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**Opening Extract from...**

# I Am Half-Sick of Shadows

Written by Alan Bradley

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# I AM HALF-SICK *of* SHADOWS

*A Flavia de Luce Novel*

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For Shirley

. . . She hath no loyal knight and true,
The Lady of Shalott.

But in her web she still delights
To weave the mirrored magic sights,
For often through the silent nights
A funeral, with plumes and lights,
And music, went to Camelot;
Or, when the moon was overhead,
Came two young lovers lately wed.
"I am half-sick of shadows," said
The Lady of Shalott.

Alfred Tennyson
*"The Lady of Shalott"*

# · ONE ·

Tendrils of raw fog floated up from the ice like agonized spirits departing their bodies. The cold air was a hazy, writhing mist.

Up and down the long gallery I flew, the silver blades of my skates making the sad scraping sound of a butcher's knife being sharpened energetically on stone. Beneath the icy surface, the intricately patterned parquet of the hardwood floor was still clearly visible—even though its colours *were* somewhat dulled by diffraction.

Overhead, the twelve dozen candles I had pinched from the butler's pantry and stuffed into the ancient chandeliers flickered madly in the wind of my swift passage. Round and round the room I went—round and round and up and down. I drew in great lungfuls of the biting air, blowing it out again in little silver trumpets of condensation.

When at last I came skidding to a stop, chips of ice flew up in a breaking wave of tiny coloured diamonds.

It had been easy enough to flood the portrait gallery: An India-rubber garden hose snaked in through an open window from the terrace and left running all night had done the trick—that, and the bitter cold which, for the past fortnight, had held the countryside in its freezing grip.

Since nobody ever came to the unheated east wing of Buckshaw anyway, no one would notice my improvised skating rink—not, at least, until springtime, when it melted. No one, perhaps, but my oil-painted ancestors, row upon row of them, who were at this moment glaring sourly down at me from their heavy frames in icy disapproval of what I had done.

I blew them a loud, echoing raspberry tart and pushed off again into the chill mist, now doubled over at the waist like a speed skater, my right arm digging at the air, my pigtails flying, my left hand tucked behind my back as casually as if I were out for a Sunday stroll in the country.

*How lovely it would be,* I thought, *if some fashionable photographer such as Cecil Beaton should happen by with his camera to immortalize the moment.*

"Carry on just as you were, dear girl," he would say. "Pretend I'm not here." And I would fly again like the wind round the vastness of the ancient panelled portrait gallery, my passage frozen now and again by the pop of a discreet flashbulb.

Then, in a week or two, there I would be, in the pages

of *Country Life* or *The Illustrated London News*, caught in mid-stride—frozen forever in a determined and forward-looking slouch.

"*Dazzling . . . delightful . . . de Luce*," the caption would read. "*Eleven-year-old skater is poetry in motion.*"

"Good lord!" Father would exclaim. "It's Flavia!

"Ophelia! Daphne!" he would call, flapping the page in the air like a paper flag, then glancing at it again, just to be sure. "Come quickly. It's Flavia—your sister."

At the thought of my sisters I let out a groan. Until then I hadn't much been bothered by the cold, but now it gripped me with the sudden force of an Atlantic gale: the bitter, biting, paralysing cold of a winter convoy—the cold of the grave.

I shivered from shoulders to toes and opened my eyes.

The hands of my brass alarm clock stood at a quarter past six.

Swinging my legs out of bed, I fished for my slippers with my toes, then, bundling myself in my bedding—sheets, quilt, and all—heaved out of bed and, hunched over like a corpulent cockroach, waddled towards the windows.

It was still dark outside, of course. At this time of year the sun wouldn't be up for another two hours.

The bedrooms at Buckshaw were as vast as parade squares—cold, drafty spaces with distant walls and shadowy perimeters, and of them all, mine, in the far south corner of the east wing, was the most distant and the most desolate.

Because of a long and rancorous dispute between two of my ancestors, Antony and William de Luce, about the

sportsmanship of certain military tactics during the Crimean War, they had divided Buckshaw into two camps by means of a black line painted across the middle of the foyer: a line which each of them had forbidden the other to cross. And so, for various reasons—some quite boring, others downright bizarre—at the time when other parts of the house were being renovated during the reign of King George V, the east wing had been left largely unheated and wholly abandoned.

The superb chemical laboratory built by his father for my great-uncle Tarquin, or "Tar," de Luce had stood forgotten and neglected until I had discovered its treasures and made it my own. With the help of Uncle Tar's meticulously detailed notebooks and a savage passion for chemistry that must have been born in my blood, I had managed to become quite good at rearranging what I liked to think of as the building blocks of the universe.

