

Little Lightfingers

By

Viola Morne

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Published by Blushing Books®,
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ABCD Graphics and Design
977 Seminole Trail #233
Charlottesville, VA 22901
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EBook ISBN: 978-1-68259-881-8
Cover Art by ABCD Graphics & Design

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CHAPTER ONE

London, England, 1887

Emily Sterling rubbed her cold fingers together. A drizzle of persistent rain had been falling all day, soaking her threadbare clothes and flattening her fine blond curls. She was so hungry—alone in the dirty streets of London, where stray cats and people alike snarled and fought over the scraps. A sudden wave of dizziness almost pushed her to her knees. When was the last time she had eaten? When was the last time that she hadn't been hungry or afraid? The months since she had been thrown out on the streets ran together in the rain and Emily couldn't remember.

A stout gentleman crossed the road to look into the window of the shop, a tobacconist. He held a large black umbrella in one hand while he pulled out a gold watch with his other. Emily crossed over and sidled closer to the oblivious gentleman. She was a small, slim girl, easily overlooked in London's teeming streets. *Ah*. The man's coat was well tailored of lovely, thick wool. A fine pigeon for the plucking. Emily bent forward, pretending to stare into the window while she slipped her hand into the fellow's pocket. The slide of silk met her touch. A twist of her wrist secured the handkerchief. She glanced at her mark's round face. He didn't even look down as Emily pocketed the square of fabric and walked away. When she was a few blocks away, she pulled the handkerchief from her pocket to examine it. Excellent quality. Fox would be pleased and Emily was assured of a hot meal. She slipped down an alley and headed back to St. Giles, where she would disappear into the Rookery, just another pickpocket in a vast network of thieves. Emily thrust her qualms aside. It was too late to worry about the morality of what she was doing. Survival was the goal in London's cold streets and, so far, Emily had succeeded.

She changed her clothes in the squalid little room she rented before heading over to the pawnshop. If she had change left over from supper, she'd ask the landlady for a pitcher of hot water to wash up. Weeks of grime had ground into her every pore, until Emily could scarcely remember what it felt like to be clean. For the first time, she was grateful that her family was all

dead, so that no one would witness the depths to which she'd sunk. Emily skipped over a puddle and turned the corner. This is who she was now. There was no way out for her now.

Unless she started selling her body. Emily shivered. She hadn't been driven to that yet, but only because she'd met Fox in the first few days she'd spent in St. Giles. He'd trained her and set her to work. Her slender fingers were long and dexterous, perfect for a cutpurse. Fox protected those in his employ to a degree. The pimps and bawds knew not to approach her.

Emily pushed open the door to the pawnshop. It was dark and dusty, piled high with bits and bobs of every description. Mrs. Rourke was occupied with a customer, so Emily perused the ladies' dresses hanging from a wooden rack at the back of the store. She fingered a frock of red silk, only slightly worn. Too dear for her purse. She remembered having pretty clothes once, a long time ago. The bell chimed as the shop door swung shut.

"You have something for me, dearie?"

"A lovely silk handkerchief, missus. Top drawer, I reckon."

Mrs. Rourke sniffed as she leaned over the glass-topped counter to pluck the handkerchief from Emily's hand. "How much do you want for it?"

"Two bob."

"Humph. I'll give you sixpence."

Emily scoffed. "Not likely. I have to eat tonight and you know Fox. He'll want his cut."

Mrs. Rourke sighed deeply. "You girls will be the death of me. A shilling, then. My best offer."

"Done." Emily held out her hand and the pawnbroker dropped a silver shilling into it, still grumbling.

"You keep your eyes peeled, Lightfingers. Them coppers are on a tear, nabbing people left and right. You heard about Queenie?"

Queenie was a friend who had been on the street only a few months longer than Emily.

"Nabbed." Mrs. Rourke shook her head. "We won't see her again, poor girl."

This was terrible news. Queenie was a bit of a girl, always ready with a cheery smile. Emily would find Fox tomorrow and discover her friend's fate. Her stomach rumbled. The pie shop on her corner beckoned and she purchased a pork pie, devouring the tough meat and gravy stuffed into a sturdy crust. Then she climbed the narrow stairs to her garret room, with its stained plaster and rickety bedstead. Emily collapsed on the hard bed and fell into an exhausted slumber,

the hot water forgotten for now. And then she dreamed of a different world, where laughter rang in sun-filled rooms and there were plates heaped with food and warm feather beds, a mother's gentle touch and a father's care. And, best of all, there was love. Emily whimpered in her sleep and pulled the thin blanket over her shoulders, shivering in her dreams.

