MY BROTHER'S KEEPER

'Tim Powers is a brilliant writer'
William Gibson

TIM POWERS

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PROLOGUE–1830

Come walk with me, come walk with me;
We were not once so few
But Death has stolen our company
As sunshine steals the dew . . .

—Emily Brontë

Halfway up the steep grassy slope, the three children sat down to rest. It was only midafternoon and the sky was clear, but their breaths were steam on the cold spring wind, and the two girls pulled their woolen coats more closely around their shoulders.

They were in shade now, for thirty feet farther up the slope stood the imposing stone edifice known as Ponden Kirk, its weathered, striated blocks looking like nothing so much as two stacks of gargantuan petrified books. Its top was level with the western plateau, and a few bare tree branches could be seen up there against the empty blue sky.

The boy tipped back his cap. "This is exactly how it was in my dream," he assured his sisters.

It had been a tiring three-mile hike from home across the low hills. They had followed sheep tracks and clambered over dry-stone walls and waded through broad fields of flowering heather and foxglove, and hopped from one flat stone to another across the rushing water of Dean Beck; and this rectangular crag had been a punctuation mark in the otherwise featureless horizon for the last mile.

The taller of the two girls took off her straw hat and pushed back her disordered dark hair. She squinted up at the twenty-foot stone monument.

"Do we climb it? We could have got round to the top from the north path, by the old foundations." Though only twelve years old, she had many times walked much farther than this across the moors, often alone.

Her brother Branwell, a year older, blinked at her. "Foundations?" His hair was carroty red, and random curls poked out from under his tweed cap. "You mean that old ruined farmhouse?"

"Closer than that—flat stones. They're broken up, hard to see among the grass unless you're right on top of them."

The younger sister giggled. "Emily imagines a Pictish temple out there."

Emily gave Anne a wry smile and shook her head. "They might be Roman foundations. Did the boy in your dream look like a Roman?"

"Maybe," said Branwell. "Like a gypsy, really. No, we won't climb it." He pointed at the base of the edifice on the north side. "Our destination is the fairy cave, in the bottom corner."

"I don't want to get married," Emily told him. According to local folklore, any girl who crawled out of the little cave through a narrow gap between the stones would marry within the year.

Anne just tugged the hem of her skirt over her boots and looked on, her eyes wide under her knitted wool tam.

"That doesn't work with children," said Branwell impatiently. "I doubt it works at all. No, that's—" He hesitated. "That's not what the dark boy was talking about."

For several seconds the wind whistling between the stones of Ponden Kirk was the only sound.

"In a dream," Emily said finally.

"What *he* said only happens in our stories," piped up Anne.

The three children, along with their older sister Charlotte, had for the last several years been making up stories about an imaginary country they called Glass Town, and frequently the plots required that one character or another be restored to life after being killed in an earlier adventure.

This afternoon's hike had had the flavor of an enacted scene from their stories; it was only now that they were here, under the shadow of this primordial monument, that Emily seriously considered the supposed purpose of their journey.

Two of their older sisters, Maria and Elizabeth, had died of tuberculosis five years earlier—Maria, who would have been the oldest of them all, at the age of eleven. Their mother had died three years before that, and their aunt had moved in to help their father with the feeding and clothing and instruction of the children . . . but it had been Maria who became almost a second mother to the others, inventing games and cooking treats for them when they were sick and telling them stories when it was time for them all to go to bed. The surviving children had mourned Elizabeth, but it was Maria whose absence they still felt every day.

Emily carefully shifted around on the slope to look away from Ponden Kirk, down the wide valley that stretched away for miles between moorland hills streaked with green grass and purple heather. Distance and intervening hills made it impossible to see Haworth church, of which their father was the perpetual curate, and the adjoining parsonage, where Charlotte was no doubt reading to him from *Pilgrim's Progress* or *Paradise Lost*, since he was nearly blind with cataracts.

This morning the three girls been peeling apples at the parsonage kitchen table when Branwell had come clattering downstairs to tell his sisters that he had dreamt of meeting Maria at Ponden Kirk, and that Emily and Anne must accompany him there directly after their midday dinner.

Anne had glanced apprehensively at Charlotte, now the eldest, who had frowned at the heathen fantasy. *That's an unwholesome place*, she had said, *and Maria is a saint with God now.*

But Emily and Anne had finished their chores, and Branwell didn't have any to do, and Charlotte had of course known that even young Anne missed Maria as much as she did herself.

