

CHAPTER 1

THE MISSING EGG

Standing in The Treasure Chest as the late-afternoon sun sent rays of colored light through the stained-glass window and across the parquet floor, Felix thought the room looked sad. All of the items seemed ordinary somehow. Maybe it had to do with that late-afternoon light, which was dim and fading. Felix had never noticed the fraying around the edges of the carpet from Ashgabat in Turkmenistan where, according to Great-Uncle Thorne, the most beautiful carpets were made. The desk and shelves, their wood probably once gleaming, looked dull. Or maybe it was the items themselves, the gold nugget and test tubes and all the things filling the room, dusty and neglected.

Felix tried to imagine Phinneas Pickworth filling

this room, coming back to Elm Medona from Turkmenistan or Persia or the Amazon with his precious items. How excited he must have been to unpack his trunk and remove the carefully wrapped treasures! Felix narrowed his eyes, as if he could almost see his great-great-grandfather here, lifting an object close to his eyes to examine it. He would have smiled as he did. Satisfied. Delighted. Eager.

“Have you heard a word I’ve said?” Great-Uncle Thorne’s voice boomed.

Felix stared a moment longer at the spot where a trick of light beneath the stained-glass window seemed to reveal a vague figure.

Felix blinked.

No, he convinced himself, it was just a shadow cast from the high shelf against that wall.

A cold breeze blew through The Treasure Chest, rifling the papers on the desk and sending goose bumps up Felix’s arm.

Whatever was beneath the window—ghost or shadow—vanished. But near where it had appeared, something glistened gold. Felix felt that the object was beckoning him. Rubbing his arms to warm himself, he walked toward it.

But Great-Uncle Thorne reached out a gnarled and liver-spotted hand to stop him.

“Does the fact that the Ziff twins are missing have no impact on you at all?” he shouted, lowering his face to Felix’s eye level.

“It does,” Felix said, looking past Great-Uncle Thorne’s voluminous white eyebrows to the twinkling object across the room.

“It, uh, impacts me,” he managed.

And it did. Of course.

Maisie and Felix had left the Ziff twins in the Congo facing all sorts of danger: wild beasts, poisonous snakes, tropical diseases. While they had lived in homey comfort with Amelia Earhart in Iowa, fishing and riding rides at the state fair, the Ziff twins had been dodging calamity. At least Felix *hoped* they’d dodged calamity. He couldn’t let himself think the worst. And now Great-Uncle Thorne had insisted they accompany him here to The Treasure Chest, even though their father was downstairs, no longer engaged to Agatha the Great, sitting with their surprised mother.

But despite all of that, Felix could not stop staring at the object, which as he slipped out of Great-Uncle

Thorne's grip and inched toward it, appeared to be a highly decorated egg.

"What in tarnation are you staring at?" Great-Uncle Thorne said so loudly that the globe on a shelf vibrated.

"That," Felix said, pointing.

Maisie, who had been quietly listening to Great-Uncle Thorne's hypotheses about what might have happened to the Ziff twins, stepped forward and followed Felix's pointing finger with her eyes.

"What?" she asked, unimpressed.

"Honestly, boy," Great-Uncle Thorne said, shaking his head, "your friends . . . No! Your cousins! . . . are missing, and you suddenly become mesmerized by a gaggle of objects."

"Not a gaggle of objects," Felix said. "Just the egg. The one that's . . ." He struggled for the right word. *Twinkling* sounded too light, *glowing* too strong. "Shining," he said finally, though that wasn't quite right, either.

"A shining egg?" Maisie repeated.

Great-Uncle Thorne tapped his walking stick on the floor three times, loud. It happened to be the walking stick Maisie liked least, with a crystal globe

at the top, each continent etched in miniature on it, and along the length of the ivory stick itself the name of every country in the world had been carved. There were so many countries that their names carved there like that gave the impression of an intricate design. But up close you could make out the words—many of them, like Rhodesia, no longer even countries. *I think it's cool*, Felix had said when Maisie told him the walking stick gave her the creeps. *Countries that don't even exist anymore?* she'd said with a shudder. *And a stick made out of some poor elephant's tusk?*

“Actually,” Great-Uncle Thorne said when he saw her staring at it now, “this walking stick was made by a witch doctor in Uganda for my father.”

“It’s illegal to kill elephants for their tusks, you know,” Maisie told him.

“Elephant?” he said, his eyes blazing. “My dear child, this is made from the tusk of the rare white rhinoceros!”

