Wildthorn

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Part One

The carriage jolts and splashes along the rutted lanes flooded by the heavy November rains. Through its grimy window, all I can see of the unfamiliar Essex countryside are bare hedgerows, the skeletons of trees, looming out of the morning mist. I shiver and clutch my travelling wrap around me more tightly – the familiar roughness of its wool collar on my neck is comforting.

It smells in here – of damp, rotting straw and something else, like sour milk. Nausea rises in my throat, but I swallow it down and, despite the ache in my bones caused by a night on that lumpy mattress, I sit upright on the hard seat. Even if the bed had been the most comfortable in the world, I doubt I would have slept. But I won't let Mrs Lunt see how apprehensive I am.

Typical of Mamma to insist I have a chaperone. But I'm not a child any longer, I'm seventeen, and I travelled by myself before and came to no harm. I would have managed perfectly well on my own.

It's ironic, really, Mamma's concern – she didn't think twice about packing me off to live with strangers . . .

Perhaps it's because the journey is so long and we had to break it in London. But if I had to have a companion, why couldn't Mary have come with me? Or if she couldn't be spared, why couldn't they have engaged someone friendly? We could have grumbled together about the

grubby rooms in the inn, and perhaps I could have confided in her.

I'd never tell this unsmiling woman anything. She makes me uneasy.

Her cloak is worn, her umbrella spotted with mildew, the bag she clasps on her lap shabby, but, in her pinched monkey face, her eyes are bold, inquisitive. And she has hardly spoken a word, not yesterday all the way down in the train from the north, nor this morning on the journey from Liverpool Street by rail and then this carriage. But she has never stopped watching me. Even without looking at her, I know she's watching me now.

Perhaps she's wondering why I've been sent away. It's unlikely that Tom has told her anything, I'm sure, except that she must see that I arrive safely. My brother would not want a stranger knowing our business.

How will these people, the Woodvilles, receive me? I know almost nothing about them, only that they have a charming son, whose mother wants a companion for her eldest daughter. 'Just remember,' Tom said, 'you should be grateful. They're taking you in as a favour to me.'

Taking you in. As if I were a vagrant, a beggar.

How long must I remain there, trying to be agreeable to this girl who will probably despise me? And will I have time for my studies? I wouldn't be surprised if Mrs Woodville really wants an unpaid governess for the younger ones.

It's Mamma's fault. How could she be so unjust?

This isn't what I planned for my life.

When I'm settled in I'll write to Aunt Phyllis and tell

her what's happened. I'm sure she'll have forgiven me for my rudeness by now. She might even invite me to Carr Head. Despite everything, that would be so much better.

As long as she doesn't know. As long as Grace has kept her promise.

We reach a crossroads and turn right. This lane is more deeply pitted, rocking the carriage from side to side. The trees cluster thickly here, deepening the gloom.

'Do you think it's much further?' I ask Mrs Lunt.

'Not far now.' She twists her mouth into a smile, but her eyes slide past mine.

The forest on one side of the lane is replaced by high stone walls stretching into the mist. Before long, the carriage jerks to a halt.

Looking out, I see that we have stopped by some tall iron gates. My pulse beats faster. 'This isn't the place, is it?'

Mrs Lunt nods.

The knot in my stomach tightens. This is far grander than I expected. But I tell myself, Keep your face smooth. Don't betray your feelings to this stranger.

A thickset man slouches out of the lodge, clamping a half-eaten crust between his teeth as he shrugs his shoulders into a crumpled jacket. He unlocks the gates. As the carriage passes he stares in, his jaws moving slowly. I'm surprised the Woodvilles don't have a smarter servant.

The gravel driveway winds through the grounds to an imposing house set on a rise, with an ornate roofline of turrets and cupolas. At the sight of it my heart sinks. Tom was right. The family must be very wealthy.

What will they think of me?

When we stop again my companion says, 'Here we are.' She's smiling again, encouraging. She opens the door and descends from the carriage, beckoning me to follow. But I shrink back, feeling a fluttering in my chest like moths trapped behind my breastbone.

I've made a mistake. I should never have agreed to this.

The coachman is unloading my box. Mrs Lunt has climbed the steps and is tugging at the bell. A tall gentleman in a frock coat appears in the doorway and speaks to her in a voice too low for me to hear. She passes him some papers from her bag.

What are those papers?

The gentleman comes to the door of the carriage and looks at me from under dark bushy eyebrows. 'You must get out now.' His voice is polite, but not warm.

He must be Mr Woodville, my new employer. Why is he not greeting me, welcoming me?

