

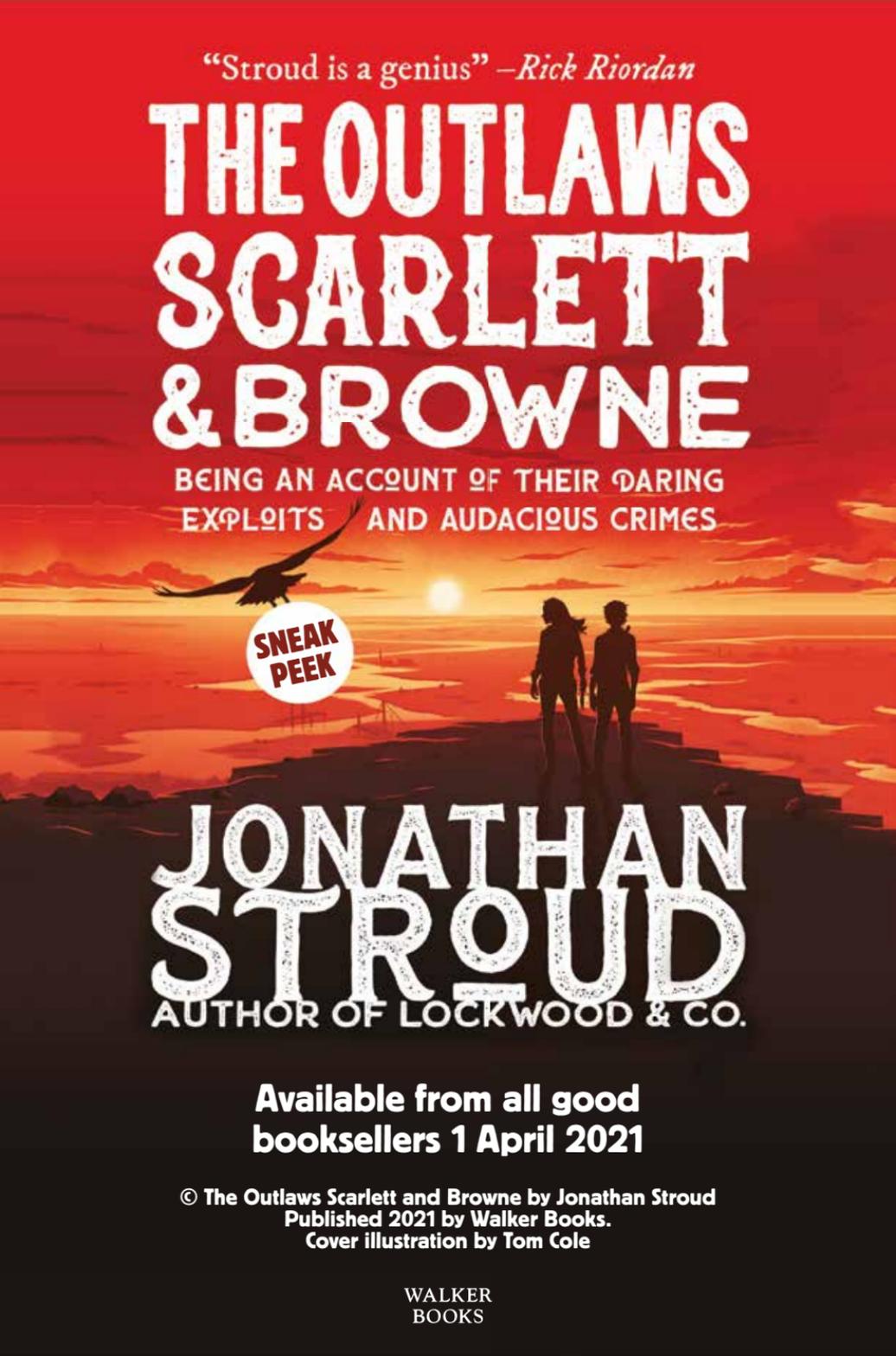
“Stroud is a genius” –*Rick Riordan*

THE OUTLAWS SCARLETT & BROWNE

BEING AN ACCOUNT OF THEIR DARING
EXPLOITS AND AUDACIOUS CRIMES



**SNEAK
PEEK**



**JONATHAN
STROUD**
AUTHOR OF LOCKWOOD & CO.

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WALKER
BOOKS

1

That morning, with the dawn hanging wet and pale over the levees, 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 woods. 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; chilly at first, but no rain. The tops of the levees were picked out in buttery gold, the western flanks still dark and blue. Way off, beyond the edge of the fen, where slopes rose towards the Wolds, 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 baggy brown waxed jacket crackled 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 above 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 over 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 search 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 levees. 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 curling 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.

