



The Highwayman

By Emily Veinglory © 2006

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The Highwayman

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The Highwayman

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Emily Veinglory

Chapter One

I put on my plumed hat—for it is expected—and a long coat to cover my clothes. I had only a few suits and could not afford for them to be recognized. I mounted the horse I kept pastured in the wild, high-walled garden and went towards the highway. My old stallion was a stolid, brown beast but well-conformed, and not given to moods. If I was driven to whip him, he could outrun anything the county had to offer.

There was a long-barreled pistol in each of my coat pockets and a saber by my side. Each of these weapons had been my father's before he died; a little flashy but still sound. I had smudged soot and grease on the guns and cloth-wrapped the sword's hilt. They served me well. On a grand horse with my weapons about me—a few years ago I might have been taken for a Royalist coming home from the war—but all I could hope for now was not to be taken at all.

I passed by the old road cutting through the trees. At the crest of a hill, between the branches, I glimpsed the main house, kept closed up now. I lived in a forester's cottage with the shutters locked to hide the light. But for my sister, I would have sold the lot to any fool who would have it and gone to be a sailor. But little Emilia, she required a few years yet to see her married off, preferably to one rich enough to return a suitably-hyphenated family to their former station. Once that was done, I could leave all this behind.

The Highwayman

I rode down the road in the darkness of a waning moon, along the hidden ways until I passed the town, and proceeded more casually from there. It did no harm to have my robberies center upon the town. What could be more natural than that? I reined in my steed at the rumbling sound of a carriage. I was somewhat daunted, because a carriage was a greater risk than a merchant's wagon or a single man, mounted or afoot. But my conscience rested easier as a conveyance this grand bespoke a man who could spare a little of his wealth and not suffer by it. Emilia was in the care of our aunt, and my sister had declared that new petticoats and slippers were imperative. I spurred my mount on and drew the more reliable of my silver handled pistols. I checked the flint with my thumb and set a charge in place.

A great lacquered carriage lumbered around the bend, and I put my old stallion squarely in its way. The driver urged his horses on, but mannered horses are not going to charge at anyone. I raised the pistol. Once it began, I felt a cold stillness free from fear; I became almost a different man.

"Try that again and I'll put a bullet in the head of one of these fine bays, and you'll be stuck here for a good while."

My voice was low and carried without shouting. I had practiced such phrases dozens of times and was well pleased with the menace I now managed to bring to them.

Normally, people stay in their carriages 'til poked out with the sharp end of a long blade. This man was a little different. The door swung open and a tall, grey-clad man jumped out into the muddy roadway.

"What is the meaning of this?"

"I'm masking my face, holding a gun and standing in your way. I'll let you figure it out."

Much to my surprise, he laughed. He was a tall, squarely-built man dressed in the puritanical way. His suit was dark and his mousy hair ragged and short, but all the same the cut of his cloth and the tilt of his head marked him as "quality". I sighted down the blackened barrel at his head but the roundhead did not seem perturbed.

Emily Veinglory

"Do you have a pistol?" he inquired of his coachman as if passing the time of day.

The man may have had a weapon hidden away in some damp corner and as like to fizzle as fire, but he wasn't admitting to it.

"Well, then," the man continued. "The only question is whether this braggart would be prepared to shoot me if I made a run for it, or charged him."

This one was certainly a talker, but he wasn't carrying even as much as sword.

"It's getting easier by the minute," I warned. "My finger is growing weary."

The man set his piercing gaze upon me. He did not seem to be sizing me up so much as looking me over. With a smirk he pulled a hefty purse from his pocket and tossed it into the slimy ditch at the side of the road.

"That's all you're getting," he said with a shrug. "Unless you want to search me?"

I was not imagining the air of invitation in that taunt. I gestured with the pistol barrel for him to get back in the carriage. It might have been just a bag of stones on the verge, but on the whole, I was inclined to cut my losses. Most folk pretty much followed the script and coughed up their valuables. The others were more trouble than they were worth, and I had a few scars to prove it.

As the carriage rumbled away he pulled down the smudged glass window on its door and kept his gaze on me in that strange appraising way he had. I saw them linger on my hand as I edged my horse out of the way, and tracked his progress with my pistol.

After the carriage had passed from view I put the gun away. I drew my saber, a heavy weapon and not over-sharp. I fished up the purse by its string with a pretty flick of my blade. As I did it I realized my mistake. On my right hand a small ring glinted, gold with a crest upon it. How had I forgotten to remove it?

The Highwayman

I turned and slipped away between the trees, my horse sure-footed even in the dark, upon familiar ground. This had the feeling of a fatal mistake.

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By the next morning, I was determined to put the matter out of my head. I put the ring away and prayed that my habit of wearing it had gone unnoticed. The best I could hope for was that the wealthy roundhead was already miles away, and thinking the worst wouldn't stop it from happening in any case. I set myself to a long postponed task. I put on a blue brocade coat because it was cold, and other than my one evening coat, this was the only one with no holes and a good lining. I tied my overlong hair back with a bit of old leather and rolled up my sleeves.

There was a half-hollow pine that had fallen, missing the back of the big house by scant yards. I brought out Myrl, the sturdy old pony that had been Emilia's when she was young. He was a placid beast and strong enough to help me drag the larger branches into a position where they could be chopped.

I tethered Myrl loosely; he liked to watch any goings on, so I saw no need to put him away. I oiled the old saw and set to work. It would have been better if the stableman, Josh, were about. He and a casual maid-of-all-work were my only staff and not paid regularly at that, but Josh was away to see his mother back in March village, so I would just have to make do. I could at least cut some wood so it would have time to dry before my current meager stocks were exhausted. I had made a few rounds and was reaching for the axe to split them when a horribly familiar voice called out.

"Hello, the house?"

The roundhead was dressed in brown this day, his hair properly combed and his figure upright upon a tidy palfrey. He walked her up neatly towards me.

"Good Sir, I am looking for Reynard Morton."

"And you have found him," I replied mildly.

Emily Veinglory

I wiped my palms upon my trousers but the sap just stuck on so I didn't offer my hand. Nor did I want to speak to him and I did not trouble to hide it. I hefted the axe and brought it down hard on the green round, which split with a loud crack. The man's horse danced back and it seemed he was no horseman, for it took him a while to get her under control.

I set to chopping. I saw him from the corner of my eye as he dismounted and left his pretty thing to get acquainted with Myrl. He came over to watch me from a slightly less lofty vantage. Finally, he bent and took one of the chopped lengths.

"Where do you want them put?" he asked.

"I beg your pardon?"

He hefted the sticky wood on one gloved hand, a look of mild amusement upon his pale face.

"Well, you seem a little busy to talk to me, so I shall simply have to give you a hand—and then we can get acquainted, as neighbors."

There was no glimmer of recognition in his eyes; mine must have showed some horror. Just what a highwayman does not need is a prominent, nosy neighbor who has seen him in action.

"Under the slate lean-to," I said, quite uncivilly.

He set about carting lengths of wood, one by one and with all the awkwardness of a man either not used to physical labor or not inclined to it. As he passed by me, I would pause in my chopping so as to avoid doing him any harm, and he would venture a few comments.

"I am Geoffrey Larkin."

"Oh, yes."

I thought he might tire of this strange and stilted situation but, if anything, Geoffrey merely became more entrenched in his amusement.

"I have been sent to improve myself as a God fearing man, and to learn the noble trade of farming."

He ventured two logs at a time and then returned.

"I am given to understand that I am meant to make my land arable, find a wife, and develop a more serious mien before I even consider a return to London."

The Highwayman

I took to the saw again, which created a kind of constant noise and business that precludes much conversation—and then back to the axe. So the morning progressed. I learned that Geoffrey had been a soldier, as I assumed, and had become a courtier, as I could infer. He was also a gambler and general rake who had been set the very tasks he had outlined. I learned that he was very much a conversationalist, requiring neither encouragement nor reply.

It was approaching noon when he finally lost his patience, if not his air of detached amusement, and I was reassured that he had not recognized me.

“Come now,” he said. “I am hungry and thirsty, and you have been working rather harder than I. Let us adjourn to my new property for a glass.”

I surveyed him silently from amidst the dismembered tree.

“What is it, exactly, that amuses you so greatly?” I snapped.

“That I have lessons to learn in the virtues like hard labor and propriety, I do not doubt,” he said. “But it is ironic that my first teacher is an azure-clad, young cavalier.”

I let the axe drop as I surveyed him.

“Very well,” I said. “As you insist upon it, we’ll have a glass and get this over with.”

Apart from the one suit of respectable clothes that I had preserved, I was wearing the most presentable garb that I owned, so there was no need to delay. I stepped carefully over the splayed branches and surveyed the stack of firewood. He had placed the lengths parallel to the wall, which was no good for drying them. I would have to restack them later. I don’t doubt that my expression was anything but satisfied at that.

I went over to fetch Myrl, who seemed as good a way to get about as any. I had no doubt that I looked quite ridiculous with my coat flaps and long legs hanging down the sides of a portly pony, but he was more than strong enough to carry me.

Geoffrey put one hand to his mouth, to stifle his own reaction. His gloves, I noticed, were ruined. He mounted his rather dainty one-footing mount and led the way.

Emily Veinglory

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The adjacent Grey Manor had been vacant for some time. I must have been fortunate to miss Geoffrey's other servants upon the road the previous evening for they were very much in evidence now, raking the cinder path, scrubbing the steps and cutting back the hedge. Quite a considerable force, which went some of the way to explaining why the man had tossed aside what turned out to be a substantial sum when we last met. Enough to keep me off the roads a good few weeks, I hoped, and it salved my conscience somewhat to know that he could afford it.

For the first time, riding up to the towering front doors as they all watched, I did feel ridiculous. It had been a very long while since I had last considered how I might appear to a person who hadn't seen me a hundred times before. I knew my clothes were too ornate for modern tastes, and too hard-worn. My hair was too long, my body too thin and my skin too tanned. I always knew this but it didn't really bother me, normally.

Geoffrey handed his mare over to a footman who reached for Myrl's bridle. I saw the old pony consider biting that presumptuous gloved hand, but he mercifully forbore from doing so. Unlike me, he could come up with some manners when they were called for.

I had my own hands deep in my coat pockets as Geoffrey led me in through the hall, still noticeably dusty where we left our muddy boots, and into the smaller parlor where a furious fire burned.

He poured two glasses of port wine without asking. He tossed his gloves down on the hearth and handed me one of the glasses.

"Shall I ring for something to eat?" he asked

I didn't fancy the idea of staying long enough to dine, so I just shook my head. There were two leather-covered chairs facing the fire and I took one of them. He settled into the other and was still watching me as if I were some kind of private joke that only he could understand.

The Highwayman

I sipped the port and, long unacquainted with the taste, I felt it burn all the way down. "So what is it, then, that you are so insistent on saying to me?" I asked.

"Don't you think it is good for such close neighbors to get to know each other?"

"I don't feel the need. There is not much between us, and doesn't need to be."

I looked over at him, lounging at his ease. He was wearing a suit in peat-brown wool with black piping. There was a subtle opulence to the dense, tight cloth and the pearlescent silk of the piping. I looked up to his face with its long nose and jaw, wide, thin-lipped mouth and dark, intense eyes.

I felt a dangerous stirring, something I had thought safely dormant after my parents' death had hastened my return from my schooling. A mutual spark leapt between our eyes and I was quick to look away, into the fire. I knew that he was still looking at me. That damn man was watching me like a cat.

"You'd be too young to have fought," he said.

"Aye."

I sipped my drink and stared at the fire.

"Old enough to inherit the hatred, though," he said.

"No, I don't much see the point of that. Cromwell rules, the king is dead, and the prince will make his own fate if he ever returns. It doesn't make all that much difference to me unless someone tracks it to my doorstep."

"Is that what you think I'll do? I'm not here to preach, if that's what you're used to from Puritans. I'm here to learn. To learn from the land and the people who still really live on it."

"You think you are going to do that?" My tone was not arch, but I suppose I revealed my opinion by asking the question at all.

For the first time since I had first seen him, Geoffrey looked absolutely serious. "I'm beginning to think that I might," he said.

When he put aside his constant wry amusement, Geoffrey's expression finally fitted upon his face. He took on the air of a roman

Emily Veinglory

statue, pale and symmetrical. His hands cupped around his crystal tumbler, long-fingered and almost delicate. I suppose he must have been past forty, but the lines on his face seemed to belong there and I could hardly imagine his likeness without them. I caught a glimpse of the motivations of those who thought to teach Geoffrey some dignity; it suited him.

I felt a strange pain in my stomach, and I knew I was in trouble. My tumbler was empty in my hands and Geoffrey hastened to refill it.

"I do not see why we cannot choose to be friends," he said

I felt my brow furrow.

"Oh, dear," Geoffrey commented, taking only a small sip of his own drink. "I do not really think that you are that unhappy at the prospect? Surely in these by-waters a little company of the evening is not such a terrible thing?"

There was a wryly seductive lilt to his voice, but I fancied Geoffrey was still not entirely sure of his ground. He watched me and I looked back with a scowl. He raised one eyebrow inquisitively and I could not help myself. It was only very slightly, but I smiled.

Geoffrey knew that he had me then. He rose quite blithely and locked the door to the parlor. I think I had the time it took him to walk from the door to my chair to save myself. Instead the impetus of my thoughts was beginning to reach other parts of my body, and unaccustomed to alcohol, my mind was a little fogged, but not enough to be any legitimate excuse.

He took my glass, empty again although I barely remembered draining it, from my hands and set it aside. He knelt down on the floor, but he was a tall man, and leaning forward, he cupped my cheek in one hand and kissed me. My few fumbling boyhood experiences seemed very little guidance, but Geoffrey seemed to require very little beyond acquiescence. His other hand unbuttoned my coat as he eased me down onto the lambskin rug before the fire.

He freed my hair; his fingers tangled in its curling length which glinted, ruddy in it by firelight. He leaned back and drew off his short jacket and linen shirt in one motion. His torso showed old scars of a

The Highwayman

stitched gash, and what might have been an arrow wound, where the surgeon cut out its barbed head. His expression was fully in earnest now, and I was lost.

Emily Veinglory

Chapter Two

Geoffrey laid open the front of my jacket, vest and shirt as if he was unwrapping a present. The midday sun and the firelight shone brightly upon us. His lips traced the line of my clavicle and lingered over my left nipple.

Desire welled up from my groin and washed like pins and needles over my body. Geoffrey pinned my shoulders firmly and straddled my thighs, intent as a lion with its prey. My scant experience of furtive nocturnal trysts balanced me upon the scales of embarrassment and passion. I writhed under Geoffrey's masterful grasp as he stripped off my remaining clothes. Geoffrey was still half-clothed, and I was beginning to have strong reservations about the whole thing.

"Shh," Geoffrey said. "Close your eyes."

His fingertips trace over my eyes, and I did as he said. The illusory darkness released some of my tension and I lay back upon the rough rug. I heard the rustle of cloth and I knew we were both naked here on the edge of this great room. I felt the heat of the fire on my right side.

His hand on my stomach pressed firmly down and his lips passed with assurance over the tip of my half-alert cock. A moan slipped from my lips as my whole body arched. Delicious tension ran down my whole length. Geoffrey worked smoothly and firmly up and down my shaft and caressed the sensitive line of skin that descends from the base of the cock towards...

The Highwayman

At that moment I was sure of his intent. Any privately educated boy with a rudimentary understanding of Greek knows how men can have intercourse, but it was a thing more discussed than ventured. His was a practiced tongue, toying with the tip of my cock, stroking my touch-starved skin and descending gradually towards a second goal.

His mouth withdrew and his moistened thumb softly intruded, he held me firmly. I will admit to being shocked, but not at all dismayed to feel his tongue trace that same descent and to linger around the edge of my rear passage. I felt the slickness of his spit, preparing me.

I kept my eyes closed, I dared do nothing else. He gently raised my legs and I felt him position himself against me. He pressed forward and my body resisted the intrusion whether I willed it or not, and in truth I was not entirely sure what I wanted. Then I felt the head of his penis edge slowly past and into my body. My hand grasped the coarse rug and my thighs gripped his body as he penetrated me slowly and carefully.

He slid down and the head of his penis nudged a part of my body whose sensations were entirely unknown to me until then. I felt a tremor in my body as tingling pleasure ran outwards from that point of contact outward through my sinews with almost unbearable clarity. There was pain also at accommodating this intrusion but not enough to bother me—just enough to feel every fiber that embraced him.