Something is wrong.

I hold tight to the seat, my heart bumping in my chest. Over my employer's head I can see, lurking in the doorway, a servant in shirtsleeves and a canvas apron, his arms crossed over his broad chest. Mr Woodville nods and the servant unfolds his arms and takes a step forward. Surely he doesn't mean to –

I will not be dragged from this carriage.

Somehow my feet carry me down to the ground. Next to me is a low railing surrounding the lawn. I could easily step over it, walk away across the grassy space, away from all these staring faces.

But I can't.

For a moment we stand, frozen, then Mr Woodville coughs and Mrs Lunt moves towards the carriage. I go to speak to her as she brushes past me, but without looking at me she gets in. The door slams, the wheels start to turn and she has gone, leaving me behind.

In the misty light a weight of stone looms over me, the house even more forbidding now I can see it properly.

Mr Woodville forms his lips into a bland smile. 'My name is Mr Sneed.'

Mr Sneed? Not my employer then. The butler?

He has a slight cast in one eye and I try not to stare at it, addressing myself to his necktie, neat between the points of his stiff collar.

'Will you take me to Mrs Woodville, please?'

He regards me gravely. 'Mrs Woodville? There is no Mrs Woodville here.'

My mouth dries.

'But isn't this her house?' Despite myself, my voice quavers.

'No, this is Wildthorn Hall.'

'*Wildthorn Hall?* But I'm supposed to be at the Woodvilles . . . they're expecting me.' I look from Mr Sneed to the servant, then back to Mr Sneed.

He smiles again. '*We* have been expecting you.'

This is a horrible mistake. *But he said they were expecting me. How can that be possible?*

Blood drumming in my ears, darkness slides in at the edge of my vision.

A hand touches my arm and my sight clears.

'Please come with me.' His grip on my arm is firm.

I want to run, but my legs won't obey me.

I glance at my box.

'Don't worry – John will bring that in.'

I walk up the steps, past the stout heavily studded door. In the porch I stumble on the coarse mat, but Mr Sneed's arm prevents me from falling. My feet carry me through the inner doors past twin suns rising in stained glass.

Inside, I find myself in a wide vestibule tiled in black-and-white diamonds that dazzle my eyes. A vaulted ceiling arches overhead. Directly in front of me is a set of tall double doors. The vestibule is empty apart from a polished table that holds an arrangement of wax flowers under a glass dome. The colours of the flowers have faded; they look pallid and damp, like flesh.

Mr Sneed presses me on. Our footsteps echo on the tiles.

We take a corridor on the right and the tiles give way to a narrow strip of green matting. After passing several shut doors we come to a halt outside another one. Mr Sneed holds up his hand. 'Please wait.' The door closes behind him, leaving me standing outside.

Now – now I must flee. Before it's too late.

But the burly servant, silent as a cat, has come up behind me and leans against the wall, watching me.

I hear a jingling noise and a young woman in a blue dress and an apron appears out of the gloom. A bunch of keys hangs on a chain from her belt. Under her white cap her complexion is sallow, as if she rarely goes out of doors.

Ignoring me, she nods at the servant, then knocks on the door.

Mr Sneed appears. 'Ah, Weeks. Come in.' The door closes behind her.

I can hear voices, but not what they are saying. Then the door opens again and Mr Sneed calls, 'Come in.' I hesitate and the servant shifts his position. I find myself crossing the threshold.

Immediately my eye is drawn to the elegant desk by the window, where Mr Sneed is standing looking at two or three pieces of paper lying on its polished top. He studies them, leaning down and frowning as if the writing is hard to decipher.

The young woman, Weeks, waits, her hands clasped in front of her, eyes cast down. The room is quite large, but it feels airless. I can't breathe. A distant ringing begins in my ears, making my head swim. I sway slightly.

Mr Sneed notices. 'Take a chair.' He gestures to one in front of the desk.

I sink on to it, clutching the arms. Don't faint. Whatever you do, don't faint.

Mr Sneed scrutinizes me for a moment with his one good eye, then feels my brow. His hand is clammy.

'You are very pale, Miss Childs.'

My head reels. 'What did you just call me?' My voice is as thin as tissue paper.

'Miss Childs. That is your name.'

Is this a trick?

And then my blood starts to flow again – they have the

wrong person. That's the explanation. It isn't me they're expecting at all.

'That *isn't* my name. I am Louisa Cosgrove.' I look from Mr Sneed to Weeks, waiting for them to exclaim, to show surprise. But Weeks's expression doesn't change.

