

Buried

The Thames seemed peaceful today.

Abby looked out over the muddy river banks, malodorous black sludge covering her feet all the way up to her ankles and an old basket sitting in the crook of her arm. The remains of what might have been some other young girl's dress many years ago, but was now nothing more than a collection of deeply soiled rags, hung loosely over her emaciated figure, giving her an empty, almost skeletal appearance. There wasn't a single part of her body that wasn't coated in mud. It was impossible to avoid the foul muck when it was the very thing that put food in her stomach every evening. Her job as a mudlark was a loathsome one, true, but scouring the bank for things worth selling was all she'd ever known, and she wasn't bothered by it.

Tucking a long strand of matted brown hair back into her tattered bonnet, Abby bent lower to examine something small and white sticking out of the muck, like a swan in a murky pond. Closer examination revealed it to be some sort of bone, maybe a segment of a finger. Uncovering something that hadn't been turned black as ebony from the mucky water was unusual, making this white bone all the more valuable. She smiled, delighted with her find. The digit was small and thin, indicating that its owner hadn't been entirely full-grown when he (or she, she thought) had lost it.

Bones had always fascinated Abby. They all had stories to tell, though it was impossible to ever hear how the tales really went. Not that Abby minded. For her, it was just as much fun to invent the story as it was to know it. For example, she could imagine that the finger had once belonged to a young girl, the daughter of a wealthy gentleman. The girl would wake up every day long after the sun had risen in the sky, and every day she would go bathe in a large porcelain

bathub with a faucet made of pure silver. If she was hungry while bathing, her father's servants would come to bring her sweet cakes and exotic fruit that she would delicately pluck from their platters and pop into her mouth. The only days she went out were Sundays, when she would go to church with her father and pass over the great Tower Bridge.

On one of these days while sitting in the back of their elegant horse-drawn carriage, she would look out onto the Thames and want to stop to get a better view. Her father would attempt to persuade her against it, but the girl was stubborn, and her father would have to capitulate. Slowly, the stagecoach would come to a halt. The moment the wheels stopped turning, she would leap out and race to the very edge of the bridge, leaning over the railing and standing on the tips of her toes so that she might see the river below her. However, all she would find was a great, horrific stench, so pungent that she would faint. No longer supporting herself on the railing, she would fall off the bridge and plummet into the murky depths, never to be seen again.

Until now, that is, thought Abby. Today, she held a part of one of the girl's fingers, the bone's pristine white color contrasting with the brown of her own grubby mud-covered hands. There were several possible explanations as to how the finger had been separated from the rest of the body. Perhaps it was eaten off by a fish, she mused, only to be spit back out again when the poor thing realized how he'd bitten off more than he could swallow.

Carefully, she set the undersized digit in the bottom of her basket along with some other small treasures: a lump of coal, a copper nail, some rope. However, the bone was probably worth more than any of her other valuables. As long as she sold it to one of the seers who lived on the street corner, she would be sure to get a handsome offer. While the seers were very good at scamming wealthy passers-by, they were none too skilled at detecting scams themselves. It would be easy to sweet-talk a day's supply of food out of them with the bone.

She wondered if this would be her fate when she died; to have her fingers end up on the necklace of a false soothsayer. Would a mudlark someday find her bones in the mud? Would they think about where she came from, and what her life had been like?

No, they probably wouldn't, she determined. Most mudlarks didn't think about where their spoils came from, or about who possessed them before they fell into their hands. Most didn't think about rich people. Abby did, though. She thought a lot about the wealthy lords and ladies who hurried along the street, pinching their noses and avoiding her watchful gaze. They never realized how much they had, how much people like her *didn't* have. It was a pity, really. The pleasures of wealth would always be wasted on those who were wealthy, the very people who couldn't understand.

Good fortune was like the sun, thought Abby. During the rainy season, the people longed for the warmth and light the sun provided. When summer arrived, they were happy, but only for a short while. After a few weeks, they would begin to complain about petty things, like how the sun was bad for their skin, or how their favorite jacket was too hot to wear now. But once the wet season rolled around again, they'd remember how nice it had been to have the sun, and they'd go right back to missing it.

Abby had never felt fortune's sunlight; rain was all she'd ever known. Rain and mud. She was just a mudlark, after all, nothing more than a street rat.

Just another face covered in the mud.