opening extract from

Two Good Thieves

written by

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published by

Pan Macmillan

I would really like to thank Laura Cecil for all her good and friendly advice, and the editorial team at Macmillan, who've been brilliant.

First published 2009 by Macmillan Children's Books
a division of Macmillan Publishers Limited
20 New Wharf Road, London N1 9RR
Basingstoke and Oxford
Associated companies throughout the world
www.panmacmillan.com

ISBN 978-0-230-73776-1

1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Typeset by Intype Libra Limited
Printed and bound in the UK by CPI Mackays, Chatham ME5 8TD

Chapter One

The city's burning.

The city is always burning.

The big river is baked to a trickle of brown water. One time the docks were busy, now the ghosts of ships moor here, hulks rusting on the mud; and though the sea's just a few miles away only the rich go there, only the rich can go anywhere: down to the white beaches, up to their ranches or away to foreign lands; but when they are in the city they stay cool, in their cool offices behind tinted windows, in their cool gardens that hiss with water, in their cool shops with marble floors and air that streams cool as silk against their smooth faces.

The city is burning.

But the uptown streets are still full of people pushing through the heat and cars crawling slow and policemen – the hard men, in white hats and white gloves and black sunglasses – watching the cars and the people, watching for trouble, watching for scuffed-up children who should stick to their own quarter, not be hanging round up here, near the fancy shops.

They don't see her though because she's too smart to get noticed. She knows how to dress and where to stand. She knows how to drift up through the sweating

crowds, maybe sticking close to this woman who could be her mother, to that man who could be her father. She knows how to keep her face blank so it doesn't seem as if she's noticing that woman's fat little purse or that man's thick wallet bulging inside his jacket. She knows how to look serious and sensible, like a good child.

She is a good child, maybe.

She could be twelve, doesn't know exactly how old she is, doesn't know her real name either, or where she came from. Her skin's dark, flat brown, not like real city people – some of them are so pale they're almost white. They say she must come from upcountry, but there's no way of finding out for sure since she hasn't got any family.

It was Demi who found her sleeping out on the street when she wasn't any bigger than a bag of sweet potato, or so he says; found her down in Basquat, where the small-time farmers have their markets. That's how she got her name. Fay gave her the name. She said, 'You gotta have a name, child. How am I gonna tell you things if you running round with no name? You want to make it through to the next meal, you gotta come when I call.' So she and Demi called her Basquat for a while. Then Demi said she couldn't have a name that was longer than she was and so she became Baz.

She has no family, unless Fay and Demi are family. Demi is like a brother, and Fay like a big sister, maybe. Fay is the smart one, the one who fixes them up, tells them where to go and what to look for. They've been together for seven years now, seven years since Demi found her and Fay named her. Seven years of watching out for each other.

Baz is watching out for Demi now. She's the eyes looking for trouble while he does the work, moving through the sea of slow people like an eel. He is so neat, so fast, so quick. See him now, close up to this man, that man, to that lady with the big bag swinging on her skinny hip, and he's nothing more than a shadow. Blink and he's gone. Like a playing card: you look at it and it's got a face that looks right back at you, but you twist that card and it's got no side, slip it through a crack in the door and it's gone. That's Demi. Sometimes she thinks he must be a wisp of smoke, not a boy.

There! Done it. So neat you don't see a tear, you don't see a stitch. Nobody sees Demi but Baz. Makes her heart skip a little just to see him do it: one minute he's gliding along, seem like two paces between him and this lady; she pauses to look in a window full of dainty shoes, looks right in, and snap your fingers, he's at her shoulder. Then he's strolling on, passing Baz, slipping her a sweet little purse, a fat little egg. The

woman steps into the shop. It could be half an hour before she finds today's a no-shoe day for her.

Baz dreams of being as good as Demi. He puffs up when she asks him how he does it. 'You could be as good as me, maybe,' he says. 'If monkeys could talk and fish could fly, you could be just as good as me.' When he teases like this she tries to kick him, kicking air because he moves so fast she can never touch him; and he dances round her, chanting sing-song like that talking monkey; but she never stays cross, because she and Demi are two sides of one coin, that's what Fay tells them, and Baz reckons that Demi's maybe better looking than any kind of monkey that she's seen a picture of.