His hands were on me again, moving up over my torso, stroking softly like a groom placating a nervous steed. He began to move within me, slowly but firmly. I could feel him looking down at me. His hand, his thumb, stroked my cheek, and his fingers curled in my tangled hair.

I reached up tentatively. His skin was soft over his ribcage. I held him as he rode me; I ran my hands down to his waist. I could feel the tide rising within both of us. Geoffrey's breath was quick and harsh. He leant forward, very close to me with his elbows on the floor and his hand under my shoulders. I felt him against me. The whole length of his muscular body covered mine. My cock slid against his stomach, slick with sweat.

My hands grasped across his back as I shuddered and came against him, appalled at my own hair-trigger lust. He pushed into me savagely hard and jerked, and was still. We lay pressed together for a long moment,

Emily Veinglory

and then he kissed me very softly. I took one deep convulsive breath and opened my eyes.

Geoffrey looked down at me; I could see that his eyes were brown and warm, but that wry amusement was creeping back in—putting distance between us.

“This is not, perhaps, what I was meant to discover in the rustic countryside.”

I pushed him away from me, feeling him slide out of my body wetly. I reached for my clothes and began to pull them on.

“Reynard—” Geoffrey said in his already familiar chiding tones. He was taking liberties in using my Christian name, but I had hardly held my reserve.

I ignored him, not even looking his way. The moment he had spoken I was suddenly back in a day-lit room with this older, larger, surer man who had obviously done exactly what he had planned to do from the moment he laid eyes upon me. I had enjoyed it, yes. There was no doubt at all that this was the greatest pleasure I had felt in my life. But at that moment all that I wanted to do was leave.

“Reynard,” he said again as he stood and walked towards me. I had my breeches on and my arms thrust through the sleeves of my shirt and jacket.

I buttoned just my jacket roughly closed over my disarranged garb and fumbled with the key. I forced the door open and strode out knowing that Geoffrey, still naked, would probably not follow me. The flustered butler wrenched the door open in just enough time before I reached it. When I got outside I could not imagine going and looking for Myrl, although I hesitated to leave him behind. I walked across the unkempt grass and between the hedges back to my own domain.

If Geoffrey looked for me, he did it on the roads and at the main house. I went back to my little cottage and locked the door, aching deep inside with a sensation that felt now like nothing more than common pain.

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The Highwayman

Emilia's bills were paid, and a letter had come to say that she would be gracing the old manor with her presence and some good news. I dared not dwell too much on what that news might be. It had been a considerable time since I last saw her, as I was not welcome in my aunt's house and she rarely let Emilia leave it.

I took out the rusted key and opened the big house's iron-braced doors. I clutched the scented letter in my hand and stood in the long-neglected reception room. The ceiling was draped with cobwebs, and the floors all but obscured with dust and debris. Some of the boards complained stiffly as I wandered through to the ballroom. Others merely sagged.

Emilia's long absence had made me complacent, and there was no way the state of the family finances could be concealed upon her return. The denizens of the region often complained about lapsed tradition of great masques and events here at the hall, but shutting up the house meant that I could keep my illicit earning at a relatively discrete level—one modest enough to keep me off the gibbet, or at least delay that fate all robbers had in common.

I was surveying a broken pane in the ladies' retiring room and calculating how many hold-ups it would take to renew the place when I heard a discreet cough. I spun around to find Geoffrey standing silhouetted in the doorway.

"I had gathered that you no longer reside here," he said, rather stiffly.

I turned with conscious nonchalance back to the window. "The estates don't earn what they used to."

A long silence followed whilst I listened to the breeze whistle against the sharp edge of the broken glass. I considered the sight that I must be in ragged clothes with my hair unbound and a day's stubble on my cheeks. Not that I should have cared how he saw me.

Geoffrey stepped a little closer. "You left in rather a hurry the other day, or else you might have had time to say where you do spend your time."

Emily Veinglory

"By week's end I need to have this place presentable for my sister's triumphant home-coming," I said with more bitterness than I intended.

"You shall have to find your entertainment elsewhere."

"What staff do you have to assist you?"

I shrugged as I stepped around him and went back onto the echoing dance-floor. "A stable man and a maid-of-all-work, off and on."

"My staff could render the job more...plausible."

I looked back at him and said what I thought for a change. "Would you seek to buy me?"

Geoffrey merely smirked. "No, just to entertain myself."

I stared at him levelly. I truly did not want to disappoint my little sister, having striven so hard to hide our destitution from her—but I also had no wish to be beholden to this man.

"Come now," Geoffrey chided. "What do you think I want? If you refuse my more intimate impulses henceforth, then I am refused. It does not stop me being what a good neighbor should, and lending a hand. It will be a few days inconvenience to me, no more."

I bowed slightly. "I would be obliged." It was a graceless concession, I am ashamed to say. We were interrupted by another voice.

"Is everything well, Rey—Master Morton?"

By local custom, if not high decree, it should properly have been m'Lord, but I had never been one for the proprieties. Josh lumbered into the hall with a suspicious mien and a lead-weighted riding crop in his hand. He hesitated a little when he saw Geoffrey. Geoffrey, for his part, took in my tall, tawny and entirely well-put-together stableman with a sweeping gaze of approval.

"It's all right, Josh," I said tersely. "Emilia's coming back for the weekend and our new neighbor, Master Larkin, is going to help us bring the place up to scratch."

"Back...here?"

"Wherever else?"

"I will make the arrangements," Geoffrey said, and with the bow, he withdrew.

The Highwayman

Josh watched him leave with a quizzical frown. "Aye, you'll be wanting to stay away from that one," he said.

"You don't know him," I replied.

"I don't have to."

Josh had ten years on me and it often showed, for all that he had his father's notions about the immutable merits of class and born-service. I usually troubled to listen to him but on this occasion it rankled, even if I secretly agreed.

"We'll need him if this place is to be made in any way presentable for Emilia."

"Perhaps she needs to know."

"That she does, but she'll know when I tell her, and not before."

Josh came over to me, and ruffled my hair as if I were still the half-grown child who'd returned to this mausoleum of a house so many years ago.

"Go and make yourself look the lord, and I'll try and remember my proper manners. Then we'll both be ready when his lot arrives. But Rey, mind yourself, I don't like the way he looks at you." Josh's eyes flickered, perhaps unsure as to whether to make himself clearer about the nature of the threat.

I walked off towards the kitchen exit, to cut back over to the cottage where it crouched hidden amidst a copse of birches. If only I were that naïve. Larkin had seen in me an impulse I had thought to stifle, but offered the right kindling, it flared into life anew. Even as I hated the man, I burned for him. Josh called after me in a forced whisper that carried through the still hall.

"Mind I might move that horse of yours to the hill paddock away from the fuss."

I turned back to him in some surprise. I didn't need to ask which horse. It was as close as he had ever come to telling me that he knew about my escapades upon the road, although I long supposed that he must. I merely nodded and went on my way.

Back in my rooms I stropped my razor and shaved close, combed my hair and tied it hard back and sponged my black wool coat. I put on

Emily Veinglory

my soundest breeches and my whitest shirt. I polished my black riding-boots and strapped on my silver spurs. I considered my reflection in the long polished mirror. It would do. The black and white made my hair the only touch of color. I was thin enough to look taller than I was, and old enough now for a stern expression to not look foolish.

I waded through the long grass and re-entered the house from the main door to find quite a lot had changed in such a short space of time. Girls were scrubbing the floor and two burly men were pulling up worm-eaten boards. Geoffrey had been as good as his word and swift about it.

"We'll wait for Master Morton—" Josh was insisting.

"It's plain enough what needs doing," snapped Geoffrey, no doubt unused to resistance from a mere servant.

They both turned as Josh approached.

"M'Lord," he said.

"Indeed," Geoffrey echoed appreciatively. "And finally looking the part."

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"In a few scant days we can make the place habitable, barely," Geoffrey said bluntly. "But I suggest you allow me to host the reception to mark your gracious sibling's return. It will be my honor, and of great use to me in ingratiating myself with this community."

His offer was certainly reasonable and not embarrassingly unselfish. The local people would be inclined to treat Geoffrey with great indifference, even hostility. Sentiments ran against the roundheads in these parts, and in any case, Geoffrey was a stranger and interloper without title or blood ties to these parts.

Josh watched with lips pursed over his disapproval. Despite my instincts, my pragmatic nature prevailed.

"I would be doubly obliged. I do not know exactly when I expect her. She is impetuous and may be close behind her letter."

The Highwayman

"Whenever she should return, let the celebration fall on the evening of the next day. I shall stand ready if you let my staff know how many we might expect on such short notice."

"M'Lord, a carriage," Josh said.

It was dull of me, but I had no idea who this new arrival would be. I strode to the grand front doors and saw a coach and four rolling up the sweeping but weed-choked drive. It slowed to a halt precisely before the door and square to it. The crisply uniformed coachman leapt down to open the door. My consternation only increased when a tall, finely dressed man unfolded himself from the interior. He was dressed in clothes with the sharp lines of new materials and the sweeping cuts of the latest fashion.

This man turned back into the dark interior and handed down a swan-necked paragon of femininity in a high-waisted gown and richly embroidered shawl. Belatedly, I recognized my little sister. Her eyes met mine and a similarly sluggish recognition dawned in them.

"Brother, dear," she said in tones more cultured than any I remembered. "It has been too long. This is Timothy Farquar, my fiancé. Our aunt's good friend and companion accompanied us, for propriety's sake."

Given her age, any engagement was a proclamation that would require my consent. I considered opening the dispute upon the doorstep with everyone looking on, but manners prevailed.

"Josh, would you be so good as to show our guests to their rooms?"

I sincerely hoped such accommodations were to be found.

"Mr. Farquar," I said with a cool bow. "As you see I am only now opening the house. In my sister's absence it did not seem necessary to keep the main building in use. Sir, I hope you will forgive some small inconvenience."

"Not at all," he replied. "It is entirely our fault for arriving with such presumptuous haste."

I hated him immensely and on first sight, but had no option but to be as charming as my rustic manners allowed.

Emily Veinglory

"It is my pleasure to have you with us, at any notice. Mr. Larkin—my sister Emilia, Mr. Farquar." I drew him into our strange circle. "Our neighbor, Geoffrey Larkin."

Geoffrey stepped forward, rather a different man to the one I had so recently met. His face sported an expression as bland and benign as a spaniel's.

He bowed. "It is my great pleasure, and I also have the honor of inviting you to my house for a welcoming reception tomorrow evening. It will give you a chance to announce your great good news."

Geoffrey's smile was cheerful and seemed unforced. I liked that even less than his usual sardonic ways, especially because if I'd seen him only in his current guise, I would never have suspected his true nature.

"That is most generous, and I am most pleased to accept," Emilia replied with an easy curtsy. She seemed to pay him little further mind, turning to me with glinting eyes. "Do you still have Myrl? Can I see him?"

"In the morning, surely? You must have had a tiring journey." And I had to work out just where Geoffrey was keeping the old thing and recover him.

"If you will excuse me, I have preparations to make," Geoffrey said with a smile that suggested he had matters well in hand, which was less than reassuring to me, given the hands in question.

There was a strange moment when Emilia turned to Josh, who was offering to take her tapestry bag and show her to her room. The pretty smile upon her face became momentarily more crooked and sincere. For a moment, I glimpsed the rascally girl I had once known and tormented.

I turned to see Geoffrey going down the drive with his ground-eating stride, and finally I glimpsed Farquar watching me with a cool and calculating eye. He quickly resumed an amiable expression but I did not doubt what I saw. I felt an instinctive frown crease my brow. Suddenly, a realization dawned upon me. The grant of the meager land that was my inheritance came with one substantial but unresented duty—my sister's dowry. I did not see how I could refuse her choice in husband—nor how I could afford it. Timothy and I would be having words on the matter, no doubt.

The Highwayman

My instincts were that I now had two calculating men to deal with. Emilia laughed at some quip of Josh's. He had been like a guardian angel to her when she was young and I was a callow older brother not yet grown to a civil age. There, at least, was one man we could both depend upon.

"Should there not be—" I began.

"Ah, forgive me. I had quite forgotten our chaperone."

His coachman was now helping an ancient lady from the coach. She was dressed all in black in a fashion that my parents would barely have remembered.

"Don't glare at me, young man," she croaked. "I may be old but I'll not be crossed, and this young Timothy has touched nothing further than dear Emilia's wrist."

So, a sister I barely remembered had returned to a house that was for the most part derelict, in the company of a harridan and a man who was likely to bankrupt me—placing me ever deeper in debt to a man who knew how he would best like to be repaid. A time was quick approaching where a little rope would seem like the least of my worries.

I only prayed that this coiffed and graceful Emilia was at heart the same rough and tumble little girl I remembered, for I desperately needed time alone to explain matters to her. I only prayed that she had made a love match with a passionate boy who would settle for elopement. But I rather suspected otherwise.

Emily Veinglory

Chapter Three

The distinctive scent of bacon drifted up from the morning room. I had spent most of the night with the rump of Geoffrey's staff, trying to sort out the main public rooms without waking our guests. Josh stepped out of the library and grasped my arm.

"Master Farquar is taking breakfast early. Rey, I think you had better—"

Timothy opened the door, fixing his ferrety gaze upon me. "My host," he said smoothly. "A word, if you please."

Josh's fingers clutched my sleeve, but then, mindful of the proprieties, he released me. I went through to speak to my future brother-in-law.

"I do not believe in maintaining a false seeming," Timothy said, preening his gingery hair before the bow window. "So I shall speak plainly. I mean to have Emilia's dowry. My family requires these funds and they must be my first concern. But you need not fear that Emilia will be neglected, as she is a charming girl and easy to love. We will wed within the week at my father's estate. And if you cannot settle the full amount upon her as the deeds account it, I shall have those deeds as our wedding gift."

I knew why he spoke plainly. He did not imagine I could do anything to thwart him. Damn Timothy Farquar. On very short acquaintance I hated him more than I'd ever hated a man before.

The Highwayman

I felt my face fall into cool neutrality, as if the robber's kerchief was over my chin. I turned and walked from the room, and out past Josh's stern vigil without a word. Perhaps I should have let him have it. For Emilia I might have...well, Emilia. It hardly seemed as if he had chosen her from ardent love. I wondered if she knew it. Should I settle for considering a rake's faint praise as good enough for her?

I found her in her room. She had a muslin jacket tied up over her nightgown. I hesitated but then supposed there could be no objections to a brother and sister speaking even if she was not very much dressed. Everything was covered except her hands and face. Her eyes were open and sincere.

"I am sorry for giving you so little warning, Brother," she said as she stood to greet me. "I dared not write. Great Aunt is a tyrant, and dearest Timothy gave me my one chance to escape, for she dotes on his every wish as much as she disdains me. More, it seems, for she approved the match. He was the one who discovered that you are my guardian-of-record. Since I am not of age, I cannot escape her without his help."

"Then why did you not just come to me?"

"Great Aunt May could apply to seize the guardianship from you and succeed, but once I am married, I am safe."

"Except from your husband."

Emilia's dark eyes flashed with wrath. "Timothy was the one who saw my plight, and who cared enough to find a way to free me from our great aunt's tyranny. Where were you, Brother? Why should I heed you and not the man who will give me my independence as a wife, not a ward and near slave?"

"I was here, trying to keep this place together without tenanted or tillable lands. I have been trying to fill our father's shoes without the benefit of his coin, staff or any of his virtues. And now Timothy demands the dowry or the lands."

"Do not lie to me," she snapped. "Your land and money is obviously more important to you than your kin. You place this false avarice on my beloved's lips. I know Timothy. I trust him and he is not a

Emily Veinglory

selfish man. Now get out of my room and do not return until you can speak without resorting to such lies.”

Raised voices drew in the chaperone who glared at us through the connecting doorway.

“It is not a proper hour to be visiting, young man.”

I backed from the room in turmoil. I collided with Josh’s broad frame even as I shut the door. I can’t say I was proud of my reaction.

“Get out of my way,” I snapped as I pushed him away.

The plan that came to me at that moment was none of anyone else’s business. It was a desperate idea. I went down the long stairs and then cut through the kitchen into the garden. Some of the marigolds were flowering unseasonably, and here and there bright weeds grew on the turned earth where the potatoes had been taken up. Our winter stores wouldn’t last long with this many people in the house. There was a little game hanging in the cellar. I had become a good shot in my solitude. I had never thought of my plight as a selfish one—but of Emilia’s happiness, I had never inquired.

