

HOME

By

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Revenge.

He savoured the word on his tongue, letting it run like an infection through his veins, thinking it remarkable what a fire burning in a man could do. It could keep him alive all these long years away and then bring him back home.

“Nicholas Andrews, I sentence you to seven years’ transportation,” the judge had intoned, allowing himself a merciful smile at keeping another felon from the gallows dance, and all for the crime of cutting a few purses. He could still hear the words with their sumg inflection and feel his hands gripping the polished wood of the dock.

He’d expect things to be bad, but the truth proved far more cruel than anything he could have imagined. Puking his empty guts out in the hold of the ship, fettered hard and helpless as the guards and sailors taunted him. Then, in Jamaica, a heat so harsh and hellish he thought it might burn the skin from his back, so intense the thought the devil was pricking his lungs. They’d set him to work cutting the sugar cane, day after day out in the steaming, stinking fields, wounds from the machete festering on his hands and arms, healing slowly and painfully as he prayed with quiet fury for his preservation. For the chance of revenge.

He survived two bouts of fever, raving off his head and swearing murder, so they told him later as he lay in bed, thin as a pauper’s dog and so weak he couldn’t even raise his hand to take the drink they offered.

It was education that saved him, those brief years he’d hated of sums and making his

letters. After the clerk died, the plantation owner had needed someone who could read and write and Nick had pushed himself forward, grovelling and despising himself for his arse-licking words, but knowing it was better – that anything was better – then serving the rest of his sentence in the cane.

The job became his life, and he was good at it, quickly trusted for his accurate accounting and good hand. The master never suspected the occasional coins he filched and buried in the dirt beneath a tree.

Every single morning he formed his lips to spit the name of the man he hated – Richard Nottingham, Constable of Leeds, the man who'd caught him, put him in gaol and landed him here. He'd have his blood for that. Seven deep cuts from the knife, one for each year he'd been gone, the last gentle and loving across the throat so he could watch the man's life bubble away in hopeless breaths. And tell him just why before he died.

When his freedom finally came, the days ticking slow like a clock running down, the ticket of leave in the pocket of his threadbare coat, the owner asked him to stay. Nick looked at him as if the words made no sense. All he knew now was home and the flame burning strong and hot in his heart.

The ship landed in Liverpool in January 1732. The money he'd stolen at the plantation had paid for his passage and food, hard tack riddled with weevils and small beer turned sour before the gale-ridden crossing was halfway complete.

He arrived penniless to an England that seemed like a foreign land, in the grip of a bitter, bruising winter which had no mercy. It was no work at all for him to cut the purses of a pair of drunken sailors, the skills of his old life still sharp. He ignored the port whores, all pox-ridden, rowdy and consumptive, and bought a hot meal and a bed from the night instead.

In the mirror he caught a glimpse of himself, his shoulders stooped, face burned dark and lined, hair matted and hanging to his shoulders, thin and grey though he wasn't yet thirty. He pulled the worn blanket over his body. There were fleas in the sheets, but at least the bed didn't rock and shiver in the waves. The next morning, without a second thought, he turned his back on the coast and began walking east.

By the time he reached Winnat's Pass the pain from the cold weather had seared to his bones and his old boots were ribbons of leather, feet flayed and bloody from the stones and ice on the roadway. But he was lucky, finding a stranger for company whose corpse at least provided new shoes, even if it added nothing to his small supply of coins; when the snow melted in the spring they'd find the body and never know what happened.

From Sheffield he made his way north, face set tight against the snow and the chill, the ragged coat held tight around his body as the gusts tore at his cheeks more brutally than any overseer's whip.

He passed Wakefield in the early dusk. His money was running precious thin and he was looking at a hungry, freezing night burrowed in a copse when he saw the farmer, a florid man with ugly, fat thighs jiggling in his breeches as he walked briskly home through the fields.

It took little to slice him, pull the body into the trees and take the rich, warm coat. There were coins in the waistcoat, enough to see him to Leeds.

Back to his home.

Back to Richard Nottingham.

Back to kill.

He crossed Leeds Bridge in the late morning, blending with the market crowds, and heard the

traders shilling their wares up on Briggate. The snow piled against the houses and walls and soot-blackened, the slush icy and treacherous in the streets. He could smell the tannery on Swine Gate and the rich earthiness and piss of the dye works down by the river. For a small moment he stopped to stare up at the bulk of the new, graceful Holy Trinity Church. Soon he was at the top of Kirkgate, watching silently as people lurched and slid around him.

He'd been standing there for nigh on two hours, his feet feeling as though he was still shackled and his hands numb from the wind's frigid tongue, when the Constable emerged. Slowly he followed, unnoticed and invisible in the throng, beyond the Moot Hall with it's bloody, etallic tang of butchers on the ground floor, up to the Head Row. He watched through the window as Nottingham entered Garroway's Coffee house, hailed some men and sat with them. Steam blurred his view through the glass and he walked on.

