A Royalist Rogue

A novel by A J Haggett

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Numerous reference books have aided me in assembling this tale, notably a booklet entitled ‘the Adventures of Captain James Hind’ by O.M.Meades.

Other sources were:

‘English Costume of the Seventeenth Century’ by Iris Brooke

‘Religion and the decline of Magic’ by Keith Thomas

‘Liberty against the Law’ by Christopher Hill

‘Change and Continuity in Seventeenth Century England’ by Christopher Hill

‘A Book of Highwaymen’ by Rex Dixon

“Highwaymen of England” by Charles G Harper

“Oliver Cromwell” By Martyn Bennett

“Cavaliers and Roundheads” by Christopher Hibbert

“Highwaymen” by Christopher Hibbert

“Knights of the High Toby” by John Barrows

“Reprobates” by John Stubbs

“Cromwell” by John Reilly

“Discovering Highwaymen” by Russell Ash

“The English Highwayman” by Peter Haining

“Stand and Deliver” by Patrick Pringle

“Gentlemen Rogues & Wicked Ladies” by Fiona McDonald

“Stand and Deliver” by David Brandon (An especially masterful and valuable book)

“Outlaws & Highwaymen” by Gillian Spraggs

“A King Condemned” by C.V.Westwood

“Highwaymen & Outlaws” by Michael Billett

Plus numerous websites, notably

http://www.british-civil-wars.co.uk/index.htm

http://www.wikipedia.org was used to provide leads

“The Newgate Calendar” at http://www.exclassics.com

Preface

The modern image of a highwayman is of a benevolent masked rogue in a tricorn hat, stopping a coach with two pistols and the call to ‘Stand and Deliver’. Hollywood and literature has remodelled Dick Turpin into this role, yet in reality, Turpin himself was nothing more than a brutal, sadistic thug.

The original role model for this gallant image was Captain James Hind, one hundred years before Turpin in the period between 1633 and 1653. Indeed, so lionised was he during his lifetime that numerous pamphlets and poems appeared, and after he was arrested a play entitled ‘The Prince of Prigs’, was written based upon his exploits, probably by noted playwright James Shirley.

Hind was very generous to the poor; especially those who affected to support the Royalist Cause. He never hurt anyone during a robbery and always displayed a great deal of wit, charm and humour. During the Civil War, he fought bravely for his King, and following defeat, he focussed his attacks almost exclusively upon the leaders and representatives of the Parliamentarians.

This, then, is the man around whom this tale is written. However, his exploits were inevitably affected by the major events surrounding him, namely the English Civil War and the Regicide of King Charles I.

I have written this book within the framework of the true history and events of the time, to the extent that I can actually say that much f it is true. But I shall wait until you’ve finished it before revealing which parts are fiction!

**Chapter 1**

“Oh, for God’s sake, not again!”

The wagon lurched as the horses strained to pull it from the mud but sank back almost to the axles as they relaxed. The rain had increased to a torrent, blowing in waves from the northwest, and the fields on either side were barely visible. Ahead, a stand of trees adorned the brow of the hill promising shelter, but first they must release the wagon from the mud. The soldiers put their weapons down and straggled forwards, muttering amongst themselves. Retrieving the planks from the cart, they heaved to push them under the wheels.

Fifty yards away at the edge of the trees, a man watched from the undergrowth. His long, graceful moustache drooped in the rain and his hair was caught up in the brambles above him. He wriggled back through the bushes before scrambling to his feet and retrieving his bedraggled hat from a nearby branch. He looked up at his companion who stood some twelve inches taller with a thick, bushy beard.

“Thomas, we’ll never have a better chance!”

“That captain worries me; he’s still on his horse and armed,” growled Thomas.

A tall, elderly woman with striking blue eyes and straw-coloured hair appeared from the wood. Clad in men’s breeches and a hooded cloak, she strode across towards the two men. “Is something wrong?”

The short man twirled his moustache, and then nodded in the direction of the wagon. “They’re stuck again. All the weapons save the captain’s are in the mud, five yards behind the wagon.”

“Then let us take advantage! Be ready to move,” announced the woman before turning on her heel and disappearing back into the undergrowth.

The man shrugged, took his horse’s reins from his taller companion and leaped aboard. Thomas waved towards a group of men huddled under an ancient spreading oak tree in the middle of the copse and followed suit. The men all moved their mounts out from the shelter to stand beside Thomas, who had moved closer to the road.

They waited.

After two minutes, the woman emerged onto the road from the trees further up, seated on her horse stark naked save for her cloak and gun.

“Dear God Almighty, what is the woman doing!” grunted Thomas. Ahead, the soldiers saw her and stopped their work. Two men ran to scramble through the hedge whilst three more ran back to their guns.

“You men! Get back to work!” directed the officer, still blissfully unaware of the woman on the hill above him. Water dribbled down the side of his face from his hat, which by now was completely soaked through.

The naked woman calmly directed her horse into the centre of the road and forwards until she was directly behind the mounted captain. “If you don’t mind, gentlemen, I’d like to relieve you of some of your burden.”

The captain whipped around in his saddle, and then was almost unhorsed as he took in the elderly naked woman pointing a pistol at his chest from a range of six feet. Most of his remaining men were grinning, but the three who had reached their guns had brought them to shoulder and were aiming at the intruder.

“I think not, madam, you have but one shot and there are seventeen of us.” Slowly, he began to remove his own pistol.

“This is indeed the case, sir. Indeed, three of your men have their muskets pointing vaguely in the right direction. But my friends have more shots, and our guns have not been lying in the mud!”

The branches rustled with hidden movement. The officer’s smile first twitched and then vanished. He lowered his pistol as the diminutive highwayman, then Thomas and the rest of the gang moved their horses forward from behind the trees, guns pointed at the soldiers.

“In the interests of your personal survival, may I suggest, sir that you throw your pistol onto the road and dismount at this point?” instructed the highwayman.

The officer looked from the highwayman to the naked woman, and then carefully climbed down from his horse, keeping his hands in clear sight.

“And the pistol?”

The officer looked around before carefully tossing the pistol onto the grass beside the road.

“Excellent. Oh, you might point out to your men that wet and muddy matchlocks rarely if ever work, but just in case of an accident, and in the interests of their own well-being, they should put their weapons back into the mud.”

The captain glanced back at the three men and nodded. One by one, they dropped their muskets and raised their hands in surrender.

“Now, if you and your men would care to line up alongside the hedge, it will enable us to conclude our day’s business and be on our way.”

The soldiers slid down into the muddy ditch. One man tripped over and landed headlong in the water, another slipped near the top and tumbled onto his comrades, almost knocking them over. The officer stood his ground until the highwayman waved his gun, and then he too scrambled down into the ditch.

“We’re doing very well, but perhaps if you sir,“ he indicated the officer, “would remove your sword belt very slowly and carefully, we could all relax a little more.”

The officer undid his belt, grasped the scabbard, and tossed it up the bank. The highwayman turned to instruct the remainder of his gang.

“Moll, please put your clothes back on. You’re supposed to distract the soldiers, not us!”

A wave of laughter erupted from both sides, and Moll, still grinning, started to dress. The highwayman turned back to face the soldiers in the ditch while Thomas collected the bags from the robbers’ horses. Rapidly, the men set to work filling them with coins from the pay wagon.

“Done. What do you want to do with these wretches?” asked Moll, who had donned a long dress, incongruously ornamented with a weapons belt.

“Oh, we won’t harm them, unless they force us to. But we do need to delay them a little.” He pondered a moment and then turned to address the prisoners. “Take off all of your clothes.”

“I shall do no such thing, sir! This goes beyond the bounds of proper warfare!” responded the captain.

“This is not warfare, captain, this is highway robbery. Take off your clothes unless you have a desire to be the sole fatality of this little exercise.”

Grumbling, the captain doffed his coat before removing his shirt. Shivering, he glanced back at the highwayman who negligently waved his gun. Grudgingly, he removed his boots and hose, then his breeches and stood glaring defiantly at the highwayman.

“See? Did that hurt? Now, John, take all their clothes and carry them half a mile up the road. Drop them in the hedge and return.”

By the time John returned, the bags were slung over the horse’s rumps. The small man leaped back into his saddle, followed by the remainder of the robbers. He wheeled his horse around to address the young officer shivering naked in the ditch.

“Farewell, sir. You should feel grateful that it is today we stopped you, for today we are naught but civilians plying our trade. Tomorrow, I ride to join my Regiment in the Kings Army, and had I been in uniform, your fates would have been somewhat different, as would the fate of your cargo.”

“Do you at least have the courtesy, sir, to tell us by whom we have been robbed?”

The highwayman paused, then resumed.

“We will tether your horse to a tree down yonder. You will notice that we did not take all the money, nor did we rob you personally. So, you can retrieve your clothes, and then take your wagon back to town, where I am sure you will find a suitable inn!

“As for our identity, it is not my place to identify my colleagues. But I, sir, am Captain James Hind.”

**Colchester**

**26th August 1648**

General Fairfax rubbed his hand down his face. His complexion was dark with a thin moustache and the grey in his flowing mane of hair belied his thirty-six years. He turned to face the Earl of Norwich seated before him.

“No. You have my terms, and they are not negotiable. Fourteen thousand pounds is minor in comparison with the cost if I allow my troops to enter the town unfettered. Soldiers have looted conquered towns since time immemorial. My men have been sleeping in tents whilst holding this siege for eleven weeks now. If I am to restrain my men from looting, I must offer something in return; else, I shall be facing a revolt.”

“But Sir...”

“You have my answer. Now, do you accept the terms?”

Norwich stared at Fairfax and then sighed. “It seems I have no option. Very well, Peers will be subject to the whim of your Parliamentary leaders, officers of the rank of captain and above will be subject to your decision as to their fate, lower ranks will be released unharmed, and the town will pay fourteen thousand pounds for distribution to your men.

“I believe you to be a man of honour, and therefore I trust you personally to ensure that the terms are honoured. May I suggest that we allow the citizens of the town a single day to flee, and that you enter the city on the following day?”

Fairfax smiled. “Of course. On your personal undertaking that your troops will fire no ordinance, it seems only sensible. Do I have such an undertaking?”

“You do, sir.”

“Then we have an accord.” He turned to address the junior officer standing to attention by the entrance. “Captain! Escort these gentlemen back to the gates of the city and ensure that they enter without hindrance.”

“Yes sir!” the officer saluted, and then waved the delegation out of the tent flap.

Once they had left, Lord Fairfax stood, stretched, and then walked to the flap.

“I am going to take some rest. Let none disturb me save for urgent matters,” he instructed the sentries, both of whom saluted, stood to attention and chanted in unison, “Yes Sir!”

**27th August 1648**

Captain James Hind backed into the shadow of the doorway and watched as the whores stepped out of the brothel and made their way along the rutted roadway. All was silent save for the distant murmur of the starving citizens shuffling towards the gate. Occasionally, there came a cry, perhaps as a loaf or a piece of jerky fell from a basket or pocket, perhaps as they were pushed aside by another desperate soul, but otherwise the town sounded sombre and subdued.

He waited until they turned the corner and then checked to make sure that the street was deserted before rushing into the brothel, closing the door behind him. He made his way through the anteroom and into the first bedroom. A rumpled, grubby bed dominated the room, but beside it, he saw a small cupboard with a water jug on top. He moved across the room, stepping carefully over the discarded women’s clothing and opened the ill-fitting cupboard door.

A basket lay within, containing a small hand-mirror and some powder. Pulling a razor from his pocket, he reached for the mirror and then paused. He took a deep breath to still his shaking hand. Gently, he shaved off his elegant moustache. He checked his reflection in the mirror and frowned. A long, aquiline nose swept down to delicately pursed lips. Below that, his chin swept back, giving him a rounded, slightly effeminate-looking face with sharply arched eyebrows and large eyes. Sweat beaded his brow. He ran his hand over his face, shaved a couple of areas of roughness, and then rinsed his face in cold water from the jug.

He extracted the soft cloth within the pot and dabbed the powder on his face until all traces of his beard were invisible. Stripping off his shirt and doublet, he turned his attention to the discarded clothing. He wandered into the next room. Some scarves draped over the back of a chair seemed suitable. He moved back into the first bedroom and pulled several dresses from the wardrobe, dropping all but one onto the bed.

Pulling the remaining dress over his head, he moved into the corridor to the cracked mirror fixed beside the door, smoothing the dress as he walked. He glanced in the mirror, then a second time. His nipples peered at him from above the neckline, which curved seductively around his male breasts.

“Ah,” he muttered, “I thought it was too easy.”

Dragging the dress over his head, he took the time to examine the chest area before pulling the next dress on. This too was a little too revealing but the third dress sported a higher neckline, although he found the style distinctly disinteresting. Pouting playfully at himself in the mirror, he wandered back into the bedroom.

The breast area hung empty and low, so he screwed up the two thickest scarves and stuffed them into the dress. The dress now hung properly. In the back of the cupboard, he noticed two small pots, which he pulled out. The contents of both were red, and he realised that his disguise was far from complete.

Picking up the mirror, he dabbed a little of the red powder onto each cheek. Gently, he rubbed them until they blended into the white powder. The last pot had a small brush inside. He hesitated briefly, then carefully painted his lips, rolling them together to even the paint. Now he really did look like a whore!

He tried walking out into the corridor and back. His usual gait was far too manly, so he tried it again, this time taking shorter steps. Better. As he was only five feet three inches tall, his feet did not appear beneath the skirt, and he realised with pleasure that as long as he exercised caution, he could keep his beautiful leather riding boots and fine breeches. He paused for a moment.

He felt his backside No problem there. His breasts. With a dress this thick, he was fine. He brushed his hands over his groin and grinned. He looked around. Several scarves still sat on the bed. He selected two, one long enough to pass around his waist and another thinner one. He tied the end of one to the middle of the other, and then, reaching under his dress he tied the one around his waist before pulling the other between his legs. Grimacing, he tucked his pillicock down between his thighs, and then pulled the second scarf tight before tying it to the front of the other. He tried walking, and found long steps were uncomfortable. Shorter was much less unpleasant.

Taking a grubby shawl from the floor, he carefully positioned it over his head and placed the ends dangling over his upholstered breasts. He lacked the elegant curls of most of the women he knew, but then, so did most of the poor. At least his hair was sufficiently long. He stiffened at the sound of the street door opening.

“Anyone here?” came a slightly intoxicated voice from the entrance.

James cleared his throat and spoke in a high-pitched voice. “We’re closed, dearie.”

“Aww… Not even a quickie? The Roundheads will be here tomorrow, and I’ll be a prisoner!”

Standing and allowing the dress to return to its usual position, James tried to grope himself, and met nothing. Grimacing, he stood and used the small hand mirror to examine himself carefully. He forced himself to smile and stepped out into the anteroom. Lit only by the light streaming through the open door, couches and small tables huddled in the shadows on every side. The Madam’s desk stood guard beside the curtained doorway in which James was standing. The trooper was holding the doorframe, weaving slightly as he took in James from head to foot. His uniform was stained with sweat and beer stains, and he was missing his helmet.

“Hey, you’re new! You sure you don’t want to earn a few coins?” He took an unsteady step into the anteroom, weaving a little as he released the doorframe.

“No, dear, we’re all heading out of town for a few days. The others have already left, but I forgot my scarf. I’m new here; a girl has to eat, same as you. I’ll be back in a couple of days, though.”

The man frowned, and then lurched towards a seat beside the madam’s desk. Sitting down, he reached over and on the third attempt he placed his tankard with excessive care on the edge of the desk. Slowly it toppled off the desk, bouncing on the floor and spreading the contents widely.

“Ohhh!” exclaimed the trooper.

James took a deep breath, and then flounced across to the desk, retrieving the bottle of mead he had noticed earlier. Handing it to the man, he jumped in alarm as the man grabbed his arm and pulled him towards himself, only releasing his grip when James was seated on his lap.

“That’s better,” slurred the trooper before pausing to take a swig of the mead. “Whew,” he exclaimed after a moment, “That’s strong stuff!”

Sweating slightly, James gently stroked the man’s hair from his face, and then recoiled as he caught a whiff of his breath.

“We’ve been drinking for quite a while, dearie, haven’t we?”

“Wouldn’t you? Tomorrow, I’ll be a prison...pris...prisoner.”

“But I thought troopers were going to be released?”

“Hah! That’s what they say now, but once they’re in here,” he waved his arm in an arc, “they can do what they want!”

James suppressed a nervous desire to laugh. “Why would a general be interested in you?”

“Cos I, I,” he reached up to stroke James’s face, “I’m a...hey! You’re not a woman!”

James pulled himself from the man’s grasp and stood up.

“Correct.”

The trooper struggled to lift himself from the chair, spilling mead as he floundered. Erect, he stared down at James.

“I should report you to my captain!”

“You should, trooper, but you won’t.”

James drove a fist hard into the man’s chin as he spoke, then stepped back as he crumpled to the floor. Taking a moment to recover himself, he mopped the sweat from his brow. Feeling the side of his face, he found the spot of roughness and pausing only to close the door, he rushed through to the back room to shave it smooth.

His Adam’s apple bobbled as he stared at himself in the hand mirror, so he took another scarf and wrapped it around his neck. A few chest hairs peeked out of the top of the dress, so he removed the shawl from his head and wrapped it around his shoulders. Finally satisfied, he retrieved his belt and tied it around his hips under the dress. Carefully checking his discarded clothing, he tied his purse onto the belt, gave a sad glance at his precious sword and pistols, and then moved back into the anteroom.

He could not resist checking the madam’s desk, but unsurprisingly it was empty. Reaching the door, he stopped, closed his eyes, and took a deep breath.

“From here on, I am a woman,” he told himself in a whisper, touched his hair and then reached for the door. The sight of his calloused right hand and the hair on his wrists stopped him, but he remembered some gloves behind the madam’s desk, which he retrieved and pulled on. The trooper remained unconscious beside the chair, and he stepped on his outstretched hand. The trooper muttered and turned but did not awaken.

Returning to the door, he opened it a crack and checked that the street was empty before beginning to pick his way carefully through the mud and excrement towards the Main Gate, cursing under his breath at the need to hold his skirts high.

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The crowds grew as the roadways converged. The narrow avenues had never been designed for crowds such as this, and James was being jostled as he trudged south towards the town gate. Normally, a pedestrian would dodge the excrement, but there was not enough room for dodging. So many feet trudging through the turds were raising a miasma of choking proportions.

As he drew closer and side streets emptied into the main street, random hands started to check out different parts of his body. He edged over towards the side against the rickety buildings lining the city walls. A window above him opened, and a bucket of excrement was tossed into the street, to the disgust of those beneath. Pausing to brush foul-smelling deposits from his arm, he felt a push from behind. He stepped forwards but slipped, landing on his backside, and causing his skirts to ride up, revealing his boots. Anxiously, he awaited the cry, but none came. No one cared.

Pressing against the wall, he got to his feet and continued on his way. He kept his position by the wall, putting his gloved hand close to his genitals ready to defend against any over inquisitive investigations. Gradually, he drew closer to the town gate, and ducked his head as he saw the guards.

Easing his way into the middle, he made his way out and past the guards without incident, and then the crowd exploded into the open air beyond the gate. He was in the outer streets of the town.

“So far, so good,” he murmured. Carefully keeping his stride short and his head down, he went with the bulk of the crowd, heading broadly southwest towards Maldon.

A cry echoed from the pathway ahead. A tall, bearded soldier was standing grinning in the middle of the road, and as he watched, the man leaned to his left and groped a young woman as she passed. She flapped ineffectually at the man’s massive paw, and then the crowd behind pushed her forwards and out of his reach.

James could feel his heart pounding as the crowd pushed him ever nearer to the man, and he gasped involuntarily as he saw him move sideways so that he would be directly in front of James. He looked up, directly into the soldier’s grinning face, and tried to move sideways, but the press of bodies on either side kept him locked onto a direct course.

“Aww my lovely, don’t leave! I’ll show you a wonderful time,” bellowed the man, grinning.

James gulped, and then raised his voice. “I’m sure you could, dearie, but I have to visit my sister. I’ll be back in two days, though. Come and see me on the High Street, near the Corn Market. Ask for Janie.” He could feel sweat starting to bead on his brow but dare not wipe it away.

“I’ll do that,” replied the soldier as he firmly groped James’s left breast before the crowd pushed him forwards and out of reach. James closed his eyes to compose himself, feeling his heartbeat subside. He dabbed at his brow with his sleeve, careful not to disturb the powder on his cheeks.

Fairfax had built a high defensive wall with forts at regular intervals all around the town. Only a few gateways interrupted the curtain and as a result, the fleeing citizens were being forced into tighter and tighter alleyways. This road passed through a guarded gate in the wall halfway between two of the small forts. Looking ahead, James saw a cluster of Roundhead troopers stationed either side of the gateway. Unlike the Royalist guards at the fortress gate, these were examining all who passed. Some were standing; most were lounging against the wall and exchanging insignificant banter with each other and with those who passed. A few were sitting around a small table throwing dice. He breathed a quiet sigh of relief.

A girl cried out, followed by gales of laughter. One of the guards had used his musket to lift a young woman’s skirt. Gently, James eased across to the other side where the soldiers were being more professional and merely watching the passing refugees. As he drew closer, he could see a young officer, clearly bored but examining all who passed.

The rag-tag stream of starving citizens oozed through the narrow gateway under the watchful scrutiny of the guards, and especially the young officer. James’s heart started to beat faster again as he realised that he would pass fairly close to his position, but he did not dare to move aside. He felt the young man’s eyes pass over him and move onto whoever was behind.

A cry rang out, and under the direction of the officer, three soldiers moved towards the queue, heading directly for James. He tensed himself but kept his head low only to be pushed roughly aside as they pulled the figure behind him out of the line. All eyes were now on the scuffle at the side of the road. James picked up his pace as much as he dared. Allowing himself a brief glance back, he saw two soldiers holding a young man whilst another pulled his clothes aside to reveal an officer’s tunic. James did not recognise him.

James trudged on through the gate. Free of the enclosing walls at last, he was dismayed to see Parliamentarian troop encampments stretching as far as the eye could see on either side of the muddy road. Thousands of troops milled around, clearly excited by the sweet aroma of imminent victory. He trudged on, staying within the crowds. Smoke from the numerous campfires wafted across the track, billowing occasionally in the light summer zephyr. The smell of cooking brought groans from the refugees, and occasionally one would peel off to plead for a morsel of food.

A rowdy group of troopers was camped beside the road ahead, harassing the fleeing citizens with jeers and insults as they passed. One of them caught sight of James and ploughed his way through the crowd towards him. James edged to the other side of the road, but upon glancing up, the trooper was almost upon him. He braced himself as he was caught by the arm and dragged off the road. He could doubtless break free, the trooper was no taller than he, but in doing so would reveal his true gender.

“And where might you be going? You’ll have plenty of business when we enter tomorrow.” James recoiled from the smell of alcohol on the trooper’s breath.

“I’m going to visit my sister. I’ll be back in a day or two,” he ventured in a high-pitched voice.

“Your sister doesn’t have what I have.”

“I’m sure, nay, I’m pleased to say she has not; but visit her I must. You can visit me near the Corn Market when I get back.”

“No, you stay, and you can visit your sister later.”

“But sir...”

“Stay I said!” the trooper took a firmer hold of James’s arm and pushed him through the crowd, who all shrank back. Passing through the last of the crowd, he emerged triumphant on the other side of the road. “Look what I found!”

His comrades all pushed forward.

“What the Hell do you think you are doing, trooper?” The trooper whirled around to see his officer standing behind him, arms akimbo. James realised that this was even more dangerous, a captain would be far more vigilant than a drunken trooper. Worse, he recognised the captain as the very man he had robbed two months earlier.

“Well, sir, I...”

“You will release this woman now.”

“But sir, she’s only a whore!”

“She is a citizen, the same as you. In fact, at this moment she stands above you as she is not about to experience the wrath of Black Tom. Do you not remember the general’s orders?”

“Yes, sir, but I didn’t think...”

“Correct, trooper. You didn’t think.” He turned to face James. “You may go, my dear, and I apologise for this ruffian’s behaviour.”

James took a deep breath before squeaking “Thank you sir,” pulling from the trooper’s grasp and re-joining the flood of escaping citizens.

Behind him, he heard the officer begin, “As for you, Roberts, you will be brought before the General later.” He stopped listening as the voice faded behind him.

The military encampments on either side gave way to woodland, and James heaved a sigh of relief. Spotting a fallen tree, he peeled off and sat down, allowing his heart rate to drop. Looking back, he could see the stream of refugees wending their way through the encampments, and just for a moment, he closed his eyes.

After several minutes, he re-joined the stream, and even picked up his pace a little, all the time keeping his eyes open for side roads. The woodlands were heavily overgrown, offering few opportunities to leave the track, but even when the woodlands petered out, all that bordered the roadway were wasted fields. Worse still, the road had turned south. After a couple of miles, a small dirt track led off to the right, so he eased over to that side and left the straggling stream of refugees behind him.

As soon as he was out of sight of the straggling escapees, he pulled his skirt up and loosening the constricting scarf from between his legs, releasing a sound halfway between a groan and a sigh of relief as the pressure on his testicles was relieved. Now he could walk properly, but more important still, he could discard the disguise, steal some men’s clothes, and travel home without excessive caution.

**28th August 1648**

Fairfax led the cavalry through the old gates into the town. The miasma of the day before had subsided now that most of the populace had left, and instead of the usual crowded bustling streets, he saw emptiness. Across from the gate, an elderly woman glared at him through an open window in a rickety-looking house, but he saw no other signs that the town was inhabited.

“We’ve entered a ghost town,” he commented to no one in particular as they made their way through the wider central street leading to the Town Hall. A couple of hundred yards in, the thoroughfare widened into a square. He halted and looked around. To the north, in front of the town hall, the Cavalier officers were waiting for him in a smart line. To the east side of the square, the lower ranks were drawn up into a line, but less tidily than were the officers. He dismounted lightly and walked forward to stand before the senior officer.

The Earl of Norwich, the commander of the surrendering Royalist troops saluted smartly, then drew and turned his sword for Fairfax to take. Formally, Fairfax bowed, then took the proffered sword at which, the officers all stepped forward in turn and laid their swords onto the ground before him. He turned to address the lower ranks of the Cavalier army stood to attention in the east side of the square.

“Gentlemen, if you would be so kind as to place your weapons on the ground in front of you, you are all free to leave; none shall stay you as long as you remain unarmed.”

A loud clattering disturbed the quiet as the arms dropped to the floor. The men shuffled off in every direction as they returned to their barracks to collect their personal belongings before exiting the town.

Fairfax waited impassively until the troops had left the square, and then turned to his retinue waiting behind him.

“Escort these gentlemen to their quarters, and then post a guard at each door. Once your charges are safely confined, kindly return to me in the hall there,” he gestured towards the town hall door, “and provide me with a list of names.”

**Chapter 2**

Henry Ireton wandered across the room to poke at the small fire burning in the grate. His expressionless eyes fell upon Thomas Fairfax seated behind a desk across the unprepossessing room, studying the lists of officers. Dressed entirely in black, Ireton wore his facial hair more fully than was fashionable, preferring the fuller look.

Fairfax looked up and studied Lord Capel and the Earl of Norwich. Capel stared back at him defiantly. His long black hair swept down to his shoulders, which were clad in velvet and gold trim. He twiddled his moustache as he stared, his smartly pointed beard brushing against his white frilled collar. Norwich, meanwhile, faced his protagonist impassively. Now in his sixties, the difficulties of the past ten years had played heavily upon him, and his formerly handsome visage had crumpled savagely. As was his wont, he was more soberly attired in brown and black, his thin, greying hair poorly concealed beneath a long brown wig. Both were comfortably seated in high-backed chairs with padded leather seating, whilst Henry Ireton’s functional wooden chair was to one side of the desk. Lifting the list of names, the General turned to face Norwich.

“There is one on this list who has previously given his parole not to take up arms against Parliament. Fighting for a cause in which you believe is something I may be able to forgive, however erroneous the cause; dishonouring one’s word is quite another matter.”

He turned towards General Ireton, who had crossed the room and was standing beside the desk. “I want to see Sir Charles Lucas. Bring him to me.”

As the general hastened to comply, Lord Norwich spoke, “Sir, you have a reputation as an honourable man; why, even the King has said as much. Can you not also be a compassionate man?”

“Compassionate, yes. But I do expect a Knight of the Realm to honour his word.”

Both settled into a long, moody silence as they awaited the arrival of Lucas. After five minutes, a knock at the door announced the return of General Ireton in the company of Lieutenant General Lucas.

“Come!”

Fairfax watched as Sir Charles crossed the room. The prisoner’s somewhat unruly hair swept behind him as he marched to face his protagonist. Fairfax studied him for a moment, taking in the white scarf around his neck, the thin moustache, and the double chin.

“General, you gave your parole not to bear arms against Parliament. Am I mistaken?”

“No, sir.”

“In which case, sir, I have to take you to task. You have broken your parole. Do you have anything to add by way of excuses for such reprehensible behaviour?”

Lucas said nothing.

“I shall, therefore, have no option but to place you before a firing squad. General Ireton? Return Lieutenant General Sir George Lucas to his quarters and double his guard. Then bring me Colonel Farre, Sir Bernard Gascoigne and Colonel Lisle.”

As the silent General Lucas was escorted from the room, Fairfax returned to his list. “I was expecting to find the highwayman Captain Hind on the list - he was a captain, was he not? And he was here?”

“He was, sir, but seems to have fled. He certainly failed to appear for muster this morning,” Capel said.

Norwich sat forward. “Well, I placed no credence in it at the time, but I did receive a somewhat garbled report of a man dressed as a woman in one of the local brothels. But the report came from a soldier notorious for his drinking and was disregarded. He said the man was gone when he awoke.”

“Well, no matter. He robbed one of our pay wagons a while back, so we shall get him eventually. Meanwhile, I am afraid that we shall have to take action against those involved in this uprising, which includes you. Don’t worry,” he held up his hand, “you shall not face summary execution in the manner of Lucas. However, you will remain under arrest until Parliament decides what is to be done with you. However, the same courtesy will not be extended to Farre, Gascoigne and Lisle.”

Ireton returned with the three prisoners. Colonel Farre had taken the opportunity to spruce up his uniform and marched smartly across to stand at attention behind Lord Norwich. Sir George Lisle followed him, his portly frame ill equipped for marching. Bernard Gascoigne had changed from his military uniform into colourful civilian vestments of blue and gold. His long mane hung defiantly down his back and chest.

“Gentlemen, this will not take long. I regard this uprising as nothing more than criminal activity. I accept that the lower ranks may have been misled or coerced - after all, they cannot be expected to know any better. However, you should know better. You shall be granted time to see a minister and pray for your immortal souls, and in the morning you shall join General Lucas before a firing squad. That will be all.”

He nodded to Ireton, who led the protesting men from the room.

“Loughborough will also be subject to Parliamentary decree,” continued Fairfax, “and the three of you shall remain here under guard until they advise me of their wishes. You will be treated with all of the civility that I deem appropriate to your rank but will remain within the confines of your bedchambers.”

When Ireton returned, the two Peers rose, and were led away by the troops. Ireton sat down at Fairfax’s invitation.

“I want you to send a messenger to Parliament, update them on developments here and request instruction concerning the disposal of our more illustrious prisoners.”

“Yes sir. May I speak freely, sir?” Fairfax waved his hand. “Your action against Lucas cannot be challenged, but are you quite certain that Lisle, Gascoigne and Farre warrant execution?”

“I am. Somehow, we must stop these uprisings. It is easy to send troopers, who are just faceless instruments of war, into battle when there is no hope of victory. Perhaps if they perceive a very real risk to their own persons, they will think twice in future. I am sacrificing the few to save the many.”

“Is Colonel Gascoigne even English? I thought he was a foreign mercenary.”

“He is, Italian, I believe.”

“Are we not risking an international incident?”

Fairfax stood and walked across to the fireplace. Staring into the sputtering flames, he stroked his chin.

“You could be right. But we do need to send a message to these Royalists that uprisings will not be tolerated, so I’m not totally sure.”

“Will not the three be sufficient? No-one will care about a foreigner anyway.”

Fairfax pondered. “Perhaps you are right. Killing a mercenary during battle is one thing. Executing a foreigner is another. Issue a reprieve, conditional upon his immediate departure from these shores, with a caveat that he may never return. Sign it on my behalf and then have him taken to Dover and placed on a ship.”

“Very good, Sir.”

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The door banged open, waking Fairfax from the best sleep he had enjoyed for many a long week. He opened his eyes as General Ireton rushed across the room to stand at his bedside.

“What on Earth?”

“Sorry, Sir, but Farre has escaped. I’ve sent out search parties, but I frankly don’t hold out much hope.”

“Relax, Henry. It is a soldier’s duty to try to escape, so it should not be too much of a surprise. We can still make our point with Lucas and Lisle. I assume that Gascoigne is already on his way to Dover?”

“Yes sir.”

“Very well. Put two guards into the rooms with Lisle and Lucas - we can’t afford to lose any more!”

“I shall do that, Sir. Should I do the same with the Lords?”

“I think not - it may have repercussions. But place men below their windows just to be on the safe side.”

“I shall sir. Goodnight, sir.”

“Goodnight, Henry.”

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The main hall had been converted into a mess hall. Tables, chairs, and benches had been appropriated from empty houses around the square and set up in long, uneven rows. Troopers milled around, finding places to sit. Mugs of ale banged on the table as laughter and conversation echoed around the room.

On the raised dais at the front of the hall, several tables were arranged in a square, with the best of the chairs arranged around them. At the head, seated in the mayor’s chair of office, Thomas Fairfax surveyed the scene with satisfaction. He turned to his left, where the ever-obsequious Henry Ireton sat awaiting his master’s orders.

“Have the remaining two prisoners stayed with us to the morning?”

“They have, sir.”

“Have they been given the benefit of the ministrations of a suitable clergyman?”

“They are with them now, sir.”

“Very well. I am going for a stroll. I am sure they will have finished their prayers by the time I return. Bring them to the square under guard and order the troops and officer selected for the firing squad to be standing by.”

General Ireton saluted smartly, turned on his heel and hurried away. General Fairfax joined his hands behind his back and strolled off to look around the town.

Colchester; an old town, it was looking less than pretty after so many years of war. Many of the streets were deserted at this time, the people having scattered throughout the county in search of relatives and friends who may be able to feed them. However, they would soon return, and indeed, Fairfax did not intend to keep his army here in Essex any longer than necessary. A child ran out before him, and one of his personal guards moved forwards to move the child but stopped at a signal from Fairfax. The general hitched his trousers, adjusted his scabbard and hunkered down in front of the child. For a moment, he studied her while she studied him back.

He smiled.

“What is your name, little girl? How old are you?”

She moved some of her straggly golden locks from her face. “Eleanor, sir. I have fully six years.”

“Where is your mother?”

“In the house, sir. She cannot move.”

“Soldier!” Fairfax addressed one of his guards. “Enter that house and report back to me.”

The soldier saluted and entered the house. A moment later, he was back. “The woman is lying on the bed, sir. She’s very weak and says she has not eaten for more than seven days.”

“Doubtless giving all of her food to her child,” observed Fairfax. “Go to my cook; have him conjure up a meal for both of them. Then bring the meal and feed this woman and child. I shall expect you to return here daily, complete with a meal, until either we leave Colchester, or the woman is well enough to fend for herself. Do you understand me?”

“Yes sir.”

“Then go to it.” He hunkered down again to talk to the child. “That soldier will bring food for you and for your mother. Not just today, but tomorrow too, and for the next few days. Now go and tell your mother, that she may find some hope.”

The child rushed indoors while Fairfax stood up, smiled to himself, and continued his walk.

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Fairfax turned a corner and found himself back in the town hall square. The piles of weaponry had been cleared away and were safely under lock and key in an adjacent house; he could see the guard patrolling back and forth. Just in front of him, a troop of soldiers was standing to attention before a nervous young officer, and the two prisoners were standing casually conversing with the ministers. Both prisoners had donned light clothing and were shivering, whether from fear or the chill in the air was not immediately apparent. Ireton, who was stationed in front of the town hall with a further troop of soldiers across the square, was watching them all. The sun was just rising over the enclosing buildings, casting long shadows across the square.

Fairfax beckoned to Ireton to come closer, and then turned to address the young captain, standing to attention before his troop.

“At ease, captain. Have you ever conducted a firing squad before?”

“No sir.”

“It is no difficulty. You have both pistols primed and ready?”

“Yes, sir.”

“And are your men similarly prepared? Their muskets are fully primed?”

“Yes sir.”

Fairfax counted the men. “Twenty-five men?”

“Yes sir.” The young captain gulped.

“You should need no more than a dozen. I shall inspect them and select the twelve.” He walked across to where the troop stood and walked along the line.

“You sir. Your hat is awry. Return to your barracks.”

“Your boots are filthy. Go!”

He continued along the lines of soldiers, rejecting those who were not perfectly presented and looking at ease. Finally satisfied, he returned to stand beside the officer. “I count fifteen men left.” He looked at the officer.

“I agree, sir.”

“Very well. You, you, and you, fall out, you will not be required this day. The rest of you, reform!”

Once the troop had reformed into two lines of six, he turned back to the captain.

“Overall, this is a very well turned-out group of soldiers, captain. You are to be commended.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“Now, once the prisoners are in place, you will bring your men forward in two lines of six. Three at the front facing each prisoner, in a perfect line, with three behind them. Upon my signal, you shall order your front men to fire, three at each prisoner.

“Should either prisoner remain standing, you will then bring forward your second line and repeat the exercise. You are then required to walk forward and put the prisoner out of his pain if it should be necessary. Is everything clear?”

“It is sir.”

“Then proceed.” Fairfax crossed to stand beside Ireton, who had moved to the side of the square. “We are now ready. Gentlemen.” He turned to address the prisoners standing proudly erect in front of the stone wall. “Do you require a blindfold?”

Both men glared back at him and shook their heads. Lisle muttered something, his breath forming a cloud in front of his face.

“What was that? Can we all hear what you had to say?”

“I said I want to look the bastards in the eye as I am being murdered.”

“This is an execution, sir, lawfully convened. But you are free to do as you say. Now if you would both be so kind as to stand against that wall, I am sure that we all want to get this over with.”

The two Cavalier officers marched across to the wall and turned to face the general.

“Captain!”

The captain marched his troops into line as instructed, and then stood to one side, his sword raised awaiting the signal. Fairfax walked across to Sir George Lucas. “Do you have any last words before we exercise the sentence?”

“None save God Save the King!”

He turned towards Lisle.

“Do you have any last words before we exercise the sentence?”

“God save the King! He shall ultimately have his victory over the usurpers!”

Fairfax moved across the square until he was facing the young captain. Looking at the prisoners, the troops and Ireton, he dropped his arm sharply.

Both prisoners opened their shirts to bare their chests, calling in unison “Now, rebels do your worst!”

The captain addressed his men. “Take aim! Fire!”

The square echoed with the sound as six muskets fired. Smoke billowed and filled the air around them. Once the smoke had dissipated, the officer glanced at the prisoners, and then ordered his second line to prepare. While they exchanged places, Fairfax looked to the prisoners. A flower of blood was blooming on Lucas’s shirt, and as he watched, he toppled to the floor where he lay prone in an ever-growing pool of blood. Lisle, however, stood tall and proud, without a blemish on his fine uniform. He leaned over and kissed Lucas on the forehead.

“Captain,” called Fairfax, “have all six men fire on Sir George.”

The captain nodded. “You heard the General. I expect to see him peppered with six holes.

“Take aim… Fire!”

Six shots rang out in unison, deafening all present. The smoke mingled with the residual smoke from the first volley, and it was a while before the prisoners were again visible. Sir George sat at the base of the wall, lifeless. Four holes in his vest testified to the accuracy of the musket men, but very little blood flowed from the wounds.

The captain drew his pistol and walked forward to where General Lucas lay unmoving on the ground. Reaching down, he turned the man over. Lucas looked back at him through pain-wracked eyes.

“God save the King,” gasped Sir Charles through gritted teeth.

For a moment, the captain was spellbound, and then he stood erect, took careful aim and shot him through the head.

Behind him, Fairfax moved forward. “General Ireton! See to it that these men get an extra ration tonight and arrange for the square to be cleaned. That will be all!”

**London**

Moll tensed as a light tapping came from the door. She was sitting beside the fire sipping a tankard of ale, A candle glowed contentedly beside her on a small table. Across the room, her tousled bed hid as if in shame in the shadows.

Putting her pipe beside the fire and reaching for her pistol, she pulled her tall, angular frame erect and moved across the room to stand behind the door.

“Who is it?”

“Jimmy.”

She paused

“Who introduced us?” she asked, the pistol still trained on the door.

“Thomas. Moll, stop messing about, let me in! It’s pouring with rain out here, and someone will see me if I stay here much longer!”

She unbolted the door and opened it, pistol aimed at the diminutive, dark, dripping figure in the doorway. “Step forward,” she ordered, moving back a step herself.

The bedraggled figure took a step forward into the light. A broad smile crossed Moll’s wizened face as she saw the man’s face.

“Jimmy! I thought you were still fighting with Lord Norwich in Colchester!”

“I was,” he grimaced. “Colchester surrendered three days ago. I decided that I didn’t want Lord Fairfax deciding my fate, so I escaped.”

“Not dressed as a woman again?”

He grinned. “Yes, as a woman. I stole some clothes and powder from a brothel. I don’t think they’ll miss them; clothes are very incidental in that profession.”

“You’ll be getting a reputation! Although I can hardly talk!” she laughed, stepping back, and sweeping her hands down majestically in front of herself, dressed as was her wont on men’s clothing. “But come on in; I have a jug of ale freshly brought, and you look as if you are sorely in need of it!”

James stepped inside the dark room. Moll checked outside to make sure that no one was about and then closed the door, reapplied the bolt and returned to her chair beside the roaring fire. Brushing the raindrops from her long hair, she reached for her pipe.

“The spare tankard is over by the bed, pull up a chair and get warm. Then you can tell me what happened.”

James crossed to the bed in the corner and scooped up the tankard lying on its side in a puddle of spilled ale. He looked around and saw another chair in the corner beneath a pile of clothes. Tipping the clothes onto the floor, he carried the chair across nearer to the fire, took the tankard and filled it from the jug by Moll’s chair. Sitting down at last, he took a deep draught of ale before looking across at Moll, who burst into laughter.

“You’ve missed some powder, James,” she pointed towards his left ear. “Looks a treat with stubble growing through it!”

James scrubbed at his face, and then smiled back at Moll, whose startling blue eyes were boring into him. Tall, with hair now a snowy white, she cut an imposing figure even relaxed beside the fire.

“So, tell me about it. Is the cause lost?” she asked.

“I fear it is, for now at least. I have no idea why Norwich and Crompton chose Colchester for the last stand, the people there were against us from the start; we had to be constantly vigilant from both within and without.

“It was fine as we were making our way up from Kent; there is a lot of sympathy down there. However, Essex, they always have been for the Parliament and only protested because of the restrictions on Christmas celebrations. Oh, Moll, what kind of men be these! That good, decent people should be deprived of the meagre pleasures in their miserable existences by decree of a handful of wizened killjoys sitting in judgement in the grandeur of the Palace of Westminster! Begone, I say, begone, and let these poor people have their fun.”

“I agree with you, James, so you can come down from your pulpit! Never let it be said that I deprived anyone of their pleasures!”

“True enough, Moll,” he responded with a grin, “but what of my former companions? Have you heard from Thomas in recent times?”

“I’ve not seen him, but I hear that he and his boys are busy over on Hounslow Heath again.”

“Good. I shall be running low on funds before too long, especially now that I have to buy a complete new wardrobe and armoury.

“If it’s alright with you, I’ll bed down on your floor tonight, and then set about re-equipping myself tomorrow; I had to leave most of my clothes and all of my weapons behind in Colchester.”

“You know that you don’t need to ask, James; you’re always welcome here, unless I have a customer, that is!”

“Still getting customers, Moll? I wouldn’t have thought you needed that.”

“I don’t, but I enjoy it. Although, customers are rare in these dark days. These accursed Puritans, there is nothing that they don’t frown upon, and they hold so much power now that most people are frightened to enjoy themselves.

“Of course, the fact that I am in my sixty third year might have something to do with the lack of customers.” She stood and stretched her tall skinny frame. “Time for bed. Are you sure you won’t join me?”

“No thank you, sweet Moll - my wife would be very displeased.”

“I know, and in truth, I would have been disappointed - but thrilled - had you agreed.”

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Dawn scratched her fingers at the shutters, peeking in around the edges. James turned as a beam of sunlight tickled his face, and then sat up. Moll still slept soundly, a light snore occasionally breaking the silence from the bed.

He stood upright and stretched, then walked quietly over to the water jug and wet his hands before rubbing them over his face. Three days of stubble scratched his hands. He walked across to the fire and added some small wood to the few smouldering embers sullenly glowing from the remnants of the previous evening. Behind him, he heard Moll stir.

“Pass me a cup of ale, will you?”

He poured a half-pint of ale into her tankard and took it across the room to her.

“Good morning to you. It was good to finally sleep without the sound of either animals creeping through the undergrowth or people moaning because of their hunger.”

“I am sure it was. Why didn’t Norwich allow the people to leave and find sustenance for themselves?”

“Norwich did. It was Fairfax; he would not allow them passage; last week, some women tried. His men stripped them naked and sent them back to bang on the gates. Such is the world they are creating in this country, all in the name of religion.”

“Bastards. Well, this is the world in which we must live. But it has created some new marks for those of us dedicated to relieving them of their wealth!”

“True enough. Perhaps it would not be unseemly for us to target these usurpers.”

“I quite agree. There are some rich pickings out there now that the war is over. Mind they’ll make sure they are well protected when they travel.”

“Nothing we can’t cope with methinks.”

“Don’t be so sure, James. These are military men, and you can bet that they will have plenty of soldiers with them. The King always did, and they see themselves as kings now that they have the true monarch locked away.”

“It would be wrong of us to either ignore the opportunities in front of us or to fear death; this is still a war as far as I am concerned. The King still lives, the Heir is safely abroad, so the candle of hope still burns, albeit with a dimmed flame for the moment.”

“You must do as your conscience demands, James. Me, I will take any opportunities I can find, but I will be sore careful in doing so. I have a good life now and have no wish to foreshorten it.”

**Chapter 3**

James Hind climbed aboard his steed. Looking up, he saw a wagon rumbling along the road ahead of him. He set off across the fields apace. Recent rains meant that many fields were flooded, and the early sharp frost had frozen the pools into treacherous icy death traps, forcing him to slow down to a gentle trot as he avoided the slippery patches. He was almost at the next town before he was able to safely cross and return to the road. A good area of cover stood beside the road here, better even than the cover he had used for the past few days, so he moved off the road, dismounted and sat waiting for travellers.

For several hours, he sat on the tree stump, rubbing his hands and peering through the trees. Occasionally he would stand erect and stamp his feet to get the circulation moving. His breath plumed before him, and he was seriously considering giving up when he saw a lone rider approaching from the west. Smiling, he walked deeper into the thicket to reclaim his horse, which was grazing in a small clearing. Climbing aboard, he checked his weapons before walking his horse back to his place of concealment. The rider was almost upon him. He moved his horse onto the road, blocking the rider’s passage.

“Hold sir. May I enquire as to your business?”

“If it is any concern of yours sir, I am taking this old horse to market in the hope of gaining a few coins to feed my children.”

James studied the old man. Old horse, old clothes, very poor quality saddlery. “In that case, sir, please proceed with my blessings,” he reached into his pocket and extracted a gold coin, “and perhaps buy some extra food for your children with this.”

“Why thank you, kind sir.” The old man studied his face. “You must be the famous Captain Hind, for I know of no other who is so generous.”

James removed his hat and bowed, sweeping his hat before him. “The very same, sir.”

“Then accept my blessings and thanks, sir.”

Nodding, James moved off the road and allowed the man on his way. Once he was out of sight, James returned to the thicket to continue his vigil.

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Alyn Lunt pulled into the inn. Dismounting with a grunt, he led the horse into the stable and into an empty stall. Removing the saddle and placing it over a nearby bench, he filled the trough in front of his horse, then backed from the stall and closed the gate.

“That be a penny, sir”

The voice coming from behind him startled Alyn, and he whirled around in alarm. It was just the groom, returning from wherever he had been.

“Ah, yes.” He noticed that the boy was looking at him. “Do not worry, I have sufficient.” Reaching into his pocket, he extracted some coins, among them the gold coin given to him by the highwayman. “Here you are. A penny.”

Alyn lifted his bag and strode into the Inn. His bedraggled appearance alarmed the landlord, who rushed across the room. “May I help you, sir?” he enquired.

“Yes. I require your best room, and once changed a good, warming meal and some of your best ale; the best, mind you, not the rubbish you serve to the peasantry.”

“That will cost you a shilling, sir. Are you sure that you have the means to pay so much?”

Alyn drew himself up to his full height. “I am Committeeman Lunt. I dress this way to fool the brigands who abound along these roads.”

“Very well, sir. Let me take you to your room.”

After changing clothes, a far more genial Alyn reappeared in the bar. The landlord ushered him to a quiet table by the window, then brought him a steaming bowl of barley soup and a frothing pint of ale.

“That is better,” commented Alyn. “You know, on my way here I was waylaid by that rogue James Hind. I fooled him, I can tell you; so much so that instead of robbing me, he gave me a gold coin,” he pulled the coin from his pocket and flourished it.

“Admirable, sir. I have never heard of him being fooled before!”

“Ah, well he hadn’t come up against me before, had he!” said Alyn, “’tis why I dress so poorly to travel; to fool such as he.”

Thirty minutes later, his meal and ale finished, Alyn retired for the night, taking a fresh tankard up to his room with him. “I have an early start in the morning,” he told the landlord, “I expect a hearty breakfast to await me.”

The landlord nodded and returned to his bar, where some locals were becoming a little too boisterous in their disputes.

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Sighing, James dismounted and led his horse into the stables.

“Ah, Captain Hind,” greeted the stable boy. “We only have one other guest this evening. Shall I settle your horse for you?”

“Yes, thank you John.”

Handing two pennies to the groom, James made his way into the inn. As always, the bar was bustling and most tables occupied. But sociability meant that James’s favourite table by the window remained unoccupied, so he wove through the tables, evading a wildly waving tankard as the owner gesticulated in support of some dramatic tale. Presently, the landlord approached him carrying a pint of ale.

“We have another guest tonight,” he told him, “And he was in here boasting about how he fooled you.”

“Fooled me? How?”

“According to him, he told you he was poor and then you gave him a gold coin. But he lied; he is a committeeman, and not short of coin.”

“On his way back from fleecing the poor people of Dorset, no doubt,” mused James.

“Probably; I can think of no other reason for a committeeman to be all the way out here.”

“Well, let him continue in his pride. I think I may try the roads to the east tomorrow.”

“It could well be profitable,” agreed the landlord, “though he said he would be leaving early.”

“Then I shall leave earlier.”

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An urgent tapping at his door awoke James. Opening the door, he saw the landlord.

“The committeeman is up and around. Eating now. Perhaps you will want to leave quietly by the back stairs?”

James was now fully awake. “Indeed. Give me a moment.”

After two minutes, he was closing the door behind him. He followed the landlord down some stairs and directly into the stable. He pressed a shilling into his hand and then saddled up his horse quickly before leading him outside and trotting off down the road.

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Alyn wiped his mouth with his kerchief, and then stood up. His bag sat beside him, and he was wearing his poor clothing again. He left fifteen pence on the table before hefting his bag over his shoulder and making his way out to the stable.

“Would you like me to saddle your horse, sir?” asked John.

“No need, I can do it myself,” declared Alyn.

Once saddled, he mounted his horse, walked out of the inn and began the day’s journey.

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“Good morning to you sir,” called James as the rider drew close. He had selected a spot at the brow of a hill with good cover from undergrowth and a wide view of the surrounding area.

“Well, good morning again,” responded Alyn. “What a surprise meeting you again.”

“Indeed, sir. Though, I must admit, I was awaiting your arrival.”

Alyn shifted. “And why would that be?”

“You see, sir, following a long day on the road, I happened to call into an inn last night. I was enjoying a refreshing pint of good ale when I heard a voice at a table around the corner, gleefully explaining how he had fooled the rogue James Hind.”

He paused.

“As you can imagine, since I actually am the said rogue, I was a very attentive if unintended audience. That gold coin was intended to ease the suffering of a poor man’s children. Instead, a greedy representative of our so-called government has stolen it from the mouths of those children. Do you have anything to offer in your defence?”

Lunt shifted uncomfortably in his saddle, looking around to see if any help was approaching. It was not. The road loomed empty in both directions, the fields stood uncaringly empty.

“I see. You will note that I did offer you an opportunity to speak in your defence. I can therefore pronounce you guilty of the theft of food from the mouths of babes. Dismount.”

“But I am...”

“You, sir, are a thief, no better than I! Dismount now before I hasten your descent.”

Alyn dismounted and stood looking up at James.

“Strip. I want to see your skin!”

“Now see here, sir, I...”

“Strip! You don’t want holes in your beautiful coat!”

“This is unseemly, sir!”

“So is stealing money from the mouths of children.” James took aim and fired a shot near the committeeman’s feet. Alyn jumped back in alarm.

James returned his pistol to his belt and drew another. “I can cut them from you with my sword if you prefer. But you might have trouble putting them back on again afterwards.”

Lunt glared at James but began removing his coat. James watched, ever wary of hidden weaponry.

Throwing the coat onto the road, the committeeman pulled his shirt off and dropped it onto the coat. Shivering, he stood with his arms clasped around his scrawny, naked chest. “Enough?”

“Not enough. You can start by removing that purse I see around your waist and throwing it to me. Then I want to see all your skin. This time, I shall shoot at any part of your body which remains clothed.”

James caught the purse, but kept his eyes locked on the reluctant committeeman as he removed his boots, hose, and breeches. “Good. Take a few steps backwards now...that’s right,” James dismounted and keeping his pistol trained on the shivering naked man, squatted down to check the breeches and coat.

Satisfied, he moved over to Alyn’s horse and checked the bag.

“Ah, some fine vestments indeed! Should fetch a pretty price. I shall take these for the benefit of those children you robbed.”

“Sir, I must protest - I have robbed no children!” exclaimed Alyn.

“No, but you took money intended for them - and by the looks of this purse, you have left a lot of families desperately short of funds. There is little I can do for them, unless I travel your original collection route, and I do not wish to travel so far; but I can see to it that other families equally poor receive some sustenance.

“Now put your clothes back on before you catch your death of cold - you see, I am ever a compassionate man.”

James tucked the purse into his own pocket and stuffed the good clothes into his bag. Looking up, he waved at the old nag grazing at the side of the road.

“Mount your horse, sir, and be on your way. Do not let me encounter you again.”

**5th November 1649**

Philip Herbert, Earl of Pembroke, eased his horse out of the gate. Behind him, John Smithers followed. Both were hunched up against the cold, but whereas the Earl wore a thick woollen coat in his favourite blue, his servant had a thin brown cloak as protection.

The Earl walked his horse down the track and through Newmarket, tipping his hat at those who greeted him. He passed the butcher’s shop and watched as a side of beef was manhandled into the building. He sniffed as he passed the baker’s shop; sneered when some youths spilled from the local inn, clearly not yet able to cope with their drink. Finally, he turned towards the Heath.

Ahead, he could see another rider trundling dejectedly along the road, and on impulse, he spurred his horse a little to come abreast.

The man looked around.

“Not an ideal day for riding, sir!”

“Indeed not, my man. I have no option, unfortunately, but I would far prefer to be home with my wife. And what brings you out on this miserable afternoon?”

“I am returning home; I was visiting friends, but now I must return to London. I am hoping to find a decent room in Cambridge for the night, then a brisk ride in the morning to get me home!”

Herbert extended his hand. “Philip Herbert, Sir, Earl of Pembroke. I too am hoping to make Cambridge before nightfall. Who do I have the pleasure of accompanying?”

The man shook Herbert’s hand, and then pulled back slightly. “Why, I am Captain Zachary Howard, late of his Majesty’s Cavalry.”

Herbert paused as he scrutinised his new companion. Clad in a similar blue coat to himself, Howard’s attire looked nevertheless somewhat careworn. A flamboyant feathered hat topped flowing dark hair and a wide moustache swept across his pale face beneath dark, piercing eyes.

“Captain Howard, a pleasure to meet you. But all that is finished now is it not?”

“Indeed it is, sir, for the moment and for most people. Although I can’t say it pleases me; Parliament saw fit to remove all my lands and take all of my possessions.”

“I have to agree with you in that, sir; historically, that is what has happened when someone displeases the King. It seems to me to be somewhat imprudent in these more civilised times.”

“Imprudent and dangerous. For there are many who have had no option but to take to the open road and commit robbery!”

“Quite so, sir, quite so. It makes travelling somewhat dangerous, but usually, a group of travellers fares somewhat better than a man alone, don’t you think?”

“That rather depends upon the character of the individual robber, it seems to me. I heard tell of a group of perhaps five robbers who held up a Parliamentary pay wagon with a whole platoon of guards.”

“Yes, I remember that one. Captain Hind, as I recall.”

“Well, he does not lead that particular band of ruffians, but I hear that he is the brains behind it.”

“I cannot imagine that we would be so unlucky as to encounter that particular group – they prefer to operate around London as I recall.”

“They do, yes. However, as we are both headed in that direction ultimately…”

“But not today. Today, we can enjoy a degree of security, methinks.”

“I can indeed, sir. But not, unfortunately, you.”

Herbert looked shocked as Howard pulled his flintlock and pointed it at him. “What is this?” he demanded.

“This, sir, is something known as a robbery. You roundheads stole my house, my land, my income, everything. Therefore, as I told you, I must survive whatever way I can. You would be wise, sir, to hand over your money now, because the alternative is to die.”

“I shall do no such thing, sir. You are nothing but a ranting Cavalier!”

“Indeed so, Sir. But this ranting Cavalier has a gun, which is, I assure you, fully loaded, fully primed, and pointing very definitely at you!”

“John! Do something.”

“I dare not, My Lord.”

“He is very wise. I am perfectly prepared to use this gun upon him, as I do have two more, primed and ready.” He pulled his coat aside to reveal two pistols tucked into his waistband.

“You, sir, are delusional if you think you are going to rob me!”

Howard adjusted his aim and shot Pembroke’s horse, which reared before falling on its side, pitching the Earl headlong into the muddy ditch. He returned his gun to a pocket, and then pulled another from his waistband before he turned towards John Smithers. “Climb down from your horse and go to help him up.”

The servant dismounted and hurried to help the Earl from the ditch. Mud besmeared his jacket, and his glorious gilded blue boots were completely covered. Herbert glared at Howard as he accepted John’s help. “That achieves you nothing.”

“No? Well, you now know that my guns are properly loaded and that I know how to use them. Also, of course, that I am prepared to use them.”

“Cromwell will hunt you down! By delaying me you are delaying Parliament’s business.”

“You impress me not with your namedropping. Cromwell does not scare me.”

“Well, he should; he defeated enough of your armies.”

“I rather feel that we probably defeated ourselves, Cromwell was just there to pick up the pieces. He is a ragtag commoner who has clambered up through the ranks and claimed the victories and accolades for himself. I wouldn’t trust him to wipe my arse.”

“He saved our great nation from the tyranny of the King. Without him, I am sure we would still be under the Stuart’s heel.”

“So instead of being under the rule of our lawful King, we are under the heel of Cromwell and his kind. I fail to see how that is an improvement.”

“Cromwell and the leaders of our Parliament have the best interests of the people at heart. Charles only had his own interests in mind.”

“So cancelling Christmas for the poor is in the best interests of the people, eh? I am not completely sure that they would agree with you; or are you telling me that you know best what is good for them?”

“It is in their best spiritual interests to concern themselves solely with worshipping the Lord and giving thanks for the birth of Christ.”

Howard pulled himself erect. “My Lord, I do not think that you believe that any more than I do. I am quite sure that you will enjoy a festive yuletide, and I am completely certain that Cromwell will do the same. They will just have their minions out, searching for poor people who have tried to inject a little joy into their miserable existences.

“But enough of this. I will take that ring I see gleaming on your finger, and I will take your gold as well. Now.”

“I do not have…”

Howard levelled his gun at the Earl. Herbert stopped his protests and removed the ring, tossing it onto the road.

“And the money, if you please.”

Philip reached inside his cloak and pulled out his purse, tossing it alongside the ring in the mud.

“That was somewhat rude of you,” remarked the highwayman. “You, servant man! Pick up those things and hand them to me!”

John moved forwards, lifted the ring and purse from the road and handed them at arm’s length to Zachary, who kept his gun levelled on the Earl.

“Good. Now take this rope,” he tossed a length of rope to the man, “and bind your master’s hands behind him.” He watched the servant tie a tight knot, and then climbed down from his horse.

“Now help your master up onto your horse but seated facing backwards.”

The servant balked, but Howard waved his gun, so he helped the Earl onto the horse.

“Seated facing backwards I said.”

“I say, that is not right!” protested the Earl.

“It is right because this pistol says it is right.”

Pembroke clambered down from the horse with the assistance of his manservant, and then remounted facing backwards.

“Now climb up yourself and face forwards.”

John climbed up into the saddle.

“Good. Put your hands behind you.”

Tucking his gun back into his belt, Zachary reached up and tied the servant’s hands behind him, and then tied the two men’s hands together, finally passing the end of the rope around the both of them and tying it off.

Zachary Howard stood back to admire his handiwork. “Excellent. Sir, you were not mannerly earlier, and this is how I treat unmannerly persons, persons who should know better.”

Stepping forwards, he slapped the horse on the rump. Unaccustomed to such treatment, it bucked, leaped forwards and set off at an uncomfortable and undignified trot back towards the town. Howard tucked the purse into a pocket and the ring onto his finger. Finally, he remounted and set off at a steady gait for Cambridge.

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Outside the Bushel Inn, the youths stopped their horseplay as they saw the horse trot past. Each looked at the horse, looked again then examined their drinks closely. Seeing nothing untoward, they ran forward as a mob, chasing the horse and laughing at the two figures tied back-to-back. The Earl simply glared back at them, unable to do anything to stop the horse or escape the humiliation. Eventually, one enterprising lad managed to reach for the bridle and stop the skittish horse. They helped the two men dismount and untied them.

“Thankee, lads,” commented John.

“John,” said the Earl. “Ride up to the house and collect another horse for me. Then explain to the mistress what has happened and ask her for 100 Jacobusses and another coat for me.”

“Yes sir, of course, sir. Do you want me to clean off your boots first?”

“No, I’ll get the constable to do that. Now hurry along. I will be at the constable’s cottage.”

John mounted his horse and rode away at speed, while the Earl started walking towards the constable’s home. Passing the baker, his stomach rumbled as he remembered the aroma from earlier and he diverted into the shop. Loaves were piled up on a table to the left of the doorway, but the baker was nowhere to be seen, although he could hear him bustling in the back room. He took a loaf from the pile and tore off a piece, assuaging his hunger while he looked out at the centre of the town.

In the distance, the church tower loomed but across the square, he could see the cobbler hammering at a pair of work boots, watched by his young apprentice. A cart filled with straw rolled by, pulled by a tired-looking ox, and accompanied by a lad of about twelve, coaxing the ox forward with smacks to his rump.

“Sorry, your lordship, I didn’t realise you were here,” Pembroke jumped at the voice behind him and turned to face the baker.

“Ah, the smell drew me in. Just add the loaf onto the account.”

“Certainly sir. About that, do you think your lordship could see your way clear to settling my account, perhaps? It has not been paid since the end of the first war, and I am but a poor baker.”

“I do not deal with such matters, that is the bursar’s job. Ask him.”

“I did, sir, many times.”

“Next time, tell him I ordered that you be paid, then. I must be on my way, good day to you sir.”

“Good day, your lordship.”

The Earl bustled out of the shop, still grasping his half-eaten loaf and made his way down a nearby alley to the Constable’s home.

He knocked on the door. After a moment, the Constable answered. “Oh, Sir, your Lordship, do come in, please!”

Herbert strode into the cottage and looked around. Two wooden chairs sat either side of a roaring log fire, a curtained area to one side indicated his sleeping place, and a table with an uncomfortable-looking bench sat against one wall. He opted for the fireside chair, and then looked again at the constable. Short, stocky and somewhat bent, he had been a valuable sergeant during the war, staying by Herbert’s side and protecting him. But now his age was showing.

“Robert, I was attacked and robbed on the Heath. Highwayman, goes by the name of Zachary Howard. He said he was heading for Cambridge, and the man was so audacious, it would not surprise me to find that he told the truth! Get a group of men together and chase him down.”

“Not that easy, Sir. I’ll have to ride around, try to find some men with horses.”

“Do you not hold a stable of horses here for that purpose?”

“Nossir, well, there is a stable, of course, but I don’t get enough money to keep spare ‘orses. I’ll ride around, see if I can find half a dozen men, but it will take time, sir.”

The Earl sighed. “Can you find six men to take with you?”

“Yes sir, that ain’t the problem sir. It’s the ‘orses you see, there aren’t enough.”

“Very well. Ride up to my house, ask Thomas to bring six more horses. You look after them, mind, and return them when you’re done!”

**27th November 1648**

Fairfax swept into the room. His uniform was perfectly pressed, and he carried his hat neatly under his arm. The assembled generals scrambled to their feet and saluted, which Fairfax returned smartly.

“Thank you for coming, Gentlemen. Please be seated,” he sat down and waited for the room to settle. The fire glowed in the grate, and the room was lined with benches to accommodate the clerks who had their pens poised to note down the proceedings as it affected their general.

“Matters proceed far too slowly. Parliament refuses even to discuss paying off the troops; the King sits comfortably in Newport, and Parliament continues to hope for a Treaty. Worse still, our remonstrance still sits awaiting debate, a full week after Colonel Ewer presented it to them.

“The time has come to advance matters. Can I have your thoughts on these issues?”

The room was silent for a moment before General Ireton spoke up.

“I am unsure what we can do, General. Are you proposing some military intervention?”

“I am. I too cannot see any way forward by conventional means.”

“Perhaps you could tell us what you have in mind?”

“I shall, as soon as I am certain that there are no other proposals.”

He waited thirty seconds before proceeding.

“Very well. I am uncomfortable, given their dithering, with the concept that the King is in the custody of Parliament. I therefore propose to take him into our custody on the mainland.” He looked around. “Does anyone wish to say anything at this stage?”

He waited a few seconds.

“Very well. I have already sent someone to stay in Newport, someone I know I can trust to be discreet. When the commissioners leave Newport, he will accompany them as far as the mainland, and then come to advise me.

“I shall in the meantime set checkpoints on all major roads from the South leading to London, and I shall detain the commissioners. Meanwhile, Colonel Ewer and his troops will cross from Lymington and wait outside of Yarmouth. He will despatch a messenger carrying orders from me ordering Colonel Hammond to report here. Colonel Ewer will wait until he sees Hammond leave the island. He will then take his troops and occupy Newport peacefully before bringing the King back to the mainland.”

Fairfax sat back. Henry Ireton stroked his beard for a moment and then leaned forward.

“Gentlemen. You will all be aware that I am in constant correspondence with General Cromwell. I can tell you that he and I are in accord on this matter; the treaty proposed by Parliament will never be honoured by the King, and all that has been gained will be lost if we allow it to proceed.

“I can therefore declare that both he and I fully support the General’s proposed plan of action.”

One by one, the other generals nodded their agreement.

“Very well,” declared Lord Fairfax, “I shall initiate that sequence of actions immediately upon our adjournment.

“Now to the other matter; the refusal by Parliament to authorise the payment of the soldiers’ wages, and their neglect of our remonstrance.

“I propose that we occupy Westminster in the first instance, and if they still refuse to accede to our demands, the whole of London.”

The table broke into confused outcries. Fairfax sat calmly watching. He glanced at Ireton, who nodded. After a while, he tapped the table and the noise subsided.

“I understand your consternation. The idea also alarms me. Nevertheless, I see no alternative if we are to be heard. Note, though, that I only propose to occupy the cities; it is not my intention to occupy Parliament. I am hoping that the mere threat caused by our proximity will suffice to jolt them into action. It certainly did eighteen months ago.”

Ireton frowned. “Sir, do you not feel that Parliament has had long enough to address these matters?”

“I do. But to occupy the seat of government without invitation is an irreversible step, one completely opposed to everything we have held dear for centuries.”

“Are we not already in new territory, though? We have overthrown the King!”

“We are indeed. However, I prefer to limit the interference as much as possible. Remember that when we occupied Parliament last year, it was at the invitation of the Speaker.”

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James dismounted and led his horse into the rickety wooden stable. Stalls occupied the far wall, and a tall stack of newly delivered straw pile made entry difficult. He handed the reins to the groom.

“We’ve not seen you in a while, sir.”

“Ah, I’ve been busy further south. This is the first time I’ve been up here since...well, since the war, if truth be told.”

“Well, welcome back, sir.”

James handed the boy his fee, then smiled and walked across the road and into the inn. Looking around the room, he observed the landlord taking an order to a traveller seated in the window. It was a little early for the evening influx and the tables were all polished and empty, awaiting occupation.

“Harold!” called James, “When you’re ready.”

The landlord turned. Distinctly rotund, he smiled as he recognised his latest customer.

“James! Indeed, sir, we have missed you.”

“Ah, I have been busy around London. But I’m taking some time to revisit my old haunts.”

He turned towards the well-dressed traveller, who was watching. “John Hind at your service, sir.”

“Francis Cooper, sir. A pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

“May I join you?”

“Of course, sir. It has been a long journey without convivial conversation.”

James sat beside the man, and then observed his companion critically for a moment. A thick blue cloak lay astride an adjacent chair, and he was dressed in a fine linen shirt beneath a dour but still high quality waistcoat. “I believe you to be a person of some importance in London, judging by your attire.”

“’Tis true enough; I am a lawyer. The new government is keeping us all busy, and it is many months since I was able to visit my parents up in Burton. But anxious as I am to meet them again, a man must eat!”

James raised his glass. “To good food, good ale, good family and convivial company.” As if on cue, the food arrived at the table and the lawyer tucked in with gusto.

The lawyer reached for his watch, and then frowned.

“I was sure that I had a watch when I sat down.” He checked his other pockets, and then stopped as James laid the watch on the table in front of him.

“I trust you can offer a suitable explanation, sir!” exclaimed the lawyer.

“A watch in a tavern lost, oh that’s a crime.” Recited James with a smile.

“See how in drinking men do lose their time.

“The string hung out, and you forgot to lock it,

“and so the watch did slip out of your pocket.

“If you would keep your watch, this you must do,

“pocket your watch but watch your pocket too!”

For a moment, Cooper studied James’ face, and then burst out laughing. “Well, I have no idea what your profession might be, young man, but I feel that you have taught me a valuable lesson this day. Thank you.”

“It is my pleasure, sir,” responded James with a smile.

The landlord came across to their table. “I trust everything was to your liking, sir?” he enquired of the lawyer.

“Excellent, thank you. I shall remember this day for a long time, I think, largely thanks to your mischievous friend here. But I must be on my way; I have a distance to travel.” He turned to James as he stood. “I am not convinced that you gave me your true name, but I have thoroughly enjoyed our discourse, John Hind. I wonder if perhaps you know that rogue James Hind; you certainly have many of his reported traits.” He thrust out his hand. “It has been a true pleasure meeting you.”

James took and shook the proffered hand. “Likewise, sir.”

Donning his cloak, the lawyer left the table and made his way out to the stables. As soon as he had closed the door, the landlord leaned down to speak to James. “Do you know Norman Eccles? Runs the Red Lion in Warwick.”

“Indeed I do. He has aided me from time-to-time.”

“I hear that the usurers are about to throw him out of his inn. If there is anything you can do to help, it will not hurt your reputation at all.”

“I do not help people to enhance my reputation, Harold; I help them because they need it. I shall make haste and visit him before anything untoward happens.”

An hour later, James was handing his reins to another groom, this time at the Red Lion. Entering the inn, he looked around. No troopers or constables were evident; indeed, the room was all but empty. The usual pall of smoke was absent, and he was able to view the inn properly for the first time ever. Wattle and daub walls joined the crooked timber uprights, which in turn supported huge beams of oak across the ceiling. A half-hearted attempt to whitewash the walls ended partway around, evidence that the landlord was not as wealthy as were others. Indeed, he saw the portly landlord in earnest conversation with a well-dressed man at a table across the room.

“Norman!” he called, “a pint of your best, please.”

He sat down by the door, placing his hat on the seat beside him. Norman looked up, and then hurried to do his bidding, bringing the frothing tankard to James’ table, all the while casting nervous glances at the man sitting placidly at the far table.

“Is all well, Norman?” enquired James, “It did reach my ear that you have a problem.”

“I do, but it is not your concern. I owe this man some money, and he is trying to take my inn from me.” He shook his head sadly, causing his jowls to wobble “It is all I own.”

“How much, Norman.”

“As I said, it is not for you...”

“How much. You’ve helped me in the past.”

“Twenty pounds. And it was a pleasure to assist a King’s man.”

James stood, and then strode across to the moneylender trailed by the clearly flustered landlord. He looked down at the man, who was making entries on a manuscript and ignoring the presence of James.

“I believe that you seek twenty pounds from this man.”

He looked up, his thin face locked in a scowl.

“I do. Not that it is any concern of yours, sir.”

“Why will you not grant him further time to pay?”

“I am not obliged to do so, or indeed to account for my actions to the likes of you, sir.”

“Here is twenty pounds. Your business here is concluded. Provide the landlord with a receipt for this money and confirm also that you will leave him in peace henceforth.”

After counting the money, the man extracted a pen and ink from his bag, took the loan agreement and wrote across it ‘full payment received’.

“Now be on your way. You have no further business here.”

Glaring, the man stood and left the Inn. James turned to the landlord. “Why was he so determined to throw you out?”

“I think he believes that he can sell the inn for more than I owed him. He is known to be greedy, but when I needed the money, he was the only one who would lend.”

“I may go and have another word with him.”

“I don’t want any trouble, James!”

“Worry not. I have a change of clothing with me. He shall not recognise me. Where will he be heading from here?”

“I believe he lives towards Kenilworth.”

“Excellent. I shall meet him before he gets there.” James lifted his bag, “Do you have anywhere I can change?”

