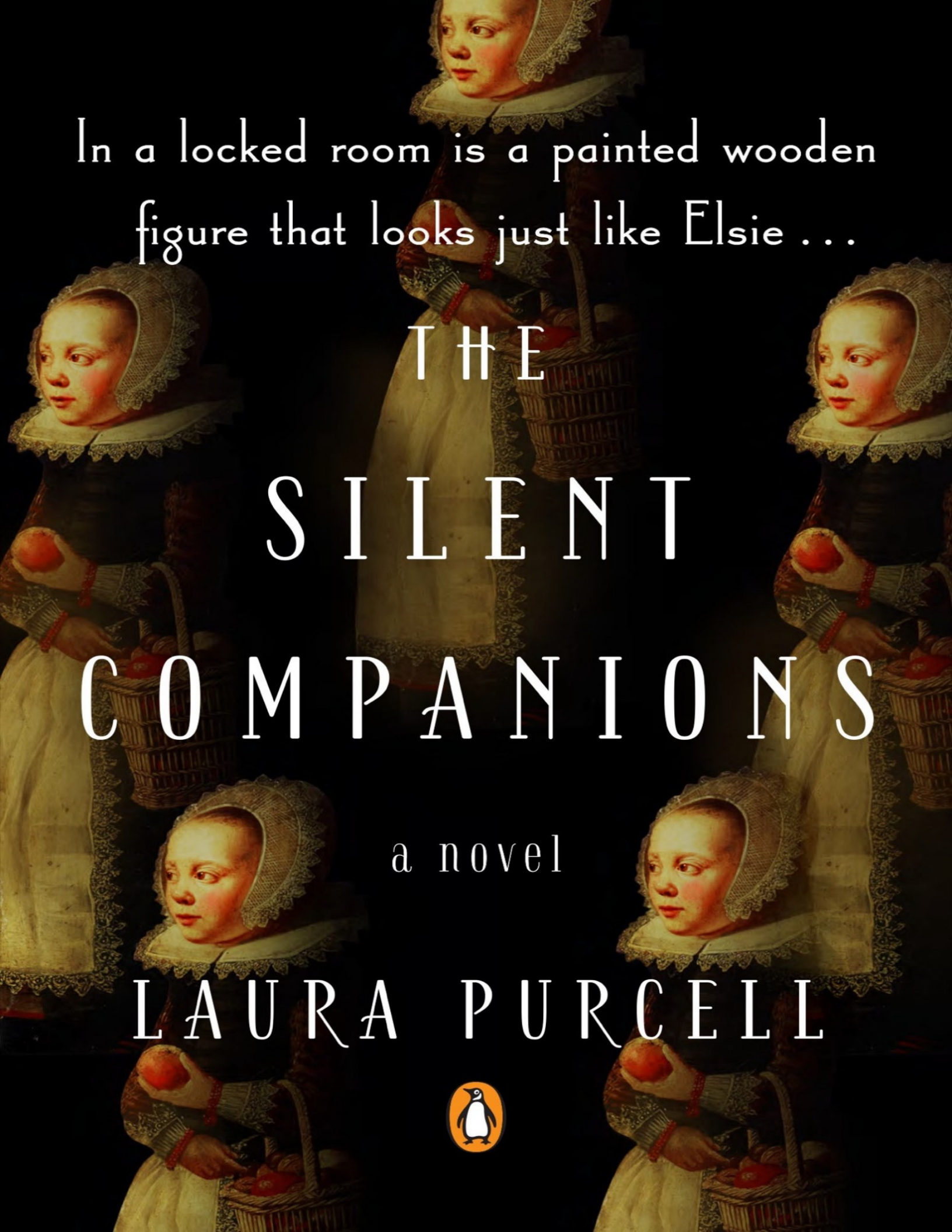




In a locked room is a painted wooden
figure that looks just like Elsie ...

