

Little & Wade
WATCHTOWER

PROTECTING NEW YORK
CITY'S CHILDREN
SINCE 1831

LITTLE WADE AND WATCHTOWER

ABIGAIL AND THE GREAT GANG TRAP

SEAN MARCH

Little & Wade
WATCHTOWER

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For Naomi

*Dark, yet glittering
A deep lake reflecting night
You are two, vast skies.*

Little & Wade
WATCHTOWER
ABIGAIL & THE GREAT GANG TRAP

New York City
November 17th
1899

“Even in the grave, all is not lost.”
- Edgar Allan Poe

PROLOGUE

*There's a legend for children who are sad and who cry,
About a little boy ghost, dressed in black, who can fly,
About a great, metal giant who stands sky high.
They'll always help you and they'll never lie.*

*They're the perfect team. One strong. One witty.
They know life is hard. Growing up is not pretty,
Especially when you live in New York City,
Whose streets can be dangerous, grimy and gritty.*

*Is there shouting at home? Do your parents drink?
Do you know someone arrested and thrown in the clink?
Is your family so poor that it always needs money?
Is life so much work that it's no longer funny?*

*Did either one of your parents leave?
Did someone close to you die and you continue to grieve?
Are you disfigured, deformed, disabled or sick?
Do you feel like life played some horrible trick?*

*Are your parents working themselves to the bone?
Are you miserable, sad, and feel all alone?
Are you afraid that you'll never live out your dreams?
Are you losing hope? Have you run out of steam?*

*Do you feel threatened with violence or strife?
Do you ever think about ending your life?
Don't lose heart! Don't forget there are people who care!
The ghost and the giant will fight your despair.*

*They will come to you when you are in danger.
They'll show you that there is still kindness in strangers.
They'll show you that, even in your darkest hour,
Deep inside you lies incredible power!*

*There's a legend about heroes only children can see,
About a wise little boy whose advice costs no fee,
About a fire-faced soldier as tall as a tree.
They will never stop fighting to set all children free.*

*So whenever your life is full of pain,
Or things are so grim that you might go insane,
You need help, but to ask will make you feel shame,
Don't ever give up. Just whisper their names.*

*Little Wade and Watchtower have so much to give.
When they appear in your life, get ready to live!*

DARK CITY

“**H**elp me!” Abigail cried out to over a thousand people at once.

Not one of them answered. Soot-blackened buildings loomed all around her. Silent storefronts ignored her cries. She knew that numerous people in their shops and apartments could hear her screaming, but no one did anything to help.

Sprinting down the sidewalk, her red hair flowing behind her like flames, her heart thumping in her chest, Abigail ran for her life. Smog infested the night sky. She saw no stars, no moon. New York surrounded her, a dirty, black city lit only by fire. All along the dark city streets stood tall, thin, metal gaslight lampposts, hissing like snakes. They illuminated the entire area with flickering flames encased in glass. Thick fog drifted inland from the East River, and the fiery lamplights created round pools of smoky light on every corner.

Cracked, uneven cobblestone streets were pocked with slimy, disgusting puddles. Sludgy rivers of curdled water gushed and overflowed in gutters. Clouds of flies buzzed over heaps of stinking trash. Rats squealed at Abigail’s feet. Behind her, she heard loud, violent footsteps swarming over the filthy pavement. She could smell the

men coming for her, their sweaty hands and the alcohol on their hot, rotten breaths.

"Help me! Please!"

Crying out, looking around for help, she found no policemen with their conical caps and brass-buttoned uniforms. At this hour, the only people out and about were homeless vagrants and scavengers, or there were a few gentlemen in top hats and long coats, but Abigail knew they meant no good. They grinned at her malevolently. She recoiled from them and raced away. No matter how many times she turned and doubled back and rounded a corner, it all felt like another confusing twist in some dark, dismal maze.

"Whoa!"

Horses and carriages, speeding up and down the streets like chariots, nearly ran her over, almost crushing her. Stallions, snorting and snarling, *clop-clop-clopped* with their heavy, metal-shod hooves. Rearing up, they brought them down like hammers that struck the pavement and splashed puddles. Large wooden wheels clattered and whirled. Carriages, lit by glowing gas lamps, lurched to abrupt stops. Coachmen, wearing top hats and overcoats, sneered and snapped their whips, forcing Abigail to stumble backward. Horses neighed, surging forward, dragging the carriages into the fog, vanishing.

Where am I? I turned left back there. Should I have done that? Should I turn right? Turn back? Where do I go? I don't remember the way. I don't remember!

Tears streamed down her face. She just wanted to go home.

Why did we move here? Why? Why? Why?

She cried as she turned another corner and fled down another ugly avenue that she could neither remember nor recognize.

"To save money," her father had told her. "We need to save money."

Save money? Abigail thought. Who is going to save me?

Panicking, she heard the men laughing, still storming toward her.

"Someone please help me!"

Nothing.

Abigail's voice echoed up and down the gloomy street. Block after

block, building after building, people slammed their windows and shut their doors with loud snaps and cracks, like whips. Then she heard something that gave her hope. It wasn't a policeman's whistle. It wasn't the loud, boisterous voices of a crowd that could surround and protect her. No, the sound that gave her hope turned out to be a harsh whisper, like a snake's hiss.

