

FATIMA PART DEUX

John Boston

The first time Father Chris Evans ever heard of Meredith Himmler was much like everyone else in America, a short news clip on local TV about a mysterious house where the statues are bleeding.....*as in like real human blood.*

Two college professors and several well-known internet debunkers immediately descended upon the house to quickly expose the fraud but were amazed to discover that they were unable to find any evidence of fraud or deceit.

We had a genuine mystery on our hand's boys and girls.....a real humdinger. according to one debunker.

Much of the attention was focused on Debbie Himmler, Meredith's mother, who seemed to be directing the entire operation as if she were on the phone with Jesus himself. She was no dummy and was a devout catholic, so in the church's eyes, they needed intervention.

Chris knew the church was just trying to stay relevant and probably even stay afloat. They had very, very deep pockets but, the allegations of sexual abuse continued almost unabated. It seemed that almost daily, another priest was being charged or convicted of sex crimes.....*with children.*

Chris had met the church brass in his home state and beyond and suffice to say, was a little less than enthusiastic. Their average age was almost eighty years old. Most had grown up in the church and had little real-world experience outside its walls. Chris tried to be pleasant and reasonable, bringing his concerns to their attention but, it was like having a conversation with a freshly painted wall.....*kinda pointless....and one-sided.*

Hear no evil.....see no evil. That was how the church approached most of its important decisions regarding the questionable behavior of many of its priests. He had every intention of telling Bishop Manly that he was leaving the priesthood and joining the newly forming North American Catholic Church, which had its own Pope and allowed priests to marry. It was beginning to gain serious traction around the country as many Catholics were fed up with the feckless leadership coming from the Vatican and the fact that it refused to deal with the pedophiles in their ranks. Tonight, however, the Bishop gave him a new assignment. He could hardly believe it when he heard the words coming out of the old man's mouth.

"Son, I need you to go investigate this Himmler woman and get to the bottom of this thing. I spoke to her this afternoon and she's agreed to have you stay with her in the house. She needs a steady hand right now.....sometimes we forget the lord is always holding our other hand." said Manly as he sipped his coffee.

"Sir, the church has people trained specifically for this type of thing," Chris responded.

"Yes but, none are available at the moment."

The light bulb went off in his head. The church was slowly squeezing him out. They must have found out about his leaving and this was about as graceful a way as they could do it. Sending him on wild goose chases all over the country every time someone sees a Marian apparition in their bowl of ice cream.

"What do I do if it's a genuine mystery?"

"God speaks to us in many different ways. It's up to us to listen. We just need you to make sure that the Himmler woman can listen and be persuaded in the right direction."

"Right.....anything else?"

"She's divorced. That idiot O'Leary actually granted the divorce, so there's not much we can do. A single, lonely woman can be tempting.....especially in this day and age. I trust your relationship with the lord is strong enough to be able to resist such temptation?" asked Manly as he nibbled on his donut.

"I think I'll be ok, sir."

"Glad to hear. It's about a two-hour drive to her farmhouse, you better get going. Who knows what you'll find. Try and manage this thing before we lose control."

Chris left the diocese and drove out to her farmhouse. She lived outside of Decatur. The farmhouse was run down and dilapidated, as were the rest of the buildings and machinery. Debbie had inherited the farm from her grandfather and from the looks of things, clearly hadn't done much with it since.

She was waiting for him on the porch. There were already other vehicles parked outside. He knew he was going to be competing for her attention, so he better get right down to business.

That meant everyone else involved had better GTFO.

Debbie was in her mid-thirties. She was also rather attractive and seemed to be very welcoming. Chris's faith was strong but every man has their breaking point. He stuck out his hand and she responded by pulling him in for a hug.

"I'm so glad you're here, father. This past week has been crazy."

"I'm here to help Debbie."

"Well, let me fill you in," she said as she led him inside and brought him up to speed on the previous week's going's on.

He also met Lazlo and Cherie. Two graduate students from the university who just showed up and kind of inserted themselves into the equation. Chris made it abundantly clear who was steering the ship from this point on.

"The church has absolutely no issue with what you are doing here, we just feel that the privacy of the family comes first. You've done testing and I'm told you still don't really have any answers.

"Preliminary testing only. Just looking for the obvious things first. Real testing could begin as early as tomorrow if Debbie wouldn't object." said Lazlo.

She immediately looked over at Chris. That look was all he needed. She was handing over the reins as discreetly as possible.

