

Praise for *The Binding*:

'*The Binding* is a dark chocolate slice of cake with a surprising, satisfying seam of raspberry running through it. It is a rich, gothic entertainment that explores what books have trapped in them and reminds us of the power of storytelling. Spellbinding'

Tracy Chevalier

'Pure magic. The kind of immersive storytelling that makes you forget your own name. I wish I had written it'

Erin Kelly, author of *He Said/She Said*

'*The Binding* held me captive from the start and refused to set me free. It is a beautifully crafted tale of dark magic and forbidden passion, where unspeakable cruelty is ultimately defeated by enduring love. Breathtaking!'

Ruth Hogan, author of *The Keeper of Lost Things*

'An original concept, beautifully written. Collins' prose is spellbinding'

Laura Purcell, author of *The Silent Companions*

'Intriguing, thought-provoking and heartbreaking . . . what a gorgeous book'

Stella Duffy

'What an astounding book . . . something entirely of its own. Brilliant concept, truly extraordinary writing and a killer plot'

Anna Mazzola, author of *The Unseeing*

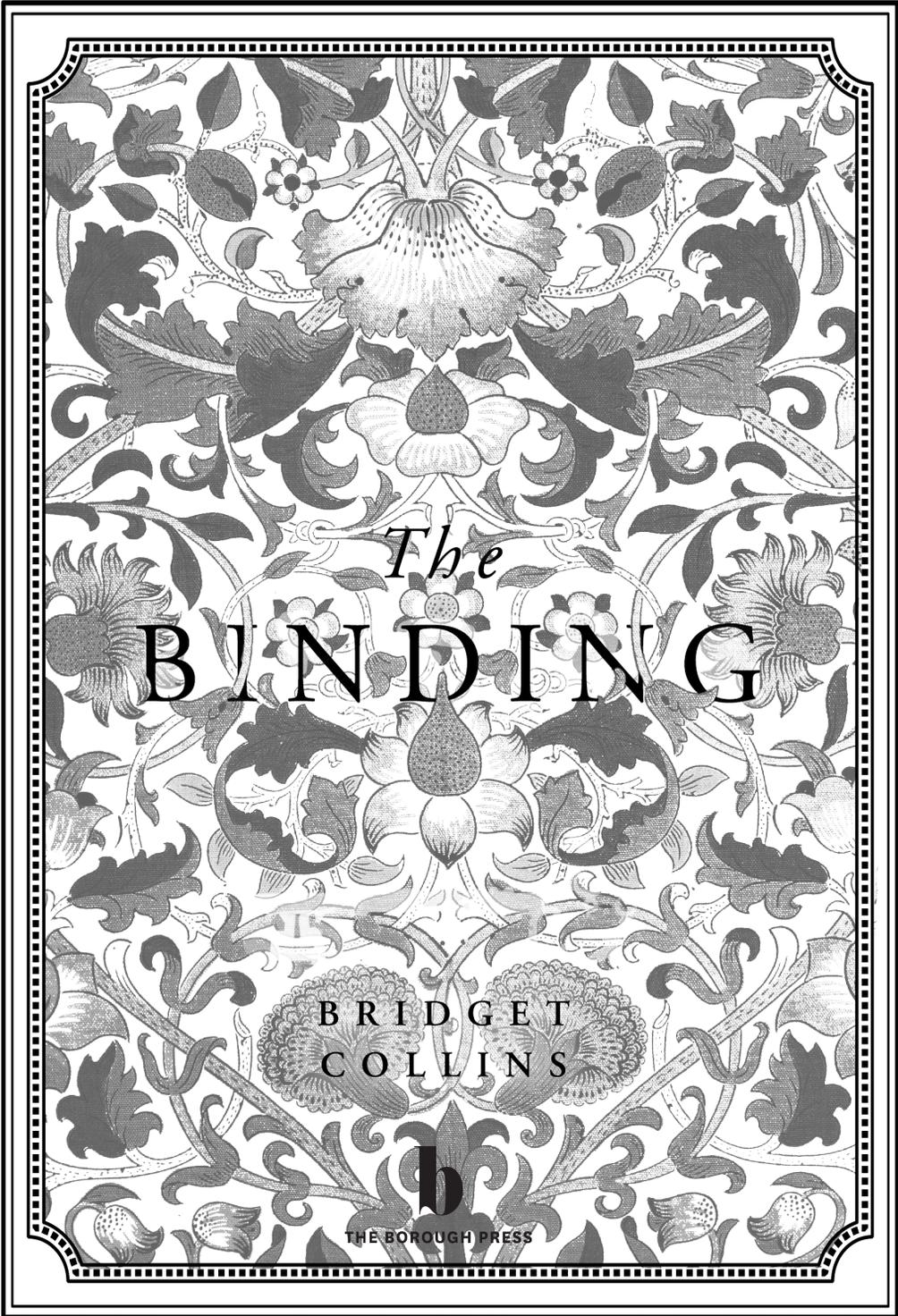
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YOUNG ADULT

The Traitor Game
A Trick of the Dark
Tyme's End
Gamerunner
The Broken Road
MazeCheat
Love in Revolution

THE BINDING

Bridget Collins trained as an actor at the London Academy of Music and Dramatic Art after reading English at King's College, Cambridge. She is the author of seven acclaimed books for young adults and has had two plays produced, one at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival. *The Binding* is her first adult novel.



The
BINDING

**BRIDGET
COLLINS**

b
THE BOROUGH PRESS

The Borough Press
An imprint of HarperCollins*Publishers*
1 London Bridge Street
London SE1 9GF

www.harpercollins.co.uk

First published by HarperCollins*Publishers* 2019

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A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

HB ISBN: 978-0-00-827211-1

TPB ISBN: 978-0-00-827212-8

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author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons,
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Set in Meridien by Palimpsest Book Production Ltd,
Falkirk, Stirlingshire

Illustrations © Andrew Davidson

Printed and bound in the UK by
CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

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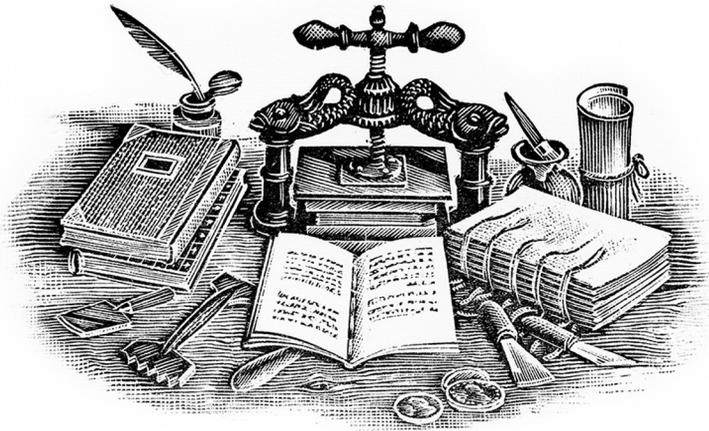
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For Nick

PART ONE



I

When the letter came I was out in the fields, binding up my last sheaf of wheat with hands that were shaking so much I could hardly tie the knot. It was my fault we'd had to do it the old-fashioned way, and I'd be damned if I was going to give up now; I had battled through the heat of the afternoon, blinking away the patches of darkness that flickered at the sides of my vision, and now it was nightfall and I was almost finished. The others had left when the sun set, calling good-byes over their shoulders, and I was glad. At least now I was alone I didn't have to pretend I could work at the same pace as them. I kept going, trying not to think about how easy it would have been with the reaping machine. I'd been too ill to check the machinery – not that I remembered much, between the flashes of lucidity, the summer was nothing but echoes and ghosts and dark aching gaps – and no one else had thought to do it, either. Every day I stumbled on some chore that hadn't been done; Pa had done his best, but he couldn't do everything. Because of me, we'd be behind all year.

