

# EIGHTEEN LIVES

DOVE CALDERWOOD



## CHAPTER ONE

*London, England*

*1700s*

MY SISTER'S BREATH rasped in her small frame. I leaned forward, waiting, praying for the rise of her chest. When at last it came, my shoulders slumped, and I finally allowed the air trapped in my lungs to escape. Isabel still lived.

Our parents' hushed voices traveled with the draft from the hall, under Isabel's door. They spoke with the town doctor. I doubted they knew I could hear them. Or perhaps they were so desperate it didn't matter who listened.

"Doctor—" My mother's voice cracked. "Doctor, can she—I mean, will...will my daughter live?"

The old wooden floorboards moaned—the doctor shifting his weight? I barely made out his deep sigh. "Isabel appears to have inflammation of the meninges."

Taking a slow, unsteady breath, Mother asked what the strange phrase meant.

The doctor must have set down his bag, the rattling instruments inside created macabre music. "The cause is not

known, but what the fates bring for this condition is quite dire, especially for one so young.”

Silence smothered the room, save Mother’s hiccupping sobs.

My nostrils flared. With my trembling hand tightened into a fist, my fingernails jabbed my palm.

*No ...*

At last Father spoke in tear-thickened words, piercing that terrible quiet. “Is there anything we can do to ease her suffering?”

“Your presence by her side until the end is the best medicine. Staying close will comfort the child. Let her know you are there, should she cry out to you. I am sorry.”

With that, the doctor’s voice stopped. His shuffling footsteps echoed down the hall, and the door closed behind them, snuffing out any hope for Isabel’s recovery.

Isabel’s decline had happened so fast. Only three days prior, she’d seemed absolutely healthy. The next morning, she rose complaining of a strong pain in her head. By evening, her skin felt blistering hot. One day later, she fell into the deep slumber she now fought.

I brushed strands of damp hair away from my sister’s face. Again, she let out a soft groan.

Her pale grey eyes fluttered open—the first time in what felt like days. I gasped, daring to hope, “Isabel?”

“Anna,” she moaned, looking up at me through droopy eyelids.

“Is the pain severe?” With misty eyes, I asked, “What can I fetch for you?”

I winced as she coughed. How her face shone with a layer of sweat! “...it’s so cold...our quilt... please...”

As I snatched up the quilt from Isabel's desk across the room, a gentle breeze blew, causing the air to chill. The scent of candle-wax wafted throughout the dim room. Through the casement, the dark haze of evening replaced the afternoon sunlight. Upon my return to her side, my sister's skin shone a ghostly white. Her arms seemed thinner than even the day before. Were I to grip them, my slender fingers would fit snugly around the whole of her upper arms like a mourning band.

With the quilt snuggled around her shoulders, I again beseeched our Lord, praying for help. For a moment, I considered calling our parents. But the sight of their youngest in this state, the quilt's colors so bright against her faded pallor... their minds would surely latch onto that image forever.

"Better?" I asked, struggling to hide concern, and guilt at my choice.

"Better." Despite the quilt's aid, Isabel shivered still. "Thank you, Anna," she whimpered, the frailest of smiles lighting her face.

Now, my gaze fell upon the quilt failing to warm my sister. A wave of bittersweet nostalgia swept over me. Sewing felt such a monotonous chore, but Isabel seemed always eager to practice the techniques our mother taught us. She asked every day until I conceded to help her make this silly thing. A breath caught in my chest. In truth, spending time together had made the whole affair much less tortuous.

The room around us blurred with my tears while I ran my fingers over our initials, stitched on the bottom corner of the quilt, a little attempt at being grown in her handiwork. Isabel would make a wonderful seamstress someday, with such an eye for things like that...

Someday.

Yet...the vision of her lying in a cold, dark tomb... gooseflesh crept up my arms. The hairs on my neck prickled and an uncontrolled shiver wracked my body. Suddenly, a frosty burst of air stole up from behind me, brushing at my hair, a glimpse of a grave's chill... We were not alone.

I turned, expecting to see Mother or Father stepping though the door. Instead, a shadow lurked in the room's corner. My entire body trembled as the vague outline of arms reached toward me and disembodied legs stepped forward. This seemed a ghostly presence, its shade not extending across the walls or floor. Instead, it coalesced, and hung, lingering a chair's height above the floorboards.

I spun, searching for the source, but found nothing.

In my peripheral vision, I saw Isabel's eyelids flutter at the change in the room, then slide shut. She sank into the bed, arms limp at her sides.

Instinctively, my hands flew to Isabel's, clutching them tightly.

*No. Not Yet.*

When I turned again, the spectre advanced toward her bedside. My racing pulse caused my command to stutter. "Come no closer!" I demanded, "What are you? What do you seek?"

The shadow drifted closer, gesturing. I recoiled despite myself, betraying the horror swelling in me. Any doubt as to the name of this spirit vanished.

I gazed upon Death.

I launched my body forward, covering Isabel's with mine. My arms wrapped around her petite torso, holding her against

me. She lay quite still. Only a muffled cough escaped her lips. “No! Please. She is but six years old. Spirit, you must be mistaken!”

“It is her fate.”

Once the first tear escaped, others quickly flowed, streaming down my cheeks. “Please, do not do this!”

“It must be done.”

My resolve strengthened. Loosening one of my arms’ grip on Isabel, I swiped at my cheeks, banishing those traitorous tears. “I will not let you take her.”

The shadow lengthened, darkening a larger area around her bed. Silence crowded the room, then a whisper echoed, offering, “One need only be willing to take her place, to change the child’s fate.”

My mouth ran dry. *Exchange my life for Isabel’s?* “Yes.”

“I must warn you—it comes at a price greater than death.” The voice did not barter, but demanded outright, “Do you agree?”

I paid little heed to Death’s warning. In that moment, the only important thing was saving my baby sister. “Aye.”

The shadow morphed again before engulfing me.

EVERYTHING VANISHED. A cold, stinging sensation crept into my fingertips, spreading up my arms little by little. *Whatever is happening, Isabel must not know how excruciating this is. Be brave for her.* Were those thoughts mine or the foul entity’s echoes? I did not stop to consider. With teeth grit, my screams remained locked in my chest. Invisible hands clutched my lungs, laboring my breath. Biting cold continued coursing through my body. Frigid tears drifted down my cheek.

*Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.... Thy kingdom come, thy will be done...Mother, Father, someone—anyone! Please spare me this agony!*

Pain increased tenfold, as if my body were falling apart. An icicle shattered upon a stone beyond the casement. When my mouth opened to cry out, I found I'd become mute; the room remained silent.

What within me could I conjure to escape this consuming pain? Memories? Yes. The day of Isabel's birth. She lay swaddled, tiny, perfect, with beautiful stormy grey eyes—they matched mine exactly. I loved her at once, and promised Mother I would watch over her all her days.

Mercifully, with the beauty of that single memory to carry me, the pain eventually vanished. Yet, I still could not see—darkness engulfed all. Silence threatened to swallow me whole. I tried moving, but a flexible, yet somehow sturdy substance held me captive. No matter how frantically I tried, puncturing it seemed impossible. The temperature felt pleasantly warm, wherever realm I'd been forced into. The temperateness might have offered comfort if my heart weren't speeding with panic.

*Am I encased? What is this thick, murky miasma?*

It appeared to be a brume of some sort, yet my lungs were not screaming for air.

I lay resting, for how long I could not tell. With a jerk, these bonds constricted, pushing me toward a light far too brilliant for my mortal eyes.