

Samson, Isles of Scilly
December 1798

He had not allowed for the weight. The cold he anticipated, the water's sluggish buoyancy, this too he considered. The darkness? The lantern does well enough, and his memory allows for shortfalls in sight. But the weight . . . this is something else altogether.

The lantern itself is manageable. It is bound to his wrist with thick twine, affording movement in both hands, but it pulls down uncomfortably on his arm and the salt water stings where the twine has already rubbed the skin. The ropes looped under each armpit – one for the salvage, one to raise him again – are cumbersome, but they help balance his body as he descends. The sinking weights, too, although bulky, can be endured.

The problem is the harness. Strong tin plate. Domed and airy around his head, further down it constricts his torso like an unforgiving corset. On deck it did not feel so heavy. Below the surface, however, the restrictive leather suit, the iron hoop skeleton that pinches meanly, together with the pressure of water and the winter currents . . . He will demand more money once the job is done.

Luck has been with him so far this night. The sky's inky cradle is starred, the moon full and fat. During the storm he took careful note of his surroundings – the ship finally succumbed on the shoals of two small islands separated by an isthmus, their inlands pitted with stone

ruins. In the moonlight these ruins shone white, a beacon for their small sailboat, and despite the December squalls the ship's starboard beam end is still visible above the waves. No, the wreck was not difficult to find.

So why is it he feels he has been led here?

Thankfully the ship rests in the shallows. He has not used this apparatus before and will not venture any deeper than he must. Twenty feet below the surface. No danger there, he tells himself. And he knows exactly where to look. Under careful instruction the object he seeks was safely hidden within the starboard bow, away from the other shipments tightly packed in the hold, but the ship broke apart in the storm; he hopes his luck stays true, that the crate has not strayed too far along the seabed, that no one else has managed to retrieve it.

The icy water needles his legs and arms. Cocooned in the heavy suit he descends further, breathing with effort, tasting the sharp taint of metal. The air pipes leading from the harness to the surface are long, and he imagines them stretching behind him like a hangman's rope. He holds the lantern in front of his body, looks through the eyeglass of the harness dome, relieved to see the shadow of the ship's ribs. Down he goes, then, searching, squinting into the murk. He thinks he hears a sound below him, something low and plaintive. He tilts his head, feels his ears pop, continues on.

His feet land. Beneath them, shifting grit. He angles his head and tries to look down. But carefully. Too sudden a movement, he was warned, and the water will seep through the harness. Slowly, yes, slowly. There. The corner of something. Using the ball of his foot he pushes himself off, back into the current. Then he sinks again, making contact with the seabed, raising the lantern to eye level. Six feet or so from the ship's remains he just makes out the dark corners of a crate. The blood pulses loudly in his ears. This is it, he is sure. He

edges slowly forward, puts one leg in front of him, then another, his feet dragging through the water. He jumps as something brushes against his shins, and lowering the lantern he watches seaweed dance around his calves.

The crate balances precariously on a large rock. He inches closer, raises the lantern again. The X he painted on its side when the ship left Palermo is clear, even in this deep aquatic dark. For a moment he marvels at how easy all this has been but then the lantern flickers and dips before flaring once again, and he knows that now is not the time to dawdle.

Releasing the twine from his wrist, he places the lantern between two hunks of wreckage so it will not turn up in the current, then unhooks one of the ropes from his arms and begins the painstaking task of securing the crate. He must be careful – there is no room for error – and the rock is a blessing it seems, for without it he would have struggled to lift the crate from the seabed at all. As he works small fish dash and dart about him. At one point he stops, strains to hear within the tin plates of the harness. Is that singing? No, it is the water sickness, it must be. Was he not told that staying under too long can be deadly?

But so soon?

He works fast now, as fast as he is able with the harness weighing him down. He wraps the rope around the crate four times and though his fingers are stiff with cold, he ties knots so tight the rope will need cutting free. When he is satisfied he pulls sharply on it – once, twice – signalling to the surface. The length jumps, slackens, becomes taut. Then, triumphant, he watches the crate ascend in a cloud of billowing sand. He hears the muffled groan of wood, the sluggish surge of stirring water and, so quietly he believes he has imagined it, the soft, haunting, almost-whisper of a woman, sighing.

London
January 1799

PART I.

The mind is its own place, and in itself
Can make a Heaven of Hell, a Hell of Heaven.

JOHN MILTON
Paradise Lost (1667)

CHAPTER ONE

Dora Blake has been hunched over her desk since dawn. The stool she sits on is too tall but she has become accustomed to its awkward height. Every now and then she lays down her pliers, removes her spectacles and pinches the bridge of her nose. Often she kneads the knots in her neck, stretches her back until she feels the pleasant crack of spine.

The attic room is north-facing and offers little light. In frustration Dora has moved her desk and stool beneath the small window for this is intricate work, and her lone candle is not fit for purpose. She shifts uncomfortably on the hard seat, replaces her spectacles and applies herself once more, doing her best to ignore the cold. The window is open at its widest, despite the New Year chill. Any moment she expects Hermes to return with a new treasure, something to crown this latest creation of hers, and she has opened his cage door in readiness, the remains of her stolen breakfast scattered beneath the perch to reward what she hopes will be a fruitful morning's hunt.

