MOUSE HEART

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For Isla, for lending me your mum

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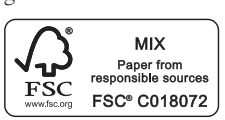
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The mouse may sometimes help the lion in need.
Proverb

'Tis a bold mouse that nestles in the cat's ear.
Proverb

These events take place during the reign of Queen Anne II



Prologue

A harbour.

All around, tall-sailed ships creak.

Night creatures scuttle away.

The cobbles glow pink. Not from the crime about to happen, but with the coming of the September dawn.

From what is left of the shadows, two figures emerge.

A blade is raised and a scream splits the empty quayside, scaring sleeping gulls into the air.

A moment later – uproar.

Feet clatter through the alleyways.

Run. Run!



Chapter 1

I've waited half an hour for Valentina. Watched a shaft of morning sunlight sundial on and off the stage while the seagulls battled overhead.

"Maybe she's forgotten us, Dog," I say, rubbing the grey ears of my old friend. He opens an eye and lets his head fall heavier on my leg. Outside, a church bell chimes seven times and someone uses the pump at the back of the theatre. Pumping, washing. Pumping, washing.

I shrug Dog off my knee and unsheathe my little rapier. I stand by the line of sunlight and let the blade dance in the air, swooping and sliding, catching the sunbeams and flicking the fractured light across the balconies that ring the stage. I parry, I lunge, driving the point towards my unseen foe and twisting the blade home.

"*Touché! Brava! Bene, bene!*" a scrawny figure calls from the shadows. It's Mr Hawkin, the man who runs the theatre company. "What skill, what promise!" He clamps a broom handle to his chest, claps, and a crow takes off from the side of the stage and flies out through the open roof.

I'm staring up at it when my blade is whisked from my hand by a second sword. I race to grab it but it spins and falls, to land embedded in the wooden boards next to Mr Hawkin's shoe.

"I say!" he says, jumping aside. Dog barks once and leaps from the stage to the sawdust floor below.

"There, poppet!" says Valentina, advancing across the stage. "Get out of that one!"

"How did you do that?" I look up at her.

"Skill, Mouse. Natural skill." She plucks a black hat from her head and bows. As she rises, her hair bubbles free in a copper cloud, bright against her black clothing. "So sorry I'm late. Now – ready?"

She lowers the point of her sword so that it rests on the third button on my shirt.

"Come on, sweetie," she whispers. "Don't let your

heart rule your head."

She pushes damp cuffs up her arms and the pale hairs catch the light. I watch her elbow – I know that it will flicker before she moves.

I step back, she advances, and I drop to the ground hands first and flip myself under her sword to the other side of the stage.

"*Brava! Brava!*" Mr Hawkin claps as I grasp the hilt of my sword and yank it from the wood.

"*Allez!*" shouts Valentina. "Go, Mouse, go!"

We circle each other. Valentina glides over the boards. We clash.

"Oh, splendid!" Mr Hawkin stamps his broom on the stage.

I hear angry crows above and running feet outside but my gaze is fixed on her sword.

She feints left; I leap to the right.

"Help! Help!" Sudden shouts come from outside the theatre. Caught mid-stroke, we freeze.

"What—" Valentina drops her sword.

The side door of the theatre crashes open and Walter staggers in, his usually sunny face rigid with fear. "I didn't do it!" he cries, stepping into the circle of sunlight, holding up his fingers and examining them as if he doesn't understand where the blood could have come from. "Help me! Mouse, Valentina.

Help me!"

"*Giove!*" exclaims Mr Hawkin. "Is that … real blood?"

Walter falls to his knees and holds out his palms. They're thick with it. "Hide me!" he says. "They think I did it."



Chapter 2

While Valentina charges into action, rubbing Walter's footprints from the sawdust, I'm paralysed.

Mr Hawkin shuts and bars the side door and almost as soon as he does, someone pounds on the main doors, sharp and angry.

"Mouse?" Walter looks up at me. He's crying.

"Let's wash it off," I say, burying my fear and dragging him to his feet.

"No time for that," says Valentina. "We have to hide him. The costume store."

Running with his hands out as if they belong to someone else, Walter races up the stairs and we follow him.

"Where?" he says, stopping in the doorway of the costume store.

Valentina points to the largest of the hampers.

From down below I can hear men shouting and Mr Hawkin bellows, "Hold on, hold on, I'm coming, but we're closed, you know!"

Valentina and I throw everything out of the hamper while Walter stands staring at the blood clotting on his fingernails.

"I don't even know who she is."

"Who?" says Valentina, grunting as she pulls out the heavy velvet cloaks folded in the bottom of the hamper.

"The woman – I think she was already dead. It was … it was horrible."

The shouting intensifies. "They're in the theatre," I say, dragging the empty hamper to the back of the room. "Who are those men?"

"I don't know. The law?" whimpers Walter. "I'm scared, Mouse."

I grip his bloody hand and hold it tight. I should say something comforting, but instead I'm panicking.

Valentina leans forward and kisses the top of his head. "You'll be fine. Just get in there."

Wiping his hands on his jacket, Walter clambers

over the side of the hamper. There are smears of blood on the wicker. I heap the cloaks on his head and Valentina wipes the blood away with a handkerchief. We jam the lid on the hamper, throw curtains over the top and rush to sit quietly at the sewing table under a little window.

Valentina pulls a frilled dress over from the side, heaping it across her legs, and threads a needle. She starts sewing a strip of lace to the cuffs.

"Slow your breathing," she whispers. "And don't panic. They'll be looking for panic."

I glance up at her.

She points back at the fabric. She seems to know what we need to do, as if she's tangled with people like this before.

Filling my hands with cloth and pins I randomly pin the bottom of a dress. I must keep my fingers moving. Otherwise they'll shake.

