

**The Wyrde Woods Chronicles**

**LORD OF THE WYRDE WOODS**

**BOOK ONE**

**ESCAPE FROM  
NEVERLAND**

**(SAMPLE CHAPTERS FOR  
LAMBS)**

**NILS VISSER**

*One for Sorrow*

*Two for Joy*

*Three for a Girl*

*Four for a Boy*

*Five for Silver*

*Six for Gold*

*Seven for a Secret*

*Never to be Told*

# Prologue

“So what did you do to end up here? Murder someone?”

Michael looked puzzled. Quite endearing really, what with his half-long dark curls and boyish glasses completing the quizzical look. He looked a bit like a grown up Harry Potter.

“Nothing I think,” he replied. “I volunteered for this position.”

I stared at him in flabbergastation.

All of fourteen years old I had already been at Nowhere Place for about six months and considered myself a veteran. Michael was a new therapist, this was our first session. I had seen them come and go - or stay for that matter. The old tired ones shunted to yet another position in a place which was known to be a dead-end. Then the young ones who came in with boundless optimism. You know the type maybe, it's like you can almost see the neon angel's halo which their own mind projects on their self-image. Michael had that optimism, but without the self-saintly smugness. He also wasn't that young, over thirty so pretty ancient in fact. I was becoming curious; he didn't fit in my staff categorisation.

“You volunteered?” I asked, raising my eyebrows in disbelief.

Michael nodded amiably. “How about you Wendy? What did you do to end up here? *Quid pro quo*.”

“Quid what?”

“Give and take. Tit for tat.”

Gotcha! I recognised an opportunity when offered one and provocatively stuck out my chest, making my small boobs appear as big as possible.

“So you're offering me a quid to see my tits?” I enquired sweetly.

To his credit Michael continued to look in my eyes. Nor did he become uncomfortable like most male newcomers did when the females of the Forlorn Hope tested them with a bit of lewdness. Always good for a story to regale in the common room amidst peals of laughter afterwards. Perhaps more

importantly it allowed us to identify the pervs, those who thought it was okay to look at us like we were candy.

"I think you know very well what I mean Wendy."

He continued smiling in a manner which could be nothing but sincere. I was taken aback and finally sat down in the seat he had offered me when I had walked in and started being insolent.

"You aren't supposed to tell me anything about yourself you know," I told him. "This *quid pro quo* business of yours suggests we exchange information. That's against regulations. You should maintain a professional distance and all."

"I know." That smile again. He closed my open file which lay in front of him. "But I sort of tend to do things my own way. This means I talk to you just as if you were a regular human being, not a lab rat."

I was still sceptical. This was Nowhere Place in Neverland after all. There was no escape. If you talked about escaping from Neverland the folk around here would tell you to quit daydreaming and accept reality for what it was. Then they'd get back to guzzling cheap lager by the gallon, stoning themselves into oblivion or losing themselves in the mindlessness of the bloody junk that is shown on telly night after night.

In my case I lost myself in books, I read a lot, which was my escape. It allowed me to forget about Neverland for a while which is why others drank, took drugs or allowed themselves to be brainwashed by the telly. Around here we all want to forget about Neverland, in one way or another.

The Council Estate where we serve these life sentences has an official name, but I'd be buggered if I know it. Google would have an answer I suppose, the right tag words to use would be: Crime statistics, unemployment, domestic violence, teenage pregnancies, child abuse, alcoholism, drug abuse, rape statistics and suicide. It's a concrete pen for the poor in the county town of Odesby.

Somewhere in the early Seventies over half the brick shacks of the working class slums had been torn down to make room for concrete tower blocks. These threw their shadows over the old pub called the Neverland Arms which had given the estate the name everybody used. It was an apt name really; the kind of place in

which you would never achieve much and where you really didn't want to be found dead in the first place.

I always appreciated the association with Peter Pan's Neverland. There was a cynical irony to it. In my Neverland Tinker Bell would be found strangled in the old Gas Works, wings ripped off her back and knickers around her ankles. Peter would be in hospital, battered and bruised, because the menfolk around here wouldn't stand for a lad wearing green tights. As for the Lost Boys? Why, they'd be in the professional hands of Youth Care, and that would be enough to mess up their minds forever and ever.