She sucks her bottom lip between her teeth, angles the pliers against her thumb.

To replicate cannetille was ambitious of her but Dora is, if anything, an optimist. Some might call this optimism mere wilfulness, but she feels her ambition is justified. She knows – *knows* – she has

a talent. She is positively convinced it will be recognised one day, that her designs will be worn all across the city. Perhaps, Dora muses, the corner of her mouth twitching as she eases a particularly tiny wire into place, across Europe. But then she shakes her head, tries to pluck her lofty dreams from the woodwormed beams above her and concentrate. It will not do to be distracted and ruin hours of work at the last hurdle.

Dora cuts another piece of wire from the roll hooked over a nail on the wall.

The beauty of cannetille is that it imitates fine lace. She has seen parure sets on display in Rundell & Bridge and marvelled at their intricate designs; a necklace, earrings, bracelet, brooch and tiara would have been the work of months. Briefly Dora had contemplated creating the matching pair of earrings from her sketch, but grudgingly admitted her time was better spent elsewhere. This necklace is only an example after all, a means to demonstrate her skill.

‘There!’ she exclaims, snipping the excess wire with a pair of fine-handled clippers. The clasp has been bothering her all morning for it proved damnably fiddly but now it is done, worth the dark early start, the strain of back, the numbness of buttock. She lays down the cutters, blows into her hands and rubs them hard together, just as a flurry of black and white descends from the rooftops with a furtive caw.

Dora sits back and smiles.

‘Good morning, my heart.’

The magpie sails through the window, lands softly on the bed. Around the bird’s neck swings the small leather pouch she has sewn for him. Hermes’ neck is bowed – there is weight to it.

He has found something.

‘Come then,’ Dora says, closing the window tight against the winter chill. ‘Show me what you’ve scurried up.’

Hermes chirps, dips his head. The pouch strap slackens and the

bird patters back, shaking his beak free. The pouch sags and Dora reaches for it, excitedly tips the contents on the worn coverlet.

A broken piece of earthenware, a metal bead, a steel pin. She can use all of these for something or other; Hermes never disappoints. But her attention is drawn to another item on the bed. She picks it up, raises it to the light.

‘Ach nai,’ Dora breathes. *‘Yes, Hermes. It is perfect.’*

Between her fingers she holds a flat oval pebble, made of glass, the size of a small egg. Against the grey of the city’s skyline it shines a pale, almost milky blue. In cannetille designs amethysts are the preferred stone; the rich purple hue glints brightly against the gold, enhancing the intensity of the yellow. But it is aquamarine that Dora likes best. It reminds her of Mediterranean skies, the warmth of childhood. This smooth piece of glass will do just nicely. She closes her hand around it, feels its soft surface cool against her palm. She gestures to the magpie. With a blink of his black eye he hops onto her fist.

‘I think that deserves a nice breakfast, don’t you?’

Dora guides him into his cage. His beak scrapes against the wooden base as he scrabbles at the crusts of bread she left for him earlier. Gently she strokes his silken feathers, admires their rainbow sheen.

‘There, my treasure,’ she croons. *‘You must be tired. Is that not better?’*

Engrossed now in his meal Hermes ignores her, and Dora returns to her desk. She looks down at the necklace, contemplates her handiwork.

She is, she must confess, not entirely satisfied. Her design, so beautifully imagined on paper, is a poor show realised. What should be tendrils of coiled gold is merely dull grey wire twisted into miniature loops. What would have been shining seed pearls are instead roughly hewn shards of broken porcelain.

But Dora never expected it to match her drawing. She lacks the right tools and materials, the correct training. It is, however, a start; proof that there is beauty to her work, for despite the crude materials there is an elegance to the shapes she has wrought. No, Dora is not satisfied, but she is pleased. She hopes it will do. Surely with this pebble as a centrepiece . . .

There is a bang, the jangle of a distant bell.

‘Dora!’

The voice that calls up from three storeys below is hard, sharp, impatient. Hermes chirps irritably in his cage.

‘Dora,’ the voice barks again. ‘Come down and manage the shop. I’ve urgent business at the dock.’

The statement is followed by the dull thud of a door closing, another one, far off. Then, silence.

Dora sighs, covers the necklace with a piece of linen, places her spectacles down alongside it. She will have to add the glass pebble later, when her uncle has retired to bed. With regret Dora props it against the candlestick where it wobbles briefly before falling still.



Hezekiah Blake’s Emporium for Exotic Antiquities stands out against the coffee-house and haberdasher’s it sits between. Its window is large and bowed, obtrusive to passers-by who often find themselves compelled to stop due to its sheer size. But the street is where many of these passers-by stay – nowadays few linger when they realise the window with its peeling frame has nothing more exotic in it than an armoire from the last century and a landscape painting reminiscent of Gainsborough. Once a booming establishment it now houses only forgeries and dust-furred curiosities that hold no real appeal for the

public, let alone a discerning collector. Why her uncle felt the need to call Dora downstairs is beyond her; she may well pass this morning without seeing a single customer.

