

The
HIGHWAYMAN'S
Confession

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BEWARE THE
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Chapter One

The late night's breeze wafted in through the open carriage window. It was a crisp, clear night—the first one of spring so far—and Emily delighted in the feel of the caress of cool air upon her face. She gazed up in wonder at the dark, cloudless sky, sparse smattering of stars, and the eerie glow of the crescent moon—a shimmering, thin sliver that brought to mind the smiling lips of one Cornelius Fitzherbert—the dashing young man with whom she had danced for most of the evening. Cornelius had been Emily's beau for two years now—they'd first met on the occasion of her sixteenth birthday—and she was pretty certain she had fallen head over heels in love with the young man.

"Doesn't the moon look beautiful tonight, my dear?" Susannah Farnsworth's soft voice broke through her daughter's reverie. "You know, your skin looks so very beautiful in the silvery moonlight. It reminds me of the sweet baby you were once. I must confess that when I see you blossoming into a vivacious young lady, of whom I am so very proud, it tugs at my heartstrings to know those childhood years are such a long way behind me."

Emily gathered her dear mother into her arms and hugged her tightly. "I am so blessed to have you as my mother," she declared. "It has been a beautiful night through and through. I cannot remember the last time I had such a wonderful time."

"Most likely it was the last time Harcourt Fitzherbert held a ball," Emily's father chimed in. Emily had thought Father had dozed off, as he'd been making low, buzzing noises behind his handlebar moustache and his top hat was tipped a little askew. "Although it's been many a month since he did so."

"I believe it was only Christmas last, darling," Susannah said with a fond smile.

“Ah! Indeed, it was.” Archibald Farnsworth eased forward in his seat and smoothed down an imaginary crease in his dark brown breeches. “And I clearly recall wondering just how the Fitzherberts could have possibly afforded such a rout. There must have been over two hundred people crammed into that ballroom of his!”

“Harcourt and Prudence have long been famous throughout London for their extravagant parties,” Emily said with a wistful sigh. “For which I shall be eternally grateful. Were it not for the Fitzherbert’s love of such lively gatherings, I might never have met Cornelius.” That much was very true. Harcourt Fitzherbert and Emily’s father were long-time business acquaintances. They had struck up a close friendship over whiskey and fine cigars at the exclusive Mayfair club at which they both held lifetime memberships. Upon learning of young Emily Farnsworth’s upcoming sixteenth birthday, Harcourt and his wife had *insisted* they be allowed to organise and host the celebrations.

Emily had been delighted, of course, since she absolutely loved the Fitzherbert’s opulent Shoreditch mansion. She had visited it many, many times over the years, as Harcourt was quite the skilled swordsman and had taken it upon himself to teach young Emily how to handle both the rapier and the foil. And, since Cornelius had been away at boarding school for all but the Christmas holidays, Emily only knew of the boy from the flattering portraits in the Fitzherbert’s family room. She had met him in person for the very first time at her birthday ball.

With such a wise head upon her slender shoulders, even at the tender age of sixteen, Emily knew that to allow Prudence to arrange the party would help further cement her father’s business relationship with Harcourt Fitzherbert, who was a renowned and much-respected industrialist. She also had an inkling Prudence Fitzherbert had designs on her as a potential prospect for their only son. Emily was told on more than one occasion the boy was rapidly becoming a young man—he’d turned sixteen two years ahead of Emily—and Prudence was eager for him to settle down and work on an heir or two to take over the family businesses and fortune.

“With what the Luddites did to poor Harcourt’s mills, I’m surprised he managed to keep his company solvent—let alone have the money to throw

such lavish parties,” Emily’s father declared with a humph. “I guess that’s what you get for going north with your manufacturing, though—the place is full of savages!”

“But they finally put a stop to Captain Ludd’s frame-breakers, Father.” Emily took great pride in keeping abreast of modern affairs and politics. It certainly led to the liveliest after-dinner conversations in the Farnsworth household. It was true, of course, that since the Luddites had been rounded up and their uprising quashed once and for all amongst the Nottinghamshire cotton and woollen mills, the wanton destruction of factory machinery had finally ceased. Farnsworth had been particularly lucky, for while he possessed a factory or two in the Midlands, his main business interests lay in the coalmines. He’d inherited a half dozen of them from his father, who had founded them back in the day when children as young as five had been sent to work the coal seams alongside the pit ponies and canaries.