I pulled the stems tight round the waist of the sheaf and stacked it against the others. Done. I could go home now . . .

But there were shadows pulsing and spinning around me, deeper than the blue-violet dusk, and my knees were trembling. I dropped into a crouch, catching my breath at the pain in my bones. Better than it had been – better than the splintery, sickening spasms that had come unpredictably for months – but still I felt as brittle as an old man. I clenched my jaw. I was so weak I wanted to cry; but I wasn't going to, I'd die first, even if the only eye on me was the full, fat harvest moon.

'Emmett? Emmett!'

It was only Alta, winding her way through the stooks towards me, but I pushed myself to my feet and tried to blink the giddiness away. Above me the sparse stars slid one way and then the other. I cleared my throat. 'Here.'

'Why didn't you get one of the others to finish? Ma was worried when they came back down the lane and you weren't with—'

'She didn't need to be worried. I'm not a child.' My thumb was bleeding where a sharp stalk had pierced the skin. The blood tasted of dust and fever.

Alta hesitated. A year ago I'd been as strong as any of them. Now she was looking at me with her head on one side, as if I was younger than she was. 'No, but—'

'I wanted to watch the moon rise.'

'Course you did.' The twilight softened her features, but I could still see the shrewdness in her gaze. 'We can't make you rest. If you don't care about getting well—'

'You sound like her. Like Ma.'

'Because she's right! You can't expect to snap back as if nothing's happened, not when you were as ill as you were.'

Ill. As if I'd been languishing in bed with a cough, or vomiting, or covered with pustules. Even through the haze of nightmares I could remember more than they realised; I

knew about the screaming and the hallucinations, the days when I couldn't stop crying or didn't know who anyone was, the night when I broke the window with my bare hands. I wished I *had* spent days shitting my guts helplessly into a pot; it would have been better than still having marks on my wrists where they'd had to tie me down. I turned away from her and concentrated on sucking the cut at the base of my thumb, worrying at it with my tongue until I couldn't taste blood any more.

'Please, Emmett,' Alta said, and brushed the collar of my shirt with her fingers. 'You've done as good a day's work as anyone. Now will you come home?'

'All right.' A breeze lifted the hairs on the back of my neck. Alta saw me shiver and dropped her eyes. 'What's for dinner, then?'

She flashed her gappy teeth in a grin. 'Nothing, if you don't hurry up.'

'Fine. I'll race you back.'

'Challenge me again when I'm not wearing stays.' She turned away, her dusty skirts flaring about her ankles. When she laughed she still looked like a child, but the farmhands had already started sniffing round her; in some lights now she looked like a woman.

I trudged beside her, so exhausted I felt drunk. The darkness thickened, pooling under trees and in hedges, while the moonlight bleached the stars out of the sky. I thought of cold well-water, clear as glass, with tiny green flecks gathering at the bottom – or, no, beer, grassy and bitter, the colour of amber, flavoured with Pa's special blend of herbs. It would send me straight to sleep, but that was good: all I wanted was to go out like a candle, into dreamless unconsciousness. No nightmares, no night terrors, and to wake in the morning to clean new sunlight.

The clock in the village struck nine as we went through

the gate in the yard. 'I'm famished,' Alta said, 'they sent me out to find you before I could—'

My mother's voice cut her off. She was shouting.

Alta paused, while the gate swung closed behind us. Our eyes met. A few fragments of words drifted across the yard: *How can you say . . . we can't, we simply can't . . .*

The muscles in my legs were shaking from standing still. I reached out and steadied myself against the wall, wishing my heart would slow down. A wedge of lamplight was shining through a gap in the kitchen curtains; as I watched, a shadow crossed and crossed again. My father, pacing.

'We can't stay out here all night,' Alta said, the words almost a whisper.

'It's probably nothing.' They'd quarrelled all week about the reaping machine, and why no one had checked it earlier. Neither of them mentioned that it should have been my job.

A thud: fists on the kitchen table. Pa raised his voice. 'What do you expect me to do? Say no? That bloody witch will put a curse on us quick as—'

'She already has! Look at him, Robert – what if he never gets better? It's her fault—'

'His own fault, you mean – if he—' For a second a high note rang in my ears, drowning out Pa's voice. The world slipped and righted itself, as if it had juddered on its axis. I swallowed a bubble of nausea. When I could concentrate again, there was silence.

'We don't know that,' Pa said at last, just loud enough for us to hear. 'She might help him. All those weeks she wrote to ask how he was doing.'

'Because she wanted him! No, Robert, *no*, I won't let it happen, his place is here with us, whatever he's done, he's still our son – and *her*, she gives me the creeps—'

'You've never met her. It wasn't you that had to go out there and—'

'I don't care! She's done enough. She can't have him.'

Alta glanced at me. Something changed in her face, and she took hold of my wrist and pulled me forwards. 'We're going inside,' she said, in the high, self-conscious voice she used to call to the chickens. 'It's been a long day, you must be ravenous, I know I am. There better be some pie left, or I will kill someone. With a fork through the heart. And *eat* them.' She paused in front of the door and added, 'With *mustard*.' Then she flung it open.

My parents were standing at either end of the kitchen: Pa by the window, his back turned to us, Ma at the fireplace with red blotches on her face like rouge. Between them, on the table, was a sheet of thick, creamy paper and an open envelope. Ma looked swiftly from Alta to me and took a half step towards it.

'Dinner,' Alta said. 'Emmett, sit down, you look like you're about to faint. Heavens, no one's even laid the table. I hope the pie's in the oven.' She put a pile of plates down beside me. 'Bread? Beer? Honestly, I might as well be a scullery maid . . .' She disappeared into the pantry.

'Emmett,' Pa said, without turning round. 'There's a letter on the table. You'd better read it.'

I slid it towards me. The writing blurred into a shapeless stain on the paper. 'My eyes are too dusty. Tell me what it says.'

Pa bowed his head, the muscles bunching in his neck as if he was dragging something heavy. 'The binder wants an apprentice.'

Ma made a sound like a bitten-off word.

I said, 'An apprentice?'

There was silence. A slice of moon shone through the gap in the curtains, covering everything in its path with silver. It made Pa's hair look greasy and grey. 'You,' he said.

Alta was standing in the pantry doorway, cradling a jar of

pickles. For a second I thought she was going to drop it, but she set it down carefully on the dresser. The knock of glass on wood was louder than the smash would have been.

‘I’m too old to be an apprentice.’

‘Not according to her.’

‘I thought . . .’ My hand flattened on the table: a thin white hand that I hardly recognised. A hand that couldn’t do an honest day’s work. ‘I’m getting better. Soon . . .’ I stopped, because my voice was as unfamiliar as my fingers.

