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Opening Extract from...

THE CONVICTION OF CORA BURNS

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Extract from *The Conviction of Cora Burns* (page 15)

Will you budge up for me, Cora? I can't get to sleep on my own.

Alice's face was washed in grey moonlight. She seemed almost to float on the cold air that slid through gaps in the floorboards. Then she stole between the sheets and Cora pulled the lumpy blanket over their heads pressing herself around Alice's bird-like limbs. Alice wiped a hand across the snot burbling from her nose and whispered. *I don't like that bed. Who was in it before?* Cora rubbed her big toe on Alice's icy foot, straw itching through the mattress. *Betty Hines. Her mother came for her, but it won't be long till she's back in again, I'd say. The mother's a widow and sickly so they live badly. In and out of the workhouse like rats in a drain.*

Alice turned in the bed and Cora could make out her eyes shining in the darkness. *I hope your mother doesn't come for you, Cora.* An odd tightness gripped at Cora's chest. She knew she must have had one once but mother was just a word. She had never before imagined her own to be a living, breathing woman. Cora swallowed the tightness away and cut a hard note into her voice. *It's best not to have a mother. Everyone who does can't stop blubbing.*

Alice put her hand on top of Cora's. *I don't have a mother either.* Cora's heart skipped a beat. *Is she dead?* But Alice shook her head. *I thought Ma was my mother until she told me I was boarded out to her from the Parish. And now I'm nine, the Guardians expect me to get the same to eat as a grown-up. So Ma can't keep me any more.* It took Cora a minute to comprehend what Alice was telling her. *If she's not your real Ma, who is?* Alice could only shrug, her eyes glistening with tears.

In the next bed, Hetty Skelling coughed in a way that made Cora suspect she was wide awake and listening. So Cora put her lips almost inside Alice's ear and made her voice as quiet as breath. *We're the same then, you and me. And that's why, from now on, we're going to be sisters.*