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Chapter One

Fourwinds

June, 1898

It was an impulse stirred by the moon over the Downs that made me decide to complete my journey on foot. Such a night as this, I thought, standing outside the railway station in the moonlight that seemed almost liquid silver, is too great a gift to ignore behind drawn curtains and closed doors. It is to be fully experienced with all senses – lived, inhaled, absorbed.

It had been arranged that my new employer, Mr Farrow, would send a pony-chaise to meet me, but a series of misfortunes had delayed my arrival. My London train had departed late, and I had missed my connection; he must have given up expecting me until the morrow. At this hour there was no conveyance of any kind to be seen. At first wondering whether to spend the night in a local tavern and continue next morning, I then had the idea of walking. I asked the stationmaster to put my trunk aside until morning, explained that my destination was Fourwinds, and showed him the address.

'Mile or so up the lane there, all uphill, then turn left down a rough old track by a copse. Stick on that track and it'll bring you to the gates.' He seemed to feel unduly put upon by my request to store the trunk, and began, with a grudging air, to haul it towards the ticket office.

'I shall send for it in the morning,' I told him.

He accepted without comment the coin I gave him for his trouble. I shouldered the small pack in which I had my necessaries, and set off at once, past a coaching inn – with no coaches to be seen – and out of Staverton in the direction he had indicated.

As the sounds from the inn and the lights from the stationmaster's house receded, I found myself alone, and very tiny, beneath the vast, starred expanse of sky. Coming from the London suburb of Sydenham, where I had lived all my life, I had rarely experienced such isolation as this, such silence. And yet, as my ears attuned to my new surroundings, it was not silence I heard: my feet trod steadily on the stony road; I heard the hooting of an owl, the screech of some unseen creature in the verge, the faintest rustle of grasses sighing against each other. I was on a high, open road, curving over the swell of hillside that I saw as the flanks of some prehistoric animal, deep in slumber. The moonlight was so strong as to throw my shadow beside me on the road as a mute companion; and so I found myself not quite alone after all, taking a childish pleasure in my shadow-self as it matched me stride for stride. I could see quite clearly my road curving ahead, and the clump of trees, inky black, that marked my turning point.

From here, my track took me sharply left. Chalky and bare, it formed rough undulations over the ground, leading me to the brow of a low hill; chalk stones grated underfoot. Fourwinds, the house at which I was to take up employment, apparently lay in a very isolated spot, for I could see no sign of habitation, no friendly lamp in a farmhouse window, no plume of smoke from a shepherd's humble croft. I felt very conscious of travelling from one stage of my life to the next: every step away from the road carried me farther from London, my mother and sister, the art school and my friends there; each tread brought me nearer to the house and its inhabitants, of which, and of whom, I knew very little.

Reaching the highest point of the track, I glanced about me; and saw now that my track descended into woodland, dense and dark. The stationmaster had mentioned no wood; but perhaps the omission could be ascribed to his hurry to finish work for the night. I hesitated; then, as sure as I could be that I had made no mistake, continued on my path down into the valley and the shadows of the trees.

Darkness swallowed me; the branches arched high overhead; I saw only glimpses of the paler sky through their tracery. My feet crunched beech mast. I smelled the coolness of mossy earth, and heard the trickle of water close by. As my eyes accustomed themselves to dimmer light, I saw that here, on the lower ground, a faint mist hung in the air, trapped perhaps beneath the trees. I must be careful not to stray from the path, which I could only dimly discern; but before many

minutes had passed, wrought-iron gates reared ahead of me, set in a wall of flint. Though I had reached the edge of the wood, my way was barred. The gate must, however, be unlocked, as my arrival was expected.

I peered through the scrollwork of the gates. The track, pale and broad, wound between specimen trees and smooth lawns; I had some distance still to walk, it seemed. The mist clung to the ground, and the trees seemed rooted in a vaporous swamp. I tried the fastening; the left-hand gate swung open with a loud, grating squeal that echoed into the night.

