

The Porcelain Maker

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BOOK ONE

In a tall cabinet, on a glass shelf, lies a white porcelain rabbit. Fluorescent light is reflected in the sheen of its coat. Lifelike, plump and pretty, you can almost imagine pulling it onto your lap to stroke, but there is some tension there. The delicately sculpted ears lie flat, and its sightless milk-white eyes roll back in fear. A pet made of prey.

Underneath, where the soft fur of its belly would be, the porcelain is completely smooth and hides the maker's mark; the word *Alloch* is stamped in an angular font that speaks of bierkellers, pine forests and Alpine lodges. Above it, painted in flat black brushstrokes, twin strikes of lightning: 

CHAPTER ONE

Donar, Cincinnati

August 1993

The asphalt of the parking lot outside Forsythe's Bargain Auctions was sticky underfoot and ruptured where fists of bittercress had forced their way through. The sallow sun cast a pall over the low-rise buildings. Thunderheads gathered above and static itched the air.

Clad in cheap aluminium siding and squatting between a dive bar and a Baptist chapel, the auction house itself was nondescript. The chapel and the bar showed few signs of life, but half a dozen cars and pick-up trucks were parked outside Forsythe's.

Inside the building's metal shell, the thrum of the air conditioner was constant, though it barely made a dent in the day's heat. The main room was cluttered: a gallery of sun-bleached prints and paintings hung on one wall, along with a rack of firearms, and a tall glass display cabinet, sparsely filled. Rows of folding chairs had been set out in front of a small lectern,

though few were occupied. The scent of must seeped up from the faded blue linoleum floor and lingered in the air.

At 10 a.m. sharp a compact woman entered at a brisk trot, a sheaf of papers and a small wooden gavel held to her breast. A halo of stiff pewter hair framed her face, while the broad shoulders of her jacket gave her the silhouette of a linebacker. She placed her load down on the lectern and looked up at the assembly, beaming with pleasure.

‘Good morning! How are y’all doing?’

Barely a dozen bored bodies sat slumped in waiting, but the auctioneer seemed to relish her task nonetheless.

‘OK folks, I’m going to get you to take a look at the sales sheet so we can get started.’

Some made a show of picking up the stapled pages which had been left on their seats, though few had much intention of parting with their money.

The auctioneer began to work her way methodically through the lots on the morning’s ticket: a mix of catering equipment and farm machinery, high-tech office supplies and careworn furniture. At times her high-cadence, sing-song patter was barely decipherable, but everyone in the room seemed to understand its ebb and flow. Under the strip lights bluebottles made slow circuits round the room and a low growl of thunder threatened in the distance. An oppressive stillness settled in.

The spell was broken by the sudden clamour of the bell on the auction house door. A woman stepped inside, and a wave of sullen heat rolled in behind her. She was in her early fifties; deep brown curls shot through with silver. Obviously an outsider, she appeared almost alien in her elegance.

Evidently self-conscious, she hurried to a row of empty chairs at the back of the room and sat down, picking up the sales sheet from the seat beside her.

The auctioneer began the bidding on an air rifle. After a brief flurry of activity, it went to a man who was sweating profusely, plucking his black T-shirt from the rolls of his belly. Then, in quick succession, a jet ski and a power boat failed to meet their starting price, too rich for the thin blood of the spectators. Sensing the end of the sale in sight, they started shifting in their seats.

‘Alrighty, let’s go ahead and take a look at our last lot.’

She flourished the grainy black-and-white image of a rather kitsch porcelain rabbit, lying on its haunches.

‘Who’ll start the bidding for this darling bunny at \$20 dollars?’

The room was silent; few here had money to spare for such trinkets. The dark-haired woman in the back row picked up the sales sheet and held it in the air. The auctioneer accepted her bid with a slight nod.

‘Thank you, ma’am.’

Every head in the room turned, surprised that this stranger should show interest in such a peculiar item.

‘Do I hear \$25? No? Going once for \$20 . . . going twice . . .’

She brought the gavel down with a snap.

‘It’s all yours.’

The auctioneer moved on.

‘Next up we have this pretty little baa-lamb. Reckon this one has your name on it, Roger!’

She sent a playful wink to a florid-faced farmer in the front row, who chuckled and waved her off.

‘I’m going to go ahead and get started at \$15 for this adorable little thing.’

Again, the stranger in the back row raised her paper. The auctioneer nodded.

‘We’re at \$15, do we have \$20 – No?’ She brought the gavel down again. ‘You got yourself a pair.’

