

Abigail's Song  
Hearts and Harmony Book 1  
By Alina Rubin

## Chapter 1

*Death is scarier and more agonizing than I imagined. The oblivion I crave won't come. My lungs, full of water, scream for air. My limbs can no longer move. Only my mind refuses to shut down, to stop telling me to save myself.*

*My clothes expand around me like angel wings. Death, take me already. I want this pain to be over.*

*Darkness fills my eyes. Then a figure made of light appears in the distance and makes her way to me. With trepidation, I recognize my mother. My eyes are no longer an impediment, and I can make out every detail of her white clothes, even the pearls with a cross I've lost as a child.*

*"Abigail, come to me. We'll be together at last."*

*Another figure blocks my mother's way. The figure faces me. She is young and has a heart-shaped face, a classical beauty. When she purses her mouth like she tastes something sour, I recognize Amelia.*

*She shakes her head at me. "You need more time. Rise! Live!"*

*Time for what? I've lost him.*

*The memories tumble into my fading mind. One immerses me. It's the day my mother died, and I met Amelia.*

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I was humming a gentle song over my brother's and sister's cradle as I rocked them in their sleep. The women in the room, my ma's friends, called my name several times, but I didn't look up. Tending to Julian and Josie was my job. Since their birth, I stayed home, watching them while our ma, Nellie Jones, worked at the mill. Whenever I wanted to escape outside to play with other children, the babies' cries pulled me back to their soiled clothes or empty bellies. Ma would get home late, and just before going to sleep, she'd sing to them. They should hear her lullaby even when she's gone.

"You're all still here?" The shrill voice of the landlady, Mrs. Levy, rang from the door.

I continued singing, hoping the dreaded woman won't take notice of me and remark on my dirty clothes or tangled hair.

"I told you to take what you want and go. I need to clean this room for a new tenant. And I must strip the bed." She slammed the door.

My eyes went to the bed where Ma and I slept, huddled to each other for warmth. My brother and sister were born on that bed. And early this morning, on December 24, 1809, my ma died on it.

Ma's three dresses, a coat and a shawl lay on the table where we normally ate our meals. The women avoided the bed, even though Ma's body was no longer there. It was deep in the

frozen earth of the cemetery.

A cough seized my chest. The women turned and stared at me with alarm.

“Is she sick with whatever killed Nellie?” Verna’s mouth twisted. “Abigail, don’t stand over the babies. They’ll catch your illness.”

She pulled me to the table, where Mabel and Lulu inspected Ma’s dresses.

“This yellow one would look good on me,” Mabel declared. “Nellie wore it to the church picnic with her pearls.”

“Where are the pearls now?” Verna asked and the women gazed at me again.

I lowered my head. “I’ve lost them.”

Verna grabbed my arm and shook it. “Where? Tell me.”

My body trembled. The guilt stiffened my breathing. I began to cry.

“Abigail Jones,” Verna hissed. “I need all I can get to raise Julian and Josie. I made a promise to your mother and to God when I agreed to be their godmother. If you don’t want them and my own son to starve, you’ll tell me where those pearls are.”

Because of my foolishness, my poor brother and sister would go hungry. Wails closed my throat and I doubled-over, coughing.

“Leave her be,” Mabel said. “She lost those pearls a while ago. Nellie was so distraught that day.”

“She should’ve sold them when she could,” Lulu added. “They looked like real jewels.”

They were real jewels. Ma said so. Even when we went hungry, she couldn’t let go of something so beautiful.

Verna stared at me like I was a revolting worm. “Nellie also wore earrings and a bracelet. Did you lose those too?”

My voice quivered. “Mrs. Levy took those, and Ma’s good shoes. And all the money she found in Ma’s pockets. We owe four months of rent.”

“But what if those jewels are worth more than the rent? That Jewess has no right.”

Verna’s face reddened. Her fists balled as she stepped towards the door.

“Nellie made her bracelet and earrings from beads she cut off from an old dress. Those were worth nothing,” Lulu said as she ran her fingers over the yellow dress.

