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# **The Hourglass Factory**

Written by Lucy Ribchester

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# The Hourglass Factory

*Lucy Ribchester*



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‘The days are past for rioting and we do not need to have recourse to bloodshed or violence to carry on our schemes of progress and reform, because we have a fairly good franchise which is an assurance that the will of the people must prevail in these democratic days.’

Sir Rufus Isaacs, Solicitor-General, 1910

In the UK in 1912, women could not vote.

## Prologue

*14 April 1912, London Evening Gazette Offices*

At 10 p.m. on Stonecutter Street the Reuters wires begin to tick.

Nobby has his head slumped on Mr Stark's desk and he jumps at the noise, the heavy morse code girding, the out-of-joint military march. The glass on top of the Reuters machine always shakes because of a loose nut or perhaps the uneven floorboards beneath the desk. He cuts the ticker tape sharp the way Mr Stark likes it, no tears or rough edges.

And then he blinks.

*Half an hour earlier, The Royal Albert Hall, London*

Ebony Diamond had waited in the dark, her wrists bound tight as shoelaces. Her fingers had numbed to blue; the pearls of sweat on her palms were turning the mixture of flour and *poudre d'amour* to paste. Behind her, Annie Evans was busy

tucking into two neat sacks the crowbar, ropes and chains they had used to split the roof tiles and slink down through the cold rafters. As she packed she sang gently, 'The Daring Young Man on the Flying Trapeze', singing 'lass' instead of 'man'.

'How's he getting on?' Annie's eyes were soft, but her smile was frozen with nerves.

Ebony didn't answer. She was watching the meeting going on beneath them, the Prime Minister working himself up into his speech. Down below, the moving sea of bowler hats in the auditorium looked like iron filings in a fish bowl.

'Legs together or legs akimbo don't matter,' Ebony's mother had always told her. 'But for God's sake keep your arms in or you'll lose one of them.' There were rumours that once at the Crystal Palace a trapeze artist had landed so sharply on a falling jolt that part of his brain seeped out through his nose.

Annie wriggled back into a squat under the low beams. She would hold out here as long as she could, but they would find her too. She hoped she and Ebony would make the same prison van.

Ebony checked the binding on her legs, squeezed a handful of flesh into a more comfortable position, ran a thumb over the sailor's knots she had tied, and wedged the wooden bar of the trapeze between the hollows of her feet. Annie passed her the banner and she bit its silk, and grimaced as its slippery perfume coated her teeth. She had done higher leaps than this and she had felt sick before each of them too. But this time they both had Holloway to look forward to. The hunger-strike, the force-feeding. Ebony had heard tell

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that they didn't clean the tube. She pushed away the thought, gave Annie a last look, climbed alone onto the wooden lip of the hole. And she jumped.

Nobby watches the details judder in: dribs, drabs, sketches, the colour of lace in the woman's bodice, the look on her face as she flew through the air. He crams a jellied pork pie into his mouth as he scans and scans the never-ending tape. It is better than a story in *Strand* magazine.

The facts change. The Prime Minister is dead. The Prime Minister is alive. The woman is a gypsy. The woman is a Londoner. The woman had a famous mother. And as they change, the activity in the office also changes. Reporters dig out obituaries, men are being dispatched to Bow Street police station and the Albert Hall. And all the time the tape ticks and slaps and stamps as if it will never exhaust itself. By the time midnight comes round, the first galley proof is drawn and Nobby is growing bored. The pie is heavy in his stomach and he thinks he might sneak a swallow from Stark's whisky bottle in the top drawer of his desk while the night editor is out of the room. But then the tape starts up again, and this time when he looks at it he doesn't just blink, he cries out.

15 April 1912, Clement's Inn, Women's Social  
and Political Union Headquarters, London

'Did you get the newspapers? Did you get them all? Is she in it? Tell me she's on the front page. Tell me the *London Illustrated* have dug out a snap.'

The woman's arms are outstretched and the sleeves of her blouse hang away from her. On her wrist a flash of emeralds, amethysts and fresh pearls catches the sunlight through the window.

