CHAPTER ONE

‘Start with her name,’ said the woman behind the curtain.

‘I don’t want to.’ The man was crying now.

‘Then let him be,’ I called.

A girl drew the curtain back, her pencil still poised over an empty page. ‘But he asked us to bring back his memories of his wife.’

‘Before the treatment or after?’

She glanced back at him. I reached for the arm of my chair and got a fistful of sheet. I knew this bed from all the years I’d sat beside it telling people they were safe. Why was I in it?

‘Give him the water by his bed,’ I said. ‘Give him a minute.’

A saucer rattled. Only when I heard him drink did I reach for my own cup. The rim burnt my lip, but when I touched it with my finger the china was cold.

My boots were on the floor. If I could get them on, I could walk down the passage to my workroom, where somebody would know what had happened. First I had to get this bloody knot out.

The girl came back to find me bent over one boot. I’d pulled the lace so tight my fingers hurt.

‘You should have called someone before you got up.’

‘That’s why I didn’t.’

She rubbed her nose and left a grey streak across it. Nineteen at most. In my first week on the wards, I’d have gone into the linen room and cried if a patient had spoken to me like that.

Oh, leave her alone, Lis.

‘I’m all right,’ I said. ‘How long was I asleep?’

‘Since early this morning.’

‘What time is it now?’

‘Nearly eleven.’

Nearly eleven. My sister would have eaten the crust off our loaf by now. According to Coriselle that didn’t count as starting lunch without me. Funny how it was always her favourite bit that didn’t count.

‘Do you remember your name?’

‘Alisende Rouvain.’

‘How old are you?’

‘Twenty-eight. Would you let me out sooner if I lied?’

She smiled. ‘I’m afraid not.’

‘Twenty-eight, then.’

‘What do you do?’

‘I’m a Restorer.’ She waited. ‘Here,’ I added. ‘Usually on the other side of the bed.’

Her smile vanished. ‘I’m sorry. I’ve only just started.’

‘It’s all right. I don’t know everyone either.’

Why couldn’t they have given me an apprentice I knew? One of the girls I’d taught would have brought me my coat by now.

She asked where I lived and who she should send for if I took ill. I gave her my street and Coriselle’s name.

‘And you remember agreeing to the Tithe?’

‘Yes, I—’

A white basin. My hands on the rim and Vessac beside me, his sleeve almost in the water. He'd told me there was nothing to be afraid of.

Before that?

I went back to the basin. His sleeve. My hands. 'What did I give up?'

She put the pencil down. I used to do that when a patient asked me something I couldn't answer. I wished she'd pick it up again.

'Shall I fetch someone? They can talk you through—'

'Just tell me.'

'People don't always remember after a Tithe.'

We used to call it a swallow, among ourselves in the wards. You could see the person get as far as a name. Then the little dip in the throat. I'd always waited kindly for the next word. From this side of the pencil it felt an awfully long wait.

A woman had once asked me to take away the smell of the tar they'd used on her husband's coffin. A week later she came back to tell me she'd walked down to the boats again. What still bothered her was the knot in his good tie. She'd meant to put it straight before they shut the lid. I'd been pleased with myself. Even that was still hers. I could remember doing that for a stranger. What had I wanted for myself?

I tried to get back to the moment before my hands touched the basin. Had I walked in alone? Had I gone looking for Vessac? I could see a wet patch spreading up his sleeve, but I couldn't get past it.

The Tithe could take what I'd asked it to take. I should still remember asking.

'Shall I fetch the First Archivist?'

I nearly said yes.

Othmar Vessac had taught me renance before anyone trusted me near a patient. He'd taught me to feel for the edge of a missing memory, and to leave it alone when I couldn't find it. He'd pull up a chair and ask me what I did remember. Probably I'd feel a fool halfway through telling him.

Right then I'd have liked that.

'Is he busy?'

'He's with the family from Veyne Row.'

Their little boy hadn't spoken since the fire. I'd seen him cling to his mother's skirt whenever someone tried to take him into a treatment room.

'Leave him with them,' I said. 'I'll see him tomorrow.'

I got the lace tied at last.

'If you feel muddled, don't try to force yourself to remember,' the attendant said. 'You need rest. And something to eat.'

'Good. My sister's been waiting years for a doctor to tell me to eat.'

She brought my coat. As I pulled the collar straight it caught a tender place beneath my left ear.

I touched it carefully. No swelling.

Maybe I'd slept on it. 'Have I been ill?' I asked.

'You were tired.' I waited. 'That's what they told me,' she added.

Before I could ask who, the man behind the curtain spoke. 'Her name was Ada.'

So quietly that I almost missed it.

The girl turned towards him. My hand was still at her elbow. When I took it away she pulled her chair close to his curtain, and I had to go out sideways to get past her.

I stepped over the loose brass strip at the turn in the corridor without looking, and nearly laughed.

Good. I knew where I was going.

A woman went by with oranges for the children's wards. Two apprentices were still arguing over the chair they'd both wanted last week. I nearly put my head round the door. Then I'd have to explain why I was up after a Tithe and I'd never get to lunch. They could keep their chair.

At the stairs, the porter had a drawing pin between his teeth. I held up the loose corner of the notice for him. The Settling of Names, a fortnight today, at the second bell after noon. On those afternoons we closed the wards while the First Archivist steadied the names beneath the courtyard. He got the pin in and I took my thumb away.

In the stair window my black curls were coming down on one side. Coriselle would say I'd fought a hedge. I leant closer to fix the damage and for a moment it was Mum turning my face towards the light. Those sapphire eyes, she'd say, with her fingers under my chin. Usually it meant she wanted something.

I left my hair alone a moment longer. I could still hear exactly how she said it.

Outside, the clouds were breaking over Petitioners' Square. I fastened my coat on the wet steps. There was time to go through the market, buy something for lunch—

A man stood up beside the fountain.

He couldn't have been much past thirty. His white hair was wet. Rain had darkened the shoulders of a black coat fine enough to get him shown straight to Vessac's study.

He looked so relieved that I glanced behind me for whoever he was expecting.

No one had come out.

‘Lis!’

Only Coriselle called me Lis.

He came up two steps, smiling at me. I nearly smiled back. Oh, please don’t let him be somebody’s husband I’d met across a sickbed.

‘You don’t know me?’

Oh, don’t look at me like that. I hadn’t forgotten him on purpose. ‘I’m sorry,’ I said. ‘Have we met?’

His hand closed on the wet stone rail.

‘Were you one of my patients?’

‘No.’

He looked down at his hand, then let go. His fingers were red with cold. How long had he been out here?

‘Then at least tell me your name.’

He glanced towards the House. ‘I haven’t got a name.’

