



**ALL
THINGS
BRIGHT AND
BEAUTIFUL**

**PATRICE
LAWRENCE**

Angel's hair was full of spiders. That's the first thing I remember about that day. I'd thought they were ants, but I should have known. I'd dug out enough ants' nests in the dry earth down by the canal. These were what Nanna called penny spiders, tiny things, running down Angel's forehead and cheeks in a quick, grey stream, dodging my hands as I tried to sweep them off her. But I didn't want to squash them. It wasn't their fault that they'd made their home in the wrong place. Nanna's bonnet must have looked so tempting and it had been empty for months.

“Take it off, Angel!”

My sister was sitting on our bed, hunched against the damp wall, her arms hanging by her sides. Her mouth was a little bit open and I was frightened that the spiders would run inside. She was two years older than me but was always smaller. Nanna said they never expected her to live. She'd got measles and diphtheria but she'd beaten them both. She'd been stronger than they'd thought.

“Angel?”

Her eyes were closed and she was shaking. I lifted the bonnet off her head and checked inside. I brushed away a few wisps of web, but all the

spiders were gone. If they really wanted to escape, it was easy. They could hide in the cracks that spread across the wall, or scuttle out of the missing windowpane, or race into the cold fireplace and up the chimney. They could even go out the way we did, through the door-shaped hole into the hallway.

“You have to check your clothes, Angel!”

She opened her eyes and looked at me as if she was going to say something, then she slid down on to the bed, scrunching herself up like newspaper.

“This is no place for the idle!”

Mrs Vickery was standing where the door should be. She was so big she could have *been* the door, blocking out the dark hallway behind her. She wrinkled her face at the stink. I should have emptied the chamberpot first thing, but I’d been too worried about Angel. Though the smell from the privy in the yard outside was blasting through the room anyway.

“Angel isn’t lazy,” I said. “She’s still sick.”

Mrs Vickery’s face wrinkled even more. “She isn’t sick. She’s idle. I told you, I got a respectable family ready for this room. They paid me up front.”

I glanced over at Angel. Her face was turned to the wall. I bit down on my lip. *Respectable?* I wanted

to yell. *Your last “respectable” family ran out after chopping up the door for firewood. They didn’t even leave us any.*

I said, “You’ll have our rent tomorrow.”

Mrs Vickery’s mouth twitched. “You said that yesterday.”

“I know. But Angel’s sick.”

“Sick in the head. Just like your mother.”

My teeth dug deeper. Soon there’d be blood. “We’ll have your money tomorrow, Mrs Vickery.”

“And how do I know she isn’t going to be sick tomorrow?”

Mrs Vickery looked around the room, at the bottles with the candle wax dribbling down the sides, past the small blue globe that was Nanna’s and then Mama’s. I’d found some apples in the market yesterday and tried to coax Angel to eat one. She’d taken a small bite and stuck it back in the bowl. The flesh had gone all brown.

Mrs Vickery shook her head. Her black bonnet shuffled. I hoped the spiders had sneaked along the thick folds of her neck and up into her hair.

She said, “I only let you stay so long because your grandmother was a respectable woman. Such a pity your mother brought her so low.”

I moved back towards Angel. I wanted my body

to block out the words that I knew were coming.

Mrs Vickery leaned back against the crooked doorframe. “She did her best, your grandmother. But your mother...”

I dug my nails into my leg but the words burst out. “Nanna loved us!”

Mrs Vickery’s eyebrows shot up. Her bonnet jerked back. “She was a decent woman. She did her best.” She shook her head again. “And do you know what I told her?”

“Stop it!” I glanced back at Angel. The words usually hit her hard, because she remembered our father. For me, he was like a ghost, almost real, but just out of my sight.

Mrs Vickery laughed. She sounded like the night cats that squawked beneath our windows.

“I told her that the best thing your father could have done was take you with him back to whatever country he came from!”

Trinidad, I wanted to whisper. Grandma had drawn a tiny little circle round it on the globe.

Mrs Vickery rubbed her hands. “For your grandmother’s sake, I’ll give you until six o’clock tonight. It won’t be me coming for the money. It will be Bernard. He’s not as kind as I am.”

She turned and swished away.

Bernard, with his twisted nose and his eyes that were always half closed and swollen. Sometimes he'd appear as Angel and I left our room in the morning. He'd never speak to us. He'd just stand there, filling the hallway. He'd crack his knuckles and grin, showing the jagged teeth in his big, dark mouth. His nails were rimmed with dirt and blood from working in the slaughterhouse. We'd squeeze past, holding our breath so we didn't breathe in the smell of dying animals.