Mr Sneed sits down at the desk and leans forward. 'You only think you are Louisa Cosgrove. But we know who you are. You are Lucy Childs.' His manner is kind, as if explaining the situation to a child.

I stare at him bewildered. They are mistaking me for someone else – this other girl. I swallow hard. 'Why would I *think* I'm Louisa?'

'Because you're ill.'

'*Ill?*' I am utterly confused.

'Yes, this is a hospital.' He pauses. 'Or you might prefer to think of it as a refuge – a place of safety, my dear young lady.'

I don't understand what he's talking about. But I do know one thing: I'm not ill. This other girl, this Lucy Childs, she must be ill, and that's why they're expecting her. Her, not me. I explain all this in a loud, clear voice.

Mr Sneed smiles. 'Thinking you are someone else and thinking you are not ill are signs of how sick you are. You are lucky that you are here where we have the skill to cure you.'

He would be looking at me directly if it weren't for the squint. 'You are clearly an unusual young woman. But here you will find we are used to dealing with unusualness of all kinds. You will soon settle in.'

Unusual? What does he mean?

He turns to Weeks. 'Miss Childs seems quiet enough at the moment, but we need to keep her under close observation. We will try her in the Second Gallery for now.'

He glances at me. 'Fanny Weeks is one of our most able attendants. She will look after you.'

I look at Weeks, wanting some reassuring sign, some hint of pity. But she says, 'Come with me,' in a flat voice, and stands by the door, holding it open.

I look at Mr Sneed. I should say something. 'I . . .' But my voice dies.

Weeks coughs and gestures with her head. Under her neat cap her hair is as dark and shiny as liquorice. I find I have risen from the seat, we are outside the door and Weeks has turned the corner and set off along the long corridor. I want to ask her what illness she thinks I have, but she's moving too fast.

The corridor ends at a door. Weeks selects a key so large it takes both her hands to turn it. The door swings open, we pass through, and Weeks locks it behind us. Another corridor, this one so gloomy the gas jets are lit. Now we're walking on bare flags; the *tap tap* of the attendant's shoes echoes on the stone but I can't hear my footsteps at all.

I try one more time. 'Do stop! This is a mistake. I shouldn't be here.'

But the blue back moves ahead of me relentlessly. Powerless to make her turn, I'm forced to follow her until I'm lost, trapped in a maze of passages and locked doors.

Eleven Years Earlier

Evelina had light brown hair, formed into perfect ringlets. Her cream, lace-trimmed dress, her cream bonnet edged with a frill, her white silk stockings and cream kid boots – all were immaculate. She had a red rosebud smile but her complexion was slightly yellow; her staring black eyes, fringed with stiff lashes, never shut.

She arrived on my sixth birthday, in a parcel addressed to me: *Miss Louisa Cosgrove.*

When I saw it, I was very excited: I'd never had anything in the post before. Inside the brown paper was a box on which someone had written *My name is Evelina.* I opened it and drew out the doll. Everyone was watching me, waiting for a reaction, and all I could do was stare at it.

Papa said, 'You're a lucky girl, Lou. How kind of your Aunt Phyllis to send such a lovely present. She says that Grace helped her choose it.'

I raised my head in time to catch Mamma giving Papa a look I didn't understand. 'Such an extravagance . . .' She turned to me and said, 'It is a lovely doll, but it's too good for every day. I'll put it away safely.'

I was about to protest, but I looked at Evelina again. She was so grand. Not like my old rag doll, Annabel. I could hug *her* soft body without worrying about spoiling her dress. Her homely face was nearly worn away where I'd kissed her and cried on her. I could tell her all my secrets. Evelina's smile was perfect . . . and lifeless.

Thinking this, I felt guilty. Although she was somewhat older than me and I hadn't met her often, of my three cousins I liked Grace the best. Her brother William seemed nearly grown-up and her little sister Maud was too young to interest me, but I admired Grace very much. For her sake, I should try to like this new doll.

But then Tom said, 'Evelina! What a soppy name. Still it suits a soppy useless doll.' He rolled his eyes and simpered, in imitation of her expression and Mamma frowned.

But it was Papa who spoke. 'That will do, Tom. It's a very nice doll.'

Papa might say that, but I had an uncomfortable feeling my big brother was right. For his tenth birthday, Aunt Phyllis had sent a folding penknife with a mother-of-pearl handle, two blades, a corkscrew and a pair of scissors. Compared to that, what use was a doll?

Not for the first time, I wished I was a boy. My brother had toy soldiers and a train set, and when we visited our cousins at Carr Head, he was allowed to climb trees and go fishing and swimming in the river. And Mamma expected me to wait on Tom and fetch things for him. It wasn't fair.

