



**Mel
Keegan**

**Dangerous
Moonlight**

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DANGEROUS MOONLIGHT

MEL KEEGAN

DreamCraft Multimedia, Australia

Dangerous Moonlight

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First published in July 2006 by DreamCraft Multimedia.

ISBN: 0-9758080-5-2

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This edition is printed and bound in the United States

Dangerous Moonlight

One

The carriage bucked over the cratered surface of the road, and despite the leather-slung suspension the occupants were jolted with every turn of the wheels. Nicholas Gray was sure his teeth would be rattled out of his skull. He leaned out through the window, looking up the moonlit road in search of the lights of Haversham, but the village was still a mile away beyond the woodland. The road wound west across a briar-thicketed common, and over the shoulder of a hill. By horseback it was not an uncomfortable journey, and Nicholas resolved to ride it in future.

Another pothole threatened to wrench off the carriage's high, left rear wheel and he turned to the man seated beside him with a pained expression. "You should invest a few shillings in this road, Sir Edward, if only to spare your guests' bones." Edward Pullin merely grunted in answer, and Nicholas glared back at the road. Pullin was a wealthy man, but it was well known his fortune was founded on parsimony.

From Sheldon Hall to the village of Haversham was only four miles, but the road made it seem much further. Carriage lanterns probed the darkness and the horses trod carefully. The hour was long after midnight. The revels at the Hall would continue until dawn, but Nicholas had grown weary of drunken antics and gambling long before. When he was offered a seat in the private carriage, he was quick to accept. Too quick, he decided ruefully as his kidneys were tested once more. Pullin had said he must be on the morning's northbound mail coach; Nicholas would take a second, headed west, for home.

The woods grew dense as the vehicle rocked about a bend and threw him against the door. He swore as he righted himself, but was jolted again almost at once, pressed back into the seat as the driver hauled back on the long reins to stop the carriage up. The horses cried out in alarm as they struggled for footing.

For a moment Nicholas was sure they had lost the wheel. And then he knew. Iron-shod hooves scattered loose pebbles, Pullin's driver shouted at his nags, and a voice from the blue-black darkness just ahead said clearly,

"Put up the musket, sir, or I will surely shoot you dead."

Sir Edward Pullin scrambled in the cubby beneath his seat, and Nicholas knew he kept a pistol there. "Don't," he hissed before Pullin could get to it. "Don't give a thief the opportunity to shoot you. I've no doubt he would delight in murdering you, for the sake of a few pounds."

"A few pounds?" Pullin almost spluttered in outrage. "This common is not fit to be traveled at night. I've tried three times to beg a full complement of soldiers from Captain Frobisher, and what does he give us? A single squad of dragoons!"

It was too late for soldiers now, Nicholas thought as he leaned out of the window. The thief sat astride a big, muscular animal on the left side of the road. In both his fists were a pair of small but heavy-caliber muff pistols, which put two shots at his disposal. Pullin's driver knew better than to try his luck. As Nicholas watched, the musket dropped into the puddles beside the carriage wheel.

The moonlight brightened as clouds scudded into the south, and Nicholas studied the highwayman critically. He was only one man, and outnumbered. How far on was the turnpike? A mile? Nicholas considered Pullin's pistol, which was always kept loaded in the cubby under the seat. The highwayman had not yet nudged his horse closer to the carriage, and Nicholas took a breath to speak. He might have whispered to Pullin to fetch the pistol, but before the words were out he heard hooves on the road behind.

Another carriage, or the dragoons? But the highwayman had not moved. An accomplice, then. Moonlight gleamed on the polished barrels of the pistols as he waited. His stallion pawed at the mud and snorted in the chill night air, eager to be moving.

A silk scarf and broad-brimmed tricorne concealed the thief's face, but Nicholas knew it could only be a young man. He saw broad shoulders, and long, muscular legs clasped tight to the horse's sides. The muff-pistols were held on Pullin's mesmerized driver, but Nicholas realized with a start, the highwayman was looking not at the coachman, but directly at himself.

On the other side of the vehicle, Pullin swung open the door and took a step out before Nicholas could hiss any warning. "Now, look here," Pullin began in his impatient, pompous way, bluffing it out like a fool, "this common is patrolled nightly by soldiers!"

Nicholas cast a glance across the carriage, and through its windows caught a glimpse of the other rider, the accomplice.

In his hands was a Naval boat gun. The brass barrel gaped malevolently. It could scatter a big charge of shot at close range. With a blunderbuss it was impossible to miss, even Pullin knew this. He stepped back into the carriage, livid with rage, and slammed the door.

Down in the darkness beneath the window, his hands scrabbled after the pistol again.

"Not now!" Nicholas rasped. "Sir Edward, leave it!" Pullin had already levered back the hammer before he took the pistol from the cubby, and Nicholas held his breath. Death was an instant away, perhaps for both of them, and his blood was like ice water.

But instead of the expected explosion from the boat gun, Nicholas heard the dull smack of a fist on bone. Through the open window, one long arm had darted down before Pullin could level the pistol, and Nicholas gasped as the older man fell heavily back and sprawled at his feet.

A thick Devonshire voice called down into the carriage. "Any more 'eroes in there?" The accomplice stooped in the saddle and looked in. His face was covered, anonymous, but bright eyes glittered in amusement.

"No. No heroes," Nicholas said softly. He saw only the wide, hungry muzzle of the naval gun. Helplessness was a bitter feeling.

"Then 'and me out yon pistol," the Devon man said cheerfully. "Don't want to put no temptation in your way, lad."

Stooping into the foot well, Nicholas did as he was told. He handed the pistol out, butt-first, and remained in his seat, listening to the sounds of activity. The younger thief had dismounted. Pullin's driver was down off his high perch, and he was as stupid as his master. A blistering curse, the sounds of a quick, violent scuffle, and a body thudded heavily into the side of the coach, though the twin muff-pistols had not discharged.

"Fool." The younger highwayman spoke without his accomplice's Devonshire burr. Nicholas would have called it a gentleman's voice, since it well-schooled, suggesting breeding, even arrogance. He looked out and watched as the thief rolled the body over and roughly examined it. "He's only knocked senseless. And deserving of his aches when he comes to!" Then the tall, broad-shouldered figure straightened and turned toward Nicholas. The pistols leveled on him again.

He could not even see the thief's eyes beneath the tugged-down brim of the elegant hat. Behind him, the stallion stood still, trained to wait without being tied. Nicholas said nothing, not even a muscle twitching as the Devon man set aside the blunderbuss and hoisted himself into the carriage.

Piece by piece, Edward Pullin's valuables were confiscated, from his rings to his silver snuff box, the gold-framed cameo portrait of his wife, his lace kerchiefs, and finally his purse. It would contain a few pounds, Nicholas had thought. But Pullin was bound for Manchester on business.

In the shifting moonlight the thief shook no less than twenty guineas into his palm, and even Nicholas was astonished. Pullin might have employed an armed escort — save that an escort drew attention to a man, made him an irresistible target for brigands. Nicholas bit his lip hard as the thieves pocketed Pullin's valuables. It was his own turn next.

The accomplice backed out of the carriage and whistled for his horse. With the rasp of boot leather into stirrup iron he was up, and poised to leave. "Don't waste time," he warned as the other, the one with the voice of a gentleman, stepped closer and swung open Nicholas's door. "The turnpike's too damn' close for comfort."

"Then get moving," the highwayman advised. "Leave this little one to me. He knows better than to challenge a brace of pistols. Don't you, lad?"

With an effort, Nicholas swallowed his resentment. "By God, sir, one day I hope you and I shall meet when these pistols are not between us."

"Do you, now?" The voice purred from behind the silk mask. "Well, that may well be. But for tonight I'll have you out of the carriage like a good lad." He thrust one of the pistols into his capacious pocket and stood waiting.

Anger seethed in Nicholas's belly as he stepped into the rutted, muddy road. "Rob me if you will, but don't you dare treat me like a halfwit. What do you want, my purse, my rings? Take them, damn you!" He snatched off the rings and flung them at the highwayman. They were plucked out of the air before they could fall, and pocketed.

