

Outliers – Stories from the edge of history

Season Two, Episode Twelve

Fresh Sweat and Cloves

By Beth Crane

Bess:

Good morning, my love. And how are you today?

[She opens the bag, sniffs lightly. The soft sound of flies].

Ah. Not good. I'll get more cloves this afternoon.

[Bess notices the listener].

I can see you, you know. Yes. Hello. My eyes are up here. There we go. No need to spend all your time staring at my bag. Oh, I know, you weren't staring at the bag, your eyes were just -- pointing in that direction. Continuously.

You know what's in the bag. I know what's in the bag. Let's give up the pretence, shall we? Here I am in all my glory. Mad old Bess Raleigh, the one who carries her husband's head around in a velvet sack. Do you like it? I had it specially made. You don't seem able to take your eyes off of it.

Of course I know I'm a -- topic of conversation. I'm not deaf. But honestly, I no longer give a damn. I've done what I needed to do. What do they think they're going to achieve by tittering



behind my back? Two of my sons are dead. My husband too. What more can they do?

I've outlived Queen Elizabeth. I've outlived King James. I'm a survivor.

No, I'm not a survivor. I'm a Throckmorton. It's in our nature.

You think I was always a member of high society? We had to work hard to get here. The Throckmortons had been out of favour with the royalty for years, relatives losing their heads left and right. But my mother schemed and planned and by the time we reached adulthood, both myself and my brother were members of the court. Queen Elizabeth was always very forgiving in some ways. Not in others.

I helped her to dress, helped her to puff and powder and put on her warpaint before she went out to fight the world. We were alike in a lot of ways. But while Lizzie liked her men wild, she wanted her women quiet. Serene. Submissive. And I could only play that role for so long.

While I was trying so hard to play that role, along came Walter. Lizzie's beloved favourite. A man who smelled of sweet sweat and cloves, a man of promises and chivalry. My hero. Nothing like the typical subservient man of the royal court. He was dashing. He challenged the queen. He challenged me.

It was innocent at first. Just a few words exchanged here and there. Glances. Stolen moments.

He had the most intense blue eyes, and his hair curled just a little. Like an angel's. He primped and styled himself like the other men of the court, but there was always something...



different. When he fixed those blue eyes on you, everything else melted away.

Stare into those eyes too often, lose yourself in his sweet scent and his words and, well, you find yourself with child.

I loved him, intensely. And he loved me. And so, under cover of darkness and away from the eyes of the queen, we were married. I bore our child in secret, my sweet little Demerai, and he was spirited away to a wet nurse. We never saw him again.

Walter was a man full of promises. Promising his loyalty to the Queen -- and then marrying me. Promising that this time he would find El Dorado -- and returning home with nothing, time and time again. Promising he'd bring our son home from his adventures safe and sound -- and then...

The problem in Lizzie's eyes wasn't the conception -- he'd had a child by another woman long before, and that was of no consequence to her. It's that we'd had the gall to marry without her permission, to hide our child from the eyes of the court. But it was the only thing I could do. There wasn't another option.

Were we to ask for her blessing, she wouldn't have given it. Walter was her property. Oh, she didn't want to marry him. Of course not. That would have meant sharing her power. But she didn't want anyone else to have him either. He'd have had a brief period of disfavour, and I'd have been banished, unmarried, to the countryside to live out my years in disgrace with my bastard son.

Instead, we found ourselves in the Tower of London.

Have you ever been to the Tower? Even in summertime it's bitterly cold. The stone is frigid enough to bite at your feet as



you walk in even the thickest shoes. I can remember the feeling, even now. I swaddle myself in furs and blankets to try and exorcise the chill from my bones, but I spent so much time there I'm not sure I'll ever quite be free of it.

I suppose it was a sign that our marriage would not be the smoothest. But we were young. We wrapped ourselves up in each other and weathered the cold.

Until, of course, Lizzie sent Walt off on some heroic adventure and I was left to walk those stone floors alone. He came home a hero to a wife who was slowly freezing to death.

By the time I was released, Demerai was dead. Poor mite never lived long enough to see the trouble he'd caused.

The plague took anyone it could touch. I know that. It cut vast swathes through every landscape, decimated town after town. But that doesn't stop me from blaming her for it.

I don't know what the Queen expected after our release. Perhaps she thought we would plead for a return to court, prostrate ourselves in front of her, beg for our status and for forgiveness. But instead we left court.

We made our way to Cornwall. Walt immediately took up politics and I relished the warmth and comfort of a house not built as a prison and the raising of our second child, safe from the plague. But Walter would never be content with our little provincial life. He needed adventure like he needed air.

I knew he was leaving again as soon as he told me of his latest discovery. A rumour he'd heard from a man who'd overheard a whisper, a half-remembered tale of treasure. There was that



glint in his eye he always had when he was off on an adventure; if you looked deep into his eyes, they glittered with gold coins, honour and jewels. That glint that said that there was nothing more important than the chase. Not me, not our son Wat, not our life together. There was a golden city at the head of the Caroni River and by hell or high water, Walter would be the one to find it.

He never did. But over and over he left me to run our estate, to build our life up again before his return. It was... unconventional for a woman to run the household. Unconventional for her to deal with the rough and rowdy types who supply you with goods and try to fool you into making the wrong choice. But they weren't counting on a woman who understood their ways. If they try to bite you, bite them back. It's the Throckmorton way.

