Leaning on two sticks, Eleanor David went for a last walk in her garden. Normally she had just one stick and a hand free to pull a rose towards her face, to touch and feel the softness of a leaf or the scaly but warm and comforting bark of a tree. But since her latest fall and her refusal of a Zimmer frame she needed two. “You will get back to one again, never fear,” Dr. Carmichael, the old family doctor, assured her, “but it will take time.”

“How much time?” she asked him in a voice thin and querulous.

“What is time?” he said, mysteriously. “Perhaps only we who are old can really know.”

“When we’ve lost our marbles the answers to the great questions become apparent? We’ll be lucky if we can frame the questions.”

And now she was framed between two hickory sticks. Her hands ached and the veins stood out with the effort to secure each to the earth. Her head darted forward like a tortoise, trying to gulp in impressions. If she were not so occupied with her sticks she might have cried.

For she could stand beside her little raised herb garden and smell the scents of chamomile and sage but she could neither pluck a leaf nor put her face down. She would not be there to see the thyme spread across the gravel making a tight, thick, but oh-so-delicate mat. But only, she thought, if the new owners remembered to pluck every single weed. There were a few oxalis heads showing now: a feeble weed that needed a plucking movement like a vertical take-off. Saying goodbye to her garden was harder than disposing of furniture.

Her son, Elliott, had made a great fuss over her Scotch chest, measuring the wall against which it was to sit, bringing her floor plans of her bed-sitting room, a concept which she hated but felt powerless to do anything about. After her garden, which was visible from its French doors, her bedroom was Eleanor’s sanctuary. It was the only room she dusted personally while the home help whisked and wiped through the other rooms, sending the dust up in the air, in Eleanor’s opinion, and then letting it settle on a damp surface. Still, Eleanor was quite fond of her helper, recognizing that she had not been trained in anything but a good temperament. She intended to give her a small tea set as a keepsake. Not that Dorothy would understand what a keepsake was.
Something was happening to words in Eleanor’s mind: one word set another off. “Keepsake” and how to explain it in a kindly way to Dorothy led on to her commonplace book in which she still wrote in a slightly quavery hand anything that appealed to her or seemed important to remember. Her latest entry came from a large-print thriller in which the wife of a detective quoted Henry James. James, whose personal habits Eleanor did not have a high opinion of (she regarded him as a scrooge and a bludger), was asked to sum up his beliefs. Be kind and then be kind and then be kind, she had copied while her mind held the image of the famous author serving a meat pie to Edith Wharton at lunch at Lamb house and then reheating it for dinner. Edith had supplied admiration and automobiles, but in Eleanor’s mind Edith was the better writer.

She did manage, before she turned indoors, to pull off a broken-stemmed Cardinal de Richelieu, whose drooping head clearly indicated it was dying. That makes two of us, she thought, filling a black coffee mug for the rose to enjoy its last drink. The dark inclining head, though the scent remained powerful, looked beautiful against the black mug on which a gold text read: *Gisborne: First to see the light*. It was a personal rule to cut only flowers that were inclining towards death, that had had their day, like the days of butterflies in the sun. And in homage to the sacrifice forced on them, she allowed the petals to fall at the base of a vase like camellia blooms turning brown at the base of a tree.

Now all this care had led nowhere: she might as well have torn every bloom in sight, cut armfuls of the white Japanese anemone she could hardly ever bring herself to pick because among the open innocent white flowers there were always clusters of fat buds waiting to open. I, too, these buds seemed to say.

Sitting in her favorite chair, a stick at either arm, Eleanor tried not to look at her beloved bedroom. Beloved was a term for headstones but it could apply to a room. Even when she closed her eyes its textures and colors pressed into her senses: loved, faded, temporal but, since her color sense was strong, majestic. For, if she was caring of flowers, in her private domain she had known no bounds. All her dramatist’s skills, her skills with tones, everything was in a different key and spoke. If she were not there it would go on speaking. She could wake in the night and be warmed, though everything was monochrome, by its harmony. Now it was to be broken up. “Mother’s garish taste,” Elliott would say and Cynthia, his wife, who had spent years on their huge drawing room and achieved a feeble miniaturism, would agree.

