



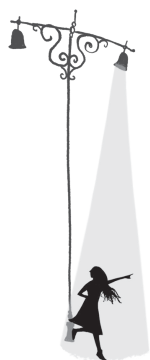
THE  
GOOD  
THIEVES

KATHERINE  
RUNDELL

Illustrated  
by  
MATT SAUNDERS

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*To Ellen Holgate, my editor,  
and Claire Wilson, my agent.*

*What luck, to work with two such women*



## CHAPTER ONE

Vita set her jaw and nodded at the city in greeting, as a boxer greets an opponent before a fight.

She stood alone on the deck of the ship. The sea was wild and stormy, casting salt spray thirty feet into the air, and all the other passengers on the ocean liner, including her mother, had taken sensible refuge in their cabins.

But it is not always sensible to be sensible.

Vita had slipped away and stood out in the open, gripping the rail with both hands as the boat crested

a wave the size of an opera house. So it was that she alone had the first sight of the city.

‘There she is!’ called a deck hand. ‘In the distance, port side!’

New York climbed out of the mist, tall and grey-blue and beautiful; so beautiful that it pulled Vita forwards to the bow of the boat to stare. She was leaning over the railing, as far out as she dared, when something came flying at her head.

She gasped and ducked low. A seagull was chasing a young crow across the sky, pecking at its back, wheeling and shrieking in mid-air. Vita frowned. It wasn’t, she thought, a fair fight. She felt in her pocket, and her fingers closed on an emerald-green marble. She took aim, a brief and angry calculation of distance and angle, drew back her arm, and threw.

The marble caught the seagull on the exact centre of the back of its skull. The gull gave the scandalised cry of an angry duchess, and the crow spun in the air and sped back towards the skyscrapers of New York.

\*

They took a cab from the docks. Vita's mother carefully counted out a handful of coins, and gave the driver the address. 'As close as we can get for that, please,' she said, and he took in her carefully mended hems and nodded.

Manhattan sped past outside the window, bright bursts of colour amid the storm-beaten brick and stone. They passed a cinema, its walls adorned with pictures of Greta Garbo, and a man selling hot lobster claws out of a cart. A tram thundered past at a crossroads, narrowly missing a van advertising *The Colonial Pickle Works*. Vita breathed in the city. She tried to memorise the layout of the streets, to build a map behind her eyes; she whispered the names: '*Washington Street, Greenwich Avenue.*'

When the money ran out, they walked. They went as fast as Vita could go in the ferocious wind, suitcases in hand, along Seventh Avenue, dodging pinstripe men and sharp-heeled women.

'There!' said Vita's mother. 'That's Grandpa's flat.'

The apartment building on the corner of Seventh and West 57th rose up, tall and stately in brown

stone, from the busy pavement. A newspaper boy stood outside, roaring the headlines into the wind.

Across the road from the apartment block was a light-red-brick building, its facade arched and ornamented. Flagpoles protruded from its wall, and two flags flapped wildly. Above them, picked out in coloured glass, were the words 'Carnegie Hall'.

'It all looks very ... smart,' said Vita. The apartment block appeared to purse its lips at the world. 'Are you *sure* this is the place?'

'I'm sure,' said her mother. 'He's on the top floor, right under the roof. It used to be the maid's apartment. It'll be a squeeze, but it's not for long.' Their return ticket was booked for three weeks' time. Enough time, said Vita's mother, to sort out Grandpa's papers, pack his few things, and persuade him to come home with them.

'Come on!' Her mother's voice sounded unnaturally bright. 'Let's go and find him.'

The lift was broken, so Vita half ran up the stairs to Grandpa's apartment, jerkily, as fast as her legs would take her. Her suitcase banged against the walls as she

raced up narrow flights of stairs, ignoring the growing pain in her left foot. She came to rest, breathless, outside the door. She knocked, but there was no response.

Vita's mother came, panting, up the final flight of stairs. She bent to pick the apartment key from under the mat. She hesitated, looking down at her daughter. 'I'm sure he won't be as bad as we feared,' she said, 'but—'

'Mama! He's waiting!'

Her mother opened the door, and Vita went tearing down the hall; and then, in the doorway, she froze.

Grandpa had always been thin; handsome and lean, with long fine hands and shrewd blue-green eyes. Now he was gaunt, and his eyes had drawn back into his skull. His fingers had drawn inwards into fists, as if every part of him was pulling back from the world. A walking stick leaned against the wall next to his chair: he hadn't needed a walking stick before.

He had not seen her and, just for that second, his face looked sculpted from solid grief.

'Grandpa!' said Vita.



But then he turned, and his face was transfigured with light, and she could breathe again.

‘Rascalion!’ He stood and Vita hurled herself into his arms, and he laughed, winded by the impact.

‘Julia,’ he said, as Vita’s mother came in, ‘I only got your telegram three days ago, or I would have stopped you—’

Vita’s mother shook her head. ‘Just try to hold us back, Dad.’

Grandpa turned to Vita. ‘Smile again for me, Rascalion?’

