

I am about to step through time, and I am terrified. I literally stand at the precipice, having determined the exact spot on the floor where the time stitch lies, the toes of my boots a scant inch outside it.

My sister is on the other side, and she needs help, and no one can provide it except me, because our elder sister is thousands of miles away, along with her fellow time-travelers. I am the only person here who knows about the stitch—and the only one who knows that Miranda and her husband, Nicolas, passed through it.

I am also the only one in our family who has not taken this leap. That includes my infant niece, who regularly travels from our time—the nineteenth century—to the twenty-first. I have said I have no interest in making the journey. That is a lie. I have said I simply do not have the time. That is less of a lie, but in truth, it is preposterous to say I could not afford even an afternoon to see another world.

I am afraid of what lies before me. It represents chaos. An upheaval of everything I know. Visit another world? I'm still struggling to find balance in my own.

I am unsettled by what lies beyond because Miranda embraces it, and my sister is chaos in human form, wild and impetuous and bold and all the things I cannot afford to be. I am a woman trained as a doctor and passing as a nurse, and the only way I manage that is by keeping my head down, giving no one cause to notice me.

Yet none of that matters if Miranda needs me, and the only reason I still hesitate is . . .

Fear.

Fear that I am not what she needs in this moment.

Two weeks ago, Miranda and Nicolas leaped through this stitch to fulfill a promise made at Christmas. The Sight runs in our family, and while my own experience with it is . . . complicated, Miranda sees and can communicate with the dead, and she promised a young man's tormented spirit that she would help his family.

To do that, Nicolas and Miranda had to go to the eighteenth century. Before they left, we learned everything we could about the historical period and the young man's story, because this was no ordinary young man. He'd been a highwayman who'd been murdered by Scarlet Jack, a vigilante posing as a fellow highwayman.

While Miranda did not expect to encounter trouble—they only planned to visit the dead boy's family—something has happened. She was due back three days ago, and I have waited as long as I dare.

I lift my satchel from the floor. I have spent the past three days rushing about preparing for my own trip while hoping it would not be needed, that Miranda and Nicolas would stagger out of the stitch, exhausted but safe, Miranda bubbling with a new story to tell.

That has not happened, and so I am here, wearing one of my two newly made traveling dresses that will fit the *robe à la française* style, with a tightly laced bodice, deep square neckline and pleated skirt. Instead of a corset, I ought to be wearing stiff stays that pull my shoulders back and thrust my chest forward, but I do not quite know how to achieve that, so I have made do as best I can. At worst, I will be considered unfashionable, and I hardly care about that.

Thankfully, my visit will predate the era of powdered and puffed hair, and I only pin mine up while adding a simple cotton cap appropriate to the time. Curling one's hair is also appropriate, but mine is already curly enough that I need only to let a few tendrils hang. My boots ought to be pointed at the toe, so I have selected ones as close to that as possible. I also ought to wear makeup, and while that thought intrigues me, I would not know where to begin, so I must hope that it is not expected of a woman traveling. In my satchel, I have only items that are—if not completely correct for the time—correct enough that I may only seem a little odd, which is nothing new for me. I have left nothing

to chance. I will enter the early eighteenth century with a plan and everything I need to pass as unnoticed as I do in this world.

I am about to step through when I realize I have forgotten to remove my spectacles. I do not actually need them to see. They are only part of “passing unnoticed,” along with dowdy clothing and a downcast glance. In a place like Thorne Manor, where I am comfortable, I do not wear the spectacles or the dull clothing and certainly not the downcast gaze, but I was in town today and quite forgot to remove the spectacles on my return.

I set them atop the letter I have left for Bronwyn and Rosalind. Then I lift my foot toward the—

Wait.

What if Miranda didn’t end up where she needed to be? It is not as if she can point to a date on a calendar and go there. She trusts that the stitch will take her where she needs to be, and so far, it has, but what if it did not?

And what is to say that I will end up in the same time she’s currently in?

The others travel between our time and Bronwyn’s, like a rail line with only two destinations. It is different for Miranda. Why would it also be different for me? What if I end up trapped in the future, as Rosalind did the first time she stepped through?

No, I cannot do this. I am being overly impetuous and must think it—

A yowl startles me, and I spin to see Bronwyn’s calico cat, Enigma, leaping straight at me. I stagger back in surprise. The cat hits me, slamming me backward, and I fall flat on my rear, satchel still clutched in one hand.

“Enigma!” I say. “That is most unacceptable . . .”

I trail off.

The cat is gone.

The entire room is gone, and I am sitting on the floor in an empty one, dust swirling around me.

I have fallen through the stitch.

I have crossed time.

I leap to my feet and wheel to look at the spot where I landed, at the mark I left in the dust.

