



THE OUTLAWS SCARLETT & BROWNE

BEING AN ACCOUNT OF THEIR DARING
EXPLOITS AND AUDACIOUS CRIMES

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I

THE WILDS

1

THAT MORNING, WITH THE DAWN HANGING WET AND PALE over the marshes, Scarlett McCain woke up beside four dead men. Four! She hadn't realised it had been so many. No wonder she felt stiff.

She tipped her prayer mat from its tube and unrolled it on the ground. Sitting cross-legged upon it, she tried to meditate. No luck, not with four corpses staring at her, and a knife wound throbbing in her arm. A girl couldn't concentrate in those conditions. What she needed was food and coffee.

She got to her feet and glared down at the nearest body. It was a portly, black-bearded Woldsmen in a denim shirt and jeans. He looked old enough to be her father. Perhaps it *was* her father. His face, half-resting on mud and stones, wore an aggrieved expression.

"Yeah, we've all got problems," Scarlett said. "You try to rob me, that's what you get."

She stepped over the man and went down to the lake to inspect the animal snares. Yet again her luck was poor. The traps were broken, the noose strings bitten through. At the end of

a smear of blood a rabbit's head lay tilted in the bent, wet grass. The long rust-brown ears were cocked upwards as if giving her a furry two-finger salute. It was like the mud-rats had deliberately left it that way.

Scarlett McCain swore feelingly in the direction of the forest. Then she took a penny from her pocket and transferred it to the leather cuss-box hanging at her neck. Already in the red! And she hadn't even had her breakfast.

Back at camp, she brewed coffee over the remains of the night's fire. She drank standing up, straining the dregs through her teeth and spitting the black grit into the water of the stream. It would be a clear day; cool at first, but no rain. The hilltops of the Wolds were picked out in buttery yellow, the western flanks still dark and blue. Way off, beyond the edge of the fen, Scarlett could see the street-lights of Cheltenham showing behind the fortifications. As she watched, they shut off the town generator and the lights winked out. In another half hour, they'd open the gates and she could go in.

She rolled up her blanket, and slotted her prayer mat in its tube, then went to collect her sulphur sticks. Two had been trampled in the fight, but three were OK: the smell had kept the mud-rats off during the night. Scarlett shook her head. It was getting so you couldn't take a kip in case one of those bristly bastards slunk out of a bush and bit your nose off. The bigger rats would do that. It had happened to people she knew.

She stooped to her rucksack, unclipped the two empty bottles and carried them to the stream. One of the men she'd killed was lying half in the water, face-up, blond hair swirling with the riverweed, a white hand floating above the pebbles like a crimped

and curling starfish. Scarlett went up-stream of the obstruction. She didn't want to catch anything.

Her leather coat brushed against the reed stalks as she waded a few steps in and refilled the bottles. Mud and water reached halfway up her boots. She glimpsed her pale, round face hanging distorted beyond the ripples. Scarlett frowned at it, and the face frowned back at her. Its long red hair was tangled worse than the riverweed. She'd have to sort that out before she went into town.

She was tightening the bottle tops when she felt the skin prickle on the back of her neck. She looked behind her, suddenly alert, her senses operating at a new intensity.

The sun was rising over the Wessex Wilds; everything was lit a fiery, optimistic gold. There was almost no breeze. Out on the lake the motionless water clung about the reed stems, as flat and blank as glass.

Scarlett stood where she was, a bottle in each hand, trying to hollow herself out so that every available sensation came flooding in. Her eyes moved slowly round.

No danger was visible, but that didn't fool her. Something had come out of the forest, drawn by the smell of spilled blood.

So where would it be?

A short distance from the shore, midway between the lake and the trees, the remains of ancient buildings protruded from humped grass. The melted walls were crags now, harder than rock and fused into strange black shapes. A flock of birds, coiling like a streamer, wheeled and darted high above, then swept off across the forest. She could see nothing else, nor was there any sound.

Scarlett walked back to her rucksack, fixed the bottles and

tube in place, and hoisted the bag over her shoulders. She kicked soil onto the fire, circling slowly so as to scan the landscape in all directions. If time had allowed, she would have rifled the bodies of the outlaws in search of supplies, but now she just wanted to get away. She made a token inspection of the bearded man; just another failed farmer who thought possessing a knife, a paunch and a bad attitude made him capable of attacking a lone girl sitting by her campfire. The knife was not as sharp as the one Scarlett had in her belt, but he *did* have a greaseproof pack of sandwiches in the pocket of his jacket. So that was Scarlett's lunch sorted.

She left the camp and began threshing her way through the tall, wet grasses. Off to the west, clouds were massing to extraordinary heights, mountains of pink and white towering over the Welsh frontier. Scarlett moved away from the lake and made directly for the crags. Better to face the creature now, out in the open with the sun at her back, than be stalked across the marshes. Hide-and-seek wasn't her thing.

When she got within fifty yards of the walls, she stopped and waited. Presently a long, low-backed piece of darkness peeled off from the edge and loped into the sunlight. It was a brindled grey-and-black wolf, a mature adult, twice as long as Scarlett was tall. Its head was lowered, but the lazily swinging shoulder blades rose almost as high as her chest. The amber eyes were fixed upon her. It came forwards unhurriedly, with the confident swagger of a salesman about to close a deal. No fuss, no flurry. It too was keen to get the job done.

Scarlett's hand moved slowly towards her belt. Otherwise she stood where she was, a slight, slim figure in a battered brown

coat, weighed down with a rucksack and tube and bottles and all the paraphernalia of a girl who walked the Wilds.

The wolf slowed its pace. When it was six yards away, it halted. It raised its head to the level of Scarlett's, and she and the animal appraised each other. Scarlett took note of the wet fangs, the black lips, the intelligence burning in its gaze. Perhaps the wolf noted something in Scarlett McCain too. It turned its head; all at once it was trotting past her and away. Its thick sharp tang whipped against her face and was gone.

Girl and beast separated. The wolf ambled towards the lake, following the scent of the bodies. Scarlett took a comb from a pocket and ran it through the worst knots in her hair. Then she located a piece of bubble gum, tightened the straps on her rucksack, adjusted the hang of her gun-belt, and set off towards the distant town.

Enough dawdling. Time to get on with business. Time to demonstrate how a robbery *should* be done.

