

THIEVES' GAMBIT

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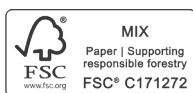
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For Keithen, my biggest fan.

ONE

A Quest can't trust anyone in this world – except for a Quest.

So when a Quest, particularly Mama Quest, tells me to curl up like a Twizzler twisted into a pretzel inside a cabinet so small it would be illegal to keep your dog in a cage the same size, I *trust* she has a good reason for it. Or at least, whatever I'm stealing is gonna be worth it.

If I were a normal person, my legs would be in a coma right now. But I guess Mom's intense flexibility training comes in handy for jobs like this.

I'd been crammed in here, on the secluded side of the mansion, for about three hours, scrolling through my dummy Insta. Over the last few months, stalking accounts about dorm life had become more addictive than K-dramas on Netflix.

When my battery dipped to 20 percent at midnight, I had to stop. Mom warned me not to use it up on irrelevant stuff – if I missed her text, I'd be screwed. So instead, I thrummed my gloved fingers impatiently until my screen lit up.

ATTN: Rosalyn Quest, Gambit Invitation

Not Mom's text, though – an email? Did one of the

summer gymnastics programs finally get back to me? Or that competitive cheer one? I'd emailed a lot of college summer programs for high schoolers in the middle of the night a few days ago, when our house felt the loneliest and the thought of spending weeks on a bustling college campus with other kids my age was the most refreshing. None had hit me back until now. I was starting to worry they'd seen through the transcripts I frantically forged for the applications.

A text notification dropped down before I could unlock the screen. This time it *was* from Mom. Almost like she sensed what I was about to look at and virtually slapped my hand away.

Your turn.

The email would have to wait.

I cracked open the cabinet door, slipping my fingers under to take the weight off the hinges so they wouldn't creak. A simple trick, but one I'd known since before I could write my name. I took a quick peek out.

The hallway was deserted. According to Mom's recon, this wing was typically empty; she and the other maids spent most of their time polishing vases in the private gallery in the other wing. Here there was less security.

I crept past the mansion's rooms with untouched four-poster beds, sparse bookcases, and bare end tables. The still quiet should have been unsettling, but I was no stranger to lonely houses. If I blinked for too long, I might have thought I was back in our family's home on Andros.

The blueprints I'd memorized took me through a living

area on the first floor, where an accent dresser covered with picture frames caught my eye. None of the other rooms had anything so . . . personal.

I picked up the farthest frame. A beaming group of college kids posed on the steps of a redbrick building. In the bottom corner, in neat, black script: *Freshman Year*.

Memories. Relationships. I could steal the picture, but I couldn't take those. If I wanted them, I'd have to earn them myself. Away from home. Away from Mom.

A soft sound made me freeze.

I put down the photo and ducked behind a sofa. Crouching, I unrolled my weapon of choice. The Quest fam isn't fond of guns – they're not stealthy. Mom carries a knife, and according to her, Granny once had a collection of syringes with fast-acting sedatives that she could dish out like spices by a five-star chef.

I suspected I didn't have the stomach to sink a blade – or needle – into someone's flesh, so instead, I adopted the meteor bracelet. The length of links is easy to wrap around my wrist, and the heavy cherry-sized metal weight at the end pops snugly into a magnetized ring on my middle finger. It's less difficult to smuggle past checkpoints than blades, and in my hands, just as effective, if not as final, as a knife.

The pit-pat drew closer.

So much for no security.

Rearing back to snap my chain around someone's neck, I choked out a laugh. The prettiest cat popped onto the top of the sofa. A Siamese with sandy fur that looked like she'd dipped her paws and rubbed her face in ash. She blinked at me

with vibrant blue eyes, then jumped to the carpet and purred, rubbing herself between my feet.

I rewrapped the bracelet around my wrist and scratched her behind the ears. She mewed and rolled onto her back. I'd just made her month.