"And your purse," the thief said genially, but as Nicholas thrust his hand into his coat for it, the muff-pistol lifted to head height and leveled on his nose. "If you've a gun in there, think again. I don't want to hurt you. Don't make me."

He froze, almost hypnotized by the dark muzzle of the weapon, so close to his face.

"Don't waste your time!" The Devon man shouted from the rear of the carriage. "Take 'is purse and get your bloody arse back on the 'orse!"

"Go," the highwayman growled. "I can handle this one. I'll catch you up."

Exasperation shortened the man's temper. "This is no time for any of your damned fool games, lad. One day they'll be the death of thee!" And then hooves scattered the gravel at the roadside, and the horse wheeled about, leaving the way it had come.

Eyes still on the muzzle of the pistol, Nicholas had not yet moved. Pulses quickened in his temples and throat as the night grew silent once more. Pullin and his driver were out cold, and to all practical purposes he was alone. He saw dark hair on the thief's collar, tied back with a

black velvet riband. He saw the silver braid on the man's expensive coat, the lace at his neck and wrists. The hand holding the pistol without a tremor was strong but fine, white, with a sickle-shaped scar across the back, a prize won in some duel.

The highwayman stepped closer and Nicholas held his breath as fingers touched his face. His pulse quickened again. "If you want my purse, it's in my coat. I've no gun. If I had one, I'd have used it by now."

The fingers traced about his cheek and jaw, charting their shape. "I've no doubt you'd have tried to. So much the better that you're unarmed, for I've no wish to hurt you. You're a lovesome creature, aren't you?"

The flattery only confused Nicholas. He floundered while his face was caressed once more, and the highwayman chuckled richly.

"Your purse, then," he said at last, "since I've no time to rob you of more. Not a mile to the turnpike, you know." And he thrust his left hand into Nicholas's coat.

Surely he could feel the bulk of the purse at once. Nicholas took a breath as the cold hand deliberately explored the warmth of his breast. Unseen eyes shafted into him, dirk-sharp, like slivers of ice under his skin, and he leaned against the side of the carriage, trapped between primal, animal instinct and stubborn pride.

The pride spurred him to strike out, knock the thief on his back, take the pistol from him and deliver him to Captain Frobisher at the garrison. Instinct was to press into the caressing palm which worked into his shirt, cradled his breast and deliberately teased his nipple. What the man wanted was all too obvious. It was his own body's eagerness to comply that shocked Nicholas Gray until he stood frozen against the carriage, unable to move or speak.

With reluctance, the hand in his shirt twisted, withdrew and took the purse with it. As Nicholas began to breathe again, the thief stepped back. "Lovesome indeed," he observed, only half mockingly. Was he breathless? He thrust the stolen purse deep into the same pocket as the rings, and the pistol leveled once more.

Still, Nicholas said nothing. He stood with his hands slightly raised as the thief called out softly to his horse. The big, rawboned stud trotted closer and stood like a statue. Mounted, the highwayman took the reins in his left hand.

The sound of hooves on the road behind made Nicholas's heart quicken, but the thief only laughed as he spun the horse about. "Fare you well, lad," he called over his shoulder as the horse turned. "And play no games on the road at night with the likes of me!"

In moments the woodland swallowed him up. Nicholas sagged back against the carriage. With both hands he rubbed his face hard, and

he ordered his thoughts before he stooped to look at Pullin's driver. The man was still unconscious, but inside the vehicle, Pullin himself had begun to stir. Nicholas clambered in and hoisted the older man bodily onto the seat.

Before Pullin was properly aware, he had straightened the lace of his shirt and buttoned his coat. "Are you all right, sir?"

Pullin peered at him in the near-total darkness. "Of course I'm not all right! I've been robbed and had the brains beaten out of my skull. By God, if I've broken a tooth I'll hang the bastard myself!" He spat a mouthful of blood and examined his teeth with one blunt thumb.

Sighing, Nicholas stepped back onto the road and watched five mounted soldiers from the local barracks come trotting up out of the shadows. "You're late," he snapped at the handsome young lieutenant in command as the dragoons reined in. "We've been robbed and the rogues are long gone. One of you, help Sir Edward. Get this carriage turned about. The gentleman should go straight home, since he has been cracked across the head and doubtless should see his physician."

"Doubtless," the lieutenant agreed, and waved his men to do as Nicholas suggested. "And who might you be? What business takes you abroad at this hour?"

"Nicholas Gray, on James Rosewarne's business. Thank Christ it was concluded at Sheldon Hall before we set out, or Rosewarne would be many a hundred guineas the poorer." He thrust his hands into his pockets and watched the officer swing down from the saddle.

"Highwaymen, Mister Gray?" The young lieutenant looked on as his men lifted Pullin's unfortunate driver into the carriage and manhandled the heavy, cumbersome vehicle about.

"Two of the scoundrels. I hear they haunt this common and are the reason Sir Edward asked for a patrol of your men."

"Thieves of all kinds haunt the byroads as well you know." The lieutenant offered his hand. "My name is Thurston." Nicholas clasped the hand for a moment. Its chill reminded him keenly of the hand inside his shirt. His skin prickled. "If you saw the robbers clearly," Thurston was saying, "you've a duty to give Captain Frobisher a description. There's a bounty on highwaymen, and a handsome reward for information leading to their arrest."

Nicholas looked sidelong at the man. "I must be on the morning mail coach. I've no time to ride to the garrison with you."

"But Captain Frobisher is at Sheldon Hall. I'm surprised you didn't come across him, dallying with some young chit." Thurston mocked his superior with a knowing wink.

"I arrived late," Nicholas said reservedly. "It was a business matter to me, not an entertainment." He pulled his hand through his hair as

the chill wind disordered it, and glared up at the moon. Its half-face was ringed about, promising bad weather. "Very well, I'll return to the Hall. Still, I must be on the morning coach. Can I trouble you for an escort? Lightning might not strike twice, but I've leaned to be cautious."

A polite half bow granted his escort. The carriage was turned about and one of the soldiers clambered onto the driver's perch. Another held the door open, but Nicholas refused. "I'd sooner ride, if I may take your man's horse," he said to Thurston. "My kidneys have endured all they can bear tonight."

The cavalry nag was tall, quiet, well behaved. It fell into step alongside Thurston's animal, and behind, the long driver's whip cracked. The carriage horses moved off with a rumble of wheels and scabbling hooves. Nicholas looked into the shadows on either side of the road. The local woods were dense. Where had the thieves gone? They must know the lie of the land intimately, and he could only wonder if they were locals.

Sheldon Hall blazed with lights. Noise, laughter, music and singing issued from the house, where ladies and gentlemen who should have known much better sprawled about in various states of inebriation and undress. With a polite smile masking his scorn, Nicholas allowed Thurston to usher him back into the house.

Though Pullin's injuries were less severe than his temper, Sir Edward was ushered upstairs to bed. A footman bent to Thurston's ear, and moments later scurried away to find Frobisher. Nicholas sat impatiently in a green velvet armchair beside the hearth in the deserted library.

Captain William Frobisher was a man of forty-five, stiff in the right knee after a musket wound at the hands of Jacobite traitors, nine years before. Still, he walked without a stick and cut a fine figure in a scarlet jacket and white britches. He wore a saber, though Nicholas doubted he could have used it, given the injury. His head was expensively wigged, powdered, curled and pigtailed, which gave him a pompous aspect.

The absurd little white pigtail made Nicholas remember the soft, dark hair caught back in the black riband, lying on the highwayman's collar. His breast shivered as he came to his feet and offered Frobisher his hand.

"Mister Nicholas Gray, Captain," Thurston said by way of introduction. "Lately robbed on the Haversham road in the company of Sir Edward himself. Alas, my patrol missed the rogues, but Mister Gray apparently saw the thieves closely. I believe his observations might prove useful."