That’s the spot. Step back into it and return—

No, I can curse that blasted cat for knocking me through, but I also know that I owe her a plate of fish for giving me the push I needed. If I go back, even just to test that I can, I might never summon the courage to return.

One look around tells me I am where I need to be. While the room itself is devoid of any furnishings that would tell me the time period, the fact that it has been left empty has also led to dust, and in that dust, two sets of fading footsteps cross from me to the door.

Miranda and Nicolas came through, left this room and did not return. That means I am in the same world as they are, and so it does not matter what the actual time period is.

I am where I need to be.



IF THIS WERE ONE OF MY SISTER'S NOVELS, SHE WOULD TELL HOW HER heroine prowled the house, taking in everything and wondering at it all. But this is me, Portia Hastings, the overly practical and overly somber middle sister. I have a goal in mind and no time to tarry. I have done quite enough of that today, and if I linger, I shall put myself impossibly behind schedule. Also, I do not particularly wish to linger. Oh, I am certain this world contains wonders, but I will see them in passing as I make my way toward the goal of my imperiled sister.

When Miranda invited me to join the planning for their trip, she pretended to be in need of my research skills and attention to detail. In truth, I think she secretly hoped to entice me into joining the mission itself. She expected it would be like helping plan another's exotic voyage. How could I not long to join it? One would think that after years of me not being the least tempted to join Miranda's adventures, she would know better. But I suppose I cannot blame her for hoping she might still light a spark inside me.

There *is* a spark inside me, and it is very easy to light. Tempt me with knowledge. That is what I seek. Miranda does the same, but her curiosity is far more scattershot. She simply wants to know. Anything. Everything. She is a sponge soaking up all new information. I want to know that which will allow me to help my patients.

There is only one thing before this that has lured me in the direction of that stitch: the promise of medical knowledge from the future. Yet I

soon realized I did not need to make the voyage myself. Like me, Nicolas is a doctor by training if not by certification—in his case, a pirate ship and the looming presence of a guillotine ended his plans for a complete medical education in France. Now he has access to the medical knowledge of the future, which he happily shares with me.

I pause only long enough to ensure there is no one at home. The house is indeed closed up and looks as if it has been for more than a season. All that means is that I do not need to worry about bumping into a very surprised ancestor of Bronwyn's husband, Lord William Thorne.

I know this house well, and so I make my way directly to the front door. Within minutes of coming through the stitch, I am outside of Thorne Manor and striding toward the path that will take me to Whitby.

Having helped my sister prepare for this trip, I know exactly where she intended to go, and I know how they intended to get there, so I need only follow in their footsteps. Once I left the house, I lost the guide of those prints in the dust and must rely on their metaphorical prints, following the route I helped them plan.

I need to head deeper into the Yorkshire moors, east toward Whitby. The easiest way to get there would be to take a coach from High Thornesbury. But as Miranda and Nicolas realized, High Thornesbury is too tiny for strangers to simply appear in without everyone wondering where you came from. We couldn't even determine whether High Thornesbury *has* a coach stop in this period. So they had planned to walk to Whitby, knowing they'd find one there.

Whitby is not a short walk. It is nearly ten miles. That is why I wore comfortable boots and brought food. I had planned to stop for a picnic on the moors, but I am running later than I expected, having underestimated the walking time and overestimated my own sense of direction.

By the time I reach Whitby, it's midafternoon. It will be only a few hours by coach to my destination, meaning I will arrive in time to find lodgings, if there are lodgings to be had. If not, I am prepared to spend the night in whatever shelter I can find. That is the advantage to being practical. I may not be the most spontaneous person, but nor do I shrink at the idea of sleeping in a hay barn.

Practicality also means I do not shrink from using cold stream water to tidy myself. When I am presentable, I find a high spot from which to

observe the town. I have been in this world for hours now, and I still am not certain what year it is . . . or even which century. Yes, that sounds ridiculous, but I have been crossing through the moors. Any farmhouses I spotted were simply that—farmhouses, with no distinguishing features that would place them in the eighteenth century, the nineteenth or even the seventeenth.

Once I have found the highest perch I can manage in boots and skirts, I pause to observe. At first glance, Whitby looks much like the one I know, complete with the harbor and the gothic abbey on the opposite hill. It is only on closer inspection that I see the differences—a building I do not recognize, another building I cannot find. It is also significantly smaller.

When I draw closer, I can truly see that I am well before my time. There is no train, not even the old horse-drawn one. The ships are different, too, and there are far fewer of them. Far fewer, too, than in the Whitby where Nicolas lived at the end of the eighteenth century. Most of all, though, the people are different. Their dress differs, to be sure, but I expected that from my research. In my time, Whitby is a thriving destination for seaside vacations, and I see little of that here, the grand hotels and such not yet built.

