

*The Memory Collector*

THE MEMORY COLLECTOR  
BOOK ONE

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# Free Preview

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Paperback Edition

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# *The Little Dancer*



**EACH OF US** is but a verse in an eternal poem, a chapter of a story generations old.

Perhaps the threads of your story were picked up when your parents met on a steamer headed for the colonies. Mine began when my grandfather eloped with his best friend's wife, only to find himself abandoned beside a broken-down carriage mere miles from home, lamenting the loss of his new love, his old friend, and all their shared dreams of a good life.

Yet, as we navigate the whims of fate and misadventure, these threads weave our lives into a tapestry of golds, azures, and royal purples. It is the mishaps, after all, that add the deepest hues.

One might think Beatrice Wren's tale began with her dramatic entrance into the world — a moment that certainly deserves mention, for her screeching was so powerful it shook ice from frosted windowpanes.

Her arrival followed two days of hard labour in her moth-

er's chambers, where both midwife and physician attended the birth in a goose-down bed of such softness, that even four decades later, Beatrice would hoard the few happy memories of her childhood with no small degree of melancholy. Warm food thrice a day. A wardrobe full of dresses.

But this is not how this story begins.

The first stitch in Beatrice's tapestry was cast in a single violent act four years before her birth when a little dancer was thrown into the inky depths of the Thames.

The dancer's limbs were pale as moonlight as the water closed over her head. She spun through darkness in a final pirouette as the current claimed her. London's clamour faded to whispers. Silt buried her cold form.

Time flowed as languidly as the water. Days blurred into months. Seasons, stars and seabirds wheeled above. The summer's warmth barely reached her resting place in the mud amongst shards of crockery and lost treasures. Winter storms churned the river bed, sending her tumbling across graveyards of discarded hopes and corroded dreams.

London's symphony changed over the decades as factory whistles began to cut through the fog, as the rattle of iron wheels replaced wooden ones on the cobbled streets above and the gentle creak of sailing ships gave way to the throb of engines and the shriek of steam.

Still she danced a suspended ballet, waiting in the gloom.

Once or twice, prison hulks trawled their bucket dredgers through the muck, lifting her briefly before releasing her back to the depths, the chain gangs aboard never glimpsing her form. With each passing season, she was nudged closer to the muddy banks.

Until at last, murky daylight kissed her face.



The Thames slithered past the embankment, its waters dark and thick with generations of rubbish and treasures. Three children picked their way across the exposed riverbed, their bare feet sinking deep into the mud. The eldest, a boy with a torn jacket held together by twine, prodded through the silt with a length of driftwood.

Frustrated, he struck the remains of a rotted wooden pail. 'Might as well head back before the tide—'

'Jack! Here!' The tiniest of them, a girl wearing a dress more patch than fabric, beckoned from behind a pier post. 'Found something.'

The third child, wrapped in what looked like a horse blanket, scrambled over. 'Let me see, Mary!'

'Back off, Tom. I found it first.'

Mary's fingers closed around the thing glinting in the muck. She wrenched it free with a squelch and wiped away the dirt. It was a small figurine, no bigger than her palm.

'Could fetch a copper from that odd woman.' Jack snatched it from her grip. 'The one that looks at us funny.'

'Miss Wren?' Mary wiped her runny nose on her sleeve. 'She gave me two blue marbles for a broken teacup not long ago.'

'Better than the rag shop.' Tom burrowed deeper into his blanket as the April wind bit his bare throat. 'They'd only give us a farthing, if that. Has anyone seen her today?'

'It's Monday, isn't it?' the girl asked hopefully, standing on tiptoe and scanning the bank.

The fog began to creep in from the Thames, turning the children into grey ghosts as they climbed the slippery steps to street level. The late afternoon crowds paid them no mind — just three river rats among countless others.

The small group headed west towards Shadwell until, just

before the fish market, they spotted a figure in a patched overcoat, hands on hips, her hair tangling in the limp breeze and gaze focused on something in the mud.

'Looks like Miss Wren found something!' Tom piped up and began to run.



Beatrice Wren shook mud from a bridle. Though the leather had rotted, its metal bit and buckles might clean up well enough to sell. Worth a few pennies, perhaps.

She looked up, squinting at three shapes of children hurrying towards her. Mary's high voice and patchwork dress gave her away, while Jack's jacket, held together with twine, marked him clearly. Tom still wore that rank horse blanket she'd noticed last November.

Beatrice had poor vision. Well, perhaps not poor in the usual sense. The world appeared crisp enough. Colours true, shapes clear. Faces, though... Faces shifted like smoke. She saw them just fine, mind. But she never found familiarity in their features. Clothing, voice, and hair colour — that's how Beatrice identified people, and most days she could pretend that nothing was wrong with her.

The real dilemma arose whenever someone with a familiar voice in an unfamiliar garment stopped to ask her about some item of trade.

'Lovely! Must dash! Farewell!' Beatrice would blurt. Her standard escape.

The mudlarks, however, posed no such challenge. The poor tended to wear the same rags year after year.

'Miss Wren? We found something special for you today. Oh, what's that you've got? Horse tackle? Fancy a trade?' Little

Mary was easy to recognise from her chatter bubbling forth like a fountain.

'What do you have?' Beatrice asked, squinting.

The girl thrust out her hand, revealing a little porcelain figurine. 'Look, it's a dancer. Rather fine. Has just the tiniest crack.'

'Hmm.' Beatrice delicately lifted the figurine between thumb and forefinger, turning it and inspecting the crack running down the figurine's back. The girl hadn't lied. It *was* rather fine.

'I can offer these two buckles.' Beatrice had to keep reminding herself to start low when haggling. She hated lies. She knew the entire horse tack was worth more than the miniature dancer, but maybe just for the buckles... Haggling, or any interaction with people for that matter, made her feel stupid. She was in her fortieth year and still puzzled by society's unwritten rules. Couldn't distinguish familiar faces from unfamiliar ones. Couldn't distinguish truth from lies. However, this particular ritual was unavoidable if she wanted the figurine.

'We want the whole lot.' Jack crossed his arms. 'The dancer is proper fancy.'

'Hmm,' Beatrice said again, waiting.

The children huddled together, conferring in whispers. Then Mary chirped, 'I accept!' She snatched the tack, elbowed her companions, and ran off.

The fog swallowed the children's retreat.

Beatrice cradled the figurine in her palm, tracing its mud-flecked contours. Another piece of history rescued from the river's greedy depths. Another story to add to her collection of objects that never lied, never changed, never wore faces she couldn't trust.





# Sanctuary



BEATRICE HURRIED ALONG THE STREET, her gaze fixed on the cobbles three feet ahead. Hems of skirts, trousers, and coats shuffled through her peripheral. A woman called out her name. Beatrice tucked her chin deeper into her collar and quickened her pace.

A familiar crack in the pavement signalled she'd reached the turn onto Ratcliff Highway. Fifteen more steps to number fourteen. Narrow, three-storey brick buildings loomed ahead, elbowing one another as though racing towards someplace better. Patches of moss clung to the soot-darkened facade where sunlight managed to penetrate the gloom. Windows stared down, panes cracked and mismatched, some stuffed with rags to keep out drafts, others patched with wooden planks. Saltpetre dusted wet foundations. A faded sign hung crookedly in the breeze, barely legible: 'Rooms to Let.'

