

CHAPTER 2

*Mother Rosario*



It happened as I expected. When all the girls had filed into the school, Sister Eucharía came back to the gate to let me in. She sent me straight to Mother Rosario's office.

'Well, madam?' said Mother Rosario icily, by way of greeting.

Everyone said she was strict but fair, only I had never noticed the fair part. She always called girls 'madam' when she wanted to show her displeasure.

'What have you got to say for yourself?' Mother Rosario went on.

'Sorry, Mother,' I said in a small voice. I tried to

sound very humble and contrite. Nuns liked that.

‘I don’t mean that, I mean, have you got an excuse, girl? Speak up, now. If you have a good reason for being late, maybe we could overlook it this once.’

That must be the fair part, I thought, but it wasn’t much good to me. I couldn’t possibly tell Mother Rosario that my mother had gone out in the night to attend a birth. Nuns didn’t understand these things. They had no children. They lived in a convent and said their prayers. Birth and babies, and getting my sisters’ hair brushed in the morning, and helping my da to make the breakfast, and the disaster that burning the porridge was – it was all too difficult to explain. If a nun burnt the porridge they probably just threw it out to the pigs and made more. Nuns wouldn’t understand what it was like to have to count every slice of bread, every spoon of oatmeal, and I certainly wasn’t going to tell her and bring shame on my family. Nuns were notorious snobs. Then there was the added complication about Liz O’Brien not being married. I couldn’t work that one out, but I knew for sure that I mustn’t let it slip to the nuns, or I

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might bring even worse shame and retribution down on my family and neighbours.

‘Madge fell and cut her knee, Mother,’ I offered, helplessly. ‘I had to clean it for her.’

‘I see. She fell because you were late and running to school?’

‘Yes, Mother.’

‘And why were you so late that you had to race over the roads like corner boys instead of walking at a brisk and steady pace, like young ladies?’

‘Patsy got grease on her blouse, Mother.’ It wasn’t working, I knew that, but I couldn’t find a way to explain the piled-up details that had made the morning go all wrong.

‘Indeed?’ Mother Rosario’s very black eyebrows disappeared under the stiff white forehead band that hid her hair and held her long black veil in place.

‘Because we had fried bread for breakfast,’ I went on.

‘Well, aren’t you well off! Fried bread, indeed!’

I didn’t know how to answer that one. It hadn’t occurred to me that fried bread was some sort of awful luxury that I shouldn’t dare to mention for

fear of offending the nuns. It was never very clear to me what would offend the nuns. They seemed to think differently from ordinary people.

‘Yes, Mother,’ I murmured, hopelessly.

‘Well?’

‘Well, what, Mother?’

‘Don’t give me cheek, Kate Delaney!’

‘Sorry, Mother. I burnt the porridge.’

‘You burnt the porridge. Well, now we’re getting places. Wasn’t that careless of you?’

‘Yes, Mother. And then I had to find a clean blouse for Patsy and Da was singing some stupid song and the girls were giggling and Eddy was singing too and I was in a rush, I didn’t sleep last night, I was up looking at the clock in the kitchen all night, and ... ’

‘Enough!’

I stopped.

‘Sorry, Mother,’ I murmured again, looking at the floor, wishing it would open up and swallow me whole.

‘It seems to me, Kate, that you are blaming everyone but yourself, here. Madge fell. Patsy tore her blouse. Your father ... ’

‘No, Mother, it was grease, Patsy got grease on her blouse.’

‘Kate!’ Mother Rosario’s voice was like thunder now. ‘Will you stop blathering and rawmayshing out of you! Grease, torn, it doesn’t matter. The point is, you are deflecting all the blame on to your unfortunate family, aren’t you?’

‘No, Mother.’

‘Don’t contradict me, child!’

‘No, Mother. Sorry, Mother.’

I could feel tears running down my face. I licked my lips. Salt.

‘Sorry, Mother,’ I said again, in a tiny voice, willing the nun to stop pestering me and just slap me and let me go to my classroom.

Mother Rosario stood up and came around to the front of her desk. She wore giant rosary beads suspended from her waist, like all the nuns, but in addition to this, because she was the head nun, she also carried a gigantic bunch of keys and a wide, flat *slat*, which she used to slap people on their upturned palms.

She was right, of course. If I hadn’t asked the stupid question about the stars, we’d have made it.

I closed my eyes and screwed them up hard, held my breath, and held out my hand for a belt of the *slat*.