Her friend doesn't smile and this rings a little warning bell.

The newspapers slap down onto the oak table, spilling left and right, slipping from their covers. Mrs Pankhurst and a few of the others have entered the press room, drawn by the rush of excitement. Murmurs are circulating, questions being asked.

'Did she get a clean swing?'

'She didn't hurt herself?'

Heads are craning for a better look. 'If she did it,' one woman says, 'I'll lead a deputation to Asquith myself, holding out them front pages like a banner in his face.'

'They can't ignore it, that's for sure.'

The merriment is tight and restless. Some of them were there last night; others on the blacklist for Liberal rallies who couldn't get in have heard the stories already. They know she 'flew like a bullet', they know she 'eyeballed Asquith like he was the devil'. They know about the banner saying 'Votes for Women'. They know the crowd shouted, 'Cut her down', 'Hang her from her own rope'.



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But what they didn't know, what none of them could have known, was what was staring at them from seven different front covers. Tawdry rags, fine-printed sheets. All black-edged. 'Titanic Sinks – 1500 Die', the *London Evening Gazette's* choice of words.

Hush settles round the room. Some of the women look at Mrs Pankhurst as if she should say something, but her silvery blue eyes are fixed on the table. After a few moments of creaking and shifting, one woman coughs and asks, 'Is she not in it at all? Not any of them?'

'What do you think?' another snaps, and runs from the room.

The silence hangs a few more minutes.

'Will she get second division, do you think?'

No one speaks.

Then Mrs Pankhurst pushes her thumb smoothly behind the cover of one of the papers and begins to leaf through it, nodding occasionally, catching her breath, and as she does so the rest of the women move forward too, and gradually the papers are distributed between silent hands and eyes.

'Rotten luck,' says a quiet voice from the corner of the room nearest the window. Mrs Pankhurst's head snaps up. But someone else beats her to speak first.

'For whom?'

SIX MONTHS LATER

# One

*1 November 1912*

The sun was beating down as Frankie George cycled along Fleet Street, trying to stop her notebook and calling cards from flapping out of her lower pockets, and her pencils from stabbing her in the chest.

She had been distrustful of the warm weather when she'd got up at noon to receive her editor's telegram summoning her to the Stonecutter Street offices. Now, as she dodged boys on motorcycles puffing out violet smoke, piles of horse muck and steaming horses dragging full omnibuses, she regretted her choice of clothing; a fetching pale brown tweed trouser suit, practical for bicycling, autumnal-hued and insulating as upholstery. The Fleet Street traffic was foul with noxious vapour and it felt like cycling through hot soup. A cart full of meat pies came wobbling towards her and she thought for a second about reaching out to pinch one, but

changed her mind when she saw the horse on the wagon behind breathing over the crusts. She veered off onto Shoe Lane, dodging smashed jack-o'-lanterns left over from Hallowe'en the night before and it was only then that she remembered it was All Saints' Day. And so hot. What next? Summer Punch on Guy Fawkes night?

Stonecutter Street was mainly made up of magazine offices, all there for the cheaper rent. For the *London Evening Gazette*, that meant being crammed into a tall rambling half-townhouse, six times as high as it was wide, leaving only enough space for one room per floor. The brickwork was poor and there were always new leaks and splits in the wall, new buckets strategically placed, new wads of stuffing filling a whistling gap. Frankie leant the bicycle against the railings outside, where she'd last borrowed it from, and hopped up the steps.

The office was buzzing with its usual hysteria. Bundles of the early edition were being cut open, men in shirtsleeves and braces were flying up and down the stairs brandishing tissue-thin pieces of paper. Shouts of 'copy' came loud and fast from each of the floors, along with wafts of Turkish tobacco and occasionally the sound of a boy being boxed on the ears.

Frankie fished in her pocket for the telegram and gave it to the man on the front desk.

'Know what he wants?' The man cupped his ear for her response above the din.

Frankie looked down at the note. It read, 'STONECUTTER STREET STARK'. She shrugged. The man shrugged back and waved her towards the stairs.

