



The
Foundling



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Also by Stacey Halls

The Familiars



The
Foundling
STACEY HALLS



MANILLA
PRESS

First published in Great Britain in 2020 by
MANILLA PRESS
80–81 Wimpole St, London W1G 9RE

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is
available from the British Library.

Hardback ISBN: 978–1–83877–006–8
Trade Paperback ISBN: 978–1–83877–007–5

Also available as an ebook

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Typeset in Dante by Palimpsest Book Production Ltd, Falkirk, Stirlingshire
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.



Manilla Press is an imprint of Bonnier Books UK
www.bonnierbooks.co.uk

DEDICATION [TO BE SUPPLIED]

PART ONE

BESS

Late November, 1747

CHAPTER 1

All the babies were wrapped like presents ready to be given. Some of them were dressed finely – though their mothers were not – in tiny embroidered sleeves and thick shawls, for winter had arrived, and the night was biting. I'd bound Clara in an old blanket that had waited years to be darned, and now never would be. We stood clustered around the pillared entrance, thirty or so of us, like moths beneath the torches burning in their brackets, our hearts beating like papery wings. I hadn't known that a hospital for abandoned babies would be a palace, with a hundred glowing windows and a turning place for carriages. Two long and splendid buildings were pinned either side of a courtyard that was connected in the middle by a chapel. At the north end of the west wing the door

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stood open, throwing light onto the stone. The gate felt a long way behind. Some of us would leave with our arms empty; some would carry our children out into the cold again. For this reason we could not look at one another, and kept our eyes on the ground.

Clara was clutching my finger, which neatly slotted into her tiny palm as a lock does a key. I imagined her reaching for it later, her hand closing around thin air. I held her tighter. My father, who Ned and I called Abe because mother did, stood slightly behind me, his face in shadow. He had not held the baby. Earlier, the midwife – a wide woman from a neighbouring court, who was as cheap as she was discreet – had offered her to him as I lay beached on the bed, shimmering in pain, and he shook his head, as though she was a barrow woman proffering a peach.

We were shown inside by a slim, bewigged man with reedy legs, and through an entrance hall unlike anywhere I'd been. Everywhere surfaces gleamed, from the walnut banister to the polished long-case clock. The only sound was our skirts rustling, and our shoes on the stone – a little herd of women swollen with milk, bearing their calves. It was a place for hushed, gentle voices, not hawkers' ones like mine.

Our little procession made its way up the claret carpet of the stairs, and into a high-ceilinged room. Only one skirt and bundled infant could pass through the doorframe at a time, so we lined up outside, like ladies at a ball. The woman in front of me had brown skin, and her black hair

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curled beneath her cap. Her baby was unsettled, making more noise than the others, and she bounced him with the unpractised air we all had. I wondered how many had their own mothers to show them how to swaddle, how to feed. I had thought about mine fifty times that day, more than I had in the past year. I used to feel her in the creak of the floorboards and the warmth of the bed, but not any more.

The room we had entered was papered green, with elegant white plaster piped below the ceiling. There were no flames in the fireplace, but it was warm and brightly lit with glowing lamps and pictures on the walls, framed in gold. A chandelier shivered at the centre. It was the finest room I had ever stood in, and it was crowded with people. I had thought we might be alone, perhaps with a fleet of nursemaids who carried off the babies that would stay, but a score of faces lined the walls – mostly women, who were certainly not nursemaids, fanning themselves and smiling curiously. They were very well-dressed and interesting to look at, and they were very interested in us. They might have climbed out of the paintings on the walls; their necks flashed with jewels, and their hooped skirts were bright as tulips. Their hair was pinned up high and cloudy with powder. There were half a dozen men scattered about too, silver-buckled and pot-bellied – not like Abe, with his drab coat like a bag of horse feed. The men appeared more stern, and many of them were eyeing the mulatto girl, as though she were for sale. They held

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little glasses in their gloved hands, and I realised for them this was a party.

