE

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ANGIE BANKS GRABBED MATT RILEY'S shoulder, but he shook her off and finished buckling the child into the back seat of his car. Breathless after chasing him up a steep, snow-covered hill, Angie wheezed as her lungs tightened.

She wanted to shout, "What are you doing?" but words were beyond her.

Five-year-old Joy looked past Matt. "Are you okay, Angie?"

Angie placed a hand on her chest and nodded.

Matt turned and his forehead creased. "*Breskva*, breathe." He closed the door and grabbed Angie's shoulders; his thighs pressed gently into her lower body. The normally intimate moment instead felt like a gentle restraint.

She wanted him to explain the sudden race, but for that she needed air. "What . . . is . . . going—?" She mouthed the words between coughs.

"Later. Breathe."

Matt pulled her meds pouch from her bag, shook the canister, connected the spacer. "Here." He folded her hands around the inhaler.

Sucking the medicine into her lungs, Angie tried to breathe through fear triggered by Matt's uphill dash and the exertion-generated asthma attack. When she lowered the inhaler, Matt handed her an opened water bottle and led her toward sheltering firs in front of his car.

She swirled the water in her mouth, spit it onto the snow. Swish, spit, swish, spit. She always did it three times. She'd made a game of it with Joy, practicing so the child wouldn't be frightened if they were alone when Angie had an attack.

Not trusting her voice, she stamped her foot and glared. Matt responded by guiding her to the passenger door and wrapping her in his arms.

“Be quiet, *Breskva*. Let this pass.” He pushed a tendril of her pale red hair behind her ear. Her hair’s color had inspired his nickname for her, the Croatian word for peach.

The pain in her chest was lessening. She choked out a demand. “What’s going on?”

“There’s no time to explain.”

“Why not?”

He sighed, folded himself over her, bent his head to hers. In the shadow of the trees, an onlooker would see a pair of lovers, not a silenced argument.

“We have to get out of here.”

Here was Plitvice Lakes National Park in Croatia, the second stop on the trip they’d been sharing with Joy’s parents. The month-long winter journey was the only time Tod and Vanetta Lynch included their daughter, Joy, and her nanny, Angie, in their travels. Even then, Angie and Joy were on their own, a challenge for Angie, who didn’t speak Bulgarian, Slovak or Russian.

When she told Matt about this trip, he’d insisted on joining them in Croatia, to introduce them to his family.

As she calmed her breathing, Angie wondered what Matt couldn’t explain.

Minutes before, they’d been strolling on a boardwalk in the 74,000-acre park on the UNESCO World Heritage List. Snow and ice covered the forest where water flowed through limestone karst, coursed over ninety waterfalls into natural dams and lakes, creating a fairytale backdrop for photos. When Matt’s phone died from taking so many pictures, she’d given hers to him.

As Matt framed the vista around them, screams rose from below. Angie grabbed Joy and held her close.

“Wait here.” Matt rushed downhill, disappearing behind firs obscuring the trail.

“What’s wrong?” Joy asked.

“I don’t know, sweetie.” Angie crouched, blocking Joy’s view with her body.

“Let’s go see.” Joy squirmed to get by.

“No. Matt will tell us when he gets back.”

Angie was unaware of the runner until his elbow clipped her arm as he

sped uphill. She pulled Joy closer and watched until the man disappeared. He hadn't even waved an apology.

"Look. That waterfall isn't frozen yet." Angie's attempt at distraction earned a pout from Joy. Before she could try a new tactic, Matt sprinted up the path, grabbed Joy, and raced away with the child in his arms.

"Somebody's hurt," he called over his shoulder. "Let's get out of the way before the medics get here. Ready for an adventure, Joyful?"

"Yes!"

"Wait!" Angie had shouted before taking off after them. Tempting "Joyful" with adventures, calling her by his nickname for her, were Matt's usual tricks to capture the child's attention. Most of the time, it was all in fun. Was this?

Now, locked in Matt's arms, Angie studied the anxious expression in his familiar sapphire eyes, resisted finger-combing the curl of wavy black hair falling over his forehead. When his chilly fingers gently brushed her cheek, she pushed them away.

"Explain." Her reedy voice didn't disguise her anger. She coughed.

"No talking." His order was sharp. "Breathe."

She took slow breaths; her eyes locked on his.

Matt ducked and peeked through the car window, smiled, and gave Joy a thumbs-up. Straightening, he whispered in Angie's ear. "A bunch of women were screaming over a man who was bleeding. Some guy was going through his pockets. He took off when I got there."

Angie's stomach clenched. "A runner?"

"Dressed like one."

"He passed us."

"Did he hurt you?"

"No."

"I told the women to call 112 and stay until help arrives. We should go."

Angie pushed Matt aside. "We can't just leave without telling the Lynches."

