

“Hold her still!”

Dr. Gehring couldn't have picked a worse time to perform such a delicate procedure as a thunder clap shook the building. He held an ice pick a quarter of an inch from the young girl's eye, and having bypassed the anesthesia, would need a steady hand. The girl would scream and kick, but only slightly more than if she were sedated. No one would know the difference. In a few moments, neither would she.

The rain came down in sheets, making it nearly impossible to see daylight through the distorted windows. It always rained in London, but never this hard, as if the gods were speaking on behalf of the child unable to speak for herself. No matter, there was work to be done.

She'd been restrained with leather straps, bolted to the underside of the cold, metal table. Two long ones held her chest and midsection tight, their ends pulled through ancient buckles, thick with rust from the blood of those before. Cleaning had never been a high priority at Eden Hills. No reason to change that now. Four smaller straps held her hands and feet, while the final two; one across the throat, the other her forehead, were cinched down so tightly that her skin plumped around them in red welts.

A large, wooden dowel protruded from her small mouth, held there by Ward Nurse Cranston. She'd been party to events like this for enough years that it had no more effect on her than putting a pot on for tea. The teeth marks in the dowel were countless, testament to the sufferings of days gone by. The girl lying beneath her was putting up a fight and had nearly taken the nurse's finger off in the process.

“Zis vood be over vit if you'd **hold still!**” Dr. Gehring bellowed. The girl's bright blue eyes burned fire at the man about to ruin her when the sky opened with another blast. The walls trembled and the overhead light flickered before going out. Catching the girl off guard, he pinned her forehead with his forearm, quickly inserting the steel pick into the corner of her eye. Guessing that he'd gone far enough, he tapped with a mallet and began swirling in small circles. She convulsed at the intrusion but was motionless as he worked. Blood pooled near her eye before winding down her cheek and onto the table. Dr. Gehring stopped when he felt no resistance and removed the pick slowly, careful not to pull anything out of her head that should remain inside. A wet sucking accompanied its return from her skull. The doctor wiped blood and matter onto his gown before returning the ice pick to the tray, ready to be used again.

“Return her to her room und put her in bed. Strap her down tight. I'll check on her tomorrow,” he said before leaving. Nurse Cranston and her aide unbuckled the girl, dropped her into a wheelchair, and sent her on her way to oblivion.

Christmas was approaching and Abby Smith was very excited. Her blonde, shoulder-length hair fell in ringlets that her mother tied in bows each morning. She had alabaster skin like a China

doll and blue eyes as bright as the sky. It was unseasonably warm in London this late in the year as Abby and her mother left the bakery. They hadn't gone far when two shops down, she froze.

"Look mummy!" She pointed through the window, forcing her mother to stop while tugging on her hand. "Can we go inside and see them?" Abby asked, staring upward. "How could I say no to such a beautiful little angel?" Her mother smiled as they went through the door. There were several prams, identical to the one in the window, sitting in a row near the middle of the store. Abby pulled her mother toward them quickly, fearing they would disappear like a mirage in the blazing desert sun.

"They're so pretty," Abby said, running her fingers along the push bar. "They *are* quite lovely," her mother agreed.

The pram was white with gold accents in hand painted aristocratic swirls that would have looked as good in a formal ballroom as on a child's toy. The wheels had a thin rubber strip around them and the intricately woven spokes were painted gold as well. A retractable shade cover was the coup de grace, allowing its owner to protect their precious cargo from the sun's rays. Abby was speechless as she gaped inside. "It looks just like you, doesn't it?" her mother asked. Abby nodded. She never asked for gifts which made it that much easier to give them. Abby's parents had been blessed with a perfect child and could not have been happier. They were to be blessed again as Abby would be enjoying the company of a brother or sister sometime after the first of the year. Her mother made a mental note of the prices for dolly and pram before they left.

Ethan was tinkering in the garden as Abby came running around the side of their flat. "Daddy, daddy.... you'll never guess what we saw today."

"Well, you just tell me all about it," he said, standing as he pulled off his gloves. "It was the most beautiful pram, wasn't it mummy?" Abby turned as her mother walked up behind her. "It was very nice. Tell your daddy what else we saw."

"It was me.... it looked just like me!" Abby blurted. Ethan turned to April. "It was the doll inside the pram. The resemblance was quite uncanny."

"It looked just like me!" Abby repeated. "That sounds intriguing," Ethan said, dropping to his knees. "I can't get over it," Abby said, shaking her head with a distant look in her eyes. Ethan smiled at April. "Abby, let's go inside and clean up so we can prepare lunch." Coming out of her daze, Abby leaned in and kissed her father on the cheek. "I love you daddy."