The paint of the door frame was bleached, exposing patches of rotted wood beneath. Bracing herself, Beatrice pulled a fist from her overcoat pocket and pushed the door open. The hinges squealed. She counted under her breath, 'one, two,

three...' To twenty-seven, the number of steps to the first landing.

'Afternoon, Miss Wren.' A man's boots appeared. Brown leather, badly scuffed. Mr Jones from the second floor? Or perhaps Mr Taylor from the third.

'Good evening,' she murmured, pressing herself against the wall to edge past.

A rustle of skirts descended the stairs. Dark blue cotton, patched at the hem — likely Mrs Henderson. 'Lovely weather, isn't it?'

'Hm.' Beatrice found herself wondering why Mrs Henderson gave thought to the weather when she rarely ventured outside, but engaging in conversation would mean slowing her pace, which she absolutely wouldn't. Muttering about poor eyesight, she continued up the stairs.

Her fingers found a familiar notch in the bannister. Twelve more steps to the second landing.

More boots in the narrow corridor. Black this time, freshly polished. A woman's. She couldn't place them. Her heart hammered. The owner's voice called out something about rent being due today. Beatrice mumbled an apology and focussed on her count. Five more steps to her door.

The key found the lock, and Beatrice crashed through, slammed the door shut and threw the bolt home. She crossed the room to a corner with a small table and a rickety stool, sat down and closed her eyes. Her fingers drifted to her pocket with the porcelain dancer, but she stopped herself before touching it.

Once her mind calmed, she stepped over buckled floorboards and a threadbare rug to a small washstand in a corner. She peeked into a chipped ewer. Half-full, good. She'd fetched water from the scullery only last night. A cautious sip made her

teeth ache from the cold. At least the thin layer of ice from this morning had melted during the day.

The chill helped to ground her, biting away the last echoes of the crowd's press and noise. Some days, she wished for nothing more than to leave this wretched city.

Other days, she was glad she managed to buy food.

With thumb and index finger, she pulled the porcelain ballerina from her coat pocket and placed it on the washstand. Then, she dampened a scrap of old fabric and began cleaning the dancer with gentle strokes. Holding the figurine by its base, she carefully avoided skin contact until it was clean and she could examine it properly.

A white tutu emerged from beneath the grime, spotted with aged, yellowish dots that might once have been gilded. The dancer's hair, twisted into a neat top knot, bore the same faded hue. Her face held a serene expression, gaze lost in the music of an eternal performance. And there, running down the figurine's spine like a horrible wound, was a crack in the porcelain.

Sighing, Beatrice folded the fabric scrap, wet the corner, and carefully rubbed it along the crack. Once she was satisfied, she settled onto her narrow bed. The iron frame squealed. The straw mattress had nothing to add, for it was too beaten up to make any noise whatsoever. Beatrice drew a deep breath, shut her eyes, wrapped her hands around the dancer, and opened herself to listen.

The Whisper came, soft as a flutter of moth wings.

*A creaking leather seat. Hooves clattering against cobblestones. The rhythmic sound of wheels rolling across Tower Bridge.*

*'But Mother, please! She's beautiful!' A young girl's voice, trembling with emotion. 'Look at how she dances.'*

*'Margaret Anne Wilson, that thing is absolutely inappropriate! No daughter of mine will keep such a vulgar trinket. The*

*skirt barely covers anything at all. One can see the entire length of her legs!*

*'But all ballet dancers wear—'*

*'Those painted hussies at the theatre are no proper example for a young lady. Give it here. Now.'*

*A sob caught in the girl's throat. The figurine shifted — pulled away from small woollen mittens. 'Please, Mother!'*

*The wind pushed into the passenger compartment of the hansom cab, carrying the damp smell of the Thames.*

*'Be quiet!' The mother's voice seemed familiar in its sharpness.*

*'Mother, nooooo!'*

As the figurine tumbled through empty air, the Whisper began to fade, leaving Beatrice alone with the cold weight of the dancer in her palms. She felt the phantom ache of a long-ago loss. The figurine had survived its plunge, but the memory of that desperate cry still echoed under its hard skin.

'There now,' she whispered, pressing her lips to the dancer's head. 'You're safe.'

She looked up and realised that darkness was falling swiftly. She stood and lit an oil lamp. The peeling wallpaper came alive with mottled shadows wavering in the unsteady light.

Cradling the dancer in one hand and the lamp in the other, Beatrice walked along her collection of treasures that lined the walls. Bits of brass and copper, a tarnished spoon that sang of summer picnics, a chunk of marble that remembered the weight of the whole mantelpiece whence it came, buttons sorted into jars by size and colour, rows of polished medicinal bottles catching the lamp light. The tarnished pocket watch hanging from a nail by the window had belonged to a factory worker who died saving a child caught in machinery. The cracked, half-blind mirror next to it had hung in a parlour

where three generations had laughed and cried. Each object held memories, unchanging and true.

And there, her greatest treasures: porcelain figurines crowding her window's narrow sill. 'Your new family, dear one,' Beatrice whispered as she placed the dancer between a headless chimney sweep and a two-legged black cat without a tail.

Muffled noises seeped through closed doors and thin walls: a baby's plaintive wail, a burst of raucous laughter, the murmur of a heated argument, all merging into a discordant symphony that set Beatrice's nerves on edge. The room grew colder, and she argued with herself whether it would be better to go down to the scullery, where someone must have lit the ovens already, or stay here for a modicum of peace.

In the end, her frozen toes and hollow stomach won.

The corridor was empty. A bad sign. Everyone would be in the scullery and communal dining area. The stairwell creaked beneath her boots as she descended, a small tin pan clutched in one hand. In the other, she held the meagre leftovers of the baked potato she'd had for lunch and meat she'd bought from the Cats Meat Man that morning, wrapped in wax paper. The din of voices grew louder with each step. Her skin began to prickle. Hastily, she crossed the communal dining hall, keeping her gaze on the floorboards, hoping no one would call her name or step in her way. Heat and steam from multiple cooking pots saturated the air as she entered the cramped space of the scullery.

Bodies pressed close in the dim light. Beatrice kept her gaze low, focusing on the familiar pattern of the floorboards. A woman rustled past, bumping her elbow. The scents of cheap ale, old sweat, and wet socks mingled with that of boiled cabbage.

'Evening, Miss Wren. Got something nice today?' Mrs

Cooper's voice was hard to mistake — a noisy croaking that made Beatrice think of a heron's call.

She edged past her towards an empty spot on the cooking range, wondering whether Mrs Cooper's reference was to her dinner or her mud larking. But since the woman couldn't know about the porcelain figurine, she must have enquired after her dinner.

'Nothing in particular.'

'Would you like a drop of tea?' Mrs Cooper asked, waving a pot under Beatrice's nose. The liquid looked strangely green. Probably second or third-hand green tea with added verdigris to make it look fresh.

With enough brains to know that this wasn't particularly good for her health, Beatrice muttered a rough 'no.'

'Suit yourself then. Though you might find a husband if you weren't so proud.'

Laughter erupted in the scullery. 'Husband? At her age?'

'Maybe one of them grave robbers would have her.' More cackling.

Beatrice placed her pan on the heat, watching the pieces of lung sizzle and bleed. Beef, the Cats Meat Man had said. Which didn't mean much. He said whatever was necessary to make people buy his wares, just like any other street vendor.

