

Chapter One

WHAT CHANGED AFTER A LONG NIGHTTIME CONVERSATION

We're new in the city, but I already know my way around pretty well. And today, when my father sent me out on an errand for him, I had the chance to show it.

Actually, he didn't ask me to go. I volunteered. I heard Mother say to Father that our servant was sick, so we should start preparing for the Sabbath today—we never let the servants see what we do on the Sabbath and Jewish holidays. Everyone thinks we're pure Christians, and heaven help us if they ever find out we're not.

We keep chickens in the yard, and when the servants can't see, Father takes one to the home of Don Anton Martinez. There, in a hidden place in his courtyard, Don Anton slaughters the chicken according to Jewish rules.

Our relatives, who've been living in this city for a long time, showed Father and me how to find the home of Don Anton and told us that we had to be very careful. You put the chicken that's going to be slaughtered in a sack and make sure it's completely hidden. And, of course, you don't tell anyone where you're going or why. You can only go into the courtyard if you see the

agreed upon sign in the window—five flowerpots. If there are only four, you leave and come back later.

At first, my parents couldn't decide whether to let me take the chicken to Don Anton. They kept asking if I knew the way, and if I knew how to hide the chicken, and if I knew about the flowerpots. Finally, they agreed to let me do it, because my father—who's a doctor—had to go to treat a duke and visit other patients, and he didn't know whether he'd be back before evening.

Mother put the cackling chicken into a sack, and I hid it under my tunic. "Just make sure you keep quiet in there," I told the chicken silently. And to my parents I said, "Don't worry, everything will be fine." I could see in their eyes that they were proud of me, but worried about me as well. I left quickly before they could change their minds.

Two hours later, I was on my way out of Don Anton Martinez's courtyard with the slaughtered chicken hidden in the sack under my tunic. At least I didn't have to worry about its cackling anymore!

"Go quickly," Don Anton Martinez urged me, "And don't stop anywhere!"

"I know," I said.

I was so happy that I felt as if I were walking on air. I'd carried out my mission perfectly and I'd be home soon. Mother would pluck the chicken quickly, and I'd bury the feathers in the ground. Even though I wanted to run, I made myself walk slowly. If you run in the street, you make people curious. I walked as if I weren't in a hurry to get anywhere, and I looked straight ahead.

“Hey, you,” I heard someone call, and I knew he meant me.

“Look at that Portuguese,” a voice said, and then I turned around and saw a gang of boys in the courtyard I’d just passed. They were looking at me curiously, but there was also something threatening in their eyes.

I wondered how they knew just by glancing at me that I was from Portugal. I was afraid, because for them, the Portuguese and the New Christians (*cristianos nuevos*) are the same. I knew it would not be a good idea to stop, so I started walking faster.

“Wait,” a strong voice ordered me, and other voices joined it. “Wait.”

I wanted to run away, but I stood my ground. I was afraid that the boys would chase me all the way home, and I didn’t want them to know where I lived. My heart was pounding wildly. But I stood there and faced them.

“A Portuguese, right?” asked a boy who was probably the leader of the gang. I recognized his strong voice as the one who’d first called out to me.

I nodded and turned to walk away.

“Stand still,” the same boy ordered me. “What’s your name?”

“Manuel . . .”

“I could see right away that he’s one of the *cristianos nuevos*,” one of the boys said jeeringly, and added with hatred, “*Judaizante*.”

“No,” I protested, “That’s not true!”

“Don’t lie, Manuel!” the gang leader rebuked me. “All the Portuguese here are New Christians, and you’re all really Jews.”

“That’s a lie,” I said. “I’m not a *judaizante*. I’m a Christian like you. Oh Holy Mary,” I said, looking upward. “I have to go.”

“First let’s see what you have there,” the leader of the gang said as he came over to me. “There, under your *capa*.” He tried to lift my tunic.

The only thing I can do now is run, I thought. But what would happen if they caught up to me? And running away is like admitting you’re guilty.

I had no idea what to do, and I was so scared that I almost fainted. But then I heard a voice that seemed to come from inside me, not my own voice—and certainly not the dead chicken’s! It said to me, “Don’t be afraid, Manuel, stand up straight and show them how broad your shoulders are. Take a step forward and tell that boy it’s none of his business.”

I did what that inner voice told me, and the boys looked at me in amazement. In the silence, I could hear the beating of my heart. But the feeling of power left me as suddenly as it had come upon me and I started to be afraid again.

The boys must have sensed this. They moved closer to me, and the one who’d first called me “*judaizante*” took a deep breath and came up to me with his chest puffed out. “Show us what you have under your *capa*,” he said, staring at me with hatred in his eyes.

“He probably stole something,” one of the boys said.

I shook my head emphatically. I couldn’t say a word. My tongue was stuck to the roof of my mouth.

Just then, we heard the sound of galloping horses, and we turned to look at the horsemen who were riding



through the alley. I heard that same inner voice order me: “Now’s your chance. Run as fast as you can and don’t look back.”

