Chapter One

By the time Mr Wetherby said temperament, I knew I was being dismissed.

A useful word, temperament. It saved a man the trouble of saying he wanted a woman out of the room.

Mr Wetherby squared the papers on his desk. Downstairs, the presses were running off several thousand copies of his opinions. Mine he seemed unwilling to put in writing. I left my gloves beside my notebook.

“Discretion must occasionally take precedence over brilliance.”

I glanced at the framed commendations behind him. “How fortunate for the men downstairs.”

“You write as though facts ought to inconvenience the people who read them.”

“They often do.”

His pen stopped above the margin. “Your work lacks restraint.”

“According to whom?”

“We have obligations to consider.”

“Which advertiser complained?”

He removed his spectacles and began cleaning one lens with his handkerchief. “You’ll be paid through the week.”

I could account for every penny of that week’s pay without opening my purse. I drew my gloves towards me. “How generous.”

“Alexandra.”

I stood. “You admire a quality until it belongs to a woman you wouldn’t invite to supper.”

His hand closed around the spectacles. “You might have done very well here.”

I tucked my notebook beneath my arm. “I did.”

The presses drowned him out halfway down the stairs. At my desk I packed my mother’s silver penknife, a scarf and three articles I had clipped when the sight of my name in print could still make me miss my stop on the omnibus. I took the clippings, though I had no idea now who would want to see them.

Matthews stopped beside me as I wrapped the ink bottle in scrap paper. “Wetherby?”

I folded the paper over the bottle’s neck, and he swore under his breath before flattening the curled edge of one of my clippings.

“I’m sorry.”

Matthews went back to work. I slipped my unfinished municipal piece into my satchel. Across the room, Miss Price from Society Notices looked up. She touched one ink-stained finger to her hat brim, the way we did when one of us had got a particularly good line past Wetherby, then bent over her page again. She still had a job.

I put on my gloves and walked out into air that struck like wet iron.

Carts hissed through the rain. At the corner, a woman with a basket flattened herself against the wall to let two gentlemen pass. Neither thanked her.

By the time I reached my lodgings, my gloves had stiffened, the municipal draft was damp against my ribs and my jaw hurt from keeping my teeth together.

Mrs Ellory was waiting in the hallway with a packet. “For you.”

I examined the solicitor’s seal while water gathered beneath my hem.

“Bad news?” she asked.

“Probably.”

She stepped aside, and I carried it upstairs.

In my room, I worked the black ribbon loose and found a death notice beneath it.

Euphemia Everard, deceased at The Willow & Thorn Tea Rooms in Mendwick, after a short decline borne with the same poor grace with which she had borne most forms of dependence.

I read it twice before sitting down.

My coat dripped onto the coverlet. I could imagine Euphemia telling me what that would do to the wool, and for a moment my grief consisted entirely of wanting to tell her it was my coverlet.

My mother's elder cousin had been a widow with a tea room on the coast, a voice like dry carded wool and a habit of sorting children into decorative, useful and disappointing. The kindest thing she'd ever said to me was, The only child in the room who looks as if she bites for structural reasons.

The remaining papers said she'd left me the tea room. I checked the name on the envelope against the name on the deed. Both were mine.

I had until the end of the week to take possession and begin running the business myself. The debts and the staff came with the building. I looked for the clause that would let me sell or lease it, or even borrow against it, and found, in its place, my aunt's familiar hand.

If you mean to sell because you are tired, frightened, insulted, or temporarily poor, do not come at all. I have no interest in sentimental heirs or cowardly ones.

Beneath the inventory lay an old brass key, worn smooth at the head and blunt at the teeth. I turned it beneath the lamp, and the glint along its edge drew my attention to the bronze fox on the mantel.

Euphemia had sent it two months earlier, wrapped in brown paper and enough string to restrain something considerably larger. A note in her severe handwriting had been tied around its neck.

For company. It listens better than most people.

The fox had remained on my mantel ever since, and somewhere along the way I'd begun speaking to it on difficult evenings.

I set the key aside and unfolded Euphemia's letter, which smelled faintly of tea and old drawers.

Alexandra,

If this reaches you, I am dead, which will improve some matters and worsen others. The room is yours because you are the only relation with enough pride to keep it standing and enough temper to keep fools from furnishing it with committees.

I could hear her. For a moment I resented that more than the instructions.

She had a page of instructions about the house and half a line about my mother. I looked for some mention of the last time the two of them had spoken. All I found was a warning against keeping a tea room as a memorial to women enduring beautifully.

You will find one key enclosed. Keep it on your person. If you are stupid with what is given separately, you deserve what follows.

Bring the fox. If you leave it behind, I shall assume you remain too young for use.

At the bottom, where her handwriting had grown less steady, she'd added:

Do not confuse being unwelcome with being misplaced. It is the common error of proud women with too little money and too much appetite for the truth.

I held the letter closer to the lamp. On the last line, her pen had slipped. I had never seen Euphemia fail to make a mark exactly where she intended.

I folded it, then unfolded it to read the line about the key once more.

The fox had stood in Euphemia's tea room for as long as I could remember. Once, when I'd reached for it as a child, she'd caught my wrist.

You may touch silver, lace, and cakes in this house. The fox is for later.

I took the little bronze animal down from the mantel and turned it over in my palm. "Later?"

I could find neither an inscription nor any way of opening it. I set the fox beside the key, nose towards the letter.

A sensible heir would write to the solicitor about the debts. I put my hand in my purse. After rent, I had enough for the journey or another week here, provided I ate very little. Downstairs, Mrs Ellory was already laying out tomorrow's breakfast for people who could pay for it.

I opened my trunk. If Euphemia had left me a trap, at least I should see the inside of it.

By the time I had packed my skirts, my hands had stopped shaking. Three years in the city fitted round them, with room for the fox.

In the morning I mended the loose seam in my skirt pocket and slipped the brass key inside. The fox went under my arm in its scarf.

Mrs Ellory appeared while the porter tightened the final strap, her attention moving from the bundle beneath my arm to the empty drawers. "I didn't know you had family."

"Not much."

“Far?”

“Mendwick.”

While the porter carried my trunk downstairs, one bronze ear worked its way through the scarf. Mrs Ellory tucked it in.

“Take care, Miss Everard.”

I raised a hand to Mrs Ellory as the carriage pulled away. I wished I’d done as much for Miss Price.

Chapter Two

Mendwick appeared through the rain just as I began to suspect the driver had taken a wrong turning.

The horses leaned back in their harness and salt came in through the ill-fitting window. I heard the gulls before I could see the square. By the time we reached it, the rain had found the one bit of me that had been dry when I left home.

Stone houses crowded around a square, their slate roofs dark with rain. At its centre stood a fountain supporting a lion with the expression of someone who had attended too many council meetings without once being consulted.

I'd tried to remember the town during the journey. Tea leaves beside a stove; Euphemia's voice; the bronze fox on her mantel. Everything outside the tea room had escaped me.

