A Halloween gift ...

Chapter thirteen (yes, really) of London Lies Beneath is part ghost story, part love story, with a beloved charm, a great deal of sea, and a taniwha.

If you only want to read the story, start on page 2 after the break, but even if you read the first page and a half, there are no spoilers for the rest of the book.

May the only spirits rising tonight be welcome in your heart,

Stella x

Thirteen

Much later that night, Ida lay in bed beside Bill, listening to the soft grunts and sleeping noises of her three children on the other side of their bedroom partition and laid her hand on her upper belly, the part of her that had felt chilled ever since Tom ran in this afternoon, and then brought it to her beating heart. Her heart that had been rushing ever since Tom mentioned going to the water, going to sea. The heart and the tense stomach that wouldn't let her sleep. She got up and very quietly went down to the kitchen. There was just a little light from the old moon outside, Ida pulled the chair across and stood up to get her medicine chest from the highest shelf. She didn't need the moonlight to see, knew the placing and contents of every vial and bottle and pill box by heart. She took out a stoppered bottle of tincture of chamomile, and yes, it might help her sleep, but she was not moving it to drink the contents. Beneath the bottle was a small folded piece of newspaper, and inside that piece of newspaper was the gift Victor had given her, the talisman his own mother had given him, the Lord's Prayer written ever so tiny in spiraling, winding writing, the miniature prayer wrapped carefully around a coin.

In the moonlight of her early summer kitchen, Ida held the

prayer to her heart. Outside the city continued with its night life, London never quite still, never truly quiet, always a cart rattling here, a can knocked over there, the rumble of a late goods train, an early tram. She held the delicate piece of paper very close and she prayed a mother's prayer, a prayer that was not the words on the paper, but the only words she had been able to think since Tom made his announcement after tea. She prayed to a God she hadn't much time for, and to whatever spirits those who came to her stall believed she understood, the spirits she was supposed to be able to harness as a wise woman.

Please do not let anything happen to him. Please do not let anything happen. Please.

Ida had a knowing about the water, and it wasn't good. She thought of the bone angel under her pillow, time to give it to Tom.

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Victor's mother did not write the Lord's Prayer charm herself, nor did the uncle who gave it to her. Every Christmas he'd sit by the fire, making sure to keep his wooden leg away from jumping cinders, and tell his stories to any who'd listen, often he'd tell them anyway when everyone was too busy and a house full of children

meant too much work to take the time to listen to an old man. Victor's mother loved to listen. She was eleven years old, the eldest of the five babies her mother had birthed, before she'd turned to her husband and decreed no more. Even at eleven Anna knew that her whole world was Southwark and that for her, Southwark was enough, which made her more interested in the stories that her father and her uncle brought home.

Her father worked on the incinerators at St Thomas's hospital and came home each night full of stories of amputated limbs thrown into the fire, of the dead that no-one could save. Anna ran skittish from spiders and mice, but there was something in her father's recounting of the lonely limbs, the organs removed, and the tiny dead babies, that drew her in even as she shuddered at the words. So it was that when Uncle Peter came for his yearly visit, leaving the Greenwich Seaman's Mission where he now spent his days, it was Anna who listened, a toddler in tow and a baby happily knocking on Uncle Peter's peg-leg and the old man none the wiser.

I was just fourteen when I went to sea, and old that was, for a ship's boy. My mother wouldn't have me going any sooner, put her foot down firm and hard.

Here Uncle Peter stamped his peg leg on the ground and the baby and the toddler giggled at the tap tap tap, banging their own stockinged feet in time.

But come fourteen, I was gone. Easy it was, we only lived in Deptford, half of it country then still, if you headed south down the high road there was a field or more not yet broken for houses. But right up by the river were all the ships that ever came into London. You could catch them before they went into the city, or better, catch them sailing away again, bound to be some lad who'd jumped ship the night before, scared of the sea after all, brow-beaten by a girl into staying home, and a ship's boy needed right away.

Uncle Peter shook his head at the folly of the men and boys he had known give up the sea for a woman.

Those ships, you'd hear them before you saw them, wind cracking the sails, timbers creaking. You'd smell them too, the tea cutters, sugar ships, spice traders, salt air and tar and something else, something of hot places they had been.

Uncle Peter had told them many times, how that morning of his fourteenth birthday, he offered himself for a year's work, raced back to his mother with the coins the purser had paid him, and then ran off to sea on a sailing ship in that early part of 1812. He

didn’t come back until he was gone twenty-eight, even then it was only a month before he took passage on another ship and sailed again. Anna believed him when he said he’d seen Napoleon leading his men, and when he said he’d turned down a passage on the HMS Beagle itself, no interest in the beetles and bugs of other lands, they’d enough of their own in a good English ship’s biscuit, weevil-ridden and bitter with it.

