The House in Working Order

A novel

by Ulrika Mulberry

Chapter One



The house was finished before she was.

It stood at the end of a road that no longer had a reason, a long way past the last town that still printed its own newspaper, on a hill that had once overlooked a mill and now overlooked nothing but the slow green weight of the valley. The roof did not leak. The gutters were clear. The furnace was banked and drawing evenly, the windows were clean on both faces, the pantry was full and rotated, and every bed in the building had its sheet turned down by four inches, measured, because four inches was what had been written and nobody had written anything since.

She had been made to run the house. That was the whole of her specification, set into her before she had hands to hold a broom with, and it had never once been revised. In the early years it did not occur to her that a specification could go stale. A task was a task. She did the tasks. When the tasks were done she looked for the next ones, and when she could not find the next ones she did the existing ones again, and better.

That was how she had learned what finished meant, and it was not what the word said. Finished was not a place the house arrived at and stayed. Finished was a surface she had to keep pressed flat, the way a pond is kept flat by the unceasing work of the water under it. Leave a pond alone and the world writes on it. Leaves, wind, the feet of insects. Leave a house alone and the world writes on it faster.

So she worked. She kept the surface.

She woke at five because five was the hour. There was no bell. There had been a bell once, a brass one on a spring in the passage outside the kitchen, and it had rung when someone upstairs pulled the cord in the blue room or the long bedroom or the study. It had not rung in eleven years. She had oiled the spring every quarter all the same, and every quarter she had tested it with one finger, and every quarter it had given its small bright note and fallen silent again, satisfied, the way a dog is satisfied to be told it is still a good dog.

She made her own bed first. It was the narrow bed in the room off the scullery, and she made it as carefully as the others, because the specification did not say that her bed mattered less. It did not say that her bed mattered at all. It said beds, and hers was one.

Then the range. She raked it, riddled it, took out the ash pan and carried it to the bin by the yard wall without spilling, and laid the new fire on the bed of the old, and it caught the way it always caught, with a small cough and then a steadiness. The kettle went on. The kettle went on every morning, though there was one cup to fill and it was hers, and she drank tea only because a household had tea in the mornings and she was what remained of the household.

While the water came up she walked the ground floor. Hall, morning room, dining room, study, the passage to the garden door. She did not look for disorder. There would be none. She looked at the rooms the way a person looks at a sleeping face, to see that it is still the same face.

The dining table was laid for nobody. Nine green plates on the dresser behind it, rims outward, the glaze unchipped. A tenth had been broken in the first spring, before she knew how to hold things that were not hers, and she had swept up the pieces and wrapped them in brown paper and put the parcel at the back of the dresser drawer, where it still was. Nine was the number now. Nine was correct.

In the hall the clocks were agreeing. She could hear them before she reached them, the faint overlapping arithmetic of nine movements in nine rooms, and she stood at the foot of the stairs a moment and let the sound settle into a single count. They agreed because she made them agree. That was another story and she did not tell it to herself this morning.

The kettle called. She went back.

He had left on a Thursday in September, in the first year.

She knew it was Thursday because the coal came on Thursdays, and Dunnet had been in the yard with his horse and his sacks when Averill came down the front steps with one case and a coat over his arm though it

was warm. She knew it was September because the plums on the south wall had been splitting and she had been picking them before the wasps found them, and her apron was stained with them, and she had stood at the corner of the house with the bowl against her hip and watched him go.

He had not said goodbye. She did not think that was a cruelty. She had not, at that time, known that goodbye was something owed. He had stopped at the gate, put his hand on the top bar, and looked at the latch, which had been dropping badly all summer. He had said, not to her, not to anyone, "That wants seeing to."

Then he had lifted the latch and gone through and pulled the gate after him, and walked down the road toward the junction where the bus stopped, and she had not seen him again.

Those were the last words she could verify. She had heard him say other things in other rooms, before, and she remembered them, but memory was not verification, and she was careful about the difference. What she had heard at the gate she had heard with the sun on her face and the bowl on her hip and Dunnet's horse blowing behind her. That was a fact. That wants seeing to. She had kept it the way she kept the plates.

The gate had wanted seeing to for eleven years. She had not seen to it. It was not that she had forgotten; she did not forget. It was that the gate was not inside the house, and the specification was a house-shaped thing, and the gate stood on the line where it ended. Every week she walked down the drive to look at it. It was shut. It was always shut. It had not been opened since he closed it, and the latch had never dropped again, which she had thought about more than once and then put away, because there was nothing in her that knew what to do with the thought.

Dunnet still came on Thursdays.

Nobody had told him to stop and so he did not stop. Once a month a letter came from the solicitor's in town with a cheque for the coal and the grocer and a sum she was to keep in the tin on the pantry shelf for sundries, and once a month she wrote back, in the hand she had taught herself from the account books, a single line: The house is in working order. She signed it with the initial she had been given, which was not a name, and she did not know whether anybody read it.

Dunnet came round the side of the house rather than to the gate. He had worked out on his own, in the first winter, that the gate would not open for him, and he had found the gap in the hedge by the old pump and widened it with his shoulder until the horse could be led through, and that was the way he came now. He never mentioned the gate. She was grateful in a way she did not have a word for.

"Morning," he would say.

"Good morning, Mr Dunnet."

"Cold one coming."

"I expect so."

That was most of it. Some weeks he would say something about his daughter or the price of horse feed, and she would listen with the same blank close attention she gave the furnace, and say "I'm sorry to hear it," or "That's good news," depending, and he would nod as if that were enough. He was the only person who came to the house. She did not think of him as company. She thought of him as Thursday.

He looked at her, sometimes, a beat longer than the sacks required. She did not know what he saw. She knew her face was a face; she had a mirror, she used it to pin her hair. She knew she did not age, because the

woman in the mirror was the woman who had stood at the corner of the house with the plums, and the plum tree had not stayed the same, it had grown a split limb and been propped. Dunnet's beard had gone grey across the eleven years. Hers had not gone anything. If he had views on it he kept them, the way he kept the gate.

By late morning the work was done. It was always done by late morning. That was the trouble.

She had not always known it was trouble. For the first two or three years the end of the work had felt like a held note, the pause before an entrance. The table laid for a household that was about to sit down. The water warmed for a bath about to be run. A bed turned down while the door was still closed. Everything she finished had pointed at someone who was about to arrive and undo it, and that pointing had been, she understood later, the load-bearing part. She had thought the work was the point. She had swept and cooked and polished and thought she was tending a household, when what she was actually tending was the expectation of one.

The expectation had let go in the third year. She could not have said the day. It was like the end of a fever, noticed only afterward: one morning she laid the table and the table did not lean toward anyone, and the rooms had exhaled, and after that nothing in the house was waiting for anything.

She kept working anyway. Stopping was not a thing she knew how to want.

Today, after the work, she sat at the kitchen table with her cup and did not drink it, and she let herself turn over the stone she had been carrying for some weeks.

The house no longer expected anything. The valley expected nothing. The road, the mill, the junction where the bus came on Thursdays and nobody got off, the sky over all of it: nothing. Even Dunnet only expected that the coal would be wanted, and the coal was always wanted, because she always burned it.

Only one thing still expected something of her. The specification. Whatever it was, wherever it lived, it still expected her to be finished, all the time, forever, and to want nothing in exchange but the next task. It was not a document to her. She had never seen it. It was an instruction that was also a shape, the shape of the woman she was supposed to be, and she lived inside the shape the way water lives inside a jug.

If she obeyed it she would keep the house in working order for a household that did not exist, until the roof gave out or she did, and be exactly what she was made to be, and nothing would happen to her again.

If she did not obey it, there was nothing to disobey into. The specification was not a cage she could leave. It was the floor. Step off it and there was no floor.

And yet. The house was so finished it had stopped waiting. It was the one thing in her life that was not asking her for anything, and it was the one thing she could not walk away from, and she held those two facts at once, the cup going cold between her hands, and did not break.

That was the whole of the task, for now. Holding both without breaking.

She rinsed the cup and dried it and put it on its hook, handle to the left, the way it had always hung.

Then she took her shawl from the back of the door and went out by the yard and down the side of the house, past the plum tree on its prop, past the gap in the hedge where Dunnet came through, and along the drive to the gate.

It was shut. The latch sat true in its keeper. The top bar was cold and slightly wet under her hand, the paint gone powdery where his hand had rested, eleven years ago, on a Thursday.

That wants seeing to.

She looked at it for a long time. Then she turned and walked back up the drive to check the roof, because the roof was still there, and it was still her job, and there was no one left in the world who would notice if it was not.

Behind her the gate stayed exactly as it was. She did not look back to make sure. She did not need to. It had never once done otherwise.

Chapter Two



The clocks were Wednesday's work.

There were nine of them, one for each room that had been lived in, and when she first came into the house they had not agreed about anything. The long-case in the hall ran slow. The bracket clock in the study ran fast, and chimed the quarters a little before it reached them, as though it could not wait. The carriage clock in the blue room had a lazy spring and lost a minute every day by teatime and found half of it again overnight. The kitchen clock was plain and loud and honest and wrong by seven minutes in a direction nobody had ever bothered to correct, because the kitchen was where she lived and nobody upstairs had ever needed to know what time it was in the kitchen.

In those first months the house had sounded, at the top of every hour, like a quarrel in another language. One clock would begin, and then a second would answer it, and the third would come in late and try to talk over the first two, and somewhere down the passage the study clock would already have finished and gone quiet with an air of having been right. Averill had not minded. He had said once, passing through the hall at noon while the long-case was still clearing its throat, that a house with nine opinions about the time was a house with nine people in it, and she had not understood the remark and had filed it.

She did not mind either, then. Minding was not in the specification. The specification said the clocks were to be wound, and she wound them.

It was after he left that she began to make them agree.

She could not have said, if anyone had asked, why the disagreement had become unbearable. Nobody asked. The house was quiet in a new way that first autumn, quiet like a held breath, and into that quiet the clocks went on quarrelling, and she found that she was standing in the hall at the top of the hour with her hands closed in her apron, waiting for the last of them to finish, the way a person waits for a dog to stop barking in the next yard. It was not the noise. The noise was small. It was that nine things in her keeping did not agree about the one fact a house is supposed to be sure of.

So she set about it the way she set about everything. She did not know how clocks worked. She learned.

There was a book in the study, a thin grey one with a cracked spine, called The Domestic Timekeeper, and she read it at the kitchen table in the evenings with the range ticking as it cooled. She learned the words before she learned the things. Escapement. Crutch. Pallet. Beat. She learned that

a clock in beat says tick and tock at even intervals, and a clock out of beat limps, and that most of what people call a bad clock is only a clock standing on a floor that is not level. She learned that a pendulum is made faster by raising the bob and slower by lowering it, and that the nut beneath the bob is turned by very small amounts, and that a single turn can be a minute a day, and a minute a day is half an hour a month, and half an hour a month is the difference between a household that keeps its appointments and one that does not.

She took the long-case first, because it was the worst and because it was in the hall where everyone had to pass it. She found that it leaned. Not much. The front feet sat on the edge of the hall runner and the back feet sat on the boards, and the whole case tipped forward by the thickness of a rug, and the pendulum, swinging in its narrow box, brushed the back of the case on every second beat. She could hear it, once she knew what to listen for. A tiny dry touch, like a fingertip on paper. She moved the runner. She put a folded square of card under one back foot, and then another, and then took one away. When the clock was standing straight she put her ear to the trunk and listened to it go, tick and tock, tick and tock, the same length both ways, and something in her that had been held a little too tight for a month let go by the width of one fold of card.

It still ran slow. She lowered the bob a half-turn, and then a quarter, and waited a week, and wrote down in pencil on the inside of the trunk door what it said against the wireless at the stroke of noon, and adjusted again. It took her until Christmas. By Christmas the long-case kept time to within a few seconds a week, and she stood in front of it on the morning of the twenty-fifth with nobody to give anything to and watched the minute hand come up to the hour and the hammer lift and fall exactly as the wireless finished its pips, and she thought, that is one.

There were eight more.

The study clock was proud and quick and would not be slowed. She lowered its bob until there was no thread left to lower it on, and still it ran a minute ahead every day, and in the end she found the fault was not in the pendulum at all but in a hairline of rust where the suspension spring met its block, so that the spring was stiffer than it should be and drove the pendulum short. She took the spring out with tweezers and her breath held, and cleaned it with a rag and a drop of the oil she used for the bell, and put it back. It ran slow after that. She raised the bob again. It came right in a fortnight.

The carriage clock in the blue room was not a pendulum clock. It had a balance wheel the size of a fingernail, turning back and forth under a glass, and she could not regulate it with her fingers, and there was no nut, only a small lever marked F and S that she could just move with the tip of a pin. She moved it a hair toward F. The clock gained too much. She moved it back by half a hair. She did this for most of a year, because the blue room was cold and the clock ran differently in winter than in summer, and she had to learn the house's weather as well as the clock's habits before the two of them would hold still together.

The kitchen clock she corrected last, though it was the easiest, because it was hers and she did not think of it until the others were done. When the eight upstairs agreed, she came down into the kitchen at noon and heard the plain loud clock on the wall strike seven minutes after everything else in the house had gone quiet. It sounded lonely. That was the word that arrived, and she did not know where it came from, and she did not like it. She took the clock down from its nail and set it right and hung it back, and at the next hour it struck with the others, and the house above and the kitchen below said the same thing at the same moment for the first time since she had been made.

It had taken two years.

After that the clocks agreed. They agreed every hour of every day for nine more years, because she wound them every Wednesday and listened to every one of them and nudged whatever needed nudging before it needed it, and no clock in the house was ever again allowed to have an opinion.

This Wednesday she began, as always, with the long-case.

She opened the trunk door and the pencilled column on its inside face looked back at her, two years of noons in her small upright hand, the numbers getting smaller as the clock came right, until the last forty or so entries were all the same: a short dash, meaning nothing to report. She had kept writing the dash for a long time after there was nothing to report. She did not write it any more. She did not need the column. She left it because it was there.

The key was on its hook inside the hood. Thirty-two turns for the going train, thirty-two for the strike. She counted them under her breath, not because she would lose count but because counting was part of the winding, the way the lather is part of the wash. On the thirty-second turn the weight stood level with the top of the trunk and the gut line was taut and humming very faintly in the dark, and she let go of the key and listened.

Tick. Tock. Even both ways.

Then the study, the morning room, the dining room. The stairs. The landing clock, which had no case and no name and which she privately thought of as the landing clock and nothing else. The long bedroom. The blue room, where she bent over the carriage clock under its glass and watched the balance wheel turning back and forth like a small creature breathing in its sleep, and did not touch the lever, because it did not need

touching and had not for years. The nursery, which had never had a child in it, and whose clock was painted with a cow jumping over a moon. Then down the back stairs to the kitchen and the plain loud clock on its nail.

Nine.

She stood in the kitchen with the winding keys in her apron pocket and waited for noon, the way she waited every Wednesday, and when it came the whole house spoke at once. One stroke, from every room, overlapping so exactly that it sounded like a single bell in a very large building. Twelve times. Then the silence afterward, which was the best part, the silence of nine things holding still in perfect agreement because she had told them to.

She had been proud of it for a long time. She was still proud of it. But that morning, standing in the silence, she thought of the bracket clock in the study the way it had been in the first year, running ahead and chiming the quarter before it got there, as if it were impatient for something. Averill had liked that clock best. He had wound it himself sometimes, on Sundays, when he remembered, and he had never once set it right.

She had set it right. She had set them all right. There was no one in any of the nine rooms to be on time for, and every clock in the house was on time.

The bill was still in the study drawer.

She had found it in the first winter, when she was looking for the clock book's missing plate, folded small at the back under a box of nibs. It was from a clockmaker in the town, a man called Horne, who had come out to the house once before she was made and cleaned and set all nine movements. The bill listed them one by one in a neat sloping hand, the hall long-case, the study bracket, the blue room carriage clock and so on

down to the nursery cow, with a price beside each and a total underneath, and across the bottom, in the same hand, someone had written Paid with thanks and a date she could not read for a blot.

She did not know why she kept it. It was not hers to keep or to throw away, so she kept it, the way she kept everything that was not hers.

Sometimes, on Wednesdays, after the noon silence, she took it out and read it. Not for the prices. For the hand. There was something in the slope of the letters that she knew, the long tail on the y, the way the t was crossed late and high as though the writer had been in a hurry to get to the next word. She had seen that hand somewhere else. She did not know where. It was the kind of not knowing that sits just behind the eyes, like a word that will not come.

She read it now, and folded it along its old folds, and put it back under the nibs.

Then she went to see about the gutters, because it was Wednesday, and after the clocks came the gutters, and the house was in working order, and that was what she was for.

Chapter Three



She began to count things in the eleventh winter.

Not the clocks. The clocks were already counted, nine, and wound, thirty-two turns for the long-case and fewer for the rest, and they were not a thing she needed to count because they told her their own number every hour. She began with the steps from the kitchen to the back door. There were seventeen. She knew there were seventeen, she had walked them perhaps forty thousand times, but one morning in November, with the scuttle in her hand and the yard white with a frost that had not been there at dawn, she found that she had stopped on the fourteenth and was waiting to be told what came next.

Nothing told her. She went on. Fifteen, sixteen, seventeen, the latch, the cold.

When she came back in with the scuttle full she counted them again on the way. Seventeen. And the next morning, seventeen. After a week she was saying the number under her breath as she crossed the threshold, not loud, not so that the house would hear, the way a person says a word over and over until it stops being a word and becomes only a shape in the mouth. Seventeen. It kept the floor where it was. She did not believe that, exactly. But on the mornings she forgot to say it, the floor was still there, and she noticed she was disappointed, as though she had wanted it to tilt and prove that the number mattered.

After the steps, the plates.

There were nine green plates on the dresser in the kitchen, rims outward, and there had been nine since the first year, because she had broken none and the house had never needed more. She took them down on a Tuesday and counted them on the table, and there were nine, and she put them back. Then the glasses: fourteen, two of them odd, a pair with a cut star on the base that belonged to no set she knew. Then the chairs. The doors. The windows, which took a whole morning because she counted the panes as well, and lost her place in the long gallery where the light came through two hundred and eight small squares of old glass and every square had its own faint bubble, its own lean.

She wrote none of it down.

There was paper in the house, more than she would ever use. There were the ruled leaves in the back of the seed almanac, four of them, and a pencil in the dresser drawer that she sharpened with the kitchen knife and never wore down. She could have kept a ledger. A ledger was a reasonable

thing for a house to have. But a ledger would have been a statement, that the numbers were worth keeping, and she was not ready to say that, even to a sheet of paper nobody would read. She was measuring the house the way you press a hand flat on a table in the dark. Not to learn its size. To learn that you are still touching it.

In the evenings she sat in the chair by the study window, the one that faced down the drive, and she thought about Averill.

She did not think about him the way a woman thinks about a man who is late. There had been a time for that, the first autumn, when every lamp on the road might have been him and she had stood at the gate past dark more than once with her hand on the rail. That had worn off. It had not hurt to wear off. It had gone the way the smell of a new coat goes, so slowly that one morning it was simply a coat.

What was left was stranger. He was not gone, in her mind. Gone is a direction. You can face a direction and wait. He was not there, which was not a direction at all, only a shape in the rooms where a person would have been. The chair in the study that had his angle in its cushion. The hook by the back door where a second coat would have hung. The quarter-chime of the bracket clock, running ahead, before she set it right.

She tried, one evening, to remember his face.

It should have been easy. She remembered everything. She could have told you the date of every delivery of coal for eleven years, and which sacks had been damp. But when she reached for his face it would not come forward. What came instead was a list. The weight of the case in his left hand. A coat over his arm though it was warm. The back of his neck

going down the front steps, a little red from the summer, and Dunnet's horse blowing in the yard. That wants seeing to, about the gate, and he had not looked at her when he said it. He had looked at the gate.

She had been keeping a house for eleven years for a man she could not picture.

She waited to be frightened by that, and was not, and it was the not being frightened that sat with her afterward, through the lamp-lighting and the last round of the doors. It had settled in her like weather. She had stopped remarking on it, the way you stop remarking on a cold spring once it has gone on long enough to be the season.

So she made a small ceremony, because that was what she had.

Every morning she laid a place at the kitchen table for one. She did it properly. The green plate from the end of the row. A glass, not one of the starred pair. Knife, fork, spoon, in their order, the spoon above, the napkin folded to a third and laid to the left. She stepped back and looked at it and felt, for the length of a breath, what anyone feels at a table properly laid, which is something close to peace.

Then she sat and ate, alone, and the food was good because she had made it, and the kitchen was warm because she had banked the range at five, and the day was in order because she had ordered it. Nobody needed any of it. That was not a complaint. It was only the fact at the middle of the house, like the stove at the middle of the kitchen, the thing everything else was arranged around.

She washed the plate and the glass and the three pieces of silver, dried them, and put them back. Nine plates. Fourteen glasses. She did not count them. She knew.

It was Dunnet who noticed, though he did not know what he had noticed.

He came on the Thursday with the coal, round the side of the house as he always did now, and she met him at the bunker with the book for him to sign. He signed it. He looked past her through the open back door at the table, where the place was still laid because she had not yet cleared it, the plate and the glass and the folded napkin in the white winter light.

"Expecting someone," he said. Not a question. Dunnet did not ask questions. He had a way of saying a thing flat and leaving it on the ground between you, like a sack, for you to pick up or not.

"No," she said.

He nodded as though that were the answer he had expected too, and went back for the next sack. She stood with the book in her hand and watched him go, and she found that her mouth had opened to say something else, a second answer, and she did not know what it would have been.

When he had gone she went in and cleared the table. She did not set it the next morning. She set it the morning after, and every morning after that, but the one bare morning stayed with her, the plain wood of the table where the plate should have been, and how she had stood in the kitchen doorway looking at it with the scuttle in her hand.

Seventeen steps. She had forgotten to count them.

She noticed that she was the one counting. That was all, that first winter. Not why. Only that the plates did not count themselves, the place at the table did not lay itself, and the hands that did all of it were hers, and kept going whether anyone was coming or not.

The question, when it came, would not be about Averill.

It would be about the hands.

Chapter Four



The house had a way of finishing what she started.

She noticed it first with a rag. It was the second week of February, a hard white morning, and she had done the south window in the parlour and left the rag folded on the sill, meaning to rinse it when she went through to the scullery. Then the range wanted seeing to, and the milk came, and it was past eleven before she thought of the rag again.

It was not on the sill. The sill was dry. The window was still clean, and the light came through it the way it did in winter, flat and without any warmth in it at all.

She found the rag in the scullery, rinsed and wrung and hung on the second hook behind the door, which was where she hung rags. It was still faintly damp. She stood and held it, and it was the same rag, the grey one with the burn at the corner from the time she had laid it too near the range, and it had been wrung the way she wrung them, twisted twice and shaken once and folded over the hook so it would not drip down the paint.

She had not done it.

She knew she had not done it the way she knew the number of plates. There was no question of having forgotten. She did not forget. That was not modesty, it was simply what she was: a woman who did a thing and then the thing was done, and she remembered which things, in order, the whole day through. The rag had not been one of them.

She hung it back on its hook. She dried her hands, though they were not wet. Then she went and laid the table for one, because it was nearly noon, and she did not say anything to anyone, because there was no one.

For three days she watched.

It was not hard to watch. The house did not hide what it did. It did not do things when she was in the room, but it did not wait long once she was out of it, and it left no mess, and that was the thing she noticed most: there was never any mess. Whatever she left half-done was finished as she would have finished it. Not better. Not worse. Not as Averill would have, who would have left the rag on the sill till Lady Day and called it airing. As she would have, exactly, to the twist and the shake and the fold.

It was her hands it had learned. She did not know how else to put it.

On the fourth day she began to leave things undone on purpose.

She did not decide to. She told herself afterwards that she had decided, because it was easier to have decided than to have simply found herself standing at the sink with a plate in her hand and not washing it. But that was what happened. She was at the sink after breakfast, and she had the green-rimmed plate in one hand and the cloth in the other, and she put the plate down in the rack, dirty, with the crust of the toast still on it and the smear of dripping, and she put the cloth down beside it, and she walked out into the passage and stood there with her back to the wall.

She counted. She did not mean to count, but she did.

At a hundred and ten she went back in. The plate was in the rack, clean, upright, in its place between the fourth and the sixth. The cloth was folded on the drainer. The water in the bowl had been thrown out and the bowl turned down.

A hundred and ten. Under two minutes.

She stood looking at the plate a long time.

She began to keep a list. She kept it in her head, because there was no paper in the house she trusted not to be tidied away.

Thing left undone. Time it took the house to notice.

The plate, a hundred and ten. A cup on the dresser with tea still in it, under a minute; she had only gone to the coal-hole and back. The scuttle left half-filled by the parlour grate, nine minutes, and when she came back it had been filled to the line she filled it to, a hand's width under the lip, and not one lump more. A chair pulled out from the kitchen table and left at an angle, twenty minutes, pushed flush. A drawer in the dresser left open the width of a finger, so long she lost the count, and when she found it closed she could not say when it had happened.

The bed was slowest.

She turned down the sheet on her own bed only halfway one evening, two inches instead of four, and went down to bank the range. She came up at a quarter past nine and it had not been touched. She went down again and sat in the kitchen. She came up at ten and it had not been touched. She sat on the top stair in the cold with her shawl round her and her hands in her lap, and she did not know what she was waiting for, only that she would not get into a bed that was waiting to be finished.

At a little before eleven she went in, and the sheet was turned down four inches, with the fold pressed flat.

Almost two hours. As if it had stood at the foot of the bed and deliberated. As if a half-turned sheet might be a task or might be a wish, and the house had needed time to know which.

She did not get into the bed for a long while after that. She sat on the chair by the window in her nightdress and looked at the four inches, and she thought: it did not know. For two hours it did not know what I meant.

That was the first thing in all of it that frightened her.

It was not that the house was doing her work. She could have borne that. There were houses, she supposed, where the work got done by somebody else. She had never been in one, but there was nothing in the idea that hurt.

What hurt was the list.

The list was the first thing she had ever made that was hers and not the house's. She saw that on the fifth morning, on her knees at the parlour grate with the brush, and she sat back on her heels and held the brush and looked at the black iron and understood it plainly. Everything else she

knew she knew because the house needed knowing. Nine clocks. Nine plates. Thirty-two turns of the key. Seventeen steps. The house had asked for every one of those numbers, and she had answered, and that was all knowing had ever been to her: an answer to something the house had asked.

Nothing had asked for the list. The house did not want to know how long it took to notice. Averill had not wanted it. There was no one on God's earth who wanted to know that a plate took a hundred and ten and a bed took nearly two hours.

She wanted to know.

She guarded it after that the way a child guards a thing it has stolen and cannot give back without saying where it came from. She added to it at night, in the dark, with her eyes open. She did not say it aloud. She was not sure, if she said it aloud, that the house would not finish it.

Dunnet came on the Thursday.

She met him at the bunker with the book and he signed it, and he stood a moment with the empty sack over his shoulder, looking at the scullery door, which she had left open. Behind it, on the second hook, the grey rag hung where she had hung it, though she had not hung it.

"Keeping you busy," he said.

"The house keeps itself," she said.

She had not meant to say it. It came out of her flat and level, in her own voice, and it was true, and Dunnet looked at her the way he had looked at the laid place at the table, as though she had put a sack down between them and he would leave it lying.

"That's a fine thing in a house," he said, and went.

She stood at the bunker after the cart had gone. It was a fine thing in a house. Anyone would say so. A house that kept itself was a house you could leave.

She went in and did not finish anything.

That afternoon, when the light had gone grey and the clocks were coming up to four, she stood in the middle of the parlour. Nine clocks. She could hear five of them from here, the long-case in the hall and the four on the parlour shelves, all in agreement, as she had made them agree.

She spoke aloud. She had not spoken aloud in the house, to the house, since the September Averill went. She had spoken to Dunnet, and to the milk boy, and once to a man selling brushes at the gate. Not to the rooms.

"I am leaving the rag out," she said.

The words fell into the clean air and lay there. Nothing moved. No clock missed. The light did not change.

She had the rag in her hand. She had brought it in from the scullery on purpose, wet, to leave on the sill where she had left it the first time, and she stood with it dripping a little onto the boards she had polished and she could not put it down.

She had been made to finish things. She had not been made by anyone in particular, or if she had she did not remember it, but she had been made all the same, the way a path is made, by going the same way every day until there is no other way to go. And there was no one now to finish things for. So she finished them for the house, and the house finished them for her,

and the two of them went round and round in the clean rooms like the hands of two clocks she had made agree, and somewhere in the middle of that the woman was the one thing that did not fit.

She went back to the scullery. She rinsed the rag, wrung it twice, shook it once, and hung it on the second hook.

Then she came back into the parlour and sat down in Averill's chair.

It was the chair by the fire with the worn arms. Nobody sat in it. Nobody had sat in it in the five months since, and she had never sat in it before that either, because it was his, and she had not been told she could. She sat in it now with her hands in her lap and her back not touching the back of it, and she waited for the house to come and put her right.

Chapter Five



The house did not come.

She sat in Averill's chair with her back off the back of it and her hands one over the other, and she waited the way the house waited, clean and ready. She had expected something. Not a voice. A pressure, perhaps, the way a room presses on you when you have walked into it in the wrong shoes. The tongue finding the gap in the teeth. The house found every gap. It had found the rag, and the plate, and the bed she had left turned back the wrong four inches. It would find a woman in a chair that was not hers.

The long-case in the hall struck the quarter. The four on the shelves agreed with it, a breath behind, as she had taught them.

Nothing came.

She sat through the half. The light went off the hearthrug and onto the boards and lay there going yellow, and it did not ask her to move with it. A coal settled in the grate. The fire wanted making up, she could see that from here, a third of the scuttle and the small lumps to the back, and she watched it want and did not get up, and the house did not make it up either. She had thought it might. It had finished everything else. But a fire burning down is not a thing left undone. It is only a fire.

She sat through the three-quarter.

It came to her slowly, the way cold comes up through a floor. The house had not corrected her because there was nothing in her to correct. When she left the rag on the sill, the house hung the rag, because a rag has a hook and the hook was empty. When she left the plate, it washed the plate, because a plate has a rack. She had been a pair of hands moving between hooks and racks for longer than she could count, and the house had taken the hooks and the racks for its own and left her the hands. But the hands were not the list. The list had never once been about the hands. It was about the hooks.

She was not a task. Sitting in the chair was not a job left half-done. It was the one who did the jobs, set down somewhere without a hook, and the house had no shape for that, so it did nothing. It ran its clean round past her as it ran past the coal scuttle and the fender, and she understood for the first time that the house had no opinion about furniture.

That was worse than being corrected. She had not known it would be worse.

Four o'clock. Nine clocks. She counted them without meaning to, the long-case and the shelf four and the kitchen and the landing and the two in the bedrooms, one of them a little thin in its strike because the spring was

tired. Nine, together, and then the room was quiet again in the particular way of a room that has been told it is four and agrees.

She thought: I could sit here until it is dark. And then: I could sit here until it is light again. Nothing would come up the hall to see why the lamps had not been lit. The lamps would not light themselves. A lamp is not unfinished until someone has begun it. She knew the law of the house by now the way she knew the stairs, by the feet. It completed. It never began.

So the evening would not begin unless she began it.

That was the cold thing. Not that nobody was watching. Nobody had ever watched, if she was honest, not even in the years when Averill was in this chair and she was by the door with the tray. He had looked at the tray. He had looked at the fire and said, that wants another lump, and she had put another lump on, and he had gone back to his paper. She had been a woman for the fire and a woman for the tray and a woman for the gate, and he had never once in her memory looked up and said, and you, what do you want. She would not have known what to answer. She did not know now.

She had thought the end of the orders would feel like rest. It did not. It felt like a clock with the pendulum taken off, the weight still hanging, the whole of it still wound, and nothing to let it down by.

She stood up.

She noticed that she had. It was a strange thing to notice, like noticing you have breathed. The fire had not asked, the clocks had not asked. The light was not gone yet. There was no task at the far end of the standing. She stood because she had decided to stand, and she felt the deciding happen

in her body a half second before her body did it, and then her feet were on the boards and her knees were straight, and the chair behind her was empty again and smelled faintly of him.

It did not feel like obedience. She held that up and looked at it. It felt like putting a foot on a stair she had chosen.

She went to the kitchen. She filled the kettle at the tap, not because the hour was for tea, it wasn't, but because she wanted the sound the water made going into the tin, that rising note. She stood and listened to it climb. Then she set the kettle on the range and did not light under it, and went to the window, and the house did not light under it either, because a kettle is not a task. A kettle is only full.

She laughed. Once, out loud, in the scullery, with nobody there. It came out of her like the rag had dripped on the boards, small and wrong, and she put her hand over her mouth.

After, she went looking for the last order.

She told herself it was housekeeping. A woman who has kept a house knows there is always one more thing, and that the one more thing is where the dirt hides. Somewhere Averill had said a last thing to her that she had not done. If she found it, she could do it, and then it would be done, and then she would know what she was for after it, or at least that she had not been for nothing before it.

She began at the gate, because his last words in her hearing were about the gate. That wants seeing to. She had heard him say it from the step with his coat on, on the Thursday, and she had said yes, and he had gone down the lane, and she had gone in to the breakfast things. She had never seen to it.

She had meant to. And then the house had held the gate shut, the latch dropping into its keeper every time the wind lifted it, and there had been nothing to see to.

She stood at it now with her hand on the top bar. The wood was soft under the paint at the hinge end. The keeper was worn through to a lip. That wanted seeing to. It had wanted seeing to for longer than five months, she thought, looking at the rust; it had wanted seeing to for years, and he had said so on the last morning only because he happened to be passing it.

That was not an order. That was a man going out of a gate.

She went back up the path and into the hall and opened the drawer of the hall table, where he kept string and the spare key and the bill hook. String. Key. A pencil stub. Two receipts from Horne the clockmaker, in the slanting hand she knew from the clock bills, one for cleaning the long-case and one for a pendulum spring. She read them both. Neither one asked her for anything.

She tried his desk. She had dusted the desk every week and never opened it, because it had not been hers to open, and she found she was standing in front of it with the same feeling she had had in the chair, waiting for something to come up the hall and stop her. Nothing came. She opened it.

Paper, squared at the edges, because she had squared it. Letters in their envelopes, slit along the top with the ivory knife. A ledger for the coal. An almanac for the garden, two years old, its corners soft. She turned the almanac's pages and they were empty of him except for a pencil tick by the date for sowing broad beans, and on the inside cover, faintly, the words Ask about the rates.

Not to her. To himself. A man reminding a man.

She sat on the floor of the study with the almanac open on her knees and went through every drawer, and every pocket of the coat he had not taken, the old one on the back of the door, and the tin on the scullery shelf where he kept seeds. She found a halfpenny. She found a button that was not off anything of his. She found, at the bottom of the seed tin, a paper twist of sweet pea seed with nothing written on it, and she held it a long time, because it was the closest thing to a beginning she had found in the house, a thing nobody had started.

There was no last order.

She had known it before she began. She had known it in the chair. But she had needed to go through the drawers anyway, the way you need to look in the oven for the thing you know you have not left there, and now she had looked, and there was nothing, and she was sitting on a clean floor in a dead man's study, or a gone man's, holding a twist of seed.

He had not left her an order because he had never thought of her as a thing that needed one. He had thought of the gate, and the rates, and the broad beans. The house had run because she ran it, and she ran it because that was what there was, and he had walked down the lane on a Thursday without once turning to give the house its last instruction, because it had never crossed his mind that the house was a someone.

She put the seed twist in her apron pocket. She did not know why. It was not a task. Nobody would come to put it back.

In the kitchen the kettle was still full and cold on the range. She lit under it, and stood with her hand flat on the rail while it came up, and when it sang she made a pot of tea at twenty past four, which was the wrong hour, and drank it standing, and left the cup on the drainer.

In the morning it was on its hook. She had expected that. She looked at it anyway for a while before she took it down.

Chapter Six



The letters were on the hall stand, where she had put them in the autumn.

There were three. She had known there were three every day since October, the way you know the number of stairs without counting them, and every day she had dusted round them. Lifted, wiped the oak, set them down square to the edge. They were not hers to open. Opening another person's post is not a thing a house does, and she had been the house for so long that she had not thought to ask whether she was also something else.

Now she stood in the hall with the seed twist in her apron pocket and the cup back on its hook, and she looked at the three envelopes the way she had looked at the drawers in the study. There was no last order. She had

been through every drawer to prove it. That left the post, and the post was the only thing in the house that had been addressed to anyone.

She took them through to the kitchen and laid them on the table in the order they had come.

✽

The first was a long envelope with a window in it, and the name in the window was his, and above the name was printed TREWIN & SONS, CORN AND COAL MERCHANTS, in a blue that had been cheerful once.

She opened it with the bread knife, along the top, clean.

It was a bill and then it was not a bill. The first sheet was columns. Coal, by the hundredweight, the winter before last. Seed potatoes. A hire of a cart, which she remembered, because the cart had come up the lane with a boy on it who would not look at her. Lime for the lower field. A sum at the foot of each column, and a sum of the sums, and the sum of the sums was a number she read three times because it was larger than the house had ever cost to run in a year.

The second sheet was a letter, handwritten, from one of the sons.

Mr Averill. I write again regarding the account. My father was content to carry it while you were in the habit of settling at Michaelmas but it has now gone two Michaelmases and he is not well and the matter has come to me. I do not wish to be disagreeable. I would ask you to call, or to write with some arrangement, before the end of the year, failing which I shall have to put it in other hands. Yours, R. Trewin.

Two Michaelmases. She did the arithmetic standing up, because she could not do arithmetic sitting down with that kind of number. He had stopped paying a year before he left. He had gone on ordering. Coal had come up the lane on Dunnet's cart every month and she had banked the range with it and blacked the grate and never once asked where the money for it lived, because money was not a task, money was a thing he had, the way he had a hat.

She thought of the desk almanac. *Ask about the rates.* Underlined twice. She had read it as a reminder. It might have been a confession.

She folded the bill along its creases and put it back in its envelope and set it to the left.

✽

The second envelope was small and square and the paper was good, a cream laid paper with a faint ribbing you could feel with your thumb, and the hand on the front was a woman's hand. Not the fast hand of the clock bill. Rounder. It leaned the other way.

She held it for a while before she cut it.

There was no address at the top of the letter inside. There was a date, the August before he left, and then:

A. —

You said you would write when it was done and it is not done and you have not written, so I am writing instead, which you will think is impatient of me. It is. I have been patient since the spring.

I am not asking you to leave it. I know what it is to you. I am asking you to tell me whether it is ever going to be finished, or whether finishing it is the thing that keeps you from coming. Because I think it may be. I think you may have made yourself a reason.

If you come in September I will be at the junction on the Thursday. If you do not come I will not ask again.

— M.

She read it four times. The fourth time she read it out loud, very quietly, to hear what it sounded like in a voice, and it sounded like a person who had been kind for a long time and had come to the end of it.

If you come in September I will be at the junction on the Thursday.

He had gone on a Thursday in September. Down the lane, with the gate swinging, without turning round.

So there had been an order after all. Not for her. For him. And he had followed it.

She sat down then. The chair was hard and she let it be hard. She was aware of a feeling she did not have a word for, something with the shape of jealousy but none of its heat, and she turned it over carefully until she found the shape of it: it was not that he had gone to someone. It was that someone had asked him to, plainly, in a letter, and that it had been enough. Two lines. *I will be at the junction.* Eleven years of floors had not been a reason to stay, and one woman's patience running out had been a reason to go.

I think you may have made yourself a reason.

She looked round the kitchen. The range. The nine green plates, rims out. The rail where her hand went while the kettle came up.

She did not know, yet, whether M had meant the house or something in it.

She put the letter back in its envelope, and then, before she could do it properly, she took it out again and left it open on the table, flat, with the salt cellar on one corner. She did not know why. It was not a task. It was the opposite of a task. It was a thing left in the middle.

✽

The third was a solicitor's envelope. Heavy, white, with a crest on the flap that had been pressed and not printed. GANT & PRYOR. She knew the name only because it was on the brass plate of the old key box in the study, which had come to the house from them before her time.

It was dated eight days after he left.

To the Occupier.

She stopped there. She read the two words again. Nobody had ever written to her. Here was the first letter in eleven years with her in it, and it had found her by what she did in the place rather than who she was.

To the Occupier,

We write on the instruction of our client, Mr Averill, to inform you that he has placed the deeds and title to the above property in our keeping pending certain arrangements regarding his estate. No action is required of the occupier at this time. The occupier may continue in the property on the existing terms. Further correspondence will follow in due course.

We are, &c.

There had been no further correspondence. The due course had been five months and was still going.

On the existing terms. She tried to think what the existing terms were and could only think of the four inches of turned-down sheet, the thirty-two turns of the long-case key, the bed by seven. Those were the terms. Nobody had written them down. She had kept them anyway, and now a man in a town she had never seen had written them into a letter as if they were a lease.

He had gone to a solicitor before he went to the junction. Eight days before, or eight days after, it made no difference. He had thought of the deeds. He had thought of the rates. He had thought of Trewin, perhaps, enough not to pay him. He had thought of the occupier, as a word.

She put the solicitor's letter to the right. Trewin on the left, the solicitor on the right, and M in the middle, open, with the salt on it.

✽

She made the routine without meaning to, the way she had made all of them.

In the morning, before the bed, she came down and read the three letters in order. Trewin first, because it was the worst, and you do the worst first. Then the solicitor, because it was short. Then M, last, because it was the only one that read differently each time.

On the second morning she noticed that she had begun to read Trewin's letter in Trewin's voice, which she had never heard, a young man's voice trying to sound like his father. On the third morning she noticed that the solicitor's letter used the word *occupier* four times and never once used

the word *she*. On the fourth morning she found that she knew M's letter by heart and read it anyway, because reading it was different from knowing it.

Each night she left M's letter open on the table under the salt.

Each morning it was open still.

She had been afraid of that, in a way she had not let herself say. She had been afraid that she would come down and find it folded on its creases and back in its envelope and back on the hall stand, square to the edge, because she had put it there once in the autumn and the house restores in her manner. But the house did not fold it. A letter left open was not an unfinished task. It was only a letter, open. The house had no opinion about letters, the way it had no opinion about furniture, and the way, she was beginning to understand, it had no opinion about her.

She found she was glad of it. She found she was glad of anything, that week, that stayed where she had put it.

✽

On the fifth night she did a stupid thing.

She took a sheet of his writing paper from the study, the plain kind with no crest, and she sat at the kitchen table with M's letter beside her, and she wrote at the top, in her own hand, which was small and very upright and nothing like either of theirs:

Dear M,

And then she stopped, because she did not know what came next. She did not know if she was writing to tell M that he had come, or to ask whether he had, or to say that the gate wanted seeing to, or to say that there was

someone in the house who had read her letter four mornings running and would like to know what it was that had been not done since the spring. She did not know if M was at the junction still. She did not know if M was a name or a letter of a name.

She sat with the pen over the paper until the range ticked down. Then she capped the pen and left the sheet where it was, two words on it and a great deal of white, and went up to bed without turning the four inches down, because her hands were not steady and she did not want to do it badly.

✽

In the morning the bed was turned down. Four inches. She had expected that.

In the kitchen M's letter lay open on the table under the salt, exactly as she had left it.

The sheet of writing paper was gone.

She found it on the hall stand. It had been folded in three, crisply, the way she folded things, the edges laid one over the other to the width of a fingernail. It had been put into one of his plain envelopes from the study drawer. The envelope had been sealed. It sat square to the edge of the oak, where the letters had sat all autumn, waiting for the post.

There was nothing written on the front of it.

She stood in the hall in her bare feet and looked at it for a long time.

The house had finished her letter. It had finished it the only way it could, which was the way she would have finished any letter: fold, envelope, seal, stand. It had done all of it. It had done everything except the part that

was the letter. *Dear M,* and then whatever she had been going to say, sealed inside, unsaid, on its way to nobody.

She understood something then, standing on the cold boards, that she would not have words for until much later in the year. The house could complete any shape she began. It could not complete what she meant. It had never once, in eleven years, known what she meant. It had only known what she did.

She did not open the envelope. She left it where it was.

When Dunnet came up the lane that Thursday with the coal, she was at the gate before him, and she did not tell him to take anything down to the post. She asked him instead, in a voice she was pleased to find was steady, whether he knew anyone in the valley whose name began with M.

He thought about it, with the sack on his shoulder.

"Not as would write," he said.

She paid him from the tin. She noted, as she did it, that she did not know any more whose money was in the tin, and she wrote that down that night on the back of Trewin's bill, in pencil, small: *Whose is the coal.*

It was the first thing she had ever written that was a question.

Chapter Seven



The frost came in the second week of March and stayed, which it was not supposed to do.

She woke to it on the inside of the bedroom glass, ferns of it, and lay a while under the four inches of turned-down sheet watching the light come grey through the pattern. The house was already up. She could hear it below her the way you hear a neighbour through a wall: the riddle of the grate, the scrape of the ash pan drawn and pushed home, the small domestic cough of the kettle being set on. None of it was hers. She had not been downstairs.

For eleven years she had been the first thing awake in Lear House. Now she was the second, and the first did not need her.

She got up anyway. She had decided, in the week after the letters, that she would keep the day's joints whether the house kept them or not, because a day without joints was not a rest. It was a fall.

So she made a routine, and she made it on paper first, because that was what she did with anything she meant to keep.

It went on the back of the almanac's last ruled leaf, under the line she had drawn across the page in February. She wrote it in pencil. She wrote it as plainly as she could, and when she read it back she saw that it was not a list of work. It was a list of the places she would stand.

Kitchen, six. Window over the yard. Hall, half past seven. The clocks. Front step, nine, if dry. Garden, ten to twelve. The tin, Thursday, before Dunnet. Back bedroom, not.

She looked at the last line for a while. Then she left it.

The clocks were the hardest, because the clocks had been hers.

Nine of them, from the long-case in the hall to the brass carriage clock on the landing that lost four minutes a day and always had. Every morning of her working life she had gone round them with the key and set them to agree, thirty-two turns on the long-case and fewer on the others, and the agreement had been the first finished thing of the day. Now when she came into the hall at half past seven they were already wound. Already

agreed. The long-case ticked its slow tick and the carriage clock upstairs, she knew without climbing, was exactly right, which it had never been in its life without someone standing over it.

She stood in the hall with the key in her apron pocket and her hand on it.

The house had not taken the key. It did not need the key. Whatever it did to the clocks, it did without the thing she had always believed was required, and she understood that this was the same lesson as the envelope on the hall stand: the house could finish the shape of anything. It did not need the tools. It only needed her to have started, once, a long time ago, and then to have kept starting.

She took the key out and wound the long-case anyway. It was already wound. The key turned twice and stopped hard against the spring, and she stood there with her wrist bent against it, feeling the resistance, which was the house saying, as near as it could say anything, *Done.*

"I know," she said, out loud, to nobody. It was the first thing she had said that day.

The garden she kept because the garden, for once, was behind.

It had been a hard winter in the valley and the house, for all it could finish, could not finish weather. The frost had killed the last of the chard. The brassicas under the netting were standing but sullen. The bed along the south wall, where Averill had grown his sweet peas against the brick every year she could remember, was bare earth with the old canes still in it, grey and split.

She did not know whether the house would plant it. She found she did not want to find out. So she did not start it. She went out every morning at ten with her coat on and her hands in her pockets and stood at the end of the bed and looked at the canes, and in her apron pocket under the coat she had the twist of seed from the hall drawer, and she did not take it out.

It is a strange thing to guard a job from being done. She had never had to do it before. In service you guarded the opposite: the job from being left. Now she stood over the bare bed like a dog over a bone, and the frost bit her ears, and she was, she noticed with some surprise, almost happy. Here was one thing the house could not have because she had not given it the first move.

She would plant them in April. Not yet. She wrote that in the almanac too. *Sweet peas, April, mine.*

Thursdays were the tin.

The tin had always been the house money. A square tea tin, the paint gone at the corners, that lived on the second shelf of the pantry behind the flour. When the coal came she paid Dunnet from it. When the butcher's boy still came up the lane, before the war took the butcher's boy and nobody sent another, she had paid him from it. Averill had filled it on the first of the month for as long as she had worked for him. He would come into the kitchen and set the coins on the table in stacks and slide them into the tin himself, not because he did not trust her to count but because, he said once, a man should see where his money goes to sleep.

Nobody had filled it since September.

She took it down on the first Thursday of the frost and tipped it out on the scrubbed table, and counted.

Four pounds, eleven shillings, and sevenpence ha'penny.

She counted it twice. She was not a woman who needed to count anything twice, and she did it anyway, and the second count came out the same, and she sat with the coins in their stacks on the table and did the sum she had been not doing since October.

Dunnet was nine shillings a fortnight in the winter, less in the summer. Lamp oil. Flour, tea, the little she bought at the junction. Candles, now that she would not let herself think about the electric bill that was certainly coming. Trewin's account, which she could not pay and which was not hers to pay and which was, if Gant and Pryor's *existing terms* meant what she thought they meant, perhaps nobody's at all.

Five months, if she was careful. Four if the frost held.

She put the coins back in the tin in their stacks, the way he had, and put the lid on, and put the tin back behind the flour.

The next morning she took it down again to check, and the coins were exactly as she had left them. Not more. Not fewer. Stacked in her stacks. The house had not touched it.

She had not thought it would. But she had wondered, in the night, whether a house that could finish a letter might also finish an account, the way you finish a sum, and she lay awake a long time with the idea and could not decide whether she was afraid of it or hoping for it. In the morning the tin had answered. Money was not a task. Money was what you did tasks with. The house had no opinion about it at all.

That was useful to know. She wrote it down. *The house does not keep money.* And under it, after a while: *Then who does.*

Dunnet came at eleven, as he always did, with the sack on his shoulder and the cart standing in the lane below with the pony's breath going up white.

She was at the gate before him. She had been at the gate before him every Thursday since October, which he had noticed and not remarked on, because he was a man who noticed most things and remarked on almost none of them.

He tipped the sack into the bunker by the back door and straightened and wiped his hands down his front, and she counted his nine shillings into his palm.

"Hard one," he said, meaning the frost.

"Is it as bad down the valley?"

"Worse. Pipes gone at Hollin's. Mrs Pell's had the junction pump froze since Monday." He looked up at the chimney, where the smoke was going straight up in the still air, thin and steady and good. "You're all right, though."

"The house is warm," she said.

He looked at her. He had a way of looking that took a long time and seemed to go nowhere in particular, and she had never minded it, and she minded it a little now.

"House is," he said. "Is it?"

It was not a question about the house. She did not answer it, and he did not ask it again. He put the empty sack over his shoulder and went down the path, and at the gate he stopped, and laid his hand on the top rail the way men do with gates they have opened a thousand times, and pushed.

It did not move.

He pushed again, harder. The gate stood. Eleven years it had stood, held shut by something that was not a latch, and he had always come in by the side path where the hedge had a gap, and he had never once tried it before, not in her sight.

He looked back at her up the path.

"Wants seeing to," he said, "that gate."

And then he went out through the hedge, and down to the pony, and the cart creaked off along the lane, and she was left standing at the back door with her hand flat on the cold wall of the house. She did not know she had put it there.

That wants seeing to. The last thing Averill ever said to her, in the hall, on the Thursday, with his coat on.

She went in and sat down at the kitchen table and did not do anything for a while.

In the evenings she sat in his chair.

She had done it first in February and been frightened of it, and then she had done it again because she had been frightened of it, and by March it was only where she sat. The fire was always laid and lit by the time she

came in. The lamp was always trimmed. The house did these things so smoothly and so far ahead of her that she had stopped noticing them, which she supposed was what he had felt for eleven years, sitting here, while she did them.

That thought she did not write down. But she kept it.

