

Abigail's Song

Chapter 2

Amelia and I huddled as close to each other as possible to keep ourselves from freezing. While I told her about my Ma, Verna, and Mr. Howard, the piano inside the church played a vigorous melody. I envied the worshippers who sat at the pews, sated and comfortable. My teeth chattered, and I whimpered, exhausted from sitting on the frigid steps, from hunger, and from the despair that gnawed in my chest.

A couple came out, passing near us. Amelia nudged me. "Your turn."

I cried the words she taught me. "Kind sir and lady, please spare us a few coins."

The lady wanted to keep walking, but the man checked his pockets and spilled his change into my cupped hands.

"God bless you," I said, encouraged by my success.

Amelia kept quiet and turned her face away.

The man caught up to the woman and offered his arm. "You have such a kind heart, my darling," she said as they walked to their waiting carriage.

"You have such a kind heart, my darling." Amelia grimaced, mimicking the woman's voice, distorting it. "Damn you, Katherine. I should be the one sitting in the carriage next to the baron."

My eyes rounded. "You in the carriage?"

Amelia's lips pursed. "I've rode in that carriage many times."

Before I could ask her why she rode that carriage, a cough squeezed my chest. My eyes watered as I hacked. Amelia cocked her head, staring at me.

"You said your mother died from a cough? Did she spit out blood?"

"No. No blood. She started coughing and shivering from a fever a week ago. Grew weaker each day, until she couldn't leave her bed and then she died."

"Only a week? I wish I could die that quickly. Consumption is a slow torture. The doctor at the charity hospital said I could live another six months."

"You're dying?" I gasped. "Are you afraid?"

She shook her head. "Last February, I wanted my parents to buy me a new horse and take me on a holiday. When they refused, I swallowed a handful of sleeping pills. I should've died then. It would've been so easy and painless."

I somehow found the energy to be outraged. I balled my fists, outraged. "You wanted to kill yourself over a horse? If you died, your soul would suffer in hell for all eternity. You should say a prayer of thanks." Weekly services were not wasted on me. When other children fidgeted or snoozed, I took to heart every word of the priest's sermons.

"Well, the caretaker is not keen on letting me in to pray," she said, glancing back at the closed doors of the church. "And I believe it were the doctors at the hospital who saved me that day. This handsome medical student, his name was Alan Parker, tended to me. He was the first

to suggest that I should become an actress.” She ran her fingers through her hair. Then another coughing fit made her spit a mouthful of blood. With a sob, she dropped her head. “Now dying will be painful and lonely.”

“You need to pray for Mother Mary to guide you to heaven.” I put my hand on her arm. “My Ma was afraid to die, to leave me and the babies. She also fretted about her sins. But last night I heard her pray to Mary. In the morning, I found her smiling. She wouldn’t wake, but she was at peace.”

“Fortunate woman,” Amelia whispered.

“Our pastor says that all true Christians will go to heaven,” I encouraged. “Are you at true Christian?”

She shrugged. “What’s true Christian?”

“That’s easy,” I said. “True Christians go to church. Toss a coin into the basket. Celebrate Christmas and Easter. My Ma was like that. And her friend Verna, who’s taking care of Julian and Josie, my brother and sister. When Verna dies, she’ll go to heaven, just like my Ma.”

“And who won’t get into heaven, according to your pastor?” Amelia tilted her head.

I cringed. “Our landlady, Mrs. Levy. She’s Jew. She was always cross with my ma, she yelled at me when the babies cried. Today, after we buried Ma, she threw me out. A bad woman like that won’t be permitted into heaven.”

“She sounds like a terrible person.” Amelia wrapped her hand around my shoulder. “But that’s not because she’s a Jew. Some people choose to be kind, and some choose not to be.”

Unsettled by Amelia’s statement, I shook my head. “She’s a bad person because she’s not a Christian. She never learned kindness.”

The church doors burst open, and a group of worshippers ambled out.

A smile curved Amelia’s lip. “According to you, all those churchgoers are kind and decent. Let’s see how generous they’ll be to the poor.” She spread her hands and cried, “Please spare some change. We’re hungry.”

Tired and chilled, I drew breath into my aching chest, and thought about Julian and Josie. Since Mr. Howard won’t provide for them, I needed to get money another way.