"This is first and foremost a private family matter. We'd just ask that you respect her privacy. This is a very, very big deal for anyone, let alone a devout catholic. Maybe we can take a break and when Debbie decides it's time, we'll give you a call and you can do all the testing you want."

Chris could tell they were none too happy about being told to leave but they didn't want to piss Debbie off either and let someone else have a crack at exposing her fraud.

"Can I say goodbye to Meredith?" asked Cherie

"Meredith?"

"My daughter. *She's autistic*," said Debbie, almost as if she were apologizing for it.

"MARY!" shouted Debbie.

"I named her after my grandmother. My parents were....well, not very Catholic," she said smiling.

Meredith came into the kitchen. She was tall and looked nothing like Debbie. She said nothing and reached over to hug Cherie.

"Keep in touch," said Cherie as they got up to leave.

"Father Chris.....whatever is going on here is um.....unique to say the least. I hope you won't lose sight of the fact that if it genuinely is a miracle, it belongs to the whole world, not just you and Debbie." said Lazlo.

"Of course Lazlo," he said.

Once the students had left, he sat down at the table. Meredith said nothing and just continued to stare at Father Chris.

"Mary, don't stare, it's not polite. I'm sorry. We don't have many guests in the house. Not as many as I would like."

"Should we pray the Rosary? I find it always helps put things into perspective," said Chris.

"I don't even have any Rosary beads. I've kind of fallen off the wagon too, I'm afraid. It wasn't until I was going through my divorce that I rediscovered my faith. If it weren't for Father Cavanaugh, I don't know what I would have done."

Chris knew Father David Cavanaugh very well. The two had met in the seminary. He was one of the few good guys left in the church. Like Chris, he was planning on leaving the Catholic Church to join the North American Catholic Church. It was like an expansion team getting the first-round draft pick. Chris's social media page was growing by leaps and bounds every day. There are still a lot of Catholics in the world, they just don't want to be led by the Vatican anymore.

"Mommy?" said Meredith

"Yes, sweetie."

"The Virgin Mary is going to appear in our backyard seven days from today," said Meredith very nonchalantly.

"Honey.....what do you mean?" asked Debbie in shock.

"She came to me today when I was outside. I walked into the cornfield and saw her and the angels. That's the reason all of this is happening. She had to get our attention. She is going to appear with a message for all mankind." said Meredith.

Chris and Debbie looked at one another.

"Debbie....is this normal behavior for Meredith?"

"Um.....no. Not at all."

"Meredith.....I'm Father Chris. I'm from the church. Meredith, it's very, very important that you be honest with me here. Are you telling me the truth? Did that really happen?"

"Yes. She told me that the crucifix of Jesus at Blessed Sacrament church is going to begin weeping beginning at midnight and is going to continue until she arrives."

"Debbie.....let's take a walk outside. Get some of this fresh country air I'm hearing so much about.

She and Chris walked outside. Debbie took out her vape pen.

"Is vaping a sin?"

"Pretty much anything fun is a sin as far as the church is concerned," said Chris joking.

"And you wonder why so many people are leaving the church?"

"No.....that I figured out a long time ago."

"You don't act much like a priest."

"I don't feel much like one sometimes either. I heard the calling. I'm glad I became one but, it's not for everybody. Even the most devout can't handle it sometimes. Debbie.....do you think she's telling the truth?"

"Meredith is many things but the one thing she is not is a liar. She hates liars. That's the thing about autistic people. They really can't lie. They don't even know how."

"What if she believes her own lies?"

"What if she's telling the truth?"

"Well, I guess I have quite a few phone calls to make. We'll know very quickly whether she's telling the truth or not," said Chris.

"I came here to get away from people and society. Now, I'm going to have half the world showing up at my doorstep. Why us? Why now? Why here?"

"The Lord works in mysterious ways. Sometimes even frustrating ways but, it's all part of his plan for mankind. We just have to trust him."

"I trusted a lot of people. All it did was get me divorced and broke. Come on inside. I want to show you something." she said and led him inside.

They went into her living room and she turned on the light. Sitting in the middle of the table was a statue of the Virgin Mary. She wasn't just dripping blood.....*she was hemorrhaging blood.* Mary had let it be and the blood had stained the table cloth and was now running down onto the chairs and floor.

"What do you think we should do?"

"Nothing. We just leave it alone. I have a feeling there's going to be quite a few people showing up here in the next few days. We better get ready. Does Meredith understand what is happening here?"

