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&
Sleigh Bells*

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SNOWSTORMS & SLEIGH BELLS

A Stitch in Time holiday novella



KELLEY ARMSTRONG



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CONTENTS

[Introduction](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[More Stories....](#)

[A Turn of the Tide](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[About the Author](#)

INTRODUCTION

*If you're new to the **A Stitch in Time** series—or if it's been a while since you've read **A Twist of Fate**—here's a little introduction to get you up to speed. Otherwise, if you're ready to go, just skip to chapter one and dive in!*

There's a time stitch in Thorne Manor, hereditary summer home to the Thornes of North Yorkshire. As far as we know, Bronwyn Dale was the first to pass through, traveling from the twenty-first century to the nineteenth, where she met William Thorne when they were both children. Later, as a widow, she returned to find William still there. They're now married with a daughter, Amelia, and another baby on the way. They live in Thorne Manor and divide their time between the modern world and the Victorian one.

Before Bronwyn returned to Thorne Manor, Rosalind, the wife of William's best friend August Courtenay, accidentally went through the time stitch into the modern world, where she was trapped for four years, separated from August and their son, Edmund.

Rosalind returned home two months ago and reunited with her family. They live at Courtenay Hall, the summer estate of August's oldest brother, Everett, earl of Tynesford. Through a much-deserved bit of blackmail, August secured the right to live at Courtenay Hall with his family.

It's now Christmas, which the Courtenay family is spending with the Thornes at Thorne Manor. As for the stitch, well, that room is off-limits. After Rosalind's experience, she has no interest in tempting fate again. The door to the stitch will remain locked.

Wait, should we mention the ghosts? The Second Sight runs in Rosalind's family. She has only the slightest touch, but her sister Miranda has it, as does five-year-old Edmund.

That should be everything. Welcome (back) to the world of **A Stitch in Time**. Settle in for time travel, holiday fun and, of course, a ghost or two.

August and I are spending the holidays at Thorne Manor. Or that was the plan. It still is . . . our hosts simply do not realize it yet.

The original proposal had been for us to arrive the week before Christmas. August's older brother, Everett—Earl of Tynesford—insisted on holding his annual holiday ball at Courtenay Hall. Which is his right, the hall being his country manor, yet Courtenay Hall is now ours . . . or it will be once this blasted ball is over. That had been the condition, with Everett complaining that he couldn't possibly relocate his Christmas ball with a mere two months' notice. We granted him that, but we were not staying in residence, where he could bully August and ogle me and tell our five-year-old son that he needs to spend more time at sport, learn to hunt, toughen up, be a man.

When Everett and his entourage descended, we'd head north to Thorne Manor, where we'd spend the holidays with our dearest friends. We would help care for little Amelia and take over holiday preparations so Bronwyn—a mere month from giving birth—could get some much-needed rest while her husband waited on her hand and foot.

Those were our plans. The baby had other ideas and decided to give her parents an early Christmas gift. That would have been lovely if she hadn't also almost given them heart failure. Bronwyn is forty, and they've been

extremely careful with her pregnancy. With this unexpected complication, William had rushed her off to twenty-first-century York. Three days ago, he'd returned home long enough to pop back to our world and send a message to Courtenay Hall, assuring us that mother and daughter were fine and the family would be home Christmas Day, if we still wished to come.

Of course we still wished to come. Also, we still wished to vacate Courtenay Hall before Everett arrived. So we hit upon a scheme whereby we'd sneak up to Thorne Manor early and surprise our friends by preparing the house for their return. Knowing how much Bronwyn loves the holidays—and how incredibly busy they'll both be—we will fashion them a proper Christmas at Thorne Manor.

It's December twenty-third. Everett was due to arrive after breakfast, and so by dawn, we were in the coach heading for Thorne Manor. We may also have accidentally granted holiday leave to all staff who requested it. An administrative oversight, which we rectified by hiring temporary staff to cover Everett's stay . . . and making sure none of them were women under the age of forty.

We arrived at Thorne Manor this morning. The housekeeper—Mrs. Shaw—had the home heated and lit, with a cold lunch waiting. We'd had to forewarn her that we'd be staying there, of course, and while we'd insisted she not make any special arrangements for our arrival, we knew she would, and we'd brought a particularly nice holiday gift to thank her for it.

We arrived in a coach overflowing with Christmas goods—everything, including food and gifts and decorations. If those decorations came from Courtenay Hall, and Everett explodes seeing the empty storage room, well, that's another of those administrative oversights. It's a good thing he can wash his hands of the hall after this week. His youngest brother simply cannot be relied upon to properly prepare for his visits.

It's now four in the afternoon. The sun is dropping, and we're bustling about like elves. Edmund has taken a box of decorations upstairs to prepare

the nursery for the baby and Amelia. He's been up there a very long time, and I shudder to think how many decorations he has used.

"What's that? Your fourth biscuit?" I ask as August ties yet another mistletoe ball in yet another doorway.

He turns and says, "Biscuit?" though it comes out like "is-kit" as he's saying it with the biscuit in question between his teeth.

I stride over. "At this rate, there shall be none left for the Thornes."

I snap the gingerbread out of his mouth.

"Well, then, you shall need to make more," he says. "Fortunately, Bronwyn stocked up for just such an emergency. Have you seen the kitchen? It looks as if someone was preparing for the arrival of a master baker. Perhaps the illustrious Rosalind Courtenay."

I nibble the half-eaten biscuit and pull a face. "You may eat all of these. I have used too much candied ginger."

"It seems perfect to me. However, if you are not entirely satisfied, I believe Bronwyn snuck in a crate of twenty-first-century ingredients for you."

He laughs as I sprint for the kitchen, my skirts nearly sending me toppling to the floor.

My time in the twenty-first century was one of the most difficult in my life, rivaled only by the period after my parents' sudden deaths. Yet even amidst the horror of being trapped two centuries away from my husband and son, I found moments of absolute wonder and delight. The two things I miss most are women's clothing and baking supplies. I've been attempting to incorporate more freeing attire into my wardrobe, and Bronwyn sneaks me baking goods. The only thing I'm truly missing are the kitchen appliances, which won't do me any good here until someone invents electricity. I've told August he needs to get working on that. Instead, he has thrown himself into trying to rig up some form of automatic stand mixer for me. I am truly the luckiest of women.

I find the crate of baking supplies hidden under a horse blanket, which Mrs. Shaw would know better than to touch, though I'm sure she grumbles at having one—even a clean one—in her kitchen.

I reach inside and pull out pouches, the supplies removed from their modern packaging in case the housekeeper accidentally removes that blanket.

“Chocolate morsels,” I whisper. “Vanilla extract. Peanut butter!”

August puts his arms around my back. “Have I mentioned how much I love it when you squeal over baking ingredients?”

I twist in his arms and hold up the jar. “I am going to bake you peanut-butter cookies with chocolate chips.”

“Mmm, make that little noise again. The sigh when you first opened that box.”

I do, and he presses against me.

“Edmund seems very preoccupied upstairs,” August says. “And I believe, in our rush to vacate the estate, we missed our morning attempt to provide him with a younger sibling.”

“We have fallen off the schedule. Completely unacceptable.”

“I thought so.”

August nuzzles my neck, and he's just begun working his way down my throat when a cat meows, loudly, in the doorway. We glance over to see two young cats watching us.

“Truly?” August says, “Both of you?”

Both are calicos. Sisters. Edmund brought Surrey with us, and Enigma is Bronwyn's cat. Their mother, Pandora, seems to be in hiding.

“They must be hungry,” I say as I back out of August's embrace. “In the commotion of arriving, I didn't set out a bowl for Surrey, and it's her dinner hour.” I kiss his cheek. “Can I get a rain check?”

“Someday, you need to tell me what that actually means.”

“It’s so much more fun watching you try to figure it out. We will definitely get back on schedule tonight, which means you’ll need a hearty dinner to build up energy.”

“Oh, I do not need energy. I plan to just lie there.”

“I don’t believe I could get you to ‘just lie there’ without ropes, August.” I tilt my head. “Although, that does sound intriguing . . .”

He grins. “Very intriguing.”

“We must feed the cats and then round up our son to go tree-cutting before it’s too dark. If you decide to check the barn later, for soft ropes, I will not argue.”

After we fill the cat bowls, I lead August toward the stairs. “Edmund did only take *one* box of decorations, yes?”

“He took one box from me.” August pauses. “Dare I guess he also took one from you?”

I sigh. “I do not even want to know what the nursery looks like. We may need to undo some of it. I mentioned that he ought not to use any small baubles that Amelia might put into her mouth, and he informed me she is nearly two and no longer a baby . . . and the baby will be too little to grab anything that isn’t handed to her.”

“Our son is far too clever.”

“I reminded him that Amelia, being not yet two, might helpfully hand her baby sister a bauble.”

“Our son’s mother is even more clever.”

I shake my head as I ascend the stairs. “Not clever enough to stop him from absconding with two full boxes of decorations.”

I reach the top, turn into the hall and freeze. The door into the stitch is open. Wide open.

“August?” I say, reaching for him, my hand groping wildly as my heart hammers.

“The office door was closed,” I say. “And locked, yes? I checked it.”

“As did I,” he says, striding past me. “It was definitely closed and locked.”

I barrel down the hall. My slippered feet slide on the hardwood, and I scramble into the room, the door banging as it slams against the wall.

I halt in the middle of the room, barely able to draw breath. It looks like a very ordinary office. A pretty one, in fact, cozy and well appointed with two desks and a chaise longue near the window.

Such a lovely little office for two, and yet even looking at it makes me want to heave my lunch onto the floor. There, in the middle of the room, is the stitch in time. It’s here that I came four years ago, following the yowls of a kitten trapped in a box. I opened the box and found the kitten that became Pandora. In doing so, I tumbled through the stitch to where she’d stumbled into it: Bronwyn’s childhood bedroom in the twenty-first century.

I have steered clear of this room, and the Thornes lock it when I am here, understanding that even seeing the closed door makes my heart race.

Do I ever consider crossing back to show August the wonders of the twenty-first century? Of course I do. But I cannot do it for fear—absolute terror—that I would cross over and he would not and I’d be trapped again, this time forever.

We don’t understand how the stitch works. At first, only Bronwyn could cross, and cross freely. Then she’d been temporarily stuck on her side, William on his, until something happened, and he could cross as freely as she. I crossed once and could not return for four years. I was able to return after the way opened for William. Does that mean I can come and go, as they do? I will not test it. I dare not.

“The door was locked,” I whisper. “I know it was locked.”

August comes up behind me and puts his arms around my waist. “Well, then, there is only one solution to this mystery. William has returned.”

“What?” I spin, my numb brain struggling to process his words. Then my eyes widen. “Yes, of course.”

I press my hands to my chest as I turn in August’s arms and give a soft laugh. “I think my heart stopped there. Yes, clearly, if the door was locked and is no longer locked, it is because Lord Thorne came home to fetch something. It isn’t as if our five-year-old son can pick locks.”

August kisses my forehead and eases me out of the office, shutting the door behind us.

“I’m sorry,” I say. “I overreacted.”

“No,” he says. “You reacted exactly as one might expect, given the trauma you endured and the fact that you have not yet allowed yourself to fully come to terms with it.”

“Fully come to terms with it?” I roll my eyes. “You and Bronwyn have been talking about me, haven’t you? That is clearly twenty-first-century therapy language.”

“Well, then perhaps what you need is twenty-first-century therapy . . . in the nineteenth century.”

I slip from his grasp and grimace. “I’m fine, August. It *was* traumatic—while I was there and couldn’t get home. But I’m home, and things are even better than before. What more could I want?”

He doesn’t answer. Just studies my expression.

My husband presents as a simple man—the carefree, devilishly handsome youngest son of an earl, endlessly witty and charming. Yet if we must speak of trauma, he has more than his share. It makes him complicated, and I adore him for that, as I adore being one of the few people who sees how great a treasure he is. Yet there are times, such as this, when I wish my husband was a little more of the image he presents. When I wish he was a little less thoughtful, a little less introspective, a little less attuned to the emotions of others.

I want to be fine. I *am* fine. I just need him to stop wishing I’d admit to something I don’t—well, *barely*—feel.

I put my arms around his neck. “How are we doing, August?”

His face breaks into a grin, and I press my lips to his.

“We are doing amazingly,” I say. “We were not doing nearly as well when I left, as much as that pained us both. While I never would have wanted to lose four years with you and Edmund, if some deity offered me the choice—give up four years or lose the love of my life—I would have stepped through that time stitch myself. That is how I see it. I went away, and I came back changed and found you also changed, and we are so much better.”

“You didn’t need to change, Rosie. It was me.”

“And I needed to see that—stop blaming myself for your jealousy and insist we work together to save our marriage. That’s what I learned. Confidence and strength.”

“I’m quite certain you possessed plenty of both already. But yes, I understand your meaning, and I will allow you, temporarily, to pretend you suffer no lingering trauma from the experience.”

“Or you could just accept that I *don't* suffer any.”

He turns and heads down the hall. “We ought to find William before he gives Edmund a fright.”

I sigh, shake my head and follow.

William is not in the house.

And neither is Edmund.

It takes at least ten minutes for the truth of that to sink in. It was such an obvious answer. William is in the modern world, and it's less than a two-hour drive from York. If he realized Bronwyn needed something in the Victorian world, he'd have gone home to get it. Or if he realized he needed to tend to a matter of business, she'd have sent him back to do it. He comes through the stitch. Unlocks the office door. Doesn't notice us because he's distracted and not expecting guests.

When we don't find him in the house, we check outside, presuming he went to the stables to visit his beloved horses, but the only tracks in the snow are from our boots and Mrs. Shaw's.

That is the moment when we both realize we haven't seen Edmund. We didn't forget about our son. We'd briefly noted that the nursery room door was shut, and noises from within suggested he was still hard at work.

Once we accept that William hasn't come home early, we race upstairs. I let August go first, his less cumbersome attire allowing him to take the steps two at a time. He soon disappears from sight. This is the lingering effect of *his* traumas—a terror of losing his loved ones. Yes, I lost my parents, but I have two younger sisters I adore. He lost his mother and his

sister, the only people who cared about him. He also lost his fiancée through circumstances that now make me shudder in relief that he hadn't married her. And he lost his wife—me—for four years. So he is up those stairs so fast I doubt he even draws breath.

A crash sounds from above, as if he's burst into the nursery.

"Edmund?" he calls. "Edmund!"

Skirts hiked, I tear down the hall and swing into the nursery. There are no decorations save two porcelain angels, one now on the carpet. That's the noise we heard. Not Edmund moving about but Pandora trapped in the nursery and none too pleased about it.

I race in and spin. "Edmund? Edmund!"

He's not here. There's a crib and a trundle bed and no place for our son to hide.

I run out, skidding around the corner and down the hall and into the office. I wildly search the room as if Edmund will pop from behind the chaise longue.

Then I see it.

A painted acorn on the floor.

I scoop it up, and in my mind, I see the two of us in the nursery at Courtenay Hall, painting pine cones and acorns and walnuts, making them into Christmas ornaments.

I stare at the acorn. Then I stare at the spot on the floor beside where it had lain. An empty spot with wear marks in the wood from a chest being moved back and forth, covering the stitch when it was not in use. Moved aside for the Thornes to pass through last week.

Before I even know what I'm doing, I lunge for the spot. I envision my son tumbling through time, hear him screaming in fear as he goes, and I lunge, as if I can still catch him. I fall, my foot twisting, and I land on my knees, pain slamming through them. I'm on all fours, gazing down at the wood floor with the wear marks.

As I see those familiar wear marks, tears spring to my eyes. I didn't pass through.

I scramble to my feet to try again. Then I see the desk. It looks like the same desk as before, yet this one has a laptop on it.

My heart stops. It beats twice, like a panicked bird, and then it seems to stop, and I can't breathe.

Oh God, no. No, no, no. I spent four years trying to escape this world, and now I'm back and . . .

And I *wanted* to be here. I jumped through the stitch on purpose. I am certain Edmund crossed, and so I came after him.

But what if he didn't?

Or what if he did, and we can't get back, and August can't get through and—

Stop.

I rise, breathing deeply and fisting my hands to control my shaking. I'm being ridiculous. I passed through intentionally. I'll find Edmund and return. Why am I in such a state?

You reacted exactly as one might expect, given the trauma you endured.

I shake off August's words. Enough of that. I am fine. Perfectly fine.