"The Willow & Thorn," the driver said, drawing up opposite a green door beneath a faded sign.

A rag rubbed a clear circle on the inside of the broad front window. I lifted my hand, already expecting Euphemia to beckon me round to the side door. Whoever had the rag went on cleaning.

I busied myself with the strap of my trunk while the driver unloaded it. Across the square a woman outside the baker's shop studied a loaf. In the glass I could see her eyes on me.

Three men stood talking beside the fountain.

"Without Dacre's money the quay would be halfway to France," one said.

"You thank him."

"Someone had to pay."

“And now?”

The third man laughed into his scarf. “He’ll collect.”

They stopped when I reached for my valise. I carried the name across the square with me, the driver following with my trunk.

The bell rang as I opened the tea-room door, admitting me into the warmth of bread, tea and polished wood. A fire burned beneath the mantel, shelves of tins and cups lined the counter, and mismatched chairs crowded around tables near the windows.

“You’ll let the weather in,” said a broad-shouldered woman emerging from the kitchen, her iron-grey hair pinned severely above an apron scrubbed into permanent service. She inspected my bonnet, boots and the water gathering beneath my coat. “Miss Everard.”

“I’m afraid so.”

Her eyes settled on the puddle. “Pity.”

She took my valise before I could object. “Agnes Taverner. I cook, keep the accounts honest, and worked for your aunt longer than either of us expected.”

“A promising introduction.”

“You’re thinner than the family.”

“It has been an ambitious year.”

Agnes relieved me of my coat and hung it on a peg. “Come through before you mildew.”

I’d barely removed my bonnet when something clattered in the back passage.

“Is she ugly?”

“No,” I called. “Only wet.”

A girl appeared with a basket of folded cloths and stopped at the sight of me. “She’s prettier than I thought.”

“Clem,” Agnes warned. Then, for my benefit, “Clemency Ridley, who was apparently raised without private thought.” Clemency accepted the full three syllables as a woman might accept an extra shift at the sink.

Colour rose in the girl’s cheeks. “Aunt Euphemia said newspaper people looked underfed and cross.”

“She was often right for hostile reasons.”

Clemency bit back a smile, but Agnes had already pointed towards the kitchen. “Cloths.”

The girl hurried away, nearly losing a towel.

A young man followed through the rear door with a sack of coal, which he lowered beside the stove before wiping his hands on a rag. “Thomas Mettam. Tom. I mend what breaks. Anything else, I kick.”

“Useful.”

“Usually.”

Agnes led me towards the counter. “You may as well know what you’ve inherited before you regret it.”

I started after her, then caught sight of the clean patch above the hearth and unwrapped the fox.

“There,” I said, setting it down.

Clemency stopped in the passage with the cloths against her chest. Tom and Agnes were watching the fox too.

I turned towards Agnes. “Before anyone tells me the place is charming, show me the books.”

Agnes folded the towel and brought out several ledgers tied with twine. The newest contained neat columns in Euphemia’s severe handwriting, with margins reassuringly free of emotion.

“What’s most urgent?” I asked, opening it.

“Coal, flour, then sugar. Crockery will do, but the roof may not.” Agnes pushed an invoice towards me. “Walter Penhallick. Check him.”

I wrote his name beside the repairs.

“Already?” she asked.

“If something’s wrong, it won’t wait.”

I worked through the suppliers, wages and repairs with Agnes. The balance had been declining for months, though Euphemia had kept paying Agnes, Clemency and Tom the same wages.

“Usually a business pays itself before it pays everybody else,” I said, studying the figures.

“Not here.” Agnes closed the ledger beneath my hand.

She returned from the kitchen with tea and buttered bread. “Eat.”

“I was hoping you hadn’t noticed.”

She pushed the plate closer, and I obeyed.

The tea was excellent, dark and rich with something faintly citrus beneath the leaves. Across the room, the fox occupied its old place above the fire.

I raised my cup towards it. “You appear to approve.”

Clemency caught me addressing the mantel as she passed with clean linen. “Does she—” she began, turning towards Agnes.

“I’ve known her ten minutes.”

Clemency thought better of finishing.

The rain was driving sideways across the square when the bell rang again.

“Ambrose Pettifer,” Agnes said without turning.

He had to put a shoulder to the door to get it shut against the wind. A leather folio was tucked inside his coat, dry against his shirt. Rain ran from his hair down the lean, handsome face he turned towards me.

I had looked quite a long time before it occurred to me to put down my bread.

“Miss Everard.”

“Mr Pettifer.”

“I brought the solicitor’s papers,” he said, opening the folio on the nearest table.

A brass key lay on top.

My hand went to the pocket where I’d put Euphemia’s key. The one on the papers might have come out of my skirt. “There are two.”

“Euphemia left this with me,” Ambrose said, holding it out.

I took it. His fingers were cold where they brushed mine, and he drew them back before I had finished looking at the key.

“What does it open?”

“The cabinet upstairs.”

I examined the matching teeth. “Two locks?”

He nodded.

“And inside?”

"No idea."

Agnes approached, drying her hands on her apron. "So she gave it up."

"The responsibility," Ambrose replied.

Her mouth tightened briefly before she took his wet coat. "Sit. Both of you."

Agnes supplied another cup and bread. Ambrose sat opposite me with the documents between us, Euphemia's additions crowding the margins.

Beside the property transfer:

Not ownership. Custody.

Farther down, another note had been pressed deeply enough to score the paper.

If both keys survive me, the question is not who opens it, but who stops the other.

The next addition was for me. Alexandra must be given the chance to refuse.

"Refuse what?"

"She never said."

"Did she say you could leave both keys with one person?"

"She said you were to have the second if you wanted it." His hand lay open beside the page. There was nothing between me and putting the key back in it.

"Show me the cabinet," I said.

"Tomorrow."

"Euphemia's instructions?"

"Yes."

"Of course."

Ambrose began returning the documents to his folio.

"I don't trust you," I said.

"That seems sensible." One corner of his mouth lifted.

A shutter slammed against stone somewhere overhead, followed by a scrape across the roof.

“The attic?” I asked.

“Still there.”

Overhead, wood struck stone a second time. Agnes called to Tom, who went out to look. I put the second key into my pocket. It felt oddly intimate to have accepted something from Ambrose which he plainly hoped I would give back.

* * *

By supper the storm had swallowed the square.

Water rushed through the gutters, and Tom returned from checking the yard with rain running from his hair. “Lower lane’s flooding. Lost a slate.”

Agnes paused with the ladle. “Quay?”

“Worse.”

Something heavy scraped across the roof.

Agnes pointed the ladle at Ambrose. “You’re staying.” When he drew breath to object, she put a bowl of stew in front of him. “Eat.”

I lowered my spoon before my amusement became too obvious, though Ambrose caught it and raised an eyebrow.

We ate after the last customers had gone. Ambrose offered me the bread before taking a piece himself. Halfway through my second slice I found I could at last begin paying attention to the conversation.