I crouched next to Angel and shook her. "Can you get up today? We're going to be out on the street!"

Angel crumpled herself together even more.

"Angel?"

"Vicky. I'm so sorry. I just can't... I should be with Mama. Please let me go."

"No, Angel. You have to stay with me."

She was crying again. I dabbed away the tears with the corner of my skirt. "We'll be all right. I promise."

I pulled our blanket over her. She didn't move. I poured some water into a bowl, dipped in a rag and rubbed my face. It probably didn't make much

difference. I needed a proper wash. I should borrow Mrs Sweeting's bath and try and find some coal to boil the water. But not now. Because I had made a promise and I had until six o'clock to keep it.

I kissed Angel's forehead. "I'll be back soon."

Her eyes flicked open and she grabbed my arm. "Don't leave me, Vicky."

"I have to."

"No." She clung on tighter.

I stroked her hand and lay down on the bed next to her. When Mama was ill, there was only one way Nanna could calm her down. I closed my eyes and tried to push the dark things out of mind and fill it with birds singing and flowers opening and icicles hanging from winter branches.

I took a deep breath and started to sing:

"All things bright and beautiful. . ."

Slowly, her hand relaxed. I touched her cheek. Her breath was slow and shallow. She sighed. I hoped she was dreaming about sunsets and mountains.

I sat on the edge of the bed and squeezed my feet into Angel's boots. They didn't leak as much as mine. I pulled on Nanna's old coat and crept downstairs and out of the front door.

Monday was washday. Lines were looped across

our narrow street from window to window, clothes and sheets flapping in the wind. Mrs Sweeting was outside prodding a mound of laundry in her tin bath. Laura, her oldest, was sitting on the step singing to a tiny baby tucked into an old fruit crate next to her. I smiled at them; Laura made a face back.

“Do you need any help?” I asked.

“Nothing for you today, darling.” Mrs Sweeting nodded towards the bundle in the crate. “I need every penny now. Sorry.”

I forced out another smile but tears prickled behind. She was the only one who'd give me a few pennies to help her. None of the other women would meet my eyes. They knew how close they were to being like us.

I'd have to try Mrs Kastner. I cut through the alleyways, skirting round the back of the goods yard, passing through St Leonard's churchyard into Hackney Road. The fog was hanging heavy; I could taste it.

Mrs Kastner and her daughter, Rebecca, owned a sweet shop. The windows were so clean I could almost touch the jars of liquorice and pear drops. Sometimes I'd help Rebecca polish the glass panes

and she'd give me a couple of pennies. Even better were the toffees, as hard as bones, wrapped in a twist of paper. I could make one last nearly an hour. But the shop door was still locked. That was unusual.

Mr Kastner's furniture shop was next door. He and his two brothers made tables and chairs in the workshop out the back. It was dusty, messy work and if they were really busy, they'd let me and Angel sweep up. We'd get enough for bread and tea, and wood shavings for our fire. But their shop was locked too. I glanced down the road. Only a few shops were open.

I crossed over to Mr Mackenzie's butcher's. Strings of fat sausages hung from hooks behind the counter. Thick joints of meat sat on trays waiting for customers to take them away – customers with money. Mrs Mackenzie gave me her usual sour look, the one that Angel said could fry the meat by itself.

I pulled Nanna's coat around me. "I was wondering..."

She said, "We can't give no charity today."

"I wasn't wanting none." Though if she'd handed me a link of those sausages, I wouldn't have said no.

“I just wondered why the sweet shop was closed.”

“It’s one of their religion days. None of ’em are around.” She crossed her arms and glared at me. “If that’s all you wanted, you’d best be going then.”

I almost wished I was brave enough to grab the sausages and run off down the street with them, but Nanna had always been strict about not stealing. Other folks worked hard for what they had, she’d said. We had no right to take it. And anyway, people always remembered us.

I backed out, making sure I stared her in the eye. She looked away first.

The clock in Mrs Kastner’s window said it was already past nine. I had to get money. But where from?

A greengrocer’s cart was parked on the corner of Columbia Road and Hackney Road. *Anthony and Sons, Purveyors of Excellent Fruit and Veg. Top Quality.* The tailboard was down and Mr Anthony was weighing out carrots. Women were crowding around him, calling to be served next.

Fruit and veg. Of course. There’s where I should have gone first!

I picked up my skirts and started running, Angel’s boots squeezing my feet like claws.

