

*L.M. Browning*

AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR OF OAK WISE



THE  
CASTOFF  
CHILDREN

*"The Castoff Children is a lovely story of hope and the power of dreams and friendship..."*

—TOMM MOORE, Writer and Director of the Academy Award nominated films

*The Secret of Kells and Song of the Sea*



**THE  
CASTOFF  
CHILDREN**

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*Ensuring the mainstream isn't the only stream.*

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*To my mother, Marianne:  
We wrote this together and we lived this together.*

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WHEN THE WINTER HAS BEEN LONG you can forget  
there is a spring. The harsh cold seeps into you and  
the feeling of warmth is forgotten.





# PROLOGUE

**T**HE FACE OF THE FULL MOON WAS HIDDEN. A funnel of powdery snow spun like a dervish between the high brick walls of the deserted alley. The winter wind howled high and low through the dark channels of the city. Tucked away in a forgotten place were twelve castoff children, taking comfort in the only thing left to them: each other.

“Duncan,” the voice of a young boy sounded, “tell us again, the story about the whale.” The boy, Asa, looked up at the young man holding him.

“It’s time to sleep.” Duncan patted the boy’s back. Asa laid his head down against Duncan’s chest.

“Joseph, how deep is the snow gonna be?” Asa squirmed, unable to sleep. He turned to the shadowy figure next to him.

“The papers say the people down south got a couple of feet,” replied Joseph.

“How much is that?” Asa perked up.

“About as much as you are,” Duncan laughed.

Marie let out a sigh. “Hush now, let’s try to sleep,” she gently chimed in. She gave Duncan a soft nudge in the dark.

“Yes, sleep,” Duncan quickly reinforced. “In the morning we will—”

There was a bang and the clap of breaking wood. The front doors lay splintered on the ground. Heavy boots thundered

through the entry way. A flood of a half dozen men came bursting into the great room. The children scattered like spooked mice bolting towards the doors racing out into the snowy night.







# **PART ONE**



# CHAPTER 1

## THE COLDNESS

FEBRUARY 1850, BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS

**T**HE BOY WAS A PICTURE OF NEGLECT. His baggy, thread-bare clothes hung off his rail-thin body. The once-thick cottons were reduced to thin cheesecloth wrappings, which gave no warmth or softness. Wound around his feet were old scraps of faded drapes that most likely hung in the windows of the well-to-do townhouses along Beacon Street before he found them in a trash bin. The outermost layer of his makeshift shoes were made of burlap potato sacks unloaded from the cargo ships moored along the southern harbor.

Tall for fourteen, Joseph had neither the look of the man he had once called *Father* nor the woman he had once called *Mother*. His plump, young face had been gouged out—prematurely lined—by the hand of hardship. Malnutrition and stress had thinned the boy's dark brown hair. Overgrown chunks draped along the sides of his face and rogue strands hung down into his chestnut-brown eyes.

This winter had aged him more than any other. It was the worst in memory. All day he had heard people talk about the storms, and his heart hardened with each snippet of conversation he caught. To the people of Boston, two massive

Nor'easters in five days was a record—something to be commented about on street corners after having a mug-up of coffee, while enjoying a pipe and the morning edition of *The Boston Post*. But to Joseph and all those on the streets, it was far from a joking matter.

\* \* \* \* \*

THE NOONDAY SUN WAS DESCENDING, taking with it what little warmth there was to be had. The hustle and bustle of the streets was starting to pick up as the next storm silently approached in the distance.

For hours he walked along the narrow paths in the hardening slush carved out by the carriage wheels along Beacon Street as he made his way towards the North End, where he would hole up during the storm.

The fires in each hearth burned bright tonight as the cold deepened. Each chimney poured out heavy smoke. Framed in frosted windows set aglow by the fire burning within the house, Joseph stared in on the perfect scene: red-faced, bright-eyed people, eating forkfuls of food from steaming plates, drinking and laughing.

Turning away from the happy scene, Joseph shuffled back into the street. He hungrily rummaged through a trash bin, found nothing and continued on.

The approaching night pressed in on him as the bells tolled 3 p.m.. On nights such as these he always used to say, "Hope burns warmer and brighter than even the fattest Yule log," as he and his friends sat huddled around the light of their hopes. Tonight, however, he was alone and hope was flickering.

*What we want is so very simple*, he thought to himself... *so simple. Why then must it be so hard?* An image formed in his imagination: a woman with a kind face putting a plate in front of him and the warmth of a father's pride beaming upon him from the head of the dinner table. Joseph ached for the heavy warmth of a wool blanket, a thick pair of knitted socks, a mug of hot tea, a warm bowl of soup, and the company of his friends. The image we carry in our mind of how it *should be* always makes the reality in front of us that much harder to bear.