"Pssst! Over here!"

Whirling around, Abigail followed the sound with her eyes. *There!* She saw a young boy, about her age, dressed in a finely tailored suit. He seemed to appear suddenly from the shadowy alley.

"I can help you! Follow me!"

Panicking, Abigail followed him. She was not sure why, but she trusted him, even though Father had warned her about boys.

"They're all rotten," he had told her. "They're either members of a gang or they want to be or they're going to be. Be careful, sometimes the gangs use little boys as bait."

Not this boy, she convinced herself as she followed him down a labyrinth of dingy alleys. *He does not look like one of them. He does not look bad at all. Actually, he looks rather elegant.*

Indeed, this mysterious boy wore a long, flowing, black tailcoat, black trousers, and a round-collared, white shirt underneath an ornate vest. To Abigail, he looked clean, wealthy, well-educated, polite, and quite old-fashioned. In fact, this little boy dressed in the kind of suit someone would have worn many, many years ago. That was it! This little boy dressed very much like her grandfather (who was long dead), but that was not the strangest thing about him.

"We're almost there! Hurry!" Moving fast, the boy darted to the left. Abigail followed. She could still hear the Longshadows thundering after her, grunting and snarling, but the boy moved so confidently. He said, "Almost there!" which meant he had a plan.

Thank Heavens! Her heart swelled up, hopeful.

"Come along! Keep up! You can do it!"

Abigail picked up speed, rushing as fast as she could until the muscles in her legs burned. As she sprinted alongside him, she wondered, *Who is he, and what is he doing out here at this time of night?*

Abigail's red hair was a twisty mess, and sweat soaked her brow while the boy's raven hair was perfectly combed and parted, even though he was running right beside her. Come to think of it, the boy did not seem to sweat, nor was he out of breath, even though they were both exerting themselves, but even these facts were not the strangest things about him.

"Just a few more blocks. We can make it."

They turned a corner and stopped briefly.

"Catch your breath. You are quite safe. Please take a moment to compose yourself." The boy even spoke like someone from a much older time, incredibly formal, polished, very mature for his age. Still, even that was not the strangest thing about him.

As they paused under one of the gaslight streetlamps for a brief rest, under that pool of light, Abigail felt just a little bit warmer. Doubling over, panting, trying to catch her breath, Abigail glanced down at the sidewalk and caught a glimpse of the boy's feet.

He wore no shoes, only a pair of long, silken white socks covering his slender feet. Abigail found this extremely odd, of course, but what she thought was even odder was that the boy's socks were completely, pristinely white. How could this be? The boy, just like her, had been running through the grimy alleys of the Lower East Side. Her shoes were filthy, but yet his socks were...pure white? That did not make sense. Nothing about him made sense.

White socks, no shoes...and a suit like grandpa? she wondered. So strange, but neither his shoelessness nor the clean color of his socks was the strangest thing about him.

"Everything will be all right. I promise. My partner and I have successfully conducted ourselves in this manner thousands of times, quite literally. Thousands."

The boy smiled. At that moment, Abigail discovered the absolutely, positively, certifiably strangest thing about him.

There they stood, perfectly still, under the white-hot gaslight, whose flame flickered and crackled like a torch, so Abigail could finally see this young boy's face clearly. He was very handsome. He had pale skin, mysterious eyes, long lashes, and a pleasant,

charming smile. All of the features on his face, his graceful eyebrows, his sharp, sloping nose, his prim, proper mouth, and delicate chin, all seemed to have been drawn with the finest ink pen. At that moment, Abigail noticed that the boy's skin looked slightly...blue?

"Your partner? Who are you? Where are we going?" Abigail asked between gulps of air. Then she whipped around when five Longshadows appeared around the corner, under another streetlamp, under their own pool of light. Spotting her, they pointed.

"No time! Follow me!"

Even though her muscles burned from running and her chest felt tight from breathing too hard, Abigail broke into a sprint again but slower this time. Behind her, she could hear the Longshadows stampeding after her. She could hear them coughing, wheezing, snorting. They were tired too, but she could hear the rage in their breaths.

"This way!" the young, slightly blue boy with white socks yelled as he raced down the dimly lit street. Abigail quickly glanced behind her at the Longshadows gaining on them both. She hoped this boy knew what he was doing.

"Head for that light!" The boy pointed. Abigail spotted it, one lonely gaslight lamppost standing in front of the entrance to a cavernous alley. Anxious, she questioned the boy's strategy.

This makes no sense. All of the streetlamps were built in straight lines, following the gas pipes underground. Father taught me that. What's this one doing all the way out here, by itself? Also, wouldn't heading for something so bright make it easier for us to be found?

Finally, the glare from the gaslight made the alley look even more menacing, like a black mouth ready to swallow her up. Abigail worried about all of these things, but she still followed the boy. She trusted him; she had to trust him. The boy stopped when they reached the lamp. He pointed into the shadows.

"In there!"

Stumbling, Abigail entered the alley, delving deeper and deeper into darkness.