Over the last few days Eleanor had attempted to call her lawyer but his receptionist told her he was away for a few days. “Would you like to
make an appointment for next week?” the bright, indifferent voice asked. The indifference, Eleanor considered, added to the brightness: there was no filter where empathy, consideration might reside, between.

“I don’t know where I’ll be next week,” she said, knowing she meant “how I’ll be.”

“Perhaps you could call back when you’ve made a decision,” the voice replied in a manner that indicated decisions were what she was about.

Eleanor simply put the phone down and sat back in her chair. She could use Elliott’s phone, she could make calls using her magnifying glass and her notebook for special numbers but it would not be the same. Rollo’s booming old voice, his bursts of laughter, would not sound the same. Watered wine, often given to children to introduce them to drinking. Even her blood seemed to be thinning; nonetheless she would try to speak to Rollo soon. There were things puzzling her. And in the meantime, though her stiff, swollen fingers ached, there was time to write him a note. Dear Rollo, she wrote, forming the odd comforting name with pleasure,

I would like you to contact me at my new address, c/o my son, at your convenience. I am not yet too befuddled, I hope, to deal with my own finances and would appreciate your advice on some matters.

Sincerely,
Eleanor David

Then, overcoming a false formality, she wrote a PS: A visit from you would be wonderful.

Cynthia David stood in the doorway of the room Eleanor would occupy. The windows were newly cleaned, the sills wiped, new stronger light bulbs in place. A modest bunch of flowers graced the mantelpiece below which a gas fire nestled. Three new magazines which Cynthia had rather resented buying had been placed, fan-shaped, on a low table. Why an elderly woman would want to read Country Life, Harper’s Bazaar and the New Yorker was beyond her comprehension. She had flicked through Country Life, marveling at the country mansions for sale, the exclusive London apartments, the full-page engagement photograph of a girl with eyes like a spaniel and a man in military uniform.

“Is this expected to come out of the housekeeping?” Cynthia asked Elliott rather petulantly.

“Of course not. Just keep a notebook of expenses and they can be reimbursted.”
So the notebook was in the recipe drawer. E. E. Cynthia wrote on the inside cover:

**Eleanor’s Expenses**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Amount</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>20/5</td>
<td>CL</td>
<td>$11.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20/5</td>
<td>HB</td>
<td>$12.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20/5</td>
<td>NY</td>
<td>$11.95</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The room was still bare. Eleanor’s furniture was to come that afternoon: her bed, a Scotch chest, clothes for the built-in wardrobe in which a line of hangers awaited, all those personal touches that Cynthia dreaded. Elliott could not understand how invasive that felt. “Think of it as a child’s room,” he said. “Think of it as locked or out-of-bounds.”

“Like Bluebeard’s,” she replied. Perhaps that had been opened to see if its decor matched and the bodies were an added extra.

Eleanor had declined their offer to arrive before her furniture: some excuse of wanting to supervise, to see her home of sixty years stripped back to walls and floor with outlines where furniture and paintings had been. Elliott regarded it as a blackmailing touch, for he could easily have supervised the closing of the house and arranged a day’s leave to do so. Now his mother would arrive like a refugee and Cynthia would not know where to put anything.

After the packers had gone Eleanor called a taxi. Elliott had queried this also, as if she was not fitting in with his plans. When she sighted the taxi through the net curtains she placed the envelope containing the key on the mat, as she had told the land agent she would, and closed the door.

“Moving?” asked the driver, when she was settled in the back seat.

“Afraid so,” said Eleanor. And then, making up her mind in an instant, as if being between houses gave her courage, she asked to be driven not to her son’s house but around the park as they did in novels of old New York—Eleanor was a great Auchincloss fan—and then, to Rollo’s offices to enquire if he was back. The memory of Auchincloss’ novels reminded her that she too was rich, now her house sale was added to her husband’s capital, some family money that had been untouched for years, and of course her extensive but hardly examined portfolio of stocks and shares.

Rollo Irving was always pleased to see Eleanor David.

