A woman in a pink Victorian dress stands with her back to the camera in a gothic abbey hallway. She is looking out through a series of pointed arch windows. The architecture is dark and ornate, with high vaulted ceilings and stone pillars. The lighting is warm, coming from the windows, creating a dramatic atmosphere. The woman's dress has a large ruffled collar and a bow at the back. Her hair is styled in an updo.

SHADOWS  
*of*  
SWANFORD  
ABBHEY

JULIE  
KLASSEN

SHADOWS *of*  
SWANFORD  
ABBAY



JULIE  
KLASSEN



BETHANYHOUSE

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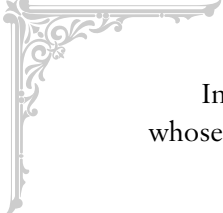
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In Memory of Katy Banton,  
whose smiles, prayers, and friendship  
brightened the world

1986–2020



The part of the abbey you inhabit  
is undoubtedly haunted.

—Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey*




The GENTLEMEN'S HOTEL in King-Street, Saint  
James's Square  
TAKES this opportunity of acquainting all  
Noblemen, Gentlemen, Foreigners,  
and others, that they may be accommodated with  
genteel Lodgings for one night,  
or as long as they think proper.

—Eighteenth-century London advertisement



A large party in an hotel ensured  
a quick-changing, unsettled scene.

—Jane Austen, *Persuasion*



For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of  
love and of a sound mind.

—2 Timothy 1:7 NKJV

# 1



MARCH 1820

WORCESTERSHIRE, ENGLAND

Miss Rebecca Lane quaked at the thought of returning to Swanford after more than a year's absence, even though her heart had never really left.

Inside the jostling post chaise, she prayed, *Please don't let him do anything foolish before I get there.*

Lines from their housekeeper's recent letter echoed through her mind.

*Your brother's behavior has grown more alarming. I fear what he might do.*

*I could not in good conscience wait any longer to write. I pray I have not waited too long as it is.*

Dread filled Rebecca again, as it had when she'd first read the words. Was John threatening to harm himself, or someone else, or what . . . ?

Rebecca sighed and leaned her throbbing temple against the

vehicle's smooth, cool window. Outside, the rolling countryside lay draped in March mist, its fields dotted with white sheep and new lambs.

Soon the tower of All Saints Church appeared above the treetops, and there, the tall chimney stacks of the Wickworth mansion.

Rebecca gestured out the window toward the village. "There it is. Swanford."

Beside her, the French maid slept on, but Lady Fitzhoward, their employer, gazed out as directed. "Ah yes." The older woman looked at her. "Are you glad to be home?"

Rebecca summoned the expected smile and nodded, though it was a weak effort. Inwardly, she thought, *Where is home?*

With her parents passed on, the vicarage, which was never actually theirs anyway, was occupied by the new vicar and his family. The underkeeper's lodge where her brother lived belonged to the Wilford family estate. And except for a brief visit the Christmas before last, she had spent the previous two years living out of trunks and bandboxes in one inn or hotel after another as a lady's companion. Perhaps in time, she could learn to be like Lady Fitzhoward and enjoy endless travel rather than longing for home. But she had not managed it yet.

The chaise turned off the main road and made its way past farmyards, cottages, and the village itself. Beyond it, imposing Swanford Abbey rose from the misty ground like an ancient headstone.

Before the sight of the old abbey-turned-hotel could rouse its customary trepidation, the chaise rumbled under an archway and into the adjacent stable courtyard.

A porter appeared to help them alight. Miss Joly, the lady's maid, awoke and climbed out first to direct the care of their employer's belongings. Lady Fitzhoward stepped down after

her, leaning heavily on the porter's hand until her cane reached the ground.

Following her out, Rebecca asked, "May I leave my trunk with you?"

The maid looked annoyed at the request, but Lady Fitzhoward agreed.

"Yes, of course. Joly shall have it stowed for you."