“Ha! The joke’s on the greedy landlady then.” Verna nodded in satisfaction.

The door flung open. Mrs. Levy’s face was a mask of fury. “If you’re not out in five minutes, I will bring a constable.”

Verna laughed. “That’s an empty threat. A British constable won’t help a Russian Jewess.”

Despite Verna’s words, my body trembled. Ma was afraid of constables, and her fear echoed in me. Another coughing fit forced me to double-over.

The women gazed at the landlady with indignation.

“Can’t Abigail spend the night here? She’s sick.” Mabel stated.

“Where’s your heart? The children’s mother died. And it’s almost Christmas Eve,” Lulu added.

Verna scoffed. "Jews know nothing of Christian compassion. All they care about is money."

The landlady's face remained blank. I believed that her heart was a stone. She was always cross with Ma about unpaid rent and the crying babies. I never saw her smile.

Verna threw on the coat and draped the dresses over her arm. "Well, since I'm the one to raise the babies, I should take all this. What I can't wear, I'll sell to feed them."

The women nodded and donned their coats. I gaped at them in confusion.

"But... Where am I going?"

"With Verna." Mabel gave me an apologetic smile. "She's your godmother."

"Am not." Verna's lips tightened. "The babies are my godchildren, not Abigail."

"Who's my godmother?" I asked.

Verna shrugged. "Who knows."

"Take her to help you with the babies. Or you can bring her to work with us," Lulu offered.

Mabel studied my bony figure. "She's ten but looks much smaller. She'll exhaust herself to death in a week. Or lose an arm, like Jenny's daughter."

Bile burned my throat. Ma often said that watching over babies may be hard, but it's better than breaking one's back at the mill.

My sister fussed. At three months, she was a poor sleeper. If not comforted, she'd wake up Julian. My brother, a little more than one-year-old, had a mighty scream. I stooped to rock their cradle and whisper to them.

A hand touched my shoulder. I looked up at Verna. Her brown eyes had a rare sparkle and her thin lips smiled. "Abigail, dear. If you listen to me, you could save yourself and your siblings. You could go live with me, and we all starve. Or you could do as I tell you, and you, Josie, Julian, as well as my husband, son, and I, will no longer worry about the cold or hunger. What do you choose?"

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No one would answer the door, and I knocked louder, pounding it with my fists. The beats of my heart were as loud as my knocks. My coat was thin, and the wind went right through it. The warmest item of clothes I had on was my mother's shawl that Verna allowed me to keep.

A well-dressed woman, fair-haired and round, answered the door and scowled. Two small girls clung to her skirts. I ogled their clean faces, their hair woven into pretty braids. Warmth escaped from within and caressed my cheeks, while the crackling of the fire taunted my ears. A whiff of roasting meat made my belly rumble. A man's voice came from within, demanding to know who was at the door.

"Another beggar," the woman said through her teeth. "I gave enough to that sick girl by the church. Go somewhere else." She closed the door before I could speak.

Verna told me to be persistent. I spurred myself to knock again.

This time Mr. Howard answered the door. His broad shoulders took the entire space of the doorframe. I couldn't believe a man this large could be my father and the father of Julian and Josie. But Verna was sure it was him.

He crossed his arms and frowned. "My wife told you to leave, little girl."

His eyes showed no recognition even though he visited our room many times. But then he never looked at me when he came to see Ma. He'd throw me a coin and tell me to go somewhere.

I filled my lungs with cold air, stifling a cough. Verna instructed me to hold my coughs or sniffles as if my life depended on it. No one would bring in a sick child and risk their family catching the illness.

"Merry Christmas, Dada." I smiled at him. My lips were so chapped that it hurt to grin. "My Ma died this morning. Please take me in. I'll be a good daughter."

The woman behind him shrieked. "What? What is that little wretch saying? She's your daughter, Jim?"

A slap hit my cheek, and my teeth rattled. My eyes welled with tears.

"Shut up, girl," Mr. Howard said through his teeth, and swiveled his head to his wife. "She's lying, Sally."

The woman stepped around him and grabbed my shoulders, breathing into my face.