Pale blue eyes studied Nicholas as Frobisher bade him sit. "I saw

only one of the men," Nicholas mused. "The truth is, it was dark, his face was obscured by a scarf and his hat. But I heard him speak and he stood quite close to me." He put his hand on his chest to still its prickling. Frobisher was waiting. "He held a pair of pistols on me the whole time, and his accomplice had a Naval boat gun. He was a young man, I know, for his companion called him 'lad,' and he had the gait and stature of a young man. He wore no wig, and his own hair was dark, tied back rather like my own. He was taller than me by half a hand's span, I should say, and broad in the shoulders. But he was a gentleman."

"A gentleman?" Frobisher sounded scandalized. "What in the world would make you say so? The man's a common thief!"

"He spoke like a gentleman, Captain," Nicholas said mildly. "His companion had a thick Devonshire accent, but the man who personally relieved me of my rings and purse spoke well. Very well, indeed, similarly to yourself and the Lieutenant."

Frobisher stroked his long, smooth-barbered chin thoughtfully, clearly not liking the implications. "A tall, broad-shouldered young fellow from a good family, then, and dark haired."

"Well dressed," Nicholas added, "and mounted on a handsome, rawboned stud of a horse. The nag was worth a pretty penny. He and his accomplice knew the country around here intimately, so I'd suspect them to be locals. And ..." He bit his lip. "The thief is marked, sir. He carries a scar, a sickle-shaped mark just here." He traced a curved line from wrist to fingers across the back of his right hand. "An old dueling scar, I'd say, which also sets him apart as a gentleman."

"Or a rascal," Thurston added.

"Perhaps." Nicholas got to his feet and looked deliberately at the pendulum clock in the corner of the library. "I've a coach to meet, sir, and I wanted a bath and breakfast at my inn before it leaves Haversham. I wasn't a guest at this celebration, but merely called here to deliver a trifle of merchandise. Sir Edward's personal business. In fact, I'm on my way home, before I must be in London in four days. If the coach departs without me I'll pay handsomely for tonight's misfortune. If you'd give me the escort Lieutenant Thurston promised, I'd be grateful to be on my way."

"By all means," Frobisher said thoughtfully. "You've made note of all this, Thurston, I hope."

The younger officer tapped his temple. "Every word squirreled away, Captain. I'm even now trying to fathom which scion of a local gentleman's house is out playing pranks at night."

"Pranks, by God?" Frobisher hoisted himself to his feet and took his weight on the injured knee with a tight-lipped expression. "Pranks will have him incarcerated, if Pullin has his way! Good night to you."

As Frobisher limped back to the merriment Thurston went ahead of Nicholas into the chill, damp night air. "Ride on with my men, if you like," he offered. "We patrol from Grindon to Haversham and back again every night."

"And you've caught many highwaymen?" Nicholas asked dryly.

"A few." Thurston gave an exasperated sigh. "They're too clever and too cautious to be apprehended often, and one or two are notorious. Cocky and arrogant."

"The man who robbed me was an arrogant bastard," Nicholas said tartly. "A scion of a local gentleman's house, you say? He could well be. But, pranks?" He shook his head slowly. "He and the man with the Naval gun were too adept, too masterly at this enterprise. They've done it before, countless times."

"As you say." Thurston stood in the wash of gold lamplight from the open door as they waited for horses. He was, Nicholas thought, quite handsome, in an aquiline way, with a hawkish nose and thin mouth which nonetheless smiled attractively. Brown eyes studied Nicholas with slight amusement, making Nick draw himself up to his full height and assume a challenging expression. But Thurston was not trying to test his mettle, and as the horses were led up he began to relax.

For the first time he admitted how ridiculously lucky he had been. Had he been stopped on the way to Sheldon Hall, it would have been a different story, for Nicholas's business was often conducted in secret, and James Rosewarne would have had much greater cause for grief than Edward Pullin. He turned up his collar against the wind and mounted as Thurston's men swung down the raked-gravel carriage-way toward the gate.

Two

Voices and footsteps echoed hollowly in the salon and the late afternoon sun cast patterns on the polished parquet floor. The foil was light in Nicholas's right hand. Its uplifted blade described a tiny circle as he waited for the Frenchman to advance. When it came, the lunge was deft and quick, a feint which lured Nicholas to his left. For a split second his shoulder and back were unguarded and Patrice Gavroche was quick to take the advantage.

"Touche, Nicholas. You're getting tired." The button on the tip of the light Italian foil grazed Nicholas's right shoulder before he could spring away. *"Were this a duel,"* Gavroche said wryly in his thick Bordeaux accent, *"I should have drawn first blood just now."*

"Were this a brawl in any gutter," Nicholas retorted as he regained his footing, *"you'd have been dead a dozen times over in the last hour. Fine skills are ... fine, when one is permitted to use them. Brigands on the street seldom play these games."* Gavroche only smiled, and Nicholas withdrew. He shifted his grip on the foil and they began once more.

The lesson was almost at an end and sweat prickled his ribs beneath his shirt and the quilted leather vest. He had caught his cuffs up above his elbows to free his hands of the extravagant lace. The muscles ridged along his forearms after effort, but his breathing was as even as Gavroche's. Nicholas was very skilled, and he knew his own worth. Gavroche never praised, but a nod, a glance, let the student know when he had done well.

There had been times when Nicholas had struggled, blundered, flushed with embarrassment after his clumsiness and ineptitude. But now Gavroche paid him the same respect he accorded his best students, those who had persisted and become masters of their art.

The foils rasped and clattered as Nicholas began another phase. Gavroche chuckled approvingly. The moment's dry humor was all the praise Nicholas would receive, and all the reassurance of his skills he needed. He had seen through the master's defense, reached in and touched the black leather protecting his breast. Where was the need for words?

At last Gavroche put up his foil and waved Nicholas away. *"Enough for these old legs, for today! You are the fourth gentleman to try me since breakfast, remember. Come and take tea with me instead, and give me your news."*

Old? Nicholas thought as he slid the foil back into its place in the rack. Sabers, rapiers, French and Italian foils, rested there, waiting for the instruction of young men. Patrice Gavroche was forty now, elegantly silver about the temples, lined a little about the eyes, but still as fit and agile as a man half his age. He possessed greater skills than he ever taught, even to his finest students. Skills Nicholas envied, even now.

A cool cloth pressed the faint film of perspiration from his face and he followed the fencing master out of the ringing practice room. He paused in the doorway to look back with a fond expression. How many hours of his life had been spent there? Dust motes hung suspended in shafts of sunlight from the high windows; the air smelt of beeswax, and he knew every fold in the flags that hung limply at the room's northern

end. The banners of France, Bordeaux and Gavroche. They were old now, dusty, but unfaded.

The house was elegant, tasteful, very quiet. By day it was dim, its rich drapes half-drawn. Not until evening did it come alive with lamps and music as Gavroche entertained his spoiled young entourage.

A footman in brown livery closed the drawing room door behind them, and Nicholas shrugged into his coat. In the wide mirror above the cherrywood spinettina he caught sight of his flushed cheeks and disordered hair, and smiled. He was his father's son. Even if James Rosewarne had wanted to deny his bastard, the truth would have haunted him every time Nicholas Gray's face appeared.

In the mirror, he watched the Frenchman seat himself in one of the big brocade armchairs by the fireplace. Gavroche never seemed to perspire, nor grow disheveled. Nicholas wondered if it were some trick of his race. "So," the Frenchman prompted as they waited for the footman, and their tea. "How is your father? At last I heard his health was only fair."

"He grows no stronger," Nicholas said regretfully. He tugged straight his coat and finger-combed his hair into order. It lay on his collar, long and copper-brown, until he knotted the green velvet riband about it. "His physicians tell me the trouble is in his heart."

"And they can do nothing?" Gavroche's face creased in a frown. "I have known your father for nearly twenty years, since you were very small. He's not so old."

"No," Nicholas agreed. "Yet his heart is failing, and none of his quacks can account for it." He shook his head slowly, leaning on the edge of the spinettina, fingers curled about the carved wood. "I think Paul worsens his condition as much as this cold, damp weather."