As I make my way to the inn from whence the coach departs, I pass a stand selling various sundries, including newspapers, the best way to discover the date. There is only one paper, and it is much rougher in design than the ones I'm familiar with. The price, though, is not significantly less than I would expect to pay in my time.

I buy a copy and then walk far enough that no one will see me staring intently at the date . . . perhaps with a look of surprise.

There is no surprise. I have arrived in the spring after the young highwayman perished. In other words, Miranda came out of the stitch exactly when she expected to. She had hoped that Fate might bring her back a year earlier, *before* the boy died. Yet Fate seems to decide which wrong it wants Miranda and Nicolas to right, and in this case, it was not to save the boy, but to ensure his destitute family received the money he'd given his life for. And now it has helpfully brought me to the same year to help them.

Before I go to climb the inn's rough steps, I lift my skirts, and I'm momentarily unbalanced when that requires far less effort than it would in my time. I'm wearing a traveling dress, but in this era, our research

indicated that I only needed a chemise, petticoats and a very small pannier under it. I am also wearing drawers, which would not be found in this era, but I could not bring myself to forgo them.

My dress is dowdy, as it would be in my time. That is not my preference, but it is excellent for blending in. When I look around, I see a lack of the vibrant colors I would expect in my time, and most of the pretty pastels are reserved for women younger than my twenty-nine years. There are many floral prints and plenty of lace and bows that I eye rather longingly.

I am dressed correctly, though, as I can tell by the woman and her daughter who enter the inn ahead of me. They are both very finely attired, looking rather out of place in the provincial lodgings. Another couple alighting from a coach are also dressed well. This must be one of the better accommodations in town then.

I head to the counter and tell the clerk that I wish to buy a ticket for the next coach heading northwest through Ravensford. He frowns at me and says, "You missed today's coach, miss. It left an hour past."

I keep my face expressionless, as I inwardly chastise myself. An hour? In other words, I would have caught it if I had not gotten lost on the moors. Or if I had not insisted on surveying the town first and buying a newspaper.

"I will buy a ticket for tomorrow, then," I say. "And I will also require a night's accommodation."

When the man hesitates, I steel myself for him to ask who else will join me in the room. My husband? Parents? Elderly relative? Miranda has said that the Victorian restrictions on a woman's freedom of movement are largely a product of our own era, particularly outside the cities. Is it different in this time period? The man's expression suggests not, which means I might indeed be seeking a hay barn for the night.

"There is no coach tomorrow, miss. Nor the next day, either. It'll be three days hence."

I stare at him. "Three days?"

"If you wish to travel to York or Leeds, there are coaches in the morning. You can likely catch one to Ravensford from there instead. Not much call for travel from here to there."

I hadn't considered this. If Whitby is not yet a popular holiday destination—nor even a popular port—then travel would indeed mostly be to the larger centers.

"I can sell you a ticket to Leeds," the man says. "That would be best. Go to Leeds, and then take a coach going through the smaller towns, like Ravensford."

"How much is the ticket to Leeds?" I ask.

He tells me. It is less than half of what I would pay in my own time. That gives me another option.

"I am in rather desperate straits," I say. "My sister is about to have her first child, and she telegraphed to say she is having difficulties. I am trained in midwifery. Perhaps I could hire a private coach?"

The man looks dubious. "You appear to be traveling alone, miss."

"Yes, I am." I channel the same attitude I use whenever anyone questions my right to be in a medical lecture. I lift my chin and cloak myself in the self-importance of my male colleagues. "As I said, my sister is in urgent medical need. I did not have time to find a proper traveling companion."

"I understand, miss, and I am not questioning that. It's just that . . ." He lowers his voice. "There are some proper coaches for hire, but they're all away, and the ones that remain are . . ."

"Ah," I say, softening my tone. "They are not the best conveyance for a woman traveling alone."

"Yes, miss. Not the best conveyances or the best . . . conveyors."

"I understand."

I think fast. Ravensford is nearly thirty miles from here. I could walk, but it would take two days. Perhaps I could hire a horse? I am not certain my riding skills are up to that. I'm still thinking when a voice behind me says, "Did I hear you're going to Ravensford, dear?"

I turn to see the woman I'd followed into the inn. Her daughter has taken their packages inside, and the woman must have been waiting behind me to speak with the clerk. I quickly step away from the desk.

"So sorry, ma'am," I say. "Please go ahead. My business can wait."

"Oh, I am not in any hurry, dear. I just overheard that you seem to be heading in our direction and are unable to procure a coach. We pass through Ravensford, and we'll be leaving in an hour or so, if you'd care to join us."

