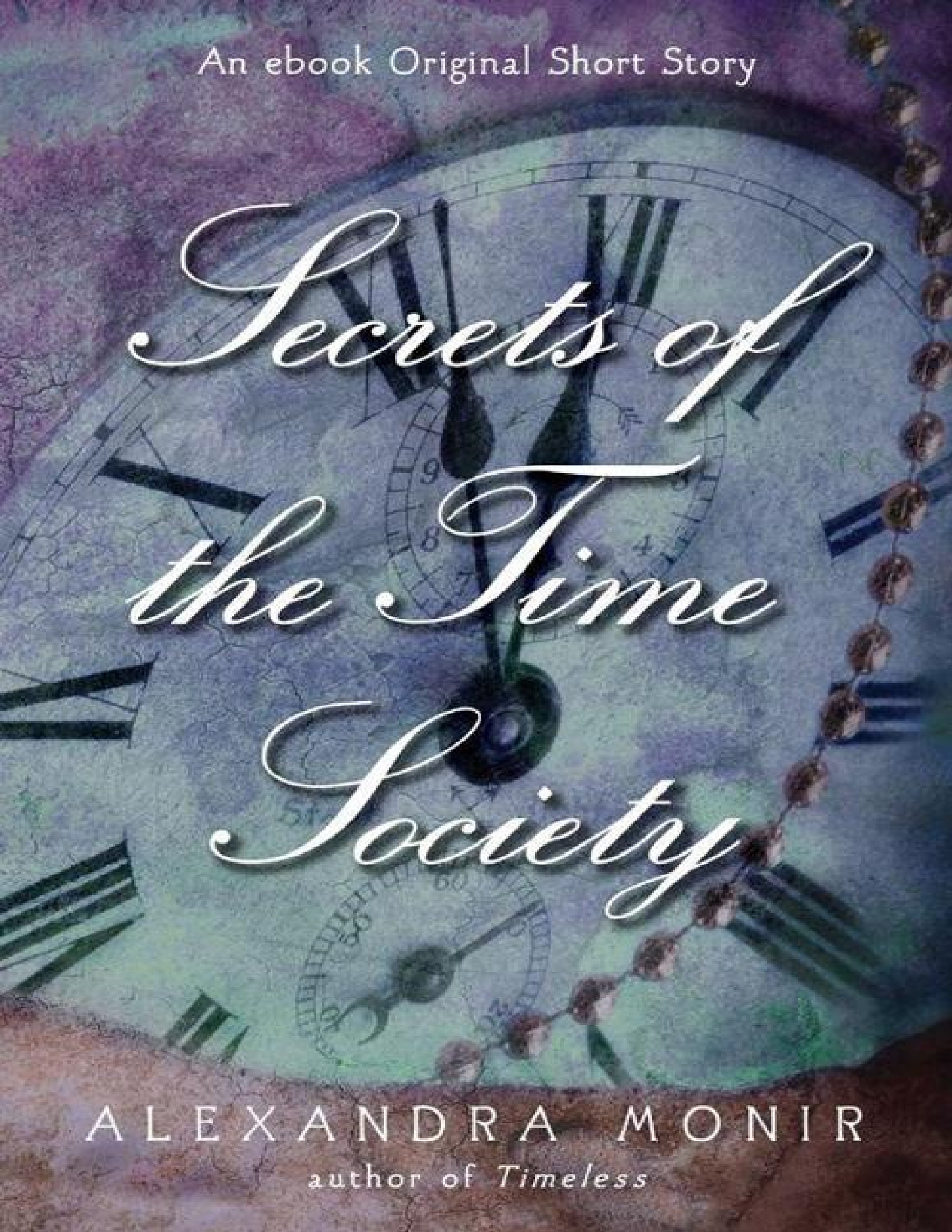

An ebook Original Short Story
Secrets of the Time Society
ALEXANDRA MONIR
author of Timeless

Also by Alexandra Monir

Timeless

Timekeeper
Available in December 2012 from Delacorte Press!

SECRETS OF THE TIME SOCIETY

A TIMELESS Story

By Alexandra Monir

Delacorte Press

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

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eISBN: 978-0-307-97739-7

v3.1

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About the Author

New York City—Present Day

Michele Windsor dreamt she was walking along an unfamiliar beach, and though she was supposed to be alone, she had the frightening sensation of another presence behind her. Afraid to look, she kept her eyes on the sand, concentrating on the seashells beneath her feet, until she couldn't stand it any longer. She tentatively glanced back—and cried out in terror.