He's got short black spiky hair like most boys in the city, skin the colour of those pale olives and brown eyes that make him look like a lost puppy dog. If some kind woman thinks he's a lost child that needs looking after, the next minute she's the one who's lost something, her purse mostly. 'Women like that,' says Demi, 'when they lose their money just get more from the money-pig; women like that, money-pig for us. Don't feel nothing for her, Baz; she don't feel nothing for us. That's how it is. We take her purse and she still rich; we take her money and we stay poor – stay poor till we make it big time, Baz. That's how it is.'

Demi loves the city, every little corner of it. He

knows its twists and blind alleys, fat streets and safe, shady squares where you can still find clean water running even in this high heat, even when the city's burning. Demi doesn't want to be any place else. It's different for Baz; she wonders about where they say she came from: upcountry, where it's all green and wide and there's hardly any streets, hardly any houses.

'What kind of place is that, Baz? Just some old dream-place! You foolin me you want to go that place. How we live without people? People just the same as the river, Baz, and we gotta swim in that river.'

She doesn't give him much time when he talks fancy: 'Then how come this water got pockets that you go putting your hand in all the time?' she says flatly. ' I seen no water like that.'

'That's cos you the most ignorant girl in the city. Sweet Maria,' he says, rolling his eyes up like he's praying, 'it's a lucky thing this rag of a girl got me to look after her.'

Fay pets him, calls him 'my private investment'. Says he's going to look after her when she gets old. Fay isn't even half old, maybe late twenties, maybe a bit more. Baz thinks she could be nice-looking. She has a mess of red hair that she won't let Baz comb for her, and her skin is pure white when she bothers to wash, but mostly she doesn't bother, not till she gets real gritty and sour. One time Baz asked her why

she didn't let herself be pretty. She said, 'I been there, Bazzie, and I'm better like this.'

She makes Baz keep her hair short so it's nothing but soft stubble when she runs her hands through it, and when she looks at herself in a shop window she sees this boy looking back at her. Sometimes Baz wishes she could let her hair grow and wear a skirt, but she listens to Fay, and she and Demi are always clean, shiny faces, new jeans, clean T-shirts. Smart. 'Got to be smart all the time in this city,' Fay tells them. 'Be smart or the hard man catch you and take you away. He take you away to prison and you don't come back.'

Demi says, 'Me and Baz run faster than any old policeman. What we got these good sneakers for anyway but to run?' But he listens all the same, even irons his jeans. He and Baz have both seen kids, so young their noses are still running, slung right into the back of the policeman's van. They know kids disappear all the time unless they're smart.

Still, Demi likes to look sharp now. He likes to strut a little, be the man. Baz tells him he looks like one of the dirt chickens you see scuffing about down in the Barrio, where she, Demi and Fay live in an old building that hangs over the dried-out river. But Baz has seen rich ladies giving him a look sometimes, as if he was something they might like to buy, like a funny bag or a soft pair of shoes. Who knows what

rich ladies really think? They hide their eyes behind cool black shades; and you can't tell what a person's thinking unless you see their eyes, and even then you can't be sure because eyes don't always tell the truth. That's what Baz reckons.

When he's in the strutting mood he tells Baz that when she's grown-up he might marry her some day, if she's lucky. He says the same thing to Fay, but she just slaps him round the head and tells him not to bother her, but she smiles all the same, even though she doesn't have so much time for Baz and Demi now. She's got other children who come her way, children looking for a place to stay, who've got no home, looking for food. She teaches them how to work on the streets, maybe shoeshine, teaches them some of the tricks she taught Demi and Baz, if they show any talent. The children stay a while – that's if they can earn their keep. 'I ain't a charity,' Fay tells them. 'Charity ain't no word round here. They got their lives, we got ours,' Fay says, and that's it.

