

A stone archway with ivy and a misty forest scene. The archway is made of dark, textured stone blocks. The left side of the arch is covered in green ivy. Through the arch, a misty forest scene is visible, with trees and a path leading into the distance. The scene is illuminated by soft, ethereal light, with several bright, star-like sparkles scattered throughout the mist. The overall mood is magical and mysterious.

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A Shortcut Through Time

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A faint line of daylight hovered on the western horizon, a pink glimmer in the darkening summer skies. Christopher unbuttoned his doublet and settled himself on the bench, his back to the wall of their – his – little cottage. The wood still retained the warmth of the sun, and from somewhere to his right came the scent of woodbine, a heady perfume that had him thinking of Sally. Truth be told, everything had him thinking about Sally, from the overgrown mess that used to be her herbal garden, to the neat stack of linen sheets she had embroidered before their wedding and which he never used, not now that she was gone, buried in the graveyard a stone's throw away.

Of late, life had lost most of its colour and all of its joy. Christopher went through the motions, from the moment he woke to the realisation the bed was empty of her, to when he retired for the night, sliding in to lie in his half, one hand resting on her pillow. If he closed his eyes, he could still see her, but with every day the image faded, and mostly he remembered her dark, long hair, the way her laughter gurgled out of her. Gone. He cleared his throat and scrubbed his eyes. Gone.

He was startled out of his gloomy thoughts by the light. A weak flicker among the trees that bordered his little garden. Christopher stood. A light? Rare indeed were visits from his neighbours – all good Anglicans who preferred not to consort with the papist. Besides, there was no road through the forest, and whoever was holding the lantern had to be tipsy, given how the beam swung back and forth. How strange. The light turned his way, darted to one side, to the other. Twigs snapped, a female voice muttered. A woman? Alone in the dark? Christopher took a step towards the dancing light beam.

“Who goes there?” he called out. Something emerged from the undergrowth and Christopher gasped, backing away. What in the name of Christ and all his saints was this? Dearest Lord! No, it couldn't be! It couldn't!

His Sally! Come back to him, her long dark hair glossy and hanging free about her shoulders, her beautiful face marred by a deep scowl. But what words were coming from her lips – profanities such as he'd never known she knew, as she tugged herself free from the brambles which snatched at her legs. And what strange garb was she wearing – blue men's hose and an odd jerkin in a bright pink material? The light, he saw now, was not from a lantern but from a small black box she held in her hand.

Sally looked up at the stranger. Thank goodness, at last she'd found someone else in these accursed woods, someone who might be able to explain how the hell she got here and more to the point, how to get out again. The battery on her phone wouldn't last long if she kept using it as a torch, but without it she would rip her jeans to shreds in the undergrowth. She just had to hope he wasn't some nutter who'd attack her.

“Hi there, can you help me? I seem to be lost. I got off the bus on Castle Lane and the bus-driver said there was a shortcut through the woods, but I think I must have strayed off the path somehow. I'm trying to get to the Tudor Wood estate, where my cousin lives. Can't get a signal on my phone or I'd ring him to come and find me.” She tried hard to keep the waver out of her voice.

“Castle Lane?” the man said. His accent was odd, she could not place it. She flicked her phone-light briefly up to his face and saw he was frowning, as confused by her appearance as she was by his.

“Yeah, um, do you know which direction I should walk in? I’m already late – Doug will be getting worried...” Her cousin had offered her to come and stay, hide herself away from the world as she came to terms with her recent loss.

“Who are you?”

That wasn’t a helpful response, but she didn’t get the feeling he meant her any harm. “My name’s Sally.” Sally Fields, to be exact, and as of three months, four weeks and two days, she was officially a widow and a bereaved parent. The accident had killed Tom on the spot, and as to their baby...She pressed a hand to her flat, empty belly. But she didn’t tell him any of this: she was sick and tired of strangers offering condolences for her loss.

The man staggered backwards, fumbling at something that hung around his neck. Sally flashed her phone at him again and saw he was holding a crucifix in front of him. What was wrong with the name Sally, for Christ’s sake? And then she noticed for the first time what he was wearing...

Sally lowered the phone, her hand suddenly shaking so badly that she thought she might drop it. She no longer needed the electric light to see what had been staring her in the face for the past few minutes. The man was wearing some sort of outlandish garb, the type she’d only seen in sumptuous historical dramas routinely churned out by the BBC. Were those hose?! His doublet – if that’s what those things were called – was made of leather, and what appeared to be a homemade linen shirt completed the outfit.