I was still bleeding. Clara had been born before daylight that morning, and every part of me felt torn. I had not been her mother a day, yet I knew her as well as myself: the smell of her, the little patter of her heart that had beat inside me. Even before she was pulled from me, red and squealing, I'd known what she'd feel like and how heavy she would be in my arms. I hoped they would take her, and I hoped they wouldn't. I thought of Abe's lined face, his eyes on the floor, his calloused hands holding the door for me. He was the only father in the room. Most of the others were alone, but some had brought friends, sisters, mothers, who looked on miserably. Abe would not meet my eye, and had not spoken much on our slow, sad walk from where we lived at Black and White Court in the city, but his being there was as good as a hand on my shoulder. When he had reached for his coat at home and said it was time for us to leave, I had almost cried with relief; I had not thought he would come with me

A hush fell over the room as a man standing before the huge fireplace began to speak. His voice was as rich and thick as the carpets. I stared at the chandelier as he told us how they drew the lottery: that a white ball admitted a child, a black one did not, and a red one meant we had to wait for an admitted child to fail the medical examination. It took all my energy to listen.

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‘There are twenty white balls,’ the man was saying, ‘five red, and ten black.’

I shifted Clara at my breast. The swells at the edges of the room were looking on us more boldly now, wondering which of us would be lucky, which of us might leave our babies on the street to die. Who among us was unmarried. Who was a whore. A nurse began moving about the room with a cloth bag for us to reach inside. By the time she came to me, my heart was stomping around my chest in boots, and I held her indifferent gaze as I shifted Clara to one arm and put a hand in the bag. The balls were smooth and cool as eggs, and I held one in my fist, trying to feel its colour. The nurse shook the bag impatiently and something told me to let the ball drop and take another, so I did.

‘Who are the people watching?’ I asked her.

‘They were invited,’ was her bored reply. I clutched another ball, let it go, and she shook the bag again.

‘What for?’ I asked in a low voice, aware of the many pairs of eyes on me. I thought of their sons and daughters in their grand houses in Belgravia and Fitzrovia and Mayfair, lying beneath warm blankets, brushed and washed and full of milk. Perhaps they would visit the nursery before going to bed tonight, grown sentimental at our plight, dropping a kiss on sleeping cheeks. One woman was staring hard, as though willing me a particular colour. She was large and held a fan in one hand, a little glass in the other. She wore a blue feather in her hair.

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‘They’re benefactors,’ was all the nurse said, and feeling as though I couldn’t ask another question, and knowing I must choose a ball, I settled on another, weighing it in my palm. I drew it out, and the room fell silent.

The ball was red. I would have to wait.

The nurse moved to the next woman, while the rest watched her journey around the room, their jaws set in tight, anxious lines as they tried to work out what had been drawn, and what was left. We had been told at the gate that our babies must be two months old at most, and in good health. Many of them were sickly, starving things that their mothers had tried to nurse. Some were six months at least, swaddled so tightly to look smaller they cried out in discomfort. Clara was the smallest of them all, and the newest. Her eyes had been closed since we arrived. If these were her last moments with me, she would not know. All I wanted was to curl around her in bed like a cat and go to sleep, and come back the next month. I thought of Abe’s silent shame. Our rooms at Black and White Court were thick with it; it stained like coal smoke and rotted the beams. I thought of taking her to Billingsgate, sitting her on my father’s stall like a miniature figurehead on the bow of a ship. A mermaid, found at sea and put on display for all to see at Abraham Bright’s shrimp stall. Briefly I fancied taking her hawking with me, bundling her to my chest so my hands were free to scoop shrimp from my hat. I’d seen some hawkers with their babes strapped to their fronts, but what happened when they

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were no longer the size of a loaf? When they were fat little things with fists and feet and hungry, empty mouths?

A woman began wailing, a black ball clenched in her fist. Her face and her child's were the same unhappy masks of despair. 'I cannot keep him,' she cried. 'You must take him, please.' While the attendants calmed her and the rest of us looked away for her dignity, I yawned so widely I thought my face would crack. I'd not slept for more than an hour since two nights ago, when Clara began to come. This morning Ned sat with the baby before the fire so I could shut my eyes, but I was in so much pain I could not sleep. Now, every part of me ached still, and in the morning I had to work. I could not walk home tonight with Clara in my arms. It was not possible. But neither could I leave her on a doorstep for the rats. As a girl I'd seen a dead baby by a dung heap on the roadside, and had dreamed about it for months.

The room was very bright, and I was very tired, and suddenly I was aware of being led to a little room off the side, and told to sit and wait. Abe followed and closed the door behind him, shutting out the sobs and the tinkle of sherry glasses. I wished for a cup of warm milk or some beer; I did not know how to stay awake.

