

Planning, foresight, and flexibility were the key elements to any well-executed criminal endeavor. William de Veres, waiting along the side of the ancient southern highway between Brighton and Crawley, preferred to think of this current venture as a patriotic duty rather than a felony, but he *had* expected it to be a bit more entertaining, and not so damnably cold.

A lacy web of frost coated the slick carpet of brown and yellow leaves and a metallic wind bit his face. Overhead, a small flock of geese, stragglers on the journey south, flew in a ragged V silhouetted against a sullen sky. They saluted him as they passed with mocking cries. Last evening, cozy and warm, huddled in a corner of Crawley's aptly named Highwayman's Inn he had planned for everything but a sudden drop in temperature. *Bloody hell! I'll freeze to death if I don't expire from boredom.*

The shadows lengthened. He blew on his fingers, warming them, and then tucked them under his armpits as he shivered in the cold. It would be full dark soon, but it could be hours yet. He hunched his shoulders and settled in to wait. The little bird's house wasn't far from here. He had passed the overgrown track that led to her door yesterday... sought it out in fact...he wasn't sure why. He seldom returned to a conquest and it wasn't his habit to think back, but something about her tugged at him, arousing his interest.

It couldn't have been her lovemaking. She was hardly the sort of woman he frequented. She was far more skilled at needlework than sporting in bed. But she had given him aid, shelter... *and comfort too*, he thought with a grin. It was a harsh world and such gifts were rarely offered freely. It must be *that* peculiar novelty that fixed her in his thoughts. What harm in stopping by to visit once his business here was done? He had offered her his aid after all. Not a pretty recompense when he hadn't given her his name. He could give it to her now and...

*It's been almost two years. She's likely married with a husband and a squalling brat. A righteous Puritan goodwife who will not thank me for knocking on her door.* He shrugged his shoulders and turned his attention to the road.

The full moon had risen in all her glory, bathing the woods in an opalescent glow. Other than the bitter chill, it was a perfect night for pillage and adventure, but his quarry should have passed this way by now. Perhaps he had misunderstood. Maybe they had decided to stay another day. Perhaps they had taken a different route, though back roads were particularly tricky this time of year and this road was the best route to Brighton. He leaned against his tethered horse, his eyes still on the road as one hand reached back, searching for—

"Is this what you be seeking milord?"

"Lord thundering Christ, Tom! What in hell do you think you're doing?"

"I'm staying right behind you, milord. 'Tis the safest place to be in these woods is what I'm thinking."

William accepted the proffered flagon of brandy, taking a long swallow before handing it back to his servant. Its sweet heat coursed through him, thawing him from the inside out, waking his brain and loosing his tongue. "How many times must I tell you, there are no headless horsemen, ghosts, goblins, trolls, or witches in these woods?"

“That is not what they say in the village, Master William.”

“And you will believe a gaggle of rustic blockheads over your own lord?”

“Begging your pardon, milord. But them that lives here might be expected to know. And even if you’ll not credit it, they say there be murderers and villains and highwaymen too.”

William put an arm around his anxious servant’s shoulders, pulling him close to speak soft and low. “Have you yet to notice, dearest Tom? The highwaymen and villains would be you and me.”

“Just so, sir. And if they’re right about that, who’s to say they’re wrong about the rest?”

William clapped him on the shoulder. A lanky tow-headed young man with a charming gap-toothed grin, Tom had followed him from England to France, and though at times he was decidedly obtuse, he was always loyal. “Your logic is impeccable, Tom, but I assure you, the only thing you have to fear in these woods tonight is me if you fail at your commission. I need you further up the road to give warning as our quarry nears. You know the plan.”

“I do, my lord. But I don’t understand why we are we risking our necks out here when we could be safe and warm back in Bruges. You were almost killed the last time you came this way, and you’d have lost your head had you been captured, Master William. Hanged maybe. And that’s not very dignified for a lord.”

“Indeed, it is not! I should have hated to embarrass you so, Tom.”

“If you’re bored, milord, surely there are other ways to ease it?”

“We are here,” William answered with exaggerated patience, “because *my* master is an indigent itinerant beggar, who is sometimes mistaken for a monarch, and sometimes for one of his own menials. His own mother charges him for meals. *He*...cannot pay his servants, and he walks the streets unable to afford a coach. All the princes of Europe have turned their backs on him and someone has to feed him. I can only hope you’ll take from this the appropriate lesson, my dear Thomas, and someday do the same for me. Now hie yourself off to yon bushes as we agreed, or I will strip you naked and tie you to a tree for the banshee to ravage.”

Sighing, Tom covered his features with a scarf and pulled his hat brim down over his eyes. “You should do the same, Master William.”

“I am not ashamed of what I do. Now shoo! Go away!” He motioned toward the bushes with an impatient wave of his pistol.

“It is a good deal warmer like this, milord.”

“I am happy for you, Tom. Off you go before I shoot you.” Tom’s superstitious fears reminded him of a poem he had been working on, and he played with some verses, to while away the time.