“Did you manage the lift?” was his first question when the young secretary ushered her in. Seen in the flesh, the secretary’s laconic voice seemed at one with the long smooth limbs, the made-up matte face. Taking her cue...
from Rollo’s expressive eyebrows she speeded up her gait and pushed a chair forward for Eleanor. Eleanor gave her a small smile in return for a too hasty judgement.

“You’ve not changed, Rollo. In spite of success. Still as Dickensian as ever.”

“Still holding to the amiable clutter. Clients, I find, like you to rat through piles of paper in search of the one law that pertains to their case. Forgetting that the law is generic.”

“Precisely. And my concern, at the moment, is generic. I’m ill-at-ease moving in with Elliott.”

“Any particular reason?”

“I think he harbors one of those male angers. He had, now I come to think of it, little enough respect for me as a child. I’m afraid he sees women as feeble, undeveloped creatures.”

“Which you could never be. You didn’t think of maintaining your independence a little longer?”

“My nights are so painful now the days just seem a pause before another bout. You will help me, Rollo, with advice if I need it.”

“I’ll give you my home number, my cellphone number as well.”

“You have a cellphone, Rollo?” in the Dickensian clutter it seemed miraculous.

“I’d advise you to get one too. Keep it under your pillow. And I’ll pay a visit.”

At first everything was sweetness and light. Elliott was more considerate than Eleanor remembered; on her first evening he produced a bottle of Napoleon brandy for her personal use. “That’s very sweet of you, dear,” Eleanor said, though she preferred weak whisky and water. The magazines on the low table and the prim bowl of African marigolds on the mantelpiece might have lacked flamboyance but they showed consideration. Cynthia hovered in the doorway, waiting to be invited in. A smile hovered over Eleanor’s lips; she was tempted to imitate Rollo and say “Come.”

In bed at night Eleanor read the life of Lady Jane Grey. The puppet queen had unbelievably harsh parents who had her whipped when pleas and blows had failed to persuade her to marry Guildford Dudley. Eleanor closed her eyes and tried to imagine the scene: presumably the whipping had been done by a servant; it must have been severe because Lady Jane was nothing if not stalwart. Probably I shouldn’t have liked her, Eleanor mused, as if one had the chance in some vast drawing room to encounter figures from the past. “Why did you prefer black and white?” she might ask and receive a theological explanation. Or they might discuss the remark Lady
Jane had made about the host: *Why, how can He be here that made us all, and the baker made him?* Perhaps black and white would come into that answer as well, the blackness of the incense-filled Popish churches Jane so abhorred and the whiteness of the baker covered in flour. The only love and security in her life had been when, as a child, she was carried about by her tutor, John Aylmer. Elliott too had been carried about by Eleanor, but perhaps not with the same gratitude as Jane. She had pointed out things in the garden to him: flowers, colors, butterflies, thrushes, and he had piped the names in a clear undiscriminating bell voice. But now it seemed the words he was really interested in were stocks and bonds, collateral, overdraft.

Eleanor had been living with Elliott and Cynthia for a month when Elliott asked if they might have a serious talk. “Of course, dear,” she replied, as he stood in the doorway.

Should she offer a brandy? Later she was to wonder if the brandy had not been the casual near-medicinal gift it seemed.

As she had known the subject was finances: was the management of her affairs, complicated by several legacies, personal insurances, portfolios, becoming a little burdensome for her to manage? Could he in any way assist without, of course, asking her to cede authority? A gathering together—an image of sheaves of gold in setting sun came to Eleanor’s mind—and later, if the occasion arose or weariness set in—he meant disease, she surmised—then he would be in a position to act prudently on her behalf.

“It’s a kind suggestion,” she replied, “but at the moment I feel quite competent. Everyone’s money management is quite different. And there is Rollo if I need him.”

“That dinosaur,” Elliott snorted. “I think we need to discuss that as well.”

“Well, not at present. Perhaps later. I do appreciate your concern, but for the moment…”

Nonetheless a cold hand had clutched at her heart, and though it was only 3 p.m. on a Saturday afternoon and Cynthia might soon enquire if she wished to join them for tea, she unscrewed the cap on the brandy bottle and poured herself a tablespoonful.