After supper, Clemency carried linen upstairs while Agnes handed me a ledger of the following day’s orders and deliveries.

“This is manageable,” I said, opening it.

“Keep reading.”

The remaining pages suggested otherwise.

“Agnes has opinions about everybody,” Clemency remarked on her way upstairs.

“Apparently it’s a local profession.” Ambrose raised his head from the table, and I added, “I used to get paid for mine.”

“The newspaper?”

“For a while.”

He waited.

“I haven’t decided what comes next.”

He turned a page. It was the first time since my dismissal that I had admitted to having no plans and been spared a kind suggestion. I took another piece of bread.

Tom finished his evening inspection, testing each window and checking the front bolt twice.

“Why twice?” I asked.

“Quiet nights are worse,” he said, leaving his hand on the bolt a moment longer before continuing towards the kitchen.

Ambrose was to sleep on the settle in the back room. Once Agnes had sent the others upstairs, I heard a chair scrape beyond the passage. I followed the sound with the respectable excuse of thanking him for the papers.

He sat beneath a lamp with Euphemia’s documents spread around him, his sleeves rolled and collar loosened, a dark strand of hair fallen near his temple.

Without his coat he looked less like another of Euphemia’s arrangements and more like a man I had followed into a quiet room.

“I thought you’d gone up,” he said, catching a loose page as the wind struck the window.

“So did I.”

He straightened the papers. “Euphemia left enough for several winters.”

“She never trusted one page where five would do.”

A faint knock sounded inside the wall.

“Pipes,” Ambrose said.

Another knock followed. He listened until it stopped. “Old house.”

I remained in the doorway.

“Settling in?” he asked.

“I’ve unpacked a fox.”

His mouth curved at one corner.

There was an empty chair opposite him, but sitting down seemed a poor idea.

“Good night, Mr Pettifer.”

“Good night, Miss Everard.”

I went upstairs before finding another reason to stay.

My trunk and valise waited beside the bed. I set both brass keys on the washstand while I undressed, studying their matching teeth before extinguishing the lamp.

For nearly twenty minutes, I behaved like a woman with sense.

Sleep was less cooperative.

The wind rattled the windows and set the old timbers groaning. Somewhere overhead, the shutter struck again.

I had lost my job for asking questions people preferred left alone. Apparently I had learnt nothing.

I got up, pulled my skirt over my nightdress and wrapped myself in a shawl. Both keys went into my pocket. Then I lit the lamp.

The storm swallowed the sound of my bare feet as I approached the attic stairs.

Halfway up, a voice came from above.

“I thought you’d come.”

Ambrose stood several steps higher, one shoulder against the wall.

“You waited.”

He pushed away as another gust struck the roof, making the lamp flame jump. “Careful.”

I cupped my hand around the glass until it steadied.

His attention settled on my pocket. “The keys?”

I drew them out, and he came down a step to examine the worn teeth. The stair was too narrow for me to move away without retreating. I stayed where I was, his shoulder warm beside mine.

I closed my fingers around the brass. Euphemia had been dead less than a week and was still managing to arrange my evenings. “Then we should stop making her wait.”

Chapter Three

Ambrose took the lamp and turned sideways to let me pass. “Mind the third step.”

It dipped under my heel despite the warning. His free hand came up behind me, then dropped when I caught the rail. Farther up, the roof obliged him to duck under a beam I cleared standing. I liked the architect better for it.

The door stuck. I leaned against it until it scraped open, lifting dust from the threshold. Beyond it, trunks and a broken cradle crowded beneath the eaves. The lamp found a small cabinet against the far wall.

Blue.

That was my first objection; its size was the second. After all the keys, warnings, secrecy and Euphemia arranging people from beyond the grave, I had expected something large enough to suit the drama. It reached barely above my waist.

I stopped several feet short. “Well. All that secrecy for this?”

Ambrose raised the lamp. “I pictured something larger.”

“You’ve pictured it before?”

His fingers tightened around the lamp handle. He did not answer, and I crossed to the cabinet.

I crouched before its two narrow doors. The blue paint had worn around both locks. Ambrose lowered the lamp beside them.

Both keys slid in easily, but when I tried the first, the lock held. The second proved equally uncooperative.

“Wonderful.”

Ambrose crouched beside me, the lamp between us.

“Try them together.”

“Of course. Why would she make it simple?”

I placed one hand on each key while Ambrose angled the lamp clear of my sleeve, then turned them.

A deep inward click sounded through the cabinet, larger than the object deserved. I pulled the doors open.

Three cream cups stood on worn velvet. The green and grey sat in matching saucers. Beside them a black-rimmed cup stood in the bare hollow meant for its saucer, and a rose-rimmed saucer waited for its cup.

“Surely Euphemia’s grand midnight corruption involved more than tea service.”

Ambrose lowered the lamp until its light reached the folded papers beneath the porcelain. “Read the notes.”

I eased the first note out from under the green saucer. Of the three it was the only one Euphemia had left crooked.

I straightened the note before opening it. Pure Euphemia. So much for years spent disapproving of the habit.

For fear. Not to remove it. Fear removed is stupidity. To make it legible enough to bear and answer.

I read it again. Fear. Was that what she meant by giving me the chance to refuse? I put the note back beneath the green cup.

The second note carried a grey line.

For grief. Not to banish it. Grief banished goes feral. To make it sit. To permit it shape.

I thought of the place in Euphemia's letter where her pen had slipped. I would have liked to hear her tell me what to do with grief. I put the note down.

Ambrose lowered the lamp towards the last cup. Its black rim was no wider than the others. I took the paper beneath it.

It lowers resistance, allowing whatever already presses hardest within to pass more freely.

I kept my hands away from the cup. "Good Lord."

A second reading made it worse.

"Abhorrent."

A rough sound came from Ambrose beside me. "Yes."

He began to rise, then stopped, still staring at the black cup.

On the lip of the case was a little gummed label in Euphemia's hand. Company china. I had grown up taking that to mean there weren't enough matching plates for the whole family. I put the note back. "We're missing the black saucer and the rose cup."

Ambrose rose and carried the lamp to a covered trunk.

"You know more than you're saying," I said.

He set the lamp on the flat lid, and the light climbed the dust sheet to sharpen the fatigue around his eyes.

I caught the cabinet edge, its wood pressing into my palm. "What else did she leave you?"

"Fragments."

"Of what?"

Ambrose's attention remained on the cabinet. "Warnings. References. Half-finished notes."

"You had another key," I said. "How did you know I'd come up here?"

"I knew you wouldn't wait."

I straightened, brushing dust from my skirt with more force than necessary. "How much did she tell you, Ambrose?"

He looked up when I used his name. For a moment neither of us moved.

He took up the lamp. "We need to find what's missing before someone else does."

I closed the doors and turned both keys together. After testing the doors, I put the keys in my pocket.

One foot had gone numb. I waited for the prickling to ease, then followed Ambrose onto the stairs.