"Paul, your brother?" Gavroche crossed his dancer's legs and leaned back in the winged armchair, an elegant sprawl in white britches and blue waistcoat. One hand idly smoothed the lace at his throat.

"My brother," Nicholas said bleakly. "My *half* brother, as he never ceases to remind me. My *legitimate* brother." He stirred and shrugged away the old resentment. "Fortune, eh, Patrice? Two sides of the blanket to be born on. The toss of a coin, and here I am —" He bowed theatrically before the fencing instructor. "Master Gray. Your servant, sir."

Gavroche smiled up at him. "Are you bitter? You've little need to be. How many bastards would switch places with you? Educated and employed by their fathers, loved even, no matter which side of the blanket they happened to be born on by chance."

"Bitter?" Nicholas's brows rose. "No, not bitter. But I worry for the

family. With my father gone, Paul will inherit everything we possess, and the Rosewarne fortunes won't last long, I fear." He paused as a discreet knock announced the footman. A silver tray clattered onto the table at Gavroche's right, and the servant withdrew. Gavroche poured for them both. Nicholas took the porcelain cup, stirring it absently as he regarded his face in the wide mirror.

An older face looked back as imagination overlaid James Rosewarne's features on his own. A little heavier about the jaw, a little broader in the nose, wider in the mouth, and silvered about the temples and brow. But the face was so very similar. Nicholas frowned at himself, thinking then of his mother. Theresa Gray had been very beautiful. Her features had molded James Rosewarne's broader ones into Nicholas's. Her eyes looked out of Nicholas's face, thoughtful, even brooding. Gavroche was speaking and he forced himself to listen.

"Perhaps I can get out of London for a few days. I should. The city is bad for my lungs! The more one breathes, the blacker they grow, what with the chimney soot we suck into ourselves." He set down cup and saucer. "I should come to Rosewarne Park. Perhaps your father would entertain me for a while, if only to bore me with endless tales of his youth."

"Please do," Nicholas urged. "He won't be good company in this state of health, and you'll find Paul damn' disagreeable, but the park is paradise after London. I've no idea how you survive in this smoke and rabble! Were it not for business, I'd never set foot in the place."

The Frenchman laughed. "Nor would I! But my business is here." He gave a graceful flick of his right wrist: *sixte, septime, octave*. "I might envy the likes of young Paul, who will inherit a fortune." He leaned forward toward Nicholas and fixed him with a disturbing, probing look. "You and I have to work with what we have, and count ourselves fortunate if we may do so with dignity and the respect of our fellows."

He was right, Nicholas admitted. If James Rosewarne had wanted to, he could have sent the young maid away when she became ripe and round with his child. He had a wife and two daughters already when young Theresa Gray came to Rosewarne Park. Did the dowager Mary Rosewarne bear grudges about her husband's flirtation? Nicholas did not know.

Mary, Paul's mother, died years before Theresa. While Nicholas remembered his own mother vividly and with love, he had only vague recollections of Mrs. Rosewarne. He spent much of his boyhood at the park, but the lady was no more than a disembodied voice, echoing in the long passages as she ordered her servants and retired to her upstairs chambers.

James Rosewarne had a kind of peasant honesty and generosity

that would have scorned to treat his lover ill, and deny blood of his blood. Ironically, Nicholas was the eldest, his first born son. When the servant girl was delivered of her child, Mary Rosewarne had two months still to carry Paul. Nicholas often looked back at Rosewarne House as he rode down to the tall, wrought iron gates, and wondered at his luck.

The most vivid memories of his childhood were of the vast acreage of the park itself, the woods, filled with fallow deer, the streams and paddocks where racehorses were bred and retired. A bell would ring to call him and Paul to lessons. Stout old Father Wellow came three afternoons a week to teach them. Paul was a good student, cute as a monkey when it came to filching answers. The priest was never quick enough to catch him at his tricks, and though Nicholas knew what he was doing, he said nothing. While Paul was still a boy, James continued to feel a father's love and pride. It would have achieved nothing to have Paul's knuckles rapped and Wellow made to feel foolish.

The afternoon sunlight faded abruptly as the sun dipped below the rooftops of houses across the street. Nicholas returned to the present with a start. Gavroche looked curiously up at him. "Forgive me, I've forgotten the time. I've business to attend to, actually. My father's business, you understand — my reason for coming to London, though I was in dire need of a lesson or two."

"Your skills are growing rusty," Gavroche observed. "How long since you fought, tested them, and yourself, against some fellow intent on your life?"

"Not so long," Nicholas told him, "but as I said, a brawl in the street doesn't allow for the skills of a master such as yourself. Just a month ago, a boy came at me with a blade nearer hatchet than saber. One cannot fence like a gentleman unless the other fellow will play the same game."

"And the outcome of the encounter?" Gavroche stood and looked into the mirror to adjust the lace at his chin.

"I'm afraid I cut him," Nicholas said with genuine regret.

The Frenchman glanced sidelong at him. "Remorse, Nick? Surely it was a matter of his life or yours. Else, why did you fight at all?"

"His life or mine," Nicholas agreed. "But he was just a poor boy out of some riverside alley, trying to better his fortunes."

"By worsening yours," Gavroche said sharply.

Nicholas's mouth tightened. "That's been done, my old friend, just four days ago, on my way home! I was robbed." Gavroche's brows rose. "A carriage was held up on the road. It was only through blind chance I was not robbed of Pullin's merchandise, or my father's money! Still, the thief took enough, and I've not yet governed my temper on the

subject." Or his heart, he knew. Even now his breast tingled uncomfortably as he recalled the touch of a stranger, and he remembered often the man's words. *Your purse, then, since I've not the time to rob you of more.* There was no doubt as to what thievery he meant.

But it would have come to a fight, the instant the thief set down his pistol. Nicholas Gray might come alive at the touch of a man's hands, but not for a stranger who would abuse him on the road. Stiff-necked Rosewarne pride would never permit him a moment's pleasure in the encounter, any more than he could allow the foolish boy who had attacked him on the street to get the better of him.

His memory of the brief duel was bitter. A fog on the river, stinging cold, a lamp in the misty dimness, and the rasp of swordsteel. What chance did a boy have in life, when he came from the warren of the poor people's houses? Thief or whore, what other choice was left?

As Nicholas straightened the green velvet of his coat he wondered for the hundredth time what he would have made of himself, if Rosewarne had sent away the young servant girl, and Nick Gray was the lad from the gutter, trying to better his fortunes any way he could.

"Come out to the park," he said as he gave Gavroche his hand in farewell. "I'd be pleased to see you there, Patrice, and I know my father would delight in talking over old times."

"Then I shall see if I can escape for a little." Gavroche touched the younger man's shoulder. "Is your business pressing? You can take my carriage, if you like. The horses would enjoy the exercise. I seldom go out these days."

"It's not so urgent." Nicholas looked out at the early twilight sky. "I'll stroll over to Henry Widcombe's house and be back at my lodgings by full dark, with luck."

"Widcombe?" Gavroche made a face, cheeks puffed out.

"I like him no better than you do!" Nicholas laughed easily as the footman appeared at the front door. "But his master owes my father money, and it's overdue." He lifted his sword from the cloak rack and buckled on the harness. The light weight settled reassuringly and he swung on a heavy brown cloak. "Till later, Patrice. Take care." Gavroche took his hand for a moment before Nicholas stepped out into the cool, tainted air of evening.

Chimney smoke blanketed the sky, and he wrinkled his nose as he made his way southwest toward Henry Widcombe's address. The sky was high but misty. Twilight would be long, and the street people were already out, scrounging for coppers. Nicholas stood for a few moments with a crowd to watch a young girl dance to the strange music of the hurdy-gurdy. A few farthings fell at her feet. Further on, a boy juggled with wooden batons and a fiddler struck up an Irish tune while his

monkey, in cap and pantaloons, danced on an upturned barrel.