An old man in coarse work clothes hobbled into the stable yard, spade in hand. He paused, faded blue eyes fixing on Lady Fitzhoward.

"Purty flower . . ." he murmured.

The porter shooed him away.

When he'd ambled off, Lady Fitzhoward turned to Rebecca. "If a week with your brother is not sufficient, let me know. If I am not here at the hotel, leave a message at the desk. As I mentioned, I hope to visit friends while I'm in the area."

Rebecca nodded. "I shall, thank you. And thank you again for changing your plans to accompany me."

Seeing her preparing to depart, the porter offered to summon a fly to take Rebecca the rest of the way.

She politely declined. The distance across the village and through the wood to the lodge was more than a mile. But the day was fine and her purse light, so she decided to go on foot.

She retrieved her valise and bandbox from among the pile of baggage, bid the two women farewell, and turned to go. After a few steps, her valise felt heavy, but it was nothing to the guilt she carried.

Rebecca walked up Abbey Lane, past the busy High Street, and along the village green framed by thatched cottages on two sides. Reaching All Saints Street, she turned right and walked by half-timbered houses hugging the cobbled street, and the Swan & Goose, the tang of sour ale emanating from the public house.



She crossed the river bridge and walked out of town. It would have been faster to continue past the church and vicarage, but she was not ready to face those poignant memories just yet.

As she followed the river toward the wood, a child's wail pierced the air, followed by heartbroken sobs. She glanced around, trying to locate the wee sufferer, and there, under a sprawling English oak, stood a boy of four or five in long pantaloons with high waist buttoned to a jacket above. A wide, frilly shirt collar rested on little, heaving shoulders.

Rebecca set down her things and hurried over to him.

"What is it? What's wrong?"

Eyes wet and nose running, the boy pointed up into the tree.

There, high above, a kite lay snared in the branches, its tail and string entangled in the gnarly limbs.

"Oh dear. That is a pity." Rebecca looked around for help. "Where do you live?"

He wiped his sleeve under his glistening nose and pointed over the river, narrow here, to the back of the vicarage.

"And are you out here alone?"

He shook his head and began sobbing again.

A girl a few years older appeared, carrying a long stick.

"Do hush, Colin. You are not a baby anymore. I will try to get it down for you."

Seeing her, the girl hesitated, then explained, "He was given that kite for his birthday and breeching. I was supposed to help him fly it, but the wind grabbed hold and would not let go."

"I see." Rebecca surveyed the tree and considered the situation. "I shall go up for it," she offered. "You stay here and watch over your brother, will you?"

The girl's eyes widened, then swept over Rebecca's neat carriage dress and hat. "You, miss?"

Rebecca nodded and unpinned the ornate hat—Lady Fitz-

howard's choice, not her own. The feather would only get caught in the branches. Then she tied her petticoat between her knees to keep from showing more than she wished.

She looked around again, glad there was no one but these two children to witness her unladylike act.

Seeing a cracked wagon wheel abandoned beside a nearby tree, she rolled it over and propped it against the trunk to form a sort of step stool. The lowest branch grew almost horizontally before curving upward. It had always reminded her of an elephant with its trumpeting trunk, like the one she'd seen at Astley's Amphitheatre. The branch was too high for the children to reach, but with the help of the wheel, she managed to lift one foot to the Y between it and the trunk, grasp the branch with gloved hands, and half swing, half lift herself up, the bark rough against her delicate stockings, which would no doubt be ruined.

From there, she righted herself and began the relatively easy feat of climbing the remaining branches as one would a ladder.

Below her, the children clapped, and she felt rather like a performer at Astley's herself.

Rebecca had never been afraid of heights and had happily scrambled up trees, including this one, as a girl, heedless of scraped hands and knees. But she was a woman now, out of practice and condition, and was soon breathing hard as she scaled the great oak.

Nearing the kite, she sat on one accommodating branch and propped her half boot on another for support. Then she began the tedious task of untangling the kite tail and string.

