

THE CANINE CONNECTION

By Betsy Hearne

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THE LAST thing Helen remembered seeing was an explosion of red.

The next thing she felt was being pressed down like cloth under a hot iron, the whole world leaning on her body.

“Luke,” she said. He had been practicing in the music room, an intricate Mozart concerto that echoed down the parquet hallway hour after hour. He would not quit till he got it right. Yet it was quiet now. Why was this iron pressing on her? She tried to remember past the explosion of red. There had been a crash. Something had fallen off the shelf—the dishes. All the dishes had come crashing down, and the floor had suddenly tilted and slid out from under her feet like she’d seen in a disaster film about a ship at sea, where the dining room piano comes loose during a storm and slides across the floor, crashing into tables full of diners and dishes. But she was not at sea, she was under an iron. She was in their apartment. Her mother was shopping. Her father was at the bank. Her brother was practicing—or not practicing anymore. Perhaps he was thinking about the music, staring out the window the way he did when he needed silence to sort out the sounds. And she had been making sandwiches for them because it was the maid’s day off and Luke wouldn’t stop to come into the kitchen. He didn’t think of lunch unless it appeared in front of him. How was it possible for a twin to be so different, she who sang hit songs with the radio and never missed a meal? Helen hummed a tune she’d heard that morning. It seemed a long time ago and the hum stuck in her throat. She had a terrible headache. Maybe she was dreaming, the nightmare where something’s chasing you but you can’t move your arms or legs. She could not move anything but her fingers. Then she heard, from far away, some kind of shouting, sirens screaming and screaming. Something shifted over her head and she passed out again.

It was still dark when she woke up and her body was full of pain. The church bells across the street rang the hour, but she lost count. She could hear a chipping sound, *chink, chink, chink*, like children throwing rocks, and then a dog barking frantically right over her head. Why was a dog barking over her head? She wished it would stop. Every sound felt like a shot. There was a rush of air and suddenly she could breathe more easily and hear the voices of men. She felt something cold and wet on the fingers of her right hand and tried to push it away. Then the iron was taken off her body and she was lifted, very slowly, but it was still too dark to see.

“She’s alive,” they said. “Get the word to her parents but tell them she’s hurt pretty bad.”

“Luke?” she asked. Nobody answered her. They were busy shifting her onto a stretcher and moving her and sticking her with needles. The church bells tolled again, twelve times. It must be midnight, she thought, but she could feel hot sunlight, and then her mind went dark.

She was on a narrow bed and her father was holding her hand. She knew by feeling the carved gold ring on his fourth finger. Someone was crying.

“She’s awake, Lillian, I think she’s awake.”

The crying stopped and the perfume her mother wore floated near. She felt her mother’s kiss, her father’s kiss, one careful kiss on each cheek, the only places that were not covered with bandage.

“Luke?” she asked. “Where’s Luke? What happened?”

It was a long time before she found out. They didn’t tell her right away. She picked it up in bits and pieces, like the rubble that was left of their apartment. The earthquake had flattened the building. What saved Helen was a steel beam fallen at an angle that prevented the ceiling from crushing her. No such beam protected Luke. The piano had splintered together with all of his bones.

She thought of the years crushed in that minute, the seventeen years that had already made him famous, the unknown years that would have seasoned him from prodigy to virtuoso to maestro. She thought of the sounds in all the concert halls silenced by crashing dishes. She could think endlessly, but she couldn’t cry. Perhaps the bandages that had covered her eyes for so long had sealed the tears. Her mother and father cried, separately and together. She could hear them sometimes at night. They did

not cry during the day, for her sake. She could hear them not crying during the day. It must have taken a lot out of them, mourning a dead genius and a blind debutante—blind and, by the feel of her face, scarred despite surgery. She thought of the dress her mother had hidden away in their new apartment. She found it in a box pushed to the back of her closet shelf, surely the same box her mother had carried home on the day of the earthquake, surely a surprise for the eighteenth birthday party concert—the concert for Luke, the party for her. It would be an expensive dress. Money was never an issue. Only perfection. Tall blue-eyed blondes can wear anything, her mother used to say, and have all the more reason to define their individual tastes. The dress felt like velvet, black or forest green or dusky rose or wine red. She would never know because she would never ask.

Helen leaned her head back against the armchair in her room and turned off the radio her mother had turned on earlier. She could not bear loud noises. Everything seemed loud to her now. Her parents had dared to buy her a guitar, which stayed quietly in its case. Before the crash she had requested one for her birthday in order to write a song, a song that had circled around in her head for quite a while before she realized it was not from the radio. The song was gone now. She no longer hummed little tunes. She rarely spoke.

“You are isolating yourself,” said her mother, but the isolation had begun in the small circle of space that saved her. Her mind stayed in that space though her body had escaped. *I only am escaped alone to tell thee.* A quote from Job in the Bible—she had read that in *Moby Dick* when she could still read.

