

One

There are two things I do before I leave the house that night. Two snippets of time to be preserved in the amber of memory, polished until they gleam sun-bright.

After August falls asleep, I slide from our bed and pull on the riding dress I secreted away before we retired. He groans, and I go still, my heart hammering. At a thump behind me, I turn, barely daring to breathe. He's on his back now, eyes closed, sound asleep.

I exhale. As I do, clouds shift beyond the window, and moonlight hits him. That sliver of light plays across his bare chest and face, and three years seem to disappear, and instead, it is our wedding night and I'm looking at my new husband, my breath catching as the moon glides over him.

I will never be this happy.

That is what I thought. I'd been almost shamed by my joy, as if I did not deserve it. I'd been afraid for it, too, wanting to swaddle it in wool, lest it shatter.

How did I get so lucky?

I'd thought that, too. August Courtenay was the third son of an earl, and for a young woman like me—with a good name but nothing more—our marriage should have been the achievement of a lifetime. His family and his fortune meant nothing to me, though.

Perhaps, then, my joy should come from what that moonlight revealed: a man with the face and body of a Greek god. I'd be lying if I said I didn't thoroughly enjoy the sight of him. Yet again, that wasn't the source of my happiness.

If anything, August's wealth and good looks had been detriments to our union, sending me fleeing his early pursuit. Only a fool falls for a man like that. A fool who thinks she'll win more than a few nights of passion and a cheap bauble for her finger instead of a wedding band.

No, my joy in that moment, waking beside my bridegroom, was the happiness of finding that most elusive of romantic prizes: love. Love from a man who saw to the core of me, past all my rough edges and idiosyncrasies. And I saw everything in him and loved him back. Loved him beyond imagination, beyond measure.

That was three years ago. Now . . . ?

I have a secret passion for Gothic tales, and I know how this one should go. Penniless girl weds an angel and finds herself shackled to a demon instead. There is nothing demonic in August. Just something small and frightened that I desperately want to soothe, and I cannot.

In each of us, we carry a shadow of the child we were, and August's is a very sad and lonely boy who is certain every woman he loves will leave him. One would think that marriage, and then a child, would cure his fear, but the more tightly we are bound to one another, the more fearful he becomes, that fear manifesting in an anger and a jealousy that has begun to frighten me.

I picture the bride who woke beside her husband three years ago. I imagine what she'd think if she could see herself now, slipping from bed, pulling on a riding gown, preparing to sneak back to Thorne Manor and retrieve her wedding band, innocently left in the kitchen as she helped the housekeeper fix an uncooperative bread dough.

That bride would laugh at her future self. Why all the intrigue? August knows she helped with the dough. He'd understand her removing her ring. What else would he think? That she'd taken it off for a tryst with the owner of Thorne Manor . . . August's oldest and dearest friend? How absolutely preposterous.

That is the extent of my husband's jealousy. The sick and sorry truth of it, that I have done nothing to ever give him cause for concern. I *would* never do anything, still being as madly in

love with him as I was on our wedding night. Yet he cannot rest his watchful gaze when I am around other men, even his most trusted friend, who has treated me like nothing but a dear substitute for the younger sister he lost.

And so I must slip from bed to ride through the night and retrieve my wedding band while praying—*praying*—my husband does not wake to find me gone.

As I rise, I watch August, and my chest tightens with love and with loss, and with the determination that we will get past this. We must. I won this incredible man, and I will not give him up so easily.

I ease from the room to the second thing I will do before I leave. The second memory I will unknowingly create. I tiptoe into the room beside ours, where I creep to a bassinet. Our son—Edmund—sleeps as soundly as his father.

I bend and inhale the smell of him, his milky breath, his sweet skin. I cannot resist brushing my lips across his head, already thick with his father's curls. One light kiss, and then I slip away, whispering a promise that I will be back before he wakes.

Escaping the house is not easy. It is the Courtenay's ancestral estate, a "country home" that would fit five of our London townhouses. Having grown up in London, I'd shuddered when August first invited me to his family's Yorkshire estate. Afterward, he joked that I very coincidentally fell in love with him on that visit, and it was the countryside that truly won my heart. Not so, but Courtenay Hall ignited a fierce passion for *place* that I'd never experienced before. It is, of course, his eldest brother's estate, yet the earl abhors the countryside, and we are free to summer here.

A house of this size, of course, requires staff, and I must exit as stealthily as any burglar would enter. At one time, the staff was accustomed to their young mistress creeping out for a

moonlit ride. I'd gallop under the stars, across the estate's vast meadows, and through its game forests and never encounter a single person who felt obliged to tip his hat or who looked askance at my windswept hair. I'd return after an hour or so and crawl into bed, drunk on moonlight and freedom, and August would sense the cool draft of my night-chill body and roll over to greet me with lovemaking.