"Oh." I hesitate. I urgently need to get to Ravensford, but to travel with a stranger? Is that different in these times? Better? Worse?

"I . . . I would not wish to inconvenience you, ma'am," I say.

She smiles knowingly. "Which is a polite way of saying you do not



know us at all and, as a young lady traveling alone, you must be careful." Before I can protest, she turns to the clerk. "David? You know us, yes? Could you provide an introduction?"

He straightens. "Of course. This is Mrs. Marion Ward. Her husband owns a shipping line, and they stay with us regularly."

"A *small* shipping line," Mrs. Ward says with a smile. "We have a country house ten miles past Ravensford, and my husband insists we stop in Whitby for business each time we come up." She turns her smile on the clerk. "Which I do not mind, as I adore the coast." She turns back to me. "There is no need to decide just yet. I was just going to ask David for a pot of tea before we leave. Would you join me for that, and we can get to know one another properly?"

With the desk clerk having vouched for Mrs. Ward, I do not need time to make up my mind. Still, I do join her for tea. She seems very kind and well mannered, with subtle inquiries about me and my family that I do not begrudge her. That is the way of things in my world, and I am certain it is the same here. We are judged not by who we are but from whence we came.

No, that isn't entirely true. It *does* matter who you are, in the sense that if I were an "unsuitable" woman, no family connections—short of royal ones—could save me. I mean that I am otherwise judged by my family. Do I have noble or genteel blood? If not, do I at least come from respectable people . . . and by *respectable*, they mean people of both repute and money.

My father was a doctor, a respected member of a very respectable profession. As for money, there was little of that. To be a wealthy doctor means to treat only those who can afford it. That was not my father, nor is it me. I skim over that by playing my best card—my brothers-in-law. My eldest sister is married to an earl's son and my youngest to a French marquis's son. Both are younger sons, to be sure, without titles themselves, but what matters is the lineage . . . and if such "respectable" families welcomed daughters-in-law from my family, well, I must come from very good stock indeed.

As I said, such inquiries are normal in my world, and so I do not begrudge Mrs. Ward the asking, or the answers . . . until I realize why

she asked, which I don't discover until I'm in the coach with her and her daughter, waiting to leave.

"Oh, and here is my husband," she says, opening the door to greet him.

Mrs. Ward introduces me to Mr. Ward, and then another figure appears . . . that of a man about my own age.

"And my son," she says, with such satisfaction that I understand exactly why I have been invited along. "Georgie? This is Miss Portia Hastings. She is from London, going to help her younger sister with her first baby. Her sister is married to a French marquis's son. Isn't that exciting? And her older sister is married to an *earl's* son."

I cringe, and I also feel a rush of annoyance. I'd said earlier that I understood Mrs. Ward's interest in my family. That was when I presumed she was only making certain she hadn't impulsively invited an unsuitable woman to share a coach with her daughter. Now I understand why she'd been asking, and I cannot help but wonder, if I had avoided the questions, would that invitation have evaporated?

*Oh, I'm so terribly sorry, Miss Hastings, but we don't seem to have any room in the coach after all.*

I need this ride, however awkward it might be, and I take comfort in the fact that "Georgie" only glances at me and grunts. Yet another spinster his mother is trying to foist on him, too old by far.

Mrs. Ward makes small noises of distress at his lack of interest, but then the coach is pulling away, and it is too late to deposit the rejected potential bride on the roadside. Also, Mr. Ward starts talking, and I would like to think he is saving me from a strained situation, but it is soon apparent that he simply likes to talk—about himself. His business and the trials and tribulations thereof, all due to the "laziness" and "ineptitude" of his workers.

Hours pass. His daughter falls asleep first. Then his wife. Mr. Ward takes no offense and only switches his attention to his son, who is gazing out the window with such obvious disinterest that I'm impressed in spite of myself. How lovely to be an only son, secure in the knowledge that you will inherit the family fortune without even pretending to respect your father.

Eventually, Mr. Ward runs out of grievances to share and promptly falls asleep, leaving me safe to turn my attention to the window. It's early dusk, blanketing the moors in silence and dove-gray light, the

perfect complement to the purple heather. I gaze out, and let time pass as I forget all my obligations and my worries, and I imagine lying on the heather, staring up at a star-dappled night sky, inhaling the rich smell of the moors. Precious moments of peace and quiet, nothing pulling at my attention. Moments to truly bask in the glory of the world around me and—

“I ought to offer my congratulations.”

I startle and look at Georgie, smirking at me.

“Pardon?” I say.

“My congratulations on fooling my mother. Admittedly, it is not so difficult a task, as much as she likes to think herself a perceptive creature. I am debating whether to tell her the truth. I will promise to wait until you are gone in return for”—he flashes his teeth—“considerations.”

