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The Last Confession of Thomas Hawkins

Written by Antonia Hodgson

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*For David and Chris,
even though they prefer the twentieth century*

'All you that in the condemned hold do lie
Prepare you, for tomorrow you shall die'

*Words called beneath Newgate Prison
on the eve of a hanging*

PROLOGUE

No one thought Tom Hawkins would hang. Not until the last moment.

Gentlemen don't hang; not even ones found guilty of murder. Hawkins wasn't much of a gentleman, that was true, but he came from a good family. A good family with good connections. The pardon would come. Sometimes the Marshal kept it hidden deep in his pocket, only to pull it out with a flourish when the procession reached the gallows. A bit of drama for the mob. A lesson, too: an act of mercy is always a lesson.

This is what Hawkins tells himself as his cart rolls slowly out of Newgate Prison. *The pardon will come. I've kept my side of the bargain. I've held my tongue.* But Hawkins has a gambler's instinct, and he can feel the odds rising with each turn of the wheel.

He should have been freed hours ago. If he could only catch someone's eye . . . but the Marshal is riding up at the head of the procession, followed by a band of constables armed with staves. Their boots pound hard against the cobbles as they march up Snow Hill. He can't see them. He is a condemned man, and condemned men must ride backwards to their hanging, on carts swagged in black crêpe. He sits with his back to the carthorse, chained in iron, long legs stretched out in front of him. He sees

only what he has already passed: the muddy road beneath him, the houses, the crowds of people.

The great bell of St Sepulchre tolls low and heavy as the devil's heartbeat, summoning the town out on to the streets. *Hanging day.* He has heard the bell toll many times before. He has followed the carts to the gallows. He has watched men die slowly, blind beneath a white hood, their legs kicking the air. Now it is his turn to dance upon the rope, while the world cheers him to his death.

No. He must stay calm. The journey to Tyburn will take two hours through all these crowds. There is still time. He has done everything that was asked of him. Surely his loyalty, his silence, will save him now? A thin, snake's voice whispers in his head. *There's nothing more silent than a corpse.*

He pushes the thought away, concentrates on his breathing. This, at least, is still his to control. There is a smudge of dirt on the ankle of his left stocking. His eyes fix upon it as the cart arrives at the steps of St Sepulchre.

The horse gives a sudden lurch and he is flung forward, then back. He winces in pain as his shoulders slice against the sharp edge of his coffin. They have tied it behind him for the journey.

Breathe.

Four prisoners will hang today. Higgs and Oakley are foot-pads, betrayed by a fellow gang member. Mary Green was caught lifting a few yards of mantua silk from a shop in Spitalfields. Cherry red, the newspapers said, as if such a thing mattered. Hawkins is the only one convicted of murder. He is the one the crowds have come to see. Even with his head down, he can feel them staring. They hang out of every window; line the narrow streets five or six deep, on the brink of riot. They curse his name, tell him he will hang like a dog. The two guards flanking his cart grip their javelins hard, watching for trouble.

Sometimes the town shows pity, but not today. Not for a man who won't confess his crime. Violence smoulders in the air, ready to catch flame. It would be safer to keep the carts moving, but there are traditions that must be observed on the road to Tyburn and this is one of them. *Perhaps they will push the cart over.* His arms are pinioned, but he could still run. He lifts his eyes to the crowds; sees only hatred, fear and fury. Aye, he could run – straight into the arms of the mob. They would tear him to pieces.

The church bellman appears on the steps. He is a narrow-boned, fretful man, and the hand bell is too big for him. He rings it twelve times, holding onto the handle with both hands. It is a struggle and he looks relieved when it's over. The crowd, delighted, applauds him as if he were a comic turn at Sadler's Wells. He frowns at them. This is meant to be a solemn moment and they are ruining it. 'Pray heartily unto God for these poor sinners,' he pipes, fighting to be heard over the din, 'who are now going to their death.'

'My thanks for that reminder,' Hawkins mutters. The guard at his left bites back a smile.