#

Emily slept and woke up hungry again. By the time she found breakfast and paid off Fox, there would be little coin left. She washed in the usual cold water, brushed her teeth with salt, and ran down the stairs.

This particular alley was a little quieter than the rest of St. Giles. Fox had found the room for her once he'd decided to take her for his own, moving her from the crowded attic she had shared with his other pickpockets. Their affair had been brief. He had wanted more from her, but she couldn't give it. She still felt frozen inside, as if only the ice would preserve her sanity on these dirty and dangerous streets. So Fox had left her, taking up with a succession of other girls. She had felt only relief.

Emily found him in a pub in High Street, reading a much-folded copy of *The Times*. His eyes glinted when he saw her.

"Miss Lightfingers, as I live and breathe. I wondered if I would see you today. Coffee?"

"Yes, please."

He usually scoffed at what he called her fine manners. But today, he remained silent, pouring her a cup from the pot at his elbow. She added cream and sugar and sipped it gratefully. Her stomach rumbled.

Fox raised a finger. "Toast and some rashers of bacon, Tommy."

The landlord nodded and passed the order on to one of the waiters. Fox held out his hand. "I hear you paid a visit to Mrs. Rourke yesterday." Emily pulled out his share from her pocket and dropped the coins into his waiting hand.

"Silk billy?" Fox knew the price of every bit of stolen merchandise that floated around the Rookery, even a handkerchief.

"Lovely quality."

He shrugged. "I think you can do better."

She sipped her coffee. "Is that what you told Queenie?"

Fox's eyes flashed. "Queenie thought she knew better than me. She went out on a job with One-Fingered Bill. The owners were still in the house and heard the window breaking. Queenie was nabbed and Bill took off."

"What will happen to her?"

Fox sighed, his anger forgotten as quickly as it had come. "Bridewell, if she's lucky."

Grief mixed with fear and threatened to choke her. "That will happen to me some day."

Fox grabbed her wrist. "Not if you're quick and smart and listen to me."

Emily shook him off. "No one is that fast all the time."

He shrugged. "Call it a hazard of the occupation."

He'd done a stretch himself, Emily knew. But imprisonment was something she didn't think she could face. A memory of her mother's face flashed before her, along with a flush of shame.

"Your problem is you can't accept what you are, Lightfingers, what you've become. Until you do that, you'll never be happy."

The waiter slammed a plate in front of her. The greasy bacon and half-burned toast made her stomach churn, but Emily had been on the streets too long to ever turn her nose up at a meal. She picked up a piece of bacon and bit off the corner. The taste of hot meat filled her mouth and she ate it all quickly, as though Fox might snatch the plate away from her.

"I wanted to make you happy, Lightfingers." Fox fingered his watch, looking at the timepiece instead of her. "But you wouldn't accept that either."

Emily wiped the bacon grease from her chin. "You're better off without me."

Fox's gaze cut to her face. "Water under the bridge now."

"It is. Thank you for breakfast." She stood and drained her coffee. "I'll see you, Fox."

He nodded. "Good luck out there. I want to see a few more profits from you by the end of the week, mind."

"Yes, Fox."

He nodded again and went back to his paper. Evidently she was dismissed. Emily buttoned up her shabby coat and went back into the street. She would walk to Drury Lane and find a few new pigeons ripe for the plucking. She still needed that bath, but she couldn't help worrying about poor Queenie. Her friend must be terrified. A bitter wind with the scent of

autumn crawled down the collar of her coat. She still felt tired, not at her best. Perhaps she should just go home.

"On the strut?"

A scrawny urchin with broken teeth grinned at her.

"Crook! What are you doing here?"

"I saw you talking with Fox. The word is he's putting the screws on all his girls. I thought you might need a hand."

"I could at that."

And then she saw him, an elderly toff, dressed to the nines, bending over to adjust his bootlaces. Emily sauntered beside him, leaning over ever so quickly to snatch his wallet from his pocket. He was oblivious and she passed on, heart beating like a drum. She had never had an easier mark. She chanced a quick glance behind her. Crook rubbed a finger along his eyebrow and Emily swerved over to nearest shop window, dipping down for a moment before she sauntered off down the street, as if she hadn't a care in the world.

"Stop! Thief!"

Emily's heart pounded. Was he talking about her? She walked faster.

"Stop that girl with the yellow hair. She picked that gentleman's pocket!"

Emily ran down the street, dodging passersby and carriages, intent on escape. The sounds of pursuit filled her heart with terror. She couldn't be caught. She spied a narrow lane mere yards away. If she could reach it, she could find her way back to the Rookery and no one would find her there. She picked up speed. Almost there. She could taste her freedom. And then disaster. Emily tripped over a loose cobble and fell flat on the street. Feet pounded behind her.