She looked down at the waiting children. The canopy of branches hid the girl from view, but the teary boy was in plain, vivid sight.

"Can you get it?" he asked. "Can you?"

Unexpectedly, her vision tunneled, and she felt strangely dizzy.

The scene and plea were all-too familiar, and upon its echoes she hurtled back through the years, looking down from a similar perch to a tearful John below, although several years older than this boy.

“May I?” he’d pleaded. “Please? Just this once?”

He’d wanted to climb up the tree with her. Begged to. Her parents had charged her with keeping an eye on her little brother—keeping him safe. She knew John was too young. Too unsteady. But he kept begging and whining and finally she’d relented, thinking if she kept him close, all would be well. She’d helped him up to the lowest branch and he’d climbed up from there, ignoring her warnings and entreaties to wait for her and not climb too high.

Heart pounding, she’d hurried after him but before she could reach him, he slipped and fell, landing on the hard-packed earth below, where he lay deadly still. . . .

“Are you all right, miss?” the girl called up, scattering her dark cloud of reverie.

“Em, yes. Just taking time to untangle.”

Rebecca lowered the kite, freed at last, to the outstretched hands awaiting it, then dropped the string as well.

She climbed carefully down, finally sitting on the lowest branch and preparing to jump. It seemed higher now for some reason.

Rebecca took a steadying breath and pushed off, stumbling to the ground. Getting to her feet, she saw the grass stain on her gown and inwardly groaned. Lady Fitzhoward had an exacting eye. She reached down and swatted ineffectually at the stain. Hopefully, Rose could help her remove it.

The little boy threw his arms around her knees, adding snot to the brownish-green stain.

The girl bobbed a curtsy. “Thank you, Miss . . . ? May I ask your name?”

“I am Miss Lane, and you are most welcome.” Rebecca gathered her things and straightened. “May I suggest the village green for your next kite-flying adventure?”

Grinning sheepishly, the children nodded in agreement and waved her on her way.

Reaching the narrow footbridge, Rebecca crossed back over the river and continued through Fowler’s Wood, approaching the lodge from behind. The thatched cottage had once been the underkeeper’s lodge, but the Wilfords employed only one gamekeeper these days and had let the lodge to John and Rebecca on very easy terms. She had lived there with her brother for a few years until financial and relational strain had spurred her to seek a position as a lady’s companion.

At her knock, the elderly cook-housekeeper, Rose Watts, met her at the door, the dear, sagging features lifting into a smile at the sight of her.

“Miss Rebecca! What a happy surprise. Thank the Lord.”

Uncertainty flickered. “Is it a surprise, Rose? I did write and asked John to let you know when I would be arriving. Perhaps he has not yet received my letter.”

The woman’s gaze shifted to a basket on the sideboard, overflowing with newspapers and correspondence. “Or perhaps it is still in that pile.” Rose looked back at her. “You did receive my letter?”

“Yes, that is why I am here. Is John home?”

“‘Course he is. He’s always home.”

Rebecca glanced from the dining parlour into the sitting room and saw that both were empty.

Rose sighed. “He’s in his room. Still asleep, most likely.”

“Asleep? It’s after three in the afternoon!”

The housekeeper’s lined face creased into an odd expression, half apology, half long-suffering frown. “It’s as I told you. He

stays up all hours, pacing back and forth and muttering to himself, then sleeps the day away. And when I try to talk to him about it, he becomes devilish angry.”

Rebecca went to knock on her brother’s bedchamber door.

“John? It’s Rebecca. I am back.”

No answer. She removed her hat and gloves and tried again. Still no response.

To distract herself from mounting alarm, Rebecca walked down the passage to the spare room where she usually slept, planning to stow her valise. She opened the door and froze. The room was an utter disaster. Between the door and bed, a small table haphazardly sat, piled high with sheaves of paper, as was the bed itself. Twine hung with pages stretched across the room. The side table and dressing chest were strewn with reference books, ink pots, spent candles, coffee cups, plates, piles of old clothes, and even John’s viola, which, as far as she knew, he had not played in years.

