

Thief

By Patricia Green

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Chapter 1

1560, England

Molly fumed silently as she waited behind the great oak trees. Hold the horses again, was it? She looked at young Kevin who assisted her, his eagerness glowing like a beacon 'tween the streaks of mud on his face. The ten-year-old gripped three sets of reins in his dirty little fists. It galled Molly to be left to do a child's job; and her all of ten-and-eight summers. Her hand went to the foot-long knife stuck in her belt. When would Neddy realize that she was able to do her share? She was as capable as any man among them in both shooting and riding. She wanted to be part of the action, play with the coneys, do something exciting! Damn her brother anyway. At this rate she would never really be part of the band, never be stalled-to-the-rogue as a true thief. Her formal initiation into the band of thieves had preyed on her mind for nearly three years now.

One of the horses whickered, and Molly comforted him with a light hand. The dense forest around them stifled some sounds, but she could hear the rumble of a carriage coming. She peered around a tree and glimpsed Neddy pulling his mask over his face and taking his position in the road. Matthew and Will were already in place behind the trees, masked, with weapons ready; Matthew even held a small dagger between his teeth in case his wheel-lock misfired as happened so often. Squirrel and Black Robert quietly waited in the branches overhead with arrows notched.

The carriage soon came into view. It was a well-made, sturdy assemblage, pulled at a brisk pace by a team of four matched bays. Molly licked her full, rose-hued lips. There would be a fine take this eve, certes, for someone who could afford such fine beasts would have a heavy purse, and mayhap some jewelry. She loved taking jewelry the most. The colors were so spellbinding, the sparkling gems so wickedly cool; and Neddy always let her put them on for a time. Her fantasies of living in a fine manor house with servants aplenty did not seem quite as outrageous when she wore rubies and diamonds. Her violet eyes darkened to purple and she shuffled her feet, anxious to see if any jewels would be among the lour Neddy would bring.

The carriage driver spotted Neddy standing in the road, his wheel-lock pistol drawn, bold as you please. Instead of stopping though, the driver applied the whip to the startled horses and they leapt forward frantically. Quick despite

his bulk, Neddy ran from the road. Molly knew the routine, and handed Neddy the reins for his big sorrel, Pumpkin. Will and Matthew were right behind him, taking their mounts from Molly as well.

Neddy paused only long enough to shout orders over his shoulder. "To Table Oak!" Pumpkin galloped away, Will and Matthew's horses close behind.

Squirrel and Black Robert took the reins from Kevin and rode fast toward the meeting place. Molly flung herself onto her mount and pulled Kevin up behind her. "Hold fast, Kevin -- we'll not miss this encounter!" She kicked The Pope into a gallop and they dashed across the road and down the narrow path, ducking their heads and fighting the snags as they went. Molly's hood fell away and her long black hair whipped Kevin's dirt-streaked face. The boy closed his eyes tightly and hung on for dear life, determined to be thankful if all he suffered was a bit of hair in his mouth.

The end of the path was wider, and Molly could see Neddy and his men still ahorse at the edge of the road. Black Robert had notched an arrow into his bow and loosed it just as Molly and Kevin came up behind the group. The missile struck the oncoming coachman squarely in the chest, and he gripped the shaft in desperation before falling from the seat. Neddy was off before the dead man's body hit the road. With a gesture from their leader, Matthew and Black Robert drew abreast of the lead carriage horses and brought them to a stop a few hundred yards away.

Molly and Kevin alighted, as did Neddy, Will and Squirrel. The men gave their horses over to Molly and Kevin then approached the coach with caution. At a nod from Neddy, Will threw open the coach door and stood aside. Neddy's voice rang out from a safe distance, his pistol drawn and ready for anything. "Stand and deliver!"

"Fie on thee, thou cursed rogue!" A man's deep-timbered voice echoed among the trees. "If thou dost wish some'at of us, then thou must come forward and show thyself, coward. Take it if thou canst!"

Neddy nodded toward Will and both Squirrel and Black Robert notched arrows. Will peered around the carriage door, pointing his wheel-lock into the darkness within. Molly could see his grin beginning, and realized she had been holding her breath. A shot rang out and she gasped.

Will groaned and grabbed his chest as he fell to the earth raising a small whirl of dust. His gun fired into the air harmlessly. A dark red stain was spreading over his leather jerkin, and Molly's hands covered her mouth to stifle her scream of horror.