“Good sir, good madam, please help us,” I addressed a young couple, and the man took out his money purse and gave me a handful of coins. “God bless you both.”

I addressed a bearded man next, but he shrugged and rushed past us. A pretty girl asked her mother for some coins to give us. The woman cringed at Amelia’s cough and pulled her daughter away. A few more good people stopped to give us a coin or two, but most sped by to their waiting carriages.

“The big finale, Abigail,” Amelia said into my ear. “Make them weep.”

I had no idea what she meant, but pleaded as loud as I could to the dwindling crowd of the worshippers. My voice broke in my parched throat. A young man in a warm coat approached us.

“Please, kind sir, would you spare any change?” I rasped.

Amelia echoed. "Help the poor and hungry."

The young man, dark-haired and handsome, gave me some silver coins. I thanked him profusely, but he wasn't looking at me. His eyes were on my new friend.

"Amelia Hearts?" he said with disbelief.

She raised her chin and pursed her lips. Then her head dropped. "Mr. Parker, what a meeting."

From their conversation I understood he was the medical student Amelia mentioned before. When he asked who I was, I tried to tell him about my ma and the babies. I was coughing so much that I could barely speak. Amelia told my story for me.

"You both will come with me to the hospital," Mr. Parker said. He was about Amelia's age, or even younger. His voice was caring, and it didn't match him, as if it belonged to a younger boy or a woman.

Ma used to say that in the hospitals people catch more illnesses and often die. At this point I was so cold and tired, I didn't care. Besides, if I died, Mary would guide me to Heaven where Ma was waiting for me.

Eventually, I became too tired to walk, Alan Parker wrapped me in his coat and carried me. Amelia shuffled next to us, coughing up blood as she walked. I must have fallen asleep in his arms.

When I opened my eyes, I found myself in a large chair next to a wood stove. Heat spread from it, warming my stiff body. The night dress I was wearing, soft and dry, was not my own. I started, unsure where I was. My head hurt, and my mouth was dry.

"Are you awake, little one?" a man asked, and I turned my head to him. He was shorter than most men I knew and had the warmest hazel eyes I've ever seen. He grinned at me, but those eyes remained concerned and fatigued.

"I've asked for some hot bottles to warm the bed for you," he said. "Meanwhile, you can sit by the stove."

I gazed around, taking in my surroundings. The stove was in the center of a large room with many cots, a few hidden behind curtains. All the beds I could see had a child in them. Whimpers, sneezes, and coughs sounded from every corner. The stench of piss and vomit made my nose wrinkle. It reminded me of the nights when the babies were ill.

"Are you a doctor?" I thought a healer would be older. This man appeared under twenty. But then Mr. Parker looked and sounded even younger.

"I'm a medical student. My name is Mr. Higgins, or you can call me Oli if you prefer." He retrieved a journal. "Your name is Abigail Jones, right?"

I nodded.

"And you are... six?"

"Ten." People often thought I was younger.

He clicked his tongue. "Malnourished," he muttered and jotted some notes. "Now please open your mouth wide."

He peered down my throat and clicked his tongue. "All red and swollen. Have you been

coughing?”

I nodded. He put his ear to my chest. His curls tickled me, and I inhaled his smell that reminded me of honey cake.

His long fingers felt my neck and forehead. Then he examined my fingers and toes. “Healthy pink. Although very cold.” He rubbed my palms, warming them. “Alan said he found you begging on the church steps. Did you sit there all night?”

My tongue was too sluggish to form words, and my eyelids grew heavy.

He nudged me. “I know you want to sleep, but first you need to drink medicine for your cough. It won’t taste good, but I’ll give you raisins after.”

Oli left for a minute and returned with a bottle and a spoon. I winced at the bitter taste of the medicine and wanted to spit it out, but he rubbed my back. When I swallowed, he plopped raisins into my mouth. I chewed them, delighted by their sweetness. Warm, dry, and cared for, I no longer felt death breathing down my neck.

“The bed is ready, Mr. Higgins,” a woman’s voice sounded.

“Thank you, Mrs. Grace,” Oli replied. He lifted me and carried me to a bed. I spied Amelia lying on the cot in the corner. Mr. Parker hovered over her.