In her father's day, business was brisk. She might have only been a child during those golden years but she remembers the kind of clientele that Blake's entertained. Viscounts would flock to Ludgate Street to request their Berkeley Square townhouses be decorated in a manner that recalled the beauties of the Grand Tour. Men successful in their trade might commission a centrepiece for their shop. Private collectors would pay handsomely for her father Elijah and his wife to excavate ruins overseas. But now?

Dora closes behind her the door that separates the living quarters from the shop floor. The bell tinkles a cheerful greeting as the door slides back into its casement but she remains tight-lipped in the face of it. If it is not Lottie Norris keeping a beady eye on her then the dratted bell Hezekiah installed does well enough to curtail her comings and goings.

Tucking her shawl tight around her shoulders Dora comes full onto the shop floor. It is crammed with furniture, ugly items arranged haphazardly against one another, and bookcases filled to the brim with volumes that do not look a day over ten years old. Hefty sideboards stand side by side, cluttered with mediocre trinkets spread over their unwaxed surfaces. Yet despite the disorder there is always a wide path that winds its way between the wares, for at the far end of the shop are the large doors that lead down to the basement beneath.

Hezekiah's private sanctuary.

The basement had once been her parents' domain – their office, the place where they mapped excavations and restored broken stock. But when Hezekiah moved from his tiny set of rooms in Soho to take over the living he overhauled it completely, erased all trace of her mother and father until only Dora's fleeting memories of them

remained. Nothing in Blake's Emporium is what it once was; the business has dwindled, its reputation along with it.

Dora flips over a new page of the ledger (only two entries yesterday) and scrawls the date in its margin.

They do make sales. Over the course of the month money drips slowly but steadily in, like the water from their leaking roof. But each sale is based on lies, on showmanship. Hezekiah attaches all sorts of fantastical histories to his objects. A wooden chest was the means by which a slaver transported two children from the Americas in 1504 (made only the week before by a Deptford carpenter); a pair of ornate candlesticks belonged at one time to Thomas Culpeper (served up by a blacksmith in Cheapside). Once, Hezekiah sold a brothel keeper a green velvet sofa he claimed was owned by a French count during the Thirty Years' War, salvaged when his 'most glorious' *château* burnt to the ground (the count was in fact a desperate widow who sold it to Hezekiah for three guineas to go toward paying her husband's debts). He even furnished the upper rooms of a molly house with six Japanese screens from the Heian period (painted himself in the basement below). If his customers cared to question the authenticity of these items, Hezekiah would have felt the cold hard floor of the Old Bailey beneath his knees long before now. But they do not question. The calibre of them, their appreciation of fine art and antiquities, is distinctly lacking.

Forgeries, Dora has discovered over the years, are not unheard of in antiquity circles. Indeed, many with money to spare commission copies of items they have seen in the British Museum or have admired abroad. But Hezekiah . . . Hezekiah does not admit to his deceit, and there is where the danger lies. Dora knows what the punishment is for such trickery – a heavy fine, a turn on the pillory, months in prison. Her stomach twists sickly at the thought. She could have reported Hezekiah, of course, but she depends on him – her uncle, the shop,

they are all she has – and until she can make her own way in the world Dora must stay, must watch the business sink year by year, watch the Blake name become worthless, forgotten.

Not all of the stock is counterfeit, she concedes. The trinkets Hezekiah has accumulated over the years (and from which she sneaks supplies every now and then) make for a small and steady income – glass buttons, clay pipes, tiny moths suspended in blown glass, toy soldiers, china teacups, painted miniatures . . . Dora looks down once more at the ledger. Yes, they make sales. But the money that comes in is just enough to pay Lottie’s wage and feed them all, though where Hezekiah finds the coin to fund his little vanities Dora does not know, and nor does she wish to. It is enough that he has sullied the living her father left behind. It is enough that the building falls to ruin, that there is precious little left to pay for the repairs. If the place belonged to her—Dora shakes the melancholy thought from her head, trails a fingertip along the counter, lip curling when it comes up black. Does Lottie never clean?

As if on cue, the bell tinkles again and Dora turns to find the older woman poking her face through the crack in the door.

‘You’re up, missum. Are you having breakfast? Or have you already helped yourself?’

Dora eyes Hezekiah’s housekeeper – a stocky soft-mouthed woman with small eyes and straw-coloured hair – with scorn. Outwardly she looks as though she would fit the role perfectly, but Lottie Norris is as far from excelling in the domestic realm as Dora’s uncle is from mastering athleticism. No indeed, Lottie is in Dora’s opinion altogether too lazy, too opinionated and, like tar on a gull’s wing, noxious, hard to remove, and wily with it.

‘I’m not hungry.’

But Dora *is* hungry. The bread was consumed over three hours ago, yet she knows that if she asks for more Lottie will make a point of

mentioning to Hezekiah that she has been stealing from the larder and Dora has no patience for his hypocritical lectures.

