THE DOOR IN THE BASEMENT

Book One of the Through-Room Trilogy

A novel

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Stranger, if you would open me, set the indicator only to a place you have already been.

— Latin inscription, found on the wall of a sealed cellar in a house in the Welsh Marches, November 2025

PART ONE

The Door

CHAPTER ONE

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The House on Brittle Lane

Henry Adler bought the house at the end of October, two days before his thirty-seventh birthday, and three months and eleven days after the date on which Clara had asked him to sign the papers, which he had signed without argument because he had run out of arguments by then. The house was at the end of Brittle Lane in a small market town on the Welsh side of the border, and it was, in the careful estimate of the estate agent who showed it to him, the worst house in the agency's catalogue.

The estate agent had told him this in the car on the way up the hill, in the small embarrassed voice of a young man who had been instructed by his manager to be honest with this particular client because this particular client had asked very specifically for an honest description. She had said: "Mr. Adler, the house is genuinely awful. It is structurally sound, by the survey, but only just; the roof needs replacing, the wiring is from the nineteen-fifties, the plumbing is from earlier than that, and the basement floods in March. The garden is mostly bramble. The neighbours are reasonable. The price reflects the work." The agent had then driven him the last quarter-mile in a silence Henry had appreciated.

The house had been built in 1672 and had been added to in 1748 and again in 1819 and finally, with some considerable disregard for the

previous three centuries of building practice, in 1962. It had been owned, since 1981, by an elderly man called Pugh, who had not, by the agent's careful account, lived in it for some years before his death; the house had been let to a series of short tenants and had been finally vacant since the previous January. The estate had been settled by a solicitor in Hereford. There had been no surviving family. The price was, by Henry's careful sums on the train up that morning, exactly the amount of his share of the sale of the flat in Hampstead, minus the small careful margin he had been told by his accountant to keep for taxes.

He had walked through the rooms in the order the agent had pointed him through them. He had looked at the kitchen, which had a single iron range and a stone-flagged floor and no usable cabinets. He had looked at the parlour, which had a fireplace large enough to stand in and a small bay window onto the garden, which was, as advertised, mostly bramble. He had looked at the two front rooms upstairs, both of which had been wallpapered in a pattern he did not recognise but suspected dated from the same decade as the wiring. He had looked, last, at the back room on the first floor, which had a small north-facing window and a single shelf of paperback novels left behind by some previous occupant, and which had been, by the agent's apology, used for storage.

He had said, at the foot of the stairs, that he would take it.

The agent had looked at him for a long moment. The agent had then said, very carefully: "Mr. Adler. Do you want to see the basement first?"

Henry had said yes.

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The basement was reached by a narrow stone stair behind a door in the kitchen, which the agent had to wrestle with for some seconds because the wood had swollen at the hinges. The stair went down twelve steps.

At the bottom of the stair was a single low-ceilinged room with a flagged floor and three rough whitewashed walls and a fourth wall of unpainted brick. There was a single naked bulb on a length of cloth-covered flex. The agent had pulled the cord. The bulb had come on with the small reluctant glow of a bulb that had not been switched on in some considerable time.

The basement smelled of damp stone and of the river that ran, four streets over, behind the church.

Henry had stood at the foot of the stair and had looked, slowly, around the room.

It had been, by the careful arithmetic of the house above it, smaller than it should have been. The footprint of the house was perhaps thirty feet by twenty. The basement was perhaps fifteen by twenty. The remaining fifteen by twenty was, by the simple geometry of where the brick wall stood, behind the brick wall.

He had not, at the time, said anything about this to the agent. He had asked, instead, whether the basement was the part that flooded. The agent had said yes. Henry had said: "I shall sort the flooding before anything else." The agent had nodded, in the manner of a young man who had been told that a problem was someone else's now, and had led him back up the stairs.

They had stood in the kitchen for a moment longer. The agent had said: "Mr. Adler. Forgive me. I do not, in my own life, work on houses. I shall ask anyway. The basement does not, when you look at it, seem the right size to you."

Henry had said: "No. It is about half the right size."

The agent had looked at him for a long moment.

"I had thought," the agent had said, "that it was perhaps just me. I shall not, in my paperwork, mention it. I should appreciate it if you did not mention it to my manager."

"I shall not," Henry had said.

They had, between them, in that small careful exchange in the kitchen of a derelict house on a hill at the end of Brittle Lane, made the first of the small careful agreements that would, in the months that came, change everything.

