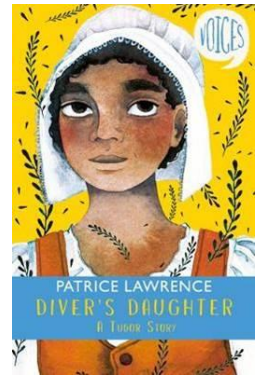


### Two Stones and a Rope



A candle flickered on the dresser. It was Widow Primmer. Shadows often soften a face, but her fury was stark.

"I should have listened to my neighbours!" she hissed.

"M... Mistress Primmer?"

She pushed me again. My shoulder jolted and a punch of pain shot up my neck and across my skull.

"I should never have let you stay here. You and your foul mother! I should never have agreed."

She wrenched off the covers and I felt the rush of cold air across me. Where was Mama? Had Widow Primmer already wrenched her away? I touched the space beside me. I felt a hint of Mama's warmth. She couldn't have been long gone.

"Mistress Primmer, I don't understand! We have done nothing to you!"

"I trusted you." She spoke quietly, her words creating mist. Then louder. "I trusted both of you!"

Her fist clenched and I rolled into a ball waiting for the next blow. Her breath was loud and harsh, like she had exhausted herself from her exertion. The quilt dropped back down on to me.

"Get up, Eve," she said. "Pack your belongings and go."

"But I have nowhere..."

"Go to your mother in All Hallows, though her work there won't last beyond today." She shook her head. "I should go there now to tell them. By the end of today, everyone in this town will know what your mother is and will condemn her. I'm giving you time to leave."

Claire was calling out in the next chamber. It was Mama she wanted – not hers, but mine. Widow Primmer took a deep breath and her eyes were full of tears.

"I'm sorry, Eve. You have to go."

The light disappeared and I heard her unlatch the door to Claire's room. I lay there for a moment in the darkness. There was a pale edge of light seeping through the slats in the shutter. It was later than I thought. This was my fault. I had believed last night that I was safe and that someone other than Mama cared for me. I had been greedy again. I was lucky to have Mama, I should not have wanted more. I had tried to take too much luck. I ran through my memories. Had we done anything that could have wronged Widow Primmer so badly? Yesterday at the fair, we'd been together laughing and enjoying the spectacle, the May Queen, the acrobat, the tiny rooms, the- Griffin. I'd told him there was no fortune and now we were being turned out.

## Diver's Daughter by Patrice Lawrence

I pushed away the quilt and felt for my stockings on the chair. I drew them on quickly and slipped my dress straight over my chemise. We had few belongings to pack. I shoved what little I could find in the bag I had brought with me. The new mantle Mama had stitched for me. Mama and I now had spare bonnets and aprons. A chemise Widow Primmer had no longer required and passed on to Mama.

I took one last look at our room. I had moved many times before. This was just like those times. There would be other rooms. I would make myself feel nothing.

"Get out!"

There was a shriek behind me and I froze. A wooden bowl looped over my shoulder and hit the stairs, just missing the cat that was racing past me.

Widow Primmer was standing outside Claire's room. "Get that creature out of here!"

The cat hadn't bothered her before. There was even a tally scratched on the wall of the buttery keeping count of the number of rats he'd caught. I felt eyes on me as I walked downstairs and over to the front door. As I opened it a crack, the cat shot out to the street. I closed the door and turned to face them.

Gina and Griffin were sitting at the same table where we'd enjoyed our supper the night before. Griffin's hand rested near the greasy smear from the custard bowl. Widow Primmer came down and sat opposite them. Her coif balanced loosely on her unpinned hair. I'd always seen her neat. I'd always known her kind. The fear was building inside me. Gina glanced away from me but Griffin held my eye. The widow must have just set the fire because it hadn't fully caught. The kindling was flaring up, shooting narrow flames towards the chimney. Griffin's face flashed dark and light. His expression said nothing.