“Whatever you think you know—” I begin.

“To believe such a story shows how desperate she is for me to wed. An exceptionally attractive woman . . .” His gaze travels down me. “Traveling alone? Unmarried at your age. You must be nearly five-and-twenty.”

I could laugh at that, but I only press my lips together.

He continues, “With an earl and a French marquis in the family, you could be the foulest-tempered shrew, and you would still have your pick of husbands. Therefore, you are lying about your brothers-in-law. Still, no woman who looks like you should be unwed at such an advanced age. You may be hiding in that hideous dress, but I am quite certain your tastes run to far more extravagant attire.”

I blink in surprise. Yes, I do have a weakness for pretty things, be they bright colors or lace trim or crisp ribbons. Left to my own devices, I would walk around in dresses that—as Miranda jests—Rosalind could use as models for her fancy cakes. The problem with such dresses is that they make me seem silly and frivolous.

It does not help that, as this lout is pointing out, I am considered conventionally attractive, which means my features follow a rather dull symmetry, with a disappointing lack of striking characteristics. If I were a dress, I would be one that is perfectly styled and perfectly boring, pleasing to the eye but not surprising in any way. In other words, I would be a dress that I myself would not want to wear. How much more interesting to be an averagely attractive woman with stunning

eyes or a strong nose or anything that makes one look twice and say more than "She is very pretty."

Losing myself in my thoughts, I forget that it was a very odd and perceptive comment for Georgie to make. I miss the next thing he says and only rise from my preoccupation when I see him leering at me.

"Hmm?" I say.

"I am correct, am I not? That you prefer extravagant attire, both in your dress and under it?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"Oh, do not play the miss with me. I know what you are." He winks. "I am from London, after all. I have an account at both Marguerite's and Juliet's."

I have no idea what he's talking about, and I only stare.

"Shall I spell it out?" He leans toward me, whispering, "You are a W-H-O-R—"

I jerk back, my gaze going to his father, sleeping beside him, and his mother and sister beside me.

"They are sound asleep, and I will not share your secrets, as I promised, in return for"—he smirks—"considerations."

"I am not a . . ." I choke on the word, and I sputter, and even as I do, I feel rather foolish for my prurience. I long to be Rosalind at this moment. She would have a sharp rejoinder, putting the young man in his place. Or Miranda. Dear Lord, I shudder at how Miranda might handle this. She'd play along, and I almost wish I could do that . . . except that playing along in this could lead to a terrible sort of trouble.

"I am unmarried because I have an occupation," I say, finally, finding my voice and chilling it as I meet his eyes with an equally icy glare. "I was engaged—for three years—to a young man who died fighting abroad."

Where ever did that come from? Part of it is true. I was engaged for years. Also, I did lose him after he went abroad . . . and fell madly in love with another.

I try not to be resentful of Reginald's betrayal. Try and fail miserably, and I must find some of that outrage now, because Georgie doesn't laugh at my lie. He hesitates and then rolls his shoulders, as if throwing off the unacceptable discomfort of potentially being wrong.

"You still cannot expect me to believe you are unmarried, with such

a face and figure." His appraisal now rakes over me, as if my own body can be used as evidence against me.

"Perhaps I am not romantically interested in men," I say.

Where did *that* come from? Moreover, how do I manage to say it without blushing? I am quite pleased with myself, though, and I fully expect him to be rendered speechless, perhaps even blush himself.

Instead, he only shrugs and says, "Romance need have nothing to do with marriage. It rarely does."

In other words, he did not take my meaning at all, and I'm gathering the courage to be plainer when he says, "Whatever the answer, your story is rubbish, my dear. Rushing madly to the side of your sister in . . . Where are you going again?"

"Ravensford."

His head jerks up. "Ravensford?"

"That is what I said."

He thumps back against the seat, laughing loud enough that his sister briefly stirs. "Oh, you are going to join the horse race. Or should I call it a mare race?"

He snickers at his own unfathomable joke. When I don't react, he says, "Lord Sterling, Earl of Ravensford?"

I still do not react, having no idea what he means.

"The earl needs money and a wife," he says. "Fortunately, for a man with such an old and esteemed title, the two often come together, which is exactly what he hopes, being rather"—he lowers his voice, as if saying a profanity—"destitute."

Georgie leans back before continuing. "Seems the old chap is in danger of losing his lands. His aunt has arranged a ball, during which all the prospective maidens will be paraded before him, like the prize fillies they are. Although, if the situation is as dire as I hear, they'd stand a greater chance of catching his eye if they ride in on pots of money."

He guffaws, and his sister stirs again but still doesn't wake. He jerks his chin her way. "Mama is trying to convince Father to take Eloise to the ball."