This Christmas he had a new story.

We were safely round the Cape of Good Hope and on our way back to England. It’d been hard, we’d weathered some bad storms and a few of our men lost to accidents. There was one who’d fallen from the topmast. If you fall all the way and the ship is with you, if it’s on a roll and out of your way, then you might fall into the sea and you might be able to swim and you might survive. But if the ship is against you? I can tell you lass, there were many pieces of that young man, and they were scattered to the winds. Another of the lads we lost went with a cough that came from nowhere at all. Racked with it he was, for the space of a night, and gone in the morning, his lips bluer than the Atlantic on a fine, bright day.

The thing is, said Uncle Peter, drawing his stool a little closer

to the fire, Once a cough or an ague takes one man on a ship, you're always on the look out for the next one.

And then? Anna asked, eyes wide.

Then we put the man in the long boat, and tow him along behind the ship itself, with water enough for a few days and a little food, if he's lucky. We wait and see. If he survives, if there's no storm, no bad weather at all – a long boat won't keep you safe in a storm – if still no fever comes, then the man is let back. But if not, well then your man must do the right thing, he steps off the long boat and into the deep. Better to go with honour and your head high, than bring the whole ship all down with you.

Anna pulled herself closer to the fire.

So we sailed on, and we waited, and the next night, I heard it. My own chest rattling and shaking, rubbing and tickling and itching to get out it was. I tried to believe it was just a bit of ship's dust or the spice grains floating in the air that'd caught me, our old beauty had been on four spice runs in her time, she'd fine grains that might catch in your throat and have you choking for days on and off, a cargo of pepper the worst of it. But it was no dust. It was the same cough all right, dry and hacking through the day, and at night I felt it sitting on my chest, like a succubus. Before the third hour of the watch was called, I had a word with the lieutenant and

we both knew there was no point calling the ship's doctor. Not that the man was any more than a butcher anyway, too keen by half on the knife and the saw, that one.

Now, sometimes a man might fight his whole way down the rope ladder to the longboat, they'd end up pushing him or hitting at him with stakes to get him to go. Not me, I'd no intention of doing that to my fellow shipmates, not after the nightmares I'd had myself, dreams of a howling man crying for mercy and damning us all to hell, dreams that lasted long after we'd sent him down to Davy Jones' locker for his rest, much rest he gave us.

They were thankful for that, my fellows, and when I'd climbed all the way down and was settling myself in the long boat, what should I do but look above me and see them all saluting? I saluted back, hoping they couldn't see my shaking hands. They lowered down three day's worth of water and my food rations, my rum, for they were mine by right, no matter that I was no longer one of the ship's company.

The first day and the first night were the hardest. When you're used to being on board ship, so close to all your fellows, running up against one man turning this way and another turning that, the snores and the farts and the grumbling stomachs of the

night, these things become normal. It's not just the rolling world beneath our feet we miss when we come home to land, it's the breath of your fellow man, close enough to feel his chest as it rises and falls. I missed that as I lay alone, the breath of other men. And then, the sun setting in the west as we sailed on north, I heard them singing.

They're not like pub songs or church songs, Anna, these are the songs of men at sea for their whole lives, men who come ashore only to pick up another passage. They're songs of sailing and whaling and battles on the wave, of women left behind in port, with hidden verses that we never sing to our sweethearts, how glad we are to be gone, on our way again. I lay myself down and listened, not knowing if I'd ever find my place again in that chorus of men.

Yes, Peter said, in return to Anna's trembling lip, I might have had a tear for myself and all. Only one, mind. When a man has only salt water for company, he's no need to be making his own.

The morning of the second day came and I was a great deal weaker, I could feel it, heavy in my arms and legs. I ate my rations, drank my water, but thought I'd save the rum in case the worst came to the worst, better to drink it all down in one go and let

myself slide into the sea, than dive in sober, all too aware of what I'd be leaving.

Through the night of the second day I barely dozed, kept awake by a bright half moon, light as a full moon and more strange for it. Just before dawn there came a huge wave, one of those waves that sometimes rise with no warning. One moment I was lying on my back, dreaming of the breakfast they'd be having up above any minute, and the next I was lifted up and over and tossed from the long boat, with a mouthful of briny for welcome and then a smack on the back of the head from the long boat for good measure. I felt myself giving in before I even decided I would. Any sailor knows this, knows fighting the sea is pointless, we sail with it rather than against it, swim with the waves, not over them. The few of us who swim that is. I was lucky to learn when I was a lad, but I've told you before now that sailors believe it's dangerous to be a swimmer, tempting a fate that will want to chuck you in.

