

## Summer 1703

When I was just an infant I was abandoned by my parents at the edge of the river in Venice, Italy. Hours later the *Ospedale della Pieta*<sup>\*</sup> took me in. I've grown up there my whole life. I know the women there know why my parents abandoned me but they refuse to tell me. Which is why I have such a strong imagination for tragic things. I am constantly being told not to lie about my past to new children. The children here don't like me. Most people think it's because I'm quiet and always reading a book -which to me doesn't seem bad at all- or because I'm usually reciting poems and such. But the truth is they tease me because I only have four toes on my right and left foot. I guess I should be grateful. In the grand scheme of things they have treated me well. They have fed me, they have comforted me as a small child when I would have nightmares, and they didn't just ignore me when I was wailing in a box at the edge of a river. I am grateful. I am grateful despite the mean children.

Today a strange man arrived at *Ospedale della Pieta*. The women here said he was to teach the girls only how to play the violin.

"He will teach all girls except one." they said. "Girls say hello to Maestro Antonio." When I heard that I nearly jumped out of my shoes.

"Oh! Except for you...Alessia."

Why won't they let me be taught by Maestro Antonio? My only chance to be good at something, to impress the children and the women here. I've been thinking about it a lot.

I've got it! I know the answer! They think I will tell too many lies about my past. I've tried convincing them that that is not what I will do, but it's useless.

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\* Hospital of Piety

Today I went for a stroll. Something caught my eye. It was a violin case!

I snuck the violin into *Ospedale della Pieta*, and have been hiding it underneath my bed. Today I found out the place where Maestro Antonio was teaching Valentina. He was teaching her how to tune her violin. I followed along as best as I could.

Each day after that I'd go to Maestro Antonio's room where he taught, and I'd follow along. One day right after I had stored away my violin, a couple of woman came and sat next to me on my bed.

"Alessia. We know you're upset," said the first one, "So we have decided to tell you why your parents abandoned you."

I jumped to my feet and looked at each of them intently. "Why?" I asked.

"Because your...parents were sick," said the second one uneasily, "and they didn't want you to become sick."

"Oh." I sat down. Couldn't they just cure it with the help of a doctor?

"What did they have?" I asked

"Oh they had... something... I don't know, fev-"

"Plague." Interrupted the second one. I raised an eyebrow.

"So which one did they have? Fever or the plague?"

The two women looked at each other. I don't believe them.

## Fall 1703

I was on my way to Maestro Antonio's study, when I ran into Maestro Antonio. He asked me what I had behind my back but I didn't answer. I just ran the other way. I kept running and running. Suddenly I heard music. I ran toward the music. There at the other end of the corridor was my father playing the violin. His back was turned so I couldn't see his face. I ran to him my arms outstretched crying, "Father! Father!" my

father at the other end of the hall turned around. All I saw was the furious face of Maestro Antonio. I woke up, sweating.

I am nothing. I am nothing at all. Just a girl, with a simple past. No talent. Just a foolish old girl. I decided to store away my violin under my bed and never touch it again. I decided not to care what people said about me anymore. I decided not to talk at all.

The next day at lunch the women announced that there would be new children arriving. But this time they didn't warn me about not lying to the new children. Valentina apparently noticed that too and said in a loud voice: "Oh! I guess the four-toed girl is leaving." I felt the fury rise up inside me. I stood up but reminded myself of my decision and sat back down. Valentina and the other children laughed. The women ordered us to go out into the corridor and welcome the new children. I made sure I was the last one to leave the cafeteria. I was at the doorway when a woman called me back.

"Are you upset Alessia?" she asked. When I didn't answer she heaved a great sigh. "If its because the children tease you, ignore them." I shook my head. "Are you sure you're okay?" she asked again. I nodded. "You may go." The woman sat down and looked at the woman next to her.

So many children arrived that some girls had to share a bed. I was one of them. I don't know who it is yet, but I'll find out after lunch. I had a pretty normal day today and by the time I got to lunch, I was feeling pretty gleeful. As usual nobody sat down next to me. I was more than happy though because the table I was sitting at had a window right next to it and I felt a sense of solidarity listening to the birds chirping. In fact I was so immersed in the outdoors that I didn't notice a new girl sit down a few yards away from me. And when I did notice, the first thing I noticed was that she was reading a book. The first person I had seen in all the years I've been here to show interest in a book. She was reading one of my favorite women poets, Juana Ines de la Cruz. For the first

time in weeks I felt the urge to speak to somebody to converse to do something, to no longer feel like nothing. I moved closer to her. "That's one of my favorite books." I said. She looked at me. "Good," she said, "Somebody else who likes literature. Yes I find it quite exquisite."

