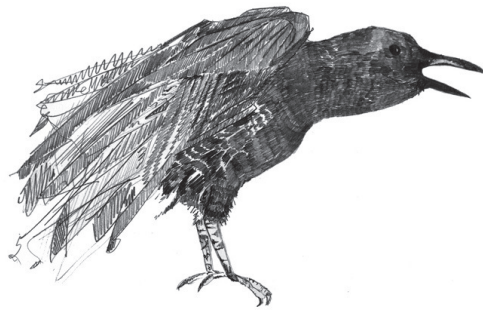


PROLOGUE



April 1912



The Church of St Peter & St Mary
Fishbourne Marshes
Sussex
Wednesday 24th April

Midnight.

In the graveyard of the church of St Peter & St Mary, men gather in silence on the edge of the drowned marshes. Watching, waiting.

For it is believed that on the Eve of St Mark, the ghosts of those destined to die in the coming year will be seen walking into the church at the turning of the hour. It is a custom that has long since fallen away in most parts of Sussex, but not here. Not here, where the saltwater estuary leads out to the sea. Not here, in the shadow of the Old Salt Mill and the burnt-out remains of Farhill's Mill, its rotting timbers revealed at each low tide. Here, the old superstitions still hold sway.

Skin, blood, bone.

Out at sea, the curlews and the gulls are calling, strange and haunting night-time cries. The tide is coming in fast, higher and higher, drowning the mudflats and saltings until there is nothing left but the deep, shifting water. The rain strikes the black umbrellas and cloth caps of the farm workers and dairymen and blacksmiths. Dripping down between neck and collar, skin and cloth. No one speaks. The flames in the lanterns gutter and leap, casting distorted shadows up and along the flint face of the church.

This is no place for the living.

The taxidermist's daughter stands hidden in the shadow of the cypress trees, having followed her father here across the marshes. Connie can see Gifford in the knot of men at the porch, and is surprised. He shuns friendship. They live a solitary life on the other side of the creek, in a house filled with fur and feathers, bell jars and black beaded eyes, wire and cotton and tow, all that is left of Gifford's once celebrated museum of taxidermy. A broken and dissolute man, ruined by drink.

But tonight is different. Connie senses he knows these men and they know him. That they are bound to one another in some way.

... when the midnight signal tolls,
Along the churchyard green,
A mournful train of sentenced souls
In winding-sheets are seen.

The words of a poem learnt in a classroom slip, unbidden, into her mind. A glimpse from the vanished days. Connie struggles to grasp the memory, but, as always, it fades to smoke before she can catch hold of it.

The rain falls harder, ricocheting off the grey headstones and the waterproof wrappers and coats. Damp seeps up through the soles of Connie's boots. The wind has come round and tugs at the skirt around her ankles. She tries not to think of the dead who lie in the cold earth beneath her feet.

Then, the sound of a man whispering. An educated voice. Urgent, anxious.

'Is she *here*?'

Connie peers through the leaves into the mist, but she cannot tell from whose mouth the words came and if the question was intended for anyone in particular. In any case, there is no reply.

She is surprised by how many have made their way here, and on such a night. Most she recognises, in the glint of the lamp that hangs above the porch. The old village families – the Barkers and the Josephs, the Boys and the Lintotts and the Reedmans. There are only one or two women. There are also, so far as she can make out, three or four gentlemen, the cut of their clothes setting them apart. One is particularly tall and broad.

She does not recognise them and they are out of place in this rural setting. Men of business or medicine or property, the kind whose names grace the pages of the local newspaper during Goodwood week.

Connie shivers. Her shoulders are heavy with rain and her feet numb, but she dare not move. She does not want to give herself away. Her eyes dart to her father, but Gifford is no longer standing in the same place and she cannot pick him out in the crowd. Is it possible he has gone inside the church?

The minutes pass.

Then, a movement in the far corner of the graveyard. Connie catches her breath. The woman has her back to her and her features are hidden beneath her Merry Widow, but she thinks she's seen her before. Drops of rain glisten on the iridescent feathers of the wide brim of the hat. She too appears to be hiding, concealing herself in the line of trees. Connie is almost certain it is the same woman she saw on the marshes last week. She certainly recognises the coat, double-seamed and nipped tight at the waist.

No one comes to Blackthorn House. They have few near neighbours and her father is not on visiting terms with anybody in the village. But Wednesday last, Connie noticed a woman standing on the path, half obscured by the reedmace, keeping watch on the house. A beautiful blue double-seamed woollen

coat and green dress, though the hem was flecked with mud. Willow plumes and a birdcage veil obscuring her face. A tall, slim silhouette. Not at all the sort of person to be walking on the flooded fields.

She assumed the woman would come to the front door and present herself, that she had some purpose in being there. Someone new to the village, coming to deliver an invitation or an introduction? But Connie waited, and after a few minutes of indecision, the woman turned and vanished into the wet afternoon.

