

LORD OF THE HEIGHTS

A WUTHERING HEIGHTS FAE ROMANTASY

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This is a work of fiction.

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PROLOGUE

The moors do not forget. Neither do I.

It began, as these stories always do, with a stranger. Mr. Lockwood, a writer seeking solitude and chasing inspiration, went off course in the storm and arrived at our threshold, dripping with questions. His mode of travel—he called his odd metal contraption a “car”—had gone lame, somehow becoming instantly inert once it neared our manse. It could be seen a short distance away during bolts of lightning.

He was clearly confused, maybe even fevered, mumbling about his sudden urge to take a fork in the road that didn’t appear on any map, only to be swallowed up by a mist and then thunderous rain.

He thought he was lost, but he just didn’t know ...

The Heights had already chosen him.

They had already whispered his name to me.

“You’d better come in before the storm takes you, Mr. Lockwood,” I told him, wishing he’d turned up anywhere but the Heights.

He crossed the threshold and the doors closed behind him, as definitively as a heartbeat silenced. He spun around, taking in the manse. “I feel like I’ve gone back in time. A place such as this shouldn’t exist now.”

He had no idea how right he was, but not for the reason he thought. The secrets these walls held.

We talked, and he was curious. Then I ushered him upstairs and showed him to his room, saying a silent prayer to the manor that it behave. Just for one night.

The manor liked to surprise its guests, and I had to be careful to guard its secrets. Tomorrow, he would be on his way to his destination, but tonight ...

Tonight he would see her.

Catherine. Wandering between worlds. A soul too wild for death to cage, pulled once again across the thinning veil. Drawn to the manor.

When, not too long later, I heard the anguished voice, and sensed her presence, I went back to his room and knocked on the door.

He turned the key and opened it, looking skittish.

"You had a visitor," I said.

"A woman," he confirmed, his voice hoarse. "She called herself Catherine. Said to tell *him* she'd returned. 'That the last barrier will break on the solstice and then he can step through the veil.'"

I tried not to show my shock, and I considered my next words carefully. "I feel your life already has an element of the strange to it, with your curious metal contraption outside. You'd better hear the truth, for it now involves you."

He looked at me for a long moment. "I would appreciate that."

I began to speak, and the manor and man listened. I told him of the boy who was not a boy, brought home in a storm not unlike this one. Of Catherine, born with fire in her blood and moss between her toes. Of the bond between them, wild and ancient. Of curses, of fae treaties carved in stone and blood, and of how love can break the spine of time itself.

I told him everything.

And then, as the storm rose again and the walls thrummed with old power, I wondered if I said too much, or not enough.

Because tonight, Mr. Lockwood ... they are returning.

And Wuthering Heights is waking.

ONE

The first lie the Yorkshire Moors tell you is that they are empty.

Unlike Nelly Dean, who spent most of her life in or nearby the haunted manse of the tales she weaves, I've traveled to the most remote corners of the earth, documenting forgotten places that exist in the spaces between civilization, and yet I have never encountered a landscape so deceptive as these moors. They appear barren from a distance. Rolling expanses of heather and gorse, occasional stone formations rising like the bones of ancient beasts. They're alive with secrets.

Tonight, they were especially treacherous.

My name is James Lockwood, and I write about places that others have abandoned or forgotten. Ruins, ghost towns, remote outposts, I find them, inhabit them briefly, and capture their essence in words that make comfortable people shiver from the safety of their reading nooks. It's made me modestly famous and comfortably wealthy, though I rarely stay in one place long enough to enjoy either status.

This assignment was supposed to be different. Three months in solitude at a renovated cottage called Thrushcross Grange, writing not about the place itself but using it as a retreat to complete my first proper book. My publisher had arranged it all. "Yorkshire's perfect for you, James. Isolated, atmospheric, steeped in literary tradition. You'll love it."

I should have known better than to arrive in winter, in the middle of a storm. And, if Nelly is to be believed, there was something about myself which had pulled me through an unexplainable time portal to explore a Wuthering Heights more than two hundred years past.

I'm still trying to wrap my head around what happened, and I have no bloody idea how I am going to get back home, to my time, but I've chosen to embrace this hurdle in my journey.

The storm had hit with unexpected ferocity about twenty miles from my destination. The rain came first. Not the gentle English drizzle I'd anticipated, but sheets of water slamming horizontally into my windshield, overwhelming the wipers of my rental car. The temperature plummeted as darkness fell, and the rain began to freeze on contact with the narrow road that twisted through the vast emptiness of the moors.

I leaned forward, straining to see through the maelstrom, my headlights barely penetrating the darkness more than a few feet ahead. My GPS had begun to malfunction an hour before, the blue dot of my location jumping erratically before settling into a stubborn "signal lost" message. My phone showed no service bars whatsoever.

"Bloody brilliant," I muttered, slowing to a crawl as another gust of wind threatened to push my small car off the road entirely. "Middle of nowhere, storm of the century, and everything that connects me to civilization decides to die simultaneously."

The road forked unexpectedly, neither branch marked by any sign I could discern through the downpour. To the right, the path continued along relatively flat terrain. To the left, it rose sharply, winding up toward what appeared to be higher ground. Logic dictated I should take the easier path, especially in these conditions.

I turned left.

Even as I made the turn, a voice in the back of my mind questioned the decision. Why choose the more difficult route, in a storm, with visibility near zero? Yet I felt a certainty that grew with each yard I drove up the winding path. This was where I needed to go.

The storm intensified as I climbed. Lightning split the sky in jagged bursts of purple white, illuminating the landscape in photographic flashes. In those brief moments of clarity, I caught glimpses of a world transformed by the tempest; twisted trees bent double by the wind, small streams turned into torrents that cut across the road, and in the distance, something substantial and dark against the horizon.

Then, defying all logic of a thunderstorm, there was a sudden, crackling mist. Directly ahead. It seemed as if tiny bolts of lightning streaked across the road, and my vehicle slowed down for a few seconds, as it passed through the fog, like it was encountering some kind of resistance, or a barrier of sorts. Once through, my headlights flickered, died, then returned with half their previous strength. The car's engine sputtered alarmingly.