The bellman calls upon the condemned to repent. The other three prisoners have admitted their guilt – they have an air of calm acceptance that draws approval from the crowds. Young girls throw sprigs of white flowers on to their carts. White for forgiveness. White for rebirth. Oakley is so convinced God will grant him mercy that he is going to his death dressed in his shroud; the long white smock and ruffled cap a sign to all that he is eager to leave this wicked world and ascend to heaven.

Hawkins is wearing a sky-blue velvet coat and breeches, and a white silk waistcoat trimmed with gold thread.

A plump, pretty girl trembles her way towards him as if he were a caged tiger and pushes her last sprig of flowers through the wooden rails of the cart. As he takes them from her their

fingers touch. She gives a start, half-thrilled, half-terrified, and hurries back to the safety of the church steps. He sighs under his breath. Perhaps later she will tell her friends how she met the notorious Thomas Hawkins on the road to Tyburn. Will she say that the devil shone out of his bright-blue eyes? That his touch burned her skin? Will she pay a shilling for an inch of the rope that hangs him, and keep it for luck?

I will not hang, he reminds himself. *The pardon will come*. But he is no longer sure.

PART ONE

Chapter One

It began with a scream in the dark. It was early January and I was limping my way home through Covent Garden. No longer the dead of night, not yet morning, but the secret hours before dawn, when rakes tiptoe from tight-shuttered bedrooms, and thieves slink back to the slums of St Giles. A time when good, respectable men are fast asleep, their houses barred and locked.

Long, uncounted hours earlier I had slipped out for a bowl of punch and a game of cards. I won three guineas. Such things must be celebrated. I bought a late supper for a ragged band of new friends, and a good deal more punch. The night continued. I spent the three guineas. Then I spent some more. At some point, I lost a shoe.

The first of the market traders were dragging their carts into the piazza, hunched double against the cold. They swung their lanterns into the shadows, searching for their allotted place. I saluted one or two as I passed, but didn't linger. The weather was dismal yet again, the air damp enough to leave its trace upon my skin. Still – at least it wasn't raining.

In fact, given that I had lost my shoe and my winnings, I was in a remarkably cheerful mood. I pulled out my silver watch and held it up to the moonlight. Almost five o'clock. Kitty would be

at least half-awake by now; she preferred to rise early. We enjoyed such different hours it was a wonder we had ever met. I imagined her now, taming her wild copper curls with pins. Perhaps I would untame them again, pull out the pins and let her hair spill down over her shoulders. Or perhaps she would shout at me for staying out all night again. Yes, now I thought of it, that was more likely. Kitty had a fearsome temper. When the meek inherit the earth, she will be left quite out of pocket.

We had met the previous autumn, when I was thrown in the Marshalsea for debt. For the past three months we had been living beneath the same roof. Some of our neighbours thought it a scandal. The rest did not think of it at all, not in this disreputable part of town. I had spent the first few weeks recovering from a sickness of body and spirit that had left me weary and out of sorts. I had been tortured, beaten and betrayed in prison, witnessed murder and almost met my own death. It was the betrayal that lingered in me, an infection that would not heal. I kept old friends and acquaintances at a wary distance, wondering, wondering . . . Kitty was not without her faults, but I knew this much – I could trust her with my life.

Slowly, I recovered my strength. I read and worked quietly at my desk, strolled about the town in the daytime, and spent my nights with Kitty. I was content – for a while. Yes, yes, damn me for a fool, but a man of my temperament may grow tired of anything. Put me in heaven, and after a short, blissful period I would be knocking at the gates of hell, asking if anyone cared for a game of cards. Lessons that had felt so sharp and certain on my release from prison began to fade. What harm could it do, one trip to the coffeehouse? One short visit to the gaming tables? And perhaps another? I was not so bad – not quite so bad as I had been. Surely that was enough? I was not a monk, damn it.

Kitty did not mind this so very much – better to let me ramble about the town than have me sit scowling into the fire. What troubled her was that I had begun to slip out alone, without her.

‘It isn’t *fair* Tom,’ she had said, the last time she caught me sneaking from the house. ‘I am not some timid song bird for you to keep locked in its cage.’

‘That is true,’ I agreed. I had heard her singing. ‘But tell me what I must do, sweetheart? The world is how it is.’

‘Well you might look a little less pleased with it,’ she muttered.