Matt tightened his grip. "Yes, we *must*. Let's go."

Angie's strength was no match for Matt's. She'd never be able to wrest the girl away from him.

No one else was in the parking lot. Even if she screamed, even if people came to her aid, they'd believe him. He knew the language. He belonged.

"Trust me." Matt opened the door, steered her into the seat, and reached across to buckle her belt, just as he had Joy's.

"We can't leave before you talk to the police." Angie whispered to keep Joy from hearing.

"The others will do that, *Breskva*." His breath was soft against her cheek. "We need to leave." He closed the door.

From the back seat, Joy asked, "Are you okay now?"

Angie smiled weakly at Joy. "Yeah. I shouldn't have run up the hill."

"Where are we going?" Joy asked as Matt headed toward the exit.

"It's a surprise." He pulled over to let an ambulance and police car pass.

"You still have my phone. I should call Vanetta," Angie said.

Matt patted his pockets. "I'm sorry. I think I dropped it running up the hill. We'll replace it later." Hiding his face like a coach on camera, he mouthed, "Don't scare Joyful."

Angie brushed a tear from her cheek, hoping no one had seen it. She had to stay strong for Joy. Mechanically, she replaced her meds in her shoulder bag. Somehow, she had to get word to Vanetta. Figure out how to get Joy back to her parents. Her fingers brushed the slim edge of her tablet inside the padded pocket of her bag. She needed Wi-Fi.

She barely heard Matt tell Joy Croatian folk tales on their drive through the mountains, as she tried to work out the reason for his sudden secretiveness. Angie knew little about the Balkan nation on the Adriatic, but Matt spent childhood summers and still spent Christmas holidays with family near Zagreb. She'd thought his presence on the trip would be a blessing.

Angie had been excited when the Lynches agreed to her request to include him. She'd introduced Matt to them three years before when he'd bumped into Angie and Joy at the library. Still, Tod had to cajole Vanetta. "It will feel more like a vacation for the girls if Matt keeps them company. And we won't have to feel guilty about spending time with our research."

Vanetta had smiled stiffly and retreated to her study. "Fine."

Angie didn't believe the Lynches ever felt guilty about ignoring Joy. Tod was a history professor in his mid sixties, and Vanetta, nearly forty, a

novelist who taught occasional creative writing classes. They put work first, and were gone often, sometimes for long stretches. They rarely spent time with their daughter.

Angie had been looking on the campus newspaper site for sophomore-year housing. When she'd seen the Lynches' ad for a live-in caregiver for their newborn, it seemed perfect. Taking the job extended her time at the university, but she'd finished her early childhood degree this past summer. She couldn't imagine leaving Joy now.

Matt's job as a corporate pilot kept him away as much as the Lynches, but when he was home, he practically lived with Angie and Joy in a mother-in-law suite behind the house. Adventures with Matt had made the trio Joy's surrogate family.

But Matt's familiarity with Croatia was fast turning into a disadvantage. He'd just isolated her and Joy in a place where she had no resources.

Squinting as a glint of early winter sunset hit her eyes, Angie noticed a sawmill on a forested road. A few miles later, in a village of side-by-side houses lining a narrow, winding street, Matt pulled into a parking lot.

"Ta da!" He gestured toward a small restaurant and inn.

"Where are we?" Joy asked.

"Ravna Gora, best little town in Croatia." Matt's grin was proud. "And *Bijela Ruža*, the White Rose."

He jumped from the car and unbuckled Joy. "Come meet my family."

Angie followed them up the steps and through a windowed porch with tables and benches. A wood sleigh decorated for Christmas stood in a corner. Beyond the threshold, Matt greeted a woman in a dimly lit reception area. She beamed and hurried around the counter to hug him. Angie heard her name and Joy's before Matt switched from Croatian to English.

"This is my Aunt Marija," Matt said. "She and my Uncle Ivan own this place."

"It's so good to meet Matt's friends." Marija hugged Joy, then Angie. "We weren't expecting you until tomorrow."

"Plans changed. I hope it's all right," Matt said.

Matt hadn't shared his plans to meet his family with Angie. Why hadn't he told her before they left? And why had he shown up a day early?

"Of course. I'll call Elena and Niko. They can bring the kids to dinner tonight. Ivan will be home from work soon."

"I'll get the luggage," Matt said.

Angie grabbed Matt's arm. "We can't stay here. Vanetta—"

He touched her lips with his finger. "Relax. I told the Lynches before we left Split." Matt tipped her chin up and kissed her. With his lips still brushing hers, he whispered, "It's okay."

No, it wasn't.

"We want you to stay." Marija smiled, misunderstanding Angie's hesitance. "Matt is family. You are family. Come." She held out a hand to Joy.

Angie smiled politely and followed Marija and Joy upstairs to a bunk room with four twin beds and a small private bath.