"Don't you dare," I said to it, patting the dashboard like one might soothe a nervous animal. "Not now."

Another flash of lightning, closer this time, and in its aftermath I saw it clearly. A manor. If such an ordinary word could apply to the structure that loomed before me.

The building stood perhaps a quarter mile ahead, silhouetted against the storm-wracked sky. Constructed of dark stone that seemed to absorb rather than reflect light, with sharp angles and a roofline that defied architectural logic, it gave the impression of something assembled by hands that understood human shelter only as a theoretical concept.

The next lightning strike revealed tall windows, like hollow eyes, staring down at the approaching road. A solitary light burned somewhere in the depths of the building.

My car chose that moment to surrender, the engine coughing twice before falling silent. The headlights slowly dimmed to nothing, leaving me in complete darkness save for the faint glow of my dashboard instruments. I turned the key repeatedly, but the engine wouldn't even attempt to turn over.

"Perfect," I said to the car. "Absolutely perfect."

I sat there for several long minutes, hoping the electrical system might somehow reset itself, but the storm only intensified. The wind rocked the car, and I felt certain that staying put might result in being blown off the road entirely, down into whatever rocky ravines bordered this godforsaken path.

I had little choice. The manor, strange and forbidding as it appeared, offered the only shelter in sight. I would have to make a run for it.

In my travel bag, I found a hooded raincoat that had served me well in tropical downpours but seemed woefully inadequate for this tempest. I pulled it on anyway, grabbed my phone and a small flashlight, and steeled myself for the dash.

The moment I opened the car door, the wind nearly tore it from my grasp. I forced myself out into the storm, and the cold hit me like a physical blow. The rain felt like ice needles against any exposed skin, and the wind cut through my coat as if it were tissue paper.

I switched on my flashlight, but its beam was swallowed by the darkness and rain. Lightning provided more illumination, each flash showing me the manor was closer than I'd estimated. I began to walk, then run, my shoes slipping on the muddy road.

With each step, the manor grew more defined, more impossible. What had seemed like architectural oddities from a distance revealed themselves as deliberate design choices that made little sense. The walls weren't simply dark stone but fitted blocks of a material I couldn't identify, with curious patterns worked into them; not decorative, but somehow functional, like circuit boards carved in granite. The roofline wasn't merely unusual but seemed to shift with each lightning flash, as if the manor were rearranging itself when not directly observed.

And it was far larger than I had initially perceived. What had appeared to be a substantial manor from the road was revealing itself to be something closer to a small castle, with wings and extensions that stretched in multiple directions, creating a footprint that sprawled across the hilltop.

A particularly violent gust of wind knocked me sideways, and I stumbled, dropping to one knee in the mud. My flashlight flew from my hand, its beam spinning crazily before extinguishing as it hit the ground. When I looked up, I realized I was now at the base of a set of wide stone steps that led to a massive wooden door.

I climbed the steps, fighting against wind that seemed determined to push me away from the entrance. The overhang of the roof provided some shelter, enough that I could catch my breath and examine the door more closely. It was ancient oak, blackened with age, banded with iron straps that had oxidized to a deep rust red. The door knocker was cast in the shape of a snarling beast, not quite wolf, not quite lion, but something that combined the worst aspects of both, with eyes that seemed to follow me as I reached for it.

I hesitated, my hand inches from the metal. An inexplicable dread crept over me, a certainty that once I announced my presence, something irreversible would be set in motion. I'm not a superstitious man, but in that moment with the storm howling around me and this impossible manor looming overhead, I felt a primitive fear that defied rational explanation.

Then a flash of lightning illuminated the moors behind me, revealing nothing but storm-lashed emptiness for miles, and I knew I had no real choice. I grasped the knocker, cold metal that seemed to vibrate slightly in my grip, and brought it down three times against the strike plate.

The sound it made was not the sharp report I expected, but a deep, resonant boom that I felt more than heard, as if the knocker had struck not wood but the membrane of some enormous drum. The vibration traveled up my arm to my shoulder, leaving a numbness in its wake.

Long moments passed, and I began to wonder if the sound had been loud enough to be heard over the storm, or if the manor might be abandoned despite the light I'd seen. I was considering knocking again when I heard movement from within. Not approaching footsteps, but a more complex series of sounds, as if multiple locks or mechanisms were being disengaged.

The door swung inward without a creak, despite its evident age and weight. Standing in the opening was a woman of indeterminate years, she could have been a well-preserved fifty or a hardened thirty. Her dark hair was pulled back severely from a face that might once have been beautiful but had been weathered by time and something else I couldn't quite name. She wore a simple black dress with a high collar, more Georgian than modern, yet it didn't seem like a costume on her, but rather felt entirely appropriate.

Her eyes widened slightly at the sight of me, but she betrayed no other surprise at finding a dripping stranger on the doorstep in the middle of a winter storm.

"Mr. Lockwood," she said.

A chill that had nothing to do with the weather ran through me. "How do you know my name?"

"The Heights has been expecting you," she replied, as if this explained everything. She stepped back, opening the door wider. "You'd better come in before the storm takes you."

I hesitated again, that sense of crossing an invisible threshold stronger than ever.

Then her warning, so practical amidst the strangeness, decided me. I stepped across the threshold, and the door swung shut behind me with the finality of a tomb sealing.

The entrance hall was cavernous, illuminated by what appeared to be gas lamps mounted on the walls. Their flames burned with an unusual bluish-green tint that cast the space in an otherworldly light. The ceiling soared upward into shadow, making it impossible to discern its actual height.

"I'm sorry to intrude," I said, suddenly aware of the puddle forming around my feet. "My car broke down on the road. I saw your lights ..."

"Yes," the woman said simply, as if this sequence of events required no further explanation. "I am Nelly Dean. I keep the Heights."

I extended my hand. "James Lockwood. I'm a writer. I'm supposed to be staying at a place called Thrushcross Grange, but in this storm—"

"You won't reach that place tonight," she interrupted, ignoring my outstretched hand. "The road will be impassable now. You're staying here."