A nursemaid appeared from nowhere and removed Clara from my arms, but I had not been ready, and it was too soon, too sudden. She was telling me there was a space for her, because a lady had brought an infant of at least six months, which was far too old, and did she not

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think they could not tell the difference between a babe of two months and one of six? I thought of the woman and her child, and wondered idly what would happen to them, then pushed away the thought. The nursemaid's frill cap disappeared through the door again, and I felt delirious, too light without Clarain my arms, as though a feather could knock me over.

'She is not yet a day,' I called after the nurse, but she had gone. I heard Abe shift behind me, and the floor creaked.

A man was now sitting before me, writing on a ticket with a fat feather, and I forced my eyes open, and my ears too, because he was speaking. 'The doctor is inspecting her for signs of ailment . . .'

I unstuck my mouth. 'She was born at quarter past four this morning.'

' . . . If she shows signs of ill health she will be refused admission. She will be examined for venereal disease, scrofula, leprosy and infection.'

I sat in dumb silence.

'Do you wish to leave a token with the memorandum?' The clerk finally looked at me, and his eyes were dark and solemn, at odds with his eyebrows, which sprouted from his head in a rather comic way.

A token: yes. This I had prepared for, had heard how the babies were recorded with an identifier, left by the mother. I fished in my pocket and brought out mine, placing it on the polished desk between us. My brother Ned had told me of the Foundling – a hospital for

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unwanted babies, on the edge of the city. He knew a girl who'd left her child there, and cut a square from her dress to leave with it. 'And if you leave nothing and go back?' I asked him. 'You might be given the wrong one?' He'd smiled and said perhaps, but the idea had chilled me. I imagined a room piled high with tokens, and mine being thrown on a heap of them. The man took it between his finger and thumb, and examined it with a frown.

'It's a heart, made from whalebone. Well, half a heart. Her father had the other.' I flushed furiously, my ears scarlet, aware of Abe still standing silently behind me. There was a chair next to mine but he had not taken it. Until now he'd known nothing of the token. The size of a crown, I had the right hand side, smooth at one edge and jagged at the other. A 'B' had been scored into it, and below it, more roughly, a 'C', for Bess and Clara.

'What will you use it for?' I asked.

'A record will be made should you wish to reclaim her. Her number will go in the ledger as 627, with the date, and a description of the token.' He dipped the feather in ink and began to write.

'You will put that it's half a heart, won't you?' I said, watching the words spill from his quill, but not understanding them. 'In case there's a whole one, and they get mixed up.'

'I will put that it's half a heart,' he said, not unkindly. I still did not know where my baby was, or if I would see her again before I left. I was afraid to ask.

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'I will reclaim her, when she's older,' I announced, because saying it aloud made it true. Behind me Abe sniffed, and the floorboards creaked. We had not yet spoken about this, but I was certain. I straightened my skirt. Streaked with mud and rain, on washing day it was the milky pewter of an oyster's shell, and for the rest of the month the dirty grey of a cobbled street.

The nursemaid came to the doorway and nodded. Her arms were empty. 'She's fit for admission.'

'Her name is Clara,' I said, feeling overcome with relief.

A few months before, when my belly was small, on one of the more genteel streets around St Paul's where the townhouses stretched up to the sky and jostled for space with the printers and the booksellers, I'd seen an elegant woman dressed in a deep blue gown, glowing like a jewel. Her hair was golden and shiny, and one plump, pink arm held a little hand, belonging to a child with the same yellow curls. I watched as she tugged at her mother, and the woman stopped and bent down, not caring that her skirts were brushing the ground, and put her ear to the little girl's lips. A smile broke out across her face. 'Clara, you are funny,' she had said, and took up her daughter's hand again. They moved past me, and I rubbed my growing stomach, and decided if I had a girl I would name her Clara, because then, in a very small way, I would be like that woman.

The man was unmoved. 'She will be christened and renamed in due course.'

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So she would be Clara to me and no one else. Not even herself. I sat stiff-backed, clenching and unclenching my fists.

‘And how will you know who she is, if her name changes, when I come back?’

‘A leaden tag is attached to each child on arrival, bearing a number that refers to their identifying records.’

‘627. I’ll remember it.’