I wanted to pull Gina away. Whatever had happened, she had no reason to be part of this. She still would not look at me. As I moved towards the table, I saw a small object. It was shaped like a woman, not small enough to live in the miniature rooms, but still not as big as a baby. As I grew closer, I saw that it had a mouth, nose, eyes and eyebrow. It was dressed in a carefully stitched gown. I remember sewing those stitches in the hayloft. After I'd finished the ostler's wife's sheets, I'd repaired my poppets kirtle, sitting by Mama's side waiting for her sadness to end. I didn't remember the poppet's hair like this, though. It was bright red, close to the colour of the strands that poked out from Widow Primmer's coif. Neither did I remember the pin that was stuck through the poppet's heart.

I looked at Gina. She was staring at the table.

Widow Primmer poked the poppet with a piece of kindling. It slid across the table towards me. "Is this your poppet, Eve?"

"Mama brought it at Bartholomew Fair," I said. "But it was not like this."

Griffin turned to me. Again, he held my gaze. "You travelled with this... thing... from London."

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"Yes, but..."

"It's as I recounted, Widow Primmer. The plan was made in London."

I shook my head. "There's no plan!"

"So you deny it?" Widow Primmer said. "You didn't make a plan with that sailor cousin of mine to come and seek me out?"

"Yes," I said. "He said that if we helped care for Claire, you would help us with lodgings."

Griffin nodded. "As I told you Mistress."

Widow Primmer nodded back, then looked at me. I'm sure your mother knows that witchcraft doesn't work from afar. You had to come nearer. Did George Symons suggest that too? Use my own daughter against me to win my trust? Then render me so sickly that I'm a prisoner in my own home?"

"Mama is not a witch! We were happy here!"

"But it is not your own home." It was hard to hear Griffin's voice above the crack of the sparking wood. "You told my sister that you would do anything to have your own home."

"Yes, but..."

Griffin turned his gaze on Widow Primmer. Like me, she was unable to look away from him.

"Her mother was sick with melancholy, or so we believed. Now I understand that it was part of the bewitchment to bring them here and deliver them to your home. They were in such a hurry to set their plans in motion that this poppet was left in my cart. It was wrapped in a linen shroud with the pin through its heart." He turned to Gina. Her face was set like she was trying to cry. "My sister found it, but has only just revealed it to me. If I had known earlier, I could have saved you more distress. But it isn't too late."

He swiped up the doll and threw it into the fire. Its hair flared first, a ball of flame. The gown and rag body smouldered then ignited. The round wooden head smoked but didn't burn. Griffin picked up the poker and pushed the remains of my poppet deep into the fire.

Griffin hooked the poker back on to its nail. "Now it can hurt no one."

"Go, Eve. Leave this house now," said Widow Primmer.

I wanted to hold Griffin's gaze in the same way he had held mine, but I would not let him see how close I was to tears.

"The charge is untrue. I gave Gina the doll. It was a present," I said.

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I thought Gina was about to speak, but Griffin put his hand on her shoulder. The fabric of her dress crinkled from the tightness of his grip.

"The accusation is witchcraft, Widow Primmer," he said. "I expressed my concerns to the beadle last night. He said he would attend to it this morning. I had to remind him that torture by witchcraft is a hanging offence. He cannot be lenient."

Widow Primmer shook her head.

"No. I don't think... I am well. There's no need.

Griffin stood up and leaned over the table.

"Have you ever knowingly given lodgings to a witch, Widow Primmer? Have you knowingly allowed this to happen within your house?" Widow Primmer's mouth worked. A finger stabbed into my thigh. It was Gina. Her eyes were pink and sore, her face paler than the morning light.

She mouthed. "Go."

I gathered my skirts and ran. It was not far to the rector's house at All Hallows, but it felt like I was running the wrong way round town. When I got there, the door was open and a bucket of slops was being emptied on to the path outside. It was the rector's wife.

"Where's Mama?" I gasped.

