For one lightning moment, I don’t recognize her, fail to see Nicole Renard in the girl who has just entered the room. The long black hair that fell to her shoulders is gone. Now her hair is cut short and combed straight and flat, with wisps touching her ears. Her cheek-bones are more prominent and her eyes seem bigger. I look at her as if studying a painting in a museum, searching for that glimpse of mischief in her eyes, but see only the question there…

She’s wearing a green cardigan, unbuttoned, a white blouse underneath and a green plaid skirt, the uniform of the school. I had seen other students dressed the same way when I entered the academy grounds earlier that afternoon.

As I knelt on the floor, the door opened and Mother Margaret, the Sister Superior, swept into the classroom, followed by the most beautiful girl I had ever seen.

‘This is Nicole Renard. She is a new student here, all the way from Albany, New York.’

Nicole Renard was small and slender, with shining black hair that fell to her shoulders. The pale purity of her face reminded me of the statue in St Therese in the niche next to Father Balthazar’s confessional in St Jude’s Church. As she looked modestly down at the floor, our eyes met and a flash of recognition passed between us, as if we had known each other before. Something else flashed in her eyes, too, a hint of mischief as if she were telling me we were going to have good times together. Then, the flash was gone and she was St Therese once more, and I knelt like a knight at her feet, her sword having touched my shoulder.

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