

THE GREEN DOOR



A Rory Lane Café Mystery Prequel

A Rory Lane Café Mystery Bonus

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Before the café. Before the notebook. Before any of it.

ONE

The shop had been empty for eleven months, and it smelled like it. Rory Lane stood in the middle of the floor with the estate agent's keys in her hand and turned in a slow circle, taking in the water stain on the ceiling, the counter that somebody had covered in adhesive vinyl the colour of weak tea, and the window that faced Main Street and let in more light than the room knew what to do with. "It needs work," said Edgar Mullins. He was standing in the doorway with his hands in his coat pockets, a man in his sixties with a landlord's particular way of occupying a property he owned and did not care about. He had said very little on the walk from his office. He had said "it needs work" twice now, which Rory understood was not an observation but a negotiating position, delivered early so it could be referred back to later. "It does," she agreed. "Previous tenant left it in poor condition." "Which previous tenant?" Edgar looked at her the way people look at a question they had not budgeted for. "Card shop. Greetings cards, gift wrap, that sort of thing. Went under. Before that a charity shop, I think. Before that." He shrugged. The shrug covered several decades and dismissed all of them. Rory walked to the back and pushed open the door to what would be the kitchen. It was smaller than she wanted and better than she expected. There was a stainless steel counter along one wall, an extraction hood that looked serviceable, and a gas connection capped off and waiting. Somebody had cooked here once, properly, for money. You could tell. Kitchens keep the shape of what they were for. "There's a flat upstairs," Edgar said, from the front. "Two rooms and a bathroom. It's included." "I know. It was in the listing." "Most people want to see it." "I'll see it," Rory said. "I'm looking at the kitchen first." She heard him shift his weight, and she knew, without turning round, that she had just moved herself into a category in his mind, and that it was not the category he had put her in on the walk over. That was fine. She had spent eleven years in professional kitchens learning to be looked at differently, and she had discovered somewhere around year six that the trick was not to argue with the first assessment but simply to

keep working until it became untenable. She crouched by the far wall, where the plaster met the floor, and put her hand flat against the panelling. It was boxed in. Somebody had run a false wall along the back of the kitchen, cheap boarding painted the

same magnolia as everything else, and had done it in a hurry, because the join at the corner did not meet properly and the whole panel gave a fraction under her palm. "What's behind this?" "Wall," said Edgar. "There's a gap." "There's a wall behind it. It's a wall, Miss Lane." He came as far as the kitchen door and stopped there, the way people do when they want to appear to be participating without committing to the room. "Look. If you want it, I'll want first and last month and a twelve-month minimum. I'll not do six. Six months is people finding out they don't like the hours." Rory stood and wiped her palms on her jeans and looked at him, and she thought, with the clarity that sometimes arrives at the exact wrong moment, that she was about to sign a twelve-month lease with a man who had never once, in forty minutes, asked her what she intended to sell. "I'll take it," she said. She had come to Willowbrook because of a photograph in a property listing and eleven thousand pounds from her great-aunt Margaret, and neither of these was a plan. Margaret had died in February. She had been ninety-one and sharp until the last eighteen months, and she had left Rory the contents of a savings account and a set of copper pans that were, in Rory's professional opinion, the finest things she had ever cooked with. The solicitor's letter had said that Margaret had wanted her to have "the money for the thing you keep not doing," which was, even from beyond the grave, exactly the way Margaret talked. Rory had been a sous-chef in a city restaurant with a good name and a bad kitchen. She had been very good at the job and had come to understand, in the last of the eleven years, that being very good at it was not going to be enough to make her want to keep doing it. She had wanted, for a long time, a room where the food was hers and the hours were hers and nobody threw anything. So she had opened a laptop at two in the morning and typed the phrase that people type when they are looking for a change of life rather than a change of address, and she had found a listing for a former retail unit on the main street of a small English town she had never heard of, and there had been a photograph of the front of the building taken on a bright day, and the door had been painted green. The door in the photograph was not green now. It had been overpainted, at some point, in a brown that had been chosen by

somebody who had a tin of it already. She noticed that on the first day and did not think about it again for six weeks.