"Quite good?" a part of me is saying. "Merely 'quite good'? Come off it, Flavia, old chum! You're a bloody marvel, and you know it!"

Most chemists, whether they admit it or not, have a favourite corner of their craft in which they are forever tinkering, and mine is poisons.

While I could still become quite excited by recalling how I had dyed my sister Feely's knickers a distinctive Malay yellow by boiling them in a solution of lead acetate, followed by a jolly good stewing in a solution of potassium chromate, what really made my heart leap up with joy was my ability to produce a makeshift but handy poison by scraping the vivid green verdigris from the

copper float-ball of one of Buckshaw's Victorian toilet tanks.

I bowed to myself in the looking glass, laughing aloud at the sight of the fat white slug-in-a-quilt that bowed back at me.

I leapt into my cold clothing, shrugging on at the last minute, on top of everything else, a baggy grey cardigan I had nicked from the bottom drawer of Father's dresser. This lumpy monstrosity—swarming with khaki and maroon diamonds, like an overbaked rattlesnake—had been knitted for him the previous Christmas by his sister, Aunt Felicity.

"Most thoughtful of you, Lissy," Father had said, deftly dodging any outright praise of the ghastly garment itself. When I noticed in August that he still hadn't worn the thing, I considered it fair game and it had, since the onset of cold weather, become my favourite.

The sweater didn't fit me, of course. Even with the sleeves rolled up I looked like a baggy monkey picking bananas. But to my way of thinking, at least in winter, woolly warmth trumps freezing fashion any day of the week.

I have always made it a point never to ask for clothing for Christmas. Since it's a dead cert that you'll get it anyway, why waste a wish?

Last year I had asked Father Christmas for some badly needed bits of laboratory glassware—had even gone to the trouble of preparing an itemised list of flasks, beakers, and graduated test tubes, which I tucked carefully under my pillow and, by the Lord Harry! he had brought them!

Feely and Daffy didn't believe in Father Christmas, which, I suppose, is precisely the reason he always brought them such dud gifts: scented soap, generally, and dressing gowns and slipper sets that looked and felt as if they had been cut from Turkey carpet.

Father Christmas, they had told me, again and again, was for children.

"He's no more than a cruel hoax perpetrated by parents who wish to shower gifts upon their icky offspring without having to actually touch them," Daffy had insisted last year. "He's a myth. Take my word for it. I am, after all, older than you, and I know about these things."

Did I believe her? I wasn't sure. When I was able to get away on my own and think about it without tears springing to my eyes, I had applied my rather considerable deductive skills to the problem, and come to the conclusion that my sisters were lying. *Someone*, after all, had brought the glassware, hadn't they?

There were only five possible human candidates. My father, Colonel Haviland de Luce, was penniless, and was therefore out of the question, as was my mother, Harriet, who had died in a mountaineering accident when I was no more than a baby.

Dogger, who was Father's general roustabout and jack-of-all-trades, simply hadn't the resources of mind, body, or finances to lug round lavish gifts secretly by night in a drafty and decaying country house. Dogger had been a prisoner of war in the Far East, where he had suffered so awfully that his brain had remained connected to those horrors by an invisible elastic cord—a cord that was

sometimes still given a jerk by cruel Fate, usually at the most inopportune moments.

"'E 'ad to eat rats!" Mrs. Mullet had told me, wide-eyed in the kitchen. "Rats, fancy! They 'ad to fry 'em!"

With everyone in the household disqualified for one reason or another as the Bringer of Gifts, that left only Father Christmas.

He would be coming again in less than a week and, in order to settle the question for once and for all, I had long ago laid plans to trap him.

Scientifically.

Birdlime, as any practical chemist will tell you, can be easily manufactured by boiling the middle bark of holly for eight or nine hours, burying it under a stone for a fortnight, and then, when it is disinterred, washing and pulverizing it in running river water and leaving it to ferment. The stuff had been used for centuries by bird-sellers, who had smeared it on branches to trap the songbirds they sold in the city streets.

The great Sir Francis Galton had described a method of manufacturing the stuff in his book *The Art of Travel; or, Shifts and Contrivances Available in Wild Countries*, a signed copy of which I had found among a heavily underlined set of his works in Uncle Tar's library. I had followed Sir Francis's instructions to the letter, lugging home in midsummer armloads of holly from the great oaks that grew in Gibbet Wood, and boiling the broken branches over a laboratory Bunsen burner in a stew pot borrowed—

without her knowledge—from Mrs. Mullet. During the final stages, I had added a few chemical twists of my own to make the pulverized resin a hundred times more sticky than the original recipe. Now, after six months of preparation, my concoction was powerful enough to stop a Gabon gorilla in its tracks, and Father Christmas—if he existed—wouldn't stand a chance. Unless the jolly old gentleman just happened to be travelling with a handy bottle of sulphuric ether, $(C_2H_5)2O$, to dissolve the birdlime, he was going to stay stuck to our chimney pot forever—or until I decided to set him free.

