CHAPTER 1

Lambing Weather

The husband we buried came home while I had my arm inside a sheep. He stood in the lambing shed with his hat in his hands and watched me work for a good half minute before I realised he was the wrong one.

“Hold her head,” I said.

He went down in the straw and took the ewe by the horns. She flung him into the hurdle. Jude would have come in on my left, where she couldn’t catch him with her near foot, and put my clean rag over the bar before he got down. He’d learnt it the same way he learnt most things about sheep: doing it wrong once, with me there to see it. Her name was Queen Anne and she had spent seven industrious years trying to kill him.

“Gil?”

“Hullo, Nell.”

The lamb’s mouth closed on my palm. If I took my hand out I’d lose the head again. For twenty-three mornings after the wreck I’d walked the shore looking for Gil. In none of the ways I’d found him had I been on my knees in a bloody skirt asking him to keep his hands off the horns. “I gave your boots away,” I said.

Of all the things. Seven years ago we’d held a funeral for him, empty-handed, because the sea had kept him. Or so we thought. I had married his likeness, baptised a child, pulled down half his house and taken up with his mother again after a five-year quarrel. What came out was the boots.

“They hurt.”

“Yes. I remember.”

“How’s she lying?”

"Head back. Come round here where she can see you and keep still."

He smelled of lamp smoke and something foul and sweet underneath. His good ear had a piece gone from the rim. I let these discoveries come to me separately, with little intervals between them when I could breathe. The lamb's clamped mouth opened on my thumb and I brought its nose round. After that the shoulders came sliding into my lap. Gil reached for the rag on the third post without so much as turning his head. He'd put that nail up himself. That was what undid me. My face began to run like a child's, and there was nothing clean to wipe it on.

"Go back outside a minute," I said.

"I came for help."

"Give me a minute, Gil."

He went. I rubbed the lamb harder than it needed and set it by its mother. Through the warped slats I could see a pair of feet in canvas shoes wound round the ankles with string. Those feet had once hung over the foot of my bed so far I put a market basket upside down to make a rest for them. He was standing very still now, conserving what was left of him.

Seven years of wondering what I would have done differently. The first thing I did when I saw him was send him out in the cold.

I took my coat to the door. Gil was still where I'd put him, those great feet of his tied up in string. I got the coat round him and brought him as far as the kitchen.

Our kitchen had a bench under the window, a scrubbed table and two doors, one low enough that every tall man who had ever loved me had left a bit of himself on the lintel. Gil ducked. He took in the new wall between us and the dairy, the little pair of wooden-soled boots cooling on the hob. He kept looking at those.

“Whose?”

“Mine, if you wait long enough. I’m told old women shrink.”

His mouth moved. There had been a time when I could have reached into that mouth with my eyes shut and found the little step where one tooth stood back behind the others. I had learned to kiss all over again on a man who owned the same tooth.

“Her name’s Dilly,” I said. “She’s six.”

The kettle was full of cooled egg water. I tipped it out, put it on again and found bread, soft cheese and the heel ends of yesterday’s onions. He ate a little cheese on his finger and had to put it down. In the cradle of his left arm, where the sleeve rode up, were half a dozen shiny white rings. Something had been wound about him while his skin was soft.

“She yours, then?” he said.

“Yes.”

He didn’t ask whose else she might be. There were six counters by his elbow, one for every penny Dilly meant to spend on a silk ribbon. I swept them into the sugar jar. Otherwise she’d be in here counting them before I’d worked out what to call him in front of her. “You said you wanted help.”

“A woman called Thirza Wale went through Marrowick yesterday. Dark, about my height, a cast in one eye. Travelling with a boy who bites. They were picked up coming off the flats. I thought you might know where they take people now.”

“Still the pound. Behind the exchange.”

“Can you get me in?”

“If the woman on duty still drinks.”

“She your friend?”

"Which one?"

He smiled then, and the room took a nasty little turn round me. "Both, I suppose."

Before I could answer, the back door opened and my life came in.

Jude had Dilly on his shoulders. She was wearing one of his mittens on her head, fingers up like a little red crown, and had both his ears between her hands. He stopped under the lintel, carefully, so as to keep her head out of the beam. Through the window, behind the man who had made that exact gesture a thousand times for her, the empty pear trees stood black against the hill.

The first noise came from Dilly. A noise like the breath that escapes when you turn over on your stomach on a hard floor. "Have you got a brother?"

Jude lifted her down. I kept expecting to see myself move. It was like looking through the kitchen window at four strangers very much in need of a sensible fifth.

"Gil," Jude said. He crossed the room with his hand out, and Gil got up so fast he backed into the dresser. All my good plates jumped. "Sorry," Jude said, taking his hand back.

Gil looked from him to me. "I wasn't home a month dead before you put me in the ground."

"We didn't have any of you to bury."

Gil's mother had kept one of his milk teeth, and after the wreck I'd planted it under the pear with blood from my tongue. Keeping bed, we called it over the fence. The thing I wanted was to hear Gil say my name again. When a man did come to the door and say it, I knew perfectly well it wasn't Gil.

"I shot the bolt on him," I said.

Gil looked at the child. “Looks like you drew it again.”

“He took a room over the cooper’s. Come autumn I had to climb those bloody stairs myself to ask him home.” Jude glanced at me. I wished I’d found some pleasanter occasion to tell him how far up they’d seemed that day.

Dilly had begun to back away. I could tell from her expression that she wanted to crawl under the hanging clothes in the pantry, her old spot from when storms got bad, and she thought she might be too big.

“Dilly, love,” I said. “Put on your boots and take a look in the shed. Queen Anne has absolutely disgraced herself.”

She picked up one boot and stood scraping a dark spot off its sole with her thumbnail. “Is he here to take Dad away?”

“Who’s been telling you that?”

She looked at me as if I had asked whose fault the rain was.

“Come here then.”

She went to Jude instead. He sat on the floor and took the boot she held out to him. She braced her hands on his shoulders while he did the toggles. Since Christmas she’d been slapping my fingers away for so much as trying.

Gil eased himself back onto the bench. I had imagined this meeting once or twice in the first year, when I still woke to the idea that a man drowning might hold his breath for a very long time. In those imaginings, whoever came through the door was beautiful and dripping with weed and wanted me desperately. This hungry, middle-aged stranger wanted me to find somebody else. If somebody had told me how grateful I would be for that, when I was twenty-two and grieving in my good black, I’d have punched them in the teeth.

"Your friends at the pound," I said. "What's the boy called?"

"Friday. He's five."

"Yours?"

"Not by blood." He was still looking at the child in Jude's lap, so like and so entirely unlike his face. "Is that going to make a difference to you?"

"Not in this house."

Sheep bleated in the yard. Jude looked up. Under his right eye the skin had puckered in a crescent as if he'd lain down too long on a crease of cloth. He pressed his fingers into it, saw me watching and took his hand away.

"Have they seen you in town?" he asked.

"Who?"

"Anybody who would know this face."

Gil looked at Dilly. She'd got her boot on the wrong foot. He made a little move to turn it for her, saw Jude's hand already there and sat back on the bench. For a while that was all the answer we had.

"I stopped at my mother's first."

Jude closed his eyes. The two of them were the same age to the day, if you liked to count such things. For that instant one looked young enough to be my first husband's son.

"Was she at home?" I asked.

"Who else would she be with at this hour?"

The bell above the pear orchard started to ring. One stroke at a time, with a good long silence between to let anything that might be underground come up and hear it too.

"My mother, up at the orchard," I said.