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The higher up the building, the more important the resident was. In the cellar, printers were operated by men in aprons who had grown so deaf from the noise of machinery that they bellowed at each other even when they were sat across the same table in the Olde Cheshire Cheese. One floor up in the basement, skilled men with fingers as fine as a pianist's sat at linotype machines, setting the letters in neat little rows.

The ground floor belonged to the sports reporters and the staffers, who could be dispatched to any part of London at a second's notice to weasel out a story from the police, morgues, the divorce courts, loose-tongued pub landladies and vengeful servants. The obituary writers, the political correspondents and the features editor occupied the office above; theirs had the privilege of a red velvet couch that threw up dust whenever it was sat upon. Up again, the sub-editors worked at desks covered in blue pencils, bottles of paste and scissors, chopping and rearranging the text given to them by the office boys. And then, at the top sat Mr Stark himself, Editor-in-Chief, with a rickety wooden floor and a great oak desk covered in rival newspapers, scraps of flimsy, and a whisky glass with a permanent crust of the previous drink left fossilising in it.

Stark also had the prestige of housing the Reuters machine, four pillars topped by a glass box; a tangle of electromagnetic wires that ticked and tapped out a mile a day of news. Horse-race results, parliamentary speeches, overseas events, shipping news, all came spilling out onto a thin strip of paper which

Nobby, Stark's office boy, would cut with a pair of shears and pass for Stark's perusal. Most of Nobby's offerings ended up in the waste-paper basket under the desk. On her first visit to Stark, Frankie had eyed the basket warily, wondering how many lovingly typed and hand-addressed journalists' efforts had been screwed up into a ball and tossed into it like old orange peel.

Just before she hit the landing on Stark's floor she heard a voice calling out, 'Oi, Georgie.'

'It's Frankie,' she began to say, turning. She recognised Teddy Hawkins straight away; one of the reporters who had his own desk in the downstairs newsroom. He had a badly formed mouth, like it had been squashed at some point and never found its proper shape again. In his hands he carried a stack of news clippings. 'Did you get our telegram?'

'I got Mr Stark's.'

Hawkins brushed the remark out of the air. 'He wants you to do a portrait piece. Half, no three-quarter page.' He grinned.

Frankie's pulse sped up a little.

'There's a suffragette performing at the Coliseum tomorrow night, an acrobat. Ebony Diamond. Know her?'

Instantly the little drizzle of excitement was replaced by a prickle of annoyance. She was on the verge of opening her mouth to say, 'Now why would I know her?' but Hawkins didn't give her the chance.

'None of us have a damned clue who she is. That's why he wanted you in.' He skimmed a glance down her trouser suit.

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‘You’ll know a thing or two about suffragettes, won’t you? Anyway, deadline’s tomorrow. He’ll tell you the rest.’ He barged ahead of her into Stark’s office, leaving a reek of stale smoke in his wake.

Frankie heard a rustle of quick conversation then Hawkins re-emerged, winked at Frankie – a gesture that made her feel slightly soiled – and joggled back down the stairs. She was gratified to see, as he disappeared, that a long streamer of flimsy from the Reuters wires was flapping off his shoe.

She gave her suit a quick brush down and went in. Stark’s huge body was craning over a galley proof, with a single eyeglass wedged in his eye and a blue pencil behind his ear. He was an oval-shaped man, pointed at the top like an egg, with colossal features; ears, nose, blue bulging eyes that looked as if they had been stuck on with editing paste, and matched his unwieldy manner with words. He liked to call the lady journalists ‘treacle’, ‘pudding’ or sometimes ‘treacle pudding’.

He didn’t look up. Frankie walked closer, so that her shoes were within his eyeline.

‘Ebony Diamond,’ he said, still poring down the long piece of print. ‘Know her?’

Frankie shook her head, then realised he was waiting for her to speak. ‘No.’ She cleared her throat.

‘She’s a suffragette.’

‘I don’t know her,’ Frankie said, trying to keep her voice even.

‘Well, I want you to get to know her. She’s been in

Holloway twice now so make it sharp. Get her to tell you about the matrons and force-feeding.'