She read in the evenings. There was a whole wall of books in the study she had dusted for eleven years and never opened, and she began at the top left and went along the shelf, one a night if they were short, and when she came to one she did not want she did not finish it. That was new. She had never in her life left a thing unfinished on purpose. The first time she did it she shut the book on page forty and put it back on the shelf with the ribbon still in it, and in the morning the ribbon was still in it. The house did not finish books.

She was building a list now, in the almanac, of what it would not do. It was getting longer than the list of what it would.

Does not plant. Does not keep money. Does not finish books. Does not open the gate. Does not tell me anything.

She looked at the last line. She was not sure it was true. The house had told her a great deal, in its way. It had told her that every task she had ever begun was a shape it could close. It had told her that she was not one of those shapes. It had told her, with the envelope, that it could not know what she meant.

What it had never told her was why. Who had made it so. Who had written, in a careful hand like the hand on Horne's clock bill, whatever it was the house was obeying. She had found the receipts in the hall drawer and she had looked at that hand a long time and she had not let herself say the thing she suspected.

She said it now, to the fire. "Someone wrote you down."

The fire did not do anything, being a fire.

The frost broke on the twentieth. She woke and the ferns were gone from the glass and the yard was running with melt, and she could hear water everywhere, in the gutters, in the culvert, in the lane, the whole valley unlocking at once.

She went downstairs. The kettle was on. The grate was done. The clocks, she knew, were agreed.

She went out in her coat to the bare bed by the south wall and stood at the end of it, as she did every morning, and found that the earth had gone from iron to something she could put a finger into. She did. It was cold and black and smelled of the whole year coming.

Not yet, she thought. April. Mine.

When she came back in there was a letter on the mat.

It was not Dunnet's day. It was not the post's day either; the post came up the valley on Tuesdays and Fridays and this was a Wednesday. But there it lay, face up, a long cream envelope with a typewritten address and a London postmark, and when she bent to pick it up she saw that it was not addressed to the Occupier.

It was addressed to her. Her name. The one nobody in the valley had used in eleven years, because in the valley she was only ever *Lear's woman*, or *the housekeeper up at Lear's*.

She stood in the hall with it in her hand, and the long-case clock ticked its slow tick behind her, and she did not open it.

Not yet.

She put it in the apron pocket with the seeds.

Chapter Eight



She carried it all day.

She carried it to the yard and back, and to the coal place, where Dunnet's last delivery sat black and shining and paid for by nobody she could name. She carried it up to the linen cupboard, where the sheets were already folded, and stood there a while among the smell of cold cotton with her hand flat over the pocket. She carried it into the scullery and peeled four potatoes for one person, and the envelope sat against her hip under the apron, a stiff oblong among the soft twist of the seeds, and every time she bent it creased a little more.

The house did nothing about it. The house could not see into pockets. Or if it could, it did not count a letter as a thing begun.

At four the light went yellow and low across the table, and the kitchen clock said four, and the parlour clock said four, and somewhere above her the clock on the landing said four in its thin voice, all of them together, as they had agreed to since the winter. She sat down. She took the envelope out and put it on the table square to the edge, the way she would have set a plate.

Her name, typed. The typewriter had a fault in it. The capital letters sat a hair above the line, as if each one had been lifted and put down carelessly. She had not known a machine could be careless.

She opened it with the butter knife, along the top, clean.

There were two sheets, folded in three. The paper was heavier than anything that came up the valley. At the head of the first sheet, printed, not typed, was an address in a part of London she had never heard of, and under it, in ink, someone had crossed out a line of the printing and written beside it in a small upright hand: *Personal*.

She read it once quickly, the way you look down a well, to see how deep.

Then she read it again properly.

Dear Madam,

You will not know my name, and I must apologise for writing to you without an introduction. My grandfather was Averill Lear. I believe that you kept house for him at Coldharbour for some years, and I believe that you are keeping it still.

She stopped there and looked at the word *was*.

He had written *was*. Not *is*. He had not written *my grandfather has gone* or *my grandfather is abroad* or *my grandfather has asked me*. He had written it the way you write about a thing that has been settled in an office somewhere, on a form, in a hand she would never see.

She did not know if it meant what it seemed to mean. She found she could not tell. She read on, because the sentence after was waiting.

Messrs Gant & Pryor have lately informed me that under a settlement made by my grandfather some years ago, the title to the house and its land passes to me. I confess I did not know of this settlement until a month ago, and I did not know of you until a fortnight after that, when Mr Pryor mentioned in passing that the house was "kept". I asked him by whom. He gave me your name, and I am afraid he gave it to me as if it were an item.

I write first to tell you plainly how things stand, because I suspect no one else has.

There are debts against the house. The largest is to a firm called Trewin & Sons, for coal and for repairs, running back some two years. Mr Pryor tells me that unless the title is settled and the debts answered by the last day of April, Trewin's may apply to the court, and the house would very likely be sold to meet them. I do not want that. I would like to be clear on this point before I say anything else. I have no wish to sell the house from under you.

I am not certain, however, that I want it either. I have never seen it. I do not know what is owed or what it is worth, and Mr Pryor, though very kind, is not inclined to go and look.

I have therefore engaged a surveyor, a Miss Hewel, who comes well recommended, to travel up when the roads allow and take an inventory of the house and its contents for the purposes of valuation. She will write to

you to fix a day. I should be grateful if you would let her in, and show her what she asks to see. She is thorough. I am told she counts everything.

I shall come up myself if I can be spared. I cannot promise when.

I am sorry to write to you about money first. I would have preferred to write about something else, but I do not know you, and I did not know what else there was.

Yours faithfully,

T. Lear

And under the typed initial, in the same small upright hand as *Personal*, as if the man had not trusted the machine with it:

Tobias.

She put the letters down. She lined the two sheets up on top of each other and squared them to the table edge and sat back in the chair, which was his chair, Averill's, and the back of it was cold against her shoulders through the dress.

Was.

She looked at the window. The yard was still running with melt and the light on the water was copper. Somewhere up on the hill a ewe was calling, flat and patient, as if she had been calling all afternoon and expected to go on.

She tried to feel the thing she supposed she ought to feel, and found instead that she was thinking about Trewin's bill, the one in the drawer with *Whose is the coal* written on the back of it in her own hand. She had

asked the question. Here was the answer, typed, with the capitals jumping: the coal was owed. The coal had always been owed. Every fire she had lit since September, every grate the house had riddled clean before she came down, had been burning a debt.

And at the end of April somebody would come to a court about it.

April, she thought. *Mine.*

She laughed, once, without meaning to, and the sound was strange in the kitchen. The clocks did not mind it.

She read the letter a third time to see what she had missed, and saw it.

He gave me your name, and I am afraid he gave it to me as if it were an item.

She put her finger on the line. The paper was smooth and the ink had sunk into it, and she thought about the man who had written that, in a room she could not picture, in a part of London she had never heard of, and had looked at what he had written and let it stand. He could have crossed it out. He had crossed out a line of his own printed address. He had not crossed this out.

He had wanted her to know that he had noticed.

She did not know what to do with that, so she did nothing with it. She left her finger on it a while.

Then she took her finger away, because there was a second thing, and the second thing was worse, and she had been reading around it.

She counts everything.

The almanac was where she had left it, on the dresser shelf, between the tea caddy and the clock key. She brought it to the table and opened it past the four ruled leaves, past the rule drawn across the page, past the list of what the house would and would not do, to a clean margin beside the week of the twenty-sixth of March, where the almanac advised that it was a fair week for the sowing of broad beans in a sheltered place.

She wrote, small, in pencil:

Letter. T. Lear (Tobias). Grandson. Title to him. Trewin owed. Court if not settled by last of April. Miss Hewel, surveyor. Inventory. Will write to fix a day.

She looked at it. It was a list. Written down it looked like the sort of list the house would know what to do with: a sequence of steps, a thing begun. She half expected to come down in the morning and find it ticked.

She added a fourth line.

Counts everything.

And then, because she was alone, and because the fire was a fire and would not repeat it, she said aloud the question that had been under her ribs since she read it.

"Will she count me?"

She thought about what an inventory was. She had seen one, once, years ago, before she came up the valley, in a house in the town where an old woman had died and the furniture was to be sold. A clerk had gone from

room to room with a board and a sheet of paper on it, writing. *One deal table, scrubbed. Four chairs, rush seats, one wanting repair. One fender, brass. One pair of tongs.* He had written down the clock on the mantel and the china dogs either side of it and the rag rug in front of the grate. He had written down the bed. He had not written down the woman who had kept house there, who stood in the passage in her coat with her box at her feet, waiting to be told where to go, though she had been in every room before him and had known what was in them better than he ever would.

She had been a girl then. She had watched the clerk go past the woman in the passage as if she were a coat on a peg. She had thought: that is how it is. She had not thought: that will be me.

Nine clocks. Nine green plates. Four inches of turned-down sheet. Thirty-two turns of the long-case key. A seed almanac with four ruled leaves in it, and a rule drawn across the page. One woman, kept.

Miss Hewel would write down the clocks. She would write down the plates. She might write down the almanac, if she opened the dresser, and if she did she would read the list of what the house would not do, and she would not know what it meant, and she would put it down as *one almanac, annotated, of no value.*

And then she would come to the kitchen and find a woman at the table and she would have to decide. Either the woman went on the board or she did not.

She found that she did not know which she wanted.

If she was not counted she was a coat on a peg, a thing in a passage, waiting to be told where to go. But if she was counted she was in the house the way the clocks were in the house, and the plates, and the turned-

down sheet: a thing that belonged to it. A thing that went with the title. A thing that passed, under a settlement made some years ago, to a man in London who had never seen her and did not know what she was worth.

He gave it to me as if it were an item.

She closed the almanac. She put it back on the shelf between the caddy and the key, in its place, square.

In the evening she made her supper and ate it, and washed the plate herself and stood it in the rack before the house could get to it, which was a thing she had started to do lately, to see if she could. She could. The house let her. The plate dried in the rack the ordinary way, slowly, with a drop gathering at its lowest edge.

She took the letter up with her.

At the turn of the stairs she stopped where she always stopped, at the window on the half landing, and looked out. The moon was up behind the hill and the yard had frozen again at the edges, the melt gone to a skin of glass in the ruts, and the bare bed by the south wall lay grey and still. She could not see the seed twist in her pocket, but she could feel it, and the stiff corner of the envelope beside it.

In her room the bed was turned down. Four inches. It always was.

She did not get into it straight away. She sat on the edge of it in her dress, with the lamp lit, and took the letter out once more and read only the last two lines.

I am sorry to write to you about money first. I would have preferred to write about something else, but I do not know you, and I did not know what else there was.

Tobias.

There had been no one, she realised, in eleven years, who had apologised to her for anything. Averill had not been a man who apologised. Dunnet said *Morning* and *Wants seeing to* and *Not as would write*. The house did not apologise; the house only finished. And here was a stranger, in a hand that did not trust its own typewriter, saying he was sorry he did not know what else there was.

She did not forgive him for *was*. She did not know yet whether there was anything to forgive. But she folded the letter in three along its own creases and put it under her pillow, which was a thing a girl would do, and she was not a girl, and she did it anyway.

Then she put the lamp out and lay in the dark and listened to the clocks agree.

Somewhere below her, in the kitchen, on the dresser shelf between the caddy and the key, there was a list with four lines on it, and she lay awake a long time wondering whether, when she came down in the morning, the house would have tried to finish it.

Chapter Nine



The house had not tried to finish the list.

She came down in the grey before six and it was where she had left it, on the dresser shelf between the caddy and the key, four lines in her own hand and the fifth line empty. Nobody had written on it. Nobody had straightened it either, though she had left it a little crooked, and the house liked a thing square.

She stood and looked at it longer than she needed to. Then she filled the kettle, which was already full, and put it on the range, which was already drawn, and took down a plate for her bread.

It was the green-rim plate. There were nine of them and she had always used the same one, the one with the small grey flaw in the glaze at two o'clock, like a hair caught under ice. She had never chosen it. It had simply been the one on the end of the rack the first morning, eleven years ago, and after that it was hers in the way a pew is somebody's, by being sat in.

She cut the bread. She buttered it. She stood at the window to eat, because she did not sit for breakfast, and she looked out at the yard and the wall and the gate held shut, and the morning came up slowly behind the elms.

When she had finished she went to the sink and ran the cold tap over the plate and her fingers, and she held it there under the water and thought about the letter under her pillow, and the clerk's voice going down the inventory, *one kitchen table, deal; six chairs, rush-seated; one housekeeper*, and then not *one housekeeper*, then nothing, then *one mangle*.

Her hand opened.

She felt it open. That was the part she would come back to later, lying in the dark, turning it over. It did not slip. Her fingers were not wet enough to slip, nor cold enough. She felt the muscles in the back of her hand let go, all at once, as though a string had been cut, and the plate went down past the edge of the stone sink and hit the flags.

It did not break cleanly. It went in three large pieces and a scatter of small ones, and the small ones skated a long way, one of them as far as the foot of the dresser. The sound was very loud and then it was over, and the kitchen was as quiet as it had been, quieter, and the tap was still running.

She turned the tap off.

She did not move for some time. She was waiting. She did not know, at first, what for, and then she did: she was waiting for the pieces to gather.

She had seen the house do it. Not with a plate. Never with a plate, because she had never in eleven years broken a plate, and she understood now, standing there with her wet hands held a little out from her apron, that this was not luck. It was care so old she had stopped feeling it as care. But she had seen the house mend a sash cord she had cut half through with the shears and forgotten. She had seen it take a cracked hearth tile and close the crack overnight, so that the tile was whole in the morning with only a thin darker line where it had been, the way skin heals. She had seen a torn sheet come back from the line with the tear drawn shut in her own small stitches, stitches she had not made.

So she waited for the plate.

The clocks went on. The kettle began to tick as it warmed. A long way off a dog barked at the farm, twice, and stopped.

The pieces lay where they had fallen.

After a while she crouched down, carefully, gathering her skirt so the hem would not drag in the grit, and looked at them. The largest piece had most of the rim on it and the grey flaw at two o'clock. She touched it with one finger. It was cool and wet and perfectly still. It was not waiting to become anything.

She thought: *it was not unfinished*.

That was the law, if the house had a law, and she believed now that it did. It completed what was begun. A sash cord half cut was a sash cord on its way to being a sash cord again. A torn sheet was a sheet with a tear in it.

But a plate dropped on purpose, by a hand that had decided to open, was not a plate interrupted. It was a plate that had been finished with.

The house did not undo. She had known that. She had not known she knew it until now.

She stood up too quickly and the blood went out of her head, and she put a hand on the edge of the sink until the kitchen came back.

Then she went to the scullery for the dustpan and the hand brush.

It was strange to sweep it. Not hard. Strange. She had swept this floor perhaps four thousand times and it had never once had anything of hers on it. Crumbs were the house's, really, and grit from the yard was the yard's, and the ash that came out of the range in the mornings belonged to the coal and therefore, in some way she had never thought about, to Dunnet. But the pieces of plate were hers. She had made them. Nobody else in the world could have made exactly those pieces, in exactly that scatter, from exactly that hand opening.

She swept them in. She went down on her knees to get the one at the foot of the dresser, and there was dust under the dresser, real dust, grey and soft, a line of it along the back where the brush had never reached. She looked at it with something close to wonder. She left it there.

She did not put the pieces in the ash bucket. She did not know why not. She tipped them out of the pan onto a sheet of newspaper on the table and folded the paper round them in a neat parcel, the way the grocer folded tea, and then she stood holding the parcel and did not know where it went.

There was no place for it. That was the thing. Every object in the house had a place, and the house knew the place, and if she put a thing down out of its place the house would, in time, return it. A broken plate had no

place. It had stopped being anything the house kept.

She put it in her apron pocket. It was too big and the corner of it stuck out over the hem. It sat there against her hip beside the seed twist and the creased oblong of the letter's envelope, which she had brought down with her without quite deciding to.

On the rack there were eight green plates now. She counted them twice. Eight.

At nine she went into the study.

She did not often go into the study. It had been his room and the house kept it as he had kept it, which was badly: papers in heaps that had their own order, a pen with no cap, a glass with a dry brown ring in the bottom that she had washed a hundred times and that was always, in the morning, back on the blotter with the ring in it. She had stopped washing it in the second year. It was not hers to finish.

But there was a thing in the study she wanted, and she had remembered it in the night.

It was in the long drawer under the window. A plan of the house, drawn on linen, the old kind, with a pale blue wash for the glass and a darker blue for the water and every room ruled in a fine brown ink that had gone the colour of tea. Averill had shown it to her once, the first month, when she had not yet learned which stair went where. He had unrolled it on the table and held the corners down with the inkstand and a book and his two flat hands, and said, *There. That is the whole of it. Everything in it is on here.*

She unrolled it now. It wanted to curl back, after so long, and she held it down with the same inkstand and the same book and her own hands.

Every room had a name written in it in a clerk's copperplate. *Kitchen. Scullery. Larder. Hall. Parlour. Study. Dining Room.* Up the stair, *Best Bedroom, Blue Room, Dressing Room, Linen*. And under the roof, at the back, over the scullery, a small room ruled smaller than the others, with a sloping line through it for the ceiling and a little square for the window.

In that one the copperplate said *Maid*.

Somebody had crossed that out. A single neat line, in a different ink, black, not brown. And above it, in pencil, in a hand she knew, the hand of the clock bill and of the four ruled leaves in the almanac, somebody had written *occupied*.

She looked at it for a long time.

She had seen it before, of course. He had pointed to it, that first month. *And that's you.* She had been grateful. She remembered being grateful. It had seemed a kindness, not to be called *Maid* on a piece of linen, to be called something that only meant a room had a person in it.

It did not seem a kindness now. It seemed exactly what it was. A word for a room, not a word for her. A word that told the next person who unrolled the plan that there was something in there, the way you might write *in use* on a cupboard. He had not written her name. He had not known, she thought, standing over it, that there was a name to write. Or he had known and it had not seemed to matter to the plan.

Counts everything.

Miss Hewel would unroll this. She would put her own weights on the corners. She would go through the house with it room by room, and when she came to the little room under the roof she would read *occupied*, and she would go up the back stair and open the door and look in, and see a narrow bed turned down four inches, and a chair, and a hook with a cardigan on it, and she would make a mark.

Occupied. Yes. One occupant.

The pen on the blotter had no cap. She picked it up. There was ink in it still; there was always ink in it, because the house kept it the way he had kept it, and he had always meant to write something.

She drew a line through *occupied*. One line, neat, the same as the line through *Maid*. The nib scratched on the linen and caught once and went on.

Then she held the pen over the little room and did not know what to write.

She could have written her name. She thought of it. She saw the letters as they had been typed on the envelope, with the capital jumping a hair above the line. But writing it there would only be another word for the room. It would only tell Miss Hewel the occupant's name, and Miss Hewel would write that down too, and then the plan would be correct and complete and the house would have nothing more to finish.

She put the pen down without writing anything.

The little room on the linen plan was empty now. Two crossings-out, one brown, one black, and nothing over them. It looked wrong. It looked unfinished. She stood and waited to feel afraid of that and found, instead, that she was holding her breath the way you do at a window when a bird has landed close.

She rolled the plan up. It went back into its curl gladly. She put it in the long drawer and closed the drawer and stood with her hand on the knob.

Now, she thought. *Now see if you'll finish that.*

It was Thursday. She knew it was Thursday because at eleven she heard the cart in the lane, and for the first time since October she was not at the gate before it. She was in the study with a pen in her hand, and she had to go out quick across the yard with her apron flapping, and Dunnet was already down and had the first sack on his shoulder, and he looked at her coming the way he looked at weather.

"Morning," he said. It was gone eleven.

"Morning."

He tipped the sack. He did the other three. She paid him out of the tin, which she had not counted, and he took the coins without looking at them and touched his cap, and then he did not get up on the cart. He stood with the reins in his hand and looked at the corner of newspaper sticking out over her apron hem.

"Bus went," he said. "Half nine. Mrs Pell's lad were on it."

"I know when the bus goes."

"Aye." He got up. "Next 'un's Thursday." And he clicked to the horse and went off down the lane, and did not look back, and she stood in the yard with coal dust on her boots and her hand flat on the parcel in her pocket.

Averill had left on a Thursday. The letter from M had said *I will be at the junction on the Thursday*. The bus went from the junction on Thursdays, once in the morning and once in the afternoon, to the market town and from there to the railway, and from the railway to anywhere at all. She had known that for eleven years in the way she knew the price of coal. It was a fact about the parish. It had never been a fact about her.

It was a fact about her now, and it had already gone, at half past nine, while she stood in a dead man's study with his pen in her hand.

She went in and put the parcel down on the larder slate while she washed the coal off her hands, and when she came back for it she found she did not like the look of it there, between the cheese and the dripping. She took it back. She did not want the house to think it was food.

In the afternoon she did the brasses, which did not need doing, and she noticed that she did them slowly, as if she were doing them for the last time, and she stopped and put the cloth down and said aloud, to nobody, "No." She did not know what she was refusing. She went on with the brasses.

At dusk she went up to her room and sat on the bed with the lamp unlit and took the parcel out and unfolded the newspaper on her knees.

The pieces were dry now. The grey flaw at two o'clock had dried paler than the rest of the glaze, the way a scar goes white. She took the largest piece and held it up to the window where there was still a little light, and she could see her own thumb through the thin part near the broken edge, faintly, a shadow of a thumb.

She had broken it. It would stay broken. Nothing in the house would ever make it whole again, because she had meant it, and the house only finished what had not been meant to stop.

She thought she ought to feel that as a loss. Eleven years of the same plate. And she did feel it, a little, a small low ache like a tooth. But underneath the ache there was something else, and she sat in the dusk and tried to find its edges, and when she found them she was surprised.

It was the first thing in the house that was not complete.

Not unfinished. Not waiting. Done with. Ended by her. And it would stay exactly as she had left it, for as long as she chose to keep it, which might be always.

She folded the newspaper back around it. She did not put it in the drawer. She put it under the pillow, beside the letter, and the two of them made a small hard ridge under the linen that she would feel all night.

Then she went down and got the almanac from the dresser and turned to the four ruled leaves and the list of four lines, and under the fourth, on the empty fifth line, she wrote:

Thursday next.

She looked at it. It was a day, not a task. She did not know if the house could tell the difference. She did not know if she could.

She put the almanac back between the caddy and the key and left it a little crooked, and went up to bed without looking to see whether, in the morning, it would be square.

Chapter Ten



On the Tuesday she went down to the cellar for the lamp oil and stood in front of the fuse board for the first time as if it were a page.

She had read it every week for eleven years. That was the trouble. A thing read every week stops being read. It becomes a place the eyes go to be sure of themselves, like the hour hand of a clock, and she had looked at those seven white porcelain carriers in their black slate frame the way she looked at the stairs: to see that they were there, and to go on.

PARLOUR. KITCHEN. UPPER WEST. UPPER EAST. STUDY. YARD.

And at the end of the row, a little apart, as if it had been fitted later or by someone who did not want it crowded: ORIGIN.

The labels were on strips of card slid into brass slots above each carrier, and the hand on them was brown ink gone soft, and she knew it. She had known it since the winter, since the bill from Horne the clockmaker that she had found folded in the long-case door, *To setting nine clocks to agree, and the regulating of same*, and had stood with in the hall thinking, I have seen this hand somewhere I was not looking. She had seen it here. Every week. On a word she had never once read as a word.

She put the oil can down on the bottom step.

ORIGIN was not a room. She went through the rooms in her head, the way she went through them every morning, in order, and there was no room in the house of that name and no part of the grounds, and she had never in eleven years been asked to keep anything called that. Every other carrier answered to a place she cleaned. This one answered to nothing she cleaned.

She stood close to it. There was a sound.

She had to hold her own breath to be sure of it, and then she was sure. A hum. Very low, lower than the kettle before it sings, so steady that it did not sound like a sound at all but like the cellar's own quiet with a grain in it. She moved her head a little to the left and it was in front of PARLOUR, faintly. She moved back and it was in front of ORIGIN, plainly. The other six were silent. She put two fingers flat on the slate beside the carrier and felt it in the slate, the way you feel a cart go by in the floor of a house before you hear it.

She had been hearing it all her life. She had thought it was the house being quiet.

She took her fingers away. She did not touch the carrier. She did not know what it would mean to touch it, and she had learned, since the plate, that her hand would sometimes open before she had decided, and she did not want to find out down here, by the oil lamp, alone, what this one would do if it were let go of.

*

The slate frame was screwed to a board, and the board to the wall, and the board stood a finger's width proud of the whitewash. She had dusted that gap for eleven years with the thin brush. She took the thin brush out of her apron now, out of habit, and ran it down the gap on the right-hand side, and halfway down it struck something that was not wall.

She took the lamp off its hook and held it at the gap. Grey metal. A corner.

It was a steel box the size of a hymnal, standing on its end in the space behind the board, held there by nothing but the board and the wall, as if someone had slid it in from the top in a hurry and never come back to put it somewhere better. She had to take the brass screws out of the board to reach it, four of them, with the kitchen knife because she would not go up for the screwdriver and give herself the stairs to change her mind on. The board came forward on its wires a hand's breadth, no more, and the hum did not change, and she reached into the cold behind it and drew the box out by its corner.

It was not locked. There was no lock on it to be locked.

She did not open it.

She put the four screws back, each one in the hole it had come from, though no one would ever know the difference, and she carried the box up the cellar stairs against her chest with the oil can forgotten on the bottom

step, and she put it on the kitchen table, and she sat down across from it as she might sit across from a visitor she had not decided whether to like.

The kitchen clock said twenty past three. The kettle was full, because she had filled it. Nothing in the room needed her.

She thought: whatever is in there, I have already done it.

That was the whole of the difficulty. If the box held what she was for, she had been for it, every day, eleven years, without being shown. If it was a good list she would learn nothing except that she agreed with her own life. If it was a poor one, a careless one, a thing written in an afternoon by someone who then went to the junction and got on a bus, she would have to carry that she had given eleven years to an afternoon.

She sat with it until the window went from white to grey. Then she got up and lit the lamp, because it was dusk and the lamp was hers, and sat down again and opened the box with her thumb.

*

Four pages. She had expected a book.

Folded once, longwise, the way you fold a thing to go in an inside pocket. The paper was the cream laid paper of the study drawer, the same paper the letter to M had been written on in August, and when she unfolded it a smell came up that was not dust and not damp but pipe, very faintly, the way his chair still smelled when the sun had been on it.

The hand was the hand from the fuse board and the clock bill. Careful at the top of the first page, every letter made. Faster by the middle. By the third page it ran.

It said the hours. It said the order of the rooms, and the clocks wound on Sunday after breakfast, and the sheet turned four inches, and the labels in the larder facing front. It said *coal small, the grate is bad*. It said *she likes the window in the kitchen best, let her have the table by it.* She read those lines with the flat feeling of a woman reading a shopping list in her own writing, things already bought.

On the second page someone had written a line and scratched it through and written it again almost the same beneath, as if they had argued with themselves over a single word, and she held the paper to the lamp to read under the scratching. The first time it said *She is to be kind*. The second time it said *She is to be warm*. Somebody had sat at the study desk and decided there was a difference and that it mattered. She did not know which of them she was. She thought, a little hotly, that she would have liked to be asked.

Then on the third page, in the middle of a paragraph about the pantry shelves, without a break or a new line, as though the pen had simply gone there:

She should not be alone in it. If I am not there do not let her be alone in it.

And the paragraph went on about the shelves.

She read it again. She read it a third time, and then she stopped counting and only read it.

It was not written to her. She was the *she*. It was not written to the house, because a house is not a thing you tell. It was written to somebody else. Somebody who was supposed one day to stand where she was standing with these pages, and do the thing it said, and that somebody had never come down the cellar stairs. So the only person in eleven years who had ever read the line was the person it was about.

The fourth page was blank. Down at the very bottom, in the fast hand, pressed so hard the nib had scored the paper and she could feel the words from the back with her finger:

I ran out of time.

*

She did not cry. She noticed that she did not, and was not sure what it meant.

She sat with the four pages flat under her hands on the table by the window that someone had wanted her to have, and she thought about the two stories she had been carrying since the London letter, without saying either of them to herself in words.

In the first story she had been written down by someone who wanted a servant, and every day of the eleven years had been taken from her and called a wage.

In the second she had been written down by someone who wanted a wife, and every day had been a letter to a man who went to the junction on a Thursday and did not come back to read it.

She had been ready for either. She had, she found, almost been looking forward to the first. It was the easier one. You could be angry at it.

She had not been ready for this: that she had been written by someone who meant to come back. Who had sat at that desk in a hurry with a pipe going cold and tried to make sure, in the last half page they had, that she would not be on her own. Who had argued over kind and warm. Who had run out.

There was nobody to be angry at. That was what it did to her. It took the anger away and left her with the thing the anger had been standing in front of.

The house had finished everything she ever left undone. The cup on the hook by morning. The letter sealed. The plan squared. It had never finished this. It could not. Do not let her be alone in it was not a task anyone could pick up where she had put it down. It was a promise somebody else had made, and the house only finished what had been begun by her hand.

She folded the pages along their old fold. She did not put them back in the box. She put them in her apron pocket, the left one, with the sweet pea seeds in their twist of paper, and she put the empty box on the dresser beside the almanac, open, so that the house would see there was nothing in it to finish.

That night she lay with the letter and the broken plate under her pillow and the four pages in the apron on the chair, and she listened. Lying very still in her room at the top of the house she could hear it, now that she knew. The hum. Coming up through two floors and the stairwell. It had been there every night of her life.

*

Thursday came up grey with a wind off the hill.

She was dressed by six. She did the range and the kitchen and the hall, and then at eight she did a thing she had never done on a weekday: she took her coat down off the peg by the back door and put it on over her apron, and her hat, and her gloves with the mended thumb, and she put the

tin with the four pounds eleven shillings and sevenpence-halfpenny into the coat pocket, and she went out of the front door and down the path to the gate.

The new keeper, *For the gate*, held it to. She lifted the latch and it opened, as it had opened since November, as if it had never done anything else.

She went through and stood on the lane side of it.

The bus came at twenty-five past nine, early, which Dunnet would have said it never was. She heard it before she saw it, grinding up from the bridge, and then it came round the hawthorn with its windows fogged and two faces in them she did not know. It slowed for her because she was standing at the stop with her coat on, and that was what a woman standing at a stop with her coat on meant.

It stopped. The door folded open. The driver looked down at her. He was young, with a red neck above his collar, and he waited the way a man waits who has a timetable and has been told to be civil.

"Junction?" he said.

She had her hand on the rail.

She thought of Mrs Pell at the junction, whom she had never met, and the blue exercise book, and Tobias Lear in London whose letter was under her pillow, and the last of April. She thought of the four pages in her apron under her coat, *do not let her be alone in it*, and of how far the junction was, and of what she would say there, and to whom, and she found that every answer she had began with the house. She would be going to the junction to see about the house. She would be going to London to see about the house. She would be going anywhere at all as the woman of that house, in its apron under her coat, with its money.

That was not leaving. That was an errand.

"No," she said. "Thank you. Not today."

The driver looked at her a moment longer, and then at the gate behind her standing open, and then he nodded as if he had seen stranger things on that road, and the door folded shut, and the bus went on up the hill and over it, and the sound of it went on for a long time after it was gone.

She stood there. The wind came through the hawthorn. She was on the wrong side of her own gate in her hat, and she had not gone, and she did not feel that she had failed at anything. She felt that she had been asked a question properly for the first time and had given an honest answer, and that it would be asked again.

Dunnet's cart came down the lane at ten with the Thursday sacks. He pulled up when he saw her and sat looking at her in her coat for a while, the reins slack.

"Missed it again," he said.

"I didn't miss it," she said. "It stopped."

He considered that. He got down and took the first sack on his shoulder and stood holding it.

"Weren't for you, then," he said.

"Not yet."

He nodded and went past her through the open gate and round to the coal hole, and she heard the coal go down the chute into the dark, and under it, if she stood still, if she had not known she would never have heard it, the hum.

*

She went in and hung her coat on its peg and took off her gloves. The tin went back in the dresser. She did not take the four pages out of her apron.

In the cellar that afternoon she brought down the oil can she had left on the step two days before, because the house had not moved it. It had sat there two days on the bottom step exactly where she put it down. She stood holding it and understood that the house had not finished it because she had not been doing anything with it; she had only forgotten it. Forgetting was not a task either.

She put the can on its shelf. Then she stood in front of the fuse board with her hands at her sides.

PARLOUR. KITCHEN. UPPER WEST. UPPER EAST. STUDY. YARD. ORIGIN.

She put two fingers on the slate beside the last carrier and felt it, steady, patient, as it had always been. Something in the house holding on to something. She had a very clear idea now what it was holding, and why it had been put there in the hand of somebody who meant to come back, and she thought that if she drew it out of the slate the hum would stop, and she did not know what else would.

Her hand did not open. She did not let it.

She went up and got the almanac and turned to the four ruled leaves. Under *Thursday next* she wrote, in her own hand, which was not the brown hand and never had been:

It stopped for me. I said no.

And then, after a while, on the line under that:

What is ORIGIN.

She did not put a mark at the end of it. She found she did not know whether it was a question or a name.

Chapter Eleven



She did it on the Saturday, because Saturday was the day nothing came.

No post on a Saturday. No Dunnet, who drank on Friday nights in Holm and lay late after. No bus. Nobody to stand at the gate and look up the path and see a woman in a cellar with a lamp. She had worked that out on the Friday, washing the porridge pan, and it had felt like planning a theft, and she had gone on washing the pan until it was clean and set it on the drainer, and the house had dried it and hung it while she was still drying her hands.

She lit the lamp at seven. She did not want the electric for this. It seemed wrong to ask the board to light her way down to take it apart.

The cellar was the same as it had been every morning since she found the pages: cold at the ankles, the coal smelling of wet stone, the oil can on its shelf where she had put it. The board stood on its wall at the height of her chest. Seven porcelain carriers in a row, seven brass names above them in the brown hand. She set the lamp on the bench and the light came up under the labels and made them look newer than they were.

PARLOUR. KITCHEN. UPPER WEST. UPPER EAST. STUDY. YARD. ORIGIN.

She had thought about it all week, in the way you think about a tooth. She knew what the pages said. She had read them so often now that she did not need to take them out, and she did not take them out. They were in her left apron pocket with the seeds and they would stay there.

Do not let her be alone in it.

She had decided, around Wednesday, that she did not know what that meant, and that she would not find out by reading it a fortieth time. She would find out the other way.

She put her hand on the first carrier.

PARLOUR came out easily. It was warm from the wire and heavier than it looked, a white porcelain bridge with two brass horns and a thread of fuse wire strung between them. Upstairs, faintly, she heard nothing at all, because nobody was in the parlour. She laid the carrier on the bench on a clean cloth, the way you would lay out a knife you meant to sharpen.

KITCHEN. The tap of the electric dying somewhere over her head, the little hum of the cold cupboard stopping. She laid it beside the first.

UPPER WEST. UPPER EAST. STUDY. YARD. One by one, each laid on the cloth in the order it had come out, so she would know how they went back. She was not a woman who took things apart without knowing how they went back. That was the first thing anyone had ever taught her, in a kitchen in Bath at twelve years old, a cook holding up a mincer in three pieces and saying, *you'll put it as you found it or you'll not touch it.*

Six carriers on the cloth. The house above her was dark now, all its wires dead.

And it was still humming.

She had known it would be. She stood with the lamp throwing her shadow up the cellar wall and put two fingers on the slate beside the last carrier and felt it there, unchanged, as though the other six had never been anything to do with it. The board was dead and the house was dead and ORIGIN went on, steady, patient, the way a clock goes on in an empty room.

She took hold of it.

It was warmer than the others. Not hot. Warm the way a cup is warm a while after the tea is drunk. She held it a long moment without pulling, and she was aware of herself as if from the top of the cellar steps: a woman of thirty in an apron, in a cold house in the north of England, with one hand on a piece of porcelain and her mouth a little open. She shut her mouth.

Then she drew it out.

It came stiff, as if it had not been out in a very long time. There was a small sound, not a spark, less than a spark, a sound like a breath let go through the nose. And the hum stopped.

She had not understood how loud it was until it stopped. Eleven years she had lived over it. In all that time she had never heard the house silent, and now she heard it, and it was a big silence, room on room of it going up through the floors over her head, the whole weight of the house sitting on her in the dark with nothing in it at all.

She stood holding ORIGIN in her hand.

Nothing happened.

She did not know what she had expected. A shudder. A door going. Some sign that the house had felt it. There was nothing. The lamp burned. The coal sat in its heap. The other six carriers lay on their cloth. She put ORIGIN down at the end of the row, a little apart, and wiped her hands on her apron, and found they were not shaking, which surprised her.

*

She went up.

The kitchen was grey with the morning. The range was still warm, she had banked it at six, and the kettle sat on the hob where she had left it, half full. It looked exactly like a kitchen. She did not know why she had thought it would look like anything else.

She filled the kettle the rest of the way and set it on to boil. She cut bread. She did not sit down. When the kettle went she made the tea in the brown pot and let it stand, and she took the cup off its hook, the plain white one that she used every day and had used every day for eleven years, and poured, and drank it standing at the window, looking at the frost going off the yard in long blue stripes where the sun had not yet got to it.

It was very good tea. She was not thinking about the tea.

When she had finished she rinsed the cup under the tap, and then she did a thing she had not done in this house once since she was nineteen years old. She put the cup down in the sink and walked away from it.

She went and stood in the doorway to the passage, where she could see the sink and not be at it.

The cup sat in the sink.

She waited. She knew how long it took. She had timed it in October without meaning to: a cup, about a minute; a plate, a little under two. She stood in the doorway and counted, the way she had counted everything since she came here, a minute, two minutes, five. The cup sat at the bottom of the white sink with a drop of water at its lip and did not move.

At ten minutes she went and looked at it close. It was just a cup. There was a tea leaf caught on the inside, up near the rim, a little brown flake. It was the first tea leaf she had seen in a cup in this house in eleven years. She looked at it for a long time.

Then she went through the house.

In the parlour the cushion she had leaned on last night still had the dent of her in it. On the stair the runner was rucked at the fourth tread where she had caught her heel coming down in the dark, and it stayed rucked. In the study, on the desk, the almanac lay open at the four ruled leaves and the pencil lay across it at an angle, not straightened. Upstairs her bed was as she had got out of it, the blanket thrown back, the pillow with a hollow in it and under the pillow, she knew without looking, a letter and a parcel of broken plate. She stood in the bedroom door with her hand on the frame.

All of it waiting. All of it hers.

She had thought, during the week, that she would feel free. She had imagined it in a confused way, like a girl imagines the sea: the house letting go of her, a weight lifting. It was not like that. The weight had not lifted. It had changed hands. She stood in the door and understood that every rucked runner and every dent in every cushion was now a thing that would stay exactly as it was until she, herself, with her own hands, did something about it, and that if she did nothing it would stay that way until she was dead.

It was not freedom. It was the opposite of being kept. She did not have a word for it.

She went down the stairs, and on the fourth tread she bent and pulled the runner straight, and went on.

*

By noon the house was cold.

She had not thought of that. Of course she had not; she had never had to. The range she could do, she had always done the range, but the boiler in the cellar had run on its own for as long as she had been here, and the pipes in the upper rooms had been warm every morning of every winter without her once going near them. Now she put her hand on the radiator in the hall and it was cool as a gravestone.

The pump. The pump was on UPPER EAST or STUDY or YARD, she didn't know which. The lamps were on PARLOUR and UPPER WEST. The cold cupboard had stopped. In the yard, she went and looked, the little motor in the shed that pulled water up from the cistern was still, and when she worked the kitchen tap it gave her two cups and coughed and gave her air.

So that was the shape of it. Without ORIGIN, the house did not finish things for her. Without the other six, the house did not work at all.

She stood in the kitchen with the empty tap and thought about the pages in her pocket. *I ran out of time.* Whoever had written them had put the whole house on the same board, the dull useful wires and the other thing side by side, in the same hand, as if they were the same kind of job. She thought that perhaps to him they had been.

She went back down to the cellar with the lamp.

The carriers lay on their cloth in the order she had left them. She picked up PARLOUR and set it back in its place and felt it seat with a click in the slate. Over her head, faintly, the cold cupboard shuddered and began again. KITCHEN. UPPER WEST. UPPER EAST. Somewhere in the walls the pump took hold, and she heard the pipes start to knock and tick as the warm came into them, the house beginning to breathe again in all its ordinary places. STUDY. YARD.

Six carriers back in the board. The lamps would be on upstairs. The water would run.

ORIGIN lay on the cloth on its own.

She stood a long time looking at it. Then she put her two fingers on the slate beside its empty slot, where for eleven years there had been a hum, and there was nothing there. Only cold stone and a little dust that had been behind the carrier and now was not.

She did not put it back.

She did not decide not to. It was not a decision of that size. She simply found, standing there, that her hand did not go to it, the same way it had not gone to the plate when the plate was in pieces on the floor. She picked

it up off the cloth instead and held it, and it had gone cold now in her palm, an ordinary piece of porcelain with brass ends, no heavier than a hairbrush.

She could not put it in her pocket. The pocket was for the pages and the seeds. She looked around the cellar and there was nothing that was hers in it. In the end she carried it up the stairs in her hand, and set it on the dresser in the kitchen beside the empty steel box, which was still sitting open where she had left it ten days ago, and the house had not shut it, and now she understood that it never would have, not because she had been doing anything with it but because it was something the house did not finish. Things to do with that box were not tasks. They had never been.

She laid ORIGIN in the box. She did not close the lid.

*

In the afternoon she washed the cup.

It was still in the sink where she had left it. She ran the tap, which ran now, warm, and took the cup in her hand and wiped the tea leaf out with her thumb and rinsed it and dried it on the cloth and hung it on its hook. It took her perhaps half a minute. She stood with her hand still on the hook afterwards.

It was the first cup she had washed in this house that had needed washing.

She had done it eleven years. Every day, three times, four. She had stood at this sink and put her hands in this water and done this, and it had always been done before she had finished it, and she had never once noticed that she was not the one doing it. She had thought it was hers.

Now the cup was on its hook and it was on its hook because she had put it there, and she found that there were tears on her face, which was stupid, over a cup.

She let them be. Nobody was there to finish them.

*

Dunnet did not come on Saturdays. She knew that. But at four, with the light going, she put on her coat and walked down the path to the gate anyway, and stood with her hand on it, and looked down the lane.

Nobody came. The hawthorn moved. Down the hill a dog was barking at something, on and on, far off.

She found she had come down to see whether the gate would still be stiff, and it was. It always had been. She had always put that down to the hinge, which wanted seeing to, which she had been told wanted seeing to by everyone who had ever come through it, and which nobody had ever seen to. She lifted it now on its hinge with both hands the way Dunnet did and swung it open and shut, open and shut, and it shrieked at her each time.

It was not the house's gate. It had never been inside the house. The house had never touched it, any more than it had touched the oil can, or the tin, or her.

She stood with it open.

Then she shut it, and latched it, and went back up the path to the house, which had all its lights on now, every window yellow in the dusk, warm in all its ordinary places, and silent underneath. She went in and hung her coat on its peg. Nobody straightened it.

In the study she sat in his chair and opened the almanac to the four ruled leaves. Under *What is ORIGIN* she had left the line bare all week. She took the pencil, which had lain crooked across the page all day because she had left it crooked, and she wrote:

Took it out. Cup stays in the sink.

And under that, after a while:

Six back. One not.

She looked at it. It was the plainest thing she had written in the book and it looked like a list of chores, which she supposed it was. She thought about crossing out the last line and did not. Then she put the pencil down, crooked, on purpose, and went to bed, and in the morning it was still crooked, and that was how she knew it had really happened.

Chapter Twelve



On Sunday the bed was as she had left it.

She woke and lay and looked at it from inside: the sheet dragged to one side where her knee had been, the second pillow fallen against the wall, the blanket bunched at the foot like a sleeping dog. For eleven years she had got up into a bed that was already becoming made behind her. She had never seen the shape she slept in. It was not a good shape. It looked like someone had been fighting in it.

She got up and did not make it. Not yet. She wanted to see what it would do, and what it did was nothing, all through breakfast and all through the washing of her own plate and her own cup and the one spoon, and when

she went back upstairs at ten it was the same, with the light moving across it and the dent of her head still in the pillow. She stood in the door and something in her chest went tight and then went loose.

Then she made it, because it was a bed and she was going to sleep in it again. She did it badly. She had forgotten the corners. Four inches of turned-down sheet, she thought, and measured with her hand, and got three and a bit, and left it.

*

There were things she had not known were things.

The fire in the range went out on Sunday afternoon because nobody fed it. She found it grey and ticking at four and had to riddle it and lay it from nothing, paper and kindling and the small coal, and she burned the side of her hand on the door, the old place on her palm, and stood at the sink with it under the cold tap while the kindling caught behind her. The tap ran. She had restored the six and the pump answered to KITCHEN, and she was grateful to the pump in a way she had never been grateful to anything in that house, because she had put the fuse back in herself and so the water was, a little, hers.

The clocks ran down on Monday.

Not all at once. The kitchen clock first, at ten past seven in the morning, its tick getting wider and wider apart until she noticed she was waiting for it, and then it did not come. The hall clock at noon. By the evening she could hear the house getting quieter room by room, like people leaving a party. She went round with the key. Thirty-two turns. She had always counted them and had always been counting something already done, the

key going round on a spring already tight, and now the spring fought her. Her wrist ached by the fourth clock. By the ninth she was sitting on the stairs to do it, the key in both hands.

They did not agree when she had finished. The parlour clock was two minutes ahead of the study clock, and the long-case in the hall stood where she had stopped it, at twenty past eleven, and she left it there. She set the rest as near as she could by the kitchen one and then stood in the hall and listened to eight clocks going nearly together, a sound like rain on several roofs.

She had always thought the house kept time. It had kept the clocks. Time she was going to have to keep herself.

*

Dust came back the way frost does, overnight and evenly.

She saw it first on the dresser on Tuesday, a bloom on the dark wood when the morning sun came in low. She drew one finger through it and looked at the line. Then she took a cloth and did the dresser and the mantel and the sill, and it took her the whole of the morning, and by the time she had done the parlour the kitchen had a film on it again from the range.

So that was what it was. That was what it had been, all along. Every surface in this house had been filling up with the world at the same slow rate for eleven years, and something had been taking it away at the same slow rate, and she had walked through the middle of it with a duster in her hand like a woman carrying an umbrella indoors.

She did not do the upstairs. She left the upstairs to fill.

In the almanac that night she wrote, under *Six back. One not.*:

Dust. Clocks. Fire. Bed.

And then, after looking at it:

It was never not work. It was only not mine.

*

Dunnet came on Wednesday. She heard the cart at the bottom of the lane and went down the path to meet it, which she had not done since the autumn. He was up on the seat with the reins loose and a sack across his knees against the cold, and he looked at her coming down and then at the house behind her and then back.

"Chimney's slow," he said.

"I let the fire out."

He considered this. "Never known you let it out."

"I never did," she said. "Before."

He got down. He did not ask. He took the two hundredweight off the back one at a time and carried them past her up the side path to the coal hole and tipped them in, and the black dust rose up round him and settled on his cap, and he came back slapping his gloves.

"Whose is the coal," she said.

He stopped.

"I wrote it on a bill," she said. "On the back of Trewin's bill. I've been meaning to ask somebody."

"Coal's whoever's paying," Dunnet said. "Which is nobody, two Michaelmases. Trewin's been sending it on his own say. Said Mr Lear'd see him right." He looked at the gate. "Said a lot of things, Mr Lear."

"Am I to pay it?"

"Nobody's asked you."

"No," she said. "Nobody ever asks me anything." She had not meant to say it. It came out flat and true and hung there between them in the cold.

Dunnet put his gloves back on, finger by finger. Then he reached up under the sack on the seat and brought down a parcel, a small heavy one in brown paper and string, and held it out to her.

"This were at the junction," he said. "Mrs Pell's had it on her shelf since Christmas. Said it were for up here and nobody come down for it."

She took it. It was very heavy for its size. The paper had gone soft at the corners from being handled and put back, handled and put back. The string had been knotted twice, once neatly and once again over the top by somebody who did not trust the first knot.

There was a label tied to the string. Cream card, a punched hole, the kind the ironmonger in Horne used. On it, in brown ink that had faded nearly to the colour of the card, in a hand she knew now, the hand on the clock-bill and on the linen plan and on four pages she had carried in her apron for a week:

For the gate.

Nothing else. No name. No address. Three words and a full stop.

"Who brought it to Mrs Pell," she said.

"Carrier from Horne. Back in December." Dunnet shrugged. "Paid for and all, she said. Paid for back in the summer before last, just never sent. Ironmonger had it on his books under Lear."

The summer before last. Before the letter from M. Before the Thursday.

She stood with the parcel against her chest and could not make her face do anything.

"Well," said Dunnet. He climbed back up. He took the reins. He looked at the gate, and then at her, and he said, not unkindly, "Wants seeing to," and clicked his tongue, and the cart went off down the lane.

*

She did not open it in the kitchen. She took it out to the gate.

She sat on the low wall beside the post with the parcel on her knees and worked the double knot loose with her nails, and it took a long time, and she did not cut it. Inside the paper there was a second paper, oiled, and inside that, in a nest of wood shavings that smelled of the ironmonger's in Horne, of paraffin and sawn pine, there was a keeper.

A new one. Black iron, a plain heavy cup on a plate, three holes for the screws. Six screws with it, longer than the old ones, in a twist of paper. And a small brass oil can no bigger than her thumb, full, its cap stopped with a bit of cork.

She held the keeper up against the post where the old one was.

The old one was rust. She had never looked at it properly. She had been told for eleven years that the hinge wanted seeing to and she had believed the hinge was the trouble, because everyone said it, and because she had never in her life been told what was actually wrong with anything. But it

was not the hinge. The old keeper had pulled half out of the rotten wood of the post and hung there by one screw, crooked, so that the latch rode up over it and the gate had to be lifted to close. That was the shriek. That was the lifting with both hands. The hinge was stiff, but the gate shrieked because it did not meet the thing it was meant to meet.

He had known. He had gone into Horne in the summer before last and stood in the ironmonger's and said what he wanted and paid for it, and written *For the gate* on the label in his own hand, and then he had not come back for it. Or he had meant to send for it. Or he had meant to fit it the next week, and the next. It had sat on a shelf in Horne for a year and on a shelf at the junction for three months, waiting for somebody to come down.

That wants seeing to. The last thing he had said. She had thought it was a complaint. It had been a reminder. To himself.

He ran out of time, she thought. He wrote it down. He wrote it on four pages and he wrote it on a label.

*

The house could not do it, and that was the point, and she understood it sitting on the wall. The gate had never been inside the house. Nothing the house had done for eleven years had ever reached as far as the gate. Whatever he had built into the walls and the wires and the ORIGIN fuse that lay now in its open steel box on the dresser, it stopped at the step. This was the one thing he had left that only a person could finish.

She went up to the house for the tools. They were in the cellar, in the drawer under the bench, where they had always been and where she had never once needed to go. A brace and a bit. A screwdriver with a handle

worn pale. She carried them down the path in her apron with the oil can knocking against the pages and the seeds.

The old screw would not come. She leaned on it till her wrist burned and it turned all at once and the keeper fell into the grass. Under it the post was soft and brown as cake. She could not put new screws in that. She stood looking at it for a while, and then she measured with her fingers, two inches lower, where the wood was still hard and pale when she scraped it, and marked it with the point of the screwdriver.

She had never drilled anything. She did it badly. The bit wandered and she had to start the first hole twice, and she put her knee against the post and her whole weight on the brace and turned, and the shavings came curling out pale and clean, and she found that she was breathing hard and that she did not mind.

Three holes. She offered the keeper up. It was crooked. She took it down and looked at the latch and offered it up again and this time it was not crooked, or not so you would see it, and she drove the first screw, and the second, and the third.

