



THE
SPARROW

A NEW MUSICAL

DETAILED SYNOPSIS

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BASED ON "STORIA DI UNA CAPINERA" BY
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BOOK AND LYRICS
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MUSIC
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ADDITIONAL MATERIALS
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ACT I

Scene 1. The convent chapel, September 1854.

A young novice has died of cholera, the third loss of the week. Father Anselmo, the convent chaplain, decides to send the surviving novices home until the epidemic passes. The Mother Superior, Alma, protests, certain that one taste of freedom will undo years of discipline. She is silenced. Maria, who has lived behind the convent walls since childhood, is among those being sent away. Her closest friend Marianna tries to lift her spirits, but Maria is afraid of what waits beyond the cloister. Marianna gives her a silver rosary so that God will travel with her. Alone, Maria prays not to be led astray.

Scene 2. The convent gates, later that morning.

Giovanni Scuderi waits to take his daughter home. Ten years have passed since he last stood beside her. As he sings of her, the scene dissolves into a flashback to 1844, when he first brought Young Maria to the convent. He told her then the story of the Ant and the Grasshopper, hoping that one day she would understand and forgive him. The flashback closes with the small girl prying her fingers loose from his coat as the convent gate closes behind her. Returning to the present, Maria emerges. Father and daughter embrace stiffly. He marvels that she looks just like her mother, who died years earlier in childbirth. They walk home together. Maria does not look back.

Scene 3. The family kitchen, that afternoon.

Maria returns to a house she barely recognizes. A sparrow chirps in a cage in the corner. She is greeted by her stepmother Rosalia, who keeps a measured distance, and by her younger half-sister Giuditta, who rushes to embrace her. Maria flinches at the touch. Giuditta wishes she could let the sparrow out of its cage. Maria looks at the bird and sees herself: he has lived in a cage all his life, she says, and would not survive outside. Her father enters, beaming, unable to stop looking at her. Giuditta, sensing herself eclipsed, escapes outside. Giovanni insists Maria go with her. After they leave, Rosalia warns Giovanni not to make it so obvious that Maria is his favourite.

Scene 4. The orchard, that afternoon.

Maria is dazed by the brightness of the sky, having seen no sky beyond the convent courtyard for ten years. Giuditta asks awkward questions about convent life. Maria recites the schedule of the canonical hours by heart, breathless. The two sisters share a brief moment of real amusement. Maria notices the mulberry trees they used to tend together as children, and they begin to remember in song. The mood shifts when Maria kneels to pray rather than continue the conversation. Giuditta withdraws. Alone, Maria sings of the wonders of the natural world and wonders whether God can be found here too, beneath the open sky. An intrusive voice intrudes, repeating Alma's warning about the sparrow that yearns for more. Maria runs after her sister.

Scene 5. The orchard, the following morning.

Nino, the eldest son of the neighbouring Valentini family, picks mulberries from the trees that border the two properties, dreaming of trading his lawyer's gown for a life on the soil. Maria is hanging laundry on a clothesline nearby. When Maria sees Nino half undressed, she hides behind a sheet. He thinks he has caught Giuditta, with whom his family expects him to marry. He is mortified to discover Maria's voice instead. As he scrambles to dress, his crooked buttons draw an involuntary smile from her. The smile vanishes when an inner voice reminds her of the convent's warnings about men. Maria's hand cramps painfully. Nino notices but says nothing as she hurries away.

Scene 6. The kitchen, later that morning.

The Scuderi and Valentini families meet for breakfast. Giovanni mentions that Giuditta and Nino have grown rather fond of one another and that the families are waiting for him to ask the question. Nino arrives, bows over Giuditta's hand, and lifts it to his lips, but his eyes meet Maria's across the room. Rosalia notices.

A long montage spans autumn and winter 1854. Through it, Giuditta watches Nino and Maria circling each other at family gatherings, in the vineyard, on country walks. Each of the three young people sings privately of expectations weighing on them: Nino's father pushes law school, Maria's vows are presumed inevitable, Giuditta has been promised Nino since childhood. By December, the families have all but agreed there will be a wedding.

Scene 7. The parlour, mid-December 1854.

