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We know
books

BY MEGAN BANNEN

The Undertaking of Hart and Mercy
The Undermining of Twyla and Frank
The Undercutting of Rosie and Adam

THE
UNDERCUTTING
OF
ROSIE
AND
ADAM



MEGAN BANNEN

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WEST STATION

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SOUTH STATION

Chapter One



To Rosie's mind, the word *red* wasn't as cut and dried as most people would have you believe.

If you said someone's hair was red, was it literally red? That primary-color-hanging-out-at-the-top-of-a-prism red? Or was it the kind of red that masqueraded as copper and rust? Rosie Fox's hair was red, but it was the copper and rust kind of red, dangling in a pair of brassy plaits from beneath the wide brim of her flat hat.

Folks usually described the dry, gritty dirt of Bushong as red, the dust of which permanently clung to Rosie's ostrich leather boots like flour on a baker's peel. But it wasn't red. It wasn't even paprika. It was more like cinnamon, although the grit it left in Rosie's mouth on a windy day didn't taste so good.

And what about the red eyes that resulted from too much crying or too little sleep? Were they truly red? Or were the whites simply rendered pink by a body's weariness? Those eyes weren't red, not really.

But Rosie Fox did have red eyes, and that was no lie. Red. The color of apple skins. The color of geranium blooms on a hot summer day. The irises that hugged her black pupils against a field of white were as bright and livid as a vine-ripe tomato.

Those red eyes glinted like a pair of cut rubies as she squinted at the West Station's portal, the befuddlingly complicated archway,



that was supposed to allow mortals to pass through the Mist, in and out of Tanria. Except it was on the fritz. Again.

"I'm pretty sure whatever you're about to do is a bad idea, RoFo."

Rosie glanced at her partner long enough to give him an insouciant shrug. "What's the worst that could happen?"

"You could break the portal, and I'd get fired from the Tanrian Marshals because of your poor life choices, and then I'd die impoverished and alone?"

The words coming out of Penrose Duckers's mouth were far more alarmist than his demeanor. He looked bored, slouching against the portal's frame, his arms crossed, his *FIC Tanrian Marshals Service* badge glinting on his khaki uniform shirt. For a moment, Duckers's mustache startled Rosie. He was so young when they'd partnered up that he could barely grow peach fuzz on his upper lip. Now he bore an impressive black pelt under his broad, handsome nose. When had that happened?

She shook off the creeping sensation that time was getting away from her again, and faced the portal with its cogs and pistons and pipes. "I can't break something if it's already broken," she reasoned.

"Not sure I agree with that statement."

"I'm not *breaking* it. I'm *fixing* it." She gave the left side a solid *thwack* with her fist.

Louis, the engineer on duty, winced. "I wish you wouldn't."

"Relax, Louis. You know I have a gift."

"Does he know that, though?" asked Duckers. "Do any of us?"

Rosie glared at him, not that her uncanny eyes had any effect on her partner. Never had. It was one of the reasons she loved the kid.

Who is not a kid anymore, she reminded herself. In a way, he was older than she was now.

"Have a little faith, Penny-D," she told him a half second before her fist arced downward, whacking the archway from a different angle. The portal did not whir to life as she had hoped. Instead, a small metal hatch near the main switch went flying off the frame and skittered into the gravel parking lot ten feet away.

"Oh, jeez," said Louis, chasing after it.

Duckers sucked his teeth. "Dang, Foxy, what did I just say?"

"Please. You know the Smack It Method works at least half the time."

"Okay, but the other fifty percent lands both of us in the chief's office. Can we not?"

She pressed her hands together. "Trust."

"Ha! Trusting you is the road to Old Hell. I want to go home."

"I'm not stopping you."

"I drove this time, genius. How else do you plan to get back to Eternity?"

"One more smack, and then we'll go."

"Ugh."

It was autumn, but hanging around in what was essentially a desert with no shade to speak of made Duckers doff his standard-issue flat hat to blot the sweat from his warm brown face. If Rosie took off her hat, she'd burn to a crisp in two seconds flat, even this late in the year. *Red as a lobster* was how people described it, another red that was actually pink. And sunburn red didn't matter a lick to Rosie anyway, since her body would return to its usual ghostly pale existence by morning light.

It wasn't a comforting thought, so she returned her attention to the broken portal, a technical marvel incongruously set into the Mist that shrouded the land of Tanria in a giant, foggy dome. There was a portal at each of the cardinal points of Tanria, the only means by which human beings could enter and exit the former prison of the Old Gods.

Except Rosie and Duckers had been diverted to the North Station's portal when their shift had ended, since this one was down.