Nicholas pressed on into the gathering chill and hurried his pace as he became aware of the time. Henry Widcombe would be waiting, perhaps hoping Rosewarne's man would not appear at all. Lights shone from rich people's houses by St. James' Park, where the wind had begun to stir the trees. He heard the hoarse cries of hawkers selling fish, the earthy laughter of whores, the rumble of carriage wheels, and he shouldered through the free-flowing crowd toward the steps below a brassbound door.

The house belonged to the Earl of Royston, but he was rarely in residence. In his stead, Henry Widcombe attended to his affairs and property. Nicholas had never made the acquaintance of the Earl, who was the actual client, but he had met Widcombe several times, and liked him less on each occasion.

A footman opened to him as he rang the bell, and he stepped into a lamplit drawing room. Indian rugs cushioned his feet and dark portraits grimaced from the walls. One depicted the Earl himself, a pale, lax-featured man in early middle age. From upstairs he heard voices, singing and laughter, and he stood beside the ornamental fireplace to wait.

He had been a guest in this house only twice before, but he knew it well enough to recognize its sounds and smells. As a door opened behind him he smelt lilac, which could not be Widcombe. He knew before he turned that young Hugh Price stood behind him. Buckle shoes were muffled by the carpets as the boy came into the drawing room. The door swung closed and Nicholas held out both hands.

"Are you still here? I thought you'd have been gone long ago! Tell me, how do you endure the likes of Henry Widcombe?"

"I've a liking for his money!" Hugh's blue eyes sparkled as he stepped into Nicholas's arms and lifted his mouth for a hungry kiss. "And he'll throw me out soon enough. I was fifteen last week. That's getting old, isn't it?"

"Ancient," Nicholas agreed as Hugh pressed against him. "Stand back and let me look at you, scallywag. You're thin, boy."

"I'm always thin." Hugh wrinkled his nose.

"Does he feed you properly?" Nicholas insisted. He was ready to believe the worst of Widcombe.

But the lad only laughed. "If he didn't, I could buy all the feed I wanted, with the money he's paid me. And —" He dropped his voice. "I've been pinching little things. Just bits he'll never notice. But enough, you know."

Enough, Nicholas thought, for him to leave Widcombe's service soon and start his real life somewhere else, far away. He held the boy

at arm's length to look him over from the cap of black curls to the polished brass shoe buckles. Widcombe dressed him as a page, and the red livery and white lace costume was very fetching. But Widcombe also tied him to the bedpost 'when he was real bad,' and Hugh would say no more of that part of his relationship with his employer.

Still, Hugh was as tough as any street boy. They had to be, to survive. For him, it was a choice: Widcombe's bed, or sweeping chimneys, and of the two, Nicholas knew the decision he would have made himself. Hugh was a whore. He might choose to continue being a whore when he left Widcombe's house, but as he grew bigger he would serve different clients in different ways. One day, Nicholas hoped, he would find a rich lover. A beautiful boy deserved better than Widcombe.

He bent and kissed the lad's full, pouting lips. Hugh laughed delightedly. "That's nice, that is. His lordship doesn't never kiss me, and I do like it."

So Nicholas kissed him again, and released him only as they heard footsteps on the creaking staircase. Widcombe did not know anything had passed between Nicholas and Hugh, but it was a year since Nicholas had made it his business to be sure of his wellbeing. If Hugh Price was a whore, he was only one of thousands in the city's overcrowded streets. But he was also very young, despite his work. For a moment, as they waited for Widcombe, Nicholas wondered if his concern for Hugh might stem from his own uncertain beginnings. He could so easily have been in Hugh's place.

Henry Widcombe smiled genially, gap-toothed and indulgent, as he appeared. Nicholas recalled Hugh's remark, that no kisses passed between him and his employer. How grateful Hugh must be. The man was stout, florid and breathless, but his clothes were immaculate and the powdered curls surrounding his face were impossibly white. Lace and brocade rustled as he thrust out a soft, plump hand. He smelt of nutmeg and snuff.

"Why, I'd all but given up on you, Mister Gray! Sit down and sample some of my new port wine. Time for business by and by, eh?" He winked at Nicholas and held onto his hand several seconds too long.

Perched on the edge of the enormous armchair behind him, Hugh snickered rudely, but Widcombe did not seem to hear. Nicholas drew his hand out of the flaccid palm and smiled politely. He watched wine drizzle into two crystal glasses, and took one. Hugh was not invited to drink. He wore house livery, no matter his actual position in this establishment. Nicholas took a sip and nodded. Widcombe had good taste, in wine as in everything else. He gave the boy a conspiratorial

smile while the older man was busy with the decanter.

"So tell me, how fares your father?" Widcombe was asking.

"No better, alas." The question diverted Nicholas from his distaste for his host. "The physicians were with him when I left, bickering like crows over his condition."

"Some ague or other?" Widcombe emptied his glass in one swig and refilled it. "Or the pox? There's a lot of it about this season."

"His heart," Nicholas corrected. "And what's to be done, I can't say." He watched Widcombe sink into a chair on the other side of the enormous hearth, with its marble cherubs and seraphs. Like a well-trained lapdog, Hugh stood attentively at his side, and when Widcombe patted his lap, sat primly with his knees tight together, the picture of absurd modesty. Only the wicked sparkle in his eyes betrayed his amusement.

"We live in God's good graces," Widcombe said philosophically as he examined Nicholas overtly, a bone at a time, as he always did. His hands toyed absently with Hugh's soft black curls.

The boy yawned, indifferent to the caresses. Nicholas hid a smile. "I find it difficult to understand how so good a man as my father could possibly be in the Almighty's black books."

"Or how you came to be the bastard rather than Paul," Widcombe added with cutting accuracy. Nicholas only shrugged. "Have you thought any further on the offer I put to you at New Year?"

New Year, when the revels had spilled over into drunkenness, and Henry Widcombe palmed Nicholas's arse and whispered into his ear things that could have delivered him to a magistrate. Nicholas had only laughed, since enough wine had passed his own lips for the proposition to seem funny. Widcombe made no secret of his tastes, as if every day he flung down a challenge to all who knew him. The business offer had actually been generous, but Nicholas guessed what accompanied it.

He would do for Widcombe what he did for his father, merely travel as a courier. But Widcombe's eyes even then lingered on Nicholas's legs, and he felt a familiar twist of his insides. Widcombe would maneuver him into debt, he hazarded; when the debt was called, rejection of the man's advances would thrust Nicholas into a debtor's cell. Henry Widcombe had done it before. Hugh had heard scurrilous tales from the servants, and he told them at every opportunity. Nicholas could only guess at their truth, but it was tempting to believe anything wicked of the man.

"I've thought it over," he said carefully. "It's most generous of you to offer me employment. Still, I'd sooner remain in my father's service."

"Though your brother owns your very name and is heir to your

home, your future?" Widcombe asked in a barbed tone intended to wound.

"Even so," Nicholas agreed ruefully. "Paul may call himself by the name that should have been mine, but my father never made a bastard of me, save in the law, which can hardly be avoided."

"The law is where it counts," Widcombe scoffed. Again, Nicholas answered with a shrug, appearing indifferent when in fact Widcombe had begun to get under his skin. "Think further on it. The offer remains open."

And the answer would remain the same, Nicholas thought acidly as he looked down at Widcombe and tried to imagine himself smothered in the man's florid embraces, tied to a bedpost for his transgressions. He turned away to hide a moment's absurd humor. "It's getting late. If you'd care to turn to business, I'd be grateful."

"If you wish." Widcombe gave High a push and struggled to his feet. "I have the whole sum under lock and key. I must say the Earl was delighted with the whole collection, and his lady will be wearing it on her next outing, in Bath. You may give your father the Earl of Royston's compliments, so he instructed me." He patted Hugh's head as of he were a pet hound. "Entertain our guest for a few moments."

The door clicked shut behind him, and Hugh pressed against Nicholas once more, his face in the warm, white lace at Nicholas's throat. "What's this?" Nicholas teased.

"He told me to entertain you," Hugh said, muffled by the lace.

"I think he meant, pour me wine!"