A line of black-cloaked girls in Victorian dress trailed Michele ominously, their faces hidden by the veiled netting on their hats. At the sound of Michele's cry, the girls lifted their veils and raised their eyes in unison. That was when Michele saw that they all had the same pale, sharp face, the same stringy black hair and flashing dark eyes. It was one teenage girl multiplied, a girl whose furious face was a strange blend of young and old. A girl who seemed almost ageless.

New York City—January 1888

Rebecca Windsor was conscious of the sudden tremor to her hands as she took the leather-bound book from her mysterious visitor. *"The Handbook of the Time Society,"* she read slowly. She narrowed her eyes at the tall, willowy figure of Millicent August. Rebecca had been surprised to find this stranger with the long silver hair waiting for her when she returned home from tea with the Vanderbilts' dull daughter. It was frankly shocking that the footman had let this woman, who had never been properly introduced to the Windsors, into the parlor of the family's brand-new Fifth Avenue mansion. Rebecca could easily have had Millicent turned out, but she had never been able to resist anything that carried a whiff of the improper or the unexpected. So now she sat eyeing the enigmatic woman, who looked back at her unflinchingly.

"Go on, then. Read it," Millicent commanded, with none of the deference Rebecca's wealth and station usually elicited from those who addressed her. She looked warily at Millicent before beginning to read aloud.

"Time may be the master of most human beings, but yours is a body and soul it cannot conquer. This unshakeable, undisputed force, that turns day into night and infants into elders, keeps its inner workings and phenomena under a mostly impenetrable veil. If you are reading this, then you have been chosen to lift the curtain." Rebecca drew in a sharp breath and snapped the book shut, her heart beginning to race. "Who are you really?"

Millicent smiled, her green eyes glittering in the light from the gas lamp. "I am the founder and president of the Time Society. It would seem that you are one of us—a Timekeeper, one link in a select chain of individuals born with the gene that enables us to move and manipulate Time. That is why I am here."

Rebecca was stunned. It had never occurred to her that there might be others like her, and now she was unsure whether this turn of events was a misfortune or a blessing.

"It's all right," Millicent said smoothly, as though reading Rebecca's thoughts. "You will be glad to join the Society, to have peers. It must be quite lonely to lead a double life at just seventeen years old, having no one with whom to share it." She peered closely at Rebecca, almost testing her to see if she had in fact shared her secret with anyone. Rebecca thought briefly of telling Millicent about

him, but she quickly decided against it.

"I rather like being the only one with this sort of … magic," Rebecca admitted instead.

Millicent smiled thinly. "That too is natural. But you see, your power will grow much stronger once you join the Time Society. You will meet Timekeepers who can do things you've only dreamt of, and you will learn from them." She leaned forward intently. "That is the purpose of the Society I founded half a century ago—to find others born with the Time-Travel Gene so we may use our gifts collectively, become stronger, and preserve our history while protecting our future."

Rebecca's head spun with so many questions, she barely knew where to begin.

"But—how can you look so young?" she blurted out. "You said you founded the Society half a century ago? But you don't even look my mother's age!"

"It's called age shifting," Millicent said, the odd phrase sending a shiver up Rebecca's spine. "Simply put, it is a way of traveling through time in the body of your younger or older self. You can learn to do it too. If you join the Society, I will teach you."

"How did you find me?" An unpleasant thought occurred to Rebecca, and she adopted her haughtiest tone as she asked, "Have you been *spying* on me?"

"I certainly wouldn't call it spying," Millicent demurred. "Long ago, the Society formed a committee of Detectors to locate unregistered time travelers. They can be quite easy to spot when you know what to look for—a woman wearing modern clothing while wandering about in Revolutionary-era Philadelphia, for instance, or a man appearing out of thin air whom others do not notice. You, dear, were spotted looking wildly out of place in the New York City of 1918."

Rebecca flushed, unable to hide her smile as she thought back to that exhilarating afternoon. It had been only her second time-traveling episode. As disbelief had given way to astonished acceptance, she had realized that time travel was the answer to every question—the mysterious means by which she might obtain everything she had ever wanted.

