

“Runnin’ away will never get ye anywhere.”

Sian lowered her book and frowned at the woman sitting across from her in the closed carriage. Helen, with the familiarity of a servant of long service, scowled back.

“It will,” Sian said with a firmness she seldom used with her maid, “allow me to avoid seeing Sir Henry. Any encounter at this point could cause him more distress.”

The maid’s face softened. “Forgive me. I should ‘ave known ye ‘ad a good-‘earted reason.”

“There is no need to apologize.” Sian raised her book and stared at the pages. The words might as well have been written in Chinese. She had not turned a page since they left St. Ives with first light yesterday, but she had held the book for every rugged mile along the Cornish coast. The setting sun now gilded the sea along the shore. The heat of the day was vanishing along with the sunlight, and soon she would not have the excuse of hiding behind a book.

Instead of the words, Sian recalled her words to Sir Henry. She did not doubt—not for a moment—that she had made the correct decision about the betrothal. Once she spoke with her sisters upon their arrival in Cornwall, she would feel better. She was certain of that.

What she was unsure about was the ghost at Nethercott Castle. She had wanted to mention the encounter to Helen, yet remained silent. There had been a hullabaloo when other ghosts visited her sisters. Maybe that was why she hesitated to tell her maid about the apparition in the well house. If the whole household wanted to pretend nothing out of the ordinary had ever happened, how could she talk about the conversation. . .and then depart for Cornwall, leaving them with another ghost?

She looked out the window. The road followed the shore, but was far enough inland so that she could not hear the sea birds over the clatter of the wheels. Leaning forward, she drew in a deep breath of salty air as she gazed at the sky.

A thin layer of clouds marked the horizon, but the sky had a frothy white color unlike the bright blue of a perfect day on the moors. Beneath it, the sea was every possible shade of blue, green, and gray, constantly in a state of metamorphosis. The cliffs curved away around a sheltered bay. Some were raw rock, but others wore a furry coat of ferns and gorse.

She thought longingly about her sketchbook and her paints. Even if they were not stored in the boot, she could not have drawn a steady line as the carriage bounced in and out of every chuckhole. She had not sketched since leaving Nethercott Castle, and she felt at odds with everything around her. She could not explain it, not even to her sisters or late father, but if she failed to spend some time each day drawing or painting, she seemed disconnected from herself.

Soon they would be at Bannatyne Hall. A night’s rest, and then she would begin work tomorrow planning the mural she would paint. In her most recent letter, Jade had mentioned missing the sight of sheep grazing. Sian had planned to paint exactly that, so her niece or nephew could grow up with a view of North Yorkshire. But days of riding by the sea had changed her mind. She wanted to capture these glorious, ever-changing colors. There were not as many sheep in Cornwall, but she would include some in the mural to please her sister.

“We must look forward, Helen,” she said when she drew her gaze from the sea to find her maid watching her with concern.

“True, but. . .”

“We shall not be in Cornwall for more than six months. By then, Angus will have missed you so much. Who knows? He may think of an offer of his own for you.”

Helen’s cheeks turned so red that Sian could see them in the fading light. “‘e already did.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Tears pricked the corners of her eyes. “Someone else could have come with me, and you could have stayed at Nethercott Castle and married Angus. I appreciate your loyalty, Helen.”

“It is no matter.”

“How can you say that? If you thought I would not be sympathetic to your situation because I gave Sir Henry his *cong e*, I am sorry I gave you that impression.”

“Miss Nethercott, do not fret.”

“If you wish, you can return to Nethercott Castle as soon as Williams has a chance to rest himself and the horses. You could be back to wed Angus before—”

“I told ‘im no.”

Sian opened her mouth, then slowly closed it.

“Angus asked me, and I told ‘im I needed time to consider it. A fine man, ‘e is, but my feelin’s for ‘im are much like yers for Sir ‘enry, if I may be so bold. Friendship—a very good friendship—but nothin’ to build a life upon.” She smiled, looking younger than her years. “I ‘ave ‘eard these Cornish men are a ‘andsome lot, so I thought to see what there be to see ‘ere. I could meet a man who makes me forget ‘bout any others. If I meet no one and Angus still ‘as a weddin’ with me on ‘is mind, I may change *my* mind.”