The housekeeper steps into the shop, looks at her with eyebrows raised.

‘Not hungry? You hardly ate a thing at dinner last night.’

Dora ignores this, instead raises her finger to show the black.

‘Shouldn’t you be cleaning?’

Lottie frowns. ‘In here?’

‘Where else do you suppose I mean?’

The housekeeper scoffs, swings a stout arm through the air like a fan. ‘It’s a shop for antiquities, isn’t it? They’re meant to be dusty. That’s the charm.’

Dora turns her face away, purses her lips at Lottie’s tone. Always she has treated Dora like this, as if she were nothing more than a servant herself and not, in fact, the daughter of two reputable antiquarians and the niece of the current proprietor. Behind the counter Dora straightens the ledger, begins to sharpen the pencil to a fine point, biting down the bitter words on her tongue; Lottie Norris is not worth the breath it would take to scold her, nor would it do any good if she did.

‘You sure you want nothing?’

‘I’m sure,’ Dora says shortly.

‘Please yourself.’

The door begins to close. Dora lowers the pencil.

‘Lottie?’ The door stops. ‘What was so important at the dock that Uncle had me mind the shop?’

The housekeeper hesitates, scrunches her stub nose. ‘How’m I to know?’ she says, but as the door swings shut behind her, infernal bell tinkling, Dora thinks Lottie knows very well.

CHAPTER TWO

Creed Lane teems like maggots in an open sore.

The traffic seems to have spilled over from the heaving maw of Ludgate Street, flooding into side streets with the ferocity of a burst riverbank. The smells so unique to the city seem more pungent in such close quarters – soot and rotten vegetables, fish on the turn. He keeps a handkerchief clasped firmly to his mouth and nose. When he finally emerges onto the quieter slope of Puddle Dock Hill, Hezekiah Blake breaks into the fastest walk his corpulent body can manage.

The letter – crumpled now from excessive reading – arrived over two weeks ago, and while he anticipated the time it takes to travel such a distance he expected the Coombes to arrive long before now; Hezekiah's patience wears dangerously thin.

Slowing, he lowers his handkerchief and tries to catch his breath. His inclination to idleness is apparent from his squat build, though at fifty-two he sees this as quite, quite ordinary, for a man so long in trade like himself must surely be expected to enjoy the fruits of his labours. Hezekiah tugs at his wig, tweaks the lip of his newest hat, smooths a hand down the muslin waistcoat stretched tight across his rounded belly. Indeed, he is sorry not to be more at liberty to indulge – the luxuries that could be his! – but soon, he thinks with a smile, soon

he will be free to indulge all he likes. He has waited in long sufferance these past twelve years. Very soon, his wait will be over.

As he approaches Puddle Dock, Hezekiah lifts his handkerchief once more. He uses this particular wharf for all his more questionable transactions. Here the stench of filth is at its most pungent. Primarily a laystall for the soils of London's streets, shipments here are unlikely to be monitored. He is thankful that this particular transaction will be conducted in the depths of deepest winter for in the summer months the fumes of shit steam and rise, sinking into everything they touch: nostril hair and eyelashes, the very clothes on his back, shipments large and small. The last thing he wants is for this most precious item to be tainted with the stench. No, he thinks, that would not do at all.

This dock is small and narrow as docks go, enclosed between two towering buildings with boarded-up windows. Hezekiah must press his back to the grimy walls to get past the bustle of dockers, tries unsuccessfully to ignore the night-soil men emptying their carts of excrement, the unappealing slop and smack of brim-filled buckets hitting the cobbles. His heel skids on something slick (Hezekiah refuses to entertain the thought of what it might be) and he barrels into the back of a Chinaman holding a bucket, its filthy contents threatening to spill over at the collide. As he reaches out a hand to steady himself against the wall Hezekiah stares, affronted, but there is no apology, no sign the man has even registered his presence at all and he has moved along before Hezekiah can press the matter. Eyes watering he breathes deeply into cotton, continues unsteadily down the sloping ramp to the river's edge.

The foreman, directing the night slop on the barges to be taken downriver, has his back to Hezekiah, and the older man must call out across the racket to be heard.

'Mr Tibb, if you please! Mr Tibb!'

Jonas Tibb half-turns his head to see who calls for him then looks back to the barges, and with a gesticulation toward the river says something Hezekiah cannot hear. The foreman turns fully then, makes his way up the dock steps, onto the sloping bank where Hezekiah impatiently waits.

‘Again, Mr Blake?’ Tibb hooks filthy thumbs over the waistband of his trousers, glances back across to the river. The weather – while cold – has remained dry and bright; the water is as still as a duck pond, smooth as glass. ‘I told you yesterday there had been no sign. That’s changed none since the sun has set and risen.’

Hezekiah’s shoulders slump. He feels the stirring of annoyance in his belly, the harsh punch of renewed disappointment. Seeing his face Tibb sighs, removes his woollen cap, rubs at his bald head.

‘Sir, you already said your men won’t be taking the quicker route by road. It’s nearly five hundred miles from Samson and with winter tides you can always expect a day or two delay. Why must you keep coming here when I’ve told you I’ll send word?’

