

1

London, Summer 1865

Dolores Rain was on her deathbed once again. It was hard to say at what point an ordinary bed became one's *deathbed*, except that Dolores had explicitly told everyone that she was dying and to refer to her bed accordingly. The bed in question was surrounded by black brocade curtains, and she could just be glimpsed through a small opening in the centre, with her brown hair strewn wildly around her pale face. She only stirred from her pillows to catch a glimpse at a porcelain clock on her bedside table. It was already after midnight.

'When's Doctor Hawthorne going to get here?' she asked, shakily high-pitched. From the fluttery feeling of her heart, she knew that her time on earth must be running out fast. This was a great shame indeed, as she was only seventeen years old and still had a large

number of novels to read. 'He's running inconsiderably late, considering he only lives next door.'

An elderly priest called Reverend Wilmot sat in an uncomfortable chair in the corner, a Bible resting open on his lap, while Dolores's faithful lady's maid, Louisa, stood next to him with her head bowed solemnly. Dolores had asked for the doctor first, not wanting her cause of death to go undiagnosed, but she had thought it wise to summon a religious man as well. Unfortunately, the priest had not uttered as many prayers as she would've liked, and after offering her a glass of holy wine and imploring her to face death bravely, he had begun to sneak glances at the clock.

'Do you think I might leave now, Miss Rain?' he asked, breaking the suffocating stillness of the room. 'We've been waiting for hours.'

Arching one eyebrow, Dolores snapped her head up from her pillow. 'Do I look dead yet, sir? Read me the psalms again. All of them.'

The Reverend let out a long breath. 'You'll fall asleep.'

'The only sleep left for me is the sleep of eternity!' Dolores suddenly widened her eyes, resisting the urge to blink. 'My vision is fading as we speak . . . oh no, it's time!'

The room plunged into darkness.

'Sorry, the candle snuffed out,' uttered Louisa the maid. She lowered a struck match to a single candle on the mantelpiece. The warm glow cast strange shadows across the green wallpaper. 'What were you saying, ma'am?'

Dolores put two fingers to her wrist, relieved to feel the beat of her pulse. Now, if she could only stop hyperventilating. Her breath puffed out in gasps beyond her control. A knock came at the bedroom door, making her jump, and Louisa opened it to let in the

terribly late doctor. He was a middle-aged man with a thick beard that only highlighted the stern line of his mouth. He was dressed smartly in a grey suit and top hat, and carried a large leather bag, which jangled with medicine bottles and medical instruments.

‘Doctor Hawthorne, at last!’ exclaimed Dolores. ‘What took you so long?’

‘Apologies,’ he muttered, with a casual shrug. ‘I was in the middle of dinner when your message arrived, and then I needed to attend to a patient who’s suffering from sneezing fits. I’m sure you understand.’

‘I’m sure I don’t!’ she replied, scrunching her bed sheets in clenched fists. ‘Since when does dinner take precedence over the dying? Your priorities are unprofessional!’

‘I’ve told you before what my working hours are, Miss Rain. I shouldn’t be summoned unless it is an emergency.’

‘This *is* an emergency,’ answered Dolores, her cheeks colouring with indignation. ‘I hardly think a patient with a sneeze is more important than a patient on her *deathbed*.’

Doctor Hawthorne’s eyes narrowed. ‘You’ve been on your deathbed twelve times these last two months.’

‘Which means I’m getting closer to the final time!’

‘Nonsense,’ he dismissed. ‘These fears of death are verging on delirium. You’ll be perfectly fine if you get a good night’s sleep.’ The doctor spoke firmly, but not without some soft concern. Dolores did present a rather frightful figure with a manic look to her dark eyes. It appeared that she hadn’t slept for days.

She turned to the vials cluttering her bedside table. They had obscure medical labels that were unreadable in the weak light. ‘What medicine should I take next? This bottle you gave me last week doesn’t work. I feel worse every day.’

‘Of course it doesn’t work,’ said Doctor Hawthorne. He hadn’t bothered to look at the medicine bottles or even to take a seat, though Louisa had helpfully placed a chair next to the bored priest. ‘I prescribed that bottle when you insisted you had the plague. As it is, you can’t keep taking medicine for every imaginary symptom. These are dangerous concoctions if not taken properly.’

Dolores gasped, propping herself up on her elbows. ‘But I’m certainly dying!’

‘Of what?’

‘Of . . . of . . .’ Her mind grasped for a diagnosis – anything that could explain the tight sensation in her chest and the sense of foreboding that clouded her mind. ‘It’s not for me to diagnose myself,’ she said grudgingly. She turned her head away from the doctor and landed instead on the priest. He had materialised a newspaper out of nowhere, and her eyes flashed in annoyance. ‘Do you mind, Reverend? That’s not a Bible.’

