

## Chapter 3

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### RATTLE RIDES OUT

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**T**HE SUN was down and the sky a red bowl over the darkening countryside when I drove the cart through the crooked iron gates of the Rattle Manse, and the stars had come out by the time I had put Old Nell away in the stable. Midnight, my master's fine black hunter horse, was not there, nor his tack. I brought my purchases into the house by way of the kitchen, and there found a note pinned to the long deal table with a paring knife.

*Dear Mr. Bristol,*

*I shall be out all night, and possibly longer. Do not wait up,  
I pray.*

*Yrs  
J. Rattle*

This was a fairly typical communication from Master Rattle, who (despite his station in life) seemed to find it amusing that he had any household staff at all. He'd grown up with many servants in the much finer seat of his family. His father was an influential and wealthy lord, and his elder brothers were celebrated, too: one

was an admiral in the navy, the other an importer of tea. James Rattle was himself, as he'd once said to me, nothing more than a spare boy in case one of the other two died prematurely. As a result he'd been given one of the hereditary estates and a trifling income. Although he joked about it, I think he acutely felt his father's indifference to him. I cannot speak of my own father's indifference, for no one knew who he was. Neither of us could remember our mothers, who had perished young in the fashion of the times.

The Manse was a big place, to be fair—far too big to maintain, and set in the middle of extensive grounds. Yet among the estates thereabouts, it was the least. The roof was falling in, it was overrun by mice (which Demon the bulldog steadfastly ignored), and the cellar flooded for a month every spring.



Having been employed by him for two years, I thought I understood my master fairly well (which, as you shall learn, shows I understood little enough). He had two reasons for not employing more servants: one was money, always in short supply—gambling consumed his entire annual stipend in a month or two—and the other was privacy. Most servants employed to mind such a wreckage as the Manse would do nothing but carry tales into town all day. Master Rattle detested wagging tongues.

I made for myself a supper of ham and butter between two slabs of bread, a clever way of taking meals invented by John Montagu, 4th Earl of Sandwich. Then I set some sausage and the jug of beer on the table for my employer—the kitchen door was nearest the stables, and among Master Rattle's eccentricities was his use of the kitchen door as if it were the main entrance to the house. His father, he once remarked, had never set foot in his own kitchen in sixty years.



This accomplished, I took myself off to bed.

## *The Accidental Highwayman*



It was the deepest part of the night, with the moon almost down behind the trees, when I was awakened by the distant sound of breaking crockery. I was quartered in a backstairs room above the kitchen, and the noise seemed to come from directly below. My first thought was burglars. Demon the bulldog had been sleeping on the rug at the foot of my bed. The short fawn fur on his back stood up and he began to screech in the way of barking peculiar to the breed. I bade him be silent.

The two of us went along the passage and crept downstairs, me in my stocking feet. I felt my way along without a candle, not wishing to advertise my presence, and stole to the inner kitchen door. Demon let me lead the way, not being a bold creature. When I looked into the kitchen, my caution was forgotten and I rushed in.

My master was sprawled upon the table, face down, the jug of beer shattered on the floor. By the moonlight coming through the small windows, I saw a dark stain spilling across the boards. It didn't look like beer.

Once I'd ascertained my master was senseless, I lit a candle from the embers in the hearth. Master Rattle was bleeding profusely from a wound in his body somewhere, his face white as paper ash. That was the first thing I saw.

The second thing was that my master was clad entirely in black from head to foot, except for the bright scarlet turndowns on his boot-tops. There was a black mask across his eyes. I smelled horse sweat and gunpowder.

I went to my master's side and my foot collided with something under the table. It was a gold-hilted sword, unsheathed, the blade smeared with blood. I struggled to turn him face upward. The unfortunate gentleman was delirious, his eyes fluttering.

"Mr. Bristol," he croaked. "My apologies."

"I'll fetch the doctor, sir," I said, pressing dishcloths over the

wound in his chest. I confess I was more frightened than I had ever been before.

