

## **LAURA'S BLACKBIRDS**

Laura Conlan leaned on the kitchen windowsill and watched the two blackbirds pecking the bird seed on the lawn. The pair had been returning for a couple of years to nest in the sycamore tree in her garden. She and Tom had come to regard them as members of the family. Tom had even suggested they start charging rent.

She had never been one for such whimsical thoughts.

As the thoroughly sensible one of the marriage, she had often chided Tom for his impractical nature and lively imagination. All through their lives together, she had been the organiser, the worrier. Her pale eyes misted and the crease between her eyebrows deepened. A fatal heart attack, just weeks away from his retirement, had been totally unexpected. She had almost not recovered from shock and grief.

To make matters worse, which she'd not thought possible, another disaster struck two months after his death - the blackbirds lost their young to marauding magpies. Laura was out when it happened. When she returned, she sensed immediately something was wrong. Glossy black feathers were strewn over the garden. There was no sound to be heard. No movement of air. Even though she was not given to fanciful thought, it felt like the world had stood still.

Her worst fears were confirmed when she discovered the nest, empty of chicks and close by, under a rose bush, the still warm body of the male blackbird. His dishevelled mate was perched on the fence just above Laura's head. Her body was peppered with bald patches, evidence of the assault she had defied in the fight to save her babies. She stayed while Laura buried him then flew away with a mournful cry. The sound cut into Laura's heart and she started to weep, the tears falling onto the rose that she had placed on his grave.

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A year later, almost to the date that Tom died, the lady blackbird returned. It was easy to recognise her – her mottled brown chest bore the memory of her injuries - but now she had a new mate. He was every bit as sleek and handsome as her first. Laura was delighted. It was a second chance for her and Laura. Nesting was only a few weeks away. The magpies had settled in the neighbourhood.

This time she would be ready.

This time she would not let them down.

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Laura was constantly on alert once the nest was rebuilt. Five delicate blue-green speckled eggs appeared one day from which emerged demanding hatchlings, blind and naked and heartbreakingly vulnerable. She would spring into action as soon as the harsh cawing of the magpies warned of an impending arrival. It became a common sight to see her running outside, whooping loudly as she brandished a broom over her head. This didn't seem to concern the pair, who quickly became used to this sight. In fact, when danger threatened, it seemed that they expected her appearance. The three of them made a formidable team. Laura began to think that the blackbirds understood what she was doing. She never mentioned this to anyone but knew that Tom would have understood. She had to chuckle at this thought. He would have been amazed at such fanciful notions. If he was looking down on her, another fanciful notion, he'd be cheering her from the heavenly sidelines. The chicks grew quickly and after a week, the nestlings were quite round, with fluffy, downy feathers. Laura knew that in another week they would become fledglings, then they would leave the nest, under the careful watch of their parents. Until then, the risks were still high and her job wasn't finished.

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One evening, as dusk settled and the night crept in, Laura grabbed her torch and went into the garden to put out bird seed and their favourite mealworms. She heard them singing in the tree and smiled happily. Before she turned back to the house, she swept the beam of the torch around the garden.

A movement caught the edge of the beam and she directed the torch towards it. With a gasp, she saw a dark shadow disappear behind a shrub at the bottom of the garden. A bolt of fear shot through her. For a moment she was paralysed. Then she glanced behind her, at the safety of the house. She hesitated. If it was a cat. She couldn't possibly go in until she'd seen it off. She picked her way over the lawn, keeping the torch directed at the shrub. As she neared, a figure separated from the foliage and stood.

It was a man.

Laura screamed. The torch dropped from her hand as he lunged forward. She wrestled with him but he was big and strong and threw her to the ground.

Her head swam.

Her ears were filled with the sound of rushing air.

She passed out.

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A face was hovering over Laura. She inhaled, ready to scream again but her eyes focused and a veil drew back to reveal the pleasant face of a young woman. A comforting smile, a perky black hat. Lower down, a dark jacket.

Laura drew some deep breaths and allowed the girl to raise her into a sitting position.

“I'm Policewoman Sharples. Kitty. You're quite safe. Are you alright, Mrs Downing?”

“A man. Outside. He attacked me...” Laura’s hand flew to her mouth and her eyes searched Kitty’s face. “How did you...?”

“Don’t worry. We’ve arrested him.” Her assurances relaxed Laura’s rigid body. “He’s at the station now. We think he’s responsible for several burglaries in the area recently.”

Laura sighed in relief. “Thank goodness you were nearby.”

Kitty shook her head. “We weren’t. Your neighbour rang us. She heard terrible screaming coming from your garden and thought someone was being murdered.”

Laura looked puzzled. Her lips pressed together as she tried to remember. “I’m sure I only screamed once, just before I fainted.”

Kitty smiled. “Not you. The man.”

“I don’t understand.”

“When we arrived, we found you unconscious on the lawn. He was curled up in a corner. He was babbling hysterically. Begging us to rescue him.” She paused to help Laura to her feet. “Shall I make a cuppa?”

Laura nodded and walked unsteadily into the kitchen.

She waited while Kitty filled the kettle and clicked it on. “What on earth would frighten him like that?”

Kitty began to laugh. “I think he’d lost his mind. It sounds unbelievable. When he calmed down, he said he’d been attacked by two birds.” She circled a finger by her head. “Obviously mental.”

Laura didn't reply. She chewed her lower lip for a moment as the words sank in. Then her face cleared and a smile began to lift the corners of her mouth.

Suddenly, from the garden, the silence was broken by chattering magpies. Laura grabbed the broom propped up by the back door and yanked the door open.

In front of an astonished Kitty, Laura brandished the broom and ran out, whooping and shouting with gusto.