“That they did, my dear,” Farnsworth replied. “But it will take poor Harcourt a good while to make up the money he lost during the last five years of Ludd’s treachery—it’s an expensive business replacing mill equipment, especially those new-fangled wide-weaving frames.” He let out a hearty snort of derision. “What on earth possessed those foolish people to believe they could halt industry’s natural progress?” He growled. “It’s 1816, not the damned dark ages!”

“Archie!” Susannah gasped and fanned at her face with a lace fan she kept about her person for such eventualities—her dear husband’s choice of language could be most colourful when his dander was up.

“I’m sorry, dear.” Farnsworth failed terribly at hiding the mischievous smirk he made at his wife’s offense. He tipped Emily a cheeky wink, and she smiled back.

Father was always at his funniest after a few drinks, and, unbeknownst to Susannah, he’d even snuck a sly tot or two of gin with Harcourt in one of Fitzherbert’s drawing rooms.

“They’ll all get their dues, of course—put on trial and shipped off to the colonies,” Farnsworth continued his tirade. “I guess the government had better hurry up with all of that rigmarole while we *still* have some colonies left to send them to!”

Susannah rolled her eyes at him. While Emily knew there was little point of her mother even attempting to silence her father on such topics after he'd imbibed a drink or two, that didn't mean that Susannah was going to enjoy listening once again to Archibald's all too familiar tipsy rant about how Mad King George had single-handedly lost America. Mother had confided in Emily that she feared it was a bitterness that would follow her dear Archie to his deathbed.

"If Mad King George hadn't been so greedy with his taxation, we might well still have America to send our convicts." Farnsworth made it all sound as if having overseas penal colonies was the very best aspect about England having laid claim to so many other countries in the name of the Empire. "And just what kind of a place is *Australia*, I ask you?" He grinned at Emily, who clearly loved every minute of her father's diatribe; it was always a pleasure to see him so relaxed. "From what I've heard, the whole place is nothing more than one great big desert—nought but sand and rocks as far as the eye can see!"

"So, wouldn't you say that should make for the perfect place to send our miscreants, Father? Deportation is supposed to be a punishment, after all." Emily enjoyed playing devil's advocate to encourage Father's opinions, much to her mother's chagrin.

"Good lord, no!" Farnsworth twiddled with his moustache, as he often did when piqued, and fixed his daughter with a hard stare. "What on earth would be the possible benefits of creating a colony of convicts and ne'er-do-wells on a continent with absolutely *nothing* to offer?" he growled. "What we *should* be doing is putting all our efforts into developing those corners of the empire that will go some way towards replacing the tax revenue we lost when Mad King George—"

"Lost America for us," Emily concluded with a broad grin at her father.

"Lost? I thought the mad old fool gave it away!" Farnsworth barked. "And let's not even get me started on the man handing over the crown to that grotesque, idiot son of his."

Farnsworth sat back in his seat with a loud harrumph. His daughter had skilfully managed to rile him up for her own amusement yet again. After the loss of America, his invective on the consummate fool and complete waste of taxpayers' money that was the Prince Regent was always a firm favourite.

Farnsworth studied Emily with great pride. “You are growing up to be an intelligent, fine young woman indeed. I’m beginning to wonder if you may just be too good for the Fitzherbert boy . . .”

Emily looked into her father’s eyes with surprise. Although Emily had to admit that young Cornelius was hardly the greatest of intellects, she was startled to hear her father speak that way about her beau. Emily stared out of the carriage window once more. She was delighted with herself for having not only held her own in yet another a conversation with Father, but also in having goaded the man a little. There were so many of her friends who would never have dared engage the man of the house upon such weighty subjects—proper young ladies were supposed to be seen and not heard, especially upon matters of politics and business.

