



A  
Haven  
for Her  
Heart

Redemption's Light • 1

Susan Anne Mason

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This is a work of historical reconstruction; the appearances of certain historical figures are therefore inevitable. All other characters, however, are products of the author's imagination, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

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In memory of Velma Demerson,  
whose real-life story of incarceration  
at the Mercer Reformatory for Women  
inspired Olivia's journey.



# A Note from the Author

Dear Reader Friends,  
Writing a book about a maternity home has been on my mind for quite some time. When I originally wrote *A Most Noble Heir*, I'd envisioned a sequel to Nolan and Hannah's story, featuring Hannah's younger sister, Molly, who would open a maternity home—or a home for wayward girls—in Victorian England. However, that book never materialized, and the idea sat on the back burner for quite a while.

Then, while brainstorming a new series for Bethany House, the idea came up again. Right around this time, I read a disturbing story in the paper about a woman named Velma Demerson, who was arrested in Toronto in the 1930s for being pregnant and unmarried. I kept the newspaper clipping about the harrowing details of her life, and it occurred to me that Olivia Rosetti, my heroine for the first book in the REDEMPTION'S LIGHT series, would need a compelling reason to open such a facility. Velma's story provided the inspiration for that.

In the meantime, I learned that Velma had written a book entitled *Incorrigible* about her experience in the Andrew Mercer Reformatory for Women (or “the Mercer,” for short), and

I ordered a copy. It was not an easy book to read at times. The horrors she endured were beyond description, but it captured me so thoroughly that I decided to use her experience as a catalyst for my heroine.

I wanted you to know this before you read Olivia's story, which is a little grittier than the usual books I've written. But the horrors that Olivia goes through really happened to Velma and to many other incarcerated women. Eventually, the Mercer Reformatory was closed down, but not until 1969—thirty years after Velma's stay there. It's hard to imagine such atrocities occurring so recently in our history.

In her later years, Velma gained the courage to sue the Ontario government for her mistreatment. She continued campaigning for an apology and seeking restitution for all women who had been incarcerated under the same law that had imprisoned her, right up until she passed away in 2019 at the age of ninety-eight.

That being said, I hope you enjoy Olivia's journey—how her search for respectability and healing leads her to help other women and how Darius teaches her the value of unconditional love while mirroring God's love for each one of us. (Of course, Darius's journey is not without a few bumps of its own!)

Until next time, my profound appreciation for your support and encouragement!

*Susan*

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*I have swept away your transgressions  
like a cloud, and your sins like mist;  
return to me, for I have redeemed you.*

ISAIAH 44:22

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# Prologue

**Toronto, Ontario, Canada**  
**November 1939**

Olivia Rosetti turned up the volume on the radio in the empty parlor. Thankfully, her parents had gone out to a church meeting tonight, giving her the rare gift of a few hours alone. With her older brother out for the evening as well, she could listen to the radio on her own for as long as she wished, without Leo and Papà arguing, and Leo getting so angry that he'd snap the machine off. Ever since Leo had failed the army physical due to a heart murmur, he hated all reports of the war. Especially since their brother Tony, one year younger than Leo, had passed all the tests and was headed overseas. Her youngest brother, Salvatore, safely cocooned at the seminary, was likely oblivious to the fact that the world was embroiled in conflict.

Olivia twisted the dial until the static lessened and the deep voice of the broadcaster boomed through. Surely there would be news of the war at the top of the hour. Not that it would give her any details of her fiancé Rory's fate. Or Tony's. But listening to reports of the Canadian troops and their whereabouts helped her



feel closer to both of them. In those moments, she could picture Rory in his uniform aboard the deck of a ship, heading to Britain to fight for freedom from Hitler's tyranny.

*Oh, Rory, why did you have to join the war so soon? If you'd known about my situation, would it have stopped you from going?*

She ran a hand over the slight swell of her abdomen, a sick sense of dread rising through her. Last night, with no options left, she'd finally divulged her secret to her mother, who, despite Olivia's protests, had immediately told her father. As expected, Enrico Rosetti had not taken the news well at all.