Was that the joke? I looked past him for the friend who’d put him up to it.

But he wasn’t smiling.

‘How can you not have a name?’

He didn’t answer.

‘Very helpful.’

I started down the steps. He moved aside at once, so carefully that I felt awkward going past him.

‘Alisende. Wait.’

I turned. He rubbed rain out of one eye with the heel of his hand. For the first time he looked as cold as he must have been.

‘What do you want from me?’

‘Go somewhere you know. Somewhere with people.’

‘Why? What’s happened?’

He looked towards the House again. ‘Please, Lis. Don’t be on your own.’

He meant it. That bothered me more than if he’d laughed.

His coat was still open. He must be freezing.

‘I’m going to my sister’s,’ I said.

‘Good.’

He stepped out of my way at once. I wished I’d let him wonder where I was going.

I went down the steps before I could say anything else.

At the far side of the square I looked back. He hadn’t moved.

I turned into the market and walked straight into a woman carrying a basket of leeks. ‘Sorry,’ I said.

She went on without looking at me.

I got my back against a wall just as a stallholder tipped the rain off his awning. Everybody who’d been sheltering under it started shouting at once. I’d wanted a crowd. I hadn’t reckoned on the noise.

Perhaps the man knew me through work. People remembered the woman who’d given them their mother’s voice back. They remembered the one who hadn’t managed it, too. But who’d told him to call me Lis?

I’d ask Coriselle. Her first question would be whether he was handsome. He was. She could work that out for herself.

The baker wrapped two seed buns for me. Two sennets. I was reaching for the money when something caught under my fingernail and I snatched my hand out of my pocket.

‘Cut yourself?’ he asked.

‘No. The lining’s come apart.’

I felt inside again, cautiously. A gap at the bottom, with a knot of stiff thread behind it.

I’d mended that pocket twice. Coriselle said everything I mended came out worse. The last time she’d asked to see my stitching I’d hidden it under the table.

These stitches were new.

‘Are you all right?’

The baker was holding out the buns.

‘Yes. Sorry.’

I paid him and moved beneath the awning of a closed ribbon shop. With the buns on the ledge, I slipped off my coat to look at the lining.

Then I saw how far the stitching went.

I’d expected a few clumsy stitches round a tear. The thread ran across the cloth in uneven rows. I turned it towards the light.

Letters.

There was faded ink underneath. An uneven upright, a crooked crossbar, the last word crowded into the space I’d left for it.

I knew that mistake because I always thought I had more room.

My handwriting.

DO NOT TRUST THE NAMELESS MAN.

Well. That would have been useful before I told him where I was going.

I turned the lining over. I'd gone over every letter twice. I could write something cruel in a temper. But sit there all evening stitching it into my own coat? A cart splashed my skirt. I scarcely noticed. I was still picking at the last stitch, but the thread held.

He'd been smiling when I came out of the House. That smile was gone now. I'd seen to that.

I could go back to Vessac. I pictured myself on the edge of the treatment bed again, offering the lining up for him to read.

I wanted Coriselle.

She would take one look at me and put the kettle on. She might tell me off while she did it, but she'd let me stay.

I put my coat on. My hand missed the sleeve, and I had to try again.

Coriselle first.

I picked up the buns, gripping the warm paper hard enough to crush one, and looked out from beneath the awning.

The white-haired man had reached the market. He stopped a boy who was wheeling a barrow and bent to say something to him.

The boy pointed down the street I'd taken.

CHAPTER TWO

I'd meant to tell Coriselle everything the instant she opened the door. Then there she was with dye on her cheek and one apron strap slipping, and all I wanted was our usual lunch.

'Here. I brought you something to eat. I've squashed one a bit.'

Coriselle looked down at the parcel.

'Have you come to collect an order?'

I kept the buns held out. Their warmth was coming through the paper.

'Coriselle. It's me.'

She raised her eyes. A small cut nicked one knuckle; the dye would sting if it got in. I almost told her, because it was easier than answering the look on her face.

'Alisende?' she said at last, on a breath. 'God, I'm sorry. Come in.'

'You didn't recognise me?'

'Of course I did. I was thinking about something else.'

'That hard?'

'Listen, I've had two customers this morning, neither of them happy, and I haven't eaten. Can you come in first and interrogate me afterwards?'

She took the buns and frowned at once. 'Did you sit on them?'

'No. But I don't think one of them survived the journey.'

'One?'

'Coriselle, I did my best.'

Steam rose from the covered dye vats behind her. Someone's yellow scarf hung over the rail, and the bell above the door was still moving after my knock.

She shut the door and went past the vats towards the stairs. I hurried after her, trying not to let her see how badly I wanted to be upstairs.

The stove kept the upstairs room warm. Even with the window open the panes were misted over and the rug felt damp. On the table was a loaf under a cloth. Sure enough, the end was gone.

‘Ah. You’ve had lunch without me.’

‘I was hungry.’

‘You could have waited.’

‘And starved to death?’ Coriselle pushed a chair out with her foot. ‘Sit down, will you?’

I sat at the table and took the squashed bun, leaving my sister the one that still looked halfway presentable.

Coriselle wiped the knife on the cloth and began to cut the bread.

‘You looked straight at me,’ I said.

The knife stopped. ‘Are we still at the door? Because I’ve been up since six trying to give Mrs Bell precisely the green she chose last week, and now she swears she chose it in daylight. It was nine at night.’

‘Coriselle.’

‘Alisende, enough. I opened the door and it took me a second to realise who it was. It happens.’

The knife hit the board. Her finger left a blue print on the bread.

‘And don’t look at me like that.’

‘Like what?’

‘Like I’m ill. You’ll be asking me what year it is next.’

I took my elbows off the table. That was how I sat with a patient, leaning in so they'd have to look at me.

'All right. Sorry.'

'Have you eaten anything today?' she asked.

'I bought buns.'

'I didn't ask what you bought.'

'No, I haven't.'

'Why didn't you say so?'

She shoved a piece of bread into my hand. Only when I'd taken a bite did she push the plate nearer. Then she poured the tea and sat opposite, with one leg tucked beneath her. She spotted the blue mark on the crust and reached for it.

I held on.

'Too late. If I turn blue, you'll have to keep me.'

'Not likely. I'll put you to work scrubbing the vats. You can earn your keep.'

The last rain had come down her upstairs wall again and the landlord had been round to explain to her about the wind.

'Does it rain in his bedroom too?' I asked.

'I did wonder. Next time he comes I'll give him the bucket to take home.'

She lifted the cup to her mouth and stopped.

'What?' I asked.

'Nothing.'

'Coriselle.'

'You're staring at me.'