Nothing happened. I waited, hand outstretched, wishing the nun would whack me and get it over with. Three on each hand was usual. I hoped I wouldn't have to have more than that. Three was just about bearable. It hurt horribly at first, and it went on stinging for hours, but it didn't break the skin or cause bruising. You could write within an hour or so, though your hands burned.

Still nothing happened.

I opened my eyes. Mother Rosario was looking at me.

'There's no need for that,' Mother Rosario said in a voice that was almost kind. 'But I'll have to see your mother, Kate. I can't have girls coming late to school with no reasonable excuse and looking like the wreck of the *Hesperus*.'

I dropped my hand to my side. The wreck of the *Hesperus*! I looked down at myself for the first time that day. I was still wearing the old clothes I'd thrown on in a rush that morning. I'd forgotten to change into my neat school skirt and blouse.

And now I remembered also that with the fuss about brushing the others' hair, I had forgotten all about my own. I put a hand to my head, and sure enough, my long curly hair was good and tangled – I could feel the knots under my fingers. I must look a right mess.

But that was a minor point. My mother was being sent for! That was the worst possible punishment, because it meant I'd be in trouble at home as well at school, and then I'd have nowhere where I could feel safe and free.

'No, Mother, please don't, I'll be good.'

I could feel the tears coming again, and now there was a drip coming from my nose too. The embarrassment of it! I wiped it quickly with the back of my hand and fished up my sleeve for my hanky, but of course it was streaked with dirt and blood, and I stuffed it quickly back up my sleeve again before Mother Rosario could see it.

'Kate, Kate, you don't understand.'

Then the unbelievable happened. Mother Rosario dipped into the deep pocket of her long, long black nun's skirt, and produced a huge blue check, starched clean handkerchief and handed it

to me. I didn't know what to do with it. I couldn't possibly put it to my nose and soil the holy nun's hanky.

Mother Rosario took the hanky back and dabbed at my tear-streaked cheeks herself, and swiped at my nose and mouth with it too. Then she handed the hanky to me again, and said, 'Keep it for today. You can wash it and bring it back to me another time.'

I nodded, disbelievingly, crumpling the handkerchief between my fingers. I would rub it and scrub it and rinse it and starch it and iron it until it was a perfectly crisp square again.

'Now, listen to me, my child,' the nun went on. 'I need to see your mother just to make sure everything is all right at home. I find that when good girls start coming late and giving back answers ...'

'I don't give back answers!' I wailed.

'There, you're doing it now!' said the nun. 'I find that when girls who are usually good start misbehaving, it often means there is trouble at home, and I just want to satisfy myself that this is not so in your case.'

'It's not, Mother, I swear. Cross my heart and

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hope to die. There's nothing wrong at home.'

I couldn't bear the thought of my poor mother being humiliated by the nuns poking their noses in and asking personal questions about our family life. She would die of shame.

'We don't swear, Kate.'

'No, Mother, but really, there's no need to send for ... '

'Let me be the judge of that, Kate. Now, you go on to your class and tell Miss Glynn that you were with me and it's all right, you're not to be punished. Tell her I'll speak to her later. Have you got that, now?'

'Yes, Mother.'

'And here, Kate.' Mother Rosario opened a small stripy pink tin she had on her desk and extracted a bull's-eye. My eyes opened wide. 'You'd want to suck that fast now, so it's gone by the time you reach the classroom.'

'Thanks, Mother,' I whispered, and slipped the bull's-eye into my mouth. The sweet, pepperminty taste spread immediately, deliciously, over my tongue.

'And don't worry, I won't upset your mother.'

I just need to talk to her. It'll be all right.'

I pushed the sweet into the side of my cheek with my tongue, and managed another 'Thanks, Mother.'

'Mother?' I asked then.

'Yes?'

'Mother, was Saint Patrick a Catholic? Only how come the Protestant cathedral is called after him?'

Mother Rosario looked at me and shook her head.

'That's too complicated for today,' she said.

She was as bad as my mother, evading questions. At least she hadn't said, 'It's a mystery,' which is what nuns usually said when you asked them something about religion that they couldn't answer. I sighed, but I didn't argue. I just trotted off to my classroom, sucking the bull's-eye as hard as I could. I needed to get it down to a manageable size before I reached the door, so I could store it neatly inside my cheek and still be able to speak clearly to Miss Glynn.