

The Highwayman

by Elizabeth Kate Switaj

Aubrey pulled close the wool cloak that used to belong to a pilgrim and wondered if some of that saintliness and pardon might rub off. The mail was late and the bushes damp, but at least years of living in the woods had taught Aubrey to avoid thorns and poison oak while waiting for likely victims to pass.

Aubrey sneezed. The mail was never late when it was bringing dinner invitations on delicate paper to equally delicate ladies, but let it be bringing, unknown to the carrier, the goods a robber needed to buy food and perhaps a room at an inn when the drizzle turned to snow, and of course it would be delayed. Aubrey, having lived amongst those fragile dames, knew that thought was ridiculous: society ladies, too, complained at how long it took the mail to arrive.

The life of a highwayman had seemed like a dream then—no silly conversations about who wore what to look at who and when, no binding clothes. No roof. No fire unless there was fog to hide the smoke. The freedom to shiver and starve.

The muscles in Aubrey's thighs tensed; a horse's hooves could be heard thumping down the road. Yes, it was the mail.

Faster than any move in a social dance, Aubrey leapt from the bushes and up onto the carriage.

Knife to the driver's throat, Aubrey was about to demand the surrender of the carriage and all its goods when he said her name. And then again: "Aubrey? Is it really you?"

She kept her knife to the driver's throat. She pressed it closer when she realized that the skin she was coming so close to breaking belonged to the man with whom she had left London.

"I thought you were dead. Or arrested. I woke up and you . . . You just left me. For no reason.

The knife drew a prick of blood.

"Not for no reason. I can explain. Just take away . . ."

"My blade? No."

"It's hard to talk with . . ."

"Struggle for me, Charles."

He told her he loved her so much that he wanted to build a life—a real life for both of them—and that he had always planned to find her again.

Aubrey spat on the ground, and the prick of blood became a trickle. "You loved me so much you abandoned me? Without a word?"

"Yes, no, it's . . . Does it matter? You can come with me. I have a home now, with a fireplace. It's warm and there's enough food and, and . . . you won't get scratched up by the bushes anymore."

"I've learned what plants to avoid since you left, Charles." But she leaned towards him, as if to kiss him.

"I never stopped loving you, Aubrey."

Aubrey shoved him to the ground. "And I never stopped loving you." She drove the horses off through the underbrush. However cold it might be in the woods, at least out here she would never have to lie about that.