"Who's your Ma?"

Tears ran down my cheeks. In my head I prayed to Mary to save me from a coughing fit that was squeezing my chest. "Nellie Jones," I rasped. "I'm Abigail. If you let me live with you, I will do any chores and care for your children." I was sure it would be my duty to wipe the children's bottoms and wash their soiled clothing.

She pushed me hard, and I fell backwards, landing in the snow. My clothes became icy and wet. I struggled to sit up. My vision blurred. Mr. Howard's giant figure and the minuscule one of his wife loomed over me.

Sally's hands trembled as she spoke. "I knew you were not working all those late nights. But a bastard daughter, Jim? Any other bastard children I don't know about?"

"My brother Julian and my sister Josie," I hurried to report. "They are only babies and would live with their godmother. She'll need money to feed and clothe them."

A boot hit my side, making my insides shoot with pain. "I told you to stay quiet," Mr. Howard clipped. He took his wife's hands. "Sally, I may not be perfect, but I've provided for you and our children. I care nothing for this spawn, who may or may not be mine. Didn't the pastor say that people should forgive each other on Christmas Eve? Go open your presents. They should make up for my... mistakes."

Sally chewed her lips. "They better be very fine. And I never want to see this girl again."

"You won't. I promise." After she went inside, Mr. Howard clasped my arm and yanked me to my feet. "Who told you to come here and call me Dada? Tell me."

I shook my head. Mr. Howard was the overseer of the mill. He could sack Verna.

"You said the babies are with their godmother. Who's she? I bet she came up with this scheme."

I could no longer hold my coughs. A fit rattled my lungs, and I spit into the snow.

He gasped and bolted from me. “Go away and never come back. Or I swear I will find out who sent you.”

The door slammed shut. I stood for ten more heartbeats, unable to move my feet. Then I began walking on my unsteady legs, trembling from the wind, and pulling my wet coat around my shoulders.

I did not know where I was walking or for how long. I just wanted dry clothes and a warm bed. God, in his mercy, watches over lost children. In the distance, I saw a church and took it as a sign from *him*. I made my tired legs walk there.

When I heard singing, my heart lifted. This was not the church I attended with Ma, but surely there would be kind people here who would help me.

As I approached the steps leading to the doors, my spirits sank. The church seemed so solemn in the dim light of street oil lamps and imposing with its massive height and the enormous cross on the top. Tears flooded my face again. I wanted Ma to hold my hand. But the singing coming from inside charmed me. After a few breaths, I climbed the first stair towards the doors.

The tall doors flew open before I made it to the second step. For a moment, I thought the doors opened for me. But then a large man and a haggard woman appeared on the threshold. To my shock, the man shoved the women towards the stairs.

“Get out of here! Go to a poor house,” he yelled to the woman, who slid down the steps.

She turned to him. “I would if they took me. The church is supposed to care for the deprived.”

“I saw what you tried to do. You were going to cough and spit at the lady. Don’t come here again.” He closed the doors.

“Bloody bastard!” She yelled after him with a rasp and spit something red into the snow.

A moan came up my throat. If I were to cough, that man would throw me out, like he did with that woman. I put my face into my hands. My weeping prompted another coughing fit, worse than the one’s before it.

A hand touched my shoulder. “Did you want to warm yourself in the church? Don’t bother. These people talk about charity all day and then throw the poor people out into the cold night,” the woman said. Her face was heart-shaped, and her eyes were large with long eyelashes. She was young and very slender. Beautiful lady, if not for fallen-in cheeks.

I kept on shedding tears and sobbing, and she patted my hair and shoulders.

From the corner of my eye, I saw that a carriage stopped by the steps and a well-dressed man got out.

“Please, sir, spare some change,” the woman begged while still petting my shoulders.

The man sighed and removed a coin purse from his pocket. “Buy your daughter some new clothes. Merry Christmas.” He went inside the church.

The woman jiggled the purse. Coins inside clicked and chimed. A wide smile spread on her lips.

“They never gave me this much before. Little girl, I’m Amelia. What’s your name?”