Olivia's hand instinctively went to her cheek, still tender from her father's blow.

*"Did you ever consider how your sins would affect the family? That it could jeopardize your brother's calling?"* he'd shouted, eyes wild. *"Taking up with an Irishman was bad enough, but this? You are a disgrace to the Rosetti name."*

Only her mother's tearful pleas had stopped Papà's tirade, half in English, half in Italian. Then, with a last curse word, he'd slammed out of their apartment over the store and stomped down the stairs, off to drown his sorrows with his comrades. Olivia prayed he hadn't told them the reason why he was drinking that night.

Static from the radio crackled over the room. Olivia fiddled with the tuner, attempting to get a clearer signal.

"Eight people were killed and sixty-two injured in Munich last night in a failed attempt to assassinate Adolf Hitler. The German leader, who had been speaking only moments before the bomb went off, was unharmed."

She twisted her fingers together at the mere mention of the dictator's name. Would the war have ended if the assassin had been successful? She breathed a prayer for forgiveness for wishing such a thing. Yet it seemed this one man continued to wreak havoc on the entire world, and she couldn't really blame someone for trying to eliminate him.

On some level, Olivia was proud of Rory for wanting to defend his country against such a despot. But on the other hand, she wished he hadn't been quite so patriotic. Quite so willing to leave her behind.

A loud knock sounded on the door. Olivia's heart began to race. Who would be coming here at this hour? Everyone in the neighborhood knew the store was closed, and most of her parents' friends would be at the church hall. Leo was at the local tavern playing pool with his friends and wouldn't be home until the wee hours.

She clutched the threadbare arm of the chair, a shiver of foreboding racing through her. "Who is it?"

"Toronto Police. Open the door, please."

The police? What did they want? Had someone been in an accident?

Heart in her throat, Olivia smoothed her hair and removed her apron, draping it over the armchair. Taking a deep breath, she crossed the room and opened the door.

A large man in uniform stood on the landing. "Are you Miss Olivia Rosetti?"

"Y-yes."

A flicker of emotion passed over his granite features. "I'm here to inform you that you are under arrest."

"Arrest? For what?" Her hand flew to her throat. Was this a joke? There had to be some sort of mistake.

"You are charged under the Female Refuges Act with being incorrigible. I'm afraid you're going to have to come with me."

"What does that mean? I don't understand. . . ." Her legs trembled so hard beneath her pleated skirt that she grasped the hall table for support.

A glimmer of sympathy shone in the man's eyes. "Your father has taken out a warrant against you. He claims that you are unmarried, under the age of twenty-one, and . . ." He hesitated, his gaze sweeping her slender form. ". . . with child."

Heat flooded her face, but she held her head high. “That may be undesirable, but surely it’s not a crime.”

“I’m afraid it is. Granted, it’s not a law I’ve had to enforce very often, but when a complaint is made, we must act.”

Her mind spun, still unable to grasp what the officer was telling her. “My fiancé left for the war, otherwise we would already be married.” A tiny but desperate fib. “As soon as he comes back, we’ll . . .” She trailed off at the immovable set to the man’s jaw.

“I’ll give you a minute to get ready. Then I have to take you down to the police station.”



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# 1

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**April 1941**

**F**reedom. Open spaces without any horrid, confining bars. Olivia had craved this luxury for almost eighteen months, yet now that she was finally released from prison, the reality fell far short of what she'd imagined.

Her blue plaid work dress and navy cardigan hung loose, offering little warmth against the chilly spring air as she trudged along King Street, carrying her near-empty handbag. With each block she traveled, her sense of panic increased.

Freedom, it turned out, came with a whole new set of problems, proving she wasn't really free at all.