She watched his head slide back and forth along the line of text while she waited for more. After a few seconds, he paused. 'Still here?'

'Well, it's just that . . . Mr Stark, I'm not sure a suffragette piece, given my background. I mean there are some news stories I could think of to . . .'

'This or quoits on Wimbledon Common. You want to cover the quoits on Wimbledon Common?'

Frankie made a quick calculation of the distance to Wimbledon in her head. It was almost worth it. 'No, sir, thank you,' she said.

'Nobby's got some notes for you, don't you Nobby?'

Stark's boy, who had been lurking in the corner, staring at the ticking Reuters machine, leant across the table and handed her a piece of paper. On the top was written in blue waxy editing pencil in Stark's florid hand, 'Olivier Smythe, Corsetier, 125 New Bond Street.' The rest of the notes were Nobby's uneven scrawl.

Frankie creased her brow. 'I'm sorry, I'm not sure I understand. This is the address of a Bond Street corset shop.'

'Yes.'

Frankie hesitated.

'Does her costumes, doesn't he?' Stark said as if the whole thing should have been quite plain. He went back to scrutinising his galley proof and Nobby shrugged at her and turned back to the Reuters machine. Frankie sighed, folded up the



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piece of paper and stuffed it in her pocket before heading back out into the hallway.

She was halfway down the stairs when a man in a brown factory coat came dashing out from one of the side rooms. ‘Hold it, hold it.’ She stopped in her tracks as he thrust towards her a leather cube. His fingers were grubby with ink and he stank of chemicals. ‘Make sure you get a good one. Get her waist in. Nice and close, mid-body, don’t let her close her eyes. Plates are already in, quarter plates.’ He pointed to a tube, half a triangular pipe tucked in the back. ‘Lose this and he’ll have your fingers for potted shrimp. If you need it, you can buy the powder at a chemist’s. Get the Muller’s stuff.’

It was only then that it dawned on her what the box was. ‘I have taken a photograph before, you know,’ she said. She hadn’t, but she had had her photograph taken, which was near enough the same thing. She carefully lifted the camera out of its box and stared at it. It had stiff red bellows and shiny brass tracks and a yellow enamel circle that said, ‘J. Lizars Challenge. Glasgow, London, Edinburgh’.

She tucked it away and slid the cracked leather strap of the case over her shoulder, then stepped back into the sunshine, letting the heat soak onto her face. She was trying to sedate the little prickle that had risen in her outside Stark’s office when Teddy Hawkins told her why she had been offered the job. Of course Teddy Hawkins didn’t interview suffragettes; he topped up peelers’ ale cups and greased politicians’ hands in the Savage Club.

Suffragette. She'd give him a suffragette. One look at her trousers and everyone just assumed she was a bloody suffragette. It wasn't even a real word anyway, it was a name someone at the *Daily Mail* had made up to distinguish Mrs Pankhurst's hammer-throwers from Mrs Fawcett's tea-drinkers. There were suffragists and suffragettes and Nusses and Spankers and Wasps, and they all looked the same in their blouses and tailor-mades, hawking pamphlets on street corners in taxidermy hats.

And now she was supposed to just pirouette along to a corset shop on the look-out for a suffragette acrobat she had never set eyes on before. It was all a big joke to them, with their oiled hair and their Turkish tobacco. She pictured them all gathered in the newsroom, laughing like monkeys into their coffee cups.

She swallowed and lifted her chin up. It was work, extra work. And portraits were a step up from the column she did with Twinkle, and her odds and sods cartoons. Besides, Audrey Woodford's *Journalism for Women* said you never turned down work. She ran her fingers through her tufty brown hair, tucking it tightly down behind her ears, hoiked the camera case tighter over her shoulder, and headed towards the railings. She arrived at them just in time to see a newspaper boy, still crammed between the wooden leaves of his sandwich board, swinging his legs over the bicycle and wobbling off down the street.

'Oi!'

The boy picked up speed, knocking his knees against the

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board as he pedalled. Frankie sighed and drew her grandfather's old pocket-watch out of her jacket. Quarter past three already. Bond Street was miles away, the centre of town clogged. If she took the underground, she might just make it.

