



ON THE  
CLIFFS OF  
FOXGLOVE  
MANOR

**JAIME JO WRIGHT**

Christy Award-Winning Author

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FOXGLOVE  
MANOR

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**BETHANYHOUSE**

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CoCo,

You are the miracle that set my life in motion.  
I will forever be grateful God blessed me with you.

You may be a daddy's-girl,  
but you'll always be my Baby Girl.

Walk close to your Creator.

Grow in God's graciousness.

Be strong, my love, be strong.

In a world that is fierce, be a warrior.

# ADRIA FONTAINE

FOXGLOVE MANOR  
APRIL 1885

He had ruined death for her, and the hope of it. Thwarted death on all sides, until the possibility of escape was removed entirely, and she was left with breath, body, and the plaguing memories of many yesterdays. Memories she would never allow to rise to the surface again. Like a shipwreck beneath the brutal waves of the expanse of cold lake, so were the abuses she had endured. It would be a monumental task to raise them from their graves, to revive them, and to see them sail again. And who would want to? Shipwrecks were things to be forgotten. Memories were like shipwrecks.

Uncertain future loomed in the distance. The wheels of the carriage rolled over stones and rutted road. To the right lay a flat expanse that boasted brown grasses with small sprigs of spring's green, outcroppings, and, in the distance, deep blue-green fir trees. To the left, imitating the cadence of her pulsating heart, were the waves. The waves of the lake that pounded the shore, the rocky

cliffs, and battered the walls of lake caves. They stretched into the distance until the waters kissed the gray skyline, void of sunlight, with a lone gull weaving its way through the winds.

Ahead loomed the cliff. High enough to boast a lighthouse, but barren of such a beacon. Instead, like a scar on a beautiful face, was a stone house. Two stories high, stick-straight long, and with a turreted tower rising highest of all. One a princess might be kept prisoner in if this were a fairy tale. Only it wasn't. It was her life. And the house was Foxglove Manor. The old estate of her father's business acquaintance. In which case, hardly even a friend—and even then, her father had insisted Mr. St. John was more of an enemy. But the two men kept up appearances for the sake of their own selfish needs, and, for the time being, that included Alexandria, who now stared at the stone manor with a solid weight in the pit of her stomach. It was all made even exponentially worse because Mr. St. John had died—leaving her father grieving only the lost secrets Mr. St. John took with him to his grave. Mr. St. John left behind his wife, who was apparently ignorant of the tenuous ties between the two men. In the end, Mr. Fontaine needed to be rid of Alexandria—among other pressing reasons—once and for all. She was a blot on their family name. On their fortune of which her father was immensely proud. No one would ever question his reasoning. His daughter had attempted the unforgivable. It was Providence she had lived, but it was shameful she had not died.

Alexandria—known by most as Adria—jostled in the carriage, gripping the edge of its worn-out padded seat with tense fingertips. She was dressed in black from head to toe, like a widow who grieved her lover. Only Adria was unwed. She had lost only herself, and that loss she grieved monumentally.

The carriage rolled to a stop outside a waist-high stone wall. There was a patchy lawn, remarkably green for the season of early spring, with splotches of snow still harbored in the shadows, and long plates of smooth rock jutting out here and there. The rock was at war with the grass, and above it all rose the arching branches of

battered trees. Trees whose arms reached toward the stone house, many of which were barren of leaves and promising they would stay that way. They were dead trees. The bark worn smooth by wind and buffeted by rain and lake water. Even atop a cliff, the lake's coldness reached. Icy and unforgiving.

With the opening of the door, Adria stepped wordlessly from the carriage. The trip from the southernmost bottom of the state by train as far north as she could travel had been more comfortable. But then she had had to abide people. At least the carriage had been lonesome. She was accustomed to lonesome.

"Your bag, miss?"

Adria turned to the driver, who held out her carpetbag. Yes. Of course. He was rented, after all, and would want payment and to be off. She took her one bag from his hand, trusting he would deliver her trunk to the manor, and extended the payment in the envelope her father had rationed out.

*"This is for travel only, Alexandria. You will not squander it."*

It had not been a question, but a command. *You will not.*

The Ten Commandments were friendlier than those her father had bestowed on her.