She cut up the leftovers of her baked potato — which, without a doubt, was a potato — and placed the slices next to the meat to warm up.

'Leave her be,' a man's voice came from the doorway to the dining hall. 'Some folks prefer their own company.'

She threw a glance at his boots. Brown leather, badly scuffed. The same who'd greeted her earlier. Yes, Mr Jones from the second floor, definitely.

'Some folks think they're better than us common folk,' another woman muttered.

Beatrice didn't bother to place the voice. She prodded the lung with a fork, counting the seconds until the meat would be done. The voices pressed down on her — some familiar, others strange. New faces she wouldn't recognise even if she looked up. The lodging house was always changing, people drifting in and out like the tide.

Steam rose from someone's cooking beside her. Cutlery clinked against tin. Teeth ground food. Lips smacked. Someone burped.

Too many people. Too close. The air was thick with unwashed bodies and breath and judgement. Her meat sizzled, nearly ready.

'Miss Wren.' Mr Jones again, closer now. 'Would you like some bread with your supper? I've extra.'

'Oh, I... Thank you. No.' She willed the lung to cook faster.

More whispers. More laughter.

'Playing the mystery lady, that one.'

'As if any man would look twice.'

'Probably hoping for a wealthy widower to save her.'

The meat was done. Beatrice grabbed the pan and backed away from the range. Voices followed her retreat, but she kept her eyes on the stairwell. More laughter. More bodies moving in the steam-filled space.

Her room was close. Peace within reach. Beatrice clutched her pan tighter and pushed through the last barrier of humanity between her and escape.

The oil lamp shone its unsteady light on rows of porcelain figurines, jars with buttons, and colourful bottles. Unlike faces that shifted and morphed, Beatrice's collection was a constant. Her treasures never pretended to be something they weren't, never wore false smiles and spoke lies.

# *Among Forgotten Things*



AFTERNOON LIGHT FILTERED through the windows of the pawnbroker's shop. Long shadows crept across shelves packed with the debris of uncounted lives. Scents of brass polish, old leather bindings, and the musty sweetness of forgotten things wrapped around Beatrice like a soft embrace. If she had a say in it at all, she would gladly move her belongings to the crowded backroom of this place and bid farewell to the lodging house forever.

Alas, she had no say whatsoever.

Her fingers traced the delicate filigree of a silver brooch, cataloguing each curve and whorl in her mind. According to the ledger on the counter before her, this piece had just passed its redemption date. It had been in the shop for three months, waiting for an owner who hadn't returned. She made a note, buffed the brooch to a shine, affixed a price tag and placed it in a display cabinet alongside a first edition of a children's book and a bronze candlestick.

The bells above the door announced a customer. Heavy footsteps crossed the wooden floor, bringing with them April's



bite and dank river scents. Beatrice kept her eyes on the ledger and adjusted her spectacles. Well, they weren't truly *hers* — merely props selected from the shop's collection to maintain her facade of poor vision without impairing her sight too much. She'd once tried a pair with lenses thick as bottle bottoms and pondered if such would be needed in her twilight years.

Assuming she survived that long. East End didn't favour the old and feeble.

'I've got something to sell.' A man's voice, gruff and impatient.

She lifted her head but not her gaze, focusing on the counter between them. 'We do not buy. This is a pawnbroker's shop. We loan money for pledged items.'

A pocket watch clattered onto the wooden surface. Gold-plated, she noted, not solid gold. It had an intricate pattern of ivy leaves etched into its case. Her fingers closed around it. The Whisper came instantly: *A flash of warmth, of pride. A graduation gift, presented in a moment of triumph. A father's weathered, liver-spotted hands trembled as they passed it over. The weight of expectations, of sacrifices made to send a son to medical school...*

'Three pounds,' the man said.

Beatrice's thumb caught on a slight indent near the crown. 'The mechanism is worn. The winder sticks.' She demonstrated with a practised motion. 'And this dent here, it affects the closing mechanism. I can offer fifteen shillings.'

'Fifteen shillings! It's worth five pounds if it's worth a penny.' His voice rose.

Beatrice snorted. She always did. It was what the pawnbroker had told her to do. Whatever the customers believe their items are worth, snort derisively. 'The plating is wearing thin at the sides,' she continued. 'And the crystal has multiple scratches. Eighteen shillings is my final offer.'

The man's breathing stopped. He coughed. Grumbled an insult.

Beatrice looked up because that, too, was what the pawn-broker had told her. Look at the clients from time to time, woman! Else they'll think you a simpleton.

'Your name for the record, please?' she said.

'What? You having a laugh?' He leaned forward. 'I've been here at least a dozen times. Sold you my wife's silver just last month!'

Beatrice adjusted her spectacles again and glanced over their rim to make a serious attempt at recognising the man. And failed. 'If you've been here a dozen times, you'd know my vision is poor.'

'Poor vision? Pah! Your writing is clear as day in that book of yours.'

She returned to filling out the ledger, her script neat and unwavering. 'Name, please?'

'Thomas Blackwood,' he spat. 'And you should bloody well know that by now.'

Beatrice counted out his eighteen shillings and laid them in a precise line. 'Your loan period is three months. The interest is twenty-five per cent per annum. Here is your pawn ticket. Have a good day.'

He snatched the coins and the ticket, muttering something that sounded like 'addled cow' as he stormed out. The door slammed, the bells jangled violently.

As she placed the watch on a shelf with other pawned items, her fingers lingered on its cool surface. The Whisper came again, fainter now, of a young man's determination to prove himself worthy of his father's sacrifice. She wondered if Mr Thomas Blackwood had completed his medical studies.

With only the muffled din of the traffic outside and the scratching of mice under the floorboards for company, Beatrice

continued cataloguing items. She lifted a silver hairpin, and it Whispered of dance halls and champagne kisses. A pearl-handled letter opener Whispered of broken promises and a lonely heart.

Beatrice ran her fingers along a brass pocket watch, and memories of Sunday afternoons and pipe tobacco Whispered through her mind. The watch had passed its redemption date last week — another item abandoned to these shelves. She marked it in her ledger, polished it, added a price tag, and placed it on a shelf for sale.

Dust motes danced in the fading afternoon light as she moved through her daily ritual — polish, sweep, listen. Each item needed its proper place and its chance to Whisper. The bells above the door remained mercifully quiet.

Near closing time, she tackled the back shelves with her feather duster, then began sweeping the floor. Her skirts snagged on a nail in the worn floorboards as she crouched to excavate heaps of ancient dust, cobwebs, and mice droppings beneath the farthest shelf.

The broom hit something solid. Something that wasn't supposed to be there.

She peeked under the shelf. A cardboard box lurked in the shadows, covered in a thick layer of dust. Huffing, Beatrice, laid on her stomach, stretched out her arm and pulled out the box. It was surprisingly heavy. She hoisted it onto the counter and wiped years of neglect from its lid.

Faded writing caught her eye: 'RESERVED — P.P.'

She consulted the ledgers but found no matching entry. She flipped back through the pages, months becoming years. Nothing.

The box felt wrong somehow, forgotten, overlooked. It didn't belong in her careful system of records and receipts. She

touched its worn corners, but unlike the other treasures, it remained stubbornly silent.