I kept a level head and ran our estate until, with much fanfare, Walter returned. He came home, wrote a book about all he'd found or thought he might have found. He always let himself get a little carried away with his writing. He never discovered El Dorado, but to read his books you'd think he'd made it right to their front gate.

I thought things would be easier when Elizabeth died. She'd never taken to me again, of course, but Walt had made it back into her favour. She'd never married and even when she was old and decrepit the boys still flocked around her. But she was one of those who stand strongest when they are on their own.

There was the expected tussle over the crown, and Walter, of course, had his revolutionary friends. Fools, the lot of them. Drunken mouths that ran loud in public places with far-fetched



plots and schemes to get rid of King James. And when they fell, they dragged us down with them.

Back to the Tower we went. But this time the sentence was execution.

King James, it seems, took pity on us. Where other heads rolled, Walter and I were merely left to the chill of the Tower. I wish I could say that the stone walls greeted us like old friends, but at least they were warmer than the kiss of an axe.

Not that we didn't treat it like home. The Tower is where we conceived our third son, and where he came kicking and bawling into the world. My sole survivor. The reason for everything I've done over the past decade.

We lived for thirteen years in that Tower, all together. Wat grew into a man in the shadow of his father's legend. Walter built up his study and grew his herb garden, brewing up his strange little herbal concoctions to try and dispel the aches and pains that the cold bled into our bones. Carew grew from a bawling babe into a child.

And then, through the thick walls of the Tower, the call to adventure came once more.

Walter convinced King James to release him one last time. To let him set sail to find El Dorado, once and for all. To bring glory to his reign. To bring the Raleighs back into favour again, the only way he knew how.



And King James, the damn fool, let him go. On one condition: he had to respect the fragile treaty we had with the Spanish. Walt swore he would and loaded up his ship.

And he took our Wat with him, keen to cut his teeth on legendary gold. His father had raised him on tales of heroics, of battles with the Spanish, of glory for England. So when they came across a Spanish encampment, Wat, with all of the enthusiasm of a boy, thought that perhaps the rules didn't apply to him. And Keymis, Walt's second in command, indulged him. Let him be a hero. Let him lead a party of men on a secret attack.

Wat never got his chance to be a hero, but he got his chance to be on the wrong end of a gunshot. And Keymis, dramatic as he always was, killed himself because Walt wouldn't forgive him. Of course he wouldn't forgive him. Give me a blade and I'd have slit his throat myself.

The Spanish ambassador demanded Walter's head. And King James, who had been so... accommodating in the meantime, had to comply or risk another war with the Spanish.

The King's Vice-Admiral, Lewis Stukeley, met him at Plymouth. We joined them soon after. We were a sorry procession. Carew, thirteen now, and still silenced by Wat's death, was not a good traveller. Walter was broken. Barely the man I knew. Still smelling of sweet sweat and cloves, but of other things too, now. Old tobacco and a sour sadness. He was frail, his intense eyes now sunken into sad, sleepless sockets. At night he spoke bravely of escape and adventure, but by day he leaned on me like an old man leans on a stick.



Stukeley was like a cat playing with a mouse. When we reached London, he offered Walt a chance to escape, a midnight boat to freedom abroad. And of course Walt took it, only to be captured half a mile down the Thames by Stukeley and his men, playing hero. They called him Judas til the day he died.

And Walter gave in. Resigned himself to his fate, to joining Demerai and Wat. But I had Carew to raise and Walter's estate to handle.

We had our last night together in the Tower. Our home for so much of our lives. The last night I held him close. Felt him warm against me. The last time I kissed lips that could kiss me back.

The moment the axe came down, my preparations began. I had a family name to regain, an heir that needed his inheritance. My women beside me, I bore his body and his head away. His body we washed, shrouded and buried, but his head...

I had other plans. I had battles to fight. I needed him by my side.

Embalming, they call it. Preservation. But it wasn't a true preservation. I should have prepared myself for that. Known that what I would get to keep of Walt would be... Grotesque. But you get used to anything, after a while.

They stripped the insides like you'd strip a cow's skull for soup. I could barely stand to watch, but I stood tall. Kept Carew close beside me.

They packed his skull and his mouth with sheep's wool, interspersed with rosemary and cloves. Stuffed his nostrils with



wax, glued his lips and eyes closed. Sewed his neck up neatly, patched the hole with a circle of lamb's leather.

He's a grisly relic, my poor Walter. These days he reeks like his peculiar medicinal concoctions used to.

But to survive, I needed something of him. I needed his strength to fight our debts -- when someone sued me for his debts, I sued them right back. I needed his strength in the courts, when I fought for our name. I needed his strength when I was alone, because there's nothing quite so isolating as knowing that your adventurer is never coming home again.

And it makes a point, doesn't it...punctuates an argument. Putting someone face to face with the man they doomed. To remind them that all men die, that all men decay.

It may have taken ten long years, but here we are. The Raleighs -- the two surviving Raleighs -- are back on top. We've survived two monarchs. I'm certain we'll survive a third.

You still want to look?

Well.

[She Opens The Bag, Shows The Listener Raleigh's Head].

Here. Meet Walter. Excuse the smell, he's having a bad day. That's what happens when you make promises you can't keep, isn't it my love?



He used to smell so sweet, of fresh sweat and cloves. His skin
was smooth, tanned nut-brown by the sun over faraway seas.
But these days he looks more like a plum pit.

My poor love.