Covent Garden Market. Nanna's family used to run a vegetable stall there. Her brother, my great-uncle Ned, would drop us round bags of potatoes and parsnips, but he'd packed up and moved out to Woodford just before Nanna died. He'd paid for her funeral, but he didn't want much to do with us. Nanna always said we didn't need anyone else. But we did. I did today.

I stood on the cobbled square outside the enormous market hall. It had taken me more than an hour to get there. My legs were wobbly from running and my breath felt like broken glass scraping up and down my throat. There were so many people, so many stalls, it was hard to know where to look. I tried to imagine pushing my way through, asking every single costermonger if they needed help.

I took one step, but all my strength had leaked out. I could smell the market – cabbages, hot pies from the barrow boys, horse dung from the trams and the cabs lined up in the side streets. I could hear the costermongers calling and the housekeepers and flower girls shouting for bargains. My feet still refused to move.

But I had to. I *had* to. My Angel was curled up

like a scrap of burnt paper in the corner of our bed. What if the spiders were creeping back? She hadn't eaten anything proper for more than a week. She didn't have enough strength to brush them away. And as soon as the clock chimed six, Bernard would come. It was so clear in my head. He'd climb the stairs, bend over the bed and sling my sister over his shoulder. Her hair would be draping down the back of his filthy waistcoat, her forehead bouncing against his shoulder as he stomped back down. He'd drop her in the gutter. I'd seen him do it to Mrs Astley, who used to be in the room above. Mrs Astley was kicking and punching at him every step of the way but it didn't make any difference. She'd still been left sitting on the street outside.

Nanna had pulled us away from the window to stop us looking.

And all I was doing now was standing there.

A cart rolled by. As I watched, a sack tipped and a cabbage thumped to the ground and rolled towards me. I hated cabbage but maybe I could trade it with Mrs Sweeting for some bread and maybe a little bit of bacon. I ran towards it, but as I bent down a small dirty hand scooped it up and hurtled away through the crowds.

What? No!

I spotted a flash of bare feet disappear behind the cart and round a corner. That cabbage was mine! I saw it first! I picked up my skirt and gave chase. But it was like everyone in Covent Garden was on the thief's side – the barrow boys, the housekeepers, the nannies, even the horses were against me. They closed round behind him, moved in front of me, wheeled their prams and barrows into me. I slumped against a pillar. I didn't have enough food in me to keep running. My sides felt like they'd been kicked by one of those carthorses. My breath sounded like it was whistling a tune. My breath? No, that wasn't me. Someone was blasting on a penny whistle. And I could hear a trumpet too.

The musicians were by the church railings. There were two girls. The one playing the trumpet was about my age. The younger one was blowing the penny whistle like an angry policeman. A small boy was sitting cross-legged at their feet, one arm waving the cap at passers-by, the other wrapped around a cabbage like it was his favourite toy. My cabbage.

A flower seller was slumped against the railings next to them, her bonnet drooped over her face,

her basket of blooms wilting like she'd begged the broken ones from the stallholders and had tried to tie them together with string. There was a baby on her lap. It was wrapped in an old shawl, sucking its finger. For a second I thought of our little brother, still and silent in the bed beside Mama until Nanna wrapped him in a blanket and took him away.

The cabbage-thief glanced at me, then looked back, eyes wide. We stared at each other.

A woman stooped to drop a few coins in the cap. Suddenly the flower girl sprung to life as if there was a ghost behind the railings tugging her strings.

"Miss! Miss!" She held up some lily of the valley, the blossoms drooping like they were still asleep. "Miss!"

The woman glanced down, gave a little smile and walked on.

"Miss!" The flower girl was on her feet, the baby still in her arms as if it was glued there. She grabbed the basket of flowers. "Miss! Please buy some! They're half price! My baby's sick! Miss!"

The woman glanced back. She mouthed the words, "I'm sorry."

But I didn't care about her words. It was her face. It looked like mine. Not the way that Angel's was

like mine. She couldn't be my sister. But her skin was light brown and she had dark, dark hair swept beneath a plain grey bonnet. For a moment our eyes met, then the flower seller caught up with her. And she was hurrying off, the flower girl keeping pace by her side.

A woman. Who looked like me. A woman in clean clothes that fit her properly, who wasn't pushing strangers' washing around a metal tub. She wasn't sweeping sawdust around the table legs and chair backs or walking backwards out of the butcher's shop because she didn't want to feel the shame burning into her back. A woman. Who looked like me.

