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RAINBOW ROWWELL

CARRY ON

A NOVEL

CARRY ON

THE RISE AND FALL
OF SIMON SNOW

RAINBOW ROWELL



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*For Laddie and Rosey—
May you fight your own battles
and forge your own wings*



BOOK ONE

1

SIMON

I walk to the bus station by myself.

There's always a fuss over my paperwork when I leave. All summer long, we're not even allowed to walk to Tesco's without a chaperone and permission from the Queen—then, in the autumn, I just sign myself out of the children's home and go.

"He goes to a *special* school," one of the office ladies explains to the other when I leave. They're sitting in a Plexiglas box, and I slide my papers back to her through a slot in the wall. "It's a school for dire offenders," she whispers.

The other woman doesn't even look up.

It's like this every September, even though I'm never in the same care home twice.

The Mage fetched me for school himself the first time, when I was 11. But the next year, he told me I could make it to Watford on my own. "*You've slain a dragon, Simon. Surely you can manage a long walk and a few buses.*"

I hadn't meant to slay that dragon. It wouldn't have hurt me, I don't think. (I still dream about it sometimes. The way the fire consumed it from the inside out, like a cigarette burn eating a piece of paper.)

I get to the bus station, then eat a mint Aero while I wait for my first bus. There's another bus after that. Then a train.

Once I'm settled on the train, I try to sleep with my bag in my lap and my feet propped up on the seat across from me—but a man a few rows back won't stop watching me. I feel his eyes crawling up my neck.

Could just be a pervert. Or police.

Or it could be a bonety hunter who knows about one of the prices on my head.... ("It's *bounty* hunter," I said to Penelope the first time we fought one. "No—*bonety* hunter," she replied. "Short for 'bone-teeth'; that's what they get to keep if they catch you.")

I change carriages and don't bother trying to sleep again. The closer I get to Watford, the more restless I feel. Every year, I think about jumping from the train and spelling myself the rest of the way to school, even if it puts me in a coma.

I could cast a **Hurry up** on the train, but that's a chancy spell at the best of times, and my first few spells of the school year are always especially dicey. I'm supposed to practise during the summer—small, predictable spells when no one's looking. Like turning on night-lights. Or changing apples to oranges.

"Spell your buttons and laces closed," Miss Possibelf suggested. "That sort of thing."

"I only ever wear one button," I told her, then blushed when she looked down at my jeans.

"Then use your magic for household chores," she said. "Wash the dishes. Polish the silver."

I didn't bother telling Miss Possibelf that my summer meals are served on disposable plates and that I eat with plastic cutlery (forks and spoons, never knives).

I also didn't bother to practise my magic this summer.

It's boring. And pointless. And it's not like it *helps*. Practising doesn't make me a better magician; it just sets me off....

Nobody knows why my magic is the way it is. Why it goes off like a bomb instead of flowing through me like a fucking stream or however it works for everybody else.

"I don't know," Penelope said when I asked her how magic feels for her. "I suppose it feels like a well inside me. So deep that I can't see or even imagine

the bottom. But instead of sending down buckets, I just think about drawing it up. And then it's there for me—as much as I need, as long as I stay focused.”

Penelope always stays focused. Plus, she's powerful.

Agatha isn't. Not as, anyway. And Agatha doesn't like to talk about her magic.

But once, at Christmas, I kept Agatha up until she was tired and stupid, and she told me that casting a spell felt like flexing a muscle and keeping it flexed. “Like *croisé devant*,” she said. “You know?”

I shook my head.

She was lying on a wolfskin rug in front of the fire, all curled up like a pretty kitten. “It's ballet,” she said. “It's like I just hold position as long as I can.”

Baz told me that for him, it's like lighting a match. Or pulling a trigger.

He hadn't meant to tell me that. It was when we were fighting the chimera in the woods during our fifth year. It had us cornered, and Baz wasn't powerful enough to fight it alone. (The *Mage* isn't powerful enough to fight a chimera alone.)

“Do it, Snow!” Baz shouted at me. “Do it. Fucking unleash. Now.”

“I can't,” I tried to tell him. “It doesn't work like that.”

“It bloody well does.”

“I can't just turn it on,” I said.

“*Try*.”