The tube train was crowded but not unbearable, and Frankie found a bit of standing space against the shaking wall. As the tube skated through pitch-black tunnels its windows became a mirror, allowing her to see what she looked like for the first time that day, for as usual she hadn't bothered to check before leaving the house. Her paisley neckerchief was crooked, her brown eyes shiny round the sockets. The olive oil her mother had given her to cook with was working a treat to keep her hair in check. Her hair had been short ever since her first day as a compositor's apprentice at the *Tottenham Evening News*, when the head compositor had taken a pair of shears and without warning sliced off her pigtails. Did her cheeks look chubbier than normal? She had always taken pride in being lean, but lately her waistband had been feeling tighter. Too many gin sessions with the old girl Twinkle, cooking up the weekly column, and too much ale in the Cheshire Cheese.

She slunk back against the window wondering how long it would take to find the shop or if this suffragette would even be there. If she could do a good job of the piece, it mightn't be the last interview Mr Stark sent her on. It was true, for weeks now she had been pestering him to give her something more than the Twinkle column, something juicier. At the *Tottenham Evening News* she had covered for staff reporters on

sick days, and been sent to court hearings and occasionally the morgue. But it didn't seem to be the Fleet Street way to let women loose anywhere other than the opening of tailors' houses, the launch of debutantes, or sensational exposés inside laundry rooms.

By the time the lift operator at Bond Street underground station had cranked her up to street level, the sun was already beginning to sink. The sky had darkened, giving way to a tea-brown fog blowing in from the Thames.

Frankie pulled the lapels of her jacket in tight, glad of her tweeds for the first time that day. There were a few trams lined up along the junction with Oxford Street while further down New Bond Street horse-drawn broughams idled. Gas and electric lights shone from inside the shops, glowing veils of silver and gold around the goods in the windows. Shoppers huddled along, dashing to make their purchases before the weather turned.

She checked her pocket-watch – quarter to four, still in good time – and took a fat Matinee cigarette and a box of matches from a case inside her jacket. Let herself warm up to it first. She lit the cigarette and trampled on the match.

Taking the smoke in slowly, Frankie walked between the row of cabs up for hire and the shop fronts. She was halfway between a tall hansom and a snuffmonger's when a shape in the next cab window along caught her eye. She walked up to it and leaned closer. At first it looked like a dismembered body, shrunk to dizzyingly small proportions, perching on a shelf inside the cab. She blinked, then realised what she was

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looking at and turned around. Behind her, silhouetted by golden gas lamps, hung a mauve silken bodice in a curved shop window. As she moved towards it, peculiar repetitions of the form began to emerge in the window's milky light, dangling from the ceiling, poised on wood figurines. She looked up at the sign. 'Olivier Smythe; Parisian Corsetier.' Below it a Royal Crest was lacquered in gold and black relief.

So this was where Miss Ebony Diamond sourced her smalls. Frankie hadn't known the music halls paid so nicely. Relieved she hadn't been sent on a goose chase, she peered through the window. There was a man behind the counter and a tall elderly woman in a pastel flowered hat making shapes in the air with her hands.

How did journalists approach such matters anyway? Audrey Woodford had conveniently forgotten to say. She sucked the last bitter hit of the cigarette then pulled out her notebook and chanced a glimpse at the leaf of notes Stark's boy had given her. 'Acrobat, suffragette, tiger-tamer. Attacked Asquith, April. Works at Jojo's Cocoa Bar, Soho. Coliseum, Friday. Wouldn't pick a fight with her.' The latter was underlined in blue. She raised an eyebrow.

The customer smiled and accepted her boxed purchase, then glided back out into the street, tinkling the shop's bell, bundling her furs at her throat. Frankie watched the man, whom she took to be Mr Smythe, straighten the garments on display in the window. There was something odd about him that she couldn't put her finger on, a delicacy in the way he held himself. Buttoning up her jacket, she tried her best to

look smart, lamenting the way her shirt never seemed to tuck evenly into her waistband. As she strode towards the shop door, a boy with a large cap tugged low over fiery ginger hair stepped out of the shadows and pulled it open. Frankie rummaged in her pocket in search of a penny for him, but she could only find one sticky shilling that she wanted to keep hold of for her tube fare, so she pulled her palm back out empty and smiled instead.