2

As always, Mr H. J. Appleby, manager of the Cheltenham Co-Operative Bank, was enjoying his lunchtime cup of tea. He had already eaten his sandwiches. His biscuits, coarse-cut oat-and-ginger, Mrs Simpson's best, were happily still to come. His waistcoat felt tight, and the prospect of making it even tighter gave Mr Appleby a sense of familiar wellbeing.

In the corner of the room the grandfather clock – known as 'Old Glory' to four generations of his family – continued its deep, reassuring count-out of the seconds. The bank below was shut, all the tellers having gone to enjoy their lunch hour in the late spring sunshine. If he swivelled the chair, Mr Appleby could see them; in fact, he could see a fair few of the good people of Cheltenham on the high street below his window. The shop workers gossiping, the post-girls finishing their rounds, his tellers queuing at Simpson's the Bakers... Sunlight glinted on clean tarmac and on the chrome handlebars of the bicycles in their racks.

Everything was nice and orderly, calm and quiet. Just the way, Mr Appleby reflected, that things should be.

Without urgency, he surveyed the papers on his desk. They had been carefully stacked and labelled by Miss Peterson. From the coloured tabs, he knew there were some Faith House documents to review, payments to be authorised, letters to sign. Not onerous, and certainly nothing as important as the biscuits. He chuckled to himself, reached out towards the plate—

—and paused. There had been no noise, but something had altered in the room.

He looked up abruptly.

A girl was standing in the doorway.

“It’s lunch hour,” Mr Appleby said. He drew his hand back from the plate. “The bank is closed.”

“I know,” the girl said. “That’s kind of the point.” One side of her mouth rose in a half-smile that did not reach her eyes. To Mr Appleby’s annoyance, she walked into the room.

She had long red hair, held back from her pale and freckled face with a black bone clasp. Jeans, boots, some kind of old white sweater. Her hands were stuffed deep in the side-pockets of a long brown coat. Mr Appleby had a teenage daughter, but seldom paid attention to what she wore. Still, even he could see this wasn’t the usual Cheltenham fashion.

“How did you get in?” he asked.

The girl didn't answer. Her eyes were a curious green colour, large and dark. They regarded him levelly. She was not showing much deference, Mr Appleby thought. Not any, in fact. And she was chewing something. Gum of some kind. Her jaws working steadily. His daughter did that too. He greatly disliked the habit.

"I must insist you answer me," he said.

The girl took a step or two towards him, past the clock, past Mr Appleby's collection of photographs arranged on the stripy papered wall. She peered casually at the photo of his wife at the cricket club fete, the one with her in the flowery dress and the wide straw hat. "My God, they build them big out here," she said. "No food shortages in these parts, clearly."

The bank manager's lips drew tight. He half rose from his chair. "Young madam, I'm going to have to ask you to leave."

With unexpected speed the girl came forward. She reached the leather chair in front of the desk. It had belonged to Mr Appleby's father, when he was manager here, and to his father before that. She swivelled it round, sat down and leaned back, her hands still in her pockets.

"Hey, it reclines," she said, chewing. "Fancy."

Mr Appleby returned his weight slowly to his own chair. After all, it was perhaps best not to make a scene. He ran the fingers of one hand lightly across his oiled hair. "Well, then," he asked. "What can I do for you?"

“Oh, I want your money,” the girl said. Her jaws made another couple of rotations. She flashed her half-smile at him. “I’m here to rob the bank.”

Mr Appleby made an involuntary sound deep in his throat. Was she mad? It was incredible how even with all the checking, the monitoring, the weeding out in childhood, a few deviants kept slipping through. The red hair should have given the game away. Or the weird eyes should.

“Are you indeed?” he said. “Are you indeed, Miss... I’m sorry, I didn’t catch your name.”