Very well, she had said finally. *You three go and have your game.*

And after their noon dinner of boiled beef and turnips and apple pudding, the three children had set off. It was only when they had walked over the first hill that Branwell told his two younger sisters the details of his dream. *There was a dark little boy*, he had said, *younger than you, Anne—he was at Ponden Kirk, and he said we might bring Maria back to life there.*

Emily stood up now and brushed off her dress. "What do we do?"

The children often enacted fanciful plays, though generally in the

parsonage parlor, and often got very carried away with the characters and the plots; and Emily was nearly certain that this was another of the same, performed outdoors for once. Certainly she didn't really expect some ritual here to let them see Maria again. She was pretty sure Anne looked at it in the same way.

She was undecided about Branwell.

He had already resumed climbing toward the foot of the monument, leaning forward to grip firmly seated stones while his scrabbling boots found purchase against woody clumps of old gorse. He looked back over his shoulder and gave a jerky nod. "In the dream," he called, "the three of us—"

"You saw us here?"

Anne got to her feet. "Not Charlotte?"

Branwell took a deep breath, then said loudly, "She wasn't in the dream. The dark boy showed me where . . ."

Emily quickly glanced along the plateau edge that loomed above them, from south to north, giving particular attention to the broad black topmost stones of Ponden Kirk; then she looked at the slope on either side, and back at the sunlit valley behind them, and she exhaled. Of course no *dark boy* from Branwell's dream would actually be here.

Anne hadn't moved. "Didn't he want her to come along?"

"She couldn't, she wasn't *there*." Branwell was now standing beside the bottom blocks of stone, panting. He waved impatiently to his sisters. "Shift yourselves!"

The two girls looked at each other, then simultaneously shrugged, spread their hands, and began carefully climbing up the slope to where their brother stood.

"Round the corner here," he said, and stepped out of sight behind a moss-streaked block, taller than he was, that made a crude pillar under a long horizontal lintel slab.

When the girls had got up to the base of the structure, they saw that Branwell had already crawled into the roughly square waist-high opening on that side; it led into a narrow cave perhaps six feet long, with gaps between the sharply angular stones of the floor and an opening onto daylight at the far end. He was sitting against a projecting shelf, his cap brushing the low overhead stone, and he shifted to make room for his sisters.

"Come on, then," he said, his voice sounding metallic in the constricted space. "Here's where we do it."

Emily tossed her hat aside and hiked herself in, and edged forward on her hands and knees. The rough stone surfaces under her palms were damp and cold, and the breeze from the valley below sluiced the tiny cave with the smells of earth and heather.

Branwell contorted to get his hand into his trouser pocket, and pulled out his penknife and opened the short blade.

"That won't incise stone," Emily said.

"It's to incise us," he said. He made a fist with his left hand and carefully drew the edge of the blade across an old scar on his wrist. "There," he said, pointing with the knife at a smooth surface of stone in front of him; and he slid the back of his hand across it, leaving a streak of blood.

He swayed, then held the knife out to Emily. He cleared his throat. "Right next to mine," he told her.

She was looking at his now blood-streaked hand and recalling that the scar was from the bite of a strangely malformed dog that they had all supposed to be mad, though the bite had healed quickly and with no aftereffects.

Emily slowly reached across and took the knife.

She looked at the damp rock with Branwell's blood on it—then shook her head. "And you should pray you don't catch a pestilential distemper." She had borrowed a copy of Richard Bradley's *The Plague at Marseilles Consider'd* from their neighbors at Ponden House, and had been impressed with the notion that microscopic poisonous insects transmit diseases.

Branwell shrugged. "Just as you please. My hand will heal. And Maria can recede again into oblivion."

"She's in Heaven," said Anne, who had crawled into the cave beside Emily.

"And might have visited with us," said Branwell.

Emily exhaled through pursed lips, then quickly cut the tip of her left forefinger. She rubbed it across the stone beside the faint streak of Branwell's blood—and leaned against the rock at her back, momentarily dizzy.

Branwell said, "That's two," and Anne took the knife from Emily's hand.

"No, Anne, wait—" began Emily, but Anne had already cut her finger. Emily caught her wrist and said, "Don't touch the stone."