“I *can't*, damn it.” I was waving my sword around—I was pretty good with a sword already at 15—but the chimera wasn't corporeal. (Which is my rough luck, pretty much always. As soon as you start carrying a sword, all your enemies turn out mist and gossamer.)

“Close your eyes and light a match,” Baz told me. We were both trying to hide behind a rock. Baz was casting spells one after another; he was practically singing them.

“What?”

“That's what my mother used to say,” he said. “Light a match inside your heart, then blow on the tinder.”

It's always fire with Baz. I can't believe he hasn't incinerated me yet. Or burned me at the stake.

He used to like to threaten me with a Viking's funeral, back when we were third years. "Do you know what that is, Snow? A flaming pyre, set adrift on the sea. We could do yours in Blackpool, so all your chavvy Normal friends can come."

"Sod off," I'd say, and try to ignore him.

I've never even had any Normal friends, chavvy or otherwise.

Everyone in the Normal world steers clear of me if they can. Penelope says they sense my power and instinctively shy away. Like dogs who won't make eye contact with their masters. (Not that I'm anyone's master—that's not what I mean.)

Anyway, it works the opposite with magicians. They love the smell of magic; I have to try hard to make them hate me.

Unless they're Baz. He's immune. Maybe he's built up a tolerance to my magic, having shared a room with me every term for seven years.

That night that we were fighting the chimera, Baz kept yelling at me until I went off.

We both woke up a few hours later in a blackened pit. The boulder we'd been hiding behind was dust, and the chimera was vapour. Or maybe it was just gone.

Baz was sure I'd singed off his eyebrows, but he looked fine to me—not a hair out of place.

Typical.

2

SIMON

I don't let myself think about Watford over the summers.

After my first year there, when I was 11—I spent the whole summer thinking about it. Thinking about everyone I'd met at school—Penelope, Agatha, the Mage. About the towers and the grounds. The teas. The puddings. The *magic*. The fact that *I* was magic.

I made myself sick thinking about the Watford School of Magicks—daydreaming about it—until it started to feel like nothing more than a daydream. Just another fantasy to make the time pass.

Like when I used to dream about becoming a footballer someday—or that my parents, my real parents, were going to come back for me....

My dad would be a footballer. And my mum would be some posh model type. And they'd explain how they'd had to give me up because they were too young for a baby, and because his career was on the line. "*But we always missed you, Simon,*" they'd say. "*We've been looking for you.*" And then they'd take me away to live in their mansion.

Footballer mansion ... Magickal boarding school ...

They both seem like crap in the light of day. (Especially when you wake up in a room with seven other discards.)

That first summer, I'd beaten the memory of Watford to a bloody pulp by the time my bus fare and papers showed up in the autumn, along with a note from the Mage himself....

Real. It was all real.

So, the *next* summer, after my second year at Watford, I didn't let myself think about magic at all. For months. I just shut myself off from it. I didn't miss it, I didn't wish for it.

I decided to let the World of Mages come back to me like a big surprise present come September, if it was going to. (And it *did* come back. It always has, so far.)

The Mage used to say that maybe someday he'd let me spend summers at Watford—or maybe even spend them with him, wherever he goes all summer.

But then he decided I was better off spending part of every year with the Normals. To stay close to the language and to keep my wits about me: "*Let hardship sharpen your blade, Simon.*"

I thought he meant my actual blade, the Sword of Mages. Eventually I figured out that he meant me.

I'm the blade. The Mage's sword. And I'm not sure if these summers in children's homes make me any sharper.... But they do make me hungrier. They make me crave Watford like, I don't know, like life itself.

Baz and his side—all the old, rich families—they don't believe that anyone can understand magic the way that they do. They think they're the only ones who can be trusted with it.

But no one *loves* magic like I do.

None of the other magicians—none of my classmates, none of their parents—know what it's like to live without magic.

Only I know.

And I'll do anything to make sure it's always here for me to come home to.

* * *

I *try* not to think about Watford when I'm away—but it was almost impossible this summer.

After everything that happened last year, I couldn't believe the Mage would even pay attention to something like the end of term. Who interrupts a war to send the kids home for summer holidays?

Besides, I'm *not* a kid anymore. Legally, I could have left care at 16. I could've got my own flat somewhere. Maybe in London. (I could afford it. I have an entire bag of leprechaun's gold—a big, duffel-sized bag, and it only disappears if you try to give it to other magicians.)