THE
SILENT
COMPANIONS

a novel

LAURA PURCELL



PRAISE FOR

The Silent Companions

“One of the most well-written horror stories I’ve read this year, *The Silent Companions* is proper gothic fare. . . . What is commendable is how Purcell is able to weave all these [classic] elements in a story that is layered and psychologically complex till the very end.”

—*Book Riot*

“You may want to leave the light on once you put down this intensely spooky gothic chiller. . . . Irresistibly creepy.”

—*The People* (UK)

“Not since *The Little Stranger* has a book so entranced and haunted me. Compelling, bewitching, and beautifully written. Read it if you dare.”

—Anna Mazzola, author of *The Unseeing*

“A genuinely creepy Victorian ghost story, it’ll keep you up half the night reading it . . . and you won’t want to turn off the light.”

—*Good Housekeeping* (UK)

“Layering on the dark and creepy, this intriguingly plotted novel is the full-blown gothic, maintaining throughout an unsettling claustrophobic atmosphere mixed with some unusual historical detail.”

—*Daily Mail* (London)

“A sinister slice of the Victorian gothic . . . It is a measure of Laura Purcell’s skill . . . that she spins these tropes into something creepy and page-turning.”

—*The Times* (London)

“Neatly crafted and compelling . . . a spine-tingling revelation every few pages.”

—*The Times Literary Supplement* (London)

“Creepastic . . . Laura Purcell has nailed it with a story that conjures up Susan Hill’s *The Woman in Black*, Henry James’s *The Turn of the Screw*, and a little bit of *Rebecca* by Daphne du Maurier.”

—Emerald Street

“Writing in the tradition of country house ghost stories, Laura Purcell has created a book that is unnerving and compelling in equal measure. *The Silent Companions* is an atmospheric gothic tale that chills the blood.”

—Sophia Tobin, bestselling author of *The Silversmith’s Wife*

“Magnificently creepy . . . I really wished it were longer.”

—Natasha Pulley, author of *The Watchmaker of Filigree Street*

“Frighteningly atmospheric, genuinely haunting, and psychologically astute, the horror of *The Silent Companions* lingers like truth in the darkest corners of the human mind.”

—Helen Sedgwick, author of *The Comet Seekers*

“Compelling and claustrophobic. The pages all but turn by themselves.”

—Essie Fox, author of *The Last Days of Leda Grey*

PENGUIN BOOKS

THE SILENT COMPANIONS

Laura Purcell worked in local government, the financial industry, and a Waterstones bookshop before becoming a full-time writer. She lives in Colchester, the oldest recorded town in England, with her husband and pet guinea pigs.

THE
SILENT
COMPANIONS

LAURA PURCELL



PENGUIN BOOKS

PENGUIN BOOKS

An imprint of Penguin Random House LLC

375 Hudson Street

New York, New York 10014

penguin.com

First published in Great Britain by Raven Books, an imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2017

Published in Penguin Books 2018

Copyright © 2017 by Laura Purcell

Penguin supports copyright. Copyright fuels creativity, encourages diverse voices, promotes free speech, and creates a vibrant culture. Thank you for buying an authorized edition of this book and for complying with copyright laws by not reproducing, scanning, or distributing any part of it in any form without permission. You are supporting writers and allowing Penguin to continue to publish books for every reader.

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Names: Purcell, Laura, author.

Title: The silent companions: a novel / Laura Purcell.

Description: New York: Penguin Books, 2018.

Identifiers: LCCN 2017026775 (print) | LCCN 2017032206 (ebook) | ISBN 9781524705282 (ebook) | ISBN 9780143131632 (softcover)

Subjects: LCSH: Widows—Fiction. | Paranormal fiction. | BISAC: FICTION / Historical. | FICTION / Romance / Gothic. | FICTION / Ghost. | GSAFD: Ghost stories. | Gothic fiction.