"Edmund?" I call as I walk to the door. It's wide open. Proof that he's been here? I can only hope so.

I lift my skirts and jog into the hall. "Edmund? Edmund!"

A noise below. A soft noise, and I almost ignore it. Just one of the cats again. Then I remember that all three cats are accounted for on the other side of the stitch. I run down the stairs, skirts hiked up in both hands, neither on the railing, and I stumble, my soft boots slipping. My hands fly up, and I crack down on my tailbone and howl as pain rips through me.

"Mama!"

That voice. That word. It sends me levering up, ignoring the screaming in my back, even as a voice behind me says, "Rosalind!"

August's footsteps thunder down after me, but I'm already flying to Edmund. I snatch him up and squeeze him, my heart still threatening to pound straight from my chest. Then August is there, his arms around us, murmuring, "It's all right, Rosie. We're all here. We're all fine."

"We need to get home," I say, my voice so breathy it's barely audible. I hoist Edmund into my arms and break from August's embrace. "We need to go. Now."

"But—" Edmund begins.

"No!" I say, and my voice is sharper than he's ever heard. He flinches. I scatter kisses on his forehead as I begin to climb the stairs. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to shout."

"Let me carry him," August says.

I hesitate. It's only a split second, but it is enough to shame me. Do I expect a trick here? For August to take Edmund and not let me flee through the stitch with him? In my heart, I know that would never happen, and yet for that split second, I am in the days before our reunion, when I feared exactly such a thing. That August might not believe my story and might keep our son from me for "abandoning" him.

That fear had been borne of nightmare, a worst-possible scenario that I did not truly believe possible of the man I knew. But there'd been moments there when I'd wondered whether August *was* the man I knew. Whether he had changed or whether I had only seen what I wanted to see.

I know better, but that doesn't keep the fear and doubt from rising, if only for a moment. A flash of remembered pain, sharper than the throbbing in my back as I clutch Edmund to me. Then I turn, carefully, and hand him to his father.

"We'll do whatever you need to do, Rosie," August murmurs.

"But, Papa—" Edmund begins.

"No." August's voice is gentler than my panicked snap, but it's firm enough for Edmund's small shoulders to slump.

“Yes, Papa.”

We continue up the stairs. I stride into the office and then stop, my heart suddenly in my throat.

“What if we can’t all get back?” I whisper. “What if one of us is stuck —?”

I don’t finish before August lifts me under his free arm and crosses those last steps to the stich. One heart-stopping moment, and then we are through, and I’m scrambling against his hold until he puts me down, and I drag both of them away from the spot.

Then I can breathe.

I can finally breathe.

August sets Edmund on the desk chair and says, “Stay right there. Understand? You did a naughty thing, and it would be wise for you to remember that, should you feel the need to argue.”

There’s a lightness in August’s voice, rendering it mock sternness. Edmund knows that doesn’t mean his father *isn’t* serious, and he nods.

Then August turns to me and takes my hands in his. “We’re back, Rosie. We crossed over and returned.”

I can only nod as I recover my breath.

“So that is the twenty-first century,” August muses.

I hiccup a laugh. “A very brief glance of it. I know that must have been disappointing.” I look at Edmund. “For both of you.”

I expect—hope?—August will brush it off, saying he has no interest in seeing the modern world. I also know that would be a lie, so I am not surprised when he only murmurs, “Hmm.”

“I apologize,” I say. “I should have let you take a look around. It’s only . . .”

“You feared we might not be able to get back, and as lovely as the twenty-first century is, our home is in the nineteenth.”

I nod. Then I say, softly, “Still, I did overreact.”

“I understood.”

“We would have been fine in that world.” I wipe sweat from my forehead. “I overreacted.”

“No, Rosalind. I respect your response as it arises from the trauma you experienced.”

I glare at him. “Bronwyn bought you a book, didn’t she?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” he says. “But if she did, I can assure you she would not foist such a tome upon me without my clear request for it.”

I sigh and shake my head.

“May I make a suggestion?” August says. “One that has nothing to do with anything I may or may not have read.”

“Go ahead.”

“We crossed the stitch. Effortlessly. There and back. I believe, acknowledging my minimal knowledge of such things, that indicates we are free to cross back and forth, as the Thornes are.”

I open my mouth to protest.

He cuts in. “We do not know what allows people to cross or prevents them from doing so. Without that information, we can never be absolutely certain that passage is possible. Yet, once the way opened for the Thornes, it remained open, and they cross freely.”

I say nothing. He’s right. I simply do not wish to grant him the point because I suspect what is coming.

“Edmund?” August says. “Would you step out of the room, please?”

Edmund nods and leaves as August calls after him to close the door.

Once our son is gone, August lowers his voice. “I would like you to consider allowing us—the three of us—to cross over again.”

I stiffen so fast pain arcs through my bruised lower back. I wince, and August rubs my shoulders. I resist the urge to yank away. Resist the urge to snap and demand to know how he could ask such a thing of me.

Because it’s a reasonable request.

And if I'm angry at him for asking, that is unreasonable.

You reacted exactly as one might expect, given the trauma you endured.

I growl under my breath. August doesn't comment. He keeps rubbing my shoulders as he waits with utmost patience.

"You want to see it," I say. "Edmund wants to see it. I am denying you that."

"No," he says evenly. "I do not want to see it badly enough that I would ever do so without your freely given consent. Edmund is too young to understand that, but if he were older, he would say the same."

"Still, you do want to see it."

August sighs. "Of course I want to see it, Rosie. Someday. When you're ready. If that is not now, then we'll lock the door. We'll leave the house entirely if it will make you feel better." He shifts to face me. "But if it could be now, perhaps that is not such a bad thing. Perhaps it will help."

I stiffen again.

He goes on. "I propose we cross over and let you take it at your pace. If that means merely allowing us to see a twenty-first-century home, that is enough. If we may also see the grounds . . . and perhaps that automated carriage William taunts me with . . ."

I sigh louder. "You want to see the car. That's what all this is about, isn't it?"

He grins. "Absolutely. Allow me to see that, and I will be happy. Allow me a ride in it—"

"No," I say with a mock glower.

"All right, I will settle for seeing it in all its metallic glory. Then, perhaps, we could walk to the village. It will be decorated for the holidays. I wonder what that would be like, in such a world. With lights running on this magical *electric* current. I suppose it would be a wondrous thing for a man to see, just once in his life—"

“Stop,” I say as my glower deepens. “You are impossible.” I raise my voice. “Edmund? Come in here a moment, please?”

The door creaks open, and he peers through. His gaze slips to his father, and I cannot fault him for that, even if it does give me the briefest pang. For most of Edmund’s life, it has been only his father and he. I left when he was too young to remember me. I am eternally grateful for the bond between August and Edmund, and so, no, I cannot fault my son for still checking in with his father when he is uncertain. We need more time. I already have his love. I have his respect. Now I need to fully earn his trust.

“Edmund?” I say. “Can you explain what happened?”

His cheeks flush bright red.

“Edmund?” I say. “If I seem angry, I am only worried. You did a thing I very much did not want you to do. However, I never *told* you not to do it. So, while I think you know it was not allowed, you are not in trouble. I only need to understand what happened. That door was locked, was it not?”

He nods.

“Did you find the key?”

He shakes his head.

“You picked the lock?”

His face screws up at the word. “No, I prized it open.”

“Prized . . . ?” I slump. “Your aunt Miranda taught you to open locks.”

Horror crosses his small face. “N-no, Mama, I did not say it was Aunt Miranda.”

I fix him with a look. “Are you telling me it was not my sister? Answer carefully, Edmund, and remember that whatever Aunt Miranda said, it doesn’t mean she’d wish you to lie. You told me nothing. I guessed.”

Not a guess, really. The word *prized* gave it away, as did the action itself. My youngest sister is a writer, hence the varied vocabulary. More specifically, she is a writer of melodramatic tales of adventure and suspense, one who fully believes that she should not write about a thing like

sword-fighting or lock-picking until she has mastered it herself. I fear for the day when she decides to turn her pen to murder mysteries.

Edmund reluctantly confirms it was Miranda.

“Yet, it was not Miranda who told you what lies within this room, was it?”

“No, Mama.”

I exhale. I may worry about my son or husband crossing over, but I live in terror of my sister discovering there is a doorway to another world. There will be no holding her back.

“Was it an accident?” I ask. “You were practicing your lock-prizing skills and when you walked into the room, something happened?”

Edmund pauses, a look crossing his face that almost makes me laugh. He is as terrible at subterfuge as his father.

August clears his throat. “Answer honestly, Edmund.”

Edmund’s shoulders sag. “No, Mama. It was not an accident. I was looking for Amelia’s special spot. She said it was in here.”

“Special spot?”

He nods. “She says she has another house. Like this one but different. To get to it, they come in here.”

I glance at August, who shrugs in bafflement. He’s thinking what I am—how the devil did Amelia tell Edmund that when the child has a vocabulary of several dozen words? Then I remember that when my sister, Portia, was small, my parents insisted I always knew what she was saying and acted as her interpreter.

I know William and Bronwyn have discussed how to handle their dual worlds once Amelia is old enough to talk. How to keep her from sharing her secret without making her feel as if she is being expected to lie. Apparently, they may need to discuss that sooner rather than later.

“So your aunt Miranda taught you to prize open locked doors, and little Amelia told you about the wonders on the other side of this particular

locked door. A perfect storm of circumstance.”

Edmund frowns at the unfamiliar words, but I see his brain processing and sorting, the way mine does, tucking them away for future exploration. My son inherited my dyslexia, but that has made him treasure words all the more. In verbal form, that is. We’re still working on his fear of the written word, which I understand all too well.

I continue, “And you saw what was on the other side of that.” I point to the spot in the room.

He’s quiet for a moment, considering. When he speaks, his words come with care. “I saw another place. I do not understand it because it is still Uncle William and Aunt Bronwyn’s house. It is, yet it is not. It is like something from Aunt Miranda’s stories where people go into other worlds. Except I did not see any monsters.”

“Do you understand what you did see?” I ask.

He shakes his head.

I glance at August. Here lies the same problem I just considered for Bronwyn and William. Do I make up a false story about the world beyond the stitch? Or do I tell the truth . . . and require Edmund to keep it secret, perhaps even to lie?

I didn’t expect to keep knowledge of the stitch from my son forever. All he knows about my disappearance is that I could not get back to him. Someday, he will question that, and I planned to tell him the truth, at the very least so he can be confident I did not abandon him.

When I glance to August for help, he only nods, which does not help at all. He’s telling me to do whatever I think is best. Lovely in theory, but it does not help me decide, especially when I know what *he* thinks is best.

Edmund has already seen the other side. Even if I tell him nothing more, he will have a secret to keep.

“That world is our world,” I say, “but in the future.”

Another child's eyes might bug in wonder and amazement. My son only considers my words, working them through.

"Aunt Bronwyn comes from that world," I say. "That is why they take Amelia back and forth. This is Uncle William's world, where he has his friends and his work, and that is Aunt Bronwyn's, where she has her friends and her work."

"In the future."

"Yes."

"How much in the future?"

I smile at this very Edmund-like question. "About a hundred and seventy years."

He blinks. "That is a lot. A very lot."

"It is."

More silence as he thinks. Then his face lights up, a crafty look glinting in his eyes. "And we must keep it a secret, yes?"

Here is where I realize I've misjudged. As a mother, I am horrified at the thought of asking my five-year-old son to keep a secret that might lead to lies. But I forget what it was like to be five and to hold the deliciousness of a secret, to be trusted with one by grownups.

August has taught our son the difference between "good" secrets and "bad" ones, and Edmund realizes this is a good secret. A safe one. A delectable one.

"Yes," I say. "Otherwise, your poor aunt and uncle would have people queued at their door and slipping in the windows and leaping down the chimney, all in hopes of seeing the future. They would be besieged, like knights in a castle, little Amelia having to learn to use a crossbow to drive them off."

He giggles at the thought. "Amelia would like that."

"I suspect she would. The problem is that not everyone *can* cross over to the other world. Aunt Bronwyn's family walked over that spot a thousand

times, but only she could come through to our world. Uncle William's family did the same, and even he couldn't pass through until . . ." I throw up my hands. "Until something happened, and the door opened, and we still don't know why."

"Because it is magic," he whispers.

I kiss the top of his head. "It is definitely magic. But it means that we cannot tell anyone because it would be terrible to know such a thing exists if you cannot see it. Can you imagine if your aunt Miranda knew and was unable to pass through?"

"She would be very sad."

"She would. So we won't tell her."

He looks back at the spot. "Is it dangerous?"

I tense.

Here, August answers for me, his voice soft. "It isn't dangerous in the sense that there are monsters. But your mother was worried we might not be able to get back. That the door would close behind us."

"But it didn't."

"It didn't."

Edmund looks from the spot to me. "And we cannot go back? To see it better, now that we know the door is open?"

I take a moment to silence the gibbering panic in my stomach. Then I say, "Would you like to go back?"

He nods so hard that August can't help but laugh, as much as he tries to stifle it.

"All right," I say. "We will hold hands and go back."

"I think we should do it two times," Edmund says. "To be sure. Go through and back and through again. Then we will be sure."

Ah, my darling son. You may have no idea why I'm in such a panic, but you are your father's child, and you understand, at some level, exactly what I fear and how you might make it better.

“That seems a fine idea,” I say. I put out my hands, one for him and one for August, and then I steel my voice and say, “Let us go into the future.”

An hour ago, I was barely able to draw breath past the all-consuming anxiety. Now I am darting about like a child, showing my son and husband all the wonders of a twenty-first-century home.

We were able to pass through twice, and so I have accepted that the way is open to us henceforth, and upon realizing that, a giddy excitement possessed me. It is as if the modern world was a wondrous land I thought I could never share with my family, and so I told myself it was not so wondrous after all. In fact, I was quite certain crocodiles lurked in every corner, waiting to snatch us up. Now that we are here, I can acknowledge the wonders and how much, deep down, I longed to bring August and Edmund here.

I begin, naturally, with Christmas. The Thornes have decorated on this side, and I explain the differences between their celebration and ours. The tree is already up, while we don't erect ours until Christmas Eve. Rather than being in brown wrapping, the presents are brightly colored with festive motifs. The decorations are also more elaborate here. I know Bronwyn loves the holidays, and she and William have indulged that love here.

I am so engrossed in my animated discussion of the Victorian celebration versus the twenty-first-century one that I overlook the very

obvious question, which Edmund finally asks, somewhat tentatively.

“How do you know so much about this world if it has not happened yet?” he asks. “Did you read it in a book?”

I freeze.

August catches my eye, and his expression asks whether we want to explain now or wait. We have tiptoed around the reason for my absence with Edmund. Yet we didn’t want to lie and use the “amnesia” excuse we’ve employed with others. We’ve said only that I suffered an accident and could not get home, however desperately I tried.

I take a deep breath, and then I nod, and August lays a hand on Edmund’s shoulder before saying, “Your mother has a story to tell.”



EDMUND REQUIRES REMARKABLY LITTLE DETAIL TO UNDERSTAND WHAT happened to me. He is a child—one who also sees ghosts. There is magic in his world, and so he has readily accepted that we stepped through time. When I say that I fell through and could not get back for years, it is as if I’m saying I was trapped in another country. It makes perfect sense, and as August points out, it also explains my earlier panic.

Edmund has questions, mostly about whether I am still afraid, whether I want to go back to our time now. He is his father’s son, in all the best ways. I assure him that I am confident that the door is fully open for us, and so we will stay a little longer.

After that, we find warm outerwear in the wardrobe, bundle up and head outside to see that object of greatest wonder: The Car.

“Is there no snow in the future?” Edmund asks, looking about in obvious disappointment.

“I believe I see a little over there.” I point beside the garage, where William has shoveled snow to clear the driveway. “The rest seems to have

melted. They may have a green Christmas.”

Edmund nods. “It is still very pretty with such decorations. It only needs snow.”

“Well, then, you must do the snow dance.”

His nose scrunches.

“What?” I say. “You do not know the snow dance? Then how shall we summon snow for baby Grace’s arrival?”

August clears his throat.

I spin, clapping my hands together. “Your father says he knows the snow dance. Excellent. See that you do not forget the pirouettes, my love.”

My husband fixes me with a look.