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James was waiting beside the Kenilworth Road, watching his quarry slowly approach. The road here was well used, not so deeply rutted as in other areas but the evening traffic was finished, the farmers all home enjoying the fruits of their labours. Trees lined the route for most of the way, but just here, there was also thick undergrowth and a small patch of grass, which his mount was trimming voraciously. Checking both ways before stepping out, James emerged from the bushes.

“I believe that you have some money to loan me.”

“No sir, I am carrying nothing, for my visit was unsuccessful; he did not pay.”

“I rather doubt that sir. I was observing you as you approached. I saw you fingering that purse by your left hip, and I am eager to do the same.”

“It is empty, I assure you sir.”

“Nevertheless, my fingers are indicating a need to feel it. The lack of such is causing my right hand to twitch, and you will observe that it holds a pistol. I most urgently need to quell this twitch lest it cause the pistol to discharge accidentally in your direction. So, give it to me now.”

The man handed the purse to James. It jingled as it passed between them, and James raised an eyebrow but said nothing.

James loosened the cord and peered inside.

“Why, there appears to be some money in here. Either you were telling me an untruth, or it has crept here unseen. Which was it?”

“I… I did not realise that there was anything there.”

“I do believe that you are telling me an untruth. No man could forget about what, thirty pounds? For that, your purse shall be forfeit. Now be on your way before I decide that your punishment for dishonesty warrants a more extreme form of punishment.”

**Chapter 4**

**28th November 1648**

**Westminster**

“Quiet!” whispered the boy as James slipped jumping down from the fence. “Do you want ‘em to hear us in Whitechapel!”

“Sorry. I am a little out of my area of expertise here.”

“Well, it was you who asked me, not the other way around. You’re sure this is the place?” The boy put his hands on his hips and cocked his head to one side. His cap stuck firmly on his head, but his ragged clothes hung from him like curtains.

“Certain. Just get me inside, I’ll pay you and then you can go.”

The boy grinned, his teeth like a lantern in the almost total darkness. “Dead easy. Anyone can get in; it’s getting away clean is the problem around here.”

“Well, you’ll be long gone, so don’t you worry about me.” James gestured towards the window. “Is that where I get in?”

“Yah, they never lock them; never need to, these toffs have guards crawling all around. Like I said, it’s escaping that’s the difficult bit.” He turned to the window and lifted it up until it stuck halfway open. Letting go, he paused to make sure it was not about to fall with a crash, then turned back to James and held out his hand. “Five shillings you promised.”

James fished in his pocket and produced a crown, which he dropped into the grubby proffered palm.

“Good luck, mister.”

With that, the boy disappeared into the darkness. James stood listening for a while, marvelling at how quietly the boy moved. He ought to learn that trick. Then, he turned back to the window and gently eased himself through. His sword caught on the windowsill, making a scraping noise as he lowered himself to the floor. Carefully, he lifted it and took a small sideways step until the full length had passed through.

The room was in almost total darkness. Only a tiny sliver of moonlight cut through the black, so sharp, so slender as to resemble a long, silvery blade. Across the room, James could see the faint outline of a doorway. He shuffled across the room, his hands before him as he felt for any intruding furniture. He stood for a moment with his ear to the door. Not a sound threatened to overpower the loud thudding of his heartbeat. He turned the handle and eased the door open a little. Peering through, he saw a single candle burning beside the door across the entrance hall.

He stood and listened. He could hear snores from a room behind the stairs, but nothing else. He stepped into the entrance hall and walked across to the foot of the stairs, before taking the first step. A creak split the night. James stepped back and listened. The snores spluttered but then continued unabated.

Moving over to the wall, James tried again. This time, the step was content with a single crack, almost like a grunt. James moved his weight up onto the step. Hearing no change, he made his way up the remaining stairs. At the top of the stairs, he paused. A single candle sat before him, dimly illuminating the corridor in both directions.

Three doors led from each side, with pictures between the doorways. Beneath each picture stood an exquisite table, each with an unlit candle, each with a bowl of flowers. Beside one door to the left sat a pair of bucket-top boots.

He eased his way down the corridor, staying close to the wall. As he moved around a table, the floorboards beneath him creaked loudly, and he froze. Along the hall, he heard movement. He leapt across the corridor to the other side, slipped along to the next doorway and pressed himself back against the door.

A door opened down the hall, and he heard footsteps. He reached for the door handle and slipped inside. Moving quietly behind the door, he listened as the footfalls paused, and then descended the staircase. He waited. Across the room, he could see a bed with a figure sleeping peacefully, a gentle snoring disturbing the silence. The footsteps came back up the stairs, paused and then approached. The door opened, paused as whoever was there checked that the sleeping figure remained undisturbed, then closed again. The footfalls receded, and then a door opened and closed along the corridor. James released his breath.

Drawing his sword, he made his way across the room to stand beside the bed. The sleeping figure slept on. Leaning down, James confirmed that it was indeed Black Tom, supreme commander of the Parliamentarian army. He raised his sword, and then shook the general before taking a small step back.

General Sir Thomas Fairfax awoke.

“Pray remain silent, sir.”

Fairfax regarded him. “I assume you are an assassin, come to murder me as I sleep.”

James laughed. “Had that been my intent, sir, you would not now be sitting upright in bed. No, I wish merely to speak with you. But pray be under no illusions, I shall use this sword if I must.”

“May I arise and take a seat? This position is not helpful to my aching back.”

James stepped back and indicated a seat with the point of his sword. Fairfax eased himself out of bed and sat in the indicated chair. Clad in an off-white nightgown, he did his best to maintain his dignity.

“Now what?”

“May I have your parole that you will make no attempt to rouse the household or capture me? I do prefer to undertake discourse without weaponry.”

Fairfax considered a moment, then nodded, at which James sheathed his sword and took another seat nearby. “I have come to discuss recent matters with you, sir. I believe that you are a man of honour, and whilst being on the opposing side makes you my enemy in warfare, I struggle to believe that a man such as you would countenance harming our lawful King.”

Fairfax looked at James.

“On whose authority are you here, Sir?”

“None save my own. I am not here to elicit treason from you, merely to understand what you intend to do with our King.”

“That is quite simple, sir. I neither plan to place him back upon the throne, nor to harm him.”

“You are the head of the Parliament’s Army, so may I take it that this will be the way matters progress?”

“As far as I am concerned, yes.” He paused. “Having said that, Cromwell has a very strong representation both on the Council and in Parliament, and I freely admit that he is a better politician than I; he may have other plans, and yes, notwithstanding that I am his superior within the army hierarchy, his wishes could well prevail. All I can say is that I shall do my utmost to ensure that the law is adhered to and the King’s person remains unharmed.”

“That is sufficient for me, sir. If your lordship is amenable to such a suggestion, I shall return from time-to-time as matters develop. But for now, I shall take my leave.”

“I am always prepared to discuss matters in a civilised fashion with a civilised man, so yes indeed, sir. May I know whom I have the pleasure of addressing?”

“Certainly, Sir. I am Captain James Hind, late of his Majesty’s cavalry.” James stood and swept his hat in an exaggerated bow.

“Captain Hind indeed! Well, sir, I admire your audacity in coming here, and shall not raise the alarm as you depart.”

“And you, sir, may be assured that you shall not be deprived of any of your wealth by my hand, although I have no control over any others.”

With a final nod, James slipped out of the door.

**30th November 1648**

**Pontefract, Yorkshire**

Cromwell leaned back in the chair, almost to the point of tipping over as he read the message. His jacket was undone, and his boots sat beside the chair. His hair straggled down the side of his cheeks, almost hiding his wart.

The messenger stood stiffly to attention before him, and across the room, Major General Hewson sipped his wine and watched. For several moments, it was as if time had stood still; no sound except the noisy movements of the troops outside the tent broke the spell. Finally, Cromwell rocked his chair forwards again, and looked up at the messenger. “I assume no reply is sought?”

“No sir.”

“Very well. Go and find some food and drink, and a place to rest.”

“Yes sir. Thank you, sir.” The messenger saluted, turned on his heel and marched out of the command tent.

Cromwell looked at Hewson, tall and spare and seemingly too long for the chair he occupied. “It seems that General Fairfax is anxious for my presence in London. He demands my rapid return. I shall make my way south, but perhaps not as rapidly as he would wish.”

“May I ask why, sir?”

Cromwell smiled. “There are things afoot in London, matters from which I would prefer to distance myself. I shall leave in a couple of days, I think. Meanwhile, I believe I could make use of another glass of that excellent wine. Where did you find such a treasure?”

**Yarmouth, Isle of Wight**

Colonel Ewer led his horse off the boat and onto dry land. Behind him, his troops were very happy to follow. Although, in this weather the phrase ‘dry land’ seemed a bit of a misnomer, but at least it was not moving around. Many of his men had been hanging over the sides of the boat, much to the amusement of the sailors. However, Ewer had at least managed to avoid that indignity, although only just.

The messenger walked across to join him. “Shall I set off now, sir?”

“Yes indeed. We shall wait out of sight, but I shall post a man here by the docks to advise me when you and Colonel Harrison are safely on board.”

Peering through the driving rain Ewer watched until he had passed out of sight then turned back to his men. He waited while his men assembled on dry land, briefed one of his officers to wait in the nearby inn, and then started a slow walk towards the low hills overlooking the town. Behind him, his forty cavalry and two hundred men wearily followed.

Two hours later, wet and discouraged, they entered a sheltered valley between two wooded hills. Sheep stopped grazing and stared at the intruders. The shepherd herded his charges into a far corner as the troops approached. Ewer dismounted.

“We set up here in this field.”

He waited whilst six men assembled his own shelter, then went inside and sat down on a camping chair hurriedly brought to him. Why so much stealth, he wondered.

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As dusk approached, the officer returned from the inn.

“They are at sea now, sir!” he announced.

“Assemble the officers, would you captain?”

Ewer moved his chair to the far end of the tent and beckoned two troopers to move the small table to a spot just in front of his place. A leak in the fabric was dripping beside the table, and he glanced up in annoyance. Once the officers had all joined him, he stood and opened his sealed orders. Briefly scanning them, his eyes went wide for a moment, and then he recomposed himself to address the men.

“Gentlemen. You have all observed that I only just saw the orders for the next stage of our mission today.

“We are ordered to proceed now to Newport and peacefully occupy the town. There is to be no looting, there is to be no aggression, we merely take control of the town. Once the town is under our control, there are further instructions, which I shall convey to those who need to know at that time. Now go and assemble your men, warn them about looting and aggression, and make them ready to march.”

**Carisbrooke Castle, Isle of Wight**

The door banged open, causing the King to jump and spoil the letter he was writing to his wife. He looked up. His manservant was rushing across the lavishly appointed room, tripping briefly on the Persian carpet.

“Really, Henry, is such a violent entry truly necessary?”

“My most humble apologies, Your Majesty, but the town is full of soldiers!”

“Really? How odd!”

“Yes, Your Majesty, and I fear that they may have evil intent; why, Your Majesty’s very life is at risk!”

“Calm down, Henry, I am quite certain that no murder is intended; not even the Army would stoop so low. Nevertheless, bring Colonel Cooke to me, would you? I’m sure he knows what is going on.”

Henry rushed back out of the room, closing the door more quietly behind him, Charles fingered his moustache as he pondered the possibilities of such an invasion for a moment, and then he pulled a fresh sheet of paper towards him and began his letter again.

“Can you tell me what is happening?” enquired Charles as soon as Captain Cooke arrived. Cooke stood firmly to attention; his uniform, as always, immaculate.

“I am afraid I cannot, sire.”

“Well, can you tell me if there is a design to carry me off?”

“I cannot Sire, I had no prior knowledge of this whatsoever. Had I been aware beforehand, you may be assured that I would have told your Highness.

“But, Sire, what I can do is try to find out. With your leave, Sire.”

Charles nodded and waved him away, then returned to his letter. After a while, he sniffed the air. Slow-matches. This meant that there were soldiers nearby with their matchlocks primed and ready. He rose and walked to open the window. From this height, he could see soldiers milling all around the castle. Sighing, he returned to his desk to continue writing.

It was almost midnight before Colonel Cooke returned. The Duke of Richmond and the Earl of Lindsey were seated in earnest discussion with the King, both men clad in comparatively casual attire as befitted a meeting between relatives. Before them lay a map of the area, and as the door opened, the Duke was pointing at a spot on the map.

King Charles looked up as the colonel entered.

“Well?”

“Major Rolph has assured me that you will not be disturbed this night, but even he seems to know little. There is much activity down there, and I am anxious that they mean harm to your person, Sire.

“Even here, there are soldiers at every door and window. But it may be possible for you to escape still.”

“I sincerely doubt that, Colonel.”

“Your Majesty, we should try. Failure would only place you in the same captivity in which you currently find yourself,” interjected Richmond. “Let me test the wind.”

Pulling on a soldier’s dark cloak, he and Colonel Cooke left the room. Several minutes later, they returned.

“We got out of the castle unchallenged, Sire,” announced Richmond.

“Be that as it may, sir, but you forget that I gave my parole to Colonel Hammond that I would make no attempt to flee. If the King’s word is so flimsy, then he is no King at all.”

“But Hammond is no longer in command here.”

“No. I will not, I cannot do it. Leave me in peace now, please, gentlemen, I wish to confer with my cousin.”

**1st December 1648**

**Carisbrooke Castle, Isle of Wight**

The King was awakened by his manservant. He sat up, blinking. Outside, he could hear the birds limbering up for the day and beyond that, the sound of troops marching and sergeants shouting,

“Sire, Major Rolph is here with a Colonel Ewer. They are demanding that you rise immediately and accompany them.”

“Very well. Tell them I shall be with them shortly.”

As Henry opened the door to convey the message, the two officers brushed him roughly aside and stalked into the room. Colonel Ewer, in full dress uniform, stalked directly to the king’s bedside whilst Major Rolph, more routinely attired, stood beside the manservant, holding his arm.

“Sir, you are to dress quickly and come with us.”

“Surely there will be time for a light breakfast?”

“No, sir, you may eat at the journey’s conclusion.”

“May I enquire where you are taking me?”

“You will find out.”

After thirty minutes, the King was dressed and ready to leave. Closely attended by the two officers, he walked downstairs, where Henry knelt to kiss his hand. Charles extended his hand, but Colonel Ewer jostled him forwards.

“There is no time for such niceties. Go on, sir.”

Reaching the coach, Charles climbed aboard, closely followed by Major Rolph.

“Hold!” ordered the King, “It is not yet come to that. Get you out!”

Annoyed, Major Rolph disembarked, and as the Duke of Richmond went to take his place, he restrained him. “No, you stay here.”

“Surely not, sir,” exclaimed the King from within the carriage, “Thou wouldst deny your King the company of his own family?”

“My orders make no mention of the Duke. He therefore remains here.”

The carriage door slammed shut and the entourage began its’ journey back to the mainland.

**5th December 1648**

**Huntingdon**

Elizabeth put down the vegetables she was cleaning and turned around as the horses entered the courtyard. The three horsemen clattered to a halt in front of the stable.

“Oliver!” she cried as she rushed across to greet the leading horseman, “I was not expecting you so soon.”

“Nor was I expecting to return home quite yet - but happenstance dictates that the army is camped outside of the town, so I am able to spend some time with my family.

“Everyone is well?”

“Everyone is fine, and all the more so for your unexpected return.”

“Good.”

Cromwell climbed down from his horse with a grimace. His breath billowed before him, but despite the cold air, his face was slick with sweat and the grime of a long journey.

“I’m not as young as I once was. Too much time in the saddle is causing me more and more discomfort.” He looked around. “Edward,” he called. A man emerged from the stables nearby. “Deal with my horse, will you, and these, my officers.” He turned towards the remaining horsemen. “Come join us in a prayer and a meal. We have time to spare for now.”

“But what occasioned this stop?” asked his wife as they walked into the house.

“I am waiting to hear from Henry. He - and only he - knows where I am. Once he tells me all is fine and ready in London, I must repair there with the utmost rapidity. But for now, I can relax.”

**London**

Moll sat bolt upright as she heard the sound of boots marching by her door. Reaching under the bed, she grasped her flintlock, briefly checked that it was loaded and primed, and then eased herself out of bed towards the door. The bed creaked as she took her weight off it, and she cursed under her breath. The boots were receding now, but that still did not mean it was safe. Carefully, she padded across the room to the door, which she unbolted and peered out through a small gap.

Her neighbours were all out on the street, chattering and pointing. As some were still dressed in their nightclothes, it was evident that they perceived no threat, so Moll tucked her pistol into her waistband and stepped outside. Along the narrow street, she could see a troop of soldiers turning the corner, a cloud of exhalation above them.

“What’s going on?” she asked.

“Soldiers, lots of them. Amos told me that they’re all over the town.”

“Any idea why?”

“None whatsoever. But it can’t be good.”

“Any signs of trouble anywhere?”

“Well, you know they took over Westminster a couple of days ago. Seems to be an extension of that, but I can’t see what they hope to achieve.”

“I’m sure they have something in mind. Fairfax and Cromwell do nothing without a reason, usually one for their own benefit.”

“True enough, but Cromwell’s not around at the moment.”

Moll pondered. “Think I’ll go into the centre. There are people I know who may be in on it.”

“I’d get dressed first, Moll!”

Moll grinned but said nothing as she returned to her home.

Two hours later, she was wandering around outside the House of Commons, hoping to catch one of her customers. Troops were stationed all around the building and in the square, making her nervous, but she had deliberately worn women’s clothing today in order to remain inconspicuous. A huddled figure scurrying from the door caught her eye, and she moved towards him. He glanced up as she approached and slowed down.

“Moll! What an utter delight to see you. Also, what an utter surprise; why are you here, of all places?” He glanced around at the troops.

“I came to see you, in fact. What on earth is going on?”

He pulled her aside as a troop of soldiers marched past. “All I know is that the city has suddenly become awash with troops. What they want is not something I’ve been told, although I’m sure that our leaders are all fully aware.” He paused as a thought came to him. “It could be to try to enforce their remonstrance - they presented a list of demands to Parliament a couple of weeks ago; I was there, I saw it. But it was rejected.”

“So there’s nothing for an honest working girl to worry about then?”

“Honest working girl? You?” he smiled and then patted her on the arm. “No, I think you can relax. As long as they don’t attempt an armed coup, it should not give you any cause for concern, my dear.”

**Chapter 5**

**6th December 1648**

**Westminster**

General Ireton’s horse picked its way along the narrow cobbled street. Children scuttled aside to avoid the hooves, always at the last minute, as a dare. Women called out, trying to gather their brood around them for safety, doors slammed, and shutters swung shut all around. He guided his horse into Parliament Square, and then turned his horse to allow Colonel Rich and Colonel Pride to join him.

“Colonel Rich, I want your cavalry spaced around the square in groups of six. They are to remain mounted and be ready to quell any disturbance that may occur. What we do this day, we do for the Army and for England.”

Ireton turned to address Colonel Pride. Solid of build, Pride sat uncomfortably upon his mount, his thick moustache hiding his mouth.

“Upon your shoulders, sir, the very future of England sits.” Ireton paused, whilst the Colonel sat more stiffly upright in his saddle.

“For too long, our esteemed Members of Parliament have sat on their collective arses whilst the army goes unpaid. Our request for payment fell upon deaf ears, and on top of that, they continue to negotiate with that accursed King.

“Today, we make history. It is your task to stand at the doors of the House. You will be supported by Sir Hardress and by Lord Grey. His Lordship will advise you which members to allow passage and which members to exclude. Here is a list of the principal troublemakers, and these men are to be detained nearby.”

“Very well, sir, I undertake these duties with considerable pride and enthusiasm. Thank you for entrusting me with such an honour.”

A commotion to his right caught Henry’s attention. A Trained Band Unit, clad in ceremonial uniform and usually entrusted with the protection of Parliament, was remonstrating with the cavalry blocking their way. Spurring his horse, Ireton joined them.

“May I help you, gentlemen?”

“Sir. It is our job to protect Parliament, how can we do that with all of these soldiers running around?”

“They are not running around, my man, they are stationed to guard the House.”

“That’s our job!”

“Normally, so, yes,” responded the General, “but on this occasion we shall be doing it for you. Is General Skippon still your commander?”

“He is, sir, and I am sure he will be extremely pissed off by your intrusions.”

“Shall we ask him? Send for him.”

The spokesman turned around and sent a man to locate the general. He turned back to face Henry Ireton, spread his feet apart, folded his arms and stood staring at the Commissar-General. Ireton merely smiled and remained in place, whilst the Cavalry around him shifted uneasily.

Ten awkward minutes later, the general came striding across the square.

“Ah, Sir Philip! Perhaps we may have a quiet private chat?”

“I think we should, sir!” said General Skippon.

“Come, sir, we need to discuss this privately.” Ireton dismounted, handed his reins to one of the cavalrymen and led General Skippon out of earshot.

“You will be aware of our remonstrance, presented to Parliament? It has not even been debated, and we are here to press our case. In the interests of public safety, you should retire your troops until we depart.”

“Dear God, man, are you staging a coup?”

“Sir, we are making sure that Parliament pays attention.”

“And may I take it on your word as a gentleman, sir, that no coup is planned?”

“No, sir. You may take it as an order from your commanding officer. I am not required to account to you for my actions!”

“Very well. I shall stand my men down. However, I am doing so under orders and in order to prevent unnecessary bloodshed. I suspect that mischief is afoot here and want no part of it.”

**London**

A banging at the door awakened Moll. The previous afternoon, she had been forced to billet two troopers who were snoring contentedly in front of the embers of her fire.

“Will you two idle bastards answer the bloody door?” she yelled. “No-one in their right minds would come knocking on my door except a bloody soldier.”

One of the solders sat up, and then shambled to open the door.

“Right, you two idle bastards, up and at ‘em!” yelled the sergeant from the door.

“Not had breakfast yet?” grumbled the prone trooper.

“Your own bloody fault, then, you should have got up earlier! Now get moving, both of you!”

The troopers hastily dressed, and then hurried out of the door past the sergeant, who nodded a curt ‘thank you’ to Moll, then slammed the door shut.

Sighing, Moll clambered out of bed; pee’d in the pot and started dressing ready for the day.

**Westminster**

In the entrance to the House of Commons, Colonel Pride was pacing at the top of the steps, with two dozen armed troops standing to attention behind him. Lord Grey of Groby stood to the side, idly rubbing his hands against the cold. Pride watched as two men approached, deep in animated conversation and gesticulation.

“Richard Winwood and Cornelius Holland,” murmured Lord Grey. “We can rely upon Holland, but I rather think that Winwood would be troublesome.”

“Mr Winwood, sir?” called the Colonel. One of the men looked up.

“Yes?”

“I am afraid that you may not enter the House today.”

“I must. It is my constitutional right and duty!”

“Not today, sir,” he gestured to a nearby trooper, who stepped forward to block the man’s path.

“This is outrageous! I demand that you allow me to pass.”

“I am afraid that my orders preclude such a circumstance, sir. I must insist that you leave.”

The trooper moved closer, lifting his pistol.

“The Speaker shall hear of this!”

“I have no doubt he will, Sir. But you shall not enter the house.”

Richard Winwood descended the steps and hurried off.

“He was not at all happy,” commented Lord Grey.

“I rather think he will not be the last.”

**Chipping Norton**

James patted his horse and then left the stable. Seeing his mother at the window, he strolled across the yard and entered the small, simple cottage where he had been born.

“James! What a delight. I see so little of you these days,” exclaimed his mother as he closed the door. Her portly frame moved with surprising dexterity as she rounded the kitchen table and rushed across to deliver a motherly hug.

“Ah, I am very busy. My line of work means that I must travel long distances, but it pays the bills. Margaret rarely wants for anything, and my children seem to have grown every time I return!”

“Such is the way with children and as they grow, their demands grow with them. However, they do need a father around. Your father was always here for you.”

James grimaced. “Indeed he was, but my strongest memories of my father have him holding a strap.”

“You were so undisciplined, it was needed.”

“All children are undisciplined. It is only by pushing the boundaries that a child learns where they are.”

“Are you hungry? I just finished my baking, there is hot bread waiting there on the table.”

“No, mother, I am anxious to spend more time with my family. I hope to remain at home for a few weeks over Christmas.”

His mother frowned. “You do not intend to celebrate Christmas, do you? You know that Parliament made it illegal.”

“Mother, I have spent the past seven years fighting Parliament and their hideous laws of repression. Do you really think I intend to deprive my children of the joy of celebrating the birth of Christ?”

“Do be careful. The committeemen are quite strict now.”

“Mother, they will be too busy celebrating Christmas themselves; you surely do not believe that the ban on Christmas celebrations was intended for themselves? It was aimed solely at the poor.”

“Your perception may be a little biased, my son. But be careful, nevertheless.”

“I shall mother. But now I must go home, I have been missing Margaret sorely.”

“And she you. She visits us regularly. More regularly than do you.”

“I have no choice. But I must go. Pass my regards to father.”

“I shall.” She blew a kiss to James as he closed the door behind him and set off for home.

**Westminster**

Dressed in her usual male clothing, her pipe peeking from a breast pocket, Moll, sauntered into Parliament Square. More people than usual were walking through the square - everyone wanted to see what was happening. She noted the troops and cavalry stationed near all the entrances to the square, but they did not seem to be hindering anyone, just standing around looking bored, chatting amongst themselves. She saw a man walking across the square, shaking his head. The erect bearing and richly embroidered cloak were familiar.

“Sir John,” she called, and he looked up, and then smiled.

“Moll! What are you doing here?”

“Like everyone else, I came to see what is going on.”

“It’s a bad business. They are refusing entry to all bar their own acolytes - I assume that a bill will be presented and passed, but I have no idea what it will say.”

“Are they arresting people?”

“Not that I’ve seen - we Members of Parliament do not, as a rule, present much of a physical challenge, especially in the face of all these troops,” he waved his hand in a circle.

A commotion broke out on the steps of the House. Two troopers were holding William Prynne, the leader of the Presbyterians while the others watched, guns drawn.

“Look!” exclaimed Moll. Two people had slipped around behind the troopers unnoticed and were entering the house. “Who were they?”

Sir John stood on tiptoe, trying to see past the crowd. “That’s John Birch and Edward Stephens. I am quite sure that if they do not want me in there, they certainly do not want them. But good luck to them.

“Actually, this could be very interesting; I’m sure the troops will find out that they got past, and the question is whether they dare to enter the chamber to get them out.”

“Why? What difference does it make?”

“All the difference in the world. If they send troops into the chamber, that would be the death knell for democracy in this country.”

As they watched, four soldiers escorted William Prynne down the steps and frogmarched him across towards Queens Court. The soldiers on the steps stood back, and Pride and Grey resumed their vigil. Behind them, the Chamber door opened, and Birch and Stephens peered out.

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Colonel Pride smoothed down his uniform, cleared his throat and pulled out his list. Moving to a table at the side of the entrance, he took up a pen, dipped it in the ink and put a cross beside Prynne’s name. Glancing up, he saw two men peering around the door to the Commons.

“Hold those men,” he barked, pointing. Two troopers leapt forwards and grasped the men’s hands, pulling them violently out of the door.

“I don’t recall greeting either of you,” commented the Colonel. “Lord Grey, can these men be relied upon?”

“Certainly not,” responded Lord Grey, “In fact, I rather think it might be in order for these gentlemen to join Mr Prynne.”

“You have no right...”

“Mr Birch is it? These troops give me whatever rights I choose.”

**Inside the Houses of Parliament**

Henry Ireton smiled as he pulled the paper towards him.

‘My Lord Cromwell,’ he wrote, ‘all is now ready for your arrival. Your servant and loving son-in-law, Henry Ireton’.

He folded the brief note, sealed it and then he left his office in search of a messenger. Hurrying along the corridor, he heard his name called, paused and looked behind him. The Speaker was rushing towards him with an irate expression on his face, and Henry cursed under his breath.

“Would you mind telling me just what is happening here? The House is almost empty today, and I am not getting any sort of answers as to why it should be so; but I do know that the army is behind it.”

“The army was sent to war on promise of payment. The men have yet to be paid and are distinctly upset about it. We did ask for them to be paid some weeks ago, but you elected to defer our requests, so the army, on General Fairfax’s orders, have taken control, and will remain so until our demands are met.”

“This is outrageous!”

“Indeed it is, Mr Speaker. It is outrageous for a government to ask troops to fight wars and then refuse to pay the men who fought for them.”

The Speaker shifted and then looked up, “and do I assume that General Fairfax ordered that lawfully elected members of Parliament be excluded from entering the house?”

“The order bears his signature, sir.”

“Then I shall berate him on the subject. It makes a mockery of democracy to bar those lawfully elected.”

Ireton shrugged. “It is not in my hands, sir.”

“Somehow, I doubt that” remarked the Speaker, “it rather seems to me that this is uncharacteristic of Thomas Fairfax, and I suspect Mr Cromwell’s hand in this.”

“General Cromwell, as I am sure you know, is still returning from the North, where Parliament sent him.”

The Speaker looked at Ireton. “Indeed. But as I recall, he can read, and” he pointed to the letter in Ireton’s hand, “I see that he is about to receive a message from his son-in-law. But clearly, you have never sent any such before...”

“What transpires within General Cromwell’s family is none of your concern, sir. Now, if there is nothing else, I have much to do.”

“I am sure you do. Yes, be on your way. But do be aware, I am not a complete fool.”

“I never suggested you were sir. By your leave?”

The Speaker nodded and the sweating Ireton hurried away to find a messenger.

**7th December 1648**

Oliver Cromwell climbed from his horse, handed the reins to a soldier and walked across the courtyard into Parliament. Saluting Colonel Pride as he passed, he pulled the door to the chamber open and strode in, just as the Speaker was rising to announce the business for the day. To his right, the seats were filled but the facing seats stood empty.

“Ah, Mr Cromwell. I am so glad that you could join us today.”

“I have been fighting up north, Mr Speaker. I could not be here any earlier.”

“Well, you are here now. Would you care to explain to the house why there are soldiers outside?”

“I was not in London when they arrived, Mr Speaker, so I cannot properly answer; indeed, I only just arrived in the city and came here directly. But I cannot say that I disapprove, or that I am surprised.”

“Oh? Kindly elucidate for the House.”

Cromwell sighed. “The House chose to ignore the army’s remonstrance. The soldiers were not best pleased to learn that the Parliament that had employed them was seeking to renege upon the payment of their wages. Nor that they continue to negotiate with the King, a king who caused many of their friends and brothers to die needlessly by launching a war upon this nation.”

“But, Mr Cromwell, it is for Parliament to determine what is the best course of action for this country, not the army!”

“Indeed so, sir; they are there now merely as a reminder of our duties. Would it not now be meet for us to attend to said duties?”

**Chipping Norton**

“I think I’ll go for a drink at the inn; it is a long time since I last talked with my old friends,” announced James, rising from his chair beside the fire

“Very well, husband. But take care; I hear there are visiting committeemen staying there. Do try not to get into a political discussion.”

“I shall avoid it like the plague; there are many things I would enjoy doing to such people, but not here. Not so close to home.”

Selecting a duller cloak than was his wont, James headed for the door.

“Do I not warrant a kiss before you go?” demanded his wife.

“You do indeed.” James walked across to where she sat beside the fire and leant down, kissed her upturned lips, and then reached to stroke her hair. She smiled back up at him. “I wish I could spend more time here at home, but God has other ideas for me.”

Backing away, he bowed gallantly and as she laughed, swirled his cloak melodramatically and swept out the door.

The Crown and Cushion Inn stood a mere two hundred yards from his door, and within moments, he was back in the warm, closing the oak door behind him. A crackling log fire glowed at him from the grate to the left, and gales of laughter greeted him as he entered. He saw a group of strangers standing at one end of the bar.

“Good evening, gentlemen.”

“And a good evening to you, citizen,” responded one of the strangers. “Will you join us in a drink?”

“You could have been reading my mind!”

James joined the men as they moved apart to create a space at the bar next to the man who had answered him. The landlord cocked a quizzical eye at James as he brought the first few ales. “The usual, please George. And let the first round be on me.”

James placed a crown on the bar, which the landlord took before heading back to collect the next few tankards.

“Gentlemen, what brings you to our tiny village?”

“We are on our way to London.”

“Parliament business?”

“In a way; Wallace here is not truly one of us, he merely accompanies us as he has business there. But for us, Worcester suffered heavily during the war, and we need funds to rebuild. The Powick Bridge area especially, and the landowners declined to contribute. We are hoping that Parliament will either order them to attend to matters or else offer a contribution themselves.”

“Ah, yes. Much of England suffered damage during that infamous period. Dividing the people as well as many of the buildings.”

“Indeed. The King had much to answer for but will now pay for his crimes.”

James bit his lip, but said nothing.

“Tell me, sir, how should we address you?”

“I am known here as John Hind, sir. How may I address you?”

“Edward Smith.”

“Henry of Powick.”

“Charles Edwards.”

The fourth member had remained silent, so James turned towards him. “And you, sir?”

“Wallace Shoosmith, sir.”

“And you have business in London, sir?”

“I have some moneys to place on deposit there.”

“Well, on behalf of my village, may I bid all of you welcome to Chipping Norton.”

All raised their tankards and took a sip.

“I can recommend the food here,” James told them. “The landlord’s wife always provides an excellent repast.”

“We were hoping so. Indeed, methinks it is time to order food. Landlord!”

After all had ordered their food, Edward turned to James.

“Your name, sir, is close to a name of some disrepute. Are you related, perhaps, to Captain James Hind?”

“No, sir, I am not aware of being related to him. Although he does have a somewhat heroic reputation amongst the poor.”

“Hah! He does indeed, but only amongst those with seditious leanings. To those who adhere to the law of the land, he remains a thief and someone who must be caught and hung for his crimes.”

“Ah, you may think so. But I am a poor man and keep my own counsel. For us, nothing ever changes; we were poor, we remain poor, and all we seek is peace to be able to conduct our lives and keep food on the table and a roof over our heads.”

“That is exactly what we seek to change! It will take time, it is true, but it is our aim to better the lot of the poor.”

“By prohibiting Christmas celebrations? Come now, you jest, surely!”

“I am forced to admit, sir, that the legislation to which you refer was not popular. Some of the extreme elements of our leadership introduced it. For our part in Worcester, we chose to ignore that one, without advertising the fact. But their heart was in the right place, for was it not intended to return the thoughts of the people to the true meaning of Christmas, the celebration of the birth of our Lord?”

“Good intentions are insufficient, sir. I accept, it may have been appropriate for those of greater means, but to the poor it simply removed one of the few pleasures left to us. And of course, like all laws, it was only ever enforced upon the poor.”

“Gentlemen,” interjected Walter, “if it is all the same to you, I shall take my food up to my room; I have insufficient resources to indulge in gratuitous drinking.”

“Come, sir! Relax and enjoy the convivial company, for you are assuredly fortunate to be travelling with such good fellows!” chided James.

“No, sir, I cannot afford to do so. I bid you farewell.” He scooped up his tankard and bowl, and then walked across to the stairs, leaving the four men staring at his wake.

“I thought he had resources to invest in London. Surely he could afford a few ales!” exclaimed James.

“He has over two hundred pounds in that portmanteau of his. He can afford it. He’s just a miser, I suppose.”

They all laughed.

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James excused himself from his companions and made his way outside, deliberately weaving as he crossed the bar to give the impression of a drunkard on his way home. Turning away from home, he visited the skinner’s shop three doors down from the inn. Purchasing a full bearskin, he rolled it up and then returned to the inn, entering through the stables and up the back stairs.

At the top of the stairs, he donned the bearskin, listened for a while, and then made his way along the corridor, listening at each door until he heard the sounds of movement. Thrusting the door open, he leapt inside and roared.

The miser jumped to his feet in horror, and then when James leapt for him, he shrieked and sprinted out of the door and down the stairs, screaming for help. James started to giggle, but then the inn mastiff, which had been lying at the miser’s feet hoping for some scraps, set upon him. Falling to the floor, the dog made for the throat, at which point James pulled the head aside, causing the dog to pause; which throat?

Quickly, he reached for the meal and thrust it at the dog, which immediately abandoned its attack and focussed upon the succulent joint of mutton instead.

Climbing from the bearskin, James looked around, immediately espying the portmanteau beside the bed. Emptying the money into his pocket, he thrust the bearskin up the chimney then took the pen lying upon the table, refreshed the ink and wrote a message. Finished, he threw the pen down and ran back out of the room, just beginning his descent of the back stairs as he heard timorous footsteps beginning to ascend the main staircase.

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Charles Edwards followed the landlord up the stairs, careful to remain a few steps behind him as he was hefting a heavy club. They led the crowd into the miser’s room.

The dog was chewing on the mutton bone in the corner, the lid of the portmanteau was open, and a sheet of paper lay upon the table.

Checking first to make sure that the room was otherwise unoccupied, Charles walked forwards and picked up the paper. A moment later, with a smirk upon his face, he turned to his fellow travellers and read.

“Those who forsake their friends to save their purse,

“May they be served the same, or worse,

“Good company henceforth ne’er decline,

“But love good fellowship lest the coin,

“For which you lust and take such care,

“Be once more taken by the Bear.”

None could contain their mirth save the miser, who stood cowering at the back of the company.

“Surely the work of our good friend, John Hind!” chortled Edwards.

“Probably. Perhaps he actually was Captain Hind - I do recall now that he hails from this region.”

“Well, none can doubt his sense of humour, that is certain. We must report this, of course, but I do rather feel that our friend here asked for it!”

“I did not, sir!” exclaimed Wallace. “But I would prefer that this misadventure remain unannounced. Methinks it could make me into a laughing stock.”

“Methinks it could, friend, methinks it could.”

**Chapter 6**

**December 9th 1648**

**Huntingdon**

Blowing on his hands, Oliver Cromwell walked across the courtyard and into his house. Nine-year-old Frances tucked up her full-length dress and hurled herself at him before he could close the door.

Grinning, he swung her up in his arms. “Ah, my lovely little sweetheart. Have you been a good girl while I was away?”

“Yes, father; I said ALL of my prayers, and didn’t giggle *once* in church.”

“Excellent. The Lord must always be taken seriously, or else he could become unhappy with you - and what would you do if that happened?”

“I would pray for his forgiveness, father.” She looked subdued for a moment, and then brightened. “But I have no need to ask his forgiveness because I haven’t done anything wrong!”

“I am delighted to hear it, my child. Now, where is your mother?”

“She’s in the kitchen, preparing dinner. Shall I go and get her for you?”

“No, I think I shall surprise her myself. So be as quiet as a mouse!”

Frances gripped her lips between her fingers, took her father’s hand and pulled him in the direction of the kitchen. Smiling, Oliver complied, mock stumbling along behind her while she giggled behind her clamped lips.

Bursting through the kitchen door, Frances could contain herself no longer. “Mother,” she yelled, “look, father is home!”

Elizabeth started, pulled her hair back from her face, turned away from the cutting board in front of the window, smiled and took a step forward. Hesitating, she returned the long knife to the cutting board and then ran around the broad kitchen table to greet her husband. “You are away too much, my love,” she murmured from his enfolding arms, “I truly missed you.”

“And I you. Sometimes, a man must do things which he doesn’t like, away from the family he loves, but I am secure in the knowledge that I am doing God’s purpose, and that one day it will become clear why He is making such demands of me.”

“I do hear that there is much change, and sometimes I hear things which frighten me.”

“My Love,” he began, kissing her on the forehead, “there are many things happening in London these days. Not all are to my liking, and I sometimes prefer to distance myself.” He sighed. “We began all of this with the aim of securing proper Governance for the people of England. But we do not all agree upon what that proper Governance should be; I must be in the room with these people, but I refuse to climb into bed with them. I sometimes wonder if I am cut out to be a politician.”

Elizabeth reached over and patted his hand. “I know that your heart is in the right place, my love.”

“These people are not interested in hearts; they’re interested in power, and I will not be party to a power struggle; we began this in God’s name, and by heaven, I will maintain that position. But it would be unwise to oppose them; they always find a reason to arrest those who do. I do not fear for my life, but I do fear for the future of my family, yes, and my country. Dead, I can do nothing to protect either.” He turned his attention to the cutting board. “What are you preparing for dinner, my love?”

“I was preparing a pottage with vegetables, but now that you are home, I shall add some pork - we killed it only yesterday, and I was going to salt it.”

“There is no need for that; I shall be happy with pottage.”

“The pottage can wait. My man eats better than that when he returns home!” she responded.

“Very well, very well. I shall go and change out of these grimy travelling clothes and then come to assist you.”

**December 12th 1648**

**Bagshot Lodge, Surrey**

King Charles pushed his chair back and wiped his mouth delicately with his napkin. Fingering his moustache, he turned to face Lady Newburgh seated to his left.

“A most welcome repast, my dear. Would that I could expect such excellent fayre on the remainder of my journey.”

“I thought you were travelling to Windsor. Surely, you will reach there today. ‘Tis not far.”

“We are, but not at great speed, I fear.”

A liveried servant came through the ornately carved door and whispered in Lord Newburgh’s ear. He stood and backed up to the wall where he stood smartly facing forward beneath the tapestries adorning the wall.

“It seems that we have a problem, your majesty,” announced the Lord.

“Oh? What is that, pray tell?”

“Apparently your horse is lame. But I am happy to offer one of my stable in its place.”

“One of your racehorses? Your King thanks you.”

Colonel Harrison arose from the table and looked out of the window. “It is getting late, sir. We must proceed with our journey.”

“Oh, very well.” The king stood and walked across to Lady Newburgh. “Your sovereign thanks you for your exquisite company, madam.” He turned to face Lord Newburgh. “And, sir, thank you for a wonderful and welcome meal. I shall remember this day.”

Nodding at his hosts, Charles walked swiftly from the room, trotted nimbly down the steps and scurried across the courtyard to the stables, where grooms were hastily preparing a horse for him.

Colonel Harrison had been marching smartly behind him, slightly caught out by the speed at which the Sovereign liked to walk. He donned his hat, brushed briefly at his jacket, and then mounted his horse before turning to address the King.

“Sir, I would remind you that my horsemen have the pick of the very best horses available, and that they are taught to maintain them in top condition. I trust that we will have no cause to put that to the test on this journey.”

The king paused before mounting his horse and turned to face the colonel. “Whilst I am indeed an excellent equestrian, I am not fond of racing, especially when being pursued. However, it is my duty to attempt escape just as it is your duty to prevent me from doing so. I have not given you my parole and I do not intend to offer such.”

He turned back to his horse and mounted expertly. Wheeling his horse, he began walking towards the road whilst the troops formed up around him watched by Colonel Harrison, who suddenly spurred his horse and galloped to the front of the column.

**Chipping Norton.**

James passed the baby across to his wife. Baby Charles gurgled happily, enjoying the attention.

“Father, can I ride your horse?” asked daughter Alice, putting on her best persuasion face.

“You must clean the kitchen first, young lady, just like your mother told you a while ago.”

She pouted. “Pleeeease?”

“Clean first, ride second.”

She shuffled into the kitchen area and stretched for the cleaning rag, leaving the way clear for her younger brothers, who scrambled onto his newly vacated lap. James restrained little hands seeking to play with his guns.

“I do wish you would take those off in the house, Jimmy,” chided his wife, “it only takes a moment of distraction, and we could have a disaster on our hands.”

“You’re right, my love, as always.”

Lifting the children off his lap, James stood and removed his weapons, placing them on a high shelf beside the fireplace. Reaching down, he scooped up the two young boys and started trotting around the room, making horse-like noises as he did so.

“Stop that!” laughed his wife, “you’ll make them sick!”

Sighing, James sat down again with a mock pout. “I finally get time to spend with my family and I’m not allowed to play with them!”

A knock silenced the laughter. He took his sword, unsheathed it and went to the door. “Who is it?”

“Thomas, ye daft bugger. Open the bloody door!”

“Thomas. What are... just a moment.”

Sheathing his sword, he unbolted the door and opened it to allow his friend entry. He stepped outside and looked up and down the street. Seeing no one, he slipped back inside and closed and bolted the door.

“What brings you up here, Thomas?”

“Didn’t expect flowers, but surely you can offer a man a drink after a long ride,” complained Thomas.

“Yes, you’re right. Margaret, this is Thomas. We... we work together.” He waited as Thomas and Margaret exchanged wary nods. “Can you bring two tankards over to the table, Margaret? It must be important for him to ride up here.”

Margaret hefted the baby onto one hip then made her way into the kitchen area whilst the two men moved across to the table.

“Is it safe to talk?” asked Thomas, nodding across towards Margaret.

“No specifics. Just tell me the basics of whatever you have.”

“Very well. London is awash with troops. Many Parliamentarians have been arrested, and they’re trying to prove that they were inciting the Scots to invade England.”

“So? No concern of ours.”

“Cromwell has gone home to Huntingdon, but in his absence, they’ve decided to send to ask him to visit the Duke of Hamilton in Windsor. So for once, we know where the bastard is and where he’ll be going!”

“Just not when. Although they are in such haste to kill off all who oppose them, you can be sure it will be quick.”

“Aye. I think they are nervous with all those soldiers camped outside of Parliament. I would be, too.”

“Where are the lads?”

“They’re waiting in the alehouse down the road. I knew you were with your family, thought it would seem like an invasion if we all came.”

“Good. Huntingdon is a long way from here. We’ll have to get on the road if we’re to get there in time.”

“Aye. Although, I’m sure that we got here before he got the message.”

James turned to his wife. “Margaret, my love, I’m going to have to leave for a few days. But I am determined that we shall enjoy the Christmas festivities together, so I shall be back in good time.”

She frowned. “I don’t want you taking any risks, Jimmy. I heard what you were talking about, and I have a fair idea what you have in mind. That is for you to decide upon, but please be extra careful.”

“I shall.” He took his weaponry from the shelf and started tying his belt.

“Pappa, you promised me a ride!” exclaimed Alice from the kitchen. “Look, I’m cleaning the kitchen just like you said!”

“I know, Alice, but sometimes Pappa has to do these things. I promise a ride when I get back in a few days. Alright?”

Holding back tears, she nodded.

He turned back to Thomas, “Let’s go.”

Blowing a final kiss to his wife, he went out of the door.

**Windsor Castle**

The column entered the Castle, rain dripping from every hat, helmet and hand, with all clothing completely soaked by the driving, pouring rain that had descended upon them. The King, however, sat bolt upright in his saddle, completely ignoring the water that dripped from his nose. As they came to a halt, Charles looked around, noticing Colonel Whichcot waiting for him inside the arch of the main doorway, and a bedraggled figure kneeling in the mud a few yards in front. Dismounting, he walked across towards the colonel. As he approached the kneeling man, he saw that it was the Duke of Hamilton.

Hamilton grabbed the king’s hand as he passed. “My dear Master....” he sobbed as he kissed the hand.

“I have been so indeed to you...”

The soldiers surrounded the king and hustled him forwards. The forlorn figure of the Duke of Hamilton watched him until he disappeared from sight.

Entering the castle, the King was led through several corridors to his own bedchamber overlooking the courtyard. He turned to Colonel Whichcot.

“Do I assume that my castle is being used as a prison? Are there others of my followers here?”

“Indeed so, your majesty.”

Charles walked to stand before the fire, deep in thought.

**December 13th, 1648**

**Hertfordshire**

Just past the brow of the wooded hill, James pulled back on his bridle and waited for Thomas to catch up. “That’s St. Albans ahead. The Great North Road is just beyond it.”

“Are you certain that he will take this route?”

“He must; it is the only sensible route to London from Huntingdon. We should be well ahead of him, so as we ride north, we must keep our eyes open ahead for travellers, and be constantly ready to attack. I am relying on the fact that a group of riders travelling in the opposite direction will pose no obvious threat. Remember, we have no idea how many soldiers he will have with him. If there are too many, we must simply pass on by.”

Spurring his horse, he moved down the slope towards the town. Thomas watched him for a moment then followed suit at a more leisurely pace, while behind him, the remainder of the raiding party followed amidst desultory chatter.

James turned in his saddle and yelled back, “The White Hart has good food and excellent ale!” He spurred his horse into a gallop. Behind him, Charlie looked at John and they simultaneously set off in hot pursuit, narrowly avoiding Thomas who was plodding towards the town.

As Thomas pulled to a halt outside the Inn, he heard laughter from inside as his companions enjoyed a civilised drink. The sun was just kissing the horizon, and he could see his breath billowing before him. “Time to stop for more than a drink,” he commented to himself, then dismounted and entered the Inn.

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Oliver Cromwell stood at the head of the table and solemnly read Grace. At the other end of the table, his wife Elizabeth stood with bowed head; alongside were his children, or at least those who still survived and lived at home; Richard, standing proudly to the right of his father, Henry to his left, young Frances and Mary alongside them.

As ‘Amen’ resounded around the room, he closed the book and sat down, followed by his children. Elizabeth took a cloth and carried the pot around to Oliver. Smiling, she ladled the pottage onto his plate, stopping at his signal. Reaching to the centre of the table, she took a plate of pork chops and placed the two largest onto his plate before serving the children.

“I am not completely sure about these new table implements,” commented Oliver as he lifted his fork. “We managed perfectly well with just a knife and spoon before.”

“Husband, you know that if we are to maintain our social position, we must become accustomed to them; there is not a civilised house without them now.”

“I am not as certain as you that we need such fripperies,” he commented, “but if it makes you happy, I will try. I would prefer to be judged by God and on my qualities and actions, rather than by men on possession of some strange Italian table implement.”

He was cutting into the succulent pork chop when he heard the clatter of hooves. He frowned. “Who can that be at this hour? Henry, would you mind...?”

Henry put his cutlery down, wiped his mouth on his sleeve and stood up, just as the knock sounded at the door. Pushing his chair back, he strode out of the room. Oliver looked up, “Doubtless some new order from Parliament. No-one else would dare intrude at this time.”

They heard a murmuring from the entrance hall, and then Henry came back into the room. “It’s a messenger from London, father. He says it is urgent.”

“They always do,” commented Oliver drily as he stood, “I don’t recall them ever asking me to do anything at my leisure!”

In the entrance hall, he walked across to where the messenger stood with a nervous look on his face. “Don’t worry, young sir, I do not bite.”

The messenger passed across some papers, which Oliver took, studied the seal, and then tore open. Glancing up, he smiled at the messenger. “How long have you been riding?”

“All day, sir.”

“Then you must be hungry.” He took the messenger by the arm and led him into the dining room. “Elizabeth, can we stretch our meal to feed this poor famished waif?”

Elizabeth leapt to her feet and rushed into the kitchen for an extra plate and cutlery, while Henry and Louise squeezed themselves further along the table to create space for an extra place.

“Sit, lad, sit. Honour us with your company for a while.”

“If you are sure, sir...”

“I am. Sit. Eat.”

“Thank you, sir. I was not expecting such an honour.”

“Rubbish. We’re all just flesh and blood, all simple servants of the Lord.” Oliver returned his attention to the papers, reading with an ever-growing frown. “Do you know what this says, lad?”

“No sir!” the youngster sounded shocked. “It was given to me for delivery exactly as it is.”

“Hmm... Well, I shall not enlighten you then, beyond saying that they want me to leave immediately to talk to someone. I shall not be leaving immediately, however; I only arrived home but a scant few days ago, and I fully intend to enjoy my family’s company for a little while longer. Parliament must await my pleasure.”

**Chapter 7**

**14th December 1648**

Inside the ‘Lamb and Flag’ inn, James, Thomas and the gang were just finishing breakfast. Their cloaks sat in a heap on the adjacent table, and all were warmly clad ready for a cold day outside.

“Time we were underway,” announced James, “We’re close to Huntingdon, so best if John rides ahead again. We’ll take our time and keep an eye open for good concealment - if we reach Huntingdon without seeing him, we can then double back and await his arrival.”

Ten minutes later, they were all mounted and James sent John on ahead. Once he was a few hundred yards in front, they all followed at a slow amble. All guns were primed; all parts cleaned the previous night. The sky was clear, but in midwinter, this meant that the sun peering weakly over the horizon had no effect whatsoever, and their breath billowed in clouds before them, slightly obscuring the view.

John paused, then turned and slowly walked back to them. “There’s a coach heading our way,” he announced. “Could be the one we want.”

“How many with it?”

“I saw five, two drivers.”

“Very well. We’re just below the crown of the hill here, so let’s form a line of 4, with two either side.”

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The former officer leaned down in his saddle and addressed Cromwell, sitting in the coach. “I think we might have trouble, sir.”

Cromwell looked up from his papers, “Tell me.”

“A horseman just appeared over the hill ahead and as soon as he saw us, he turned around and disappeared again. I think we should be prepared.”

“Very well. Safe is indeed better than sorry.” Cromwell went deep into thought. “Yes, range the men on either side. You place yourself on the other side; I will be poised here at this window with guns cocked. When you’re set, tell the drivers to drive over the hill at speed.”

“Yes, sir,” the officer saluted. He turned to address the other riders. “You two, over that side, you two stay here. We’re going over the hill at pace; if there’s anything waiting, we’ll catch them unawares.”

He waited until everyone was in place, and then addressed the drivers, “Go!”

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The sound of galloping horses and the rumble of the coach came just before the whole ensemble burst over the top of the hill, steam billowing from the straining horses. James just had chance to glance at Thomas standing in the centre of the path before he had to duck as a horseman fired at him. The bullet whistled past his ear, then the coach and riders were upon them, and he had to attend to his own safety.

Drawing his sword, he fended off one of the riders before plunging the sword into the second, who fell screaming from his horse. A moment’s reprieve as everything went past, and he turned his horse to look back. Four of his men were on the ground, Thomas included. Thomas lay still whilst the others were clutching wounds. He could see the remaining three men galloping away down the road, pursued by three riders, and the coach was pulling to a halt a hundred yards down the road. The remaining rider on his side was reloading his pistol whilst turning his steed in readiness for a fresh attack back up the hill on James.

James dug his heels into his horse and galloped off across the fields to the west. Looking back, he saw the rider following him. Field gave way to forest, but he slowed only enough to enable his horse to pick a safe route through.

He kept going through the woods, and then burst into the open on a farm track. Spurring on, he galloped south. Still, he could hear the sound of pursuit, so again he spurred his horse forwards, looking for a place to hide.

Five miles further he was still sure that he was being followed but when he saw a good mount loosely tethered to a bush, he pulled his horse to a halt, grabbed his bag, untied the horse, leapt upon it and spurred it down the track, ignoring the shouts from the bushes at the side of the road. More confident now that he had a fresh steed, he slowed down and listened for sounds of pursuit. Satisfied, he continued at a more sedate pace until he reached a proper road heading into Bedford, and then spurred his mount a little.

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Oliver Cromwell stood with feet apart and hands on hips, staring down at the two men bound and lying on the ground before him. He looked up with one eyebrow raised as the former officer dismounted.

“He had too much of a lead; I had no hope of catching him unless he fell.”

Cromwell turned his attentions back to the men on the ground. “What did you hope to gain?” he asked. “I am not a rich man, and never carry much money with me.”

“You are a revolutionary leader. That is enough,” retorted Thomas, struggling to release his bindings.

“And even now, you strive to get to me.” Cromwell sighed. “Well, you will not be able to try for much longer.” He looked up at the former officer. “I cannot tarry any longer. Get these rogues to the magistrates, and then come after us. Take one man. Tell them to try to get the names of the others.”

Cromwell made his way back to the coach. The officer and another man brought the raiders’ horses forward and tied them together. They lifted the bodies of the two dead men onto two of the horses, which shied slightly and had to be soothed; horses can smell death as easily as any other animal.

Checking the bindings on the two prisoners, they hefted them face down across the backs of the remaining steeds, then each mounted their own horse, the captain leading the convoy with a rope tied to the halters, the second man riding behind with guns cocked. Slowly, they made their way towards St. Neots and the local lockup.

**16th December 1648**

**Chipping Norton, Oxfordshire**

James closed the stable door, making sure that he made no sound; his parents disapproved of his activities, and he had no desire to argue. He walked across the yard and out into the street. A hundred yards down the lane was home, the one place he could relax, the precious place containing his wife and children. Keeping to the shadows, he walked swiftly along the lane and slipped into the garden, then eased himself around the side of the house to the window at the back, where he could listen.

Inside, his wife was busily chiding the children about their failure to complete their tasks for the day. James listened a few minutes longer, and then slipped back around to the front of the house and into the house.

“Father!” exclaimed Alice, running to hug his leg. “Can I go on the horse now?”

James smiled. “Not today, he’s very tired. But tomorrow, I promise.” He turned to his wife. “Ah, my love.” He smiled at her. “It has not gone well, and now all I seek is the joy and peace of my wife and children; and to celebrate the occasion irrespective of whatever those killjoys in London may say.”

She smiled back at him and took him into a warm embrace. “Then we shall, my love, we shall.”

**1st January 1649**

**Westminster**

The Speaker stood and looked around the house. As usual these days, the opposition benches yawned empty, and even the government benches were sparsely populated. He took a moment to take a head count, aware of the need for a quorum.

“Now to the next order of business. I am presented with a petition that doth declare that by the fundamental laws of this country, it is treason for the King of England for the time being should levy war against the Parliament and Kingdom of England. Is there need for debate upon this issue?”

He looked around, and seeing no dissent, held the document aloft.

“May I have a show of hands upon the acceptance of this declaration? All those in favour?” he looked around, “and all those against? The motion is therefore carried. The member for Leicester will carry the order to the Lords. The next order of business concerns the Public Revenues. Mr Allen, kindly commence.” He sat down.

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Lord Grey, Member for Leicester, re-entered the chamber. Nodding to the speaker, he showed the ordinance papers still in his hand and sat down. It was fully ten minutes before a break occurred in the oratory, and the speaker took the opportunity. “The Honourable Member for Leicester?”

“Mr Speaker, I found the Upper Chamber empty. Upon enquiry, I was told that today they have declared a holiday and will not return until tomorrow.”

“Have they indeed? Well, it seems we must await their return. Lord Grey, kindly make it your first duty tomorrow to present the Ordinance to them for their ratification.”

**2nd January 1649**

**London**

Moll looked up in alarm at the hammering on her door.

“Who is it?”

“Sir John.”

She opened the door, looked both ways and ushered Sir John Seymour into her home. He was dressed modestly, doubtless by way of self-protection; the east end of London was not a prudent place for a man of wealth to wander.

“What on earth brings you here, Sir John? I was not even aware that you knew where I live.”

He grinned. “It’s not too difficult with a few coins, Moll. Everyone knows you.”

“I suppose. But again, why are you here?”

“I may not be allowed into the Chamber of the Commons, but I was not forestalled when I tried to enter the Public Gallery. Yesterday, the remaining members passed a couple of bills intended to bring harm to the King.”

Moll gasped. “They had the audacity? But surely, the Lords refused them!”

“Ah, there’s the rub. The Lords were in recess yesterday, so the bills will be debated today, and I want to see it. But ‘twill look better if I have a handsome woman on my arm, and it must be someone with appropriate sympathies.

“I suspect that your sympathies for the King are somewhat stronger than mine, but we are joined by a desire to see no harm come to our lawful King. Will you accompany me?”

“I certainly shall. However, you will have to wait awhile until I have donned some attire that is more appropriate. Kindly turn your back for a few moments.”

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As they entered Parliament Square, Moll looked around. Troops still occupied the steps of the Commons, indeed still occupied the square. Arm in arm, she and Sir John marched across the square and entered the doorway to the Public Gallery of the Lords. As they took their seats, Lord Manchester stood.

“Gentlemen of the House, I have received excuses from the Earl of Nottingham and the Earl of Oxford that they are suffering ill health and are therefore unable to attend the house this day.

“Today’s primary business concerns two bills from the Commons. The first declares that it is treason under the fundamental laws of this country for the King to declare war against Parliament. The second calls for the trial of the King of England on a charge of High Treason.

“Hitherto, I believe that we have all regarded these threats as no more than the outpourings of a group of consummate windbags. But are we prepared to pass this into law? It is a fact that the King alone has the power to call or dissolve Parliament, and to me it seems absurd even to suggest treason against a body over which he exercises the ultimate legal authority. Shall we consider the question of Treason by the King initially?”

Moll leaned towards Sir John and whispered, “Does the law allow them to do this?”

Sir John looked at her.

“Of course not. That is why they excluded the lawyers from the Commons.”

Down on the floor of the House, Lord Manchester looked around at the dozen or so Peers. “The Earl of Northumberland.”

The Earl stood, and then paused for a moment, gathering his thoughts. “I put it to the house that probably not one in twenty of the men and women of England are satisfied that it was the King, and not Parliament, which began the conflict. Unless we can satisfy ourselves upon that point, I fail to see how we can accuse the King of Treason.”

Taking his seat, the Earl looked up in surprise as the Earl of Pembroke stood.

“My Lord, it is not for me to comment upon such a proposal, save to suggest that we should be very certain of our response. I would venture that never before has the Commons made such a radical proposal, and we twelve shall stand condemned should our response be anything but unequivocal.”

“Indeed, the Earl of Pembroke makes a good point. The turnout today is lamentably low, but characteristic of recent times. It falls upon we twelve to proclaim upon a very serious matter.

“The Earl of Denbigh.”

Denbigh stood. “My Lord, I would rather be torn to pieces than to have any part in accepting so infamous a proposal.”

Lord Manchester stood. “Are there any here present prepared to argue in favour of the motion?” He paused. “None? Shall we therefore take a vote upon the question: Should we delay consideration of this matter until a later time?”

Looking around, he nodded. “Let it be recorded that the Lords here present voted to deal with the matter now.

“Very well. In that case, I ask the House to vote upon the statement that ‘By the fundamental laws of the Kingdom, it is Treason in the king of England for the time being to levy war against the Parliament and Kingdom of England’. All those in favour?”

No hands rose.

“Against?”

All twelve members raised their hands.

“In that case, let it be recorded that the motion was rejected by unanimous vote. The second ordinance calls for the erection of a High Court of Justice for the trial of the King. Given the result of the previous vote, I shall present this issue in the negative. Will the House now vote upon the question, ‘This House rejects the proposal to erect a High Court of Justice to try the King?’ All those in favour?”

Twelve hands rose.

“It is carried, therefore, that the ordinance is rejected.”

Manchester paused.

“Given the nature and seriousness of the work which we have undertaken this day, I propose that the house be adjourned for seven days. All those in favour?”

Twelve hands rose.

“Then let it be recorded. The House is adjourned. Sergeant at Arms, kindly convey these documents to your counterpart in the Commons.”

Sir John stood, pulling Moll’s elbow with him. She looked at him.

“They just had the balls to tell the House of Commons that they must obey the law, and to stick their seditious laws up their collective arses. The Sergeant is taking the response to the Commons now. This is a moment I do not want to miss!”

Lord Manchester gathered his papers and stepped down from the podium.

“Manchester!” He turned.

“Are you planning to visit your estates during the recess?”

“I am indeed, Denbigh. You too?”

“Oh, certainly. London is such an unhealthy place these days, don’t you think?”

“Indeed it is, Denbigh, indeed it is. And I truly do not envisage it becoming any healthier while we are away.”

**Thirty Minutes later**

**House of Commons**

Moll and Sir John climbed the stairs and looked into the public gallery of the House of Commons. All seats were taken, and soldiers stood at the back, watching the gallery. Seeing no alternative, they squeezed in at the back with soldiers on either side of them. Moll leaned over to whisper in Sir John’s ear. “I cannot say that I am comfortable so close to these troops. Are you sure that this is worth the risk?”

“It is worth any risk, Moll,” he muttered, “this is the moment where they either capitulate or else completely tear up the laws of this country.”

Below them, the room hushed as the Sergeant at arms brought a document to the speaker. The member, who had been in full oratory flow hesitated, then sat down while the Speaker studied the document before him.

“Gentlemen,” intoned the speaker. “The members of the Upper House have rejected both bills concerning the King.”

For a moment, a stunned silence graced the room with its presence, and then Henry Ireton stood. At a nod from the Speaker, he began. “Mr Speaker, every man on these benches has been lawfully elected by the people of this great nation. The Upper house, on the other hand, is no more than a ragtag assembly of unelected notables.

“I put it to you, Mr Speaker, that they have no right to have any say in the affairs of this nation, and I would like, with your permission, to present a motion that this House, on behalf of the people of England, rejects the authority of the House of Lords, and that henceforth all laws shall be passed by the elected members of this House.”

As he sat, Lord Grey leaped to his feet. “I for one would rather wield the axe myself than allow the King to escape justice. I second the motion.”

Mr Speaker looked at Henry Ireton and then stood.

“I am forced by tradition to present the motion for a vote. All those in favour?”

All hands rose.

“Very well. Let it be recorded that this House has voted in favour of the motion.”

“As I expected!” whispered Sir John. “To all intents and purposes, the army have now taken over the government entirely. It is a sad, sad day for this country.

“Doubtless now they will pass into law their acts concerning the King. I do wish the king to face reform, but I do not wish him any harm. But it is evident that they wish to see him dead and gone, and as far as I can see, the people of England have no say in the matter.”

“Shall we leave now?” asked Moll. “I see no purpose in watching any further; it will only distress both of us.”

Sir John Seymour nodded, and they squeezed past the soldiers towards the exit. The soldiers merely glanced at them, but there were those who noticed the tears running down Sir John’s face.

**3rd January 1649**

James took his leave of his family and returned to London, finding lodgings near to Moll’s home. Once he had stabled his horse, he made his way to the Inn, eager to find out what had happened to Thomas.

Opening the door revealed the usual raucous scene. Harlots dandled on knees, drinks sloshed, and smoke and noise completely filled the air around him. He peered through the fug, hoping to see Moll. Across the room, he saw her, seated alone.

“Ah, Jimmy, I was beginning to fear the worst; I haven’t heard from you in a while.”

James signalled to the landlord and sat down to await his drink. “We tried to take Cromwell; it went disastrously wrong, I saw Thomas, Frank, Edward and Charlie on the ground; the rest of us scattered. I have no idea yet what happened to any of them.”

His drink arrived and he took a deep draught. “I’ve just been lying low at home, enjoying my family.”

“It is not good news. I had no idea that you went after Cromwell, but I knew that it had gone awry. Thomas was hanged afore Christmas, as was Charlie. I heard that Frankie and Edward died on the spot. I have not seen nor heard of John, Peter and James Dewey; they must be lying low. I know that James hails from Oxfordshire, perhaps he has returned there.”

“Dammit! I knew we should have planned better; we were over-eager to get at Cromwell and now they are all dead. It is my fault.”

“It is not, James; Thomas was ever the leader, it fell to him to decide upon how the raid should be performed.”

“Yes, but in reality, twas I who planned our raids. I should have...”

“No, James!” interrupted Moll. “You cannot blame yourself; there is no profit in it. Responsibility can only lie at the door of the leader and that was Thomas. You must simply move on from this disaster, grateful that tis not you lying there mouldering.”

“I shall have to think deeply, of that I am certain,” affirmed James.

“There is more.”

James raised a quizzical eyebrow.

“Parliament has just passed a law giving themselves the right to try the King for Treason.”

“They did what? Did not the Lords stop them?”

“They tried. They rejected it, I was there, and I saw it. Parliament passed another Bill giving themselves absolute power and discretion. The King is to be tried for treason!”

“Is there no movement to rescue him?”

“Not that I have heard. I believe that he has tried several times to escape, to no avail. Now he is heavily guarded, and it would take a large army to release him.”

“They can’t do that! It is… it is sacrilege.”

“Many would agree with you, but few have the resources to do anything about it. Not all of the remaining government are in favour of this, but they are being overruled.”

“For now, all we can do is pray that common sense will return. At least the heir is safe in France.”

“There is that.”

“Well, whatever happens concerning the King, I must try to find the rest of the lads. Do you have any idea where they live?”

“No, but I can ask around. Give me a few days and I shall see what I can do.”

**Chapter 8**

**St. James’ Palace, London**

**Noon, Saturday 20th January 1649**

King Charles put down his knife and dabbed at the corners of his mouth with his napkin. Pushing back his chair, he stood and walked across to his writing desk. Barely had he refilled his pen when the doors opened.

Two soldiers pushed the doors wide and Colonel Tomlinson marched in with several soldiers. At a signal from the colonel, the troopers halted and hovered just inside the room.

“You are to accompany me, Sir,” announced the colonel.

“Indeed so? And what new adventure awaits us today, pray tell?”

“Today marks the start of your trial.”

“Is that so? Well, gentlemen, perhaps you can give me a moment to assemble my notes on the subject before we depart.”

“I am ordered to make haste, sir, but in the interests of allowing a fair trial to take place, I shall ignore that order long enough for you to do so; but Prithee, be quick!”

King Charles gathered his notes from his bedside table, pushed his arms into the coat being proffered by his manservant and then strode from the room, followed by the colonel and his troopers.

Upon passing through the main doors of the palace into the cobbled courtyard, the King paused to enjoy the fresh air. “There is nothing quite like the clean, refreshing smell of the English Air,” he announced.

“By your leave, sir, we must hurry,” responded the colonel. “Kindly board the sedan.”

Charles looked down the steps, and then took them two at a time as he raced to his transport, eager to get the blood flowing in his veins. He paused at the door. “Sir, is it necessary for all of the curtains to be closed like this? I wish to view my Kingdom, and indeed to allow my subjects to see me.”

“I regret, sir, that they must remain closed; I am charged with ensuring your safe conduct to Westminster Hall, which means protecting your person from attack as well as preventing any foolish rescue attempts.”

“Such a shame, such a shame.”

The door to the sedan was slammed shut behind the King and a full troop of foot soldiers assembled around it. The colonel climbed back up the steps to review his troops, and then marched smartly to the front of the troops. Glancing at the sergeant behind him, he set out at a smart pace southward towards the park. Behind him, the bearers lifted the sedan chair, then started walking, the troops keeping step alongside, behind and in front. Crossing the Mall, they entered St James’ Park. Charles peeked out from behind the curtains, enjoying the sight of the sparsely clad trees. They skirted the lake and emerged onto Horse Guards Road before halting in the courtyard of Whitehall Palace.

The colonel walked back to the chair and pulled the door open. The King blinked in the sudden brightness, and then climbed from the chair. Colonel Tomlinson indicated that the King should precede him into the palace, and then followed him, waving to some troopers to follow.

Inside the building, the colonel turned to the king who was tapping his foot impatiently.

“We are to take a barge, sir, down to Westminster Hall.”

“A barge? Surely it would have been easier to simply walk there!”

“Perhaps so, sir, but there are large crowds around the Hall, and we prefer to avoid trouble.”

“Oh, very well!”

Walking at his customary rapid pace, Charles made his way towards the garden, the soldiers all struggling to keep up. As he entered the garden, the colonel made a determined effort and overtook the king, leading the way down to the river. Beside the river stairs, in the doorway of his cottage stood old John Henry, a palace servant, standing respectfully at attention with his son beside him.

“Are you still alive?” jested the king as he passed with a smile.

“Aye, Your Majesty, they have not yet seen fit to dispose of me.”

“Come, sir, we have not the time to dally,” interjected the colonel. “You are expected at Westminster Hall.”

Charles climbed into the barge and took his seat in the cabin. The colonel took a seat opposite him whilst the troops took up station on the open deck. Charles looked around, drinking in the scene. The January wind bit into his face, capriciously taking little nibbles with every bluster and he felt pity for the soldiers standing on the open deck. The river looked grey and deserted, even the ducks taking shelter. ‘Only men are stupid enough to wander free in weather like this’, he mused silently to himself. Four more boats filled with troops were awaiting the barge.

The barge was poled away from the bank, then the whole flotilla made its way slowly along the river for two hundred yards to Sir Robert Cotton’s House, where more troops were formed up into two lines either side of the path into the house. As they passed Bridge Street, Charles smiled wryly as he saw the crowds surrounding the Palace.

“My, my, Colonel, you certainly are not taking any chances, are you?” commented the king upon disembarking.

“No, sir, now if you would be so kind, it is cold, and I would like to send these troops back to the warmth of their barracks.”

Without further ado, Charles set off at a brisk pace, entering the house and heading directly for the roaring fire waiting in the drawing room nearby. Outside, the Colonel dismissed the troops before hurrying back to his own billet to warm up.

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“He has arrived,” said Cromwell turning from the window, “I think it is evident that he will challenge the authority of the court from the start; I believe we can leave it up to Mr Bradshaw to admonish him when he does so. The charge is ready, the Commissioners are all,” he looked around, “well, almost all here - we can cope without the cowards who have deserted us. Has anyone seen Lord Fairfax?”

There was no response.

“Well, even Fairfax is not critical to our plans. I believe it is now time for us to enter the chamber.”

They filtered out of the Painted Chamber and took up position behind the twenty halberdiers and the officers bearing the sword and mace. Then they waited whilst the guards assembled behind them, then at a signal from John Bradshaw, the entire cortege moved solemnly forward towards the Great Hall.

The procession reached the great doors, which were flung open, and slowly they all shuffled through. Banked rows of benches rose beneath the south window for the commissioners, with Bradshaw’s chair slightly elevated above the others. Just below Bradshaw was a table covered by a Turkish carpet, and in the centre of the hall upon a slightly raised dais sat a lone armchair upholstered in red velvet. The public galleries ran all around the hall, and armed guards stood at every entrance.

The galleries were silent as the audience took in the pageantry of the occasion. They watched as the ceremonial sword and mace were laid upon the table. They watched as John Bradshaw took his place, with the two lawyers Lisle and Say on either side. They watched as the remaining commissioners took their places. The guards took positions between the galleries and the court, the clerks took their seats behind the table, and once all was in place, Bradshaw glanced at Cromwell, and then nodded to Phelps, one of the clerks.

Phelps stood. “This Court is convened under the powers granted to it by Act of Parliament passed on January the second this year.”

Phelps sat down as Bradshaw stood.

“Let the prisoner be brought forth,” announced Bradshaw, and then paused as twelve halberdiers marched from the Court. “Whilst we await the arrival of the prisoner, perhaps Mr Phelps can do the roll-call.”

Phelps stood again and began calling names from a list in his hand. As each name was called, the commissioner in question rose, announced his presence, and then sat down.

“Lord Fairfax,” he called. Hearing no response, he called again, “Lord Fairfax.”

In the gallery, a woman in a mask stood. “He has too much sense to be here!” she announced.

Bradshaw glanced up and signalled to the guards, who roughly ushered the woman from the room.

“Who in the name of God was that?” whispered Cromwell to his neighbour.

“Did you not recognise the voice? It was Lady Fairfax.”