He'd seen what he needed, and closed his eyes as a smile creased his lips. The man was still alive, still here.

He could do it tonight, he could watch in the darkness as the blood stained the snow, then he could breathe out and live again.

His fingers twitched.

No, not tonight.

He wanted the act to last, for each moment to fill him so the memories could tumble over him in all the evenings to come.

Slowly, almost carelessly, he strolled back down Briggate. He passed the Ship, once his haunt, and walked on to the Talbot.

Inside the door the noise overwhelmed him like a wave and he stood still, eyes flickering with suspicion across a press of faces. Fire leapt in the large hearth, the heat inviting and irresistible. He pushed his way onto the corner of a bench near the blaze. As one

of the serving girls swept by he ordered ale and stew, the cracked, awkward sound of his own voice surprising him.

Tomorrow he'd done it. The debt would be paid, he could leave Leeds and really feel like a free man.

The warmth of the food and the sharp crackle of the logs left him weary. He needed as bed, he needed sleep; in this city that would pose no problem. First, though, he needed a woman.

The last time had been two years before. As a present to celebrate Christmas the master had presented him with a slave for one night. She lay, brown eyes wide and empty, silent as he forced himself on her. When he woke the next morning he was alone, and only the heady smell of her in the thick dawn assured him that it hadn't been a dream.

Outside, the air was cold and the sky had stilled with early darkness. His breath clouded the air and his soles crunched over ice as a few flakes of snow fluttered half-heartedly.

She stood half on Briggate, at the corner of a yard whose name he didn't recall. Her face was in shadow, a pathetic, patched shawl drawn across her shoulders, moonlight picking out the pale skin of her bony arms. He moved closer, astonished to find his heart pumping fast.

"Looking to warm yourself up a bit, are you?" She tried to sound cheery but her voice quavered with the chill.

He nodded.

"Down here then love."

He followed her into the tight entrance to the yard, still in sight of the street. As she turned towards him, a sense of relief in her smile, her hands already hoisting her skirts, he

rested his blade lightly against her throat so that a paint line of red drops bloomed on her skin.

He didn't need words; she understood. He pushed her back against the wall, tore at her clothes and entered her. Her eyes opened wider, the blank, hopeless stare an echo of the girl in Jamaica. It was only seconds later that his backhanded blow sent her to the floor, still mute, and he dashed back into Briggate, tying his breeches.

It was God's joke, he decided, that he'd end up in a rooming house in the same yard where he'd been a boy, before his parents had died of the vomiting sickness and he'd made his way on the streets. He glanced at the old door as he passed, but any memories were held like secrets behind the wood. It was just one night then he'd be finished here, on his way to York or London, to anywhere a man could disappear and start life anew. There was only one tie here and he'd loosen it soon enough.

The dank room already held two men with ale heavy on their breath, their sleeping farts sweetening the air. He lay on the straw pallet fully clothed, the wretched rag of a blanket over him, and drifted away.

Something cold and metallic was pushing against his mouth. Confused, still sleep-drunk, he thought it was a dream and struggled to open his eyes, pawing at his face with one hand.

"Sit up."

The words came as a command, colder than the bitter air in the room. Without even thinking, he sat up. Thin, early light came through a window covered by years of grime.

The man towered over him, seeming to fill the space, his presence full of menace. He was tall, with unkempt grey hair, his face lined, but his back was straight and his chest wide

under dirty clothes. One large fist held a silver-topped walking stick lightly.

He knew who this was; it was impossible to have lived on the edge of the law in Leeds and not know. Amos Worthy.

“I hear you were with one of my girls last night.” The man’s eyes were dark, his voice slow, as deep and resonant as any preacher. “You didn’t pay here. I can’t allow that.” He paused, letting the words hang ominously in the air. “But then you had to cut her, didn’t you? So now I have to make an example of you.”

Nick started to reach for the knife in his pocket. The man simply shook his head once and gestured over his shoulder. A pair of thickset youths, their faces hard and scarred, arms folded, stood inside the door. The two other beds were empty.

“I know who you are, the man said, speaking softly and conversationally. “Oh aye, you’ve got the Indies burned on your face, Nick Andrews. Seven years is a long time away from home.”

All he could do was nod. Whatever words he’d once possessed had deserted him. Worthy was offhand, easy in his certainty and Nick felt the piss burn hot down his leg as his bladder emptied. He was going to die here, in this room, in this bed, before he could finish his work. And all for a few short seconds with a whore.

“All that time doesn’t seem to have made you any wiser, laddie. Just back, are you?”

Nick nodded again.

“A short homecoming, then.” He raised his thick eyebrows. “You crossed me. You can’t do that here.”

He brought his stick down hard. Nick saw it fall, quick, effortless, but it burst his nose, the shock of pain hard and sudden, blood gushing chokingly into his mouth.

“You can kill him now, boys. You know what to do with the body.”