As the slow, sepia-toned Manhattan of 1888 had faded, replaced by the kinetic and colorful city of 1918, Rebecca had floated through the city as if in an ecstatic dream. Her eyes drank in the great inventions people of her time fantasized about but didn't dare hope to experience: the horseless carriage, the radio, the moving picture! Rebecca stood in rapture on the sidewalks of Fifth Avenue, watching not just one automobile but a *parade* of them, in different colors and models. They carried beaming men in army uniforms, who waved to the crowds through an onslaught of ticker tape and confetti while other New

Yorkers held up banners proclaiming victory in something called World War I.

Later that day, Rebecca had raced into the back row of the grand Mark Strand Theatre, watching with openmouthed awe as a giant screen flickered to life and elegant black-and-white characters danced about, telling a story. It was stunning to witness how much had changed in a mere thirty years, and when she had gone home to 1888, it was with the dull disappointment of returning to a world without luster. *If it weren't for him, I would have stayed*, Rebecca thought wistfully. *Stayed in that thrilling New York of 1918*.

"Rebecca?"

She snapped back to the present at the sound of Millicent August's voice. "I beg your pardon—I was just remembering," Rebecca murmured. She flipped through the handbook in her lap, watching as each page surrendered to the next. The pages were covered with what looked like riddles and answers, and she felt her heartbeat quicken with anticipation. *I need to understand*, she realized. *I need to be able to do all I can with my new power*.

Rebecca looked up at Millicent. "You were right to come. I would like to join your Society."

"I am very pleased to hear it," Millicent replied, her tone betraying no hint of surprise. Clearly Millicent had known what Rebecca's answer would be. The thought annoyed Rebecca; she loathed being predictable.

"Tell me more," Rebecca demanded, jumping out of her seat to pace the room. "How could your Detectors see me? Whenever I've gone into the future, I've been invisible to everyone."

"You have to spend a full seven days in another time before your body leaves its true present and joins you in the past or the future. Until then, you live like a ghost, appearing only to those who possess the gift of Sight. These are usually ordinary people with no powers themselves but who can see spirits, angels, and time travelers," Millicent revealed. "It is often an inherited gift."

Rebecca nodded, trying to take this all in. "And why is it that I am like you—a Timekeeper?"

Millicent frowned. "You really don't know?"

Rebecca wondered for a moment if she had made a misstep. "However *should* I know?"

"Well, it's the key, of course," Millicent explained. "The power is in the key."

Rebecca's pacing came to a halt.

"The Key of the Nile, which we all possess, is what marks us as different from the rest of the population," Millicent continued. "These keys, which came from ancient Egypt, form the shape of the ankh, the hieroglyphic character for eternal life. And in fact, the abilities brought forth by these keys do link us closely to the

immortal."

Rebecca instinctively reached up to touch her neck, where a key hung on a gold chain, tucked under the high collar of her tea gown.

"Before they depart this earth, Timekeepers always give the Key of the Nile to a family member," Millicent said. "Every member of the Time Society is related by birth to another time traveler, and each family's key is completely unique. That is why time travel is considered an inherited gift, like the Gift of Sight. What's curious is that no one from your family has ever been in the Society—which would mean that whoever gave you your key must have lived their entire life as an undetected time traveler. Who was it?"

I stole it.

"I—I don't remember," Rebecca lied, the key burning against her chest. "I think I've always had it—I only found it recently, in an old box of things I'd forgotten about."

"Is that so?" Millicent asked, a slight edge to her voice.

"Yes," Rebecca replied, drawing herself up to her full height. "It looked like just an ordinary key to me at first, so I cast it aside—until I discovered its power just this year."

To Rebecca's relief, Millicent nodded. "I see. Still, it's a shame. I am *so* interested to know the identity of the Timekeeper who came before you."

Before even thinking the question through, Rebecca blurted out, "If the key is what allows me to time travel, does that mean that if I hadn't received it … I wouldn't have this power?"

"The power runs in your family's blood, in the Time-Travel Gene," Millicent said slowly, looking so intently at Rebecca that the girl was forced to avert her eyes. "That is why you were given your key. Now, the key is the traveling device; most Timekeepers cannot move through time without it. Yet there *are* a few extraordinary Timekeepers who have learned how."

As Millicent spoke, Rebecca felt the blood draining from her face and the cold weight of disappointment settling in her stomach. Millicent glanced at the mantel clock and stood. "I should be going now, but first, I'd like to invite you to attend the grand opening of our new Time Society headquarters next week. Nearly all of our members will be there, so it will be the ideal way to introduce you."

Rebecca paused. Could she still go through with this? But Millicent was watching her expectantly, so she nodded quickly. "Of course. Where is it?"