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He had completed on the third of November.

He had not moved in at once. He had spent the first week sleeping on a camp bed in the front parlour, which was the room with the smallest number of leaks; he had eaten, in those first days, on a small folding camping table, from a single saucepan he had cooked over a propane burner because the gas had not yet been reconnected. The cold-water tap in the kitchen worked. The electricity worked, after a fashion, in two of the eight ceiling fittings. He had bought, on the second day, a small electric kettle and a thicker sleeping bag and a paperback copy of a book on Welsh vernacular architecture that he had thought might be useful and which had, in the end, told him only that the house was a very poor example of the style.

He had begun the work in the second week.

He had begun, as he had told the agent, with the basement. He had cleared the small piles of broken plaster and the rotted wooden crate that had been there since at least the seventies, and he had laid down two long sheets of plastic against the wall that flooded, and he had set up two industrial dehumidifiers from the hire shop in town. He had been a

structural engineer for fourteen years before the redundancy at the consultancy, and he knew, in a way many homeowners did not, how a damp basement was actually solved. He had laid the foundation for solving it on the second day. He had set himself, in his careful schedule on the kitchen table, to begin on the fourth day on the matter of the wall.

The wall, by then, he had measured twice.

His measurements had agreed. The wall was about three feet thick. The space behind it was perhaps fifteen feet by twenty by seven feet high. The space had been, by the construction of the wall, sealed for some considerable time; he had examined the mortar with a small torch at three points, and the mortar had been hand-mixed lime, of the kind that had not been used in domestic construction in this country since perhaps 1840. The wall was older than the kitchen above it. The wall might, by his careful reading of the survey notes from the estate, be older than the 1672 house.

He had sat on the bottom step of the basement stair on the evening of the third day, with a mug of tea in his hand, and he had looked at the wall, and he had thought, as he had thought several times in the last two months, that Clara had been right about one thing, which was that he needed a project.

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CHAPTER TWO

Mara

On the morning of the fourth day, Henry walked into town for breakfast and met the woman who would, in the months that came, be the second person to know about the door.

He had not, when he had walked into the small café on the square, intended to meet anyone. He had intended to eat a bacon roll and to drink a coffee and to consult, on his phone, the local builders' merchant's stock list for the particular kind of lime mortar he was going to need. He had ordered the bacon roll. He had drunk the coffee. He had been working through the stock list when the woman at the next table had said, in the small careful voice of a person who had been deciding for ten minutes whether to speak: "You're the chap who bought Pugh's place."

Henry had looked up. The woman was perhaps his own age, in a heavy wool coat over work clothes, with dark hair tied back and a face that had been weathered, by the look of it, by a fair number of years of outdoor work. She had a mug of tea in front of her and a small notebook open beside it, and she had set down her pencil at the moment of speaking.

He had said: "Yes."

"I'm Mara Lewis. I do most of the building work in this end of town. I was due to give Pugh's solicitor a quote on the place last spring, only they sold it before I could. I've not, in the small way of small towns, been able to stop wondering whether you'd be looking for help. I'm sorry to introduce myself across the table. There isn't, in this town, another way to do it."

Henry had thought, for a moment, that he would say no.

He had been intending, in his first three months at the house, to do the work alone. He had wanted to do the work alone. He had been telling himself, since the summer, that solitary work in a derelict house was the small careful next thing for a man who had just been left by his wife of nine years; he had not, in the train up that morning, allowed any other reading of the project. He had been clear with himself on this point.

He had also looked, in the four days since he had arrived, at the actual condition of the roof.

He had said: "I shall need help with the roof."

Mara had nodded once. She had said: "Yes. I had a look from the bottom of the lane on Monday. The roof is one job. The chimneys are another. The flashing's been bodged twice and is now beyond the third bodge. I should think a fortnight on the roof, for two of us, if I bring my apprentice. I've a slate man in Hay we can use for the front pitch. What's your timeline?"

"I have, at the moment, no timeline."

She had looked at him for a long moment over her tea.

"Right," she had said. "That's the best answer I've had from a client in seven years. We can do the roof in November and December, weather permitting. I'll write you up a quote this afternoon. It's a fair quote. I do

not, in the small way of this town, gouge people from London. If you want references I can give you three on this street and four on the next."

"I shall not need references."

"You should, by rights, ask for them."

"I have decided not to."

She had looked at him for another long moment. Then she had said: "All right. I'll bring the quote round at four. Will you be in?"

"I shall be in."