"You did." Anne brushed the tip of the cut finger with the thumb of her other hand and pressed it against the stone.

A cloud might have passed overhead, for the light dimmed briefly.

"Ah!" said Anne softly. Emily squeezed her wrist and shook it before she let go.

"And that's three," said Branwell.

Anne sat back, sucking her finger, and after several seconds she said, "This wasn't all a game, was it? And it never had anything to do with Maria." She looked past Emily at Branwell. "Did you know? Or did that dark boy in your dream lie to you about it? That," she went on in a wondering tone, "is why Charlotte wasn't in your dream—why she isn't here. She wasn't *there*."

Emily felt as though all the warmth had drained from her body, leaving her as cold as this cave. Until Anne spoke, she had thought that the memory, which had surfaced when she touched the stone, had been a stray association of her own.

"Yes," she said, "it was the three of us then." Turning to Anne, she added, "I'm surprised you remember. You were only four."

Six years ago, just a few months before Maria's death, Branwell and Emily and Anne had gone for an afternoon walk on the moors with the parsonage housekeeper, Tabby. A mile northwest of where they now sat, a sudden gusty rainstorm had sent the four of them running for the nearest shelter from the wind, an abandoned and roofless stone farmhouse. From the doorway they had watched the curtains of rain sweep heavily across the suddenly shadowed moors . . . and then the hill from which they had descended only minutes before had exploded.

With a boom that shook the dirt floor under them, the side of Crow Hill had erupted in a spray of flying chunks of earth and even spinning boulders, and half the hillside had broken up and slid away in a torrential flood down into the valley; the earth had rumbled for a full minute as water continued to cascade through the new channel.

+ + +

Branwell took the knife back from Anne and closed it. None of them stirred to see if Maria might have appeared outside, on the slope or the plateau.

Branwell was blinking in the streaks of daylight as if disoriented. "So it was just a dream," he said gruffly. "A fantasy—we all miss her."

"No," said Emily. She stared at her brother. "You knew this would be some kind of . . . continuation of that afternoon in the storm, the eruption on Crow Hill. On the climb up here, when Anne asked you why Charlotte didn't come with us today, you said she couldn't, she wasn't *there*." She cocked her head, and her eyes were narrowed as she smiled at him. "Do we have some pestilential distemper now? Who was your dark boy?"

"Out," said Branwell. "It was a game, an adventure in Glass Town."

Anne slid her legs out of the opening and then carefully lowered herself onto the steep slope. Emily followed and retrieved her hat, and when Branwell joined them they began picking their way down toward the path at the bottom of the valley.

"Best not to bother Papa with any of this," said Anne breathlessly.

Previous curates at Haworth church had warned the congregation of devils that still roamed these remote northern hills, and the children's father often emphasized the same spiritual peril in his sermons. Too, he was more superstitious than seemed quite right in a clergyman, and took all sorts of eccentric precautions at the parsonage.

"No," agreed Emily. "Why worry him—" She couldn't, with any conviction, add the word *needlessly*.

When the three children had hiked back across the moors and marshes in the waning daylight to the parsonage, they told their older sister Charlotte about crawling into the fairy cave in Ponden Kirk, and the knife, and the blood on the stone. Branwell did his best to dismiss it all as a game inspired by a meaningless dream, but Charlotte seemed uneasy at having given them permission to go, and emphasized Anne's advice that they not trouble their ailing father with it.

Oddly, for the four children were closely united in their losses and their shared stories and their preferred isolation from most of the people in their small Yorkshire village, it was to be many years before any of them would speak again of that day.

PART ONE: MARCH 1846

"But where did he come from, the little dark thing,
harbored by a good man to his bane?"

—Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*,
chapter XXXIV

CHAPTER ONE

On the spring morning when she found the wounded man below Ponden Kirk, Emily Brontë was thinking of that afternoon, long ago now, when she and Branwell and Anne had climbed up there and left blood in the narrow fairy cave.

In the ensuing years the four Brontë siblings had sometimes been separated, when one or another of them was at school or employed, but those periods had been brief, and now they were all again living at the parsonage with their elderly near-blind father. Four years ago Emily had spent ten months with Charlotte at a school for young ladies in Brussels, but she had come home when their aunt died, and now at the age of twenty-seven Emily had no intention of ever again leaving the village of Haworth and the parsonage and her lonely, beloved Yorkshire moors.