I bend to Edmund. “I believe he thinks I am stalling, keeping him from seeing The Car. How terribly unfair. I was only thinking of snow for the baby’s first Christmas.” I turn to August. “Fine. You may delay the dance until you have seen the motor vehicle.”

I walk to the garage side door and unlock it from the set of keys we found in a drawer. “You know, it may not be in here. They did go to York in quite a hurry. They could have taken the fancy car and left the rather dull little one.”

“Having never seen a car before, I would not know fancy from dull.”

“Oh, I think you might.” I flick on the light. “And you are in luck. They took the safe and practical vehicle, naturally, and left this one.”

The car is an “antique,” which is laughable to someone from our world. It’s an Austin-Healey convertible, cherry red with gleaming chrome. I may lean more toward practical conveyances myself, but even I cannot look upon this car without sighing, ever so softly, and imagining Bronwyn and me ripping about the countryside in it.

Which we might actually be able to do, now that I have conquered my fear of crossing over.

Have I conquered it?

I shove the doubt aside to revel in the look on my husband's face, staring at the convertible the way I stared at my first cherry-red, gleaming-chrome stand mixer.

"That—that is . . ." August steps toward the car and reaches out a hand, pulling back before he touches the metal.

"Go on," I say. "Caress her to your heart's content, and I shall endeavor not to be jealous." I pick up a polishing cloth from a workbench. "But you'll be the one cleaning off the fingerprints."

He tosses the rag over his shoulder and strokes the car bonnet.

"I suppose you would like to see the engine," I say.

The look he gives me . . . There is a moment where I *might* actually feel a pang of jealousy, right before I must admit that I've enjoyed that same look every day of our marriage. This dalliance will be allowed. It is Christmas, after all. The season to be generous.

I open the car and pop the bonnet. Then I sit back while my husband explores the wonders of the combustion engine. An interest in mechanics is most unbecoming for a man of his social stature—much like an interest in baking had been unbecoming for mine—and he did not have my tolerant parents. It is only now, as he approaches his fourth decade, that he has finally allowed himself to admit his interest in the mechanical, beginning with that mixer project for me. I am delighted to see it and to see him pointing out components to our son, August's face shining the way I'm sure mine must when I give Edmund a baking lesson.

"Tell me when you would like me to start it up," I say.

August blinks over at me, so adorably that I have to laugh. It is as if, in his excitement, he forgot that the car is not an exhibit in a museum.

He lifts Edmund in one arm, our son sighing in a way that tells me he will not allow such childish handling much longer, which *also* tells me that we must pick him up and cuddle him and carry him as much as we can before it is too late.

August backs up until he is practically plastered to the garage wall and then he waves for me to start the engine. I walk to the other wall and press a button. When the garage door begins to rise, they both jump, Edmund giving a squeak of alarm, suddenly not nearly as annoyed to be in his father's arms.

"Sorry!" I say. "I did not think to warn you. I have to open the garage door before we turn on the car, on account of the fumes."

"Carbon dioxide," August says. "It would be formed by combustion—the carbon from the fuel combining with the oxygen in the air."

"Car-bon d'oxide," Edmund says. "Isn't that what makes bread rise, Mama?"

"It is," I say, smiling at him. "When yeast feeds on sugar, it produces carbon dioxide, and that makes bread rise."

And here, I must admit that I have already begun to feed my son information he may not be able to reveal to the Victorian world. When I was in the twenty-first century, I tried to soothe my fears the way many people deal with the anxieties of modern life—by losing myself in television. For me, as the daughter of a doctor, I'd been particularly fascinated with the advances in science, and I'd spent endless hours watching documentaries and science shows, giving my mind something else to do when it threatened to devour itself with worry.

Then I returned and took over my son's schooling with somewhat unorthodox methods, having discovered that his dyslexia had spawned a fear of formal learning. I incorporate lessons into everyday life, including baking, and here I have told him something that I believe Louis Pasteur is just beginning to discover.

Was that wrong? Should I instead have perpetuated the misunderstandings of Victorian science? My father would be appalled at the thought. So too, would August. No, I will tell Edmund the truth as I know

it, and if that means he may also have to later be told what he can and cannot pass along, we will deal with that.

August takes Edmund closer to the running motor, and they both examine it from a safe distance.

“So it is a horseless carriage,” Edmund says.

I laugh. “That is exactly what they will call it, when it is invented.”

He gives me that crafty look. “Perhaps because I will invent it.”

I walk over and kiss his hair. “Perhaps so. Now, let us go back inside, and we shall see whether there is anything we can ready here for the baby’s arrival before we return to our time.”

“Are we not going for a ride in the horseless carriage?” Edmund says. “You know how to drive it, yes?”

I hesitate. I’d obtained my license mostly so I could rent a car for my regular pilgrimages to Thorne Manor, to try crossing through the stitch, back before Bronwyn inherited the house.

“I think that means yes,” August stage-whispers in Edmund’s ear.

“I do know how,” I say slowly. “But this is not our car, Edmund.”

“If that is truly why you are refusing, Rosie, let me remind you who *does* own it. My oldest and dearest friend, who would never deny me such an opportunity, at least, not after informing me that, should I crash, he will hand me the repair bill.” A smug smile. “Which is not a concern.”

“Can you afford such a repair?”

He arches his brows, as if I did not nearly faint seeing his account books last month. August has always had money—he’s an earl’s son, after all. But he is also in business with William, who recovered his own family fortune speculating on technological advances, based on the stories a teenage Bronwyn had told him about the future. August has both hereditary and independent wealth, more than I had realized in the early days of our marriage.

Still . . .

“All right,” I say. “The worst that can happen is that we crash the car beyond repair, and it must be replaced. It is an antique but not a particularly rare one, so I estimate perhaps twenty or thirty thousand would cover it.”

“Twenty or thirty thousand . . . what?” August asks carefully.

“Pounds, of course.”

He looks from me to the car and back. “Twenty or thirty *thousand* pounds. How—how does anyone afford to drive a vehicle? I was under the impression they are extremely common.”

“They are. The answer, my dear husband, is a financial concept I’m certain you have encountered.” I pause for a beat. “Inflation.”

August winces. “Yes, of course. It is quite bad enough on an annual basis. I can only imagine what it is on a centenary one.” He looks at the convertible and sighs. “All right. Perhaps I do not want to spend half my life’s savings on a single car ride.”

He pauses and then gives me the twin of his son’s crafty look. “Wait. I recall William saying that the trick to transferring wealth is to do so in forms other than money. To find rare coins and jewelry in our world and bring them here, in pristine condition, where they might fetch a small fortune. I shall do that if I crash the car.”

“If *you* crash it?”

“Er, I meant you.”

I shake my head. “The Thornes will have automobile insurance, should anything catastrophic occur. If not, yes, we could repay it. I could point out it is Bronwyn’s car—William having no love for a carriage without a horse—but that is beside the point. She would not begrudge us a short ride.” I walk out the garage door. “There is no snow or ice, and the day is overcast but clear. It is safe for driving.”

I take my time with the car. The sun is dropping, which does make it a little more dangerous, but I don't want to rush. It's been six months since I've been behind the wheel, and one lesson I learned with rentals is to fully examine the vehicle first and then take it around the block before leaving the lot. Be certain I know where to find the switch for the headlamps and the turn indicator and that I don't accidentally pop open the boot while trying to lower my window. Get a feel for the pedals and the cornering, too. Yes, perhaps I overdo it, but that has been my way since I was a child, testing one step before the next where others rush headlong.

I do consider whether we ought to look for clothing better suited to the twenty-first century. I decide that would add an unnecessary complication that would only plunge us into the full dark of night. We had already found jackets and scarves and hats. Those will disguise us to anyone seeing us drive past. I don't expect to stop anywhere, but even if we are seen? It's the holiday season. We are attending a fancy dress ball, outfitted as a Victorian family.

Once I have thoroughly examined the vehicle, I strap Edmund into Amelia's car seat. He does not appreciate that—*are you certain this is not for babies, Mama?*—but with some adjustments, it fits. He is a small and

slender child and well under the weight limit listed on the seat. Once he's in, I check August's seatbelt.

"I do not believe it's possible to mis-fasten it," he says as I check the buckle. "It tightens automatically."

I ignore him, check again and then round the car, climb in and put on my own belt.

I start driving so slowly we could walk at a quicker pace. August groans. Even Edmund makes a noise that sounds suspiciously like a sigh. Then I am out of the driveway and perched at the top of the hill.

"All right," I say. "So, you have both had your first car ride. Exciting, was it not? Let us pull back into the laneway—"

I can't even finish, sputtering in laughter at their expressions. "I'm teasing. I was thinking perhaps we shall drive to Whitby and back."

"Whitby?" Edmund says. "Is that not a very long way from Uncle William's house?"

I smile at him. "Not when you are driving a horseless carriage. Why do you think I was being so careful with the safety restraints? Now, again, are you ready?"

Edmund nods.

I glance at August. "I don't hear anything from you."

"Because you are having far too much fun torturing us, and I will not give you the satisfaction." He waves at the windshield. "Just ride already."

"It's *drive*. You ride a horse. You drive a car."

"Rosie . . ."

"I just wanted to be sure you were ready. Really and truly ready."

"Yes, we are quite ready. Now—"

I hit the gas, and the engine roars, tires squealing as the car launches itself down the empty hill so fast that Edmund screeches in delight and August's hands fly to the dashboard, his eyes bulging.

I ease off the gas. "I did warn you, did I not?"

“Do it again, Mama!” Edmund says, legs kicking. “Do it again!”

“I will soon. For now, we must drive sedately through the village. Look! Do you see the lights on the trees?”

I continue pointing out the village decorations as we ease down the last part of the hill. We pass a cottage on the outskirts that I believe is the home of Bronwyn and William’s gardener, Del, and his wife, Freya. Del is a descendant of the Shaws, and Freya is apparently a descendant of *my* family. Through Edmund? Through an as-yet-unborn child? Or through one of my sisters? All I know is that Freya has my old cookbook, which she inherited as a family heirloom.

I also know that the whole situation rather makes my head hurt and that I shouldn’t ask for more details. Do I really want to discover that Freya is descended from my daughter, Millicent, whom I will give birth to in two years? Or do I want to see my “old cookbook” . . . the one I’m currently filling? Do I want to read annotations I haven’t yet written? Yes, it makes my head positively pound thinking of it. What I do know is that I should dearly love to meet Del and Freya someday. This is not that day, but if I can banish my fear of the stitch, it is yet another reward nestled in my future.

We pass the house, and I take the first turn out of town. We can drive through it more fully later, when it is dark, the streets empty, no one to question why a strange family is out in what is clearly the vehicle of Bronwyn Dale Thorne.

We continue on, up and down the narrow, steep roads of the North Yorkshire countryside. While there are no “highways” here, I still keep to the back roads and avoid those wide enough for two cars to pass.

“Once you’re out of High Thornesbury,” August says, “it looks much the same as in our time. Even that is not so much changed. Cars instead of horses. A few odd-looking buildings. And light, so many lights. Also signs.” He twists to peer at one as we zip past. “Signs for street names. Signs for steep hills. Signs warning of turns.”

“That was one of the first things I saw,” I say. “Before I realized I was in a new world. I couldn’t understand why coach drivers needed signs warning of curves and hills they could obviously see. But moving at this speed, drivers need all the help they can get. Not that they pay attention to most of them. Particularly the speed limits.”

August grins. “Are you paying attention to the speed limits, Rosie?”

“Certainly not.”

“I don’t suppose I could take a turn at the wheel,” he says after a moment. “The road seems empty enough. Perhaps we could find a flat stretch where I might try it? At an excruciatingly slow rate of speed?”

“You’d like a driving lesson?”

“I’m not certain how Bronwyn would feel about me using her fancy car, but if I went slow enough, and only for a quarter mile or so . . . ?”

“She would be fine with that. It’s a clear night, and as you said, these particular roads are empty. I think we just passed a road that looks like a suitable candidate. Let me turn around and go back.”

I three-point turn the car, showing off a little as I maneuver on the narrow road. Then I return to the even narrower lane we’d passed, which seems to snake off along grazing land, open and empty fields. As we pass the sign, Edmund pipes up from the back seat, where he has been quietly enjoying the ride.

“Did that sign say Hood’s Lane, Mama?”

I beam at him through the rearview mirror. “It did. Very good.”

“I knew the letters,” he says, “because Aunt Miranda read me a Robin Hood story, and then she told me about the ghost of Hood’s Lane.”

“Did she now?” I say, only half paying attention as I peer ahead. The night has fallen fast, and I don’t want to use that as an excuse to deprive August of his lesson. I need to find a flat stretch, open enough that he can see any oncoming traffic.

“It is a *pirate* ghost,” he says. “She has seen him herself.”

“A pirate ghost, hmm?” I say as August chuckles under his breath.

When I came back to Courtenay Hall, I discovered my husband reading a popular novel—a risqué pirate adventure, which I have since thoroughly enjoyed myself. My sister has been terribly interested in my opinion of the book, and we have begun to believe she is the author herself. I have asked, and she denies it, which is most vexing. If she has written such a delightful tale, I want to congratulate her, and I can hardly do that if she continues to pretend she has “no idea what I’m talking about.”

“Tell me about this pirate ghost,” August says.

He can tell I need to focus but hate to ignore Edmund, and I am grateful he takes over the conversation. I catch a little of the discussion, enough to understand that my sister has seen not a ghost but a phantom echo, the sort that usually results from a violent death, as if that death is imprinted on the world, endlessly replaying for those with the Sight.

Fortunately, however this “pirate” died, she didn’t share that part with Edmund. She just told him the exciting bits about the man himself, who seems to have been Black, as she refers to him as “dark-skinned.” She also, naturally, gives the pirate a sympathetic backstory. Apparently, he steals from the rich at sea and gives to the poor fishermen and sailor’s widows.

“It sounds as if your aunt has confused her pirates with her Robin Hoods,” August says.

“Because he *was* Robin Hood,” Edmund says firmly. “The Robin Hood of the Bay. That’s why this road was named after him. It’s where he perished, cut down by navy knaves.”

I swear I hear my sister’s voice in that last line, and I cough as August sputters a laugh. So it seems my sister didn’t skip the death scene after all. I should have known better.

“Navy knaves,” I murmur.

“Yes, because they were from the navy, and they were also knaves, which means a scoundrel.”

“I see.”

August returns to asking questions about the “pirate Robin Hood.” There’s a likely spot coming up for his lesson, where the road seems to straighten. I need to squint, even with the bright headlamps. It was overcast when we set out, but now it seems even more so, the cloud cover complete, the night ink-black above us. Still, not reason enough to deny August his lesson.

I pull over. August undoes his seatbelt, but I shake my head.

“Not yet,” I say. “Safety first.”

I go on to explain the pedals and the steering wheel and point out the indicators and headlamps and windshield wipers.

When I get to the emergency brake, August groans. “I am going a few hundred feet, Rosie. All I need to know is how to drive straight and then to stop again.”

I ignore him and continue with the lesson until even Edmund is groaning. Then I agree it is time to switch seats. When I get out of the car, I lift my head and sniff the air. There’s a heavy weight to it. An eerie quiet, too, broken only by the wind.

And those *still* aren’t good reasons to deny August his lesson. It is as if my subconscious is making excuses, which is vexing. I want to give him this lesson. So why am I hesitating?

I shake it off and climb into the passenger seat. Then it’s onto a recap lesson, which gets Edmund groaning again, but August lifts a finger to stop me and then points to everything, naming it and its purpose.

“I was paying attention, Rosie,” he says with only mild reproach.

“I know,” I say. “I am just . . .” I peer out the window. “Out of sorts.”

“Is it a ghost, Mama?” Edmund says.

I smile back at him. “No, it is not a ghost. Not even a pirate one, though I should dearly like to see that.”

“Aunt Miranda says he is very handsome and dashing.”

“I am quite certain he is.”

“Also clever and kind. She says that is even better than handsome and dashing.”

My smile grows. “Your aunt is very wise . . . when she is not filling your head with tragic pirate death scenes.”

I turn back to August. “All right. Let us begin the lesson. Hands on the wheel. We’re stopped on the roadway, which means you only need to drive straight. If we see oncoming cars, you’ll turn very slightly to the left and stop.”

“We haven’t seen any cars yet, which is a good sign, considering how long we’ve been sitting here.”

“That was my intention,” I say. “I was testing the traffic.”

“Wise, just like your sister.”