Had Mr Green, the pawnbroker, forgotten to put it in the records? That would be unheard of. While he wasn't as meticulous as Beatrice, he wouldn't shove an item under a shelf and ignore it for years. But perhaps he'd been deep in his cups when he hid it?

She checked the clock on the counter. Half eight. She'd close up the shop in half an hour. It was Tuesday. Mr Green usually came in on Thursdays to check the books and finances. Would it be safe to open the box now?

Deciding to just take a quick peek, she lifted the lid. Her breath stopped in her mouth when she saw the contents. The lid dropped from her hands onto the counter. A small cloud of dust rose, but Beatrice had eyes only for the porcelain figurines inside the box. Their colours were fresh, their limbs unbroken, their faces without a scratch.

'Who abandoned you?' she whispered and picked up a porcelain child cradling a cat and a flower. Instantly, Whispers punched her in the chest.

*A young woman — no, a girl — crying in pain, struggling against a shadowy figure.*

*Blood on her face.*

*Blood in her hair.*

*Cruel hands wrapped around her throat.*

With a gasp, Beatrice threw the lid back on the box as a wave of panic rolled over her. Bent over, her forehead pressed to the counter, she was hacking more than breathing.

A murder.

She'd witnessed a murder.

## Crossing the Line



THE PAWNBROKER'S shop was too small to contain all of Beatrice's fears. She huddled in a corner, flinching at every shadow that passed by the windows. Her fingers were clenched around the delicate curves of the porcelain child. It was Whispering to her insistently, as though standing right next to her and relentlessly tugging at her skirts.

Beatrice's eyes darted to the door, expecting Mr Green to enter any moment. Angry that she'd opened the box. Outraged she'd touched a figurine. Didn't she know no one was permitted to look at them, let alone touch them? Didn't she know the box had been safely hidden for years until *Her Great Nosiness* unearthed it from its secret spot?

The shop's clutter seemed to scream at her, condemning her for considering theft.

The figurine's Whisper grew more urgent. Beatrice's heart was bruising her ribs. She would never be able to buy it. But stealing it?

She couldn't.

Could she?

'She's been here for years,' she murmured to herself. 'No one wants her. Mr Green surely forgot the box long ago.' Her fingers closed around the base of the figurine.

The inscription on the lid snagged in her memory. 'RESERVED.' The thought sent a fresh wave of guilt through her, but the figurine's call drowned it out. Its porcelain surface felt warm against her palm, alive with memories desperately pushing through her skin.

Shutting her eyes, she pressed the figurine to her chest. Whispers exploded into violent images — hands grappling in darkness, crimson spreading across floorboards, wide eyes filled with terror. The visions pressed her ever deeper into the dark corner of the shop.

A cry for help. That's what this was. Would she ignore it? Of course she wouldn't.

Couldn't.

The shadows deepened as the flame of the oil lamp flickered lower. Dust tickled her airways. A cough wrenched up Beatrice's throat, and at that precise moment, her hand moved of its own accord. The figurine slipped into the pocket of her overcoat, its weight both thrilling and condemning.

'I'll find out who did this to you.' A cracked whisper. And a vow. 'Although how a woman like me can find a killer, I don't have the faintest clue.'

She thought of the 'RESERVED' inscription again. Someone wanted this box, planned to come back for it. Had something happened to the person? Had they been killed, too?

The implications sat like hot bricks in Beatrice's stomach, but the figurine's Whispers had hooks deep in her flesh. They promised secrets that needed uncovering. They promised meaning to a meaningless life.

Beatrice's hand moved towards her pocket, then stopped and hovered over it. She didn't dare touch the figurine now.

The tales of violence and fear would cloud her mind, and she needed to finish sweeping the shop and lock up as if nothing had happened.

She had to make sure everything looked normal.

She filled her lungs and got to work.



The gas lamps cast long shadows across the cobblestones as Beatrice hurried through the narrow streets. Her boots slipped over a thin layer of ice covering the uneven ground.

A chorus of high-pitched laughter sounded ahead. Her shoulders tensed. Experience had taught her that children could be the cruellest of all creatures. In a group, they could cause serious damage to someone like her. Following her sense of self-preservation, she finally looked up.

Five urchins huddled in a circle, their faces alive with malicious glee. One of them held a stick, jabbing it downward with sharp, vicious thrusts.

Something in the centre of that circle squeaked.

Beatrice stopped and forced herself to look closer. The children were torturing a rat. Its tail was trapped by a boot. Its grey fur was matted with blood, the small chest rising and falling with panic.

The sight broke something inside her. Without thinking, she strode towards them, her voice rising from deep in her throat. 'Stop that! Stop it right now, you little monsters!'

She locked eyes with the nearest boy and saw him flinch at the raw fury in her face. 'How dare you torture a helpless creature?'

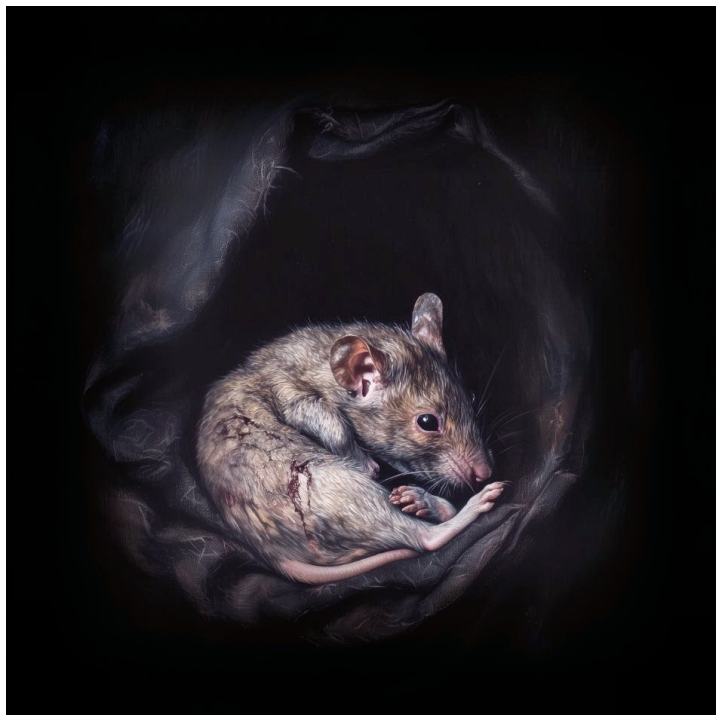
The children's laughter turned uncertain. They exchanged glances, then scattered like leaves in the wind.

The rat lay motionless on the cobblestones. Beatrice

crouched beside it, whispering, 'You're safe now, poor thing,' as she reached out.

Sharp teeth sank into her finger as she tried to lift the animal. Beatrice bit back a cry but didn't let go. 'It's all right. I know you're terrified of people,' she murmured, using her other hand to open her satchel. 'But I promise I won't hurt you.'

Gently, she placed the injured rat into her bag, cushioning it against the soft folds of her spare shawl. 'There now. We'll get you warm and fed. No one will harm you again.' The rat's whiskers didn't even twitch as it released her finger. Beatrice carefully closed the bag. She wasn't naive enough to believe the rat trusted her and her mumblings. The poor creature was probably dying.





