

Six months ago, I inherited a haunted house. I also inherited the ghosts that go with it. Or that's what Aunt Judith said to me in her final letter, smelling of her tea-rose hand cream, the scent uncorking a fresh spate of ugly crying. But I understand what she meant. Not that the house is haunted, but that it haunts *me*. If I can wave burning sage and tell myself I've put the spirits to rest, then I should. What happened there twenty-three years ago does indeed haunt me.

It's time for me to face that, and so I'm heading to Yorkshire, where I'll spend the summer ostensibly on sabbatical in my great-aunt's country house while I decide what to do with it. What I really want, though, is answers.



AS MY TAXI ROLLS THROUGH THE YORKSHIRE COUNTRYSIDE, I tick off the landmarks, as if I'm a child again, plastered to the window of our rental car as we make our way to Thorne Manor. Outside Leeds, I saw changes—houses where I remembered fields, shopping centers where there'd been forest—but as we roll into the moors, we seem to slip back in time to my childhood,

every tiny church and stone sheepfold and crumbling barn exactly as I remember it.

The last time I came this way, I'd been fifteen, a girl just starting her life. Now, I return at thirty-eight, a history professor at the University of Toronto. A widow, too, my husband—Michael—gone eight years.

We drive through High Thornesbury itself, a picture-perfect village nestled in a dale. As we start up the one-lane road, the cabbie has to stop to let sheep pass. Then he begins the treacherous climb up the steep hill. At the top stands Thorne Manor, and my heart trips as I roll down the window to see it better.

The house appears abandoned. It is, in its way. Aunt Judith rarely visited after Uncle Stan died here all those years ago. Yet from the foot of the hill, Thorne Manor has always looked abandoned. A foreboding stone slab of a house, isolated and desolate, surrounded by an endless expanse of empty moor.

As the taxi crunches up the hill, the house comes into focus, dark windows staring like empty eyes. No light shines from windows or illuminates the long lane or even peeps from the old stone stables. I push back a niggle of disappointment. The caretaker knows I'm coming, and yes, I'd hoped to see the house ablaze in welcoming light, but this is more fitting—Thorne Manor as a starkly beautiful shadow, backlit by an achingly gorgeous inky purple sunset.

The driver pulls into the lane and surveys the lawn, a veritable weed garden of clover and speedwell.

"Are you sure this is t' place, lass?" he asks, his rural Yorkshire accent thick as porridge.

"I am, thank you."

The frown-line between his bushy brows deepens to a fissure. He grips the seat back with a gnarled hand as he twists to look at me. "You didn't rent it from one of those online things, did you? I fear you've been played a nasty trick."

"I inherited it recently from my great-aunt, and there's a caretaker who knows I'm coming."

I hand him the fare with a heftier tip than I can afford. He scowls, as if I'm offering blood money for his participation in a heinous act against innocent female tourists.

"That caretaker should be here to greet you properly."

"I already texted," I say. "She'll be here soon."

"Then, I'll wait."

He turns off the diesel engine, takes exactly the fare from my hand and settles in with a set of his jaw that warns against argument. When I say that I'm stepping out to stretch my legs, he mutters, "Don't go far. Nowt out here but sheep and serial killers." And then he peers around, as if one of each hides behind every jutting rock.

I close the car door and drink in the smell of wild bluebells. As I walk toward the house, I catch a sound on the breeze. A rhythmic *squeak-squeak*, each iteration shivering up my spine.

A figure labors up the hill on an ancient bicycle, the chain protesting. Atop it sits a black-clad figure, long coat snapping in the wind, the hood pulled up, face dark except for a glowing red circle where the mouth should be.

Squeak-squeak.

Squeak-squeak.

The figure turns into the laneway, and the cab driver gets out, slamming the door hard enough that I jump.

"I thought you said the caretaker was a woman," he says.

I see now that the bicycle rider is a man with a lit pipe clamped between his teeth. He wears a macintosh draped over the back of the bike, the hem dancing precariously close to the rear wheel. Under his hood is a round, deeply lined clean-shaven face and bristle-short gray hair.

"Miss Dale?" The rider's voice . . . is not the voice of a *he*. I look again, and in that second glance, I'm far less certain of gender.

"Ms. Crossley?" I say, sloshing my pronunciation of the title, in hopes it could go either way.

“Aye.” She eyes me with a sharp gaze. “You were expectin’ someone else?”

“No. Just making sure. We’ve never met.”

As I say that, moonlight illuminates her face, and I hesitate.

“*Have* we met?” I say. “You look . . . familiar.”

“I’ve been takin care of t’ place twenty years now. Never seen you visit, though..”

There’s accusation in those words. I say, evenly, “Yes, I used to come out as a child, but after my uncle’s death, I only visited Aunt Judith in London.” I turn to the driver. “Thank you very much for staying with me. It wasn’t necessary, but I appreciated the company.”

Delores Crossley looks at him, her arms folded. When he doesn’t move fast enough, she shoos him with one leathery hand. “That was the lass bein’ polite. Get gone. She’s not askin’ you in t’ tea. Or owt else you might’a been hopin for.”

He straightens, affronted. “I was keeping an eye on her—”

“Ah’m sure you were. And now you can keep your eyes t’ yourself. Go on. Git.”