“That’s because I didn’t bloody give it, did I?” the girl said. “Right, there’s a safe in the wall behind you. You’ve got sixty seconds to open it, Mr...” She glanced at the silver nameplate on his desk. “...Mr Horace Appleby. Ooh, so I know your name. Isn’t it good to be able to read? Sixty seconds, Horace, starting now.”

“Maybe we can discuss this,” Mr Appleby said. “Would you take a cup of tea?”

“Don’t drink the muck.” The girl crossed her legs and checked her watch. “That’s five seconds gone and fifty-five seconds left.” She winked broadly at him. “I do maths, too.”

“A biscuit, then?” He pushed the plate towards her. With the other hand he pressed the button under the desk. Eric would handle her. Eric was calm and big and not over-nice. He did what he was told. He’d take her to the quiet courtyard at the back. Nothing to scare the horses. Just a few slaps, bruises in soft places, send her weeping on

her way. He smiled at the girl. His eyes flicked towards the door. Eric didn't appear.

"Fifty seconds," the girl said. "If you're waiting for that big guy stationed in the lobby, I'm afraid he won't be coming. He's a little ... tied up right now."

Mr Appleby blinked at her; his surprise got the better of his caution. "You tied him up?"

Now the girl did grin properly, both sides of her face scrunching up like a goblin. "Course not! The very idea!" The grin vanished. "I knocked him senseless. And if you don't open the safe," she added, "I'll do the same to you."

Mr Appleby didn't believe her about Eric, but all the same she was there, and Eric wasn't. He sat slowly forwards, steepled his fingers, put his elbows on the desk. There was a gun in his drawer, a nice Cheltenham-made revolver. Bought from the gunsmiths two doors down. But he'd have to get it out, fast maybe, and the drawer was stiff. "If you knock me out," he said, keeping his voice light, "then I won't open the safe. Will I? That's logic, isn't it?"

"Sure," the girl said. "If I do it in that order. Forty seconds."

Now that he was really looking, he could see the mud stains on her jeans and boots, the scuffs and patches on her coat, tell-tale signs of life led beyond the town. There was a peculiar leather cylinder hanging round her neck too, held in place by a dirty string. Penance box, maybe. So she was mad. Some kind of zealot. Mad and bad. He'd

been misled by her youth, when she was just another filthy outlaw crept in from the Wessex Wilds.

He could do it, though. Get the gun. He'd used to shoot birds out on the flats, blast them down when the beaters blew the horns. Did it almost before they took to the air. He was older now, but he wasn't so slow. He could do it. The question was when. He realised that his hands were shaking.

Maybe it was better to keep her talking.

"You're clearly rather an unhappy person, my dear," he said. "You need guidance. If you want, we could pop along to the Faith House, get a Mentor to set you right."

"Oh, I don't think so," the girl said. "Thirty-five seconds."

Mr Appleby glanced at Old Glory. The hoary time-blackened face of the clock showed twelve twenty-seven. Miss Peterson never stayed out long. Yes, his staff would come back soon, find Eric, see something was wrong... "You're not from here, I take it," he said. "Maybe you didn't see the cages in the square? Just opposite the tea shop?"

"Thirty seconds remaining," the girl said. "Yeah, I saw them."

"Those cages are where we put petty criminals here in Cheltenham," Mr Appleby said. "You quit this nonsense now, you'll get away with a day or two in the cage. Nothing too painful – just a bit of public jeering, maybe some prodding with the poles of justice. Then you're run

out of town. But if you don't quit it..." He tried to speak slow, put emphasis on every word. "If you don't quit, we've got the iron posts at the far end of the fields. We tether you there and leave you for the beasts. Or, who knows, maybe the Tainted come out of the woods and carry you off alive. Do you want that, my dear? I'm an Appleby, one of the ruling families in this town. I can arrange it, easy as blinking. Thieves, deviants, bank robbers: that's what we do to them."

"Yeah?" The girl's green eyes gazed at him, unblinking. "Seems you're pretty tough. But I do things too. Ask the big guy in the lobby downstairs. Ask four dead outlaws out there in the fens." She blew a tiny bubble of pink gum, let it pop back into her mouth, continued chewing. "One thing I won't do," she added, "is waste time with my life on the line. Your speech there took fourteen seconds. I've used up another six. That's ten left to get that safe open, to remember the combination and turn the wheel just right. And you with those poor old shaky hands and all."