The Reverend looked at her from over a pair of spectacles, a copy of the *Daily Periodical* crinkled on his lap. ‘Sorry, I thought you were done with me. You can have the paper if you’d like?’ He held it out by way of commiseration. ‘It will distract you from your impending demise. There’s another outbreak of cholera in the city. They say the disease can spread through open windows—’

Dolores clapped her hands over her ears, while the doctor gave an exasperated sigh. ‘Oh, have I caught cholera too?’ she exclaimed. ‘I can feel it! My head . . . it hurts!’

‘A sore head is a symptom of a headache, not cholera,’ remarked Doctor Hawthorne. ‘There is nothing wrong with you, Miss Rain. I give you my word.’

‘Your word didn’t help my father though, did it? Or my sister!’

The doctor's face suddenly turned grim. He looked away from her accusing glare, finding a distraction in his shoes.

Dolores's outburst hung in the air. Her father had sickened from cholera and died two years prior, with Doctor Hawthorne having tended to him in his final days. Dolores had been away at boarding school at the time, hurrying home too late to say her goodbyes. She and her older sister Edith had mourned their father together until the time came for Dolores to return to school, but it was barely a year later that another letter with black borders had arrived for her, bearing the news that Edith had succumbed to the same disease, following their parents to the grave. Their mother had unfortunately died while Dolores was still a baby.

Dolores now lived alone in a large house that she should never have inherited, with a fortune too large for one young lady. She had been in deep mourning ever since, with too much time on her hands, and far too little company.

'I cannot help you, Miss Rain,' said the doctor, once he'd regained his composure. 'And nor can any potions, pills or prescriptions. I don't deny that you are suffering, but it is not an ailment that anyone can cure.'

Dolores clasped her shaky hands to steady them. 'What am I suffering from then, Doctor?'

'Grief,' he announced resolutely. 'Your nerves are in disarray and exacerbated by endless sadness. A young lady in your position should have her mind set on the future. Courtship. Marriage. *Children*. A husband will soon replace the family that you have lost, but you won't find one staying in this dreary chamber.'

Dolores looked at him in disbelief. 'A husband would give me more worries, not less!' she protested. It was true that she had barely

left her bed in months, and her only amusement came from languishing over gloomy novels and even gloomier poetry. Louisa came in every few hours to tend to the fire and deliver her meals on a tray, but their limited chatter about the unreachable cobwebs gathering around the ceiling cornice could hardly count as companionship.

‘My daughter is expected home tomorrow, and I know she is looking forward to seeing you,’ continued Doctor Hawthorne kindly. ‘Ada’s letters are full of concern about how lonely you must be.’

Dolores and the doctor’s daughter, Ada Hawthorne, had been friends since they were children. Ada was still away at boarding school, and Dolores had received some letters from her but always ignored them, not knowing what to write about.

At the thought of her old friend, Dolores pulled her bed covers up to her neck and shivered. The doctor had hit a nerve. She did feel lonely, but in her opinion, friendship and courtship were for girls with sunny dispositions, not someone perpetually gloomy.

She could tell that the doctor just wanted to get home to bed, and even Reverend Wilmot had stood up, eager to be dismissed. She had wasted their time again, and she now knew that the sinking feeling in her stomach was more likely to be embarrassment than oncoming cholera. ‘Good night to you both then, gentlemen,’ she said, nodding her head civilly.

Doctor Hawthorne swept out of the room without a backward glance, but Reverend Wilmot gave a polite bow and said, ‘I’ll keep praying for your recovery, Miss Rain, or failing that, a good death.’ He took the newspaper from under his arm and placed it on the foot of her bed. Louisa followed to let the two men out, closing the door behind her.

Dolores dropped back against her pillows with a groan. She couldn't steady her racing thoughts. She had been so sure that this time she was really dying. Now, she felt oddly deflated. The candle at least gave her some comfort, and she reached over to the newspaper in search of a distraction.

She skimmed headlines about the disease-ridden city, her heart leaping instead of calming, but then her gaze alighted on a box beneath the main article. It was an advertisement:

Mr Marvel's Miraculous Nerve Tonic!
A Guaranteed Cure-all for your aches, ailments,
warts and worries!
Try the Amazing special elixir that patients are calling
a Wonder, a Phenomenon, and a Balm of Life!
Visit Marvel's Apothecary off Regent Street today to buy
the only cure needed in your medicine cabinet.

Whimsical black swirls entwined the printed letters, and a skull headed the top. This was exactly what Dolores needed! She carefully ripped out the article and pulled a cord next to her bed.

Within minutes, Louisa looked in expectantly. Her dark hair was neatly tucked under a white cap, and she wore a stark black dress and white apron. Her features were pretty, if not a little pointed with a raised chin and vigilant eyes that were always on the lookout for what her mistress might need next.

'Are you dying again, ma'am? Would you like a cup of tea?'

Dolores held out the torn paper and waved it. 'I need you to find this apothecary and buy me a bottle of Nerve Tonic. It's a miraculous cure for exactly what I'm suffering from.'

‘Beg your pardon, but the doctor said you weren’t suffering from anything.’