"The rector's wife gave me a sour look. "How do I know? Do you think I want to do servants' work? Perhaps that sailor man turned her head."

"Sailor man?"

"The one who came here two nights ago."

*Jacques Francis had returned?*

The rector's wife stood upright, stretching out her back.

"I didn't mind the other one, coming to walk her home. This one, though... I don't like loud voices on my doorstep."

I touched my skin. "Was he like me?"

She shook her head. "No. He was a tall fellow with too much beard. Though I couldn't help hearing a little of the conversation." She scratched her head. "He was shouting so loud I couldn't not hear it. He was weaving her a yarn about treasure in the water and she was saying there wasn't any. I had to ask my husband to send him away. Perhaps your mother followed him later."

"She was home last night," I said.

"Well she isn't here this morning."

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She tapped the bucket so the last drips splashed on to the street and closed the door. The next time she opened it, it would be to the beadle.

Mama hadn't mention meeting George Symons. But then, I hadn't mentioned Griffin and the wooden beads to her. We'd both angered people looking to make their fortunes from us and we'd both kept secrets from each other. George Symons must have snatched her on her way to work. Perhaps he'd had a knife like Antonio, forcing her through the common land and orchards out towards the dock. He would make Mama dive. The Thames was treacherous but its currents were our everyday life. Mama knew nothing about the depths here. Would her nose bleed and her eyes burn? Would she become trapped between the bones of men who had drowned? Was she already struggling, her breath running out and the sea pressing around her? I stopped walking so abruptly that a man behind me slammed into my back. He swore and walked on, looking back at me, angry. I could not help Mama by myself. I couldn't do anything, I couldn't even walk.

"Eve!" Gina was puffing towards me, tears running down her face. "I'm so sorry! I'm so sorry!"

I wanted to be furious, but this wasn't her fault.

"Mama's not at the church," I said.

"I know," she gasped. "A black man just came looking for her at Widow Primmer's. He said it was urgent."

"A black man?"

"Yes! He said there was a man coming from London, an angry man, who thought your mama had taken his fortune."

"George Symons?"

"Yes, that was his name."

"And the... black man? Did he say where he was going?"

"To the quay. The west side."

I bobbed forward and kissed Gina's forehead. "Thank you!"

I reached deep inside myself for more breath and I ran. I turned into St Michael's Square. The maypole was still standing, its drooping ribbons brushing the dirty cobble stones. My feet slipped on the petals and flower heads as I raced towards the West Gate.

The quay was usually busy, but there were only a few fishermen around now. Most of them must have been sleeping off the May Day celebrations. A few vessels bobbed in the water, small boats that looked worn from travel. I recognised Jacques Francis immediately looking out across the water. He turned round and pointed.

"They're there," he said.

I squinted. I could just see a dark smudge out on the water.

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"Are you sure?" I asked.

He nodded. "We have to go to her."

"On a boat?" Just watching the gulls glide across the water made my stomach hurt. "I can't. I can't go on a boat again."

"I think he told your Mama that you'd be hurt if she didn't follow him." He crouched down next to me. "If you come with me, she'll see that's not so."

I knew that I had already drawn more than my fair share of luck. I knew that I had avoided my destiny twice already. I would not avoid it for a third time. Yet, if I stayed here, it would be Mama who would fulfil my destiny instead of me.

"I won't let anything happen to you," he said. I couldn't tell him that if it was my destiny to drown, he wouldn't be able to prevent it.

"Stay here a moment."

I watched him walk to the end of the pier, look from side to side, then wave. A rowing boat came into sight. It was a little bigger than the one the fisherman and Antonio had used, but still no bigger than a Thames wherry. Jacques beckoned me over. The pilot looked at me and said nothing. He was a broad-faced man with skin rubbed by harsh winds. Jacques Francis handed him a purse. The coins clinked as the pilot took it and laid it by his feet in the boat.

"This is Samuel Hambleton. He'll take us there."