So she smiled, at first naturally, and then, when he didn’t look away, wider, until it felt like every single one of her teeth was showing.

‘Thank you, Rascalion,’ he said. ‘You have your grandmother’s smile, still.’ Vita’s stomach clenched as she saw tears rise up in her grandfather’s eyes.

‘Grandpa?’

He coughed, and smiled, and cleared his throat. ‘God, it’s good to see you. But there was no need.’

Julia pushed Vita towards the door. 'Go and find your room, darling,' she said.

'But—'

'Please,' said her mother. Her face was white, and exhausted. 'Now.'

'It's the one at the end of the corridor,' said Grandpa. 'More of a cupboard than a room, I'm afraid,' he said, 'but the view is very fine.'

Vita went slowly down the corridor, her suitcase in hand. She noticed how the floorboards squeaked; how the paint peeled from the wall. She pushed at the door. It stuck; she held on to the wall and kicked it with her stronger foot. It flew open, scattering thin shards of plaster.

The room was so small she could practically touch all four walls at once, but it had a wooden wardrobe, and a window looking out over the street. Vita sat on the bed, pulled off her left shoe, and took her foot in both hands. She dug her fingers into the sole, pointing and flexing the toes, and tried to think.

They had arrived. She should be thrilled. They had made it across the ocean, halfway around the world,

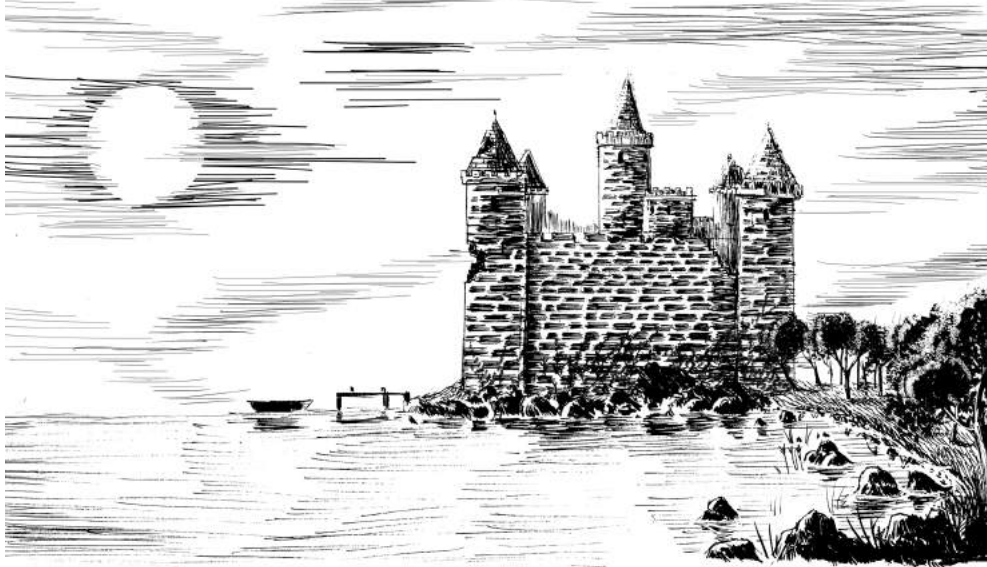
and New York waited outside the window, stretching up to the sky like the calligraphy of a particularly flamboyant god.

But none of that mattered at all, because Grandpa wasn't as bad as she had feared. He was worse.

Vita's skirt pockets were full of gravel from the garden back home; she picked out the largest stones, and began to throw them at the wardrobe door. It helped her think.

A person watching might have noted that each hit the precise mathematical centre of the wardrobe handle – but nobody was watching, and Vita herself barely noticed. Her mind was not on the stones.

She had to do something to make it right. She did not yet know what, nor how, but love has a way of leaving people no choice.



## CHAPTER TWO

Grandpa's disaster had come from a blue sky, as disaster often does. The telegram he sent Vita's mother had been short: YOUR MUM DIED LAST NIGHT.

Vita had sat on the doormat, unable to move. Her mother, white-faced, carried her into bed, where together they drank blackcurrant cordial and told each other stories of Grandma, who had travelled the world with Grandpa and had a guttural laugh like a sailor's. The stories helped them both a little, as stories often do.

But that had not been the end of it. More letters followed. The first were dark, and short. Hudson Castle, Grandpa wrote, felt full of ghosts.

Hudson Castle was very small, judging by castle standards. It had been uprooted from its hilltop in France and shipped, stone by stone, across the ocean to America by Vita's great-great-great-grandfather. The castle had been thought, in its day, both very grand and mildly insane. Now it was run-down, crumbling, beautiful, and inhabited only by Grandpa, entirely alone.

But then hope had crept in. A man, Grandpa wrote, had offered to rent Hudson Castle. He had offered to transform it into a school. Grandpa would stay on as a governor; it would give him new purpose, something to do. No paperwork had been signed, but the man was eager to begin renovations. The man's name was Sorrotore, a New York millionaire.

He enclosed a press cutting, showing a man standing outside a vast New York building, smiling at the camera with Hollywood teeth. '*Victor Sorrotore outside his home in the Dakota,*' read the caption.