Unable to go on but unable to stop, he just kept walking—dragging his numb feet forward—until finally his body stopped of its own accord. He saw something. It took a moment for what was happening to catch up with his tired mind—something his eyes had passed over had brought him to a stop. He saw another child lying in a snow bank—a child he knew very well.

Joseph's weak heart jolted to life. Breaking out of his frozen shock, Joseph took off running—hobbling over to the child as fast as his stiffening legs would take him across the icy ground. Once there, he knelt beside the still figure.

“Ben!”

The tiny figure did not move—not even a stir at the sound of a friend's voice.

Joseph's excitement rolled over to terror.

“Ben, Ben, I found you. ...Ben?”

Joseph pulled Ben into his arms. A momentary relief washed over him. Yet as the reality sunk into him, relief became panic. Ben was sick. A storm was coming. *What do I do?* he asked himself in alarm. Joseph held Ben tight trying to warm the fragile boy with an embrace, but he had little body heat to give.

Ben's hands and feet were frozen. His shoes, which were nothing more than old dress shoes made of cracked leather, had begun to rip away from the soles. The thin socks that he wore were soaked by the wet streets he had trod during the day and frozen hard by the cold night air. Between the dirt and dried blood smeared across his face, Ben looked like a small soldier after a prolonged battle.

"Ben...Teddy, I'm here. It's Joseph,"

When Joseph had first found Ben, all those years ago, he had been sitting in the same place for days on end—the place where his mother had left him and told him to stay and wait for her, with no intention of ever returning to him.

Uprooted from his home, forsaken by those he loved and depended upon, all Ben had left from before that traumatizing day was his small teddy bear—a tiny, worn bear with a brown corduroy body that had been squeezed so tightly throughout the years it was balding and misshapen. The bear had two buttons for eyes: one green and one pale blue. Thankfully, Anna was good at sewing and, despite limited material to work with, had managed to keep the precious bear intact—sewing and re-sewing the tearing seams, closing holes, re-stitching the detail of the bear's little smile and triangular nose.

Ben carried the bear everywhere. Even now as Joseph hugged the freezing boy he could feel the bulge of it underneath Ben's coat. It was because of his affinity for the stuffed animal that all of the others in the group had over time taken to calling Ben *Teddy*.

A firm resolve settled in Joseph's heart. Not even feeling his own fatigue, Joseph stood up, picked Ben up and marched

on. He went to the nearby houses but no help came. When finally Joseph had finished traveling the length of Hanover Street, he entered the slums of the North End where he came to his only option.

The doors to a tenement building were flung open. One of the double doors broken off its hinges was left propped up against the side of the brick building. Joseph stared at the building apprehensively, before finally assenting to pass into the dark mouth of the hallway. He wished there was some other place where he could find help, but there was not.

Before the Revolutionary War, such buildings were mansions of well-heeled families, many of which had alliances with England and departed after the redcoats were defeated. The mansions fell into decay and were taken over by landlords, who rented the rooms one by one to the flood of Irish immigrants arriving in ships that docked in the harbor. The once affluent neighborhood darkened further as the dockyards grew more popular, bringing sailors with their pent-up thirst for strong drink, women, and gambling. All but the poorest and those with the vilest tastes remained, making it a place of last resort.

With the broken doors letting the snow sweep in, the air in the stairwell was as cold as the air outside. Joseph spotted two figures ahead, lying on the first landing of the stairwell. His breath caught in his chest. He pulled himself against the wall in an attempt to blend in and waited. Thankfully, the men did not stir, empty bottles lay lax in their callused hands.

Joseph passed by the drunken men as he continued to climb the steps. Teeth clenched tight, under his breath he prayed for

one thing alone: To find some quiet corner in which to rest. His eyes were wide—whites clearly visible in the dark.

*Don't wake up. Don't wake up.* He willed through gritted teeth.

He felt like he was trying to creep past sleeping beasts. Men with scarred faces and broken teeth, who reeked of liquor and smoke, growled gibberish and slurred threats at him as he walked by with his head down.

Finally he came at last to the top floor where he proceeded down a narrow, dark hallway. Each time he came to a door, he glanced in looking for a safe place to lay Ben down until finally he found one at the far end.

The room was dark. The offensive, acidic smell of urine and vomit caused Joseph's nose to curl.

"At least we're out of the snow, he whispered to the hardly conscious Ben.

Suddenly from out of a shadowed corner, a forbidding figure appeared.

"Hey! You! Whatcha doin' here boy?"