Not twenty minutes later, a low whistle and the rumble of a carriage traveling at a full speed interrupted his reverie. It was a tactic meant to discourage men such as him, but it was a foolhardy one to use at night, and it would not work against the surprise he had in store. As the coach rounded the bend and barrelled straight for him, he stepped out onto the highway waving a lantern, one booted foot planted firmly on a sturdy log he and Tom had wrestled across the road. Any attempt to jump it or swerve around it would result in a wreck, and he was gambling the

coachman would not take that risk.

*Now the fun begins.* His eyes lit with excitement and he didn't flinch as the coach careened toward him, lurching sideways in a spray of dirt and stones. William put down the lantern to draw his pistols as the cursing coachman fought with his team, laying them back on their haunches in a desperate scrambling stop.

"I do beg your pardon. I've forgotten *le mot juste*, but I believe it's 'Stand and deliver!' or...Ah! Tom. There you are. What is the other phrase one uses?"

"I believe it's 'Your money or your life,' sir."

"How very trite. Your money or your wife would be more amusing. Perhaps we'll try that next time, just to see what happens." Though he spoke to Tom, his eyes were fixed on the driver. "You there! Coachman! That was nicely done. Now keep your hands where I can see them. I am not in the habit of shooting competent servants, they are far too hard to find, but I will put a bullet between your eyes right now, friend, do you reach for that blunderbuss you've been eyeing." His words were clipped and cold. The coachman, a grizzled fellow with a wiry frame and the steady eyes of one who'd been a soldier, eased his hands away from the weapon and raised them in the air.

"Good fellow. Now down you get. You will kindly remove your boots and clothes and hand them to my man."

The coachman surveyed William's thigh-high leather boots, his silver trimmed coat and matching cape, and his broad-brimmed, long-plumed hat. "I am one who fought for the young king too, milord. But not every man can abandon kith and kin and follow him to foreign shores. It's colder than a witch's tit this night. If you leave me bare-arsed in the woods, I'll not see morning."

"What's your name, man?"

"Alan Jackson, sir."

"Fair enough, Alan Jackson. You may cut loose one of these nags. Make for Brighton rather than Crawley mind. And when you get there, use this to drink His Majesty's health." William reached into his purse and flipped the man half a crown. "You needn't worry for your master." He spoke loud enough so that the heretofore-silent passengers could hear. "Provided he is polite and accommodating, he shall come to no harm."

Alan Jackson looked doubtfully to the coach. He had survived two rounds of civil war, had a wife and three daughters to provide for, and wasn't paid near enough to warrant spending a freezing night trussed naked in the woods. He doffed his cap, cut loose one of the lead horses, and was soon galloping down the road toward Brighton.

"You are aware he will double back once he thinks we're gone, and alert the watch in Crawley, Master William?"

"The thought has crossed my mind, Tom. But no matter. We'll be in Brighton by then, and someplace else soon after." He clasped Tom by the shoulder, and nodded towards the coach. The remaining three horses shuffled and snorted, clearly still alarmed, but there wasn't a peep from the carriage. "Shall we take a closer look at our prize?"

William strolled over to the horses, murmuring in a soothing tone as he righted traces, patted withers, and rubbed ears and noses. When the animals had settled down, he directed Tom to the left side of the coach with a brusque nod. He approached from the right.

He tore aside the leather window flap, raised his lantern, and peered inside the carriage. A portly gentleman with bushy brows glared back. William thought he looked rather like an angry badger, but for the too tight clothes and the pistol waving back and forth.

“You didn’t expect this, did you, sirrah!” the badger challenged with a triumphant sneer. “Make one move, you cowardly cur, and I shall shoot you through the heart.”

Ignoring him, William leaned against the window frame, angling his head to get a better look at the badger’s companion. She was a pretty chit with tumbling blonde curls, pouting lips, and naughty blue eyes that couldn’t hide a flash of excitement. He grinned and winked at her.

Her chaperone, bristling with indignation, raised his pistol and aimed it with shaking hands.

Tom spoke from the window on the far side. “I would advise against that, sir. Your barrel is not loaded and mine is primed and ready. It might distress the young lady to see your blood spilled all over the carriage.” *His* hands did not shake and his weapon pointed directly at the man’s temple.

“Well met, Tom! Look you here. We’ve plucked ourselves a fine Sussex squire and his beautiful daughter.”

“She is not my daughter—she is my wife, you plaguey bastard!” the squire sputtered. The girl watched William wide-eyed, her bottom lip quivering.

“My apologies then, sir. And my condolences to you, madam.” He motioned with his pistol. “Now if you would both be so good as to step from the carriage?”

Tom, one leg through the window and already halfway in the coach, snatched the man’s pistol, then gave him a hard shove that sent him tumbling out the door.

“Allow me, madam.” William reached in a hand to help the young lady descend.

“Blasted highwayman!” the badger cursed, dusting off his hands and knees. “Rogues and rascals the lot of you! Spineless cowards who hide in the dark rather than do a good day’s work. I shall see you hang at Tyburn. Mark my words!”