That evening Eleanor did not join the family for dinner. She made up a tray—a gaoler’s tray—of honey sandwiches and a tall glass of milk. She ate slowly as Lady Jane Grey might, for she imagined Lady Jane Grey with small, even teeth and a propensity to chew the requisite number of times: a fact Lady Jane could not have been aware of. The brandy had left her feeling queasy. Why take medicine for no disease, she thought. Physick which only heightened fate by recognizing it, as a prayer book might recognize a
scaffold. Nothing should be so emphasized, thought Eleanor, and the reason for her rich, vacated rooms came to her: a democracy of objects, colors of a commonwealth. Wear the rich dress, she wanted to say to Jane, for that evening she did not read many pages nor understand them properly. You could be felled by gathering clouds as by gathering physicians. *What shall I do with it?* Lady Jane had cried to Mrs. Ellen, her nurse, when the splendid gown was laid out. *Tinsel cloth of gold and velvet, laid on with parchment lace of gold,* Eleanor read, just before the book slipped from her fingers. Wear it, she pleaded. Wear it. Though Elizabeth I had outfoxed them all by dressing down, just like Scarlett O’Hara in *Gone With the Wind.*

Rollo Irving had written to Eleanor David after, on two occasions of phoning, he was told she was resting and didn’t want to be disturbed. A woman answered the first time and a male the second. The son, Rollo decided. He tried to recall some stories about the son’s youthful exploits. Something covered up, a fine paid by the parents. A child who never wanted to return an embrace, Eleanor had once said, before changing the subject. “How is Eleanor?” Rollo asked the woman’s voice and the answer, “She is very well,” came on a rising note of surprise.

Still a note wouldn’t go amiss. *Dear Eleanor,* Rollo wrote. *Would you care for an unannounced visit? I hope your change of address is working out.* A letter full of what would be called bromides though a bromide could be well meant. When, after two weeks, there was no reply and he did not care to phone again Rollo decided to call.

“I’ve been thinking of those speeches from the scaffold,” Eleanor said when Rollo had been shown into her room and was seated in a high-backed armchair. He was surprised at the change in her: dark circles under her eyes that might not lift, a skin more pallid and taut, though she remained lively. He did not like to ask if she were well.

“I’ve been reading Lady Jane Grey again,” she went on, in explanation. “I wonder someone doesn’t collect the speeches together: Mary Queen of Scots, Thomas More, Anne Boleyn, Raleigh, as examples of supreme invention under pressure.”

“Of course they may have been composed in the hours waiting,” Rollo suggested gently.

“But to deliver them, even if committed to memory,” Eleanor went on, and a faraway look came to her eye. “To remember to thank the executioner who would shortly be baying your head to the crowd as a traitor. So many levels. Mary Queen of Scots speaking her last words in Latin, Jane with her Protestant prayer book.”

“All reduced to their essence,” Rollo thought, but didn’t say so. Was it
this that appealed to her? His eyes took in the details of the room: plainer somehow, more constrained. A rather prissy flower arrangement on a low table.

“And your own particular scaffold.” Rollo said softly. “What is that? Living here?”

“I must needs say it was more unwelcome to me than my instant death is terrible,” Eleanor said softly. “I’ve been puzzling over that sentence. She meant kindness, the kindness of the Catholic abbot, Feckenham, who was trying to save Lady Jane’s life by converting her.” Rollo could hardly follow.

“What do you mean? Can we leave Lady Jane for a moment?”

“Ah, but I hardly feel we can. That kindness . . .”

Rollo, though he felt bone-weary, leant forward and took one of her hands.

“From the top,” he said in his legal voice. “Even Lady Jane Grey had a beginning.”

Was someone listening at the keyhole? Once or twice there was a step in the carpeted hall, he felt certain. And no hand-holding could elicit all the details or a proper chronology. Kindness, at first there had been undoubtedly that. Kindness within the capacity of those doing the giving. Magazines and flower arrangements, tea on a tray. But there had also been several attempts at financial enlightenment, usually following a day of fresh magazines or flowers or tea on a tray. Terms which Eleanor had not understood, words which did not stay still but circulated, interlocking like planets. His situation and hers. As if one was an asteroid and likely to collide with the other.