"In San Diego, California." Millicent chuckled at Rebecca's wide-eyed expression. "Why, you've gone thirty years into the future! California will be a very short trip for you, especially if you follow the directions in your handbook."

Rebecca stared down at the book in wonder. As she walked Millicent to the

door, she asked, “Why San Diego? What’s there?”

“One of our members was involved in the building of the first luxury hotel in California, the Aura Hotel,” Millicent answered. “He is quite brilliant, and was able to design it so that it appears to the public as simply a grand hotel, but when registered Timekeepers enter, it transforms into our headquarters. It is like a train station from which we can depart one time period for another—but set in a seaside hotel.”

As Millicent’s hand closed on the doorknob, Rebecca opened her mouth to say something, but she stopped herself just in time.

“Goodbye, then,” Millicent said. “I’ll see you in California?”

“Yes.” Rebecca nodded. “I’ll be there.”

She watched Millicent leave the room and then sank back into her seat, staring angrily at the flames burning in the fireplace. So the gift of time travel wasn’t really hers. The thought was like a sickness.

Rebecca hadn’t thought twice about snatching the key years ago, on the one day she had managed to escape her governess and secretly explore the household staff’s quarters. The Windsor family butler, Byron, had died suddenly, and Rebecca’s childhood infatuation with Byron’s handsome son—an infatuation that had grown into an obsession—had implanted in her the desperate need to explore his dead father’s room before the man’s presence was forever wiped away. Rebecca had been raised with the belief that none of the servants had belongings of their own, that all their possessions belonged to the house they served. So her twelve-year-old self, drawn to the exotic golden key she found on the late butler’s pillow, had picked the key up and stuck it into her dress pocket without shame, then put it away in a secret box containing other pilfered possessions.

She’d forgotten about the key until the box resurfaced just this year. Now seventeen, she knew when she saw it again that the key was special. It had twitched before her incredulous eyes, as though it were desperate to get out of the box and come to life. And it had brought Rebecca to life, sending her into futures far more exciting than the ornamented cage she lived in as a young Victorian heiress. Yet Rebecca had never really given the key its due. Though she knew it contained magic, she had refused to credit her remarkable ability to time travel to anything other than herself. It had always been of the utmost importance for Rebecca to feel like the most powerful force in her world. But now, to know that the greatest experience and achievement of her life would never have been hers if she hadn’t stolen a *butler’s* key years ago … it was unthinkable!

As Millicent’s words about the Time-Travel Gene echoed in her ears, Rebecca

was overcome by a wave of nausea. *Did Byron intend to give the key to his son? Does this mean that* he *was supposed to be the time traveler … and not me?*

Rebecca tried to imagine telling her beloved what she had done; that the miraculous power she had told him about was stolen from his dead father and was likely meant to be his own. *He would never speak to me again; he would never look at me again*. She panicked. *He would be lost to me forever. I can* never *tell him*.

Rebecca wrung her hands desperately. All she wanted was to go on as if she hadn't learned the truth about the key, but did she dare? What if the Time Society discovered she was a fraud? She couldn't imagine Millicent August taking the news kindly. Rebecca could lose everything.

But I'll for certain lose everything if I tell the truth, Rebecca realized. *Yet if I go on as before, I can still have it all: unimaginable power as a member of the Time Society and a life spent with the man I love*.

As she looked down at the Time Society handbook in her lap, the secrets held within its pages seduced her, silencing her conscience. "I am the keeper of the key now," she quietly declared. "The power has been transferred to me."

New York City—October 25, 1910

Rebecca sat stiffly with the other spinsters on the balcony above the Windsor ballroom. It was their duty to chaperone the dancing debutantes and young men, making sure no one enjoyed themselves too much. *As if that were even possible*, Rebecca thought wryly, remembering the balls of her youth: the constricting gowns, the intricate dance steps of the quadrilles that were such a bother to remember, and the boys crowding her who clearly only wanted access to the Windsor fortune. And now here she was, nearly forty years old and feeling like a stranger in her old home—the home that now belonged to her saintly brother George and his family. Life's regrets had etched deep lines in Rebecca's face, had grayed her black hair. She was all too aware that the boys she used to dance with, now attending the ball as husbands and fathers, would no longer recognize her.

She watched the blur of dancers in their formal finery without really seeing them, heard their laughter and chatter without really listening, until a change in the scene made her blood turn cold.