I’d sighed and lifted my hands. A weak apology, but it was not my fault the town was made for bachelors. The women who frequented the coffeehouses and gaming tables and taverns could not be called *respectable*. Kitty didn’t care, but it troubled me that I couldn’t protect her in such wild places. Nor did I like the hungry looks of the men, slavering like dogs around her. I knew what they saw when she arrived upon my arm – a rich, unmarried wench sharing her bed with a penniless rogue. A whore, in other words. And men do not treat whores well, in the main.

‘Perhaps if we were married . . .’ I’d added, slyly.

I turned down Russell Street, leaving the piazza and the market behind me. I had asked Kitty to marry me a hundred times, and she had refused me a hundred times in return – with good reason. A few months ago she had inherited a fortune from her guardian, Samuel Fleet, including the house and print shop where we now lived together. If she married me, the business and all her fortune would fall under my control. How could she trust me not to gamble away her inheritance? She had never admitted her concerns to me, but I could see the doubt in those sharp green eyes of hers, whenever I asked for her hand. Given the choice between being rich or respectable

she had chosen to keep her money and let her reputation fend for itself. I couldn't blame her for it. I'm sure I wouldn't marry me either.

A blurred shape leaped down from a wall into my path, startling me from my thoughts. A cat, out hunting. It pounced hard into a pile of stinking rubbish a few feet ahead. There was a scuffle, and then a long, vicious squeal. A moment later the cat trotted past, triumphant, a huge rat dangling in its mouth. I skirted the rubbish heap with an anxious eye. I had almost walked straight through it.

Russell Street is like a young country girl, fresh arrived on the London coach. It begins with good intentions – smart coffee-houses, handsome private homes. Then after a short distance it takes on a pragmatic but profitable air – an apothecary's, a grocer's store. After that comes a fast, sordid descent – a grimy gin shop, a gaming house, a brothel with broken windows and a rotting roof. And opposite the brothel, a bookseller's and print shop, selling filth and sedition under the counter. A sign hangs above the door – a pistol tilted at a lewd angle. And underneath the pistol: *Proprietor, S. Fleet*. No longer. *S. Fleet* was dead – burning in hell or causing havoc in heaven, who could guess? This was Kitty Sparks' place now.

The Cocked Pistol is set back from the street, as if ready to slink away at the first glimpse of trouble. It is also narrower than the houses upon either side, which gives it the appearance of being squeezed slowly to death by its neighbours. I paused at the dark-green door, preparing myself for Kitty's wrath. It could be a fearsome thing to behold, and rather thrilling for us both. Her face would flush and she would bunch her fists tight into her gown, her chest heaving. She would call me a selfish dog, a scoundrel, an inconstant son of a whore. At some point the questions and accusations would falter and she would grab me or I

would grab her and we would fling ourselves up the stairs. She had the most bewitching way of slipping her fingers beneath the band of my breeches and pulling me into bed, while staring deep into my eyes. A simple thing, but my God it was worth all the shouting.

'Thief!'

A muffled scream, close by. I gave a start, and peered up and down the dark street. There was no one there; not that I could see. The street fell silent, as if holding its breath. I felt the hair prickle along my neck. Was someone hiding in the shadows? I reached for my sword, drawing it smoothly from my side.

Someone shouted again, a sharp cry of fear. *'Help! Help! Oh, Lord, spare us!'*

A young woman's voice – a maidservant, I thought. She was calling from the house I'd just passed – Joseph Burden's home. The very last place I would expect a commotion. There were churches that were less quiet and respectable. I ran back to the door and thumped my fist against it.

'Holla! Mr Burden! Is all well?'

No one replied. I could hear shouts and screams within, and footsteps on the stairs. Burden bellowing angrily for more light. The girl was still weeping. *'I saw him! I swear I saw him!'*

A housebreaker, it must be. January was their favourite month – long, dark nights and no one out on the frozen streets to see them. Except men like me. I pounded harder on the door. *'Mr Burden!'*

The bolts slammed free. Burden's apprentice, Ned Weaver, stood in the doorway, clutching a hammer in his fist. His broad shoulders blocked the view into the hallway. He ducked his head to save it from catching upon the frame.

