

## The Haunting of Bourne House

*Note: To Swoon and to Spar takes place from January to May 1818; this bonus scene is set a year-and-a-half later, in October 1819 (a month after To Woo and to Wed's epilogue, for those who like to keep track of timelines). Happy reading!*

Despite her personal history as pertained to the (allegedly) supernatural, Jane had never believed in ghosts. After all, if they didn't see fit to haunt an exceedingly atmospheric Cornish manor set atop a seaside cliff, encased in moody coastal fogs, buffeted by wind and rain, far removed from anything remotely resembling civilization, then clearly they must not exist, for they'd be hard-pressed to find a more suitable location in which to take up residence.

Which was why it was all the more disconcerting, nearly two years into her marriage, to discover that she might be inhabiting a haunted house.

Not Trethwick Abbey, of course; *that*, at least, would have made sense. But it was Bourne House, the London residence that Penvale had inherited from his father, and from generations of viscounts Penvale before him, that had the audacity to be haunted, and Jane found this distinctly irritating. It was bad enough that they were in London at all; Jane had reluctantly agreed with Penvale's assessment that spending an autumn and winter on a remote cliff with a small baby was not, actually, the most enticing of prospects, but that didn't mean that she didn't nurse a small ember of begrudgement all the same. It wasn't even that London was nearly as terrible as she'd once considered it (it turned out that friends made any setting considerably more enjoyable), it was simply that it . . . well, it wasn't Cornwall.

Lovely, quiet, green, empty Cornwall, in their manor that she knew every inch of, full of all of her favorite books, and mercifully absent of any mysterious noises. Which was more than could be said of Bourne House at the moment, unfortunately.

"*Abbbbb*," said the noise, and Jane started, then went very still. It was late afternoon, and Penvale had taken Nora on a walk around St. James's Square, leaving Jane to what should have been a blissful half-hour with her books. She set down the

volume in her hands without even bothering to mark her place—a scandalous bit of neglect under ordinary circumstances—and rose to her feet, allowing the woolen shawl she'd had draped around her shoulders to fall onto the chaise. She planted her hands on her hips, cocked her head, and listened.

Hard.

She had not budged from this position in several minutes when she heard the telltale sound of footsteps in the hallway, and she turned in time to see the door open, revealing Penvale and their—unsurprisingly, albeit disappointingly—wide-awake daughter.

“What on earth are you doing?” her husband asked, and she realized with a glance down that her hands were still on her hips, her head still tilted at a slight angle.

“Listening,” she said, dropping her hands and instead crossing her arms over her chest. “I see the walk didn’t work.”

“Not in the slightest,” Penvale said cheerfully, shifting Nora from one hip to the other. Nora—eight months old, with a few dark curls and a slightly demonic gleam in her eye—beamed at Jane.

Jane narrowed her eyes at her.

“Bok!” said Nora gleefully, which was what she said about almost everything, it being the only word in her lexicon as yet. “Bok! Bok! Bok!”

Jane sighed, then crossed to Penvale and retrieved Nora from him. “Bok!” Nora howled, as soon as she was passed from father to mother, sensing that there was treachery afoot.

“Yes, I know, bok,” Jane agreed. “Bok bok bok. But you need to *sleep*, and clearly walks with Papa are not enough to make that happen.”

“I don’t understand it,” Penvale said, mystified. “Diana and Jeremy say that if they so much as put Isabella in her pram, she falls asleep.”

“That is because Isabella is a baby, and not a demon in baby form,” Jane said with a dark look at her own offspring. Nora seemed unperturbed by this show of maternal affection, having become distracted by the sight of one of Jane’s own curls, identical in hue to Nora’s, which she was now tugging on eagerly.

“Speaking of demons,” she said, would-be casual, “you haven’t heard any . . . unusual sounds lately?”

Penvale’s eyebrows shot up. “If you don’t count the noise Nora makes whenever she has her clothes changed, no.” He eyed her with undisguised wariness. “Don’t tell me you’ve heard another ghost, Jane. I simply haven’t the energy for it.”

“Ha, ha,” Jane said, rolling her eyes. “I’ve just been hearing odd . . . moans. When I’m alone.”

Penvale’s expression was veering towards concern. “Why don’t you let me put Nora down for a nap—”

“*Attempt* to put her down,” Jane muttered.

“—and you can rest, too.”