He regarded me, and his eyebrows fell into stern furrows. ‘If your circumstances change and you do wish to claim your child, the fee for her care will be payable.’

I swallowed. ‘What does that mean?’

‘The expenses the hospital incurred caring for her.’

I nodded. I had no idea what sort of cost that might be, but did not feel as though I could ask. I waited. The nib scratched, and somewhere in the room a clock ticked patiently. The ink was the same colour as the night sky in the window behind him; the curtains had not been drawn. The quill danced like some strange, exotic creature. I remembered the large woman outside with the blue feather in her hair, and how she had stared.

‘The people in the room,’ I said. ‘Who are they?’

Without looking up he replied: ‘The governors’ wives and acquaintances. Lottery night raises funds for the hospital.’

‘But do they need to watch the babies be given over?’ I asked. I knew my voice did not sound right here; it made him sigh.

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‘The women are very moved by it. The more moved they are, the more donations are made.’ I watched him come to the end of the paper and sign it with a flourish, he sat back to let it dry.

‘What will happen to her, when I go?’

‘All new admissions are taken to live in the countryside, where they will be cared for by a wet nurse. They return to the city at around five years old, and live at the Foundling until they are ready to work.’

I swallowed. ‘What do they work as?’

‘We prepare girls for service, and set them to knitting, spinning, mending – domestic pursuits that will make them attractive to employers. The boys work in the rope-yards making fishing nets and twine to ready them for naval life.’

‘Where will Clara be nursed? Which part of the countryside?’

‘That depends on where there is a place for her. She could be as near as Hackney or as far as Berkshire. We are not at liberty to reveal where she will be placed.’

‘Can I say goodbye?’

The governor folded the paper over the whalebone heart, but did not seal it. ‘Sentimentality is best avoided. Good evening to you, miss, and you, sir.’

Abe moved towards me and helped me from my chair.



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The Foundling Hospital was on the very edge of London, where pleasant squares and tall houses gave way to open roads and fields that yawned blackly into the distance. It was only a mile or two from Black and White Court, where we lived in the shadow of Fleet Prison, yet it may as well have been two hundred, with its farms and cows to the north, and wide streets and townhouses to the south. Coal smoke choked the courts and alleys I was used to, but here there were stars, the sky like a large velvet drape, covering everything in silence. The moon was pale, illuminating the few remaining carriages of the wealthy guests who'd watched us give up our children. Sated with the evening's entertainment, they were now home to bed.

'You'll be wanting something to eat, Bessie,' Abe said as we walked slowly towards the gate. It was the first time he'd spoken since we arrived. When I didn't reply, he said: 'Bill Farrow might have some meat pies left.'

I watched him trudge beside me, and noticed the defeated slope of his shoulders, and how stiffly he moved. The hair that spilled from under his cap had turned from the colour of rust to iron. He squinted at the quays now, and the younger boys had to point out the boats from Leigh that brought the shrimp from among the hundreds swarming on the water. For thirty years my father had sold shrimp from a shed on London's fish market. He sold it by the basket to costermongers and bumerees, to hawkers and fishmongers, alongside two hundred other

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shrimp sellers, from five in the morning to three in the afternoon, six days a week. Each morning I took a basket to the boiling house at the end of Oyster Row and hawked it from my head in the streets. We did not sell cod; we did not sell mackerel, herring, whiting, pilchards, sprats. We did not sell roach, plaice, smelt, flounders, salmon, shad, eels, gudgeon, dace. We sold shrimp, hundreds of them, thousands, every day, by the double. There were plenty more fish that were nicer to look at, nicer to sell: silver salmon, rosy crabs, pearly turbot. But our living was made, our rent paid, from the ugliest of all, looking as they did like unborn creatures ripped from the belly of a giant insect, with unseeing black eyes and curled little legs. We sold them, but we did not eat them. Too many times I'd smelled them spoiled, and scraped the little spidery legs from my hat, the eyes clumped together like spawn. How I wished my father had been a Leadenhall market man instead, and I a strawberry seller, smelling like a summer meadow, with juice and not brine running down my arms.

We'd almost reached the tall gates, and a cat mewed nearby. My insides were empty and aching, and I could think only of a pie, and my bed. I could not think of my baby, and whether or not she had woken to find no comfort. If I did that, I would fall to my knees. The cat wailed again, and did not stop.

