

London, October 1786



ELIZA BIRD stood and watched from the shadows. Tom was in trouble again. Master Mossman's voice cut through the air, and so did his strap. "There will be no dinner for you again!"

Tom's cries filled the room and her own tears fell with his. Her brother was only ten years old. He shouldn't be expected to do a man's work! But things were different here in London. Here, children could be bought for not much more than the price of hot chestnuts from a street vendor, bought and used as slaves.

Eliza's fists clenched at her sides as she watched. She knew better than to run to Tom. It would only make things worse. Perhaps he would be beaten again. But as soon as Mr Mossman dismissed him, she would be there. She'd hold him and soothe him. She might only be a year older than him, but she would give him the same love their mother would have.

Thoughts of her mother brought tears. "Oh, Ma, why did you have to die?"



Their father had gone many years before. So when their mother and the babies had sickened and died from dysentery, she and Tom had become orphans.

Eliza's heart ached as she remembered that awful night. Molly, her mother's friend, had taken them in. But the next day, she had handed Eliza and Tom over to Master Fred.

Molly's eyes had filled with sorrow as she had spoken the words that still haunted Eliza, "I ain't got a choice. There's not enough food for me own little 'uns. You go with Master Fred, here. He'll see you safe."

But he hadn't.

Escape!

ELIZA HAD THOUGHT Master Fred was a friend of Molly's, but she soon learned the truth. They'd walked for miles, and her body had burned with exhaustion. She couldn't give in to her own sadness and fear, because she needed to protect Tom, who kept crying. With her arms around him, she half dragged him along.

It was when Master Fred stopped at an inn, leaving them outside in the cold, that Eliza overheard his plan. He was trying to sell them!

Eliza's brain was tired and her throat parched, but she had to act fast. Tom leaned heavily against her and she shook him. "Tom! We have to get away!"

Tom blinked. "Is that you, Ma?"

Tears filled her eyes. "No, it's me, Eliza. You have to wake up. We have to be quick!"