



Chapter Eleven

It was a beast. A thing like the lions and tigers of Bartholomew Fair, but bigger, wetter. It roared again, louder. Cassia could smell something putrid and sharp as metal; she could hear it breathing, a loud rasping like wind through the crack of a wall. She couldn't move; fear had turned her limbs to stone. The beast was closer all the time, it was setting itself down faster and faster. It sensed her, she could feel its consciousness focus entirely on her being, the hunter in the dark.

Cassia came to her senses and began to run, only her boots

were so full of water that their weight dragged her down, and she moved slowly, heavily, as if she were in her Dream. She gritted her teeth and pushed forward until her legs ached, until she could tell by the changing light that she was back in the basement room. She ran up the steps, hammering on the door until she felt her knuckles splinter against the wood.

‘Let me out! LET ME OUT!’

It was behind her, it was close – perhaps it was in the room already, reaching for her. Cassia felt terror swamp her, smother her; she couldn’t breathe, she couldn’t think, there was only the dark and the thing and the terror, the terror that was making her heart jerk like a frantic bird.

She screamed. It was the scream of a small child, long, high and sharp. She closed her eyes, pressed herself against the door and waited for whatever it was to come to her. But dimly she became conscious of another sound – a muffled animal wail of pain. The water moved again, but there was nothing coming nearer. Instead, the sounds were growing fainter, until she could hear only their echo.

Cassia’s legs gave out beneath her, and she sat down hard on the steps, her breath coming too fast. She could scarcely understand what had happened – it was impossible, it was beyond anything she had imagined . . .

‘Cassia!’ Behind her, the door burst open, and she felt

hands gripping her shoulders, hauling her to her feet and turning her around. Felix. ‘What happened? I heard you scream. Did you fall?’

Cassia shook her head. She couldn’t articulate what she had heard. She felt as though she had been snatched from reality and plunged into a world of bad dreams – into a terrible ballad children weren’t supposed to hear.

Meanwhile, Felix was still talking. ‘. . . managed to get out of the study. When I saw them again, they told me they had decided to take you in today, after all. I had to pretend to leave and double back. Not sure I fooled them, but they’ll find out soon enough you’re not in that basement, and then I think we will be in serious trouble.’

‘I don’t think so.’ Cassia finally found her voice. ‘I don’t think they expect me to be in the basement any more.’

It was only when they were safely out on the street, and Cassia was surrounded by the comfortable press of Londoners all around her, that she voiced to Felix what she had found in the workhouse cellar. Felix kept opening his mouth to speak and then closing it again, but he didn’t interrupt until Cassia had finished her story.

‘A beast? What sort of beast?’

‘I – I don’t know, I didn’t see. Something big – and there

was a smell. Like ... like the tide, when it brings rotting things in.'

'And you think it was after you?'

Cassia nodded. She was still filled with the instincts of prey: her body trembling with adrenaline, every muscle tensed and poised to run.

'I see.' Felix chose his next words with care. 'You know ... you did knock your head pretty hard on that desk. Maybe you ought to lie down.'

'I'm not addlebrained!' Cassia said loudly – so loudly that several passersby turned to stare. She lowered her voice again. 'I know what I heard and it *must* be linked to the missing children. Don't you remember what it said on the blue cloth? *Monster, guide us*. The men who left this behind, who stole a child, are involved somehow with this ... thing. They're bringing it children, the same way the workhouse people tried to bring me.'

'It's a theory,' Felix said, but Cassia knew he was only humouring her. 'But if there truly were a *beast* being kept in a tunnel below a London workhouse, if children were being kidnapped and brought to it – don't you think we would have heard something?'

'And how would you have heard about it?' said Cassia, feeling her face grow hot. 'What would you know about anything that goes on beyond a courtroom or a dinner party?'

'Will you *stop* biting my head off? I am on your side!' Felix snapped. 'Only perhaps I was wrong to work with a girl who is a proven liar.'

The two of them glared at each other. And then Felix's face softened. 'Surely you must see that this is even more absurd than your theories of yesterday. Stealing children away to deliver them to a hidden beast – and for what possible reason?'