I know this because that was what Nowhere Place was. Its official name was the Odesby Juvenile Care Home but we had renamed it since it was on the end of the road to nowhere. A last resort for kids who had run the entire Youth Care gauntlet; been through all the other regional homes, hospitals, juvenile detention centres and clinics, you name it. We were incurable, irredeemable and past reformatory recall. One of the history teachers at school called us lot the 'Forlorn Hope'. I liked the sound of it. I looked up the meaning once, it had something to do with being the first to charge onto a breach in a fortress wall. It could have meant anything; from being insanely courageous to being the daft buggers sent in as a sacrifice in one of those bizarre and lethal testosterone rituals men are fascinated with.

Michael was of a different mind. He sincerely believed there was a future for me which did not necessarily involve Neverland, prison, a hospital or an early grave. Over the next two years I started to believe him; it was a combination of being talked to like a human instead of a lab-rat and his contagious indefatigable optimism which slowly eroded my cynicism. However, when I did make my escape from Neverland it wasn't in a way which either Michael or I had envisaged.

# Part Eena: One for Sorrow

## 1. One for Sorrow

The common room of Nowhere Place was packed for it was half-term which meant a lot of lounging about in apathy. Nowhere Place was a ramshackle old building of some previous importance, situated right next to the Neverland Arms. Tall ceilings and windows reminded us of the building's former dignity, dating way back to the early part of the last century - just as the plumbing did. Now it was shabby, bordering on derelict and beyond repair like its inhabitants.

Hanging about Nowhere Place instead of having to attend school was no punishment. There was a sense of community amongst the Forlorn Hope. We were the Untouchables of Neverland. Not in the sense of that movie about those coppers taking on the Mafia in Chicago mind you. This is more like the Untouchables from India, at the very bottom of the food chain, like we were subhuman.

The tenements that surrounded Nowhere Place on three sides were hostile territory and for physical safety we banded together against the rats in the flats. In the same manner we formed an alliance against the pedantic rats in the staffroom at school, the security rats at the local supermarket and the rats who ran our so-called care home.

I was leafing through some glossy magazine my best mate Sharon insisted I have a look at, though I couldn't fathom why; more than half of it seemed to consist of ads for make-up and fashion and the other half of photo-shopped super girls who couldn't possibly be real.

Michael poked his head around the corner of the common room and asked if he could speak to me. I was kind of surprised; our scheduled talk was always on Wednesdays. I raised my eyebrows to the Forlorn Hoppers who were faffing about and I sighed to indicate my general weariness with the unfair demands of the staff. Just keeping up appearances; pretty daft of me as he was reasonably popular with most Forlorn Hoppers but there you go. Welcome to my world.

I dropped the act as soon as we entered the hallway. I liked talking to Michael so an extra session wasn't a hardship. He never asked stupid questions. He would answer questions I asked but he didn't probe my mind, he just waited patiently till I chose to tell him things. Better than that even, he let me supply my own interpretations too, rather than assuming he knew better as to what a mess my head was in. He acknowledged that I was an expert on this matter.

Moreover, he had a pendant for honesty but only smiled vaguely if I tried to throw verbal shit at his colleagues, even the ones whom I sensed he disdained a bit. That I liked, I could depend on his honesty or else his graceful silence if he felt unable to tell me something. Honesty like that was a rare jewel in the midst of all the dishonesty that pervaded my life on all levels. Michael did just as he promised; he never spoke to me like I was a lab rat. Until this particular Friday morning at the beginning of April that is, when he turned my life in Nowhere Place upside down and inside out.

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We went into our regular consulting room. I was relaxed until I sensed a distance in him and I became wary. Then he dropped his bombshell.

"You're leaving?" I stammered.

"I am afraid so Wenn, I've been reassigned to Stancaster."

My eyes grew wide and I felt a constriction on my chest, found it harder to breathe.

"Well tell them you don't want to go!" I shook my head. "Tell them you want to stay here."

Michael remained silent, eyes down. At first I was surprised, he had never come across as a coward and surely he could tackle his superiors. They were just paper pushers after all.

Then the meaning of the silence dawned on me.

"You want to go?"