“I taught her everything she knows. And now I will teach you to drive.”

I give him instructions, which he carries out, and the car rolls forward. He grins, and for a moment, I am seeing his grin for the first time, unable to look away, staring like I had risen from the dark earth to see sunlight for the first time.

August stays at that “excruciatingly slow pace”—as he promised—while he tests the brakes and the steering wheel, getting a feel for the handling. Then, just as I am about to say he can give it a little gas, Edmund leans forward in the car seat.

“Did you hear that, Mama?”

August brakes, bringing the car to a halt. We both listen.

“It sounds like a wail.” Edmund tilts his head. “It must be a ghost. Perhaps it is the pirate.”

“Perhaps.” I put down my window. A blast of cold air rushes in, and I quickly roll it up again as I shiver.

“Shall I stop?” August says.

“No, it’s simply the wind on the moors.”

I instruct him to give the car a little gas, which he does, gradually increasing the speed until we're nearing the limit. He glances very briefly at me, and his grin stuns me again, until I realize he's checking my response to his speed. The road is long and straight, and I see no reason why he can't go just a little faster if he's comfortable.

He takes it up a notch more. Then the wind howls, shaking the convertible top. Edmund lets out a yelp of surprise. I twist to tell him it's fine, and the world goes white. One moment, it's pitch black, and the next, snow blasts the windshield.

August takes his foot off the gas, the car slowing.

"Rosie?" he says carefully. "I can't see anything."

"Keep slowing," I say. "Ease your foot down on the brake, carefully, so we don't slide. Keep the steering wheel straight. If we stop in the middle of the road, so be it. There hasn't been another car—"

Lights illuminate the driving snow. A car? Impossible. No one has passed in either direction since we turned down this road.

"Rosie?" August says. "Is that another car?"

I open my mouth to tell him to brake fully and stop here. The oncoming car will see that we're in distress, and it will either stop or steer around us.

Before I can say a word, the other driver smashes their horn, the blare of it startling August as those oncoming lights fill our car. August swerves left and hits the shoulder. Edmund screams, and the other horn keeps blaring, muffled voices shouting as someone laughs. Our car slams into something, and I smack back against my seat.

I'm out of my seatbelt in a flash. I turn to see August is struggling to get out of his seatbelt. He catches my eye and exhales in relief. Then I scramble out of the car as he twists to check on Edmund.

I yank my seat forward and lean in through the open door.

"I am all right, Mama," Edmund says in a small, wavering voice. "It was scary, but I am fine." He looks up at me. "The baby seat was a good

idea.”

I hiccup a laugh and lean in to hug him. As I do, the wind cuts through my dress and coat, and snow swirls into the car. I quickly return to my seat and shut the door, instead turning to look back at Edmund that way.

“Everyone is all right?” I ask.

They both agree they are. Shaken but fine. While it had seemed a hard hit, we’d barely been moving at that point.

“Is the car broken?” Edmund asks.

“I hope not,” I say. “Let us see what the damage is, and with any luck, we can be on our way as soon as this storm passes.”

We are not going anywhere. The car struck a sign, one warning of low visibility ahead, and I do realize the irony of that. It seems the road dips, and that is how the other vehicle appeared from nowhere. While the damage is minimal—I hope—the engine has cut out and refuses to restart.

After inspecting the car, August and I both climb back in. We shiver as we check on Edmund, who is wide eyed with worry.

“What are we to do?” Edmund says.

“We wait for the storm to end,” I say. “And then we will try again to start the car. If that fails . . .” I glance at August. “We aren’t dressed to spend the night in here.”

“I saw a farm a quarter mile back,” August says. “We could ask for help. If they have horses, they can pull out the car.” He pauses. “Or, I suppose, in this world, one doesn’t pull carriages from ditches using horses.”

“One does not,” I say. “However, the basic principle holds. We can see whether they have a tractor to pull us out. If not, they’re bound to have a telephone, and I can call for a tow truck.”

August pats his pockets. “I have a few pounds on me. I doubt that would be enough to pay the driver.”

“I am hoping they’ll let us be billed,” I say. “If not, I believe I recall my credit card number, and I don’t think I asked William to close it down when he was handling my affairs here.”

“I presume a credit card is a card that allows credit with the bank?”

I smile. “Exactly that. One way or another, we shall get to Thorne Manor. It is Christmas, after all, and I believe we can hope for the kindness of strangers.”

I peer out the window. “It already seems to be letting up. A sudden and inconvenient squall.”

“Does it mean they’ll have a white Christmas?” Edmund asks.

“It may, and so it is a good thing, even if it has inconvenienced us. Now, I propose that you two stay in the vehicle while I walk to the farmhouse.”

August shakes his head. “I will go.”

“I am quite capable of it, August. Also, I am the one who knows this world and its customs . . . and how to use a phone . . . and the number of my credit card.”

He hesitates and then says, carefully, “Agreed, but you are also a woman alone in the countryside. That is not jealousy,” he hastens to add. “It is safety.”

“My being alone will startle no one in this world,” I say. “Is it less safe than you going in my stead? Yes, but only slightly. I will be careful and stay on the doorstep. If anything, you might alarm them more—an oddly dressed man showing up after dark.”

“Ought we all to go?” Edmund says.

August pauses again and then shakes his head. “No, your mother is right. It is warmer here, and you are the least well dressed. I trust your mother, and I will not insist on accompanying her.”

“Thank you,” I say and lean over to kiss his cheek before I ready myself to leave.



THE STORM HAD BEEN ABATING WHEN I LEFT THE CAR. YET I GET ONLY A hundred feet or so before it whips up again. I pull Bronwyn's large but very warm jacket tighter and continue trudging along the side of the road, squinting into the distance for lights, whether from a car or the house that marks the end of my journey.

When we'd been driving in the opposite direction, the snow had been slamming into the windshield, as if the wind blew it straight at us. Now I swear that wind has maliciously changed direction so it can blow into my face instead.

All I see is white. Snow pounds against my face and swirls about me and even manages to blow up my skirts, despite the hem dragging along in the snow. I was rather fond of this dress, too, a festive red with a lace trim that I'm certain is being ruined beyond repair.

I sigh and plow forward, head down, as the edge of the road guides me. The actual road has long since vanished under the snow, but brambles along the shoulder peek through to guide my path. August insisted I take the flashlight we found in the boot, and while I swear it only conspires with the snow to render me blind, it does help me pick up that brown vegetation.

August said the house was about a quarter mile back. Either he was measuring with grave optimism, or the storm has upended my own sense of distance. Likely a combination of the two. Either way, it seems to take forever before dim lights appear. I pick up my pace, only to have a gust of wind knock me clear off my boots.

I sit in the snow a moment, grumbling to myself. Then, as I begin to rise, I catch a faint jingle.

Sleigh bells?

The sound, only faintly audible, slips away, and I shake my head. We are not in a world of sleigh bells. More likely I heard wind chimes from the

farmhouse.

I continue on until I reach the drive. There's a car at the top, covered in snow. The house is dark except for one lighted front window, and that gives me pause. I do not have a watch, but it must be later than I thought. I hate to wake the owners. However, it is an emergency, and I can only hope they understand.

As I head up the front walk, I realized that what I'd thought was a lighted front window is actually a holiday decoration lighting the window. A menorah. There's a doormat with festive dreidels wishing me a happy Hanukkah, and I smile at that. In the Victorian world, it would be a rare Jew who dared put up such decorations, especially in the countryside. I only hope that this family does so with confidence and without trepidation, though I am certain there is a little of the latter still.

My mother was Jewish, and so I recognize the symbols from my grandparents' home, where we had celebrated Hanukkah. I don't recall quite what I thought of that as a child. It seemed a variation on the holidays rather than a symbol of their faith. For us, even Christmas was mostly devoid of religion, and I wonder now if that was our parents' way of reconciling the two, tucking religion aside rather than choosing which faith to raise their daughters in. We were raised in love and kindness, and that was what mattered.

Now, though, I pause to look at that LED menorah, and I reflect a little, in a way I might never have if I hadn't visited the modern world. My father met my mother through *her* father, who'd been a doctor and his mentor. I don't know what my maternal grandparents thought of the union, only that they'd accepted it and loved us. Did that union explain why we had no contact with our paternal grandparents? Perhaps.

My mother's father died when I was young, and her mother passed when I was a teen, but my memories of them are as bright as those of my parents. I look at that menorah, and I silently declare that I will do more to

understand that part of my heritage, because it is one, as I realize after living in the twenty-first century. A faith, yes, but also a heritage.

I straighten and rap on the door as I prepare a bright “Happy Hanukkah” greeting. When no one answers, I press the bell. It buzzes. Then all goes silent, only the whistling of the wind to be heard.

I both knock and ring the bell again, to no avail. Then I head back down the driveway, where the car sits, and I realize it isn’t just covered in snow. It has a tarp over it. Put away for the winter.

I peer at the barn. It looks like a stable, which means the owners won’t be away long. I walk to it. The door is latched but otherwise unlocked. I hesitate a moment, during which I debate the propriety of peeking in versus the danger of my son spending the night in a storm-blasted convertible. The choice is simple, and I push open the door.

The smell of hay and horse wafts out, but the latter is faint, and when I walk in, I shine the flashlight on empty stalls. Two look as if they’ve been occupied, but they’re empty now. Have the homeowners boarded their horses while they’ve gone away for the holidays?

I shine the light around. The barn isn’t what I’d call tidy, but it is clean. The mess is mostly confined to a workshop area, where someone crafts furniture from the looks of it. That workshop contains a pot-bellied stove, with wood piled beside it.

I glance from the stove to a pile of clean straw. We could take refuge here. Light the stove. Sleep on the straw. It is trespassing, but while my parents raised me to be a law-abiding citizen—and to be considerate of others—they also raised me to be practical. If I meant no harm and I left the barn as I found it, then the owners should understand my predicament and forgive the trespass.

I give one last look around, and then I head to put the proposal to August.

August agrees that my plan is a reasonable one, far more reasonable than either staying in the cold car or battling the storm further in search of another house. Not a single car has passed to be flagged down. We are, simply put, out of options.

We bundle Edmund up as best we can, even as he fusses that he is already warm. Then we set out. The storm has subsided enough for the trek to be an easier one, and August is able to concede to Edmund's protests that he does not need to be carried "like a baby."

When we reach the house and head up the drive, Edmund spots the LED menorah in the window.

"How does the flame light the whole candlestick?" he asks.

I explain that they are not real candles, but a lighted decoration.

"It is a menorah," I say. "For the Jewish celebration at this time of year. Hanukkah."

"A Jewish Christmas?"

"No, it's a holiday that falls at the same month and is very important to the Jewish people."

I lead him up onto the porch and point out the dreidel decorations and tell him what they are and that a game can be played with real ones.

"Have you ever played it, Mama?" he asks.

I'm about to say yes, many times, when I pause. I see August there, watching with curiosity. I've never told him about my mother's heritage. That was no oversight, I am shamed to say. August's family had enough reasons to object to me. My family was not nearly on his level. Worse, I was "in business." Orphaned, too, as if I'd done something to cause that. Twenty-four and unmarried and lacking even a dowry. Whatever was August thinking?

Now that I truly understand how horrible his father and brothers had been, I wish I had tossed my heritage onto the pile of my "undesirable" traits and let them deal with it. At the time, though, while my pride would have forced me to deny it, I had still held hope they would accept me. That someday, they would declare I was indeed good enough for August. And so, burdened with all the "objectionable" qualities I could not hide, I hid the ones I could, including my Jewish heritage.

That meant that I never told August my mother had been Jewish. It seems an unfathomable oversight, yet I was no more likely to go to a synagogue on Saturday than a church on Sunday. So why bring it up? Again, because it was more than religion. It was my heritage, and I denied it, and that shames me.

"My mother was Jewish," I say.

Dare I admit that I brace a little for August's reaction? Just because a loved one has never shown any sign of prejudice does not mean they don't possess any. I cannot imagine that of August, but I also cannot imagine what ugly biases his father wedged into his young brain.

August only smiles. "Well, then, you are a quarter Jewish yourself, Edmund."

Edmund considers, his expression thoughtful. Then he says, "What does that mean?"

August scoops him up. "Perhaps your mother will explain more once we are in the barn warming our fingers and toes. I have Jewish business

associates, but I fear I do not understand the faith as well as I ought. Now, let's get into the barn and get the fire going. I may have pilfered some twenty-first-century sweets from Thorne Manor and tucked them into my pockets. I have no idea what they are, but I propose we find out."



A FIRE ROARS IN THE TINY WOODSTOVE. AUGUST AND EDMUND HAVE arranged hay bales around it. As we eat the sweets—wrapped candies and chocolates—I answer what questions of Edmund's I can about Hanukkah. Whatever I cannot answer, I promise we will research together. Then Edmund is gone, warmed up and poking about the barn. August and I share a hay bale, his arm around me.

"It's Happy Hanukkah, then?" August says. "Like Merry Christmas."

"Yes, but in the twenty-first century, unless you know for certain that someone celebrates Christmas, people say Happy Holidays. There are other religious celebrations at this time of year, and even if one does not celebrate *any*, they understand the sentiment."

"I confess, I've never considered whether anyone in my acquaintance might not celebrate Christmas. I've probably even wished my Jewish associates a merry one, which is rather embarrassing."

"I'm sure they understood."

"I hope so. I shall now acknowledge the proper holiday." His arm tightens around me. "There are wonders here, in this world, and I have only begun to scratch the surface. My life is in our time, and I would not wish to leave it, but I find this all very fascinating. Fascinating and overwhelming."

"It is indeed."

"I don't know how I'd manage it without you as my guide."

I smile and lay my head on his shoulder. "You'd figure it out."

“As you did. I cannot imagine it, Rosie. To come through the stitch into this world, incomprehensible to us in so many ways. You had no one to guide you. You navigated this world and not only survived but made a place for yourself. Started a business, rented a flat, learned to drive a car. All on your own, without even being able to admit where you came from, to explain the defects in your understanding. You did all that.”

“I had to.”

“That doesn’t make it any less incredible.”

My cheeks heat, and I’m glad he can’t see me blushing.

“Here is what I did not understand,” August says, his voice even lower. “I knew you had been separated from your family—from me and Edmund and Portia and Miranda. I could imagine how difficult that was. But you were separated from *everything* you’ve ever known. Cast into this world to fend for yourself.”

I squirm.

He sighs. “You don’t want to talk about what you suffered. It’s done, and you wish to move onward. But . . .” He pulls me tighter against him. “When you were giving me that endless lesson on operating a car, you said I needed to check in the rear-facing mirror every now and then, so I know what’s behind in case it catches up and overtakes me. We do not need to talk about what you went through if you would rather not, but I still need to think about it, to understand it, and that means I will occasionally mention it. When you pull back or make a joke or change the subject, it doesn’t tell me you’ve healed. It says that I’m poking a sore spot, and I don’t mean to, but you must understand that it hasn’t healed and care for it, even as you’re moving onward.”

When I don’t answer, he kisses the top of my head. “You went through an incredibly difficult and, yes, *traumatic* situation that lasted for years. As strong as you are, you cannot expect to escape from that unscathed.

Whether you're willing to accept that or not, understand that I *have* accepted it. I'm just not certain what to do with it."

I'm quiet for a moment, and then I whisper, "Be patient with me."

His arm tightens around my shoulders. "I will be as patient as you need me to be, Rosie. You have shown me more patience than I ever deserved, with my jealousy and my suspicion. I only ask that you allow me to acknowledge what you've been through and do not throw up your armor each time I allude to it."

I nod against his shoulder, and we sit quietly until Edmund lets out a little shriek. Then we both jump, nearly tumbling off the hay bale.

"Mama!" He holds up a box in his hand. "I found a game of drey-dals."

I rise and walk to where he stands in front of a wall of storage shelving. It's filled with all the things modern parents tuck away but cannot bring themselves to discard. Boxes labeled as children's clothing and toys and also a stack of games. In the last, Edmund found a set of handmade dreidels.

"You know how to play, yes?" he says, holding up the wooden box.

I smile. "I believe I remember. Let's find out."



WE PLAY DREIDEL BY THE WOODSTOVE AS THE WIND HOWLS AND SNOW beats against the windowpanes. It's far from the holiday evening I imagined when I woke this morning, but it is a memory we will cherish after we have forgotten any other.