“Really? I have never socialised with Fairfax, so have never met her. But I heard that she is something of a Royalist.”

“Very much so, general. I am sure that it is her influence prevents General Fairfax from attending today.”

They returned their attention to the proceedings as the roll call finished and the door was opened to admit the king, who was preceded and followed by the halberdiers. The soldiers moved to their stations at either side of the court, whilst Charles Stuart paused to take in the scene, then walked quickly across to the raised chair prepared for him in the middle of the hall.

Dressed entirely in black, with the great irradiating star of the garter resplendent upon his cloak, he paused and glanced up at the assembled commissioners. Around his neck, the jewelled George hung from its blue ribbon, and on his head, he wore his customary tall hat with his long grey hair sweeping down to his shoulders. Maintaining an impassive face, he sat and faced his accusers.

John Bradshaw stood, swirled his black gown behind him and looked around the court. The noise stilled, and he lifted the document in his hand and began to read.

“Charles Stuart, King of England. The Commons of England, assembled in Parliament, are aware of the great calamities that have been brought upon this nation and of the innocent blood that has been shed. They have concluded that you are responsible for it, and feel that they owe a duty to God, the country and themselves. They have also kept in mind the responsibility imposed upon them by the people of this nation and have therefore constituted this High Court of Justice before which you have been brought, in order that you may hear the charges which have been laid against you.”

He paused, looked at John Cook and sat down as Cook stood up.

“My Lord, on behalf of the Commons of England and all of the people of this country, I do accuse,” He turned to glare at the king, a mere five feet away. “Charles Stuart here present of high treason and high misdemeanours, and in the name of the House of Commons I demand that the charge be read to him.”

“Hold one moment,” said Charles, his voice steady.

Cook continued to unroll the document, ignoring the king. Charles leaned forwards and tapped Cook several times on his arm with his cane. Cook ignored it. The head of the cane fell off, and after a momentary pause, the King left his seat and retrieved it.

“Sir,” interjected Bradshaw, “the court commands that the charge be read. If you have anything to say afterwards, you may be heard.”

Cook smiled as the King remained silent, and with evident enjoyment, he continued.

“It is known that as King of England, you, Charles Stuart were entrusted with a limited power to govern by, and in accordance with the laws of this land. But sir, you did conceive a wicked plot to raise yourself up and gain unlimited and tyrannical power to rule according to whim and to overthrow the rights and liberties of the people of England.

“In pursuit of this design, you traitorously and maliciously levied war against the people and Parliament of this country. You sought invasion from foreign countries in pursuit of this aim, and following defeat, did attempt to renew the hostilities within the past year. These wars were wicked, murderous, and destructive and their sole objective was to raise you, Charles Stuart, above and at the expense of the people of this country.

“You, Charles Stuart, are therefore responsible for all of the treasons, murders, rapes, arson, looting, destruction and mischief done to this nation. You, Charles Stuart, are therefore a tyrant, a traitor, a murderer and an enemy of the people and commonwealth of England.”

Charles had been fidgeting in his seat, looking around the courtroom as if bored beyond reason. At the closing words, he laughed.

Cook sat down, the signal for Bradshaw to rise. “Sir, you have now heard the charges. The court awaits your answer.”

Charles looked at Bradshaw for a moment before responding. Normally, he spoke with a stutter, but on this occasion, he spoke clearly and fluently.

“I would like to know by what power I have been brought here. I desire to know by what lawful authority. There are many unlawful authorities, thieves, robbers. A man holding a sword at another’s throat holds the ultimate power, the ultimate authority. But he is not a lawful one. Remember, I am your king. I am your lawful king, and you should think carefully about what sins you lay upon your own heads, and what the Judgement of God will be; I am entrusted to be king by virtue of a long and lawful descent, and I shall not betray that trust to bow to a new and unlawful authority.”

“I demand that you answer the court in the name of the people of England, of whom you are elected king.”

“England has never been an elective kingdom; it has been a hereditary one for almost a thousand years. I stand here in defence of the liberty of my people, far more so than any of you who come here pretending to be my judges.”

“Your answer is to interrogate the court? That is unwise in the current circumstances. You have been told the basis of our authority two or three times now.”

“I did not come here to submit to this court,” Charles said. “I was brought here by armed force. I will back the privilege of the House of Commons, properly constituted, to the hilt. But I see no evidence of the House of Lords here present; this causes me to wonder where is my Parliament? Show me a legal authority, warranted by the word of God, by the scriptures, or by the constitution of the kingdom, and I will gladly answer to it.”

Bradshaw waved to the guards. “Take him away.”

From the guards, a chant started, “Justice, Justice, Justice.” Charles, startled, turned around to look.

“Will you answer the charges?” asked Bradshaw again.

Charles looked at him and then stood.

“Sir, let me tell you, this is not a trifling matter. I am obliged to keep the peace by the duty I owe to my God and my country, and I will do so to the very last breath of my body. You have yet to satisfy God and the country as to what gives you the authority to do this; if it is by usurped authority, you cannot do so. There is a God above who will call you and all those who give you this power into account...”

Bradshaw interrupted the king.

“The court will adjourn until Monday. Sir, the court will expect your answer at that time. We are fully satisfied that we have the authority to convene this court.”

“You have not shown any legal authority which would be sufficient to satisfy any reasonable man.”

“That is your opinion. We are satisfied that we are your judges.”

“It does not matter what I think, or indeed what you think. It is the opinion of God and the people which matters.” He pointed to the charge sheet, lying alongside the sword and mace of state, “I do not fear that in the slightest.”

“Oh, in the name of God, take him away!” exclaimed Bradshaw.

As the King strode from the room, the soldiers were chanting ‘Justice, Justice, Justice’, but from the gallery came matching chants of ‘God save the King’, causing a small smile to cross the Monarch’s lips as he passed through the great doors.

**Westminster Hall, London**

**Monday, 22nd January 1649; Afternoon**

Charles entered the hall with his usual dignity, walking directly to his chair and taking his seat. Once settled, he looked up to Bradshaw, who looked towards John Cook to start the session. Cook was deep in conversation with another lawyer, both having their backs to the court.

Charles leaned over and poked Cook in the back with his cane. Cook whirled around, glaring at the king, who merely pointed with his cane towards Bradshaw. Bradshaw nodded at him, and Cook reddened before turning to face the prisoner.

“May it please your lordship? My Lord President, at the previous sitting, I presented to the court charges of high treason and other such crimes against the prisoner before us. My Lord, at that time he saw fit to decline to provide an answer, instead trying to dispute the authority of the court.

“I therefore wish to present to the court a motion that directs the prisoner to make a definite answer by way of confession or negation. Should he fail to do so, the court should proceed as if the prisoner had pleaded guilty to all charges.”

Cook sat down, at which Bradshaw stood.

“This court has been convened in accordance with an Act of Parliament passed in the Commons. It therefore has full authority under English law, and we are completely satisfied as to the legality of it. Since we are satisfied, the whole kingdom, the king included, must be satisfied with it too.”

King Charles stood.

“If it were only my own particular case which concerned me,” began the king, “I would have satisfied myself with my protestations concerning the legality of this trial on the previous occasion. But it is not just my case alone; it is the freedom and liberty of the people of England that is in jeopardy. You may pretend whatever you wish, but I stand more for my people than do you. For if you feel free to make whatever decisions you choose, without any checks or balances such as the House of Lords, then no man’s life is safe, no man’s possessions are safe.

“I shall now explain in greater detail my reasons for refusing to answer you.”

Bradshaw stood.

“We will not listen to arguments and disputes from a delinquent. You must submit to your judgement and give us an answer now.”

“I know full well my rights as king,” answered the king, “and I also know full well my rights as an Englishman. You are riding roughshod over both.

” I am not a lawyer, but I do know law and reason. I know as much law as any man in England, and therefore I plead for the liberties of the people of England far more than you do.”

“Sir,” responded Bradshaw, “you speak of law and reason; it is fitting that there should be both law and reason, and there is both against you. You may not dispute our authority. If you continue to dispute the authority of this court, you will be held in contempt of court, and such will be recorded against you.”

“Is it possible for a king to be delinquent? I am not sure that it is, but I would suggest that any man standing before a court of true law has a right to question and be satisfied concerning the legality of that court.”

“No-one may question the capacity of this court. We sit here by order of the House of Commons, and of all of your predecessors, and you shall answer to them.”

“Indeed so? In that case, perhaps you can show me one precedent.”

“You may not interrupt the court!”

“The House of Commons was never a court of law, so perhaps you could tell me how it suddenly has become such?”

“Clerk to the Court, will you call upon the prisoner to answer the charges!”

“I will answer,” responded the King, “as soon as I know under what authority you act.”

“Guards! Remove the prisoner!”

“I would like to detail my reasons for refusing to reply.”

“The court does not care what a prisoner would like to do.”

“I, sir, am no ordinary prisoner. Show me where there is a jurisdiction which does not allow the accused to be heard.”

“We show it to you here! The Commons of England! The next session shall be the final one unless you plead.”

“Well, sir, keep in mind that a king is not required to offer reasons for the liberty and freedom of his subjects.”

“Oh, how wonderful a friend YOU have been to the laws and liberties of England; let all of England and the world be your judge.”

“Sir, it was the liberty, freedom and laws of my subjects that caused me to take up arms. I defended myself with arms; I never took up arms against the people but for them.”

“Court is adjourned! Get him OUT of here!”

**27th January 1649**

**Westminster Hall**

James and Moll picked their way up the stairs and into the public gallery. Moll, as always, was dressed in men’s clothing, though today of a more sober mien than was her wont. James was mindful of his notoriety and fully aware that there were likely to be past victims present in the chamber. Accordingly, he had disguised himself as a woman again.

Finding a suitable spot near the railing, they stood and scrutinised the room. Panelled in oak, the walls rose to a high ceiling with magnificent oak beams spanning the room. Opposite them were the benches occupied by the judges, most of whom were already assembled, chatting amongst themselves, in some cases clearly exchanging jokes. James recognised several faces and took careful note of others. In the centre of the room was a raised dais with a single seat upon ornate carpeting; clearly, this was for the king.

He looked around as the main doors opened and Sergeant-at-Arms John Bradshaw, the President of the Court stalked in, followed by some soldiers and then, after a short delay, the king himself. As was his wont, King Charles took his time reaching his seat, taking the time to look carefully and expressionlessly around every part of the room, and a thrill coursed through James’ body when he felt the king’s gaze alight briefly upon him.

The President called the room to order. The king addressed him.

“I have not been given any opportunity to defend myself. Surely, this right is offered to even the lowliest of miscreants in my country so it should be offered to me, your sovereign.”

“Sir, you have had all of the opportunities that you are going to get. Your delaying tactics will work no longer.

“Gentlemen of the court. It is well known to all that this court has been convened several times, and the prisoner brought forth to answer charges of treason and other high crimes brought against him by the people of England...”

He stopped as a voice came from the gallery. “Not half, not even a quarter of the people of England. Oliver Cromwell is nothing but a traitor!”

Colonel Axtell, in charge of the guards for the day, ordered his troops to level their muskets at the gallery, and especially at a group of masked women. The group rapidly hustled one of their number from the hall, and the troops lowered their muskets.

“Who is that?” whispered James to Moll as the group was pushing past.

“I cannot be sure; Lady Newburgh is the obvious contender, but I have met her, and she speaks with a far higher voice. Perhaps Lady Fairfax?”

“Really? I am impressed.”

“The court has considered the case,” Bradshaw continued, “and the prisoner having refused to plead has been adjudged to have pled guilty to the charges. The matter of sentence has also been discussed and determined. This notwithstanding, we are prepared to hear any defence offered by the defendant provided he does not try to open a debate upon the jurisdiction of the court.”

Charles looked up. “Since you will not hear that which I consider to be the most important aspect for the liberty and peace of my subjects, I shall waive it. However, I must say this. That you have taken from me all that I hold dear, but I have at least been able to retain my honour and my conscience. I have held firm and resolute for the defence of my kingdom in the face of fierce attacks upon it, at the cost of my life, for I am quite certain that you will have assembled a most ugly sentence for me.

“You should be aware that a sentence conceived in haste is often repented at leisure. Since I can see that my end is near, I desire to be permitted to speak to both Houses of Parliament on the subject of the liberty and freedom of my people. I trust that this, at least, will be allowed. If you decline such a request, it will indicate clearly to all that the well-being of my people is not of importance to you.”

Bradshaw thought a moment and then stood. “Sir, though you speak with great eloquence, this is merely another device to delay matters and to evade and deny the jurisdiction of the court.”

“Excuse me,” said Charles, “but you do mistake me; this is no such thing, you judge before hearing what I have to say.”

“No. You have delayed us enough. You shall delay us no further...” He paused as there was a disturbance on the benches beside him.

“Do we have hearts of stone?” declared John Downes from the Commissioners Benches. The commissioners on either side of him tried to force him to sit, but he was resolute. “Are we, indeed, men?” He gasped as they made greater efforts to restrain him. “If I die for it, I must do it!”

Cromwell, sitting immediately in front of him, turned around. “What is the matter with you? Are you insane? Can you not just sit down and be quiet?”

“No, sir, I cannot be quiet. I am not satisfied with the integrity of this day’s proceedings.”

Bradshaw turned back to face the king. “The court will withdraw for consultation,” he announced, and then led the commissioners, many of whom were arguing loudly, from the hall.

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Bradshaw convened the court.

“Charles Stuart, King of England, you stand charged that you were the cause, instigator and continuer of two unilaterally declared, cruel and bloody wars, and are therefore guilty of all the treasons, murders, rapes, burglaries and mischiefs done to this nation.

“For all of which treasons and crimes, this court adjudges that you, the said Charles Stuart, are a tyrant, traitor, murderer and public enemy, and that you shall be put to death by the severing of your head from your body.”

As each word resounded around the chamber, James felt increasingly sickened, increasingly tempted to shout out. Moll put a hand on his arm and shot him a warning glance, and he subsided.

The president rose. “The sentence now read and published is the act, sentence, judgement and resolution of the whole court.” The remaining judges then rose to stand alongside the president.

“Am I now permitted to speak?” asked the king, still expressionless.

“Sir, you are not to be heard after sentence,” responded the president.

“Am I not, sir?”

“No, sir. Guards! Withdraw the prisoner.”

“By your favour, I would speak after sentence. Hold!” as a guard took his arm. “I say, sir, by your favour, sir! If I am not permitted to speak...”

Two guards took him by the arms and dragged the protesting king from the hall. Some tried to climb the barrier from the public gallery and troops rushed to intercept them, beating all and sundry with their musket butts. Moll was holding James back, and many others were protesting but to no avail. Any guards not engaged with conducting the King from the hall now turned their attentions towards the public gallery.

Moll nudged James. “Time to leave, methinks.”

James nodded. He allowed Moll to guide him outside and away from the hall. Finally, once the crowds had abated some, he turned to her.

“What kind of a people are we, that we allow our monarch to be tried and convicted by men such as these?”

“We are a country under a cloud. However, you can do naught to secure his release, so we must simply accept it. I was looking closely at the judges, and I think I will recognise many of them should I see them. I shall treat them cruelly if they come under the scrutiny of my pistol. For now, we keep quiet, stay low and retain our own principles.”

James nodded. “But” he thought, “Perhaps General Fairfax can.”

**Chapter 9**

James washed the makeup from his face and pulled out a set of ordinary, but smart clothes. Donning a puritan hat, he checked himself in the mirror. Carefully, he pushed his hair up inside the hat, and then searched around for a bible.

He maintained a scowl throughout his walk, quietly enjoying the extent to which people looked away, and especially amusing, when they spotted him heading towards him and crossed the street. After fifteen minutes, he turned into a quiet street with elaborately decorated buildings on either side. Keeping to the left side, he reached the home he sought and climbed the steps to Sir Thomas Fairfax’s London residence.

He rapped firmly on the door.

“Edward Willoughby to see the General,” he announced firmly once the door was opened. Brusquely, and maintaining his scowl, he entered the building without invitation.

“I will tell the general you are here, sir,” responded the servant. “Kindly wait here.”

James nodded and watched the man as he entered a room off the entrance hall. A minute later, he was ushered into the room. General and Lady Fairfax were seated on a sofa before the fire, taking tea. A glorious fire crackled in the hearth. Both looked up as he entered.

“Would you care to join us, sir?” inquired Lady Fairfax.

“Thank you, tea would be most welcome at this time.”

The general looked closely at his visitor as he sat, then visibly started. “You?”

James grinned. “The same, sir.”

Fairfax turned to his wife. “You may recall me relating the tale of a nocturnal visitor I had a few weeks back?”

She nodded.

“May I therefore introduce you to Captain James Hind, highwayman and former captain in the King’s Army?”

“I am pleased, if a little surprised to finally meet you, captain.”

“The pleasure is all mine, madam. I especially enjoyed your contribution to today’s proceedings, although I must confess, I was a little alarmed at the sight of so many muskets pointed in my general direction.”

“Ah, you were there?”

“I was, my lady. Although my chosen attire for the condemnation of the king differed significantly from what you see now. In my profession, and with my political leanings, it is advisable to deceive the eye of the beholder.”

“Pray tell, how you were attired? Perhaps I saw you without realising it.”

“I was dressed as a woman, madam, but a poor one. Ironically, my companion was a woman attired as a man.”

“You were with that Moll Cutpurse woman?”

“I was.”

“Then I did see you! In fact, as I recall I was rather rude to you and pushed you aside as we hurried to leave.”

“You are correct, madam, but I was not offended, how can I be offended by someone who has the courage to speak out so freely?”

“Or ill-advisedly.” interjected the General, a scowl distorting his features.

“Astonishing! I, of course, was hustled away from the building to safety. Did you see the ending?”

“Unfortunately, I did. It was no surprise - they were never intending to allow the king to speak in his defence. I have to say, though, the fighting amongst the commissioners was somewhat of a surprise - it would seem that not all have been successfully bullied into total submission.”

“I have not been told of that. Please tell.”

“One of the commissioners stood and protested when Bradshaw refused the King freedom to speak to the Lords and Commons. His neighbours sought to subdue him by pulling him back to his bench, and Cromwell told him to shut up and sit down, but he had the courage to stand his ground. They had to adjourn for a while, and the one who had complained did not return with them, indeed, there were numerous absentees. But I know not who they were.”

“The end result was unchanged, I imagine.”

“You are correct, my lady. The king is condemned to death.”

“That is why I refused to take my seat,” said Fairfax. “It was obvious from the very beginning that they intended to murder the king, and I wanted no part in it. I felt that by allowing myself to be listed, then refusing to take part, I would make my position crystal clear.”

“Why, sir?”

“I am certain that England will return to monarchy in the fullness of time, and I want no reprisals against my family. Equally important, however, I believe that one should be honest to oneself; I sought reform, not murder. I was unable to stop them, but I certainly disrupted them. Now I must see what I can do to get the sentence commuted.”

“Do you think you can do that?”

“I can try. I am still Cromwell’s superior officer within the army, and I do have my supporters.”

“You may rest assured, captain,” piped up Lady Fairfax, “that my husband will do everything in his power to save the king.”

“I never doubted it, madam. I visited him initially because he seemed to be the only honourable man amongst my king’s enemies. I still believe I was correct in doing so.”

The general cleared his throat. “I was somewhat surprised by the attire, captain.”

“No-one will think to stop a scowling puritan with his bible in his hand, general.”

“You may indeed be right, captain. But do take care upon leaving, Cromwell, or more particularly that slimy creature Ireton, will have troops everywhere until the king is dead.”

“They shall not take me, general; you may be assured of that.” James finished his tea, and then lifted the spoon. “Such beautiful silver plate; I wish my profession earned me sufficient to allow me to adorn my home table with such; I am sure my wife would love it!”

“I quite agree,” commented Lady Fairfax. “Thomas, why do you have such finery here in London when our cutlery at home is so shabby?”

“I need it here for the calibre of guests I receive, my dear. However, I do agree, we should not be disadvantaged at home; I shall attend to it, but I’m sure the good Captain does not wish to eavesdrop upon our domestic matters!”

“Please, sir, be not concerned for me. Do remember, I come from more lowly stock, and it is a relief to hear that such matters are not the sole prerogative of the poor!” He stood to leave, and then paused and bowed towards Lady Fairfax. “It has been an honour to make your acquaintance, madam.”

She nodded, and the general stood to shake his guest’s hand. “Always a pleasure, captain.”

**29th January 1649**

**The King’s Dressing Room**

The door opened and the children entered the room. Elizabeth walked sedately and properly. She was not yet come into the full bloom of womanly beauty, but even in her youthfulness, she showed promise of what was to come. Henry, however, ran to throw himself at his father. Puberty lay in the future for him, and the lessons in decorum were not yet a part of his behaviour.

Charles sat on the edge of his bed and lifted his son onto his knee before turning to face his daughter. My dear Elizabeth, I have some important tasks for you to perform for me.” Elizabeth nodded. “You must tell your brother James that he must now look upon Charles not as just his older brother, but as his Sovereign Lord. I also request that you order them both to love each other, and to forgive my enemies. You will not forget this, my dear child, will you?”

“No,” she replied, “I shall not forget for as long as I shall live.” Bored with this, Henry clambered down from his father’s knee to investigate the ornately decorated bedroom.

“Good. I expected no less of you. I also want you to pass a message to your mother. Tell her that I have loved her faithfully all of my life, and that my tender regard for her will not cease for as long as I have breath in my body.”

Elizabeth burst into tears. Charles swept her into his arms and hugged her, tears flowing down his face.

“You must not feel so badly for me, my child; I shall die a very glorious death. I shall give my life for the laws and the freedom of this land, and for steadfastly refusing to compromise my belief in God and the proper worship of Him. I have already forgiven my enemies, and I have asked God to forgive them also. So it is good.” He smiled at her as he released her. Elizabeth smiled back, and then sat upon the bed as her father turned his attentions to her brother.

“Come, Henry, let me dandle you on my knee one last time,” cried Charles with false jollity. Henry clambered back up onto his father’s knee. Charles looked at his son, all frivolity gone from his face. “My dear boy, they are going to cut off your father’s head.”

Henry stared into his father’s face. “They are going to cut off my head,” repeated Charles, “and perhaps they will want to make you a king; but you must not be king, not as long as your brothers Charles and James are still alive. Because, my son, if you do, they will probably cut your head off too, at some time or another.”

“They will never make me king,” declared Henry. “Never! I would rather be torn to pieces!”

“Very good, very good. You will remember?”

“I shall, father.”

“Excellent. I knew you were a good boy, a true Stuart. Remember too that you must obey your mother, and to pay close attention to your prayers and devotions.” He turned to face his daughter.

“I have refused to see any but you, my children; I must have time to make my peace with God before I die. But I beseech you both to tell any who ask that I die with dignity and without regrets. You must forgive those who have accused me, but you must never trust them either; they have lied to me and to their followers. Their souls must be in sore peril.

“Do not grieve for me, for I die a martyr. I die knowing that my eldest son will take up the mantle and restore proper governance to my country. That my people will recognise in time the magnitude of the error they have committed, and that they will beseech Charles to return to England and take up the throne, which will become rightfully his at the moment of my death.

“You should tell all others that I expect them to support my son when that time comes, to aid him in whatever way he requires.”

Charles took a deep breath, closed his eyes for a moment then took his children into his arms for a final hug before escorting them to the door.

**30th January 1649**

Charles Stuart opened his eyes. It was still early, and no sound disturbed the darkness save for the gentle snoring of his attendant, sleeping peacefully beside the bed.

“Herbert,” he whispered, then as the snoring continued, “Herbert!”

“Sire. I apologise, sire, today of all days I should...”

“Be at peace, Herbert,” interrupted the King. “Today, I shall arise myself, for I have a great work to do.” The attendant scrambled to his feet, bowed and backed away a little.

“Are you sure, sire?”

“I am, Herbert, be at peace. I shall require my best attire. Tis a cold morning, so please bring me extra underclothing, for I have no wish to be seen shivering lest my enemies believe that I fear death.”

“Death holds no terrors for me,” he continued, “I merely thank God that I am prepared and ready to embrace it.”

Once dressed and groomed, he admired himself in the mirror. The double thickness of shirts changed little, merely adding a touch of extra girth to his chest. The selected coat hung straight and clean, and his boots gleamed in the unseasonal morning sunshine. Finally selecting a hat of the deepest black with two unusually long ostrich feathers, he smoothed his moustache, stroked his beard and smiled.

“Excellent,” he commented to no-one in particular, “my subjects can feel naught but admiration for such a well-groomed fellow!”

A knock sounded at the door, and Herbert opened it to admit the Bishop of London. His long black robe had been freshly cleaned, and his cassock perfectly placed for such an auspicious occasion.

“Sire,” he bowed after entrance. “I am here to say a few prayers with you.”

“Come in, come in. I am ready.”

Together, they knelt whilst the bishop read the prayers. The bishop then began reading the twenty-ninth chapter of the Gospel according to St. Matthew, which details the closing scenes of Christ’s life.

“This does seem a most appropriate reading,” commented Charles, “your monarch thanks you for choosing it.”

“May it please your majesty; this is the proper lesson for today.”

“Then it is a most appropriate coincidence that it should occur on the day I am to join Him. I am ready for the journey, and eager to meet Him.”

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“General!” Henry Ireton was sweating profusely as he chased his father-in-law along the lengthy, panelled corridor.

Cromwell paused and looked back at his son-in-law. “What is it, Henry, I’m in a hurry.”

“I was thinking last night and realised that the moment we execute the king, Charles Stuart will be proclaimed king under English Law. We’ll just be replacing one problem with another, this time one who is outside our control.”

“I hadn’t thought of that! You are right of course. You’ve had more time to think about this, have you any ideas?”

“We have to pass a law through the Commons before the king dies, making it a punishable offence to proclaim a successor.”

“Come,” Cromwell hurried back towards the Commons Chamber, “we need to get it passed before they adjourn to watch the execution.”

As they entered the chamber, the Speaker was in the process of approving the expenses of the House. He looked up, at which Cromwell raised a finger before hurrying to sit next to Colonel Marten and beginning a whispered conversation.

The Speaker looked towards the benches. “Is the motion approved?”

All hands rose save the three conspirators.

“The motion is therefore passed. Mr Sergeant at Arms, advise the treasury accordingly.”

The Speaker patiently waited while Lieutenant General Cromwell, General Ireton and Colonel Marten made notes. A few minutes later, the Colonel stood.

“Colonel Marten,” announced the Speaker.

“Mr Speaker, I wish to place before the House a bill seconded by General Ireton, proposing an Act prohibiting the proclamation of any person to be King of England, Ireland, or the dominions thereof.”

The Speaker looked at General Ireton, who nodded. “Very well, the bill is hereby placed before the House. All those in favour?” he looked at the array of hands raised. “All those against?” No hands were raised. “I therefore order that said act is passed, and that it should be printed and published forthwith. It is further ordered that the Sergeant at Arms proclaim the act in Cheapside, the Old Exchange and in Westminster, and that all military officers here present do take steps to ensure that the act is obeyed.

“Mr Lisle, Mr Love, you are ordered to withdraw from the House and prepare letters to be sent to the Sheriffs throughout the land ordering them to ensure that the act is proclaimed and policed within their jurisdictions, and to send a speedy account of their actions back to this House.”

“It is now time to reaffirm the votes of the fourth of January. If I may remind the House, it was declared that the people are the origin of all power under God. Further, that the Commons assembled here represent the wishes of the people and have Supreme Power in this nation. Finally, that whatsoever is enacted by the Commons assembled has the full force of Law even if the Act does not meet with the approval of the House of Lords or any king.

“Does the House wish to reaffirm these declarations?”

“Aye!” echoed throughout the chamber.

“Are there any who oppose the declarations?”

After a few moments of silence, the Speaker declared, “They are thereby ordered to be published and treated as Law.”

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James and Moll slowly approached Whitehall. For so sombre an occasion, both had attired themselves with some magnificence, and none who saw them would have had the slightest doubt as to their allegiances. Ahead, they saw the crowd milling around as they tried to enter the square.

“Perhaps we should enter the square from the other side; I certainly do not want to go too close to those soldiers,” whispered Moll, for once dressed in female clothes.

“There is a way in on the other side. Let us hope that there are fewer guards,” responded James, turning his horse and urging him into a trot across Green Park. His best cloak billowed behind him, and the feathers in his hat swung in the breeze of his passage. James had again had his hair coiffed to perfection and shaven closely - his king may see him, and he did not want to give an unfavourable impression.

As they had hoped, there were no guards to the west, so they sidled into the square, staying close to the exit and near to the wall.

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Colonel Hacker nervously knocked upon the door of the King’s Chamber. After a minute without response, he knocked again, louder this time. Inside, the king bade Herbert to see who it was.

“I am ordered to see the king,” called the unhappy Colonel.

“Let him enter,” instructed the king.

Wringing his hands before him, Colonel Hacker entered the chamber. His face was wracked with distress, his eyes almost tearful.

“I have the most awful duty to perform; it is not my wish. But it is now time for us to escort Your Majesty to Whitehall; however, I am instructed that once there, you may have a little time for rest.”

“Very well,” responded the king. “Proceed, and I will follow.” He took the bishop’s arm, and they walked solemnly from the room. Outside, a troop of soldiers stood at attention, formed into a square. The king walked to the centre of the square, then paused and looked around.

“Herbert,” he called, “come walk with me awhile.”

Herbert scampered over to stand beside his monarch, who smiled and took his arm. The king began walking towards Whitehall, the guards before him clearing the way, those alongside and behind keeping pace.

As they entered the square, the king slowed in order to take in the scene before him. To his left, a man dressed in full cavalier regalia sitting proudly upon his horse caught his eye. Smiling briefly, he nodded.

He resumed his rapid pace until they reached the building and the door opened before them whilst the troops moved aside and stood to attention. Without breaking stride, the three men continued into the hall and the doors closed behind them.

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James felt tears on his cheeks. “Did you see that?” he asked.

“I did. You will probably be the last friendly face he sees in this lifetime. Treasure that moment, Jimmy.”

“I shall. And I shall fight on until the cause is won!”

**Chapter 10**

General Cromwell waited until the Speaker dismissed the House for the day, and then hurried out of the chamber. Saluting Colonel Pride as he passed, he hurried down the steps and turned right towards Whitehall Palace.

The crowds jostled him and made his passage difficult, so he pushed his way across to a group of troopers who were watching the people from the safety of a doorway.

“I need to get through to the palace. Clear a way through for me.”

The men jumped, but immediately began clearing the way with much shouting and pushing. Cromwell began to make progress whilst behind him, Henry Ireton scurried to catch up before the gap closed.

As they approached, the crowds grew thicker.

“Faster!” urged Cromwell, anxious to get beyond the reach of the crowd before they realised that he was amongst them.

Finally, with a gasp he pushed through the doors and stood inside for a moment to catch his breath. Ireton pushed through and stood beside him. Across the hall, he saw General Fairfax pushing his way towards him through the throng inside the hall, so he quickly beckoned to Colonel Tomlinson standing nearby.

“Wait until we have taken General Fairfax into the chapel, and then proceed with your orders,” he whispered. Tomlinson hurried away just as Fairfax reached them. “General! I didn’t expect you to attend, it wasn’t necessary, you know.”

“I know that, general. However, I have some important issues I must raise with you. I have spent the past two days under siege by the bearers of petitions for clemency. These need to be addressed.”

“Indeed they do, general. Shall we talk through here in the chapel; it is far too noisy out here.”

Cromwell pushed the chapel door open whilst Ireton ushered Lord Fairfax into the chapel and closed the door. Peace engulfed them, and they all took a moment to take in the magnificent windows adorning the King’s private chapel. Ireton broke the peace.

“Ah! This is much better. I so hate crowds.”

Fairfax glared at him. “This is not a moment for levity or jovial remarks,” he chided him. “A man is about to die, yet you act as if ‘twere nothing.”

He turned towards Cromwell.

“I have received petitions from the Dutch Government, the Scottish Parliament and the mayor and people of London requesting that we grant clemency to the king. The execution must be delayed until they have been properly considered.”

“Parliament received a petition from the Dutch this morning, and indeed granted permission for the Prince Elector to visit the king.”

“And what was the decision of Parliament regarding the Dutch petition?”

“Parliament decided to defer it to another day. We have much more important matters to deal with.”

“Yes, I did see the order of the day. Voting to pay expenses, as I recall. You regard this as more important than a petition from a friendly Government?”

“Twas not I, general, twas Parliament. I am but one vote. But enough. Come; let us pray for guidance in this matter.”

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The soldiers pushed through the crowd and took up position around the scaffold, weapons drawn, eyes searching. The hastily erected scaffold cast a dark shadow in the weak winter sunlight, and they pushed the crowds further back, not because of security, but to escape the deathly chill of the sinister darkness.

The balcony doors opened, and King Charles and his bishop stepped into the doorway. Charles adjusted his hat slightly and stood taking in the scene. Then he moved forwards on the scaffold to address the people.

“My people. Understand that I seek your freedom as much as anyone else does. But understand also that to attain that freedom there must be laws and governance; that way, your life and your God become yours. It is not your right to govern, that is not your concern; a king and his subjects are very different and unless that is recognised, there can be no liberty.

“This is why I am here. If I were willing to give way to rule by the sword, I would not be here. I am a martyr for my people.

“I shall not delay you much longer, I only have this to add; I would have wished for a little more time to organise what I would say to you a little better. I do hope that you will excuse me.

“I have a clear conscience, and I pray to God that you will act in accordance with what is best for England and best for your own salvations.”

The king then turned to talk with the bishop and executioner. James saw him thrust his hands forwards briefly whilst talking. The king turned again towards the crowd. “I go from a corruptible to an incorruptible Crown, where there can be no discord.” He removed his hat and cloak and placed a cap on his head, pushing his hair tightly inside. Finally, he knelt over the block and began praying. A reverent silence descended upon the crowd.

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Charles placed his head on the block and prayed, “Lord, thy servant is about to knock upon thy door. I beseech you; welcome him into your arms and Your Kingdom, where there can be no more pain.”

Thrusting his hands forwards, he waited.

He heard the sound of air passing over a swiftly moving object, felt a prick at the back of his neck, a second of blinding pain, then...

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James saw the axe descend, saw that it cleaved the head from the king’s body in a single clean strike. Then silence.

The executioner reached down and removed the head from the basket, holding it up for all to see. A horrified groan echoed around the square as all realised what they had witnessed; the theory is far removed from the actuality.

The crowd went silent. An angry murmuring arose, slowly filling the square, and James moved his horse forward a couple of steps and unsheathed his sword. Holding it high above him, with tears running down his face he cried, “You have murdered our king! The king is now in France; long live the king!”

The murmuring rose to a cheer, and James wheeled his horse, dug his heels in and galloped from the square, tears still streaming. Behind him, the cheering subsided, but Moll, sitting quietly on her horse at the back of the square heard the beginnings of a chant arising; “God save the King, God save the King...”

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In the Chapel, Thomas Fairfax lifted his head as he heard the groan from outside the building. Straining to hear, he eventually heard the chant from the crowd.

Leaping to his feet, he turned to face Cromwell.

“You evil, conniving bastard! You never intended to listen to any pleas for clemency; you just wanted to prevent me from delaying the execution.

“I have no idea what your evil plan is, but by this feral act you have declared your hand and declared war on the people of England.”

Red faced, Cromwell got to his feet. “General, you may be Commander in Chief of the New Model Army, but within parliament you are no more than another voice, one of the members who may vote. Parliament voted to try the king, he received a full and fair trial, and the verdict of the people has just been carried out.”

“Having arrested or excluded all of those who are not your lackeys, it was always inevitable that you would get your way. This is no longer a democracy; it is a nation in sore crisis.”

“As I recall, general, the order to trim parliament was signed by your hand.”

“It was not, sir! Someone, and I do suspect your lapdog beside you, forged my signature onto that order. I knew nothing of it until twas all finished with.”

Cromwell had whirled to face Ireton as Fairfax spoke. Ireton flushed but remained cool in his demeanour.

“I shall find out about that matter, sir. Meanwhile, we have a fait accompli on our hands, and we must live with it. You included.”

“I shall consider my position very carefully, Cromwell, you may be sure of that. However, do not imagine for a moment that I plan to step down from my position as Commander in Chief and hand it to you. You already have Parliament in your pocket, with the Army too you would be free to become a dictator, and we just finished disposing of one of those, one at least who had the training for the job.”

**1st February 1649**

**London**

The dandy strolled along the Strand, nodding to the passers-by, often with a twirl of his silver-headed stick, the end of which shone brightly in the winter sunshine. Turning the corner near to Charing Cross, he doffed his hat at a passing group of women, and then wove his way across the street, dodging the manure left by the passing horses as adroitly as he avoided the carriages themselves.

Looking up at the houses, he located his target, and skipped up the steps, using the end of his cane to rap the door.

“May I help you, sir?” asked the manservant answering the door.

“Sir John Hines to see the General.”

“Won’t you come in sir? It is a little chilly out today.”

“Certainly!” the figure stepped inside, enjoying the warmth when the door was closed.

“If you don’t mind waiting here, Sir John, I shall apprise the General of your arrival.”

While the servant was gone, James removed his gloves and strolled around the vestibule, admiring the pictures and statuary placed around the walls. He turned as he heard footsteps.

“If you will pardon me, sir, the General has no recollection of having met you.”

“Ah, yes, well it was rather brief, but he did invite me to visit him here.”

“I shall advise the General accordingly, sir.”

After a moment, he returned.

“The General will see you now, sir.”

Entering the study, the Dandy paused a moment. The General was standing before the fire, his hands behind his back. To the right, the desk was strewn with papers and the pen sat in the inkwell, asking to be used. General Fairfax himself looked highly strained, although he maintained a polite, welcoming smile as he studied his visitor.

His eyes went wide for a moment, and then he strode forward, hand outstretched, “Sir John, of course I recognise you, I do apologise. Do take a seat. Carstairs? Could you bring a little spiced wine for my guest and I?”

The dandy and the general sat before the fire whilst the servant brought wine, and as soon as he was out of the door, General Fairfax leaned close to the dandy. “You take a damnable risk coming here in broad daylight, Captain Hind.”

“I do, sir, and I would not take such a risk normally. But I wanted to hear from you exactly what happened yesterday.”

Fairfax grimaced. “Cromwell and Ireton. They outsmarted me. Again.”

“Tell me more. I thought you intended to try to delay the execution?”

“Indeed I did. Over the past two days, I have had visits from representatives of the City, from the excluded Members of Parliament, from the Dutch Government and from the Scots. All were asking me to delay the execution. But when I arrived at Whitehall Palace, Cromwell and Ireton assured me that there was no rush. They took me into a room for discussions, which they turned into more of a prayer meeting. By the time I got out of there, the execution was over, exactly as they had planned it.”

“General, I fail to comprehend how an honourable man like you can continue to work with men like that.”

“I struggle myself. Perhaps I shall resign at some point, who knows? But for now, I shall remain in place in an attempt to limit the damage those two do to this country. Trying the king is one thing; he needed to be brought down a peg or two. But executing him is something else, and the devious tricks they used to achieve their objectives clearly show what calibre of men we are dealing with.

The general looked at James. “I believe fervently that this country needs a king, if only to curb the damage the likes of Cromwell can wreak. I believe that eventually, the country will come to its senses and re-establish the royal line. I also believe that somehow, you either are, or will be in contact with the heir to the throne. I am unable to dishonour myself by a treasonous act of any kind. Nevertheless, I do ask you to convey to his majesty that I tried my best to save his father, and that when the time is right, I shall use whatever influence and power is available to me to restore the throne and bring serenity and security back to the people of this country.”

James looked back. “I am not, at this time, in contact with his majesty. But if it should ever come to pass that I do encounter him, you have my solemn word as a gentleman that your message shall be conveyed verbatim.”

For a moment, the general studied the face of his enemy. “Thank you. Now, can you tell me why you elected to visit me so overtly, and dressed so outlandishly?”

James laughed. “Dressed like this, everyone notices the clothes, but no-one notices the person wearing them. It is a ruse I have used before, many times in different guises. Once to evade appearing before you, in fact.”

“Really? Please explain.”

“I was at Colchester when it surrendered. Given my history, I did not want to be presented on a platter to you, so I dressed as a whore and walked out with the populace.”

“Ah, I do recall asking where you had vanished to at the time.”

“Well now you know,” James paused to finish his drink, and then looked again at the general. “I truly have no idea where matters will go from here. It seems that you too are in the dark and fearful for our country. But we can only hope that the nation will come to its senses sooner rather than later.

“However, I am relieved to find that there is one of our enemies at least who can recognise the dangers of the path this country is stumbling along. I hope that you will be able to offer guidance and influence matters for the better.”

He rose to leave. “It has been a pleasure talking to you, general. I shall keep my promise, but will no doubt return at some point in the future.”

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The Earl of Southampton knelt beside his king’s body in the chapel at St James’s Palace. None had sought to forestall him, although no others were being allowed in to view the body. Silently, he wept as he prayed. Behind him, he heard footsteps, but remained kneeling.

The footsteps stopped and he heard the owner’s boots scuff as he too knelt in prayer. After a while, he heard the boots again as the owner stood. Southampton turned to look, but the figure was muffled against the cold.

“Cruel necessity,” announced the figure in a voice he could have sworn was Cromwell’s. Then he turned and strode from the chapel.

**Chapter 11**

James leaned forwards to soothe his horse, which had started to move restlessly as they hid in the thicket. This was a favourite spot close to Wantage, having good views in both directions, whilst affording good cover. A large bag hung on either side of his pommel, empty for the present.

In the distance, he saw a shabby looking man approaching on a tired looking ass. He waited patiently until the man was but five yards away before stepping out of the trees in front of him.

“Where are you going, sir?” enquired James. The man did not look as if he would be able to contribute much to James’s pocket, but the experience with the committeeman had taught him not to judge by appearances.

“Wantage market; I am going to buy a cow to provide milk for my children.”

“How many children do you have?”

“Ten, sir.”

“And how much do you intend to pay for this cow?”

“I have been saving for two years; it will be two pounds.”

“Sir, it is necessary for me to relieve you of your money at this time; but I will not wrong your children by depriving them of their milk. My name is Hind, and if you will give me your two pounds quietly and meet me again here in the same spot at the same time a week hence, I promise to double the sum.”

“It seems that I have no choice but to trust you sir; you are armed, I am not.” The Old man handed over his purse.

“Do not worry old man; I shall be true to my word; else why would I provide you with my name? But mind, be cautious and do not mention a word of this to anyone before we next meet.”

The old man turned his ass around and trudged back towards his home. James returned to the thicket and counted the money out, slipping it into his own purse. He was just about to leave when he saw a carriage in the distance, heading his way from the south. James glanced north; the old man was slowly approaching the next bend in the road and would have passed out of sight before the coach arrived.

Taking his place in the thicket beside the road, just out of sight, he waited for the coach to arrive. As the rumble drew near, he stepped out into the road with his guns pointed at the driver, who pulled the horses to a halt. James glanced over the coach, pleased to note that it was richly appointed, promising a good return for his efforts.

“Climb down, sir, and seat yourself on the ground next to the front wheel,” ordered James. The driver hastened to comply. “Place your hands on your head and remain quiet; I have no dispute with the likes of you sir unless you give me cause for alarm.

“Now, let us see who your passenger is.”

James walked his horse to the side of the carriage, and then called out, “You sir, in the carriage. Come slowly and quietly out of this door.”

The passenger climbed down and then stood with hands on hips facing James. His gaunt face was etched with disapproval and distaste.

“Do you know who I am, sir?”

“Indeed I do. I recognise you from the travesty of a trial in Westminster. You are Hugh Peters.”

The cleric shifted. “I assume that you have come to murder me, then?”

“No, sir, that is not my intent; only God can stand in judgement for the sins of which you are guilty, and I would not presume to usurp God’s vengeance. My intent is to rob you.”

“Young man, according to the eighth commandment, you should not steal. Besides, Solomon said, ‘do not rob a poor man, because he is poor’.”

“You are a Fool! If you obeyed God’s laws as you ought, you would not have presumed to have perverted his holy word when you took the text ‘Bind their kings in chains and their nobles with links of iron’ to so mistreat your Royal master, whom you and your accursed republican party murdered in front of his own palace.”

“But the king permitted unholy Catholic services to take place before his own eyes...”

“This does not mean he partook of them.”

“It matters not!”

“I would beg to disagree, sir. Moreover, unlike His Royal Highness, I am neither unarmed nor helpless. I am holding a gun trained upon you.”

“The commandment ‘thou shalt not steal’ is one of the strongest commandments, and you, sir are placing your very soul in peril by attempting to break this commandment.”

“Do you suggest, sir, that the commandment ‘Thou shalt not kill’ is a weaker commandment? I would suggest that my soul is my business and is in far less peril than is yours. In addition, sir, I say to you that you should not speak ill of men of my profession, for Solomon plainly said, ‘do not despise a thief’. But there is no point in us arguing, the substance of what I have to say is this; Pay up now or I shall send you out of this world to meet your master the Devil.”

Mr Peters pulled a purse from his cloak and handed it to James.

“Excellent,” commented James, “and if you will now be so kind as to hand over your fine cloak, our business will be concluded successfully, and you may be on your way.”

Taking the proffered cloak, he backed away and indicated to Peters to climb back into his coach. Once the door was closed, James waved his gun at the driver and watched as the coach recommenced its’ journey.

Looking forwards, he saw that the coach had not yet reached the next bend, so he spurred his horse and again stopped the coach.

“What now!” came from within the coach, and James smiled.

He waved his gun at the driver. “Just stay there, this will not take long.”

Walking to the side of the coach, he leaned down and addressed Hugh Peters, who was cowering on the far side of the carriage. “Sir, now I come to think of it, I am convinced that this has happened to you because you did not obey the Bible, which expressly says ‘provide neither gold nor silver nor brass in your purses for your journey’. Whereas you had provided a substantial amount of gold for yourself. However, I have realised that it is now in my power to help you to fulfil another commandment and I would be shirking my responsibilities were I to fail to do so. Therefore, pray give me your coat.

“You know sir, our Saviour also commanded that if any man takes away your cloak, you must also offer your coat; as you claim to be a man of the church, I cannot imagine that you will ignore such an express command especially as you cannot pretend to have forgotten it, seeing as I have just reminded you.”

Peters removed his coat and handed it through the window to James, who laughed, backed away and then galloped across the nearby fields, leaving the cleric fuming helplessly.

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James stood patiently waiting in the thicket near to Wantage. Snow lay thick, glistening as it began to thaw, and he had his face covered against the light, icy breeze. His hat was filled with the shining jewels of dislodged flakes of snow from the branches above him.

Exactly at the appointed time, the old man came wearily trudging down the road towards him, this time leading his donkey. The old man looked around as he approached the thicket. James glanced in both directions before stepping out in front of him.

He pulled his scarf down from his mouth, “Greetings, sir.”

The old man jumped. “Greetings! As you asked, I have told nobody, though I was sore pressed by my wife to account for matters!”

“I see that you lead your ass. Is he lame?”

“He is old, like me. I rest him when I can.”

“Well, perhaps I can ease matters for you. Here are the four pounds I promised you, that you might buy two cows, not one. And here is a further pound, that you may either buy better cows, or perhaps a new ass.”

“Sir, this is too much, even the usurers do not make so much!”

“Sir, were you a usurer I would relieve you of everything you had. You loaned me the money when I was in need, yet you are poor yourself. Enjoy your profits, and feel free to tell your wife and the world of your encounter with the notorious cavalier and highwayman, Captain James Hind.” With a courteous nod, James pulled himself onto his horse and galloped off north, back towards his home and family.

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James stretched his legs out, enjoying the warmth of the fire. Behind him, the children played noisily whilst his wife sat opposite him, sewing a gauntlet.

“Why do you do these things, James?” she asked. “Do you not care about your family? Could you not take up a lawful profession?”

“I rather doubt that I could, Maggie,” he smiled back, “they know who I am, they know I oppose them, and with dictators, opposition is not to be countenanced. I cannot be in any place for long.”

“Surely, though, there are professions which could still allow you to move around?”

“Perhaps. But in any event, Maggie, you need not fear for my safety; I walk under the protection of a spell.”

“You do? Tell me more.”

“It was perhaps three years ago. Yes, a little less. I was travelling towards Hatfield when an old woman stopped me near to the George Inn, begging for alms.

I gave her a crown, and made to move on, but she stepped before my horse, preventing me from moving on.

’I have stood here all morning waiting to speak to you,’ she said, ‘would you have me do so for nothing?”

“’Speak your mind,’ I responded with a smile, and she looked up at me very solemnly.

“’Captain Hind, you ride and face many dangers, great and small,’ she said, ‘Using my particular skills, I have found a way to protect you for three years. After that time, you shall be as any other, and in the same dangers. But if you are in England, come to visit me again and I shall renew the charm for you.’

“She then took a small box from her pocket and passed it up to me. ‘When you are in distress,’ she told me, ‘open this. Inside you will see a star set in the eye of a needle, which is itself set in a gimbal. Whichever direction the star points, that is the way to safety.’

“Then she took out a white wand, waved it over the box and smacked my horse on the rump with it. ‘Farewell,’ she called after me. I turned and thanked her as I galloped away, but that was the last I saw of her. I should return in the summer.”

“That is quite a tale,” responded his wife. “And gratifying for your wife to hear. Be certain to return to her before the spell expires, though!”

“I shall. But in the meantime, I shall have to be on my way fairly soon; I have heard that the accursed Bradshaw is to travel later this week, and I would very much like to have a word with him.”

“Well, white witch’s spell or not, take great care, my love.”

“Of that, you may be certain. After the taking of Thomas Allen - you remember him, he visited here once - I spend far longer planning than I do executing my raids. Part of it is that my horse must be well rested, which is why I must leave so long before the raid.”

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The carriage picked its way along the narrow lane wending its way between Sherborne and Shaftesbury. John Bradshaw was hoping to get as far as Salisbury before nightfall, so two horses had been hitched to the carriage.

“I can afford it now,” he had contentedly comforted himself.

He was idly reminiscing over his recent successes when the coach drew suddenly to a halt. The carriage door suddenly swung opened and he found himself staring at a grinning ruffian in a finely feathered hat.

“Good day to you, sir. We have some business to conduct, I believe,” announced the ruffian. “Captain James Hind at your service, sir, formerly of the armies of our late king. I am led to believe that you have brought some money for me.”

“Do you not know who I am? You shall hang for this sir, I shall have you hunted down and, yes, I shall sit in judgement myself and see to it!”

“I shall not, and you shall not, sir. I do not fear you, or any other king-killing son of a whore still alive. At this moment, I have as much power over you as you recently had over the king, and I would be doing God and my country a service were I to use my power as you did. Nevertheless, I prefer to let you live, villain, to suffer the pangs of your own conscience until justice shall lay her iron hand upon you and demand an answer for your crimes.

“You are not worthy to die at any other hand but that of the common hangman, or at any place other than Tyburn. But if you do not hand over your money immediately, I shall not hesitate to send you to your maker without benefit of any clergy.”

Bradshaw pulled two pounds from his pocket and passed it to the man.

Hind looked down at the money with contempt. “Sir, I shall provide you with a third nostril if you do not fully comply with my request. You are already aware that I am distraught about the murder of my king, and you should also know that I was there, I saw you sitting at the head of the coven which decreed his murder.”

Reaching below the seat, Bradshaw pulled out a purse and handed it across. James Hind opened the purse and looked inside. Smiling, he looked at Bradshaw.

“Ah, indeed sir. This metal could win my heart forever.” Keeping his gun trained upon Bradshaw, he addressed the purse in his other hand. “Oh, precious Gold! I admire you as much as Bradshaw, Prynne and all the other such villains do; the difference is that they would sell the Lord Jesus for your sake, whereas I would not.”

He turned to address Bradshaw again. “Do you know, I am sure that this is the substance which you Republicans call a wonder potion, rather like Quinine but more effective. Its virtues are strange and varied. It can make justice deaf and blind; it removes the stains of deepest treason far more effectively than soap does the common stains of a poor man’s labours.

“It is an antidote to poison; it assists in creating vile rebellious principles in those that use it. It clears the eyesight; it turns traitors so that they see only innocence in the worst of sinners.

“It is a wonderful ointment for a dying cause; it stifles division as surely as butter and brimstone cure an itch. In a word, it turns fools into wise men and wise men into fools, and both into knaves.”

He extracted and held up a coin.

“The colour of this precious balm is, as you see, bright and dazzling, and if applied quietly into the hand in the proper manner and dosage, invariably performs all of these cures and more.”

James returned the coin to the purse and slipped the purse securely into his pocket. Raising his pistols, he looked Bradshaw full in the eyes. “Until now, you and your infernal friends have run around acting as if you were some sort of messiahs. I believe that the time has now come to stop your careers.”

Taking aim at the terrified lawyer, James laughed as he saw a dark stain despoil the man’s breeches, and then spurred his horse to the front of the coach where the two coachmen sat steadfastly staring ahead.

“I have no argument with you,” he stated before pointing his guns at the two horses and shooting them.

Putting his pistols into a side pocket, he wheeled his horse and rode sedately away.

**Fleet Street, London**

The inn was as always shrouded in thick smoke from innumerable briar pipes. Across the room, a group was celebrating something noisily with the aid of much ale and numerous harlots. James peered across the table at Moll, who was contributing enthusiastically to the fug.

“I have wanted to get my hands on Harrison for a while. Now I understand that he will be travelling next Wednesday.”

Moll glanced up at him. “I have Fairfax in my sights. He will be crossing Hounslow Heath the same day. He doesn’t usually bother with much of a bodyguard, so it shouldn’t be too difficult.”

“We may owe Fairfax for his executions after Colchester, but I think he is the voice of moderation in this abortion of a Parliament, so try not to kill him.”

“If you insist.”

“But do take care! You’re more valuable to the cause alive than as a martyr.”

“I know. We both are.”

“After Thomas was taken, I’m ridiculously careful.”

“Very well. I’ll see you back here afterwards?”

“Yes, but then I’ll probably head home for a while. I have not seen my wife in a while; I have been too busy on the road!”

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Moll was lying in wait on Hounslow Heath. Seeing no movement on the road, she dismounted and led her horse a little deeper into the undergrowth before loosening her breeches and squatting down to relieve herself.

“Easier in a dress,” she muttered to herself before straightening and retying her breeches. Suddenly alert, she stood still to listen; in the distance, the sound of wheels on stone disturbed the morning birdsong, and she heard a flock of birds suddenly take to the air.

She finished tying her breeches, leaped onto her horse, and eased him back towards the road. Standing in the saddle, she peered along the road in the direction of the sound. In the distance, she saw two men on horseback alongside a smart-looking coach. It was approaching from the direction of London.

Earlier, she had cut down a nearby bush and laid it alongside the road. Leaning down, she took the rope she had tied to one end and urged her horse across the road until the bush lay squarely across the rudimentary road. Returning to her hide, she awaited the arrival of the coach.

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James watched as the coach passed into a small copse on either side of the road. Gunshots, followed by much shouting and the sound of clashing swords told him that someone else had beaten him to his quarry.

Annoyed, he urged his mount forward and across the fields, intending to emerge onto the road a half-mile further along. The hoof beats concealed the moment when the conflict ended, and it was only when he slowed down to pass through the small hedgerow lining the road that he realised that silence reined.

He halted and dismounted, holding his reins as he edged forwards to peer around the hedge.

In the distance, he saw the coach halted, the door open. Some of the soldiers were dismounted and holding swords to the throats of men on the ground. Clearly, the attack had not gone well. Harrison was pacing around giving orders, and James watched as the soldiers bound the men on the ground before tying them to a single rope.

After a while, the colonel returned to his coach, which lurched back into motion. Three men accompanied him while the remainder started in the opposite direction with the captives stumbling along behind them.

James stepped back behind the hedge, moving away from the gap as the coach and reduced complement of guards rumbled past. Once clear, he risked a final look both ways along the road to reassure himself that only three guards remained, then remounted and raced back to the higher line a field away from the road.

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Moll waited anxiously as the coach approached. She heard it start to slow and drew her guns. Cocking both with practiced ease, she gently urged her horse forwards. The coach was stationary before the bush, and both servants had dismounted and were trying to move the bush out of the way.

“If I may have your attention, gentlemen,” announced Moll. “I would very much enjoy a discourse with your passenger.”

The men started, and made to return to their horses and guns, but stopped short as they saw Moll pointing her guns squarely at them from a mere ten yards.

“Sit down, gentlemen, with your backs to the bush if you please.”

Once they had seated themselves, she turned her attention to the driver. “I see a pistol beside you, sir. Be so kind as to throw it onto the ground over here.”

As the pistol landed, she nodded at the driver and waved her pistol. “Now go and sit with the other two.”

She watched as he slowly descended, then waved her pistol again as he took his place beside the others. “Excellent. Now,” she turned towards the coach, “if you would be so kind as to exit the coach on this side, we can conduct our business and all be on our way again.”

Glowering, the figure opened the coach door and descended. “Do you know who I am?”

“Indeed I do, General Fairfax, indeed I do. Unfortunately, for you, however, my sympathies have always lain with the royalists, so your identity contains nothing to awe me. The treatment of your prisoners at Colchester gave me no satisfaction; so, do not expect me to hesitate to act. Now you will pass me your purse.”

“I shall do no such thing madam!”

Moll took aim and shot the general in the arm. She returned the spent weapon to her pocket and withdrew a third pistol. All the while, she kept her other gun trained on the general, now writhing on the ground clutching his arm.

“I beg to differ, sir. Would you care to reconsider?”

The general regained his feet and released his arm to reach into his coat and pass a bulging purse up to his assailant. “As a royalist, you should know, Madam that I opposed the execution of the king, and refused to sign the death warrant.”

“Indeed so? Well in that case, sir, you may keep your life. My friend Captain Hind believes that only God may pass judgement for so heinous a crime, whereas I am happy to assist God in his sentence. But I already knew that you tell the truth, else I would now be robbing a corpse.”

She opened the purse and peered inside. Observing a glint of gold, she smiled down at the general. “A pleasing sight. We can all now proceed, I think.” Turning her horse, she shot both horses grazing at the side of the road.

“We don’t want any chasing,” she commented before spurring her horse into a gallop back towards London.

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James galloped along the edge of the fields, trying to get ahead of the coach. Whilst he had passed it several miles before, he needed some space to allow him to return to the road before it passed. He espied a copse ahead and angled his headlong gallop towards it.

Arriving, he glanced back along the road. The coach was still lumbering towards him, still with only three guards. Finding cover, he prepared his guns.

Slowly, the coach came nearer. All of the guards had made their way to the front of the coach as they approached the copse, nervously watching for any movement. James backed away from sight, emerging on the far side of the trees. He picked his way around the back, emerging onto the front again as the coach passed from sight. Urging his horse forwards, he pulled alongside the coach and pointed his gun at the sole passenger.

“Stand and Deliver!” he announced. “You three riders stop too and remain facing forwards. If anyone turns, you will have a dead colonel on your hands.”

All stopped and remained motionless.

“Good. Now throw your guns into the ditch at the side of the road. Gently does it! Excellent. Now you can dismount and lie face down in the middle of the road where I can see you.”

“Now you, driver, get down there with them.”

Spotting a gun on the seat beside the driver, he eased forwards and took it, returning his own gun to his pocket. Glowering, the driver climbed down and lay face down in the mud. James eased back and beckoned to the passenger. “Get out.”

Colonel Harrison climbed down with surprising alacrity, and then stood, hands on hips, facing Hind.

“I shall be obliged for your purse sir,” commented James, keeping the gun trained on the colonel.

Colonel Harrison reached inside his robe, causing James to raise an eyebrow and pointedly take aim. Seeing this, the colonel slowly withdrew his hand, carefully holding his purse between two fingers. James reached down and took the proffered purse, then sat back and opened it.

“How much?”

“I know not sir; perhaps seventy pounds.”

James glanced in the bag again. “Very well.”

“I assume you now intend to murder me, Captain Hind.”

“Ah, you recognise me. Excellent. However, had you listened to your fellow rabble-rousers, you would know that I am a thief, not a murderer. Even for scum like you. Only God can pass sentence on a crime as awful as yours, so it is not for me to pre-empt his judgement. But Beelzebub must be rubbing his hands with glee at the tortures he will be authorised to use upon you and your evil co-conspirators.

“I believe that the anticipation is even worse than the actuality, so I prefer to allow you to revel in your crimes. Who knows, someone capable of so awful a crime may even accumulate more tortures in his remaining time. But I have achieved my objective now, so I shall take my leave.”

Turning his horse, James set off at a canter back along the road. After a while, he saw the troops previously with the Colonel galloping to catch up. Deciding to be audacious rather than attract attention, James continued on his way. As they neared each other, the Officer held up his hand, bidding James stop.

“Sir, did you see a coach with three attendants back there?”

“Indeed I did, sir. I think they are but a mile ahead of you,” replied James.

“Thank you, sir.”

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The servant pulled to a halt before the Magistrates office, tied his horse to the ring beside the large oaken door and rushed through, startling the men inside.

“Sirs, the general has been attacked and robbed not three miles from here! He urges you to give pursuit to the attacker, a woman dressed in men’s clothing - she came this way and should not be too far ahead of us.”

The magistrate jumped to his feet, banging his knee on the table before him. Rubbing his knee with one hand, he pointed at four constables lounging on a bench. “You men! You heard! Saddle up and give chase.”

They rushed from the room and crossed the road to the stables. Hurriedly, they saddled their horses and once they were all ready, mounted and galloped off in the direction of London.

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James tied his horse behind the inn, and then entered the bar. Other than a small group seated near the small window, the room was empty, so he selected a table near the bar and sat down as the landlord approached.

“Good day to you, sir,” he greeted the landlord, “A pint of your best ale and a bowl of your famous soup, if you please.” He handed a guinea coin to the landlord. “And do please let me know if you see anything untoward which might be of interest!”

“Captain Hind, Sir, it is an honour to welcome you to my humble establishment.”

“Have we met, sir? I have no recollection of visiting here previously.”

“No, sir, but your reputation precedes you. You are very welcome here.”

“Excellent. Now, the food and ale?”

“On its way.” The man bustled away towards the kitchen.

James sat back, swept his hat from his head and placed it on the bench beside him. Across the room, he saw several curious faces turned his way, but he ignored them and kept a watch through the windows behind them. He was confident that the soldiers would not think to look in here, so close to the robbery; they would be expecting him to be racing like the wind still.

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Moll slowed as she left Hounslow. Puffing like a grampus, the mare gratefully continued at a ponderous plod. Gradually, the village disappeared behind her, and ahead, she could already see the first houses in Brentford.

“Brentford, Chiswick, Hammersmith, and Kensington,” she recited to herself, listing the route home. Her reverie was interrupted by the sound of galloping horses behind her.

Urging her tired mare into a gallop, Moll bent low to give a low profile for any bullets aimed her way. Behind her, the pursuers burst around the bend like a torrent through a narrow ravine, exploding onto the road and urging even more speed out of their steeds as they caught sight of their quarry.

Moll squeezed her knees on her horse, who tried her best to provide an extra burst of speed. But so tired was she that instead, she stumbled upon a rut in the road and tumbled end over end, casting her rider into the ditch.

When Moll regained consciousness, three men were standing over her with guns pointing directly her way, whilst a fourth was removing her guns.

“Seems as if you got me, lads,” she grinned weakly whilst running her hand through her tousled hair.

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James finished his soup and pushed the bowl away from him. Sitting back, he smacked his lips and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. A swig of ale completed his contentment. The landlord was near the window, talking with a group of men when he suddenly stood upright and rushed back towards James.

“Some soldiers just pulled up outside, captain. You might want to make your way out through the kitchen.”

“Thank you, sir,” James grasped the man’s hand and clapped him on the shoulder. “I shall not forget this.”

He made his way behind the bar and through the kitchen. Behind him, he heard the Inn door burst open, but he did not wait to hear what was said; within two minutes, he was on his horse and racing along a side street towards the south.

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James had slowed to a trot, having heard no sounds of pursuit. He rubbed his forearm across his brow then stopped as he heard the thunder of hooves behind him. He looked around. No cover was visible for miles, and that was across muddy, treacherous fields so he encouraged his horse to gallop again. The horse, tired beyond reason, refused to speed up beyond a canter, and James watched anxiously over his shoulder as the thunder of hooves drew nearer and nearer. He drew his gun, and as the rider appeared behind him, took aim and fired.

The gunshot alarmed his horse, who suddenly found the energy to speed up, and they galloped away from the scene. With relief, James noted that the hoof beats were no longer following.

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The soldiers helped Moll from her exhausted mare. Stumbling on the cobbles, she was grabbed by each arm, and once she was safely standing, frogmarched into the magistrate’s office. The magistrate was pacing anxiously in front of the fire whilst General Fairfax sat in his chair behind the desk at the side of the room. His arm was now bound in a fine white linen bandage, although a spot of blood showed clearly where the injury lay. He looked up as she walked in.

“It seems that the boot is on the other foot now, madam,” he observed.

Fairfax looked aside to the magistrate. “Bind her properly and securely, and then transfer her to Newgate. I shall speak with the Attorney General to attend to her trial and execution.”

The magistrate nodded and indicated to two of his men to take her to have proper iron shackles attached.

Moll looked at the wounded General. “What would it cost me to persuade you to forget this episode?”

General Fairfax laughed and pointed to his injury. “More than you can afford, Madam.”

“Name your figure.”

Fairfax pondered awhile.

“Two thousand pounds. I told you it would be more than you could afford!”

“Done. Where shall I have it sent?”

“Are you serious, woman?”

“I am. Where shall I send it?”

“To my lodgings in Whitehall. But you do not see freedom until I have it.”

“I shall make arrangements as soon as I get to Newgate.”

“Very well. I have no wish to see you at liberty again, but I am a man of my word, and I named a price I was sure you could not afford; I was in error, but it is my error to rue. Send the money, and I shall see to it that you are freed.”

**Chapter 12**

James looked up as the door swung open. No Moll. He had been sitting here all evening waiting for her, and still no sign. He ordered yet another ale, but his mind began to run over the possibilities. Have they taken her, he wondered, or killed her, even!

He was feeling progressively guiltier as the evening advanced; why had he allowed Moll to take Fairfax? True, Fairfax was an easy target usually, but he himself had only narrowly evaded capture, so perhaps Moll, with her advancing years, had failed to escape?

He was interrupted by the approach of a grubby urchin clad in ragged shirt and breeches. Dirt streaked his face and hands.

“Is you the captain?”

“It rather depends upon who is asking and why,” responded James.

“Oh, Moll asked me to find the captain and ask him to visit her in Newgate. Gave me a penny and said ‘e’d give me one too.” The boy extended his hand.

“Not so fast. Tell me more. The happier I am, the more your penny grows.”

“Jailer told me to go see this lady in Newgate. She told me to come ‘ere and find the captain. Tell ‘im to visit ‘er in Newgate. She give me a penny, said you would give me another.” The hand went out again.

“What colour were her eyes?” asked James.

“Easy. Blue.”

“Very well.” James extracted two pennies and dropped them into the extended hand. Grinning, the boy closed his fist and made his way out of the bar.

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James looked through his clothes. Selecting some handsome leggings and a colourful waistcoat, he redressed himself until he looked like a court dandy. Adding some powder to his face, he donned a court wig before taking his purse and checking the content.

He took a handsome walking stick, pulled on a gaudy coat, and stepped outside. Returning to Fleet Street, he strolled east before turning up the old Bailey towards the Prison.

Newgate prison was located at the northern end, on the corner with Newgate Street. There was no building more feared, and despite the beauty of the sculptures over the gate, and his confidence in his own disguise, James hesitated before taking the final few steps to the door beside the chilling portcullis protecting the gates. For Moll, he was prepared to take the risk.

“Yers?” asked the gateman.

“I say, sir,” James was enjoying the dandy look and affectations, “I need to see a lady within these walls. Name of Moll. Can you help me?”

The burly gateman looked James up and down. At only five feet three inches, James knew he presented no obvious threat, and as a result, he was unworried by the scrutiny. In the same way, the gatekeeper saw a short, slightly built dandy, and was quite unconcerned.

“I might. Cost ya two shillings, mind.”

“Two shillings? Oh, very well.” James sighed and extracted a florin from his purse. “Here you are, my good man. Now take me to see her, if you would be so kind.”

“Oh, that only gets ya in the gate, matey. I can’t leave me post here. But I will call someone else to take yer to see ‘er.”

Sighing, James stepped inside, wincing as the heavy wooden door crashed shut behind him.

“Eric!” yelled the gateman. “Gotta customer for ya!”

James held his tongue but took a mental note of the man; he would deal with him later. Now he watched as a tall, filthy wretch shambled across the courtyard towards him. As he approached, his stench began to assail James’ nostrils such that he was forced to pull his scented handkerchief from his pocket and hold it near his nose.

The man moved close to James and leered down at him. “Yer wanna see one a me guests? Cost ya. Who ya wanna see?”

“Er, Moll. The lady’s name is Moll.”

“Oh, Moll Cutpurse? She be extra. A crown. That gets ya ten minutes wivver.”

James seemed to be thinking, but in fact, he was suppressing the urge to gag. Gaining control for a moment, he handed over a half crown, and showed another. “You get this one as I go out of the gate, and only if I have had my full ten minutes. You understand me?”

“Unnerstood, Guvner. Come wiv me.”

He led the way across the yard. James shuddered in the gloom and looked up to the sky peering over the high enclosing wall. The man opened a gate, ushering James through and inside the dull forbidding building. James quickly pushed his way in, putting as much distance as possible between himself and the stinking man. Down some stairs they walked, through a gate and eventually the man opened a cell at the far end of a long corridor.

The man put a sputtering candle onto a ledge just inside the door. Moll sat on the floor near to the only opening, a chimney. All around her, women and children of all ages lay on the floor, the aromas of despair and excrement even overpowering the stench of the jailer. Solid stonewalls loomed all around, covered in graffiti from past occupants. An air of gloom engulfed James as he looked around.

James turned towards the jailer, lifting his handkerchief to his nostrils as he did so. “Ten minutes. Now go.”

Smirking, the jailer closed the door before yelling back. “Ave yer fun. Ten minutes is all ya get!”

Moll stood, and then came over towards James. Her finery was covered in dirt, and her usual lively spirit was visibly absent.

“Thank you. I knew it was difficult for you to come here, but I can trust no other.”

“For you, anything, Moll. How do I get you out of this place?”

“It is all arranged. I need you to go to my house.” She leaned closer to whisper in his ear. “Pull my chair away from the fire. Lift the flagstone beneath it. Remove two thousand pounds, then close the stone and leave all as you found it.” She looked around. All the other prisoners were watching her curiously, but none was close enough to hear. One woman was edging her way along the wall towards them, so Moll lowered her voice still further.

“Take the money to General Fairfax’s quarters in Whitehall. He awaits it.”

“Are you certain that he will release you?”

“Yes, he promised and I believe he is a man of his word. But do be careful, James, do not let him take you in exchange!”

“Fairfax is an honest man. But I shall dress as a whore. As long as he doesn’t fancy a quickie, I should be alright.”

“Well make sure that you look like a fairly ugly whore then!”

They both laughed, causing all in the cell to look up at them.

“I’ll deliver the money, and then I want to ride back up to home to see my wife. I shall not be gone long, but it is a while since I saw my family.”

“That is fine, I am sure Fairfax will honour his word – not that you could do much if he failed to do so!”

Behind them, the key turned in the lock and they pulled apart as the aroma entered the cell.

“All done are ya? Well, ya better be, cos it’s time ta go.”

James nodded at Moll, and then turned to face the man.

“Here is a pound, my man. I want all in this cell to have a decent meal and a tankard of ale each. I shall hear if you fail to provide, and you will have good reason to worry should such occur. Not everything is as it might appear. Now lead me out of this hellhole.”

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Zachary Howard strolled into the bar. It was still early, so the usual thick layer of smoke had not yet accumulated, allowing a clear view of the entire room. The landlord stood behind the bar, wiping his hands on his rather grubby apron, and a barmaid was cleaning a table near to the window. A quiet time of day. Zachary sauntered across to the bar to order food with a tankard of ale, and then selected a quiet table and sat down. Patiently, he sipped his ale until his food arrived, and with a flirtatious wink at the barmaid, he tore into the bread and started his meal.

Around him, the bar slowly filled as he ate. Whilst not by any means a fashionable haunt, it was popular with the serving classes, who would congregate here at all times of the day and night, providing Zach with a plentiful supply of gossip and useful information.

Finishing his meal, he pushed his plate away and leaned back in his chair. The barmaid saw his signal and poured a fresh pint of ale before delivering it to his table. Clearing the empty plate away, she giggled as he pinched her ass, and then slapped his hand lightly with a grin as she sashayed away.

Around him, the inn was beginning to fill up as working men called in after a hard day’s toil. Gradually, the room filled with smoke and laughter as they relaxed. Zachary’s table was being spurned as long as there were tables free, but eventually,two men sat at the other end of his table with a nod and began talking. Zachary feigned indifference, instead keeping an eye on the voluptuous barmaid, who flirted with the handsome stranger at a distance as she worked.

“My master is returning to Wales for an indefinite period,” announced one of the men at his table. He was comparatively smartly dressed, his clothes clean if not especially expensive.

“No! What are you going to do?” responded the other, pulling a pipe from his jacket pocket.

“He gave me an excellent reference and sent me to see Lord Fairfax. I start tomorrow.”

“What will be your role there, do you know?”

“I have not been told. His Lordship just said he wants me to deliver something to his wife.”

“But will she recognise you?”

“I asked the same, and he said he would give me a letter of introduction. I believe that I am to accompany her up to Yorkshire, where I shall serve in whatever way she chooses. She’s in a place called ‘Faringdon’ in Berkshire at the moment, it seems.”

“So we shall no longer be seeing you in here?”

“No, I’m afraid not. I would prefer to remain in the city, but I must go where my work takes me.”

“I’ll miss you, Thomas.”

“And I shall miss our evenings together. But at least I’m employed, and I hear that he is a good employer.”

Zachary finished his beer, stepped over the bench and pushed past the servant before leaving the inn to the obvious disappointment of the barmaid. Looking around, she spied another young gentleman and turned her attentions in his direction.

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Thomas stood to attention before Lord Fairfax’s desk, hat in hand. Fairfax was scrutinizing him carefully, making Thomas want to squirm. He had worn his best clothes today, but inevitably felt inadequate when in a room so beautifully decorated with tapestries and drapes.

