



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 centre 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 rumoured 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 it 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 travelling 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 favour, 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 further back were rows of cages and wagons which 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 cut purse strings. It was still there. He was ready.

An hour later, Boy had found nothing. He'd prised 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.

'Oi, what d'you think you're doing, lad? Come here. I want a word.'

Spinning on his heels, Boy ran, weaving through the wagons before blending into the crowd again. Only then did he risk looking over his shoulder. The man with the crumpled suit was craning across the heads of the spectators. Boy hunched his shoulders and kept low. His heart thudded.

'Ladies and gentlemen!' Mr Trott's bellow couldn't have been better timed. Everyone turned towards the stage. Four men were lowering a cage on to a raised plinth. Behind the metal bars, a lion glowered sulkily. 'May I present Hannibal – the handsomest beast in the jungle!'

On cue, the lion rose to his feet, opened his jaws and roared. The crate lurched sideways. Boy winced at the screams.

‘No need to be alarmed, ladies. He’s as tame as a spring lamb and gentle as a kitten. I’d climb in there myself if I wasn’t wearing my second-best coat. Now, who’ll start the bidding?’

‘Two hundred guineas!’ shouted one large gentleman in the front row. He must be one of the guests who owned a zoological house or travelling menagerie. Boy had even heard a rumour that an American showman called Barnum had sent a buyer from across the ocean.

‘Two hundred and ten!’

‘Two hundred and twenty.’

‘Two thirty!’

‘Very well. Three hundred guineas.’ It was the large man again, his face half hidden by a grey plume of sideburns. A line of gold buttons curved across his jacket. ‘And I hope he can play the piano for that.’

The crowd laughed as the hammer came down.

‘Sold to Mr Arthur Albright of the Yorkshire Zoological Gardens for three hundred guineas.’ Mr Trott nodded to the winning bidder who smiled through his whiskers as if he had captured the lion himself. ‘Congratulations, Mr Albright. He’s a beautiful animal.’

Mr Trott shuffled his papers and Boy pushed a little closer, a flush of nerves prickling his skin. The final lot had been reached. His time was running out.

‘And now, ladies and gentlemen, I have for you the largest and cleverest elephant ever exhibited in our great country. Maharajah the Magnificent!’

From the side of the stage, a curtain twitched and fell. Standing in the waves of purple cloth was the biggest star of the Royal Number One Menagerie. And Boy forgot every reason he was here.

With tusks as long as a man’s leg, the elephant towered above the crowd. His rippled grey skin stretched over a wide back before falling into deep folds where legs met body. Each ear, large as a tablecloth, had faded at its edges as though scrubbed by an overly enthusiastic washer-woman.

If the Queen herself had emerged, she couldn’t have caused more of a stir. Not only had Boy never seen anything like this creature, he’d never even imagined one existed. The elephant must be the strongest, most powerful animal to walk the earth.

But it was Maharajah’s trunk which hooked his curiosity – as bizarre as a man with a third arm. It was coiled around a wooden stick that the elephant brandished like a street magician would wave a wand. Boy couldn’t take his eyes away.

Then, without warning, Maharajah swung the club at Mr Trott. The crowd gasped. Boy tensed, waiting for the blow to land. This was going to be painful. But, a bare inch from trouble, the elephant slowed and gently tipped the auctioneer’s hat from his head.

‘As you can see, ladies and gentlemen, he loves a bit of tomfoolery.’ Mr Trott didn’t look amused. He scooped up the hat and pushed it back on. ‘Come on, Sandev! Walk the beast about. We’ve not got all day.’

From the side of the stage, a slim, wiry man emerged. To Boy’s eyes, he looked almost as exotic as the elephant. His red trousers were baggy at the knee and gathered at the ankle. Embroidered straps held a silver-headed cane to his chest. And a circle of white cloth covered his head, creating a peculiar type of hat. But most fascinating of all was his colour. Because this man was the first person Boy had ever seen with skin just as brown as his own.

‘Well get on with it! Time’s money.’ Mr Trott tapped his hammer impatiently. Sandev’s solemn face didn’t even flicker. Instead, he held his palms together as though in prayer and bowed slowly. The entire field hushed. Impressed, Boy lifted up on to his toes. He didn’t want to miss a moment.