"I love you too precious." Ethan would have to see this dolly and pram for himself after the effect they'd had on his daughter.

That evening after Abby had fallen asleep, he asked April which store they'd been at. She told him Benson's. He lit his pipe and stared into the fire. "I'll pop in some time this week. She seems quite taken with the lot of it."

Monday morning dawned in typical British fashion. It was gray, cold, and the rains had returned. On average, it rained eight to ten days a week. Whenever the sun *did* make a brief appearance, the townspeople would leave their homes and bound into the streets, their arms outstretched, praising the day. Ethan chuckled at the thought, pulling the collar of his overcoat up, his derby down, and began his walk to work.

He was an accountant at the importing/exporting firm of Cardin and Slade. Through the business district he traveled daily and was familiar with Benson's, having passed it on more than one occasion. They were not yet open but he saw the pram in the window display. The doll inside looked nothing like his daughter. He'd stop in for a closer look later in the day. For now, he wanted to get to his office where it would be warm and dry.

Carriages splashed water in every direction forcing foot traffic to cling near the buildings. Passersby kept their heads lowered allowing the rainwater to stream from the front of their hats instead of rolling down their back sides. Many more had umbrellas, as did Ethan, in a corner of his office behind the coat rack, which did him no good at this point.

Abby woke feeling both cold and warm. She crawled out of bed and made her way to her mother's bedside as the early morning gray crept through the windows. The form under the blanket looked impossibly large. The dresses April wore were very good at concealing her girth, but with nothing more than a nightshirt, she looked like she'd swallowed a medicine ball.

"Mummy?" April stirred but did not wake. Abby got into bed, snuggled up close, and whispered, "Mummy, are you awake?"

"Morning love."

"I don't feel right," Abby said in her small voice. April placed the back of her hand on Abby's forehead. "Does your tummy hurt?"

"I hurt all over."

"You might have a touch of fever at that, darling. You stay here and I'll warm some milk."

April moved to the edge of the bed and slid until her feet met the floor. Her extra weight tried pulling her forward and she leaned back, countering the effects. The fire from the night before had died off with only a few, small glowing embers dotting the black ash. April chose two smaller pieces of kindling to use in the kitchen stove. There was no electricity in their house as of yet, though Ethan had mentioned it on occasion. April didn't complain. She was happy with the life they had. It was better than many who were forced to live with other families in the same house. If they never got electricity, she'd be just as content. Her family was healthy, that was what mattered. The small tin of matches was nearly empty and rattled as April pulled it from the

cupboard. *Need to make these count*, she thought. She kept used matchsticks as well. They were useful to get a fire started.

“How you feeling love?”

“I’m sleepy. Will you wake me when the milk is warm?”

April placed the kindling in the stove and built a small mound around it with matchsticks. With a single strike, she’d light the gas lamp on the wall, hurricane lamp on the table, and the stove. She removed the globe from each lamp, struck the match, and went into action. She was blowing on the small flame inside the oven seconds later. When it caught, she returned to Abby who was fast asleep. A sheen of sweat beaded on her forehead. *You’ll not be attending school today*, she thought, moving the hair away from her face, hoping she had nothing more than the onset of a cold.

There were so many things to worry about when a family member took sick – smallpox and cholera being the worst. They’d been fortunate that none of them had ever gone to hospital for anything serious. Even Abby’s birth had been at home, assisted by a midwife with no complications. April prayed to God nightly, thanking Him for His graces. So many others from the area had taken ill, been unable to pay their keep, and had been sent to the workhouses with their children in tow. What kind of life that must be, she couldn’t imagine. Strangers sleeping on floors, body to body, forced to work twelve to sixteen hours at a time, being fed only the smallest amounts necessary. When one got sick, many got sick. The only place left to go at that point was the Eden Hills Asylum, beyond the district. April shivered at the thought.

Eden Hills had been built over one hundred years before, and by appearance, conveyed it was the last stop before being rolled into a pauper’s grave. No marker or stone to let the living know you’d existed. Only a dirt mound that would settle and become overgrown with grass and weeds. April could remember her grandfather telling her of the local history when she was small, including the construction of Eden Hills.