‘That’s not true. He said my nerves are disarrayed. And this tonic fixes nerves – see, *Nerve Tonic*.’

Louisa took the advertisement and read it with a doubtful frown. ‘I’ve never heard of it. If it really cured *everything*, don’t you think *everyone* would buy it?’

‘It’s new,’ Dolores said curtly. ‘You must go first thing in the morning before it sells out.’

Louisa hesitated before putting the article on the bedside table. At eighteen years old, the maid was close in age to the sister that Dolores had lost and often helped make decisions about the house that Dolores found too difficult in her grief, just like Edith had once done. Although Dolores could tell from Louisa’s reluctant expression that she wasn’t going to like this next decision. ‘It’s not my place to disobey you, but this is for your own good,’ Louisa stated. ‘The doctor told me that I mustn’t allow any more medicines.’

‘What? Ignore him! My medicines are—’

‘You’ve tried too many, ma’am. He says if you take any more, you might really die, and well, by then it would be hard to tell a real deathbed from a fake one. He might not bother coming.’

‘A fake one? I’ve *never* faked a deathbed; I’ve just pulled through many times! Are you saying you won’t help me?’

‘I am helping you, ma’am. By doing what the doctor says.’ Louisa leant forward and plumped Dolores’s pillows, with a gentle smile and devoted care that went beyond the usual bounds of duty. ‘Now, you must get to bed. Goodnight.’ She snuffed the candle and slipped out.

Dolores didn’t know what to do. Doctor Hawthorne had not

only refused to treat her, but now he had turned her maid against her as well. It was as Dolores reluctantly closed her eyes that she came to a startling resolution. If Doctor Hawthorne and Louisa were conspiring together, she would have to buy the Nerve Tonic herself – in secret, no less. She thought over the advertisement again, her heart racing at every exciting word: *Miraculous! Amazing! A Wonder!*

The address wasn't even that far, and very close to her favourite mourning dress shop. She could take the carriage and be dropped right outside the door. Besides, there was no doubt that buying a tonic would certainly be an easier fix than finding an unwanted husband.

2

Louisa interpreted it as a sign of improving health when Dolores asked to be dressed that morning in her finest black mourning gown. The maid tucked Dolores's hair under a long lace veil, and a small ruff went around her neck, set off in the centre with a brooch that held a token of her mother and father's hair entwined. The whole ensemble made Dolores look quite frightful, like a phantom had raided a dress shop, but also suitably dignified in her misery.

'You look lovely, ma'am,' said Louisa, who couldn't help but appreciate such an extravagant work of woe. 'Do you plan a day in the study?'

The study on the floor below was Dolores's sanctuary whenever she was feeling adventurous enough to leave her bed. 'Actually, I'm going for a ride in my carriage,' she said, her voice betraying a slight tremble at the thought. 'Doctor Hawthorne's speech about planning

my future made me realise that I should probably start with leaving the house.'

Louisa blinked in surprise. 'That's a splendid idea, ma'am!' She smiled encouragingly. 'Very brave of you. I'll have Jack get the carriage ready.'

Dolores gave a small smile in return, but through the dreary gauze of her veil such a rare expression was sadly lost.

The orders were delivered downstairs, where the coachman, Jack, lounged in the kitchen chatting with three equally bored footmen, a cook and a scullery maid. Before the untimely death of the late Mr Rain, the household had been buzzing with activity, guests and splendid dinner parties. Now the servants were nervous of even whispering too loudly because Dolores jumped at the slightest noise. To hear Miss Rain now requesting a carriage ride was certainly an unexpected development!

In the stable yard behind the garden, the carriage was wiped down for dust and cobwebs before being steered around to the front steps of the house by a pair of black horses. Rain House was situated on an elegant London square, and as Dolores peered out from the front door, she couldn't remember when she had last stood in the sunlight. Luckily, no neighbours were about to see her squinting and cowering like a vampire venturing out of her den. She hurried down the steps and dived through the open door of the carriage, Jack promptly slamming it shut behind her.

The carriage broke into movement, jolting over the bumpy cobblestones of the street. The wheels creaked from disuse, and as soon as they were halfway round the Square, Dolores called for the carriage to stop.

Jack appeared at the door. 'You ready to turn back, ma'am?' he asked.

'We've only just left.'

The coachman shrugged, clearly not expecting anything less.

Dolores sat up straighter and pulled out the newspaper advertisement which she had hidden up her sleeve. She had ripped it in two and held out the half which simply stated the details of the apothecary shop. 'You must take me to this address,' she said, handing it over to him.

'Yes, ma'am.' Jack returned to his driver's perch and spurred the horses into a trot.

Dolores pulled back the curtain on the passenger window. Soon the streets were lined with a curious array of shops, and people thronged the pavement, with ladies' skirts trailing in the dirt and gentlemen towering in their tall top hats. The sounds of whinnying horses and roaring wheels crowded in on her. She whipped the curtain shut again and fell to nervously picking at the threads of her gloves.