Master Rattle redoubled my alarm by fiercely gripping me upon the arm, as if all his strength was concentrated in that one hand. "No doctor!" he snarled. "Promise me that. Not a soul knows of this but you and I."

"But Master," I said. "You—"

"The devil take me!" he interrupted, and fell into a faint.



I did what I could to stop the flow of blood. I'd had a little experience with such things, acrobatic work being an endless source of injuries. But I'd never seen a bullet wound. It was a terrible sight, and I felt sick in body and soul as I bound it up. Regardless of my master's entreaty, I fully intended to call the doctor at the first possible opportunity. The poor fellow wasn't in his right mind, after all.

At length I could do no more. I wanted to get my master up to his bed, but moving him could have been fatal. Instead, I fetched some bedding from the cupboard and tucked it around the patient right there on the kitchen table, with a pillow under his head. Master Rattle appeared to be sleeping, not unconscious, and a little color had returned to his face. I fervently hoped the worst of the danger had passed. I put Demon up on the table for company, and the little dog sniffed the bandages and licked at my master's face.

I would have rushed out straightaway, but lacking shoes, I hurried up to my bedchamber, the candle-flame stretched almost to the point of extinguishment. Upon catching sight of myself in the small looking glass over the washbasin, I paused to rinse the blood from my hands. It wouldn't do to ride about in the dark looking as if I'd murdered a man. Just as I was buckling my shoes, there came a great pounding at the front door of the Manse.

In a panic now, I rushed down the stairs, through the library, drawing room, and great hall to the grand foyer. The candle went

## *The Accidental Highwayman*

out entirely. Demon had set to barking again, and sounded like a cat with pneumonia. Just before I reached the front door, a chilling thought occurred to me. Someone had done terrible violence to my master. Who else but the assassin would be at the entrance at this hour of the night, come to finish the job? I slowed my steps. The hammering on the door was redoubled, and now I could hear someone calling, “come out, Jack, d\_\_\_ your eyes!”

“One minute,” I called, trying to sound calm. I relit the candle, which cost me four lucifer matches to accomplish, so much was I trembling. The phossey\* stink of them was awful. I could hear the men—there was more than one voice—arguing outside in muted tones. I began to wish there was a pistol about me. There had been one in my master’s belt, come to think of it.

If only I presented a more imposing figure! With clumsy fingers I retied the ribbon that held the hair at my neck, straightened my weskit†, and took a long breath. Then I threw back my head and squared my shoulders in imitation of Master Rattle, strode to the door, and opened it—none too wide.

Three men stood on the broad granite steps. The mark of habitual villainy was written plainly upon their faces, visible even by candlelight. One wore an immense two-cornered hat with an ostrich plume in it; this ornament made the stranger look half again as tall as he was. The man beside him wore a sailor’s short jacket and Monmouth cap, and had an iron hook in place of his left hand. The third man was the unpleasant character with the scarred face who had observed me at the Widow’s Arms; one of his sleeves was torn and spattered with blood.

“What is the meaning of this?” I demanded, before the men had opportunity to speak. I kept a hand on the door, ready to fling it shut if they rushed me.

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\* Matches of that period were made with phosphorous. The smoke from them was poisonous in sufficient quantities.

† Weskit: waistcoat or vest.

“We would have speech with your master,” the man in the enormous hat replied. His voice was as unpleasant as his demeanor.

“The master is unavailable,” I said, as haughtily as I could manage. “Good night to you, sirs.” I moved to close the door, but to my dismay, the second man thrust his hook into the gap.

“Belay that, young squire,” he growled. “We come to see old Jack, and we means to see him.”

“There’s no Jack here.”

“Yer master, swab. By whatever name!”

“If you must,” said I, trying to imagine what a proper servant would do in this situation. “Please wait here while I rouse him from bed. I doubt he’ll like it very much.”