Last month, when we arrived at the summer estate, I'd slipped away for a ride, and August had followed. He'd stuck to the shadows, and when I caught him, he insisted he'd only been concerned for my safety. If that were the case, he'd have said so and ridden with me. No, he'd been following me.

So while I do not fear being stopped by staff, I do fear them innocently mentioning my moonlit ride to August. Yet I am prepared, and soon I am on my horse, riding from the estate without attracting any notice.

Thorne Manor is not, unfortunately, over the next hill or down the next dale. It's nearly seven miles away. I am only glad that I have a young and healthy gelding and that the roads are empty at this hour.

When I near the village of High Thornesbury, the sound of voices drifts over on the breeze. Drunken male voices. I skirt the village at a quieter pace and then set my mount galloping up the hill to the manor house.

A light burns in Thorne Manor, but the house is empty. William had business to tend to in London, and so August insisted he take our coach. Yes, a lord, particularly one with William's income, should have his own coach, but our William is even more eccentric than I. As for household staff, he has only his aged housekeeper and groom, and he gave them two nights off to stay with their adult children in High Thornesbury.

I don't stable my horse. I'll give him a quick grooming before the return journey. For now, I leave him at the water trough and then slip in through the kitchen door, which never quite locks properly and needs only a certain lift-and-pull to open it.

My goal is less than ten paces from the door, where I'd helped the housekeeper, Mrs. Shaw. Baking is my passion. It had also been my salvation when my parents died and left their three daughters with a comfortable home and a small income but no money to bring into a marriage. As the oldest, I considered it my responsibility to provide that for my sisters. There'd been an easy and acceptable way: marry one of several rich suitors. Or a difficult and scandalous way: open my own bakery. Naturally, I chose the latter.

My wedding band is exactly where I left it, tucked behind a canister of flour. I'm putting it on when a scream sounds overhead, and I jump, my riding boots sliding on the kitchen floor.

Eyes wide, I press myself into the shadows as something thumps on the floor above. I hold my breath and measure the distance between myself and the door. Another thump, and I turn instead to a hanging meat cleaver.

I ought to run. That is the sensible thing to do. Yet I keep imagining that scream. A high-pitched screech like that of a terrified woman.

William is away, and most of High Thornesbury will know it. How many also know about that broken kitchen door? For a man with William's dangerous reputation, one would think he'd be far less trusting. Or perhaps he expects his reputation will keep invaders at bay.

There is another possibility. Not burglary, but a man luring a woman to this empty house.

I touch the handle of the cleaver and then think better of such a sharp and unwieldy weapon. I take a poker from the hearth instead. Then I creep, sure-footed, to the stairs.

I'm halfway up before a sound comes again, and it stops me in my tracks, my mind

struggling to identify what I'm hearing. It's hollow and haunting, half yowl and half keening, raising the hairs on my neck.

I climb slower now, poker gripped in both hands, gaze straining to see in near darkness.

I reach the top, and the sound comes softer, hauntingly desolate. I swallow and continue until I reach an open door. Moonlight floods the small room. A child's room, yet I've stayed in this house often enough to know it's William's. His childhood bedchamber, which he inexplicably insists on retaining.

The sound comes again, but there is no sign of anyone within. The noise seems to emanate from the vicinity of the bed. Could someone be prostrate and injured on the floor behind it? I grip the poker tighter and take two steps before my ears follow the noise instead to the box at the end of William's bed. A storage chest.

Am I hearing a trapped child?

One hand still wielding the poker, I heave up the heavy lid of the box to see a calico kitten trapped within and yowling piteously.

"Who put you in there?" I whisper, and I'm about to throw the lid completely open when—

The box disappears. One second, I'm gripping the half-open lid, staring at a kitten, and the next, the lid disappears, leaving me staggering. I stumble forward and catch myself on the foot of the bed.

I push up sharply, shaking my head as I hold the foot of . . .

The foot of a bed that is not William's.

Two

The bed is but an empty steel frame, listing to one side, in a room that stinks of disuse. The moon shines through a curtainless window.

I look around. It is structurally the same room, yet entirely different in its furnishings. There's a narrow bed frame and an odd white-painted chest of drawers. A vanity sits to one side, its top scattered with jars, all of them coated in a quarter-inch of dust.