'Because I had the Tithe today.'

‘I know.’

She answered at once, then looked at my hands.

‘You told me you were going, didn’t you?’

‘I don’t remember.’

Coriselle frowned. ‘No, you definitely did.’

‘When?’

‘Yesterday.’

I tried to remember the previous evening. Rain outside the shop window. My coat thrown over a chair. Something burning in the pan, and Coriselle swearing at it. After that I couldn’t put much together.

‘We had supper here yesterday. What did we eat?’

‘Potatoes. And the onions you’re always picking out.’

‘I don’t pick them out.’

‘Of course not. They gather at the edge of your plate all by themselves.’

‘I just don’t like too many of them.’

‘There! And you say you don’t pick them out.’

I opened my mouth to argue and realised how badly I wanted to keep this stupid quarrel going. ‘What was I like yesterday?’ I asked.

‘What do you mean?’

‘Well… Was I nervous? Worried about anything?’

Coriselle thought about it.

‘I don’t know. I don’t think so.’

‘You’d have noticed.’

‘Alisende, I was barely on my feet myself yesterday.’

‘Did I leave anything with you?’

Coriselle set down her cup. A little tea ran into the saucer.

‘There was something.’

‘What?’

‘I can’t remember. You asked me for something.’

‘What did I ask?’

‘If I knew, I’d tell you!’

She got up and looked around the kitchen. I looked too, though I didn’t even know what we were looking for.

‘Was it a parcel, perhaps?’

‘No… I don’t think so.’

‘Let’s look.’

I got up too. Coriselle opened the cupboard, moved one plate, then another, and stopped with her hand on the shelf.

‘I did remember,’ she said.

I went closer, then stopped short of taking her arm. Holding Coriselle still never helped when she was upset.

‘Coriselle…’

‘Wait. It was there a minute ago.’ She slammed the cupboard hard enough to set the plates knocking. ‘I promised you something.’

She held up one blue finger. Below the dye stain was a loop of black sewing thread. ‘You did that. All morning I thought my cuff was coming apart.’

‘Leave it a minute, Coriselle. It’ll come back.’

‘Don’t.’

‘Don’t what?’

‘Use that voice. As if I’d come to see you at work.’

‘All right.’ I sat on my hands. She looked at me for a moment, then drew her sleeve back to show me the little white scar under her thumb.

‘Do you remember the kettle going over?’

‘Yes.’

‘I remember Mum carrying me upstairs afterwards. My ear was right against her heart. You wanted to see my hand and I wouldn’t take it out of the towel.’

‘I was frightened you’d lost all your fingers.’

‘So was I.’ She counted them against the table, leaving five little blue smudges. ‘I remember the stairs. I don’t remember the water hitting me. I’m happy with that, Lis.’

‘Have I ever tried to give that back to you?’

‘No. But you should have seen your face downstairs when I asked if you’d come for an order. If I do that again, Lis, don’t go looking for a day you know we spent together. Not that one. I like being able to pick up a kettle.’

Her five blue fingerprints were drying on the table. I’d have sworn she’d been too small to remember the stairs at all.

‘All right,’ I said.

‘Good.’ She pulled her sleeve down.

She rubbed her forehead.

‘What if it matters?’

‘Maybe it doesn’t.’

I'd come here meaning to show her the warning. She was frightened enough already, I told myself. When she turned her eyes from my coat to my face I was glad I wouldn't have to explain why I'd told him where she lived.

'What did they take from you?' Coriselle asked.

'I don't know.'

'How can you not know?'

'I don't remember what I gave up.'

'Does that happen?'

'Sometimes.'

She kept looking at me. Anything else I said would only make it worse. I thought of the notice about the Settling. Vessac could explain how my Tithe had done this to Coriselle. She'd never meant to give the House anything.

Someone knocked downstairs.

Coriselle jumped. We'd both forgotten about the shop.

'Damn. A customer, probably.'

She wiped her hands on her apron, noticed the blue prints on the white cupboard door and groaned.

'Oh, for heaven's sake. I only cleaned that yesterday!'

I couldn't help laughing.

Coriselle looked at me. For a second I thought she would smile as well. Then she caught my sleeve.

'You'll come tonight?'

'Of course.'

'Alisende. I mean it.'

‘I know. I’ll be here.’

‘Don’t forget.’

‘I’ll try not to.’

She didn’t smile.

I put my hand over hers. ‘I’ll come, Coriselle. I promise.’

She nodded and hurried downstairs.

I took my time washing the cups. Below me Coriselle was explaining to a customer that the cloth would look lighter once it dried. The crosser she got, the better I felt. I tucked the last bun under the bread cloth for her to find when the shop shut.

Outside, the white-haired man was waiting by the closed butcher’s. As soon as he saw me he straightened up.

I crossed before I could change my mind.

‘Have you spoken to Coriselle?’

‘No. Why?’

‘She didn’t recognise me at first.’

He looked at the shop at once. ‘Not at all?’

‘She remembered eventually. But I asked her to do something yesterday and now she can’t even remember what it was.’

He swore under his breath.

‘Yes, exactly,’ I said. ‘So what do you know about it?’

He looked at me. There were shadows under his eyes and a white scar at his eyebrow. I tried to tell whether he was lying, but his face gave nothing away.

‘That shouldn’t have happened yet.’

‘Yet?’

His gaze went to the shop door. A woman with an empty basket walked between us; when he stepped back to the wall, I followed.

‘How long did you think she had?’

‘It doesn’t affect everyone straight away. I thought she had more time.’

‘Before what?’

He glanced in the direction of the House. I remembered the notice beside the stairs.

‘Before the Settling?’

‘If anything is still loose by then, they’ll bind it. But I don’t know how much she’ll lose before the ceremony.’

‘Did you do this?’

‘No.’

He said it at once, without hesitation.

Then he looked back at the open shop door and watched until it closed.

‘Then I’ll go to Vessac,’ I said. ‘He can explain what my Tithe has to do with my sister.’

‘Just be careful. Don’t agree straight away to whatever he offers.’

‘I’m going to ask him a question, not volunteer for an experiment.’

I’d already told this man more about Coriselle than I should have.

He looked past me, then back at the shop.

‘Does she remember you now?’

‘Yes.’

‘Good. Stay with her tonight.’

‘I can decide where I’m going to sleep.’

‘Of course. Only if she gets frightened, don’t push her to remember. Let her rest.’

I’d almost told Coriselle the same thing upstairs. It was even worse hearing it from him.

‘You sound as though you’ve seen this before.’

‘I’ve seen people lose their memories.’

‘So have I, believe it or not.’

‘I know.’