Anne and Charlotte had both held positions as governesses of children in affluent families, but had eventually been dismissed—little Anne because she had tied her unruly charges to a table leg so that she could get her work done.

For a long time they had all hoped that Branwell would achieve success as a portrait painter, but those hopes had proved vain.

He had always shown some innate skill at drawing and painting—among other projects, he had done a portrait in oils of himself and his three sisters that had effectively caught their likenesses, though his own face in it wasn't recognizable—and it had been decided that he would apply for professional instruction at the Royal Academy of Arts in London.

And so in the early autumn of his eighteenth year he had set off on the first part of the two-day, two-hundred-mile journey, carrying cash and letters of introduction . . . but a week later he had come back home to Haworth, penniless and claiming to have been robbed by "sharpers" before he had even got to the metropolis. He had been evasive about details, and Emily had come to suspect that he *had* got to London, and done something there that he was ashamed of, though she knew better than to try asking him about it.

He had tried various employments to support himself after that. He had been a tutor briefly six years ago, but had been let go because of drunkenness, and then he had worked at the new railway station in Halifax, but lost the job when the entries in his account books proved to consist mostly of poetry and drawings.

Branwell and Charlotte had always been close, even through these temporary separations. They had for a while collaborated on stories set in their fictional land of Angria, and they had signed their work UT or WT, for *Us Two* or *We Two*.

But last year he had been abruptly dismissed from a position in Thorpe Green, twenty miles northeast of Haworth, and had come home in disgrace. He had been employed by a Mr. and Mrs. Robinson as tutor to their young son, but had, he claimed, fallen in love with his employer's wife, and been driven from the house by Mr. Robinson. In the nine months since then, he had simply devoted himself to strong drink, and these days Charlotte could hardly bear the sight of him.

Privately, Emily wondered about the exact circumstances of his termination—Mr. Robinson's angry dismissal letter had threatened to "expose" some unspecified action of Branwell's, implying something more heinous, much more ungodly, than simply making advances to a married woman.

Casting about for some way to make money without the ordeal of leaving home, the three sisters had spent thirty-one pounds to have a thousand copies of a book of their poetry printed, pseudonymously, as *Poems by Currer, Ellis, and Acton Bell*. The book was scheduled to be published two months from now. And though as a boy Branwell had joined them in writing their verses and stories, they had kept him ignorant of this new literary effort—which was not difficult, since lately he slept till noon and spent his evenings at the Black Bull,

an inn that sat a hundred yards downhill from the parsonage front door, just past the Haworth churchyard. It was a short walk, but he often needed help getting back home.

On most days, in any weather, Emily left the parsonage to go for sometimes daylong walks, always with her dog, a big bullmastiff named Keeper; but she nearly never ventured down to the village. She walked west, away from the church and the parsonage and the churchyard, out across the moors; and today she had followed familiar ways along paths and across wind-scoured hills to Ponden Kirk.

She had often wondered what she and Anne and Branwell had actually done on that day sixteen years ago when they had left streaks of their blood there. Twice in the years since then, both times just at sunset when she'd been hurrying home to the parsonage, she had glimpsed what appeared to be a little boy standing at the top of Ponden Kirk; both times she had paused to peer more closely, and both times the shape had proved to be a momentary illusion, for it had fragmented and dispersed as a flock of crows.

Shortly after dawn on this bright, sunny day, she had as usual been awakened by the pistol shot that her father fired over the churchyard every morning. A glance at the window had shown her that it was a day to be outdoors, and she had put on a long wool dress and hurried downstairs.

She had put on her boots shortly after making oatmeal porridge for herself and her sisters, and promising Tabby that she would wash the pot and dishes when she got back. Sometimes the wind that shook the parsonage windows seemed to carry the strains of a wild, remote music—repetitive and atonal, as if older than humanity's ordered keys and scales—and as Emily hastily put on a coat and stepped outside she had felt that today she could almost dance to it. Keeper was trotting right beside her as she crossed the yard to the wall-bordered road, raising his great head and sniffing energetically, as if he too found something exciting in the wind.

The two of them had hurried along the road and soon left it to follow a curving sheep path. Only a few weeks ago these moors had been white with snow, and the black lines of stone walls had made broad geometric figures across the far-off hills, but this morning the path curled between acres of waving green grass. Emily's dress

billowed behind her and her loose chestnut hair was tossed back over her shoulders. She was the tallest of her family, with a rangy, athletic figure, her plain, strong face tanned by endless days spent outdoors.

