

Strangers

STRANGERS HAD COME TO THE *CHIESA*.

Susanna stood taller on the wooden steps. There, she and about thirty other girls pressed close to warm themselves in the chilly, incense-sweet air. They waited patiently to sing their parts in the Latin Mass.

Today, besides the usual old ladies in black dresses, there were two young couples.

“So *short*,” whispered Elvira, nodding at the couple on the left.

“But maybe rich. Very rich,” said Antonetta. “Look—the woman has fur trim on her coat.”

“Looks like fox fur,” Elvira said. “It’s red.”

“You should know about foxes,” Susanna whispered.

Elvira had red hair, the same rusty, burnished color as the fur trim.

Suor Anna shook her head at them and frowned, her long, crooked finger to her lips. She was the head nun, and very old. She wore the black habit of the nuns, the huge, round white collar around her neck. Her finger was encircled by a gold wedding band, because she, like the other nuns, was a Bride of Christ.

Fox-Fur Lady's husband had a balding head and nice, light eyes.

Attention was now on the other couple on the far side of the *chiesa*. Everyone stood up on tiptoe. Susanna shifted the waist of her black skirt so the button squarely faced the back.

The woman wore a dress with big flowers, like a garden blooming across her large body. How had she gotten so fat? Susanna wondered. Since the war, Italy had not had enough food.

Her husband, in a plain brown suit like soil waiting to be planted, was very thin. Maybe she ate his food and her own too.

"They're here to adopt someone," pronounced Carla. "My parents told me that the nuns were arranging adoptions."

Adoptions? The word reverberated in the cold air. Susanna rocked against Pina, who stood next to

her. Did that mean that some of them might go to a home of their very own?

More than ten years ago, all of the girls standing on the wooden steps had been brought to the *Istituto di Gesù Bambino* as babies. Some had been orphans. Some had had mothers or other family members who couldn't keep them. The nuns had cared for them all this time.

Now some girls might leave.

The whispers curled around Susanna. Hopes and wishes were inhaled with each breath.

Padre Giovanni, the priest who said Mass and listened from his confessional to the girls' deepest secrets, lifted the goblet of wine toward the big cross where Jesus hung. He prayed—“*Dominus vobiscum . . .*”—as he performed the transubstantiation.

It was a mystery, a miracle, the way the clear red wine became Jesus's blood, the way the thin wafers became his body.

But today Susanna didn't care about the miracles of the wine and bread. She cared about the miracle of the visitors who'd come. Were they really here to *adopt*?

Susanna sighed. She already knew she wouldn't

be one of the girls chosen to leave. She looked down at her hands. When the girls were being nice, they said she was the color of *cappuccino*. When they were mean, they said her skin was the color of unwashed brown potatoes.

Suor Vicenza stood with her conductor's baton to lead them in the next hymn. The youngest nun, she had a sweet round face. With an upward arc, she lifted her gentle arm to lead the singing.

Pina might be chosen for adoption. Pina, Susanna's pretty best friend. Pina with her milk-white skin, her gleaming yellow hair, braided and wound over her head like a crown.

Susanna loved to play hairdresser with Pina's blond hair, while Pina struggled to do the same with Susanna's wiry curls.

The nuns said that as babies, they'd sat next to each other and rocked back and forth in the high chairs placed at the edges of the dining room. Later they'd played rag dolls. Summers, they'd hidden from each other behind the pots of tomato plants and dwarf lemon trees on the rooftop *terrazzo*.

Whereas Pina believed herself to be an orphan, Carla, on the other side of her, had parents. Every month they came to see her. After the visits, Carla

bit her fingernails a little deeper, gnawing on them, exposing the raw places.

One time, Susanna had asked, “Carla, why don’t you live with your parents?”

Carla had lifted up her head, pointing her long nose in the air, and said, “My parents are important, and they live in a far-off country and can only visit me sometimes on business trips.”

Someone had snickered.

“They’re too important for *her*,” someone else had whispered.

Susanna herself had seen Carla’s *papà* hand bundles of *lire* to Suor Anna.

And she’d heard Carla crying in the night.

It would serve her parents right if she got adopted!

Maybe Donatella, standing in front of Susanna, would go. Donatella liked to brag that she was half American. But that was why she was there at the *Istituto*. The whisperers said that Donatella’s mother had been the girlfriend of an American GI, a liberator of Italy from the Fascist dogs. Maybe, in the fierce fight, he’d gotten killed. Or maybe he’d run away once his girlfriend became a mother. And now Donatella’s mother, said those whisperers,

was married to another man. A man who didn't know about the liberator or his child. Donatella was a secret, hidden away there. At the *Istituto di Gesù Bambino*.

Maybe it would be Elvira. On Sundays, Elvira wore her hair, the color of that fox fur on the visitor's coat, tied with a special blue ribbon.

When Elvira's grandmother visited, blue-ribboned Elvira slipped into the *stanza della compagnia* to meet her. But so far, her *nonna* had brought not an invitation to a beautiful new life but only chocolates.

The twins, Antonetta and Georgina, identical with their crisp black curls and their green cat eyes, were true orphans. But at least they had each other. Would the looking couples want to get two new daughters at the same time? Wouldn't that be too much?

No matter what, Susanna repeated to herself, she would not be the one.

"You're a *mulatta*," Suor Anna had once said. "A cross between a white person and a black one. I can tell by your tight curls, your dark skin. Surely, your father was an American soldier. A *nero*. No Italians have hair or skin like yours."

Susanna had never seen a *nero*. She'd only read about them in the book of Robinson Crusoe. In that story, all the *neri* had been cannibals. She shivered at the thought of people eating people.

“*Cannibale*,” the girls sometimes called Susanna.

Italian parents would want a girl with creamy skin and hair that could be stroked with a brush one hundred times at night. A daughter who looked like them. They wouldn't want a half-cannibal daughter.

She wouldn't implore. With her head held high, Susanna focused on Jesus hanging on the cross, his throbbing, pulsing heart exposed for everyone to see.