"That's her. That's the girl."

Rough hands picked her up. "Yer in for it now, yer bloody little dipper."

Too late now for anything but regret. She was caught.

#

Sir Richard Beresford leaned back in his sturdy oak chair and sighed. All morning he had felt a wave of discontent. And for no reason that he could discern. He was one of the most prominent barristers in London. He lived in a large house in a fashionable section of London. He had plenty of friends and acquaintances, if not much family. His only sister had emigrated to Canada a few years ago and his parents were dead.

Why did he feel so dissatisfied? The September morning was warm, with a light breeze that dissipated London's perpetual smoke and allowed the scent of chrysanthemums to infiltrate his office window. His clerk bustled in with another pile of folders.

"Sir Richard, you wanted to be reminded that Mr. Armstrong is being arraigned this morning at 9:00 o'clock."

Quinn Armstrong, known on the street as Blackjack, was a successful fence of stolen goods. Defending Blackjack was a highly profitable venture.

Sir Richard grimaced. "What is he up for this time?"

"Aiding and abetting a known criminal."

"Thank you, Thomas."

Sir Richard picked up the folder and found his hat and gloves. It was only a short walk from his chambers to the Old Bailey. London's Central Criminal Court was half full of the usual rabble—prisoners, their families bewailing their fate from the benches, policemen, witnesses, and the usual assortment of the legal profession. He took a seat at the table at the front, where several of the more junior of the barristers from his chambers were already busy at work.

Sir Richard listened idly as his colleagues handled their cases. His gaze wandered over to a group of prisoners huddled against the wall. A girl with blond hair caught his eye. Her eyes were fixed on the judge and Richard was struck by her bearing as she stood there shivering, her eyes downcast. She was obviously poor and hungry, judging from her clothes and pallor. Unfortunately, he knew what would happen next. The charges would be read and she would have no defense. She would be found guilty and serve her sentence in Bridewell, subject to disease and violence. By the time she was released, she would be changed irrevocably. If she weren't on the streets now, she would be when she found out that no one would hire a jailbird, no matter how pretty. And she was pretty, in spite of the dirt and her dreadful clothes. She pushed a lank curl from her cheek, revealing a bone structure as finely carved as any Greek statue.

"The Crown versus Mr. Quinn Armstrong."

Sir Richard stood and argued in defense of the client, gaining a dismissal from the judge due to police mishandling of the evidence. Blackjack wrung his hand and left the courtroom with a jaunty step.

"Emily Sterling."

The blond girl climbed into the dock and listened to the charges against her. Theft of a wallet. So she was a pickpocket. A shame, really. She was quite young beneath all that dirt.

"How do you plead?"

"Not guilty, my lord."

Her voice was low, sweet, and familiar. That was not the accent of the streets. What was her name again? *Emily Sterling*. It couldn't be. Another strand of blond hair had escaped its pins to curl against Emily Sterling's porcelain skin. A smear of smut sullied one smooth cheek. She suddenly raised her head, revealing eyes as clear and gray as a stormy sky.

Richard felt as though he had been punched in the stomach. He knew this girl. How had Miss Emily Sterling ended up here in the Old Bailey and charged with theft? If—when—she were found guilty, she would be imprisoned, even sentenced to hard labor. No, he would not let that happen. He could not see Emily suffer.

Without conscious thought, he stood and addressed the judge. "Sir Richard Beresford, my lord, appearing for the defense."

Judge Smyth-Evers nearly dropped his gavel. "Sir Richard? You are defending this creature?"

"Yes, my lord."

The judge shook his head. "As you wish. The prosecution may call its first witness."

#

The witness for the prosecution was a Mr. Creevey, a tall, lanky man wearing spectacles. Richard smothered a smile when he recognized the fellow. Mr. Creevey testified that he had seen Emily pick Mr. Milton's pocket and walk away. He had hurried over to assist the elderly gentleman, who was astounded to find his wallet missing. Mr. Creevey had sounded the alarm and run off in pursuit.

"Your witness, Sir Richard."

"Mr. Creevey. I have seen you in this courtroom before."

Mr. Creevey looked surprised. "I don't believe so, sir."

"No? You didn't perform a similar service for Mrs. Wilson several weeks ago? I believe she gave you a finder's fee when her purse was recovered."

"Ah, I do recall the incident. A very nice lady and properly grateful."

"How often do you search the streets for pickpockets, in order to profit from their activities?"

The prosecutor bounded to his feet. "My lord, I must object. Mr. Creevey is not on trial here."

"Your objection is sustained."