I prayed the man would remove his hook from the door, and my relief was tremendous when the sharp point slipped back outside. I closed the door firmly, locked it, and walked unhurriedly back into the depths of the Manse. As soon as I was out of view of the front windows, I ran for the kitchen.

“Master,” I cried, and wrung my employer’s hand.

To my inexpressible relief, his blue eyelids fluttered open.

“You didn’t call the doctor, I trust,” he whispered.

“No, sir,” I said. “But three ruffians have come to the door inquiring after you. They’re outside now.”

“Has one of them a hook?”

“Yes, and another a tremendous big hat with a feather in it, and the third a saber cut to his cheek.”

“Worse luck,” Master Rattle sighed. He took a deep breath and his next words came out all in a tumble. “I haven’t the strength to defend us, lad, but I assure you we are in mortal peril. It was Mil-liner Mulligan shot me; that’s him in the hat. But he doesn’t know if the ball struck me or not. Everything was confusion. The hook is Sailor Tom, and the third a mate of his: I added a scar to his collection tonight. Escape by the kitchen door, I pray you. Flee.”

“I’ll not leave you defenseless, sir.”

“I know it. But I wish you would. Do not take my part in any of

## *The Accidental Highwayman*

this. If you must remain here, you're going to have to get rid of them somehow. I can't think of a way. My mind is in a fog. There's a loaded pistol in the console by the door. If they attack you, kill one of them if you can; it may discourage the others."

With that, Master Rattle gasped and fell back once again, senseless. Demon sniffed at his nostrils, as if to tell whether life remained. My mouth was as dry as a ship's biscuit, and my heart thumped in my chest with as much fury as the hook I could now hear applied to the front door. I'd no idea what to do, and no time to do it. So I returned through the house, scouring my brains for a means to turn the visitors away.

It took all the courage I had, but with the pistol from the console concealed behind my back, I opened the front door once more. "I am surprised to find the master is not at home," said I. "May I take a message?"

It seemed like the worst possible excuse to avoid allowing these three ruffians into the house, but nothing else had come to mind. They muttered between themselves for a few moments, and then Milliner Mulligan nodded his head, making the hat sway like the masts of a schooner.

"I'm not surprised to hear that," he said with grim satisfaction. "We shall return on the morrow."

With that, the men descended the steps and hurried away from the house. I closed the door behind them, tucked the pistol in the back of my belt, then raced around the ground floor of the Manse, checking that all the doors and windows were locked (those that would even shut properly). It was a futile exercise and I knew it.

I returned to the kitchen and found my master awake, staring sadly at his dog. Demon stared back, his wide-set brown eyes fixed upon our master. "They've gone, sir," I said. "But I expect they shall return soon enough."

"They'll come back with reinforcements," Master Rattle said. "If I could lift my hand I'd take up my pistol, but I'm done in. Save yourself, Mr. Bristol. Take Midnight and ride away from

here before they return. But—ere you go, furnish me with some brandywine.”

I took up my master’s icy hand. “I’ll not leave you, sir,” I said. “You gave me my first proper home and treated me better than anyone ever has, and got hardly any work out of me in return. I owe you a debt of gratitude and I mean to repay it by defending your life.”

“Sentimental fool!” Master Rattle said. “I forbid you to take my side in any of this. Did I not say so?” A thread of blood trickled from the corner of his mouth, and I dabbed it away with a corner of linen. Then he muttered some nonsensical words, as if in a dream.

“If you would defend me, then go fetch the magistrate,” he said, after the wave of delirium had passed. “Treat me as an enemy of the law, and do nothing that would aid my cause. I beg you. I’m finished, and there’s no rope long enough to reach me where I’m going. But first bring me that wine. And fetch paper and quill, and I’ll write out my will. Quickly, before I lose my senses again.”

To my shame, I found my face was wet with tears. This was no time for childish grief. I had to save Master Rattle and needed clear eyes to do it. To conceal my sorrow, I fetched wine, paper, pen and ink, and some sand to blot the ink dry. My master propped himself up on one elbow and drank directly from the wine bottle, coughed painfully (which brought fresh blood to his lips), and lay back, his head lolling.

