

from *The Good Thief*

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The Good Thief was inspired by the authors I read and loved as a child: Robert Louis Stevenson, Mark Twain, Charles Dickens and the Brontë sisters. I wanted to write an adventure story that followed in the footsteps of these great authors, so it is a transcription of sorts, although more in spirit than content. This opening chapter introduces my hero, Ren. As the story progresses, he is adopted by a conman named Benjamin Nab, who takes Ren on journey across New England, robbing and scamming people along the way. Eventually they end up in the town of North Umbrage, where Ren discovers clues to his hidden parentage, and learns the most important lesson of all—how to tell a story that will save his life.



Chapter 1

THE MAN ARRIVED AFTER MORNING PRAYERS. Word spread quickly that someone had come, and the boys of Saint Anthony's orphanage elbowed each other and strained to catch a glimpse as he unhitched his horse and led it to the trough for drinking. The man's face was hard to make out, his hat pulled so far down that the brim nearly touched his nose. He tied the reins to a post, and then stood there, touching the horse's neck, watching her drink. The man waited, and the boys watched, and when the mare finally lifted her head, they saw the man lean forward, stroke the animal's nose, and kiss her. Then he wiped his lips with the back of his hand, removed his hat, and made his way across the yard to the monastery.

Men often came for children. Sometimes it was for cheap labor, sometimes for a sense of doing good. The brothers of Saint Anthony's would stand the orphans in a line, and the men would walk back and forth, inspecting. It was easy to tell what they were looking for by where their eyes went. Usually it was to boys almost fourteen, the taller ones, the loudest, the strongest. Then their eyes went down to the barely crawling, the stumbling two year olds—still untainted and fresh. This left the in-betweens—those who had lost their baby fat and curls but were not yet old enough to be helpful. These children were usually ill tempered, and had little to offer but empty stomachs and a bad case of lice. Ren was one of them.

He had no memory of a beginning—of a mother or father, sister or brother. His life was simply there, at Saint Anthony's, and what he remembered began in the middle of things—the smell of boiled sheets and lye, the taste of watery oatmeal, the feel of dropping a brick onto a piece of stone, watching the red pieces split off, then using those crumbling, broken shards to write on the wall of the monastery, and being slapped for this, and being forced to wash the dust away with a cold, wet rag.

Ren's name had been sewn into the collar of his nightshirt. Three letters embroidered in dark blue thread. The cloth was made of good linen, and he had worn it until he was nearly two. After that it was taken away and given to a smaller child to wear. Ren learned to keep an eye on Edward, then James, then Nicholas—and corner them in the yard. He would pin the squirming children to the ground and examine the fading letters closely, wondering what kind of hand had worked them. The R and E were sewn boldly in a cross stitch, but the N was thinner, slanting to the right, as if the person working the thread had rushed to complete the job. When the shirt wore thin it was cut into bandages. Brother Joseph gave Ren the piece of collar with the letters, and the boy kept it underneath his pillow at night.

Ren watched now as the visitor waited on the steps of the priory. The man passed his hat back and forth in his hands, leaving damp marks along the felt. The door opened, and he stepped inside. A few minutes later, Brother Joseph came to gather the children, and said: "Get to the statue."

The statue of Saint Anthony sat in the center of the yard. It was carved from marble, dressed in the robes of the Franciscan friars, the dome of Saint

Anthony's head bald, a halo circling his brow. In one hand he held a lily, and in the other a small child wearing a crown. The child held out one palm in supplication, and used the other to touch the Saint's cheek. There were times, when the sun receded in the afternoon and shadows played across the stone, that the touch looked more like a slap. This child was Jesus Christ, and the pairing proof of Saint Anthony's ability to carry messages to God. When a loaf of bread went missing from the kitchen, or Father John couldn't find the keys to the chapel, the children were sent to the statue. *Saint Anthony, Saint Anthony, Come bring what I've lost back to me.*

Catholics were rare in this part of New England. A local Irishman, who'd made a fortune pressing cheap grapes into strong port, had left his vineyard to the church in a desperate bid for heaven before he died. The brothers of Saint Anthony were sent to claim the land and build the monastery. They found themselves surrounded by Protestants, who, in the first month of their arrival, burned down the barn, fouled the well, and caught two brothers after dark on the road and sent them home tarred and feathered.

After praying for guidance, the brothers turned to the Irishman's wine press, which was still intact and on the grounds. Plants were sent from Italy, and after some trial and error the brothers matched the right vine with their stony New England soil. Before long Saint Anthony's became well known for their particular vintage, which they aged in old wooden casks and used for their morning and evening masses. The unconsecrated wine was sold to the local taverns, and also to individual land owners, who sent their servants to collect the bottles in the night, so that their neighbors would not see them doing business with Catholics.

Soon after this the first child was left. Brother Joseph heard cries one morning before sunrise, and opened the door to find a baby wrapped in a soiled dress. The second child was left in a bucket, near the well. The third in a basket by the outhouse. Girls were collected every few months by the Sisters of Charity, who worked in a hospital some distance away. What happened to them, no one knew, but the boys were left at Saint Anthony's, and before long the monastery had turned into a de-facto orphanage for the bastard children of the local townspeople, who still occasionally tried to burn the place to the ground.

To control these attempts at arson, the brothers built a high brick wall around the property, which sloped and towered like a fortress along the road. At the bottom of the wooden gate that served as the entrance they cut a small, swinging door and it was through this tiny opening that the babies were pushed. Ren was told that he, too, had been pushed through this gate and found the following morning, covered in mud in the prior's garden. It had rained the night before, and although Ren had no memory of the storm, he often wondered why he had been abandoned in bad weather. It always led to the same conclusion: that whoever had brought him there could not wait to be rid of him.