‘It’s not that, son.’

‘I know I’m no use now—’

‘Oh, sweetheart,’ Ma said. ‘It’s not your fault— it’s not because you’ve been ill. Soon you’ll be back to your old self again. If that was all . . . You know we always thought you’d run the farm with your father. And you could have done, you still could – but . . .’ Her eyes went to Pa’s. ‘We’re not sending you away. She’s asking for you.’

‘I don’t know who she is.’

‘Binding’s . . . a good craft. An honest craft. It’s nothing to be afraid of.’ Alta knocked against the dresser, and Ma glanced over her shoulder as she swung her arm out swiftly to stop a plate from slipping to the floor. ‘Alta, be careful.’

My heart skipped and drummed. ‘But . . . you hate books. They’re wrong. You’ve always told me – when I brought that book home from Wakening Fair—’

A look passed between them, too quick to interpret. Pa said, ‘Never mind about that now.’

‘But . . .’ I turned back to Ma. I couldn’t put it into words: the swift change of subject if someone even mentioned a book, the shiver of distaste at the word, the look on their faces . . . The way she’d dragged me grimly past a sordid shopfront – *A. Fogatini, Pawnbroker and Licens’d Bookseller* – one day when I was small and we got lost in Castleford. ‘What do you mean, it’s a *good craft*?’

‘It’s not . . .’ Ma drew in her breath. ‘Maybe it’s not what I would have wanted, before—’

‘Hilda.’ Pa dug his fingers into the side of his neck, kneading the muscle as though it ached. ‘You don’t have a choice, lad. It’ll be a steady life. It’s a long way from anywhere, but that’s not a bad thing. Quiet. No hard labour, no one to tempt you off the straight and narrow . . .’ He cleared his throat. ‘And they’re not all like her. You settle down and learn the trade, and then . . . Well. There’re binders in town who have their own carriages.’

A tiny silence. Alta tapped the top of a jar with her fingernail and glanced at me.

‘But I don’t – I’ve never – what makes her think that I—?’ Now none of them would meet my eyes. ‘What do you mean, I’ve got no choice?’

No one answered. Finally Alta strode across the room and picked up the letter. “‘As soon as he is able to travel”,’ she read out. “‘The bindery can be very cold in winter. Please make sure he has warm clothes.” Why did she write to you and not Emmett? Doesn’t she know he can read?’

‘It’s the way they all do it,’ Pa said. ‘You ask the parents for an apprentice, that’s how it works.’

It didn’t matter. My hands on the table were all tendons and bones. A year ago they’d been brown and muscled, almost a man’s hands; now they were no one’s. Fit for nothing but a craft my parents despised. But why would she have chosen me, unless they’d asked her to? I spread my fingers and pressed, as if I could absorb the strength of the wood through the skin of my palms.

‘What if I say no?’

Pa clumped across to the cupboard, bent down and pulled out a bottle of blackberry gin. It was fierce, sweet stuff that Ma doled out for festivals or medicinal purposes, but he poured himself half a mug of it and she didn’t say a word.

'There's no place for you here. Maybe you should be grateful. This'll be something you can do.' He tossed half the gin down his throat and coughed.

I drew in my breath, determined not to let my voice crack. 'When I'm better, I'll be just as strong as—'

'Make the best of it,' he said.

'But I don't—'

'Emmett,' Ma said, 'please . . . It's the right thing. She'll know what to do with you.'

'What to *do* with me?'

'I only mean – if you get ill again, she'll—'

'Like in a lunatic asylum? Is that it? You're packing me off to somewhere miles from anywhere because I might lose my wits again at any moment?'

'She *wants* you,' Ma said, clutching her skirts as if she was trying to squeeze water out of them. 'I wish you didn't have to go.'

'Then I won't go!'

'You'll go, boy,' Pa said. 'Heaven knows you've brought enough trouble on this house.'

'Robert, don't—'

'You'll go. If I have to truss you up and leave you on her doorstep, you'll go. Be ready tomorrow.'

'Tomorrow?' Alta spun round so fast her plait swung out like a rope. 'He can't go tomorrow, he'll need time to pack – and there's the harvest, the harvest supper . . . Please, Pa.'

'Shut *up!*'

Silence.

'Tomorrow?' The blotches on Ma's cheeks had spread into a flush of scarlet. 'We never said . . . ' Her voice trailed off. My father finished his gin, swallowing with a grimace as if his mouth was full of stones.

I opened my mouth to tell her it was all right, I'd go, they

wouldn't have to worry about me any more; but my throat was too dry from the reaping.

'A few more days. Robert, the other apprentices don't go until after the harvest – and he's still not well, a couple of days . . .'

'They're younger than he is. And he's well enough to travel, if he did a day in the fields.'

'Yes, but . . .'

She moved towards him and caught his arm so that he couldn't turn away. 'A little more time.'

'For pity's sake, Hilda!' He made a choking sound and tried to wrench himself away. 'Don't make this any harder. You think I want to let him go? You think that after we tried so hard – fought to keep a pure house – you think I'm proud of it, when my own father lost an eye marching in the Crusade?'

Ma glanced at Alta and me. 'Not in front of—'

'What does it matter now?' He wiped his forearm across his face; then with a helpless gesture he flung the mug to the floor. It didn't break. Alta watched it roll towards her and stop. Pa turned his back on us and bent over the dresser as if he was trying to catch his breath. There was a silence.

'I'll go,' I said, 'I'll go tomorrow.' I couldn't look at any of them. I got up, hitting my knee against the corner of the table as I pushed back my chair. I struggled to the door. The latch seemed smaller and stiffer than it usually was, and the clunk as it opened echoed off the walls.

Outside, the moon divided the world into deep blue and silver. The air was warm and as soft as cream, scented with hay and summer dust. An owl chuckled in the near field.

I reeled across to the far side of the yard and leant against the wall. It was hard to breathe. Ma's voice hung in my ears: *That bloody witch will put a curse on us.* And Pa, answering: *She already has.*

They were right; I was good for nothing. Misery rose inside

me, as strong as the stabbing pains in my legs. Before this, I'd never been ill in my life. I never knew that my body could betray me, that my mind could go out like a lamp and leave nothing but darkness. I couldn't remember getting sick; if I tried, all I saw was a mess of nightmare-scorched fragments. Even my memories of my life before that – last spring, last winter – were tinged with the same gangrenous shadow, as if nothing was healthy any more. I knew that I'd collapsed after midsummer, because Ma had told me so, and that I'd been on the way home from Castleford; but no one had explained where I'd been, or what had happened. I must have been driving the cart – without a hat, under a hot sun, probably – but when I tried to think back there was nothing but a rippling mirage, a last vertiginous glimpse of sunlight before the blackness swallowed me. For weeks afterwards, I'd only surfaced to scream and struggle and beg them to untie me. No wonder they wanted to get rid of me.

I closed my eyes. I could still see the three of them, their arms round one another. Something whispered behind me, scratching in the wall like dry claws. It wasn't real, but it drowned out the owl and the rustle of trees. I rested my head on my arms and pretended I couldn't hear it.

