

ABIGAIL WILSON

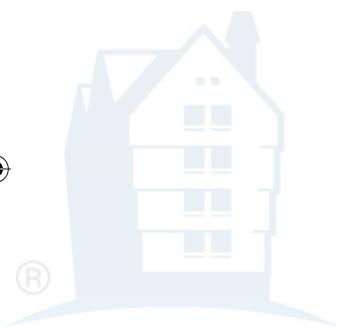


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## PROLOGUE

1811

*Kent, England  
Village of East Whitloe*

Foolish. Impetuous. Risky. You needn't hold back now, Piers. I know precisely what's ticking in that mind of yours."

I forced my shoulders back against the bark of the oak tree where I'd spent the last few interminable hours shivering. Even the slightest movement of my hurt ankle caused knives to twist beneath my skin.

Piers Cavanagh merely shook his head as he looked over my injury. "I simply cannot deduce how the devil this happened. First off, it's nigh five in the morning. Second, I was under the distinct impression you were to return home this afternoon." He rolled his eyes heavenward. "Believe me, I've been counting down the hours till I would see you again, and I'm certain it was to be later today."

I threw my hands up, regretting the action at once as I winced. "I haven't the foggiest idea how the date of my arrival became confused. I was always to return on the seventeenth of March. Do you know, no one was sent to the coaching house last night to bring my maid and me home to Flitworth Manor. What a pickle we were in."

Having finished pawing at my ankle, Piers moved his hand to my resting fingers, his gaze following suit. “Yet here you sit with all the signs of a battered ankle. Thank goodness the bruising isn’t worse.”

“I admit my decision to borrow a few hacks and set out on the journey ourselves turned out to be a poor one. I was thrown . . . the little beast.”

His eyes shot to mine. “Do you mean to tell me you left the coaching house on your own with no escort but your maid?”

“Don’t scold me. I daresay I’ve paid enough for my foolishness. I was just so anxious to see you again.” I tipped my head back. “Pon my word, the last thing I wanted to do was to waste one solitary hour apart from you when I’m to be dragged out of the country tomorrow morning. Oh, Piers. I still cannot believe my family’s move is actually happening . . . and so suddenly at that. My parents were quite devious to send me away to my cousin’s house while they worked out all the details. I can’t even begin to tell you how many miles Ceylon is from here.”

Piers sighed. “A little over five thousand. I checked.”

My heart squeezed, but I lifted my chin. Secret romance or not, surely no distance, however great, would squelch what Piers and I had discovered only a few months before. I toyed with the edge of my lip.

At least we would have letters. Really, all I had to do was wait for his proper proposal, and I would be whisked back to Britain and into Piers Cavanagh’s waiting arms. If only his mother hadn’t already decided on Honora Gervey for a daughter-in-law, this whole ridiculousness could have been avoided. Engagements entered into by parents at the infants’ cribs rarely came to fruition, particularly when the parties involved had little interest in each other.

He squeezed my hand, a wry smile inching across his face. “And you’re absolutely right. We haven’t any time to lose.” He rearranged his position on the ground, then leaned in close, pausing only at the last second to flick his eyes to the road. “Where exactly is your maid again?”

“I sent her for help hours ago.”

He ran his finger down my hairline and around my ear, his deep blue eyes as alive as I’d seen them a week ago. “How I’ve missed you, Charity Halliwell.”

Careful of my ankle, he closed the gap between us, pressing his lips to mine.

I melted forward, numb to the aching world beyond his kiss. There was no one in Britain like Piers Cavanagh, and he’d given his heart to me and me alone.

Suddenly he pulled away, fumbling for his pocket watch; his cheeks still slightly pink. “It’s getting late.”

A gust of wind ruffled his brown locks and made over his face. Disquiet filling his eyes, he turned to the road like he’d seen a ghost. “Do you think you can ride?”

“I don’t know.”

He ran a hand down his chin, a gasp of frustration on his breath. “It will be slow going either way. You’ve picked the deuce of a morning to have an accident.”

I rubbed a chill from my arm. “You won’t leave me to get help, will you? I’ve been alone in the dark for so long now. I’m certain I can manage with your assistance. In fact”—I moved to stand—“I know I can.”

He hung his head, a curious tension filling the air between us. “All night, huh? You had to have been out here all night. What were you thinking, Charity?”

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“I told you. How could I have known the horse would be so careless?” Nerves prickled down my back. What did it matter now? He was here. I was safe.

Another wayward glance down the road was followed by a difficult lapse into silence. I’d always been able to read Piers like an open book, but this odd intensity was nothing short of alarming. Had something happened in the week I’d been away?

He pushed into a squatting position. “Let’s get you the rest of the way onto your good foot.” One hand on my arm and another at my back, he tugged me effortlessly to a standing position. I would have been lying if I said the movement didn’t send my leg throbbing, but I hardly noticed as I was lost in Piers’s strange behavior, my mind afire to figure out what was wrong.

He placed his arm beneath mine, bracing me against his side, his other hand securing his horse’s reins. “One hop at a time, and I suppose we’ll get to Loxby Manor eventually.”

I looked up into his troubled eyes. “What is it?”

He responded simply by pulling me close. “My estate is the closest by far. Don’t worry, we’ll fetch the doctor from there. I would never dream of leaving you.” Then almost to himself, “Everything will work out.” He pressed his lips together. “I have faith that it will.”

He gave me a wan smile, but I’ll never forget the look in his eyes, like he knew something I did not, like he’d lost something he knew he might never get back.

## CHAPTER 1

*Five years later, 1816*

I knew something was terribly wrong the moment I stepped foot back inside Loxby Manor—the pervasive restlessness of the servants, the strained silence of the front room.

I'd spent much of my childhood visiting its inhabitants, but my pace turned tentative as I peered in each open doorway of the ancient house, searching for the telltale presence of a coffin, for I could have sworn I'd stumbled upon the start of a funeral.

The Cavanagh's elderly butler, Mr. Baker, whom I remembered all too well, emerged from the shadows of a distant hall. The candelabra in his hand lit a familiar, but rather disturbed face.

"Ah, Miss Halliwell . . . There you are. If you would be so good as to follow me to your room." He hid the remains of a grimace as he motioned to the grand staircase. "The family is regrettably engaged at present, and since you are likely tired from your extensive journey, they've arranged for you to rest for the evening in your bedchamber undisturbed."

For a moment I stood as if nailed to the parquet floor, digesting his words without fully understanding them. Where was Seline or Mrs. Cavanagh? Or even Avery?

I glanced wildly about the dim hall as a shiver tickled my shoulders. Could it be true? Not a single member of the family could be bothered to welcome me back to Kent? Of course Piers Cavanagh was from home. I'd made certain of that before ever considering a long visit in the first place.

Mr. Baker waited for me halfway up the stairs, his voice dipping to one of impatience. "This way, if you please."

With little choice, I hurried up the carpeted steps behind him, my gloved fingers sliding along the curved banister. Yet on the landing I hesitated at the balustrade, my unwitting gaze hunting the small alcove on the ground floor that was only visible from where I now stood.

Five long years had crept aching by since I departed East Whitloe and my friends at Loxby Manor, but in that breathless moment I wondered if my heart had ever really left. I could almost see my sixteen-year-old self rushing into that alcove, far too eager for my own good, accepting Piers's outstretched hands with such reckless abandonment. How full of hopes and dreams I'd been then . . . Needless to say, that was before Ceylon. I turned back to the lonely corridor and the butler's retreating form. Everything was different now.

Mr. Baker deposited me in a small out-of-the-way room with pale green papers and golden drapes before deserting me with the promise of a supper tray. I crossed the room only to slump down upon a bow window seat near the fireplace and toss my bonnet at my side. How different my arrival had been from the one I'd anticipated. Perhaps Mrs. Cavanagh was not as pleased to host me as her letter had indicated.

The clatter of footsteps sent me roaring to my feet. My bed-chamber door burst inward and a young lady spilled into the room. "Charity!"

Her delicate fingers lay across her chest, and she paused to appraise me before guiding the door shut.