'Thief?' I whispered.

‘Aye.’ He gestured with his hammer, back over his shoulder.
Still inside.

‘Is someone hurt? I heard screams . . .’

He shook his head. ‘It’s just Alice. Gave her a fright.’ An odd, rather sour look crossed his face. ‘He woke her up. The thief. He was standing over the bed.’

I took a step towards the piazza to fetch help.

‘Wait!’ Ned seized my arm and pulled me back to the front step, almost lifting me from my feet. It felt as if I were held in the jaws of some great hound. Burden was a master carpenter and worked his apprentice hard. ‘We have him trapped. Stay here on guard, sir, I beg you. Don’t let the devil pass.’

He thundered back up the stairs. *Trouble*, I thought, rubbing my arm. Well – I had a talent for it. I squared my shoulders and gripped my blade a little tighter, wishing I had not drunk quite so much punch. Or indeed been left with just the one shoe. I could still hear sobbing in an upper room, and boots thumping back and forth as the men searched the house – but nobody came back to the door. The more I waited, alone in the dark, the more puzzled I became. Why had the thief picked Joseph Burden’s home, of all the houses in London? There were finer places to rob even on this street, and Burden always kept his windows and doors firmly locked and bolted at night. He was known and mocked in the neighbourhood for securing his house as early as six o’clock in winter.

The door to the Cocked Pistol swung open, candlelight spilling softly on to the street.

‘Tom!’ Kitty leaned out, bare feet on tiptoe. She was half-dressed in a silk wrapping gown and a white quilted cap, a few loose curls spilling across her forehead. ‘There you are, you dog. What are you about? If you’re pissing against the shop again . . .’

My angel. ‘Housebreaker. I’m guarding the door.’

Her eyes caught light. She disappeared inside for a moment, then emerged in a pair of my boots, twirling a large frying pan in her hands. As she clopped towards me I considered ordering her back to the shop for safety. Imagined how that suggestion would be greeted. Remained silent.

‘How many?’ she asked from the corner of her mouth.

‘Just one. I hope.’

Kitty hurried back to the shop and called up the stairs. ‘Sam! *Sam!* Fetch my pistol.’ She picked up her gown and ran back to me, peering eagerly over my shoulder into the narrow hallway beyond. The house was still in uproar, panicked voices tumbling through the air in a confusion of shouts and commands.

‘Trapped like a rat in a barrel,’ Kitty murmured. ‘What will they do to him, Tom?’

I thought of Joseph Burden – devout, severe, unyielding. ‘Lecture him to death, probably.’

Kitty snorted.

‘They’ll hang him.’ A low voice behind us.

‘*Sam,*’ Kitty scolded, smacking the boy lightly on the arm. ‘Must you creep about like that?’

Sam Fleet – fourteen years old, named for his late Uncle Samuel, my old cell mate. Looked like the old devil, too – the same short, lean build, the same black-eyed stare. A darker complexion, like a Spaniard. Thick black curls tied with a black ribbon. He was holding a pistol.

I tucked it beneath my coat. Sam had already slipped past me, poking his head through the door into the gloomy interior. Burden’s house was a mystery to the neighbourhood; he did not encourage visitors. I tapped Sam’s shoulder. ‘Go back inside.’

A flicker of irritation crossed his face, but he did as he was

told, sauntering away as if it were his own decision. I smiled after him, recognising the small act of defiance from my own youthful rebellions.

The house had fallen silent. I took a step into the hallway and shouted up the stairs.

‘Mr Burden? Ned? Is all safe? Do you have him?’

‘Mr Hawkins?’ a soft voice replied, from the landing above. A figure descended slowly – dainty bare feet, the hem of a dress brushing the stairs, a slim hand holding a candelabrum. She did not seem quite real at first, moving with a slow, dreamy grace. Judith – Joseph Burden’s daughter. She must be Kitty’s age, but she rarely left the house save for church, and I had never spoken with her before.

‘For heaven’s sake,’ Kitty muttered. ‘I walk faster in my damned sleep.’