I must have drawn back instinctively into the deepest corner of darkness, because when I opened my eyes Alta was in the middle of the yard, calling my name without looking in my direction. The moon had moved; now it was over the gable of the farmhouse and all the shadows were short and squat.

'Emmett?'

'Yes,' I said. Alta jumped and took a step forward to peer at me.

'What are you doing there? Were you asleep?'

'No.'

She hesitated. Behind her the light from a lamp crossed

the upper window as someone went to bed. I started to pull myself to my feet and paused, wincing, as pain stabbed into my joints.

She watched me get up, without offering to help. 'Did you mean it? That you'd go? Tomorrow?'

'Pa meant it when he said I didn't have any choice.'

I waited for her to disagree. Alta was clever like that, finding new paths or different ways of doing things, picking locks. But she only tilted her face upward as if she wanted the moonlight to bleach her skin. I swallowed. The stupid dizziness had come back – suddenly, dragging me one way and then another – and I swayed against the wall and tried to catch my breath.

'Emmett? Are you all right?' She bit her lip. 'No, of course not. Sit down.'

I didn't want to obey her but my knees folded of their own accord. I closed my eyes and inhaled the night smells of hay and cooling earth, the overripe sweetness of crushed weeds and a rank hint of manure. Alta's skirts billowed and rustled as she sank down beside me.

'I wish you didn't have to go.'

I raised one shoulder without looking at her and let it drop again.

'But . . . maybe it's the best thing . . .'

'How can it be?' I swallowed, trying to fill the crack in my voice. 'All right, I understand. I'm no use here. You'll all be better off when I'm – wherever she is, this binder.'

'Out on the marshes, on the Castleford road.'

'Right.' What would the marshes smell of? Stagnant water, rotting reeds. Mud. Mud that swallowed you alive if you went too far from the road, and never spat you back . . . 'How do you know so much about it?'

'Ma and Pa are only thinking about you. After everything that's happened . . . You'll be safe there.'

'That's what Ma said.'

A pause. She began to gnaw at her thumbnail. In the orchard below the stables a nightingale gurgled and then gave up.

'You don't know what it's been like for them, Emmett. Always afraid. You owe them some peace.'

'It's not my fault I was ill!'

'It's your fault you—' She huffed out her breath. 'No, I know, I didn't mean . . . just that we all need . . . please don't be angry. It's a good thing. You'll learn a trade.'

'Yes. Making books.'

She flinched. 'She chose you. That must mean—'

'What does it mean? How can she have chosen me, when she's never even seen me?' I thought Alta started to speak, but when I turned my head she was staring up at the moon, her face expressionless. Her cheeks were thinner than they had been before I got ill, and the skin under her eyes looked as if it had been smudged with ash. She was a stranger, out of reach.

She said, as if it was an answer, 'I'll come and see you whenever I can . . .'

I let my head roll back until I felt the stone wall against my skull. 'They talked you round, didn't they?'

'I've never seen Pa like that,' she said. 'So angry.'

'I have,' I said. 'He hit me, once.'

'Yes,' she said, 'well, I suppose you—' She stopped.

'When I was small,' I said. 'You weren't old enough to remember. It was the day of Wakening Fair.'

'Oh.' When I glanced up, her eyes flickered away. 'No. I don't remember that.'

'I bought . . . there was a man, selling books.' I could recall the clink of my errand-money in my pocket that day – sixpence in farthings, so bulky they bulged through my trousers – and the heady, carefree feeling of going to Wakening

Fair and slipping away from the others, wondering what I'd buy. I'd wandered past the meat and chickens, the fish from Coldwater and the patterned cottons from Castleford, paused at the sweetmeat stall and then turned towards another a little further away, where I'd caught a glimpse of gold and rich colours. It was hardly a stall at all, only a trestle table guarded by a man with restless eyes, but it was piled high with books. 'It was the first time I'd seen them. I didn't know what they were.'

That curious, wary expression was on Alta's face again. 'You mean . . .?'

'Forget it.' I didn't know why I was telling her; I didn't want to remember. But now I couldn't stop the memory unfolding. I'd thought they were boxes, small gilt-and-leather chests to hold things like Ma's best silver or Pa's chessmen. I'd sauntered over, jingling my money, and the man had glanced over both shoulders before he grinned at me. 'Ah, what a golden-haired little prince! Come for a story, young sir? A tale of murder or incest, shame or glory, a love so piercing it was best forgotten, or a deed of darkness? You've come to the right man, young sir, these are the *crème de la crème*, these will tell you true and harrowing tales, violent and passionate and exciting – or if it's comedy you're after, I have some of those too, rarest of all, the things people get rid of! Have a look, young sir, cast your eyes over this one . . . Bound by a master in Castleford, years ago.'

I hated the way he called me *young sir*, but the book fell open as he passed it to me and I couldn't give it back. As soon as I saw the writing on the pages I understood: this was lots of pages all squashed together – like letters, lots of letters, only in a better box – and a story that went on and on. 'How much is it?'

'Ah, that one, young sir. You have wonderful taste for a young 'un, that's a special one, a real adventure story, sweeps

you off your feet like a cavalry charge. Ninepence for it. Or two for a shilling.'

I wanted it. I didn't know why, except that my fingertips were prickling. 'I only have sixpence.'

'I'll take that,' he said, clicking his fingers at me. The wide smile had gone; when I followed his darting gaze I saw a knot of men gathering a little way off, muttering.

'Here.' I emptied my pocketful of farthings into his palm. He let one drop, but he was still staring at the men and didn't stoop to pick it up. 'Thank you.'

I took the book and hurried away, triumphant and uneasy. When I reached the bustle of the main market I stopped and turned to look: the group of men was advancing on the man's stall, as he threw the books frantically into the battered little cart behind him.

Something warned me not to stare. I ran home, holding the book through my shirt-cuff so that I didn't stain the cover with my sweaty fingers. I sat on the barn steps in the sun – no one would see me, they were still at the fair – and examined it. It wasn't like anything I'd ever seen. It was a deep, heavy red, patterned with gold, and it was as soft to the touch as skin. When I opened the cover, the scent of must and wood rose up as though it hadn't been touched for years.

It sucked me in.

It was set in an army camp in a foreign country, and at first it was confusing: full of captains and majors and colonels, arguments about military tactics and a threat of court martial. But something made me go on reading: I could see it, every detail, I could hear the horses and the snap of wind against the canvas, feel my own heart quicken at the smell of gunpowder . . . I stumbled on, absorbed in spite of myself, and slowly I understood that they were on the eve of a battle, that the man in the book was a hero. When the sun rose,

he was going to lead them to a glorious victory – and I could feel his excitement, his anticipation, I felt it myself—

‘What in hell’s name are you doing?’

It broke the spell. I clambered instinctively to my feet, blinking through the haze. Pa – and the others behind him, Ma with Alta on her hip, everyone back from the fair already. Already . . . but it was getting dark.

‘Emmett, I asked what you were doing!’ But he didn’t wait for an answer before he plucked the book away from me. When he saw what it was his face hardened. ‘Where did you get this?’

A man, I wanted to say, just a man at the fair, he had dozens and they looked like boxes of jewels, in leather and gold . . . But when I saw Pa’s expression something shrivelled in my voice box and I couldn’t speak.