Adria tilted her lips in a small smile with the vague urge of necessity. *Be off!* She would be glad to be free of the driver, but there was no rejoicing. For here, at the wall of Foxglove Manor, Adria stood on the cusp of a new prison. One of obligation that would haunt her.



She sensed him before she saw him. His form, a misty gray behind the fogged windowpanes on the upper story of the stone manor. He bore his stature like a beast of burden, weighted by the mere fact of his being alive.

Adria met brooding eyes, hooded with no hint of color—he was too far away. The waves of the lake crashed against the cliff, sending spray airborne and misting her face with a fine dusting. She wiped her cheek with the clothed fingertips of her hand. Her

glove was damp when she pulled it back. Wind wove around the trunks of weathered trees that embraced the manor, their gray, scraggly branches protesting with creaks and moans.

He turned from the window and disappeared.

Adria reached out as though she could draw him back. Pull him from the prison depths of Foxglove Manor. Whoever he was. Another soul harboring at the manor for the sheer sake of obligation? Or maybe there was more. More to Foxglove Manor. To Mrs. Reginald St. John.

Tendrils of dark curls swept over her face as wind gusted again, arguing against her arrival with the vicious bite of its cold edges. Stiffening her shoulders, Adria dismissed the strange man from her mind, from her dreams. She had seen him before. Many times. In the darkness of her heart, in those moments when her mind went far away. He was there. Tall and strong. A Captain. A soldier. A hero.

Adria squeezed her eyes shut. She felt the length of her dark lashes and knew they hid her sapphire-blue eyes. Eyes that had seen many things, closed against many more, and refused to open when she discovered the places inside of herself where Adria could simply *be*. She forced them to open. Forced herself to swallow any anguish that threatened to sour in her throat. A glance at the upper-story window. Empty. Perhaps he had never actually been there. A figment of her imagination. A phantom she always wished looked after her but whose existence was very suspect.

The iron gate clanked as Adria lifted the unlocked latch. She pushed it open and stepped onto the grass that struggled to revive with April's kiss of warmth. A stone path, rugged, with uneven levels and surfaces, stretched toward the entrance of Foxglove Manor. On the bottom stone step, a splash of autumn orange mingled with the fur of a mangy fox. Her left ear was half chewed off, leaving a ragged flap of gray that lifted over the length of thin muzzle. A full tail curled around her haunches, and only the fur moved in the wind. Fur that was sparse. At Adria's approach, the fox started

to its feet, eyed her with beady suspicion, then scurried into the shrubbery, its tail stretched behind it like a flag.

One at a time, Adria took the steps. There were only four, and then she reached the door with the rounded top, the iron hinges, and the massive ring that hung in its middle. A last tentative look at the lake and cliff behind her. One long sprint and she could stretch wide her arms, open them to the frigid spring wind as her body met the air. A flight over cold waters. It was a special sort of freedom, deceptive in its consequences . . .

Adria shook her head. Clearing her thoughts. She raised the door knocker, but before she clapped it down, the door opened. Heavy on its hinges. Protestations ground out, and a wrinkled face stared back at her. Knobby nose. Liver spots on the cheeks that were as whiskered and patchy as the renegade fox. His suit was too large, sagging over his shoulders, yet the old man stood with a sort of pride that one might mock. Mock because he had nothing on his person to inspire pride, and so it was empty. Empty of human purpose but thick with the need to be important.

“Miss Fontaine?” His growl was stern. No welcome. Just a tired expectation of her arrival.

She nodded.

He opened the door further, ignoring the heavy bag in her hand.

Adria cast one last desperate glance behind her. At the lake. At the gray-blue air that stretched into infinity. Foxglove Manor would be her home now. But it was not her refuge. She stepped inside, her foot coming to rest on the dull wood floor. Adria knew she was more than her father’s cast-off daughter. She was also his pawn in a scheme that spanned the lakes, coming to rest here, beneath the roof of Foxglove Manor.

“Come.” The growl interrupted her shaky calm.