"It's family style," Marija said. "Matt said it would be best. Come down when you're ready."

"I need to go," Joy said, bouncing from foot to foot.

"Then go." Angie waved her to the bathroom, sat on a bed, and retrieved her tablet. Yes, there was guest Wi-Fi. Angie sent a quick email to tell Vanetta where they were. Moments later, after a "thumbs up" reply, Angie took her first deep breath in hours.

After a meal of soup, *sarma*—a cabbage roll—and dessert, Ivan, on zither, and Niko, on *bugarija*, a guitar, played traditional music while the children danced. Between songs, the adults shared more wine and told stories about Matt's childhood visits. When Elena announced it was time to get their kids home, Angie was surprised to see it was after nine.

"Can I play with them again tomorrow?" Joy asked as Angie settled her into bed.

"We'll see," Angie said.

"Where's Matt?"

"Right here." He leaned against the door frame. "I came for story time."

Angie snuggled with Joy and read a short fairy tale.

At its end, Matt rose from a stool near the door. "Kiss good night?"

Joy hugged him. "This is a *great* adventure."

"I'm glad you like it."

"You need to sleep now." Angie watched the child's gaze drift to the bit of sky framed by lace-edged curtains.

Matt tugged Angie into the hall, flicking the light, and closing the door behind him. Picking up the brandy glasses he'd left on a low table in the hall, he handed one to Angie and clinked his gently against hers. "A toast to adventures?"

She looked at him through eyes drowsy from dinner and drinks, took a sip, and collapsed on a couch near the table.

"Whoa. That's strong," she said.

"Plum brandy. Traditional drink."

"But it's nice." She sipped again, letting the warmth melting through her nurture an uncommon bravado. "You owe me explanations."

Matt sat next to her. "I have a lot to tell you." He touched a finger to her parting lips. "Just wait. And promise you won't tell anyone what I'm about to say."

She saw concern—or maybe pleading?—in his eyes. Was he afraid of her reaction? But she had no choice if she wanted answers. She nodded.

"The short version is, well, our meeting three years ago wasn't accidental." He swallowed his remaining brandy and put his glass aside. "I'm with the FBI, and I was told to, um, befriend you. To get close to the Lynches."

"FBI?" Wary, she pulled away. "Befriend?"

"The Lynches are spies. They came to Croatia to defect to Russia."

"That's crazy." Angie's thoughts roiled. The Lynches defectors? Matt an agent?

Matt pulled a vibrating phone from his pocket. He swore as he read a text. "We need to leave." He rose and pulled Angie to her feet.

"Why?"

"Vanetta is on her way here."

"How do you know?"

"We're tracking them." He answered her unspoken questions. "That last night we were in Split, I bugged their luggage. My local contact just texted. But I don't know how they know we're here." He turned Angie toward the bedroom. "Let's get Joy."

She reversed in his arms and pushed against his chest. "They know because I told Vanetta."

Matt's eyes narrowed. "Why?"

"She's Joy's mother."

Matt shook his head. "It doesn't matter now. Police are on the way. We have to leave, and I have to warn my family."

Before Angie could argue, a voice behind them demanded, "Where's my daughter?" Vanetta and a man stepped around a glass partition at the landing. Angie recognized the man's clothes; he was this morning's runner.

Angie moved forward. "She's asleep. Where's Tod?"

"He's . . . hurt. We need to go to the hospital in Zagreb." Vanetta glanced at the man. "Alexei will drive us."

"There's no need to wake her." Matt stepped in front of Angie. "Tell me which hospital and we'll bring her in the morning."

"No. I want her now."

"Vanetta, what's going on?" Angie asked, still feeling the brandy-boosted bravery.

Alexei pulled a knife from his pocket. "It's none of your business. Bring the girl."

Vanetta sighed and spoke sharply in Russian, scowling at Alexei.

Matt pushed Angie toward the bedroom, then like a soccer player, slide-tackled Alexei, knocking him off his feet and propelling them through the glass and down the stairwell. Thuds and grunts followed their descent. Ivan's shout rose from below.

"What's all the noise?" Joy stood in the open door, blinking in the hall light. Discordant sirens screeched in the distance.

Angie felt her chest tighten as she crouched and pulled Joy close.

"Joy, baby, come to momma." Vanetta, arms outstretched, stepped forward.

Joy rubbed her eyes and looked from her mother to Angie. "Is momma coming on our adventure?"

"Don't . . . know." Angie's voice was failing.

"You're coming with me." Vanetta grabbed the child.

"No!" Joy circled Angie's neck with her arms, squeezing tightly.

Angie struggled to loosen Joy's chokehold.

"Come here." Vanetta clutched her daughter.

"I want Angie."