It wasn't a question or an offer, but a statement of fact. I found myself nodding agreement, though I hadn't consciously decided to accept her hospitality, such as it was.

"You're soaked through," she observed. "Come."

She turned and walked deeper into the manor, clearly expecting me to follow. I did, leaving wet footprints on the flagstone floor. The entrance hall opened into a great room dominated by an enormous fireplace where logs the size of small trees burned with the same strange blue-green flames as the wall sconces.

The room was furnished with heavy, dark pieces that might have been antiques or might have been crafted yesterday, it was impossible to tell. They had a timeless quality, designed for function rather than fashion, but with an artistry to them that spoke of skilled hands. The walls were lined with bookshelves, filled not with decorative leather-bound volumes, but an eclectic assortment of books of varying ages, sizes, and apparent use.

"Wait here," Nelly instructed, pointing to a high-backed chair near the fire. "I'll fetch you some dry clothes."

As she disappeared through a doorway, I took the opportunity to examine the room more closely. Despite the roaring fire, the space retained a peculiar chill, as if the stones of the walls somehow generated cold rather than merely failing to retain heat.

I approached the bookshelves, curious what sort of library this strange manor might contain. The volumes were arranged in no discernible order: ancient tomes bound in materials I couldn't identify sat alongside poetry collections, with languages I recognized adjacent to scripts I'd never seen before.

I reached out to touch one particularly unusual spine, marked with symbols rather than letters, when a sound made me turn. It wasn't Nelly, but rather a subtle shift in the ambient noise of the manor, like the change in pressure when a door opens elsewhere in a building, but more organic. I had the distinct impression that the manor had taken notice of me.

"Ridiculous," I muttered to myself, withdrawing my hand from the shelf. "It's just an old manor settling."

Yet as I moved to the chair Nelly had indicated, I couldn't shake the feeling of being observed, not by human eyes but by something more diffuse, as if the manor itself was assessing me. The flames in the fireplace seemed to flicker in response to my movements, sketching my silhouette in distorted patterns across the floor.

I pulled out my phone to check if I had signal and was surprised to find the screen black, the battery completely drained despite having been nearly full when I left the car. I pressed the power button several times to no effect.

"Whatever that contraption is," Nelly said, returning with a bundle of clothing, "it won't work here."

She handed me a white shirt, a thick sweater, and a pair of dark wool trousers, all approximately my size but of a style I couldn't quite place.

"These belonged to a previous guest," she explained. "There's a washroom through there where you can change. Leave your wet things by the door; I'll see to them."

The washroom contained a claw-foot tub, a basin filled with warm water, and a wash cloth to cleanse myself.

I changed quickly, grateful for the dry clothes despite their strange provenance. They fit well enough, though the fabric felt unusual against my skin; the wool too soft, the cotton of the shirt too crisp, as if they'd been made to resemble normal clothing without quite achieving it.

When I returned to the great room, I found a small table had been set near the fire with a tray bearing a decanter of amber liquid and a single glass.

Nelly stood by the fireplace, her face unreadable. "You'll want something to warm you," she said. "It's our own making."

I approached the table cautiously. "What is it?"

"Just spirits," she replied, with the ghost of a smile. "Nothing you need fear, Mr. Lockwood."

I poured a small measure into the glass and sniffed it, a complex aroma of honey, herbs, and something metallic underneath. I took a tentative sip and felt

instant warmth spread through my chest, radiating outward to my limbs. The taste was unlike any spirit I'd encountered before, simultaneously sweet and bitter, with notes I couldn't identify.

"This is excellent," I said truthfully. "Thank you for your hospitality, Mrs. Dean. I hope I'm not imposing too greatly."

"The Heights takes who it wants," she said cryptically. "You should rest now. I've prepared a room for you."

I glanced at my watch, an old mechanical timepiece that had survived numerous adventures, only to find it had stopped; the hands frozen at 7:13 p.m., though when that had happened I couldn't say.

"What time is it?" I asked.

Nelly looked at me as if the question were somehow inappropriate. "Time behaves differently here, Mr. Lockwood. It's late. That's all that matters."

She led me up a grand staircase that curved along the wall of the entrance hall, the stone steps worn in the center from centuries of use. The upper floors of the manor were a labyrinth of corridors that seemed to follow no logical plan, turning at odd angles and occasionally presenting identical doors on opposite walls. I tried to maintain my sense of direction, but after the third turn, I was completely disoriented.

"How large is this manor exactly?" I asked, attempting to sound casual rather than uneasy.

"Larger on the inside," Nelly replied without turning around. "That's what people usually say when they notice."

We passed a series of closed doors before she finally stopped at one that appeared identical to the others. She produced an old iron key from her pocket and unlocked it, pushing the door open to reveal a spacious bedroom.

"You'll be comfortable here," she said, handing me the key.

I looked around in wonder. "Are these genuine antiques?"

Nelly looked at the same furniture my gaze fell upon and frowned, as if my words implied a slight insult. "Well, they might not be the latest season's taste, but they are no more than a generation 'aged.'"

My eyebrows furrowed. "I know of nothing made in the 21st century looking as resplendent as this. Or the late 20th century either."

"I had expected you to be more interested in the manor, not transfixed by its furnishings." She looked at me carefully. "Sometimes the words you use are strange, Mr. Lockwood. Surely you know it is 1801 here?"

My eyes bulged, shock evident on my face. Then I laughed. "Is this a ... reenactment manor? Am I being punked? Is someone going to jump out at me and say, 'Surprise!'"

She cleared her face of all and any expression. "Perhaps you need a calming tonic before bed?"

I felt slightly uneasy, but smiled. "I appreciate the consideration, but I am not in the habit of taking anything to impair my cognitive abilities when sleeping in a stranger's manor. Meaning no offence, ma'am."

She smiled. "None taken. Although, you'll likely wish you'd taken one after all, to get through the night. Lock your door, Mr. Lockwood. It's an old manor. Things wander."

Before I could ask what she meant, she turned and walked back the way we had come, her footsteps fading more quickly than seemed possible given the hardwood floors.