The driver stalks back to the car as I call another sincere thank-you. He ignores it, and the taxi peels out in a spray of gravel.

I say nothing. Translating Delores’s North Yorkshire accent is taking all my brain energy right now. At least she isn’t using “thees” and “thous” as you sometimes find with locals her age. Dad says, when I was four, I came back from our summer trip talking like an eighty-year-old North Yorkshire native, and my junior kindergarten teacher feared I’d suffered a brain injury, my speech garbled beyond comprehension.

The more Delores talks, though, the faster my internal translator works, and soon my brain is making the appropriate substitutions and smoothing out her accent.

After the taxi leaves, she turns to me. “So, you’re staying.”

“For the summer, yes. As I said in my e-mail.”

“I hope you didn’t buy a return ticket just yet, ’cos I have a feeling you’ll be needing it sooner than you expect.”

I meet her gaze. She only locks it and says nothing.

“I’ll be fine,” I say firmly.

With two brisk taps of her pipe against an ivy-laced urn, she sets the pipe on the edge and stalks inside.

I drag my suitcase through. The smell of tea wafts past, the distinctive Yorkshire blend I haven’t drunk in so many years. I pause, and I swear I hear my father’s “Hullo!” echo through the hallway and Aunt Judith calling from the kitchen, where she’ll emerge with a tea tray, pot steaming, having calculated our arrival to the minute.

Grief seizes me, and I have to push myself past the grand entranceway. To my right, footsteps echo, and lights flick on, and I follow the trail of illumination into the sitting room. The sweet scent of tea roses wafts over me, as if it’s engrained in the wood itself. The last time I saw this room, it was mid-century modern. Now, it’s cottage chic, in cream and beige with pink accents. A striped couch begs me to sink into its deep cushions, as does a massive wooden armchair buried under pillows and blankets. Books are artlessly strewn over a rough wooden coffee table.

Aunt Judith also painted the woodwork, and I try not to cringe at that. When Michael and I married fresh out of college, we’d rented a house for which the term *fixer-upper* would be a compliment. A crash course in home renovation turned into a shared passion I haven’t indulged since his death. Now, I imagine stripping that paint and refinishing scratched wooden floors, and a long-buried thrill runs through me.

“Miss Dale,” Delores calls from the next room.

“Bronwyn, please,” I say as I follow her voice into the kitchen.

At one time, cooking would have been done outside the house—in a courtyard kitchen. The modern version would have been more of a service area. It’s compact but pretty with painted wood cupboards and a smaller refrigerator than I have in my condo. A good quarter of the space is dedicated to the AGA stove, already

lit, warming the tiny room enough that I peel off my sweater. The faint smell of oil wafts from the stove, the scent as familiar as the Yorkshire tea I smell here, too, an open box on the counter, as if Delores drank it while preparing the house.

“Got a few groceries in the cupboard. Fresh scones and a loaf of bread, too. My wife baked them.” Her gaze lifts to mine, defiant now, waiting for a reaction.

“Please thank her for me.”

A grunt, and she waves at the AGA stove. “You know how to work that?”

“I do.”

“You’ll need to do a proper shopping. Don’t know how you’ll manage ba’ht a car.”

Baht. It takes me a moment to access my rusty North Yorkshire dictionary, substitute “without” for “ba’ht” and realize she’s commenting on my lack of a vehicle.

“My aunt’s will said my uncle’s car was still in the garage?”

A bark of a laugh. “You couldn’t get that mouse motel running down a steep hill, lass. You’ll need to get sowlt else. I can’t be running you around. You saw my mode of transportation. I’m not giving you a croggy.”

I smile. “I don’t think I’d fit on the handlebars anymore. I’ll be fine. I won’t need anything more now that I’m here.”

“Nah, now that you’re here, I can fix that mullock of a yard. Been wanting to for years, but your aunt insisted it wasn’t worth the effort. Her will pays me five years of wages, so I’ll be fixing up the property.”

She circles through the dining room, a small office and then the formal parlor. The last stands empty.

“Your aunt had me sell the furniture. She asked me to put it in the town shop and use the dosh for the upkeep. I have her letter, if you want to see it.”

“I don’t need that. Thank you.”

While I hate the thought of Aunt Judith selling furniture, I’m not surprised. Thorne Manor had been her one luxury, passed

down from her grandfather, whose first wife had been a Thorne. The fact that she passed it on to me is both an honor and a responsibility, one that makes my heart ache and tremble at the same time.

I follow Delores up the wide, grand staircase. My hand slides over the wood railing, worn gray and silk-smooth with age, and at the feel of it, I remember all the times I stepped through the front door, dropped my bag and raced straight upstairs as my dad laughed below.

"Uh, Bronwyn? Your aunt and uncle are down here."

True, and I adored them, but first I had to see . . .

"Your room," Delores says, as if finishing my sentence.

I smile. "I know the way," I say, and I turn left at the top of the steps.

She shakes her head. "I made up the master suite. That old room is small and dark, and the bed's ready to collapse. No reason for you to use it."

No reason except that it's mine, and I spent some of my happiest days there. My perfect, wonderful room, with its perfect, wonderful secret.

Secret? No. Delusion.

I swallow, tear my gaze away and hurry after Delores to the master suite.

"Linens are all new and laundered," she says.