Usually Hezekiah would not stand for such talk. He is a reputable tradesman after all and this man would ordinarily be beneath his notice, but Jonas Tibb has never once questioned why Hezekiah wishes to conduct his business in such a way and the foreman’s discretion has always been unwavering.

‘Hell’s teeth, Tibb. You have no notion of its import. I paid good money to claim this shipment.’

Money, he thinks now with unease, he could ill afford.

Tibb lifts his shoulders in what seems to be the beginnings of a shrug before he appears to think better of it. His watery grey eyes crinkle in a half-smile.

‘I’m sure the Coombes won’t be letting you down. They never have, have they?’

Hezekiah brightens. ‘No, no indeed, they have not.’

Tibb nods curtly, replaces his hat, and Hezekiah grunts now, annoyed with himself for displaying weakness in front of a lowborn.

‘Well, then,’ he says. ‘I shall look forward to hearing from you in due course. I expect a note delivered as soon as you see his boat coming in, do you understand?’

‘Aye, sir.’

‘Very good.’

And so Hezekiah – handkerchief once more *in situ* – makes the distasteful journey back up to Puddle Dock Hill, through the cramped cesspit of Creed Lane and onto the crowded bustle of Ludgate Street, but his mind is all a muddle, his temper most aggrieved, despite the foreman’s words.

Where *are* they? Where is his shipment, his most longed-for prize? Perhaps something has happened – an ambush, or perhaps the Coombes have run off with it – or – and here Hezekiah barks a laugh that causes a milkmaid to look at him oddly and tip her yoke – it has *sunk!* No, the thought is too awful, too ironically funny to consider. Quick, he thinks, quick! He must have something to ease his turmoil.

Hezekiah’s attention is now drawn to shop windows, eyes darting like billiard balls at the break. A new snuffbox? No, he already has two. Another wig? He touches the fine coil at his ear, the silkiness of carefully chosen human hair. Mayhap not, this one was expensive enough. A cravat pin, perhaps? But then his eyes alight on something else and he smiles, feels the familiar surge of *want*, the satisfaction of knowing an item is meant so perfectly for him. He enters the shop and, credit given, the purchase is done in moments.

Back on the street he pats his chest, palm pressing on the small package which sits comfortably within the inner pocket of his great-coat, and smiling widely Hezekiah adjusts his hat, continues on.

CHAPTER THREE

Dinner is a painful affair. Unlike the rest of the house the small dining room with its rich maroon wallpaper and merry fire is cosy and warm, and would be quite an agreeable little place to sit if she were in different company. But Dora and Hezekiah have never been much for pleasant conversation, especially in recent weeks. Christmas passed without any amusement to be taken from it for Hezekiah's humour was dark and mutinous, which made the experience altogether rather trying. That humour continued – unprecedented, it seemed – into the new year, and Dora has been making every effort to avoid his sharp tongue, the irritation that seems to seep from him like Thames fog. Dora curls her fingers round her napkin. She would much rather pass the evening in her damp and draughty bedroom fixing the glass pebble to her necklace with only Hermes for company. Indeed, she has far more rewarding discussions with him than anyone else, and he only a bird.

Thoughtfully Dora watches her uncle. Hezekiah is distracted, more so than usual, for he is slow to eat and keeps his gaze set on the large map of the world that hangs on the wall behind her, absently stroking his scar, a fine white line that spans the length of his cheek. He coughs and fidgets, taps his wine glass with his thumb, its *clink-clink-clink* a wearisome noise as the evening draws on. Every now and

then his other hand strokes the gleaming pocketwatch that hangs from his waistcoat, its chain glinting in the candlelight.

Dora stares at it fixedly after the sixth time he reaches for it, trying to recall if she has seen it before. Did the watch belong to her father? But no, she would remember it. A new acquisition then, Dora decides, but she holds her tongue. The last time she asked how Hezekiah could possibly afford to buy such baubles he went an alarming shade of red and scolded her so loudly that her ears rang until the following morning. When her uncle coughs again, the effort making a large globular piece of mutton wobble dangerously on his fork, Dora decides she cannot stand it any longer.

‘Uncle, are you ill?’

Hezekiah jumps, looks directly at her for the first time all day. His eyes betray for a moment a nervousness she has not seen before but he shields it quickly.

‘What a notion.’ He pops his fork into his mouth, chews open-mouthed like a cow. Dora watches with distaste as the overcooked meat swirls about on his tongue. A speck of gravy lands on his chin. ‘I was pondering the future of the shop. I feel . . .’

Dora sits up straight in her seat. Is he *finally* going to discuss the running of the shop with her? For she has ideas, so many wonderful ideas! First, she would remove the dead weight and replenish with good, genuine articles sourced from her father’s old contacts. Second, make enough money to hire men to undertake digs overseas, employ artists and engravers to catalogue their finds. They could be listed once more in Christie’s directory, provide a retreat for scholars and private collectors, house a small museum, a miniature library. Perhaps – for the more frivolous aspects of the business – cater to the aristocracy’s whims of themed soirées. Restore the shop to its former glory. Begin again.