It happened one evening a few weeks later. Papa had been called away to a patient, but the rest of us were in the parlour. It was cosy in the light of the oil lamps with the fire flickering: like being in a warm, red cave. It was peaceful too. Mamma was sewing up the hem of one of my frocks. I'd caught my foot in it when I'd been playing at railway-train crashes alone in my room, but Mamma didn't know that. Because she thought I'd been good, she'd brought Evelina down for me, having checked that my hands were clean. But I was itching to join Tom, squatting on the

carpet in front of the brass fender, shooting marbles. I knew Mamma wouldn't approve, though.

The doorbell rang and a minute later Mary appeared to summon Mamma. With a sigh, she put down her mending.

As soon as she left the room, I said, 'Let me play, Tom. I know what to do.' I'd been secretly practising, doing it the right way, with the thumb, just as Tom said.

'Pooh, I doubt it. Girls can't play marbles.'

I glared at him. He was always saying things like that. 'Well, *I* can. Look, I'll show you.' And I joined him on the floor.

When Mamma returned, Tom and I were in the middle of a fierce argument.

'I hit it, so it's mine,' I said.

'No you didn't,' said Tom.

'I did.'

'Caw, caw, Miss Beaky!'

Tom knew that nickname annoyed me. He always said my nose looked just like a crow's beak.

'That will do!' said Mamma. 'If you can't play without squabbling, the marbles will be put away.' She didn't come back to her seat by the fire, but went over to her writing desk and started sorting through some papers.

She hadn't forbidden me to play marbles so I seized the disputed one, with a triumphant glare at my brother. Tom frowned but, glancing at Mamma, he didn't say anything. I knew he was angry, but I didn't care. At least he wasn't ignoring me.

We played on in silence until at last Mamma closed the bureau lid. 'Time for bed, Louisa. Make sure you pick up all your toys.'

We started gathering up the marbles. I'd given up arguing

about the unfairness of having to go to bed before Tom – I knew that Mamma would say: 'When you are ten, like Tom, you can stay up longer.'

'What is your doll doing on the floor, Louisa?' Mamma's tone was sharp.

I started guiltily. I'd forgotten about Evelina. I picked her up. And then I saw it.

'Oh!'

'What's the matter?' Mamma bent to look.

One side of Evelina's face, the side that had been nearest the fire, had melted: from the corner of her eye, her face sagged in folds, her red cheek had slipped and her mouth was distorted into a grimace. Tom pushed in to look and I pressed Evelina to my chest. I didn't want him to see.

There was a horrible silence.

Mamma said, 'Oh, Louisa, how could you be so careless! The doll is ruined. And it was so expensive.'

She prised the doll out of my arms. Studying its face again, she shook her head. Then she said, more to herself than to me, 'What will your aunt say?'

I started to cry. I didn't want Aunt Phyllis to suppose I was ungrateful. And what would Grace think of me?

Through my sobs I watched Mamma, waiting for her to pronounce sentence.

At last she said to me, 'Go to your room and wait for me to come.'

As I went past Tom, unseen by Mamma, he stuck his tongue out at me, gloating.

In my bedroom, I waited for Mamma. She came in looking grave, but she didn't mention Evelina. I undressed, washed and

put my nightgown on while Mamma watched. I said my prayers and climbed into bed, then waited to hear what my punishment would be.

'Tomorrow you will stay in your room. You can contemplate what your thoughtlessness has led to and resolve to be more careful in future.'

I let out my breath. Not too bad.

Looking at me sadly, Mamma said, 'Goodnight, Louisa.' She didn't kiss me.

As soon as we were alone, I told Annabel what had happened.

'It's that stupid doll's fault. Fancy being made of wax.'

I kissed Annabel's dear cloth face and hugged her until I fell asleep.

I stared at Evelina. Her black eyes, unblinking, stared back at me out of her ruined face. I sighed. What would Grace say if she could see her?

To distract myself from my uncomfortable thoughts, I looked in vain about the room for something to do. Then my eyes came back to the bed where Evelina and Annabel lay side by side.

'Aren't you glad you don't have to wear a lacy dress?' I said to Annabel. 'It would be so hard to keep clean.'

She smiled back at me.

I turned to Evelina, an idea forming in my mind. Papa had told me about scientists, people who asked questions about the world and investigated it to find out what it was like. I could be a scientist and find out what Evelina was like.