My eyes widened. “Seline? Can it be you?” Her name wafted into a whisper as I took in the beauty before me. Was this the same girl I’d traipsed through the woods with, having escaped my governess time and time again, to pick berries and climb trees? Her hair had darkened to a pleasing gold, and her face balanced the perfect combination of innocence and allure. No wonder Avery had mentioned in his letters that she’d been declared the toast of the season. Seline Cavanagh had grown into nothing short of an artful goddess.

And she was here in my room . . . after I’d specifically been told otherwise.

She extended her arms, urging me to meet her at the center of the rug where she took my hands into hers. Those astute green eyes did a bit of talking of their own, measuring my worth. “What ladies we have become.”

She produced a half-hearted laugh as she pulled me into an embrace, then drew away. “I’m so glad you have arrived at last. Faith but Mama has no sense at all. She thought it best I stay away so you could relax this evening, considering . . . Well”—an exasperated sigh—“let’s just say, I could not wait to hear all the news of Ceylon.”

My brows pulled in. Mrs. Cavanagh had told Seline to stay away . . . *from me?*

“I cannot believe you’ve traveled so far and have seen so much of the world when I’ve never even left Britain.” She pursed her lips. “I’m quite jealous, you know. Tell me all about your travels. What is it like there?”

Although I’d prepared myself for questions about my time in Ceylon, my heart still quivered at her words and my muscles clenched. Would I ever lose the horrible impulse to flee?

I swallowed hard against the lump in my throat. This would not be the last time I was asked.

The truth was, Ceylon was nothing short of beautiful, the people kind, the tea plantations and estates a grand affair, but it took all my willpower to keep the tears at bay, to look past the *incident*, as my mother liked to call it. There was much more to my time in Ceylon than that terrible day.

I took a deep breath. “Ceylon is a different world from Britain. It is a beautiful island with rolling hills and a sweeping shoreline. Did you know they have elephants there?”

“No, I didn’t.” She checked. “Did you touch one?”

“Of course. They’re quite friendly.”

Seline blinked, her mouth puckered just so. “Mama would faint if she even saw an animal of that size. In fact, I’d advise you not to mention that part to her . . . among other things, like my being in your room. Your, well, let me just say, the timing of your arrival has proven to be a bit awkward.”

“Awkward? Whatever do you mean?”

She gave an indifferent shrug, her hair glinting in the firelight. “Nothing all that dreadful. Certainly not worth the histrionics Mama has enacted this last hour or more. She’s got the entire house in an uproar. Surely you remember how dramatic she can be.” Seline shot me a coy glance. “Ridiculous, since the whole thing was nothing but a silly accident.”

I inched down onto a nearby chair, lost as to what could possibly be amiss at Loxby that had turned the entire household upside down. Granted, at least now I wouldn’t have to talk about Ceylon.

I fumbled with my fingers in my lap. When my mother proposed the idea to spend a year with the Cavanagh’s while she and Papa visited my brother in Boston, I’d latched on to the notion at

once. It was a golden opportunity—the perfect distraction from my difficult memories, time away to start anew. Yet the tone of Seline’s voice and her uncertain countenance sparked an all too familiar wave of repressed nerves. Had I made the wrong decision after all?

Seline seemed to follow my thoughts as she knelt by my chair, patting my hand as if I was a child. “Do not fret. Everything shall be made right within the week.”

I stared up. “Tell me what has happened.”

A spark of mischief lit her eyes. “I suppose you must know the whole. Living in this house, you’ll learn of it soon enough, only I beg your discretion as it is rather personal in nature.”

Personal indeed. As a child Seline had steered headfirst into any trouble that came her way, and I was always right there with her, joining in, keeping her secrets.

There was the time she’d dared Lord Kendal to touch her ankle and laughed so prettily when he’d done so. And the day she tempted Hugh Daunt to take her fishing all alone for the afternoon. She never did reveal to me what they’d done on that riverbank, but Hugh couldn’t take his eyes off her after that.

Thankfully her elder brothers had always shielded her. But now? I produced a weak nod. “Oh, Seline. Years ago we promised to look out for one another, and I have every intention of continuing to do so.”

Her shoulders relaxed as that dainty smile she affected so well returned to her lips. “You were always so wonderfully trustworthy, and I can see you haven’t changed a bit.” She squeezed my hand. “Perhaps it is a good thing you came to Loxby at such a dreadful time. I daresay you can help protect me from Mama.”

I angled my chin. “Only if you tell me what you’ve got yourself into this time.”

“I’m afraid it is a bit of a bramble.” She fought back a laugh. “Well, you know how men get?”

I sighed, for I did know just how men got around *her*. Even at fifteen she’d been enticing. How she’d made it to twenty without an engagement I couldn’t guess.

She turned her attention to the arm of the chair, tracing the pattern with her finger. “It all started when Mr. Lacy, our head groom, took on a new stable hand—his nephew.” She snuck a peek beneath her lashes. “His name is Miles, and you know how I love to ride early every morning.”

I seemed to remember her sleeping until midday, but now was not the time to quibble.

“So you see, it wasn’t exactly my fault. I couldn’t help but interact with him alone day after day. It was only natural . . . I mean, I was simply humoring the man. Neither of us were the least serious. He knows full well I will settle for nothing short of a title. I told him so from the beginning.”

“A title, hmm?” I wondered why Lord Kendal had not yet come up to scratch. The two had been inseparable since childhood.

She huffed, her hands suddenly animated. “Wouldn’t you know, this morning, one of the dratted servants slunk into the stables and found Miles and me . . . well . . . you know, kissing.”

I sat up straight. “Oh, Seline.”

“Then the wretch dared to tell Papa. And now Mama thinks it likely the rumor will circulate the neighborhood.”

Seline had been labeled the village flirt years ago, but kissing a stable hand—it was the outside of enough. No wonder the house had been a veritable mausoleum when I arrived. Mrs. Cavanagh was right. This was much more serious than Seline’s usual nonsensical whims. Her very respectability was at stake. “What do you plan to do?”

“Well, deny it of course. Miles has been paid to leave the estate and keep his mouth shut. He is lucky Papa is willing to do that.”

A line squirmed across her brow. “You needn’t look at me like that. You always were such a curst innocent. I vow I never could say or do anything without ruffling your feathers.” She leaned forward, the hint of a laugh on her breath. “There is more to discover than books, my dear, but I daresay you wouldn’t have the least idea what I’m even talking about.”

My jaw tightened. Why was it that people always assumed those who are quiet or shy know nothing of the world? How shocked Seline would be if she learned what actually happened in Ceylon, but I had no intention of sharing that day with anyone besides my mother. Not now, not ever.

I touched my forehead. “Won’t there be a scandal?”

“Not if I can squelch it or head it off. I do have a plan.”

A plan, hmm? I waited for her to say more, but she rose and made her way to the fireplace and poked the logs.

She angled her shoulders to steal a glance back at me. “What about you? Any special gentlemen you met at a ball? If you even had those in Ceylon.”

I cringed as the memories of the dreaded house parties I’d been forced to attend on those blustery summer nights came to mind. Goodness, how I’d hated them.

“If you remember, I have great difficulty hearing and understanding people in crowded spaces. It’s an affliction I’ve suffered since birth. Everyone’s voices jumble together, particularly with the instrumentalists present, until the sounds form nothing but a mess of words and notes. Trust me, when a gentleman did take pity on me and asked for a dance, I hadn’t the least idea what he’d said during the set to make conversation. I must have come across as

dull as ditchwater, for I was rarely asked for a second dance. After all, nodding and smiling can only get you so far.”

There was a beat of silence, and then she said dryly, “You poor dear. I do recall you struggling with something of the sort. At any rate, I remember how Avery used to tease you mercilessly when you misunderstood what was said, though you can’t entirely blame him as you quite often did.”

“Neither of your brothers had much patience with me.”

“Well, the good news is Avery is in as much hot water as me at present. He was rusticated from university just last week. In fact, Piers was so angry he dashed off a letter informing us he means to arrive tomorrow. Can you believe it? With any luck my little indiscretion with Miles should slip quite nicely under the rug, particularly if I have a certain announcement to make.”