I shudder to imagine how late it must be when we finally fall asleep in the hay. Edmund goes first, and I think perhaps August and I will stay awake, unable to sleep in such a place. But I snuggle down with him to talk and before I know it, I am in dreamland.

I haven't been sleeping long when I wake. I feel straw beneath my fingers, and I'm thrown back to those early weeks in the twenty-first century, nights spent wherever I could find shelter.

I bolt upright, gasping for air, terror slamming through me.

I'm still there. I never left. I didn't get home. I—

“Mama?”

I look to see Edmund standing in an open doorway, bathed in moonlight. He looks ethereal. Unreal. A spirit come to haunt my dreams and torment me, and I scramble up, clawing at the straw as I rise and sprint to him. I snatch him up.

Real. He is real. Warm and alive.

“Mama?”

I hear the trepidation in his voice, and I set him down, gulping air as I hug him and stumble over apologies.

“It's all right, Edmund,” August says behind me. A warm hand goes around my waist. “Your mama had a nightmare. That is all.”

Shame licks through me, and I start to apologize to both of them, but August pulls me to him and whispers in my ear, “Patience, remember? You have all you need from me, but you must grant it to yourself as well. No apologies.”

My eyes prickle as I nod. Then I draw in a deep breath, cold air searing my lungs as I realize where we are. In the barn. Standing at the door. Which was open when I grabbed Edmund. That's what woke me—the draft of ice-cold air.

“Edmund?” I say carefully. “Were you going outside?”

“No, Mama. I was listening to the sleigh bells.”

“Ah, do you hear them, too? I did earlier. There are no sleighs here, though. Not the kind with bells anyway, and it is far too late for anyone to be out playing in the snow. I think it is wind chimes. From the house.”

Edmund shakes his head. “It is sleigh bells. Do you not hear them?”

I pop my head outside. The storm has abated, and the night is silent, the now-cloudless sky stretching above with endless stars.

“It is a very pretty night,” I say. “But I fear I do not hear any bells.”

“I do,” he says, frowning. “Even with the door closed.”

I glance at August, who moves closer to lean out and then shakes his head. “Your hearing must be far better than ours, Edmund.”

“No,” Edmund says firmly. “I hear them, Papa. Nearby. The sound of sleigh bells.”

We look at each other. The night is definitely silent.

“What did you hear earlier, Rosie?” August asks.

“I thought it was also sleigh bells, but very distant. Then I realized it could not be, and I presumed it was wind chimes, blowing in the storm.”

“There is no storm now, Mama. No wind, either.” Edmund walks back to where he’d been sleeping with Amelia’s too-small coat draped over him. He picks it up. “We ought to go and have a look. It is a mystery.”

“It is very late, Edmund,” I say.

He pulls on the long coat, which barely passes his waist. “It is a Christmas mystery, and we must solve it.”

I look at August, who throws up his hands. “Our son has spoken.”

I sigh and go to fetch Bronwyn’s coat.

Do I hear bells? I honestly don't know. I did earlier, but I am no longer certain what I hear now that I am trudging to the road with my family. I keep thinking I catch just the faintest jingle, yet when I try to latch onto the sound, it disappears, as it did before.

All I know is that Edmund very clearly hears a sound that I can barely detect, while August hears nothing at all? That worries me because there is only one obvious solution: a ghost.

My son has encountered ghosts before, and they have never meant him any harm. What I fear is the type of ghost he mentioned earlier, with Miranda's pirate Robin Hood. The spectral replay of a tragedy. We are on the road where Miranda insists she saw the pirate murdered. Is that what Edmund hears? Not sleigh bells, but the clinking of swords or a horse's harness? The pirate's death repeating on a loop for Edmund to witness?

"Edmund?" I say as we reach the road.

"Yes, Mama?"

"I know your aunt has been explaining your Second Sight."

"Yes, Mama."

"If you are hearing something we are not, and we know a pirate's death plays out along this road . . ." I clear my throat. "I would not wish you to witness such a thing."

Edmund says nothing. He simply continues onward, boots crunching in the snow. When I glance at August, my husband's green eyes twinkle with amusement.

"Edmund?" August says.

"Yes, Papa."

"Are you *hoping* to see a pirate tonight? Is that why we're out here?"

Edmund takes two more steps before saying, "I really do hear what sounds like sleigh bells, Papa. I would not tell stories about that."

August motions for me to hold my response and let Edmund continue. He walks a few more steps, leading the way, before he speaks again.

"I should like to see the pirate," Edmund says. "I do not wish to see his death on purpose. If I spot him, I will turn away before he is attacked." He looks back at me. "Is that all right?"

"I believe your mother would prefer you *not* to seek out the pirate," August says. "At the risk of seeing something disturbing. However, as your aunt has described the poor man's end, and I trust you do not wish to see that, then I think we might allow you to decide whether we ought to continue investigating."

Our son gives the question due consideration. "I think so. I do know what happened to him, so if I see the navy men, I know it is time not to look." He stops and peers down the moonlit road. "But I should like to see the pirate, Mama."

I sigh. My gaze goes to August. Earlier, I'd reminded myself that August has been the only parent Edmund has known. Now I must remind myself that I have been the parent of a young boy for a mere two months. Edmund is learning to accept me as his mother, and I am learning to be one.

Here is one of the hardest challenges of parenting, as I am quickly discovering. Knowing when to allow a child to do a thing, trusting they have the maturity to do it, all the while praying they do not look back two decades later, horrified by what you allowed. In short, finding the balance

between encouraging independent thought and not psychologically scarring your offspring for life.

I do not want him to see a pirate die, even if it is a spectral replay. However, I do trust that he doesn't want to see that part, either, and that he will have enough advance warning to avoid it.

I'm still working this through when Edmund stops short. He stands there, staring down the empty road.

"Do you see him, Mama?" he whispers.

I quickly rearrange my features to hide my trepidation. My son is a five-year-old child seeing a pirate ghost. I may not have been parenting for long, but whether it is the twenty-first century or the nineteenth, I know how exciting it would be. I can only imagine Miranda at his age seeing such a thing. She would have been ecstatic, and while my son may be much more restrained in his emotions, he must be equally so, and I must share this excitement with him.

I crouch beside him and peer down the road. "I do not. Is it the pirate?"

He shakes his head. Then he turns and whispers in my ear, "I think it is Santa Claus."

How much does my heart soar at that? Not the idea of seeing Father Christmas, but the fact that my son whispers it to *me*. He knows it may sound foolish, and like his mother, he hates looking foolish. Yet he trusts that moment with me. Oh, he'd trust the same of August, but August is not bending here with an ear to be whispered in.

"What do you see?" I ask.

"It is a man in a sleigh," he says. "A proper sleigh, with a horse. Like Uncle William's. But it is not Uncle William. It is an old man with a white beard."

"What is he doing?"

"He is stopped near Aunt Bronwyn's car. He is looking at it, I think."

"Hmm. That *is* a mystery. Should we draw closer?"

Edmund nods and reaches up to take my hand. Then he takes August's in his other, and the three of us walk down the middle of the snow-covered road. As we draw near, I swear I catch the stamp of a hoof and the jingle of a sleigh bell. The road, however, stays empty.

"Hello," Edmund calls as we near the convertible.

A moment's pause. Then Edmund says, "Yes, I can see you. You are driving a sleigh with a brown horse."

I let out a held breath. If the ghost is communicating, it is not a death echo.

Edmund looks up at me. "He wishes to know if you can see him, Mama."

"I cannot."

"She did hear your bells," Edmund says, turning back to the ghost. "That was earlier. Were you here earlier?"

The man must say something, and Edmund nods. As I watch, something flickers. At first, it is only a shimmer. Then I can make out the faintest image of a man standing beside a sleigh.

"Can you see him now, Mama?"

"A little, yes," I say.

"And I see nothing but a snow-covered road," August says. "Alas."

"Because you do not have the Sight, Papa. Mama has a little." Edmund rises onto his toes. "There are presents in your sleigh, sir. Are you Santa Claus?"

The man laughs and shakes his head. He is perhaps in his sixties, with a white beard, a dark overcoat and a fur hat.

The man's mouth moves. Edmund waits until he stops speaking and then says, "Can you hear him, Mama?"

"I cannot, unfortunately."

"He says he is from . . ." Edmund looks back at the man. "Nineteen-oh-three. He was going to visit his daughter and her family for Christmas when

he was caught in a snowstorm.”

“Oh no!” I say. “Was he all right?”

I know the answer, but I still ask. The man says something, and Edmund shakes his head.

“He was thrown from the sleigh. He says it did not hurt at all. He went to sleep and woke as a ghost. Then it was another day, another snowstorm, and he . . .”

Edmund’s face scrunches as he listens intently. “He found someone caught in the blizzard. A boy on a horse. The man went for help and forgot he was a ghost, but somehow, a person seemed to know what he meant, and they came and found the boy.”

“So he saved him. That is a wondrous thing.”

The ghost shrugs, throwing off the compliment. Then he says something more.

“That is what he does,” Edmund says. “He comes back during storms looking for people in trouble. He finds those who can help, and they don’t seem to hear him, but they know what to do. It is magic, like Santa Claus, but better because he brings help instead of presents.”

The ghost makes a face and says something, as if laughing it off.

“He says he does not have the chance to help as much these days. People seem to magically bring help all by themselves.”

I smile. “Mobile phones. They are able to summon assistance.”

“Sometimes they cannot, and he helps, but most times he just watches, and he is glad they are safe.”

The ghost waves at the car, and Edmund says, “Oh, that is ours. Well, it is actually my aunt’s. We are staying someplace warm until morning. But thank you for coming to check on us.”

“Yes,” I say. “Thank you very much, sir. We appreciate such kindness.”

He speaks again, and Edmund says, “He wishes to know if we need him to summon help.”

“Thank you, but no. We shall be fine. Is there anything we can do for *him*? I suppose he does not often get a chance to speak to someone with the Sight. Is there something he needs us to do? To help him cross over?”

Edmund listens and then shakes his head. “He says he can cross over, and he does. He only comes back for snowstorms.”

“I understand. Is there anything else we can do?”

The man laughs and speaks, still smiling.

“He says he doesn’t suppose we know any Christmas carols,” he says. “That is one thing he misses. People going Christmas caroling.”

Edmund listens again and continues, “He says around here, they used to dress up in their holiday best and go from door-to-door, singing Christmas songs.” He glances at me. “Like they do in London.”

“Yes, it is not a custom much practiced in the twenty-first century,” I say. “However, I do believe we may be able to accommodate you, sir. We know a few songs and . . .” I unzip Bronwyn’s heavy coat. “When the storm struck, we were on our way to a fancy-dress party. Would you settle for Victorian Christmas carolers?”

The man’s face breaks into a wide grin.

“He says he should like that very much,” Edmund says. “Though we ought not to remove our coats in such weather.”

“Oh, I think we can remove them for a song or two. It is sheltered here, and the night is not nearly as cold as it was with that wind.” I shrug off the jacket and tuck it inside the car as August and Edmund do the same. Seeing our outfits, the man’s smile grows even wider.

“Now, sir,” I say. “Do you have any requests?”

It is morning. The morning after a truly magical night, and we sleep in until the sun is fully risen over the horizon. August manages to pull yet more candy from his pockets—dear Lord, how much did the man take? We eat that with water from the taps, and as we do, Edmund says, “Ought we to leave a gift, Mama? For the people who live here?”

I smile. “I plan to. Did you have anything in mind?”

“I thought we might tidy the barn.”

I have to laugh at that. “Yes, I believe it could use a bit of a tidy. Let’s give it a quick one, and then we’ll be off.”

We spend perhaps an hour cleaning up. As we finish, I find a pencil on the workbench and turn over an advertisement page left for fire starter. On the back, I write a note, explaining that we had to take shelter in their barn overnight, and we tried to leave it better than we found it, in hopes they’ll forgive the trespass.

I also plan to leave my brooch. It is a simple one, not worth much, but they might find the “antique” a pretty bauble. As I remove it, though, I hesitate, realizing it was my grandmother’s. After last night’s memories, that gives me pause.

“You do not need to leave that,” August says when he sees what I’m doing.

“I have others from her, and I really ought to leave some token of thanks.”

He removes his stickpin and lays it on the note instead. It is a much more valuable piece of jewelry, and I thank him for that.

“It only gives me an excuse to buy another,” he says.

We leave the note with the stickpin on top, and then we head out into the bright winter’s morning.

“Now this is a proper white Christmas,” August says as he ducks to grab a handful of snow.

“The snow will stay, yes?” Edmund says.

“Tonight is Christmas Eve. It is cold enough to last until at least Christmas Day.”

August fashions a loose snowball and flings it at Edmund, who yelps and ducks and dives for his own handful. I join in the game, and we continue down the lane, lobbing snow at each other and laughing.

How many times did I dream of moments like this? Trapped on this side of the stitch, watching children playing in the snow with their parents, and imagining August doing the same with Edmund, knowing he would, which was wonderful, but it nearly broke me with razor-sharp yearning. I would have been that parent, too. I would have thrown snowballs with my children and laughed and been silly in a way I have never been with anyone except August.

Now I have these moments. Endless ones. A half dozen in just the last twelve hours. Teaching my husband to drive a motor vehicle. Eating candy for dinner. Playing dreidel with my family. Caroling on a winter’s night. Sleeping in a haystack together. Throwing snowballs in the sunshine. We are having an adventure we shall remember forever.

Will I ever stop pausing to marvel at these moments? Stop freezing them for memories, my eyes prickling with joy? I’m sure the novelty will

fade, just as that pang of remembered fear will fade, and that is not a bad thing.

This is my normal, and I only hope I never quite forget how much I wanted it. That doesn't mean I'll never allow myself to be cross or annoyed or frustrated with my family, no more than I'd never expect them to feel the same about me—we wouldn't be human if we did not clash sometimes. It's the ordinary moments like this that I hope will always hold their luster . . . while losing their pain of old grief and fear.

There *is* grief and fear. I woke up last night thinking I was alone in this world again, and that is far from the first time I've done so. I hate using the word *trauma* for what I experienced. It should be reserved for all those who have gone through so much worse. After all, I am healthy and whole, back living my privileged life with my wonderful family. To call what I went through *trauma* feels like stubbing my toe and declaring I need a week in bed.

I did more than stub my toe. Something in me is damaged. So very damaged. Perhaps it's time to read whatever book Bronwyn slipped through for August. It is definitely time to acknowledge my trauma to him.

I am damaged. I'm healing, but I'm not whole. Not yet. And neither are you. I acknowledge both those things. I was trapped here, and you were left there, having no idea what became of me, fearing the worst, that your jealousy drove me away, either to my death or to some far off place where I could start again.

We continue playing our snowball game as we run along the road. We're heading for the car, to try again getting it running, and if that is not possible, I have a note to leave in the windshield. Not that anyone is likely to presume such a gorgeous car has been abandoned. After a storm, they'll understand what happened, but I will still take extra care, just as I did with the barn. These things belong to others, and I used them without

permission, and so I will do my utmost to ensure there is no fallout from my actions.

“Uh, Rosie . . . ?” August says.

I stop, snowball in hand. “You surrender?”

“No, but is that not where we left Bronwyn’s car?”

I turn to follow his finger. When I see nothing but white snow, I shake my head. “It must be farther up.”

“No, here is where we stood last night to sing.”

He points to a trampled part of snow at the side. Just beyond it, tire marks head off the road.

The lane is no longer the pristine white of last night. Several cars have passed, now that it’s daylight and the storm is gone. I can still make out our footprints, yet there is another pair as well. The boots of someone who circled the car and then, if I am correct, climbed into the driver’s side.

A terrible thought strikes me.

“Did you—?”

I stop myself. I was about to ask whether he left the keys in the ignition, which sounds as if I am blaming him. I was the one who put them there. I am the one who understands that they must be removed before leaving a car.

I rephrase it carefully. “There were keys in the ignition. I don’t remember taking them out.”

He winces. “Because you were busy making sure everything was shut off. I saw the keys, and I meant to ask if we needed to take them. I did not.”

“Without the keys, we didn’t lock the doors, either. I am accustomed to new vehicles, which use a remote lock. This one requires the actual key. I left the car unlocked with the keys in the ignition on a very empty road.”

“Someone stole Aunt Bronwyn’s car?” Edmund’s eyes round.

“I think so,” I say. “Because I was not careful.”

“No,” August says. “Because I had just crashed during a snowstorm, and we were both far more concerned with getting our son to shelter than looking after an object that cannot perish from cold.”

