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Opening Extract from...

THE THIEF ON THE WINGED HORSE

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I

In Oxford there lies a small river island called Paxton's Eyot. It is secluded from the nearby colleges, partly because of the dense trees growing at the perimeter. The Thames flows to the west, the Cherwell to the north, and a narrow ditch curves round the south-easterly side. It was here that, last September, a young stranger crossed the footbridge. He had paint-flecked fingers, and dark hair that fell into his eyes no matter how frequently he pushed it back. His name was Larkin. Larkin had come to the eyot in search of two things. The first was Magic. The second was A Job.

Almost as soon as he stepped onto the eyot he lost his mobile signal. But he had no desire to phone, or be phoned by, anyone he knew. The sun was low and bright in the sky and starlings were weaving in a murmur above the trees. Larkin explored an orchard. The bark of one tree was engraved with the image of a man on a winged horse, and beneath it, a single word: THIEF. Undeterred, Larkin scrumpled four quince and hid them in his bag.

Shortly the orchard gave way to a row of cottages. The eyot was less than a mile long, but that was sufficient to house a hundred families. And there, at the end of the terrace, Larkin came to his destination: the Kendricks' famous workrooms, the only source of magic dolls in this country or any other.

The stone façade resembled the Euston Arch, for the building was Roman in style, with tall pillars upholding a portico. The great doors to the shop were arsenic green and topped with a leaded fanlight. Larkin skipped up the central steps and lightly pushed the door open, into a compact hallway. On the walls were three wooden plaques painted with two centuries of names: the descendants of Kendrick, of Botham and of Jackson, together with relations by marriage. A fourth plaque was headed *Ramsay*, but was otherwise blank. Larkin spent some time reading the lists and of course he recognised the names. They were the same names available in the public records; the same lineage that Larkin had traced, in his teens, after his mother had disclosed that their own, official, family tree contained a falsehood.

Larkin stepped through the second set of doors, to where the Kendricks' dolls were on sale.

A young woman stood behind the counter, next to a brass till. She didn't acknowledge Larkin's entrance, apparently because she was engrossed in a ledger. Her black hair was artfully piled upon her head, Gibson-girl style. She was somewhat fat, had a complexion like bisque, and was scowling deeply – from concentration or bad mood Larkin couldn't yet say.

He turned his attention to the wares. The magic dolls lined every wall. They were shielded by iron bars. Each

doll extended her right hand between the rails, as though beseeching the customer. Larkin placed his finger on the nearest tiny palm. Instantly he felt a rush of Heady Optimism. He removed his finger, and the Heady Optimism vanished as quickly. The doll was dimpled; she wore a taffeta dress and white lace cap. Her neighbour was dressed as a shepherdess, complete with crook, and stiff bow beneath her bonnet. At the touch of her hand, Bucolic Bliss swirled through Larkin with sweetness and intensity. He let her go, bringing the Bliss to an end.

There were many dozens more dolls. He caressed all of them, drawing a new feeling from each one. A china doll, with a cracked face, was the last of them. Despite the fracture her powers were intact. Her cold touch left him Gloriously Exultant. The sentiment thrashed inside him, against his ribs, in every pulse, and he savoured its depth and novelty. The doll watched him with blue glass eyes. Damaged, yet inspiring Exultation; how could Larkin resist purchasing her? He hadn't come to buy, but he now had no intention of leaving without the doll.

He approached the sales assistant. A name tag was pinned to her dress. *Persephone*. Romantic parents, seemingly.

"Yes?" she said. Her tone was so surly Larkin laughed. She made a poor ambassador.

"I'd like to buy the broken doll," he answered.

Persephone raised an eyebrow. Clearly, his laughter hadn't endeared her. But she said: "Good. I'll be glad to see the back of that one."