“There seems to be a misunderstanding. We do not hide, sir. We are king’s men. I am William de Veres.” He performed a courtly bow. “We are here collecting funds for His Majesty, King Charles II. A small donation that will be remembered kindly if you will...or a tax you shall forfeit to contribute to his cause, if you will not.”

“King? What king? There *is* no king, unless you speak of that degenerate wastrel! That...that debauched whoremonger who was rightly cast from England’s shores.”

Tom cocked his pistol and the girl shrieked in alarm.

“Tsk tsk, Tom. There’s no need for that.” William reached out and lowered the barrel of the weapon so it pointed at the ground, and then returned his attention to the badger. “No king you say? Be careful, sir. You mark yourself a traitor. Now you may consider it a fine, and count yourself lucky to escape with your hide.”

“You are a Royalist cavalier, sirrah? I suppose ’tis only fitting you represent your outlaw

king by robbery and pillage.”

“I represent *England’s* king. And yes, of course we rob and pillage. Only the lazy ones do not. This is growing tedious. Let’s finish the thing shall we?” William cocked his pistol and the squire peeped in fright. “Your purse, your jewelry, and whatever is in that box, if you please. And not another word if you value your life. You may insult me, but I will not allow you to insult your rightful king”

The squire hurriedly divested himself of his rings and pocket watch, and tossed them and his purse at William’s feet. His face went white and he moaned, almost crumpling to the ground, when Tom pried open the locked strongbox revealing more jewelry and an impressive quantity of newly minted gold and silver Commonwealth coins. A smile of satisfaction lit William’s face as he sifted through them. He had hardly believed his ears in Crawley when he heard the man tell his wife it was safer to move their valuables at night without an escort, so they would not draw attention to themselves. *’Tis true what they say. A fool and his money are soon parted.* How fitting that Cromwell’s coin would soon be keeping Charles in wine and whores.

He threw a couple of gold coins to Tom, who caught them deftly. “Keep a horse to carry this lot, and use the others to move the coach off the road before you cut them free. Do you fancy his wig and coat, Thomas? They will be of no use to Charles.”

“Aye if it pleases you, milord. They will fetch a pretty penny from a pawnbroker.”

William waved his pistol at the shivering couple. “You heard him. Down to your shirt and drawers, sir. You may keep your boots. You’ll have need of them.”

Puffing and sputtering, the corpulent squire began removing his wig and coat. The woman started fumbling with her stays. William laughed and stopped her with a hand on her arm. “Not you, *ma belle demoiselle*, though I assure you, His Majesty would look upon the gesture most kindly.” He chucked her under the chin, and then ran an expert finger along her décolletage, stopping to fondle a lovely amethyst gold-and-pearl pendant that hung between her breasts. Moving to stand behind her, he unclasped it, trailing his fingers along her neck and shoulders as he did. He tugged gently at her earrings, removing them too, and murmured hot against her neck, “Is there ought else you would contribute, my dear? For your king?”

The squire gasped in outrage as his mesmerized bride turned to face her handsome assailant, seemingly offering her lips to be kissed. William smiled and took her hand instead, bending to kiss her knuckles as he carefully examined her rings. “Is there one in particular you would like to keep, love?”

“Ahem!” The voice came from the side of the road.

“Yes, Tom?”

“There could be another coach along here at any moment, milord.”

“Quite right! Keep your favorite, girl. And hand over the rest. Quickly now.”

The woman’s smile was much older than she was. She handed over three rings, keeping the one that was clearly the most expensive.

“You’ve given him your wedding ring? My mother said you were little more than a strumpet and I would not believe her!”

“Shall I kill him for you after all, my dear? They say the lot of a young widow is much happier than that of a young woman married to an old man.” William laughed aloud when she seemed to consider it. Before she could answer, he jumped into the ditch and slapped the horses on the rump, sending the startled animals galloping into the dark.

“Cold-blooded blackguard! You will abandon us here like this?”

“I am a gentleman, sir. I would never do that to a lady. You, however, are a different matter. You have your boots, and Crawley is but five miles away. If you run you should stay warm enough.”

“Eh?”

“Run.”

“What’s that you—”

“Run!” William raised his pistol and fired it just over the man’s head. The half-clothed squire hared off down the road, his white shirttails flapping behind him like ghostly sails in the moonlight. William took off his coat and wrapped it around the girl, and then he and Tom loaded the remaining horse with their booty. “Well done, Tom. We’ll be off now.”

“What about the log, milord?”

“The log?”

“It is a hazard, Master William, to any who pass this way. Someone might be killed.”

“Tom...Tom...Tom.” William sighed and shook his head. “You don’t really grasp the concept of being a villain, do you?”

Together they grunted and heaved, rolling the heavy obstacle off the road, and then William leapt onto his horse and held out his hand. “Well, girl, will you sit and shiver until help comes along? Or shall I drop you at an inn in Brighton?”

She grasped his hand and placed a foot in the stirrup, and he pulled her up to ride pillion behind him. He wheeled his horse to look back down the road. They could just make out a fluttering white form disappearing round the bend. “Your man runs well, my dear.” Laughing, he turned his horse in the other direction, and set off at a gallop down the road.