Instead, she was homeless, penniless, and friendless. Where could she go? Did she dare darken her parents' doorstep? Without even enough money for bus fare, it could take an hour to reach her family's store on foot. If she did, and she was able to get her mother alone, would Mamma help her? Or would obedience to Papà keep her from aiding her only daughter?

Olivia's steps faltered. Unused to walking for so long at a time, her feet screamed in protest. Blisters burned on her toes and heels. Her shoulders sagged forward, as if unwilling to bear the

burden of her problems. But with little choice, she forced herself to plod on.

Just when she thought she couldn't continue, a familiar street sign appeared above her. *Kensington Avenue*. A few blocks farther west and she'd reach Rosetti's Market. Her stomach growled and curled in on itself, the gruel she'd eaten for her last meal at the Mercer Reformatory long since burned off. The little extra weight she'd put on during her pregnancy had been stripped away by long hours of laboring at the sewing machines in the reformatory factory. That, along with the meager food rations, had left her much thinner than before her incarceration.

Olivia approached the storefront with caution, her steps slowing as conflicting emotions swirled within her. How she'd dreamt of this moment every day during her confinement, of returning to the sights and sounds of the store. The vision of Mamma in her apron at the front counter, laughing at the chatter of the Italian ladies as they chose their vegetables. The smell of overripe fruit on sale at the front aisle. The clang of the cash register opening and closing. She'd missed everything about her home, her mother most of all. In a family of men, she and Mamma were kindred spirits, always sharing a secret smile, a knowing wink.

But a nagging worry dimmed the excitement of Olivia's homecoming. Would Papà allow her to come back? Surely she'd paid for her sins and had earned admittance back into the family. But deep down, part of her railed against asking for aid from the man who'd caused her suffering in the first place.

Forgiveness, preached so easily from the tongue of the prison chaplain, sat hard on her unwilling spirit.

But if humility granted her a place to lay her head while awaiting Rory's return, then she would swallow her pride and bide her time. Once this dreadful war was over and her fiancé came home, maybe then she could put the past eighteen months of misery behind her. Her hand rested on her flat abdomen, and

the perpetual ache in her chest intensified. Would that even be possible after all she'd lost?

A lone figure stepped out onto the sidewalk beside the crates of apples and oranges and began to sweep the dirt from the entrance.

*Mamma!*

Her heart leapt at the sight of her mother's kerchief and apron, head bent in concentration on her task. Unbidden tears burned Olivia's eyes. How she'd missed Mamma's comforting touch while she was locked away these many months, treated worse than a caged animal in a laboratory. How she'd longed for her mother's love, her words of encouragement, her home-cooked food that cured every ill or worry.

Olivia's steps quickened, a smile tugging her lips upward. "Mamma," she cried, emotion strangling her voice.

Her mother looked up. The broom dropped to the ground as she rushed toward Olivia and clasped her in a tight embrace.

"Oh, *mia preziosa ragazza*."

The whispered words of endearment washed over her soul like a balm. After kissing Olivia's cheeks, her mother wiped her eyes with her apron.

"You are too thin," Mamma clucked as she held her by the shoulders. "You need to eat."

As if in answer, Olivia's stomach growled. She laughed at her mother's raised eyebrows.

"I am hungry, Mamma. Is there anything left from the noon meal?"

"Sì. There's some soup and—" Mamma stopped, a sudden frown wrinkling her brow. "We must not let your father find you here. Come around to the back."

Olivia straightened, her gut giving a painful lurch. So Papà had not forgiven her, just as she'd suspected.

Mamma grabbed her arm, and they slipped like thieves down the side alley to the rear entrance into the storeroom. Bypassing

the storage bins, they climbed the narrow staircase up to their apartment. Mamma moved swiftly into the kitchen, opening the icebox to remove a large cast-iron pot. Olivia's mouth watered just thinking of the delicious meal it might contain. Minestrone soup, perhaps?