Halfway down, I stopped. He turned back, raising the lamp.

"This is intolerable," I whispered.

"The cabinet?"

"You."

I descended one step, narrowing the distance.

"I've seen it. I've read the notes, Ambrose." My grip tightened on the railing. "What are you not telling me?"

"I thought you should see it first."

"You could have warned me."

"I tried once."

He was looking down the dark stairs. Whoever he had tried to warn, it hadn't been me. "What happened?"

"Help me find the missing pieces. Then I'll tell you."

I slipped past him. My shawl caught on his cuff and he freed it, careful not to pull the loose wool. At such close quarters I could see that the little nick under his jaw had opened again in the wet. It seemed an oddly private thing to know about a stranger.

By the landing I could walk beside him again. “I’ll hold you to that.”

“Yes,” he said, without asking which part I meant.

* * *

By morning, I could have drawn the black cup with my eyes shut. Fortunately, I had a tea room to open. Clemency carried out warm bread, Agnes checked the milk and I took up the account book. Here, at least, I knew what I was looking at.

Edith Lobb entered in brown wool, surveyed the room and stopped. Her bonnet had the moral authority of a statute.

“My table.”

I lifted my pencil from the ledger. “Good morning.”

Her bonnet tilted by perhaps one degree. “The window table.”

I indicated the row of windows. “Which one?”

Mrs Lobb had already claimed one with the angle of her bonnet. “Second from the door.”

Clemency slipped between me and the counter carrying a fistful of spoons, her apron brushing my skirt.

The second window table was occupied by two fishermen with wet cuffs and large hands. “It appears to be taken,” I said.

Both men suddenly found their cups interesting under Mrs Lobb’s stare.

I set the pencil down and came around the counter. “You are welcome to take the table by the fire.”

Mrs Lobb inspected it as though I had suggested exile. “I have no quarrel with warmth. Euphemia never put me there.”

Near the cutlery tray, Clemency made a small sound that might have been a laugh or a warning.

“My aunt treated most relationships like minor border disputes.”

Agnes appeared in the kitchen doorway with flour dusting one wrist. “Second window table. Market mornings.”

I pointed towards the fishermen. “They’re already there.”

Agnes reached for the nearest cup as though the matter required no further study. “Won’t be for long.”

Mr Wren drained his cup while Mr Crowley collected the sugar bowl. They moved towards the fire with the resigned efficiency of men correcting an error before it hardened into local history.

“Thank you, Mr Wren. Mr Crowley.” Mrs Lobb took possession of the table and put her reticule on the spare chair.

The men settled by the fire without protest. Apparently I alone had failed to understand the arrangement.

I stopped beside the table. “My apologies. I hadn’t realised the chair had been consecrated.”

Mrs Lobb tugged one cuff into place. “You haven’t learned where the draughts are yet.”

A thin current of cold entered beneath the frame and curled around my hem.

From here she could see the whole square and hear almost everyone who entered.

Agnes arrived with tea and placed the cup precisely where Mrs Lobb's hand was already travelling. "Strong. No lemon. One slice of bread, butter thin enough to pass inspection."

I took the empty tray from Agnes and carried it towards the counter.

Behind me, Mrs Lobb took her first sip. "Too hot."

Agnes continued into the kitchen without turning. "Then it's yours."

For the next twenty minutes, I ran the Willow & Thorn with considerable efficiency and was delighted with myself.

Mrs Bellamy asked for two buns, selected three and smiled. I returned the third to the plate.

Mr Aster chose a chair by the wall and then complained that he could not hear Clemency, so I moved him nearer the counter where every order could reach him with admirable clarity.

A girl from the Elwood house arrived clutching fivepence in one damp fist and asked for six buns.

I counted the coins once. "Fivepence buys five."

She looked from the tray to me. "Yes, miss."

I wrapped five buns and handed them across.

The morning balanced to the penny.

Clemency moved between the tables without her usual chatter. Mr Aster frowned into the kitchen noise, his cane across his knees; Mrs Bellamy folded the empty napkin into her basket. A woman with wool caught on her sleeve set down a spool and asked if the tea could go on Friday account. I asked what name to put it under. "Jane

Mett," she said, and watched me write it. Not somebody's wife, then, and not another penny in the till until market day.

Through the front window, I saw the Elwood girl disappear into the rain with five buns pressed to her chest.

I wrote the final total into the morning column and admired the neatness of it.

Agnes appeared beside me carrying a clean plate. "You frightened the Elwood girl."

I kept the pencil poised above the ledger. "She paid for five."

"Her mother sent fivepence because she knew Euphemia would add the sixth."

I lowered the pencil, still looking towards the empty doorway. "No one told me."

Agnes barely paused. "Their father broke his leg. Euphemia always made it six." She glanced towards the room. "And Mr Aster can't hear a word from where you put him." Agnes continued, "Mrs Bellamy's third bun is for her husband's aunt, though she'll swear she doesn't need it. Gideon brings us sugar when he orders too much."

I wrapped the third bun and set it beside the ledger. My beautifully accurate morning had begun to resemble evidence for the prosecution. "I followed the prices."

Clemency came back from the kitchen carrying fresh spoons. She laid them out with more care than the task required. "I'll keep an extra bun for Mrs Elwood." She set two spoons beside a cup. "Mrs Bellamy will ask about Mr Dacre."

I looked up too quickly. "Laurence Dacre?"

"The quay. Everyone's talking about whether he's paying for the new stones. Mrs Lobb says he never repairs anything without eventually owning where it stands."

"They let him?" I asked.

Clemency nudged one spoon into line with another. “The work had already started before anyone knew quite who’d arranged it. Dacre paid after the last storm—or I think he did.”

At the window, Mrs Lobb adjusted the fall of her glove with sudden concentration.

“She says it holds until it owns,” Clemency murmured.

“Enough,” Agnes called from the counter.

“But she should know.”

Agnes came over, relieved Clemency of the spoons and handed her a paper bag. “Mrs Elwood first.”

Clemency wrapped a bun with considerably more force than baked goods deserved and set it beside the till.

I closed the ledger while Mr Aster turned his good ear towards Clemency as she repeated the day’s soup more slowly.

Mrs Bellamy finished her tea, gathered her basket and came to the counter.

I picked up Mrs Bellamy’s parcel. “You’ve forgotten something.”

Mrs Bellamy’s hand paused over the basket. “My goodness.”

I handed it to her, and she tucked it inside without opening it. “You’re a treasure, Agnes.”

Agnes kept wiping down the opposite end of the counter. “I know.”

Mrs Bellamy laughed and went out into the rain.

Not five minutes later, the back door opened on a gust of damp air and wet wool.

Tom came in with a sugar sack on his shoulder and lowered it beside the flour. “Morning.”

Agnes moved a crock of flour out of his way with her foot. “Bellamy?”

Tom nudged the sugar sack into place with his boot. “Ordered twice what he meant again.”

