

## The Rose Thief by Claire Buss

*This is the middle of nowhere. Where nothing happens and no-one knows about it. This is where The Great Sadness was created – where love came to die. All because of a stolen rose. Come closer and I'll tell you the story. Share your snacks.*

He was known as The Rose Thief. It was one of those annoying rumour mill nicknames that stuck despite the best efforts of the thief-catchers to stem public approval of a thief who only stole roses. No-one actually knew who, or indeed what, the thief was – it may well have been a woman or a troll or a malevolent spirit. What was important was the fact that only the Emperor's – may he live for ever and ever - garden grew roses. So the thief was stealing from the Emperor – may he live for ever and ever – and no-one but the Emperor – may he live for ever and ever – had access to the rose gardens. Not even one of his thousand and one wives. It made solving the theft extremely difficult. It also made the Emperor – may he, oh you get the idea – look extremely foolish and was the reason why the current Chief Thief-Catcher - Ned Spinks - was currently strung up by his ankles, in the third best reception room, idly 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, nasally voice came from the direction of Ned's right shoulder. It was the High Right, the Honourable Lord Chamberlain. Ned tried to swing around a little so that 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 Emperor – may he live for ever and ever – wants this so called Thief of Roses caught.

Now.'

The High Right remained behind Ned making him feel decidedly 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. He was fairly sure love handles were not meant to sag upside down. Gravity was not doing him any favours.

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

There was a sudden lurch and he crashed to the floor in an inelegant heap of slightly overweight law enforcement officer. Shaking the stars from his head, Ned winced as the blood rushed back down his body making 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 had carved most of his body parts off. Ned counted his fingers and toes surreptitiously.

'You have one day thief-catcher. 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 any of his limbs.

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

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

A small, grubby looking child marched into the room wearing an air of nonchalance which quickly deflated into obvious relief at seeing Ned in one piece. On closer inspection it wasn't a child at all. It was a dirty little sprite with hairy ears and a tail just visible from the bottom of it's filthy red coat. The sprite peered into Ned's face. The smell that accompanied her was other-worldly.

'Jenni. A little space.'

The sprite huffed, a little 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 deeply into the bloodshot yet still vibrantly blue eyes of its master. 'Joe says you're Chief now.'

Ned pushed himself up from the floor, trying vainly to ignore the incredible smell infiltrating his nostrils. 'Yep. Lucky me.' He staggered slightly before walking out of the room, the sprite capering at his side.

'You need a bath Jenni. You stink.'

'Been under cover ain't I?' A few flies buzzed in Jenni's wake. 'Came straight 'ere didn't I.' She scratched an armpit viciously. 'Undercover looking for the rose thief ain't I?'

'Yeah, about that.' Ned held the palace door open for Jenni and jauntily saluted the guards in the corridor. 'Any luck?'

'Just a pile of shite.'

'Well I can smell that.'

'No – a pile of rose shite – that special stuff what makes them grow.' Jenni jabbed her thumb over her shoulder at the palace slowly receding behind her. 'And it ain't theirs.' She beamed up at Ned. 'I done good right?'

Ned nodded, then winced as the upside-down headache kicked in. 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 just goes to show that even the down and outs have some standards.