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ONE

'Oh, Lord, what is that?'

Louisa, out in the fog with a pair of scissors, explored the soft obstruction with the toe of her shoe. A rag, she decided. A cloth dropped by Rosina from a window, back in the summer. Stooping to pick it up, feeling for it on the brick path, she gasped. The thing was warm under her fingertips. She crouched down and peered through the vapour at a yellow beak, jet plumage around a glassy eye. It was a blackbird. Newly, beautifully, dead.

The fog was sour on her tongue. It tasted of iron and smoke mixed with a primeval dampness, made her eyes water and her cheeks sting. Enveloped in the yellow cloud, Louisa could make out nothing. Her own garden might have been a limitless place stretching to eternity in all directions or it might have shrunk to the very spot where she stood.

All over London, birds had been dropping from the sky – thudding on to the leather roofs of carriages, falling down chimneys and splashing into lakes in the great parks under the gaze of

statues. Everyone said that they were an omen although there was no agreement on its meaning. Louisa wouldn't allow this one to be an omen. She would rid them of it.

Pulling on a glove from her pocket, she made herself pick up the bird. It was light for its size, all feather and quill and claw. Balancing it on her palm, she made her way along the path to the wall at the end of the garden and stretched out her arm to toss the corpse into the mews. As she did so, she felt a scrabble of claws, sudden and intimate against her wrist. The creature lurched, unfurled its wings like a black umbrella and vanished into the morning.

Louisa stared after the soft sound of wingbeats.

'Fly away home,' she said.

It wasn't until she was indoors, her cloak off, standing at the stone sink in the scullery and running the tap over her fingers, that she remembered her purpose. She'd gone into the garden to cut a sprig of buds for Harriet's breakfast tray.

Drying her hands on a dishcloth, she felt in her pocket for the scissors and returned them to the dresser drawer. She wouldn't go out again. It was she who cherished the tiny shoots of quince and viburnum. Herself, not Harriet, that loved to inhale the intense, vanishing scent of wintersweet.

'I suggest that you take her for a change of air, Mrs Heron.'

'We intend to, Doctor, when summer comes.' Standing in front of Dr Grammaticas on the top-floor landing, outside Harriet's door, Louisa smiled at him through closed lips and touched the round complications of hair on the back of her head. 'We shall go to Boscombe in July, as we always do.'

Dr Grammaticas shook his head.

He'd put on his gauntlets, was stretching the fingers wide and interlocking them with the other hand. 'Harriet needs to go somewhere warm. Dry. The climate in Egypt is said to be beneficial.'

Feeling herself gaping, Louisa closed her mouth.

'I couldn't.'

'Travel? Why not?'

She crossed her arms over her chest, raised her eyes to the gas lamp suspended from the ceiling above the doctor's head. It seemed to give him a yellow halo, a small dirty sun set against the months of darkness.

'I . . . I shouldn't like to go so far from home,' she said.

Dr Grammaticas frowned.

'Her breathing is accelerated, the post-respiratory rest almost lost. And there's something else.' He glanced at the closed door and lowered his voice. 'Something I cannot measure.'

Straightening his muffler, he stepped past Louisa and began his descent of the stairs. They were uncarpeted at the top of the house and too narrow for a man of his build, scaled for the hips of maids and children, the struts of the banister wobbling like loose teeth under his hand, the treads creaking underfoot.

Louisa hurried behind him as he took the lower flights of stairs, reached the dim hall, the fanlight obscured by a red blind that cast a warm glow over the pattern of tile. He brushed past the fern case and accepted his coat from the maid who'd hastened forwards with it. The girl was new, one of a succession to have passed through the house in recent months; Louisa couldn't for a minute remember her name.

The doctor was still shrugging on the coat as he swung open the

front door, admitting a gust of foul air.

'Talk to your husband,' he said, descending the stone steps to the street. 'See what he considers best.'

'Should I get in more tincture?' Louisa called after him. 'A new bottle of friar's balsam?'

Silence. A boy loomed out of the fog, walking along the pavement in front of the house, and for the second time that morning, Louisa almost screamed. She shut the door and rebolted it, top and bottom, pulled across the heavy tapestry curtain, then stood, leaning her back against it. Harriet thought the world of the doctor although Louisa couldn't help asking herself why that should be, when in all the years he'd been attending on her he had been unable to cure her.

Louisa would not break the habit of a lifetime and go away. She dared not.