“Should Amelia be here?” I asked.

Oli sighed. “No. But we have nowhere else to place her.” He lowered me into a bed and covered me with a blanket. The sheets were warm from the heated bottles. My body grew heavy.

I rested my head on a pillow. “Amelia said she’s dying.”

“She’s very sick.”

“And me?”

He gave me a smile full of warmth and patted my head. “You are going to get better. We’ll take good care of you. I’ll check on you soon.”

Exactly what I wanted to hear. I thanked Mother Mary for bringing me into this hospital where I would be cured and fed. My eyes closed.

When I woke up, the room was bathed in sunshine. Amelia stood over me, dressed in her ripped coat. Her cheeks regained a bit of color. She would be pretty, if not for her thinness.

I blinked and gazed around, for a moment confused about where I was. Instead of Oli and Mr. Parker, an older man walked around the ward. The children in beds to my left and right were finishing their porridge.

I bolted upright. “Did I miss breakfast?”

“Don’t fret, you’ll get your breakfast, little one.” Amelia smiled, becoming even prettier. “I wanted to wish you a speedy recovery. I’m leaving now.”

“But you are sick.”

I’d only known her for one night and barely understood who she was, a beggar or a rich man’s daughter, but I wanted her near me.

She bit her lip. “There’s no cure for consumption. They need the bed for a sick child. At least I got one night of proper sleep and a couple of hot meals.”

“Where are you going?”

Her shoulders slumped. “I don’t know. I asked Mr. Parker to talk to my mother. She and my father didn’t believe me when I told them I’m dying. Maybe if she hears it from him, she will let me come home.”

“Why won’t they believe you?”

“Because I became an actress.” She raised her arm in an elegant manner. Then she dropped it and sighed. “When I was recovering in this hospital from taking sleeping pills, Mr. Parker told me that I should try acting and stage a play with my friends. I loved it so much that I ran away from home and joined a theater troupe. A girl from high society can’t do such a thing. My parents renounced me. They think whatever I say or do is only an act. I told them how I was robbed, how I became ill. They didn’t believe me. Or didn’t care.”

My chest churned for Amelia. Not only did she lose her nice life, but she also lost her parents’ love. My ma had so little, but she always said she’d love me no matter what. Even when I lost her necklace.

Amelia blinked away tears. “I am scared, Abigail. Last time I saw them, my father yelled they have no daughter anymore. My mother had this look of revulsion, like I’m the lowest thing on this earth. I don’t even know what to say if I see her.”

My brow furrowed in thought. Amelia sighed and walked away with her head down.

Church bells chimed in the distance. I straightened because I knew what Amelia was supposed to do.

“Wait!” I yelled. Raising my voice made me cough.

Amelia returned. “Are you alright?”

I gulped air to stop my coughing fit. “You should pray to Virgin Mary for help. She’ll guide your mother to you. Tell your mother you are sorry.”

Amelia’s face squeezed like she tasted something sour. “You don’t know my mother. All she cares about is what her friends will say about her. She won’t forgive.”

I clenched her hand. “She will. She’s your ma. My ma had this pearl necklace, the most precious thing we owned. One day, when she went to work, I donned the necklace and went out to the street. I wanted to show it to these girls who mocked me for my patched clothes.”

I broke into a cough, and Amelia poured me a cup of water from a pitcher that stood by my bed. After I swallowed, she nodded for me to go on.

“Those girls ... snatched the necklace right off my neck. It was too long for me, and my head fit through. The strands of my hair were caught in the clasp, but they yanked hard and ran away with it. All day I was shaking and crying, thinking what I’d say to Ma. I started praying every prayer I knew and then I added a few I made up. When Ma came home, I told her I’m sorry. She didn’t even understand what for, but I repeated and repeated how sorry I was. When she understood what happened, she ran out to look for those girls. I didn’t know their names or where they lived. No one owned up to stealing the necklace and we never got it back. But Ma didn’t punish and forgave me.”

Amelia covered her face with her hands. When she withdrew them, tears ran down her cheeks. “Oh, Abigail. You are special. I want to hug you, but I fear giving you my sickness.” She

squeezed my hand instead. “I will go to the church and pray for my mother to forgive me. If the caretaker won’t let me inside, I’ll pray on the steps.”

