

*Thus did the fatal disease rise
like a demon bent on destruction;
it took its course,
not heeding mountain, sea nor clime;
death was its object, man its victim,
and the uttermost ends of the world
its destination; wherever its cold hand
was extended - the people died
Death struggled with time itself,
and gnawed the moments
that separated him from his victim.
- John Hogg "London As It Is"*

CHAPTER 1

Manchester, 1833

The dismal grey stone making up the ancient decaying edifice looming in front of her was covered in a thick layer of coal dust and grime. It looked like a medieval prison. Unfortunately, it was also their last hope. If the poorhouse turned them away, she feared there was little hope for James. She looked down at the young boy's cherubic face, now quiet in her arms. He had finally fallen into an uneasy sleep after fussing and crying for what seemed like hours. Bright circles of red on his cheeks told her that his fever had not let up. She could feel the heat radiating off his little body as she cradled him against herself. A small hand tugged at her skirts, and Mary whimpered, looking up at her, "Em, can we go in?" Her cheeks were also flushed, and Emma fervently prayed Mary wasn't getting sick too.

She carefully balanced James in her arms and banged again, louder, at the heavy wooden door. Despite how slight and frail James was, her arms were burning and she was feeling shaky. She hadn't had anything to eat since yesterday morning, instead, sharing her bit of stale bread and cheese between the twins. The poorhouse certainly wasn't anybody's first choice of refuge, but she no longer had any options. They needed to eat, and James needed a warm place to sleep...and hopefully some medicine.

Emma almost gave up hope before the door finally creaked opened to show a very tall, lanky man with thin, greasy hair combed sloppily over his balding pate. He passed a cursory glance over them with a cynical eye, and for a moment it seemed that he would slam the door without even acknowledging them.

"Please," she quickly begged, "Please. We're desperate. Our parents are dead of cholera, and James is sick," she said, glancing down at her brother, who softly whimpered in his sleep. "Please don't turn us away. We've no place else to go. I'm strong. I can work."

He opened the door a little wider and gazed at the beautiful, young woman standing before him. He stared at her face with cold, shifty eyes for a long moment, and then slowly his inspection drifted down her body, taking in the once good quality, but now dirty and tattered dress and boots. As he raised his eyes, Emma felt her skin prickle, and she shivered. She fought

the urge to grab the children and run. Instead, she lowered her eyes to the muddy ground and waited.

Eventually he opened his mouth and grinned at them, revealing large, stained teeth. “Of course, you can come in, pet. That’s what we’re here for to help such unfortunate wretches such as yourselves, and I’m sure the master will want to be seeing *you*. I’m the porter here. I deal with the people coming and going. Not that many people that come in ever go back out,” he cackled, coughing up a wad of phlegm and spitting it on the ground next to her boots. “Name’s Murphy. I’ll take you to the master of the house.”