"If you want," Hugh grumbled. "Myself, I'd sooner have a few kisses. I like kisses, and it's a long time between visits. You're only here once in months."

Nicholas sat on the edge of the chair and drew the boy closer. "Now, don't you dare tell me a beautiful imp like you doesn't find kisses anywhere he goes hunting for them."

"No." Hugh's slender arms slipped about his neck. "It's true. But yours are the nicest."

"Are they?" Nicholas traced the youth's lovely features with one fingertip. He felt a tiny, betraying prickle along the jaw, and Hugh spoke with a deeper voice this year. "You poor little monkey. Why don't you come away with me, this very night? Let me take you out of this place, and away from Widcombe."

Hugh's long eyelashes batted seductively at him. "Would you give me a job, then?"

"I can't afford to pay servants, you know that," Nicholas said sadly. "I'm a bastard, remember! Paul Rosewarne is the heir."

"Would you take me to bed, then?" Hugh teased, eyes sparkling.

"I live in my father's house, I wouldn't dare!" Nicholas was aghast at the notion of bedding anyone at all, no matter their gender, in Rosewarne House, under his father's very nose, and Paul's. Paul enjoyed his strumpets, but he liked them in skirts and flounces, and he would be merciless if he discovered a male on Nicholas's pillow. Nicholas could imagine the scene, and did not have to pretend a shudder.

"Then I'll stay with his lordship." Hugh said resignedly, with a nod at the closed door. "He pays me well, and I pinch little things. A brooch here and a snuff box there. Solid silver, solid gold, some of them. He's got so many, he just thinks he's lost 'em! I've got a whole bag full, pushed under the bed. He's too fat to get down there and look under. Every now and again I go down to Cheapside and sell the whole bundle to an old smith. He melts them down and makes new things to sell."

Nicholas laughed ruefully. "Just be sure you don't get caught." Hugh wanted to kiss again. Nicholas indulged him, but felt a pang of genuine pity.

Yet Hugh was one of the lucky ones, a street boy who was beautiful enough to catch a man's attention. Others his age lived like rats in the alleys. If they lived at all. Hugh was well fed, well dressed in the house livery. He was clean and smelt of lilac.

"Careful?" He grinned widely. "I'm always careful. And he'll not keep me on much longer. I'm starting to sprout hair on my chest!" Hugh tossed his head, delighted with the achievement. "I'll go soon enough, and I'll do all right. I've got money now."

"Come and find me," Nicholas told him. "You know where I live. I'll see if I can find something for you, if you want honest employment ... or someone," he added with a teasing tug at one black curl. "Widcombe is a toad. I can't imagine how you bear him."

But Hugh was indifferent. "It's all the same in the dark. Like they say about cats being gray, you know? And afterwards I can take his money and go out, when he's dead asleep and snoring like a pig. I know a sweeper lad who'll do anything for tuppence, and he likes my way with him." The large blue eyes were solemn, reflective. "Gentle, like."

"Gentle, as Widcombe isn't?" Nicholas asked quietly.

"Sometimes." Hugh cocked an ear to the door and stepped quickly away as he heard the creak of the stairs. He straightened his coat and tugged down his cuffs. They were a little too short. He was growing quickly. Soon he would be a man. "Do you want wine, then?"

"I have to go." Nicholas stood. "Even being in the same house with Widcombe taxes me. You know what he wants from me, don't you?"

"Same as he gets from me," Hugh said acidly. "But you're a gentleman, not a poxy dockside brat. It wouldn't be proper if he did it to you."

I'm a bastard from a village in Dorset, with a doubtful future and twenty pounds' savings in the whole world, Nicholas thought with rueful self-mockery as Widcombe appeared. A pigskin purse dangled from his plump, white fingers, and Nicholas took it. Sovereigns filled his palm and he counted them roughly.

Widcombe clucked disapprovingly. "Can't you trust me?"

"I do trust you," Nicholas lied smoothly as he returned the coins to the purse and thrust it into his pocket. He graced Widcombe with a smile and offered his hand. "I imagine we'll meet again soon enough."

"Since the Earl has a new lady love, I should say so!" Widcombe snorted. "A vain creature, sickly-pale and winsomely virgin."

"Not at all to your taste," Nicholas observed with a shrewd glance at Hugh, who was darkly Welsh, and whose careworn, worldly youth taunted a man's heart.

Widcombe frowned deeply at him, as if trying to decide if he had just been insulted. Nicholas's polite smile did not waver. At length Widcombe passed over the glib remark. "The lady's birthday is in May. She must have a new trinket, costlier than the necklace at Christmas. The Earl is thinking of matching earrings and bracelets. Ask your father what's new. Emeralds and rubies are her fancy. She's of Irish extraction, I think. Some tradition or other."

"Red and green," Nicholas quoted, "should never be seen, save on the back of an Irish queen." Widcombe made a disagreeable face as a footman appeared, and Nicholas withdrew toward the door. Upstairs, men's voices laughed, muffled but still coarse. Were they gambling? "Good night," he said to his host, but Widcombe was on the stairs already. As the servant let him out he became aware of Hugh slipping into the late, faded twilight with him. "Won't he need you, since he's entertaining?"

"Not when he's playing cards and getting legless," Hugh snickered. "He'll be about as much use as a eunuch tonight, aye, and holding his head till noon tomorrow."

"Spoken maliciously," Nicholas observed. "Where are you going? To find your sweeper boy, and make merry on tuppence?"

"I thought I'd come with you," Hugh said brashly, hopefully.

"So I'll be caught with a boy in my room at the tavern?" Nicholas gave the lad's head a gentle cuff. "No chance, scallywag! But you can walk with me as far as the river. Then look for your lad and made him happy."

"You just don't want me," Hugh said, pretending melancholy.

"Oh, Hugh." At the corner of the street, where a ragged girl was

selling wilted flowers and a troupe of acrobats tumbled for the amusement of the crowd, Nicholas took his thin shoulders in both hands. "Grow up and be a man, know who you are, what you want." Hugh looked up at him out of solemn eyes. "Take the toad's money, and when he throws you out because you've sprouted hair on your chest, and you're shaving your face, leave London. Get out of the smoke before your lungs blacken. Take your sweeper boy and run away, both of you. Go and be young before you have to be old. You understand?" But Hugh shook his head and Nicholas sighed. "Never mind. Doubtless you know best. Stroll with me a little way."

They walked to the river and along the bank away from the bright lights of the gentlemen's residences. The sky was mauve, almost completely dark, the lamplight was yellow, and the smell of cooking food reminded Nicholas of how long it was since he had eaten. The river lapped, black and oily, at their right, and voices called from cargo barges which plied downstream in the gathering night.

At last, almost within sight of the Duke of Gloucester tavern where Nicholas had taken a room in the morning, Hugh grasped his hand tightly. They stood in the deep shadow between waterfront buildings, and Nicholas trusted the darkness for anonymity as he tipped up the boy's chin and kissed his nose.

"Be careful, be wary and be good," he told Hugh by way of farewell.

But Hugh was not listening. His eyes had drawn toward the murk of the riverside buildings. Some sixth sense prickled Nicholas's spine. He spun about, and a scant second later saw what Hugh had seen. A man stood pressed against the bricking, obscured by the dense shadow, a cloak and wide-brimmed hat. Nicholas saw no more than a shape and the faint gleam of light on the blade of a dirk or dagger.

"Who's there?" He thrust Hugh away as his right hand closed on the hilt of his saber and half-drew it. "Come out and be seen." The saber rasped out of the scabbard, and the stranger took a step toward him, out into the last faint blue of twilight. It was barely brighter than starlight. Nicholas could not see his face, but he saw the dirk shift into the man's left hand while the right drew a light French foil. "A thief," Nicholas snarled. "By God, is the world full of them? Look around the corner, Hugh, see if he has accomplices. Carefully, now!"

An accomplice with a pistol would change the odds disastrously. Nicholas would be in the same position he had resented days before, on the road. But Hugh looked down the waterfront both ways and called softly, "No one but the footpad. He's hunting on his own tonight."