Rosie wondered if Chief Maguire would ask the portals' inventor to take a look at it. The engineers were so good at their job these days that Adam Lee almost never came to Bushong anymore. Rosie hadn't seen the man in a good five years, not since the last time he had been called in to fix the West Station's portal when the engineers couldn't figure out what ailed it. Most people found him either boring or intimidating. And yet the last time she had encountered him—

A peculiar spot inside the open hatch caught her attention.

"What is that?" she asked Louis as he positioned the hatch door onto its hinges.

"What is what?" He didn't look at Rosie or even inside the inner mechanism of the portal. He was too busy trying to reattach the door with the smallest screwdriver under the altar of the sky.

Rosie crouched beside him to point at a dark, twisty stain within, lurking behind a pair of tubes and a cluster of wires.

"That."

"The tubes?"

"No."

"The wires?"

"No. *That*."

"There's... nothing there?"

"Oh my gods, Louis, look where my finger is pointing."

"Ugh," Duckers moaned again. He shoed Rosie out of the way so that he could have a look.

"Well?" she asked him after he'd squinted inside the hatch for more time than was necessary.

"I see tubes and wires."

"And the thing."

"No thing."

"The shadowy blotch thing in the back."

"Nope. Tubes and wires."

Rosie turned pleading eyes to the engineer. He shook his head and grimaced in apology.

"You guys." She wormed her way between them and reached into the portal to move aside the wires and show them the very obvious spot.

"That's a bad—" began Louis.

And then a jolt shot through Rosie's entire body. She went painfully rigid and her jaw clenched so hard a few of her teeth cracked as wave after wave of pain coursed through her in a matter of seconds. She convulsed with a current so strong it reminded her forcefully of the two times in her life she had been struck by lightning. And then she was hurtling backward, as if she were an ugly rag doll thrown across a room by a petulant child. She landed on the edge of the gravel parking lot in a cloud of not-red dust. She heard and, worse, felt a couple of ribs crack before everything went blank.

Not dark, but empty.

She couldn't hear Louis finish his sentence, uttering the word "idea" in a stunned daze. She couldn't see Duckers rush to her side, cussing his fool head off. She couldn't taste the blood in her mouth. She couldn't smell the smoking mess of her singed hair. She couldn't feel the horrid fracture at the back of her skull. All she could do was *be*, and that was her least favorite thing to do.

Mother of Sorrows, she was dead again.

She hated dying, hated the sickening nothingness inside her rib cage, the eerie silence of death, the freaky way her body stopped hurting. And there wasn't a blessed thing she could do about it but let the burden of her immortality crush her soul while she waited for her body to return to her. Which it inevitably would.

It always did.

The heart always recovered first, then the lungs. After that was anyone's guess. This time, her sense of touch was next in line. She could feel a dull ache at the back of her head and a tightness—stitches, probably, with a thick pillow of gauze over them. Her hearing arrived shortly thereafter, which was unfortunate, since she was now treated to her boss's wrath.

"Salt Sea and all the gods of death! What now?" came the voice of Chief Alma Maguire, ringing through the infirmary. At least, Rosie assumed she was in the station's infirmary. That was usually where she woke up. Ah yes, there was the particular squeak of the infirmary's door swinging closed in Maguire's wake. Someone ought to oil that.

"Hi, Chief," said Duckers.

"Don't *hi* me. How is she?"

"Not dead," muttered Dr. Levinson.

"She's going to wish she was after I'm done with her. I've got a puddle of blood causing a hazmat situation in the parking lot and an engineer who's going to need years of therapy and... Let me think... Oh, that's right. There's a charred hole in the West Station's portal! What happened this time?"

Rosie's hearing was never so acute as when she was half dead. She could actually make out the sound of Duckers's hands nervously bending and unbending the brim of his hat, a habit he had picked up from his mentor when he first joined up twelve years ago.

"So, the portal was down," he began.

"I am aware. Louis was fixing it."

"Fox decided to help."

"And then she touched wires with steam-powered current running through them and got herself killed," Dr. Levinson finished

dryly, her mouth a disapproving slash across her face as she lifted Rosie's wrist and took her pulse. So apparently Rosie could see now.

She blinked.

"Well, look who's alive," said Maguire with false joviality. Alma Maguire was the best boss Rosie had ever had, but the woman laid on irony so thick you could prod it with a fork. She glared down at Rosie's prostrate body on the exam table, her own brilliant aquamarine demigod eyes glinting with icy fury. Rosie was jealous of those eyes, so striking in Maguire's deep brown face. Blue-green and red were simply shades on the color wheel, but stick them into a demigod's eye sockets, and one hue became beautiful, while the other became terrifying.

