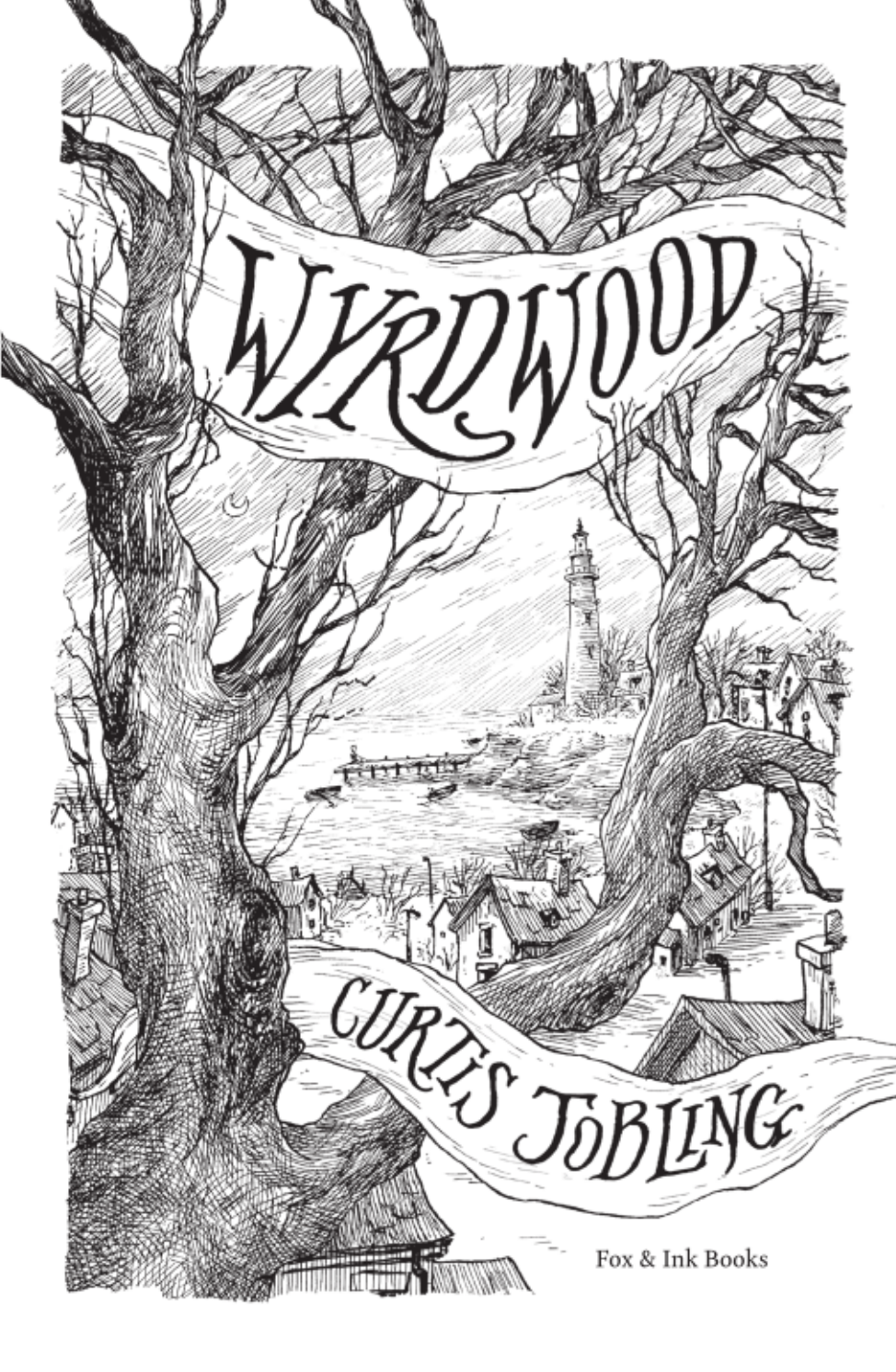

WYRDWOOD
CURTIS JOBLING
Fox & Ink Books

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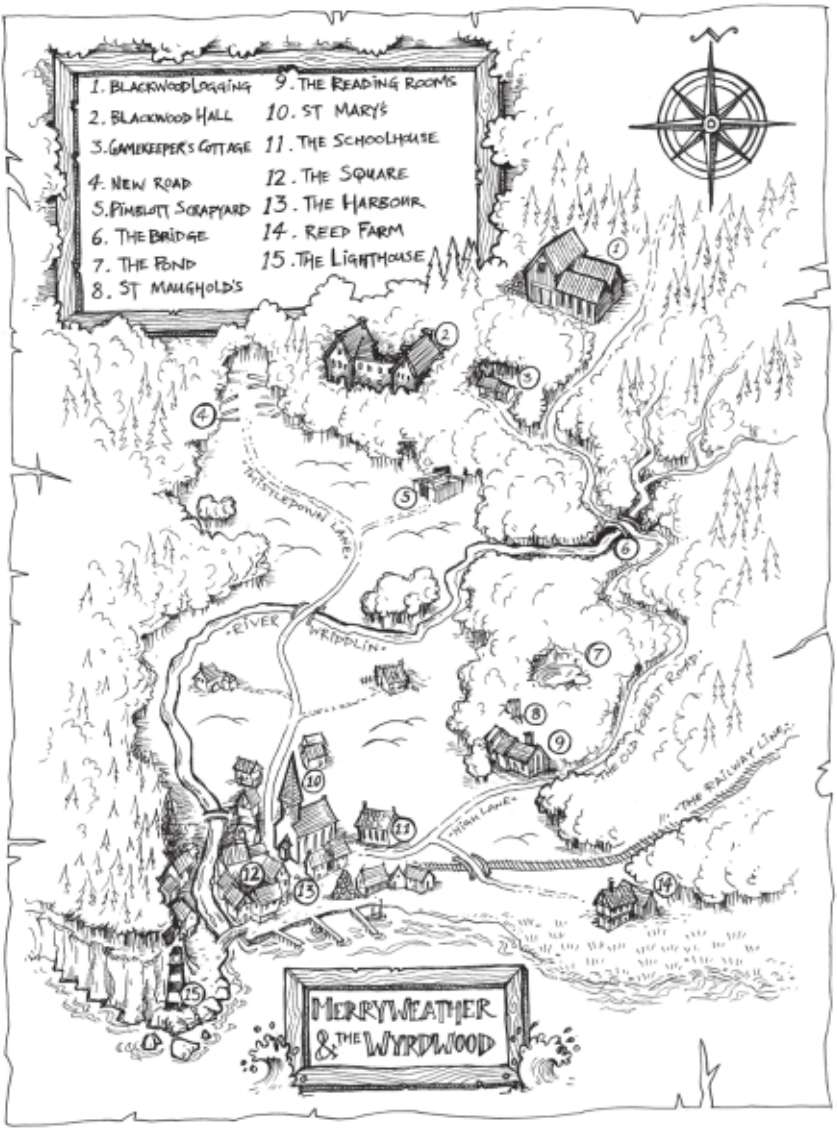
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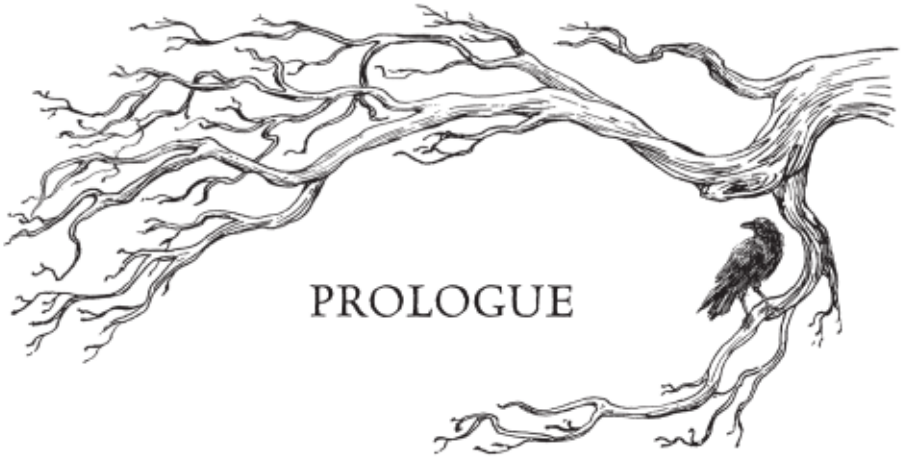
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For the Tuesday Night Players –
Andy, Ian, Mark and Nick


1. Blackwood Logging
2. Blackwood Hall
3. Gamekeeper's Cottage
4. New Road
5. Pimblott Scrapyard
6. The Bridge
7. The Pond
8. St Maugholds
9. The Reading Rooms
10. St Mary's
11. The Schoolhouse
12. The Square
13. The Harbour
14. Reed Farm
15. The Lighthouse
Thistledown Lane
River Weddlin
The Old Forest Road
The Railway Line
Mill Lane
Merrymeather & the Wyrdwood



AUTUMN



PROLOGUE

ALPHA'S PAWS KICKED UP THE LEAVES, SHOWERS of red, brown and gold thrown high in his wake. Sam Harper watched the dog go, pursuing a rabbit with boundless energy and hopeless optimism. He envied how simple life was for the hound, as it scampered over a nearby rise.