The stranger's voice was deep, coarse, ruined by gin. "Get back here, boy, and stand against the wall."

"You run, lad," Nicholas corrected sharply. "You run all the way home and don't stop till the door is bolted behind you. Go!"

"But —" Hugh hesitated, looking from Nicholas to the thief and back.

"Go, I said." Nicholas shifted his grip on the weapon. As he heard Hugh's retreating footsteps he withdrew from the footpad to make maneuvering space. "I imagine you want my purse."

"Now, what gives you that idea?" The foil and dirk moved together, like marionettes in the man's clumsy hands. "I'll take it now."

"You may certainly try," Nicholas urged. "I've quite a heavy purse, as it happens." The Earl of Royston's money was in his inside pocket, hard against his ribs. His belly tightened. If he had not been Patrice Gavroche's best student in years, he would have been running, fast, and shouting for soldiers.

No place in the city was much safer than any other. The taverns were full of thieves, the streets haunted by robbers, and the open road fraught with highwaymen. An escort of soldiers drew the wrong kind of attention; the odds were with a single man traveling quietly, well-armed and skilled. But any traveler took risks and made the best of them. Nicholas had been robbed on the road several times, but street thieves seldom used pistols. Gunshots alerted the soldiers, who were never far away. The sword was silent, and in talented hands, just as deadly. The gallows or a convict ship awaited thieves. Often, stealth was a better weapon than a pistol.

The French foil was a much lighter blade than Nicholas's saber, and badly suited to a brawl. He gave the man credit for courage at the same time as scorning him for stupidity. He would learn his mistake soon enough. Even an adept swordsman was at a disadvantage with the light weapon. The footpad would have done better to take an old cutlass and whetstone it like a razor.

Steel clattered as the blades met, and Nicholas turned the foil aside. The thief was wrong-footed at once, and scrambled out of reach. Nicholas waited, poised on his toes as Gavroche had taught him in the early, novice's lessons, so long ago. Another, wilder swipe with the foil might have marked his face, but the saber swept it aside. Nicholas was more concerned about the dirk.

It jabbed upward, searching for his ribs, and he slipped away, agile as a dancer. The thief cursed fluently, but Nicholas had the man's measure now. The foil lunged once more, half-seen in the gloom, and the saber rang loudly on it. The blow hammered on the blade, close to the knuckle-guard. Nicholas heard the foil snap, and the clatter of metal on the cobbles at his feet. The thief thrust at him with the broken remnant, desperate now, since he had backed himself against the wall.

With nowhere to run, he could only fight on or surrender.

And surrender meant arrest, a rope, or a passage to the colonies in America as a convict slave. In the same moment Nicholas both scorned and pitied him. He stood back from the wall and let down the saber. "Come on, man, do you want me to injure you? Let it go! Be on your way, for God's sake."

"So you can send the soldiers after me?" The thief's voice was rough with healthy fear.

"I've not seen your face," Nicholas said tartly. "Go back where you came from, and next time choose a dandy for your sport."

"But I know you." The gin-coarsened voice said bitterly.

Nicholas's belly tightened again. "And would follow me to my lodgings, and make mischief later?"

"I followed you from Widcombe's," the thief growled. The dirk and ruined foil were still brandished before him. "You're Nick Gray, working for the jeweler, taking baubles to m'lords and miladies, aye, and fetching money from them."

"So you do know me." Nicholas brought up the saber. "Foolish. I had half a mind to let you go, and now I wouldn't dare. Will I kill you, or hand you to the soldiers, footpad?"

The thief did not answer. A flurry of movement in the shadows brought Nicholas up on his toes again, moving with the skills the fencing master had taught, plus a grace and agility which were born in a man, and could not be learned. Nicholas was neither tall nor heavy. Gavroche had assessed him shrewdly. His stature denied him the big man's reach, but his lighter build afforded him a turn of speed few big men could match. He needed only skill and practice.

It was ten years since Nicholas had first held a foil, and felt the sting of embarrassment as Gavroche cut easily through his defenses before a group of boys his own age, all of whom were well-along in instruction. Now, it was Nicholas who stood aside and watched boys hesitantly begin their lessons, and perhaps smiled at their mistakes.

This thief was untaught, desperate and overeager. He was also clumsy, and his lungs were bad. He wheezed and panted, and soon the unskilled thrusts began to drag. Still, the man would not surrender, while the saber flicked aside his blows. At last, one lucky cut with the broken foil came too close for comfort. Nicholas swore, and the tip of the saber flicked out. It nicked the thief along the curve of his cheek.

Sudden pain, the warm, wet dribble of blood and the nag of exhaustion finished the man. Foil and dirk rattled onto the cobbles as he sagged to his knees. "Christ Jesus. Do it, then. *Do it!*" He turned his head aside to present his throat. "Kill me if you're going to." He wheezed like leaking old bellows. "No soldiers."

The saber barely touched the man's exposed throat. It was one thing to kill a man in the heat and frenzy of a brawl, but common murder had a different smell about it, stinking rank. Nicholas put up his sword.

"Oh, get on your feet, man," he snapped as the thief remained on his knees, wretched yet surly, rejecting pity. "That little scrape didn't hurt you. I've had worse from my instructor and called in an honor! You're sick, aren't you?" The man got up unsteadily. "It's doctoring you want, you idiot, and a fireside, not gin under your belt and mischief on the docks." Nicholas took him by his wide, threadbare collar and manhandled him out of the shadows. "Where did you get the foil? It's plain you've no idea how to use the thing."

"You bloody know I stole it." The wheezing had begun to ease. In the grudging moonlight Nicholas saw a waxen face, a lax mouth with the checkered aspect of missing teeth, and straggling dark hair, streaked with gray. Was the man sick, or just rotten with gin?

"Who are you?" Nicholas demanded as he slid away the saber.

But it was Hugh's voice that answered, from the shadows against the rough bricking. "I know him! Damn it, it's Jake bleedin' Biggin!"

Biggin swung toward the young voice. "Who says I am?"

"I do," Hugh said brashly. "You were wearing old man Frampton's livery when I hung round his back door with the dogs, looking for a bite to eat! You don't know me, Jake? You should. You fed me and the dogs often enough."

The full April moon had just shown through a break in the overcast. The light rose, and they peered at one another until the thief slumped down, hugging his chest. "All right, so I'm Biggin. Now put the soldiers on me, and have your laugh." He scrubbed at the cut on his cheek, which had bled into his collar.

"It'll be Newgate for you, Biggin," Hugh chuckled, thoughtlessly cruel.

"Who is this dolt?" Nicholas asked as the boy returned to him. "Or, who *was* he?"

"He used to be a servant in one of the big houses," Hugh said indifferently. "Fat old Frampton had a house full of them, all as fat as himself." He turned up his nose at Biggin. "Mind, that was a few years ago. I was just a little scrap trying to get by, and lucky he didn't put his boot up my arse for my trouble."

"Biggin?" Nicholas prompted. "Oh, here." He thrust his kerchief at the thief, for the scratch. "You're no longer with this Frampton's household?"

"What household?" Biggin demanded sourly. "Frampton hanged himself from a bannister before the soldiers could take him, after the

bailiffs finished with the house. He lost everything he had to the South Sea Company."

The story was common. Fortunes had been made in a day only to be lost in a day when some trick of financial alchemy turned gold into lead. Rich men were ruined, and poorer speculators paupered. Nicholas looked down at Hugh, in his immaculate page's costume. "I thought I told you to run home."

"And leave you up against the wall?" Hugh demanded scornfully. He was, beneath the velvet and lace, the same boy who had run the streets, somehow surviving until he was old enough for men like Widcombe to take an interest in him. "What if he'd had a pistol?"

"Then I'd have been shot and robbed," Nicholas retorted, "and what difference could you have made?"

"I'd have run for the soldiers and had him chucked in Newgate," Hugh said darkly, "then I'd have fetched the quack for you."