I breathed in. I felt like my tiredness had been swept away with the swish of her skirt. A horse clopped by, its cart full of bulging sacks of vegetables. A porter strode past, a stack of flower boxes balanced on his head. There was laughter behind me. A little boy and his sister were playing hide and seek in the cemetery. My pockets were still empty, but they didn't have to be.

I walked over to the musicians. The child's eyes widened and he grabbed the cabbage so hard it jerked out of his hands and rolled across the

cobbles. He lunged for it, but I got there first. I picked it up. The trumpet player stopped.

“Don’t you go near him!”

I dropped the cabbage back in his lap. “I wasn’t going to.”

“Well, clear off then.”

“I want to sing with you.”

“You what?”

“I can sing!”

The girl with the whistle scowled. “You can’t.” She turned to the trumpet player. “She can’t, can she, Enid?”

Enid shook her head. “We’re not splitting four ways.”

I glanced at the empty cap. “You can’t split nothing four ways. Just let me try.”

Before they could say anything else, I took a deep breath in, opened my mouth and let my voice curl round the tune. *All Things Bright and Beautiful*.



Ding! It was five o’clock! Dong! But Enid wanted me to stay for one more tune. Ding! I had to get home for Angel! Dong! The cap was heavy with coins but the posh opera folk would make it heavier. Ding! But Bernard... Dong! Bernard.

I promised Enid I'd be back the next day, shoved my share of money in my pockets and ran.

The clock at Liverpool Street Station said five to six. My heart felt like it was going to jump out of my mouth and run down the road by itself. I hurled myself through our front door, pulled myself up the stairs and stopped. A blanket had been nailed across the door space. And there were voices coming from the other side.

I slid down the wall on to the dirty floor. Bernard had done it. He'd thrown Angel out on to the street and given our room to someone else.

“When Victoria comes...”

I sat up straight. *Victoria*. Did they mean me? No, I knew about five other Victorias. But the voice – that sounded like Angel. Not the tough, loud Angel I knew before, but definitely Angel!

I forced myself to stand up. I pushed the blanket aside. My sister was sitting at the table with a bowl of steaming soup in front of her. Soup?

A woman I'd never seen before was sitting next to her. She turned to look at me. Her face was kind and open. A man was standing by the fireplace. He was short and thin. It looked like his jacket could go round him twice. He was frowning.

I ran to my sister, the coins knocking together in my pocket.

She smiled. "I told them you'd come, Vicky."

She picked up a spoonful of soup and offered it to me. I shook my head and it sloshed back into the bowl, the spoon clanking against the enamel.

"I tried to get her to eat." The woman put an arm round Angel's shoulder. "You have to eat, love."

"My soup," the man muttered. "That's my good soup the girl's got."

The woman twisted round and glared at him. "Stop it, George. You've had yours already and there's more in the pot."

"Even so, Lou. She's taking food right out of our own children's mouths."

The dirt-smearred windows let in so little light, I hadn't noticed the children huddled on our bed. Two of them must have been twins, with another smaller one between them. None of them could have been more than five.

Footsteps. Workboots slamming down on wooden stairs. Lou shoved herself away from the table and went and crouched by her children, arms around them. Her husband, George, turned towards the cold fireplace.

Angel opened her mouth. "Bernard."

"It's all right," I whispered. "I have the money."

The blanket was yanked from the doorframe, threads left dangling down from the nails. A pale fist, knuckles cracking. Angel huddled against me.

I took her hand. Her fingers were as light as a ghost's. I couldn't see Bernard's face, but I could smell him. Blood and smoke and street dirt.

Lou's voice from the corner. "You've no right to come in here. We've paid. Tell him, George!"

George didn't turn round.

In the room above, I could hear Mrs Sweeting dragging her tub across the floor. Her baby was crying. One of Lou's children whimpered.

Lou's voice had shrunk, but I heard her. "George? Please."

George clutched his jacket around himself, then turned to face us. "We paid you a week upfront, Mr Vickery."

Bernard snorted. "You paid for your family. Not for these two. That's extra."

I said, "I have money."

I dug in my pocket, pulled out the coins and held them in my palm. Three heavy footsteps. My head filled up with Bernard's stink. I could hear Angel's

breath, in and out, quick, like she wanted to speak but had lost her words. I closed my eyes. The coins were swept from my hand and the footsteps headed away. They stopped.

“You’ve bought one more night.”

My eyes snapped open. “Another night? That’s enough for a week!”