There it was again. I know. Had he stood beside my worktable? Had I let him watch me with a patient? When the shop door opened behind him I was glad of somewhere else to look. Coriselle waved her customer off, then lifted a blue hand to me. I waved back.

‘I’ll be here for supper,’ I said.

‘If you need me before then, there’s a shelter by the ferry. I’ll be there till the last crossing.’

I waited until he’d turned the corner before I went the other way. At the end of the row a woman was trying to untie a knot with her teeth. A piece of dark blue wool dangled from her mouth.

‘Can I give you a hand?’

‘That’s what I was going to ask you.’ She took the wool out of her mouth. ‘Miss Rouvain, isn’t it?’

I thought she wanted directions to the House. Then she put the little bundle on a bale of cloth beside me and undid the string. It was a scarf, a man’s, with a dark patch where his chin must have rested. She had wrapped a folded bit of paper inside it.

‘He starts before he gets to the end of the joke,’ she read to me. ‘Sometimes he has to start the whole thing again.’ She folded it up. ‘I wrote that. Sounds like him, doesn’t it?’

‘I didn’t know him.’

‘No. Well. I couldn’t say if it does either.’

A carter wanted the bale. We moved to the step of a closed shop. Her grey veil had come loose and the end kept brushing my nose. She tucked it behind her ear.

‘Who was he?’

‘My husband. Florel. If I say his name quickly I can nearly hear the way he used to say mine. Then I go and try to listen.’ She looked down at the page. ‘All that about his laugh and I can’t hear the bloody thing.’

‘Is that what you’d like me to find?’

She nodded. ‘Just once would do.’

‘What should I call you?’

‘Ysabet.’

She handed me the scarf, still warm from her pocket. A man sat at a table with his fist against his mouth, trying to keep a straight face while the person opposite finished a drink. He had a joke ready. I wanted to hear it too.

Then his hands lay flat on grey cloth. A white burn by one wrist. Behind him was the drawer that never shut properly. My drawer. I touched his wrist the way I always did when a treatment was over. All I had under my thumb was wool.

‘Well?’ said Ysabet.

Too little left to tell, I could have said. She might even have thanked me for trying.

‘He was in my chair. I took a memory from him.’

Ysabet sat down. With both of us on that narrow step our skirts touched.

‘Did he ask you to?’

I tried to get back into the room. All I could see was the top of his bent head, the pink line the scarf had left across his neck.

‘I don’t remember him asking.’

‘That’s what I came to find out.’ She took the scarf off my knees. ‘He used to come home and tell me everything. Even things I’d spent all day hoping he’d forget.’

‘When did he die?’

‘After they took him back.’ She rolled the paper into the scarf. Her fingers were quite steady now. ‘Who else put their hands on him?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Where will you look?’

I’d been about to tell her how sorry I was. She went on waiting for an answer. ‘At the House. I’ll ask tomorrow. Can I meet you here after?’

‘You can ask. Leave my name out of it.’

She went away with the knot in the scarf still undone. Over the road Coriselle was turning the sign to Closed. If I knocked she’d brew tea and tell me I’d done what I could. I sat on the step a little longer, trying to hear the end of the joke.

CHAPTER THREE

That night Coriselle stole a clean stocking from my bag, quarrelled with me about the salt in the potatoes and fell asleep beside me. My sister again. I lay listening to the pipes knock and wondering how I'd get out of her bed without frightening her if she woke up and saw a stranger.

By morning I'd nearly persuaded myself she'd just been tired. She woke me complaining I'd stolen the blanket. I was so pleased to hear her I gave her half. And I still say she stole it off me first.

I left my bag with her and went to work. In the square two boys were fishing coins out of the fountain, quite unmoved by the porter's threat to fetch their mothers. No white head among the people stopping to watch. Why on earth had I looked?

Someone had brought flowers into the House. The scent met me halfway up the stairs.

Outside my workroom Lissa was trying to hitch up her shawl with one elbow and keep the tea tray level.

'Well? Did the boy speak?' I asked.

'Which boy?'

'From Veyne Row. Vessac saw him yesterday.'

'I don't know.' Lissa shifted the tray. 'Sorry, who have you come to see?'

I smiled.

Lissa was rarely friendly before her first cup of tea. Afterwards she could have a go at you so neatly you wouldn't realise till lunchtime.

'Myself. I hope my desk hasn't run away.'

She didn't smile.

‘I’m sorry?’

‘Lissa, it’s me.’

She looked closely at me, then at the workroom door.

‘Have we met?’

At first I didn’t understand the question.

Three years we’d worked side by side. Three years. Last week I’d lent her money for her daughter’s winter boots, because the House was admirably consistent about paying us late.

‘Lissa…’

The tray tipped in her hands. Tea splashed up to the rim of a cup and I reached to steady it without thinking.

She stepped back.

‘Would you wait downstairs, please?’

I stood with my hand still out.

‘Alisende?’

Tomaselle came out of the next room carrying an armful of clean towels. Her grey plait hung over her shoulder. She took one look at me and dropped the towels onto the bench.

‘Good God, you look awful.’

I could have kissed her.

‘Good morning to you too.’

‘Was the Tithe that bad?’

Lissa looked from me to Tomaselle. ‘You know her?’

‘Of course I know her. She’s…’

Tomaselle stopped.

‘She works here.’

‘Yes, I…’ Lissa shook her head, bewildered. ‘I’m sorry. Of course.’

She hurried into the workroom without once saying my name. She still knew where the tea went and could have put her hand on any paper I asked for. It was me she couldn’t place.

‘What’s wrong with her?’ Tomaselle asked.

‘I wish I knew.’

She took my elbow. ‘Sit down before you fall.’

I sat. My legs were giving way.

The towels were still warm from the laundry. I put my hands on them so Tomaselle wouldn’t see my fingers shake.

‘She really didn’t recognise you?’

‘Coriselle didn’t at first yesterday either.’

Tomaselle sat beside me. For the first time I could remember, she had nothing to say.

‘Have you spoken to Vessac?’

‘Not yet.’

‘Then go and see him. Now, do you hear?’

I nodded.

I wanted to ask if she’d forget me too. What if she turned away now and saw a stranger the next time she looked?

But I couldn’t ask.

I smoothed a crease in the towel until Tomaselle put her hand over mine.

‘I have patients today.’

‘They’ll live.’

The workroom door opened. Lissa came out without the tray, glanced at us and walked on.

I’d rather she got angry with me. Shouted, accused me of something ridiculous. Anything but that polite, indifferent face.

Tomaselle squeezed my hand.

‘Come on. I’ll take you.’

We’d already started towards the stairs when someone called to me.

‘Miss Rouvain!’