This did sound appealing. Jane couldn’t recall the last time she’d had a full night’s sleep—the frequent banshee screams from the nursery down the hall did have a rather damaging effect on peaceful slumber. Except—

“You don’t think I’m imagining things!” She scowled at her husband, who was regarding her with an expression of such tenderness mixed with worry that she couldn’t quite muster the energy to work herself into a proper fit of indignation.

“Of course not,” he said diplomatically, then leaned down to kiss her—quite thoroughly—before she could protest further. “I just think you could use a rest.”

Jane stifled a yawn with her hand. The thought of an hour in her bed was undeniably appealing.

“Well . . .” she said reluctantly, her arms already holding Nora out towards him. “Perhaps I’ll just shut my eyes for a few minutes.”

“Bok! Bok!” Nora said indignantly, not liking to be handed back to Penvale any more than she had liked being taken from him in the first place.

“I couldn’t have said it better myself,” Jane agreed, and reached out to press a quick kiss to Nora’s soft, chubby cheek.

An afternoon nap . . . and, surely, no more ghostly moans. It did sound rather nice.

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Two nights later, Penvale was soaking in the bath, feeling that all was right with his own little corner of the world, when he was unceremoniously interrupted by the door to his bedchamber banging open and Jane appearing, flushed in the face and positively vibrating with indignation.

“Penvale!”

“What?” he asked defensively, sinking slightly lower in the tub, as though water and soap bubbles would possibly be any defense in the face of a wrathful wife.

“The noise is back!”

“The noise,” he repeated blankly, momentarily lacking any notion of what she might be talking about.

“The *moaning*,” she said. She was already dressed for bed, with a red velvet dressing gown over her nightgown; Nora had been bathed and seen off into the company of her nanny for what would no doubt be a harrowing attempt to force her to sleep, and Penvale had been thinking—clearly overly optimistically—of a quiet evening with a brandy before the fire in his sitting room, Jane tucked up against his side. Perhaps even a bit of recreational nudity, depending on how the evening progressed.

Now, he realized that he would not even be permitted to enjoy his bath in peace. “I hardly knew you,” he informed the bathwater mournfully, before pushing to his feet, not missing the appreciative gleam that came to Jane’s eye as he reached for a towel.

“All right,” he said, towel secured firmly around his waist and gooseflesh already rising on his arms, “let’s hear this whispering.”

Jane turned without another word and led him through the connecting door into the sitting room, and then her bedchamber beyond. She came to a halt in the middle of the room, tilted her head, and *listened*.

Penvale, wishing to be supportive, followed suit.

And heard . . . nothing.

“Jane,” he said slowly, after a minute had elapsed with no sound other than the scrape of branches against the window. “Are you certain you heard this?”

“Of course I am,” Jane snapped. “Do you think I’ve lost my mind?”

“No,” he said, then a dark suspicion struck him. “Though, of course . . .”

“What?” she demanded.

“Well,” he said, eyeing her speculatively. “You do have a certain . . . history.”

Her jaw dropped. “You think I’m making it up!”

“Well, it’s not as though there’s not a precedent,” he pointed out reasonably.

Jane’s eyes narrowed. “Given, you know.” She crossed her arms across her chest. “The two previous times that—” Here, she exhaled sharply, and Penvale began to truly fear bodily harm. “—you tried to convince me that you were a ghost?” he finished in a rush.

“I see,” she said slowly. “So I choose *one* time to get up to some ghostly mischief—”

“Twice!” he protested.

“The second time was a *joke!* It was an anniversary gift! It was *romantic!*”

“Oh, yes, how could I forget the romance of chasing one’s own wife around a freezing house in Cornwall in the dead of winter?”

“You’re just put out because you were so slow, even though I was eight months pregnant with Nora,” Jane said smugly.

“Jane.” Penvale stared at her incredulously. “Obviously I *let you escape.*”

“Of course you’d insist so. Now.”

Penvale opened his mouth to object, but what promised to shortly devolve into a proper argument was forestalled by a single, unmistakable moan.

Penvale’s eyebrows shot skyward.

Jane fairly radiated smugness. “*See?*”

“I do,” Penvale said slowly, his mind churning. He had a fairly good idea of where the noise was coming from—and didn’t particularly relish the notion of confirming.

“So you’ll admit that it sounds like a ghost, then?” Jane asked.

“It sounds like . . . something,” Penvale hedged. “Wait here,” he informed her sternly, and retreated back into his dressing room to pull on a nightshirt and banyan. Jane, naturally, paid him no heed whatsoever, and followed close on his heels, peppering him with questions as he hastily made himself decent.