Sandev whistled into one of Maharajah’s huge ears. The elephant stomped forwards, and Boy felt the earth shake beneath his feet. The tremor seemed to reach up and wrap around his bones.

‘See his noble brow. Observe his proud stature. This magnificent beast was once the personal pet of an Indian prince before he was given to the Russian Czar. I’m told he only agreed to part with the animal in exchange for six bags of gold.’

Boy could hear rumblings among the menagerists.

‘I’ll start the bidding at five hundred guineas.’ Mr Trott peered at those on the front row. ‘Gentlemen, may I remind you of the strength of this great creature. He’s been known to pull the weight of twenty grown men in a wagon. For several miles. Going uphill.’

Reluctantly, Boy dropped back on to his heels. He didn’t have time for daydreaming. He needed to hide until the pavilion cleared, then start the search again.

Twisting, he slid back through the crush. A sudden surge knocked him off balance, and his jacket swung open. A silver whistle tipped out. A few pennies followed. Then a hatpin. His pickpocketing blade. And one leather glove.

‘You thievin’ little beggar!’

A hand clamped around his neck and, for a moment, Boy was frozen. Then he fought. He kicked and punched and scratched, but nothing worked. The fist refused to loosen. Wriggling, he tried to see who held him. It was a man, solid and squat and wearing what was surely the brightest red waistcoat in the whole of Edinburgh.

‘Oi, Crimple. Sling this runt up there will you? He won’t be able to go nowhere.’

Another hand grabbed his collar. He was winched into the air, and brought face-to-face with a giant – one of the keepers who had tackled the Siberian bear. Hope bled away.

‘Over here, Gov?’ The keeper reached a tall column beside the pavilion gate. Once a marble statue would have stood there but now it was empty. Boy was thrown up. Roughly. The bricks scraped his shins.

‘That’s the place. He won’t be shiftin’ in a hurry.’ Red Waistcoat was already scurrying back towards the auction stage. ‘You keep an eye out. I’ll deal with him later.’

Boy glanced down and his stomach lurched. The ground looked far away. For one moment he considered jumping but the cold spring had hardened the earth to rock. A fall was certain to break a bone, most likely one in his neck.

Desperately, he searched for another escape. The stage was only a stone’s throw away but everyone’s attention was on the sale. And even if they saw him, it was unlikely anyone would help. He was trapped, his throat so clogged with fear he needed to breathe faster to get enough air.

‘. . . I must tell you that Mr Samuel MacKeith, a leading butcher in this fair city, is keen to introduce elephant steaks to Scotland. I hope that will influence your bids, gentlemen. I’m certain none of us would want to see such a fine beast on our dinner plates?’

A hand snapped up.

‘Yes, five hundred and fifty guineas – now with Mr Albright. Will anyone give me five sixty?’

From his perch, Boy spotted Red Waistcoat waving furiously at the back of the bidders. A rush of anger mixed with his fear. This man was to blame. It was his fault that he was caught as firmly as a fish on a hook. Then Boy realized something; something which brought a small spark of satisfaction.

Red Waistcoat was in trouble of his own.

People had pushed forwards for the final sale, blocking

the auctioneer's view. What Boy could see, Mr Trott could not. Red Waistcoat, and his attempts to bid for the elephant, might as well be invisible.

'Five hundred and sixty from Monsieur Clemontard of the Ménagerie du Jardin in Paris. Am I offered more?'

Frantically, Red Waistcoat waved again but the auctioneer's gaze was fixed on the front row. 'Mr Albright?' A nod. 'That's five seventy from you, Mr Albright.'

The words seemed to jolt Red Waistcoat. Boy saw him whirl away from the stage like a scarlet spinning top. Puffing and panting, he broke into a waddling run, darting between the spectators. On another day, Boy would have laughed. Today he couldn't even smile. Red Waistcoat was heading back towards the column. But why?

'Raise your arm, lad. Raise your arm!' He was getting nearer. 'Do it now. Now! I'll not be outgunned by that Yorkshire cheat.'