Mr Appleby swallowed. "I'm not opening the safe," he said.

"Eight seconds."

Just a quick movement would be all he needed. Distract her, wrench the drawer, pull out the gun... "I really think," he said, "we should talk about this." Gabbling now. Calm down. She wasn't going to do anything.

"Six."

He looked towards the window.

“Five,” the girl said. “Four.”

“You’re too late.” Mr Appleby pointed down into the street. “The militia are here.”

The girl rolled her eyes, but she turned her head to look, and Mr Appleby yanked at the gun drawer. Stiff, yes – but he had it open! Goddam it, the gun was wrapped in a handkerchief! Why had he done that? What was he thinking? Who wrapped their revolver like a birthday present? He flicked off the cloth, had it in his hand. He jerked his arm up, cocked the gun—

—and found the girl had a revolver of her own already pointed at his heart. She looked infinitely bored. Another bubble emerged, slowly, insolently, from the centre of her mouth. She moved a strand of hair from her face.

Bang! The bubble popped. With a groan of fear, Mr Appleby flinched backwards in his chair. He dropped the gun with a thump upon the desk.

“Three, two, one,” the girl said. “Time’s up, Horace. Now open the bloody safe.”

“All right!” Mr Appleby rose; in a flurry of frantic movements, he turned the circular dial, inputted his grandfather’s code, and swung the safe door open. He heaved the strongbox out and dumped it down between the revolver and the plate of biscuits.

“There,” the girl said. “That wasn’t so hard, was it?” She gestured with the gun. “Now take off the lid.”

He did so. Inside, as lovingly prepared by Mr Appleby himself, was the bank's cash reserve: neatly wrapped wads of fifty-pound notes, Wessex-issue, stacked, spotless and vulnerable. It made Mr Appleby sick at heart to see them like that, so naked and exposed. He stared at them miserably.

The girl took a string bag from somewhere, shook it out. "Put the notes in, please." Her eyes flicked towards the door.

A great hatred rose in Mr Appleby as he obeyed her. It was hatred for the chaos that ruled beyond the walls of the Surviving Towns, out there in the endless fens and forests; chaos that had the impudence to skip into his study wearing dirty boots and a leather coat.

"I'll see you killed," he said. "Where are you going to run to? Mercia? The Wilds? We've got trackers."

"Yeah. But they're no good." She was doing up the bag, looking at her watch.

"I have friends in every town."

"Friends? With your face? That I seriously doubt."

"You are stealing Faith House money. You understand that they have operatives? They'll hunt you down."

The girl hefted the bag in her hand. "Will they? You heard of Jane Oakley, Mr Appleby?"

"No."

"Jenny Blackwood?"

He shook his head.

The grin became a glare. "Geez. Don't you ever read the news-sheets?"

“I assume they’re outlaws and brigands. Wicked females who beset the towns.” He leaned towards her across the desk, quivering with all the righteous fury of a rich, respectable man. “They’re your associates, I suppose?”

“No.” The girl bent in close. He caught the smell of woods and water, and of a none-too-fragrant woollen sweater. “They’re not my associates, Mr Appleby. They’re me.”

There was a soft cry from the doorway. Mr Appleby and the girl looked up. Miss Petersen stood there, open-mouthed and anguished, and with her – thank Shiva! – a militiaman in his dark green bowler hat.

For an instant no one moved.

To his own surprise, Mr Appleby reacted first. He snatched at the string bag, yanking it towards him. The girl came with it; he struck out wildly at her, but she ducked beneath the blow, swivelled and punched upwards with a strong, thin arm. Pain exploded in Mr Appleby’s midriff, in the region of his tea and sandwiches. He let go of the bag and toppled backwards in his chair. Moaning, flailing, through his streaming tears, he saw the militiaman begin to move. But where was the girl? Above him, on the desk! She’d jumped so fast he’d barely seen it. She caught his eye, smiled. Bending low, she clutched the bag of notes to her, then sprang straight over Mr Appleby and out through the plate-glass window, pulling it away with her in a cone of sparkling shards.

Gone.

Blue sky. Sunlight.. A heartbeat of silence.

A sudden outcry from below.

Dead, surely! Clutching at his stomach, Mr Appleby hoisted himself up. He took a stumbling step, leaned out of the window, gazed down upon a wonderland of spreading glass and scattering pedestrians.