The gentle *clip-clop-clip* of the horses’ hooves on the hard dirt road was quite hypnotic. The carriage—kindly laid on by the Fitzherberts to take the Farnsworth family home—was going at a nice, steady speed. It would make the three-mile journey to St. James’s park in a little over an hour, and the family would be home a little after two a.m. There was no urgency for the carriage driver to push the twin black mares to anything more than a trot, as tomorrow was Sunday and Emily and her parents could remain in their beds long after the dawn chorus that usually awakened them. It was also no matter if they missed morning mass, for they would be able to catch the Evensong service. Reverend Donohue, a celebrated fire-and-brimstone preacher, was normally a stickler for his congregation adhering to his mass schedule, but he didn’t mind too much on the odd occasion, though, especially if the errant members of his congregation slipped a more substantial than usual donation onto his silver collection plate upon their next visit.

The carriage eased to a halt. The horses’ hooves fell silent.

“What the . . . ?” Farnsworth grumped as the gentle rocking of the carriage ceased somewhat abruptly. Snorting, he stuck his head out of the window. “I say!” he called up to the carriage driver, and the booming baritone of his voice was quickly swallowed up by the cool night air. “You! My man! Why have we stopped?”

There came no reply.

Emily poked her head out of the window just in time to see their carriage driver hightailing it into the dense woods that bordered the left-hand side of the road. “Father . . .” With a concerned glance at Mother’s worried, furrowed brow, Emily fought to keep her voice steady.

If Archibald Farnsworth had heard his daughter, he chose not to reply. His eyes were firmly affixed on something on the road ahead. Emily followed her father’s gaze and espied the stranger, who was standing stock-still and contemplating the carriage. The stranger’s face was masked, and his eyes glinted with menace in the sparse moonlight. He began approaching their carriage with what appeared to be a flintlock pistol held tightly in each hand.

“*Stand and deliver!*” he called out with a deep, commanding voice.

Emily shuddered head to toe at the sound of the well-worn cliché. So, they *really* did say that! She’d heard all the stories of the notorious highwaymen who frequented the roads around London, and had often imagined them to be mysterious, romantic figures who dwelled in the darkest shadows of the night—all ready to whisk away fair maidens in their strong arms to live a life of clandestine wickedness.

However, Emily was finding the reality of the situation to be far from romantic. For the first time in her young life, Emily wished she had her trusty rapier by her side—but what young debutante carries her sword to a spring ball?

“Stay in the carriage.” Farnsworth’s firm tone let his wife and daughter know that, in no uncertain terms, he was *not* to be ignored under any circumstances. He grasped the latch and swung open the carriage door.

“Archie!” Susannah exclaimed. Her eyes were wide with fright and she clutched at her fan as if her very life depended upon it.

As Emily rested a comforting arm around her mother’s shoulder, she felt her slender body tremble beneath the blue silk dress she had purchased especially for the Fitzherbert’s ball. “We need to stay calm, Mother, and everything will be just fine,” she whispered.

“But what if that man is Pikehead Jack?” Susannah cast a worried glance as her husband climbed out of the carriage. “What do we do then? We have nothing at all to protect us.”

Emily swallowed hard and gave Mother's arm a gentle squeeze. Pikehead Jack had gained a great deal of notoriety as a vicious highwayman in the three years and some he'd been terrorising the roads around North London. Stories abounded that the evil rogue had a penchant for leaving his victims' heads on pikes by the roadside—once he'd relieved them of all their money and jewellery, of course. Emily had an inkling such yarns were little more than exaggerations made up to frighten small children into their beds at night, but looking at the way the tall man dressed all in black strutted towards the carriage with such fearful purpose, she really was beginning to wonder.

“What is it you want, my good man?” Addressing the highwayman, Archibald Farnsworth's raised voice was firm and gave away no hint of alarm. He closed the carriage door behind himself and walked towards the horses at the front of the carriage, where they waited with patience and chomped upon their metal bits. “I have money—you can take it all and be on your way.”

Emily looked on with her heart in her mouth as Father pulled out the purse from his breeches and held it high for the highwayman to see.

The highwayman remained silent and continued his steady pace towards the carriage. He clucked at the two horses as he passed by them. They snorted in his direction and stomped their hooves on the dry, compacted ground.

Then, the sharp crack of a pistol shot split the chill night air.

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