TWO

The panel came off on a Tuesday. She had spent five weeks doing the things you do before you can do anything: the licensing, the environmental health registration, the argument with the electricity supplier, the long careful business of costing out a kitchen when the money is finite and the difference between a good oven and an adequate one is nine hundred pounds you have already spent twice on paper. She had scrubbed the flat until it stopped smelling of other people. She had eaten, for most of that period, standing up. And on the Tuesday she took a crowbar to the false wall at the back of the kitchen, because it was hiding roughly eleven inches of floor space and she had reached the stage of the plan where eleven inches mattered.

The boarding came away in two pieces, releasing a smell of old dust and a quantity of dead spiders. Behind it was, as Edgar Mullins had promised, a wall. At the bottom of the wall, in the corner, standing upright on the floor where somebody had put it down and never come back for it, was a biscuit tin. It was a large one, the kind that used to hold a quantity of shortbread that would be considered aggressive today, printed with a pattern of thistles gone soft with age. The lid was on. Rory sat down on the kitchen floor with the crowbar across her knees and looked at it for a while before she touched it, because there is a particular category of object that you know, immediately and without evidence, is going to matter. The lid came off with a small breath of sound. Inside there was a notebook, a photograph, and a length of green ribbon tied around a bundle of receipts. The notebook was hardbacked, quarter-bound in cloth, and swollen with use. Rory opened it on her knee and found handwriting, small and upright and entirely legible, in blue-black ink that had gone slightly brown at the edges of the strokes. Honey and walnut loaf. Burn the honey first, properly, until it smokes and goes bitter at the edge, then off the heat and in with the butter. Everyone else's is too sweet. Ours is not. She turned the page. Seed cake,

for Mrs. Anderton, who asks every week and pretends she doesn't. Damson, if Perce brings them. Two pounds of fruit to one and a half of sugar, not the other way, whatever the book says. She read for twenty minutes, sitting on the floor of a kitchen that was not yet a kitchen, in a building that had been standing empty for the better part of a year, and by the end of it she knew several things about the woman who had written it. She had cooked for a room full of people who she knew by name. She had disagreed, on principle and at length, with published recipes. She had been funny in a dry way that did not announce itself. And she had stopped writing in the middle of a sentence, on a page dated the fourth of September, with the pen line trailing off at the end of the word and. The photograph was black and white and had been taken from across the street. It showed the front of the building. It showed a sign above the window, hand-painted, reading THE WILLOW TEAROOM in a plain, confident script. It showed two women standing in the doorway in aprons, one older and one younger, the older one laughing at something outside the frame and the younger one looking directly at the camera with the particular self-possession of somebody who had been told to stand still and had decided to do it on her own terms. And it showed the door, propped open on a hook, painted a colour that in black and white read as a mid-grey and that Rory, for reasons she could not have defended, was entirely certain had been green. She turned the photograph over. Ivy and me. Opening week, 1961.

THREE

“The Willow Tearoom,” said Mabel Finch. She said it the way a person says a name they have not had occasion to say in some time and are pleased to find still fits in their mouth. She was sitting behind the desk in the reference section of Willowbrook library with her reading glasses pushed up into her hair, and she had taken the photograph out of Rory’s hand within four seconds of it being produced, which Rory would later understand was simply how Mabel received

information. “You know it?” “I ate there.” Mabel turned the photograph to the light from the window. “Not in nineteen sixty-one. I’m old, Miss Lane, I’m not archaeological. But through the sixties and seventies, yes. My mother took me on Saturdays and later I went by myself, which at fourteen felt like an event.” “What was it like?” Mabel considered the question with the seriousness of a woman who did not intend to give a soft answer to a real one. “Small,” she said. “Eight tables. Mismatched chairs, which at the time I thought was because she couldn’t afford matching ones and which I now think was a decision. Very good cake and a firm view about how it should be eaten. She wouldn’t do cream with the honey loaf. People asked. She said no.” Mabel’s mouth moved in a way that was not quite a smile. “The town found this outrageous for about a decade and then found it a point of pride, which is how the town treats everything.” “She’s the older one?” “That’s Ivy Coulter.” Mabel touched the photograph, not quite on the face. “The younger one is her sister. Dorothy. Dot.” “Did they run it together?” “For a time. Dot married and moved to Whitby, some time in the sixties, and after that it was Ivy on her own.” Mabel set the photograph down on the desk and looked at Rory over the top of her glasses, and Rory felt herself being read with an efficiency that she found she did not resent. “Where did you get this?” “It was behind a false wall in the kitchen. In a biscuit tin. With her recipe book.” Mabel was quiet for a moment. “Well,” she said. “That is the most interesting thing anybody has brought into this building in four years.” The library’s local collection occupied one wall and part of a store cupboard, and Mabel navigated it the way other people navigate their own kitchens. The parish magazines were bound in annual volumes. The Willowbrook and District Gazette was on microfilm up to 1989 and in

