

Chapter One

Iron Bars

The day I decided to take my fate into my own hands began much like any other. As soon as I was dressed, I headed to the harpsichord salon to practice. The maestro had finally returned from Venice and would arrive shortly. I was anxious to show him how much I'd learned in his absence. But when I turned the corner near Mamma's sitting room, a clash of angry voices stopped me. Mamma was arguing with Father, something she never did. And something she shouldn't be doing now, as she was heavy with child.

I tiptoed to the sitting room door. With one hand on the wall, I leaned close. The edges of the decorative plasterwork dug into my fingers as Mamma said, "Did Maria request this herself?"

My hand relaxed. They weren't arguing about me. But knowing my sister's fate was intertwined with mine, I pressed forward again.

"No," Father replied. "It was *my* decision, one I would have carried out long ago if not for the Sardinian occupation. It's time she had a tutor who specializes in mathematics, one who can nurture her natural aptitude for the subject. He will teach her astronomy as well."

“Astronomy!” Mamma screeched. “Maria already spends too much time with books. Haven’t you noticed her pallor? The throat illness took a greater toll on her than the other girls.”

I pictured Mamma seated in the high-backed armchair near the window, her legs resting atop the footstool cushion she herself had embroidered. No doubt her normally calm blue-gray eyes flashed steely as she said, “Maria needs fresh air and physical activity, not more studies.”

“Very well,” Father said. “We will increase the frequency of her dance lessons. And I will order her to keep a window open in her study at all times. Come spring, I’ll have her tutors move her lessons to the garden.”

“They will simply stuff her head with more book learning,” Mamma said. “What of her *real* education, the one she would have received at convent school? Maria should be cultivating practical skills, such as sewing and embroidery, and how to manage a home—skills she will need to be a useful wife and mother.”

“There will be time enough for that,” Father said. “She is young.”

“Young? Perhaps her quiet manner has led you to forget that your eldest daughter is fourteen! Instead of hiring more tutors, you should be making arrangements for her future. For her betrothal, and Emilia’s, too.”

My betrothal! I clasped my hands to my bodice. It was the subject I’d both longed for and feared, especially since seeing Zia Delia last week.

At thirteen, I’d never heard either of my parents speak of my betrothal before. But that hadn’t kept me from painting a portrait of my future husband in my mind.

He’d be as tall as Father, if not taller, with mysterious dark brown eyes. And even more important, he’d love music as I did and encourage my meager talent.

I turned my ear to the wall so as not to miss a word.

“Though, I dare say,” Mamma went on, “given Maria’s religious devotion, she’d be happier as a nun.”

“Don’t even suggest such a thing!” Father’s voice crescendoed. “I will not have her extraordinary talents hidden away in a convent.”

A chair scraped. Father must have stood up. “Do not concern yourself about our daughters’ futures, Woman. That is *my* responsibility. I assure you I will do what is best for them *and* for the family.”

Father’s staccato footsteps approached. I gathered my skirts and hurried away on tiptoe.

When I was out of earshot, I let my heels drop and continued down the drafty corridor to the harpsichord salon. Father’s words echoed in my mind. He’d promised to do what was best for his daughters *and* for the family.

Of the seven children in our family, four were girls, with perhaps another on the way. It would be burdensome—if not impossible—to provide marriage dowries for that many daughters. At least two of us would end up nuns, whether we had a calling or not. Such had been the fate of Zia Delia, Mamma’s youngest sister.

In my mind, I saw again the long, narrow convent parlor where Mamma and I had visited Zia Delia last week. The parlor was separated from the nuns’ quarters by two large windows. Iron bars covered the window openings, crisscrossing the space where glass should be. A linen drape hung over the bars on the nuns’ side.

When we’d arrived that day, Mamma had eased herself into a wicker chair facing the first window, directly across from Zia Delia. We couldn’t actually *see* my aunt, only her shadow on the drape. I had stood with my hand on the back of Mamma’s chair as she’d tried to make conversation. The other nuns talked and laughed with their visitors. Zia Delia said nothing.