I walk to the vanity and lift one bottle. It looks like red glass, but the material is like nothing I've seen before, lightweight and covered with glossy printed paper that has faded with age. Big letters proclaim "Sun In," and the picture . . . Is that a photograph of a young woman?

I turn the bottle into the light and nearly drop it. The photograph depicts a naked woman. I blink and stare. No, she's not entirely unclothed, but she might as well be, dressed only in scraps of blue fabric over her breasts and nether regions. She's at a beach, holding some sort of ball-like sphere, and I can only stare in horror and fascination.

I gingerly set down the bottle and pick up a tiny tube made of the same strange material. It bears the words Dr Pepper. Some kind of remedy, then? I open the cap to find a waxy sweet-smelling stick. A third container is white with a bright pink lid. The glossy paper is covered in lips and hearts, and the typeface screams "Teen Spirit" and proclaims it to be something called deodorant. A deodorizer? I have heard of such a thing to cover the scent of manure. As for "teen spirit," I know what spirits are—either alcohol or ghosts—but whatever is a teen?

Clearly I am sleeping. I only dreamed that I awoke and rode to Thorne Manor. I've never been an imaginative sort—my sister is the writer—but some latent talent has arisen in this fantastical dream.

I set down the "deodorant" and walk from the room. It does *look* like Thorne Manor.

Pictures line the hallway, but it's too dim for me to see them, and I don't pause to look closer.

Downstairs, a clock strikes the hour, and it is unmistakably the same clock.

I reach the front door, and that, too, is the same, or so it seems until metal glints, and I notice an odd locking contraption above the knob. When I turn the handle, a metal bolt slides back. The doorknob itself has also changed, but after a few tries, it opens with a click.

I pull the heavy wood door to look out at a front lawn so wild and overgrown it would give Mr. Shaw heart failure. I walk down steps to a laneway that now runs to the stables instead of circling past the house.

There's no sign of my horse, but by now, I don't expect to see him. This is clearly a dream, and I am exploring it out of curiosity. When I wake, it'll be a delightful story to tell August.

Should I share it? What if he wonders why I am dreaming of Thorne Manor? My heart thuds. Is this how it will be forever now? I cannot even share my dreams with my husband for fear he'll read something untoward in them?

No, we will overcome this obstacle. It may take time, but he will see he has no cause for jealousy.

I cross the lawn to find a wider road than I remember. At the foot of the hill, High Thornesbury glows with an eerie light, a dome of it cast over the village.

Entranced, I hike my skirts and make my way down the hill. It is not a short walk. Not an interesting one, either. Everything seems exactly as I recall until I round a corner to find a metal signpost. It seems to be warning of a sharp curve, which makes me laugh. Any fool can see the curve. It's not as if a horse will come careening around and miss the turn entirely.

A sheep bleats in the distance, and a cow answers. I smile. That, at least, has not changed. Nor have the brambles along the roadside, already thick with red berries that will turn black and

sweet in another month. The air smells of heather, the scent of the moors. There's something else, an acrid scent I don't recognize, but the heather is stronger, along with the less pleasant odor of sheep droppings.

I'm nearly to the bottom of the hill when thunder rumbles. I peer up, but the night sky is clear, moon and stars shining bright. The sound grows closer and becomes like the growl of some wild beast. I stagger backward as lights appear from nowhere, two blindingly bright orbs bearing down on me faster than a horse at full gallop.

It is, of course, my imagination. A new fancy from my dream. After that initial moment of terror, I fix my feet in place, determined to see what my mind has conjured. I am curious. Yes, that is an odd reaction to a creature barreling toward me, growling and shrieking as it rounds the corner. But I want to see it. I want a tale to tell August and a tale to tell my sister Miranda, one that might inspire a fresh tale from her pen.

At the last moment, my resolve cracks. This creature—a low-slung carriage-sized shadow—is charging me at demonic speed, its eyes blinding my own, and a tiny voice whispers, “What if it is not a dream?” I throw myself to the side, diving through a tangle of hedge and bramble as the beast screams to a stop.

Through the thorny vines, I watch as the beast sprouts wings that disgorge two men. The one closer to me is dressed in blue trousers that fit as tight as riding breeches. Over his chest, he wears a shirt without collar or sleeves or buttons or cravat. He looks like a vagrant, unshaven with wild and uncut hair.

“What?” His shadowy companion throws up his arms. “Are we stopping for hallucinations now?” His voice is thick with the local accent, but it's not quite right.

“I saw a girl in the road,” the other says. “A blonde in a blue dress.”

The first man snickers. “Like the one who shot you down tonight? Had one too many pints, and now you’re seeing her everywhere?”