Sian let her maid prattle on, but her thoughts went far beyond the carriage. If she could be as fickle as Helen, then she would not have wasted so many months thinking about Lord Lastingham. She would have accepted his silence and moved on. But it was impossible. Her heart yearned to belong to the earl, even though he clearly had no interest in it.

Maybe visiting Bannatyne Hall would be the best way to banish him from her mind and her heart. After all, Helen might be correct. There could be a man at the far end of western Cornwall who would make her forget about any others.

She looked out at the sea. If there was a man in Cornwall to help her forget Lord Lastingham, she could not wait to meet him.

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The carriage jerked to a halt. Had they become mired again? Oh, Sian hoped not. Last time, it had taken more than an hour to get the carriage freed from the mud. Then, with day closing in around them, she had made the decision—against her better judgment—to continue on. Good sense urged returning to the coaching inn in Redruth, but it would have taken as long to go back as it would to keep going. So they kept going. Had they arrived at Bannatyne Hall?

Sian sat straighter. It was dark. She must have dozed off after the sun set. Where were they? Moonlight pierced the carriage, but no lanterns marked their arrival at Bannatyne Hall, and the carriage was tilted forward too much at an angle to be at the house. Her sister had told her about the last long hill that dropped down toward the sea before leading to the village of St. Gundred and the estate.

“Why are we stopping here?” she asked.

Helen did not answer.

Shifting on the seat, Sian looked at her maid. Helen stared out the window on the carriage’s other side, her eyes as round and almost as wide as her open mouth. Other than the moonlight cascading along the hillside, the only light came from the lantern hanging from the side of the carriage. It was enough for her to see what Helen had, and Sian’s own mouth gaped.

Close to a half dozen men stood by the road. They wore dominos as well as black cloaks. Swords hung from their waists, and she guessed they had other weapons as well. Where had they come from? Behind them, the dark hill loomed like a squatting giant that had misplaced its head. No trees broke the craggy line where the earth had fallen away to reveal the rock. Not a single building tamed the wild expanse.

Wanting to ask again why they had been stopped, she gasped when one of the men called, “Down! Now! Both of ye!”

Williams, the coachman, shouted back, “Begone! Let us pass. Find prey somewhere else.”

“Down! Now! Both of ye!”

Sian saw something flicker in the moonlight. Not a lantern, but light off a whetted blade. Or had it been the barrel of a gun? She could not be sure, and it did not matter. She would not allow these thieves to hurt her coachee or the tiger riding on the back of the carriage.

She pushed past her paralyzed maid. Opening the door, she called, “Leave us alone! We carry nothing of value.”

“No,” sobbed Helen. “Stay back, miss!”

Before she could move, a gloved hand seized Sian's arm and pulled her from the carriage. She stumbled awkwardly off the step, jarring every tooth in her head, but she kept her feet under her. Being on her knees before thieves was something she must avoid. Any sign of weakness, and they would attack like the pack of wolves they were.

"Release me!" she ordered, trying to shake herself out of the grip. Her bonnet went awry, half-blinding her. She glared at the man whose face was hidden, save for his mouth and chin, behind black material.

When the hand relinquished its hold on her arm, she was astonished. She hoped her sense of triumph did not show on her face as she settled her bonnet on her head. Not that it mattered because a second later, Helen was pulled from the carriage to stand next to her. The thief had not obeyed Sian; he had turned his attention to her maid.

The carriage bounced again as both Williams and the tiger dropped to the road. Young Morley looked ready to swoon. He inched closer to the driver, his eyes so wide with terror that the whites glowed in the faint light.

"Ye were lying, miss," drawled a man among the clump of shadowed thieves. He spoke in a broad Cornish accent, but she recognized his voice as the one calling out the orders. "Anyone with the least hint of sense can see yer carriage driver questionably carries something of great value. A lovely lady and her maid."

She bit her lower lip to keep from retorting, even though she hated how he mocked her. The wrong word might compel the thieves to do something horrific. Even the right word could be dangerous. She put her arm around Helen and drew the shivering maid closer.

"Anyone else in there?" he asked.

Sian was pushed aside roughly by the man who had yanked them from the carriage. She stepped on Helen's foot and apologized.

"'Tis nothin', Miss Nethercott," Helen whispered.

"Did ye call her 'Miss Nethercott?'" The man who had given orders, stepped forward.