"I think so. She's very smart, just doesn't know how to be a normal girl.....if there is such a thing anymore."

Chris had a suspicious feeling this thing could wind up being kind of a big deal. The kind that changes your life forever.

It was confirmed early the next morning by Father Cavanaugh that the crucifix in his church was indeed dripping blood. Chris wasted no time in contacting the church brass. Problem was, the brass was just a tad over the hill and speed was not something that most eighty year old excelled at. Chris waited for over three hours while they made their decision. Finally, his cell phone rang. It was Bishop Manly.

"We're going to hold a press conference at the farmhouse at two this afternoon. You're going to address the media and tell them that the Virgin Mary will appear in exactly six days at noontime. Are you okay with this?"

"Sure. I'll start typing something up and let you look it over," said Chris.

"Good. Archbishop Lenoza will be arriving shortly. I'm sure there will be quite a few visitors to the farmhouse very soon. We've contacted law enforcement and given them a heads up as well. This thing could get out of control very quickly."

Chris looked out the window and saw two police cars pull into the driveway. These weren't just regular, run-of-the-mill, *I'm just here to collect a damn paycheck* type officers, no sir. The chief of police himself decided to visit the farm. They weren't going to leave anything to chance.....not this time.

He shook hands with the officers. The chief was named Lattimer. He had been a cop all his life.....his exact words.

"I've also been a catholic my whole life. I know what this means for the church. Guys.....permit a layman to speak in layman's terms but, you're sure about this, right?" he asked.

"The church is going to be sending over some people from the Vatican tomorrow. I guess they have the final say on whether or not this is considered a miracle or not but, from our standpoint, yes. Yes, this is really happening."

"I always wanted to visit Fatima, I could never do it on a policeman's salary."

"Maybe your prayers have been answered," said Debbie.

"We'll be keeping three officers here round the clock until this is over. Two are reservists and one was an MP in the Army for almost a decade before he joined the force, so, I would venture to say you are in good hands. State Police and the Sheriff's department are also going to be sending over officers if needed. I'm sure we can expect quite a large crowd." said Lattimer.

"Debbie, just curious.....how big is this farm?" asked one of the officers.

"Almost two hundred acres," she said.

"It's your property. You don't have to let anyone on it if you don't want to," added Lattimer.

"No. Father Chris and I have already discussed this. We want the whole world to experience this miracle. If you can make it here, we'd be honored to have you." she said.

"Media just showed up," said one of the officers.

"The church's social media said that there was going to be a major announcement at the farmhouse at two PM. They've called just about everyone who calls themselves the media. I'd say we can expect a big turnout." said Chris.

Lazlo and Cherie pulled up to the farmhouse and were met at the door by the officers.

"It's okay, you can let them in," said Father Chris.

"What's with the cops?"

"Just here to make sure things run smoothly."

"You know, this would sound a lot more authentic if the scientific community was allowed to investigate. If it is a real miracle, it will stand up to science," said Lazlo.

"Okay. Let's step outside for a moment Lazlo," said Father Chris as he put his hand on Lazlo's shoulder. He was nearly six inches taller and many pounds heavier. Lazlo looked like a child next to Father Chris. Chris waited until they were out of earshot.

"Lazlo, are you here because you want to see the Virgin Mary or just laugh at us when she doesn't appear," asked Chris.

"I want to see if the bleeding can be explained by conventional science, that's all. I don't see the harm in that."

"Fair enough. Run your tests but stay away from Meredith, are we crystal clear on that point?"

"Okay, why?"

"Pretty soon, that poor girl's face is going to be put on every screen around the planet. I want to give her some breathing room. There's no telling how an autistic girl is going to react to all this."

"You don't think the Virgin Mary is going to appear at all, do you?" asked Lazlo, almost smirking.

"The good Lord works in mysterious ways Lazlo.....sometimes in *very mysterious ways*."

"Well, I guess in six days, we'll have our answer, now won't we?" he said as he walked back into the house.

Chris knew he'd have to keep the kids on a short leash. He'd also have to tell Lazlo that he is not to speak to the media while he is here at the house. Chris will do the speaking. Lazlo is certainly a bright kid but far too young to realize what impact his words will have on Catholics and non-Catholics alike.

Loose lips sink ships. Words to live by.