Blood welled from the bite on her finger. Beatrice stuck it into her mouth and sucked it clean, then cradled her satchel close to her body as she resumed her journey home, wondering how she could make the business of dying more comfortable for the rat.

'If you can manage to hang on a little longer, I'll show you to my lodgings,' she told it in low, soothing tones. 'They aren't much, but they're safe. And I have a hunk of bread, a slice of cheese, water to wash your wounds, and a quiet corner where you can rest.'

Beatrice strode through the front door of the lodging house, her footsteps on the old floorboards purposeful for the first time in years. Her precious cargo shifted in her bag. Perhaps not dead yet, she mused.

The scullery glowed with lamplight, voices drifting from within. A man and a woman, probably old Tom and Mrs Peterson judging from a glimpse of their clothes and the late hour. They sat hunched by the cooking range, faces lit by dying embers.

'Good evening,' Beatrice called out as she entered, heading straight for the tap.

The conversation stopped. Mrs Peterson's spoon clattered against her bowl.

'Why, Miss Wren...' Tom trailed off.

Beatrice filled a kettle, keeping her eyes fixed on the task. 'Rather chill tonight. Feels like winter is creeping back.'

More silence followed. She felt their stares boring into her back as she set the kettle on the cooking range. Droplets danced and fizzed across the hot cast-iron surface.

'Uh, yes. That it is,' Mrs Peterson replied. 'That it is.'

Beatrice waited until the water would be nearly too hot to touch, then lifted the kettle and gave a curt nod before leaving. Behind her, whispers erupted. She paid them no mind. Her

thoughts focused solely on a poor, injured creature and a stolen figurine.

In her room, she eased the rat from her bag, settling it onto a clean cloth spread out on her mattress. She lit her oil lamp and took a closer look at her new companion. Its breathing came in rapid, shallow bursts, its black eyes gleaming with what she interpreted as terror and defiance.

'Let's get you cleaned up and tend to those wounds. I promise I'll be gentle.' Beatrice dipped a rag into the warm water and began dabbing at the injuries. The rat twitched but appeared too weak to attempt escape. Blood and grime came away, revealing cuts that weren't as deep as she'd feared, though internal damage was a possibility and a concern.

Her teeth worried at her cheek. 'A physician would press down on your belly, but I doubt that's practical given our size difference. Hum. What about food? A healthy appetite is usually a good sign.'

She crumbled a piece of bread into tiny morsels, offering them one by one. The rat wiggled its whiskers but didn't accept the food. The water, now tepid, met the same rejection. Beatrice's heart grew heavy.

Reaching into her coat pocket, she retrieved the wedge of cheese she'd saved from lunch. She broke off the smallest corner and held it close to the rat's nose.

Whiskers trembled. After a moment's hesitation, delicate paws reached for the morsel. Relief flooded Beatrice as the rat began to nibble the cheese.

'There's a good fellow,' she whispered. She stretched her back and announced with great formality, 'I hereby christen thee, Sir Sebastian. Until you have recovered, you shall have a place in my home and share my meals.'

Sir Sebastian withheld all commentary save for a quick

swipe of his tongue across his snout before closing his eyes with a gentle sigh.

Beatrice told herself that this was a sigh of contentment, not the final breath the Grim Reaper extracted from the dying.

She shed her layers until she stood in her underclothes. With her breath a white cloud and her teeth chattering, she used the last of the warm water to wash her body. In all the years since leaving her childhood home, the choice between staying warm and being clean remained a daily battle. Cleanliness usually won.

After completing her ablutions, she used the chamber pot, cracked open the window, poured its contents down the facade, then rinsed the pot with her used wash water before disposing of that as well.

By the time she was ready for bed, her bones rattled with cold, and her toes had gone numb. She slipped beneath her collection of threadbare blankets, accumulated over many winters. Careful not to disturb the rat, she rested her head on the thin pillow and gazed at the ceiling.

For the first time in her life, Beatrice felt neither small nor insignificant. No. She felt like a woman who'd made a meaningful difference in someone's life. Even if that someone was a sewer rat.

And now, she resolved, she would seek justice for the murdered child. She would find the killer, whatever the cost, one way or another.

Beatrice drifted into slumber with a sewer rat nestled in her hair and loot hidden behind her chamber pot.

## Doors Slammed Shut



BEATRICE LOCKED the door to her room, working the key around the familiar stiffness of the worn brass mechanism. She made her way down the stairs and onto the street. The morning sun had melted away the night's frost, leaving gleaming puddles in the dim April light. A whiff of early spring blossoms hitchhiked on a stiff breeze before disappearing into the muddy stink of the Thames.

For a moment, her hand lingered on the doorknob, the Whispers from last night still urging her to do something, *anything*. The blood, the terror. If she ever wanted to catch the killer, she needed answers. And most of all, she needed to know if what she'd seen had truly happened or if her sanity was slipping away.

Perhaps police records held the answers?

She opened her satchel to check on Sir Sebastian. The rat was curled into a tight bundle atop a shawl she'd arranged as a bed for him. His breathing was steady and peaceful. When sharing bread crumbs with him for breakfast, she'd realised with no small measure of surprise that he'd been remarkably tidy: no

accidents on her pillow or anywhere else in the room that she could spot.

It appeared that rats deserved far more credit than society gave them.

She turned into the yawning alley. Her stomach clenched as she thought of the journey to Leman Street. The morning crowds. The suffocating press of faces and bodies. And the police station itself... She shuddered as she thought of all those uniforms and stern faces blending into a homogenous mass of indistinguishable men.

The sun reached through a gap between buildings and touched her face. She closed her eyes. Breathed in. Despite the lingering chill, spring was winning its battle against winter. But that offered no comfort against the dread of what might await her at Division H. She'd never set foot in a police station before. Would they even be willing to help her? Would they laugh at her questions? Mock her when she couldn't meet their eyes or recognize them if they stepped away and returned?

Sir Sebastian stirred in the bag. She risked another peek. His whiskers twitched in his sleep. Despite his small size, his presence steadied her. The rat probably didn't care about anything at all as long as she kept her promise of treats and shelter.

The doleful tones of a church bell marking nine o'clock wiped away her trepidation. She wouldn't spend a whole day holding on to a doorknob. Beatrice's legs felt like pudding as she began making her way from Ratcliff Highway towards Leman Street.

The doors of Division H closed with a resounding thud behind her. Her chest tightened as the sea of blue uniforms before her melted into a dizzying haze. The sharp scent of boot polish and tobacco smoke didn't help.

She caught herself before pressing her satchel against her chest, remembering Sir Sebastian. Instead, she traced her fingertips along the shoulder strap, drawing strength from her companion's silent presence. One foot in front of the other, she approached the front desk where a row of polished brass buttons winked on a constable's uniform.

'I need to report a murder.' The words emerged as barely more than a whisper. She had to repeat herself twice before the man looked up. Her voice warbled. 'I overheard a man talking about it. He strangled her, but there was blood too—' The words tumbled out wrong, a jumbled mess of loose threads.

The officer's eyebrows hiked up. Whether in surprise, shock, or amusement, she couldn't tell. She never could.

'When and where did you hear this conversation?' he asked.

'I—' She felt as if spiders were creeping up her neck. The truth about the stolen figurine's Whispers was stuck in her throat. 'Last night. Near the...the docks.'