He stood a head taller than the other men. His shoulders seemed as broad as the carriage, but that was an illusion because she could not discern where his black cloak ended and the night began. A swagger in his step warned he considered her and her companions no threat. Another flicker caught her eye. One of his boots held the remnants of a shine, and it reflected the light from the torches his men held.

Like the others, his face was concealed by a domino that swept over his head. He wore a low cap to hold the fabric in place. No hint of his hair or the shape of his brow could be seen.

When Helen did not answer his question as she put her hands over her face and began to sob, he closed the distance between them. What would he do when he discovered Sian carried very little money and nothing that would have much value to him? Her drawing materials and clothes could be sold, but she doubted he would gain much for them in this desolate corner of Cornwall.

"Miss Nethercott, are ye?" he asked.

"Yes," Sian said as she patted Helen's arm. She needed her maid to stop being watery-headed. If the chance came to escape, Helen must not be dripping like a leaking ceiling.

"Do ye have a Christian name?"

"Yes."

"Speak it" He did not raise his voice, but his command struck her like the lash of a whip.

"Sian Nethercott." She would not risk their lives over something incidental. Yet she was curious why this highwayman needed such information. A pulse of horror careened through her. The only reason he would need her name was if he intended to ransom her back to her family.

"Sian Nethercott," he repeated, her name sounding odd with his accent.

He stepped away, and she let her breath slide past her lips. He moved with easy grace, even though the ground was uneven. Watching him, she tried to gauge what he was thinking. How could she guess? He did not act as other highwaymen did. They made their demands, took their booty, and vanished into the night.

“Ye are bound for Bannatyne Hall then,” he said as he strode back to them. “Did no one tell ye to reach its door before dark?”

She did not reply. Any information she gave him might be used in whatever plans he had. She wished she could guess what they were.

“I know yer name,” he continued. “Ye show a rare lack of curiosity about what mine is. Can I dare to believe that ye were forewarned and came this way anyhow?”

When she did not answer, he stepped closer to her. His voice remained calm, but she heard underlying tension in it. Outrage that she was defying him even so slightly? The aura of authority surrounding him suggested he was unaccustomed to resistance.

He stood so close she could smell the salt on his cloak. Helen choked back a gasp, but Sian made no sound. The silence was broken only by the faint crash of the waves upon the rocks below the cliffs. Was he waiting for her to scream in terror? She would not give this common thief the pleasure of enjoying her fear.

“Ye need not be frightened,” he said, as if she had spoken that vow aloud. “I have no interest in taking anything from ye ladies or yer men or the carriage that takes ye to Bannatyne Hall. I wish to offer ye something. Advice you should heed for yer own sakes. Advice ye *will* heed.”

“We want nothing from you,” Sian fired back, unable to remain silent any longer. “Begone, and take your curs with you. You have delayed us long enough. Lord Bannatyne will not be pleased to hear of this.”

Beside her, Helen moaned, “Miss Nethercott, take care. Do not anger ‘im further.”

It was good advice, and Sian knew she should take it. Raising her chin, she stared up into his eyes that glistened in the torchlight. She could not determine their color. Not that she cared a rap if they were brown or blue or even orange.

“When do ye believe ye will tell Lord Bannatyne of this?” he asked. “The lord and his lady are not here.” He prowled away like a cat waiting for a mouse to poke its head out of its hole.

Her eyes followed his every motion, trying to prepare herself in case he pounced too. “That is no concern of yours.”

She turned to grasp the carriage door, but a broader hand settled on it. Not a word was spoken as the fingers slowly closed, one at a time on the handle. Leather creaked with each motion, loud in the uneasy hush. Black cloth brushed her arm, consuming it in shadow. She heard a sharp intake of breath, but not from her. She was unable to breathe as a sense she could not name told her the cloth was part of the cape worn by the man who had spoken. Behind her, he stood too close. His other arm rose, and his cape enveloped her. His left hand settled on the window. He must have leaned toward her because his breath caressed her nape.

Pulling in a ragged breath, she fought to hide its sparse sound. She had challenged him—foolishly, she knew—but she would not beg for her life. But what of Helen? What of Williams and the boy Morley? The thoughts were like a fist to her gut, knocking out her rebellious thoughts. No matter how she felt about standing up to these thieves, she must protect her servants, most especially her maid. Helen? Where was Helen?