"My lord, Mr. Creevey is the sole eyewitness to the supposed crime," Richard said, "I merely seek to establish his credibility."

"Very well, but proceed with caution, Sir Richard."

"Thank you, my lord. Mr. Creevey, did Mr. Milton give you a similar reward once his wallet was recovered?"

"No, sir. As to that I don't believe..." Mr. Creevey's voice trailed away as he realized that he had said too much.

"What is it you don't believe?" Sir Richard prompted.

"That the wallet was recovered."

"Grant me a moment to fully comprehend this situation. You claim to have witnessed the accused steal a wallet from Mr. Milton. You raised the alarm and chased the young lady, who slipped on the street and fell, injuring herself. You then pounced on the young lady and handed her over to the constable, who immediately searched her. The wallet was not found on Miss Sterling's person."

Mr. Creevey ran a finger around his collar. "That is substantially correct, sir."

"In fact, except for your testimony, there is no proof at all that Miss Sterling did, in fact, steal Mr. Milton's wallet?"

"No, sir."

"Thank you, Mr. Creevey. I have no further questions."

The prosecutor re-examined Mr. Creevey, trying to paint a picture of Emily's guilt, but Richard's questioning of Mr. Creevey had left his credibility in doubt and the judge dismissed the charges. Richard summoned the bailiff, whom he instructed to place Emily in a small room down the hall. Emily looked confused, staring about her as if she couldn't quite understand what had just happened. The bailiff took her arm and assisted her down from the dock, leading her out of the side door of the courtroom.

It took Richard another hour to make his way to where Emily was being kept. He was asked to consult on the next case and then a solicitor needed to speak to him on his way out. This was the price he paid for his success. His firm was one of the busiest law practices in London.

The sight of his old school-friend's sister in the dock had been something of a shock. He trusted Emily had not found the waiting too difficult. The poor girl looked like she had been living on the street for months, her clothing dusty and crumpled, her pretty features marred with dirt. Seeing Emily like this aroused some streak of protectiveness he had not known he possessed.

Richard found Emily slumped over the scrubbed wooden table in the middle of the small room. An empty teacup sat beside her. Had the poor girl fainted? Richard bent to check her pulse. It was strong and regular; she was merely sleeping. Blue shadows lay underneath her long, golden lashes. The bones of her face were too prominent, as if she had been deprived of food for a long time. His gut twisted. The last time he had seen Emily, she had been seven or eight. A bright, pretty little thing, all smiles and giggles. She was a woman grown now, but so small and slight she might still be a child except for the curve of her bosom. A wave of unexpected desire washed through him. She was just the kind of little girl he yearned for. Richard touched her arm lightly. He hated to wake her but they could not stay here all day. She roused with a gasp, looking around her wildly.

"Calm yourself, Miss Sterling. You are quite safe."

Her gaze swung up to his. "Who are you, sir?"

"I am Beresford. I was a friend of your brother's."

Her mouth drooped. "You knew Charlie?"

"We were at school together. I visited your home on several occasions."

Emily examined his face for a moment before her eyes widened with recognition. "Richard? Richard Beresford?"

"Yes, although you should more properly address me as Sir Richard."

An enchanting blush colored her face, so that Richard saw a glimpse of the cherished child she had been.

"Shall we go?"

Emily blinked. "Go where, sir?"

"I'm going to take you to my home so you can get cleaned up and then you will relate to me precisely how a gently-bred girl like yourself ended up in this situation."

Relief shone in her beautiful eyes for a moment. But then she said, "I can't just go home with you. Besides, I really did steal that wallet. I was just so hungry."

Her honesty touched him. "You should not admit your guilt to me, Emily, but I shall pretend not to have heard you. Come, I have sent for my carriage."

Emily's lips firmed. He had forgotten how stubborn she could be.

"You are free to go, Emily. The charges against you have been dropped." Richard took her little hand and pulled her gently to her feet. "Come, my dear, allow me to assist you. Afterward, I will take you anywhere you want, if that is your desire."

Emily shook her head sadly. "That is just the problem, Sir Richard. I have nowhere else to go."

#

Sir Richard's house was situated in Belgrave Square, an enclave of the wealthy and successful. Emily's family had not been wealthy enough to own a home in London. They used to hire a house for the Season, returning to the family estate in Derbyshire for the rest of the year. Emily's memories of this corner of London were vague: walking in the square with her nanny, her mother coming to visit her in the nursery before going out, the swish of silk, and the scent of her mother's perfume.