There was a broken-down pub down boundary lane where an old lag of a robber lived. He’d only ever met me masked, but he said that if we worked double-handed we could take the rich coaches on the heath road. If he wasn’t drunk yet, this would be the day we proved it while I was still angry enough to risk it. Emilia and her man could have the dowry and be damned. The land and title I’d held onto only for her sake would be mine and only mine after all. I might well be damned for her dowry; she had made her own choices and would hear no cancel. If God willed it, let her be damned as well.

* * * * *

As my temper cooled, I tried to convince myself of the folly of my ways. I would have to see Geoffrey first to check on the preparations for the ball. I contemplated just stalling the marriage. Even if Great Aunt May seized the guardianship, perhaps she wouldn’t go along with the elopement. I had only Emilia’s word on that, after all. Yet the fact that this

The Highwayman

was what my sister wanted weighed upon me no matter how misled she seemed to be. My own judgment was hardly above reproach. I had become a robber—she was merely proposing to become a wife.

All I had to do was find the dowry. Then I would be at the end of my family obligation, and she would be in Master Timothy's care, for better or for worse. I would have the lands and....

I had never wanted them, had I? Or at least I had protested as much in my many introspective prayers. Why not let Timothy have them? After a peculiar fashion, I could even believe Emilia when she said he was not a selfish man, and that he acted for the sake of his own family even at the expense of what was left of mine. But something in my gut simply would not condone it. If I would not let the rake take them from me, why not sell the lands and use the money for the dowry? It would give Farquhar the triumph but with a not unsatisfying Pyrrhic edge.

But alas, I finally realized this. I wanted the lands and the title that came with them. I wanted to be here in this foolish position with a great crumbling house that I couldn't even afford to maintain—because this was where I belonged.

As such, I arrived upon Geoffrey's doorstep in a state of some turmoil. His butler had obviously been instructed to admit me whenever I called. He showed me through to the study where Geoffrey was bent over a large parchment rolled out on the table. As I approached, I saw that it was a map of the district upon which the properties were shown. Ink of different ages was apparent where the boundaries had been redrawn several times. It was not a process my own residual estate had benefited from. When he saw me, he lifted his hand and let the map roll closed.

"And how are you this fine morning, Master Morton?" he asked.

He looked as if he had slept as poorly as I. His hair stuck up roughly and the skin around his eyes was creased with fine lines. But his eyes and smile were sharp and bright as if he thrived on such a regime.

"Well..." I replied ambiguously.

He rolled out the map again. "This land of mine, or so I am told, is perfect for sheep," he said. "Sheep." I gathered that sheep were not his favorite animals. "Steep pasture, and exposed, with a clay soil, miles of it.

Emily Veinglory

Now your few acres..." He smoothed his hand over the old map again but did not so much as glance down upon it.

"Are, as you say, my few acres."

"Quite so, I just had in mind something in the nature of an exchange. My only real interest, you see, is in the breeding of horses. My only interest that may be pursued in a rural setting—present company excepted."

"We can, perhaps, discuss this another time. There is rather a lot on today."

Geoffrey looked me over appraisingly. "As you say." He let the map curl closed again. "Barely an hour since dawn and you are not my first visitor this day. I had thought my time in this rural retreat might be more restful. Thankfully this place seems to be quite, ah...eventful."

I was anything but interested in Geoffrey's visitors until—

"A special sheriff has been appointed to deal with the robberies on the highways across the moor. He came to speak to me about my own little encounter. Perhaps you had not heard that I was greeted by a rather terse highwayman no more than a few miles from here."

His gaze dropped to my hand where a pale band marked the place that my father's ring had once rested. I feigned mild interest. "I am sure it will be a great comfort to travelers to know that the matter is being so assiduously addressed. It has come to the point where only paupers and those with men-at-arms can pass safely."

Geoffrey's vulpine smile had returned as he poured me brandy, unasked.

"It is a little early in the day," I protested.

He shrugged and downed the measure himself, turning the cut glass in his hand. "Well, things might be a little quieter whilst Sheriff Mathers is here. It would be a foolish highwayman who took to the roads whilst the sheriff and his men are lurking by the roads."

He had edged closer to me as he spoke. In the chill room I imagined that I could feel the warmth of his body—but what I truly felt was the warmth of mine. He rested one free hand upon my shoulder.

The Highwayman

"You will want to spend time getting to know your sister's fiancé, but then we must find time to talk. There is a fine market for horses since racing was ostensibly abolished, and I feel we are well-placed to exploit it. I have the capital to buy in bloodlines, but you have the best land and would be able to manage things when I am called back to court. I feel we could make a very useful partnership."

He bent in and kissed me with strange gentleness. That small point of contact enveloped my mind and I felt my eyes close. I struggled with the impulse to step into his embrace and surrender my ridiculous plans to his sound-seeming proposition. Yet wiser parts of my heart balked. Geoffrey was an unknown quantity and not to be trusted, and I was not going to be any man's kept boy. I pulled away from him, my hand upon his chest both pushing him away and curling against him.

"That you are generous I cannot deny," I said in a harsh, hushed voice. "But you are presumptuous also."

He laughed and wrapped his long arm around my shoulder. "You know what I love about you?" he asked, using that word oh so casually. "You're one of the few people who isn't impressed by me one little bit. You represent something of a challenge."

He wasn't entirely accurate there. My main thought at that moment was that Geoffrey's arm about my shoulder felt like coming home. It would have taken very little indeed to fan the latent coals of my desire into flame again. But now was not the time, were there a time for this at all. I stepped away from him with telling haste.

He addressed me as if I were some maid to be pursued, her coy entreaties to be given little weight. And if I felt like one as well, it only added weight to my resentment.

* * * * *

He had been laughing again when I left. I had faith that Josh and Geoffrey would handle the arrangements and by the hour of seven there would be a ball commencing. That gave me the best part of a day to rendezvous with old Roche and accomplish the heist of my life with

Emily Veinglory

unseemly haste. One good hunt, combined with what I had already taken and cached, would cover the dowry if I had only a little luck.

I rode up through the ravine to the old tavern that crouched by a road that had dropped from use some fifty years ago when the port silted up and the lowlands at this pathways terminus became too salty to croft and too shallow to offer port. Roche preferred to ride by night when he took to the road at all, so I was confident of finding him in. I tied up my horse and knocked at the back door.

He took a good long time in answering but seemed pleased to see me.

"Anything rich rolling by today?" I asked, already hearing the steel of my working voice.

"I thought you worked alone, Little Red." It was a token rebuke, to repay me for declining his offer when it was first made.

"I have a need." I brushed in past him and found the place better-kept within than I'd expected. Even the wood had a gleam to it.

"A robber that hurries his life, hurries his death," old Roche said. "But come dusk I'll ride out with you and see, all the same. It gets tedious working alone, and I've almost enough to quit this foul boil of a town and get back to civilization. One good two-handed take might do it, and I'll leave you to weather the trouble it causes." He looked aslant at me.

"Come, take a drink with me."

"There is a fog out on the heath; we need not wait for dusk. Besides, the merchants avoid the hours of darkness now—too many of our kind on the road."

"If you speak any sense, it is by accident," the old man grumbled, folding his arms stubbornly. "You have got to be steady to live to be old in this trade."

I had an evil thought about the loot the old man must have stored up, saving to move back to the debauches of London. Perhaps he saw it in my face, as there was a flicker of fear in his bleary eyes.

"I'll go alone, then."

Roche rubbed the grizzled bristles on his face. "Oh, I'll go with you, boy. But if you do not heed me you'll turn and find me gone. I've lived

The Highwayman

longer than any highwayman I know, and I still mean to die in my bed — or under some booze-hall table, at least.”

“The heath road?”

“The heath road,” he conceded. “It could be a cold wait for nothing. I’ve no news of any particular quarry.”

At least it seemed he had not heard about the new sheriff, and I was willing to bet he would move on when he did. So I knew that I must grasp the chance I had. Desperation still curdled in my gut and for some perverse reason, it was Geoffrey’s sneering face that intruded upon my mind’s eye. Perhaps I should take some satisfaction that I had bested him, if barely, upon the road — regardless of what had occurred upon his parlor floor.

Emily Veinglory

Chapter Four

There was indeed a goodly mist on the heath and the overcast wintry skies made late afternoon as dark as evening. Roche outlined a simple plan. He'd stay ahorse, and I would do the bully work in close, stripping the travelers. Jewels and high valuables only, for quick flight. Between us, we could take down coaches even that rode with an armed man or two. You took the chance of someone getting brave, but having the man spare to aim a steady pistol made that kind of man quite rare.

We waited in the lee of a craggy rock. Both horses stood placidly, used to lying in wait. My gaze flitted over the road and hills, and sometimes I fancied I saw a subtle movement amongst the heather. It must have been naught but the mist and the wind.

Roche let one wagon pass. "Farmer," he said. "Not worth it."

He might have gone for the second but I was not having it. It was a sturdy, plain thing a rich man might use as disguise but the horseflesh was spavined and thin as well. There'd be no riches there.

"The cold's getting in my bones," Roche grumbled, gathering up his reins. "We'll try again tomorrow."

"No, wait."

A new dark shape crested the hill, horses at a rumbling canter. It was a big-wheeled sprung coach, expensive and as daintied up as a lady's toy. Whatever fool let his wife go about this way was lucky we only wanted her jewels.

The Highwayman

"Ah, yes," Roche said with satisfaction. He spurred to head the quarry off and I was close behind him.

And I would have to confess there was a savage joy to it, to ride side by side with another hunter—for all that it's a shameful and tawdry trade.

The coach fair bolted along, light as it was and drawn by two well matched chestnuts. Sweat sprayed off them, for they'd been driven hard. But Roche sawed his reins and cut just in front, then grabbed the lines and pulled the nearer beast up short.

He depended on me to watch the coach. One cloaked man drove and two ladies rode within, clutching the sides as their vehicle lurched and swayed to a sudden stop. Roche released the reign and rode out in front, raising his big blunderbuss.

"Stand and deliver," he said. No bravado there, but a simple order that put a chill even down my spine.

The driver giggled, and suddenly I saw that beneath the peaked cap it was another girl driving.

"If you'll step to the verge we'll not detain you long," I added hoping to forestall any hysterical response.

"A real gentleman robber is it?" the driver replied. "From your diction I'd say so. But my sisters will not step down unless you assure their safety."

"I assure you I want only your jewelry and any other items of value you might be carrying with you. We need not detain you long."

"I am surprised you caught me at all." A bold woman indeed. I could only hope she would not opt to act the man with some weapon.

She jumped down with a flap of thick material and wrenched open the door. I did not miss seeing the dirk at the lady's waist but balked at the idea of wresting it off her.

Swinging off my own mount, I drew my longer blade and gestured with the tip. I threw a kerchief down on the road and anchored it with my toe.

Emily Veinglory

"Those necklaces please—rings, your clutch purses, anything else you have on you. Look honest in your alacrity and I won't need to search you."

The two younger girls looked flushed and timid but the driver was no more than a little tense as if watching a race or spectacle.

"You want to take your time with one of them? I can wait," Roche called out.

And, with a chill, I was forced to face the kind of man he was—the depravity of what I was doing. The driver hesitated, her hand slipping under her cloak. I swung the sword to her.

"I gave my word to you ladies. So I suggest you keep your hands out in the open or I shall be forced to amputate a few of those pretty fingers for nothing."

The two girls looked to be twins, or sisters at least, and whoever sent them out adorned in diamonds deserved to lose them—the diamonds, that was. Next time he might not be so lucky.

"Get her to take off her cloak, at least," Roche said with a leer.

I ignored him. This would be enough. I didn't need whatever the hellcat had, be it baubles or blade. I was pretty sure the other two had held nothing back. They looked tearful but well-short of hysterical, and so things were nicely under control.

"Very well. My apologies for the inconvenience you may—"

"Riders," Roche interjected. He was already wheeling his horse.

I scooped up the swag and swung up on my mare. The driver lunged for me and grabbed the kerchief. There are some limits to gallantry, so I kicked her off before my disguise was disarranged and spurred away. The riders were almost on us already—three men on big beasts that looked fresh and fast on the gallop. The man in the lead wielded a blade and one behind leveled a pistol.

I spurred my old stallion and felt him gather under me. He might be getting long in the tooth but he knew when I needed him most. He seemed to understand. Before I could even get the lay he'd picked a path for cover and bolted. But the lead man flashed past me wide. I heard the sheering cloth before I felt the strike of the blade.

The Highwayman

I bent down low and let my steed find his way until we got into the crags, then kneed him round sharply into the brush. I was praying we had a few moments out of sight while they wheeled around — time to use one of the old horse's other tricks.

I tapped his neck and pulled the reins, and he folded his legs up and slumped down onto his side. I unhooked the knee underneath but stayed on his back, flat as I could. I had not an instant to spare as two of them thundered past. The third pulled up, his horse whickered and half-reared as he glared about, clear as a silhouette against the pewter-colored clouds. A moment later he was gone.

Shaking and waiting, and silently cursing, I knew this had to be the end. This would be the sheriff and his men. I had to get back home without coming across them again. I peered up. They might go after Roche but equally, they might realize they'd missed me and double back soon.

My stallion scrambled up, more stiffly than he used to. Not for the first time, I wondered about giving the valiant beast a name. Over the years it had just never happened, growing into a superstition of sorts, but it seemed unfair on a horse this game.

I took off sideways from my previous path, away from the woods but into the cover of the stream bed that was worn down far enough to conceal me if I stooped. It was a message from the angels, no doubt. Next time the bastard would have dogs, and I'd be dead. It was time to curtail my sins if I sought to survive them.

Dismounted, I waded through the freezing water, keeping the old stallion's head down, which he hated, flicking his ears and tugging all the time. He just wanted to see the danger coming, but what could be seen could see us back. I picked my path and kept stooped down, feeling blood run down my back and not daring to stop as the damned horse jerked back again.

It must have been past the hour of seven by the time I had him pastured, praying Josh had made some excuse for me. The house was dark, the cottage empty. I stripped off my clothes, sodden with water and

Emily Veinglory

blood. With the drapes closely drawn, I struck a sulfur match and lit a single candle.

Blood was smeared across my whole back, but I was shaky with relief to see the cut was shallow. It gaped a little and kept bleeding sluggishly through fresh scabs. But to kill any speculation I had to get to the welcoming party in a way that made it seem I had been there for hours.

And if God was inclined to punish a sinner, that wouldn't be possible. It was my sister's party, a new sheriff and a mark on my flesh to give me away. This could very well be the end of me.

* * * * *

My evening clothes were laid out in waiting, my red brocade coat atop them. I poured water from the ewer and scrubbed dirt and blood off my hands and face. Other than that, I hoped I would not bleed enough to show on my shirt-front or through the coat. The only discovery that would be worse was if someone had cause to look in the woodpile where the diamonds were tucked away.

Dressed, no doubt shoddily, I blundered through the darkness towards the Grey Manor. It was lit up brightly, but circling around the side, I hoped to find an open window and so not be seen arriving late.

Just as I was going to step around the hedge onto the sweeping lawn a hoof-fall broke the silence. The sheriff and one of his men rounded the corner of the building. The horse's breath fogged the air and both sat stiffly in their saddles. The third man from their party broke through the undergrowth a few feet away and rode to join them.

"I saw a lone man in the woods," he called out in a harsh whisper. "It could be him."

They all looked around, sharp-eyed. It felt as if their gazes raked over me, shrunk back against the newly trimmed privet. But it seemed the fates still favored me as none of them seemed to mark my presence.

The Highwayman

The man in the peaked hat was the leader, the sheriff, I presumed. “Go back the way you came and try to pick him up. You, circle around and come up through, try to flush him. I will watch for him here.”

My heart lumbered into a canter but I’d had such a close call already I could hardly respond. I couldn’t hide. I had to get into that house and cover my absence. I watched, frozen. The sheriff sat back in his saddle, scanning like a hawk. Then he nudged his horse gently, moving around towards the front of the house. This might be my only chance.

He wasn’t even out of sight and might wheel round any moment. I sprinted for the back of the house, all but holding my breath to keep quiet. The lawn was still cut long as they tried to get the over-grown grounds under control, and I tripped and stumbled across what seemed like an endless expanse.

Diving around the corner I dared not even look to see if the sheriff had noticed my graceless bolting. I pressed back against the mortared stone and closed my eyes, listening for the sound of horse’s hooves. Hearing nothing, I gathered myself up and tried the rear entrance, the sash windows, all dark and locked down.