Señor Moro is the king of the Barrio; nobody crosses him, not even the police. Fay says Moro has pockets so big he can even fit the captain of police in them. For a long time Baz thought Señor Moro must be a giant to have such big pockets. She knows what kind of a man he is now. Demi showed her a place in the Barrio called Moro's Wall. A nothing place. Once it

must have been the end wall of a big building. There's nothing left of the building now, just the wall and a pile of rubble and rubbish around it. The time Demi showed her, there was a small crowd standing around and a dead body on the ground. 'Señor Moro have him killed,' Demi told her. When she had asked why, he had shrugged. 'That's what he do.'

Baz now knows better than to pry about Señor Moro or the business he has with Fay, and so back at Fay's place, the den, she keeps a piece of herself locked up, doesn't get too friendly with the small children. If they cry, they cry. Everybody has to cry sometimes. Crying doesn't get you one little thing when you are on the street. She doesn't stop wondering though. Some thoughts come into her head even when she tries to keep them shut out, wondering what happens to the children when they go. Some stay long enough that she thinks Fay is going to let them stay, boys that begin to copy Demi a little, get his swagger, strut a little, get his grin, get too comfortable. She wonders if Raoul is too comfortable.

After Baz – and Demi, of course – Raoul has been with Fay the longest, more than two years. He is good, fast on the street, and everybody likes Raoul. He has a big smile and Baz thinks he has a big heart too; he'll help anyone in the gang, even the littlest child that Fay brings in. But he has a mouth that loves to talk, and

Fay's sometimes sharp with him, cuts him down when he speaks out of turn.

Baz moves over to the shady side of the street and buys herself a Coke, feels the purse Demi slipped her, tucked into the top of her jeans. Good leather, but Fay says only bring back the money. 'Once you got it, the money yours; purse always belongs to someone. They find it on you, don't come running to me for help.' She steps into a quiet side street and in two seconds has emptied the purse – paper money tucked in her shoe, change in her pocket – and is back with the people passing by her.

She sees Demi over by a news-stand, looking at the magazines. The news-stand man is watching him; they watch any kid standing by their stalls whether that kid looks smart or not. People who've got stalls on the street think every child is a thief. Probably right too. She sees one other person who seems to be watching Demi, a pale-looking young man with fair curly hair. Rich maybe, she thinks; she catches the flash of silver at his wrist. He's not doing anything, just smoking a cigarette. Maybe waiting.

Demi catches her eye, and Baz knows that he wants to head right up to the centre, so she takes a sip from her Coke and then drops it in a trash bin, right under the nose of a policeman; he's got a face carved out of stone, eyes hidden behind dark glasses. Turning her

back on the policeman, she starts to drift up the street, barely glancing across at Demi, but shadowing him all the time.

Just as she has been taught, she studies the people around her, all the time keeping an eye out for the wide-open shopping bag, or the thick wallet just begging to be pulled out of a loose pocket. Her fingers get itchy when she sees a man with a whole roll of notes in his hand, peeling one off to buy himself a cigar and slipping the fat roll back in his hip pocket. A fat, waddling man, with big sweat stains down under his cotton jacket. Easy, she thinks, but she doesn't go near him. Today she is the watcher; her job is to keep the thief safe. Demi would rage if she'd been picking pockets on the side instead of looking out for him. He wouldn't hit her though, never has, not like Fay. She says, you get hit, you learn quick.

All their lives, she and Demi learned quick. She knows Fay wouldn't have kept them otherwise. No mistakes. Never. 'You make a mistake,' she says, 'and I the one who gets taken. If that happen, nobody safe. Everybody I know,' and she doesn't just mean the children – Baz reckons she means all those shady men she does business with too, 'everybody's name gets told and everybody goes inside. End their time in the Castle.' The Castle is where nobody wants to go. The Castle is the city's prison.