Mr Pell sat outside a treatment room with his hat clamped between his knees.

An illness had taken nearly a year of his life from him. I’d helped him remember his daughter’s voice, but there were little things that still wouldn’t come back.

‘You haven’t forgotten me, have you?’ he asked with a smile.

I stopped.

Had I forgotten him? What a lovely question.

‘Of course not, Mr Pell.’

‘They said I was to see another Restorer today. I hoped you might have a minute.’

‘I’m not seeing patients this morning.’

Mr Pell’s face fell. Thank God, I thought, and then could hardly look at him. He knew who I was. More than that, a perfectly good Restorer was waiting behind that door and he’d rather have me.

‘It’s only the song,’ he said. ‘I remember my daughter’s voice, but I can’t get the song she used to sing.’

Three notes came when he hummed it. On his second try there was the same dreadful silence where the fourth ought to be.

‘Let’s try.’ I reached for the ribbon she’d tied round his wrist. I’d asked for something his daughter had worn often. People sometimes brought a brand-new length from the haberdasher and wondered why I could get nothing from it.

Mr Pell held his arm out.

The ribbon was soft and worn. I touched it lightly and listened to what was left in it.

A warm kitchen. Someone’s cross but doesn’t mean it. Hands off the pot, before you spoil the lot. Somebody laughs.

Then a girl starts singing.

Her voice came from the next room, three notes and then a fourth, high and clear. I was humming it aloud.

‘Is that it?’ I asked him.

‘Near enough. She’d never reach that high.’

My mother used to sing it that way. For as long as I’d had my hand on the ribbon I could have sworn it was his daughter’s voice.

‘Can I tell her I remembered it?’ he asked. ‘She used to sing it in the kitchen. I’d have to stand at the door. Never let me near her pots.’

I ought to have told him whose note he’d heard. ‘Ask if you can come in while she cooks. I’d trust what you hear in her kitchen more than anything you and I can find on this bench.’

‘Oh, she’ll like that.’ He looked pleased with me again, and I let him.

I let go of the ribbon and the kitchen disappeared.

Mr Pell began to hum again.

As Tomaselle led me away I listened for the fourth note. His voice faded as we turned the corner.

I never heard whether he found it.

* * *

Vessac stood at the window with a cup in his hand. The tea had gone cold long ago, but he didn’t seem to have noticed.

I’d seen him like that when I was sixteen. I’d spoilt my first attempt to restore someone else’s memory and was sure he’d throw me out of the House.

Vessac had simply asked what I’d learnt.

‘Alisende. Come in.’

Tomaselle waited until he’d seen my face, then slipped out.

Vessac gestured to a chair.

I stayed on my feet.

‘People are forgetting me.’

‘Who?’

I told him about Coriselle. About Lissa. About the promise my sister knew she’d made, though she couldn’t remember what it was.

When I’d finished, I realised I was gripping the edge of the desk so tightly my fingers had gone white.

Vessac quietly moved the cup away from my hand.

‘Does anything hurt?’

‘Yesterday it hurt here, below my ear.’

‘May I?’

I moved my hair.

He felt my neck gently. His fingers were cool, the touch familiar. How many times had he examined me after a difficult procedure?

And still I couldn’t calm down.

‘There’s no swelling. Does it hurt now?’

‘No.’

‘All right. Sit down, please.’

I sat.

Vessac brought his chair round the desk and settled opposite me. There was nothing between us.

I often did the same with my patients.

‘Lissa asked who I’d come to see. She knows which drawer I keep the tea in, but she doesn’t know who I am.’

‘She hasn’t said that to me.’

‘Has anybody asked her?’

‘Shall I send for her?’

I pictured Lissa coming in to find us both watching her. ‘Leave it.’

‘And Coriselle? Did she recognise you last night?’

‘Yes.’

‘And this morning?’

‘Yes.’

‘Good.’

‘What’s good about it? She looked at me as though I was a stranger!’

‘And then she recognised you,’ he reminded me gently.

I stopped. He was making sense, and that was the most irritating thing about it.

‘Yesterday I touched a man’s scarf. I could feel where I’d worked on him, but I couldn’t remember him asking me to do it. Who would have seen him after me?’

‘Can you give me his name?’

I thought of the woman on the shop step. ‘Can I see my old cases?’

‘You can see any one of them with me. I’ll have it brought up now if you tell me which one.’

I’d watched him do that for me for years. It had never struck me how easily he could choose what came up those stairs.

‘What happens in thirteen days, at the Settling?’

‘The same thing as always. We secure what people have chosen to leave behind. You know how it’s done.’

‘Coriselle never gave anything up.’

‘I’m not talking about her. I’m talking about you. You need some rest, Alisende.’

A coal cracked quietly in the grate.

On the shelf behind Vessac stood the little painted bird I’d given him when I was an apprentice. Hideous, if I’m honest. The beak was chipped and the eyes looked in opposite directions. Somehow it was worse seeing that he’d kept it.

‘What did I ask you to take?’

Vessac looked at me. ‘You know we don’t return memories just because someone feels uneasy without them.’

‘I’m not asking you to give it back. Just tell me what it was.’

‘And if hearing the answer brings back the very thing you wanted to be rid of?’

I’d asked patients that question myself. I was very sorry about it now.

‘Was I afraid? When I came in?’

‘You were very tired.’

Again. The attendant had said the same thing.

Vessac leaned forward.

‘Listen, I know you. Give you the smallest thing to go on and you’ll be at it till you drop. Give yourself time to recover. Then we’ll talk.’

I thought of Lady Merrow, who for six days hadn’t been able to sit in a chair without shaking. The House let me sit on the floor with her for as long as she needed.

People were helped here. Vessac had brought us cushions without asking how long we meant to be. I looked at him now and tried to find the question that would make him listen to me as patiently.

‘There was a man waiting outside the House yesterday.’

Vessac didn’t move, but he was listening more closely now.

‘What man?’

‘Tall. White-haired. He knew my name. Says he doesn’t have one of his own.’

Vessac leant back in his chair.

‘Has he come near you again?’

‘Yes.’

‘What did he say?’

‘Almost nothing. That’s the trouble.’

Vessac looked out of the window. ‘Some people are difficult for our art to reach. Without a true name there’s very little to catch hold of.’

‘I know.’

‘You know it in theory. It’s a different thing when he’s standing in front of you.’

‘Most people won’t let me read their memories at all. A name makes it possible. It doesn’t give me the right.’

I’d once treated a woman who brought in a birth card with a name nobody had called her in thirty years. I tried it first, with her leave, and felt nothing under my fingers. When I asked what her friends called her, she gave me a name short enough to say without drawing breath. The instant she spoke it I felt someone reach for her in the dark. Her wife, it turned out. I waited for her to tell me whether to follow.