Connie wishes now she had gone out and confronted their reluctant visitor. That she had spoken to her.

'Is she here?'

Whispered words in the dark bring Connie back from last week to this cold, wet churchyard. The same words, but a different question.

The bells begin to toll, echoing across the wild headland. Everyone turns, each set of eyes now fixed upon the western door of the tiny church.

Blood, skin, bone.

Connie finds herself staring too. Is she imagining that the crowd stands back to allow those who have come – apparitions, spirits – to enter the church? She refuses to give in to such superstition, yet something is happening, some movement through the mist and air. An imprint of those who have felt Death's touch upon their shoulder? Or a trick of the light from the wind-shaken lamp above the door? She does not consider herself impressionable, yet this promise of prophecy catches at her nerves too.

This is no place for the dead.

From her hiding place, Connie struggles to see past the men's shoulders and backs and the canopy of umbrellas. A memory,

deeply buried, sparks sudden in her mind. Black trousers and shoes. Her heart drums against her ribs, but the flash of recollection has burnt out already.

Someone mutters under his breath. An angry complaint. Connie parts the branches with her hands in an attempt to see more. Shoving and jostling, male voices rising. The sound of the door of the church flung open, banging on its hinges, and the men surge inside.

Are they looking for someone? Chasing someone? Connie doesn't know, only that the graveyard seems suddenly emptier.

The bells toll more loudly, catching their own echo and lengthening the notes. Then a shout. Someone curses. Hands flailing against the wet evening air. A hustle of movement, something rushing out of the church, frantic motion. Connie takes a step forward, desperate to see.

Not spirits or phantasms, but birds. A cloud of small birds, flocking, flying wildly out of their prison, striking hats and graves and the stones in their desperation to be free.

Still the bell tolls. Ten of the clock, eleven.

In the confusion, no one observes the black-gloved hand. No one sees the wire slipped around the throat and the vicious twist. Savage, determined. Beads of blood, like a red velvet choker on white skin.

The clock strikes twelve. Beneath the crack and fold of the wind and the remorseless toll of the bell, no one hears the scream.

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The last discordant note shimmers into the darkness. For a moment, a vast and echoing silence. Nothing but the sound of the relentless rain and the wind, the ragged pulsing of Connie's blood in her head.

The ghosts of all whom death shall doom.

Time hangs suspended. No one moves, no one speaks. Then, a rustling and a shifting of feet. The click of the inner church door, opening or closing, Connie cannot tell which.

‘That’s the last of them,’ someone says. ‘They’re all gone.’

A restlessness runs through the crowd remaining outside. They feel they have been played for fools. That they have been the victims of a hoax. Connie, too, feels she has awoken from some kind of trance.

In pale procession walk the gloom.

She remembers, now, a woman’s voice reciting the poem out loud, a long time ago. Connie writing down the words to help commit them to memory.

Most of the birds are injured or dead. A man lifts one of the dying finches from a tombstone and throws the corpse into the hedgerow. People are talking in low voices. Connie understands that they are embarrassed. No one wishes to admit to having been duped into thinking that the sudden midnight apparition was anything other than the flight of the trapped birds. They are eager to be gone. Lifting their hats and hurrying away. Taking their leave in twos and threes.

Not ghosts. Not images of the dead.

Connie looks for the woman who’d kept watch over Blackthorn House. She, too, has vanished.

Connie wants to go into the church herself. To see what, if anything, has taken place. To see with her own eyes if the hymn books are all in their usual places, if the striped bell rope is tethered to its hook, if the pews and the polished plaques and the lectern look the same. To try to work out how so many birds could have become trapped inside.

Keeping to the shadows, she steps out from her hiding place and moves towards the church. All around the porch,

tiny bodies litter the ground. Chaffinch and siskin, silent now. Brambling, greenfinch, linnet. In different circumstances, Connie might have taken them, but her duty to her father is not yet discharged. She still can't see him and is worried he has slipped away. Frequently she is obliged to follow him home from the Bull's Head to ensure he doesn't slip into the dangerous mud on the marshes and come to harm. Tonight, despite this strange ceremony in the churchyard, is no different.

Finally she does catch sight of him. She watches as he puts out his hand to steady himself, staggering from the church wall to a sepulchre tomb. In the single lantern left burning, she sees that his bare hands are red, raw, against the stone and lichen. Dirty, too. His shoulders slump, as if he has survived some elemental ordeal. A pitiful sound comes from his throat, like an animal in pain.

Then Gifford straightens, turns and makes his way down the footpath. His step is steady. Connie realises that the sharp rain and the cold and the birds have sobered him. For tonight, at least, she need not worry about him.

Blood, skin, bone. A single black tail feather.

A black glass bead is blowing back and forth on the path. Connie picks it up, then hurries after her father. She does not notice the dark, huddled shape lying in the north-east corner of the graveyard. She does not notice the twist of bloody wire.

Connie does not know that a matter of yards from the broken bodies of the songbirds, a woman now also lies dead.