‘Yes?’

Hezekiah swallows his food, takes a long swig of wine.

‘Now we have begun a new year, I feel it might be time to sell. I tire of trade. There is far more pleasure to be had elsewhere, after all, far better things to invest my money in.’

His voice is offhand, almost cold, and Dora stares at her uncle across the table. ‘You would sell Father’s shop?’

He sends her a level stare.

‘It is not his shop. It passed naturally on to me when he died. Does it say Elijah on the board, or Hezekiah?’

‘You can’t sell it,’ she whispers. ‘You just can’t.’

He dismisses this with a wave of his arm, as if he were batting away a fly.

‘Times change. Antiquities are no longer *à la mode*. The money from the sale would be sufficient to purchase a fine seat in a more reputable part of town. It would be an agreeable change for me.’ He wipes the corner of his mouth with a napkin. ‘The building would fetch a good price, as would the contents, I’m sure.’

Dora feels entirely numb. *Sell* the shop? Her childhood home?

She takes an unsteady breath.

‘For shame, Uncle, you would contemplate such a thing.’

‘Come, Dora. The shop is not what it once was—’

‘And whose fault is that?’

Hezekiah’s nostrils flare, but he ignores this too.

‘I should think you would be glad of a change of scene, more, ah, *liberating* surroundings. Is that not what you wish?’

‘You know what I wish.’

‘Oh, yes,’ he sneers. ‘Those little sketches of yours. You’d be much better off finding someone to buy you such pieces rather than attempting to fashion them yourself.’

Dora lowers her cutlery. ‘And where, Uncle, would I wear them?’

‘Well now . . .’ Hezekiah hesitates, gives a little laugh that carries

on its edge something she cannot quite decipher. ‘Who knows where our fortunes might take us? You do not wish to stay here for ever, do you?’

She pushes her plate away, her appetite – never prodigious on Lottie’s mediocre cooking – completely lost.

‘I prefer, Uncle, to think on more practical endeavours rather than flights of fancy.’

‘And is designing jewellery a practical endeavour or a flight of fancy?’ Dora looks away. ‘I thought as much,’ he says, his sneer even more pronounced. ‘No goldsmith will accept a female designer – you know that, I’ve said so often enough but you will not listen. You waste the sketchbooks I buy you. Do you realise how much good paper costs?’

Lottie comes in then to clear the plates. It is just as well, for Dora is on the verge of tears. As the housekeeper slides her master’s plate across the tabletop, Dora dips her head. She will be damned to let them see her cry.

‘I do not want to work for a goldsmith.’

‘What now?’

She spoke too quietly, she knows. Dora steels herself, raises her head to look at him squarely across the table.

‘I do not want to work for a goldsmith,’ she repeats. ‘I want to open my own establishment, to work independently of anyone else.’

Hezekiah stares at her a moment. Lottie stares too, empty plate in hand; a drip of gravy threatens to make its escape onto the floor.

‘You mean to make the jewellery yourself?’

Her uncle’s voice is laced now with amusement, and his mockery makes Dora colour.

‘I wish to become a reputable *artist*, for a jeweller to make up the designs on my behalf. Mother’s friend Mr Clements, perhaps.’

There is a beat of silence. Dora had not expected Hezekiah to support the notion – that would be far too much to hope for – but then,

as the ridicule spills itself from her uncle's lips in cruel disjointed laughter, joined by the giggled snorts of Lottie Norris, her chest tightens with anger.

'Oh, dear heaven,' Hezekiah cries on a sigh, wiping the corners of his eyes with fat thumbs, 'this is the most amusement I've had in weeks. Come now, Lottie, what a fine joke she tells!'

Dora scrunches the napkin she holds in her fist, directing all her frustration into the starch. 'I assure you, sir,' she says tightly, 'I am perfectly serious.'

'And therein lies the joke,' Hezekiah crows. 'Practical endeavours indeed! You have neither the education nor the capital to carry out such a thing. No one in their right mind would take a peculiar half-foreign orphan like yourself seriously. You would be laughed right out of trade before you'd even started.' He sits back in his seat, expression sobering. 'You have your mother's creative talents, I grant you. But also, like your mother, you think far too highly of them. She was convinced she and your father, my own dear brother, God rest his soul, could make their fortune in antiquities, would be recognised the world over for their more, ah, unique finds. But look where her ambition took them . . .'

Dora is silent. Her uncle's neglect, though painful in those early years, she is used to. His fits of anger, manageable. This cruel contempt, however . . . *this* is new, and simply too much for Dora to entertain. She takes a deep breath that pulls painfully at her lungs, begins to push her chair out from behind her when Hezekiah raises his hand.

'Sit. We are not yet done.'

But I am. The words stitch themselves to her tongue, will not unpick themselves as she does as she is told, but Dora glowers deeply at her discarded plate, recites the Greek alphabet internally to calm her:

Alpha, beta, gamma, delta . . .

‘Lottie,’ Dora hears Hezekiah say, ‘will you bring in the tea?’