After a few minutes, the carriage slowed to a stop and she heard Jack's heavy boots as he came round to the door. She had half a mind to grab the handle and hold it shut, but he pulled it wide before she had a chance. The noise instantly magnified, and there was something menacing about the bustle of people behind his back. Jack stood aside so she could see past him.

'Are we there?' Dolores ventured forward and her breath caught as her eyes fell on the most wondrous shopfront she'd ever seen.

On either side of a blue front door were two bowed windows, the latticed panes warped like a magnifying glass. In the left-hand window was a skeleton in a smart suit, its hand clasped around an

upturned medicine bottle as if about to pour liquid into its ghastly mouth. In the right-hand window was a painted mannequin in a matching suit, holding the same bottle, only now empty. In gold letters above the door was the shop name: *Mr Marvel's Apothecary*, along with the tagline: *Cheating Death since 1667*.

Dolores felt a burst of confidence. Cheating death was more than her doctor had ever claimed to do. There was hope for her yet.

A bell chimed above her head as she entered. The shop was small, bounded at the far end by a counter, and there were shelves built into each wall, with pill boxes, bottles and jars competing for space with boiled sweets and bundles of herbs. The smell was overpowering, peppery and sweet at the same time.

Dolores squinted at some anatomical drawings nailed to the wooden front of the counter. In one of them, a poor woman had a frog stuck in her stomach, but Dolores couldn't work out whether it had been put there intentionally as an unusual cure, or if the surgeons were detailing how to take it out.

A young man stood behind the counter, dishing pills from a brass measuring scale into bottles and carefully attaching labels. He had tousled sandy-brown hair and amber eyes, which lit up at the sight of a new customer. 'Welcome!' he greeted her warmly. 'What can I do for you today?'

'Are you Mr Marvel?' Dolores asked, her eyes darting to a jar of squirming leeches sat on the counter.

'Indeed I am.' He rested his elbows down beside the jar. 'Having some issues with your blood?'

Dolores's eyes shot back to him. 'Excuse me?'

He tapped the jar's lid, making the contents wriggle. 'The leeches. They're good for bloodletting.'

‘Oh, no.’ She shook her head in a fright and recalled the sign on the shopfront. ‘You’re Mr Marvel, the *apothecary*?’ she asked again.

He lifted a fist to lean his chin against it. ‘That’s right.’

‘*The Mr Marvel?*’

He cocked his head to one side. ‘I’m sensing that you don’t believe me.’

She regarded him with an air of suspicion. ‘Well, you’d have to be more than two hundred years old if that were true. The sign outside dated back to the plague years.’ The boy looked barely a year older than herself. She had hoped to speak with someone with a bit more experience, not some young shop assistant with a jar of leeches.

‘Are you doubting my capabilities as an apothecary?’ His eyebrows furrowed in offence. ‘You saw the skeleton in the window advertising our Elixir of Life, right?’

‘Well, yes, but—’ Dolores stumbled over her words, blinking nervously. There was no way this supposed-apothecary could actually be in his second century, but his serious expression made her second-guess herself and look around the shelves for a potion for eternal youth. It was her first time speaking to someone new in months, and she was already making a fool of herself.

He laughed suddenly, causing Dolores’s heart rate to spike even further at the noise. ‘Sorry, I couldn’t help myself. Mr Marvel was my great-great-grandfather.’ He grinned, putting her out of her distress. There was a mischievous charm to his face. ‘I’m Septimus.’ He held out a hand. ‘What can I help you with?’

Dolores bristled, irritated by his joke. ‘I’d really rather speak to whoever else works here,’ she said, folding her arms over her

chest. She could feel her heart still racing against them. ‘Indeed, if you aren’t the original owner of the shop, kept alive by some magical elixir, then you seem far too young for much medical experience.’

‘On the contrary.’ Septimus drew himself up to his full height and crossed his arms too. ‘I am the most skilful apothecary you’ll find in this city! I grew up in this shop, watching first my grandfather, and then my father, mix every concoction and compound every pill imaginable. I was mixing tonics as an assistant apothecary by the age of five, and no one can outsmart me at diagnosing a disease or identifying what herbs will make which remedy.’

Dolores felt impressed, dropping her hands to her sides. ‘And where’s your father now?’

Septimus’s bravado faltered. ‘Ah . . . he’s not here,’ he remarked. He ran a hand through his hair, making the top stick up roguishly. ‘He is away travelling the world for new cures to benefit our loyal customers. Our stock is sourced from all over, you see, from Egypt to the Amazon rainforest.’ This answer sounded rather rehearsed, and Dolores guessed that he must get a lot of customers questioning his young age.

‘How exciting!’ she exclaimed. For Dolores, travelling a mile from her front door was a special adventure. ‘You must be very jealous.’

‘Please, there’s nowhere I’d rather be than right here with you in this shop.’ He grinned that charming smile again.