I still sigh, slumping, and August pats my back.

“Merry Christmas, Bronwyn,” I mutter. “I borrowed your car, crashed and left it to be stolen.”

“I will fix this,” August says. “I have been looking for an excuse to magically disappear some of the ugliest paintings in Courtenay Hall. They shall travel through the stitch, where someone with money and no taste shall snatch them up at auction, and Bronwyn will get a new car.”

I bite my tongue against saying that does not change the fact we lost hers. I should not have borrowed it. I can come up with a dozen excuses why I thought it was acceptable, but it was not.

I will throw myself on her mercy and beg forgiveness. In recompense, besides replacing the car, I’ll stay a few extra days to help with baby Grace and let Bronwyn sleep. I may have missed most of Edmund’s early years, but I do remember how badly I missed sleep.

“What do we do now, Papa?” Edmund asks.

“We walk to Thorne Manor. Do you think you are up for it, Edmund?”

He straightens. “I am. It is not overly far.”

August and I exchange a look. It is at least five miles. If it were closer, we’d have walked back last night. Still, the sun takes the chill from the air. When Edmund tires, we’ll rest or carry him.

I peer down the road and brush off Bronwyn’s snowy gloves. “All right then. To Thorne Manor we go.”

We've made it only as far as the end of the road when Edmund spins, staring back the way we came. Then, without a word, he takes off at a run.

"Edmund!" I say.

We both race after him. He doesn't go far before he stops, staring down the empty road.

"Edmund?" I say.

He glances back. "Do you not see him?"

"See who?"

He turns back to the road, his voice an awed whisper. "The pirate."

I crouch beside Edmund as August does the same on his other side.

"He is walking this way, along the road," Edmund says. "He has a sword. Papa, he has a *sword*."

"A sword? Well then, he is indeed a pirate."

"Only he does not look like a pirate from books," Edmund says. "He walks like a soldier."

"I bet he was a privateer," I say.

"Not a pirate?"

August chuckles. "That would depend on who you ask, Edmund. Privateers sailed the high seas and raided enemy ships for the Crown."

“State-sanctioned pirates,” I say with a smile.

“So, he is a good pirate?” Edmund says.

“Yes, we will call him that. A good pirate.”

“He has the same skin color as Papa’s friend, Mr. George, in London. Does that mean he is also from Africa?”

“He might be. Or he might be from the islands. Or he might be from England, just like you, with parents or grandparents or great-grandparents who came from elsewhere, as mine did.”

Edmund nods, still staring at the privateer.

“Aunt Miranda thinks he is very handsome,” Edmund says. “Dashing, that is how she puts it. Dashing and swashbuckling.” He wrinkles his nose at me. “What does swashbuckling mean?”

“Daring and romantic. Does he look swashbuckling to you?”

He peers at the ghostly replay of the privateer who, judging by the angle of Edmund’s gaze, is nearly upon us.

“I suppose so?” Edmund says. “He looks very de-determined.” A glance my way. “Is that the word?”

“It is if he looks as if he has someplace to be and he does not want anyone getting in his way.”

August says, “Like your mama when Surrey jumps on the table and Mama wants her off it.”

Edmund giggles at that. “Yes, he looks the same way. Determined.”

I’m about to speak again when I catch a sound. Sleigh bells? My head jerks up.

“Edmund,” I say quickly as I rise. “Turn away. I think the navy men are coming.”

Edmund shakes his head. “The pirate—privateer is gone. He disappeared. I do hear the bells, though. It must be the man who helps people.”

“If you two are hearing what sounds like sleigh bells,” August says. “Then I hear it, too. It seems to be coming from out there.” He points at the field.

“The sleigh ghost,” Edmund whispers. “Only now, we can all hear him!”

I glance at August, who shrugs. It definitely sounds like sleigh bells. We continue in that direction. The jingling had seemed to come from the field, but as we draw close, we see a right-of-way path.

Something is coming along it. Coming fast.

The path dips down a rise. We carefully cross and stand at the juncture of the path and the road.

“Is it a sleigh?” August says. “It sounds like hooves—”

Before he can finish, a giant black horse shoots over the hill. August grabs us and dives to the side. The rider pulls the horse to a halt, and the bridle bells stop jangling.

“What the devil?” a voice says.

“Uncle William!” Edmund says, leaping from his father’s grip.

“Edmund?”

It is indeed William Thorne, atop a black stallion, and for a moment, I again think we have passed back into our world. Then I realize the horse is not Balios, and I remember William has a near-twin of his nineteenth-century horse here. A stallion for breeding, he would say, but really, Lord Thorne is simply the sort of man who must challenge his riding skills with a temperamental mount.

“We are here,” Edmund says, trotting over while giving the monstrous beast wide berth. “We came through the secret spot.”

“Did you?” William looks at me, brows rising.

“Someone *snuck* through the secret spot,” I say. “After someone else’s toddler daughter apparently told him all about it, in whatever secret language they share.”

“Amelia,” William says with a sigh. “I can only hope Grace is less trouble, though she is giving no signs of it, arriving early and frightening us half to death.”

“You would be most disappointed if either of your daughters was anything less than a handful,” I say. “They come by it honestly.”

“True, their mother is a bundle of mischief. Always has been.”

I roll my eyes. “I trust mother and child are fine?”

“Fine and home at Thorne Manor. Grace was sleeping, and Bronwyn kicked me out for a ride, claiming I was going to wake the child, hovering over her.”

“Hovering over Bronwyn, too, I bet.” I look up at him. “While we have much to explain, I need to confess something before we do.”

William swings off the horse. While I’d seen him in the twenty-first century once before, the puffy down-filled jacket and blue jeans are still disconcerting.

“Is something wrong?” he asks.

“I convinced Rosie to take Bronwyn’s car out for a ride,” August cuts in before I can answer. “It was a clear evening with no signs of snow, and I wheedled and begged.”

“No, you didn’t. You asked, and I made a decision I ought not to have made.” I straighten, which barely brings me to William’s shoulder level. “I borrowed Bronwyn’s car and gave August a driving lesson.”

“On a flat and empty road,” August says. “After an *hour* of safety instructions.”

William’s lips twitch. “I can imagine. Let me guess. Then the storm hit, and August panicked and drove her into the ditch.”

“I did *not* panic,” August protests.

“He actually didn’t,” I say. “We were pulling to the shoulder when a car came ripping along and August had to veer. The convertible became stuck.

We spent the night in a barn, and when we returned to retrieve Bronwyn's car, it was gone."

I clear my throat and look up, meeting William's gaze. "I believe, in our haste, we left the keys in the ignition."

"And the doors unlocked?"

"Er, yes. Which is unforgivable, as is the borrowing of the car without permission."

"I am shocked at you, Rosalind. Shocked. You are usually so much more responsible than that."

My cheeks heat. "I know, and I apol—"

"First, you invade our nineteenth-century home and decorate it. With *Christmas* decorations, no less. Then you follow your son through the stitch. Could he not just have stayed on the other side? Perhaps tidied up the mess we left? No. You followed him, and then you borrowed barely enough winter clothing to keep from freezing. Was there not an entire wardrobe to choose from? Imagine if you'd died of cold? How thoughtless would that be? Then you borrowed the car to give this one"—he jabs a finger at August—"a holiday treat that I am quite certain he did not deserve."

William sighs. "Please tell me you did not leave a piece of jewelry or other valuable in the barn to compensate for sleeping on their hay overnight?"

"Rosie tried to leave her grandmother's brooch," August says. "I substituted my stick pin."

"We also tidied up for the owner," Edmund says. "That was my idea."

"Of course it was. Two months back, Rosalind, and you are already infecting this child with your ridiculously inflated sense of responsibility. Well, I suppose I should thank you for this gift."

"Gift?" I say.

"Yes, the gift of giving me something to hold over your head forever. Now, whenever you are shocked by my own irresponsible behavior, I can

bring up the time you stole my wife's car."

"Mama did not steal it," Edmund says. "She borrowed it. Papa also borrowed sweets, which we have eaten, and as we cannot return them, I suppose that is theft."

William spins on August. "You ate Bronwyn's candies? God save you, man. The car is one thing, but I cannot help you with that."

William claps Edmund on the back. "We will have to enlist your mother's help replacing those treats with bakery goods. A few dozen scones should do the trick. I hear you are becoming quite the expert baker yourself."

"I am," Edmund says. "But what about the car?"

"Oh, the car is fine. It's home in the garage, though I suppose I will now need to call the police and tell them we were mistaken, and it was not stolen and abandoned. That will be embarrassing."

William peers at Edmund. "Perhaps we can turn in your parents as the thieves. They should be out of prison in a few years. You'll be fine until then, won't you? Running Courtenay Hall on your own?"

Edmund knows Lord Thorne well enough to only giggle and shake his head.

William sighs. "Fine, I will tell them it was a misunderstanding, and the miscreants have been apprehended and sentenced to a half day of hard baking labor."

"While I do hate to interrupt when you're having so much fun," August says. "May I point out that Edmund is not exactly dressed for this weather?"

"And whose fault is that?" William says. "Did I not already give you proper hell for dressing him like that?"

William looks down at Edmund. "That coat is rather fetching on you, though. I see you have inherited your father's sense of style."

"Are you mocking my son for wearing a girl's coat?" August says.

William's brows shoot up. "Never. I am a Thorne. I have at least two great-uncles who preferred women's attire. My commentary referred to the size, which is rather small for him and looks quite uncomfortable, not unlike much of what you wear yourself."

"At least I am not wearing *those*." August points at the blue jeans. "They have a hole in the knee. Do you even realize that?"

"It is the fashion, although, admittedly, that is not how I bought them."

William reaches down for Edmund. "May I offer you a ride, young sir? In light of your parents' terrible negligence, dragging you into a winter wonderland while woefully underdressed."

Edmund lets William lift him onto the horse. Then William points to the left. "Head that way and take the first right. I'll get the other car and come round to fetch you."

William climbs onto the horse, and they are off, bells jangling in their wake.

We are back at Thorne Manor. All of us, right down to baby Grace. Amelia runs off with Edmund, needing to show him all her toys and her pony, because the daughter of William Thorne didn't just have *one* pony before she was old enough to walk—she had one in each world.

I settle in to coo and cuddle the baby as August relays our adventure to Bronwyn. The new mom sits on the sofa curled up against her husband, who is feeding her scones, insisting she must revive herself after that difficult birth ordeal. Bronwyn might roll her eyes at that, but she doesn't turn down the scones.

“And how are you doing, Rosalind?” Bronwyn asks. “It can't be easy for you, being back in this world.”

I grimace, and before I can say that I'm fine, August does it for me, mimicking my tone, which has both Bronwyn and William laughing.

“Yes, silly question,” Bronwyn says. “Of course, she is fine.” She takes a nibble of scone. “Or so she says.”

I sigh. “I have already had the PTSD talk from August, and yes, I know I need to . . .” I fidget, adjusting my position as I shift the baby. “I need to stop ignoring what happened to me. I did not plan to come back to the

twenty-first century, but now that I have—safely—I should like to do so more often. This world has its marvels.”

“It does,” Bronwyn says. “As does yours.”

“I think I find it difficult to admit there are things in this world I miss. I can joke about stand mixers and good chocolate, but there are other things, too, and to admit it feels as if . . .” I sneak a look August’s way. “As if I am saying it wasn’t so bad, being here.”

August says softly, “Just because an experience is not uniformly terrible does not mean you didn’t suffer. I have some wonderful memories from the last four years. Memories of life with Edmund. Of life with friends. Of things I did that I enjoyed. Would you prefer I didn’t?”

“Certainly not. I wanted you to be happy while I could not be there.”

“I had moments of great happiness, along with grief and anger and everything else. I expect you had the same, Rosie. Just because you were desperate to return does not mean you spent four years in abject misery. I’d be horrified to think you did.”

I nod, and we sink into the comfortable silence of understanding. The baby wakes, and I get to make faces at her and *ooh* and *aah* over how tiny she is before I finally relinquish her to August so he can have a cuddle.

We’ve resumed talking—this time about the baby’s early arrival and the panicked trip to York—when the doorbell chimes. William goes to open it, and I hear two feminine voices. I glance at Bronwyn, who’s smiling and getting to her feet.

“Freya dragged Del up,” Bronwyn says.

I have only a split second of confusion—from the voices—before William brings the couple in. Bronwyn has never mentioned that Del is a transgender person—why would she?—and I’m relieved that my surprise doesn’t last long enough to show on my face.

I’m equally relieved that, despite being from a very different time, August makes the mental leap in a blink and is right there, baby in his arms,

introducing us and saying how much he has heard about them, as they say the same about us. Or Freya does. Del only glowers at his wife.

“I told you they’d be too busy for a social call.” He looks at Bronwyn. “I swear, she’s been perched in the front window like a tiny hawk. I practically had to tie her down so she didn’t come up hours ago.”

“Oh, that’s the story, is it?” Freya says. She turns to Bronwyn. “We saw you drive by this morning, and he says, ‘Hmph, they’re early. Figures. Should probably head up, see if anything needs doing.’ I’m the one who said we should wait. And we aren’t here for a social call—we’re here to see what you need.”

“So you *don’t* want to see the baby?” August says, arms tightening around the little one. “All right then. I’ll just put her in her cradle . . .”

“Only if you want this one tackling you,” Del says, hooking a thumb at Freya.

Freya is white-haired, plump, walks with a cane, and seems the least likely person to tackle anyone, but there’s no mistaking the determined glint in her eye as she cuts off August’s retreat and holds out her arms. He passes Grace over, and as we all head into the living room to chat, I try not to stare at Freya, to study her, to figure out whether she might be descended from me or my sisters or another relative. I want to say more—to take her aside and talk, just talk—but that is a conversation for another time. For now, I am only glad to have met her at last.



IT’S EARLY AFTERNOON, AND WE’RE MAKING OUR WAY DOWN THE HILL TO High Thornesbury. Del and Freya are watching the children to let us show August around the modern holiday version of the town. William had wanted to drive down so Bronwyn wouldn’t need to walk, but she’d insisted she wanted the exercise.

We've changed our clothing. The "heading to a fancy-dress party" excuse doesn't work as well midafternoon. William had insisted he owns only blue jeans on this side of the stitch, which I'm certain was a lie to force August to wear them. I won't say they look amazing—they are two sizes too large—but that only requires me to use my imagination and picture what he'd look like in a snug pair of worn jeans, and the image keeps me quite toasty warm on the trip downhill.

As for me, I'm wearing a lovely cashmere sweater over riding pants William lends out to young local equestrians. Paired with the boots from my time, it is a delightfully unique outfit, and I'm rather pleased by it. Judging by the looks August keeps sneaking me, he agrees. His looks are purely appreciative, with no hint of what I would have seen in them four years ago, sizing up my attire in terms of how it might attract men's gazes.

It's chilly out, Rosie. Perhaps you'd like a stole with that?

Is that bodice comfortable? The neckline seems a little low.

Are you certain you'd like to wear your hair down today? It looks so lovely pinned up.

I'd tried to take his words as mere fashion advice, but in my heart, I'd known them for what they were, and I'd felt judged for my choices. There is no longer any of that in his look, and the relief I feel only serves to remind me that if I ever see judgment again, I will not mistake it for anything else. And we will talk about it.

"Do you know what we ought to do tonight?" William says as we reach town.

"Dare I ask?" Bronwyn replies.

"Caroling. Edmund's ghostly friend was right. There is a distinct lack of caroling, which we shall rectify. We'll see whether Freya can look after Grace."

"I believe Freya would prefer to join us," Bronwyn says. "And Grace will be fine coming along as well. Bundle her up and take advantage of

these early days, where she sleeps so well.”

William hesitates.

“A brief round of caroling will be fine, William,” Bronwyn says. “Unless you’re suggesting I stay home with her.”

“We’ll bundle her up, and I’ll carry her.”

We head along the main road, pointing out everything to August along the way.

“Is that the same pub?” August asks.

“It is indeed.” William claps him on the back. “What do you say we pop inside for a better look? And a fine warming drink. It seems to be about that hour.”

“You two go on,” Bronwyn says. “Don’t spare a thought for those among us who are breastfeeding and need to spend a *third* Christmas alcohol free.”

