

## The Rogues 1: Accidental Heroes, by Lian Tanner

### Chapter 1: No more Schemes

Duckling's grandpa had the sweetest smile you could imagine. It made him look like the sort of person who would rescue a kitten from a drain, or nurse a wounded sparrow back to health. It made him look kind-hearted and trustworthy and *good*.

But Duckling knew better. That smile meant trouble – and she'd thought they were finished with trouble.

So instead of smiling back at him, she asked, 'What do you want?'

Grandpa's face fell. 'It would be so much nicer, my dear, if you said, "Can I help you with anything, Grandpapa? A small errand, perhaps? Yes, of *course*, Grandpapa."'

'What do you *want*?' asked Duckling again.

The man who called himself Lord Rump slid a finger into the pocket of his silk waistcoat and drew out three copper miseries. 'An excursion to Tooth and Claw market. Here, buy yourself a pie on the way.'

Duckling looked at the coins but didn't take them. 'Where's the catch?'

'So young and yet so cynical,' cried her grandpa. 'Why, there is no catch at all, just a simple trip there and back—'

Duckling interrupted him. 'No more Schemes. That's what you said when we came here. You said you were going to retire. You promised!'

'And so I will, after one last—'

'You said we were going to settle here in Neuhalt, like ordinary people.'

Grandpa repeated the word as if he'd never heard it before. '*Ordinary*? We are not *ordinary*, my child! We are the bright comet that shoots across the sky, leaving lesser folk gasping with admiration.'

'They're not gasping with admiration,' said Duckling. 'They're gasping because you ran off with their rings and brooches. And I don't want you to do that anymore. It's like living on the edge of a cliff, and never knowing if we're going to fall off.'

'Of course we will not fall! I have got us out of every sort of difficulty in the past, have I not? My brilliance has carried us through? Why stop now?'

'Because I've had enough. *Please*, Grandpa.'

Lord Rump stared at her. At his feet, the gas fire hissed feebly. ‘You really want me to retire?’

‘Yes.’

‘Then I shall retire.’ And he sat back in his chair and folded his hands across his ample belly.

Duckling narrowed her eyes. It wasn’t like Grandpa to give in so easily. What was he up to? ‘So I don’t need to go to Tooth and Claw after all?’

‘Oh, you must still go to Tooth and Claw. If I am to retire, we will need money.’

‘We’ve got money. We’ve got plenty.’

‘No. We *did* have plenty, but—’ Lord Rump spread his hands. ‘You know how these things happen. A friendly game of cards – I swear the other fellow was cheating.’ He shook his head. ‘So was I, of course, but that was no reason for him to do so.’

Duckling felt as if the bottom had fallen out of her stomach. ‘You lost our money? *All* of it?’

‘Dear me no, I would never be so careless. I kept back enough for three weeks’ rent and a bribe or two.’

‘Oh, Grandpa.’ Duckling sat down on the overstuffed sofa with a thump. ‘What are we going to do?’

Lord Rump beamed at her. ‘We will just have to carry out one last Scheme—’ He took a closer look at her face and his expression became apologetic. ‘I do not like it any more than you do, my dear. But what other choice do we have?’

Duckling knew better than to trust *any* of her grandfather’s expressions. ‘How dangerous is this Scheme?’

‘Not dangerous at all.’

‘Tell me the truth!’

‘That *is* the truth. Would I lie to my own flesh and blood?’

*Yes*, thought Duckling. *Often*. ‘Are we going to have to run for it?’ she asked. ‘Like we did from Spoke?’

‘Hush, child, don’t mention that ungrateful place. We are not from Spoke; we are from – ah – the Spavey Isles, due west and halfway around the world. The ruler of the Spavies is my – why, I do believe he is my second cousin.’ Lord Rump’s chair creaked as he spun a brand-new history out of thin air. The handsome gold watch

chain that stretched across his belly glinted in the gaslight. ‘And I am his ambassador.’

He held out the coins again. ‘As for *running for it* – that is such an ugly expression. We do not *run*, you and I. We merely stay several steps ahead of trouble. Now, go to Tooth and Claw and find me a boy.’

Duckling sighed inwardly and took the coins. She might argue, but in the end she always did as she was told. Grandpa was the only family she’d ever known, and she owed him her life. ‘What sort of boy?’

‘Strong. Not too bright. Tell him we will give him a good contract, protection from slavers, blah blah blah. And—’ Lord Rump looked around cautiously, as if there might be someone hiding behind the sofa. ‘And make sure he is alone. No parents in the city. No fond aunties to make a fuss if something happens to him.’

‘You want a disposable,’ said Duckling.

‘Nicely put, my dear. You have hit the whatsit firmly on the thingamajig. Yes, I require a disposable boy.’