Rose stopped in the doorway behind her. “I am sorry, Miss Rebecca. He’s taken to using this room as an office and store-room of sorts. I would have asked him to clean it—or done it myself—had I known when you were coming. What you must think of me! In my defense, John has kept me busy writing a clean copy of his new manuscript.”

“I understand.”

Rebecca gestured toward the pages hanging on the line. “Why are those there?”

“I believe he spilled something and is drying them out.”

“I see. I shall . . . em, sleep on the sofa tonight, and we’ll sort it tomorrow.”

“Very well. Come with me to the kitchen. I have something else to tell you.”

She joined Rose for tea at the scarred wooden table. The

older woman said, “Since I wrote to you, I have learned that a certain author, and you will guess who I mean, wrote to reserve a room at the Swanford Abbey Hotel. I heard it from Cassie Somerton herself—she’s head housekeeper there. He arrived last night, and word is spreading fast round the village. I worry what John might do.”

Rebecca nodded, a new wave of dread washing over her. Why was that man in Swanford?

As they were finishing their tea, the Wilfords’ steward arrived, and again Rebecca tried to rouse her brother. “John?” she hissed through the door. “Mr. Jones is here for the rent. John?”

In the entryway, the stoic man shifted from foot to foot. “That’s all right, miss. Don’t want to spoil your homecoming. I’ll return another time.”

Face hot with embarrassment, Rebecca replied, “Thank you, Mr. Jones. I apologize for the inconvenience.”

And later, when Rose began setting platters of food on the dining table, Rebecca tried again. “John? Dinner is almost ready. Please join us.”

No reply. She pressed her forehead to the solid wood and added on a plaintive note, “John? Do answer. You begin to worry me.”

Finally, she returned to the kitchen and said, “You have a key to his room, do you not?”

Rose nodded as she poured gravy into a sauceboat. “Used it once when he didn’t respond, but he flew into a rage and warned me never to use it again.”

Rebecca raised her chin. “Well, he has not warned *me*.”

Rose handed over the key from her chatelaine, worry lines on her brow. Rebecca didn’t blame her. She was worried too. Worried her brother might have done himself a harm.

Rebecca strode down the passage, took a deep breath, and

inserted the key into the lock. Then she pushed the door open, the hinges creaking in protest.

There he lay, eyes closed, half-dressed, disheveled, lying amid jumbled bedclothes, wadded papers, teacups, empty whiskey bottles, smaller suspicious-looking brown bottles, and plates of half-eaten food. The air was foul with the cloying odor of sweat and spoiled meat.

She wrinkled her nose. “John?”

No reaction. Her heart banged hard.

“John!” she repeated sharply, slogging through the debris to the bed and shaking his shoulder.

His eyelids fluttered open. “What!” Displeasure and confusion puckered his face. “Becky? Why are you here? Leave me alone.”

*What’s wrong with you?* She wanted to shout, but the lump in her throat stopped her. She knew what was wrong—to some degree at least. He had never been quite right since that fall from the tree. The resulting head injury had left him confused, lethargic, and moody. A condition that had grown worse over recent years, exacerbated by a deep depression of spirits and too much drink.

And the cause?

She knew it all too well.



Frederick Wilford glanced around the Wickworth drawing room into the hall beyond. Everywhere he looked, the furniture, mirrors, and silent clocks lay shrouded under protective white Holland cloths—and had been for two years.

*Will I never be able to put the past behind me?* he asked himself. *Forgive her . . . and myself?*

The sound of hammering from upstairs seemed to pound

right into his brain. He rubbed ineffectually at his throbbing temples.

The front door burst open, the caller not bothering to knock.

“Freddy? I’m here!”

Frederick stepped into the hall to greet his younger brother, who lived in London but visited every year at Christmas and Frederick’s birthday.

Dapper, fair-haired Thomas set down his valise and handed his greatcoat to the suddenly appearing footman.