“That was a purple dress. This one was blue. A long, old-fashioned dress.”

His companion gasps. “Oh, my God, you saw her!”

“Saw who?”

“The ghost of the moors.” The shadowy figure waves his hands. “Whooo! She’s coming to get you!” The figure starts climbing back into the beast. “Get back in the bloody car, or you’re walking home.”

The other man returns, and the beast roars off. I watch it go . . . and then I run.

I race back to Thorne Manor, up the stairs to that strange and empty room, where I wait to wake up.

I do not wake up. At some point, I sleep, instead, drifting into a fitful dream of hearing my son’s cries and being unable to find him. Then I wake from that to find myself on the floor of that bedroom, in a house that is and is not Thorne Manor.

I investigate. It is all I can do, short of sobbing in a corner, which would hardly solve anything. The house is empty. Long empty, although furnishings suggest it has not been abandoned. And those furnishings . . . the strangeness of them, like the house itself both familiar and not.

The kitchen is filled with devices I do not recognize, cannot fathom the purpose of, mingled with ones so familiar I find myself stroking them like talismans that will carry me home. The entire house is like that—things I know and things I do not. Somehow that is worse than if it had been entirely unfamiliar. It’s like seeing a portrait of my parents that does not quite look like them, teasing me with grief and longing and frustration.

I find water, and I find food, and I ponder my situation for a day and a night before coming to the only conclusion that makes sense. I have passed through time.

Later, I will laugh at how long it took me to realize what would seem obvious to any modern denizen of the world. Time travel is so deeply embedded in modern storytelling that it is almost cliché. Yet I come from a world that has not yet birthed H. G. Wells and his time machine. I have read both *Rip Van Winkle* and *A Christmas Carol*, which lightly touch upon the concept of moving through time, but that is nothing like what I experience.

And yet I *have* encountered the concept, in a way, which might be the only thing that keeps me from declaring I've gone mad.

It happened on my honeymoon. August and I were on a ship bound for Italy. It was our second day into the voyage, and we'd only left our stateroom for food. That morning, we were stretched out naked on our bed, the sea breeze drifting through the open porthole. I remarked on how incredible it was that we could travel to Rome in a few days, and I mused on how much faster it might be for our great-grandchildren.

"You should ask William about that," August said, cutting an apple and handing me half. "I believe he may have secret knowledge of the future."

"It certainly seems like it, with his gift for investing."

"Not a gift at all. As I said, secret knowledge." He slid closer and lowered his lips to my ear, as if we were not alone in our stateroom. "I believe he once knew a girl from the future."

I sputtered a laugh. "The future?"

He rolled onto his back. "The summer we were fifteen, he became incredibly, irritatingly distracted, with scarcely any time at all for me."

"No time for you? Or your youthful shenanigans?"

“Shenanigans? True, I was a bit of a rascal, getting myself into this bind and that.”

“Bind,” I murmured. “Now that is a word I have never heard used to refer to a lady’s private parts.”

He choked on a bite of apple, sputtering as he coughed it out. He wagged a finger at me. “I was a very proper young man, Rosie, who saved himself for his marriage bed.”

That had me laughing hard enough that someone rapped on our door to be sure we were all right. August assured him we were.

“So William shunned your company,” I said. “That summer you were busy falling into binds, and he did not wish to join you.”

August shook his head. “I will not rise to your bait, only saying that your opinion of my youth is very wicked. Not inaccurate, but still wicked. So William spurned me, and being mildly jealous—”

I cleared my throat.

He gave me a look. “All right. *Very* jealous. A man must have one flaw, and that is mine.”

“*One* flaw?”

“Others have more. I have but one.” He coughed to cover my laugh. “And so, to resume my tale, I became jealous and resolved to learn the reason for his distraction. It was a girl.”

I gasped. “Truly? A young man distracted by a young woman. What a twist in the tale!”

He rapped my bare bottom with one finger. “You mock, but William was not me, and I had never seen him display more than mild interest in the fairer sex. Yet there he was, enthralled by a secret love. Even more remarkable was the girl herself, who dressed and spoke in the oddest way.”

“Because she was”—I gripped his arm, my eyes mock wide—“from the future!”

“Well, no, at first, I thought she might be French. Or American. Or perhaps some fae creature from his beloved moors. After that summer, William fell into the darkest brood, and I realized the affair had come to an unhappy end, and I resolved not to tease him about his mysterious buxom brunette. Then, years later, when his mother passed and he realized the family coffers were near to empty, he began making the maddest gambles, investing in newfangled ideas that seemed destined to failure.”

