Chapter One

Anetta

You can find him by following the leaping shadows along the walls of the school corridor, for Father Vivaldi often paces there and waves his arms about. This time he's so intent on whatever he hears in his head, he doesn't notice us dancing around him or running right past. Luisa Benedetto plays tag, reaching up and tugging his sleeve, yet he flicks away her hand as if it's a pesty little bird and doesn't even look down. Almost fourteen, she is small for her age and sometimes seems younger. But her voice is as large as a room and so sweet that I carry the tones that she makes in my mind so I'll hear them

when I'm feeling sad. My own voice is pleasant enough. Somewhat, they say, like my face, which is almost the very same shade as my very pale hair. When I've looked in a glass, which we're not encouraged to do, I could see there was no counterpoint between the two to make me seem pretty and overshadow the marks of the pox.

Father tells me it would be wise to spend more of my time on the viola d'amore than on my singing, that I have an ear and a touch for the instrument. I would like to explain how I have a heart for it as well. But perhaps he's already aware of this in the same way that I am aware when he loses himself to the music he's making while walking the halls.

"Ouch!" says Maria.

The distracted man has given her a good swat in the face with one of his flapping hands.

"*Scusi,* my dear," he says, snapping back to the life all around him. He rubs the slight red mark on her cheek while she looks up, her dark eyes hurt but resigned. We're becoming used to these antics again. He studies his watch. "Surely it isn't so late. Almost the middle of day."

"It's a half hour past violin ensemble for the beginners," I tell him. "Maestra dei Cori has sent me to say they've been waiting long enough."

Father has been a *maestro* here, except during the few years just past, for most of the life I remember. But I don't really feel completely at ease with this priest since

his unexplained recent return. Perhaps I should not have used Maestra's own words.

Often called the Red Priest because of his startling red hair, Father shakes the cap of it in dismay. Not at me, I'm relieved to find, for he seems to look into himself as he spits out a litany of complaints. From what I can gather, his great efforts to arrive before first bell seem to be complicated by the fact that the apartment of his parents, where he and his many brothers and an unmarried sister or two still live, is always in a state of upheaval.

"How do I do it? How do I lose track of time in this way? It cannot be so many hours since dawn and my father's rap on my door. Today Guido went off with my only clean shirt, and I had to search for a worn one of Tomaso's. I came as fast as I could, can you believe it, still carrying the notes that I heard in my dream. Where does the day go?"

He is not really asking me anything. But if he were, I would tell him the way he goes out of himself when the music takes hold. Afterward, he must know it, just as I do after living inside a concerto for hours on end.

"It is your fault, you know," he says, taking small steps in a hurry to keep up with me. My feet are much longer than his but have finally ceased growing, I'm happy to say. At fifteen, I am well rounded and tall. But my body seems awkward beside his slight frame.

"It's the new concerto for your performance on

Sunday. I have some ideas for the harmonies right near the end of the second movement."

He has discovered the dissonant places that troubled me. I should have known that he would. If he did but look at me at this moment, he'd see the pleasure in my eyes, for even as I hesitated to mention it, I was certain he'd find the problem.

I step more quickly, and he increases the length of his strides.

"Why are you running?" he asks at last, almost breathless. "I cannot keep up."

I had forgotten about the asthma, how it can suddenly visit him. They say that is why he can never perform an entire mass, and why Father Luigi was engaged to do it instead. In fact, though our teacher does indeed wear the skirts of his calling, he does nothing more priestly than hear an occasional confession. Myself, I think his dereliction of sacred duty is really because he cannot focus on anything but the music for long. Quite understandable, it seems to me, for it is rumored that he promised the Board of Governors two masses and vesper settings annually, plus two motets a month and as many concertos as he can devise to display the talents of those girls deemed most eligible. It is also rumored that his music is making something of a stir in Venice and even beyond, and that he will continue to perform sporadic concerts with his father at the Teatro San Angelo. If the tales I've heard of his more ambitious designs are true, it

is hard to think they can be launched from this *ospedale* for orphaned girls.

I try to slow down so he can catch up. It seems my eagerness to share my own news has quickened my step again.

"I am the one to check the *scarfetta* in the church for the babies today," I say at last. Usually the students, the *figli di commun* who study no instrument, do it. But every so often, because Signora Mandano knows how I love it, I get a turn. I sometimes wait and wait in vain for the wheel to move. It is set on its side like a flat disk that can twirl from the street and deliver an infant into the nook of the chapel, leaving the one who brought the baby completely unseen.