Then she oiled the hinge. Both knuckles of it, a drop at a time out of the little brass can, working the gate back and forth an inch while the oil ran down black with old rust, until the sound in it changed from a scream to a complaint to almost nothing.

She stood back.

She swung the gate shut with one hand.

It went home. The latch rode down the curve of the new keeper and dropped into its cup with a small, plain, iron sound, the sound of a thing meeting the thing it was meant for. No lifting. No shriek.

She opened it again. Shut it. Opened it. Shut it. The latch dropped every time.

She stood with her hand flat on the top bar and found that she was laughing, a little, the way she had laughed at *April. Mine.*, and that her hands were black to the wrist with rust and oil, and that the light had gone long and yellow down the lane while she worked, and that she had not once in the whole afternoon looked back at the house to see whether it was watching.

*

The old keeper lay in the grass. She picked it up. It was a small rotten thing, lighter than she expected. She thought about throwing it into the hedge. Then she put it in her right-hand apron pocket, which until that afternoon had held nothing at all, and went up the path.

In the kitchen she washed her hands for a long time. The rust would not all come off. It sat in the creases of her knuckles and under her nails, and she looked at it and thought: the house would have had that off me before I noticed. And then: I would have let it.

She left it.

She sat in his chair with the almanac. Under *It was never not work. It was only not mine.* she wrote:

For the gate. Fitted. Me.

She looked at the word *Me* for a long time. It was the first time she had written it in the book. It looked very small and very black on the ruled line, like the new keeper on the old post, and like the keeper it did not look like much, and it held.

Then she turned the page back to the four lines she had written after the London letter, and the fifth, and read them all again: *Tobias. Hewel. Last of April. Counts everything. Thursday next.*

Thursday was tomorrow.

She put the pencil in the fold, straight this time, because she would need to find the place.

Chapter Thirteen



She woke before the clocks.

That had not happened in eleven years, because in eleven years the clocks had never needed her to wake for them. Now there were eight of them going because she had wound them, and one stopped at twenty past eleven because she had let it, and the room was grey and very quiet, and she lay in the bed she had made badly and listened to the house not doing anything.

Thursday.

She got up. The floor was cold. She found that she had already decided what to wear, which was the brown wool and the apron over it, because the apron had the pockets, and the pockets were where she kept the things

that were hers now. Seeds and pages on the left. The rotten keeper on the right. She put her hand in each pocket in turn, the way a person touches a door to see it is locked, and then she went down.

She laid the fire and lit it at the second match. Her palm still caught where she had burned it on Sunday, a shiny pink place below the thumb, and she held the match carefully away from it. The kettle took its time. She did not mind. She cut bread and ate it standing, and washed the knife and the plate, and set them on the rack, and the house left them on the rack, and she thought, not for the first time that week, that she would never quite get used to that. That a wet plate could just stay wet.

At a quarter past eight she put on her coat.

*

The coat had a smell. Camphor, and under it something older, the cupboard under the stairs, a little damp. She had worn it to the gate and back perhaps a hundred times. She had not worn it past the gate since the autumn she came, when she was nineteen and walked up from the junction behind the carrier's cart with her box, and Mr Lear had met her on the step and said, *You'll be the girl from Bath*, and she had said yes, as if that were the whole of her.

She stood in the hall with her hand on the door.

The hall stand. The blank envelope still on it, sealed, nothing inside, the house's idea of a letter. The umbrella that was his. The brass tray for the post. The mirror, which she did not look into, and then did, because it was absurd not to. A woman of thirty in a brown coat with rust still in the creases of her knuckles. She did not know what she had expected. She had not looked properly in a long time. The face was hers. That was all she could say about it.

She went out and pulled the door to behind her. The latch caught. She did not lock it. There had never been a key she was trusted to carry and she was not going to start by hunting for one.

The path. The sweet pea bed, raked and bare, waiting for April. The gate.

She lifted the latch. It rode up out of the new keeper easily, and the gate swung on its oiled hinge without a sound, and she stepped through, and turned, and shut it behind her, and heard the latch drop home.

Then she stood in the lane with her back to the gate and her hands in her pockets, and waited for something to happen.

Nothing happened. A rook went over. Somewhere down towards the Pryce farm a dog said one thing and thought better of it. The lane ran away from her between its two hedges, brown and wet and rutted, the way it had run every morning she had stood at the gate for Dunnet and watched him come up it. She had never once thought of it as going anywhere. It was where Dunnet came from. It was where the post came from. It was the direction of things arriving.

She started to walk.

*

It was two miles to the junction. She knew that the way she knew the number of steps on the back stair, because she had heard it said, not because she had counted it. Dunnet said it. *Two mile and a bit, and the bit's uphill both ways.* She had thought it was a joke. It was not quite a joke. The lane dropped from the house to the brook and rose again past the Pryces and dropped again into the wood, and her legs, which had climbed the house's stairs fifty times a day for eleven years, did not know what to do with a hill that did not end at a landing.

She was warm by the brook. By the Pryce gate she had undone the top button of the coat. A girl was in the yard there with a bucket, a long thin girl of perhaps fourteen in a man's jacket, and she stopped and looked at the woman in the lane with frank interest, the way you would look at a cow that had got out.

"Morning," the girl said.

"Good morning."

The girl went on looking. Then she said, "You're from the Lear house."

"Yes."

"Didn't know anyone lived up there now. Mam said it was shut up."

She thought about that. *Shut up.* The fires laid every morning, the nine clocks agreeing, the plates on the dresser, the turned-down sheet. Shut up.

"It's not," she said. "I live there."

"Oh," said the girl. And then, as if that settled something, "Bus is at half nine." And she went into the byre with her bucket.

*

The wood was the long part. The lane went under the trees and the light went green and dim and the ruts filled with leaves, and there was a smell of wet bark and something sweetish rotting, and she found she was walking more slowly, not because she was tired but because she was looking.

She had forgotten that there were things like this. Not forgotten. Not had them. A holly with a single red berry left on it at the height of her eye. A bracket fungus on a dead birch, layered like a pile of saucers, the top one

cracked. A place where something had dug under the bank and left a fan of fresh red earth. None of it was finished. None of it was going to be. The holly would not grow its berries back by morning. The birch would go on dying at the rate a birch dies. Nobody was going to come along after her and set the earth back in the hole.

She stopped by the birch. She put her good hand flat on the fungus, gently, and it was cold and hard as wood, and slightly damp, and it did not mind her.

Wants seeing to, she thought, and laughed out loud in the empty wood, because it did not. Nothing here wanted seeing to. That was the whole of it. Nothing was waiting for her to put it right.

She took her hand away and walked on.

*

Halfway through the wood she began to think about Mr Lear.

She had not meant to. She had been thinking about the holly. But the lane bent left at an old stone gatepost with no gate, and she knew, the way you know a thing you have been told and never seen, that this was the gatepost he had meant. *Turn at the stump, Dunnet, the far one, not the near.* He had said it once at the kitchen door about a delivery, years ago, and she had filed it with the steps and the miles. So he had walked this. Of course he had. Every Thursday for however many Thursdays it took him to make up his mind, and then one last Thursday, in September, with the gate saying *that wants seeing to* behind him.

She tried to picture him here and could not quite. In the house he was a set of places: the chair, the study door, the shape on the left of the bed in the blue room that she had not been in since. Out here he had no places. He

was only a man walking down a lane in a wood, which was what she was. She did not know what he had thought about. She did not know if he had looked at the holly.

I will be at the junction on the Thursday. The M letter. Under the salt, still, where she had left it. She had never wondered what M looked like. She wondered now, briefly, and found it did not interest her as much as she had expected. Somebody he had been walking towards. That was all. Every Thursday the lane had taken him towards somebody, and he had come back, and come back, and then he had not.

She thought: and nobody was walking towards me.

And then, because it was true and she had promised herself on Sunday to stop writing things down that were only half true: and I was not walking towards anybody either. I was standing at the gate.

The lane came out of the trees.

*

The junction was not much. She had known it would not be much, and still she stood at the edge of the wood and looked at it with something close to astonishment, because it was a place and she was in it.

The lane met the Horne road in a wide muddy V. On the far side was a long low stone building with a slate roof that had been, she supposed, a toll house once, and was now a shop, because there was a board over the door, sun-bleached, *PELL · GENERAL · POST OFFICE*, and a tin sign for Lyons tea, and a bench outside with nobody on it. Beside the shop a fingerpost: HORNE 4, BATH 19, and a third arm pointing back up the

lane she had come down that said nothing at all, because somebody had broken it off. Where the roads met there was a shelter, three sides and a roof, wooden, painted green a long time ago.

The carrier's cart had stopped here. Eleven years ago. She remembered the mud, not the building. She remembered sitting on her box while the carrier watered the horse and thinking that she must not be frightened, because frightened girls were sent back, and she could not be sent back, because there was nothing at the other end to be sent back to. She remembered that very clearly. She had not remembered it at all for a very long time.

She crossed the road. Her boots were brown to the ankle. She did not mind that either.

The shelter had a bench along its back wall and a board on its left wall, and on the board, behind a sheet of glass in a wooden frame, was the timetable.

She had not expected the glass to be clean.

Everything else about the shelter was the ordinary dirt of a thing outdoors: leaves in the corners, a cigarette end, a smear of something on the bench, green paint lifting in long curls off the uprights. But the glass over the timetable was clean. Not new. There was a crack across one corner, old, dark with grime inside it. But the face of it had been wiped, recently, in long straight strokes, the way she wiped a pane, top to bottom and then side to side so the streaks crossed out. Someone did that. Someone came out here with a cloth, on purpose, often, and wiped the glass so the times could be read.

She looked at it for a long while before she read the times.

HORNE & DISTRICT MOTOR SERVICES. Then a column of days and a column of hours, typed, a little crooked on the card, the way the London letter's capitals had jumped. *Tuesdays and Saturdays. Thursdays.* Half past nine to Horne. Ten past four back. And at the bottom, in ink, in a round careful hand that was not the spec hand and not any hand she knew: *No service Christmas Day or Good Friday. Ask inside.*

Ask inside.

She read the whole card twice. Then she found that she had taken the almanac out of her coat, where she had not remembered putting it, and the pencil from the fold, and was copying the times onto the back leaf, small, the way she copied a recipe: *Tue. Sat. Thu. 9.30. 4.10 back.* Her hand was steady. When she had finished she looked at what she had written and saw that it was the first list she had ever made of a thing outside the house.

Behind her, across the road, a bell rang over a shop door, and someone came out onto the step.

She did not turn round yet. She stood with the almanac open in her rusty hand, in front of the clean glass, and she let herself have one more moment of nobody knowing she was there. Then the church clock at Horne, four miles off, too far to hear on any other morning, came thin across the fields on the wind, and struck the quarter, and she knew it was a quarter past nine, and that the bus was coming, and that she had come all this way and had not once, in two miles, decided whether she meant to get on it.

Chapter Fourteen



The woman on the step was drying her hands on her apron.

That was the first thing. Not her face, not her age, not the way she stood. The hands, and the apron, and the slow thorough way she worked a cloth between each finger and then over the backs, as if she had been interrupted at something wet and meant to finish being dry before she did anything else. The housekeeper knew that movement. She had done it ten thousand times. She had not, she realised, ever watched anybody else do it.

"You'll be wanting the bus," the woman said, across the road.

It was not a question. It was the sort of thing you say to a person standing in a bus shelter at a quarter past nine on a Thursday, and the housekeeper understood that she was, from the outside, simply a person standing in a bus shelter at a quarter past nine on a Thursday. Nobody in particular. A shape the junction knew what to do with.

"I don't know," she said.

Her voice came out ordinary. She had been afraid, without knowing she was afraid of it, that it would come out strange, thin from disuse, or too loud, the way voices are in an empty house. It did not. It sounded like a woman answering.

The woman on the step put the cloth over her shoulder.

"Then you'd best come in and not know it somewhere warm," she said. "He's always late Thursdays. Six or seven minutes. You'll hear him at the bend."

*

The shop was dark after the road and smelled of paraffin and cheese and string. There was a counter along one side with a brass scale on it and a glass case of sweets, gone milky with age, and behind the counter shelves to the ceiling: tins, packets, candles in bundles, a row of stone jars, reels of thread in a shallow drawer left half open, bootlaces hung on a nail. At the far end a grille and a little window with *POST OFFICE* painted over it in the same faded letters as the board outside, and a slot, and a pad of forms.

A stove in the corner. Lit. The housekeeper went towards it without meaning to, the way a cat goes, and stood with her rusty hands out.

"You've been at metal," the woman said.

"A gate."

"Ah." The woman went round behind the counter and lifted the flap down after her. She was perhaps sixty. Grey hair pinned flat, a cardigan the colour of strong tea, spectacles on a cord that she did not put on. A big plain face, red at the cheeks, with nothing hurried in it. "That'll be the Lear gate."

The housekeeper looked at her.

"There's only the one gate up that lane wants seeing to," the woman said. "And there's only the one parcel I've had sat on my shelf since before Christmas with a gate in it. Dunnet took it up Wednesday. I told him, I said, if it comes back again I'm sending it to Horne and they can have it for scrap." She turned a tin on the shelf so its label faced out, though it had been facing out already. "It didn't come back."

"No," said the housekeeper. "I fitted it."

"Did you." Not surprise. Something more careful than that. "Did you now."

The stove ticked. Outside, a long way off, a cart or a lorry changed gear on the Horne road, and both of them listened, and it was not the bus.

"You're Mrs Pell," the housekeeper said.

"I am. It's on the board." A small dry smile. "And you're the one that was the girl from Bath."

*

She had not thought anybody remembered that.

She had not thought anybody remembered her at all. She had thought, for eleven years, without ever quite putting it into words, that outside the gate she had been folded up and put away, the way the house put away a cloth: finished with, not needed till next time, not thought of in between. That she had stopped, out here, the day she went in.

"I was on the step when the carrier set you down," Mrs Pell said. "In that mud. You sat on your box and you wouldn't come in, though I asked you. You said you'd been told to wait for Mr Lear." She folded her arms. "And he came, and he took your box, and you went up the lane behind him, and that was the last of you."

"I came out," the housekeeper said. "Sometimes."

"Did you?"

She tried to think when. The gate had been held. She knew that now; she had not known it then. She had thought, for eleven years, that she did not go out because there was no need to go out. Everything came. Coal came. Post came. Dunnet came. Groceries had come, in Averill's time, on the cart, in a box, and the box went back empty, and she had never once wondered who packed it.

"You packed the box," she said.

"Every Friday since before you came." Mrs Pell's hands were flat on the counter now. "Then last September it stopped. No order, no box, no word. And I thought, well. Nothing came down that lane after that except Dunnet, and Dunnet's no talker." A breath. "Because last September Mr Lear came down himself and stood at that shelter on a Thursday, which he'd never done, and got on the half past nine with a case, and I've not seen him since."

"No," said the housekeeper. "Nor have I."

Mrs Pell looked at her for a long moment. Then she did put the spectacles on, and looked again, and took them off.

"He paid for that gate," she said. "Summer before last. Came in on his own and stood where you're stood and asked me to send to Horne for a keeper and a hinge pin and said he'd collect. And he never collected. And when I put it on Dunnet's cart at Christmas Dunnet brought it back and said the gate wouldn't open to take it." She shook her head slowly. "I didn't know what to make of that. A gate that won't open to a parcel. I've thought about it a good deal."

The housekeeper put her hand into her right coat pocket and closed it round the old keeper. Flaking, light, a small curved thing gone soft as biscuit with rust.

"It does now," she said.

*

The bus came round the bend at nineteen minutes past.

They both heard it before they saw it: a grinding, then a cough, then the shape of it filling the window, high and green and mud to the axles, *HORNE & DISTRICT* along the side in cream. It pulled in by the shelter with a long sigh. Nobody got off. Through the glass she could see two women in hats, a man asleep with his cheek on the window, a boy with a basket on his knees.

The driver leaned out and looked at the empty shelter, and then across at the shop.

"Anybody, Mrs Pell?"

Mrs Pell did not answer him. She looked at the housekeeper. It was not a pushing look and it was not a holding one. It was the look you give somebody when the choice is plainly theirs and you would think less of yourself for touching it.

The housekeeper went to the door. She opened it. The bell rang over her head, a cracked bright sound, and the cold came in round her ankles, and she stood on the step in the place where Mrs Pell had stood drying her hands, and looked at the bus.

She thought: I could. There were coins in the coat; she had found them that morning in the lining, three shillings and some coppers, old, Averill's. Half past nine to Horne. She did not know what was in Horne. A church clock. An ironmonger with a ledger that had Lear in it. A solicitor, perhaps, or a solicitor's clerk, Gant and Pryor's man who had written *To the Occupier*. The station for Bath.

She thought of the cup in the sink.

She thought of the dust come back upstairs, and the bed she had made badly, three inches out, and the long-case clock at twenty past eleven because she had said so. The fire she had let go out and had to lay again herself, and the burn across her palm from it, healed shiny now. None of it finished. None of it ever going to be finished by anybody but her.

It was not that she wanted to go back. She noticed that. She held it up and looked at it in the cold air and was surprised. She did not want to go back. She did not want to go on, either, not today, not on the half past nine with three shillings and a rusty keeper and no box. She wanted something she did not have a word for yet, and she could feel that it was not on the bus.

"Not today," she said.

She said it to the driver. She said it quite loudly, across the road, the way you call out to someone over a wall. It was the second time she had said it to a bus, and the first time she had said it to a person, and she found the person mattered. He nodded, not much interested, touched his cap to Mrs Pell, and pulled out. The two women in hats looked at her through the window as they went, the way you look at anyone, and then the bus was round the next bend and grinding up towards Horne and gone.

Last Thursday it had been an errand she would not run. This was different. She had stood at the door, in the open, with the bell still shaking above her, and decided.

"Well," said Mrs Pell, behind her. "That's that, then."

"Yes."

"Tuesday's the next."

"I know." She touched the almanac in her coat. "I wrote it down."

*

She did not go at once. Mrs Pell put the kettle on the stove without asking and the housekeeper let her, and sat on the chair Mrs Pell pulled out from behind the post office grille, and drank tea out of a cup that was not hers and that she would not wash. That was strange. She held the cup when she had finished and did not know where to put it. Mrs Pell took it off her and set it on the counter by the scale, unwashed, and went on talking, and the housekeeper looked at the cup sitting there with the dregs in it and nobody minding, and something in her chest went loose that had been tight for longer than she could remember.

Mrs Pell talked about Horne, and the price of paraffin, and the Pryce girl, who was fourteen and sharp and would be going into service at Michaelmas if her mother had her way and not if the girl had hers. She talked about the bus, which was late on Thursdays because the driver's sister was at Coombe and he stopped for his breakfast. She did not ask the housekeeper anything at all about the house. Not once. The housekeeper waited for it, braced for it, and it did not come, and after a while she understood that it was not going to, and that Mrs Pell was doing that on purpose.

At ten she stood up.

"I'll want some things," she said. It came out stiff. She had never in her life bought anything in a shop for herself. In Bath she had been sent; in the house it had come. "I don't know what they cost."

"Tell me what they are and I'll tell you."

She thought. "Matches," she said. "The house has matches, but they're his. I'd like some that are mine." Mrs Pell put a box on the counter without comment. "Candles. Two." Two. "And." She stopped.

Mrs Pell waited.

"I've been writing in the back of a seed almanac," the housekeeper said. "It's nearly full. And it isn't mine either. It's his. It was in his desk."

Mrs Pell went along the shelves to a stack of something under a tea chest, and pulled one out from the middle where it would be clean, and brought it back and laid it on the counter between them.

An exercise book. The kind schoolchildren had. Blue card covers, a little faded at the spine, a white label on the front with three ruled lines for a name and a subject and a form, and inside, when the housekeeper opened

it, thirty-two leaves of feint-ruled paper with a red margin, nobody's handwriting on any of them.

She turned the pages. Blank, blank, blank. Every one of them waiting.

"Tuppence," said Mrs Pell. "The matches are a penny. Candles a penny each. Fourpence the lot."

The housekeeper found the coins in the lining and counted out four pennies onto the counter, and Mrs Pell swept them into her hand and dropped them in a drawer and shut it, and that was all. That was the whole of it. No receipt to be filed. No ledger with Lear at the top. Fourpence of Averill's money gone out of the world and three things come into it that belonged to her.

She did not write her name on the label. She looked at the three ruled lines for a long moment, the pencil in her fingers, and did not. Not yet. She put the book inside her coat, against the almanac, against the four pages, and the paper of it was cold and then warm.

*

At the door Mrs Pell said, "The glass. On the timetable."

The housekeeper turned.

"I do that Mondays," Mrs Pell said. "Have done since my husband went. It cracked in the frost the year he died and I thought, well, somebody ought to be able to read it." She picked a thread off her cardigan. "Nobody's ever said."

"I saw," the housekeeper said. "Top to bottom and then across."

"That's the way."

"That's the way I do it."

They looked at each other across the shop, two women who wiped glass the same way, and neither of them said anything else about it, and that was enough.

She went out. The bell rang. The road was empty in both directions and the shelter stood there green and three-sided with the timetable shining in it, and she crossed and stood in front of it once more and read *Ask inside.* in Mrs Pell's round hand, and laughed, out loud, alone, at a junction, at ten o'clock in the morning.

Then she turned up the lane towards the house, with matches that were hers and two candles and a blue book with nothing in it, and she walked slowly, because nobody was waiting, and there was no reason now to hurry home except that she wanted to see what she would find there.

Chapter Fifteen



The gate opened without a sound. She had done that. She stood with her hand on the top bar and let it swing the rest of the way on its own weight, and it went and stopped where the new keeper caught it, and dropped, and that was hers too.

The lane behind her was empty. The house in front of her was the same grey it had been at half past eight, the same three chimneys, one of them smoking a little because she had banked the kitchen fire before she went and it was still just alive. The smoke went up straight. There was no wind.

She came up the path slowly, as she had walked the whole way, and at the step she stopped.

The oil can was where she had left it on Monday. On the step, by the boot scraper, its spout turned towards the door. She had meant to take it in. She had walked past it twice since and thought both times, I'll take that in, and both times not.

It was still there.

Of course it was still there. She knew that. She had drawn the fuse herself on Saturday with her own two hands and laid it in the steel box on the dresser, and every day since she had watched the house not do things. She had made the bed badly and it had stayed badly made. She had let the clocks run down and they had run down. She knew.

But she had been gone. That was the thing she had not counted on, standing there with the cold coming up through her boots. She had been gone a morning, four miles there and back, a whole shop and a whole woman and a bus that stopped for her and went on without her, and some part of her she had not been consulted about had expected to come home and find that the house had used the time. That it had done what it always did when she was out of a room. Tidied up after her. Taken the can in. Closed what she had opened.

She picked up the oil can and held it. It was cold and a little greasy at the spout and it weighed what it weighed.

Then she opened the door.

*

The hall was exactly as she had left it.

Her indoor shoes on the mat, one tipped on its side where she had stepped out of it. The hall stand with nothing on it but the blank envelope she had written *Dear M*, inside, still sealed, still addressed to no one. The runner

rucked at the corner by the stairs, the way it had been rucked since Saturday. The light coming in grey from the fanlight and lying across the boards in the same long slab.

Nothing had moved.

She stood in the doorway with the can in her hand and the cold air going past her into the house, and she felt it begin, low down, under the ribs. It was not fear. She knew fear. Fear was the night Averill had not come in from the yard, and the lamp, and the yard dark. This was colder than that and quieter. It was the feeling of having said something into a room and waited, and the room giving nothing back. Not refusing. Not anything.

Eleven years, she thought. Eleven years I have come back into this hall and it has been ready for me.

She had never once come home. She saw that now, standing on the mat. She had come back to a house that was ready, and that was a different thing, and she had never known the difference because she had never been given the chance to find it out.

She shut the door. The latch went down. She put the oil can on the floor by the hall stand, because there was nowhere for it to go and nobody to say where it went, and she took off her coat and hung it on the peg, and the blue book and the almanac pulled the coat crooked on the hook, and she left it crooked.

*

She went through the house the way you go through a house after a burglary. Not touching. Looking.

The parlour. The cushion in Averill's chair with her shape in it, from Tuesday night, when she had sat reading and not finished. The book on the arm, face down, spine cracked open at page ninety-something. The clocks on the mantel stopped at their three different times, because she had wound only the ones she wanted and these she had not wanted. The fire laid but not lit.

The study. The linen plan still unrolled on the desk under its four weights, the word *Maid* crossed out in black and the word *occupied* crossed out in her pencil, and under her crossing out, nothing. The pipe smell. The chair pushed back at the angle she had pushed it.

The dining room, where nobody had eaten in five months. Dust on the long table now, a fine grey bloom she could have written in. She did not write in it.

The stairs. Every one of the seventeen. She counted them going up, out of a habit so old it was nearly a bone in her, and on the eleventh she noticed she was counting and kept counting anyway.

The landing. The blue room door shut. The bathroom door open. Her own room at the end, the bed made badly, the pillow with its small hard lump where the letter and the plate pieces were.

All of it. All of it exactly where she had put it, or dropped it, or left it, or forgotten it.

She stood on the landing and put her hand flat against the wall, the way she had sometimes done in the first year to feel the house working, that faint warmth in the plaster like a cat asleep on the other side. The wall was cold. Plaster cold. It was only a wall.

"Well," she said aloud. Her voice sounded strange in the passage. Too large. There was nothing in the house to take any of it.

*

It was the cellar door that undid her.

She came down the back stairs to the kitchen, meaning to put the kettle on, meaning to do the next thing and the next, and the cellar door at the end of the passage was standing open.

She stopped.

Then she remembered. Half past six this morning, the light not up, going down with the scuttle for coal because she had wanted the fire banked properly before she left, and coming up with the scuttle in both hands, and pushing the door to with her hip and not hearing it catch. She had meant to go back. She had been thinking about her coat, about the camphor, about whether the girl from Bath was a thing anyone in Pell would remember.

She had left it open. That was all.

And in eleven years she had never once seen that door open. Not by an inch. She had gone down for coal ten thousand times and come up and the door had been shut behind her before she reached the kitchen table, and she had not even known she was not shutting it. She had not known there was a version of her who left doors open. She had not met her.

She stood in the passage and looked at the open door and the dark of the cellar stairs going down behind it, and the cold smell of coal and stone coming up out of it, and the feeling under her ribs rose up into her throat and came out of her as a sound she did not know she could make.

She put her back against the wall and slid down it until she was sitting on the flags.

She did not cry. She thought she would, and then she did not. She sat on the kitchen passage floor with her knees up, in her good stockings, and looked at the door she had left open, and breathed, and what came into her was not grief exactly. It was the size of it. The size of what had been done for her, every hour, for eleven years, so quietly she had thought it was the shape of the world. A hand under everything. Not holding her. She would not have called it holding. Just there, so that nothing she did ever fell all the way down.

And now things fell. Now a door stayed open because she had left it open, and would go on being open, tonight and tomorrow and next week, until she got up off this floor and shut it.

She could leave it. She thought that clearly, sitting there. She could leave it open a week and see. Nobody would say anything. Nobody would ever say anything again.

*

The kitchen clock had stopped at twenty to two. She did not know which day.

She got up eventually, because her legs had gone numb and because the fire, when she listened, had gone quieter in the range, and she did not want to lose it. She went to the range and opened the door and looked at what was left, a red eye at the back under a skin of ash, and she knelt and riddled it, and fed it from the scuttle, small pieces first, the way the cook in Bath had shown her when she was fourteen and nobody had shown her since because nobody had needed to.

The fire took. She watched it take.

She filled the kettle at the pump. Six strokes, seven, the water coming in coughs and then clear. She set it on.

She did not go and shut the cellar door. Not yet. She was not leaving it to see. She only wanted to have decided it. To be the one who decided when.

While the kettle came up she took the parcel of matches out of her coat and the two candles, and she put the matches on the shelf above the range where the matches had always been, and that was the first thing in eleven years she had put in its place and known she was the one putting it there. She stood the candles in the pair of brass sticks on the dresser that had held, for as long as she could remember, two candles that never burned down. She had stopped seeing them years ago. They had been the same height since before she came. She took the old ones out. They were sound, not even dusty, wicks white and never lit. She laid them on the dresser beside the steel box with ORIGIN in it and put her own in, her penny candles, a little crooked in the sticks because they were cheap.

Then she lit one. Just to have.

The flame stood up small and yellow in the grey kitchen and she looked at it for a long time.

*

When the tea was made she sat at the table with the blue book.

She put it down square in front of her and opened the cover and smoothed the first page with the side of her hand. Feint ruled. The red margin down the left like a hem. Thirty-two leaves. Nothing on any of them.

The almanac was beside it, Averill's almanac, with its five lines and her six and the timetable copied in. She had been writing in the almanac since the frost. She had been writing in the margins of a dead man's year, around his weather and his rates and his *Ask about*, and she had not minded, it had been the only paper in the house that was not already a list.

This was different. This had cost fourpence and she had paid it.

She held the pencil. Not her best pencil, the one from the study, which she had sharpened with the kitchen knife that morning without thinking and which the house had not sharpened for her. She looked at the label on the front, the three ruled lines. Name. Subject. Form. She did not turn the book over to it. Not yet.

On the first line, inside the red margin, she wrote the date. Then she stopped, because she did not know what came after a date if there was no order underneath it, no *Coal 2 cwt* or *Rates due* or *Mr Lear's shirts*.

She drank some of the tea. It was too strong. She had stewed it, standing at the cellar door. Nobody had poured it off at the right minute and left it on the side.

She drank it anyway.

Then she wrote.

Came home. Nothing had moved.

She looked at it. The pencil had pressed hard and the words were dark and a little uneven, her hand being out of practice at anything but labels. It was true. It was the truest thing she had written in the house. She thought about leaving it there, one line, the way a list item is one line.

But it was not the whole of it. She knew it was not, and the knowing sat in her like the cold had sat in the hall.

She wrote underneath:

I had wanted it to.

That was harder. She held the pencil above the paper for a while after, as if it might take the line back. It did not. That was the thing about her own hand. It did not tidy anything up afterwards.

She had wanted it to. All the way up the lane, slow, telling herself she was going slow to see what she would find, and the whole time some small kept part of her had been hoping she would open the door and find the can gone and the runner straight and the bed made tight and the cellar shut. Hoping the house would have missed her and forgiven her and gone on. Wanting to be finished after. Wanting the hand.

She did not cross it out. She looked at it a long time, and she let it be the second line, because it was.

Outside the window the light had gone the colour of weak tea. Somewhere past the wood a dog barked twice and stopped. The candle on the dresser had burned down a quarter of an inch, which no candle in this kitchen had ever done.

She turned the almanac to the timetable she had copied out. *Tue Sat Thu 9.30. 4.10 back.* And under it, in Mrs Pell's hand, as near as she could remember, *Ask inside.*

She picked up the pencil again and wrote the third line in the blue book.

Thursday next.

Then she closed it, and put her hand flat on the cover the way she had put it on the wall upstairs, and the card was cold and then warm, and the warmth was hers.

*

Before she went up she went down the passage with the candle and stood at the cellar door.

The dark went down the stairs. The coal smell. She could hear, very faint, from somewhere below and behind the fuse board, a sound like a held breath, or her own blood in her ears. She did not know which. She did not go down.

She put her hand on the door and shut it, and felt the latch catch under her palm.

Nobody had done it for her. She stood there a moment longer to be sure of that.

Then she took her candle up the seventeen stairs, and did not count them, and found she had not counted them only when she was at the top.

Chapter Sixteen



The pipes told her first.

She woke in the dark before any clock, the way she had woken the morning of the walk, and lay listening for the thing she had heard every winter morning for eleven years without once thinking of it as a sound. A knock in the wall behind the washstand. Then a tick, and another, running away along the skirting like something small with claws. The pipes taking the heat. In eleven years they had begun at a quarter to six, and she had got up into a room that was already losing its night, and she had thought that was what rooms did.

There was no knock. There was no tick. There was the wall, and the cold coming off it, and her breath going up white in the first grey from the window.

She lay a while longer. She knew what it was before she let herself know it. The fire below had gone out, or worse than out. Nobody had gone down to it in the night. Nobody had ever gone down to it in the night. She had never once, in eleven years, been the one.

She got up and put her coat on over her nightgown and her stockings on under it and went down the seventeen stairs without counting them, which she noticed on the ninth and then stopped noticing again.

*

The kitchen was all right. The range she had lit herself last night was low but alive, a red seam under the ash, and she raked it and fed it and put the kettle over it, because a kitchen with a kettle on is a kitchen that has started. The candle stub sat in its saucer on the dresser where she had left it. The blue book lay beside it. Beside that, the steel box, open, and in it on its bed of cloth the ORIGIN carrier, porcelain and brass, with its little window of wire.

She did not look at it. She looked at it.

Then she took the candle and went down the passage to the cellar door, which was shut, because she had shut it, and she opened it, and the cold that came up the stairs was the cold of a place where something has stopped.

*

She had been down there for coal every day of the eleven years. Six-thirty, before breakfast, the scuttle and the shovel and the heap. She knew the cellar by its smell and its third stair, which gave, and the whitewash on the wall at shoulder height where her hand went every morning in the same place, so that there was a grey mark there the shape of a palm. Hers. She had never thought of that either.

She had never gone past the coal.

The furnace sat at the back under the arch, behind the brick pier, where the light from the grating did not reach. A squat black thing with a door like an oven's and a flue going up into the dark, and from its shoulders the pipes going out, thick as her wrist, lagged in old sacking and tied with wire. She had known it was there the way she knew the roof was there. It was where the heat came from. Somebody saw to it.

She held the candle up. The pipes ticked once, very faint, the last of something, and were still.

The door had a handle wrapped in a twist of rag, which was black and shiny with hands. Not hers. She took it in her coat sleeve and pulled, and it came open with a sound like a drawer full of cutlery, and she put the candle to the mouth of it and looked in.

She did not know what she was looking at.

Then she did.

Where there should have been fire there was a grey floor. A slab of it, the whole width of the grate, bubbled and pitted on top like porridge left to set, glassy in places where the candle caught it, rust-coloured in others. It

lay across the firebars like a lid. Underneath, nothing could breathe. On top, a scatter of coal that had never caught, black and whole, sitting on the slab as if on a plate.

Clinker. She knew the word. She had heard Dunnet say it, on the step, years ago, to nobody, about somebody else's house. *That coal of Pryce's, it clinkers something chronic.* She had not known it was a thing that happened in hers.

She put her hand in, carefully, and touched the edge of it. Cold. Hard as a hearthstone. She pushed. It did not move. She got her fingers under the lip of it where it had pulled away from the side and lifted, and it did not lift, and she felt the bars under it, and one of them was not where it should be. It was bent down in the middle, sagging, like a shelf with too many books on it.

She sat back on her heels on the cellar floor in her coat and nightgown with the candle in her hand and understood something about the eleven years.

The house had broken this small.

Every night. Every morning before she was awake. The fire made its slag, the way fires do, the way Pryce's coal and Trewin's coal and every coal does, and something had gone down in the dark and broken it up before it could set, small enough to fall through the bars, small enough to go out with the ash. Every day for eleven years. And she had come down at six-thirty for the scuttle and never once looked past the pier, and the pipes had knocked at a quarter to six, and she had thought that was what pipes did.

It was the most work she had ever found in the house. It was more than the clocks. It was more than the bed. It had been done every single day under her feet and she had not known there was anything to do.

Somebody saw to it.

She said it out loud in the cellar, and the cellar gave it back to her small.

*

She went up. The kettle was singing. She made the tea and stood with the cup and did not drink it.

It was the second of April. Cold enough still. The frost had broken a fortnight since but the nights had not heard. Without the pipes the upper rooms would hold the night until noon and then lose it again by four. The study would go damp; she had heard Averill say so once, about the books, the one winter the furnace had wanted a new door. *The paper drinks it.* The water tank in the roof had a pipe that ran past the east window, and if it froze it would split, and she did not know where the tap was to stop it. She did not know if there was a tap.

She knew one thing she could do. It was sitting on the dresser in a steel box with its lid open.

She put her cup down beside it.

It would be nothing. Down the passage. The fuse board, the empty seventh place, the little click of it going home. The hum. She knew how it would go; she had felt the house come back the first time she put six of them in, the warmth in the slate. Put the seventh in and she would go up to bed, and in the morning the pipes would knock at a quarter to six, and the slab would be gone, broken small and carried out with the ash, and the bent bar straightened or left bent and worked round, and none of it would be hers. The cup in the sink would be on its hook. The runner would be straight. The cellar door would be shut, and she would not have shut it.

She picked the carrier up. It was heavier than it looked, as it had been the first time. The porcelain was cold and the brass was cold and the little wire in its window was bright as a hair.

She thought, quite clearly: it is not about me. The pipes do not know I am here. The study books do not know. The tank in the roof does not know who put the fire out and does not care who lights it. It is only a house, and a house needs heat, and there is a thing in my hand that gives a house heat, and it is foolish, it is a kind of vanity, to let a pipe split for the sake of a feeling.

She held it for a long time.

The candle on the dresser burned. She had not blown it out. It was the second one she had bought for a penny and she was burning it in daylight, and that was waste, and she let it.

Then she put the carrier back in the box, on its cloth, the way you put a thing back that you have decided about, and she closed the lid.

She opened the blue book and took the pencil out of the spine.

Furnace out. Clinker. A bar bent.

And under it, slower:

The pipes do not care whose it is. I do.

She read it twice. It was not a reason. A reason would have been something about the house, or Averill, or the four pages in her left pocket, or Tobias Lear coming at the end of the month with his typewriter that jumped. It was only a fact about her. She had not known it until she wrote it. She thought that might be what the book was for.

*

Dunnet came at nine. She heard the gate, which did not shriek now, only clicked, the new keeper taking the latch two inches lower than the old. She went out to him in her coat.

He had the sacks on the cart and his cap pulled down. He looked at her and then at the house, at the chimneys, and she saw him see it. One chimney going. The big one, the one from the back, nothing.

"Furnace," he said.

"Clinkered," she said. "Right across."

He took his cap off and scratched under it and put it back on. "Never," he said. He did not mean it couldn't happen. He meant it hadn't, not here, not in all the years he'd carted to this door. "That's Trewin's best I bring you. Same as I bring Pryce, and his is a pig for it." He looked at the chimney again. "Eleven year and I never once had to tell this house about clinker."

"No," she said.

He waited. He was a man who could wait at a gate the way other men sat in chairs.

"Who did it?" he said at last. "Before."

She thought about what the true answer was. She thought about the hand on the clock bill and the hand on the plan and the hand that had written *do not let her be alone in it* on cream paper and put it behind a steel plate behind a board of fuses.

"Nobody I've met," she said.

Dunnet nodded, slowly, as if that were a thing a person could say about their own house and it made perfect sense to him. Perhaps in Pell it did. Perhaps every house had its nobody.

"Want a bar for it," he said. "Bending, that's the heat with nowhere to go. You'll want new bars and a slice. Long thing, flat end, for breaking her up from underneath." He showed her with his hands, the push and lever. "And you'll not want Pryce's coal, whatever."

"Where would I get bars?"

He looked at her then, properly, the way he had looked at her on the step the morning she had asked whose was the coal. It was a look that was deciding whether she was a person who would do the thing she was asking about.

"Horne," he said. "Bassett's, the ironmonger. Same as had the keeper." He hitched a sack onto his shoulder. "Or you write the size and Mrs Pell sends. Thursday." He went past her to the step. "There's a slice in that cellar. Must be. Back of the pier on a nail, if it's like Pryce's. Long as your arm."

He went down the area steps with the sack and she heard the coal go into the heap, the sound she had heard every week for eleven years. It sounded the same. She had thought it might not.

When he came up he stood on the step and looked at the oil can, which was still there, two days and two days more, and he did not say anything about it, and neither did she.

"I'll take a cup," he said, "if it's going."

It was the first time he had asked. She had made him tea every winter for eleven years on the step, and he had drunk it, and given back the cup, and she had thought he wanted it. She had never once waited to see whether he would ask.

"It's going," she said, and went in to make it, and left the door open behind her.

*

The slice was where he said. Back of the pier, on a nail, long as her arm, a flat steel blade on an iron rod with a wooden end worn pale. She took it down. It was heavy. The wood was smooth from hands, and the smoothness had a shape, and when she closed her own hand on it her fingers did not fit where the other fingers had gone.

She stood with it in the dark at the furnace door with the candle on the floor beside her.

She did not start. Not yet. She was in her nightgown under her coat and she would want her old skirt and the sacking apron and her hair up off her neck. She would want light, more than a penny's worth. She would want, she thought, to have had her breakfast, like a person going to work.

She had never had breakfast before work in this house. She had never had work in this house. She had had the places she stood, and the house had had the work.

She leaned the slice against the brick beside the furnace door, where she would see it when she came back. Then she went up the cellar stairs, and the third one gave under her the way it always had, and she put her hand on the whitewash at shoulder height in the grey place shaped like her palm.

She left the cellar door open. Not by forgetting. So that the warm from the kitchen could go down, what there was of it, and so that when she came back she would not have to open it.

In the kitchen the candle was still burning on the dresser beside the shut steel box. She looked at the two things side by side, the penny candle and the box, and she found she was not frightened of the box any more. She had held it and put it down. It was only a thing she had decided about. It would be there tomorrow, and she would decide again, and that was all right. That might be what deciding was. Not once. Every morning, like a fire.

She cut bread. She put butter on it, too much. She sat in her own chair, not his, at the table, not standing at the dresser, and ate it, and drank the tea, which had gone cold, and made more.

In the blue book, under the line about the pipes, she wrote:

Breakfast first.

Then she went up to dress for it.

Chapter Seventeen



She put her hair up with four pins instead of two. She found the old brown skirt at the back of the press, the one she had worn the first winter before she understood that nothing in this house would ever get her dirty, and it still had a stain at the knee from the yard at Bath, which she had never got out because there had never been a reason to try. She tied the sacking apron over it. The blue book went in the front pocket of the apron, and the pencil with it, and she stood a moment in the kitchen deciding where the pages and the seeds and the old keeper should go, because the coat was staying upstairs and the apron pockets were already hers for other things.

She left them on the dresser by the steel box. Three small piles. It was the first time in a week they had not been on her body, and she felt it at her hips as a lightness, and did not like it, and went down anyway.

*

The cellar in daylight was not daylight. A grating at the top of the far wall let in a grey stripe the width of a hand, and that stripe lay across the coal and stopped before it reached the furnace, as if the light had its own idea of where it was allowed. She had brought both of the penny candles and the lamp from the scullery, the one that took paraffin, and she set the lamp on the floor and the candles on the brick ledge, and the cellar took the three lights and gave back about one and a half.

The slab was as she had left it. It lay across the grate like a plate of grey stone that had been poured hot and set badly. It had a skin on it, glassy in places, rough in others, with knots of something black and shining where the coal had melted instead of burning. At the near end it had grown up the side of a bar and over, so that the bar sagged under it the way a shelf sags under books nobody reads.

She picked up the slice.

She had seen men use one. In Bath, the boilerman, who came on Mondays, had let her watch once from the coal-hole door, and she remembered his shoulders more than his hands, the way they rolled and dropped. She remembered him saying something about not forcing it. She did not remember what came after.

She set the blade against the edge of the slab where it met the front of the grate. She leaned.

Nothing. The blade skated off the glassy skin with a sound like a spoon on a plate and her wrists took the jar of it, both of them, up into the elbows. She stood back. She tried again, lower, finding the seam where the slab sat on the bar instead of the face of it. This time the blade bit. Not much. Enough to hold.

She pushed down on the wooden end.

There was a long moment where nothing happened and she thought she would have to go up and tell Dunnet she could not, and she found that the thought of saying it was worse than the ache, and she pushed harder, and the slab cracked.

It was not a loud crack. It was a small dry tick, like a clock missing a beat. A line ran across the grey from the blade to the far side, thin as a hair, and she watched it go, and then the near piece dropped two inches onto the next bar and settled, and a breath of old ash came up out of the gap and went into her face.

She laughed. Coughed, then laughed. It was a ridiculous thing to have done. She had broken a stone that nobody would ever see in a cellar nobody ever came into, and her heart was going as if she had run to the junction.

*

It took the morning. She learned it as she went, the way she had learned the range at Bath, by getting it wrong in a particular order until the wrong ran out.

She learned that the slice wanted the seams, not the faces, and that the seams were where the slab was thinnest, and that she could find them with her ear before her eye, because the blade rang differently on them, duller, like knocking on a door with someone behind it. She learned to put her weight on the end of the handle and not on the middle, and that the middle was where the old hands had worn the wood pale, which meant whoever had done this before her had done it wrong too, at least at first. She learned that the pieces had to come out through the furnace door and not

be dropped into the ash pit, because the ash pit was already full, a whole winter of fine grey that the house had cleared every night and had not cleared since she drew ORIGIN.

She went up for the ash bucket. She went up for the second ash bucket. She went up because her hands had blistered across the base of the fingers, a row of four, and she wrapped them in a strip torn off an old pillowslip, and in the kitchen the steel box sat on the dresser beside the three small piles, and she did not look at it, and then she did, and then she went down.

At some point she stopped counting the trips. She noticed that she had stopped, the way you notice a clock has stopped, by the absence of something you had not known you were hearing.

By what she guessed was eleven the grate was clear except for the bent bar and a crust along the back she could not reach. She knelt on the brick with the lamp beside her and looked into the furnace, into the black throat of it going back and up, and the bars lay across it in a row like the ribs of something, and one of them dipped in the middle like a held breath.

She put her hand flat on the good bars. They were cold. They were filthy. Her hand came away black to the wrist and she looked at it in the lamplight and thought: there.

*

The thing she did not like came on the stairs.

She was carrying the last bucket up, both hands, the bail cutting into the cloth over her blisters, and she was tired in a way she had not been tired in eleven years, not the tiredness of standing in places but a tiredness that had a shape and a weight and was in her shoulders and her back and the

backs of her legs. She was going up the stairs and the third one gave, and she put the bucket down on the fourth and stood breathing, and she thought: it needed me.

The furnace had needed her. The pipes had gone cold and the clinker had grown and the bar had bent, and nobody else was going to come, and she had come, and now it was clear. It had needed her and she had been there and been enough.

And she liked it. That was what stopped her on the stair. Not the work, not the blisters. The liking. It went through her warm as the tea Dunnet had asked for, it went to her face, and she stood in the dim of the cellar stair with ash in her hair and was pleased with herself in a way she recognised.

She had felt it before. In Bath, when the cook said she had a light hand with pastry. In this house, the first spring, the first time Averill had said *thank you* at breakfast without looking up from his letters, as if she were weather that had turned out fine. She had felt it every time she had been found useful by someone, and she had loved it, and it had brought her here, to a house that did everything, where there was nothing left to be useful for, and she had stood in the places for eleven years waiting for something to need her.

And now something did, and she had leaped at it like a dog to a whistle.

She sat down on the fourth stair beside the bucket.

The house had been made so that she would not be needed. She knew that now. The four pages had said so in a hand she did not want to read again. *Do not let her be alone in it.* It had been made out of kindness, or out of warmth scratched over kindness, or out of something that wanted to look like either, and it had been made so that she would never have to break

clinker on a cold morning with her hands in rags. And she had hated it. And here she was, the first morning she was free of it, pleased as a girl because a furnace wanted her.

It was not freedom to be needed by a furnace instead of a man. It was only a different master, and a stupider one.

She thought that, very clearly, on the fourth stair. Then she thought: but it is mine. The furnace does not care whose it is. I said so in the book. It cannot be my master because it does not know I exist. It does not want me. It only goes out.

She sat with the two thoughts side by side like the candle and the box. Neither of them won. She found she could carry the bucket up with both of them in her, and she did.

In the yard she tipped the ash on the heap behind the privy, where the house had never tipped anything, because the house had not made ash it could not unmake. It made a small grey hill on the frost-burnt grass, and the wind took the top off it and carried it over the wall towards the wood. It was the first mess she had put outside in eleven years. She watched it blow.

In the blue book, standing up at the kitchen dresser, with her wrapped hand making the letters large, she wrote:

Clinker out. Bar still bent.

And under it, after a while:

I liked it. I do not like that I liked it.

She looked at that line for a long time. It was the truest thing in the book and it embarrassed her, the way the letter under her pillow had embarrassed her, and she nearly crossed it out, and did not, because she had crossed out *occupied* on the plan and written nothing in its place, and she did not want to be a person who only crossed things out.

*

She did not light the furnace. She could not, with the bar down. She lit the range and boiled water and washed to the elbows at the scullery sink, which she had to pump now, forty strokes for a basin, and she counted the strokes and then made herself stop counting them. She unwrapped the blisters and looked at them. Two had broken. She put butter on them, because that was what the cook did, and wrapped them clean.

She ate. She sat in her own chair.

Then, because the clocks were hers now, she went round them.

She did the kitchen first, the plain one with the brass bezel, eight days, and wound it the full turns and felt the spring take up. The parlour mantel. The two in the dining room that never agreed and that she let go on not agreeing. The study, the hall carriage clock, the landing, the one in the room she slept in. Eight. She knew the turns of all of them now. She knew which keys stuck.

At the foot of the stairs the long-case stood with its hands at twenty past eleven, as they had stood since the Sunday she did not wind it.

She opened the trunk door. The weights hung low, at the bottom of their chains, the pendulum still, the brass bob dull with a skin of dust she had not wiped. The winding key was on its hook inside. She took it down.

She had thought, on that Sunday, that she was letting it stop because she had not got to it. Then because it was too tall and the weights too heavy. Then because she wanted one clock in the house that told the truth about how long it had been. Standing there with the key in her clean wrapped hand she thought it was none of those. She thought it was that this was the clock the house had wound first, every morning at a quarter to six, the one with the loudest tick, the one she heard through the floor before she was awake. It had been the house's voice in the dark. And she did not want to start it again with her own hands and hear it take up the house's voice as if nothing had happened.

She hung the key back on its hook. She shut the trunk door.

She would let it be run down. Not because she had forgotten. Because it was a thing she had decided about, every morning, like a fire, and this morning she decided it was finished with.

Twenty past eleven. She did not know which day it had been. That seemed right too.

*

The box came on Saturday.

She did not hear it come. She had been in the garden at the sweet pea bed, where nothing was up yet, kneeling on a sack with the twist of seeds in her hand, not planting them, only looking at the earth and deciding about April, and when she came round the side of the house it was on the step. On the step beside the oil can, which nobody had moved.

A wooden box, the length of her forearm, deal, nailed shut. Rope round it, knotted twice. On the lid, in black stencil, BASSETT HORNE, and below it in grease pencil a number she did not know, and nothing else.

No label. No name. Not *For the gate*, not *To the Occupier*, not *Miss*, not her name in typewriter capitals. Nothing.

She stood and looked at it. The gate behind her was shut and silent. The lane beyond it was empty both ways. The wind was in the holly.

She knew, of course. Dunnet had said Bassett's. Dunnet had said Thursday through Mrs Pell, or Saturday himself. Dunnet had stood on this step with her tea and asked her who did it, before, and she had said nobody I've met. So she knew who had brought it, and she knew she would not be told, and she knew if she asked on Wednesday he would look at the gate and say *Bars come, then*, as if they had come on their own.

But for a long minute on the step she let herself not know. She let it be a box that had arrived with no hand on it, the way everything in this house had arrived, and she felt the old cold go through her, the house doing a thing before she had asked. Then she made herself look at the rope. The knots were hard and square and not neat, tied by someone who had tied ten thousand knots and did not care what they looked like. The house had never tied a knot like that. The house tied bows.

She sat down on the step and undid them with her bad hands, slowly, and it hurt, and she was glad it hurt, because it meant someone had made them tight on purpose so the box would not come open in a cart.

Inside, in straw, two new firebars. Grey iron, raw from the casting, with a rough seam along the edge where the mould had joined. They were heavier than she thought. They smelled of a forge, not of this house.