“Thomas, you came very highly recommended by Lord Pembroke. He said that you were the most honest man he knew. A substantial compliment, one I am about to put to the test.”

“Yes sir, thank you sir.”

“I want you to go to the stables and ask for one of my horses, saddle up and return here. Tie the horse to the hoop outside the window there.

“As I told you before, I do not actually have any need for more staff here in London, but I do need someone trustworthy to accompany my wife up to Yorkshire and take up service there. I assume that you are happy with this?”

Thomas nodded, although his body language indicated otherwise.

“You are to take a delivery of some silver plate to her in Faringdon. Carstairs will give you instructions on how to get there, and you will need to take this letter of introduction. From that point forth, you are to take your orders from Lady Fairfax, and accompany and protect her on her journey back home. Is everything clear?”

“Yes sir.”

“Carstairs will give you a pistol, ball and shot; this is a valuable consignment you are transporting. I assume you know how to use them?”

“Yes sir. I served during the war.”

“Good. Here is some money to cover food and accommodation on your journey to Faringdon – you should only need to stop once overnight, so I would expect you to arrive sometime tomorrow.”

The door opened and Carstairs entered, smoothing down his long straight hair as he came in.

“Sir, there is a, a *person* on the doorstep asking for you. She says she has something for you.”

General Fairfax sat back in his chair.

“Did she not say what she has for me?”

“No sir. But she said that you were expecting it.” He wrinkled his nose. “Although I am not at all sure what your lordship could be expecting from such a person.”

“Very well, Carstairs. Show her in.”

“But sir!”

“Show her in. Indulge me in this.”

“Very well, Sir. But I do so under protest.”

“Duly noted, Carstairs. Now kindly show her in.”

“Yes sir.”

Fairfax turned back to Thomas. “I assume everything is clear, but if you need to know anything more, ask Carstairs. Now collect your possessions and put them in the saddlebag that Carstairs will give you for your journey.”

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James pushed past the servant in the door and stood facing General Fairfax clad in a dress and bearing the makeup provided by the numerous whores who frequented the same inn as Moll.

“You have something for me, I believe?” rumbled the general.

James carefully adjusted his voice to be higher pitched than normal. “Yes sir. Moll Cutpurse asked me to deliver this to you here, in person.”

The General took the parcel and carefully cut it open. Inside, golden Jacobusses gleamed. He glanced up at the courier. “I bet you have never seen so much gold at any one time, eh young lady?”

“No sir,” squeaked James.

“Very well. Wait awhile as I count it.”

After five minutes, he looked up. “It is all here. I shall honour my word.”

Reaching into his desk, he extracted a sheet of writing paper. James read upside down as he wrote.

*My dear William.*

*I have been persuaded to withdraw all charges against my assailant on Hounslow Heath, and therefore humbly request that you order the release of Miss Moll Cutpurse from Newgate prison forthwith.*

*Your humble servant,*

*Fairfax.*

“Carstairs!” he called.

Carstairs entered immediately.

“Carstairs, I want you to show the lady out now, then take this message to the Attorney General’s office and place it in William Steele’s hands and only his hands. I want you to then await his written response and bring it to me. Do you understand all of that?”

“Yes sir. Deliver the message, and then bring his response to you.”

“Good. That will be all.”

**Chapter 13**

Zachary Howard loaded his saddle onto his horse and led him from the stables. Mounting outside the inn, he leaned down to pay the groom, and then set off at a trot. He was determined to get well ahead of his mark, so pushed his mount into a gallop as soon as they had left the town behind. Passing through Henley on Thames, he finally allowed his exhausted horse to slow to a walk.

“I should make Wallingford by nightfall,” he mused aloud, “Then a good night’s sleep ahead of tomorrow’s main event.”

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James looked up at the sky and frowned. Rain was coming, and he was still seven miles or so away from Henley. Trees lined the crown of a hill ahead in the distance, so he urged his stallion to more vigorous efforts in an attempt to reach shelter before the skies opened., As soon as he reached the trees, he dismounted to relieve himself while his horse took the opportunity to munch on some succulent grass at the side of the road.

Looking back the way he had come, he saw a horseman trudging slowly along the rutted way half a mile behind. He finished his task, tucked himself in and checked his guns. They were all loaded. He tucked two back into his belt and kept hold of the third as he remounted.

His horse snickered his disgust as James directed him into the thicket, where he waited patiently for the rider to approach. The trees sheltered him as the rain started, pitter-pattering onto the thin, fragile new leaves just starting to peek from the branches. Gradually, the rain came down harder and drips started bouncing off his hat.

The rain became a torrent. James moved forwards as the visibility shortened; there was now a danger of moving too late. As he emerged from the trees, the full force of the downpour hit him, and he covered his gun with his cloak. He saw movement down the road as the poorly clad rider approached, pushing his mount to greater effort as he too tried to reach the trees and shelter. Indeed, so intent was he upon reaching shelter that he failed to notice James and almost rode into him.

“Stand and deliver!” shouted James over the din of the rain.

The rider stared, then reached for his gun, but thought better of it when James took more careful aim.

“That’s better. Move off the road slowly and into those trees.”

The rider obeyed, moving under the sparse canopy.

“Excellent. Now if you will just hand me those bags and your purse, we can conclude this transaction and be on our way.”

“Sir, I was trying to reach shelter in these trees when you stopped me. But I regret that I am unable to accede to your demands.”

“I am proud to be able to say that I have never been forced to kill a mark. But please do not take that to mean that I never would.”

“I… I cannot, sir. What I carry was entrusted to me by my new master, and if I part with it, he will surely think that I stole it myself.”

“That is not my concern, sir.”

“You would ruin me? How can I tell Lady Fairfax that her husband’s gift has been stolen by a highwayman?”

“Lady Fairfax? You work for the general?”

“I do sir.”

“That changes everything. Had you reported that any other Roundhead employed you, I would proceed with the robbery. However, Lord Fairfax is the sole honourable man amongst that rabble. The only hope for our great nation rests in his breeches, and for that reason, not only shall I not rob you, but I shall also accompany and protect you for as long as we share the same route.”

“So tell me, where are you bound?”

“Faringdon, sir.”

“Very well, we shall ride together as far as Abingdon, at which point I must turn north. Two are far less likely to be robbed than one.” He tucked his gun back into his waistband, and then peered out across the fields. “I think the rain is easing. Come, friend, let us ride.”

“Thomas, Sir. My name is Thomas.”

“And I am James.”

“James Hind? You are the famous Captain Hind?”

James swept his hat across himself and bowed. “The very same, sir.” Water dripped down his neck and he hastily replaced the hat. “Now let us ride – I know of an excellent Inn in Henley where we can stop for the night. The food is excellent, the accommodations acceptable and the ale superb!”

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They crossed the long bridge over the river Thames and entered the flourishing town of Abingdon, James smiled - the affluence of an Oxfordshire town felt like a success story to an Oxfordshire lad. Before too long, he leaned across to Thomas.

“Take care from here, Thomas. I turn north at the end of the road, and you need to take the road ahead there to the left,” he pointed at a junction in the road guarded by a blacksmith and a bakery.

“You should be safe enough within the town but be especially careful the other side. There are many thickets for thieves and scoundrels to hide. The first part through to Southmoor should be safe enough; few travel that route. But once you reach Southmoor and the Oxford Road, be very wary - I have worked down that way myself, and there are plenty who seek to emulate me. So be very, very cautious.”

“Thank you, sir. And thank you for your protection thus far; I’m sure all will be well – I cannot imagine I shall be held up a second time on the same journey!”

“Anything is possible, my friend. Are you armed?”

“Yes, sir, my lord gave me a pistol for protection.”

“Do you know how to use it?”

“Certainly. I too fought.”

“Well keep in mind, the road is very different to the battlefield. What I learned from the road was useful to me in battle, but I am not convinced it works the other way. Show me your pistol.”

Tom pulled his pistol from his waistband, and then glanced at James, who had two cocked pistols pointed at him. James returned his pistols to his waistband.

“In the time it took you to release that gun, I could have killed you with ease. Loosen your belt a little; keep the pistol loaded ready to fire and practice cocking it as you pull the gun from your waistband. Then you can be ready to fire instantly. That second could be the difference between life and death.”

“Thank you, sir. I shall heed your words.”

“Do. But this is my turning, so God Speed!”

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Zachary Howard watched from the other side of the bridge as the two men parted company. Once he was satisfied that his mark was alone, he slowly rode forwards to the junction, all the while watching James until he reached the corner and turned north.

As soon as he saw that he was in the clear, he spurred his horse to catch up with his mark.

Around the next corner, he espied Thomas’s horse tethered outside an Inn so he tied his own horse alongside and entered the Inn. Closing the door, he paused a moment to take in the scene and decide upon his tactics.

Two elderly men sat at a table near the door, each smoking pipes belching out thick, noisome smoke. The half-empty jug on their table told that they had been in place for some time and would remain in place a considerable time longer. They were arguing about their respective spouses.

Groups of men in various states of inebriety took most tables, but his eyes locked upon his mark, seated in a corner with a tankard of ale and a steaming bowl of food. There was a vacant table next to him. Zachary made his way to the bar.

“A tankard of ale and a bowl of pottage, if you please, landlord,” he barked.

“Are you sure you would not prefer a jug, sir?” asked the landlord. “Most find our ale sufficiently enjoyable that they find themselves in need of more quite rapidly.”

“No, I have to get home to Faringdon. My wife will kill me if I fall through the door rather than walk through it!” A wave of laughter rippled through the inn behind him. “I’ll take a seat...” He scanned the room and then pointed at the table beside his mark. “Over there.”

The landlord poured his ale and Zachary gathered his tankard, dropped coins on the bar and made his way across the room to sit down, nodding to his mark as he sat. Carefully, he had selected a seat sideways on, and so it fell to Thomas, his mark, to attract his attention.

“Sir? Excuse me, but I could not help but overhear. You are going to Faringdon?”

Zachary turned. “Indeed I am, sir. I make cheese and am returning from Wallingford. I get a much better price for my cheese there than I can in the local market.”

Their conversation was interrupted by the arrival of Zachary’s food, but after undressing the barmaid with his eyes, then thanking her, he turned back to Thomas. “And you sir? What brings you to these rural parts? Your accent sets you apart... London?”

“Indeed, sir, I do hail from the big city. I just took up employment with a new master, and he has sent me to his wife.”

“Sir Robert Pye?”

“No, Sir, Lord Fairfax, his wife is staying there for now.”

“Ah, Lord Fairfax. A hero indeed, without him, I feat the Royalists would have won the day.”

“You may well be right, sir. Although Cromwell did his part.”

“Later, yes. But without Fairfax, the war would have been lost well before Cromwell came to prominence.”

“Probably so,” Tom leaned across and extended his hand, “Thomas Edwards at your service, sir.”

“Zachary Roberts.”

Tom picked up his spoon and continued eating, then after a moment he paused and turned again to Zachary, who had done the same. “Sir, perhaps we can ride to Faringdon together, offer mutual protection as it were against any highwaymen we may meet.”

Zachary considered for a moment, and then nodded. “I wouldn’t expect to be accosted, indeed never have. But it will make a lonely and uninteresting journey far more pleasant.”

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The two horses ambled up the gentle slope southwest of Littleworth. Through the trees lining the road, they could see the spire of the church, and as they reached the summit, Faringdon came into view in the distance silhouetted against the setting sun. Zachary looked behind them, and then rechecked ahead.

“I regret, sir, that I may have slightly misled you.”

“Oh, how so?”

“My family name is not, in fact, Roberts. It is Howard. Perhaps you have heard of me?”

“No. Should I have?”

“I would have hoped so, and I am deeply saddened that my infamy is so undeveloped. But my name is indeed Zachary Howard, and if you had heard of me, you would know that I am, in fact, a highwayman of some repute.

“I only rob the accursed Roundheads, and as your master certainly qualifies, I would ask you to hand over your bags.”

Thomas looked at Zachary ashen-faced. “I regret I cannot, sir.” As Zachary’s hand moved to his waistband, Thomas pulled out his pistol, cocked the hammer and fired at Zachary. He hit the horse, who toppled over, throwing Zachary clear.

Zachary rolled to his feet, gun in hand.

“I shall either take the bags whilst you stand over by those trees, or alternatively, I can take them whilst you lie bleeding beside them. It is immaterial to me which you choose.”

“You would murder me for a few plates?”

“I would. Now, make up your mind which, I tire of this game.”

“I cannot, I will not allow you to steal his Lordsh...”

Thomas’s exclamation ended as Zachary stepped forwards, took careful aim and shot him in the face.

Thomas’s head exploded in a shower of blood, brain and bone. His horse reared in terror, hurling Thomas’s lifeless body onto the grass at the side of the road. Relieved of his burden, he began backing away, his eyes wide with fright.

Zachary took the horse’s bridle and calmed him, glancing up and down the road. No potential witnesses were visible in the gathering gloom. Walking away from the body, he found a bush on the opposite side and tied the horse, soothing him as he did so. Gradually, the horse calmed, and once he began eating the grass, Zachary backed away and returned to the body, calmly brushing gore from his coat. He hunkered down beside the body of his victim and searched his pockets. Other than a few coins, there was only a letter, which he hastily stuffed into his pocket before grasping one arm of the corpse and dragging it deep into the undergrowth.

He returned to the road, and after checking again for other riders, he pulled the letter from his pocket and read it.

*“My Dear,” it began, “Hoping that you and my daughter Elizabeth are in good health, this comes to inform you that I have located some plate which I believe will please you and befit our own residence. It is brought to you by my man Thomas, a new servant; whom I would have you treat very kindly, for he comes recommended by Pembroke and others before him as a very honest and worthy gentleman.*

*“The Lord be praised, I am very well and earnestly long for the happiness of enjoying your company, which I hope to do within this month or five weeks at farthest. I subscribe myself,*

*“Your loving husband till death,*

*“Fairfax.”*

For a few moments, he stood in the middle of the road, thinking. Suddenly, he jerked upright. Taking a rope from behind his saddle, he tied a loop around the dead horse’s head, and then removed his saddlebags.

Hooking the other end of the rope around the other horse’s shoulders, he mounted and urged it into the woods. Slowly, the dead horse slipped across the roadway, and once it was past the first row of trees, he stopped, dismounted and removed the rope. Questing around, he spotted a dead branch lying beneath the trees, took it and returned to the roadway, sweeping away the drag marks. The recent rains made this task easy, and in a few minutes, there was no visible evidence that anything had been moved.

He checked the portmanteau tied behind the saddle. It was full of silver plate. Zachary transferred Tom’s possessions into his own bag then threw it across the pommel and remounted. Looking around, all the trees nearby were quite young. He set off. Faringdon was not far away, and he could see the candlelight gleaming in the windows of the big house in the distance.

As he approached, he espied an old, dead tree trunk half buried in the undergrowth. Dismounting, he emptied the bag into the hollow trunk before remounting and walking sedately to the tradesman’s entrance at the side of the house. An elderly footman opened the door and approached him as he dismounted.

“May I help you, sir?”

“If this is where Lady Fairfax is in residence, then you may; I come from his Lordship.”

**Chapter 14**

Inside the house, Zachary glanced around. Whilst the kitchen where he had entered was very plain and quite basic, the hallway bore soft woollen carpet underfoot, intricately patterned. The walls were sternly panelled in traditional dark oak, with portraits of the Pye family ancestors glaring down on him. He shifted uncomfortably.

“Her Ladyship will see you now.” Zachary jumped as the manservant’s words came from behind him.

“Follow me.”

They walked across the soft carpet towards an ornately carved door, which the manservant rapped sharply, then entered, with Zachary following behind, hat in hand. Lady Anne Fairfax looked up as they entered. Tall, with glossy dark hair tied in a ponytail behind her, her figure was emphasised rather than concealed by the modest dress she wore. Zachary felt her sharp gaze pass up and down him as she assessed her visitor. “I am told you wish to see me?”

“Um...yes, milady,” started Zachary. “Lord Fairfax bade me bring you this letter.”

The manservant beside him took the proffered letter and carried it across to Lady Fairfax, who opened it, then sat down to read the content. Zachary looked around the room while he waited. Long drapes framed the windows, and the room was lined with bookshelves. A sofa beside the fire provided her ladyship with a warm and comfortable place to sit beside a younger woman, more of a girl really, who was watching him curiously but silently. Behind the sofa, another manservant stood watching him without blinking.

Lady Fairfax looked up. “Thomas, is that your name?” Zachary nodded. “This letter says that you were carrying some plate. Where is it?”

“Your ladyship, I was told in Abingdon that there are highwaymen plying the Oxford Road at the moment, so I left the portmanteau with a trustworthy publican for safekeeping. I thought that it would be safer for two persons to bring it than just myself alone. If that is acceptable to milady, of course.”

“Perfectly acceptable, Thomas, thank you for your thoughtfulness. I see that you are to accompany us on the next stage of our journey, so I shall ask Agnes to prepare a bed for you - we do not plan to move on for a few more days yet.” She glanced at the man behind her, who vanished through a door on the other side of the room.

“Edward here will take you back to the kitchen for some warming food, and explain to you how we do things around here. Then you can stable your horse and move your possessions into the room being prepared. Welcome, Thomas, welcome - my husband speaks highly of you, so I am sure we shall all get along perfectly well.”

She glanced at Edward, who took Zachary by the arm and led him to the kitchen.

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Zachary lifted himself up onto one elbow as he heard Edward close the door to the adjacent room. The other servants were already abed, doubtless sleeping like babies. His room was small, but adequate with a bed and a small cupboard for him to store his belongings. A bible sat on top of the cupboard but he had no reason to use it.

He sat up and swung his feet around to don his boots - then thought better of it and stood up in his hose. Rummaging in his bag, he pulled out a length of strong twine and cut it into a dozen lengths, each a yard long. He tied a loop into the end of each piece, and then laid them aside.

Rummaging in his bag, he extracted his slow-match and put it on the cupboard. Next, he extracted an old shirt he had taken from Tom’s possessions and ripped six lengths from it, starting each cut with his knife. Taking care to make no sound, he took four lengths of twine and two lengths of cloth and put them on the bed. Picking up the slow-match, he lit it from his candle, took a single length of cloth and two of twine in his right hand, picked up the remainder with his left and crept to the door. He had noted earlier that the door creaked when opened wide, so he opened it just far enough to slip through.

He made his way along the corridor to the silent man’s room, taking care to walk on tiptoe and at the edge of the corridor in order to minimise the risk of the ancient floorboards creaking in protest beneath his feet. He opened the door a fraction, and then paused to listen. Gentle snoring caressed his ears and he grinned. Easing himself into the room, he made his way across to the faint shadow sprawled across the bed. Cocking his pistol, he lit the candle with his slow-match. Once the candle flickered into life, he extinguished his slow-match and stuffed it into his pocket.

Below him, the man stirred, and Zachary stepped back, gun pointed. The man’s eyes opened, and then opened wider as he saw the gun pointed at him. He began to speak, but Zachary shushed him.

“That’s right, say nothing. As long as you do as you are told, there need be no casualties here tonight. Now, arise, sir, take the candle and walk slowly and quietly into the corridor.”

Zachary followed, and then waved his gun towards the cook’s door. “Enter that room and arouse the cook. Quietly, mind, and make sure she makes no sound. I shall be behind you.”

Zachary followed the man into the room, maintaining a decent distance as he felt that this man could be a danger. The silent man roused the cook, shushed her, and pointed back at Zachary.

Wide eyed and trembling, she clambered out of bed, never taking her eyes off Zachary’s gun. Zachary eased over to the corner of the room and waved his gun for the two prisoners to go out into the corridor.

As he followed them, he reached for the door handle and eased the door shut. Along the corridor, Edward’s door opened and he stepped out.

“Ah,” announced Zachary, “we were just coming to get you. Please do join us.”

The elderly man eased along the corridor wall and stood slightly behind the cook. Zachary smiled at them.

“Almost ready, I think. We’re just waiting for Agnes to join us - perhaps it would be more seemly for a lady to disturb her slumbers.”

He waved his gun and the cook entered the girl’s room. Zachary moved his remaining prisoners to stand beside the door so that he could watch the proceedings from across the corridor.

Agnes awoke from a deep sleep, visibly confused.

“We are being taken prisoner,” the cook told her, “so far he has not hurt anyone, but you never know with these people,” she paused to glare at Zachary, who laughed aloud, “so come along quietly and we can only pray that God does not seek our presence at this moment.”

Zachary waited until the two women had rejoined the group, and then waved at Edward’s room.

“Let’s all assemble in there, shall we?”

The four shuffled into the butler’s room.

“Excellent. I can see that we have a good chance of everyone surviving this little episode. Now, you,” he indicated the silent man, “take these four lengths of cloth and gag everyone, including yourself.”

“Now, tie everyone’s ankles tightly together with these ropes. No tricks, mind, I shall check them. Now your own ankles. Good.”

He stepped back to the doorway.

“You, you and you, kneel beside the bed and lie face down on it. Right, you, young lady. Take three of those ropes there and tie the hands of the others behind them tightly.”

He watched as the girl fumbled but kept his peace as she gradually tied her fellow servant’s hands.

“Good. Now, all of you shuffle up towards the head of the bed; make room for this delightful young lady. Right, you kneel down with them and put your hands behind your back. I will have to tie yours myself, but I do know how to tie a knot whilst still holding a gun! The rest of you, bury your faces in the bedclothes - any face I see will have an extra hole in it within a second.”

He knelt down behind her, keeping the gun pointed at her backside, then used his own groin to press it against her buttock. His hands now free, he tied her hands tightly, and then took hold of the gun again. Reaching down, he checked her ankle bindings and then stood up behind her.

He walked along the line of bound prisoners, examining their bindings. Satisfied, he stood back.

“Very well. Now, keep in mind that if I see any of you anywhere but in this room and in that position, I shall shoot you. I will not challenge you, just shoot. I have three guns, all primed and ready.”

He turned on his heel and returned to his room, where he gathered the remaining ropes and cloths, then took his bag and his boots and dropped them near to the main doors. Making his way quietly up the stairs, he paused at the top and listened intently for a few minutes. Save for the gentle hooting of an owl in the distance, nothing disturbed the quiet in the dark and gloomy house.

Choosing at random, he moved down the corridor to his left and gently opened the first door.

The bed was unmade, and there was no fire in the grate. He closed the door again and opened the door opposite. The gentle sound of someone sleeping greeted him. He moved over beside the bed, relying for the moment on the faint slivers of moonlight filtering through the window opposite.

The young girl was sleeping soundly. He had not been introduced to her, but knew that she was the daughter of Lord Fairfax, knew that Fairfax was a prominent roundhead, and that knowledge was enough. A faint stirring in his loins gave him an idea, and his teeth glowed in the direct moonlight as he grinned.

Standing back from the bed, he transferred his gun to his left hand, and then plunged his fist inside his breeches, before setting about encouraging the hint of an erection. It took just a few minutes, and then he prodded the girl with his gun.

“Wake up, whore! And keep quiet!”

Slowly, she opened her eyes, which widened as she saw the gun. Zachary put his finger to his lips. “Shh…”

She brushed a strand of hair away from her face and pulled the bedclothes up to her chin.

“Remove your nightgown, slowly and quietly.”

“I cannot, sir, I remain a maiden for my future husband.”

Howard grinned at her trembling. “Before the accursed war, I could easily have been one of your suitors, but the whoremongering Parliamentarians robbed me of my titles and lands. So imagine that the war never happened, if it helps, and that you are having a clandestine tryst with an amorous suitor.”

“No!”

“Yes! Or you die.”

“This is an unholy act you are committing! Spare me this disgrace, for the disgrace will fall upon me alone, though I resist mightily.”

“The disgrace will also fall upon the shoulders of a prominent Parliamentarian, and that is enough for me. Now comply or die!”

He watched with obvious enjoyment as she struggled to remove her nightgown with trembling hands. “You would steal my maidenhead?”

“Normally, such an action would desecrate my own view of acceptable behaviour by a gentleman. But you are the daughter of an accursed Roundhead, and I am at war with the Roundheads. This is therefore an act of war. Now shut up and get on your hands and knees on the bed and present yourself for me.”

Keeping the bedclothes up to her shoulders, she turned over in the bed, knelt, and then turned her head. “Do with me as you will, sir. I do so that I might live. But I co-operate no further than this.”

Zachary loosened his breeches and released his erection. Moving to the bed, he pulled the bedclothes away and studied her naked body for a moment, stroking himself. Her face was pressed into her pillow, and her heaving chest showed her distress. Her pale back led to wide hips and a beautiful, rounded pair of buttocks. Giving himself a final stroke, he climbed on to the bed and drove into her, causing her to cry out. “Hum,” he commented, “you have no maidenhead to steal. How disappointing!”

After a few minutes, he withdrew, and climbed from the bed, tightening his belt once he was out of the girl’s reach.

“Now, take the rope by your bed, and tie your ankles together tightly. Try no tricks on me, now, I am not afraid to kill if I must.”

The naked young woman brushed the tears from her face and then took the rope and did as she was bidden.

“Tighter! We want no escapes!”

She glared up at him but tightened the ropes before knotting the ends and sitting back upright.

“Excellent! Now take the cloth and put the middle in your mouth before tying it tightly behind your head.”

Zachary watched as she complied, then stepped forward to caress her breasts. She recoiled violently and he waved his gun at her.

“Now, take the other rope and put the loop around your right wrist, then pull it tight. Good. Lie face down with your hands together behind you. Try no tricks; I can tie a knot with a gun in my hand. Good.”

Zachary returned his gun to his belt whilst he bound her wrists, then tested the knots tied by the girl on herself. Satisfied, he backed away.

“Very good. I shall leave you now, but should you succeed in freeing yourself, you should know that if I were to see you elsewhere in the house, I would shoot you without challenge. “ Smiling, he left the room.

He made his way along towards the other end of the corridor, again walking at the edges to avoid any sound. Reaching the first door, he grasped the handle and turned it, easing the door open. The sound of gentle snoring assailed his ears and he smiled grimly before slipping into the room and closing the door quietly behind him.

A large bed dominated the room, set against the wall to his left. To the right, the last few coals glowed faintly in a desperate but fruitless attempt to stay alive. Across the room, slivers of moonlight fought against the dust on the windows as they tried to illuminate the room, succeeding only faintly.

Zachary could see a hump in the bedclothes, illustrating clearly Lady Fairfax’s position in the vast bed, and he noticed her clothes draped neatly over a chair. He made his way across the room to stand beside the bed. Her ladyship stirred as he trod on a loose floorboard, which uttered a protesting creak, causing her to turn in her sleep and mutter inaudibly into the bedcovers pulled tightly around her chin.

Zachary pulled his gun from his waistband, brushing against his fading erection and causing a faint stirring as he recalled his mission. Transferring the flintlock to his left hand, he again plunged his hand deep inside his breeches as he prepared himself. Casting his mind back, he had no trouble recalling what her ladyship looked like, and his erection surged as he mentally undressed the beautiful and commanding woman who had addressed him earlier in the evening.

When he was finally ready, he prodded her with the barrel of his gun. She stirred and then settled back into sleep. He prodded her a second time.

“Agnes, it is not yet light, why do you rouse me at such an hour?”

“I regret that Agnes is tied up elsewhere,” advised Zachary, “so it falls to me to awaken you.”

She turned. “Thomas! How dare you enter my room at this hour! By all that is holy, you shall be horsewhipped for this! Now return to your room and let me sleep; I shall deal with you in the morning!”

“I regret that none of those events are about to occur, my lady. Rather, you are going to remove your garments, throw back the bedclothes and accommodate me.”

“Edward!” she shouted, and then turned back to face her aggressor. “Edward will accompany you...oh. You have a gun.”

“I have a gun, and the gun is cocked and loaded and pointing in your direction. I also have a healthy erection. And incidentally, Edward is tied up elsewhere too.”

Lady Fairfax studied him for a moment, decided that he was serious and began to remove her nightdress.

“You know, my husband will hunt you down, and he has significant resources at his disposal to ensure that you are caught.”

“I am sure he will; indeed, I hope he will. Nothing arouses me more than an opportunity to cause distress to a leading Parliamentarian. Now push the bedclothes down, lie back and spread your legs.”

He watched as she pushed the bedclothes back, slowly and reluctantly, and then turned to look at him, her hands trembling.

“I am sure you are as feisty as your daughter but do be warned; I am not afraid to kill - ask Thomas!” he laughed. “But you would be talking to the wind; he is unable to reply. Now lay back and open your legs or I shall be forced to create another hole in your body for my use.”

Trembling and reluctant, she spread-eagled herself on the bed, then turned and stared at him. He loosened his belt and climbed up onto the bed, keeping his gun trained on her head from his hand on the pillow. She lay there staring into his face.

“Why do you assault me when I was the only person to protest at the trial of the king?”

Zachary ignored her, instead thrusting violently into her, driving her hard up the bed. She winced as he drove deeper still. With a final thrust, which caused her to cry out against her will, Zachary spent himself and stayed inside her for a moment with his head bowed as he recovered his breath. Looking up again, he pulled out of her and slid from the bed, keeping the gun always pointed.

“Are you done?” asked Lady Fairfax.

“I am, madam. I have mortally hurt an enemy, and in warfare, that is a conclusion of value. Your actions are not relevant. What matters is that you are married to a villain, and he has now suffered hurt at my hands. You remained with him throughout the conflict, offering him succour and support. You did not kill him or turn him. You are as guilty as he is.

“But this is irrelevant; I have no need to justify my actions in an act of war. Now, take this rope and tie your ankles together tightly.”

While she tied her ankles, he tightened his belt and adjusted his clothing. Once she was done, he ordered her to gag herself, and then roll over.

Taking the last length of rope, he approached the bed and tied her hands together behind her back. He pulled the bedclothes over the now shivering woman, and then set about searching the cupboards and dressing tables in the room. Once he was satisfied that he had taken all of value, he returned to the daughter’s room, covered her as she was now shivering violently, then again checked all the drawers and tables.

“You shall hang for this!” she mumbled through her gag behind him.

Zachary chortled. “Not if I can help it, I won’t!”

**Chapter 15**

At ten in the morning, the inn was unusually quiet. The landlord was bustling in the back room, and occasionally the smell of cooking wafted into the room. James and Moll sat huddled in a corner. locked in quiet conversation.

“I can’t afford to be taken again, James,” explained Moll.

“I can well imagine. I was astonished that you had so much money tucked away!”

“Well, I don’t anymore. I’ll have to stick to being a fence from now on.”

James leaned across and patted her hand. “Between us, we have stung these Roundheads pretty badly. They are all frightened to travel now, except for Cromwell. I too shall sit back now; there is a determination to catch me, which I must allow to fade before I venture out again. I shall no longer look for Parliamentarians to rob, but I shall not pass up any opportunities which present themselves either.”

Moll looked over the top of her tankard as she took a sip. “You know, we made quite an impact since they murdered the king, did we not?”

“We did. But it is now time for both of us to relax a little; there are few of the leaders left to rob anyway!”

They both burst into gales of laughter, causing those around them to pause in their discussions and look across, then smile as they turned back.

“Then too, we are not alone; the war left many without means, especially from the king’s ranks.”

“And many of those will only rob the Parliamentarians, same as we.”

“Yes, Philip Stafford over there,” she pointed with her pipe at a smartly dressed young man with a whore on his lap and a laugh on his lips, “tries to focus upon them; he has brought in some fine booty.”

Both turned and reached for their swords as the room went quiet. A tall man wearing full Cavalier regalia had entered and was striding towards the bar.

“Landlord, a pint of your finest,” he boomed as he approached the bar. Along his path, men moved away from him, and a group of rogues who had been laughing and jostling just a few minutes earlier, rose and moved silently away.

“Who in the name of all that is holy is that?” whispered James.

Moll grimaced. “That, young sir, is Zachary Howard. He tried to pass some fine plate to me the other week; I refused to take it.”

“That’s not like you. Why?”

“Did you not hear? It was silver plate sent from Fairfax home to his wife. Howard stole it, then went to Fairfax’s home and raped his wife and daughter. I have no problem with the plate, but we both saw Lady Fairfax shouting for the king at his trial; she is a king’s woman and is not fair prey.”

Across the inn, the landlord silently slapped the drink on the counter, and took the money. Howard took a hearty draught, and then turned to look around the silent, sullen faces. Spotting Moll, he made his way across the inn towards her.

“Why, if it isn’t Mistress Moll. Slumming it a bit, aren’t you, hobnobbing with ruffians and thieves in here?”

“Thieves and ruffians yes; but none of them are rapists.”

Howard coloured. “They were fair game; the family of a Parliament man.”

“Lady Fairfax had the balls to stand up in court at the king’s trial and argue with them. Twice, in fact. I would say that makes her a loyal subject.”

“I will not be berated by a common whore!”

Moll stood, glowering. For a moment, she simply examined the man before her as if he were a cockroach scuttling across her table, but then she stepped to one side and drew her sword. Men scrambled to leave the nearby tables as she spoke.

“Whore, yes - once upon a time. But common? Me?”

As Howard drew his sword in response, James stood, put his hand upon Moll’s sword and pushed it down towards the table.

“Captain, I have sat quietly listening to your rantings. But I shall not, nay I cannot tolerate you insulting and threatening my companion. I suggest that it would be better for all were you to put up your sword, silence your tongue with that ale, and then depart.”

“And who would you be, sir? Her pimp?”

James pushed Moll back into her seat and moved into the open space, drawing his sword.

“Captain James Hind, sir, at your service. Now, if you would care to finish your drink and depart, I can save myself the trouble of cleaning and sharpening my sword later.”

James stepped back from the table and slowly walked around to stand in front of Howard, who towered over his five-foot three-inch frame.

“I would add, sir, that by targeting Fairfax, you do our sovereign Lord a disservice; it is common knowledge that he refused to serve on the trial; however it is not so widely known that he tried to stop the execution.”

“How could you possibly know that?”

“I have my informants, captain, as I am sure do you. Apparently, mine serve me better.”

As he talked, James strolled around the space, keeping his eyes on his opponent. Howard matched his movements, waiting for his opportunity. For a moment or two, they simply circled. All around, the room was deathly quiet, only the sound of the circling boots on the sawdust disturbed the silence.

James had let his sword drop, and Howard saw his opportunity and lunged. Turning sideways, James let the blade slip by him, and then stepped back and side-on to his opponent.

“I see that your pretensions to be a gentleman are something of a sham, sir. But let us see if your swordsmanship is up to the task.”

Howard likewise turned side-on, and the two men circled each other, feinting left and right, searching for the crucial opening. Around them, men scrambled to put as much distance between themselves and the swordsmen as possible. Moll remained calmly seated, sipping her ale whilst watching closely.

James bumped into an abandoned chair, and briefly glanced down. Howard seized the opportunity and lunged forwards, his sword cutting into James’s coat. Immediately, James brought the hilt of his sword down onto the back of his opponent’s sword, increasing the rip in his coat but unbalancing his opponent.

As Howard stumbled, he brought his other fist up and delivered a powerful blow to the side of Howard’s head, causing him to stagger sideways. For a moment, the two men rested, glaring at each other, then Howard heaved himself upright and took up his stance again, closely followed by James.

They circled, watching each other, then James flicked his blade sideways whilst half lunging, catching Howard’s wrist with his blade.

“Very clever, captain. But that can only work once, and I’m still standing,” jibed Howard.

“Indeed you are; but you are bleeding, sir, and you will tire first. Do you wish to ask for quarter?”

“Quarter? Never!”

They circled further, each searching for that elusive opening.

James dived to the floor, rolled and brought the flat of his blade hard up between his opponent’s legs before continuing his roll and standing upright, blade ready. Howard let out a screech and his hands automatically went to his groin as he doubled over.

James waited.

Howard was able to pull himself upright and immediately lunged, but slipped slightly in his own blood, for some minutes now pooling before him. James stepped sideways and brought the hilt of his sword down hard onto his opponent’s skull, wincing at the crack as he made contact.

Howard continued on his lunge, but fell forwards once his arm was fully extended, then remained motionless on the floor.

James rolled him over, disarmed him then put his hand to the man’s nostrils. “He breathes yet,” he announced, and then wiped his sword on the prone man’s doublet before reaching down to take his purse.

Standing, he investigated the purse and extracted several coins. “I have a coat to repair, and he shall pay for it!”

He pulled his chair around the table, sat down and took a draught of ale, all the while keeping the tip of his sword on Howard’s throat. He looked up at the landlord, bustling across the room.

“I suggest you take a fee for the cost of cleaning up his mess. Once he awakens, we shall send him packing, but I have something to say to him first.”

The landlord nodded and took five shillings from the purse. “Don’t need his kind in here,” he muttered, and then set to cleaning up the pool of blood.

James glanced towards Moll, all the while keeping his sword tip on Howard’s throat.

“I didn’t know Fairfax tried to stop the execution. How do you know that?” asked Moll.

James pondered for a moment, and then signalled her to lean closer. “He told me,“ He raised his hand to still Moll’s exclamation. “I’ve been visiting him from time to time, and we discuss matters. He does not attempt to capture or turn me, and I do not attempt to turn or harm him. But a dialogue is useful to both of us and perhaps later to the king.”

“What is this about him trying to stop the execution?”

“I went to see him the night before, and he told me that he was receiving delegations from other countries and from various groups of Englishmen. He had two delegations to see the next morning, and after that, he went to Whitehall to try to stop the execution taking place, merely to delay it at that point, but with the intention of giving himself time to stop it once and for all.

“But Cromwell took him into a side room to discuss the matter, and whilst they were there, the King was executed. Clearly Cromwell had no intention of allowing Fairfax, his senior officer don’t forget, the opportunity to stop it.”

“The people should know this, James!”

“Yes, they should, and they will, but I cannot spread the word yet without effectively announcing that we are talking. It is not in his, my, or the king’s interests that this should be known.”

“So Fairfax was against the king’s trial, then?”

“Yes. He joined the rebels because he sought reform, but he never expected that they would seek to depose and execute the king. Cromwell outsmarted him, he admits that.”

“I wish you had told me this earlier, before I robbed him!”

“I did not dare. All I could do was exhort you not to kill him.”

Howard groaned and started to sit up but recoiled as the sword tip dug into his throat.

“Ah, you are returning to us. Good. I have taken cash from your purse to cover the cost of the repair to my coat, and a small fee for the landlord to clean up the mess.

“You should leave here now, grateful that you still live. I do not expect to see you in here again, nor indeed anywhere else; you besmirch the name of his majesty’s soldiers. It would be well if you were to leave the country for a while to give me time to forget what you look like. I cannot imagine that you will be welcome anywhere that is aware of your identity and crimes in any event. Now get up and go away.”

Howard got to his feet, glowering at Hind. “And my sword?”

“You may collect that from here in the morning. Be aware that I have been living by the sword my whole life and I know many more little tricks like that; you will not best me with a sword, so do not ever try again.” Howard started to leave, but James called out to him. “And should I ever hear that you have raped again, be assured that I will seek you out.” He turned to Moll and added, “I would kill anyone who did that to my wife and child.”

“Fairfax has put up a five-hundred-pound reward for his capture.”

“I cannot betray another thief, however foul his misdeeds; no-one would ever trust me again. I shall have to be satisfied with having damaged both his pride and his balls!”

From the doorway, Howard turned again to face his conqueror. “You will regret this, Hind!” he snarled before storming out of the door, leaving it open to the icy blasts of the chill east wind.

**The Hague, Netherlands**

Sir Thomas Peyton banged his fist on the table causing all around it to jump. Some local ale had spilled from the line of tankards before the dozen or so men seated around the table. Charles Stuart, who was sitting at the other end of the table, raised an eyebrow.

“Sir Thomas, I appreciate your enthusiasm, but can you please refrain from being quite so unruly in my household?”

“My liege, I apologise; but we cannot just sit back and let the Parliamentarians do as they please! They will think that we have given up.”

“That, sir, is exactly what we want them to think,” interjected Lord Loughborough, “can you not see that they are presently far more powerful than we, and that we need time to regroup?”

“The people will rally if we start the action.”

“Ah, but will enough of them be willing to join us and fight?” added Charles. “I think not, not yet. But in time.”

Sir William Compton entered the fray for the first time. “You forget, Sir Thomas, that they are passing repressive and ludicrous laws; the people are becoming more and more disaffected as time passes. They made a mistake murdering the king, the people resented it and they cannot undo that folly. We need only wait; our time will come. For now, we simply need to keep awareness of his Highness alive, and the Parliament men will do the rest for us.”

“But the people must not believe that we have given up!”

“This is true,” responded Sir William. “May I suggest a compromise here? Our problem is that we simply have no idea what the people of England are thinking. Intelligence gathering enables intelligent planning. Therefore, I propose that I will return to England quietly, and locate Captain James Hind.

“I have known James since I was but a child, but you are all aware of his recent activities against the usurpers. He has become something of a folk hero, and he will know what the common folk are thinking. Let me set him a quest, to delve deeper and wider, and report to us here.”

Charles Stuart pondered awhile.

“This argument does make good sense,” he announced. “Proceed, Sir William. You may go and find your man,” he reached for his goblet, “but first tell me a little more; he is a vagabond, is he not? How do you know such a man?”

“He hails from a village close to my family seat, my Lord; indeed, his father made all of our best saddlery. I first met him then as a child, but when your father ordered me to guard Banbury, James sought me out to volunteer and fought alongside me with great valour. Later, at Colchester he was amongst my best officers.

“In between times, he was a successful highwayman, and used his skills to great effect intercepting enemy supply trains; I doubt we could have held out as long as we did in Banbury without those extra supplies coming in, and it must have significantly hindered the Parliament Army to lose so much.

“We heard that there was a single loyal officer present at your father’s execution, and I suspect that it was he; few others would have had the sheer audacity. Since then, he seems to have been conducting a one-man war against the Usurpers.”

“I like this man more and more!” declared the heir. “I must meet him sometime.”

**The Strand, London**

**7th April 1649**

Moll puffed on her pipe, leaning back in her chair. Her little shop was quiet for the moment, and she was debating whether to close early and go for a drink at the inn three doors away. Her decision was made for her when the door swept open and a well-dressed cleric entered, followed by his servant.

“The coat displayed at the front there; it bears a remarkable resemblance to one I recently misplaced.”

“Would you like to try it on? If it is the wrong size, I do have others in the back of similar quality.”

Moll lifted the coat from the hanger and handed it over for inspection. “I can well see your lordship in such a coat.”

“You probably have; this IS my coat!”

“I doubt that sir. I bought it, like all of the others, in total good faith. I am sure that you know my reputation, sir.”

“I know you for a blasphemer, a whore and a thief, madam!”

“Indeed? Do I therefore assume that you do not wish to buy the coat, sir?”

“Why should I pay good money for a coat which I know is mine?”

“Because you lost it, sir. If I have managed to recover it for you, you can think of it as a finder’s fee if you wish. But you are not leaving this establishment, an establishment with a reputation for fair dealing, incidentally, you are not leaving this establishment with that coat unless you pay for it.”

“I shall call the constable!”

“Which will avail you of nought, sir; this is an honest establishment, patronised by many fine gentlemen in the city, and I can assure you, the constable will make no attempt to support you.”

The cleric moved to brush past Moll, but found her firm in her stance, and at six feet tall, she towered over the diminutive cleric. “You either return the coat to me, or pay for it,” she snarled, reaching for her sword beside the chair.

“Do you know who I am?”

“You are Hugh Peters.”

“Then you know it is unwise to cross me. Let me pass.”

“As a man of a church, I am sure that you know the phrases ‘Whoever oppresses the poor insults his God’. Are you about to insult your God?”

“I see nothing to indicate that you are amongst the poor, Madam. A poor person could never afford to buy such as this.”

“Ah, sir, ‘tis clear you are not a man of business. The money I have invested in my stock belongs to my trade; I cannot use it otherwise without putting myself out of business and therefore without any income. No, sir, my ‘wealth’ is in the meagre profit I make from my trades. Now kindly either relinquish the coat or pay for it.”

Peter’s servant leaned across and whispered in his ear. Peters looked at Moll, then whispered back, before turning back to face Moll, who stood with her hand upon her sword.

“Madam, I am advised that you speak the truth, and shall therefore pay your price. But may I ask from whom you obtained such a fine piece of merchandise?”

“You may ask, sir, but I shall not answer; nor could I with any honesty, for I do not record my suppliers.”

“Humph!”

Hugh Peters pulled some coins out of his purse, handed them over and donned his coat. “Should you come across a similar cloak, perhaps you could put it aside for me.”

“Of course, sir. But I have to say, garments of this quality are not common.”

With a final glare at Moll, Peters swept from the shop. His servant turned to wink at Moll before following.

“Time to close,” Moll told herself, closing the shutters facing the street. Smiling, she gathered her tobacco and pipe, donned her sword and left - this would be a fine tale for the Inn, and James would be delighted.

**Chapter 16**

**Swindon**

Zachary Howard leaned back in his chair and took a draught of his ale. Across the room, he could see Cromwell, talking quietly with a local dignitary. The rest of his entourage were ranged around the bar in groups of five or six, drinking and puffing on their pipes.

He had been in this hotel for three days, carefully being both gregarious and generous, spreading the tale that he was a rich Cromwellian supporter who was about to leave the country to review his estates in Ireland. In reality, he did not intend to leave England as long as the pickings remained as rich, and right at this moment, the best prize of all was within his reach. Tonight, Cromwell had invited Zachary to dine with him, an invitation that Zachary had accepted with fawning enthusiasm.

He waited whilst a table was prepared, and then he strolled across the bar and climbed the stairs to his room, where he checked his grooming. Satisfied, he reached into his bag and extracted his favourite flintlock, checked the charge and shot then placed it carefully into a pocket inside his jacket.

He checked around the room for any remaining possessions, and then satisfied that all was packed, he closed his bag and placed it beside the bed before walking across to the window. He had carefully selected this room for its opening window, and he checked again that it would open fully. Finally satisfied, he closed the window again and strode from the room.

Downstairs, several tables had been pushed together in his brief absence, and Cromwell had taken his place for dinner.

“Ah, there you are!” boomed Cromwell, “I thought you might have abandoned us. Come, sit beside me and we can take prayers together before we eat.”

Zachary made his way to the table and sat to Cromwell’s right. Others came to join them, and soon there was a buzz of conversation and merriment around the table until Cromwell held his hand up for quiet. Every man around the table fell silent instantly.

“Before the merriment begins, gentlemen, do you not think we should take the time for prayers?”

None sought to forestall him, so he began intoning grace.

“Amen,” echoed the congregation once he was finished, and Cromwell waved at the proprietor who waved his barmaids through with the steaming bowls of food. Cromwell turned to Zachary.

“So tell me, Mr Edwards, what is your line of work?”

“I do little work these days, sir, but I own several gunpowder factories throughout the land. Twas I who provided you with the means to vanquish our oppressors, and in return, you provided me with the means to become wealthy and buy lands and plantations overseas; I even own a tobacco plantation in Virginia.”

Cromwell joined his laughter.

“Ah, then you should meet with the venerable Hugh Peters, he spent some years preaching in our colony over there before he returned to aid us with profound spiritual guidance during the war.”

“I know of the name, sir, but regret I have never had the pleasure of meeting him, or even hearing him preach.”

“Ah, you should make time to hear him! He is a thorough inspiration to us all. Sadly, he is currently recovering following a dreadful robbery by a villainous Royalist. But he is strong; he will soon be back amongst us, urging us on to even better worship of our Lord.”

“Accursed Royalists. Devil worshippers all. They should all be burned at the stake.”

“Now, now, Mr Edwards. Jesus bade us forgive our enemies and forgive we must if this great nation is ever to recover from her wounds. Were we to follow your tenet, we would be executing fully forty men out of every hundred, the effect would be worse than the Black Death with not enough workers to till our lands.

“No, we must forgive and forget. The war is won, the fighting is over.”

“In my line of business, that is not especially good news, sir,” quipped Zachary with a smile.

Cromwell smiled back but did not reply as the food arrived and they began to eat.

Once the last morsel was eaten, the last chunk of bread consumed, Zachary sat back in his chair. “This inn does provide a wonderful meal!”

“Well, it is God who provides the meal, but I agree, this landlord does seem to find the very best of what God provides for us. Twas very acceptable ale accompanying it, too.”

Cromwell paused in thought, and then turned to face his neighbour. “It is late, and I have an early start in the morning, they will require me back in London. Would you care to join me for evening prayers, sir?”

“I would indeed be greatly honoured, sir,” agreed Zachary. The two men scraped back their chairs and Cromwell turned to the remaining guests.

“I regret, gentlemen that old age forces me to retire; I can no longer carouse late into the night, nor is it Godly for me to do so. Do be ready tomorrow for we have a long ride ahead of us!”

Cromwell left the table and marched to the stairs, trailed by Zachary. “I shall return shortly, gentlemen, rest assured,” asserted Zachary as he followed the general.

Entering his room, Cromwell stood to one side to allow his guest to enter, and then closed the door.

“This bible,” he strode across the room to collect a bible at his bedside, “this bible was blessed by Hugh Peters himself! I am confident that his blessing will ensure that God is listening attentively as we pray.”

Stopping by a chest beneath the window, Cromwell knelt and waved for Zachary to kneel beside him. Zachary stepped forward, withdrew his pistol, reversed it and smacked the general on the head with the butt. Cromwell toppled over, unconscious.

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When Cromwell awoke, he was seated in the chair with a gag in his mouth and ropes holding his arms and legs to the chair. He tried to release himself, but the bindings were too tight. He took to hurling abuse at his captor who sat on the bed with his pistol hanging from his hand, but his gag reduced his rantings to an incoherent babbling.

“You shall not escape, general, so you may as well save your strength - remember, you have a long ride tomorrow! Nor is anyone likely to hear your rantings. So, let us get to business. Where is the gold?”

Cromwell glanced towards the bedside cabinet.

“Thank you. That saved me much searching.” Zachary rose from the bed and went to the bedside cabinet, removing a small portmanteau. “My, my, general, this is heavy indeed! I wonder what you have in here.” He lifted the lid and smiled. “Perfect. I shall relieve you of this and be on my way.”

Cromwell was turning red in the face as he struggled to release himself, all the while trying to hurl abuse at his captor.

“Oh dear, general, you look quite hot, your face is the colour of beetroot. What can I do to ease your difficulties - ah, I see just the thing.”

Placing the portmanteau upon the edge of the bed, Zachary knelt down and lifted the chamber pot from beneath the bed. Cromwell was watching, and his rantings grew more fervent as he saw what his assailant had in mind.

“Oh dear, general,” commented Zachary mildly as he lifted the cloth from the chamber pot. “You seem to be suffering from a rather unpleasant stomach complaint. I am also disconcerted that the landlord has not emptied it before now. Maybe the hotel is not as good as I thought. Well, never mind, it will serve to cool you down. We do not want you coming down with a fever, do we?”

Walking behind the now frantic Cromwell, he tipped the contents onto the general’s head, and then placed it upside down upon his head. Cromwell slumped in his chair, clamping his eyes and lips shut as the noisome mess trickled and slid down his face.

“Ah, well, general, I can’t stay here chatting, I must be on my way. You know, that hat suits you. In fact, it suits you so well that I feel an urge to salute.”

Zachary stood firmly to attention and saluted. “Captain Zachary Howard, at your service, sir,” he barked, “Maybe you should think about a new style of headgear for your accursed New Model Army!”

Zachary took the portmanteau, then opened the door and peeked outside before leaving and closing the door quietly behind him. Cromwell had renewed his efforts and was rocking his chair from side to side so Zachary rushed to his room, opened the window wide, took his bag and climbed out onto the roof. He made his way to the edge and then walked along the edge until he saw a pile of hay below him and beside the stable door. Leaping down, he climbed to his feet, brushed off the chaff from his coat and then entered the stable to reclaim his horse.

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Cromwell had succeeded in toppling his chair and set about bouncing up and down to attract attention. Outside, he heard a horse galloping away, but he continued until he heard a knock at the door. He shouted through the gag, although it was somewhat muffled. But it was loud enough, for the door burst open and two of his officers rushed in.

The sight before them stunned them into inactivity. The great Lord Cromwell was horizontal on the floor with a gag in his mouth, bound firmly to a chair. Shit dripped from his hair and smeared his face, and the chamber pot lay broken on the floor beneath his head. One officer moved to the general and removed the gag, at which Cromwell started yelling.

“Quick, get the men on the road, find that Edwards character and bring him back here. I don’t care if he is injured, killed or in pieces, bring him back here if you value your commissions!”

**Chapter 17**

**Chipping Norton**

**9th April 1649**

“James! Oh, James, I was so embarrassed!” Margaret said, brushing the flour from her apron.

“What on earth is the matter?” asked James, closing the door behind him.

“We had a visitor. Well, to be truthful, twas you he sought. But I had no notice, no idea he was coming, and I had nothing to give him, and the place was a mess, and I was covered in flour, and...”

She stopped as James walked into the kitchen area of the room and gently put his hand over her mouth.

“Calm down. Take a deep breath. Now, slowly. Who was this visitor?”

“Sir William Compton! I had no wine, no foo...”

Again, James used his hand to stop the flow. Lovingly, he brushed a smear of flour from his wife’s cheek.

“Fine. Sir William came. Tell me slowly.”

She took a deep breath. “He knocked on the door, and as soon as I opened the door, he slipped inside and closed it. I was a little frightened, but then he introduced himself, and once he had said who he was, I recognised him of course.

“’I apologise for the intrusion, Madam,’ he said, ‘but I am seeking your husband. I see that he is not here, but are you expecting him home any time soon?’’”

“I asked him if he wanted to sit down, but he declined, saying that he was in as much danger as you are. What did he mean by that?”

“My love, I am a highwayman and a declared Royalist. They would love to get their bloodstained hands on me, and I must be constantly vigilant.

“Sir William is also a declared Royalist, indeed one of the leaders. I thought him to be abroad, but clearly that is not so. If he seeks me, it will be on the king’s business, so I must hasten to his call. Did he say where I might find him?”

“Yes, up at the hall.”

“As I thought. I shall return later, but for now, I must respond to this summons. Prepare dinner for us all, I expect to be hungry!”

Kissing his wife on the forehead, he left the house.

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Carefully keeping to the shadows, James slowly walked his horse towards the Great Hall. Moving into the shade of a small copse, he dismounted and tied his horse to a tree hidden from view. He made his way up to the house and hid in the bushes beside a large, lit window.

Inside, he could hear merriment, and the occasional clink of cutlery on crockery. He lifted himself and risked a glance through the window. Sir William sat alongside his youngest sister and opposite his elder brother, now Earl of Northampton.

For a few minutes, he stood watching before standing erect and tripping lightly up the steps to knock on the great doors. He hesitated; it seemed so wrong, perhaps he should go around to the servants’ entrance. Pulling himself to full height, he adjusted his hat and then rapped firmly on the door. Within moments, a servant opened the door.

“Can I help you sir?” he enquired.

“Captain James Hind to see Sir William.”

“Very well, sir, you are expected. Do please come in,” he stepped aside and swept his arm in a welcoming gesture.

James entered, removing his hat as he did so; he had never been to this part of the hall. He stood looking around for a while as the servant walked through a door at the side of the hall. Through the open door as he went in, James could see a crackling fire with a magnificent fireplace below a large painting. The door closed, giving him a moment to admire the beauty and the space in the entrance hall before a smiling William Compton came striding out from the dining room.

“Captain Hind, do please join us. We had just finished eating and we men have retired to the drawing room.” He ushered the nervous highwayman into the room.

Dark oak panelling graced the walls, giving the room a dark, moody feel. Tapestries hung from the walls, and heavy curtains huddled before the windows, offering protection from the cold. A fire crackled in the grate, where a servant was feeding the flames. Beside the fire, Lord Northampton was leaning forwards in a well-upholstered chair, filling a clay pipe.

“Come, sit down, sit down,” effused Sir William, “would you like something to drink? We do have some claret, if that appeals.” He ushered James into a chair facing his brother, then pulled a third chair to sit facing.

“Er… no thank you, Sir William. I was told that you wanted to see me,” James fiddled with his hat.

Lord Northampton eased his bulk forwards in the chair. “Young man, I understand that your origins mean that you are nervous in surroundings such as these,” he swept his arm around, including the luxurious embroidered curtains and the tapestries, “but there is no need; your activities have been noticed, and those of us who still support the cause applaud you. Your actions mean that you are here by right, and I must declare, I am proud to have you as a guest in my home.” He sat back in his chair and began puffing on his pipe, his eyes locked onto James.

“Indeed so, Captain. Jonathan!” Sir William directed his remarks at the man feeding the fire, “bring Captain Hind a glass of claret.”

“Well, sirs, I only do what I feel my king would have wanted me to do.”

“We appreciate that - was it you who attended his murder, by the way?”

James nodded.

“I thought so,” responded Sir William, “I told the king as such only two weeks ago in the Hague. This brings me to the purpose of your visit, indeed the purpose of my return to England.” He waited while James accepted the goblet of wine and took a tentative sip. “We, that is those of us around the king, are in need of information. I suggested that you might be the person best able to deliver it, and the king agreed.

“What we want to know is the mood of the people. The king cannot return to claim his throne until he has the support of the people, and we simply do not know if he has it. We know that your travels do not cover the whole of the country, so I am here to ask you to widen your travels a little, go up north, to the east, throughout the kingdom, and find out the general mood.

“I shall return to Holland shortly, but you will find Edward Massey at this address.” He handed over a piece of paper. “He is awaiting your visit. He will not take your report, he will simply arrange for you to travel to join us so that we can be briefed at first hand.”

James studied the paper and then folded it and put it in his purse.

“It shall be an honour. You may rely upon me.

” If it is of interest, I do have something of a dialogue with Lord Fairfax. He is not a man for turning, but I do know that he had no wish to harm the king and was deeply upset by the execution and the way he was tricked.”

Sir William clapped him on the back. “I always knew we could rely on you, but never in my wildest dreams did I imagine that you would be having discussions with Fairfax! Remarkable! But now to a final matter.”

“We do have our informants at all levels of government, and word has reached us that you are becoming a sore irritant to them. They discussed you at length at the very highest level, and we hear that they plan to put a lot of effort and men into capturing and disposing of you. So do please take extra care; we are in desperate need of this information.

“You stable your horse in your father’s saddlery; you should stop doing that, as it is common knowledge locally. Instead, use the old barn on our lands a mile to the north; it is safer, and my brother has arranged for a stall to be built inside.

“Should you need sanctuary, come to the hall and we shall provide it. But meanwhile, be very careful and see what you can find out.”

James finished the wine and nodded. “I shall.”

“Your king is depending on you and expressed a desire to meet you when you come over, so perhaps that can act as an incentive to you.”

“I need no incentive, sir; to serve my king is enough.”

James stood, returning the goblet to the hovering Jonathan, bowed towards Lord Northampton who nodded back, and then William escorted him from the room to the front steps of the hall.

“Where is your horse?” he asked.

“Hidden in that copse. As you see, I always take care!”

Both men laughed.

“I shall convey what you had to say about Fairfax to the King. I am certain that he will be most interested.”

William slapped James on the back again and they parted, William to the warmth of the drawing room, James to ride back home.

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“James! I was so worried! Where have you been?”

“At the hall, my love,” James reached for his wife and hugged her, “The king has set me a task. It will please you, as it involves no real dangers other than those I face every day. Indeed, Sir William asked that I cease raiding for a time in order that my task may be completed.”

“That is something of a relief, I admit.” She moved back to the kitchen. “Your meal is ready but I already fed the children.”

“There is one more thing. He told me that the Parliamentarians are putting much effort into trying to apprehend me. I have this paper,” he pulled it from his purse, “which I need you to keep well-hidden and safe for me. When I need it, I shall ask. But should it fall into the wrong hands, a good man will die, probably painfully.”

“I do not like getting involved in these things, James, you know that.”

“I know, but you are the only person I can trust with it; were I to be captured, it must not be found.”

“If you insist,” she replied, tucking it into her apron pocket. “I shall hide it well and shall certainly not look at it. Are you sure that they will not come here?”

“No, they may visit trying to find me, but they will not be looking for scraps of paper, they will be looking for me. And here or not, they shall not find me!”

**London**

Moll looked up as the shop door swung open. Lord Fairfax stood in the doorway. For a moment, he just loomed in the door, whilst his eyes adjusted to the limited light within Moll’s little shop. Moll reached for her sword, but Fairfax raised a calming hand. She stopped, instead watching him warily as he closed the door and strode towards her.

“Moll Cutpurse,” he boomed.

“General Fairfax. To what do I owe this visit?”

Fairfax laughed. “You need not worry, Moll. I come in peace.”

Moll relaxed.

“So, what can I do for the great General Fairfax today?”

“A few weeks ago, I was robbed; more specifically, my servant was robbed and my wife also. I was told that you may be able to find and return the missing items, for a fee, of course.”

“The tale of that robbery and the events alongside it is well known, and I readily offer you, and especially your wife and daughter, my sympathies. Most of the villains around here would do the same.

“I was offered the valuables stolen in that robbery, but I turned them down, knowing as I did the dastardly deeds which accompanied the thefts. Even I have some honour! But I can ask around and find out who has them, then buy them back for you.

“Give me a week, and then return here; I should have something by then. My friend holds you in very high esteem, despite our differing political sympathies. For his sake, I shall sell them back to you at the price I pay.”

“I think I know the friend you mean, and thank you. I shall return in seven days. Goodbye, madam.”

With that, he turned on his heel and left the shop, leaving Moll feeling bemused but nevertheless, feeling good.

**Part 2:**

**The Royalist Rogue and the Lady**

**Chapter 18**

The highwayman leaned forward to soothe his horse. His diminutive stature was tempered somewhat by the slightly elevated heels on his bucket-top boots but exaggerated by the extraordinarily long sword that hung from his waist. Clean-shaven save for a small goatee, his handsome features were developing a slightly worried look as the wait extended. In the distance, the spire of Buriton Church peered over the treetops, reminding the highwayman of home. A gentle breeze disturbed the feather protruding from his cavalier’s hat but failed to distress the deep blue cape hanging from the man's shoulders. Weak sunlight struggled to find its’ way through the timorous new branches in the treetops above, expiring in a dappled presence on the shoots urgently thrusting from the brown forest floor below.

Sighing, he dismounted and led his horse to a small patch of grass beside a fallen tree nearby. He sat on the log and reviewed the past few days. As requested by his king, he had ridden around the country, sounding out the mood of the people. Almost everywhere, he had detected a clear desire for the return of the monarchy, but also a reluctance to fight after so many years of bitter warfare. The people wanted peace above all. He was charged to make his way across the water to meet with his king and tell him what he had found, - but alongside a reluctance to convey such uninspiring news was the stark fact that he was running out of money. It was easy indeed for the king's lords to urge him to cease his activities, whilst he was working for the king since a lord had no shortage of resources, but as is always the case, no one had thought to cover his costs. This meant that he needed to provide for his own family before leaving, and he was sitting here on a damp log in a dismal forest in late April, waiting for suitable prey to come along.

His reverie was disturbed by the clatter of a carriage making its way along the rutted road nearby. He donned his hat, remounted his horse, and made his way back to his observation point. A large and well-appointed coach was wending its’ way along the meandering road below him. Looking closely, he saw only one driver and no accompanying horsemen, so he made his way through the trees until he was standing four square across the rutted road with guns drawn. The coach drew closer before coming to a halt. The highwayman sat scrutinising the carriage for a moment, taking in the slightly shabby livery and the elderly driver sitting with his hands held aloft. The man’s arms were shaking, so James waved his pistol in a clear indication that he could lower his arms.

“Are you armed, sir?”

“No, sir, I would be as much danger to myself and my passengers as to any attacker.”

“In that case, old man, I shall trust you to remain seated and calm. I merely wish to address your passengers.”

He walked his horse around to the carriage door, leaned over and flung it open. A chorus of squeals greeted him, and alarmed, he sat back in his saddle. Regaining his composure, he removed his hat and swept it before him in a deep, chivalrous bow.

“What have we here? I was expecting to find a crotchety old man clutching a worn but full purse, but instead I find myself bedazzled by a vision of outstanding beauty and grace, not just once, but four times. Driver. Did you kill me, have I ascended to Heaven?”

“Why no sir, I told you, I have no weapon.”

“This may be why you are charged with conveying such a fragrant cargo.”

Inside the carriage, the four young women giggled. Returning his pistols to their holsters, he dismounted, walked to the carriage door, and peered inside. The four young ladies all sat back in alarm, The coach itself was a sturdy but practical build, not over-endowed with luxuries. The ladies sat upon uncushioned wooden bench-type seats with similar wooden backrests.

Satisfied that no dangers lurked within, he turned his attentions to the ladies.

To his left sat two dark-haired ladies, the furthest of which had strikingly beautiful high cheekbones. To his right, both girls sported blonde hair and the more flirtatious of the two also enjoyed high cheekbones. He straightened his hat and placed a boot onto the Carriage step, without attempting to enter.

“I, however, have no such handicap, ladies, and it is this that brings me to this point. For, you see, I am betrothed to the most wonderful woman in the world, why, she is as pretty as you, beautiful even, and we most earnestly desire to be wed. But a misplaced investment has ruined me, and I have need of funds to enable our marriage to take place; for her father will not permit her to marry a pauper.”

“Would not her dowry replenish your fortunes, sir?” enquired one of the women. Her blonde hair peeked out at the side of a modest bonnet. The highwayman paused to admire her fine features and high cheekbones.

“It would indeed, madam. But he is adamant that I must be able to match the dowry, and I find myself now embarrassed and unable to comply.”

“We are ourselves on a journey to convey the dowry to Constance’s fiancé. What a wonderful coincidence,” twittered another, unconsciously smoothing her unfettered mane of dark hair. “But you certainly have my deepest sympathies, sir, for there is nothing worse than unrequited love.”

“Quite,” interjected the first girl, eager to retain the attentions of this dashing young man, “it is shameful indeed that matters of the heart should be so governed by money.”

“My feelings exactly, madam. But this is the world in which we must live, and I do not make the rules, merely comply with them. Well, some of them.”

The third woman interjected, her serious mien emphasised by her heavy jowls, unusual in one so young. “Yes indeed, sir, but why should people in love be kept apart for the lack of something so tedious? Constance here is desperate to marry, but it cannot happen until the three-thousand-pound dowry has been paid. Three thousand pounds, sir. Surely love is sufficient.”

“Man cannot live on love alone. But I do my best to help level the field.”

“You have not yet introduced yourself, sir,” pointed out the bride-to-be.

The highwayman paused a moment to examine his interlocutor. This woman was stunning in her beauty. High cheekbones lay beneath piercing dark eyes and sculpted eyebrows. Her dark hair swept down the side of her face to graceful shoulders clad in a beautiful blue gown.

“I have not? I have not indeed.” He stepped back and again swept his hat in a graceful arc as he bowed. “Captain James Hind at your service, ladies.”

“Captain Hind. Why sir, your exploits are the talk of the country.”

“I am flattered, madam. I simply ply my trade as does any other artisan.”

“Artisan? Why sir, you are spoken of as a benefactor. Tales abound concerning your generosity.”

“I only aid those in need.” He frowned. “Although, there was one occasion when a Parliamentarian sought to cheat the poor, but I corrected his error.”

“Do tell, sir, please.”

James checked the road both ways, still clear. “As I recall, it was not far from here that I encountered a poorly dressed man riding morosely towards the East. Upon challenge, he told me that he was taking his horse to market to sell it, so that he could feed his children. I gave him a gold jacobus and bade him proceed and buy good food for his brood.

“Later that evening, I entered an inn and was told that the man was, in fact, a committeeman who had been boasting about how he had fooled me. The next morning, I arose early and rode east, where I awaited his arrival in a suitable wooded area. As he approached, I stepped out before him and greeted him politely. ‘Well, good morning again,’ he responded, ‘what a surprise meeting you again.’ I pointed out that it was no surprise to me, I had been waiting for him. ‘Why would that be?’ he asked me.

“I told him that I had heard him boasting about how he had fooled the rogue Captain Hind, and that since I actually am the said rogue, I was enthralled by what he had to say.

“’That Gold coin’ I told him, ‘was intended to ease the suffering of a poor man’s children. Instead, a greedy, king-killing representative of our oh-so-self-righteous parliament has stolen it from the mouths of those children.’ I then asked him if he had anything to offer in his defence.”

James paused for effect, looking at each spellbound young woman in turn.

“I pointed out that unlike at the trial of our sovereign, I had offered him an opportunity to defend himself. I pronounced him guilty of the theft of food from the mouths of babes.”

“Ooh. What did he say to that?”

“Say? Nothing. There was nothing he could say. I ordered him to dismount, and then to divest himself of his clothing.”

“Oh. You surely do not plan to issue such an order to us, sir, do you?”

“Certainly not. Standards may have dropped in London, but I am not...I am no ruffian, madam, you may rest easy.” James smiled inwardly as he noticed her face fall ever so slightly.

“To continue the tale, he stripped naked, and then I took all of the fine clothes from his saddlebags, and all of the money from his purse.”

“’Sir, I must protest,’ he said, ‘I have robbed no children.’”

“’No,’ said I, ‘but you took money intended for them, and by the looks of this purse you have left a lot of families in utter destitution.

“’I can do little for them, but I can make sure that other families equally poor receive some sustenance.’ I ordered him to put his clothes back on, remount his steed and go on his way, with the warning that it would be better for him if I never saw him again. I took the clothes and money back to the inn and asked the landlord there to distribute it amongst the poor.”

The women looked at one another. “But why do you do it?”

“I do it because someone must, else more people will starve. I am ever a king’s man, and I know he would not want his people starving to death whilst greedy Parliamentarians line their pockets at the people’s expense.”

“So gallant,” exclaimed Constance. “Tis indeed a shame that there are not more like you.”

James doffed his hat and bowed. “Thank you, madam, for those kind words. But I fear that our time is running short, for whilst it is ever a delight to talk with such beautiful young women, there is the problem of my marriage to resolve. I regret that I shall have to insist that you loan me a thousand pounds from the dowry you carry. I shall, rest assured, do my utmost to repay it to you in due course, but my need is pressing, more pressing than is yours. For surely, your betrothed must love you enough to accept your affections at a lower price.”

“Oh, sir, I am not sure about this, my father was most insistent...”

“As am I madam. Loathe as I am to mishandle a woman at any time, I shall, if I must, wrest it from your hands.”

The young woman counted out the demanded one thousand pounds and handed it to the highwayman. “I do hope that my marriage does not founder because of this.”

“If it does, madam, rest assured you have had a lucky escape. For if he is as avaricious as that, he will certainly be a most unsatisfactory husband.”

James tucked the purse inside his belt and bowed again to the women. “I must take my leave at this juncture, ladies. But I wish you well in your endeavours, and perhaps we shall meet again once the king is back in his rightful place.”

He smiled at the women, who now looked distinctly crestfallen, mounted his horse, waved to the ladies and then to the driver, before galloping away.

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Some months earlier, the Earl of Northampton had offered safe stabling, which the ever-prudent highwayman had gratefully accepted. So, as he returned home, James rode to the stable and bedded his horse in a prepared stall on the Earl’s land. Thoughtfully, food had been provided for his steed and he settled his tired mount before setting off across the fields towards home. It had been over a week since he had last seen his wife and children. Nevertheless, caution meant that he must stay back and watch the house awhile to ensure that there were no Parliamentarians around. He settled behind a clump of bushes and watched for movement. Before him, the field lay fallow this year and beyond that sat the back of a row of small cottages, each with a small garden full of nascent vegetables and a fruit tree or two.

After an hour of watching, he felt confident enough to approach the back of the house. Positioning himself beside a window, he listened. After a while, hearing nothing he risked a glance inside the house. He saw his wife working in the kitchen whilst the children played in front of a glowing log fire. No evidence of anyone else in the house.

He moved around to the corner of the building and scrutinised the houses within sight. No movement at any of the windows, no sign of anyone hiding in bushes. Staying behind the house, he slipped across to survey the bushes on the other side. Again, he saw no movement, so he eased along the stonewall, ducking beneath the waist-high bushes he had planted himself. As he reached the door, he cast a quick glance around before letting himself in backwards. He turned around.

His wife was seated before the fire, the baby on her lap. Her auburn hair was tied neatly behind her head, revealing her ruddy, slightly plump cheeks. The older children were playing over by the sleeping area, using the curtain to hide behind. A pot steamed over the fire spreading tempting aromas and causing his stomach to rumble.

“James. Oh, I was so worried. I thought they might have taken you.”

“No, my love, I have seen no dangers at all since I left home. Why were you so concerned?”

“They came, twice. I am sure they will be back today. They came in, actually, they burst in, but they didn’t search the house, so your paper is safe.”

“I now need that. I was hoping to be able to spend a little time with you, but apparently, it is not to be. I must report to the king across the water, so it may well be a while before I return. I have some money for you. I suggest you bury it in case they do decide to search.”

James counted out five hundred pounds and tucked it into his wife’s purse, while she retrieved the paper. “Now I should leave before they return. Goodbye my love. I shall be counting the days until my return.”

They kissed, and he took each child in turn and gave them a hug. Returning the youngest to the floor, he smiled at his wife and then eased out of the door, checking carefully for any watchers. Slipping around the side of the house, he sprinted across the field and then slowed to a stroll as he entered the trees and passed out of sight.

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Sir John looked up at a knock on the door. Heavily built with wispy salt-and-pepper hair, he was dressed in a dark shirt, open at the neck.

“Come,” he barked.

The doors opened to reveal Henry, his tall, lugubrious steward, leading a beautiful young lady with cascading brown hair.

“Do come in, my dear,” boomed Sir John as Henry ushered Constance into his study. He rose from behind the desk and hurried to kiss her proffered hand. “It is a delight that you grace my humble home with your presence.”

Constance looked around. The room was distinctly gloomy, panelled in a dark wood with daylight struggling to brighten the room around heavy drapes that had only been partly opened. Books lined one wall and the stubs of last night's candles huddled in a huge candelabrum looming over the desk.

“It is a delight to be here, I am sure,” whispered Constance, “but it is improper for us to be alone together before matrimony. I was told that your mother would act as chaperone?”

“Indeed, she will. I shall send for her but she lives in the far wing of the house and does not walk easily these days. She will join us momentarily, I am sure.” He turned to address his steward. “Henry, please advise the lady that her presence is required in the study.”

Henry bustled away, and Sir John returned his attention to Constance. “I believe that you have something for me?”

