THE LOST AND DROWNED

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started for Ollie and finished for Alex

‘There is prodigious strength in sorrow and despair.’
Charles Dickens, A Tale of Two Cities

I will not be made useless,
I won’t be idle with despair,
I will gather myself around my faith,
For light does the darkness most fear,
These hands are small, I know,
But they’re not yours they are my own,
But they’re not yours they are my own,
And I am never broken,

Jewel, Hands

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WITH EVERY SNOWFLAKE THAT FELL ACROSS London's narrow, cobbled streets Lydia felt the chill of her own death creep closer. Despite the cold, her woollen vest was wet with sweat. She lay there wide eyed – too scared to sleep, terrified of what her dreams might mean. Dirty hair was matted to her pale skin and her panicked breaths rose like ghosts into the gloom above the cobweb-festooned rafters. She wiped the hair from her eyes and felt tears cut through the thin layer of grime on her cheeks, streaking her face.

Snow was building up on the window ledges, darkening the already murky dormitory. Outside, the wind shrieked down the lane like a mournful spirit. Winter had returned, bringing back nightmares that Lydia had spent a year trying to forget. Images of the missing girls held captive by something terrible that lay hidden in darkness, drowning in filthy water.

Bleary eyed and yawning, her little sister sat up next to her.

'You alright?' Sophie asked, pulling the thin blanket back

around them both. 'Have you even slept yet?'

Lydia nodded and tried to smile, her green eyes wide and awake. Her heart was still hammering so loudly she was sure her sister must be able to hear it. Even as she blinked, the images of the dead girls' sunken faces flashed in front of her.

Shaking, Lydia took Sophie's outstretched hand and gave each finger a kiss.

'Did mother used to kiss our fingers like that?' Sophie asked, lying back down again, the caress seeming to spark some long-forgotten sensation.

Lydia watched her sister's chest rise and fall as she began to fall back to sleep not waiting for an answer. Such a fragile looking thing, Lydia thought. Like a baby bird that had fallen out of the nest too early. Sophie's red hair, which refused to be dulled by the grime of the mill and orphanage, hung over the bed like a scarlet waterfall and her ivory skin glowed with an almost ghostly luminescence in the dark.

'Maybe ... I think so,' Lydia said unsure, more to herself than to Sophie, questioning her own recollections.

Every winter it had become more difficult to distinguish between the real memories of her mother and those she had made up to fight back the despair that often rose like a dark cloud around her.

There were so many things that she was now no longer sure had actually happened. Had her mother's smiling lips and cheeks been as rosy as she pictured? Did her mother really pick Lydia up and dance around the front room singing nursery rhymes, or had she invented that? Had she really spent her mother's final

few minutes promising her she would always look after Sophie? Or was that something she had said to her wild sister to try to calm her down so many times that she now believed it?

A crackle in the fire distracted her and she turned to watch a lone, weak flame splutter and disappear. The embers burnt orange, then pink before turning to a dull grey ash.

Despite the cold of their room, Lydia felt a strange, new chill creep under the door and through the dormitory. She sat up and stared in terror. Leaving a silvery trail on the stone floor and over the legs of the beds, a path of frost twisted and turned about the room. Moving, not naturally like a breeze from a window, but like a sentient predator, like a snake winding its way around a nest of baby mice.

All warmth was sucked from the room. The only sound was the crackle of frost forming on the stone floor. Lydia tried to rub some warmth back into her scrawny arms as she stared transfixed at the trail of ice that wound its way towards her. She grabbed her blanket and pulled it over her sister and herself. Squeezing her eyes as tightly shut as she could, she hugged her sister and prayed they would both make it until morning.

'Please, not again. Please, not again. Not my sister. Not her,' she panted in a feeble, stuttering whisper. She lay there for a minute until she was relieved to feel a warmth seep back into the room.

Lydia edged the blanket down and peeked around, ready to dive back under cover if she saw something. Nothing. Everything was as it should have been.

We've all survived, Lydia thought to herself. But then she

noticed it. Harriet's bed was empty. She bolted over to where her friend's blanket lay crumpled on her mattress and tugged at fistfuls of her own hair. Two wet footprints, still half frozen, stood facing Harriet's bed. Panicked, Lydia checked under Harriet's empty bunk, then the next bed and the next, pulling off covers until she had looked in every dark corner and under all twenty-seven beds. 'No, no, no! This isn't happening again,' she stammered, her voice close to breaking.