Nicholas cuffed his head gently. "All right. Still, you've had your excitement for one night. Run home, or find your friend."

"And what about Jake Biggin?" Hugh demanded as he drew away reluctantly in the direction of the taverns and music.

"What indeed?" Nicholas echoed. "Go on, Hugh. I'll see you again, by and by. And what of you, Master Biggin? No soldiers, you say. Yet you know my name and my business, and will doubtlessly murder me in my bed for my purse unless I see you safely locked away." Biggin shuffled his feet uncomfortably. Coughs racked him. He hugged his chest, and Nicholas frowned at him. "What's your ailment, man?"

"Chimney soot," Biggin snarled. "Are you going to shout for the soldiers, or what?"

"Newgate," Nicholas observed dryly, "would kill you." Biggin said no more and would not look up. "Give me one decent reason why I shouldn't call them," Nicholas challenged.

Still, Biggin was silent. In fact, the reasons were good enough. The man was a fool rather than a murderer; too sick to work, too clumsy to steal. And he had fed a little boy at the back door, and fed the stray dogs, when he could have chased them instead. Nicholas glanced after Hugh and sighed.

"And what in God's name made you choose me, Biggin?"

Still dabbing at his face, Biggin shuffled anxiously. "I knew you when I saw you going into Gavroche's. I guessed you'd be on business, and when I followed you to Widcombe's I knew you'd have heavy pockets when you left. I only had to lighten them for you, and I'd have lived like a lord for a year. Now tell that to the beak!"

So he was not so foolish after all. Nicholas hesitated. "You assumed I'd be easy prey. Do I look like a fop? A dandy?"

"Like a gentleman," Biggin corrected reluctantly. "You never know with gents. Often as not, they're soft as lard under their stockings and lace." He spat onto the cobbles. "It was worth my while to try. I've seen you around, running messages for your father. You're Rosewarne's handsome young bastard. A lot of the lasses know you on sight ... and a few of the lads." He gave Nicholas a furious glare. "Shout, then. There's soldiers in the tavern just yonder, and a good loud shout from young lungs like yours'd bring the buggers running."

But Nicholas was silent, hovering between pity and humor. "You're an idiot, Jake. I imagine you know where I'm lodged, or could find out soon enough." A grunt answered him. "Then be sure of this: I sleep lightly, I'll borrow a pistol from the landlord, and I'm expecting you. I'll shoot you dead if you come upon me in the night. But for now ... run. Get away from me, and stay away. I've no wish to see any more of you."

The man's waxen face gaped in astonishment, gap-toothed and foolish. He was not young, Nicholas saw, and sickness had eaten him to the bone. One grubby hand held out Nicholas's kerchief. "Take this. I don't want you saying I stole it, and putting me in Newgate for the sake of a wipe."

It was dark with blood. "Keep it," Nicholas growled. "It's no concern of mine whom you steal from in future, so long as it's not from me. Come at me with a sword again, and next time, God help you. By now you know I am no idle fop. Go on, run while you can."

And Biggin ran. Nicholas heard his wheezing long after he had vanished into the shadows after Hugh. Singing and music issued from a riverside tavern but he walked on, one hand on his sword, the other on his purse. The April night was mild and the full moon bobbed in the oily river water as he hurried toward his lodgings. Locals appeared not to notice the stench of the river, but Nicholas spent little time in the city, and found it suffocating.

The Duke Of Gloucester was a respectable house. Its stout, ruddy-faced landlord sometimes accommodated nobility, and he displayed the King's emblem above his door. Jon Baker had served German George ten years before, and was fond of reminding his staff and patrons alike.

A half-dozen soldiers sat in the chimney corner, oblivious to the whores and gamblers about them. Nicholas nodded good evening to their sergeant, and called for Baker's young wife, who worked at the bar.

"A supper tray, when you've a moment." He pressed a penny into her hand, and dropped his voice. "And the loan of pistol and shot, if your husband would do me the favor."

"A pistol?" Her white-capped head turned curiously toward him. She was a pretty girl, and Baker's third wife. The others were long in their graves, with most of their children.

"A fool surprised me by the river," Nicholas said softly. "If he's of a mind to come after me, I'd as soon have a pistol on my pillow as a lovely young thing like yourself."

She giggled, flattered yet pretending modest outrage, and gave him a nudge with one plump elbow. "Mutton and pickles for your supper, Mister Gray. And aye, when I can catch my Jon for a minute I'll see about the pistol. You sure you don't want to talk to Sergeant Hoskins there?"

Nicholas glanced at the young soldier who sat with his leg draped artlessly over the arm of his chair, unaware of his companions as he gazed broodingly into a tankard. He was pale, pretty, but not of a good family, Nicholas guessed, and he was suffering through unpleasant duty on his way to higher ranks and better pay.

"No. The thief is long gone by now. Let the Sergeant enjoy his ale and get along to bed. My supper, and a favor from your husband, mistress." He touched her cheek in parting, on his way to the narrow stairs.

His room overlooked the street. Floorboards creaked underfoot as the one cheap candle left burning for him lit several others, filling the air with the smells of tallow and wicking. In the coffee house across the way, whores touted for business with shrill laughter and tuneless singing. He stood at the window to watch them dancing as a blind boy cranked the handle of a hurdy-gurdy. He thought of Hugh and felt a familiar pang of pity. He thought next of Jake Biggin, and wondered what the future held in store for a boy like Hugh. London knew no mercy and when a man was down, kicked him hardest.

Would Hugh turn to thievery? Not for the first time, Nicholas's mind returned to the highwayman. A rogue with gentle hands and elegant speech ... a stranger whose touch brought sudden, shocking pleasure. With an effort he put away such thoughts as a knock announced the lady of the house with his supper. On the side of the tray were the taverner's cannon-barrel pistol and a poke of powder. "Mind you be careful with that," the girl cautioned seriously. "My Jon nearly shot his foot off, first time he fired it."

"I'll be careful," Nicholas promised dutifully as he took the tray. Old Jon Baker was an oaf with ten thumbs, and her story was probably true. He locked the door behind her and divided his attention between his supper and the gun.

The barrel unscrewed for loading. He charged the chamber carefully and slipped a .60 caliber bullet into the concave mouth. The pistol

lay by his hand as he finished the bread, pickles and stewed mutton. His purse was already under the pillow.

He was tired after the long day but the noise of the tavern and coffee house across the street would keep him awake until the early hours. If Biggin dared try his luck again he was even more of a fool than Nicholas thought. But thieves abounded in every tavern, and if Biggin recognized the face of Nicholas Gray, so might others.

He stretched his spine on the sagged palliasse and closed his eyes. On the street, strumpets shouted to passing men, promising an hour's paradise for a penny or three. He smiled, thinking of Hugh and his sweeper boy, who would do anything for tuppence and enjoyed Hugh's gentleness. How easily could Nicholas have been like Hugh, counting himself fortunate to warm beds, as long as his youth lasted. He wondered again at his luck.

He turned over and vainly courted rest, if not sleep. The mail coach pulled out at six, westbound for Dorset and Devon by the best roads. He would leave it with two days' journey behind him, at the livery stable in the village of Alderley, which stood in woodland belonging to Rosewarne Park.

Once, the estate had belonged to a marquis. It came into James Rosewarne's hands just a year before the bastard child was born, when a thoroughbred called Kingfisher romped home at fifty-to-one, and a shrewd young jeweler became a wealthy businessman overnight.

Nicholas pondered his father's fortunes with a faint, rueful smile. Lately, the old man was always ailing, increasingly frail, and his physicians swore he would not live long. Paul Rosewarne's face might have haunted Nicholas then, but it was forcibly banished. The day when he must contend with that particular evil would come soon enough.

Three

The sea wind was fresh and cold in William Henry Trevellion's face as he put his back into the work of rowing. The boat had turned in toward the beach and the breakers were uncooperative. Clouds scudded across the moon and he knew it would be raining by midnight. The sea battered restlessly against the boulders which guarded this cove. It was small, sandy, secluded. Perfect, he thought as he lifted himself over the

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