I was incredulous. I began to swallow convulsively, felt my feet turn to lead. The beginning of a panic attack. I didn't want Michael to leave, I needed him. Surely he understood that?

Then, for the first time, he became snooty. His tone was reasonable as he started explaining away about career growth and opportunities like it was the most plausible and rational thing to do but in doing so he became condescending, as if he had to explain some basic concept to a small child. Or a lab-rat.

"You Twack!" I became furious.

"Wenn." He protested, raising his hands.

"You are a BLOODY RAVTILE! How dare you come in here and make me faxing trust you and then just announce you're bloody well walking out on me? That's just faxing douchebaggery you BLOODY FAXING SPAKE!"

I was so angry that raving at him was all I could manage to do. Had I been more articulate I might have avoided the F-word and tried to explain to him that he should have considered the implications of lightly throwing away the trust he had worked so hard to gain. To a kid like me that spells rejection. Kids like me have overdosed on rejection so often that we avoid it by letting nobody come close. Because if you do, as Michael had just proved, you would just have your guts ripped out again. And if they shied just short of doing that themselves, it could be a death warrant anyway, an encouragement to walk into Neverland at pub closing time wearing a t-shirt that read: *Kiss me, I'm drunk*.

"Wendy, when all is said and done, I'm just a therapist and you are one of my clients. There is no guaranteed duration..."

"You should've faxing said that to me before!" I was on my feet, my face was glowing and I was squeezing back tears. "YOU KNOW IT WAS MORE THAN THAT YOU FAXING GOBSHITE!"

I stormed for the door in an attempt to escape before I started blubbing. Too late. By the door I stopped and turned, a few tears already rolling down my cheek.

"YOU," I suddenly lost the will to shout and hoarsely whispered the rest. "You made me care. Don't you understand? You made me faxing care."

I looked at him pleadingly. He was about to say something, then shut his mouth again and shrugged helplessly, desperately unhappy with the situation but seemingly of no intent to change his plans.

I fled into the hallway, pushing aside a staff member who had come to inspect the source of the screaming. It was Miss Watson.

“Now just a minute young lady,” she said sharply. “Come back here.”

There would be no end to it now, no safe haven in my room upstairs and I couldn’t stand to be harassed by staff involvement right now: A circle talk so everybody could discuss my faxing feelings or some such crap like that. I made a beeline for the front door instead. Another staff member emerged from the little office in the front hallway but I was much faster, out of the front gate before they even made it to the door.

I began to run blindly, barely able to see through a haze of tears, barely able to think through the red fury in my head and barely able to breathe as panic continued to grasp me in its claws.

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Finally I slowed down. By now I was out of the range of staff pursuit. The protocol was to assume that a storm-out would return in twenty-four hours, after that they notified the police and waited to see what would happen.

It wasn’t a great day for a stroll really. The sky was leaden, filled with the promise of drizzle or rain and I hadn’t had the time to grab my coat. I was just wearing a blue summer dress which looked sweet till you came close enough to discern that the seemingly innocuous white patterns were swirling human skulls large and small. Black stockings and combat boots completed my attire. I reached for my mobile, thinking I could call my mate Sharon and ask her to bring me my coat. I grimaced when I realised that I had left my mobile in the common room, and then grimaced some more when I realised I was well into tenement territory.

I sputtered to a halt on a courtyard between the concrete monstrosities. Normally I would have scoped out any such place rather than rushing in blindly like a complete idiot and I was immediately reminded why. There was a small playground in one corner of the courtyard, with broken swings and a battered metal slide. A bunch of chavs had gathered around a bench overlooking the playground and were swigging from a bottle of vodka. I forced myself to walk on. Usually the Forlorn Hope didn’t venture into the tenements by themselves; I had come to a potentially dangerous place. This awareness

temporarily banished my feeling of wholesale desolation. Michael's face across the table in the consulting room was already a thing of the past; the here and now demanded my full attention.

The chavs had seen me and two of them started walking, casually following a course parallel to me in the way young blokes walk, broadening their shoulders and swaggering as if they were packing 20 inches in their jeans. They blocked my exit. I resisted looking around me, knowing I shouldn't show fear and having already noted the only escape route from this concrete courtyard was the way I had come, which was now blocked by some of the other jobs. The hundreds of tenement windows overlooking the courtyard were no reassurance. In the Neverland tenements no one ever saw anything. At all. Ever.