'And you waited until now to report it?'

'No, I mean yes, I—' Her fingers twisted the fabric of her sleeve. 'I couldn't. The streets aren't safe at night. But he killed her. I'm certain of it.'

Another officer materialized beside the desk, older with a thick moustache that twitched as he spoke. 'Are you saying you were at the docks at night but deemed the streets too unsafe to report it to a constable on the beat?'

'I—'

'What did this man look like?'

Her stomach lurched. The man was asking the impossible of her. She couldn't describe faces. Never could. 'Tall? Wearing...a coat.'

'What colour coat?'

'Dark. Perhaps brown. Or black.' She blinked, fighting to keep her voice clear.

'And the victim?' The senior officer's tone was razor-sharp. 'You mentioned blood but said she was strangled. Which was it?'

'I believe it was...both.' The room began to tilt sideways.

'Listen here, you old goose—'

'Constable, I will handle this matter.'

'But sir, she's clearly—'

'That will be all.'

The moustachioed officer seized Beatrice's arm and steered her towards a colleague who was questioning a woman with a threadbare red shawl wrapped around her shoulders. Their voices carried across the room in heated debate.

'I'm telling you the truth,' Beatrice mumbled. 'He strangled the poor girl.'

'Stabbed her as well, did he?' the officer pressed.

'Yes! I mean, perhaps? I saw blood.'

'You *saw* blood.'

'No, that's not... He spoke of it, is what I meant to say.'

He leaned in, scrutinising her breath. 'Not in your cups, at least. Where might your husband be?'

'My *husband*?' The word felt like a shovel of salt in her mouth. Revealing her unmarried status would take away what little credibility she had left. 'What bearing does that have on the murder?'

'Do you realise how many folk come here with tales of murder?'

'How should I know that?'

'What makes you so certain it was murder? Perhaps the fellow was in his cups, spinning yarns?'

'I know it was a murder! The figurine showed me—'

'Figurine?'

'I mean, I dreamt... No, that's wrong.' Panic clawed at Beatrice's throat. 'The Whispers told me—'

'Whispers?' His face loomed before hers as he sniffed her breath again. 'You seem sober enough. Perhaps you should see an alienist?'

'No, please, you must listen! There's been a murder! A girl is dead. You have to—'

The slap rang out sharp and cruel. Her head snapped back and her cheek blazed with pain as the officer struck her face. He pressed closer, his breath scalding her skin.

'Now see here, you addled biddy. Colney Hatch always welcomes new inmates. Keep wasting my time with your ravings, and I'll personally see you delivered there.'

Tears burned behind Beatrice's eyes as she staggered backwards. She fled to the doors, the floor swaying beneath her feet, the threat of being locked up in an asylum chasing at her heels like a nightmare.

Out on Lemman Street, she pressed her back against a frigid brick wall. Her cheek stung from the blow, but the physical pain was nothing compared to the rage and powerlessness roaring in her chest. She'd tried to help, tried to do the right thing for once, only to be dismissed as a madwoman.

'Never again,' she whispered, the words tasting of salt and copper. 'I'll never speak to another policeman. Not one. They can all bugger themselves!'

Her shoulders slumped. Beatrice dabbed her nose with her kerchief. Though the fabric caught her tears, it failed to absorb the humiliation.

A commotion erupted from the doorway she'd fled moments ago. Two officers muscled the woman with the red shawl through the doorway.

'And don't come back, you drunken slag!' One officer shoved her off.

The woman lurched, catching herself against a lamppost. Her greying hair hung in tangles around her weathered



features. The hem of her skirt dragged through the gutter mud.

'Devils, the lot of you!' She spat on the ground. 'Think yerselves above us common folk. Go bugger yerselves!'

Beatrice let out a laugh. 'I expressed similar sentiments only a minute ago. They must hear such pleasantries a hundred times each day.'

The woman's gaze landed on Beatrice. She shuffled closer, the sour smell of gin rolling off her in waves. 'Gave you the brush-off too, did they, love?'

Nodding once, Beatrice lowered her handkerchief, careful to keep her eyes down. The woman's features blurred together like wet paint, but the rasp in her voice carried decades of hard living.

'Typical. No time for the likes of us.' The woman leaned heavily against the wall beside Beatrice. 'When I heard what you was sayin', poor Maggie Firth came to mind. Margaret, they called her proper-like in the papers. Found behind the pub at Dean and Chapels two winters ago.'

Beatrice's breath caught. The name Margaret struck like a physical blow, sending tremors through her chest. Did the figurine mention the name last night? She couldn't remember, but it must have. Why else would she feel like the ground was opening below her feet?

'Must've been one of her clients what did it. Strangled her first, then took a knife to her.' The woman traced a line across her middle, then swiped her nose on her sleeve, leaving a glistening trail. 'Cut her open, he did. Not all the way, like he'd had a mind to. Got interrupted halfway through his bloody business.'

The words 'Margaret' and 'knife' tangled in Beatrice's mind like thorny vines. Her fingers clawed at the rough brick behind her, her short nails splintering.

'Police never bothered trying to find who done it.' The woman's voice dropped to a bitter hush. 'Just another dead whore to them. Could've been any of our regulars, but they wouldn't spare a moment asking 'round. Not for the likes of us.'

Margaret. *Maggie*. The name carved itself deep into Beatrice's thoughts, stirring something dark and obscure. Had it always lurked there? Did she know this Margaret? But how could she? Her stomach crawled with phantom sensations, the bite of steel, a flash of red, a scream swallowed by shadow. The connection hovered just beyond her grasp, taunting her.

The old woman continued her drunken rambling, but Beatrice barely heard the words. Her heart hammered an angry protest against her ribs as that name burrowed deeper, unearthing something she couldn't quite grasp.

Maggie.

*Maggie*.

Who are you?

Do I know you?

Am I going mad?

## Paths Converge



SCENTS of new paper and damp raincoats replaced the smell of coal smoke from the street outside as Beatrice stepped through the entrance hall and looked up, taking in her first glimpse of the Free Library — or indeed, any library.

But now she was investigating a murder and had no choice but to venture into polite society, no matter how impolite she found society.

*Investigating a murder!* Snorting, Beatrice shook her head. What utter tosh. 'Fumbling about for clues' was closer to the truth, but she refused to let reality take all the wind from her sails.

When nausea crept in, she realised she'd been staring at the crowded room for too long. Too many people, too much noise. Lowering her eyes, she reached into her satchel where Sir Sebastian nestled in his makeshift shawl bed. She touched his soft, curled-up form, and felt his little nose investigate her fingertips. A gentle swipe of his tongue as though sensing her discomfort, and then he settled back to slumber.

Best get on with it. She wove between tables, skirting past

dockworkers absorbed in their morning papers, and approached the librarian's station.

'Pardon me,' she murmured, fixing her gaze on the dark wool of his waistcoat. 'I need to locate articles about a violent death from two winters ago.'

'You'll have to speak up, ma'am. I can barely hear you. And kindly keep your hands off the counter.'

Her queasiness surged. She swallowed, inhaled a lungful of air, and forced her voice stronger. 'Margaret Firth.' The name bounced off the tall ceiling. 'She was murdered. Strangled and mutilated.'

'Shush! Your manners!' The librarian's chair grated as he bolted upright. 'We don't discuss such morbid matters here.'