Constance blushed. “Why surely sir, it is more important for us to become better acquainted. We will, after all, be spending a lifetime together bringing up our children.”

“It is indeed important, but first, we do need to observe the proprieties. We are not yet wed.”

“I perceive that you are referring to the dowry.” She paused and lowered her gaze for a moment before taking a deep breath and looking him full in the face.

“I regret that we were robbed on the way here. We were perhaps fortunate in that he not only made no attempt upon my virginity; he only took one thousand pounds. But I have arrived with my purity intact, which is surely the most important.”

Sir John reddened. “Surely important indeed, madam, but the dowry must be paid in full.”

“I regret that my father will not be able to raise more; it almost ruined him assembling this much. You set a very high price.”

There was a discreet tapping at the door. “Enter.”

Henry entered and moved across to where Sir John was standing. “Sir, her Ladyship is on her way. But as you instructed, I have counted the money the ladies brought with them. I have to report that it is almost a thousand pounds short.”

Sir John stroked his chin. “Very well. Place the money in the secure room and await my instructions.”

The steward bowed, and then retreated from the room.

Sir John turned back to Constance. “Without the proper dowry, there can be no wedding. I therefore request, madam, that you leave my house and return whence you came. I shall keep the residual money as recompense for my inconvenience.”

“But sir, do you not love me?”

“Love you? Love you? Why in the name of all that is holy should I love you? You come here with an inadequate dowry, telling a dubious story about a robbery, when I know full well that any highwayman would not only ravage and kill you, but he would also take it all. Although looking at you, I can see why sex did not occur; who would want to lie with you?”

A sneer crossed his face as he watched Constance run from the room. He rubbed his hands together before returning to his desk.

**Chapter 19**

**April 1649**

James rode slowly down the dark, narrow London street, looking for the address on the note he carried. Dusk was approaching so the streets were bustling with workers making their way home. He found the house he sought in the middle of a small terrace. Pausing, he looked around. At the far end of the street, he saw an inn, and urged his horse forwards. Reaching the inn, he walked his horse into the stable, handed a penny to the stable boy, removed his hat, and left.

He walked back down the street to the house in the middle of the terrace, checked the street both ways and then knocked on the door.

“Who is it?”

“A friend. I have business over the water.”

“I need a name.”

“Hind.”

The bolts came back from the door and a spindly little man with wispy receding hair peered out. He checked both ways up and down the street before ushering James inside. He guided James along a corridor and down some steps into the cellar. A single candle burned upon a table set in the middle of the room. Boxes lined the walls and the beams supporting the floor above bowed alarmingly above them. Once they were both seated at the table, he spoke again.

“Edward Massey at your service, sir. I was told to expect you. How can I help you?”

“I am Captain James Hind. I have business with His Majesty and was ordered to deliver it in person. I was instructed to come here once I was ready.”

“As I said, I was told to expect you. The king is in The Hague, so we will need to get you on a crossing. I shall give you a letter, which you should guard with your life. Go to the person mentioned in the letter, he will organise your crossing to France. The Hague is further north, but here is a map showing the towns between your landing point and The Hague. You will find his Majesty’s retinue in apartments beside the Royal Palace.”

“What about money? I have a little left of my own funds, but obviously none for these foreign lands.”

Massey grinned. “It is ever the lot of those of us who serve those with money that they are reluctant to provide payment. I have no English money for you, but I have been given a stock of foreign coin. This purse should contain enough to get you to The Hague, but I do suggest you hasten to get there quickly once you are on foreign soil. Apart from the fact that you have little money, our enemies have their spies out looking for lone riders such as you, riding to see the king. Be very careful. If you have any Jacobusses they can be used freely over there, but it does point you out as an Englishman.”

“I speak no foreign languages, so I think they will be able to discern that anyway.”

The two men laughed. Edward pulled a pen and paper to him. James watched as he wrote out an address in Dover and a letter to the person. Massey sat back and waved the letter in the air to dry the ink.

“Take this now and be on your way. Forget who I am and where I live. I suggest you leave tonight.”

“That is not practical for me, I have been riding all day and need some rest. I do have some lodgings of my own here in the city, but I shall be away tomorrow.”

Massey stood, indicating the end of the meeting. At the door, he stuck out his hand.

“Good luck, Captain. It has been a pleasure meeting the legendary highwayman.”

“Thank you. May God protect you.”

--oOo—

James crept up to the window and peered inside. General Fairfax sat before the fire, reading some documents. He looked around the room, with the now familiar drapes and tapestries, to make sure that there was no one with the general. Seeing that he was alone, James walked back to the fence, climbed back over and returned to the street. Retrieving the Bible from where he had hidden it, he straightened his hat, brushed down his clothes and adopted a scowl. He started marching down the street with a determined air. People moved aside to let him pass, and he had to suppress a smile at the evident fear on their faces, few dare face down a rampant puritan.

He reached the front of Fairfax’s house, ascended the steps, and rapped at the door. The door opened. A tall figure with carefully coiffed grey hair and a dark jacket and breeches stared down at him with unconcealed disdain.

“May I help you, sir?”

“Edward Willoughby for General Fairfax,” announced James as he pushed past the astonished figure and entered the vestibule.

“I shall see if he is available, sir.”

“Of course he is available. Simply announce me.”

The steward bustled off. James looked around the room; paintings lined the stairs, presumably of Fairfax’s ancestors, and he moved across to get a better look. As he did so, the steward returned, followed by General Fairfax. who looked nervous, and a little flustered, but he nevertheless greeted James.

“Mr Willoughby, how good of you to come and see me; I was hoping you would call. Come, let us retire to the study where it is warm.”

He ushered James into the study, then turned to his steward. “I think a little warmed claret would be appropriate, if that is acceptable, Mr Willoughby?”

James nodded assent, then moved to sit in the offered seat.

Fairfax took his seat opposite. As soon as the door was closed, he exploded. “You. I should run you through right now. It was one of you accursed Royalist highwaymen that stole my plate, murdered my servant, and attacked my family. That is unforgivable. Not to mention that I was robbed myself, although we did catch the miscreant with my money.”

James smiled. “I was not at all involved in either of those crimes. Although I was involved in both after the event.”

“Explain yourself.”

James waited until the steward had served the claret and left, then turned towards his host.

“As regards the robbery of yourself, I had previously told Miss Cutpurse that you are not to be killed, for I suspect that she may well have done so without that exhortation. I could say no more without revealing our discussions.”

“Yes, as I recall she did mention you during the robbery.”

“You came out of that matter with a considerable profit; I know, for it was I delivered the money to you.”

Fairfax started. “You? But it was a whore delivered it.”

“I do have some abilities with costume and disguise, general,” he adjusted his voice to be higher than normal. “Moll Cutpurse asked me to deliver this to you here, in person.”

“Good heavens! Now I understand how you managed to elude me in Colchester.”

“As long as none of your soldiers sought to grope me in the wrong places, I knew I was safe.”

Both men laughed, then Fairfax asked, “And the other matter?”

“Ah, Zachary Howard. I should tell you that I met your man Thomas just outside London, and I accompanied him as far as Abingdon, where I left him to cover the remaining few miles to Faringdon. I was on my way home, just north of Oxford. It must have been after Abingdon he was attacked. I even gave him lessons in self-protection as we rode.” The general nodded. “Shortly after the, er… events, Zachary Howard came into our inn. Understand, general, this inn is frequented by plenty of thieves and whores, so little disturbs them. However, as he entered, a deathly silence came over the place, sufficient to disturb us in our conversation and cause us to reach for our swords.

“Having bought a drink, he recognised Moll, my companion; most people do, and then he wandered over to our table. As it happens, she had previously refused to buy the plate from him because she had heard of the murder and assaults and had no wish to be associated with either. He was abusive and rude, and so we crossed blades. As a consequence, it will be a little while before he has need to engage the services of a whore, and it should be in another country. I told him that I would kill him if I ever saw him again, and that I would hunt him down if I heard that he has attacked any more children. He will need a few weeks however, to allow his wounds to heal. His gait will be peculiar for a while to come, I feel.”

“I put up a large reward for his capture, why did you not avail yourself of that?”

“I could not, general. Were I to do so, none would ever trust me again, there is a rudimentary code of honour amongst thieves, you know. However, that same honour means that he will be shunned wherever he is recognised, so it is indeed likely that he will leave the country, at least for a while.”

“Well, it does my heart good to learn of his misfortunes, and I thank you for that. I also thank you for accompanying poor Thomas most of the way. I shall make a point of telling Lady Fairfax when I next see her; she will appreciate it, too.”

“And your daughter? Is she recovered?”

“She is a sturdy wench, lively of spirit. I am sure that she will recover.”

“Your wife earned great respect for her interventions during the king’s trial. It will not be forgotten.”

“And what of you, sir? I have not heard a lot of you in recent weeks.”

“I have matters to attend to, sir, matters which I cannot divulge. However, you will hear naught of me for the immediate future.”

“Ah, it is perhaps as well. Parliament will be issuing a bounty on you shortly, so the further away you find yourself, the better.”

“I shall be safe, sir.”

“You will not forget my request?”

“There is indeed a strong likelihood that I shall be able to deliver that message, sir. But I may say no more.”

Fairfax stood, signalling the end of the discussion. “God speed, Captain.”

“And may God protect you, general. I do fear for your safety surrounded by these scoundrels.”

“I can take care of myself, captain. I may not be a very good politician, but I am a good general. My men are completely loyal to me. The army will stand by me, even against Cromwell if the need should arise.”

James paused as he stepped from the door. “These are dark days, General, full of dark deeds. I hope that between us we can bring peace and prosperity back to our nation.”

“It is indeed a long, dark road we see before us. But we shall prevail. Eventually.”

--oOo—

James started awake. His frugal room was dark, but there was a commotion outside the door. Before he could move, the door burst open and several burly constables carrying pistols rushed in. James started to rise but the two biggest constables hurled themselves at him and held him down. Two more constables emptied his bag onto the floor and began rifling through his belongings.

“Hmm… gentlemen, do we have a problem?”

“We don’t. You do,” snarled one of the men holding him down. “Now get up and stand over there while we check the room.”

James swung his feet to the floor, stood with a grunt and walked slowly across the room. The guns followed him as he walked, then he was pushed in the back and stumbled the remaining few feet to slam against the wall.

“Gentlemen, gentlemen. Is there need of such uncouth behaviour?”

“Shut up,” snarled the man as they checked the cupboards and his boots. A dagger was removed from his boots and then they threw them at him. “Put those on.”

“Am I not allowed my breeches?”

Someone threw his breeches at him, and he pulled them on, followed by his boots. His coat followed but they bundled all his weaponry and other possessions in a bed sheet and one of the constables slung the bundle over his shoulder.

“Right, You. Come on, there’s a nice room at Newgate being prepared for you.”

James followed, occasionally being prodded from behind. Out in the street, a small crowd had gathered around a wagon, into which he was unceremoniously pushed and then the door slammed behind him. Just before the door slammed, he saw a constable handing a purse to Zachary Howard who saw his glance and smirked at him, holding up the purse.

--oOo--

Fairfax smacked his fist into the palm of his hand as he paced back and forth.

“Calm down, Thomas. Whatever is the matter with you?” asked his wife.

“Captain Hind was taken last night. Betrayed by someone called Edwards, but that is not the point. He may reveal our discussions, which would not be fatal for us, but it would certainly be embarrassing.”

“Can you not engineer his escape somehow?”

“Absolutely not. That would be tantamount to treason, and I cannot countenance such a thing. The furthest I could go would be to be a little negligent in security, but even that would be difficult. However, I’m sure I could pull rank to keep myself in the clear.”

“Will he not be expecting to hear from you?”

“Yes, you are right, he will. However, he will not be pleased by what I have to say to him. I wish I could help him, but I cannot without betraying my oath.”

“He is a resourceful man, Thomas. I am sure he will be able to engineer his own escape. And he does seem honourable, he will be able to work out that betraying you will not secure his own release but may harm you. I do not believe that you have anything to worry about save that poor man’s future. Will they hang him?”

“Absolutely certain. Cromwell is almost leaping with joy, not a pretty sight, I assure you. He has appointed Bradshaw to preside at the trial, and you know as well as I that no man is innocent in his eyes.”

“Can you undertake the security to and from the court? Maybe an opportunity can present itself.”

“I can, my dear, and I will. But I cannot be too lax as I am certain that Cromwell will want to attend. But yes, that may be an idea - shows Cromwell that I too am determined to see justice yet allows me to be... a touch negligent for the captain.”

--oOo--

Lord Thomas Fairfax idly brushed the surface dirt from the cell wall and then casually leaned against the wall. A small, barred window up near to the ceiling afforded limited light so a torch had been placed in a holder near the door.

After a few moments, two jailers burst through the doorway dragging a struggling James Hind with them. After a brief tussle, they successfully shackled Hind to the wall and stood back.

“Go,” ordered Fairfax. “Return only on my order. The prisoner and I have...things to discuss.” He smiled and they smirked back.

Once the door was closed, Fairfax approached James. “Scream every now and then; I am supposedly beating information out of you.”

James screamed and then grinned at the general. “Not how I envisaged our next meeting, sir.”

“Nor I. Even worse, there is little I can do to secure your release. Cromwell is on your case. He has appointed Bradshaw to hear your trial, so you will be condemned. I have agreed to take the security detail to accompany you to and from the court, and I plan to force you to walk all the way, that way you are not shackled to a cart. But you will have to find your own opportunity to escape; I cannot manufacture one for you. The constables still have your possessions, but I have ordered that they should be sent to my home. Where do you want me to deliver them?”

James screamed again, causing them both to wince.

“Moll. Moll Cutpurse. She is trustworthy, and if I do succeed in escaping, I shall visit her not too long afterwards. But if I fail, I think I would want her to have them anyway, they are of no use to my wife.”

“Very well, I shall see to it; I have business with her anyway.”

James grinned, his teeth shining against his grimy face in the gloomy room. “I am pleased you two are at peace. She remains an ardent Royalist but will not be taking up her pistol again, she had to pay too much after the last time.”

“Well let us hope that an opportunity presents itself. Oh, I meant to ask you, who is this Edwards fellow who betrayed you?”

James grimaced. “That, my dear Lord Fairfax, was Zachary Howard; the man who had forcible sex with your wife and daughter, killed your servant and stole your valuables. Also, though less disturbingly, who recently humiliated Cromwell.”

Fairfax stared at him. “You mean he had the nerve to turn you in and claim the reward? Well, I hope he appears at your trial, I shall find the constable responsible and post him in the courtroom with instructions to identify your betrayer so that we may secure him.”

“It may be better to place your constable on the route to and from Newgate. He will know better than to appear in a place like a courtroom where his escape routes are limited, but he will want to gloat over my misfortune, that is for certain.”

“You attended the trial of the king, did you not?”

“I did, but I am skilled at disguise, and came as the female half of a couple. He is a pariah everywhere and knows nothing of disguise.”

“Very well. I shall place the constable in both locations, and then we can be sure. But I cannot raise this with Cromwell, he was sore embarrassed by that incident.”

“I can imagine.” James screamed again. “For that alone I could almost forgive Howard his treachery, almost. But I am sure that you shall catch him, relieving me of the necessity of committing murder, an act that may well be a sin, but is necessary. I allowed Bradshaw and Peters to live when I had them at my mercy, killing in cold blood is not something that comes easily to me but for Howard, I would make an exception should the opportunity arise.”

Fairfax smiled. “I can never forgive him, even with his masterly humiliation of Cromwell. The Bible demands too much at times, but there is always an alternative in there; an eye for an eye comes to mind. But now I must go. Good luck, captain. Be on the lookout for your chance, there may only be one.”

--oOo--

Thomas Fairfax dismounted, handed his reins to his groom, and took the bag from his groom’s horse. He looked up and down the street, checking to make sure that he was not observed by anyone he knew, then ignoring the stares of passers-by, he pushed open the door to Moll’s shop and slipped inside.

“Miss Cutpurse,” he announced as he entered, “these are James Hind’s belongings. I retrieved them from the constables, and he asked that they be delivered into your hands.”

Moll took the bag from the general and placed them behind her chair.

“A sad business. I never thought he would be taken.”

“He was not so much taken, as betrayed. He told me that it was Zachary Howard who collected the thirty pieces of silver.”

“That scoundrel. I should have guessed; James did humiliate him.”

“Well, he has his revenge now. But all is not lost. James is a slippery customer, and I shall have to watch him closely as I escort him to and from the courtroom.” He winked at Moll. “On another matter, did you succeed in tracking down any of my stolen items?”

“Some, yes. The plate was far too hot to handle for most, so Howard only got a pittance for it. The one who did buy it was so relieved to get rid that I was able to buy it for not much more, so that was easy. The jewellery has been more difficult, however; some was sold on, and I cannot get my hands on that. But what remained is here,” she pointed at a portmanteau by the door, “and this is what I paid for it all.” She passed him a written account.

Fairfax raised his eyebrows as he studied the document. “You have done well indeed, my dear. I would have paid double this to retrieve it all.”

He reached inside his purse and counted out several coins. “Here, accept a little extra for your efforts, you traced more than I thought you would, and I am very grateful. Think of it as a partial refund of what you paid me.”

“Thank you, my Lord.” Moll curtsied, although the masculine garb rather detracted from the intended effect.

Fairfax smiled, picked up the portmanteau and then reached for the door. “Should any more become available, do let me know. But meanwhile, madam, goodbye.” He bowed and exited.

**Chapter 21**

A kick to the ribcage roused the sleeping James, and he sprang to his feet with a snarl on his lips. As he was due in court, he had been moved to a small, dank cell of his own the night before. Barely ten feet square, for once he had been grateful for his small stature.

“Feisty. Well, that will soon change. Jailer, shackle his wrists and hogtie his ankles, we don’t want him escaping.”

Fairfax backed away from the prisoner as two burly jailers took hold of James’s arms and brought them together for the shackles. One of them slammed James back into the wall, where he stood stunned, held by the throat by one whilst the other tied his ankles with a length of strong rope.

“Not too close together, he has a walk in front of him and we want to get there today or Judge Bradshaw will be asking why his prisoner is absent.”

“Why? He always finds his defendants guilty and condemns them to death, he has no need of prisoners or witnesses, just a gavel,” snarled James.

“You should show more respect, young man,” commented Fairfax. “I’m sure he will provide you with a fair trial.”

“Not likely,” retorted James. “I robbed him several months ago, he’s the only mark I’ve ever had who pissed his breeches.”

“Condemned out of his own mouth.”

“Perhaps, but since Bradshaw sits as judge, he cannot accuse me or give evidence against me, can he?”

“He cannot, although he is usually able to adapt any situation. But he could ask me to give evidence.”

“General, you know as well as I that I will be found guilty with or without the facts, so I do not really have anything to lose here. But I intend to make full use of my right to speak before sentencing.”

“Try not to antagonise General Cromwell too much; he will be riding with me back towards Newgate and I would prefer not to be harangued all the way.”

“After that kick, why should I care tuppence what you have to endure?”

“You have to care because I shall be instructing your jailer when we return. Enough of this foolishness. He irritates me. Take him out to the troops waiting outside.”

The jailers pushed a recalcitrant James stumbling out of the door followed by the General. They waited while one jailer locked the door behind them, and then continued along the dank, dimly lit corridor. Cries of anguish came from behind one of the locked doors to one side and echoed around the stonewalls. At the end of the corridor, they pushed James up the uneven stone steps to the courtyard. James paused and blinked in the dim but unfamiliar light but was pushed forwards by a punch in the back from one of the jailers. He stumbled and fell, grazing his wrist on the rough cobbles as he broke his fall and rolled over.

“I’ll remember that, you pus-ridden pig.”

The recipient of his invective shrugged and kicked James in the backside. “Get up.”

James struggled to his feet and started walking across the courtyard at the fastest pace his hog-tied ankles would allow. As he reached the gate, it swung open to reveal a double line of troops, who ushered him into the centre. One trooper moved in front of him, another behind as the general strolled out and mounted his horse. The gates to Hell slammed shut behind him.

James shuffled along the road. He slowed his pace to hide the fact that he could make a much better pace if an opportunity should present itself.

Crowds thronged all along Old Bailey Street and as far as the eye could see. A line of soldiers held the crowds back with difficulty, wavering continuously as the people pressed closer to get a look at the celebrity highwayman. The troops reformed into an arrow shape, with James in the middle and the general riding behind. The point man was laying about, clearing a route through the throng who backed away from his flailing musket. As the formation edged forwards, the crowd surged back once the point man’s musket was out of reach, and the arrow formation bulged and reformed as the press grew too much for the troops to hold back.

As they passed Green Arbour Court, he saw that the crowds went quite a long way back up the side streets, and hope bloomed in his breast as a strong surge hit them from there. The troops were almost backing into him but held and gradually fought back as they moved forwards out of reach of the street.

He saw Bishop’s Court ahead and prepared himself for an even bigger surge. But the sergeant also saw it and bellowed out to his men. “Use your musket butts and make a space around you.”

The crowd surged and James saw Moll’s head in the crowd, exhorting them to greater efforts. The troops fell back into a tight circle as the crowd was pushed towards them from behind. They began punching people at random because there was no longer enough room to swing the muskets. Dozens of people were beaten to the floor until they formed a barrier between troops and people. Another troop began fighting their way towards their beleaguered colleagues. James was crushed now between soldiers, unable to move and even Fairfax was having a problem, kicking men, women and children as his horse became more and more panicked.

A chant began somewhere to his right, “Captain, captain, captain...”, and he looked across, again catching a glimpse of Moll’s face in the crowd.

Fairfax’s horse reared in fright, and the crowd pushed their way back to give clearance. Clattering to the front of the troop through the crowd, Fairfax yelled “follow me.”

Inspired, his men began pushing in his direction, with James locked tightly between them. As the crowd drew back a little, two soldiers grasped his arms and forced him to move with them. Briefly, he stumbled, tripping over the ropes on his ankles, but the soldiers held, and he was propelled forward with his feet off the ground for a few yards.

The second troop reached the general, turned, drew their swords, and began to wave their weapons to force the crowd back. The crowd gave way, and the troopers began to move forwards again. A grinning face at the edge of the crowd ahead caught his eye, and he saw Zachary Howard.

He started to move forwards, eager to confront his betrayer but slowed down as he remembered the need to deceive. The gates to the courthouse loomed over him, and he was thrust into the gloom as the doors were slammed shut behind him.

Fairfax climbed from his horse and handed the reins to a trooper. “You and you,” he pointed to two more troopers. “Escort the prisoner to the dock, stand behind him on guard until it is time to return him.” Fairfax then walked through a nearby door.

As James was ushered into the courtroom, a hush descended. He looked around. Dark panelling gave the whole space, large though it was, a gloomy, threatening air. The Judge’s chair was elevated slightly so that all participants had to look up to the judge. The dock was up only a couple of small steps, placing defendants below all others. Up in the gallery, tall windows tried to bring a little light to the proceedings, but failed, quite literally, dismally.

Troops held the crowds back to allow General Fairfax to take his seat alongside Oliver Cromwell. The gallery heaved as everyone tried to get a look at the prisoner. A line of troopers stood in front of the benches facing the gallery with muskets at the ready. Twelve nervous men sat in the jury box, but the judge had not yet arrived. James was hustled into the dock, the troopers took up position behind him and the buzz subsided as the doors were flung open again.

“All rise for Judge Bradshaw.”

“Why, is he going to piss his pants again?” jibed James.

The gallery erupted into laughter and even some of the facing troops had difficulty maintaining a straight face. The clerk glared at James, and he quieted, still smiling.

Judge Bradshaw swept into view and after a brief glare at the defendant, ascended the podium and took his seat. His long judicial cloak was edged with gold braid, his cap sat straight on his head. He glared again at the prisoner and then addressed the Clerk seated at a bench below him.

“Clerk to the Court, please read the charges.”

The clerk rose to his feet. “My Lord, today we have James Hind, accused of highway robbery.” He looked at James. “How do you plead?”

“Does it matter?”

“This is a court of law. You are required to enter a plea.”

“I plead insanity, then.”

“That is not an acceptable plea, do you plead guilty or not guilty?”

“Yes”

“Which?”

“Witch? No one ever accused me of being a witch before. True, I have been known to dress in women’s clothing occasionally, but a witch? Never. I plead that I am not a witch.”

The gallery was by now in hysterics and Judge Bradshaw was forced to stand. “The gallery will be quiet or I shall be forced to have you all evicted.” He looked down at James. “And you, young man, would be well advised to take these proceedings seriously. Your very life may depend upon it.”

“Oh, that. My life. Well, as we all know what the verdict and sentence will be, it’s actually a bit of a sham, is it not?”

“This is a court of law, and you would be well to remember that. Now, make your plea and we can proceed.”

“No.”

“Very well. Let it be recorded that the defendant has refused to enter a plea, and that the court interprets that as a guilty plea.” He turned aside. “Gentlemen of the jury, can I have your verdict for the record?”

“My Lord, we have not received instruction yet to retire and consider our verdict.”

“You need not retire when a defendant has pleaded guilty. Consult amongst yourselves if you must, but then advise me of his guilt that I may proceed.”

Bradshaw sat and glared at the jury whilst they consulted with each other, tapping his finger on the bench to show his irritation. After hasty whispered consultations, the foreman turned back and faced the judge.

“Guilty, my lord.”

“Good.” Bradshaw turned back to face the court. “Let it be recorded that the defendant has been found guilty as charged.” He looked down at James in the dock. “Does the defendant have anything to say in mitigation before I pass sentence?”

James glanced to the gallery, then across to where Fairfax and Cromwell sat staring at him. He saw Fairfax give an imperceptible shake of his head, and then turned back to face the judge.

“I do not.”

“The prisoner will show respect when he addresses the court,” shouted Bradshaw, and then gathered himself at a withering glance from Cromwell. “A court of your peers has found you guilty of the heinous crime of highway robbery. The law prescribes but one sentence for this, that you be taken from this court to a place of confinement, in this case Newgate Prison and that at a time to be determined by the Lord Chancellor, you shall then be taken to a place of execution and there you shall be hanged by the neck until dead. And may God have mercy on your soul. This is the verdict of the Court. Court is now dismissed.”

Bradshaw stood, causing the clerk to yell out, “All rise.”

Stepping down from his podium, Bradshaw allowed himself a small smirk at James before sweeping from the room.

The gallery was buzzing as they crowded to exit, but the sound rose in pitch as soldiers blocked their way to allow Cromwell and Fairfax to depart. Once they had disappeared, the tone quietened.

Fairfax appeared in the doorway where moments before, Bradshaw had departed, and waved his troops to bring James down. James looked deliberately disheartened as he descended from the dock, and the soldier behind him pushed him in the back. Once he had recovered his step, he shuffled towards Fairfax and through the doorway.

--oOo—

Across the courtyard, Fairfax was consulting with a constable who was shaking his head. Fairfax pointed to the gates as he gave his orders, and the constable scurried away to do the general’s bidding. Cromwell pulled on his riding gloves as he strode across the room.

“What was that all about?” he enquired as he tightened his belt a little.

“I have learned, general, that the person who gave us Hind was in fact the man who attacked my wife and daughter, and robbed you. That was the constable who gave him the reward, he is sure he can recognise the man again, and you can be sure he will be here to enjoy his victory; I gather that he and Hind hate each other with a passion. I had him in the gallery, but there was no sign. I’ve just sent him to mingle with the crowds outside, see if he can spot him there.”

“I am impressed, my Lord. Hanging a criminal like Hind will be a pleasure, but that man...What excellent intelligence you must have. Let us hope, then.”

Both generals swung onto their horses, and Fairfax gave a signal to his troops, who opened the doors and started the long and difficult walk back to Newgate Prison gates.

Outside, James blinked in the sunlight, but maintained his slow and steady pace. The soldiers were busy keeping the jostling crowds back. Sporadic chants of ‘captain, captain’ were interspersed with chants of ‘justice, justice’ and ‘long live the king’. James kept his eyes open for an opportunity, but with a soldier behind and another in front, there was nothing he could do.

Onwards they trudged and the deeper into the square they went, the more the crowd jostled. Fairfax and Cromwell walked behind, ignoring the chants. Occasionally, something would arc over the crowds and splatter on the pavement around the entourage, but whether these were aimed at the prisoner, the generals or the troops, none could tell. Cromwell looked aside angrily as a rotten egg hit his arm but he was unable to see where it had come from.

James saw Moll at the front of the crowd, making her way along beside the line of troops, throwing punches when needed to stay nearby. A constable ahead, gesticulating wildly towards General Fairfax caught his eye. As they passed, the constable called out, “General, general, over there, over there.”

Fairfax glanced where he was pointing, and then leaned over towards Cromwell, who was trying to brush the egg residue from his jacket.

“General, is there anyone over where the constable is pointing that you recognise?”

Cromwell looked at Fairfax, glanced at the constable, then across to the crowd on the opposite side to the constable. His eyes bulged.

“Stop that man.” he bellowed, spurring his horse towards Zachary Howard. “Ten Jacobusses to the man who captures him.”

Chaos ensued as the crowd behind the constable surged forwards, breaking the cordon of troops, racing towards where Howard was trying desperately to elude the grasping hands of those around him. The troops themselves had a choice between being knocked to the ground and trampled or following the surge.

James saw the mass of humanity thundering towards him and dropped to the floor, curling himself up into a tight ball. His shackles restricted him, and he yelled out as a boot caught his midriff. The crowd slowed, and he felt a hand tugging at his arm.

“Quickly James, before they realise.”

He looked up into the wrinkled face of Moll Cutpurse. He scrambled to his feet, aided by Moll and another man. He looked quizzically into the man’s face.

“Charles Davis, friend of Moll’s,” explained the man, “and a blacksmith.”

With one either side, they made their way to the wall and then hurried along Old Bailey Street. At the junction with Ludgate Hill, he glanced across at the forbidding walls and gate of Newgate Prison before hurrying across the road and into Giltspur Street. Suddenly, he was pulled aside into Cock Lane. Halfway along, Charles opened a door and they all tumbled through into the blacksmith’s shop.

--oOo--

The crowd of hands and faces holding him down parted and Zachary Howard found himself glaring up into the face of Oliver Cromwell.

“Well, Mr Edwards, it seems we meet again,” commented a grinning Cromwell.

“We do, general. But I doubt you can damage my reputation as effectively as I damaged yours.”

“That may well be true, but whereas I shall live to repair the damage, I shall see to it that you do not.”

“Where are my Jacobusses?” asked the man holding Howard’s head.

Cromwell rummaged in his purse and pulled out a fistful of coins. “I see four men actually holding him. Release him to the troops behind you and I shall give you the coin I promised.”

Once Howard was secured, the troops and generals moved back to take up their positions, four of them holding ropes secured to Howard. General Fairfax looked ahead.

“Um… general?”

Cromwell looked up from beside his horse, where he had been tightening a strap. “Yes?”

“Whilst we have indeed gained a very valuable prisoner, it seems we have mislaid another.”

Cromwell glanced ahead and then smiled. “God works in mysterious ways,” he murmured.

--oOo—

Bouncing along the rutted lane, the carriage tilted dangerously as it turned through the ornate gates before slowing down on the far smoother driveway and halting in front of steps leading to ornate double doors. A footman rushed from the shelter of the canopy to open the door and lower the steps. Relieved to have finally arrived, the four young ladies shakily descended the steps aided by the footman and rushed to get out of the rain. Standing beneath the canopy on top of the steps brushing rain from her clothes, Constance paused before turning to her companions.

“I must tell my father of events. It will be best if you await me in my rooms.”

“Are you sure?”

“I shall be fine. I have no reason to fear my own father.”

The three young ladies gathered their skirts and tripped up the steps while Constance remained behind, staring into the distance through the blustering rain.

“Is everything satisfactory madam?” Constance started as the footman stood beside her looking concerned.

“Everything is fine.” She brushed past him and hurried inside. It was mid-afternoon, so she knew her father would be taking tea in the drawing room. As she entered, he looked up, his face lighting up as if spotlit.

“Constance, thank heavens you are back safely. I was beginning to worry. I assume everything went well?”

Constance looked down, took a deep breath then returned her gaze to her father. “It could not have been worse. We were robbed on the way there, although he only took part of the money. But when we arrived, Sir John took the rest of the money to cover the cost of what he called ‘his inconvenience’, insulted me more grossly than I could have imagined possible and then threw us out.” As she spoke, her words dropped dully like stones clashing but her father’s face first dropped, then took a reddish hue then purple.

“He did what?”

“He took all of the money and grossly insulted me.”

“I was warned that he was inclined to be somewhat greedy and selfish, but this. I could never imagine a peer of the realm behaving in such a manner.”

“Well, he did, father, and there was naught we could do about it, what hope would four feeble women have against Sir John and his servants?”

“Indeed so, my dear, indeed so. Well, I shall try my best to recover the money, but I rather think that he will deny that you brought it, and we can do little about it; a court will believe a peer of the realm every time against a young woman. I am afraid too that I shall not be able to raise another dowry for you, not for quite a few years, anyway. Business has been bad in recent years, and I have little to spare.”

“Oh father, that is the least of my concerns. The highwayman was right, after all.”

“The highwayman? Why, what did he say?”

“He told me that if Sir John would not accept the money left, then I would have had a lucky escape. Having seen him when thwarted, I am glad the marriage faltered, I cannot imagine being married to such a man.”

“You cannot take the word of such a rogue as having any meaning.”

“But he was right. However, this is not important. I do need to contemplate my future and decide what I am to do with myself.”

“That is not for you to decide. But I think that you do need to calm down in any event. Perhaps we should discuss this tomorrow, after breakfast?”

--oOo—

Constance pushed her chair back from the breakfast table and stood up, she still had no appetite. As she turned towards the hallway to return to her room, her father bustled in.

“Ah, Constance my dear. We need to talk about matters. I hope you have now recovered from it all?”

“I am no longer exhausted, if that is what you mean, father. I am not at all certain that I shall ever recover from Sir John’s insults, however.”

“I understand, but trust me, you shall. Meantime, I have despatched a messenger with a stern message demanding the return of my money, although I hold little hope of ever seeing it.”

He sat down and waited whilst his servants placed cold meats and fresh bread within his reach. Once his ale was poured, he took a sip and waved at Constance’s chair. “Sit down”.

She returned to her seat and looked up at a servant, who poured her a goblet of ale. Taking a sip, she looked up at her father. “I can accept that marriage is not imminent, nor indeed ever likely now. However, I am not able to relish the prospect of sitting around here sewing for the rest of my life.”

“I don’t see any alternative, my dear.”

“You are forgetting, Father, that my impending nuptials are well known around the area, so the collapse of my engagement is excruciatingly embarrassing for me. Furthermore, the recent wars saw to it that a significant proportion of the eligible men were killed, and let us be brutally honest, the remaining good men are married already; the fact that the man who was my fiancé turned out to be such a monster only serves to underline that fact. Certainly, for the time being I feel a need to be alone, to live alone until it all dies down at least. Maybe an honourable man will emerge in that time, I don’t know.”

“I would not permit my daughter to go alone into the outside world, it is a very dangerous place out there.”

“I am aware of that, and indeed have encountered it. I was very lucky to be robbed by a true gentleman, who made no attempt on my virtue or that of any of my companions. I know enough to realise that most would have taken all the money, had sex with us all and then killed us. But I was not planning to be far away, rather I had my eye upon the empty cottage on the other side of the woods.”

“Impossible. That is for a worker, not a lady. Nor will I permit you to be so far away unprotected.”

“Father, you were saying only the other week that you were struggling to find work for John Harris. He lives nearby, he can prepare the cottage and later, he can act as my protector.”

“No lady lives alone in a cottage like that. We shall never be able to marry you; people will believe that you are committing improprieties.”

“According to Sir John, no man would want to lie with me anyway, and at this time I have absolutely no wish to lie with, or even meet any man. All you need say is that I have gone into seclusion; it is true, but they need not know where I actually am. It is what I wish, father, at least for the present.”

“I am not at all happy about this, but you know I can never stop you. I gave up trying years ago.”

Constance stood and walked around the table to her father. Taking his hand, she bent down and gently kissed his forehead. “Thank you, father. I shall come out of this stronger, I am quite sure.”

“You’re quite strong enough already, young lady.”

**Chapter 22**

Charles lit a candle and placed it near to the anvil. “Quickly, they’ll have realised you’re missing by now and will be starting to search for you. Give me your wrists.” He examined the bolts holding the shackles in place, then took a hammer and chisel, placed the chisel carefully and then struck the end. The bolt sheared, and James lifted his left hand free, flexing his fingers as Charles cut the other hand free. Kneeling, he cut the rope connecting James’s ankles. James rubbed his ankles with relief as Moll pulled some fresh, nondescript clothes from her bag.

“Come along James, get changed, we need to be moving, this is too close,” She brandished a false beard “and you need to use this, your face is too well known.”

James stared at the beard with horror. “Moll, that beard shouts ‘I’m in disguise’.”

Moll shrugged. “It’s all we have.”

“Very well, but let’s make our way to Mumford Haggett’s place. I can really become invisible there. It’s only a few hundred yards from here.”

James donned the nondescript clothes and pulled on the beard, and then looked at Moll. “Let’s go.”

Before opening the door, he turned towards Charles. “Thank you for your help. It will not be forgotten.”

Charles shrugged. “A friend of Moll’s is a friend of mine. “

“Nevertheless. Thank you.”

James and Moll slipped out of the door and walked quickly towards the west.

--oOo—

Fairfax stared at his subordinate for a moment, and then shrugged.

“We should send some troops to track him down, though.”

All around them the crowds who had gathered to catch a glimpse of Captain Hind returning from court were milling about. A murmuring and quizzical sound indicated that not all had yet realised that the captain had escaped.

“I’d rather not, although ‘tis you who are on duty here, not I. Bradshaw will be livid, but I think we can live with that. We have a much more important prisoner in Hind’s stead, and we should take no chances. I would suggest that we send men out once Howard is safely behind bars.”

Fairfax nodded. “Do you not feel that Hind is as important?”

Cromwell shook his head. “No. Both men are enemies of Parliament, ‘tis true, but Howard is the more dangerous; he is known to kill whilst Hind is not. We’ll get him in time, but we can afford to be patient.”

Fairfax ordered the march to resume and both men calmly walked their horses forward behind the soldiers.

--oOo--

“Haggett. Hurry up.”

James hammered at the shuttered door while Moll looked around. People were starting to look. The scrape of bolts being withdrawn came from the other side of the door, and a dusty, careworn face appeared in the crack.

“Can I help you?”

“Mumford, it’s both a relief and a shock that you don’t recognise me.”

Haggett’s face lit up. “Ah, Captain, come in.”

James and Moll pushed their way inside, leaving the dusty man to close the bolts. Moll looked around while James stripped the offending beard from his face.

“Thank God you’re still here,” exclaimed James, rubbing his chin. “I need to be able to get away un-noticed.”

“Yes.” Haggett was holding the false beard up with his fingertips, an expression of disdain on his face. “I think we can improve on this. What did you have in mind?”

“I’m not entirely sure. I need to get out of London without being stopped.”

Mumford glanced aside and walked across to take a wig from Moll’s hands. “These are very precious items, madam, not to be handled unnecessarily.” He turned back to James, “Perhaps as a cleric? I can turn you into a quite passable imitation of Hugh Peters.”

James chortled. “Perhaps not Peters, I did rob him a while back. But a cleric sounds a good idea. I think a beard might help too.”

“Well, we can certainly do better than that monstrosity in which you arrived.”

--oOo--

Arriving at Newgate, Fairfax climbed from his horse to escort the prisoner, now struggling in vain to release himself from his bonds, as the troopers led him through the foreboding gates of Newgate Prison. He turned to address the gatekeeper. “This man receives no visitors and remains in his cell until the day of his trial. If he is missing when we return to collect him, you will go in his stead.”

The gatekeeper nodded and led the cortege through the gloomy courtyard to a doorway covered with green mould despoiling the magnificent old wood. A wizened, dirty gaoler stood outside with a nervous grin, revealing rotten teeth. At a nod from him, the gatekeeper retreat and hurried back to his post.

Passing through the doorway, the gaoler lit a torch and stretched downwards to ignite a second just inside a staircase. Fairfax recoiled as a vision of Hell flickered into sight. Torches were attached at intervals down a steep, moss-covered staircase. Water dripped from the walls and an evil, foetid stench pervaded the air.

“General, you might not want to follow, we keep these cells for very special prisoners, and the steps are very slippery,” croaked the gaoler.

“I want to check the cell for myself and see the key turn in a solid lock before this man passes from my sight.”

The gaoler nodded and with no further comment, started descending the staircase, lighting the waiting torches as he reached them. The troopers followed suit, dragging Howard behind them. Fairfax watched them descend, and then followed.

Down, down the stairs led until an area of flat rock came to light. Howard intensified his struggles and pulled so violently that the troopers lost their footing, descending the last half-dozen steps helter-skelter and dragging Howard tumbling behind them.

Fairfax stopped and drew his pistol, remaining higher up on the staircase. “Captain Howard, your struggles can bear no fruit. If you free yourself and try to climb the stairs, I shall shoot you. There is no other way out of here?” He looked towards the gaoler.

“There is only this staircase, General.”

Howard paused, and then climbed to his feet. The troopers regained their footing and pulled angrily on the ropes binding Howard, causing him to jerk and grimace. The cortege resumed its progress until a door loomed at the end of the short corridor. With difficulty, the gaoler turned the key and flung the door open. Fairfax gestured to the troopers who pulled the prisoner to one side as the General took a nearby torch and strode into the cell. He removed his hat as his head bumped the ceiling, then he looked around.

No windows disturbed the solid stone walls at any point, no openings whatsoever. He walked around, examining the joints between the stones, but there was no evidence of any possible weaknesses. As he passed the back corner, his boot crunched on something, and he bent to examine, a pile of human faeces, dried with age. The floor was solid rock. Satisfied that escape was impossible save through the door, he turned back to the gaoler standing in the doorway.

“You will provide straw for him to sleep on, cheap beer to drink and the minimum of food. No man shall enter this cell other than to provide food and drink, and even then, you will have an armed man waiting at the bottom of the stairs, with his gun cocked and instructions to kill.” He strode back across to the door and resumed his position behind the troops. “Take him in and release him.”

Once the door was closed behind Zachary Howard, the general moved forwards again to check the lock. Satisfied, he turned to the gaoler. “You must check on him hourly, but otherwise, no one descends those stairs without an order from Parliament. Should he escape, the penalties for you will be extremely severe. Do I make myself clear?”

“Yessir. No visitors ‘cept me.”

“Good. Now let us get out of this hellhole before I vomit.”

Outside the prison, Fairfax returned to his horse.

“General, we have new orders,” announced Cromwell, “There is a riot to the North of the city and Parliament has asked that we ride with haste to quell it. Hind will have to wait.”

Fairfax nodded and spurred his horse forward at a trot with the soldiers following.

–-oOo–-

James stepped aside and looked pious while Moll struggled to unlock the door to her shop. He opened the large bible in his hand and pretended to read. After a lot of grunting and swearing, the lock opened, and they bustled inside.

“Fairfax brought your possessions, although obviously, they’d already stolen any money when he got hold of them.”

“No surprise there. I had just collected my money for travelling to The Hague, so much of it will be useless to them. Can you loan me some?”

“Of course.” Moll lifted a floorboard and extracted a bag of coins. “Will this be enough?”

James opened the bag and looked inside. He glanced back up at Moll. “How much is here?”

“Should be one hundred Jacobusses.”

“That should do it. I can get more over there if it isn’t.”

--oOo—

“What is the point in me sentencing the enemies if those idiots are going to let them escape?”

John Bradshaw was red in the face and gesticulating as he addressed the men in his room. His desk was placed to receive the sole rectangle of light through the window, but still two candelabrums flickered, one at each end of the desk. The gloom concealed the rest of the room, but two pairs of feet were visible in the ring of candlelight.

Henry Ireton leaned forward. “One of those ‘idiots’ is my father-in-law, and both are respected heroes of Parliament. I expect, sir, that you refer to them with the respect and deference that are their due.”

“‘Idiots’ I said, ‘idiots’ I meant. How could they lose a condemned prisoner?”

Henry Ireton stood. “I refuse to remain in this room if you persist. Either apologise or I depart.” Bradshaw remained silent. “Very well. Good day to you, sir,” he nodded at Thomas Scot sitting silently in the other chair, and then marched smartly from the room, slamming the heavy door behind him.

After a few seconds of silence, Scot leaned forward.

“Do you not think it was a touch tactless to refer to Oliver Cromwell in such tones?”

“It may have been, but it was warranted. Their mismanagement of the simple task of escorting a condemned prisoner back to gaol resulted in his freedom, and God only knows when we shall recapture the villain.”

“But they did take Howard in the process.”

“Scant solace in that. You have not been robbed by one of these villains, yet.”

“I am aware that Hind robbed you, and that he showed no respect in your courtroom. But we shall recapture him, and you and I can ill afford to incur the wrath of either General Fairfax or General Cromwell.”

Bradshaw looked long at Scot, and then seemed to regain his composure. “Perhaps. I will deal with them direct in due course. In the meantime, I have a task for you, one upon which I require satisfaction. You will track down and retake Hind. Use your spies, find out where he lives, find his family. Do whatever you have to do but get me Hind.”

Scot scratched his neck as he considered. “You are giving me carte blanche to do whatever is needed? I may need some protection.”

“You have my protection if it helps get Hind.”

“Very well. I shall send out word and get the information. I can’t guarantee instant success, mine is a slow business, but I’ll get what you need.”

--oOo—

Sighing, Constance flopped onto the bed, frowning as she did so. Was she really so ugly? The highwayman didn’t seem to think so and nor had she thought so before she encountered Sir John. She stood up and walked across to the expensive mirror her father had bought her last year. A round face with well-defined eyebrows and dark lashes framing deep blue eyes stared back at her. Sumptuous lips and a frame of curly brown hair completed the ensemble. Stepping back, she struggled to remove her dress before giving up.

“Kitty.”

Her maid bustled into the room. “Yes, milady?”

“Help me out of these.”

Finally naked, she crossed once more to the mirror.

“Milady, is this proper? You be all, well, naked.”

Constance looked back over her shoulder. “Come here. Three days ago, I was told by Sir John that I was so ugly that no man would ever want me. I want to understand what is wrong with me. Tell me honestly.”

“Milady, I am but a mere maid. How can I know what a knight like Sir John thinks is attractive?”

“You are not as, erm… restrained as I, Kitty. I have seen you with that young footman. I am not asking you to look as a knight would look, I am asking you, woman to woman, what do you see that a man would dislike?”

“Why nothing, milady.”

“I want honesty, Kitty, at this stage I am looking to find out what I can do to remove the problem. You know what a man wants better than do I. Help me, Kitty.”

Kitty looked confused for a moment, then stood erect and studied her mistress. “Milady, nothing.”

“I am that ugly, then? Nothing can be done?”

“No, milady, the very opposite. Pardon me for saying so, milady, but were I a man, I would have a bulge in my britches right now. If there is a problem, it is Sir John, not you.”

Constance moved closer to the mirror and studied her reflection. Perhaps Kitty was right, she could see nothing amiss. But he had said that. She gathered herself. “Thank you, Kitty. I think I should retire now; perhaps the green nightgown today?”

--oOo—

Constance flung herself back onto the bed, her dress flaring slightly as she did so. “I simply don’t know what to do, really. Sir John has ruined my marriage prospects, who would take me without a dowry?”

Across from her, two young ladies were sprawled inelegantly at either end of a chaise-longue. The taller girl sported blonde hair stuffed untidily into a blue cap. She frowned. “It will be difficult. It’s a shame you can’t get the money back.”

“Father is trying, but Sir John is refusing to even talk to his envoys.”

“Can he not apply to the courts?”

“He can, but is loath to do so; can you imagine how awful it would be for me? Having that insult repeated for all the world to hear?”

The other girl looked up, brushing her long brown hair behind her ears. “Yes. It would also pretty well ruin the chance of anyone coming forward.”

“Exactly.”

A dull silence enveloped the three usually lively girls. After a minute, Constance uttered a humourless laugh. “Maybe I should dress up as a highwayman and rob Sir John to get it back.”

The blonde girl smiled. “It was a highwayman caused the problem in the first place, so it does seem appropriate.”

“But he was right; can you imagine being married to a man such as that?”

“James Hind? Mmm… haven’t I just.”

“Lucille. You know full well I meant Sir John. Although...”

They laughed, and then the two girls joined Constance on the bed. Lucille pulled off her helmet and threw it towards the chaise-longue, missing by a mile. “What can I do with my hair. It has a mind of its’ own.”

**Chapter 24**

The exhausted horse clattered through the elegant gateway arch and into the courtyard. The buildings were clearly intended for royalty or nobility at the very least; they were clean, and soldiers were all around, mostly with their muskets pointing at the figure slumped on the horse’s back. Captain James Hind looked up as an armed guard took the reins from his exhausted fingers.

“Wie bent u? Met welk doel bent U hier?” James looked blank. “Who are you and why are you here?” repeated the guard upon seeing the lack of comprehension on the rider’s face.

“I am Captain James Hind of the loyal army of His Majesty King Charles of England. I am here at the request of General Compton.”

At the mention of the general’s name, the tension left the courtyard like a pricked balloon.

“You may dismount. Someone will bring the general here to verify your statement.”

James slid from the saddle, removed his hat, and rested his forehead on the saddle. The guards all stepped back upon seeing that he sported a cavalry sword but took no further action. The horse stamped his feet and snorted in the cool spring air.

The sound of boots marching roused the cavalier and he pushed himself upright as General William Compton strode across the courtyard towards him.

“James. We had given you up.”

The guards backed away as the General drew near.

James smiled. “So had I, especially after they took me. But thanks to Moll Cutpurse and General Fairfax, here I am.”

“Fairfax? Well, this is going to be an interesting story, I can tell - but shall we do it in the warm?” Compton took James’s arm and began urging him towards a doorway. As they reached the door, he turned and addressed the guard holding the horse’s reins. “See that the horse is taken care of and bring the bags in.” He hauled the large wooden door open and ushered James inside.

A long corridor faced him as the door swung shut with a loud boom, which echoed repeatedly. As the reverberations faded, he could hear voices in the distance. Windows provided light for the first few yards, and as Compton ushered him forward, he saw the soldiers in the courtyard walking his exhausted horse into the stables.

“Come,” urged the general, “I’ll show you to your room and send some food and drink. When you are ready, just ask one of the guards to take you to the banqueting hall - His Majesty is holding court at the moment but should be finished in an hour or so. I know he is very eager to meet the last Cavalier to salute his father.”

James stood back and brushed himself down as the guard opened the door. He walked through into a large room, some thirty feet high and probably twice that in length. The walls were hung with faded tapestries and two large tables stretched almost end-to-end. At the far end, he saw a huddle around his Monarch, who slouched in a large wooden chair, one leg draped decorously over the arm of the chair.

Charles looked up and indicated in his direction before muttering something. Compton, seated to the king’s right, looked up and beckoned James to join them. “Captain Hind, do join us.” He looked around and waved at a young serving girl standing by the wall. “Wench, bring a tankard of ale for the good captain.”

James approached the huddle. As he drew near, he removed his hat and bowed towards the King. “Your Majesty.”

Charles smiled and removed the dangling leg from the arm of the chair, drawing himself up to his full height. “Captain Hind, welcome. I have heard many tales of your exploits and look forward to hearing in more detail later. But come, take a seat, and let us to business.”

James sat on the bench to Charles’s left, teetering on the edge. The serving girl brought a tankard of ale, squealing a little as she passed too near to the king’s wandering hand. A ripple of laughter followed her as she scurried from the room.

Charles turned towards James. “So, Captain Hind. Tell what you found out on your travels.”

James gulped; he knew that his words were not going to be well received. “The people are not ready for another war, your Majesty.” He paused as he watched his sovereign’s face cloud over, and then pressed forward. “Many now regret their choices and resent the interference by Parliament into their world, but they need to rebuild after the carnage. In time, they will rise up for you, ‘tis certain. But not yet.” He sat back and awaited the storm.

Charles stared at Hind. “This is not what I was hoping to hear, Captain.”

“I am aware of that, your majesty. But if I convey untruths to you, I render myself useless to you.”

General Compton inserted himself into the conversation, ignoring a withering look from the prince. “Captain, you said that they will rise for his Majesty, can you assess when they will do so?”

James considered a moment. “Not accurately, General. Many have lost everything, they need to get back on their feet, food on their table, wounds healed before they can consider such things. Meanwhile there will be, there are little rebellions all the time, but insufficient to assist his Majesty. Yet. But the resentments are building all the time.”

Silence entered the room for a while. In the distance, the sound of someone dropping a pot echoed through the corridors. Finally, the prince sat back. “Well, Captain, I appreciate your endeavours and your candour. Now we must decide what to do with you next. Do we send you to Ireland, they are in sore need of a good sword over there, and I hear that Cromwell is to cross the Irish Sea, making the need even greater? What do you say, general?”

General Compton debated a moment. “A waste, if I may say so, your Highness. Captain Hind has already demonstrated a considerable talent for embarrassing and demeaning the enemy, not to mention his valuable contact with Fairfax, when your time approaches your majesty, we will need contacts at the highest level.”

“Accepted, general. So, what do you propose?”

“That we send him back and connect him with... he whose name is not mentioned.”

“To what end?”

“To act as he is told. Primarily to protect our people and our communication routes. And, of course, to continue to sting and demoralise the enemy.”

Charles lifted his tankard and took a draught. Wiping his mouth on his sleeve, he stared at the highwayman seated to his right. “Very well, general, we shall do as you suggest. Send a message to our man and advise Lord Northampton to provide the link.”

He leaned forward. “Captain, you are to report to Lord Northampton when you return. He will advise you from there. For now, let us drink and enjoy your tales. I hear that you are especially unpopular with John Bradshaw.”

James smiled. “That is indeed true, your Highness. But as long as I can steer clear of his grasp, he is but an irritation.” He paused. “I did promise Lord Fairfax that I would convey his best wishes and advise you that Cromwell tricked him; he tried everything he could to prevent your father’s execution.”

The prince grimaced. “You may advise him that I did already know this, and it shall not be forgotten. But onto less solemn matters, tell us about Hugh Peters.”

**Chapter 25**

The constable pored over the document. “Are you sure that is what it says?” He scratched his head, disturbing what little order had existed in his unruly mop of red hair.

His dishevelled appearance matched the room in which he stood. A table straddled the middle of the dingy room and in the dim light of two candles, a well-dressed man stood opposite, glaring down disdainfully.

“Yes, and that is Thomas Scot’s signature underneath it. Can we get on with it now?”

The constable shrugged. “Very well.”

He tucked the document into his coat pocket and stood up. “Hind’s cottage is at the other end of the village, but I can tell you, he’s not often there.”

“That matters naught. If we can catch him there, that’s excellent, but if not we shall ask his wife where he is.”

Grumbling, the constable tramped out and marched along the main street. The other man followed and signalled to the officer waiting outside, who in turn waved at his troops and led them in hot pursuit of the constable. The growing crowd of townspeople looked at one another meaningfully before stepping back to be out of reach of any trouble that might be brewing.

The constable halted and pointed to a cottage near the end of a row. “That be his.”

The captain stopped his men, and then pointed to the two soldiers closest to him, “you and you go down this alley and make your way along the back, keeping yourselves well hidden. Take station the other side of the cottage.” He pointed at two men chatting at the back of the column. “You and you, follow them and take station at the back.”

He waited whilst they rushed away and once they had turned the corner, he started moving forwards. The other man hung back, allowing the troops to move in front of him.

“Jenkins, Hallett; go into this garden and take station this side of the cottage. Be ready in case the target bolts. Now, the rest of you follow me to the door. Let none escape.”

The troop advanced until the officer stood before the door. The birds stopped singing. The sound of chopping and a woman humming could be heard clearly in the silence. At a signal from the captain, two of the soldiers put their shoulders to the door, which opened easily, causing both men to stumble across the threshold. Glaring at his men, the captain marched in after them. A domestic scene met his eyes. A fire burned low in the grate whilst a woman stared at him wide-eyed from the kitchen area, a large knife held in her trembling fist. Children stood with their mouths ajar around the fireplace.

“Kindly place the knife on the table, madam. We want no accidents.”

Visibly terrified, the woman dropped the knife to the floor and backed away. “Who are you and what do you want? There is nothing here to steal.”

“Steal? Madam, we are Parliament’s army. ‘Tis your husband who is the thief.” He beckoned to the two men standing before the fire. “Search the place.”

“If it is my husband you seek, he is not here, nor has he been here for a few weeks now.”

“We know where he was, but I admit that we did hope he would have returned home after his escape. But no matter; you can tell me where we can find him.”

“I have no idea where he might be. He never tells me for just this reason.”

The puritan, who had been listening to the exchange from the doorway, interjected, “I am afraid, madam, that we are unable to believe you. Now, in your own best interests just tell us where we can find him and there will be no further unpleasantness.”

“I know not for he never tells me.”

“I see. You intend to be stubborn. Perhaps your children can help you out.”

He turned, bent over, and leered at the four young children cowering in the corner. “Now children, who is going to be a good child and help your mother? Where is your father?”

All four children retreated as far as they could. The oldest daughter piped up, “We do not know, sir. Father tells us nothing of his work.”

The man nodded and stood erect. “Very well. Captain, take all of them.”

“Mr Lunt, are you sure? It is not usual to take chil-”

“You will do as I say. Take all of them. We shall find a way to extract the information.”

The captain walked across and took the woman by the shoulder. “I am sorry madam, but I must do as ordered.”

At his nod, the troopers took hold of the struggling children. The girl started to scream, and the soldier put his hand across her mouth as she writhed and tried in vain to toss her head from side-to-side. One child wriggled free of his captor and ran out of the door. Seeing soldiers in the street, he ran around the side of the house.

A shot rang out.

The captain dragged the woman outside, passed control of her to one of his troopers and rushed to the corner. Two of the soldiers from the front had run to the side of the house, but reaching the corner, pulled up sharply and stood looking down. The captain pushed them aside but then he too pulled up short. The five-year-old child was lying on the ground whimpering in a pool of blood. One glance at the wound told him that the child would not survive.

He took a deep breath and wiped his hand down his now-haggard face. “Who did this?”

A figure stood from the undergrowth at the back of the house. “I did, sir. I did not realise it was a child, I just saw a figure running.”

“Well, there is little we can do about it now. But you and I shall have a discussion on the subject later.”

With a desperate wrench, the woman broke free of her captor and ran to join the captain. Her hand clapped over her mouth as she began to wail. Shaking uncontrollably, she stared wild-eyed at the child, then faced the captain.

“What kind of monsters *are* you?” she bellowed, her voice breaking in the middle. “Shooting a child of five years? Is Cromwell so fearful of overthrow?”

A clamour began from outside on the street, where villagers had begun to gather. The captain looked up sharply, and then turned to the soldier who had killed the child.

“Collect this child and take him to the church. You shall pay for him to be properly buried, and indeed for a headstone. Then return to the constable’s home. Take one trooper with you.” He turned back to the woman. “This is deeply regretted, madam, but you should blame your husband - were he not such a thorn in the side of Parliament, we would not be here.”

“My husband does not even injure your masters. But you, you break into my home, abduct us and casually kill a child? I have known little of these things, but my husband does hold your parliament men in disdain, and now I can see why. What kind of monsters could DO something like this?

“Mrs Hind, it was not our intention to kill, merely to apprehend. Now you must come with me.”

He led her to the street, where three soldiers were holding tightly to her remaining children. As the captain reached them with the woman, she called out to her children “The soldiers have killed little Jamie.”

The villagers had formed a straggling ring around the soldiers, and at her words, an angry gasp arose, followed by angry muttering whilst the children began to cry, and the captain studied his feet. The captain looked up and frowned, and then called out. “Men. I want all of you here at the front of the house immediately.”

The soldiers emerged from all sides of the house and formed up around the captain and the troopers holding the children.

“Mister Lunt. Where are you. We need to be moving.”

The puritan, now named, strolled from the house, a piece of pie in his hand. Seeing the captain glaring at him, he shrugged. “It's very good.”

The captain set his troops marching forwards. The man scurried to catch up, not wanting to face the angry villagers alone. As the soldiers approached the ring of villagers, they hesitated but the captain’s ringing order to proceed tightened their resolve and they kept going. Reluctantly, the villagers allowed them through but followed behind them, angrily muttering. Occasionally, a louder voice would rise above the hum, and none of the words sounded friendly. A rock arced over and bounced near to the puritan, who immediately rushed to take up a position of safety near the front of the procession. Meanwhile, the constable moved across to walk beside the captain.

“Captain, I don’t like the look of that crowd. It’s all right for you, you will be leaving here but I have to live with them. What is this all about?”

“We want Hind.”

“Hind has been working his course for many years now, captain. Why now?”

“Being honest, I have no idea. I know he escaped from custody recently, but that happens often. Someone has a particular interest in him, I suspect.”

Reaching the constable's house, they turned aside to enter. The soldiers took up station outside, uneasily watching the crowd which was growing as news of the death of one of their own spread. The constable closed the door and turned towards the puritan.

“Damn Cromwell. Who are you?”

“Alyn Lunt. I work for Thomas Scot. You would do well to be more polite or I shall have you arrested too!”

“Not by me,” interjected the officer, “my orders are to take Hind or his wife. I have accommodated you as far as taking the children, but I’ll be damned if I’m going to arrest the entire village. And I do not think this is Cromwell’s doing, a friend of mine was on the guard detail when Hind escaped, and he told me that he overheard Cromwell tell Fairfax that Hind can wait.”

“Well, whoever it is had best watch his back, I wouldn’t want to be in Captain James Hind’s sights when he learns of this. If it sits well with you, Captain, I am going to tell the villagers that Mr Lunt here was the prime instigator of this, this abomination, and that I must obey orders from London, as do you.”

“I have no objection to that, it’s pretty well true anyway.”

Raised voices outside made them pause and look towards the door. Suddenly, an elderly couple burst in. Behind them, the villagers stood watching, crowding in upon the soldiers.

“What are you doing with my grandchildren and my daughter-in-law, come to that,” bellowed the red-faced old man.

“Edward, where is Jamie?” asked the woman.

“Yes, and what have you done with Jamie?”

“These people have been apprehended lawfully in pursuit of the lady’s husband,” interjected Lunt, “and you are interfering with the lawful pursuit of a known criminal.”

The old man's face clouded. “That does not give you the right to kidnap an honest woman and her children.”

“I have my orders, which you would do well to respect.”

The constable stepped forward. “I am afraid to tell you sir that Jamie has been killed by one of the soldiers. And that this man has a signed order from Thomas Scot allowing him to take Mrs Hind in for questioning.”

“That does not mean he can take the children. Nor does it give him the right to kill them. Release them. Now.”

“I shall not release them and if you do not leave now, I shall extend the order to include you also. If those are your grandchildren and daughter-in-law, that means that you sired the highwayman Hind, did you not?” Lunt glared at the elderly man but carefully placed himself behind the officer.

“It seems sir, that I have no choice. But I have noted your name, Lunt, and this shall not be the last you hear of this matter. No indeed, not by a long way. You may also inform the garrison at Oxford that they may look elsewhere for their saddles from this point forth, I shall not soil my saddlery with work for Parliament any longer.” Turning, the elderly man ushered his wife from the building.

Outside, he loudly explained all that had transpired inside, and then quietly asked a question of a young man standing nearby. Glancing over his shoulder, he led his wife away but not without pausing briefly next to the Puritan’s horse.

The officer sighed. “You are aware that that man makes the best saddles in the county. You and your arrogance have now deprived us of decent equipment. Now shall we get out of here before we face a full-scale riot?”

With troopers either side, they walked out, and the captain mounted his horse before turning to the villagers. “Ladies and gentlemen, what has transpired here is regrettable but necessary.” He paused.

A voice came from the crowd. “Since when has killing children been necessary? Does Cromwell think he’s King Herod?”

“The killing was an unfortunate mistake, and the trooper shall be dealt with according to military law.” He leaned forwards and lowered his tone, “and I seriously doubt General Cromwell is even aware of this action.”

He turned aside. “Mr Lunt, make up your mind. Either you are staying here, or you are coming with us. We are leaving. Now.”

Alyn Lunt took a final look at the suddenly frayed stitching on his saddle, climbed aboard and hurried after the departing soldiers.

--oOo—

Alyn Lunt led the way down the dank, slippery stairs within Newgate prison. Behind him, the soldiers dragged Margaret Hind and the three children down the steps. The Gaoler was waiting at the bottom of the stairs.

“Sir, we already have a high security prisoner down here. General Fairfax will be displeased when he learns that his prisoner has company, especially a woman.”

“These prisoners are here on the orders of John Bradshaw. They are to be interrogated. His lordship will provide his own men for that purpose. Your prisoner will be even more secure.”

The gaoler wrung his hands and shook his head but turned and led them along the corridor. He paused and looked over his shoulder. “In the same cell or will you separate the children?”

“All together, but the cell must be one with firm manacles.”

“In that case, this is the best place.” He crossed the corridor and turned the key in the lock. The hinges squealed as he pushed the door open. “The manacles are to your right.” He ducked through the doorway, illuminating a large, dank room.

Lunt followed him in and grimaced. An unlit fireplace graced the far wall, and a skeleton clad in rags sat staring at them from the corner.

“This will do perfectly. Bring the prisoners in.”

He stepped aside as the soldiers pushed Margaret and the terrified children through the door.

“I want her in the manacles.” The soldiers stared at him in horror. “Now.”

The officer pointed to two of the men who grabbed a wrist each and dragged the struggling, screaming woman to the wall. The gaoler moved forward, removed a key from his belt and clipped the two iron rings around her wrists above her head.

“Good. Mr Bradshaw will deal with her himself. I expect you to accommodate his wishes fully.” He turned to the officer. “I want two of your men at the top of the steps at all times.”

The officer blanched but nodded his assent before leading his men from the room. Lunt turned to face the prisoner.

“You will co-operate. You will tell us where to find your husband. It will be up to you how unpleasant it is getting to that point.”

“But I do not know where he is.”

“I am certain that you do. We will get him eventually, you know, so you are wasting your time pleading ignorant.” He signalled to the gaoler and left the room.

--oOo—

John Bradshaw ducked through the door followed by the gaoler. He looked up at the shadowy figures to his right. Three children sat huddled together on the floor near to a woman, who was hanging slumped from the manacles fixed high above her head. A pungent pile of faeces lay between her feet and the stone floor was wet. After a while, the woman lifted her head and blinked in the light from the torches.

“Ah, good, I am glad we have your attention. All you have to do is tell us where to find your husband and we can be finished in here,” purred Bradshaw.

“I keep telling you people, I don’t know where he is, he never tells me where he is going or when he will return.”

“Lying will not help you. Perhaps you would respond better if it was one of your offspring in danger... come her, my dear,” he said pointing at the eldest child, who clung tightly to her mother’s leg. Seeing no response, he waved a finger at the gaoler, who grasped the girl around her waist and pulled her away from her mother.

“Bring her to me. Now, what is your name, little girl?”

“Alice, her name is Alice,” cried the woman.

“Alice. A nice name Alice. I like that name. Don’t you, gaoler?” The gaoler nodded. “Now wouldn’t it be awful if something were to happen to a nice girl called Alice?” Bradshaw looked at Margaret Hind, struggling to break from the manacles.

“Gaoler. Drop your trousers.”

“Sir?”

“You heard me. You are about to sample some young fruit. Unless, that is, her mother has something to tell me.” He looked up at the prisoner.

“I told you; I don’t know where he is.”

“Gaoler. You have your orders.”

“Sir, this is not...”

“You know what to do.”

--oOo--

Alice lay sobbing quietly beside the grinning skeleton. Her hands were firmly clasped around her knees but were nevertheless trembling violently. Margaret Hind stood staring steadfastly at Bradshaw. The gaoler was tying his belt near the door.

“What kind of person orders the violation of an innocent child? I can understand my husband’s opposition to your brave new world if having sex with children is a part of it. If I am to die here at your depraved hands, then so be it. I am proud to have the chance to defy you.”

Bradshaw glanced at her and then turned to face the gaoler.

“I shall send in some specialists. See that they are obeyed.” He turned back to the prisoner. “I doubt if you will last long before giving the information to my specialists. This is your last chance to provide it without further pain.”

“I would tell you to go to hell, but I am sure that that door is already gaping, awaiting your arrival. It is obvious that you will be going there anyway. It takes a special kind of evil to do what you just did.”

Bradshaw turned on his heel and left.

**Chapter 26**

The mare picked her way along the overgrown path. On her back, Constance sat uncomfortably straddled with her overskirts billowing around her waist. As the saddle was actually designed to be ridden side saddle, she was sitting somewhat too far back and stretching forwards. The path suddenly opened into a clearing with a thatched cottage set on either side. She swung her left leg back over the saddle and moved to sit decorously in the side saddle position and with a look of artificial innocence on her face.

An elderly man came around the side of the larger cottage just as she realised that her overskirt was still bundled around her waist. Rather than tidy it, she jumped to the ground, tugging at the overskirt as she did so. John Harris caught her and placed her on her feet.

She flushed. “Thank you, John.”

“‘Tis my place in life now to see that no harm comes to thee. I am proud to have such a task.”

“Do we have a table and chairs set so that we can have a serious talk, John?”

“Yes, milady. Please follow me.”

He led her around the corner of the larger property and flung the door open. He stood back as Constance entered. “If you’ll excuse me a moment, Milady, I just need to tie your horse.”

“No need, John, she won’t stray far.”

Clearly torn, he hesitated, and then followed her inside.

The cottage followed the normal pattern for general rural housing; single storied and with a larger area containing a kitchen area and seating. A couch stood against one wall piled high with tapestries and a table sat patiently in the middle of the room with wooden benches either side. At the far end, a fireplace stood proud but unlit in the centre and a door beside it led, presumably, to a bedroom. Constance took in the view, and then strode across to sit on one of the benches. She indicated to John that he should sit opposite.

“John, I have known you all my life, you have served my father well and he has now entrusted you with what he describes as his ‘most precious possession’; his daughter; me. However, we will not be able to function as we need here with the same level of formality as is required up in the big house. Therefore, my first request is that you address me as Constance and not Milady.”

“I believe that you will be moving to the other cottage. Do we have stables anywhere?”

“Not yet, Mil...Ma’am.”

Constance burst into peals of laughter at his compromise, but waved for him to continue.

“I shall need some help to adapt the far end of my cottage to permit stabling, but your father has promised me some labour once the fields are all planted.”

“Good. Now, I see a huge pile of tapestries over there. Why?”

“Your father sent them.”

“Well, your mistress is telling you to send most of them back. Just keep one for each room, and if you want some for your cottage, you have my permission to keep them. Next, I cannot spend all of my time sitting in the cottage, but the saddle I have is most unsuitable. I want you to locate for me a proper saddle, one that a man would use. My father will probably protest, but if you tell him that I insist, he should relent. I also insist that you have a good horse for your use stabled here, and that you too must have proper saddlery.”

“Mistress, I am not good on horseback.”

“Then you must learn, you are not young, which is why you no longer work in the fields. A horse will return your mobility to you and thereby increase your value to me.”

“Yes, Milady... C… Constance.”

“Finally, I want you to obtain pistols for both of us, together with powder and shot. We must be able to defend ourselves if needed. You were in the army, I recall, so you can teach me how to shoot.”

“Yes, Mistress. The Levellers were rioting over at Burford the other day, but Fairfax and Cromwell sorted them out, they hung the three ringleaders there in the churchyard, I hear.”

“All the more reason for us to be ready for trouble, John.”

“Yes, Mistress.”

“It’ll be fun.”

--oOo—

Evening was spreading its cloak across the sky as James approached the stable provided for him by the Earl of Northampton. Ever wary despite his exhaustion, his eyes darted left and right, searching in the encroaching gloom for that tiny glint of steel, listening for the errant shuffling of tired feet. The trees themselves seemed threatening in his weariness. As the barn door opened before him, he sat erect in the saddle and reached for his pistol, then relaxed as he recognised one of the Earl’s men.

Coming to a halt before the door, he dismounted.

“Good evening, Thomas. I wasn’t expecting to see you here.”

The man smiled as he reached for the reins, “His Lordship placed me here. There has been a man waiting for you for three weeks now.”

“Why?”

“Let us settle your horse, then I can explain as we walk to the hall.”

“No, no, I was going home.”

“Not wise, that is the point, there are troops awaiting you there. Please, come with me and his Lordship can explain.”

“My wife, she will want to see me. I have been away for weeks.”

“James, you and I have known each other a long, long time. Trust me. You do not want to go to the village right now. Let his Lordship explain.”

James shrugged, then led his weary horse into the stable. Thomas brought fresh fodder and stood aside as James eased the saddle off and slung it across the gate of the stall. Taking his bag, James patted the mare before closing the stable door and following the lamp carried by Thomas, who was leading the way across the fields.

Approaching the hall, James followed Thomas through the trees to the side of the building. A small doorway led down a small staircase into the cellar. Along one wall, numerous dusty bottles lay in wooden racks which had been specially built to accommodate their difficult, bulbous contours. The other wall was empty, and the cobbled floor swept clean save for some errant vegetables spilled on their way to the kitchens above. They ascended a staircase on the far side and entered the kitchens.

Cooks bustled hither and thither, shouting at scullery maids, who cowered as they stirred bubbling pots or prepared vegetables. The head cook, red in the face, was beating a maid who had spilt some sauce whilst the steward stood aloof at the top of the steps opposite. As he spotted and recognised James, he pushed his way through the bustle, took James by the arm and with a nod to Thomas, escorted him up the steps and out into the corridor.

“His Lordship has been getting anxious lest they catch you. Good to see that they didn’t.”

“Actually, they did for a while, but I managed to escape, with a little help from my friends.”

“Come, his Lordship will be pleased to see you. May I take your bag?”

“No need, I must go home once I have spoken with your master.”

The steward looked at him, opened his mouth to respond and then clearly thought better of it. “As you wish. Come.” He led the way along the corridor.

As they reached an ornate door, the steward knocked, then awaited the summoning “Come” before opening the door. James Compton, Earl Northampton, was stuffing some papers into a drawer as they entered, the steward leading with James Hind just behind him. The highwayman removed his hat and held it in his left hand, as the Earl swept around his desk to take James’s right hand in a firm handshake.

“At last. I was losing hope of your return.”