At two PM he was nervous but knew he had to be on point. There were about a dozen media types gathered on the front lawn. Chris didn't want to find chairs or camping chairs for them. He

didn't want them too comfortable. This had to be short and sweet. Archbishop Lenozi introduced himself. Chris knew he was only a coffee getter at this point. Once the brass from the Vatican showed up, he may as well pack it in. Of course, the church had to realize at this point, the one wild card was Meredith. It was really her who was calling the shots. She spent most of the day attached at the hip to her mother. She was just holding her Rosary Beads and rocking back and forth. She looked like she was in shock. Chris had zero experience with children, let alone autistic children. Meredith just marched to the beat of her own drummer. He knew he had to have a very uncomfortable conversation with Debbie. He pulled her aside a few minutes before the press conference.

"You do realize that everything for you two is going to change after this afternoon? I just want you to understand that. Your life is never going to be the same."

"I know. Sometimes I wished God hadn't picked me.....but, he did. Thy will be done." she said.

"How's Meredith taking all this?"

"It's kind of weird to have a police officer stand next to you all day. This is going to be very difficult for her. I told her she has to tell the world what she saw and she understood. I'd like the interview to be done right after yours."

"I'll run it by the Bishops. I don't think it will be a problem."

Chris was floored to see Archbishop Lenozi was just sitting down with the media in the living room. Chris had wanted to do the conference from the porch. He wanted to at least give Debbie and Meredith some kind of privacy. He looked like a king and dressed like one as well. That irked Chris to no end. Jesus was poor. Mary and Joseph were poor. The apostles were poor but the church hierarchy drove around in Cadillacs and luxury SUVs.

Just a fraction of the paintings inside the Vatican were valued in the hundreds of millions. The Vatican Guard didn't just guard the Pope.....they guarded everything the church-owned.

"Ladies and gentlemen, for those of you who don't know me, my name is Archbishop Juan Lenozi. Debbie is a member of my archdiocese. The Himmler house has been touched by the hand of God. Father Christopher Evans will be addressing the specifics." he said and gave Chris the small microphone.

"Thank you, Archbishop. One week ago, statues began bleeding inside the Himmler household. Weeping statues are certainly nothing new. Most are fakes or frauds. This time, it's not a fake or fraud. An entire research team has spent the last ten days here, trying to prove it is a fake or fraud and cannot. Last evening at the dinner table, Meredith Himmler told her mother Debbie and me that the Virgin Mary will appear in their cornfield in exactly seven days. That leaves us only six days to prepare."

"I'm sorry father.....are you saying that Mary, the mother of Jesus is going to appear somewhere on this farm?" asked a reporter.

"Yes, I am."

"Is it possible to speak to Meredith?" asked another reporter.

"She will be making a statement shortly."

"So, what is your message to Catholics and non-Catholics, father."

"Our message is simple: join us. Be a part of something truly amazing. Something that will touch your soul. Something that will change your life forever. We welcome everyone."

There was an uncomfortable silence in the room. The media didn't seem to know how to respond. They had assumed this was simply some kind of pr stunt from the church.

"This is Meredith?" asked one of the reporters.

Meredith stayed by her mother's side and never said a word.

"Meredith is autistic. We want her to be an example for every other autistic child. God loves all his children."

Most of the reporters simply left the room. No one even asked to speak to Meredith. None of them were Catholic or even Christian. Still, he was surprised to see them simply leave without asking any more questions. Perhaps they wanted to be the first to relay the information. Sure enough, within minutes, the phone calls began. Within an hour, everyone's phone was going off with text messages. It was beginning. God wanted to give everyone enough time to make it here. God wanted all of his children to witness the miracle.

An hour after the press conference, the first of many, many cars showed up on the property. Debbie recognized him as the local pastor from the Baptist church in Decatur.

"I just heard. I'm so excited. I guess in six days, we can all be Catholic." he said.

Chris was busy coordinating everything. The church brass had actually left everything to him. He knew they were keeping a close eye on him but had given him plenty of leash. He knew they were going to need a lot more officers. Christian or not, law and order had to be maintained. By his guess, they would need at least fifty or more. He was talking to the local fire chief who would have staff out there until things calmed down. He was posting to social media as soon as he knew anything. Within the hour over a hundred thousand people were following. This thing was getting bigger by the minute. He also made certain that Debbie and Meredith had one officer with them at all times. Lazlo and his team had to stay in their van for now. The barn and shop were being used by law enforcement as their local headquarters. He had the spare bedroom upstairs. The farmhouse wasn't spacious by anyone's standards. He had no idea how he was going to contain and find room for thousands of people on this farm. Chris ordered pizzas for everyone and put it on the church's tab. He ordered from two different restaurants to split the order. Twenty-four large pizzas. There were so many people arriving, he felt like he was quickly losing control. He grabbed his cross for strength and guidance. He could almost hear the words coming from Mary's mouth.