One second-story window gaped ajar and I could hear the lawmen conferring again in low mutters. A bowed, budding rose bush gave purchase, just enough to get on top of the small overhang above the rear entrance. It scratched and groaned, the hoary thorns biting my fingers as I climbed and it seemed that I must surely be caught.

From that narrow stone ledge my flailing hand could not quite reach the windowsill, and in a final act of desperation, I leapt for it. I had no way of knowing who might be in the room—some ladies set to scream their alarm? My shirt shifted wetly on my back and blood wended down between my shoulder-blades. I could hear hooves crunching on the gravel and with one convulsive motion I hauled myself up, tipping headfirst over the sill and pitching headfirst into the room.

My feet clattered against the raised window and I thudded heavily to the ground. The room was almost pitch-black. It seemed to be a dressing room, with closets and a few padded chairs. There was an adjoining door from which a pale light flickered. I crawled forward,

Emily Veinglory

lurched upright and peered into a large bedchamber dominated by a great fabric-wrapped bed. There must be a door from there to a hallway, and all I would need to do was get down to the ballroom and pray my appearance was not too blatantly disheveled.

As I slipped across the room, I paused by the bed. It was piled up with pillows and cushions and loaded down with covers, including something that looked like a bearskin. It seemed that Geoffrey made very little effort to play the Puritan in his private chambers.

At that very moment the man himself burst into the room with preoccupied haste.

There was a frozen moment where I flailed for some excuse, expecting outrage at my intrusion.

The Highwayman

Chapter Five

"I need to have a word with you, Master Larkin," I blurted.
"Confidentially."

Geoffrey's face slipped into an appraising glance from me to the bed. "Well, if you do feel the need to sneak into my boudoir, far be it from me to complain."

He stepped in close, curling one hand over the great carved banister-post and resting the other on my chest, his fingers toying with my hastily tied and pinned cravat. Glancing down, I could see it was unevenly tied.

"While you explain, perhaps I can fix this for you," Geoffrey offered. He removed the tiepin, casting a dismissive eye over the topaz stone.

"Geoffrey, I suppose I can assume we are on familiar terms." It became clear that Geoffrey was drawing my cravat off rather than correcting it, his fingers moving down to the cloth-covered shirt buttons.

"Perhaps overly familiar on first meeting," Geoffrey commented, "For you have surely been cooler to me since."

I caught Geoffrey's hands, gloved in fine silk—strong, large fingers that were not dissuaded from their task. The only way to distract him, to excuse my strange behavior would be to tell, truly, about my troubles. His broad fingertips pressed through against my chest, startling me not so much in the soft, lingering touch as the instantaneous, visceral response of my own body.

Emily Veinglory

With a stifled intake of breath I stepped back, the back of my legs hitting the padded edge of the bed. "I mean by that," I forestalled, "that I have a difficulty—something I should properly share with some old comrade or acquaintance. But there are some old ideas of propriety in these parts, and even though my father's title was removed from him, the people hereabouts still regard—"

"You as nobility. And you've been selling off land, and doing—well, one can only speculate as to exactly what you do—to meet those obligations."

He said this slyly, but the hint was soft enough that I suddenly realized that he did not know for sure. His warning of our previous meeting aside, he was only guessing about my escapades upon the road.

I gave an irritated hiss and tried to push back against him, but Geoffrey's broad chest did not give an inch.

"So tell me," he said. "I assure you, you have my full and most acute attention."

And despite the sardonic tone I suspected that he meant it. But with my shirt flaps falling open, there was a limit to how much further I could disrobe before he found evidence of the evening's damages. I leaned away from him but with a gasp, toppled onto my back upon the heaped-up covers. I might have leapt up like some nervous debutante, but at least this way my wounds were out of sight and there was a limit to how much more of my clothing he could remove.

I had not given sufficient thought to the matter, however, of what Geoffrey could do. Geoffrey's gloved hands hooked over my breeches and drawers, loosening the ties and sliding them inexorably downwards. He leaned over me, a great dark shadow, dry lips pressed against my throat. His kisses on my cheek were gentle. He drew back just long enough to peel off his fine gloves.

"It is impulsive, I confess," Geoffrey said in a hoarse voice. "But I hope for a most total familiarity between us, an amity that will leave no obstacle to your words, or to your body. I was too sudden, too selfish, when I first met you."

The Highwayman

I could feel the breath puffing against my skin as he wended downwards. But these ardent protestations were really too much. What did this man really know about me? No, this was not love at first sight, just lust made eloquent by refusal.

"You were just too perfect," Geoffrey continued. "But I have come here to learn patience, restraint...."

But as his immediate goal became clear my objections faded upon my lips. The touch of his mouth gripped my shaft gently. It was compelling. Embarrassment warred with pleasure as he ran his wide tongue slowly down my stiffening length. My flailing fingers wound in that ridiculous fur that lay atop his blankets.

He took me into his mouth slowly, one hand still flat upon my abdomen and pressing down firmly. The swirling of his tongue, wet over the head and sliding down the under-seam teased my cock so hard I moaned aloud. He worked me slowly as blasphemies piled upon my tongue and I clenched my jaw to keep them in.

Oh, God, how this man infuriated me, but in this moment, I might forgive him anything. I wanted to urge him to more speed, more force, but I could not make myself speak such wanton words.

I was all the more appalled as he crouched forward, sucking my cock in smooth, assured strokes, and traced one finger down between my buttocks and teased my hole. He circled the rim and then pressed slowly in, seeking confidently within and then pressing firm, finding a warm, wet, revelatory place from which emerged a wave of pleasure so great it could only be the greatest of venal sins.

I came, with some horror, within his mouth in a great rush that made my eyes dim and my body cold. He crawled up over my limp body and, looking down, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. His face fell in lines of infuriating self-satisfaction. For one dangerous moment I lost the will to fight him and lay spent and defeated. Was this rank debauchery? Or was it love?

And then the door burst open with a crack like lightning.

* * * * *

Emily Veinglory

The next few moments were something of a blur as my consciousness returned fully, if sluggishly, from that place that base pleasures send it. I groped for my clothing, hindered by my stiffening back.

"Sheriff Mathers," Geoffrey barked. "I cannot begin to conceive of a valid excuse for this outrage, so I shall have your swift exit and your apology."

But Mathers stepped forth into the room, a cool expression on his face when he saw me fastening my breeches.

"My man thought he saw a suspected robber entering your window. I was thinking only of your safety."

"Your man is more addle-pated than you, for I and the young Earl have been quite alone in here. And I think you should consider rather carefully how you are going to handle this scene. If you choose to make enemies here, I dare say you will have ample cause to regret it."

The sheriff looked to me again. I fastened my shirt-front and adjusted the starched collar, giving him no acknowledgement beyond a raised eyebrow. I tried to find my highborn arrogance as I addressed him; however, it was all but worn through. I found myself unwilling to be a bare-faced liar, for all that I was a masked thief.

"Master Larkin overstates my title, which our gracious ruler saw fit to terminate. But in the country such things matter less. I daresay we could go downstairs where the guests must now be gathered, speculating on your hasty entrance. You could then make accusation of brigandry or buggery, whatever best pleases you. I would find the spectacle of their stoning you out of town most amusing."

"You are sure of yourself for a slip of a boy," Mathers said. Not for the first time, my looks counted against me, for I doubt he had many years on me.

But for all his words, as I walked towards him his gaze flicked aside, and he stepped back almost upon the toes of his man. My shame transmuted into anger and sharpened all the tones my family and schooling had set in place.

The Highwayman

"Those who don't revere my family's long patronage will no doubt be eager to curry favor with the luminaries of our new reign." I gestured to Geoffrey without looking his way. "I am confident, Sheriff, of what I know. I have lived in this parish life-long and know it very well indeed. Whilst you, sir, come new to town and bumble about like a pig at a tea party. I suggest you take yourself out the way you came with alacrity and sincere apologies to all you meet upon the way, explaining the abject error of you followers' eyes and your own manners."

Quick calculations flashed within his eyes, but Mathers bowed his submission. "Of course," he muttered. "I am absolutely very much mistaken and do offer my regrets for so abruptly interrupting your conversation. I would not, of course, suggest your involvement in any impropriety." And he could not resist one slight barb as he looked down at me from the advantage of several extra inches of height. "You obviously lack the build of the miscreant we seek, even if your station did not place you entirely above suspicion."

He turned and gestured sharply for his man to clear the way before striding down the hallway. I closed the door firmly behind him. Turning, I found Geoffrey lounging backwards onto the bed. He clapped his hands in slow applause.

"Oh, nicely done," he said. Then, stooping, he recovered my crumpled cravat. "I believe I was correcting this for you."

The chill of the road filled me for a moment. I looked over at him as he made light of this debacle. Geoffrey looked up and his smile faded somewhat as he toyed with the cloth. I shook my mood, struggling back to my real self and snatching the cravat from him. I fastened it, feeling a blush prickling at my cheeks.

With a sigh, Geoffrey stood and approached me, straightened my haphazard knot and fixed the pin in place. He tucked back my hair and buttoned my jacket before me, almost as if he were dressing a child.

"You had something you wished to say to me," he said.
"Something quite urgent it seemed."

"Did I? Well, I am sure it can wait. You have guests to attend to."

Emily Veinglory

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We came down the stairs together like lord...and lady of the manor. Perhaps that's what unsettled me the most. Geoffrey's substantial battle-scarred frame and unshakeable insolence seemed to overpower, to lessen me. What could I be, in that shadow, but a lesser partner? Yet as we descended, his presence was a foundation, a reassurance.

Scattered guests were already present, clustered about the room. Emilia separated herself from a group of ladies.

"Reynard," she declared. "There you are. I had assumed you would be escorting us."

"I must apologize," Geoffrey said, loud enough for many to hear. "Master Monroe and I had some business matters to discuss. We share an interest in horses."

Farquar came up beside Emilia. "Horses," he sneered. "I would think that the men of this county might be more concerned with these robbers terrorizing travelers."

Other guests began to gather around them. Amongst them, I realized with a sinking feeling, were the three ladies from the coach I had recently waylaid.

"We were accosted this very evening by a big, red-haired brute," the youngest said. "It was terrifying!"

Her sister clutched her arm, and the taller woman who had been driving them was now revealed as a stoutly built brunette in a dark grey gown that exposed a great deal of her voluptuous body.

"I do not think we were in danger," she said.

Farquar put his arm around Emilia. "It would be foolish to assume a highwayman will stop at robbery, has he the time to go further."

"Sir," Geoffrey interjected. "There are ladies present."

They glared at each other for the length of a slow breath before Farquar muttered his apology.

"It has become an oppressing problem. These highwaymen grow bolder every day," I added with a carefully understated degree of righteousness. "Only a week ago I was stopped on the road and robbed of

The Highwayman

my father's ring. I hope our new sheriff will continue to be assiduous in hunting the culprits down. But perhaps a little more...focused in his pursuit."

There was a titter of amusement amongst the more observant. While Emilia, nervous of the mood drew the conversation to her own plans and a stream of new arrivals kept me busy renewing old acquaintances even as I tried to conjure some coherent way to announce my sister's engagement to this beaming crowd who had barely seen her since she learned how to walk.

* * * * *

Sharing the role of host kept me up late. It was very late before the last stragglers were seen to their coaches, some in a near stupor from the free availability of wine of every vintage. It was clear that Geoffrey brought considerable assets to his pastoral exile. He was an amiable host who moved freely about the room, and I was careful to introduce him to every man and woman we encountered. The endorsement, not unambiguous in my own mind, was clearly understood by all present, and met with some good feeling.

By the early hours of the morning I felt utterly drained, incapable even of coherent thought. As I saw Emilia to her coach, her chaperone was sleeping within. Farquar was quick to slam the door closed, rendering me unwelcome. It was hard to complain, as anyone would assume I had a mount waiting to bear me back.

I turned and found servants clearing the room and Geoffrey standing in the midst of it, watching me steadily as I stood in the doorway. I could see in his gaze a return to that soft bed and those profane lips. Whereupon he would discover a saber cut upon my shoulders, lies upon my lips and besides, I would be insensibly asleep the moment there was a mattress under me. He would have no more sport with me tonight.

Emily Veinglory

I fancy I saw a glimmer of surprise in him as I walked out that door into the dark. I was not his to claim, as yet. But had I the will to stay that way?

The Highwayman

Chapter Six

Josh was waiting for me that night at the cottage. He helped tear the blood-caked clothing from my back. It had shown through only in the smallest spots, dark red against the fabric's crimson in small speckles across my back. I fancied that no one had noticed it by candlelight.

I had come so close to telling Geoffrey everything, deflected from my confession just because he could play a cock like a musical instrument. But lying on my front with Josh's dispassionate hands swabbing trails of blood off my back and ass, I did tell him about my crimes. My lifelong companion, he had earned my trust even though I had not burdened him with such disclosures before this night. He listened to me silently until the end.

"I'll take the diamonds into London," I concluded. "Fence them along with what's left of my stash. Pay the dowry, amend the deeds, and be done with it. By leasing the low field to Geoffrey for his damned horses I should take enough to live on and keep the house from falling down, if very little else."

I twisted and saw Josh stooped, wringing out a rag of rust-colored water with the glint of tears in his eyes.

"Oh, I should not have told you." I sighed. "It is not your concern."

He turned to me a spark of anger in his eyes. "Not properly, perhaps," he said. "But I grew up with you and Emilia, looking after you in my own small way. And I saw what was happening, I knew after a while what you had sunk to, and I just...pretended nothing was wrong."

Emily Veinglory

"Josh."

"Lie still. You'll start the bleeding again."

"Josh. This can still work out...."

"With Emilia marrying this money-grubbing rake? You pay him off and you keep the house, but what about your sister?"

Which was quite true. "I'll need two days, maybe three to see the lawyer and get the funds. Josh, I can only hope that you will protect her honor in this house. And we can hope she'll see that she has other options. I will see what I can do to expand her options. If only there was some woman in the family to advise her...."

"Those ladies who were so reckless to take the heath road near darkness," Josh prompted.

"What, distant cousins, I heard?"

"Their mother, your late father's cousin, lives in a house on the main road to London. She fosters several girls and is well thought of."

I turned to him, and fancied I saw a more than brotherly interest in Emilia's well-being in his eyes. He helped me sit up and wrapped bandages about me tightly.

"I will do everything I can," I swore. "In all the haste I can manage. But it may add another day to my journey and I fear that Farquar might press his suit. Well, men have been known to—"

"Take a girl by force so she has no other option, no other man who'll take her." Josh's voice dripped with venom at the very thought, but he did not dispute the possibility.

"Have Sally, the maid, come serve as lady's maid. We'll find some way to pay her."

"Aye, she's a feisty girl and I'll be nearby day and night. Emilia will be safe. I swear it."

"Then go arrange it. I must sleep now and start my journey early in the morning."

I dimly heard him moving about and packing for my journey as I drifted into sleep. I was fortunate to have Josh to protect Emilia, but I very much feared that Farquar would be more than a match for him. The next

The Highwayman

few days offered a treacherous path but I dared not even pray for guidance given all my sins.

* * * * *

Every fiber of my body protested a start before dawn. Josh had my riding hack ready, Bounder, an ugly, dun-colored beast with an iron mouth but hardy constitution. I found my —perhaps undeservedly—loyal man had already recovered the loot from the hiding place I told him of. He showed me how it was hidden within my powder horn and snuff box. Josh saw me off tersely with many reminders to take care and not dally on the road.

I bent in the saddle and placed a hand upon his shoulder. “I trust your vigilance, your care of my sister. But if Farquar over-steps, take the matter to our neighbor. He may not be the most trustworthy of men but I am sure he would take in a lady suffering under any threat.”

But it was with foreboding and many a backward glance that I road away from the house.

I stopped at the hollow tree that was my regular hiding place. It contained Geoffrey’s discarded purse along with a few other trifles. I had the courtesy to tell Roche of my plans, over the barrel of a pistol. He would get his share, but given how quick he was to leave me, it would be when I was ready, and possibly less than half if the fence paid out meanly.

I took to the road at a leisurely canter, nervous this once to meet another highwayman on the road who could topple all my tenuous plans. Already I fretted over leaving Emilia with nothing more than a terse message and Josh, whom I was sure would die to protect her. But, as a servant, it would be hard for him to enforce rule except in my name—which did not seem to cow Farquar greatly even when I was present.

My shoulders were stiffly bandaged, but in sitting back to try and ease them, my back bore the brunt of my hack’s uneven gate. Bounder, for his part, had been too long in stable and quickly lost his vigor. I took to alternating spells at canter and walk to eat up the long miles.