Sophie bolted out of bed and ran up to her, wrapping the blanket around her sister's bony shoulders. 'What's wrong, Lydia? You're scaring me.'

Lydia darted back across the cold stones to Isabel, the eldest of the girls, was still sleeping soundly. She shook her by the shoulders and Isobel woke, her big, brown eyes peering blearily up at Lydia from under a mop of black wiry hair. She clutched Lydia's arm with icy fingers.

'Harriet's gone!' Lydia said and swallowed back the dread that dried her throat. It was the day she had been fearing for almost eleven months. The day she hoped and prayed would never come again.

Isabel sat up and pulled her frizzy hair back into a ponytail.

'Are you sure, Lydia? Maybe – ' but Lydia cut her off.

'She's gone. Harriet's gone!'

By now, all the girls in the dormitory were awake, their eyes wide and fearful. Even those girls that hadn't been at Rottenhall Orphanage previous winters had heard the stories. There wasn't an orphan in the whole of London that hadn't listened to rumours of girls who were sleeping peacefully one moment, then gone

the next. Girls disappearing without a trace.

The orphans looked now to Lydia and Isabel. Lydia knew that death and fear were no strangers to these girls. They had watched mothers and sisters coughing up blood, had seen friends trampled by horses and dragged into weaving looms, but the winter brought with it something far worse.

Lydia put an arm around Sophie who had begun to sob and pulled her tight.

'How am I going to keep you safe?' she whispered.

Soon, other girls around her began to cry too and panic spread through the dormitory like a contagious disease. The commotion brought Mrs Bloater waddling into the room, the fat under her arms swinging long after she came to an abrupt stop.

'What on earth is all this noise about?' she croaked, her fat neck wobbling like a greying blancmange. Shadows thrown from the lamp in her podgy hand made her warty face look even more grotesque than normal.

'It's Harriet, Madam, she's gone,' Lydia said, looking at the floor.

'Well, where's she gone?' the cook asked, gazing about the room. There was no response. 'I said, where's she gone? She can't just be lost. One of you little brats knows where she's run off to!' The girls were silent and a grimace spread across Mrs Bloater's swollen face as she wiped her nose with her sleeve and waddled over to Lydia and Isabel.

'Perhaps one of you knows where she is? What about you, Isabel, our little mulatto? Do you know where she's gone? Or you, Lydia, I bet you know where she's hiding?'

Lydia struggled to bite back her retort. 'She's gone for tea at the Ritz,' is what she really wanted to say, but sarcasm would only get her or Sophie hurt.

'Well, we'll see what Mr Scrivit thinks about all this when he gets back,' Mrs Bloater sneered as she squeezed her enormous frame out of the room and down the corridor. For a moment Lydia was confused as to why on earth Mr Scrivit was not asleep in his room upstairs, and wondered why he would be out at this time of night, but her confusion was quickly replaced by a fresh fear. She might not know where Mr Scrivit was, but she knew exactly what he would think when he got back. He would think they all deserved a beating for being out of bed after curfew.

Some of the girls got back into their bunks and pulled the covers over them, trying to be as small and insignificant as possible, hoping that Mr Scrivit might not notice them when he came thundering in. Despite her exhaustion, Lydia was far too heartbroken and frightened to even consider trying to sleep again. Harriet had been one of her best friends since she had arrived five years ago. She was the kind of girl that would save you some bread from her own measly rations if Mrs Bloater decided it would be funny to knock your plate over and step on your food. She had found enough scraps of material at the mill to start making and repairing the other girls' socks and never asked anything in return. And now she was gone. In less than a minute she had disappeared from their lives and, if she was to share the same fate as the girls the previous year, never be seen again.

Sharing nervous looks with Isabel, Lydia got dressed in silence thinking these terrible thoughts. Every rib on her back was clearly

visible. Pale, bruised skin was stretched over fragile bones. She had barely enough meat on her to keep the grey, woollen clothes she wore from falling to the stone floor.