Before leaving, Amelia gave me all the coins we received from begging, and I hid them under my pillow. When I get out of the hospital, I’d bring her these coins to Verna for Julian’s and Josie’s care.

I had my breakfast of porridge with honey, and then the doctor checked on me and gave me the same bitter medicine I had yesterday, but this time without raisins. With my belly full, I dozed off.

I woke up to loud steps and a woman’s trembling voice. A lady with curly silver hair, wearing a beautiful coat, hurried through the ward.

“Where, where is she?” she implored, glancing at Mr. Parker, who sped behind her. “Where is Amelia?”

The doctor approached, telling them that he discharged Amelia, and she left.

The woman, who I guessed to be Amelia’s mother, put her hand on her heart. Her expression was crestfallen and lost.

I sat up. “She said she will go to the church and pray that her mother will forgive her and take her home.”

“I forgive her a million times!” The lady exclaimed and ran out of the ward.

There was only one explanation in my mind. The Virgin Mary had heard Amelia’s prayer and made a Christmas miracle.

In the evening, Oli examined me again. He beamed at me when I opened my mouth and stuck out my tongue.

“Better,” he said after he finished prodding me. “I see from the notes that you ate your breakfast and dinner and slept during the day. That’s exactly what you need to be doing to get over your illness.”

I grinned back at him, happy for once.

After giving me the bitter medicine and raisins, he gave me a serious look. “Abigail, I heard you lost your mother. I’m so sorry. Are there any relatives that would take you in when you are better?”

I didn’t answer. There was Mr. Howard, but he had already told me not to bother him. And Verna would struggle to feed me, my brother and sister, and her own family.

“It’s very important that you think of someone you could live with,” Oli prompted with a concerned look. “If there’s no one, you would go to the orphanage.”

I shrugged. “All right. I have nowhere else to go.”

Oli bit his lip. “Yes, it may be all right. In the orphanage they would feed you and hopefully school you, but I think it would be better if you had a family.”

I released a heavy sigh. *Didn’t I just tell him I had no family?* There was no use wishing

for one.

“Mr. Higgins, please see to ... what’s his name? Second bed on the right,” the gray-haired doctor ordered.

Oli raised his head. “Do you mean Ezra?”

“Yes. What kind of name is that for a boy? Anyway, he needs bloodletting.”

Oli squeezed my hand and left to care for the patient. The child cried, and Oli spoke with a gentle voice to comfort him. The evening changed to night, and the ward grew darker. The cries of pain and fear changed to a quiet whimper, and I closed my eyes, listening to Oli whispering to the boy. When the ward grew quiet, the doctor gave Oli some instructions and stepped out. The boy sobbed again, and then a mesmerizing, heartbreakingly beautiful tune pierced the silence. It took me a second to understand where it came from. Oli was singing a lullaby.

“Durme durme itziko de madre”

The song stole my breath away with its serenity and sadness.

Mrs. Grace shuffled in, and Oli stopped the song abruptly.

“How is Ezra?” she asked in a soft voice.

Oli didn’t reply, and she tiptoed closer.

“Oh. Poor child. I’ll sew the bag. Maybe more than one, seeing how many patients we have with pneumonia.”

“I hate to agree with you, Mrs. Grace, but yes. When you have time, please prepare several bags.”

There was a moment of silence, then Mrs. Grace spoke again. “Mr. Higgins, would it be appropriate if I say my usual prayers for Ezra?”

“Yes, I don’t see... Why are you asking me?”

“I thought you would know about... their customs.”

“I don’t.” There was an edge to his voice. “I believe, however, the Lord welcomes all prayers.”

She sighed. “The Lord does, but the people are less accepting. Well, if it’s not forbidden, I will pray for the departed soul as usual.”

My Ma prayed to the Virgin Mary more often than to the Lord. When I asked why, she said, “because Mary was a woman and a mother. She understands why I sin sometimes. And she’ll watch over you if something were to happen to me.”

While Mrs. Grace uttered her prayers, I said mine. “Holy Mary, mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death. Please take little boy Ezra into Heaven. Amen.”

Oli turned his head and gave me a long look.