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If Sister Jean Marie reminded Ruth of a bird, Mother Superior was a hawk. The woman's piercing ice-blue gaze trapped Ruth and held her firm on the seat of an uncomfortably stiff wooden chair.

"Your full name?"

"Emma Ruth Russo." The name rolled easily off her tongue. The Italian name she'd not been allowed to use for three years. And the borrowed first name she hoped they could not track.

"Your age?"

"Nineteen." She would be in a few weeks, anyway.

"And your family?" Mother Superior held a fountain pen poised over the paper. As soon as Ruth talked, the pen sprang to life, scratching her answers.

Ruth studied her hands. "I'm an orphan. My mother died when I was eleven. Papa was killed in an accident when I was young."

"Where were you born?"

"New York City. After my mother died, I lived with an aunt for a little while, but she barely earned enough to keep herself

alive. So, she took me to the Children's Aid Society. I stayed there until they put me on an orphan train and brought me to Iowa. I was fifteen." Speaking aloud of the heartache of those years suddenly made old griefs resurface, and tears filled Ruth's eyes. She blinked hard and swallowed.

Mother Superior's blue eyes registered no compassion. She continued jabbing Ruth with questions. "Where is the father of the baby?"

Ruth's hands twisted in her lap. A tear spilled over and landed on her skirt. Her thumb rubbed at the spot. "He's dead."

Mother Superior's pen quivered, but she didn't write. "Cause of death?"

How could she continue these lies? Surely, she would trip up somewhere. Ruth blurted the first thing that came to her. "Polio. He contracted polio."

The questions were relentless. "And the father's family? Would they not support you?"

Ruth shook her head. "They're very poor people."

As the pen scratched again, Ruth sat up a little straighter. "I just need a place to live. I can work. I'll find a job."

Mother Superior sniffed just a tiny bit. "An employer would not hire someone in your condition, Emma. We will take you in. You may live here until you have given birth and recovered. You will work at the home and attend Mass at the cathedral on Sundays. We will try to find a suitable place for you after your baby is born and adopted. But you must live by the rules here at Sisters of Mercy."

Ruth shivered as a chill swept over her. "But—I don't want my baby to be adopted. I want to keep her—or him. I don't want her to be an orphan too."

Mother Superior's eyebrows drew together as she glared at Ruth. "That would not be the best choice for your baby. He

deserves a home with both a mother and a father. You have no way of supporting yourself, let alone a child. I know you are upset and emotional right now. But in the coming months, you will see the foolishness of trying to keep the baby. Have you seen a doctor yet?"

Ruth shook her head. She couldn't speak.

"We will make an appointment with Doctor Osborne. He tends to all our mothers. When we know your due date, I will help you make a plan. Now, Sister Jean Marie will take you on a tour of our facility and instruct you on our house rules. And I will let the other sisters know you will be with us until your baby is born. Welcome to Sisters of Mercy."

When Mother Superior stood, she towered over Ruth, and her shoulders were as broad as many of the farmers around Grantsville. Ruth trembled but stood, arms folded across her middle, and followed the nun down the hall.

It was a relief to be with Sister Jean Marie. Ruth hurried to keep up as the tiny woman scurried up and down the halls and in and out of rooms in the mammoth old home. They saw almost every room, from the dank and dimly lit basement to the tiny bedrooms on the third floor, where mothers stayed after giving birth. In each area, Sister Jean Marie spouted so many dos and don'ts that Ruth's head began to hurt.

Sister Jean Marie guided Ruth through the kitchen with floor-to-ceiling cabinets, long counters, and a white enamel electric stove. One burner held a huge pot. A short girl with pretty waved hair stood over it, stirring the contents. She paused to greet Ruth with a shy "hello."

They concluded the tour in the dining room, where women lined up at a pass-through window into the kitchen to receive a bowl of soup. They carried the bowls to the table and set them beside a glass of water, a napkin, and a soup spoon already in place.

“Go ahead and get your lunch.” Sister Jean Marie urged Ruth.

After receiving her steaming vegetable soup, Ruth sat at the table next to a woman she’d met the previous evening. Lydia had long freckled arms, dark red hair, and looked like she was ready to give birth any moment. “Hi. How was your meeting with Mother Superior?” Lydia whispered.

