

Prologue: 1695

For the hour it took for the baby's wails to run their course through misery to fury to exhaustion, no one thought of anything but how God had favored Venice above all other cities. The radiance of the Blessed Virgin and all the saints emanated from one spot, the balcony over the altar of the Chapel of the Pietá. From there, benediction flowed over the black cloaked nobles seated on the scarred wooden benches, to the ragged workers crammed in at the rear. It filtered out the door to the people spilling onto the walkway of the Riva degli Schiavoni, and to those straining to hear on small boats bobbing in the Venetian Lagoon.

For that hour, heaven opened and God spoke. Two dozen women in red and white dresses were his messengers. No counterpoint, however frantic or interlocked, was beyond the skill of the musicians of the Pietá, hidden behind an iron grille draped in black gauze. No subtlety of harmony was overlooked, no languid musical line ever rushed. If music were a fabric, that of the figlie di coro would be brocade, lace, gossamer.

And the singer was the golden thread. "Qui habitat," Michielina sang, "in adjutorio altissimi." Each note floated over the listeners like a feather held aloft by the breath of angels. While many of those listening could not have understood the words, those whose ermine-trimmed cloaks spoke to their high position in life would have understood the Latin and perhaps noted the aptness of the psalm. If indeed there were a place on earth to glimpse the dwelling place of the Most High, it was surely the balcony of the Pietá.

When the last notes vanished, the figlie di coro disappeared into the secret places of the Pietá through a door in the rear of the balcony. The heavens closed, and the people began to spill out into the October twilight.

“Michielina is better than Paola at the Mendicanti, don’t you think?” A young nobleman opened a side door of the chapel. “After you,” he gestured to his identically dressed companion.

“I prefer the Mendicanti,” his friend said. “But Michielina...” he inhaled sharply to show his appreciation. “She is very good. Perhaps a bit breathy at times but—”

“Ugly as a toad and walks with a limp, I’ve heard.”

“Ahh,” the first man said with a sigh, “such a tragedy. Perhaps we should be grateful we can’t see them.”

Before the second man could reply, what might have been mistaken for a sack of rags draped over a small packing crate in a doorway caught his attention. From within the box a loud intake of air was followed by a choking cough and a hoarse, exhausted wail.

As one of them moved forward to take a closer look, his boot touched the edge of the sack. It moved, and he saw a small arm appear from under one of its folds.

He bent over and jostled the shoulder of the child. “Little one,” he said. “Are you all right?” When he turned her over, she did not startle or wake, but fell as limp as the dead. The upturned face was that of a three year old girl. Her eyes had rolled up towards her drooping lids and her mouth had fallen open to reveal a row of perfect white teeth underneath a lolling tongue.

“Laudanum,” he said. “I think she’s had a dose.” He tried to pick her up in his arms but found she had been fastened to the crate by a thick silk cord from a dressing gown. “Someone didn’t want her to wander off and drown.”

The baby was drenched with sweat from its prolonged screams, but was now snuffling and falling back asleep. Wedged under its head was an envelope on which the word “Pietà” had been written in a meticulous hand.

“Vying with Michielina for attention?” the second man said. “No wonder no one heard you.” He stood up and began banging on the door.

In the corner of the small examination room off the infirmary ward of the Ospedale della Pietá, the little girl had been stripped down to her underclothing and was seated on top of the overturned crate while a wet nurse for the baby had been fetched from one of the surrounding homes. After the baby had fallen contented from the woman’s breast, she was laid on a long wooden table, bathed and left to fall asleep.

Even in the dim light of the oil lamps, for by now night had fallen, the baby’s wrappings told the story that was undoubtedly contained within the unopened letter. The shawl in which she had been nestled was soft, honey-colored wool, with a sunburst pattern emblazoned in crimson and gold silk.

“Expensive,” one of the nurses said, holding it up to get a better look. She folded the shawl and placed it on the end of the table. “Get the book,” she said to a girl of about twelve standing beside her.

The girl went to a cabinet and brought out a large leather bound register and put it down next to the shawl, returning to the cabinet to bring the pen and ink.

“And put the iron in the fire,” the nurse ordered. She opened the envelope, and as she pulled out the letter three gold coins fell from its folds. She moved closer to the lamp to examine them before putting them back in the envelope.

She turned to look at the girl. “I told you to put the iron in the fire.”

The girl's eyes darted toward the small girl seated on the crate, before she turned away and fetched a metal object from a hook on the wall. As the nurse read to herself, the girl poked at the fire with the rod before leaving its tip at the edge of the coals.