I entered the room, closed the door behind me, and turned the key in the lock with a solid click that provided more reassurance than it should have.

The bedroom was unexpectedly comfortable, almost cozy despite its size. A four-poster bed dominated the space, made up with crisp linens and what appeared to be hand-stitched quilts. A fire burned in a small fireplace opposite the bed, the flames here a normal orange red rather than the eerie blue green of the downstairs fires.

A writing desk stood near the window, an elegant piece that would have cost a fortune in an antique shop. Beside it, a bookshelf held a small selection of volumes, and I wondered if they had been chosen specifically for me or were standard issue for this guest room.

I crossed to the window, wiping condensation from the glass to peer outside. The storm continued unabated, lashing the landscape with wind and rain. Lightning illuminated the scene in stuttering flashes, revealing a view that should not have been possible given where I believed my room to be located within the manor.

Instead of looking out over the front approach where my car had died, I was gazing upon what appeared to be an internal courtyard surrounded by other wings of the manor; except that within this courtyard stood an ancient grove of trees that twisted and writhed in the wind. Their movements seemingly too deliberate, too coordinated to be explained by mere weather.

I stepped back from the window, disturbed. The types of trees I'd been able to see when approaching the manor didn't match the ancient, gnarled specimens below. I also found it hard to imagine a country house hiding a courtyard of such size. It almost seemed as though the manor had rearranged itself after I'd entered, or as if the bedroom itself had migrated to a different part of the structure altogether.

"You're overtired," I told myself aloud, hoping the sound of my voice would dispel the growing sense of unreality. "It's an unusual manor, built on irregular terrain. The courtyard was simply hidden from the approach road. Perfectly logical."

I turned my attention to the room itself, trying to ground myself in the concrete details of my surroundings. The furniture was solid, well-crafted, with an aesthetic that suggested it had been made for this room rather than purchased and placed here. I ran my hand along the carving on one of the bedposts, following the pattern of intertwined branches that spiraled upward.

As I traced the design, I realized with a shock that it was changing beneath my fingertips; the carved branches shifting subtly, extending new growth like accelerated time-lapse footage of a living plant. I jerked my hand away, and the wood became still once more.

"Trick of the light," I muttered, though the fire's steady glow provided no explanation for what I'd seen or, thought I'd seen.

I moved to the mirror above the dresser, intending to check my appearance after the ordeal of the storm. The reflection that greeted me was recognizably myself, dark hair plastered to my forehead despite my efforts to dry it, the day's stubble on my jaw, circles under my eyes from the stress of the journey, but something was wrong.

My reflection seemed slightly delayed, as if it were moving a fraction of a second behind me. When I raised my hand, the reflection followed just slowly enough to notice, creating a disturbing sense of disconnect. Worse, behind my shoulder in the mirror, I could see the door to the room, except it appeared to be open a crack, though I was certain I had closed and locked it.

I spun around to confront the actual door. It was firmly shut, the key still in the lock where I'd left it. When I looked back at the mirror, the reflection showed the door properly closed as well.

"Enough," I said firmly, addressing both myself and, irrationally, the room. "I need sleep."

I inspected the bed thoroughly before sitting on it, half-expecting to find some new impossibility, but it seemed to be exactly what it appeared, a comfortable, if antique, place to rest. I removed my borrowed shoes and lay down fully clothed, pulling one of the quilts over me.

Despite my exhaustion and the relative comfort of the bed, sleep proved elusive. The storm continued to rage outside, and the manor responded with creaks and groans that sounded too intentional to be dismissed as normal settling. Occasionally, I heard what might have been footsteps in the corridor outside my door, though never passing directly by, always approaching from a distance, then fading away before reaching me.

I must have dozed eventually, for I was awakened by a sharp tapping sound. I sat up, disoriented, uncertain how long I had been asleep. The fire had burned low, casting deep shadows into the room. The tapping came again from the window.

I rose from the bed and approached the window cautiously. The storm had, if anything, intensified. Rain and sleet pelted the window in sheets, making it impossible to see through clearly. I wiped the condensation away with my sleeve.

A woman's face appeared on the other side of the glass.

I recoiled, nearly falling backward in shock. We were at least three stories above the ground, with no balcony or ledge outside the window, there was no possible way anyone could be there.

Yet she was, her face pale, wild dark hair whipping in the wind. Her eyes were wide and desperate, her mouth moving as if speaking, though the storm drowned out any sound she might have been making.

"Who are you?" I called, though I knew she couldn't hear me through the glass and gale.

She placed her hand against the window, the white fingers splaying across the pane. Her lips formed words I couldn't hear, but I could read their desperate shape: "Let me in."

Logic warred with instinct. There was no rational explanation for her presence outside a third-floor window in a storm, yet her desperation seemed so genuine, so human, that I found myself reaching for the window latch.

As my fingers touched the cold metal, she spoke again, and this time, impossibly, I heard her voice, not muffled through the glass, but clearly, as if she were standing beside me.

"Let me in," she said, her voice melodic but rough, as if from disuse. "Heathcliff ... I've come for you."

The latch turned under my hand, though I wasn't conscious of having moved it. The window swung open with violent force, admitting a blast of freezing air and driving rain. The woman remained suspended outside, defying gravity, her torn white dress billowing around her.

"Who are you?" I asked again, shouting to be heard over the storm. "How are you doing this?"

Her eyes, an unusual amber, almost golden color, fixed on mine with feverish intensity. "Thirteen years," she said, though it wasn't an answer to my question. "Thirteen years I've been wandering."

A rational part of my mind insisted this must be a dream or hallucination, yet everything about the encounter felt viscerally real, the cold rain soaking my clothes, the wind tearing at the curtains, the woman's presence so palpable it seemed to change the pressure in the room.

"It has to be tomorrow night," she continued, her voice shifting between a whisper and a wail. "The solstice. The last barrier will be broken. I will come then to get you."

She moved forward suddenly, not climbing through the window, but simply *passing* through the opening as insubstantially as mist, then resolidifying before me. She was slight but radiated a strange vitality, an internal energy that made her seem larger than her physical form.