They were soon out of sight of the parsonage, and from habit Emily watched the hilltops, and called cautions to hares bounding where hawks might see them beside the rushing waters of Sladen Beck, and walked wide around the ancient standing stone known, for no remembered reason, as Boggarts Green. When they had hiked a couple of miles across the hills, the wind had shifted to the north, and was colder. Keeper had paused on a wet stone halfway across the rushing water of a creek where the wind was turbulent between the hills, and cocked his head and snarled.

It was a sound he sometimes made when the two of them had stayed out past dark, and at those times Emily had thought of boggarts and gytrashes and barguests, the legendary devils that, according to local folklore, roamed the moorland hills and dales at night; though right now the rippling heather at the crests of the hills shone pale purple in morning sunlight.

But she trusted the dog, and when the path on the far side of the creek mounted to an elevation higher than most, she glanced around at the uneven horizon behind her and the long rising ground ahead, and she could make out a figure at the foot of the ascent to Ponden Kirk, apparently crawling on all fours in the bracken. It was too clumsy to be an animal.

She clicked her tongue to tell Keeper to stay by her and not go running ahead, and she carefully picked her way around projecting stones down to the valley floor. The figure wasn't visible now among the lowland marsh ferns, and it wasn't until she was only a dozen yards away that she got a good look at the wounded man.

He was slowly and laboriously crawling south, moving left across Emily's view. The visible sleeve of his broadcloth coat was torn free at the shoulder, and the left leg of his woolen trousers was dark with blotted blood. Any hat he might have had was gone, but his face was hidden down to the jawline by a mane of disordered black hair.

Keeper snarled again, and the man rocked over onto his right side, facing Emily and the dog. With his free left hand he pried a knife from his bloodstained right fist and raised it. Emily noticed that it had two narrow blades, in parallel.

Keeper tensed his massive shoulders and hindquarters for a lunge, but Emily had already clicked her tongue again to keep him still; he froze, quivering.

Emily frowned and bit her lip, staring at the man. He was probably taller than she was, solidly built, and his now-visible face was swarthy—he might be Welsh, if not a Spaniard or a Portuguese. She guessed that a black cloth disk on a ribbon across his lined cheek was a displaced eyepatch, though in fact both of his brown eyes were glaring at her. There were streaks of bright blood on the blades of the knife.

Keeper stood rigid, the fur on his neck bristling.

Emily looked around again, but saw no sign of who or what might have attacked the man; there might be murderers up on the plateau, but she had Keeper.

"How badly are you hurt?" she asked. "You need a doctor."

"I need," the man said through gritted teeth, "to get out of view." His voice was a deep rumble, and his accent wasn't local; it sounded vaguely French to her. He dragged his left leg up and pressed his right palm against the dirt. "I can stand—I can walk."

Emily had often rescued injured birds that she found on the moors, even hawks; she certainly couldn't leave a man in this state.

"You can't walk," she said. "Put away the knife."

He exhaled. "Is there anyone visible on the Kirk?"

Emily quickly looked up at the massive black stone edifice, and left and right along the edge of the plateau. The empty blue sky made every detail of rock and tree branch along the edge starkly visible, and there was no spot of animation.

"No," she said; and she recalled, not for the first time, that the word *kirk* was commonly used in Scotland to mean *church*, and it had been used the same way here in northern England, long ago. The black monument did appear to be a construction, not a natural stone outcrop—a church to what sort of god?

"You were attacked?" she asked. She got no answer.

He raised himself back up on his straightened right arm and one knee, and was struggling to get his other leg under himself. Sweat gleamed on his knotted face.

His arm folded and he fell back onto his right shoulder.

Panting harshly, he extended his left hand to the side, palm up;

and after a few seconds Emily stepped forward and took the knife. Its leather-wrapped grip was sticky with blood, and she just dropped it on the ground.

To Emily's surprise, Keeper turned away from her and the wounded man to growl and bare his teeth at the knife.

The man had got up in a swaying crouch; Emily raised a restraining hand to Keeper, then crouched beside the man's left side and slid her right arm under his. "Get out of view how quickly?"

"Ah—quickly."