“Don’t be long, Mr. Bristol,” he said, in a voice almost too faint to hear. “Midnight is quick, but so are my enemies. I must rest awhile.” With that, he closed his eyes.

At the thought of the handsome black horse, inspiration came to me. The moon was down and it was the darkest hour of the night. With a little luck—if his enemies were on the road, and if they suspected he was unhurt—I might yet save the Manse, and therefore my master, from further attack.

“I’ll need your riding-costume, sir,” said I.



## Chapter 4

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### THE IMPOSTER

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**I** MOVED TO enact my plan as swiftly and surely as I could. Midnight did not tolerate strangers, but of all the people in the world, I'm proud to say the horse was second-fondest of me, who brought him apples and fed him mash. He was still wearing the saddle, his reins dragging along the ground. His flanks were wet and chill with sweat. Never before had Master Rattle failed to put the animal away properly, no matter how late it was, or for that matter how drunk he was.

But Midnight was startled when I approached him. He could smell the blood, and his big dark eyes rolled with confusion at the sight of me dressed in his master's clothes. The black broadcloth costume fit me not too badly (although the long coat was prodigiously heavy), the scarlet-lined riding-boots were only a trifle too large, and with the mask across my eyes and the cocked hat\* upon my head it would have taken an owl to spy the difference. I wore my own shirt and weskit, as they weren't soaked with blood. Only

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\* Cocked hat: a hat with the brim turned up to form two or three sides. Also bicorne and tricorne, respectively.

Midnight could tell that I was not his accustomed rider in the clothes. Horses are not so easily fooled as men.

I was surprised to see Midnight had a white, diamond-shaped blaze on his nose, until I patted it to reassure him, and discovered the marking was made with chalk.

On foot I led Midnight out of the stable yard and down the lane behind the Manse, careful to make as little noise as possible. At a suitable distance from the house, I leapt into the saddle and we galloped straight onto the broad road that the trio of villains must have taken to leave the property. It had been less than an hour since I closed the door behind them. With any luck they were still on the road, whether coming or going.

Despite my fear, I was thrilled to ride Midnight. He was a graceful animal, powerful as a bull, seeming to flow down the road like the wing of some huge raven. Again I confess childish vanity: We must have made a fine-looking pair, me in my inky-black redingote\* with the long skirts flying, a gold-hilted sword at my belt, and the mighty horse with his neck stretched out and his nostrils flaring, mane whirling like black flames.

We had gone less than a mile when I heard a coarse voice shouting up ahead on the road. Several man-shapes emerged onto the path from the concealment of some trees, and I distinctly heard Sailor Tom cry, "Whistlin' Jack's upon us, men, repel boarders!" There was a clash of steel, the yellow flash of a musket, and I spurred Midnight off the road as the shot whined past my head. The horse sprang over a tall hedge as if it were a whisk-broom and pelted off across a field on the other side. Behind us came shouts of desperate fury and men crashing through the thicket.

I didn't dare shout anything lest I give away the trick—my voice was nothing like my master's—but I could still make noise. I drew the pistol from my belt and fired it wildly behind me. A volley of

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\* Redingote: riding coat. A jacket with long, voluminous tails, cut for horsemen.

## *The Accidental Highwayman*

curses followed the report of the weapon, and then Midnight was galloping full tilt through a wood, and it was all I could do avoid being swept out of the saddle by low branches. I kept my course directly away from the Manse, so that none would think “Whistling Jack” intended to return.

Twenty minutes later, I was back at the Manse by a roundabout route, with Midnight tied to a tree behind the carriage house in case the marauders had decided to pursue their original purpose. I crept onward to the kitchen door, then pulled open the small scullery window beside it. I’d unlatched it for just this occasion, the door being locked. I didn’t dare open the door in case my master’s enemies were already in the house—they would certainly hear the clank of the old, stiff lock.