bound volumes after that, and it had been a weekly until 1983, which meant that anything that had happened in the town between 1961 and 1978 had happened in a newspaper somewhere in that cupboard. They found the tearoom in the advertisements first. A quarter-page in 1962, announcing morning coffee and afternoon teas. A smaller one in 1968. A photograph in 1971 of the Willowbrook Amateur Dramatic Society taking tea after a production of something, with Ivy Coulter visible at the edge of the frame holding a teapot and looking as though she had been told to be in the picture and was tolerating it. And then, in the issue for the twelfth of September 1978, a single line in the column of business notices: The Willow Tearoom will be closed until further notice. “Until further notice,” Rory said. “Mm.” “That’s not what you write when you’re closing.” “No,” Mabel agreed. “It is not.” They went forward. October, nothing. November, nothing. In February 1979 the premises appeared in a

classified advertisement offering a retail unit to let on Main Street, with reference to a fixture list available on application, and after that the tearoom did not appear in the newspaper again. Rory sat back in the library chair and looked at the microfilm reader and thought about a woman who had written until further notice and had meant it, and who had stopped writing in her recipe book in the first week of September with the pen still moving. “Her sister,” she said. “Dot. In Whitby.” Mabel was already reaching for the parish magazines.

FOUR

The espresso machine arrived on a Thursday, on a lorry that could not get down Main Street and had to be unloaded at the top by two men with a trolley and an attitude of grievance. It was a two-group Italian machine of a certain age, bought secondhand from a restaurant supply firm in Bristol, and it weighed rather more than the listing had suggested in a way that Rory suspected was traditional. It came in through the front door at an angle, with a scrape that took a curl of brown paint off the frame, and it went onto the counter with a sound like a full stop. Rory paid the men, closed the door, and stood looking at it. It was, by a considerable margin, the most expensive object she had ever owned. It had cost more than her first car and roughly a third of what was left of Margaret's money, and it had a small dent in the left-hand side panel that the seller had described as cosmetic and that Rory had used to knock two hundred pounds off the price, which had been the most enjoyable four minutes of her month. "Right," she said to it. The machine said nothing. "You're going to be difficult," Rory said. "I can see it in you." It took her four days to get it running properly. The pump was fine. The boiler was fine. The problem was somewhere in the group head on the left, which delivered a pressure that climbed to where it was supposed to be and then, without warning or apparent reason, dropped by two bar and stayed there sulking until the machine was rested. She stripped it twice. She replaced a gasket that did not need replacing. On the fourth day she found a hairline crack in a fitting that cost eleven pounds and swore at it with real feeling. On the fifth day it worked, and she pulled a shot that was, all things considered, extremely good, and she stood in her empty café at half past nine at night drinking it out of a paper cup because she had not yet bought any china. "Margaret," she said. It was not sentiment, or not only. Great-aunt Margaret had been difficult in exactly this way: capable of enormous warmth and entirely on her own schedule, prone to going wrong for reasons that were never the reasons you first suspected, and worth every minute. It seemed to Rory a reasonable thing to do with a name. She wrote it on a strip of masking tape and stuck it to the side panel over the dent, and it stayed there for four years until the tape gave out and by then nobody needed reminding.

FIVE

“Coulter,” said Tom Percival.

