

TRY
THE 1ST
CHAPTER!

HONESTY

&

LIES

Also by Eloise for Firefly:

Elen's Island

Gaslight

Seaglass

Wilde

HONESTY
&
LIES

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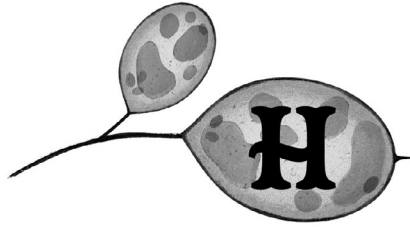
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‘Ye eventes showne in this booke are but a
fiction.’

For Janine Barnett-Phillips,
Jennifer Killick and Rhian Tracey.
True friends in tough times.



CHAPTER ONE

HONESTY

‘The City of London,’ someone shouts as the cart hits a pothole and almost spills me out. I have made it. Never have I seen so many people and never have I smelled so many either. It stinks to high heaven. Bodies and filth and the deep, green stench of the river. The air snaps with cold and icicles hang from every timber and roof.

I climb out as nimbly as I can, having been squashed among cabbages for so long, and thank the farmer, paying him for his kindness. I am wobbling like a newborn foal.

London. People everywhere, unloading cargo from vast, weather-beaten ships. Languages I have never heard before bloom into the air. The cold

hurts every patch of exposed skin but my cheeks flame with excitement. *London.*

Who knew that I, a girl of only thirteen years, could make it this far alive? I peek from beneath the hood of my cloak, astounded by everything. Two men with hounds drive a flock of sheep to market. Another runs past, carrying a puppet, chased by a string of gabbling children. The bright colours spinning around me are dizzying and wonderful.

It should be easy to blend in here, with people of so many shapes and sizes, but I am still afraid. How terrible it would be for someone to grab me now and force me to return after such a journey. Surely, I am safe here, so far from Wales? But some of the ships look like the ones we get at home in Dinbych-y-Pysgod and I believe in bad luck. I can picture my father sailing up the Thames, appearing here in front of me, shouting and reaching out to catch me in a net, haul me in, and take me back to be whipped. I need to keep moving.

I sidestep some poor seasick soul who is puking over his toes and someone else's heels, and accidentally jolt a sausage seller who shoves me away. My stomach roars. The last meal I had was a

blackbird two days ago and a gnaw on a raw cabbage in the cart.

I can see now that all my ideas of what I would find in London are laughable. What opportunities will there be here for a girl with little skill, except for a quick tongue and a way with stories? I cannot tell anyone about my parentage or past. I shall have to rely on my wits. I must make a plan. If I stand still near the riverbank for much longer, my blood will freeze in this ice-flecked air. If I keep moving, perhaps fate will take a chance on me and help me to find hope. I pray it will.

I weave through the crowd, my head bowed against the brunt of the wind. My feet are bloodied and blistered, my hands scratched and covered with filth, but I am here. I am here! I am terrified.

Dodging a rolling barrel, I tack my way between women bartering for cheaper prices, scowling theatrically when they are refused. Just like the women I see every day in the marketplace. Thinking of home, I have to stop, leaning against an overturned boat, my chest heaving with panic. On a warm day it might be exciting to tarry here, watching the world go by, but today I spout white breath like a dragon.

I am a dragon, I tell myself. Brave and proud and

fierce, with fire in my belly. I have made it all the way here and I am not yet dead. I must seek out lodgings before night and soon after find work. The pitifully few coins in my purse will not last me long. I will not despair.

Dread tingles my fingers, and my breath comes in short, sharp bursts. I rub my hands together to stop the fizzing pain. Standing here is not helping me at all. I must be brave and move again.

Christmastide celebrations are well underway, and a group of revellers sing enthusiastically until one of them falls in the river and has to be fished out. Everyone is in festive mood and I'm about to head towards a milling throng to see what fun is drawing them together, when I am grabbed by the wrist.

'Come with me on an adventure,' a gnarled old woman coaxes.

I cannot break away.

Her gums hold no teeth; her eyes are milky yellow; her nails the talons of a hawk. She drags me towards an alley with surprising strength for someone so withered. That is how I know that she is bad. I can taste it like blood on my tongue. Danger. I struggle to get free, a rabbit in a snare. Someone

is waiting in the shadows for us, and pure terror makes me strong.

‘Let me loose!’ Gritting my teeth, I pull back, lift one foot and kick. She collapses and I leave her there in the filth as I run.

