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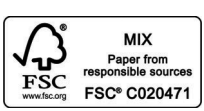
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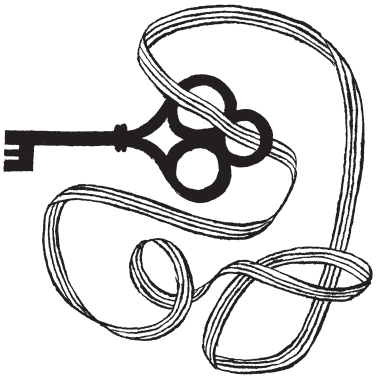
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CHAPTER I

A Boy and His Rat

Snow is falling.

Snow as white as a swan's feather, white as a trillium bloom. The whiteness is nearly blinding against the dark green and brown of the surrounding forest, and it lies in downy heaps between the quiet, dormant clutches of ivy and blackberry bushes. It is heaped against the bases of the tall fir trees, and it carpets the little trenches in the shallows around the wide cedar roots.

A road carves its way through the deep forest. It, too, is covered in an untouched shroud of snow.

In fact, if you didn't know there was a road beneath the snow, if you didn't know there were centuries of footsteps and hoofbeats and miles of weathered flagstones beneath the snow, you might just think it was a fallow stretch of woods, somehow left untouched by the forest's teeming greenery. There are no wheel tracks, no tire treads on this road. No footprints mar the delicate white of the snow. You might think it was a game trail, a stretch of ground where no tree could take root because of a constant traffic of silent walkers: deer, elk, and bear. But even here, in this most removed area of the world, there are no animal tracks. The more the snow falls, the more the road disappears. It is becoming just another part of this vast, unending forest.

Listen.

The road is quiet.

Listen.

A distant clatter suddenly disrupts this placid stillness; it is the sound of wagon wheels and the whinnying of a horse, pushed to the limit of its strength. The horse's hooves beat a mad rhythm against the earth, a rhythm dulled by the mute of the snow. Look: Around a bend comes flying a carriage, two of its four wheels lifting from the ground momentarily to make the turn. Two sweat-slick black horses are harnessed to the coach, and plumes of steam blow from their nostrils like smoke belching from a chimney. Perched above the horses is the coachman, a large man piled in black wool and a tattered top hat. He barks gruffly at the horses at their every stride, shouting,

"GYAP!" and "FASTER, ON!" He spares no strike of the whip. There is a look of deep consternation on his face. He spends the brief moments between the snaps of his whip eyeing the surrounding forest warily.

Look closer: Below him, in the simple black carriage itself, sits a woman, alone. She is dressed in a fine silk gown, and her face is covered in a shimmering pink veil. Rings studded with bright jewels glint on her fingers. In her hands, she holds a delicate paper fan, which she opens and closes nervously. She, too, watches the flanking walls of trees surrounding the carriage, as if looking for someone or something within them. Opposite her sits an ornate chest, its sides decorated with gold and silver filigree. A lock holds the chest's twin clasps closed, the key to which hangs at the woman's throat by a thin golden cord. Antsy, she raps at the ceiling of the carriage with the fan.

The driver hears the rapping and spurs the horses on, raining even more blows from his whip down on their heaving flanks. A sudden flash of movement on the road ahead catches the driver's attention. He squints his eyes against the blinding white of the falling snow.

A boy is standing in the middle of the road.

But this is no ordinary boy. This boy is dressed in what appears to be an elegantly brocaded officer's coat, like some infantryman from the Crimean War. His hair is black and curly and sprouts from beneath the coarse fur of an ushanka hat. He is idly swinging an emptied sling. There is a rat on his shoulder.

"STOP!" shouts the boy. "THIS IS A STICKUP!"

"You heard him!" shouts the rat. "Rein it in, fatso!"

The coachman hisses a curse under his breath. With a quick turn of his wrist, he has dropped the whip and has taken the reins in both of his hands. He snaps them eagerly, and the horses lean into their gallop. A cruel smile has appeared on the coachman's face. "HYA!" he shouts to the beleaguered horses.

The boy's face, formerly buoyed with confidence, falls. He swallows hard. "I—I'm serious!" he stammers.