He was behind the counter at the hardware shop with his hands flat on the wood, a big man gone quiet with age, and he had been listening to Rory’s question for some time before he answered it, which she was learning was not slowness. “You remember her?” “I remember the tearoom.” He looked past her at the window, at the street. “I was a boy in this shop when my father had it. She came in for a lock, once. Nineteen seventy-something. Wanted a mortice on the back door and wanted it that day.” “Did she say why?” “People don’t, mostly.” He shifted, and the floorboard behind the counter made the sound it presumably made forty times a day. “She was going away. That’s all she said. Going away and wanted the place shut properly.” Rory stood in the hardware shop with her hands in her coat pockets and felt something settle into place with the particular quiet click of a fact that fits. “Mr. Percival, do you know every building on this street?” Tom Percival looked at her, and his expression had the blend of gruffness and warmth that she would come to know very well over the following years, and which she would think about differently much later on, when she had reason to. “I know every brick on this street,” he said. “It’s not a large street.” He sold her a tin of paint, two hinges, and a set of brushes, and he did not ask what colour she was going to paint the door, because she had brought the photograph in with her and put it on the counter, and he had looked at it for a long moment and then gone into the back and come out with a shade card and put his thumb next to one of the greens without saying anything at all. The parish magazine for October 1978 contained, on the third page, in the column headed From the Parish, four lines that Mabel found on the Thursday and telephoned Rory about at eight o’clock the same evening, having obtained her number by means that were never explained. We send our prayers to Miss I. Coulter of Main Street, who has gone to Whitby to nurse her sister Mrs. D. Ellery through a serious illness, and who we hope to welcome back among us before long. “Before long,” Rory said. “They always write that,” said Mabel, on the other end of the line. “It’s a formula. It means nobody knows.” “How long was she gone?” There was a pause, and in the pause Rory could hear the specific sound of

Mabel Finch deciding how much to say and in what order, which was a sound she would spend the next decade learning to interpret. “Dorothy Ellery died in 1986,” Mabel said. “Eight years. Ivy nursed her for eight years, in Whitby, in a house I imagine she did not much like, and by the time it was over she was seventy-one years old and the tearoom had been let to somebody selling wool.” A rustle of paper. “She died herself in 1994. In Whitby. There’s a notice. Her address at the end was a residential home on the Scarborough road.” Rory sat down on the bottom step of the stairs to the flat with the phone against her ear and looked down the length of her unfinished café at the window and the street beyond it going dark. “She never came back.” “She came back once,” Mabel said. “In 1981. I saw her. I was twenty-six and working in this library and I came out at lunchtime and she was standing in the street looking at the shop, and there was somebody else’s name over the door, and I said hello, Miss Coulter, and she said hello, Mabel, and asked after my mother.” A

pause. “And then she went and got the bus. That is the entire event. I have thought about it perhaps four times in forty years and I have never once told anybody, because there is nothing in it.” “There’s quite a lot in it.” “Yes,” said Mabel. “Well.”

SIX

The chairs came from a house clearance in Millford, on a Saturday in March, in the back of a florist's van. June had found the auction and had presented it to Rory the way people present things they have already decided about. "Eleven o'clock, viewing from nine, and they've got a lot of forty assorted dining chairs which nobody sane will bid on. I've got the van. You've got no chairs." "I was going to buy chairs." "You were going to price chairs," said June, "which is not the same activity, and you've been doing it for three weeks." The saleroom was a cold barn on an industrial estate with a concrete floor and a smell of other people's houses. Rory walked the lots for an hour with a catalogue and a pencil and found the forty assorted chairs stacked in two towers against the back wall, and they were, as advertised, assorted: bentwood, ladder-back, four painted a bad green in the seventies, one wicker armchair with a split in the left arm. "They don't match," Rory said. "No." "Not any of them. Not even nearly." June put her hands in her coat pockets. "Is that a problem?" And Rory stood in a freezing barn in Millford and thought about eight tables and mismatched chairs, and about a woman in a photograph who could have afforded matching ones by 1971 and had not bought them. She got the lot for sixty pounds because nobody else wanted forty chairs, and they took two trips in the van, and by the second one it had started raining and they carried them in through the green door one at a time with newspaper over the seats. She cleaned them over four evenings. Three were beyond saving and went to the tip. Six needed regluing, which she did badly and then did again properly after watching a video made by a man in Ohio. The four bad-green ones she stripped back and painted a soft grey, and then, on the last one, changed her mind halfway and left it green, because it looked better with the door. The wicker armchair went by the window, where the floorboard sang, with a cushion on it to cover the split. "That's the good chair," June said, standing in the doorway with a cup of tea, surveying. "You know that, don't you. That's the chair everyone will want." "It's a broken chair with a cushion on it." "It's the good chair," said June. "Mark my words. You'll have people waiting for it." She was right, as it turned out, within about three weeks. It was Mabel's chair for a fortnight until Mabel decided that the second table from the window offered a better view of the door, and after that it