The bell's jangle set her nerves going. She crossed into the dark panelled sweet-smelling chamber and calmly set about flicking through the racks of fabric, as if shopping for a corset was the most natural thing in the world. The truth was it all made her feel a little nauseous: the liquid satin, the rough-textured lace. Something about the place reminded her of an effete butcher's shop, a slightly creepy hairdressing salon, somewhere Miss Havisham and Sweeney Todd might have set up business together. She had in her hands a cream and caramel number – a colour combination that reminded her of straitjackets – when she heard footsteps behind her.

'Can I help?'

Frankie turned and it was then that she realised what was so odd about the man. He was corseted to a gruesome size; fourteen and a half, fifteen inches. She tried not to stare, concentrating instead on his face. His cheeks were sharp, like they had been cut by tailor's scissors, his round brown eyes large and curious.

She cleared her throat. Could she ask outright for Ebony Diamond? She hesitated. 'I'd like to buy a corset.'

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Mr Smythe couldn't conceal his amusement as his gaze roved her trouser suit. 'Really?'

'Yes, I have a wedding to attend. On Saturday,' she added curtly, thinking that corset shoppers were most probably curt. She was in the process of dreaming up some monstrous dress to tell him about, the kind her mother might have made her wear if she did indeed have a wedding to go to, when she spied a shadow springing into shape on the side wall of the shop. Smythe seemed to notice it too for he stepped in front of her, trying to block her view and began rambling loudly about the extraordinary weather and whether an autumn wedding was something he would prefer, or a spring one. But Frankie had already seen the silhouette. Now, all of a sudden it dawned on her what the photographer man at the *Gazette* had meant when he said 'get her waist'.

It was Ebony Diamond. It had to be. She could have been cut from a Victorian novel, swooping into full view now from beyond the curtain covering the rear of the shop. A black old-fashioned gown was sculpted around her, curving up to her neck and down in pleats and layers to trail along the ground behind her as she rushed. But it was her waist that caught Frankie's eye. She was corseted to a size every bit as tight as the shop's proprietor. It made Frankie want to belch imagining how tightly squeezed the food and organs were in there. Frankie had only ever worn stays for a week when she was thirteen – the nuns called them 'stays', 'corsets' were for the Mary Magdalenes of the world – but the pain from being

birched for not wearing them was outweighed by the pain from wearing them so she had given up.

The woman's hands were coated in tiny black gloves and struck ahead, keeping her balance as she ran into the shop crashing into racks of carefully spaced bodices, knocking them over, tripping over her skirts. She dashed past Frankie, leaving a pleasing sweet smell drifting behind her, *poudre d'amour* and gin. Suddenly her ankle became tangled in the serpentine straps of a corset that had fallen and she stopped for breath.

Smythe coloured from the neck up, and made a weak attempt to direct Frankie towards the fitting room with his hand to her back. She nimbly slipped his grasp.

'Excuse me,' he muttered, and edged past her, picking up a couple of fallen garments as he went. 'Ebony,' he hissed. Frankie was surprised at his use of her first name. 'What has got into you? You're trembling like a kicked dog.'

The woman in the black dress spun to face him. 'She's up there, isn't she?'

'Who?'

'You know perfectly well. And if you know what's good for you, you'll come with me and not come back.'

'Now is not the time.'

With a shaking hand Ebony reached down inside her lacy bosom and pulled something out. 'You want to ask her –' she gestured with her head towards the ceiling of the shop where scuffling, workshop sounds were rumbling away, '– where she got this from.' Holding the thing up to the light, Frankie saw it was a brooch, a large silver one, with a winking,



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glinting, gold pattern carved onto its surface. ‘Cos it didn’t fall off a tailor’s dummy.’ Ebony tipped her arm back, pausing for a second, then hurled the thing forcefully at Smythe. He ducked, covering his hands to his head, and it went plummeting into the green velvet drape covering the back of the shop, then hit the floor with a bullet’s whack.