'It's a baby,' I realised aloud in surprise. But where? The grounds were dark, and the sound came from somewhere

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to our right. There was nobody else around – I turned to see two women leaving the building behind us, and ahead the gates were closed, manned by a stone porter's lodge with a glowing window.

Abe had stopped, looking with me into the darkness. 'It's a baby,' I repeated as the noise started up again. Before all this, before I grew Clara and gave birth to her, I'd never noticed infants crying in the street or wailing in our building. But now, each little mew was as impossible to ignore as if someone was calling my own name. I left the path to go along the dark wall that hemmed the hospital grounds.

'Bess, where you going?'

In a few strides I saw it: a small bundle left on the grass, pressed against the damp brick, as though for shelter. It was swaddled as Clara had been, only a tiny, ancient face visible, with dark skin and fine black wisps of hair at its temples. I remembered the mulatto woman. This was surely her child, and she must have picked a black ball. I gathered the baby in my arms and shushed it gently. My milk had not yet come, but my breasts were sore, and I wondered if the child was hungry, and if I should feed it. I could hand the baby to the porter at the lodge, but would he take it? Abe looked open-mouthed at the bundle in my arms.

'What shall I do?'

'It ain't your trouble, Bessie.'

A noise came from the other side of the wall: people

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running and shouting, a horse neighing. Outside the city everything was darker and louder, as though we were in some strange land at the very edge of the world. I had never been to the countryside before, had never even left London. The baby was settled in my arms now, its tiny features creasing into a sleepy frown. Abe and I went to the gate. In the road beyond, people were gathering, and men were running with lanterns towards a coach-and-four, and trying to calm the sweating, bucking horses that had worked one another into a panic. Several white, shocked faces were looking down at the ground, and I slipped through the gate to move closer, still holding the baby. Two feet poked out from beneath the shafts. I saw a muddied skirt, and elegant brown hands. There was a low, guttural moaning, like an injured animal. Her fingers moved, and instinctively I turned to shield the baby from the sight.

‘She came from nowhere,’ the coachman was saying. ‘We was only going slow and she jumped out.’

I turned and walked the short distance to the porter’s lodge, which was unlocked and abandoned; he was likely at the scene. Inside it was warm, with a low fire burning in a grate, and candle flickering at a small table set with an abandoned supper. Finding a spare buff coat on a peg, I wrapped the child and left it on the chair, hoping the porter would understand whose it was, and take pity.

In the distance, several windows in the Foundling were yellow, but most were black. Inside, perhaps in their beds,

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were a hundred or more children. Did they know their parents were outside, thinking of them? Did they hope they would come, or were they happy in their uniforms, with their hot meals, their lessons and instruments? Could you miss somebody you didn't know? My own daughter was inside, her fingers closing around thin air. My heart was wrapped in paper. I had known her hours, and all my life. The midwife had handed her to me, slick and bloodied, only this morning, but the Earth had turned full circle, and things would never be the same.

CHAPTER 2

If I wasn't woken by the sound of my brother pissing into a pail, it was because he hadn't come home. The next morning Ned's bed was empty, and I leaned over to see he was not lying on the floorboards next to it, which he sometimes did when he'd fallen out in a tangle of sheets. The bed was made, the floor bare. I rolled back, wincing. I felt bruised on the inside; filleted I'd be purple and blue. Next door, I could hear Abe's footsteps creaking on the bare boards. The windowpanes were still black, and would be for hours.

My breasts had leaked in the night, and my nightgown was wet, as though my body was crying. The midwife had warned me this would happen, and said it would stop soon. My breasts had always been the first thing people

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noticed about me, often the only thing. She'd told me to bind them with rags so the milk wouldn't come through my clothes, but all that had was a clear, watery liquid. The pump in the court felt a long way away when I was this sore, but it was down to me to fetch the water. I sighed and reached for the slop pail, and from the other room heard Ned clatter in through the front door. Our rooms at No.3, Black and White Court were on the top floor of a three-storey building, overlooking the murky depths of the paved court below. It was here I'd been born, and where I'd lived all my eighteen years. I learned to crawl and then walk on the sloping floor, tucked as we were under the eaves, which creaked and sighed like an old ship. There was no one above us, only birds roosting in the roof and sitting on the chimneys and church spires that jabbed into the sky. Our mother had lived here with us, too, for the first eight years of my life, before she left us. I cried when Abe opened the window to let out her spirit; I wanted it to stay, and ran over to watch it fly up to heaven. I didn't believe in all that now. They took her body away and Abe sold her things, keeping only her nightgown for me to sleep with, which I did until until it didn't smell of her any more – of her thick, dark hair and milky skin. I didn't miss her, because it had been so long. I expected to need her less the older I got, but when my belly grew and the pushing began, it was her hand I wanted to hold. I'd been envious of the girls with mothers last night, who'd worn their love on their faces.