Agnes pressed two fingers into the side of the sack, testing its weight. “So he remembered.”

Tom worked one shoulder loose after the load. “Usually does.”

He gave the front room a brief nod and headed back towards the yard before I could decide whether thanks were expected.

I pencilled ‘sugar’ beside the third bun. If I ever had to explain this account to a solicitor, I rather hoped Mrs Bellamy would come with me.

The front bell rang, and the Elwood girl appeared on the mat, cheeks flushed from running, the original paper bag in one hand. “I forgot—”

Clemency was already crossing the room; she took the waiting bun and slipped it into the bag before the girl could finish.

The child stared down.

Six.

“I only paid—”

Clemency folded the paper firmly over the top and pressed the bag back into her hands. “I know.”

The girl tucked the bag against her ribs and smiled with her whole face before running back into the rain.

I was still watching the door when Agnes measured tea into the brown pot and levelled the spoon against the rim. “What?”

“Nothing.”

Her spoon moved through the tea while I opened the ledger again to a blank page.

Tom came through the front door this time with a coil of wire and two spare hinges, his screwdriver tucked into his belt.

Mrs Lobb looked up from her cup. “Side latch again?”

Tom shifted the hinges higher against his hip as he passed. “Mm.”

Her attention returned to the window. “About time.”

I watched him head into the passage. “How long has everyone known about this?”

Tom stopped just beyond the doorway, the hinges still in one hand. “A while.”

Of course.

The Willow & Thorn had spent years developing a language of damaged hinges, missing buns and furniture ownership, and I had arrived speaking fluent ledger.

I followed Tom into the cooler corridor. He set the spare hinges on a shelf and tested the side latch. It caught until he lifted the handle a fraction, then opened smoothly.

“I’ve been forcing it.”

Tom crouched at the lower hinge and pulled the screwdriver from his belt. “Lift it next time.”

“You might have mentioned that yesterday.”

He gave the screw another turn. “You were fighting with the latch.”

I opened my mouth, then closed it again.

Tom adjusted the hinge. “Damp swells the wood. You can feel it catch.”

He stood and opened it with two fingers.

“Old houses usually warn you,” he said.

“How?”

“Listen to the pump when the washer’s going. It knocks twice. You get to know the sounds.”

He offered me a length of wire. “Window catch.”

I took the wire. “For what?”

“Hook that under it. Lift instead of forcing it.”

I slipped the wire into my pocket.

Tom collected the spare hinges and went back to his work. I tried the door once myself before following.

Another woman entered the tea room shaking rain from her shawl, a basket with one repaired handle hanging from her arm. Water had darkened the bottom of her skirt, and she paused just inside the doorway.

I went back through the passage as she asked, “Table by the wall, if it’s free?”

“It is.”

I crossed the room, relieved her of the basket and tucked it beside the chair while she eased herself down. Clemency approached with a cup as I reached for the kettle. “Hot water first. Tea when you’re ready.”

She held her damp hands together in her lap. “That would be kind.”

I poured while Clemency set a currant bun beside the cup.

She hesitated over the plate. “I didn’t ask for—”

Clemency pushed the bun within easier reach. “It’s for you.”

As I carried the empty kettle back to the counter, Clemency glanced at me from old habit. The till stood open beside the ledger and my pencil.

I reached automatically, then stopped.

I closed the till instead, and across the room Agnes paused with a saucer in one hand before slotting it neatly into place. “Hm.”

I took up the waiting tray. Mrs Lobb watched me approach.

As I passed, Mrs Lobb drew her reticule into her lap, clearing just enough space for the edge of my tray.

My step shortened.

Mrs Lobb turned the cup a fraction in its saucer and resumed her inspection of the square.

I continued towards the next table without thanking her.

Neither of us would have survived it.

Chapter Four

Verity Lyle came into the Willow & Thorn half a step behind her mother-in-law. They both stopped inside the door to let a man out, but only one of them started walking again. Sarah had to turn and smile before Verity followed her.

I noticed because I was waiting for them to move so Clemency could get past with the sugar. She was attacking a damp lump with a teaspoon.

“If you’re obliged to strike something,” Agnes called from the kitchen, “kindly take it out of the good bowl first.”

The younger woman smiled and bent her head at once. She wore a blue shawl, one finger hooked through a darn where it had begun to give again.

Clemency drifted towards my elbow with the sugar bowl tucked against her waist.

“Mrs Sarah Lyle,” she whispered, loudly enough for both women to hear. “And Mrs Verity… well, Mrs Daniel Lyle.”

“Names are not theatre, Clemency,” Agnes said from the kitchen without raising her voice.

Clemency retreated into professional interest in sugar.

Sarah Lyle had heard everything and forgiven us in advance, her smile arriving already prepared. “Good morning, Mrs Taverner.”

Agnes gave her the brief nod reserved for people whose habits required no further study. “Morning.”

Sarah turned that polished pleasantness towards me, taking in the open ledger, my apron and whatever resemblance to Euphemia I had failed to inherit. “And you must be Miss Everard. Strange seeing someone else behind Euphemia’s counter.”

I wiped a faint line of ink from my finger as I came around the counter. “The place appears to be surviving the indignity.”

Sarah gave the remark precisely one polite laugh, then moved on.

Behind her, Verity angled towards the empty wall table until Sarah touched two gloved fingers to her elbow. “Not there, dear. We sit by the fire.”

Verity hesitated. “I thought last time you said the fire was too close.”

Sarah drew out the chair beside the hearth and waited while Verity set her small basket beside it and sat. “You complained of the heat all week, dear. I told Daniel.”

Colour rose in Verity’s face. She opened her mouth, then reached for the basket instead.

Clemency carried two clean cups over on a tray and placed them on the table.

Sarah settled nearest the fire and began removing her gloves, laying the first beside her reticule. “Tea, please. Weak for Verity.”

Verity let the darned corner of her shawl fall from her grasp. “Ordinary is fine.”

Sarah paused with the second glove half removed. “Another change.”

Sarah drew it off. Clemency waited beside the table, then looked to me.

“Two teas,” I said. “One weak. One ordinary. Milk separately.”

Clemency moved immediately towards the kitchen.

Sarah held the same pleasant smile as the clasp of her reticule clicked beneath her touch. “How thoughtful.”

Verity lowered her face towards her cup too late to hide a brief smile.

When Clemency returned with the tea, I set the milk jug within Verity’s reach.

I bent over the milk account. Behind me came Sarah’s mild, “Verity, dear. Easy with the milk.”

My nib stopped before it touched the page. I looked up: Verity had only lifted the jug, her tea still untouched and dark. “I haven’t poured any,” she said.

Sarah leaned just close enough for her sleeve to brush Verity’s cuff. “You always use too much.”

The jug met the table harder than Verity intended. Across the room, Edith Lobb paused with her cup halfway to her mouth before drinking.

Sarah took another sip. “Did you bring the mending?”

Verity rubbed the darned corner of her shawl between finger and thumb. “I thought we were leaving it until Friday.”