But Charlie had been a frequent visitor to Belgrave Square, bragging about his friend, the baronet's son. She was sure he could have told her many tales of their exploits together, but Charlie had been a protective big brother who would never have sullied her ears with his more unsavory activities. Emily had heard bits and pieces of the conversations between her parents concerning Charlie's exploits in London, and Richard Beresford had figured in them frequently. Sir Richard Beresford, she corrected herself.

Emily stole a glance at him. He was no longer the schoolboy she remembered, with legs too long for his body and his face full of mischief. Sir Richard was tall and well built, with broad shoulders under his fashionable dark coat. His black hair was cut short at the sides and brushed straight back from his forehead, and he was clean-shaven, unlike most men. But his eyes were the same, as blue as the sea. He was still the most beautiful man she had ever seen.

Sir Richard stared out at the passing streets without speaking. Emily had been uneasy at first, tucked in this fine carriage with a man she barely remembered. It was kind of Sir Richard to concern himself with her well-being. His kindness was the only thing keeping her from collapsing into abject humiliation. What would Charlie have thought—or her parents—to see her in these circumstances? Arrested and tried like a common criminal—which she was. She must be strong.

The carriage pulled up in front of Beresford House's imposing front. Sir Richard jumped down from his seat and assisted her to climb down. His grip on her fingers was firm and reassuring. A lad ran up to take charge of the horses and Sir Richard escorted her up the stairs to the door flung open by a stately butler. Once inside, she was handed into the care of the housekeeper, a round, pleasant woman named Mrs. Lester.

Mrs. Lester brought her upstairs to a large, airy bathroom furnished with a claw-foot tub. The housekeeper turned the taps and hot water flowed into the tub. Such luxury. Mrs. Mudge, the woman who had taken Emily in after her family died, had a water closet but baths were taken the old-fashioned way, in a tub filled with scant inches of lukewarm water lugged from the kitchen. And Emily herself had done the lugging.

Mrs. Lester sprinkled bath salts that smelled pleasantly of roses into the water. She helped Emily out of her clothes, tut-tutting over their state of disrepair and the dirt ground into the fabric.

"I'm not sure I can ever get these clean, miss."

"It wouldn't matter, except I have nothing else to wear."

There was no point in pretending she wasn't destitute, arriving as she had at Beresford House without anything except the clothes on her back.

The housekeeper's nose wrinkled as she picked up Emily's shoes, soiled with mud and other unpleasant substances picked up on the streets of London. "I am afraid these will have to be thrown out. Do you require any assistance with your bath?"

"Thank you, no, I shall be quite all right." She must look a fright in her threadbare chemise, grown gray with age.

Mrs. Lester curtsied. "I shall return once you have finished, miss, with a frock for you to wear. Just ring the bell if you require anything."

Emily nodded and the housekeeper bustled away, closing the door behind her. She stripped off the soiled chemise and dipped a toe into the water, so lovely and warm. She was too dirty to get into the lovely scented water. A pile of clean cloths and towels lay on a table beside the sink. She dipped a cloth into the water and scrubbed away the worst of the dirt. Then she stepped into the bath and sank down with a sigh. The water closed over her body like a warm embrace. Emily picked up the rose-scented soap and smoothed it over her skin, washing away days of soil and unhappiness. It was sheer bliss. When she washed between her legs, she felt a pleasant sort of tingle. She removed her fingers hastily. That was not allowed.

Emily immersed herself completely, her lank hair swirling beneath the surface of the water. So quiet, so peaceful. She sat up and picked up a bottle marked "Hair" and poured some of the sweet-smelling solution in her palm, working it into her hair. Lovely. She ducked under the water again to rinse off and then stood up and reached for a towel. Glorious. Even the towels were luxurious, thick and soft. She tucked it around her body and went back into the bedroom. A lovely frock of striped gray poplin with pearl buttons lay on the bed. Mrs. Lester bustled back in with a pile of underthings over one arm. She helped Emily to dress and tied her sash.

Emily looked at her reflection. Mrs. Lester had brushed her hair and left it loose around her shoulders. The gray dress was pretty, but cut very short, revealing her calves and ankles in their white stockings. It seemed rude and ungrateful to complain, but she couldn't go downstairs like that.

"Mrs. Lester, don't you think this dress is a trifle short?"

"Now, dearie, you look very nice, just like Sir Richard ordered. He's waiting to speak to you in his study. I'll show you."

So Emily followed the housekeeper downstairs and through a carpeted hall to a paneled door. Mrs. Lester rapped on the door.

"Come," said the deep voice beyond.

Mrs. Lester opened the door and gently shoved Emily inside.

Sir Richard looked up, his gaze moving over her body and Emily trembled. What did he want from her? Because, if her experiences had proved nothing else, they had shown her that a gentleman always wanted something.