Cassia tried to keep a haughty expression for as long as she could – but inwardly, she knew he was right. It was a fantastical thing to expect someone to believe; in the daylight and open air she could scarcely believe it herself. It made her sound ridiculous, like a child who couldn't tell the difference between reality and make-believe.

'All right, my ducklings!'

Teo bounded up to them, Taleggio perched on his shoulder. 'We did that up in prime twig, didn't we? I thought I'd break my sides laughing when those two old crows came out to squawk at me.' His face turned serious. 'So, what's the story – did you find Jack and Effie? Have they got them chained up, picking rope? That's what I heard they do to you in the Big House.'

Felix scoffed at Teo, but his voice had none of the scornfulness that it had before – his tour around the poorhouse had clearly shaken him. Meanwhile, Cassia had been struck by

a thought. Felix was right; a creature of that size couldn't go unnoticed. There must be someone who knew more. After all, she was not the only one who believed in monsters.

'Teo, when you collected stories for my ballads, where did you get them from?'

'Oh, everywhere. Different folks have different stories. You'll hear nothing but gloomy ol' love songs from the watercress sellers, but go down the right alley and there are hangmen's tales all the way to Newgate.'

'And who told you about Three Fingers Charlie? Or the ghostly graveyard woman? Where did the ghost stories come from?'

Teo thought for a moment. 'Well, now you mention it – I suppose they all came from the mudlarks. My pals down by the river, they always have something that makes you tremble at the knees. Why? Is it Three Fingers Charlie that has the kids?'

Cassia's heart pounded. She remembered the creature's smell – the fetid fumes of the river. 'Teo, I need to speak to your friends. Will they talk to us, if you ask them?'

'Maybe.' Teo looked doubtful. 'They're not much fond of toffs and swells, you know.'

'Tell them it's urgent. Tell them ... tell them it's about a creature, one that moves around in the water, that hunts children. They might know what I mean.'

Teo nodded, and ran ahead, as serious as Cassia had ever seen him. Felix gave her a questioning glance – but Cassia refused to entertain it. They set off together, still not speaking.

Unbeknownst to any of the three, a man in a blue brocaded coat, who had been leaning against a building opposite, put down his paper and began a careful, nonchalant pursuit.

As they descended the bankside, it seemed to Cassia that they were entering an entirely different realm. They were in the river's territory now. Behind them, London faded into fog as thick as treacle, until they might not have been in a city at all. The ground was marshy beneath their feet. The smell was indescribable; Cassia brought her hands to her face and breathed through her mouth. She could hear the Thames, engorged with recent rain and choking on the rotting mass of London's waste, but it was difficult to see it. There were low voices, and the sound of footsteps sloshing through the mud, but nobody she could make out. All she could see was a small rowing boat tied to a half-sunken mooring post, drifting on the tide. Cassia stepped closer to Felix, not wanting to lose sight of another person in this strange, half-submerged land. But Teo waded forward, calling out: 'All right, Eddie? I've brought some mates of mine to see you.' He waited. The only sound was the gurgle of the

mud as the tide came in. ‘Oh, come off it, they’re all right. Jack and Effie are missing, so are other fair kiddies, and they think you lot might be able to help.’

Still nothing. Summoning her courage, Cassia stepped forward. ‘Not just that. We . . . we know something is taking them. And I think you know about it too.’

‘We don’t talk about it.’

Cassia looked down. A small boy had emerged from the mist and was looking up at them shrewishly. He looked around Cassia’s age; hunger or illness must have stunted his growth. He was also the filthiest person Cassia had ever seen: every inch of his skin was covered in Thames mud, but his hair was sandy and his eyelashes and eyebrows pale. He was clutching a cluster of gold rings in his hands. Cassia didn’t like to think where he had got them, down here in the river.

‘Buzz off, Teo,’ he said, with a cold survey of Felix’s waistcoat, Cassia’s fine dress. ‘You shouldn’t have brought them. I don’t know nothing about anything.’

‘That’s not true,’ said Cassia, before Teo could reply. ‘You know exactly what I’m talking about.’

‘No, I don’t.’