I glance at the girl, who looks barely old enough to wear a corset. "Surely she is not of age."

"Sixteen. Too young to wed, but not too young to form an engagement, which Lord Sterling might agree to if it came with a generous loan. As for you . . ." That raking gaze again. "If you thought to catch

his eye with your face and figure and a modest dowry, you had best turn back now."

"I am going to visit my sister," I say. "I have no dowry, which means I would be of no interest to Lord Sterling. Now, if you are finished insulting me, sir, might I ask a favor?"

"Your wish is my command, my lady." He feigns a half bow. "Whatever could you want of me?"

"Silence," I say. "I would like sil—"

A noise sounds outside the coach, and one of the horses lets out a neigh of alarm as the driver pulls them to a sudden stop.

*Please tell me there is a sheep on the road.* It is the Yorkshire moors. There are always sheep on the road, and the fact that I have not already been saved from Georgie by a stray ovine is disgraceful.

Through the window, I can see that it is now late dusk, with a full moon lighting the moors. I cannot, however, see what has stopped us.

Whatever it is—sheep, dog, conveniently fallen tree—the sudden stop has the desired effect of waking the Wards, the elder Mr. Ward startling up with "What's that?" and Mrs. Ward clutching her breast with "Oh, heavens!"

I take the door handle, and I have it halfway open when Mrs. Ward says, "My dear, what ever are you doing?"

"Escaping," I mutter. Again, that is not like me at all, but it is as if I have realized I am in a world where no one will ever see me again. I can do and say what I wish without fear of how it will reflect on my family or me.

I climb from the coach and—

Oh!

I find myself staring into a pair of amber-gold eyes.

That's when I see the mask covering the lower half of his face.

And then I see the gun.

**T**he man—I still see nothing but those arresting eyes—wears a black kerchief over his nose, covering the lower half of his face. He also holds a flintlock musket, which is pointed at my midriff.

“Get back on the coach,” he growls.

I stare, not quite comprehending what is happening. Then another male voice—lighter and almost jovial—says, “Ignore my companion’s rudeness, miss. While I am loath to say this and deprive my eyes of such beauty, I must insist that, yes, you retreat to the safety of the coach.”

“Why?”

I keep my gaze on the first man, whose eyes narrow and then open again as he nods.

“She’s simple,” the first man says to the second.

“I am most certainly not *simple*,” I say. “I only do not understand . . .”

And then realization strikes. We are on an empty road through the moors, in a fancy coach, which has been stopped by armed and masked men.

“Highwaymen,” I whisper.

“We prefer knights of the road,” says the second man. He speaks with a clear Yorkshire accent, but it’s lighter than I’d expect from the region.



I must have fallen asleep on the coach. I finally got Georgie to stop talking, and I fell asleep with the others. That is the obvious explanation. I am on a mission to help my sister, whose own mission involves highwaymen. And so I am dreaming that we've been stopped by highwaymen.

"Miss?" the second one says. "I really do need to insist you get back into the coach."

I reach up to my throat and unclasp the necklace there. It is a simple piece, far from my favorite and lacking any sentimental value.

I hold out the necklace to the first masked man. "Take this. It is all I have, as I am traveling alone and have only caught a ride with these people. There is a little travel money in my bags, but I would ask that you allow me to keep that." I lower my voice. "The gentlemen on the coach will have more. Particularly the younger. He is a boor, and you ought to take him for everything he has. His papa will give him more."

The man stares at me with those remarkable eyes. I waggle the necklace in front of his masked face.

"Well, take it," I say. "I wish to stretch my legs while you complete your business here."

"You may keep your necklace, miss," the second one says. "But I really must insist that you—"

"What is the meaning of this!" says a voice behind me.

I glance over to see Georgie fairly leaping from the coach.

"Oh, decided to join us, did you?" I say.

"I was asleep."

I make a most unladylike noise. "No, you were cowering until you realized they were being reasonable and mistook that for weakness."

The second highwayman chokes on a laugh. I finally glance over at him. He is somewhat smaller than the first man, who is tall and broad shouldered. The second is fair haired, the first dark, both with their hair tied at the nape of the neck, worn much longer than is the fashion in my day. The second called the first his "companion," but I suspect the relationship is closer than that, given the resemblance in their broad foreheads and eyes. Cousins? Brothers, even?

I am examining the scene as if I am awake, yet haven't I already decided I'm dreaming?

Am I still certain of that? I rather hope so, as I have just told two highwaymen that I am ignoring their demands. I have also been most

ungracious to Georgie, though, to be quite honest, if this is not a dream, I will be less horrified by that than I ought to be.