William grins at her. “You are most thoughtful, Lady Thorne. And in return, I’ll be equally considerate and have a drink for you.” He puts his arm around her waist and pulls her to him. “I’m teasing. If we do go in, we can all have something warm and nonalcoholic.”

“No, I was the one teasing.” She pats his shoulder. “Enjoy your drink. I need to grab a few things before the shops close.”

“I’ll go with Bronwyn,” I say, and we part at the pub, the men promising to catch up in time to carry our parcels.

Bronwyn and I continue on, chattering away even more now that the men have left. It’s been a very long time since I had a female friend. I’d been too busy with life after my parents died—caring for my sisters, opening my business, growing up fast. Miranda and Portia had eventually taken the role of friends, but as much as I adore their company, I realize now I was missing something in my life. With Bronwyn, I have started to find it, along with the determination to find more.

I tell her about the farm where we stayed, and the Jewish decorations and my own epiphany regarding my heritage.

“Your parents made the choice not to highlight that in your life,” she says. “In their minds, it was the correct choice for the world you grew up in. I’m not even sure how much has changed. Less than I’d like to think. But now you’ll make your own choice, and whatever that might be, it will be the best one for *you*.”

I smile and loop my arm through hers. “Thank you. I do want Edmund to be aware of his heritage, even if August and I will need to discuss how open we are with it. I’d like to start with the holidays, though. Impart an awareness that Christmas is not the only one.”

“Oh! Then I know exactly where to begin.” She points to the local bookshop. “I was already going there. I need to buy books for William and Edmund. Our first Christmas together, William bought books for himself from me and—”

“For himself . . . from you?”

She waves a hand. “Don’t ask. It did, however, launch a tradition of buying books for one another, which we read on Christmas night when we’re too stuffed to move. We’ve been trying to carry on our favorite family holiday traditions while inventing our own.”

I smile. “I just may steal that particular one from you.”

“Please do.”

She pushes open the bookshop door. As soon as we walk in, I spot a display celebrating winter holidays across cultures, and I smile at that, as well as at the young family choosing books from it.

As Bronwyn goes off to do her own shopping, I find books for Edmund—on pirates—and August—on auto mechanics. Then I return to the center display, where I pick out a selection of books on Hanukkah and one on making your own dreidels from molding clay, a project for Edmund and me over the holidays. Once I have everything, I catch up with Bronwyn.

“I’m afraid I’ll need to ask you to pay for these,” I say. “I have enough in my old accounts to repay you later.”

“As William has told you, you have plenty in your old accounts, and the fact that you never asked us to empty them always seemed to suggest you were not quite done with this world.”

I feel my cheeks heat. “I suppose I was not.”

She takes the books from my hand. “Good,” she says and then heads for the cashier.

Late that night, we leave the Thornes in the modern world and drunkenly stumble back through the stitch to spend the night in ours. We tuck Edmund into Amelia's trundle bed and then make our way to the guest room, where I discover that I was definitely not the only one who thought their spouse looked quite fetching in twenty-first-century garb. August is rather taken with the riding trousers, which I shall have to repay William for and add to my chest of "night-play wear" . . . along with the soft cords I may have secreted back from the modern garage.

While I considered myself adventurous in the bedchamber before, if I'm listing what I gained in the modern world, I must add a newfound confidence in that side of our marriage. I'm quite certain some Victorians were at least as adventurous as their twenty-first-century counterparts, but they were not as open about it, certainly not within the confines of an upper-class marriage. Having spent time in the modern world, I brought confidence to my already curious inclinations, and in August, I have an equally curious and open partner, which is truly wonderful.

All that is to say that we do not get to sleep until it is nearly dawn. It's more than the intimate play. It's as if the last barrier between us has crumbled. He has seen the twenty-first century, and it is an experience we can continue to share. I have admitted how it both terrified and delighted

me, and that shadow has been lifted. I will speak more openly about my time there, acknowledging the—yes—trauma of the experience, and August will no longer need to tiptoe around the subject.

The morning light has set the room ablaze by the time Edmund wakes us, nudging me ever so gently until my eyes open.

“There is someone at the door,” he whispers. “I was waiting in bed, and I heard a coach out front, and now someone is there.”

August lifts his head, blinking. We do expect the Thornes later, but they won’t arrive by coach, and they won’t come before Christmas luncheon.

A crisp rap sounds at the front door.

August groans. “It is Christmas morn.”

“It must be an emergency,” I say. “Someone expecting William to be at home. Wait in the hall, please, Edmund. We shall dress and see who it is and then check whether Santa brought you any presents.”

“But first, coffee,” August says, rising, the coverlet around his waist. “Ring the maid and ask . . . Oh, that’s right. There is no maid here. I’m sorry, Edmund, but you must wait until Papa has had his morning coffee. It may take a while.”

“Ignore your father,” I say. “He’s teasing you. You’ll have your presents as soon as we get rid of this caller.”

I wave Edmund out. I’m still pulling on my morning dress when he raps urgently at the door. I tell him to come in, and he pokes his head through.

“There is someone downstairs, Papa! An intruder!”

I sigh. “Let me guess. William still has not fixed that back door. Apparently, our visitor tired of waiting.”

I adjust my dress as August walks into the hall.

“Hello, dear brother,” a voice trills from the stairwell. “Merry Christmas!”

“Miranda?” I say.

I don't even get the word out before my son is vaulting down the corridor. I peek out to see him leaping into her arms.

"Whatever are you doing here?" I ask.

"Well, isn't that a fine hello. Merry Christmas to you, too."

I walk over to give her a hug. "You know what I mean. We expected you and Portia up for Boxing Day. You are welcome, of course. It is simply unexpected."

"Portia will be delayed, and since I was only waiting to travel with her, I decided to come last night. There are such interesting people on the train Christmas Eve."

"You arrived last night?"

She pulls off her gloves. "I stayed in York."

I open my mouth to protest and then close it. In this world, a young woman does not ride the train alone from London to York and then find herself lodgings. Or she does not unless she is my sister, who would find the modern world so much more to her liking.

I hug her again, using the embrace to stifle my concerns before I give them voice. There is a limit to how much I may fuss over Miranda these days. She is a grown woman and, if we are correct, a successful authoress.

Author, I correct myself.

Yet she is still my little sister. And far too reckless in regards to her own safety.

I take a look at her as I pull back. She may be twenty-six, but she still looks like the girl I remember. No taller than I, but with a figure some might—and do—call plump. Unfortunately, that only makes it easier for her to get away with whatever schemes her imagination concocts. She is a pretty, plump blond girl, certainly innocent and mild.

I snort at the thought, which has her brows rising.

"Let us go downstairs and—" I begin.

"—brew coffee," August says.

“Open presents,” I finish.

“What about the Thornes?” Miranda asks. “Are they still abed?”

I hesitate.

“They are not at home,” August says. “The baby arrived early, and they had to go to York. They should be here this afternoon.”

“I saw the pirate!” Edmund says, and perhaps he was simply bursting to tell her, but I get the feeling he’s helping his father distract Miranda from asking about the Thornes.

“You three go on,” I say. “I still need to put on my boots.”

They leave, Edmund chattering about the pirate, which he is pretending to have seen in *this* world. I’m still lacing up my indoor boots when Miranda returns.

“They are starting the water for coffee,” she says. “I was going to put my bag away, but the room seems to be locked.”

“The one right across from ours?”

“The next one down. Which was also locked the last time I was here. That seems odd, does it not?”

“As it is not our house, Miranda, I believe we shouldn’t question locked doors.” I meet her gaze. “Nor attempt to *prize* them open.”

She only grins. “Has Edmund been practicing his new skills? Wait until you see what I got him for Christmas. Did I mention I have been taking sword lessons?”

“You mean fencing lessons.” I finish tying the boot laces. “Yes, you did mention that.”

“Mmm, no. Fencing was dull. I am now taking sword fighting.”

“Of course you are.” I pause as I rise. “Tell me this has nothing to do with Edmund’s gift.”

She picks up something from the floor. When she lifts it, I see the cashmere sweater I borrowed from Bronwyn. “What is *this*?”

“My shirt,” I say, taking it.

“I’ve never seen a shirt like that. Nor made of that material.”

“It is a Yorkshire style. From special sheep.”

I tuck the sweater into a drawer and turn to find her lifting the cord tied to the bedpost.

“Out,” I say, pointing.

Her lips twitch. “Is that a special Yorkshire custom as well?”

“Miranda . . .”

“A cord tied to a bedpost. Whatever might that be used for? Please tell me it is on August’s side of the bed, dear sister. That would make this story even better.”

“There is no story,” I say. “Yes, it is August’s side of the bed. The poor man sleepwalks dreadfully. Terribly dangerous in a house that is not his own.”

She sputters a laugh. “You are not even going to bother making up a plausible excuse, are you?”

“I do not believe I need to. Just be warned, Miranda, if you so much as mention that cord to August, you will need all the sword-fighting lessons you can get.”

She laughs again and pulls me into a hug. “I missed you, Rosie.”

“And I missed you. I would miss you even more if I had to murder you for interfering with my enjoyment of my darling husband.”

“I never would. Though I am curious—”

“Use your imagination. I know you have an excellent one.”

I steer her into the hallway and shut the door behind us.

“About that locked room . . .” she says.

“It belongs to the Thornes. It is their office, which means it is none of our business. Now, let us get downstairs before Edmund explodes from waiting for his presents.”

I usher her along the corridor. Once we’re past the locked door, I glance back at it and wait for my heart to start tripping. When it does not, a curious

lightness rises in me, and I find myself smiling at the closed door.

Not a gateway to hell, but a passage to adventure.

“Rosie?”

I prod Miranda along. “Christmas awaits. Let us get to it.”

THANK YOU FOR READING!

I hope you enjoyed Rosalind and August's holiday adventure. You may have guessed that the "pirate ghost" was more than a passing side note . . . and that Miranda is not going to forget the mystery of that locked door or Rosalind's unusual clothing. Those stories will collide in book three in the series, coming in October 2022.

A Turn of the Tide stars Miranda, who learns about the stitch, sneaks through to see the future...and instead goes back to 1790, where she meets a certain very-much-alive young privateer and gets caught up in his Robin-Hood campaign.

More details will come in early 2022, but for now you can read an early draft of the first two chapters starting on the next page.

A Turn of the Tide

A Stitch in Time book 3

Coming October 2022

Imagine, if you will, that a locked door stands between you and the greatest adventure imaginable. It is not the sort of lock one might find on a safe containing such a treasure, but a mere interior door lock, easily opened with a hairpin. Imagine having an older sister who honestly believes that will keep you from the adventure. A sister, I might point out, who is speaking to a sibling already six-and-twenty, and not a small child in need of protecting.

What lies on the other side of that door? A time machine. That is what I've heard them call it—Rosalind and her husband August, whispering together when they think I cannot hear them, when they think I will not press my ear to the door to listen. Yes, yes, at my age, I ought to be past such shenanigans, but I learned early in my life that the best conversations are always held behind closed doors.

Time machine. I have never heard those words combined, yet I am a writer with a very healthy imagination capable of conjuring meaning from the words. They also refer to this thing as a “time stitch,” which makes even less sense. No matter. I know what lies behind that door. A passage to the future. From our century—the nineteenth—to the twenty-first.

Is any lock supposed to keep me from *that*?

Honestly, I wonder whether my sister knows me at all.

Fine. I will concede that she knows me very well—having raised me and my other sister, Portia, after our parents died. She knows me well enough to have all those delicious “time machine” conversations behind closed doors. And, perhaps, she believed that, given the sense of responsibility she worked so hard to instill in me, that I will not open that locked door when it resides in the home of another.

To get to this doorway to untold adventure, I must enter the home of my sister’s dear friends—Lord and Lady Thorne—while they are not at home, and I believe the correct term is “trespass.” Also, “breaking in illegally.” I feel bad about that. I really do. I am not above minor criminality, but this is a much greater offense. I can only sooth my conscience by insisting to it that the Thornes are excellent people who would never begrudge my adventure, and it is only my sister’s damnable caution that keeps me from openly pursuing my goal. Or, perhaps, my sister’s lack of trust in my ability to keep a secret, which is reprehensibly offensive . . . and also justified.

In this, though, I understand the magnitude of the secret, and so I shall indeed keep it until my dying day. I am perfectly trustworthy when it comes to what matters, and this does.

I first encountered the locked door on Christmas Day, quite by accident. At the same time I discovered—in the guest room my sister was using—items of clothing that did not look like anything I’d ever seen, though she insisted they were simply Yorkshire fashions. That set my inner detective tingling. Two mysteries to be solved. Might they be linked?

It took months—five agonizing months!—to get my answers. Given that I make part of my living as a newspaper writer, I ought to have been able to get to the bottom of the story faster. The problem was lack of access. I live in London with Portia while Rosalyn lives in Yorkshire with her husband and son. I had to come up with endless excuses for visiting them, which is not a hardship. They live at an earl’s summer estate—the earl being August’s brother—and it is a glorious place, filled with forests and

lakes and follies and secret passages. The company of my brother-in-law and adorable nephew are also an attraction. Fine, I even enjoyed being around Rosalind, who is quite lovely when not thwarting my deepest desires.

Five months of finding excuses to visit Courtenay Hall and listening at doors—well, listening when noises within didn't tell me I absolutely should *not* be listening. Bits and pieces of conversations to piece together until I understood the staggering truth. There was a spot in that locked room in Thorne Manor, through which they could leap forward nearly two centuries. A spot that my sister had stumbled through and been trapped there for four years, during which we thought her dead.

I think that is the most difficult part of the secret to keep. I know why my sister vanished, and the answer was not “an accident and amnesia,” and I so desperately want to talk about that, to console her on an ordeal even *my* imagination cannot fathom. But no, for now I must pretend I don't know the truth. That is yet another reason to pass through time—so that I can return and tell her and we can talk what happened to her.

Enough maudlin meandering. I am thoroughly annoyed with Rosalind for keeping such a marvel as a “time machine” from me, and I will not pause to admit that, yes, she probably is doing so out of fear that I would race through and be lost to her.

I don't know what happened to keep Rosalind from returning, but if such a thing happens to me, while it would be a difficult adjustment, I would be far better circumstances than she'd been. I have no husband or child, and Rosalind would be able to pass over and visit me. Of course, there is Portia, and my friends, and my career . . . But I will not think of that. There is risk, yes. But reward beyond measure. I am going to see the future. The *future!*

I have chosen my timing with care and such patience that Rosalind would be impressed. All right, “patience” may overstate the matter. When I

first understood what lay behind that door, it took all my willpower not to run to Thorne Manor, burst in on the Thornes and break open the door right in front of them. That wouldn't do. I had to wait until they were in London, Thorne Manor left empty. Then I was off.

I came in through the kitchen door, which I will point out did not require breaking any locks. The door doesn't close properly, and William Thorne is in no rush to fix it. He would say that his reputation should stop anyone from breaking in, but I suspect he also presumes that anyone who does break in must be in dire need. The Thorne family has long had a reputation for being eccentric, which only means that they do not act as others expect from nobility, and I find them fascinating for it. Many might eschew the title of "eccentric," but I consider it a lofty achievement, one I hope to claim myself.

I enter through the kitchen door and be sure my boots are clean before I head for the stairs. Halfway there, a movement makes me jump, but it is only a calico cat.

"Pandora?" I say. "Or Enigma?"

The cat fixes me with a baleful look, and I smile. "Hello, Pandora."

She ignores me as I continue through the house. I am familiar to her. Even if I were not, well, cats are not dogs. Dogs will raise the roof if a stranger nears the house. Cats will let a stranger stay a fortnight undisturbed, so long as their food bowl is kept full.

I head up to the locked room, which I open easily. Then I hesitate.

As much as I long to run and leap into the future, there is a moment where I must take stock of the situation. I am about to leap into the twenty-first century. Am I ready? Mentally, yes, but on a more practical level, do I have everything I'll need for the journey?

My clothing is not correct, but I plan to borrow some of Bronwyn Thorne's. While she is half a head taller than me, she is a sturdy woman and

I am a plump one. I should be able to find a suitable outfit until I can buy my own.

As for money, I have fifty pounds. I don't know how much that might be worth in the future, but it seems enough to make a start of it. I also have my notebook. I am never without my notebook and two pens with two bottles of ink, because when a writer is struck by an idea, she is certain to find her pen nib broken or ink gone dry. I carry both book and writing implements in a fashionable little pouch I designed myself, where they rest along with my knife. A second pocket knife lies against my thigh, in yet another original design. One can never have too many weapons.