It was a brilliant plan. I wondered why no one had thought of it before.

Peering out through the curtains, I saw that it had snowed in the night. Driven by the north wind, white flakes were still swirling madly in the light of the downstairs kitchen window.

Who could be up at such an hour? It was too early for Mrs. Mullet to have walked from Bishop's Lacey.

And then I remembered!

Today was the day the intruders were arriving from London. How could I ever have forgotten such a thing?

It had been more than a month ago—on November 11, in fact, that grey and subdued autumn day upon which everyone in Bishop's Lacey had mourned in silence all those whom they had lost in the wars—that Father had summoned us to the drawing room to break the grim news.

"I'm afraid I have to tell you that the inevitable has

happened," he said at last, turning away from the window, out of which he had been staring morosely for a quarter of an hour.

"I needn't remind you of our precarious financial prospects . . ."

He said this forgetting the fact that he reminded us daily—sometimes twice in an hour—of our dwindling reserves. Buckshaw had belonged to Harriet, and when she had died without leaving a will (Who, after all, could even imagine that someone so brimming over with life could meet her end on a mountain in far-off Tibet?) the troubles had begun. For ten years now, Father had been going through the courtly steps of the "Dance of Death," as he called it, with the grey men from His Majesty's Board of Inland Revenue.

Yet in spite of the mounting pile of bills on the foyer table, and in spite of the increasing telephonic demands from coarse-voiced callers from London, Father had somehow managed to muddle through.

Once, because of his phobia about "the instrument," as he called the telephone, I had answered one of these brash calls myself, bringing it to rather an amusing end by pretending to speak no English.

When the telephone had jangled again a minute later, I picked up the receiver at once, then jiggled my finger rapidly up and down on the cradle.

"Hello?" I had shouted. "Hello? Hello? I'm sorry—Can't hear you. Frightful connection. Call back some other day."

On the third ring, I had taken the receiver off the hook and spat into the mouthpiece, which began at once to give off an alarming crackling noise.

"Fire," I had said in a dazed and vaguely monotonous voice. "The house is in flames . . . the walls and the floor. I'm afraid I must ring off now. I'm sorry, but the firemen are hacking at the window."

The bill collector had not called back.

"My meetings with the Estate Duty Office," Father was saying, "have come to nothing. It is all up with us now."

"But Aunt Felicity!" Daffy protested. "Surely Aunt Felicity—"

"Your aunt Felicity has neither the means nor the inclination to alleviate the situation. I'm afraid she's—"

"Coming down for Christmas," Daffy interrupted. "You could ask her while she's here!"

"No," Father said sadly, shaking his head. "All means have failed. The dance is over. I have been forced at last to give up Buckshaw—"

I let out a gasp.

Feely leaned forward, her brow furrowed. She was chewing at one of her fingernails: unheard of in someone as vain as she.

Daffy looked on through half-shut eyes, inscrutable as ever.

"—to a film studio," Father went on. "They will arrive in the week before Christmas, and will remain in full possession until their work is complete."

"But what about us?" Daffy asked. "What's to become of us?"

"We shall be allowed to remain on the premises," Father replied, "provided we keep to our quarters and don't interfere in any way with the company's work at hand. I'm sorry, but those were the best terms I could manage. In return, we shall receive, in the end, sufficient remuneration to keep our noses above water—at least until next Lady Day."

I should have suspected something of the kind. It was only a couple of months since we had received a visitation from a pair of young men in scarves and flannels who had spent two days photographing Buckshaw from every conceivable angle, inside and out. Neville and Charlie, they were called, and Father had been exceedingly vague about their intentions. Supposing it to be just another photo visit from *Country Life*, I had put it out of my mind.

Now Father had been drawn again to the window, where he stood gazing out upon his troubled estate.

Feely got to her feet and strolled casually to the looking glass. She leaned in, peering closely at her own reflection.

I knew already what was on her mind.

"Any idea what it's about?" she asked in a voice that wasn't quite her own. "The film, I mean."

"Another one of those blasted country house things, I believe," Father replied, without turning round. "I didn't bother to ask."

"Any big names?"