I look at each man in turn. They haven't moved or spoken, as if frozen in a tableau, which should indicate this is indeed a dream. Yet they are not immobile. The younger highwayman is still recovering from his laugh; Georgie is still recovering from my sharp words, and the older highwayman is glowering at me as if I am the cause for this going sideways.

I suppose I am, aren't I? And I suppose I am also mistaken, and it is not a dream after all. We really have been set upon by highwaymen.

"Miss?" the younger one says. "Keep your necklace, and if you do not wish to climb back inside, please step away from the coach. Our business is with Mr. Ward and his family."

"You know who we are?" Georgie asks.

The younger highwayman rolls his eyes. "No, we simply sit on this empty road for hours in hopes that more than a farmer's cart will pass. We know who you are, and we know that you can afford to pay the toll."

"Toll?" Georgie says.

"He is being metaphorical," I say with a sigh. "You must pay him so that we may continue on our way. Have you never been set upon by highwaymen before?"

"Certainly not."

"Then you are overdue in paying your road tax." The younger highwayman sweeps off his tricorne hat with a mock courtly bow and then holds it out to Georgie. "Pass this around inside. We prefer money, and if we get enough of it, we will not require your valuables."

Georgie makes no move to take the hat. The younger highwayman is several feet from him, holding it out, and Georgie just stands there with his hands shoved into his pockets.

The younger one sighs and steps toward Georgie, his voice broadening into a deeper Yorkshire brogue. "Take the hat, lad, and we will not need to bother your family inside the coach."

Georgie lifts his chin, meeting the other man's gaze. The older highwayman rocks forward, as if to intervene, but at a look from his compatriot, he settles for a warning growl.

"Here," I say, with a step toward the younger highwayman. "I shall

take the hat and pass it inside. His mother and young sister are within, and if they can stay there, that is best."

Georgie's left arm flies out to ward me off.

"Then take the bloody hat," I mutter.

Georgie puts out his left hand for it. The younger highwayman takes another step. Georgie yanks his right hand from his pocket, and I see why it was hidden there . . . and why he wanted the highwayman moving closer.

"Knife!" I say.

I twist to stop Georgie, but the older highwayman knocks me out of the way. There's a gasp and a curse and then a snarl of rage, and by the time I recover my footing, Georgie is on the ground. The older highwayman has one boot on the young dandy's chest and the muzzle of his musket under Georgie's chin. I turn to the younger highwayman. He's reaching for something on his chest, and it takes a moment for me to realize it is the handle of a small knife, the blade embedded in him.

"Don't remove it!" I say.

I hardly expect him to listen, but he stops, and his gaze lifts to mine.

"I am trained in medical care," I say. "Do not remove it, or it shall bleed more."

The coach door flies open, Mr. Ward leaning out. "Georgie?" His gaze swings to the first highwayman. "Unhand him, you cad. *Now.*"

The older highwayman raises his musket to point at Mr. Ward. The older man stumbles back and seems about to close the door.

"Give him the hat," the highwayman growls to me. "He is to fill it with everything they have, and if I do not think it enough, I will give his son an injury matching my companion's."

I pick up the hat from the ground and hand it to Mr. Ward. "Do it."

The old man sputters.

"Georgie injured his compatriot," I say. "He will not hesitate to do the same to your son. To your *heir.*" I meet his gaze. "Your *only* heir."

"And perhaps I will aim lower," the man growls. "Ending the possibility of *continued* heirs."

Inside the coach, Mrs. Ward twitters and gasps. Mr. Ward snatches the hat from me and snaps, "You will pay for this, girl."

"She did nothing," the highwayman says. "If you wish to blame someone, blame your son."

"For not wishing to fatten the pockets of scoundrels?"

"Why not?" the highwayman meets his gaze. "He does it when he works for you."

The younger highwayman makes a noise in his throat, and the older one glances over quickly, concern darkening his eyes.

"I am fine," the younger man says, his voice strained. "However, if we can finish this with minimal delays for sermonizing, I would appreciate that."

The highwayman shoves his gun muzzle back under Georgie's chin and says to Mr. Ward, "I will count to thirty."

Mr. Ward disappears into the coach.

"May I look to your companion's injury?" I ask the older highwayman.

"Please," the younger one says. "And don't ask him. He'll let me bleed to death as he decides whether you can be trusted not to murder me."

The older man curtly nods and returns his gaze to the coach. I hurry to the younger one and help him lower himself onto the road, propped against the coach wheel.

I examine the wound, and I am torn between relief that the injury is not worse and distress that it is still more severe than I hoped. The knife has a small blade, and only half of it is embedded in the man's chest, which is good. Yet that half had the bad luck of finding a spot between his ribs. Thankfully, Georgie apparently has little knowledge of anatomy and struck on the right side, well away from the man's heart.