Jacques took my hand and walked me to the edge of the pier. The boat rocked in front of me. My legs weren't my legs, they were part of the river, flowing away from me.

"You have strength inside you Eve," Jacques said. "Just take one small step. Then another. If you must, close your eyes and I will help you aboard."

I closed my eyes. He passed my hand to Samuel Hambleton. I felt the callouses and roughness of his skin as he gripped me.

"Hold her steady," Jacques Francis said. I wasn't sure if he meant me or the boat. I didn't open my eyes. The fear was building inside me and I wanted to pull away and run as fast as I could, through the Bargate and on the road back to London. If I opened my eyes, I would do just that. Jacques Francis took my other hand. I stood there, my foot raised, halfway between land and water.

"Just one step," he said, gently. "One step."

I took the step. The boat moved, but the hands held me steady. My heart was trying to beat itself out of my body. I made my other foot follow.

"The bench is behind you," Jacques Francis said. "Sit down."

My knees were wobbly, so I let myself sink.

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"Well done, Eve. I'm coming aboard now."

The boat moved again and sunk lower into the water.

"Let's go," Jacques Francis said.

I opened my eyes. He had taken up the second oar. I stared straight ahead as I was propelled out and away from the land.

The smudge became sharper. It was definitely a boat. How many people were on it? One? Two? Was it really them? Closer and closer. I saw a bow, a mast, the back of a man. The man turned and saw us. It was George Symons. Where was Mama? I leaned over and tried to look down into the water. Instantly my stomach churned and my eyes blurred. I sat upright so quickly the boat rocked. George Symons didn't move. He seemed to be waiting for us. As we drew up next to him, I saw two heavy stones in the bottom of his boat. They were tied to either end of a length of rope.

"Where's Joan?" Jacques Francis shouted.

George Symons shrugged. "I told her to bring me my fortune. If she didn't there would be no daughter to return to."

Jacques Francis looked down at me. "Her daughter's here."

"Your infidel friend doesn't know that."

I heard Jacques Francis take a deep breath. "How long has she been down there?"

"I don't have a timepiece to measure." His voice was calm, like it didn't matter if my mother was dead or not.

"There is no gold," Jacques Francis said. "Just the poor souls who couldn't be buried on the land. I told you so in London."

George Symons shook his head. "Do you expect me to believe your godless lies?"

Jacques Francis said nothing. He removed his cap and his cape. "I will find your mother, Eve."

The water stirred by the bow. Fingers, a whole hand, a face pushed through to the surface. My mother gasped and opened her eyes. She saw me.

"Eve?"

Jacques Francis held out an oar. "Take this, madam!"

"Do you have anything?" George Symons shouted. "Have you found the gold?"

Mama swam grasped the oar and, shuffling one hand over the other, pulled herself towards us.

"Eve," she said. "I'm so happy--"

I heard the rasp of the rope and the thump as a stone hit the side of the boat.

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"No!" Jacques Francis yelled.

He was too late. George Symons had dropped the rope across Mama's left shoulder. Mama clung to the oar. I reached out my hand to her.

"Mama! I'm here!"

Jacques Francis heaved the oar closer. Mama's fingers touched mine just as George Symons picked up the second stone.

"Take this!" Jacques Francis handed me the oar. It was heavy and I grasped it with both hands, but Mama's weight made the wet wood start to slip through my palms. Jacques Francis tried to reach across and grasp the other boat. Both boats swayed as he lunged towards George Symons. George Symons glanced back at him then leaned over to drop the second stone over Mama.

"No!" Jacques Francis tried to pull George Symons away. "You'll kill her!"

"Then she'll die."

The stone's weight made him lurch forward. He was still when I blinked and heard the splash as he fell in.

"Mama!"

The rope pressed against her throat and her mouth gapped open like she was gasping for breath. Then she was dragged backwards into the depths.

The water was my destiny. I knew it. I'd nearly drowned twice but had been saved. Did I wait for it to claim me a third time or did I run towards my fate? Did I let Mama die or did I do everything I could to save her? She was down there. She was alive. I breathed in slowly and slipped over the edge of the boat into the water.