Despite the strange clothes and the shabby little Tudor house that looked like it was barely large enough to accommodate one person, the man was handsome. With that flowing dark hair framing his face and wide dark eyes he would have been attractive in any time period, but why was he staring at her that way? And why was he muttering a prayer under his breath as if he’d just seen a ghost? He was the weird one, living alone in the woods as if time had stopped and stood still since the first Elizabeth sat on the throne.

The woman said something, but all Christopher could hear was the wild beating of his own heart. Was this some kind of vision, or had his beloved Sally come back to him, a restless spirit searching for some semblance of peace? His mind was searching for answers, but his heart already knew the truth. Despite the physical resemblance this woman wasn’t the girl he’d loved nearly all his life and mourned every minute of the day. This woman was coarse and wanton; she wore breeches and a bodice that left her arms bare, and despite that angelic face displayed the self-assurance of a man. There was no modesty in her gaze, nor did she seem troubled by the fact that she was wandering about at night unescorted, as was not proper for a young maid. And the look in her eyes! Her initial look of surprise turned to one of consternation, and then naked fear rearranged her features into a mask of terror. She stared at him as if he were a demon of some sort, a creature from the lowest rings of hell come to life.

This is a dream. If I can just wake up... Sally closed her eyes, stuck her cell phone in her back pocket and pinched her arm, hard. It didn’t work. When she opened her eyes, she’s wasn’t back at the bus stop, nor had she fallen asleep on the bus. Nothing changed. The man still stood before, watching her with a look that was part fear, part curiosity. He clung to the crucifix as though it were a lifeline. Out of habit, she pulled out her mobile to check the time. Nothing. The blank screen frightened her. The subtle quiet that she couldn’t define frightened her. The stars, so vivid now, pulsed over Sally’s head

“The nearest castle is two day’s ride on a swift horse. Darkness comes fast. You’d better let me offer you a bed for the night, and a meal.” He tucked the crucifix under his tunic, and took a step towards Sally. She backed away. She wanted to run, but she had no idea where to go. In the distance an owl screeched. As if on cue, the sun slipped away.

“I’ll not hurt you,” the man said, extending a hand. “But there’s plenty out there that will.” He nodded at the encroaching forest. Sally licked her lips. Why, oh why had she decided to take a shortcut through the woods?

“This way.” The man gestured towards the house and the faint golden light that spilled from the open door. He bowed. “And I am Christopher Scott. Welcome to my home.”

Sally hesitated. Follow a strange man into his hovel? How many times had she watched a slash-horror film and screamed at the heroine on the screen, “*Don’t go in there, he’s an axe-murderer.*” Except this Christopher didn’t look like an axe-murderer, truth be told. He looked sad, and confused, and his eyes were red-rimmed as if he’d been crying not long before she came upon him. She weighed up her options and figured that possibly he might have a phone inside the house. A landline could be a life-saver.

Her hopes sank when she followed him inside the tiny dwelling and saw that he didn’t even have electricity, but relied on candle power. In the flickering light, she saw that he lived alone, and with only the very basics. The table looked like something from a tableau in one of the National Trust Tudor houses that Doug got so excited about, with what looked like pewter plate and goblets, and two carved chairs. This guy certainly didn’t place much value on creature comforts. But, incongruously, there was a pile of embroidered linen neatly stacked on the dresser. That brought Sally’s gaze to the corner of the room where one big, wooden bed stood, curtains pulled back. Where, exactly, was she supposed to sleep?

Christopher thought that he had seen fear in her eyes when she first chanced upon him. Now he could sense the disgust. This was not his Sally, this woman who was assessing the house and evidently finding it wanting. The garden was overgrown, yes, but he tried to keep the house exactly as Sally had done. He watched her as she cast her judging gaze around the home that Sally had loved with such pride. He saw her brows draw together and he looked at the object of puzzlement. The little wooden crib, half-finished, shoved to one corner, where he could not quite forget about it, nor bear to part with it, but yet could rarely look at it. A flicker of emotion passed across the woman’s face, as if she knew, or remembered. A cold shiver coiled its way down his back and he stepped forward, speaking in a hurry. “You will take a bit to eat? There is some bread, fresh from Goodwife Parsons this morning, and a little cheese...”

The woman said, “Great. Er, where’s your loo?”

Christopher shook his head. Who was this person, who looked like his dead wife and yet spoke words that were incomprehensible?

Christopher frowned. “The... *loo*?”

“You know, the bathroom? The toilet?” Sally did a little jog on the spot to illustrate the urgency of her need to pee. Bladder control had never been one of her strengths, especially not since she’d lost...

Damn it!

She took a long deep breath and sucked in her lower lip, blinking away the shimmering veil of tears that suddenly clouded her vision. Little by little, the man shifted back into focus, frowning at her from where he stood behind one of the two heavily carved chairs, his long, artistic fingers clutching onto the wood as if his life depended on him doing so.