Control is the greatest illusion of them all. Trust in God and Jesus. They're the ones who are always in control.

No one wanted to speak to Meredith. She was shy and awkward. She just gave off this weird vibe, almost as if she were hiding something. As if she wasn't really autistic at all, she just wanted people to think she was so they would leave her alone. Perhaps Debbie was blinded by the fact that she was her daughter to see just how weird she was. Chris didn't want to judge. He had very little if any experience with children. They weren't exactly his *forte*, so to speak. He wouldn't even know if a child was normal or not.

Overnight dozens of cars had appeared and were stopped by the officers. They just wanted to be part of the miracle. Debbie told them they had no facilities but porta-potties were being delivered courtesy of the church.

"I hope you got a lot of them. I think there's going to be an awful lot of people showing up in the next few days." said one of the men who showed up in his camper.

Two sheriff's deputies from the county had arrived and were assisting also.

By noontime the next day, there were over two dozen vehicles and about a hundred people.

"Cell phones and social media kind of changed everything. A lot of people will be watching the mother of Jesus appear on their cell phones as it's streamed live by the networks. Still, we have to be ready for anything." said Chris.

Chris watched it on TV. Hundreds of cars and trucks were leaving Mexico headed north up to Decatur and Debbie's farm. They would no doubt be joined by many others before they arrived.

"There's a lot of Catholics in Mexico," said Debbie.

"There's a lot of Catholics right here in Illinois too," added Chris.

"Debbie, there's something else I wanted to talk to you about. It's the worst-case scenario. I'm sure the church brass is coming up with a plan for it right now."

"What do you mean?"

"What if we have a few hundred thousand people on the farm and nothing happens? What if this turns out to be a bust?" asked Chris

"Father, she said the statue at Blessed Sacrament would begin bleeding and it did. You wanted proof and she gave it to you."

"I know but, this is going to be the biggest event for the church in fifty years....maybe even a hundred years. There's a lot that can go wrong. Being a priest means you have to think about the church also. Not much has gone right for us in the last thirty years."

"You really are a very confused priest. I thought you were supposed to be my rock," she said disappointed.

"I am your rock, Debbie. I just want you to be realistic about this incredible event as well. This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. I want you and Meredith to become the household names of every Catholic on the planet. Not in the way Judas was, if you can understand."

"I understand just fine. I never thought the church would send a doubting Thomas to steer this ship. You don't care about me or Meredith at all, you're just here to protect the church!" she yelled.

"I'm here to make sure the Virgin Mary arrives in your cornfield. I'm not just thinking about the church, I'm thinking about the well-being of every Catholic in the church. If something goes wrong, it could cause a whole lot of people to begin to question their faith. Would you want that?"

"No.....I guess I never thought about that. I just got so caught up in the moment.....I never thought about that." she said in a much quieter voice.

"I can tell you this with a very high degree of certainty: *this is either going to make or break the Catholic Church*. We need a win win right now and a big one. Maybe Jesus sees things the same way I do. I can only hope." said Chris, rubbing his Rosary. He was interrupted by Lazlo.

"Got a second father?" he asked.

"Sure."

"I think you might find this interesting."

"What do you have?"

"We were examining the first statue, the one that was bleeding. The ones that were called on to investigate. I've got to admit, if it's a fake, I have no idea how it's done. It wasn't until we put it under a microscope that we found something unusual. There are tiny microscopic pinholes under the eyes. They cannot be put there by accident. Same for the crucifix in the church. I doubt whoever made them since they are over a hundred years old would have the means to do something like this. Somehow they are storing the human blood and releasing it at a later date. No idea how they are doing this. I've got to hand it to them, they're good. I think we've solved the case. This isn't a miracle at all."

"Lazlo, you haven't solved anything. The church hired their own experts to look at them and said the pinholes were a natural part of the manufacturing process. They were made using one-year-old equipment, there were bound to be defects in them. Come back to me when you've got something."

"We were able to get another crucifix made at roughly the same time. It doesn't have the same pinholes. Someone put them there. Just give me a few more days and I'll have an answer for you. This is definitely not a miracle." he said.

"Good luck," he said and walked out of the room.