*The water isn't claiming me, I'm letting myself sink.*

*The water isn't claiming me, I'm letting myself sink.*

As I sank, I kept my breath inside me, then I opened my eyes. The water was murky and streaked with weeds and pecks of mud. It was like the river understood that it could no longer take me. The deeper I sank, the harder it tried to push me out. I didn't look down. I knew there was a great depth of water below me. My chest could hold in the air no longer and I let myself be pushed upwards. I broke the surface and fought to stop myself breathing out in one big gasp. If I did, it would feel like I'd never catch my breath again. Instead, I blew out slowly until I was empty and took another breath.

I looked across the water. The rowing boats were further away than I expected. What if I could never swim back to them? I pushed that thought away. I had to find my mother. I took another deep breath and a hand grabbed my ankle and yanked me down. As I screamed, my mouth filled with water. I saw hair floating in the tide, a mouth with a string of bubbles floating upwards, eyes wide with terror. George Symons. He was drowning and he was taking me with him.



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I kicked at his hand and felt my heel connect with his knuckles. He let go and I managed to rise until my head was out of the water. I coughed and spat, my arms flailing around me. The river was fighting back. It had come for me again. A hand held my shoulders. I tried to wriggle free.

"Stay calm, Eve." It was Jacques Francis. "I'll take you back to the boat."

"They're both in the water," I said. "George Symons and Mama."

"I can't save both. Let me take you back and then I'll find your mother."

"No." I said. "No one must drown."

"But you—"

"I saw George Symons. If he's there, bring him up and I'll help him."

"I'll try once. That's all the time we have."

I nodded, rolled on to my back and waited. Mama was under the water, under the stones. I had to roll that thought up, push it away. I must only think thoughts that would let me keep floating. A moment later, one head surfaced and then another, eyes closed, wet hair stuck to his skin.

"He's alive," Jacques Francis said. "Here! Over here!" He raised his hand and waved it towards the boats. "Take him quickly, but if he drags you under..."

If he dragged me under, I was to let him go.

George Symons was floating on top of the water. His eyes were closed and his mouth was open. I grabbed the shirt beneath his shoulder and kicked my legs gently.

"I have to go," Jacques Francis said. "Promise me, Eve. If he starts to drag you under, save yourself."

Jacques Francis disappeared. All I had to do was to keep George Symons afloat until the boat came. My arms were already hurting. Should I be here with this man who didn't care if my mother died? Perhaps I should let him go. I had jumped in to save Mama, not him. My fingers loosened on the back of his shirt. I turned a little to look at his face. Nearly thirty years ago, he hadn't been much older than me when he was cast into the sea and knew that his uncle was dying below him. It hadn't been his destiny to drown then and it wouldn't be today.

I heard the swish of oars in the water and lifted my head. The rowing boat was close. Samuel manoeuvred towards me. The oars clunked as he dropped them on to the bottom of the boat. He leaned over and grabbed George Symons' shoulders, grunting hard. The boat tipped but didn't capsize.

"Lift his legs," Samuel said. "But take this first."

He handed me a pale ball, an inflated pig's bladder. Some of the wherry men carried them, especially those who worked close to the bridge and worried about capsizing at high

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tide. I held the bladder in my hands and hooked my arms around George Symons' legs and heaved up. I only moved him a few inches, but it was enough for Samuel to pull him the rest of the way into the boat. George Symons landed with a thud.

"I have to take him back to shore," Samuel said. "Are you coming?"

I shook my head. "Not yet."

Samuel nodded. "I hope God's luck is with you all."