Her niece's fiancé, the handsome young Philip, was leading an unfamiliar girl into the ballroom, gazing at her with an intensity that gave Rebecca the uncomfortable sensation of having trespassed upon a private moment. Her heart dropped as she remembered how her own face had once glowed the same way, how she had basked in the precious hours spent with the one person she wanted most—before she learned the ugly truth that he had never returned her feelings. The memory was too painful, and she pushed it away, letting anger consume her instead, as she wondered how Philip could look at anyone else like that when he was engaged to poor Violet. Rebecca stood up to find her niece, but then she saw the girl in Philip's arms more closely. Her smile seemed to pierce Rebecca's skin.

It was the very smile that had belonged to the man who stole Rebecca's heart and brought about her downfall—the butler's son. This girl looked *just like him*.

Rebecca was vaguely aware that hushed whispers and shocked gasps were filling the room. The dowdy Agnes Andrews, seated next to Rebecca, turned to her with a scandalized expression on her face. "Is he *mad*, dancing by himself like that?"

Rebecca stared at Agnes “By himself …?” she echoed.

The woman behind Rebecca clucked disapprovingly. “I suppose he thinks he’s being amusing, dancing with the air,” she said with a sniff.

So the others couldn’t see the girl.

“I—I’ll be just a moment,” Rebecca muttered. She hurried down the stairs and into the thick of the ballroom. Something else was wrong—the girl looked out of place, her blue chiffon dress too plain for the occasion, her neckline shockingly low. Rebecca inched her way to the edge of the dance floor, as close to Philip and the girl as possible without being too noticeable.

As she watched the girl look into Philip’s eyes and sway in his arms, Rebecca nearly doubled over. The girl wore a key around her neck—a golden key shaped in the ankh symbol, with a sundial carved into its bow. It was the very key that had been taken from Rebecca, the key that she so often reached for in her dreams—and there was none other like it in the world.

“Michele,” she heard Philip breathe. Rebecca shuddered to learn the girl’s name. She inhaled a shaky breath, trying to make sense of the heinous facts. The man she’d loved and lost had fathered a child, and as if that betrayal weren’t enough, he had given this loathsome daughter of his the key. *She* was a Timekeeper now, a member of the desirable circle that had so brutally shut Rebecca out. And now Michele was trying to destroy the Windsor family by breaking up Violet’s engagement, just as Michele’s father had destroyed Rebecca herself so many years earlier? Well, Rebecca could simply not allow any of this to go on.

A high-pitched ringing sounded in her ears as she turned and walked out of the ballroom. Once out of sight of her family and the party guests, she took off into a run. Her carriage was waiting outside, and she ignored the questioning look on the driver’s face as he jumped up to open the door for her.

“I need to depart for California at once,” she commanded.

“But Miss Windsor, your private rail car isn’t available at this hour,” the driver protested. “And you’ll need your baggage—”

“Just take me to the train station now,” Rebecca said through gritted teeth. “And you mustn’t say a word about this to anyone.”

She leaned back against the plush upholstery of the carriage, closing her eyes as she remembered the last time she had been in California. It was nearly a lifetime ago.…

The Aura Hotel—February 2, 1888

Rebecca's first impression of the Time Society's headquarters was that it looked like a beautiful porcelain castle, with its gleaming white latticework and its turreted red roofs soaring into the sky. She turned her face to the sun, soaking in the California warmth she'd never before experienced. She held a card from Millicent August in her hand, engraved with the date and the Time Society logo: a coronet circling a finely drawn clock. Holding the card while the key pulsed against her neck, Rebecca had been transported from her New York City bedroom to the Aura Hotel. *I'm here*, she thought giddily, her pace turning into a skip as she approached the entrance.

For a moment Rebecca stood outside the front doors, peering in. The dark wood-paneled lobby was filled with gentlemen in black tails and top hats, accompanying wives in billowing evening gowns and upswept hairdos as they languidly made their way toward the banquet room for dinner. Rebecca waited for one of the footmen to open the door and let her in, until she remembered that they couldn't see her. She took a deep breath, pushed through the doors—and let out a startled gasp.

An invisible hand had waved itself over the scene, erasing all traces of a normal hotel. The guests she had just been watching faded into ghostly nothingness and the lobby enlarged to more than twice its size, the ceilings rising so high that Rebecca could hardly see where they ended. And then two spinning tornadoes whirled into the room, like a choreographed storm. Rebecca scrambled back in terror—until the tornadoes revealed themselves as *people*, a young man and woman.