She gripped his side and draped his left arm over her shoulders; then she took a deep breath and straightened her legs. He was heavy, but she was able to stand, holding him up.

He pressed his boots against the ground, taking some of his weight off her, and the two of them began hitching their way forward. Keeper padded close beside the man, growling deep in his throat and, every few steps, turning his head to glance back.

"Assist with your feet," Emily said breathlessly, "all you can. There's a—" She tossed her head to get her windblown hair out of her eyes. "There's a beck among rocks down to our right."

He took a deep breath and pronounced, "A beck."

"A stream. Water. Place your feet and flex your legs! I can bathe your wounds—perhaps bandage them—and get help." The narrow stream lay a couple of hundred feet downhill, and she wished she could just roll him to it.

"I'll—have no help," he said.

"Obviously."

He was walking, slowly and haltingly, though it seemed that she still bore most of his considerable weight.

"Aside from yours," he conceded, "until we reach your beck." He inhaled sharply between his teeth and halted, his eyes clenched shut, then resolutely lurched forward another step. "And then you—go back to your sheep. I won't—" He blinked sweat out of his eyes and peered blearily ahead. "I won't be here if you come back."

Emily had the breath to say, "We shall see." She was sweating herself now, in her long wool dress and coat, in spite of the chilly wind that tossed her damp hair.

In a few minutes they reached the bank of the narrow creek bed. Several great granite stones stood up at angles among the luxuriant

reeds that grew along the edge, and Emily followed Keeper between two of them and carefully lowered herself and her burden until they were both sitting on the grassy bank. Only a few feet below them, clear water rushed over gravel and trailing weeds. The creek was narrow enough that Emily could have jumped over it.

She freed herself from under his arm, and stood up and stretched. Keeper nudged her thigh with his great jowly head, crowding her back as if to say that their task here was finished.

Emily patted the dog's head. To the wounded stranger, she said, "Can you slide down?"

He gripped the bank with both hands and pushed backward, and slid down until his boots were in the stream.

The abrupt movement made him arch his back and pound one fist into the mud; he relaxed slowly.

"There," he said, panting. "Now go home, girl."

She certainly didn't want to establish an acquaintance with him, but she wasn't going to leave him yet—and *girl* wouldn't do. Recalling that he had taken her for a rural shepherdess, she just gave him, "Emily."

She stepped down beside him on his left while Keeper scrambled down and stood watchfully at his right. For a moment she stood on tiptoe to scan the nearby sunlit hills and the rim of the plateau; no motion was visible, so she crouched beside the wounded man.

He seemed alarmed that she had not left him. He pulled the eyepatch back into place over his left eye, though he could obviously see well enough out of it, and said, "Right—Alcuin, yes? Be on your way now, will you?" When she cocked her head he added, "It's a name, my name."

"How do you do." She began unbuttoning his coat, and when he tried to prevent her she pushed his bloodstained hand away. "I know who Alcuin was. Advisor to Charlemagne."

The man was breathing more normally now, and he turned his head to see her with his right eye, looking closely at her for the first time.

"Yes." Reluctantly, for he clearly wished she would go away, he asked, "Are you Irish? Your vowels aren't all that far from County Down."

Emily had now begun unbuttoning his blood-sodden waistcoat,

and she could already see a broad gash in his side through the torn fabric. At least it wasn't bleeding energetically. "Top Withens is a mile south of here," she said. Seeing his baffled look, she explained, "That's a farmhouse. I'll get Mr. Sunderland and his sons to carry you there. You'll need a doctor to prevent this from mortifying, and to do some stitching up."

"I heal fast."

"Not from something like this." He really didn't seem to be in immediate danger of dying, and she gave him a curious frown. "Though I'd judge your eye, at least, is well enough that you could get rid of the patch."

"It's a—formality."

She had spread his unbuttoned coat to see if he had other wounds, and he caught her hand. Keeper's big front paws were instantly on his chest, and Emily could feel the vibration of the dog's growl through Alcuin's hand.

He released her hand and slowly lowered his own, blinking up at Keeper's teeth. When the dog stepped back, he turned his head toward Emily and said, "That scar on your hand—a burn?"

She nodded. "On an iron."

"As for ironing shirts?" He peered again at the irregular white scar on her knuckles. "You must have leaned on it."

"I must have."