'But it was reported. I need to confirm—'

'Our archives only go back twelve months. The central library might help with your...distasteful research.' He rapped his pencil against a ledger with a dismissive shake of his head.

Beatrice's fingers found the edge of the desk. The wood carried memories of coarse hands applying a fresh layer of beeswax.

'Please remove your hand from the desk,' the librarian said, his tone brittle.

'Where might I find the crime reports?'

He gestured to a shelf. 'As I said, nothing beyond twelve months.'

Silently, she withdrew to the newspaper section. Fresh editions sat crisp and proper. Older issues showed signs of heavy use: corners dog-eared, mysterious stains speckling their pages. But none dated back far enough. The librarian hadn't lied.

She mustered what little scraps of courage remained and approached a woman wearing a broad-brimmed hat, a crisp white blouse and dark skirts to enquire about the archives's location.

'Oh! I'm not...' The woman clutched her book to her chest and hurried away.

Pressing her damp palm against her forehead, Beatrice shut her eyes and let her fingers rest on a stack of old newspapers in front of her. Whispers of dock accidents, parliamentary speeches, society gatherings, burglaries, and soap advertisements. But nothing of Margaret Firth's final moments.

A throat cleared behind her. 'Ma'am, are you quite all right? You've been standing here talking to yourself.'

She recognized the stern tone of the librarian. 'The papers don't go back far enough. I need to find—'

'As I've explained, we don't keep extensive archives. We maintain only recent archives. Unless you wish to read today's edition, I must ask you to leave. You're unsettling the other readers.'

Beatrice snatched back her hand and dropped her gaze to her boots, feeling the familiar weight of defeat settling around her like a well-worn cloak. The newspapers' Whispers faded to a dull hum as she left the public library.

A faint drizzle began to fall as Beatrice walked towards the East End dockyard. Soon, everything was turned into a smudged aquarelle of muted greys. She hunched her shoulders and tucked her chin against the cold April wind, turned up her collar, and clutched her ha'penny as if it were a charm. Steam and the scent of boiled meat and vegetables wafted from a nearby cart, where a vendor stirred a pot of sheep's trotters stew.

Her stomach growled, though not merely from want of food. The morning's defeat had left an emptiness no meal could fill.

'One ladle.' She extended the coin, careful to keep her eyes fixed on the vendor's rough-knuckled hands.

Scents of boiled sheep's wool and old peas rose from the thick stew. Cradling the warm bowl in her cold fingers, she

found a spot away from the other dock workers but near enough to the vendor to assure him she wouldn't leg it with his dented tin bowl.

Sir Sebastian's twitchy little nose poked from her satchel, demanding his share.

'At least you believe me.' She picked out a morsel of meat and offered it to him. The rat snatched it with surprising precision and speed. 'Though I suppose you must, given your temporary reliance on my generosity.'

She nudged a mushy pea to the rim of her bowl, picked it up and presented it to the hungry rat. Though the stew brought warmth to her belly, it did little to thaw the cold certainty in her chest. The murder was undeniable. The figurine's Whispers had shown it plain enough: hands around a throat, a struggle, blood. But who would heed the words of a woman who couldn't even recognize her own reflection?

'We make quite the pair of lunatics.' Beatrice watched Sir Sebastian's fastidious grooming. 'I hear voices from trinkets, and you chose a woman's satchel for lodging.'

The last spoonful came too soon. She returned the bowl, murmuring her thanks, then turned towards the river. The tide was out, exposing stretches of the riverbed. With luck, she might find something worth selling, enough to keep food in her belly and the rent paid.

The muddy foreshore stretched before her, strewn with castoffs from London's teeming masses.



'Perhaps you'll yield something precious today,' she murmured to the riverbed.

She picked her way down the slippery steps. Sir Sebastian vanished into her satchel, retreating to daytime slumber as nocturnal adventures awaited. The muddy foreshore stretched before her, strewn with castoffs from London's four million lives.

'Would be nice if you have something valuable for me today,' she whispered, but as always, the riverbed was silent.

The persistent drizzle seeped through her coat as she picked her way across the sodden shore. Her boots sank into the Thames's wet embrace with each careful step. She lifted yet another piece of driftwood, discarding it with a dull splash

when she found nothing beneath. Selling common trinkets like broken clay pipes, shattered bottles, and lost buttons would be difficult. Every mudlark found those daily. She needed a treasure worth enough to appease her landlord for another week or two.

Her fingertips grazed something unyielding beneath a tangle of weeds and a torn netting. Its shape was too precise to be natural. Beatrice crouched down, heedless of the mud soaking her skirts as she cleared away debris.

A strongbox emerged from its muddy grave. Her pulse quickened at its heft. Ten pounds. Perhaps twelve? Though corroded and crusted with river muck and algae, she might be able to get good money for it. The quality of its construction revealed itself when Beatrice scraped away the grime with her fingernails. Decorative scrollwork appeared around a keyhole that was filled with sediment from years underwater.

The box's Whispers were muffled, its mysteries guarded through countless tides by iron walls. But value was there, in the box if nothing else.

She tested the corroded handles with frozen fingers. They refused to budge, fused by rust and time.

'Blast it,' she muttered, tugging her shawl closer as she weighed her options. She had no tools to open it, and using a rock on the box would damage it further. Cracking the lock with a knife or spoon from the scullery, perhaps? That would make sense only if she knew beyond doubt that the contents exceeded the box's own value.

No, she couldn't risk damaging it. But that meant finding a locksmith, one she'd have to both pay and trust not to pilfer the contents. A risky undertaking, even if she were there to watch. But what choice did she have?

Her decision made, she gathered the strongbox into her



arms, careful not to crush Sir Sebastian in her satchel. 'Let's see what stories you have to tell.'

The drizzle persisted, but Beatrice scarcely noticed. Her mind was locked on her newfound treasure, the secrets it might hold, the warm meals it might buy, the rent it could cover.

She ascended the steps to the East End dockyard, her boots slipping on the slick stones. A wall of noise hit her as she reached the top, clanking chains, groans of timber, shouts in foreign languages. She steadied herself and scanned the tumult before her.

By a warehouse doorway, she spotted a locksmith in his stall, tools at his side and wares laid out for trade. His face held her attention, its features so distinctive they etched themselves into her mind.

His right arm bent oddly, and his hands were stained with oil, but his scarred visage was like a chart she could navigate by, distinct among the sea of faces.

A flash of a smile crept over her mouth as she adjusted her grip on the strongbox and threaded her way through the throng of carts and labourers towards his stall.

She was still grinning when the locksmith fixed her with a cold stare and snapped. 'What in the devil's name are you gawking at? Shift your carcass, woman, you're blocking my view.'

## *Nail in the Coffin*



**GRIM HUNCHED** beneath the canvas of his makeshift stand. With his good hand, he arranged his picks and files. His right arm, an ugly reminder of his past, was tucked against his ribs.

With eyes the colour and unforgiveness of flint, he watched drizzle turn the dockyard into a soup of mud and coal dust. Rabble swarmed like maggots on carrion. Porters lumbered past, barrel-shaped necks and shoulders supporting vacant expressions. Hawkers bellowed their shoddy merchandise, volume compensating for poor quality. Fishwives in filthy aprons haggled over spoiled catch, their shrill voices stabbing at his skull. Dock workers stumbled past his stand, addled with gin and stupid as cattle. Two peddlers squared off over a patch of ground, brandishing their fists over goods that lay scattered in the muck. The lot of them, he thought, were nothing but walking proof of God's sick sense of humour.