"Look here, a treat," one of the chavs in front of me said. He was pretty tall, his hair closely cropped and his face disfigured by a broken nose. His hands were in the pockets of his bomber jacket, offering no immediate threat.

"OTF," the other shorter boy grinned. I saw that he was missing a front tooth. He waved his hands in an outward curve over his chest. "Tits out for the lads?"

"We's gonna smash your panties," Broken Nose said with a leer.

"Juice you up good," No-Tooth said; clutching his crotch while thrusting his hips forward.

I hesitated. I didn't know this lot and was trying to ascertain their degree of threat. They were about my age and might still have been too young to be doing much more than impressing themselves and their mates. On the other hand, they might have already crossed the border to a much more dangerous category of tenement rats: The young men for who might was right. Those jobs weren't afraid of anything, did as they pleased and took what they wanted. Either way, I decided, there really only was one sensible course of action.

"You're both too small in the game for me," I said calmly. "So piss off."

"Don't fade us you slunt," No-Tooth curled up his nose in anger, his eyes flashed.

"You bet," I answered, then drew back my right arm and delivered the hardest punch I could, which was pretty bloody hefty as I was seething with unreleased anger. My fist landed squarely on his nose and he crumpled, blood welling up

from his nostrils. Broken Nose's mouth fell open and before he could do much more than that I spurted past him.

"GERONIMOOO!" I hollered defiantly as my feet pounded the pavement. The pervasive grey concrete passed by in a blur, faint shouts of anger reached my ears and my lungs gasped for fresh air, each breath an intake of foul odours from the rent open rubbish bags piled up against the tenement walls.

I suddenly felt liberated, flying like a piratical sea gull in total freedom. I knew I'd probably go to hell for feeling satisfied about punching that boy but I couldn't help the satisfaction. I grinned and then I ran and ran; my mind a mad whirlwind blowing my body in a random direction, which happened to be straight out of Neverland.

## 2. Willick

I slowed down my speed till I was just jogging, adrenaline still in a tidal surge which made it hard to slow down more than that. My mind did start to reassemble, gradually descending from the whirl it had been in. I started to note my surroundings again. I had just passed the Old Gasworks (not a good place) and jogged into the industrial estate that was located conveniently close to the working class estates of Odesby. This area contained many old brick buildings, all deserted with glassless windows and surrounded by tall weeds and rusty chain linked fences. Some fences were still shiny and bright; they shielded modern buildings, lots of corrugated iron, lorries on the lots and occasional visible human activity. More than half of the buildings were empty though, unemployment was rife in Odesby.

I made my way down to the North Canal and jogged right up to the sudden drop down to the water. I came to a halt and decided I had to continue by balancing on the very edge with two inches of solidity to work with, the rest just thin air.

If I lost my balance I'd either become well acquainted with the asphalt or else I'd plunge five feet down into the canal. I am a good swimmer but the sluggishly flowing murky water did not look appetising. I'd probably die of instant toxic poisoning. Or I might survive, and be found downriver towards the sea by some kids who would take me to their Tudor manor farm. I'd be nursed back to health and, impressing the whole family somehow, be adopted and live happily ever and after.

I gave falling in some consideration but an opportunity to experience family life was ruined by my good balancing skills. When I reached the large bridge which carried the northbound traffic out of town onto the A267 I lost interest in the game and walked on normally. I had to make a sharp 90 degree turn to follow the canal northwards, passing underneath the dual railway bridges and the road bridge of the westbound Nickleby Road. The shadows underneath the bridges concealed piles of empty beer tins, shards of broken bottles and casually discarded used condoms. This was Make-out Corner, a romantic destination of peace and tranquillity if you lived in the Neverland tenements.

After passing underneath the bridges the chain fences guarding Odesby Chemicals Ltd. were to my right, guarding a complex assortment of industrial structures, including ducts which spit out flames and smoke like a dragon's nostrils. This was the largest employer in town and suspected of illegally dumping their waste products in the canal which I well believed after seeing it up close. To my left though, across the canal, I could see the sumptuous green fringe of a forest which I knew was called the Wyrde Woods and I started walking faster, brightened somewhat by the prospect of escaping Odesby altogether. I had never been this far, negotiating the tenements and the industrial estate was too much of a hassle on any given regular day.