I put my hand on the table. A splinter worked through the scrubbed boards and curled round my little finger, soft and warm as a baby's grasp. When I tried to pull away it held me.

Jude spat into his hand. An unopened pear blossom lay on his palm.

CHAPTER 2

A Man of His Own

I cut the splinter with the bread knife. It bled two drops of sap, which left a dark mark on the table for as long as we had that table. Jude slipped the blossom into his pocket before Dilly saw it.

“Dad.”

“I know.” He changed the boot over. “There’ll be porridge at your gran’s.”

“With holes?”

“I should think so.”

When she was small he had made her a special breakfast by dipping a wooden spoon in the middle of perfectly ordinary porridge. He had raised in our house a person who would never take delivery of anything until she had inspected the hole.

“Go out through the lambing shed,” I said. “Take her up to her gran’s. Stay there until I fetch you.”

He shook his head.

“For once in your life, Jude.”

“You want me to take our girl to Gil’s mother’s? After he’s just been round there and scared the woman half to death?”

I’d meant my own mother, and he knew it. For seven years we had passed a saucer of exactly this size backwards and forwards across this table without dropping it. We were frightened and looking for a quarrel we knew how to finish.

Dilly picked the blossom out of his pocket and ate it.

We stared at her. She inspected the circle of faces with the exasperation of somebody whose eating habits had always been a point of public interest. “What?”

“Was it bitter?” I asked.

“Bit.”

“Go and put the kettle on for your dad.”

She could reach all the taps except the cistern tap when it stuck. I heard the kettle fill, a grunt from her as she lugged it to the hob, and then a great many boots scraping on our step. Harth had found out which house to come to.

The Harth orchard ran eight acres between our house and Graft Green. Mam was a nursery girl the night she took a widow up there with a broken spoon and opened the loam for a tooth. By morning a young man hung in the oldest tree with his knees tucked under his chin. That’s why we call it the Spoon Pear. There was ice on the water butt that April. Not a soul, the poor wife included, had thought further ahead than getting him back. Nobody had a blanket.

Nowadays there were blankets, a bath under a copper hood, milk, a doctor, good outside stairs so you could take the babies straight up to the warm. A fresh tooth made a surprisingly faithful likeness. An old one needed the person who loved its owner to lie in the bed and remember. There was no accounting for what that person would remember best. Men who had lost limbs before the end came back whole. With only a splinter to go on, the orchard might give you a child of two who talked like a man of forty. Everybody who had received somebody from Harth Orchard owed the orchard a little of their labour. There were people who thought this fair and people who got up in public on Sundays to say the world was coming to a very peculiar end. Either sort would cross a cold yard in their nightclothes if you said it was possible for two copies of a husband to look each other in the face.

We could hear old Jip Naylor on the step telling somebody what a likeness it was, and he'd never been inside our house.

There'd been boots outside my door the morning the orchard gave me Jude. Somebody had walked him down from the nursery in an old coat with the sleeves rolled back. Through the door he said, "Nell?" and for one sick, lovely second I had Gil on the step with his hands full, wanting me to let him in. Then the latch lifted and I threw my weight against it. I was twenty-two and alone in the house. He knew where we used to keep the spare key.

"Would you all go away," I said.

The latch dropped. It was somebody else who started in about what women promised when they went up the orchard. Then I heard that voice again. "Has anybody got a pair of boots? I seem to be the only one standing in this bloody puddle."

As soon as they'd gone, I slid the key out from under the sill and took it to bed with me. I could still feel the knock of the latch against my palm. The nursery had beds and a kitchen of its own. He could have stayed there as long as he liked. He got a room over the cooper's shop and paid for it by putting a proper stair up the outside. For weeks I passed that stair on my way to buy flour. I could stop at the foot of it as long as I liked and still take my flour home alone.

Back at our kitchen table, Jude reached past Gil and took the knife off its hook.

"Which one of you two are you going to do in?" Gil asked.

"The cheese," Jude said. He cut a thick slab and put it between two heels of bread, then gave it to Gil. "You're grey to the gills. I'm going to ask you to do a thing I've no right to ask and I'd prefer you didn't fall on top of me."

"I suppose I could listen."

"Tell them when they come in that you don't want me lifted."

Gil ate half the sandwich in three bites. He wiped his mouth, taking care to use the clean corner of his cuff. "What's lifted?"

The knocking started. Some woman pressed a small face against the kitchen window and I made the sort of gesture that used to get my knuckles rapped. The face was withdrawn. Dilly went into the pantry, leaving the door ajar.

"When an original comes home," Jude said. "They take the orchard one out of circulation."

"Kill you?"

"I've never met anybody it happened to. Mind, I wouldn't have."

"Jude."

He put the knife back on the hook. It hung crooked and he straightened it. I had watched him do this every day and often gone over afterwards and set it squint to see how long it would take him to notice.

"It's happened twice in thirty years, both before I was grown," I said. "A gentleman called Bairn was locked in his shed while the nursery decided what it ought to do with him. He was dead in the morning. The other woman went down to the orchard with her family and no one saw her again."

"That was Bert Bairn who locked him in the shed," Gil said. "His cousin. Wanted his goats."

I had forgotten that anything that happened to either of us before the wreck had happened to both.

"I won't have you killed." He sounded offended.

The door opened before anyone had decided to answer it. My mother came in with Gil's mother Loveday on her arm. Since their daughters had married and their sons died, these women had got a good deal more use out of one another than they ever had out of a husband. Loveday's hair had come loose in a thin white skein down the front of her dress. The careful Loveday of my childhood would no more have set foot in my kitchen with her hair trailing than brought in a cow and asked for a cup of tea for it.

Gil took the string off his wrist and tied her hair back. They had seen each other already that morning. It interested me to notice what his mother had immediately forgotten, that she disliked people she loved seeing her cry.

My mother shut the door. "Anybody sitting down?"

"No, Sal," Jude said. "We've decided to live up in the rafters."

"Save me a chair up there then." She had brought her walking stick, whose rubber foot squeaked against the flagstones. "Nell, get rid of them, will you?"

I set Queen Anne loose in the yard. She had just had a child and possessed strong views on privacy. Through the window I watched Jip Naylor abandon a perfectly good shoe to her. Dilly crept out of the pantry and put it on the doorstep for him afterwards. I was grateful for the time it took to coax Anne back into her hurdle. It let me think of everything except why my mother might have rung the bell.

When I went back in, the room was steaming. Gil had his canvas shoes off. His right foot, where the little toe ought to have been, was a ruin. Jude was washing it while Loveday held the bowl steady. She did not seem quite able to look at either of them. Beside the hearth my mother had spread a piece of flannel on Dilly's chair, and on it a little oval mirror, a white plate and a wooden-handled pruning knife. I knew that kit. I had rinsed the plate a hundred times in my father's sink when the women in the graft

bed split going over to the bath. I had never before seen it in a room in which a person I loved was taking his shirt off.

"Get out," I told my mother.

"I shall want your hand presently. I'm less good than I was."

"Get out."

She put the knife down. "Look in his mouth first."

Jude was trying to get up off his knees without using Gil for a prop. I helped him into a chair and he obligingly tilted his face back. Seven years ago I had broken a tooth of his with my wedding ring while we were trying to fish a hook out of his cheek. It had left a roughness he sometimes used to my advantage when he had me in bed and in no hurry. Behind that tooth now was a white lacework that extended over the roof of his mouth to his throat. A drop of red welled out where a stem had burst through the gum. The flowers were opening while I watched.

"You can smell it," Dilly said.