"We're here!" He sounded so confident, triumphant even, but she

could not see why. They had sprinted into a dingy, dirty alleyway tucked between two squat, iron-grey buildings. *This is safe? How?*

Abigail stopped and considered retracing her steps back the way that she had come. The only illumination emanated from the single gaslight. Everything else was plunged into blackness, and from where she stood in the alley, the lone streetlamp now seemed as if it were miles away.

“Go in, as far as you can. All the way!” The boy’s voice now seemed to echo all around her. Following the sound, Abigail ran and ran and ran until she slammed into something rock hard. Clutching her nose and face, crying out in pain, Abigail stumbled backward. She felt blood on her palm, and she tasted her split lip. She reached out and touched a solid wall of rough brick and stone.

“It’s a dead end. What do we do?” Abigail asked but received no answer. “Where did you go?”

The boy had disappeared.

Oh no! Abigail panicked. Father was right. This boy was one of them. His clothes were a costume...his hair...everything. He’s led me into a trap. He baited me, and I fell for it. I’m going to die. This is it. I’m going to die.

Abigail retreated as far back into the alley as she could and tucked herself into a tight little ball. From her vantage point, she could see the single gaslight streetlamp standing there, hissing, blasting out light in all directions. She wished it would go away, or turn off, or even fade just a little, but the fiery radiance just seemed to keep spreading deeper into the alley. The fire’s orange glow seemed to crawl toward her, like lava.

Please, don’t see me. Please, don’t see me. Please.

Trembling and exhausted from running, she panted. Her deep breaths stirred up all her emotions, and she started to cry. Then her eyes sprang open.

Wait! she told herself. *If the boy disappeared, there must be a secret way out.*

She quickly checked everywhere for a hatch, a secret door, a ladder. There must be something.

Nothing.

Devastated, tears welling up in her eyes, she whispered, "Please. Please don't let me die." She tried to summon up some courage, but then her skin crawled when the sidewalk shook. Five sets of footsteps, like the galloping of horses, thundered toward her location. She froze. Crouching in the dark, terrified, Abigail fixed her eyes on the single streetlamp at the edge of the alley. She whimpered in fear when five brutal, ugly men appeared in the light, spreading their shadows across the walls of the buildings like black slime. Abigail held her breath. The alley measured about thirty feet deep. If she kept perfectly still and silent, they might just keep going, a slim chance, but possible. "Please," she prayed.

The men all panted, coughed, and wheezed. They leaned against the lamppost to take a rest. The Longshadows all dressed the same. All the men wore the same scuffed up, cheap leather shoes, the same tall hats, and the same scrappy, dirty, black suits with faded vests. When they stood together, clustered tight, they all seemed to meld together into the same monstrous black mass. Their faces, however, were all different shapes and sizes, all hideous and terrifying. Abigail did not know their real names, but in her mind, she gave them all nicknames to match their appearances.

The first, Growler, the oldest, had wolfish grey hair and a matching beard, cold blue eyes, sharp white teeth, and powerful, sharp-nailed hands. Abigail spied the butt of a heavy pistol and the bone handle of a long hunting knife tucked under his jacket.

The second, Thumbsucker, stood very tall and lanky, with oversized feet and hands, chubby fingers and swollen, blunt thumbs. His wild, crazy, bulging eyes were too big for his skull, and his buck teeth were too big for his mouth. He giggled and laughed at things even when they were definitely not funny. Clumsy, oafish, stupid, and immature but immensely strong, Thumbsucker struck Abigail as the kind of person who liked to "play." Unfortunately, while "playing," he could easily, accidentally poke out one of your eyes, dislocate your shoulder or break your arm and simply shrug and say "oops." To crush skulls and bash in people's brains, he carried a long, blunt

wooden club horribly decorated with chips, scratches, notches, cracks, and bloodstains.

The third, Yellowteeth, the stinkiest and dirtiest, had obviously not bathed in weeks. He reeked of filth, and food stuck in his teeth. When he smiled, even in the dim light, Abigail recoiled at the sight of his ugly, stained teeth, full of cavities and cracks. Yellowteeth carried a pistol under his jacket as well. Clenching his jaws like an angry dog, Yellowteeth slipped a pair of brass knuckles over his hands and flexed his fingers.

The fourth, Spitball, a thin man, the fastest and sneakiest, blinked his sly, cruel eyes and slunk around like a snake. From his mouth, he dribbled and drooled juicy droplets of white spittle all over his chin as if it were venom. He reeked of too much alcohol, which he sipped from a silver flask that he pulled from his jacket. Giggling, Spitball whipped out a straight razor, a long, sleek, sharp silver blade that he could use to slit open a warm throat.

Finally, in the center stood their leader, who frightened Abigail most of all. A vile, older man, fat and grotesque, like a wild boar, Pighead snarled and grunted. Barely visible beneath his hat, Pighead's scalp bristled with tufts of hair. He had a nose like a hog's snout, stunted and smushed up against his face, with snotty, snorting nostrils. Pighead's swollen hands were covered in ugly, hairy bumps; his fingers ended in long, dirty nails. His plump belly bulged out, and warts covered his fleshy face. Too fat and heavy for his stubby legs, Pighead limped. His forehead overflowed with sweat. Panting, he inflated and deflated like a balloon. He smelled awful, like dirty laundry.