“Your Lordship, in recent weeks I have been betrayed by another veteran of His Majesty’s forces, sentenced to death, escaped with help from friends, travelled to see His Majesty in the Hague and I have just returned. I have yet to see my family, I have been riding all day and Thomas stopped me from returning home, insisting that I must see you first. Please, your Lordship, tell me what is going on.”

A shadow passed over the Earl’s face. “Ah, James. I do understand, truly I do. But we are all acting in your best interests. Please, be seated and I will explain.” He turned to address the steward. “Bring two glasses of burgundy and then leave us.”

The Earl looked across the desk while he waited for the steward to depart. He drummed his fingers on the walnut tabletop, then stopped himself. James simply sat gripping his hat.

As the door closed behind the steward, the Earl sighed. “James, there is no easy way to tell you this. But Scot’s men came looking for you three weeks ago. As you were not there, they took Margaret and your children. Whilst doing that, they killed one of your children.”

Agony crossed James’s face as Earl Northampton spoke. His eyes teared as he blurted. “Why would they kill a child?”

“I believe it was a mistake, but whichever way around, you have to accept his loss. It is equally important that you keep your head; as far as we know, the rest of your family still lives, and are in desperate need of you.”

His hat falling to the floor, James’s shoulders shook as he buried his face in his hands. The earl sat, allowing the captain to master his grief. Eventually, James looked up.

“I am not sure what I can do. I have no idea where they are.”

“James, you are not thinking straight at the moment. It would be disturbing if you were. But I think I can help. You must in any event stay here for the next few days whilst I set processes in motion. I have received word from the Hague as to your future duties for his Majesty and the first stage is for you to meet Him.”

“Who?”

“I don’t know. No one does, although the King across the water might. But he assembles and disseminates intelligence to help the restoration of the Monarchy. As a result of that, he has so many contacts that he will probably be able to find out about your family.”

“I feel so helpless.”

“That is because you are, at the moment. But you won’t feel that way once you have talked to him. Now, have you eaten? We are about to dine, and a bedroom has been prepared for you and awaiting your arrival for three weeks. You are my honoured guest for the next few days whilst I send word to him, and I am looking forward to hearing what you have been doing over the past few weeks.”

--oOo—

Constance stood in the doorway of the cottage, looking around. Spotting John Harris cutting some wood, she called out, “John, can I borrow you for a moment?”

John put down his axe and walked across the clearing. “Yes, Mistress?”

“I shall need to make myself some more practical clothing. Do you have a spare pair of breeches I can use to give me some guidance?”

John looked embarrassed. “No, Mistress, these be the only ones I have.”

“Oh. Do you know where I can get some?”

“I can ask around, but I think most of the workers only have one pair.”

“Never mind. I shall have to steal a pair of my father’s when he isn’t looking.” She saw the expression on John’s face and burst out laughing. “Not ones he’s wearing.”

-–oOo–-

John Bradshaw looked up at the rapping on his door. “Come.” he barked.

The door opened and two poorly dressed men entered, clutching leather caps in their hands. In the gloom, they were not visible, so Bradshaw waved them forward.

“Well? Has she talked?”

“Sir, she has not. I do not think she has any knowledge to give us.”

“Of course she does.”

“Sir, we have already administered enticements, which usually get results. Nothing. None have ever lasted this long without submitting. If we continue, she will probably die.”

“What of it? She is wedded to that highwayman Hind, so she is of the criminal classes. She will be no loss.”

“Sir, are you instructing us to torture her to the point of death and beyond?”

“I am. I want Hind and she knows where he is. Now go and do your jobs before I find someone else to do your work.”

--oOo—

Yawning, James closed the door to his bedroom and ambled along the corridor towards the staircase. Despite his grief, he could not help but admire the opulence of the hall, the space, the beauty and the comfort. He paused at the top of the staircase, as he had every day, to admire the paintings and tapestries which adorned the walls. He made his way downstairs and turned towards the dining room

Samuel, his Lordship’s steward, stood in the doorway and stayed James’s progress. “I’m sorry sir, his Lordship has a special guest in there and must not be disturbed. He only arrived this morning, but they have been talking for over an hour now, so should be finished soon. This guest has visited before, and is always very brief, in fact he hardly speaks at all, usually.”

James nodded. “I shall eat in the kitchen, then, I’m more comfortable there anyway.”

Pausing frequently to admire wall hangings, he made his way slowly to the kitchen. Thomas, the servant who had greeted him at the stable, was sitting at a large wooden table eating bread. He beckoned to James to join him, and as James sat down, a maid brought him a wooden plate, smiling as she placed it in front of him. He pulled out his eating knife and cut a chunk of bread just as the head cook brought him a healthy chunk of cheese, putting her finger to her lips in a ‘hush’ signal. Realising that all knew of his loss, a tear sprang to his eyes which he swiped away. He couldn’t even visit his son’s grave. Focussing on his meal for a while, his mind turned to that possibility.

He lifted his head to find Thomas staring at him with some consternation. “Don’t worry, Thomas. I shall recover, and those responsible for my distress shall encounter distress of their own. I do not care how high the responsibility goes. But for now, can I ask a favour of you?”

Thomas nodded.

“Can you visit the graveyard? Find out where my child is buried, and walk around to see just how many soldiers guard it, if any, and where they cower?”

“What do I say if they accost me?”

“Tell them that you knew the child. My guess is that they are simply obeying orders and won’t be too thorough. Other than my part, just tell the truth.”

“My day off is the day after tomorrow. I’ll go then, don’t want to arouse suspicions anywhere, although I’m sure everyone here is loyal.”

“Thank you, Thomas. I won’t forget it.”

The steward came into the kitchen and waved across at James. As he stood, James reached across the table and grasped Thomas’s forearm. “Thank you.”

As they entered the corridor, the steward paused. “James, you are awaited in the study. His Lordship and that man. He gives me the shivers, be careful.”

“Thanks for the warning, Samuel. But I know this is not a man to be trifled with. And he may ultimately be of help to me. I want those responsible, and he can probably identify them.”

Entering the study alone, he was surprised to find it in semi-darkness. Seated to one side, he saw the earl and a figure he could not identify sat behind the desk. He wore a dark coat, unseasonably for early June. More, he wore a hat indoors, pulled down over his face, and a scarf concealed his chin.

“Sit.”

James moved forward and sat in the only chair, set in the only ray of light through the window, with the dark, sinister figure silhouetted before the window.

“I have been told to make use of you. I don’t know you and I trust none save the king across the water. But I do have a task which I believe you to be ideally suited for, if the legends are to be believed.”

“They are,” interjected the earl. “My son and I have followed his career with interest and have witnessed some exploits at first hand.”

The figure ignored the interruption. “You are to be at the Crown Inn at Playhatch, do you know it?”

“I know the landlord well.”

“Good. Cromwell is taking an army to Ireland. You need to be at the Crown on thirteenth July, when we anticipate Cromwell staying overnight with some of his Generals. Try to find out anything you can of their plans - that they are on their way to Ireland is public knowledge, but we don’t know where they intend to land or what the plans are once they arrive. Once you have the information, report to the White Hart in Newark. Is it all clear?”

“Yes. Now I have something to ask of you. My family were taken recently.”

The man nodded. “I know.”

“I want to know where they were taken and what has happened to them.”

“I have people in the right place for that, I think. I shall ask. But it will take a while, I cannot ask people to take unnecessary risks.”

**Chapter 27**

James took advantage of the misleading light of dusk to approach the graveyard. The bushes and trees surrounding the cemetery and church offered him ample cover as he approached the small clearing where Thomas had said that the guards would be waiting. James sized up the immediate surroundings. Their guns were leaning against a tree and caution had clearly disappeared long ago, as they were both sitting upon a fallen log smoking pipes and chatting quite loudly, clearly not expecting any activity.

James set off to do a circuit of the graveyard, whilst keeping to the undergrowth. Reaching the opposite edge of the clearing and therefore certain that these two dullards represented the total forces guarding his son’s grave, he paused to assess his options.

Slipping around to the back of the clearing, he crawled through the undergrowth to the tree against which the guns leaned. Reaching forward, he retrieved first one, then the other and slithered back until he was far enough away to be able to stand up. He examined the weapons. Both were loaded so he removed the flints from both, then placed then against a nearby tree. Flints were an expensive commodity these days, so he put the flints in his pocket, took out his own pistols and walked around the bushes to enter the clearing. At first, neither man noticed him, allowing him to find a comfortable position leaning against a tree. He cleared his throat, causing both men to jump.

“Gentlemen,” he drawled, “sorry to interrupt your little talk but I need to see my son’s grave - I hope you don’t mind?”

Both men shook their head, their eyes glued to the pistols pointing in each direction.

“I don’t suppose either of you were part of the crowd who kidnapped my family and murdered little Jamie, were you? So courageous, shooting down a child of five years.”

“N… No”

“Good, good. Take off your clothes.”

“What?”

“You heard me. I want you both naked as babes. Quickly.”

Both men began to remove their clothes. James pushed one gun back into his baldric, and then bent down to pick up a rope from just behind him. As he turned back, he saw both men remove their breeches and achieve the nudity he sought.

“Good, well done gentlemen; I do so hate having to shoot people, so uncouth. Now, into the graveyard if you please. Lead me to the grave of my murdered son. And do keep in mind that to me, he was murdered by Parliamentarians like you, so the value of your miserable continued existence is not particularly important to me.”

He followed them until they reached the new plot occupied by his son. “Good. You,” he pointed at one, “lay face down behind that gravestone over there and you,” he pointed at the other naked figure, “lie down in front of it. Both of your knees against the stone, feet in the air, nose in the earth.”

He waited until they were both in position, then moved forward. The rope already had a loop in the end, which he slipped over one of the guard’s ankles. Wrapping it around one ankle of the other guard, he walked to his head and looped the rope around his neck. Being careful not to strangle the man, he then took the rope to wrap around the other guard’s neck before tying to the remaining ankles. Satisfied, he stepped back. “Very well, gentlemen, if you don’t move too much, you should have little discomfort, apart from the chill. Just wait here awhile. I do need to bid my son farewell. He was so young and innocent, he must be in heaven, where he’ll be safe from Parliamentarians like you”

--oOo—

From the shelter of the trees, James watched as the convoy made its way slowly along the muddy road. Cromwell himself led the troops, plodding along slowly on his glistening white warhorse as they approached Charvil village. Cromwell wheeled his horse around and trotted back to confer with a group of officers following several yards behind. The convoy halted behind them while they conferred. After a few minutes, Cromwell and a handful of more senior officers set off along the road whilst the remaining officers made their way back along the convoy. James paused for a moment to make sure that the army was settling down for the night, and then followed the senior officers, carefully staying out of sight behind the trees. As soon as Cromwell turned off the road, James realised that they were indeed heading for the Crown Inn and spurred his horse to overtake them across the fields.

Arriving at the inn, he handed his reins to the groom, slipped him a coin, and rushed into the bar. The Landlord was busily wiping a table near the door as James rushed in. A few candles split the gloom, but it was evident that the inn expected few patrons this evening. Across the room and through the kitchen doorway, a gaggle of pretty barmaids could be seen giggling together.

“James. It’s a long time since we saw you, how have you been and how is trade?” He swiped his hand across his balding head as if to smooth down an errant lock of hair which had long departed this scalp.

“Excellent, thank you, to both. However, I must conduct a little business here. Cromwell will arrive soon with some of his minions, would you mind if I became one of your barmaids for a few hours?”

“Cromwell. I could do without his sort coming here.”

“I understand, but let it be for tonight, I want to see what I can do to thwart his next mission”

“Well, I am shorthanded tonight so certainly. But how will you pass as a barmaid with such a moustache?”

“I have my razor. Can I have a room off the beaten track?”

“Don’t worry. I’ll put you up in my spare room at the back.”

--oOo--

James entered the bar. His upper lip felt strange, being now bereft of a moustache and instead coated thickly with foundation makeup. Red lipstick adorned his lips, and the brown wig tickled his cheeks. His dress billowed uncomfortably, but at least served to protect him from any groping which might serve to identify his gender.

Across the room, the landlord was locked in discussion with the other barmaids, and judging from the looks cast his way, he was the subject. By the fireplace, Cromwell lorded it over a circle of lesser generals, all clutching tankards of ale. As the door closed behind him, they all glanced his way, and he was slightly disconcerted to notice that one of the officers tried to lock gaze with him. He made his way across to join the landlord and the barmaids.

“James, glad you got here, Cromwell and his cronies want feeding and I think it’s important that the girls know who you are. I had to stop them from spitting in the food. Girls, this is James, who we will call Jane tonight. Whatever he is up to, I can promise you it will be more damaging to the enemy than anything you can do, so play along with him and remember his name is Jane. Now get those tables pulled together over by the window there, so we can get them started.”

The three wenches and James hurried over to the window and pulled three tables together before moving sufficient chairs to surround the table. One girl returned from a trip to the kitchen clutching two wooden candelabra. James took the splint across to the fire and bent over to light it from the flames. As he expected, hands groped his bum and he jumped and gave a little squeal when one hand became a little too intrusive.

“Boys. Plenty of time for that sort of thing later,” he purred. The officers all laughed although a cloud passed over Cromwell’s face. James skipped back to the tables being prepared, taking care to take a glance over his shoulder to see whose eyes followed his departure. Satisfied that three pairs of eyes were watching, he bent over to light the candles, allowing his skirts to rise a little as he did so.

One girl leaned over to whisper in his ear. “You almost had me convinced there, and I know you’re a man. The three of them can’t take their eyes off you now, and Cromwell is displeased.”

James grinned back. “That’s what I was hoping for. But I’m not greedy, I only want one of them.”

The girls all made their way back to the bar where the landlord was filling the second jug of ale. “Amalie, take these to the table, the rest of you get the food from the kitchen.”

The generals were getting ever noisier as the ale flowed, but in between Cromwell was quietly giving instructions. Whenever James or one of the other girls approached the table, he would stop and await their departure; as a result, James was getting desperate, so far he had no information to deliver.

One of the girls whispered in his ear after she returned from delivering yet another jug of ale. “Did you notice, the tall one with the thinning hair is keeping notes? I’m not sure what you are looking for, but he seems to be the weakest link - he has the hots for you too.”

“I knew he fancied me, but I hadn’t seen him making notes. That could be useful, keep an eye on him for me, I will do the same, I’d like to get my hands on that bit of paper.”

“Of course. Uh… oh, I think they need more bread.”

“I’ll take it.”

James sashayed across the room carrying the basket of fresh bread and leaned across the table next to the tall man, placing the bread in the middle of the table. He felt a hand groping where his breast would normally be but in fact was a balled-up scarf under his bodice. He squealed and pulled back, but the man’s other arm was wrapped around his thighs.

At the head of the table, Cromwell stood. “We won’t be needing the bread, miss. ‘Tis time to retire. Gentleman?” He walked over towards the door followed by a couple of particularly obsequious officers. The tall man stood, pushed his paper into a pocket and as soon as Cromwell was out of sight, pulled James toward him.

“We have a little unfinished business to attend to, my dear.”

James’s hand slipped into the officer’s pocket and extracted the document, dropping it under the table. “Oh, no dearie. I gave all of that up when the yellow discharge started.”

The man pulled back and rushed across the room to the stairs whilst the three serving wenches held back laughter. As soon as the door closed, they all exploded with laughter. Smiling, James bent to retrieve the document from under the table and then rushed to the kitchen. The landlord was cleaning but looked up as James burst in.

“I need some parchment and a pen, quickly.”

The landlord pointed at a desk in the corner. “My clerk works there, maybe inside?”

James opened the lid and pulled out a quill, ink and parchment. Sitting down, he inked the quill and began copying the officer’s notes, not fully understanding what he saw but copying it nevertheless. Finishing with a flourish, he refolded the original document and rushed to drop it under the table. Leaning back against the table edge, he smiled at the serving wenches.

“I think we have just scored a major blow toward the restoration of his Majesty. Thank you all.”

As they smiled back at him, he heard footsteps from above, so rushed into the kitchen to avoid being seen. The tall officer emerged from the staircase and ran to the table, a look of anxiety on his face. When he spotted the paper under the table, he let out an audible sigh of relief as he retrieved it. From the kitchen, James watched through a gap in the doorway as the man tucked the paper inside his jacket and returned to the staircase.

“I must go,” announced James, then dashed to the room he had been assigned.

**Chapter 28**

The carriage made its’ way along the narrow dirt track. From time-to-time, it bounced on a rut in the road, sometimes eliciting complaints from within. The elderly driver focussed grimly on the task at hand, ignoring the protests. Tied to the back of the carriage, a dun mare walked along, she knew this track well, having carried her owner along it many times over recent months. The window slid down on the left side of the carriage and a young woman’s head was thrust out.

“Geoffrey, pull right into the centre of the clearing, you won’t be able to turn around if you don’t.”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

Checking that the mare was still plodding along behind them, she withdrew her head and closed the window with a snap. Two minutes later, the carriage entered a clearing with houses on either side. Slowly, it moved to the middle of the clearing between the houses but before it had drawn to a halt, the door was flung open and the young woman emerged, leaping joyfully from the step. She turned as the carriage stopped and awaited her father, who slowly descended to join her.

“Really, Constance, you should act more ladylike, how can we ever find you a husband if you continue to, er… bounce like that?”

“Father, it is who I am. If this hypothetical husband-to-be wants to marry me, he has to accept me for who I am, not some mythical female creature who has no personality. That is one thing I have learned from the horror of meeting Sir John. Has he replied yet, by the way?”

“No, he hasn’t, nor do I think he will.”

“Maybe we should assemble a gang of thieves to steal the money back.”

“Young lady, your thoughts and ideas are becoming ever more alarming. Now, let us look at this new home of yours. Are you quite sure that you want to move here? It’s much more comfortable up at the big house.”

“It is, and I know, but this is exactly what I want, what I need. Since I started this project, I feel as if I’ve come alive again.”

They started walking up the path towards the doorway.

“Yes, of course I have noticed you are livelier now. We shall see how it works. John will be in the other cottage?”

“Yes, and the stables will be on the other end of his home. They should be finished later today or tomorrow.”

Rushing ahead of her father, Constance threw the door open. “Welcome to my new home.”

-–oOo–-

The gatekeeper led John Bradshaw through the gloomy courtyard to the mouldy doorway. The gaoler waited with a nervous grin, revealing rotten teeth then he passed through the doorway, lit a torch and stretched downwards to ignite a second just inside the staircase. Without comment, he then started descending the staircase, lighting the waiting torches as he reached them. Bradshaw watched him descend, and then followed. Down, down the stairs led until an area of flat rock emerged from the gloom. Pausing to light another torch, the gaoler led the way to a door which was slightly ajar, showing a wan light inside. He flung the door open.

Bradshaw’s specialists were standing beside the supine, naked body of a blood-streaked woman. At the far end, next to a semi-clothed skeleton, three children huddled in terror. There were no windows to disturb the solid stone walls, no way for sound to escape.

“Well?” Bradshaw asked.

“She died, Sir.”

“Really? Well, not important as long as she gave up her husband.”

He paused. “She did give up her husband?”

“No sir. She maintained to the end that she did not know his whereabouts.”

“Fools.”

“Sir, we did warn you that she may die.”

“Incompetents.” He turned on his heel and started for the door.

“S… sir,” stammered the gaoler, “W-what do I do with the children?”

“Why do you think I care? Do whatever you want with them. Eat them if you want.” He stormed out and the men heard his dainty footsteps almost running up the staircase. Halfway up, he slipped and fell but picked himself up quickly and continued his exit.

--oOo—

Stretching, James made his way down the rickety stairs carrying his bag, passed through the door at the bottom into the main bar area. Glancing around, the place was hardly a-bustle, so he wandered over to a table by the door to the stables and sat down. He suppressed a yawn as a serving wench sashayed across to take his order.

“Ale, bread and cheese will be a good way to start,” he told her, then finally gave way to the urge to yawn. The girl laughed.

“Didn’t sleep well?”

“No, someone snores like a laden ox cart up there - he was still at it when I came down if you don’t believe me.”

“I believe you, he’s a regular, which is why he isn’t disturbed.” She bustled away to get his order. As she passed through the door to the kitchen, James heard footsteps on the staircase, and then a shadowy figure emerged. He looked around, espied James, and made his way across the room. As he sat in the seat opposite, James realised that this was the man he had come to see. Piercing eyes lasered into James’s. James stared back, taking in the goatee beard and curly hair, both almost white.

The man spoke. “Well, you have seen my face, which few active personnel ever do. I was not expecting you until later.”

“I arrived late last night. But don’t worry about me, I might have seen your face but still have no idea who you are. And they have been trying to get me for a very long time with limited success.”

“I, however, successfully served Cromwell and I think you will enjoy the fruits of my time there.”

The man raised his eyebrows but said nothing as the serving girl brought James’s breakfast.

“Anything for you, Sir?” she asked.

“My usual.” She left, and as she reached the kitchen the man continued, “What do you have for me?”

James reached inside his doublet and removed the sheet of parchment. “One of the officers was taking notes as Cromwell talked. I picked his pocket as he left to go upstairs, then copied it. He had no idea because he found it later under the table where he had been eating. I don’t understand some of his writing, but I copied it as exactly as I could.”

He passed the document across the table. The man opened it and began reading. His eyes grew large.

“Do you know what we have here?”

“No. I copied it quickly, blindly. I had to get the original back before he realised it was missing, and I have not had time to study it.”

“This tells us much of what Cromwell intends for the first few weeks. It doesn’t say where they will land, which is a shame, but this is incredible information, I see now why his Majesty chose you.”

James finished his ale as the serving wench returned with the man’s meal.

“I need to be on my way, I have much to do down south while I await information from you on the fate of my family.”

“Eight weeks from today, be back here. I should have the information you seek by then, but I hope you can continue to upset the enemy from time-to-time too.”

“Very well, eight weeks.” James dropped some coins on the table, hefted his bag onto his shoulder and left for the stables.

--oOo—

Sir Thomas, Lord Fairfax, Commander in Chief of the Parliamentary Army climbed from his horse, tied the reins to the loop fixed to the wall and then followed the gatekeeper through the dark foreboding gates of Newgate Prison. Once inside and within the forbidding confines of the courtyard, he turned to face the man who had let him through. The guard’s aroma wafted towards him in the draught, and he recoiled slightly.

“I trust that Zachary Howard has received no visitors and has not left his cell?”

“As you ordered, General, he has remained in isolation.”

Fairfax nodded and marched across the courtyard to the doorway he knew led to his prisoner. Two soldiers stood alert on either side of the doorway.

“I am pleased to see that Howard is being well guarded,” commented the general.

The soldiers looked confused. One glanced at the other. “Sir, we are not here guarding Howard. We are here on the orders of Mr Bradshaw, guarding his prisoners.”

Fairfax drew himself erect. “Are you telling me that there are other prisoners down there? I left explicit orders…where is the gaoler.”

“He will be inside, sir. We don’t know why, but Mr Bradshaw did tell him to have fun.”

Red of face, Fairfax pushed past the soldiers and threw the door open. Torches were lit below, so he carefully but quickly descended the slippery, uneven steps curling seemingly into the very bowels of the Earth, the aroma giving the same impression. He soon arrived at the area of flat rock. Holding his kerchief to his nose, the General looked around. At the far end, he could see the locked cell door behind which he hoped Zachary Howard festered. Zachary Howard, the killer of Fairfax’s servant, the thief of Fairfax’s property and worst of all, the rapist of Fairfax’s wife and young daughter. Without further ado, he strode across to the door and tried the lock, it was firmly closed so he opened the viewing panel and peered inside. Utter blackness greeted him, but he heard movement and jumped back suddenly as Howard’s face appeared in front of his own.

“Come to gloat, General?” sneered the prisoner.

Fairfax ignored him and slammed the panel shut. He turned towards the open door to an adjacent cell. The sound of a whimpering child wafted from the open door, causing him to pause; was Bradshaw interrogating infants now? He grimaced, squared his shoulders, and pushed his way into the room, encountering a scene from Dante’s Inferno.

Facing him was the naked dead body of a blood-streaked woman, dangling from chains fixed high up on the wall. Marks in several places on her corpse showed that she had been subjected to appalling torture. At the far end of the dank, stinking cell, two children huddled in terror next to a semi-clothed skeleton. Glancing to his left he saw the gaoler, red of face and pumping vigorously into a young, prepubescent girl, who was quietly whimpering. There were no windows here, no way for sound to escape. The prisoners here screamed in vain.

“What in the name of God do you think you are doing?” bellowed Fairfax.

The gaoler paused, withdrew from the girl, and pulled his ragged trousers up. “Sir, just obeying orders; these children be mine now that the woman be dead.” The little girl pulled her rags around her and scampered across the room to join her brothers.

“What spawn of the devil could order such a thing? Whose orders are you obeying?”

“Mr Bradshaw, sir.”

“And I suppose ‘twas he ordered the guards to protect against the children escaping? If grown men cannot escape this place, what makes you think children could?”

“Sir, it was his order.”

“I thought I left orders that there were to be no other prisoners down here whilst Howard was a resident?”

“You did, sir, but Mr Bradshaw over-ruled your orders. I cannot naysay him.”

Fairfax stepped back towards the door. “You will not assault that little girl any further, or you shall have good reason to fear me, along with all and any decent minded people. I shall give the soldiers fresh orders, but no one, and I mean no one, touches these children Do I make myself perfectly clear?”

“Yes Sir.”

Fairfax left, hurrying up the stairs. Once outside, he steadied himself by taking several deep breaths before addressing the two soldiers.

“Lett me make certain that there is no question in your minds about what I am about to say. Do you know who I am?”

“Y-Yes Sir.”

“And who am I”

“General Fairfax, Sir.”

“And what is my position within the army?”

“You be the commander, Sir.”

“Correct. So I shall make my orders to you perfectly clear. You are no longer guarding the children for Mr Bradshaw. Your task is to ensure that Zachary Howard remains here alone until it is his time before the judge. There can be no variation of this order, and if anyone tries to do so, you are to ignore his orders and refer them to me. Should they attempt to pull rank on you, I order you to arrest them. Is that perfectly clear?”

“Yes Sir.”

--oOo—

Tying his horse to a tree within a small copse, James pulled out his pistols and returned to the street, keeping his head low until he reached the muddy track. Checking both ways, he walked, apparently nonchalantly, to the middle of the road and stood there for a while, looking this way, then that until he was satisfied that no enemy eyes were observing him.

He strolled along the street towards the constable’s cottage. An elderly woman collecting vegetables from her garden shuffled to her gate and smiled at James as he passed, he remembered her from his childhood and smiled back, sweeping his hat in an arc as he bowed towards her, causing her to giggle like a schoolgirl and shuffle back inside with a broad grin on her face. Finally, he reached the Constable’s cottage. Carefully, he made his way onto the path and moved to stand beside the door, listening. Hearing no sound, he eased the door open. Once inside, his eyes swept the room, no one home. Relaxing, he walked across to the desk and sat in the comfortable chair behind it, placing his pistols on the desk.

Sometime later, he heard a footstep approaching so he collected his pistols and withdrew to a dark corner behind the curtain concealing the constable’s sleeping quarters. Two voices drew closer and louder as the door opened and closed. James peered around the curtain. The constable stood with his back to James but beyond him stood James’s own father.

James slipped around the curtain, keeping a pistol trained on the constable’s kidney. Both men turned to face him. His father’s face erupted into a swathe of smiles, whilst the constable gazed at the pistol and looked distinctly nervous. Father and son embraced for the first time in several years, although James kept the pistol trained on the constable as he did so.

“They killed Jamie and took the rest of your family,” announced Edward, James’s father, “We couldn’t stop them.”

“I know,” confirmed James, “I am trying to find out what happened and who is responsible.” He pulled back and turned to the constable, “starting with you. Tell me what *you* know.”

“All I know is that these soldiers turned up with an oily puritan person, nasty piece of work he was. They waved a paper in my face and made me take them to your cottage. I did not know they was going ter kill anyone, truly I didn’t. Look, here’s the paper over here.”

He lurched to the desk and pulled open a drawer. James watched very closely, pistol cocked and pointed, trigger finger poised. However, true to his word, the constable pulled out a sheet of paper and passed it over to James. James took the document and sat down, placing the pistol on the desk in front of him. For a while, he studied the document, and then he looked up. “I need names. Who did this?”

His father piped up. “I heard the name Lunt mentioned. That was the puritan.”

“Yes, Alyn Lunt, I remember now,” added the constable, more relaxed now that the gun was no longer pointed at his kidney. “The soldiers came from Oxford, I believe, the captain let Lunt know his displeasure when your father told them to look elsewhere for saddlery.”

James stood. “Very well. I have encountered Lunt before, and I warned him not to let me see him again. He will be deeply sorry that he ignored my entreaty, but my first task is to find what remains of my family. Constable, are there still troops skulking around my house?” He hefted the pistol.

“No, that order was lifted a few days ago. And James, you were my friend; I would not attempt to take you even if I thought I could. But they gave me no choice.”

James patted the constable on the shoulder. “I know.”

His father stepped in front of James. “James, don’t embark on a killing spree. You are something of a folk hero around here, but if you start killing, they will be helping the authorities rather than staying quiet.”

“No, father, it is not how I operate. I have had a lot of the enemy at my mercy over recent months, and all have lived to tell the tale. I simply made sure that they would be so embarrassed that they want to stay as far away from me as possible. Lunt will get special treatment; he will live but he will wish he didn’t.”

“Good. Your mother and I are immensely proud of our son. You must stay the night with us at least. Your mother will be heartbroken if she misses you.”

James smiled, but there was an air of sadness contained within the smile. “I would be grateful, father. It is too risky for me to sleep anywhere else, and it was a long ride down from Newark. My mare and I are both exhausted.”

“Come, let us collect your mare and talk of better times, I am quite sure that your mother will want to feed you to bursting.”

--oOo—

Dusk was threatening to engulf Borough High Street as the door to the George Inn in Southwark opened and a tall man clad in a black cloak and wearing a wide rimmed black hat stepped into the street. His scarf was pulled up to cover his mouth, but errant wisps of pale hair could be seen peeping from under the brim of his hat. He paused to scan the street. Satisfied that none observed him, he strode along the street to the building next door and entered the Tabard Inn. As usual at this time, the bar was filling with revellers and he had a little difficulty identifying his target, but eventually he saw the young man sitting quietly drinking a pint of ale in the corner of the bar. Pushing his way through, the tall man paused to order ale for himself before sinking into the seat opposite the young man.

“Do you have anything of significance to report?”

The young man stroked his wispy beard before responding. “Not really, it’s been pretty quiet lately.” He passed a document under the table to the tall man’s waiting hand just as the ale arrived.

“I have a task for you. Someone took the family of James Hind, the highwayman. I need to know who was involved and where the family is now.”

“Why?”

“Not something you need to know, apart from the fact that they took a man’s family without any due process of law. If this is to be how the Parliamentarians intend to operate, anything we can learn will be useful.”

“As you wish.”

The tall man took a healthy swig if his ale, “I shall return here in four weeks.” Taking a deep draught to finish the ale, he dropped some coins on the table, stood, and left the inn.

**Chapter 29**

The carriage drew to a halt outside the house, and the coachman climbed down to open the coach door and lower the steps for the lady who gingerly climbed down, taking his proffered arm with a gloved hand. Reaching the cobbled road, she turned to the coachman.

“Kindly await my return; I do not expect to tarry long.”

The coachman nodded. “Yes, Ma’am.”

She walked up the steps of the house and knocked.

After a brief delay, the door opened. “May I help you, madam?”

“Yes, I am here to speak with Lord Fairfax. Kindly let him know that I am here.”

“Who should I say is calling?”

“Why, Lady Rotherhithe. Do you not recognise me, Carstairs?”

The steward paused. “I am afraid not madam. Have I met you previously?”

“I have visited several times, although it is a while since the last time. But never mind, I shall wait in the entrance there, the evenings are getting a little chilly, don’t you think?”

Carstairs stood aside to allow the visitor in, closed the door and hurried through an adjacent doorway to find Lord Fairfax. The visitor held tightly to her bag and examined the paintings adorning the walls. After a few minutes, Lord Fairfax appeared.

“Ah, my lord, your steward does not remember me. I am bereft.” She held the back of her hand to her forehead. “But surely you do?”

Fairfax looked closely, and then a broad smile crossed his face, “Of course, my dear, how could I forget. Do come through to the drawing room, we are about to take tea. Carstairs, bring another place setting if you please.”

He took the woman by the elbow and escorted her through. Carstairs followed long enough to close the door behind them, and then hurried away in search of crockery. Lord Thomas Fairfax waited until he was sure that Carstairs was out of earshot before turning to his wife, seated beside the table with a quizzical look on her face.

“Anne, my dear, meet...” a broad grin crossed his face “Meet Captain James Hind.”

Lady Fairfax concealed her laughter behind her hand. “Well, Captain, this is somewhat more than an unexpected pleasure. I do understand your need to be clandestine in your movements, but is this not a little, a little, extreme?” She burst into peals of laughter, while her husband struggled to control himself.

“It is indeed somewhat extreme. However, these are dangerous times for all of us, madam, and I have no wish to endanger either you or your husband, nor indeed myself. But I do have an urgent request to make of your husband, if I may?”

Carstairs returned with cutlery and cups, so Lord Fairfax indicated a seat for his guest and took his own seat beside his wife. They waited for Carstairs to finish fussing around before continuing.

Lady Fairfax looked at James. “So, Captain, what brings you to our door in such splendid garb?”

“If your ladyship pleases, I do need help from the general. My wife and family were taken from my home recently by soldiers of the Oxford Regiment and delivered to London by order of Thomas Scot. I have the order here.” He fished into his/her bag and pulled out the document he had taken from the Constable.

He handed it to Lord Fairfax and continued. “They killed my eldest son in the process. The raid was led by Alyn Lunt, who I have encountered before, and I shall certainly be having a word with him in due course. But my first priority is to get my family back.”

Lady Fairfax turned to her husband, who had finished reading the order.

“Is this the brave new order we were promised by Cromwell?”

“My dear, I seriously doubt Cromwell knows anything about this action. I can almost guarantee that it was not on his order; after James escaped, I suggested sending out troops to find him and he was completely sanguine about the escape, more concerned with making sure Howard was firmly locked away. No, I would suspect Bradshaw more, especially if Scot signed the order. However, I shall look into it, quietly. Meanwhile, shall we proceed with our tea? Then James, if you can give me a month, I should have something for you by then. But for heaven’s sake, find something less outrageous to wear when you return.”

They all laughed, but as they began their meal, Lord Fairfax suddenly sat bolt upright. “Dear Mother of God, surely not.”

“What, dear?” enquired his wife, nibbling at a small cake.

Fairfax turned to James. “A couple of weeks ago, I went to check up on Howard. I was annoyed to find…well, that is not important, what is relevant is that I encountered a family, put there in the dungeon by Bradshaw. The woman was dead, I had to pull the gaoler off the little girl and there were two younger children huddled together. Does that sound like your family? The gaoler said that the children were his now that the woman was dead. “

James was holding the arm of the chair in a ferocious grip and staring wide-eyed at the General.

“My daughter is nine, my two remaining sons are one and three, they killed my five-year-old son already. My God, do you really think? Sir, I implore you, can you find out?”

“Not tonight, no. But I shall go there first thing tomorrow morning. Using one of your other disguises, can you return tomorrow evening?”

James nodded.

--oOo--

“A penny each I said.” The gaoler leaned back against the damp wall and scowled across the gloomy alleyway at the couple in front of him. His face seemed to be bearded but was in fact simply dirty and unshaven. His unkempt clothes hung from him as if they had been stolen from someone else, as indeed they had; not that the corpse had any further use for them.

“But if we give it all to you, we can’t feed the poor mites.”

“Not my problem.”

The little girl piped up, “Please, lady, please take us away from the man, he does horrible things to me. I can find food for us.”

The woman paused, looked hard at the girl, “You know that God does not like people who tell untruths, don’t you?”

“Honest, I am not lying. Please take me away from him.”

The woman turned to her husband. “Pay the man.” She glared at the gaoler, who squirmed a little under her gaze but did not move his outstretched hand.

“I was obeying orders,” he muttered.

“I find that hard to imagine. Just take the money and go, leave us in peace.”

The gaoler scurried away, clutching his three pennies whilst the couple looked at the three filthy children. The man squatted down in front of the girl. “And what might your name be?”

“Alice, sir. The baby here is Charles and he just staled on me. That is Samuel playing in the mud. Sam, come here and meet the nice people.”

--oOo—

Lord Fairfax clattered to a halt outside Newgate prison, handed the reins to the doorkeeper.

“Those children. Who are they?”

“A criminal’s”

“Whose?”

“Hind, I think. But they are gone now; Herbert took them earlier.”

“You’re sure?”

“Completely sure, sir. He said Mr Bradshaw gave them to him.”

“Since when could any man give children like that? Very well, never mind, you cannot oppose someone like Bradshaw.”

He took the reins back and galloped back towards parliament.

--oOo—

The Puritan strode along the street, scowling at all he passed. The bible clutched in his right hand looked more like a weapon than a source of wisdom and people crossed the street to avoid coming to the notice of such a virulent person. Reaching the steps to the home of Lord and Lady Fairfax, he strode up and hammered on the door. The steward opened the door after a few seconds, then stepped back as the figure strode past him and into the entrance hall. “Edward Willoughby for Lord Fairfax and be quick about it; I am in a hurry.”

He stood tapping his foot as the steward rushed to inform his Lordship. Seconds later, he returned with his master.

“Come, Sir, join me in the study.” Lord Fairfax beamed as he led the way across the hall.

Once inside, they waited until Carstairs had closed the door and departed before speaking. It was the visitor who spoke first. “Well?”

Lord Fairfax indicated a chair and took another chair facing. “James, I’m sorry. Yes, it was your family. Your wife is dead, your daughter has suffered in the same way as mine but at the hands of the gaoler, who has taken her and your sons I know not where. I can’t find out any more without arousing suspicions and questions I would be unable to answer.”

James sat, staring into space, fighting to retain control. Thomas Fairfax had the decency to remain silent while his guest gathered his wits. James took a deep breath, exhaled, and turned to look at his host.

“I truly do not want you to take any risks. I have my own contacts and I shall find out where they are and who has harmed both them and my wife. They will regret their actions, although I do not kill outside of the battlefield.” He paused. “Is the gaoler the same putrid fellow from when I was a guest there?”

“Yes, I think so. The gatekeeper said that his name is Herbert.”

“And you saw him having sex with my daughter?”

“Yes.”

“I shall have to find a very special reward for him. However, I can say no more at this point, not least because I do not want to test your loyalties. For now, I shall bid thee farewell.”

He stood, they shook hands and James bowed, re-donned his puritan hat, scowled without difficulty, and left.

--oOo--

Steaming and snorting, the mare pulled to a halt under the trees near Buriton. The highwayman leaned forward to pat his horse, and then leaped nimbly onto a fallen log. In the distance, the spire of Buriton Church peered over the treetops, reminding the highwayman of home. A gentle breeze disturbed the feather protruding from his broad brimmed hat but failed to distress the brown cape hanging from the man's rather narrow shoulders.

Weak sunlight struggled to find its’ way through the clamouring branches in the treetops above, expiring in a dappled presence on the ferns urgently thrusting from the forest floor below. Sighing, he led his horse to a small patch of grass beside another fallen tree nearby. He sat on the log as he awaited the sounds of an approaching coach. After what seemed an age, he looked up as he heard the clatter of a carriage making its way slowly along the rutted road nearby. He adjusted his hat, remounted his horse and made his way back to his observation point.

A large and well-appointed coach was wending its’ way along the meandering road below him. Looking closely, he saw only one driver and no accompanying horsemen, so he made his way through the trees until his mount was standing square across the road with guns drawn.

“Stand and deliver.”

The driver looked up, startled by the call. He whipped the horses into frenzied activity. Startled, the highwayman took aim at the driver, who was now close enough to be recognised as Henry, Sir John’s steward. Firing both pistols, he almost fell off as the guns recoiled, and only just succeeded in dodging the speeding coach as it bounced by him. He fell from the frightened horse as it reared, punched the ground in angry frustration and watched the carriage bounce away down the rutted track. He sighed, and removed his hat, releasing a cascade of dark hair and revealing high cheekbones and seductive dark eyes.

Constance got to her feet and started walking after her bolted horse.

“I really must work on my marksmanship.”

--oOo--

James Hind sat quietly in the trees, watching his cottage from a place of concealment. After an hour had passed with no sign of movement, he quietly moved closer, making full use of the long grass and weeds despoiling what had once been a vegetable garden tended by his wife. Reaching the back of the house, he made his way around the side and crouched down to watch the street. Satisfied that there were no watching troops, he slipped around to the front and entered the cottage. Inside, it was cold and dark with a definite aroma of rotting food. Feeling around, he located the candle that always stood on the bench beside the door and lit it.

Blinking in the sudden light, he saw the remains of his home. Food sat rotting on the table, a mouldy pie sat inches from his hand with a single slice cut from it. The fire sat cold and empty, no children playing on the cowhide scrunched up before it. He wiped a tear from his eyes and reached for the shovel standing behind the door.

Extinguishing the candle, he slipped out of the door, closing it firmly behind him. He would probably never see it again, but no reason to let the animals destroy it, he might yet bring his family back. He passed around to the back of the house and paced five steps along from the corner. Then two steps out into the garden. He began digging beneath a cabbage that had bolted.

Some minutes later, the shovel hit a hard surface, so he stopped and moved to the corner of the house. He looked in every direction, checking that he remained unobserved. Satisfied, he returned to the hole he had dug, got down onto his hands and knees and began digging with his hands, slowly revealing the lid of a wooden chest. He scraped the dirt from one edge of the chest and lifted the lid. Inside was an oiled burlap sack, which he heaved from the box with some difficulty. Checking inside, the glint of coin was visible before he hoisted the sack over his shoulder and made his way carefully back to where his mare stood contentedly grazing. Pushing the oiled bag into one of the leather bags slung over the horse’s back, he mounted and set off for London.

**Chapter 30**

Alfred Leah poured blotting powder over the sheet he had been working on, and then waited a moment before tipping the excess back into the box. Glancing out of the tiny window beside his workbench, he noted the position of the sun and determined that evening approached, he had worked a little longer than he intended.

Checking to ensure that his page was properly dry, he gathered up his day’s output and holding his candle at arm’s length to avoid singeing the papers, he left the room and walked along the corridor to the file room. Pushing the door open with his backside, he glanced both ways along the corridor to ensure that no one was approaching and backed into the room. Placing the candle upon a small shelf put there for the purpose, he spread his papers across a nearby desk and began placing each into the correct cubbyhole. Once all were properly filed, he returned to the door and peered out into the corridor. All was silent as the grave, few worked this late.

He returned to the file room and located the records of the Examinations Committee. Flipping through, he came to a page that did not match the others in format. A quick glance told him that only the chairman had been involved, which was most irregular. Noting the name ‘Hind’, he guessed that this was indeed the file he sought. He tucked it into his shirt and left the room to return to his office down the corridor.

Pulling out a blank sheet, he copied the salient points. Using the blotting powder again, he tucked the original document back into his shirt before folding the notes he had made and slipping the paper deep into his pocket. Standing, he made his way back to the file room to return the file. Gathering his scarf and coat, he hurried out of his office and made his way to the Tabard Inn, as was his wont on most evenings.

--oOo—

Captain George Bishop was about to leave himself, but seeing Alfred further along the corridor, he ducked back into the doorway from which he had just exited; he knew that Alfred normally left on the stroke of six.

As Alfred entered a room further along the corridor, Bishop hastened to the doorway and watched Alfred tuck a document back into place. Then he quickly moved along the corridor to the next doorway and watched as Alfred scurried back to his office, before emerging seconds later and walking away.

The captain left his place of concealment and entered the file room, crossing to take the file he had watched being replaced in its cubbyhole; he knew that Alfred was not working on the Examinations Committee. He took it back to his office to find out what had caused a good clerk to risk his future like that.

--oOo—

The squirrel ran along the branch and leapt towards the next tree as the branch it had been sitting upon cracked and fell to the forest floor. Down on the forest floor a hundred yards away, Constance sighed and turned towards John Harris. “I’ll never get this right.”

“You will,” he reassured her, “it just takes time. You also need more strength in your wrists; perhaps you could try exercising them in some way? We used to lift heavy stones over and over, that works quite well. The stronger your wrists, the better you can hold the pistol steady as she fires. However, we were not firing pistols, so we did not need it to be so well concentrated in our wrists; we needed the arms and shoulders more. But I saw officers using stones regularly and they did use pistols. If you keep trying, it will come.”

She lifted the other pistol and took aim. John reached across to push the gun back down.

“Try holding it in both hands, one around the other.” He stepped back.

She took aim, wrapping both hands around the handle. She pulled the trigger and moments later came the puff of smoke and loud report. In the tree nearby, the squirrel took flight again as the bullet ripped through the branches close to its tail.

From the forest floor came a delighted squeal. “That was nearly right, John, wasn’t it?”

John Harris smiled. “Yes, you’re getting there. But we have no more lead for the moment, I shall have to go and get some more before we can practice again. You work on your wrists meanwhile.”

--oOo—

Darkness had long ago engulfed Southwark as Alfred entered the Tabard Inn. He recoiled a little at the wall of tobacco smoke, and then bent slightly to look beneath the white, curling layer, which had formed across the entire room. As he had expected, the Tall Man sat in the corner alcove with his hat pulled down to conceal his face. He smiled to himself, even the Tall Man had not yet found a way to drink without exposing his chin. He wove across the room, ignoring the whores who grasped at his jacket as he passed. Stopping one of the serving wenches on the way to order ale for himself, he threw himself indecorously onto the seat opposite the Tall Man.

“I have found what you seek.”

“Excellent. Tell me.”

The young man smiled at the serving girl as she arrived with his ale, took a sip, pulled on his wispy beard and looked up at the man opposite.

“It was by Bradshaw’s order via Scot. They sent one of their lackeys called Lunt with troops from the Oxford Garrison. One child was shot and killed accidentally, the wife and remaining children were taken to Newgate. That is all I can find out, except that Bradshaw sent his personal torturers in. Here, I wrote down the key points for you.”

He passed a document under the table to his companion’s waiting hand.

The Tall Man tucked the document inside his doublet, took a healthy swig of his ale before looking up again at Alfred. “I shall return here as usual in four weeks.” Finishing his ale, he dropped some coins on the table, stood and left the inn.

The young man collected and pocketed the coins, then leaned back in his seat, looking for the serving wench he had smiled at earlier; there was some real promise in her responses.

--oOo—

With his bag over one shoulder and his bedding under his arm, James pushed his way through the crowd and up to the bar. A chirpy young woman with dark hair looked up at him.

“Can I help ‘ee sir?”

“I need a bed for the night,” he looked around as a jostle in the crowd pushed him in the back “if you have one, that is.”

“Course we do. Might have to share, though,” she winked at him.

“If I must. What is going on here? It’s not usually this full.”

“You are not local, then. Everyone knows this is Moulding the Cocklebread night here.”

James grimaced. “Ah, that explains it. In any event, I shall drop my bedding upstairs and be right back, I have had a long ride and I am really looking forward to a bowl of potage and a tankard of ale.”

“Yes sir.”

Ten minutes later, James re-entered the bar, which was now simmering with excitement. The serving girl waved across the bar and pointed to a table behind her, on which he could see a tankard and a steaming bowl of potage. He pushed his way across the bar, causing more than one youth to turn angrily, but the sight of his baldric and pistols was enough to soothe their anger. He sat at the table, dropped his hat onto the bench beside him and pulled out his eating knife.

“Any meat in today’s meal?”

“No, but there are plenty of fresh vegetables, I peeled them myself earlier.”

He grimaced before taking a swig of his ale. The woman left him to his meal. Despite the lack of meat, he was enjoying it when someone sat in the seat opposite him. James looked up into the cool eyes of the very man he was here to see.

“I remembered that you arrived early last time.”

James nodded and continued with his meal until the young woman arrived with ale for his companion. She smiled at him and sashayed away from the table.

“I think you are going to be busy tonight,” commented the man as he watched her swaying backside depart.

“Not part of my plan,” commented James before taking a swig of ale to wash down the last vestiges of his meal.

“Definitely part of hers.” Both men laughed. “I promised to try to find out about the abduction of your family. Our man has some names,” he pulled out a paper from inside his shirt. “The local constable, Captain Roberts from the Oxford garrison and several troops from there, we only have one name, Private Edwards, who actually shot your son and was ordered to pay for the burial. Bradshaw asked Thomas Scot to get your wife, Alyn Lunt was the man on the spot who decided to take the whole family. For some reason, there is reference to him eating a slice of pie. They were taken to Newgate; The head gaoler is called Herbert. We think Bradshaw sent in a couple of his specialists, but their names are not in the documents. I dare not ask our man to take further risks on this.”

“No need, thank you. I am sure that I can find those names from the gaoler. I have good contacts in London.”

“I won’t give you any tasks this time but do return a month tomorrow for instructions on the next task.”

“Thank you, I shall.”

“I must be on my way now, enjoy the evening’s entertainment.”

The man stood, tucked his hair into his hat, pulled the rim down and lifted his kerchief over his beard before giving a cursory nod and pushing his way out of the inn.

James watched him depart and failed to notice when the serving girl removed his dirty dish. He did notice, however, when she climbed up onto the table. He saw other girls climbing onto the other tables. The girl grinned down at him. “Don’t worry, I don’t bite, much.”

All the girls, including the one on his table, bent over and grasped the hems of their skirts. The girl on his table had turned to face away from him. As if at a signal, they all pulled the skirt hems up to over their heads, revealing a veritable bowling alley of buttocks. A few seconds later, they all began to simulate copulation. Where there were several girls on a single long table, it produced a mesmerising effect as they automatically adopted the same rhythm. James, however, saw none of this; he had a close up of a very pretty pair of buttocks in action, and was unable to take his eyes away, even when they all began to sing.

“My dame is sick, and gone to bed, and I’ll go mould my cockle bread. Up with my heels and down with my head, and this is the way to mould cockle bread.”

For a few minutes, the girls continued to move their hips erotically before everything descended into chaos as young men pulled them from the tables with much laughter and squealing. The girl on James’s table jumped down then sat on his lap with a smile. Having been somewhat aroused by the preceding dance, James now noticed her not as a serving wench but as a pretty young woman with a sunshine smile. He smiled back, unable to control events lower down his body. She put an arm around his neck, pulled him closer and kissed him with passion. James responded, becoming even more enthusiastic as he felt her hand sliding up his thigh and caressing his erection. She squeezed his erection, broke the kiss and stood up.

“Your bedroll is the one over by the window?”

“Yes.”

“Leave room for me when you climb in tonight.”

With that, she bustled off to help the landlord behind the bar. James sat still, slightly stunned. One of the other drinkers wandered across.

“You lucky bastard. Tonight is her first night and all of us were hoping to get off with the new girl. Then you come swanning in and take her; it’s not fair.”

James studied the youth. “It is as it is, young man. Now do run along, I am here peaceably and want to keep it that way, but I can look after myself if I must. It is also a fact that she chose me, not the other way around. Now go.”

--oOo--

James stirred as he felt someone slip into his bedroll behind him. He turned and encountered the perfect smooth skin of a naked young woman in the pitch black of the night. Across the room, he heard muffled giggling and the unmistakeable sounds of copulation. A hand touched his cheek and then two eager lips touched his. Responding, he wrapped an arm around the shoulders of his companion and pulled her closer. He could feel her hands undoing his belt, and then he gasped involuntarily as a cool, soft hand grasped his member. Regaining a degree of control, he stroked her right breast, feeling the nipple harden beneath his touch. She gave an involuntary gasp as he pressed her breast against her with his palm over the nipple. Pulling away from the kiss, she plunged deep under the covers and took his manhood into her mouth. Wrapping her tongue around the tip, she caressed him, and then grasped his testicles gently in her hand. After a few minutes of this, with no visible reaction, she paused and re-emerged. Reaching up in the darkness, she felt his cheek, which was wet with his tears.

“What’s wrong?” she whispered.

“My wife and eldest son were murdered by Bradshaw and his people a few weeks ago. You excited me so much with your touches earlier, it reminded me of her. I have not been with anyone since I found out. I miss her.”

Emily paused, and then moved up a little further in the bedroll before pulling his unresisting head to her breast, where he quietly sobbed. She felt tears running down her breast and pulled him closer. Eventually, his sobs subsided but she continued to hold him until he fell asleep.

**Chapter 31**

As he neared the George Inn, James slowed to a walk whilst he scanned the people he passed. They in turn examined him, but with no animosity, he saw. The inn was as he remembered it from three years earlier, just a little more dilapidated. But the woman he sought was not on the street as he had hoped. Finally, some way past the Inn he dismounted and approached a woman with long, dark hair who was selling apples beside the road.

“Can you help me? I’m looking for an old woman who used to beg near here.”

“You want some apples? Only a farthing.”

“Yes, I’ll have some apples and pay you double if you help me find the old lady.”

She looked at him. “Really? Very well.” She handed him several apples, which he placed in his saddlebag.

“The old lady?”

“Ah, yes. She lives over by the river.”

“Where?”

“Head back towards the church, after the bridge turn to your right. Her home is the only building down that way.” She extended her hand and James dropped the halfpenny into her palm.

Climbing back onto his horse, James turned and followed her directions, eventually arriving at a tumbledown cottage beside the river. As he dismounted, the door opened, dragging noisily on the dirt in the process. An old woman hobbled out. Her hair was straggly grey and thinning on top, her face heavily lined and she used a stick to struggle along the path. But a fierce light sparkled behind her eyes, which were fixed firmly on James’s face.

“Ah, Captain Hind. I was hoping you would drop by. I imagine you want me to renew your protection. Come in, come in, I can’t get around as much these days.”

James tied his horse to a nearby tree and followed her inside, ducking to avoid the low doorway. As he stood erect, he saw a small fire burning in the grate. The old woman’s sleeping area was off to one side, and a table sat in the middle of the room. Shelves lined the walls, filled to overflowing with bundles of herbs, and pots containing unknown potions. The woman stood leaning on the table watching him taking in the scene. She walked over to a shelf beside the fire and retrieved her white wand.

“Do you have the compass?” James had been carrying it and held it out as if for her inspection. She smiled and tapped it ten times with her wand. “I have spent a goodly part of the past three years trying to work out how I could extend the coverage of my spell, I am old and do not expect to be here in three years from now. But I do want you to be able to continue your work for our Lord and Master across the seas. The spell should last until the king sits again on his throne. It was the best I could do, but once he regains power, you will be less hunted and therefore less in need of my protection.”

James gave her five crowns. “I hope that this will keep you going for longer than you think.”

She smiled. “It is for your generosity of spirit that I chose you, Captain. Now go, go and avenge your beloved wife.”

--oOo--

The tall man in the wide-brimmed hat paused in an alleyway opposite the George Inn in Borough High Street. Pretending to brush some dust from his coat, he watched the door opposite whilst checking up and down the street. After a few minutes, he crossed the street and entered the Inn. Inside, the bar was virtually empty save for a small group of youths carousing near the window and a single young man seated at the other end. Calling at the bar to collect a tankard of ale, he crossed the bar and sat in the alcove behind the young man. Leaning back in his seat, he checked again that no one else was within earshot before he spoke.

“You said you had something urgent for me.”

“I do. You know that I work as a clerk for Thomas Scot. His assistant rushed in the other day to tell him that we have a spy in our midst, frightened me for a while, but then he named Alfred Leah. You need to extricate him as soon as you can.”

“I only know of one operative who could do that, but I shall be seeing him in a few days. I shall attend to it. Thank you, and well done for reporting so quickly.”

“I was just following my conscience.” The young man stood, “If anything else arises, I’ll contact you again.”

“Do. I shall be away for a few days arranging the rescue, but any information once I return will be crucial.”

The young man nodded and left the inn. The tall man sat pondering while he finished his tankard, then he followed the young man out of the door and walked south to prepare for his journey.

--oOo--

After tying his horse to the ring outside the door, James took his bags off the saddle and entered the shop. Moll was sitting behind a large wooden desk with her feet resting on the cluttered surface beside the blunderbuss, which was pointed directly at the door. As soon as she saw who it was, she let go of the weapon, placed her pipe carefully into a ceramic bowl and leapt to her feet.

“James.”

James grinned and dropped his bag to the floor, just in time as Moll hurled her not-inconsiderable bulk into his arms and gave him a rib-cracking hug. Laughing, James squeezed free.

“Ah, Moll. I have missed you. And I have much to tell you, shall we do it here or shall we report to the inn?”

“Oh, definitely the inn.”

“Oh, before we leave, I need to give you something,” he rummaged in his bag and pulled out a leather bag, “one hundred Jacobusses.”

“There was no hurry to repay that. I’d written it off as a contribution towards the restoration of the crown.”

“I repay my debts. If I say I borrow something, I always repay it. This reminds me, I owe a young lady the loan I took from her dowry.” He shrugged. “Later. Now let’s go.”

--oOo--

The inn was sparsely occupied, and the only light came from a few candles placed randomly on the sturdy wooden tables. A pall of smoke lay around head height, mostly emanating from Moll’s pipe. She and James sat with a tankard of ale each, Moll puffing noxious fumes from her pipe whilst James was recounting his adventures abroad.

“But there was a nasty shock when I got back home, my wife and children were kidnapped by Bradshaw’s people.”

“Bradshaw considers himself above the law, so although that would be illegal, he is free to do as he wishes. Cromwell does little to curb him.”

“Worse, I have since found out that my wife died at their hands, my son was shot and killed accidentally, my daughter assaulted and my children have been given away.”

“Oh, James.” Moll leaned forward and placed a hand on his arm. “What can I do to help?”

“I know now who was involved. Bradshaw I shall save for later, but I’d like you to find my children for me.”

“James, if you find them, what are you going to do with them? You have no wife; you have no safe home.”

“You’re right, of course. Very well, find them but make no contact. I will have to think about what to do with the children. Can you also find out where Alyn Lunt lives, and the gaoler named Herbert? I shall also want to identify who Bradshaw’s torturers are, but that can wait for now.”

“I shall work on it. Do you want to sleep at my place tonight? I do have room.”

“Thank you, yes. I need to be on the road tomorrow, though; I have an appointment up north.”

--oOo--

James guided his horse into the stable, and then jumped down. He reached into his purse, extracted a coin and handed it to the groom.

“I shouldn’t be too long so leave the saddle in place. Just feed and water him.”

Slinging his bag over his shoulder, he strode into the Inn. The bar area had but a few customers, most of whom were arguing around a table at the far end. Not wishing to join in the arguments, which seemed to be about the local mayor, he sat at a table by the door to the stables. A serving wench sashayed across to take his order.

“Ale, bread and cheese, if I may, in that order.”

She bustled away to get his order. As she passed through the door to the kitchen, James saw the main front door open, and then a shadowy figure entered. He made his way across the room to sit in the seat opposite. James stared back at the mysterious man he had come to see.

“I have an urgent task for you,” the man announced, and then leaned forward, “It seems that our man in Bradshaw’s office has become a suspect. We do not think they will arrest him yet, though, they will want to try to see whom he meets first. Therefore, I want you to rescue him. Be aware, he will be under surveillance which may be clandestine, so take no chances and try to have backup ready to step in if things go wrong.”

James thought for a moment, and then looked up. “I have a few ideas, but I’ll need to scout the place out first.”

The man handed over a small fragment of paper on which an address was written. James slipped it into his pocket just as the serving girl arrived with his food. He addressed her. “Is Emily not working today?”

“No, sir, she will be on duty later if you want to wait.”

“No, it’s alright. I have a long journey ahead of me anyway.”

She departed and the man stood up. “Don’t get too attached to this place, I’ll be changing my base soon, can’t be in one place too long. Although that girl last time was pretty.”

James nodded. “She was, and I wouldn’t mind seeing her again, but this task sounds too urgent.”

The man looked at him. “It was whilst he was gathering information for you that he was spotted, so in a sense, you owe him this.”

“I shall be on my way as soon as I have eaten.”

“Bring him back here. He is too valuable to lose, and I should have set up a new base for him by then.”

--oOo—

The squirrel sat on the branch above and behind the two noisy humans. Below him, the man stepped back.

“Now, grip tightly and expect the kick. Don’t pull the trigger, squeeze it and then brace yourself.”

The young woman lifted the pistol, took aim, and squeezed the trigger. Half a second after she did, there was a puff of smoke, a muffled bang and the target across the clearing developed a small hole with a puff of dust. The squirrel retreated to a higher branch.

“Yes,” cried the young woman.

The man smiled, took the pistol from her and gave her another. “Now do it again.”

She took careful aim and pulled the trigger. Nothing happened.

“You must always cock the pistol first, young Constance.”

“Oh yes.” She cocked the pistol and took aim again. Click, puff, bang and another hole appeared in the target.

“You must remember these points, or it is useless. Even I could have run across that clearing and taken the gun from you while you were working out why it did not work. It must be automatic.”

“I shall get it, I’m sure. At least now I can actually shoot straight.”

“Yes. Now let us try again. This time including preparing the gun for firing.”

--oOo—

James checked his third pistol was loaded, tucked it into his belt and turned towards Moll, who had her pistols laid out on her bed and was busily checking them.

“Are you sure that we can do this on foot? I don’t like not having a fast and easy escape route set out.”

Moll turned around, bringing her candle from the bedside. “Don’t worry, James; we are very close here, which is why I know where to go; I’ve lived here for twenty years, I know every alley, nook and cranny nearby. On top of that, my shop is not locked, and I will not lock this door as we leave, so we have two possible routes to safety. The stables are in a third direction, and if we need that many exit routes then we are in serious trouble anyway.”

“That’s what worries me.”

They left the room and Moll pulled the door tightly shut. “Best way is to just circle around and see if he’s being watched before we get too close. This is my locale, I know everyone here, including your Alfred, so I know that the parliament has few friends here, and I know which places are empty. We can check them all.”

They made their way in the darkness towards Alfred’s address. As they neared their target, James slowed, peering into every shadow, every opening before moving on. Turning the corner onto Alfred’s Street, James hastily stepped back out of sight and whispered, “Two soldiers in that alleyway over on the other side. We’ll have to work around and incapacitate them.”

Moll looked around. “You go down that street back there, the first alleyway will come up behind them. I will give you a few minutes and then walk over towards them. They can see I’m a woman, so they won’t be alarmed.”

“We’ll disarm them and bind them, that way we minimise the urgency of the hunt afterwards. You’d better pull your scarf up to hide your face, though.”

A few minutes later, she pulled up her scarf, grasped the pistol in her pocket and strolled out, walking down the street. She noticed the two figures that had quickly withdrawn into the shadows and changed her direction slightly to bring her close to the alley entrance. As she drew closer, she heard a scuffle, so she jumped in front of the alley with her pistol pointed at the remaining trooper. “Please do not make me waste my powder on you.”

Eyes wide, he placed his musket on the ground next to his colleague and stood upright with his hands in the air. “We don’t want no trouble.”

She nodded at James who began tying the hands of the fallen soldier before he recovered consciousness. Then she turned back to the other soldier. “Tell me what your instructions are.”

“We watch that house down there and arrest anyone who visits.”

“Who ordered this?”

“Our captain, we don’t know who gave him the order.”

“Very well, now sit down with your hands behind your back.”

James began tying the second soldier’s hands, “move over beside your friend there.”

Once they were tied together firmly, he stood and contemplated his handiwork.

Moll continued her interrogation, “Are there others?”

“Yes, at the other end of the street.”

“Don’t be in a hurry to escape. We have no wish to hurt either of you, but we will if we must.”

James and Moll set off for the other end of the street using an adjacent alleyway. At each opening, they took a moment to check for any hidden presences, and eventually, they spotted a soldier hunkered down in a doorway.

“There’s no way to get to him without him seeing us,” whispered James.

“How about if I take a pot shot at him and let him chase me, you can then dive in and get our man.”

“You’re sure you can outrun him and his shots?”

“Absolutely sure. Look at him, I bet he drinks heavily, and he certainly enjoys pies more than is good for him.”

Moll left and James got into position ready to run to the address he had been given. A shot rang out and in the dim light, James saw a puff as the projective struck the ground close to the soldier’s feet. The soldier jumped up, peering in the direction of the shot, then set off at a lumbering pace, chasing the gunman, or in this case, gunwoman. James controlled an urge to snigger; Moll had not been exaggerating about the soldier’s girth. As soon as the soldier turned the corner, James sprinted out to the street and raced to the address he had been given. Bursting through the door, he looked around, instantly taking in the absence of soldiers and a very surprised Alfred, who was seated at his table with a piece of bread in his hand and his mouth open, ready to receive.

Grabbing the young man by the arm, he started for the door. Alfred resisted. James turned to face him, a little breathlessly. “You are suspected by the parliament thugs, and they will execute you. We have been sent by the Tall Man to rescue you, but we must hurry, we have incapacitated two soldiers and drawn a third one away, but he will be back soon. Come on.”

For a moment, Alfred stood staring, in shock. Then, at James’s urging, he started running. They ran past the two bound soldiers, and by a circuitous route, James led Alfred to Moll’s home, dragged the door open and then dragged the winded clerk inside, slamming the door behind him.

After a few minutes, the door burst open and Moll entered, slamming the door behind her. “Fellow, you must be important to have that many soldiers guarding you.”

“I didn’t know they were there. I didn’t even know that they suspected me.”

“The Tall Man asked me to get you out after someone else told him that you were suspected. He obviously couldn’t meet you himself when he knew that they would be watching.”

“I am so sorry, I am being ignorant, you have just rescued me, and I haven’t even asked your names.”

“This is Moll Cutpurse; I think you know each other already.”

Alfred reached out and shook Moll’s hand. “No, I knew the lady by sight of course, but we hadn’t actually talked. “

“And I am Captain James Hind.”

“Ah, Captain. I recall getting some information about you recently.”

“Yes, you did, and thank you for that. But now we have to work out how to get you safely out of London.”

Moll looked up. “Ah, that reminds me, James, I have found your children, they’re not too far from here.”

“Excellent. Let me have the address later, and I’ll set up someone to watch them.”

Alfred interrupted. “Excuse me? I must get my papers back.”

“What? Look, your home will be crawling with soldiers now, there is absolutely no way that we can return there today.”

“I cannot leave without them. They are far too important.”

“What is so important that you are willing to risk your life for them?”

“Do you not risk your life every day in your efforts for the crown? I am no soldier, but I have been gathering information that should be of great value to the restoration effort. I must have those papers.”

“Oh, very well. I will get them for you, you are not going anywhere, you said yourself, you are no soldier. Now we need to work out how to get you away from here. Moll, any ideas?”

“We have to disguise him, and you too, they will be on high alert after this.”

James grimaced. “That means we have to get him to Mumford Haggett’s place. Risky.”

“Can’t we do it ourselves?”

“Moll, you saw how good his disguises are. No-one has ever seen through one of his disguises.” He paused and stroked his chin, “but I suppose we could use two of my disguises to get there. Which gives me an idea as to how to get those accursed papers. I’ll go dressed as a whore, if I can borrow your lipstick, Moll.”

“Of course.”

“Good. Exactly where are they, Alfred?”

“In front of the door, you’ll see a floor plank with a big knot hole in it. Lift it, it’s all under there.”

“Good. Now, let’s have something to eat and drink, get some sleep and tomorrow I’ll get them.”

--oOo--

James pulled his false breasts up to where they should be, patted his wig and pursed his lips. Looking at Moll, he raised an eyebrow. “Is that alright?”

“Well, now that you have your breasts up there, yes.”

Grinning, James tucked his pistols into pockets concealed within the dress’s voluminous folds. “Shame I can’t fit my sword in here. However, I should be fine, especially with you shadowing me.” He turned to face Alfred. “You stay in here, do not answer the door, do not step outside. I know that the Tall Man has plans for you, and he was preparing somewhere for you to be, but we still have to get you there alive. Let us do the work, we are skilled at this; you are not.”

Alfred nodded and James and Moll slipped out of the door.

Moll held back to allow James to get ahead of her, and then they made their way to the street where they had rescued Alfred just twelve hours earlier.

No soldiers lurked in the shadows as they walked the length of the street, so they walked back, Moll remaining well behind James and keeping to the shadows where possible. It was a grey November morning with a light drizzle, meaning that the clouds hung dark and low.

As soon as James drew level with Alfred’s door, he darted sideways and slipped inside whilst Moll continued walking until she reached the alleyway that had hidden the soldiers the evening before, today it could hide her.

Inside, James blinked in the gloom. His breath billowed before him in the unheated room, which smelled a little of mildew. He waited for his eyes to acclimatise, and then stiffened as he heard the back door open and then close. He glanced around the room, which he could now dimly see, and moved quickly across to stand behind the door.

A tall soldier strolled into the room, securing his belt as he walked. James came up behind him.

“Well, hello, sweetie.”

The soldier twirled around in alarm but took his hand off his dagger when he saw what appeared to be a whore, blowing kisses at him.

“How did you get in here?”

“Through the door, silly. I came for my usual rendezvous, a little early today but I do have another meeting later. Is Alfie here?”

“No, Alfie isn’t here.” He reached for the whore’s arm and began shepherding her towards the door. The whore twisted out of his grip and pulled the trooper’s arm behind his back.

“Unfortunately, I came for Alfie, and you will have to wait whilst I get what I came for,” said the whore in a deep voice. “So, you can co-operate, or I can hurt you rather badly. Which is it to be?”

The soldier felt a pistol muzzle pressing between his buttocks. “I shall co-operate.”

“Good. Now put your other hand behind your back. Just to make sure, you understand.”

James tied the soldier’s hands to his ankles, and then eased the soldier to the floor, removing his weaponry.

“There. That didn’t hurt now, did it? I’ll just be a few minutes and then I’ll leave you in peace.”

He pulled up the plank Alfred had told him about, and then pulled out the bags hidden beneath the floor. “Hum, a little more than I expected but never mind.” He pushed everything into the largest bag, then rearranged his dress, which had become somewhat dishevelled during the brief struggle.

Dropping the soldier’s knife in the corner, he turned back to the struggling man.

“You should be able to free yourself fairly quickly, I think, but if not, I’m sure someone will be along to relieve you later. Whatever, I shall be well away. One piece of advice. No one else knows that there was anything down there, so if you free yourself quickly enough, you can replace everything and then there is no need to report this, this intrusion. Meaning no trouble for you. Just a suggestion.”

He opened the door, checked both ways and then left, giving the soldier a cheery wave as he closed the door behind him.

**Chapter 32**

Moll and James tumbled through the door, much to Alfred’s alarm, and then collapsed in a heap laughing. After a few moments, James untangled himself and stood up, pulling off the long dark wig as he did so.

“I’m sorry, Alfred, it’s just that as we were walking back from your place, a crowd of youths tried to persuade us to go with them. What a shock they would have had.” He passed the bag over to Alfred.

Whilst James changed out of his costume and resumed his normal look, Alfred rummaged through the bag, finally lifting his hand triumphantly with a bag of coins. “I don’t like being dependant on others,” he commented to no one in particular.

As soon as James had returned to his usual masculine self, he touched Moll on the shoulder, “I’m going to set up some surveillance on my children, you were going to give me their address.”

Moll walked across to the fireplace and picked up a scrap of paper sitting on the shelf. She glanced at it before handing it to the waiting James. “Here you are.”

“I’ll be no more than a couple of hours, and then we must get Alfred to Mumford Haggett’s place. Try to work out a disguise good enough for us to get him there while I’m gone.” He strode from the room, closing the door behind him.

Moll looked at Alfred. “As James said, we need to find a suitable disguise to enable us to walk the mile or so to Haggett’s shop.” She glanced at the discarded whore’s costume. “I think I have an idea.”

Alfred looked with horror. “No.”

--oOo—

James was pacing eastwards towards Whitechapel, where lived a young lad who had previously helped him to break into the house of Lord Fairfax. As he entered the street, he saw his target sitting on a wall with three other boys, smoking a pipe. As soon as the boy saw James, he said something to his companions, jumped down from the wall and walked across the street.

“Mornin’ guvnor. Need another break-in?”

“No, not this time. This one should be more profitable for you and a lot easier.”

“Go on,” the boy walked beside James, who was ambling down the street.

“My wife was murdered and my children were stolen. I have found out where my children are, and for the time being, I just need someone to befriend my daughter and generally keep an eye on them until I can come and get them. You will be well paid, but until I tell you, you must not mention me to her, she is only nine and cannot be relied upon to keep a secret.”

“Whatever you say. I need you to show me who she is.”

“Yes, I’ll take you there, you know the best way to get there, I’m sure.”

He read out the address from the scrap of paper, and the boy perked up immediately.

“Yes, I know that street, I live on the next street some of the time, well, my mother does, and I sometimes stay there with her.”

“Excellent, lead on, then. However, remember that I must stay hidden; it is very important that she does not know yet that I have found them. I have to find a safe place for them first.”

Darting through dank alleyways and along streets thronging with London’s Great Unwashed, they made their way south towards the river. The boy stopped, holding his hand out to prevent James passing him.

“This is the street, and I can see a little girl I don’t recognise. She is looking at me. I will cross the street. Watch my hand, I will keep it low as long as she is looking at me or the other way. If I lift it, duck because she is looking your way.”

He sauntered across to the other side and began to walk along the street. Once the boy was far enough down, James crept to the bend, removed his hat and peered around the corner, watching all the time for the boy’s hand. He saw a small square surrounded by squalid houses, with a blank wall to one side. His daughter was walking towards the boy with his oldest remaining son holding her hand. He saw the baby playing in the mud a little further away. The boy was now talking to his daughter, and when he glanced up and across at James, James nodded firmly before backing out of sight, the baby had been looking his way.

James walked back along the street and waited at the far end. After several minutes, the boy appeared and trotted down to join him.

“Nice girl,” commented the boy, “desperate to find you, she was asking me if I knew Captain Hind and I had to lie.”

James pulled a few coins from his pocket. “Be her friend, tell her you’ll look for me. Look after her and the other children as much as you can. I shall be back as soon as I have worked out where to take them and how to care for them. This is a starter for you,” he handed the coins to the boy, “there will be more.”

The boy quickly counted the coins. “Thank ‘ee Captain.”

James smiled. “I need a name, didn’t need it last time, but I need to be able to find you this time. I don’t know exactly when I will return.”

“They call me Mizzler. Ask anyone, they all know me ‘round here.”

“Very well, Mizzler. See you soon.”

