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opening extract from

Mortlock

written by

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published by

Bloomsbury Publishing

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MANY A ONE FOR HIM MAKES MOAN,
BUT NONE SHALL KNOW WHERE HE IS GONE;
O'ER HIS WHITE BONES, WHEN THEY ARE BARE,
THE WIND SHALL BLOW FOR EVERMORE.

'THE TWO RAVENS', TRADITIONAL FOLK BALLAD

CHAPTER ONE
THE KNIFE THROWER

Josie Chrimes levelled the knife, holding it by its blade. She felt its weight shift towards the handle, the cool steel pressing on her forefinger and thumb as she extended her arm. The Great Cardamom stood twenty strides away. *It could be twice as far and I'd still be able to send the blade through him*, she thought. Josie never missed. She reached her arm back, then snapped forward and, with a confident flick of her wrist, sent the knife whirling towards its target.

The sound of the audience's gasp made her smile. The knife flashed across the stage until – with a *thunk!* – it pinned the Great Cardamom's top hat to the corkboard behind him. Knife after knife had described his outline, so close that Josie had seen the front rows of the audience craning forward, wide-eyed, eager to spot a trickle of blood. But now this last knife had hit its mark, Cardamom stepped neatly from under his hat, still pinned

to the cork, and smoothed his red hair. With a flourish, he gave a deep bow, looking over at Josie to share a secret wink. The crowd went wild, clapping and cheering.

Josie strode across the stage, narrowing her eyes against the harsh glare of the footlights. Then she took Cardamom's hand and shared the second bow, dipping so low that her nose brushed against her skirt.

As the two of them straightened up, Josie glanced over at Cardamom. She was almost taller than him now. Out in the street, they would have made a curious sight: he stocky, with dyed red hair, clipped moustache and red-lined cloak, she dressed in leggings and a light shift, her long, blonde hair spilling from under a black bow. But onstage, they still made a perfect fit.

Josie took a deep breath, smelling the sweat from the audience and the dust ingrained in the velvet curtains. The music from the orchestra's pit filled the air, vibrating through her bones. *This is where I belong*, she thought, squeezing the hand of her guardian, the Great Cardamom.

'Ladies and gentlemen.' He raised his hand, asking for quiet. 'I give you Artemis the Huntress! Thirteen years of age, a lifetime of talent!'

After a fresh round of applause, their act moved on. Josie watched as Cardamom amazed the audience by producing almost anything they called out from his pockets: pork pies, mousetraps, fruit, coins, doves . . . Even a ferret appeared in his hands. He dragged a bunch of fresh carnations from inside his coat, winked at Josie and threw them to her. Now and then he would release a balloon,

and Josie would flick a knife from her hand to burst it. Josie kept her smile fixed but she wondered how Cardamom conjured up all these things. Backstage, she'd often secretly checked his pockets and found them to be ordinary and empty. Her guardian didn't let her in on his secrets. 'That's magic,' he'd say mysteriously. Josie knew it was nothing more than sleight of hand, but that still didn't explain how he knew what the audience was going to ask for.

A levitation act followed the conjuring, then filling a jug from a bottle that never seemed to run dry, rabbits from hats – it was all standard material. Cardamom and Josie often went to the Lyceum up the street to see Professor Anderson, the so-called 'Wizard of the North', perform similar feats. But Cardamom's performance was seamless. As he wove his real magic, Josie would tumble, cartwheel, flip and roll in between tricks or when she brought props on. The collective gasp from the audience when she ran across the stage, then bounced and somersaulted to Cardamom's side, made her grin. She enjoyed herself almost as much as the audience.

Tonight, the clapping and cheers spilled into the wings as Josie and Cardamom squeezed past the dancers who were next on.

'But why Artemis?' Josie asked, pressing herself against the wall and blowing the dancing girls' plumes from her face as they filed by. 'It's such a dull name.'

Cardamom stopped and turned, thrusting his face into Josie's. 'Your talents come from ancient gods,' he hissed,

suddenly sombre. The flush of excitement had faded from his cheeks. Then he gave a wink. 'And we wouldn't like to upset them, would we?'

Josie watched her guardian push past the stagehands and waiting actors, heading out of sight into the dark interior of the theatre. She frowned. Those moods of his! Cardamom could shift from maudlin to joking in the blink of an eye. Onstage he looked demonic with his pointed red beard and arched eyebrows. And yet, in rare moments, he could reveal the gentlest of souls. She hurried after him.

Josie caught up with Cardamom in a storeroom, where they could talk with no fear of their voices disturbing the action onstage. It was the place they always went to when they needed to talk.

'If it makes you happy, Uncle,' Josie sighed, 'I'll keep the name Artemis.'

Cardamom gave a faint smile. He shrugged his shoulders. 'The audience is going to love you whatever stage name we choose. As you grow up, the act gets . . . easier.' Cardamom suddenly looked much older. With a pang of sadness, Josie noticed that his dyed hair drew attention to his advancing years.

A short, barrel-chested young man dressed in dark breeches and a waistcoat emerged from the backstage shadows beyond the storeroom. A stubby clay pipe wreathed curls of smoke around his mop of black hair and his thick moustache. He held a dripping paint brush, paint speckling his rolled-up shirt sleeves.

'Gimlet!' Josie threw herself at the stocky character and hugged him. She was grateful for the distraction. 'What have you been up to? Have you finished the new backdrop for the Underworld?'

Josie had been watching Gimlet's preparation of the scenery for Cardamom's new act. Her guardian had decided on the theme of Dante's *Inferno*. Dancers would be dressed as imps and demons, while Cardamom would perform tricks that would baffle the Devil himself. Gimlet had set to work on creating the backdrop: flames and furnaces with fearsome, satanic faces staring out from rocky caverns.

