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The rhythmic song of the train's wheels on the tracks and the warm, late-afternoon sun slanting through the window weighed heavy on Ruth's eyelids. She blinked, and the cornfields blurred past. In some fields, the corn was beginning to fire—the bottoms of the stalks and the leaves had turned brown, dry and brittle, one of the first signs of fall's advent and the nearing harvest time in Iowa.

Today's temperatures were summery, but they would change quickly in the coming months. Her small suitcase wouldn't accommodate a winter coat, even if she'd had one to bring. Ruth rolled her eyes at the irony. A coat was the least of her problems.

She pulled out her coin purse and checked the contents. The small piece of paper with a Des Moines address scrawled on it was still folded safely inside. She tucked the purse back in her pocket and allowed herself the luxury of closing her eyes.

"Next stop, Des Moines, Iowa. Arriving now. Des Moines. Please gather all your belongings." The conductor's voice in the

aisle startled Ruth awake. She stood and pulled her suitcase down as the train swayed and slid to a stop.

Ruth eased down the metal steps, her heart hammering. Buildings towered around her, and motorcars sped up and down the crisscross of streets. She clutched her suitcase while people jostled past. She'd lived in New York City as a child, but it had been three years since she'd been anywhere other than the farm or the village of Grantsville, and the noise and bustle made a sliver of fear creep up her spine. A glance at the sun told her she had less than two hours of daylight. She needed to go. But which direction? She had no idea where Cottage Grove Avenue was, and everyone on the platform seemed too busy to ask.

Ruth let the stream of people move her along the platform to the station. She could use the facilities inside and then find someone to ask for directions. After enjoying her second indoor toilet in one day, she washed her hands, dried them on the roller towel on the wall, and walked into the lobby.

Compared to the depot in Grantsville, it was huge. Everyone rushed past, bags clutched in their hands. A woman in a huge, gaudy hat bumped into Ruth and hurried on without apology. Ruth edged toward one of the ticket windows when a voice at her elbow said, "Are you lost, kitten?"

She turned and nearly bumped into a well-dressed young man with dark hair combed in a wave to the side.

"Ummm. No. Well, maybe." She held out the scrap of paper. "I need to get to this address."

A little frown creased his brow as he read the address. "Do you have a car?"

She shook her head. "No." *Did she look like someone who could afford a car?*

"Can you take a cab?"

Again, she shook her head. "I can walk. I'm used to walking

long distances.” She must have walked several miles every day just taking care of the house and the farm.

He studied her for a moment, then pointed. “Okay, then. Go straight west on this street to 6th Avenue. Then turn north until you get to Woodland. Go west on Woodland to 19th, and north on 19th to Cottage Grove.”

Ruth repeated. “West to 6th, north to Woodland, west to 19th, and north to Cottage Grove. I can do it.”

He glanced at the clock on the depot wall. “I’d take you myself, but I’m going the opposite direction—to Indianola with a friend in his car. I’ll walk you to the street, though.”

“That’s not necessary. I appreciate the information, and I’m confident I can find this place.” She tucked the paper in the pocket of her dress and gave him what she hoped was a pleasant but dismissive smile.

He ran fingers through the thick wave of his hair, then tucked his hands in his pockets. “Hey. I get to Des Moines about once a week. How about we go to a hop? Or a picture show? Can I ring you up?” He gazed at her with a winsome smile.

Ruth picked up her suitcase and straightened her shoulders. “No, that’s not possible.” She strode out of the depot and knew without looking that he stared at her until the door closed.

The sun had slid behind the tall buildings of the city when she set the suitcase down and rubbed her shoulders. There wasn’t much in the case, but it had become heavier and heavier with each block. She pulled the paper out of her pocket again and checked. The black numbers on the gray three-story home in front of her matched. A neat little sign informed passersby: *Sisters of Mercy Home for Unwed Mothers*.

Behind the house, facing the street on the next block and rising even taller, stood a massive stone church. Ruth tipped

her head back and followed the spire to its very peak, where a cross seemed to scrape the clouds and maybe Heaven. Surely a place in the shadows of the house of God would be safe.

She trudged up the wide steps to a wraparound porch. Several wicker chairs and a swing made it warm and welcoming. She hoped the people inside were as well. With a deep breath, she lifted her hand and knocked.

Light footsteps clacked on a wooden floor. The door swung open. A tiny, bird-like woman dressed in the black and white habit of a nun appraised her from head to toe with bright, beady eyes. “May I help you?” she chirped.

Ruth dropped the suitcase and covered her face with her hands as a sob escaped her lips. “Can—can I stay here?” She felt like she was fifteen again, standing on the operahouse stage and hoping for a family.

The nun reached for Ruth’s suitcase with one hand, and with the other took hold of her arm and guided her inside to a parlor with pale blue upholstered chairs, a striped sofa, and a fireplace. She set the suitcase down and patted the seat of a chair. “Sit here.”

Ruth’s knees buckled, and she sank onto the cushion.

The nun perched on the edge of a chair opposite Ruth’s. “My name is Sister Jean Marie. Now tell me what’s going on with you. Where have you come from?”

Fear rushed in and strangled Ruth’s words. What if they traced her and sent her back to Grantsville? What if *he* found her? She couldn’t let that happen. “My name is Emma, and I—I came from Indianola,” she blurted out.

The little nun’s head bobbed, and the habit moved with it. “And you’re in a family way?”

No one had yet put it in words. Ruth looked at her dust-covered shoes and nodded.

A small hand patted hers. “God can forgive even this and

use it for his glory. We love babies here. We can help you, Emma. How did you get here?"

Ruth raised her head. Did she dare hope? "I walked from the train depot."

"Oh, my. That is a long way. I'm guessing you haven't had dinner, have you, dear?"

"No." Nor had she had anyone speak soothingly to her, or care for her, in a very long time.

"Come on. Follow me. I'll show you where you can sleep tonight, and then I'll take you to the dining room and introduce you to some of the girls. Tomorrow, you will meet with Mother Superior. She makes the final decisions regarding new admissions."

Despite the nervousness of meeting Mother Superior, Ruth felt safe. Hope spread through her and gave her new strength. She picked up her suitcase and followed Sister Jean Marie up the wide wooden staircase.