With only three days left till the big event, the Himmeler Farm was filling up with vehicles and campers. Police were doing a decent job of crowd control. They estimated the crowd at around five thousand. A dozen more porta-potties had arrived courtesy of the church and the media had set up their own camp on the edge of the farm as well. The mainstream media had begun to cover the story more and more with each passing hour. Not to give it credence but, more to just mock it. Chris could almost see the newscaster's thought bubble as he read from the teleprompter.

Look at all these idiots. They think Mary is going to show up in this hick's cornfield and talk to them.....and these people are allowed to vote.

Problem was, the closer they got to the big day, the more and more uneasy Chris became about it. He had spoken at length with several bishops and church officials, they were excited but also somewhat nervous. No one questioned the girls at Fatima in 1917 or mocked them, or even doubted them. The Fatima miracles were an important piece of the church's history. Granted it was over a hundred years ago but the entire event was handled much differently than this one. Most people have never heard of Fatima but, everyone has heard of Meredith Himmeler.

Her interview with the network was awkward. You could see the girl's intelligence hidden behind an awkward personality. She answered the questions completely and very thoroughly. The interviewer was polite but also clearly not a practicing Catholic. There were just so many things that could go wrong, he had to be prepared. He wanted to see Mary just as badly as all other Catholics but, as the days grew closer, for some reason, he just knew it wasn't going to happen. He knew it in his gut.....his gut's track record was practically unblemished.

He knew he had to be very careful about what he said to Debbie. She was still very new to her faith and Catholic newbies can be difficult to deal with. Gone were the days when anyone wearing a collar could simply give an order and it would be followed without hesitation. As much as the church would love to go back to those days, it simply wasn't going to happen.

He tried to maintain his distance from the crowds but, thousands of people just tailgating could lead to problems themselves. A small group of atheists had shown up to protest the event. No one was quite sure what they were protesting. They were kept separate from the crowd but Chris did not want them removed. He wanted even the heathens and pagans to be painfully reminded of God's power.....if God decided to actually use that power.

The team from the Vatican consisted of two elderly bishops and one cardinal. They spoke to Chris at length. They walked around the farm and looked at the two crucifixes that were still bleeding. They spoke to Meredith and Debbie for nearly an hour. They led the group in prayer and they prayed the Rosary.....then they left. Just got back in their van and left. Chris had no idea if they were coming back or not. It was painfully clear what was going on....almost to clear: *They were letting him, quarterback, this whole thing because they weren't convinced she was going to show up either. Father Chris was the one who would fall on the sword. He was Lee Harvey Oswald of this whole operation.*

At least that was how it seemed from a distance. He had learned the church simply had its own agenda and the well-being of its followers sometimes took a back seat. He had to protect Debbie and Meredith. He had an obligation to them as well.

That sinking feeling in his stomach just got worse. He was torn between his faith and his gut. They were pulling him in two completely different directions. Who could he turn to for help? No one above him was going to help. No-one underneath him was either. He would have to face this battle alone, just like every other battle he had faced in his life up to this point. They always seem insurmountable when you have to face them alone. He prayed and prayed for an answer but never got one. He loved his faith but, his faith had let him down on more than one occasion. It was only there to help, not decide for him. He was going to have to do that all on his own.

He was so angry at himself for being weak at a time when everyone around him needed him to be strong. He felt like he had let down Debbie and Meredith most of all. Maybe he just wasn't cut out for the priesthood after all. It's all he had ever known. He was a chaplain's assistant when he was in the Army and joined the seminary upon discharge. He couldn't wait to administer Eucharist and conduct mass. He was so eager. That seemed like a lifetime ago. Somewhere along the line, he had lost his enthusiasm. He just couldn't be led by the church officials or the Pope anymore. It was one bad decision right after the next. It wasn't his faith that had let him down, he had developed an almost sixth sense about these things. Something just wasn't right about all of this. As crazy as it sounded. He was getting more and more nervous about all of this as the big day approached. Ever since his last conversation with Debbie, he had decided to keep his distance. If this thing went south, she was going to need him more than ever. He had lost most of his enthusiasm because he wasn't really so much a priest anymore, he was just a therapist. He had gotten very good at listening, a skill very few people possess nowadays. He had also realized that most Catholics are just one bad day away from abandoning their faith. It was a sign of the times. The lure of instant gratification was simply too much for most people. Chris looked outside the window and had to wonder:

How many are here just to take a selfie with the Marian apparition and how many are true believers?