Grim spat on the ground. He was in a particularly foul mood, which had nothing to do with the weather. Some half-wit had blundered into his workshop the previous night in an

act of monumental stupidity. The dolt had stumbled like a blind bat in a graveyard, brandishing a knife with misplaced confidence. To put the turd on the mud cake, Grim was certain someone had betrayed the location of his sanctuary. How else would that scum have known where to find him?

Sure, a select few knew what services Grim offered behind locked doors. But to demand he come at once and pick a lock the nitwit was too stupid to pick by himself? Clearly, the man had nothing but pea soup for brains. But there was hope he wouldn't return for another round of arse-walloping.

It was a fool's mistake to think that beneath Grim's roadmap of burn scars was a man humbled by fate. As was the assumption that his crooked right arm and clenched fingers were signs of weakness. Whenever fate dared show its face, Grim kicked it in the mouth with a savage grin. Then he stomped on it for good measure, and if time allowed, he took a piss on it as well.

Grim was neither weak nor humble.

He was a killer.

He'd stabbed and slashed and shot Afghans for Queen and Country until a bayonet mangled his right arm. It had earned him nothing but a discharge slip and a few pennies that spat upon his sacrifice. At home, his bride recoiled from the darkness that seeped from his soul, the terror and fury that woke them both night upon night. And so he'd drowned himself in gin until the day he surfaced in starched sheets, his flesh screaming beneath bandages.

The doctors told him he'd been found sprawled in the street, his nightshirt and hair on fire as he watched his home burn to ashes. When dawn broke, constables dug through the wreckage and found two bodies: his wife, still in her bed, and near the kitchen's hearth, a small corpse. Some vagrant lad, they

reckoned. A street waif who'd crept inside seeking shelter from the cold night.

The flames had granted the child's wish with savage generosity.

Though Grim had no memory of that night, the ghosts of his wife and the nameless child haunted him with anguished shrieks.

In the years since, he shunned both bottle and bedmate, made a wide berth around children of all ages, gagged at the faintest whiff of roast meat, and avoided people whenever possible.

Rudeness was a tool he used like a sledgehammer, and everyone in the dockyards knew not to approach unless they had work and payment in hand.

And so, when a middle-aged woman looked kindly at him that dreary day, Grim's mind presented him with three possibilities:

1. She was a streetwalker desperate for coin.
2. A lunatic escaped from Bedlam.
3. Her glance was for her man, standing somewhere right behind him.

Grim turned and found no one. Scanning her clothes, he concluded she wasn't working the streets. She wore no hat on top of her mess of greying hair and hugged a box crusted with Thames filth to her chest, dirtying her patched overcoat.

A mudlark then. They'd shuffle up with their Thames discoveries of rusty keys and broken padlocks, hoping to make a sale. He hadn't coin to spare, especially not for rubbish.

His fingers had barely risen for a crude gesture when the woman's face lit up as though he were the second coming of Christ. *Nobody* ever smiled at Grim. Not with half his face

twisted to cooled tallow. Not with the venom that fell from his mouth as soon as he opened it.

When she stopped at his stand, still beaming, he snapped, 'What in the devil's name are you gawking at? Shift your carcass, woman, you're blocking my view.'

At that, her smile faltered, and Grim breathed a sigh of relief.

Blinking nervously, she cleared her throat and heaved the muddy box on his stand. 'I need help opening this.'

He eyed the rusty thing for a blink of an eye, then held out his good hand. 'One shilling.'

Lips pinched, she rummaged in her satchel and reluctantly handed over a coin.

He pocketed the money. 'Here's a hammer. Now get lost.'

'What? A shilling for a hammer? Are you mad? And what am I supposed to do with it? Smash open the box like a walnut?'

'It's not a box you've got there. It's a festering pile of scrap. Not worth ruining my tools. Bugger off, you're wasting my time.'

Contrary to Grim's expectations, the woman did not bugger off. She drew herself up and jabbed an angry finger at his nose. 'You're a thief and a brute! A whole shilling for the privilege of breaking my own property? I've met rats with more honour than you! Keep your hammer and your charming personality to yourself and give me my money back!'

'Payment for services rendered.' He shrugged and returned his attention to a puzzle padlock that needed repinning and oiling.

'What service? You didn't open my strongbox. I want my money back!'

'Took my time chatting with you, didn't I? Time ain't free.' The left corner of his mouth curled into a cruel smile while the

right remained frozen. What could this odd bird do, anyway? Punch him in the face? Wrestle the money from his pocket? Ha!

Quick as a viper, her hand shot out and snatched a brass automaton from his display. A delicate clockwork monkey, worth at least five shillings, disappeared into her coat pocket.

Before Grim could protest, the hammer crashed onto the table, scattering picks and files. She tucked the mud-crust-ed strongbox under one arm and bolted.

'Oi!' Grim lunged around the table. 'Give that here!'

She darted away, but he managed to catch her sleeve and yank her off balance.

'Unhand me!' she screeched.

They grappled over the toy, pushed and pulled at each other, neither backing down. A tangle of limbs and curses. When her elbow caught his ribcage and stole his breath, he forced a wheeze. 'Stop this at once, woman!'

A bobby's whistle cut through the fog, and Grim knew he was running out of time. If he wanted the monkey back, he would have to return the shilling to this old bird.

'Blast it all! Take your cursed shilling, you mad cow, and give me back my monkey!'

'What's this commotion? Assaulting a lady in broad daylight! And what's this talk about a monkey?' The bobby's chest was pumping, his face mottled crimson under his helmet.

Releasing his grip, Grim thrust the shilling at her. 'Simple misunderstanding, officer. The lady thought I shortchanged her. All sorted now.' His eyes flashed a silent threat. 'Ain't that right, miss?'

She straightened her overcoat, chin rigid. 'Well, the question remains whether or not he will complete the work I paid him for.'

Grim bared his teeth like a rabid dog. Devil take her! This

insufferable creature seemed hell-bent on being the final nail in his coffin.

The constable's narrowed gaze flickered between them. 'Explain yourselves, both of you.'

She glared at Grim, raising her eyebrows in a silent challenge. Begrudgingly, he gave her a nod, signalling he'd fix her stupid box, already plotting his revenge.

'All sorted,' she told the bobby, shifting the strongbox against her hip, mindful of her satchel.

'And what is that you have there?' The bobby gestured at the mud-caked box.

The woman was about to open her mouth when Grim cut across, 'The lady's strongbox took a tumble into the river en route to repairs.'

A derisive sound escaped her, but she held her tongue.

'Doesn't look like it fell into the river today,' the bobby said.

This day was going down the sewers faster than shit on a string.

'Unhand this property, or I will arrest you.'

The woman stared at the constable as if calculating her odds. Could she manage a kick in the copper's soft parts, and then...what? Leg it?

With an icy glare at Grim, she relinquished the strongbox. It was obvious to them both that the copper would keep the box for himself, which made Grim rather happy. The faster that man disappeared and the less he and his fellows took interest in him or his business, the better.

Now, he just had to find a quick way of getting rid of this madwoman.

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