Where was the body? He rubbed his eyes.

Somewhere near, a bell gave a merry tinkle. Mr Appleby looked up the road.

There – a bicycle! The girl on it, peddling like a demon! Off up the high street, the string bag bouncing at her shoulder. She looked back once, saw him peering, made an abusive sign. Then she swerved round a toddler, upended an old lady into the gutter, and sped on.

Mr Appleby could hear Miss Petersen behind him, yabbling like a crow. He heard the militiaman blowing his whistle, blundering his way downstairs. He ignored these distractions, craned his head out of his broken window and watched his money receding up the street. Soon he could no longer see the bag, but only a dancing flash of bright red hair, which seemed to wave cheerily at him as it passed the post office and the duck pond and the bus stop, and so vanished at last through the gates of Cheltenham and out into the Wilds.

3

The secret of being a successful outlaw was to move fast and stay light on your feet. No ties, no allegiance. Rob one town, head for the next; fling yourself willingly into the wastes between. Never look back. That's what set you apart from the fools in their little houses, cowering behind the safety of their walls. There were too many dangers in the forest. They never wanted to chase you far.

Even so, the Cheltenham pursuit proved more capable than Scarlett McCain had expected.

She sat under cover at the edge of the trees, looking through her binoculars at activity on the marsh road. There were three main search teams, fanning out from the truck parked below the levees. Trackers with rifles; members of the militia in their green bowler hats; guys with big black dogs scurrying around. How those dogs could follow the scent of a bicycle, Scarlett didn't know, but they were doing a decent job of it. Everyone moved swiftly, efficiently, with a grim and purposeful air. The Cheltenham

Co-Operative was their bank, and she had their money in her bag. They'd definitely risk the woods a little way before it got dark.

Scarlett wrinkled her nose. That was the drawback of doing a job at lunchtime. The chase would last a bit longer than usual.

But it was OK. The bike was underwater in a ditch. The cash was in her rucksack, and her rucksack was once more on her back. She had everything she needed, nothing to slow her down. Tucking the binoculars away, and keeping her head low, she crawled backwards through the bracken and into the shadow of the trees.

To begin with, the woodlands were sporadic and half-tamed. She passed loggers' camps, rough fields for pasture, grassy apple orchards, rows of beehives. Armed guardsmen watched over the pigs rooting in the orchards, while shepherds walked close beside the sheep flocks, keeping an eye on the thickets beyond. Scarlett slipped by them all, unseen, and so came to a remote and sunlit meadow, where the town's punishment posts stood on an ancient concrete platform. The chains hung empty. Light pierced the clouds; the trees around were soft and golden. There was an atmosphere of sombre melancholy in the glade. Scarlett felt a twinge in her belly, a deep, soft, remembered pain that she did not want to acknowledge. Far behind came the yammering of dogs. She plunged on into the deeper Wilds and left the Cheltenham paths behind.

She went at a brisk pace, boots scuffing through the sandy soil, past shadowy boles and fallen branches, without bothering to disguise her trail. From time to time she checked the compass on her belt-chain, keeping north by east, in the general direction of the Mercian border town of Stow. If she kept away from the roads, she would reach Stow's safe-lands early the following afternoon. It meant a night out under the trees, but that didn't bother Scarlett. She had done many such journeys, and nothing had killed her yet.

An hour into the forest she came to a dead zone, where black mould rimed the trunks and a sour smell of ash persisted in the air. Here she saw crude symbols on the rocks, animal skulls wedged in crevices, dark blue slashes daubed on branches. The marks were old and faint, but it was a place to tread cautiously. Scarlett listened, and heard the noises of animals in the undergrowth and birds calling overhead. Her movements became easier. If the wildlife was relaxed, the Tainted were unlikely to be near.

Another hour, and with the trees once again verdant and the air clean, her pace had slowed. She began to think of Stow's attractions: its pubs, gaming tables and hot food. When she got there, she would first pay off her debt to the Brothers of the Hand, then start enjoying herself. In the meantime, she was on her own in the wilderness, which was just how Scarlett McCain liked it. She could not

hear the dogs. The search parties were surely far behind. Provided she kept clear of wolves and other dangers, she had little to worry about.