‘Ebony!’

Ebony stared at him. Her black eyes burned. For a second Frankie thought she might be about to start weeping. Then her gaze hardened again. ‘Ask her,’ she said, tipping her chin towards the ceiling once more. She flung another rack of clothing out of the way, swung open the door of the shop, making the bell jerk, and slammed it shut.

So that was Ebony Diamond, Frankie thought. The Notorious Madame Suffragette. Striking face, somewhat tempestuous, but then Stark’s boy had said not to pick a fight with her.

Suddenly Frankie remembered the camera still slung across her back.

‘Wait!’ She reached round her shoulder, unclipping the latch on the box. The brass tracks slipped out so fast she nearly dropped it. She wriggled the strap over her head and let the case fall to the floor. ‘I need a photograph.’ Tripping over the spilled clothing she raced towards the door.

Frankie could see Ebony Diamond moving quickly along the street, her black hourglass figure melting into the fog. She yanked open the door, letting in a rush of cool damp air. ‘Wait!’ she cried. ‘I’m a journalist! Wait! Miss Diamond!’

Ebony began picking up speed, her swift walk becoming a jog, then a run, her skirts skating out behind her like raven wings. Frankie gritted her teeth and ran after her, feeling the tightness of her trousers catching, regretting the amount of ale she had drunk over the past few weeks.

Up ahead at the crossroads with Brook Street, Ebony had to stop as a chain of trams went sliding past tinkling their bells. A Fenwick's shopwoman in an apron approached Frankie brandishing a bottle of the latest Guerlain Eau de Parfum. 'Musk!' she barked. 'Musk direct from the Musk Ox!' Frankie dodged her spraying hand and dipped round in front of Ebony Diamond.

'Miss Diamond.'

It took a second for Ebony's black eyes to latch onto her. Her face was white as the moon with a short upturned nose and a wide scarlet mouth. 'Are you following me?' she spat.

Frankie was out of breath but managed to pant, 'I just want to ask you a few quick questions. About Holloway prison. For the portrait page. The newspaper. How does that sound?' She stuck her hand into her pocket and pulled out one of her calling cards.

Miss Diamond looked startled for a second, then took the card and ran her finger absently over the embossed surface. She studied the letters slowly. 'Francesca George, Contributor, *London Evening Gazette*.' The lines on her face straightened out; she looked like she might have something on the tip of her tongue. 'A journalist, you say?'

'That's right,' Frankie was beginning to line up the camera.

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If she could just keep her in one place for a few seconds. Truth be told, she could probably make the rest up. Facts were fairly sticky at the *London Evening Gazette*. And that tiff at the shop was a winner whether it was about tax or pink knickerbockers.

Suddenly Ebony rammed the card back towards her, sending the camera stabbing into Frankie's face. 'You've got some nerve, giving this to me.'

Frankie stumbled backwards. 'I don't know what you mean. I just need to ask you a few questions. About the force-feeding.'

'Force-feeding my eye.' She jabbed the corner of the card at Frankie. 'You're the one drew that cartoon for *Punch*, aren't you – "Take it up the nose Maud I will, pass the tea".'

Frankie's stomach sank. She had known this was going to happen as soon as Teddy Hawkins mentioned the word 'suffragette'. It was why they had chosen her, she was certain. They'd all be in the Cheshire Cheese by now, knocking back pints of porter, sharing pork scratchings and smirking.

The cartoon in question had been drawn by Frankie several months ago, and had been intended for *Punch*. Frankie had been trying for years to have a piece printed there and was always told that her drawings weren't satirical enough, except this one which the boy on the *Punch* reception desk, who didn't look old enough to be in long trousers, had coughed at before handing back. After *Punch* rejected it, it had floated down the murky Fleet Street food chain, before landing at

the door of the *London Evening Gazette*, a rag with circus-style lettering for its title, and the strapline, 'The Greatest Newspaper on Earth'. The cartoon was perfect *Evening Gazette* material, Mr Stark had said. A group of women poised over cakes and scones – her figurines were 'superb', he said, 'just like *Punch*' – while one was busy fixing to the teapot a long tube of the kind used in Holloway Gaol to force-feed women on the hunger strike. Ebony Diamond had misquoted her. The caption was, 'No Mildred, I think I'll take it through the nose this time'.