I climbed through the window, and there the stealth ended. The window frame tipped my hat over my eyes, and then I tangled my legs in the sword. Thus encumbered, I fell headlong over the stone sink, smashed a stack of china plates, broke a couple of bottles, and upset a tin washtub that clanged like the bells of St. Ives Cathedral. Demon started making his shrieking sounds, somewhat like a hyena with its head caught in a jar. So much for caution. I limped into the kitchen.

My master was dead, it appeared, his underclothes stained with blood. Demon stood between his feet, small but determined, his short, tawny fur bristling and his face rumpled with agitation. The Master was entirely still, his eyes fixed heavenward, his face as white as sugar. But when I entered the room, those glassy eyes rolled in my direction.

“You’d make a fine cat burglar,” Master Rattle whispered. “But why are you dressed in my costume?”

“Sir, I think I lured them away,” said I, still breathless from my adventure. “It worked: They thought I was you. I heard them call your name, and they shot at me, sir. But Midnight took me off like a feather on a hurricane, and we left them handily behind.”

“You’re a fool,” Master Rattle said, his voice as faint as falling

snow. "It was a good idea of yours—they won't dare return tonight if they think me uninjured. After that it doesn't matter. But I told you not to take my part in any of this, and now you have. You've sealed your fate."

"You're not done yet, sir," said I, trying to sound encouraging. But my voice broke a little with grief. The shadow of death was unmistakably upon him.

"I think by now you know my secret," Master Rattle continued, ignoring the encouraging words. "I'm Whistling Jack the highwayman. That's why I'm out all night on occasion. My income doesn't support a gambling habit and a drinking habit at the same time, so I've more than made up the deficit by robbing members of my own social class. I once stopped a coach belonging to my very own uncle, in fact."

"I never knew, sir," I said, as if my ignorance were some sort of error. My worst fears had come true. That scold Molly Figgs had been correct in her wicked conjectures, and I had served a criminal for two years and thought myself a gentleman's gentleman. But at the same time, I knew him to be a good fellow, and kind, and a friend when he might more easily have been a tyrant. He *was* a gentleman. How he made his income didn't change any of that. I was pulled both ways, and all the while my head whirled with sorrow and fear.

Demon was licking his master's hand now, and the sight of that little creature's devotion stung fresh tears to my eyes.

"You never suspected, that's why," Master Rattle said. "You're far too generous for your own good. But there's no time. Already my sight fails me. Mr. Bristol—Kit, if I may—you'll find my last will and testament beside my hand. Take it. Turn Nell and the gray loose; they'll find homes soon enough."

"I'll change out of these clothes, sir," said I, "and fetch the king's men once—if—you're gone. There's an end of it. I'm guilty of nothing, so I'll remain. There's no need to flee into the night."

"No, Kit," my master said, and found the strength to grip my

## *The Accidental Highwayman*

wrist. He sat up a little, so urgent was his concern. His eyes blazed. "There's a fellow about named Captain Sterne who will hang any man found with me. But he's the least of your worries. Through your efforts on my behalf tonight, you are now bound to the very task I so feared—the thing that made me such poor company these last few months."

He drew a long breath. It sounded like hard work. "You must bring Demon and Midnight to the deepest part of Kingsmire Forest, and there you'll find an old witch. She'll reveal your folly to you. Give to her my beloved bull-pup for safekeeping. Midnight is yours."

Then my master turned his head to look upon the dog, and said, "Demon . . . farewell."

"An old *witch*?" I blurted. "Oh sir, this is all too much for me. Let's get you a surgeon, and—"

But James Rattle, alias Whistling Jack, was dead.

At that moment there came a great noise at the front door of splintering wood and breaking glass. I snatched up the fold of paper at my dead master's hand, shoved it into the breast of the redingote, and rushed out the kitchen door. At the threshold I whistled sharply, and Demon, with a last, beseeching look at our master's mortal remains, bounded after me.