

THE
ELEPHANT
THIEF

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Chapter One

SOMEWHERE IN EDINBURGH

8 April 1872

He couldn't breathe.

His lungs were pumping. His lips were open. But there still wasn't enough air.

The sack covering his head blocked everything. His nose. His eyes. His mouth. Fear burnt in his stomach, sharp and acidic.

He wondered where he was being taken. And why.

But most of all he wondered if he was going to survive the night.

Outside, the horses slowed and the carriage jerked to a stop.

"Move!"

Boy felt a rough shove in the center of his back, and he toppled, gracelessly, from the carriage. The ground hurt. And he cursed every decision he'd made that night. If he'd been more careful, less cocky, he would have seen the two men waiting outside the abandoned boarding house where he'd been living for the last three months.

But by the time he had, it had been too late. The hood had already covered his face, and his arms had been twisted behind his back.

"Get up, you little runt."

Heavy hands lifted him to his feet. The night breeze chilled his skin. Somewhere nearby, a door was wrenched open, and



instinctively, he turned towards it. Then he was pushed, almost stumbling, across the threshold.

Where was he? What did they want with him? Fear pulsed frantically in his chest.

Abruptly, the sack was torn from his head, and he gulped in air. Every mouthful tasted of damp and decay and the sea. He pivoted slowly on his heels and tried to focus.

He was in an old warehouse. Judging by the sounds and smells, it must be close to the Leith docks. At the far end of the room, a man stood by the only window. A shaft of moonlight turned him into a dark silhouette.

“Boy. So glad you could come.”

The voice was instantly recognizable. And Boy’s breath stuttered.

Frank Scatcherd. Leader of the Leith Brotherhood, a collection of Edinburgh’s worst criminals and thugs. And the man who called himself the King.

“I expect you want to know why you’re here.” Casually, Scatcherd pushed away from the window. As he walked, his steel-capped boots tapped on the bare floorboards. Boy waited, but the King was in no hurry. It was as though he knew that every second hiked the fear a little higher. “Well? Nothing to say?”

Now Scatcherd was so close that Boy could see the pattern of the silk scarf tied around his neck. The King liked to look good. His hair was slick with barber’s oil, and a cap tilted jauntily over one ear. It was rumored that a razor had been sewn into the peak so he could blind a man with a single head jab. But no one knew for certain if that was true.



Boy swallowed, throat as dry as dust, but he said nothing. The silence stretched for several heartbeats. Then Scatcherd slid a knife from his jacket sleeve.

“So you’re still not talking.” Deliberately, he rolled the blade in his palm. Forwards and back. Forwards and back. “What a pity.”

Boy lifted his chin and stared at the moving knife; the jagged tip was rusty with old blood. And he knew it wasn’t bravery that kept him silent. Right at this moment, he wished he could make any sound at all. But he couldn’t.

“Well, it’s lucky for you, I don’t need your voice.” The knife stopped moving. “I assume you’ve heard of the Wormwell auction?”

Cautiously, Boy nodded. Everyone in Edinburgh knew about the auction. Walter Wormwell owned the Royal Number One Menagerie, the most famous traveling show in the country. But two weeks ago, he’d been found lying in his study, as dead and cold as his untouched chicken supper. According to gossip, he’d left behind a large collection of zoological animals and an even larger collection of debt. Tomorrow the entire menagerie was being sold to settle those bills.

What Boy didn’t understand was Scatcherd’s interest. Why would the King bother with a penniless bankrupt like Wormwell? Or an auction of zoo animals? It made no sense.

“Two days before he died, Wormwell stole money from me. A great deal of money. Naturally, I want it back . . . and you are going to get it for me.”

Boy swallowed, trying to sort through the significance.



A part of him was relieved. He was going to be allowed to walk out of here alive. This time, there would be no punishment. No pain.

“I’ve already had his house searched. Nothing. Not even a penny under the floorboards. The menagerie is the only place left. Of course I’d prefer to go to the auction myself, but the police are sniffing around. So I’ve decided to send you . . .” Scatcherd’s lips twisted into a smile. “My pet thief.”

Boy flinched. How could he find a missing fortune when the Brotherhood had failed? And what would he be looking for? Coins? Bank papers? Gold? It had every sign of being a fool’s errand.

“My men will get you inside the pavilion.” Scatcherd jerked his head at the two thugs standing on either side of the doorway. “From there, you’re on your own. Keep your eyes and ears open. Wormwell hid that money and there has to be a trace somewhere. And remember . . .”

Boy waited, heart tripping. Scatcherd raised the knife and gently trailed it along Boy’s arm. It stopped at his wrist, just above the ugly tangle of scars.

“The last time I asked you for a favor, you let me down. This is your chance to make it up to me.” Abruptly, Scatcherd’s fist twisted, and the blade sliced through skin. Boy clenched his teeth against the pain. “And if you fail, just imagine what I will do to you.”



Boy hung by his fingertips from the top of the high stone wall, feeling the strain through every muscle. He closed his eyes and let go. His landing was clumsy but silent.

Finally, he was inside the auction ground.

On the other side of the wall, he heard Scatcherd's thugs muttering to themselves, then their heavy footsteps as they walked away. They'd done their job. Now it was up to him.

And if you fail, just imagine what I will do to you.

Scatcherd's words chased through his head like night shadows. He rubbed his wrist and felt the old scars beneath his fingers. He didn't need to imagine what would happen if he failed. He already knew.

But there was no need to panic; he was good at this. Faster, smarter, better than anyone else. And the truth was that in this crush no one would even notice a pickpocket. They were too busy staring at one of the strangest sights Edinburgh had ever seen.

Two leopards, some tigers, one battered baboon, and a handful of camels trudged around Waverley Pavilion. Then came a line of antelope, two hyenas (one spotted, one striped), and a golden lioness whose tail swished as she walked.

Boy had never seen anything like them before—animals that weren't cats, dogs, or rats. The only reason he knew their names was because of the auctioneer. Bartholomew Trott liked the sound of his own voice.

“. . . and finally, one Siberian brown bear sold to the London Zoological Gardens for forty guineas." Mr. Trott brought his hammer down and smiled the smile of a man making money.



“London’s got a bargain there. He’s young, healthy, and lively as a trout.”

But the bear was already causing trouble. Jaws wide, he reared up on huge hind legs and fanned out his claws. Boy knew it wouldn’t do any good. Escape was impossible. Two keepers were already pulling on his chains and, defeated, the animal fell sprawling to the ground.

Boy turned away, trying to ignore the tug of sympathy. Instead, he examined the pavilion field. Most spectators stood near the curtained stage where the animals were being brought up for auction. A little farther back were rows of cages and wagons that housed the rest of the Wormwell menagerie. They were probably the best place to start.

He reached into his pocket and checked for the small blade he carried to slash open pocket linings and to cut purse strings. It was still there. He was ready.

An hour later, Boy had found nothing. He’d pried open crates, crawled under wagons, and plunged his hand inside several straw-stuffed cages. But just as he’d expected, it was useless. There was no gold. No jewels. No banknotes.

His only real success was hidden in the lining of his jacket—a hoard of stolen pennies, silk handkerchiefs, and a lady’s scarf pin. He’d even managed to sneak a tin whistle from the pocket of one of Mr. Trott’s clerks.

Boy reached the last of the cages and sidled around a corner. The path was blocked by a group of animal keepers talking to a man in a crumpled suit. Instinct made him pull back; he was a fraction too late.