The rogues were spurred into action. Squirrel lay his bow aside and ran to the coach, pulling a tall, black-dressed man out roughly.

Nobles. Molly recognized the rich velvet of the man's doublet, the jewels and pearls adorning his blue satin-slashed sleeves. Molly's heart raced. 'Zwounds! They had never robbed peers before.

Matthew left the matched horses and ran forward to help force any other coach-riders out. A woman's screech was followed by another black-dressed fellow's expulsion from the carriage, and Black Robert climbed in to extract whatever booty he could find. The second nobleman, blond and lean, though not

of the same intimidating height as his companion, struggled with Matt. They seemed well matched, landing a blow for a blow.

The taller noble pummeled Squirrel, who was at least a head shorter and nowhere near as broad, and it soon became apparent that Squirrel was losing the fight.

Squirrel's boot-knife skittered into the dirt beneath the coach. Molly glanced toward Neddy. Neddy moved into the fray, unable to fire his pistol without endangering his men, but willing to use his ham-sized fists.

Molly was frantic to help. Dirty fingers clenched her knife as she considered stabbing the fellow. She had never killed a man, and was not entirely certain she could. Her hand fell away. She wondered if she could bash one of the nobles with something. But what? Her eyes lit upon Will's pistol, still clutched in his white fingers. Without another thought, Molly shoved her charge's reins into a startled Kevin's hands, and ran into the road.

The pistol was heavy, its base rounded and weighted for use as a cudgel when its one shot had been discharged. She pulled it from Will's stiffening grasp and made straight for the tall noble. He was holding Squirrel by the jerkin, pounding the poor boy's face into mush. Squirrel was no longer resisting; his smashed nose sent a wide ribbon of blood over his mouth and chin, staining his jerkin and the lord's hand which held it. Molly had to save him. She raised the pistol over her head as the tall man let Squirrel crumple to the ground. He turned and Molly glimpsed his murderous, dark-gray eyes flash with momentary surprise at the sight of her before she brought the butt of the pistol down against his temple. He fell in a solid heap at her feet.

Time seemed to slow as Molly knelt down beside the man she had struck. A small trickle of blood ran from a thin cut in his hairline near his temple. Molly pushed waves of brown and gold-streaked hair away from his face and touched his cheek gingerly. Her fingers lingered over the sharp angle of his jaw, enjoying the rough curls of his beard.

He was still breathing; his chest rose and fell rhythmically. Well and good. Molly did not care to be responsible for killing the young nobleman. It was dangerous enough to have wounded him.

The fellow looked so peaceful. The daunting gray eyes which had locked with hers were closed, and his face was far less menacing that way. He was a comely one though. Possibly the most magnificent man she had ever seen this close. And clean; he smelled like spices, rich and exotic.

Molly was suddenly conscious of her dirty hands; their fingernails ragged and broken. So very different from the man she stared at.

Her gaze moved over him slowly. It was ridiculous, she knew, to find him so attractive. He would certainly have skewered her without a thought. Her heavy sigh softly stirred his hair.

Neddy's voice rang with authority nearby. "Bing a whist, fellows! The baggage wain arrives." He slung poor Will's body before him on Pumpkin and made for the path.

The rumble of the cart carrying the nobles' luggage and personal servants was coming closer. Molly looked around. Her noble was asleep, of course, but

the other gentleman was trussed up nearby. The woman traveler was sobbing within the carriage. Molly wondered if she was the gray-eyed noble's wife. A purely unreasonable spark of jealousy made her hope she belonged to the other bejeweled fellow.

Black Robert pulled her to her feet and shook her from her reverie. "Flee, Molly!" She looked from the man at her feet to the one who held her arm. "Molly?" Robert turned her face toward his. "Are ye well?"

What was the matter with her? She had to get away! "Well enough, Rob." A dimpled smile lit up her smudged face.

The tall, grim man grunted in return. Kevin ran forward with her horse and she mounted The Pope with practiced ease, and pulled the boy up behind her. "Bing a whist!" she cried.

It was a hour's hard ride into the countryside where they had camped. Molly's nose began to quiver as she dismounted. The smell of roasting venison was a welcome treat. Yesko must have poached a deer while the others had been at the high-law this morning. Molly's empty stomach rumbled.

The glen they had been camped in for the last few days was well protected by small hillocks all around and a copse of trees provided some cover from the elements. However, until this day, the only game to be found had been a few skinny hares and the fish from a nearby stream. Molly's mouth watered as she headed for the succulent meal.