I cross the large, airy room to the king-sized bed and make a show of smoothing the linens. I'm ready to gush politely, but they're five-star hotel quality, and I sigh with pleasure as I rub them between my fingers. Then I notice the thick quilted comforter. It's clearly handmade . . . by someone who knows what they're doing. It's a star pattern, diamonds of jade and wine against a black backdrop.

"Oh, wow," I say as I stroke the comforter. "This is amazing."

Delores harrumphs, but she's clearly pleased. "The wife made it for your auntie and never got a chance to give it to her."

I turn to face her. "Thank you. For everything. This is far more than I expected."

Delores waves a gnarled hand. "I told her she was making too much fuss. You'd think Queen Liz herself was coming." She tromps from the room. "I'd best be getting home."

I walk her down to the front door, and then say a heartfelt, "Thank you, Ms. Crossley."

"It's *Mr.*" She doesn't give me time to respond, just meets my gaze with that challenging stare. "I prefer *Mr.*"

"And *he*? Or *they*? *Ze*?"

His eyes narrow, as if I'm mocking him.

I hurry on. "I'm a university professor, Mr. Crossley. I use whatever pronouns my students prefer."

A slow, thoughtful nod. "I prefer *he*." A pause. "If you forget and use *she*, though, I won't hold it against you."

"I won't forget, Mr. Crossley."

"Del's fine, too."

That's right. He'd signed his e-mails "Del." The only time I'd seen "Delores" was in the introduction from the lawyer handling the estate.

He heads for the door. "You have any trouble, call. Or come on down't. We're at the bottom of the hill, first cottage on the left. Easy enough run for a strong lass like you."

"I'll be fine, but thank you."

"I'll be back come morning. Take a look at that old car. See if there's any life left in her."

I thank him again, and then walk out and watch him leave, a shadowy figure on a bicycle, newly lit pipe gritted between his teeth.

Del leaves, and I'm alone, which is nothing new, and hardly bothers me, even in this isolated old house. I plan to snuggle in with tea and biscuits and a book. I get as far as donning my nightshirt—one of Michael's old tees—before the bed upstairs seems a lot more inviting than tea or biscuits or even a book. I've spent the last day crammed into a seat of some sort: plane, train, taxi. I desperately need to stretch out and sleep.

When I flip on the stairway light, it flashes once and sputters out. I flick it a few times before fetching a candlestick from the kitchen.

Being this isolated means the house is subject to power outages, and the utility company is never in a rush to fix them. Granted, I don't actually need to light a candle. It's one burnt-out bulb. I could get to my bedroom by leaving on the foyer light. Which would be no fun at all. I'm climbing a darkened staircase, alone in an eighteenth-century haunted house in the English moors. Anyone with a speck of imagination would want to ascend with a lit candlestick, white nightgown—or oversized white T-shirt—billowing around her.

I do exactly that, and I hear not a single ominous creak of a

floorboard, catch not one unearthly flicker in the corner of my eye. Terribly disappointing.

I step into the bedroom and—

Something moves across the room. I jump and spin, nearly dropping my candle, only to see myself reflected in a mirror. It's Aunt Judith's antique vanity with three-way mirrors. I see it, and I can't help but smile, that spark of fear snuffed out. As a child, I'd sit at that vanity for hours, silently opening jars of cream and pots of makeup, sighing over the exotic scents and jewel colors. Aunt Judith would always "catch" me, and I loved to be caught because it meant a little girl makeover, creams rubbed on my face, stain on my lips and my hair stroked to gleaming with her silver brush. Then out came the cold cream, as chilly as its name, wiping off Aunt Judith's work before my mother saw.

I walk over and lower myself into the seat. The top is still covered in pots and boxes, their cut glass and silver tops gleaming as if Aunt Judith were here only moments ago. I open one jar of night cream, and the smell that rushes out is so familiar my eyes fill with tears. I sit there a moment, remember. Then I rise and pinch out the candle.

With moonlight flooding through the drapery-free window, I crawl into bed, and oh my God, I was not exaggerating about the linens, sheets so soft I want to roll in them like a kitten in catnip.

My eyes barely close before I'm asleep.



I WAKE TO A TICKLE ON MY CHEEK, LIKE A STRAY HAIR DANCING in the night breeze. Michael used to say it had to be twenty below before I'd sleep with the windows shut. I crack open my eyes and—

A face hovers over mine.

I jump up with a shriek and crouch there, fists clenched as my gaze swings around the room. The *empty* room.

When I spot something big and pale to my left, I twist to find

myself gazing out the huge bay window. A nearly full moon blazes through . . . a pale circle hovering above me.

I exhale and shake my head. In the bleary confusion of waking, I mistook the moon for a face, the shadowy craters for features. And I'd woken because a stray hair tickled my cheek, caught in the breeze coming through that window, which I . . .

I look over. Which I did *not* open last night—the window is shut tight.

Well, then, it was a draft. It's an old house.

I flip onto my side, away from the window. No sooner does my head touch the pillow than someone whispers in my ear.

I jump, flailing as the sheets tangle. I fight my way free and scramble from the bed with a "Who's there?" so tremulous that shame snakes through me.