Weird man. Still, how he chose to live his life was none of her concern. She tried again. “The lavatory?”

“Ah!” Christopher cleared his throat. “You have need of the... privy.”

Oh, *finally!* Perhaps it was some trick of the dim light, but Sally could've sworn his cheeks had turned red.

“I will make a start on our supper while you, erm...” Christopher nodded towards a white chamber pot in the far corner of the room. “Yes, well.” Spinning on his heel, Christopher went over to the fireplace and crouched down, feeding a small chunk of wood to the greedy flames.

Sally gaped at him. Was he for real? Did he seriously think she was going to use a chamber pot, especially with him only a few feet away? She stared at the broad expanse of his back, doublet and all, fixing him with all of her outrage, but Christopher didn't turn around. Instead, he began humming to himself; a gentle tune that teased her memory then slipped out of reach, too brief to be deciphered. A lullaby? Yes, a lullaby, and her mouth formed the words soundlessly while her eyes yet again stung with tears. Her baby...

The demands of her bladder refused to be ignored for a moment longer, so Sally wiped her eyes and went to have a look at the pot. Thankfully, it was empty, and seemed clean enough, even by modern standards. Trying not to think about the stranger in the room with her, Sally wriggled out of her jeans and crouched over the pot. *Ahh!*

Christopher woke at dawn, standing up stiffly from his makeshift bed on the floor. A quick glance verified the woman was still there, fast asleep in his bed. Dark hair spilled over the pillow – just like his Sally's – dark lashes fluttering under his inspection. She was awake, and it made him smile, that she pretended to sleep, reminding him yet again of his wife, who would do anything to be allowed to stay in bed that much longer.

Last night has been strained. She had scowled at the rye bread, had grimaced at the pottage, and had stared at him as if he were some sort of apparition whenever she thought he wouldn't notice. When he'd banked the fire and closed the shutters, she'd squeaked, saying she didn't like the dark, so reluctantly he'd left one of the shutters half open. Night air could be dangerous – everyone knew that, did they not?

In the bed, she stretched, and he couldn't stop himself from looking at her, his gaze lingering on her bosom, on the outline of her long legs. Sweet Mary in her heaven! Why was he being tormented like this, with a perfect lookalike – and namesake – of his dead wife? He wanted to touch her, caress that downy cheek, kiss those slightly parted lips, but instead he turned away, concentrating on blowing life into the fire again. Behind him, he could hear her moving about. A thud, and he winced when she blasphemed. This young woman needed to have her mouth washed with lye!

He poured some ale into two mugs, and handed her one.

“No tea?” she asked. He had no notion what she might be referring to.

“There's some bread,” he offered. She made as if to throw herself at it, he halted her with a frown. “First we say grace.”

“Jesus!” she muttered, and he scowled at her. She might look like his beloved Sally, but she had no decorum, no sense of modesty. Might she be a tinker's brat?

Sally sipped at the tankard of ale he had passed to her. Well, that was a first – drinking at breakfast time, but her throat was parched and it seemed to be all he had to offer her. That and some dry gritty bread. She nibbled on it, taking the chance to look around properly now that it was daylight, and Christopher had flung open the shutters.

Her sense last night that this was some sort of living museum was not lessened by what she saw. Basic wooden furniture, an open hearth with a blackened pot hung over it, a pair of dead rabbits and what looked like a pheasant hung from the rafters. She wondered why on earth she'd been so easily persuaded to stay last night. There'd been the bus, the short cut through the woods, the path dividing and she'd taken the left turn. Some ruins – looked like the remains of a lych-gate – she'd passed through the arch, breathing in the scent of the honeysuckle which almost smothered it, and for an instant she'd had the weirdest sensation, as if she was wading through ice-cold gelatine and suddenly it had been dark and she'd lost the path. She'd stumbled on, using her phone as a torch, and then...

Her phone! Maybe now it might pick up a signal. She pulled it out of her back pocket and checked – but no. Not even a single bar of a signal. And it wouldn't be long before the battery would be completely dead. And she already knew there was no electricity, let alone a charger, here in this cottage.

“Look, thanks for the bed and food, but I guess I should be going now. Which way should I head to get back to a road?” Any road would do.

“Road? The track through the village will lead you to the great road that leads to town. I will go that way later, to the market. I can lead you.”

Sally smiled at him with relief. Town, market – that meant people, civilisation, and the chance to get help. Or at least find out where on earth she was. And call Doug before he expired.

“Finish your ale and bread, and then we will go,” he said.

She nodded, but had barely taken another sip when there was a loud rap at the door.