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Ned came stumbling into the bedroom we shared, crashing open the door and tripping over the slop pail I'd left on the floor, tipping my piss all over the floorboards.

'You clumpish fool!' I cried. 'Bit of warning next time.'

'Shit.' He stooped to pick it up from where it had rolled. In the two rooms Ned, Abe and I called home, there wasn't a straight line anywhere – the roof slanted and the floorboards tilted. He didn't stumble as he set it back on the floor. He wasn't too soaked with booze, then, merely dampened. I wouldn't return from the market with sore feet and an aching neck to find him pale and groaning in bed, smelling of vomit.

He flopped on the bed and began pulling off his jacket. My brother was three years older than me, with pearly skin, red hair and enough freckles for the two of us. He spent what little money he earned as a crossing sweeper in gambling kens and gin houses.

'You going to work today?' I asked, knowing the answer.

'Are you?' he said. 'You only had a baby yesterday. The old man ain't making you go on the strap, is he?'

'Are you in jest? Think I'd be tucked up in bed with a pot of tea?'

I went into the other room to find that Abe had mercifully fetched the water while I was asleep, and was warming it in the kettle. The main room was sparsely furnished but homely, with Abe's narrow cot against one wall and Mother's rocking chair before the fire. Opposite

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that was another chair and a couple of stools, and all our pots and plates piled up on shelves by the small window. As a girl I'd stuck pictures to the walls, reproductions of bonny farm girls and buildings we knew: St Paul's, and the Tower of London. We had no frames, and time had made them curl and fade. I liked being at the top of the house: it was quiet and private, far from the shrieks of the children who played below. I soaked a rag and scrubbed the floorboards in my room, wincing at the smell but not made sick by it. When I'd been growing Clara, the smell of everything on the market made me heave. Perhaps now it wouldn't.

Once I'd finished and set the pail by the door to take down, Abe passed me a cup of small beer and I took a seat opposite him, still in my nightgown. The events of yesterday went unspoken between us. I knew we would talk of it one day, but for a long time it would lie like a frost between us.

'They took the baby then, Bess?' Ned's voice came from the bedroom.

'No, I put it under the bed.'

He was silent, but after a while said: 'And you ain't gonna tell us whose it is?'

I glanced at Abe, who stared into his cup, then drained it in one.

I began to pin my hair up. 'She's mine,' I said.

Ned appeared in the doorway in his shirtsleeves. 'I know she's yours, you halfwit.'

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'Oi,' Abe said to Ned. 'Why you getting undressed? Ain't you going to work?'

Ned fixed him with a superior look. 'I'm starting later,' he said.

'The nags ain't shitting this morning then?'

'Yes, but I need somewhere to shove my broom. Know of anywhere?'

'I'll get dressed,' I announced.

'You're making her work after yesterday?' Ned went on. 'Are you her father or her master?'

'She ain't afraid of work, unlike some as live under this roof.'

'You're a fucking slave driver; let the girl lie in for a week.'

'Ned, shut your arse and give your face a chance,' I said.

I washed our cups in the water over the fire and set them on the shelf, then brushed past Ned to get dressed, taking a candle with me. Ned swore and kicked the bed frame, sitting down on it with his back to me. I knew we'd come home later to find him gone.

'Go to sleep, will you? Stop ragging him,' I said, standing briefly naked, pulling on my shift and wincing.

'Listen to yourself – you should be lying in.'

'I *can't*. I didn't work yesterday.'

'Cos you was birthing a baby!'

'Didn't care about that then, though, did you? Where were you?'

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‘As if I want to be around to see that.’