She had pulled off her cape and was running her fingers through the tangled mass of black curls which spilled over her shoulders and down her back, when Ned pulled her off course. His face was dark with anger, and Molly knew her stomach would have to wait. He propelled her by her elbow to their wagon.

Although Matthew had been right behind her, and she looked to him for support, her friend turned away, his usual smile gone, replaced with tightly clamped lips. No help there.

Each of the rogues had learned early-on in their relationship not to interfere between Ned and his sister, Molly. No one in the small band of rogues stepped over the line and onto that forbidden territory to come to the girl's defense.

"Aw, but Neddy," Molly cajoled as they entered the cramped wagon. Ned had to stoop within. Even this, the largest wagon, could not accommodate his six-foot, four-inch frame. "I only did it to save Squirrel. The brute would have torn him asunder. I'faith, Neddy, I saved his life!"

Ned had pulled his mask down and was untying it, his movements careful and slow. Never a quick man with words, he appeared to be giving her comments serious consideration while he thought of what to say. "Sit down, girl," he rumbled.

Molly took a place on the pallet she slept in nightly. She, Ned, Beth and Beth's little boy, Tad, shared the wagon and it was cramped. But it was the only home she had known.

Ned sat on the pallet he shared with Beth. "Ever since our mother died twelve years ago," he began. "I have done me best to see ye raised." Molly tried to interrupt to tell him how much she appreciated him, but he held up a hand to

quiet her. "Molly-girl, ye are a lovely, smart, strong woman now. No longer a scrawny, spitting kitten. And I be happy and proud to take some credit for that." He paused and Molly smiled with pride. "But," he frowned, "ye are also willful, spoiled, and stubborn. And while I take credit for the good things of ye, I must also give meself blame for these faults of yours." Molly's pleased grin vanished. "I have not spanked ye since ye became a woman some five years past, but this day I be well and truly tempted to take ye over me knee and beat some sense into ye!"

She squirmed on her pallet. Molly was not afraid of Ned, but she hated to displease him. She stared at her feet, miserably aware that she had disappointed him by not minding his orders to stay with the horses.

Ned sighed. "Still and now, ye have made a hard decision easier by yer reckless behavior. I have been selfish in keeping ye here with me." He hesitated, his discomfort apparent when he would not meet Molly's curious look.

"Neddy?"

He pulled the stolen pouches from his belt and began counting their contents. "Remember ye Paul Stillman?" Molly nodded, recalling the short, wiry, young man with the kind brown eyes from their last trip to London two months ago. "Well, ye know that Paul and me have been friends for many a year; he wore the brew proud as me when we were stalled-to-the-rogue together in a tiny tavern near the King's Bench gaol in London. Certes, he has seen ye grow as I have." Molly nodded again. "Me age he be, near a full score and ten, and done well by himself, too."

Molly could feel Ned beating around the bush, and was beginning to suspect his reasons.

"His ale-house is always busy, and the rooms above are comfortable and well-tended."

Molly's eyes lit with panic. He could not be-- God's teeth! He would never... "I vow, Neddy, I shall ne'er do't again! Please Neddy--"

Ned's wide palm covered her mouth, his expression bespoke his unhappiness. "Shh, Molly-girl. 'Tis for the best. Paul has asked for ye and on the morrow I shall send word that I agree to the match."

Molly pushed his hand away with force. "Nay! Nay! Oh, I beg ye, Neddy, do not send me away." Tears began to stream down her face -- the first he had seen her cry for many years.

Ned's lips flattened beneath his yellow beard and moustache. "I shall miss ye Molly, 'tis true. But I would miss ye more were ye hanged as a common thief. I cannot keep ye away from our coney-catching, nor will I find ye have become a doxy like those whores Jezy and Seline."

Molly took his huge hands in hers. "But, i'faith, Neddy, they are not whores in sooth. Well, at least Seline's not. She be a dancer. A real dancer."

Ned was shaking his great head, his face grim. "Nay, sweeting. They are all doxies with this band. Even Seline. She has just set her price so high that few men can afford her, but can they show the lour, in gold, she will spread her legs just like the others."