‘Robert? What . . .?’ Ma reached for it and then pulled away as if it had bitten her.

‘I’ll burn it.’

‘No!’ Ma let Alta slip staggering to the ground, and stumbled forward to catch Pa’s arm. ‘No, how could you? Bury it!’

‘It’s old, Hilda. They’d all be dead, years ago.’

‘You mustn’t. Just in case. Get rid of it. Throw it away.’

‘For someone else to find?’

‘You know you can’t burn it.’ For a moment they stared at each other, their faces strained. ‘Bury it. Somewhere safe.’

At last Pa gave a brief, curt nod. Alta gave a hiccup and started to whimper. Pa shoved the book at one of the farmhands. ‘Here. Package this up. I’ll give it to the gravedigger.’ Then he turned back to me. ‘Emmett,’ he said, ‘don’t ever let me see you with a book again. You understand?’

I didn’t. What had happened? I’d bought it, I hadn’t stolen it, but somehow I had done something unforgivable. I nodded, still reeling from the visions I’d seen. I’d been somewhere else, in another world.

'Good. You remember that,' Pa said.

Then he hit me.

Don't ever let me see you with a book again.

But now they were sending me to the binder; as though whatever danger Pa had warned me against had been replaced by something worse. As though now I *was* the danger.

I looked sideways. Alta was staring down at her feet. No, she didn't remember that day. No one had ever spoken about it again. No one had ever explained why books were shameful. Once, at school, someone had muttered something about old Lord Kent having a library; but when everyone snickered and rolled their eyes I didn't ask why that was so bad. *I'd* read a book: whatever was wrong with him, I was the same. Under everything, deep inside me, the shame was still there.

And I was afraid. It was a creeping, formless fear, like the mist that came off the river. It slid chilly tendrils round me and into my lungs. I didn't want to go anywhere near the binder; but I had to.

'Alta—'

'I have to go in,' she said, leaping to her feet. 'You'd better go up too, Em, you have to pack and it's a long way to go tomorrow, isn't it? Good night.' She scampered away across the yard, fiddling with her plait all the way so I couldn't glimpse her face. By the door she called again, 'See you tomorrow,' without looking round. Maybe it was the echo off the stable wall that made it sound so false.

Tomorrow.

I watched the moon until the fear grew too big for me. Then I went to my room and packed my things.

II

From the road, the bindery looked as if it was burning. The sun was setting behind us, and the red-gold blaze of the last sunlight was reflected in the windows. Under the dark thatch every pane was like a rectangle of flame, too steady to be fire but so bright I thought I could feel my palms prickle with the heat. It set off a shiver in my bones, as if I'd seen it in a dream.

I clutched the shabby sack in my lap and looked away. On the other side of us, under the setting sun, the marshes lay flat and endless: green speckled with bronze and brown, glinting with water. I could smell sodden grass and the day's warmth evaporating. There was a rank mouldering note under the scent of moisture, and the vast dying sky above us was paler than it should have been. My eyes ached, and my body was a map of stinging scratches from yesterday's work in the fields. I should have been there now, helping with the harvest, but instead Pa and I were bouncing along this rough, sticky road, in silence. We hadn't spoken since we set off before dawn, and there was still nothing to say. Words rose in my throat but they burst like marsh-bubbles, leaving nothing on my tongue but a faint taste of rot.

As we jolted along the final stretch of track to where it petered out in the long grass in front of the house I sneaked a look at Pa's face. The stubble on his chin was salted with white, and his eyes were sunken deeper than they'd been last spring. Everyone had grown older while I was ill; as if I'd woken up and found I'd slept for years.

We drew to a halt. 'We're here.'

A shudder went through me: I was either going to vomit or plead with Pa to take me home. I snatched the sack from my lap and jumped down, my knees nearly buckling when my feet hit the ground. There was a well-trodden path through the tufts of the grass to the front door of the house. I'd never been here before, but the off-key jangle of the bell was as familiar as a dream. I waited, so determined not to look back at Pa that the door shimmered and swayed.

'Emmett.' It was open, suddenly. For a moment all I took in was a pair of pale brown eyes, so pale the pupils were startlingly black. 'Welcome.'

I swallowed. She was old – painfully, skeletally old – and white-haired, her face as creased as paper and her lips almost the same colour as her cheeks; but she was as tall as me, and her eyes were as clear as Alta's. She wore a leather apron, and a shirt and trousers, like a man. The hand that beckoned me inside was thin but muscular, the veins looped across the tendons in blue strings.

'Seredith,' she said. 'Come in.'

I hesitated. It took me two heartbeats to understand that she'd told me her name.

'Come in.' She added, looking past me, 'Thank you, Robert.'

I hadn't heard Pa get down, but when I turned he was there at my shoulder. He coughed and muttered, 'We'll see you soon, Emmett, all right?'

'Pa—'

He didn't even glance in my direction. He gave the binder

a long helpless look; then he touched his forelock as if he didn't know what else to do, and strode back to the cart. I started to call out but a gust of wind snatched the words away, and he didn't turn. I watched him clamber up to his seat and click to the mare.

'Emmett.' Her voice dragged me back to her. 'Come in.' I could see that she wasn't used to saying anything three times.

'Yes.' I was holding my sack of belongings so tightly my fingers ached. She'd called Pa *Robert* as if she knew him. I took one step and then another. Now I was over the threshold and in a dark-panelled hall, with a staircase rising in front of me. A tall clock ticked. On the left, there was a half-open door and a glimpse of the kitchen beyond; on the right, another door led to—

My knees went weak, like my hamstrings had been cut. The nausea widened and expanded, chewing on my insides. I was feverish and freezing, struggling to keep my balance as the world spun. I'd been here before – only I hadn't—

'Oh, damn it,' the binder said, and reached out to take hold of me. 'All right, boy, breathe.'

'I'm fine,' I said, and was proud of how distinctly I'd shaped the consonants. Then it all went black.

When I woke, there was sunlight dancing on the ceiling in a billowing net, water-wrinkles that overlapped the narrow rectangle of brightness that spilt between the curtains. The whitewashed walls looked faintly green, like the flesh of an apple, marred here and there with the solid froth of damp. Outside a bird whistled over and over again as if it was calling a name.

The binder's house. I sat up, my heart suddenly thumping. But there was nothing to be afraid of, not yet; nothing here but myself and the room and the reflected sunshine. I found myself listening for the sounds of animals, the constant

restlessness of a farmyard, but all I heard was the bird and the soft rattle of wind in the thatch. The faded curtains billowed and a wider band of light flared across the ceiling. The pillows smelt of lavender.

Last night . . .

I let my eyes rest on the opposite wall, following the bump and curve of a crack in the plaster. After I'd fainted, all I could remember was shadows and fear. Nightmares. In this clean daylight they seemed a long time ago; but they'd been bad, dragging me over and under the surface of sleep. I'd almost fought clear of them, once or twice, but then the weight of my own limbs had pulled me under again, into a choking black blindness like tar. A faint taste like burnt oil still lingered in the back of my mouth. They hadn't been as bad as that for days. The draught raised goose-pimples on my skin. Fainting like that, into Seredith's arms . . . It must have been the fatigue of the journey, the headache, the sun in my eyes, and the sight of Pa driving away without a backwards glance.