"None that I recognize," Father said. "The agent rattled on and on about someone named Wyvern, but it meant nothing to me."

"*Phyllis* Wyvern?" Daffy was all agog. "Not *Phyllis* Wyvern?"

"Yes, that's it," Father said, brightening, but only a little. "Phyllis. The name rang a bell. Same name as the chairwoman of the Hampshire Philatelic Society.

"Except that *her* name is Phyllis *Bramble*," he added, "not Wyvern."

"But Phyllis Wyvern is the biggest film star in the world," Feely said, openmouthed. "In the *galaxy!*"

"In the universe," Daffy added solemnly. "*The Crossing Keeper's Daughter*—she played Minah Kilgore, remember? *Anna of the Steppes . . . Love and Blood . . . Dressed for Dying . . . The Secret Summer.* She was supposed to have played Scarlett O'Hara in *Gone With the Wind*, but she choked on a peach stone the night before her screen test and couldn't speak a word."

Daffy kept up to date on all the latest cinema gossip by speed-reading magazines at the village newsagent's shop.

"She's coming here to Buckshaw?" Feely asked. "Phyllis Wyvern?"

Father had given the ghost of a shrug and returned to staring glumly out of the window.

I hurried down the east staircase. The dining room was in darkness. As I walked into the kitchen, Daffy and Feely looked up sourly from their porridge troughs.

"Oh, there you are, dear," said Mrs. Mullet. "We was just talkin' about sendin' up a search party to see if you was still alive. 'Urry along now. Them fillum people will be 'ere before you can say 'Jack Robertson.' "

I bolted my breakfast (clumpy porridge and burnt toast with lemon curd) and was about to make my escape when the kitchen door opened and in came Dogger on a rush of cold, fresh air.

"Good morning, Dogger," I said. "Are we picking out a tree today?"

For as long as I could remember, it had been a tradition for my sisters and me, in the week before Christmas, to accompany Dogger into the wood on Buckshaw's eastern outskirts, where we would gravely consider this tree and that, awarding each one points for height, shape, fullness, and general all-round character before finally selecting a champion.

Next morning, as if by magic, the chosen tree would appear in the drawing room, set up securely in a coal scuttle and ready for our attentions. All of us—except Father—would spend the day in a blizzard of antique tinsel, silver and gold garlands, coloured glass balls, and little angels tooting pasteboard trumpets, hovering as long as we could over our small tasks until late in the darkening afternoon when, reluctantly, the thing was done.

Because it was the single day of the year upon which my sisters were a little less beastly to me than usual, I looked forward to it with barely suppressed excitement. For a single day—or for a few hours at least—we would be carefully civil to one another, teasing and joking and

sometimes even laughing together, as if we were one of those poor but cheerful families from Dickens.

I was already smiling in anticipation.

"I'm afraid not, Miss Flavia," Dogger said. "The Colonel has given orders for the house to be left as is. Those are the wishes of the film people."

"Oh, bother the film people!" I said, perhaps too loudly. "They can't keep us from having Christmas."

But I saw at once by the sad look on Dogger's face that they could.

"I shall put up a little tree in the greenhouse," he said. "It will keep longer in the cool air."

"But it won't be the same!" I protested.

"No, it won't," Dogger agreed, "but we shall have done our best."

Before I could think of a reply, Father came into the kitchen, scowling at us as if he were a bank manager and we a group of renegade depositors who had somehow managed to breach the barriers before opening time.

We all of us sat with eyes downcast as he opened his *London Philatelist* and turned his attention to spreading his charred toast with pallid white margarine.

"Nice fresh snow overnight," Mrs. Mullet remarked cheerily, but I could see by her worried glance towards the window that her heart was not in it. If the wind kept blowing as it was, she would have to wade home through the drifts when her day's work was done.

Of course, if the weather were too severe, Father would have Dogger ring up for Clarence Mundy's taxicab—but with a stiff winter crosswind, it was always touch and go

whether Clarence could plough through the deep piles that invariably drifted in between the gaps in the hedgerows. As all of us knew, there were times when Buckshaw was accessible only on foot.

When Harriet was alive, there had been a sleigh with bells and blankets—in fact, the sleigh itself still stood in a shadowy corner of the coach house, behind Harriet's Rolls-Royce Phantom II, each of them a monument to its departed owner. The horses, alas, were long gone: sold at auction in the wake of Harriet's death.

Something rumbled in the distance.

"Listen!" I said. "What was that?"

"Wind," Daffy replied. "Do you want that last piece of toast, or shall I have it?"

I grabbed the slice and gobbled it down dry as I dashed for the foyer.