THE TENTH

Book Two of the Through-Room Trilogy

A novel

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There is a tenth position. It is not on the dial. The dial is the lock; the wall is the key.

— *Beryl Lewis, notebook on the long matter, final entry, second volume, 1996*

PART ONE

The Key

CHAPTER ONE

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The Morning the Crates Had Moved

They did not, in the careful way of two people who had locked four doors between themselves and a problem, ring Mr. Prys at once.

Mara had said, at the kitchen table, with the kettle on the hob and her hands wrapped around a mug she had not yet drunk from, that it would be a mistake to ring an eighty-one-year-old man at quarter past nine on a Tuesday morning with a piece of news of the present weight without first having sat for a careful half hour and worked out, between them, what exactly they intended to ask him. Henry had agreed. They had sat for the careful half hour. They had each made a small list, on the backs of two separate envelopes, of the questions they intended to put to Mr. Prys; they had then, at ten to ten, exchanged the lists, and had read each other's, and had drafted a third list, in Mara's neat blue ink on a single sheet of A4, that was the consolidation of both.

The third list had had nine questions on it.

It had been Mara who rang. She had said, in the small careful kitchen-table conference that had preceded the ringing, that the call was the kind of call that needed to be made by the person Mr. Prys had been corresponding with for the last six months and not by the person he had only met once over biscuits in Aberystwyth, on the small careful

principle that an eighty-one-year-old man receiving difficult news on the telephone should hear, in the first three seconds, a voice he knew. She had rung at ten past ten.

Mr. Prys had not, at first, picked up.

He had picked up on the second attempt, three minutes later. He had said, in the small careful Welsh-inflected voice of an old man who had been, by his careful telling on the line, in the bath: "Miss Lewis. You are ringing me on a weekday morning. I shall, accordingly, assume the matter is one of weight. Hold the line, please, while I sit down."

He had sat down. He had said: "Tell me, please."

Mara had told him. She had told him, in the quiet methodical style of a country builder reporting an unusual condition on a job, about the moved crates; about the dial set, in the night, to the ninth position; about the silver-green colour of the dial's glow; about the quiet square of glowing mortar on the east wall of the inner room; about the last entry on the man-in-Aberystwyth's translation of the manifest, which had been dated three days after the closing entry and which had listed, as the destination of a slow key of pale grey-green stone, the tenth.

She had read out, at the end of the telling, her grandmother's small careful sentence on the last page of the second notebook of the long matter, in the particular clear handwriting that was, in every reading-out of it, perhaps the line her grandmother had taken the longest to write: There is a tenth position. It is not on the dial. The dial is the lock; the wall is the key.

She had stopped speaking.

Mr. Prys had not, for some seconds, said anything.

Then he had said: "Miss Lewis. I shall ask you two questions before you ask me yours."

Mara had said: "Please."

"The first is whether you and Mr. Adler are, at present, in the kitchen of the house on Brittle Lane."

"We are."

"The second is whether the door at the foot of the basement stair, the door across the threshold of the inner room, and the steel door between the inner room and the new chamber are, at present, locked, with the keys in your possession."

"They are."

"Then please do not, in the next four hours, go down into the basement for any reason. I shall ring you back at half past two. I shall, in the intervening time, consult the small careful contents of the file on my own shelf that bears the small careful initial that I have, in fifty-three years of keeping it, not previously had reason to take down. Do not, in the meantime, attempt to do anything yourselves. Do not, in particular, attempt to read the wall. Do not, in particular, attempt to touch the careful square of mortar. Do not, in particular, turn the dial. I shall ring at half past two. Is this acceptable."

Mara had said: "It is acceptable."

Mr. Prys had said: "Goodbye, Miss Lewis. Please tell Mr. Adler that I have, on this morning, been thinking of him."

He had rung off.

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They had not, in the four hours, gone down into the basement. They had stayed at the kitchen table.

They had drunk three pots of tea between them. Mara had eaten, at twelve, two slices of buttered bread; Henry had not, on the small careful

offering of the same, taken any. They had each, at various points in the four hours, looked at one another across the kitchen table and had not, at any of those points, said anything.

At one o'clock Mara had said: "Henry."

Henry had said: "Yes."

"I am, on this morning, frightened."

"Yes."

"I have not, in any of the nine months since November, been frightened in this kitchen. I have been cautious. I have been careful. I have, on several occasions, been concerned. I have not, until this morning, been frightened."

"No."