My heart dropped. “Piers will be here tomorrow? I thought he hadn’t returned home in five years.”

How I wished my voice hadn’t cracked, for Seline rounded on me, her eyes flashing. “Don’t tell me you’re still harboring that ridiculous calf-love you always had for my brother.”

“Certainly not.” Not after he’d ended our secret relationship in one cryptic letter, the first and only one I received from him. “I was just surprised to hear he was coming home is all.”

She crossed her arms. “It was a shock to all of us, believe me. He’s been hiding for so long at Grandmama’s old cottage outside Liverpool, we thought he’d never return. At least I hoped he wouldn’t.”

“Why did he go to Liverpool?”

I’d spoken too quickly. Seline darted another knowing glance. “Why, the scandal of course. He can’t face the shame of his public disgrace.”

I stifled a gasp. Seline and Avery had written me a handful of letters over the years, and none mentioned one word about a scandal. Thoughts raced through my mind—cheating at cards, an illicit affair, a brawl—but nothing made any sense, not about Piers. He could never stoop to anything of the sort. Of course he had easily walked away from our relationship. Had I ever really known him?

I drew my arms in close. “What do you mean . . . a scandal?”

She glared at me as if testing the motivation for my question. “I suppose you wouldn’t know, isolated as you were. It happened right around the time you left for Ceylon.” She flicked her fingers in the air. “You remember when Lord Kendal and I got rather silly that one day, and I allowed him to touch my ankle?”

I dipped my chin. “How could I forget?”

“Well, Lord Kendal had the gauche to boast about our silliness at White’s, and Piers caught wind of it. He got so angry he called Kendal out on the spot, only my illustrious brother never bothered to show up for the duel. Kendal declared him a coward that very day, and rightly so. Piers wouldn’t even give a reason for his absence. I was never so embarrassed in my life.”

The room blurred. Piers a coward? Why on earth wouldn’t he show up for a duel he’d arranged? I lightly shook my head as a strong chin and a pair of resolute blue eyes came to mind. Surely there was some sort of mistake.

Seline went on, ignorant of the shock coursing through my body. “Piers received the cut direct first in London then everywhere else. He is completely beyond the pale at this point, and I decided years ago to have nothing to do with him. I’m certain Piers’s disgrace is at the heart of why Lord Kendal never offered for me. My brother’s absolute cowardice has left a blight on this entire family. Mama can hardly bear to be in the same room with him.

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Her hopes are all with Avery now. If only Papa will change his will before the end and leave Loxby to Avery, this family might come about.”

I looked up at the mention of her father. My mother had warned me about Mr. Cavanagh’s accident. “How is your papa?”

She expelled a weighted sigh. “Not well at all. He spends most of his time in bed.” She gave me a sideways glance. “His vision never did return.”

“I’m so sorry to hear.” Mr. Cavanagh had always been such a kind, thoughtful man. I could hardly imagine him confined to his bed, blinded by a kick from a horse.

Seline paced the rug as if she anticipated the ceiling to fall, her attention on each wall she faced as she turned. “And what about your parents?”

“They are well, extremely proud of the work my brother is doing in Boston. Arthur is a chemist. His work has even been lauded by the government.”

“Oh.” She paused by the window. “Is there a reason why they didn’t take you with them to America?”

“Mama thought I might do better here.” I studied the creases on my palm.

“Or perhaps she thought I might find you a husband and take you off their hands.”

My shoulders slumped. “Something like that.”

“You know, I think it a glorious idea. We have so many eligible gentlemen in the area.” She clapped her hands. “Oh yes. Tony Shaw or Hugh Daunt shall do nicely for you. They’ve never been all that picky when it comes to looks. And you do have a little dowry.”

I knew Seline hadn’t meant to insult me, but her words stung. Of course she was right. I could hardly be called pretty. Plain, more

like. Mousy brown hair, dull brown eyes, freckles. I was decidedly forgettable. The closest I'd received to a compliment was when old Colonel Baynes had referred to me as a taking little thing. Granted, he wasn't wearing his spectacles at the time.

The sound of a scuffle drew my attention to the corner of the room where I caught a flash of white. "What was that?"

Seline followed me to the far side of the bed where I leaned down to peek beneath the bedside table. There in the shadows hid a snowy white cat. Carefully I reached underneath the table and was rewarded with a touch of soft, velvet fur. The cat hesitated at first, but soon enough she allowed me to scoop her into my arms.

I turned to Seline, cradling the animal. "What a darling."

Seline waved her arms in the air as I approached. "Get that curst thing away from me. I cannot tolerate animals. Mama banished the beast from the house, but she keeps finding her way back inside, if for no other reason than to terrorize me."

The cat nestled her head against my shoulder, a low purr vibrating against my chest.

Seline seemed to shiver as she backed away. "Hugh should have known I would hate it when he gifted her to me last year." Her voice lightened. "You remember Hugh, don't you? He lives on an estate just to the south."

Certainly I remembered Hugh. She'd mentioned him as a possible suitor for me just moments ago—one of the less picky ones. He'd also been a staple at our pretend garden parties. It seemed he hadn't lost the affection he'd acquired the day he and Seline spent at the river. "Is he still a good friend of yours?"

"A silly one, but a friend nonetheless."

There was an edge to her voice that had seemed to grow over the course of the conversation. She wandered to the window again,

this time thrusting back the drapes. She fell motionless for a split second, and then her mouth fell open.

“Oh my goodness. He must have returned sooner than I thought.”

She was breathless as she spun back against the wall. “What shall I do? He’ll hear about Miles and everything I’ve planned will be lost.” She narrowed her eyes. “Unless . . .”

I laid the cat on the bed. “Unless what? He who?”

She pressed her hands to her cheeks, her gaze darting around the room. “It might work. It just might work.” She stalked over and grasped my shoulders. “Stay here, and you must tell no one you’ve seen me this evening. Do you understand?”

I glanced at the darkened window. “Why? What do you mean to do at this hour? Who are you talking about returning home?”

“I cannot say at present, but I believe it will prove just the thing.” She snapped her fingers. “Quickly, have you a black cloak in your wardrobe?”

“A cloak? Never tell me you mean to leave the house.”

“All right, I won’t tell you.” She scampered to the looking glass, her fingers wild in her hair as she tugged and pulled each errant strand back into place.

I stood helplessly in the center of the rug, holding my hands out in front of me. “Seline?”

She glanced over her shoulder, a sly smile across her face. “So do you have the cloak or not?”

“I do in my trunk, but I cannot let you leave the house, not like this.”

“Don’t be such a prude. It’s not like I haven’t gone out at night alone before. I know full well what I’m doing.” She laughed. “Besides, I haven’t much of a reputation left to protect.” Then her face changed, and she crossed her arms. “Listen, I do not dare risk a return to my

room, and the back stairs are so wonderfully close to yours. Either you give me the cloak or I'll fish it from your trunk myself. I'm running out of time."

She knelt on the floor and swung open the trunk's lid. Caught up in a misguided desire to help my friend, I found myself kneeling beside her, pawing through my things. I was forced to remove several garments before locating the long black cloak I hadn't used in years.

She grasped it from my hand. "Charity, you are the dearest dear. I shall never forget your kindness. I promise to find you the perfect husband soon enough. You'll see." She touched my cheek, pushed to her feet, then slung the cloak over her shoulders, flipping the hood over her golden hair. She fumbled with the collar. "What's this?"

"Oh, that's my brooch."

"It's pretty." She fastened it beneath her chin.

"Please be careful with it. It was my grandmother's. She had one of my grandfather's favorite collar jewels fashioned into it."

"You needn't worry. I'll take good care of it." She flashed me a smile. "If everything goes according to plan, my whole life changes tonight. Mama will be so pleased. She'll regret the day she ever called me an ungrateful wretch." She seemed almost weightless as she bounded to the door.

"Please." My stomach clenched, and all at once I couldn't let her leave. I grabbed her arm. "I don't care how many times you've gone out alone. A lady should never do so, particularly at night. You could be assaulted or worse."