Emily Veinglory

The wayward girls' behavior, Lavinia, Pearl and Susannah, gave me a pretext to call upon Lady Walther. But it would be best if I could arrive in the afternoon before it began to grow dark. I knew little of her but prayed to find an ally in a lady charitable enough to raise these girls as her own.

The roads were quiet and I missed a turn, losing time cutting over fields. Bounder flicked his ears and huffed annoyance, especially when he had to get over a hedge to make the lane. He had a good traveling gate but his name was given in irony; Bounder hated to jump and landed with a splay-legged grunt that almost threw me over his neck.

It was barely short of early evening when I came to the gate of the Walther's estate, and I was now close enough to ride through the night and make London by dawn. I reined up a while and considered it. I could arrive at my relative's door at a much more hospitable hour if I attempted it upon return.

But Bounder's head was hanging and I ached from ass to neck. I was of two minds as I gathered my reins, but looking up, I found myself regarded by a woman I did not immediately recognize. She was seated easily on the back of a stolid looking beast that was at least half carthorse. Two shaggy coursing hounds ambled at the horse's heels.

In plain riding clothes and good light, Lavinia would have to be called plain-looking. Her face had a strong jaw and her features seemed to bunch in the middle of her face. But black curly hair was something of a saving feature, and the keen expression in her dark eyes. Her body was a solid presence that abounded with classical curves.

"You've come a long way just to report out girlish misdemeanors," she said saucily.

"I had business in London. The opportunity to cause you trouble was simply happy coincidence," I replied sharply, but with enough humor to not be a rebuke.

She smiled at that, hardly the picture of a chastened daughter. "Allow me to escort you to the house."

* * * * *

The Highwayman

Lady Walther received me with some surprise but warmly enough, once I explained who I was. The girls, as I had suspected, had been upon the road without her leave. The escapade had cost them a planned trip to the theatre and a portion of their clothing allowance. The younger two seemed quite contrite, but Lavinia only feigned her apologies, and poorly.

Indeed she looked me over quite boldly. "You are not married, Master Morton?" she inquired as soon as it was clear that we could not be counted as related, cousins many times removed.

My protestations of disinterest were treated more as irrelevant than disingenuous. But after some hours of petty conversation Lady Walther dismissed the girls to their rest. Once they were safely gone, she turned to me.

"Now, young man. Perhaps you will tell me what troubles you."

"Having been a most undutiful relative I hesitate to broach the matter that truly brings me here."

The lady smiled. She had an aristocratic face with white hair fussily arranged, but her eyes contrasted her staid appearance.

"Having been left well-provided for by my dear husband, I am used to petitioners from the many distant branches of my kin." She leaned forward and straightened the frayed lapel of my blue coat. "So, although I surely do not promise to be obliging, I will most certainly not be offended."

"I have not come cap in hand for money, Lady Walthers. What I ask is altogether more presumptuous. My sister, who has been the ward of our Great Aunt May, was the cause of the ball your girls ran off to attend. I am very concerned that the engagement announced there, the marriage to follow most hastily may not be in Emilia's best interest. But I am poorly placed to discuss this with her."

"Would she listen to a stranger more than her older brother?" She seemed, at least, not dismissive of my plight.

"I have been a most neglectful brother and have a poor understanding of a lady's options in her place. I merely hoped that if you should choose to visit her, as a lady of good standing and blessed with a

Emily Veinglory

harmonious marriage—well, perhaps out of the goodness of your heart you might give the counsel our mother is not here to provide.”

The lady’s eyes were shrewd. “You do not like this man that she had chosen?”

“It is not for me to like him. But, I feel our great aunt pressed for the match and, living under her sway, Emilia takes the offered...release from the constraint of childhood. I am putting this poorly.”

“No, you are putting it well. A girl of breeding, but forgive me for saying this—reduced circumstance—must choose wisely. I do not think you ask too much in hoping a female relative might take an interest. And not having one closer than I... Certainly if I couch it in terms of simply helping a girl prepare to take up wifely duties—and addressing in passing whether this should be done... I do not promise to disapprove of the match, mind you.”

“I would not dare attempt to dictate your position.”

Lady Walther leaned back in her chair. “Then your wisdom more than makes up for the tenuous relationship of our blood. Am I to understand there is some urgency to this matter?”

“Barely a week remains before the date Farquar’s family has chosen. I...”

I wanted to say that I believed the dowry was the only consideration that saw the matter delayed that long, but hesitated to speak ill of a man that Lady Walther wished to assess for herself.

“I do question the haste. And having to attend to related matters with my lawyer and bank I find I leave them alone in our parents’ house with a chaperone whose advanced years should be enough to excuse her from such duties.”

“You must have inherited such subtlety from your mother,” the lady said as she stood to conclude our discussion. “Dear Harry was born to be a soldier, and not one to strategize at that. Now allow Jaspers to show you to your room. I apprehend that we may both be rising early for a journey, come the morning.”

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The Highwayman

Perhaps it sounds foolish, but Lady Walthers had my trust almost from the beginning, and it was a great weight off my mind to see her the next morning loading up her wards into a great coach. A second wagon followed behind, weighed down with trunks and carrying a party of maids and footmen.

Bounder seemed reinvigorated, and after suitable and effusive thanks, we took to the road at a swift trot that he sustained most of the way to the outskirts of London. I paused as the road swept down, taking in the vista of the curling river and the smoke-bedded buildings of the town. Traffic was thicker now, a bustle of lumbering wagons, rattling carriages and men ahorse on every kind of mission, along with farmers and traders bearing their wares into the town, from huge stacks of firewood to piglets bound up in wicker baskets.

And so I paid very little heed to a horse pulling up beside me at a point where the view more than warranted a pause in one's journey.

But as the rider stayed by my side, closer than would be considered courteous, I turned. Geoffrey's dainty palfrey looked all but done in, with sweat staining her arched neck and froth dripping from her muzzle. And for a man who loved horses, his seat was awkward at best.

"It seems I was fortunate to catch you."

A few minutes more and I would have passed into the maze of the city's street, harder to find than a pebble amongst thousands upon the beach.

"Is there something wrong at home to send you out in such haste?"

"When I left last night all seemed peaceable. But it had been preying on my mind that there was something you meant to say to me. Something most urgent. And when you left for the city so early, I began to wonder if all was well with you."

A likely story.

"I do recall you saying that you are not welcome in London until you have repaired your ways."

Emily Veinglory

“No one need know I am here.” He nudged his weary horse a few steps down the road and turned back over his shoulder, clearly expecting I would follow. Which, failing any other sensible course, I did.

The Highwayman

Chapter Seven

I rode grudgingly, not quite pulling up beside Geoffrey, whose great height but smaller mount brought him approximately to my level.

"I have business to see to," I said preemptively. "Appointments today with the family lawyer. Emilia's marriage has implications for a number of legal provisions left in place by our parents. This is hardly the inexplicable flight you seem to be painting it as."

"Far be it from me to interfere with your brotherly duties. I only hope that you might accept the hospitality of my club, and we might share a meal together this evening."

"There is no need for you to trouble yourself so."

"I have already troubled this far. And perhaps by providing a room for your stay, some company, you might feel a little more at ease with me. I mean only to discuss your pasture lands, so if you would not accept on my behalf, think only of my poor horses, otherwise doomed to pasture on perilous peaks and cliffs."

"You have horses?"

"A few, and I mean to have more."

"Do you always get what you mean to have?" I must confess that my resentment was clear in my voice, a most churlish snap.

He slowed further, receiving the curses of a wagoner behind us. But looking across to me he said quite gently, "I am quite capable of recognizing the difference between a hunter and a petitioner—and of accepting whatever answer I am given. But perhaps in convivial surrounding, my prayers might yet be indulged."

I turned away from him. My lustful neighbor was proving a persistent distraction just when I needed my wits the most. "Take the answer as no, and to your kind offer also," I said tersely. "Then we might at least salvage a respectable friendship."

"What does it cost you to accept my hospitality, Reynard? If it will please you, be as chaste as a nun. I demand nothing, press no suit beyond my welcome—and am not much given to pleading."

Emily Veinglory

This last phrase somewhat affronted. I sighed and thought of the proprieties. I would have this man as my neighbor for years to come and might well depend upon his largess on behalf of those horses he talked so much about. It did no harm to accept his welcome into a gentleman's club. A certain level of decorum could be expected there.

"Well, then. I am obliged to you, once more, for your offer. And if it satisfies you, I will accept. I apologize for speaking so shortly."

My words were not delivered with sincere inflection, but Geoffrey seemed satisfied—perhaps a little too content, as if he had only feigned affront to manipulate me. I gritted my teeth over any further comment.

* * * * *

I excused myself to take care of business. Time to see my usual crooked man before trying the staid family lawyer. Damned if my fence didn't seem to read the desperation in me. But I argued, threatened and wheedled. I assured him I would deal with him exclusively—hinting at a profitable partnership with a more experienced man of the road.

It was enough to make me sick, but the bottom line was that I needed the dowry amount, and crooked Jack had always given me the best price. There was no point running around the other shops. I ground it out of him in the end, and just enough to make it worth Roche's while to keep his mouth shut. It was a substantial amount, and he put me off until the following day for the full payment. So I kept the stones with me until then.

Mr. Trock, the family lawyer, was good enough to see me immediately. He was obviously perturbed at having Emilia's glad tidings delivered so grimly, but the papers were easily drawn up. Upon the dowry amount being delivered to Mr. Farquar's legal representative, the deed would list the manor and its remaining lands as mine without further obligation. The amendments were drafted before my eyes. Staring blankly I realized what I was doing. Trading my sister for a pathetic remnant of land, faded trophies of a family who ultimately fell with the same star they rose upon.

The Highwayman

But I said nothing. I signed and was witnessed and everything was drawn up and ready. It took some hours, and I strode along the fouled street well after dark, looking for the façade of the club Geoffrey had entered.

* * * * *

The “club” looked like little more than a large private house without any plaque or sign upon the door. That morning I had seen only the stables at the rear, and a glimpse of the gleaming foyer as Geoffrey stepped inside.

Pushing open the heavy wooden door, I found myself immediately under the interrogative gaze of a man clad like a footman, tall and soundly built even for that position. The effect was somewhat intimidating for a self-made rustic like myself.

“The Watkins party?” the man enquired.

“So I am told,” I replied. Given that this was Geoffrey’s club the use of a false name seemed disingenuous at best, but I had to assume there was a reason.

“Your companion is in one of our private dining rooms. I believe he is awaiting your arrival. Sean will show you through.”

A young man—a boy, really—was conjured up as if by magic at the mention of his name. I glimpsed a small booth built into the wall with a bench seat—presumably he waited there until called for.

The sight of him engaged a cog in my thinking. He was a young man of unlikely prettiness, and the footman’s very slight emphasis on the word companion, led me to wonder about the nature of this club and its ostensible respectability.

There was little else, however, to excite suspicion. I was led through a spacious reading room with scattered upholstered chairs and two facing walls lined with handsome, leather-bound volumes. Beyond this room, a crooked hallway was punctuated by several doors, some blocked by solid doors and others by heavy curtains. The overall effect was impeccably refined and well-suited to masculine tastes—yet still felt

Emily Veinglory

somewhat improvised as if the building had been hurriedly remodeled after first being intended as a large private dwelling.

The boy drew aside the curtain, and the room beyond exhibited none of the restraint of the more public spaces. Every surface was silver gilt or swathed in lush fabrics. A small dining table with two seats in highly-polished oak sat near the center of the room. Along the back wall, a couch more in the proportions of a bed was covered in what looked like black satin. Indeed, only the color palette of black, grey and brown set it apart from some lady's boudoir.

It had been a long, tense and tiring day—but I had been foolish to expect decorum from Geoffrey Larkin. At least he was not lolling on the outrageous day bed, but sitting near the front of the room where two upholstered chairs faced a small card table before a gleaming marble fireplace.

He looked up and smirked. Perhaps I was just too tired, but it didn't bother me. Perhaps I was just becoming used to his habitually jaded ways. Perhaps his face just naturally fell into expressions of that sort. My back began to itch furiously. Supposedly that means it is healing, but it was hardly going to accomplish the task by later this evening, so I bolstered the uncertain defenses of my virtue as best I could, given the breaches already made.

I set my saddlebag against the wall and dropped into the second seat, leaned back carefully and relaxed as best I could, feeling my muscles ache. Geoffrey continued to watch, somewhat quizzically. "Nothing to say about my club's notions of décor?" he asked.

"I have seen your bed. Good taste was not to be expected." I realized then that Geoffrey had been a little on edge also. Perhaps his guests in this establishment were generally a sort more habituated to the dubious aesthetic.

"I am pleased to see that you will not let a few tasseled cushions prompt you to thinking I cannot keep my word."

"You word?"

The Highwayman

"To refrain from my usual advances," he said wryly. "To be as chaste, as I said, as a nun. Your expression when you came inside was hardly one of delight."

"Geoffrey, I have spent the last hours immersed in complex and arcane paperwork to a less than delightful end. Had I given it a moment's thought, I would not have been surprised to step in here and find you dressed in nothing but a wimple."

He laughed at that and leaned back in his chair, propping his long legs up on the hearth. I got the strong impression that I had been forgiven for some trespass that I was not even conscious of committing. Geoffrey had decided that we were to be friends after all—though I had no particular faith that he would not venture to trespass further if I showed the slightest weakness.

Emily Veinglory

Chapter Eight

Geoffrey recommended the beef, which proved to be quite palatable, and the claret, which he was rather quick to pour and eager to refresh my glass. The conversation, however, was easy and without any suggestive excess.

I had never really had a male friend who was not constrained by some difference in station. Geoffrey was happy to tell me a great deal about himself, his fascination with horses as creatures, despite neither great interest or nor proficiency in riding or driving them.

I did notice that Geoffrey's glass stagnated as he sipped from it. So that when the meal, rather more ample than I used to, drew to an end over port and on Geoffrey's part a cigar—I had never acquired the habit—I had consumed the better part of the bottle.

My pocket watch confirmed that midnight had passed in a fog of convivial banter, and for a moment my mind went to Emilia, and whatever was happening now back at the house. Bless Lady Walther, who must be there by now, with her noble assurance and a few sturdy man-servants as well—should they be required.

"Much as I hate to revive your suspicions of me," Geoffrey said, "there are few rooms free in the club, so we will be obliged to share."

I turned to him with a sigh. "Master Larkin," I said with some boldness. "I cannot deny that it would be easy to consider you a friend. But easier by far if you keep your hands to yourself this night."

The Highwayman

But full as I was with fine wine and good food, it was more my telltale wounds that restrained me than my uncertain will.

* * * * *

Geoffrey led the way to what must have been his accustomed room, up a set of sweeping stairs that seemed out of place at the back of the house. A rather hefty gentleman was descending and made some kind of familiar comment. Geoffrey hushed him but I could guess the gist of it from the way he leered at me as he passed. I was careful to keep my bags with me, the deeds and legal documents in them provided sufficient excuse.

The room itself was spacious and warmed by a now-smoldering fire in the hearth. It was clustered with enough furniture to suggest it was more of a second home than an occasional retreat. I almost felt as if I were trespassing as I stepped over the threshold—for all that I was sure Geoffrey had “entertained” here many times before.

This impression was confirmed when Geoffrey opened the elaborately carved mahogany closet and revealed it was packed tightly with clothes of all kinds. He pulled out an old-fashioned nightshirt and tossed it casually in my direction.

“I hope you will not mind if I forego bed clothes. It has never been my habit unless the conditions are particularly frigid.”

I did not bother searching that comment for innuendo, preoccupied with thoughts about how to get into this starched throwback without revealing my grimy bandages.

He turned to me, shrugging off his already-unbuttoned jacket. “Look at you, so suspicious again,” he said. “How can I reassure you of my attentions? You need only command me.”

Even in such supplication his voice sounded so warm and self-assured.

“Oh, really,” I said with some skepticism.

He raised his hands, “My word upon it.”

“Well, then. I suppose you should undress. Facing the wall.”

Emily Veinglory

He raised an eyebrow at that, but complied, giving me time to shuck off my clothes and put on the ridiculous nightshirt.

Geoffrey took his time so by the time I was covered enough to hide my secret, he stood with his broad, scarred back to me, muscles creating a topography that begged to be touched. I clenched my hands into fists and just watched as he pulled off his tight boots, somewhat awkwardly, with one hand against the wall. His buttocks flexed beneath tight trousers as he balanced first on one leg and then the other.

