

China Nethercott did not guess, as she drove along the country lane, that she was being stalked.

Why should she? After all, she had driven three times in the past three days over this same road from Cropton to Nethercott Castle, her family's home at the edge of the North Yorkshire Moors. On those previous trips, her younger sister Sian had been with her. This afternoon, Sian had decided to remain at Mrs. Stone's house in Cropton and finish the quilt that the ladies had been sewing for the harvest festival that would be held in a month.

China did not enjoy sewing and the gossip that drifted north from York or inland from Whitby. She preferred being outside, wandering through the fields around the castle or going for a drive across the wind-blown moors. Each season brought a new vista, and she exulted in the changes.

She sighed. Since she and her younger sister had returned from London, she had had little chance to drive across the moors. She had tried to settle back in to her old routine of overseeing the household, but found herself chafing at responsibilities she once accepted without complaint. She tried not to think that she had been content with her life then because she had not known any better.

Now she could not help wishing her days contained something more exciting than decisions about which foods to order and how she could best serve the local community. She knew many women envied her position as chatelaine of Nethercott Castle, but she wanted more.

More what? She was not sure.

But she also knew how important it had been to work on the quilts that would help raise money for a new roof for the ancient church in Lastingham. The parishioners were accustomed to discovering pools of water on the floor and in the eight hundred year old crypt beneath it. The new bell that had been installed several years ago sounded lovely when it rang with the other two, echoing across the valley and against the moors, but she could not help worrying they would tumble through the leaking roof.

China looked through a break in the trees edging the narrow dirt lane. With the road following high Rawcliffe, she had a splendid view of the valley below. The fields were awash with August sunshine but the light held little heat. The month had been unseasonably cold, more like March than summer. Most of the farmers along the moors kept sheep, unlike in the south where farmers struggled to bring crops to harvest. Word had reached Yorkshire that even the hardiest plants were failing because warm weather seemed to have forgotten to come. Nobody could remember such a cold summer.

Suddenly her horse neighed and tugged the cart violently to the right. China groaned as the reins jerked on her arm, straining her shoulder.

"What is wrong with you, Bayberry?" she asked. The horse was usually placid, but now the horse whinnied again more frantically. Again the cart pulled to the right.

The woods closed in around the road, tall and thin trees set in sparse undergrowth. A rustling sound came from her left. She looked,

hoping to espy some roe deer in the shadows. The day became strangely still. There was no breeze. Birdsong had vanished. Even the distant baaing of sheep was gone. It was as if she alone were alive.

She chided herself for her stray thoughts, knowing it would be silly to let her imagination trick her. She had spent most of her life trying to avoid that. There were enough rumors about the Nethercott family's peculiar ways. She did not want to add to them.

Something then stuck out of the hedgerow on her left. Sunlight flashed off metal. Something long and metal. A gun!

Her first instinct was to slap the reins and set the horse to a run. Instead, she drew back on the reins, halting Bayberry before the horse could panic.

There had been rumors about a thief stopping carriages along the deserted roads of the moors, but those attacks had taken place on moonless nights. Had the highwayman grown more bold? Or, she gulped at the thought, more desperate?

She must not panic. It might be one of her neighbors hunting. And Squire Haywood, the local magistrate, had asked the men in the local parishes to help find the highwayman. Nobody had seen a hint of the robber, save for his victims. He obviously knew the moors well, which meant he must be a local resident. That was a horrifying thought.

"Stay where you are!" came a shout. The voice was oddly accented, but the words were clear and emphasized with a motion from the weapon.

China realized the metal thing protruding from the hedgerow was not a gun. The end was made of metal. The rest of it was a wooden shaft—a spear! Why was a highwayman using a spear?

The man stepped out from the concealing branches. He wore leggings that reached just below his knees and a long shirt with short sleeves. Both were faded red. A cloak with a cowl draped over an armored waistcoat made in strips of metal, lashed together in the front. More pieces of metal hung over his shoulders and halfway down his upper arm. His shoes were leather, and as he stepped closer, she could see they were studded on the bottom. On his head, he wore a helmet that had a broad piece of metal to protect the back of his neck. A short sword was set in a scabbard lashed to the armored waistcoat. In one hand he carried the spear that must have been almost seven feet long; in the other, he held a scarlet shield that was rounded to offer him protection on three sides.