When I was a kid, I binged vlogs on pet adoption while Mom was gone on long jobs. That was before I realized that nothing without Quest blood was ever setting foot in our house – animals included.

Siamese cats are popular because they're gorgeous, but they also get lonely easily. Without companions, they tend to die early. I had a feeling the owner of this isolated house hadn't thought too much about getting their cat a friend.

When I continued on, the cat followed, tail flicking happily. I nudged her away. Cute as she was, picking up a feline sidekick wasn't in the game plan. Turning, I broke into a run. French doors divided the next hallway from the last. I clicked them shut before the cat could get through. She mewed in a voice just low enough to break my heart, before darting off.

With her gone, I reopened the doors in case security passed through and noticed a change.

My mental map led me to a room with the curtains pulled wide. The Kenyan stars and moon lent just enough light to see how stock-standard the room was. Tidy furniture. Tasteful wall art. A bed no one had ever slept in. Another room for ghosts.

A lone vase sat on the nightstand.

Qianlong period porcelain, circa 1740. Estimated value: irrelevant. The only price that mattered was the sum our client offered to get it out of their rival's collection and into theirs.

A week ago, this vase had been on display in the private gallery on the other side of the mansion.

Until Mom started working here as a maid.

She called this a Jigsaw Job. Piece by piece, she smuggled in shards of a replica and assembled it. For someone as skilled as Mom, switching the real one with the fake was child's play. Unfortunately, the owner was – rightfully – concerned about theft. Security searched the staff each day when they left. Mom could move the vase around inside the house, but she wasn't gonna get it out.

That was my job.

I dragged out the case Mom had left under the bed. The cushioned interior was perfect for shock absorption. Pro tip: If you don't have a way of getting your product out undamaged, don't bother at all.

Something rattled inside the vase as I picked it up. When I tipped it, a string of diamonds poured into my palm. I rolled my eyes. Mom has so many tennis bracelets you could see her from Mars if she wore them all. If I asked why, she'd just respond, *Why not?*

A laser pointer was tucked in the side of the case. I angled the beam into the motion sensor on one side of the window. Fun fact about motion sensors: You can trip most up with a five-dollar laser pointer off Amazon. They only detect motion when something disrupts the beam connecting them, so I made sure they thought that beam was always there, keeping my laser pointed directly at the sensor while I slipped out. Simple things work best. I would have had a harder time if they'd bolted the window shut with nails. *A little* harder.

In about sixty seconds, I was out and on the windowsill like Spider-Girl. I squeezed the case between my thighs and was about to slide the window closed when something burst into the room.

Something desperate to get out.

The cat vaulted past me and straight onto the lawn. Landing, well, like a cat. Thank Jesus I still had the laser pointed at the sensor, or that would've been not so great for me.

She mewed endlessly, begging me to come down and play with her. She was persistent, that was for sure.

With the window shut, I scaled the brick wall to the camera facing the lawn. I had ten seconds to stop it from swinging toward me. No time for finesse. I ripped out the larger of the two cords feeding into the wall. The camera stopped midturn, stuck until someone came to fix it. Hopefully not until long after I was gone.

The cat was still screaming her head off.

'Okay, I'm coming,' I said.

And now I was talking to cats. But it wasn't like the video-only camera – Mom had gotten the serial numbers off the cams so we could look up their specs ahead of time – was going to hear me.

I leapt down. The cat rubbed herself again all over my legs. How could I resist? I swooped her into my arm that wasn't holding the case and let her melt into my chest.

I made my way quickly to the industrial lawn mowers waiting in a line, ready for the morning. The little four-by-two storage compartment under the driver's bench, right above the engine and behind the bags of fertilizer, was going to be my suite for the next few hours.

I looked out over the horizon, where waves of savannah grass and bushwillow trees met the star-speckled sky. In moments like this, I understood why my family had been in love with this globe-trotting profession for three generations.

But it wasn't always starry nights and cool breezes.

'You know I can't take you with me.' The cat made a soft clicking sound as I tickled above her tail. 'At least you've got a pretty view, yeah?'