My trousers and shirt were hanging on the back of a single chair. I got up and dragged them on with clumsy fingers, trying not to imagine Seredith undressing me. At least I was still wearing drawers. Apart from the chair and the bed, the room was mostly bare: a chest at the foot of the bed, a table next to the window, and the pale, flapping curtains. There were no pictures, and no looking-glass. I didn't mind that. At home I'd looked away when I walked past my reflection in the hall. Here I was invisible; here I could be part of the emptiness.

The whole house was quiet. When I walked out on to the landing I could hear the birds calling across the marsh, and the tick of the clock in the hall below, and a dull banging from somewhere else; but underneath it all was a silence so deep the sounds skittered over it like pebbles on

ice. The breeze stroked the back of my neck and I caught myself glancing over my shoulder, as if there was someone there. The bare room dipped into gloom for a second as a cloud crossed the sun; then it shone brighter than ever, and the corner of one curtain snapped in the breeze like a flag.

I almost turned and climbed back into bed, like a child. But this house was where I lived, now. I couldn't stay in my room for the rest of my life.

The stairs creaked under my feet. The banister was polished by years of use, but the dust spun thickly in the sunlight and the whitewashed plaster was bubbling off the wall. Older than our farmhouse, older than our village. How many binders had lived here? And when this binder – Seredith – died . . . One day, would this house be mine? I walked down the stairs slowly, as if I was afraid they'd give way.

The banging stopped, and I heard footsteps. Seredith opened one of the doors into the hall. 'Ah, Emmett.' She didn't ask me if I'd slept well. 'Come into the workshop.'

I followed her. Something about the way she'd said my name made me clench my jaw, but she was my master now – no, my mistress, *no*, my master – and I had to obey her.

At the door of the workshop she paused. For an instant I thought she'd step back to let me go first; but then she strode across the room and bundled something swiftly into a cloth before I could see what it was. 'Come in, boy.'

I stepped over the doorsill. It was a long, low room, full of morning light from the row of tall windows. Workbenches ran along both sides of the room and between them were other things that I didn't have names for yet. I took in the battered shine of old wood, the sharp glint of a blade, metal handles dark with grease . . . but there was too much to look at, and my eyes couldn't stay on one thing for long. There was a stove at the far end of the room, surrounded by tiles

in russet and ochre and green. Above my head papers hung over a wire, rich plain colours interspersed with pages patterned like stone or feathers or leaves. I caught myself reaching up to touch the nearest one: there was something about those vivid kingfisher-blue wings hanging above my head . . .

The binder put her bundle down and came towards me, pointing at things. 'Lay press. Nipping press. Finishing press. Plan chest – behind you, boy – tools in that cupboard and the next one along, leather and cloth next to that. Waste paper in that basket, ready for use. Brushes on that shelf, glue in there.'

I couldn't take it all in. After the first effort to remember I gave up and waited for her to finish. At last she narrowed her eyes at me and said, 'Sit.'

I felt strange. But not sick, exactly, and not afraid. It was as if something inside me was waking up and moving. The looping grain of the bench in front of me was like a map of somewhere I used to know.

'It's a funny feeling, isn't it, boy?'

'What?'

She squinted at me, one of her milky-tea eyes bleached almost white by the sun on the side of her face. 'It gets you, all this. When you're a binder born – which you are, boy.'

I didn't know what she meant. At least . . . There was something *right* about this room, something that – unexpectedly – made my heart lift. As if, after a heatwave, I could smell rain coming – or like glimpsing my old self, from before I got ill. I hadn't belonged anywhere for so long, and now this room, with its smell of leather and glue, welcomed me.

'You don't know much about books, do you?' Seredith said.

'No.'

'Think I'm a witch?'

I stammered, 'What? Of course n—' but she waved me to silence, while a smile tugged at the corner of her mouth.

'It's all right. Think I've got this old without knowing what people say about me? About us.' I looked away, but she went on as if she hadn't noticed. 'Your parents kept books away from you, didn't they? And now you don't know what you're doing here.'

'You asked for me. Didn't you?'

She seemed not to hear. 'Don't worry, lad. It's a craft like any other. And a good one. Binding's as old as the alphabet – older. People don't understand it, but why should they?' She grimaced. 'At least the Crusade's over. You're too young to remember that. Your good fortune.'

There was a silence. I didn't understand how binding could be older than books, but she was staring into the middle distance as if I wasn't there. A breeze set the wire swinging, and the coloured papers flapped. She blinked and scratched her chin, and her eyes came back to mine. 'Tomorrow I'll start you on some chores. Tidying, cleaning the brushes, that sort of thing. Maybe get you paring leather.'

I nodded. I wanted to be alone here. I wanted to have time to look properly at the colours, to go through the cupboards and heft the weight of the tools. The whole room was singing to me, inviting me in.

'You have a look round if you want.' But when I started to get to my feet she gestured at me as if I'd disobeyed her. 'Not now. Later.' She picked up her bundle and turned to a little door in the corner that I hadn't noticed. It took three keys in three locks to open it. I glimpsed stairs going down into the dark before she put the bundle on a shelf just inside the doorway, turned back into the room and pulled the door shut behind her. She locked it without looking at me, shielding the keys with her body. 'You won't go down there for a long while, boy.' I didn't know if she was warning or reassuring

me. 'Don't go near anything that's locked, and you'll be all right.'

I took a deep breath. The room was still singing to me, but the sweetness had a shrill note now. Under this tidy, sunlit workshop, those steep steps led down into darkness. I could feel that hollowness under my feet, as if the floor was starting to give. A second ago I'd felt safe. No. I'd felt . . . *enticed*. It had turned sour with that glimpse of the dark; like the moment a dream turns into a nightmare.

'Don't fight it, boy.'

She knew, then. It was real, I wasn't imagining it. I looked up, half scared to meet her gaze; but she was staring across the marsh, her eyes slitted against the glare. She looked older than anyone I'd ever seen.

I stood up. The sun was still shining but the light in the room seemed tarnished. I didn't want to look in the cupboards any more, or pull the rolls of cloth out into the light. But I made myself stroll past the cupboards, noting the labels, the dull brass knobs, and the corner of leather that poked a green tongue round the edge of a door. I turned and walked down the aisle of space, where the floor was trodden smooth by years of footsteps, of people coming and going.

I came to another door. It was the twin of the first one, set into the wall on the other side of the tiled stove. It had three locks, too. But people went in and out – I could tell that from the floorboards, the well-trodden path where even the dust lay more lightly. What did they come for? What did she do, the binder, beyond that door?

Blackness glittered in the corners of my eyes. Someone was whispering without words.

'All right,' she said. Somehow she was beside me now, pulling me down on to a stool, putting weight on the back of my neck. 'Put your head between your knees.'

'I – can't—'

'Hush, boy. It's the illness. It'll pass.'

It was real. I was sure. A fierce, insatiable, *wrongness* ready to suck me dry, make me into something else. But she'd forced my head down between my knees and held me steady, and the certainty drained away. I was ill. This was the same fear that had made me attack Ma and Pa . . . I clenched my jaw. I couldn't give in to it. If I let myself slip . . .

'That's good. Good lad.'

Meaningless words, as though I was an animal. At last I straightened up, grimacing as the blood spun in my head.