"Don't be absurd, not in East Whitloe. You've been reading too many novels."

An ache swelled in the back of my throat. If only it was just the novels. I went on, miserably aware of the pain seeping into my words. "Please, you don't understand."

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She wriggled out of my grasp, a coy bend to her shrug. “Besides, I won’t even be alone.”

I stood breathless as she hesitated at the door for one final statement. “Wish me luck. I won’t be long.”

I didn’t even have a chance to reply before the door closed and the room fell empty around me, the casement clock ticking away an uncomfortable silence. I stood like that for several seconds, trying to make sense of why Seline had darted from my room, before returning to the open drapes.

What had Seline seen through the darkness that set her off? I pressed my forehead against the cool glass, scanning the moonlit garden and the west lawn beyond.

Twinkling on the horizon, at the jagged tip of a nearby hill, something did catch my eye. A light, wavering in the evening breeze like a solitary ember fanned to life one breath at a time.

Hardly anything was left of the curved stone cloisters of Kinwich Abbey, but I recognized the glowing remains straightaway—a lonely remnant of another time, another place. The people who lived around the village of East Whitloe believed the ruins of the old abbey still housed the ghostly spirit of a monk who once lived there. As girls, Seline and I had been too scared to venture anywhere near the rubble.

I shook my head. Seline and I were girls no longer. My hand inched over my lips as I stared into the abyss. Whoever placed that light within the cloisters had drawn Seline racing from the house to meet them.

## CHAPTER 2

*I* ate the supper on my tray by the bow window as I listened to the ebb and flow of the wind, my gaze glued to the light flickering amid the ruins of Kinwich Abbey. Who exactly had Seline scrambled from the house to meet, and what on earth did she have planned?

I tucked my feet beneath my nightgown and tipped my head against the window's hard wooden frame. June's daytime warmth had vanished with the sun and ushered in the cool, layered depths of nightfall in the countryside. Nearby tree branches whipped back and forth in the moonlight while the growing gusts charged against Loxby's ancient stones.

The wind had always fascinated me. I suppose it was the pure relentlessness of it. Heaven's invisible hand sweeping over the world. Sometimes it was as light as a feathered touch, a soft whisper on my skin, and other times a fevered fury that left nothing untouched. My father once explained that the wind was a promise of things to come. He said all we needed to do was listen to its call.

Another strong gust pounded the wall and my heart lurched. It was not an evening to be out and about. Why had I ever let Seline leave?

As I sat quivering on the window seat, still exhausted from the

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events of the day, the hours stretched on endlessly. The remains of my supper grew cold on the tray. Yet I could not abandon my post, not when Seline was out there somewhere in the gloom. I glanced at the clock for the hundredth time. Eleven thirty. Where on earth could she be? Whatever she had planned, she hadn't indicated it would take all that long.

A great deal of time had passed since she escaped my room, yet the strange beacon on the hill remained fixed in place. The impulse to leave the house and initiate a search wavered in and out of my mind, charging my nerves for flight. But it had been so long since I'd ventured into Loxby's expansive woods, and I'd promised myself in Ceylon that I'd never be so foolish about my surroundings again. Besides, I had little chance of finding my way in the darkness. I pressed the palm of my hand to my forehead. Why had I ever agreed to her ridiculousness?

The *pit-pat* of rain tickled the window, and I sat up just in time to see the light on the hill jolt and weave.

I pushed the drapes aside and pressed in close. The dithering glow seemed to vacillate then split in two, the smaller light bobbing its way toward Loxby, while the larger simply disappeared into the opposing hillside.

I kept my focus on the small glow as it crawled toward the house, dipping in and out of the trees, up and over the gradual curve of the land. I was forced to wait several minutes until a dimly lit figure scampered across the rose garden and I was rewarded by the outline of a black cloak.

I released a trapped breath. The onset of the drizzle must have sent Seline scurrying back to the house. Thank goodness. I sat for a moment, then took a few relieved steps onto the rug.

A door slammed somewhere in the distance, and Loxby's old walls

seemed to groan in response. Muffled footsteps resonated through the twisting corridors of the ground floor, and then an unexpected silence took hold.

I stood for some time in the center of my room completely still, straining to hear the least movement beyond my door. But the quiet was deafening. Slowly, the hair began to rise on my arms.

Seline would have to venture back this way. The side stairs were the fastest and easiest way to the family wing. I inched to my bedchamber door and cracked it open, peering into the blackened hall. Surely it would only be a moment before my dear friend crested the stairs and I could calm my frantic heart.

“Seline,” I whispered into the gloom.

Nothing.

I tied my dressing gown a bit tighter about my waist and tiptoed to the edge of the steps. “Seline.”

Again, nothing but my heartbeat throbbing against my ears.

Where was she? I stared down the curved stairwell then fleetingly at my bedchamber door. It was possible she had taken an alternate way to her room. Perhaps she did not wish to discuss anything further with me tonight. I knit my brow—that is, if it was indeed Seline who had entered the house. My chest tightened.

I would never sleep if I didn’t find out for certain.

Seline had occupied the same bedchamber at Loxby for all the years I knew her. Perhaps a quick peek in her room would ease my mind, and then I could make my way back to bed. The silvery haze of moonlight would be ample to guide my slippers steps. I secured the ribbons on my robe and turned down the main corridor.

Little had changed at the manor house in the years I’d been away—the same floor-length paintings hung in the hall, the sparse furniture with a flair for the Orient, the familiar white wainscoting

that appeared gray in the dim light—every inch conjured a memory from my past.

It didn't even occur to me that I might need to be cautious until I heard a cough a few paces from the door to Seline's room.

Not any cough, mind you—a deep, manly cough. My gaze snapped to my robe. Heaven help me if I'd stumbled onto Baker or one of the servants. I was scarcely presentable. And worse, it could just as easily be one of the other inhabitants of Loxby Manor.

I grimaced at the thought. Now was a particularly awkward time for a reunion. I plunged behind the velvet drapes at the L in the hall seconds before the moving shadow clambered into view around the far corner.

From the fold of the curtains I was able to catch a glimpse of the candlelit figure as he took shape in the long corridor. Broad shoulders, medium build, dark hair, lanky gait.

Avery.

My shoulders relaxed, and I pressed my palm to my heart. I'd forgotten Seline said he'd been rusticated from school. Relieved, I nearly vacated my hiding spot, but I realized all too quickly I was in no condition to meet an old friend. Tomorrow would be better.

I held as still as possible as Avery, thankfully unaware of my presence, simply lumbered down the far hall and disappeared from sight. I allowed several more seconds to pass to be certain he had indeed retired to his room.

That's when I heard it. Another set of heavy footsteps, pounding toward me from around the corner of the dark corridor.

Someone else was up and about without a candle, and it wasn't Seline. I leaned against the window casement and closed my eyes. The pant of heavy breathing seemed to echo down the quiet hall. My skin crawled.

*Tap, whoosh. Tap, whoosh.*

The nature of the person's tread was strangely uneven, almost as if the individual dragged something behind him. The prickling fingers of fear scurried across my chest, tightening every muscle one by one as my memories of Ceylon threatened.

*Tap, whoosh. Tap, whoosh.*

Whoever it was, he was achingly close. *Run!* My feet itched to escape, but I gripped the edge of the wainscoting, willing myself to stay in place. It was probably just a servant—the butler or a maid—and they were simply doing their job.

I tried to breathe like my mother had taught me to whenever I imagined things differently from what they actually were. “*Everyone is not out to assault you. I promise it will get easier, Charity,*” she’d remind me time and again. And she was right . . . about part of it. Time had dulled the pain my attacker left in his wake, but the wound would never fully heal, not when it was filled so deeply with grief.

It took several minutes for the sounds to drift away and my muscles to slacken and my pulse to slow, even longer for me to allow the silence of the hall to calm me.

Carefully I tugged open the drapes to find an empty corridor beyond the thick fabric. A quick look both directions, and I was relieved to see I was indeed alone. I rushed straight into Seline’s bedchamber, sealing the door behind me without a sound.