Adria followed the old man in his saggy suit down a dark hallway. She would not close her eyes now. She would keep them wide open. She would let the day bleed away until, tonight, she could reassess her future. And maybe—somehow—she could find *him* again.

# KAILEY GIBSON

## FOXGLOVE MANOR PRESENT DAY

No one had believed her twenty years ago. Twenty years ago when she went missing, and twenty years ago when she was returned.

*Kailey Gibson.*

*Five years old.*

*Abducted May 3, 2001.*

*Height 3.5 feet, weight approximately 46 lbs.*

*Last seen walking toward Blueview Elementary. Wearing blue jeans, a silver-sequined pink T-shirt, and pink tennis shoes.*

It was a missing-child poster that had never been made. She had been taken at 7:45 a.m. and returned one block away from her front yard at 3:40 p.m. A school day. Her teachers had noted her absence. Her parents had questioned her. No one believed her. She was a five-year-old little girl who frequently became lost in her own secret world built between herself and her brother, Jude. Between her imagination, Jude's autism, and her parents' own inability to function properly, Kailey's abduction went unnoticed by everyone

except Jude. But Jude was a vault of secrets no one bothered to try to crack. Least of all, Kailey's parents. Kidnapped for eight hours had changed nothing for the world. Kidnapped for eight hours had changed everything for Kailey's world.

Her car rolled to a stop in the allotted parking space that was marked only by a granite boulder she had to gauge carefully to avoid ramming her front bumper into. She shifted the vehicle into park, drawing in a steadying breath, and glanced instinctively at the man beside her in the passenger seat.

Jude stared into the distance, and what others might interpret as a vacant expression, Kailey knew was one of memorization. Every nuance of the property before them was being committed to memory, compared with that memory, calculated, then filed away. She leaned over the console and lifted the corner of the blue bandanna tied around his neck. Dabbing the spit bubble at the corner of his mouth, she also wiped away the white-crusting saliva. Sometimes Jude would study sights so hard, he would forget to swallow. Their parents had always been averse to that habit. They'd claimed it made Jude look—well, Kailey refused to remember the word, let alone say it.

She glanced into the back seat at the cats, who curled on the gray padding like a yin and yang of felines. One with black short hair and one with white long hair.

"We're here, Edgar. Poe." Kailey addressed the cats instead of Jude. Sometimes it was better to leave her older brother in the depths of his mind. Conversing was stressful.

Poe didn't bother to open his blue eyes, but the tip of his fluffy white tail twitched in response. Edgar's yellow eyes slit with narrowed suspicion.

"Yes. I know." Kailey unbuckled her seat belt and reached into the back seat with a grunt. She scratched Edgar between the ears. The cat tilted his head back slightly, his one fang on the left side of his mouth exposed as his upper lip pulled upward in a catlike snarl. It was really his way of smiling. But no one believed that either.

She should have buckled her cats in for the car ride. Or rather, put them in a carrier and buckled the carrier in. But it stressed them out too much—stressed *Jude* out too much. The incessant meowing set him on edge, and even though Jude also drew comfort from them, he didn't handle nervous energy well. Which made her own struggle with nerves and anxiety a bit of a quandary on more than one occasion.

"Okay, okay," Kailey breathed, reaching back to tug out her elastic band and let her straight dark hair fall around her shoulders. She fluffed it, snapping down the visor to take a quick glance in the mirror. Her mascara was smudged. She fixed it, and as she did so, she saw the white cat in the back seat. Poe opened a blue eye and yawned, a tiny irritated squawk releasing from his throat.

"Fine." Kailey could take a hint. While Edgar tolerated Kailey's affection and reasonable self-confidence issues, Poe had no patience for it. He was the man in the foursome that was made up of Jude, the two cats, and herself. There was no insult to Jude to identify the white cat as such. Poe would take on Dwayne Johnson himself if he felt it was necessary, and then he'd hiss in the man's face and make his customary little *pffft* sound before sauntering away.

Kailey studied her brother for a long moment. Jude's head nodded in a methodical motion. His mouth moved as if he were whispering, but there wasn't any sound. She could make some of it out, though, just by reading his lips. Numbers. Letters. He was reciting his sequences again. Sequences that never made sense.