Once the man is seated—out of sight of his companion's watchful gaze—he allows himself to wince. "It is bad, isn't it?" he says.

"It would have been worse if you had removed the blade."

His eyes crinkle slightly, as if he's smiling weakly beneath his mask. "You are avoiding the question."

I finger the edges of the wound. "Very carefully inhale for me. Do not make any sudden movements."

His long and slow inhalation makes him wince, but he manages it.

"The blade has not pierced the lung. That is good. But the placement does mean that I will need to remove it before it does."

"Twenty-nine," the older highwayman calls. "Thirty."

The coach door swings open. Ward climbs out with my satchel in

hand, hanging open. He shoves the hat at the highwayman and curls his lip at me, making it clear where the coins have come from.

"Oh, no, no, no," the younger highwayman rasps. "We want *your* money. Not hers. I think we made that clear."

"I do not care," I say. "There is no time for argument—"

The older man grabs the hat and tosses it aside, coins tinkling to the hard-packed road. Then he yanks Mr. Ward aside and climbs into the coach, ignoring Ward's bleats of protest. More sounds of protest rise within, but they're equally weak, and moments later, the man emerges with a wad of notes in one fist and necklaces dangling from the other. Without a word, he pushes Ward perfunctorily against the coach, empties his pockets and takes his jewelry.

The highwayman starts to give Ward a push toward the coach, only to haul him back by his collar and look at me. "I presume you do not wish to continue traveling with them?"

"Why, yes," his companion says. "Surely she would like to be shoved out at the first crossroad, left on the moors in the dead of night." He looks at me. "We will see that you arrive at your destination, miss."

"Provided you treat my compatriot first and that he survives."

The younger highwayman rolls his eyes. "Pay him no mind. He is fond of barking, but rarely bites." At a noise from his compatriot, he sighs. "I said *rarely*, not *never*. Now stop growling, or she shall begin to wonder whether she has encountered a barghest on the roadside."

The older highwayman releases Ward.

"Wait!" I say as Ward climbs into his coach. To the highwayman, I gesture at his injured compatriot propped against the wheel. He lets out a curse and shouts to the driver to hold up, but Ward, safely inside, shouts the opposite, and the older highwayman fairly dives my way. We both take hold of his injured companion just as the coach rocks forward.

"We shall report you to the authorities!" Georgie calls out the window as they ride away.

"Please do!" the younger man calls back. "I am the damnable Lord Sterling, Earl of Ravensford. Please see to it that he—I am arrested at once."

Georgie makes a rude gesture as the coach rolls off.

"I am going to remove your shirt," I say to the younger man.

"I should hope so, as my injury is on my chest."

I nod, hoping my flush isn't apparent. I am accustomed to a world where I do indeed need to warn male patients before I disrobe them, sometimes even having them protest and attempt to cover themselves as best they can, which makes a proper examination most frustrating. It seems it is indeed different here, and the younger man does not bat an eye when I remove his bloodied shirt.

"I appreciate your kindness, miss. Given that we held up your coach, you have been both generous and equanimous."

I arch my brows at him. "You did meet my fellow passengers just now, did you not? I was quite ready to jump out and flee into the moors on my own."

"How ever did you end up with them?"

I turn to his companion, and I am about to ask for water when the man thrusts a waterskin at me. I nod my thanks and wet a clean part of the discarded shirt as I tell my story—from my pregnant sister to the lack of coaches and Mrs. Ward's offer.

The older man grunts. "She thought you seemed a possible match for that young lout."

"Indeed. I wish I had realized it as quickly as you. Fortunately, he was not interested, as he presumed I was telling tales and was actually . . ." I clear my throat, uncertain of the right words and not convinced I could use them even if I was. "A lady who trades in her affections."

"What?" the older man's eyes darken over his mask, his voice lowering to that growl.

"I set him straight," I say as I clean his companion's skin around the knife handle. "Then he decided I was heading to some sort of bride-choosing ball for a Lord Sterling." I look at the younger man. "Is that the one you mentioned?"

"It is." He regards me. "Is that your intent?"

"Certainly not. I am hardly in the market for a husband, and even if I was, this Lord Sterling apparently requires a sizable dowry. I have none."

"Good," the younger man says. "You do not wish to be caught up in that nonsense. Nor married to Lord Sterling."

"You did not seem overly fond of him."

"He is a brute. Rude, uncouth and an utter tyrant. Anyone living under his roof deserves nothing but sympathy."

His companion moves forward. "Did you say you needed that knife out of him?"

"I do," I say. "I have cleaned the area in preparation."

"She can do it," the younger man says. "She is the physician's assistant after all and—"

His companion wrenches out the knife.