His face and hands showed scratches, but the gash in his side seemed to be his only serious injury. She unfastened the last buttons of his waistcoat to get a better look at the wound, but the blood-soaked tatters of his shirt prevented a clear view. This time he didn't risk pushing her hand away but groaned, "Oh, let it be, damn you!"

She ignored the profanity; but clearly he would accept no help from her, and in any case his wound would need more expert attention than she could provide. She stood up and brushed dirt and fern fragments off her dress. "I'll be back with the Sunderlands."

He grimaced and shook his head. "I suppose I must beg your pardon . . . Miss Emily! But—" He sat up experimentally. "*Ah!* Save your trouble—I won't be here." He winced and grabbed his side, but didn't lie back down. "Irish?"

"My father is." She stepped up the bank, closely followed by Keeper. "He came over forty years ago."

"Forty . . . wait." Alcuin turned to look up at her, evidently careless of his wound. "The scar on your hand—would your father's name be Brunty?" In fact her family name was Brontë, and she was startled at the near-accuracy of his guess, but kept her face expressionless. He went on, "Is he aware of Welsh?" Still getting no response, he slumped back down. "No, never mind, child. You wouldn't be here. Run along to your sheep."

For a moment Emily was on the point of asking this Alcuin person whether he actually knew something about her family, and what he meant by *Is he aware of Welsh*—but that would lead to questions and answers: to some unpredictable and certainly unwelcome degree of intimacy with this stranger.

"We may be well over an hour," she said. "Press your hands on the wound to slow the bleeding."

His eyes were closed, but he waved at her. "It's stopped bleeding. Go *away*, for God's sake."

Emily stepped up onto the level ground and scanned the horizons. The bleak landscape still showed no motion except for the heather shaking in waves along the hillsides in the cold wind, and with Keeper at her heels she began walking south with a ground-covering stride.

For twenty minutes she and the dog hurried south, following a path along the east slope of the Middlemoor Clough, and when the path ascended to the highland and eventually to the base of the hill at the crest of which sat Top Withens farmhouse, she paused and looked back across the miles of tan-and-green hills. Ponden Kirk wasn't visible from here.

Keeper had loped on ahead, and now came trotting back and licked her hand encouragingly.

"A moment, boy," she told him. She raised her hand and looked at the scar on the back of it. Anyone could guess that it was from a burn—but were the old tooth punctures perceptible too?

One twilight seven years ago a strange dog had got into a fight with Keeper in the churchyard out in front of the parsonage; the animal had resembled *Dogues de Bordeau* she had later seen in Brussels—a muscular, short-snouted mahogany mastiff—but with a bigger head, and longer legs and toes. In fact it had resembled the dog that had bitten Branwell fourteen years before that.

She bared her teeth now, remembering how she had broken up that fight between Keeper and the other dog. Armed only with a hastily-snatched-up pepper pot, Emily had abandoned her ironing and run down the front steps of the parsonage and vaulted the low churchyard wall, and she had dashed the black powder into the strange mastiff's face. The creature had retreated, and galloped off across the moors, but not before clamping its jaws on the back of Emily's hand. She had hurried back to the kitchen, where she washed the wound; and then she had picked up the iron, filled with live coals, and pressed it against the wound for five agonizing seconds.

Remembering it now, she flexed her hand; then looked more closely. She spat on her thumb and bent to rub off a spot of Alcuin's dried blood on a clump of grass.

"Do you think he's dying?" she asked Keeper. "He didn't think he was."

She straightened and looked at both sides of her hand to be sure no spot of his blood remained; then started up the hill toward Top Withens.

When she led Mr. Sunderland and two of his sons to the beck below the standing stones, Alcuin was gone, as he had told her he would be—though traces of blood on the grass and the prints of his boots bore out Emily's story. Mr. Sunderland invited her to have midday dinner with his family, but they were all virtually strangers to her, and she dreaded the thought of sitting among them while they tried to engage her in social conversation. It had been a fair ordeal even to approach their gate.

She declined the invitation with reserved politeness, and declined too the subsequent offer that one of Sunderland's sons should escort her back home.

She and Keeper retraced their long route back to Ponden Kirk, and then across the well-known trails and fields and becks that would take them back at last to the parsonage—though on the way she did stop at the spot where she had first seen Alcuin, and, in spite of Keeper's evident disapproval, retrieved his peculiar knife.