Much of the yellow room lay as it always had. Heavy mahogany furniture dotting the various walls and a lovely poster bed with gauzy white curtains. I crept forward before resting for a soothing moment on the edge of Seline’s crème coverlet.

She was nowhere to be found.

I looked around in confusion. She had said nothing about staying out the entirety of the night, nor did I believe she would ever

do such a thing, not after all she'd revealed about her situation with Miles. I raked the ribbons on my nightgown through my fingers.

Though Seline told me Mrs. Cavanagh had been angry with her earlier in the evening, her mother would certainly want to know that her only daughter was not in her bed, particularly at this hour. I'd promised Seline my silence, but her continued absence was not something to take lightly. The strange footsteps I'd heard pounded over and over again in my head. She could very well be in trouble.

Recollections flashed through my mind as I debated my next move. If only someone had come looking for me that night in Ceylon, so much would have been different. The thought drove me to my feet. Mrs. Cavanagh must be told and straightaway.

I dashed from Seline's room and down the corridor to the long family wing without a moment's hesitation. It wasn't until I stood before Mrs. Cavanagh's door, my hand poised to knock, that a fresh wave of nerves sparked to life. I'd not seen Seline's mother in five years, and she had always been terribly proper. What would she think of me, pounding on her door in the middle of the night, forcing her from her bed? Would she brand me as an aid in Seline's flight from the house?

I swallowed hard and knocked.

The door thrust inward far more quickly than I had anticipated. Mrs. Cavanagh's hand flew to her chest. "Why, Miss Halliwell! What are you about at such an hour?" Her handkerchief trembled as she dabbed her face.

From the looks of her rumpled evening gown, she'd not been to bed. What mother could sleep after learning of a scandal that involved her own daughter? She'd had such high hopes for Seline. Even in our youth she paraded her about, a living trophy of wealth and privilege.

I rubbed my arms. What I was about to tell her would only make her evening worse.

“I’m sorry to disturb you, Mrs. Cavanagh, but I’m terribly worried. I’ve come about Seline.”

“Seline!” Her eyes flashed, and she shoved the door open wide. “What now, child?” A moment’s hesitation, then she yanked me into her bedchamber. She cast a weary glance over the hall before slamming the door shut.

I was directed into her private sitting room with a half-hearted gesture of hospitality, which she quickly betrayed with the emergence of a scowl.

The large apartment was a lavish affair, full of deep purples and sumptuous pinks. I couldn’t help but take in the complexities of the room as I spoke. “Again, I am sorry to disturb you at such an advanced hour, but it is urgent.”

Mrs. Cavanagh cast a shrewd peek at her clock. “I must say, I’m surprised to find you still awake after such a long journey. I vow you young people shall never cease to amaze me.”

“Seline came to see me earlier this evening.”

“She did, did she?”

“We talked for a bit, and then quite suddenly she told me she meant to leave the house. I tried to stop her, but . . .”

Mrs. Cavanagh’s eyes narrowed as a flush lit her cheeks. “What do you mean . . . left the house? At night, my gel? Are you mad?”

“I assure you, I am quite lucid. When Seline came to my room, she was terribly distraught about what happened earlier today.” My throat felt suddenly dry. “I-I’m at a loss as to where she intended to go, only there was this light we saw out my window and she decided—”

“You mean to tell me she left the house alone?” She fanned her face with her hand. “Oh, dear me, I’m feeling faint.” She glanced

around madly before collapsing into a chair. “Avery must be sent for at once.”

She twisted her hands together as if washing them in the air. “You don’t think she went to see *him*, do you? No, no, she would not do such a thing to me, not after everything.” She tugged on her ear as if it might soothe her nerves as she rocked back and forth in her chair. “Avery’s the only one who can possibly keep this wretched scandal at bay. I only hope he’s returned from town.”

I lifted my voice. “He has.”

Her focus snapped to me, and I realized a bit too late how such an admission must sound. I stumbled over my next words. “I only know because I saw him just moments ago in the hall, walking to his room, I assume.”

She cast a rather daring look at my nightgown, and I added quickly, “Good heavens, I didn’t allow him to see me like this. I made certain of that.”

She jerked the bell pull, her hand quivering in the firelight. “Well, at any rate, he must be sent for at once.” Her fingers lingered on the embroidered rope for a moment as she stared into the shadows of the room. She gave it a quick tug, then slowly she turned to face me, her green eyes narrow, her jaw set. “I suppose Seline told you all.”

It was difficult to find my voice, trapped as I was in her piercing gaze. “She told me about Miles Lacy if that is what you mean.”

Mrs. Cavanagh crunched forward, dipping her chin into her chest. “And I can only hope you realize how important discretion is at such a moment.”

“Certainly.” I tucked a strand of hair behind my ear as I knelt beside her. “Seline has always been one of my dearest friends. I would never say anything to hurt her or anyone else in this family.”

She lowered her eyelids. “That is good to hear.” She curled her

icy fingers around my hand. “Tell me, did Seline say anything that might help us ascertain where she meant to go this evening? I can only assume it was to see that horrid stable boy.”

“As I said before, we saw a strange light in the valley through my bedchamber window. It must have meant something to her.”

“I see. Another liaison perhaps.”

A knock sounded at the door and Mrs. Cavanagh nearly jumped out of her skin. Her voice erupted from between her narrow lips. “Come.”

An elderly woman in a dark blue dress sidled through the open door. “Yes, ma’am. You rang?”

“Harriet.” Mrs. Cavanagh’s voice turned distant. “Summon Avery to my sitting area at once.”

The dark color of the maid’s clothes sparked a memory. “Oh!” I squeezed Mrs. Cavanagh’s hand. “There was something else.”

Mrs. Cavanagh’s arm shot up, silencing me with a flick of her wrist until the maid had left and the door was sealed. Then she gave me a hard smile. “My dear Miss Halliwell. You do understand what I mean about discretion, don’t you? The last thing this family needs is for my lady’s maid to catch wind that Seline has left the house.”

I covered my mouth. “I didn’t think.”

“No, you didn’t.” She pursed her lips. “Well, go on. What were you about to tell me?”

“I don’t know what it means, but Seline was determined to borrow my black cloak before she left.”

Mrs. Cavanagh stared at me for a moment, then twitched a nervous laugh. “Well, of course she would need a cloak. There’s a decided nip in the air tonight.” Then she stood. “If that is all the information you have for me at present, I shall leave you for my sitting room. Avery shall be waiting for me, and I daresay you must be missing your bed.”

Her voice softened a bit as she took my arm. “And don’t worry your pretty head, my dear. You’ve done all you can do tonight. Avery and I will see that everything is hushed up and Seline is returned to her room as quickly as possible. We will all speak again in the morning.” A sharp nod. “Good evening, Miss Halliwell.”

I paused for a moment, considering whether I should tell her about the second set of footsteps, but they were so very odd, I might very well have imagined them. Goodness knows I had done so before.

Mrs. Cavanagh swung open her bedchamber door and waited as I passed through it, confusion heavy on my heart. However, I halted one step into the hall as Mrs. Cavanagh’s maid flew around the far corner, a note gripped in her hand.

Her face was pale, her arm stiff as she strangled out, “Mrs. Cavanagh! Mrs. Cavanagh!”

Mrs. Cavanagh thrust the door wide and the rush of wind ruffled the paper in the maid’s hand. “What is it?”

The maid shook her head like a baby bird, thrusting out the note in one fell swoop. “I passed by Seline’s room and found her door open. This note was on her bed.”

Mrs. Cavanagh snatched the letter from her maid’s hand and angled it into the light. Her countenance shifted as she pored over every last word, her face transitioning from the harried look she’d worn since I knocked on her door to a pale grimace. She lowered the note, her whole body shaking in response.

I moved to support her arm, my own fear and curiosity extinguishing any qualms I had in addressing her. “What does it say? Where is she?”

The note fell to the carpet. “Seline’s set off for Gretna Green with Miles Lacy. And we are all ruined.”