He was down to just two days. Two days were all he had. The future of the Catholic church was going to be decided in two lousy days. Everyone was getting nervous and excited as well. There was something in the air. His attitude was beginning to change as well. That sinking feeling in his stomach was now gone. He figured it was just last-minute jitters. Debbie had stepped out into the spotlight. She had given dozens of interviews and seemed to be embracing the spotlight. The whole time she was talking, Chris could almost read the expression on her face. It was only because he had learned so much about her over the past few days. It was pretty unmistakable.

Betcha wish you hadn't left us now, huh?

It was clearly directed towards her ex-husband, who still hadn't even called to see how Meredith was doing. Not going to win *the Dad of the Year Award* by any stretch of the imagination.

The excitement was brewing. The cars from the Mexican caravan had begun to arrive and had pulled several hundred more joining them on their journey to the farm. The church had somehow

gotten ahold of a dozen FEMA trailers to be used for emergency housing. He had no idea who was using them but they were delivered yesterday. There were thousands of people camped and moving all over the farm. He met hundreds of them and introduced several of them to Meredith, who barely even acknowledged them. The Himmler Farm had become a small city, full of believers wanting to know that their faith was about to be restored.

One day out, Cardinal Murdoch from Chicago arrived at the farmhouse. Chris gave him and his staff his bedroom and he was going to have to sleep in the cellar with the officers who were sleeping in shifts. Things were happening so fast Chris barely had time to acknowledge them. A stage was built in the middle of the cornfield. Meredith was going to go out on the stage and begin praying the Rosary at noontime as she was instructed to do in her first visit. Everyone in attendance will begin praying the Rosary, led by Cardinal Murdoch. He had also received the bad news from the weather channel. Their beautiful summer weather was about to come to a screeching halt. Rain and thunderstorms were forecast for tomorrow afternoon. It wasn't supposed to begin raining hard until that afternoon, but forecasts can change quickly. It was going to turn the farm into one giant mud pit. As the hours melted away, he was getting more and more excited, just like everyone. He and the Cardinal had breakfast together and prayed together. The Cardinal led a gigantic outdoor mass in Debbie's fields that morning. It was truly an incredible sight to behold with over fifteen thousand Catholics praying together. Part of the mass was conducted in Latin, as it was before the Vatican 2 in the 1960s. Chris had never felt close to his Catholic faith than he did that morning. Everything was now falling into place. He was almost angry at himself for doubting his faith. Even a man of the cloth can be his own worst enemy at times. He recalled what an elderly priest had said to him once in the seminary. It always hit home:

My son, it's always darkest right before dawn.

He slept very little that evening. Two babies had been born right here on Debbie's farm. The parents asked Debbie to be the Godparents, which she graciously accepted. Cardinal Murdoch was going to do a ten o'clock Mass in the cornfield. Several more church hierarchies had arrived that morning. Several dozen bishops from the conference of bishops were arriving at the farmhouse to assist with Mass. One of the officers pulled Chris aside and gave him the bad news.

"It's not looking, good father."

"What's wrong?"

"National Weather Service just updated their forecast. We're going to get hit hard by this storm. It just hit Springfield and is moving right towards us." he said.

"We can't control everything. The Cardinal did mass outside in Africa. He's no stranger to harsh weather."

"This storm had lightning strikes, father."

Chris stopped in his tracks. This was not good. Not at all. He went upstairs and gave Cardinal Murdoch the bad news. He was getting dressed by his two "*helpers*" who looked barely old enough to shave.

"I once did a mass in Tanzania in the rain. It was in 1975. It rained so hard, I could barely see the people sitting in front of me. We've taken all the necessary precautions, my son. Not to worry." he said looking at himself in the mirror.

Chris was nervous but the show must go on. Rain, sleet, or snow, made no difference to the Post Office, or the Catholic Church. He checked the weather on his phone and could see the severe thunderstorm warning for the Decatur area. This could get ugly real quick. Parts of Springfield were now underwater. A lightning strike had just scorched a cell tower knocking out service. It had struck a car dealership as well causing several fires. The center of the disturbance was set to pass right over the northwest part of Decatur, where the farm was located.

He checked in Debbie and Meredith. The church had made a replica copy of the exact clothing Lucia Santos was wearing on the day in October 1917 in Fatima, Portugal for the Miracle of the Sun. She looked ridiculous but Debbie thought it was brilliant. A photographer was busy taking pictures of her.

"Meredith.....are you ready, honey?" he asked.

She seemed to ignore him and looked like she was counting something. She didn't even seem aware of his presence.