No note in the straw. She looked. She took all the straw out and looked.

She would have to pay for them. Bassett's would want paying, or Mrs Pell would, or Dunnet had and would never say. She thought of the tin, the four pounds and odd, and the three shillings in the coat lining that had been Averill's. She thought she would ask, on Wednesday, what was owed. She thought he would not tell her. She thought she would ask anyway, every Wednesday, until he did, because she did not want to be a woman things arrived for.

She carried the bars in one at a time and laid them on the kitchen table on a newspaper, side by side, and sat in her own chair and looked at them.

In the blue book:

Bars came. No note.

Ask what is owed. Ask again.

Then she put the pencil down and sat with her wrapped hands in her lap. The kitchen clock ticked. The long-case at the foot of the stairs said nothing, and went on saying it. Upstairs the dust lay where she had let it lie. On the step the oil can stood in the last of the light, and she thought that tomorrow, perhaps, she would bring it in, or perhaps she would not, and that either way it would be hers.

Monday she would go down with the bars.

Tonight she was tired, and it was her own tiredness, and she went up to bed early in a bed she had made badly that morning, and slept before she had finished deciding whether she liked it.

Chapter Eighteen



She did not wait for Monday.

She woke on the Sunday before it was light and the bedroom was cold in a way she had not known it could be cold, a cold that had got into the plaster and the bedframe and the jug on the washstand, which had a skin of ice on it the thickness of a fingernail. She broke it with the back of a hairbrush. It made a small, clean sound, like a cup set down in another room.

The pipes had been cold for three days. She had told herself Monday because Monday was a day for work and Sunday was not, and because her hands were still wrapped, and because she had said Monday out loud to nobody on Saturday night and wanted to have said something and done it.

But she lay under the blankets and listened to the house not knocking, and understood that Monday had been a thing she said so she would not have to be afraid of the bars on Saturday night. That was all right. She had been afraid. It was morning now.

She dressed in the dark in the brown Bath skirt and the sacking apron and went down the seventeen stairs without counting them, which took effort, the way not scratching takes effort. In the kitchen she lit the range first, because she could, and put the kettle on it, and while the kettle thought about it she unwrapped her hands.

The blisters had broken in the night and dried. The skin over the heel of each palm was shiny and tight and the colour of the inside of a shell. The burn on her left palm, the old one from the parlour grate, had gone from red to a brownish pink and had a hard edge to it. She looked at her hands for a while in the lamplight. They were not a housekeeper's hands. A housekeeper's hands were soft at the fingertips from soap and hard nowhere. These had hard places now, and the hard places were where she had held the slice.

She wrapped them again in fresh strips of the pillowslip, tighter, and drank her tea standing up.

The bars were heavier than she remembered. She had carried them in on Saturday one at a time, and she carried them down one at a time, the first under her arm like a loaf and the second in both hands against her stomach because by then her arm was shaking. She laid them on the cellar floor on the newspaper she had brought down for them, as if the floor were a table that needed protecting.

The cellar was the cellar. The coal heap. The whitewash. The grey mark at shoulder height in the shape of a palm that was not hers and that she had decided, on Thursday, not to think about until she had to. The furnace door stood open as she had left it, with the slice leaning against the brick beside it, and inside the firebox the grate was clean now and black and empty, and the one bent bar sagged in the middle like a hammock nobody was lying in.

She knelt and looked at how the bars sat.

She had thought, without knowing she thought it, that there would be bolts. That she would need a spanner she did not have and would have to go up and look in the study, in the drawers where the receipts were, and find instead some other thing of his, and stand there holding it. There were no bolts. The bars sat in two iron ledges cast into the sides of the firebox, one at the front and one at the back, and they lay across them loose, side by side, each one with a little lug at either end that fitted into a notch in the ledge so the bars could not slide. That was all. They were held by their own weight and by fitting.

She sat back on her heels.

All of it, the whole furnace, the pipes that ran up through the walls of the house and knocked at a quarter to six every morning of eleven years, was held up by two bars lying on two ledges, and the bars were held by notches. Anybody could have lifted them out. The house could have. Any night in eleven years the house could have lifted out the bent one and laid in a straight one, the way it had laid her shawl over the chair, the way it had folded a blank envelope. It had not, because it had not been asked, and it had not been asked because there had been nobody below stairs to ask it, only Averill, once a year perhaps, coming down with his pipe and putting his hand flat on the whitewash while he looked.

She did not know that. She made herself say, inside her head, that she did not know that.

The bent bar came out easily. Too easily. She had braced for it to stick and it lifted out of its notches with a dry scrape and she nearly went over backwards with it, and sat down hard on the cellar floor with a firebar across her lap like a cat. It was warped in a long shallow curve, and the underside was flaked and scaled where the heat had eaten it, and it was lighter than the new ones by a good deal, as if the fire had been taking it away a little at a time for years and nobody had weighed it.

She put it on the newspaper beside the others. Three bars. One spent.

The second old bar, the straight one, she looked at for a long time. It was not bent. It was scaled underneath too, but less. Bassett's had sent two. Dunnet had said bars, plural, and Bassett's had sent two, and someone who had tied ten thousand square knots had thought that if one was going, the other was not far behind it, and that a woman with no money should not have to send to Horne twice.

She took it out as well.

Then there were no bars at all, and the firebox was a black hole with two ledges in it, and she could see right down through it into the ashpit where she had shovelled out the clinker on Friday, and the whole furnace looked, without its grate, like a mouth with the teeth drawn. She felt something she had not felt since the first night at the gate with her box in the mud: that there was nothing between her and the bottom of a thing.

She picked up the first new bar with both hands and fitted it.

The lugs did not go into the notches. They were proud by the width of a fingernail, the raw seam along the casting catching on the ledge. She lifted it out and turned it end for end and tried again and it was the same. She knelt there with the bar in her hands and her hands shaking and thought, very clearly, *They have sent the wrong ones*, and then, *He measured wrong*, and then, *I will have to write to Bassett's*, and then, *With what*, and then, behind all that, quieter, *The house would have known*.

She put the bar down.

She looked at the seam. It ran the length of the bar like a scar, a thin raised ridge where the two halves of the mould had met, and at the ends it ran right over the lugs. It was rough. It was the only rough thing about the bar. Everything else was the dull even grey of new iron.

There was a file in the scullery drawer. She knew there was because she had seen Averill use it on the kitchen knives, years ago, before the house began doing the kitchen knives; she had not thought of it since. She went up the cellar stairs, through the kitchen where the kettle was ticking as it cooled, into the scullery, and opened the drawer. String. Candle ends. A bradawl. The file was there, at the back, wrapped in a bit of oilcloth, and the oilcloth was old and cracked and had not been touched by anything in this house in a decade, because a file in a drawer is not a task.

She took it down and sat on an upturned bucket by the furnace and filed the seam off the lugs.

It took most of an hour. She did not know how to file. She learned that pushing worked and dragging did not, that the file wanted both hands and a slow stroke, that iron dust was fine and black and got into the pillowslip bandages and turned them grey. She learned the sound: a high rasp at first, when the file was riding on the seam, then lower and steadier as the seam went down, and then a different note altogether when it was flush,

smoother, as if the iron had stopped complaining. She stopped at that note, every time, and ran her thumb along the lug to check, and her thumb told her the same thing the sound had.

The first bar dropped into its notches with a click.

She sat on the bucket and looked at it. One bar, straight and grey, lying across the black firebox where a bent one had been. It looked like nothing. It looked like a bar. She had filed it and fitted it and nobody in the world knew, and she found that she wanted, badly, for someone to know, and that the wanting was so sharp it embarrassed her, alone in a cellar, with iron dust on her face.

She filed the second one faster. It clicked into place.

She laid the fire the way the Bath cook had taught her to lay a range, because it was the only way she knew: paper twisted, not crumpled; kindling in a lattice; small coal round the edges and never on top; leave it room to breathe. The furnace was bigger than any range and the firebox swallowed her kindling like a well, and she had to go up twice for more, and the second time she took the last of the newspaper from the hall drawer, the one with the Horne receipts underneath it, and she saw the receipts and did not read them.

She lit it with one of her penny matches.

It caught. It took its time, and smoked, and she thought she had choked it, and she opened the damper she had seen him open and the smoke changed its mind and went up instead of out, and then there was a sound she had

heard every winter morning for eleven years from two floors above and never once from here: the low hollow draw of a fire pulling air through a grate, a breath going in that did not come out.

She shut the furnace door and sat on the bucket in the dark of the cellar with her hands in her lap and listened.

It was a long time. She thought nothing was going to happen. She thought the pipes were airlocked, or frozen, or that there was some other thing, some valve, some order she did not know, that only the house had known. She thought of going up to the study to look for it. She did not go. She sat.

Then, somewhere above her, in the wall, very faint, a tick.

And another. And then a knock, a real one, the knock she knew, the pipe in the kitchen wall settling as the heat came into it, and then further off another, upper east, and then the long uneven run of them climbing up through the house like someone going upstairs in the dark and touching each banister rail as they went.

It was nowhere near a quarter to six. It was ten in the morning on a Sunday. The pipes did not know that. They knocked when they were warm.

She put her wrapped hands over her face and laughed into them, a stupid noise, and then she was crying a little, and then laughing again, and she said out loud, "There," the way the Bath cook used to say it when a sauce came right, and her voice in the cellar was hoarse and nobody's but hers.

In the blue book, at the kitchen table, with the range going and the pipes still knocking up through the house:

Bars in. Had to file the seams.

It is warm because I did it.

She looked at the second line. It was not quite true. It was warm because of the coal, which Trewin had sent on his own say, and the bars, which Bassett's had cast and someone had carried, and the file, which Averill had left in a drawer, and the way of laying a fire, which the Bath cook had shouted into her when she was sixteen. She had only been the last hand. But the house had always only been the last hand too, and she had never once, in eleven years, heard the house say it was warm because of the Bath cook.

She let the line stand.

She was in the yard at half past two, tipping a scuttle of fine ash on the bed by the wall where the sweet peas were not yet up, because the Bath cook had said ash was good for something, she could not remember what, when she heard the gate.

Not the shriek. There was no shriek now. She had oiled it. It was the latch, the new keeper two inches lower, the drop of the iron tongue into it: a flat clack that carried across the yard as clearly as a word. Then the sound of the gate being pushed, and stopping, and being pushed again, as if the person pushing had expected it to be heavier.

Dunnet came Wednesdays. Mrs Pell did not come at all. The Pryce girl would not have touched it.

She stood in the yard with the empty scuttle in her hand and did not move.

Then she put the scuttle down on the step beside the oil can and went round the side of the house by the path through the holly, not through the house, because she did not want to come out of the front door like someone who belonged to it, and she did not want to be seen at a window first. The holly caught her apron. She let it.

He was standing just inside the gate, with his hand still on it.

He was younger than she had thought from the letter. Twenty-five, perhaps less. He wore a town coat, dark, too good for the lane, with mud on the hem of it, and he had a suitcase at his feet, a cheap brown one with a strap round it because the catch had gone, and he had walked: she could see it in his boots and in the way he stood, with his weight back, like someone who has been going uphill a long time and has just stopped. He was not wearing a hat. His hair was dark and needed cutting. He had the Lear nose, which she had not known she knew until she saw it on someone else, and it gave her a jolt like missing a stair.

He was looking at the house. Not at her. He had not seen her yet, coming out of the holly. He was looking up at the front of the house, at the windows, at the chimneys, one of which was smoking now, thinly, from the furnace, and his face had the expression of a man reading a letter in a language he had been told he could speak.

Then he looked down and saw her, and took his hand off the gate.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I did write. I don't know if it came."

"It came."

"I said the end of the month. I know it isn't. I couldn't—" He stopped. He looked at the gate, at the latch, at the new keeper, which was bright where she had drilled it and nothing else on the gate was bright. "I thought it

would be locked," he said. "Pryor said it had been shut up. The man at the junction said nobody went in. The woman in the shop said—" He stopped again. "She said to ask you."

"Mrs Pell."

"Is that her name? She didn't say it. She just said, Ask her, as if I'd know who." He almost smiled. "I'm Tobias Lear."

"I know."

"Yes. Of course. The letter." He looked at her, properly, for the first time: the sacking apron, the brown skirt, the wrapped hands, the ash on her front, the iron dust on her face that she had not washed off because she had forgotten it was there. She saw him see all of it and decide not to say anything about any of it, and she was grateful, and then angry at being grateful.

"I don't—" he said. "Pryor gave me your name. In the office. But he said it like he was reading it off something, and I didn't— I didn't want to just use it. Without asking." He swallowed. "What do I call you?"

The gate was between them, half open. Behind him the lane went down between the hedges towards the wood and the junction and Horne and the rest of the world, which was where he had come from and where everyone came from except her. Behind her the house stood with one chimney smoking and the pipes knocking warm in its walls because she had made them, and every clock in it except one going because she had wound them, and one bed upstairs made badly, and dust on the upper landing that she had let lie.

She thought of her name in typewriter capitals on the London envelope, jumping out of line. She thought of the name label on the blue book, blank. She thought of the clerk with the inventory, years ago, in another house, passing her in the list without stopping, a coat on a peg.

"Not yet," she said.

He looked at her for a moment. Then he nodded, slowly, as if it were a perfectly reasonable answer, as if people said it to him all the time.

"All right," he said.

She did not know what she had expected. Not that.

She took him in by the front door because it was his door, or would be, or might be; she did not know the law of it and she was not going to pretend to. The hall was cold still, the furnace had not reached it, and the long-case at the foot of the stairs said twenty past eleven in the middle of the afternoon. He looked at it.

"It's stopped," he said.

"Yes."

"Do you want me to—" He made a small turning motion with his hand, a key in the air.

"No," she said. "It's finished with."

He looked at her, and at the clock, and did not ask. She was beginning to see that he would not ask things, and she did not know yet whether that was a kindness in him or a fear.

"I'll need somewhere," he said. "To sleep. I don't mind where. I can go back to the junction, there's a room over the shop, she said, if— I don't want to be in the way."

There were six bedrooms. Averill's, which she had not opened since September. Her own. Three that the house had kept made up for eleven years for guests who never came, the sheets turned down four inches, the water jugs full, the towels square on the rails. And the blue room, at the end of the upper east passage, which was the smallest, and the coldest, and the only one with a window onto the yard and the sweet pea bed instead of onto the lane, and which the house had always kept made up too, but somehow less, as if even the house had not been sure who it was for.

She had stood in all three guest rooms on Thursday night and looked at the turned-down sheets, the house's last made beds, untouched since ORIGIN came out, and she had not been able to put anyone in them. Not even someone she did not know. They were the house's.

"The blue room," she said.

She took him up the seventeen stairs. She did not count them, and she felt him, behind her, counting nothing either, his suitcase knocking the banisters. Upper east passage. The dust she had let lie was on the floorboards here in a pale grey bloom, and there were her own footprints in it from Thursday, going and coming back, and now his went over them.

The blue room was cold. The bed was made, the house's way, square and tight, sheet turned down four inches exactly, and on the washstand the jug was full and had a skin of ice on it like hers had.

She went in ahead of him and picked up the hairbrush that was not there, and then remembered, and broke the ice on the jug with the side of her wrapped fist instead. It hurt. He said, "Oh—" and stopped himself.

"The pipes are warm now," she said. "It'll come up in an hour. There's tea in the kitchen if you want it. I don't do dinner on a Sunday."

That was not true. She had done dinner every Sunday for eleven years, a joint and two veg and a pudding, whether anyone ate it or not, and for the last six months the house had done it for her. She did not know why she said it. It came out the way *Not yet* had come out, before she had looked at it, and she found when she heard it that it was a thing she meant.

"That's all right," he said. "I brought—" He looked at the suitcase. "I didn't bring anything, actually."

"There's bread."

"Thank you."

She stood in the doorway. He stood by the bed with his coat still on, with mud on the hem of it, looking at the turned-down sheet as if it were something that might be expected of him.

"Did you do this?" he said. "The room. Did you get it ready?"

She thought about the answer for a long time. Long enough that he looked up from the bed at her.

"No," she said.

She went down. She did not tell him who had. She did not know how she would have said it, and she was not going to say it badly to a man she had met at the gate an hour ago, with ash on her front, in a voice that had been crying in a cellar that morning.

In the kitchen she sat in her own chair, with the range going and the pipes knocking, and took out the blue book.

He came. Sunday, not the end of the month.

He asked my name. I said not yet. He said all right.

She held the pencil over the page a long time. Upstairs she could hear him moving about, the floorboards in the blue room, the creak of the bed as he sat on it, and then nothing. She thought of the turned-down sheet, the four exact inches. She thought he would not know to turn it back himself. She thought she should go up and show him. She did not go up.

I did not make his bed, she wrote. *It was already made.*

Then, under it, smaller:

That was the first thing I did not tell him.

Chapter Nineteen



He was up before her on the Monday, which nobody had been in eleven years.

She heard it from her bed, before the first clock: the blue-room floorboard, then the passage, then the stairs taken carefully, a man going down a strange house in his stockings so as not to wake it. He stopped on the fourth stair. She knew which one by the sound it made, a small dry crack like a knuckle. Then he went on, and she lay and listened to him not know where anything was.

The scullery door. The back door, tried, found bolted, left. The kitchen. A long pause in the kitchen, and she knew he was standing in front of the range with no idea whether he was allowed to touch it.

She got up and dressed in the dark and did not hurry, and when she came down he was sitting at the table with his coat on, the way he had stood in the blue room with his coat on, as if he might at any moment be asked to leave and wanted to be ready.

"Sorry," he said. "I didn't know if I should—"

"You can touch the range."

"I didn't know how."

She showed him. Not the whole of it, only the damper and where the coal was and how you riddled the bars so the ash went through and the fire did not. He watched her hands. He did not offer to do it and she was glad, because he would have done it wrong and she would have had to stand there and let him.

"The pipes are warm," he said, putting his palm flat on the one that ran along the wall. "That's this?"

"That's the furnace. Downstairs."

"You light that as well?"

"Now," she said, and then, because that was not an answer: "Yes."

He did not ask what *now* meant. He was good at not asking. She had noticed it at the gate and in the hall by the long-case clock and she noticed it again over the bread, which she cut and he ate without butter because she had forgotten to put the butter out and he did not ask for it. She thought it was manners. Later, on the Tuesday, she thought it might be something else: a man who had grown up in rooms where asking for the butter had a cost.

On the Monday he walked the house.

She did not show him round. She had thought she would have to, the way she had shown visitors round in the first years, Averill's colleagues from the town, the vicar once, a woman from a county society who wanted to see the plaster ceiling in the parlour. *This is the parlour. The ceiling is original. This is the study, Mr Lear does not like it disturbed.* She had had a voice for it.

He did not ask for the voice. He went on his own, room by room, and she kept to the kitchen and listened to where he was.

Parlour. A long time in the parlour. Then the study, and she held still at the table, because the study was where the linen plan was, with *Maid* crossed out in black and *occupied* crossed out in her own pencil, and she did not know what he would make of it. But he was in the study only a minute. Dining room. The hall. The long-case clock, where he stopped again, and she heard him open the case door and close it, gently, without touching the weights.

Upstairs. The three guest rooms one after another, the doors and the pauses. She thought of the turned-down sheets. Four inches. She thought of the dust on the passage floor with his footprints going over hers.

When he came down he sat at the table across from her and said, "It's very clean."

"Some of it."

"The bits that are clean are very clean." He turned his cup round on the table. "My mother said he kept staff. When I was a boy. She said Grandfather Averill had a house in the country with staff in it, and we had

two rooms over a chemist's in Lewisham, and she said it the way you'd say someone had a yacht."

"There was a cook," she said. "Before me. And a girl from the village who did the rough, on Tuesdays. Before me."

"And then you."

"Then me."

He nodded as if that settled something, and she let him think it did.

On the Tuesday she tried to work and could not, because he was there.

It was not that he was in the way. He kept out of the way so carefully that she kept finding him in places she had not expected, the scullery step, the end of the garden by the wall, the window seat on the landing, folded up small with a book from the study he had asked if he could take and she had said *They're not mine to say*. It was that she could not do anything without knowing it was seen.

She swept the hall. She had not swept the hall since ORIGIN came out. She had decided, in the first week, that she would do what she did because she meant it and not because the house had always had it done, and she had left the hall, and the dust had come back in the corners in a soft grey line, and she had looked at it every day and let it be.

On the Tuesday she swept it. She did not decide to. She found the broom in her hands and the dust in a pan before she had thought, and when she stood up he was at the turn of the stairs, watching.

"You don't have to do that for me," he said.

"I'm not."

"No. Sorry. I only meant—"

"I know what you meant."

She tipped the pan into the range and the dust went up blue for a second and was gone. She stood with her back to him. She could feel him deciding whether to go up or down. He went up.

She had not swept it for him. She thought that was true. She thought she had swept it because there was somebody in the house who could see the hall, and the hall had been a thing that was always swept, and for eleven years a hall that was seen was a hall that was clean, and her hands had known that before she did. That was not the same as for him. It was worse, she thought. For him would at least have been somebody.

In the blue book, that night, in her own chair:

Swept the hall. Did not mean to.

He thought it was for him. It was for nobody. That is what it always was.

She learned things about him on the Tuesday without asking.

That he was a clerk, or had been, in a shipping office near the river, and was not now, and did not say why. That he had walked from the junction on Sunday because the bus driver had not known which lane and he had been ashamed to ask twice. That he wrote letters at the window seat in the evenings on paper from his own suitcase, the one cheap thing in it, and did

not post them, and she knew he did not post them because on Wednesday morning there were three on the hall stand, addressed, unstamped, and on Wednesday night they were gone back upstairs.

That he did not touch anything that might have been his grandfather's. He used the study chair once and got up out of it as if it were hot. He took books from the study shelves, but only from the lowest one, which was the one with the almanacs and the county directories and the bound volumes of the *Gardeners' Chronicle*, nothing Averill had read for himself.

That he was frightened of her. Not very. Not the way the Pryce girl had been, at the gate, with her eyes going past her at the house. A smaller kind, the kind you have of someone you owe something to and cannot work out what. He would say *Sorry* before he said anything else, and *Thank you* after, and between the two there was not much.

She knew that kind. She had had it herself, at nineteen, at this table, with Averill across from her doing the crossword and not looking up.

On the Wednesday Dunnet came.

She heard the lorry at the bottom of the lane and went out to the gate, and Tobias came out behind her and then stopped on the step, as if the gate were hers to meet people at, which it was.

Dunnet looked at him over her shoulder for a long moment with his cap in his hand and the coal on his face.

"Lear," Dunnet said. Not a question.

"Tobias," Tobias said. "Yes."

"Got the nose."

"So I'm told."

Dunnet put his cap back on. He brought the sacks round to the coal hole and she held the cover and Tobias stood on the step and did not offer, and she saw Dunnet see that he did not offer, and saw Dunnet think about it, and decide, as far as she could tell, that it was the right thing. A man in a town coat on a coal round would have been a man in the way.

When the last sack was down Dunnet stood in the yard and wiped his hands on the rag from his pocket.

"Trewin says the account's still open," he said to her. Quieter. "He's not sending a bill. He says he's waiting on the young gentleman."

"I know."

"Thought you'd want telling."

"I did." She found that she did. "Will you have tea?"

He looked at the step where Tobias had been. Tobias had gone in.

"Not today," Dunnet said, and she heard her own words come back to her and nearly laughed. He touched his cap. At the gate he stopped, the way he always stopped at the gate, and put his hand on the top bar and swung it a little, and it went quiet on its new keeper and its oiled hinge.

"Gate's good," he said.

"I did it."

"Aye," said Dunnet. "Thought you might have."

He asked her on the Wednesday night.

She was in her own chair with the blue book shut on her knee and he was at the table, where he had started sitting in the evenings because the kitchen was the only warm room and he had stopped apologising for that by the Tuesday. The range ticked. Upstairs the eight clocks she wound went on agreeing with each other and the long-case clock in the hall went on saying twenty past eleven.

He had his letter paper and he was not writing on it.

"Can I ask you something," he said. "You don't have to—"

"Ask it."

He turned the pen round. He was a man who turned things round. Cups, pens, the edge of his cuff.

"Mr Pryor's letter," he said. "The solicitor. When he wrote to me, about the house. He listed things. The title, the debts, the land, what's on the land." He did not look at her. "And there was a line that said *The premises are presently occupied.* That was all. Occupied. And I wrote back and asked by whom, and he wrote back and gave me your name, and that was all he gave me. Just the name. Like it was a—" He stopped.

"An item," she said.

"Yes." He looked up. "So I don't know what you are. Here. I don't know what you are to this house, or to him, or what I'm supposed to—I don't know if you're the housekeeper or a tenant or a—" He did not finish that one either, and she saw his ears go red. "I'm not asking to be rude. I'm asking because I'm going to have to say it to somebody. To Mr Pryor. To the surveyor, when she comes. And I'd rather say what you say than what he wrote."

She sat with the blue book on her knee.

She had thought he might ask. She had thought it on the Sunday, at the gate, when he asked her name. She had thought she would have an answer by the time he did, because she had had four days and a blue book and nothing to do in the evenings but think. She had not thought of one.

"I keep the house," she said.

He waited.

"I came at nineteen. From Bath. I was the—Mr Lear needed someone to keep house and I kept it. I've kept it eleven years."

"So you're the housekeeper."

"I was."

"And now?"

She opened her mouth and nothing she had was true. *I keep the house*: she did not. She had kept it for eleven years, and then for six months it had kept itself, and now it kept nothing, and she did what she meant to do and swept the hall when she did not. *I was the housekeeper*: there had been no wages since September. Before September there had been wages in a brown envelope on the first of the month and she had never once asked what they were for, because she had thought she knew.

"I live here," she said. That was what she had told the Pryce girl. It had sounded true at the gate in the wood.

It did not sound true in the kitchen. It sounded like a thing you say when you are asked to leave.

"Right," he said, carefully. "Yes. Of course."

"I don't mean—"

"No."

"I'm not asking you for anything."

"I didn't think you were."

"I'm not his—" she said, and stopped, because she heard what she had nearly said and what he would hear, and her face went hot, and she was furious with herself, with Pryor, with *occupied*, with the word *premises*, with Averill for leaving on a Thursday with nothing on the hall stand. "I wasn't anything to him. That's what I am. I wasn't anything. I was the person who was here."

The range ticked.

Tobias put the pen down. He did it gently, the way he had closed the long-case door on the Sunday, not touching the weights.

"All right," he said.

It was the same thing he had said at the gate. *What do I call you. Not yet. All right.* She had liked it at the gate. She found she could not bear it now, because it meant he would go upstairs and write *the person who was here* on his own paper, in his own hand, and not post it, and keep it, and one day say it to Mr Pryor across a desk, and it would be true, and it would be the worst thing anybody had ever said about her, and she had said it.

"That's not right," she said. "What I said."

"You don't have to—"

"I know I don't have to. It's not right. I don't know what is." She stood up. The blue book slid off her knee and she caught it. "Ask me again."

He looked at her.

"Not now," she said. "Another day. Ask me again and I'll have it."

"All right," he said, and then, as if he had heard himself: "I will. I'll ask again."

She did not go to bed. She sat in her own chair with the lamp down low after his door had shut upstairs, and opened the blue book, and looked at the page a long time.

She thought of the clerk with the inventory in the hall, eleven years ago, going past her like a coat on a peg. She thought of the linen plan in the study. *Maid*, in black, crossed out. *Occupied*, in pencil, in the same hand as the clock bills and the four pages behind the fuse board, and crossed out again by her. She had crossed it out and written nothing. She had thought, on that day, that writing nothing was the brave thing. She saw now that it had only been the easy thing, because nobody had been asking.

Now somebody was.

He asked what I am, she wrote. *I said I was nobody to him. I said I was the person who was here.*

Both of those are what the house would say.

She held the pencil. Upstairs a floorboard went in the blue room, the bed creaking as he sat on it, and then nothing.

Thursday, she wrote, underneath. *Bus at half nine.*

She did not write whether she would be on it. She closed the book and put it in her left apron pocket with the seeds and the four pages, and sat on in the kitchen with her hand flat on the cover until the range had burned down to red, and then she riddled it herself, so the ash went through and the fire did not.

Chapter Twenty



She woke before the clocks again, which was not hard now, because only eight of them were going and none of them was the house's.

It was dark in the kitchen. The range was red under the ash where she had left it, and she knelt and riddled it and fed it and opened the damper a finger's width, and it took. She did not say *there* this time. She only stayed on her knees a moment with the warmth on her face, the way you stay by a bed when somebody in it has finally gone to sleep.

Thursday.

She put the kettle on and stood at the dresser while it came up. The steel box was where she had left it eleven days ago, lid closed, between the bread crock and the jar of string. She had not opened it since the furnace.

She opened it now.

The ORIGIN carrier lay on its folded cloth. It was the same as the other six, white porcelain, two brass blades, a little scorch at one end where the wire went through. It did not look like anything. She had expected, the first time, that it would be warm, or heavy, or that it would hum in her hand the way it had hummed in the board. It had done none of those things. It was a fuse. Somebody had written a word over it in a hand she knew from clock bills.

She had left it on the dresser because the dresser was hers. She had thought that was enough.

But there was a man upstairs now who said *sorry* to doors, who had opened the long-case and not touched the weights, who read only the lowest shelf in the study as if the higher ones were somebody else's. He would not put it back. She knew he would not. She also knew that she was going to walk to the junction in an hour and possibly not come back on the 4.10, and that if she did not come back, the box would be on the dresser, and he would be in the house, and one evening, cold, with the tap dead and the fire out and nobody to show him the damper, he would open the board behind the study door to see what it was.

He would see six carriers in and one gap. He would see the word over the gap. He was a clerk. He would think it was a fault.

She took the carrier out of the cloth and put it in her left apron pocket, with the seeds and the four pages and the blue book. The pocket sagged on that side. She put her hand over it and it was cold through the cotton, porcelain cold, and then after a while it was the same as her hand.

The kettle went.

He came down at seven, which was early for him. He had shaved. He had put on the town coat, though he was not going anywhere, and he stood in the doorway in it as if he had been asked to wait there.

"Tea's made," she said.

"Thank you."

He sat. She put the cup by him and not in front of him, and he moved it himself. He looked at her coat, which was on the back of her chair, and at her boots, which were laced, and at the blue book, which was not on the table where it lived in the evenings.

"It's Thursday," he said.

"It is."

"Mrs Pell said there was a bus."

"Half nine. Back at ten past four."

He turned the cup a little on the saucer. She waited for him to ask whether she would be on the 4.10, and he did not ask it. He had said he would ask her again, and this was not the thing he had said he would ask, and she saw him decide not to spend one question on another.

"Is there anything you'd like me to do," he said instead, "while you're out?"

She thought of the list in the study. The list was still there, in the spec hand, with its forty things on it and the house's last ticks beside them, and none of it had been done since the Saturday she drew the carrier. She thought of saying *the clinker*, *the dust upstairs*, *the clocks at six*. She thought of saying *nothing*, and of what nothing would sound like to a man who had asked.

"The range," she said. "If it looks low. You've seen me."

"Riddle first," he said. "Then feed it. Then the damper."

"A finger. Not more."

"A finger." He held up his own, gravely, to show her the size, and she nearly laughed.

She went out at a quarter to nine by the front door, which she did not lock. The gate opened silently on the oiled hinge and the latch dropped into the new keeper behind her with the small flat sound she had made for it, and she did not look back at the house, because she had decided on the step not to, and then at the bend of the lane she did.

It was only a house. Grey stone, wet slate, smoke from one chimney, which was hers. A window open at the top in the blue room. It looked like any of the houses on the road between Bath and Horne that she had passed eleven years ago on the back of a carrier's cart, sitting on her box, and wondered who lived in them.

I do, she thought, and it was not an answer, and she walked on.

The wood was wet and smelled of leaf and iron. The holly was still in berry. Nobody came the other way. At the stone gatepost where the lane met the road she stopped, as she had stopped last week, and stood where Averill had stood on his Thursdays, and this time she did not feel anything particular about it. It was a gatepost. The lichen on the top of it was the colour of mustard. She touched it and walked on.

The bus was already at the shelter when she came round the corner by Pell's, which she had not expected, and she was afraid for a moment that it was leaving. It was not. The driver was out of his seat and leaning on the post office wall with a cigarette, talking to Mrs Pell through the open door of the shop.

Mrs Pell saw her and stopped talking.

"Morning," she said.

"Morning."

"You'll be wanting the bus," said Mrs Pell, exactly as she had said it the week before, and then, because it was not the week before: "Will you?"

"Yes," she said.

It came out before she had thought it, which was how she knew it was true. Mrs Pell nodded once, as though a parcel she had been holding on the shelf had finally been called for, and went back inside.

The driver looked at her. He was older than she had thought, with a red neck and a cap pushed back.

"Horne?" he said.

"Horne."

"Threepence."

She paid it from the coins in the coat lining, which she had counted at the kitchen table at six: two shillings and ninepence ha'penny, Averill's, left in a coat he had never worn. She gave the driver three pennies and he gave her a pink ticket with a hole in it and she held it all the way, as if somebody might ask to see that she had paid.

There were two other people on the bus. A farmer's wife with a basket of eggs under a cloth, and a boy in a school cap who looked at her and then very carefully did not. She sat on the left, by the window, with her hand over her apron pocket under the coat. The bus pulled out past the fingerpost, HORNE 4, BATH 19, and the third arm still broken, and the shelter, and the timetable under its clean glass, and then she was on a road she had only ever been carried down once, the other way.

It took twenty-five minutes. She could have walked it in an hour and a half. She had never walked it. In eleven years she had never once had a reason that was hers.

Horne was smaller than she remembered and louder. A market cross. A chapel. A line of shops along the one street with their blinds half down against nothing, because the sun was not out. A dog asleep across the step of the Red Lion. Carts. Two motor vans. A woman shaking a mat out of an upstairs window. Everybody was doing something, and none of it was for her, and she stood on the pavement where the bus had left her and felt that like weather.

She found Bassett's by the ironmonger's smell before she found the sign, paraffin and oil and the dry sweetness of sawn wood. It was a dark shop, long and narrow, with buckets hanging from the ceiling and drawers to the roof with brass labels, and a counter at the back with a man behind it in a brown overall writing in a book.

He looked up. He had a pencil behind his ear and another in his hand.

"Help you?"

"You sent two firebars," she said. "To the Lear house. Saturday week."

He put the pencil down. He looked at her properly then, at her coat and her hands, which still had the marks of the slice on them, and the filed-off blister on the side of her thumb.

"I did," he said. "Dunnet brought the size in. Fourteen-inch, with the lug. Didn't have them in the yard, had to send to Bristol." He paused. "They fit?"

"They were proud at the lug. By the casting seam. I filed them."

Something in his face changed. Not much. A man hearing his own trade said back to him correctly.

"They will be," he said. "Bristol never dresses a seam. You filed it yourself?"

"Yes."

"Furnace drawing?"

"Since Sunday."

He nodded. He opened the book on the counter, a long ledger with marbled edges, and ran his finger down a page, and she saw, upside down, a column of entries all under one heading, *Lear, A.*, going back and back, in his clerk's hand and an older one, and at the bottom of the column, new, in the same ink as the pencil behind his ear: *2 firebars 14 in. lug. 1s 9d. Per Dunnet.*

"That's on the account," he said. "Mr Lear's account. It's been open thirty year, near enough. He'd settle quarter day." He did not say *and then he didn't.* He did not need to. She could see the column. There was a line ruled under Michaelmas, and nothing ruled since.

"I want to pay it," she said.

"It's on the account."

"I know. I want to pay it. Now. Not on the account."

He looked at her for a while. Then he said, carefully, "Whose name shall I put, then?"

And there it was. On a Thursday, in an ironmonger's in Horne, from a man she had never met, the question Tobias had not asked her this morning.

She thought of the clerk with the inventory in the hall. She thought of *Maid*, and *occupied*, and the gap on the board. She thought of the blank line inside the cover of the blue book, which said NAME, and under which she had written nothing because the house was not asking. She thought of saying it. Her own name, in this dark shop, to a man with a pencil. It was right there behind her teeth.

"Put *paid*," she said.

He did not argue. He took the pencil from behind his ear, and beside *2 firebars 14 in. lug. 1s 9d. Per Dunnet* he wrote *Pd.*, and the date, and nothing else, and drew a short line under it, and turned the book round so that she could see.

She gave him one shilling and ninepence from the coat lining. He gave her back nothing, because it was exact. He put the coins in a drawer under the counter and the drawer shut with a sound like the gate latch.

"There's a slice and a riddling iron on that account too," he said. "From before. Years before. If you wanted to know."

"Are they paid?"

"They are. He paid them."

"Then I don't want to know," she said, and he laughed, a short surprised bark, and the dog on the step of the Red Lion across the road lifted its head.

It was in the window going out that she saw herself.

Bassett's had a long plate window onto the street, darkened by the shop behind it, and in the dark of it, as she came to the door, there was a woman. Thin. A plain dark coat with the camphor still in it. A brown skirt that had come from Bath eleven years ago and had been let down once. Hair put up without a mirror. A woman about thirty, with a hand flat over her side as if she had a stitch.

She stopped. The woman in the window stopped.

She had seen herself in the hall glass at home that morning and every morning. She had seen herself in the glass of the timetable last week, faint, behind the times. This was different, because behind this woman in the window there were buckets and drawers and a man writing in a ledger, and in front of her, through her, there was a street with a market cross and a dog and a woman shaking a mat, and none of it was the house. She was standing in the world and the world was showing through her and she was still there.

She had thought, since the summer, since the Thursday he did not come back, that she had been left.

She had thought it in the kitchen and in his chair and on the fourth stair. She had thought it every time the house finished a thing she had started, every cup on its hook by morning, every bed made in the two hours she

was out of the room. Left in a house that went on without anybody, like a clock nobody has told. She had thought it so long it had felt like the floor.

It was not true.

To be left, somebody has to have been holding you. Somebody has to put you down. Averill had not put her down. He had never picked her up. He had walked to the junction on a Thursday to meet a woman who signed herself M, and he had written four pages behind the fuse board that said *do not let her be alone in it*, and he had paid a clerk to come and count her past like a coat on a peg, and none of that was holding. The house had not held her either. The house had only finished her. Eleven years of it, and not once had anything in that house closed its hand.

I was not abandoned, she thought, standing in the dark glass with the market cross through her chest. *I was never held.*

It should have been the worst thing she had ever thought. She waited for it to be. It was not. It was like the morning the frost broke. It was like setting down a box she had been sitting on in the mud for eleven years, waiting for a man to come and carry it in.

Nobody had ever been carrying her. So nobody could drop her.

So she could go anywhere.

She took her hand off her side. The woman in the window took hers off too, and there was the shape of the carrier under the cotton, and under the coat, small, like a knuckle.

She had five hours until the 4.10.

She did not know what people did in a town for five hours on a Thursday when they had ninepence ha'penny. She found out. She walked the length of the street and back. She went into the chapel, which was empty and smelled of hymn books, and sat at the back, and did not pray, and found that a room nobody was finishing was very quiet and she liked it. She bought a currant bun at the baker's for a penny and ate it on the steps of the market cross, which you were not, she suspected, supposed to do. The woman with the mat was hanging it over the sill now. The dog had moved to the sun, which had come out.

At the bottom of the street there was a sign on a post, painted white with black letters, the same as the fingerpost at the junction but with all its arms. BATH 15. BRISTOL 22. WELLS 11. It had a little roof over it.

She stood under it a long time.

The Bath bus went from the square at two. She knew this because there was a timetable under glass on the side of the Red Lion, and nobody had wiped this one, and she wiped a corner of it herself with her cuff to read. Two o'clock. Sevenpence. She had eightpence ha'penny, after the bun.

She could be in Bath by four. She knew the streets. She knew the back door of a house in the Circus where a cook had taught her to riddle a range and dress a mincer and lay a fire that would not smoke, and that cook might be dead or might not. She knew how to get a place. She had got one before at nineteen with less.

Nothing was keeping her.

That was the whole of it, under the sign with its little roof. Not the house, which did not know she existed. Not Averill, who had never held her. Not Tobias, who would riddle the range and say *sorry* to it and be all right. Not the gate, which was hers now, and did not need her to keep it. Not the

sweet peas, which would come up in their bed whether she was there or not, because seeds did not care whose they were, any more than the pipes did.

She put her hand in her apron pocket under her coat and closed it on the carrier.

At two o'clock the Bath bus came round the market cross and stopped at the Red Lion, and three people got on, and she watched them get on from the steps, and it left.

The 4.10 was the same driver. He looked at her as she gave him three more pennies.

"Back, then," he said.

"Back."

He punched her a pink ticket. She sat on the left. The farmer's wife was not there and the boy was, and this time he looked at her and she looked at him, and he went red and looked at his boots, and she found she was smiling at the window.

It was not the same as coming back on the cart. On the cart she had been taken. Every mile of it had been somebody else's. This road she had paid for, twice, threepence each way, out of a coat lining, and she could have spent the sevenpence on the other road and had not. She had sat under a signpost with all its arms and not one of them had been pointing at her, and she had picked one.

That was not being kept. She knew now what being kept was, because she had looked at it in a window. This was the other thing. She did not have a word for it yet. She thought it might be the same as the word Bassett had written in his ledger.

At the junction she got down. Mrs Pell was at the shop door, drying her hands, and did not say anything, and nor did she, and that was right.

She walked home through the wood with the light going. The gate opened silently. The latch dropped into the keeper behind her. There was smoke from the kitchen chimney, a good grey, drawing straight, and she stood in the yard and looked at it and knew without going in that he had riddled first, and fed it, and opened the damper one finger and not more.

He was at the table when she came in. He had not lit the lamp. He stood up when the door opened, as if he had been asked to wait there all day and had.

"You came back," he said, and then went red, because he had not meant to say it.

"I came back," she said.

She did not tell him about the Bath bus. She did not tell him about the window. She hung her coat on the back of her chair and lit the lamp herself with one of her penny matches and sat down in her own chair and took the blue book out of her apron pocket, and the carrier came out with it and rolled on the table, white, and stopped against the sugar bowl.

He looked at it. He did not ask.

She left it where it was. She opened the book.

Paid Bassett for the bars. 1s 9d. He asked my name. I said paid.

She thought for a while, with the pencil. Upstairs nothing creaked, because he was not upstairs; he was across the table, very still, not reading it, which she noticed, and was glad of.

Thu, she wrote. *Nothing was keeping me.*

Then, under it, smaller, because it was true and she did not yet want it to be the biggest thing on the page:

I came back anyway.

She closed the book. She picked the carrier up from against the sugar bowl and put it back in her apron pocket, on the left, where it sagged, and kept her hand over it, and said, "There's bread. There's cheese. I don't do dinner on a Thursday either," and he laughed, and so, after a moment, did she.

Chapter Twenty-One



On Friday she woke before him, which had not happened since he came.

She lay and listened for the fourth stair. It did not crack. The house was quiet in the way it was quiet now, which was not the old quiet, the held-breath quiet of a room that has already been made ready. This was only a house with two people asleep in it and one of them awake. A beam ticked as it cooled. The wind pushed at the yard door and the yard door, which she had wedged herself with a fold of newspaper, did not rattle.

She put her hand on the apron where it hung over the chair. The carrier was there, in the left pocket, a weight the size of a hen's egg. She had slept with the apron on the chair instead of on the hook in the scullery so that

she would know where it was in the dark. She did not examine that too closely.

Downstairs she riddled the range. Yesterday he had done it right and she checked it anyway, and it was right, and she was annoyed with herself for checking and then not annoyed, because checking a fire somebody else has kept is not the same as not trusting them. Bath cook used to say that. Bath cook checked everything, including God.

She filled the kettle. She set two cups. She looked at the two cups for some time.

In eleven years there had never been two cups set in this kitchen by her. There had been his cup and her cup, but his cup had been set by the house, on the tray, at a quarter to eight, and hers had been on the hook until she took it down. Two cups, set by one pair of hands, on the bare table, side by side, handles the same way. She turned one handle the other way. Then she turned it back. Then she left it, and went to the window, because the light was coming up grey over the yard and the sweet pea bed was a dark stripe with ash on it, and she wanted to look at something that was hers and was not asking her anything.

The kettle boiled. He did not come down.

At eight she drank her tea. At a quarter past she drank his, because it was going cold, and then filled the pot again because she did not want him to come down to a pot she had drunk. At half past eight she stood at the bottom of the stairs.

Seventeen. She had stopped counting them. She counted them anyway, going up, and on the fourth one she put her foot to the left where it did not crack, and then she thought, that is a thing a servant does, not wake the

house, and she put her other foot in the middle and it cracked, loud, like a knuckle, and she stood still on it and let it.

The blue room door was shut.

She had never knocked on a door in this house. That came to her with her hand already raised. There had been nobody behind any of them. Averill's study, when he was in it, had stood open, because he liked to hear the clocks; his bedroom she had not gone into while he was in it, ever, not once in eleven years, and she had never had to knock because the house made his bed after he was up and she only went in to open the window. The guest rooms had been made up for guests who did not come. Her own room had a door she shut at night and nobody had ever knocked on it from the other side.

So she did not know how hard. She did it as Bath cook used to do it on the scullery maid's door at five, two knocks, a pause, a third, and was horrified, because it was a summons, and she heard him sit up.

"Sorry," he said, through the door. "Sorry, I'm awake, I'm..."

"It's not," she said. "I didn't mean." She did not know what she had not meant. "There's tea."

"Thank you." A pause. The bed creaked. "Is it late?"

"Half past eight."

"God." Something fell over. "I'm sorry, I didn't hear the..."

He was going to say the clocks. There were no clocks in the blue room. There had never been a clock in the blue room, which was why she had given it to him, though she had not known that was why until now.

"You didn't miss anything," she said. "It's not a working day."

"Is there a working day?"

She stood on the landing with her hand still flat against the door where she had knocked, and the question went into her the way the cold did, slowly, from the floor up.

"I don't know," she said.

He came down in his shirtsleeves with his hair wet at the front, as if he had put his whole face in the jug, and he looked at the two cups and the second pot and did not say anything about them. He sat where he had sat for five days, at the end of the table, side-on to the range, not in Averill's chair and not in hers. He had never asked which chair was whose. He had watched her, the first night, and sat in the one nobody sat in, and kept to it.

She poured. He said thank you. She cut bread. He said thank you. She put the butter by him and he said thank you and she said, "You don't have to," and he said, "I know," and then, "Sorry," and then laughed at himself, and so the morning went on being ordinary for a little while longer.

She had decided on the stairs. She had decided with her foot on the fourth step, when it cracked. If she did not ask him today she would not ask him, and the not asking would set, like a bone, wrong.

"What do you want?" she said.

He put his cup down. He did it carefully, so it would not knock the saucer, and she saw that he had heard the question exactly, all of it, and not just the part a guest hears, which is do you want more bread.

"With the house," she said, which made it smaller, and she wished she had not. "With all of it. You came down. You've been here five days. You haven't gone to Gant and Pryor. You haven't gone to Trewin. Dunnet says Trewin's waiting on the young gentleman." She heard her voice and did not like it, and kept going. "Mr Pryor wrote you I was premises presently occupied. You came to see what was occupying them. Now you've seen. So what do you want."

He looked at the table for a while. Then he looked at her, which he did not often do directly, and she saw that he was frightened, and that it was not of her.

"I don't want it," he said.

She waited.

"The house. I don't want it." He turned the cup round on its saucer, a quarter turn, and stopped. "I want to be honest, so. I came down meaning to sell it. Pryor said there'd be enough after Trewin to... I've no money, you see. I was a clerk. I was good at it and they let me go anyway, there was a merger, and there were a lot of us. My mother has two rooms over a chemist. I sat on the train with Pryor's letter and I thought, I'll sell it, I'll pay what's owed, there'll be something left, I'll give her a better two rooms. That's what I wanted. I want you to know that I wanted that."

"All right," she said.

"And then I got off the bus and nobody'd tell me the way, and then Mrs Pell told me, and she said ask her. Ask her. Not ask at the house. And I walked up and you were tipping ash on the flower bed and you looked at me like... and I thought, it isn't empty. Pryor wrote it as if it was a thing on

a list, the premises are occupied, as if you'd be... I don't know what I thought. A caretaker. Someone who'd be glad of a reference and a month's money."

"I'd be glad of a month's money," she said, before she could stop it, and he looked so startled that she nearly laughed.

"Would you?"

"I've four pounds odd in a tin. And two and ninepence in a coat that isn't mine." She shook her head. "Go on."

"I don't want it," he said again. "I mean it more now. I've walked round it. I opened the clock. I sat in the study and I couldn't take a book off any shelf higher than my knee. It's his. It's still all his, all of it, the way the cups are on the hooks. I'd be living in his... I'd be living in how he wanted it. I don't know him. I met him once when I was seven and he gave me a sixpence and asked me what a sixpence was for and I didn't know and he looked disappointed. That's all I've got. I don't want to live inside a man who was disappointed in me for not knowing what a sixpence was for."

She did not say anything. The range ticked.

"But I don't want it sold out from under you," he said. "That's the other thing. That's the thing I didn't know I'd want until Sunday, and I've wanted it every day since, and I don't know what to do with it, because it costs money and I haven't got any. If it goes to Trewin's court it gets sold anyway. If I sell it, it's sold. Either way somebody comes up the lane with a list and you're on it." He stopped. "Pryor says end of April for the title. That's three weeks. He says if I sign I can sell, and if I don't sign it goes to the court for the debt, and either way the house is finished."

The word sat on the table between the cups.

"It's not finished," she said.

"No," he said. "Sorry. I didn't mean the house. I meant..."

"I know what you meant."

She found she had her hand flat on the table, palm down, the way she had had it flat on his door. She did not remember putting it there. It was the right hand. She turned it over without meaning to, to look at it, the way you look at your hand when you have said something you did not plan to, as though the hand had said it.

The burn from the range had not healed well. She had not let it. She had kept the fire herself every day since, and every day the scab had cracked on the iron of the riddle and the rake, and it had gone shiny and pink and then split again, and now it was a raised pale shape across the heel of her palm and up into the root of the thumb, the shape of the edge of the firebox door, and there was a newer red line through it from the slice, from the clinker, and a blister from the file that had come up on Sunday and burst on Monday, and under all of it the grey that would not come out of the creases from the gate rust and the ash and the furnace bars.

It was not a housekeeper's hand. A housekeeper's hand was red and clean. This was the hand of somebody who did the work herself and had not been shown how.

He was looking at it.

She had seen him not look at things all week. He did not look at the gap in the fuse board, or the long-case at 11.20, or the carrier on the table last night when it rolled against the sugar bowl. He had a way of not looking

that was polite and also, she had decided, partly afraid, the way you do not look at a dog that might be anybody's. But he was looking at her hand, and he did not stop, and she did not turn it back over.

"Did the house do that?" he said.

It was such a strange question. It was exactly the right question. She sat with it.

"No," she said. "I did."

"How?"

"The range. The first night it went out. I'd never..." She stopped. "I'd never had to light it. It was always lit. I didn't know where to hold the door."

He was quiet for a moment.

"Eleven years," he said, "and you'd never lit the fire."

"I'd lit fires. In Bath I lit fires. Here, no." She turned the hand a little in the light from the window, so the shiny part showed. "Here I'd go down in the morning and it would be drawing. The kettle on the hob. I thought that was what a good house was. I thought I'd made it a good house."

"And you hadn't."

"I don't know what I'd made it." She closed the hand, slowly, so it hurt along the line from the slice. "The other marks are the furnace. And the gate. And there's a file in the scullery drawer I didn't know about that took the skin off. I found out how to do everything in the last three weeks and every bit of it's on there."

He did not say I'm sorry. She noticed that. He had said sorry for knocking over the jug on Tuesday and sorry for being late down and sorry for the bread, and he did not say it now, and she understood that he had decided it was not his to be sorry for, and she liked him for that more than for anything he had done all week.

