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Opening extract from
Runaway

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CHAPTER ONE

‘We’ll be safe here, Charlie,’ my father said as he shut the thin door of the new lodgings behind us. He put down our heavy trunk on the worn, creaking boards and rubbed his hands together to get the circulation going again.

I looked around the room with a sick rush of disappointment. We’d moved so many times in the last few weeks, giving a different name to each new landlord. Each time we moved, it was worse. Each room was shabbier and more run-down than the last. This one had been whitewashed once, but the grubby walls bore the traces of many previous occupants and there was a pile of refuse in one corner. The meagre furnishings were battered and dirty. The stairwell stank of cabbage, latrines, and poverty. Many desperate families were crowded into similar cramped rooms in the building. I could smell hopelessness mingling with the other odours. I could never have believed we’d end up somewhere like this.

I was increasingly concerned for my father’s well-being. First my mother had died of that dreadful sickness. Then we’d left the Americas to return to England, where I knew not a soul. My brother, to my great distress, had chosen to stay the other side of the ocean. And now my father worsened day by day . . . But it wouldn’t do to say

so. 'That's good, father,' I said instead. 'I hope this move will give you some peace of mind.'

He embraced me and kissed me on each cheek by way of reply. 'You're such a good girl, Charlotte,' he said warmly. 'Your mother would be proud of you, God rest her soul. I'm so sorry to put you through this. Perhaps we made a mistake leaving America. You think we did, don't you?'

I sighed. 'I miss our friends,' I agreed. 'And I know we didn't live in luxury there, but this . . .' I looked around the sordid lodging with distaste.

'I know, I know.' My father passed one hand over his face, rubbing his greying stubble. His once upright figure had become a little stooped of late and his former military neatness was sadly compromised.

'But this is temporary. I felt certain I was bettering us by returning to England. I had good reason for believing that, Charlotte. I still do! One day soon, you will see.'

My father began exploring the room, hunting for a loose floorboard. He found one beside the battered closet and concealed his papers there. Once he'd had valuables to hide too, but if there was anything left, I didn't know about it.

A sparkle came into father's eyes as he straightened up; a faint reminder of his former, cheerful self. I felt a surge of affection for him. Such a dear, loving father he'd always been to my brother and me.

'Here you are, my dear,' he said, delving two fingers into his coat and pressing a coin into my hand. 'Take this and go and find us a hot pie while I unpack. We must celebrate our new abode in style!'

I smiled back. Our pleasures were few nowadays and my father's joys were rare. I was more than willing to celebrate, however modestly. Standing on tiptoe, I kissed his thin cheek. 'Why don't you lie down and rest instead of unpacking?' I suggested.

'I *am* a little tired,' he admitted with a small sigh.

I hunted in my luggage for a brush and ran it through my long brown hair, which had been tangled by the wind earlier. My gown was patched and shabby, but I shook out my petticoats so they fell more neatly. I picked up the coin again and blew father a kiss. Closing the door carefully behind me, I ran down the creaking stairs.

The street was dusty and full of refuse. The stench was appalling. There could be no greater contrast between the poor quarters of London, teeming with ragged humanity and filth, and the places I had grown up, the open spaces of Newfoundland and Nova Scotia, where my father had served in a private company of the English Army. The land there was sparsely settled and the air crisp and clean. Here the air was rank with foul vapours.

My search for a pie shop led me to busier streets where horses, wagons, street sellers, and pedestrians thronged the thoroughfares. The rumble of wheels on cobbles, the clatter of hooves, the tramp of boots, and loud voices created a bewildering hubbub. I was anxious about becoming lost; London was a vast maze to me.

The sharp crack of a whip cut through the general noise. Startled, I turned. An elderly, rather gaunt bay horse was straining between the shafts of a cart. The muscles were standing out on his neck as he threw his weight into the collar. A searing memory tore

through me as I saw the horse. I'd been grieved to leave my own beloved bay mare behind in America. This horse was quite different, but the colouring reminded me of her nonetheless. The lash fell viciously again, this time drawing blood from the horse's shoulder. He snorted in pain and fright and redoubled his efforts, straining obediently until his eyes bulged, but the cart didn't move an inch.

'Get up, you lazy creature!' shouted the driver, raising his arm once more.

'Stop! Stop!' I cried, rushing forward. 'Try looking, before you lash your horse! Your wheel is jammed!' I ran out into the road and placed myself in front of the maltreated beast, putting a hand on his bridle. The man could not drive his horse forward over me, so lowered his whip arm and began shouting at me.

'The wheel of your cart is jammed between two stones,' I shouted over his obscenities. 'You need to back up, not try to force your poor beast forward!'

Several other passers-by had also stopped. A buxom woman with a basket had spotted the jammed wheel too and was crying shame on the driver. 'Don't beat the poor, defenceless beast for somethin' that's none o' his fault!' she shouted.

By the time three or four people had joined the fray, the driver finally stopped swearing long enough to take a look. As he climbed down to examine the wheel, I soothed his horse by stroking his dark, whiskery nose and speaking calmly to him. The horse rolled his eyes at first, quivering with fear and pain. Gradually, however, responding to my voice and gentle touch, he quietened.

I helped back the horse, while two men pushed at the cart to free it from the rut between the cobbles. 'Make sure you check your wheels next time, before you strike your horse!' scolded the woman with the basket once the cart was free again. I gave the horse a final pat, bid him a reluctant farewell and stood aside. I felt an ache in my heart as he trotted away. I'd spent my life with horses. The worst thing about being suddenly so poor was being deprived of their companionable, comforting presence.

Realizing I'd been gone much longer than planned and my father would be fretting about my safety, I asked the woman with the basket if she could direct me to a pie shop. There I bought a steak and kidney pie wrapped in paper and hurried back towards the lodging before it could cool.