When she was halfway down the stairs Judith paused, her free hand gripping the rail tight. There was a fresh cut on her lip. She stared at us both, grey eyes lost and distant in a pale face. ‘Why are you here?’ Her voice was slow and dazed, as if she were emerging from a dream.

‘Miss Burden – you’re hurt. Did you see the thief? Did he strike you?’

‘Thief? I . . . no.’ She put a hand to her swollen lip. ‘I saw nothing.’ She gave a hollow laugh. ‘Nothing at all.’ She sank to the stair, resting her forehead against the banisters as if they were the bars of a prison. The candelabrum slid to the floor.

Kitty leaped forward and settled it on the ground before it set the place alight. I knelt down beside Judith. She was trembling violently, her breath coming in short gasps. Whatever she had seen had shocked her out of all sense. Fearing she might faint or fall into a fit, I took her hand in mine and squeezed it gently. It was small and very smooth, the hand of a girl who spent her days

embroidering cushions and pouring tea. 'Don't be afraid, Miss Burden. You are quite safe now.'

'We have a pistol,' Kitty said, arching an eyebrow at my hand linked with Judith's.

'And a frying pan,' I added, smiling.

Judith offered a ghost of a smile in return. 'You are kind, sir,' she murmured, but her hand lay like a dead thing in mine.

'Is Alice safe?' Kitty asked. Alice Dunn was Burden's housekeeper. She and Kitty would sometimes talk over the yard wall.

'Alice?' Judith withdrew her hand and curled up on the stairs, her head buried in her gown. 'Why should I care if *Alice Dunn* is safe? She is only a *maid*.'

Judith.

Joseph Burden stood at the top of the stairs, looming above us like a bear about to attack. An old fighting bear, long past its prime, but still dangerous. He was a giant of a man, with thick, strong arms from years of hard labour. His belly was vast, straining against his nightgown. He thumped down the steps and pulled his daughter to her feet with a savage wrench. Judith gave a cry of pain, stifled at once. Her father seized her by the back of the neck and with one great shove pushed her up the stairs. She slipped and scabbled away, without a word.

Kitty clenched her jaw.

Burden heaved himself down the rest of the stairs and pushed his face into mine. '*You*. How *dare* you enter my home?'

I leaned back on my heels, avoiding his stale, hot breath. 'Your apprentice begged me to stand guard. Did you find the thief?'

His face reddened. 'There was no thief. Alice was mistaken. Foolish slut doesn't know when she's awake or dreaming.'

That made little sense to me. I'd heard the screams well

enough – Alice had sounded perfectly awake and quite terrified.

‘Mr Burden. Did you strike your daughter?’ Kitty asked. Her voice was steady, but she was holding the pan in such a fierce grip that her knuckles had turned white.

Burden curled his lip. ‘Hawkins, tell your whore to mind her tongue or I’ll rip it from her throat.’

‘Coward,’ Kitty hissed.

Burden spun around, aiming his fist at her. She swung the pan like a racquet, and Burden’s knuckles cracked against the solid iron with a loud clang. He yelped in pain, cradling his hand. Kitty raised the pan above her head, preparing for another blow. I snatched her by the waist and led her out on to the street before she broke his skull.

‘Arsehole!’ she yelled, as he slammed the door on us. ‘Come out here and threaten me again – just you try it! I’ll kick your fucking teeth out.’

A cheer rose up from the brothel across the road. Joseph Burden was not a popular man down this end of Russell Street. Kitty glanced up at the whores leaning out of their windows, and bobbed a curtsy to them. Her temper was as fast and hot as lightning and died just as quick – thank God, or there would be no living with her.

She grinned at me and pulled me close, tugging on my coat with both hands until our bodies twined together. ‘Where have you been tonight, Tom Hawkins?’

I kissed her, running my hands down her gown, finding the soft curves beneath.

‘You stink of smoke,’ she sighed. ‘And liquor.’ She slid her cheek against mine, her skin smooth against my stubble. Brought her lips to my ear. ‘Kiss me again.’

I did as I was asked. The world melted away, as it always did.

THE LAST CONFESSION OF THOMAS HAWKINS

And I forgot all about Joseph Burden, and his daughter's strange behaviour, and the thief who was never there.

That was my first mistake.