She meowed, and maybe I was losing it, but it sounded like cat for 'Are you serious?' I set her down and pushed aside fertilizer bags before folding myself into the space, keeping the case snug to my chest. Everything smelled like gasoline and mildew. But so be it. Mom would tell me to think about a new laptop. Five-hundred-dollar braids. Custom kicks that no one but she and Auntie would ever see me wearing.

I pulled the fertilizer bags back into place, but the cat wiggled through a tiny opening between two of the bags. She settled atop the case on my chest, still purring and mewling.

'You want me to steal you too, is that it?'

She licked my cheek. Okay, she could stay. For a while. I wondered how long it would take her owner to notice if I *did* steal her.

From my hiding place I caught a flicker of light. No, two lights? Somebody was patrolling the lawn. They were early . . . Had something triggered an alarm? Had they noticed the camera?

The cat's purring sounded like an electric fan. I wanted to shush her, but how do you quiet a cat?

I reached to unwrap my bracelet. It sounded like they were coming my way. How the hell was I going to pounce out of

this spot fast enough to get the jump on them?

Crap.

‘Nala . . .’ A man clicked his tongue. Kibble rattled in a jar. ‘Where are you, you little brat?’

Double crap.

I tried to push Nala out, but she kept springing onto the case, purring relentlessly and *mewing*.

Then I remembered something else about Siamese cats. They’re also the most vocal cat breed.

‘I can hear her,’ another man’s voice said. ‘How did she get outside?’

The other guy scoffed. ‘No clue. This stupid cat’s always trying to run away. We’ll put her in a closet until Boss returns.’

With everything in me, I willed Nala to be quiet. Why hadn’t she just run away when she escaped from the window? She could’ve been long gone by now. The thought of her panicking in a closet for days or weeks twisted my conscience. If she would just be quiet, I’d take her with me. Screw what Mom wanted.

But she wouldn’t be quiet.

And they were getting nearer.

I’m sorry, Nala. My arm twisted around to grab the laser pointer from my back pocket. I shined the little red dot over the case, instantly making her eyes dilate and her muscles stiffen. Cat reflexes: activated. The flashlight beams shifted away from the mowers for a split second, and feeling crappier than I expected to, I shined the laser onto the mansion’s wall. Nala darted out, tearing across the grass toward the pinprick of light and right into the sights of her pursuers.

‘I got her!’ Nala’s desperate hissing filled up the night. She was putting up a hell of a fight, but she’d already lost.

The flashlights faded. Everything did, except for my own quiet breathing.

I hated what I did to that cat. But she should know, you can’t really trust anyone.

TWO

The first words out of Mom's mouth after a job are never 'Are you okay, Ross?' Instead, it's 'You have it?'

I rolled out of the mower, landing right at Mom's feet. Never mind the fact that I'd been about to die of heat exhaustion and had been nearly suffocated by fumes for the last half hour since the mower started moving. I was fine. If I was alive and with her, then I was fine. The target was the important thing.

'Look at my baby, being exemplary and all,' Mom said, clicking the case open and examining the prize. She looked completely unlike herself disguised in landscaper overalls. Very different from her typical polished island baddie look, even when she fished the tennis bracelet out and slipped it onto her wrist.

Mom sighed, watching the way the bracelet's diamonds danced in the morning sunlight. I had to admit, diamonds suited Mom. She was a glamorous sort of beauty. Long weave and tasteful eyelash extensions. Thick hips and a pinched waist she loved to accentuate – the complete opposite of my more slender build. Her style was dramatic, not fur coat and stilettos level, but enough that whenever we went someplace where she

could really flex herself, she was always drawing double takes.

Hence her love for diamonds. Anything that could make her sparkle more.

Mom pressed a quick kiss to my forehead. She smelled like cut grass and gasoline, but I probably smelled worse.