Boy hesitated. It made no sense at all but every instinct screamed that this was a golden opportunity. So how could he twist it to his advantage?

'Just put your arm in the air and wave. He'll see you up there.' Red Waistcoat's voice was growing more desperate as he got closer. Crowds still blocked his path. 'Come on! COME ON!'

But Boy didn't wave. He did something much better. Bringing his fingers to his lips, he whistled. Loud, clear and shrill. The note soared over the heads of the spectators. They turned in one movement as though pulled by a single

string. Boy made sure everyone was looking – and then he lifted his arm.

‘Well, well! It seems we’ve a late bidder.’ Peering across, Mr Trott pointed with his hammer. ‘Five hundred and eighty . . . there on the column.’

‘But he can’t.’

‘He’s just a child!’

The shouts from the front row were loud enough for Boy to hear. He dropped his arm quickly. What had he done? After a lifetime trying to stay out of sight, he was caught centre stage. And there was no one to blame but himself.

‘Of course he can.’ Red Waistcoat had reached the column. He leant against the stone base, breathless but triumphant. ‘The lad’s with me. WITH ME!’

But Boy knew it was never going to be that easy. Nothing ever was. Sure enough, Mr Albright was already pushing through the crowd, his grey whiskers quivering.

‘This is outrageous, Mr Trott. You can’t go along with it! I was invited on the understanding that this would be a fair sale among gentlemen. Not children. And certainly not grubby street urchins.’

‘I’m sorry, Mr Albright, but as long as there’s money to back up the bid I have to accept it.’ The auctioneer lifted his voice. ‘Mr Jameson, if the boy’s with you, can I be assured you have the funds?’

‘I’m good for five hundred and eighty guineas. And more besides that.’

‘Then let’s finish this now.’ Mr Albright’s gold buttons rose on his chest. ‘I’ll give you six hundred and twenty. But that’s my final offer. You won’t get a better one.’

Faces turned expectantly. The sideshow wasn’t over yet. Boy looked down at Red Waistcoat. Even at this distance, he could see a gleam in the man’s eye.

‘What say we go higher, lad? About seven hundred should do it.’

Never in his whole life had Boy imagined being in reach of so much money. It was just possible that seven hundred guineas could buy all the food in the city. He put his fingers to his lips and whistled.

‘Seven hundred!’ Red Waistcoat shouted. ‘SEVEN HUNDRED GUINEAS!’

Boy waved again and the crowd roared. For several moments, nothing else could be heard. Not even Mr Albright’s protests.

‘It looks as though the boy’s bought himself an elephant!’ Mr Trott brought his hammer crashing down. ‘Sold for seven hundred guineas to the Belle Vue Zoological Gardens in Manchester, owned by Mr James Jameson.’

For one glorious moment, Boy actually believed Maharajah was his. It was as good as dipping for a sixpence and finding a sovereign instead. Maybe it was even better than that. And then he remembered. This wasn’t his victory. It wasn’t even his fight. And it certainly wasn’t his money.

On the ground below, Mr Jameson was bouncing up and down on short legs like an excited toad, his red waistcoat

bloated with pride. 'I beat that snooty, stuck-up buffoon. I beat him fair and square.'

The crowd cheered again, so loudly that at first only Boy noticed Maharajah lumbering towards them. Then people were forced to shuffle aside. Boy envied them. If he had been on solid ground, he would have run until his legs gave out.

But he could only watch as Maharajah stopped in front of him. Gold eyes, bright as candle flames, stared back then blinked.

Suddenly, the elephant swung his trunk.

Boy jerked away, then cursed his own stupidity. There was nothing behind him but air. He was going to fall, straight on to the cold, hard earth. In that terrifying half-second, Boy wondered if it would be easier just to let it happen.

He never found out.

A tight grip stopped his dive backwards. Maharajah's trunk curled around his wrist, warm and rough. Boy's heart-beat slowed. The clever, gold eyes blinked again and when they opened, he saw himself reflected back. A scrawny boy in stolen clothes. For a moment it was just the two of them.

'My good Lord, will you look at that! The lad and the elephant. They're shaking hands.'

And later Boy realized that this was how it all began.