Up close, I could see that her skin had an almost translucent quality, the blue veins visible beneath the surface. Her dress, which I had thought white, was actually a faded ivory, edged with delicate embroidery that might once have been colorful now dulled to ghostly tracteries.

"You're not him," she said, disappointment clouding her features as she studied me. "But you will help. Tell him I have returned. Tell him Catherine has come for him."

She reached out, her fingertips brushing my cheek. Her touch was ice, a cold so profound it burned. I gasped, unable to move or speak.

"The old magics are stirring," she whispered, her face now inches from mine. "The Heights remembers. The blood oath remains."

Then she stepped back, her form becoming less substantial with each passing moment. "Tell him," she repeated, "that the last barrier will break on the solstice then he can step through the veil. He can come home."

And then she was gone. Not departed through the window or door, simply no longer present in the room. The window remained open, rain and wind pouring in.

I forced myself across the room and closed the window, securing the latch with shaking hands. When I turned back, there were wet footprints on the floor leading nowhere, and most disturbingly, a handprint of frost on the inside of the glass where she had touched it from the outside.

I retreated to the bed, huddling under the quilts, unable to process what I had witnessed. I kept my eyes fixed on the window until exhaustion finally claimed me.

When morning came, weak light filtering through the frosted window woke me. For a merciful moment, I thought the events of the night had been a particularly vivid nightmare, until I saw the evidence that remained.

The handprint on the window was still there, the frost refusing to melt despite the relative warmth of the room. Water stains marked the floor where rain had blown in, and most convincingly, a single strand of long dark hair lay on the pillow beside me; hair that was not my own.

A knock at the door startled me from my contemplation of these proofs. I rose, suddenly aware that I was still fully dressed, and turned the key in the lock.

Nelly Dean stood in the corridor, her expression grave. Her eyes moved past me to the window, noting the frost handprint with no surprise whatsoever.

"You had a visitor," she said. It wasn't a question.

"A woman," I confirmed, my voice hoarse. "She called herself Catherine. Said to tell *him* she'd returned. 'That the last barrier will break on the solstice and then he can step through the veil.'"

Nelly's face remained impassive, but I detected a subtle tightening around her eyes. "I feel your life already has an element of the strange to it, with your curious metal contraption outside. You'd better hear the truth, for it now involves you."

I looked at her for a long moment. "I would appreciate that."

And with that, Nelly Dean began to speak. Not of the present, but of a darkness that had been growing for decades.

TWO

Nelly Dean sat across from me in that strange, firelit room, her hands folded in her lap, perfectly still. Outside, the storm had lessened to a steady drumming against the ancient stones of Wuthering Heights, but the wind still moaned through the eaves like a creature in pain.

I had changed back into my own clothes, now mysteriously dry despite the previous night's drenching. The borrowed garments lay folded on a nearby table, and I couldn't help noticing that Nelly had not touched them since I'd set them there.

"You've seen her," Nelly said, her eyes fixed on the handprint I'd copied into my notebook, a crude rendering of the frost pattern that had still not melted from my bedroom window. "Catherine Earnshaw. Or, what remains of her."

"Who is she?" I asked, trying to keep my voice steady. "What did she mean about 'barriers are broken'?"

Nelly's gaze drifted to the blue-green flames in the hearth; they cast hollows beneath her cheekbones, aging her decades in an instant.

"To understand that," she said, "you need to understand everything. The Heights. The Earnshaws. The Lintons. And most of all, Heathcliff." She spoke the last name as if it were a spell, something dangerous to invoke without proper precaution.

"I'm listening," I said, pen poised over my notebook. The writer in me couldn't resist documenting this, even as the rational man struggled with what I'd witnessed.

Nelly's eyes found mine, and I felt a curious sensation, as if she were assessing not just my attention but my worthiness to hear her tale.

"I'll tell you," she decided finally. "Because the Heights has chosen you and because the barriers are indeed breaking again; between life and death, the past and future. What happens next may depend on what you understand of what came before."

She leaned forward slightly, and when she spoke again her voice had changed, deeper, with an accent that seemed to belong to another time.

“My name is Ellen Dean, though I’ve been called Nelly all my life. I’ve served at Wuthering Heights since I was a girl no higher than your elbow, and I’ve watched three generations pass through these halls. During that time I’ve witnessed love and hatred and things beyond mortal understanding unfold beneath this roof. And I remember when he first came, the boy who wasn’t a boy. The creature who became Heathcliff.”

The fire seemed to dim, and the walls of Wuthering Heights drew closer around us. As Nelly Dean began her tale in earnest, I could have sworn the manor itself was listening.



Nelly’s Tale Begins

I was fourteen years old when Mr. Earnshaw brought him home. That was many years ago, though sometimes it feels like yesterday, and sometimes like a thousand years have passed.

Wuthering Heights was different then, lighter, warmer, though no less strange. The Earnshaws had held this land for centuries, and the manor recognized them as its own. Old Mr. Earnshaw was master then, a stern but fair man with eyes that saw more than most. His wife was still alive, a frail, nervous woman who never fully acclimated to the peculiarities of the manor her husband had brought her to. They had two children: Hindley, fourteen and full of himself, and Catherine, six years old and wilder than any child I’d ever known.

I was nursemaid to Catherine then, though “minding” her was like trying to capture lightning in a bottle. Even as a small child of six, she had a quality about her—a brightness, a ferocity—that marked her as special. Mr. Earnshaw doted on her. His wife feared her, though she’d never have admitted it. Hindley merely tolerated her, too concerned with his own importance to pay much attention to his little sister.

And then there was me, watching, always watching. That’s been my role in this strange drama. The witness. The keeper of secrets.

It began with Mr. Earnshaw’s journey to Liverpool. He announced it at breakfast one autumn morning that he needed to conduct business in the city and would be gone for three days, perhaps four.

“Bring me back a fiddle!” Hindley demanded immediately.

“And I want fairy tales!” Catherine added, bouncing in her seat. “A book of proper fairy tales, not the dull ones from the vicar.”