Christopher's blood ran cold when he saw the sour countenance of Mistress Hollis through the small window. Strangely, she never came by when Sally was alive, nor did she offer any assistance when his wife was heavy with child and could have used a helping hand, but now Mistress Hollis stopped by nearly every day, her pointy nose twitching with curiosity, like that of a rat that got a whiff of a piece of cheese. Christopher would have preferred not to open the door, but Mistress Hollis wasn't easily deterred. Yet again, she banged at the door before returning to peer through the window, her hand shielding her eyes from the morning sun to allow her a better look into the dim confines of the cottage.

Christopher turned to Sally. He felt rather foolish, but it was best if Mistress Hollis did not see his guest. “Keep out of sight,” he said quietly, and hoped that Sally took no offense at his rudeness. Sally shrugged and stepped away from the door.

Christopher opened the door a crack and rearranged his features into an expression of bland politeness. “Mistress Hollis, good morrow.”

“And a good morrow to you, Master Scott.”

Christopher waited for the woman to state her business, but she became distracted, peering over his shoulder and craning her neck as if expecting to see something untoward.

“Do excuse me, Mistress Hollis, but I'm going into the village, and would like to be on my way.”

“As it happens...” Mistress Hollis never finished the sentence. A horrified screech tore from her chest as her eyes grew round with horror. Her bony finger seemed to be pointing at something just behind Christopher, and he knew with a sickening certainty that she'd caught

sight of his strange visitor. She stepped back, lost her footing, and fell onto the front step with a thud. She inched back on her rump, still shrieking like a banshee. Christopher held out his hand to help the woman up, but she slapped it away as she continued to put distance between them.

“Don’t you touch me, you filthy papist,” she roared. “I should have known better than to take pity on you after your devil’s witch of a wife died. I thought I was just doing my Christian duty, as any good neighbour would. But you!!! What kind of black magic did you stoop to to conjure up her spirit, you Godless heathen?” she cried as she finally got to her feet, still backing away from Christopher as if she were afraid to turn her back on him. She made the sign of the devil, then finally turned and ran toward the village, toward the church.

Sally reeled at the mad woman’s words. Christopher stood in the doorway, watching Mistress Hollis’ retreating figure.

“She’ll be back, of that we can be certain.” He cast his eyes over Sally’s jeans and sweater. “You can’t wear those clothes.”

“Okay, I’ve had enough of this.” Sally walked over to the table, sat down, and took a sip of the lukewarm ale. “I mean this is charming, living without electricity and pretending to live in the past, but don’t you think you’re taking this a bit too far?”

Christopher was on her in a flash. He grabbed her arm and pulled her out of the chair. Sally thanked the heavens above for all the self-defence classes she had taken. The look on Christopher’s face when she wrenched out of his grasp was satisfying indeed.

Christopher’s eyes blazed in anger. He moved away from her. “Mistress Hollis will be back, and she may bring others with her. I cannot keep you safe from them if you’re dressed like that. There’s a basket in the corner there, with Sally’s clothes in it. You’d best put them on.” He was dead serious. An icy weight settled in Sally’s belly. Something was very, very wrong.

Next to a tiny crib was a basket full of folded linen. With trembling hands Sally rifled through the garments. Strange clothes: long linen garments, heavy woollen skirts, and some sort of bodice that laced closed. Sally picked at the embroidery that adorned one of the sleeves. These were well-worn garments, shiny with use – the real thing, not some masquerade costume. Her stomach heaved. What had happened to her? She closed her eyes, recalling the ancient crumbling stones of the old ruined arch she’d passed through. She’d felt compelled to step through, drawn forward by the scent of honeysuckle, and now it seemed as if stepping through the arch had hurled her backwards in time. *How absurd*, the logical part of her brain chimed in. Ridiculous! She picked up a few things and stood.

“I am not sure—” She held the garments up to Christopher.

“They go like this.” He took the clothing from her and explained the various layers. He shook out a petticoat, and a small linen shirt fell to the floor. He froze, staring at it.

“Did you have a child?” Sally met Christopher’s gaze. She saw the pain there, felt it, as it merged with her own sorrow. All the emotions spun, overlaid by a healthy measure of fear. *I will not cry*.

“My wife died in childbirth. The babe died thereafter.” His voice cracked. He rubbed his eyes with the back of his hand. Just like her: she made as if to take his hand, wanted to tell him she too had lost a child – and a spouse. But he did not notice her extended arm. Instead, he turned away and retrieved a dagger from the mantelpiece which he tucked into his belt. Sally’s mouth dried up.

“What year is this?” Sally whispered the words, knowing that she wouldn’t like the answer as she uttered them.