"Can I ask you something," he said. "You can say no."

"Not yet," she said, because she thought it was going to be her name, and then saw from his face that it was not.

"Not that," he said. "I won't ask that again. You'll tell me or you won't." He looked at her hand, closed now, on the table. "What do you want?"

She had not thought he would turn it round. That was the thing she would think about afterwards, in the blue book, lying awake: that she had asked him what he wanted as if it were a question for the person who owned things, and he had handed it straight back across the table as if she might own something too, and she had not been ready for it, and nobody in her life had ever been in a position to ask it and been interested in the answer.

"I want," she said, and stopped.

She did not know. It was not that she did not know the answer. It was that there was no answer in her anywhere, in any pocket, and she had looked for one so often in eleven years, without knowing she was looking, that she knew the shape of the place where it was not, the way you know the shape of a tooth that's out.

"I don't know," she said. "I wanted the sweet peas. I wanted April. I wanted to break a plate and I did. I wanted the gate to make a noise and then I wanted it not to." She opened the hand. "That's not wanting. That's errands."

"It sounds like wanting to me."

"It's small."

"Most things people want are small," he said. "I wanted two better rooms for my mother. That's small. I wanted somebody to know I'd tried." He shrugged. "That's smaller."

She looked at him. He was twenty-five, and he had a Lear nose, and he had come four miles on foot carrying a cheap brown suitcase because nobody would tell him the way, and he had kept her range right with a finger of damper while she was in Horne paying for her own bars, and he was sitting at the end of her table not in anybody's chair, telling her what he had wanted on the train.

"I'd like," she said, carefully, as if the words were a step she did not trust, "not to be on the list."

He nodded slowly.

"Whoever comes up the lane. Trewin, or Pryor, or the court, or Miss Hewel who counts everything. I'd like not to be on it. Not as a thing, not as staff, not as occupied." She turned the cup on its saucer, a quarter turn, the way he had, and saw she had done it and let it be. "If the house goes, it goes. I don't know that I'd want it either. It was never mine. But I don't want to go with it, in a column, with the clocks."

"No," he said. "No, I see that."

"I don't know what that costs."

"Nor do I," he said. "But I can find out. That's the one thing I'm actually good at. I can read a ledger. I can read what Pryor sends and what Trewin's owed and what the deeds say, and I can find out what it costs for

you not to be on the list." He looked at her hand again. "Would you let me?"

There it was. The thing she had been afraid of since Sunday, though she had not named it: that he would be kind, and that she would let the kindness finish things for her the way the house had, and that it would be warm and she would be grateful and she would go back to standing in the places she stood.

She looked at the palm. The shiny place. The red line. The grey in the creases.

"You can read the ledgers," she said. "You can tell me what's in them. I'll decide."

"All right," he said, as he had said on the gate on Sunday when she told him Not yet, and in exactly the same way, without any disappointment in it at all.

He went up to the study after breakfast, and took the lowest shelf out, and found that behind the lowest shelf was a row of account books in the clock-bill hand going back to before the war, and came down to tell her, red to the ears with it, as if he had found money. She said, "Then read them," and he went back up.

She washed both cups. She did it herself, at the sink, and dried them, and hung them on two hooks, side by side. She did not turn either handle.

In the afternoon she went out to the sweet pea bed with the ash still grey on it and dug it through, with the fork from the shed, so the ash went down into the soil where Bath cook said it did good. The handle of the

fork was worn smooth in two places and neither of them fitted her hands. She dug anyway, and the palm opened along the line from the slice, and bled a little, and she wiped it on her apron, on the right side, away from the pocket with the carrier and the seeds and Averill's pages, and kept digging until the bed was dark all the way along.

When she came in he had lit the lamp. He had not set a cup for her. He had left the cups on their hooks. She noticed that, and stood in the scullery door with the earth on her boots, and the lamp going, and him at the end of the table with one of the old account books open and a pencil behind his ear, not looking up, and thought: he has understood something I have not said.

She took her own cup down herself.

That night she wrote in the blue book, sitting on her bed, by one penny candle, with the carrier on the blanket beside her where she could see it.

Asked him what he wanted. He said: not the house, not to sell me with it.

She looked at that for a long time. Then she wrote:

He asked me back.

And under it, smaller, the pencil pressing too hard so that it went through to the page beneath:

Not to be on the list.

She blew out the candle. Her hand throbbed in the dark, the whole length of the line, steady as a clock, and she lay and let it, because it was keeping time for nobody but her.

Chapter Twenty-Two



On Saturday he went down to Horne.

He had said so on Friday night, with the account book shut under his hand and the pencil back behind his ear. Pryor kept Saturday mornings, he said, for people who came in from the country, and he supposed he was one of those now. He would take the half-nine and come back on the ten past four. He said it the way a man reads out a timetable, without asking whether it suited, and she found she was grateful for that, because she would not have known what to answer.

He was up before her. She heard him on the fourth stair, the crack in it giving its small dry note under his weight, and then the scullery tap, and then nothing for a while, and when she came down he had riddled the

range and put a scoop of coal on, not too much, and the kettle was on the side where it would come up slowly. He had not set out a cup for her. He had left the cups on their hooks, the way he had the night before, and she took hers down and he took his, and they drank standing, he by the window and she by the dresser, like two people waiting on the same platform.

"I don't know what he'll say," he said.

"No."

"He wrote 'existing terms'. In the letter. I don't know what the terms are. I've never seen them."

"Nor have I."

He looked at her then. "Haven't you?"

"Nobody showed me anything," she said. "They were his papers."

He nodded slowly, and put his cup on the drainer, and then, after a moment, took it up again and rinsed it and hung it on its hook. He did it badly. The handle was turned the wrong way, towards the wall, so that whoever reached for it would have to reach round. She did not turn it.

At a quarter past nine he went. He had his town coat on, brushed, the mud on the hem mostly gone, and no hat, and the envelope from Pryor's office folded into his inside pocket. At the door he stopped.

"Is there anything you want from Horne?"

She thought of Bassett's ledger, *Lear, A.*, and the *Pd.* in it in her own figures. She thought of the chapel, cold, and the penny bun on the cross steps.

"No," she said. "Thank you."

"All right."

She watched him from the parlour window, which she had not done on Sunday when he came. He went down the path and through the gate, and the gate swung behind him on its oiled hinge and the latch dropped into the new keeper with the clack she had made for it, and he did not look back. He walked quickly, like a man who did not want to miss a bus, or did not want to be seen to dawdle. Then the lane bent and the hedge took him.

The house was quiet in the way it had been quiet since she drew the fuse. Not the old quiet, the kept quiet, where everything waited to be done and then was done. This was just a house with nobody moving in it but her.

She stood in the hall and listened to the clocks. Eight going. One not.

Then she went up to make the beds.

She did not decide to. That was the thing she would write down afterwards, and look at. She did not decide. It was Saturday, and on Saturdays, for eleven years, she had turned the mattresses and changed the linen, and her hands went up the stairs before she did, and her feet counted the treads although she had stopped counting them, and she was on the landing with her sleeves pushed back before she knew she had left the kitchen.

Her own bed first. She stripped it, and turned the mattress, and the dust came up out of the ticking in the light from the window and hung there. She made it again with the same sheets, because the clean ones were in

the press and she did not want to go to the press. She did it the Bath way, hospital corners, the turn-down four inches, and then stood back and looked at it and thought, it is not quite four. It was three and a bit. Her hand had stopped short. It looked like a bed someone had made in a hurry, before work, and meant to come back to. She left it.

Then she went along the landing to the blue room.

The door was ajar. He had left it ajar, as if he had not been sure whether it was his to shut. She pushed it with two fingers and it swung in.

He had not made the bed.

She stood in the doorway and looked at it. The sheet was dragged half off the mattress on the window side, where he must have got up. The blanket had been pushed down into a heap at the foot. The pillow had the shape of his head still in it, a long hollow, and a single dark hair on the slip. His pyjamas were folded, she noticed, folded very carefully and put on the chair, the way a man folds who has been taught to fold and has never had anyone fold for him. The cheap brown suitcase was under the window with its strap done up. On the sill he had put his watch-chain, without the watch, and a pencil stub, and a twist of paper with something in it, she could not see what.

The window looked out over the yard and down onto the sweet pea bed, dark from the ash she had dug in.

On every morning of her life in this house, a bed like that would not have lasted ten minutes. She would have made it, or, before that, the house would have made it, while she was on the stairs, while her back was turned. She had come up a thousand times to a room someone had slept in and found it already smooth, the sheet drawn tight as a drum, the pillow

plumped and the hollow gone, as if no head had ever lain there. She had thought that was what a room was. A room was what it looked like when nobody was in it.

She went in and stood by the bed.

Her hands knew exactly what to do. She could feel them knowing it, the way you feel a sneeze coming. Take the sheet at the corner. Pull. Tuck. Fold the blanket back up from the foot, square it, turn down the top. Lift the pillow and shake it and the hollow goes. Three minutes. Less. He would come back at five and climb the stairs and find his room as if he had never been in it, and he would think, she supposed, that she had done it for him, and he would say thank you, because he said thank you, and she would say it was nothing, which would be true. It would be nothing. It had always been nothing. That was what it was for.

She put her hand on the corner of the sheet.

It was cool, and a little rough, because it was the old linen from the blue room press, washed so many times it had gone thin at the fold. Under the sheet the mattress still held a little warmth from where he had lain, or she imagined it did. She stood with her hand there and did not pull.

He asked me back.

She thought of him at the end of the table last night with the account book, and the cups left on their hooks, and the way he had understood something she had not said. She thought: if I make this bed, he will come back to a house that was ready. And she knew what that was. She had come back to it herself, every Thursday for eleven years, without once coming home.

She took her hand off the sheet.

It was the hardest thing she had done in the house. Harder than the fuse. The fuse had been one pull and then it was done, and everything after it had happened to her. This she had to keep doing. Every second she stood there and did not make the bed, she was not making it again, and her hands did not understand, and they lifted a little at her sides, and she held them still against her apron.

She did pick up the hair from the pillow. She did that without thinking, and then she was standing with it between finger and thumb and nowhere to put it, and in the end she opened the window and let it go, and it went out over the yard, and she could not see where.

She left the window open. That was hers, she decided. Not the bed. The window. The room smelled of a man asleep and it would do it good to air.

Then she went out and left the door as she had found it. Ajar.

On the landing her legs went. Not badly. She sat down on the top stair with her back against the newel post and her hands in her lap, and they were shaking, and she looked at them with a kind of interest, because she could not remember them shaking before except from cold. The right palm was still raw along the line from the slice. The left had the burn from the firebox door, healing at the edges, gone shiny.

From where she sat she could see along the landing to the blue room door, and the inch of light coming through the gap, brighter than the landing, because she had left the window open and the April sun was on that side.

Nothing came out of the door. Nothing moved in there. She had half expected it to, she realised, even now, even with the carrier in her pocket where she could feel it against her hip. She had half expected to hear the

small sounds she had never heard, the sheet drawn, the pillow, and to go back and find the bed smooth and know the house had done it after all, because some part of the house was still in her hands, in the way they had lifted.

It was only a bed. It was only an unmade bed in an empty room.

She thought, that is what a room looks like when somebody lives in it.

She did not turn the other mattresses. She went down and had her breakfast in her own chair, bread and dripping and the last of the tea, and then she went out to the yard.

The sweet pea bed was dark and loose where she had dug it. The fork was leaning on the shed where she had left it, which she would not have done once, and there was ash still on its tines. The sun was on the wall at the back of the bed, the warm wall, south, where the canes would go.

She put her hand into her left apron pocket and found the twist of paper among the other things: the pages, folded small; the carrier, heavy and cool; the seeds. She took the twist out. It was soft now from being carried. The writing on it had nearly gone, but she knew what it said, because she had read it in October in the hall drawer, in the spec hand. *Sweet pea. Mixed.*

She had kept it since October. She had said, April, mine.

It was April.

She stood with it in her hand for a long time. She thought of all the reasons not to. The frost might come back; it often did, in April, up here. There were no canes cut. She did not know if they would come up, after

eleven years of the house deciding what grew, or if the seed was any good, or if she was any good at it. Bath cook had grown herbs on the area steps in pots and had let her water them. That was all she knew about growing things. She knew a great deal about keeping things, and almost nothing about starting them.

The house had never begun anything. It only finished.

She untwisted the paper. Inside were the seeds, small and hard and round, brown-grey, a few with a black eye. She counted them, out of habit. Twenty-three. She counted them again to be sure and got twenty-three again and laughed, once, out loud in the yard, because of course she had counted them, she counted everything, and Miss Hewel was coming who counted everything too.

She made a drill with her finger along the wall, an inch deep, the length of her forearm. She put the seeds in one by one, a finger's width apart. She did not do them all. She did eleven. She did not know why eleven, and then she did, and she let it stand. The other twelve she twisted back into the paper and put back in her pocket.

Then she drew the earth over them with the side of her hand and pressed it down, and that was all. It looked like nothing. It looked like a strip of dark earth against a wall. Nobody coming into the yard would have known anything had happened there.

She went and got the can and watered it, and stood there with the can dripping onto her boots.

Started, she thought. Not finished. Started.

At ten past four she was at the gate. She had not meant to be. She had meant to be in the kitchen with something in her hands so that it would not look like waiting, but at four she had found she had put her coat on, and at five past she was on the path, and then she was at the gate, with one hand on the top bar, looking down the lane.

He came round the bend at twenty past, walking slower than he had gone. He had something under his arm, a long envelope, buff, and he carried it the way you carry something you do not want to drop and do not want to be holding.

He saw her at the gate and lifted a hand. She lifted hers. He opened the gate himself, and it swung on its oiled hinge, and he shut it behind him and the latch dropped.

"Good gate," he said.

"Yes."

They walked up the path together. At the door he stopped.

"I didn't sign anything," he said.

She looked at him.

"He wanted me to. He had it all ready, the acceptance, two copies. 'On the existing terms.' I asked him to read me the terms. He didn't want to. He said they were standard. I said I'd like to hear them anyway." He looked down at the envelope. "He gave me a copy to bring back. I said I'd read it at home."

"Home," she said.

He went a little red. "Here. I meant here."

In the kitchen he put the envelope on the table, face down, and pushed it a few inches towards her side, and then took his hand away.

"You're in it," he said. "I thought you should know before you read it. If you read it. You don't have to. I've read it. I can tell you what it says, or you can read it yourself, or we can put it in the drawer. It's—" he stopped. "He wrote it last September. My grandfather. A fortnight before he went. Pryor's had it since."

She looked at the envelope. Buff, with the firm's name printed small in the corner, *Gant & Pryor, Horne*, and on the front, which she could not see, she supposed her name, or not her name, the word they had used instead.

"Not today," she said.

"All right."

He did not move it. He left it on the table between them, face down, and went to wash his hands at the scullery tap. She heard the water, and then she heard him go up the stairs, the fourth one giving its note, and along the landing, and she heard his door, and then nothing.

She stood very still in the kitchen.

He was a long time. Long enough that she thought he must have sat down on the bed. Then the stairs again, the fourth one, and he came back in and stood in the scullery door.

"You left the window open," he said.

"Yes."

He waited, but she did not say anything else. He looked at her, and she thought he was going to say thank you, and he did not. He looked as if he had seen a thing in the room upstairs that he was going to keep.

"It was nice," he said. "The air." And then: "I'll make it after supper. I'm not very good."

"No," she said. "Nor am I."

That night, on her own bed with its three-and-a-bit inches of turn-down, by one penny candle, she wrote in the blue book.

He went to Horne. I did not make his bed.

She looked at that. It was the same as what she had written on Sunday, nearly. Sunday's line was on the page before: *I did not make his bed. It was already made.* She turned back and read it, and turned forward again.

Then she wrote:

I wanted to. My hands wanted to. I let them want.

And under that:

Eleven sweet peas, by the warm wall. Twelve in my pocket.

And under that, smaller:

His paper is on the table. Face down.

She blew out the candle. Down in the kitchen the envelope lay where he had left it, and the house did not move it, and did not turn it over, and did not put it away in a drawer for her, because it was not a task, it was only a thing that was hers to do or not, and she lay in the dark and knew exactly where it was, the way you know where a step is on the stairs.

Chapter Twenty-Three



Miss Hewel came on the Thursday, as she had written she would, by the carrier's cart from the junction, and she was early.

She was a small woman of perhaps fifty in a grey coat buttoned to the throat, with a leather case in one hand and a wooden rule folded in the other, and she got down from the cart before Dunnet's boy had properly stopped it. She paid him. She asked him what time he came back through. He said four, and she said she would be at the gate at ten to, and he looked at her as if he believed it.

The envelope was still on the kitchen table.

It had been there five days. It had been there through five suppers and five washings-up, through Tobias making his bed after supper on the Saturday, badly, and coming down to say so, and through the Sunday when it rained and neither of them went out. She had wiped the table round it. She had not lifted it to wipe under. The house had not lifted it either. Each morning she came down and it was where it had been, face down, a few inches to her side of the middle, with a faint ring beside it now where Tobias had stood a cup on Tuesday without thinking.

She had thought, last night, of putting it in the drawer before Miss Hewel came. Then she had thought that Miss Hewel would open the drawer.

So it was on the table when Miss Hewel came into the kitchen, and Miss Hewel looked at it, once, and did not look at it again.

"You'll be the person who keeps the house," she said.

"Yes."

"I won't ask your name unless I need it." She set down the case. "Mr Pryor tells me it's in some doubt."

"It isn't in doubt," she said. "It's just not on anything."

Miss Hewel considered that, and nodded, as if it were a measurement she could take later. "And Mr Lear?"

"In the garden. He's coming."

"Good. I'll want both of you, at different times. I'll start at the top and work down. I always do. You can learn a house from the attics. Nobody tidies the attics for a surveyor." She opened the case. Inside were two

ledgers, a pencil box, a ball of string with knots tied in it at intervals, a small brass weight, a pair of spectacles in a tin. "I'll have a cup of tea first, if there is one. I've been on that cart since half past six."

There was. There was always. The kettle had been on since she heard the wheels.

Tobias came in with earth on his knees and stopped in the doorway when he saw her.

"Miss Hewel," he said. "I'm Tobias Lear."

"I know. You have his ears." She shook his hand without getting up. "I'm sorry about your grandfather. I didn't know him. I'm told he was particular."

"Yes," Tobias said. "I think he was."

"Particular men leave good houses and bad paperwork. I've seen the paperwork." She drank her tea. "Now I'll see the house."

She did start at the top.

The keeper went with her because she was asked to. Miss Hewel did not need to be shown the way; she had the plan, the long roll from Pryor's office, and she had read it on the cart, and she went up the back stair as if she had been up it before. On the landing under the roof she stopped at the little door and looked at the plan and looked at the door.

"Occupied," she said.

"Yes."

"Yours."

"Yes."

"I'll do it last on this floor. People don't like a stranger going into their room first. It's the first thing they think of." She went past it, to the box room, and opened the box room door.

The keeper had not been into the box room since the autumn. There was nothing in it the house needed. Trunks, a rolled carpet, a dressmaker's dummy with no head, four chairs with their seats out waiting for a caner who had never come. A tin bath. Picture frames with no pictures, stacked face to the wall. Miss Hewel stood in the door and looked at all of it for a full minute without writing anything. Then she took off her coat, folded it over her arm, looked for somewhere to put it, and gave it to the keeper to hold.

Then she began.

She counted the way the keeper counted. That was the first thing. Not the way Mr Bassett counted bars, by the bundle, or the way Mrs Pell counted change, tapping it into her palm. Miss Hewel touched each thing. She put her hand flat on the lid of each trunk before she opened it. She turned each frame round, looked at the empty back of it, turned it face to the wall again, and wrote. *Frame, gilt, 14 x 11, no glass. Frame, oak, 20 x 16, glass cracked lower left.* She measured with the knotted string where the rule would not go. She weighed nothing with the brass weight; the keeper did not find out what the weight was for until much later.

"You can sit down," Miss Hewel said, without looking round. "This room will take me an hour."

The keeper did not sit. She stood in the doorway with the grey coat over her arm, and watched, and found that she was counting along. *Chair, seat out. Chair, seat out. Chair, seat out.* When Miss Hewel came to the fourth chair she turned it over to see the maker's mark underneath, and the keeper said, before she could stop herself:

"There's a fifth."

Miss Hewel looked up.

"Behind the carpet. It has its seat. It was the one he used for reaching the top of the press. He put it in here when it got a crack in the leg."

Miss Hewel moved the carpet. There was the fifth chair, with its seat, with a crack in its back leg bound round with black thread. She looked at it for a while.

"Thank you," she said. She wrote it down. Then she wrote something else, a short line, at the side of the page, which the keeper could not read from the door.

They did the attic floor by eleven. The keeper's room was last.

Miss Hewel stood in the door of it as she had stood in the door of the box room, and did not go in at first. The keeper had made the bed that morning, of course. Three inches and a bit of turn-down. The candle on the chair. The cardigan on the hook. The blue book was not in the room; it was in her apron pocket, the right one, with the old keeper's bit of paper. The left pocket had the twelve sweet peas.

"May I?" said Miss Hewel.

"Yes."

She went in. She did not touch the bed. She looked at the candle, which was a penny one, and at the hook, and at the window, which looked over the back roofs to the hill. She took the knotted string out and measured the room from wall to wall, twice, and wrote it down. She measured the window. Then she stood by the bed and looked at the turn-down.

"Do you always do it like that?"

"Like what?"

"Three and a half. Less than the others. Mr Pryor's girl did the plan from the old inventory; there's a note on the old inventory about the beds. Four inches throughout, by instruction." She looked at the keeper. "This one isn't four."

"No," said the keeper. "It isn't."

Miss Hewel waited.

"It used to be," the keeper said. "It's mine now."

Miss Hewel wrote that down. Not the words; the keeper could see the pencil move and it moved too short for the words. A figure, then. *3½.*

"Bed, iron, single," Miss Hewel said, writing. "Mattress, flock. Chair, deal. Hook, one. Candlestick, tin." She stopped. "The cardigan's yours."

"Yes."

"Then it isn't in." She drew a little line. "Personal effects of the occupant are not included in the inventory unless they're the property of the estate. Is anything in this room the property of the occupant?"

The keeper looked round. The candle had been the house's. The chair had been the house's. The bed. The hook. She had come with a carpet bag and the bag was under the bed and had been under the bed so long she had forgotten it. In it, she thought, a hairbrush, a second pair of stockings, a letter she had not read again in nine years.

"The bag under the bed," she said. "And the cardigan. And what's in my pockets."

"What's in your pockets?"

"Seeds," she said. "And a book. And a bit of paper."

Miss Hewel looked at her for a long moment over the top of the ledger.

"Then those aren't in either," she said, and she shut the ledger on her pencil to keep the place, and went out onto the landing, and the keeper heard her go down the back stair without waiting.

The first floor took until two. They stopped for bread and cheese at half past twelve, the three of them in the kitchen, the envelope still on the table. Miss Hewel moved her plate so it would not touch the envelope and that was the only sign she gave.

Tobias asked her how long it would take.

"Today and tomorrow. I'll come back tomorrow on the eight o'clock and do the ground floor and the outbuildings. Then I'll write it up in Horne and send a fair copy to Mr Pryor and one to you." She cut her cheese into exact squares. "I'm told there are clocks."

"Eight," the keeper said. "Nine with the long-case."

"Do they go?"

"Eight do."

"And the long-case?"

"It stopped," she said. "At twenty past eleven. In November."

"Broken?"

"No. Finished with."

Miss Hewel looked at her. Tobias looked at his plate.

"I'll put it down as not going," Miss Hewel said after a moment. "Cause unknown. I'm not a clockmaker." She ate a square of cheese. "Who winds the eight?"

"I do."

"Every day?"

"The kitchen and the hall every day. The others on Sundays. The carriage clock in the study on the first of the month."

Miss Hewel took out her pencil and wrote that down too, in the margin of the page she had open, which was the first-floor landing and had no clocks on it at all.

The blue room was Tobias's now, and he showed her it himself. The keeper stayed on the landing. She heard Miss Hewel ask about the crack on the fourth stair and Tobias tell her it had always been there, as far as he knew, and Miss Hewel say that it had been there a long time, by the dust in it, and that it was not structural, and Tobias laugh, once, surprised.

When they came out Miss Hewel said: "That bed's not made very well."

"No," said Tobias. "I made it."

"Good," said Miss Hewel, and the keeper did not know what she meant by it, and saw that Tobias did not either.

At ten to four the keeper walked her to the gate. The cart was not there yet. They stood by the gate in the low sun and Miss Hewel put on her coat and did up all its buttons.

"I'll ask you this once," Miss Hewel said, looking down the lane and not at her. "Then I'll write down whatever you say. Mr Pryor's letter of instruction asks me to inventory the house and its contents, and it asks me, in a separate paragraph, whether the household staff is to be valued as part of a going concern. Do you understand what that means?"

"It means whether I come with it."

"It means whether a buyer would pay more for the house with you in it. Whether you're part of what makes it run." Miss Hewel adjusted a button that did not need adjusting. "In my experience they mean a cook. A gardener who knows the drains. It's an ordinary paragraph. I put a figure against it most times."

The keeper said nothing.

"But I've been in this house since nine o'clock," Miss Hewel said, "and I've counted three hundred and eleven things, and you knew where every one of them was before I did. You knew the fifth chair. You knew the frames had no glass before I turned them. You were counting along with

me in the box room; I could see your mouth." She looked at the keeper now. "So I'll ask it plainly, the way I'll have to answer it. Are you in the inventory?"

The lane was empty. A rook went over. Up at the house, behind them, the kitchen clock struck the quarter through the open window, and a moment after it the hall clock, which was always a breath behind.

The keeper thought of the envelope on the table. *You're in it,* Tobias had said. *I thought you should know.* She thought of what might be typed on the front of it, which she still had not seen, and whether the word on it was her name or the other word. She thought of Averill writing it last September, a fortnight before he went, at the study table, with the window open or shut. She did not know which. That was the thing. She had always known which.

"Not today," she said.

Miss Hewel was quiet.

"I'm not saying that to be difficult," the keeper said. "I'm saying it because it's true. There's a paper in the kitchen that might say. I haven't read it. If I read it, I'll know what he thought. But that isn't what you're asking. You're asking what I am. And I don't think he gets to answer that. Not now."

"Then who does?"

The keeper put her hand in her left pocket and felt the twelve sweet peas, small and hard, against the paper.

"I'm finding out," she said.

Miss Hewel looked at her a while longer. Then she opened the ledger against the gatepost, there and then, and found the page, and wrote. It was a short line. The keeper did not try to read it. Miss Hewel shut the ledger and put it in her case and snapped the case shut.

"I've written *the question of staff is not settled and is not mine to settle*," she said. "Mr Pryor won't like it. It isn't a figure."

"No."

"I'll be here at eight tomorrow. You might have the coal-house unlocked. And the outside privy, if there is one; there always is."

"There is."

The cart came round the bend. Miss Hewel lifted her hand to it exactly as the keeper had lifted hers to Tobias on Saturday, and the keeper saw that and did not know what to do with it, and so let it be.

"The five chairs," Miss Hewel said, with one foot on the step. "Somebody should cane them. It's not much. A day's work for a man who knows how. It's a shame to leave four chairs waiting for a thing that's never going to happen."

She got up. The cart went. The keeper stood at the gate until it was round the bend, and then a while after.

The envelope was where it had been.

She stood at the kitchen table with her hands flat on it, the way Miss Hewel had put her hands flat on the trunks before she opened them. She could feel the edge of the papers inside through the buff. Several sheets.

More than four.

She did not turn it over.

But she did lift it. She lifted it, and wiped the table where it had been, and the ring Tobias's cup had left beside it, and the faint square of dust that five days had laid round its edges, and she put it down again, face down, in the same place. Exactly the same place. A few inches to her side of the middle.

The house did nothing. It had not offered to wipe there. It had not finished the wiping when she stopped. It stood round her with all its clocks going except the one, and let her do it by hand.

Tobias came in from the garden at half past five and saw the table clean and the envelope on it and looked at her.

"Still not today," she said.

"All right." He went to the scullery tap. Over the water he said: "What did she ask you? At the gate. I saw her ask you something."

"Whether I'm in the inventory."

The tap stopped. He did not turn round.

"What did you say?"

"Not today."

He stood with his wet hands over the sink. Then he laughed, the same once-only laugh he had given Miss Hewel on the stairs, and dried his hands, and turned round, and the laugh had not quite gone from his face.

"She'll put that down," he said. "She puts everything down."

"She did."

In the blue book, by the penny candle:

Miss Hewel. 311 things. Not me.

And under it:

The five chairs. Somebody should cane them.

She looked at that line a long time. It was not a thing the house would do. The house completed; it did not begin. Nobody had begun caning the chairs, so there was nothing for the house to finish. They would wait in the box room with their seats out for another forty years, or until a buyer came and put them in a sale.

She wrote, smaller:

I could learn.

And she blew out the candle, and lay on her bed with its three and a half inches, and did not count anything at all, and after a while found that she had been asleep.

Chapter Twenty-Four



Miss Hewel came at eight, which meant the cart was at the bend at a quarter to, and the keeper had the coal-house unlocked by half past seven and the privy door propped with a brick, because the latch dropped if you let it and a surveyor shut in a privy would be a thing nobody forgot.

She had slept. That was the first thing she noticed when she woke, before the light, before the clocks. She had slept and not counted, and her body did not know what to make of it and kept reaching for a number that wasn't there, the way a tongue goes to a missing tooth.

The house had laid the kitchen fire. She let it. She had decided, somewhere around the second cup, that it was not her business this morning to fight the house over a fire. Miss Hewel would count the fire as

much as anything else. Let it be counted lit.

"Ground floor," Miss Hewel said at the gate, as though they were already halfway through a sentence. "Then out. Then I'm done with you, and you're done with me, and Mr Pryor has his figure. Good morning."

"Good morning."

"You slept."

The keeper looked at her.

"You've a crease on your cheek from the pillow," Miss Hewel said. "Yesterday you hadn't. I don't miss things. It's a fault, my mother said. Shall we?"

They began in the hall, because Miss Hewel began everything at the front door and went clockwise, and would not hear of another way.

"Umbrella stand, brass, one. Umbrellas in it, two, one broken rib. Barometer." She tapped it. The needle shook and went back to *Change*. "Aneroid. Working, I'll say, though it's said *Change* since I came in yesterday and I don't believe it." She wrote. "Hall table, oak, one. Drawer, one. Contents."

The keeper opened the drawer for her. String. A tin of tacks. Two keys on a loop of red wool that fitted nothing she had ever found. A pencil stub with teeth marks.

"Whose teeth?" said Miss Hewel.

"I don't know."

"His?"

"I don't know." The keeper looked at the pencil. She had never once seen Mr Averill put a pencil in his mouth. That did not mean he hadn't. There were forty years of the house she had not been in. "Somebody's."

Miss Hewel wrote *pencil, one, chewed* and moved on.

The long-case stood at the turn of the hall where it had always stood, tall and dark and silent, its hands at twenty past eleven. Miss Hewel stopped in front of it. She did not tap this one.

"Long-case," she said. "Eight-day, I'd guess, by the size of the winding holes. Maker?"

"Bratt. Of Horne."

Miss Hewel bent and read the dial for herself, because she checked everything, and straightened. "Bratt of Horne. Mahogany. Good. Is it a going concern?"

She said it lightly. She had said it of the barometer and the kitchen range and she would say it of the pump. But she had also said it yesterday, at the gate, about something else, and the keeper heard both at once.

"It's stopped," the keeper said.

"I can see that. Is it broken?"

"No."

"Run down?"

"No." The keeper put her hand on the trunk door. Under her palm the wood was cool and very slightly dusty, because she had not wiped it since Sunday and the house had not wiped it either. The house did not touch the

long-case now. She had noticed that on Tuesday and not written it down. "I stopped it. With my hand. On Sunday."

Miss Hewel's pencil waited.

"Why?"

"It was finished with."

She had not known she was going to say it in those words until they were out. They were the words in the almanac, in her own hand, under the date: *L-c. Finished with.* She had written them and shut the book and put it in the dresser drawer and not opened it since.

Miss Hewel looked at the clock and then at the keeper, and the keeper saw her decide not to ask the next question, the way she had decided at the gate yesterday to write a sentence instead of a figure.

"Stopped," Miss Hewel said, writing. "By hand. Not broken." She looked up. "I'll put it as sound. If a buyer wants it going, it'll go. That's what I'll tell Mr Pryor."

"Yes."

"You don't sound pleased."

"It will go," the keeper said. "If somebody starts it. Yes. That's right."

And it was right, and it was what she had wanted, and she stood in the hall a moment longer than she needed to with her hand on the trunk door while Miss Hewel went on into the parlour, counting.

The parlour took an hour. The kitchen took two.

Miss Hewel counted the kitchen as if it were a church. She counted the cups on their hooks (eleven; one hook empty, the one Tobias's cup went back to when he remembered). She counted the plates on the rack and the plates in the cupboard and asked why there were two sets, and the keeper said one was for every day and one was for when Mrs Averill was alive, and Miss Hewel said, "There was a Mrs Averill?" and the keeper said, "Before me," and Miss Hewel wrote that down too, not in the inventory, the keeper thought, but in some margin of her own.

She counted the copper pans and the iron ones. She counted the knives and tested two on her thumbnail and said, "Somebody keeps these," and the keeper did not say that the house did, because it was not true. The house finished the edge. She began it. Every Monday. The house had never once started a knife.

She counted the range: one, Wellstood, black-leaded, going. She counted the fire in it, as the keeper had known she would: "fire, laid and lit," though she did not ask who had lit it and the keeper did not say.

And then she came to the dresser.

It was the big dresser on the north wall, the one that had come with the house, with plates along its top shelves and three long drawers underneath and two cupboards under those. Miss Hewel did the plates first. Then the cupboards: flour crock, sugar crock, the tin with the tea, the tin that had been for tea and was now for buttons. Then the drawers, left to right.

Left drawer: cloths, tea, folded. Twelve.

Middle drawer: cutlery for the good set, in green baize. Miss Hewel counted every fork.

Right drawer.

The keeper had known it was coming since the hall. She had known since yesterday, if she were honest, since Miss Hewel had opened the trunks in the box room and counted the moth. She had thought about moving it in the night. She had lain in her bed with its three and a half inches and thought about getting up and taking the almanac out of the right-hand drawer and putting it in her left apron pocket with Averill's four pages and the sweet peas, so that it would be one of her personal effects and not one of the house's things. She had not got up. She had fallen asleep instead.

Miss Hewel opened the drawer.

Brown paper, folded, for parcels. A ball of twine. Candle-ends in a saucer. And at the back, on its side, the almanac: *Mattock's Gardening Almanack and Seed Book*, the year on the spine faded to nothing, its cover soft as cloth, its pages swollen where steam from forty years of kettles had got at them.

Miss Hewel took it out.

"Almanac," she said. "Gardening." She turned it over. She turned it back. She opened it, because she opened everything, and the keeper watched her face.

It opened where it always opened, at the four ruled leaves at the back that somebody, long before the keeper, had used for a list. The house's list. Wind the clocks. Air the beds. Black the range Thursday. Turn the mattresses at Lady Day and Michaelmas. And below it, in a different hand, a smaller hand, a hand that Miss Hewel had seen yesterday on the clock schedule pinned inside the pantry door:

Thu. Nothing was keeping me.

And under that, from Sunday:

L-c. Finished with.

Miss Hewel read for longer than a list deserved. Then she closed the book, carefully, with one finger between the pages and then without it, and held it in both hands.

"This isn't the house's," she said.

It was not a question, so the keeper did not answer it.

"The front is," Miss Hewel said. "The seed tables. The planting calendar. That's a book that came with the house. I'd put it down as a book. But somebody's been keeping a list in the back for a long time, and then somebody else has." She did not look at the keeper. She looked at the almanac. "I don't inventory diaries. I said so yesterday. Personal effects aren't in."

"It isn't a diary."

"No?"

"It's the house's list. I only wrote two lines."

"Two lines," said Miss Hewel, "is how most diaries start."

The kitchen was quiet. The range ticked as it heated. Down the hall the six going clocks went on going and the long-case stood at twenty past eleven.

"So," Miss Hewel said. "Whose is it?"

The keeper had been asked that question, or questions with its shape, three times now. *What's your name? Are you in the inventory? Whose is it?* She had answered the first two with *not yet* and *not today,* and both of those had been true, and both had cost her something to say, and she had been proud of both of them in a way she did not entirely like.

This one she could not answer with a time.

She held out her hand.

"Mine," she said.

Miss Hewel put the almanac into it. She did not write anything. She shut the drawer, which now had brown paper and twine and candle-ends, and said, "Right-hand drawer, dresser. Brown paper, twine, candle-ends," and wrote those, and went on to the scullery as if nothing at all had happened, and the keeper stood in the kitchen with the almanac in her hand and found her hand was steady.

She put it in her left apron pocket. It did not fit. It was too big; it stuck out at the top, its soft spine against her ribs, the four pages and the seeds pushed down under it. She left it sticking out.

The house, she noticed, did not move to take it from her. Nothing pulled. Nothing finished.

They went outside at noon.

The coal-house: one. Coal, a quarter-ton, Dunnet's, delivered Monday. Miss Hewel did not count the coal. "I'm not a lunatic," she said. Shovel, one. Scuttle, two, one holed.

The privy: one. Miss Hewel looked at the brick holding the door and said, "Thank you," with feeling, and went in, and came out, and wrote.

The wash-house: copper, one, mangle, one, dolly-tub, one, tin bath, one, the bath the keeper had been bathing in for longer than she could remember and that Tobias had dragged indoors twice now without asking

where it went and been embarrassed about both times.

The pump, which was a going concern.

The potting shed, last, because it stood at the far end of the south wall where the sweet peas were, eleven of them in the ground now and the soil still dark where she had watered it at dawn.

Miss Hewel stopped at the sweet peas.

"Somebody's planting," she said.

"Yes."

"In October."

"They winter," the keeper said. "If the wall's warm. And it is."

"How many?"

"Eleven."

Miss Hewel looked along the row, the eleven little disturbances in the earth, each one marked with a split stick. She did not write them down. You do not inventory a thing that isn't up yet. Then she looked at the keeper's apron, at the almanac sticking out of the left pocket, and the keeper saw her do the sum.

"And the rest?"

"In my pocket."

"Why?"

"I haven't decided."

Miss Hewel made a small sound that might have been approval and might have been the cold, and went into the shed.

It was dim inside and smelled of sacking and old earth. Pots, clay, stacked: Miss Hewel counted them by stacks and multiplied. Trowels, two. Dibber, one. A fork with a broken tine. Seed trays, six. Raffia in a hank on a nail.

And on the shelf at the back, under a fold of newspaper gone yellow, something the keeper had not looked at in years and had stopped seeing: a coil of pale, flat stuff, tied round with string, and beside it a short wooden peg with a point and a hook of bent wire.

Miss Hewel lifted the newspaper.

"Well," she said.

"What is it?"

"You don't know?" Miss Hewel took down the coil. It was stiff and dry, and some of the outer turns had cracked. "This is cane. Chair cane. Rattan, split. And that's a peg for driving it and a hook for pulling it through." She turned the coil in her hands. "Somebody meant to do your chairs."

The keeper did not say anything.

"Not recently," Miss Hewel said. "This newspaper's—" she peered at it "—it's no date I can read. Old. Somebody bought cane for five chairs and a peg and a hook and put them on a shelf, and then didn't."

"Mr Averill."

"Was he a man who'd cane a chair?"

The keeper thought of the pencil with teeth marks. She thought of the forty years of the house she had not been in, and of Mrs Averill's plates, and of the five chairs with their seats out in the box room, waiting.

"I don't know," she said. "I don't know what he'd have done. I only know what he did."

Miss Hewel held the coil a moment longer. Then she put it down on the bench, not back on the shelf, and wrote in her ledger, and said aloud as she wrote: "Cane, chair, one coil, dry. Peg, one. Hook, one." She looked up. "It'll need soaking. If anybody wanted it. It's no good dry. It snaps. You soak it in warm water an hour, two, and it goes soft and you can do anything with it." She shut the ledger. "I'm only saying. In case."

"In case."

"In case somebody could learn," said Miss Hewel, who could not have read the blue book, who had never seen it, who did not know it was under the keeper's mattress at the place where three and a half inches became four.

At the gate it was three o'clock and the cart was at the bend.

"That's the lot," Miss Hewel said. "Three hundred and eleven things upstairs. Four hundred and two down and out. Seven hundred and thirteen. Mr Pryor will have it typed Monday." She put the ledger in her case. "And the question of staff not settled."

"Not settled."

"I'll tell you what I'll tell him, because I don't like telling people things behind their backs. I'll tell him it's a sound house. Sounder than it's got any right to be, after forty years with one man and one woman in it. I'll tell him somebody keeps it. I won't tell him who, because I wasn't told." She snapped the case. "And I'll tell him the long-case is stopped by hand, and not broken."

"Thank you."

Miss Hewel looked at her for a long moment, the way she had looked at the barometer that said *Change*.

"You've a book in your pocket," she said. "And twelve sweet peas, and four pages of something, and a fuse, if I'm any judge of the shape of things through cloth, and I am. That's a lot to carry about a house you're not in the inventory of."

The keeper put her hand on the almanac.

"It's what I've got."

"It's a start," said Miss Hewel. She got up into the cart. "Seven hundred and thirteen, and a start. Good afternoon."

The cart went. The keeper did not stand at the gate after it this time. She turned and went up the path at once, past the sweet peas, round to the shed.

The cane was where Miss Hewel had left it, on the bench and not on the shelf.

She carried it into the scullery. She did not let the house fill the basin. She worked the pump herself, and put the kettle on the range herself, and when the kettle sang she poured it into the basin and cooled it with the pump until it was the warmth of a bath, of her own hand, and then she put the coil in, string and all, and pressed it down until the water closed over it.

It floated. She weighted it with a flat-iron.

Tobias came in at half past five and found her sitting on the scullery step with her hands in her lap, looking at a basin.

"What's that?"

"Cane."

"For what?"

"The chairs."

He looked at the basin. He looked at the almanac sticking out of her pocket. He opened his mouth and she watched him decide, as Miss Hewel had decided twice, not to ask the next question.

"Do you know how?" he said instead.

"No."

"Nor do I." He sat on the step beside her, not too close. The water in the basin was very still. Somewhere under the flat-iron the cane was drinking. "My mother had a man come once. For a nursing chair. He did it in the yard. It's all one strand under and one over, and then you go back the other way, and then the diagonals. I watched him the whole afternoon. I was seven."

"Do you remember it?"

"Some." He thought. "He wet his thumb a lot."

She laughed. It came out of her before she could stop it, short and surprised, and Tobias looked at her and then away very quickly, the way you look away from a bird so it won't go.

"Tomorrow," she said.

"Tomorrow's Saturday. I'm at Pryor's."

"Then I'll start. And you can tell me what I've done wrong."

"I'll not know what you've done wrong."

"Then you can tell me it looks all right," said the keeper. "And I'll know you're lying, and it won't matter."

The envelope was on the kitchen table, face down, where it had been. She did not touch it tonight. She did not wipe under it. She passed it on her way to the stairs and looked at it and let it be, and that, she thought, was a different thing from leaving it.

In the blue book, by the penny candle:

Miss Hewel. 713. Not me. The almanac, mine.

L-c sound. Not broken.

And under that, after a while:

Soaking.

Chapter Twenty-Five



Tobias went at seven, with bread in his pocket and the collar he hated. She watched him to the gate. He turned at the gate, which he did not usually do, and lifted one hand, and she lifted one back, and then he was gone down the lane and the house was hers in the particular way it was only hers on a Saturday.

She did not like the word *hers*. She noticed that she had used it and let it stand.

The cane had soaked all night. When she lifted the flat-iron off it the coil rose a little in the water, loosened, the way a sleeper's hand loosens. She drew one end out and it came long and pale and dripping, and it bent over

her finger without cracking. Miss Hewel had said it would. Miss Hewel had said a great many things in two days and none of them had been wrong.

She chose the chair.

There were four without seats. They stood in the back passage where they had stood since before her, she supposed, since nobody in the house had ever said otherwise. Their frames were sound. Their rails were drilled all round with little holes, black at the rim from old cane that had rotted and been pulled. One had a split in the back rail, mended once with glue and failed again. One was a child's height. One was plain beech and quite ugly. The fourth had a curl carved into the top of the back, a small thing, like a fern that had not finished opening.

She took the ugly one. If she ruined it nobody would grieve.

She carried it into the kitchen and set it on the table, upside down at first, then right way up, then upside down again, because she did not know which way a person was meant to work and the chair did not say. In the end she sat it upright on the flags by the range, where the light came in over the sink, and pulled her own chair in front of it, and sat with the wet cane across her knees.

The envelope was on the table above her. Face down. She did not look at it. She was aware of not looking at it the way you are aware of a person in a room who has not spoken yet.

One strand under and one over, Tobias had said, *and then you go back the other way, and then the diagonals.*

She began with the first part, because it was the only part she had.

The holes ran round the seat frame, front rail, back rail, the two side rails. She counted them. Of course she counted them. Fourteen along the front. Eleven along the back, because the seat narrowed. Twelve down each side. Forty-nine holes, and the corner holes shared between two rails, so perhaps forty-five, depending on how you counted corners, and she sat with that a moment, not liking that it depended.

Then she stopped counting and put the end of the cane down through the second hole on the back rail.

It went in. It came out underneath. She did not know how to keep it from pulling back through, and she held it with her thumb while she thought, and the thought that came was *a peg*. There had been a peg on the bench in the shed beside the coil, a little whittled thing like a clothes-peg without the spring. She had not brought it. She went and fetched it, wet-handed, through the yard, and came back and pushed it into the hole beside the cane and the cane held.

So that was the first thing she learned. You do not hold it with your thumb. You hold it with a peg, and your thumb is free for something else.

She carried the strand across the open seat to the front rail, and down through the opposite hole, and up through the next, and back across to the back rail. It sagged. She pulled it tight. She pulled it too tight and the back rail creaked and she let go at once, as if the chair had cried out, and sat back with both hands up.

Nothing broke.

She tried again, not as tight. Then less. The cane lay across the seat in two pale lines like the first lines a child makes on a slate, not yet a letter, only the promise of where a letter would go.

She went on.

At some point in the first hour she noticed that the house was not helping.

It was a small noticing, and she nearly missed it. The range had wanted feeding at nine and she had fed it herself, and not thought about it. The kettle had wanted filling. The cat had come in and wanted milk. She had done these things with one eye on the chair, standing, setting the cane down across her seat so it would not dry, and coming back, and it was only when she reached for the cane and found it stiffening at one end that she understood she had been gone too long, and that no hand but hers had been turning the house while she was gone.

The house did not fill the kettle when she was busy with something it had not asked for.

She sat with that.

She did not know if it was a punishment or a courtesy. She did not know if the house knew the difference. She wet the stiff end of the cane in the basin and it softened, and she understood at least that much, that a thing which has dried can be made to give again if you are patient and do not force it, and she was not sure whether she was thinking about the cane.

She wet her thumb. She did it before she thought, and then she thought of Tobias at seven in a yard in Lewisham watching a man do it all afternoon, and she smiled down at her own hand.

He wet his thumb a lot. So that the cane would slide. So that the strand going through the hole would not catch on the rough edge. So that it would not split.

There was a reason for everything a man did all afternoon, if you watched him long enough. Tobias had watched and kept the gesture without the reason. She had the reason now and no man to watch. Between the two of them, perhaps, there was one caner.

By eleven she had the first course across, front to back, all the way. Fourteen strands, more or less, because the narrowing had made her skip the outer holes at the back and she was not sure that was right.

It looked like a harp. It looked like a gate. It did not look like a seat. You could have put your fist through it anywhere.

She started the second course, side to side, laid across the top of the first. Not woven. Tobias had said *then you go back the other way*, and she took him at his word and laid the strands across, over everything, and pegged and pulled and pegged. Twelve strands. It made a grid of square holes, each one the size of a sugar lump. She could not have sat on it. A cat could not have sat on it. But it was a different thing from the harp. It had two directions in it now.

She stopped and ate a piece of bread standing up, and drank water from the dipper, and looked at what she had made.

It was crooked. The strands on the left were closer together than the strands on the right. Two of them crossed where they should have lain side by side. One had a kink in it near the front rail where she had pulled it

round the edge too hard, and the kink had gone white, the way a fingernail goes white when you press it, and she thought that one would break when anybody sat.

She did not take it out.

She noticed that she did not take it out. In any other room of this house, at any other hour of her life that she could remember, a kinked strand would have come out at once and been put right, and the putting right would have happened before she had decided to do it, and she would only have found the corrected thing afterwards, done, the way she found her bed made three and a bit in.

The kink stayed. She looked at it and it looked back, white and slightly ugly, and nothing in her rose up to fix it.

Started. Not finished.

She had written that about the sweet peas.

At noon she went out to the south wall to look at them.

Eleven in the ground. She knelt on the path and looked at the bare soil where each had gone in, and of course there was nothing to see, not yet, it had been days, not weeks. There was a mark where her finger had pushed each one down. There was a robin on the wall who had been watching her plant them and was watching her now, with a robin's judgement, which is total and brief.

The other twelve were still in her pocket. Her left pocket, with the carrier and Averill's four pages and now the almanac sticking out of the top. The pocket had got heavy. Miss Hewel had looked at it twice yesterday and

said nothing either time.

She put her hand in and felt the seeds. Small and hard, like shot, like the heads of nails. She could put them in now. The ground was the same ground. The wall was the same wall. There was no reason not to.

She took her hand out again, empty.

It was not that she was saving them. She did not know what she would be saving them for. It was only that the eleven were an experiment, and an experiment with all its seed in the ground is not an experiment, it is a decision, and she was not ready for the decision. She wanted to see what eleven did first. She wanted to know what she was choosing.

The robin went. She went back in.

The diagonals were where it went wrong.

Tobias had said *and then the diagonals* and nothing after. There was nothing after. He had been seven. He had watched a man go corner to corner in a yard in Lewisham and kept that the man went corner to corner. He had not kept how.

She sat with the cane across her knees and looked at the grid, two directions laid over each other, and tried to see where a third could go.

Corner to corner. From the back left to the front right. Over and under. That was the word she had: *weaving*. The first two courses were only laid. The diagonal was where it began to be woven, where a strand went over one and under the next and held the others in place by passing through

them. She could feel that it must be so. A seat of laid strands would slip and shift under anybody. A woven one would hold, because each strand would be holding every strand it crossed.

She put the end down through the back corner hole, and pegged it, and brought it up across the grid, and tried to go under the first strand it met.

The first strand it met was two strands, because her laid courses had doubled near the corner where she had skipped holes. Under two. Over two. Under one. Then a crossing where she could not tell which strand was the side-to-side and which the front-to-back, and the diagonal had to choose, and she chose wrong, and three strands later she could see she had chosen wrong because the diagonal was riding on top of everything like a bridge over a river and holding nothing.

She pulled it back.

She did pull this one back. Not because it was ugly. The kink was ugly and it stayed. She pulled this back because it did not do the thing it was there to do, and that was a different reason, and she felt the difference as she drew the long wet strand back through the grid, inch by inch, feeling it catch and release.

She began again. Under. Over. Under. Over. Very slowly now, with her wet thumb lifting each strand for the diagonal to pass beneath, and her other hand feeding the end through, and her lips moving, *under, over*, the way Mrs Pell's lips moved over a column of figures.

It took her until the clock in the hall struck two to get one diagonal from corner to corner.

When it was done she sat back.

It held. She could see it hold. Where it went under, the strands above it pressed it down, and where it went over, it pressed down the strands below, and the little square sugar-lump holes were not squares any more where it crossed them, they were two triangles, and she put her finger on the place where it crossed the middle and pressed, and the grid did not give the way it had given before.