I confess that having been somewhat ambivalent whilst pursued, I felt a strong pulse of passion within me at the sight. Given just a little space, a little time, a little respite from my troubles...

I walked silently towards him, almost without intending to, but in my mind I knew I could not touch him and he must not touch me. He slid off his snug trousers and drawers. He kept his face towards the wall, not even glancing towards me. I began to have an inkling then, just how seriously Geoffrey took his word.

"And what would you have me do now?" he asked.

I wondered if it was some innate inflection of his voice that made every utterance seem sarcastic to some degree.

"Turn around."

He pivoted upon the spot as if on a parade ground, a little more than a foot away from me. His few inches of extra height obliged me to raise my chin and look upwards at his face. My gaze glided down from there, over his broad body, shrouded in the darkness of a room lit only by the small fireplace behind me. The stiff cloth of my nightshirt constricted me, falling almost to the floor. I folded my arms across my chest and regarded what my own form threw into shadow: Geoffrey's altogether admirable form. His cock reared half-alert. He stood as if unmoved by his own arousal.

"You cannot be so enflamed by me, Geoffrey, dressed in this ridiculous garment."

"I have given myself over to your command, Reynard," he replied stoically. "And as a man who has fought in battle, it is obedience you may be sure of. But like any man, some things are not even under my control

The Highwayman

and they respond to how you look, how you smell, your heat and every memory I have of you, whether I will it or no."

Even as I watched, his cock strained to the perpendicular. I experienced some temptation to try and give pleasure with my mouth as he had done. But now was not a good time to escalate an already risky encounter. I felt the cool certainty of the highway fall over me, like a shield behind which nothing could harm me.

"Well, I am not inclined to assist you with that," I said. "Perhaps you should see to it yourself."

Geoffrey watched me steadily. "If I might retrieve something from my nightstand?"

"As you wish."

I watched with some curiosity as he took a few steps over to a low cabinet with many shallow drawers. He drew from it what look like a small, enameled ink bottle, removed the cork, and poured a small amount of clear oil onto his palm. I breathed deeply, detecting a sweet scent as the oil warmed on his skin.

He placed the bottle carefully back in the drawer, leaving it open, and returned to his place. He watched me, without confrontation or apology, as he rubbed his palms together and then reached down with his right hand and wrapped his fingers around his shaft.

I struggled to maintain an indifferent expression as I watched with some fascination while he handled himself with practiced ease. He ran his slick hand up and down his cock in slow, sweet strokes. Pausing, running his thumb over the head, pulling back the skin and circling over the flushed head. He grew fully hard, and the smell of his cock seemed to fill the room. I eased my weight from foot to foot, tortured by pangs of lust as my cock stirred, pushing out the heavy fabric of my suffocating garb.

Seeking some distraction, my gaze roamed over Geoffrey's well-filled frame from his large, rounded shoulders, and to his heavy chest muscles and tight stomach. Deeply chiseled lines swooped down, dividing his thick, long thighs from a hairless groin. Dimly, I supposed that he must shave or pluck his private hair to produce the resulting

Emily Veinglory

smooth taper of flesh from taut stomach to engorged cock, but my gaze was seduced back to his attentions to his own pleasure.

He worked his flesh unhurriedly, reaching with his other hand now to massage his balls, Pulling up on his cock lifted his sack so I could see clearly how he fondled it even as his arousal drew it up against his thick member. Then leaning back upon the wall he held his cock tight and ran his other hand down the seam of flesh behind his balls, tracing back and forth. His breath came quick and quiet and his eyes had rolled up, his gaze straying towards the ceiling.

Freed from his gaze I watched, feeling almost invisible as he pumped his shaft quickly now, the sound harsh like slapping as he worked himself, pushing back against the wall. Long minutes passed as he drove himself to the point of coming only to slow and tease the moment out. My own cock stood up hard and I fought the urge to draw attention to my state by covering it.

I froze, breath caught, as Geoffrey straightened his back and looked me, eyes sharp and dark. He came in a jet, a few drops spewing as far as the immaculate white of my nightshirt. Geoffrey's knees buckled and without a thought, I stepped forward and steadied him. The skin of his chest was damp, his faced flushed.

"Are you satisfied?" he asked with a husky voice.

He did not touch me but stood, panting. He must have felt my hard cock pushing against his stomach.

"Allow me?" His fingertips brushed so gently, the split side of the nightshirt as high as my knee. He touched only the cloth. I felt it pull lightly, sliding between our bodies. His voice, despite his earlier protestations was almost pleading. I only nodded.

He reached up under the shirt and I placed both hands upon the wall, easing back only enough to separate our bodies by a hand's breadth or two.

"Only that," I said. "No more."

He knew what I meant. To only touch that one place and not venture some romantic embrace. His greased hand touched me lightly

The Highwayman

and I gasped. I was already so heated from watching him that I knew it would take so very little to make me spend myself.

He pulled up along my cock, covering it with the heat and thick scent of his own sated body. My head felt heavy. I rested my cheek down lightly upon his collarbone, closing my eyes. The odor of his body was so strong, almost bestial, and filled my body with lust for him.

He circled finger and thumb, tightening as he pulled up and loosening as he slid down in an easy, regular rhythm—but obediently touched no other part of my body. I locked my legs in place, willed them to hold me even as my balls clenched up and then with a single, wounded sigh, my seed spilled out of me as warm as blood.

I stepped back from him clumsily, night shirt sliding down to cover my expended flesh with crumpled linen. Without another word he went to the bed and pulled back the covers. My befuddled mind search for some purchase. I wander to stand before the fire, feeling the heat of it upon my front.

I heard the soft whisper of cloth as Geoffrey slid beneath the covers. After a long minute I turned and cautiously joined him, staying well over on my side of the cold bed.

Emily Veinglory

Chapter Nine

I awoke groggily to the dim light of early morning. There was an acrid smell in the room. Craning my neck cautiously, I saw that Geoffrey sat upon a delicate chair before a roll-top desk that I had barely noticed before, placed as it was just behind the door. Before him, on the green felt of the exposed desktop, lay the strand of stolen diamonds. My gut curdled at the sight.

Geoffrey held a small clay pipe in one hand, puffing upon it contemplatively as if unaware of the jewels sparkling by his elbow. I could tell that my movement had not gone unnoticed although he did not look in my direction. After a moment, without even turning to me, he spoke.

"You almost... no, you did have me fooled," he said. His tone was ambiguous.

"You were expecting a full confession of my sins, on the basis of one day's acquaintance?" I pulled myself from the warm bed, feeling irritable and on edge. "You almost had one, but you were not inclined to hear it, so I reconsidered."

"You did climb through a second story window." He turned to me. "The sheriff told me that there were two men he sought. One, old and grey-haired. One a tall brute with dark hair."

I walked gingerly to a table where a bowl and ewer sat, and poured out water. "Everything is dark at night, and to add to the effects of fear, a man always seems taller of a horse. I mean, you would have been

The Highwayman

altogether certain if you had remembered our first encounter with perfect clarity."

I rubbed the tepid water over my face, feeling stubble down my cheeks and jaw.

A reluctant 'huh' conceded the point. "You were clever to mention the loss of the ring. I had marked it, and the indentation upon you finger. But men rarely report such losses."

"Not wishing to concede being bested by a mere ruffian upon the road," I added. "Yes, well. It was destined to be a short-lived career. And by the end of the day it will be over."

I walked over casually and recovered the jewels. He did not stop me. Somehow that restraint confirmed my suspicions. Geoffrey's attentions, his persistence and forbearance—he wanted something from me, something other than the desire of every sodomite.

"So just how much do my illicit excursions disrupt your careful little plans?" I stowed the stones back in my bag which lay open upon the floor. "Do not imagine that I think you have told me the full story of your decision to rusticate in our parish."

"Oh? You think I would disobey a directive from Cromwell himself?"

"I think that you would avoid provoking him, being quite capable of restraint, unless you could turn his approbation to your advantage. I'll confess that your exact aims confound me. But I have some measure of you, Master Larkin. You had a purpose from the moment you sought me out."

I turned back to him and found Geoffrey leaning back in the flimsy chair and grinning ruefully.

"So, I don't get to play deceived lover, is that your implication?"

"Sir, if the matter had been left entirely in my hands, you would be neither."

Geoffrey puffed upon his pipe and blew the smoke contemplatively towards the ceiling. "Well," he conceded. "I should probably explain, and then we shall decide whether to forgive each other. Perhaps you should dress. That garment really doesn't become you."

Emily Veinglory

I recovered my clothing from the floor where, in my haste, I had left it. And Geoffrey began to talk.

"Since the protectorate was established it became clear to me that Puritan reign will not endure much longer. If you cleared this country of gamblers, sodomites, Catholics, cock fighters, horse racers, every youth that likes to dance and every man who likes to watch them do it—well, then Cromwell would be living here on his own. And in the face of popular resentment, the bayonets of his army will only keep him in power so long."

His voice faltered as I pulled the shirt clear of my head, and I could tell by the pull of it that the bandages were scabbed onto my skin.

"Keep talking, Geoffrey."

And Geoffrey did continue, but as he did so he stood and carried the basin over and laid it on the bed. His tone became somewhat preoccupied as he inspected the wound I had apparently managed to conceal from him until now.

Soaking the sleeve of the nightshirt in the water, he dabbed the edges and started to pull loose the dressing which, all things considered, I would rather have left where it was until I had the time and patience deal with my own frailties.

"So it occurred to me," Geoffrey continued, in a conversational tone, "that even as a man who served in the Lord Protector's army but was never altogether convincing as a dour Protestant, I might manage not to be ruined when parliament crawls back to bow before the throne. Especially if I curry the favor of those who are counted as nothing now, but will rise quickly when there is a Charles back on the big chair."

He unwrapped the tight bandages to the edge of the wound where they caught. He dabbed carefully at the edges and hissed in a way that suggested the cut was more serious than I had allowed myself to suppose.

"How dull am I not to have noticed," Geoffrey muttered. "I saw there was some stiffness in your carriage...."

"Your tale, Geoffrey."

"Surely you can discern it from there. I needed to endear myself to a young man robbed of title but still in good esteem. Someone in a dire

The Highwayman

enough position that I might aid them, and good enough character that they would not discard a friendship when it became inconvenient."

My attention was more on the delicate prying of his fingertips, jaw clenched to make no sound, than his revealing words. Not that it pained me greatly, but I could feel the unmet edges of the skin, and a wet dribble of blood as the scab was broken.

But I understood now, at least, what a man of influence like Geoffrey saw in me that warranted such persistence. My heart sank and pain ceased to matter to me.

"Pull that damned thing off," I snapped. "I do not have all day."

He simply continued in his patient way.

"Damn it, Geoffrey. I must get to my fence and onto the road if I am to make the journey in a day. Then we shall discuss what mutual benefit is to be had, assuming Cromwell will not reign for decades and his son after him."

"You sound sharp, Reynard. Would you expect me to somehow be in love with you before we even met—or to confess all at first sight? We, both of us, did things out of necessity, and kept them to ourselves. Until now." He finally had the wrappings off. "This should have been stitched," he said tersely. "But it is too late now."

He gingerly cleaned and redressed the wound. I realized he surely should have expected something of the sort since rifling through my saddlebag where another makeshift bandage had been tightly wrapped and packed away. He certainly fetched and employed it now without hesitation.

There was a quality to the silence that suggested Geoffrey had a great deal he wanted to say, but even he had to observe a degree of masculine reserve. Instead he saw to doctoring me as best he could and stepped away.

"I will see the horses are readied," he said. "As I know your secret now, we might as well go together to this fence of yours before beginning our return journey. I would counsel you to a day or two of rest if I thought you would listen, or trust me to act on your behalf."

Emily Veinglory

I did not need to reply to the implied question. Too many secrets between us, freshly revealed.

* * * * *

There was unease between us from that moment. So, I was a robber and he was maneuvering for political advantage. Strangely, I was not sure that was the cause of my disquiet.

Crooked Jack required more threats and fervent promises to get the money he had promised, and having a strongly-built roundhead holding my horse outside probably didn't hurt the argument. I didn't even try to explain his presence, but the fence glanced out his grimy window more than a dozen times, no doubt imagining scenarios better than any I could devise. He'd plainly been planning to cheat me still, but thought better of it in the end.

I finally had the funds I needed as I swung back up onto my mount, and we wheeled together towards the main thoroughfare.

"Reynard," Geoffrey began, raising his voice over the clash of shod hooves upon the cobbles. But he broke off. "Oh, dash it."

With an emphatic jerk he urged his horse down a side street and cantered incautiously down a steep lane. I pulled up short, but glancing upwards found a stern-faced man in military dress approaching at a trot. Everything from his polished armor to his rigid bearing suggested a man of some authority. "That man!" he barked accusingly.

"Oh, Robert?" I improvised. "Does he owe you money also?"

Even if I had no way of knowing how much of Geoffrey's story was the truth, he had certainly departed with alacrity. Perhaps he truly was in some form of exile.

"Money?" The man pulled up beside me, but both man and mount outstripped my own height so I ended up peering up at his scarred visage. He clearly meant to be intimidating, so I did my best to feign a little fear. In truth I neither knew who he was, nor cared to find out.

The Highwayman

"Oh, Bob Potter owes money to half the city. He's even taking to dressing like one of you lot, but I can't say it's convincing up close. He hasn't the character for it."

I ventured a kind of drunken grin and tried to look too vapid to bother with.

"My dress is that of a Godly man. Yours, on the other hand, apes a former age and declares support for a royalist cause."

"Should I discard perfectly functional clothes just because the fashion has changed?"

The big brute scowled, as if this was something of a new thought for him. Finally he just snapped, "Move along."

I was pleased to comply. Stupid of me not to have given a little thought to my dress. Away from the benign stagnation of my home parish it was bound to draw attention. But a Puritan could hardly argue with my genuinely frugal reasons.

I urged Bounder on, drawn less by desire to be home than a fear of what had gone on there in my absence.

* * * * *

Geoffrey reappeared at my side a few blocks later. We passed little in the way of conversation as I pressed the pace. I made few concessions to companionship in using Bounder's ground-eating canter, slowing to a walk only when the ground was soft or the way blocked by other traffic.

The sun rose high and hot and it approached noon when Geoffrey broke his silence. His pretty mare had steel in her, showing no more sign of weariness than my own cantankerous gelding. I knew I would have to ease the pace now and should have showed more moderation. There was still a long way to go and we would be lucky to make it by dark.

We crested a hill together, a place where one had to take a rutted track to move from the main road and cross over to the heath road which bypassed the city in favor of the seaside towns to the south.

"There is a stream here," Geoffrey said. We should water the horses and take a moment to dine on the humble provisions I thought to bring."

Emily Veinglory

I did not want to delay, but Bouncer was starting to flag and the sound of running water made my parched throat ache. I glanced to Geoffrey and then dismounted, assuming I would follow his suggestion—and, indeed, it would be petulant not to just for the sake of it. I stepped off, feeling the ache in my back and Bouncer all but pulled me to the edge of the stream. I let him take his fill. He was not the type of horse to founder from over-filling his gut.

Geoffrey held his own palfrey and pulled her back after he judged she'd had enough. Well, it is the handsome horses that tend to want for brains. They're not so different from the rest of us in that.

He caught my arm and took my reins from my hands with proprietary ease.

"A short spell to rest will speed us on our way." He tossed the horses' reigns over the upraised limb of a dead tree and turned his attentions to me.

With one arm held across my back he lowered me gingerly onto the long-growing grasses.

"I thought you meant to eat?" I said.

"We can eat in the saddle. Other things can only be done on the ground"

"I have no patience for dalliance." Nor had I expected Geoffrey to deem his promise of the previous night as now elapsed.

Carefully but firmly, he held me down. "A moment, only," he whispered straddling my body and leaning forward so his face was scant inches above my own. "I just mean to know. Do we return to the pleasant slopes of our adjacent homes as allies, friends, or..."

"I would not have thought you a man who needed constant reassurances, Master Larkin. Nor do I see how one specific conquest so concerns you when you must have come across other impoverished sons of noblemen in the course of your researches who would do just as well."

Ah, and there it was, the source of my affront. My verbal ruminations were cut short as his lips pressed against mine, pressing me down into the ground with the smell of crushed grass more heady than any wine. I winced as my fresh bandages, not bound tight enough, rubbed

The Highwayman

against my skin, and he pulled away from me, passion blended with anger in his eyes.