At the same moment another sound arose, competing for shrillness with the gate's protest: a sound to make my heart pound and my nerves stretch taut. It was a wailing shriek that filled my head and thrummed in my ears; close enough to make me shrink against the gate, which I pushed open to its fullest extent against the shadows of the wall. Whether the cry was animal or human, I could not tell. If human, it was a sound of terrible distress, of unbearable grief. I felt the hairs prickle on the back of my neck, my eyes trying to stare in all directions at once. Instinct told me to hunch low till the danger passed. Dropped into such strangeness, I had acquired, it seemed, the impulse of a wild creature to hide myself and survive whatever perils were near. The metal bit into my hands as I clung to the gate. Attempting to retain a clear head, I reminded myself that I was unfamiliar with the sounds of the countryside at night. It must be a fox, a badger, some creature yowling in hunger or pain.

The next instant, all my senses quickened again as I discerned a movement in the shadow: a movement that resolved itself into a cloaked figure – slender, female – rushing towards me. As I had not seen her approach, she must have been lurking by the wall. In the confusion of the moment, the thought flitted across my mind that this might be a ghostly presence – the setting, the eerie light, the ground-veiling mist that made her seem to advance without feet, all contributed to this fancy. Since she appeared intent on collision, I reached out both hands to ward her off; but, unswerving, she grabbed me by one arm. I saw that she was not woman but girl – an adolescent girl, with hair wild and loose under her hooded cloak – and no ghost, but a living person, breathing, panting, alarmed. For it must have been she who had shrieked.

'Help – please help me!' she begged, tightening her grip on my arm, and peering close into my face.

At once a different instinct was aroused – for now I must be protector, not prey. 'Madam, I am at your service,' I assured her, looking around, steeling myself to confront possible attackers.

'Where is it?' she implored me, her eyes searching mine. 'Where?'

'Madam – miss! Please explain what is distressing you, and I shall gladly give what help I can.'

Thinking that I might take her with me to Fourwinds, where assistance could be summoned, I tried to free myself from her grasp in order to close the gate behind me, but she seemed equally determined that it should stay open. For a few moments

we struggled; I was surprised by her strength and tenacity. I tried to shake her off; I almost flung her from me; but she was like a terrier set on a fox, and would not be detached.

'Have you seen him?' she pleaded.

'If you might stand back and allow me to—' I began, but she burst out with, 'No! No! I cannot stop searching, while he is roaming free—'

'Who?' I enquired, looking about me again.

'The West Wind!' she replied, in a tone of impatience; and she tilted her head and gazed about in anguish, as if expecting a gusting presence to manifest itself above our heads.

'I beg your pardon?'

'The West Wind!' she repeated. 'He must be found – captured, and secured!'

The poor young lady must be deranged, I realized, suffering from fits or delusions – had escaped, maybe, from some institution. For why else should a young woman of her tender years be out alone at night, so far from habitation, and on such an extraordinary mission?

With the gate closed at last, I thought it best to humour her. 'I'm afraid I have no idea where to look,' I answered.

She turned her head rapidly this way and that; she gazed at me again. 'Who are you?' she demanded, almost rudely.

'My name is Samuel Godwin, and I am on my way to Fourwinds. A Mr Ernest Farrow lives there.'

'Oh! To Fourwinds!' she repeated, as one struck

by an amazing coincidence – although we were, presumably, in the grounds of that very house. For a few moments she stared at me; then, abruptly, her manner changed. She stepped back, making an effort to breathe more calmly; she straightened herself and seemed to grow taller; she became, in effect, a different person. 'Then – you are my new tutor.' She extended a hand to shake mine, as formally as if we were being introduced in a drawing room. 'I am very pleased indeed to meet you – I am Marianne Farrow, one of your two pupils. Let me lead you to the house, and introduce you to my father and sister.'