“—means we should return to Cornwall immediately, since at least we *know* that that house doesn’t have any ghosts.”

Penvale frowned. “How, precisely, do we know that? Just because the ghost that was supposed to live there was, in fact, *you* doesn’t mean that there aren’t any other ghosts to be found lurking about.”

“I thought you didn’t believe in ghosts,” Jane protested.

Penvale leaned over to drop a quick kiss on her lips. “I don’t. Stay here.”

He made his way out into the hallway, where—right on schedule—he heard another moan, louder this time. He closed his eyes, already regretting what he was about to do, before setting off down the hall, until he reached the discreet doorway that led to the servants’ stairs at one end of the corridor.

“Do you think it’s coming from the walls?” Jane asked, right behind him, and he jumped.

“Where did *you* come from?” he demanded.

“I’ve been right behind you this entire time,” she informed him coolly. “Perhaps you’re starting to lose your hearing now, too, in addition to your eyesight.”

“My eyesight is *fine*,” he informed her, though truth be told, as he wasn’t wearing his spectacles at the moment, she did look rather fuzzy at the edges.

“Hmm.”

He turned back to survey the door ahead of him, and then, without preamble, proceeded to make a great deal of noise.

“I don’t *think* the noise came from this end of the hall, Jane,” he said, at twice his normal volume.

“Then why did you—”

He reached out and clapped a hand over her mouth.

“—but *perhaps* I’d better check this stairwell, just in case,” he continued, still at nearly a shout. “We don’t want you fretting about ghosts in the home, after all! The irony! Ha! Ha!”

“Hffph uu u lofft uuuur pfensess?” Jane asked, still muffled by his hand.

He ignored her, and waited a few long seconds. Was it his imagination, or did he detect the faint sound of hastily scrambling? Cautiously, at last, he inched the door open, to find a mercifully empty stairwell, though with a telltale stocking left behind.

Satisfied, he closed the door, took Jane by the arm, and escorted her bodily down the hallway.

“What is *wrong* with you?” she burst out, as soon as the door closed behind her.

“Jane,” he said, torn between the desire to laugh and the desire to shake her. “You cannot tell me that you did not recognize that sound.”

“I’ve told you,” she said, “it sounded *just* like the noises I made when—”

“When you were haunting me?” he asked dryly.

“Well, yes,” she said, having the grace to at least look sheepish.

“I agree that it sounded just like you,” he said, advancing towards her slowly. Her dressing gown had come untied, and her nightgown was somewhat thin, hinting at the enticing curves beneath. “In a slightly different context.”

She frowned. “In—oh!” A hint of color crept into her cheeks. “You mean they were—”

“Indeed,” Penvale said, fighting a smile.

“I wonder who it was,” Jane said, thoughtful now. “If one of the footmen is going to get a maid into a delicate situation, I really think—”

“I did not, at any point, hear a male voice,” Penvale said, and Jane’s eyes widened.

“*Oh*. Well.” She paused. “I suppose that’s one concern taken care of, at least.”

“Indeed,” Penvale said, still trying valiantly not to laugh. “I made enough noise that they were able to get away, thankfully, without me seeing them, so at least now they’re aware that that’s not a good spot to carry out their trysts. What’s wrong?” he added, seeing how Jane’s brow was wrinkling fetchingly.

“If we could hear *them* in the servants’ stairs,” she said slowly, “then do you think *they* can hear us?”

Penvale lost the battle with a smile. “I very much hope that they’re not lurking in the stairwell trying to.” He took another step towards her, then fisted his hands in the fabric of her dressing gown, tugging until she was pulled flush against him. “But if you’re worried,” he murmured, nudging her backwards until she bumped against the edge of the bed. “You can try to be very, very quiet.”

“I don’t think that should be difficult,” she said, but there was a ragged edge to her voice that betrayed her, and he leaned down to place a lingering kiss on her neck.

“Shall we test that theory?” he asked, and dropped to his knees, his hands already on the hem of her nightgown inching it upwards.

“Let’s,” Jane said, inhaling on a sharp gasp as he pressed another kiss—to the inside of her knee, this time.

In the end, Jane would be forced to concede that she was not, in fact, very good at being quiet.

And Penvale would feel rather smug about it.

And they would both hope, quite fervently, that there were no servants anywhere nearby at all.