She had returned to her notebook. He had returned to his phone. They had not, in those first ten minutes, said anything further; but Henry had, by the time he left the café, decided that he was glad she had spoken.

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Mara had brought the quote at four. The quote had been fair. Henry had signed it on the kitchen table by candlelight, because the kitchen still had no working bulb. Mara had looked, in the small candle-light of an October afternoon, at the kitchen and at the cold range and at the camp bed visible in the parlour through the open door, and she had said: "Mr. Adler. Have you got someone coming for the wiring?"

"Henry, please."

"Henry. The wiring."

"I had not yet rung the electrician."

"Right. I'll send Geraint round on Monday. He's done my last six rewires. He's expensive but he doesn't, in the small way of bad electricians, burn anyone's house down. You'll want the wiring done before you do anything else, because you cannot, in any sensible order,

plaster a wall that is going to be chased for cables in three months. Are you living here, in the meantime?"

"Yes."

She had looked at the camp bed again.

"My mother has a small cottage to let down by the river. She lets it for a hundred and twenty a week in the winter. She'd take a hundred for someone she knew. I'm not saying you can't sleep on a camp bed for three months. I'm saying you don't have to."

"Thank you, Mara. I shall, for the moment, sleep on the camp bed. I have decided, for reasons that are perhaps not very interesting, to live in the house while I work on it."

She had looked at him for a long moment. Then she had nodded once.

"All right," she had said. "I'll not press. The offer stays open. I shall, in the meantime, send Geraint on Monday and bring my apprentice on Tuesday for the scaffold. Henry. May I ask you a question."

"Yes."

"The basement."

He had been very still for a moment.

She had said, carefully: "I went down with the agent in July. He was showing it round to a couple from Birmingham who didn't bite. I went because I thought I'd be doing the work. The basement isn't the right size. I've not, since July, been able to stop wondering about it. I do not, in the ordinary course of my work, find houses with rooms in them that aren't on the plans. I am asking you because you're the new owner and because you have, by the look of you, also noticed."

Henry had set down his pen.

"I have noticed."

"Do you, in your plans, propose to open it?"

"I do."

"When?"

"As soon as the dehumidifiers have done their work. Perhaps a week."

Mara had been quiet for a moment. Then she had said: "I am not, in any way, going to ask you to share whatever's in there. The house is yours. The wall is yours. I shall, however, ask one small thing, which is that you do not open the wall alone. Not on the first day. I've been around old houses my whole working life. I have seen a sealed cellar twice. Both times there was a reason it had been sealed. Once it was rats. Once it was a body. I am asking you, as a structural matter and as a courtesy to the person you will, on opening the wall, possibly find, to have a second person present when you take the first brick out. It does not have to be me. It can be the postman. It only has to be someone."

Henry had thought about this.

He had said: "It can be you."

Mara had nodded once.

"Tuesday, then," she had said. "After the scaffold. Half past four. Bring a torch."

She had gathered her notebook and her keys. At the door she had turned and had said: "Henry. I shall not, in the small way of this town, mention this to anyone. I should appreciate the same courtesy."

"You shall have it."

She had gone.

Henry had stood at the kitchen window for some minutes, looking down the lane in the small grey dusk of a November afternoon, and he had understood, in the careful way of a man who had not, in the previous three months, made a single new acquaintance, that he had just made one.

CHAPTER THREE

The Wall

The wall came down on the Tuesday afternoon, in the dim yellow light of two work lamps and one head-torch and the small careful patience of two people who had decided, between them, to do the work properly.

Mara had arrived at half past four as she had said. She had not, when she had arrived, brought tools; she had brought, instead, a thermos of tea and a paper bag of buttered scones from the café on the square, and she had set them on the bottom step of the basement stair as a small careful offering against what, by her own clear reading, was likely to be a long evening. She had brought her apprentice up to the kitchen for tea before they came down. Henry had not asked the apprentice's name, which had been polite of him; the apprentice had not, by Mara's small private gesture in the doorway, been intended to be told about the wall. The apprentice had drunk a mug of tea. The apprentice had gone home at five.

Mara had come down at ten past five. She had been wearing, by then, a pair of work boots and a heavy canvas jacket and a head-torch she had already switched off. Henry had been at the wall with the small careful pile of his tools: a club hammer, a brick bolster, a small geological pick, a dust mask, a pair of work goggles, and a roll of black plastic that he had

set out on the floor in case there was, on the other side of the wall, anything that he wished to lay on the plastic rather than on the floor.