A roll of thunder rumbled overhead and a sudden drum of heavy rain hammered onto the metal roof. The auctioneer moved on, raising her voice over the volley of noise. Over the next fifteen minutes, the dark-haired woman won a further eight porcelain figurines: a Viking, a smiling shepherdess, an ornate candelabra and a bear, looming up on its hind legs. A swallow, a greyhound – wet tongue lolling – a mouse and a rearing stallion. The proportions of each were different, but all were intricately sculpted in lifelike detail.

As she brought down the gavel for the last time, the auctioneer found herself staring at the stranger in their midst. The dark-haired woman was gathering her belongings, tucking her sunglasses into her handbag. She somehow seemed to sense the auctioneer’s gaze on her and gave a tight and fleeting smile in return. There was no joy or triumph in it, only determination.

A short while later, Clara Vogel found herself sat outside the cashier’s office, waiting to pay for the porcelain figurines she now held on her lap. She was fighting the hollow feeling that always came over her after a long-haul flight. She could already picture herself climbing between the clean, cool sheets of her bed at the airport hotel, but that would have to wait. Here and now, she had a payment to make and a promise to herself to keep.

Inside the cashier's office, the man in the black T-shirt was paying for his air rifle. The auctioneer stacked his dollar bills in a cash box and handed over the gun.

'There you go, Nathan. You be careful now and remember me to your mom.'

He took the gun from her and passed Clara in her seat, giving the brim of his weather-beaten cap a brief tug. The auctioneer beckoned to her. 'Come on in and take a seat. Won't be a minute; I'm just adding up your bill.'

The office was crammed with files, towers of paper which threatened to fall from every surface, an inventory of ephemera. Clara sat down cautiously and observed the older woman pecking at her calculator.

'You have ten items, coming to a total of \$258.' She looked up at Clara. 'Wasn't sure if anyone would buy them, truth be told. On account of their . . . historic nature. If you know what I mean.'

'The maker's mark.'

The auctioneer's face registered her distaste.

'I don't mean to insinuate anything, obviously.'

'It's quite all right, I was aware of their provenance. I know it must seem quite macabre.'

Clara's English intonation was unmistakable; the auctioneer clapped a hand to her chest. 'Can I just say, I love your accent. Where are you from?'

'I was actually born in Germany, but we moved to England when I was very young. Have you ever been?'

'Oh, bless your heart, no!' The auctioneer shook her head at the novelty of such an idea.

Clara opened her handbag and pulled out an envelope of

traveller's cheques. She signed her name and handed them across the table.

'Thank you!' The auctioneer tucked them in the cash box, then thrust out a hand. 'I'm Peggy, by the way. Now tell me, are you a collector? Because we have some real tasteful porcelain coming in a few weeks, beautiful vases which I'd be happy to put by ...'

'I'm not a collector, no.' Clara shifted in her seat. 'But I wonder ... might I trouble you for help?'

'You're fine, sweetie; go right ahead.'

'Is it possible to get the details of the person selling the figurines?'

The woman's doughy jowls drooped in disappointment. 'Oh my, I'm so sorry, but no. I just couldn't, in all good conscience. People round here really value their privacy.'

Clara had blithely assumed this part of the transaction would be straightforward. She had rehearsed this conversation in her head but made no plan beyond. Now she felt a hot flush rising on her chest. 'It's just, I've come such a terribly long way ...'

She stopped as she felt involuntary tears wash into her eyes, the sudden force of feeling taking her by surprise.

'I'm so sorry, please excuse me.'

'Are you OK, dear? Can I get you a glass of water?'

The auctioneer reached across the table to take her hand.

'You must think me very silly. I'm just a little overtired – I flew in from London last night with the express intention of buying these items.'

A faint frown of suspicion flickered across the older woman's face.

'You came all the way from England for some china knick-knacks?'

‘I’ve been searching for one piece in particular for quite a time. That’s why I came myself, you see. I’ve spent months trying to track down the Viking. I own one already, but this is the only other copy that I’ve ever come across.’

‘But how did you even find out that I was selling them?’

Clara sighed, too tired now to tell anything but the ungar-nished truth.

‘I have people in several countries on a retainer. They’ve been keeping an eye out for this make of porcelain in general, and that one piece in particular. A collector based in New York telephoned me as soon as he saw it for sale on your mailing list.’

Clara paused and then leaned forward, intently.

‘Peggy, can I speak candidly?’

‘Of course,’ she said, her eyes now wide with interest.

‘I need to find out who owned the Viking because they might be the only person who can tell me who my father is.’