A memory flickers, from my last night in this house, twenty-three years ago. I woke to a figure looming over me. A figure whose face I can never remember, who said words I can never recall. Who sent me screaming from my sleep and then—

I swallow hard and rub my eyes. There is no ghost here. There never was. A hair tickled my cheek. I opened my eyes to see the moon, and then I imagined the whisper. I'm tense and stressed, overwhelmed by memory and emotion, in a place I once loved above all others, a place I haven't set foot in for two decades when that love twisted to heartbreak and grief and fear.

There's nothing here except memories, and so many of them are wonderful. Focus on those. Remember those. Exorcise the ghosts and reclaim Thorne Manor as that place of magic and mystery.

I cross the room and open the window. The night breeze rushes in, and I gulp it down, lowering my face to the screen. As I do, I see my beloved moors, paths winding through it, familiar trails that make my feet and my heart ache with wanting. A cow lows somewhere, and a dog barks, as if in answer. My gaze moves to the narrow road down the hill, and the glow of houses below. A reminder that I'm not truly alone.

I'm crawling back into bed when something thuds deep within the house. I go still, my head swiveling. Another thud, coming from the direction of my old room.

I push to my feet, but a yowl sends me tumbling back onto the bed. I grab the nearest thing at hand, wielding it like a shield, taking sanctuary behind a . . . pillow? I stifle a choked laugh, cut short by another yowl, weak and quavering, a drawn-out cry of despair.

Still clutching the pillow, I creep to the door. The sound comes again, pricking the hair on my neck. My fingers graze the doorknob.

What? You're going out there?

That only makes me square my shoulders. Yes, I'm going out there. I'm not fifteen anymore. I won't huddle in my bed, a frightened mouse of a girl.

Except I hadn't huddled in my bed that night. I'd run, which is when everything went so horribly wrong.

Well, I'm not running now. I'm acting clearly and decisively, armed with my . . . I look down at the pillow, toss it aside and snatch the umbrella from my open luggage. I take my cell phone, too, before I slide into the hall.

The creature keeps yowling. Pitiably sounds that come from behind the closed door to my old bedroom.

I turn the knob. Then I knee the door hard enough that it slaps against the wall.

A cry. A skitter of claws on wood. A streak of orange hurtles under the bed.

Orange?

Well, it's not a ghost.

I play back a mental video of that streak. Too big for a mouse. Too *orange* for a rat.

Huh.

As I step into the room, the stink of still air and mildew washes over me. Dust cyclones in my wake. Ahead, my old bed is indeed broken, the box spring sagging, mattress gone.

Propping my umbrella against the wall, I turn on my phone's flashlight and lower myself to the floor. When I shine the light under my bed, teeth flash. Razor-sharp teeth half the length of my pinky nail. Tiny black lips curl in a hiss, and orange fur puffs, little ears flattened in the most adorably fierce snarl ever.

It's a kitten. One barely big enough to be away from its mother.

It hisses again. *She* hisses. I know enough about felines to realize that *calico* means female.

When I move the light aside, the kitten spots me. Or she seems to, her tiny head bobbing, her eyes likely still struggling to focus.

How young is she?

And what is she doing in my old bedroom?

The kitten lets out the tiniest mew.

"Where's your momma?" I ask.

Another mew. I reach under the bed, and she skitters away, claws scrabbling over the hardwood.

I eye her. Then I back out and look around. There's clearly no mother cat in here. My gaze trips around the moonlit space as my heart swells with love for this room, and I have to remind myself I'm looking for a mother cat . . . or some way a kitten could get in. Even then, of course, I notice everything, the disrepair hidden by shadow. Two large windows, one overlooking the moors, the other the old stables. My narrow bed and double dressers, and something I'd almost forgotten—a small vanity with a padded stool and mirror, a surprise from Aunt Judith and Uncle Stan when I'd returned at fifteen. My gaze slides over my own collection of makeup and creams, and my eyes mist until the room swims.

I blink hard. This isn't solving the kitten mystery. I circle the room, studying the walls. They're in perfect repair without a baseboard gap big enough to let in a mouse. I look behind the dresser and vanity and bed. No holes there.

I walk to the windows. They're shut tight, the smell in here

guaranteeing this room wasn't aired out with the rest of the house.

I turn to look around again, and I spot the kitten peeking from under the bed. I lower myself to the floor. When she mews, I stay where I am and dangle my fingers. A pause. Then she takes one tentative step. Another. She makes her way across the floor until she's sniffing my fingers. Then she rubs against my hand. When I go to stroke her head, she hops right onto my lap and purrs up at me.

I chuckle under my breath. "Not a stray, are you?"

She is adorable, a puff of long, soft fur, her back and head abstract stripes of black and orange, her belly and paws snow white. As I pet her, she rubs against my hand. A house cat, then, raised with people and a mother who trusted those people to handle her babies.

I lift the kitten as she motorboat purrs. She really is tiny with an oversized head and huge blue eyes. I know kittens are born with blue eyes, so does that mean she isn't old enough to be weaned? Either way, I'm sure she's not old enough to be exploring on her own. So, where did she come from?

As I pet her, I lift my phone in my free hand and thumb to the browser to see how old kittens are when their eyes change color. When I get a message that I'm not connected to the internet, I glance at the signal strength icon. It's flat. I had a signal on the drive here, but I haven't checked my phone since I arrived at Thorne Manor.