Plus, rumor had it that Alma Maguire's divine mother was nice. Some demigods had all the luck.

"What were you thinking?" Maguire barked, rousing Rosie from her sulk.

Act first, think never, because fifty years from now, no one is going to remember this anyway, Rosie thought in reply, her oft-repeated personal motto. It was probably for the best that her mouth wasn't working yet.

"She kept saying there was something wrong inside the portal." Duckers spoke for her.

"As if she would know." Maguire looked down at Rosie again. "Remind me, Fox: When did you finish that graduate degree in mechanical engineering?"

"I think maybe she really did see something, Chief, something that Louis and I couldn't see. She kept talking about a shadowy... blotch... thing." As Duckers spoke, he slowly withered under Maguire's fierce gaze.

"Of course, a shadowy blotch thing. Clearly a valid reason to go poking around inside a complex and extremely expensive piece of machinery."

Duckers was mangling his hat, but he continued to stand up for Rosie, gods love him. "She was adamant. She definitely saw something in there."

"What are you trying to say?" Maguire asked him, softening. She always showed greater mercy to Duckers than to Rosie, not that Rosie could blame her. Duckers was a human plushie.

He gestured toward Rosie with his hat. "What if this is her demigod gift?"

"I didn't think Fox had a gift."

Gods of creation, it was so weird to have people talking about her as if it were Rosie's dead body in the room rather than the immortal piece of shit she'd been born with.

"Well, maybe she finally found it," said Duckers.

"The ability to see a shadowy blotch thing?"

"The ability to see stuff no one else can see. You know, the way Hart can see souls."

Hart Ralston had been Duckers's mentor, and before that he had been Alma Maguire's partner prior to her promotion to chief marshal. Like Maguire and Rosie, he was a demigod, but unlike anyone walking the earth, he could see the souls of the departed as they floated off to sail the Salt Sea.

Maguire's demigod gift was the ability to light a fire with her bare hands. Again, she was a million times cooler than Rosie would ever be. It was so unfair.

"Whatever it was, she was trying to show Louis. She was trying to be helpful," said Rosie's faithful partner.

Dr. Levinson snorted at this, earning her a baleful look from the chief, a glare the marshals under her command referred to as Maguire's Ire. The doctor cringed in apology and resumed bandaging Rosie's head, even though her skull was likely to be completely healed by morning.

Maguire released a long, gusty breath full of irritation. "Well,

I'm delighted to hear that Fox wants to help out so badly, because she is about to get her wish."

"That doesn't sound good," said Duckers.

"Au contraire, Marshal, I'm sure your partner is going to be thrilled with this assignment. Since fixing the wreckage out there is way outside Louis's pay grade, I've had to call in Dr. Lee, the man himself." Alma smiled sharply at Rosie, who was powerless to respond. "You get to be his escort for the duration of his stay, Marshal Fox, so that you can answer any questions he might have as to how you managed to fry his portal so very, very, very badly." With each *very*, Maguire's face inched closer to Rosie's. Mother of Sorrows, the woman knew how to make a marshal quail.

"Dang." Duckers laughed under his breath.

"You, too, Marshal Duckers."

"Me? What did I do?"

"You partnered up with a loose cannon ten years ago. That's on you. I'm expecting Dr. Lee early next week. You?" Here, she loomed over Rosie like the ancient God of Wrath. "Rest up and be less dead. I need you on your best behavior when Dr. Lee arrives. And don't think I don't see those non-regulation ostrich leather boots you're wearing. Get it together, Fox. And as for you." She turned on Duckers, who visibly shrank. "Keep your partner in line. I'll see you both first thing Sorrowsday morning."

Maguire made to exit the room but paused at the door and addressed Duckers, her demeanor somber.

"Will I see you at the funeral tomorrow?"

He nodded bleakly.

"I know it wasn't unexpected, but it's a sad business all the same," she said. "Till tomorrow, then."

With that, she exited the infirmary, accompanied by the familiar squeak of the door hinge.

Rosie experienced a stab of guilt as she looked at Duckers. She.

had been so focused on her own problems, she had forgotten that he was dealing with his own. She wished she could offer him a hug or some words of comfort, but all she could manage was a dramatic moan, a sound so pathetic that even Dr. Levinson took pity on her.

"I'll get you an aspirin."



Rosie was still moaning when Dr. Levinson finally released her from the infirmary a half hour later, mostly to cover up the stream of complaints freely flowing from the mouth of Penrose Duckers as he drove them both home.