'Impossible,' she said aloud. 'Unthinkable.'

Hearing the maid's step on the stair, she tried to compose herself, pulling her cuffs down over her wrists, smoothing her skirts over her hips, before she looked up. It wasn't the maid. It was Harriet. She stood on the landing, her feet bare under the hem of a plain white nightdress, her auburn hair loose on her shoulders, crinkled from night-time plaits, the old pink pashmina she insisted upon thrown around her narrow shoulders. She looked as if she'd stepped out from a painting on the walls of the National Gallery.

'Why is it impossible?' she said.

'Where are your slippers?'

'I wish it, Mother. More than anything.'

'We're not going to Africa, Harriet. It's too far away.'

'Too far away from what?'

'Home, of course. Home.'

Louisa kept her voice low. Dr Grammaticas always warned against excitement, unnecessary dramatics, tears or laughter. Besides, she and Harriet had – after the passions of her teen years – arrived at a form of speaking with each other that was cautious and careful, exhibited in each syllable their mutual wariness. On Louisa's part, it held too the certain knowledge that many years of enforced companionship lay ahead, yet to be navigated.

'Did the girl bring up your breakfast?' Louisa asked, her voice softened.

Harriet had descended to the hall and was standing in front of her. Her pale face displayed the oddly adult look it had assumed from when she first became ill, at not more than seven or eight years old, and that she had never quite grown into.

'I'll die here then. If that's what you wish.'

Louisa flinched.

'How can you say such a terrible thing, Harriet? All I want is your health. Your happiness. That's all I've ever wanted, since the moment you were born.'

'What's best for me is to go away from here, Mother. To a place where I can breathe.'

Sitting on the unmade bed, Louisa poured a glass of water from the jug. She couldn't be sure whether she heard or imagined the muffled strains of carols rising from the street below. *May nothing you dismay*. The fog made everything so quiet, as if all of life was being lived secretly.

It was the most injurious kind – sulphurous, yellow as mustard powder. The death rates were exceptional, according to the reports

in the newspaper, and there were fears of an epidemic of Russian influenza. Harriet couldn't leave the house without suffering fits of coughing that racked her narrow body, turned her lips and the tips of her fingers mauve, risked bringing on a full attack.

Louisa had done all she could. She and Rosina had sealed the gaps along the edges of the sash-window frames with folded strips of newsprint. They stuffed rags into the keyholes of the outside doors each night, fitted the plugs in the drains of the basins and drew the winter curtains at mid-afternoon. It made no difference. The fog crept down the chimneys, stole in between the floorboards, penetrated the very bricks and mortar. Insinuated itself into Harriet's chest.

The previous night, she'd had an attack as bad as any she'd ever suffered. Louisa pictured Harriet's shoulders lifted high, her mouth open and gasping, the room filled with the smoke from a burning nitre paper. In the small hours of the morning, Louisa had begged Harriet to let her send for Dr Grammaticas. Harriet had shaken her head. 'It's o . . . ver, Mother,' she'd said, in the halting cadence produced by her shortness of breath. 'The wor . . . st is over.'

Minutes later, the dog had jumped up on the bed. After an hour, Harriet said she was hungry, would like a cup of tea, a slice of toast. Louisa had fetched the loaf from the kitchen with a toasting fork and a kettle. Harriet insisted on making the toast herself, over the bedroom fire. She ate it spread with butter, at four o' clock in the morning, saying what was the point in being alive if you couldn't ever do as you pleased.

Let peace and health and happiness . . . As the ghostly strains continued to rise from the street, Louisa began to pace the old silk

rug that lay on the floor at the end of the bed. It was a week before Christmas and she had other worries. Her older sister Lavinia, next in age to herself, was due to arrive in two days' time with her husband. Letters came by every post detailing Lavinia's requirements. She needed a daily dose of liver salts, must sleep with the window open despite what she read of the foul fog in their filthy city. Lavinia lived in Northumberland beside a grey, slapping sea, breathing air that had never been breathed before.

Stopping in front of one of the two long bedroom windows, Louisa drew up the slats of the Venetian blind. The houses on the other side of the street had disappeared and below, the gas lamp still burned at ten in the morning, illuminating nothing more than itself. She pressed her forehead against the cold glass. Harriet knew nothing of the circumstances that had caused Louisa all her life to shun travel, to avoid society beyond their own small community of family and friends.

Staring sightlessly into the street, Louisa could think of only one course of action. She would seek advice from her own mother.