belonged to whoever got there first, which the town settled among itself without ever discussing it.

SEVEN

The tin had contained a bundle of receipts tied with green ribbon, and Rory went through them properly on a wet Sunday with a pot of tea and the recipe book open beside her. They were supplier dockets, mostly, going back to the early seventies. A dairy in Millford. A flour mill that no longer existed. A fruit merchant, invoiced quarterly, with a name that appeared in the recipe book too, in the note about damsons: if Perce brings them. Percival & Son, Hardware and Sundries, Main Street. Rory looked at it for a while. Tom Percival's father had sold Ivy Coulter damsons out of the back of a hardware shop, presumably off his own trees, presumably for cash, and somebody had made a receipt for it anyway because that was how things were done, and forty-odd years later the receipt was in a biscuit tin behind a false wall and the son was still standing behind the same counter. There was one more thing in the tin, at the bottom, which she had not noticed on the first day because it had lain flat against the base. It was a single sheet of writing paper, folded once. The handwriting was Ivy's. It was dated the eleventh of September 1978, which was the day before the notice appeared in the Gazette, and it read: To whoever has the place next. The oven runs hot on the left. Don't trust the door seal on the top one, it lies. The floorboard by the window sings. Leave it. It tells you when someone comes in and you're in the back. I have put my book behind the panel because I will want it when I come home and I don't want it in a box in Whitby getting damp. If you have found it, then either I have not come home or I have and I have forgotten where I put it, and at my age I would not bet against the second. Either way: use it. Recipes are no use in a tin. Ivy Coulter Rory read it three times. Then she got up and walked to the front of the café and stood on the floorboard by the window, and rocked her weight onto it, and it sang, exactly as advertised, a small dry creak like a question being asked.

EIGHT

She got the honey loaf wrong four times. The recipe, as Ivy had written it, was not a recipe in the modern sense. It was a set of instructions from one competent person to another, with the assumptions left in. Burn the honey first, properly, until it smokes and goes bitter at the edge. No quantity. No pan size. No indication of what properly meant, beyond the fact that Ivy Coulter had clearly had strong feelings about people who did it timidly. The first attempt was cautious and tasted like a nice sponge, which was the worst possible outcome. The second was burnt in the wrong way, acrid rather than bitter, because Rory had walked away from the pan for eleven seconds to answer the door to a man delivering the wrong flour. The third was better and the crumb collapsed. The fourth was very close and she overworked it after the walnuts went in, which she knew she was doing while she was doing it, in the way you do. The fifth was right.

She knew before it came out of the oven, from the smell, which was not the smell of honey cake. It was darker than that, and slightly savoury at the edge of it, the way burnt sugar goes when it stops being sweet and turns into something with an opinion. She let it cool for forty minutes, which was the hardest part, and cut the end off it standing at the counter at eleven o'clock at night. It was extraordinary. It was not a nice cake. It was a good one, which is a different thing: dense and slightly sticky, sweet for two seconds and then not sweet at all, with the walnuts giving it a bitterness that arrived after you had swallowed and stayed for a while afterwards. It was the kind of thing you would eat a small slice of and think about for an hour. Rory stood in her kitchen with a slice of it in her hand and understood, with total clarity, why a woman would have refused for seventeen years to serve it with cream. She wrote in the margin of Ivy's page, in pencil, because it seemed wrong to use ink: Burn it further than you think. Pan off the heat before butter or it splits. 170, fan, 50 mins. Then, after a moment: You were right about the cream.