‘Right, well shut your bone box. Rent day tomorrow.’ I could not keep the scorn from my voice. ‘You got your share, or are me and Abe gonna pay it again? It would be nice if you contributed, once in a while. This ain’t an inn.’

I blew out the candle and set it down on the dresser. Abe had buttoned up his old coat and was waiting for me at the door.

Ned’s voice came through from the bedroom, hard and spiteful. ‘And you ain’t the Virgin Mary. Don’t be pious with me, you little whore.’

Abe’s mouth was set in a grim line, and his light eyes met mine. Without a word, he passed me my cap and motioned me into the cold, bare corridor that always smelled of piss and last night’s gin, and the door swung shut behind us.



To the river, then. Each morning, by the time the clock face hanging off St Martin’s reached half past four, Abe and I had already left Black and White Court, keeping the high walls of Fleet Prison on our right and going south through Bell Savage Yard to the thoroughfare of Ludgate Hill, before turning east towards the milky dome of St Paul’s. The road was wide and lively even at that time, and we’d pass crossing sweepers and delivery carts and sleep-soaked wives queuing outside bakeries with their

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bread for the ovens, and messengers bouncing between the river and the coffee houses with news from the water. The traffic thickened towards the bridge, and the masts in the wharves bobbed and drifted beyond the sheds crowding the river's edge. Men making for the quays and piers yawned, still half-dreaming of their beds and the warm women they'd left there. Even though it was black as pitch – here and there oil lamps burned above some doorways, but in the November fog they were like pale little suns behind heavy cloud – Abe and I knew the way with our eyes shut.

We passed the Butchers' Hall and moved down towards the river, which lay low and glittering before us, already choked with hundreds of vessels bringing fish, tea, silk, spices and sugar to the various wharves. The going was steep this way, and not easy in the dark. When the clock struck five a few minutes after we arrived, the porters would begin shoring in, moving baskets of fish from the boats in the hithe to the stalls. From six, the city's fishmongers and costermongers and innkeepers and fish fryers and servants would descend with barrows and baskets to haggle over the price of three dozen smelt or a bushel of oysters or a great fat sturgeon, moving up in price as the sellers came down, meeting somewhere in the middle. The sun would rise, weak and watery, so the cries of the merchants – 'Cod, alive, alive-oh!' and 'Had-had-had-haddock,' and 'Getcher smelt, flounder, shad, gudgeon, dace,' with a low and deep emphasis on

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the last word – were no longer disembodied, but belonged to the red-cheeked merchants and their wives. Each cry was as distinctive as the next, and I knew without looking who had called it. There was a kind of magnificence to Billingsgate, to the morning sun on the creaking masts in the hithe, the iron-necked porters with four, five, six baskets piled on their heads, sliding through the crowds. By seven o'clock the ground was a churning mass of mud, studded all over with fish scales like glittering coins. The stalls themselves were a jumble of wooden shacks with leaning roofs that dripped icy water down your neck in winter. Willow baskets lay bursting with stacks of silver sole and crawling crabs, and handcarts groaned with shining shoals. There was Oyster Street in the wharf, called for its row of boats parked nose to tail, piled high with grey, sandy shells. Or if it was eels you were after, you had to get a waterman to take you out to one of the Dutch fishing boats on the Thames, where curious-looking men with fur hats and jewelled rings balanced over great tureens of the serpent-like creatures, writhing and stirring in their murky broth. Blindfold me and I would know a plaice from a pilchard, a Norfolk mackerel from a Sussex one. Sometimes the fishermen caught a shark or a porpoise and strung it up for all to see; once a high-humoured porter put a dress on one and called it a mermaid. Then there were the Billingsgate wives, themselves porpoises in petticoats, with their fat red hands and prow-like bosoms pushing through the

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crowds, shrieking like gulls. They carried flasks of brandy to nip in the cold months, and wore gold hoops at their ears. I decided from an early age I would not become one of them, would not marry a Billingsgate boy for all the shrimp in Leigh.

Vincent the porter brought our first three baskets piled with grey shrimp, and Dad and I tipped them into ours. We had to work quickly, as the other shrimp sellers would be doing the same. After we'd unloaded, I took a basket to the boiling house, where it would be cooked by a ham-armed Kentish woman named Martha while I went to fetch my hat from the storehouse. Martha was uncommunicative but not unfriendly; we'd wordlessly agreed a long time ago the hour was too early for chatter, and when the shrimp was the same colour as her red face, Martha would pile it onto my hat, clattering and steaming. I was used to the weight by now; it was the hot water that hurt, running as it did down my neck and scalding me, but it was nothing compared to Martha's raw pink hands that were stripped of all feeling.