"A child, even swaddled, could die unobserved in such a cold place," I tell him.

"Ah, yes," he says absently. It's clear the infants are of no special interest to him until they can lift a violin or sit at the cello. But to me they are . . . not family, really, not true family . . . but something, someone to care for. Though the nurses and attendants fuss over the infants at first, only the women who came here as orphans themselves can truly know. Many of the little ones are as scrawny as runts in a litter of Santa's puppies; some live only a day or two. The fat ones, the ones with no scarring or running sores, are petted and rocked from the start. Even the wet nurses choose them if given a choice.

Only when I am certain that Father is truly headed

toward the classroom do I enter the chapel and go directly to the *scarfetta.* On my way back across the narrow Calle della Pietà, I stop to watch the gondoliers navigating in and out of the lagoon and to look at the gleaming dome and spire of the San Giorgio Maggiore across the water. For a moment, I feel the warm sun on my face and I wonder at my expectations when checking the wheel and my great disappointment when it is empty—as it is today, as it has been all week. There are plenty of babies to care for already, so why is there always a feeling like Carnival whenever a new little one is deposited there? How remarkable it has always seemed that by just a turn of the wheel by unseen hands, another small shining soul can enter the life at the Pietà.

"No baby today?" asks Luisa as she comes up behind me on her way to Father's repair shop. She gives me a poke with her broken bow. "Good. Less crying. Less laundry for Signora Mandano." She raises the bow above her head and twirls. The loose strings fly about like long spiderwebs. "I will never have babies. If I did, I would also give them away."

Luisa is different from all of the others. For reasons none of us understand, she has a real mother who visits at least three or four times every year and a real last name.

I can tell that Father has arrived inside the classroom because the beginning ensemble members have all started tuning at once, sounding like all of the tabbies

together that cavort in the alley each night. Then suddenly silence, that pure space of time before touching the bow to the strings when all faces are turned to the stick and waiting to bring forth the very first notes. I can feel the anticipation from here.

"Anetta, you're dreaming again," says Signora Mandano. She hands me a stack of clean linens. "Give these to the girls in the nursery."

How I wish I were holding another new baby instead.

"Don't worry," says Rosalba, on her way from the street where she, too, must have been sent on some mission. She is also fifteen but seems wiser in so many ways. She knows how I dote on the infants. "There are more bastards in Venice than ever before. They say that the present doge celebrates excess."

Rosalba is just like her name, a blossoming rose with skin pale and soft and all shades of the pink you can find in one petal. Her features are small but so bright and expressive, her eyes as black as a man's shoe buttons. "Captivating" is how I have heard her described and "so competent," but never "beautiful." I think she might be if allowed one day to wear a patch on her cheek, one near her small nose perhaps. She plays all the wind instruments well but will not agree to be called Maestra dell'Oboe, no matter her skill at it. *Rosalba* is what she insists upon, laughing and saying, "If only I were allowed to learn the krummhorn. I would gladly be *maestra* of that." As she well knows, there is no instruction here in

brass instruments and thus no possibility of such a fanciful title.

"Remember," she says, "there is rehearsal at three in the church for the program on Sunday."

I have not forgotten but am surprised that she has remembered, considering her lighthearted — some would say careless — approach to learning the music each week. The thought of the Violin Concerto in B-flat makes me feel weak, however. There are so many passages I haven't mastered. Since Father Vivaldi came back, we've had a new concerto to learn almost each week, ones in which the main instrument sometimes plays all by itself. Imagine!

Rosalba pauses, then steps down and loops one firm arm through my own.

"I can tell by your knitted brow that this concert troubles you as much as the last. How can that be so when you practice five times to my one and eventually know each note and mark in the score as if you had placed them there yourself?"

"It's the violin," I confess to her. "It isn't my first instrument."

"And if it weren't the violin, it would be the placement of the chairs and music stands, or the breeze from a window that should not have been opened, or the snuffle from a nose that needs to be blown."

I cannot control my laughter. Having been here together since babyhood, Rosalba sometimes seems to

know me better than I know myself. She has been sure of her path since the moment she stepped out the nursery door. I have always watched her for cues and followed a few steps behind.

"You worry too much," she says then, squeezing my hand. "You will do well. You always do well. And besides, in the usual way, we'll be hidden behind the grille. There's nothing whatever to fear."

Nothing except the large critical ears of the dukes and the doge, the ones who hold the futures of most of the girls here in hands that we can't even see.