## CHAPTER 3

After a fitful night of sleep and the uncomfortable silence of an empty breakfast room, I realized my only hope for information regarding Seline's unfortunate situation would be to return once again to Mrs. Cavanagh's bedchamber.

The precipitous appearance of the letter the previous night wrought more questions in my mind than answers. First off, why hadn't I seen the note when I entered her room just a few minutes before? It was dark, yes, but was it really possible to miss such a vital item? And when exactly had Seline left the note? Nothing about the events of the evening made any sense.

An offhand comment from a maid in the hallway informed me that Avery had set off quite early in search of her, and it would probably be some time before he returned. Mrs. Cavanagh remained my only recourse in the house with whom I might mull over the inconsistencies that plagued my thoughts. If only she wasn't so easily affected.

The family wing looked oddly cheery in the daylight, the ghosts of the previous night's escapades tucked neatly beneath a warm, yellow glow. Even though I knew in my heart that as a mother Mrs. Cavanagh would wish to hear my suspicions, I couldn't help but fear the flurry of her nerves.

The shouts of a heated argument rent the cloying stillness of

the hallway and arrested my steps. What at first I thought emanated from Mrs. Cavanagh's bedchamber, I realized only too quickly came from the room next door.

Seized by the shrill pitch of Mrs. Cavanagh's voice, I sank against a wooden pillar, numb as to which way to turn. Of late I tended to shy away from conflict, so it was strange of me to stand there and eavesdrop . . . but I did so like a curst statue.

As I feared, Mrs. Cavanagh's shock from the previous night had turned into hysteria by the light of day. I could almost see her hands fluttering before her as she spoke.

"Please, don't take a pet about Mr. Lacy. I only meant to—"

"How I continue to handle our curst situation is entirely up to me. Don't ever forget that." The second voice was that of an older man, an angry one. Considering the proximity to Mrs. Cavanagh's room, I could only deduce it was her husband. "It seems Mr. Lacy could not stop his nephew's abhorrent behavior any more than you seem able to manage our own daughter's."

A dramatic snuffle. "I've not been remiss in any way. Acquit me of that at least. I've been the best mother anyone could be to our daughter. And for you to question my judgment when I've done everything you've asked of me—everything. Who do you think handles Loxby in your stead?"

He gave a pointed sigh. "We both know Piers runs the entirety of the estate from Liverpool. All *you* have been left to worry about is how to spend my money."

There was a hint of the victim in Mrs. Cavanagh's voice. "I'm well aware that you've no choice but to lie there day after day, planning your next criticism of me, but—"

"Enough." The word boomed through the wall.

My eyes widened and my cheeks felt hot. What was I thinking

listening in on a private conversation? But her next words kept me firmly in my spot.

“Now I have that Halliwell girl to deal with. You would force me to let her come here.”

My hand retreated to my mouth as my eyes slipped closed. I had been right in my assumptions. Regardless of my mother’s enthusiasm, my visit was wholly unwanted.

Mr. Cavanagh’s shrewd tone broke the amassing silence of the hall. “Miss Halliwell shall likely be a comfort for you as we wait for word on Seline’s whereabouts.”

Mrs. Cavanagh’s voice shook, but she managed to carry on well enough, “Yes . . . well . . . I . . . That is neither here nor there. What I am most anxious about is Avery. You know how easily he can be entrapped. Thankfully the little mouse is as drab as she ever was. I do not believe his head could be turned where Miss Halliwell is concerned. And it’s a good thing, too, for I have high hopes for him. As should you.”

Another sigh. “Your memory seems to be selective at best. As I told you before, I have no intention of discussing my will with you again. Let it alone.” A long pause. “Have Piers come to my room as soon as he arrives.”

A huff. “I wasn’t aware you knew he was coming.”

Mr. Cavanagh coughed out an irritated laugh. “Interesting that you did not tell me so yourself. We promised to be forthright with one another, did we not? Thankfully I have Baker to apprise me of what goes on in this house. I may be weak and blind, but I am not on my deathbed yet, lest you forget.”

“You needn’t act like I withheld the information on purpose. We’ve been at sixes and sevens throughout Loxby since Seline’s shocking disgrace. As you well know.”

I heard footsteps approaching my position beyond the door, and I sprang into a brisk walk, my feet flying numbly down the carpeted hall, my mind awash with what I'd overheard.

Avery. High hopes that didn't include me. The utter notion!

I took a careless look behind me. Goodness, I had no intention of approaching Mrs. Cavanagh now. Not when she thought I came to Loxby to—my chest tightened—make a match with her younger son.

I gripped the banister hard as I hurried down the steps, my heart a wrangled mess. Avery Cavanagh was never anything more to me than a good friend, and there had always been Piers . . . How could she think I'd come here to set my cap at Avery?

My head hurt. 'Faith, but I'd come to Loxby to escape the thought of men entirely, and here was one waiting to engage me, only this time his mother wanted her children to have nothing to do with a drab little mouse like me.

Perhaps voyaging to America would have been the better option after all.

No. I knew full well conversation about marriage would have been front and center if I'd gone with my parents. Oh yes, I'd felt the undercurrent of hope when Mama had mentioned cousin Samuel would be meeting them in Boston. He had always been the family joke when it came to me. If I never found a suitable husband, I could certainly have him. Well, I didn't want cousin Samuel or anyone else. Not anymore. Why couldn't anyone understand that?

Mrs. Cavanagh could rest easy. Not only were Piers and Avery marked off any list of mine but I'd torn up the whole dratted thing and torched it to ashes in Ceylon. I had plans of my own, none of which involved a husband.

At some point during the upcoming year, I would find a governess position—one as far away from Loxby as I could get.

Unfortunately I'd made the decision to come to East Whitloe, and I had little choice but to stay at the manor house and await Mrs. Cavanagh's pleasure for the time being. I owed the family that much. Besides, I couldn't leave now, not after Seline had disappeared so suddenly, not if I could help her in some way.

I moved past Mr. Baker in the long corridor to the drawing room. There was a moment's hesitation in his step until he halted midway down the hall as if he meant to delay me. But then he gave his head a light shake and hurried on his way.

I plowed through those double mahogany doors as if I owned the world, only to stop short one measly step inside the room.

I immediately realized I was not alone—and my entire world flipped upside down.

Piers Cavanagh didn't turn from where he stood at the fireplace, but I knew he'd heard the click of the door, for his fingers clenched into a ball and his arm plunged from the mantel to his side.

The air in the room felt thin.

He'd grown taller over the years, his shoulders broad, his dress so terribly refined. Had I ever seen him wear a black jacket quite like that one? All of a sudden I didn't know where to rest my hands. In front of me or at my sides?

Goodness, the room was warm.

I stepped forward, my brow pulled tight, my chest heavy. Oh dear. What had he done to his hair? The curls I remembered so well had been cut short, leaving behind a tangle of thick locks dusted with a bit more brown and a little less red.

My heart rode painfully on a storm of nerves, and I could do little but mouth his name as I waited for him to turn and acknowledge me. Seline said he planned to return today, but had I ever really believed I would see him again?

Carefully he stepped back and glanced over his shoulder, the utter shock of finding me at Loxby all too evident in his blue eyes. “Miss Halliwell?”

It was hard to see anything but the young, carefree boy I’d spent the whole of my youth admiring. One letter had changed everything between us. I knew nothing of the gentleman across the room. “Good morning, Mr. Cavanagh.”

There was a slight silence before he affected a smile. “What on earth are you doing here?”

“I suppose your mother didn’t tell you.”

Piers had always been a master at quizzical glances, and he took a moment to examine me. “No, she didn’t.”

I detected a curious note of wistfulness in his voice, and it drew my gaze painfully to his face. “I came for an extended visit while my parents are across the Atlantic. I’m to stay at Loxby for the next year.” I swallowed hard, fear of what he might say swelling in my throat.

“A whole year? That’s”—he looked away for a moment as if to hunt the right word, then turned back to me—“auspicious.” He extended his hands as he crossed the rug toward me, but his eyes betrayed a rigid undercurrent that only grew with each second. “Tell me, is your family well?”