A large loaf of bread sat on the cutting board on the counter. Olivia hesitated, then hunger overcame her reticence, and she reached for the knife to cut a thick slab. After slathering on a layer of butter, she took a large bite. Never had anything tasted so good.

Mamma ladled the soup into a bowl. "It's cool now, but it will fill your belly."

"Cold is fine, Mamma."

Olivia pulled out a chair at the table, the same green tablecloth she remembered still in place. She gulped down several spoonfuls of the soup, relishing the burst of flavors she'd almost forgotten existed. Prison fare had been bland at best. She swallowed, glancing around her old home. It seemed like forever since she'd been here, yet nothing had changed. The same worn sofa and armchair. The same radio on the rickety table in the corner.

Down the narrow hall, all appeared unchanged as well. The door to their parents' room was closed as usual. Neither she nor her brothers ever dared venture in there without an invitation. The door to Leo's room sat slightly ajar. And her door, the first one visible, was also closed. Would Mamma have left Olivia's room exactly as it had been before she'd been banished?

"I do not think he will allow you to return." Her mother's soft voice was filled with regret. Sorrow clouded her dark eyes, now etched with many more worry lines than two years ago.

Before this horrible war had started.

Before Olivia had made the worst mistake of her life.

"I want to come home, Mamma. What can I do to make it so?"

Mamma shook her head and turned away to return the soup pot to the icebox.

Footsteps stomped on the stairs. "Rosina? *Sei qui?*"

The spoon in Olivia's hand trembled, spilling liquid onto the tablecloth.

Her mother sent her a panicked look. "Go to your room. I will talk to him."

Olivia stood and headed toward the bedroom, her instinct to run quickening her pulse. But then she stopped. "No. I will face my father. I will not hide."

"Olivia, please." Mamma's eyes went wide, darting to the stairs.

A second later, Papà appeared in the doorway. The moment he spied Olivia, he came to a halt, the rag rug skidding beneath his feet. The color drained from his face, and, for an instant, Olivia thought she saw a flicker of happiness flash in his eyes.

She took a tentative step toward him. "Papà."

He held up a hand, his features hardening, and turned furious eyes on Mamma. "How dare you defy me and bring her here?" he said in Italian. Papà only used English when absolutely necessary.

"Enrico. *Per favore* . . ." Mamma cowered behind the table.

Why had Olivia never realized what a tyrant her father was? How he bullied everyone into submission? Outrage sparked her courage, and she stepped forward, shoulders squared. "It's not Mamma's fault. Don't be mad at her."

His dark brows formed a solid line over his eyes. He crossed his arms, his stance combative.

Her legs shook, from fear or fury she couldn't tell, yet she didn't retreat. Ugly words, accusatory words, circled her brain, but before she said something she couldn't take back, she worked to rein in her emotions. Despite what he'd done to her, despite how he treated her mother, Olivia had to be smart. She needed a place to live. Needed to be with Mamma again. And somewhere underneath her anger and pain, she still loved her father. She had to try to mend the rift in their relationship. Taking a deep breath, she made a deliberate attempt to humble her attitude. "Papà, I've come to ask for your forgiveness. And to see if I can please come home."



Several seconds ticked by, then her father grunted. “*Il bambino?*”

Olivia’s muscles seized with a spasm of grief, now as familiar to her as breathing. Clenching her hands into fists, she held her head high. “They took him from me, as you knew they would. They put him up for adoption.”

Her mother gasped. Her father remained silent.

“*Un ragazzino?*” Mamma’s sorrowful whisper sliced through Olivia’s stoic calm.

Her throat closed up, and she could only nod. Yes, a little boy. Her son, Matteo, whom she got to hold for only a few precious minutes before he was ripped from her arms.

Her father shook his head. The coldness in his eyes sent a shiver down Olivia’s spine. “We no longer have a daughter. You are not welcome here.” He turned to point a finger at Mamma. “Rosina, you are needed in the store.” Without a backward glance, he disappeared down the staircase.