Sarah set down her cup. “Daniel needs the shirts before then.”

Verity drew the basket onto her knees, checked beneath the folded cloths, then began again.

“Oh, Verity,” Sarah said softly.

Still looking inside, Verity said, “I was certain I packed it.”

Sarah blew once across her tea. “We’ll manage. We always do.”

Verity let the top cloth fall back into place. “I’m sorry.”

My pen had left a blot in the milk account. I put it down.

I picked up a plate of currant buns and went to the fire table.

I held the plate towards Verity. “Would you like a bun?”

She startled at being addressed directly and glanced towards Sarah. “I—”

Sarah adjusted the handle of her cup. “She’ll have one. She forgets to eat whenever Daniel is away.”

Verity pressed her lips together, and I lowered the plate into the space between us.

Clemency stopped wiping the counter.

Sarah looked at me, and I kept the plate where it was.

Interfering in another woman's breakfast after less than a week in town was probably a poor way to establish myself as a discreet businesswoman.

Fortunately, discretion and I had already ended one professional relationship.

When Verity finally faced me, I asked, "Would you like one?"

She hesitated over the bun. "Yes. Please."

I tipped the plate towards her, and she reached out and took one herself.

"Thank you," she said, settling it beside her cup.

"You're welcome."

I went back to the counter. Verity broke the bun in half and ate a piece while Sarah continued talking.

Sarah paid exactly, thanked Agnes, put on her gloves and rose. Verity collected the basket in both hands and followed her towards the door.

Sarah held the door as Verity stepped through, and the bell gave one clean note behind them. Around the room, cups shifted and a chair scraped.

Edith Lobb murmured something to Martha Bellamy containing enough consonants to guarantee it was not charitable.

Agnes came through from the kitchen and picked up an abandoned cup.

"Who is Daniel Lyle?" I asked.

Agnes fitted the cup into its saucer. "Fisherman. Away more than he's home. Verity married him young."

"And Sarah?"

"Runs things whenever anyone lets her. Verity used to thank her for it."

I wanted to go after Verity, but what could I say in front of Sarah that would do her any good once they were home?

The milk account was out by a halfpenny. I left it so, and crossed to the window in time to see Sarah take her daughter-in-law's arm to guide her across a street with no traffic in it.

* * *

I corrected the flour account for the third time before accepting that the figures had no intention of improving through intimidation.

I had nearly proved Walter Penhallick dishonest across three separate columns when the front bell sounded and Ambrose Pettifer entered with another bundle of papers beneath his arm.

His coat was brushed and his collar fastened. It was hard to believe we had stood on the attic stairs only hours earlier.

I pressed my pencil into the ledger hard enough to leave a mark. "Mr Pettifer."

"Miss Everard." He gave way to Clemency's tray, then set his folio beside my ledger. His gaze caught briefly on the mark my pencil had left. "Revised prices and invoices."

I pulled the folio closer. "Excellent. I was beginning to fear the morning might be straightforward."

Ambrose sat opposite me, and I showed him the unfinished page.

"Yesterday's total appears twice," he said.

"I was ensuring the error had company."

His attention lingered on the page. "How much sleep did you get?"

"Very little." I sipped the cold tea and regretted it. "Unless resenting a cabinet counts."

"It doesn't, I'm afraid."

He checked the corresponding invoice. "Here. Penhallick charged twice as well."

"Walter Penhallick appears to mistake widowhood for stupidity."

Across the counter, Clemency was sawing at a loaf when Agnes emerged from the kitchen with a plate of bread. "If the flour account is wrong, I'm the one who suffers." She placed it between us. "Eat."

I reached immediately for a slice.

Agnes pivoted around Clemency before the girl could collide with her and vanished back through the kitchen door.

When Ambrose closed the folio and rose, I looked up too quickly. "You're leaving?"

"Harbour office." He slid one receipt into the inner pocket of his coat. "Send for me if Penhallick gives you trouble."

"I can manage him."

"I expect you can." He caught a receipt before my cup could dampen it and set the paperweight on top.

I had expected an argument. Instead he left me the evidence and went. I watched him cross the square before turning back to Penhallick's figures.

Before Penhallick arrived, I had changed an order, fetched more hot water and caught Clemency's tilting tray.

"Wall table first," I told her. "You don't have to carry everything at once."

She took a cup off the tray and gave me a relieved smile. I carried it to the window myself.

Walter Penhallick arrived shortly before noon with his account book tucked beneath one arm.

He was narrow through the shoulders, prosperous around the waist and dressed in a waistcoat whose principal achievement was expense.

“Miss Everard.”

I set the pencil beside the ledger and matched his courtesy. “Mr Penhallick.”

He removed his hat and held it neatly against his waistcoat. “My condolences regarding your aunt.”

“How kind. You have mine regarding your arithmetic.” I moved aside from the counter and indicated the open ledger. “Do come in.”

His smile faltered as he followed and laid his account book beside mine.

“I thought the matter of current supply rates might benefit from a gentler explanation, given the change in management.”

I pointed to the ledger. “These weren’t on my aunt’s account.”

“Market conditions have changed.”

I touched the altered entries. “Explain these. Especially this one. Flour went up when my aunt died?”

Behind the counter, Clemency’s laugh transformed into a cough several seconds too late to be useful.

Colour climbed into Penhallick’s cheeks. “Your aunt never objected.”

“My aunt made the regrettable choice to die. I would hesitate before treating that as posthumous approval.”

The two nearest customers held their cups halfway to their mouths. By the time I noticed them, retreat had become unattractive.

“I only thought a lady new to the business might appreciate some guidance.”

I knew that upholstered language well enough; it had already cost me one career. “Put the rate back and remove the last two charges.”

Penhallick started to answer, but I spoke over him. “Or I can ask around the market whether Penhallick & Son makes a habit of raising its prices for widows and female heirs.”

Somewhere in the kitchen, Agnes set down a tray hard enough to make Clemency jump. Penhallick checked the figures, then the occupied tables behind me.

“Very well,” he said between his teeth.

I slid the pencil towards him. “Excellent.”

He looked at it.

I smiled.

Walter Penhallick corrected the figures himself.

Only after the final number had been altered did I say, “Clemency, would you bring Mr Penhallick a clean receipt?”

Clemency produced one so quickly that she nearly betrayed how long she had been waiting.

At the window table, Edith Lobb folded her napkin precisely once and laid it beside her saucer, which from Mrs Lobb was practically exuberance.

Penhallick collected his amended book, tucked it beneath his arm and departed with considerably less ceremony than he had brought in.

The bell had barely settled before Clemency reached the worktable. “That was magnificent.”

Agnes dusted flour from her palms. “We still need flour.”

I crossed through the inflated amount and wrote the corrected rate beneath it.

Three shillings saved. I could do something with three shillings.

As I closed the ledger, Edith Lobb’s nearly empty sugar bowl caught my attention. She sat at the window as usual, her reticule occupying its own chair.