The five Longshadows, catching their breath, chuckled.

"Why you gotta make us run?" Spitball heaved. Then all of the men quieted down as Pighead wiped his sweaty, slimy brow with a dirty handkerchief and stepped forward.

He stared into the alley and locked eyes with Abigail. "You're a swift one." Pighead wriggled his bumpy fingers. Then his evil eyes glinted, "But it's over now."

Abigail backed up against the wall. With no way out, the alley

may as well have been a pit. Pighead smiled maliciously. Instantly, the five Longshadows clumped together, side by side, and built a wall with their sweaty bodies. They began to close in on her, sealing the alley off from the rest of the world. Stalking toward Abigail, they blocked the streetlamp's fire like an eclipse. Abigail felt even more enshrouded than before. Sinking down to the ground, Abigail could not contain herself. Tears flowed down her face. The five men crowded around her.

"Please! Somebody help me!"

"Nobody's coming." Pighead limped toward her, flexing his ugly hands. "Nobody cares."

Crying, Abigail pitifully slapped Spitball's hand away when he poked and prodded at her. All around her, the five Longshadows laughed at her and jeered.

"Aw, you want your daddy to save you?" Pighead grinned.

On reflex, she nodded, which only made them laugh more.

"Awwww!" Yellowteeth chuckled. He reached for her.

"Don't touch me!"

In response, he raised one of his brass-knuckled fists in front of her face. "Behave yourself!" Yellowteeth hissed. His putrid breath, stinking like beer and vomit, forced her to retch. Disgusted, Abigail raised both of her arms to protect herself and covered her nose and mouth.

Pighead pursed his lips and jammed two of his fat fingers into his mouth and then blew, letting out a high-pitched whistle. It nearly blew out Abigail's hearing. Wincing, she covered her ears with her hands. A second later, from a short distance away, another high-pitched whistle responded. Then five more Longshadows, wearing similar dark suits and hats, appeared at the mouth of the alley. Abigail shivered. The second wave of black-clad gangsters flowed toward her like an oil spill. They cornered her. She felt the air getting sucked out of the alley, leaving barely enough for her to breathe.

The leader of this second pack of Longshadows, who Abigail nicknamed One-Eye (because he wore an eyepatch over his scarred face), saluted Pighead and then joined him. Now there were ten

members of the gang, lit from behind by the single gaslight, creating sinister silhouettes. The tallest of One-Eye's group, a mammoth man she nicknamed Big Chin, carried a bulky, burlap sack that writhed and wriggled around, making muffled noises.

"Didn't expect you to be so close by." Pighead sounded a little surprised. He gestured to Big Chin's bag. "Who did you snatch?"

"Shoeshine boy," One-Eye spat. "We spotted him two blocks from here. Little urchin seemed healthy enough. Figured we'd scoop him up for the Boss."

Pighead's eyes narrowed suspiciously. "What shoeshine boy? We didn't see anything."

"We followed him straight here. You didn't spot him?"

"No one got past us," Growler growled.

"Guess you're losing your touch. We tracked him running this way, bagged him up." Then One-Eye leaned forward to get a good look at Abigail. "Who's she?"

Abigail stared straight at him and whispered, "Please, don't let him take me." For a brief moment, she detected in One-Eye's face a flash of real remorse. Something told her he probably raised children of his own. He briefly hesitated, then he sighed bitterly.

"I'm sorry, little girl," One-Eye whispered. "There's nothing I can do for you."

Abigail's heart sank. Tears streamed down her face. In response, the men all laughed out loud, barking like a pack of dogs. Spitball spat, and a clump of phlegm and saliva plopped in front of her. Abigail recoiled from it as if flinching from acid. Her eyes searched all of the surrounding buildings. There were dozens of windows and fire escapes with iron ladders and stairways, but they were too high up for her to reach. She felt like an animal trapped in a cage.

"*Help me! Somebody, please help me!*" Abigail exclaimed.

Then the burlap sack suddenly sprang to life, and the little boy trapped inside began to shout as well. "*Help me! Please help me!*"

"Shut up!" Big Chin grunted and dropped the bag onto the cold, stone ground with a loud *whoomph!* The little boy's voice cut off.

"Please! Help! Help!" Abigail desperately hollered. Her voice

echoed throughout the alley, reverberating up the walls of brick, stone masonry, and metal that sealed her in like a prison. Only one window stood open. A faint, flickering candle stood on the sill, illuminating the smeared glass. Abigail called up to it expectantly, hoping for a sign.

“Please!”

Then the candle winked out, and the window’s shutters slammed shut with a loud crack that echoed throughout the alley until it faded away, leaving only a hopeless, dead silence.

“She’s got a tough spirit, this one!” Pighead boasted.

All ten of the Longshadows, who had quieted down to let her scream, waited for a moment, then burst out laughing. Abigail frantically looked everywhere for help, but nothing happened. No one answered. All of the windows were closed, cold, and indifferent. Staring up at the starless sky, Abigail slid down the wall, collapsing to the ground. She clasped her hands together, and she prayed.

“That’s enough of this nonsense,” Pighead snorted. “Come along, girl!”

“No,” Abigail spoke quietly, but firmly, staring straight up at Pighead’s awful, ugly face.