You must not trust anyone these days. Everyone knows that London is full of thieves and filchers, rogues and muggers. Worse still, that woman may be a witch. A shudder runs the length of my spine and I hunch my shoulders. Even here, amongst all these people, a witch could kill me with a curse. I speed up. Head down. Getting as far away from her as possible.

‘Argh!’

The girl I’ve bumped into is red-faced with anger. I’m covered in cabbage and dirt and have left a mark on the package she carries.

‘I’m so sorry.’ Despite my fright, I remember to speak in English. Raising my hands in surrender, I see they are shamefully unclean so knot them behind my back.

‘You must learn to look where you are going.’ Her voice, though small, is colder than this winter’s day. ‘This is an item of great importance.’

‘There was someone chasing me,’ I say in agitation.

Will this girl help me? We are about the same age. From her clothes I can tell she is a person of some means.

‘Who?’ She eyes me suspiciously. ‘Have you done something wrong?’

‘No. The woman meant *me* harm. She’s gone now.’

She scans the space behind me for pursuers.

I must befriend this girl. Flattery works well at home. ‘I know nothing about London at all. I imagine you know many things.’

‘I do.’ A flicker of thrill crosses her face, which she quickly hides.

I try to appear innocent, but it just makes her examine me more closely. ‘If only I knew as much as you,’ I add and regret it immediately because she scoffs in reply.

She inspects me, cocking her head this way and that like a chicken. I whimper a little, truly self-pitying, then try a different ruse.

‘I need someone knowledgeable who can find me safe lodgings for the night.’ Crossing my fingers behind me, I implore her with my eyes. *Please help me. Please.*

Her face shows nothing. I cannot read her thoughts.

Something tells me that I should be sincere

with this girl, but the truth is too frightening, so I make up a story.

‘The truth is, I was on a ship as a lady’s maid. Unfortunately, a gigantic wave knocked me overboard. I managed to swim to the bank but the ship and all my possessions and everyone I know are now sailing off to...’ I search in my mind for foreign places. ‘To far-off countries. I don’t know what to do.’

This last bit is true at least.

‘Your clothes are dry,’ Mistress Disdain says. Her scornful manner would make a less dragon-hearted girl give in.

‘They have dried in this keen wind.’

‘A likely story.’ She begins to walk away.

‘For pity. Please. Please help me.’ Something in my wavering voice makes her return.

‘You enjoy telling tales, that much I know. You are also up to no good, that much I also know.’ She raises a finger to warn me against interrupting. ‘Tell me, girl, why should I help you? If we are to get to the truth eventually, we may as well visit it now.’

‘If you do not help me, I will surely die.’ I feel my lip quiver and clench my hands into fists.

‘You have almost ruined my package.’ The girl

primly brushes tiny bits of me from her parcel. Even when every last trace of me is completely gone, she keeps fussing. She will wear a hole in the paper if she's not careful.

'What is inside it?' I cannot stem my curiosity. I always want to know about everything. Father says it is a fault I've had since I was born. I put him to the back of my mind and smile encouragingly at the girl. The wrapping is fine quality and sealed with a violet ribbon.

She glances around and leans in whispering, 'Glorious materials for Queen Elizabeth herself.'

I try not to smirk. This girl is either a liar or mad, or as much of a storyteller as me. As if she would be carrying something for the Queen! Turning my smile into a look of wonder, I play along, asking in awe, 'For the Queen herself? I can hardly believe it. What an honour it must be.'

'An honour indeed.' She narrows her eyes, green as early apples and twice as sharp. Now I have her herring-hooked and wriggling, I keep her on the line.

'Tell me, please, how you came to have it in your possession?' This girl has money or good employment and is clean and well fed. I am determined to forge a friendship with her.

‘Your voice is peculiar.’ Her expression is so scornful, she looks as if she has licked vinegar from a wound. ‘It almost sings.’

I laugh and clap my hands together. They ring with the cold and my bones hurt, but it is joyous to think of my voice like this. ‘Yes, because I am Welsh.’

‘That explains it,’ she says, not unkindly but not respectfully either. ‘I have an errand to run. I will point you to where you can find rooms for the night. Be quick. I am needed elsewhere.’

I say, ‘Thank you,’ in English, of course, but only once and curtly. Then I rush after her as she scurries along. Her hair is flaxen-yellow and tendrils of it break free from her hat, tangling back towards me in golden snakes. She is taller than me, her stride is long, and I have to trot to keep up. At least hurrying warms my blood.

I keep an arm’s length from her. She seems bright and trustworthy, but villains come in all guises.

As she rushes ahead, I wonder what the planets have written for me and how fortune will treat me now that I am alone. Fate has brought me to this girl, and I must use the cards it has dealt me and all of my energy to keep myself alive.