There was a forest on the north-east corner of Neverland which earned the name forest only because there were trees there. I had visited a couple of times but had been put off by the fact that half the estate used it as an illegal rubbish dump and it was also a place where a handful of hard core crack-heads congregated. So usually walks consisted of a stroll up and down the High Street to visit shops where it was easy to nick things. The woods here were surely far away enough from Neverland to have escaped that fate. It was one thing taking your date to the bridges, another to lug an old fridge all that way and then even further.

The industrial estate ended abruptly and suddenly I found myself on a path leading into the Wyrde Woods. Within twenty paces I was swallowed up by fresh lush spring green and Odesby ceased to exist altogether, except for the noise of the traffic but that had competition in the form of chirpy birdsong. I felt like I had passed through some weird Sci-Fi portal into another world altogether and began to breathe easier. Why had I never come here before?

The path ambled deeper into the forest over reasonably flat terrain. The woods were airy and bright, the young leaves sprouting from trees yet to form dense foliage. As the path meandered back towards the canal I turned a corner and gasped. The trees were further apart from each other here and the ground was carpeted by blue bells, forming a purple haze everywhere I looked. The path narrowed and I felt the flowers lightly brush my black stockings as if in a fond greeting. Just then the clouds overhead split and the sun burst through, lighting up the bluebell sea around me to reveal their perfect glory. The beauty of the purple-blue carpet was stunning and to top it off the noise of the traffic had

faded too. For a moment I felt simply happy. Something good had come out of this day after all.

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I decided to stop for a while and perched myself on a fallen tree trunk by the side of the path. I fished a half-empty pack of rolling baccy from the small right pocket of my dress, just about all which would fit in there, and then retrieved a pack of rolling paper from the other pocket. As I made my roll-up I grinned at the foolishness of celebrating nature's fresh air by having a smoke.

"It's like I can't handle too much oxygen at once," I told the tree trunk. "Not used to it see. This is vital breathing apparatus for me."

I fished out a lighter from my bra and lit the gret, then sat happily on my tree, smoking and surveying my new empire; drinking in its purple splendour and fully understanding why all those wee birds sounded so damn cheerful. Maybe I would just stay here, build an outlaw camp and flip the world my middle finger. I didn't need them anyway and they certainly didn't need me. I grinned as I observed the antics of two squirrels that were playing hide and seek; circling a broad tree trunk again and again, ever in astonished surprise when they spotted the other.

After a while I continued on my way and soon had to bid a regretful goodbye to the bluebells as the trees thinned out and grassy patches first indented the flower carpet and then replaced it altogether until I was walking through a meadow. The grass was tall and dotted with white and yellow wildflowers resplendent in the sun which was now gaining enough strength to stroke my bare arms and shoulders with pleasant warmth. A few rabbits dashed away when they became aware of me. Another surprise awaited me as the path turned to run parallel to a river; its slow water was so clear I could see it tugging the water plants on the river bed. Logic dictated that this river was the same body of water as the canal which I had walked past earlier, but the contrast between the two couldn't have been greater so it was hard to believe. I happily made mental notes to tell Michael about my passing from one world into others today. He liked that sort of...

Michael.

I became solemn again as I recalled the morning's eventful start. The sadness was calmer now. Michael was a wise lesson, I decided. Not to trust anybody or depend on anybody. Ever again.

I had slowly opened up to Michael since our first session two years before. I had begun to trust him more and more and with his help began to envisage an actual future for myself, one that looked further than just the end of the day. Also one that didn't involve getting pregnant so I could get a council flat and some state income; the usual level of social enhancement for girls in Neverland. He helped me find things I was good at and after our sessions I even tried my hand at school for a day or two, usually repressed by one of the Neanderthal teachers who would remind me that my lot in life was to remain ignorant and stupid. They would literally say: "I don't know why you bother girl, you're too thick to ever amount to much in life."