"It's not something I generally find a fault, Reynard, but sometimes you do talk too much, and to no great effect."

Irony indeed. I pushed him off me, or tried to. "I do not talk a lot. To be frank, I do not even feel a lot and so have little to discuss. I suggest that if you are looking for conversation, entertainment or some kind of grand passion you fix your hopes upon someone more suitable, and amenable."

Geoffrey's face was solemn, perhaps for the first time since that day we met. He gripped me by the shoulders and, looking up at him, I felt my heart pound. The skin felt tight across my face as I gritted my teeth over a whimper of pain.

At my stifled flinch he released me and rolled to the side. He sat with his knees drawn up, arms folded over them and face turned away from me. I righted myself slowly, feeling the familiar dampness of the wound being torn open again. Damn him anyway.

Rising slowly, I saw our two horses standing companionably side by side and watching us curiously. I sighed. He seemed so sure of himself most of the time. Geoffrey was older, larger, had been a soldier and dealt with the steeply tilting allegiances of court. It seemed he had his weaknesses after all. For whatever fleeting reason he had fixed on me, given me the power to wound him. And I found it was not in me to be indifferent to his pains.

He looked up at me, squinting in the noonday glare. "You unman me, Reynard," he confessed grudgingly. "I am left...confounded."

"Perhaps one of those rural practices you need to learn is patience, Geoffrey. I have a sister about to marry a man who wishes only to seize my property and so probably has not love for her. A sheriff whose has seen and marked me, close upon my heels. And just enough money to buy off Farquar, end my inglorious moonlight career and hopefully talk my sister out of the need for a dowry so I can use the funds to salvage what is left of the estates my father and his line safeguarded for hundreds of

Emily Veinglory

years. Hard as it might be for you to bear, anything else may just have to wait until tomorrow.”

He searched my face and seemed satisfied by what he found. “Well, best we make haste to deal with your tribulations, then.” That wry and crooked smile—somehow I was able to find it endearing now.

The Highwayman

Chapter Ten

Bounder took a stone, and though I had it out again, the frog of the foot was badly bruised. His pace slowed and I was averse to pushing him. It grew dark and slipped into full night so that I could barely see the way by clouded starlight. Finally, I was reduced to leading the poor horse and stumbling on afoot. I urged Geoffrey to go on ahead to his own bed. He urged me to take his horse and leave him to walk, but neither of use seemed willing to take such advantage and so we continue on together right through the night and arrived at the gates of the big house with the first gray glow of pre-dawn, exhausted.

The house was still unlit, too early even for my borrowed servants to be about. I turned to the Geoffrey. "You should go on to your own bed," I said. "I appreciate your company for this rather trying journey."

Geoffrey looked up at the front face of the old manor house. "Your dogmatism has convinced me that there may be trouble in this house today," he replied. "I would not rest easy wondering how matters fell out."

"Geoffrey, it is too early to disturb the house. I mean only to make myself presentable and rest until a marginally civilized hour."

I started to lead Bounder around the side of the house towards the stable he obviously anticipated eagerly. The poor beast's head lifted and his ears pricked up as he hobbled after me. Geoffrey also followed. I gave him one look that failed to carry much chastisement. I suppose I was getting used to having him around.

Emily Veinglory

He made no comment as we settled the horses in the nearest boxes and left them, leaning hip-shot together in the deep straw—enviably good companions. I noted my old stallion in the far box, not the out-of-the way pasture to which Josh had moved him. I could only suppose that he had some good reason.

The walk through the small copse to the cottage never seemed so long. Not just for the weariness in my legs, but also because of an awareness of Geoffrey following close behind me.

What would it look like to a man used to the best in things, or was I forgetting that he had almost certainly marched with an army, waded through mud and slept in makeshift shelters? In any case, the simple dirt path fringed by unkempt weeds and the vine-choked doorway seemed unbearably shabby. I turned the old iron key and forced open the stiff hinges.

The front room was cleanly whitewashed but every piece of furniture was put together from sundry unmatched blankets without refinement or ornament. It was essentially unchanged from when my father's old gamekeeper had lived within. Geoffrey surveyed the scene with a sharp eye as he dropped his pack upon the table in the small room's center.

I had expected that he would remain there as I stepped through into the bedchamber; you would think I would know his habits better by now. As I struggled to ease off my jacket without arching back my shoulders, he was standing close enough behind me to take the garment and lay it aside.

We stood in the gloomy confines of the shuttered room, between the soft but shabby bed and the washstand where fresh water and a flannel cloth lay ready. Quite without a word Geoffrey started to remove his clothing—this time facing me quite squarely.

When he was done he methodically did the same for me. It was not even in my mind to object. There was a long hour 'til even the servants would be rising, and I imagined that Josh was laid, if not across Emilia's threshold, then at least close enough to hear if she called out.

The Highwayman

Geoffrey reached for the now-ragged bandages but I stayed his hand. "No time for that."

He reached instead for the flannel, turning to dip it in the basin, wring it out gently and drape the wet cloth over his hand. The water felt cold as he applied it to my cheek.

"The dust of the road is thick on you," he said as he cupped the back of my head with his other hand and applied the flannel systematically across my forehead and down my face.

"Desist, Geoffrey. You are not my mother, nor am I any longer a child to need help with simple tasks." But I did not push him away with any great conviction.

"Ah, but I am very versatile. More so, perhaps, than you think. And any man might sometimes like to be cared for."

He smoothed back my hair and released the tie that held it. I sank wearily to sit on the edge of the bed. Geoffrey simply took up one of my hands and wiped the dirt from it systematically.

"You...tire me, Geoffrey."

"You are not the first to have that reaction," he replied, unperturbed, as he continued his work from a standing position

Which left me at eye level with the man's groin, lit across by a single line of light from between the shutter's slats. A line that traced across the stocky curve of his hip and described the round shaft of his cock which hung loose but swollen fatly in the first stages of interest.

Geoffrey took up my other hand and continued his task with strange concentration that left me rather free to contemplate that flushed organ so close before me. And though I was tired I was not, anymore, quite so confused. What Geoffrey saw in me, other than a convenient pawn, I could not truly know — nor was I inclined to ask.

I leaned forward, first coyly laying my lips upon the curve of his thigh. My right hand was still entwined slickly with his, but he lowered it and became still. My heart beat hard in my chest, for I had little more than common sense to guide me in what to do. The thought of the act intrigued me even in that it disgusted me. I moved my lips across to brush the

Emily Veinglory

upper surface of his cock, feeling the subtle bulge of the veins that traversed it.

I spoke as if to the cock itself. "You will me find me less than expert in some areas."

I ran the tip off my tongue down the soft skin, down to the head where the skin shifted at the slightest touch.

"I assure you," Geoffrey said hoarsely. "Technique is irrelevant."

And his body was in agreement, responding to this slight touch with a suddenly, perceptible swelling that was almost startling. With sudden boldness I raised my hand and held the tip. Having little more than my own body as a source of comparison I would guess he was a little greater in size than average. Slipping my lips over him, I had to stretch my mouth wide to take him.

The taste bordered upon disagreeable but was nothing next to the feeling of Geoffrey frozen and all but trembling at my touch. I let my mouth grow wet as I moved cautiously taking him from the tip to about halfway down his length. The thickness of his cock already filling my mouth, I hesitated to go further. I explored the head, feeling the hood wrinkle and slide back beneath my tongue. The texture of the flesh beneath, the faint slit just back from the top. Every detail fascinated me.

I grew more confident feeling the faint movements—Geoffrey stifling the urge to push deeper, his hand rested for a moment upon my head but drew back. I took him as deep as I dared, feeling the cock-head near the entrance to my throat. I pushed deep and then gripped him firmly, and pulled back hard and wet. He was eager and hard beneath my sensitive lips. I pulled my hand from his and curled it around his hard ass, but moved it to Geoffrey's back as he pushed too firmly towards me.

I held his hip firmly as I repeated the gesture, edging a little deeper and pulling back faster and harder. I began to treat the whole thing as something of an experiment, varying my stroke and working my tongue, even letting my teeth run along his skin ever so gently, then seeing just how far I could take him, and pulling back when I felt it was too much.

I worked upon the head, teasing back the skin again, feeling the delicate texture with some curiosity, and reached forward to stroke the

The Highwayman

full balls. I was by no means done with my exploration when I felt him jerk and come. I pulled back with some dissatisfaction and looked up from Geoffrey's spent cock to his flushed face.

"I was not done with you," I said.

"I do apologize," he replied weakly. "I shall endeavor to do better next time. Or I shall certainly hope to."

He knelt down upon the bare boards of the floor. His hand ran up along my thigh, but I resisted his touch. I was barely aroused myself in my concentration upon a new experience and I did not want to yield, to be subject rather than master.

That was when I heard footsteps upon the path, and realized both bedroom and front door stood ajar. I leapt to my feet and closed the bedroom door, hushing Geoffrey with a gesture. I struggled into my clothes, a fresh shirt and my blue jacket. I was both relieved, and upon regarding Geoffrey sitting back on my bed with an expression of utter insolence, even more distressed to hear Josh call out.

"Rey?"

"A moment."

Stay here, I mouthed to Geoffrey most emphatically.

I tossed aside the fussy cravat. It would take rather more than an open collar to shock Josh—although a naked Puritan might do the job. I slipped out to meet him and the expression on his face knocked any thought of embarrassment out of my head. He brought me up to speed efficiently.

"Master Farquar has become most vexed since the moment Lady Walthers arrived. They had words, and I felt obliged to take Emilia outside, and Sally tells me that Lady Walther's manservant was obliged to set between them." He sounded appalled at Farquar's manners. "We talked about our childhood and she seemed again to be the beautiful girl I remembered, and later she and Lady Walthers were in her rooms talking most of the night. Farquar was turned away from the door. He was livid, and when I told him you could raise the dowry he was even more outraged. He meant to have the lands. It was his plan, and your aunt's all

Emily Veinglory

along. They have both conspired to use Emilia's good nature against her with this terrible false courtship."

I recalled then how affronted Great Aunt May had been to discover she was Emilia's guardian in the literal but not legal sense, and I was deemed old enough to be independent. That she aspired to the land and title had not occurred to me at the time.

"What has he done?"

"He has been roaming the estate, as if he was trying it on for size. He found that old stallion and insisted I bring him up to the stable because he's built like a race horse and so would be ruined by being kept on scrubby pasture. And he rose just now, early, and raised the servants to prepare his coach. In watching him I saw you had returned...and Master Larkin's mare."

At that cue Geoffrey stepped out—fully dressed, thank God—and feigning a groggy expression. "Well, Rey," he said with deliberate over-familiarity. "What do you think the old boy's up to?"

"It is really not your concern, sir," Josh snapped, forgetting himself.

But Geoffrey did not leap to being affronted by insubordination; he looked at Josh directly with his usual mildly amused expression. "Well, we are none of us quite involved or behaving as we should, are we? Nor is your concern for young Emilia entirely that of a loyal servant." He let that statement stand but did not seem to require any answer. "I can only say for sure that I mean no harm to that girl, and that I pass judgment on no one. Now let us sit down and determine what can be done."

I felt strangely excluded as Josh and Geoffrey stared at each other within the confines of the small room. After a moment Josh bowed his head. He pulled out a chair and I wonder if he meant to offer it to Geoffrey like a servant, or use it himself like an equal and a man. It had been slow of me not to note the emphasis of his concerns. Did he harbor such feelings for my sister? Even if she should return them, the situation would be difficult, well nigh impossible for them.

Any other musing was broken off sharply by a sudden, cut-off woman's scream. My sister. The three of us leapt for the door in a jostling confusion. Josh burst into the lead and we were close behind him as we

The Highwayman

crashed through the tree in time to see the great carriage accelerating down the drive towards the road. Four horses straining on the traces were hitting their stride.

Josh, ardent in his pursuit, pounded after it futilely on foot. There was little doubt in my mind what was occurring now. Farquar, seeing his plans crumbling, had settled upon a forced elopement. I skidded in gravel and turned towards the stable. My old stallion pricked up his ears, sensitive as ever to my needs. I delayed not a second but grabbed his mane and hauled myself onto his back. He answered to my knees and we left the stable at a canter, sweeping past Geoffrey and almost knocking him down as he belatedly followed after me.

"He turned left on the road," Geoffrey called after me.

Even in such a short time the carriage had vanished from sight, so I blessed Geoffrey's quick thinking. My stallion had a ragged gate but for sheer speed, none could beat him. He thundered down the road, powerful and perfect beneath me as I focused on keeping my seat and hanging on tight. He was a canny beast, and as soon as we took the bend he saw the carriage and made for it.

I felt his focus, his hooves falling hard, driving into the clay, his neck stretched out as he gripped the bit and drove forward like a falcon swooping on its prey. We gained inexorably and my mind whirled. Without a weapon, not even a sword, how could I stop them? I could try to grab the reins, but without a saddle I would be easily unseated.

I drew even with the rear of the carriage and contemplated a desperate and even more foolish leap. Between the stallion's abrupt gate and the jouncing I could barely glimpse a thing of the interior but a flash of Emilia's face, streaked with tears. Without thought I plunged my fist through the thick glass. Pulling back, I felt my arm and wrist cut and a sharp jet of blood. Emilia screamed again. Fool, I chided myself. Fool, go for the driver.

He sat on the far side of the coach, so I pulled my stallion back, squeezing my knees and pulling back on his mane with blood-slick fingers. The game horse fought me a little, without reins to curb him, but he knew my will and demurred—then quickly gained on the other side. I

Emily Veinglory

smiled grimly as I saw the driver's coat-flap flying in the wind. I reached out with my good hand, balanced my weight carefully over to the far side and grabbed for it. One sharp tug was enough to catch the man unawares and send him flying. The long reins were wound tight in his hands, so he bounced hard off the ground, my stallion dancing aside to avoid him. The coach horses were fresh and bolting, but the sudden jerking weight threw them into confusion. I craned to see him rolling free, loosing the reins to the side of the road, but he must have been hurt badly by the fall. I shoved that consideration aside.

Pulling out before the coach horses, I saw them start to stumble as the lines flapped and tangled their feet; it took little now to encourage them to clatter to a halt.

Wheeling, I saw the left hand door kicked open. As Farquar stepped out I could see the way we had come behind him, a good long stretch of road given our pace. A horse and rider approached along it, but too far away from me to make out whom.

Farquar held a polished pistol so tight in his hand that his fingers were blanched white with strain. I heard the far door open and the rustle of leaves as someone got out.

"Run, Emilia," I called out. "Keep the carriage between you and Farquar." I could only pray she saw now just what kind of man he was.

Farquar's head turned. He turned the pistol towards the carriage, aiming right through the two open doors. I started toward him and he turned the weapon back on me.

"Run! Now!" I shouted.

But I heard no sound of movement. In a flicker, I saw the rider approaching. Geoffrey's long legs wrapped around Myrl's broad, barrel-chest and the little pony galloping with hoof beats that grew louder by the second. We all wavered upon a dangerous equilibrium, as if content to let this madman make the choice. Who would die? The girl whose love for him was not as blind as he had hoped? The brother who foiled his plans? The man who thundered towards him from behind?

Farquar took one quick compulsive breath, then whirled and raised the pistol towards Geoffrey. I leapt at him; arms outstretched, and

The Highwayman

collided with him, taking him to the ground even as the shot rang out with a flash. A burning, choking cloud of black powder filled the air as the sound of the shot filled my ears. I saw nothing as to whether it found its target.

My right hand answered me poorly and Farquar seized me by the neck. We tumbled over the ground as I tried to pry him loose, but I was out of breath already. My chest convulsed and my vision blurred. I flailed at his face, but he was on top of me now, thrusting me down into the ground and pressing his whole weight upon me. My last fading thought was that of all the ways I could have died this must be the worst—at the hands of this coward and braggart.

With a rough thud and jerk, the weight was gone and nothing but the aching gray sky was above me. I caught a glimpse of Myrl's speckled belly and Geoffrey's broad-booted foot to make sense of the scene.

* * * * *

The rest of the morning passed like one of those dreams that make frustratingly little sense. Emilia stayed by my side whilst Geoffrey subdued her would-be suitor. He then came to my side, seized my lacerated arm and hissed his disapproval, wrapping his bare fingers over the wound as he snapped at Emilia to bring him cloth, any cloth.