Larkin took a fat roll of bank notes from his inner pocket, in accordance with the price, and placed them on

the table. Persephone gave them a perfunctory rifle, which showed either surprising faith in his honesty, or a disregard for Kendricks' bottom line. A trill marked the stowing of his cash in the till.

Persephone then slipped from behind the counter. She heaved back the iron railings and picked up the doll with the cracked face. She shoved the railings back into place with a clang.

"What caused the crack?" Larkin asked, when she'd returned to her station.

"I don't know." She placed the doll in a silk-lined box, which she slid across the counter before returning to her ledger. Larkin watched her write several entries in precise, lower case letters.

Evidently she thought their business was complete. But Larkin made no move to leave.

"I also wish to speak to Conrad Kendrick," he said, smiling.

"Why?" She didn't lift her head.

"I want to work here."

"Are you descended from Sally Botham?" she asked. "Or Rebecca Jackson?"

"No."

"You can't be a Kendrick!" Incredulous, she met his eye at last.

"No, I'm—"

"This is a family business. You must be descended from Botham, Jackson, or Kendrick to work here – or marry in. Conrad Kendrick won't consider anybody else."

"What if I said I'm descended from Jemima Ramsay?"

“I’d call you a liar.” She spoke coolly, without condemnation, as if he bored her. “Jemima Ramsay died with her unborn child, in 1821, and left no other offspring.”

“The child didn’t die. Jemima Ramsay ran away with a French man, and her husband announced her death to avert gossip.”

“That’s not true.” Persephone narrowed her gaze at him, perhaps weighing whether he was deluded or deceitful. “Jemima Ramsay is buried in St Ignatius’s church.”

“Will you allow Conrad Kendrick to judge the story for himself?” Larkin asked.

“I’d be in trouble if I allowed any Tom, Dick, or Harry to see him.”

“What would make it worth your while?” Once more Larkin took a roll of money from his pocket, and she shook her head.

“Not that.”

“Then what?” There must be something.

Her cheeks flushed. It was rather becoming. He waited.

Almost crossly, she demanded: “Give me your buttons.”

“My buttons?” he repeated, sure he must have misheard.

“That’s what would make it worth my while. Or don’t bother, if you value your buttons more than meeting Conrad. Leave without seeing him, it makes no difference to me.”

Larkin looked down at his coat buttons. They comprised half a dozen ebony ovals, and were of good vintage quality, but were otherwise unremarkable. Each was secured via two central holes apiece, which flanked a shallow ridge – as though someone had pinched the button between thumb and forefinger, and the wood had unexpectedly yielded.

“Very well,” Larkin agreed, the buttons holding no particular value for him.

Persephone beckoned him, peremptorily. He crossed the boundary that separated customer from worker. She reached beneath the counter for a pair of gold scissors – they were around three inches long, and shaped like a stork. For the time it took to sever the buttons they stood toe to toe, close enough for him to detect the scent of apple soap on her person. He listened to the croak of scissors cutting thread, and felt a thrill of nerves, that a stranger held a blade to his chest. Particularly a stranger who demonstrated, in their short acquaintance, eccentricity and ill-temper.

“When will Conrad Kendrick expect me?” Larkin checked.

“Not till tomorrow morning. He accepts selected visitors between half eleven and half twelve, at his house. I’ll tell him you requested an audience. He might even let you in, for a laugh. But he won’t give you a job. Jemima Ramsay had no offspring. And Conrad will never hire an outsider.”

“Too set in his ways?”

“If you like. He’s nearly sixty-five.” She bowed her head to cut the last button. Larkin observed a bee alight in the whorl of her hair. He was about to alert her, but it looked so at home there he said nothing.

When he left the shop he was satisfied. The meeting with Conrad Kendrick would take place; despite Persephone’s warnings, Larkin was still sure that, face-to-face, he could secure himself an apprenticeship. Wouldn’t that be wonderful, Larkin daydreamed? To sculpt those dolls? To command the emotion of whoever touched them? He deserved that chance, and it was in his grasp.