Dog sits beside me, ears twitching, but his tail lies flat on the floor. He looks up at me as if I can explain the sounds coming from below.

Feet thump on the staircases and I hear Mr Hawkin protest. Glancing up at the door, I spot a red handprint. Oh no! But then I remember it must come from the murder play we did last. Walter's hands were dripping that time too. And Valentina did a whole chunk where

she tried to wash blood off her palms.

It was really good.

I got murdered.

I quite often get murdered.

The audiences like plays with murders in them.

Breathe, Mouse, breathe.

I'm trying hard not to think about the men.

Don't let the fear in.

Bang!

The door to the costume store swings open and two men in heavy grey coats burst in.

"Perfect!" says the one in front. He's short, almost bald and grizzled. He narrows his eyes as he surveys the lines of hanging costumes. "Lots of itty-bitty hiding places for our villain."

"Our … murderer," says his partner, rolling the "R" in the middle of the word. This man's tall and young-looking, with a sprouty beard and raggedy teeth to match.

"Quite correct," says the first. "We are indeed seeking a mur-de-rer."

"He could easily be in here…" The second man pulls a sword and gestures to a pile of sacking. The sword is not like the little one I fight with, but a long, heavy, mean kind of sword that would run a person through. "Or in here!" He pokes the blade into the

holes at the top of the smallest hamper.

"I could even do a little of this!" He lunges and the sword runs smoothly through the layers of costumes inside.

"No!" squawks Mr Hawkin. "Those are our livelihood! You can't do that!"

"Show us where he is and we won't." The young man pauses, his sword in mid-air. His gaze is flicking all around the room.

"We know he's in the theatre – we saw him come in," says the older one from the door.

"There's a back entrance, you know," I say as loudly as I dare.

The grey one looks around the eaves. "Did someone speak?" he says. He comes over to me and examines the cloth in my hands. He reaches for it and I let him pick it up. "What's this?"

"A costume," I mumble.

"A costume." He nods his head. He smells stale and there's a fresh trickle of sweat running down from his ear to the grubby top of his shirt collar. "So why is there a row of pins right through the middle? Eh? Not a hem, not attaching two things to each other – just right through the middle."

"Stop it!" says Valentina. "She's just a child – while I sew, she amuses herself with the pins. Is that a

problem?" she says the final word as if she thinks the man is stupid.

He leans forward, his nose meeting hers.

"Rot!" he says. "I know you theatre types. You can climb on the roof by the time you're weaned. You're on stage before you can talk. So don't lie to me, pretty lady, or I'll have you."

Valentina brushes his face to the side. It's not a slap, but it's firm, and then she stands. She's far taller than him and I can see it doesn't please him one bit.

Beyond them, the other one has opened the costume hampers. All of them. He's jabbing each one in turn. The sword dips in and out, slicing through the fabric below.

"Anyone in there?" he says, as if he's playing hide and seek with a small child. "Come out to play, little one – we just want to clap you in irons!"

I stare at the large hamper. I can't help it. And I know I'm probably showing all the signs of panic. I unclench my fist and sneak a glance at my palms. They're smeared with blood from Walter's hand.

The room is holding its breath. Mr Hawkin is wide-eyed, staring at the mess of costumes. I'm guessing he's more worried about the costumes than Walter.

Valentina is fuming. I can feel it.

The man with the sword reaches the large hamper.

"Wakey-wakey, little man. Time to get out of the basket!"

"Stop!" Red fingers emerge, grip the side of the hamper and Walter, snow-faced, stands. He's shaking.

"Out you get," says the man. "Here." He holds out his hand as if Walter is an elderly woman needing help down from a horse. "Now, that was silly, wasn't it? We could just have arrested you without making holes in all these pretty clothes."



Chapter 3

I watch as they trap Walter's wrists in heavy metal rings.

I stand by as they drag Walter down the stairs and then push him from the stage to the pit. He lands badly and limps for a few paces, but the two men don't care.

Nobody's doing anything to stop it. Valentina and Mr Hawkin are just watching.

Without warning the words explode out of me. "You can't!" I shout. "You can't take Walter."

"Oh yes we can," says the short one, pushing me back. "Oh yes we can. I'm Jameson and he's Stuart.

We work for the queen and you're a nothing."

A nothing?

I dart under the man's arms and leap down into the pit, grabbing Walter's coat-tails and hanging on as tight as I can. Then I hook my elbow round Walter's, and Dog jumps down beside me and takes Walter's sleeve in his teeth, pulling him towards the stage. *We can do this, we can get him back.* Walter bends his knees. We slump together on the sawdust of the theatre floor. Dead weights, entangled.

"You're being quite a nuisance," says Stuart, the tall one. He jumps down next to me and picks me up under my armpits, yanking me away from Walter. As he swings me round I grab his arm and try to sink my teeth into it but he pulls my head back using my hair as a handle. Finally he draws his sword and points it at me. "Now, stay there, you!"

Dog leaps, but Jameson is there now and kicks him aside, and Dog skids through the sawdust, struggling to stay upright. He suddenly looks really old.

I sit with my back to the stage, licking blood from my lip, keeping my face as hard as the earth. Jameson shoves open the main doors and Stuart marches Walter outside, his sword-point in the small of Walter's back.

"Bye-bye, all!" says Jameson. "Oh yes, before you start calling in your powerful friends, remember – harbouring a criminal is an offence. We could overlook our little search – or we could not. It depends…" Doffing his three-cornered hat, he gives us a mocking bow and waves a cheery goodbye. He slams the door shut behind him.

There's an awful silence in the theatre. Mr Hawkin stares at the door as if Walter might come back through to deliver his punchline.

But he doesn't.