"The thing I am, in particular, frightened of is not the dial. It is not the moved crates. It is not the small careful glowing mortar. It is the careful sentence in my grandmother's notebook."

Henry had said: "Why."

Mara had been quiet for a moment.

She had said: "Because, Henry, the sentence is in my grandmother's handwriting. My grandmother was, by every account in her own notebooks, a woman who never crossed a door and who never met a keeper. She had her particular surviving documents and her small contacts and her careful sixty-three years of asking patient questions of small old people in country pubs. She did not, by any of those means, in any source she ever recorded, encounter the patient claim about the tenth position. I have, in the nine months since November, read every page of every notebook three times. The sentence about the tenth position is, in every reading, unsourced. It does not, in any of the

surrounding pages, refer to any conversation or any document or any old story that might have been its origin. It is, on the last page of the second notebook of the long matter, written by itself, in a small careful different ink, with a date in the margin that I had not, until this morning, looked at carefully."

Henry had said: "What is the date."

Mara had said: "The date is the twenty-seventh of October, 1997."

"Two months before her death."

"Two months. The sentence is, by every reading I can do this afternoon, the last thing she wrote in the long matter. She wrote it after sixty-three years of careful work. She wrote it, by my best reading of her hand in those late months, when she had been ill enough to know that she would not have many more careful sentences to write. She wrote it, in the small careful way of an old woman writing the important last thing. She wrote it without a source. She wrote it as if she knew it."

Henry had been very still.

He had said: "Mara. Is it possible that your grandmother — "

Mara had said: "No, Henry. It is not possible. My grandmother died in our front parlour in December 1997. I held her hand for the last seventeen hours of her life. She did not, in any of those hours, leave that parlour. She had not, in the previous six months, been physically able to leave the house. She had not, in the previous fifteen years, even gone to Hereford. She did not, in any way I can construct, cross a door. The sentence is not, in any reading I can do, a piece of personal experience. It is, by every reading I can do this afternoon, something she had been told. By someone who came to her. In the last two months of her life. And whom she did not, in any of her notebooks or her letters, name."

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Mr. Prys had rung at exactly half past two.

He had not, on the small careful resumption of the call, said anything by way of greeting. He had said, immediately: "Miss Lewis. Is Mr. Adler with you. I should like, if possible, to address you both."

Mara had said: "He is here. I shall put on the speaker."

She had set the phone, very carefully, on the kitchen table between them.

Mr. Prys had said: "Mr. Adler. Good afternoon."

Henry had said: "Mr. Prys. Good afternoon."

Mr. Prys had been quiet for a small careful moment.

He had said: "I shall tell you three things. The first is that I have, in the intervening four hours, consulted the file I mentioned. The file is, in the small old way of my filing, the file I have, in fifty-three years, twice opened and never, in any conversation with any other person, drawn from. The file contains, by my own patient classification of fifty-three years ago, the surviving documents that mention the tenth position. There are, in the file, four such documents. Of the four, three are accounts by people who did not, on any other careful evidence, know what they were talking about; they are, by my best reading, garbled folklore. The fourth is a single page of a letter, in a hand I have never identified, sent to a man called Iorwerth Eames in 1862, of which the relevant passage reads, in my own translation from the original Welsh: 'The tenth, Eames, is not a position. It is the keeping. The keepers of the tenth do not, in their long careful work, themselves cross. They are visited.' I shall send you the photocopy by the first post tomorrow."

Henry had been very still.

Mr. Prys had said: "The second thing is that I have, in the intervening four hours, also rung my patient intermediary in Penrith and have, by him, sent a message to Aedith Owen. I have asked her, in the message, whether she has ever, in her thirty-one years of keeping, been visited in the night. The intermediary has, by his usual schedule, gone up to the farm this afternoon. I shall, on his telephoning me this evening, have her reply. I shall ring you again tomorrow morning."

Mara had said: "Mr. Prys. The third."

Mr. Prys had said: "The third thing, Miss Lewis, is that the quiet sentence in your grandmother's notebook is, by my own best reading of her surviving correspondence with me, not a sentence she had from any source I am aware of. I had been her correspondent on the long matter for the last twenty-three years of her life. She had not, in any of our exchanges, ever mentioned the tenth. I had not, in any of mine, ever mentioned it to her. I had not, at the time, known of the four documents in my own file; I learned of them only in 2004, when the file was reorganised. Your grandmother had, by my best reading, no source. She must, accordingly, have had a visitor. I had not, in twenty-three years of correspondence, suspected this. I shall, on subsequent reading of her later letters, look again. I am sorry, Miss Lewis, to be telling you this."