“What did you say?” Pighead sucked in his bloated, fat cheeks, surprised.

“I won’t let you take me alive. There’s nothing I can do. There’s nowhere I can go. There’s no one to help me. My life is over, so you may as well end it now. It will only be worse if I go with you.”

All of the Longshadows grunted in confusion. They certainly had not seen that coming. Surprised, the Longshadows stepped back and argued among themselves.

“Now what?”

“What do we do?”

“We can’t just kill her!”

“She won’t come quietly.”

“Then knock her out!”

While they bickered, Abigail sat back and wiped her tears away. She was done crying, screaming, asking for help, and running. Now,

she recollected all of the happiest moments of her life. She recalled walking in Central Park with her father, holding his hand, reaching her other hand out to touch all of the flowers, and remembered running her hands over every wooden object that her father ever carved for her. She pictured all of the shelves stuffed with her favorite books. Their printed words echoed in her mind, their crisp pages crackled against her fingertips, and the smell of dusty paper and dry ink tickled her nose. She remembered the taste of her mother's cooking and felt her mother's warm cheeks against her lips. Abigail's fingers tingled as she recalled racing them through her mother's red hair, and then she let out a peaceful sigh. *I'll be with Mama soon. I've lived a good life, and now it's come to an end.* Resigned, Abigail took one last look around the alley, the last place she would ever see.

Wait, what was that?

Narrowing her eyes, Abigail rose to her feet because she spied something at the edge of the alley. Pighead quickly slapped her across the face with his rough, sweaty hand. Abigail fell backward, clutching her mouth.

"You behave!" Pighead barked. "Now someone knock this brat out, and let's be off!"

The ten men loomed over her. Lit from behind by the fiery light at the mouth of the alley, they cast ten long shadows over Abigail. She could smell the beer and food on their breath and taste her own blood in her mouth. *There!* She caught it again in the corner of her eye.

Something very strange happened, something that neither Growler, nor Spitball, nor Pighead, nor Yellowteeth, nor Thumb-sucker, nor One-Eye, nor Big Chin, nor the rest of their crew noticed, but Abigail did. Every few seconds, she looked past these awful men, all the way down to the alley's entrance, where the gaslight stood there shining like a lonely star in a night sky. She hoped to see someone, anyone, a kind passerby, or perhaps even a Metropolitan policeman, cross into the shining pool of light. Then she could cry out, and someone could come and save her.

No one came, but she did see something quite different.

Peering past the men, at the mouth of the alley and the single streetlamp, Abigail, unfortunately, did not see anyone step into the light. Instead, she saw the lamppost at the edge of the alley...move?

Did I just see that? I did!

She swore that the lamp had moved. She swore that it turned to look directly at her.

LAUGHTER AND FIRE

“I’ll knock her out,” Thumbsucker volunteered.
“No! Not you! You’ll break her in half.”
“Boss doesn’t want her damaged.”

It happened again. Thumbsucker stepped between Abigail and the streetlamp for a moment, blocking her view. When he shifted position, she could see it again. The lamppost moved at least five feet closer! Before, it had been standing on the edge of the sidewalk, right near the street. Now it stood at the mouth of the alley. The brightness and angle of the illumination had changed, but the Longshadows seemed not to notice.

“We need a Blackjack. That’ll do it.”

“Anyone got a Blackjack?”

“Who’s got a Blackjack?”

“Blackjack?”

“Nobody brought a Blackjack?”

“I didn’t. Did you?”

“Why would I carry one? I kill people. You can’t kill people with a Blackjack.”

“That’s the point. That’s why we need one.”

“Here, I’ve got a dang Blackjack.”

One Eye pulled out a soft pouch with a lump of metal in it that could knock someone out with one, blunt strike: a Blackjack.

“All right, get on with it. Knock the brat out. Let’s move.”

“No.” Abigail shook her head. “No. *No!*”

One Eye seized her by the wrist. “I’m sorry, girl.”

“Hey, where did all of this fog come from?”

Distracted by the moving lamp, Abigail turned her attention back to the alley, which had filled up with a dense, silvery mist. It began as just a few wisps of white vapor around her hands and feet and curling around the fire escapes. Quickly, it spread everywhere, all around them, tangling them all up like a spider’s web, obscuring everyone’s sight.

“Something’s off,” One Eye sounded worried.

“It’s just fog from the river, from the wharf! It’s nothing,” Pighead blurted out. He sounded nervous.

“I’ve never seen it like this,” Growler warned them. He pulled out his hunting knife, sensing something.

Abigail sensed it, too...something in the air, something hiding, watching, surrounding them. Then they all heard rustling coming from the burlap sack that Big Chin had slammed down onto the ground, the bag that contained the shoeshine boy. Before, the bag had been screaming and writhing around in the man’s arms. From the moment it hit the ground, it had gone silent.

The bag started to wriggle on the ground like a worm. Startled, One Eye released Abigail. Then the sack sat up and started to laugh, a cruel, mocking laugh, the laugh of a child about to play a nasty prank.

“*Hahahahahahahahahahaha!*”

Abigail could perceive the outline of the boy’s face and his wide-open mouth, even through the sack.