--oOo—

James peered out of the door, and then closed it. “There are some soldiers walking towards us. Probably nothing, but let’s not take chances.”

He waited a while, until the sound of the soldiers’ chatter had passed by and was well past. He opened the door again, and this time he waved to the two figures behind him and stepped out into the street. Moll followed, dressed in brown trousers and jacket with a battered medium brimmed hat. As usual, she was smoking a pipe. Behind her came a shrinking figure with long dark hair, a wispy moustache and beard and a low-cut dress revealing a hairy chest. James shook his head. “We’re all going to get arrested, I‘m sure of it.”

“Don’t be so pessimistic, James. Let’s just hurry.”

They all hurried along the street, keeping Alfred between them. As they passed people, there were a few bemused stares and one or two even laughed aloud, but this was the East End of London; the authorities were the enemy, and none would think of aiding them against another inhabitant.

Turning a corner, they encountered a loitering group of youths sharing a pipe of tobacco between them. Seeing Alfred dressed as a whore with a scarf over his mouth, two of them approached him and began grinding against him whilst their friends blocked James and Moll from freeing him. Eventually, one became a little too friendly as he grabbed what he thought was a woman’s triangle but in fact he grasped more than he was expecting. Alfred gasped.

“Hey, it’s a man.”

James drew his sword and waved it at the youths blocking his path. “Move away and then go away before I have to hurt someone.” He glared at the lad who had yelled. “Do you want to be the first male soprano?”

The boys ran down the street. One turned and raised his middle finger in typical youthful defiance before disappearing down an alleyway. Moll laughed as James returned his sword to its scabbard, then took Alfred by the shoulder and pulled him forward to continue their journey.

They hurried along, speeding up a little as they passed by the Old Bailey, where James had been sentenced to death by John Bradshaw a few weeks earlier. Finally, they reached Mumford Haggett’s shop, the door to which was, as always, locked. James hammered on the door.

The light from a candle could be seen flickering around the door as the shopkeeper made his way to the door. As soon as he had pulled the bolt, James pushed his way inside, dragging Alfred with him. Moll followed at a more leisurely pace and closed the door behind her. Mumford Haggett stood beside the door clutching his candle and looking somewhat annoyed.

James looked back at him. “I apologise, Mumford, but I was very anxious to get this sorry excuse for a disguise out of sight.” He waved at Alfred who stood beside him.

Mumford stepped forward and held his candle higher in order to get a good look at Alfred. “Oh, dear Lord. Did you not have a razor to remove the moustache and beard at least?”

“There wasn’t time. Mumford, I need your help, I have to escort this young man out of London, and they are going to be looking for him everywhere.”

“Well, my suggestion would be for you to use the scowling Puritan routine, and if we can at least trim this young man’s beard and moustache, we can dress him as your wife or better still, your grandmother, which would explain some moustache.”

“I’ll leave him in your capable hands for a while. My puritan costume is back at Moll’s place, but I need to get a cart. I’ll be back later.”

Ninety minutes later, a horse and cart drew to a halt outside the costumier’s shop. The driver collected his bible from the seat beside him and climbed down, scowling at passers-by who dared to look at him; most simply crossed the street.

He knocked on the shop door and within a minute was admitted, only to reappear two minutes later with a diminutive woman carrying a bag and wearing a dull grey shawl. He heaved himself up into the driving seat and glared at the woman until she had pulled herself up into the seat beside him, moving the large bible to the centre of the seat. As soon as they were both seated, a flick of the whip encouraged the horse to start and signalled the closure of the shop door.

As they trotted along the street, the man was seen to turn to the woman and speak briefly, she merely nodded and gripped her bag tighter.

As they trotted away, James glanced aside.

“For the love of God, put that bag down out of sight. If it contains what you say it does, it is too valuable to risk, and if they stop us, it will be the first thing they look at, simply because you are holding it too tightly. Put it behind the seat, it’ll be safe enough there.”

“My whole life is in here,” muttered Alfred, gripping the bag.

“Fine, no-one is taking it from you. However, if you do not put it away, I guarantee they will. If they stop us at all, leave it to me, do not speak unless you have no choice, is that clear?” Alfred nodded. “Good. Now put the bag down in the cart.”

Alfred put the bag in the box behind the seat, and then sat facing forward. “When can I change back into my normal clothes?”

James pondered a moment. “Let’s see how it looks at Bishopsgate – I want to head up through Ware and over to the Great North Road at Stevenage. At this stage, to get us out of London, the story is that we are heading home to Stevenage, and as you are my wife, I speak for you. Nevertheless, you should be prepared to speak in a high voice if there is no choice. Just don’t make it too unnatural.”

They fell silent as the cart turned north and headed towards Bishopsgate. The road here was wider than they had hitherto been travelling, and as they moved further from the grimy city the houses seemed to retreat from the street, placing gardens and walls where previously there had been shops and houses. Ahead, a cart had been skewed across the road. A brazier burned to one side of the road and soldiers were either lounging around beside the road, their breath creating a cloud before them, or else warming their hands at the fire.

“Keep in mind you are a minister’s wife. You are not worried; you are not concerned if they stop us; we are innocent travellers and godly travellers at that. I’ve been eluding the roundheads for many years, and they only got me the once, and on that occasion, it was because I was betrayed.”

“Yet you are here.”

“I am. I escaped. Bradshaw was livid.” James smiled at Alfred, who returned the smile.

They drew near to the cart and adopted suitable scowls.

“Stare straight ahead, scowl a bit. Remember what I said.”

One soldier had been leaning against the wall. As they approached, he took a step forward and began to raise his hand, but as soon as he saw James glaring at him, his hand fell and he waved them through. James waited until they were clear of the gate before commenting from the side of his mouth. “You may unclench your buttocks now.”

Alfred looked at him, and they both burst out laughing to the astonishment of the few pedestrians beside the road.

James kept the horse at a good pace until they had passed Stoke Newington village. He turned to Alfred. “There’s an inn I know in Enfield. More to the point, they know me and are loyal to his majesty. We can change there and get something to eat and drink as well as buy a bedroll for you. Once we approach Ware, we will divert to Hertford, there is another inn I know there where we can get a night’s rest. But for now, it looks like we’re in the clear.”

**Chapter 33**

James led Alfred into the bar of the White Hart in Newark, and collapsed, exhausted onto the first seat inside the door. Alfred sat on the bench opposite and waited while James recovered. It was as yet quite early, and the bar was almost empty. However, two figures were making their way across the room, one of whom was a tall man with a hat pulled down at an angle over his eyes and a scarf covering his mouth. In his hand, he carried a half-full tankard of ale, which he slapped down on the table, causing Alfred to jump. The man pulled his scarf down and was about to speak when the other figure arrived. It was a pretty, dark-haired young woman who gave James a dazzling smile before speaking.

“I was wondering when you would return, it’s been a while. Ale for you both?”

James smiled back and nodded, at which point she tripped away to the bar. The tall man watched her leave and then turned back to James. “Where have you been? I was expecting you a couple of days ago. Word reached me that Alfred had disappeared after being rescued, but that was a while ago.”

James stared up at the man, who had now taken a seat. “Riding off like maniacs would get us arrested within ten miles. We took the time to let the initial heat pass, then disguised ourselves. Then we drove a carriage at a leisurely pace so as not to arouse any suspicion. We were not stopped at any point, despite the hue and cry his disappearance caused, indicating that we completely fooled them.” He paused as the ales arrived. “This is how I work. Slowly, assuredly, carefully, and never without a predetermined set of escape routes. If you want fast, find someone else. If you want assured, here I am.”

He sat back and took a good swallow of ale whilst staring at the tall man. Alfred sat between them, looking from one to the other and staying prudently silent.

The tall man removed his hat, pulled his scarf down and smiled. “I must apologise. You are both very important to us, and I was beginning to fear that they had captured you. I am used to slipping around in the shadows and it never occurred to me that being brazen but disguised would work. But clearly it does – I am suitably chastened and impressed.”

James nodded in acknowledgement and took a healthy draught of his ale. He looked up. “So, what is next?”

“First of all, we need to place young Alfred somewhere safe and secure; we have prepared a new home and identity up in Yorkshire. For now, your task is simply to take him there. I shall give you instructions on how to find Sam Lamis, our man up there, who has set everything up. From there, Alfred can continue his work in greater safety. Your task henceforth will be primarily to collect and deliver intelligence between various locations for us. Sam, myself, as well as some others to the west.” James nodded. “As before, we shall meet up here every four weeks but there will be other regular calls once we have everything working. Not forgetting that I shall move our meetings to another place at some point – it is risky to stay in one place too long.”

James smiled and glanced over towards the bar where the dark-haired girl was watching him. “This place does have its appeal.”

The tall man followed his glance and smiled back. “Indeed, it does, but don’t get too attached.”

--oOo—

James crept across the fields and pressed himself flat against the back of his former home in Chipping Norton. The garden was now overgrown, the vegetables gone to seed and beyond. The cottage thatch was now home to several animals, and he could hear rustling from above. Whilst he did not feel threatened by the village constable, who had been a friend in their youth, he nevertheless was exercising caution in case of military presence.

He crept to the corner and studied the vegetation; tall grasses blocked the path from the front gate, and it was clear that no-one had approached the house for some considerable time.The bushes across the road were now a little threadbare, making it easy for him to reassure himself that no military lurked there. Treading nevertheless with great care and crouching low, he made his way around to the front of the house. As soon as he felt confident enough, he slipped in the door and closed it behind him.

In the gloom, he could see nothing, but he knew that a candle always sat beside the door. He felt around and found it, where he had left it on his last visit. Lighting it, he looked around his former family home. Spiders were covering every space with their magical weavings, but James saw them differently and swiped them away. The rotting pie sat where he had last seen it. Casting around, he found his wife’s flour storage box, emptied the contents onto the floor, put the odorous pie inside and closed the lid. With a last glance around, he extinguished the candle and slipped outside. He paused a moment, staring at the door. He strode up the street towards his father’s work yard.

--oOo--

James relaxed in the chair as he digested the huge meal his mother had just forced him to eat. His jacket was open and his leg hung over the arm of the chair. Candles sputtered on the table bearing the remains of the meal just completed. His mother was fussing around, doing incomprehensible bits of cleaning and tidying whilst his father sat opposite, leaning forward.

“I miss home cooking,” commented James to no one in particular.

His father looked up. “You need to find a new wife and start again, now that you have lost your family.”

“Oh, I have found my children, although they do not yet know it. I have someone watching over them from a distance whilst I work out what to do.”

“You must bring them here. We will look after them.”

“Perhaps. I need to think about the whole thing, I have not had time really – I received word on their location in the middle of rescuing someone for His Majesty and have only just finished delivering His Majesty’s servant to his new safe location. However, I am free of duties for now, so I plan to head down towards the south coast and stay in a quiet inn there while I work out how to deal with this.” He paused. “What would be useful is if you could gather everything from my house and store it for me; at some point, I will want a new home and it will be a decent start.”

“Of course,” boomed his father, “We can all go down tomorrow and start.”

“Not me, I’m afraid – I do still have to be careful, not everyone is a friend in this village. I must be on my way early tomorrow, but I can leave you some money to hire some helpers.”

**Chapter 34**

Smiling, Captain James Hind slowed his horse to a walk. A good haul made all the better for the Parliamentarian sympathies of his victim. He patted the bulging pouch hanging from his belt. “That should cover me for a good few weeks”.

Looking around as the road forked, he hesitated, and turned his horse off to the right, speeding up to a trot now that he had made a decision. After a few minutes, he paused and moved into the thick trees bordering the road while he studied the area. He wove his horse through the undergrowth, pausing every now and then to scan his surroundings and listen for any disturbance. There were no sounds beyond birdsong, so he made his way back onto the road and around the next corner, where an inn was set back from the roadway. A cobbled courtyard sat before it with stabling to one side. A tiled roof indicated the prosperity the inn enjoyed, and the walls were all freshly painted white.

Dismounting, he led his horse into the stables; there were four other mounts stabled. The young stable boy rushed to Take his reins from him.

“Lots of guests tonight; anyone I need worry about?”

“No sir, no soldiers or rampant Roundheads.”

“Very well.” James handed the boy three pennies, removed his bags from his stallion’s back and made his way through to the bar.

The heavy wooden door grated on the floor as he pushed it, sending a groan echoing through the bar on the other side. Everyone watched as he eased himself through the half-open door and closed it behind him. Two attractive young women sitting either side of the roaring fire caught his eye, but he forced himself to tear his eyes away from their ample bosoms and scan the rest of the room. Two men sat playing draughts in the corner, but otherwise only the landlord was present, standing behind a large, heavy table set with empty flagons and tankards. James made his way across.

“A pint of your best, and a bowl of pottage, if you’d be so kind. Do you have any rooms spare?”

“Indeed, sir, I do. Do you prefer front or back?”

James glanced sideways at the two wenches. “Whichever has the biggest bed.”

“That’ll be the front.” The landlord paused as he calculated. “One shilling and two pence, if you please, sir.”

James fished in his pouch, pulling out several gold Jacobusses before finding the coins he needed. He glanced up at the landlord who was staring wide-eyed at the pouch. “Here.” The landlord came out of his daze to accept the coins, and then bustled away with a tankard in his hand. James started as a hand alighted on his arm.

“Why don’t you come and sit with us?” purred the young woman, “my name is Gwen, my friend is Mary.” She paused to pat her hair and lower her head into a well-practiced seductive look. “What, pray tell, is your name?”

“J… James,” stuttered James, caught a little off guard. He studied the woman, enjoying the attention. Her long, thick, dark hair tumbled to smooth shoulders before cascading down her back. Her dress was cut low, giving a view of a substantial cleavage. Red painted lips pouted below darkly fluttering eyelids.

Gwen laughed, then took his arm and led him to a chair beside the fire. “No need to be frightened of us, James, neither of us bites...well, not much.”

James looked at her and sat down. “I’m sorry, ladies, where are my manners? I was recently widowed in an appalling way and have yet to come to terms with my loss or with the ways of women.”

“Do not fret, dearie, we will look after you well,” volunteered the lady introduced as Mary, “we understand men and that is all that matters now.”

The conversation stopped as the landlord called James to a nearby table for his meal, but the two women accompanied him. Waving to the barman, James ordered drinks for them.

--oOo--

James awoke, aware that there was someone in his room. He reached under the bedroll and retrieved his dagger. Gradually, his eyes became accustomed to the faint light from the window, and he saw a large shadow bent over his bags. Slipping the covers down, he stood and walked on tiptoe until he stood behind the shadowy figure. He reached around and touched the knife blade to the neck of the intruder.

“I wouldn’t move too suddenly if I were you, I do keep this dagger very sharp. Now, very gently, light that candle beside you.” The figure reached for the candle and started to reach into a pocket. “Careful, I do get nervous when someone reaches for something I can’t see. Slowly.”

The hand came out of the pocket and lit the candle with the matches he extracted. James recognised the landlord.

“You are in my room in the middle of the night. Why?”

“I… er… I...”

“Ah, I get it. You saw my pouch and wanted to help yourself to some of the contents. Sharing, is that it?”

“Well, I…”

He stopped as James held up his hand. Outside, several horses clattered into the yard.

“Ah, and you decided that stealing my money wasn’t enough, eh? Sent word to the constable?” James backed away from the cowering landlord, his face distorted with anger, “I should kill you.”

“No, no, please, I…”

“But I don’t kill. But you will find a drop in business.”

Turning away, he turned back and kicked the landlord between his legs with all the force he could muster. The man’s eyes went large and with a squeak, he folded to the floor, his hands pressed between his legs.

James pushed his belongings into his bag and rushed to open the window. Flaming torches lit the courtyard. He knew that his own horse was resting in the stable across on the other side, but several horses were snorting and jostling in the courtyard, where he could see a single trooper trying to pacify them. He climbed from the window and made his way along the roof until he stood directly above the trooper, then threw his bags down, followed a moment later by himself taking a flying leap onto the soldier, who looked up just too late.

Crashing to the floor, the soldier remained motionless. James leaped up, grabbed his bags, and jumped onto the nearest horse. Grabbing the reins of several other mounts, he urged the horse forward and galloped from the inn. Behind him, shouting told him that he had been spotted but as soon as he rounded the corner, he released his grip on the other reins and guided his own mount into the undergrowth where he sat and waited for the chasing soldiers to pass.

Satisfied that he had achieved his objective, he dismounted and released his horse before creeping back through the bushes to watch the chaos in the courtyard. As it settled and the soldiers departed, James stood and crept around to enter the stable. Once inside, he saddled his own mount, slung the bags across his haunches and climbed aboard before walking his horse across the courtyard and away.

--oOo--

Constance removed her hat, allowing her long, thick hair to cascade down her back. She scratched her head as she stared at the sparse undergrowth. She had tried to hold up Sir John’s coach a few weeks earlier from this very spot, but the remorseless advance of winter had stripped the trees and bushes naked, and there was no concealment available. She could hide herself in here, but not her horse and she would never be able to stop a horse and carriage on foot. Sighing, she pushed her hair back into her hat and pulled her scarf up to cover half of her face. There would be no robbery today. Turning her horse, she began the trek back home through the narrow lanes.

Thirty minutes later, she turned onto the main road to Portsmouth; much wider but with more riders, so she coaxed more speed from her mount to avoid contact with others. However, to no avail, she heard another horse catching up and looking aside, she saw a bewigged man pull level with her.

“Good afternoon, sir,” he called. “Heading for Waterlooville myself, where are you headed?”

“I turn off at Clanfield.”

“We can ride together, much safer, too many highwaymen around lately.”

“As you wish, sir.”

The man looked across as their horses rounded a corner. “My name is Sir Robert. Whom do I have the pleasure of accompanying?”

Constance panicked slightly before responding. “Charles, sir.”

“Well, hello, Charles, is there any reason we are riding at such a speed?”

“Er, my wife expected me home a while ago.”

“Really? Hmm…” The man fell silent as they approached another rider.

--oOo--

James was trudging along slowly, not wanting to strain his horse too much, and anyway, he had no reason to rush – the inn he sought was not too far away now.

He looked up as two riders passed him at high speed, noting especially that the one rider had a lock of long, dark hair fluttering from the back of his hat. But not his concern, so he returned to his dark ponderings whilst his horse plodded on south.

--oOo--

Reaching the turn for Clanfield, Constance turned towards the man riding alongside her. “I turn off here, Sir. Good day to you.”

“I think I’ll accompany you awhile,” he responded, turning his horse with hers. “I believe there is a decent inn a little way down here.”

Constance’s eyes widened. She urged her mount to still greater speed, hoping to leave the man behind, but he rode a fine mare, and easily kept pace. As they neared a corner, he glanced behind and then ahead. As they turned, he moved his mount close to Constance and grabbing her wayward lock of hair. Constance was pulled backwards, her hat flying to the ground as they both fell from their horses.

Sir Robert was first to his feet and pulled Constance by the hair into the woods on the north side of the road. The horses watched the riders depart and then moved to the side of the road to graze.

--ooo--

James turned the corner and was surprised to see two unaccompanied horses grazing beside the road. Remembering the pair he had seen passing him by at high speed, he directed his horse off the road and tied him to a branch. Taking out his sword and pistol, he stood for a moment listening.

Across the road, he could hear grunting and movement, he crossed the road, collecting the discarded hat on the way and moved into the bushes. A muffled shout to his right caught his attention and he moved in that direction, spotting what was apparently carnal activity beneath an oak tree, which had clearly been struck by lightning at some point in its recent history.

He leaned against the bole of a massive elm tree and watched as the couple writhed and thrust, but then jerked upright when he noticed that the man’s hand was over the woman’s mouth, and she was fruitlessly pounding his back with her fists.

Watched by the terrified woman, James moved to behind the couple and placed his blade tip on the man’s back, just above his coccyx. The man stopped trying to enter the struggling woman beneath him and looked around.

“Yes,” commented James, “it is a cavalry sword, and it is being wielded by an experienced cavalry officer. If you upset me at all, I can remove your tonsils from beneath. I therefore recommend that you follow my instructions precisely and make no sudden moves at all.

“Now, without making any sound, you will lift yourself off this woman and allow her to free herself. You, however, will stay facing the ground. Madam, you may now extricate yourself, and please attend to your attire. But do remain next to this oaf.” He waited whilst she rearranged her clothing. “Now please sit on the fallen log over there whilst I attend to this spawn of Satan.” He waited until she had seated herself, and then turned to address the man, who was still prostrated face down in the thick autumn leaves. “Handkerchief.” He took the offered silk handkerchief and without taking his eyes off the man, handed it to the woman without comment. She gratefully took it and wiped her tear-streaked face.

“Better?” asked James. She nodded. “Good. Can you handle a pistol?”

“Yes.”

He passed his pistol to the woman. “Keep it trained on him, if he disobeys me, pull the trigger. If he tries to escape, pull the trigger. In fact, unless he stays exactly still and does as I tell him, pull the trigger.”

She smiled, disconcerting James for a moment. From a downtrodden victim she had suddenly turned into a ray of sunshine. Alternatively, was it just that she was free to pull that trigger at any time?

“Now, I understand the temptation after what he was doing, but believe me, by the time I am finished with him, he will wish that you had pulled the trigger.”

He looked around and moved to one vine-covered branch of the oak. The stems were sturdy and strong, if now naked of foliage in the shade of winter. Taking out his knife, he cut several lengths and returned. He tied the man’s hands behind his back, leaving a good length of vine dangling. Removing the man’s belt, he examined it, and then discarded it after removing the purse tied to it, which he transferred to his own belt. He removed the man’s boots and swept his tights and leggings from his knees and off, leaving the man naked from the waist down.

He examined the boots. “Good quality, I think I’ll keep these,” he commented.

He led the bound man to the roadside. Spotting a thick oak beside the roadway, he took the man there and tied him. He tied the man’s ankles together, took the length of vine dangling from his wrists, and tied it to his testicles.

“That should discourage attempts to escape.”

The woman had accompanied James, never letting her aim waver, but she was carrying the man’s remaining clothes. “What shall we do with these?”

James glanced at them, and then took the pistol from her grasp. “I can give them to someone I trust, who can sell them and pass the proceeds to the poor.”

She handed them over without comment, and they went to get the horses.

A little further down the road, as they passed through a narrowing where two enormous oaks leaned towards each other as if trying to join branches, Constance leaned over and whispered to James, “You don’t recognise me, do you?”

“I do, but I am not completely confident that my recollection is correct – I have had a dramatic couple of years.”

“You robbed me of part of my dowry.”

“I thought it was you, but I couldn’t be sure; you were to be married, as I recall.”

“I was, but it was just the money he wanted. He took it all but refused to marry me and was extremely brutal about turning me down. You were right; I cannot imagine the horror of being married to a man such as that.”

James looked down. “I did not intend to rob you of marital bliss, madam, it was a loan, and the money shall be returned to you – both by me and by him. But for now, I shall accompany you to safety. Do you live far from here?”

“Not far, perhaps ten minutes ride. My name is Constance, by the way – I know your name, of course.”

They both adjusted their hats and rode away, James holding the reins of the rapist’s horse.

--oOo--

James watched as Constance slowed her horse as they neared a gap in the tree. “My cottage is down here, but my father insisted that I have a servant living close by to watch over me. John is no trouble, but he would undoubtedly report to my father if he saw you, and I am sure he will be waiting. I would like to talk to you a little, so if it is acceptable to you, perhaps you could follow a little later, once John is abed.”

James nodded assent and stopped to allow Constance to get ahead of him as she turned through the gap. Once she was far enough ahead, he urged his horse forward and followed.

Passing through the trees, he marvelled at how well hidden her home was, and almost emerged into the clearing before he pulled back sharply on the reins and backed out of sight. Constance was dismounting from her horse and talking to an elderly man, who was holding the reins. He watched as she crossed to a large cottage to one side and entered. The man led the horse in the opposite direction, disappearing around a smaller cottage.

James sprang back into life and walked his horses around the outside of the clearing, dismounting behind Constance’s cottage. He tied both horses on a long leash near to an open patch of grass and made his way along to the door, which he tapped. Constance opened the door and ushered him inside, looking towards John’s cottage, but the servant was still settling her horse in the stables on the other side.

James removed his hat and looked around. A log fire burned in the grate and bread and cheese sat on the table along with a few apples. Constance disappeared into a room beside the fireplace only to reappear a few moments later with a jug of ale and two small tankards. They sat down on either side of the table. Constance looked up at James with a slightly troubled expression.

“Please do not misinterpret this. I do want to talk with you, in fact I am becoming somewhat lonely out here, but it is not an invitation to my bed.”

“I did not think it was; no woman is going to emerge from an unwelcome attempt upon her person with a desire for sexual activity. You should already be aware of my attitudes on such matters, it is a matter of public record and, I am ashamed to say, you have had personal experience beforehand.”

She reached across the table to grasp his wrist. “You were doing your job. I cannot blame you when your actions caused me to be spared a fate worse than death – he was a horrible man, and he hurt me terribly.”

“How?”

Constance looked uncomfortable for a moment before she replied. “He said…it is etched on my brain, I can never forget it; he said, ‘Love you? Why in the name of all that is holy should I love you? You come here with an inadequate dowry, telling a dubious story about a robbery when I know that any highwayman would not only ravage and kill you, but he would also take it all. Although looking at you, I can see why congress did not occur - who would want to lie with you?’”

She wiped a tear from her cheek and sat back.

James leaned forward and placed his hand gently on hers. “Well, today’s events were none too savoury, but do you not feel that it does rather give the lie to that last part? I can also assure you for myself that whilst sexual assault is not amongst my many crimes, desire is, and you most certainly qualify. Now, did you put this food here to torture me or are we really going to eat it?”

**Chapter 35**

James stood, walked to the log pile beside the fire and put a couple onto the glowing red embers. He prodded the ashes, clearing an air passage whilst staring vacantly into the distance. Finally, he gathered his thoughts and returned to his seat at the table.

“So, tell me more about this fiancé of yours. Who is he and where does he live… what happened exactly?”

“Sir John Whickers. He lives at Whickers Hall down towards Littlehampton. As for what happened, well, we arrived, and I was whisked into his study. Whilst we talked, which was mainly me explaining why it was short one thousand, his steward had taken the money from our coach and counted it. When he reported to Sir John that we were short, Sir John… well, you have heard what he said to me, but he ordered his steward to put the money in his strong room as payment for his inconvenience. My father has been trying to get his money back ever since, but Sir John just ignores him.”

James looked grim. “I cannot apologise enough for what you have gone through, it is my fault, and I shall ensure that at the very least, your father will get his money back. It is my trademark to ensure that my opponents are left humiliated rather than dead – you just saw that – and Sir John shall not escape that part. I merely request that you ask no questions when I return the money to you and limit the information you give your father.”

“Thank you; it is good to know that chivalry and honesty are not completely dead.”

“I am not sure that many would agree with you, especially those of a Parliamentarian persuasion. By the way, what are the leanings of Sir John, and indeed you and your father, come to that.”

“Sir John didn’t sign the King’s death warrant, but only because no-one asked him. As for my father, you will be amused to learn that he was delighted by your meetings with Messrs Bradshaw and Peters. Roaring with laughter. I think he is a closet Royalist, but he does not discuss such things with his daughter. As for me, I have been too sheltered hitherto to have formed any opinions.”

“You will be aware that I am very much a servant of His Majesty; in fact, I needed that money to travel out to visit him in the Netherlands in order to make a report to him in person.”

“Oh. And your fiancée?”

James looked away. “A lie, I am afraid. At that time, I was married with four children. However, I did need the money to travel, and I felt that young ladies would respond more favourably to what I said than to the truth. I’m sorry.”

“Why do you say ‘at that time’?”

“Because Sergeant John Bradshaw had my wife tortured to death, my eldest son was shot dead whilst they were kidnapping my family, he had my daughter ravaged and gave my surviving children away to the jailer, who in turn sold them.”

“John Bradshaw? The judge?”

“Yes. I have found my surviving children, but they do not yet know it. I shall take them back once I know how to care for them. I obviously cannot return to live in my old home, so I must create a new one somewhere, and find a way to care for the children – Alice is my eldest child, but she is only nine.”

“How awful. What you need is a quiet place and a live-in nanny.”

“True enough, but remember who I am. I have to be careful; I do not want to be taken and hanged; that would leave my children without mother or father – unthinkable. I am riding south to find a quiet spot to consider my options.”

“I wish I could invite you to stay here, but John would not allow it; he would report to my father, no doubts about that. But there are unused cottages nearby; perhaps you could rent one of those?”

“That is an idea, especially if it is as secluded as this one.”

“Most of them are.”

“Are there any large ones?”

“There is one not far from here, but it is almost derelict now, no-one has lived there for years.”

“I shall leave shortly, but I shall stay at the inn down the road. I do need to think, but quite possibly I shall visit your father and try to rent the place. Does it have a name?”

“Not really. But it is the only other cottage off Lovedean Lane.”

“Good. But how do I know of the place?”

“You stopped to relieve yourself and saw it through the trees?”

“Yes, that works. I assume that come spring, it vanishes behind the foliage?”

She nodded. James stood and retrieved his hat. “Thank you for your hospitality, madam. May I leave my bags here for a while? It is all I have for now, and I won’t really need it until I am ready to move into a new home.”

“Of course.”

“Good. I was hoping to be able to see you again. This makes it certain.”

She blushed and reached up to pull his head down so that she could kiss him on the cheek. “I was hoping so too,” she whispered.

**Chapter 36**

James let his horse lead as he made his way slowly into the forest. Should he take the cottage? Could his children cope with yet another change of environment? Where could he find someone to look after them? He looked up as another rider drew alongside him, alarmed that his musings had allowed a stranger to come so close.

“Good morning, sir” chirped the gentleman rider. Clean-shaven, he wore a non-descript hat and dowdy clothes which were nonetheless clearly expensive, “I hope you are not offended but I was admiring your horse; where did you find him?”

James smiled; in reality, he had stolen the horse from the man who had tried to have sex with Constance, but he was not about to say that. “I really cannot recall; I simply admired him and bought him.”

“Ah well. Do you mind if we ride together? It is so much safer these days with all of the highwaymen plaguing the roads, especially around London.”

“Certainly, sir, why should I object?”

“Although, I must admit, having read all of the journals recently, I would give twenty pounds to see that Hind chappie.”

James smiled.

The rider turned to James, “Sir, I really do like that horse. What money shall I give you to exchange horses with me?”

James considered. “Forty pounds.”

“I will give you thirty pounds in gold.”

“Sir, ride him.”

They both dismounted and the man gave James thirty pounds in gold. They exchanged horses and continued their journey in companionable silence. A while later, they came to a wide ditch.

“Sir,” asked James, “leap over that ditch.”

“I cannot.”

Hind sighed in exasperation. “Why buy a horse of such quality and not use him properly. Look, dismount, sir, and I’ll show you.”

They both dismounted and James climbed aboard his previous mount, wheeled him around to provide more of a run up, and then urged the horse forward and over the ditch. Once on the other side, he wheeled back.

“Sir, you said that you would give twenty pounds to see Hind, and now you have seen him and more, talked and ridden with him. I charge ten pounds for you to ride my horse, and you have done so. But methinks you have seen enough of him now, and so I bid you farewell.”

Wheeling the horse once more, he urged him to gallop away. The man stood dumbfounded at the side of the road and watched him ride away.

--oOo--

James was still chortling when he turned into the driveway leading to Davenport Hall. He walked his horse slowly towards the building, noting as he did so that there was a slight air of disrepair about both the drive and the building ahead. As he dismounted, the front door opened and a man, who James assumed was the steward, descended the steps to greet him.

“Good afternoon, sir. We were not expecting anyone today.”

“I am sure,” responded James, “but I believe that the owner of the empty cottage over by Lovedean Lane is to be found here. I would like a word, if I may.”

The steward hesitated. “Who shall I say is calling?”

“Edward Willoughby.”

“Well, Mr Willoughby, if you will follow me.”

James tied his horse to a branch nearby and followed the steward up the steps. Once inside, the steward closed the door and turned to address James.

“Please wait here whilst I apprise Mr Davenport of your presence.” He scurried away down a corridor to the right of the wide staircase.

James looked around with interest while he waited. The house was itself grand enough, but there was some evidence of harder times in the cracks and scuffs on the wall and stairs. Clearly, the owner was struggling to maintain the lifestyle and he could see that the loss of several thousand pounds would be devastating. He resolved to recover the money just as the steward reappeared.

“Mr Davenport will see you in the study, sir. Please follow me.”

They walked through to the study. Mr Davenport, a portly fellow with rosy cheeks and a shining bald patch, rose from behind a large desk and walked around to shake hands. The large windows looked out across the fields behind the house, allowing rays of sunshine to illuminate the room.

“Mr Willoughby, I understand. Your name is not familiar to me?”

“I would be rather alarmed were it so, sir; I try to maintain a low profile whilst in London. I do have houses further north, but I would like to be able to spend some time here, nearer to the south coast.”

“I see. But what does this have to do with me?”

“I do not want to purchase or build at this point, so I want to rent a property; I spotted a suitable cottage yesterday on Lovedean Lane and asked the young lady in the next cottage up who owned it; she directed me to you.”

“Ah, that would be my daughter. Yes, I would be willing to rent that cottage, but it is virtually derelict.”

“I would want it to be renovated, but I am prepared to pay for that myself. If I were to offer, say, thirty pounds in gold, would that cover for a start?”

“Well, obviously if you plan to renovate it at your own expense, I do not expect you to pay any rent until you actually move in.”

“Of course. However, I do not know the local tradesmen. Is there anyone I could ask to oversee it all for me? I shall need to be away for a lot of the time over the next few months.”

“Well, I can’t really spare any of my servants. Perhaps my daughter will allow John Harris to oversee things. He watches over her but is really under-employed.”

“Shall I leave the money here with you, and notify your daughter and Mr… Harris, did you say? Yes, Harris, and if they agree, suggest that they talk to you; as a father myself, I know that you would welcome a visit from your daughter.”

They enjoyed a moment of mutual jollity before James stood and collected his hat. “I shall advise them what I want and will return in a few weeks with more money if needed.”

He bowed to his host and marched from the room, leaving Constance’s father with a bemused smile on his face.

--oOo--

James walked his horse slowly along the path leading to Constance’s cottage, keeping his eye open for the elderly man he had seen when he led her back home. As the path opened, he saw him, slightly bent with age but nonetheless still sporting a proud mop of long grey hair, standing beside the path with a musket pointing at James.

“You be trespassing. Go back.”

James held his hands up. “No, sir, I am here with the full knowledge of Mr Davenport. I am here to talk to his daughter and John Harris, who I imagine is you.”

“That be my name. What be your business?”

Constance came out of her cottage. “What is going on, John?”

“This man says your father sent him to talk to us.”

“So, shall we let him talk to us? Lower the musket, John please. Keep hold of it if it makes you feel better. Sir, please state your purpose.”

“Your father has agreed that I may rent the cottage down the road. He suggested that I use Mr Harris to oversee the renovation of the property.”

“Come, sir, let us all go into the warm to discuss this. John, you too.”

James clambered down, watched by John Harris, who kept the musket pointing vaguely in his direction.

“You fought in the war,” stated James.

“Aye, I did. What of it.”

“For which side?”

“His Majesty, of course.”

“What rank?”

“Musket man.”

“I was cavalry, Oxford Regiment. Captain.”

John relaxed a little. “Perhaps one day he will return.”

James leaned towards him. “Do not repeat this, but I sat at his table in the Netherlands nine months ago, and he is desperately trying to reclaim his throne. It will happen, but who knows when; not yet, that is for sure, and that was indeed the sad message I had to give him.”

“Why not?”

“He needs the people with him. Without the people, he is nothing. But the people need to recover from the past few years first, and then they will come out for him.”

John considered a moment. “That does make sense. But these puritans are intolerable with their stupid religious laws.”

“I cannot argue with you. Although, when in London, I don their attire to be able to move around freely; none dare waylay me.”

They laughed together, and John uncocked the musket. They made their way inside, where Constance was fussing around the table, pouring ale. They sat around the table, although John made sure his musket was within reach.

“Now, I am renting the cottage down the lane there,” announced James, “but it needs some work before I can bring my family down. I have yet to visit the property, but it is certainly big enough for my needs; it is simply a matter of cleaning it and making sure there are enough rooms. I need a room for myself, another for my three children and another for a live-in nanny.”

“Will your wife not be joining you?” asked John.

A pained expression crossed James’s face, and he bit his lips to control his emotions. “Bradshaw took her. She was murdered, as was my eldest son.”

John’s face showed a mixture of emotions, ranging from compassion to embarrassment via suspicion. James also showed a mixture, running from anxiety to gratitude. For a moment, they all sat the in silence.

“I have left thirty pounds with Mr Davenport,” James said. “That is to cover the costs of these renovations, if more is needed, I shall be back in a couple of weeks, and will have more then. I do have some furnishings, of course, and I shall arrange for them to be brought down once the cottage is ready to receive them.”

“I shall visit my father and collect the money,” announced Constance, “John, do you foresee any problems overseeing the renovations?”

John shook his head. “No, milady.”

“Good. I look forward to welcoming a new neighbour.” She smiled at James, who smiled back, and then stood up.

“Excellent. I hope we can all become good friends.” He walked to the end of the table and thrust his hand out to John Harris, who took it. “Until the next time.”

--oOo—

Constance collected another log and took it across to the fire. She paused, and then turned around. Her three friends were all sitting at the large table to one side of the room. Several candles were set on the table, casting a flickering light over the young ladies and the room.

“A man tried to forcibly have carnal relations with me a while back.”

Amelia looked up from playing with her mane of dark hair. “Really?”

Lucille banged her tankard down onto the table, causing ale to splash onto the front of her dress. “Only tried?” she asked as she dabbed at the splash.

“Yes. He probably would have succeeded if he hadn’t been interrupted.”

“By whom?”

Constance paused, smiled, and sat down, savouring the moment, “Captain James Hind.”

“What? No.”

Constance smiled. “Yes.”

“Come on, stop teasing. Tell, tell.”

“I was dressed as a man and riding down from Petersfield direction when a man pulled alongside and insisted upon riding with me ‘for our mutual safety’.”

“Was he handsome?”

“Not particularly. Anyway, I was unaware that a lock of hair had come out of my hat at the back, so he knew I was a woman. When I turned off for Clanfield, he insisted on accompanying me. As we passed around the bend, he attacked me and dragged me into the bushes.

“His leggings were around his knees, and he had yanked mine off entirely. He was lying on top of me, prodding at me down there with his hand over my mouth when I saw a figure behind him. I didn’t know who it was at that point, although I recognised it was a rider we had passed a while before. Anyway, the rider placed the tip of his sword on my attacker’s…where the sun never shines. The man stopped and looked around.”

She took a mouthful of her ale and looked at her friends, who were both staring at her, open-mouthed.

“He told the attacker to lift up and let me free and told me to get dressed.”

“Did he see your…you know?”

“Definitely, he..he must have done. However, he was the perfect gentleman; he waited until I was dressed, and then gave me a handkerchief to clean up. Finally, he gave me a pistol and told me to shoot the attacker unless he did exactly as he was told. He stripped the man’s breeches and boots, and then tied him up. Eventually, he tied him to a tree by the side of the road, and then he escorted me home.”

“He’s been here?”

“Yes.”

“Ooh, I must visit more often.”

“Anyway, he came in and we talked. He told me about his wife being murdered and his children kidnapped. He was in every way the perfect gentleman.”

“Did he not try to bed you?”

“No, I told you, he was the perfect gentleman. Honestly, if he had tried, I would probably have consented, but regretted it later. As it is, I have enormous respect for him. But I did kiss him.”

“No.”

“Yes.”

“Was it good? Did he respond?”

“I think he was a little taken aback, but he was clearly not unhappy about it.”

“How do you know?”

“He smiled at me, and it was definitely not a fatherly type of smile.”

**Chapter 37**

The bar was, as usual, heaving with revellers. Smoke hung close to chest level, making it difficult to see much of anything in the thick, cloying fug. Shouts of laughter interrupted shouts of distress whenever a tankard was spilled.

James elbowed his way through the crowd and dropped indecorously opposite Moll Cutpurse, who was, as always, puffing upon a foul-smelling pipe.

“What the hell are you burning in that thing, cowshit?”

Moll looked at James for a moment and then blew smoke across the table at him. “No, that was yesterday. This one is better, be grateful you were not here then, it was even making my eyes water. But it did guarantee I was able to sit in peace without interference.” She glared at James and then burst out laughing. “Oh, I have something for you, I thought you might want to know where that Lunt fellow lives.”

“I certainly do. But tell me later, I wanted to tell you, I have found a cottage which is being renovated for me. It’s far enough away from the beaten track to be safe, but close enough to a village.”

“Great news. Does that mean you’ll be reclaiming your children?”

“Yes, but not yet. I need to find a live-in nanny for them, and I can’t do that until the renovations are complete. Then I have to bring our possessions down from Chipping Norton – my parents are storing it all for me.”

“Excellent news indeed. I assume that you are not charging off abroad on some royal business for a while, then.”

“No, but I do have some things I need to sort out. First, I need to assemble a group to help me raid and rob a house down near Littlehampton. I will head off to check out the lie of the land but essentially, I need to be able to immobilise the staff and the proprietor while we empty his safe room. The man is a thief of the worst kind, so there should be plenty for all, although my primary target is to recompense one of his victims. The remainder can be split between everyone. Can you find suitable people?”

“You know full well that I can. I will take part myself. I assume the target is a Parliamentarian?”

“Of course.”

“Then we have a deal. Perhaps four more reliable people should do it, do you think? We don’t want to spread the proceeds too far.”

“Excellent. Now if you can tell me where to find Lunt, I can get on my way to size up the target.”

Moll fished into her leggings and pulled out a scruffy piece of paper. ”Here you are. Enjoy.”

“Trust me, I shall.”

--oOo--

James walked his horse down the street identified on the paper Moll had given him. The houses looked about ready to fall down, and there was very little identification, but towards the end of the street he saw the house he sought. As decrepit as the rest of the street, no-one would ever have guessed that the house was occupied by a tax collector. Opposite, a dark, dank alleyway lurked. A perfect place for him to hide while he awaited his quarry – but not today; James had always taken his time over his movements, giving himself the opportunity to spot potential problems. It was why he still lived, despite parliament’s efforts.

He spurred his horse up to a trot as he set off for the south of England – he wanted to make sure that Constance was in good health, for no reason he could think of beyond the fact that he wanted to see her again.

As he walked his horse down the road towards the south coast and Portsmouth, he was able to daydream a little, whilst keeping his eyes open for troops and any potential troubles. He wondered what life would be like with young Constance. Although he could see no reason why she would want to be with him, given his profession and especially his age. But he could still daydream, she did seem happy to see him, which was probably why he was so eager to visit her, despite having no particular excuse to be there. He diverted his thoughts when they started to become a little too erotic and focussed instead on his surroundings. He would soon have to find accommodations for the night, so he racked his brain trying to think of an inn on his route.

He sat upright as he saw a figure ahead trudging slowly on a rather tired looking ass. He pulled alongside the rider.

“Good evening, sir…parson,” he amended as he saw the rider’s attire. The figure looked up, his ruddy cheeks almost glowing in the cold, crisp air.

“Ah, good evening to you, sir.”

“Whence are you bound?”

“Portsmouth, sir, but ‘twas almost prevented for earlier today, I was robbed of five pounds in silver, and the knaves left me but five shillings in all to bear my charges.”

“Sir,” said Hind, “I too was robbed of a little money today; a man is better to let them have it quietly than to endanger one’s life to resist, but I was cunning enough to hide my gold in my boot beforehand.”

“Nay, I believe you, mine is as safe, for I have quilted it in the collar of my doublet.”

“Most ingenious, sir. But I see the inn ahead – I plan to stop for the night and continue on the morrow.”

“Would you object to some company over your meal, sir? I too need some rest.”

“A truly delightful prospect, sir.”

“Tell me, parson, what would you guess to be my trade?”

“Why sir, I have no idea.”

“I am a cutter, for I must cut the collar of your doublet off, before I shall come to your money.”

“But…”

James held up his hand to stop the protests and then drew his knife, handing to the parson whilst drawing his pistol. “Perhaps it would be easier were you to extract the coins yourself – you might be able to leave your doublet fit for repair.”

--oOo--

The cool morning breeze cooled James as he pulled into the woods and wove through the trees towards Constance’s cottage. He was almost there when he spotted a white something moving in the undergrowth off to one side, so he dismounted and quietly led his horse in that direction. After a few minutes, he saw with relief that it was Constance, carrying a basket; she was gathering fallen walnuts. He stood watching her for a few moments, enjoying the way her body moved.

“Constance,” he called out in a stage whisper,

She looked up in alarm, then burst into a wreath of smiles as she saw who it was. “James.”

“I was just passing nearby and wanted to look in, make sure that you are alright.”

“Of course I am alright, but I am even better now.”

James blushed a little, scratching his nose to conceal his discomfiture, “Well, I can’t actually stay, I just needed to see… wanted to… I thought I’d check in to see if you were alright as I was passing.”

“Oh, where are you going?”

“I, er, um… I am on my way to Portsmouth, yes.”

“Really?”

“Yes...actually no, I just wanted to see if you are alright,” he said. Constance clearly realised that he had come solely to see her but said nothing. “Well, I’d better be on my way.”

She moved across to where he stood like a nervous teenager and took his hand, held it to her cheek, closed her eyes, smiled and looked him in the eye. “I count every moment between your visits.”

She released his hand and ran off in the direction of her cottage, while James stood open-mouthed watching her leave.

**Chapter 38**

James stiffened as he heard a figure approaching from behind him in the dark alley. The smells here were worse than usual, and he marvelled once again at how anyone could choose to live in such a place. He glanced over his shoulder and saw a figure approaching in the shadows. He observed the glint of steel in the figure’s right hand. He cocked his pistol and turned around.

“Friend, you do not want to be here. Nay, you want to be as far away from me as you can be. Do you not agree?”

The figure had stopped dead upon hearing the pistol being cocked, hesitated as he heard the voice, and scurried away.

James smiled and resumed his vigil opposite the house belonging to Alyn Lunt. He had been watching for over an hour, and whilst there was a light visible inside, he had observed no movement. He waited until a passing rider had moved out of sight and then he crossed the dank alley to knock on the door. He heard footsteps approaching so he took a step back and raised his pistol. Two bolts were withdrawn, and the door opened with a shuddering creak of protest from the hinges. A woman stood holding the door. Her hair was in total disarray, her clothes filthy and ragged. James stepped forward to block the door and briefly recoiled at the aroma emanating from her.

“Madam close the door in your usual manner and then sit down. No harm will come to you if you simply comply.”

“I’m a married woman, I’ll have you know, and my husband is bigger than you and will not tolerate me being violated and will…”

James held up his hand in a clear indication to stop. “Madam, I have no plans to violate you in any way, shape or form, and I do know your husband. It is he I wish to address. I take it that he is not home.”

“Nay, but he should be home any moment.”

“Very well, let us sit like civilised people and I shall tell you of your husband.”

He pushed past her, holding his breath as he did so, and looked around the room. Light came from a single smoky candle sitting upon a wooden mantelshelf above a meagre fire. A crudely made wooden table occupied most of the room, with bench seats either side. Against one wall, a ragged curtain hung from a rope strung across, doubtless to conceal the sleeping area. He made his way across to the far side of the table to face the door, and then signalled to the frightened woman to close the door and sit opposite him.

“I told you that I know your husband. I also know OF him, and it is that aspect I intend to discuss with him. You see, whilst I was away from home, your husband took troops to my home, where he stole some pie.”

“What matters that?” she interjected.

“Little indeed. I have, in fact, brought the rest of the pie to give to him. It was made by my wife just before your husband kidnapped her.”

“My husband works for the parliament. He does not kidnap.”

“According to law, someone who has committed no crime is free to live their life. My Margaret was completely blameless, although I do freely admit that I am perhaps a little more relaxed about such things. He kidnapped her and all my children save one, who was murdered. I assume that you do not wish to contend that my eight-year-old son was a criminal?”

“Of course not.”

“Such of my family who survived your husband’s raid were taken to Newgate prison, where my wife was tortured to death and my daughter of nine years was sexually attacked repeatedly. Accordingly, I do not regard your husband as a friend.”

“What are you going to do?”

“Assuming you do not displease me, you shall be unharmed. Informed, but unharmed. Your husband too will not die as he deserves – I shall leave it to God to decide his fate. But I shall see to it that he is fully aware of my displeasure, and indeed that the world knows what he is. Do not attempt to thwart me, madam, or you shall share his discomforts.”

“I freely admit that I was not aware of these matters; I shall have my own discussions with my husband in due course, but with your reassurance that he will not be killed, I shall acquiesce quietly.”

“Good. Now, I must bind you to ensure no interference, and then we await your husband.”

--oOo--

There came a sharp rapping at the door. “Come along woman, I do not want to stand out here all night and freeze to death.”

James opened the door, staying behind it as Alyn Lunt bustled in, rubbing his hands together against the cold. He was clad in a finely made coat and wore a woollen hat pulled tightly down over his ears.

“Where is my dinner, woman? I am late, so I expected it to be cooling, not awaiting cooking.”

“I am afraid that is my fault,” announced James from behind him as he closed the door. “I interrupted the cooking part, but no need to worry unduly, I have the remainder of a lovely pie baked by my loving wife. You tasted it, I believe?”

Lunt whirled around, his face becoming ashen as he observed who stood behind him with a pistol facing his way.

“Yes, sir, ‘tis I. We had a brush once before where I told you that it would be better for you if we were never to meet again; you chose to ignore my warning by kidnapping my family, murdering my son, stealing some pie and at the very least you were an accessory to the subsequent torture and murder of my wife, accompanied by the violation of my daughter. Did I miss anything out?”

“I… I had nothing to do with what happened to your wife and daughter. I merely followed orders.”

“True enough. But ‘twas you who placed them in harm’s way. Whose orders, incidentally?”

“Thomas Scot.”

“I shall make a point to pay him my respects in due course. But for now, you must pay your dues for your crimes, or at least to the extent available; ‘Tis God who shall have the final say, and I rather suspect that his displeasure will be more onerous than mine. Now, you will turn around whilst I bind your wrists. I do not want my record before God blemished with your death, but I shall not be thwarted in my quest for justice.” He turned to address the woman. “You have been warned, madam; I am taking your husband away, and as long as he does not try to escape, he will be alive when you next see him. But I shall return here shortly, and I expect to see you exactly where you sit now.”

Holding Lunt by the shoulder, he opened the door and pushed him outside, closing the door behind him. “To the left,” he ordered.

Reaching the inn at the end of the alley, James pushed his prisoner inside the stable and pulled the door closed. In the gloom, the horses stabled there snorted as if in greeting, but the young stable boy started in alarm. James raised a hand to signal quiet.

“This matter is not your concern, boy, and if you forget what you see there will be a reward in it for you when I next visit.”

The boy nodded and turned away; James was a regular customer and was known to be a man of his word. Hind walked across to where his own horse was feeding in one of the stalls. Beside him sat the saddle and ropes as well as a bag. Whilst keeping an eye on Alyn Lunt shivering by the door, he saddled his horse. He took ropes and bag to an empty stall facing the door to the Inn.

He took the rope and strung it over a beam above, then tied a loop in one end.

“Come here,” he demanded, glaring at Lunt.

“You promised no injury.”

“I, unlike you, am a man of my word. But I promised you would return alive; I did not promise that you would not be injured. There is a subtle difference. Now, come here before I do have to hurt you.”

Lunt scurried across the stable and stood cowering before the highwayman.

“Strip.”

“Strip? Again? Here?”

“Strip now. Otherwise, I shall be forced to cut the clothes from you, and I cannot guarantee to be accurate enough to avoid cutting you too, maybe even severing an important part,” James glanced down; Lunt caught his meaning and shivered.

Alyn Lunt removed his garments before standing naked and shivering. James studied him with an expression of contempt on his face.

“Stand in the rope loop.”

Lunt complied. James tightened the loop around his ankles before pulling in the other end of the rope, dragging Lunt off his feet, and pulling further until he was suspended with his head inches above the ground. James then tied the rope off and opened his bag.

Lunt gasped when he saw the message on the placard. “No.”

Once it was tied around the shivering, weeping man’s waist, James stood back to admire his handiwork. “Excellent. But you must be hungry.”

Pulling a wrapped package from his bag, he extracted a visibly rotting pie.

“You must be hungry, you having missed dinner and all. It is so lucky that I thought to retrieve the rest of that lovely pie my wife baked the day that you sent her to die. Here, eat a piece.”

“I won’t, no.”

James extracted his sword, stood back and slapped it down onto the man’s exposed testicles. “You will.” Lunt screamed, but once he had his breath back, he nodded.

James fed him the rotting pie, which Lunt chewed but could not make himself swallow. James fed him another piece.

“My, my, you are a messy eater. Didn’t your parents teach you any manners at all?”

Lunt chewed and forced himself to swallow, although crumbs and rotten meat were strewn around his upturned head and in his hair. With that, James stood, and looked back at the pathetic man hung upside down with a placard declaring him ‘Murderer and thief’ dangling over his chest.

Nodding to himself, he turned to the stable boy. “Do not get involved until others have seen this.”

The boy nodded and James led his horse outside and along to Lunt’s house, where he attached another placard. ‘Here lives a liar, a thief and a murderer. Trust him not.’

**Chapter 39**

Moll and James lay in the snow beneath the naked oak trees alongside the gravelled drive. Behind them, and indeed beyond the hedgerow, four ruffians dressed in thick woollen coats stood stamping in the snow to keep warm. Steam billowed from their mouths as they awaited the call from Moll. The last light vanished from the building in front of James and Moll, at which point they both scrambled to their feet and made their way back to the group.

"Here we go. Eddie, are you sure that you can get in unnoticed?"

"Absolutely."

"Go get us in and make us all rich."

They all stifled laughs and then Eddie, by far the smallest of the group, slipped away in the semi-darkness. The rest approached the hall using whatever cover they could find until they were standing against the wall beside a large pair of windows. Here, they paused as they awaited word from Eddie.

Eddie appeared at the corner of the building and in a stage whisper asked, "Are you coming or not?"

They followed him around to the back, where he had propped a door open with a stool, and entered the gloomy, silent hall. James lit a candle and they looked around at a spacious kitchen. Copper pans hung from hooks around a large oven. Shelves on one wall contained small jars filled with spices, whilst larger jars held various herbs harvested the previous Autumn. A door stood at either end. James strode across to open one of them, revealing a staircase leading up. Moll opened the facing door to reveal a corridor with doors either side, clearly the servants' quarters.

They all drew their weapons and advanced. At the first door, James handed the candle to Moll before opening the door. The candle behind him provided enough light for him to see the sleeping figure across the room. Noticing that it was a young girl, he tucked his pistol back into his baldric and shook her awake whilst clamping his other hand over her mouth. Her eyes sprang open, and sheer terror was evident on her face.

"Don't worry," reassured James, "no-one will harm you if you just quietly do as we say. Will you do that?" She nodded. "Good. Now, if I take my hand off your mouth, will you make any sound?" She shook her head, and he released her. "Sit up. Good. Now, how many servants are there down here?"

"Six."

"And are there any more upstairs?"

"Only the steward and the master."

"Do you know where the money is kept?"

"Yes, there is a strong room upstairs but only the steward and the master have keys."

"Don't you worry about that. We can be quite persuasive when we want to be. Is there another way up apart from through the kitchen?"

"No."

"Good. So, I want you to stand in the corridor with two of my men to help keep the servants quiet if they wake up. Don't worry, they will not hurt you if you behave. Oh, one more thing; where is the steward's room?"

"Up the stairs to the dining room, then through to the corridor beyond. His room is the first on the right."

"Thank you."

They left the room together. James pointed to Eddie and another man. “You two stay with…what is your name?”

“Rosie.”

“You two stay with Rosie here and keep the servants subdued if they awaken. No-one gets hurt as long as they stay quiet, and you do not touch young Rosie, clear?”

“Clear.”

“Good. Now to find the steward; apparently there’s only him and the master upstairs; we’ll deal with the master if he awakens but for now, we’ll concentrate on the steward.”

James took the candle from Moll and led the way through the kitchen and up the stairs. Everything was dark, with only the sphere of light offered by the candle revealed but it was clear that this was a house of some wealth; even the staircase from the kitchen to the dining room was panelled in dark oak. The doors to the dining room said the same; double doors with ornate decoration and door furniture that looked like gold.

Opening the doors, they entered a large room. The long table wore a white linen tablecloth and was set for a single breakfast. The lower part of numerous pictures loomed on the walls, but the candle offered inadequate light to see any further up. James led around the table and past an ornate sideboard holding empty dishes ready to be filled. A second door, even more ornate than the first emerged at the edge of the circle of light.

Moll pushed ahead of James and opened the doors to reveal a wide corridor with a carpet running down the centre to past the circle of visibility. The lower part of paintings could be seen adorning the walls but disappearing into the gloom beyond the reach of the single sputtering candle.

Reaching the first door on the right, James handed the candle to Moll whilst he eased the door open. Inside, dimly revealed by the candlelight, was a larger room than that of the girl downstairs but considerably less well decorated than outside the door. A man could be seen, and indeed heard, to the right of the door, deeply asleep. James drew his sword and advanced into the room. At a wave from him, another of the men entered and stood with his pistol trained onto the sleeping man. James tapped the man on his shoulder with his sword. The man grunted and turned. James tried again, and this time the grunt was accompanied by a vague swatting motion towards the man’s shoulder.

Moll entered the room with the candle; beside the bed, a bottle lay empty on its side. She moved across to sniff it.

“Gin.”

“Very well, let us see if we can find the key.”

James and Moll checked around the room. James had the idea to check the man’s britches which lay in a heap on the floor near the foot of the bed. He held up a bunch of keys which were attached by a cord to the belt.

“Charlie, go back downstairs and bring the girl – tell her she remains under my protection if she seems frightened.”

Leaving one man to watch the sleeping steward, they exited the room and waited outside in the corridor until Charlie returned with the young girl, who was clutching her voluminous nightshirt tightly to herself.

“Ah, Rosie; you have no need to be frightened; we are not here to hurt anyone, even the steward sleeps soundly still.”

“Probably drunk.”

“Yes, very obviously so. But we have the keys, we just need you to point out the right room.”

“It’s that one across the hall, the steward is supposed to guard it, it’s why his room is up here. Fat use he is.”

“Thank you, Rosie. Now, is there another door nearer than the kitchen?”

“Yes, the main doors are just down there at the other end of this corridor.”

“I assume one of the steward’s keys will open them?”

“Yes.”

“Very well. Charlie, take her back to Eddie and come back up; we will need more hands up here too, so bring Joseph with you.”

James tried the keys one-by-one in the door opposite until finally the door clicked open. He and Moll entered and looked around. Several chests lined the walls, one of which was open. Inside sat several canvas bags, each containing coins.

“Ah, this looks good. I’ll take a couple of bags and open the door; we can pile the bags up near the horses for now. We must make sure that there is always someone here in case either the master or steward wake up but basically we need to just get as much out there as fast as we can.”

Moll nodded and as James shouldered two bags and started along the corridor, she started briefing the remaining crew.

--oOo--

The pile of bags near to the horses was clearly all that they would be able to carry, so James entered by the kitchen door and collected Eddie, then upstairs to collect Moll and the remaining thieves. Closing the front doors as he left, he dropped the keys on the doorstep, and they all returned to the clearing behind the hedgerow to load their horses.

“I need four thousand to cover the repayment I promised, and the rest can be divided.”

--oOo—

Tying his horse to a branch deep in the woods, James gathered the four bags of coins and slipped through the undergrowth towards Constance's cottage. As he reached the edge of the clearing, visibility became clearer in the moonlight. At the far end, he could see a faint light coming from John Harris's cottage, which was good; he did not really want to wait in the cold until John had departed.

The main cottage also showed a light, and he made his way to the doorway, staggering slightly under the weight of the bags. Rapping on the door, he stepped back and put his hand on his pistol butt just in case. But it was, as he had hoped, Constance's face that peered around the door.

She smiled when she saw who stood there and fluffed her hair as she pushed the door open to allow him entry. He stepped inside and dropped the bags just inside the doorway with a sigh of relief. Pulling himself erect, he turned and was surprised when the young lady flung her arms around his neck and kissed him with passion.

"I missed you," she stated when she pulled away.

He, utterly taken aback, simply stood there feeling pleased but uncomfortable. After a moment, he took hold of her, pulled her in towards him and returned the compliment with equal passion.

"I was not expecting such a welcome, you caught me unawares," he explained to the shaken young woman; she had never been on the receiving end of such a kiss and her legs felt a little wobbly, so she clung to him tightly as she recovered her composure. He was older and more experienced, so he knew full well what was happening, so he stood there holding her.

After a minute or so, she pulled back and walked to sit before the fire. "Do sit down, sir."

He crossed to sit opposite her, walking a little stiff-legged.

"Are you injured?" she asked.

"No, why do you ask?"

"You walk with difficulty."

He laughed. "I would not really call that an injury - it was inflicted upon me two minutes ago, and by you."

"But I....oh. I see." She blushed and looked away. "That was not my intention sir."

"I know. Worry not, as far as you and I are concerned, I may be a rogue, but I am also a gentleman. I have come here to bring you back your dowry."

"You did say it was but a loan, and I thank you for honouring your word. But 'tis too late for me now, even if I wanted to marry him, which I very much do not. My father is certain that what. Sir John took is gone forever."

"I said I was returning your dowry and that is what I have done. It is all there, including Sir John's contribution."

"Sir, I am grateful, but it is not your responsibility to cover his malfeasance."

"I am not. Bear in mind my profession. Let us just say that there is even a possibility that the self-same coins have come home."

"Oh. But what do I say to my father?"

"The truth is always the easiest. Tell him that you were attacked whilst out riding. Tell him that I rescued you. Tell him that I was mortified by your story. Tell him that I escorted you home. Tell him that I promised to do what I could to mitigate the problems, and that this night I delivered upon my promise. But do stress that I have not laid a finger on you." She looked up. "That was my lips, not my finger.”

They laughed together.

"I must absent myself for now, but I shall be watching you at noon tomorrow. John must accompany you to deliver the money to your father. Leave at noon, I shall be hidden but watching to ensure that you are safe. I shall then leave and return later to check up on my cottage."

“Before you go, there was one thing I wanted to say to you, to ask of you.”

“What’s that?”

“I know that John Bradshaw has done terrible things, I know that he has hurt you more than I am capable of imagining. But you are known, famous for your aversion to killing, it is why the world loves you.”

“Not all the world.”

“Well, no, not the Parliament. But the people do. I just don’t want you to ruin that, to lose the advantage that gives you.”

“What do you mean?”

“Right now, you could set up home somewhere safe in the knowledge that most people would be happy to have you as a neighbour, enjoy it even, and would never dream of betraying you. But if you kill Bradshaw, you lose that advantage. Please, think about it.”

James looked at her. “I shall give very serious thought to what you say, Constance. I admit, I was a little blinded by my thirst for vengeance but what you say makes sense. I shall think about it, for sure.”

--oOo—

"I don't understand. Why do you need me with you if all you are doing is visiting your father?" John complained. "I was hoping to check my traps this afternoon." He shuffled his feet, uneasy about denying anything to his mistress.

Constance smiled up at him. "John, I do not want to keep you in the dark, but I cannot reveal everything. I need to be protected on this journey because I am carrying a very large sum of money."

"But where did it come from?"

She looked at him speculatively. “John, sit down.”

Nervously, he approached the table and sat facing his mistress. The room was cold this morning as the fire had yet to be lit, and his breath billowed before him.

"Do you remember that I was robbed on the way to Sir John a while back?" John nodded. "The highwayman came to return what he took, as he had described it as a loan when he took it. When he heard what Sir John had done, he said he felt responsible and gave me what Sir John had taken as well. He said he was now loaning money to me but would reclaim it in his own inimitable way from Sir John. So, I am now returning it to my father."

"There is only one highwayman like that. Was he perhaps James Hind?"

"He was, he is."

"Such a strange coincidence; you are first robbed by Captain Hind, then we have a captain coming to live next to us, and now Captain Hind is visiting to repay the money. But you saw him alone at night."

"I was not yet abed, John, and he was, he is a perfect gentleman."

"That be his reputation, indeed."

"Very well, now that we are clear that I remain unsullied and that you have not failed in your duty, that Captain Hind is a good fellow and that you are not about to waste your time, can we also agree that there is no need for you to report this to my father; I shall do that myself. And can you please help me get those heavy bags“ she pointed, “into the carriage?"

--oOo--

"I do not understand. Where did you get all this money? Don't misunderstand me, my dear, it is extremely welcome but where did it come from?"

Constance stood up and walked around the table to stand beside her father. She caught the eye of the steward and indicated that he should leave them alone, then stood stroking her father’s hair, which she knew full well he loved. Once the door had closed behind the steward, she settled down upon her haunches and faced her father.

He glared at her; "Do not try to distract me, I insist upon knowing what my only daughter has been up to."

"Do you remember that I was robbed?"

"Yes, of course I do."

"Well, I forgot to mention that he had said that it was just a loan. But recently when I was out riding, a man attacked me with very clear carnal intent. But another man rescued me and left my attacker in an extremely embarrassing position by the road."

"I heard about that. Well, the half-naked man tied to the tree by the road. He refused to say what had happened and has now moved to the colonies; that was too big a disgrace to overcome."

"My rescuer was the same highwayman. He escorted me home. But when he heard what had happened with Sir John, he went quiet and said he felt responsible. Last night, he visited me and delivered the money. He said that only his part in the debacle was covered from his own funds, and that Sir John had been persuaded of the error of his ways. I assume that he robbed the horrible man, as that is indeed his profession."

"Well, whoever this man is, he deserves to be ranked up there with Captain Hind. Few thieves are that honourable."

"Father, it was Captain Hind."

"Well, that explains a lot. But I am alarmed to hear that he has been visiting you.”

“Father, given that he rescued me from an attacker, and that he has had ample opportunity to have his way with me, I think that we can assume that he is an honourable man. There are simply no grounds for you to worry; if anything, I am safer when he is around. He told me that whilst I would not see him today, he would be watching from a distance to ensure that I got the money to you safely.”

“You seem to have made quite an impression on him.”

“He caused the failure of my marriage and feels responsible. Although had I known then what I know now about my fiancé, there would have been no marriage proposal in the first place.”

“Perhaps I should start looking at the potential suitors now that we have the money back?”

“Father do not waste your time. If I am to marry, it shall be to a man of my own choosing who wants me, not the dowry. I still have to determine what my future role in life is to be, and I can assure you that running around catering to the needs and whims of a man like Sir John is not it.”

“That brings me to another matter, which fits very well, Kitty. She is of absolutely no use here, but she could be of considerable help over there in your cottage. So, I have ordered William that as soon as he has finished with Mr Willoughby’s property, he is to return to your cottage and reopen one of those closed off rooms, make it fit for her.”

“But I am coping very well, father.”

“I am sure that you are, but I am uneasy about these nocturnal visitors of yours, and to be honest, if Kitty does not return to being your maid, I shall have to replace her; she is too clumsy and scatter-brained for cleaning, and the kitchen is overstaffed as it is.”

“But…”

“On this, you shall not divert me; either she comes to help you, or she loses her job. Do you want that?”

“Of course not, she was very dear to me but...”

“Then that is settled, then. I simply cannot afford the cost in broken crockery if she stays. And I have no desire to dismiss her; she is a charming girl.” He sighed. “Whereas you are impossible, daughter. But you are all I have, and I cannot naysay you.”

**Chapter 40**

Dismounting, James tied his horse to a branch hanging low over the grass, giving him plenty of rope to allow him to feed freely on the sparse grass showing through the thin covering of snow. In front of him, his new cottage stood, sheltering beneath a canopy of spreading evergreen trees. From this side, the roof looked firm and intact, the thatches all tightly bound, and he could see that at the one end there had been recent repair work. The small windows were all hidden behind recently installed shutters and the walls looked sturdy and unblemished.

Ignoring the open door in the centre of the wall before him, he walked around to the right side of the building. Here, he saw a large door, which undoubtedly hid a stabling area, so he pulled it open, noting that it dragged on the floor a little. As he had guessed, inside were stables for two horses, albeit somewhat dilapidated. A sturdy door stood between the two enclosures, and this had clearly been recently installed, the wood gleaming clean and new. Satisfied, he walked back outside and pushed the stable door closed again. Continuing around the house, he backed away to view the roof, finding again that it was recently repaired and looked in good order. The windows too were all hidden behind new shutters but there was no door on this side. He noticed that the chimney too had recently been repaired, and the walls on this side were again solid and sturdy, this time without any repair work visible. He went around the third corner and again saw new shutters and a sturdy wall.

Satisfied with the exterior, he walked back around to the front and entered the open door. A man was busily installing a new door at the far right of a fireplace similar in shape and size to that he had seen in Constance’s cottage. Unlike her cottage, however, there were three other doorways arrayed either side of the hearth. The walls were all bare of adornment but in good repair. Looking up, he could see a substantial area of repair to the underside of the roof, and the floorboards underneath had been recently replaced. He smiled, his home in Chipping Norton had only a dirt floor, and he doubted if his children were sleeping in a property of such luxury. The carpenter was clearly struggling with the weight of the door, so he stepped forward, startling the man but who nevertheless gave a grateful smile as they eased the door into place together.

“My name is Edward Willoughby,” stated James, catching himself just in time, “I shall be moving my family here in due course.”

“William Thwaites. I work for Mr Davenport.”

“Pleased to meet you, William. Now, how is work progressing?”

“Well, as you can see; I need to replace three more doors, but I really needed help to lift and install them.”

“I shall discuss that with Mr Davenport’s daughter. Now, I’d like to see what is through these doorways.”

He spent the next thirty minutes walking the property with William, examining each room.

“Well, William, I shall leave you to your labours now, and go to talk with Miss Davenport. I believe that John Harris is overseeing the work with her?”

“He is, yes, but with the best will in the world, he is old and lacks the physical strength at his age to help much with lifting heavy weights like these doors.”

“Yes, I can see that. I shall make sure that you get more help, I am eager to bring my family here.”

James returned to his horse, untied him, and swung into the saddle. Offering a salute to William, he urged his horse forward onto the path between the cottages.

Weaving between the trees, he fell into a reverie as he examined his own feelings. He found he was excited to be on his way to see Constance again but was not sure where such an attraction could lead, given his profession and her position as the daughter of a rich merchant.

“Not so rich, actually,” he mused, as he recalled the effect the loss of a few thousand pounds had had upon the family, “Maybe there is hope for me yet – and she does seem to have a mind of her own, too.”

He emerged into the clearing containing the two cottages inhabited by John Harris and Constance. John was across the other side cutting logs, but of Constance there was no sign. He walked his horse across to where John was labouring. John saw him and stopped cutting, puffing a little with the exertion and obviously glad of the interruption.

“Good day to you, John. I have just come from the cottage down the way – it is progressing well.”

“It is that, although I think that money is running short now. You’ll have to ask my mistress about that.”

“Is she here?”

“She is – I think she is cooking, judging by the smells that have been coming from that direction. Making me quite hungry.”

James smiled. “I hate to interrupt her in such a crucial task, but I must – I shall have to be away soon.”

With a friendly wave towards the elderly man, James walked the horse over to a fence near to the door of Constance’s cottage, dismounted, tied the horse to the fence and stepped up to the door, which he rapped loudly.

Constance came hurrying to the door, her hair in disarray and a smudge of flour on her forehead. As soon as she saw who it was, she became flustered, “Oh, I’m sorry, I was cooking, I am not nearly ready for a guest, oh my, please forgive me…”

“May I come in?”

“Oh, yes, sorry, of course, it’s just that...”

“It’s just that you are not groomed for a visitor, but in this case, it is a visitor who is simply pleased to see you and is, if anything, delighted by your disarray.”

“Well, yes. You are?”

“I am. I cannot stay long, I have places to be, but I wanted to see how the cottage is progressing – very well, it seems.”

“Yes, it is, can I offer you a beer?”

“No need, I shall not be here long this time. I hear that you are running out of funds for the cottage renovations.”

“Yes, really William needs a helper but there simply isn’t enough money left.”

“Here is another twenty pounds. Hire his helper. William also knows what else is needed, I have just come from there. I can now start to make arrangements for my furniture to be brought down. Once I can find a suitable nanny to look after them whilst I am away, I shall collect my children too. Can you think of anyone suitable locally? Needs to be someone discreet because whilst your father thinks my name is Willoughby, there is a risk, nay a likelihood that the children will reveal who I really am.”

“Me?”

“You? But is not such a thing beneath a young woman of your position?”

“Having been rejected by a peer of the realm, my reputation is completely ruined now anyway, and I decide what I want to do – my father invariably agrees. In fact, given how close by it is, and how safe I shall be, he will probably be eager for me to do it. He knows I will not agree to another arranged marriage.”

“Well, I don’t know what to say, if you are sure I am truly grateful.”

“I am completely certain. In fact, I am becoming excited at the prospect already.”

“May I kiss you before I go?”

“Ohh, please do.”

He took her in his arms and looked down at her face with her high cheekbones, smudged forehead, wild hair, closed eyes, and her lips slightly parted as she quivered in anticipation. He kissed her, and the passion, the electricity between them grew to almost unbearable heights until they finally pulled apart breathlessly. She then became conscious of his erection pressing into her, put her hand to her mouth, gasped and fled into the kitchen.

**Chapter 41**

The icy wind kept dislodging James’s hat, so he was forced to sit holding it tightly on his head. The trees themselves seemed to be shivering in the wind, naked as they still were after the rigours of winter, indeed, he thought, if I were a tree, I would be seriously thinking about retreating down into my roots. He rubbed his gloved hands together and caught his hat as it tipped forward. Trees provided little cover at this time of year, but this spot was only visible from a distance, which he hoped would give him the cover he needed – the road weaved drunkenly at this point, providing a little extra cover. He had seen a carriage approaching before it passed from sight behind some trees beside the road, so he was close to the roadway, ready to act.

True to form, the carriage came around the bend slowly and the driver was about to whip the horses into a canter when he noticed the guns pointing in his direction, with the highwayman behind them. He pulled back on the reins and raised his hands above his head. James nodded at him, and then signalled for him to dismount. He did the same himself, never losing sight of the coachman who wisely sat with his back against the front wheel.