“Yet they succeeded, and thus he filled the family coffers to overflowing. And somehow that is proof that this girl was from the future . . . ?”

“She gave him information *on* the future. On inventions yet to come.”

“So William Thorne fell madly in love with a girl from the future, who broke his heart but shared secret knowledge of her advanced culture.” I peered at him. “Are you sure she wasn’t French?”

He laughed and pulled me to him for a kiss. And that was the end of the conversation as we resumed our honeymoon and promptly forgot everything else.

I still do not leap on August’s speculations as the obvious answer. Yet there is another aspect to the tale that forces me to consider it.

August hadn’t merely raised the possibility of traveling through time as a hypothetical fancy. He’d been talking about William Thorne, who’d met a strange girl at Thorne Manor, a girl with odd dress and odd speech, whom William kept hidden, a girl August believed came through time.

A girl who came through time *at Thorne Manor*. Where I opened a box and tumbled into the dusty and abandoned bedroom of a girl.

It is then that I remember the kitten. I return to the bedroom and, in the light of day, clearly

see tiny feline tracks on the dusty floor. Tracks that lead to the foot of the bed and disappear.

A kitten from the future, who somehow passed through time and found herself trapped in a box that doesn't exist in her world. She cries for help, and I come running, only to pass through time in the other direction.

That is both perfectly sensible and perfectly ridiculous. Yet if time travel exists perhaps it is like yeast, an inexplicable but proven chemical reaction. Add yeast to the right ingredients, mix in the right environment, and you can make dough magically rise. Add a portal to a house, mix in the right circumstances, and you can blink through time.

Someone in the distant past discovered that yeast makes dough rise. For centuries before that, people ate unleavened bread. Was it not possible that I had made a discovery of my own? One made before me by a girl who met a boy from another time, loved him and then disappeared back to her own realm?

The solution then is obvious. Recreate the circumstances and return to my husband and child.

I plant myself in that spot, matching my dust-cleared footprints exactly. And there I stand through four hourly chimes of the clock below.

I had arrived shortly before the grandfather clock struck three in the morning. Perhaps timing is the key then. That night, I stand on that spot from one until five. I repeat this every night for a week. Then I think perhaps the moon matters, and I wait for it to be in the same portion of the cycle and try again.

I wear the same dress. I position myself as if opening an invisible box. I arrange my features in some semblance of surprise, as if seeing a kitten. Nothing works.

For six weeks, I try to get home. When I need food, I forage or raid village gardens at night.

Days and weeks come and go, and I stay. I stay in an empty house, crying myself to sleep, dreaming of my husband and child, becoming a mere ghost of myself.

I stay, and the kitten does not return, and when six weeks have passed, I begin to understand what that means.

I am here, and I am not going back.

That leaves me two choices. Fade away with wanting, drifting into madness as I haunt this empty house. Or make a life for myself here. Make a life while never giving up hope, while never stopping my efforts to return to my family.

I stay until the second change of the moon brings me no closer to home. Then I dry my tears and walk out of Thorne Manor.

Three

I might not be the writer in the family, but I could pen an entire novel on my first year in the twenty-first century. It would be an adventure, a mystery, a tragedy and a farce, and at times, a tale of horror.

In a terrible way, it is my parents' untimely passing that allows me to survive in this new world. We may have had little money, but our parents made sure their daughters wanted for nothing. Our mother educated us. Our father hired tutors when we had the extra funds. I was given free rein in the kitchen, even when I ruined a small fortune in ingredients, testing new recipes.

We were spoiled in other ways, too. Relatives breathed a sigh of relief when I neared marriageable age. Here, clearly, lay the solution to my parents' financial woes. I might be an odd girl, but smitten young men already penned odes to my fragile beauty. I could be married off soon and married off well to a wealthy bridegroom who would extend his generosity to my sisters and help them make equally good matches.

A sensible plan. But if my parents had been sensible people, their daughters would not have been dowryless. My parents were not fools. Nor were they spendthrifts. They were something even less acceptable in society. They were romantics.

My father was the second son of a baronet, whose only chance at a gentleman's life had been to make either a good marriage or a good career. Instead, he married the daughter of a vicar and became a physician. While he was an excellent doctor, he shared his wife's charitable heart and insisted on charging patients according to what they could afford. We were far from penniless, but my sisters and I were often the only girls at a party wearing last year's fashions. Worse, we weren't the least bit ashamed of it.

My parents married for love and found wedded bliss, and so that would be my dowry: the freedom to marry the man of my choice. And I had been in absolutely no rush to do so.