Knuckles rapping on her window startled Kailey and sent Edgar flying into the back windowsill. Poe arched in a hiss. Jude didn't appear to notice the sudden interruption.

"Hello?" The definitively male voice was questioning. Kailey leaned away from her car door even as she eyed the intruder through the glass.

He had a dark brown eyebrow the color of wet bark on a tree after a rainstorm, and it cocked upward into an inverted v, while his left eyebrow remained as straight as a caterpillar on a warm

summer day. His eyes were gray and matched the tempestuous waves of Lake Superior behind him. They matched the gray sky. Everything here at Foxglove Manor was gray. Gray, stormy, and tumultuous. Exactly as Kailey remembered.

“Alive in there?” The man’s voice was hoarse—naturally so. Like he’d been yelling at a rave concert and never quite regained full use. His mouth was bordered by a well-trimmed beard. He waved a hand. There was a ring on his right thumb. It was black. Black silicone.

“Kailey Gibson?” he tried again.

Kailey jumped, the sound of her name startling her from her mental observation. She’d never outgrown living in her head. She’d simply outgrown talking. A ramification of eight hours huddled in a dark van with a stranger. Eight hours she would never get back.

Kailey rolled down the window using the hand crank. It was an old car she drove. Their uncle Tim’s. He’d willed it to her when he died last year of old age and a lack of things to do. At least that was how he described his death in his eulogy, which he wrote prior to actually “kicking the bucket.”

“H-hello.” Darn stutter. She didn’t have a speech impediment. She was just nervous, more so because the guy at her window was hot—in a rugged, Upper Peninsula sort of way. Clean-cut but with an edge of lumberjack, softened with a side of teddy bear.

He jammed his hands into his gray pants pockets and remained tilted at the waist, a quizzical expression on his face and a slant to his lips. He waited.

“Y-yes.” Dang it. Kailey tried again. “Yes, I’m Kailey Gibson.”

A hand shot through the open window. The same hand with the black silicone thumb ring. “Axel Pavlov.”

“Like Pavlov’s dog?” The words escaped Kailey before she could stop them.

He smiled, and it broke his face into laugh lines that stretched from the corners of his eyes. “I guess. My great-grandfather was Russian, but he was a farmer.” His eyes shifted to Jude, who remained fixated straight ahead, then back to Kailey.

“Mm.” Kailey squeaked and made herself smile. “Okay.” It was a paltry response that required action to deflect the attention away from her inability to make proper human conversation. Kailey made quick work of preparing to exit the car. She didn’t reach for Jude but tempered her voice into a familiar tone meant only for him.

“Jude, you need to unbuckle your seat belt.”

She could tell he’d heard and understood her.

Kailey waited, well aware of the presence of Axel Pavlov outside her window. He waited too.

“Jude,” Kailey prompted again. While she could unbuckle Jude herself, if her fingers so much as grazed him, he might launch into an episode. Touch was not a friend to Jude.

Finally, Jude reached for the seat belt, without removing his gaze from the view outside the windshield. There was a click, then the belt retracted. Jude reached for the door handle and pulled it toward him. The passenger door opened.

Taking his action as acquiescence, Kailey did the same with her door, but not before casting a nervous glance toward the cats. Poe narrowed his blue eyes.

*Yes, yes. I know, Poe. Chin up. Eyes forward.*

Was she the only person in the world who talked via ESP with their pet?

Kailey shook her head to clear her mind and realized Axel Pavlov continued to watch her. There was an entertained humor in the depths of his eyes, yet the taciturn expression on his face gave away nothing.

She glanced beyond him. To the expanse of water that was as frigid as the wind felt. Lake Superior in all its chilled glory. The sandy beach. The piles of driftwood. The massive cliff overlooking it all, and the manor. Foxglove Manor. A familiar stone house with layers of unremembered memories held captive in its walls and in Kailey’s mind. Goose bumps raised the flesh on her bare arms when another gust of wind blew strands of hair across her face and resulted in her hugging herself.

“Hope you brought a coat.”

Kailey wasn't sure if Axel was asking her or merely making a statement. She chose to believe it was a question.