Ruth shook her head and whispered back. “I’ll tell you later.”

The nuns took their soup bowls to a separate table. Mother Superior went through the line last. When she set her bowl at her place, everyone stood while she prayed.

We don’t have to worry about the soup being too hot to eat, thought Ruth, as Mother Superior finally concluded her prayer, and they sank to their chairs.

Lydia passed a basket of crackers to Ruth. “Will you be staying with us?”

“Yes. Until my baby is born.” Ruth took four of the saltines and passed the basket across the table.

“Who are you rooming with?”

Sister Jean Marie had shown her the room, but she didn’t know who the other bed belonged to. “It’s the first bedroom on the right.”

“Oh, that’s my room.” A short, round-faced girl with pale, limp hair extended a hand across the table. “I’m Doris.”

Ruth set her spoon down and shook the proffered hand. “My name is Emma.”

“Hi, Emma. And welcome to Sisters of Mercy. It will be good to have someone in the room again. My previous roommate left right after the birth. Her mother and father took her back home to Newton.”

“And her baby?” Soup dribbled from Ruth’s spoon as she waited for the answer.

“Oh. I suppose it was adopted. We never hear about the babies.”

“You don’t even know if it was a boy or girl?”

Doris gave a little shrug. “No. Sometimes a baby will stay here for a few days, and one of the nuns cares for it, but most of the time, babies go to their adoptive home right away.”

Ruth ate the rest of her soup without talking, listening to the girls chatting around her. She watched as some of them stacked bowls and spoons on the counter at the pass-through window. How was she supposed to spend her afternoon? According to the house rules, everyone had chores, but none had been assigned to her yet.

She needn’t have worried. When she stood, Sister Jean Marie appeared at her elbow. “Come, dear. I’m going to introduce you to Frances. She’s the resident in charge of our cleaning crew and will show you what your duties will be.”

She led Ruth to a tall, angular woman with a protruding belly. “Frances, this is Emma. She’s been assigned to your crew. Please give her instructions and put her to work.”

Sister Jean Marie patted Ruth’s hand as one might pat a small child’s. Somehow, Ruth didn’t find it the least offensive. The nun smiled. “You’ll do fine. I’m glad you’re here.” Then she darted across the dining room to another cluster of women.

Frances tossed her perfectly-styled waves of brown hair. “First day?”

Ruth nodded. “I came last night, but I had my interview with Mother Superior this morning.”

“And you passed the inspection?” Frances’s laugh was friendly. “When are you due?”

“I’m not sure. I haven’t seen the doctor yet.”

As she talked, Frances led her up the broad stairs to the second level. “I’m going to assign you the third floor. The girl

who cleaned it moved out.” She turned to look at Ruth. “I think you can handle it.”

The third floor held five bedrooms—three for mothers who had delivered, and two for the nuns, sisters Jean Marie and Catherine. Mother Superior’s bedroom was on the first floor, near the labor and birthing room. A large closet held cleaning rags, brooms, dust mops, rug beaters, and everything necessary to keep the third floor pristine. If the room was occupied by a resident, Ruth was not required to clean it. But sitting areas, hallways, the bathroom, and the nun’s rooms must be cleaned daily. Some jobs, such as rug beating, would only need to be done weekly.

“So that’s the lowdown. Do you have any questions?” Frances shifted from one foot to another, no doubt eager to get started on her own afternoon chores.

“When we finish, what do we do?”

“Oh, that’s our own time. We can write letters home or do laundry or clean our rooms. There isn’t much free time. Guess they don’t want us to spend time thinking about how we ruined our lives.” Frances shrugged and headed for the stairs. “I will inspect your work. If it isn’t clean enough, I get into trouble as well as you. So, don’t get me into trouble.” Although her tone seemed friendly now, Ruth guessed Frances was the type she wouldn’t want to cross.

Ruth pulled a duster off the shelf and headed to the empty room where she’d spent her first night. She’d moved her suitcase with its meager contents to the second-floor room she would share with Doris. Where the expectant mothers lived. She paused a moment with a hand on her barely rounding abdomen. The rollercoaster of events leading up to today had not given her many moments to consider. In a few short months, she would become a mother.