NINE

The environmental health officer came on the Monday, four days before the opening, and her name was Mrs. Aveling and she was thorough. Rory had been told to expect an hour. It took two hours and twenty minutes, and by the end of it Rory had opened every cupboard in the building, produced the thermometer calibration records she had started keeping the week the fridges went in, explained her cooling procedure twice, and stood in the yard while Mrs. Aveling looked at the bin store with an expression of professional neutrality that gave away nothing at all. “Your supplier list,” Mrs. Aveling said. Rory handed her the folder. It was, she was aware, more than had been asked for. Every supplier had a page. Each page had the trading name, the address, the contact, the products, the delivery days, and a copy of whatever certification they had provided, and behind the pages was a running log, started six weeks earlier, of every delivery that had come through the door: date, time, supplier, what came, what temperature it came at, and who signed for it. Mrs. Aveling turned the pages for rather a long time. “Did somebody tell you to do this?” “No.” “Most people give me an invoice folder and a hopeful expression.” She closed it and handed it back. “Why do you keep the times?” Rory thought about how to answer that honestly and decided to. “Because I worked in a kitchen where something went wrong once,” she said, “and it took nine days to work out where it had come from, and for six of those nine days the person everybody thought was responsible was the person who had done everything right.” She shrugged. “It seemed like a cheap thing to have. Two minutes a delivery.”

Mrs. Aveling looked at her for a moment with an expression that was not quite approval, because approval was not what she was there for, but was adjacent to it. “Keep doing it,” she said. She gave the café a five, which was the highest rating available, and the sticker for the window came in the post eleven days later, and Rory put it up in the bottom corner of the glass where it would not compete with anything and stood outside on the pavement looking at it for slightly longer than the object warranted. The delivery log went into a lever-arch file under the till. She wrote in it every morning for three years without missing a day, and she never once had occasion to look anything up in it, and she went on doing

it anyway, because it took two minutes and because Mrs. Aveling had said keep doing it and because some habits are cheap and you only find out what they were for later.

TEN

June Holloway came in on a Wednesday afternoon in the last week before the opening, when the café was nearly a café and Rory had reached the stage of exhaustion where things had started to seem funny. Rory had met her three times by then: once when she had gone into the florist's three doors down to introduce herself, once when June had come in with a bunch of something and left it on the counter without a word because Rory had been on the phone to environmental health, and once in the queue at the chemist's. June was somewhere in her forties, with red hair pinned up with a pencil and soil under her nails and a way of standing in a doorway that suggested she had already decided to be pleased about whatever was going on inside. She had a flat parcel under her arm, wrapped in brown paper. "You're not open," she said. "Saturday." "I know it's Saturday. Everybody knows it's Saturday. Mabel Finch has told the entire town it's Saturday." June put the parcel down on the counter. "Don't open it now. Open it tonight when you've stopped." "June." "Tonight." Rory opened it at half past ten that night, sitting on the floor with her back against the counter and a bowl of pasta she had cooked in the flat and brought down because she could not stand to be upstairs when there was still a smell of paint down here. It was a sign. It was a piece of board, planed and primed and painted, about four feet long, and on it, in a plain confident script that was not quite the script in the photograph and was clearly, deliberately, a cousin of it: RORY'S CORNER CAFÉ And in the bottom right, small, where a person would have to be looking for it: J.H. Rory sat on the floor of her café with a sign in her lap and cried for about ninety seconds, which was the first time she had cried since February and was, she recognised even at the time, not entirely about the sign.