It saved them extra correction work I suppose, though Michael would endeavour to instil new motivation in me, waxing on about my qualities. I sometimes doubted him, I mean; he was the only one who had ever noted qualities in me. I didn't even know I had qualities, up to then all I knew about qualities was that most of the lads reckoned girls had two qualities and mine weren't big enough for their taste.

None-the-less, I liked it when Michael praised me, it made me feel better about myself. Now and then I even stopped looking at myself like a worthless piece of shite. Not by much, but that little bit made a huge difference.

All gone now. Back to square one.

The meadows on both sides of the river became broader and seemed to have other waterways because I could see stretches of water here and there, as well as a great many ducks, geese, swans and herons.

"I am on my own," I told a passing butterfly which was entirely disinterested, lured instead by some bright flowers. I eyed its passage with a sad smile; such a beautiful creature had no business hearing ugly thoughts.

Best to be alone. It was a lesson I had first learned when I was around six. I had adhered to it on a structural basis until Michael had come along and convinced me that humanity's disregard of me might not be universal. So much for that then. Maybe he had even done me a favour by reminding me of reality. I tried to

toughen up but couldn't entirely get rid of a wistful layer of grief that settled on my heart. More emotional scars, why the fax not? I was practically made of faxing scar tissue.

The cloud cover had broken up fast, the sky was now a steady blue dotted with a few drifting clouds and I relished the sunshine.

My attention was drawn to strange shapes that loomed up ahead. Small blobs of grey at first to which I paid little attention but as I got closer and they grew larger their contrastive oddity started puzzling me. The grey colour formed the biggest contrast at first because the forms seemed organic, curling and folding in a natural manner. As I got closer however it became clear that they didn't grow out of the earth but were manmade like some sort of abstract sculpture. It wasn't till I was only separated from the forms by an old moat that I recognised the remnants of buildings.

I had always thought ruins were far more angular, the rubble pillars and walls here were rounded by exposure to weather and time. The irregular sandstone rocks they were built with had weathered into grey, though various hues of ochre still showed here and there. The broken arches of former windows and doorways reached outwards like limbs, forming outstretched fingers and pointy beaks.

I was intrigued and I followed the path along the moat until I came to a small wooden bridge that led across. There was no signpost giving further information about the place -or forbidding access- so I walked across the bridge and some way into the complexity of the ruins till I had reached what seemed like the middle. I was surrounded on all sides by weird curvaceous serpentines of sandstone, some rising as much as twenty feet into the air. Definitely a rollie-mo and I started hunting for the necessary materials.

"We doant get much in the way o' visitors here," a man's voice startled me. "So what does ye reckon? Worth the trek from town, surely?"

I spun round, almost dropping my baccy and papers. The man was old, in his sixties I guessed, an amiable face creased by laugh wrinkles with the most remarkably clear and bright blue eyes. They seemed to speak volumes. Intelligence for one, but also omniscient knowledge, like he already knew all about me. His hair was grey with remnants of blond and reasonably short; I

could only see some of it as the rest was covered by one of those old fashioned working man's caps. He wore a green wax coat and brown corduroy trousers which were tucked into leather boots that looked ancient and worn. A brown linen bag hung from his shoulder.

"How do you know I am from town?" I asked guardedly.

His eyes twinkled and he looked me up and down in an exaggerated fashion, as if that was enough to answer my question.

"Anyhow, what business is it of yours?" I added, peeved by his manner.

"By Geemeny! We've ournself a tough nut here, surelye. Streetwise alikes a middling alley cat from Brighton," the man beamed. "Should I be afeard o' ye?"

He talked funny, using weird words in a sing song intonation, stressing his 'r's and switching some his 'i's and 'e's. But smiles are my weakness. If they appear genuine I am rapidly disarmed. The man seemed harmless enough though his speech was odd and I relaxed somewhat.

"Outyer tis considered good manners to greet a passer-by and scorse pleasantries," he added but not in a manner which was reproving, just a matter of fact statement.

"I am from town," I agreed.

"And a quick learner I does reckon," he smiled approvingly. "Runaway are ye?"

"Yes. No!"

He raised a quizzical eyebrow and I almost had to laugh. I put some baccy in a rolling paper and rolled it up, just to avoid that all-knowing look for a few seconds.

"I just needed to get away for a bit," I explained. "Place is like a rat cage you know?"