The woman was dressed in such a scandalous style, it made Rebecca feel a funny combination of appalled and envious. The short, low-waisted skirt revealed her bare legs, her blouse had enough sequins to costume a burlesque performer, and her chin-length hair boldly displayed her naked neck. *You could get arrested for looking like that in 1888*, Rebecca thought.

The gentleman looked much more normal, dressed in a navy military uniform with gold buttons. He had clear blue eyes and his hair was a wavy blond pompadour. He stepped forward to greet Rebecca.

"You must be our new arrival," he said, giving her a slight bow. "Rebecca

Windsor, born 1871, am I right?”

Rebecca nodded, staring at him in confusion. He chuckled.

“We have to learn all the Time Society members’ birth years. That is how we know what time they truly come from,” he explained. “But forgive me for being so rude—you don’t even know my name! I am Hiram King, born 1818. And this is Ida Pearl, born 1920.”

Ida stepped forward and held out a pink-manicured hand. “Pleased to meet you.”

“Hello,” Rebecca replied breathlessly, staring in fascination from one to the other. She turned to Ida. “You must know everything about the future, then, having been born in 1920!”

Ida chuckled. “Not quite everything. There are still plenty of secrets left to uncover.”

“Are you both age shifting?” Rebecca asked eagerly.

“I am,” Hiram said with a wink.

“And I am my true linear age, twenty-one, traveling back in time to meet you in this moment,” Ida answered.

“I read about age shifting in the handbook and I tried following the instructions, but it hasn’t worked for me yet,” Rebecca lamented. “Why would anyone *want* to be their true age if they could be any age they choose?”

“Well, much as we need sleep for our bodies to function, we also need time to be ‘in rest’ at our true age. Age shifting takes quite a toll on the body, and spending too many days as your younger or older self can limit your total life span.” As Rebecca absorbed this information, Hiram gallantly held out his arm. “Now, Millicent asked us here to show you around the headquarters before the official grand opening reception.”

Rebecca fell into step with Hiram and Ida, and they walked through the cavernous lobby, stopping at a bronze elevator adjacent to a red-carpeted staircase.

“Timekeepers who wish to spend the night need only reserve a room at the front desk.” Hiram nodded at a reception area across the way, which was overseen by a line of men in black suits and women in starched white blouses and black skirts. “Then you take this elevator or the stairs up to the guest rooms. Each room is outfitted in the décor of a different period and filled with the books and newspapers of the day, which helps us get acquainted with the era we are traveling to. So, for example, say I am returning to the year 1830 after being in this year, 1888, for a number of days. I would reserve room 1830, and there, surrounded by the furnishings, artwork, and writings of 1830, I’d be reminded of the customs and rules of that year. Behaving out of line with the time you are in

has had disastrous consequences for several Timekeepers, so it is very important to assimilate."

Rebecca barely heard Hiram's warning, she was so enchanted by the prospect of countless rooms decorated in the styles of different time periods. "How far into the future do the guest rooms go?"

"The designers of the headquarters can only build rooms for as far into time as we've experienced," Hiram explained. "We have a research committee in charge of gathering the literature, décor, and newspapers from each year to fill the period rooms, and naturally, they cannot work on a room based on a time that none of us has ever been to. The farthest that a Time Society member has traveled into the past is 1492, while we've gone as far into the future as 1991. This means that when you visit the headquarters today, in 1888, you will find rooms dating from the very discovery of America all the way up to the year 1991. As new future years are unlocked, additional rooms are added."

"1991—it sounds positively inconceivable!" Rebecca marveled, wondering what inventions she would find in that room.

"Moving on, then. Ida is quite the culinary expert, so she will be glad to tell you about the dining at the headquarters," Hiram said with a smile.

Rebecca followed them down the corridor until they approached an airy restaurant, with floor-to-ceiling windows revealing the ocean and the sandy beach. Round wooden tables filled the room, and a couple dressed in inconspicuous black clothing were the only diners there. They were eating the oddest-looking dish Rebecca had ever seen, using what appeared to be sticks in place of silverware.

"The restaurant is nearly empty now, since most of us are saving our appetites for the feast later this evening," Ida said, grinning. "The wonder of this place is that you can order the oldest or the most modern dish you like, from mutton chops to sushi."

"Sushi?" Rebecca had never heard such a funny-sounding word.

"Why, that's what that couple over there is eating. It's a simply delicious Japanese dish of raw fish wrapped in rice. You can eat it as finger food, or with chopsticks in place of utensils," Ida explained.