Classification: LCC PR6116.U73 (ebook) | LCC PR6116.U73 S55 2018 (print) | DDC 823/.92—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2017026775>

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, businesses, companies, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Cover design: Alison Forner

Cover art: *A Girl with a Basket of Apples* (dummy board), English School, (18th century) / Hinton
Ampner, Hampshire, UK / National Trust Photographic Library / Bridgeman Images

Version_1

For Juliet

CONTENTS

[PRAISE FOR THE SILENT COMPANIONS](#)

[ABOUT THE AUTHOR](#)

[TITLE PAGE](#)

[COPYRIGHT](#)

[DEDICATION](#)

[ST JOSEPH'S HOSPITAL](#)

[THE BRIDGE, 1865](#)

[ST JOSEPH'S HOSPITAL](#)

[THE BRIDGE, 1865](#)

[THE BRIDGE, 1635](#)

[THE BRIDGE, 1865](#)

[THE BRIDGE, 1635](#)

[THE BRIDGE, 1865](#)

[THE BRIDGE, 1635](#)

[THE BRIDGE, 1865](#)

[THE BRIDGE, 1635](#)

[THE BRIDGE, 1865](#)

[ST JOSEPH'S HOSPITAL](#)

[THE BRIDGE, 1865](#)

[THE BRIDGE, 1635](#)

[THE BRIDGE, 1865](#)

[THE BRIDGE, 1635](#)

[THE BRIDGE, 1866](#)

[THE BRIDGE, 1635](#)

THE BRIDGE, 1866

THE BRIDGE, 1635

LONDON, 1866

THE BRIDGE, 1635

THE BRIDGE, 1866

ST JOSEPH'S HOSPITAL

THE BRIDGE, 1866

ST JOSEPH'S HOSPITAL

THE BRIDGE, 1866

THE BRIDGE, 1635

THE BRIDGE, 1866

ST JOSEPH'S HOSPITAL

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

ST JOSEPH'S HOSPITAL

THE NEW DOCTOR took her by surprise. Not that there was anything unusual in his arrival – doctors came and went often enough. But this one was young. New to the profession, as well as the place. There was a brightness to him that made her eyes ache.

‘This is her? Mrs Bainbridge?’ The *Mrs* was a nice touch. She could not remember the last time she’d been given a title. It played like a tune she could only just recall. He looked up from his notes, intent upon her. ‘Mrs Bainbridge, my name is Dr Shepherd. I am here to help you. To make sure we are giving you the sufficient level of care.’

Care. She wanted to stand up from where she sat on the edge of the bed, take his arm and gently guide him to the door. This place was not for innocents. Next to the stocky, middle-aged hag of an attendant he looked so vibrant, so alive. The limewashed walls had not yet leached the colour from his face or dulled the tone of his voice. In his eyes she saw the gleam of interest. This disturbed her more than the attendant’s scowl.

‘Mrs Bainbridge? Do you understand?’

‘Told you.’ The attendant sniffed. ‘You’ll get nothing from her.’

The doctor sighed. Tucking his papers under his arm, he came farther into her cell. ‘That does happen. Often in cases of great distress. Sometimes the shock is so intense that it renders the patient unable to speak. It seems likely, does it not?’

They bubbled up, the words in her chest. Her ribs ached and her lips tingled with the force of them. But they were ghosts, echoes of things that had been. She would never experience them again.

He bent forwards so that his head was level with hers. She was acutely aware of his eyes, wide and unblinking behind his spectacles. Palest rings of mint green.

‘It can be cured. With time and patience. I have seen it done.’

The attendant sucked in a disapproving breath. ‘Don’t get close, doctor. She’s a fierce one, all right. Spat in my face once.’

How steadily he watched her. He was close enough for her to smell him: carbolic soap, cloves. Memory flickered like a tinderbox. She refused to let the flint spark.

‘You do not wish to recall what happened to you. But you *can* talk. The smoke inhalation was by no means bad enough to render you mute.’

‘She won’t talk, doctor. This one’s no fool. Knows where they’ll put her if she ain’t in here.’

‘But she can write?’ He looked about the room. ‘Why is there nothing here for her to write with? Have you not *tried* to communicate with her?’