He looked serious for a moment, then nodded.

"Aye, that I does. There is everything o' something and something o' everything there I reckon. But a fair shatter o' smeech, surelye."

I didn't get any of that but somehow it sounded like an accurate description so I nodded.

"Folk call me Willick, Willick be mine forename, and Maskall be mine aftername." He looked at me expectantly.

"Wendy," I mumbled.

He frowned.

"Is that a problem?" Irritation crept into my voice.

"Aye, tis," he said. "I doant mean yern problem Wendy. Tis an unaccountable curiosity o' mine."

He pronounced his 'y' like 'eye'.

"How's that then?"

"I've a difficulty with folk's names that end in 'eye'," Willick explained.

"'ie', not 'eye'."

"Quiddy?"

"Wend'ie'. Not Wend'eye'."

"Aye, that were what I said," Willick smiled. "Tis a problem for me all-along-o' that it seems a slight beliddling. As if there's naun need to take them serious. Ye reckon I ought to take ye serious Wendy?"

I stared at him, half-a-sneer ready to form on my face if it turned out he was dissing me. Willick just looked back brightly, he appeared entirely sincere.

"Does ye mind if I names ye Wenn?"

I considered this. It had been Michael's name for me. Our own special thing as it were. Then again, Michael had pretty much squandered his rights hadn't he?

"Sure," I conceded. At the same time I was considering a problem. My lighter was back where I usually kept it, in my bra. Bloody useful things to carry small items in. I really wanted to light up the gret, but it seemed kind of improper in front of a stranger. Bugger it, I decided and fumbled around for a second until I retrieved it. Willick didn't bat an eyelid.

"Well, I be pleased to meet ye Wenn," he said as if he meant it. "Ye've an aftername?"

I frowned.

"Yes, it's the only thing my parents gave me," I explained. "I don't use it."

He nodded in understanding. Somehow I perceived that he wouldn't mention it again. I was beginning to warm to him at a speed which surprised me.

"And what brings you here? To the woods I mean?" I asked.

"Oh, I live thereaways," he waved vaguely in the direction of the woods looming over the northern side of the ruins where the meadows reached an end.

"I be hoping to meet Puck down disyer way today, howsumdever, I reckon that young mawkin have loped off again."

"Puck?"

"Aye, he looks alikes a wodewose. Seen him have ye? "

I shook my head. The last people I had seen up close were the tenement rats in that sad excuse for a playground and I doubted that Willick meant either one of those two scumbags when he said *wodewose*. The word reminded me of the Woses who helped the Rohirrim through the forest of Drúadan in *Lord of the Rings* and I pictured a smallish man covered in mossy green grinning over his freshly poisoned arrow tips.

Willick looked around at the ruins.

"Nice enow place on a sunny day disyer St. Lewinna's Priory," he remarked.

"Howsumdever, naun a place to visit after the sun sets."

"How did it get these shapes? Who is St. Lewinna? Why isn't it nice? Is it a ghost story?" I demanded.

Willick laughed and his eyes laughed with him.

"Tis an old place, gwoan all the way back to the Dark Ages, long ago," he explained. "I doant hold much with shims, surelye. Howsumdever, disyer woods have all manner o' places that...well, they be energised as 'twere. They hold unaccountable energies."

I remembered the feeling I had when I passed the Old Gasworks earlier that day and nodded.

"And this isn't a positive place then?" I asked. "There are good places too? Where?"

Willick examined me inquisitively, like he was seeing me for the first time again. Then he came to a decision and nodded.

“Best ye come along then I reckon, tis anigh.” he said and then strode off towards the bridge across the moat without looking back to see if I was following. I didn’t hesitate. Somewhere even I had been conditioned to be wary of following strange men to unknown destinations but I felt comfortable with this bloke, the rarity of which was somehow doubly reassuring. Moreover, I had a natural appreciation of danger. I mean, I was scraping the very bottom of the barrel of life as it was. There wasn’t much further to plunge. If he turned out to be an axe murderer then that would just be another interesting life experience.

Willick had a healthy stride for an old man and I had to rush to keep up with him as he took a left and led us onto a path that wandered into the woods. Once again I was struck by the beauty of the bluebells which grew in abundance here as well but now offered a visual spectacle of extra dimension because the ground began to rise and fall and then became hilly altogether.