Dolores cleared her throat and looked away. ‘Well, there is something I’m after.’ She pulled out the crumpled advertisement. ‘I saw this in the newspaper. Does it really cure bad nerves?’

‘Would I advertise it if it didn’t? Rest assured, the Nerve Tonic

does wondrous things, I promise.’ Septimus ducked behind the counter and rummaged through a box of new stock. ‘Here you are!’

He plonked a large angular bottle on the counter. It was much bigger than Dolores had expected, and she instantly knew it would be hard to keep hidden from Louisa. The glass was clear, but the liquid inside was an emerald green that practically glowed. The label was similar in design to the advertisement, black tendrils weaving like ghostly fingers throughout the name: *NERVE TONIC*.

‘There’s nothing worse than a bout of nerves,’ said Septimus, regarding her with a glint to his eyes. ‘Worry, anxiety, hysteria, stress: they are all bound up in that one little word and make even the simplest of activities impossible to accomplish. Well, fear no more, Miss, uh . . . I didn’t catch your name?’

‘Dolores Rain.’

‘Fear no more, Dolores! This tonic will set all the phantoms in your life to flight. You’ll never be braver, never more courageous, than after a dose of this elixir! And the whole bottle is yours for the meagre price of . . .’ He coughed. ‘Three shillings.’

‘Three *shillings*?’

‘You can’t put a price on your health, Miss Rain.’

Dolores sighed and opened her purse, scraping together all her coins. ‘Fine, but you’ll have to pack it up for me and write “*Books*” on the side in big writing. My doctor doesn’t like me buying medicines.’

Septimus grimaced in understanding. ‘Doctors spend more time consulting books than they do listening to their patients. I recommend that all my customers keep an extensive medicine cabinet. You never know what ailment could strike you next! Let me make some suggestions . . .’

Under the apothecary’s advice, Dolores picked out a jar of

soothing candies for sore throats, a collection of herbs, a sleeping ointment, and a gloopy face paste which smelled like swamp water but reputedly gave women very beautiful skin. She also asked if she could buy the picture of the frog woman, because she desperately wanted to translate the Latin annotations and find out exactly what was going on.

‘Been puzzling over that one myself,’ said the apothecary, unpinning it from the counter and rolling it up. ‘You must promise to come back and tell me when you find out.’

‘I’m sure I’ll be returning here many times. You’ve been most helpful.’

‘It is my life’s vocation to make all my customers better, no matter their ailment. Now . . .’ He gestured back to the jar on the counter. ‘How about some leeches? They’re priced two for one, just for today, so you must stock up fast!’

Dolores waved her hand quickly. ‘No, thank you.’

He sighed. ‘Fair enough. They are a bind to feed . . .’

With everything from the candies to the face paste concealed in plain brown paper, Dolores waved goodbye. ‘Thank you for your help, Mr Marvel. I’ll visit again one day, unless this tonic cures me of everything as it’s supposed to do, in which case you won’t see me until I’m an old lady in need of a potion to make me young again.’

‘I’m working on just such a potion in my spare time,’ said the apothecary, tapping his head to signify all the ideas he had up there. ‘But please, you must call me Septimus. There is never an excuse for formalities when leeches are present.’

Dolores cast one last look around the strange shop. She wasn’t used to being treated with such a lack of formality, and it was a pleasant contrast to Doctor Hawthorne’s stern instructions.

The bell above the door chimed as she left. Her coachman didn't question why her bundle of books jangled, and she climbed into the carriage with a proud smile. Visiting such a curious shop was courageous in itself, and Dolores felt hopeful that the Nerve Tonic would bring even greater changes to her life.

3

Dolores was feeling more at ease than she had in months, so when Jack opened the door for her at the end of the journey, she had no trepidation and jumped straight on to the pavement.

‘Dolores? Is that you? Oh!’

The sudden voice, which was so happily high-pitched, drained the blood from Dolores’s face faster than any leech could accomplish. She dived back inside the carriage and yanked the door shut. Her fingers trembled on the handle.

‘Dolores, you funny creature!’ called the happy voice. ‘It’s me, Ada! What are you hiding in there for?’

‘I’m not hiding,’ Dolores retorted, her grip tightening. Socialising with the apothecary had been one thing, but she wasn’t ready for something as strenuous as reuniting with a friend. ‘I’m trapped. The door is stuck. We’ll have to talk later.’

The door on the other side of the carriage opened. 'You can get out of this door if you want.' A tall girl wearing a lilac bonnet ducked her head inside, her tresses of blond hair falling over Dolores's packages. 'Oh, you've been book shopping! Get anything good? I stopped at so many shops on the way home that I have twice as many suitcases as I did when my journey started.'

Dolores put a hand over her packages protectively. 'You're back for a short visit then?'

'No, I'm done with school. There's only so much you can learn before it's time to find a husband, I guess. The footmen are carrying my bags into the hallway as we speak.'