She whipped around. A small moan slipped past her taut lips when she realized his cape blocked her from seeing anything. Why? To conceal what he planned to do to her, or to keep her from seeing what he intended for her maid?

As if she had asked that, he said, “We plan no harm for yer servant.”

Her gaze jerked up toward his before she could halt herself. Even though his face was shadowed by the domino that hid his features above his lips, he must have been able to see her expression. She lowered her eyes.

“Nor,” he continued, “any harm to ye, miss.”

“I have no reason to believe you when you have stopped my carriage and terrified my servants.”

“True, but I speak the truth.” His finger beneath her chin tilted her head back so he could see her face again. “Ye must believe that.”

“Why?” She managed no more than a whisper.

“Because ye are stepping into a wasp’s nest. Ye should turn yer carriage about and go back to wherever ye came from. ‘Tis not safe for outsiders here.”

“I am not an outsider.”

“Aye, ye have family at Bannatyne Hall, but they are not there now. Go home, and come back when the viscount is here to guard over ye. A lovely young miss with blond curls and snapping brown eyes will draw too much attention when everyone here knows how important it is to mind one’s own business in St. Gundred.”

“I *was* minding my own business until you halted my carriage,” she said, recognizing the name of the village near Bannatyne Hall. Were he and his men from St. Gundred? “Now that you have given us both advice and warning, will you allow us to be on our way?”

She thought his mouth quirked into a smile, but it must have been a trick of the moonlight because he said, “Ye show spirit, Miss Nethercott. Most folks, when they meet us, look as scared as if they have seen a ghost.”

Spirit? Ghost? Why was he talking about ghosts? She told herself not to jump to conclusions. Anyone who traveled to Cornwall was cautioned that the local people believed in many types of creatures that rational people denounced as impossible. Not only ghosts, but piskies who hid in the old barrows and amidst the stone circles where no one worshiped any longer.

“Such spirit can be dangerous here,” he continued.

“Thank you for the warning.” She hoped her prim tone covered her momentary reaction. The ghost she had seen was far behind her in Nethercott Castle. “Both of them. Now. . .may we please take our leave?”

He opened the door, easing back far enough to give her space to step up into the carriage.

She fought the temptation to rush in and pull the door shut in her wake. Instead, she called, “Helen, get in.”

For a long moment, the man did not move. Then he edged aside to let Helen scurry into the carriage. As soon as she was seated, he gestured with unexpected graciousness for Sian to climb in.

She considered ordering Williams into the box and Morley to clamber into his place on the back of the carriage, but she was not sure how far she could push this man.

“Do come, Miss Nethercott,” urged Helen, her voice broken with sobs. “Do ‘urry.”

“I am.” She raised her foot to the step and grasped the side of the carriage. When a black-gloved hand was held in front of her face, she moved away, throwing herself off balance.

His wide hands steadied her, but at a sharp angle. She put her hands onto his shoulders to keep from falling against his chest. That put her eyes on a level with his for the first time. They were dark pools in the night, but she suspected that, even if the sun had been at its zenith, she would not be able to read any of the emotions within them.

“I warned ye,” he said, his voice a low, raw whisper that sent an abrupt shiver down her spine. “Ye need to take care.”

Before she could think of a suitable response, his mouth slanted across hers while his arm pulled her up against him. She heard her servants shout protests, then all sound vanished as his lips burned into hers. The coarse fabric of his mask chafed her cheek. His fingers splayed across her back, something she noticed only with one corner of her mind. Every other sense was focused on how his tongue traced her lips, teasing them and thrilling them at the same time.

The strong scent of sea salt filled her along with the more powerful one of unbridled masculinity. When his tongue teased her mouth open, she was unprepared for the moist heat of his tongue gliding along hers. She heard a breathless moan. Was it hers? She did not care when he lured her to seek pleasure in his mouth, too. She tasted a hint of ale, but she already was intoxicated.

As his mouth glided across her face and followed the ribbon of her bonnet along her throat, he pressed her ever closer to his hard chest. She could barely breathe while he set her skin to quivering beneath his fiery lips. When he reached the edge of her bonnet, he whispered close to her ear, “I have

been waiting for ye.”