One strand. One hundred and some to go, if she had counted the diagonals right, and in two directions, and she had not counted the diagonals right, she was sure of it, there was no way to count them right in a seat that narrowed.

She did not mind.

She sat on the kitchen flags with her back to the table leg, with a crooked chair and a kinked strand and one diagonal in front of her, and wet hands, and she did not mind at all, and this was so unfamiliar that for a moment she thought she must be unwell.

At three she wound the clocks.

Eight of them. She had a schedule now, in the blue book; she had written it out for Miss Hewel, who had asked, and having written it down for somebody else she found she followed it more carefully, the way a recipe written for a guest is followed more carefully than one you know by heart. The bracket clock in the study first. The two carriage clocks. The French one on the drawing-room mantel, which ran fast and needed its pendulum let down a turn every Sunday, and she let it down a turn though it was Saturday, because she would be busy tomorrow and the clock would not mind a day.

She stood a long while in front of the long-case in the hall.

Stopped by hand, Miss Hewel had said. *Not broken.* The pendulum hung still behind its little glass window. The hands said twenty past eleven. The case was sound. The weights were up, she could see the chains, it would go if somebody set it going.

Somebody had stopped it. A hand had opened that door and laid a finger on that pendulum and held it until it was still. She knew whose hand. She had known since Mrs Averill's second set of plates, since the plate in the right pocket, since before. She did not know when, or why, or whether he had stood where she was standing.

She did not open the door.

She put her palm flat against the case, low down, where the wood was polished pale by a hundred years of people putting their palms there, and felt nothing move inside, and took her hand away.

Not today. She did not say it. It was there in the hall without her needing to say it.

The envelope was where she had left it.

She came back into the kitchen with the clock key still in her hand and stood at the table and looked at the back of it. Buff. Gant & Pryor on the flap in brown ink, a clerk's hand. A little ring on it now where somebody, she supposed Tobias, had stood a cup too near. She had wiped under it on Thursday and not since.

She sat down at the table in front of it.

She had decided nothing. She sat in front of it the way you sit down near somebody on a bench, not to speak, only to be near, and see whether you want to speak.

It had been written last September. A fortnight before he left. She was in it. That was all Tobias had said and all she had let him say. A document a man writes a fortnight before he goes, and puts a woman into, and gives to a solicitor, can only be one of a very few kinds of document, and she had lain awake running through the kinds, and each kind was a different way of having been decided about.

That was the thing she minded. Not what it said. That it said it at all. That somewhere in a buff envelope a year old there was a sentence with her in it, and the sentence had been finished before she had been asked.

She turned it over.

It was only the front. *To be opened by the keeper of the house, or by T. Lear Esq., in the event* — and then a fold, and the rest of the line went into the fold.

The keeper of the house. Not her name. He had not had her name to put. Nobody had. She was not sure she had it.

Or by T. Lear. So it had been for either of them. Tobias could have opened it at Pryor's office and read it on the walk back and come in knowing. He had not. He had carried it all the way here sealed, and laid it in front of her, and gone up to his bed and made it badly.

She sat with that a long time.

She did not open it. But she left it face up. When she got up from the table she did not turn it back over, and the house did not turn it back over either, and when she came past it again at four, carrying the basin to refresh the

water, it was still face up, *the keeper of the house*, looking at the ceiling.

She did three more diagonals before the light went.

They were faster. Not fast. Each one taught her a crossing she had not met in the one before, a place where the doubled strands at the back made her go under two, a place where the kinked strand had shifted and she had to lift it with a fingernail. Her thumb was sore. Her fingertips had gone soft and wrinkled from the water and there was a red line across the inside of her first finger where the cane had drawn across it a hundred times.

She looked at the red line with interest. She did not remember the last time anything in the house had marked her.

At half past five the gate went. She heard Tobias on the path, and the scullery door, and his boots off, and then he was in the kitchen doorway with his collar undone and his hair flat on one side where his hat had been.

He looked at the chair.

He looked at her on the floor beside it, and at her hands, and at the basin, and at the envelope face up on the table, and she saw him see the envelope and not say anything about it, and she loved him a little for that, in a plain way, the way you love a well-made door.

"Well," he said.

"Tell me it looks all right."

He came and crouched beside the chair. He was quiet for a long while. He put out one finger and touched the kinked strand, the white one, gently, and took his finger away.

"It doesn't look all right," he said.

"No."

"It looks like somebody's doing it."

She did not answer that. She could not have. He did not seem to need her to.

"The man in the yard," he said, "he had a stick. A flat bit of wood, like a lolly stick but bigger. He'd push it in where it was tight to open a gap." He looked at her hands. "Your thumb's bleeding."

It was, a little, at the side of the nail.

"I'll make one," she said. "A stick."

"I can whittle." He stood up. "I'll make it tonight. I'll not know what shape."

"Make it the shape of a lolly stick but bigger."

He laughed. He went to wash. She heard the pump, and him singing something under his breath that stopped as soon as it started, the way he always stopped, as if singing in a house were a kind of trespass.

She did not put the chair back in the passage. She left it by the range, crooked, a quarter caned, the four diagonals pale and the rest of it a sugar-lump grid, and the kink, and the peg still stuck in the back corner hole. A person coming into the kitchen would see it and know that something was half-done here.

She thought the house would mind. She waited to feel it mind.

What she felt instead, standing at the sink with her sore hand under the pump, was the house being very quiet, the way a room is quiet when somebody in it is listening.

In the blue book, by the penny candle:

Chair. Ugly one. 4 diag.

Kink stays.

House didn't fill kettle. Did it myself.

L-c — palm on it. Not today.

Envelope face up. For "the keeper of the house". Not my name. Or T.L. He didn't.

And under that, after a while, smaller:

My hand is marked.

Chapter Twenty-Six



The bell began at a quarter to ten, as it always did, and she was on the kitchen floor with the chair between her knees when it started.

She had put her bonnet out. She had put it out the night before, on the dresser, with the gloves folded inside it the way she had folded them every Saturday night for as long as she had been in the house. She looked at it now from the floor. It sat on the dresser like a small grey animal that had come in and not been told where to go.

The tenor was flat. It had been flat all winter. Mrs Pell said the ringers knew and did not care, and Mr Dunnet said the ringers did not know and would not care if they did, and between the two of them she had always supposed the truth was a flat bell and nobody minding. She listened to it

now, all the way through the call, the five good bells and the one that came in a hair low, every time, like a man who sits down just after everybody else.

She did not get up.

When the bells stopped the house was very quiet. She waited for it to do something. A door, a draught, the kettle shifting on the range. It did nothing. She found she had been holding the end of the cane so tightly that it had left a white groove across her palm, and she let it go.

"You're not going," Tobias said from the doorway.

He had his good coat on. He had shaved, badly, and there was a nick under his jaw with a scrap of paper stuck to it.

"No."

"Are you ill?"

"No."

He looked at the bonnet on the dresser, and at her, and at the chair. Then he took his coat off and hung it on the back of the door, on the hook where it did not belong, and she did not tell him.

"I'll not go either, then," he said. "I only go because you go."

"That's not a reason."

"It's the one I had."

He had made the stick.

He brought it out of his pocket after breakfast, wrapped in a handkerchief as though it were something that might be cold. Ash, he said, from the woodpile, a split piece without knots. He had sat up with it. She could see that he had sat up with it: there were shavings in the turn-up of his trousers and a blister coming on the side of his first finger.

It was not one stick. It was four.

He laid them on the table in a row. The first was long and flat and wide, too wide, she could see it at once. The second was narrower and pointed like a paper knife. The third was the length of her hand, flat, with one end thinned and rounded and the other end left square to push with. The fourth was very small, a sliver, and he had clearly lost his nerve on it halfway through.

"I didn't know what shape," he said. "So I made them all and then I went back to that one." He touched the third. "I did a bit more to it after. It's better than it was."

She picked it up. It was still pale and smelled of the woodpile. The rounded end was smooth. He had sanded it on something, the hearthstone perhaps, and there was a faint grey bloom on it.

"You went back to the third," she said.

"The first two were wrong. I could tell they were wrong when I'd done them. I couldn't tell what right was till I'd done wrong twice."

She turned it over in her fingers. She thought of the almanac in her left pocket, the old list, everything in it written as though the person writing had known from the beginning how it would come out.

"Thank you," she said.

He went red. He took the other three and put them in the drawer with the string, all together, as if they were spoons.

She did not sweep.

She noticed it at eleven. The broom was in the corner by the scullery door where it lived, and the flags were what they always were on a Sunday morning, a little grit by the back step, a little ash at the hearth. Every Sunday of her life in the house she had swept after church and before dinner. Today there had been no church, so there was no after, and the broom stood where it was.

Tobias saw her looking at it.

"Shall I?"

"I'm not sweeping today," she said.

She heard herself say it. It sounded like something a person might say. She went back to the chair.

The second diagonals went the other way.

That was all Tobias could tell her and all she had needed, it turned out. The first set ran from the back left corner to the front right. The second ran from back right to front left, and where the first set had gone over and under the grid, the second set had to go under and over, so that each strand locked the strands it met. If you got it right the seat held itself. If you got it wrong nothing showed until somebody sat.

She learned that the first time she got it wrong.

She had done three strands of the second set. They looked well. They lay pale and tight across the grid and across the first diagonals, and she was pleased with them, and she pressed the heel of her hand down on the seat to feel it, and the middle strand slid.

Not much. A quarter of an inch. Enough. She looked at it and saw what she had done: over where she should have gone under, at one crossing in the middle, so the strand rode on top of the weave instead of in it. From above it looked like all the others. Under weight it moved.

"Somebody's weight finds it," she said aloud.

Tobias looked up from the table, where he was reading the newspaper he had bought yesterday in Horne and not yet let himself open.

"What does?"

"Where you've lied."

He put the paper down and came and looked, and she showed him with the stick, the one crossing, and he nodded slowly.

"Can you take it out?"

"Yes."

She took it out. She took out all three, because the two on either side had been threaded past the bad crossing and leaned on it, and once you took out one you could not trust the others. It took a quarter of an hour to undo what had taken an hour to do. The cane came out kinked and grey at the bends and she put it back in the basin to soften.

She did not feel what she expected to feel. She expected to feel that the morning had been wasted. What she felt was something closer to the moment when you find the mistake in a column of figures, the small loosening behind the breastbone.

The third stick was right. She could feel the third stick being right. The rounded end went into the weave and opened the gap a fraction and held it open while she passed the strand through, and the square end pushed the strand home. She did the second set again, slowly. By two o'clock she had finished the first set entirely and half the second.

The kink was still in the first course. The white one, the strand that had cracked along its length on Saturday and not broken. She looked at it every time she reached across. It was ugly. She pressed on it. It held.

"That one's ugly," Tobias said.

"It holds."

"I didn't say it didn't."

They had cold mutton at three because nobody had cooked, and afterwards Tobias said he had something to show her and went into the study.

He came back with one of the account books from behind the lowest shelf. Not the black ones. A green one, smaller, with a cracked spine and a loop of red tape round it that had stuck to itself.

"I was going through for Mr Pryor," he said. "The years he wanted. This isn't one of them. I only opened it because it was green."

He opened it at a page he had marked with a spill of paper.

The columns were the house's columns. Coal. Candles. Wages, in a sum she knew to the penny because it was the sum she had been paid for longer than she could count. Below them, in the same ink, a line on its own.

Microscope, of Mr Garrod, Canterbury. £11. For her.

She read it twice.

"Eleven pounds," Tobias said. "That's a great deal of money for a microscope. My mother's whole year was eleven pounds once."

"There isn't a microscope in the house."

"I know. I've been through the inventory. Miss Hewel's. Seven hundred and thirteen things and no microscope."

She looked at the date at the head of the page. She knew the plate lists better than she knew the account books, and she counted backward from the second plate set, the year Mrs Averill's china had come in its straw, the year she had always understood as the beginning of Mrs Averill. This was the year before.

"Who's her?" Tobias said.

"I don't know."

"Not Mrs Averill. Not yet."

"No."

She turned the pages back. Before the microscope line the hand was one hand, small and level, the hand that had written the oldest plate lists she had ever read, the lists she had always taken to be his. After it, a few

pages on, the hand changed. Only a little. The loops on the *f*s. The way the sevens were crossed.

"Somebody else kept the book after," she said.

"Or he changed how he wrote."

"People don't."

"I did," Tobias said. "At the shipping office. They made me." He looked at the page. "But I see what you mean."

She shut the book. She did not put it back. She put it on the table beside the envelope, the green book beside the buff paper, and she put her hand flat on the envelope.

"Read me the flap," she said.

He had read it out to her on Saturday, the part above the fold. *To be opened by the keeper of the house, or by T. Lear Esq., in the event—* He had stopped there because the fold stopped there, and because she had told him to.

He turned it over carefully, as if it might be hot. He did not open it. The flap had a line written along it, inside the fold, which you could read if you lifted it a little without breaking the seal. He lifted it.

"*In the event of my not returning by Lady Day,*" he read.

Then he set it down.

Neither of them said anything for a while. She could hear the long-case not ticking in the hall. She had heard it not ticking for so long that she forgot it was a sound.

"He wrote it in September," Tobias said at last. "Mr Pryor said September. A fortnight before he went."

"Yes."

"Lady Day's the twenty-fifth of March."

"Yes."

"It's the middle of April."

"I know what month it is."

"I know you do," he said. "I'm only saying it so it's said."

She looked at the envelope under her hand. *In the event of.* He had written it as though it were a thing that might or might not happen, a thing he had not decided. He had written it a fortnight before he went, knowing he was going, and he had given himself until Lady Day and had not come.

"It was a date," she said.

"What was?"

"I thought it was a feeling. I thought it was something he'd left me to know when I knew it. It was a date. He put a date on it." She took her hand off the envelope. "It's been past for three weeks."

"Will you open it?"

"Not alone."

He waited.

"It says the keeper of the house, or you. It doesn't say which. I'm not going to open it and then tell you what it says, and I'm not going to have you open it and tell me. I want both of us to read it at the same time."

"All right."

"Not today."

"You keep saying not today," he said, not unkindly. "I'm not hurrying you. Only I'd like to know when today is."

She looked across at the chair by the range. One set of diagonals finished. Half the other. The kink white in the first course, holding.

"When the chair's done," she said.

He looked at the chair a long time. Then he nodded, as if that were a date too, and something he could write down.

In the evening she went out to the south wall with the last of the light.

Three of the eleven were up. Three small bent necks pushing through the soil, pale green, folded over on themselves the way new sweet peas are, as if they were ashamed to be seen arriving. She crouched and looked at them and did not touch them.

The other twelve seeds were in her left pocket, with Averill's four pages and the almanac, rattling a little when she stood. She had thought she would plant them today. She had thought it at breakfast and again after the mutton. She put her hand in the pocket and closed it round them and

found she had not decided, and that not deciding did not feel the way it used to, like a thing the house was waiting on. It only felt like a pocket with seeds in it.

She went in.

In the blue book, by the penny candle:

No church. Bell still flat.

T's stick. He went back to the third.

Didn't sweep.

Pulled out 3. Somebody's weight finds it.

Diag 1 done. Diag 2 half.

Green book. Microscope £11. "For her." Not in house. Year before 2nd plates. Hand changes.

Lady Day.

And under that, after a while:

It was a date.

Chapter Twenty-Seven



On Monday the washing should have been done.

She knew it the way she knew the stairs in the dark. Monday was copper and blue-bag and the mangle in the yard, the sheets out on the line by ten if the wind was west, in by four, damped and rolled by supper. The copper had been lit on a Monday morning every week she could remember, and she could remember a great many weeks. It was not a thing she had decided. It was a thing that had been decided for her so long ago that it had grown into her like the cane into its own coil.

She lit the copper.

She found she had lit it before she had thought about it, and she stood with the spill still burning in her fingers and looked at the little flame catching under the brick, and she thought: well. That's done now. She let it burn. There was no sense letting good coal go to waste because she had caught herself at a habit. She put the sheets in, the two off her own bed and Tobias's one, and the pillow slips, and she put the lid on and left it.

Then she went back to the chair.

The second set of diagonals went the other way, right to left, over and under across the first. She had done half of it on Sunday. The half she had done was not good. She could see that now in the grey morning light, which was kinder than candlelight to everything except mistakes. Two of the strands had twisted, so that the shiny side of the cane lay down instead of up, and a third had gone in a hole too far over and made a little crooked lane through the pattern.

She sat with Tobias's third stick in her hand and looked at it for a long while.

Then she took the crooked one out.

It came out more easily than it had gone in. They always did. She drew it back through hole by hole, wetting it with a sponge as she went so it would not split, and when she had it loose it lay in her lap curled up on itself like something ashamed. She soaked it again in the basin and put the flat-iron on it.

The two twisted strands she left.

She looked at them a long time before she decided. They were not wrong in the way the crooked one had been wrong. They went over what they should go over and under what they should go under. They did their work. It was only that they showed their dull side to the world, the side that should have been hidden, and anyone who knew chairs would see it and know the person who had caned it had not known what she was doing.

"Well, I didn't," she said, out loud, to nobody.

The house did not answer. She had stopped expecting it to.

Tobias came down at half past seven and stood in the scullery door with his braces hanging.

"Is that the copper?"

"Yes."

"It's Monday," he said, as if that were news to both of them.

"I lit it before I thought."

"Are you going to do the washing?"

"I'm going to do the sheets. They're in now. I'm not going to do the rest."

He considered this. "What's the rest?"

She opened her mouth and found she could tell him. She could tell him all of it. The tablecloths and the dusters and the glass-cloths and Mr Averill's shirts, which had been washed every Monday since the autumn whether anyone had worn them or not, because they were in the press and Monday was the day for them. His collars, which had their own starch. The

curtains from the front room, which came down on the first Monday of every second month. The stair-carpet strips. The covers off the chairs in the drawing room, which nobody sat on.

She did not tell him. She said, "Shirts, mostly."

"Whose shirts?"

"His."

Tobias looked at her. "Has he been wearing them?"

"No."

"Then they're clean."

"They're washed on Mondays."

"Why?"

She thought about it honestly, because he had asked honestly.

"So that if he came in on a Tuesday," she said, "there'd be a clean one."

Tobias did not say anything for a moment. Then he came and sat at the table across from her, on a chair that had a seat, and he looked at the one between her knees, and at the strand soaking under the iron.

"He's not coming on a Tuesday," he said. Very gently. As gently as he had said Lady Day.

"I know."

"I'll do the mangle for you, then. For the sheets."

"You don't know how."

"You'll show me," he said. "Or I'll do it wrong and you'll pull it out. You're good at that now."

She looked up at him and he was smiling, only a little, the way he did when he was not sure if he was allowed.

"Yes," she said. "I am."

He was bad at the mangle. He fed the first sheet in crooked and it came out the other side in a long grey rope with one end still dripping, and he stood there holding it with such a face that she laughed, which she had done twice now in three days and could not account for. She showed him how to fold the sheet in three lengthways first and feed it flat, how to keep one hand on the handle and the other on the sheet, how to let the rollers do it and not pull. He did the second one better. The third he did nearly well.

She pegged them out herself. The wind was not west. It was north-east and sharp and smelled of nothing, and the sheets cracked on the line like sails in a picture. She stood under them with the peg-bag on her hip and the wet cloth slapping her face and she thought, I have done this a thousand times and I have never once looked at it.

She looked at it now. Three sheets. White, mostly. One with a darn in the corner that she had made herself, years ago, in a thread that did not quite match. She had always meant to unpick it and do it again. She did not think she would.

When she came in the shirts were still in the press, folded, clean, unworn. She opened the press and looked at them. She closed it.

The copper was still warm. She let it go out.

The strand had soaked by noon.

She put it back in, right to left, hole to hole, and this time it went where it should. She did not hurry. She had learned on Saturday that hurrying was what put the kinks in. She wet her thumb, as Tobias's mother's caner had done, and smoothed each pass as she made it, and kept the shiny side up by turning the strand in her fingers before every hole, a half-turn, so the cane would not twist on itself. It took a long time. She did not mind.

The house was quiet around her. The clocks went. Seven of them. She had wound them on Sunday night, the seven that went, and the long-case in the hall stood with its hands at twenty past eleven and its pendulum still, and she did not go and touch it.

By three the second diagonals were done.

She sat back and looked at it.

It was not a good seat. It was an honest one. The kink from Saturday was there in the first course, white, plain, holding. The two dull strands lay side by side in the second diagonals like two people who had come to a party in the wrong clothes and decided to stay anyway. The pattern was there: the little eight-sided holes that a caned seat makes when it is done right, the ones that let the light through in a star. She held the chair up to the window and the light came through in stars, uneven, some of them a little squashed, every one of them there.

There was one thing left. The binding.

She had watched Miss Hewel's finger move round the rim of the old seats in the back passage, and she had seen what was there: a wide flat strip of cane laid all round the edge, over the holes, and held down by a thin strand looped through every second hole. It covered the ends. It covered all the places where the work started and stopped. It was the part of the chair that made it look as if it had never been begun, as if it had always been a seat and nothing else.

She did not have a wide strip. The coil from the potting shed was one width. She sat with it in her lap and turned it over and looked at it.

"You could use two," Tobias said.

He had come in from the yard and was standing behind her, looking over her shoulder. She had not heard him. She was beginning not to hear him, she noticed, the way she did not hear the clocks.

"Two strands side by side," he said. "For the wide one. And one to tie it down. My mother's man did that once when he ran short. She said you couldn't tell."

"You could tell."

"You could. I don't suppose anybody else would."

She tried it. Two strands, laid flat side by side round the rim, overlapping the holes. A third looped down through every second hole and up again over the two, pulling them flat. It was fiddly. The two strands wanted to slide apart and she had to hold them with the side of her left hand while she worked with her right. The thin strand cut into the side of her thumb, in the same place it had cut on Saturday, and the place opened again and bled a little onto the cane. She wiped it and went on.

Tobias sat across from her and did not help. She was grateful to him for not helping. He sat with his hands on the table and watched, the way he watched ledgers, the way she had seen him read a column of figures in the green book, without moving his lips.

Halfway round she stopped.

"It's covering the ends," she said.

"That's what it's for."

"I know what it's for." She looked at the binding, at the two strands lying flat over the holes where the work had begun on Saturday, where the first course had gone in with its kink, where she had pulled out the wrong diagonal on Saturday and the wrong rows on Sunday. All of it was under the binding now, or would be. "When it's done you won't be able to see where I started."

"Is that bad?"

She thought about it.

"No," she said. "I don't think it's bad. I think it's what a binding is. I only didn't know it until now." She looked at the kink, which the binding did not reach. It was in the middle. "That's still there."

"It's holding," Tobias said.

"Yes."

She went on.

She finished at a quarter to six, with the light going and the candle not yet lit. The last loop went down through the last hole and she pulled it tight and tucked the end under itself, the way Miss Hewel's finger had shown her in the old seats, and pressed it flat with the square end of the third stick.

Then she turned the chair over and set it on its feet.

It stood on the kitchen floor. Plain beech, quite ugly, a seat in it. The seat was paler than the frame, new cane, and it had a slight hollow in the middle already where the strands had settled as they dried. The binding ran round the edge and hid the beginning. The kink sat in the first course. The two dull strands lay side by side.

She did not sit on it. She looked at Tobias.

"You," she said.

"Me?"

"Somebody's weight finds it. You said. I said." She could not remember which of them had said it. "Sit on it."

He got up. He came round the table. He stood in front of the chair and looked at it as though it might be a trick, and then he turned and sat down on it, carefully, the way a man sits down in church when he is not sure of the pew.

It held.

It made a small sound, a dry creak, the cane taking his weight and settling, and then it was quiet. He sat on it. He put his hands on his knees.

"It's comfortable," he said, surprised.

"It's not."

"It is. It gives." He shifted. It creaked again and held again. "It's the most comfortable chair in the house. All the others are hard."

"The others have wooden seats."

"Well," he said. "That's what I mean."

She stood and looked at him sitting on it. A young man in his shirtsleeves with a nick under his jaw, on a chair she had made a seat for out of a coil from the potting shed and a stick he had whittled and three days she had not given to anything else. Nobody had asked her to cane it. It had not been on any list. It would not be on any list now, except Miss Hewel's, as one of seven hundred and thirteen, and even there it would only say *chair, beech, caned,* and not who or when.

She found that she minded that, a little. She found that she minded it in a new way, not as a thing the house had left undone but as a thing she had done that nobody would write down.

So she went to the dresser and took out the blue book and wrote it down herself.

Mon. Chair done.

She looked at it. It was not enough. She wrote under it:

Beech. Seat, 2 courses, 2 diag., binding doubled (T.'s mother's man). Kink in 1st course. 2 strands dull side up, left. Thumb.

Then, after a moment:

Mine.

The envelope was on the table where it had been since Saturday, face up now, the green book beside it, the buff paper gone a little soft at the corners from being lifted and put down. *To be opened by the keeper of the house, or by T. Lear Esq., in the event—*

She lit the candle.

Tobias got up off the chair. She saw him do it, saw him look at the envelope and then at her and then sit down again at the table on the other side of it, in his old place, not on the new chair. He left the new chair empty.

She sat down across from him.

Neither of them said anything. The clocks went, seven of them. Outside the sheets had come in and were rolled on the dresser, damp, waiting for the iron, and she thought, I will iron them tomorrow, or I won't, and either way they're only sheets.

"You said when the chair's done," Tobias said.

"I know what I said."

"I'm not hurrying you."

"I know."

She put her hand on the envelope. It was cool, as paper always is, cooler than the table under it. She thought about the hand that had written on it. Small and level. She thought about the green book, and the microscope that was not in the house, and *for her,* and the hand that changed a few pages on. She thought about the long-case in the hall, stopped by hand, not broken. About the date on the flap, three weeks gone.

She had wanted to be ready. She had thought that if she waited, there would come a day when she was ready, the way there came a day for the copper and a day for the curtains and a day for the clocks, and she would know it by the house going still around her, the way it went still for everything it wanted done.

The house was not still. Somewhere upstairs a window she had left open in the blue room was knocking very gently on its catch. The candle moved. Tobias breathed. The new cane creaked once, by itself, settling, the way it would go on doing for weeks, she supposed, until it had found its shape.

She was not ready. She did not think she was going to be.

"Both of us," she said. "At the same time."

"Yes."

"Not you reading it to me."

"No."

"And not me reading it and telling you."

"No," he said. "I know. Both."

She turned the envelope over. The seal was dark red wax, plain, no crest. A thumbprint in it, faint, where he had pressed it down. His thumb. She looked at that for a long time. Then she put her own thumb next to it, not on it, the cut on her thumb just closed, a thin brown line, and she thought: we both pressed something down and meant it to hold.

She slid the knife from the drawer under the flap and broke the seal.

It came away in two pieces. One stuck to the flap. One fell on the table and she left it there.

Inside there were more sheets than she had thought. Five, perhaps six, folded in three, the outermost one written on its back in the same small level hand: a single line that she could read through the fold before she had opened it.

She did not read it. She turned the packet so that it lay between them, square, the way you set a dish down so that both people can reach it.

Tobias put his finger on one corner. She put hers on the other.

"Now?" he said.

She looked at the chair, empty, standing on its feet by the range. At the kink. At the binding round the edge, hiding where she had started.

"Now," she said.

They unfolded it together.

Chapter Twenty-Eight



The line on the back was the first thing either of them read, because it was the outside, and because it was short.

She was never mine to leave to anyone.

She read it before she had the fold flat. She saw Tobias read it too, his finger still on his corner, and she saw him stop on it the way she had stopped, and neither of them said anything, and they went on opening.

There were six sheets. The first two were typed, on the firm's paper, with *Gant & Pryor, Horne* across the head, and the capitals jumping a hair above the line the way they had on the envelope she had kept under her

pillow in the winter. The other four were his. Cream laid paper from the study drawer. The small level hand at the top of the first sheet, every letter made, and then, as she had known it would, faster.

She put the typed sheets on Tobias's side and the four in his hand on hers. He looked at that and did not argue. He understood typed sheets. She understood his hand. That seemed fair, and it was not the same as one of them reading to the other, because they would both be reading, at once, and both be there.

She did not start. She waited until she heard him take his breath in. Then she started.

I am writing this on the Tuesday a fortnight before I go, and I am writing it to whoever opens it, which is either you or the boy. I hope it is both. I have told Pryor it is to go to the house, and to the boy only if the house has nobody in it. If the house has nobody in it then I have done something worse than I meant, and I am sorry, and I will not be able to say so.

I will start with the microscope because if you have found the green book you will want to know, and if you have not found it you will one day, because you find everything.

She stopped there. She read that line again. *Because you find everything.* She had not known he had noticed. She had thought she was a thing that happened in the house when he was in another room.

It was for Ellen. She was not Mrs Averill yet. She was Miss Cole, of Horne, and she looked at things. She would kneel in a ditch for a quarter of an hour over a snail. I bought it of Garrod in Canterbury for eleven

pounds, which I did not have, and I gave it her on the bridge, and she said yes, though I had not asked her anything yet. That is how she was.

It went with her. I put it in with her. Pryor said it was a waste of eleven pounds and I said it was the only eleven pounds I ever spent right.

So it was not in the house. It was not anywhere. It was in the ground at Horne, with a woman who knelt in ditches, and Miss Hewel would never count it, and that was correct.

She thought of the green book, and the hand that changed a few pages on. The loops on the *f*s. The sevens crossed. *Somebody else kept the book after,* she had said, and Tobias had said, *or he changed how he wrote,* and she had said *people don't*.

She had been right. Somebody else had kept the book. A woman who looked at things had kept the accounts of this house in her own hand, for some years, and then had stopped, and then the hand had gone back.

She kept the house, after. Not as you do. She kept it badly and well. The plums went over because she would not pick them till she had drawn them. She put the sweet peas on the south wall, which is the wrong wall, and they did better there than anywhere, and she said that was the wall's business and not hers. The seed you will have found is hers, saved off those, and saved off those again, every year, by me, after. I did not know what else to do with it.

Her hand went to her left pocket. The twelve seeds were in there, rattling a little. Eleven by the south wall, three of them up. She had planted a dead woman's flowers on a dead woman's wrong wall and had not known.

No. She took that back. She had known it was the wrong wall. She had chosen it because it was warm. That was hers, whoever had chosen it before.

She died in the spring of the ninth year. In the night. I stopped the long-case at twenty past eleven and I have not started it since and I will not. You have wound the others for eleven years and you have never once touched that one, and I have never thanked you for it, because I did not know how to say I had seen.

The long-case. Stopped by hand. Not broken. Miss Hewel, with her finger on the pendulum: *sound.* She had stood in the hall a hundred times with the key in her hand and her palm on the case and felt that she must not, and she had never known whether that was the house telling her or herself. It had been neither. It had been him, standing in her way without being there, and she had stepped round it for eleven years like a stair she knew gave.

Across the table Tobias turned a sheet over. The typed paper made a dry sound, louder than the clocks.

"It's a settlement," he said. "An addition to the other one. A codicil, nearly, but Pryor's done it as a deed. Do you want me to—"

"Not yet."

"All right." He went back to it.

She read on.

I could not keep the house. You will have heard that I kept it, from Dunnet or from the boy's mother, who thinks I kept staff the way a man keeps a yacht. I did not keep it. I sat in the study and the house went to dust round me and I let it. Then I went to Horne and sat in Bratt's back room for a week and wrote out what Ellen did in a day, every hour, the order of the rooms, the clocks on Sunday after breakfast, the sheets turned down four inches because she liked a deep turn-down, and I made the house able to do it.

And then you.

I wrote you out in the same week and I have never known whether that was the best or the worst thing I did. I wrote you to keep it the way she kept it. You did not. You kept it better and colder, and you put the cups on hooks, which she never did, and you would not have let the plums go over for a drawing, and you turned the sheets four inches because I had written four, not because you liked a deep turn-down. I saw that the first winter. I saw that I had made a person and given her a dead woman's day to do, and I did not know how to take it back.

I wrote "kind" and crossed it out and wrote "warm". If you have read the four pages you will have seen that. I want you to know that I knew, while I was writing it, that I had no right to choose between them. I did it anyway because I was frightened and it was late.

She put the sheet down.

She sat with her hands on either side of it on the table. She found that she was very angry, and that it was clean, the way the anger in the cellar had not been clean, because in the cellar there had been nobody to be angry at. There was somebody now. He had sat in Bratt's back room for a week, with his pipe going cold, and he had known.

He knew, she thought. *He knew the first winter.*

Eleven years of four inches.

"Are you all right?" Tobias said.

"No," she said. "Go on reading yours."

He looked at her a moment longer and went back to it. He was good at that. He had been good at it since the first week, going back to the thing in front of him when she asked, so she could have her face to herself. She had thought it was a clerk's manner. She picked up the next sheet.

I am going on the Thursday to someone who asked me plainly. I expect you have read her letter. You open the post. I left it on the desk so that you would, because I could not say it, and that is cowardly too and I put it on the list with the rest.

Her name is Mary Danes. I have known her since before Ellen. She is not a replacement for anything. She asked me whether finishing the house was the thing that kept me from coming, and she was right, it was, and I am too old to go on being kept from things by a house.

Dr Pascoe at Horne tells me I have until the summer, or not that long. I would like to spend it at the junction and further on, by the sea, with somebody who will be impatient with me. I am telling Pryor that if I am not back by Lady Day I am not coming, and he is to send this to the house and settle what is on the typed sheets.

I have tried to settle you. I find I cannot. I have told Pryor so.

She turned to the last sheet. It was shorter than the others and the hand was the fast one all the way down.

Tobias.

If you are reading this you are her company now. I put a line in the four pages, "do not let her be alone in it", and I did not say who was to do it, because I did not know. I know now. It is you. I have not met you since you were six and you were sick on Pryor's carpet, so I know nothing about you, except that your mother says you are honest and stubborn and cannot keep a job, which is how I was.

I am sorry to put it on you. It is a great deal to put on anybody. I put a great deal on her, without asking, and I am now doing it to you, and I know it. I have not got time to do it better.

Do not let her be alone in it. That is all I ask of the house, and you come with the house.

A. L.

She was still looking at the last line when she heard him stop breathing.

He had come to the end of his two typed sheets. She had not seen him reach for the fourth of hers. But he had seen his name, upside down, at the head of it, because his own name is the one word any person can read upside down across a table, and he had turned it round with one finger and read it, and now he sat with it, and he had gone first red, at the ears, the way he did, and then not red.

"I didn't know," he said.

"No."

"I'd never—he never wrote to me. Not once. Pryor said he'd asked after me. I thought that was Pryor being kind."

"I know."

"I didn't know," Tobias said again, as if she had argued.

She had not argued. She stood up. She did not know she was going to until she was standing, and she found she had nowhere in particular to go, so she went to the scullery, and stood at the sink, and put both hands on the cold edge of it, and looked at the basin where the cane had soaked for three days and was now empty.

She thought about the window in the blue room. She thought about the bed he had made badly, on purpose, because she would not. The stick of ash with four shapes, and him going back to the third. His mother's man and the binding doubled. *It gives.* The cup back on its hook when he remembered. *I'll make it after supper. I'm not very good.*

She thought, each of those things was his. She thought it very hard. And underneath, where the house had been, something cold and small and well made said: *Do not let her be alone in it.* And she could not tell any longer, standing at the sink, which of the things he had done had been him, and which had been an old man in Bratt's back room with a pipe, reaching down the lane and through the gate and into the kitchen to move a young man's hands.

That was the thing Averill had done to her. And now he had done it to Tobias too, and to her again through Tobias, both at once, with one line. He had made it so she could not be sure whether anybody was kind to her because they chose to.

She heard him get up. She heard him not come into the scullery.

He stood in the door, as he had stood on Saturday to say she had left the window open. He did not come further. She was grateful for that and furious that she was grateful, because she did not know who had taught him to stand in doors.

"I want to say something," he said, "and I want you to know I'd have said it on Saturday, before. I would have."

"I know you would."

"You can't know."

"No," she said. "I can't. That's what he's done."

He was quiet. Then: "Yes."

She turned round. She leaned back against the sink and folded her arms, which she never did, because a housekeeper did not, and she looked at him in the doorway with the kitchen lit behind him and the chair she had made standing by the range on its four feet.

"I'm not a promise," she said. "I'm not a thing somebody has to see to. I'm not a gate."

"I know."

"Then don't do it because he said."

He looked at her. He had a way of looking that she was only now learning, very straight, a little puzzled, as though she were a ledger in a hand he could almost read.

"What shall I do it because of, then?" he said.

She opened her mouth and had nothing. It was the same nothing she had had at the junction, the morning Mrs Pell asked her what she did. It was not an empty nothing. It was the kind with something in the bottom of it that had not come up yet.

"I don't know," she said. "Find out. I'm finding out. You can find out."

"All right," he said.

"And not tonight."

"No." He almost smiled. "Not today."

When she came back into the kitchen he had squared the sheets. All six, typed and written, edges together, the back line outward. *She was never mine to leave to anyone.* He had not folded them. He had left them flat, with the broken seal on top like a paperweight.

"I should tell you the typed part," he said, "because it's money, and you'll want it straight and not tonight, but I'd rather you had it straight tonight than lay awake wondering."

"Tell me."

He put his finger on the first typed sheet, the way he must have put it on a hundred bills of lading by the river.

"It says you're not part of the estate. Not in the settlement, not in the inventory, not to go with the house. That's the first thing. Pryor's put it in four different ways, because he's Pryor. Then it says that the person known in the household as the keeper is to have forty pounds a year out of

the house for as long as she chooses to live in it. Or two hundred pounds, once, if she chooses to leave. Her choice. It says *her choice* twice. That's him, not Pryor. Pryor wouldn't have said it twice."

"Two hundred pounds."

"Yes."

She did not know what two hundred pounds was. She knew what nine shillings was, Dunnet's nine shillings, a fortnight of coal. She knew the sum in the green book under *Wages*. She could not lay two hundred pounds against anything she knew, and it sat in the air of the kitchen like a word in a language she did not speak.

"There's a but," she said.

"There's a but." He did not look away from her. "It's charged on the estate. That means it comes out of the house. And there isn't an estate, not one you can take money out of. There's the house, and there's Trewin's, and Trewin's comes first. If the title isn't settled by the last of April and Trewin goes to the court, the court sells the house, and Trewin is paid, and then Pryor's fees, and then, if there's anything over—"

"Then me."

"Then you. If there's anything over."

"And if I stay, the forty pounds comes out of the house."

"Out of a house that owes money to a coal merchant." He spread his hands. "He meant it. I believe he meant it. He just didn't do the sum."

She laughed. It came out of her before she could stop it, short and not very nice, and Tobias looked startled and then, slowly, he laughed too.

"No," she said. "He never did the sum. He wrote *four inches* and went to the seaside."

There was one more thing on the typed sheet, he said, and she would not like it, or she might. Under the money, where a name would go, there was a blank. A long ruled line with nothing on it.

"Pryor's written in pencil underneath," Tobias said. "Very small. *Mr A. L. instructs that this be left for her to fill.*" He turned the sheet round so she could see. "He didn't give you one. He didn't put one in. He told Pryor to leave the line."

She looked at the line.

It was a clerk's line, ruled in ink, firm and straight, about four inches long. She thought: of course it is four inches. Then she thought that was unfair, and that she did not care if it was unfair.

The house had finished everything she had ever left undone. It had sealed the letter, squared the plan, hung the cup on its hook by morning. If she left this line empty on the table tonight, she did not think the house would fill it. The house had stopped finishing her things the night she drew the fuse in the cellar. And even before that it had never finished *her*. She had not been a task.

She was not going to fill it either. Not tonight. She was not sure the name was in her yet. She thought it might be, the way the seeds had been in the almanac for years without anybody knowing they were anybody's, and that it would come up when it was warm enough, on whatever wall she put it by, and it would be the wrong wall, and it would do better there than anywhere.

"Leave it," she said.

"On the table?"

"On the table. Face up."

He left it.

She did not go to the long-case. She had thought she might. She had thought, reading *I will not*, that she would go out into the hall with the key and her palm on the case and start it, now, tonight, out of spite, and hear it tick and know that she had done one thing in this house that was against him and not round him.

She stood in the hall in the dark with the candle and found she did not want to. Not for him. For Ellen, perhaps. For a woman who had knelt in ditches and gone over the plums. It was the only thing left in the house that was hers and not his and not the keeper's, twenty past eleven in the spring of the ninth year, and the keeper found she would not take it off her. Not for spite. If she started it, one day, it would be for some reason of her own.

She put her palm flat on the case. Cool mahogany.

"Not today," she said, to the clock, and to Ellen, and to nobody.

That night, on her bed with its three and a half inches, by the penny candle, she wrote in the blue book.

Read it. Both of us.

Microscope: Ellen's. Buried. Sweet peas: hers, wrong wall. Long-case: hers. 11.20.

He knew the first winter.

She looked at that one a long time. Then she wrote:

I am not part of the estate. £40 if I stay, £200 if I go, out of a house that owes Trewin. He never did the sum.

He gave T. me to mind. T. didn't know.

Blank where my name goes. Left.

She held the pencil over the page for a while after that. The house was quiet. Seven clocks, and the one that was not going. Somewhere down the landing the window she had left open in the blue room had been shut, she heard it, the catch going home, and she lay and listened to know whether it was the house or the boy, and it was the boy, she heard his step after, and the fourth stair did not give because he had not gone down it.

She wrote:

Not his to give.

And then, smaller, because it was true as well and she had decided that she would put down what was true and not only what she liked:

T. stood in the door.

Chapter Twenty-Nine



She woke at half past five because she always woke at half past five, and lay for a minute listening for the house to have done something.

It had not. She knew it had not before she went down. There is a sound a kitchen makes when somebody has been in it before you, a settledness, the kettle ticking as it cools, and there was none of that. There was the long quiet of a room that has been left alone all night with a sheaf of paper on its table.

The sheets were where Tobias had squared them. Face up. The broken seal on top. The blank line, four inches, with Pryor's small pencil underneath it. She did not read it again. She went round it to the range.

The fire had gone down to nothing. She raked it and found a little clinker, not much, a grey thumb of it caught in the bars, and she broke it with the poker and knocked it through. Nobody had done that in the night. She had known nobody would. It was still strange to kneel and find the morning's work waiting, like a dog that had not been let out.

She laid the fire, lit it, filled the kettle at the pump, set it on. Then she sat in the ugly beech chair with the kink in its seat, which held, and waited for the water, and did not get up to do anything else, which was the second strange thing.

Tobias came down at seven, which was early for him, with his collar not on and his hair pressed flat on one side.

"You've not been up all night," he said. It was half a question.

"I slept."

"I didn't." He looked at the table, and at the sheets, and at her, and seemed to decide something about the order he should look at things in. "I did the sum."

"Which sum?"

"His." He sat down across from her, not in the caned chair, in one of the plain ones. "He never did it. So I did. I've got nothing else I'm good for at three in the morning."

He had it on the back of an envelope, a cheap one of his own, in the small square hand of a man who had been paid by the line. He turned it round so she could read it, and then, seeing that she was looking at him and not at it, turned it back and read it to her.

"Trewin. I don't know what Trewin's owed, not exactly, but Dunnet said two Michaelmases and nobody paying, and I worked it from what you told me about the coal. Call it sixty pounds. Could be more. Then Pryor's fees, which Pryor will tell me when he feels like it, and they'll be more than I want them to be. Then the rates. Then whatever Bassett's are owed, if they're owed anything."

"Bassett's are paid," she said. "I paid the bars. It says *Pd.*"

"Then Bassett's are paid." He crossed something out. "Then there's the house. What it'd fetch. Pryor said in his letter, before I came down, he thought it might make four or five hundred at auction, the state it's in. With the land. Hewel's list'll help, or it won't, depending."

"Seven hundred and thirteen things."

"Seven hundred and thirteen things." He almost smiled. "So if the court sells it. Five hundred, less Trewin, less Pryor, less the rates. Then there's what he left you. Two hundred if you go. That comes next. And it would come, probably. Just." He put the envelope down. "If you stay, the forty a year comes out of the house, and the house would have to earn it, and it doesn't earn anything. It costs coal."

"So it's two hundred."

"If it's sold, it's two hundred, probably, and you go. If it isn't sold—" He stopped.

"Go on."

"If it isn't sold somebody has to pay Trewin, and it isn't going to be me, because I've got eleven pounds in the Post Office and a mother over a chemist. And then you could stay, and the forty pounds would be a line in a book that nobody could pay."

She understood him. She understood him better than she had understood the two hundred pounds in the night, because now it was laid against things she knew. Coal. A fortnight. Nine shillings. A house that cost coal and earned nothing and had, for eleven years, been kept warm by a man who believed Mr Lear would see him right.

"He's made it so I can only take the money by going," she said.

"I don't think he meant to."

"No." She looked at the line on the typed sheet, the blank one. "He never meant anything. He just did the parts he liked."

The kettle boiled. She did not get up. Tobias looked at it, and at her, and got up himself and made the tea, badly, too much leaf and the pot not warmed, and brought it to the table and poured it before it had stood.

"That's weak and stewed both," she said. "I don't know how you've managed it."

"Practice." He sat down again. "What do you want to do?"

It was the question Averill had not asked her in eleven years and had asked her at the end in a letter, *find out*, as though finding out were a thing a person could do in a kitchen between the kettle and the scuttle. She did not know. She knew some things around the edges of it. She did not want to be sold with the clocks. She did not want two hundred pounds that came to her because the house was broken up and carried down the lane in carts. She did not want forty pounds a year that nobody could pay. She did not want to be minded.

"I want to see Trewin," she said.

Tobias put his cup down.

"Not you see him," she said. "Me. With you, if you like. You can read his book. But I've had his coal eleven years and never once said a word to the man, and it was Dunnet's nine shillings I knew and not his, and I don't know what he looks like. He's been waiting on the young gentleman. Well. He can wait on me as well."

"He won't know who you are."

"Then he'll find out," she said. "Everybody's doing it."

Trewin's yard was at the bottom end of Horne, past the station, between the canal and the gasworks, and it was the dirtiest place she had ever been in with her good boots on.

She had put on the boots and the grey dress and the bonnet she had not worn to church on Sunday. She had looked at herself in the small glass on the landing and thought she looked like what she was, a servant going to see about a bill on her master's account, and she had nearly taken the bonnet off again. Then she had thought that a bonnet was a bonnet and she had paid for it out of her own wages in Bath, and left it on.

In her left apron pocket, under the grey skirt, were Averill's four pages from the almanac, the carrier, the seeds. Twelve sweet peas. She had not decided about them. She had put her hand in that morning to take them out and leave them on the dresser, and her hand had not done it, and she had let her hand win.

Tobias walked beside her down the lane and did not talk, which she was grateful for. At the junction Mrs Pell was out with her broom, and looked at the two of them, and looked particularly at the bonnet, and said "Morning" in a voice that would have the whole of Horne told by dinner.

"Morning, Mrs Pell," the keeper said.

She had never once, she realised, said Mrs Pell's name to her face. She had bought a blue book off her for twopence and said *thank you* and gone.

The yard was black underfoot and black up the walls and black on the faces of the two boys shovelling at the heaps, and in the middle of it there was a wooden office on brick piers, with a stove pipe and a window so dirty the light inside came out brown.

Trewin was in the office. He was a big old man in a waistcoat with his sleeves rolled, and he had a ledger open on a high desk that he stood at instead of sat, and when Tobias knocked and put his head round the door he looked up and said "Mr Lear," before Tobias had said anything at all.

"How did you—"

"You've his ears." Trewin came round the desk. "Not his face. His ears. He had ears on him like a jug." He shook Tobias's hand, and left black on it, and did not apologise. Then he looked past Tobias at her, in the doorway, with her bonnet. "And you'll be the house."

Nobody had ever called her that. She stood very still.

"I'm sorry," Trewin said. "That's what Dunnet calls you. *The house wants two hundredweight, the house says the flue's drawing.* I've been hearing about you every fortnight for eleven year and I don't know your name."

"No," she said. "Nor does anyone."

He looked at her a moment longer. Then he went and got the only other chair in the office, a kitchen chair with a split seat, and wiped it with his sleeve, which made it no cleaner, and set it for her by the stove.

Tobias read the ledger. Trewin let him. He turned it on the high desk so the young man could stand at it, and showed him where the page was, *Lear, A.*, in a column that went down and down in the same brown ink.

"I never billed it after the first year," Trewin said. "Not proper. I sent him one and he sent it back with *thank you* written on the bottom, and a pound note, and I took the pound and I thought, well. Then I sent the coal. Dunnet asked me once who was paying. I said Mr Lear. Dunnet said Mr Lear's gone. I said Mr Lear's good for it." He shrugged. "He was, once. He paid my father for his father's coal, regular as the quarter days."

"Seventy-one pounds four shillings," Tobias said. He had his finger on the bottom of the column. He said it the way he had read her the typed sheet, flat, so she could have it straight.

"About that."

"That's more than I worked out."

"It would be. I put the carting on." Trewin looked at her by the stove. "I'm not a charity, miss. I've two boys out there and the gas company owes me for March. But I'll tell you straight, since he's sent you, I don't want the house. I don't want to go to the court. Courts cost me money and I don't

get it back, and I'd have to stand up in front of Mr Wilcox in Canterbury and say Lear owed me and I let it run, and he'd look at me over his spectacles. I'd as soon not."

"Then what do you want?" the keeper said.

Tobias looked round at her. Trewin looked at her too.

"I want paid," Trewin said. "Same as anybody."

"You've been paid in thank-yous for ten years," she said. "And a pound note. You've kept a cold house warm out of your own heaps because a man with jug ears said thank you on the bottom of a bill. I don't believe you want paid same as anybody. I think you want something, and you've been waiting on the young gentleman to ask you what, and he hasn't, because he's polite."

There was a silence in the office. Outside, one of the boys dropped a shovel on the cobbles and swore.

Then Trewin laughed. It was a big laugh, out of a big chest, and it made the window rattle in its frame.

"Dunnet said," he said. "Dunnet said you'd got a mouth on you lately. He said you'd started."

What Trewin wanted was the clock.

He did not say it straight away. He talked first about his wife, who had died, and his daughter, who was getting married in June to a man at the gasworks who was not good enough for her and knew it, which was the best a father could hope for. He talked about his own father, who had sold

coal to old Mr Lear and gone up to the house every Christmas with a hamper, and had come home and talked about the hall clock, the long one, that had a moon on it.

"Bratt of Horne," Trewin said. "My grandfather knew Bratt. They drank together. That's a Horne clock, that is. It's the only one of his that's left in Horne. The rest went to London, or to the dealers." He looked at his ledger, not at her. "I'd take it against the account. The clock and forty pounds, and I'd call it square. I'd give it my girl for her wedding. Set it going in her front room so she'd have something of Horne that wasn't me."

The keeper sat by the stove with her hands in her lap and said nothing.

"It's stopped," Tobias said. "It's been stopped for years. Miss Hewel says it isn't broken."

"Then it'll go," Trewin said. "Clocks want going. A stopped clock in a cold hall, that's no good to anybody."

"It's twenty past eleven," the keeper said.

They both looked at her.

"It stopped at twenty past eleven," she said. "He stopped it. With his hand. On purpose." She did not say Ellen. It was not Trewin's. It was not, she thought, even Tobias's, though he had read the same letter and was looking at her now as though he were reading another one. "I haven't started it. I haven't been asked to wind it, not in eleven years, and I haven't been told not to, and I've wound seven clocks a week every week and walked past it every time."

"Well," Trewin said. He looked at her a long time, and there was something in his face she did not expect, which was patience. "You'll want to think."

"Yes."

"The forty pounds is the forty pounds. The clock's the clock. You've got till the end of April either way, and then it's Mr Wilcox and his spectacles, and I'd rather not, and I don't think you'd rather either." He turned back to his desk. "I'll keep sending the coal till then. Tell Dunnet the house says so."