ELEVEN

She painted the door on the Thursday. It took three coats, because the brown underneath was the kind of brown that fights, and she did the last one at seven in the evening with the light going and the door propped open on a hook, exactly as it was propped in the photograph, because it was the only way to paint both edges without shutting herself out of her own building. Vivian Crowley walked past at half past seven. The Willowbrook Pâtisserie was three doors up on the same side, and Rory had been in twice and bought macarons both times, and had received on each occasion a level of professional courtesy that could have been used to chill a room. Vivian stopped on the pavement. She looked at the door. “Green,” she said. “It was green originally.” “Was it.” Vivian looked at it a moment longer, in the manner of a woman conducting an inspection she had not been asked to conduct. “You’re opening Saturday.” “I am.” “Six months,” Vivian said, “is when people find out whether they meant it.” She adjusted the strap of her bag. “The macarons you bought were the pistachio and the rose. You came back for the pistachio, which means you have a palate. That is not a compliment, it is an observation. Good evening.” She went. Rory stood with a brush in her hand and the smell of paint in her nose and found, to her considerable surprise, that she was smiling. Calvin Whitmore came on the Friday, uninvited, in the middle of the afternoon, and walked around the room with his hands behind his back like a man inspecting a regiment. “So this is it,” he said. “This is it.” “Bit small.” “Eight tables.” “Mm.” He looked at the pastry case, which was empty and gleaming. “Willowbrook’s had four cafés in twenty years. Do you know how many are still open?” “One,” Rory said. “Vivian’s. And it’s a pâtisserie.” Calvin Whitmore turned round and looked at her properly for the first time since coming in, and something in his face reorganised itself in a way she did not entirely like and would not understand the significance of for another three years. “You’ve done your homework,” he said. “I’ve done some of it.” “Business Association meets first Tuesday of the month, upstairs at the White Hart. You should come. People will want to know who you are.” He went to the door and paused with his hand on it, and looked at the fresh paint, and then at her. “Green,” he said, in the tone of a man noting a decision he would not have made, and went out. The bell, which she had hung that morning, chimed behind him.

TWELVE

She opened on a Saturday in the third week of April, at half past six in the morning, because she had not been able to sleep past four and there had seemed no reason to stand upstairs being awake when she could stand downstairs being awake and getting something done. The pastry case filled up between five and half past six. Lemon-cream scones, which she had been refining for two years and would go on refining in quarter-teaspoons for years after. Almond croissants. A tray of honey and walnut loaf, burnt honey and all, sliced thick, on a stand at the end of the counter with a small card in front of it that she had written out four times before she got it right: Ivy's Honey & Walnut Loaf From a recipe found in this building. No cream. She was firm about it. At twenty past seven, a man in a grey cardigan came in. He was somewhere around seventy, tall and thin, with a broadsheet under one arm and the particular quality of a person who has come out of the house early because the house is quiet. He stopped just inside the door and looked at the room the way a surveyor looks at a room. "Are you open?" "I've been open for fifty minutes. You're the first." "Ah." He seemed to consider whether this was a burden. "Flat white. With oat milk, if you have it." "I have it." He took the table at the back, by the shelf where Rory had put the books, and unfolded his newspaper, and did the crossword while she made his coffee. She brought it over and set it down beside the paper. "Thank you," he said, and nodded once, and that was the entire transaction. He was there for two hours. When he left he put the exact money on the counter and nodded again, and Rory said "see you tomorrow" without particularly thinking about it, and Harold Briggs stopped in the doorway with an expression she could not read. "Yes," he said. "Very likely." She did not know, then, that he had been widowed three years, or that he had spent the previous eleven hundred mornings in an empty kitchen in a house on Church Lane with the radio on, or that the two hours he had just spent at the back table with the crossword and a flat white was the longest he had sat anywhere other than his own house since the funeral. She learned it later, in pieces, over about four years, in the way you learn anything about Harold. By nine the café was two-thirds full and Rory had stopped being able to think about anything except the next order, which was, she would come to understand, the correct and desirable condition.

Nora Bell came from the gift shop and bought a coffee and a scone and told her the sign was lovely. Elliot Marsh came from the bookshop, tall and vague and pleased, and stood looking at the shelf at the back for six minutes before buying a croissant and observing that the shelf was in the right place, which from Elliot was effusive. Mrs. Harper came down from the White Hart and looked at the room with a publican's eye and said, "Eight tables. You'll want ten." Tom Percival came in at twenty past ten, ordered a bacon roll, paid in coins counted out exactly, and ate it standing at the end of the counter. June came at eleven with sweet peas from her own greenhouse, out of season and grown under glass and entirely improbable, and put them in glass jars on all eight tables without asking, and then went back to work. And at half past eleven, Mabel Finch came in, sat at the second table from the window facing the door,