“*Hahahahahahahahahahaha!*”

“*Shut up!*” One Eye yelled at him.

The fog thickened.

The flame flickered.

“*Hahahahahahahahahahaha!*”

"I said *shut up!*" One Eye roared and then gestured to Big Chin, who drew back his fist and prepared to smash the shoeshine boy across his face.

Abigail screamed, "*No! Don't!*"

Just as Big Chin punched the burlap sack, it completely disappeared.

Everybody froze.

"Did you all see that?" One Eye spoke first.

"What?" Abigail managed to whisper.

"Jeez." Spitball's eyes sprung open.

Growler did not say anything. Sniffing, clutching his hunting knife, he glanced around the alley like he was about to be attacked.

"Wha...?" Yellowteeth could barely form words.

Pighead glanced around. "Stand fast."

One Eye lunged forward and thrust his hands down to the ground. Feeling around the fog-blanketed stone floor of the alley, he picked up an empty burlap sack and felt inside. The streetlamp flickered.

"We followed the boy," One Eye spoke up, holding up the empty burlap sack. "We ran him down. We picked him up...wait. You!" He gestured to Big Chin. "You grabbed the boy, picked him up, and threw him in this bag?"

"Yup," Big Chin answered with his deep voice.

"When you carried it, this bag, did it feel heavy or light?"

Shrugging, Big Chin simply grunted. "Everything feels light to me."

"What's happening?" Thumbsucker spoke for everyone.

"We're leaving!" Pighead roared, trying to instill order. "Did you hear me?" Pighead insisted. "It's a trick. The fog, the flickering light... the boy slipped out and got away. Seize the girl. *Now!*"

In the dancing light of the fire, One Eye gazed fearfully at Abigail. All color drained from his face.

"I know what's happening. It's them. It's *them!* They've come for *her!*"

"Me?" Abigail shook her head, not understanding. All around her,

the fog closed around all of them like fingers. The Longshadows murmured, frightened. They readied their weapons. Abigail, alarmed and even more confused, backed away slowly.

“We have to let her go!” One Eye warned Pighead. “Leave her!”

“No! No! She’s *mine!*” Pighead roared, reached out, and seized Abigail by the arm.

“No! Don’t!” Abigail protested, but just as Pighead pulled Abigail toward him, the glow from the lamppost abruptly winked out and vanished, plunging the foggy alley into darkness.

“They’re here,” One Eye whispered.

“Stand fast. Strike matches! Ignite a torch!” Growler commanded.

“I can’t see nothin’,” Spitball complained.

“Shut up, all of you! Let’s feel our way out,” Pighead snorted.

Then Abigail heard a sound.

They *all* heard it, whirring, clicking, clanking, hissing, knocking, popping, grinding, the sounds of some mechanism powering up. Abigail flinched at the screeching clamor of steel bending and gears cranking. Abigail recognized the noise, very similar to one of the hulking machines her father worked on in the factory, but she sensed that there was something more. It sounded like something waking up and coming alive.

Peering into the misty darkness, Abigail swore she could see something enormous lurking in the black. *There!* She could barely make it out. High up, at least twelve feet off the ground, a low flame lit up. A flickering red and blue dot appeared in the black as if an angry cyclops had opened its single, piercing eye. Deep, monstrous breathing, metallic and hollow, like someone sucking air through a metal tube, resonated menacingly throughout the alley and chilled everyone to the bone. Hovering in midair, the red and blue dot, the burning eye, floated forward. As it did, heavy, thudding, booming footsteps shook the ground.

Yellowteeth screamed. Something yanked him deep into the fog, and he vanished. Terrified, Abigail broke away from the Longshadows and scampered backward until she felt the cold, wet brick and stone wall against her back. Frozen in fear, she did not move.

Thumbsucker, roaring like an ogre, rushed toward the flickering red and blue eye and swung his hefty piece of wood. He struck something with a loud *crack*, and the club split and splintered against metal. “Muh...muh...monster?” Thumbsucker managed to squeeze out of his clumsy mouth before something punched him in the face, sending him flying backward. His skull knocked against the wall, and several of his bones cracked. Abigail cringed as Thumbsucker exhaled before falling unconscious and slumping to the ground.

“*What’s happening?*” Pighead squealed.

“*We have to get out of here!*” One Eye called out.

Whoosh!

With a roaring rush, the gaslight flame reappeared, this time standing in the dead center of the alley.

“*What the heck is that?*” Spitball yelled.

“*Run!*”

Something lashed out and attacked, and the Longshadows all started screaming. All around Abigail, the dense fog obscured her sight. Lit up by the firelight, the murky, swirling mist glowed bright gold, orange, and red. Inside the luminous cloud, the remaining eight Longshadows were nothing but tiny silhouettes getting thrashed by something gigantic and powerful. Abigail saw what resembled a miniature sun floating and darting through the fog. Every time the fireball moved, another thudding impact detonated in the alley. Peering closer, she swore she saw an incredibly tall, thin man reach out with incredibly long arms and brutally assault the Longshadows. It was like watching a scarecrow slaughter squawking black birds.