It was then that she found the bus.

Coming out of a fern-choked gully, she saw ahead of her the curved embankment of a metalled road cutting its way through the forest. It was probably the one linking Cheltenham with Evesham to the north. The slope rose steeply, almost as high as the canopy of the trees, but Scarlett's eyes were fixed on its foot, where an upturned motor-coach lay, wrecked and broken, its battered side pointing at the sky.

She could see where it had pitched off the highway at the curve of the road, splintering the posts of the barrier fence, before turning over onto its roof and sliding most of the way down. A great black smear had been gouged through the vegetation, with many stones pulled loose by the fury of the descent. Near the bottom of the hill, the bus had struck rocks and tipped again, coming to rest on its side across the middle of a little stream. The undercarriage faced her, black, shining, indecently exposed. The wheels were still; there was silence in the little forest valley. A thin trail of oil danced and twisted in the water passing out from under the coach, shimmering away beneath the sun. A company of flies moved in the air either side of the metal carcass, like black lace curtains quivering in a breeze. But

there was no wind, and other than the flies no sign of life. Even so, Scarlett McCain did not stir from her position in the shadow of the ferns, but remained still, watching the rise and fall of the flies.

Something swift and blue flashed above the water. A kingfisher looped along the stream and veered away into the trees. Scarlett came out of the brake. She walked to where the coach lay like a stricken beast: a vast thing, stupid in its haplessness.

A great hole had been torn in the side of the coach that faced the sky. The metal around the hole was peeled up and outwards like the petals of an iron flower.

There was a smell of petrol and spilt blood.

Scarlett halted with her boot caps resting in the oily water and listened again. Just the insects' buzzing, the indifferent trickle of the stream. Fragments of gory clothing were strewn across the stones on either bank, where the soft ground had been churned by giant paws. She could see the prints in the mud, and bloody drag marks glittering beneath quivering coatings of flies. The marks curved away from the embankment and into the trees.

It had been a Wessex Countryman, one of the bus services that linked the fortified towns. The blood on the ground was no longer fresh. The crash had happened at least the day before. Possibly some survivors had got out before the beasts emerged from the woods; but they had certainly not all escaped.

In any event they were gone now, leaving their possessions behind.

Scarlett put her hand under her hair and scratched the back of her neck. Then she assessed the position of the sun. The creatures that had scoured the coach were unlikely to return before dark. It was still only mid-afternoon.

She vaulted up onto the exposed side of the coach and walked along the side towards the great torn hole. Through the windows under her feet she could see broken seats, cases, scattered clothes – a spoil-heap of bloody debris. Some of the eating had been done inside the coach. Bears or wolves, maybe, obeying the urgency of their hunger. Only when they were full would they have hauled the remaining bodies away.

When she reached the crater, Scarlett paused again for a time, pondering the implications of the outward curl of metal, the way the hole had been punched from within... But nothing stirred inside the coach, so she lowered herself carefully over the edge, swung like a pendulum for a moment, then dropped into the space beneath.

She landed lightly, knees flexing, coat billowing stiffly about her. Soft yellow daylight, thick with dust and death, streamed down from the line of windows above. Everything in the coach was turned ninety degrees out of true. Double-rows of seats projected towards her from the side, forming deep recesses like the cells of a monstrous hive. One set of seats was low; the other hung above her

head. Everything was strewn with a chaos of shoes, clothes and pieces of light baggage that had been thrown around the tumbling coach and later torn by claws.

Scarlett saw little of immediate interest, but after ten minutes' careful inspection she had forced open several bags and collected certain useful items: three tins of meat, one of chocolate pudding; a torch with a wind-up battery, and two books, much battered and repaired. Scarlett could read and knew the value of books. They would fetch a good price at the Mercian fairs.

There was also a little metal briefcase, secured with a padlock that Scarlett could not break. She didn't bother searching for the key. It had probably been in someone's pocket, which meant it was now in the belly of a wolf. But the case was just heavy enough to be interesting, and she took that too.

She returned to her starting point beneath the hole, packed her prizes in her rucksack, and hung the briefcase securely beside the prayer tube. She was just gazing up at the sky and clouds, preparing to climb back out, when she heard the noise.