Maria writes letters to Marianna. The family leaves for a Christmas party from which Maria has been excluded. Alone, Maria opens a window to find Nino, who has come to confide in her about his struggles with his father. She reads aloud her latest letter from Marianna, who has decided not to return to Santa Chiara but to work in the cholera wards of Palermo instead. The news shakes Maria. Nino notices her hands cramping again and is appalled when she explains the convent's punishments. He gently suggests that if Marianna has found holiness outside the cloister, perhaps the convent is not the only place where God lives. He sings of the possibility of more. Maria resists but joins him on the refrain. They are interrupted by Rosalia returning for forgotten gloves. Nino slips into the garden. Rosalia notices the cold air but says nothing of substance, almost tenderly calling Maria a good girl. Outside, Nino sings a brief reprise to himself, certain that his heart could soar.

Scene 8. The parlour, early January 1855.

The Christmas party is in full swing. Maria, drawn out from her writing desk by Nino's younger sister Annetta, is invited by her father to dance the Scacciapinzeri, a tarantella meant to chase away bad thoughts. The number unfolds as a long communal dance. During it, Margherita, Nino's mother, takes him aside and gently confronts him about his attention to Maria. She promises to speak with Salvatore, his father, on his behalf.

At Margherita's request, Maria sings the Salve Regina. Her trained voice silences the room. Salvatore jokes generously that no wonder the convent will not let her go. Maria slips outside. Nino finds her in the garden with her cloak. They dance together, just the two of them. He gives her a slightly crushed rose from a nearby bush, apologizing that it is the best he can do. The dance spreads back into the parlour, surrounding her, and for the first time Maria allows herself to move with it. Alone with the rose, she sings a brief reprise: she cannot ignore that there is something more.

A knock at the door interrupts the moment. The quarantine has been lifted. Rosalia turns to Maria with a small, measured smile and tells her it will not be long now before she goes back.

The parlour dissolves. Maria stands alone in an abstract space and prays for guidance. Voices rise from everywhere: the Latin choir intoning the Dies Irae, Rosalia, Giovanni, Nino, Alma, all calling at once. Maria sings the final verse alone, asking God to lead her through the darkest night, accepting that this is how she will find His love.

ACT II

Scene 1. The front porch, the morning after.

A coach waits to take Maria back to the convent at first light. Rosalia has arranged it. When Giovanni admits he was happy to have Maria home, Rosalia turns sharp, reminding him of the years she has given to this house, and warning him not to chase his happiness at the expense of a poor girl's vocation.

Alone, Rosalia confesses her resentment in song. The scene briefly dissolves into a flashback to 1844, where the audience sees her first persuade Giovanni to send Young Maria away: without a dowry, the girl would never find a suitable match. Returning to the present, Rosalia continues, more confessional now.

Nino arrives, alarmed by the early coach. Rosalia tells him Maria felt uncomfortable at the party and asked to leave. He is wounded but accepts. Alone, Rosalia turns to the sparrow in its cage and finishes her song by speaking to the bird.

Scene 2. The convent gates, a couple of hours later.

Maria walks briskly toward the gate, eager to be back inside. Giovanni asks gently if she is afraid that slowing down might bring second thoughts. Maria insists she is where she is meant to stay. They embrace. He tells her he is proud of her.

As Filomena, a young nun, opens the wicket to welcome Maria, Nino arrives, breathless. Filomena gives them two minutes alone. Maria tells him she has found peace. Nino asks why God would have waited ten years to give it to her, why a child was denied a childhood. Maria flinches. He sings of running away together. He lifts her chin gently. She closes her eyes. But when he takes her hand, she withdraws it. She walks through the wicket without looking back. Alone at the gate, Nino offers her his blessing.

Scene 3. Marianna's bedroom and Maria's cell, mid-January to March 1855.

In a duet of letters spanning two months, Marianna writes from Palermo, where she now works in the wards, and Maria writes from her cell. Marianna asks careful questions about Maria's health. Maria deflects, blaming the Lenten fast for her stomach pains. She closes one letter announcing she will take her final vows on the twenty-second of March.

The scene transitions to the chapel on the day of the vows. Anselmo administers them. Alma cuts Maria's hair and places the veil on her head. Maria discreetly picks up a single lock of her hair from the floor and slips it inside her dress.

Alone afterwards, Maria writes to Marianna that it is done. She is now Sister Mary of Sorrows. She confesses that as she prepared for this day, there was only one face she saw when she closed her eyes: Nino's. The letter finished, she sits in long silence, then breaks, asking aloud what she has done.

Scene 4. The convent parlour and Giuditta's bedroom, early April 1855.

Two scenes unfold in parallel. In her bedroom, Rosalia tugs at Giuditta's hair, telling her they have a future to prepare for. In the parlour, Maria sits across the lattice grille from her father, who asks gently if she has been eating.