“Quite well.” I forced myself to take his hands, only to drop them a second later at the sound of footsteps in the hall.

Piers’s plastered smile vanished, and he stepped shrewdly away. It seemed neither of us was in the mood for playacting.

Mrs. Cavanagh breached the door and bustled past me on a whiff of lavender perfume, her eyes ticking like a clock between Piers and me before settling sharply on him.

Her voice, however, sounded defeated. “So you’ve come home at last.”

She trudged to the sofa and settled down, staring for a moment before fluttering her eyes closed and extending her cheek.

I could read the insecurity in Piers's stark expression as he stooped to place a kiss. "Good morning, Mother."

She took a loud, quivering breath, then turned to me. "I suppose Miss Halliwell has been airing all our dirty laundry."

I could have sunk into the floor after what I'd overheard her say earlier in the family wing.

"Certainly not." Mortified, I made my way to the far end of the sofa and took a seat. "I came into the drawing room but a second before you did." I couldn't help casting a sideways glance at Piers. "I had no idea your son had already arrived."

Piers gave a shrug and wandered to the window. "If you are referring to Avery's situation, Mother, I've already heard all the blasted details. I scrambled off a note informing him I would consider writing his teacher a letter if he promised to start afresh. No more larks."

Mrs. Cavanagh snorted. "Start fresh indeed. Avery's the only one I count on at Loxby these days—certainly not Seline. Heaven help me if the two of you don't mean to drag this family through the mud at every turn." She pressed a handkerchief to her nose, and a slight wail accompanied her words. "I shall never be able to return to London at this rate."

Piers ignored her outburst and propped his shoulder against the wall. "What has Seline done now?"

"What hasn't she done?" Another snuffle. "You remember Mr. Lacy?"

He gave her a hard smile. "Who do you think I correspond with weekly on the running of the estate with Father indisposed?"

She waved her handkerchief in the air. "I really wouldn't know."

He crossed the room and took a seat in the opposing chair. “What about Mr. Lacy?”

She stiffened and tipped her nose in the air. “He has a nephew, that’s what.”

I listened as Mrs. Cavanagh recounted Seline’s indiscretions, from her kiss to her desperate nighttime flight from the house, but it wasn’t until she mentioned the letter Seline left behind in her room that I gave voice to the questions that had been brewing in my mind. “Mrs. Cavanagh?”

She jerked her head up. “Yes, dear? I nearly forgot you were there.” She patted my leg. “Miss Halliwell was the last to speak with Seline before she left. Have you anything to add?”

Now was my chance. “I have been doing a great deal of thinking over the night, and I cannot help but ask, are you completely certain Seline wrote that note? You see, when she fled my room, the last thing she said to me was that she wouldn’t be out long. I fully expected her to return straightaway.”

Piers leaned forward, curiosity bending his brow. “What are you getting at? Do you think Seline’s flight some sort of ploy?”

I tethered my lip between my teeth. “I don’t know exactly. I mean, it is indeed possible that Seline changed her mind. Yet when she left my room, she made it perfectly clear that she had no intention of departing the estate.” Of course Seline did say she had a plan. But to elope, and with Miles Lacy? Certainly not.

Mrs. Cavanagh’s fingers came to life, wiggling in the air. “Then where else can she be?”

All eyes shot to me.

“Who could say, but taking flight for Gretna Green in the middle of the night? That doesn’t sound anything like her, not unless it included a gentleman with a title.”

Piers rubbed his chin, his eyes steady on me. “Miss Halliwell does have a point, Mother. Seline is impulsive and foolish, but why on earth wouldn’t she wait to flee until morning?” He lifted his eyebrows. “I would like to take a look at this note.”

I nodded quickly as it was just what I’d been hoping to do all night. The letter had to reveal something.

Mrs. Cavanagh’s lady’s maid was sent at once to fetch the letter from Mrs. Cavanagh’s bedchamber, and the three of us were forced to wait patiently for her return—Piers with his stern brow and troubled gaze, Mrs. Cavanagh full of strained quivers, and me, taunted not only by my acute fear for my dear friend but by the added presence of her brother. Why did he have to come home at such a time?

The clock ticked away the seconds aching slow until the maid rushed back through the door, the note thrust out in front of her. Mrs. Cavanagh accepted the letter as if it were a dead animal and unfolded it before us. We all stared at the crisp white paper, but Piers was the first to take the note into his hands and scan carefully over Seline’s scrolled words. “It does appear to be her handwriting.”

Mrs. Cavanagh scoffed, “Well of course it’s her handwriting.” He passed it to me.

My dearest Mama,

Miles and I are off for Gretna Green this very hour.

Seline

Awfully short at such a moment. I narrowed my eyes. “Do you think she might have written it under some sort of duress? See how the ink blurs here.”

Mrs. Cavanagh grasped the letter, smashing it closed. “Well,

I daresay she was under duress. The poor dear must have thought she was out of options. People can do all sorts of things when they are desperate.”

“But to make such a rash decision before—”

“My dear Miss Halliwell, I can certainly understand your wish to find meaning in such a haphazard trip to Scotland, but this letter proves Seline took off with little regard for her family, particularly her mama.”

Mrs. Cavanagh pressed her handkerchief to her nose. “I only hope Avery may find her in time, or we shall be forced to welcome the new Mrs. Lacy back to the house in a few weeks. I do hope she enjoys living out her days in one of the small cottages on the estate. I fear that is all her father will do for her now.” She stumbled to her feet and made her way to the door before pausing to rest her hand against the doorframe. “I do apologize, but my nerves are far too raw to continue on in this way. I need to lie down. You must excuse me.”

Caught up in the drama of her departure, I watched her sweep from the room before I turned back to face Piers. My fingers gripped the armrest of their own accord. He was studying me with that look of his that seemed to know and question everything. Yet at the same time he couldn't keep still, swinging his boot across his opposing leg then back to the floor.

A curious mix of emotions snuck over me as I watched his awkward dance—the delicious hint of exhilaration I'd felt the last time I'd seen him, accompanied by the inescapable veil of abandonment that swathed every last memory of our time together. I glanced up. Was Piers as affected by my unexpected presence at Loxby as I was by his?

He rested his elbows on his knees and his chin in his hands. “I

suppose we've little recourse but to wait for word from Avery. Odds are my mother's right, and Seline did just as she wrote in that note."

I nodded in agreement, ushering in the wretched weight of silence once again.

I took a deep breath. Regardless of how things had ended between Piers and me, there was no reason to be uncivil, not anymore. Besides, my parents had trained me better than that, and he would be gone from Loxby soon enough.

"Piers." My voice faltered. "It is good to see you again."

I wasn't prepared for the look he gave me. Part hope, part dread, and his response, terribly slow. "I cannot guess what you must think of me."

I didn't move as the years melted away. Time would never dull my need for some kind of closure.

He kept his voice emotionless, yet he had difficulty meeting my eyes. "I never should have insinuated anything regarding our future before you left. It turned out to be a turbulent time for me." The muscles twitched in his jaw. "Of course I do realize excuses are futile. I've not the ability to rewind time."

*And . . .*

His letter about his responsibilities hadn't been enough explanation at the time for ending our relationship. This was even worse.

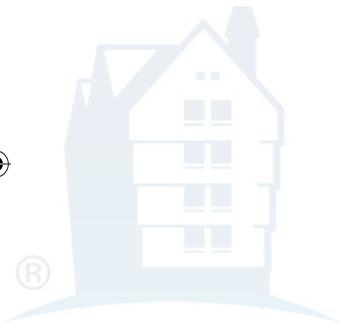
He ran his hand down his pantaloons, his focus vacant on the corner of the room. "You've probably heard, but I live a very different life now, one of isolation. Believe me when I tell you, I never would have come home if I'd known you were here."

My eyes widened.

He pushed to his feet and started for the door before stopping cold at the edge of the carpet, his voice hollow like a ghost from the darkest corners of Ceylon. "We'll have no choice but to be in

ABIGAIL WILSON

each other's company over the next few days, and there is a part of me that is glad I got this chance to see you again, but I feel certain at some point you'll understand me when I tell you, the past must remain in the past."