So my body was already letting go, before my mind woke up to what it was and where I was, and even when I did wake to it, I wondered if perhaps I should go under. I still had the croup, though I'd thought in the night I could feel a loosening, that perhaps the succubus on me was unhooking its claws, ever such

a little. And it was that possibility that spurred me to fight. Fight my own urge to swim against the wave, my limbs waking up and trying to thrash out of the water, up to a long boat and a ship I knew must be far gone by now. I relaxed all over, I let go, became seaweed, driftwood, a gull's feather in the wind, but deep, deep in the blue. And just before the liquid already in my lungs gave way to the full flow of the ocean, I felt my foot break free of the water, break out and up. And then I was an old whale, bursting up and free, grabbing at air and swallowing it down, choking and coughing up all the sputum and sickness that was in me. I knew, when I finally caught my breath, floating on a wave as kind as a mother's breath, that the croup was gone, washed out by the clean brine of the ocean. Rubbing my eyes, I knew the ship was gone and all. But not the long boat, there it was, not two hundred yards away, and right way up at that. And sitting up in the boat was the ship's doctor. That young man who'd such a keen joy in the scalpel and the saw. There was no point thinking he'd bring the longboat to me, doctors are terrible sailors, so I cut into the water and I covered that distance with the strongest strokes my tired arms could make.

He hauled me on board and pointed far ahead. The ship, our ship, was a child's toy in the distance, a little wooden sailboat that

a lad takes to the pond.

I was listening out for you, he said, I heard your cough change in the night. I wanted to speak to you, see if we couldn't save you after all. Then the wave came. I was knocked over.

He smiled, Doctors never make good sailors, but we do make good doctors, he said, pointing down to where my legs were twisted below me.

And it was only in seeing the gash in my leg and the blood coming from it, pouring from it now the leg was out of the water, that I realised I was in pain, and bloody awful pain at that.

He ripped his own shirt, to tie off my leg and stop the blood. I knew, that while he was saving my life by tying off the leg, I'd likely lose the leg should we ever get back. Well, I thought I was gone, thought we both were, all I cared about was staying alive for a day, two. When you're that close to death it's not about weeks or years, it's hours, minutes, that count. We counted the night, that doctor and I, in stories. You'd think, in pain as I was, from the gash and the blood loss and the tight strip of shirt tied round my thigh, you'd think I'd want to hear roses and sweet songs. Not a bit of it. I knew then why most of the sea shanties are of death and sorrow, girls waiting on quay-sides for men who never come back, and men giving themselves up to the deep. The only thing that takes

your mind off what's bad is a well-told story of worse.

He was from the north, this young doctor, joined his first ship on the Tyne and learned his trade at sea, apprenticing one ship's doctor after another until he found himself on our lady. He told me of the lamp worm, a fat serpent that lives in the Tyne, and his story was as long as it was disgusting. In return, I told him of our own river dwellers. The taniwha brought back from the new world, from New Zealand, stolen from a Maori king, a man covered in swirling, whirling tattoos and the creature brought into our London docks as just a little thing, a lizard almost, but not quite. Carted that little lizard over to show off to royalty, see the wonders they have in our far-flung dominions, and then taken about as a sideshow for the pleasure gardens and the zoological gardens. Which it did for a few years, and no worry, plenty to gawp and stare at the taniwha's scales, its ridged back. Then one night, when a storm lashed the city and thunder rolled up and down the river, the cage where it was housed was snapped by a bolt of lightening, two men fried in their beds, and that taniwha, with not a care in the world for lightening or thunder, slipped away into the water rushing off the lane and down to the river, slipped into the Thames itself.

Peter looked to Anna, her eyes wide and ears reaching to hear more, and he lowered his voice to tell the rest of his story in a

gravelly whisper.

You know what they say about the taniwha, don't you, girl?

She shook her head.

He smiled as he said, It's homesick, of course, but the Thames is too busy and it can't get by the ships for fear of being seen and landed and brought ashore for our pleasure again. It doesn't like to be looked at, not directly. And it's bigger, much bigger now, grown full on the secrets we tell to the water. That taniwha lives off our whispers, eating up the fears and tears we tell over the side of a bridge. It's grown fat on what we hide from in the dark, beneath the bedclothes. There's no getting from it either, it will follow you along the Effra or the Neckinger as easy as it rides the tide from Tilbury to Teddington.