“Even worse,” Maisie said, her eyes blazing right back at Great-Uncle Thorne. “White rhinoceroses are an endangered species!”

“That egg,” Felix said softly.

Both Maisie and Great-Uncle Thorne watched him as he gently lifted the egg from its place among the fossils and feathers.

The small bells from the yoke of a yak tinkled as another cold breeze blew through The Treasure Chest.

The egg was the most magnificent thing Felix had ever seen.

Heavy in his hand, larger than a baseball, beneath its ornamentation the egg was the purest white. Whiter than fresh snow. Whiter than clouds or angel hair. Four ribbons of gold radiated from its top, along the delicate curve of the egg, all the way to the bottom. Each ribbon had a different motif carved into it. Cherubs. Roses. Wolves' heads. And what appeared to be interlocking letter *Rs*.

Then there were the jewels. Sapphires and diamonds bigger than marbles formed a cap at the top and covered the bottom. They sparkled as if they had just been polished, revealing every shade of blue imaginable. Cobalt and navy and midnight and sky. The diamonds, too, were different shades. Champagne and pink and yellow and eggshell.

Felix stroked the top of the egg, marveling at how many diamonds and sapphires covered it. All of

them a slightly different color, all of them so smooth.

Except one.

His hand paused over a particularly deep-blue sapphire. So dark, in fact, that it almost looked black. This sapphire did not shine like the others. It was dull and rougher cut.

“Put! That! Down!” Great-Uncle Thorne ordered.

When Felix didn’t obey fast enough, Great-Uncle Thorne poked him in the knees with his walking stick.

“Ouch!” Felix exclaimed, holding on even tighter to the egg.

“Give it to me this instant,” Great-Uncle Thorne demanded.

He didn’t wait for Felix to hand over the egg. He just grabbed it from him.

“Hey!” Felix protested.

But Great-Uncle Thorne was not listening. His eyes took in every inch of the egg. His hands ran over its surface slowly, as if they were memorizing it.

Not memorizing, Felix realized as he watched Great-Uncle Thorne. The opposite. *Remembering* it.

“Have you been here the whole time?” Great-Uncle Thorne whispered in a raspy voice to the egg.

Tears sprang to his eyes and fell down his cheeks.

“What in the world is going on?” Maisie asked, confused.

Was she the only one worrying about Hadley and Rayne? Was she the only one who didn’t care an ounce about this fancy egg?

Felix put his hand on Maisie’s shoulder.

“It’s the missing egg,” he said, tears in his eyes, too.

“What missing egg?” Maisie asked.

Great-Uncle Thorne managed to lift his eyes away from the egg and look at Felix and Maisie.

“All those years she accused me of stealing it,” he said. “And it was here the whole time.”

“Who?” Maisie asked.

“Great-Aunt Maisie,” Felix said softly, for Great-Uncle Thorne’s attention had gone back to the egg. He was tracing the design on each gold ribbon and whispering to himself as he did.

“Don’t you remember?” Felix said to Maisie. “She had her Fabergé egg, and you broke the code to open it. But she told us that Thorne had stolen another one. That’s why they never spoke again.”

Great-Uncle Thorne turned to face them. In that one instant, Felix thought, he looked like the

very, very old man that he was.

“That’s one reason,” Great-Uncle Thorne said. “But also because I kept her from staying with Harry.”

He added, “Harry Houdini.”

Maisie and Felix nodded.

“But I knew what it would mean if she stayed. And I didn’t want to lose her,” Great-Uncle Thorne said.

Although he was speaking to them, he had a faraway look in his eyes.

“When we got back, she was furious,” he continued, “and she threatened to lock The Treasure Chest and throw away the key. *You’ve kept me from my one true love, Thorne*, she told me. *And I’ll never forgive you for that.*”

Great-Uncle Thorne’s gaze settled on Maisie and Felix.

“You didn’t know her the way I did. She was strong willed and stubborn and thickheaded. And,” he said with a sigh, “utterly marvelous.”

Felix tried to reconcile the old Great-Aunt Maisie that he’d known with the girl Great-Uncle Thorne described. He thought of the picture on the wall of the Grand Staircase, and the glimpse of her

as that girl when they had met Harry Houdini. But still, to him, Great-Aunt Maisie was a crabby, snobbish old woman.

“And then,” Great-Uncle Thorne said with a sigh, “we discovered that the egg was missing. How she carried on! Accusing me of thievery. And worse. The more I insisted I had nothing to do with its disappearance, the more she insisted I did. There were no more trips to The Treasure Chest. No more midnight swims or Newport parties or adventures. That autumn I went to school in England and I never spoke to or saw my sister again. Until I came back last winter. And then . . .”