The asylum sat alone, high on a bluff, letting the world know that, although it was but a building made by man, it had no interest in being near anything else. Her grandfather told her of how he and his friends would play truant from school to watch the barges in the shipyard being unloaded, one gigantic stone at a time. Wagons pulled by teams of oxen would weave their way toward the dirt path leading to the build site. There were a multitude of deaths that occurred while the building went up. Oxen would drop while a wagon was on the move and be dragged until they could be unhitched and pushed to the side of the path, left to rot. Grandfather had said at one point, there were more dead carcasses lining the road, than living oxen and men combined

The men who died fared no better than the animals. Many were crushed by falling stones that snapped from their winches while being lifted from barge to wagon, or by wagons rolling back onto them as they made their way behind. What was left of the mangled bodies would be scooped up and deposited into a large pit behind the structure, giving Eden Hills the reputation

of being haunted, long before it was completed. Nobody mourned the dead. Most were from surrounding counties with no way of notifying relatives. Grandfather told her that occasionally, someone would arrive to inquire about a family member they'd not seen or heard from in some time, be told they were free to have a look around, and, more often than not, leave as they'd came – alone. The next day, fifteen or so new faces would show up at the docks looking for work.

The final touch was the spiked, wrought iron fence that ran the perimeter of the property, put up to *keep the loonies away from town*. Grandfather had laughed at little April's reaction to that. Grandfather spent the last few years of his life inside that fence, having no one who could afford to keep him. April still remembered the night her parents came home after visiting the old man. Her mother was crying, and said a stranger now occupied grandfather's room. April's mother never spoke of that night again. *Please Lord, keep my daughter safe*, April prayed.

A slate with chalk lie on a shelf in the pantry. Abby loved to draw and it was one of her favorite toys. The cold of the slate contrasted with the heat from the milk as April sat down on the bed. She dangled her fingertips into the water of the wash basin, letting droplets fall onto Abby's sweat soaked brow. Abby jumped. "Oh my darling, I didn't mean to startle you. Are you feeling any better?" Abby's blue eyes were dull and hazy. She shook her head. "Why don't you sit up and drink some of this milk. Take small sips so it doesn't hit your stomach all at once." Abby's fever hadn't yet broken, and April thought she may have to fill the wash basin with ice for her to sit in.

"I'm so cold mummy," Abby said between sips. "I know you are love. We're going to work on getting you better. You'll be staying home today." Abby loved school and normally would have protested. Today she said nothing, and April knew she was truly sick. "I brought the slate for you to draw on if you'd like. Let's get you comfortable and you can make me a picture." April fluffed the pillow so Abby could sit back. "Would you like something to eat?"

"I'm not very hungry," Abby said, beginning to draw.

April removed the burning wood from the stove and carried it to the fireplace. She extinguished the lamps to save their fuel as well. Once the milk in the pot cooled, she'd return it to the ice chest. There was under half a block of ice left – that would be halved again if she were to use it for Abby. There were clothes that needed mending. April sat down in the wicker chair, glad to have something to do to help pass the time. She glanced at the mantel clock – it was nearing eight a.m.

The fire had burnt away when she opened her eyes. It was half past one and she'd slept most of the day away. April jumped from the chair and ran to Abby, whose hair was a wet, tangled mess. A small line of crimson wove its way from the corner of her mouth onto the pillow where it had spread before drying.

"Abby?" April felt her cheeks – they were hot to the touch, and her skin was a bright pink. "Abigail Marie, you wake up this instant!" Her small body was stiff. The tendons in her neck

protruded as she clenched her teeth. She was seizing badly and April would have to get her temperature down fast. She ran to the ice chest. *To hell with saving any of it*, she thought, realizing she'd need something to put it in as well. She raced to the pantry, yanking out the large wash basin, dragging it to the ice chest. Bear hugging the ice, it stuck fast to the skin of her forearms. April tried shaking it loose over the tub to no avail, and with a jerk, she separated it from her body, losing flesh in the process. *Ice pick.... Think April! Your little girl's brain is being cooked in there!*

April began hacking at the large crystal while gripping the edge of the basin with her left hand to keep it from scooting across the floor. Small, glimmering prisms sailed through the air in all directions, magnified and distorted in her watery gaze. More concerned with speed than accuracy, the ice pick arced down, gleaming off the ice rather than penetrating it. The point sank deeply into the meat between her thumb and forefinger. April howled as blood ran from the puncture into the basin, pooling with the water and turning it a rosy red.

She dragged the basin into the next room before the cooling fireplace. With her good hand, April plunked one of the remaining logs into the coals and raced back to the bedroom. Abby was rigid, making it easier for April to carry her. Pops and cracks sounded their arrival as moisture in the wood heated. April dropped to her knees, standing Abby like a cigar store Indian. She'd have to balance her upright inside the basin in the hopes that the coolness would work its way up through her body.

April moved her into place, not caring if the ice adhered to her daughter's skin. At this point, it didn't matter. She was out of options. April's blood slicked hand slid up Abby's leg, tilting her to one side as she came back down. Her foot caught the side of the basin and tipped it, sending most of the ice onto the floor, and across the room. *"Jesus Christ! How about a little help here?"* she cried in anger.