‘Yes, you do. You talk about all sorts of monsters with Teo, why won’t you talk about one that’s real?’

‘We just don’t! You got to look out for yourself first, and if

you start thinking about the monster then the music’ll come for you too.’

Silence. Eddie looked furious with himself.

‘What do you mean, “the music”?’ asked Cassia. ‘We’ve been hearing music all day – those strange nursery rhymes that aren’t nursery rhymes at the fair. They’re a part of it, aren’t they?’

Eddie eyed her reluctantly. ‘The nursery rhymes ain’t nothing – they just stop nosy people asking what they shouldn’t. The music is different, all the river kiddies know about it. It comes in on the tide, on the wind. When you hear it, you follow it. You’ve got no choice.’

‘Follow it where?’

Eddie looked into the shadow-strewn waters coming in around them. ‘Into the river. That’s where it’s waiting. It gets you, and it takes you down to the Deep Dark.’

‘The Deep Dark?’ Teo looked pale. ‘But that’s just a story. We used to scare Effie with it.’

‘What’s in the Deep Dark?’ asked Cassia.

‘No one knows,’ said Eddie. ‘But sometimes, when a kiddie disappears, there’s another sound too. Roaring – like nothing you’ve ever heard, it rattles you right down to your bones.’

‘You’re saying children down here have been vanishing for years?’ Felix spoke up. ‘Why has no one done anything?’

‘Done anything?’

‘People don’t want to see children hurt – surely if you told someone . . .’

‘The river kiddies who wash up drowned dead every week, who cares about them? When a kid wades a bit too far in the water, or gets stuck in the mud when the tide comes back, who raises a fuss?’ Eddie shrugged. ‘Easiest thing in the world, nabbing one of us. No one expects us to live long anyway.’

‘Have you seen children going into the river this summer?’ asked Cassia. ‘Not just mudlarks, either – have you seen a dark-haired boy, small for his age, answers to the name of Isaac Costa?’

For the first time, Eddie looked disconcerted. ‘No. It’s strange – since winter things have been different. Sometimes you hear the music still, and there are still kids that follow it . . . but they ain’t going into the river. I don’t know where they’re going any more.’

At that moment, a single soaring note came through on an instrument – so beautiful that it made Cassia’s breath catch in her throat.

‘That’s it! That’s the music!’ cried Eddie.

Cassia listened. It was difficult to catch – the wind was changing direction, and the sound changing with it. But it stirred something in her. Had she heard it before? The tune

made her feel something familiar . . . Then she heard the low rumble of a roar.

She gripped Felix’s arms. ‘Felix, the boat. If it’s in the river, we can see it for ourselves, you’ll see that I’m right!’

But Felix stood stock still, glassy-eyed.

‘The music . . .’ Felix whispered. He took a step . . .

‘Felix!’ Cassia clapped her hands over his ears, and his eyes came into focus. ‘We need to get on the river, we can cut off the creature!’

The pair made their way to the boat, unmooring it from its post and pushing themselves out. There was an eerie sound on the air, rising above the background of the beast’s roar. The fog seemed to wind even closer around them and Cassia thought she heard a crying echoing through the mist. Strange, half-sung fragments of song were making their way towards them. Cassia caught a few bars of:

*‘My name is Jack Hall chimney sweep, I’ve robbed
both great and small . . .’*

‘Isaac!’ Cassia cried. ‘Isaac, is that you, are you there?’

But the wandering sounds were broken up by a triumphant roar that blasted through the fog and scattered the last few birds foolish enough to have lingered. Something in it chilled

Cassia right to the quick. It was getting closer, louder, it would have them any moment . . .

‘It’s real!’ Felix gaped, his face white. ‘I can hear it – good God, it’s *real*.’

But Cassia sensed something else. ‘Felix, stop. STOP!’

Her voice broke through, and Felix let the oars drop into the boat, where they clattered against the wooden bottom. There was nothing else moving near them; they were alone in the water.

‘It’s not here. We need to get back now.’

Felix wordlessly obeyed, rowing with all his might to the shore. The music was dying on the air, and the fog seemed to lift a little – though perhaps that was just Cassia’s imagination.

Teo was nowhere to be seen.