Luisa is petulant with me when we take our evening leisure. There is a pallor about her, and I think she may be feeling unwell. Rosalba thinks I coddle Luisa, but she appears so young and fragile at times and in more need of protection than some of the others. I myself am not truly at ease in a group, and am just waiting until all the others retire and I can go unobserved to the chapel to practice my solo for the performance on Sunday. Despite Rosalba's reassurances that I will do well, I'm always in fear that I will not be as prepared as Father Vivaldi expects.

The chapel is so silent at night and completely dark except for the flickering light from the votives that burn on the side altars. The dome is as black as a deep upside-down hole. The candle I carry gives just enough light to guide my steps up to the loft of the choir where we

perform. Some instruments have been left behind since the practice session in the late afternoon. Their graceful shapes and polished wood come alive for an instant when I pass among them, then fade into darkness again. My viola d'amore sits in the shadows, near the organ, lonely and proud, as if it is waiting for me. But it is the violin that must shine in this concerto, an instrument that Father Vivaldi has restored himself. When I bend to attach the candle to the music stand, I discover the new bow Father has left for me. Yet I don't begin bowing at once. I lean back in my narrow chair and absorb all the quiet and calm. The other girls say they would never come here at nighttime alone. But though it does feel ghostly and strange at the start, if I say a quick *Ave* to Santa Maria of the Visitation, for whom the chapel is named, my fears are always quieted. The same is not true about my fear of this new music. The score before me has *L'estro armonico* written along the margin in Father Vivaldi's hand. Seeing the music for only the third time, I am still amazed at its technical difficulty. So much syncopated bowing. Such lengthy crescendos and diminuendos. The sensation I get from just looking at the score is in fact one of great extravagance and unbelievable adventure. I am pleased that he has chosen me to play the second solo part with our best violinist, Anna Maria, but am intimidated as well.

I first tune my instrument with the aid of the continuo, and then, as this is not my first time alone with my

part, I work for quite a time on the burdensome measures that had confounded me in rehearsal. When at last I feel ready to tackle the whole of the piece, I begin slowly, delighting in the silvery tone of this violin and making my way as I would across the slippery stepping stones in the kitchen garden after a rain. But the challenge of the notes themselves begins to take hold, and I soon find that I must deal with Father's many arpeggios in such an unusual manner, and have to modulate so abruptly that it keeps my entire attention until, at the end of the solo, I am completely spent.

When I hesitate at the last arpeggio, I hear a noise—very faint and chirpy like a bird. Absently, I think how perhaps one flew in through a chink in the dome and is caught for the night. It has happened before. I try the difficult place where the change of bow occurs on a note off the beat, then I accelerate the tempo a little and play the *ritornello* in a different key, the way it is transcribed. I think I can master it this way. I only hope Father agrees. He will notice my sensitive playing of the difficult crescendos, I'm sure, and approve. Nothing passes his perceptive ear.

There again! I hear it. A little splash of a chirp. Or could it be whimpering. Yes. Growing louder, escalating into a cry. I drop my bow and run to the choir steps as fast as I can. I'm halfway down the dark stairway before I realize I've forgotten my candle and must go back for it. As I start down once again, I hear the thin wail rising

over the clunk of my footsteps, and hurry to the nook at the back of the church. Just as I suspected, there is a baby on the wheel, red-faced and screaming. It is cold in here tonight, and the child is swaddled in nothing but a rough damp blanket. There are remnants of bloody afterbirth on her small body, and the cord looks as if it has been bitten rather than cut. Her tiny fists punch at the air as if she is already angry at this world she has so recently entered. I scoop her into my arms and press her against the warmth of my chest, sticking the end of a finger between her blue lips. She gulps little sobs between attempts at sucking the make-believe teat.

When I rush with her across the street and into the light of the nursery, I cannot help but observe that her face is unscarred and beautiful, one of the favored ones. The women gather around in surprise and delight when they see her.

"It is so late," says the night nurse. "Who would leave a newborn all night in an empty church? How fortunate that you found her, Anetta."

"Whoever left her must have heard me practicing the concerto. They must have known I would find her."

I am faint with the excitement of something so unexpected, so seemingly divine, as if Santa Maria had placed this infant there herself.

"May I name her?" I ask.

"Names," says the nurse with a sigh. "There are never enough names to go round!"

"But I have one. It's perfect."

"All right. Let us hear it."

"Concerta," I say. "Concerta Maria."

She thinks for a minute, then nods her head.

"It will do. There is no other."

From the first, I feel that her words say more than she knows.