The housekeeper is all simpers and curtseys. When the door swings shut behind Lottie Dora senses Hezekiah turn back to her, and he offers up a humourless laugh.

‘I can admire your aspiration at least, as lofty and unrealistic as it is. Draw away, if you must. It will keep you amused in the coming months. I will even continue to provide the paper.’

Something in his voice. Dora’s brow furrows. She looks up.

‘Uncle?’

Hezekiah is lazily stroking his scar.

‘You’ve grown to be quite a picture in the last year. So much like your mother . . .’ A log in the fire cracks. ‘You’re twenty-one now,’ he continues, leaning his complete weight onto his elbows. ‘A woman. You’re far too old to still be sharing my roof.’

Dora is silent a moment as the import of his declaration sinks in. She swallows hard. ‘You mean to be rid of me.’

He spreads his hands. ‘Don’t you also mean to be rid of me?’

She hesitates, cannot dispute the question.

‘Where would you have me go?’ she asks instead, but Hezekiah merely shrugs. Smiles.

Something hard settles in her stomach and turns itself over. Dora does not understand the meaning of that smile, but she does know her uncle well enough to understand that no good can come from it.

Behind her the door swings open. Dora remembers how to breathe, and Lottie sets the tea tray down on the sideboard, the fine bone china rattling.

‘Here we are, sir,’ she says, over-bright. ‘And I’ve brought in the sugar plums you ordered, fresh this morning.’

Lottie is brandishing a box shaped like a hexagon.

‘Offer one to Dora, Lottie.’

The housekeeper hesitates, narrows her eyes, but she does as Hezekiah asks and Dora stares at the box, the treats nestled within. Her gaze moves warily to her uncle who watches, hands clasped beneath his chin.

‘What are these?’

Her tone is suspicious. She cannot help it.

‘Sugar plums, as Lottie said. A delicious delicacy.’

Lottie wafts the box under Dora’s nose. She catches the scent of sugar. Hesitates.

‘Go on,’ Hezekiah presses. ‘Why don’t you try one?’

Gingerly she selects a plum from the top and bites into it, teeth sinking into the gelatinous orb, and for a brief moment Dora relishes this fine and unexpected offering. The flavour bursts on her tongue – vanilla, spice, a hint of orange and nut, quite unlike anything she has ever tasted in her life – but then she catches Hezekiah watching her from across the table. He is looking at Dora in a way he never has before.

A cat watching an unsuspecting bird. Hungry, calculating.

CHAPTER FOUR

From a cramped window seat tucked into a small alcove, Edward Lawrence watches January play out its cruel and bitter game. The morning is as cold as a mortuary slab and the wind has whipped itself into a frenzy, sending flurries of biting ice down the terrace of Somerset House. The sycamore trees that line the formal path bend against the wind, empty bird's nests hang on desperately to their bare branches the way a beggar clings to bread. The water in the fountain is frozen solid, the walkways dangerously slick, and over the balcony the barges rock angrily in the Thames.

How long he has been waiting, Edward cannot say. At the far end of the lengthy corridor – above the large doors behind which his fate is being decided – there is a clock, but it needs winding. His shoulders ache from slouching into such a confined space; the window seat is uncomfortably hard. He has been nibbling a jagged fingernail on and off since he got here, counted the frescos on the ceiling twice. He has recited the Society's motto – *Non extinguetur* – too many times now to count. *Shall not be extinguished*. So. He might have been waiting an hour. He might have been waiting only minutes.

On his lap is a copy of the report he presented to the committee. The binding is simple, the paper the cheapest in stock, but it is his labour of love, his proudest achievement in his twenty-six years and

what Edward hopes will be his ticket into the Society of Antiquaries. *A Studie of Shugborough Hall's Shepherd Monument*. It all rests on the election – the Blue Paper – a minimum of five votes.

When the doors eventually open Edward stands, clutches his *Studie* close to his chest. Cornelius Ashmole, his oldest (his only) friend, is making his way toward him, parquet creaking beneath the tread of heel to toe. Edward risks a hopeful smile but he can see from Cornelius' face that the news goes badly. When he reaches him, Cornelius gives a small apologetic shake of the head.

'Only two votes.'

Deflated, Edward sinks back onto the window seat, holds his *Studie* loosely between his knees.

'My third try, Cornelius. I was so thorough . . .'

'You know what Gough's methods are. I did warn you. Something less cryptic, more grounded in antiquarian scholarship.'

'When the facts aren't there, Cornelius, sometimes conjecture is all there is!' Edward raises his papers, brandishes them in his friend's face. 'I thought this would be enough. I truly did. The detail I went into. My drawings . . .'

'"Amateur" is the word they used, I'm afraid,' Cornelius responds with a grimace. 'They've been spoilt by the likes of Stukeley. If it's any consolation, they said you showed great promise. The depth of your descriptions really was extremely impressive.'

'Hmph.'

Cornelius, being so very tall, sinks down on his haunches.

'Many,' he says gently, 'do not gain entrance into the Society until much later. Some only when they are nearly decrepit.'