The gate was hinged to open one way—in. When Ren pushed at the tiny door with his finger, he could feel the strength of the wooden frame behind it. There was no handle on the children's side, no groove to lift from underneath. The wood was heavy, thick and old—a fine piece of oak planed years before from the woods beyond the orphanage. Ren liked to imagine he felt a pressure in

return, a mother reaching back through, changing her mind, groping wildly, a thin white arm.

Underneath Saint Anthony's statue the younger boys fidgeted and pushed, the older ones cleared their throats nervously. Brother Joseph walked down the line and straightened their clothes, or spit on his hand and scrubbed their faces, bumping his large stomach into the children who had fallen out of place. He pushed it now toward a six year-old, who had suddenly sprung a bloody nose from the excitement.

"Hide it quick," he said, shielding the boy with his body. Across the yard Father John was solemnly approaching, and behind him was the man who had kissed the horse. He was a farmer. Perhaps forty years old. His shoulders were strong, his fingers thick with calluses, his skin the color of rawhide from the sun. There was a rash of brown spots across his forehead and the backs of his hands. His face was not unkind, and his coat was clean, his shirt pressed white, his collar tight against his neck. A woman had dressed him. So there would be a wife. A mother.

The man began to make his way down the line. He paused before two blond boys, Brom and Ichy. They were also in-betweens, twins left three winters after Ren. Brom's neck was thicker, by about two inches, and Ichy's feet were longer, by about two inches, but beyond those distinguishing characteristics it was hard to tell the boys apart when they were standing still. It was only if they were out in the fields working, or throwing stones at a pine tree, or washing their faces in the morning that the differences became clear. Brom would splash a handful of water over his head and be done with it. Ichy folded a handkerchief into fourths, dabbed it into the basin, then set to work carefully and slowly behind his ears.

It was said that no one would adopt Brom and Ichy because they were twins. One was sure to be unlucky. Second-borns were usually considered changelings, and drowned right after birth. But no one knew who came first, Brom or Ichy, so there was no way to tell where the bad luck was coming from. What the brothers needed to do was separate, make themselves look as different as possible. Ren kept this information to himself. They were his only friends, and he did not want to lose them.

Standing together now the twins grinned at the farmer, and then, suddenly, Brom threw his arms around his brother and attempted to lift him from the ground. He had done this once before, as a show of strength before two elderly gentlemen, and it had ended badly. Ren watched from the other end of the line as Ichy, taken by surprise, began to recite his multiplication tables, all the while struggling violently against his brother, to the point that one of his boots flew into the air and sailed past the farmer's ear.

Father John kept a small switch up the sleeve of his robe, and he put it to work now on the twins, while Brother Joseph fetched Ichy's boot and the farmer continued down the line. Ren put his arms behind his back and stood at attention. He held his breath as the man stopped in front of him.

"How old are you?"

Ren opened his mouth to answer, but the man spoke for him.

"You look about twelve."

Ren wanted to say that he could be any age, that he could make himself into anything the man wanted, but instead he followed what he had been taught by the brothers, and said nothing.

"I want a boy," said the farmer. "Old enough to help me work, and young enough for my wife to feel she has a child. Someone who's honest, and willing to learn. Someone who can be a son to us." He leaned forward and lowered his voice, so that only Ren could hear him. "Do you think you could do that?"

Father John came up behind them. "You don't want that one."

The farmer stepped back. He looked confused, then angry at being interrupted. "Why not?"

Father John pointed to Ren's arm. "Show him."

Now the other children leaned forward. The priest and the farmer stood waiting. Ren did not move, as if somehow he could wait this moment out until it transformed into something else. He stared past the farmer at a maple tree, just beyond the stone wall, its fall leaves beginning to turn. Soon those leaves would be a different color, and then the wind would come, and the tree would look like something else completely. Father John's hand disappeared into the sleeve of his robe, and then the switch came down, leaving a thin red line that smarted enough to make the boy give up his secret.

He was missing a hand. Ren's left arm simply ended, a piece of skin pulled neatly over the bone and sewn crookedly in the shape of a V—the scar tissue raised but healed. The skin was white in places, the stitching like the legs of a centipede, fanned out, frozen and fossilized.

Somewhere between his entry into the world and his delivery through the door of Saint Anthony's, Ren had lost it. He wondered where the hand was now. He closed his eyes and saw it clearly, palm open, the fingers slightly curled. He imagined it behind a dustbin, inside a wooden box, hidden in the grasses of a field. He did not consider size. He did not think that it would no longer fit him. Ren simply looked at his right and thought about its match, waiting patiently somewhere in the world for him to retrieve it.

The farmer tried not to react, but Ren could see the disgust hidden in his face as he turned away and moved down the line. When he chose a boy from the other end, named William, with red hair and a bad habit of chewing his fingers, the man acted as though it was the only decision he'd made.

Ren watched as the farmer lifted his new son into the wagon. The man patted William on the head, then turned and counted out some money and handed it to Father John, who quickly slipped it into the sleeve of his robe. The farmer climbed up onto the driver's seat and made ready to leave, but at the last moment lowered the reins and glanced back at the statue of Saint Anthony.

"What happens to the ones no one takes?"

"They are conscripted," said Father John, "into the army."

“Not an easy life.”

“It’s the will of God,” said Father John. “We do not question his ways.”

The farmer looked down at the priest, then at his new son, nervously biting the skin on his thumb. He released the brake on the wagon. “I do,” he said, and then called to his horse and started off down the road.