I push to my feet. I hold the kitten just tight enough that she can't jump to her doom. I needn't have bothered. She isn't going anywhere, and when I tuck her into the crook of my arm, she snuggles onto the convenient boob perch.

I take the kitten downstairs and give her a plate of water. There's a cold chicken in the fridge, and I tear off tiny bits, which she ignores. When the grandfather clock chimes, I expect it to be three or four in the morning. Instead, it gongs twelve.

Only midnight? How early did I go to bed?

Maybe I didn't fall asleep at all. Or not as deeply as I thought. That might explain that phantom touch. One explanation for ghosts is hypnogogic and hypnopompic hallucinations, where you think you see something while you're falling asleep or waking up, but you're actually asleep and dreaming without realizing it.

Overtired and unsettled by a long day of travel, I'd fallen into a restless sleep and thought I woke to someone leaning over my bed . . . but it was the dream-hallucination that actually woke me. And the dream itself was precipitated by the eerie sound of a trapped kitten.

Even with the explanation, I'm not eager to return to the master suite. Also, it makes a fine excuse to reclaim my former bedroom. I find the old mattress wrapped in storage and drag it in while the kitten watches in fascination. I put the oversized master suite sheets and comforter on my narrow bed. One corner sags, but I can fix that tomorrow. For now, I settle the kitten into a blanket-filled cardboard box, and by two a.m., I'm drifting off to the music of tiny kitten snores.



I WAKE TO THE CALL OF A MOTHER CAT. AS I SURFACE, I CATCH scents that don't belong in my bedroom—the perfume of sandalwood, and the musk of horse and the tantalizing aroma of a smoldering fire. Which means I haven't woken at all. I've tumbled into a dream where the kitten's mother anxiously searches for her lost baby.

In the dream, someone sleeps beside me, and when I shift, a hand slides onto my hip. A broad, masculine hand tugs me closer, and I ease into the heat radiating from the other side of the bed. My legs bump his, and his reach forward, inviting me in, our feet and calves entwining.

It isn't Michael. Not his scent or his touch or even his still familiar breathing. That doesn't make me pull back in alarm. It's been eight years. I no longer suffer pangs of guilt on the rare occa-

sion that other men invade my dreams. Michael still visits them often enough.

The man's fingers splay over my hip, pulling me closer. A nuzzle, then lips parting against my forehead in a whispered, "Bronwyn."

I hesitate.

I know that voice.

No, I know that inflection to my name. I do *not* know the voice. The man's scent, equally familiar and yet not familiar, smelling of sweat and horse and sandalwood, teases me with hints of familiarity.

I touch his hand on my hip and slide my fingers over the hard muscles of his forearm, making him shiver against me. He exhales through his teeth as my fingers trace up his biceps to his shoulder. That shoulder shifts under my hand as his mouth drops to the crook of my neck, kissing there, whispering words I can't catch, just the sound of a British accent, again both familiar and not, a voice in my head, insisting I know him yet refusing to fill in the missing piece with a name.

I crack open my eyes to see jet-black hair curling over pale skin. He's still kissing my throat, tickling kisses as he murmurs my name.

One hand still rests on my hip. The other slides underneath, gripping and pulling me closer, until I feel the hard urgency of him against my stomach. I ease up, breaking his kiss to adjust my position to a more satisfying one. He chuckles and shifts to accommodate me.

I arch my hips into his, and he lets out a low groan, the sound ending in my name. I try to see his face, but it's buried in my hair. He's tall, then. Tall, dark and possibly handsome, but I'm not terribly concerned about the last. This is quite enough, a well-built man groaning my name, his body hot and hard against mine, perfect fodder for a midnight fantasy.

Our legs entwine further, and I realize he's naked. I'm still wearing my nightshirt and panties, and he seems to be in no rush

to relieve me of those. I'm in no hurry, either, enjoying the journey, the destination inevitable. He presses against me, and I part my legs, and he groans again, his hands gripping my hips.

Then the cat yowls.

His eyes fly open. The room's too dark for me to catch more than a flash of light eyes, blue or green. Before I can get a better look, he shoves me away with, "What the bloody hell?"

That voice . . .

No, not the voice. The accent. A proper upper-crust London accent, one that isn't actually heard in London anymore, a relic of a bygone era.

He scrambles out of bed, realizes he's naked, and yanks the coverlet with him, imperfectly draped over his front.

"Who are you, and what the devil are you doing in my bed?"

I don't answer. I'm waiting to wake up. That's what will happen next, obviously. Two dreams overlapped—the anxious momma cat and the lovely sexual fantasy—the former inexcusably interrupting the latter.

Or perhaps the dream will restart. Yes, I'd like option two, please. Silence the cat, and return this shadowy cursing figure to his proper place in bed.

"Are you deaf?" the man snaps. "Dumb? I'm asking you a question!"

Any time now, Morpheus. Rewind ten minutes please, and hold the cat.

The man stands there, half-lost in shadow but presenting a very fine figure, broad shouldered and naked except for the unfortunate coverlet.

"I asked you a question," he says.

"Two."

His shadowed face scrunches. "What?"

"You asked me two questions. Who am I, and what am I doing here."

When I speak, he goes still, head tilted, face slackening. He blinks, those light eyes vanishing for a second.

“Speak again,” he says.