As well as being her neighbour, Ada Hawthorne had been one of Dolores's closest friends at Mademoiselle's Meritorious School for Girls, located in the Kent countryside. Their education had included genteel skills, such as how to sew, play the harpsichord and lure in fashionable young men. By the time that Dolores had left the school, Ada had already mastered these lessons and embroidered all the soft furnishings in their dormitory with complicated butterflies.

Dolores opened her mouth to say something friendly, like 'Welcome home', but didn't get a chance before Ada started chatting again at full speed.

'Of course, Father doesn't mind me leaving school because it was getting dreadfully expensive, and he needs to fund Theo's education in medicine and afford my dowry. He doesn't realise that I'll be much more expensive now than before, as obviously I'm going to need new dresses before I can appear in high society. It's crucial that I make friends while my lessons are still fresh in my mind, not that I've forgotten anything in a long time . . . but oh, how dreary

and old-fashioned you look, Dolores! Are you in . . . yes, mourning! How dreadful. I'd forgotten about that.'

Dolores tensed her shoulders as Ada suddenly wrapped her in an awkward hug. The various bottles in the packages that were supposed to contain books clunked in between them, but luckily, Ada had forgotten about those as well.

'I'm so sorry,' said Ada. 'I promise to be a sympathetic companion whenever you need to cry . . . but obviously, you'll have to wear something brighter when you come to dinner parties with me.'

'Actually, I'd rather not come to any—'

'You mustn't decide now. Wait until you see the lovely silk shawl I've bought to wear!'

Ada squeezed Dolores's hand before shoving her out of the compartment via the door that was supposed to be stuck. Directly behind Dolores's carriage was a second one with two horses, and a fleet of servants were ferrying boxes from its roof into the hall of the Hawthornes' family home.

'That one contains my books, and that one holds all my needles and threads. That reminds me, would you like your cushions embroidered?' Ada's eyes, always on the lookout for plain fabrics to inflict joyful patterns into, lingered from Dolores's dismal dress to the dark mourning sheets that hung in the windows of Dolores's house. 'Gosh, you've really taken a fancy to those dreary curtains, haven't you?'

'Those are mourning sheets . . .' Dolores trailed off, as looking up at the foreboding facade of Rain House, she noticed that the window of her second-floor study had been uncovered. And worse than that, there was someone just visible within the room.

This shadowy person stood beside a table placed in front of the

window. A collection of framed family portraits was displayed there, and the figure had picked one of them up to examine, blocking their face from view.

‘I seem to have an intruder!’ exclaimed Dolores anxiously. She certainly never had guests.

Ada put a hand to her bodice. ‘How frightful! I’ve got a pointy umbrella packed somewhere. Would you like me to help scare them away?’

Dolores would’ve appreciated the help, but she was sure that Ada would find the inside of the house even drearier than her mourning dress. ‘I can manage by myself,’ she said. ‘I’m bound to have a pointy umbrella in my closet too. It could just be one of the servants, anyway.’ Although, it was strange for them to have taken down the mourning sheet without her permission.

‘I’ll finish unpacking then,’ said Ada brightly. ‘We must meet up as soon as we can. Oh, I think my shawl is in that box!’ Hailing down one of her footmen, Ada ran back to her carriage and proceeded to open box after box in the middle of the street.

Dolores collected her own packages and hurried inside. Scared of running into Louisa while carrying her contraband medicine, she rushed upstairs to her bedchamber on the third floor to hide her packages under the four-poster bed. There was a thick sheet of dust underneath, so clearly Louisa hadn’t cleaned there in a long time.

After hiding the packages, Dolores rummaged through her walk-in closet and pulled out a suitably threatening umbrella. The fabric may have been bordered with malting black feathers, but there was also a sharp ebony point, which looked like it could cause some damage if needed.

Of course, it wasn’t her intention to face the potential intruder

alone. She had planned to sneak back downstairs and summon one of the servants, but just as she spied the study door, which stood slightly ajar, her foot slipped off the bottom step and she landed face down on the second-floor landing. The door opened at once and a man looked out with a mixture of alarm and curiosity. His eyes alighted on the crumpled heap of black lace and feathers.

‘Are you hurt?’ he asked, kneeling at her side.

‘Yes . . . um, no . . . my umbrella broke my fall.’ With her veil askew and loose feathers cascading down her, Dolores struggled to sit up in a more dignified fashion. She now noticed that the mysterious man was handsomer than any intruder she had imagined. She cursed under her breath for not recognising him sooner. It was Doctor Hawthorne’s son, Theodore. He had the same fair hair and easy smile as his younger sister, Ada, and his arresting blue eyes regarded her thoughtfully.

Dolores winced.

‘Here, let me help you,’ exclaimed Theo, mistaking her embarrassment for an injury. Before she could protest, he scooped her up in a pair of strong arms and carried her into the study, placing her gently on a low sofa before going back across the room to collect all the black feathers that had dropped off her during the journey. He deposited them in a little pile on the tea table. ‘Is your ankle sore?’ he asked. ‘Would you like me to pour you some tea? Tea mends any number of ailments.’