I bent my head. I could smell the pears.

"The bell calls them to flower," I said to my mother. "You rang it."

"Clee saw Gil at Loveday's and went straight up to ring it. Four steps on this hip to take the rope off him. I told you to get people off the yard so I could work. Are you going to let me?"

My daughter put her finger up to catch a petal that fell on Jude's shirt. There were ways to start a day so badly you had trouble imagining any effort of yours might make it worse. I said yes.

Jude lay with his head in my lap while my mother cut the little white stems, working with the mirror under his nose so she could see if his breath still came. His

blood tasted so much of pear that it sent four wasps banging against the window. Whenever he wanted her to stop he squeezed my knee. I had told him talk was overrated when we were first courting and there was still the question of what his voice did to me. We'd got up quite a language. One finger was that hurts. Two a little more. A whole hand closed meant whatever you're doing now, Nell Barrow, for the love of God, go on with it. He kept his hand open the whole time.

It was Gil who got Dilly outside in the end. I heard him asking her how old Queen Anne was and whether it was normal for a chicken to stand on top of her.

My mother put the stems one by one on the plate. At their broken ends she touched a little mud she had brought in a snuffbox. "There. He'll be right for several hours, provided he can move about. Get him outdoors."

"And after several hours?"

"Bring him up and we'll bind the source."

"You might tell me what that means before you do it."

Her head came up. These last few months her hair had gone a dusty grey even at the roots, and the parting had widened so you could see how for sixty years she'd been combing her hair over an old scar. I liked her best in the middle of the night, with a job to do. She had the marvellous patience of the entirely unsentimental.

"There is a join in the big tree that belongs to him. As long as it keeps pushing, he'll keep flowering. I'll wind it with cold lead. It ought to give us until the feast."

Three days. On Pear Sunday the new ones took their first fruit from the hand of a grafted person chosen by lot. In the evening they held the children's races on the green. Dilly had planned since Twelfth Night to come third, as the third prize was a china dog with a pink nose and the first was a book of improving tales.

"Come early, before Clee gets the others together. He's sent to Marrowick for an assessor."

"Why? Who asked him?"

"Same person who rang the bell."

Outside, somebody laughed. It was Gil, with pain still in it. Through the window I could see him holding the lamb up on its hind legs by the forefeet, the way he used to dance with a puppet at the fair. Dilly regarded this entertainment with habitual suspicion. Then the lamb lost its footing and her whole head went back. She had a low, smoky laugh you'd have expected from a coalman who drank.

Jude lay looking up at me with damp lashes. "I've been working on that child since the day she was born," he said indistinctly. "He's been here a quarter of an hour."

I put my thumb under his lip and wiped away a drop of white fluid. "I'm afraid if I start talking to you I'll scream," I said.

"Better do it now. Before your mother puts me outside to attract the bees."

I kissed him instead, badly, because of his mouth. There was a whole word I could feel him trying to say against my lips, a word that didn't belong to any language we had yet managed to invent.

That afternoon he went up to the orchard. I took my first husband to the pound. Had I been given a choice between the day that was to come and one more ordinary bad morning with the two of us cross about a knife on its hook, I would have taken the bad morning and spent the rest of my life in it quite content.

CHAPTER 3

The Pound at Marrowick

Marrowick had once thought so highly of its dead that it built a roof over them. In the old fish exchange there were six stone saints in six stone niches where merchants sat to set the price of skate, and under the flags that smelled of yesterday's fish lay everybody's mother. It was the best place in the district to go to ground. Anyone with reason to hide could take up an ancestor's stone and lie in darkness, with buyers going on all day about the poor quality of sole immediately above his ear. I'd hidden there at nineteen with a customs runner who had surprisingly sweet breath for a fellow who was forever eating eels. Gil was the first person I'd told about him.

"Was it that one?" he asked as we went in. A man in a leather apron was taking the backbone out of a huge, limp pink fish and there was a runnel of blood down a stone angel's neck.

"Over by the swordfish."

"Always did think you had a funny idea of a nice afternoon."

He was on one of Jude's crutches, the one Jude used to get the top window open at night. His clothes were my brother's from the back of an old press. They smelled of moth paper and made him look a great deal healthier than he was. People took a white face and a decent coat for a gentleman on the mend and got out of his way. I had ten pennies in my glove, a bent silver skewer up my sleeve and a little of the graft mud my mother had left behind on the table. I could afford to buy us precisely one variety of trouble.

"What sort of offence?"

"Who says there was an offence?"

"They picked Thirza up. Do I need the skewer or the money?"

"The money, if you can manage."

"Did she run away from a husband?"

"Woman pulls herself half drowned out of a bay and that's your first thought?"

"You did."

I wished I hadn't said it. I could tell he was wishing very hard, too.

"Do you want to know why I didn't write? I wrote eleven letters and a man took money to deliver them. Four years later I washed his drawers after he died. Still had them in a piece of old skin in the hem of his workcoat. The money was gone, naturally."

"Eleven."

"I only kept the last two. I'd put such a lot in the others about getting picked up tomorrow and home next week. Couldn't bear them."

At the top of the steps he had to stop for breath, and I became interested in a notice covering collection times for market slops. I had once written my name on the bottom of his foot in ink while he slept. That was what I was thinking of now. He was twenty and the market notice had been about onions or potatoes then and the world was forever arranging itself into afternoons when you could lie about writing on people's feet. I should have liked to say to that young Nell that some days you would have him here in front of you and discover you could only talk to him outside the pound about slops.

He was looking down at the hand below my glove where I wore a plain band of copper. "Have you still got the little gold one?"

"I sold it when the search boats stopped going out. I paid for another day."

He took that in while somebody tipped a basket of living crabs into a trough, the sound of all their legs going at once making it hard to hear.

“Thank you,” he said.

The pound keeper on duty was indeed fond of drink. Unhappily she had drunk enough the night before to make the prospect of future indulgence less pleasing than usual.

“Nell. Don’t tell me your sheep’s eaten another guest at the Arms.”

“This is my cousin Fen.”

“I’m his aunt then, am I? The whole of Fallow Street knows who he is. There’s people taking bets on which of them you’ll sleep with tonight.”

“Put my money on the sheep.” I put down two pennies. “You took a woman and a little boy off the flats yesterday. We’ll take them home, if that’s all right.”

The pound keeper, whose name was Cherry, had known Gil at school and used to break little chips off her slate to throw at his ears. There were two dimples in her cheeks that I had envied for half my life. Neither appeared now.

“You don’t want that woman at your house, Nelly.”

“Let me talk to her.”

“You don’t want the boy neither. Here, drink this, Gil. God above, you smell like a dead horse.”

She handed over a cup of water. He spilled some. One hand had a tremor he had managed to conceal up to now by holding the other in his lap.

“Where?” he asked.

Cherry opened a window we all knew was painted shut, tried to write on a loose sheet of paper with a stick of sealing wax and finally fetched her coat. “There’s things

I'll have to account for in my time, and the woman in number three has already been up half the morning telling me what some of them are. You can come with me, Nell. Him I shall have to ask to wait."

"He goes where I go."

"Take it up with the boy's mother. That's who asked me."

I thought Gil might object, after keeping two of those eleven letters and coming out of a drowned bay to find me. But he sat down on Cherry's stool and let me go on alone to meet the woman who knew what those years had been like for him.

There was standing water in the corridor behind the cells. A little brackish tide came and went under the floor, so that men who liked to say Marrowick did very well for itself out of smuggling might have looked first at its arrangements for the detention of smugglers. A little boy was sailing a piece of bread crust on the water with a pin stuck in it for a mast.