‘Victor Sorrotore,’ whispered Vita, and she memorised his face, just in case.

Within a week, Sorrotore struck. Grandfather returned from an afternoon walk to find his way back home barred. A strange man with two guard dogs came out of the caretaker’s cottage and pointed a rifle at him. ‘Hudson Castle belongs to Mr Sorrotore,’ the guard had said. ‘Scram!’

Grandpa had never in his adult life been told to scam. He had tried to push past the guard, and one of the dogs had bitten his ankle; not a snap but a true bite, which drew blood. The gun was levelled at his chest. Bewildered, he took the train to New York, rented the tiny apartment on Seventh Avenue, and found Sorrotore’s lawyer.

The lawyer expressed surprise as only lawyers can, his eyebrows riding so high up his face they nearly reached the back of his neck. Grandpa knew very well, the lawyer said, that he had sold the castle to Sorrotore. The money was there, in Grandpa’s account. A very small sum – only \$200 – but it was understood that Hudson Castle had become a

burden, one Grandpa was glad to be rid of. Grandpa checked his account; it was true.

Grandpa tried to hire a lawyer of his own, to demand that Sorrotore produce the title deeds, but he could find none who would take the case without more money than he had. 'Justice,' he wrote in his final letter, 'seems to be only for those who can afford it.' He would try, now, to forget the house in which he had been born. He would try, he wrote, to forget his life there with Lizzy: it was safer that way.

Upon receipt of this last letter, Vita's heart had swooped into her throat. Hudson Castle was Grandpa's home. It was where he could live alongside all his memories of Grandma Lizzy. 'No,' she whispered.

She had seen her mother's face, and it had given her hope. Her mother was soft-bodied, sweet-voiced, and iron-willed. The two shared the same brown eyes, and the same stubborn jawline.

The next day, her mother returned from town with two tickets in hand. 'We're bringing him back here, whether he likes it or not. The ship sails from Liverpool,' she had said. 'We leave tonight.'

Vita saw that her mother's engagement and wedding rings had gone from her left hand. She didn't ask more, only went to her bedroom to pack, her boots smacking on the floor like a soldier's on the way to battle.

It was Grandpa who taught Vita to throw.

Vita's grandfather's name was Jack Welles. Or, technically – because he had come from the kind of family that believed in long names, long cars, and long dinners – his name was William Jonathan Theodore Maximilian Welles. The family fortune had long since disappeared, but the habit of extravagant naming remained. His father was American, his mother and his schooling were English. Jack was a jeweller by trade, tall enough for doorways to pose a hazard, and thin enough to fit his legs through a letterbox.

When Vita was five, two things happened: her father was killed in the Great War, and she contracted polio. Her mother fought against the disease with wild, unsleeping passion. For long dark months Vita lay in a hospital bed, lifted out for baths in almond



meal and oxidised water. She was given chloride of gold to drink, and wine of pepsin. She began to look far older than she was.

And then one day her grandparents arrived from America. Grandpa sat by her bed, gave her a ping-pong ball, and told her to call him when she could hit the head surgeon with it. Then he drew, with the steady hand of a jeweller, a very small bullseye on the far hospital wall.

She missed, and missed, until she did not.

Grandpa coached her like an athlete. He was a crack shot himself, and Vita spent hours throwing. She threw pebbles, marbles, darts, paper aeroplanes. When she came home from hospital, aged seven, she could send steak knives in elegant loops to land upright in a pat of butter across the room.

Vita grew, and her bones grew stronger, and eventually her leg brace was put away. Her left calf was thinner than her right, and her left foot curved in on itself, and her shoes were made, gratis, by a cobbler in the softest leather he could find. Her mother top-stitched them with red silk, and embroidered birds

on them. She could run, though it made the muscles pull and burn, and although Vita willingly complained of cuts, and demanded bandages where there was very little blood, she never breathed a word about that particular pain.

She grew up small, and still, and watchful. She had six kinds of smile, and five of them were real. All of them were worth seeing. Her hair was the reddish-brown of a freshly washed fox.

Vita's mother Julia only once raised the question of Vita's constant target practice.

'She won't have it easy,' said Grandpa. 'And she looks so breakable. She might as well know how to throw a rock or two.'

By the time Vita was eight, she could hit an apple in the highest branches of a tree from fifty paces. She could skim a stone and make it bounce twenty-three times. 'Back home, your Grandpa's the best shot in town,' said Grandma Lizzy. She was a tall woman, with a stern nose and richly kind eyes. 'But I think you're better.'

Grandpa watched Vita bowl overarm at the sea.

'Now learn about velocity: learn how the air makes things twist. Look it up! Learn it! Learn as much as you can, for learning is the very opposite of death! Wonderful!' Grandpa was the only person Vita knew who seemed to spark electricity when he talked, as if he struck against the world like flint against steel.

Eventually, Grandpa and Grandma went back to America, back to Hudson Castle. It was shortly after this that everything changed, and led Vita here, to her tiny room in the attic, looking out as the sun set over New York City.