

ONE NIGHT IN ENGLAND

1764

Rain splattered the beaten track, the aural canvas in turn painted with the clatter of horse's hooves and the rumble of the carriage. Now and then the sky flashed with lightning, and after long seconds the growl of thunder rose all around, like the roar of seas.

The driver's face was lit by the yellow glow of the lantern swinging at his side. Water pried at the glass casing, unable to reach within and snuff out the tiny flame no matter how it tried. The coachman's eyes were narrowed, both in concentration and against the thrash of the rain. Every now and then he would cast the whip across the rump of his charges, but he doubted they could even feel it. His arse was numb from cold; so too would theirs be. Another crack of lightning, another toll of thunder. The gap between light and sound narrowed: the storm was getting closer.

Daniel was somewhat drier in the body of the coach, though his boots still dripped with the black graveyard mud that had sucked at them an hour before. He'd stared out of the window for a while as they'd left the village, but had given up once they'd hit open country. Now the only sights available were lit by forks of lightning and veiled behind rivulets of rain, and they held no comfort for him. Trees and fields. The odd scarecrow spun wildly in the racing wind. He looked down at his gloves, the leather worn pale from the rough handle of the spade. The carriage jolted over ruts in the road and he could hear the splash of the wheels trawling through puddles beneath the tattoo of the horses' hooves. Upon crossing a particularly large dip or peak, the coach would jar angrily, and the coffin before Daniel would clunk on the wooden floor.

The driver was first to notice the sound. Though his mind was otherwise distracted, he was attuned to the symphony of the horses, the percussive rhythm of their gallop, the snorts of their labour. An echo rode on the wind, an echo of the horses' gait. Another travelled the road this night. Gripping the reins, the coachman shifted on his seat to check the track behind him. He could see nothing, but thought he caught a stray whinny on the wind. He twisted to look around the other side of the carriage but the rain drove into his face. The sound of strange hooves was growing louder.

Daniel heard the sound too and muttered a prayer into the dark night.

A traveller. Just an innocent, riding home to his bed.

He thought of his cargo and knew it would not be so.

The driver tossed the reins and snapped the whip across the straining hindquarters of the horses. Daniel watched him through the slit window at the front of the coach. He felt in the pockets of his coat and withdrew a pistol and a bag of powder. He heard a bray from the road behind as he loaded the weapon.

Rain lashed the driver's face as he risked another look back. As he did so the lightning flashed and for a moment the world was bright as a summer's day. The image froze like a painting in his mind: the cloak of cloud spread overhead, the bumpy road

stretching back as far as the eye could see. The black-clad figure, bent low on its steed, in hot pursuit of the coach. As if in resignation, the driver gave the reins one last flick.

Daniel watched through the thin window as the figure galloped past the coach. He saw the rider pull something from his cloak and a moment later there was a bang and flash that nothing to do with the storm. He felt the jerk of the carriage as the horses started, and peered through the front window. His driver was unharmed. He turned back to the door window to see the black rider aiming up at the coachman. A flick of the gun-hand. A signal to stop. Daniel clutched his own pistol in a clammy hand.

The carriage rumbled to a halt by the side of the track. The moonlight did little to illuminate the scene; all Daniel could see was the fence separating field from road. Crops trembled in their ranks. The stranger kept his gun trained on the driver and swung down from his horse. He indicated for the driver to do the same. The lower half of his face was masked by a cloth, and he reached for a tricorne hat fixed to the saddle of his mount, settling it on his head to keep the rain out of his eyes.

‘How many inside?’ he called out.

‘Just the one sir. We carry no money, no goods that would be of interest to you.’

The assailant cocked his head.

‘You know nothing of my interests.’ He waved his gun towards the door. ‘Open up.’

Daniel watched the exchange and tucked his own pistol under his black cloak. His driver approached the door and, with a concerned glance through the window, opened it. The highwayman stepped forward, gun pointing into the carriage.

‘Out you come. Stand and deliver.’

Daniel wrapped his cloak around him and climbed down the wooden steps. He slipped a little, but could not reach out to steady himself with his hand already round the butt of the pistol. He regained his balance and squelched down into a deep puddle. Water flooded his feet and rain soaked his face.

‘We have nothing to give you. Had we anything it would be yours. But we carry nothing of value.’ He spoke bitterly, and the rain flecked from his lips.