Sunlight glinted off the mail and spear, surrounding him with a cool glow. He wore a frown beneath his prominent nose. His eyes were pale blue and his dark hair beneath his helmet closely cropped.

China stared at him, shocked. She had seen drawings of such clothing in her father's books about ancient Roman legionnaires who once held the area as part of their vast empire. She wanted to ask him why he was dressed so, but if she angered him, he might drive that spear through her.

But why was a highwayman dressed as a Roman soldier?

"Get out," he ordered, holding the spear inches from the center of her chest.

She obeyed, whispering a soft apology to the horse before saying, "If you are planning on stealing the cart, please treat my horse with kindness. There is no need to lay on the whip."

"I have no interest in your horse or cart."

Drawing her reticule out of the cart, she opened it and emptied a few coins into her hand. She held them out to him.

"I have no need for your money."

"Then what do you want?" She took a step toward the rear of the cart as his gaze swept over her. The road was deserted. Was her only choice her honor or her life? "I must warn you that I can scream very loudly. If you lay a single hand on me –"

"We have no time to waste. Will you be silent?"

China nodded, surprised at her own prattle.

"What is your name?" he asked.

"China Nethercott."

"From the priory – I mean from the castle?"

"Yes, Nethercott Castle. Not many people around here remember that it was a priory more than two hundred years ago." She hesitated, then asked, "Are you interested in many periods of history?"

"All of them."

"Excuse me?"

"I am interested in all the periods of Britannia's history since I was sent here with other Menapian and Belgics when Carausius proclaimed himself emperor of Britannia while Diocletian was emperor in Rome."

"Excuse me?" she repeated, not recognizing any of the names except Britannia and Rome. She was ready to condemn the man as deranged, but it was an epithet she did not use easily. Too many people had labeled her sweet father crazy when he had simply chosen to live his life in his own manner and raise his three daughters to question the world around them.

He paused so long in answering that she wondered if he had gone into some barely conscious state. If he were truly mad, he might be unsettled by her questioning his fantasy and have become frozen in thought. She had read about such cases. No one comprehended why such a reaction occurred, and it was extremely rare.

Then he replied. "We are wasting time when – All right. Let me see if I can explain this with terms you will comprehend," he said in a calm voice that suggested she was the witless one. "I came here with members of my clan from the area you now call the Low Countries. I served my emperors – both the one in Rome and the usurper who claimed to rule Britannia and western France - by training troops at what is now known as Cawthorne Camp," he said.

She knew that name. Beyond the trees, on the edge of a flat hilltop that dropped sharply into the valley, were the ruins of a Roman settlement. Her father had spent many pleasant afternoons digging among the earthwork ruins, always excited whenever he found an artifact, even if only a pottery shard.

"But that camp has been abandoned for almost fifteen hundred years," she said.

"I realize that." He grimaced and shook his head. "Why is it always

the same? Why must all of you pester me with the doubt, the questions, the attempt to pretend you believe me even though you think I am insane?"

"Are you asking me to answer those questions?"

"No!" He drew in a deep breath, letting it sift out past his clenched teeth. Glancing over his shoulder, he squared his shoulders. "I was talking to myself. Let us get this underway. Tempus omnia revelat."

"Time reveals everything?" she asked, unsure because his odd accent was even more pronounced in Latin than in English.

"You know Latin."

"Yes, my father taught my sisters and I so we could read his books and discuss them with him."

His eyebrows shot up and then he smiled. "It is about time that women were educated!"

That smile altered everything about him. Though his spear was still aimed at her heart, she could hope – for the first time – that he had no intention of driving it through her.

"I agree," she said carefully.

"And you are educated enough that you cannot believe that a Roman centurion stands before you."

"It is unlikely."

His smile broadened, creasing his deeply tanned cheeks. "It would be if I were still alive. However, more than a century before the camp in the trees was allowed to return to its natural state, I died here."