

## The thick of the crowd.

The candle's flame flickered as yet another chilly draught broke in through the cracked panes of glass and shutter board. Inside, Eliza's eyes, still weary from lack of sleep, adjusted to the first beams of daylight. Around the room, in a variety of positions lay her family – some huddled together beneath rags, others leaning on their crooked furniture.

A sudden rattle on the window, followed by several on the door (it must have been a knocker-upper) woke the half frozen-to-death family and caused them to stir in their make-shift beds. Ma sat bolt upright – a look of panic spread across her aged face.

“Wake up! Wake up! All of you! We must...”, but before she could finish her command the thin door of their family room burst open, nearly crushing little Thomas between it and the cracked wall he used to prop himself up on at night. There, silhouetted in the doorway was the unmistakable presence of Mr. Black, their Machiavellian landlord who had arrived to collect a debt.

“Please, please Mr. Black, I promise, this time next week I'll...”

“Enough of your nonsense, Mrs. Spraggins, you know how it is.” A tinge of twisted delight began to curl his moustache-covered lip.

“I thought you'd default on your debt, so I've taken the liberty of bringing, shall we say, protection for my assets...”

Two tall men, standing imposingly walked into the room; the unmistakable uniform of the Bobbies caused the little children to gasp. Before anyone could exclaim complaint, one of the men leapt toward Ma and grabbed her by the hair. She howled with sorrow. The small children, all five of them, leapt into action and began to kick, punch and attack the other policeman with all the strength and venom they could muster. Little Thomas was struck across the face and thrown out of the room, William – who was half dressed – was scooped up into a uniformed pair of arms and thrown out into the Winter. Annie ran after him holding a tattered pair of trousers and

an odd, torn shoe. Eliza ran for her life, worried about her little brothers and sisters and met up with them outside. Poor little Annie never came out of that room. Anguished, Ma bellowed at the children to follow her. Although she knew one of her children was left behind, she had to get the others to safety. She cupped William's tiny hand in hers and lifted Thomas onto her hunched back.

However, before they could reach the end of the street, the three men burst out of the room they had been evicted from.

"RUN!" screeched Ma, desperate to avoid another beating. William's hand slipped from hers and he ran to catch up with Eliza and Annie. In the ensuing chaos the two groups were separated. London had awoken from its sleep and the East End was now teeming with noise, unusual foreign smells and people who were swarming like bees around market stalls.

Eliza peered through the crowd because she knew Ma was there – somewhere. Astonishingly, as if by a miracle, she spotted Thomas' beautiful blonde hair bobbing around in the crowd. She heard shouting and cursing as she ran back toward them.

Suddenly, Thomas' hair dropped to the ground amid a shriek. Eliza winced and came to a halt by the side of a busy road. There, on the other side of the road was her mother, her pockets being turned out by a cackling Mr. Black and the two police officers. Clearly unsatisfied with the results they threw the destitute woman to the ground. Mud stained her face.

At that moment, the harsh sound of wood on stone rumbled toward Eliza. Before she could react, a horse drawn carriage broke her horrified gaze and by the time it had passed, Ma, Thomas and the three men had disappeared into the thick of the crowd - never to be seen again.