“You will read again,” said her father. He talked about braille and books on tape. Now her parents were talking about a guide dog. “Oh, thanks,” said Helen, “the canine connection.” It was not as if she had ever relied on friends. She had Luke, or had *had* Luke—past perfect in the grammatical sense, in every sense.

“There’s no need to be sarcastic,” said her mother softly. “It was a dog that saved you, a search-and-rescue dog.”

“I thought the steel beam saved me.” “The dog found you.”

Helen remembered a cold, wet touch on the fingers of her right hand. “Maybe he should have left me there.”

“Helen! How can you talk like that?”

So she did not talk, not even to the therapist they hired to heal her invisible injuries. More and more she stayed sealed in that circle of space where it was still safe, where Luke reconsidered his interpretation of Mozart while staring out the music room window and her mother shopped for a velvet dress and her father juggled money at the bank. Not that she refused to cooperate. When they insisted on taking her to the Guide Dog Institute, she went. She met her dog and was as polite to him as he was to her.

“We’ve matched you with a German shepherd:” said her trainer, “very handsome, very intelligent.” Evidently it was a German shepherd that had found her—not the same one, obviously. She tried to look pleased. The dog’s fur was thick and soft. His ears reminded her of velvet. Brown or black velvet, she supposed. When he reached forward for the acquaintance sniff, his cold, wet nose touched the fingers of her right hand, which she pulled back abruptly.

The trainer said nothing for a moment, as if waiting.

“His name is Odin,” he said finally. “It’s an odd name, but the children in the family who raised him were studying mythology in school. Odin is the Norse god of—”

“I know who Odin is,” Helen interrupted. The god of art, culture, war, and the dead. The perfect companion for her.

Helen obediently learned the commands. Odin already knew them, of course, but he practiced with her stoically, tolerant of her mistakes and steadfast in the face of her impatience. She knew the trainer did not like her. His other students were grateful for their dogs. Helen felt nothing except more capable of crossing a street without clinging to her mother’s arm. Instead she had to cling to a dog’s halter, but at least Odin did not talk. He was a quiet dog and never intruded on her silence. Helen and Odin graduated from the training school and he took up residence in the apartment, where her mother asked her to brush him daily so he would not shed dark fur on the thick new bedroom rug. It was said to be white. Her mother had kept busy redecorating since they moved in. Helen knew this was a model of adjustment. She kept her door closed and, since she gave them no choice, her parents kept their distance.

Odin, too, kept his distance, but it was his own standard of distance, not hers. He stayed exactly close enough to respond as a working dog should when she needed him. There was never any attempt to insinuate himself comfortably on the chair or bed, to impose his head or paw on her lap. He stayed on the floor beside her wherever she was.

If she moved, he moved. Without asking, he redrew the circle of space around her to include himself, like a shadow-but too heavy for a shadow. His presence weighed on her, pressed on her heavy as iron. He was not a shadow but a *twin*. She stared sightlessly out the window, unable to move. Of course she walked him dutifully morning, noon, and night. Or did he walk her? She fed him, as the trainer had recommended, feeling her way with the can opener, measuring the dry lucid from a bag into what smelled like mashed meat, mixing it all together while the maid cleaned the kitchen after her mother's epicurean dinners. Life must go on.

Helen ate very little and she slept less and less, waking often to an explosion of red and a crash of dishes splintering on the tilted floor. Sounds real and imagined made the difference between day and night. This part of town was quiet. She could barely hear the church bells that pealed out every hour across the street from the old apartment. The traffic that passed outside her window was orderly, limited at night to the sibilant motors of homecoming Mercedes, Jaguars, old-fashioned Cadillacs, the occasional Rolls Royce.

Tonight the tires swished gently along the pavement. A scent of spring rain floated through the window toward the bed. Helen heard Odin sigh and felt the press of sleep, heavier, heavier. She was pinned beneath it and could not move. The red exploded again and again like an artery, pumping pain in spurts while cascades of dishes crashed around her, splintering bones and piano keys, and the floor tilted back and forth like a ship on hurricane seas. A siren screamed endlessly into her ears. She felt something cold and wet on the fingers of her right hand. She woke trying to push it away and sat up, but the siren continued screaming and there was another sound beside her rising from low and hollow to higher, ever hollower tones, a black hole of loneliness so unbearable that she could only open her own mouth as the ghost of Luke's Mozart tore loose from her throat and floated upward in a human howl. She could only throw back her head and howl with Odin while the siren screamed past their window.

When it faded away their howls died to cries. Runnels of tears ran down her face and neck and nightgown. There was a knock at the door and her mother rushed toward her on a pathway of delicate perfume.

"Helen, are you all right? We heard the most unearthly noise. A siren and . . . I don't know what." Her mother could not see tears in the dark.

Helen dropped her hand to the side of her bed and felt something cold and wet touch her fingers. She smoothed Odin's velvet ears and rested her hand on the strong bones of his head.

"We'll be all right now" She reached out her other hand as her mother turned to go.

"And Mama? Please leave the door open."