Angie scooted backwards, pulling everyone through the open door. Her

inhaler was behind them in the bedroom. She needed to breathe so she could talk to Vanetta.

“Angie!” Joy screamed. “Angie!”

“Come here!” Vanetta tugged, and Joy squirmed.

Angie grasped Joy’s small carry-on and swung it as hard as she could, knocking Vanetta off balance and onto the floor. Angie straddled Vanetta’s back, pinning her down. The woman screamed and flailed beneath her. Angie nudged Joy toward the far wall and whispered, “Inhaler.”

Joy found the medical pouch. As they reached toward each other, Vanetta bucked and tossed Angie aside. Angie’s head cracked against the footboard of the nearest bed. Joy screamed again as Vanetta lunged for her. Angie ignored the pain, pushed herself upright, catching Vanetta in the gut. Vanetta let go of Joy and the women wrestled, tumbling back toward the doorway. Angie’s hand connected with the stool, and she swung it hard at Vanetta’s head.

At the blow, Vanetta collapsed soundlessly. Angie stared at the unmoving form and prayed she hadn’t killed her. Blood tinged Vanetta’s hair.

Angie scooted backward, gasping, and saw Joy peeking out from behind the bed frame, holding the bag with her inhaler.

Joy scrambled onto Angie’s lap, crying. “Are you okay, Angie?”

Angie nodded, wrapped an arm around Joy, opened the bag, and awkwardly prepared her inhaler and raised it to her lips.

Joy scrambled off and dug through the bag to find the water bottle Angie always carried. Handing it to her, she pulled a collapsible cup from Angie’s medical kit, opened it, and held it out so Angie could swish and spit.

Angie’s breathing returned to normal, but her head throbbed. Gradually, the noises below diminished. She hugged Joy, rocking her and hoping the tearful child would fall asleep despite her silent mother lying near them.

Angie jumped as a shadow covered Vanetta, but exhaled when she saw Matt. A police officer and a couple of medics accompanied him.

“It’s all right now,” he whispered, stepping over Vanetta and crouching next to Angie and Joy.

Angie winced when Matt stroked her hair and touched the bump.

"You need a medic."

"I'm fine."

"No, you're not." He spoke to the medics in Croatian, nodding at their responses.

"Is she . . . ?" Angie glanced toward Vanetta.

"She'll be okay." Matt lifted Joy and sat on the bed with her. "They want to check you and Joy."

"What happened?" Joy snuggled in Matt's embrace, gently touching a bandage on his forearm.

"A lot, but I'm fine. Everything will be fine."

Angie hoisted herself to the bed and Matt slid next to her.

They watched as the medics tended to Vanetta, placed her on a stretcher, and took her away.

The police officer and Matt spoke in Croatian until the woman medic returned to examine Joy, then Angie. She pulled an instant cold pack from her bag, activated it, and applied it to Angie's head, lifting Angie's hand to hold it in place.

Matt translated. "She doesn't think you have a concussion, but she wants me to check on you tonight and get you to a clinic tomorrow." He hugged Joy. "And she wants you to get some sleep, Joyful." He rose and tucked the child back into bed. "We're going out in the hall so Officer Marić can talk to Angie."

Joy grabbed Angie's hand. "Don't close the door."

"I'll leave it open a crack." She bent to kiss her. "Close your eyes, sweetie."

Angie answered questions about everything from the runner in the park to her fight with Vanetta. When the officer left, Angie checked on Joy before asking Matt, "How's Vanetta?"

"She'll be okay, but it could be quite a while before Joy sees her again."

"Why?"

"Because Tod was the man in the park. He died there."

Angie's eyes widened. "What happened?"

"Tod wanted to take Joy back to the U.S. Vanetta disagreed."

She would be in custody during the murder investigation, he said, then, most likely, stand trial with the Russian. After years, maybe decades, in prison, Vanetta would return to the U.S. to face espionage charges.

Angie gasped. "What about Joy?"

"I think we'll be able to take her home in a few days."

She glared at Matt. "What 'we'? You lied to me for three years. I don't even know you."

"I'm sorry, *Breskva*. I never lied about how I feel." Matt grabbed Angie's shoulders.

"You never told me what you were doing."

"I couldn't."

"Right, you 'befriended' me. So, now you move on to the next assignment? Someone else like me?"

"There's nobody like you, *Breskva*." He pulled her against his chest.

The long night had drained Angie, and she struggled to pick through its mental and emotional rubble. She deeply loved Joy. She still wanted to love Matt. She let him hold her and gave in to tears.

Later, Angie felt Matt's nudge and saw Joy race across the hall, bathed in pink dawn light. She scrambled between them.

"Are we still on our adventure?"

"You bet, Joyful." Matt kissed her hair.

Angie hugged Joy and whispered as the child settled into her lap. "And it's a big one."