"That Gil?" he asked.

"It's his friend," Cherry said.

"Where?"

"By my desk on his bottom. Where I would like you on yours, Friday, before you get a wet tail."

"You said my name." He sounded pleased. He had a long busy face with the skin stretched over the nose and his hair had been cut in a sloping line, giving him a permanent appearance of leaning into the wind.

"Boat's coming back," I said.

He scooped it out and ate it. "You want Mam."

A woman sat in the third cell with her back flat against the wall. That funny eye Gil had spoken of looked at a place about a foot beyond me. There was a disconcerting effect when the straight one turned to look at me too, as if the two places one might have occupied in the world had suddenly drawn together. She was older than I'd expected, her hair already whitening thickly over the ears. Somebody before her had scratched a galloping horse in the whitewash and she had coloured it in with the red dust off a brick.

"Give us a minute," I said to Cherry.

"You get six. If he's sick on my floor you get two."

Thirza listened to her footsteps going away. Then she leaned her head against the wall and laughed.

"You really do have that expression."

"I beg your pardon?"

"I did wonder. He used to say there is a look that comes over Nell when a person is being a holy fool. Gets very courteous. Everybody should move out from under."

"I hope there were nicer things he said."

"No, that was his favourite." She looked down at her hands. "Did he see his mam?"

I put the other eight pennies on the sill. "This should get you out. They usually want three for a beggar, five if they know it's all you've got. Tell me why you'd rather he didn't come in."

"Pull the bar back first."

"You can reach it yourself with a long enough arm, from there."

"No. Look at my back."

With some difficulty she shifted sideways. Her shift stuck to her. A slender branch came out under each shoulder blade and had grown through the thick cloth of her coat into a dusty bank of earth showing between the stones. She had broken those branches several times. There were curled, bloody shavings under her legs. Every time she began to move they rooted again, and now the big stone to which she was attached had moved a finger's breadth out of the wall.

"Got a knife?" she asked.

"I should think so, yes."

"Thought you would."

The branch on the right was thick as my wrist. I put the skewer down. "Who's your orchard woman?"

"She drowned."

"Where was the bed?"

"Our mud was in barrels. They rolled them down when the tide turned. You see, the island wasn't big enough." Her fingers were square and covered in old burns. "He didn't tell you where he was?"

"No."

"I expect he got as far as the letters and afterwards you were here."

I had a brief, unreasonable dislike of her. She could see my entire morning as clearly as a fish in a bucket. I took her shoulder and leaned in close to the join. A curious thing about a tree trying to grow through a woman is how quickly you can get used to the tree. You worry about bark slipping and how far you can bend a twig in the sap season before it gives. Three minutes later you may look down and see a damp human face, set with patience, waiting to be attended to like anybody else.

"Does Friday know?"

"He knows everything I know, thanks to people who'll discuss anything in front of a child if they think he's too busy sticking his finger up his nose."

"I can take those roots off you and seal the cuts for a while. There's an orchard in Harth. If anybody can settle this my mother can."

"She called Sally Barrow? Used to wear a red ribbon round her hat? I'd like fairly badly to meet your mother."

"We're always pleased to entertain."

She said, "Where I come from they call this having taken. They put you in the ground standing up. Somebody else eats well for the rest of his life."

I took the whole stone out of the wall instead. She went limp with surprise as it settled into my hands, a square of dressed limestone with a little white beard of roots. Friday came in, took one look and went to fetch a bucket. I had to swallow a good deal of useless pity for a boy who knew without asking what sort of vessel would fit his mother.

By the time Cherry came back with Gil limping after her, Thirza had managed to stand. I slung the bucket up between us on the crutch and hooked Thirza's coat round it. It passed quite convincingly for a knapsack.

Gil took Friday up with his good arm. The boy felt his cheek, inspecting the shave Jude had given him in our kitchen.

"Ugly," he said, and put his head in the hollow above Gil's collarbone. Gil closed his eyes for a moment. It was as private a thing as if somebody had put two thicknesses of curtain between us.

Cherry let the eight pennies lie. Her dimples were back and I thought about covering the child's ears.

"Any particular reason you put my prisoner through a stone wall?"

"Her back was itching. If you'd like to put her in another cell she can do you a window."

"Wouldn't be surprised. I've still got the woman asking after her in my front office. You wouldn't care to go out the other way, I suppose."

Thirza turned that wandering eye on me. "What woman?"

"Got the collar of a district factor. Called herself Strake. Thin boots, three coats to wear at once. Writes left-handed." Cherry took a ring of keys off her belt. "Go on. Take the steps under the old exchange. Tide's coming, you'll need to shift." She looked at my little pile of pennies. "Keep two," she added. "Give that little man a decent dinner. It'll make a welcome change from my plaster."

On the dark stair beyond, the water was already up to our ankles. I held the bucket while Thirza stood with her hands against the wall and Gil went ahead on his torn foot with the boy. Twice Cherry put her head through a hatch and led us back on ourselves. I had never seen the great flat undersides of the market before. Blackened by water, with grown men's names scratched where nobody except a fish could possibly read them. We hobbled under the grave I'd once amused myself in. I was thinking fondly of that girl and her good knees when Friday slipped his foot into a crack and started to scream.

Somebody heard him on the floor above. The grave cover slid back. A woman in a quantity of good black clothes looked down through the hole. She had a broad, kind

face, with a little inflammation at the side of the nose, and was eating a hard pear with her pocketknife.

“Thirza,” she said. “You’re an awful nuisance to anybody who cares about you.”

There were two feet of water in the passage now, and a broken ladder up to the light, and Friday’s little foot in that crack. What she did was lie flat on her front on a stone angel and offer us her hand.

CHAPTER 4

The Woman with Three Coats

I put my hand in hers. You do when there's a child going blue.

Strake had arms like the bed of a press. She took the boy's weight while Gil went under, head and all, and worked his fingers into the crack round the trapped foot. Something gave so suddenly the woman above us rolled backwards, carrying Friday into the light, and Gil came up with blood down his face.

For the rest of my life I could put myself under that market and feel how my wet skirt dragged at the backs of my knees. Thirza coughing, the crutch bumping my ribs with every lift of the water. I pushed her at the ladder and Strake put her hands under her armpits and dragged. Behind me, Gil had begun to make a small, repetitive noise I could not make sense of. When I turned round he was beating at the underside of a stone.

"Here," he said. "Here. Here."

He had been under another stone somewhere. He couldn't get his head up far enough to see who I was. He got me in the cheek with his elbow, and the lamp I was carrying went into the water, and we were alone in the dark with a six-inch strip of daylight neither of us could get to. I could have told him he was home. I said what I would have said to him when he was twenty.

"Gil Rill, I swear on your mother I will tow you up the market on your bare arse."

He gave a great heave of breath. His hand found my collar and he let himself be led.

Above us nobody was buying fish. Half of Marrowick had come to see whether the bones of the pious had given up a corpse, and in a way, I suppose, we were a fair return on their interest. Strake had spread the outermost of her coats over the heads of Thirza and her son. The boy had a cut over his ankle the length of a bean. He lay quite still while she wrapped it. Then she leant close and whispered something I didn't hear. His head came up like a terrier's. He spat in her face.

A fishmonger gave a troubled cheer. She wiped her forehead and tied off the rag.

"I suppose I had that coming. Nell, is it? My carriage is in Slipper Street."

"We'll manage."

"I know you will. There's space for the others. You can ride up front with Dun if you don't like me."