‘Wouldn’t trust her with a pen.’

‘A slate then, and chalk. You will find them in my room.’ He fished in his pocket and thrust a key at the attendant. ‘Fetch them. Now, if you please.’

With a frown, the attendant took the key and shuffled out the door.

They were alone. She felt his eyes upon her – not hard but uncomfortable, like the tickle of an insect crawling over her leg.

‘Medicine is changing, Mrs Bainbridge. I am not a man who will give you electric shocks or plunge you into cold baths. I want to help.’ He cocked his head. ‘You must know that certain . . . accusations have been made against you. Some people suggest you should be moved to a more secure facility. Or that perhaps you do not belong in an asylum at all.’

Accusations. They never explained the basis of the charge, only called her a killer, and for a while she had lived up to the reputation: throwing cups; scratching the nurses. But now she had a room of her own and stronger

medication, it was too much effort to act the part. She would rather sleep. Forget.

‘I am here to decide your fate. But in order to help you, I need you to help *me*. I need you to tell me what happened.’

As if he could understand. She had seen things beyond the comprehension of his small, scientific brain. Things he would deny were possible until they stole up beside him and pressed their worn, splintered hands against his.

A dimple appeared in his left cheek as he smiled. ‘I see what you are thinking. Every patient says the same, that I won’t believe them. I confess, there are many delusions here, but few are without foundation. Some experience has formed them. Even if it sounds extraordinary, I should like to hear it – what you *think* happened. Sometimes, the brain cannot cope with the information it has to process. It makes sense of trauma in odd ways. If I can hear what your mind tells you, I might be able to understand how it works.’

She smiled back. It was an unpleasant smile; the one that made the nurses edge away. He didn’t flinch.

‘And perhaps we can turn your predicament to our advantage. When a trauma has occurred, it often helps the victim to write it down. In a detached way. As if it happened to someone else.’ The door whined; the attendant had returned with the chalk and slate in hand. Dr Shepherd took them and reached towards the bed, offering the items like an olive branch. ‘So then, Mrs Bainbridge. Will you try for me? Write something.’

Tentatively, she reached out and picked up the chalk. It sat strangely in her hand. After all this time, she could not remember how to begin. She pressed the tip to the slate and drew a vertical line. It squeaked – an awful, high-pitched squeal that set her teeth on edge. She panicked, pushed too hard. The end of the chalk snapped off.

‘I really do think a pencil would be easier for her. Look, she is not dangerous. She is simply trying to do as we ask.’

The attendant glared. ‘On your head be it, doctor. I’ll bring one later.’

She managed to scrape out some letters. They were faint, but she was afraid to use force again. Just visible on the slate was a shaky *Hello*.

Dr Shepherd rewarded her with another smile. 'That's it! Keep practising. Do you think you could build it up, Mrs Bainbridge, and do as I asked? Write down all you remember?'

As easy as that.

He was too young. Too fresh and full of hope to realise there would be times in his life he would want to erase – whole years of unbearable moments.

She had pushed them down so deep that she could only reach one or two. Enough to confirm she did not want the rest. Whenever she tried to think back, she saw *them*. Their awful faces barring the way to the past.

She used the cuff of her sleeve to wipe the slate clean and write again. *Why?*

He blinked behind his glasses. 'Well . . . Why do you think?'

Cure.

'That's right.' The dimple appeared again. 'Imagine if we could cure you? Set you free of this hospital?'

God love him. *No.*

'No? But . . . I do not understand.'

'Told you, doctor,' said the attendant in her harsh, magpie voice. 'She did it, all right.'

She tucked her legs up and lay flat on the bed. Her head throbbed. She raised her hands to her scalp and gripped, trying to hold things in place. Bristles prickled from her shaved head. Hair growing, months passing, locked away.

How long had it been? A year, she supposed. She could ask them, write the question on the slate, but she feared to learn the truth.

Surely it was time for her medicine, time to deaden the world?