But the Mage sent me off to a new children's home, just like he always does. Still moving me around like a pea under shells after all these years. Like I'd be safe there. Like the Humdrum couldn't just summon me, or whatever it was he did to me and Penelope at the end of last term.

"He can *summon* you?" Penny demanded as soon as we got away from him. "Across a body of water? That isn't possible, Simon. There's no precedent for that."

"Next time he summons me like a half-arsed squirrel demon," I said, "I'll tell him so!"

Penelope had been unlucky enough to be holding my arm when I was snatched, so she'd been snatched right along with me. Her quick thinking is the only reason either of us escaped.

"Simon," she said that day, when we were finally on a train back to Watford. "This is serious."

"Siegfried and fucking Roy, Penny, I know that it's serious. He's got my number. *I* don't even have my number, but the Humdrum's got it down."

"How can we still know so little about him," she fumed. "He's so..."

"Insidious," I said. "The Insidious Humdrum' and all that."

"Stop teasing, Simon. This is *serious*."

"I know, Penny."

When we got back to Watford, the Mage heard us out and made sure we weren't hurt, but then he sent us on our way. Just ... sent us home.

It didn't make any sense.

So, *of course*, I spent this whole summer thinking about Watford. About everything that happened and everything that *could* happen and everything that's at stake ... I stewed on it.

But I still didn't let myself dwell on any of the *good* things, you know? It's the good things that'll drive you mad with missing them.

I keep a list—of all the things I miss most—and I'm not allowed to touch it in my head until I'm about an hour from Watford. Then I run through the list one by one. It's sort of like easing yourself into cold water. But the opposite of that, I suppose—easing yourself into something really good, so the shock of it doesn't overwhelm you.

I started making my list, my good things list, when I was 11, and I should probably cross a few things off, but that's harder than you'd think.

Anyway, I'm about an hour from school now, so I mentally take out my list and press my forehead against the train window.

Things I miss most about Watford:

No. 1—Sour cherry scones

I'd never had cherry scones before Watford. Just raisin ones—and more often plain, and always something that came from the shop, then got left in an oven too long.

At Watford, there are fresh-baked cherry scones for breakfast every day if you want them. And again in the afternoon with tea. We have tea in the dining hall after our lessons, before clubs and football and homework.

I always have tea with Penelope and Agatha, and I'm the only one of us who ever eats the scones. "Dinner is in two hours, Simon," Agatha will tsk at me, even after all these years. Once Penelope tried to calculate how many scones I've eaten since we started at Watford, but she got bored before she got to the answer.

I just can't pass the scones up if they're there. They're soft and light and a little bit salty. Sometimes I dream about them.

No. 2—Penelope

This spot on the list used to belong to "roast beef." But a few years back, I decided to limit myself to one food item. Otherwise the list turns into the food song from *Oliver!*, and I get so hungry, my stomach cramps.

I should maybe rank Agatha higher than Penelope; Agatha *is* my girlfriend. But Penelope made the list first. She befriended me in my first

week at school, during our Magic Words lesson.

I didn't know what to make of her when we met—a chubby little girl with light brown skin and bright red hair. She was wearing pointy spectacles, the kind you'd wear if you were going as a witch to a fancy dress party, and there was a giant purple ring weighing down her right hand. She was trying to help me with an assignment, and I think I was just staring at her.

"I know you're Simon Snow," she said. "My mum told me you'd be here. She says you're really powerful, probably more powerful than me. I'm Penelope Bunce."

"I didn't know someone like you could be named Penelope," I said. Stupidly. (Everything I said that year was stupid.)

She wrinkled her nose. "What should 'someone like me' be named?"

"I don't know." I *didn't* know. Other girls I'd met who looked like her were named Saanvi or Aditi—and they definitely weren't ginger. "Saanvi?"

"Someone like me can be named anything," Penelope said.

"Oh," I said. "Right, sorry."

"And we can do whatever we want with our hair." She turned back to the assignment, flipping her red ponytail. "It's impolite to stare, you know, even at your friends."

"Are we friends?" I asked her. More surprised than anything else.

"I'm helping you with your lesson, aren't I?"

She was. She'd just helped me shrink a football to the size of a marble.

"I thought you were helping me because I'm thick," I said.

"Everyone's thick," she replied. "I'm helping you because I like you."