A thin, twitchy young man moved forward. His hair was matted, his eyes sunken.

"Ummm. Nothin'. Leavin'." Joseph muttered as he turned around.

"Oh no you're not." The man moved quickly to block the boys' exit.

Joseph's breathing quickened. He tried to push past the man.

"No. No. No. No. No." He rocked back and forth. "Can't let you go. Can't. Can't," the deranged man mumbled.

"Yes you can. We need to go." Joseph assured.

Their eyes met in the shadows. The air in the room seized



taut. The ratty man grabbed Ben and pulled him from Joseph's arms. The sickly boy hit the floor with a muffled thud. Joseph charged. The man was pushed back but reached out a boney hand. A wiry fist closed around the collar of Joseph's shirt. Joseph ran forward, letting the thinning shirt tear away from him. Wrapping his arms around Ben, he hoisted the boy over his shoulder and made for the door.

"Not so fast," the ghostly man shouted as he clamored to his feet.

Joseph kept moving. The man grabbed hold of Ben's coat, but it too was ripped away from the boy as Joseph ran from the room, barreled down the stairs and disappeared into the snowy night. Snow and ice was launched into the air as he sped into the street, still clutching Ben tight against his chest.

\* \* \* \* \*

IT WAS NEAR DUSK. The streets were crowded. Frantic people buzzed around, going from shop to shop filling their baskets with supplies as the next storm loomed. Wood sold by the bundle, lamp oil by the liter and coal by the bucketful. The panic was so thick it was almost tangible. Everyone was wrapped in concern for themselves, taking no notice of two young boys moving down the street—a small one who was paler than the snow itself and the other older one struggling to carry him—both without coats, shivering in a cold sweat.

Minutes drew out like hours. The eerie stillness that always precedes a great storm fell over the city. The crowds thinned along Hanover Street the further down the lane Joseph got. In the mounting silence, Joseph could feel the brute winter

breathing down his neck. Ben still could not walk. Eyes focused and his jaw set, Joseph forced himself forward. His eyes watered as the wind picked up small shards of ice from the ground and blasted his bare face. His teeth chattered. The wet air expelled from his deep, ragged breaths turned to crystalline vapor immediately. He looked down at Ben in his arms who was drifting in and out of consciousness. The dark blue circles around his eyes had deepened, making him look like a pale skeleton—a ghost of a child.

Joseph turned his gaze upward toward the sky just ahead of him. The churning front approached—gray mixing with pearly white, charcoal black clouds were descending, colliding and expanding—the storm was amassing. *It'll be here soon*, Joseph thought to himself.

“We’ll be all right, Teddy,” Joseph repeated over and over again. Ben did not answer. His head lay limp, rocking lightly on Joseph’s arm with each heavy step taken. “We’ll be all right,” Joseph repeated again, this time trying to comfort himself.

Nowhere else to go, they marched into the throat of the inescapable storm. “I’m taking us somewhere warm, Ben. Just stay with me,” Joseph’s voice trailed off. His eyes scanned each inch of the street. Taking in the iced air with each deep breath was like being stabbed in the side with a fiery knife.

He pushed on, but then it came: the impact against the icy ground. His knees buckled and the rest of his body gave way. “Dammit!” He cried out. The strike rang up his bones, causing him to shout out loud, sending a pained cry down the now-deserted street. Upon impact, Joseph spilled Ben out onto the street. He lay spread-eagle on the ice with Ben lying sprawled off to the side a little ways from him like a ragdoll—unmoving.

He drifted off for a time while laying there—ten or twenty minutes—he did not know. No help came. Joseph's cry of pain as he hit the ice had echoed through an indifferent city.

He rolled over onto all fours, braced his weight upon his palms and pushed himself up.

Joseph stood, oriented himself and then finally managed to take a few shaky steps toward Ben, who had not awakened from the sudden impact of the fall.

Joseph had planned to find them some shelter, but that was not going to happen.

He grabbed both of Ben's arms and pulled the boy along, walking backwards against the cutting wind. Turning down a side alleyway, Joseph made his way to the very back, putting Ben to rest in an empty corner against one of the high brick walls.

Holding Ben to his chest, Joseph shook as he stared out into the darkness, watching as the unending barrage of snow fell. In a daze of weariness Joseph drifted out of time. He did not know how long they sat there—long enough that coldness became numbness. His mind felt detached from his body. He stared into Ben's eyes. The boy's limp head tilted back towards the black sky.

Joseph was not winning the struggle against the cold undertow that pulled him down. Yet, just as his head began to fall sideways and his clear vision slipped out of focus, a hand reached out and cradled his frozen cheek. Hands holding his face brought his eyes level with the gaze of another who called to him.