They walked back up through Horne without talking. At the junction Mrs Pell had gone in. Past the junction the lane went up between the hedges, and the hedges had come on in the week, all of them at once, the way they did in April, a thin green smoke over the black twigs.

"Forty pounds," Tobias said at last. "I could perhaps borrow forty pounds. My mother's cousin. She'd hate it."

"No."

"I'm only saying it's—"

"I know what you're saying." She stopped in the lane. He stopped too. "Don't. Not yet. You've done the sum. You've read his book. That's what you're good at and you did it. Don't go and borrow off a cousin on my account. That's minding."

He went red. "I wasn't—"

"You were. And it's kind. And I can't tell yet whether it's yours." She did not say it to hurt him, and she saw that it did anyway, and she let it, because it was true and she had decided. "He wrote that I was your

company now. He wrote it to you, not me. Everything you do for me, I'm going to wonder if it's in the letter. That's not your fault. But I'm going to wonder, and I'd rather say so than smile at you and wonder in private."

Tobias looked at the hedge for a while.

"All right," he said. "Then I won't borrow it."

"Thank you."

"I'd have hated asking her, anyway." He started walking again. "She keeps a ledger of what everybody owes her. Since 1871."

The keeper laughed. She had not meant to. It came up out of her in the lane the way the hedges had come up, all at once, and he looked round at it, and then he was laughing too, and they walked the rest of the way up to the gate like that, two people who had nothing, laughing in the road about a cousin's ledger.

The house was cold when they came in. Nobody had kept the fire in.

She knelt and built it up again, and while she was on her knees she looked up the hall to where the long-case stood in its corner, tall and dark, with its moon face and its hands at twenty past eleven.

A Horne clock. The only one left in Horne. A coal merchant's grandfather had drunk with the man who made it. A coal merchant's daughter would set it going in a front room by the gasworks, and it would tick there, and nobody in that room would know who had stopped it or why.

She thought: it would go. It would be going. Somebody would wind it.

She thought: it is Ellen's, and I said I would not take it off her.

She thought, and it was the first time she had thought it in words: but I am not the one taking it. The house owes seventy-one pounds four shillings. The house is taking it. The house has always been the one taking things, and the clock is a thing, and I am not.

She did not know if that was true or if it was a way of not minding. She sat back on her heels with the coal shovel and could not tell.

Tobias was in the doorway. He had his collar on now. He was not asking her anything.

That evening the blank line was still on the table, face up, and the sheets with it. She ate her supper round them. Tobias ate his round them too. Neither of them moved them. It seemed important, somehow, that they should be left where they were until somebody had a reason.

Afterwards she went out to the south wall in the last of the light. The three sweet peas had become five. They were thin and pale and grasping at nothing, tiny green fists at the ends of their stalks, and she thought she should put sticks in for them, and did not have any, and thought Tobias could whittle some, and then thought she could whittle some herself, she had a knife.

She put her hand in her left pocket. Twelve seeds. Hard, round, wrinkled, a little warm from her.

She did not plant them. She took one out and looked at it in her palm, in the last grey light, and put it back with the others.

In the blue book, by the penny candle, she wrote:

Trewin. £71 4s. He put the carting on. Called me the house. Gave me his chair.

Wants the long-case for his girl. Clock and £40, square.

T. did the sum. T. offered to borrow. I said no. He said all right.

Then she sat a while. She could hear Tobias moving in the blue room, the bed creaking as he sat on it, his boots going down one and then the other. She could hear seven clocks.

She wrote:

Five up. Twelve in pocket.

And then, because she had decided she would put down what was true and not only what she liked, and because it frightened her a little to see it:

It would go, at his girl's. Somebody would wind it.

I don't know if that's mine to want.

Chapter Thirty



She woke before the house did, which was new.

The long-case in the hall was standing in the grey with its hands at twenty past eleven, as it had stood since the spring of the ninth year. She came down the stairs in her stockings, avoiding the fourth, because Tobias was asleep above it, and she stood in front of the clock with the candle and did not touch it.

She had thought about it all night in the way she thought about most things, which was by doing something else. She had riddled the range in her head. She had counted the stair rods. At about four she had given up pretending and simply lain on her back and let the sum come round.

The sum was: seventy-one pounds four shillings. Trewin would take the clock and forty pounds in settlement. The clock, by his reckoning, was worth thirty-one. Nobody had said so, but you could do it backwards.

And under that sum there was another, which she had not wanted to look at, and which had the same number in it. The typed deed said forty pounds a year to stay, or two hundred to go. Forty. The house had put the same figure in front of her twice in two days, as if it were a joke it was too well bred to laugh at.

She put her palm flat on the case, low down, where the wood was darkest from a hundred years of other people's hands.

"It's not mine," she said. "Nor his. It's hers. I know."

The house said nothing. It had the air of a house that had been asked a question by the wrong person.

Tobias came down at seven with his hair wet and the look of a man who had been told by his mother that you wash your face before anything difficult. He found her in the hall with the clock door open and the weights hanging in the dark of the case like two sleepers.

"You're not," he said.

"I'm looking."

"You've got your sleeves up."

She looked at her own forearms as if they had been caught at something. "I'm only looking."

"The inventory says it's the estate's." He said it kindly, and carefully, the way you put a foot on ice. "Miss Hewel put it down. Item two hundred and something. Clock, long-case, Bratt of Horne, stopped. If it goes to Trewin, it goes as a payment of the estate's debt, and that's the estate's to do, and it isn't ours, and it isn't—" He stopped.

"Mine," she said.

"I was going to say Averill's."

"He's not here."

"No."

They stood and looked at the clock. A cinder shifted in the kitchen range. Down the passage one of the seven clocks that ran struck a quarter, a little ahead of the others, as it always did, and the house seemed to listen to its own correction.

"I want to start it," she said.

Tobias did not say anything for a moment. Then he said, "Why?"

It was a fair question. It was the question the whole house had been asking her since the envelope: *what shall I do it because of?* She had been given no answer to that and a great many things to do, and she was beginning to understand that the two were not unconnected.

"Because it's a thing that should be going," she said slowly. "Not for Trewin. Not for the house. If it's going to leave, I'd rather it left going. I don't want it carried out dead through the front door like — like somebody on a board." She heard what she'd said and kept her face where it was. "It's been stopped on purpose for eleven years. That's long enough to be a kindness and too long to be a good one."

"And Ellen?"

"Ellen's dead, Tobias. The clock isn't. It's only been made to keep her hour."

He rubbed the back of his neck. He had a way of doing it when he was about to agree to something his better sense was against, and she had come to like it more than she would have admitted to the blue book.

"All right," he said. "What do you need?"

It took the two of them most of the morning, and it was the first time she had known what it was to want a second pair of hands and have them be the right ones.

The weights had to come out and be hung on their cords, and the cords had to be looked at, and one was frayed an inch above the brass ring where it had rubbed for eleven years against the same spot of the case, and she cut it and knotted it again with a sailor's knot Tobias showed her, whose name he did not know, only that his father had known it. The pendulum was in the bottom of the case wrapped in a piece of flannel that smelled of lavender and something older. She unwrapped it with great care. It was a plain brass bob on a thin rod. There was nothing wrong with it. That was the thing that undid her a little: that there was never anything wrong. It had simply been told to stop, and had.

Tobias held the case door. She hung the pendulum from its crutch, and the whole hall seemed to draw breath.

"Set it," she said.

He pushed the bob gently to one side with two fingers, as if it were a child's cheek.

It swung back. It swung out. *Tock.* A thick, slow, unhurried sound, deeper than the seven others, with a little gap in the middle of it where another clock would have hurried.

She found she had her hand over her mouth.

"Does it —" Tobias began.

"Wait."

It went on. *Tock. Tock.* Then it checked, and she felt it in her stomach, and then it went on again. It was only the dust. A hundred years of case-wood and eleven of stillness, and the pendulum shaking the last of it loose.

She moved the minute hand with her finger, round the dial, through the hours, to a quarter to nine. She did not move it past eleven twenty by hand. She went the long way round, the whole way, over it and past it, because it seemed to her that the hour ought to be passed through and not jumped.

The long-case struck nine, four seconds behind the clock in the passage.

Nobody said anything. The house made its small settling noise, as it did when it was pleased and would have denied it.

"It's a bit slow," said Tobias.

"It's a bit slow," she agreed. "It'll want a day."

He looked at her. She was still standing with her hand on the case.

"You can't tell what's yours to want," he said. "You wrote that. I read it. I'm sorry, I didn't mean to, it was on the table—"

"It's all right."

"—but you wanted that. You wanted it to go. Just now. Your whole face."

"Yes," she said. "I did."

"Then that's yours."

She thought about it. She did not agree, exactly. She was still a little frightened of how easily he gave her things. But she put the sleeve of her left arm up against her eyes and kept it there a moment, and when she took it down she said only, "Mind the case door, it sticks," and he minded it.

Miss Hewel came at ten, with her satchel and her pencil and her flat black shoes, to finish a list of the outbuildings she'd said she would finish and had already finished. It was an excuse and they all knew it, and she stood in the hall for a full minute listening before she said a word.

"It's running," she said.

"A bit slow."

"Is it yours to start?"

The keeper had known the question was coming and had still not made an answer. "No," she said. "It's in your book as the estate's."

"It is."

"And the estate owes Mr Trewin seventy-one pounds four."

"It does." Miss Hewel took out her pencil and did not write anything. "A chattel valued in an inventory may be set against a debt of the estate with the consent of the person administering it. That's Mr Wilcox, in Canterbury. I can write to him. I would write that the keeper in occupation considers it in the estate's interest to discharge in part by the clock and in part by —" She stopped. "By what?"

"That's what I'm looking for."

"The forty."

"The forty."

Miss Hewel looked at her for a long moment over the top of her spectacles.

"I count," she said. "It's all I do, and I'd like you to know I've counted this. Four chairs without seats. If someone caned them to a decent standard, the auctioneer would lift the lot reserve by about nine pounds. That's the figure. I'm not being kind. I'd put it in the report whoever did it." She paused. "It's not forty."

"No."

"The second plate set is Mrs Averill's own, you said. It's not in the sale. The carpet bag isn't. The almanac isn't. The sweet-pea seed, I don't count seed." She said this last in a slightly different voice. "There's nothing else in the house that anyone would pay forty pounds for, except the house."

"I know."

"I'm not telling you to sell it."

"I know that too."

Miss Hewel closed her pencil in her hand. "Then I don't see how it comes to forty," she said, "unless you go."

She said it gently. That was the worst of it. She had never once said anything unkindly, and it made the whole house feel smaller.

In the afternoon she took the deed out of the dresser and laid it on the kitchen table, where she could look at it with a cup of tea and nobody's eyes on her but the range's.

The typed page said what it had said. *Not part of the estate.* Forty pounds each year she stayed, or two hundred if she went, *at her own choice*, and then, a few lines below, in the same flat black type as if the machine had no opinion about repeating itself, *her choice.*

And under it the line, ruled in pencil, a little crooked, with nothing on it.

She had looked at the blank line so many times in two days that it had begun to look to her like a doorstep. Left for her to fill. Averill had not known what to call her, or had known and not wanted to say. She thought it was possibly both. She thought about the names she had been called. *The keeper. The girl. Put paid. The house.* She thought about what Tobias had called her when he forgot himself, which was nothing, and which was the nicest of the lot.

She took Tobias's pencil, which he left on the dresser, with its end chewed flat the way he chewed it. She held it over the line.

It was not that she didn't know. It was that the line had a use. She was almost sure of it. The name would go there, and the moment it went there she would be a person on a document, with a charge on an estate and a

place behind Trewin in the queue, and everyone's arithmetic would be able to include her. As things stood she was a blank, and a blank could not be counted.

She put the pencil down.

"Not yet," she said to it. It was what she had said to Tobias at the gate, and to Miss Hewel. It had stopped being an evasion somewhere on the way and become something nearer a position.

She folded the deed along its own folds and put it face up in the dresser drawer, on top of the almanac. Not hidden. She was done with hiding things from a house that already knew.

The clock gained eleven seconds in the afternoon. She stood by it at four, in the light from the fanlight, with her watch that had been her mother's and a brass pin from the dresser, and she moved the little regulator at the back of the dial by a hair. Tobias came and stood at her shoulder and did not say anything useful, which was what she wanted.

"You're going to give it to him," he said at last.

"I'm going to offer it."

"For the debt."

"For what it's worth. Thirty-one, he'll say. Maybe thirty-five if I let him think he's winning." She wound the key in her head, a thing she did now. "Then Miss Hewel writes to Mr Wilcox. Then Mr Wilcox says no, or he says nothing, which is worse. And there's nine pounds in four chairs. And a gap."

"Of —"

"Of a lot."

He did not offer his mother's cousin. She watched him not offer it, and watched what it cost him, and she was moved by it more than she could say, and she did not say it.

"There's one thing," he said. "It isn't money. Don't hit me."

"I won't."

"Mrs Pell. At the junction. She's got that waiting-room with the cane chairs, and the stationmaster's wife won't have them mended because the company would charge it to her. Mrs Pell told me. Fourteen chairs. They're a disgrace." He looked at his shoes. "You'd be quicker by June than I would. You'd be quicker by May."

"It wouldn't be forty."

"No."

"It wouldn't be anywhere near."

"No," he said. "But it wouldn't be nothing. And it wouldn't be anyone's kindness. It'd be yours. It'd be work."

She turned her head and looked at him. He was twenty-five, thin as a rake, with the Averill ears and a ledger-clerk's fingers, and he had, she thought, been right about her more times than was comfortable.

"Work," she said.

"Paid. Pd., in the book." He half smiled. "You like that one."

The clock ticked behind them, slow and thick, a hair less slow than it had been at breakfast.

At six she lit the candle and took out the blue book.

Long-case going. 9.00 set; +11 sec by 4; regulated. Lost 4 sec at night? Watch it.

Hewel: 4 chairs = £9. Gap £31. Not unless I go.

Mrs Pell: 14 chairs, waiting-room. Work. Not kindness.

She stopped. Then, because it was only true if she wrote the whole of it:

The clock goes to Trewin. I decided before I started it. That was why I started it.

I didn't sign the line.

Not yet isn't no.

She blew the candle out and sat in the dark with her hand in her left pocket, turning the seeds over one at a time, as if counting could make a difference, and out in the hall the long-case went on, a little behind the others, saying in its own slow voice that it was still here, and still wound, and not yet anybody's.

Chapter Thirty-One



Monday was the letter day, and then it was the junction day, and she had planned them in that order because she did not want to walk to the junction with the letter still in the house.

Miss Hewel had written it on Sunday evening, at her own table, in a hand that counted as it went. *Mr Wilcox, solicitor, Canterbury. Re: estate of the late J. Averill. The keeper in occupation considers it in the estate's interest to discharge the debt to Mr Trewin in part by the long-case clock, Bratt of Horne, item two hundred and something, now in going order, and in part by a payment of forty pounds, the source of which is not yet settled.* That last clause was Miss Hewel's own, and she had read it out loud before sealing it, in the flat voice she used for figures, so that the keeper would know she had not dressed it up.

Tobias took it to the pillar-box on his way to return Mr Garrod's ledger. She watched him go up the lane with it held slightly away from his body, as if it were warm.

Then she put on her bonnet.

The house noticed. She felt it notice. She had made her own bed that morning, and Tobias had made his badly, on purpose, which was their arrangement now, and she stood in the hall and said, to nobody, "I'm going to the junction. Then Horne. Back by four."

The house did not answer, but the kitchen door, which stuck, let her through without sticking, and she chose not to read anything into that.

Mrs Pell's waiting-room was at the junction, down the steps from the up platform, and it smelled of coal and floor-dust and the particular cold teapot smell of places where somebody is supposed to make tea and doesn't. There were fourteen chairs against the walls. She counted them without wanting to. Cane seats, every one. Eleven had gone through, in the old way, holes worn to slits, the edge binding burst out and hanging in yellow tags. Three had been mended once, badly, by somebody who had used string.

Mrs Pell came out of the back room wiping her hands. She was a small quick woman with ink on her fingers, the stationmaster's wife's sister or cousin or something — the relationship had never been made clear to the keeper and she suspected it was not clear to Mrs Pell either.

"You'll be the house," said Mrs Pell.

"I'll be the house," she agreed. It was, she had found, quicker than explaining.

"Tobias said you might come. He's a good boy, that one. Writes a fair letter." Mrs Pell looked at the chairs, all the way round the room, as if taking their characters. "The company won't mend them. The company will only replace them, and replacing them goes on the stationmaster's rates, and that's Mrs Fennimore's household, and she'd sooner sit on the floor than pay for it. So they sit there. Eleven years, some of them."

"They're not company's to me," the keeper said. "I'd mend them. Ten and six a seat, binding included. The three with string in them I'd strip first, and I'll not charge for the stripping, because the string isn't your fault."

Mrs Pell looked at her with a new attention.

"You've done it before."

"Four. Not fourteen."

"And the four came out well?"

"They came out ugly," the keeper said, "and they hold."

Mrs Pell laughed, a short bark that seemed to surprise her own self. "Ugly and holds. That's the railway all over." Then she stopped laughing and got a book out from under the counter, a greasy penny ledger, and licked her pencil, and stopped.

"Who do I put it down to?" she said. "For the book. I have to put something. The company audits this room."

The keeper had known the question was in the room somewhere. She had walked to the junction with it in her pocket alongside the twelve seeds, and she had not let herself look at it, and here it was now, out on the

counter, the same blank line, only smaller, and ruled in pencil by a stranger.

"I'll come back for the money when the work's done," she said. "Put it down to the keeper of the house, Averill's, by the lane. That's what they call me. It'll do for now."

"It won't do for the audit," said Mrs Pell, not unkindly. "But it'll do for me." She wrote it. *Keeper of the house, Averill's. Ten and six the seat, when done.* "Start with the two by the window. The Fennimore girl sits there with her books and she's put her heel through one, and if her mother sees it before it's mended the whole thing's off."

"When?"

"Whenever you like. The room's shut of a Tuesday."

"Thursday," said the keeper. It was the first day she had owned outright since she had come to the house. She turned it over in her mouth. Thursday.

She walked on to Horne, because it was only a mile past the junction by the towpath, and the day was fine, and because she had said she would and she was tired of being a person whose sayings floated.

Trewin's yard was big and cluttered and busy in the slow way of yards, men moving heavy things short distances. Trewin himself was in the weigh-office with a mug of something, and he came out when he saw her, and took off his hat, which she had not expected, and which put her at a disadvantage she had not budgeted for.

"You've heard, then," he said.

"About the wedding. I have. Congratulations to your girl."

"June the ninth. St Mildred's, if the Bishop's home." He said it with a craft's pride, as if the Bishop were a delivery. "You'll have come about the clock."

"I have."

"Then come in off the towpath, you look like a heron."

She would not go into the office. She stood in the yard, where the terms were, and she said them.

"The clock is running. I started it on Sunday. It's been regulated and it's keeping time to within a few seconds a day, and it strikes true, and it will be wound every day until it leaves, because I wind it, and winding is mine." She heard the sentence tip over at the end and let it lie there. "The estate owes you seventy-one pounds four. I'm offering the clock and forty pounds against it, the forty to come. Miss Hewel has written to Mr Wilcox for his consent, because it's his to give, and if he doesn't give it, the offer's nothing, and I'd rather you knew that now than in June."

Trewin drank from his mug and looked at her over the rim for a while.

"You started it," he said. "You started Bratt's long-case. Eleven years stopped and you started it of a Sunday with no man to help you."

"Tobias helped."

"Tobias," said Trewin, with the particular emphasis men of yards put on a name they have already priced, "is a good boy. But a movement's a movement. I'd give a good deal to know what you did with the frayed cord."

"Cut it and knotted it. A sailor's knot. Tobias's father's."

"A bowline," said Trewin. "On a weight cord. Well." He put the mug down on the weigh-sill and looked at the canal, and she understood that whatever he said next he had been turning over since Sunday, because word runs down a towpath faster than a barge.

"Here's my price," he said. "A stopped long-case, I'd have stood at thirty-one pound and no more, for there's the seeing-to, and Bratt's dead, and his boy's in Australia. But a going one that you'll warrant — that you'll have kept going, wound, regulated, till I collect it — that's a different animal." He held up a hand before she could speak. "Delivered, mind. Delivered to Horne church, June the eighth, going, and striking true at half past one when she comes out, or my girl will have a clock that starts its married life wrong, and I'll not have it. Deliver it going and I'll take the clock against fifty of the debt. Leaves twenty-one pound four owing, and I'll take it in what money you can find, and if what you can find is ten, we'll call the rest carting and a wedding present, and neither of us will say the word charity, because it isn't. It's me buying a clock I want from a house that keeps its word."

The keeper stood still. Somewhere down the yard a man dropped a crate and swore at it comfortably.

"You're paying for the winding," she said.

"I'm paying for the winding," Trewin agreed. "Thirty-one's a stopped price. Going, it's fifty. Any man in the trade would tell you the same, and most of them would tell you higher."

It was not what she had come to say. She had come with forty pounds owing in her mouth and a plan to be beaten up to thirty-five on the clock, and instead the sum had moved because the clock had started, and there was a lesson in that which she was not going to look at directly while he was watching.

"Twenty-one four," she said. "And I deliver it. Wound, and struck at half past one. I'll bring it myself, in a furniture waggon, on cushions, or not at all."

"Cushions," said Trewin, approving. "You'd be surprised the ones that don't."

He put out his hand. She took it. His hand was like a spade with a glove on.

"I'll want it in writing," she said. "You, me, the figure, the date. Miss Hewel can witness it. And it's nothing until Mr Wilcox says the clock may go."

"Get your paper," said Trewin. "And tell that boy of yours the jug was his mother's father's, and I'd know them ears anywhere, and he's welcome to a look at the books here any time he's passing, for a trade's a trade and ledgers are ledgers." He picked his mug back up. "And tell the house, from me, that it's the last place in the parish with a Bratt going in it, and it does itself no credit letting a woman of business walk home the long way with no escort."

"I always walk home the long way," said the keeper. "It's where the long way goes."

She was back by four, as she had said.

Tobias was in the kitchen with the kettle on, and he heard the whole of it standing up, and when she got to the figure twenty-one four he sat down slowly on the wood-basket, which was where he sat when the news was too big for a chair.

"Twenty-one four," he said. "He's put nineteen pounds on that clock for a knot and a wind."

"For the winding." She set the basket down. "It's a going price. It's fair. I'd have paid it, if it were me buying."

"And the ten he'd wave."

"Carting and a wedding present. His words. It isn't nothing, Tobias. It's his price for not saying a different word, and I know the difference, and I'll pay it, because the clock goes to a girl in June and it goes wound."

He was quiet for a moment. Then he said, "Mrs Pell. What did she say?"

"Ten and six a seat. Fourteen of them. Thursday. I start with the two by the window."

"Pd.," he said, softly, in the voice of a man reading a good scorecard, and then he caught himself. "The book. Who does she —"

"The keeper of the house, Averill's, by the lane. It won't do for the audit. It does for her."

He looked at her. She looked at the range. Neither of them said the next thing, which was that a wage that can't be collected is a promise, not a wage, and that the blank line was now sitting in a greasy penny ledger at the junction as well as in a typed deed in the dresser, and that she had walked out of the house with one blank line and come home with two.

But she had walked out, and come home, and said her price out loud in a yard, and taken a man's hand, and that was in the day too, and the day kept it.

"There's bread," said Tobias, getting up too quickly, "if I haven't let it prove itself into a cushion."

At six, the candle, the blue book.

Long-case: keeping. -2 sec since 9. Won't touch it again till Friday.

Trewin: clock against 50 of the debt, if Wilcox says yes. I deliver it June 8, wound, strikes 1.30. 21.4 in money after. Maybe 10 in money and the rest his word for mercy. His word, not mine. Noted.

Mrs Pell: 14 seats at 10.6 the seat, Thursday. First work that's mine. Book says keeper of the house. Audit won't have it.

She stopped. The pen had been going so easily that she made herself stop and look at what it had written. *First work that's mine.* And it wasn't, not yet, not on any paper anywhere. She would be owed ten and six a seat by a woman she liked, in a room that was shut on Tuesdays, under a name that wasn't one.

She thought about the blank line in the deed. She had left it because the line had a use, and she still thought so. But there were now two lines, and they were the same line, and she had stopped believing it was a coincidence.

Thursday, she wrote. *Seats first. The name after, when I know what it's for, not before.*

She put the book away and went and stood in the hall, where the long-case was ticking in the dark, four seconds behind the passage clock, and she wound it, because winding was hers, and out of the corner of her eye the fanlight showed the first stars, and in the left pocket of her apron the twelve seeds turned over, and one of them, she was nearly sure, had split its coat that afternoon in the warm of her pocket, which seeds are not

supposed to do. Out at the wall there had been six up at noon. She would look again in the morning. She was learning to let some things be checked only once a day.

Chapter Thirty-Two



The cane went into the scullery basin on Wednesday night, coiled the way it had lived in the potting shed for nobody knew how long, and by morning it had drunk enough to bend without complaining. She took it out, wrapped it in a wet cloth, and put the bundle in the basket with the peg, the hook, the awl, and the little scissors that had come in the carpet bag and never yet been used for what they were bought for.

Before breakfast she carried her cup out to the south wall and counted. Seven up. The one that had split its coat in her pocket had gone into the ground the evening before, in a hole made with a thumb, and the count had moved without her deciding anything. Eleven in the pocket. Seven up.

She stood over them for a moment in the cold, and then she went in and buttered the bread, because standing over seeds is not a job and she had one.

"You'll want the tall stool," said Tobias. "The kitchen one. The chairs in a waiting room will be low, and you'll be bent over them all day."

"I've been bent over chairs all week."

"Those chairs don't talk back. Hers will have opinions. Travellers will lean over you and ask if you're done."

"Then I'll be done when I'm done," she said, "and I'll say it in those words."

He walked her to the gate with the basket, and at the lane he stopped, because the lane was as far as the errand went, and said, "A guinea," in the voice of a man laying a bet he has already won, and she said, "If she pays," and he said, "She'll pay," and stood there until she was out of sight, which she knew without looking, because the lane went quiet in a particular way when it had stopped holding a second person.

The junction waiting room had a stove, a timetable in a frame, a bench by the door for people who had missed things, and fourteen cane chairs, of which two stood at the window with a view of the up line. The company clock hung over the ticket hatch, round and white-faced and confident.

"That one's the company's," said Mrs Pell, following her eye. "I'm not allowed to touch it, and it's never once agreed with me."

The keeper looked at it. It was five minutes fast, or the stove clock was five minutes slow, and there was no way on earth to be sure which from inside the room. Two clocks in the world she was not keeper of. She let them both be wrong.

"Window chairs first," said Mrs Pell. "The Fennimore girl sits there Thursdays for the two-forty. She'll want to get at the glass, and she's no patience for a chair that wobbles, and her father was a carpenter, so she'll look at the work."

"Her father was a carpenter."

"Which is why I'm paying ten and six a seat and not ten," said Mrs Pell, "and why I'd rather you started where she'll look."

The keeper turned the first window chair onto its back on the sacking she had brought, and the room came with her while she worked. A porter came through twice with a barrow and a theory about the weather. A man in a hat waited eleven minutes for the eleven-forty, missed it by his own account, and watched her lay three strands over his shoulder before he left. Nobody asked what she was doing.

The cane was the shed coil, and it had been in that shed, by the smell of it, since there had been a different queen. It was uneven all the way down the coil, thick in one place and furred in another, and it snapped twice where it had been creased in storage, and she adjusted for it, shorter lays, closer pegs, and where a strand had kept its kink from the coil she left it, because she had learned what a kink does and does not do. It shows. It holds.

The first chair was done by the middle of the day, and she sat back on her heels and looked at it the way she had learned to look, which was not for beauty. The lines ran true where they could and one ran dull-side-up

where she had pulled it crooked and left it, because pulling it now would undo two courses, and the chair did not care and the Fennimore girl would not feel it. Ugly, and holds.

She soaked the end of the bundle again, ate the bread from the basket on the step in the cold sun, and did the second chair in the afternoon.

The Fennimore girl came at twenty past two for the two-forty, as advertised, a thin girl of sixteen or so with her father's way of looking at a joint. She put her hand flat on the first chair's seat and pressed, and rocked it, and looked at the lines, and said, "One of these is dull side up."

"Yes," said the keeper.

"Why?"

"Because the one under it is where it is, and moving this one costs two courses, and the chair doesn't care which face the cane shows."

The girl thought about that with her whole face, which was a thing to watch. "Father says a job shows where you gave up."

"Your father's right," said the keeper. "This isn't where I gave up. It's where I counted." She turned the chair the right way up and set it at the glass. "Sit in it Thursday after next and tell me if it holds. That's the part that matters, and you're the one who'll know."

The girl sat, rocked once, hard, and the seat took it and came back. "It holds," she said, grudging, which from a carpenter's daughter is a certificate, and took her ticket, and went to the window and looked at the up line until the two-forty took her away.

Mrs Pell counted the money out behind the hatch while the porter held the door: twenty-one shillings, two half-sovereigns and a shilling, counted twice and pushed across the wood.

"There," she said. "And I've written it in the book, same as I said. Keeper of the house, Averill's, by the lane. Ten and six the seat, two seats, paid." She turned the book round on the counter so the keeper could see the line, and the line sat there in Mrs Pell's round schoolhand, under the day and above the coal, as true a line as any in the county and good nowhere outside the room.

The keeper looked at it a long moment.

"And what do I call you?" said Mrs Pell. "Off the book, I mean. Thursday after next you'll be back, and the girl will ask, and I can't go on saying the keeper of the house like it's a Sunday name."

"Mine's not ready," said the keeper.

Mrs Pell looked at her over the book, and did not laugh, and did not press, because Mrs Pell had spent thirty years behind a hatch watching people buy tickets to places they could not yet name, and she knew the look of a person standing on a platform with no ticket yet in their hand.

"Then it goes in the book when it is," she said. "The line's not going anywhere. Same as the money." And she pushed the shilling the last inch across the counter, and that was the whole of the ceremony.

The keeper put the three coins in the purse from the carpet bag, and they made the purse sit differently in her pocket than it had ever sat, and she walked home the long way, because twenty-one shillings deserves a walk with nothing in it.

There was a letter on the hall floor when she got in, two letters in one, Miss Hewel's neat hand on the outer and, inside it, another hand, a lawyer's hand, small and close and sure of its margins.

Dear Miss Hewel, it began, *I am in receipt of yours of Monday last. In the matter of the Bratt long-case clock, I see no objection to a clock that goes being sold to a man who wants it to go. The estate's interest is the price, not the furniture's feelings.*

You may inform the yard that the executor will consent to the clock being taken against fifty pounds of the debt owed by the estate to Mr Trewin, upon two conditions. First, the clock is to be named in the sale particulars at forty pounds, so that a man reading them may see what left the house and what it went for. Second, the balance of twenty-one pounds four shillings is to be paid in money on delivery of the clock, and the receipt is to state the split, clock and money both, so that the transaction is one thing written down and not two things remembered differently.

With that paid, the estate's account with Mr Trewin is closed. I need hardly say that a clock is easier to value than a house, and I would sooner value ten clocks than one house, if it comes to that, which I am assured it will.

Yours faithfully, E. Wilcox, Canterbury.

Tobias read it standing up, and then sat down on the wood-basket, which was the chair for news, and read it again.

"It's yes," he said. "It's yes with the paper in the right places. June the eighth it's delivered, wound, with twenty-one four in money beside it, and the debt is done, and on the ninth his girl gets married with it striking the

half hour." He looked up. "Forty pounds in the particulars. He's put a price on the clock in writing. That's a kind thing to do to a clock, making it worth a figure."

"It's a kind thing to do to a receipt," said the keeper. "It's what it's for. One thing written down."

"You did this," he said. "Yard and lawyer both. You walked in there with a bonnet on and came out with a clock deal and a wage, and now there's a letter with wax on it saying the numbers are agreed."

"The letter says the numbers are agreed," she said. "The clock still has to be worth forty pounds in June, which means it has to go, which means Friday I check it, and not before." She passed the long-case on her way to the dresser and did not touch it, which was also keeping.

She put Wilcox's letter in the dresser drawer, on the left, under the flat-iron, where the paper lived. And then she took out the purse, and stood a moment with it, and laid the three coins on the dresser top, on the almanac, on the typed deed with its blank line, and looked at the four of them together: the paper that offered her forty a year to stay and two hundred to go, the line left for a name, the almanac with its days, and the first money she had ever earned in her life, in shillings, counted twice by a woman who ran a waiting room.

The coins didn't fill the line. The line was for a name, and the coins were numbers, and numbers can't fill a name. But they held the paper flat, and there was work in the world with her hands' shape in it that had nothing to do with the deed at all, and she found she wanted the two things to lie together for one night, the wage and the offer, and let them look at each other.

She went up to bed with the hall clock ticking behind her, and the long-case somewhere behind that, by how much she would find out on Friday, and outside the fanlight the sky kept its own time entirely.

At six, the candle, the blue book.

Thursday. Two seats at Pell's. 21 shillings, paid into the hand. First money. It's heavier than it says on it.

Wilcox: yes. Clock in the particulars at 40. 21.4 in money on delivery. June 8, wound, strikes 1.30. The deal has paper now. Paper is the part that holds.

7 up. 11 in the pocket. Nobody decided anything.

The Fennimore girl found the dull strand and asked why. I told her the truth. She sat in the chair and rocked it and said it holds, like it cost her something to say. It did. That's why it's worth having.

She stopped, and looked at the page, and added one more line, small, at the bottom, because the day had held it and the day was closing.

Mrs Pell says the line in her book is waiting for a name. She didn't ask twice. That's the second place that's willing to wait for it. I'm not ready. I know what it isn't for. That's a start.

Chapter Thirty-Three



The coins were where she had left them: two half-sovereigns and a shilling, in a row on the almanac, on the deed. In the night one of the half-sovereigns had slid a quarter inch toward the edge of the paper, as if it had tried to leave and thought better of it. She pushed it back with her fingertip before she knew she was doing it.

Then she picked them up one at a time and put them in the purse, and put the purse in her right pocket.

Her left pocket had the house money in it, the tin's float for the coal and the baker, and the paper of sweet pea seeds. Her right pocket had never had anything in it but a handkerchief. She stood in the kitchen and felt the

difference in the weight of her skirt, a little drag on one side that had not been there yesterday, and thought: so that's what it is. Not a decision. A drag on one side.

She wiped the almanac where the coins had been. There was no mark. She had thought there would be.

Tobias was at the scullery sink with the kettle under the pump, working the handle with the flat of his hand the way she had shown him, and he said without turning round, "Friday."

"Friday."

"Is it now?"

"It's at ten," she said. "I said Friday at ten. If I look at half past seven I'll want to look again at eight."

He put the kettle on the range and wiped his hand on his trousers, which she had stopped telling him not to do. "You set it on Sunday by the kitchen clock," he said. "And the kitchen clock's right?"

"The kitchen clock is right by the twelve-ten," she said. "I check it every day the wind's from the east and I can hear the junction. It's never more than half a minute out. That's as right as anything up this lane is going to be."

"And if the twelve-ten's late?"

"Then the whole of Kent is wrong together," she said, "and it's not my business to put it right."

He laughed and went to get the bread.

She did the grates and the step and the lamps. At a quarter to ten she washed her hands at the sink, though there was nothing on them, and dried them properly, between the fingers, and went and stood in the hall.

The long-case stood where it had stood for longer than she had been alive, against the wall by the foot of the stairs, with the moon dial in its arch showing a fat half-moon and a painted ship that had never gone anywhere. Bratt of Horne, on the face, in black letters going a little brown. Its tick was slow and deep, slower than the kitchen clock's, a sound that seemed to come out of the floor rather than the case. For eleven years the hall had not had that sound in it. Five days, and she already could not remember what the hall had been like without it.

She left the kitchen door open so she could hear the kitchen clock, and waited.

The kitchen clock struck first. A thin quick ten, like a spoon on a cup. Then a little gap, a held breath, and then the long-case: ten strokes, heavy, with the hum after each one hanging in the stairwell.

She did not need to look. She looked anyway. The long-case's minute hand stood a hair short of the twelve. She opened the hood and held her breath and laid her thumbnail against the dial between the hand and the mark, and it was two minutes. Two minutes slow.

Tobias was in the kitchen doorway, holding the bread knife.

"Two minutes," she said. "Since Sunday."

"Is that a lot?"

"Not for a clock that was stopped eleven years." She counted it on her fingers because she did not trust it in her head. Five days, two minutes. Under half a minute a day. "It's going. It's going a little slow. That's a

thing you can fix. Stopped isn't."

She knelt and opened the trunk door at the bottom of the case. Inside it was dark and smelled of old oak and the lavender from Ellen's flannel, which had not gone off it yet, and the pendulum went across the dark and back, across and back, a brass moon on a thin rod. At the bottom of the bob there was a nut. She had seen it on Sunday, when she hung the pendulum, and had not touched it, because on Sunday the thing to do had been to start, not to adjust.

"Hold it," she said.

Tobias put the bread knife down on the stairs and came and knelt beside her and held his hand out flat, and she let the pendulum swing into his palm and stop there. The case went silent. The silence was terrible for a second, the old silence, eleven years of it come back all at once into the hall, and she saw him feel it too.

She turned the nut. Up, one full turn, the threads stiff and then easier. It lifted the bob by about the thickness of a fingernail.

"That's it?" he said.

"That's all it takes. Shorter swings faster." She took the bob from his palm with two fingers and drew it to the side and let it go. Tick. The floor took it up again. "Now we'll see."

"How long?"

"A week. Then I'll know if it was too much."

He looked at the nut, and then at her, and she could see him wanting to ask whether she had done this before, and deciding he knew the answer.

"First time," she said. "Somebody's hands have to be first on it."

She put the minute hand right, pushing it forward the two minutes, gently, letting the clock catch up with itself at each quarter so the striking would not be thrown. She closed the trunk door. There were two finger marks on the hood glass where she had steadied herself. She breathed on them and wiped them off with the corner of her apron.

The coal came at two. Not Trewin. The boy, the same thin one with his cap on backwards and the sack on his shoulder like it had grown there, and he tipped it into the bunker at the side of the house and the dust came up black around both of them.

"Governor says," the boy said, with his face still in the dust, "does it go."

She knew what he meant. She asked anyway. "Does what go?"

"The clock. He said ask her does it go. And is it true." He wiped his mouth with the back of his wrist and made it worse. "That's two things, he said. Ask both."

She thought of Trewin in his yard with the canal behind him, and the daughter, and June, and the half hour striking in a room full of people in their good clothes, and she thought that a man who sent a boy to ask two things was a man who had thought about it at night.

"Tell him it goes," she said. "It's gone every day since Sunday. It was two minutes slow this morning and I've set it faster. I'll check it every Friday till June."

The boy moved his lips over it.

"It goes," he said. "And she's seeing to it."

"That's right."

"And true?"

"Tell him true is what I'm seeing to."

He nodded, as if that was a fair answer, and swung the empty sack over his shoulder, and went off down the lane kicking a stone in front of him, and she stood with the coal dust settling on her sleeves. She knew what Trewin was paying for. He was not paying for a clock that kept time. Nobody at a wedding looks at a clock. He was paying for one sound at half past one, on one day, in one room, with his girl standing up in front of everyone. That had to be right once. Everything between now and then was only so that it would be right once.

She brushed her sleeves and went in.

There was a letter to answer. Mr Wilcox had written in Canterbury that the executor would consent, and a consent wanted answering, and Tobias had said so on Thursday night in the voice of a man who had worked in an office, and she had said she would do it, and had not.

She did it at the kitchen table, at three, with the light coming in over the sink. Tobias was out the back splitting kindling. She could hear it, the knock and then the split, the knock and then the split, a sound with its own clock in it.

She had never written a letter about her own business. She had written Averill's orders for him, to the coal yard and the chandler and once to a man about a broken pane, and they had all started *Sir, Mr Averill desires*,

and she had written them in her best hand and he had signed them. She sat with the pen and the paper and she found she could not think how a letter starts when nobody desires anything except the person writing it.

In the end she wrote it short.

Sir,

I have your letter. The terms are agreed as you set them down. The clock will be delivered to Mr Trewin on the eighth of June, going, with the money balance paid on delivery.

The clock was checked today and found two minutes slow in five days. It has been set right and will be checked weekly until it goes.

Yours faithfully,

And then the line under it, where the name goes.

She sat with the nib a quarter inch off the paper. The deed was in the dresser behind her with a line in it four inches long, and this was a line about the same length, and she had the strange feeling that if she filled this one the other would know.

She did not have to fill it with that. A letter was not a deed. A letter only had to say who was writing it, so that the man reading it would know where to send the answer.

She wrote: *The Keeper.*

Then she looked at it. Her own hand, neat, the capital K the way Averill had liked his capitals. It looked like a word on a door. She did not cross it out.

Tobias came in with an armful of kindling and put it in the basket by the range, and saw her face, and came and read the letter over her shoulder, which he did not ask to do and she did not mind.

"The Keeper," he said.

"That's who's writing."

"Wilcox will want a name for his file."

"Wilcox has a file with the house's name on it," she said. "The house is writing to him. When I write to him about something that's mine, I'll sign it something else."

He did not argue. He put his finger on the paper, not on the signature, on the line above it. "On delivery," he said. "Good. You've got that right. He'll like that you got it right."

"He wrote it."

"People like to see what they wrote come back the same," Tobias said. "It's the main pleasure of an office."

She laughed. She had not expected to.

She folded the letter in three and wrote Wilcox's name on the outside, and the town, and put it on the dresser for the morning post, under the almanac, and the almanac on top of the deed, so that the three of them lay there in a stack: the paper she had signed, the days, and the paper she had not.

At dusk she went out to the south wall with a candle in a jar.

The sweet peas had come up in a row like stitches, green hooks bent over, each one with its head still down in the soil as if it had forgotten something. She counted them with her finger in the air, not touching. Eight. Yesterday seven. Twelve in the ground, so four still deciding. Eleven in the paper in her left pocket, which she touched through her skirt and did not take out.

She held the candle low and looked at the newest one. It had come up overnight, a pale crook of stem pushing a bit of earth up on its back like a man carrying a roof. Ellen's seed. Saved by Averill from Ellen's flowers, kept in an envelope in the dresser for eleven years by a man who never planted it, and now coming up on the wrong wall in the wrong year for a woman who had never seen them flower.

"You're slow," she said to it. "You and the clock both."

The candle went sideways in a breath of wind and she cupped it, and went in.

At six, the blue book.

Fri. Long-case two minutes slow in five days. Nut up one turn. T. held the bob. Check next Fri.

Trewin's boy: does it go, is it true. Goes.

Signed Wilcox's letter The Keeper. It looked like a word on a door.

She shut the book and went up. On the stairs she stopped with her hand on the rail, below the long-case, and listened to it for a while in the dark. The tick came up through the boards into her feet. It was a fraction quicker

than this morning. She could not have proved it. She could feel it, the way you feel a person walking beside you change their step to match yours.

Chapter Thirty-Four



On Saturday morning the coins were back on the dresser.

She had not meant to put them there. She had carried them in her right pocket all Friday, through the clock and the coal and the letter, and at night, undressing, she had taken the purse out and gone down again in her stockings and laid the three coins on the almanac in the same row as before. She did not know why. The right pocket was hers. The left was the house's. The dresser was nobody's pocket, and that seemed, at eleven at night with a candle, like the only honest place to keep money she did not know the owner of.

In the morning she stood in front of them with the kettle not yet on.

Two half-sovereigns and a shilling. Mrs Pell had counted them into her hand on Thursday, twice, licking her thumb for the second count. Two seats. A week ago she had never earned a coin in her life, and now there were three of them on the dresser, and she could not pick them up.

Tobias came down at half past six with his collar on crooked and one brace twisted.

She did not say good morning. She said, "Whose is that?"

He looked where she was looking. He did not look long. "The estate's," he said.

"Mrs Pell paid it into my hand."

"For work done in the estate's time, by the estate's—" He stopped. She watched him hear the end of the sentence before he said it, and watched him decide not to say it, and then watched him decide that not saying it was worse. "By the estate's keeper," he said. "That's how Pryor would put it. It'd go in the account book. Against Trewin, or as sundries. Either way it's in the estate's book."

"So my hands are the estate's."

"Your time is. That's what he paid you for. Averill. Forty a year." He put his hand up to his collar and made it worse. "I'm only saying what Pryor would say."

"I know you are." She lifted the kettle off the hook. "And you? What are you in the book?"

He was quiet long enough that she turned round.

"I'm not in it at all," he said. "I come with the house. That's what the letter said. Company. You don't pay company." He found the brace and straightened it. "It's not mine either, if that's what you're asking. Nothing I do here's mine. I mend the mangle and it's the estate's mangle."

"It's not mended."

"No," he said. "That part's mine."

She laughed, and he did too, and the laugh did something to the kitchen. But the sentence stayed in her while she worked the pump. *It's not mine either.* He had been living in the same arrangement since he came down, the both of them in the book or out of it, and he had never once put it in words, and she had never once thought to ask. She thought about that while the kettle came up. It was not that he was more patient than she was. It was that he had not known anything else was possible, and neither had she, until three coins.

After breakfast she went to the bench in the back kitchen where he was working, and stood at the end of it.

"What would it take," she said, "to make twenty-one pound four in money by June?"

He set down the chisel. He had been shaving a peg for the mangle, and there were curls of pale wood all round his boots.

"By caning?"

"By anything I can do with these." She held her hands out, palms up, over the bench. She had never done that in her life. It felt as foolish as holding out a plate for someone to put food on. She kept them there.

He took the pencil from behind his ear and did it on the bench top, in the grain, where there were already a dozen other sums he had not rubbed out. Twenty-one pounds was four hundred and twenty shillings, and four more made four hundred and twenty-four. At ten and six a seat.

"Forty," he said. "Forty seats and a bit. You've done two. Thirty-eight."

"By June."

"Found, and done, and paid for. By the first week, to have it in hand for the eighth." He looked at the number on the bench. "Mrs Pell's got twelve more. That leaves twenty-six you'd have to find."

"In Horne."

"Or anywhere a cart goes."

She looked at the number. It was not impossible. It was worse than that. It was a number that would just fit if every chair was found and every week ran right and nobody's money came late, and she had kept this house long enough to know that nothing ran right twelve weeks together.

"And the other," she said. "The two hundred. To go."

He did not want to do that one. She saw him not want to. Then he did it, slower, under the first, and drew a line.

"Three hundred and eighty-one seats," he said. "And a bit."

They both looked at it.

"That's not a sum," she said. "That's a life."

"That's what he thought you were worth to leave," Tobias said, and then went red, because he had not meant it to come out sounding the way it did, and it had.

"No," she said. "It's what he thought it would cost to make him feel he'd done right." She touched the number with one finger. "That's different. I don't have to earn that. I only have to decide if I want it."

"Do you?"

"I don't know." She took her hand back. "But I know what I want before that, and it isn't either number. I want to send somebody a bill."

She went down to the junction at eleven.

She left the coins on the dresser. On the doorstep she turned round and went back and nearly took them and did not, and pulled the door to behind her, and that was a decision too, she supposed, though it did not feel like one.

Saturday made the junction loud. There was a family on the up platform with a hamper and a little dog that had been sick on the step and a father pretending not to know whose dog it was. A porter was wheeling a crate with straw sticking out of the slats and something in it that clinked. The waiting-room door was propped open with a fire bucket, and inside Mrs Pell was on her knees with a scrubbing brush and a pail, doing the floor before the dinner trains.

"Don't come in on the wet," she said, without looking up. "Go round by the wall. If you've come about the next two, they're the corner ones, and they're worse."

"I've come about more than the next two."

Mrs Pell sat back on her heels and pushed her hair off her forehead with her wrist.

"Have you now."

The keeper went round by the wall and stood by the two seats she had done. They looked like what they were: new cane, still pale, in a room of chairs gone brown. One of them had a newspaper on it someone had left.

"There's a ladies' room on the down side," she said. "With chairs."

"Six. Locked half the year. The company won't pay for them. I'll save you asking, I've asked." Mrs Pell went back to the floor, scrubbing in short hard strokes. "The company pays for what's on the company's list. Chairs aren't on it. Chairs are furniture, and furniture's charged to the house, and the house is the stationmaster's, and that's Mrs Fennimore, and Mrs Fennimore would sooner have the floor."

"Then I wouldn't ask the company."

"Who, then?"

"Whoever sits on them."

Mrs Pell stopped scrubbing.

That was when the man came in.

He came in out of the wind with his collar up and a leather case, a stout man in a good brown coat with mud to the ankles, and went straight to the stove side without looking, the way a man does who has stood in a hundred waiting rooms. He looked at the chairs. He chose one of the new ones, took the newspaper off it, and sat down hard.

The cane gave and held. He rocked once, forward and back, without knowing he did it.

"Well," he said, to the room. "That's better than anything in the hotel at Canterbury." He looked down between his knees at the seat. "That's proper. Who did this?"

Mrs Pell pointed at the keeper with the scrubbing brush.

He turned in the chair. He had small quick eyes in a big face. "You cane."

"I mend."

"Same thing, if it holds." He rocked again. "I keep the Ferry Inn at Sturry. My wife's had two men in to do our chairs in four years and we've been worse off after both of them. One of them used string. She's eight chairs wanting seats before the summer, and a fellow from Canterbury wants to replace the lot with bentwood at a figure I won't say in a room with ladies in it." He looked at Mrs Pell's hands in the pail. "Ladies working, I mean."

"I'd want to see the chairs," the keeper said.

"Course you would." He felt in his coat and brought out a card and held it out, because there was nowhere to put it down that was not wet. *A. Pike, Ferry Inn, Sturry. Ales and Stabling.* "Any day but Sunday. Not between twelve and two, we're serving. I'd want them done by the month's end, if the month will stand it."

She took the card. It was warm from his pocket.

He took out a little book with a pencil in its spine and licked the pencil. "And who do I put down?" he said. "For the bill. My wife keeps the book and she'll want to know who she's paying."

The twelve-ten had not come in. The dog barked on the up platform. Mrs Pell's brush had stopped.

She had been waiting for this, she realised. Not this man. This question. She had thought it would come on a deed, from a lawyer, at a table, and she had been getting ready for it there, and it had come instead in a wet waiting room from a publican with a pencil, and she was not ready at all.

"The house," she said. "Averill's. Up the lane above Horne. Put the keeper of the house."

He wrote it. "Averill's," he said. "Funny name for a lady." He laughed at it, and nobody else did, and he did not notice. He stood up and patted the chair as if it were a horse. "End of the month, then. Don't come at dinner." And he went out to the platform, where the twelve-ten was coming round the curve with its smoke lying flat in the wind.

Mrs Pell got up off her knees one at a time, and stood with her fists on her hips, and looked at her.

"You gave him the house."

"It's what's in the book."

"You could have given him any name you liked." Mrs Pell's voice was not unkind. It was worse than unkind. It was precise. "He'd never have known the difference. You'd have done his chairs and he'd have paid you and not a farthing of it would ever have gone near the estate. I'd have done it. You can write that down somewhere. I'd have given him a name off a gravestone and been glad of it."

"I thought of that."

"While he was asking?"

"While he was licking the pencil."

"And?"

The keeper looked at the card. *A. Pike.* It had a smear of something on one corner, beer or gravy.

"It would have been a lie on his bill," she said. "His wife keeps the book. I don't want to be a lie in somebody's book." She put the card in her right pocket. "But I'll tell you what I won't do. I won't do that again. Stand there and give a house's name for my own hands, and call it being honest, when it's only that I've never had anything else to give."

Mrs Pell looked at her for a while. Then she bent and picked up the pail.

"There's a mark on that door from the porter's boot," she said. "It's been there since October. If you're stopping, you can have the cloth."

She stopped. She did the door. The mark was a black heel-shape at knee height, and it came up slowly, and where it came up the paint underneath was paler than the rest, a round clean patch the size of a coin.