It turned out she'd accidentally turned her hair that colour, trying out a new spell—but she wore it red all of first year. The next year, she tried blue.

Penelope's mum is Indian, and her dad is English—actually, they're both English; the Indian side of her family has been in London for ages. She told me later that her parents had told her to steer clear of me at school. "My mum said that nobody really knew where you came from. And that you might be dangerous."

"Why didn't you listen to her?" I asked.

"Because nobody knew where you came from, Simon! And you might be dangerous!"

“You have the *worst* survival instincts.”

“Also, I felt sorry for you,” she said. “You were holding your wand backwards.”

I miss Penny every summer, even when I tell myself not to. The Mage says no one can write to me or call me over the holidays, but Penny still finds ways to send messages: Once she possessed the old man down at the shop, the one who forgets to put in his teeth—she talked right through him. It was nice to hear from her and everything, but it was so disturbing that I asked her not to do it again, unless there was an emergency.

No. 3—The football pitch

I don’t get to play football as much as I used to. I’m not good enough to play on the school team, plus I’m always caught up in some scheme or drama, or out on a mission for the Mage. (You can’t reliably tend a goal when the bloody Humdrum could summon you anytime it strikes his fancy.)

But I do get to play. And it’s a perfect pitch: Lovely grass. The only flat part of the grounds. Nice, shady trees nearby that you can sit under and watch the matches ...

Baz plays for our school. Of course. The tosser.

He’s the same on the field as he is everywhere else. Strong. Graceful. Fucking ruthless.

No. 4—My school uniform

I put this on the list when I was 11. You have to understand, when I got my first uniform, it was the first time I’d ever had clothes that fit me properly, the first time I’d ever worn a blazer and tie. I felt tall all of a sudden, and posh. Until Baz walked into our room, much taller than me—and posher than everyone.

There are eight years at Watford. First and second years wear striped blazers—two shades of purple and two shades of green—with dark grey trousers, green jumpers, and red ties.

You have to wear a boater on the grounds up until your sixth year—which is really just a test to see if your **Stay put** is strong enough to keep a hat on.

(Penny always spelled mine on for me. If I did it myself, I'd end up sleeping in the damn thing.)

There's a brand-new uniform waiting for me every autumn when I get to our room. It'll be laid out on my bed, clean and pressed and perfectly fitted, no matter how I've changed or grown.

The upper years—that's me now—wear green blazers with white piping. Plus red jumpers if we want them. Capes are optional, too; I've never worn one, they make me feel like a tit, but Penny likes them. Says she feels like Stevie Nicks.

I like the uniform. I like knowing what I'm going to wear every day. I don't know what I'll wear next year, when I'm done with Watford....

I thought I might join the Mage's Men. They've got their own uniforms—sort of Robin Hood meets MI6. But the Mage says that's not my path.

That's how he talks to me. *"It's not your path, Simon. Your destiny lies elsewhere."*

He wants me to stand apart from everyone else. Separate training. Special lessons. I don't think he'd even let me go to school at Watford if he weren't the headmaster there—and if he didn't think it was the safest place for me.

If I asked the Mage what I should wear after Watford, he'd probably kit me out like a superhero....

I'm not asking anybody what I should wear when I leave. I'm 18. I'll dress myself.

Or Penny will help.

No. 5—My room

I should say "our room," but I don't miss the sharing-with-Baz part of it.

You get your room and your roommate assignment at Watford as a first year, and then you never move. You never have to pack up your things or take down your posters.

Sharing a room with someone who wants to kill me, who's wanted to kill me since we were 11, has been ... Well, it's been rubbish, hasn't it?

But maybe the Crucible felt bad about casting Baz and me together (not literally; I don't *think* the Crucible's sentient) because we've got the best room at Watford.

We live in Mummers House, on the edge of school grounds. It's a four-and-a-half-storey building, stone, and our room is at the very top, in a sort of turret that looks out over the moat. The turret's too small for more than one room, but it's bigger than the other student rooms. And it used to be staff accommodation, so we have our own en suite.

Baz is actually a fairly decent person to share a bathroom with. He's in there all morning, but he's clean; and he doesn't like me to touch his stuff, so he keeps it all out of the way. Penelope says our bathroom smells like cedar and bergamot, and that's got to be Baz because it definitely isn't me.