THOMAS NELSON  
*Since 1798*

## ACCLAIM FOR ABIGAIL WILSON

“*The Vanishing at Loxby Manor* cleverly combines Regency romance with Gothic intrigue, and the result is a suspenseful, thoroughly entertaining read. Charming and lovely.”

—TASHA ALEXANDER, *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING  
AUTHOR OF *IN THE SHADOW OF VESUVIUS*

“Abigail Wilson’s latest Gothic romance hits the notes readers have come to expect from her talented pen: romance, shadows and intrigue, and a brilliantly executed atmosphere. But it is the deep characterization, the sense of longing for the past and a love lost and reforged—not to mention the deeply humane flaws and fallibilities of its dimensional characters—that solidify *The Vanishing at Loxby Manor* as a must-read Regency. I will never tire of Wilson’s intelligent voice, expert pacing, and heart-stopping romance. She is a master at her craft and a rare stand-out in a popular genre.”

—RACHEL McMILLAN, AUTHOR OF *THE LONDON RESTORATION*

“Weaving a shadow of mystery among the gilded countryside of Regency England, Wilson’s tale of love lost, buried shame, and secret societies is a delicious blend of romance and intrigue. Flawed characters grace each page with a vulnerability and deep desire to be known for their true selves, which is a beauty unto itself. Splash in gorgeous historical Regency details, and murder brewing around every stone and readers will be burning through the pages until the riveting end.”

—J’NELL CIESIELSKI, AUTHOR OF *THE SOCIALITE*,  
ON *THE VANISHING AT LOXBY MANOR*

“Like each of Wilson’s novels, *The Vanishing at Loxby Manor* drew me in from the start and didn’t let go. From the heartfelt characters to the twists that kept me guessing, I relished each turn of the page. Wilson is a master at historical mystery, and I cannot wait for her next story.”

—LINDSAY HARREL, AUTHOR OF *THE JOY OF FALLING*

“In *The Vanishing at Loxby Manor* Abigail Wilson has created a gothic romance that is filled with great characters and a mystery that unfolds

chapter by chapter. A perfect blend of mystery, family relationships, lost years, and star-crossed love. There is also an integral thread of letting go of past tragedy and moving into the future. This book is perfect for readers who love Regency fiction in gothic settings. Be warned, you won't be able to walk away from these characters."

—CARA PUTMAN, AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR OF *FLIGHT RISK*

"This latest from Wilson (*Midnight on the River Grey*) has all the elements of a classic Regency romance, but the mystery adds another layer, enriching the plot . . . Recommended for fans of Tasha Alexander and Lauren Willig."

—*LIBRARY JOURNAL ON MASQUERADE AT MIDDLECREST ABBEY*

"This is a very well written Regency romance wrapped in a historical mystery involving murder, government agents, French spies, poison and kidnapping. The descriptions of house, grounds, furnishings and costume all immerse the reader in this 19th-century world. Well-drawn characters add a distinctive flavour to the action, and there are several mysteries to untangle . . . A very enjoyable read and recommended."

—HISTORICAL NOVEL SOCIETY

"This novel is so packed full of mystery, intrigue, and romantic tension that you will be turning pages until the wee hours while your heart hurts from the emotional tension."

—AUSTENPROSE.COM

"Wilson (*Midnight on the River Grey*) weaves a splendid tale of murder and deception in this fun, suspenseful Regency . . . The main couple are well matched in spunk and intellect, and Wilson strikes a nice balance between intrigue and gentle romance. This delightful story is sure to entertain."

—*PUBLISHERS WEEKLY ON MASQUERADE AT MIDDLECREST ABBEY*

"From the very first page, I was enraptured! Ms. Wilson delivers a timeless story made even better by a hero who epitomizes generosity of love like no other I've read before. *Masquerade at Middlecrest Abbey* has intrigue,

mystery, and suspense beautifully enhanced by the vulnerability revealed through memorable characters, making this story impossible to put down. A must-read recommendation, this story is exactly what makes me love reading!”

—NATALIE WALTERS, AUTHOR OF  
THE HARBORED SECRETS SERIES

“Murder is far from no one’s thoughts in this delicious new romantic mystery from Abigail C. Wilson. With scandal dodging every turn of the page, mystery hiding behind the visage of each character, and a romance brewing with an English rake of the worst—and best—sorts, readers will find nothing lacking! I was entranced, mesmerized, addlepat, and not a little bit bewildered as I wandered the halls of Middlecrest Abbey. While it was easily cemented before, it is now forever set in stone that I am a loyal fan of all things Abigail C. Wilson.”

—JAIME JO WRIGHT, AUTHOR OF *ECHOES AMONG THE STONES*  
AND THE CHRISTY AWARD-WINNING NOVEL, *THE HOUSE ON  
FOSTER HILL*, ON *MASQUERADE AT MIDDLECREST ABBEY*

“Suspicion shades the affluent grounds of Middlecrest Abbey in this riveting novel by Abigail Wilson. The artful balance of mystery and romance cleverly blends with the Gothic tones of Regency England. With exquisite prose and a layered plot, *Masquerade at Middlecrest Abbey* is a compelling story not to be missed.”

—RACHEL SCOTT MCDANIEL, AWARD-WINNING  
AUTHOR OF *ABOVE THE FOLD*

“With a wonderfully suspicious cast of characters, intriguing clues, and a lush backdrop that readers can easily get lost in, *Midnight on the River Grey* is a captivating novel.”

—HISTORICAL NOVELS SOCIETY

“Abigail Wilson’s debut novel is a story rich in detail with a riveting mystery . . . With enough jaw-dropping plot twists to give readers whiplash, it would be a severe oversight to pass this story up.”

—*HOPE BY THE BOOK*, BOOKMARKED REVIEW,  
ON *IN THE SHADOW OF CROFT TOWERS*

“Readers who enjoy sweet romances, Gothic settings, innocent heroines, and mysterious heroes should enjoy this read.”

—*HISTORICAL NOVELS REVIEW ON IN THE SHADOW OF CROFT TOWERS*

“Abigail Wilson’s *In the Shadow of Croft Towers* is the kind of novel I love to recommend. Well written, thoroughly engrossing, and perfectly inspiring. I honestly couldn’t flip the pages fast enough.”

—SHELLEY SHEPARD GRAY, *NEW YORK TIMES*  
AND *USA TODAY* BESTSELLING AUTHOR

“Mysterious and wonderfully atmospheric, Abigail Wilson’s debut novel is full of danger, intrigue, and secrets. Highly recommended!”

—SARAH LADD, AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR OF *THE WEAVER’S DAUGHTER*

“What a deliciously satisfying debut from Abigail Wilson! *In the Shadow of Croft Towers* is everything I love in a novel: a classic Gothic feel from very well-written first person storytelling, a Regency setting, a mysterious hero . . . and secrets abounding! *In the Shadow of Croft Towers* is now counted as one of my very favorite books, and I can’t wait for more from this new author!”

—DAWN CRANDALL, AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR  
OF THE EVERSTONE CHRONICLES SERIES

“Mysterious . . . Melodic . . . Thrilling and original . . . Abigail Wilson has crafted a debut that shines. Artfully weaving shades of Gothic romance in a portrait of Regency England, Wilson brings a fresh voice—and a bit of danger!—to the mist and hollows of a traditional English moor. With a main character both engaging and energetic, and a quick-out-of-the-gate plot that keeps you guessing, one thing is certain—if Jane Austen ever met Jane Eyre, it would be at Croft Towers!”

—KRISTY CAMBRON, AUTHOR OF *CASTLE ON THE RISE*  
AND THE BESTSELLING DEBUT, *THE BUTTERFLY AND THE VIOLIN*, ON *IN THE SHADOW OF CROFT TOWERS*

“Part mystery and part romance, Abigail Wilson’s debut is an atmospheric period novel that will keep readers guessing to the very end.”

—AMANDA FLOWER, *USA TODAY* BESTSELLING  
AUTHOR OF *DEATH AND DAISIES*