"What did you tell him?"

She looked down at Friday. "I asked him to give me a second chance to explain."

He put both arms round Gil so hard that I heard the air come out of him.

"Go on ahead," I told Thirza. "Gil has a friend on Slipper Street does a very fine line in other people's carriages."

The four of us got back to the mouth of the lane before we saw a pair of constables dragging the friend in question out of the traces of his cart. The woman with the three coats stood in the open door of the carriage behind us. I had been afraid to show her the road to my house and she had the local watch rostered to stop the other ways home.

"It would save a little of everybody's time," she said. "I need to see your mother. I gather there's a marriage in some difficulty up your way. District sent for me."

"Did they send for you yesterday, when you were looking for Thirza? It was very thoughtful of them. Even Gil wasn't expecting him home this morning."

The nice face did something for which I hadn't a name. I saw at last that it was a very plain face that people were always offering the consolation of kindness, whether she deserved it or not.

"Come and sit by me," she said. "I should like you to understand what's happened to your family."

I went round to the driver and climbed up beside him on the box.

During the journey he kept his mouth tight shut, except to blow his nose. It struck me, on the fourth or fifth such operation, that he did it every time Thirza spoke above a whisper. By crouching close to the glass I heard the word 'wreck' and the name of a little island I'd seen written on charts when we used to walk by the harbour eating chips out of last week's almanac. Wych. A brown hump of land shaped like the wing bone at the end of a fowl, and on top a scratch in black ink. I had read the words Salt Orphanage and imagined the children of dead sailors. My father used to make a purse up for them every Christmas and wouldn't let me put the worst of my change in it. He would give a penny where his thumb had worn the king's nose right off, and say that was good enough for God but a boy with nothing of his own deserved a whole face.

At the turn for Harth, Friday threw up. Strake took her second coat off. Two parish constables rode up behind us and followed.

I saw the damage as soon as we came over the top of the hill. In the time we'd been gone the whole west face of the orchard had gone white. Snow in May doesn't lie inside the hedges so neatly. Along the road men stood with hats in their hands as if a

particularly important funeral had just gone by and they were afraid of putting them back on a moment too soon.

The carriage stopped by a woman in her shift. She had come out of her house so quickly she still had a mixing spoon in her hand, and when she saw Gil she flung it at the carriage. It took a chip out of the gilding.

"Go back," she said to him. "Make him go back."

Gil had one hand up to fend off the wet flour. "Who was that?"

"Your cousin Jip's eldest," I told him. "There's a girl at her dinner table that took in the influenza and came back in the graft bed. A girl of about Dilly's age."

"Was that my fault?"

"She wants her child. I should think she would throw spoons at God."

At the orchard house an iron trough had been set up under the pear trees. More than thirty people sat waiting on the grass with their feet in the earth. Some had come from the other end of the parish. One man was still dressed for his wedding. I saw Mallow Peake, who dyed our wool, directing the placement of blankets. Her wife Bea was at home in bed with a bad hip and Mallow had probably been awake all night. She had on two different earrings and you could usually have trusted her to be found drowned in the bath with her hair nicely set.

"Who rang the bloody thing?" she called to me.

"Tell you after I've found out how many I get to slap."

"Don't you give the good one to someone else." Her voice had a furry edge. When she opened her mouth wider I saw a stump behind her front tooth.

I found Jude under the pear we called the Duchess, where my mother was on the ground with her sleeves up and her knife laid flat against the bark. Dilly had gone to her

grandmother Loveday's. Knowing this I still had to look for her small mittened head among the feet.

Strake came out of the carriage after us with the boy over one shoulder and the bucket on the other. There were wet patches under the arms of her one remaining coat. The parish constables dismounted at the gate and remained on the road.

"This your doing, Lettie?" my mother asked without looking round.

"It looks like yours to me."

Strake put Friday down on a folded blanket. Gil went to his knees beside him and began unlacing the ruined shoe. Something in the knot defeated his wet fingers. I went down with him, because it seemed cruel to leave him pulling on that knot while strangers looked on. When I had it loose Friday put the bare foot trustingly in my hand. On its instep, in a place where healthy boys generally had a couple of blisters, a neat square of skin had been lifted and closed up again.

"Don't," he said.

"All done. Can I see your other shoe?"

He pulled it off with the pleasure of being a person whose skills had materially increased within the last ten minutes. I praised him excessively. His mother watched me put my fingers inside. On both shoes a sheet of metal was set into the sole, thin and pliable as a layer of birch bark. She had done it herself. I knew from the crude edges round the heel where she'd cut it in a hurry with the nearest thing that would cut.

"No soil?" I asked.

"None if he can help it."

She had the little stab of a mother's terror in her voice that means some busybody is about to correct what you've done for your child and the next thing they find in the gutter will be your bloody teeth.

"I'll find him something to wear."

Jude caught my arm. He eased a folded handkerchief out of his pocket. Inside was a crust of bread with the soft part rolled into a ball. "Last of the currant loaf. I put that by for you."

It had been up on a shelf when I left the house that morning. With flowers coming out of his mouth and half the orchard poorly, Jude had climbed on a stool to save me the good end. I shoved the lot in my mouth before anybody saw my face crumple. Jude whistled our kitchen tune, the one he always left a gap in. I put the missing note in for him through a mouthful of currants.

He watched in startled appreciation. A currant got stuck in my tooth.

"Oh, for God's sake. Can you see it?"

"Give us a look."

I stood there in the shade of the most expensive tree in the county, with my mouth held wide like a horse at market, while my husband fished me out a currant which he ate himself. His face was still close to mine when I heard Gil laughing. My first reaction was actual, physical shame. I wanted to get the taste out of my mouth as if I'd been caught with somebody else's child in it. Then Gil turned and I saw that I had become funny in a way that had very little to do with him. He was telling Thirza something and she could see it, too, this foolish woman who had gone and got herself a husband more peculiar than she was.

Jude's fingertips brushed my chin. "All right?"

"Give me an hour to think about it."

"I would if I had it."

My mother had finished at the trunk. She sat back on her heels. A strip of metal as wide as my palm encircled the place where Jude's graft joined the Duchess. It was the grey of a puddle before dawn and I recognised the stuff in Friday's shoes. Somebody had drawn a circle on the bole in red chalk, and marked where that council man Clee would have liked to see a saw go in.

Strake walked round it. "Well. That'll be one way of saving him, if the others last till Sunday."

"What others?" I said. "He isn't making them sick."

"Turn round, sweetheart."

There was a single groan on the grass, although upwards of thirty mouths had made it. The people who had been sitting with their feet in the soil were dragging them out in pain. From every sole, long white hairs had grown into the ground. At the far edge of the group the bridegroom wept quite silently in his handsome new coat while his bride tried to help him wrench himself free. The Duchess had taken the pressure of the band and sent the sap back through all the other branches.

"Don't get up," Thirza called. Everybody looked at the filthy strange woman with a bucket of rubble slung across her back. "Sit where you are! Don't tear the roots. Lord's sake, people, if you tear the roots you won't get them out of the ground again."

Jude left me. He took the bridegroom firmly by the shoulders and got him sitting again, with two red crescents on his insteps where he'd been starting to peel. The bride knelt behind and held on to him in all that fruitless satin.

"Who's got lard?" Thirza called.

Mallow put a hand up. She was the only woman I knew who carried the better part of a small household on her person. She had a screw of pork dripping in her dress pocket beside the loaf she had brought for her tea. Thirza took it. In ten minutes, with the two of us lending our hands, we had thirty people out on the grass, scrambling for their shoes.