Mara had looked at the plastic. She had said: "You are an organised man, Henry."

"I am a methodical man. I am not, in the deeper sense, organised."

"Methodical will do, this evening."

She had set down her tools. They had begun.

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The wall had three courses of brick.

The outer course had been recent — perhaps mid-Victorian by the look of the bricks themselves, although Henry had not seen the like in any of the local houses he had walked past, and the bond had been a kind he had not seen used since a job in Norfolk in 2012. The middle course had been older. The bricks had been hand-made, irregular, with the small careful firing scars of a kiln that had not been a modern kiln. They had measured, by Henry's careful tape, slightly larger than a Tudor brick and slightly smaller than a Roman one. He had not, in his fourteen years as a structural engineer, ever seen bricks of this size.

The inner course had not been brick at all. It had been a single layer of small flat stones, set in a lime mortar that was, by Henry's careful inspection of a sample under his torch, not lime mortar of any kind he had ever seen. The mortar had small flecks in it that, in the torchlight, did not behave like flecks of mineral in mortar. They reflected, very faintly, in directions the torch had not pointed.

Mara had looked at the inner course for a long time. She had said: "Henry."

"Yes."

"I do not, in my profession, often say this. I shall say it now. I have never seen a wall like this. I do not, in particular, know what the inner mortar is made of. I should, if you do not object, take a small sample home in a jam jar and not, in any way, send it to a laboratory. I should like to look at it on my kitchen table tomorrow morning, by myself, with a magnifying glass, and to think about it."

"I do not object."

"Thank you."

She had not, however, taken the sample at that moment. She had set the jam jar aside on the lower step. She had picked up her bolster. She had said: "We should, I think, see what is behind it first. The sample will keep."

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They had worked for two hours.

The outer course had come down in twenty minutes, in the small clean way of Victorian brick, with each brick coming out almost whole and being set, by Mara's small careful method, in a neat pile against the opposite wall. The middle course had taken an hour. The hand-made bricks had not come out cleanly; they had come out in pieces, in the small reluctant way of old work, with the lime mortar holding them in a way modern mortar did not. Henry had taken two of the largest fragments and had set them on the plastic for keeping. He had not, at that point, been able to say why.

The inner stone course had come out, in the end, easily.

It had been the easiest of the three. The stones had been laid in a single careful layer, edge to edge, with the strange mortar only between them and only along the edges. When Henry had set the bolster against

the first stone and had tapped, lightly, with the hammer, the stone had not so much come out as moved aside; the mortar had not held it, on the bolster's tap, the way mortar held stone. It had let the stone go.

Henry had looked at Mara. Mara had looked at Henry. Neither of them had said anything. Henry had set the stone, very carefully, on the plastic.

They had taken out the rest of the stones in the next twenty minutes. None of them had resisted. The mortar had, by the time they were finished, not been lying on the floor in the small dusty heaps in which old mortar usually lay; it had been lying in small careful piles that had not, by Henry's torch, looked like ordinary lime mortar at all. The flecks had stopped reflecting at angles the torch had not pointed in. They had become, by the time the last stone was out, ordinary flecks of something pale grey in something dark grey, which was what they should always have been.

Mara had said, very quietly: "Henry."

He had said: "Yes."

"The mortar was alive."

He had looked at her in the torchlight.

"The mortar," she had said again, "was alive. I do not know what else to call it. The mortar was holding the stones until we were ready to take them out. When the second-to-last stone was out, the mortar gave up. I felt it give up. The last stone fell into my hand. I have, since I was twelve years old, done the work of taking down walls. Walls do not give up. Walls fight you, until the last stone is out, and then they fall. This wall did not fight us. This wall agreed."

Henry had said: "Yes."

He had been thinking exactly the same thing. He had not, in his careful methodical professional training, ever permitted himself to think such a thing about a wall before. He had thought it about this one anyway.

Beyond where the wall had been was a single dark room.

He had lifted his torch.

The room was, as he had measured, perhaps fifteen feet by twenty. The ceiling was the natural rock above; the floor was the same flagstones as the rest of the basement, although these flags had not, by their condition, been walked on in some considerable time. The walls of the inner room were not brick. They were stone of a kind Henry had not, in this part of the country, ever seen — a pale grey-green stone, in dressed blocks, with the small careful tool-marks of work done by hand and not by saw.

And against the far wall, fifteen feet from where Henry and Mara now stood, was a door.