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PANDORA

Written by

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A Novel in THREE PARTS



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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

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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

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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.

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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

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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

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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 sopha 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,

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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

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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.

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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

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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!'