“Just as I thought,” the nurse said, breaking the silence. She began to read aloud.

God help me, I am abandoned by my patron, who says the baby is not his, the letter read. My delivery left me damaged in ways it is not seemly to speak of, and I dare not even show myself to those who once wished for nothing more than a chance to supplant him in my affections. For three years I have been able to keep my daughter out of sight and under the care of my servants, to keep that appearance of a carefree youth so important to those in my trade. I had intended to do the same with the infant, who was born three months ago, but I no longer know where I will live, or even if I will live much longer, having little money and no appeal to any but the coarsest of men.

I am plunged into the pit of grief by the decision I must make, and I pray you to understand that it is only because I cannot protect my children that I give them to you. I have named the older one Maddalena, in honor of the saint to whom I have prayed to intercede for my forgiveness and thus preserve my soul. She has already been baptized with that name. The baby has a way about her that brings brightness into my heart, and almost from the moment of her birth her eyes were the color of a clear sky. I have taken that as a portent of happiness for her in her life, and I pray you for that reason to baptize her with the name of the Virgin and call her Chiaretta.

The nurse picked up the pen and wrote the date in the left column of the register.

“Maddalena,” she spoke aloud as she wrote. “And Maria Chiaretta.”

She continued to read. *I have enclosed all the money I can part with, to help with the burden of finding a wet nurse who will also take in Maddalena, so they can remain together. I put my trust in the infinite mercy of God, who make all things possible and hears the prayers of the fallen, and though I do not deserve or even dare hope to see my children again, I have also included a token, divided into three, so that if it pleases God that I may ever return for them I may know them, and they may have a means to know each other if circumstances pull them apart.*

“Bring me the tokens,” the nurse said to the girl. “I need to describe them in the book.” She took the two pieces of ivory into her hand and strained to see the details in the lamp light. “An ivory hair comb,” she said, “broken into three pieces. Each girl has one end, with a carved flower. The mother’s piece will fit between, which is how she will prove who she is if she ever comes back for them.”

“Will she?” the girl asked.

“No,” the nurse said. “But some of them need to hope.” She put the letter back in its envelope, wrote the description of the shawl and the broken comb into the book, and gave the pen to the girl to clean. “If you don’t want to help, go find a box to store these things. And while you’re at it, go to the refectory and bring her back some bread and a little cheese.” She looked over at Maddalena. “Are you hungry?”

By now the small dose of laudanum had begun to wear off. Maddalena had pulled herself back up to a sitting position on the crate and was rubbing her eyes, too dazed to reply.

As soon as the young girl had hurried from the room, the nurse got up and pulled the iron rod from the fire. The tip glowed red as she blew ash from it. She picked up one of Maddalena’s feet with a jerk, and the little girl fell onto her back on the crate. Pulling her lips into a thin line,

the nurse brought the end of the red-hot poker down onto the bottom of Maddalena's heel and held it there for a moment.

The nurse had dropped her foot and was returning the iron to the fire before shock had turned to screams of pain and betrayal. "There, there," she said as she came back with a drop of salve on her finger. "It will heal."

As she grabbed Maddalena's foot again, the little girl squirmed and struggled to get out of her grasp, but the nurse held her ankle in a grip so firm it left white haloes around her fingers. She looked for a moment at the blackened rectangle enclosing the letter "P" before dabbing the ointment on the wound and going to look for a bandage. By the time she found one, Maddalena's screams had quieted to a few gulping sobs, and she watched in stunned confusion as the nurse wrapped a clean cloth strip around her foot.

"We don't take in anyone but babies," the nurse said, in a tone neither harsh nor tender, but matter of fact, as if she were explaining it to the walls as much as to the little girl. "They don't remember it for more than a minute. It wasn't as simple for you, I'm afraid, but it couldn't be helped."

She rubbed her hands on her coarse apron as if to wipe away her involvement in the act. "You'll be gone in a few days and it's how we'll keep track of you." She removed the branding iron from the fire. "It's how we'll get you back."

"I don't want to come back!" Though the pain had undone the last effects of the laudanum, Maddalena's words were muffled and slurred, as if she were crying out in her sleep. "I want to go home."

"You'll forget." As the nurse examined the glowing tip of the iron for a second time, Maddalena panted, too frightened to scream, but this time the nurse walked toward the table

where Chiaretta had begun to stir. She picked the baby up by the ankle, and dangled her upside down next to the table.