“I did.”

“He'll need one too.” Axel tilted his chin up toward Jude. Jude stood on the opposite side of the car, ramrod straight, staring at the manor.

Kailey continued to nod in assent to the direction.

The moment grew more awkward.

Axel tipped his head toward the car. “Might want to grab them.”

“Oh!” Kailey laughed nervously. “Yeah. Yeah, good idea.” She spun, rolling her eyes at Edgar, who had perched himself on top of the gray wool pea coat she'd bought in 2010. It'd fit her well at fourteen. It was an old, outdated friend. Kailey opened the car door, yanked it from beneath Edgar, sending him jumping to the floor. She snatched a red hoodie emblazoned with a faded and crackled *Dungeons & Dragons* screen print that Jude could throw over his T-shirt.

“Jude? Here, buddy.” She slid the hoodie across the top of the car. Jude retrieved it wordlessly.

Shrugging into her coat, Kailey relished the sensation of its familiarity, even though the shoulders were a bit tight and she had gained several pounds since her early teens. She'd never been tall—or stocky—or even really anything but average. Four inches over five feet and a standard 135 pounds. Not light enough for the Superior winds to blow her off the cliff, but not so fluffy that her coat split at the seams.

“Why don't you guys come inside?” Axel motioned with his hand toward the manor. The wind whipped his dark hair in multiple directions. He seemed unaffected by it. “The residents are anxious to meet you, and Teri is probably going to accost you the minute you walk in.”

Maybe she'd paled a little, but there was a hitch in Axel's step as he guided her up the stone path. “I didn't mean that literally,” he assured her, studying her.

Kailey offered a squashed smile.

Teri Breckley was the person whom Kailey had been coordinating with. She was the director of the Foxglove Manor home, also the head nurse, and had been the one to interview Kailey over the phone for the position of a home aide.

Yes, Kailey understood she wasn't remarkably qualified for the position.

Yes, Kailey recognized her high school diploma and an associate degree didn't lend itself to home health care.

No, she didn't have a problem serving as an elderly person's companion or helper.

No, she had no qualms assisting with meals, changing linens, helping groom or bathe a resident.

Yes, she understood it was unorthodox to request to bring her brother and expect him to receive free room and board.

Yes, it was okay to take fifty percent of her earned wages back to offset their accommodations for Jude.

No, she didn't expect them to help with her autistic brother.

And so forth. Details. All of which Teri had been cordial enough to arrange and make accommodations for, but Kailey had to assume that she was hired as an aide simply because few people had applied for the position. A position that included room and board in the remarkably old stone manor. What Teri Breckley didn't know was that Kailey had come to Foxglove Manor when she was five. It had been a summer rental then, and her family had been trying to discover respite here on the cliffs of Lake Superior. Kailey's mom had ruined that option and it had only been the beginning of a horrible nightmare.

They followed Axel past a tilting and tumbling stone fence. Jude remained a solid eleven paces behind. Eleven, because Kailey's feet would take up the twelfth pace, making the distance between them even and mathematically geometric in Jude's mind. That he didn't account for his own feet, therefore leaving only ten paces between them, didn't bother Kailey. So long as it made sense to Jude, that was what mattered most.

The familiar heavy wood door with its arched entry greeted Kailey as Axel opened it. He held it open with his left arm and stepped aside for Kailey to enter first. She was met with the smell of chicken gravy, most likely from lunch, and a whiff of peppermint. But more than that, she was greeted by a draft of cold air that curled around her ankles, crawled up her torso, and settled just under her skin. Even with her old pea coat on, Kailey shivered.

“Still cold?” Axel raised a brow, stepping in behind her and shutting the door.

Kailey scanned the entryway, its shadowed corners, its heavy wood trim, and its Gothic darkness that saturated every bare crevice. She nodded in response. “I’m always cold.” And she was. She had been cold since the day she had been taken when she was five years old. She had been freezing since the day she asked her brother Jude to tell her why their parents had died. And she’d been frigid since the moment Foxglove Manor’s door had closed behind them, the last time they’d taken exit of its dismal rooms, and the last time she had seen her mother cry.