Had they lived until I wed, I'd have gone straight from their home to my husband's, never needing to worry about the myriad concerns that come with independent life. If I'd been that girl, I doubt I'd have survived my first year in the twenty-first century. Instead, I'd lost them when I was nineteen, alone and unwed, with two younger sisters to care for.

Even with that experience, in this new world, I am like a baby taking her first steps, putting each foot down with care and deliberation, constantly assessing and analyzing her environment. Oh, I suppose there are babies who fearlessly rush into ambulation, accepting the bumps and bruises as an intrinsic part of the process; I was not that child, and I am not that adult. I consider, consider and then consider some more.

That first year is an excruciatingly slow process of learning about my new world. I raid gardens for months while I determine the best and safest way to gain employment. I live in sheds for months more until I have the money and knowledge to rent a room. Others would move faster, but my careful deliberation allows an easy transition. I do not make mistakes that mark me an outsider. Mistakes that might have landed me in a psychiatric ward.

I assimilate. That is the word used for newcomers to a land, and that is what I do. Slow and careful assimilation, all the while telling myself it is temporary.

I return to Thorne Manor every month, matching the moon cycle. With each failure, I fortify my defenses against despair until the day I arrive to find the house occupied. Seeing that, something in me breaks. The change is not unexpected—I noticed a caretaker had been preparing the house in the last month. It is not even an unmovable obstacle—the new owner doesn't change the locks, and I had a key copied from one found in a kitchen drawer. Yet as the house

moves into her new phase of life, it draws back the shroud on a mirror I've kept carefully covered, refusing to acknowledge the reality reflected there. The reality that I am not moving forward in my own life. That two years have passed, and I am no closer to home than I was that first night.

That mirror also shows a woman two years older. A mother with a son who will now be three years old. A wife with a husband who . . .

I've tried so hard not to finish that sentence. Not to wonder what August thinks happened to me. I tell myself that perhaps time is frozen in their world, and when I return, it will still be that same night. My years away will have been an adventure during which I grew and learned so much. I will return no longer the young bride, cowed and confused by August's jealousy, but a twenty-first-century woman with the skills and the confidence to correct the problem. To save my marriage without losing myself in the process.

A glorious fantasy. The reality? The reality is that my gut tells me time has not stopped in that world. My infant son is a young boy now and almost certainly has no memory of me. My husband will have thought I ran away, abandoned him, his worst fears come true.

I've refused to face these things because they loose a wild, gnashing, all-consuming terror inside me. I've been forgotten by my son, reviled and hated by my husband, and there is naught I can do about it.

Has August moved on? Found a new wife for himself and a mother for Edmund? The thought ignites outrage. His wife is alive. Edmund's mother is alive. Yet when I consider it in the cold dark of night, I must face an equally cold and dark truth. I almost hope August has moved on. For his sake. For Edmund's.

I do not want them to mourn me forever. I do not want that place in their life vacant forever.

If I cannot return home, I want August to have found a woman who makes him happier than I did, a woman who can silence his demons, a woman who will love my son as her own.

And where does that leave me? Does the woman in the mirror stay frozen forever, aging but unmoving? Subsisting and existing but never truly living? Alone and lonely, the exact fate I would never wish on August?

Is it time for me to move on? Another year will pass before I'm ready to answer that question.

#

It is year four. My son has just turned five. My husband will turn forty soon. I myself have celebrated my thirty-first birthday. Time passes, and I stay still, and I am, in this very moment, facing that as I've never faced it before. I stand in my bakery, looking at a man who could be part of my future.

He could or he could not, and either seems equally likely. I do not know him that well. We may realize we are not compatible. Yet it isn't about *this* man so much as it is about taking *this* step.

Eight words. "Would you like to go for tea later?" Even if nothing comes of it, by speaking the words, I am acknowledging that I may never return to August and Edmund.

The man—Noah—has no idea what I'm contemplating. He's pretending to choose two macarons. For over a month now, at precisely one o'clock each afternoon, Noah stops to pick up macarons for his afternoon tea. I'm not even sure whether he eats them. The first time, when he'd come wanting sweets for his mother, he'd declared he wasn't much for pastries himself. That, apparently, was before he tried my macarons.

They're decent macarons. Not my finest pastries. The delicate almond cookies sandwiched

with ganache are currently in vogue, and I do them well enough. My minuscule bakery in the Shambles has won awards for my cannelés and my jam tartlets, but the tourists want macarons, and apparently, so does Noah. He's just never certain what flavor he wants on that day, which is an excuse to linger and chat with me, and I am fine with that because he is an excellent conversationalist.