Elliott had talked about her situation as if it were settled forever and his was not. She could hardly protest that she had never felt less fixed in her life. A condemned person might have more control of a cell; especially one with as many comings and goings as Lady Jane’s. And there was tradition: did the stones, the view of the scaffold produce words? It was a thought that had not occurred to her. Perhaps there were notes on the walls: firmness, speak slowly . . . When Eleanor focused on her son again it seemed he was asking for some kind of limited power of attorney to ease her burden. He placed some literature about it on top of the latest Country Life which was devoted to Devonshire. A few days later, when the atmosphere had noticeably cooled, Eleanor went to the phone in the hall while Cynthia was out shopping and called Rollo. “He talks of needing capital for the business, that my money would come to him in any case and now he is providing a home . . .”

“A roof over your head, I’d call it,” Rollo replied, keeping the anger from his voice. If only she had consulted him before she agreed to move.

“We never suspect our children of duplicity, do we Rollo? Why is that?
Because they should be better than us, because we shower tolerance on them and forget to look for faults. Because we have them from babyhood?”

“Ours to work on,” said Rollo, thinking of his own grown-up children, both in distant countries.

“He was always strong-willed. Like Lady Jane. I was always a little afraid of him. I have so many meals in my room now, on a tray. It’s as if he can’t bear the sight of me at the family table.”

“A very shallow diplomacy, dear Eleanor. If you’d instantly agreed you might be looking at yourself in polished wood. Hardly a fair exchange, I’d say.”

“I’ve said too much,” she replied.

“I’ll get you a little cellphone,” Rollo replied. “Think of a place to hide it before my next visit.”

Elliott David’s need for capital was greater and more urgent than his mother could have imagined. Never as confident as his manner implied, he had plunged heavily on the stock exchange and now the Asian crisis was having a domino effect. His financial planner, the toast of a circle of acquaintances, was now in retreat, speaking of long-term recovery and aggregates. Cynthia’s money, which had added sparkle to insipidity, was either tied up in insurances and mortgage loans or fixed bond issues. You can possess the world and have no cash flow, Elliott thought angrily, and instantly after came the thought of his mother’s funds, conservatively accumulating like a layer of dead leaves in a drain. How much could she need, living in his house? She paid no board, just a monthly sum, direct credited and arranged by Rollo, to cover service costs and a proportion of the rates. Should he ask for more money for food? Though she ate now mainly in her room. If she used the rest of the house more, approaching her for money would not seem so like an interview. Perhaps they should take her to a restaurant, order a bottle of champagne which was supposed to be good for the digestion. Sometimes he just wished his mother would fall asleep and not wake and he could be praised as a short-time caring son, given his just rewards in her will. He could maintain his gravity in front of Rollo, whatever Rollo’s private thoughts, and then he would buy a magnum of Dom Perignon and whirl Cynthia through the hall, bringing colour to those pale cheeks and a little fire to that cool blood.

In the afternoons Eleanor rested on her bed. She read the life of Lady Jane Grey in small sips before inserting her bookmark and lying back on her pillows to think. If she could just concentrate on the little queen her own problems seemed to recede. For Lady Jane had been a queen without intention, a pawn pushed into a situation that was not only none of her
choosing but one she could never choose. Her whole character, her whole bent lay elsewhere. She could not get to like finery or Popishness; had there been an alternative she would have remained plain, almost a servant. She would not see her husband, Guildford, before his execution, only sending him a note. There were two men in Lady Jane’s life that Eleanor puzzled about. John Aylmer, her tutor, against whose breast she nested like a small, still and then yielding bird as he walked about outdoors, and the good Abbot of Westminster who had pleaded to Queen Mary on her behalf and tried until he almost endangered his own safety to convert her. When that failed he asked to accompany her to the scaffold and it was he whom Jane kissed goodbye. “Just a child,” Eleanor thought, the book slipping from her fingers onto the bedcover and then onto the floor with a thud that reached Cynthia in the kitchen, forcing iris stems into a wire holder for a stiff floral arrangement.