The coachman's cracked lips have pulled back to reveal an astonishing row of yellow teeth. He is not slowing. The lady in the carriage gives a slight shriek as it careens along the snowy road. The boy quickly reaches down and pulls a rock from the ground. He wipes it clean of snow on his trousers and sets it into the cradle of his sling.

"Don't make me do this," he warns. It's not clear whether the coachman hears this; he is barreling toward the boy and the rat at an alarming rate.

With a casual expertise—he's evidently been practicing—the boy lets loose the stone from the sling, and it flies toward the coachman, who ducks just in time; the stone sails over his head to fall into the deep, snowy bracken of the forest. The boy does not have time to pick up another; the coach is so close that the boy can smell the sweat coming off the horses.

The rat gives a little *ulp!* and dives into the gully at the side of the

road. The boy follows him, and they tumble into a pile together. The carriage roars by. The horses, spooked at having so nearly missed hitting the two brigands, whinny noisily as they pass.

The veiled woman in the carriage clutches at the key at her throat. She gives a high-pitched warble of fear. The coachman, somewhat chuffed at his bravado, throws a look over his shoulder at the boy and his rat. "Better luck next time, suckers!" he shouts. His attention thus diverted, he does not see the cedar trunks as they fall, domino-like, in a crash of splinters to block the road ahead. Three of them. One after another. *Bam*. *Bam*. *Bam*.

The woman screams; the coachman swings his head to face forward and gives the reins a violent yank. The horses yawp. Their hooves scramble desperately against the slick surface of the road. The carriage tips and shimmies and emits a shuddering groan. Thinking quickly, the driver hollers an impassioned *"HYA!"* and deftly navigates the horses and carriage through the obstacle course of the fallen trees. Bodies, male and female, are appearing from the woods; they are dressed similarly to the boy, but their uniforms are mismatched. Some wear tattered shirts; some have bandannas covering their faces. They are all children. The oldest might be fifteen. They are staring with disbelief at the coachman's ability to thread the cumbersome carriage with its two panicked horses through their trap. Within moments, the coachman has cleared the obstacles and has returned to his whip, urging the horses on.

In the meantime, the boy and the rat have picked themselves up from the roadside ditch and have brushed the clinging snow from their clothes. The rat leaps back up to the boy's shoulder as the boy puts his fingers to his lips and gives a shrill whistle. From the dense scrub of the forest comes a horse, a dappled brown-and-white pony. The boy throws himself astride the horse, the rat holding tight to the boy's epaulet, and kicks it into a gallop. Arriving at the fallen trees, he leaps the horse and clears the three cedars. A spray of snow and mud flies up when the horse makes landfall. The children in the woods have shaken themselves from their shock and are calling their mounts; soon the road is filled with galloping



riders giving chase to the fleeing carriage.

The coachman, ahead, marks this. He curses the bandits' temerity. The wind is lashing at his face; the snow is now driving, icy.

Of the pursuing riders, the boy with the rat is clearly among the fastest. Many are unable to keep up the pace that the carriage is setting and fall away. Within minutes, only four remain: the boy, another older boy, and two girls. They draw closer to the speeding carriage and split apart, two on each side of the vehicle. The rat, holding tight to the boy's shoulder by a flap of his furry hat, issues a warning to the coachman: "Give up your gold," he shouts, "and you can go free!"

The coachman responds with a hair-raising curse that makes the



boy blush, even in this most hectic of moments. He is now level with the carriage. He can see inside: the veiled woman, the key at her neck, the clasped ornate chest. The woman watches him curiously, her large brown eyes glinting from above the shimmering cloth at her face. The boy is momentarily distracted by the scene. The rat shouts, "LOOK OUT!"

In an effort to unseat his pursuers, the coachman has feinted the carriage to the left, and the boy nearly runs his pony directly into the coach's traces. He catches a shriek in his throat and veers the pony off the road. The pony's hooves hit the soft underbrush of the roadside and it falters; the ground drops away here and slopes down to a rushing brook far below. The boy braces for the fall, but the pony is nimble. In a flash, the boy's steed has righted itself and finds its footing again on the road. The boy whispers a word of thanks in its ear. They are back in the chase.