Picking the doll up, I untied her bonnet and laid it down. Then I started to examine her dress. It was fastened with tiny

hooks and eyes. I undid them and pulled off the dress. She was wearing a pair of cotton drawers. I took those off too. Her body and the tops of her arms and legs were made of cloth, stuffed with something soft.

'She's just like you underneath,' I told Annabel.

The bottom half of her arms and legs were made of kid leather, like my best shoes. I studied her face. Where the wax had melted I could see something else underneath. I looked round the room. I needed a knife. Tom's penknife. He wasn't allowed to carry it about with him, so it must be in his room.

I opened the door and listened. I couldn't hear anything. As fast as I could, I tiptoed along the landing, into Tom's bedroom, and opened the drawer where he kept his treasures, all jumbled together. The knife was there, half hidden under a magnifying glass and a lump of sealing wax. I seized it and ran back to my room.

My heart was thudding and I had to wait a moment until my hands felt steady. Then I opened the knife carefully. I picked up Evelina and laid her on top of my chest of drawers. I hesitated: it seemed cruel to plunge the knife into her head but I told myself not to be silly.

'I don't love her like I love you,' I said to Annabel. 'And Papa said scientists have to be bold sometimes.'

I put the tip of the blade against her forehead and pushed. It went in easily. I cut along above the eyebrows and down the right side of her face, making a flap which I pulled open. The wax was just a coating. Inside was a lining of papier mâché.

The eyes were glass balls. I pulled one out. It was like a marble. I extracted the other one, too.

Having gone this far, I thought I might as well continue. I cut

the arms and legs off at the elbows and knees, where the kid leather covering ended. Next, I split open the body from top to bottom. The stuffing started to come out, stiff and dark: I thought it was horsehair.

There was no more to see.

'Well,' I said to Annabel. 'What shall we do now?'

The door opened.

'It's time to wash your hands for – Oh, Miss Louisa! Whatever have you done!' Mary's shocked face peered down at me, and the remains of what had been Evelina scattered across my chest of drawers. I swallowed. There was going to be trouble.

'What did you think you were doing?' Papa looked at me gravely. He was sitting at his desk in his study, which was also his consulting room. The smell of tobacco smoke and medicines tickled my nose.

I wriggled uncomfortably.

Mamma had been speechless when she saw what I'd done. She'd stared at my handiwork while I waited for her to say something, my heart thumping like a drum. Eventually she'd looked at me and said very quietly, 'I don't understand you, Louisa. I don't understand you at all.' Her voice was like a grey shadow and I felt more frightened than if she'd shouted.

She'd left me sitting on my bed all day until Papa came home.

He was still waiting for an answer.

'I . . .' I faltered. 'I wanted to see . . .' I stopped.

'What?'

'I was being a scientist. I wanted to see how the doll was made.'

Papa had an odd expression on his face, as if he'd swallowed

something too quickly. After a moment he coughed and said, 'But you've ruined a very expensive present.'

'It was spoilt anyway!' For a moment I felt almost cheerful. And then I remembered it was my fault the doll was spoilt in the first place. I hung my head. Papa was hardly ever angry, but this was different. This was very bad.

'Louisa.' Papa's tone was quite unexpected. I looked up at him. 'What are we going to do with you?' He was shaking his head and almost – *smiling*?

I was mystified.

Papa coughed again. Now his face was serious. 'So – for your punishment . . .'

I waited, holding my breath.

'I think you should write a letter to your Aunt Phyllis, telling her what you've done.'

I swallowed. 'All of it?'

Papa nodded. 'Yes, every bit of it. You can write it now.' He stood up.

I thought of sitting at the big table where we did our lessons and trying to write the letter, with Tom watching me and laughing.

'Papa . . .'

'Mm?'

'May I write it at your desk?'

He looked down at me for a moment, then patted my head.

'Yes, you may.'

I sat down in his chair with the carved wooden back. My feet didn't reach the ground. He pulled the silver inkpot towards me and put a piece of paper in front of me.

'Be sure to use your best handwriting.'



'I will, Papa.'

He went out of the study. I heard Mamma speaking to him in the hall and I tiptoed over to the door and put my ear against it. I heard Papa say, 'But it was just natural curiosity, Amelia, not naughtiness.'

Mamma replied, 'You're too indulgent with her, Edward. It's not good for her to think she can do as she likes.'

The parlour door closed and I couldn't hear any more so I went back to the desk. I stared at the three wooden owls on Papa's pipe-rack. They stared back. I dipped the pen in the inkpot and bent over the paper.

'Dear Aunt Phyllis . . .'

I sighed. This was going to be very hard.