I took the canister from the shelf before she could ask, crossed between two tables and refilled the bowl beside her saucer.

Mrs Lobb glanced from the refilled bowl to me, then lifted her cup and looked back at the square before I reached the counter.

Back at the ledger, I picked up my pencil. Mrs Lobb had drawn the sugar bowl nearer her elbow. She took another spoonful and went on looking out of the window. I put the pencil down.

* * *

The next morning, Verity Lyle came alone.

She stood just inside the door, gloved fingers still curled around the latch and a basket looped over her other wrist. Mist darkened the edge of her bonnet. Clemency saw her first and, astonishingly, stopped talking halfway through a sentence.

Verity tried to smile and could not quite manage it. “Miss Everard, I’m sorry. It’s nothing, really. I only thought perhaps…” She swallowed. “Could I have a moment?”

I put down the cup I had been drying. “You look as though you need to sit down.”

Her elbows drew closer to her body. “It isn’t a crisis. I know how this sounds. I’m only tired, I think.”

From behind the counter, Agnes fitted another clean cup onto the shelf with a sound of profound disagreement. “You’ve apologised twice and haven’t said what for.”

Verity glanced towards her, startled enough that her weight shifted away from the door. “That’s just it.” Her voice dropped as she added, “I keep thinking perhaps I’ve got it wrong somehow.”

I opened the back-room door. “Come through.”

Verity stayed beside the threshold, one foot still angled towards the front room. “No, truly, I don’t mean to cause trouble.”

I held the door wider. “You’ve already brought it inside. We may as well give it a chair.”

A faint breath of amusement escaped her as she followed me in, then quickly faded.

Verity lowered her basket between her feet and sat down before I’d finished pulling out the chair. “It sounds absurd when I say it aloud.”

I settled into the chair opposite and gave her room to continue. “Say it anyway.”

Her laugh came out small and unhappy. “When Daniel is away, his mother likes things done a certain way. I suppose that’s fair. It’s his house too.”

“Well,” she amended, “it was her son’s house first.”

I had a question about Sarah on the tip of my tongue. I tucked my foot beneath the chair before I could edge it any closer.

Verity drew herself a little straighter. “She is kind,” she said too quickly. “Everyone says she is. She brings things when Daniel is away, and she knows which tradesmen cheat, and she remembers market days better than I do.”

“She only likes order.” Verity shifted her knees to make room for the empty chair beside her. I pushed it away. She watched it go. “Sometimes she remembers things differently. I say something happened, and she tells me it didn’t. Kindly. Always kindly. As though she feels sorry for having to correct me.”

“This morning…” She pressed her lips together, then tried again. “I told her she had repeated something I specifically asked her not to tell Daniel.”

I lifted the teapot lid. Empty. I put it down again.

“She looked at me and said I’d never asked her not to,” Verity continued. “She said it so gently that I ended up ashamed for insisting.”

A pan fell in the kitchen. Agnes called to Clemency, and Verity flinched.

Verity waited for the noise to subside. “Perhaps she is right,” she said almost under her breath.

I got up to fetch her bread and a fresh pot. Overhead a board creaked, and I thought of the line Euphemia had written under the green cup. Enough to bear and answer. I could very nearly hear how it would sound if I left out the part about the cup.

Verity pushed herself halfway out of the chair. “No. Forgive me. I shouldn’t have come. I’ve brought you a family quarrel.”

I stopped beside the door. “You’re already here. Stay a minute.”

Verity sat down again. I could have fetched an ordinary cup. Instead, I climbed to the attic and unlocked the cabinet.

The green line was barely wider than a thread. I lifted the cup and its saucer, locked the cabinet and carried them downstairs. She needed enough quiet to hear herself. That was what I told myself on the stairs.

Clemency had left a fresh pot on the table. I closed the door behind me.

Verity sat where I had left her, one glove removed, folding and unfolding its empty fingers across her knee.

I set the cup before her. “This is tea.”

Her eyes moved from the green line around the rim to me. “Is it?”

I reached for the pot. “Mostly.”

She almost smiled. As I poured, I put my thumb over the green rim to catch a drip. I had time to tell her while she took off her second glove, and time again while she blew across the tea. Six words would have done it.

I let her drink.

After another sip, she set the cup down. “No.”

“That isn’t what happened.”

I sat opposite her.

“She waits until we’re alone,” Verity said. “In front of people, she asks. Afterwards, she corrects.” Verity looked up. “I did ask her this morning. Twice. I remember the second time because I was embarrassed that the first hadn’t been enough.” She planted both feet beneath the chair. “I’m frightened.”

She let the sentence remain between us. “But I’m not mistaken.”

“When Daniel returns, she’ll tell him I’ve become emotional. And if I argue, I’ll sound exactly as she expects me to.”

I resisted the urge to make a plan for her and asked, “What do you need?”

Verity looked towards the writing desk. “Paper. A pencil.” She drew a breath. “I need it written down before I see him—what happened, what she said, what I asked. And what I won’t argue about.”

I passed her the paper and pencil. Her first line slanted, and halfway along it she crossed out a word and fitted a smaller one above. I had to sit on my hands to stop myself turning the sheet so that I could read it.

When she rose, she held the basket close against her side. At the door she hesitated, then carefully arranged her face before stepping into the public room.

I waited until the front bell settled behind her, then rinsed and dried the green cup and saucer before taking them upstairs and opening the cabinet with both keys.

I returned them to their hollows.

She had gone away with her own words on paper. I held on to that while I shut the cabinet.

Downstairs, I wiped the counter and began sorting the spoons.

By the time Ambrose arrived, the counter shone, the spoons sat in obedient rows, and Verity still occupied every available corner of my attention.

“Miss Everard.”

“Mr Pettifer.” I put down the spoon and turned.

Ambrose crossed to the window table and laid down his folio. He remained standing, holding one glove in his other hand. “Harbour invoices and a note from Mr Finch.”

As I joined him, Ambrose glanced at the carefully aligned spoons behind the counter. “The house again?”

“Among other things.”

He pulled out the chair opposite mine. “Penhallick’s already public knowledge.”

Clemency passed behind him carrying a tray and nearly stopped. “You missed it,” she said with genuine reproach. “Mr Penhallick lost his dignity and three shillings in less than five minutes.”

“So I heard.”

Clemency continued towards the window tables.

Ambrose opened the folio, and I caught the edge of the top sheet as he slid it towards me. “How much did you hear?”

“Enough to know Penhallick corrected the figures himself.” He added, “And that you’re not ornamental.”

The top corner bent beneath my grip, and I smoothed it flat. “That sounds dangerously close to a compliment.”

“It was.”

The quiet after it scattered the answers I usually kept ready. I looked back at the folio.

Ambrose smiled as he reached for his pen.

He passed me the next invoice. I liked sitting with him, liked that he thought well of me.

“I should tell you something,” I said.

He put down his pen.

Clemency came to the counter looking for the small teapot. I turned towards her before Ambrose could answer.