I'd tell you how Penny manages to get into our room—girls are banned from the boys' houses and vice versa—but I still don't know. I think it might be her ring. I saw her use it once to unseal a cave, so anything's possible.

No. 6—The Mage

I put the Mage on this list when I was 11, too. And there've been plenty of times when I thought I should take him off.

Like in our sixth year, when he practically ignored me. Every time I tried to talk to him, he told me he was in the middle of something important.

He still tells me that sometimes. I get it. He's the headmaster. And he's more than that—he's the head of the Coven, so technically, he's in charge of the whole World of Mages. And it's not like he's my dad. He's not my anything....

But he's the closest thing I've got to anything.

The Mage is the one who first came to me in the Normal world and explained to me (or tried to explain to me) who I am. He still looks out for me, sometimes when I don't even realize it. And when he does have time for me, to really talk to me, that's when I feel the most grounded. I fight better when he's around. I think better. It's like, when he's there, I almost buy into what he's always told me—that I'm the most powerful magician the World of Mages has ever known.

And that all that power is a *good* thing, or at least that it will be someday. That I'll get my shit together eventually and solve more problems than I cause.

The Mage is also the only one who's allowed to contact me over the summer.

And he always remembers my birthday in June.

No. 7—Magic

Not *my* magic, necessarily. That's always with me and, honestly, not something I can take much comfort in.

What I miss, when I'm away from Watford, is just *being* around magic. Casual, ambient magic. People casting spells in the hallway and during lessons. Somebody sending a plate of sausages down the dinner table like it's bouncing on wires.

The World of Mages isn't actually a world. We don't have cities. Or even neighbourhoods. Magicians have always lived among mundanity. It's safer that way, according to Penelope's mum; it keeps us from drifting too far from the rest of the world.

The fairies did that, she says. Got tired of dealing with everybody else, wandered into the woods for a few centuries, then couldn't find their way back.

The only place magicians live together, unless they're related, is at Watford. There are a few magickal social clubs and parties, annual gatherings—that sort of thing. But Watford is the only place where we're together all the time. Which is why everyone's been pairing off like crazy in the last couple years. If you don't meet your spouse at Watford, Penny says, you could end up alone—or going on singles tours of Magickal Britain when you're 32.

I don't know what Penny's even worried about; she's had a boyfriend in America since our fourth year. (He was an exchange student at Watford.) Micah plays baseball, and he has a face so symmetrical, you could summon a demon on it. They video-chat when she's home, and when she's at school, he writes to her almost every day.

"Yes," she tells me, "but he's *American*. They don't think about marriage the way we do. He might dump me for some pretty Normal he meets at Yale. Mum says that's where our magic is going—bleeding out through ill-considered American marriages."

Penny quotes her mum as much as I quote Penny.

They're both being paranoid. Micah's a solid bloke. He'll marry Penelope—and then he'll want to take her home with him. *That's* what we should all be worried about.

Anyway ...

Magic. I miss magic when I'm away.

When I'm by myself, magic is something personal. My burden, my secret.

But at Watford, magic is just the air that we breathe. It's what makes me a part of something bigger, not the thing that sets me apart.

No. 8—Ebb and the goats

I started helping out Ebb the goatherd during my second year at Watford. And for a while, hanging out with the goats was pretty much my favourite thing. (Which Baz had a field day with.) Ebb's the nicest person at Watford. Younger than the teachers. And surprisingly powerful for somebody who decided to spend her life taking care of goats.

"What does being powerful have to do with anything?" Ebb'll say. "People who're tall aren't forced to pay thrashcanball."

"You mean basketball?" (Living at Watford means Ebb's a bit out of touch.)

"Same difference. I'm no soldier. Don't see why I should have to fight for a living just because I can throw a punch."

The Mage says we're all soldiers, every one of us with an ounce of magic. That's what's dangerous about the old ways, he says—magicians just went about their merry way, doing whatever they felt like doing, treating magic like a toy or an entitlement, not something they had to protect.

Ebb doesn't use a dog with the goats. Just her staff. I've seen her turn the whole herd with a wave of her hand. She'd started teaching me—how to pull the goats back one by one; how to make them all feel at once like they'd gone too far. She even let me help with the birthing one spring....

I don't have much time to spend with Ebb anymore.

But I leave her and the goats on my list of things to miss. Just so that I can stop for a minute to think about them.