“Tis the year of our Lord 1586.” Christopher said. They looked each other, both somehow knowing that Sally’s very presence put both of them in grave danger. “Here,” he added, holding up a flat piece of cloth. “We must not forget the stomacher.”

Christopher watched his hands moving, helping the woman into Sally’s clothes. It was as if he were watching another life, another world. How came this woman here, and why did she not know the date? She had discarded her strange clothing and he glanced at the pile of odd-coloured fabric on the floor, wondering where in the world folk might dress in such a way. Was he going mad? He knew he was not dreaming, nor looking upon a ghost, for Mistress Hollis had seen his visitor. She was real, but not of this place. He looked again as she struggled with his wife’s clothes. Mayhap...not of this time? Christ and his Saints! He suppressed the urge to cross himself.

Glancing again at the tiny linen shirt, so carefully stitched by his wife yet never to be used, he swallowed against the lump in his throat. Why had he confided in this woman? He was drawn to her because she looked so much like his own departed dear heart and yet, there was something more. She knew his pain, he could feel it. Whether she was his own Sal, come back to him to answer his prayers, or some creature from who knew where, she understood what it was to lose a child. He was sure of that, if nothing else.

She only had her sleeves to put on, and he stepped in closer to show her. As she turned to face him, a section of her hair brushed against his cheek. Perhaps God had, indeed answered his prayers, for here she was, standing close enough for him to breathe in her scent, to feel the warmth of her skin. The sadness was still there, in her eyes, and as she looked up at him he felt his stomach lurch. His feelings swirled around, churning his insides, as pity mixed with desire, and then guilt added potency to the mix. For if this was not his wife, then he had no business feeling so drawn to her. She lifted her chin, and he lowered his head... Thunder rumbled outside. No, this was no summer storm, but the sound of hoof beats and the angry chuntering of a mob.

Christopher dashed to the window, took a look outside and said “Hide. You must hide. Now!”

Sally's heart hammered wildly as she caught a glimpse of the crowd advancing beyond the tiny window. It looked like a lynch mob. All that was missing were the torches and pitchforks, and perhaps a baying dog or two. These natives looked a long way from friendly.

Disappearing suddenly seemed like an extremely good idea. Glancing about her, Sally scanned the room for a suitable hiding place, but in a house of such tiny dimensions, her options were limited.

“Where can I hide?” she asked.

“Quickly!” Tearing himself away from the window, Christopher grabbed Sally by the arm and dragged her to the right hand side of the fireplace. Breathing hard, he reached up and pressed a corner of one of the many dark wooden panels that lined the walls. With a soft click, a section of panelling quietly swung open to reveal the inky blackness within.

He wanted her to hide in there? Sally shook her head and tried to take a step backward, but Christopher held her arm too firmly. “Don't be afraid,” he murmured, his breath brushing over her cheek.

That was easy for him to say. He wasn't the one about to be closeted up in a coffin with only the household spiders for company.

“*Christopher Scott*,” a man bellowed from outside. “If you place any value on the future of your worthless soul, I demand that you open this door.”

Christopher quickly glanced toward the window. Then, to Sally's surprise, he cupped her face between his hands. "Do you trust me?" he whispered, a faint smile curving his lips.

Without hesitation, Sally nodded. Although it made no sense, she did trust him. This man. This stranger. Utterly and completely.

Without another word, she allowed Christopher to back her into the narrow hidey hole, and she made no protest as he softly closed the door, sealing her inside.

Darkness enfolded her, a thick, suffocating blackness that constricted her throat and trapped her scream, preventing it from escaping. Closing her eyes, Sally concentrated on the muffled voices in the room beyond the door.

"Good day to you, Reverend Bernard! 'Tis a little early for a social call, not that I am displeased to see you, of course."

"It grieves me to say that is not a social call, Master Scott. A report of a most alarming nature has reached my ears."

"Oh? I am sorry to hear it." Sally heard the shrill scraping of a chair leg over the floor. "Will you not take a seat, Reverend? Might I offer you some refreshment whilst we talk?"

"Nay. I will take nothing from the hand of a man who consorts with demons--"

"Demons?" Christopher sounded confused.

"A dead woman's face resurrected from the very fires of hell!" the other man cried. "What else could it be?"

He was obviously a man of the cloth. Sally could almost smell the brimstone from inside her cupboard.

Christopher shook his head, forming his lips into small smile. "What nonsense is this, Reverend Bernard?"

"Nonsense?" Mistress Hollis jostled through the crowd. "I saw her!"

"Saw who?" Christopher asked.

"Her! Your dead wife, alive and breathing."

"My wife is dead." Christopher drew in a long breath. "Very dead."

"And yet Mistress Hollis saw her." The reverend paced up and down the room, ordering one of his men to search thoroughly.