"This is the third time you've up and died on me!" He shouted to be heard over the powerful engine of his cherry-red muscle duck. "For most people, the average lifespan is, like, eighty years. For you? It's three, maybe four. It's ridiculous! *You're* ridiculous! And it stresses me out! I don't like it when you die! How many times do I have to tell you this?"

He smacked the steering wheel throughout this speech to drive home his point.

"I don't die as often as I did when the drudges were around."

"Exactly! There aren't any murderous undead bodies roaming Tanria now, so you have zero excuses!"

Duckers was being generous. During the years when the drudges had terrorized the former prison of the Old Gods, her many partners had not accepted the undead as an excuse for her propensity to die in the line of duty. She would always contend that she had saved lives by putting herself in harm's way, but she had burned through eighteen partners before she'd found Duckers, the only one who had stuck with her. Of course, the way he was laying into her now made her worry that she had tried his patience too far, too many times.

"And now you've got us both on babysitting duty next week," he said. "I mean, have you met Adam Lee? The guy is boring as shit. I think he might actually be an automaton."

"He's not that bad."

"Yes, he is. He is *that bad*. And now we're going to have to spend quality time with him because of you. You know what that makes you? A ninnyhammer."

"I know. You're right. I'm a..." Rosie pulled up short. "What am I?"

"A ninnyhammer."

"What's a ninnyhammer?"

"You. Total ninny. And if anyone could be described as a hammer, it's you, bowling through life like a tornado and whacking anything that looks like a nail. Ninny. Hammer."

She regarded him with profound affection. "Gods, I love you."

"It's a great word, right?" he said with an irrepressible grin.

"So you forgive me?"

"Yes, I forgive you."

"And you won't leave me?"

"Nope. You're stuck with me." He reached across the bench of his autoduck and gave Rosie's knee a reassuring squeeze, revealing the stoppered bottle tattooed on his arm. As a teen, he'd nearly lost his soul when his appendix burst. A temple votary had had to reattach it to his body in permanent ink.

"We're partners, RoFo. I'm not leaving you."

Except he would. Someday. He would leave her the way everyone left her—across the Salt Sea to the House of the Unknown God, and even that tattoo wouldn't be able to hold his soul in this world. But that was a problem for Future Rosie. For now, she'd be contented and grateful to have him by her side.

"What time's the funeral tomorrow?" she asked him.

His face fell. "Ten o'clock."

"I guess Zeddie's going to be there, huh?"

Zeddie Birdsall was Duckers's ex-boyfriend. He'd been so upset when they broke up ten years ago that he'd left the island of Bushong to take a job at an upscale restaurant on Medora. He rarely came home, and when he did, his visits were brief, so it had been easy for Duckers to avoid him—until now.

"Yeah, he'll be there," Duckers said with the same grim resignation he might use to say something like *So I guess I'll stick my head in this noose now.*

"Want me to go with you?"

He shot her a hopeful glance. "Would you?"

"Least I can do after croaking on you today."

"I'd hate to put you out, though. Normally I'd beg Hart and Mercy to go with me, but that's not going to work this time. Obviously."

Hart and Duckers had remained friends after the former had left the Tanrian Marshals, even though Hart was married to Zeddie Birdsall's sister, Mercy. Thanks to Duckers, Rosie was friends with Hart and Mercy, too.

"Seriously, don't sweat it," said Rosie. "I'll go."

"But you hate funerals."

"Everyone hates funerals."

"I know, but..." He weighed his words. "You hate them for your own special Rosie Reasons."

"True, but I love you more than I hate funerals, so I'm going. End of discussion."

"Gods, thank you."

"That's what friends are for, Penny-D. But to be clear, you're not carrying a torch for this Zeddie guy, right?"

"No, of course not."

She gave him a hard side-eye.

"I'm not! That was ten years ago, and I was the one who broke things off."

"When's the last time you went on a date?"

"This again?"

"This again."

"I date."

"Not much."

Duckers scoffed. "Like you have room to talk. I can count on one hand the number of people you've dated since we partnered up. And by *dated*, I mean *went out with one time and decided nah.*"

"Fair, but I, unlike you, have all the time in the world to find my one true love."

"Ouch. Cold."

"I'm just worried that it's going to suck for you to see your ex-boyfriend tomorrow." She patted him on the shoulder.

"I'll be fine. I'm bringing a hot date to this funeral, remember?"

"You'll have the hottest date in the temple. I'm a total snack."

He shook his head, smiling. "I fucking love you."

"Aw, I love you, too, hot stuff."

Despite the fact that Rosie had died that day and Duckers was gearing up to go to a funeral tomorrow, they drove the rest of the way home in good spirits.