Anna shivered and Peter went on,

We laughed at each other's tales, course we did, but we both knew we told truth too. I thought I was gone, Anna, God's truth, and I will always be grateful to that young doctor from the Tyne who kept me awake all night, kept my heart pumping, if only in fear.

Peter didn't tell Anna that he and the young doctor found another way to keep themselves awake, a way of skin on skin, of man on man, a way that all sailors knew, though few admitted, a

way that made sure a man in pain and mortal fear might think it was worth staying awake, staying alive another hour, and another, that life might be sweet enough to bear the pain.

He was quiet for a while and when he brought his hand to his own mouth he remembered another man's hand, another man's mouth.

But your leg Uncle? And the ship? How did you get back?

I'm coming to that.

It was not long before dawn. There's a false dawn, far out to sea, when the whole world's a disc of water, nothing more. A dawn that comes from the west, as if the sun sends up a flare, a last hurrah before it begins to climb up all over again in the east. Sometimes people trust that false dawn, trusted it too well. I told you he was no sailor, this young doctor. He saw the false dawn and he was so happy that the day had returned, so glad to see the light that it brought him up from the half-sleep we were both in, up on to his knees in the bottom of our long boat. And he took out of his breast pocket a little parcel, a fold of leather, and inside that was another parcel, wrapped round in one, two, three lots of paper. And beneath that, was a coin covered in one last scrap of paper, and on that paper was written, in the smallest words I'd ever seen, the Lord's Prayer. He held it out to me and told me it

was our safe deliverance, that his own mother had given him the coin and made him promise to keep him about him at all times, but we were sure to be saved now and that as I had kept him safe all night the coin should now be mine.

I started to say not at all, that we were not saved yet, it was no time to cheer as if we were home and dry. I started to tell him this Anna, but I've told you before now, and you know from my story already, that the sea is an unpredictable woman. And she did as it often will, she slapped him down. A wave, just like the one that sent him down to me in the first place, sent him down to keep me alive through that night. This time she took him, he went with the wave.

I was alone for a day more. You know a body cannot survive without water for long. We can live without food, as too many poor folk know, but without water we're nothing. I was nothing and I knew that I was and imagined I was delirious when the ship came alongside me and they leaned over the rail to call down their surprise that I was in the boat and alive at all and was my cough gone and could they safely haul me up and trust me to answer true? I shouted back,

True, the cough has gone, but it is gone the way you all have, and the young doctor too. I know you all to be dead and the

leavings of my dried-up mind.

But they laughed and dropped the ladder down, told me to haul myself up, to count myself lucky, because hadn't I been swept along on the biggest wave since Jonah, swept away and then swept back, and now here I was healed and safe. Their language was more salty than that, girl, and then I knew they were no figment. And nor was the pain of my leg. I pointed to the gash and the blood and the strongest of the young lads was sent down the ladder to help me back up.

That night, when I'd drunk all the water I could get down me and gratefully eaten a dry biscuit or three – you should never take in too much food after a big thirst, the guts can't handle it – I asked about the young doctor, did he have a friend on ship who could take the coin back to his mother. They looked at me like I was sea-crazy after all. The young doctor had died the day after my cough had taken me down to the long boat. I was lucky he'd not come down with his cough the same day as me, or we'd've been sent to the boat together and he'd surely have taken me with him, the sickness had killed him so fast. They'd wound him in his own hammock that very day and sent him to the deep.

I took to my berth that night, glad to have the closing walls of it round about me. As I fell asleep I held the coin with the prayer

and prayed for him.

Uncle Peter shook his head, I don't pray now Anna, haven't for many years, but that night I gave thanks for the ghost of a man who would never make a sailor. The next morning I was on with my work, you musn't lay a-bed long when you're at sea, you don't want your fellows to start thinking they don't need you.

Anna frowned, a question in her mouth, but not one she knew how to ask.

What is it girl?

But your leg, what happened to your leg? Did someone else cut it off? Was there another doctor?

Goodness me no. The leg I lost in one big bite, a dozen years later. A shark it was, off the California coast, the damn thing near took all of me with it. Clean bite though, right through above the knee, nicely done.

Uncle Peter shook his head, Still, at least it took the bad leg, the one the young doctor saved for me for a good few years. I'd have minded a damn sight more had it taken the good one.

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Years later, when Anna gave the prayer to Victor, he asked her, But how did your uncle come to have the prayer?

What's that lad?

How’d he have it? If the doctor was – a ghost?

I’ve no idea, I didn’t ask and he died the year later. There’s some things best just believed, you believe and that prayer will keep you safe.