House of Good Intentions

Extended synopsis • Naria Khan

Alexandra Everard knows she is losing her newspaper job the moment her editor mentions her temperament. That evening she learns that Euphemia, her mother's cousin, whom she calls her aunt, has left her a business on the Mendwick coast. With a week to claim her inheritance and barely enough money for the journey, Alexandra takes the key and goes. At the Willow & Thorn she balances the till and offends half the regulars before lunch.

Ambrose Pettifer, who has been looking after Euphemia's papers, brings Alexandra a second key. Together the keys open a cabinet of cream china. The green-rimmed cup helps its drinker bear fear, the grey eases grief, and the black weakens the drinker's resistance to a desire they already have. Euphemia also kept a rose cup, but only its saucer is in the cabinet. When Verity Lyle comes to the shop alone, Alexandra listens as she describes asking her mother-in-law, Sarah, to keep a confidence. Sarah told Verity's husband anyway, then assured Verity she had never asked. Alexandra fetches the green cup. She has time enough to explain while Verity removes her gloves, but she says nothing. Verity asks for a pencil to set down what happened. Alexandra would like to take that as proof she helped.

Looking through Euphemia's old accounts with Ambrose, Alexandra finds one entry for a woman who accepted help and afterwards avoided the shop. On another page are the names of Ambrose's brother Stephen and his wife, Harriet. As customers remark on the change in Verity, Laurence Dacre, who supplies the town with winter coal, takes an interest in the shop. At a fundraiser, Mrs Elwood asks whether she can collect her coal without calling out her name at the yard. Ambrose numbers her voucher so that her

name can stay in the house ledger. Upstairs at a bookshop, Alexandra asks Ambrose whether the invoices have been an excuse to see her. Most of them were genuine, he says. She catches his coat and draws him into a kiss.

Smoke drives the staff out of their kitchen, and men attack Alexandra and Ambrose while they are examining records at a warehouse. As she tends his injuries, she discovers he has kept the black saucer from her since before they opened the cabinet. He tells her what Stephen did. When Harriet said she was leaving, Stephen borrowed the black cup. Harriet still wanted the man she remembered marrying, and after she drank that wish crowded out every reason she had to go. Afterwards even choosing a ribbon could make her hesitate. Although she eventually left and married again, Ambrose remembers how she used to be the first to laugh. Alexandra spends a night with him while he still believes she has never used a cup. When she finally tells him about Verity, he leaves.

Over supper, Dacre shows Alexandra her own voucher numbers with private details beside them. He knows where Mrs Elwood buys on credit. Unless Alexandra gives him a say in distribution, he will hold back six families' coal, including hers. His offer extends to protecting the shop if she shares access to it and the cups. Alexandra refuses, tells Ambrose what happened, and spends the money she saved for boots to help buy six sacks elsewhere. She also tells Verity exactly what she knew when she poured the tea. Verity takes back the pages she had trusted Alexandra to keep and lodges her own sealed statement with Finch.

At a hearing into the conduct of the tea room, Verity tells the clerk to put her original complaint under its own heading, "Before the tea". She insists he keep the word "twice" when he records how often she asked Sarah to keep her confidence. Alexandra

submits her own signed account of misleading her. With the help of Viola Cresswell, whose father chairs the hearing, Ambrose shows that the room was booked before officials asked Verity what had happened. The inquiry can continue, but it gives Dacre no right to enter the house.

That afternoon Dacre has Alexandra taken to the old Vane office. His note demands that Ambrose bring the black cup at midnight. Ambrose leaves the note with Finch so the constables know where to wait. Inside, Dacre holds a knife to Alexandra's throat and demands that Ambrose give her the cup. Instead they ask whether Dacre trusts himself enough to drink. Ambrose warns him precisely what the cup can do. Dacre drinks anyway, and his wish to show them how clever he has been keeps him talking while Alexandra works her second wrist free. She catches his knife hand, kicks the dropped blade under the shelves and helps Ambrose hold him until the constables enter.

Once the evidence has been recorded, Alexandra takes the coal hammer to the green, grey and rose cups. Ambrose breaks the black. Their families' deeds stay in the ledger, and Alexandra's in her signed account. The official review ends in a written reprimand, the shop stays open, and Dacre is committed for trial. When another paper offers Alexandra paid work, she checks the coal weights with Tom and leaves Verity out of her story. Verity, who now keeps her own household accounts, comes back for ordinary tea and a bun. She tells Alexandra she still gets angry and may come for tea anyway. By late spring, Ambrose goes home mainly for clean shirts. Alexandra asks him to bring them.