Mrs. Earnshaw said nothing, only reached for her husband’s hand across the table. There was fear in her eyes. “You know what happens when you leave the grounds,” she said softly.

Mr. Earnshaw patted her hand. "Nonsense, Eleanor. That's just old, folk superstition."

But I knew better, and so did he. The Earnshaws were bound to this place by something older than deeds and titles. When they strayed too far, for too long ... the Heights had ways of reminding them where they belonged.

He left the next morning, riding out through the predawn haze. I stood with Catherine at her bedroom window, watching her father disappear into the swirling mist.

"The manor doesn't like it when Papa leaves," she said matter-of-factly, her small hand pressed against the glass.

"And how would you know that, Miss Catherine?" I asked, trying to sound amused rather than unsettled.

She turned to me with those extraordinary eyes of hers, amber, almost golden in certain lights. "It tells me things," she said simply. "At night, when everyone's asleep."

I should have been alarmed, should have reported such talk to her parents. But even then, I understood that Catherine Earnshaw existed half in our world and half in another. It was her birthright, though none of us fully comprehended what that meant. Not yet.

The days of Mr. Earnshaw's absence passed strangely. The weather turned, as it often did when he was away; clouds rolling in from nowhere, winds that seemed to circle the manor rather than blow across the moors. Mrs. Earnshaw took to her bed with one of her headaches. Hindley disappeared for hours, off playing with the stable master's son. And Catherine grew increasingly restless, pacing the halls at night, pressing her ear to the walls as if listening for voices.

On the evening of the third day, when Mr. Earnshaw was expected home, a storm blew in from the east. Much like the one that brought you to our door, Mr. Lockwood, though perhaps not quite so violent. We lit extra candles and built up the fires, but the Heights seemed to swallow the light, growing darker by the hour.

"He's coming," Catherine announced suddenly over dinner, dropping her fork with a clatter. "And he's not alone."

Mrs. Earnshaw frowned at her daughter. "Don't speak nonsense, Catherine. Your father will be home when he's home."

But Catherine was already out of her chair, racing toward the entrance hall. I followed, more out of curiosity than duty.

She flung open the front door just as Mr. Earnshaw was dismounting from his horse. The wind nearly tore the door from her grasp, and rain slashed in horizontally. Mr. Earnshaw looked exhausted, his clothes soaked through, his face haggard with fatigue. But what caught my attention was something he kept covered, clutched tightly against his chest beneath his coat.

"Inside, quickly," he ordered, pushing past us into the hall.

Catherine didn't move from the doorway, her thin nightgown plastered against her by the rain, her wild hair whipping around her face. She was staring at her father ... No, at what he carried, with an expression I'd never seen before: wonder, recognition, and something like hunger.

"Come away from there, Miss Catherine," I said, pulling her back and shutting the heavy door against the storm.

By now the commotion had drawn Hindley and Mrs. Earnshaw from the dining room. They gathered around Mr. Earnshaw as he shrugged off his sodden coat, revealing what he had been protecting from the storm.

It was a child, a boy, I thought at first, though that impression would shift and blur in the days to come. He appeared to be about Catherine's age, soon confirmed to be seven in age. He was small and thin, with a mane of tangled black hair that fell over his face. His skin was a deep olive tone, much darker than our Yorkshire pallor, and he wore nothing but a tattered shirt and trousers that hung from his frame.

"What in God's name is that?" Mrs. Earnshaw asked, one hand rising to her throat.

"A boy," Mr. Earnshaw said gruffly. "Found him on the streets of Liverpool. No name, no family that I could discover. He doesn't speak. Not English at any rate."

"And you brought it *here*?" Hindley's face contorted with disgust. "A gypsy vagrant?"

"He's no gypsy," Mr. Earnshaw said sharply. "And he is to be treated as one of the family. I've named him Heathcliff, after our son who died in infancy."

This pronouncement sent a shock through the room. The infant Heathcliff was never spoken of, the child born between Hindley and Catherine who had lived just long enough to be baptized before succumbing to a fever. Mrs. Earnshaw made a small, wounded sound.

"How dare you," she whispered. "How dare you give that ... that *creature* our child's name."

But Mr. Earnshaw wasn't listening. He had crouched down beside the boy, unwrapping a package that had been concealed beneath his coat alongside the child.

"I did bring your presents," he said, his voice gentler now. "A fiddle for Hindley." He held out an instrument that even I could tell was finely made. Hindley, fourteen years of age like myself, snatched it without thanks, still glaring at the newcomer.

"And for you, Catherine—" Mr. Earnshaw continued, but she was no longer beside me.

Somehow, without any of us noticing, Catherine had crossed the hall and now stood directly before the strange boy. They stared at each other with an intensity that would have been uncomfortable between adults, let alone children.

Neither spoke, but something passed between them, a recognition, a communication without words.

The boy raised his head fully for the first time, and I caught my breath. His eyes were not a child's eyes. They were ancient, fathomless, black as midnight, but with a strange gleam like stars reflected in a well. They swept over each of us, dismissing Hindley and Mrs. Earnshaw in an instant, lingering on Mr. Earnshaw with something like calculation, passing over me as if I were furniture before returning to Catherine.

Then, to everyone's astonishment, he smiled. It transformed his face from something almost frightening to something merely beautiful, though the beauty remained unsettling. Too perfect, too knowing for a child.

Catherine smiled back, and it was like watching two predators recognize each other.

"I knew you were coming," she said, her voice carrying clearly despite its softness. "I've been waiting."

The boy said nothing, but he extended his hand toward her, a strange, formal gesture for a child. Without hesitation, Catherine placed her small palm against his.

The candles throughout the entrance hall flickered simultaneously as if a draft had swept through the manor. But the air was perfectly still.

"Catherine, come away from him," Mrs. Earnshaw ordered, her voice tight with alarm.

Catherine ignored her mother completely, something that would have earned her a swift punishment on any other occasion. She kept her hand pressed to the boy's, her amber eyes locked with his black ones.

"His name isn't Heathcliff," she announced with absolute conviction.

"What would you know of it?" Hindley sneered.

Catherine turned to look at her brother, and there was something in her expression that silenced him instantly.