"She is wrong." Christopher eyed his neighbour with dislike. "We all know she is overly fond of small beer."

"What?" Mistress Hollis went an unbecoming shade of purple. Two of the men snickered, silenced by the reverend's icy glare.

"Or you are lying," the reverend said. "Personally, I'd take the word of Mistress Hollis over yours any day. All papists are deceiving, lying bastards destined for hell."

"Hear, hear," one of the men called. "We don't want no papists here!"

"I have lived here all my life," Christopher said. "This is my home, my land, bequeathed to me by my father who had it from his father and so on."

The reverend, a meaty man with jowls that quivered with his every movement, leaned towards him. "We don't care. A papist – and even worse, a papist that conjures spirits – has no place here." He swept the room with his gaze. "A good, sturdy home for one of my flock."

"My home," Christopher said stonily.

The reverend laughed. "Not for long, Master Scott. Either you're out of here by nightfall, or we burn the place down – with you inside. It is time to cleanse Willow Brook of papists once and for all."

Mistress Hollis shone up. "My nephew has need of a place."

“I’m not going anywhere,” Christopher said, crossing his arms over his chest. “As I said, this is my home, and I hold the deeds to it.”

“And who will care when you are dead?” Simon the smith said. Christopher met his eyes, and Simon looked away, a deep blush colouring his face.

“You used to be my friend,” Christopher said.

“As a witless child!” Simon spat, eyes darting in the direction of the Reverend.

“Oh, aye? And who was it who loaned you the money to start your forge? Who saved your wife when she almost died in childbirth? We did – me and Sally!” Christopher took a step towards Simon. “And you have never repaid the loan, have you?”

“Not only a papist but a usurer,” the reverend cut in. “You have until nightfall, Christopher Scott. If you’re still here then, you burn – as should all papists.”

They left. Christopher sank down to sit and cradled his face in his hands. Now what? All he had in the world was this house and the lands that went with it, and now, thanks to a most uninvited visitor, he was to lose it all.

Sally let out the breath she hadn’t realised she’d been holding when she heard the door bang and knew the mob had gone. This was all happening because of her. Christopher could lose everything – his home, his land, his possessions. He’d already lost his wife and child. And now, because of her, because she apparently resembled his dead wife, he would lose everything else. They had to get away from here, somewhere safe, before the mob returned at nightfall. But where could they go? He must know a place.

She knocked on the wooden panel. It was time he released her. But he did not come. She called out: “Christopher? Let me out now! We need to make a plan.”

Still he did not respond. She listened hard, and heard sounds of movements. Things being dragged across the floor. Bangs and clatters. As though - as though he was packing his belongings, getting ready to leave. Without her? She felt the panic rising as the walls of her tiny prison closed in on her. A tickle on her face – cobweb or spider? A scratching at her feet – rats? The damp, stale air suddenly seemed inadequate, her lungs heaved and she hammered again and again on the panel. She’d trusted him – surely he wouldn’t leave her to die here, to suffocate and then burn?

At last the door swung open and she stumbled out of the priest hole, gasping with relief as she fell onto the floor.

“You bastard!” she screamed. “I thought you were going to leave me to die! I heard everything they said – about burning this place. Why didn’t you let me out earlier?”

He was bending over her, his hands under her arms, pulling her upright, pulling her close to him. He said nothing, but there was an intense look in his eyes. She tried to pummel his chest, still angry at her ordeal, but he was holding her too tightly, too close. Her knees trembled at his proximity. Why was she reacting like this?

“Why didn’t you let me out sooner?” she asked again, her anger giving way to a new emotion as she breathed in his smoky scent.

“Ssh,” was all he said, and she wondered whether perhaps some of those people might still be outside.

Christopher released Sally as suddenly as he’d taken her into his arms, unsure of what possessed him to even touch her. He turned his back on her and continued throwing his few possessions into a worn leather satchel. Where would he go? Where could he go? Papists were not welcome anywhere, even during the reign of this “benevolent” queen who swore that she wouldn’t make windows into men’s souls – Protestants’ souls, more like. This place,

this house was all he'd ever known, and he had been happy here, at least until he lost his wife and his precious boy.

Christopher spun around to face Sally. This was all her fault, and now she would go back where she came from and leave him to pick up the pieces of his shattered life. "Why did you come here?" he demanded, his voice shaking with fury.

"I have no idea how I came to be here. I walked through the forest, through the ruins..."

"So, go back through the ruins," Christopher spat out. "You've done enough damage here. I'm about to lose everything I hold dear because of you."

"It's not my fault I look like your wife." Sally began to cry, but her tears only angered him further. "I don't know how to get back," she whimpered. "Will you not help me?"