'Better?'

I nodded, fighting the acid creep of nausea. My hands were twitching as though I had the palsy. I curled them into fists and imagined trying to use a knife with fingers I couldn't trust. Stupid. I'd lose a thumb. I was too ill to be here – and yet . . . 'Why?' I said, and the word came out like a yelp. 'Why did you choose me? Why *me*?'

The binder turned her face to the window again and stared into the sunlight.

'Was it because you were sorry for me? Poor broken-minded Emmett who can't work in the fields any more? At least here he'll be safe and solitary and won't upset his family—'

'Is that what you think?'

'What else could it be? You don't know me. Why else would you choose someone who's ill?'

'Why else, indeed?' There was an edge to her voice, but then she sighed and looked at me. 'Do you remember when it began? The fever?'

'I think I was . . . ' I took a breath, trying to steady my mind. 'I'd been to Castleford, and I was on my way back – when I woke up I was at home—' I stopped. I didn't want to think about the gaps and nightmares, daytime terrors,

sudden appalled flashes of lucidity when I knew where I was . . . The whole summer was ragged, fever-eaten, more hole than memory.

'You were here, lad. You fell ill here. Your father came to get you. Do you remember that?'

'What? No. What was I doing here?'

'It's on the road to Castleford,' she said, with a faint smile. 'But with the fever . . . you remember it, and you don't. That's partly what's making you ill.'

'I can't stay here. This place – those locked doors. It'll make me worse.'

'It will pass. Trust me. And it will pass more quickly and more cleanly here than anywhere else you could go.'

There was a strange note in her voice, as though she was almost ashamed.

A new kind of fear tugged at me. I was going to have to stay here and be afraid, until I got better; I didn't want that, I wanted to run away . . .

She glanced at the locked door. 'In a way,' she said, 'I suppose I did choose you because you're ill. But not in the way you think. Not out of pity, Emmett.'

Abruptly she swung round and pushed past me, and I was left staring at the dust that swirled in the empty doorway.

She was lying. I'd heard it in her voice.

She *did* pity me.

But perhaps, after all, she was right. There was something in the silence of the old house, the low rooms filled with steady autumn sunlight and the still order of the workshop, that loosened the dark knots inside me. Day after day went by, until the place wasn't new or strange to me any more; then week after week . . . I learnt things by heart: the crinkling reflections on my ceiling, the gappy seams in the patchwork quilt on my bed, the different creak of each tread

under my foot when I came downstairs. Then there was the workshop, the gleam of the tiles around the stove, the saffron-and-earth scent of tea, the opalescent gloop of well-mixed paste in a glass jar . . . The hours passed slowly, full of small, solid details; at home, in the busyness of farm life, I'd never had the time to sit and stare, or pay attention to the way a tool looked, or how well it was made, before I used it. Here the clock in the hall dredged up seconds like stones and dropped them again into the pool of the day, letting each ripple widen before the next one fell.

The tasks Seredith gave me in the workshop were simple and small. She was a good teacher, clear and patient. I learnt to make endpapers, to pare leather, to finish with blind or gold tooling. She must have been disappointed at the way I fumbled – how I'd paste a page to my own fingers, or gouge a square of pristine calfskin with a sharp centre-tool – but she said nothing, except, occasionally, 'Throw it away and start again.' While I practised she'd go for a walk, or write letters or lists of supplies to be ordered by the next post, sitting at the bench behind me; or she'd cook, and the house would fill with the smell of meat and pastry. We shared the rest of the chores, but after a morning bent over painstaking work I was glad to chop wood or fill the copper for laundry. When I felt weak I reminded myself that Seredith had done it all on her own, before I came.

But everything I did – everything I saw her do – was preparing materials or practising finishing; I never saw a block of pages, or a complete book. One evening when we were eating dinner in the kitchen I said, 'Seredith, where are the books?'

'In the vault,' she said. 'Once they're finished, they have to be kept out of harm's way.'

'But—' I stopped, thinking of the farm, and how hard we all worked, and how it had never been enough; I'd argued

continually with Pa, asking for every new invention to make it as productive as possible. 'Why don't we make more? Surely, the more we make, the more you can sell?'

She lifted her head as if she was about to say something sharp; then she shook her head. 'We don't make books to sell, boy. *Selling* books is wrong. Your parents were right about that, at least.'

'Then – I don't understand—'

'It's the binding that matters. The craft of it, the dignity. Say a woman comes to me for a book. I make a book for her. For *her*, you understand? Not to be gawped at by strangers.' She slurped soup from her spoon. 'There are binders who only think to turn a profit, who care about nothing but their bank balance, who, yes, sell books – but you will never be one of them.'

'But – no one's come to you . . .' I stared at her, thoroughly confused. 'When am I going to start using what you're teaching me? I'm learning all these things, but I haven't even—'

'You'll learn more soon,' she said, and stood up to get more bread. 'Let's take things slowly, Emmett. You've been ill. All in good time.'

All in good time. If my mother had said it, I would have snorted; but I stayed silent, because somehow it *was* a good time. Gradually the nightmares grew fewer, and the lurking daytime shadows receded. Sometimes I could stand for a long time without feeling dizzy; sometimes my eyes were as clear as they used to be. And after a few weeks I didn't even look twice at the locked doors at the end of the workshop. The benches and tools and presses murmured comfort to me: everything was useful, everything was in its place. It didn't matter what it was all for, except that a glue brush was for glue, and a paring knife for paring. Sometimes,

when I paused to gauge the thickness of a scrap of leather – in places it had to be thinner than a fingernail or it would fold badly – I would look up from the dark scurf of leather shavings and feel that I was in the right place. I knew what I was meant to be doing, and I was doing it – even if I was only practising. I *could* do it. That hadn't happened since before I was ill.

I missed home, of course. I wrote letters, and was half glad and half miserable to read their replies. I would have liked to be at the harvest supper, and the dance; or rather, I *would* have liked it, before . . . I read that letter over and over again, before I crumpled it up and sat looking out past my lamp-flame into the blue dusk, trying to ignore the ache in my throat. But the part of me that yearned for music and noise was the old, healthy part; I knew that silence, work and rest were what I needed now. Even if, sometimes, it felt so lonely I could hardly bear it.

The quiet days wore on, as if we were waiting for something.

When was it? Perhaps I'd been there a fortnight or a month, the first day I remember clearly. It was a bright, cold morning, and I'd been practising gold tooling on a few odd scraps of leather, concentrating hard. It was difficult, and when I peeled away the foil to see an uneven, indistinct print of my name I cursed and rolled my neck to ease the ache out of it. Something moved outside, and I looked up. The sun dazzled me, and for a moment all I saw was a shape outlined against the light. I narrowed my eyes and the glare softened. A boy – no, a young man, my age or maybe older – with dark hair and eyes and a pale, gaunt face, watching me.

I jumped so much I nearly burnt myself on the tool I was using. How long had he been there, watching me with those black stony eyes? I put the tool carefully back on to the brazier, cursing the sudden tremor that made me as

clumsy as an old man. Who did he think he was, lurking there, spying?

He knocked on the glass. I turned my back on him, but when I looked over my shoulder he was still there. He gestured sideways to the little back door that opened on to the marshes. He wanted me to let him in.