“Don’t!” Maddalena screamed as she tried to scramble down from the crate. The nurse pressed the branding iron onto the baby’s heel, and the room filled again with the shrieks of the two girls and the smell of charred flesh.

Part 1: The Mark of the Pietá

1701-1703

Chapter 1

The black and silver bow of the gondola disappeared into a fog so thick it hissed as it parted around the hull. Around each stroke of the oar, a vague, uncapturable melody swirled and trailed away in the water.

The gondolier had been moving so slowly he wasn't quite sure he had reached the mouth of the Grand Canal. The air seemed hemmed in by the facades of the grand homes where the noble families of Venice were finishing their suppers, but in front of him it opened up like a yawn as he entered the broad lagoon.

He leaned forward and squinted, cocking his head to pick up the calls of other boatmen. A song was traveling across the water from near the church of Santa Maria della Salute, and as he listened he could hear it getting louder. Finally he could pick out the words the boatman was singing.

A group of gentlewomen I did see

On All Saint's Day, 'twas just a year ago;

The fog swallowed up the gondolier's reply.

The one in front moved with a special grace,

And Love at her right side did seem to be.

The other boat had drawn so close the gondolier could hear a change in the sound of the water before they slid past each other in opposite directions.

Such a pure light did from her visage flee,

“Twas sure a spirit radiant and aglow;

The words faded as the boats pulled away. But in Venice, song was in the breath. The two gondoliers sang out together through the mist until they were too far apart to continue.

Grown bold to look, I saw then in her face

The spirit of an angel, truthfully...

As the gondolier’s voice died away, the curtain of the felce parted, and a stout middle-aged woman wearing a loose, dark cloak and veil peered out from the cabin. “I can barely see you,” she said. “Where are we?”

“The Broglio. I’m tying up there.”

“The Broglio?” Her voice turned up with disapproval. “You were supposed to take us to the dock at the Pietá.”

“Hell of a night,” the gondolier said by way of explanation, clearing his throat and spitting a mouthful of thick phlegm into the lagoon. The boat bumped against the dock, and he muttered a low curse as he jumped off. The bucking motion made the woman lose her balance, and she sat down with a grunt.

“Look,” the gondolier said, coming back on board to help her up. “You can walk the five minutes to the Pietá faster than I can take you on the water. I’m finished with this night.”

The woman growled, as if to say that he would hear more about this in due time, before turning back toward the cabin. In a few minutes she emerged to put a satchel and a covered straw basket on the floor of the gondola.

She turned her head. “Don’t dawdle, now,” she called back into the felce.

A small bare hand pulled back the curtain and a face peered out. A girl who looked to be no older than six stood motionless until she was prodded from behind.

“Go!” The voice behind her said. Within a few minutes two little girls, the other about nine, were standing on the dock.

The woman picked up the satchel and basket. “Come along,” she said without looking to see if they were following. She crossed the small piazza so quickly the girls almost lost her in the fog, before stopping at the point where the spiky, red and cream brick façade of the Doge’s Palace began to emerge from the mist. Having oriented herself, she turned to the right and resumed her pace. The girls struggled to stay no more than a step or two behind as they passed one column after another of stone so close to the color of the fog they could sense more than see them.

The woman muttered as she stumbled over a crate left behind by one of the merchants whose stalls spilled out onto the Riva degli Schiavoni during the festival period just before Christmas. Faint odors of wet straw and the contents of baskets in which dried flowers and herbs, clams, sausages made from wild game, and pungent salves and tonics had been laid out for sale wafted up from the detritus of the day.

A stone bridge loomed in front of them and then another, before the woman turned abruptly into an alley. She banged the large bronze knocker on one of the doors, and the grate over a peephole slid open.

“Who’s there?” a woman’s voice asked.

“Annina. With the two girls.”

They heard a bolt being thrown and the groan of hinges as the door creaked open. A woman in a white cap, dressed in a cloak just like Annina's, motioned them in.

"Hurry. It's cold," she said, her voice echoing along the walkway of the courtyard in which the girls found themselves. "You will sleep down here tonight. Annina will stay with you. No point in disturbing the others so late."

The room she left them in was bare except for a small wooden prie-dieu and a bed on which the girls sat stiff and motionless. Outside, the two women lingered, talking in low voices.

"Chiaretta--the younger one--can sing," Annina said. "And she's quite pretty."

"And the older one?"

"Maddalena. Hardly speaks. They told me she's good with her hands, and more obedient than the other one, but I can't see that there's much to her."

They nodded goodnight, and Annina turned to go into the room while the other woman disappeared into the mist without another word.