Winter with its driving rains, chill nights and high winds, confined Eleanor more and more to her room. She caught a cold which descended to her chest and Elliott, solicitous once more, called a doctor. Antibiotics were prescribed and Eleanor slept for most of a day and a night. Her recovery was slow however, as if she had surrendered to illness, sinking into it, making no attempt to help herself out. Elliott’s behaviour was now sunny and attentive; he sat on the end of her bed and once patted her hand. He does not care for me, she thought, and his cruelty sent her further into despair. Sometimes she wondered if she were losing her mind. The thought of her garden, windblown and neglected, since the new owners admitted they could not tell a weed from a flower, brought tears to her eyes. As winter deepened and the damp cold turned to sharp frost and brilliant sun Eleanor roused herself. No one knows the desperation of tiny efforts, she thought, as she dressed with alarming slowness. Then with her two walking sticks she took a turn around the room. As she stood at her bay window she saw Cynthia’s car, steaming and puffing, turn down the drive. At least if she fell there would be no mock solicitude, no face trying to compose itself into a proper expression. “I am a little mad,” Eleanor said to herself aloud, in a voice that creaked. “I have been ill and madness is a part of it.” But why had she not heard from Rollo?

On the kitchen bench there was a package addressed to herself. The mail was not due for several hours. Perhaps it had come yesterday while she slept. It was uncommonly hard to open: the blunt kitchen scissors hardly penetrated the tape. A vegetable knife and nail scissors were required before it could be done. Eleanor’s heart pounded hot and dry in her chest and she almost cried when another taped package was revealed. She sat on the end
of her bed and pulled out a mobile phone with a flap like a crayfish tail. *Keep this somewhere safe. Ring me any time. Rollo.*

There was just time to slip it into a shoe and hide the instructions under her handkerchiefs when the car returned.

Elliott had half-expected his mother might sign papers in the manner of Elizabeth I signing the death warrant of Mary Queen of Scots. Tactfully, the full document was not visible and Elizabeth had signed in the offhand manner of an author at a book launch. But his mother’s unexpected recovery—he had been assured a head cold could lead to pneumonia and the complications were promising—inflamed impatience into rage. Once, when Eleanor was explaining she felt no need yet for transferring power of attorney, and in any case Rollo’s advice and the examination of all small print, in which she had been instructed by his father, was obligatory, he shook her slightly by the shoulders and then attempted to turn it into an embrace. But Eleanor was not fooled. She had been thinking of small print a lot lately as she attempted to understand the instructions for the cellphone. The print was so exceedingly small she had to use a magnifying glass. “Bedsocks,” she had said to Cynthia when she enquired what was in the parcel.

As for Elliott his initial shock at his desire to shake his mother had soon turned into something else. Her recalcitrance, her desire not to face facts, even the evasive way she had with words inflamed him. The solution was so glaringly simple: a part inheritance in advance, signed and sealed: he was asking for nothing that was not destined to be his. If the physical impulse stunned him, his cold, withholding manner grew. He no longer gave her a goodnight peck or wished her a good day. How could a good day in business—a rarity—compare? “Believe me, old man, totally gaga is easier,” one of his colleagues confided when they were having a lunchtime beer. Best of all was sudden death, death in one’s sleep, the quick swift illness. Elliott shook himself and ordered a strong coffee. He must try to talk to his mother again, lay his cards on the table, have a large preamble like one of the old-fashioned novels she enjoyed. Perhaps he could present his money worries in the parenthetical manner of Henry James.

Eleanor used the cellphone for the first time the night Elliott and Cynthia went to the opera. She knew Elliott had no interest in opera; he must be wishing to impress someone or had been given free tickets. Cynthia had stood in the doorway in a new ruched gown with a huge fabric rose at the shoulder.