I imagined him sinking gently into the mud, up to his knees, then his waist. I couldn't bear the thought of speaking to him. I hadn't seen anyone except Seredith for days; but it wasn't just that, it was his stare, so steady it felt like a finger pressing between my eyes. I kept my face averted from the window as I swept the parings of leather to the ground, tidied the scraps of gold foil into their box, and loosened the screw of the hot type-holder so that I could tap the letters out on to the bench. In a minute they'd be cool enough to put back into their tray. A spacer, like a tiny brass splinter, fell to the floor and I bent to pick it up.

When I straightened to flick it on to the bench, his shadow still hadn't moved. I sucked the sting out of my burnt finger and conceded defeat.

The back door had swollen – when was the last time it had been used? – and stuck in the frame. When I managed to get it open my heart was drumming with exertion. We stared at each other. At last I said, 'What do you want?' It was a stupid question; he clearly wasn't a tradesman with a delivery, or a friend of Seredith's here for a visit.

'I . . .' He looked away. Behind him the marsh shone like an old mirror, tarnished and mottled but still bright. When he turned back to me his face was set. 'I've come to see the binder.'

I wanted to shut the door in his face. But he was a customer – the first one since I'd arrived – and I was only an apprentice. I stepped back, opening the door wider.

'Thanks.' But he said it with a sort of effort, and stood

very still on the step, as if walking past me would soil his clothes. I turned and went back into the workshop: now he was inside he was no longer my problem. He could ring the bell or call for Seredith. I certainly wasn't going to stop work for his sake. He hadn't apologised for disturbing me, or watching me.

I heard him hesitate, and follow.

I made my way back to the bench and bent over the piece of tooling I'd been working on. I rubbed at one of the words to see if I could make the letters a bit clearer. The tool had been too hot on the second try – or I'd let it linger too long – and the gold had blurred; the third was a little better but I hadn't pressed evenly. There was a chilly draught from the open workshop door, and quiet footsteps. He was behind me. I'd only looked at him for a second, but I could still see his face as clearly as if it was reflected in the window: white, smudged with shadows, with red-rimmed eyes. A deathbed face, a face no one would want to look at.

'Emmett?'

My heart skipped a beat, because he shouldn't have known my name.

Then I realised: the tooling. *EMMETT FARMER*. It must have been just large enough for him to read from a few feet away. I picked up the leather and slammed it over, face down. Too late, of course. He gave me a crooked, empty smile, as if he was proud of noticing, as if he was pleased that I'd blenched. He started to say something else.

I said, 'I don't know if the binder is taking commissions at the moment.' But he went on looking at me with that odd, thirsty half-smile. 'If that's what you've come for. And she doesn't sell books.'

'How long have you been here?'

'Since harvest-time.' He had no right to ask; I didn't know why I answered, except that I wanted him to leave me alone.

'You're her apprentice?'

'Yes.'

He looked round at the workshop, and back at me. There was something too slow, too deliberate in his look to be mere curiosity. 'Is it a – good life?' A twist of contempt in his voice. 'Here, alone with her?'

The sweet scorched smell of the tools on the stove was making my head ache. I reached for the smallest, an intricate centre-tool that never came out properly in gold. I wondered how it would feel to bring it down on the back of my other hand. Or his.

'Emmett—' He made it sound like a curse.

I put the tool down and reached for a new piece of leather. 'I have to get on with this.'

'I'm sorry.'

Silence. I cut the leather into a square and fixed it to a piece of board. He was watching me. I fumbled and nearly caught my thumb with the scalpel. It felt as if there were invisible threads tangled between my fingers. I turned to him. 'Do you want me to go and find Sere— the binder?'

'I – not yet. Not just yet.'

He was afraid. The realisation took me by surprise. For an instant I saw past my own resentment. He was as frightened and miserable as anyone I'd ever met. He was desperate. He stank of it, like fever. But I couldn't pity him, because there was something else, too, in the way he looked at me. Hatred. He seemed to hate me.

'They didn't want me to come,' he said. 'My father, I mean. He thinks binding is for other people, not us. If he knew I was here . . .' He grimaced. 'But it'll be too late when I get home. He won't punish me. How could he?'

I didn't answer. I didn't want to wonder what he meant.

'I wasn't sure. I didn't think . . .' He cleared his throat. 'I

heard she'd chosen you and I thought I'd come and – but I didn't think I wanted – until I saw you there . . .'

'Me?'

He took a breath and reached out to brush a speck of dust off the nipping press. His forefinger trembled, and I could see the pulse beating at the base of his neck. He laughed, but not as if anything was funny. 'You don't care, do you? Why should you? You've got no idea who I am.'

'No, I haven't.'

'Emmett,' he burst out, stumbling on the syllables, 'please – look at me, just for a second, please. I don't understand—'

I had the sensation that I was moving, the world racing past me too quickly to see, the speed drowning out his words. I blinked and tried to hold on, but a sickening current lifted me up and whirled me downstream. He was still talking but the words sang past me and away.

'What's going on?' Seredith's voice cut him off.

He spun round. Red crept over his cheeks and forehead. 'I'm here for a binding.'

'What are you doing in the workshop? Emmett, you should have called me at once.'

I tried to master the nausea. 'I thought—'

'It wasn't Emmett's fault, it was mine,' he said. 'My name is Lucian Darnay. I did write.'

'Lucian Darnay.' Seredith frowned. A strange, wary expression swept over her face. 'And how long have you been talking to Em— to my apprentice? Never mind.' Her eyes went to me before he could answer. 'Emmett?' she said, more softly. 'Are you – well?'

The shadows swirled round me, blacking out the corners of my vision; but I nodded.

'Good. Mr Darnay, come with me.'

'Yes,' he said, but he didn't move. I could feel his desperation pulsing out in dark waves.

'Come,' Seredith repeated, and at last he turned and moved towards her. She reached for her keys and started to unlock the door at the far end of the workshop; but she didn't look at what she was doing, she looked at me.

The door swung open. I caught my breath. I didn't know what I had expected, but there was a glimpse of a scrubbed wooden table, two chairs, a hazy square of sun on the floor. It should have been a relief, but a tight claw closed round my chest. It looked so tidy, so austere – and yet . . .

'Go in, Mr Darnay. Sit down. Wait for me.'

He drew in a long, slow breath. He glanced at me once, the fierceness in his eyes as unreadable as a riddle. Then he walked to the door and through it. When he sat down he kept his back very straight, as if he was trying not to shake.

'Emmett, are you all right? He should never have . . .' Her eyes searched my face for a reaction they didn't find. 'Go and lie down.'

'I'm fine.'

'Then go and mix up a jar of paste in the kitchen.' She watched me walk past her. I had to make an effort to take smooth steps and not stagger. Black wings were beating around me and it was hard to see where I was going. That room, that quiet little room . . .

I sat down on the stairs. The light lay on the floorboards in a silvery lattice. The shape of it made me think of something – half-remembered nightmares, a flash of Lucian Darnay's face, his hungry black eyes. The darkness hung in front of me for a long time, like a fog; only there was something new in it, a flash like teeth, sharper than I could bear. Not hatred – but something that would have torn me apart if it could.

Then it closed round me, and I was gone.