I should have loved to bring my sword, but I fear they are quite out of fashion in Victorian England. I wonder if it is different in the twenty-first century? One can only hope. Although, I suppose, any world that requires such weaponry also implies a great deal of danger, which would be . . . I know I ought to say “distressing” but the word that keeps coming to mind is “exhilarating.”

No matter. I am ready, with both pen and blade, which is all one really needs in the world.

I lift my chin and march into what is clearly an office. When I glimpse a notebook on the desk, I must steel against the temptation to read it. I have a purpose, and it is—for once—far more exciting than reading.

I am Miranda Hasting, also known as Randall Dash, to the literary world. All right. “Literary” world may be an exaggeration, given the snide remarks I've had the misfortune to read in reference to my novels, but they sell well enough that my fifty pounds was pocket change, left lying in my drawer at home.

So, let me try that again.

I am Miranda Hasting, aka Randall Dash, writer of adventurous tales of lady pirates with quick swords and quicker tongues, and I am about to dive into the deepest well of creative inspiration.

The future awaits.

I stride into the room, head high as I ready myself for the machine . . .

There is no machine.

I stop and look about. There is nothing in the room resembling a machine.

That must be a metaphor. Not an actual “machine” but a device that opens the door into another world. With that, I know exactly where to find it.

My gaze turns to a shelf stuffed with books. Doors into other worlds, indeed. I take three steps, diverting past an awkwardly placed chest and—

I smack into the foot of a bed. Which would be far more embarrassing had there been a bed there a moment ago.

There was no bed in this room. And now there is.

I have done it. I have crossed into the *future*.

The future!

I take a deep breath and, heart tripping, feet bouncing, I pivot, taking in the wonders of the . . .

Well, that’s disappointing.

There’s no other way to put it. I might say devastating, but I am too optimistic to make that drastic a determination yet. I am standing in a room that is just a room. A rather dull room, even.

It’s a small bed chamber, so I must presume that in the future, either two-year-old Amelia Thorne has moved out of the nursery or this room has been set aside for guests. I hope it is the latter. The girl I know is as cherished by her parents as my sisters and I had been by ours, and the nursery Amelia shares with her baby sister is a perfect doll house. This room is . . . I turn, wrinkling my nose. Drab. That is the best word for it. Not unpleasant or even uncomfortable, but simply drab. A guest room then.

What is truly disappointing is certainly not that the room is dull but that it is all so very ordinary.

I have tried to imagine the future, ever since I learned my sister could travel there. To do so, I conducted a mind experiment based on the past. The twenty-first century is approximately a hundred and fifty years from my time. So I must cast my mind back a hundred and fifty years, considering all the ways the world has changed, and I should expect it to change at least that amount for the future.

Yet, when I look around this room, I see nothing unexpected. There's a fireplace that has not yet been converted to a coal-burning hearth. There are oil lamps and candles. Whatever became of that marvel known as gas lighting? Did it make houses explode, as people swore it would? Then my gaze stops on one particular item: a basin discretely tucked half under the bed.

I stare at it in horror. Not all the things I had been so certain would be improved within the next century, personal sanitation sat near the top of the list. I'd dreamed of deep bathing tubs with steaming hot water that flows like magic and the end—surely the end—of the horrors of the water closet. But no, in the future they are still using bed-chamber pots? Tell me it is not so.

I roll my shoulders and straighten. No matter. There must be a reason why people of the future relieve themselves in chamber pots at night. And why they haven't converted every hearth to coal. And why they are not yet using gas lighting. All will be explained, and I am certain there are marvels I cannot imagine yet to come. Rosalind and August would hardly travel to this time if it did not hold delights. I simply must discover them for myself, starting with leaving this room.

I open the door, which looks exactly like the door in my world, right down to the lock.

Enough of that. It is a house. People do not tear them down and rebuild when fashions change. I have stayed in everything from a modern London flat to one that belonged back in Elizabethan times, right down to the decor.

I march to the top of the stairs and—

A clatter from below. A clatter, and then an oath.

I go still and listen. A muttering sounds after the oath, and while it's too low to recognize it as more than a man's voice, I know it is not William Thorne. He does curse, but the muttering is distinctly not his style. Also, William is in London with his family.

So who is downstairs?

In my time, the Thornes employ a shockingly small amount of staff for their social station. They are private people, which I can understand. I am often mistaken for being exceedingly outspoken and talkative, but when I am at home, I very much enjoy the quiet, closing my door even against Portia. Only when I am alone can I truly relax and be myself, and the Thornes have fashioned a cocoon where they do employ others—as they should, given their wealth—but they do not have the army of staff one might expect.

If I am correct, they have a housekeeper, a part-time nanny and a stableboy. What would they employ in the future? Perhaps their twenty-first century housekeeper is male. I should like to think such a thing is possible—the dream of a world where I would not need to write adventure tales under a man's name and Portia would not need to sneak into medical lectures dressed as a boy.

While I would adore a future where I could draw a bath at a whim or flick a switch and have a hearth magically ignite, I would happily forgo those creature comforts for one where a man could be a housekeeper or a woman a stable-hand, if they so desired.

That is, I decide, what has happened in this future. Not industrial advances but social ones. And if anyone were to hire a male housekeeper—or male nanny—it would be the Thornes.

That does, however, still raise the question of what I am to do about this unexpected resident. I still need to borrow clothing and orient myself in the

future world before I leave the house, and yet I cannot remain with someone here.

I will begin by confirming that it is indeed a member of the indoor staff. Otherwise, if it is a groundskeeper or stable-hand, I need but wait for his departure.

I take the steps one at a time, all the while tracking the noises, which emanate from the kitchen, further suggesting a housekeeper. He seems to be fixing lunch, the curse coming when he dropped something.

I consider my routes. Then I crouch down, waddling duck-like into the parlor. Thorne Manor is not overly large. It is, after all, a summer house, though the Thornes have made it their year-round abode. The large country parlor leads into the kitchen at the back of the house, and I position myself behind the sofa and adjust until I am on an angle to see through the open kitchen door and—

Oh, my. That *is* a sight.

Were I to hire a male housekeeper, his appearance would not play into my decision, no more than if I were hiring a stableboy. I know many a lord of the manor who insists on “helping” choose house maids. Even if they do not intend to prey on them, they choose the pretty ones as they might choose a pleasing piece of art. It is pleasant to gaze upon and reflects well on their taste. Some women also take a hand in choosing grooms and valets. That is equating people with possessions, which is undeniably wrong. If I were to choose a male housekeeper, I would do so based entirely on his skills.

That is real life. In books, though, there is a place for the handsome groom in tight riding trousers who will ask if there is any other way he can be of service to his lady, and that lady, if she is possessed of my imagination, will know endless ways they might enjoy one another’s company, so long as he is equally enamored of the idea because otherwise . . . Well, I cannot see the appeal of “otherwise”—of a groom who would only offer because he felt obligated. No, in a proper romantic novel, he must be as enthusiastic about the idea as I am. Er, as the lady of the house is, I mean.

The point is that, if I were to conjure up a fantastical male housekeeper, the man in the kitchen would fill that role in every physical way. Tall and

well-built with his sleeves rolled up to show leanly muscled forearms. A perfectly sculpted jawline. I am very fond of jawlines, being more fond only of eyes, and from what I can see, his are the richest brown. Dark curled hair cut very short. His skin is also dark, and I have no fetish about that—I've known women who do—but nor do I care what color the covering on such a fine-looking man. It does, however, make me reflect that if the future is forward-thinking enough to cast men in the role of housekeeper, one might also think it would cast darker skinned people in roles other than household staff, but I suppose even the future cannot be perfect.

While I can see enough of the man to know I would like to keep gazing on him indefinitely, he is still partly cast in shadow, and I can make out only his upper body as he sits, eating his lunch. While something about him seems familiar, I cannot imagine what it is, and I decide he must vaguely remind me of someone I've met.

He is not so much eating his lunch as devouring it with a gusto that makes me hunger for something other than food.

Enough of that, Miranda. You may indulge in such thoughts later, when seeking inspiration for your next novel. The point is that this man is the Thorne's housekeeper and . . .

And why am I so certain he's the housekeeper?

That was an arbitrary role I'd assigned him when I first heard noises. Yet now I'm looking upon the man and . . . I don't see a housekeeper.

He's sitting at a work table in the kitchen, where he's pulled over a stool as a seat. He's plowing through thick pieces of bread stuffed with meat. There's a cup at his side and from here I can smell ale. When I glance under the table, I note a remarkable pair of boots, with gleaming coppery buckles.

Those boots . . .

Where have I seen—

The man shoves back the stool with a squeak. When I glance up, I still can't make him out entirely, but there is something very familiar hanging at his side.

Is that a sword?

I blink and pull back. Mere moments ago, I'd been inwardly joking about dwellers of the future carrying swords. Now I see one with a sword?

I give my head a shake. I'm mistaken. I must be. That is some modern implement at his side where another might carry a sword. Even in my day one hardly sees them outside of a gymnasium.

I lift my head just as he reaches for something on the table. Something embedded *in* the table. It's a bone-handled knife with the tip wedged into the cutting-block tabletop.

That is not a housekeeper, Miranda.

It is a . . .

Well, I'm not certain of the specifics. He is far too well-dressed to be a vagrant, and he does not strike me as a thief. Not a common thief, that is.

He grabs the knife and flips it, nimble and confident, at ease playing with a deadly weapon. He gives it a twirl and then sticks it into a sheath at his side.

A well-dressed, well-groomed man, confidently playing with a knife as if it is a mere tool. A tool of the trade.

Not a common thief, yes, but this is not a common home. One would need to be exceedingly confident to break into a house such as this. And to not only break in but help oneself to lunch.

A gentleman thief.

A highwayman.

My heart does a little flutter even as I hear Portia telling me there is no such thing as a gentleman thief. No real-life Robin Hoods, stealing from the rich to give to the poor. If I ever did meet a highwayman, I'd be vastly

disappointed, finding myself in the clutches of a smelly ruffian with filthy fingers plucking at my jewelry.

Perhaps, but that is in the present. Perhaps in the future, such creatures have sprung from the pages of melodrama and taken shape.

Either way, the important part here is that this man is *not* the housekeeper, and he is in the Thorne's house, with a knife, while they are in London.

I must drive him out. While there is always the temptation to run at him, a knife in each hand as I snarl in fury, it doesn't work as well as one might expect, at least not when one is a plump young woman with blond curls and, apparently, an angelic countenance. I have channeled my inner Valkyrie, only to have my opponent dub me "adorably fierce." He might have meant it as a compliment, but I have never felt so infuriatingly dismissed. Worse yet, he then told me how attractive a quality that was in a woman and asked if he might see me again later, preferably when I was unarmed.

That experience, while still able to rouse a flare of indignation, taught me a valuable lesson. What I see as defects can become assets, if used to my advantage. If men expect me to be wide-eyed and innocent, soft and defenseless, then that is exactly what I shall be . . . right up until I put my blade at their throat. That is the theory anyway. I have yet to put it into practice. Most men that I need to fend off require a kick between the legs more than a blade at the throat, especially when the blade could inflame the very passions I am attempting to discourage.

Still, I have honed my feminine charms to as fine a blade as any I might carry. I will employ them here. I will, of course, also employ an actual blade.

I take my pocket knife from my pouch and instead slide it where it belongs—in a pocket. I design all my own clothing for exactly this purpose. It is no wonder women find themselves at the mercy of predatory

gentleman when they have no pockets into which they may secret a defensive weapon. It is a conspiracy, I am certain, one I have learned to thwart. I have even converted Portia to the wonders of pocketed skirts, though she insists on using hers for so-called practical items, such as pocket watches and pocket money. What is a pocket knife if not practical? Sometimes I despair of ever understanding my older sisters.

The highwayman—yes, I shall call him such, as there is no one to stop me—has risen from the table and moved to a spot I cannot see. There’s a tapping and clattering of dishes that covers any sound of my journey from couch to doorway. Then a sigh and a struck match, as if he’s settling in with a pipe or cheroot.

All goes quiet as he presumably smokes, and I mentally unspool my performance. I will pretend I have stumbled upon him. Shriek in feminine dismay and horror. Run screaming for the constable. At that, he should also run—in the other direction—and vacate the premises. If he comes after me instead, I will lure him in and then surprise—

The cold tip of a knife digs into the back of my neck.

“Do not move,” a voice growls. “I have no wish to harm you but—”

I swing around, knife raised. Or that is the plan, but he’s too close for a proper “swing” and instead I find myself pressed against the wall with *his* knife at my throat.

In theory, this should be an alarming circumstance. While I have been in scrapes before, this one is new, and I have the distinct sense that I ought to be terrified. But I am also suddenly and discomfiting aware of why my own former victim found the situation somewhat more invigorating than one might expect.

My word, he has gorgeous eyes.

That is not at all what I should be thinking, and instead, it is all I am thinking. Before I’d seen only that he had dark eyes that were very pretty

indeed. Now those eyes are ringed with enviable lashes, and the irises are flecked with gold.

I have never remotely been mistaken for a poet, but in that moment, I believe I could compose an ode to his eyes, and before I know what I'm doing, I hear myself saying, "You have the most beautiful eyes."

He blinks and pulls back. "What?"

I drop my gaze. "I am sorry, sir. That was very forward of me, but I could not help notice—"

I ram my fist into his stomach. I don't use the hand gripping my knife. That would be wrong. My other fist executes a perfectly aimed blow to his solar plexus.

He falls back, those gorgeous eyes widening in shock. I hit him again. This time, he dodges the blow. I take a deep breath, as if winded. Then, when he begins to straighten, I charge. I hit him with all my might and he flies backward over a footstool. His knife clatters to the floor, and I launch myself on him like a cat, landing on his chest, with my own blade at his throat.

I'm tensed, ready for him to throw me off. Instead, he only looks down at the knife against his throat and says, "I suppose I deserve that."

I'd heard his voice earlier, but I'd been too busy staring into his eyes to really hear it. Now that I do, it's beautiful, a light contralto with a French accent, made even more melodious by a wry lilt to the words.

"Yes, you do," I say. "Now—"

He bucks under me, legs flying up. I only press the knife in a little harder.

"I used a distraction trick myself moments ago," I say. "Do you really think I'd fall for it myself?"

He sighs and thumps his head back to the floor. "All right. You have bested me, fair maiden. There are five pounds in my jacket pocket, which I left in the kitchen. It is yours. But then you must leave."

“No,” I say. “It is you who must leave.”

I propel myself up, my free hand wrapped around the pommel of his sword. Yes, it’s a sword. I’d noticed that in taking him down. Now I’m up and dancing away with the sword in hand.

He only sighs and shakes his head as he rises. “Put that down, child.”

“Child?” I sputter. “We are of an age.”

“Hardly,” he says. “I am six-and-twenty.”

“As am I.”

He smiles. “Does anyone actually believe such a story, child? You cannot be more than eighteen. Now put down that sword or I shall be forced to take it from you hand.”

I raise the weapon, and his eyes harden.

“Do not play this game, little one,” he says as he comes toward me. “A sword is no toy. It is a dangerous weapon that requires years of training, and you will only injure yourself if you attempt to use it.”

I execute a perfect lunge and thrust.

He stops in his tracks. “My mistake.”

“Evidently.” I lift my chin. “I am not a *child*. I am Miranda Hastings, friend to the gentleman whose home you are burgling.”

“You mean Lord Thorne? The man whom *I* call friend? The man whose house *you* are burgling?”

“Burgling?” I squawk. “Do I look like a thief to you?”

He eyes my dress. “I am not certain. Your dress does seem unnecessarily ostentatious, whatever your intent.”

“Unnecessarily ostentatious?” I stop myself with the reminder that I am not in my world, where my dress is perfectly fashionable. That’s also when I get my first good look at him. I look to see what he’s wearing—to get an idea of the future fashion. I see him in full then, head to toe, for the first time, and my stomach clenches with recognition.

I know him.

Dear Lord, I know him.
Not as a man, but as a ghost.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kelley Armstrong believes experience is the best teacher, though she's been told this shouldn't apply to writing her murder scenes. To craft her books, she has studied aikido, archery and fencing. She sucks at all of them. She has also crawled through very shallow cave systems and climbed half a mountain before chickening out. She is however an expert coffee drinker and a true connoisseur of chocolate-chip cookies.

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