James approached the carriage door and flung it open. Two figures stared out at him. The man was portly, wearing a yellow ochre coat with silvery sash and a cummerbund of old gold hue. His thin moustache was overshadowed by dramatic curved eyebrows which had clearly been carefully manicured. His long, dark, curly hair rested on his shoulders. The man had his hand on the hilt of his sword but took his hand away as soon as he saw the pistol in James’s hand. James glanced to his right, where a thin woman with dark hair pulled back in a tight bun was glaring at her husband in disgust.

“Well? Are you going to just sit there?”

“My dear, this man has a pistol pointed at me. I could never draw a sword before he could shoot me. Better to be poorer but alive, don’t you think?”

“Better to be a coward, you mean. I should have listened to my mother, she told me, oh yes, she knew what you were, if only I had seen it, if only I had listened to her. Now I assume you are going to just sit there whilst this man ravages me and cuts my throat.”

“Madam, I have no intentions of ra...”

“You shut up.”

James stood back and waited whilst the woman continued to berate her husband, who shrank deeper into his seat. He glanced down at the coachman. “Are they always like this?” The coachman nodded. “I see. Right.” He raised his voice. “You will shut up or against my principles I shall shoot someone.”

She paused her tirade. James faced the cowering man. “I will admit, I have never seen anything like this. Who are you people?”

“I, sir, am General Monck.”

“Really? And whose side are you on today, the rightful king’s or parliament’s?”

“I am parliament’s man, sir.”

“Today,” observed James. “Well, General, it seems to me that you are truly already being punished for your misdeeds, more horrifically than anything I can inflict on you. So, I shall not actually take your money this time. But I will take that portmanteau of papers I see beside you.”

“Now see here...” the woman began.

James pulled his sword from its scabbard and placed the tip on her breast. “Madam, I do try not to hurt women, but you are sorely trying my patience. I do try not to kill, but that in itself does not prevent me from cutting out a vicious and irksome tongue. Do I make myself completely clear?” She nodded. “Good. Now, if you, general, would be so good as to close the portmanteau and pass it across, we can all be on our way. Although I suspect that you will actually be disappointed to end the period of enforced silence.”

--oOo—

Constance looked up at the sound of a carriage pulling up outside. Rinsing her hands in the bowl by the side of the table, she grabbed hold of a cloth, dried her hands, tossed the cloth onto the table, wincing as she narrowly missed the pastry she had been working on, then rushed to the door, running her fingers through her hair as she ran. She opened the door just as her girlfriends reached the patio.

“Constance. There you are – you’ve been hiding from us.” chirped Lucille, ever the outgoing one. Her thick blonde hair hung loose this morning, cascading over her shoulders. Her eyebrows showed in sharp contrast to her pale skin, although today she had not leaded her face.

“I’ve been hiding from the world; it is not easy to recover from a rejection like that, and obviously my reputation lies in ruins. Not that I am too worried about that anymore.” Constance ushered her friends in and closed the door behind them.

The visitors arrayed themselves around the table while Constance fussed around the fire, trying to persuade it to be more generous with its heat. Succeeding, she sat beside Amelia, whose thick dark hair was also left loose. She jumped up again and rushed to get a pitcher of beer and four goblets.

“Constance, my dear, do sit down and stop fussing,” said Rose, glancing at the others. “It’s us, your friends. We’re here to gossip and destroy everyone else’s reputation.”

Settling, Constance poured the beers and relaxed a little. “So, what is new?”

“You’ll like this one; Sir John Whickers was robbed – they took about twenty thousand pounds, apparently. Lucille grinned across the table at Constance. “He was livid, has dismissed his steward and is apparently virtually rebuilding his house to make it robbery-proof.”

Constance thought a moment, and then relented to her impulse. “That would be Captain Hind.”

“How do you know that?”

“Because he brought the entire dowry back to me – I delivered it to my father last week.”

“Surely he couldn’t do that alone. How could he carry so much money?”

“He exhorted me to ask no questions, and I honoured that. But you are right, he struggled to carry the four thousand, so twenty would mean he had help. But I cannot say for certain.”

Amelia interrupted. “But are we not missing the main point here?”

“What?”

“Captain James Hind, a handsome and dashing Royalist officer, who you, Constance, have admitted to having kissed, has been here yet again. Come on, Constance, tell.”

Constance blushed and shifted while she tried to work out what to tell them. She took a sip of her ale, looked each in the eye and began.

“I only tell you as long as this information stays within this cottage. That means you, Lucille.”

Lucille pouted and looked down before looking up again. “Alright. It goes no further.”

“Good. Yes, Captain Hind has been here, and more than once. But my chastity remains complete. I told you before, he is always and ever the perfect gentleman.”

“Ah, but there is more to it than that, I can tell,” announced Rose, leaning forward.

“Yes. We did kiss a couple of times.”

“Go on.”

“When he first appeared, I was so pleased to see him that I simply leaped on him and kissed him. He insisted that I had caught him by surprise and took me in his arms and gave me a kiss the like of which I had never imagined possible. I could feel it in all sorts of places, all over my body, yet he simply held me and kissed me.”

“Tell, tell – what did it feel like?”

“I can’t. Could a blind man describe a rose? Could a deaf man describe birdsong? It is one of those things which you must experience to understand. Believe me.”

The girls pondered this in silence for a while, before Rose piped up. “And the second visit?”

“That time was more recent. We discussed some things, and as he left, he asked me if he could kiss me, and I said yes. That one, too, was unforgettable and indescribable.”

“Try,” demanded Amelia.

“Well, apart from my head feeling as if I was floating, I wanted to - and that is where it gets difficult, I wanted to do something, but I didn’t know what it was that I wanted to do. Even now I have no idea. Honestly, it frightened me, and I ran into the kitchen. When I came back, he had gone.”

As the girls took their leave, Lucille hung back, waiting until the other two girls were out of earshot. “Constance, I’ve never told you this, but sometimes I… look, I understood a lot of what you were telling us more than I think those two do; I don’t want to talk in front of them, but if I can come and visit you alone, I can explain and show you, if you would like.”

“I would, very much. Please, do come – you can stay over, my bed is big enough.”

“That will be even better. I’ll see you soon, look, I must hurry, or they will suspect something.”

She dashed to the carriage and leapt aboard, tripping slightly on the step and landing with a bang and the most unladylike of curses.

--oOo—

James slowed his horse and pulled him to a halt beside the rings fixed to the wall outside the front of the White Hart Inn. Leaping from the saddle, he tied him to the nearest ring, grabbed the portmanteau dangling from the pommel and dashed inside the bar. As he had hoped, the Tall Man was sitting in an alcove, although he was talking to someone whose back was to James. Ever alert, the Tall Man spotted James immediately, said something to his companion, and rose to greet James in the middle of the bar.

“I was not expecting you,” he said, clearly displeased at the diversion from protocol.

“I was not expecting to be here, but I thought these documents were too important to delay.”

“Documents?”

“I, erm… encountered General Monck and relieved him of some of his burden. I thought you might find them interesting.”

James lifted the portmanteau and handed it to the man, who looked around before placing the case upon a nearby table, opening it and taking the top sheet of paper from within.

“Extremely valuable. Of course, a lot of the details will change now that they know we have these, but there is a lot of information here. I am occupied at the moment, but this certainly deserves a celebratory beer. Can you wait awhile?”

“Sorry, but I have to be in Chipping Norton, and it is a long ride yet – I’ll probably have to stop overnight somewhere near Leicester.”

“Shame. Well, next time. Stay safe.”

--oOo--

It was approaching evening as James guided his horse into the safe stable provided by Earl Northampton. He made sure his horse was comfortable, watered and had sufficient feed before he made his way down to the village and stood behind some bushes watching.

Satisfied that there were no Parliament troops lurking and waiting to take him captive, he slipped across the road to his father’s saddlery and dived into the shadows in one of the stables. Standing quietly in the shadows, he watched through the open door, looking for any sign of movement. At the far end of the courtyard, he could see light in the window of what he knew was the kitchen, and he saw occasional flickers as someone passed between the lamp and the window. After a few minutes, he moved to another stable doorway, closer to the light so that he could see more clearly. His mother was bustling around the table, clearly preparing her husband’s evening meal.

Feeling safer he moved to the door and gently rapped. After a moment, it swung open and his father stood there, pistol in hand. But as soon as he saw James, he lowered the pistol, broke into a broad grin, and stepped forward to hug his eldest son.

“James.”

Hearing the name, James’s mother dropped a ladle with a clatter and rushed out to join in. After a moment or two, James spoke. “Can we go inside? I do feel exposed here.”

As he pushed his plate forward and leaned back, James exclaimed, “I haven’t eaten that much in many a long year. I must stay fit and alert these days, Bradshaw’s people are everywhere. But I am slowly rebuilding.”

“What do you mean?” asked his father.

“I do not kill, but do you remember that odious character Lunt, who took my family?”

His father grimaced. “Who could forget him.”

“Last I saw of him, he was hanging suspended by his ankles, naked save for a placard on his chest declaring that he is a murderer, a thief and a liar. I doubt his reputation can survive that, but I shall keep watch. God will punish him ultimately, but it is my task to ensure that he fears every moment of his miserable life.”

“Vengeance is a very thin gruel, James.”

“It is indeed, but there is more, both good and bad. Margaret died under torture, Alice was repeatedly violated, and once Bradshaw had no further use of them, he let the jailer sell the children.” He paused. “But I have found the children, although they do not yet know it, and I placed an acquaintance to watch over them whilst I find and create a new home for them. The good news is that I have found a cottage down south, it is being refurbished now and I have even found a lady willing to care for them when I am away.”

“Well, that is good news, although we would of course prefer you to be nearby.”

“Too dangerous; this is where they expect to find me. Where I am going, we can live in peace and security, I think. At least for a while.”

“Well, if the children will have a nice home, that is wonderful. But what about you? Are you alright?”

“I, I survive, and am even beginning to find flashes of happiness. Only flashes for now, but I know that I must put the loss of my dear Margaret, and indeed Jamie, behind me else I become a festering sore myself and that will not be good for my children. I do find some solace in the company of the children’s future nanny, I must admit, although she herself is perhaps out of reach.”

“It is perhaps a little soon to be considering remarriage, son.”

“It is, but also it is not – I have the well-being of my children to consider, and they have suffered more than enough. Now that the new cottage is almost ready, I need to arrange delivery of the furniture from here. I assume that you collected it?”

“We did, it sits in the first stall.”

“I cannot ask you to deliver for me, nor indeed can I deliver it myself; it would be too dangerous; I need to be able to flee at a moment’s notice. Do you know anyone we can trust to bring the stuff down south?”

“Would that not provide Bradshaw with a route to tracing you? I am certain he keeps an eye on us.”

“In due course, I shall smuggle you south to see your grandchildren. But for now, I want someone to take a cart south, let us say to Littlehampton. I intend to intercept him partway and do the last part myself, sitting him in an inn for his own safety.”

“David? He isn’t very bright, but he is honest and loyal – we use him from time to time where muscle is needed that is beyond me.”

“Certainly. I can leave money with you, and if you can set him off, say, a week today, I shall keep an eye on the road three or four days later. Give him a list of villages to aim for, that way he cannot get lost, and I will be able to intercept him.”

--oOo—

James watched as the cart made its way slowly down the main road towards Littlehampton. It was no accident that he had slightly misdirected the delivery; he wanted to leave no trail of any kind to allow the authorities to track his move, and he also needed to be sure that none followed the cart.

The cart crossed the brow of the hill in the distance, and still he saw no followers. Satisfied at last, he spurred his horse down the bank to join the road and galloped after the cart. He caught up with it in the next village, waved to David to follow him and led the way at a more sedate pace to the inn at the far side of the village, well off the main road.

He led the way to the stable door and handed his reins to the stable groom before taking the bridle of the carthorse and leading it around in a circle to face back down the lane.

Finally, he looked up at the cart driver, who was watching James calmly. He was probably in his mid-twenties, solidly built and clean shaven but with long dank hair hanging down either side of his face.

"David, you must be tired, you made such good time. Take a break here in the inn whilst I take the cart the rest of the way. I have booked you a room, so you can even have a drink or two, all on me."

"I'm fine, sir, I can help you unload."

"David, I know your heart is good and you would not willingly betray me. But these people are ruthless - they killed Jamie and then Margaret in their efforts to find me. They would do the same to you. So, it is better you don't know."

"I wouldn't tell them, no matter what."

"Perhaps, but you would still be dead. As it is, you can refer them to this inn, who can confirm that I booked you a room and you were here for a couple of days whilst I took the cart."

David grimaced. "You always did get the better of me."

"Yes, but this time it is to protect you."

"Oh, very well."

--oOo--

James pulled on the reins and the cart stopped. The door to his cottage sprang open, and William came through to see what had arrived.

"Ah, sir, 'tis you. Sorry, I was expecting some wood."

"Would you like me to pull forward a little to leave room?"

"If you would, sir, I do need the wood urgently - I can do no more until it arrives"

"Well perhaps you can help me unload this cart, then. You should have a helper, too; I did leave orders for one to be provided."

"I do, sir, thank ‘ee, but 'tis he driving the cart I await - I sent him to get it."

"Very well, I shall pull over to the corner there and we can unload into the main room – most of it does not need to be in place; I can deal with that later. I do need to return the cart, however."

For the next fifteen minutes, the two men carried the contents of the cart inside and piled it all out of the way in a corner. The last item off the cart was a large oaken table which required both men and considerable swearing and grunting, but finally, the cart was empty.

James slapped William on the back. "Thank you. I think I might have struggled on my own."

They laughed, and it was at that moment that another cart arrived, this time laden high with planks.

"I shall leave you to that lot," commented James as he swung up into the driver's seat.

--oOo—

Lucille urged her horse forward, anxious to reach Constance’s cottage before nightfall. Ahead of her, an empty cart was being driven quite hard towards her, but the driver saw her and moved across to the left side of the road, swinging his large, feathered hat in an arc as he passed her. Briefly, she thought that she recognised the driver but dismissed it from her mind as she passed the tree made famous by the bound and half-naked Sir Robert weeks earlier.

Reaching the turnoff for Constance’s cottage, she slowed and let her horse pick its own way through. Emerging into the fading daylight in front of the cottage, she dismounted and led her horse around John Harris’s abode to the stables around the back.

John was tending to the horses as she entered and gave her his usual charming smile – she smiled back, knowing full well that whilst he did like to flirt with the ladies, he dare not do so openly with ladies of quality. Within his own stable, however, he felt comfortable.

“I shall be staying overnight, John,” Lucille announced. “Constance is expecting me.”

“Leave your horse with me, milady, I shall look after it.”

Smiling, she took her bag and left the stable.

--oOo--

Constance was finishing her meal when there came a knock on the door. Taking her napkin, she wiped her mouth and fingers before rising from the table and walking across to the door, from which a second, more impatient rap echoed.

“Have patience a moment, I’m coming,” she called as she approached the door. She paused and looked back at the table, laden as it was a little untidily with the remains of her meal and various cooking utensils. She shrugged and opened the door. “Lucille.”

Smiling, Lucille walked in, giving a hug to her friend, “I told you I’d come and help you, didn’t I?”

“Yes, but I wasn’t expecting you tonight. Look at the mess.”

“Nonsense, we’ll clear up together…are those cakes over there?”

“Yes, I baked them this afternoon after you left.”

--oOo--

An hour later, they sat on the bed.

“Tell me, you say you know about these strange feelings when kissing, but how do you know?” asked Constance.

“A couple of years ago, my mother and father needed to spend time in London but did not want me to go with them so they arranged for me to stay with my mother’s sister; she was a widow, and renowned for her dislike of men.

“She disliked men although she was a widow, but she certainly liked women or rather girls, for I was but a girl back then.”

“Oh? Do go on.”

“She seduced me within the first two days. That was when I learned what pleasure women can give to each other. “

“Really?”

“Really. I shall show you that, but she told me that a man can give even more, but rarely does.”

“Ah, but men are a precious resource these days – there are so few of them.”

“Yes, she told me that, too. She said that almost half of the people alive today are children, and two thirds of those that are adults are women, which is why so many women remain unattached, but also why so many women spend time together.”

“But tell me; what happened?”

“It is better if I show you while I tell you. Shall we go to bed?”

“Good idea. I can loan you a nightshirt, I have several.”

“I don’t need one, Constance. Nor do you.”

“Oh.”

“It is far better to go to bed naked anyway.”

“It is? Well, if you say so.” Constance began removing her clothes whilst Lucille watched her. “Are you not undressing?”

“Sorry, I was spellbound watching you. Sir John really made a huge mistake rejecting you.”

Constance blushed. “Don’t be silly.”

Lucille was removing her dress. She stood upright in just her shift. “Constance, you greatly underestimate yourself.”

Constance watched as Lucille walked around the bed to where Constance stood, now similarly clad. Lucille reached up and cupped her friend’s face between her hands. Constance was pulled towards her, all the while staring into her friend’s eyes. As their breasts touched each other, Lucille let out a gentle sigh before turning her head slightly to kiss Constance full on the lips. Constance resisted slightly, and then relaxed as she felt the sensations swirling through her body. She felt Lucille’s tongue pressing to enter her mouth and found herself opening her mouth slightly wider to allow her full access.

As Lucille released her face and wound her arms around Constance’s body, Constance lifted her own arms to enclose Lucille’s neck and pull her to herself. She felt Lucille’s hand stroking her spine and she moaned as her spine tingled all the way down, closely followed by Lucile’s fluttering fingers. Her legs wanted to give way, but it seemed as if Lucille weas inside her mind for she pulled Constance down onto the bed without once breaking contact.

As she lay there beneath Lucille, she felt her heart beating fast. She felt Lucille release her hand from behind Constance’s back and trail her fingers lightly around her friend’s waist to her navel.

Constance gasped and lifted her hips, causing her shift to slide up her thigh. Lucille’s hand took advantage and her hand slipped across to rest upon the exposed thigh. Constance’s eyes sprang open as the jolt of contact hit her. She felt warmth between her legs and groaned as she felt the hand move closer to the warmth.

She pushed Lucille away and sat up to pull her shift over her head and throw it across the room. Then she pulled her friend back towards her, kissing her ardently. She found her hand wandering to her friend’s breast. She heard Lucille gasp and felt the nipple harden beneath her palm. Emboldened, she began tugging at her shift. Lucille pulled away briefly to help her and Constance reached for her as she threw the shift behind her.

Both girls gasped as their naked flesh came together. Constance pulled Lucille’s head back towards her and kissed her with a passion she had only ever felt before when kissing James. Lucille, for her part, grasped Constance’s buttock and pressed their pubic bones together. With her other hand, she sought Constance’s breast, stroking the hardening nipple. Constance groaned as she once more felt the waves pass over her. She threw her head back, eyes closed, moaning gently. She felt Lucille’s tongue moving down her throat and her hands started to grasp the bedclothes. The tongue became her total focus, and as it approached her right nipple, she stopped breathing. When Lucille took her nipple in her mouth, her breath exploded. She felt wetness between her legs but then she felt Lucille’s hand moving over her hip and coming to rest on her inner thigh.

Without knowing what she was doing, she took hold of the hand and moved it onto her pubic bone. Lucille responded by sliding her hand a little lower and lightly touching Constance’s now thoroughly wet clitoris. Constance uttered a cry and her hips jerked involuntarily. She lifted her head and looked at her friend.

“Is this proper?”

“Does it matter? There is nothing in the *Bible* to forbid us from enjoying each other, only men. It refers to dishonourable passions, but what is that? Lying with animals perhaps? I have never asked our preacher. Just enjoy it but tell none – you know full well that they would object because they are excluded.” She returned to nuzzling Constance’s nipple and massaging her clitoris.”

Constance had little choice but to succumb to the waves of pleasure sweeping over her. She felt Lucille’s finger slide further down and start massaging her entrance. She cried out as the pleasure became more than she could bear silently. Her hips gyrated madly as she climaxed, which continued for several seconds before she collapsed inert on the bed with Lucille still holding her.

“Oh, Lucille,” she whispered, “that was wonderful, and I can see now what it was I sought when he kissed me.”

“Well, you are still a virgin, so you need to know that the first time, my aunt told me that it will hurt. But it will still be wonderful over the top of that, and it is only the first time.”

“Thank you for this, Lucille. Now I think I should do the same to you if you want me to. Do you?”

“Of course I do.”

**Chapter 42**

Thomas Fairfax topped his wine glass. He waggled the bottle towards Oliver Cromwell, who was seated in the seat occupied by Captain James Hind just a few weeks earlier. Cromwell shook his head; whilst he eschewed alcohol himself, he was wise enough to realise that were he to deprive others of their pleasures, he would soon be singing alone.

"So, tell me, what has been going on over here whilst I have been dealing with the ungodly hordes over the water?"

"I thought you were getting regular reports?"

"I was, but we both know how sanitized those reports are. What was happening that wouldn't appear in the reports?"

Fairfax pondered awhile. "Well, Parliament is neither use nor ornament. All they do is discuss new ways to define treason, basically making it a capital offence to criticise them. Apart, that is, from paying themselves ever greater amounts for ever smaller reasons."

"Do you seriously think I hadn't noticed that? I just don't yet know what I can do about it. For now, I just must grit my teeth and endure, just as you do."

"Being honest, I am not sure how much longer I can endure being so close to such corruption."

"I understand. You were ever the paragon of virtue and honour in this administration, yes, including me; I do not delude myself, but I do excuse myself with the consolation that my motivation is at least honest."

"Are you aware of Bradshaw's machinations?"

"No," he sat forward, "he is the most dangerous of them all. Tell me. Give me weaponry to use against him."

"I am sure that you recall capturing Zachary Howard, and that we delivered him to Newgate. I gave instructions that no other prisoners were to be placed in that particular dungeon and left two soldiers to guard the door."

Cromwell nodded.

"I went to check up on him; the soldiers were there but were guarding other prisoners who had been placed down there by Bradshaw, their duty changed on his order. He had overruled my orders. What was even worse, whilst I was down there, I could hear whimpering like a child from another cell. I went in and found the jailer raping a little girl whilst two younger children watched from across the room. These, I found out, were all that remained of James Hind's family. Bradshaw had ordered his family abducted and imprisoned. One child had been killed during the abduction and Hind's wife died under torture. This was all done in our name by Bradshaw."

"Hind is one thing. But children? I shall have to keep this in mind, I was intending to suggest placing Bradshaw at the head of a new intelligence service, but if this is how he uses the power he has, God only knows what he would do if I had gone ahead with that. By the way, are the children still down there?"

"No, he gave them to the jailer to sell."

"And all this in the name of Parliament. God protect us."

--oOo—

James eased around the corner. In the yard before him, several children, including his own, were playing. Washing hung from a string fixed across the yard, idly blowing in the June zephyr. Mizzler, the boy burglar he had paid to watch over his children was deep in conversation with Alice, James’s daughter.

Mizzler always kept his eyes open, and quickly spotted James, who waved for him to come around the corner. Disappearing from view himself, James waited for the boy to appear.

He came running around the bend, stopping when he saw James. “You need to move quickly, Alice is following me, I couldn’t stop her.”

“Go back, intercept her and tell her to come around this corner to meet someone.”

Mizzler’s eyebrows shot up. “You are ready to meet her?”

“Yes, now go before she arrives.”

The boy shot back around the corner, but reappeared seconds later with Alice in tow. She was complaining, “Stop pulling me, what if I don’t want to…. Papa.”

She burst into happy tears as he took her into his arms and picked her up, hugging and swinging her around. “Oh, Papa, where have you been, there have been so many things happening and we missed you and mama died and they shot Jamie and a nasty man was doing horrible things to me and..”

The flow of tears became too much for her and she buried her face into his shoulder. James too had tears streaming whilst Mizzler looked away. After a while, James put her down and settled onto his haunches.

“I know all of those things, Alice, and it is horrible. I am doing what I can to get everything right. Are the people you live with treating you well?”

“Yes, they are very kind to us. But I want to be with you, Papa.”

“You shall. I have been watching you for a while now, and I sent Mizzler here to keep an eye on you and make sure that you are alright while I try to make a new home for us.”

“He’s nice. I like Mizzler. Don’t like Olly much, though, he is nasty.”

“Why do you say that?”

“He is an older boy,” Mizzler said, “bigger than me and he does not believe that Alice’s father is a highwayman. So, he bullies her.”

“Well, not much I can do about that yet, if he believes her, he might tell the authorities and they would then be waiting for me when I come for them. Do your best to protect her, though.”

“I shall, I do, but as I said, he is bigger than me – I don’t want the attention that would happen if I were to knife him.”

“No, don’t do that.” He turned back to Alice who was holding onto him. “Alice, I must go now, but I shall be back to collect you and take you to the new home. It will be soon. Do you live in one of these houses here?”

She pointed at the yard. “Just in there.”

“Very well, do not wander far from here in the next couple of weeks, I shall suddenly appear and take you away. Do not tell anyone, including your brothers. Do you understand?”

“I want to go with you now.”

“I know, sweetheart, but I must come here with a cart, I only have my horse today. They would catch us and give you back, but they would put me in prison and probably kill me. Let me make a plan and then we can get away all together safely. It will be soon, I promise.”

“It will be sad for the people we are living with; they are nice, and they paid all they had to buy us.”

“So, I shall arrange for them to get their money back. You belong with me, and soon will be in a lovely cottage in the woods.”

“Truly?”

“Truly. You will love it, and there is a very nice lady who has promised to look after you when I have to be away.”

“A new mama?”

James hesitated; he was not yet ready to think in such terms, but the rapier-like mind of the nine-year-old girl pierced straight to the heart of the matter. “No, she is just a nice lady I know who has agreed to look after you.”

“I shall see what she is like. I miss Mama but I saw her die and I am old enough to know that she is gone forever. The boys still ask for her, they do not realise.”

“None can be happy about it all. All I can do is work to bring us back together and use my own skills to make sure that those who do us evil know that I am displeased and feel my displeasure.”

“You’ll kill them?”

“No, I never kill. But I can make them extremely unhappy and frightened, as well they should be because God will surely judge them wanting. Now, I must go, I have things to do so that we are safe when we leave here.”

He gave her a hug, and then tried to stand up, but she would not let go. He prised her hands open and stood, hating seeing her cry but knowing that he must.

“Mizzler, look after them. Alice, it shall be very soon, I promise, and when I do return, you must do exactly as I tell you immediately, do you understand?” She nodded. “Good. Now go back and play, but with hope in your heart.”

**Chapter 43**

James sat in the window area of the inn facing the grim exterior of Newgate prison. He cowered a little as he saw the gates open and two poor wretches dragged inside protesting in vain. It made him a little uneasy being so close to such an evil place, where he had himself been a guest not so long ago. The inn itself was characteristically grim, poorly decorated, with rickety chairs and tables. The landlord was surly and greedy, making James reluctant to buy ale - but he must keep a drink in front of him if he wished to stay where he was - and he did.

Outside, the sun was leaving the grim setting behind, and James was beginning to think he might need to stand outside the prison to spot his prey. But the doors opened across the way and he saw his target, the jailer known to all just as Herbert.

Finishing his ale, he rose and hurried across to the door. Upon reaching the street, he panicked at first as his prey was nowhere to be seen but heaved a sigh of relief as Herbert came out of a cheap food shop at the far end of the street. Pulling his collar up against the fierce wind blowing down the street, Herbert set off down a nearby side street with James rushing to catch up before he made another turn.

Entering the side street, he caught sight of the jailer as he disappeared down an alley. Rushing, James reached the alley before Herbert had reached the end and was able to follow at a more sedate pace as the man weaved through the warren of streets making up the East End of London. James was surprised and pleased when the man entered a house not one hundred yards from the courtyard where his children were living. An idea entered his mind, but he set it aside; if the opportunity arose, yes but for now, he still needed to subdue his prey.

Noting the exact house, he moved to the corner and looked around at the courtyard. The washing line remained in place but was currently unoccupied. No children played outside in the gathering gloom, but full darkness had yet to envelope the area. He looked up, pleased to see no stars and therefore little risk of moonlight. Satisfied, he returned to the doorway behind which his prey was enjoying his evening meal. He paused for a moment to remind himself why he was here.

"This man had sex with my child. This man watched my wife die under torture. This man had sex with my daughter. With my little girl. With Alice," he muttered to himself, then extracted his pistol and knocked on the door. The door opened readily but as soon as Herbert saw the pistol, he tried to close it again, but was prevented by James's boot which had been thrust into the doorway.

"Now that is no greeting for a man to offer the father of his latest conquest, now, is it?"

"I don't know what you mean."

James elbowed his way inside and closed the door behind him. "Oh, I think you do. It is very improper to have sex with girls and then ignore them."

"But she was a whore in the brothel. I paid the proper price."

"Wrong answer. Try again."

"Well, before that...well, there was in the prison, but that doesn't count."

"She thinks it does."

"How do you know? She's still in there and has had no visitors."

"You mean there are more victims of your depravity?"

"I don't know what you mean."

"Had any good children lately?"

"If they be in Newgate, they are not good."

"This one was a total innocent, and you even sold her."

"Oh, you mean Hind's spawn. What is it to you?"

"How remiss of me, I did indeed fail to introduce myself properly. My name is Hind. The highwayman. Father to the children you refer to as my spawn. But currently not so much a highwayman as an angry, vengeful father."

Herbert paled, as much as could be seen through the grime.

"I was under orders. Mr Bradshaw, he told me to do it."

"Mr Bradshaw was not there."

"He was. It was to force your wife to tell us where you were."

"Really. And the other times?"

"What other times?"

"The other times you had sex with my daughter, was that ordered by Bradshaw too? It is my understanding that you had already killed my wife by then."

"I didn't kill her. Bradshaw's enforcers did the torturing, not me. And even they were telling him that she knew nothing but would die if they carried on; he told them to keep going."

"And where do I find these enforcers?"

"One, I just don't know him. The other is a regular in the inn facing the prison, you might find him there."

"Describe him."

"Same height as me, bald, big muscles, big black beard."

"Turn around."

"What?"

"Turn around."

"But I gave you your wife's killer."

"You did indeed, which is why you will see the dawn tomorrow. But you are still my daughter's rapist. Let us say that your sentence has reduced. Now turn around and put your hands behind your back. Do it or I shall show my anger."

Herbert put his hands behind his back and turned around, upon which James tied his wrists together, and placed a loop around his neck.

“Now you will follow me.”

James led the bound man out of the door, then led him to the square upon which his children currently lived. After making sure that all the doors and windows around the square were closed, he turned around and gagged his prisoner. Keeping a firm hold of the rope around the man’s neck, he removed the man’s breeches, recoiling slightly at the stench he released. Tying the man’s ankles together required a tightening of the man’s noose, but eventually it was achieved, and James pushed the man over. Grabbing the rope around his ankles he heaved the jailer upright but upside-down against the wall, where he hooked the ankle binding around a nail protruding from an exposed beam-end.

He stood back to admire his handiwork. Herbert was slightly too tall, so his head was bowed forward on the ground, and his genitals dangled limp and grimy at around head height. Satisfied, he pulled a thin cord from his pocket and tied it tightly around the man’s scrotum, leaving the end of the cord dangling.

“You will live to see the dawn. But whether you are able to have sex with any more children is less certain. My daughter lives near here, and from my recollection she tends to bounce from her bed before any other. I have left a string dangling just in case she wants to pull it tighter, which I suspect she will. Goodbye, Herbert.”

--oOo--

Constance looked up as the door opened. Kitty, her erstwhile maid peered around the door. “May I enter mistress?”

“Of course, Kitty, do come in.”

Kitty entered, tugging a heavy beg behind her. Outside, a cart could be heard leaving the clearing, although Constance had been concentrating so much that she had failed to notice it arriving.

“I assume that was the footman driving the cart. Your young man?”

Kitty blushed. “Yes, milady, it was. My bag was too heavy to carry all this way. He even brought it up to the door for me. He is a real gemmun, he is.”

Constance laughed. “Kitty, there is no reason for you to be embarrassed; we are all young, attractive, unattached women together here.”

“But milady, you...”

“I was rejected by a peer of the realm, so at present, no-one of title is in the least bit interested in me. But I am still here, a ripe young woman eager for the picking.”

“Milady. Be that proper?”

“It is proper if I say it is proper; I am still my father’s daughter, but we have to make this work, and it will be impossible if we retain too much formality.”

“All right, Milady.”

“Much better. We need to have a talk, too about what you will be doing here, as well as defining where your loyalties lie. But for now, shall I help you with that enormous bag – what on Earth do you have in here?”

After hauling the bag through to the newly refurbished room, Constance sat on the end of the bed while Kitty unpacked her possessions and put them on the shelves William had installed on the one wall.

“This be more luxurious than up at the hall,” commented Kitty, “I only had half this much space there, and there was no lock on the door.”

“So, you couldn’t sneak your young footman in at night,” teased Constance.

“Never. “

“But his room has a lock, if my guess is correct.”

“Well, yes. But Kenyon would never allow us to be together in the house; he was very strict about that.”

“Kenyon is not here. You are free to invite your footman here if you so wish, just so long as it does not interfere with my plans, so you must check with me first. Although I think it easier if you let him in through the back door rather than through the main room.”

“Oh, mistress, thank you.”

“You will need to help me here and with some other duties I have agreed to take on.”

“Of course, mistress. Whatever you tell me to do.”

“Firstly, I have agreed to nanny the children of the man who has taken the next cottage down.”

“Mr Willoughby? Why, that is beneath you, Constance.”

“Perhaps, but it is what I have chosen to do.”

“Well, he is handsome.”

“He is, Kitty, and you have a naughty mind.”

“Sorry, milady.”

“But you aren’t too inaccurate. He is handsome, you are right. Now, there are some things that you must tell no-one. That includes your young man. Is that clear? I shall eject you instantly if you betray me.”

“Oh no, mistress. I know I am not a very good maid, and I am lucky to have work here with you, which I think I might even enjoy. I will do nothing to spoil that.”

“Good. Let us start with Mr Willoughby. That is not his real name.”

“Oh?”

“No. I am telling you this because it is certain that one of his young children will blurt it out at some point, so I want you to know now and be aware how important silence is.”

“You have not yet told me.”

“Oh. No, I haven’t. Mr Willoughby is actually the highwayman Captain James Hind.”

“Really? How exciting! Why is he coming here? Are you not afraid that he will attack you?”

“Parliament murdered his wife and one child, and his little girl was subjected to repeated sexual attacks under their care. Then they sold his children, but he has found them and sought a safe place for them. I was happy to offer that – I have no marriage prospects now, so this is probably as close as I will ever get to being a mother. As for being attacked, he has had plenty of opportunities to do that if it was his intention. No, I think we are dealing with a concerned, widowed father rather than a highwayman.”

“Oh, how awful for him.”

“Indeed, it is. But we can make it better for the children and put their father’s mind at ease.”

“Was it not he who robbed you of your dowry a while back?”

“It was, and it was also he who returned it all, including the part Sir John had taken. It was also he who rescued me when a man tried to attack me on the road, and left the man tied naked to a tree on the roadside.”

“I remember hearing about Sir Robert being found naked tied to a tree, but I did not know about the attack.”

“He attempted to have sex with me, Kitty; Captain Hind stopped him before he got that far. Captain Hind does appear here sometimes, and I never know when. So, you will need to be quiet and out of the way if he visits here, and if your young man is here, he must leave through your window without knowing why. Do you understand, Kitty?”

“Yes, mistress. Is he your lover?”

“Impertinent, Kitty, but a fair question; no, he is not although I admit that I am not entirely certain that I don’t want him to be.”

“Really? Well, he is really handsome.”

“He is, and also a gentleman, far more so than Sir John, for example.”

“You do seem to be quite taken with him.”

“I am. But I honestly struggle to see how we could be a couple – he is very high on Parliament’s wanted list.”

“But if you love each other...?”

“Don’t be a romantic, Kitty. I must be realistic. Apart from anything else, can you imagine my father’s reaction? From a peer of the realm to a condemned criminal.”

“Is he condemned?”

“Yes, he was sentenced to death a few months ago.”

“Well, even so, what is there to stop you having some happiness for a while? It’s not a crime, you know.”

“These days, I’m not so sure. We shall see. But for now, shall we throw together something to eat before bedtime?”

--oOo—

James trotted through the dark and dingy East End streets until he reached a low wall beside some wasteland where some houses had collapsed but had not yet been replaced. Mizzler was the boy he had left to watch over his children and he knew that Mizzler regularly visited this spot. True to form the boy was sitting on the wall talking to several other boys. James reined his horse back to a walk and directed him across to the wall.

“Mister James, how are ya?”

“I’m good, Mizzler, very good in fact; I need you to do something for me.”

“Wassat?”

“Tell Alice to stay close to home the day after tomorrow and have the young ones nearby. I shall collect them sometime during the day, but I cannot say exactly when. If there is anything precious to her, she must have it with her because the pickup is of necessity very fast. Clear?”

“Clear. I’ll go and tell her now. She’ll be excited.”

“Good but warn her to tell no-one. Oh, I need to pay you, it will be a bit rushed, and I might forget.” He extracted several gold coins from his pouch and handed them to the boy, who gasped, but pocketed them.

**Chapter 44**

James relaxed in the comfortable chaise-longue, revelling in a degree of comfort he had only experienced when hosted by the Earl of Northampton. He had decided to be sparing with candles as this was not actually his house, and whilst he did not fear the man who lived here, he found the several pictures of the judge glaring down distinctly disturbing. Ergo, only a single candle burned, and that illuminated no more than James’s right arm and the glass of fine wine he was enjoying. He turned his head as he heard muffled noises behind him.

“Be quiet, I have no dispute with you, only with your master so I neither wish nor intend to harm you. But do not attempt to thwart me in any way, and that includes making noise to warn him. I abhor shedding blood, especially innocent blood, but I shall if I must.”

The sounds stopped and he took another sip of wine. Footsteps sounded outside the door on the other side of the room, so he carefully placed the glass on the small table and drew one of his pistols from his baldric.

A rapping on the door announced the beginnings of impatience, and then a familiar voice was heard. “Winters, you duffing nincompoop, open the door.”

James stood up and strolled across to the door, slid the bolts across and opened the door, stepping out of sight behind it as he did so. He waited until Sergeant John Bradshaw had stepped inside fully before closing and bolting the door.

The sergeant turned, trying to see through the gloom. All he could see was a silhouette. “Take my coat off, man, and why is the fire not lit in here?”

“I regret the cold, sir, but Winters is unavailable at present. You see, I decided to bind him so that we could have a little discussion without being disturbed. He is over there behind the chaise-longue.”

“What? Who? How dare you, do you know who I am?”

“Of course I know who you are; you are the man who ordered the murder of my wife and eldest son, and the ravaging of my daughter. You are Judge John Bradshaw. Can you guess who I am? Or have you murdered so many that it is impossible to decide?”

“Hind.”

“Very good. Yes, I am James Hind, mourning widower, yes, vengeful father yes, but also a captain in His Majesty’s cavalry. As you ordered the death of His Majesty, I am sure that you can imagine how concerned I am for your welfare. Now drop your coat on the floor and sit down. We have some talking to do before I decide what to do with you.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I just told you, I have yet to decide. Now sit down; given the evil you have done to my king and my family, I would not hesitate to extract your entrails and use them to hang you from that beam. Indeed, that remains one of my options.”

Bradshaw crossed the room and sat on the edge of the seat, clasping and unclasping his hands before him. James watched from the shadows before moving forward.

“Now, I am going to light a few more candles. But do not be so foolish as to try to take advantage of my apparent distraction.”

He returned his pistol to his baldric and without once turning his back on his adversary, he circled the room lighting candles. As the room lit up, numerous paintings of John Bradshaw were revealed on the walls. James pulled a chair out and sat facing the judge.

“Do you not think it a little conceited to have so many pictures of yourself on the walls?” he raised his hand as Bradshaw opened his mouth to reply. “Don’t bother answering that, it is not my concern and I really do not care how many pictures there are. Although…;” He paused as he rubbed his chin, deep in thought. “Very well. Can you explain why you murdered my wife? Be aware, Judge, I know a lot more than you might think, so lying would be ill-advised. And given that you are a judge, you are supposed to specialise in only the truth, are you not? Now, why?”

“She was married to a criminal and refused to give up his whereabouts. She died under questioning.”

“You mean she died under torture. Yes, you may well blush, sir, I told you that I know more than you might think. As it happens, she did not know, and frankly, at that point neither did I; I was abroad, somewhere between Calais and the Hague. I had no idea which country I was in for much of the journey, let alone the exact town. She told the truth; she did not know.”

“I did not know that. I am not to blame.”

“Torture is illegal in this country. It was made so by your own laws. You are an officer of the law. Ergo, that means that you are in truth a worse criminal than any who have suffered condemnation at your hand. Do you have a pen, ink and something to write upon?”

“Yes, in the study.”

“Can Winters write?”

“No, of course not.”

“Pity.” James walked around to behind the chaise longue and bent down to help the bound servant to his feet. He held him as he hopped across the room to a chair. Once seated, James removed the scarf wrapped around the terrified steward’s mouth.

“Where is the study?”

“Upstairs.”

“Are there more paintings of him?”

“Yes, but why?”

“Never mind. Now I am going to release your wrists and ankles. Pick up that candle to light our way, because we are all going for a little walk upstairs to the study. Please, no heroics. I know that your master will not try anything, he pissed himself the last time I had the upper hand. That means that I shall be focussing on you. Now both of you, lead the way up to the study, then stand in the middle of that room. I shall be behind you, as will my sword and pistol.”

The three men made their way up the staircase, before turning to the right and entering a room. James paused just outside the doorway, waiting until both Winters and Bradshaw were standing in the middle of the room before he entered himself. What was clearly a substantial room disappeared in the gloom beyond the reach of the candle. James stepped aside to stand next to the door.

“Winters, go around and light the candles, there’s a good fellow. I want to be able to see what is here.” He waited as the room slowly came into view. “Now sit in that chair over there.”

As soon as the steward had settled, James took the time to look around the room. The walls were mostly bare, with just a couple of portraits of Bradshaw and another of a woman. He addressed Bradshaw.

“Your wife?”

“My dear late wife, yes.”

“Did you murder her too?”

Bradshaw remained silent, so James continued his review of the room’s contents. A desk sat silently before the window, through which the dark snake of the river Thames lay coiled before the palace of Westminster. In the distance, the moon was peering nervously over the horizon, casting an eery glow along the turbulent river.

The desk was clear save for a pile of papers on one corner, a decorative inkwell and a stand containing several quills.

“Where are the spare sheets of paper?”

“Top left-hand drawer.”

Closing the door, James made his way across to the desk and checked each of the drawers. None contained weapons and the top left-hand drawer was neatly stacked with fresh, clean sheets of paper. He extracted a few and dropped them on the desk before crossing to face John Bradshaw.

“Sit behind the desk and prepare to write.”

Bradshaw slunk around to the opposite end of the desk and sat down. He took a sheet of paper and placed it before him, then opened the inkwell before dipping a quill tip in. “What do you want me to write?”

“I, John Bradshaw do hereby confess...” he paused as Bradshaw began writing, “that I did use torture to extract information from Margaret Hind.”

Bradshaw threw the quill down onto the paper, splashing ink across the page. “I’m not writing that.”

“You are. Do you know how painful a shot to the knee is? I am told it is excruciating.” James moved around to the front of the desk, squatted down, and placed the muzzle of the pistol onto Bradshaw’s left knee.

“That classifies as ‘under duress’. This document will have no legal validity.”

“It will nevertheless serve my purposes. Now write.” He emphasised the last word by pressing the gun muzzle hard into the kneecap, causing Bradshaw to wince, but he nevertheless reclaimed the quill, took the blotting powder, poured it over the ink blots and blew it in James’s direction, causing James to sneeze.

“Ah, could it be that there are some balls hiding under the snivelling cowardice of the exterior? My, my.”

Bradshaw glared at James but continued writing. “Yes, ‘that I did order the use of torture to extract information from Margaret Hind’.”

“An improvement, yes. To continue, ‘because of which, Margaret Hind died.’ Then sign it.”

Silence reigned, disturbed only by the scratching of the quill and the frequent tinkle of quill again inkwell lip. Finally, Bradshaw again tipped blotting powder onto the page and blew the powder towards his interlocutor. Taking the document and standing, James leaned over to enable him to see in the dim candlelight what had been written. His lips moved as he studied the document, and then he stood erect again.

“Now for the next one. Same start, ‘I, John Bradshaw do hereby confess...’” he waited for Bradshaw to catch up, “’that I ordered Herbert, the jailer of Newgate Prison, to have sex with Alice Hind, aged nine years.’ Then sign.”

As soon as Bradshaw had blown the powder from the page, James took it and studied it carefully. He then returned both documents to Bradshaw. “Fold them properly and use your seal to close them.”

Bradshaw complied, before James took them and tucked them inside his baldric.

He stepped away from the desk, taking a candlestick with him.

“Thank you for your co-operation, gentlemen. Now, Winters. Remove his boots for him.”

The servant stood and sidled around the desk before kneeling to remove his employer’s boots. He stood and looked at the highwayman.

“No harm has come or will come to you – unless you try to interfere. Now go back to your chair and sit quietly until I have left.”

James waited while the servant returned to his chair, and then turned to face Bradshaw.

“If I feel that you are continuing your pursuit of me, at least one of these documents will become public knowledge. My personal inclination is to slowly disembowel my wife’s killer, but I know that it is not what she would have wanted, not the way she thought. However, such evil cannot be allowed to pass unpunished.”

He drew his pistols, aimed, and fired. Bradshaw howled in pain as his toes exploded into a gory mess on the carpet.

“If you leave me alone, then this will be our last encounter – unless you are unfortunate enough to travel on a road I am working. I tend not to work in the city, so you might be safer remaining within the confines of London. Winters, you might want to find some bandages for your master. I’m sure that you don’t want him to bleed to death. Personally, I couldn’t possibly care any less.”

--oOo--

A gust of wind funnelled through the narrow, dirty streets and tugged at James’s Puritan hat, forcing him to grasp the rim. Some rags skittered along the gutter in playful pursuit of one another, and a random wayward billow lifted ashes and tried to blind the two figures in the small, covered cart. As he approached the courtyard where he hoped to find his children, James pulled back on the reins and guided the cart around the corner, scanning for any troublesome troopers or constables. None were visible, but across the other side he could see Mizzler lying on the ground feeling his chin, whilst a bigger boy was shaking Alice, James’s daughter.

He turned to Moll, who was seated beside him hugging her knees in the icy blasts. “I think it better if the captain deals with this, don’t you?”

“Definitely. At his age, he won’t fear the Puritan very much.”

Swapping hats, James took his sword from beneath the seat and jumped down from the cart. Moll picked up the reins and walked the horses to the centre of the yard to turn the cart around while James ran to the rescue of his daughter.

The bully had his back to the square, so he did not see James approaching. But Alice did.

“Papa.”

The boy turned, not releasing his hold on the girl.

James smiled without mirth. “Yes, Olly, that is right. I am her father, and this is a sword. An awfully long, terribly sharp sword. You are currently mistreating my daughter, and because of that, you have placed yourself in serious mortal danger. But you are now going to gently put her down, and she in turn is going to go and get her brothers. Do we fully understand one another?”

The boy gulped and nodded before putting Alice down and backing away. “I didn’t mean no ‘arm, mister.”

“Unfortunately, that is not what it feels like to your victims. And you will address me as ‘captain’, not ‘mister’. I knew about your bullying, which is why I came prepared. Now, you will sit on the floor while I conduct my business. You will stay there for several minutes after I depart. Have you got that?”

“Y-yes sir.”

“Yes, captain.”

“Yes, captain sir.”

“Better.” James watched as Alice picked up baby Charles and took Samuel by the hand. “Alice, walk over to the cart in the corner and climb aboard. I have business to conduct here.”

He turned to Mizzler, and winking, inclined his head towards the corner, hinting for him to go away. He turned back to the bully, raising the tip of his sword to rest on the boy’s chin. A spreading darkness around Olly’s groin told James that he had his full attention.

“Olly, I know who you are and will have no trouble finding you again if the need arises. I told you to stay here for several minutes, and I meant it. You will also stop bullying smaller children – I do come to this area from time-to-time, and I shall be asking around. And my daughter was telling the truth; I am her father, and I am indeed the dashing highwayman Captain James Hind. Goodbye.”

He stood fully erect, sheathed his sword, and trotted back to the cart where he took the reins from Moll and flicked them to get the horse into motion.

Once they were out of the square, he removed his hat and replaced it with his puritan hat. His sword went back under the seat. He turned to his children behind him in the back of the cart. “Alice, there are clothes over there for all of you. Get changed quickly and remember that you are now a devout puritan. No smiles, no laughing. I brought the swaddling board; it is over there in the corner. Strap Charles in – is he wearing his clout?”

“Yes, I changed him just before Ollie arrived.”

“Good. There are more in that bag, and we can rinse them out in streams once we are in the countryside. I’m trusting you to watch the boys for me while I get us out of London.”

“What about the people who were looking after us? They’ll be ever so upset.”

“I can’t help that, but I have arranged for them to receive much more money than they paid for you, and they will also be told that you are all now safely with your father. That is the best I can do for them.”

He turned to Moll. “Thank you for all of your help.”

“Always a pleasure, James, always fun. But ‘dashing highwayman’? Laying it on a bit thick, don’t you think?”

“Absolutely, Moll. Anyway, made me look good in front of my children.”

“It certainly did that. Now, if you pause at the next corner, I can jump out and walk home from there. Good luck.” She turned to the children in the back. “Enjoy your new life, kids.”

Once Moll had jumped down, James turned to address his children. “We are going to a new home, but it is a long way. Alice, you can come and sit beside me if you want, but you must wear that bonnet if you do, and still watch the boys.”

“It’s uncomfortable, Papa,” protested his daughter.

“I am sure that it is,” responded her father, “but do you think this hat is comfortable, or these breeches? The breeches really itch, and I just want to tear them off but most important of all, I want to get us all safely out of London. So, we will have to wear these clothes until we are outside the city. Then we can change into our proper clothes. I have brought some of the clothes from home, and everything else from there is waiting for us in our new home.”

Muttering, Alice pulled the bonnet on. James allowed her to sit beside him but kept the big Bible between them. Once she was settled, he reached over and tidied her up before taking the reins and urging the horse forward.

“Alice, I am really counting on you to watch the boys for me. We must go through the centre of the city to cross the river.”

“Papa, I have been looking after them since they killed mama.”

“I know, my feele, and I appreciate it. I am enormously proud of you. Now, I shall try to keep to smaller streets as much as I can, but we will pass soldiers and it is important that they do not look at us too closely. Remember that we are going to a place where you can be free and happy. All we have to do is to get there. I want to try and cross the river at London Bridge, but they often post soldiers there, so we might have to go a lot further along.”

“I’m hungry, Papa.”

“Once we are out of danger, we shall stop and eat; I did bring some food. But it just is not safe here. Best way is for you to sit and read your bible, keeping an eye on the boys. If we are stopped, let me do the talking, you say nothing unless you have no choice. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Papa.”

She opened her Bible to a random page and began quietly reading, glancing now and then into the back of the cart where the baby was now sleeping, and Samuel playing with some wooden toys James had placed in the cart.

Maintaining a steady pace, James guided the cart through the winding back streets of the East End of London, heading towards London Bridge. Eventually, he pulled the cart to a halt.

He turned to Alice. “Alice, I’m just going down to the corner to see if there are soldiers guarding the bridge. I’ll only be a moment, just stay here and stay quiet.”

He jumped down and walked to the corner with Fish Street Hill. Down towards the bridge, soldiers were stopping all travellers. His worst nightmares were realised. He rushed back and climbed back aboard the cart.

“Lots of soldiers, we’ll have to go another way.”

He flicked the cart back into motion, turning up the hill before taking the road west along Great Eastcheap. As he turned, he glanced back at the bridge down the hill; no soldiers were climbing the hill in pursuit. He pressed on along to Cannon Street before turning south onto Dowgate Hill to join Thames Street and trundle slowly along, parallel to the river. At the end of the street, he turned the cart towards the river and Dung Wharf, knowing full well that soldiers would not willingly stay there because of the stench.

Reaching the wooden wharf at the bottom of the hill, he jumped down and approached a boatman sitting calmly smoking his pipe. Dressed in raggedy clothes, the man sported a bushy moustache but was otherwise fairly clean-shaven.

“Walter, good to see you’re still here. How’s business?”

“Not good. The soldiers are too busy lounging around on blockades to chase criminals, so you are the first approach I have had in days. Across for you and your cart?”

“Yes. Can you get me to Paris Garden Stairs? Is it safe?”

“No, last I knew there was a patrol sitting there. Copers Bridge is your best bet. You wouldn’t get the cart up Paris Stairs anyway.”

“What a bufflehead I am. Thank you, Walter; I had not thought of that. Will five shillings be enough?”

“Ten, more like. These are difficult times.”

“Seven?”

“Eight, and that’s my lowest.”

“Very well, eight, and you tell no-one.”

“Done.” Walter stood and walked along the wharf. “I’ll bring ‘er around, wait there.”

James returned to his cart. “We’re crossing the river here. We should be home free once we get to the other side, but I want to put a few more miles behind us before we can relax.”

“Does it smell over there too?”

“No, Alice, but the reason I know that there are no soldiers here is because it smells so bad. Over the water it should be fine. In fact, we’ll soon be between fields once we cross.”

“Good. I don’t like it here, it smells of danna.”

“Yes, which helps us. Try not to breathe too deeply.”

He turned as he saw his daughter look towards the river, where Walter was bringing his barge alongside the dock and tying it off. He unhitched the horse and led him to the bollard holding the barge, where he tied the reins. He returned to the cart, pulling it onto the barge with the giggling toddlers still inside. Eager to be useful, Alice untied the horse and led him onto the barge, where James took the reins from her. He smiled at her as she hugged his leg whilst gazing up adoringly at the father she had been sure she had lost forever. Walter closed the back of the barge, retrieving the boarding planks before untying the ropes and poling off across the river, upstream towards Westminster.

Four-year-old Samuel was now looking over the sides of the cart, spellbound by the moving landscape, while Alice too looked around as they crossed the mighty Thames, but without once releasing her hold on her father’s leg. James looked down and smiled as he scanned the banks as well as the river itself for any dangers.

Walter brought the barge around and expertly docked against the rickety wooden quay. Tying off, he opened the end and lay out the boarding planks. James gave the reins to Alice, who proudly led the horse off the barge while Walter helped James unload the cart. Having hitched the horse back onto the cart, James turned to Walter and gave him ten shillings.

“It was worth it, Walter, you were right.”

He climbed back aboard the cart, Alice adjusted her bonnet and clambered up to sit beside him. Her hand sought his and she gazed up at him as he flicked the horse into motion.

“We should be safe now, Alice. As soon as we have passed those buildings you can see down the road there, you can take the bonnet off.”

She gripped his hand as they trotted down the road, only letting go when they were between fields. She scraped the bonnet from her head and threw it behind her.

“No, Alice, get the bonnet back, we don’t want it to get too dirty. I don’t think we will need it again, but I cannot be certain.”

“Is it far, Papa?”

“Quite far, yes. The closer we are to soldiers, the less safe we are and there are lots of soldiers in London.”

“But no soldiers where we are going?”

“Not really, no. A few sailors perhaps, but they are no trouble.”

“Will we get there soon?”

“No, Alice, we will have to stop in an inn to sleep tonight and perhaps tomorrow.”

“There are soldiers in the inns around where we were in London.”

“I know, sweetheart. But I know the inns where it will be safe. We shall stop to sleep first at a village called Ripley, I have told the landlord to expect us. It’s not too far, about twenty miles. But we shall eat well before then. In fact, if you look behind my seat, I think Moll put the food basket there.”

“Good. I’m starving.” She scrambled to her feet, almost lost her balance as the cart lurched in a pothole, and then stepped over her seat to find the food.

“Don’t eat it all, we can stop soon, and all eat together.”

She smiled, took a hunk of bread from the loaf before returning to sit beside her hero.

--oOo—

Moll rapped on the door. Around her, dusk was casting its cloak over the dingy square. The air was now still, and nothing moved save for Moll herself, who was looking around her in the fading light. She heard footsteps, and then the door opened to reveal a slightly overweight woman with a worried expression.

“Yes? Have you seen my children; they seem to have vanished?”

“Yes, I did see your children, I saw them leave with their father “

“No, he’s resting after a hard day’s work.”

“No, I mean their real father. I know that you paid the jailer Herbert for the children. That opportunity arose after he had had sex with the girl and, also on orders of Judge Bradshaw, overseen the death by torture of their mother. I am sure that Alice will have told you this.”

“Well, yes, but I thought it was the imaginings of a child.”

“It was all true. Her father tracked them down and has now taken them to his new home, where he hopes that they will be out of danger.”

“But they are my children now.”

“No, they are not. But their father – Captain James Hind, if you are interested – asked me to come here, thank you for your care, reassure you that they will be happy and well cared for and to give you this,” she held out a small pouch.

The lady took the proffered item and peered inside. She gasped as she saw the glint of gold. “What is this? Does he think he can buy our children?”

“No, he is saying ‘thank you for looking after my children whilst I was away’.”

“They are our children.”

“Look, lady, I am merely delivering this money to you. I have no idea where he has taken them, nor do I wish to know. I do know that it is a safe place and far from the prying eyes of John Bradshaw. You would be wasting your time searching, and Oliver Cromwell has far bigger fish to fry. I have done as I promised; we do know how much you paid for the children, and you have profited greatly. Enjoy it but make no attempt to find the captain’s children.”

**Chapter 45**

“Are we there yet?”

James resisted the temptation to react angrily, this being the twentieth time the question had been asked today.

“No, my feele, but nearly. Our new home is in these woods but a bit further along. We’re nearly there.”

Alice jumped up and down, almost falling from the cart. James laughed. “Stop that, I know you’re excited, but you’ll hurt yourself. How are the boys doing?”

Alice pouted but stepped over the seat to enter the cart. A moment later, she leaned back over the seat to talk quietly. “Charles is sleeping but that corner of the cart really smells bad, so I think his clout needs changing. Samuel wants to come and sit with us up front.”

“Very well, but you must keep a tight hold on him. Leave Charles for now, we shall arrive in a few minutes and as he is asleep, he won’t know the difference. We will be turning up that path you see up ahead on the left – it’s bumpy but we need to warn the lady who lives there that we have arrived. Our cottage is just a little further.”

The two children climbed into the front and sat on the bench. Alice put her arm around four-year-old Samuel and took a tight hold of her father’s hand. He glanced down at her, pleased, before returning his attention to turning the cart into the woods along the rutted track leading to Constance’s home. As they emerged from the trees, James saw that much work had been done clearing the undergrowth. John Harris stood in the far corner, leaning on his musket, which James was sure would be fully cocked and loaded ready to fire. A scythe leaned against a nearby tree trunk.

Seeing James, he leaned the musket against the tree trunk beside the scythe and strode across with a beaming smile. “Captain. So glad you are back. I know that Mistress Constance will want to be told; she is up at the big house at the moment. Perhaps you would like Miss Kitty to come with you to help you move in?”

“Miss Kitty?”

“Ah, of course, she came down after your last visit. She has been Mistress Constance’s maid for years. She moved down from the big house two or three weeks ago.”

“Well, I don’t know her although I’m sure Mistress Constance would only have a maid she could trust. Perhaps not at this stage, but if it be convenient, do please let Mistress Constance know that we have arrived.”

“I shall, sir. I did lay a fire for you, ready to be lit, although today it be warm enough. Having said that, I am sure that the children will be hungry.”

James laughed. “Always. Don’t worry, John, we’ll be fine.” He urged the horse forward, turning to take a track leading through the trees.

After a few minutes, the track opened onto another, smaller clearing with a white-painted cottage with a thatched roof. The grass had been flattened in a path through the trees on the other side but was otherwise long and uncut. A porchway ran along the side of the cottage, leading to a door beside a small window.

“Here we are. Alice, we have finally arrived. We are there. Welcome to your new home.”

As soon as the cart stopped moving, she stepped over young Samuel and jumped down from the cart. She started to run towards the cottage door before pausing and returning to help her little brother scramble down. James sat and smiled, exhausted, and exhilarated.

A shame Constance isn’t here, though, he thought, then raised his eyebrows in surprise at his own thinking. Flustered, he jumped down and walked around to the back of the cart to extract the baby. Recoiling slightly at the stench, he lifted the board with the baby still strapped to it and leaned it against the cartwheel. “Good heavens above, Charlie boy, what have you been eating?” He unstrapped the child from the boards and helped him to stand on the grass. “Alice, can you come here and help me with Charles?”

--oOo—

“KITTY.”

Constance threw her jacket on the floor as she ran towards her room in search of a change of clothes, “KITTY.”

“Yes Mistress?” Kitty was already in the bedroom.

“Oh, there you are. Quickly, the Captain has arrived with his children, and we need to get over there – I need something nice to wear.”

Kitty smiled. “I’m sure he doesn’t care what you wear, Mistress.”

“Kitty. Kindly keep your dirty mind to yourself. Now, what about the brown dress with the lace?”

“That needs washing. You wore it yesterday; I haven’t had time yet.”

“Green?”

“That will be good, and you do look very good in it, if I may say so.”

“You may, now help me off with this.”

Five minutes later, they left the cottage and walked rapidly, almost running, towards James’s cottage.

“Mistress, we have no need to run, surely – he will still be there if we arrive a few minutes later, and is it not unseemly to arrive out of breath?”

“You’re right Kitty,” Constance stopped a moment, put her hands on her knees and recovered her breath, “one must not appear too eager.”

As soon as she had recovered her breath, she glanced at Kitty, who was calmly waiting, nodded and they continued at a more sedate pace.

As they approached the clearing, Constance turned to Kitty. “Is my hair tidy?”

“It is mistress. Do stop worrying; if I may say so, he will love the sight of you.”

They continued and emerged into the clearing. Immediately in front of them, a young girl was cleaning up a baby who was giggling and wriggling. A toddler was standing in front of the cottage licking the wall whilst they could see James at the other end of the clearing separating the horse from the cart.

“Kitty go help the girl with the baby, I’ll stop the toddler,” instructed Constance, striding across to grab the child, who was spitting out the moss he had licked from the wall.

“Hello, who are you?”

“I am Miss Constance, and I will help to look after you now. What’s your name?”

“My name is Samuel Hind,” he enunciated, “Do you make nice pies? Mama makes nice pies.”

“Not really, no. But Kitty does, and she will be helping too.”

“Who is Kitty?”

“That is Kitty over there helping your sister.”

He stared across the clearing at the chaotic efforts to change the baby, who was giggling uncontrollably. An arc of urine from the baby caused both Kitty and his sister to step back. A peal of laughter erupted from the toddler, “He staled on them.”

“Everyone seems happy here,” James had approached unnoticed and was standing beside them.

Constance gasped and stood up, flustered. “Greetings, Captain. I am sorry I was not here when you arrived.”

“No-one could expect you to wait around for me – even I did not know when we would arrive; I was unsure of the day, let alone the time. I am simply delighted to see you.”

“And I too am pleased to see you and your family. Have they seen inside yet?”

“No, it’s been a bit chaotic since we arrived, especially with the baby. But now that you are here, I am sure we can make some progress.”

He glanced down to where Samuel was sitting eating some grass. “Samuel, stop that.”

“But I’m hungry.”

James looked at Constance, who looked back, then they both burst out laughing.

“Kitty.”

“Coming, Mistress, almost finished here.”

“Is there any food? The children are hungry.”

“Not here, but I can run back to the cottage and get some.”

“Good.”

“Just let me finish tying the baby’s clout.”

“Very well. Bring a bottle of wine, too. I brought one back from the big house but put it down and forgot it.” She looked back at James who was staring at her.”

She fidgeted a little and patted her hair.

“Shall we have a look inside?” James was smiling down at her.

“Oh, yes, of course.”

As they mounted the steps to the small porch, a voice behind them caused both to turn. Alice was running towards them with the baby in her arms, “Wait for me.”

Samuel had climbed up to their level while they waited and now clung to his father’s leg. James looked down, laughed, and swooped to pick the boy up, swinging him onto his shoulders while the boy giggled uncontrollably.

Constance smiled. “Watch his head on the door jamb as we enter.”

--oOo--

Kitty rubbed her hands together as she left the children’s room and closed the door. “Wonderful children you have, sir.”

James frowned. “Perhaps. I certainly think so. But it is, or rather was down to my wife. I was absent far more than I was present. That will change, I hope.”

Constance reached across the table and placed her hand on his. “So do I. But if you must be away, we will take care of the children.”

James looked at Kitty.

“Yes, James, she does know who you are, and I do trust her.”

James nodded, looked at Kitty before indicating that she should take a seat.

“If you know who I am, you know what my profession has been for several years. But now that my wife has been murdered, my children need me too much for me to take too many risks. Besides, I am getting old, I can lay claim to thirty-five years already. He paused. “Oh, how time flies. But I have far higher responsibilities now, serving His Majesty across the water. Sometimes, this entails me being away but there is no nobler cause.”

He turned to face Constance. “I have yet to ask; in which direction does your father lean?”

Constance giggled. “He has no idea who you are, of course, but he is an admirer of Captain Hind and has little time for Cromwell and his quockerwodgers; bad for business, he would say. I wouldn’t really say that he was a Royalist, but he is certainly no Roundhead.”

“Good. I want to be confident that the children are safe. I have no doubts about your trustworthiness, but I urge the both of you to remain completely silent concerning my true identity.”

Both women nodded.

Kitty piped up, “Sir, ‘tis not my place to reveal anything concerning my mistress, and that does include those with whom she associates.”

James laughed and turned to face the blushing Constance. “Do we associate?”

Constance was spared the embarrassment of a reply by a brisk rapping. James stood, collected his pistol from a nearby shelf and opened the door. John stood there, his musket over his shoulder.

“I came to accompany Mistress Constance back to her cottage; ‘tis not completely safe in these woods in the dark.”

“Come in, John, we were just finishing up – the children are finally quiet, thanks to Kitty.”

“Thank ‘ee Captain.” He stepped up, removing his hat as he entered. As James closed the door, John seemed to come to a decision.

“I was posted up at Oxford during the troubles, sir. I remember especially a young captain who caught the eye of His Majesty by his daring exploits in the surrounding areas. Indeed, his success at stealing roundhead supply trains was what kept us fed, as I recall.”

“Oh?”

“Aye, sir. One Captain Hind. I will never forget his face.”

“Is that so?” James began to raise his pistol.

“I remember him as a truly honourable man. The sort of man I would trust with my life. The sort of man I would trust around my mistress. He would have nothing to fear from me, it would take some of the load from my aged, aching shoulders if I knew that such a man was close by and willing to protect her. I can never betray my mistress; I can never betray my king, nor could I betray his officers to the roundhead usurpers.”

The two men stood eye-to-eye for a moment. John looked away towards Constance who was watching with evident alarm. “All is good, milady, but we do need to leave before darkness descends.”

--oOo—

As the sun started to peer over the treetops, James sat on the cottage steps, smiling indulgently as his children ran around the clearing, clearly enjoying the freedom as well as being back with their father. Alice especially, he noticed, kept looking up at him as if to make sure that he had not disappeared.

He stiffened as he saw someone picking their way along the path from the direction of Constance’s cottage, but relaxed as he recognised Kitty, who was carrying a basket. He stood and walked across to meet her.

“Good morning, Kitty. I assume that your mistress is also awake. I have some matters I wish to discuss with her.”

“She is, sir, and she sent me here with some food for the children. She asked me to stay and keep an eye on them while you visit her as she too has some matters to discuss with you.”

Little Samuel had spotted Kitty and was running across the clearing to greet her. He tripped on a divot and fell with a cry. They both rushed across to where he sat brushing himself down.

“Are you alright?” asked Kitty.

“Yes, miss Kitty. Do you have any food, I’m hungry?”

James smiled. “I’ll leave you here with them for now. Lady Constance expects me?”

Kitty nodded.

“Very well, in that case I shall not tarry; it never does to keep a lady waiting.” James set off down the lane.

--oOo—

As James rounded the last tree, Constance jumped to her feet from where she had been seated on the steps. Brushing her rear, she marched across to where he was approaching. “Good morning, captain.”

James smiled back. “Good morning, milady.”

“Do come inside, Kitty prepared a small repast for us before she left.”

They climbed the steps and entered the cottage. As he closed the door, James saw old John watching from across the clearing; John raised a hand in acknowledgement, and James nodded back.

He turned to see Constance standing just behind him. On the other side of the large room, he could see bread and cheeses on the table, along with a pitcher of what he presumed was a mild beer. Constance threw her arms around his neck, pulled his head down to hers and kissed him. Surprised, James responded. She moved her arms down to wrap around his chest and pulled him tightly to herself. James found his body responding to her, but this time she did not pull away; instead, he felt her moving her body against his.

After a while, he pulled away and looked down into her shining eyes. “Shall we eat? I have some important matters to discuss, and you do truly distract me violently.”

Flustered, she took a moment to recover her composure before taking him by the hand in a new, easy familiarity and leading him to the table. “You are right, sir; we must deal with food and other matters before we can relax properly. I want nothing to distract us today.”

James said nothing but sat facing her. She poured him a mug of beer, then her own, all without removing her eyes from James’s face. He was just starting to feel uncomfortable when she broke the eye contact and handed the still-warm loaf to him to break.

James reached into a pocket of his jacket and extracted a sealed document.

“This is an important document. It is a signed confession by John Bradshaw to the deliberate murder of my wife. If he gets his hands on me again, I am sure that I shall suffer the same fate. But this document, in the right hands, will also destroy him; Cromwell is no friend of mine, but I do know that he is suspicious of Bradshaw, and should this document come to his attention, whilst it may not save me, it might help to steer England back onto a more honest path in readiness for the return of his Majesty in due course.

“Obviously, Bradshaw knows that I have this, and indeed another, equally damning letter which is deposited with a friend in London. It is the knowledge that I have these letters which I hope will deter him from trying to locate me. So can you please keep it in a safe place until and unless there is a need to use it. Which I hope will be never.”

“I shall place it with my father’s documents. He will store it for me, or more particularly Mr Willoughby, without intrusion. I see that Bradshaw placed his seal on it, but I do not think he would know whose seal it is.”

“Unlikely.”

She placed the letter to one side, then took a moment to compose herself while James sat back. She took a deep breath and lifted her head to look at him.

“When you rescued me from my attacker, I was grateful to you. I even then felt a surge of something I did not recognise, but which I attributed to my feelings of gratitude; that was not how I had planned to become a woman.

“Our subsequent meetings brought us closer together, but I was unsure and confused by the feelings I was encountering; they were entirely new to me. Thus, I was pushing you away, not because I wanted to push you away but because I simply did not know what was happening. This is no longer the case. I know now what is happening, I know now why it is happening and I understand now what I should do next and how I must respond. If you will permit me, that is.” she suddenly blushed and looked down at her hands, which she had been wringing together beneath the table, “The truth is, I have fallen in love,” she took a deep breath, “with you.”

James stood and rounded the table to stand beside her. She looked up at him, her eyes wide, her pupils dilated, her face vulnerable.

He held out his hand. “Come.”

**Chapter 46**

“Oh, James.”

**Ode to Captain James Hind**

Here is the matchless mirror of his kind

That genteel English robber called Captain Hind

Whose courage on the road there’s none could quell

And who did in ingenious pranks excel

No murderer he; he took your gold, ‘tis true

But he made you think ‘twas out of kindness too

With so genteel an air, he all would do.

Nor would he e’er his pistol use, or sword

To those who’d be so kind as to take his word

But unto those that would rebellious grow

That he could master ‘em, he’d make ‘em know

To the poor that wanted, he still would give

And willing was that everyone should live

But unto those he knew had got enough

And would not part with it, he was very rough

And yet for all his noble airs you’ll see

He swung at last upon the fatal tree.

September 4th, 1652

**The Epilogue**

I hope you enjoyed the tale - I certainly enjoyed writing it and learning about such a pivotal moment in British History. For the most part, I have tried to stick as close to the truth as possible. However, where it helps to keep the story flowing, I claim creative licence in the context of the timing and location of some events. Philip Stafford was actually executed earlier than allowed in here, and Captain Howard’s attacks on Lord Fairfax’s family and on General Cromwell took place some years later. Additionally, there is no evidence whatsoever that James Hind and General Fairfax ever met.

The chapters detailing the betrayal, capture, trial and escape are all fiction, although Hind was betrayed and captured in the end - but that falls well outside this book. Otherwise, what you read up to that point was mostly true. From then onwards, I have allowed my imagination to run riot, I’m afraid, as the truth was much too mundane. Later, he was part of Charles Stuart’s disastrous attempt to reclaim his throne and was probably instrumental in the King’s escape.

Charles Stuart, Charles I, was merely sticking to a dearly held principle, and was not wrong; if anything, it was the law at fault. I therefore tried to portray him as human -- fallible and stubborn. I felt that history shows him somewhat harshly; he was not a competent king, but neither was he an evil one. If one takes the time to look back at his father, it is easy to see where his arrogance arose.

Cromwell was a master manipulator and politician, and he made sure that he was absent when most of the more unpopular decisions were taken. However, Henry Ireton, his son-in-law, generally drove them for him.

The sole exception to this rule was the actual execution of the king; Cromwell was very much to the forefront in this, the driving force. Perhaps he realised that it would take a lot of bullying to achieve this end, and he certainly provided this in abundance, although he was absent from the platform at the actual moment as he was busy distracting Lord Fairfax, his superior officer, who had come to delay the execution.

Was Cromwell the masterful and ruthless manipulator as I have portrayed him? I believe this to be true. After all, many of the more successful modern politicians often fall into this category, so why not four hundred years ago?

Was the trial legal in the first place? There is much debate on the subject, but most seem to argue that the end justified the means. Personally, I can never accept such a weak argument. It was illegal under English Law, be that right or wrong, and it certainly was not the only time that the Roundheads ignored the actual law in order to achieve an objective. There was no provision in English Law for the Monarch to be brought before any Court. A glaring omission, perhaps, but it was so, and therefore the trial was, by definition, unlawful, exactly as Charles declared.

Was the trial fair? Under modern law, we regard a refusal to plead as a ‘not guilty’ plea. In that trial, they took it as a ‘guilty’ plea. Bradshaw allowed no time for any defence and cut short any attempts by the King to defend himself. Guns were used to stop any form of protest from the gallery, so it cannot qualify as any form of fair trial.