‘Exemplary like my mama,’ I said, because I knew she’d love to hear it, and hopped up onto the driver’s bench, leaving room for her too. With a contented smile, probably more about the compliment than the successful job, she cranked the mower on, and we headed toward the edge of the property, where an off-road Jeep, water, and air-conditioning cold enough to make me cry with gratitude waited.

I pressed my forehead to the car’s air vent.

‘We can go somewhere cooler next.’ Mom eyed my worship of the cold air filtering through from behind the wheel of the Jeep. ‘Maybe southern Argentina. Or the Alps, eh?’

‘We literally just got off a job. Not to mention, the Boscherts.’ I’d heard they hadn’t appreciated our last jobs in Denmark and Italy, breaking their unofficial claim on the high-end thieving market in Europe. In the world of family-run thieving empires, there could only be one top dog, or at least one per continent.

Forcing myself to sit back, I swiped the charger and plugged in my dead phone. The side-eye from Mom told me she didn’t approve. We were having a conversation, so I should be paying attention to her.

‘Good thing we’d sooner be caught stealing costume jewelry than caring about what the Boscherts want.’ She cocked a perfectly threaded brow at me, so I gave her the nod she wanted.

The spark of an idea kindled in my mind. ‘I mean, if you want us to pick up more jobs in Europe, it’d make sense for someone to network over there. Maybe if I went to school for a while, as a cover, it’d be a good opportunity?’

I held my breath. There were probably smoother ways for me to bring up the leaving thing again. All my life I’d never been anywhere without Mom, or Auntie, and I’d been a lot of places. I thought when I’d turned seventeen a few months ago, when other Bahamian kids graduate high school, she’d start being less . . . you know.

‘Hm . . . maybe not.’ Mom looked straight ahead into the empty stretch of road and savannah grasses. I waited for an elaboration. A reason, something. Instead, she said, ‘Once we’re back, we’ll lounge and watch something low-budget for a whole week, huh, baby?’

I forced a smile. ‘That sounds cool.’

Satisfied, she picked a playlist on her phone and turned the volume up. My screen glowed. An email. From one of the summer programs.

I angled it away from Mom as I read.

Dear Rosalyn,

Thank you for applying for our High-Performance Gymnastics Summer Camp. We are pleased to invite you to our second session (July 1-July 28), or if it’s not too late notice, we have one spot remaining in our first session (June 2-June 29). As a nationally renowned program, we are excited to attract dozens of talented young athletes every summer who are passionate about befriending peers in their field. We hope you’ll choose to join us for this unique experience.

The email went on with housing and fees and contact info. The more I read, the harder it was to school my expression. My bullshit transcripts and fake competition scores actually worked. I could be there . . . in a week if I wanted to be. Today was May 26.

Nala should've outrun the guards when she had the chance. Now she was stuck. I wasn't going to make the same mistake.

I typed back. I'd love to come!

Mom rapped along with the lyrics blaring from the speakers, nudging my shoulder to jump in with her. As usual, I pursed my lips and put up a fake fight before joining in. She used a verse about ice on her wrist to flick her new bracelet, and I laughed. On the outside, everything was the same. Same post-job high. Same me and her. But it couldn't be like that forever. I felt like I'd just shifted the wheel of my life off its axis, right under her nose, and she hadn't noticed.

I scrolled through my inbox. Where was that message I got before Mom texted? Weird. Unless it wasn't in my personal email . . .

The black box email account. How our family accepted jobs. Accessible only through the deep web, and 100 percent hackproof and untraceable – that was the way Mom explained it to eight-year-old me. You needed a passcode just to get an email sent to it. I *never* got notifications from the black box email. It should have been impossible.

I punched in the five consecutive passcodes for the black box's account.

The message was there. Still unopened. Mom must not have checked it yet.

My heart caught in my throat. Someone was emailing the black box just for me?

Hello Rosalyn Quest,

Congratulations on earning our interest. You are invited to participate in this year's Thieves' Gambit.

The competition will begin in one week. We anticipate a two-week run time. Please contact us to make arrangements.

- The Organizers