"I'm Alessia." I said putting out my hand. She took it.

"I'm Aurora." And then we began to converse. I told her about everything. When she heard about my secret she laughed and said "I come from a rich family. They didn't want me because I wasn't into being part of a royal family." She looked past me as if in thought. "and anyway they don't believe in music for women but I do. So when my brother would have his lessons, I would take a violin from my father's study and follow along. I learned so much from it. My mother told *Ospedale della Pieta* to not let me study music here. And my mother's voice could convince anyone." She laughed again. For the first time in my whole life I think I've made a friend.

With all the luck Aurora turned out to be my bed partner. Aurora snuck two books in our bedroom and when we thought everybody was asleep we would turn on the oil lamp and read and read until we were so tired that our eyelids were drooping. Aurora was the one who encouraged me to keep playing the violin and every day after that I would come back and tell her everything I had learned. I think Aurora is the most extraordinary person I'll ever meet.

## Winter 1703

It's winter now. My favorite season. Four days after Christmas is my birthday. This year I'm extra excited because I have a friend with whom to celebrate it. The only bad thing about Aurora is she is twelve. The age when you are allowed to move from *Ospedale della Pieta* is fifteen. And I know Aurora wants to travel around the world selling paintings. Aurora is an amazing painter. She says if that doesn't work she would be an author. I would like to be a musician one way or another. In fact I

stole some music sheets from Maestro Antonio and have been composing my own music.

On Christmas day I woke up to find four presents at the end of our bed, two for Aurora and two for me. I had always only gotten one present on Christmas. I woke up Aurora immediately and she sat up in bed and smiled. Aurora got a journal from the women and pastels from me, which I bought with difficulty. I got a book about Joan of Arc from the women and a book about fiddle songs for the violin from Aurora. I picked up the Joan of Arc book and started reading it. It was extremely interesting. The other girls were too happy to be mad at anyone. We got in a circle and shared our presents. Aurora gave me a lacy dress to cover up the violin book. At the Christmas feast we had a great time as well. We talked about our dreams. My dream was to be a musician but of course I didn't say. I just said I wanted to be an author. It was the best Christmas I've ever had.

## Spring 1706

Spring was particularly warm this year. I particularly enjoyed it because at thirteen years old you are able to walk farther into the city. I snuck out the violin and went to a far away park and played. Can you believe that after all these years they still don't let me play the violin? And they still haven't caught me! I was close to *Ospedale della Pieta* when it started to rain. I got there just in time.

"Alessia! What do you have in your hand?" asked a cool voice.

"I ...I was..." I stammered. Then regaining my posture I said, "I was taking a stroll..." I cut myself off. It was useless. The woman snatched the violin out of my hand.

"What's this?"

"I ...It's a vio-"

"She was running an errand for me," said a voice. I whirled around. There stood Maestro Antonio.

"Oh." She strolled away. I went upstairs to tell Aurora all about it.

We were just finishing playing one of my favorite songs when a voice startled me.

"Alessia!" a woman was carrying a tray of food. She snatched my arm and pulled me in. "this young lady was spying on you." She told Maestro Antonio.

"I'm sorry. I truly am. I couldn't resist." I said. He chuckled.

"Oh! I know." I was surprised. "You're very talented you know." I blushed then I left the room.

Tears ran down my face. Aurora was leaving. My beautiful Aurora. She had found a job as a painter. I ran to her and hugged her tight. We didn't let go of each other, and by the time we did, our dresses were soaked. My only friend was leaving. Would I ever see her again?

## Epilogue 1708

When I turned fourteen I was told that my parent abandoned me because I was deformed. Now I no longer want wicked parents like that. Parents who didn't like me because of my looks. I'm now fifteen. I've gotten a job playing the violin although I'm not paid much because of my gender. I don't want to leave Maestro Antonio or *Ospedale della Pieta*. I'm sure going to miss it.

"Thank you."

"Oh! Don't thank us!" the woman blew her nose. The other women cried. I turned to Maestro Antonio. "Good bye, Alessia." He said.

"Good bye. Good bye Antonio Vivaldi." And with that I walked toward my destiny.