He reached over to the tea table, where a cup and teapot sat ready on a tray. Dolores observed that there was a second cup resting on the table by the window. The framed portraits had been put back askew, with the one of her sister Edith turned to face the light. Theo had been engaged to Edith before she’d passed, so the

photograph conjured up painful memories for both of them. Until a few months ago, Theo had worn nothing but black like Dolores, but he had decided to come out of mourning and now wore a summery beige suit and crimson cravat. He stood out starkly against the dark furnishings of the study, a vision of cheerful days.

‘This is an unexpected visit,’ Dolores said, taking the cup of tea with an air of suspicion. ‘Did Doctor Hawthorne send you to check up on me?’

‘He said there’s nothing wrong with you that more company wouldn’t fix. I’ve come to be a cure for your low spirits.’

Dolores choked on her tea. She’d already bought a cure and it was currently hidden under her bed.

‘You must get lonely cooped up in this house,’ Theo continued. ‘Ada is eager to drag you out at the first opportunity, and judging by the chatter I heard from the street, she must have already caught you. We both miss your friendship.’

‘I doubt I’m suited to anyone’s company any more.’ Dolores motioned to their surroundings, because the dark furnishings, piles of gloomy old books and black cushion covers couldn’t be more of a contrast to Theo’s sunny attire.

‘Melancholy doesn’t have to be your only companion,’ he replied. ‘Can you not make room for a little brightness in your day?’

Given the way that Theo held her gaze, she felt like he could see through her veil, and it made her feel rather vulnerable. All she wanted to do was cover up the window and return to her chamber, but Theo was a gentleman and that required certain manners and expectations; Dolores couldn’t just tell him to leave, not before they’d finished their tea. Theo spoke about melancholy in an earnest tone, but that didn’t mean that their grief for Edith was the same.

He still had his ambitions and career as a doctor ahead of him. More recently, he had even enjoyed success as a poet, publishing a volume to great acclaim in the literary circles of London. It was entitled *Forget-Me-Not*, a homage to Edith's favourite flower. Dolores had found a shared sympathy in his words, but she'd always been too reserved to admit it. The slim volume of poems was stacked with Dolores's other poetry books by the mantelpiece. She hoped Theo wouldn't notice.

Struck with silence even now, Dolores nodded along to Theo's attempts at a one-sided conversation. He remarked fondly on the tower of novels next to her chair and complimented her umbrella, not knowing that she had intended to scare him out of the house with it. Dolores's attention quickly drifted to the hidden bottles in her room, the Nerve Tonic beckoning her to bed. She snapped back to the conversation just in time to catch Theo saying: 'Don't you agree?'

'What? Yes . . . umm, absolutely.'

He smiled, regarding her with gentle eyes like one might consider a bird with a broken wing. He finished his tea and stood to leave. 'It's good to see you again, Dolores.'

Dolores jumped up. 'Oh, indeed.' She couldn't imagine what she had agreed to, unless it happened to be: '*Isn't it a good idea that I leave right this second?*', in which case she was pleased that he wasn't offended.

He crossed to the door, and as she pretended to wince again on her foot, she had a good excuse not to show him the way out. After waiting for the sound of the front door closing, Dolores hurried back up to her bedchamber. She occupied herself with a novel until it grew dark outside, and then pulled on the chain by her bed for

assistance. Soon enough, Louisa arrived to help Dolores get ready for bed.

‘You should have told Mr Hawthorne that I wasn’t home,’ Dolores said, as she slipped under the heavy bed sheets in her black nightgown. ‘And for once, it wouldn’t have been a lie.’

‘He was very persistent, ma’am,’ said Louisa, setting a candle next to the bed. ‘It’s a blessing to have friends who still care about you.’

Having friends felt more like an inconvenience. Dolores’s face turned crimson with embarrassment when she recalled Theo carrying her into the study. Louisa tended to Dolores with similar gentleness, but that was expected of a servant.

‘Sleep peacefully,’ said Louisa, stepping quietly out of the room.

The bedchamber took on a new eeriness as soon as Dolores was alone. Slipping out from beneath the covers, she ducked down beside the bed and pulled out the Nerve Tonic. The black stopper had a skull imprinted on the top, which didn’t feel soothing for an anxious patient, but she tried to ignore it as she opened the bottle. The luminous green liquid inside smelled very sharp, like alcohol, but also like crushed herbs. She took a big gulp.

Instantly, her throat constricted, and her tongue sizzled. She coughed and spluttered. Her head spun and her eyes saw double, the four-poster bed becoming an eight-poster prison cell. She reached desperately for the water jug on her bedside table, but her hands trembled and she dropped the bottle of Nerve Tonic. It landed on the floor and smashed.

Dolores was in too much of a panic to care. That apothecary had lied to her! His tonic wasn’t wondrous, or miraculous. It was disgusting! Did she feel less anxious? Had her nerves evaporated like steam out of a teapot?