'All right, Pidge?' Tommy, one of the pox-scarred porters, paused on his delivery of Thames smelt. 'Might I see you in the Darkhouse later on?'

'Not tonight, Tommy.' It was our daily ritual. I told him the same every time, and he replied in kind. Sometimes I wondered for how long I'd be obliged to take part in this performance, and would feel relieved if I missed him on his deliveries. He called me Pidge on account of my

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large chest. One afternoon a long time ago, Tommy had caught me on his way back from the Darkhouse, the roughest pub on the north bank, and pushed me against one of the sheds, pawing at my breasts as he pumped himself with one hand, trying to get me to touch him before shuddering gratefully onto my skirts.

‘How about we find a dark house of our own, then, Pidge?’

‘Not today, Tommy.’

He winked, and went on his way to Francis Costa’s stall. I began the climb from the river to the city. London was waking up properly, washed with a low tide of clerks and businessmen on their way to their counting houses and coffee houses. Often their wives or servants made their breakfast – smoked mackerel or eggs or porridge in china bowls. And I could count on one hand the sailors and mariners who’d bought from me, sick to their stomachs as they were of seafood. No, I was looking for the mousetrap makers, the blacking boys and plasterers having a tobacco break, the lavender sellers and street sweepers pausing to stretch their backs. Knife grinders, wig sellers, market gardeners on their way back to the country having sold their wares. Harried mothers who’d buy a handful to divide between their screaming kids; drunks who had not yet been to bed. Once I’d emptied my hat, which could take one hour or three, I’d go back to Billingsgate and do it again. Summer was the worst, when the city stank, and I with it. In those months, by midday most of

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our stock was only good for the cats. Winter was terrible, but at least it kept fresh until sundown, when the market closed.

Left, right, left, right; each day I walked to my own pattern, calling: 'Fresh shrimp, straight off the boat, tuppence a third for you, sir, for you, madam.' It was difficult to compete with church bells and carriage wheels and the general din of a winter morning. I moved up Fish Street, past the pale column of the Monument, and into the city, stopping to rub my hands together at the corner of Throgmorton Street and kicking a dog from sniffing at my skirts, but only for a moment, because to stop was to freeze and feel the weight of my hat. And that's when I saw the bone shops.

There were four or five of them, supplying bones for all of London's waists. Symbols sat over their doorways: a wooden whale, an anchor and sun, a pineapple. Wicker baskets stacked with skeletons stood outside. The bone made its way downriver from the warehouses at Rotherhithe, selected by merchants, cut slender as a blade of grass and wrapped in linen, silk or leather, or whittled by a scrimshander into horns and handles. Into hearts. I put an instinctive hand to my stomach; my stays had sat in a drawer for months now, and it would be a while until I could wear them again. If anyone had seen my globe of a belly at Billingsgate, they'd never mentioned it, just as they wouldn't now as it slowly disappeared. Even Vincent and Tommy said nothing. Soon it would be flat

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again, and I'd forget how big it had been. I'd never forget, though, what it felt to be a home to someone.

'Are you gawking or hawking?'

A woman who couldn't have had more than three teeth in her head had stopped before me. I felt around for the little pewter tankard, filled it and tossed the contents into her grubby hands. She threw the lot into her rotten mouth, and fished in her pocket for another coin.

'I'll take an 'andful for me son as well. He's an apprentice at a milliner's. He'll be hungry by now, he will, so I shall take this to him at his place of work.'

I unloaded another tankard into her palm. 'I shall look forward to buying a hat from him one day,' I said.

'Got a little one at home, have you?' She indicated my swollen stomach pushing through my cloak.

'Yes,' I lied.

'A little cherub, is it? Or a darling angel?'

'A girl. Clara. She's with her father, before he goes to work.'

'Lovely. You look after yourself,' said the woman, and she limped away into the crowd, clutching her shrimp.

I turned to face the morning once more. 'Fresh shrimp,' I called, as the sun finally, slowly, climbed into the sky. 'Straight off the boat.'