"He had a name before," she said. "But it's gone now. Lost. Heathcliff will do for his human days."

"Human days?" Mrs. Earnshaw repeated faintly. "What nonsense is this?"

Mr. Earnshaw laid a hand on his wife's arm. "She's overtired, that's all. Excited by the newcomer." But I noticed he didn't meet his wife's eyes as he said it.

"Nelly will see to washing him," Mr. Earnshaw continued briskly. "He'll sleep in the nursery with Catherine for now."

"I will not have that filthy gypsy brat near my daughter!" Mrs. Earnshaw protested.

"He stays," Mr. Earnshaw said, his voice suddenly hard. "And that's the end of it."

I'd never heard him speak to his wife in such a tone, and neither had anyone else present, judging by their shocked expressions. Mrs. Earnshaw's face crumpled, and she turned away, hurrying toward the stairs.

Hindley looked from his father to the boy with naked hatred. "We don't know what he is or where he's from," he spat. "He could be diseased. He could be dangerous."

"Oh, he is," Catherine said, with a delighted laugh that raised the hair on my arms. "He's very dangerous. But not to me."

"Enough, Catherine," Mr. Earnshaw said wearily. "Nelly, take the boy upstairs and see him bathed and fed. Find him something of Hindley's to wear, even if it's too big."

"I won't have him in my clothes!" Hindley protested.

"You'll do as you're told in my manor," Mr. Earnshaw snapped, his patience clearly at an end.

Hindley stormed off, clutching his new fiddle, while Mr. Earnshaw sank heavily into a chair by the fire, suddenly looking much older than his years.

I approached the two children, who remained standing hand-in-hand in the center of the hall.

"Come along, then," I said, trying to sound matter-of-fact despite my unease. "Let's get you both upstairs."

Catherine finally released the boy's hand and turned to me, her face alight with a joy I'd never seen in her before.

"He's going to change everything, Nelly," she whispered, though not quietly enough that Mr. Earnshaw couldn't hear. "The Heights knows it. That's why it's been waiting too."

I didn't know how to respond to such strangeness, so I simply herded them toward the stairs.

"Did Papa bring my fairy tales?" Catherine asked as we climbed.

I realized with a start that Mr. Earnshaw had never given Catherine her present. In the shock of the boy's arrival, it had been forgotten.

"We'll ask him in the morning," I said. "He's very tired now."

"It doesn't matter," Catherine replied, glancing back at the silent boy who followed us. "He knows all the stories anyway. The real ones, not the ones in books."

In the nursery, I filled the copper tub with hot water from kettles I'd set to boil earlier. Catherine perched on her bed, swinging her legs, watching with bright interest as I began to undress the boy. He allowed this with neither resistance nor assistance, like a doll being manipulated.

As I removed his tattered shirt, I had to stifle a gasp. His torso was marked with scars, some old and white, others newer and still angry-looking. But it wasn't their presence that disturbed me so much as their pattern. They formed

deliberate shapes across his skin, spirals, interconnected circles, and angular lines that reminded me of the ancient carvings on certain stones scattered across the moors. Not random injuries, but deliberate markings.

"Who did this to you?" I asked softly, though I didn't expect an answer from a boy who supposedly couldn't speak.

He looked at me directly for the first time, those midnight eyes seeming to see through me rather than at me. "Those who feared what I would become," he said in perfect, accentless English.

I nearly dropped the washcloth I was holding. "You can speak!"

"Of course he can speak," Catherine said impatiently. "He just doesn't always choose to."

The boy's gaze returned to Catherine, and the ghost of that unsettling smile flickered across his face again. "Only to those worth speaking to," he said.

I should have reprimanded such rudeness and should have reported to Mr. Earnshaw that the boy had lied about his abilities. But something stopped me, some instinct that warned against drawing attention to what I'd witnessed.

Instead, I finished bathing him in silence then dressed him in a nightshirt that had belonged to Hindley. It was far too large, making him look even smaller and more vulnerable, though I was already beginning to understand that appearances were deeply deceptive when it came to this child.

"You'll sleep here tonight," I said, indicating a trundle bed that had been pulled out beside Catherine's. "Tomorrow we'll sort out something more permanent."

"He's staying with me," Catherine declared. It wasn't a request.

"For tonight," I conceded, too exhausted by the evening's events to argue. "Now into bed, both of you. It's well past proper bedtime."

Catherine climbed under her covers without protest, which should have been my first warning. She never went to bed willingly. The boy sat on the edge of the trundle bed, his back very straight, watching me as I moved around the room, banking the fire and turning down the lamps.

"Goodnight, Miss Catherine. Goodnight ..." I hesitated, still uncomfortable with the name Mr. Earnshaw had given him.

"Heathcliff," Catherine supplied. "His name is Heathcliff now."

The boy, Heathcliff, inclined his head slightly, neither accepting nor rejecting the name.

I left them then, pulling the nursery door mostly closed but leaving it ajar, as was my custom so I could hear if Catherine woke in the night. I paused in the corridor, suddenly overwhelmed by a deep unease. Mr. Earnshaw had brought something into our manor, something that wore the shape of a child but was not, could not be, simply a child.

My room was just down the hall from the nursery, a small but comfortable chamber that had been mine since I first came to the Heights. I prepared for bed mechanically, my mind still turning over the events of the evening. As I plaited my hair, I caught a movement in my small looking glass, a shadow passing behind me, though I was alone in the room.

“Just nerves,” I murmured to myself. “You’re imagining things, Nelly Dean.”

But as I slipped into bed and extinguished my candle, I couldn’t shake the feeling that something fundamental had changed at Wuthering Heights, that a door had been opened that was never meant to be unlocked.

Sleep eluded me. The storm that had accompanied Mr. Earnshaw’s return had settled into a steady rainfall that drummed against my window. Beneath that rhythm, I became aware of another sound. Voices. Very faint, coming from the direction of the nursery.

I rose, wrapping my shawl around my nightdress, and crept down the corridor. The nursery door remained as I had left it, slightly ajar. A faint light spilled from the opening. Not the warm glow of the banked fire, but something cooler, bluer.