Do his visits remind me of August's wooing? Of how my husband wandered into my shop looking for a gift—for a lover, of course—and left nearly an hour later with a basket of pastries, none for his lover? Do I compare and contrast August's visits with Noah's and find the latter lacking? Excellent conversation, to be sure, but bereft of the charm, the spirit and the sheer overwhelming Augustness of August that finally won me over.

It is not the same. Nor do I want it to be. I look at Noah, a handsome divorced thirty-five-year-old with a steady office job and a good flat and a kind manner, and I know that if I'm to take this step, he is an excellent man to take it with. He is safe.

I will not say he is boring. I will not. On a scale of one to ten, with one being deathly dull, Noah rates a perfectly respectable seven. It's not his fault that August was a twelve, and really, if I'm being clear eyed with myself, honestly remembering the tumult and heartache of our last year together, perhaps I would, in the long run, be happier with a seven. Just as August, if he has found new love, has hopefully found someone more conventional, able to placate his jealousy in a way I could not.

Noah leans over the counter, dark hair tumbling forward as he peers through the glass at the jewel-toned cookies below. "They're all too good, Rosie. That's the problem."

"I should suggest one of each, but I'm a terrible salesperson."

He smiles. "And as much as my stomach would love that, my waistline would not. You need

to start offering only two types a day, so I don't need to choose."

"Is that what you'd like?" I say. "Grab two and be on your way?"

Rosalind Courtenay, are you flirting?

Yes, I am, and when Noah lifts his eyes to meet my dancing ones, his cheeks color. "No, I suppose that isn't what I'd like at all."

I wait for him to say more. He won't. His gaze slips to the wedding band on my finger, and that is enough. He knows I claim widowhood, but as long as I wear that ring, he is respectful of my grief. If a step is to be made, I'm the one who must make it.

We speak instead of local politics and an upcoming festival where I will have a booth. I'm debating what to sell—in addition to macarons, of course—and I ask his advice, and we chat until a queue forms and my shop girl—ahem, *sales associate*—cuts me a look that politely begs for help. Noah sees it and makes his choice swiftly, as considerate as ever.

He's barely out the door when I make my decision. I will ask him to tea. Today. Now.

I serve one quick customer and then apologize to my assistant and promise to be quick. Apron off, I'm out the back door, ducking down the narrow alley to intercept him.

He's moving fast, his tall and lanky frame expertly weaving through tourists milling through the Shambles. Tourists. I owe them my success. As lauded as my pastries might be, it's my key location and those tourists themselves who allow me to pay the rent on both my tiny shop and flat. And yet, well, I'd be lying if I didn't admit there were times when I cursed them, muttering that the lack of tourist hordes was one thing definitely better about the nineteenth century.

With his height and his sharp suit, Noah easily cuts through the crowds. I'm a five-foot-tall, slight-figured blonde in a sundress. No one moves for me. No one even notices me. Well, yes, some men do, sadly, but not to move out of my way.

I'm weaving through the crowd when a child's screech catches my attention. Children—particularly young ones and particularly happy ones—always have that effect on me. I'm like a pointer hearing a game bird. I stop whatever I'm doing as if that joyous cry might somehow come from my son.

This time, it's not even a boy. It's a girl of perhaps eighteen months. She's spotted a bright-colored toy in a shop window and nearly launched herself out of her father's arms, reaching for it. That makes me smile, even as a pang shoots through me.

I'm about to turn away when the father's voice cuts through the surrounding burble of tourist chatter.

“Yes, yes, Amelia, that is a toy. A lovely toy, and we shall return for all the required closer examinations once your mother has shown me this magical bakery, which is apparently, even more magical than all the other bakeries she adores.”

The first thing to catch my ear is the name. Amelia. I've always liked that name. Then I notice the man's tone. It's oddly formal . . . and yet not. Almost a mockery of the speech of my own world, like an actor well-versed in older language, using it to humorous effect. Both of these, however, would not hold my attention if it were not for one more thing.

That voice.

I know that voice, and on hearing it, I turn slowly, my lips parting in a whispered, “William?”

While he's facing the toy shop, his figure matches that of William Thorne. Dressed as I never saw Lord Thorne dressed, of course—in a casual shirt and trousers, with a zebra-striped baby bag over his shoulder—but he's tall and broad shouldered with dark hair that curls at his neck nape. And the woman beside him, angled sideways from me?

I remember August's words from that night in our stateroom.

I resolved not to tease him about his mysterious buxom brunette.

The woman with William is tall with chestnut-brown curls and a full figure. She's also pregnant, and though I can't see her face, her figure nudges at my mind. I'm chasing that nudge when she smacks her husband on the arm.

