

1.

A Promise

Cremona, Italy

1715

On a cold February afternoon, Anna Maria lay on her bed, crying. Snow fell outside the window. It covered the balcony and the narrow street below.

Sister Bianca, Papa's nurse, came to the door. "Hush, child." She had a frown on her thin face. "Your father wants a last word with you."

Terror pierced Anna Maria's heart. "Is Papa going to die?"

“He will enter the Kingdom of Heaven,”
said the sister.

“No! I want him to stay here.” Anna Maria bolted out her door and hurried down the dark hall. The sound of Papa’s coughing came from his room. It was the same cough that had taken Mama away last year.

Anna Maria smoothed her blond curls back and wiped her eyes. Then she opened the door and looked in. A candle burned on the table beside the big bed.

Papa lay propped up on pillows. Anna Maria stared at the side of his face. His long, pointed nose was like a beak.

Then she ran to his bed. “Papa!”

He turned his head toward her and his eyes shone. “Annina, my angel.”

“Papa, don’t leave me!” She clasped his hand. It was rough and stained from making violins.

“You will not be alone, Annina. I have made a new violin for you,” he said. “Go and look in my workshop.”

Anna Maria did not move. She had to hold on to Papa.

“Quickly now, bring it to me,” he urged.

Anna Maria ran down the stairs and across the snowy courtyard. In his workshop, a new violin case lay on the bench. She picked it up and hurried back. Opening the lid, she lifted the violin out of the case. Its golden wood glowed as if lit from within.

“Oh, Papa, how beautiful.”

“There is an inscription inside,” he said. She held the violin to the light and read.

For Annina

Play and you shall hear my voice

Nicolo Lombardini

Made in the Year 1715



“It is true,” Papa said. “I kept the violin here in my room for a month before varnishing it. And while I slept, my soul entered its body.” He paused to gather strength. “Sister Bianca will take you to live at the Pietà in Venice.”

Anna Maria shook her head. That was a home for orphan girls. “I don’t want to go, Papa. I want to stay with you.”

“You cannot stay with me, Annina.” He took her hand. “Your mother was happy there when she was a girl. And so was Sister Bianca.”

Anna Maria kept shaking her head while Papa had a coughing spell. She could not imagine Sister Bianca being happy anywhere.

At last he went on. “Antonio Vivaldi will be your violin teacher.”

“But I like Maestro Cavalli,” said Anna Maria.

Papa held up his hand for silence. “He is a good teacher. But Don Vivaldi is a great one. Do you remember when he came here to buy a violin? You played for him. He said you were a most talented child.”

Anna Maria remembered, even though she was only five years old then. Now she was nine, and everything was changing.

“But, Papa, I don’t want you to leave me,” she said.

“Annina, my angel. As long as you have your violin, I will be with you. And you will be safe at the Pietà.” He touched the violin. “Now, play for me. The largo from Vivaldi’s D Minor Concerto. You know, *dum dee-dee dum.*”

Anna Maria knew. After tuning, she tucked the violin under her chin. Then she closed her eyes and drew the bow across the strings. She let herself be carried along by



the music and the sweet, clear voice of the violin. Papa's voice.

After the last note, Papa reached out and touched her cheek. "You have such talent, Annina. Promise me you will go to the Pietà and study with Don Vivaldi."

Anna Maria bit her lips together and nodded. Invisible hands seemed to be gripping her throat. She could not speak.