

Chapter One

He rode in on the back of a wagon loaded with crates of chickens and bales of hay, driven by a brutish farmer who had not uttered a word throughout the journey except to curse his horse. Arthur would have enjoyed a bit of conversation as the wagon lurched along the muddy ruts, but the natural world was a thing of splendor and inspiration to him, and he was content to gaze upon the vistas opening up before his eyes. It was September and the wind was balmy and thick-scented with heather. Each climb to the brow of a hill revealed rise after rise carpeted in swirls of purple, green, and gold, each growing paler until the moors faded into a violet haze, and thereafter only shelves of mist the color of blush that might be land or might be clouds. The upper reaches of the River Worth flowed from these hills and fed the becks that fed the mills that fed the people, when times were good.

Arthur and the Church of England had been an arranged marriage of sorts, but he had been one of those fortunate few who had fallen deeply in love with his bride despite her many foibles and warts. He had no tolerance for those who sought to strip her of her liturgy and beauty, and undermine her authority. He was a proud young man, conscious of the dignity vested in him as the newly appointed curate to Haworth, so it was understandable that he was a little vexed to be arriving in the village atop a bale of hay in a lowly wagon full of chickens. There was something unsavory about it, a hint of degradation. He meditated on Christ's entry into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey but could not reconcile this image with the squawking birds all around him. He wished he had a horse, but a horse was not within his means.

By the time they arrived at the bottom of Main Street the sky had darkened and lead-gray clouds were moving up swiftly from the south. The wind rose. Workers from the outlying mills were returning home across the fields, hurrying down to the village and disappearing into the dense, hidden warrens of the poor.

At the tollgate the farmer ordered him down. "I'll deliver yer box but ye walk from 'ere," he muttered as he swiftly pocketed the coin Arthur dropped into his hand.

"Where might I find the parsonage?" Arthur asked stiffly. "I am Reverend Brontë's new curate."

For this bit of introduction all he got was a scowl and a sharp jerk of the head indicating the top of the steep hill.

A cold drizzle had blown in, sharp as needles.

The street was a long, brutal climb, and several times he threw an anxious glance over his shoulder at the old mare laboring slowly up the steep cobbled way. To the right the hillside fell off sharply, with ramshackle sheds and small garden plots scattered along the slope below. On the left rose a straggling row of small stone cottages built from millstone grit quarried in those treeless moors. A sense of oppression and harshness hung over the village.

Halfway up, Arthur paused to rest. Glancing back down the hill he saw that the horse had stalled and the farmer had resorted to a whip. Arthur was accustomed to dealing with recalcitrant draft horses, and he had a winning way with stubborn beasts, a talent that did not always translate to his own species. So when he turned back down the hill, it was more out of sympathy for the horse than for the brutish farmer. Drawing close, he could see the panic in the horse's eyes and the strain that rippled along her muscled flanks. Arthur had once witnessed the carnage when a horse hitched to an overloaded wagon had been dragged backward down an icy slope, and he knew the animal had reason to fear. Arthur stepped up beside the horse and spoke soothingly to her, but when he reached for the bridle he was startled by the crack of the whip just over his head.

"Away with ye," the farmer shouted. "Git away. Git yer hands off my

horse.” Without warning he lashed out again with the whip, barely missing Arthur’s cheek.

Arthur’s eyes flashed with anger. He was a powerful man, with a good height and an oxlike build. He had it in him to drag the farmer from his seat and give him a thrashing, but his only concern was for the safety of the horse. He steeled his mind to the task and ignored the cursing, the whip, and the rain. With a firm, coaxing voice, he spoke to the beast, and after a moment she began to move.

Arthur stubbornly led the animal to the top, never relinquishing the reins until they reached a junction at the heart of the village where the road widened and leveled.

The farmer pulled his cap down around his head and waited in sullen silence while Arthur unloaded his trunk from between the bale of hay and crates of chickens. Without so much as a nod of gratitude, the man took up the reins and drove away.

Arthur looked around and found himself in front of the Black Bull Inn. Just a few feet away, up wide steps and through a gate stood the parish church: an ugly, dreary edifice, hardly more inspiring than the gloomy village that lay at its feet.

It was a disappointing revelation, but he was not the kind to ponder disappointments.

At the Black Bull he got a civil reply to his inquiry and learned that his lodgings were just up the lane. He arranged to have his trunk delivered and then set off up the cobbled street.

Past the church, the graveyard came into view. It spread up the treeless slope, climbing to the very walls of the parsonage and spilling into the fields beyond, an insidious thing that swelled its stomach with every harsh winter, famine, and plague. The parsonage stood alone at the top of the steep hill, anchored firmly in this sea of dead. Beyond lay the vast stormy sky and the wild moors.

The house was a two-storied Georgian thing, brick with a pair of whitewashed columns flanking the door. Respectable and unexceptional in any way.

Daylight was waning and Arthur was rain-soaked and out of temper, but he was curious about the aging reverend who had written him such elaborately courteous letters in an old-fashioned, grandiloquent sort of language. Patrick Brontë was an Irishman, like himself, and Arthur had hoped to come to the end of his journey and find a little bit of home. A bit of Irish humor, and perhaps a glass of whiskey or port to revive his flagging spirits.

He hesitated at the bottom of the graveyard, nearly blown back by a stinging gust of wind. At that moment a woman appeared at the lower window of the parsonage. She held a candle that cast a warm light across her face, and she paused to peer out at the evening sky. After a moment, the shutters were drawn. One by one, upstairs and down, she appeared at the windows until the house was closed to the world.

At that moment a sudden, agonizing wail poured from the house. It sounded only briefly before being carried off by the wind as it swept, lamenting, past the sharp corners of the parsonage and out to the open moors, where there was nothing to impede its passage.

But Arthur was convinced it was not the wind he had heard.

He was not the superstitious sort; nonetheless, he turned his back on the parsonage and strode across the lane to the stone cottage where he had taken lodgings with the family of the local sexton, John Brown.

A stonemason by trade, John Brown tended the church and the graveyard; he inscribed the names of the dead on the tombstones, as his father had done before him. It was a large family, and all they could offer him was a small room looking out on a dirt yard where chickens scratched around slabs of granite. But Arthur was a practical man, and the situation was both affordable and convenient. The church school, which would fall under his supervision, stood adjacent to Sexton House, and the parsonage was a stone's throw away.

John Brown and his wife gave him a warm welcome. His room was ready; there was hot water to bathe his face and a light supper of boiled

ham. As he knelt by his bed for prayers that night, Arthur consoled himself with the thought that he need not stay in Haworth longer than a year. Once he was ordained, he would seek his own incumbency elsewhere, in a more congenial place.

If it be God's will.