The carriage leads them now by several horse lengths. The three other bandits are struggling to keep up. One of the riders, a girl with straw-blond hair, has grabbed hold of the roof of the coach and is attempting to climb aboard. It is a risky ploy; the girl's face is set in concentration. The other two bandits, a boy and a girl, have managed to spur their mounts to ride parallel to the coach's horses. The blond-haired girl grunts loudly and vaults from her horse; she barely manages to grab hold of the latticework that runs along the top of the carriage. Her horse veers away; her body swings against the

carriage-side, eliciting another high-pitched scream from its passenger. The girl steadies herself and climbs to the top of the carriage, giving a triumphant whoop. She turns her head to the boy with the rat, who is still several horse-lengths behind.

"May the best bandit—" she begins. Her sentence is cut short when the carriage plows underneath a low-hanging bough and the girl is lifted from her perch in the blink of an eye. The boy with the rat must duck to avoid the girl's dangling feet as he gallops his pony toward the carriage.

"Win," finishes the girl, suspended from the limb of the tree.

The boy nods to the rat and grits his teeth in determination. There is now only he and the other girl. The other boy has fallen away from the chase, his mount limping into the underbrush.

"Aisling!" the boy shouts. "Get the horses!"

The girl, now parallel with the right-hand horse, has heard him. She is trying to get her hands on the horse's bridle, but the coachman's whip is foiling her every attempt. "Away, vile brigand!" shouts the coachman. The girl winces as the whip's leather tip leaves a red welt on the back of her hand.

"Septimus," hisses the boy to the rat, "think you could help out?"

The rat smiles. "I think I could do a little something." The boy is now even with the carriage. He can hear the mewling of the maiden within. The rat leaps from the boy's shoulder and lands on the nape of the coachman, who lets out a bloodcurdling scream.

"RRRRRATS!" he shouts. "I CAN'T STAND RATS!"

But the rodent has already crawled down the coachman's shirt and is busy practicing a kind of Irish step dance between his naked shoulder blades. The coachman hollers and lets fall both the whip and the reins; the coach's horses, confused, lose their gallop, and the boy and the girl are able to pull up even with them. With a quick glance at each other, the two bandits leap astride the carriage horses and pull them to a scrambling stop.

The coachman jumps from his seat and stumbles away down the road, his hands desperately clawing at his back. The girl and the boy watch him, laughing, before turning to the task at hand. The girl beckons graciously. "After you." The boy bows and walks toward the idle carriage, radiating confidence. He swings the door open.

"Now, ma'am," he says proudly, "if you wouldn't mind turning over . . ."

His words falter. Inside, the woman has removed her veil to reveal a shocking, tangled nest of auburn facial hair.

Also: There is the barrel of a flintlock pistol pointing at him.

"I don't think so," says the passenger, in a husky (and very unladylike) baritone.

The boy is crestfallen. "But—" he begins.

"Bang," says the passenger. He gives the boy a scolding rap on his forehead with the pistol barrel.

The boy stares and scratches at his temple, as if replaying the

entire scene in his mind. He kicks his boots in the snow. The winter term of Bandit Training has begun. And Curtis has just failed his first test.



In what might seem like another world from the one in which this scene was playing out, but was in fact only a handful of miles distant, Prue was staring out of a second-floor window, watching the snow fall and disintegrate against the lawn of George Middle School. *Typical Portland winter*, she thought, *falling slush*. With every dropping clump, she felt her chin bore farther into the palm of her hand. A couple walking along the sidewalk gingerly avoided the gathering puddles along their way, their coat lapels folded up to cover their exposed necks. Cars, dusted with a layer of brackish gray snow, splashed rooster tails of icy water from potholes as they swished along the wet streets. It looked positively miserable out.

"Prue!"

The voice sounded in Prue's mind like someone calling to her over a vast distance; like a lighthouse keeper hailing a ship in a gale. She chose to ignore it. It came again:

"Prue McKeel!"

It was sounding closer. More present. A master of ceremonies beckoning the star performer to the stage. She began to lift her chin from her palm.

"Earth to Prue McKeel!" This time, an explosion of laughter