

Chapter 4

London

“Hush now Lila, you mustn't cry.”

Ester Tosh placed a tired hand on her infant's forehead and immediately recoiled in shock and sadness upon discovering how cold it was. She was stumbling now; choking on ash from the industrial plumes of the factories lining the River Thames, wincing as her vision blurred and became clear again. A soft pain appeared near the bridge of her nose at the corner of each eye but there would be no tears. She could acutely feel the crack running down the center of her tongue every time she drew breath. The bitter air passed through her parched mouth like a scabbed desert. “Almost there,” she said—more to herself than to the newborn.

She looked down at the bundle of rags in her arms and tried in vain to smile. The child inhaled sharply, clenching her tiny fists which shook violently, grimacing with exertion for a scream that wouldn't come. The babe fell limp and silent in her arms as Ester neared the bank of the river.

“I did all I could for you. I held you to my bosom but there was nothing there. The world is filled with nothing.”

She lifted her arms and held the desperate mass above the churning current.

“I'm so sorry,” she said and let go. A gentle splash followed. She lifted her chin slightly in a show of solidarity toward another prostitute downstream who had just completed the same ritual and who solemnly returned the gesture.

She was wavering on her feet now—the water and sky trading places in her view. In her

mind, she began to pray. *Lord, if you are to take me now, please let me fall forward. I've known hunger like this before but I have never known such thirst. Please let me return to you on the wings of an aquatic angel. Let me be baptized once more in this river and with one final drink I will know of your mercy.*

The back of her head slammed hard across the cobblestones behind her feet. A trickle of blood rolled away from her lifeless eyes.

He had seen it from a distance as he strolled through the bustling crowd. His nimble hands moving deftly in and out of passing sack suits and frock coats, relieving them of their coins. He was small enough to be easily ignored which made him a very good pickpocket but sometimes proved to be less than advantageous. He was too short to see what it was exactly until he was only inches away. He had gone for help immediately.

And now young Gavin Tosh stood in a semi-circle with his Mother, Father and older brother, staring down at the crumpled heap that was his lifeless sister. Although he was only ten years old he was already well-acquainted with death and was quite surprised to find that his personal proximity to this tragedy had not changed its feeling in any discernible way. It was the same numb sensation that had become more than familiar to him in these hard times for the common man and child lost in the wave of the industrial revolution.

“What are we going to do for Ester?” he asked.

His mother sobbed. “Well we can't just leave her here. Who knows how much time has passed already.”

“We should find a proper place to bury her,” said his father.

“But we haven't any tools or land!” said his mother who was now crying so hard her shawl drooped from off her shoulders.

“Quite right. Quite right.”

Nightfall was fast approaching and a frigid breeze swept suddenly over their bodies. The lamps behind them flickered softly and sputtered. For a moment they stood shivering in the cold in quiet reflection.

“I think she wanted to be cremated,” said his brother suddenly.

His mother opened her mouth in protest but was silenced by another more violent gust of wind. She pulled her tattered shawl toward her weathered neckline and stared at the ground.

“Yes, I think you're right,” said his father through chattering teeth. “We should do our best to honor her wishes.”

They spent the next hour transporting her body to the nearest side street and constructing their makeshift funeral pyre. Soon their faces were bathed in a warm dancing light as they huddled together and felt the rising heat against their palms.

“Cyril you dolt, hurry or we'll be late to the stable master fight,” shouted Lady Compton. Lucy sighed dejectedly.

“Very good Madame. I will attempt to take a shortcut.”

He pulled the reins hard to the side and the horses neighed in protest as they careened explosively around a corner down a side alley in the busy and dark city of London.

“Lady Compton, there is something up ahead.”

“Don't stop Cyril. I don't care what it is.”

“It looks like a fire, Madame.”

“I don't care what it looks like! We will not be late!”

He slapped the reins hard against the backs of the thoroughbreds and their gallop became a torrent of hooves.

Gavin dove to the side. His escape had been so narrow that he had felt beads of sweat from the lithe animals pulling the carriage strike his face moments before he hit the ground. His mother was knocked sidelong into the flames by a passing wheel. His father dove after her and cradled her in his arms as he summoned the strength to ascend like a Phoenix from the ashes. He had lifted his knees just off the ground before he was spent by the effort and consumed. His older brother stood at the edge of the embers with his head buried in his hands. Overcome by guilt and grief he fell deliberately forward and screamed. The fire grew in life with each soul is devoured.

“Don't ever question me again Cyril!” came a shrieking voice from the carriage that was vanishing into the darkness. “I will have you banished from our manor without a moment's hesitation. You will never again set foot on the fertile ground of Tear of a Meadowlark at the Dawn of Remembrance if you ever again display such willful disobedience!”

Gavin rose to his feet, his face contorted with malevolent rage.