Mr Stark himself had called her into his office the Monday after it was published, shook her hand – the only time he had looked her in the eye – and offered her a Friday column which he billed as a 'guide to society' with Twinkle, an ageing 'lady about town'.

'Look, I just need one photograph. You don't have to say anything. But if I turn up without a picture, my editor'll hang my guts for a laundry line.'

'Get that thing out of my face.' Ebony's black skirts rustled as she pushed past Frankie. The traffic had cleared, creating an opening. Frankie ducked in her way, raising the camera to face height.

Suddenly Ebony lunged. As Frankie snapped the shutter, the full force of Ebony Diamond's right hook whipped her jaw round. Ebony was as nimble as she was strong and her hands danced over Frankie's until she had a firm purchase on the camera. In one sharp movement she had ripped it away and was striding back towards the Fenwick's woman.

## The Hourglass Factory

‘It’s not mine. Give it back.’

‘You should have thought about that.’ Ebony tossed the camera to the ground and for one terrifying moment Frankie thought she might be about to stand on it.

‘It’s not mine, for pity’s sake!’

Ebony took a step back, then reached across to the Fenwick’s woman and snatched the bottle of musk perfume out of her hand.

‘Have you gone mad?’ Frankie realised with a strike of horror what she was up to and could only watch as Ebony cracked the atomiser off the top of the bottle with the side of her hand and poured perfume all over the camera. She reached into her dress pocket, pulled out a match, struck it off the sole of her boot and dropped it.

Shoppers and clerks sprang back as blue-gold flames washed up the sides of the leather. The protective gloss began to sizzle and burn.

Frankie scrambled forwards. ‘What d’you do that for? Off your onion, you are! You’re madder than a sack of cats.’ The heat scorched her hands as she tried to smother the flames. Looking around her desperately she saw a hurdy-gurdy man with a tin cup of foul-coloured beer. She swooped on it, snatching it up, ignoring his protests, and tossed it quickly onto the fire.

Leathered smoke hissed into the air. The flames flattened then vanished. Frankie tentatively touched one of the brass tracks, and whipped her finger back as it scalded. Bits of the metal along the sides had melted out of shape. She would

have to take it to one of the clockmaker's on Gray's Inn Road before handing it back.

She looked up and around her but there was no sign of Ebony. The London crowds had folded back into order. If she hadn't been swallowed by the mob of people she had dissolved into the thickening mist. Sitting back on her haunches on the cold ground, Frankie let out a long groan.

This was just about the worst day she could remember since Mr Rodgers from the *Tottenham Evening News* made her hang around Southwark morgue for six hours waiting to catch a glimpse of a man who had been savaged by a pig. She wished bitterly that she had taken the quoits tournament, or a divorce hearing, or stayed in bed and settled for no work. Anything but this mad, savage suffragette.

She climbed back to her feet and picked up the sodden, scorched malty-smelling camera. Traffic was careering along wildly, bodies began to push against her in their eagerness to get past. The Fenwick's woman was exclaiming 'dear me, dear me.'

With a heavy feeling she started off in the direction of the nearest tube station. She had gone a few paces when a colour caught her eye in the grimy mist. Somewhere along the road a flash of bright copper was bobbing up and down, at first gently, then slowly breaking into a more vigorous bounce, swerving through the traffic and pedestrians.

The boy with the ginger hair, the boy who had let her into the shop. Frankie stopped to watch him as he ducked behind a parked cart, looked ahead, then dashed out again, light as a tomcat on his feet.

## The Hourglass Factory

Probably a pickpocket, she thought. Just as well she hadn't given him that shilling, thank heavens for small mercies. Then with another audible groan – this one drawing looks of horror from the Bond Street crowds – she realised she had left the camera case back at the corset shop.