

# O: ARTHUR: By the River Thames,

## 1854

Arthur walks through the heart of London in the oppressive heat of August 1854, the air thick with the putrid scent of decay. Factories churn out smoke, mixing with the stench of overflowing cesspools and horse-drawn carriages leaving trails of waste along the cobbled streets. The once-mighty River Thames, now a lifeless ribbon of filth, sluggishly carries the city's refuse, serving as both a source of drinking water and a breeding ground for disease. Arthur, conscious of the risks, covers his mouth and nose with a damp cloth as he makes his way from his modest printing job back home. He moves quickly, stepping over puddles of unidentifiable sludge, desperate to escape the suffocating air. Though he has grown accustomed to the filth, something about this summer feels worse than previous years—more deaths, more sickness, and a growing sense of unease that weighs upon him.

His home, a small, dimly lit basement flat, offers little relief from the stifling heat. Despite its cramped quarters, Arthur takes pride in keeping it as clean as possible, ensuring the windows are open when the air permits. That morning, before heading to work, he had stopped at a public water pump to fill a pail, trusting it to provide fresh water for his family. With wages barely enough to cover food, he purchases a small gift for his mother—a pair of gloves—as a token of appreciation for her sacrifices. Though he longs to buy sweets for his younger brothers, he resists, reminding himself that money must be stretched carefully. A rare indulgence comes in the form of *The Poetical Works of John Keats*, a book that brings him solace in a world where beauty is often drowned out by hardship. As he returns home, he allows himself a brief moment of satisfaction, believing he has done well for the day.

However, his peace is shattered the following morning when one of his younger brothers suddenly falls ill. It begins with stomach pain and nausea but quickly escalates into relentless vomiting and diarrhea. Arthur watches helplessly as his mother attempts to comfort the boy, though her worry is evident in the tremble of her hands. Panic creeps into Arthur's mind as the dreaded word begins circulating among neighbors—cholera. He recalls the water he had so carefully fetched and feels a terrible realization settle over him. Could he have unknowingly poisoned his own family? The thought is unbearable, and as more members of the household begin showing symptoms, he is overwhelmed with guilt. Their small flat, already suffocating in the heat, becomes a prison of sickness and despair.

As the cholera epidemic spreads, the city's response remains misguided, with authorities convinced that the disease is caused by foul air rather than contaminated water. Streets are doused with disinfectants, and residents are advised to avoid bad smells, yet the death toll continues to climb. Arthur, now consumed with fear, learns of a physician named Dr. John Snow, who proposes a radical theory—that cholera is waterborne, spreading through the very pumps that people rely on for survival. Despite evidence linking the outbreak to the Broad Street pump, his warnings are largely ignored by officials who cling stubbornly to outdated medical beliefs. Meanwhile, more lives are lost, and Arthur's sense of helplessness deepens.

The realization that the very substance meant to sustain life is the source of death is both horrifying and cruel. As Arthur watches his brother's condition deteriorate, he wrestles with the knowledge that he may have played a role in their suffering, despite acting with the best intentions. The city around him, teetering on the brink of crisis, offers no answers—only the unrelenting march of disease. London, with its grandeur and filth intertwined, continues its routine as bodies pile up, and the river carries its secrets. For Arthur, the weight of this tragedy will never fully leave him, a permanent mark of the fragile and perilous nature of survival in a city that refuses to acknowledge its own decay.