Freezing was easy; the hard part was rewinding her brain sufficiently to figure out what she'd actually heard. Not a single sound, she thought, but sounds – a thump, a scuffle, a whispered snatch of words. She looked back, and for the first time noticed the large, box-like construction projecting from the ceiling. It was an amenity that all

coaches had: the toilet cubicle. Its door was shut.

Everything was dead quiet. Scarlett looked up through the hole at the wandering clouds, at the freedom of the sky. She lifted her hands, arm muscles tensing, ready to launch herself out—

And sighed. With silent steps she left the hole and approached the cubicle again.

When she got near the door, so that she was almost beneath it, she noticed a red bar showing beside the metal handle. There was a word on it:

OCCUPIED

There were also many long scratches scored deep into the varnished wood, showing where something had made frantic attempts to get inside.

Scarlett listened. No sound came from the cubicle.

She moved closer. The door was a few inches above her head. From the looks of the hinges, it would open downwards.

She had an odd impulse to knock politely on the door, but resisted it as absurd. Instead she cleared her throat; she had not spoken since leaving the bank, three hours before.

“Hello?”

It was strange to hear her voice at all in that wrecked and ruined place. It sounded false and heavy. No response came from behind the door.

“Is someone there?”

She waited. Not a movement, not a rustle.

Scarlett leaned back against the roof of the coach, scratched her nose, blew out her cheeks. This time she did reach up and tap gently on the side of the cubicle. “It’s half past four,” she said. “Soon the sun will move behind the trees and the glade will be in shadow. The creatures will return. They will smell you and attack the door. Eventually they will tear it down. I am a traveller, a simple pilgrim and a girl of God. I am here now, but soon I will leave. No other aid will come to you. If you are injured, I have medicines. I can help you up onto the road. But you have to come out,” Scarlett said, “in twenty seconds. That’s the deal. Otherwise I go.”

Her ears caught the trace of a whispered conversation. It was not a big space for two people to be trapped in. She imagined the stifling heat and dark. She imagined being inside there while the coach was rolling down the slope. She imagined being inside while the beasts ate the other passengers; while wolves howled and slavered and scratched at the plywood door. Scarlett McCain had plenty of imagination. Too much, in fact: it was something she could not eat, nor fight with, nor sell to give her tangible benefit, and she regretted having it.

“Ten seconds,” she said.

Someone said something inside the cubicle; almost at the same moment, a flurry of rapid impacts struck the

wood close above Scarlett's head. She stepped away – but not fast enough. The door swung open, slamming her hard on the side of the skull. As she reeled back, stars sparking behind her eyes, the cubicle disgorged its occupant. It fell at her feet, rolled across the debris in a blur of flailing legs and arms.

Scarlett McCain, clutching at the nearest seats, teeth ringing in her jaw, levered herself upright.

She gazed wordlessly down at a single sprawled person.

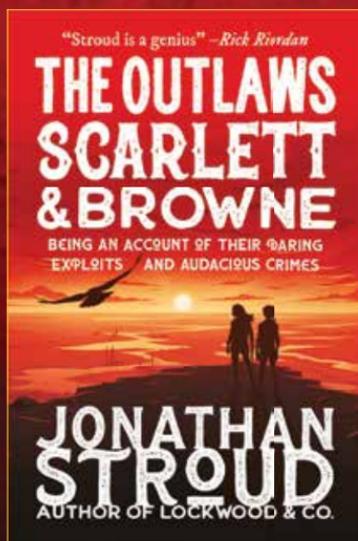
It was a youth, wiry, pale and angular, possessed of enormous staring eyes and a mane of wild black hair that spiked outwards like a fountain of water caught by sudden frost. Just one curl of it flopped forwards over his face as if someone had slapped him from behind. He raised a slender hand and pushed the strands away from his eyes, then resumed his original position.

A boy, staring up at her.

“Holy crap,” Scarlett said.

With fumbling fingers, she took a coin from her pocket and transferred it to her cuss-box.

Jonathan Stroud wrote his earlier novels – *Buried Fire*, *The Leap* and *The Last Siege* – whilst working as an editor at Walker Books. Now he works full-time as a writer, with his bestselling Lockwood & Co. series and Bartimaeus trilogy gaining worldwide interest and two titles, *Ptolemy's Gate* and *The Empty Grave*, having been long-listed for the Carnegie Medal. Jonathan lives in St Albans.



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