"Help you?" he echoed. She'd just unwittingly taken everything from him. Perhaps he'd take something from her as well, something he hadn't realized he'd been longing for until he held her in his arms. She was a stranger to him, but dressed like that she could almost be his Sally. Almost. Christopher closed the space between them in two short strides and grabbed her by the arms, yanking her roughly against him. Sally looked terrified, but he didn't care. He shoved her against the wall and kissed her hard as his body held her captive against the rough timbers. She began to struggle, but after a few moments her resistance ebbed and her lips opened in response to his. He'd meant to hurt her, to punish her, and teach her a lesson, but suddenly his anger melted away. His heart thumped against his ribs as his treacherous body reminded him of what it felt like to be alive.

"Sally," he whispered as they finally drew apart. And for a moment, he wasn't at all sure which Sally he was referring to.

His lips tasted sweet and salty at the same time, so delicious that Sally forgot herself for a minute. God, the feel of those arms around her, the heat of his chest. He broke their connection, startling Sally back to reality. Her breath came heavy as she met his gaze. There was no mistaking the lust there, overlaid with confusion, and—due to Reverend Bernard—fear.

"I—we—um—" Sally couldn't form a cohesive sentence, all of her tingling from his kiss and embrace.

"We need to leave," Christopher said, his voice gentle and soft.

He feels it, too. Warmth flooded her belly and her cheeks grew hot. She thought of the last time she had been interested in a man, but try as she might, nothing had ever compared to the feel of Christopher's body pressed against hers. The very smell of him conjured up a desire in Sally she had never known.

"You'd best put your own clothes on." Christopher had his back to her now, moving through the tiny house. Sally stripped off the cumbersome garments and quickly changed back into her modern day attire. He carefully added an ancient Bible and what looked like two pewter plates to the belongings in the leather satchel before moving the tiny table to the centre of the room.

"Help me," he said, stacking the two chairs on top of the table. He picked up the linen chemise that Sally had just taken off, ripped it into pieces and arranged the tattered shreds among the wooden furniture. The bed-hangings, the bedclothes – all of it he added to the growing heap.

"What are you doing?" Sally asked.

"This is my house. I'll decide what to do with it."

Sally nodded, and before too long they had constructed a respectable pile of kindling, wooden furniture, and cloth.

Christopher snatched a metal tinderbox from the mantle. He pulled out a flint steel, and a linen cloth that looked scorched in places. He made quick work of setting the cloth ablaze, and with a steady hand, he held the burning fabric to the pyre. When the fire caught hold in a shred of the baby's smock, Sally placed a hand on Christopher's shoulder. *I am so sorry.* What had she done to the poor man?

"Open the shutters, love," Christopher said. Sally moved to do so, her heart singing at his endearment. The breeze fanned the smouldering fire. Smoke filled the room, and with a whoosh, Christopher's belongings went up in flames. Holding hands, they ran out of the house, not stopping until they were safely away from the flames and the smoke. Christopher put his arm around Sally. She glanced up at him, saddened by the tears that ran unchecked down his cheeks, warmed by the heat of his body.

Christopher sniffed. They'd stopped beyond the garden, no more than a series of weed-beds and soon to be scorched. He stole one last look at the place he'd lived in all his life, first as a lad and then with his love. Snatching a few rasping breaths, he turned to run again, but in turning, came face to face with Mistress Hollis. Her brows were drawn together, and her mouth was puckered in disapproval.

Before she could speak, he took his arm from Sally's waist and held his hand up in front of the old crone's face. "Say naught. 'Twas my house, to do with as I wished."

Mistress Hollis shook her head, as if she would not believe him. "Wanton destruction!"

He repeated, "Mine. My property."

She, too, raised a hand, as if to wag a finger at him. Her cloak flapped, loosened from her body by the action. But she was no longer looking at him, nor at the blazing cottage, but at Sally.

Mistress Hollis put her hands in front of her chest, her forearms placed as if to make the sign of a cross. "A ghost! God save us all, 'tis a ghost!"

Christopher seized the moment. Grabbing Sally's hand once more, he dragged her, running towards the woods. Behind them, Mistress Hollis screamed. "What Devil's work have you done? What is that creature you have unleashed? You will not get far! By God, you will not!"

In the evening gloom, there was just enough light left for him to pick a path at speed through the trees, the blazing cottage on his left-hand side. Circles, he was running in circles, for here it was now on the right. Now he was mad, driven insane by fear and panic, for there was more than one burning building. Side-stepping tree roots, veering round tree trunks, he dashed on, pulling Sally along behind him, sweat trickling down between his shoulder blades. Voices. 'Twas not the cottage he could see, but burning torches. The men of the village were coming for him. For them. Christopher released Sally's hand and put his own to his neck in an involuntary gesture. He would hang. He blinked at the orange glow of the flaming torches, coming nearer. No, he would burn. And so would she.