My mother and Strake stayed under the Duchess. Little white darts kept coming down out of the tree and dissolving on my neck like sugar.

“You want to tell these people why you’ve come?” my mother asked.

“Will you give me the knife?”

Mam kept her knife, so Strake used her own. She left the band in place and cut a fine line up the new bark above it, then peeled the skin back with her nail. A soft white something bulged out through the cut, striped at one end with small blue veins.

“What do you see?” she asked me.

I came close enough to have the thing bare its little ridged gums at me. I fell backwards over a root.

Thirza was saying something vicious through her teeth. Some of our people were too far up the hill to see. They were the lucky ones. What I had seen was a mouth as small as the end of my thumb. It had a tooth in it with a chip in the corner.

“There’ll be another one of me,” Jude said.

“There’ll be forty by Sunday,” Strake told him. “Your original came home. How many teeth does a grown man have, do you suppose? Now imagine how many of those you can get out in pieces if you don’t mind the pain. Those white sticks sent over last night were carrying more than grafts. Somebody on Wych packed his teeth along the wood.”

Gil looked at his shoes.

“What did you do?” I asked him. “Gil?”

He opened his mouth for us. Behind a presentable row of teeth at the front, every single one was gone.

CHAPTER 5

His Mother's House

"My teeth were a decent article," Gil said. "I ought to know. I paid for every damned one."

His mother came up the hill with Dilly skipping beside her. He shut his mouth quickly. Loveday had found her good black shawl and she had put Dilly into a ridiculous Sunday frock from the days when mothers absolutely required their infants to look like a blancmange. There were three layers of lace arranged over her bottom and a little division for a tail. She went away with heaps of people's clothes, did my child, because she was so willing to climb into them and had grasped quite young the uses of being pleasing to old women.

"Loveday," I said. "Perhaps you could take the children down to yours for a little while."

"My house is full. I have absolutely everybody who might be able to recognise my own son drinking tea in my front room. He'll need to come down himself and persuade them he's capable of getting into bed."

She held out a hand to Friday. He took off in the other direction.

"Ours is full too," Jude said. "We appear to be having an interesting afternoon in this family."

"Be quiet, both of you. Here, Nell." Loveday gave me a hot egg out of her pocket. "You look as if you've been dragged through a hedge. There's another for his woman if she'd like one."

I had expected to have a little difficulty reconciling my mother-in-law to Thirza. Gil might have gone through life with the idea his mother was a cold woman. He had

never seen her slipping a warm egg into the hands of the person responsible for some of his happiness while he wasn't there to see it.

We ate the eggs in the old calf house behind the orchard, the two of us sitting on upturned pails while the children tried to fish woodlice out of the wall with a stem of grass. I'd got all of them out of their shoes and down on boards where neither earth nor splinters could get at them. Jude had taken Gil to the pump for a wash. What happened between them in that interval neither ever told me. They came back looking like quite a nice pair of bachelors you'd trust to bring a respectable distance into the house on Sunday afternoons.

Thirza had got low enough in herself by then to be able to lie on one hip on a bank of straw. Her back bled and the bucket needed seeing to. Strake knelt beside her and unknotted the straps.

"Still there," Thirza said. "Still my own back, Lettie."

Strake drew away. She didn't make a scene of it.

I gave Thirza the last swallow of my tea. My district did a serviceable line in old wives and I was intimately acquainted with most of their tales. The orchard is a kindness to those who have no comfort left. The orchard gives you what you put into it. God sees to the fruit but Sally Barrow keeps an eye on the gate. In none of these did a person have her skin hooked to earth she brought in a bucket.

"Who took Gil's teeth?" I asked.

"A man at Wych who bought him for the work. Didn't use to be a man who bought anybody there. There was an orphanage and a house for people the county couldn't look after, my mam was one of them. I grew up eating at the long table beside her and we had meat every Sunday. Your women came out with a little tree about ten

years ago. Brought people back." Thirza wiped the rim of the cup on her sleeve. "They'd a particular liking for children. Somebody loses a child they'll sell you the roof off their house to see it again."

"My mother took a tree out?"

"She and Lettie and a man called Abel Clee. They thought it might be useful. It turned out to be very useful indeed."

"I went out with them," Strake said from the open doorway. "You get a bit further in these stories if you consider that what people do first and what they do next might be two different things. I'm not a grafter. I am good with money. I found money to build a landing stage and pay a doctor. Over the years Wych has brought back a hundred and nine people. Three of them live here, Nell. A woman took twins she got from Wych home in her own apron."

"And you let men take his teeth."

"I spent two years trying to find out what was happening after the county sold the beds to the Marrowick Salt Company. By that time I was only allowed in the nice wards. I expect that's what your mother's been trying to explain to you."

My mother, sitting against the wall with a boy's makeshift shoe in her lap, looked at the ground.

I could have borne the other things in that hour, the gums with the tooth in, my husband's unsteady fingers, the questions my girl would have in the years to come and the few days in which I might have to find the answers. I found I could not bear that look on the face of the woman who had taught me to tell a truth with my mouth still stinging from what it had cost to get it open.

"Mam," I said.

She pulled a piece of rough metal out of the shoe and ran her thumb down its edge. “I don’t think this gentleman Clee is going to be very interested in anything I’ve got to say.”

“I am.”

She looked up at me. It was the beginning of the worst quarrel we had ever had and it was conducted throughout in the quiet voices of people who know their children are playing just outside.

“The returns in Harth have always been free,” she said. “People come with a tooth. A kiss in the earth, a drop of their own blood. They take away somebody they’ve lost, with whatever life the person remembers all ready for them to live again. You think fetch and carry makes that happen? I had to put something in the ground to get it to grow. What did you imagine it was, Nell?”

“Did you put people in?”

“I put my own bloody hand in the hole. I held it there from January to April, every night. How do you think I got this bad hip? From doing the hornpipe with the king?”

“Apart from you. Other people.”

“At first they wanted to do something for the ones they’d got back. Women would sit in the graft bed half an hour and put their hands down while they were talking to the girl next to them. We had an old aunt who liked to do it all night. She said all her bad dreams came out through her fingers and went into the ground. I expect they did.”

I let her hear the silence. Dilly and Friday were having a complicated low discussion about the relative value of girls’ underskirts and boys’ underpants in the catching of woodlice.

"On Wych," I said.

She bent her head again. "Nobody can go as far as Wych every night to hold up a tree. We needed somebody who could stay."

"And did you find them?"

She lifted her right hand and spread it on the old milk shelf, where I could see the dirty scar that forked between the two smallest fingers. "You've got a question that belongs to Lettie Strake. You should ask her."

"You can ask me." Thirza had got herself up on one elbow. "I sat there every Thursday for two years. Then I got Thursdays and Fridays. When Gil came in he couldn't feel his legs. They put him on the opposite bench with his hands in the dirt for as long as he liked. I thought it was a damn sight better than shovelling salt. Then on Saturday nights they started fastening the gates."

A hand tugged at my skirt. Friday stood looking up at me. "She wouldn't have," he said.

"Wouldn't have what, lovely?"

"Let them do it to me. My mam said. She wouldn't have."

"I believe her."

"They went and did it anyway."

Thirza looked as if she would like to get him out of my sight. Instead she put her arm out, bucket and all, and made a space into which he fitted so well I could see he had been brought up on her hip, able to shut one hand in the knot of her hair. Dilly had carried a curl of mine till she was four. There had been a patch of short broken hair above my left ear on account of it. I would have traded half the people I knew to have it back just then.