Mamma began describing Father’s recent name-day celebration to Zia. “After the meal, we adjourned to the harpsichord salon. There, we listened to Maria recite two epic Greek poems she’d translated herself. Carlo said it was the best present she could have bestowed upon him.” Mamma gave an exasperated sigh. “Really, he praises that girl too much! If

heaven hadn't blessed Maria with such a humble nature, she'd be unbearably prideful by now." Mamma shook her head. "Afterward, Emilia gave a spectacular performance on the harpsichord, but Carlo barely thanked *her*."

So Mamma had noticed, too.

As I recalled Father's disappointment, the room started to spin. I gripped the wicker chair tighter and breathed in deeply until my bodice stays dug into my ribs.

"Carlo's behavior was terribly rude," Mamma went on, "especially compared to Count Riccardi's impeccable manners. *He* praised Emilia profusely, saying how he'd never heard anyone her age play so beautifully, boy or girl."

I took another deep breath. Mamma didn't understand. The count was just being polite.

Zia Delia's shadow shifted. "What did you play, Emilia?"

Surprised by her question, I released my grip on the chair. "Three of Scarlatti's sonatas and Rameau's Suite in A Minor."

Zia bowed her head. "Secular music is strictly forbidden within these walls." Her voice held both sorrow and longing.

How could such beautiful music be forbidden? I shivered at the thought.

I stepped forward and pressed my hand against the iron grille. On the opposite side, Zia stood and raised her hand to mine. She pressed hard, as though she could make our fingers touch through the linen drape. But I felt only the cold iron bars.

Zia whispered, "Don't let them do this to *you*." Her shadow gestured behind her, toward the nuns' quarters. "Don't let them lock you away from the music."

I shivered again then shook my head. *Father would never do that to me.*

Now, as I neared the harpsichord salon, I wasn't so sure. Especially not after what I'd just overheard. Or rather, what I *hadn't* overheard.

When Mamma had mentioned arranging for Maria's betrothal and mine, Father had said nothing of me. He'd spoken only of Maria. A spark of envy flared in my chest. *Heaven forgive me*, I prayed silently as I took a quick breath to extinguish the

flame. Even if envy wasn't a sin, I owed Maria too much to blame her for Father's favoritism.

I pushed my thoughts aside. Time was running short. I had to prepare for my lesson—my first with the maestro in nearly three years.

Not long after the Sardinian invasion, Maestro Tomassini had accepted a temporary assignment in Venice. The maestro was a stern taskmaster, but I'd sorely missed his instruction. His return made me grateful Milan was again under Hapsburg rule. I'd be doubly grateful if the maestro's time away had somehow softened his disposition.

I hurried into the harpsichord salon. Paintings of various sizes covered the walls here as in the other rooms. Most depicted scenes from the Bible, though there were also a few landscapes, seascapes, and still lifes. But this room held a work of art not found elsewhere in our palazzo—a harpsichord.

This morning, sunlight from the window fell directly on the harpsichord's open lid, illuminating the painting there of a small white ship sailing across a blue-green sea. The waves carved onto the harpsichord's side panels continued the nautical theme, as did the lovely mermaid figures hugging the base of each of the three legs.

Naldo, our manservant, must have been here already, for fires burned brightly in both hearths, chasing away the December chill. I sat down and began as I always did, by pressing the high-C key. As the note rang out, it merged with the sensation of the quill plucking the string to send a quiver of delight through me. I loved both the sound and the feel of the instrument.

Instead of starting with one of my usual practice pieces, I played the opening allemande of Rameau's Suite in A Minor. I'd hoped the challenging opening would distract me from the dark thoughts hovering at the back of my mind. But playing Rameau only reminded me of Zia's words, "Don't let them lock you away from the music." Which would be worse, to be deprived of music or of love?

My fingers slipped, striking an ugly chord that set my teeth on edge. I dropped my hands to my lap.

I didn't understand—why couldn't Father let Maria take the veil? She would truly welcome a life of devotion to God.

Yet Father'd been angered by the mere suggestion. *I will not have her extraordinary talents hidden away in a convent.*

The chiming of the Basilica bells pulled me into the present. Maestro Tomassini would be here any moment. I raised my hands to the keys and began my first practice piece—a piece the maestro used to have me play blindfolded.

Suddenly, I knew what I must do. I had to make Father feel the same way about *my* talents as he did Maria's.

My fingers stumbled again as a voice in my head said, *But you're not good enough.*

To which my heart replied, *then I must become good enough.*