“Is that an order, m’lord?”

“Yes, it is, girl.”

“Well, not having been a girl for many years, I decline to comply.” I pause. “Though I suppose I just did, didn’t I?”

“Who are you?” he asks, his voice lower now, tense, as if fearing the answer.

“Just a woman who was enjoying a very fine dream before the cat yowled. Please stop yelling at me. You were so much more appealing half-asleep.”

He stares at me. Just stares. I’m about to speak again when he lunges and grabs me by the arm. I’m still in bed, kneeling, and his sudden yank topples me before I can object. Next thing I know, I’m on my feet, being dragged into a patch of moonlight. My nightshirt tears, but he doesn’t seem to notice. Fingers roughly grip my chin and wrest my face upward.

Then he stops. Goes completely still again and breathes, “Bronwyn.”

I look up into a face as familiar as his smell and his voice. I know them by heart, and yet do not know them at all. A broad face, hard edged and beard shadowed, with a knife-cut line between thick brows. A face that I remember as soft edges and smooth cheeks. Yet under that hard maturity, I see the boy I knew. I see his sky-blue eyes. I see the curve of his jaw. I see the dark hair curling over a wide forehead. I look at the man and instead gaze upon a boy I haven’t seen in twenty-three years.

“William,” I whisper, and he releases me, recoiling.

I fall backward, thumping to the floor, and when I look up, the man is gone.

I sit on my bedroom floor, blinking. A cat mews, and I jump, but it's only the kitten, crawling onto my lap, as if wondering how I got on the floor.

Good question, kitten.

Obviously, I'd fallen out of bed after dreaming I'd been yanked from it by . . .

William.

Twenty-three years ago, I fled this house, screaming about a ghost. One episode, however, was not enough to land me in a psychiatric ward. That came when, in my grief and shock, I began babbling about other people I'd seen in Thorne Manor. About a boy who shared my room hundreds of years ago. A boy who'd been my friend . . . and then more than a friend.

William Thorne.

I don't remember the first time we met. For me, William has always been as much a part of this house as the grandfather clock. My earliest memory of Thorne Manor is of being in a room that is mine and yet not mine. In William's bedroom, the two of us, little more than toddlers, playing marbles as if we've known each other forever. In that memory, I sense that I've already been there many times, seen him many times, played this game many times.

I'd been too young to think anything odd about that. William was my friend at Auntie Judith's summer house. If I closed my eyes and thought about him in my bedroom, I would open them to find myself in *his* room.

When we got older, we roamed farther afield. To the stables, to the hay barn, to the moors, to the attic, and the secret passage and every corner of this house. We avoided his family and staff. I was William's secret, and he was mine.

Then came my parents' divorce, and it was ten years before I returned. At fifteen I came back, and I had only to think of him while in my bedroom, and I stepped through, and there he was, my age again and as awkwardly sweet as any fifteen-year-old girl could want.

I fell in love that summer, and it was the most perfect first romance imaginable. We walked hand in hand through the moors. We kissed under a canopy of stars. We talked, endlessly talked, and wanted nothing more than to be together even if I was curled up in the stable with a book while he groomed his horses.

As for *how* I traveled back to William's time, we didn't need an explanation. The answer was obvious. He was real, and I was real, and therefore, what happened must be equally real—real magic. A shared room, a shared life. A reasonable explanation for a fifteen-year-old girl, madly in love with a boy who lived two centuries before her.

The truth was much harsher. After my uncle died and I babbled my confession about William, the doctors explained that stress had twisted memories of an imaginary childhood friend into vivid hallucinations of a teenage boy.

My father is a historian, and I caught the bug from him, and so, the doctors explained, I imagined a Thorne boy who once lived in my Thorne Manor bedroom. An imaginary playmate for an only child who spent her summers in an isolated country house. At fifteen, I'd been reuniting with Dad against my mother's wishes. The stress of that proved too much, and my mind

conjured William anew, shaping him into the friend and the first love I desperately needed.

Tonight, I visited William again to find him a grown man, still my own age. Yet this was clearly a dream, and somehow that makes it worse, the flame of loss igniting another, never quite snuffed out. Michael is eight years dead. And William Thorne never lived at all.

It's a long time before I fall back to sleep, and when I do, my pillow is soaked with tears for a husband I lost and a boy I never truly had.



I WAKE THE NEXT MORNING IN A FAR BETTER MOOD. THERE IS A kitten curled up at my side, as if drawn there by my silent crying, and it's hard to laze in bed with a tiny creature who needs you to fix her breakfast.

Midmorning, I tuck the kitten into my newly kitten-proof room. Then I pop into the detached garage—formerly the stables—in case Del was exaggerating about the condition of the car. When I tug off the tarp, dust motes fly, and a few mice scatter, but the chrome and cherry-red paint still gleams.

Uncle Stan's baby, Aunt Judith had called it. At the time, I hadn't seen the appeal of such an old car. Now, I realize my mistake. It's an Austin-Healey convertible. I have no idea what year or model, but she's a beauty, and my fingers itch to wrap around the leather-bound steering wheel. That, however, is where Del was telling the truth. While the keys are in the ignition, the motor doesn't turn. I'm no mechanic, but my dad taught me enough to confirm the problem isn't a dead battery or empty gas tank. Still, I fold the tarp aside and leave the garage door open to air the car out.