Edward lances his friend with a look. 'Do you think that makes me feel any better?' Then, '*You* are thirty!'

'I experienced the joys of the Grand Tour. I spent my summer desecrating Italian tombs and when I returned could devote all my

time to scholastic interests at leisure. Besides, my father is on the board.’ Seeing Edward’s crestfallen expression he lays a comforting hand on the younger man’s shoulder. ‘I don’t mean to rub my good fortune in your face, but it is a fact that these things made all the difference. Think how much better you will feel having achieved a fellowship on your *own* merit. No shortcuts, pure mettle.’

But Edward is shaking his head. ‘How much easier it is for those with money to achieve what those without it cannot.’

‘Now you’re being melodramatic.’

‘Says the man who has always been rich.’

Cornelius has no answer to this and the two share a space of quiet, listen to the wind whipping sharply at the windowpane. After a moment Cornelius nudges Edward’s knee with his elbow.

‘Do you remember when we were boys and I boasted that I could swim to the folly and back without stopping?’

Edward smiles at the memory. ‘You got halfway before you started floundering in the reeds and nearly drowned.’

‘And you sat right there in the boat beside me and told me to keep going, not to give up, though we both knew I was a damned fool to try.’

So it had always been with them; one would back the other for no better reason than it pleased him to do so, but the two were as different as wine and water. Cornelius was the wealthy to Edward’s poor, the learned to his ignorant, the dark to his fair. Edward was the reticent to Cornelius’ brash, the short to his tall, the unlucky to his fortunate. What a pair they made back then, what a pair they make now, and they chuckle at the memory, though Edward’s laugh is markedly more subdued. Cornelius’ smile wavers, then dies. They lapse into momentary silence once more.

‘I truly am sorry, Edward. I don’t know what else to say.’

‘There’s nothing *to* say.’

‘Except . . . don’t give up. Though I suppose such platitudes will only frustrate you at this juncture.’

‘You suppose right.’

A pause. ‘You *must* persevere. I’ll support you where I can, no matter how much it costs, whatever you need. You know I will.’

‘Even though I’m a damned fool to try?’

‘Even then.’

Edward says nothing; in his embittered state Cornelius’ words feel hollow. How much money has Cornelius already paid out to help him? How much time away from the bindery has he already been allowed? The thought frustrates him, shames him, and Edward stands, runs a hand through his hair.

‘I must go.’

Cornelius stands too. ‘The work can wait, you know.’

‘It can’t. I just . . .’ Edward sighs, shakes his head, feels now the hot rush of humiliation like a brand. ‘I need to go.’

Edward turns away, makes a hasty retreat down the hall and through into the anteroom, Cornelius following close behind. At the top of the vast staircase Cornelius ceases his dogged chase and as he descends Edward feels his friend’s pitying gaze on his back like daggers. Eager to be free of it he picks up his pace, rushes out through the main doors of Somerset House and into the wind, taking refuge in London’s clotted streets, the comforting flow of traffic.

His *Studie* bends back against itself in the wind. Briefly Edward contemplates chucking it into the nearest gutter but his love of the thing gets the better of him and he wraps the papers in his coat, crosses his arms, presses them against his chest like a shield. On he tramps down the Strand, head down, chin crushed into the folds of his scarf. He keeps his mind blank for now, focuses instead on putting one foot in front of the other. When Edward passes through the wide arch of Temple Bar he is glad to put the bustle of the Strand behind him.

Tired now as much from the bad news as battling the wind full on, he slips into a coffee-house just off Fleet Street, not because it is the rich aroma of coffee he craves (he would much rather lose himself in a hefty glass of ale) but the warmth; his toes are like icicles and he is genuinely surprised they have not snapped off, that he will not find the fleshy nubs jiggling about at the caps of his boots when he peels them from his feet in the warmth of his lodgings later on.

Edward unwinds the scarf from his neck, finds a cosy corner near the fire, orders a cup. The *Studie* he keeps hidden beneath his coat. He takes a cautious sip of coffee but it is too hot and so he cradles the cup in his hand, contents himself instead with the comforting smell of aromatic spice, stares unseeing into the grate.

All that time, wasted. Again.

His first attempt he had not expected to succeed – a report mapping his thoughts on the list of the publications he had read (borrowed from Cornelius and Cornelius' father); the early studies of Monmouth and Lambarde, Stow and Camden, the later works of Wanley, Stukeley and Gough. His grasp of Latin, while deficient in certain areas, was adequate and his interest in the field obvious, but, no – his education was lacking, he did not have enough knowledge; he had no original ideas of his own. So Edward applied himself to further study, chose to focus his efforts on effigies in London churches since there were so many of the damn things. He had been hopeful about that second attempt. But the answer came back that while it was impressively written, it was clear yet again nothing new had been brought forward, and so Edward chose another tack.

When Edward and Cornelius were boys they often explored the Staffordshire countryside surrounding Sandbourne, the Ashmole country seat. The neighbouring estate Shugborough Hall – not six miles away, three via the river – was often a source of adventure for them. Edward remembered how one day they had trespassed on the