

See the glittering black sand and the horizon that stretches for ever?

That is the middle of nowhere.

Where normally nothing much happens and usually no-one knows about it.

*It is also where *The Great Sadness* was created, where love came to die.*

All because of a stolen rose, an Emperor's infinite wisdom, magic & family.

Come closer and I'll tell you the story.

Share your snacks.

Chapter 1

He, or very possibly she, was known as The Rose Thief. It was a nickname that stuck despite the best efforts of the thief-catchers to stem public approval for a thief who only stole roses. No-one had yet admitted to knowing who, or indeed what, the thief was. He could indeed be a woman, or a troll, or even a malevolent spirit. What was of great significance and importance was only the Emperor's – *may he live for ever and ever* - rose garden was being violated. The thief was stealing exclusively from the Emperor – *may he live for ever and ever* – and no-one but the Emperor – *may he, oh you get the idea* – had access to the rose gardens. Not even any of his thousand and one wives. It made solving the theft extremely difficult. It also made the Emperor look rather foolish and was the reason why Chief Thief-Catcher - Ned Spinks - was strung up by his ankles, in the third best reception room of the Emperor's Palace. Ned was waiting to see what would happen next, and in the meantime, tracing rude shapes in his imagination with the dark stains on the floor beneath him.

'Do you know why you are here?'

The high-pitched, nasal voice came from the direction of Ned's right knee. It was the High Right, the Honourable Lord Chamberlain. Ned tried to swing around a little so he could at least speak to the ankles of the High Right but he had no turning circle. The blood pooling in his head was beginning to make it hard to think coherent thoughts. He decided against his usual witty repartee.

'It's my turn?' Well, maybe just a little. To lighten the mood.

The High Right ignored Ned's response. 'The Emperor – *may he live for ever and ever* – wants this so called 'Thief of Roses' caught. Now.'

'I'll see what I can do, Sir.'

The High Right did not respond and remained behind Ned, making him uneasy. Due to the voluminous nature of his shirt, a large portion of Ned's back was on display and he didn't think it

was necessarily his best side. Feeling rather vulnerable, he was now thoroughly convinced that love handles were not meant to sag upside down. Gravity was not doing him any favours.

He lurched unexpectedly and crashed to the floor in an inelegant heap of somewhat overweight thief-catcher as he was cut down. Shaking the stars from his head, Ned winced as the blood rushed back down his body and made his ears sing. At least he still had his ears. The last time the Emperor took a dislike to the Chief Thief-Catcher, the High Left Inquisitor carved most of his body parts off. Ned counted his fingers and toes surreptitiously.

'You have one day Thief-Catcher.' The High Right glared at Ned who had reached a count of at least eight digits. 'Don't let me regret not ordering the removal of your eyeballs.'

Ned heard rather than saw the High Right leave. His head was still adjusting to being the right way up and despite the leg count, Ned wasn't entirely sure he had active control over his limbs. Standing had yet to be attempted.

A rather loud conversation began filtering through the third best reception room doors, which were ajar.

'I don't care what you fink. I'm going in to get 'im.'

A small, grubby looking child with a mop of straw-like hair marched into the room wearing an air of nonchalance which soon deflated into obvious relief at seeing Ned in one piece. Two palace guards peered in, saw that the High Right had finished and decided to mind their own business for once. Palace guards excelled at minding yours, it was a strenuous part of training – you couldn't be a palace guard if you didn't know what your next door neighbour's aunt had for tea last Thursday.

The small child wasn't a child at all. She was a dirty little sprite with large, hairy ears and a coppery coloured tail just visible from the bottom of her filthy red coat. The sprite peered into Ned's face. The smell that accompanied her was other-worldly.

'Jenni. A little space.' Ned tried not to breathe.

The sprite huffed, hurt at the not so warm welcome. 'Be like that then. I only came straight

'ere to find you and get you out of whatever mess you're in now.' The sprite leant in again, utterly disregarding Ned's request for personal space and looked deep into the bloodshot yet still vibrant blue eyes of her boss. 'Joe said you was scooped.'

Ned pushed himself up from the floor, trying in vain to ignore the incredible smell infiltrating his nostrils. 'Yep. Lucky me.' He staggered a few steps before collecting his limbs and being able to walk towards the door. The sprite capered at his side. 'You need a bath Jenni. You stink.'

'Been under cover at the docks ain't I?' A few flies buzzed in Jenni's wake. 'Cos we fawt he might be basing 'is operations round that way, right? So I've bin looking for the rose thief ain't I?' She scratched an armpit viciously. 'Came straight 'ere tho didn't I? When Joe said.'

'Yeah, thanks. What about the docks, what did you find out?' Ned held the third best reception room door open for Jenni and jauntily saluted the guards in the corridor as they walked through. 'Any luck?'

'Just a pile o' shite.'

'Well I can smell that.'

'Nah – a proper pile of rose shite – that special stuff what makes them grow.' Jenni jabbed her thumb over her shoulder at the palace corridor receding behind them as they exited through a side gate. 'And it ain't theirs.'

'Whose was it then?'

'Dunno. Didn't 'zactly speak to the owner. There weren't much left, right and it was in one of them hire when you need a bit o' space like places. You know, the ones Two-Face Bob hires out. It'd dried a bit and that but it was definitely shite.' She beamed up at Ned. 'So even tho I didn't find nobody I still done good, right?'