Tucked behind the convertible, I find two ancient bicycles. I take Aunt Judith's, with its huge front basket. A few drops of oil

on the chain, a bit of air in the tires, a backpack for extra storage, and I'm off to town.

At around a thousand people, High Thornesbury is just big enough that I can blend in with the June holiday crowds. I'll socialize when I'm less jet-lagged and better able to put names to faces twenty-three years older than I last saw them.

After a visit to the hardware shop and the grocer, my backpack is full, but my bicycle basket holds only a small bag of kibble and a bottle of red wine, cushioned by a pair of thick woolen socks. Then I smell fresh bread wafting from the tiny village bakery, and since I have extra room . . .

By the time I leave town, my bicycle basket is full to overflowing. I blame Mrs. Del's scones. Sure, one might think that since I already have a box of them at the house, I shouldn't need more, but having *some* only makes me worry about the morning when I'll have none. Also, as lovely as tinned biscuits are, they're no match for fresh shortbread. Or gingersnaps. Or butter buns.

If I don't get the convertible running, I'll be doing a lot of riding on this old bicycle. The seat feels as if it were cast in cement—I need all the extra padding I can get.

The ride back to Thorne Manor is straight up a twelve percent grade, and I'm spurring myself on with the promise of chocolate-dipped flapjacks when I see Del heading my way on his bicycle. He looks even more bizarre in daylight, his macintosh thrashing, clunky work boots pumping the pedals, the pipe clamped between his teeth. On a fishing boat, he'd be right at home. A bicycle? Not so much.

His face is set in a way that defies anyone to stop him. So I'm about to lift a hand in greeting as we pass, but he pulls to a halt, and I realize that's just his normal expression. Impatience and annoyance, set in the stone of his weathered skin.

"Won't be up today," he says. "Got a call in town. Urgent business." A roll of his eyes doubts it's urgent, and if he's right, I wouldn't want to be the person who summoned him. "I was going to come by and see if you needed owt. You've found the grocer."

He peers into the basket, and his face darkens. "Frey's scones not to your liking?"

I smile. "They're too much to my liking, which means they'll be gone by tomorrow morning."

"I'll bring you more, then. Saints knows, she baked enough of them. Said she remembers you eating a whole basket by yourself when you were a sprog. I said you had probably learned restraint. Guess not."

"Frey?" I say. "Is that short for Freya?"

"Aye-uh."

"She used to teach in town, didn't she? She played whist and bridge with my aunt."

Freya was living in Liverpool when I returned at fifteen, so it's been over thirty years since I've seen her. I pull up a mental collection of a soft lap and a softer voice, a laugh too hearty to come from that voice. A pile of dog-eared books. A basket of fresh scones. The smell of chalk and sage and browned butter.

"I'd love to see her," I say.

"She doesn't get out much these days. Waiting for a hip replacement. She's off to the city today for a doctor's visit. She'd love to have you for tea tomorrow, though."

"I'll enjoy seeing her whenever it's convenient. Oh, and I found a kitten upstairs."

"Upstairs?" His gray eyebrows soar into his hairline.

"Locked in my old bedroom."

He frowns. "I was there all last week, cleaning. No kittens inside or out. They'd have a feast in that garage, but I've never seen any even in there."

"This one's very young." I show him the picture on my phone.

"Huh." He eases back on his bicycle seat. "Doesn't seem big enough to be away from her ma."

"I know. Last night, I tried looking up what to feed her, but I don't have a cell phone signal."

"Aye, we're in a bit of a dead zone here. It's fine down't the road, but at the house, you need to be in the sitting room. Or the

front yard. Unless the wind picks up. Or the fog rolls in. Or it rains. But I don't need the internet to tell you that's a very young kitten who can't eat that." He points to the dry kibble in my basket. "You'll need to mix it into a slush." His gaze lifts to mine. "You keeping her?"

"I'd like to find her family if I can."

"Kitten that young? She's hasn't wandered away from town. Someone dumped her. If you want her, she's yours."

I should say that I'm only here for the summer, and I know nothing about caring for pets. Mom was allergic, and Michael and I had been preparing to buy our first house—which would have meant our first pet—when he got his diagnosis. After that, I just didn't get around to it. Like I "didn't get around" to dating again, "didn't get around" to having kids, "didn't get around" to buying a house . . .

All that was on The List. After three doctors declared Michael's tumor terminal, he made a list of everything he wanted me to do when he was gone. Buy a house. Fall madly in love. Get married and have children. Well, no, actually, I was supposed to have a few flings first. Forget long-term relationships, and just have sex with hot guys. Yes, that was actually on The List.

Somewhere on it was this, too. Adopt a cat. And so, while I'm sure I'm not the ideal pet-parent for a barely weaned kitten, when Del asks whether I'm keeping her, I find myself saying, "Yes."

He nods and says he'll talk to the local vet and then come by tomorrow morning.



WHILE I PROMISED MYSELF CHOCOLATE FLAPJACKS AS MY HILL-climbing reward, in reality . . . Let's just say it's probably a good thing Michael and I never had kids, because I display a strong risk for becoming my mother, who'd promise me treats for an accomplishment only to bait-and-switch later.