“In the back room. I’ll get it.”

I was already standing. His question followed me. “Is everything all right?”

“Yes.”

The green cup was locked away upstairs, but I hurried all the same.

Chapter Five

By ten the next morning Mrs Finch’s table was still empty. The two women from the quay had chosen one by the door and were talking quietly until I approached. One put her hand over the other’s.

I set down their cups. “Ladies.”

“Miss Everard,” one replied.

The other kept her fingers on the milk jug without pouring.

I left them to it.

Where Mrs Finch usually sat, the chair was drawn up neatly under the table.

I could think of half a dozen reasons to stay home in this weather. None explained why Agnes kept glancing at the clock.

I set the order slate against the counter. “Mrs Finch is late.”

“She knows what time we open,” Agnes said.

I glanced at the empty table. “Is she usually late?”

Before Agnes could answer, the front bell rang.

A boy stood on the mat, wet to the ears, holding a folded note between two fingers as though paper might bite if handled incorrectly.

“For the Willow & Thorn.”

He offered it to me and fled before responsibility could spread.

The signature was Mrs Hale’s. I recognised the careful loops from the standing order in Agnes’s book.

I broke the seal.

Miss Everard,

Owing to a change in circumstances, Mrs Hale will not require the standing order for Thursday tea cakes this week. She regrets any inconvenience.

The page was immaculate.

“Change in circumstances,” I said, passing the note across when Agnes held out her hand.

She read it, then slid it beneath the flour tin.

“Is Mrs Hale ill?”

Agnes returned to her knife. “She was upright yesterday.”

I glanced at the note. “‘Circumstances,’ then.”

Clemency looked up from the spoons. “Maybe Mrs Hale has a reason—”

Agnes turned her head, and Clemency reconsidered with admirable speed. “A poor one.”

Agnes sliced through the loaf. “Mrs Hale has ordered those cakes every Thursday for six years. Her sister comes for cards. They eat four, complain about two and send one home to a cousin who insists she dislikes sweet things.”

“Because Verity came here?” I asked.

Agnes’s knife stopped halfway through the loaf.

She finished the cut. “Verity came in barely able to speak and left knowing what she wanted to say. People noticed.”

My thumb followed the polished seam in the counter. “What would you have me do?”

“Serve tea.”

A deeply unsatisfying instruction, and unfortunately a useful one.

By eleven, I was still checking the doorway.

“I’m going to Pike’s.”

Agnes glanced towards the sugar. “For sugar?”

I pulled my gloves from beneath the counter. “For air with commercial justification.”

“Better.”

Clemency brightened. “Shall I—”

“No,” Agnes and I said together.

Her mouth closed.

I collected the empty sugar sack and escaped before the room could manufacture another conversation around me.

At the pump, two women stopped talking as I passed. One raised her hand to me, then lowered it to her basket. I kept walking.

The bell above the shop door gave its stiff complaint.

Pike’s smelled of flour and lamp oil. The shelves reached almost to the ceiling; there was scarcely room for three customers to stand at the counter.

Mrs Pike stood behind the counter measuring sugar.

Near the seed drawers, Reverend Pike was speaking with Martha Bellamy and a narrow woman I recognised from the east lane.

“—dreadful weather for the roads,” Martha said with admirable clarity.

“Quite,” the Reverend agreed. “The roads.”

The narrow woman discovered an absorbing interest in starch.

Mrs Pike looked up. “Miss Everard.”

“Mrs Pike. Sugar, if your stock has survived the roads.”

“How much?”

"Our usual, please. Before Agnes sends a search party."

Behind me, Martha resumed. "Of course, it may be nothing." The narrow woman made an encouraging sound, and Martha continued, "Young wives are impressionable. Especially with husbands away."

I watched Mrs Pike lower the scoop into the sugar and raise it, only to settle it back and begin again.

Reverend Pike cleared his throat. "Private household matters are best managed privately."

"Yes," Martha said. "Though that was rather the difficulty, wasn't it?"

Paper crackled beneath Mrs Pike's hands as I rested one finger on the counter. "You're measuring very slowly."

Mrs Pike settled the scoop back into the sugar. "I'm making sure of the weight."

Martha lowered her voice just enough to make sure it still carried. "I only meant that it has become a familiar pattern."

"Don't say that," the narrow woman whispered.

"I'm not accusing anyone."

When I turned, Martha smoothed her gloves and the Reverend straightened.

"Martha. How lovely." I let my attention shift to the Reverend. "Reverend."

Both greeted me with enough civility to satisfy a witness.

"What are you saying about her?"

"We were concerned for Mrs Daniel Lyle," Martha said.

"About Verity?"

"She has seemed… unsettled."

"By whom?"

Reverend Pike moved closer to the counter. “Miss Everard, you don’t know the family.”

“Have you asked Verity?”

Before the Reverend could answer, Mrs Pike set the half-folded parcel on the counter between us.

Martha straightened. “Sarah Lyle is a respected woman.”

“I’m talking about Verity. She’s frightened of her.”

The narrow woman tightened both hands around her basket.

“Miss Everard,” the Reverend began.

“Yes?”

Martha recovered first. “You sound very much like your aunt.”

“So people keep telling me.”

Mrs Pike tied the parcel and pushed it towards me. “Your sugar.”

I counted out the coins.

“Miss Everard.”

Mrs Pike spoke clearly enough for the shop to hear. “People remember badly when they are frightened.”

Sugar parcel in hand, I kept my place at the counter. “Were they frightened of Euphemia?”

Mrs Pike glanced towards Martha. “People came to your aunt after they had exhausted cleaner choices.”

“That tells me very little.”

“It’s what I can tell you here.”

Nobody attempted another discussion of roads.

Outside, the mist had thickened enough to blur the opposite buildings.

By the time I got back from Pike's I had half a dozen answers for Martha. I was still turning over what she'd said about Euphemia when I untied the parcel and filled the nearest bowl. Only when I pulled off my gloves did I see how much sugar had stuck to the wet wool.

Clemency materialised beside me holding three spoons and looking as though she had spent my entire absence negotiating with curiosity. "Was Pike's busy?"

"Busy enough."

Clemency moved closer. "They're saying Mrs Lyle came here one woman and left another."

I put the gloves beneath the counter. "How observant of them."

"And they say Euphemia used to do the same."

I opened the cutlery drawer and found I had nothing for it.

"Mr Aster said he'd never heard such nonsense," Clemency added. "Then he asked what kind, so I think he wanted it repeated."

I picked up a cup and began to scrub at the tea stain inside it.

"You needn't scrub the glaze away," Agnes said.

I returned the cup to the shelf. "I know."

The afternoon post brought a note from Sarah Lyle. She wanted a copy of anything Verity had written on my premises. Her son would naturally wish to see it when he came home.

I had neither the paper nor the right to send it. I turned the note over and wrote that if Mrs Lyle wanted anything from me she was welcome to ask in person. Then I