Rebecca wrinkled her nose. Raw fish hardly sounded like an acceptable meal to her.

"We have shops and recreation here at the headquarters as well," Ida continued proudly. "There is an extensive costume shop where we can purchase the appropriate wardrobe for our time travels, a currency exchange, and of course, a bookstore. We have a swimming pool outdoors, and it is always quite entertaining to watch the vastly different bathing suits on display."

A chime sounded loudly, and Rebecca jumped. She looked around but couldn’t find the source.

“It’s the headquarters clock,” Hiram told her. “It’s built into the walls, so it chimes equally loudly in every room. That’ll likely be Millicent summoning us. Come along.”

Rebecca trailed after them, still taking in all the strange and delightful sights. “Does Millicent live here?” she asked.

“No, but close enough. When the Aura became our new headquarters, Millicent moved into that charming redbrick house next door,” Hiram replied.

They entered a formal room that reminded Rebecca a bit of the parlor in her mansion back home, with its gilded ceilings and rich furnishings in the style of the palace of Versailles. A silver-haired woman in a long red velvet dress stood waiting for her. Millicent August.

“Hello,” Rebecca greeted her excitedly.

Millicent didn’t return her smile. “Hello, Rebecca. Hiram and Ida, thank you for your help. You may go now.”

Hiram and Ida nodded, looking taken aback by Millicent’s manner. Rebecca swallowed hard as she watched them leave, her throat dry with sudden nerves.

“There’s someone here to see you, Rebecca,” Millicent said, her quiet voice a warning.

Rebecca’s body and mind felt paralyzed with fear as she watched the door slowly open. In walked a young man, who eyed her accusingly.

“You!” Rebecca gasped.

San Diego—November 3, 1910

Rebecca approached the three-story Victorian house next door to the Aura Hotel, knowing somewhere in the logical part of her mind that this couldn't be a sound idea, that her journey here was a mistake, that Millicent August had made it very clear years ago that she never wanted to see Rebecca again. But adrenaline and hysteria were drowning out Rebecca's common sense, and she found herself banging her fist persistently on the door until it at last opened.

The shriveled, wrinkled woman who answered the door shocked Rebecca into momentary speechlessness. Millicent August was a skeleton leaning on a cane, her hair wispy-thin. *She's not age shifting*, Rebecca realized. *This is Millicent at her true age—over a hundred years old*. Rebecca didn't know whether the sight was admirable or grotesque.

As she and Millicent stared at each other, Millicent's steely eyes suddenly narrowed. "Rebecca Windsor," she snarled, her voice weak but somehow still intimidating. "I told you I never wanted to see you again. You're a liar and a thief and—"

"He had a child!" Rebecca interrupted, her voice rising in anguish. "He had a child in the future—he broke the law of your Society! And now the girl has gone back in time. I saw her at my family's ball in 1910. She's after my niece's fiancé—he can *see* her! She's trying to ruin my family. You must put a stop to it!"

Millicent paused, then grudgingly opened the door just wide enough for Rebecca to step into the entrance hall.

"And what do you expect me to do?" Millicent asked coldly. "Have the girl killed?"

Rebecca rubbed her forehead in desperation. "Change things—make it so he never had a child, so she can't exist."

"What if I told you that the girl is a member of your own family?"

"My own family?" Rebecca echoed, uncomprehending. "What could you possibly mean?"

"You aren't the only one who has discovered this girl, Rebecca. He had a child with Marion Windsor in 1993. The girl you seek to erase is not ruining your family—she *is* your family."

"No." Rebecca shook her head. "That can't be true. He would never betray me

like that, not with someone of my own blood!”

“It wasn’t betrayal. It was love,” Millicent said simply.

“No!” Rebecca roared. She felt wild with anger and pain, and she lunged for Millicent, furiously pushing her against the wall. “You’re the liar!”

Millicent’s elderly body hit the wall hard, and her head cracked against it. Her eyes rolled back, her final expression one of shock. Rebecca watched in horror as the woman crumpled to the floor, blood streaming from her skull.

“No!” Rebecca fell to her knees, shaking Millicent desperately. “Come back, come back, please!” How could someone so powerful die so suddenly, so easily? Rebecca caught sight of herself in a hallway mirror and shuddered. Her hands were covered in Millicent’s blood. *Murderer!* her reflection taunted.

She leaned over Millicent’s body, her throat filling with sobs as guilt ate at her insides. And then a glint caught her eye: Millicent’s key.

