

## 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*

*The*  
VANISHING  
*at*  
LOXBY MANOR

ALSO BY ABIGAIL WILSON

*Masquerade at Middlecrest Abbey*

*Midnight on the River Grey*

*In the Shadow of Croft Towers*

*The*  
VANISHING  
*at*  
LOXBY MANOR

ABIGAIL WILSON



THOMAS NELSON  
*Since 1798*

*The Vanishing at Loxby Manor*

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ISBN 978-0-7852-3295-7 (trade paper)

ISBN 978-0-7852-3312-1 (epub)

ISBN 978-0-7852-3315-2 (downloadable audio)

#### **Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

CIP data is available upon request.

*Printed in the United States of America*

21 22 23 24 25 LSC 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

*For my daughter, Audrey  
The girl with an endless zest for life, a wicked  
humor, and a deep compassion for others.  
I thank God every day He allowed me to be  
your mother as well as your friend.*



## PROLOGUE

1811

*Kent, England*  
*Village of East Whitloe*

**F**oolish. 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?"

“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.

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."

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.