I could hear myself saying much the same thing on a shop step to a woman with a scarf on her knees. I went quiet.

Vessac gave a little smile. ‘That’s why you’re impossible to argue with sometimes.’

I nearly smiled.

‘Be careful,’ he added. ‘If someone knows you’re vulnerable, he may tell you anything at all just to win your trust.’

I remembered the white-haired stranger. The way he’d looked at me by the fountain. The way he’d said ‘Lis’.

‘Do you know him?’

‘I know what he is.’

‘And what is he?’

‘I’d rather you weren’t alone with him.’

My hand found the rough stitches through my coat. I nearly showed him, but he'd just refused to tell me who the man was. I wasn't ready to let him explain away the one warning I'd left myself.

Vessac told me to take the day off. I declined an attendant to walk me home and he didn't insist.

At the door he said, 'Come back tonight if you can't sleep.'

I thanked him. I did mean it.

I stood on the steps facing the busy square, letting the cool air get at my face. Rest. Eat. Stay with people I knew. All sensible, and none of it explained Lissa.

I went back to the closed shop to meet Ysabet. There was packing straw all over the step and nobody sitting on it. I looked across the street in case she'd chosen somewhere out of the way of the carters.

A merlet was turning into the crossing by the potter's shop. Across the road I caught a glimpse of grey under the arch. I raised my hand. The woman turned. Ysabet. I'd have to tell her how little asking had done.

I stepped sideways to let a woman with a basket pass me.

Something shoved me hard in the back.

I stumbled and only just kept my feet, but I was already in the road.

The driver shouted.

I didn't have time to turn.

Someone grabbed my waist and pulled me sharply back. My heel caught on the kerb and I lost my balance, but the man caught me before I fell.

The carriage rushed so close past us that its wheel threw dirty water over my skirt.

The horse squealed. The driver swore.

I was pressed against someone and couldn’t get my breath.

‘Easy. Stay still.’

The voice was right beside my ear.

The white-haired stranger.

His hand was warm at my waist. The street went quiet and there I was with my back against a door, laughing. He had his hand in the same place. I said something that made him lean closer, and I knew how his kiss would taste.

Then he kissed me and I flinched so hard the street came back.

He let go at once.

I hit the wall with my shoulder and stared at him.

‘What happened?’ he asked.

‘You…’

That was it. I couldn’t say another word.

He glanced at my mouth, then met my eyes. It was quick, almost nothing. But I saw it.

‘What did you remember?’

At the crossing a man was arguing with the driver. The driver was shouting back, asking who’d stepped in front of the wheels.

There was no sign of the woman with the basket. Or the grey veil.

I put my palm to the wall. The stone was cold and rough.

Real.

‘Nothing.’

He opened his mouth, then stepped aside without answering.

‘Someone pushed me,’ I said.

‘I saw you fall.’

‘That’s not the same thing.’

‘No.’

He searched the crowd. I wanted to know whether Ysabet had seen me go under the wheels. From across the street she might think I’d walked away from her.

My eyes stung. I stared at his collar until I could speak.

‘I need to go home.’

‘I can follow behind you.’

‘No.’

He waited.

I looked at the crossing. Then at his coat, wet where my skirt had been pressed against it.

‘Not behind,’ I said. ‘Walk beside me. Where I can see you.’

CHAPTER FOUR

Mrs Harlowe had taken my name off the door.

Somebody called Pearce had the little brass holder beneath my bell. I rubbed a thumb across the card. Down on the pavement the white-haired man was waiting for me to ring.

Perhaps she'd moved me to another room. She'd threatened to often enough when the fireplace smoked, as if I filled the room with soot on purpose.

I rang the bell.

Mrs Harlowe opened the door with a cloth in her hand. She smelt of furniture polish and the peppermints she insisted were medicine.

'Yes?'

'Why is Mr Pearce's name on my door?'

She had a look at the card, as if I might have misread it. 'Are you here to see Mr Pearce?'

'I've come home.'

Her eyes went to the mud on my skirt. I straightened my coat. Imagine tidying yourself up to be let into your own house.

'Do you need a room?' she asked.

'I need mine.'

'Not in this house.'

I caught the door. 'Mrs Harlowe, I paid you last week.'

'Take your hand off my door.' She was looking over my shoulder now. 'Is this a joke?'

The stranger had come up one step. He stopped when he saw her look.

‘No,’ he said.

‘Take your friend away, then.’

‘He isn’t my friend,’ I said.

He looked down at his boots. Oh God. He’d heard every word.

‘My things are in there.’

A window opened above us. Mr Pearce leaned out in his shirtsleeves. I’d passed him on the stairs often enough. Surely he’d say something.

‘What’s going on?’

As soon as I let go, Mrs Harlowe slammed the door. I gave her a minute to open it again before I went down the steps. At the bottom the white-haired man moved out of my way.

‘Don’t,’ I said.

‘I haven’t said anything.’

‘Keep it up.’

He did.

I walked to the corner and stopped at the side gate. Beyond it was the narrow yard where Mrs Harlowe kept her coal. The latch stuck in damp weather. I lifted it and pulled, just as I had yesterday.

The gate opened.

And that small success made me want to cry.

‘What are you doing?’ the stranger asked.

‘Going home.’

‘She might call someone.’

‘She can explain what his name is doing under my bell while she’s at it.’

He looked up at the back of the house. ‘Which window?’

‘Over the washhouse.’

‘Alisende…’

‘If you’d like to help, wait here.’

He took a deep breath and stepped back to give me room.

I climbed onto the coal shed wall and from there to the washhouse roof. My hem snagged on a nail and I had to free it carefully. A tile shifted under my boot.

‘Stay close to the wall,’ he called up.

‘I’ve done this before.’

‘That hasn’t made the roof any stronger.’

I kept close to the wall. The broken latch gave at the first push. A quick look round, then I swung a leg over the sill and slid down onto the rug. My boot landed on the same old worn patch. There was my cup by the basin, still cracked down one side where Coriselle had dropped it.

And on my bed lay a man’s coat.

The pot of shaving soap was where I usually kept my bowl of hairpins. Someone had carefully put the bowl behind the books. They hadn’t even broken it.

I put it back.

Two of my hairpins were in the soap pot.

In the chest at the foot of the bed I found a spare dress under a folded blanket. I ran my fingers over the patch on the cuff. I’d have known Coriselle’s annoyingly even stitches anywhere. My dress.

I sank back onto my heels.

A floorboard creaked outside the door. I stayed still until the steps had passed.

Even if I dragged Mrs Harlowe up here and made her count the dresses in the chest, somebody else had a key to my room now.