I peered through the gap, prepared to scold Catherine for lighting a candle after hours.

What I saw instead has haunted me for many years.

The two children sat cross-legged on Catherine’s bed, facing each other. Between them hovered a small sphere of light, not flame, but something like the glow of foxfire or those strange luminous fungi that sometimes grow in the deepest parts of the woods. It cast their faces in a ghostly blue pallor, transforming them into something other than children.

They were speaking, but not in any language I recognized. The sounds they made were liquid and strange, full of syllables that seemed to fold back upon themselves. Catherine’s voice was high and clear, while Heathcliff’s was deeper than any child’s voice should be, resonant with harmonics that made my skin prickle.

As I watched, frozen in the doorway, Catherine extended her hand, palm up. Heathcliff placed his hand over hers, and where their skin touched, that strange blue light grew brighter, sending tendrils spiraling up their arms like glowing vines.

Catherine laughed, that wild, fearless laugh that was uniquely hers, and the floating sphere of light expanded, filling the room with its eerie glow. For just an instant, I glimpsed something else in that light: the nursery walls seemed to become transparent, revealing not the familiar chambers of Wuthering Heights beyond, but a landscape I had never seen; towering trees with trunks as wide as manors, their branches interwoven to form cathedral-like spaces, and between them, figures moving with a grace that was not human.

Then Heathcliff turned his head and looked directly at me.

The light vanished instantly, plunging the room into darkness save for the dull red glow of the banked fire. When my eyes adjusted, I saw two perfectly ordinary children, apparently sound asleep in their respective beds.

I backed away, heart pounding. I told myself I had imagined it, a waking dream, a hallucination born of stress and the strangeness of the evening.

But as I turned to go back to my room, I noticed something on the nursery floor that hadn't been there before: a small, perfect circle of white mushrooms, their caps gleaming faintly in the darkness.

A fairy ring. *Inside* the manor.

I hurried back to my room and locked the door, something I had never done before at Wuthering Heights. As I lay awake until dawn, I kept thinking of old stories my grandmother had told me, of changelings and fairy abductions, of mortals stolen away to the realm beneath the hill, and of the terrible price paid by those who welcomed the Fair Folk across their threshold.

Mr. Earnshaw had brought something back with him from Liverpool, but I wasn't at all convinced it was a lost orphan boy. And whoever, or whatever, Heathcliff was, Catherine had recognized him instantly, had been waiting for him, as if his coming had been arranged long before Mr. Earnshaw ever set out on his journey.

As the first light crept through my window, I made a decision. I would say nothing of what I had seen. Not to Mrs. Earnshaw, who already feared the boy. Not to Mr. Earnshaw, who seemed compelled by forces he himself might not understand. And certainly not to Hindley, who needed no further reason to hate the newcomer.

I would watch and wait and protect those I could from whatever was unfolding at Wuthering Heights.

But even then, in those first hours, I knew that something ancient and perilous had entered our lives, and none of us would escape unchanged.

I fell silent, aware that the fire had burned low while I spoke. Mr. Lockwood stared at me, his pen motionless over his notebook, his face pale in the flickering light.

"You believe he was ... what? A fairy? A changeling?" he asked, his skepticism warring with the evidence of his own recent experiences.

"I believe, Mr. Lockwood, that the boundaries between worlds are not as fixed as we pretend," I said carefully. "And that Heathcliff came from somewhere ... else. Somewhere Catherine recognized, somewhere that called to the blood that already ran in her veins."

"What blood?" he pressed. "You speak as if the Earnshaws themselves weren't entirely human."

I met his gaze steadily. “The oldest families of these moors made pacts long ago, Mr. Lockwood. Bargains for power, for land, for protection. The Earnshaws more than most. Catherine was the culmination of generations of such bargains, human enough to walk in daylight, but with enough of the other blood to hear the manor speaking, to recognize Heathcliff for what he was.”

“And what was he?”

I glanced at the window, where morning light now struggled through the persistent storm clouds. “Even after all these years, I’m not entirely certain,” I admitted. “But I know this: he loved Catherine Earnshaw with a ferocity that transcended death itself. And now that the barriers between worlds are thinning, as she told you, he will stop at nothing to reclaim her.”

“But she’s dead,” Lockwood said, confusion evident in his voice. “You said this happened thirty years ago.”

“Death is a permeable boundary for beings like them,” I replied. “And Heathcliff ... Heathcliff has been calling her back. Working magics no mortal was meant to attempt. The storm that brought you here, Mr. Lockwood? That was no natural tempest. That was Heathcliff, tearing at the veil between worlds and, it looks like, maybe between time.”

“Where is he now?” Lockwood asked, his voice dropping to a near whisper.

“Here,” I said simply. “He’s always here. Wuthering Heights is as much a part of him as he is of it now.”

A log shifted in the grate, sending up a shower of blue-green sparks. Outside, the wind changed direction, now howling around the eastern corner of the manor, where Catherine’s old bedroom had been.

“There’s much more to tell,” I said, rising from my chair. “About Catherine and Heathcliff’s bond, about the tragedy that drove her to choose another, about Heathcliff’s disappearance and terrible return. But first, I think we could both use some tea.”

As I moved toward the door, I saw Lockwood glance nervously at the ceiling, tracking the sound of footsteps that crossed the floor above us, footsteps I had long ago learned to ignore.

“Don’t mind that,” I told him. “The past walks freely in this manor, Mr. Lockwood. Best get used to it if you’re staying.”

“I have no intention of staying,” he said quickly. “As soon as the storm breaks, I’ll make my way to Thrushcross Grange as planned. And hopefully in the right time.”

I smiled faintly. “The Heights chose to bring you here, Mr. Lockwood. I doubt it will release you so easily. Now, about that tea?”

As I left him there, clutching his notebook like a talisman, his face caught between disbelief and dawning horror. He would understand soon enough. No one comes to Wuthering Heights by accident, especially not now, when the old magics are waking and the blood oath between Catherine and Heathcliff demands fulfillment.

The storm showed no signs of breaking. And I had so much more to tell.

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