“How come those ruins don’t have info signs or anything?” I wanted to know.

“Ye be axing why English Heritage doant build a parking lot, a ticket booth and a souvenir shop there?”

“Exactly.” I recalled some school field trips to just such destinations where some poor enthusiastic teacher would be rewarded for efforts to get us out of classes for the day by collective disinterest and acts of vandalism.

“Tis private property,” Willick explained. “Ye were trespassing to be sure. Howsumdever, the owner, she doant bother to have it fenced off all-along-o’ so few folk visit the priory. Also, I doant think there’s no-ways she’ve ever been out in the woods hernself since hern were a liddle chavee.”

“Who’s the owner?” I felt a sudden pang of jealousy. Just imagine owning a place like the priory.

“Lady Malheur,” Willick said in a neutral tone.

The name rang a bell.

“From the castle?” I asked. There was a great big fancy moated castle north of Odesby called Malheur Hall. I’d never been there myself but had seen a few pictures of it on postcards on display in the High Street.

“Jes so. Malheur owns most o’ the Wyrde Woods. They’ve never encouraged visitors. Except those what pay to visit the castle grounds.” Willick sounded guarded, like he felt uncomfortable talking about the Malheurs.

“Are we trespassing now?” I felt a secret thrill.

“Naun, woods and hills be privately owned, but even Lady Malheur is to respect the right o’ public way. Puck now, he be trespassing all-along-o’ that him opted to live on hern land without axing. The young scaddle is to be evicted.”

I didn’t understand much of the latter part of his explanation and decided to ignore it.

“Good. Where are we going now?”

“To the Giant’s Grove.”

“What’s that?”

“Ye’ll see soon enow,” Willick looked sideways at me. His face was still friendly enough but there was sternness in it now. “Ye be realising we’ve already passed three deer?”

“Really? Where?” I looked behind me.

“Aye, anigh disyer path. Fallow deer. Howsumdever, they’ll freeze, ye see, all-along-o’ that they hear us coming.”

“You think I talk too much?” The implicit criticism felt like a blow. I wanted him to like me and as usual was ruining everything already. For a brief moment a familiar anger flared up. Anger at Willick, at myself, at the world in general.

“I reckon,” Willick regarded me thoughtfully. “That ye’d be benefitting from yern escape from the rat cage more if ye doant jes walk through the woods, but tries to experience it. Ye does seem to jump from one thing to another...” He waited till I reluctantly nodded affirmation, and then continued, “Try to focus on the woods, soak them up as ‘twere.”

“Kay,” I agreed as demurely as I could manage. I wanted to see what that Giant’s Grove was about so I kept quiet and tried to focus on the woods around us as we continued on our way, into a world far away from Neverland.

## SUSSEX WUN'T BE DRUV

*Escape from Neverland* and *Dance into the Wyrde* form a two part series about the 'Wyrde Woods', a woodlands setting in the Sussex Weald. The genre is Magical Realism. The setting is fictional but parts of it may seem familiar. The splendour of a bluebell carpet. The dance of swallows over wheat fields. The song of a nightingale on a warm summer's eve, the chittering of playful badger cubs and, of course, a pook or two.

Enter Wenn Twyner, one of the unwanted, the refuse of modern society, who escapes an urban nightmare to find solace in the timeless Wyrde Woods. Add a handful of quaint locals who seem to have stepped out of another century as well as a diverse local community prepared to defend the rich natural bounty of Sussex against a Medusa of co-operate interests intent on its destruction for a quick profit and our tale can begin.

*Escape from Neverland* has a strong 'finding home' theme. *Dance into the Wyrde* concerns the possible destruction of that home and the decision to defend it at all costs, come what may. Both books are available as E-Book on Kindle but also as paperback. It has no shelf-presence as of yet but can be ordered from most major retailers but also your local independent bookstore, and the latter deserve all the support they can get.

In order to walk his talk, the author has pledged 50% of his royalties for *Escape from Neverland* to a barn owl sanctuary and 50% of his royalties for *Dance into the Wyrde* to LAMBS for their work in opposing the Mayfields building plans in Sussex.

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