My hand was under the bed before I knew what I was reaching for. The loose board. Press down on the left, lift on the right. A small iron key lay underneath.

I picked it up.

The teeth bit into my palm. I reached for the reth, the familiar trace of memory left in the metal, before I could stop myself.

River water. Cold stone against my knees. Somebody at my shoulder whispered, ‘Hurry.’

I dropped the key.

My hand was covered in blood.

It ran between my fingers and dripped onto my skirt. I shoved up my sleeve, looking for the cut.

The washstand was three steps away. I made a mess of getting the jug up with one hand and struck my fingers against the porcelain. The water that went into the bowl was clear.

My skirt was dry too.

A knock sent me backwards into the washstand.

‘Hello? Is someone in there?’ Mr Pearce called.

The key lay beside the raised floorboard. I grabbed it and pushed it into my pocket, then tried to put the board back. My fingers wouldn’t do as I wanted.

The door handle turned.

‘Wait!’ I shouted.

As if I were getting dressed in my own room.

The handle stopped.

‘Who’s there?’

I darted to the window, climbed onto the sill and lowered myself onto the washhouse roof.

The door opened behind me.

‘Hey!’ Pearce shouted. ‘Mrs Harlowe!’

I went down the tiles too fast. My boot missed the wall, and I’d have fallen into the coal yard if someone hadn’t caught my forearm.

‘Careful,’ the white-haired man said.

‘I am being careful.’

‘It doesn’t look like it.’

He held me until I found a foothold, then helped me down.

His hand was still round my arm. I waited for the other room, for that brief, impossible certainty that he was going to kiss me. The brick scraped my right palm and he let go. We were in Mrs Harlowe’s yard. That was all I got.

Mr Pearce’s head appeared at the window.

‘She was in my room!’

‘Mine,’ I muttered, but he didn’t hear.

The stranger looked at the gate.

‘We’d better go.’

I didn’t argue this time.

We walked until the house was out of sight. I’d meant to go to Coriselle, but the moment I pictured myself at her door again, waiting to see whether she knew me, my legs went weak.

There was a little chapel at the next corner. The door stood open and I went in.

He stopped at the entrance. I sat down at the end of a bench, and he stayed by the door.

There was no one else inside. A few candles burnt at the altar. It smelt of wax and cold stone, and somewhere above us water dripped steadily into a bucket.

I pressed my hands between my knees.

In the end I couldn't bear it.

'Come in or go away. Please stop hovering.'

He came over to the bench and sat at the other end, leaving a good deal of space between us.

'What did you find?'

I laid the key across my palm. He was careful to look me in the face before he looked down at it.

'You know what it opens.'

When he said nothing I could have shaken him. At least being angry was easier than wondering what right I had to lean on him.

'You knew what might happen to Coriselle. You knew what I might see if you touched me. And I'd swear you know what this bloody key fits.'

'Yes.'

'Then tell me!'

He laid his hands on his knees. Lifted one and put it down again.

'Before you went to the House, you made me promise not to tell you which memory you'd chosen to be rid of.'

I stared at him.

‘I asked you to promise that?’

‘Yes.’

‘How convenient. Now you needn’t answer anything at all.’

‘I know.’

I nearly threw the key at him, but I closed my fist round it instead, until the iron dug into my palm.

‘Why would I do that?’

‘You were afraid that if I told you first, you wouldn’t know what you’d remembered and what you’d made up from what I told you.’

I knew how easily fear could fill a gap in a memory. Ask a patient the wrong question and you could make her remember what you wanted to hear.

Knowing that didn’t help at all.

‘Is the promise stopping you from speaking?’

‘No.’

‘So you’re choosing to keep quiet.’

‘I’m trying to do what you asked me to.’

‘What about what I’m asking now?’

He looked down. I waited. I wasn’t going to help him answer.

‘I can tell you how to keep yourself safe,’ he said at last. ‘What work I do now. What happens when a memory comes back. I should have told you that at the crossing.’

‘But you won’t tell me what we were to each other.’

‘No.’

‘Then at least stop making me drag the things you can tell me out of you.’

He nodded.

‘Don’t try to force the fragments back. A familiar thing might bring something to mind, but if you cling to the memory and follow it further, you can lose track of where you are.’

Another drop fell into the bucket.

I opened my fist. The key had left red marks on my palm. I blinked, but they stayed.

‘Did you hurt me?’

He turned away.

The key slipped in my damp palm. I nearly asked whether he’d ever been kind to me.

I hated myself for wanting to know.

‘I can’t trust you.’

‘Someone just tried to push you under a carriage. Your sister’s frightened and your landlady won’t let you in.’ He kept his hands on his knees. ‘You don’t have to trust me. I can still walk with you.’

He’d answered everything except whether he’d hurt me.

I wanted to say that I wasn’t alone. I had Coriselle, Tomaselle, Vessac. People who knew me.

Some of them.

For now.

I looked down at my skirt. Mud on the hem, a little tear from the nail. Not a trace of the blood.

‘I saw blood,’ I said. ‘Upstairs. On my hands. Then it was gone.’

He didn’t try to touch me. ‘Did you see anything else?’

‘Water. Stone. I don’t know.’

‘You’re here now.’

The teeth of the key had left little dents in my palm. I’d nearly put it back under the board when Pearce knocked. Once it was there, all Vessac had to do was get me to forget where I’d left it.

‘I’m going to find out what it opens. If there’s anything in it about my sister, she sees it first.’

‘Do you want company?’

I thought how easy it would be to hand it to him. Let him open whatever it was and tell me what he thought I ought to know.

‘You can come. I’m keeping the key.’

He stood aside at the chapel door. I led him towards Penny Lion Bridge. Most people pictured the beast on the parapet with its little heap of coppers in the paw. What came into my head, quite clearly, was the belly of the arch seen from below.

CHAPTER FIVE

I'd walked past the one-eared lion at the bridge for years. Today I ducked under a folded awning beside it and found a flight of steps I'd never noticed from the street.

Below us, boats knocked against their moorings in the high brown water. On the nearest barge a woman beat a rug over the side.

The white-haired man stopped a few paces behind me.

'Are you sure?' he asked.

'No.'

I went down anyway.

The stairs were steep, the bottom two steps slick with mud. I held the iron rail until it ran out, then put my palm to the bridge wall. At the water's edge the river lapped over the toes of my boots.

His boots clattered on the steps behind me.

'Stay there, please.'

He stopped above the last bend in the stair.

I touched the stone again.

No visions. No words. I just knew I had to go further, under the bridge, along a narrow ledge above the water.