Frederick looked past him, expecting to see his valet. “Your man not with you?”

“No. Went off and got himself married, poor fool.” Then his brother glanced around, eyes wide. “You still have everything covered? Really, Freddy, this place is like a mausoleum.”

“Good day to you too, Tom. Welcome home.”

Thomas shook his head. “Wickworth has not been my home in ages, thankfully. Who would want to live here? Ghosts? Certainly not living, breathing people.”

“You know why everything is covered. We are renovating.”

“Are you? I thought you stopped all that after Marina died. The refurbishments were her idea, after all.”

“I have put off the plans for this floor. The men are working upstairs for the present, finishing the guest rooms.” He gestured behind himself. “But I can’t leave that gaping hole open between the library and drawing room forever.”

His brother’s eyes glinted. “Like a wound refusing to heal?”

Frederick frowned.

“Look, I can’t stay here again,” Thomas announced. “Not with these paint fumes and all this dust flying about. I left here with a rattling cough after Christmas. Let’s stay at the abbey—a birthday treat for you and a little holiday for us both. What do you say?”



Hammering started up again from above, making Frederick's headache all the worse.

"Come on," Thomas wheedled. "You are holding the canal meeting there anyway. Besides, when is the last time you've spent a few nights away from this place?"

*And from all the memories it holds . . .* Frederick silently added. "Very well. Assuming they have rooms."

Thomas beamed. "Excellent. You won't regret it. We shall have a merry time."

Frederick highly doubted it.



In the morning, while Rebecca was still asleep on the sitting-room sofa, her brother burst from his room with a stack of pages in hand.

"It's fate you're here now, Becky."

Startled awake, Rebecca surveyed her brother's unkempt appearance and fevered gaze. "Have you even slept?"

He shook his head, greasy dark hair flopping over his forehead. "Up working and thinking all night, and I've decided. You are the perfect person to place my new manuscript into his hands."

Confusion pinched. "What?"

"I've tried sending it to other publishers directly, and they all rejected it. Most without reading it. 'Declined by Return of Post'! My only chance is if Oliver will recommend it to *his* publisher."

Rebecca struggled up into a sitting position. "But would he? Considering your history with him?"

"Rose made a clean copy for me. He doesn't have to know it's my work until he passes it on to his publisher. We'll use a pen name."

Rebecca considered the plan and felt her brow furrow. “Will Mr. Edgcombe be at the hotel too? I met him that day, we—” She broke off, not wanting to remind John of that unhappy scene, and instead said, “Perhaps I might give the manuscript to him directly?”

John shook his head. “William Edgcombe died over a year ago. His brother, Thaddeus, has taken over, and he doesn’t accept unsolicited manuscripts either.”

“Then, might we not work on Mr. Oliver’s sympathies—remind him what he owes you?”

John sat on the sofa near her feet. “No, Becky. Do not mention me. You know it will put him on his guard. He’d probably burn it out of spite.”

“Or steal it,” Rebecca muttered.

“Maybe. But if I want to risk my own work, that’s my decision.” John’s eyes gleamed. “And if he does steal it again, we’ll be prepared this time. We have a copy and Rose has read it. Perhaps you might read a few chapters as well, as you failed to do before. Then it would not be my word against his.”

Remorse stabbed her. His fall from the tree was not the only injury she felt responsible for.

“There are no other options,” John went on, voice rising. “This is the only way.”

Rebecca didn’t trust Ambrose Oliver and couldn’t believe her brother would either. Moderating her tone, she said, “I don’t think it would be wise to—”

“Stop!” he interjected. “Don’t talk about things you don’t understand. I know far more about publishing than you do.”

Rebecca bit back a retort, realizing he was working himself into one of his fits of pique.

*Oh, John.* He could not be thinking rationally. Would his mind ever be right again? At peace?

She laid a hand on his rumpled sleeve. “You must forgive him, John, for your own sake. You are eaten up with bitterness.”