“*Shoot it!*”

Bang! Bang! Two pistol shots flashed and cracked the air like thunderclaps. Two loud *clangs* and then a pair of *pew pew* sounds reverberated throughout the alley as two bullets ricocheted and bounced harmlessly against the walls, sparking against the brick and stone. Abigail jumped at a loud swatting sound, followed by a loud crack.

“*My hand!*” Pighead screamed in agony.

Abigail then turned just in time to spot a smoking pistol fly past her head and crash against the wall. Someone, or something, had

slapped the weapon clean out of Pighead's grip. Petrified, Abigail shut her eyes tight. Her hands clasped in prayer, Abigail did not see what happened next, but she could hear, smell, feel everything. She felt an overwhelming source of heat against her skin, and she flinched with every impact, every agonizing cry.

"*Too strong!*" Big Chin, his jaw broken, blood filling his mouth, whimpered just before something knocked him out with a crushing impact.

"*Run! Run!*" Abigail heard boots scuttling away from her, Longshadows trying to flee, but then she felt two huge, booming footsteps chase after them. Abigail heard men whimper, and then metal gears grind and groan. Then she flinched at a deafening, clamping sound, like a claw pinching flesh and bone.

"*It's got me! It's got me! Aaaaahhh!*"

Wailing men flew through the air and collided against the walls of the alley. Their pathetic cries stopped with loud *whumps!*

"*Fight!*" Growler roared. "*Fight!*"

"*Kill it!*" Pighead squealed.

"*Stab it! Stab it!*"

"*It's too strong!*"

Even though Abigail covered her ears, the battle sounded as if she were inside a burning storm. Something titanic rumbled and roared like thunder as it moved through the alley. Her ears took in so many horrific sounds. Ribs and skulls cracked against metal. Metal clashed and clanged with even stronger metal, and Abigail felt drops of blood and sweat fling themselves against the walls and splatter like rain.

"*Help me!*"

"*Aaaaaahhhh!*"

She yelped as another man flew through the air and crashed against the fire escapes, which loomed over ten feet above the alley.

"*Aaaaaaaaahhhh!*" another one of the Longshadows screamed.

Snap! Another bone broke.

Through it all, Abigail, even covering her ears, could not block out the whirring, clicking, hissing, clanking, stomping, thudding, punching, and screaming, so much screaming. Then, after a few

more *whumps* and *slaps* and *crunches* and *yelps* and *whimpers*, the alley fell quiet. The wispy fog stood perfectly still, like a web that seemed to snatch up all of the sounds and clutch them tightly.

Silence.

Complete silence.

Abigail slowly, nervously, opened her eyes. Looking around, her mouth dropped open. The fog gently wafted and lingered in the alley, and the golden gleam from the gaslight, blurry but still bright, hovered in place. Because of the glow, the silvery vapor did not feel like an icy, chilly mist. Instead, it felt warm, like steam. The whirring, hissing, clanking slowed and quieted down. Abigail heard the metallic breathing again. Peering through the haze, Abigail could not detect any of the men.

“*Gah!*” A trembling hand reached out.

Abigail flinched. Pighead crawled out of the fog toward her. His crushed hat lay next to him, so Abigail could see the top of his scalp, which was covered in chunky warts and thin, receding hair. His lumpy nose had burst open, and it gushed blood. He spat out two of his teeth from his swollen, bruised mouth. His bloated cheeks dripped blood, and his vile lips were split open. One of his eyes, horribly bruised, puffed up. Something had fractured his right arm. Folded backward, his bashed limb twitched at his side like a broken wing. The man she called Pighead, who once loomed over her like a terrible monster, now seemed like nothing more than a crushed bug.

“Gah...guh...bleh...” he uttered as he painfully inched toward her, reaching out with his shattered, left hand. Two of his fingers had been snapped and bent backward, and his mangled thumb swelled up bright red.

“...I’m...sorry.”

Obscured by the fog, the golden light floated toward Pighead. As the shining beacon moved forward, the clicking and whirring grew louder and heavy footsteps thudded against stone. Pighead turned and faced the light, which illuminated his panicked, battered face. Then something from inside the mist grabbed Pighead’s outstretched leg.

“No...No!” he cried and whimpered.

Something snatched him back into the fog with such force that he practically flew off the ground, vanishing back into the murky clouds. Peering into the smoky haze, Abigail could make out the silhouette of an incredibly tall, thin man, wearing a top hat. This mysterious figure loomed over Pighead, who cowered on the ground and feebly held up his one functioning arm to defend himself.

“We...were...just doin’ what we were told!”

The giant with the top hat stood over the criminal. Abigail narrowed her eyes. *Strange, the blaze seems to be radiating from...the tall man’s...face?* Abigail could not perceive anything clearly, but the light illuminated enough for her to see this gigantic figure raise his arm and bring it down like a hammer on Pighead’s ugly, bulbous face.

“No...”

Whump!

Pighead’s whole body snapped back, and his skull cracked against the stony ground. One last gasp escaped from his body. Then the dark giant with the top hat and the glowing face turned toward Abigail.

“Oh, no.”

The floating flame moved forward, whirring, clicking, hissing, grinding, and clanking. The towering, shadowy figure stomped toward Abigail, and the leaden footsteps crushed hats, knives, pistols, even stones beneath them.