'Mrs Bainbridge? Mrs Bainbridge, are you well?'

She kept her eyes shut. Enough, enough. Four words, and she had written too much.

‘Perhaps I have pushed her too hard for today,’ he said. But still he hovered, an unsettling presence by her bed.

This was all wrong. Her mind was thawing.

Finally, she heard him straighten up. Keys jangled, a door creaked open.

‘Who next?’

The door closed and muffled their voices. Their words and steps petered away down the corridor.

She was alone, but the isolation did not comfort her as it used to. Noises that usually went unnoticed came painfully loud: the rattle of a lock, laughter far away.

Frantic, she buried her face beneath her pillow and tried to forget.



The truth. She could not stop thinking about it during the cold grey hours of silence.

They didn’t get newspapers in the day room – at least, not when she had been allowed in there – but rumours had a way of seeping under doors and through cracks in the walls. Journalists’ lies made it into the asylum long before she did. Ever since she awoke in this place, she had been given a new name: *murderess*.

Other patients, attendants, even the nurses when they thought no one could hear: they twisted their mouths and bared their teeth as they said it, ravenous. *Murderess*. As if they wanted to frighten her. *Her*.

It wasn’t the injustice she loathed but the noise, its syllables hissing in her ears like – *No*.

She shifted in bed and hugged her goose-pimpled arms tight, trying to hold herself together. Until now she had been safe. Safe behind the walls, safe behind her silence, safe with the beautiful drugs that drowned out the past. But the new doctor . . . He was the clock signalling with a dread knell that her time was finished. *Perhaps you do not belong in an asylum at all*.

Panic spiralled in her chest.

Back again to the same three options. Say nothing and be presumed guilty. Destination: the gallows. Say nothing and, by some miracle, be acquitted. Destination: the cold, sharp world outside, no medicine to help her forget.

Only one choice remained – the truth. But what was that?

Gazing back to the past, the only faces she saw clearly were those of her parents. Around them, shadowy figures massed. Figures full of hate that had terrified her and twisted the course of her life.

But no one would believe that.

A full moon shone in silvery lines through the window at the top of the wall, touching her head. She lay there, watching it, when the thought came to her. In this place of misrule, everything was upside down. The truth was mad, beyond the realms of any healthy imagination. And that was why the truth was the only thing guaranteed to keep her under lock and key.

She slid from the bed onto the floor. It was cold and faintly sticky. No matter how many times they mopped it, the scent of piss hung in the air. She crouched down beside her bed, finally facing the bulky shadow across the room.

Dr Shepherd had ordered them to bring it: the first new item in an unchanging landscape. Just a desk. But it was another instrument to crack open the charnel house and exhume all she had buried.

With her pulse pounding in her neck, she crawled across the floor. Somehow she felt safer down low, crouched beneath it, looking up the notched legs. *Wood*. She shivered.

Surely there was no reason to be cautious here. Surely they could not take any piece of wood and . . . It wasn't possible. But then none of it was possible. None of it made the least bit of sense. Yet it *had* happened.

Slowly, she stood and surveyed the surface of the desk. Dr Shepherd had left all the implements out for her: paper and a thick, blunt-ended pencil.

She pulled a page towards her. In the gloom she saw a void of white, waiting for her words. She swallowed the pain in her throat. How could she relive it? How could she bring herself to do it to them, all over again?

She peered into the blank page, trying to see, somewhere in its vast expanse of nothing, that other woman from long ago.

THE BRIDGE,

1865

I AM NOT DEAD.

Elsie recited the words as her carriage sluiced through country roads, churning up clods of mud. The wheels made a wet, sucking noise. *I am not dead.* But it was hard to believe, looking through the rain-spattered window at the ghost of her reflection: pale skin; cadaverous cheeks; curls eclipsed by black gauze.