'Steady,' Gimlet laughed, holding the wet brush away from Josie's hair. 'I need to put the finishing touches to the scene. I might be living in this theatre for the next few weeks!'

'You already do, Gimlet,' Cardamom teased.

'It beats making coffins,' Gimlet said.

Josie felt herself shudder. Stage sets and funeral boxes. Gimlet had told her he supplied caskets for undertakers when work in the theatre was slack or during an epidemic. *What a life*, she thought. At least her work onstage kept her fed.

Cardamom interrupted her thoughts. 'Come on. Let's get this greasepaint off. It's time to go home.'

Josie shut the dressing-room door behind her and leaned her weight against it for a moment, closing her eyes. Now

that she was offstage, she could feel exhaustion seeping through her. She pushed herself forward into the room and tugged off her shift. Then she pulled on the starched blouse and stiff black dress that Cardamom insisted she wear outside the theatre. The fabric made her scratch and wriggle. Cardamom would look at her wearing this dress and always say something hurtful such as, 'I wish you could be more ladylike.'

Josie knew she wasn't a beauty. She didn't need Cardamom to tell her that. When she was younger, she'd watched the dancers with their long, graceful legs.

'Do you want to be a dancer, Josie?' one of them had said, bending down to her and tweaking her nose.

'Oh, yes, please,' she'd replied, but the dancers had giggled and skipped off to their rooms. Now Josie knew why. She was just too plain.

Madame Carla had said she was handsome. Josie knew that 'handsome' wasn't the same as 'pretty'. But then, Madame Carla was the Bearded Lady act in the booth outside the Erato, so she was hardly an expert.

Josie chewed her fingernail and gazed at the pale reflection in the dressing-room mirror. Slowly, with a wad of cotton wool and gentle strokes, she removed her make-up. She sighed as she drew the cotton across her broad nose. *And those eyes*, she thought. *Such a dull brown*. She lifted a hand and twisted a lock of blonde hair round her fingers. She kept it clean and shining, tying it up with a black ribbon. It was the one thing she was proud of.

Josie stood up and smoothed down her dress. Then she hung her costume in the wardrobe and opened the dressing-room door. Cardamom stood in the corridor, a fist raised to rap against the wooden door. His cheeks coloured as he cleared his throat.

'I was just coming for you,' he explained.

Josie looked at him. She'd noticed the faint smell of alcohol on his sour breath. *Not again*, Josie groaned inwardly. He turned and led the way to the stage door. Shaking her head, Josie followed.

Ernie Cumbers, the theatre bouncer, rocked on his heels at the exit. He gave a sharp nod of acknowledgement. 'Evenin', Mr Chrimes. Miss Josie.'

'Evening, Ernie,' Josie said, smiling. Cardamom nodded back. Ernie looked fearsome to anyone who didn't know him: a gorilla of a man with no neck to speak of, a flat nose and tiny eyes in a hammy face. He wore a showy checked suit and a bowler that looked two sizes too small for his head. But Josie had seen him wipe a tear from his eye at some of the sentimental songs performed at the Erato. She'd also seen him throw drunkards halfway across the street when he'd caught them in the dancers' dressing rooms. Ernie caught her eye and tipped his head towards the welcoming committee.

A small group of admirers waited for Cardamom outside the back of the theatre, well-to-do types from what Josie could see of their shiny toppers and smart suits. Some of the ladies present were flanked by coachmen. A gentleman with a long white beard stepped forward and

shook Cardamom's hand vigorously.

'Sir, a startling act, so well executed,' the man said, his hand still a blur. 'Where did you learn such wizardry?'

'From ancient fakirs, deep in the hidden valleys of the Himalayas,' Cardamom replied. He drew himself up to his full height and pulled his hand free. 'From the dervishes and witch doctors of darkest Africa. I have travelled the world studying the dark arts, sir.'

Josie heaved a sigh; she'd heard it all before. She stared across the road. A tall, gaunt man, muffled against the winter's night in a long scarf and shabby coat, stared back, making her start. A frizz of grey hair escaped from under his battered top hat. Their eyes locked for a second, then he turned, pushed into the crowds milling along the street and was gone.

Josie blinked and shivered. The man had been watching them, she was sure. The theatre attracted more than its fair share of oddballs. She'd point him out to Ernie if he turned up again. She snapped her attention back to Cardamom's admirers.

'Mr Cardamom, you must come and relate your great exploits to me some time.' A lady in a fur stole handed him a card. Josie pulled a face at the way the woman gazed into his eyes.

'Nothing would give me greater pleasure, madam.' Cardamom bowed low and placed the card in his breast pocket. Josie rolled her eyes. No one addressed her; it was as if she were invisible. They were happy to applaud her

onstage – why couldn't they say something now?

Josie stood watching as, after a few more pleasantries, the crowd dispersed. Cardamom half raised his hand to wave but no one looked back as they climbed into their waiting carriages. *He looks so alone*, she thought. He couldn't have looked lonelier if he'd been standing on a windswept moor or a desolate beach. At times like this she understood him. Sometimes she felt the same – alone. No, worse – abandoned.

'Come on. Mrs Yates will be waiting at the door for us,' Cardamom said, turning to Josie. His face had lost all its animation. The show was over. Josie knew that feeling – it was like a paper bag blown full of air one minute, with the air smashed out of it the next. Cardamom led the way down the alley, back to the only home they knew – Bluebell Terrace. As Josie hurried along the cobbles, she watched Cardamom's retreating back. She hoped his darkest mood wouldn't set in again. Not tonight.