"Joseph, Joseph, I've found you. Joseph, what happened?" The voice was the gentle tone of a caring presence. It was the voice of Joseph's sole comfort in this world: Anna.

Hearing her voice from the distant place he was being pulled into, Anna's arrival was like a dream—the apparition of a divine being plucking him out of the dark.

Anna brushed her hand over Joseph's ghostly face. She looked down and felt Ben's face, "Joseph, what happened? Where are your coats? Nevermind, it doesn't matter," she said, throwing off all questions.

Joseph's head was limp, his eyes were open, but he stared blankly at her from within a daze of hypothermia. "Joseph, you have to wake up!" Anna ordered him, adding in a soft plea, "Please, wake up."

Joseph's legs were just mounds beneath the perfect blanket of newly fallen snow—a shroud that had been pulled halfway over him. She pulled Ben to the surface of the snow. "I've been looking for you both for weeks. I'm so glad to see you. I didn't think our reunion would be like this, but at least you found each other." These last words were strained as she heaved Ben up out of the snow encasing him. She laid him down, took off her coat, buttoned Ben into it, then turned back to Joseph.

"Joseph!" she said firmly. Joseph heard her voice as though it were an echo traveling through a void. He reached for it, trying to grasp hold of it—trying to wake. She was not a dream. She was real, and he needed to get up.

From within his frozen state, Joseph's eyes showed him the scene. The blurred figure moving around began to clear, until finally he could see her auburn hair and hazel eyes.

"Ben...sick," he said in a weak, vague, disconnected voice.

Anna stopped fussing with Ben and looked Joseph in the eyes—cradling his cheeks in her hands. "I've got him, but you have to help me," she stressed. "I won't leave you here. If you

don't get up, I'm staying, and if that happens, we'll all freeze and Ben will surely die. So get up Joseph. Get—up!” Anna knew Joseph could not rise to save his own life, but he would find the strength to rise if it were to save Ben and her.

Jerking painfully, Anna began to move his legs and arms until at last he moved them on his own. The first movements felt like he was forced to break his very bones. Yet, the more he moved the easier it became.

Anna picked up Ben and helped Joseph to his feet, and the three of them moved slowly, shuffling out of the alleyway and down the street.

Through the night, through the storm, and through the blinding pain, Joseph just kept walking—step-by-step led by the sound of Anna's voice calling him forward

“Keep going, Joseph. I've got you. Just keep walking. We're almost there....”

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

L.M. Browning is an award-winning author of nine books. In her writing, Browning explores the confluence of the natural landscape and the interior landscape. In 2010, she debuted with a three-title contemplative poetry series. These three books went on to garner several accolades including a total of 3 pushcart-prize nominations, the Nautilus Gold Medal for Poetry and *Forward Reviews'* Book of the Year Award. Balancing her passion for writing with her love of learning, Browning sits on the Board of Directors for the Independent Book Publishers' Association, she is a graduate of the University of London, and a Fellow with the International League of Conservation Writers. She is partner at Hiraeth Press as well as Founder and Editor-in-Chief of *The Wayfarer*. In 2011, Browning opened Homebound Publications, an independent publishing house based in Connecticut. She is currently working to complete a B.A. at Harvard University's Extension School in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

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**T**he year is 1850. The Revolutionary War has long since come to an end and the industrial revolution is beginning to build steam, overturning the old ways of home and hearth as it gains momentum. In a desperate hour, in the back alleys of Boston, a group of twelve castoff children come together to care for each other. Plagued by the unanswered questions surrounding their past and grief for loved ones lost, the children attempt to come to terms with the bitter truths that have defined their life thus far. Feeling forsaken, faced with prejudice, hostile gangs and in the hardest winter on record, the children find themselves on the ragged edge. Until a series of mysterious events begin taking place, making them feel that they are not as alone and helpless as they might have thought.

“This book will inspire many a reader to value what is lasting and dear in a life lived with enduring values.”

—**GUNILLA NORRIS**, award-winning author of *Becoming Bread*

“Browning takes us into a Dickensian world of children whose blood bond with family has been broken by the cruel circumstances of late 19th century life. . . . *The Castoff Children* is a timely reminder of all those who have been abandoned early in life, in today’s world as well as in the past.”

—**GEORGE HARRAR**, author of *Reunion at Red Paint Bay*

“As hope becomes a trickster in this classic tale of the human spirit refusing to be vanquished by desperate circumstances, the author skillfully carries her readers along on the wild and heart-warming ride.”

—**GAIL COLLINS RANADIVE**, author of *Nature’s Calling*

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