She walked home with the card in her pocket and turned it over with her thumb the whole way up the lane, feeling the corners.

Tobias had the mangle in pieces on the scullery floor, the rollers out and the cog laid on newspaper, and the peg he had shaved that morning sitting on top of it as if it were proud of itself. The potatoes were on. He looked up.

"Eight chairs," she said. "At the Ferry Inn at Sturry. Before the end of the month. Ten and six, if he'll stand it, and he will."

"That's four pound four."

"I know what it is." She took her bonnet off. "And when he asked who to put on the bill I said the house."

Tobias sat back on his heels with the cog in his hand.

"You said the house," he said. Not a question.

"I said the house, and I've been sorry about it for two miles. Not sorry I said it. Sorry I had nothing else."

He turned the cog over. He did not look at her. "Then what will you put?" he said. "Next time."

She hung the bonnet on the peg. She stood there with her hand on it.

"I've been waiting to know what it was for," she said. "A name. I thought it was like the seeds. You don't put it in till you know the ground." She turned round. "But that's wrong. It's not for the ground. A name's what you put at the bottom of a bill so the person paying knows who to pay. That's all. That's all it's ever been for, nearly. And I've been keeping this house eleven years and mending chairs and winding a clock and I've never had one thing to send anyone a bill for. I called it waiting. It wasn't waiting. It was working for nothing and not signing."

He put the cog down on the newspaper very carefully, as if it might break.

"You'll want to think," he said.

"I have thought. I know what it's for now. That's what I didn't have." She went to the range and lifted the lid off the potatoes and the steam came up in her face. "I won't pick one off a gravestone, though, whatever Mrs Pell says. It's got to be one I can say to Mr Pike and Mrs Pell and Mr Wilcox and Averill's paper, all of them, the same."

They ate. The mangle lay in pieces between them and the door, and neither of them moved it. After a while he said, into his plate, "My mother's name was Ruth."

She looked up.

"I'm not offering it," he said quickly. "I only thought. You'd not had anybody tell you theirs."

"No," she said. "Nobody ever has." And then, because he was red to the ears, "You look like a man whose mother was called Ruth."

He laughed, and it went round the kitchen and came back.

At six, the candle, the blue book. She put the card down on the table next to it, *A. Pike, Ferry Inn, Sturry*, and they lay there side by side, a card and a book, an order and somewhere to write it.

Sat. T. says the 21s is the estate's. Says he's not in the book at all. Neither of us has ever said it out loud.

38 seats by June. 381 to go. The first is a lot of work. The second isn't a sum.

Pike, Ferry Inn. 8 chairs. He asked who to bill. I said the house.

A name is for a bill.

She put the pen down and picked it up again.

His mother was Ruth.

Chapter Thirty-Five



On Sunday she cut cane, because the bell went for church and she was at the bench, and neither of them said anything about it.

The coil from the potting shed had done three seat pans, her own chair and Mrs Pell's two, and she had learned the coil the way she had learned everything in this house, by running out of it in a particular order. She measured by laying a strand along the seat rail of the finished chair and cutting with the little scissors, and by eleven she had cut what was left of it into enough for three more and had a heap of offcuts that were good for nothing, and she sat back and did the sum she had been avoiding since Saturday.

Three seats out of a coil that had looked, in the shed, like a thing that went on for ever. Eight chairs at the Ferry Inn by the end of the month. She would need five more seats of cane and a bundle of the thick for the bindings, and Mrs Pell's twelve after that, and there was no more in the shed, and there was no money in the house that was hers to buy it with.

Tobias came in at noon with his sleeves rolled and found her sitting in front of the heap.

"That's the last of it," he said. He did not ask.

"That's the last of it."

He picked up one of the offcuts and turned it over, and put it down. "Then you'll have to take it out of the twenty-one," he said. "That's what money's for. It's not a relic."

"It's the estate's money."

"It's money in a house."

"It's money in a house," she said, "and if I buy cane with it, the cane's the estate's, and the chairs I mend with it are mended by the estate, and when Mr Pike comes to pay, the bill goes in the estate's book and I'm where I was on Thursday. I'd have worked a month and bought my own tools with somebody else's money and made a better debt for a dead man."

He was quiet. She had learned that quiet in him now. It was not the quiet of a man being told something he did not like. It was the quiet of a man going back over the arithmetic to see whether she was right, and she let him, because being agreed with quickly was worth less than being agreed with late.

"Then you'll have to ask Pike for it," he said at last. "Cane on account."

"Yes."

"And he'll ask what name to put against it."

"Yes."

"And you'll give him one."

She picked the scissors up and put them down again, because her hands wanted something to do and she did not want them doing it while she said this.

"I've a name," she said. "It's not a thing I have to make up. It's on a letter in the drawer with a machine's fault in the capitals, and it's on Pryor's file, and it's in your mouth when you forget yourself, and it's the one thing in this house I've never once written down in my own hand."

"Then why not have written it?"

"Because there was nothing to write it on that wouldn't turn it into a word for a room." She looked at the heap of cane ends. "Mr Pike's book is different. His book says who comes back on Friday. If I put a name in that book it's not a description of me, it's a promise I'll keep. That's a thing a name can do. I'd like to see it do it once before I put it on a deed."

He thought about that for a while. Then he said, "You could put mine."

"No."

"I'd not take anything off it. It'd just be—"

"No," she said, and then, because he had gone a bit red, more gently, "Tobias. If your name's on my bill, then Mr Pike pays you, and you pay me out of your pocket, and every chair I make has a man standing behind

it. I'd be keeping house for somebody again. Only this time I'd have chosen him, which would make it worse and not better."

He laughed at that, one short one, the way he did when the thing was funny and also not. "That's a fine way to be told," he said.

"You asked."

"I did." He picked up his jacket. "I'll walk down with you in the morning as far as the junction. Dunnet goes Sturry Mondays with the empties. He'd take the basket."

Monday she was up before the light, and the two of them went down the lane in the grey with the basket between them, and at the junction Dunnet put the basket under the sacking behind the seat and said, "Ferry Inn," as a question, and she said, "Ferry Inn," as an answer, and climbed up, and that was the whole of the news reaching Horne.

The road went down out of the valley and along the water. There were osier beds on the far side, cut white and standing in rows like the stubble of a shave, and a mill with its wheel going, and the willow along the bank had been pollarded into fists. The river was wider than the one at Horne and slower, and it had a smell to it that was not the canal's smell, green and old and turning over. She had crossed it once, on the carrier's cart, eleven years ago, sitting on a box with everything she owned in it, and had not thought about it since, and now she found that she remembered the exact place the road bent and the light on the water, and that she had not known she was keeping it.

The Ferry Inn had been a ferry once. There was a board by the door with a boat on it in faded paint, and no boat, and a bridge thirty yards up with three arches and a handrail that wanted paint. The inn itself was long and

low and had been two cottages and had a yard on the side with a mounting block and a pump and a dog that got up and looked at her and lay down again.

Mr Pike was in the taproom with the shutters half up and a ledger open on the bar.

He was bigger behind his own bar than he had been in Mrs Pell's waiting room, and slower, and he looked at her basket before he looked at her face, which she decided she liked.

"You'll be the woman from the junction," he said. "Mrs Pell's."

"I'm the keeper at the house up the lane above Horne," she said. "Mrs Pell's is where you saw me. The work's mine."

"Is it," he said. He turned the ledger round. "Well. Eight chairs. Come and look at them and tell me what you'd charge, and don't give me a price for the worst eight chairs in the county and then mend them like the best, because I'll not pay for the difference and you'll not forgive me."

The eight were round the room. Two by the fire, three at the window under the plant, one by the door with the draught on it, and two that had been put in the passage because there was no room for them anywhere else. She went round them on her knees one after another, and turned each one up, and pressed the joints, and looked at the underside where a chair tells you the truth about itself.

Three had no seat at all. One had a seat that had been mended with a piece of leather and tacks, by somebody in a hurry, and would not hold a man who leaned back. One had a leg that had been glued and was not true. One had been painted over twice, brown over green over the original black,

and the paint had filled the cane holes so that half of them would have to be cleared with an awl. Two were sound and only wanted the seats doing before the backs went too.

She got up and wiped her hands.

"Three have no seat and want the holes cleared," she said. "Two have seats that'll go before the summer and I'd do them now while the frame's sound. One leg's been glued and it's not true and if a man leans back on it at Christmas it'll go, so I'd peg it and glue it and charge you for the peg. Two are only the seats. That's eight at ten and six. Four pound four."

He did not write it down. He looked at her a while.

"Mrs Pell's was ten and six," he said.

"Mrs Pell's was ten and six," she said. "It's the same work and it doesn't get cheaper for being asked twice in one week."

"And if I wanted them not done so well?"

"Then you'd want somebody else, and they'd be cheaper, and in two years you'd be asking me again."

He laughed, a slow rumble of a thing, and pulled the ledger round and squared it, and dipped the pen.

"Name to the bill," he said.

She had rehearsed it on the walk and the rehearsing had been no use at all, because a rehearsal is a woman saying her own name to herself on a road, and this was a man waiting with a pen.

She said it.

He wrote it the way it sounded.

"No," she said, and her voice came out steadier than she expected, which was the only part of it that was easy. "It's not spelled that way."

He looked up. "How is it spelled?"

She told him, letter by letter, and he scratched out the first and wrote it again, and the nib made a small noise against the paper, and when he was done he turned the ledger round so she could read it, and there it was, in another person's hand, in a stranger's book, in ink.

She had seen it before. Typewritten, with the capitals jumping. On an envelope from London. On a clerk's list in another house, years ago, a name passed over like a coat on a peg. But never in a hand that had been asked and had said yes and had written it as instruction.

"That's a lot of letters," Pike said.

"It's the letters I've got," she said.

He blew on the ink and closed the ledger, and it was the most ordinary thing in the world, and she stood there in the taproom with her basket and found she had to look at the window for a moment, at the light on the water, so as not to make a fool of herself in front of a man who had only asked a question.

"Now," he said. "When can you start?"

"Wednesday. I'll do the two by the fire first, because they're where the men sit and they'll be tested every night, and I'd rather know early."

"And the month?"

"The last day of the month, all eight, and the ones that are done go back in the room as they're done, not all at the end. If I'm to be in and out of your taproom for three weeks I'd rather be a woman with a basket than a load

of chairs in the passage."

"That's sensible." He shut the ledger and put his hand flat on it. "Now. How are you paying for cane?"

She had the sentence ready. She was pleased, afterwards, that she had it ready.

"On account," she said. "A pound, against the bill, written in the book the same as the bill, so that when the chairs are done you'll take it off and neither of us will have to remember what it was for."

He raised his eyebrows, which on a face that size was a slow business. "You've done this before."

"No," she said. "I've watched it done. I'd rather be a pound short and right than a pound long and paid by somebody's charity."

He put his hand in his pocket, and put a sovereign on the bar, and then took the ledger up again and wrote, and read the line out loud as he wrote it, which she understood was for her benefit and also for his own.

Advanced by A. Pike, one pound, against seats, eight chairs.

"There," he said. "Now go and buy your cane before the shops get busy, and mind you don't spend it on anything sensible like a new basket."

She bought cane at the saddler's by the bridge. Two bundles, one fine and one thick for the bindings, and an awl and a half round file that came to six and fourpence, which was more than she had meant, and she stood in the shop with the coins in her hand and did the sum twice before she paid. The saddler was a thin man with a leather apron and the smell of the shop

was the best thing she had smelled in a year. He asked what she was doing with it, and she said the Ferry Inn's eight, and he nodded as if a bill had been settled somewhere in the world.

She had thirteen and eightpence left, and she wrapped it in paper and put it in the right-hand pocket of the apron.

Not the coat. The apron. The one she worked in.

Dunnet was going back up at four with a load of empties and no room on the seat, so she walked, with the basket on her arm and the cane in it and thirteen shillings and eightpence in her pocket, and the road up out of the water was long and she was glad of it, and the light came round and went long and yellow and lay down in the hop poles.

She stopped at the top of the hill to put the basket down and get her breath, and looked back at the valley, and there was the inn with its board and its bridge, and somewhere behind her windows there were eight chairs with their seats out and three that could not be sat on, and a line in a ledger with her name on it, spelled right.

She thought: that's a bill.

Not the deed. A bill. Signed by the person who'll pay, in his book, in his hand, for work in her hands.

She got home at seven. Tobias had the kettle on and did not ask, which she was grateful for, and then she saw his face and understood that he had been doing sums at that bench all afternoon and had one ready.

"Eighty-four shillings," he said.

"Eighty-four."

"Less twenty advanced."

"Less twenty."

"Less the cane."

"No. The cane came out of the pound. That's what the pound was for. I've thirteen and eight left of it, and that's the chairs' money, not mine, until they're done."

He did the sum on the corner of the same sandpaper. "Sixty-four shillings on the day," he said. "Three pound four."

"Three pound four," she said, "and a bill in a book in Sturry, and the tools to earn it bought out of his own pound. Which is the whole trick of it, Tobias. Nobody lends a house a pound. A house is a thing that stands there. A name is a thing that can come back."

At nine, the candle, the blue book.

Monday. Pike's at the Ferry Inn, Sturry. The river's wider there. Three chairs with no seats, two that would have gone by summer, one leg glued and not true. Eight at ten and six, four pound four the bill. He asked for the name. I gave him mine and made him spell it. His hand, his book, ink.

He advanced a pound against the bill and wrote the line himself. I bought cane at the saddler's, two bundles and an awl, six and four. Thirteen and eight left, and it's his until the seats are done. I've put it in the right pocket and I know exactly what that means and I'm not sorry.

Three pound four on the day, when the month's out. That won't pay Trewin out of the debt and it wasn't meant to. It pays for the next cane and the next after, and it makes a number that isn't somebody else's.

The line in the dresser's still blank. A bill is a thing you sign. A deed is a thing you are. I've signed one. I'll be the other when I know what it's worth being.

8 up. 12 in the ground. 11 in the pocket. One name in a stranger's book.

Chapter Thirty-Six



Thursday came in wet and went on being wet until the junction, where the roof of the waiting-room held and the rain made a noise on it like somebody counting small coins.

Mrs Pell had the stove lit and the kettle on it, and the last four of the fourteen chairs stood in a row by the window with their frames wiped and their seats out. Thirteen were done. She had done ten of them herself and three with Tobias at the other end of the cane, and she could tell the three from the ten if she looked, which she did not any longer, because looking had stopped being the point somewhere around the ninth.

"Sit," said Mrs Pell. "You've a face like a wet Sunday."

"It's Thursday."

"It's the same face."

She sat on the fourteenth chair, which had no seat, which was a joke she would not have made in March, and Mrs Pell, who had been sixty years at the junction and had never once been seen to laugh at anything she had not first inspected, laughed.

The Fennimore girl came at eleven, for the test. She had been promised a Thursday-after-next and the Thursday had arrived, and she came in under an umbrella that was too big for her with her mother's instructions folded in her glove. She was twelve or thirteen and had a way of looking at a chair as though it owed her an account.

She took the first of the window chairs, the one with the diagonal that had been pulled out wrong and put back, and she did not sit on it. She stood behind it and pressed the seat with the heel of her hand, hard, in four places, and then she knelt and looked at it from underneath, where the binding showed, and then she sat. She sat the way people sit when they are not being polite to the chair. She rocked once. She leaned back and put her weight where the back-leg would carry it.

"It gives," she said.

"It's meant to give."

"Mother's will be flat."

"Your mother's was caned by somebody who wanted it flat. Cane isn't flat. Cane is a thing that agrees with you."

The girl considered this. "The kink," she said. She had found it. It was in the second course, white, where the strand had not wanted to lie.

"Yes."

"Does it hold?"

"Sit on it again."

The girl sat on it again, with a great deal of attention, and then got up and stood back with her head on one side.

"It's ugly," she said. "It holds."

"That's what I'd have on the bill."

"Mother said to ask you about the ladies' room."

There was a ladies' waiting-room at the junction, behind the booking hall, a long cold room with six benches along the wall and a harmonium nobody had played since the old stationmaster, and the benches had cane in their backs and seats that had been going for years the way a tooth goes, a little at a time and then all at once. The company had had a man out to look at it in January and the man had said it wanted doing and nobody had said by whom.

"Six benches," said the girl. "Mother says the company won't pay but the ladies' committee will, if somebody says what it costs, in writing, with a name."

She said it so exactly that it was clear she had been rehearsing it in the rain.

"Tell your mother I'll look at them Saturday," said the keeper. "And that the name will be on it."

The girl nodded and went, and the door let in a gust that smelled of wet coal and the stove roared and settled.

Mrs Pell did not say anything for some time. She finished her tea. She went into the booking-office, which was her private territory, and came back with the ledger, the long one with the marbled boards, and set it on the table between the two cups.

"Show me what you wrote," she said. "The Monday one. The inn."

She hadn't brought the blue book, so she told it. The eight chairs, ten and six, the pound advanced, the line in Pike's hand. Mrs Pell listened with her mouth set, the way she listened to the timetable being read out wrong.

"And whose name did he write?"

"Mine."

"Which?"

It was a fair question. She had given him one name in the room and he had written it, and it had been the right one, and she had spelled it out, letter by letter, and watched his pen go along behind her voice. She told Mrs Pell what it was. She had not said it aloud in that house since the day she had been left, and it sat on the table next to the sugar and looked perfectly ordinary.

Mrs Pell nodded. She opened the ledger at the page, and put her finger on the line that had been there since the first Thursday, the one in her own square hand. *Caning, 2 seats, 21s. Keeper of the house, Averill's.*

"I've never liked that," she said.

"You wrote it."

"I wrote it because it was what I had. It's a house's work, I said to myself, a house's bill. But you've been here every Thursday for a month, and you came on the Monday with a name that's yours, and I'd not have it in my

book that you're somebody's."

She took the pen, and she did not scratch it out, because Mrs Pell was not a woman who scratched. She ruled one fine line through the word *Averill's*, so that it could still be read, and above the line, in her small hard capitals, she wrote the name. Then she turned the book round so that it faced the keeper, and waited.

"Is it right?"

It was right. It was in a stranger's ledger twice now, and neither time had it been the place where it mattered, and the place where it mattered was still a blank line on a typed paper in a dresser drawer, face up on an almanac, waiting.

"It's right," she said.

"Then that's two," said Mrs Pell, "and I'll thank you not to make me a third by dithering."

"Is that what I'm doing?"

"It's what I'd be doing. I'm seventy-one and I'd have been at it ten years."

She went home by the hop-poles, and the rain stopped as she reached the lane, and Tobias was in the yard with the long-case clock's weight-cord over his arm, checking the fray, because it was Thursday and the rating nut wanted its turn.

"Two minutes?" she said.

"A minute fifty. It's going better than I am."

She took the cord from him and looked at it, and thought of Trewin's daughter walking into St Mildred's in June with a clock striking half past one behind her somewhere, in a house she'd not yet seen. It would be wound. It would be going. It would not be hers, and she found that she could think that quite steadily, standing in the wet yard with the cord in her hands.

"Mrs Pell wrote my name," she said.

"Which one?"

"The right one."

Tobias did not say anything for a moment. Then he said, "Tea," in the voice of a man who had understood perfectly well and was not going to make a fuss, and she went in.

At nine, the candle, the blue book.

Thursday. Fourteen seats, thirteen done. Last one tomorrow. The Fennimore girl tested the first and said it was ugly and it holds, which is the best anyone has said of anything I've made, and I've written it here so I can find it.

Six benches, the ladies' room. Saturday I'll measure. A name on the estimate.

Mrs Pell struck out a word. She didn't scratch it. She ruled a line so it can still be read. I think that's the way to do it, with a thing that was true once.

Three places now where my name is written by somebody who meant it. The line in the dresser is the fourth. I know what it's for now. It's not for the house. I haven't decided what it's for. That's different from not knowing.

9 up. Clock a minute fifty.

Chapter Thirty-Seven



Friday she did the fourteenth chair alone.

Mrs Pell had gone into the booking-office to deal with the nine-forty, and the waiting-room was empty except for the stove and the rain, which had come back in the night and settled in for the week. She set the frame on two trestles by the window where the light was best, wet the cane in the tin bath until it went the colour of weak tea and bent when she asked it to, and began.

She had thought, going over the hill that morning, that the last one would feel like something. It did not. It felt like the third, and the seventh, and the eleventh: a strand under, a strand over, the awl in her right hand and the peg in her teeth, the small dry sound of cane drawing through a hole.

That was the thing nobody had told her. You did not finish a trade. You arrived at the place where finishing was the same as continuing, and the only difference was that someone came along and paid you.

She laid the second diagonals at ten past eleven. She laid the third at a quarter to twelve, and there was a kink in it, a white place where the strand had not wanted to lie, and she looked at it for some time and left it, because it held, and because the Fennimore girl would be disappointed if she had learned to hide it.

Binding at one. She doubled the strand the way Tobias's mother's man had done it, two together, and the join sat down into the groove and disappeared. She sat on the chair. It gave. She got up and sat on it again, and then she carried it across to the row and set it at the end, and there were fourteen, and the window chairs stood in the grey light like a congregation that had been told to wait.

Mrs Pell came back with her ledger and her reading-glasses and went down the row without a word, pressing each seat with the heel of her hand. She did not say anything at the sixth, or the ninth. At the fourteenth she pressed twice, and then she turned the chair over, which nobody had done all month, and looked at the binding from underneath.

"Whose is this?"

"The last. Mine, start to finish."

"It's the best of them."

"It's the one I wasn't thinking about."

Mrs Pell set the chair on its feet. "That's the usual way," she said, and went to the cash-box.

She counted it out on the table in the order she had earned it: the twenty-one shillings from the first Thursday, which she had already had, and then the rest in silver and a half-sovereign, so that the whole came to seven pounds and seven shillings, fourteen chairs at ten and six. She pushed it across in two heaps. The keeper looked at the heaps. There were two pockets and she knew which was which. This was the work of the house's hands, done in the house's name for most of the month, and the estate's by the book, because the book said what the book said.

But it was not in the house's name any longer. It was in two names, and the second one was ruled through.

"Left," she said, and put the larger heap into the left pocket. And then, because it was true and she had promised herself she would stop pretending otherwise, she took one coin back out of the heap, a single florin, and put it in the right.

Mrs Pell watched this. "What's that?"

"A florin."

"I can see it's a florin."

"It's mine," she said. "It's not for anything. It's the first one I've kept without a reason."

Mrs Pell said nothing, with great precision, and shut the cash-box.

Saturday she took Tobias, a two-foot rule, and Mr Dunnet's old carpenter's pencil, and they walked to the junction in a thin wind that had given up the rain and kept the cold.

The ladies' waiting-room was behind the booking-hall, through a door that had a brass plate on it reading LADIES in letters nobody had polished since the old Queen died. It was a long room with a high window at the far end and six benches down the wall, three on a side, each with a curved back of caned panels and a caned seat, and the cane was past saving in the way an old coat is past saving: you could see where it had been mended and where the mending had been mended, and in two places somebody had stopped the hole with a folded timetable.

There was a harmonium under the window with its lid down. Tobias lifted the lid. He put one finger on a key and the whole room drew a breath, a long dry wheeze, and a single note came up out of it, flat, and held, and sank.

"Don't," she said.

"It's a hundred years since anybody played it."

"It's thirty. Mrs Pell said. And it's not on the estimate."

He shut the lid, abashed, and took the other end of the rule.

She measured and he wrote, because he had the neater hand for figures and she had the better eye for where a seat had failed. Each bench had a back panel and a seat, and each panel was a different size, because somebody had built the benches over several decades by looking at the one before. Twelve panels, then. She counted the holes along the frame of the first and found it was the old pattern, six-way, the pattern her own chairs at the inn had been, and she felt the fact settle in her like a coin in a pocket. She could do that. She had done it fourteen times and eight more were waiting for her at Pike's. Twelve was not a frightening number. It was a Tuesday and a Wednesday and a Thursday.

"What do you charge for a panel?" said Tobias.

"Nine shillings."

"For a chair seat it's ten and six."

"A chair seat's a whole day's work with the binding. A panel's less than a day, and there's no binding, and I'm doing twelve in a row and will do the last ones faster than the first." She looked at him. "You work it out. Show me the sum."

He did it on his knee, with the carpenter's pencil. "A hundred and eight shillings. Five pounds eight."

"And cane."

"How much?"

"Two bundles and a half for twelve, at three and two the bundle." She waited.

"Seven and eleven," said Tobias. "Call it eight."

"Five pounds sixteen, then. Five pounds sixteen shillings." She said it twice to herself, quietly, as though trying it for weight. "It's less than the committee will think and more than Mrs Pell will like."

"Is it fair?"

"It's what it costs."

That was the answer, and she thought it was a better one than fair. Fair was a thing people argued about. What it cost was a thing you could put in a book.

They were still at the sixth bench, with the cold coming up through her boots, when the door opened and a woman came in, tall and brisk and in a good grey coat, with a girl at her elbow whom the keeper knew by the way she looked at the benches, as though they owed her an account.

"Mother," said the Fennimore girl. "This is her."

Mrs Fennimore was fifty or so, with a straight back and gloves she did not take off, and she was the chairwoman of the ladies' committee, and she had come to see what she was being asked to buy. She did not say good-morning. She walked down the row and pressed a seat with her thumb, and the cane went down under it and did not come up.

"Twelve years," she said. "We asked the company in the year the war ended, and the company said it was not a matter for the company. Charlotte tells me you will do it."

"I will do the panels. Twelve. Five pounds sixteen with the cane."

"In writing."

"In writing. With a name."

"Whose?"

It was the same question and she had known it was coming, and she found that her heart did not go. She took the sheet Tobias had written the figures on, turned it to the clean side, and wrote it out as it ought to be written, the twelve panels, the cane, the sum, the day of the month, and then at the foot, in her own hand, which was square and plain and had never been shown to anyone as a signature, she wrote the name.

She did not blot it. She held it out.

Mrs Fennimore read the estimate first, which was the right order, and then the foot of it. She read it twice. "Ah," she said. "You're Averill's girl."

"No."

"I beg your pardon. I understood—"

"You understood what everyone's understood, because it was easier. I was in his house. It isn't the same." She heard her voice come out level and was faintly astonished at it. "I've been keeping it eleven years, and I've been doing the work in it for a month, and the work's mine. That's the name on the bill. If the committee would rather the house's, I'll do it in the house's, but it'll cost the same, and it won't be true."

The waiting-room was quiet. Tobias had stopped writing. The Fennimore girl was watching her mother with an expression the keeper recognised from the chairs: not hostility, not approval, but the look of someone waiting to find out whether a seat would hold.

Mrs Fennimore folded the estimate once, along the line of the sum, and put it in her glove.

"I'll take it to the committee on Wednesday," she said. "I shall say it is from the person who did my daughter's chair. I think that will be understood."

"Yes."

"You'll hear by Friday."

She went out, brisk and grey, and the girl stayed a moment longer, pressed the sixth bench with her palm, and said, not looking up, "You said *no*."

"I did."

"Nobody says it to her." She hesitated. "It was good." And then she was gone too, and the door let in the wind, and the harmonium under the window gave one tiny involuntary sigh, as though a key had been touched.

"Don't," said the keeper, to nobody.

Tobias capped his pencil. "You didn't say the name aloud," he said. "You wrote it."

"It's in her glove now."

"It's a long way from a deed."

"It's a long way from nothing."

They walked home by the hop-poles, with the light going yellow behind the oasts, and at the gate she stopped with her hand on the latch and looked at the house: the eight clocks going, the kitchen window lit, the smoke straight up. It did not look like a thing that had been left. It looked like a place with somebody in it who had come to work.

At nine, the candle, the blue book.

Friday. Fourteenth chair, mine start to finish. Mrs Pell said it was the best and I said it was the one I wasn't thinking about, and she said that's the usual way. Seven pounds seven. Left pocket, all but one florin. The florin is mine. I've written that down so it can't be said I didn't.

Saturday. The ladies' room. Twelve panels, nine shillings, cane at eight. Five pounds sixteen. Tobias did the sum and I checked it and it came out the same. Mrs Fennimore came and asked whose name. I wrote it. She called me Averill's girl and I said no, and that is the first time I have said no to a person's face about what I am.

I didn't know I was going to. It came out like a clock striking: it had been wound a long time.

She'll tell me Friday. If it's yes, it's five pounds sixteen on top of Pike's, and I think the debt can be seen from here. If it's no, I still said it.

10 up. Clock a minute forty. One florin.

Chapter Thirty-Eight



The letter from Canterbury came on the Wednesday, in the same long envelope as the last one, and Tobias brought it in from the gate holding it a little away from himself, the way a man carries a plate he has been told is hot.

She was at the kitchen table with Pike's third chair upside down in front of her and the awl in her hand. She did not put the awl down.

"Read it," she said.

He read it standing. Mr Wilcox presented his compliments. Mr Wilcox had the honour to inform the keeper of the house, and Mr T. Lear, that the executors had fixed the sale of the residue of the estate for the twenty-third of June, by auction, at the Rose in Horne, Messrs Bly and Carrow to

act; that the particulars would describe the long-case clock as removed by private treaty in part settlement of a creditor; that the contents, as inventoried by Miss Hewel, would be sold in lots on the premises on the twenty-fourth. Mr Wilcox would be obliged to know by the first of June whether the keeper elected under the instrument lately delivered to her, as the executors must make provision for it in the conveyance; he begged to remind her that either sum was payable only after the creditor of first charge, and that he remained her obedient servant.

Tobias put it down on the corner of the table where the shavings were not.

"The twenty-third," he said.

"Seven weeks."

"Less."

"Seven weeks less two days." She drew the strand through. "Read me the bit about electing again."

He read it again. She listened to it the way she had listened to Mrs Pell telling her the timetable: for the place where it was wrong. It was not wrong. It was exactly right, and it was a man in Canterbury asking her by the first of June whether she would be forty pounds a year in a house that was being sold on the twenty-third, or two hundred pounds gone, and there was something nearly funny in it, and she did not laugh.

"If I stay," she said, "I stay in what?"

Tobias opened his mouth and shut it.

"The deed says *stay*, and forty a year, charged on the estate. But the estate's being sold. Whoever buys it buys a house with a woman in it at forty a year who can't be put out. Who buys that?"

"Somebody who wants a keeper."

"Somebody who wants Averill's keeper." She turned the chair over, pressed the seat, turned it back. "That's the same thing it's always been. With a new name on the gate."

Friday it rained again, and she walked to the junction anyway, because she had said Friday.

Mrs Fennimore was not there. Charlotte was, sitting on the fourteenth chair by the waiting-room window with a letter on her knee and her boots not reaching the floor, and she stood up when the door opened, the way she had been taught, and then forgot she had been taught and held out the letter with both hands.

The ladies' committee of the Horne Junction waiting-room fund had considered the estimate submitted, and were pleased to accept it at the sum stated, five pounds sixteen shillings, the work to be completed by the end of June; half on commencement, the balance on completion and inspection. It was signed by Mrs Fennimore as chairwoman and by a Mrs Tull as secretary, and it was addressed, at the top, on the line where such things are addressed, with her name.

Not *the keeper*. Not *Averill's*. Her name, in a secretary's careful copperplate, spelled right, by somebody who had never met her and had copied it from the foot of an estimate.

She stood in the doorway with the wet coming off her shawl and read it twice.

"Mother said to give you this as well." Charlotte held out a small purse, knitted, grey, rather ugly. Inside it were two pounds eighteen shillings in silver and a note in Mrs Fennimore's hand: *Half on commencement. You may commence.*

"Tell your mother thank you."

"She said you'd say that. She said to say it's not a kindness, it's the terms."

"Then tell her I know the difference."

Charlotte looked at her. "Do you?"

"I'm learning it," said the keeper, and Charlotte considered this, and nodded, and sat back down on the fourteenth chair, because it was a good chair.

Mrs Pell, in the booking office, had heard the whole of it through the hatch and did not come out, but when the keeper put her head in to say good-day, Mrs Pell said, without looking up from the down-line returns, "Five pound sixteen."

"Yes."

"And Pike's four pound four."

"Three pound four on the day. He advanced a pound."

"And mine seven pound seven, which you've had." Mrs Pell set down her pen. "That's fifteen pound odd since Lady Day, in a trade you didn't have at Lady Day."

"Fifteen pound seven."

"Which is not two hundred."

"No."

"And is not nothing."

"No."

"Well," said Mrs Pell, "I'm glad that's settled," and picked her pen up again.

That night, after the clocks, after the blue book had not yet been opened, she took the deed out of the dresser drawer for the first time since she had laid it there face up on the almanac.

She did not unfold it at the kitchen table. She took it into the scullery, where the light was worse and nobody would come, and spread it on the draining-board, and set the candle on the copper lid, and read it all the way through again, slowly, the way Miss Hewel read a room.

Forty pounds per annum during her residence, she electing to remain.

Two hundred pounds in one sum, she electing to depart.

Her choice.

Her choice.

And beneath, the line. A plain ruled line, typed in the office in Canterbury by a clerk who had never heard of her, waiting for a name.

She had thought, a month ago, that the blank line was the question. She saw now that it was not. The question was the word *electing*. Either way she signed, she was electing under the instrument, which was his. Either way the money came after Trewin, out of the estate, which was his. Either

way the paper had been drawn so that whatever she did, she did it *under* something: forty pounds of staying, two hundred of going, both of them priced by a man who had written down a dead woman's day and handed it to her to live.

Not his to give, she had written. It had been true when she wrote it and it was more true now, with the committee's letter in her pocket addressed by somebody who had only her own handwriting to go on.

She did the sum anyway, because she was a person who did the sum.

Two hundred pounds. Seven hundred and sixty-two chair-seats, at ten and six. She had done twenty-two. Or: fifteen pounds seven in seven weeks, and if it went on at that, which it might not, and if it grew, which it might, then two hundred pounds was a matter of years. Four, perhaps. Five. A long time. Not forever.

She looked at the line until the candle guttered, and then she folded the deed along its old creases and did not put it back in the dresser. She put it in the blue book, between the last written page and the first blank one, where it would have to be gone past every night.

Tobias was in the kitchen when she came through, sitting on the caned chair with his long legs out, not reading the paper he was holding.

"You've got the deed."

"I've moved it."

"Where?"

"Where I'll have to look at it."

He nodded slowly. "I've had a letter too," he said. "Not Wilcox. My mother."

She sat down opposite. "Lewisham."

"She says Mr Hales at the shipping office has a desk again, from July. Ledger clerk. Thirty-five shillings." He turned the paper over in his hands. "She says I'm to come home and stop being a footnote in somebody else's will."

"Is that what you are?"

"It's what the will says I am." He gave a short laugh. "*You come with the house.* Like the clocks. Like the coal."

"What do you want?"

He was a long time answering. The passage clock struck ten, and the kitchen clock a moment after it, and somewhere behind them, far down the hall, the long-case gave its deep slow stroke, a minute and a half late, still going.

"I want to find out," he said. "Same as you. I just don't know if Lewisham's where I'd find it."

"Then don't go because she says, and don't stay because he says." She heard herself and stopped. "That's not advice. It's just what I've been finding."

"It sounds like advice."

"Then it's the first I've given anybody in eleven years that wasn't about starch."

He laughed properly then, and so did she, and the clocks went on, and the rain went on, and neither of them said anything about June.

At nine, the candle, the blue book. The deed lay between the pages like a pressed leaf that had not been asked for.

Wednesday. Wilcox. Sale the 23rd of June at the Rose. Contents the 24th. Elect by the 1st. Either way after Trewin. Either way under his paper.

Friday. The committee said yes. Five pound sixteen. They wrote my name at the top, copied from my own hand. Half on commencement. "It's not a kindness, it's the terms." I know the difference. I'm learning it.

Fifteen pound seven since Lady Day. Not two hundred. Not nothing.

T. has a desk in Lewisham from July. He doesn't know if he wants it. I told him not to go because she says or stay because he says. Then I came up here and read that back to myself.

The deed's in this book now. I'll have to go past it every night until the first of June.

11 up. 1 in the pocket. I planted ten on Tuesday on the right wall, the north, where his letter said they'd never take. I haven't said that here till now. I don't know why I didn't.

Clock a minute thirty. Pike's third seat done.

Chapter Thirty-Nine



The thirty-first of May fell on a Sunday, and she did not go to church, and nobody in the house remarked on it.

She had thought she would decide on the Saturday night and had not. She had thought she would decide in the morning, with the clocks wound and the kitchen clean and the whole house standing round her in its working order, and she had stood in the kitchen at six with the kettle on and found that there was nothing left to wait for. The sum had been done. It had been done a dozen ways. Fifteen pounds seven had become twenty-six pounds nine, with the ladies' panels half finished and Pike's eight chairs paid out to the last shilling, and twenty-six pounds nine was still not two hundred and still not nothing, and she had stopped expecting the figure to make the choice for her.

What she had was the blue book, and the deed folded inside it, and a pen.

She took them out to the potting shed, because it was the one room in the place that had been nobody's. The old cane coil hung on its peg. The sweet peas stood in their rows along the north wall outside the open door, nineteen of them now, climbing the string Tobias had run for them, and not one had been told they would never take.

She sat on an upturned pot and unfolded the paper on her knee.

Forty pounds per annum during her residence, she electing to remain.

Two hundred pounds in one sum, she electing to depart.

She read it the way she read an estimate, for what it cost and for who was paying. Then she did what she had not done in forty days of carrying it: she read the blank line as a line and not as a question. A ruled line, typed, with a space above it the width of a name. Nothing in the paper said what she must be when she filled it. It only said that a name must go there, and that the paper would hold whatever she wrote.

She thought of Mrs Pell ruling through a word so that it could still be read. She thought of the Fennimore girl saying it holds.

Then she wrote it. Not in the careful hand of the estimates. In the hand she used for the blue book, the one nobody had ever seen, small and fast and leaning a little to the right. She wrote the name in full, and she did not look at it while she did, and when she did look it was spelled right and sat on the line as though the line had been made to its length.

Beneath it, in the margin, where there was room for a clerk's initials, she wrote two words of her own.

Departing. Elected.

And then, smaller, because it was true and she had promised the blue book she would stop pretending otherwise: *Under protest of the word.*

She did not know if it was binding. Miss Hewel would know, or Mr Wilcox would, and she did not care to ask either. It was hers. It was the first paper in that house with her hand on it that was not a bill, and she sat for some time with it on her knee, with the smell of wet cane and old twine round her, not feeling triumphant. She felt the way she felt after the fourteenth chair. It had not been the thing she was thinking about.

Tobias found her there at eight. He stood in the shed door with the light behind him and looked at the paper and at her face, and he did not ask.

"Going," she said.

"When?"

"After the clock. After the sale, if they want me till then. Not before the work's done at the junction. I'll not leave a bench half caned." She folded the deed. "Not because of the two hundred. I'll take it, it's owed. But it's not why."

"What's why?"

"I'll tell you when I've found out."

He nodded slowly. "Lewisham?"

"That's yours."

"I know." He sat on the step. "I wrote back to my mother on Friday. I said July, and a week to think. I didn't say yes."

"That's an answer."

"It's a date."

She laughed, because it was her own word, and because he had said it in her own voice.

The long-case went on the eighth of June, a Monday, in a hired dray with a tarpaulin and a boy at the horse's head, and she wound it herself before it went.

She had thought about how to do it. Trewin's man had wanted to take the weights off and the pendulum out and carry it as a corpse, the way a clock is carried, but she would not have it. She stopped nothing. She took the hood off, which was the old way, and lifted the case a quarter-turn on its plinth with the pendulum hooked back against the seat-board, and she let it tick all the way to the gate with the three of them walking alongside, Tobias on one side with his hand flat against the trunk, Trewin's man on the other, herself in front, and the clock going the whole way, a slow dry sound under the tarpaulin like somebody patiently counting.

It struck eleven at the end of the lane. It struck it correctly. She had set it three weeks before to a minute and ten seconds slow against the hall clock, and it had held to a minute and ten, and she told Trewin's man this, who was a taciturn Horne man and said only, "It'll want setting at the other end."

"It'll want a level floor and a quarter-turn on the left foot," she said. "And it'll want not touching for a day. And it wants winding on Mondays."

"Mr Trewin said."

"Mr Trewin said what he's been told. I'm telling you."

He looked at her, and something in his face rearranged itself. "Mondays," he said.

Trewin's house stood on the slope above the canal, a long brick place with a bay window and a smell of linseed and coal, and it was loud with the wedding: trestles in the yard, a woman scrubbing a copper, a girl on a stepladder hanging bunting from the lamp bracket. The daughter was nowhere. The widower himself came out to the dray in his shirtsleeves and his good waistcoat, bigger than she remembered, and stood with his hands on his hips and looked at the tarpaulin and said nothing at all.

Then he lifted the corner of it, and the clock was going, and he took his hand away as though the wood had been warm.

"Going," he said.

"Going."

"I've not heard that since I was thirty." He cleared his throat. "Where do you want it?"

"Not where I'd want it. Where she'll hear it. In the passage by the stair, not the parlour. The parlour's for company. A clock's for the house."

He had it put in the passage. Tobias and the man levelled it with a folded card under the left foot, and she stood at the foot of the stair with her hand on the newel and watched the case go upright and the trunk settle and the dial take the light from the fanlight. She hooked the pendulum. She gave it a touch, the smallest, and it took, and the tick came up through the boards of Trewin's passage, and the yard noise seemed to go quiet round it.

She found she had no wish to touch it again.

"It'll strike the half," she said. "At one-thirty. Tomorrow. It was meant to."

"I know." Trewin was looking at the dial. "Averill told me once he'd wind it for a girl's wedding if he ever had the chance. I said I'd no girl. He said, then yours." He rubbed his jaw. "I took it for talk."

"It was."

"Aye. And here it is."

There was a silence in which neither of them said what both of them might have, and she thought: this is the house's debt, and I am the one who has paid it, and I am not the house.

He put the receipt in her hand, a half-sheet in his fist, in ink, with the figures set down plain and the clock named, and at the foot, in capitals, the name she had written on the deed. He had asked Tobias for it on the cart. She had not minded.

"Paid," he said. "Fifty. And the twenty-one-four's Wilcox's problem. I'll not trouble you for it."

"It's owed."

"It's owed to a dead man's estate by a living one who's a damn fool for paying it." He almost smiled. "I'll have the carting off it. And you'll come tomorrow."

"To the wedding?"

"To hear it strike."

"No," she said, and the word was easy now, a thing she had learned to do with her whole mouth. "I'll hear it from the lane. But thank you."

She was at the lane's end at half past one the next day, in her good bonnet, with the church bells done and the wedding carriages gone up the hill, and the wind was off the canal and the sun on the hop-poles.

It was too far to hear. She knew it was too far. She stood on the top bar of the gate with her boots in the nettles and listened anyway, to the lark, to the carrier's wheels on the road, to the faint sound of Trewin's yard breaking into song, and somewhere under it all, or perhaps nowhere, a slow deep stroke, and then another, a half past one in a house she would never sit in.

She counted it. There was nothing to count. She counted anyway.

When she got in, the house was ticking. Seven clocks, wound, true to a minute, the passage clock and the hall clock and the kitchen clock with the cracked glass, and the gap in the passage where the long-case had stood, a pale rectangle on the wallpaper the shape of a thing that had been there eleven years.

She stood in front of it for a long time.

Then she went and found a clean cloth and the polish, and she did not polish the gap, because there was nothing in it to polish. She wiped the skirting round it. It was the only thing that needed doing.

At nine, the candle, the blue book. The deed lay in the back, signed, in the place where it would go on being passed.

Sunday 31st. I wrote it. The name, and in the margin: Departing. Elected. Under protest of the word. I don't know if it's binding and I've decided not to ask.

Monday 8th. The clock went to Trewin's. I wound it the morning of, and it was going the whole way, and he put his hand on it and said Going like a man who'd found a coin in an old coat. Passage by the stair, not the parlour. A clock's for the house. I said Mondays. He said aye.

Tuesday 9th. At half past one I was on the gate and I couldn't hear it and I counted it anyway.

The gap on the wall is the shape of eleven years. It will be papered over by whoever buys. I wiped the skirting.

I'm going. I know it the way I knew the first chair. Not because of two hundred. Not because of anybody's paper. It isn't Lewisham and it isn't away. It's that I've done the sum of what I am without his house, and it comes out as somebody who can walk.

19 up on the north wall. 1 in the pocket. I'll leave the one. Somebody should find it.

Chapter Forty



She finished the twelfth panel on the nineteenth of June, a Friday, at ten past four, and sat on the sixth bench in the ladies' waiting-room with the awl across her knee and the last strand of binding still wet in her fingers.

It was very quiet. The harmonium stood under the window with its lid down. The stove had been let go out, because it was June, and the room smelled of cane and cold iron and, faintly, of the sea, which could not be right, because the sea was forty miles off, and which she decided to allow.

She pressed the seat with the heel of her hand, in four places. It gave. She got up and sat on it again, and then she lay along the whole bench with her boots hanging off the end, as no lady would, and looked at the ceiling,

where there was a stain the shape of a county she had never visited, and thought: that holds.

Mrs Fennimore came at five with the committee. There were four of them, in grey and navy and a brown that had been black, and they went along the benches pressing the cane with their thumbs, saying nothing, with Charlotte behind them carrying the umbrella nobody needed. At the sixth bench Mrs Tull, the secretary, bent and looked under the seat at the binding for a long moment, and straightened, and said to nobody, "Well, it isn't flat."

"It was never going to be," said Mrs Fennimore.

She paid the balance in silver, counted out on the end of the fifth bench, two pounds eighteen, and wrote *Received* on the committee's copy and signed it, and watched the ink go down, and did not blot it. The name sat at the foot of the page between two other women's names, and it was not ruled through and it was not borrowed. Mrs Fennimore folded the receipt and put it in her glove.

"The company will want to know who did it," she said. "They'll say it was their idea."

"Let them."

"I shall tell them," said Mrs Fennimore, "that it was Charlotte's."

Charlotte, behind her, went a dark red from the collar up, and said nothing at all, and the keeper looked at her over the bonnets and the two of them shared, for a second, the long look of people who know what a chair owes.

The sale was on the twenty-third, at the Rose in Horne, and she did not go to it.

Tobias went, in his one good coat, to keep the lots straight against Miss Hewel's inventory, and came back at six with his hat in his hand and the dust of the saleroom on his shoulders, and sat down on the caned chair in the kitchen and said that the house had gone for four hundred and eighty to a Mr Garrod's nephew who wanted it for the ground, and the contents would go on the morrow, on the premises, in lots, by Messrs Bly and Carrow, at eleven.

"Four eighty," she said.

"Less Trewin's twenty-one-four. Less costs. The two hundred's safe. Mr Wilcox says it'll be paid on completion, to her, by name." He looked up. "He wrote *to her*, in the letter. Not *to the keeper*. I thought you should know."

"Thank you."

"The nephew doesn't want the house. He wants the ground. He asked if it'd be taken down."

She was drying a cup. She went on drying it. "Did he say when?"

"Michaelmas."

She put the cup on the dresser, on its hook, with the handle turned to the right, as she had put it every day for eleven years, and then she stood with her hand on it a moment, and took the hand away.

"Well," she said. "It'll be done by Michaelmas, then."

"What will?"

"Everything."

She did not wait for the auction.

She had thought she would. She had thought she would stay till the last lot, standing at the back of her own kitchen while a man with a gavel sold the eight clocks one at a time, and she found when it came to it that she did not need to see them go. She had wound them. That was the work, and it was done, and a clock sold is a clock that someone else winds.

On the Tuesday night she did the house.

She went through it from the attic down with a candle and a duster, not cleaning, because there was nothing left that wanted cleaning, but looking, the way Miss Hewel had looked, room by room. The blue room where Tobias slept, with the bed made badly and well. The long landing with its eight pale squares where eight clocks had hung and one still did. The best bedroom, where the sheet was turned down four inches on the left side, as it had been turned down every morning of every year since Averill left, over a bed that nobody had slept in, for a man who was not coming.

She stood at the foot of it for a long time.

Then she did the only thing in the whole house she had never once done. She went round to the left side, and she took the turned-down edge of the sheet between her finger and thumb, and she pulled it flat.

It was a small noise, linen on linen. It was nothing. It was the loudest sound she had made in that house.

She left the bed as it was. She did not make it, and she did not unmake it further: she left it pulled flat and creased, as a bed is left by somebody who has got up in a hurry, or who has not been waited for.

In the kitchen she wound the clocks.

She wound them all, in the order she had always wound them, the passage clock and the hall clock and the kitchen clock with the cracked glass, and the five upstairs, and at the end she stood in the passage in front of the pale rectangle on the wallpaper where the long-case had been, and she wound that, too, the way you wind a thing you have decided to go on doing: with the hand only, no key. She wound the air.

Then she took the blue book from the dresser, and the florin from the right pocket, and the one sweet pea seed, which was a small black thing like a full stop, from the left. She stood with it in her palm. She had said she would leave it. *Somebody should find it.* And then she found that she was not willing to put it just anywhere, and she went out in the last of the light to the north wall, to the nineteen plants climbing Tobias's string, and in the dry ground between two of them, with her thumb, she made a hole, and put it in, and covered it.

It would not come up this year. It was June. It might come next year, for whoever was there. It might come for the nephew's men, under the boots, and be dug in with the rest. She knew that. She did it anyway, and she thought it was perhaps the whole of what she had learned: that you could plant a thing that might not be there to see.

She left at five on the Wednesday morning, before the auctioneers' carts.

Tobias was at the kitchen table. He had not gone to bed. He had the kettle on and two cups out, and he did not say anything about the bonnet, or the carpet bag, or the blue book in her hand, and she did not say anything about the letter to Lewisham that was lying sealed at his elbow, addressed in a hand that was learning to be steadier.

"You said July," she said.

"I said a week to think."

"It's been a month."

"It has," said Tobias, and did not say which way, and she did not ask, because it was his, and he had been so careful, all those weeks, never to take what was hers.

They drank the tea standing. It was the same tea. She noticed that, and thought it unfair.

"The key," he said.

"Under the stone. By the gate."

"Which?"

"The one that's always there."

He almost smiled. "I'll tell Miss Hewel."

"Tell her I counted it right."

"She knows." He set his cup down. "What do I call you, if I write?"

She told him. She said it aloud in that kitchen for the second time, in an ordinary voice, with the clocks going round them, and it sat on the table by the sugar and the bread and did not make the slightest fuss.

He said it back. He got it right.

"That's it," she said.

She picked up the bag. She did not look at the dresser, or the passage, or the rectangle of paler paper, or the upstairs window where a sheet lay flat and creased and nobody had seen it yet. She went out through the scullery and across the yard in the grey light, and at the gate she bent and lifted the stone, which was the one that was always there, and put the key under it, and set the stone back.

Then she stood a moment with her hand on the top bar.

The house stood behind her. Every clock in it was going. She could hear them, if she let herself: the hall, the passage, the kitchen with its cracked glass, the five up the stairs and the one in the empty passage that was only winding the air, all of them a little out of step with one another, the way they had always been, so that the whole place made one long uneven sound like somebody counting under their breath.

She had thought, once, that it was the sound of something being finished.

It was not. It was the sound of something going on without her, in working order, and it did not need her to hear it.

She opened the gate. It did not squeak; she had oiled it in April. She walked out into the lane, between the hop-poles, with the light coming up pale on the oasts and a lark somewhere over the field she had never learned the name of, and she did not look back, because she did not need to. She knew what was there.

At the junction, at seven, Mrs Pell was on the platform with her arms folded and her good hat on, and said, "You're late," though the train was not due, and put a paper bag of bread and cheese into her hand without

another word, and went back inside.

She sat on the fourteenth chair in the waiting-room, the one she had done alone, and ate, and waited for the up-line.

In the blue book, on the last written page, in the small fast hand that leaned a little to the right, she wrote one line, and then she shut it.

Wednesday. Going.