Giovanni tells Maria that Nino and Giuditta are getting married. The two spaces fold into a shared number, as the family circles around the wedding plans and Maria, behind the grille, struggles to keep her composure.

Once the family leaves, Filomena tells Giovanni in private that Maria has been keeping the Lenten fast severely and now seems to be living on the Host alone. Giovanni asks her to keep watch and to write at once if her health worsens.

Scene 5. The convent chapel, mid-April 1855.

A small procession enters for the office. Anselmo intones Psalm 23 and the sisters answer. Maria's lips move with them but no breath comes. At the line about dwelling in the house of the Lord forever, she collapses. Anselmo refuses to interrupt the office. Alma protests, recalling Sister Agata, but is overruled. Music swells. Marianna and Maria continue their duet of letters. Marianna sings of Maria fading day after day, refusing the bread, the broth, the water. Maria, lying in the convent infirmary, writes back. She came close to breaking, but God was there. Marianna tells her it is not too late to go back. Maria refuses. She cannot fail her family. Marianna yields with sadness and begs her not to waste away. In a postscript, Maria adds that the Abbess has told her that if she eats a loaf of bread, she will be allowed to see the wedding take place from behind the lattice grille.

Scene 6. The convent chapel, late April 1855. Nino and Giuditta's wedding.

The lattice grille separates the inner cloister from the public chapel. The altar begins to rotate, revealing Maria on the inner side, fragile in a wheeled chair, Filomena beside her. Maria searches for Nino among the family on the other side and cannot find him.

The grille rotates again. The audience sees Salvatore with Nino in a side area. Salvatore tells him he is doing the right thing and promises him that after the wedding he will be free to leave the law and work the land. Giuditta enters quietly behind them in her wedding dress and overhears everything. Salvatore exits.

Giuditta steps forward and tells Nino she now understands the bargain: he did not choose her, he agreed to her. As they sing of the marriage they are about to share, the wedding ceremony assembles around them in dumb show. They sing of the lunches they will have to handle, the questions they will dodge, the rings they will wear, the silences they will keep. They close together, telling themselves that all will end well.

The grille rotates a final time. Maria, behind it, watches as Anselmo administers the vows. At the moment Nino says yes, Maria pushes herself up and whispers that he looked at her. The mass ends. As the wedding party prepares to leave, Maria forces herself forward and grasps the iron bars of the grille, calling out Nino's name. Filomena calms her. Anselmo declares the disorder unacceptable and orders Maria to the lower cells, with Agata. Alma protests gently but is silenced.

Scene 7. The lower cells, a couple of days later.

A vaulted stone chamber. Maria lies frail on her bed. Filomena tries to coax her to eat. Maria refuses, telling her it is the only thing that is hers.

Sister Agata, who has been confined here for decades, watches from her bed. She tells Maria that she remembers the day Maria first arrived at the convent, ten years ago, and the scene dissolves briefly into a flashback. Young Maria once greeted Agata gently in the corridor; Alma returned and dragged Agata back to her cell, explaining to the child that Sister Agata had given in to the temptation of the flesh and descended into madness.

Back in the lower cells, Agata sings of her own banishment from the garden of Eden. She sings of the sisters who believe faith is measured by restraint, who learn to silence their desire, who often forget that the sweet throes of love can make the strongest faint. Maria, exhausted, drifts into sleep. Agata closes her song almost tenderly.

Filomena returns with a glass of water. Agata tells her softly that she is shouting into an empty well. Filomena turns and sees that Maria has died.

Scene 8. The kitchen, a few days later.

Morning calm. The sparrow's cage is still in the corner. Giuditta enters with a letter and a small package from the convent. As Giovanni opens the letter, Filomena's voiceover begins, sung over a familiar melody. Sister Maria has passed on to a better life. Filomena has sent in secret a small package containing the silver rosary Maria used to pray with, the petals of a withered rose, and a lock of hair Maria saved for her father.

Nino enters cheerfully, ready for a walk, and registers slowly that something is wrong. Giuditta, almost without thinking, opens the cage. The bird slips from her hands and flies away. Giovanni cannot finish the sentence. Nino takes the letter and reads for himself.

The kitchen vanishes into dim light. Maria emerges from the darkness for her final song. They told her her life was God's design, a life she could not choose. They never saw her heart. But her soul is hers alone, a flame they cannot control. Now she is ready. She will follow His light. The sparrow is finally free, taking her flight. Though she is saying goodbye, those she leaves behind have only to look to the sky to find her, on the farthest star.