Great-Uncle Thorne dropped his head in his hands and began to sob.

“There, there,” Felix said, rubbing Great-Uncle Thorne’s back the way his own mother did when Felix was upset.

“But . . .,” Maisie began.

Then she waited, because with Great-Uncle Thorne sobbing like this, it probably wasn’t the time to ask.

Great-Uncle Thorne raised his tearstained face.

“What?” he asked her.

“Well, Great-Aunt Maisie had her egg. We saw it,” Maisie said, looking to Felix, who nodded in confirmation.

“And I presume you have yours?” Maisie asked rhetorically. “So this one is the egg Phinneas Pickworth gave to Ariane when you and Great-Aunt Maisie were born?”

“The very one,” Great-Uncle Thorne said, and sobbed even harder. He held the egg close now, like a long-lost friend.

Maisie waited until Great-Uncle Thorne’s sobs quieted.

“But what’s so special about this egg? I mean,” she added quickly, “other than the fact that it was your mother’s and everyone thought it was missing.”

Great-Uncle Thorne took a deep breath.

Maisie and Felix held their breath.

“I don’t know,” Great-Uncle Thorne said.

“What do you mean, you don’t know?” Maisie, puzzled, asked him.

Great-Uncle Thorne held the egg at arm’s length and studied it. Maisie and Felix studied it, too.

The Treasure Chest grew very quiet.

“Yes,” he said finally. “It is special because it

belonged to our mother, a woman we, sadly, never knew.”

He paused again, took another deep breath, then continued.

“And of course, the fact that it was missing—stolen, we all believed—makes finding it even more wonderful.”

“So maybe that’s it?” Felix said. “Those facts alone make it a very special egg. And make it even more exciting that we found it again after all this time.”

But Great-Uncle Thorne shook his head.

“You see,” he said, one finger rubbing the odd sapphire, “unlike my Fabergé egg or Maisie’s, this one has never been opened.”

“Why not?” Maisie asked.

“Inside is the key,” Great-Uncle Thorne said.

“The key to . . . ?” Maisie prodded.

“My mother was French,” Great-Uncle Thorne said. “You know that, *oui?*”

“Is that why everyone here speaks French and eats French food?” Felix said, thinking of the *moules frites* and *duck à l’orange* and *pot-au-feu* that showed up for dinner almost every night.

“And you know that *Elm Medona* is an anagram for—”

“*Lame demon*,” Maisie interrupted, frustrated.

“Which comes from the French novel *Paris Before Man*, which was written by Pierre Boitard in 1861 and which is about time travel,” Great-Uncle Thorne said.

“What does any of this have to do with the egg?” Maisie said in exasperation.

“The key is in this egg,” Great-Uncle Thorne said.

Maisie opened her mouth to ask, again, *What key?*

But Great-Uncle Thorne held up his hand to stop her.

“I have no idea what the key opens. Or what it means,” he said. “I only know that my father, Phinneas Pickworth,” he added, as if Maisie and Felix might have forgotten who his father was, “ordered Maisie and me to never, under any circumstances, take out the key unless he told us it was time.”

“That’s why it was so terrible when it went missing,” Maisie said, thinking out loud.

“I know that if we lift this sapphire, something

will open,” Great-Uncle Thorne said, his long fingers resting on the dark sapphire.

“I know that whatever opens will reveal another door, and that door requires a code to open it,” he said. “But whatever the implications of all of that are . . . well . . .”

Great-Uncle Thorne shrugged.

“For now,” he said, “I will take this to my room with me and reunite it with the other two.”

He began to walk toward the door.

“Wait!” Maisie called to him. “What about Hadley and Rayne?”

Great-Uncle Thorne, baffled, looked at her.

“The Ziff twins?” she reminded him.

“Ah! Yes. Very troublesome.”

He considered for a moment then said, “I’ll return this to my room and then come back here to discuss the Ziff twins.”

Felix watched Great-Uncle Thorne leave The Treasure Chest.

“Weird, right?” Maisie said. “The mysterious key. The right time . . .”

“Mmmm,” Felix said, because that was all he could think to say.

What he knew, what he felt certain of, was that the egg had not been in The Treasure Chest all these years after all. Someone, or something, had returned it today, this very afternoon. And Felix had a terrible feeling that whatever that key opened, the time had come to use it.