A laugh from the staircase. “Didn’t your new friends tell you? Rent’s gone up.”

George rubbed his eyes with the back of his hand. “It seems like we’re stuck with you.”

“George!” Lou stood up, hands on her hips. “That’s uncharitable. And they paid, you saw them!”

“None of that money’s going into our pockets, Lou. Are they getting breakfast on the house too?”

“Stop!” Lou stepped towards him. The twin was crying louder now, sobs that made the heavy air shake.

I stood up. “He’s right. You’re under no obligation to us.”

Angel’s fingers scabbled against my shoulder. “Let me go to Mama. Please.”

I kissed her cheek. My lips were damp from her crying. “No, Angelica. You have to stay here. Lou?”

Please can you look after my sister?"

"No," Angel said. "Just let me go."

"Lou," I said. "Can you?"

Lou nodded. "But you don't have to go."

But I did. Other than our globe and Nanna's bonnet, Angel and I had nothing left in the world. Even if we had somewhere to stay tonight, what would happen tomorrow?



London night. Light and shadows. The moon was hidden behind the clouds. The street lamps had been lit, but voices called from dark corners. This time I was lucky. I crept on to an omnibus at Old Street and the conductor let me stay.

Covent Garden Market was closed but it still felt like the whole of London was there. Ladies in fur jackets and heavy, sweeping skirts strolled arm in arm with gentlemen. Flower girls sat by every lamppost calling out their wares, their baskets of blooms by their sides. A barrow boy pushed past me yelling out, "Fried eels." My stomach tightened.

Enid, please still be here! I weaved my way through the crowd towards the church. *Please, Enid! Please!*

But an organ grinder had taken their place. He had a little monkey on a leash dressed in a tiny

jacket and trilby. He was pulling on the leash trying to make the monkey dance, but it was fighting to get away.

“Sir!” A woman bent over the monkey, trying to untangle the lead from around its neck. “This is needless cruelty.”

The monkey shot forward, teeth bared. The woman jumped back.

The organ grinder smirked. “It’s a cruel beast, madam.”

The woman straightened up. It was her! The one who’d walked off across the square with the flower girl pleading at her heels. The one with skin the same colour as mine.

“A cruel beast indeed,” she said. “But I’m not talking about the monkey.”

She managed to unloop the lead and headed away. I ran after her.

“Miss!” Her dark-blue dress wove between the opera suits and lush silks and velvets. “Miss!”

I hadn’t noticed the puddle of water and wet leaves. A flower girl must have emptied out her bucket. I slipped and flew forward, grabbing a handful of the woman’s jacket.

She spun round. “Thief!”

“No! I’m not a thief!” I glanced around, in case a policeman had heard her. Luckily I didn’t see any. I let the soft fabric fall through my fingers. “I just ... I just need to talk to you.”

Her face softened. “Have we met before?”

She remembered me! “This afternoon. Right here, by the musicians.”

“Oh, yes.” She sighed. “Are you here by yourself? You look so young. What do you want from me?”

“I ... I want...” But what did I want? She didn’t look rich. What could she do for us? “It’s just me and my sister. We’ve got nowhere to go. Angel’s been sick since our grandma died and we’re going to end up in the workhouse.”

She gave me a little smile. “Is that so bad?”

My breath stopped. Didn’t she know? DIDN’T SHE KNOW? I swung round and walked away. I felt a hand on my shoulder.

“Sorry. I’m not from London. I don’t always understand. Is the workhouse really so bad? I don’t know. I’ve never had the misfortune to have to enter one.”

Her eyes were shaded by her broad hat. Her face was hard to read.

“Yes,” I said. “It is. They don’t really want to

help us so they make it as bad as possible. Me and Angel, we'd be split up. I'm strong, but Angel – she isn't. I don't know what to do.”

“I don't know what I can do. I have so little money.”

“Mrs Vickery's our landlady. Her son, Bernard, took all my money. Maybe you can talk to her.”

“I don't know. Why me?”

I touched her hand, the same light brown as me and Angel, then touched mine. “Please?”

“I'll try,” she said. “That's all I can promise. What's your name?”

“I'm Victoria.”

“Hello, Victoria. I'm Miss Malvery. Olive Malvery.”



We took a cab back east. Miss Malvery bought some bread, hot pies and apples to bring with us. The driver dropped us by Liverpool Street Station and Miss Malvery followed me through the dark narrow streets to our home.

I pushed open the front door but Miss Malvery let it swing shut. We were in darkness. She breathed in sharply. I reached behind and offered her my hand. She took it, holding it tight. I knew every

groan and dip of those rotting steps.