Gil stood up. Loveday made no attempt to stop him although his knees had an uncertain look. “They had a sheet with the price of things set out on it. My two big teeth got me warm blankets when Thirza’s lungs went bad. Four a boat they said they’d send to take a letter. After that they put me on broth and did away with the pretence of buying. You haven’t a man to prosecute for stealing my teeth, Nell. I sold the first of them. Put that in your reckoning.”

“How did they get planted up here?”

“It’s handier if you put me down as the villain for this bit too,” said Strake. “I can save you two days’ work hunting for who took the cuttings. I took a cutting for every patient still in the three open wards. Some had chips of Gil’s teeth bedded in them already. I wrapped the lot in damp canvas and sent them to Sal on the evening packet. I didn’t know which sticks held teeth, and I wasn’t leaving a single patient unaccounted for. Of the original island beds, there’s three still above water. The salt company has taken out the bottom of its own island.”

Thirza said nothing.

“What have you come here for then?” I asked her.

“There’s still people on the three beds.”

Strake got up and walked slowly over to the place where a black seam of old dung showed through the whitewash. She wiped her hand across it as if it were the blackboard in the schoolhouse. With a nail off the shelf she scratched three numbers in it. Twenty-seven. Forty-one. Twelve.

“There are eighty rooted people left on Wych. The sea is going to take the island at the top of Sunday’s tide. The salt company moved all the free people last week, and anybody the company considers a return is there until the water comes up. Among the

eighty are seven or eight children no older than that boy. I brought the cuttings here so there'd be a little piece of each one here on dry land. If the people die, at least the families can come here for another start. I know what that is worth. I know it isn't the same. They can have their families find them."

Thirza walked stiffly across the straw and slapped her.

Friday went white. Thirza lowered her hand and he caught it in both of his, right over the rings. He held on while she spoke.

"You can give up on a child on your own time, Lettie. You take a boat out there and make them room in it."

"Were you going to row them back with your hands?"

"If I have to."

"You'll need someone along who can get a foot free without breaking the ankle," I said. Friday still had the marks of my fingers on his. "I'll come."

Strake looked at me. Of all the people in that calf house I was the one she might reasonably have expected to take her side. I'd had seven years of happiness from a tooth.

"Tell me where they're lying," I said, and she turned back to the numbers on the wall.

Jude came to me. I felt the straw shift as he put his foot down beside mine. He didn't put a hand on me. It was better that way for a while.

"You've two days clear and then Sunday morning," he said. "How deep do they draw, your boats?"

"Ours draws three foot."

"Won't cross the mud at the island without the tide. Half a foot's plenty for an apple punt. When they built the presses up here they used to take the mash down whole."

A queer kind of embarrassment went through me. It is a terrible pleasure to have somebody remind you, while you're hard at work hating your own mother, that you married a man with some brains.

"Who's got one?" I asked.

"Clee's got one. Nailed a roof on it and took to calling it the Assize House. Edge of Graft Green. If you pass the Spoon Pear you've gone too far."

"The assize house." Gil was smiling. I could remember a boy at the river one summer measuring out rough water with the length of his own body, saying he would take me past the boom to see the open sea. For a moment I could see the boy in both of them. "You want to steal the assize house."

"The parish hasn't paid me yet for the last time I fixed it. On that account I might say as much as the bottom four inches of it belongs to me."

"Four inches is about what we need," said his brother, and so it started between them, in a dark calf house in May, with a woman who had her back to us, a woman who had been slapped and two small children hoarding lice in a pile of clothes on the floor.

That evening at Loveday's, I waited until the children slept before I went to bed with Jude. We had taken the old room over the coal cellar. The low ceiling and the paper gone loose at the join were almost too much for me. As a girl I had slept here with a different man. I knew what you could hear from the next room, and what you couldn't, and which noises of your own you'd want to be sure of keeping to yourself.

"We could go home," I said.

"It's better she has us all under one roof. Mum's got her life back and caught it square between the eyes."

He got his shirt caught over his head. I freed it. He had a red crease across his nose and a bit of my hair caught in his collar.

"Mind the paper," he said, reaching up. A loose flap had caught in the button at his neck. I could see a little yellow moon printed on its underside, left over from some older decoration. "Better moons than that have fallen on me in the course of my profession."

I knew that moon. I'd paid a penny to see the end of a play and missed the whole blasted thing.

The first time I climbed the cooper's stair was a market day towards the end of June, long before I asked Jude home. His door was propped open on a bucket and the cooper's girls were sat on the landing shelling peas. I'd taken him one of Gil's collars. I had a great notion of asking him to put it on and say my name again. He was at his bench shaving the nose off a large wooden moon.

"Will it be terribly inconvenient for you if I tell you I'd rather you didn't bring me his things?"

There were six little buttons in that collar. I remember counting them while I worked out whether I could get down the stair without letting him see me cry. He went on shaving the moon. I was halfway down before I heard him laugh.

"What?"

"The man's charged me for the seat I'll need to stand on to work it. Come on Saturday if you like. You've paid his prices before, you might know a way of getting my penny back."

On Saturday I had my seat near the back. He stood behind a black cloth with a pulley in his teeth, both hands on the thing and nobody to take up the slack. The rope had begun to creep through his teeth. I went round the side and got a hand under it just as the gentleman playing the king flung his arms up to address the heavens. We got the moon up over his head all right. Getting her down again was another matter. We let the king die under a full moon in broad daylight. I could feel laughter coming up through the boards from the boy at my back, trying so hard to keep it in he had to put his forehead on my shoulder.

When the boards emptied he put a penny in my hand. “Wages,” he said. “The first girl I’ve had who could hold the moon up the whole time it took that bugger to die.” His laugh came out properly then, an ugly little snort that went straight down my stays.

“Are you doing it again tomorrow?” I asked.

“God, I hope so. I’ve got a girl coming.”

He turned his head and suddenly I had Gil’s mouth six inches from mine. I nearly went home. Then he said, “I’ve still got bloody rope in my teeth,” and there he was again. I had to wait for him to pick out a strand of hemp before I could kiss him. I went home alone and lay awake so pleased with myself you’d have thought I’d invented kissing.

The moon in Loveday’s bedroom was still caught on Jude’s button. I eased the paper off it. He was looking down at me, the same silly crease across his nose. He waited till I was quite back in the room with him before he spoke.

“How was it seeing him?” he asked.

“Like finding an extra stair where you thought there was floor.”

"Was it nice?"

"Yes. A bit. I found out that what I remember of him and what he remembers of me might still exist somewhere on earth. I'm ashamed of how much that meant. Did you hate it?"

"I wanted him to do me a favour."

"I heard you ask."

"Not that. I wanted him to put that bloody knife back straight on its hook. I stood there in the kitchen watching him get his fingers on my chair and I thought, clean as a whistle, if he straightens the knife I shall have to kill him."

"Oh, Jude."

He let me kiss the damp corner of his eye. He never did that. I used to think there were parts of a person you earned the right to touch in time, the way different flowers opened to their own season. That night I understood you might live with someone sixty years and still there'd be one place he had never needed your mouth until today.

I put my hand flat on his back and waited. Presently he did the same to me. We lay in that foul little room with the smell of ancient cabbage boiling up from the cellar, and at some point the width of a finger between the rest of us occurred to him as worth the crossing. Whatever the house heard that night, let it keep.

CHAPTER 6

Four Inches of Court

I woke to Loveday emptying a bucket of water over a magistrate. There were worse things to wake to.