"Father, can you watch her just for a minute? I'm going to get my picture taken with Cardinal Murdoch?"

"Of course," he said.

He said nothing as he sat down next to her. She was looking at herself in the mirror.

"What do you think of my outfit, father?" she asked.

"You look lovely."

"No, I don't. I look ridiculous. That's what you're thinking. I can almost see it written on your face." she said.

Chris was caught off guard by her remark. He decided to say nothing more about it and quickly changed the subject.

"Did you pray this morning?" he asked.

"No," she replied.

"Don't you pray every morning?"

"I've never prayed in my life. I just fake it," she said.

That comment certainly threw Chris off his game. He didn't quite know what to make of it.

"You mean you've never prayed before in your life? You can't be serious Meredith?"

"Do you know what ball lightning is, father?"

"No, I can't say I do."

"Neither do most scientists. It's a different kind of lightning. Not alternating current or direct current. No one knows how it even exists but it does. Millions.....maybe even billions of amperes. It can melt the flesh right off the bone." she said, looking at herself in the mirror.

"No, I guess I didn't know that."

"You Christians are so dumb.....so dumb. You'll fall for anything.....*because you've never stood for something in your life*," she said and walked out the door.

Chris sat on the bed in shock. That sinking feeling in his stomach had just returned with a vengeance. He had to stop this.....somehow.....some way. He had to get these people away from the lightning, only it was too late. Once the crash is set in motion, there was simply no way to stop it. You would think common sense would have prevailed but it never seems to.

It had already begun to thunder by the time Mass started. There were over nine thousand people in attendance. Chris was practically begging the police to stop the Mass but they wouldn't.

"He wants to conduct Mass in the rain, that's his business." said one of the officers.

"I have a very, very bad feeling about all of this gentlemen. Conducting mass in a field in the middle of a thunderstorm can be very dangerous." he pleaded.

"It's Illinois. We have thunderstorms all the time. We made sure everything was grounded. The engineers even set up lighting rods out in the field to draw away the lightning if it hits." said another officer.

"I don't think that's going to be enough," he said nervously.

"I have a very bad feeling about all of this," he said.

The two officers gave him a weird look, then walked away as they responded to something on their radios.

Chris watched in horror from the farmhouse TV. At about fifteen minutes into the Mass, Meredith simply walked off stage. He could see the lightning hit the nearby fields. No-one stopped the Mass. Murdoch was screaming and hollering about people's faith being constantly tested and never rewarded. Chris had to recoil at the horror of it all.

"Jesus, is somebody going to stop this thing?" he screamed.

He ran outside, in the backyard. He saw Meredith walking away, towards one of the barns. He ran over to her as fast as he could and grabbed her by the arm.

"Meredith.....you can stop all of this. I know you can, just stop it before someone gets hurt."

She said nothing but had a very, sick twisted grin on her eleven-year-old face. It made Chris let go of her and take a few steps backward.

"The record for the most people killed in a single lightning strike is twenty-one. I think today, that record is going to be shattered into a million little pieces," she said.

"JESUS, HELP US! YOU LITTLE MONSTER!" he screamed and ran towards the stage. He was screaming and hollering as loud as he could to anyone who would listen. He saw the first lightning bolt hit some of the vehicles parked in a nearby field.

"STOP.....STOP.....FOR GOD'S SAKE, GET INSIDE. GET INSIDE, BEFORE THE LIGHTNING....."

He was cut off by the piercing flash and the intense heat that engulfed the air around him. He thought he could hear screaming before they were vaporized by the lightning. It knocked him backward and sent him flying towards some trees. The lightning had turned the oxygen into ozone. Everything smelled like it had been burned by an electrical fire. He could hear so many people screaming. He looked up and saw a group of people on fire. He could see people running and screaming. The stage and those on it were gone. Dozens, if not hundreds were gone with them. He looked over to see Meredith standing next to her mother, holding her hands. Debbie was motionless but Meredith seemed to be almost smiling.....or perhaps *even giggling*.

He looked down and saw that his collar had been scorched and his shoes with their thick rubber soles had spared him from the worst of it. Chris got up and ran over to help the fireman. He stopped in his tracks when he realized the only miracle performed that day was that somehow he was still alive. He was going to help as many victims as he could. Immediately after that, he was going after Meredith, who had played a trick on all of them, especially him.

The greatest trick the devil ever performed was convincing the world he didn't exist. Meredith hadn't fooled him.....old scratch had slipped one by him and everyone else.