Baz remembers little dark snatches of that first time she was on her own. There was noise all the time and it was night-time, lights flashing by, cars maybe, coloured lights too. Someone tugging her hand all the time, and her legs so tired she could hardly keep up. She can't picture the person holding her hand. She thinks it was a woman, but doesn't know if it was her mother. She remembers walking and walking till the noise got less but the dark got thicker so she couldn't even see her feet, and she was crying, wanting to be picked up, but the person holding her hand wouldn't pick her up, just kept tugging her along, wanting her to keep going.

Baz remembers pulling her hand away because she just didn't want to go any further. Maybe the woman stopped and said something to her, maybe not. She remembers this dark shape walking away from her, hunched up a little, like perhaps she was carrying something. Baz wonders sometimes if it was a little baby this person was carrying in her other arm and that was why she wouldn't pick Baz up; or maybe she was sick, or maybe she just didn't want a child hanging on her hand, bawling all the time; maybe she felt it was a better thing to let Baz go and not see what happened to her. Leave her in the darkness.

Baz tries not to think about this woman, but she wonders about her all the same and imagines that

if she met her she would ask her why she let go her hand. Baz believes that if a person is lucky enough to have family, real family, you don't let go of the hand holding on to yours. Any fool knows that family is the most precious thing.

It was that next morning that Demi found her on a piece of wasteland near the market, all curled up and fast asleep. A dog right next to her growled, he said, when he came up. She always liked that bit of the story. Seemed like that dog reckoned she was its pup, he said, but he shooed it away all the same. Baz thinks about that dog a lot – how maybe she'll find it one day, though she knows it'd be an old dog now. But she dreams how she would look after it, give it bread softened in milk because it might not have teeth any more.

She remembers waking and and seeing Demi looking down at her, the sun shining right behind him, and asking him his name.

'Demi,' he said. 'You got a name of your own?'

She remembers that hollow feeling in the pit of her stomach, hunger, and panic because she didn't know anything, and she might have cried again except this shadowy face above her laughed, and his laughter made her think of sunlight and that had made her feel better. 'Why you called Demi?' she had asked him.

'Don't you know nothing?' he said. 'Means half, cos

I'm half grown. Going to be like a giant when I'm big.' She remembers him saying that, and her believing him because he was so much bigger than her then; now she has caught up with him some – even with his strutting and big talk she doesn't reckon that Demi will ever make giant.

He took her back to where he and Fay lived, a shack with a roof and dirt floor. It was a long walk but he talked all the way, and there was Fay right at the door and she picked Baz up in her arms and hugged her like she'd been missing her all her life and wiped her face and gave her her name right there and then and she had food, and they sat on the floor and ate together, and that is how they became a family, kind of. Fay looked a lot younger and prettier, seemed softer too. Men came and took her out places, and she taught the two children how to take things out of pockets without anyone noticing.

Soon after that Demi and Baz began working together, not thieving on smart streets, but small stuff: bit of shoeshine, going to the market and lifting a little fruit from the stalls maybe, looking lost so that someone give them a piece of money. Then they began picking pockets. Had to learn to run then.

Now their legs are a little longer and they run a lot faster. They're a good team; know what each other are going to do before it happens, almost. She knows

where he's heading now, up to the street where the shops are so cool you can walk past the door and the door swings open like magic and it makes you shiver because the air that comes out is cold as witch breath. That's the truth. And they have more jewels in those shops than you could ever imagine, but unless you look like you've got money swelling out of your pockets, you can't hardly look in the window without a guard breathing down your shoulder.

Demi is standing on the corner. She crosses over to his side of the road but stops about twenty paces away from him, right at the mouth of a little slip of an alley. She knows he's hoping he can strike lucky, maybe get a little parcel with a silver ring all wrapped up in it.

The two of them wait.

Sometimes taxis pull up and rich men and women get in, parcels hanging off them like strange fruit.

They wait.

Five minutes. She's edgy. It's too long. She's seen a police car drive by real slow. She steps back in the shadow, but she's sure he is going to get noticed – even looking good, he's out of place up here. Children don't come to this part of town, not on their own.

Then it happens.