He glanced to his left and right. "The ruins." There was nowhere else to go, but when they got to the old ruined abbey, there would be no escape there either – not with these determined pursuers at their heels. Above the sound of his and Sally's ragged breathing, the determined baying of dogs carried through the trees, and the torches winked like beacons, coming ever closer. Sally squeezed his fingers; she was as scared as he was, he could feel it.

But then the squeeze became a tug. Yanking his arm to make him follow her, she said, "This way."

Adrenaline surged through Sally's veins, a welcome burst of energy that transformed her trembling legs into tireless pistons of steel. Never had she been so acutely aware of her own mortality. Each thud of her galloping heart seemed like a countdown to the end of life. How many moments did she have left? From somewhere deep in the shadows, she sensed death watching. Waiting.

On they ran, zig-zagging wildly through the trees. Greedy branches snagged Sally's hair and clothing, marking her face with scratches she was too terrified to feel.

The barking dogs seemed much closer now, but she dared not look back. Oh, where were the ruins? They should have reached them by now.

A triumphant shout went up from behind them. "There they are!"

The dogs' frenzied yelps reached a crescendo, and suddenly Sally knew how a fox must feel. Chased and hunted. Pushed to the brink of collapse and then ripped apart.

"Watch out!" Christopher yanked on Sally's arm and a rush of air whipped past her cheek. A heartbeat later there was a hollow *'thunk'*.

"Jesus!"

Only a few feet away, the shaft of an arrow quivered, deeply embedded in the bark of a tree. Christopher had just saved her life, but there was no time to thank him, for a large hound burst from the undergrowth and with a blood-chilling snarl, it sprang at them in a blur of teeth and flying spittle.

Christopher cried out in agony as the hound sank its teeth into his raised arm. "Run!" he gasped to Sally.

Leave him? No way. Not ever. Whatever the future held, their fates were entwined now.

Bending down, she patted her hands over the damp earth until she found a sturdy tree branch. Perfect. Without hesitation, she lashed out at the snarling dog. "Get. Off. Him." She punctuated each word with a blow until at last, with a pained yelp, the hound let go of Christopher's arm. As a parting shot, she brandished her branch again at the cowering dog and growled deep in her throat. Wisely, the animal hurtled back into the undergrowth.

The mob were almost on them now, the woods aglow with flickering torchlight. "Let's go," she hissed, sliding her arm about Christopher's waist.

They rounded a thick holly bush and suddenly, there they were. The abbey ruins, glowing and ethereal in the moonlight, the arch just a stone's throw away.

The mob was right behind them.

"Come on!" Acting on instinct, Sally dragged Christopher towards the arch. What if this didn't work?

A pitch fork clattered against the ruined walls, tossed by some unseen hand. Mocking voices drifted through the night. Promises of death and dismemberment, of pain and humiliation. She faltered, stumbled.

Christopher squeezed Sally's hand. He must have read her mind for with a pained smile he said "I believe in you, love."

The phone in her pocket buzzed and gave an unexpected *beep*.

Sally returned Christopher's smile. "I believe in me too." Hand in hand, they ran through the moss-encrusted arch.

It was dark – and silent. No sounds of pursuit, no flickering torches. Christopher inhaled the heavy scent of woodbine and turned to Sally.

"We did it," she said, grinning at him. She held up that strange little box of hers, and he backed away, not knowing what to make of this thing that glowed in the dark.

“I have reception,” she continued, and he took yet another step away from her. He peered at his surroundings, recognising the familiar lay of the land, but in some places the ruins had all but disappeared, and only the small arch through which they had come bore any resemblance to what it had looked like before. Before. Christopher inhaled and licked his lips. “What year is this?” he asked in a cracked voice, echoing her question from some days ago.

Sally shrugged, not raising her eyes from the glowing box. “2016.”

“What?” he squeaked, and this time she did look at him.

“It’s okay,” she said, moving towards him.

“Okay?” He gave her a bewildered look, threw a look at the arch. If he were to go through it, would he return to his own time? A soft breeze lifted the woodbine, and he inhaled the heady smell. Go back. He took a hesitant step towards the arch.

“No!” Sally grabbed hold of him. “You can’t!”

She was right: To return was to die. But to stay... A tremor had his legs buckling.

“Hey,” she said. “It’ll be all right. I’m here for you.” She held out her hand. “It’s you and me now, Christopher Scott.”

He tightened his hold on her hand. “You and me,” he repeated hoarsely. In response, she rose on her toes and kissed him.