It was her own petticoats that she provided, the wound bound tight as I was loaded into the carriage with Emilia. I struggled to hold onto some semblance of my wits as Josh caught up with us quicker than should have been possible since it seemed he came the whole way on foot. I did not miss how he clasped Emilia's arm, and she leaned towards him before they both conferred over me with worried miens. I meant to tell them not to worry, but I do not think I said the words.

I was strong enough to insist I would go not farther than the drawing room. It was there that the doctor was brought—a portly fellow, quite familiar with how to stitch a wound. He worked on me blithely as Geoffrey and Josh argued over who should return for the trussed up Farquar and his injured servant.

Emily Veinglory

Lady Walthers appeared and brought efficient order, reminding Josh of his role in the household, but also that there was every good reason to ensure the villain would not escape. Emilia watched through the bow window, her gaze on Josh's retreating form

"What if Farquar has another pistol?" she asked with concern.

"He was trussed with good leather, Mistress Morton," Geoffrey said. "He will not do more harm this day."

She seemed barely content at that, but blushed under lady Walther's inquisitorial gaze and said no more. When the sheriff arrived, I took little part in the explanations although, sprawled upon the couch, I seemed to serve as evidence.

At some point Josh returned and the doctor called for him to aid in carrying me to my room, not that I had one in the house. But in either case I was not going to be treated as an invalid.

"I can walk," I protested. But initiating the attempt was the last thing I remembered of that day.

The Highwayman

Chapter Eleven

The next day I awoke to find Lady Walther sitting by my bedside. Well, by the side of the bed in one of the main house's many rooms—this one had been my father's once. I recognized the great carved bedstead, gone all but black with age. Lady Walther was working at some petit point and, glancing up, she smiled. It seemed fortunate the lady had taken an interest in my affairs—and continued to. I might well have seen the last of Master Farquar, but Emilia's situation was not entirely settled.

"The chaperone, at least, seems to be honest," she remarked, as if we had already embarked upon a conversation and reached some level of agreement. "I left her in the kitchen with Joshua and Emilia. I suspect there might be cause for that precaution even now."

She did not seem to be as outraged by the prospect as was generally considered proper. For the only other man of the house was loyal Joshua, decidedly not from her own class.

"Geoffrey will be annoyed," she added, setting aside her busy-work.

"About Josh and Emilia?" I asked, befuddled.

"I hardly think so," she replied. "That is hardly where his interests lie. And I do not rely on inference there; I have had a long chat with our Master Larkin and he was surprisingly quick to realize that it behooved him to be honest with me. I will be understanding about many curious qualities in a man, but dishonesty is not one of them. It is fortunate that I am not easily shocked, although some thought will have to be given to the

Emily Veinglory

proprieties eventually. No, I mean only that I have just managed to displace him from this post—he was sure you would wake soon. It seems he knows you well, and likes you rather well, too.”

I did not rise to that subject of conversation, but it seemed enough to her that I heard it without rebuttal.

“Reasonably well,” I said. “For a short acquaintance.”

I moved to push the blanket down, but my right wrist complained at the effort. Raising it, I found thick bandages, and fingers curled and frozen in their positions.

“The doctor says you should not try to use that hand. Allow it to heal and the damage will be limited. If you promise to rest, I will bring you some tea and breakfast.”

“I am not hungry.”

“Well, then. If you promise to eat and listen whilst I explain how to best proceed, I shall outline what must be done for your sister’s well being and your own good name, such as it is, given that you have been slighting the traditional duties somewhat. And, of course, to protect your family honor and to keep gossips from doing what gossips do best. Perhaps I will fetch your Master Larkin to see you and resist acting the chaperone.”

I let my hand rest back on the covers, and Lady Walthers gave me an altogether too knowing smile.

* * * * *

One the whole, I was happier than I deserved to be. I’d even paid off old Roche, who was no doubt killing himself with gin in some hole in the wall even now. In a few weeks my life had changed completely, and everything that went before seemed just a dim prologue.

Cromwell was grazing contentedly in lush spring pasture as the sun set. Which is to say that my faithful stallion finally had a name, a very ill-advised name which Geoffrey had conferred upon him. He shared his domain with three rather fine mares. His turn of speed, which I had always appreciated, was apparently impressive even to Geoffrey’s more

The Highwayman

objective eye—and his conformation suggested the best thoroughbred blood lines. Thus a highwayman's horse retired to stud, and very pleased he seemed with it.

We even had a tenant now—a crofter running sheep on the higher lands, mostly Geoffrey's domain but partly across mine which held the better water. We didn't see much of him, but it was nice to see the sheep straggling across the hills, a sign of life. I also enjoyed Geoffrey's continued, irrational disdain for the creatures. I found it quite pleasant to work with them and sometimes visited the old man and helped him out if it seemed called for.

I finished my circuit of the new fence, every stave hammered tightly in. We'd have it remain in stone given the time, but it looked as if the men had done a good job for now. My right hand was still stiff. I stretched the fingers as much as I was able and fancied I was seeing a little improvement day by day. I tried not to draw attention to it, partly to spare Emilia any guilt.

She was lodging with Lady Walther, the good lady's verdict being that one girl in a bachelor household was ill-advised—and if her feelings for Josh were worth the sacrifices they would entail, it would be best to see if they were enduring first. My sister visited me quite often, or at least I offered the pretext and chaperone for the one she truly called upon, often with her trio of foster sisters in tow.

Josh, for his part, was still not pleased with my own perversions, but he had desisted being surly around Geoffrey, who seemed to have the ability to charm any man or beast if he willed it—other, perhaps, than the sheep. They had a love of horses in common, and perhaps the love of those they were not meant to. None of us had much leeway for casting stones.

And, well, my neighbor. It was falling dusk, and although I ostensibly lodged in my father's room now, I knew that should I go to the old gamekeeper's cottage, there might be a man waiting there—a man who had his own key. And that is where my feet led me, or other parts of my anatomy. It was not some effortless love affair. He rankled me, and it

Emily Veinglory

was easily done. That was simply how our natures ran and we worked around it as best we could.

I barely stepped foot within the door before Geoffrey seized me. "You took so long."

"It is barely dark at all," I protested.

"It is always dark without you." He all but ripped the clothes from me, already naked and entirely ready for me.

"Such poetic sentiments." I laughed, but suffered him to propel me through to the bed where he laid me down and pulled off my boots. He could still be a little overbearing, but I found my ways to hold my own and drew lines he proved wise enough to balk at crossing.

A bottle of his own special oil sat upon the broad window sill, still warm from the last rays of the sun. I reached for it as he pulled off my drawers and tossed them aside. He snatched it from me. I made some show of trying to get it back, standing from the bed but foiled by his higher reach.

"Oh, no," he chided. "I am still sore from last night, my little stallion. Please indulge me tonight."

And truth be told I was usually inclined to so indulge him. It was a fortunate conjunction of preferences. As he pulled the stopper, the smell of it alone was enough to make me hard. He had told me in passing of the ingredients supplied by an apothecary in London—whale oil and the first pressing of flax seed, some perfume to give it the sharp bite of animal musk and other, lesser ingredients not worth a mention.

He threw the small bottle aside and pushed me back, his kiss pushing the back of my head sharply against the plastered wall. Then abruptly he grabbed my arm and turned me to face the wall. My palms pressed on its rough surface.

I was still uneasy at his forcefulness at times, and I bristled tensely at how well he knew me. His touch slid down between my buttocks sliding over my hole and delving along the seam of flesh to the base of my balls. I thought of nothing but that sensation—the resistance leeched from my body. He was impatient today, but then, so was I.

The Highwayman

His forefinger drew back, lingering over my hole and then slipped inside—dipping slowly into that outer ring of sinew, testing and teasing me. Only then did he place his other hand between my shoulder blades, pushing me hard against the wall. Ah, yes, next time I sucked him, he might be feeling my teeth a little. He was getting too domineering again. But he probed inside me now, curling his finger deftly to touch that place that weakened my will, for the time being at least.

I eased my feet further apart. He drew back that clever digit and I felt the warmth of his body against my back, crouching to position himself against me. The moment he most coveted, I knew, having made sure I was slick and ready, was to enter in a single deep thrust. It still startled me every time, no more than now. We'd never done it standing before, and it made me tighter, tenser. His hard cock, more insistent, pushed up by his taller frame, provoked a spark of pain but then was sliding, piercing, pushing. I moaned as he insisted on my every depth, filling me deep and straining my flesh.

Buried deep, he paused, his hands shifting to my waist, waiting. He waited for the permission, the easing of my body, the welcome, and I gave it to him. And this night it was he who was the stallion. He thrust up into me harshly, pushing me against the wall in sudden jerks, but I met him each time, bracing myself, opening myself and unable to stifle the bestial grunt I gave in answer every time he fucked me. He pushed in even deeper than I would have thought possible, held me, and with that greased hand reached for my cock, pulling up along it roughly until I quivered against him. My knees failing, I sat back against his broad, bent thigh and felt him impaling me with a warm intensity that eclipsed every thought in my mind. He supported me so easily.

His fingers, coarser and more calloused now, fumbled over the base of my cock where my balls pulled up tight against the shaft. His clenched fist tight, merciless, and the rhythm of his ministration ground his hard cock up into me. My body dripped with the sweat sliding between our bodies, and I came with a shudder that wrung out every muscle in my body. My seed spurted against the wall and my ass

Emily Veinglory

tightened about that harsh intrusion so that I shivered with lust and pain even as I spent my passion.

Geoffrey pulled his cock from me but still held my body against him, turning and guiding me to the bed so that I lay face down upon the mattress but with my ass offered and my knees almost upon the floor. He slid into me again so perfectly, like sword to sheath, slower now. Long, leisurely driving—he did not rush to his own conclusion, but he could not last long. I felt the wetness in me, and the slow shrinking of his member.

We stayed like that a spell. And then he whispered to me. “My highwayman.”

“And what have I stolen from you, Geoffrey?”

“You do not like me to wax romantic, Rey. You’ve told me it makes you feel less of a man.”

His weight pressed down on me and I found that I wanted to hear him say this, just once. “I’ll forgive you on this occasion.”

He laughed but gave me what I wanted, as he always did in the end. “My heart, Reynard. You have stolen my heart which I wish you to keep forevermore.” And being Geoffrey, he could not sustain a serious mien for more than a moment. “Not that you ever returned that purse you had from me the first night we met.”

He eased from me and crawled to draw me up beside him on the bed as the evening air cooled the sweat on our bodies. Soon we would go our separate ways to our ostensibly bachelor beds. Men and women both must do what is expected of them, and only hope to snatch the chance to also do as they desire. But I was not complaining.

My plumed hat and pistols are locked away in an attic trunk. The high-walled garden is running to weeds, but the main house gleams with life and polish, especially when my sister brings her new foster family with her to visit and insists I give in to the county’s desire for fine balls during the season. Truth be told, I am beginning to truly fill my father’s old role as the nobleman of the parish. And there is a new mood in London and across the nation, a mood inclined to new kings and old habits. We may expect a demand for race horses by the time we have stock ready to sell. And I need not be a highwayman ever again.

The Highwayman

I have all the treasure I will ever need now, in one more infuriating, obstinate and surprisingly constant man. I suppose I may burn in hell for all eternity for my trespasses upon the road and in this bedchamber. But for this man, this family I love, I believe I shall count it worth the price. Or maybe God is more forgiving than our other Lord Protector Cromwell would have us think. As Geoffrey and I draw out, wordlessly, the moment before we must part, I find that I can think so.

Although next time I come by to meet up with Geoffrey, I might get out the old road costume and kerchief—just to turn the tables on him for a little while....

The End

Emily Veinglory

Author Bio

Emily Veinglory is an expatriated New Zealander currently adrift in the corn fields of Indiana. She writes a range of fantasy, erotica and romance, often with a dark or paranormal twist.

You can visit her at www.veinglory.com

Enduring Promise

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Chapter One

"Don't do this to me," Evan Harris muttered under his breath.

His sports car lurched one last time, shoving him against the steering wheel, knocking the wind out of him, before it came to an abrupt stop and died.

"C'mon, start." He turned the key and pressed the gas pedal several times, but the motor remained dead.

"Shit!" He slammed his fist against the steering wheel. He fished his cell phone from the backpack on the passenger seat and hesitated for a moment. Who could he call? Nobody knew where he was headed. He'd jumped into his car and driven away without even leaving a message for his assistant. He let out a long sigh. Maybe Triple A. He started to punch the numbers when he noticed the No Service Available in the display.

"Great. Just fucking great." He threw his cell phone back in the bag. Leaning back, he ran his hands through his hair in frustration. He looked out the windshield to see nothing but a great expanse of shortgrass prairie and scrub vegetation. The sun's weak rays barely pierced through

Tempest Knight

the thick, low hanging gray clouds. At least the hard rain that had followed him since he left the highway had lightened to only a soft drizzle.

What the hell had he been thinking when he took this shortcut? Rubbing his temples, he frowned. But that was exactly the problem, wasn't it? He'd not been thinking. Tension and unease had slowly built inside him for days. But this morning he'd awakened with a sense of restlessness he couldn't explain. The urge to get away from New York—and his work—had grown as the hours went by. This morning, before he'd had time to consider what he was doing, he'd phoned his partner to take over the photo shoot he'd scheduled. Then he'd packed a light bag, jumped in his car, and slammed his foot down on the accelerator like a possessed madman. The car ate up the miles. The need to drive away had been all consuming. Yet, the edginess hadn't eased once he'd hit the highway. On the contrary, it'd grown with each mile. Mixed with a sense of urgency. Until he'd meandered onto the country road.

"Yeah, well, now I'm stuck in the middle of nowhere," he muttered. Opening the glove compartment, he pulled out a road map he kept there for emergencies like this. As he studied the map carefully, his frown deepened. Once he'd gotten out of New York, he'd been compelled to head south, that much he remembered. Yet he couldn't remember exactly when or where he'd gotten off the highway.

Tossing the map aside, he threw his head against the headrest, eyes closed, and swore under his breath. Unbelievable. He was lost. Really lost.

You are not lost.

He opened his eyes and looked around. Had he been thinking out loud? He grabbed the map and focused on it. Gradually a few marks started to become clearer. If his calculations were correct, there should be a town about five miles away. He folded the map and put it away.

He grabbed his backpack and climbed out of the car. A gust of chill October air swirled around him, and he wrapped his jacket tighter. With a last contemptuous glare at the car, he shouldered his pack and headed down the dirt road.

Enduring Promise

He took a quick glance at his watch. A quarter after four. The sun would set soon. With any luck, he could make it to the town before dusk. He hurried his footsteps, not wanting to be caught after nightfall in these desolate parts.

The heavy rain had turned the road into a mess of muddy sludge and puddles. With every step he took, his leather boots sank deeper in the muck. His breath became ragged with the exertion. Sweat covered his brow. Every now and then he glanced over his shoulder, hoping for the sight of a passing car or a farmer's truck, but he hadn't seen another vehicle since leaving the highway behind. Not even a single house.

The wind picked up, feeling like sharp knives cutting his face. He drew his jacket tightly around him, zipping it all the way up. The light grew dimmer. He shifted his backpack and rubbed the muscles knotted with tension beneath the straps. The urge to keep moving grew stronger with each step he took.

He stopped short at the sound of thunder rumbling in the distance. He turned around and stood frozen as he stared in dismay. Big gray-blue clouds darkened the sky, and rain enveloped the land like a blanket, moving fast in his direction.

He weighed the idea of returning to his car to weather the storm, and his glance wandered back in the direction from where he'd come. Did he have time to get back to it? Lightning struck closer. Without another thought, he turned and ran.

The clouds rolled closer, casting shadows with every flash of lightening. The storm would be here any minute. The soft droplets that had accompanied him before were thick now. He couldn't stay out in the open. He needed to find a place to weather the storm—and soon. He looked around desperately in search of anything that could work as a shelter. When a flash of lightning pierced the darkness, he spotted a broken-down picket fence to his left and a faint glow of light beyond.

A house.

Bending double against the bitter wind, he jogged to the other side of the road. A soft mist rose from the ground and swirled slowly around his feet as he reached the fence. His gaze traveled up and down until he

Tempest Knight

found a gravel path leading to the house shrouded by tall weeds. From where he stood, the house looked old and deserted, yet dim lights shone from the lower floor.

He glanced over his shoulder again. The storm raged less than a half mile away, and the gentle drops became thick, slashing at his cheeks. The wetness crept into his shirt, beginning to soak his flesh. Needing no further encouragement, he darted up the gravel path.

The rain picked up. He peered over his shoulder. Behind him the mist turned into a thick fog that rose higher. Unnatural.

Armand...