He rowed away. I let myself float on my stomach, face down peering into the gloomy water until I had to lift my head for a breath. How long could Mama hold her breath? No one could for this long. Down there, there were masts and anchors and bones and maybe even treasure. The river had secrets and intended to hold on to them. *Please don't hold on to my mother.*

I heard my name. It sounded far away. I saw an arm waving in the air close to the shore. That was Jacques Francis. Where was Mama? I kicked my legs hard, holding the bladder with one hand and pushing through the water with the other. The water became shallow and my feet kicked mud. I stood up and waded through, my feet sticking in the troughs left from the waves. Mama was there, lying on the shore. Jacques Francis was crouched over her. As I ran towards her, I saw her face was covered in blood.

I dropped down next to her.

"Is she alive?"

H looked at me and said nothing.

\* \* \* \* \*

## Afterwards

Jacques Francis isn't angry any more. He told me that he was angry when he jumped off the boat. He was angry as he plummeted towards the river bed. The water there was so deep, he said, because two rivers met by the quay. That was how his anger felt, surging towards him, whichever way he turned and without end. The same way Mama would sink into her melancholia, he would sink into his anger. Eventually, Mama would surface from her sadness, but he was never free. He felt the buzz of his anger every moment of the day.

If it wasn't for me, he would have let George Symons drown, especially if losing him meant saving Mama. Jacques had learnt many times that all lives were not equal. His own, he had believed, was worthless. He would save Mama. He would save me. Everybody else could die.

As the water closed over him, his anger had softened. The weight of the water crushed it from him. On land he felt the ache in his knees when he walked and in his wrists when he gripped a horse's reins. In the water, he was twenty years old again. His body was light and moved without effort. He had opened his eyes and it was like visiting a land that he had once know well.

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"Except there were no boats beneath us. The big ships anchored further out. It was deep, but it had been deeper."

He had felt the familiar ache in his ears and behind his eyes. He had pinched his nose and pushed his tongue up against the roof of his mouth. He hadn't even thought about it, he did it instinctively. Down he went and that's when he'd seen Mama. She had shifted the rope from her throat to her chest, but the stones were stuck in the mud. Her arms and legs were floating above her, her eyes were closed. He had lifted the rope there was little slack. As his chest ached, he'd managed to shift one of the stones enough to free her. He knew they were surfacing too quickly, but there was no choice.

George Symons survived. His younger sister still lived in Portsmouth and he was taken there to recover. I do not know what became of Gina and Griffin. Now I am in Southwark again. I think that one day I'll turn a corner and see the, especially if there's a fair. When I hear a drum beating I expect to see a small girl in a white costume, but like me, she'll be nearly fifteen now.

I miss Mama, but I'm grown and should make my own life. That's what she tells me when I visit her on Sunday afternoons, though she's always happy to see me. I care for a surgeon's children, helping his wife with the baby and four others while he's at sea. It will be at least a year before he returns. Since Francis Drake came back with his riches, every merchant wants to sail to the other side of the world to find gold or rob a Spaniard.

Jacques Francis is still an assistant to the apothecary, though the apothecary is rarely behind the counter these days. His eyesight is so bad he can't see the labels any more, and he almost poisoned a mercer's sister two months ago. Now Mama and Jacques are married, they both live above the shop too. They haven't found any medicine that can cure Mama's deafness, though it is not as bad as two years ago. Even a month after her rescue, she couldn't hear anything and the pain deep inside her ear made her cry.

On Sundays after church, we walk along Bankside and watch the ships as they sail out towards the sea beyond. I think Mama and Jacques sometime think of returning to the countries where they were born. They know, though, that everything has changed. They weren't the only ones who were stolen. What if they return to find their friends and family were also stolen into slavery? What if they're captured again themselves? Mama still believes that we must trust no one. She trusts Jacques Francis, though. I can see it in her eyes. And Jacques? Yes, he cares for Mama too. But when he stares towards the sea, there is another expression on his face. He's the man who would, for one last time, like to jump from the rocks into the sea and swim to shore with an oyster in each hand.

"Come away from the water, *mpendwa*."

I don't know if Mama is talking to me or Jacques, but he takes her hand and they turn away from the river.

\* \* \* \* \*