The front door banged open and the girls froze. Heavy footsteps thudded up the stairs towards them. Lydia jumped off her bed, where she had been sitting and chewing the ends of her dirty fingers, and pushed Sophie behind her. The other girls scampered around too, aimless in their panic, like chickens when a fox bursts into their cage.

Slamming the door open as hard as he could, Mr Scrivit stormed in, his belt already dangling ominously from his hand. He was an enormous man who appeared even taller because of the large top-hat he kept squeezed over his huge head. He had to duck under the doorway as he stepped inside and squeezed his shoulders through the doorway – a doorway three of the girls could have stood side-by-side in. He was dressed, as usual, in a waistcoat and jacket that perhaps had once been the height of fashion, but now were faded, stained and far too tight.

'Right, I want to know why my workers are out of bed when they should be sleeping!' Mr Scrivit bellowed as he paced around the room, stroking his mutton-chop sideburns and silently daring the girls to look up at him. Lydia was staring at her feet when giant boots stopped in front of her. She held her breath. For a second nothing happened, then an explosion of pain tore across her scalp as Mr Scrivit took a fistful of her hair and dragged her to the front of the dormitory. Lydia cried out as she stumbled to the floor, landing painfully on her side. Sophie screamed for her older sister, but Isabel put her hand over her mouth and pulled

her back.

'Did *you* get everyone out of bed, Lydia?' Mr Scrivit shouted, spraying spittle in Lydia's face, his stale breath reeking of beer, his bulging eyes bloodshot and lifeless. 'It's the kind of petulant thing you like to do! Scaring them with your stupid ghost stories, no doubt.'

'It's Harriet, Sir. She's missing,' Lydia sobbed.

'So what? Some stupid, little girl has gone missing. I turn children away at the door each morning. All of them begging for me to take them in. What do I care if one's run off?'

She wanted to tell him that it was stupid to think that any of the girls would run off. None of them had anywhere to run to. None of them had any family or place to call home. All they had, which was only the rags they slept in and the friendships they had made, was there in the orphanage and at the mill. No girl lasted more than a day on the streets.

'But shouldn't we report it? Let someone know?' Isabel asked, hoping to distract a little attention away from Lydia, but also secretly hoping that there might be someone in London who still cared. Someone who might at least look for Harriet and the other girls.

'Listen to me, and you listen good!' Mr Scrivit growled as he paced over towards Isabel. 'Nobody cares what happens to you lot. No one! So keep your mouths shut!' he said, emphasising each point by jabbing Isabel in the chest. 'Understood? I give you all honest work and this is how you thank me? Telling each other ghost stories when you all should be sleeping. Well, someone will have to be punished for this, so pick a girl for a

beating, Lydia,' he said, wrapping the thick, leather belt around his podgy fists.

She looked around at the girls that she lived and worked with, the only family she knew. Scrawny, pale girls like herself, robbed of parents and hope. She couldn't inflict pain on any of them.

'I choose myself,' Lydia mumbled.

Mr Scrivit grinned. 'How wonderfully noble of you.' He stepped back and let the belt unfold and roll to the floor with an ominous thud. 'You always thought you were better than everyone else. Always giving me and my late wife filthy looks! I should have dealt with you long ago!'

Lydia gritted her teeth and tried to go somewhere else in her mind, to travel far from that room. She tried to think of blue skies and green fields and magic but, at that moment, there was nowhere she could imagine that wasn't cold and full of fear.

The belt thundered across her back and Lydia screamed out. She wobbled, but stood back up as straight as she could, biting down on her bottom lip. Crack! Again the belt lashed against her pale skin. The coppery taste of blood filled her mouth as she bit down and this time she did begin to cry.

'Mum,' she whimpered, as half-forgotten images of a warm smile flickered like a candle in a snow storm.

'Mum!' Mr Scrivit mocked. 'Mum?' he said again and could not restrain his own laughter. 'Your mother's dead, in case you hadn't noticed, Lydia! She died coughing her own lungs up in my mill!' He continued with an excited grin, 'Now, stand up straight girl and show me some respect!' The belt whipped across her shoulders for a third time and a warm trickle ran down her back. Lydia didn't remember anything after that.