“Don’t hurt me,” Abigail clasped her hands in prayer and shut her eyes. “Please, don’t hurt me.”

“Don’t worry,” someone whispered in her ear.

“*Ahh!*” she screamed. Startled, her eyes sprang open.

Right next to her, there he was. The mysterious, stylishly dressed, little, slightly blue boy stood there again.

“He’s not going to hurt you. He’s never hurt a child in his whole, entire life, and he’s been around for quite some time.”

Immediately, Abigail chastised him. “You? Where did you go? You led me into this?”

“Of course, I led you into this,” the little, slightly blue boy stated matter-of-factly. “We engineered a trap for them.”

“You used me as bait?” Abigail fumed.

“You were not the bait,” the little, slightly blue boy spoke gently, trying to mollify her. “You were the spring, and you played your part brilliantly. Thanks to you, ten gangsters will never torment another child again, or at least not for several years. Well done.”

The boy’s compliment, combined with his refined, exquisite manners, made Abigail feel better for a brief moment. Nevertheless, she was, understandably, very upset, and she quickly puffed up and reddened again.

“Why? Why did you leave me?”

“Please, forgive my absence. We needed the Longshadows to think that you were alone, and for that ruse to work, *you* needed to believe it, too. Besides, I had to concentrate on the bag illusion, which proved to be quite intricate and involved. Simultaneously, the situation necessitated that I produce a convincing fog as well,” the little, slightly blue boy apologized. “Terribly sorry, but as you can see...it all worked out quite swimmingly.”

Abigail noticed that the fog disappeared just as quickly as it had materialized, and her vision was no longer obscured. All ten Longshadows lay busted, bent, bashed, bruised, beaten, and bloodily unconscious. These nasty, despicable men were all lying flopped on the ground, contorted in strange poses like badly treated dolls that had been torn up and thrown away. Their chests rising and falling, they were not dead, but when they woke up they would wish that they were. Abigail could see all of this, not only because the fog had lifted, but also because of the golden glow that radiated from a flickering fire. When she beheld the true source of the light, Abigail, gazing upward, stepped back in awe.

“Go on, please introduce yourself to the young lady.”

Someone, or something, very tall and very heavy, stepped right in front of Abigail with another *boom*. Immediately, Abigail marveled at her mysterious rescuer’s shoes, which were finely crafted, leather, with silver buckles, the kind her father could never afford. They were

a gentleman's shoes, sturdy, but very fashionable, a little scuffed now from the battle, but nevertheless of superb quality. Intrigued, Abigail listened to the constant whirring, clicking, clanking, hissing, knocking, popping, grinding noises, the sounds of a machine. She felt warmth on her face, like daylight. Using her hand to partially shield her sight, as if blocking out the sun, Abigail stared up at the immense man standing before her.

She estimated he stood at least ten feet tall, no wait, more than that, twelve feet. Even though quite tall and thin, he had wide shoulders, a broad chest, and a formidable pair of long, gangly arms. He wore a distinguished suit, very finely tailored, with a brocade vest decorated with dozens of finely sewn silver gears. Unfortunately, this stylish outfit had suffered several rips and slashes from the gang's bullets and blades. Through these holes, Abigail perceived what could only be described as polished metal skin. *Polished metal skin?*

This Herculean man wore fine leather gloves over his brawny hands. His fingers flexed open and closed, squeaking like hinges. Abigail finally detected the source of the mechanical whirring, clicking, clanking, hissing, knocking, popping, grinding: the giant's limbs and joints. Abigail became confused. *Is this a man or a machine?* His chest rose and fell as if he were breathing.

Who is he? What is he? she thought. Questions flooded her mind. *Does he wear armor beneath his suit? Have I been rescued by a Medieval knight? Wait, why would a knight be dressed in a suit? Might he be wearing a helmet? I better get a look at his face.* She adjusted her gaze up, up, up. This man was so tall! Craning her neck, Abigail elevated her sight all the way past his shoulders, above his neck...and she gasped.

His face was...the top of a lamppost?

Indeed, this colossal steel Goliath had no eyes, no nose, no mouth, no cheeks, no chin. Instead, four panes of glass contained a flickering gas lamp that radiated a gorgeous, incendiary light and spread a glowing warmth. Fire was the massive man's only facial feature. Abigail found this mysterious, metallic giant's head to be entirely indistinguishable from the tops of the gaslights that lined the

city streets and provided luminosity and heat. For Abigail, who gazed up at him in absolute wonder, this humanoid mechanism had a face like a star. The flame glittered, glinted, and shimmered through the glass. His chest did indeed rise and fall like someone breathing, and with every breath, his fiery face flickered and flashed.

Gas, Abigail observed. He's powered by...gas.

Abigail could not see the very top of this strange being's wondrously odd head because he wore an oversized, black top hat, the most finely crafted she had ever seen. Then, this fire-faced, unusual individual reached up to the brim of his hat and saluted Abigail as a gentleman would. Apparently, this magnificent, massive, mechanical man had manners.

The little, slightly blue boy then bowed gracefully toward Abigail. "Pleased to make your acquaintance. Allow us to introduce ourselves. I'm Little Wade," he gestured to his enormous, whirring, hissing, clanking companion, "...and this is Watchtower."