Strictly speaking, Alpha was Kiki's dog, but with his daughter away at boarding school the task of training the young dog had fallen to Sam. As an author who spent hours in front of his computer all day, he couldn't complain; an hour-long yomp through the Wyrdwood usually resolved any writer's block he was experiencing and put a smile on his face in the process.

A harsh wind suddenly whipped at his back, snapping against his overcoat. He turned his waxed collar up as leaves took flight from the forest floor, briefly whirling about him in a vortex. Sam looked around, realising he'd lost sight of his dog, and sound of him too. The forest was quiet but for birdsong and the breeze teasing the branches.

Sam quickened his step, heading off up the rise where he'd

last seen the collie. The ground underfoot was mulch, the fallen autumn leaves already decomposing, making his ascent slippery and slow-going. Reaching the summit, Sam found Alpha a couple of metres down the slope. The dog was 'on point', his nose aimed straight ahead in the direction of the nearby logging road that cut through the forest.

"What on earth's gotten into you?"

Alpha barked three times, harsh and loud, and Sam followed his gaze.

Whoever the woman was, she didn't respond to Alpha's barking, her back turned to the man and his dog. Her blonde, breeze-tossed tresses flashed like spun gold in dawn's autumn light, while in her fist she gripped a long twig, her knuckles white and tense. She stood in an apparent trance, strangely motionless in the middle of the Old Forest Road. At first glance Sam thought her a ghost, for a shimmering glow seemed to radiate from her. A second later, and with his eyes focusing, Sam realised it was the woman's skin that shone, pale as alabaster, from head to toe. And from head to toe was no exaggeration, for Sam now saw the woman was completely naked. The wind caused her trailing hair to rise and fall, coiling about her with a life of its own.

What was she doing out in the cold, naked and alone? Was she lost?

"Hello there!" shouted Sam. "Are you all right?"

There was no reply.

Has she even heard me?

Beyond the woman was a hairpin bend in the road, a great

bank of trees obscuring the route ahead. Not hidden from view for Sam, though. From his vantage point he could see clouds of diesel exhaust following a Blackwood timber wagon as it departed the lumber yard. He could hear the low growl of its engine as it now rumbled into view. Where the woman was standing, she was entirely hidden from the driver's perspective in his cab and would only be visible when he rounded the sharp bend.

"You need to get off the road!"

Sam began walking, and then to run, painfully aware the woman wasn't reacting to his shouts. Alpha bounced through the treeline, barking with agitation and rising panic, adding his voice to his master's. The wagon was closer, its thunderous engine causing birds to take flight from the nearby trees.

"Move!"

Sam's cry was more of a shriek now. He stumbled up the road's embankment, the dirty exhaust smoke rising over the treetops as the eighteen-wheeler approached the blind corner.

The woman didn't move.

The logging truck appeared around the bend, filling the road, the woman's shining white form in bright contrast against the filthy metal cab. Sam's legs powered him on as he dived, scooping her up in his arms. Rolling clear of the speeding vehicle, her body provided no resistance, her frame light as a feather. The trucker's horn blared its warning too late, but it didn't matter; the two were clear.

Both Sam and the woman tumbled down the embankment, leaves flying in their wake. Alpha bounded after them, yelping with concern. Sam threw an arm out to grab a sapling, slowing their

progress before they ended up in a muddy brook. His heart raced, blood surging, hammering through his head like a pneumatic drill. His mouth was dry, adrenalin working its strange magic on him.

The woman lay limp, unconscious. Alpha padded up to them, nudging her with his wet, black nose. Sam brushed him away, placing his palm over her forehead. She was burning up, her skin warm to the touch. He pulled at the end of the twig she held, surprised to discover her grip was as strong as iron, even though she was out cold. He looked back up the slope to the road, but to his dismay saw no sign of the lorry driver returning, let alone stopping to check they were all right. Taking off his coat, Sam wrapped it about the naked woman, pulling the wax jacket tight about her torso. With cold, tattered fingertips he fastened the buttons closed along its length.

Picking her up, her head lolling against his chest, Sam inhaled the scent of fresh flowers that spoke of spring meadows. It wasn't the last time something about the woman would strike him as odd, especially in the dying throes of autumn. Setting off through the woods, the ghost-white woman cradled in his arms, he noticed the birds and squirrels providing an audience in the trees, sat in branches on high, silently watching them pass by.

"Come," he called back to Alpha.

The dog didn't immediately follow. He stared into the woods and released a low growl, a parting shot at some unseen menace. Then Alpha was off, close to Sam Harper's heel as his master made his way home through the dark of the forest.