‘I think I’ll decide that for myself,’ the highwayman responded. He reached for the carriage lantern and unhooked it. His horse snorted and then started to piss. It steamed in the cold. The thief stepped to the back of the coach and grunted at the empty rails.

‘No luggage,’ he said out loud.

‘As I said,’ replied Daniel. He caught the eyes of his driver and nodded. Flicked his own eyes down at his cloak, trying to signal his plan. The highwayman turned.

‘No luggage on display that is.’

He placed a foot on the step and then paused. He looked at the two men. The driver, his face weather beaten, his clothes soaked through. The passenger, shivering in fresh exposure to the elements, huddling into himself. The highwayman pointed the gun at the driver.

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‘You. Go first. What are you carrying?’

The driver stepped up and into the coach. He stepped over the coffin. The thief kept his gun trained before him, and pointed the lantern into the darkness of the carriage. An eyebrow raised when he saw the casket. The other followed when he heard a click behind his head.

‘Another step sir, and it will be your last,’ said Daniel. The gun in his hand trembled a little from cold, but at this range it wouldn’t matter. ‘Hands in the air. Keep hold of the torch. Drop the gun.’

The highwayman bit his lip. The rain kept falling. Daniel felt the water squelch in his boots.

‘I said hands in the air.’

The highwayman raised his hands.

‘And drop the gun!’

At this the thief smiled.

‘I’m afraid not. What kind of outlaw would I be without a weapon?’

‘I will shoot you.’

‘Then pull the trigger.’

A lighting flash, and thunder a second later. Daniel looked at the coffin inside the coach. And fired.

A damp click. He pulled the trigger again. Nothing.

The thief turned and aimed his own weapon at Daniel.

‘You might have remembered to cover your gun from the rain.’ He waved his own gun, where the locking mechanism was covered with a leather shield. ‘Now. Your money or your life.’

‘We have nothing for you.’ Daniel spat the words out in defeat.

‘As you wish.’ The gun flared and Daniel felt a pain like a hard punch in his gut. He felt his useless pistol drop from his hand, and stumbled back a step. The thief turned his attention back to the driver.

‘You. Open it up.’ He gestured to the coffin. The coachman obeyed without a word, hauling at the lid of the coffin till it slid upwards, the nails releasing their hold. The thief grunted. He’d expected his victims to have hidden their valuables within, but it looked to contain a genuine stiff.

‘All the way now. I want to see if your friend died for nothing.’

The driver cracked the lid off and dropped it to the floor of the carriage. Thunder and lightning struck simultaneously. The highwayman brought the torch in close.

The body was that of a woman. She looked freshly dead. The skin was very white and her clothes hadn’t mouldered.

‘Who is she?’ asked the thief.

‘She was his wife,’ muttered the driver. He couldn’t see Daniel’s body past the glow of the lantern.

‘And now she will see him in the afterlife.’ The murderer prodded at her cheek with the barrel of his pistol, and stroked it down to her breasts, still firm. Very fresh indeed. ‘And what is this...’

The brass tip of the gun clinked softly against the chain of the pendant hanging round the woman’s neck. He squinted to see it in more detail. It seemed to be a jewel surrounded by elaborate metalwork. He looked closer: a ruby treasure guarded by exquisitely carved strands of silver.

The highwayman stripped a glove from one hand with his teeth and spat it onto the floor of the carriage.

‘Don’t try anything,’ he warned. The gun remained in his right hand. Without taking his eyes from the driver, he felt for a clasp on the pendant chain, fingers lingering for just a moment too long on the dead woman’s breast swell, then on her ear lobe. He unclipped the fastener and lifted the necklace before his eyes. The chain was striking, alternately silver and red. The jewel fascinated him, and it was all he could do to stop from staring at it. Wrenching his eyes away he slipped it into a pocket inside his coat.

‘My thanks.’ The highwayman lowered himself back down the steps. He hung the lantern back at the front of the carriage. The driver still had yet to emerge. He removed his hat and tied it back to the saddle of his mount, and re-holstered his weapon. He hauled himself onto his horse, and trotted to the coach door. The driver knelt before the coffin. His gaze shifted from the casket to dark ground outside, where the body of Daniel surely lay.

‘I’m sorry for your friend,’ said the highwayman. He wasn’t.

‘I’m sorry for you,’ said the driver.

The highwayman looked at him quizzically. Then spurred his horse and wheeled around, riding back down the road, leaving his victims behind him.

Above, lightning flashed. After several seconds, the thunder roared its answer.