The blanket had been nailed back over the door. I pulled it aside. George stepped forward towards us.

He glanced at Miss Malvery, then at me.

“She’s gone,” he said.

Gone? Who?

I looked round the room. Lou was sitting on a stool by a small fire. The children were top-and-toe in bed. The table had been cleared. Angel’s chair was empty. My heart felt like it was punching itself.

“Where is she?”

Lou half rose. “We tried to stop her, Victoria. We really did.”

“Did she say where she was going?”

Lou and George swapped a look.

“To find your mother,” Lou said.

Each beat of my heart, a thud of pain.

“Is your mother far away?” Miss Malvery asked.

I tried to say the words but my mouth felt too heavy to move.

She was still holding my hand. She squeezed it. “Would you like me to come with you?”

I nodded.

There weren’t so many street lights near our

home. The gas lighters didn't like coming here in case they got robbed. But the public houses were well lit and candles flickered in the windows of the houses. We passed the men queuing for the lodging house and the old women dressed in tattered black who always sat on the benches in Itchy Park. Miss Malvery wanted to know where they slept. I knew that some of them lived in the broken-down sheds crammed between the privies in the back yards. Others slept on the benches in the day and walked the street at night. We walked past the building where Mama used to work. There was just one small window in that room where she and five others made artificial flowers for rich ladies' hats. She had to work quickly as she was only paid for each flower. But each one had to be perfect or else she wouldn't get any money for it. She'd been sent away when the gossip reached the supervisor that Mama was expecting a child. That was my poor little brother who never opened his eyes.

I was the first to see Angel, on the corner of Vallance Road and Fournier Street, leaning against Whitechapel Union Infirmary wall. She was wearing Nanna's bonnet. It was light grey in the gloom, but on bright days the colours seemed

to glow, especially the blue flowers Mama made specially to decorate it.

I ran up to Angel and wrapped her in my arms. She was only wearing a thin dress.

“Here.” Miss Malvery draped her own shawl around Angel’s shoulders. I pulled it tight and pinned it in place.

“Angel?” I didn’t want to say the words that were bubbling up through me. “Mama’s not here any more. Nanna told us. Do you remember?”

The shawl hadn’t made much difference. Angel was shivering so hard I thought she’d fall apart.

“We need to get her into the warmth,” Miss Malvery said. “Would you like some hot chocolate, Angelica?”

“Our brother died.” Angel’s voice almost faded into the night. “Mama said she still saw him when she was sleeping. He’d be alive and smiling at her. She said she just wanted to carry on sleeping. She wouldn’t...”

“She wouldn’t eat or drink,” I said. “She wouldn’t talk to us.”

She’d just lain in bed with her face turned to the wall, her cheeks powdery from the dried tears. In the end, Nanna had brought her here hoping the

doctors could help her. She'd died two weeks later.

"Sorry," Angel whispered. "I should be helping you, but sometimes everything seems so hard. If I wasn't around, it would be easier for you."

"How can you say that? You're my sister! I love you more than the world."

Suddenly her arms were around me too, her face in my hair, like the times we used to snuggle up under the blankets while Mama sang to us.

Miss Malvery's arms circled both of us. "I'm sorry too." She held us closer. "So sorry that you were left alone and had nowhere to go. I've rented a room in Covent Garden, next to Enid and her family. Though it's not much better than your home now."

There'd be no Bernard. And we'd have Miss Malvery.

"If you stay with me tonight," she said, "we can try and find you somewhere more suitable tomorrow."

I whispered, "What do you think, Angel?"

"Yes," she said. "Please."

"Good." Miss Malvery steered us away from the infirmary. "Enid said you sing well, Victoria. I'm a music teacher. Did you know that?"

“No, Miss Malvery.”

She sighed. “There’s no reason why you should know.” She wiped her eyes. “There are so many things that I don’t know too.” She glanced back at the infirmary. “But I think that now is the time for me to find out.”

Olive Christian Malvery (1877–1914) was born in Lahore, now in Pakistan. Her parents were English and Indian. She came to London when she was twenty-three and was shocked by the way poorer women were treated. She made friends with the women, living in the same run-down rooms, working in the same jobs as them and pretending to be homeless so she could experience the workhouse conditions. She wrote about the experience in magazines and books, and campaigned on behalf of the women all her life. When she married, she invited costermongers from Hoxton to be her bridesmaids and a thousand working women as her guests.