No! Her heart jumped peculiarly, as if it had forgotten its usual rhythm, and her face in the mirror looked deathly pale and frightful.

The dressing table and mirror stood opposite the bed, and beyond her own appearance, Dolores could spy a second face in the dim room. She blinked, thinking she was still seeing double, but the face was attached to a body which was seated on the edge of her bed. It was a girl with dark hair like her own, inquisitive brown eyes and a hesitant smile. The expression matched a certain framed portrait in the study downstairs. Despite her grogginess, Dolores was in no doubt that she was staring at her dead sister.

‘Edith?’

Dolores didn’t want to turn around, staring at the mirror in the hope that the reflection would change.

The dread that had been sitting in her stomach burst out in an explosion of shrieks. Edith wore an elegant black gown, which Dolores recognised as the one her sister had been buried in. It was impossible to be seeing it now.

Her mind raced for a logical explanation, as her screams petered out. ‘How can I see you?’ she whimpered.

As soon as she spoke, the figure in the mirror swept away like mist. Dolores spun around. The bed lay empty, but she could see a shadow passing along the walls.

The shadow skipped to the door, then disappeared.

Dolores rushed to grab the candle and open the door. Sure enough, the shadow was still there, moving swiftly along the walls of the corridor.

She crept after it. Framed portraits hung all along the hallway, but each one had been covered with a black mourning sheet, just like the windows. She held the candle out ahead of her, and followed

the flitting shadow, which seemed to become more tangible as it roamed the house. Dolores could hear the patter of footsteps and the sweep of long skirts. Finally, the shadow veered off to the left, passing through another door.

Dolores stopped abruptly. It was the door to Edith's bedroom. Her death chamber.

No one had entered there in a year. The servants had shut it up and put sheets over all the furnishings to keep off the dust, lending the room the same grim finality as a pall over a coffin.

Pressing her ear to the door, Dolores sensed that the shadowy figure stood on the other side. Strange, laboured breathing rasped quick and urgent from within. Was Edith waiting for her?

Dolores turned the handle, but the door held stubbornly. She pulled and pushed, shaking it on its hinges. It wouldn't open. She knocked. 'Edith, can you hear me? I need to find the key! Edith?'

She crouched down and put her eye to the keyhole. She expected to see only darkness, but instead, an unusual scene opened out before her as if lit by the glow of some unseen lamp. She saw the outline of a four-poster bed like her own, with a pale, sickly girl propped up under the covers. A dark figure loomed over her, ominous and flickering like a hazy reflection. Dolores blinked and strained to see more. Her vision blurred in and out of focus, her body fighting against an urge to faint.

'What are you doing?' a shocked voice asked.

Dolores jumped and swung around, nearly dropping her candle.

Louisa stood in the dark corridor, staring at her with worried eyes. She had a set of house keys attached to her waist, which jangled as she moved closer. 'You shouldn't be out of bed at this hour, ma'am,' she said, taking the candle out of Dolores's shaking

fingers. 'Let alone screaming loud enough to wake the whole street! Are you sick?'

'I . . . I . . . Edith was . . .' Dolores motioned to the door feebly. She frantically knelt back down, peering through the keyhole, but the room beyond was dark. 'I need the key to Edith's room.'

'You've been crying about your sister,' said Louisa, her voice softening as she formed the most likely explanation. 'You should have come to find me right away if you were upset.'

'Didn't you hear a second set of footsteps?'

'I heard nothing besides your shrieking. Let's get you back to bed. You'll catch a chill standing out here.' Louisa took Dolores's hand and led her back to her bedroom. Her grip felt particularly tight, guiding Dolores like a child who had suffered a nightmare.

'I just need the key,' repeated Dolores, struggling to twist her hand free, although her legs were too weak to resist Louisa's brisk pace. 'Edith needs my help! She—'

'And how do you explain this?' They'd reached the bedroom, and Louisa's eyes flicked to the strange green puddle on the floor. She put the candle down and bent to pick up the fallen bottle. '*Nerve Tonic*? This is more medicine! You know what Doctor Hawthorne said.'

Dolores put a hand to her pounding head. 'I know. It's ghastly stuff. I made a mistake.'

'Well, then I hope you've learnt your lesson. You'd best go to bed properly this time. I'm not leaving until your eyes are shut.'

Dolores climbed into bed, but not even the warm sheets could stop her from shivering. From across the room, the dressing-table mirror reflected back the fear on her face, along with an unmistakable resemblance to Edith. Had she just imagined it all?

She thought about the skull on the bottle of Nerve Tonic. The medicine hadn't cured her nerves, but it had resurrected her buried fears. Doctor Hawthorne hadn't been able to save Edith, and now he had carelessly dismissed Dolores's own symptoms of unease.

Perhaps her nightmarish vision of Edith's deathbed was an omen of danger, or at the very least, a sign that the dead in Rain House were not at peace.