"If you're going to mock my love of bakeries, William, perhaps you ought not to be the one bringing treats to the flat every evening."

"Mock? Did I mock? Never. I happily indulge your passion for pastries. I simply wish that if you were to discover the most magical of all magical bakeries, it could be located somewhere other than *this*."

He turns to look meaningfully along the narrow cobbled road with its cutesy shops and gaggles of tourists. I have to smile as he shudders. His companion rolls her eyes, her response swallowed by passing college students in Harry Potter robes, shouting, "Expelliarmus!"

It is only then, as the students pass, that I realize William has turned. That I see his face, and that it is, beyond any doubt, *his* face. And the woman with him is his "girl" from the future.

The latter might seem wild conjecture. After all, *buxom brunette* is hardly an uncommon descriptor. Yet I see her face now, and I am, for a moment, back in twenty-first-century Thorne Manor.

I might have lived there for two months, but I'd never paid much attention to the house itself. I'd paid particularly little attention to the objects that make a house a home. The books on the shelves, the photos on the walls, the papers on the desk. Those were all reminders that I was trespassing on another's property, invading another's most private place. Yet when I see the woman's face, I cannot deny that I've seen it before. An old photo at Thorne Manor, one of a

young girl with her parents, all of them in modern dress.

This woman was once a girl with a connection to Thorne Manor. A relative of those who owned it in the present. That was how she met William, how she'd passed through time to spend a teenage summer with him.

More than that, I know her. Not the girl, but the woman. I see her face in full, and recognition strikes like lightning. She has come to my shop thrice in the past week. We've spoken on the last two occasions, but even on that first one, I'd noticed her.

I can picture her, standing in my shop, eying the pastry display, her daughter on one hip. I noticed her, not because she was beautiful or unusual. I noticed her because she was happy. A mother perhaps nearly a decade older than me with a baby on one hip and another in her belly. A mother glowing with contentment and joy. I saw her, and I'd retreated into the back. As I did, our eyes met, and hers widened, and I'd thought it was because she realized I was backing away.

When she came two days later, I made a point of serving her, shamed by my first reaction. She'd asked questions in an accent I'd mistaken for American. As we talked, I learned she was a history professor from Toronto, married to an Englishman. They had a summer house in North Yorkshire, but her husband was in York for a horse show, and they were spending the week at a holiday flat.

When she'd come by yesterday, I'd found myself smiling, happy for the excuse to chat. I even offered her my card and said the shop shipped throughout Yorkshire. We don't ship anywhere, actually, but I'd felt the urge to reach out. I've come to realize I've omitted one very important part of a satisfying life: companionship. So I was seeking that, whether with this woman or with Noah. Baby steps toward a fuller life.

Now, seeing the woman with William, I know exactly why her eyes had widened that first

day. Why she'd returned twice more and made a point of talking to me.

She knows who I am.

She has seen a portrait or photograph of me in my world. Her husband was August's best friend. She would know his wife had vanished, and she might even know my former profession. One day, she walks into a bakery in York, and who does she see? She cannot believe her eyes, quite literally, and so she comes twice more, striking up conversations as she continues her assessment. When she has decided I am indeed Rosalind Courtenay, she brings William to confirm.

I watch them. Her face is turned up to William's, his own countenance as joy bright as hers. Tears spring to my eyes. I could not be happier for him. He is a dear friend and a good man, yet there has always been a shadow in him. Now it is lifted, and he glows with its leaving, and I want to run to him and throw my arms around his neck.

William. Dearest William. It is I. Rosalind.

Yet my feet do not move. I only stare, and that moment of joy on seeing him freezes in my gut as one tear trickles down my cheek.

William.

I want to run to you. Throw myself at you. Beg you and your lovely new wife for help. You are here, in my world, and you can take me home.

Tell me you can take me home.

What if you cannot? What if you are trapped here, too? Only for you, it would be a blessing. You have your wife. You have your daughter and another child on the way. You have your home and even your beloved horses. You will miss August dreadfully, but otherwise, there would be nothing tying you to that other world.

Even if William and his wife can move freely between worlds, that does not mean they can take me back. What would we do then? Have William return to tell August that I'm trapped forever in the future?

As I watch, William and his wife continue toward my bakery, and my feet remain rooted to the cobblestones. They are nearly past the alley when William half turns, frowning. My breath catches, but his gaze only slides across the shadows before he continues on.

I wait until they are gone, and then I run. It is time to go back to Thorne Manor. Back to that spot that brought me here, in the hope—the wild hope—that seeing William means I can finally return home.