I didn’t run toward home. I turned around and raced back in the direction of Don Anton Martinez’s courtyard. I didn’t stop. I just kept running.

The boys chased me, yelling, “Thief, Portuguese thief! Catch him!”

It was so hot in Seville that day that the streets were practically empty and no one stopped me. The sweat dripping from my forehead blurred my vision. I could not see where I was going. And I didn’t dare look back.

I ran as fast as I’d ever run before—not an easy thing to do with a chicken swinging from side to side in a sack under your tunic!

I didn’t stop until I got to the river. Everything seemed to be whirling around in front of me, but I realized that it was my own panic that was making me feel like everything was topsy-turvy. When a little time had passed and I saw that the boys who had been chasing me were nowhere to be seen, I calmed down a bit.

I sat down under a tree not far from the large river, the Guadalquivir. I felt the need to say a prayer of thanks. Not out loud, of course, but in my heart I gave thanks to God, the God of the Jews, the God that I had felt existed even before my father talked to me about Him. I don’t know how or why, but I suddenly felt strong again, and I knew that even if those boys showed up now, I wouldn’t be afraid of them anymore.

I remembered the night my father told me that we weren’t Christians, as I had thought until then—the

night my whole life turned completely around. The things he told me that night opened the door to a new world for me, a majestic world that was wonderful and awe-inspiring at the same time. From that night on, I'd been waiting for the chance to prove to my parents that I deserved the trust they'd put in me.

The evening had begun with a big meal, and then I had gone down to the cellar with Father and we talked almost till dawn. Sitting down there in the candlelight, Father began, "Manuel, I hope you have eaten your fill. Because we will fast until tomorrow night."

Then he explained that we were not Christians as I had been brought up to believe, but that we were Jews. He talked for many hours about who we were and what we believe and why we must keep our beliefs a secret. He told me why Jews fast on Yom Kippur, and I was proud that he was going to let me fast too.

Now that I knew we were Jews, so many things made sense to me.

Born in 1622, I was just a little kid when we fled from our home in Bragança, Portugal, to Spain, but I always wondered why we left. We didn't come straight here, to Seville. At first, we were in the capital, Madrid.

How I suffered in that big city. The children used to bully us for reasons I didn't understand, me and my little brother Juan, who is four years younger than I am. All they had to do was see us and they'd start yelling: "Dirty Portuguese." And they called us even worse things—*marranos* and *sucios*.

Juan didn't want to go outside because of them. But our small apartment in Madrid was so crowded that we

could hardly move. We had to go outside sometimes.

One day, Remedios, our big sister, went to buy something in the market. Juan went with her and she held his hand the whole time. But when her hands were full of vegetables and Juan had to hold onto her dress, he lost his grip and they lost each other in the crowd.

The market was close to where we lived, and Juan could have found the way back by himself. But he was terrified and started to cry. In an instant, a crowd of people and children were standing around him. They asked him why he was crying, and when he didn't answer, a man, who was with his two children, forced him to go home with them.

In the man's house, they gave him a piece of cake and begged him to calm down. They said to little Juan, "We're your friends. Don't be afraid of us."

Juan wasn't afraid of them. But he wouldn't talk to them. He just sat there and didn't say a word.

They said, "We know your family. You're from Portugal, *cristianos nuevos*."

Juan kept silent, and then the man said, "We'll take you home, and tomorrow we'll come to your courtyard—so you can play with the children."

And they brought him home. Juan told us all that, but in a mixed-up way, and I tried to make sense out of what he said. Because what he told us was very important.

It seems that we were very lucky that Juan had refused to speak. If he had spoken, we might have gotten into a lot of trouble. The man who took my little brother to his house had been waiting to latch onto a lost child in the market. He worked with the

Inquisition, and his specialty was to get children to talk and say incriminating things about their families.

We found out that other Portuguese children had been caught in his net, and after they chattered away—the way young children do—their parents were taken to the Inquisition cellars to be interrogated. It was enough for a child to say that his family dipped their hands in water before eating, and they would be accused of observing Jewish customs.

I saw that man when he came to our house with his children to wait for Juan. He looked like a nice person, and I wasn't surprised that he was so good at his job. They say that's the devil's way, to come disguised as a "good fellow" who only wants the best for you. He came a few times to trap Juan, and if we hadn't moved to Seville, maybe he would have succeeded.

Here I am, getting carried away in the flood of my memories when I'm still in the middle of telling the story of what happened when I left Don Anton Martinez's courtyard. As I sat under the tree, I thought about my sister, Remedios, who would probably be very glad to hear about what I'd done.

Remedios didn't know that they'd allowed me to go to have the chicken slaughtered. She'd left the house early in the morning to help Aunt Tereza prepare for the Sabbath. If she'd been home, maybe she'd have objected to my going. Still, sitting under the tree, I thought about how she always worries that something bad might happen to me or Juan. Now, when she comes home, she'll find out that I really can be trusted. What I'd done would prove to her that I'm a grown-up.