"Come round the back like anybody else!" she called. "I told you when your father was alive and I'll tell you now he's dead. I will not conduct parish business through my bedroom window."

The magistrate retrieved his sodden hat from the rhubarb and came round. We all sat down in the front room with our knees close together under a table too small for the number of people we appeared suddenly to be. Judge Abel Clee had married a large busty young woman out of the fens and had been very happy for over forty years. My mother had worked beside him more than twenty of those years and I had only once seen him bring her so much as a lettuce out of his garden. He had none of the sadder vices you come to expect from people who have known your parents for ever. He was perfectly prepared to ruin you for the public good before breakfast.

"Having regard to the exceptionally wet condition of my trousers, Loveday, I'll take a chair with a cushion if you've got one."

She gave him the one with the thin place in the webbing.

"I was hoping to get five minutes with the boy," he said.

Friday slid off his chair under the table. A little hand fastened round my left ankle. I made space for him under my skirt and he sat between my feet eating a piece of fried bread.

"I don't believe there is a boy in this house," I said, "although things do breed in the pantry."

Judge Clee buttered his toast. There were hairs growing out of his nostrils and both ears, startlingly white, like a rabbit trying to look out of the middle of his face. As a young man he had been so handsome that his wife still got letters from girls who had seen the portrait in the upper schoolroom.

“There are fifty-eight people in Harth who have their graft somewhere on your mother’s tree. A good number have children. I gather a considerable quantity of foreign stock was spliced into that tree in the early hours of yesterday morning.”

“Who did the work?” Jude asked.

“I rather thought the one who keeps the keys. Who ordinarily does the work?”

My mother continued eating a piece of cold toast. We had all heard what Strake said in the calf house. It was another thing to look at the woman who had done the actual splicing and see her lifting the toast to her mouth with a strip of rag round the thumb.

“It was raining,” she said. “That parcel she sent, half the tips were black already. If somebody sends me a length of green with one inch living on it, I won’t let it die in the rain.”

“Your difficulty, Sally, is that there’s two perfectly good human beings claiming the same bit of root, in addition to eighty people out on the flats. The moment those gentlemen got near enough for the tree to smell them together, every bud on those sticks started to swell. We have three days’ root feed being used in half a day. On Sunday Harth will have twice as many people to look after and our established households could be in the ground.”

I felt Friday tug at the hem of my skirt. His appetite had survived pretty well, considering. I passed him another piece of toast with the buttered part turned in.

"What exactly is your remedy, Abel?" Loveday asked.

"Take those cuttings out this morning and lay the second Mr Rill down in the orchard house until we know whether he can be transplanted."

"And exactly where are you thinking of transplanting him?"

"Madam, that is why we're sitting down trying to think. Everybody keeps looking at my face as if they had already heard it found guilty of something."

Jude's chair moved. He leaned over to the judge so that they might have been two men talking racing at the Arms.

"My name's Jude. I'm rather particular about it, just at present."

"Indeed it is. I'm sorry to have forgotten my manners. You see the difficulty, Jude."

"I do."

"And you'll stay to be examined?"

"No, sir. You can have your assize house back a day or two late. I'm taking it out for a wash."

I shall never know how he could have been so calm. He was a man with a bad mouth and a frightened wife eating breakfast at an old table. People had stopped the joinery orders the second year he came among us on account of some speech at the school about the property rights of the risen. We had eaten mashed turnip with a bit of marrow fat for an entire March. The man across from him held enough of the world in his hand to do it again.

"Will you, now?" said Abel.

He took a boiled egg out of the dish and went out with it in his pocket, his trousers still sticking to him in the rear. Gil had looked up only once in the course of the

conversation, when Loveday referred to transplanting Jude. After the judge had gone he pushed his plate away.

"Here's what I could do. Get well clear of Harth. If it's me the thing smells."

"How far did you get yesterday?" Jude asked.

"Six miles to Marrowick."

"Mallow got the flowers while Nell was in the pound. They'd every opportunity to notice you'd gone that far. It eased off for a quarter of an hour when your lady came out of the carriage."

"Wasn't him leaving Harth then," Thirza said. She'd sat down on a high milking stool, which enabled her to keep the bucket at a decent height for her shoulders. The boy went to her with his piece of fried bread half chewed and she finished it. "Was me coming in. The other cuttings know me. They've had their feed from me all these years. You put me up there and I can hold them while you get the people off."

"How long?" I asked.

"On Wych? They used to give me Sundays off and I took them. On Saturday nights I had to be helped off the bench. I got mastitis there once and couldn't get off to feed him."

Friday's face showed an interest in the origin of his dinner. "You cried," he said.

"Course I cried. My tit nearly dropped off."

Loveday, who used to require the windows thrown open for the word 'drawer' in the context of a personal garment, poured the woman more tea.

"Nell and I will take the punt," Jude said. "I'll need someone knows the channels. Can you sit looking forward and tell me which way the water runs?"

Gil looked at his mother, his woman, the little boy, his swollen foot. When we were young he would have said he could swim it carrying any two of us at a time. He rubbed the bridge of his nose. “I’ll do more for you if I lie on the boards. I can put a hand over the side to test the pull. You see what you get when you say if instead of can you, old lad.”

Loveday stood up so abruptly Dilly got marmalade on her neck. “I’d like five minutes with the one I shoved into this world myself.”

“Not yet,” Gil said.

The room went appallingly quiet.

“I haven’t heard how I get them home, Mam. When I know I’ll give you the whole morning if we’ve got it.”

She sat down. They were both very red. The child beside me put her hand out without looking up and patted her grandmother on the chest just above the gathered folds of her good Sunday apron.

It is possible to steal an assize house if you have a parish at your back and an empty stomach. Jude took the sea door off its hinges. I came along the bank with a long-handled spade and Mallow directing a collection of the people who had sat on the grass the day before. Some were not precisely enamoured of the scheme, their confidence in the orchard having taken a knock of late. The bridegroom was called Robin. He came with the trousers of his wedding suit rolled to mid-thigh and a bunch of wilting roses in his buttonhole.

“Thought you were going to be in bed all weekend,” I said.

“I asked her, did she want me to go. She said, only if you’re coming back. I said that wasn’t an answer. She said it was the only one she bloody well had.”

"Are you coming?"

"She had the same trouble getting a straight word out of me."

The assize house had been drawn up on the riverbank in my grandfather's time. Jude's father had gone to hearings there when the tar was still wet, and come home with black breeches which Loveday had been at some pains to keep from becoming the subject of everlasting discussion. The court benches ran crossways over great curved knees of oak. From his swivelling chair the judge could put his trumpet to his lips and convey the majesty of the law to people minding their own business a quarter of a mile upstream.

"Leave the trumpet," Gil told him. "A person can have a great deal of entertainment with a trumpet in a small boat."

"Do you see this? Is your mother keeping moles in here?" Jude was on his back beneath the platform. He came up holding a pair of long green stockings and a lady's garter. Robin went very pink.

"Could I have those? I think the public getting an eyeful of them could be misunderstood."

"Keep your ear out for them calling your first child Abel."

We got the house off the bank by rolling it down on the miller's barrels, which he charged us sixpence for and we paid with a note of credit on the District Court. The men with the broadest backs prized up the landward end. Mallow and I took the bow and kept the nose pointed at the bend, walking the rope round the lime tree where people tied up their horses on court days. Once it got away from us down the slope, the old house went quite smartly. For thirty or forty feet we could have been mistaken for respectable adults. Then we were in the river up to our arses with the widows looking