ordered a pot of Earl Grey and a lemon-cream scone with butter on the side and no jam, and then said, to nobody in particular but at a volume calibrated for the room: "You have Ivy's honey loaf on the counter." The café, which had been noisy, went about fifteen percent quieter. "I do," said Rory. "With the burnt honey." "With the burnt honey." Mabel looked at her for a long moment. Then she said, "Bring me a slice," in a voice that had gone slightly wrong at the edges, and Rory brought her a slice, and Mabel ate it in the window of a café she had first sat in as a girl of eleven with her mother on a Saturday in 1966, and did not say anything at all for some time. When she did, it was this: "She'd have said the crumb was too open." "It is a bit." "It's a great deal too open. You've been generous with the honey, which she would also have mentioned." Mabel set her fork down. "It is, however, the correct loaf. Which I did not expect to eat again." She picked up her tea and looked out of the window at Main Street, at the bunting somebody had put up for something, at the light coming down the street the way it did in April. "You'll want to write things down, you know." "Sorry?" "In this town." Mabel turned back. Her face had reassembled itself. "People tell you things in cafés that they would not tell you anywhere else. It is the tables, I think, and the fact that everyone's hands are busy. You'll find you're told a great deal, and most of it will be nothing, and some of it will be something, and you will not be able to tell which is which at the time." She took a sip of tea. "So write it down. That's my advice. It's the only advice I intend to give you, so I'd take it." Rory laughed. She went back behind the counter, and the morning went on, and at some point in the afternoon, in a lull, she found

herself at the till with a pen in her hand and nothing much to do with it, and she thought about a woman in Whitby who had gone away for a fortnight and stayed eight years, and about a recipe book behind a panel, and about the fact that Edgar Mullins had told her there was nothing behind the wall and had believed it, because he had never once been curious about anything he owned. There was a notebook in the drawer under the till. She had bought it for stock ordering. It was A5, hardbacked, and blue. She opened it to the first page and wrote the date, and under the date she wrote: Ivy Coulter, 1961–1978. Honey loaf, no cream. Floorboard by the window sings. Then she looked at what she had written, and felt slightly foolish, and closed it, and put it back in the drawer. She kept it, though.

THIRTEEN

They took the sign down in the evening to fix a bracket that had been fitted crooked, and put it back up in the last of the light, June holding the ladder and Rory at the top with a screwdriver in her teeth. “Left,” said June.

“It is left.” “It’s your left. It needs to go my left.” “That’s the same left, June.” “Then it needs to go further.” They got it straight eventually. Rory came down the ladder and stood in the road, which you could do on Main Street at eight in the evening, and looked at it: the sign, the window with the lamps on inside, the green door. “How many did you get?” June said. “A hundred and eleven covers. I didn’t think I’d count. I counted.” “Is that good?” “I have absolutely no idea.” Rory pushed her hair off her face with the back of her wrist, which was the only clean part of her. “Ask me in six months.” June considered the building with her head on one side. “It suits it,” she said. “The green.” “It was green before.” “I know. I remember it.” June said this without any particular weight, the way you mention a thing that has always been true. “My mum used to take me. She had the pink wafer biscuits behind the counter for children, which she gave you if you sat properly.” She picked up the toolbox. “I’d forgotten that until this morning, when I saw your card on the loaf. Forty years and I’d forgotten, and it came back the whole way in about a second.” Rory looked at her. “You never said.” “You had a lot on,” said June. “And it’s not the kind of thing you say in a queue.” She started up the street toward the florist’s, and then turned round and walked backwards for a few steps in the middle of the empty road. “Same time tomorrow?” “Half six.” “God.” June turned round again. “See you at seven, then.” Rory stood outside her café for another minute, in a small town she had chosen off a photograph, with eleven thousand pounds spent and a twelve-month lease and a sign with somebody else’s initials in the corner of it. Then she went in and locked the door, and the floorboard by the window sang as she crossed it, telling nobody at all that somebody had come in. Rory Lane’s story continues in *Scones and Suspicions*, the first Rory Lane Café Mystery.