He scowled. “Forgive him? He stole from me. Ruined my chances and my name. Called me a liar. I should be threatening *him* with a defamation suit instead of the other way around. And would—if I had more evidence. Or the money for a more powerful lawyer.”

Rebecca sighed. She had heard it all so many times before. She said, “I don’t want to leave. I just got here. And I want to help—”

“You can help me far more at the abbey,” he insisted. “I already have Rose here. I don’t need two women scolding me. And take your things. Might be a few days until you have an opportunity to speak with him.”

“John, an unmarried woman cannot stay in a hotel alone.”

“Is not your Lady F staying there?”

“I am not certain. She said she might visit friends.”

He shrugged. “Either way, no need to be fastidious. It is not some gentlemen’s club in London. This is Swanford Abbey—perfectly respectable.”

She regarded her brother, another rebuke on her lips, but before she could reply he looked her in the eye and implored, “Please, please help me, Becky.”

In that moment, she saw John as a little boy, climbing onto her bed, his hair untidy and book in hand. “*Read me a story, Becky. Please?*”

Taking a deep breath, she said, “I will think about it.” She reached for the pages, but he held them away from her.

“Not these. You’ll smudge them. Read from my copy, if you care to. Not that you’ve ever cared about my work before. . . .”

Her stomach churned with that old familiar guilt along with unease. What should she do?

She just wanted her brother back as he had once been, but she feared that John was gone forever.

Donning her spectacles, Rebecca read a few chapters of John's draft—actually quite good, she thought—then set it aside to dress. She went into the kitchen and found Rose bent over a book of household accounts.

The cook-housekeeper looked up with a rueful shake of her head. "I am behind on my bookwork as well as the housework."

Rebecca sat down across from her. "John asked me to take your copy of his manuscript to Mr. Oliver."

Rose nodded. "I overheard."

"It seems a fool's errand to me, not to mention improper. I don't know that I should even try."

Rose lifted a veined, work-worn hand and framed Rebecca's chin with it.

"If that's all he wants, give it to him. Besides, better you than John himself. Best thing we can do is keep him away from the abbey until Ambrose Oliver leaves."

Rose was right. But the last thing Rebecca wanted to do was to go inside Swanford Abbey, a place she had avoided since childhood.

With a sigh of resignation, Rebecca made quick work of repacking her valise, then looked around the sitting room to see if she had forgotten anything.

She noticed that the Lane family portrait was no longer hanging above the fireplace. Had Rose or John moved it for some reason?

She stepped closer to the mantelpiece and saw that someone had propped three sketches there—awful, amateur, adored. Her mother had drawn them in the vicarage garden. The first showed the vicarage's paneled front door and listing porch,

woodbine climbing its columns. The second showed two children at play with a ball, meant to be her and John, she knew, although the simple drawing resembled neither. And the third was of a man in black—her father—standing beside the old rosebush, which reminded Rebecca of the hothouse flowers she had laid upon their grave when last she was home.

Rebecca looked above them, at the empty place on the wall. The sketches were dear, because her mother had done them, but they were a poor substitute for the professionally painted portrait of her parents and herself, with John as a toddler.

Rose shuffled past with a broom.

“Rose, where is our family portrait?”

The housekeeper hesitated, the lines on her face deepened by a wince. “Gone. John sold it.”

Rebecca’s heart sank. “Sold it? Why?”

“Needed the money. Or at least, wanted the money.”

“But who would even want our family portrait?”

“Don’t know. Was it done by someone famous?”

Rebecca shrugged. “Samuel Lines, I believe. Or one of his pupils. I was rather young at the time.” Betrayal heated her veins. “He had no right to sell it!”

“I understand your anger, my dear. But trust me, it’s not worth losing your only sibling over. Your living, breathing family is more important than any portrait.”

Rebecca squeezed her eyes closed and drew a shaky inhale. “I suppose you are right. I will wait to raise the issue with John. We have a more pressing matter to deal with first.”