Though she had not convinced him yet, she tried again. "But Beth--"

He frowned. "Beth too, and ye know it well. I may keep her as my woman now, but once Tad is weaned, she will be back to dancing in the tent and whoring with the others. She be a good woman, certes, keeps to her place and does her share --"

Molly's temper flared. "Saints' piss, Neddy! That be all I want to do: pull my weight, do my share! If ye would but see my side. I could dance in the tent - just dance. I be good at it, Neddy, ye know it well. People would come from far to see me dance, and then ye and the others would have more fat purses to cut than ever before! Never would I have to whore, and I could remain innocent of the coney-catching and the high-law just as ye want! Please, Neddy, please--"

"Nay!" Ned's voice thundered as if to convince her with volume. "Ye just cannot see! What if I be caught, or kilt like Will was this day? Then who would care for ye? Have ye considered that?"

Molly recognized the stubborn set of his jaw, the determination in his eyes, and it made her desperate. "Then I could go and marry Paul Stillman... or Matthew would have me. I know he would." She brushed tears from her cheeks, damning herself for crying like a woman. "And what makes ye think ye'll be caught? Ye have kept us safe for many years now."

"Molly, Molly, Molly." He shook his head, sending long blond ringlets flying. "Those were peers we claimed the high-law of this day. They have only to recognize one of us and they will hang us all forthwith. We might not ever make it to the assizes; they need no court, no judge. 'Twas an error I hope we'll ne'er make again." He smoothed her dark head as she sagged with defeat. "'Tis me love for ye, sister, which forces me to send ye away. It be a better life awaiting ye with Paul." He paused, then remembered her desire to dance. It was something she had been pestering him about for a few years now. "And until we reach London, and I see ye proper married to Paul, I want no more talk of ye dancing in the tent. What respectable man would have ye after ye have paraded your teats and pratt before half the men south of London?"

"But--"

"Nay! That be final. I have not spent these last five years preserving yer virtue, fighting off those lecherous louts like poor dead Will, just to have ye give yerself to one of them, or worse sell yer maidenhead after I be dead. Even Matthew, though I love him like me own brother, only keeps himself chaste around ye because I have made it clear that I would kill the bastard that touched ye." Her angry purple glare did not halt his lecture. "Ye will not become a doxy. I made that promise to our mother and I shall keep it unto the grave."

This was without a doubt the worst day in her life. Oh, why did she have to hit that nobleman? Neddy was right to be irritated, after all, the lord had seen her face, if just for a moment. He might be able to identify her, and then the whole band would be lost. And all for her greedy desire to be a rogue. But marriage? She had hoped to avoid that hang-man's noose forever if she could. There would be no freedom, no excitement. Naught but babies and endless drudgery, day after day.

"And have I no say in the matter, brother? 'Tis my life!" Molly's heart was breaking. If only she could have been stalled-to-the-rogue. Then at least she

could have earned some honor in her life. But that required more than bashing someone over the head.

She saw Ned flinch at her misery. "Oh, Neddy." She held his hand to her cheek. "We have been with the Rogues of St. Paul for as long as I can remember. I have always dreamed of being stalled-to-the-rogue, to feel the ale sloshed in my face and hear the cheers of my band as I become one of them. Even more since ye became our upright man, three years ago. Can I not even earn that little prize, Ned?"

Ned's head shook, though not with conviction. "Molly, I think me--"

"Just once, Neddy. Just let me cut or carry a purse, or stall a coney one time, Ned. Please? Then I can be stalled-to-the-rogue before we go to London. Please?"

"Hmm." His dark violet eyes, so like her own, pierced Molly, looking for and not finding a suitable answer there.

"Oh, Neddy. Just one time! What harm can be in't? Mayhap at the faire on the morrow? I promise, once I be stalled I'll not plague ye again. I shall go to London and marry Master Stillman willingly."

Ned pushed sweat-dampened locks of yellow hair away from his face. "Molly, I fear I shall have to have a talk with Paul Stillman afore ye say the vows. The poor fellow will be clay in yer hands if I warn him not."

Molly recognized the signs of Ned's acquiescence. "Then I may do't?"

He smiled. "Aye. Ye may carry a purse on the morrow." Molly jumped up with a squeal. "But only one, and straight from the stall, Molly. Hear me, girl? No adventuring!"

She hugged the huge man and laughed. "Oh, aye, Neddy. Gramercy, gramercy! I thank ye!" Her giggles were infectious and his laughter boomed as he returned her hugs. "Shall we have a wake for poor Will, Neddy? 'Twould be a sin to lay him low without a keg gone in his honor."

"Aye, little sister, go to! And send Black Robert to me. I shall have him hie to London with the sunrise."