Tears slid down Mamma’s cheeks. “I’m sorry, *cara*.”

Olivia’s lips trembled. Part of her wished her mother would stand up to Papà. Tell him that Olivia was their daughter and that of course they would forgive her. But Mamma couldn’t risk the wrath of Enrico Rosetti being turned on her.

“I’ll just get some of my clothes, then.” Swallowing hard to hold back the tears that begged for release, Olivia went down the hall to her room and pushed open the creaky door. Her jaw dropped. The room had been stripped bare, with nothing but the bed in the middle, leaving it more sterile than her cell at the reformatory had been. All her photos, her bulletin board with her awards from school, all gone.

She rushed to open the closet. Only barren wire hangers swung there. She turned to see her mother wringing her hands in the doorway. “Mamma, where are my things?”

“He . . . he got rid of them.”

“He what?”

Olivia scrambled to the scarred wooden dresser, yanking open drawer after drawer. Every one empty. Her lips quivered. All her clothes, her mementos from childhood, and—most importantly—all Rory’s gifts to her, gone. Her mind struggled to remember what treasures she’d hidden there. The book of poetry where Rory had inscribed words of love, the dried rose pressed between the pages, and the silver locket he’d given her for her eighteenth birthday. She sank onto the soft mattress, grief fresh in her throat.

“I managed to save a few things.” Mamma reached under the bed and drew out a cloth bag. She undid the drawstring and revealed a few pieces of clothing and a battered cigar box. Then she drew the string tight again. “You can look at them later. I must go.” She pushed the bag into Olivia’s arms.

“Mamma, did Rory send any letters here from the army?” She yearned for any word of him. Proof that he was still alive and that he missed her as much as she missed him.

It had been hard enough not having any member of her family visit her for the past eighteen months. But not receiving any word from Rory had been sheer torture. She had no idea if her letters had reached him, if he even knew she’d been pregnant, or that she’d given birth to their son. In her dreams, she’d imagined Rory leaving the war to come to her rescue. But she’d never heard a single word from him.

Her mother looked away. “Oh, *cara*.”

“Papà destroyed those too?” Why was her father so cruel? But then again, he’d always despised Rory, “a filthy Irishman” he called him, and likely blamed him for leading his daughter astray.

“*Mi dispiace*.”

“Why are you sorry? It wasn’t your doing.” Bitterness coated Olivia’s tongue. Her mind whirled with the unfairness of all that had happened to her. If God was out there, He was certainly exacting His punishment. “I’ll just have to wait for Rory to come home, then. Papà can’t keep us from being together.”

Mamma shook her head, tears glittering in her eyes. “Oh, Olivia. He isn’t coming home.”

Olivia’s heart slowed to a dull throb in her chest. “Of course he is. As soon as this ridiculous war is over.” Or maybe sooner. She’d even prayed that he would be injured, just a little, enough to warrant them sending him home to recuperate. Was that selfish of her? Her fingers tightened on the drawstring.

“No, *cara mia*. Rory . . .” She hesitated. “Rory è morto.”

Olivia’s head jerked up so fast she bit her tongue. “Dead? No. That’s not possible.”

Her mother’s face crumpled. “Sì, *cara*. Eileen came to the store to tell us. They got a telegram three months ago.”

“She came here?” Olivia heard her own voice echo in the empty room. If his sister had come to the store, then it must be true.

Her hands shook, her heart shriveling in her chest as the ache spread outward and the horrible words sank in. Mamma would have no reason to lie. No cause to deceive her. But how had Olivia not known? Surely if she and Rory were soul mates, she would have felt his absence from this earth.

The distance she’d felt from Rory since he left to join the war now widened into an unending chasm, one that could never be crossed. She’d clung to their unborn child as the one tangible bond connecting them, but when the authorities had torn baby Matteo from her arms, Olivia’s hope had wavered.

*Once Rory is home and I’m with him again, she’d told herself, all will be back to normal. We will overcome this loss together.*

Now that would never happen.