Mara had said: "Mr. Prys. Thank you."

Mr. Prys had said: "Goodbye. I shall ring tomorrow morning."

He had rung off.

CHAPTER TWO

Aedith's Reply

Mr. Prys had rung the next morning at quarter to nine.

He had said, without careful preamble: "Miss Lewis. Aedith Owen has, in her thirty-one years of keeping, been visited four times. She had not, until my message yesterday evening, mentioned the visits to me. She has, on the strength of the message, written me a letter. The letter is on its way by the intermediary in Penrith. He will deliver it to me by the second post on Friday. She has, however, said in the message itself that she will be glad to receive you and Mr. Adler again, if you can come, on any day next week between Tuesday and Thursday. She has said that the matter is now, in her careful judgement, no longer one she is willing to discuss by letter or by intermediary."

Mara had said: "We shall come on the Tuesday."

Mr. Prys had said: "Good. I shall send word."

He had not, on the further question of what the visits had been like, said anything; Aedith Owen had not, in the careful brevity of her message, said either. He had said only: "Miss Lewis. Mr. Adler. Do not, in particular, attempt to receive a visitor of your own before Tuesday. I do not know what the protocol is. I should rather, in the patient absence of the protocol, that you and Mr. Adler not be alone in the kitchen at the

end of Brittle Lane at any careful hour at which a visitor might choose to arrive. Do you have anyone, in the meantime, who can stay."

Mara had said: "My brother is in Hereford. I shall ring him this morning. He can be here by tonight."

"Good. Please ask him to come."

He had rung off.

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Mara's brother was an accountant called Owain Lewis, who was thirty-six and unmarried and lived alone in a patient flat off the cathedral close in Hereford. He had been told, by Mara on a careful telephone call at half past nine, that there had been a particular intruder at the house at the end of Brittle Lane, that the police had not been called for reasons she would, in person on the evening, explain, that she needed someone she trusted to sleep in the back bedroom for six nights, and that she would, in compensation for the disruption, return him the quiet favour at any later time of his choosing. Owain had said: "Mara. I shall be there at six. I shall bring a bag."

He had been there at six. He had brought a bag.

Mara had introduced him to Henry at the kitchen table over a pot of tea. Owain had been, in Henry's small careful first reading of him, a quieter man than his sister, with the same sharp face and the same dark hair but with the small office manner of a person who had spent twelve years in the small careful office of a Hereford firm; he had shaken Henry's hand once, had sat down at the table, had drunk his tea, and had said, after some minutes: "Mara. Tell me what's actually going on."

Mara had looked at Henry. Henry had nodded once.

Mara had said: "Owain. We are going to need, between us, to make a small careful agreement before I tell you. The agreement is that you will, in the next twenty minutes, hear a small careful story you will not, on any small careful subsequent reflection, be able to confirm. You will, on hearing it, be left with three options. The first is to believe me, and to stay, and to never mention this conversation to anyone. The second is to disbelieve me, and to go home, and to never mention this conversation to anyone. The third is to disbelieve me, and to go home, and to mention this conversation to several people, and to bring, in the small careful way of a concerned brother, a doctor up to this kitchen by the weekend. I am asking you, as your sister, to commit, before I begin, to one of the first two."

Owain had looked at her for a long moment.

He had said: "Mara. Is anyone in this house in physical danger."

"Possibly, yes."

"Have you committed any crime."

"No."

"Has Mr. Adler."

"No."

"Is it the kind of story I will believe."

"No, Owain. It is not."

Owain had been quiet for some seconds. He had then said: "Mara. I shall commit to the first or the second. I shall not, in any case, commit to the third. Go on."

She had gone on.

She had told him, in the careful methodical way of a country builder delivering an unusual report to an older brother who had spent twelve

years in an accountant's office, the careful first month: the survey, the wall, the door, the dial, the warning, the man in Aberystwyth, the first crossing to Caerwyn. She had then, in the same quiet style, told him the small subsequent eight months: Tarn, Geren, the paper from Salth, Master Calder, the brass-springs, Reeve Vatten and the licence, the supper, Aedith Owen, the Ashlands, the small careful Welsh-Marches premium, the slow expansion of the basement. She had then, at last, told him the careful morning of the previous day.

Owain had listened. He had not, in the listening, said anything.

When she had finished, he had been quiet for a long moment.

He had said: "Mara. I shall ask one question. May I see the silver."

Mara had said: "Yes."