Gripping Abby around her legs with one arm, the torn skin on April's forearm burnt as the salt from Abby's sweat-soaked body crept into the wounds. April scooped as many pieces of ice toward the overturned tub as she could reach, and forced them inside. With a grip like Samson, she lifted Abby again, lowering her into the basin. Abby jerked as her skin met the cold. April slid her hands up and around Abby's waist, and the little girl began to shake. *Take me.... take anything.... don't take my daughter*, April prayed. Somebody or something must have been listening. Moments later, Abby's sparkling blue eyes were looking down into her mother's. "Did you see the picture I drew you mummy?" April held her and wept.

"Afternoon Ethan. Dreadfully wet outside. A far cry from two days ago." Henry Ellis was the night man at Cardin and Slade, and relieved Ethan. "Aye Henry, I don't believe the rain's let up all day. Nearly drowned on the way in this morning. Left me umbrella 'ere last week. Won't be leaving it 'ere today." Henry laughed as he shook out his overcoat, hanging it on the rack opposite Ethan's. He carried his top hat across the room and sat it on the filing cabinet adjacent to the

small fireplace. He watched from the window as the people below scurried about, weaving between carriages while skipping puddles.

“Damn shame what ‘appened to Brody Peete’s son, innit?”

“What’s that?” Ethan asked, without looking up from the ledger. “He’s got the cholera.” Ethan stopped writing and leaned back in his chair. “They’ve not been boiling their drinking water?”

“Brody swears by God they always boil it. Neither he nor his wife are sick, just their boy.”

Ethan laced his fingers behind his head, staring into the fire. The rain against the window and crackling of the wood drowned out the steady ticking of the clock. “I don’t see how the boy could’ve contracted cholera.” Henry only shook his head. “He fevered up terrible. They couldn’t break it and ended up carting him off to Eden Hills. ‘E’s still up there. Brody doesn’t know when he’ll be coming home.”

Henry was several years younger than Ethan, with no family of his own. His elder sister had sailed to New York after leaving school, never to be heard from again. His parents were dead, forced to work until they dropped, leaving Henry to navigate the world alone. He lived in a boarding house at the district edge, populated by diseased prostitutes and vagrants; an endless sea of ever-changing faces. Henry would die of syphilis, causing him to go mad as it ate away his gray matter. The result of too many trysts with too many dirty girls.... but that was years away. For now, Henry’s business was everyone else’s.

The clock struck three and Ethan stood. Bundling into his still-damp coat, he went downstairs, opened his umbrella, and started for Benson’s.

“Afternoon sir – can I ‘elp you with anything?” asked the clerk in his thick, cockney accent. “Just having a look ‘round right now.” Ethan moved toward the prams. “Right – don’t hesitate if you’ve any questions,” said the clerk, busying himself elsewhere.

Ethan could see why Abby had been so taken with the pram. It was a stunning piece of work. He supposed if he were a girl of seven, he’d have wanted one too. Inside each rested a doll. No two alike. It was then that he saw her.... It was Abby all right. As if whoever had made it had used his daughter as the model. It gave Ethan a chill seeing her like that. He lifted the small girl out of the pram and its eyes popped open.

“They’re quite lifelike, aren’t they sir?” The clerk asked from behind, making Ethan jump. “A little *too* lifelike,” he said, staring into the deep blue pools of glass. “How much for the both of them?” Ethan was unable to pry his gaze from the porcelain figure in his hands. The clerk leaned in conspiratorially and lowered his voice. “Actually.... we have more than we need. I can let you have both dolly and pram for forty quid.” The clerk quickly stepped back in anticipation of being shaken vigorously about the shoulders by the enthusiastic customer who’d shout, *Forty quid? Here, take my money NOW!* “Too much,” was all that Ethan said before walking away. The clerk

hurried after him. "Wait, thirty quid." Ethan stopped, and without turning said, "twenty quid, not a bit more." The clerk sighed. "All right.... twenty quid." Ethan turned with a smile as the clerk led him to the register. "I'll need these delivered, but not until Christmas, understood?" Ethan scrawled his address on a slip of paper, shoving it across the counter with his payment. "Right sir," the less cheery clerk replied. "Make sure the blonde doll is the one that arrives. I don't want any of the others."

Ethan folded the receipt and headed for the door. The rains had let up but the air was cooler. Snow was on the way, and it wouldn't be long until the streets were iced over. Ethan would have paid forty quid if it had come down to it. He'd have done anything for Abby.