Millicent wore it around her neck under a high-collared dress, just as Rebecca had once done. Rebecca’s fingers trembled as she touched the key. It was bigger than the one she had worn long ago, the shape bolder, with a diamond in the center of the bow where the sundial was carved. Once again, Rebecca’s dark desires took over.

With this key, I can time travel again, she thought longingly. *I can change things—I can* fix *things*.

And for the second time, Rebecca Windsor stole a key from a corpse.

New York City—November 3, 1910

Rebecca stood outside the Windsor Mansion gates, looking up at the lights in the windows. She could easily imagine what the scene inside looked like—her "perfect" brother, George, dining with his snooty wife, Henrietta, and their children, including that Clara girl from the orphanage whom they had oddly decided to adopt. But that wasn't the Windsor Mansion Rebecca would be entering.

She held Millicent's key in both hands and whispered, as if it were an incantation, "March the ninth, eighteen hundred and eighty-eight."

New York City—March 9, 1888

The flood of energy that filled Rebecca as her body rose above the ground, spun through the air, and landed back on Windsor Mansion property twenty-two years in the past was so exhilarating that she momentarily forgot all about the terrible crime that had made it possible. All she felt was the relief and satisfaction of having the power of time travel restored to her.

The Fifth Avenue block on which her home rested was suddenly quiet. The land on either side of Windsor Mansion was still empty, and the sounds of Model T Ford automobiles were years away. Rebecca eagerly pushed through the gates, racing through the front garden and up the steps, much more like a girl of seventeen than a woman of nearly forty. She was returning to her home as it had appeared when it was hers; to her body as it looked when it was young and unspoiled.

As Rebecca slipped into the mansion, she caught sight of her governess walking briskly into the library. *What would she think if she knew what was to become of me? What would my parents think?* Rebecca wondered. But she pushed the unsettling thoughts aside, focusing instead on her task.

She hurried up the stairs to the third floor, her palms sweating with anticipation as she approached her bedroom. The red-carpeted hallway led to the familiar French double doors. Turning the knob and entering at last, she saw the seventeen-year-old Rebecca Windsor of 1888, frozen in front of her dressing mirror in the lilac-and-white princess bedroom. And just as she had studied in the Time Society handbook years ago—the handbook that had also been wrenched away from her by Millicent August—forty-year-old Rebecca Windsor of 1910 reached out her hand to touch her younger self. Staring into the mirror, Rebecca watched as she and her younger body gasped in unison, a tightening force gripping her chest as the two of them moved seamlessly into one.

A smile curved Rebecca’s lips. Millicent’s key, hanging on a gold chain around her neck, had done its job. Though she was her forty-year-old self in mind, she was now seventeen in body. And anything was possible.

New York City—Present Day

As Michele tried to calm her terrified mind, the multiple girls in black slowly merged into one. The girl stared at her with hatred. Michele tried to run, but the sand held her rooted to the spot.

"I know who you are," the girl hissed. "I know who you come from." She stepped closer, her smile full of malice, and Michele shrank back in horror.

A stranger appeared in the distance, his voice competing with the sounds of the waves crashing against the shore. "Michele, run! Save yourself!"

Peering into the night, Michele tried to make out the man's form. Who was he? Why did his voice sound so familiar? Wait. Was this …? It couldn't be, could it? Her father?

"Michele, wake up!" he cried, his voice full of urgency.

Michele could feel the girl's gaze pierce right through her. Why did this girl she didn't even know hate her so much? Was she someone from the past? It was another set of unanswered questions to add to the list she'd been accumulating during her time travels.

"I'll be watching you," the stranger whispered, slowing turning and drifting back to where she'd come from. As her silhouette vanished into the night, Michele's dream slowly began to fade, and along with it, her father's faraway presence.

As her dream swirled away into a distant memory, Michele jolted awake, breathing a sigh of relief at finding herself safe in her bedroom of the Windsor Mansion. But fear lingered on her skin like a persistent scent. It all seemed like an endless charade, one that had followed her into the present. But somehow her father knew who this girl was. Maybe he could help reveal another layer of this new life.

She leaned back against her pillows, trying to soothe her mind by returning to the usual subject of her dreams: the love of her life, Philip. Though she had come so far in the past few months, she had the sudden feeling that her journey had only just begun.

About the Author

A singer and a writer, Alexandra Monir divides her time between Los Angeles and New York City.