No, I wouldn't actually do that to my child, not when I know

what it was like. I do, however, do it to myself. I postpone the flapjacks and boil a couple of farm-fresh eggs instead. Then, for added masochism, I do twenty minutes of ballet exercise.

Mom had been a professional ballerina, who'd hoped her only child would follow in her slippers. Unfortunately, I inherited Dad's body shape. I'm five-foot-ten and not thin. Never been thin. I was a "big-boned" kid, who became a "voluptuous" adult, both being polite euphemisms for a figure that will never grace the princess—or even the queen mother—in *Swan Lake*.

When I was little, my mother held out hope that I would shed my baby fat even when my bone structure scoffed at the notion. That probably explains a childhood of "You can have ice cream if you clean your room," which turned into "Here's a nice yogurt parfait."

I went to ballet lessons twice a week and adored it. By the time I turned nine, though, Mom realized I'd never follow in her professional footsteps and declared the lessons a waste of money, claiming her child support wouldn't cover them. That last part was a lie. As I later discovered, Dad always added extra for my lessons.

I don't remember my parents ever getting along. They were like colleagues forced to work together on a shared project, and that project was me. When I was five, they finally split. As Mom put it, Dad "ran off with some girl." The truth is that he reunited with his childhood sweetheart and asked Mom for an amicable split with joint custody.

In leaving for another woman, Dad stole Mom's dignity, and she retaliated by stealing me. She claimed Dad was abusive, and he lost all visitation rights. I hated her for that—I hated her for a lot of things—but there *was* love in our relationship. Taking me out of ballet lessons wasn't spite or greed. I clearly would never be a ballerina, and she didn't want to set me up for disappointment. The idea that I'd have been happy dancing as a hobby likely never occurred to her because she wouldn't have been.

My mother has been gone two years. Lung cancer from a life-

time of cigarettes to keep her ballerina thin. Dad lives in Toronto, and I see him at least once a week. He's still with his second wife, who is as lovely and non-evil a stepmom as anyone could want.

As for ballet, when Dad discovered I'd stopped, he insisted I take it up again. I still dance with a troupe every week—the ballet equivalent of community theatre—and I love it even if you couldn't pay me to wear a tutu.

So I might grumble about masochism, doing those ballet exercises, but spinning my way through Thorne Manor sends my already kite-high mood into the stratosphere. In the daylight, the house is pure magic. Its shadows become pockets of cool shade among the rectangles of sunlight stretching across the rich wood floors. A heather-perfumed breeze blows through every open window. I dance between sun and shade, drinking in the scent of the moors and feeling the wind kiss my skin. If there's anything dark in this house, it's not here now. In the daylight, I can't imagine it was ever here at all.

After my dance exercises, I explore the house, poking around its nooks and crannies. What surprises me most is the smell: a mix of moor and wet wool and old wood and the faint whiff of camphor. It shouldn't be a pleasant odor, but it is because it's the smell of Thorne Manor, sparking memories of endless days curled up in one of these nooks or crannies with an old blanket and a book.

I kneel beside a storage hole under the stairs. I open the tiny crooked door, and I'm not sure I can still fit inside, but I want to try, grab a blanket and a pillow and a novel and a cup of milky tea and pretend I'm five again, fifteen again, half-doing in the lantern light as I listen to the clomp of Uncle Stan's boots, and Aunt Judith's shout for him to take those bloody things off and Dad's laugh at this daily routine of theirs. My eyes prickle at the memory, but it's a good one, and maybe someday this summer, I will indeed crawl in here and read. For now, the kitten explores the space, and I watch, smiling like an indulgent parent.

When she tires of that, I find Aunt Judith's sewing kit and

fetch my shirt from last night. I noticed a small rip in the seam this morning.

A rip . . . after William yanked it?

I shake my head. No, a rip because the shirt is ten years old, and I've stitched it more than once. It's one of Michael's, from my collection, three of which made their way into my suitcase. This particular one is a Toronto Maple Leafs tee. Born in Cairo, educated in England, Michael had never seen a hockey game until he came to Canada for his graduate studies. That didn't stop him from becoming a bigger Leafs fan than my father, who still drags me to games. Michael had never strapped on skates before, but by his second year, he was on a varsity team. He joked they let him play to inject a little color in the team, but that wouldn't explain the MVP trophy still proudly displayed in my condo. Michael did nothing by halves. People presumed he learned hockey to assimilate into Canadian culture, but that never crossed his mind. He'd watched a few games, thought, *That looks interesting*, and threw himself into learning it.

Michael threw himself into *life*. Every driving trip we took, I knew to double the travel time because he'd constantly detour to "see what's over there." He spoke four languages and started learning Japanese "for fun" after the diagnosis. When that diagnosis came—a glioblastoma brain tumor—the joke was that he'd worn out his brain from overuse.

I have a stack of his old T-shirts and jerseys, my only sleepwear for the past eight years. I treat them like antique lace, washing them on delicate, mending every hint of a separating seam. And now this one needs repair, which has nothing to do with a dream from last night and everything to do with the fact that, perhaps after eight years, I should stop wearing my dead husband's shirts to bed.

Perhaps someday. Not today, though. Today, I grab the shirt and the sewing kit and settle in with my kitten and a cup of tea and stitch the torn hem as if the shirt's owner will return at any moment and expect it back.