The ledge ran from the bottom step beneath the arch. Beyond the bridge a barge lay moored at the outer quay. I didn't like the ledge. It was hardly wider than my boot, and below it the current tugged at the weeds. But there were gaps between the stones where I could get a grip. My fingers found them before I had time to look.

'Alisende.'

'I can manage.'

‘It’s wet there.’

‘I have eyes.’

‘I was beginning to wonder.’

I looked back.

He was scowling at me. After all those careful silences, he could find plenty to say about wet stone. I almost laughed, then felt my boot slip and turned back to the wall.

Three steps along the ledge my fingers found a gap in the mortar and a little iron ring. What looked like stone was a wooden cover with sand worked into the paint. Behind it sat a box. I got the key into its lock by bracing my knuckles against the wall, but I couldn’t make it turn.

‘Lift the lid a little,’ the man said.

I looked over my shoulder.

He was on the bottom step, one hand braced against the wall. He hadn’t followed me onto the ledge.

‘You’ve opened it before.’

‘Yes.’

I wanted to know what we’d left there together, so I lifted the lid a little and turned the key.

The lock gave.

There was nothing inside.

Something had lain in it long enough to leave a pale rectangle on the dark wood. I ran my thumb along one corner and came away with a little blue dust.

Someone had scratched a line into the wood.

IF THIS IS EMPTY, SOMEBODY FOUND US FIRST.

I read it twice. It wasn't my writing. The letters were deep and rough, cut with a sharp point.

'Did you write that?'

He couldn't see the words from where he stood, but he must have known what I meant.

'Yes.'

'What was in here?'

He was looking past me, towards the stairs. When I turned I saw a man in a brown coat at the top and another just behind, running his hand along the rail. Neither so much as looked at the river.

The white-haired man stepped back from the water.

'Put the box down,' he said.

I shut it. My hands wouldn't let me leave it open. The key stayed in the lock. I pushed the box into the recess and pressed the cover back into the wall.

I wiped my thumb on the lining of my coat. The little half-moon under the nail stayed blue. Coriselle used to come home from the vats with ten of them.

'Come back now.'

The man in brown started down.

'Miss Rouvain!' he called. 'We've been looking for you.'

I shifted one foot along the ledge.

'Who are you?'

'The House sent us.'

The white-haired man straightened his shoulders. He barely seemed to move, and yet suddenly he seemed to fill the narrow stair.

‘Go back up,’ he said.

The second man smiled, a short knife in his hand.

I hadn’t seen him draw it.

The first lunged.

The white-haired man caught his arm and threw him against the rail. Iron rang on stone. I flinched, my boot slipped, and the river splashed over my toes.

The knife blocked my way back. I hitched my skirt above my knees and edged along beneath the arch towards the barge. The woman on deck stopped beating her rug.

‘Help!’ I called.

She stared at me, then at the stairs behind me.

‘Don’t fall in!’

I’d have thanked her if I’d had any breath.

I caught the mooring rope and waited for the barge to swing towards the wall.

‘Now!’ the woman shouted.

My boot slipped on the wet edge of the barge. The woman grabbed my coat and hauled me onto the deck. I landed so hard on my left knee that I cried out.

‘Get down!’

I ducked behind the crates as something hit the rail. A knife? A stone? I didn’t stop to find out. The woman swore and swung her rug beater at the man with the short knife. He’d braced a boot against the mooring ring in the wall and was reaching for the side of the barge.

‘Get off my boat!’

He lost his balance and hung from the iron ring. There was another shout from the stair and the crash of someone hitting the rail. The first man was still fighting the white-haired one.

The woman caught my sleeve.

‘Other side. Down the plank.’

A narrow gangplank ran from the far side of the barge to the quay beyond the bridge. I crawled past the crates, got to my feet and limped towards it.

‘Are you coming?’

‘It’s my boat.’ She pushed me towards the plank. ‘Run!’

I ran. Fish went flying out of a boy’s basket on the quay. Behind me the woman blew a whistle that could have woken both banks of the Darsen. I kept listening for another pair of boots on the stones.

A grain wagon blocked the end of the quay. I was halfway through the gap between the wheel and the wall when the whistle stopped.

The man with the knife had got onto the barge. He took the beater out of the woman’s hands. Nobody on the quay turned a head.

‘He’s got a knife,’ I told a man under a sack of grain. He followed my pointing finger.

‘Bess!’ he shouted. The driver jumped down, and two men left the wagon with him. On deck the stranger was still holding the rug beater. He looked down at it. Bess held out her hand for it.

‘Off you go,’ one of the men told me.

I could see the market awnings over his shoulder. I'd done what I could for Bess. I was almost ready to believe it when the man on the barge turned back his lapel. The driver pulled up short.

'House business,' he called. 'Everything's in order.'

He was looking straight at me. Bess gave the smallest possible shake of her head.

Go.

'She helped me,' I said.

The man by the wagon gave me a frightened look. 'Then what did you do?'

Bess had got as far as the plank. The man caught her elbow. 'She'll be coming with me.'

Oats trickled from a torn corner of a sack. I got my fingers into the tear and heaved. My grazed palm slipped. It took my whole weight to tip the sack, but once the oats went, they went everywhere. The driver grabbed the rail to stay on his feet. On the plank the man holding Bess went down hard on one knee.

'Run!' I shouted.

Bess stepped back onto her deck and yanked the plank sideways. For one awful second he hung between boat and quay, both hands gripping the stones. Then the driver hauled him up by the back of his coat.

Bess stood there with the plank in her hands. From the look she gave me, she was just as furious with me as she was with him.

'Off,' she said.

He was ashore already. There he stayed. The men gathered round him and the driver started shouting about the oats. I never did work out whether they meant to help him or give him a good shaking.

I backed into the gap by the wagon.

‘You!’ called the man who’d put down the sack. ‘You’ll pay for that!’

The attacker tried to get up. Someone held on to his sleeve, still demanding to know who was paying for the spoiled grain.

I ran.

After a few steps Bess shouted after me. I nearly stopped, but she wasn’t calling me back.

‘Not the bridge!’

I hurried towards the market and risked looking over my shoulder at the corner. Bess was alone on the barge, holding the rail. When she saw me she impatiently waved me on.

Two carts were coming into Dyers’ Market side by side. I squeezed between them into the thick of the crowd and thought for a moment I’d lost the men. Then somebody seized my left arm just above the elbow.

‘Miss Rouvain. This way.’

A third man stood beside me. Respectable enough to look at. Clean collar, tidy beard, no blood on his clothes. A House pin glinted under his lapel.

I knew that pin.

It didn’t make his grip hurt any less.

‘Let go of me.’

‘You’re not yourself. We want to help.’