Outside the sky was iron grey, the monotony broken only by crows. Mile after mile and the scenery did not change. Stubble fields, skeletal trees. *They are burying me*, she realised. *They are burying me along with Rupert.*

It wasn't meant to be like this. They should have been back in London by now; the house thrown open, spilling over with wine and candles. This season vivid dyes were in fashion. The salons would be awash with azuline, mauve, magenta and Paris green. She should be there at the centre of it: invited to every diamond-spangled party; hanging on the arm of the host in his striped waistcoat; the first lady escorted into the dining room. The new bride always went first.

But not a widow. A widow shied from the light and entombed herself with grief. She became a mermaid drowning in black crêpe, like the Queen. Elsie sighed and stared into the hollow reflection of her eyes. She must be a

terrible wife, for she did not long for seclusion. Sitting in silence musing on Rupert's virtues wouldn't help her grief. Only distraction could do that. She wanted to attend the theatre, to ride up and down on the rattling omnibuses. She would rather be anywhere than alone in these bleak fields.

Well, not quite alone. Sarah sat hunched on the squabs opposite, poring over a battered leather volume. Her wide mouth moved as she read, whispering the words. Elsie despised her already. Those mud-brown, bovine eyes that held no spark of intelligence, the pinched cheekbones and the lanky hair that always dribbled out of her bonnet. She'd seen shop girls with more refinement.

'She'll be company for you,' Rupert had promised. 'Just watch her while I'm down at The Bridge. Show her a few sights. The poor girl doesn't get out much.'

He wasn't exaggerating. His cousin Sarah ate, breathed and blinked – occasionally she read. That was it. There was no initiative, no yearning to better her position. She'd been content in her little rut as companion to a crippled old lady until the crone died.

As a good cousin, Rupert had taken her in. But it was Elsie who was stuck with her now.

Yellow, fan-shaped leaves came swooping down from the chestnut trees and landed on the roof of the carriage. *Pat, pat.* Earth upon the coffin.

Only another hour or two, and the sun would start to set.

'How much longer?'

Sarah looked up from the page with glazed eyes. 'Hmm?'

'How long?'

'Until . . .?'

Dear God. 'Until we arrive.'

'I don't know. I have never been to The Bridge.'

'What? You haven't seen it either?' It was incomprehensible. For an ancient family, the Bainbridges didn't take much pride in their ancestral seat. Even Rupert, at the age of forty-five, had possessed no memory of the place. He only seemed to recollect he owned an estate when the lawyers were

ratifying their marriage contract. 'I cannot believe it. Did you not visit even when you were little?'

'No. My parents often spoke of the gardens, but I never saw them. Rupert took no interest in the place until . . .'

'Until he met me,' Elsie finished.

She swallowed back the tears. They had been so close, hadn't they, to creating the perfect life together? Rupert had gone up to make the estate ready for spring and the heir who would arrive to inherit it. But now he'd left her, with no experience of running a country house, to cope with the family legacy and an impending child, alone. She envisaged herself nursing a baby in a mouldering parlour with tattered, pea-green upholstery and a clock on the mantel swathed in cobwebs.

The horses' hooves squelched outside. The windows began to mist. Elsie pulled down her sleeve and rubbed it against the glass. Dreary images lumbered past. Everything was overgrown and shabby. Remnants of a grey brick wall poked up from the grass like tombstones, while clover and bracken swarmed around. Nature was coming into its own, reclaiming the space with brambles and moss.

How could the road to Rupert's house *be* in such a state? He was a fastidious businessman, good with numbers, balanced in his books. So why would he let one of his possessions degenerate into this mess?

The carriage rattled and stopped abruptly. Peters cursed from up on the box.

Sarah closed her book and placed it aside. 'What's happening?'

'I think we're getting near.' Leaning forwards, she peered as far into the distance as she could. A light mist snaked up from the river, running alongside the track, and shrouded the horizon.

Surely they were at Fayford by now? It seemed as if they had been jolting along for hours. Boarding the train at London in the smudged, whisky-coloured dawn felt like an occurrence of last week, not this morning.

Peters snapped his whip. The horses snorted and strained in their harness, but the carriage only swayed.