Ned nodded, then winced as his upside-down headache kicked in. 'Could be Two-Face Bob is involved, we'll have to have a little chat with him.' He tried to make a mental note to investigate the dockyards further whilst ignoring the hammers in his head.

The unlikely pair walked down Palace Lane, back to Headquarters at Hangman's Noose. They did not notice the wide berth the great unwashed gave them, which goes to show that even the down and outs have some standards.

Headquarters wasn't the real headquarters. The official residence of the thief-catchers, over on Justice Heights, burnt down in '04 after a nasty disagreement with the Guild of Organised Crime. It was rebuilt twice before the then Chief Catcher took the hint and upped sticks. These days anyone who wanted to find a thief-catcher visited the Hangman's Noose, a delightful little hostelry that perched jauntily on the edge of the aptly named Black Narrows. If by delightful you mean grime encrusted walls, floors and ceiling, a barman who'd sooner shoot you than serve you and a clientele that lacked a certain respectability, then yes, extremely delightful. As for the Black Narrows, they were definitely black – some say it was because that was the only colour of stone left in the quarry, others say it's because all the evil committed in one place has stained the streets with blackness – and they were certainly narrow. This is because wide streets are a pickpockets nightmare. No-one went into the Black Narrows voluntarily, unless they were naive tourists or had the misfortune to live there. Much of the bread line and below had to live there. But even so, no-one went out in the narrows at night time unless they absolutely had to and even then they tried to get out of it, unless of course it was part of their professional workload. It was one of *those* places, a tourist honey trap for people looking for danger and suitable living conditions for those wishing to cause the danger. All in all, it was the perfect location for Thief-Catcher HQ. Anyone who was that serious about needing a thief-catcher clearly had the funds for the job and no-one, not even the Guild of Organised Flame, was brave enough to try and destroy the Noose. They'd rather be hung, drawn and quartered.

Reg, the Noose's resident barman - he never, ever, left - nodded in greeting as Ned entered through the concealed side door. It was the shortest route to the rickety stairs that lurked in the rear of the saloon where the gloom was deepest, knee high and thick as treacle in places.

'Anything?' Ned asked. Reg acted as a surly doorman for the thief-catchers, he let everyone in, regardless of whether they were welcome or not, but he was supposed let Ned know in advance if he let people through when no-one was around. Especially anyone connected with the current Rose Thief investigations.

'Up.' Reg didn't believe in conversation or indeed sentences with more than one word. They were unhealthy and contagious. The Noose's patrons were of a similar mind except on Thursdays when Yvette von Strunkle performed her weekly show. Then many rich and colourful words were shouted, often hoarsely, by short, hairy men in large overcoats who bought their own peanuts and drank copious amounts of the vilest liquor available.

Ned nodded his thanks and began the treacherous climb. One in five steps were missing and those that remained were so old and rotten that putting any weight on them was risking a broken limb. Ned tried to look at it like a deterrent for time wasters. You had to really want the thief-catchers to climb these stairs. As they skirted the mattress at the top of the stairs, Ned noticed the door to the thief-catcher office was ajar, a shadowy figure visible through the frosted glass. Ned put an arm out to slow Jenni down and went first, a catch spell on quick release from the supply in his spellcaster belt. As soon as he saw who it was he relaxed.

Bob's two noses wrinkled as Jenni's fragrance filled the office. The sprite stood behind Bob and stuck her tongue out rudely. The face on the back of Bob's head retaliated by hawking and spitting snotty phlegm at the sprite. She dodged it easily and began to make one of her own.

'Jenni – enough.' Ned plonked himself down in the nearest chair. 'Two-Face Bob, what can I do for you?'

Both faces smirked and spoke in unison. 'It's not what you can do for me Spinks, it's what I can do for you. For a price.'

'And that is?'

'I know who the Rose Thief is.'

'Yeah?' scoffed Jenni. 'What you got stinking in your warehouse by the dock then eh? We

know all about that an' all.'

'Jenni!' Ned leaned back in his chair, putting his battered boots up on the corner of his battered desk before responding to Two-Face. 'Why come to me? Why not report it to the Palace yourself.'

Two-Face Bob walked over to the small window and peered out, looking up and down the street below before turning back to Ned and rubbing his hands.

'Pay me first. Then I'll tell you everything I know. This is a big one right – at least four thousand gold bits.'

'Ha! Four thousand gold... you must be joking. Not even the Emperor has that kind of cash just lying around.'

'May he live for ever and ever,' whispered the rear head of Two-Face Bob.

'We already know it's you anyways – what yer talking about bits? You ain't getting no bits.' said Jenni but Two-Face Bob ignored her.

'I know you got scooped up and I know you've got a deadline.' He jerked a thumb over his shoulder at the sprite who was picking her nails in disinterest. 'I doubt the pixie will be much help to you.'

'Sprite.' Ned corrected him.

'What?'

'She's a sprite and unless you have any hard evidence you'd like to leave with the thief-catcher's office, get out of my sight.'

Two-Face Bob turned so that his faces could scowl at both Ned and Jenni before he stalked out of the room and banged the door shut.

'Four thousand gold bits.' Ned shook his head. 'You believe that guy?' Moving his head was a bad idea, it re-woke the killer headache he'd been trying to ignore and Jenni's stink was starting to make his eyes water again. 'You – go get clean. Come straight back and fill me in again on what you found.' He pulled open the drawers of his desk, searching for something, anything that would clear

his head. He opted for the half bottle of scrumble he'd been saving for a rainy day.

Jenni clattered and banged in the small bathroom next door while Ned reviewed the case so far.