“You look very lovely, dear,” Eleanor had said and then the heels had disappeared down the hallway. She thought Elliott called a farewell.
Propped up with pillows, nervous but consoling herself that she could simply close the phone’s crayfish tail over any errors, she dialled Rollo’s number. The phone rang six times and then Rollo’s voice, measured and slow, said he was not available. *Please leave a message and I’ll get back to you as soon as possible. Leave the time and your contact number. Please begin to speak after the beep.* There was a long startling beep and then silence. She cleared her throat—would that be recorded?—and in a voice that squeaked said: “Rollo, this is Eleanor David. I haven’t thanked you for the phone because I’ve been learning to use it. It is 8:35 pm and I am afraid. I need to talk to you.” Then, because she didn’t know how to end, she added, “I guess you are at the opera too.”

“Mother has not been particularly well,” Elliott said when they met Rollo in the foyer of the Opera House at half-time. Rollo was wearing a scarlet-lined opera cape and Elliott thought he looked absurd. But he seemed unaccompanied and they withdrew slightly behind a statue of the theatre’s founder.

“I’m sorry to hear it,” Rollo replied, his eye resting for a moment on Cynthia, whose bare shoulders rising above her pink and black evening dress looked mottled.

“She’s not so mentally alert,” Elliott went on.

“Not like Turandot,” said Rollo. “Are you enjoying it?”

“Not a lot,” said Elliott.

“I’ll call on your mother sometime if I may,” Rollo said as the interval chimes sounded.

“Best to ring first. Have a word to Cynthia.”

The cellphone rang inside Eleanor’s shoe but stopped before she could get to it.

“What was that noise?” Cynthia asked from the doorway.

“I’d like you to knock before you enter,” said Eleanor. “And I didn’t hear any sound. If you’ll excuse me I’ll get dressed.”

“If you’re sure,” Cynthia said. “Do you need any help?”

“No thank you.”

When Cynthia didn’t move Eleanor looked into her face. Strain, weariness and something more.

“Did you enjoy the opera,” Eleanor asked.

“Turandot was very cruel.”

“Yes. Some people are.”

I must tell Rollo if he ever comes about Lady Jane’s hands, Eleanor thought. Everything had gone swimmingly up to the hands. The giving of gloves and
handkerchiefs and prayer book; the divesting herself of an outer gown and a scarf about her neck. The accepting of a new handkerchief with which to make a blindfold. She had forgiven the executioner, the signal for proceedings to pass into his hands. Just like signing a medical consent form, Eleanor considered. Forgiveness in her case would give such power to Elliott. Beware of those who kneel and beseech. The executioner had summoned Jane onto the pile of straw surrounding the block; he had moved away to reveal it to her, a huge, broad-shouldered man. The block might have been attached to him: a hump. Jane had tied on her own blindfold but then she could not find the block. Her hands felt for it and felt only air. Speech, prayer, clemency, ordered gesture, all dissolved and the little stage was shaken with her heartbeats. “What shall I do? Where is it?” she cried. Then someone, like Rollo, had come forward and guided those fluttering hands to touch wood. More moving than all the speeches, more moving than the speech she would shortly make to Rollo, asking him, in the calmest way, to come and collect her, to arrange accommodation for a temporary stay, to take care of her finances, some of which she was determined to remit to Elliott, but she would not be dictated to in what manner, once she had located the little crayfish flap phone in her shoe.

Eleanor’s hands fluttered along the line of shoes, finally locating it in a Hush Puppy. Then, using the magnifying glass to check once more the instructions, pressing the talk button and then, slowly, Rollo’s numbers, she waited until Rollo answered on the fifth ring.

“I’d like you to come and collect me today. We’ll go to your office first to discuss matters, then you can find me somewhere temporary to stay. And I’ve got something to tell you about Lady Jane’s hands.”

“I’ll be there at 10:30,” Rollo replied. “Just pack what you need in a small bag.”

“Lady Jane’s hands, Rollo, remind me of that. The way they went beyond speech, into the unknown itself, how they were the truest part of her.”

But Rollo had gone. The fluttering hands and then the great torrent of blood, staining the straw. So much blood, such egress of blood, for so little a queen. On those questing hands she had raced the executioner into eternity. The theory was not quite clear but it would come. Meanwhile there was an overnight case to pack.