A keening wail escaped her throat as she bent forward over her knees. “No. No. He can’t be gone. They made a mistake. He’s coming back to me.”

Mamma laid a hand on her back. “Mi dispiace,” she said again. “May God have mercy on you both.”



Ruth Bennington stood on the sidewalk in front of St. Olaf's Church and simply stared at the beauty of the building before her. As usual, the beckoning lights from within penetrated the inky dusk, seeming to reach out and draw her inside. With a weary sigh, she climbed the stairs leading to the front door, grasped the metal handle, and let herself into the vestibule. The calming scent of candlewax and sulfur greeted her.

"Well, Lord. Will tonight be any different? Or will you see fit to grant my request at last?"

Ruth moved farther into the sanctuary until she came to her usual pew. She made the sign of the cross and sat down on the hard bench, relishing the feel of the unyielding wood beneath her.

On the altar in front of her, two tiny flames flickered. Even in the dim interior, Ruth could make out the stained-glass windows and the paintings of the saints that adorned the pale walls.

How long had she been coming to this place to worship? Forty years? Maybe closer to fifty. Ever since she and Henry had moved to Toronto as newlyweds. A soft smile curved her lips. They'd been so young back then, so naïve, with no idea where life would take them or when their roads would diverge.

Almost involuntarily, her eyes moved to the plaque under the window nearest her. *In memory of Henry Ward Bennington. Gone from us too soon. From his loving wife, Ruth.*

A lone tear wound its way down her cheek.

*It's time, Lord. Not that I can tell you how to manage things. But I've been alone for years now. I'm tired. I want to see my Henry again.*

With a gloved finger, she wiped the moisture from her face and began her prayer ritual. If she were fortunate and tonight was indeed the night God chose to grant her request, she'd make sure she was ready.

Two hours later, Ruth hauled her stiff frame up from the seat, disappointment her usual companion. God had not let the life seep from her while she prayed. If only she could muster the

courage, she'd do the deed herself, but images of hellfire and damnation kept her feet firmly rooted to this earth.

"Thy will be done," she whispered, as she did every night when leaving the church.

The depressing prospect of returning home alone made her bones ache. At least when Henry had first passed away, she'd had her grandson, Thomas, living with her, so the mausoleum of a house hadn't felt so empty. But since the boy had moved out two years ago after they'd quarreled, Ruth had done nothing but pray for her own death. A prayer that maddeningly had gone unanswered.

She shuffled past the pews, almost too weary to lift her feet. If she hadn't paused for a brief moment at the last row, she likely wouldn't have heard the soft moan that drifted through the air. Ruth froze, straining her ears. Had she imagined the sound?

A second later, a slight movement caught her attention. She swiveled, peering down at a huddled figure lying on the bench. Long dark hair spilled over the woman's face, obscuring her features. She shuddered and moaned again.

Was she ill?

Ruth glanced around the empty building, a shiver of nerves rushing through her. Maybe the woman wasn't in her right mind. Maybe she had some contagious disease.

Or maybe, like Ruth, she'd come here to pray for death.

Ruth gathered her courage and approached her. "Hello? Are you in need of help?"

The woman moved, swiping her hair from her face as she attempted to sit up. "*Si, per favore.*" She was hardly more than a girl. But her eyes were glassy and her cheeks feverishly red.

Ruth took a step back. "Are you ill? Can I call someone for you?"

The girl leaned back against the pew, head lolling. "No one to call."

No one? How could that be? Such a lovely young thing. Or she would be when she was cleaned up. "Where do you live, dear?"

The girl shook her head. “Nowhere.”

Ruth straightened. She may have led a somewhat sheltered life, but she knew when someone was in trouble, and this girl was hanging on by a thread. “Wait here. I’ll be right back.”

She rushed out of the church, a new energy to her step. Tonight the pastor would earn every penny of his meager paycheck and leave his warm bed to give them a ride to her house.