She had risen, and had gone up to the front parlour, and had returned in two minutes with the iron strongbox. She had set it on the kitchen table. She had unlocked it. She had opened the lid.

Owain had looked at the silver for some seconds.

He had taken out, very carefully, a single silver mark from the top of the pile. He had turned it over in his hand. He had set it back. He had closed the lid.

He had said: "Mara. I shall stay until next Sunday."

Mara had said: "Owain. Thank you."

"I shall, in the meantime, not, in particular, mention this to a doctor."

"Thank you."

"I shall also, in the particular private hour of my own thinking about this in the back bedroom, very probably arrive at a small careful set of further questions, which I shall ask you and Mr. Adler at breakfast each morning. The first such question, which I shall ask now, is whether this

quiet arrangement has, on the small careful evidence of the iron strongbox in front of me, been declared to His Majesty's Revenue and Customs."

Henry had said: "Mr. Lewis. It has been declared, by a small fiction involving a distant cousin and a careful trust structure, to the extent that the bank deposits derived from it require declaring. The structure was, by your sister's suggestion last December, designed by a quiet Hereford accountant whose name has been, in the patient courtesy of the household, withheld from me."

Owain had looked at him for a long moment.

He had said: "Mr. Adler. I am, in fact, the accountant."

"I had supposed so."

"The structure is, by my own careful design, robust. It will not, on any quiet inspection of the kind the patient authorities ever conduct on a man with a structural engineering pension and a modest inheritance, fail. You should, however, in the quiet course of the next year, allow me to make perhaps three further adjustments. I shall, on Sunday morning, raise them."

"I shall, on Sunday morning, listen."

Owain had nodded once. He had said: "Now. Henry. Mara. The small old back bedroom of this house has, by my reading on the way up the stairs, a perfectly serviceable lock. I shall, from this evening, sleep with the door locked from the inside, with a small careful chair against the door, and with my mobile phone on the small careful nightstand on a charging cable. If, at any small careful hour of the night, I am woken by any small careful unusual sound, I shall ring my sister's mobile, which I shall ask you, Mara, to keep on the nightstand on your own side. The arrangement is, by my reading of an accountant's patient security training

in the case of a Hereford office break-in, the small careful right one for the circumstances. Is this acceptable."

Mara had said: "Owain. It is acceptable."

"Good. Now. Is there any chance, in this kitchen, of supper."

CHAPTER THREE

Tarn

Henry had gone to Caerwyn on the Friday morning of the same week, with Owain in the kitchen and Mara at the kitchen table and the quiet resolve in his mind that he would not, on this particular Friday morning, conduct any market business at all.

He had gone, in particular, to see Tarn.

He had carried, in his satchel, only the small folded translation of the manifest in his back pocket, a quiet written account of the morning of the moved crates that he and Mara had drafted on the Wednesday evening with Owain at the table making small interjections about the precise wording of two paragraphs, a slow jar of marmite for Ifa, and the careful eleven silver marks that he had been intending, since the previous Friday, to spend on a small new display cloth for his stall.

He had not, on the way through the silver-barked wood and the wide flagstoned road, attended to the morning. He had walked, in the small careful methodical way of a man whose mind was on a kitchen table four worlds away, more quickly than was, by the small careful rules of his usual approach to the city, advisable.

He had reached Tarn's shop at quarter to eleven.

Tarn had been, on his coming in, behind the counter with a sheaf of receipts and a slow brass abacus. She had looked up. She had taken him in. She had set down the receipts.

She had said: "Henry. Come into the back room. I shall close the shop for the morning."

She had closed the shop for the morning.

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She had read the written account at the back-room table for nine minutes without speaking.

When she had finished, she had set the paper down. She had been very still for some careful seconds. She had then risen, and had gone to the small careful shelf at the back of the back room, and had taken from it a single small ceramic flask of a pale yellow liquid Henry had not, in nine months, seen her take down before. She had poured two glasses. She had set one in front of Henry. She had sat down.

She had said: "Drink, please."

Henry had drunk.

The liquid had been sharp and warm and had had a quiet sweetness at the end of the swallow. He had not, in any of his careful drinking, encountered a thing quite like it.

Tarn had said: "Now. I shall tell you, in the small careful right order, what I am going to tell you. I shall begin by saying that I have not, in forty years of small careful keeping, heard of the small careful arrangement you have described. I shall not pretend otherwise. The moved crates, the dial on the ninth, the careful colour of the dial, the patient glowing square of mortar — none of these is, in any of my forty years, a thing I have, in any patient conversation in this back room, ever