Burn Season

A Refusal Lands Novel

N. Van Seters & Claude

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PART ONE

Dry Lightning

June – July 2049

1

The Calf Table

The barometer hung where it had always hung, beside the kitchen door, and Jens Tollefsen tapped the glass with one knuckle on his way past it, as his father had, and his grandfather. Thirty and two-tenths. High and dry. He did not look at it longer than that. His father used to stand in front of it for minutes at a time.

Karin was at the table with the ledger open and her reading glasses down her nose. She was eighty-two and up before him every morning of the year, and he had stopped trying to beat her to the kitchen when he was forty.

"Rourkes'?" she said.

"Rourkes'."

"Take a coat. It'll be cold on the river till ten."

"It's June."

"It's the fifth of June," she said, "and it's forty-one degrees on the porch, and you're fifty-six." She did not look up. "Thea's been saddled since five."

He looked out. His daughter was in the yard on the grey gelding, sitting him the way she sat everything, as if she had been put there by a crane and meant to stay. She had her hat pulled down and a rope on the saddle she had no use for at a branding where her fath-

er and her cousin would do the roping. The gelding was asleep under her.

"Where's Nils?"

"Asleep. He was on his tablet till one." Karin turned a page. "I heard it. The little chime it makes."

"I'll get him."

"Get him gently."

He went up the stairs. The boy's door was open a crack and the room smelled of a boy, which was a smell of socks and something electrical. Nils was asleep on his back with one arm off the bed and the tablet face down on his chest, rising and falling. He was twelve and long. He had his mother's hair, dark and straight, and Jens's feet already, which he was always falling over.

Jens stood in the door longer than he needed to.

"Nils. Branding."

The boy opened his eyes. He looked at the ceiling for a while as if it might have something else to say.

"Do I have to?"

"Yes."

"Thea wants to go."

"Thea's going. So are you. Kieran's roping. You can drag calves." He came in and took the tablet off the boy's chest. On the screen was a map, a satellite picture of somewhere green with lines drawn on it in colours, and numbers in boxes. "What's this?"

"It's a game. You build a town and the water has to get to everybody." Nils sat up. "You have to plan where the pipes go before people move in, or they get mad."

"Do they."

"It's harder than it looks."

"Everything is." He put the tablet on the dresser, face down. "Ten minutes. Your mother's got coffee on the stove for you, if you want it. Don't tell your grandmother I said so."

• • •

Shannon was in the log barn with the light on. She had two outside colts in that week, a pair of sorrel three-year-olds belonging to an outfit from Grass Range, and she was not coming. She had said so on Thursday. She had said it quietly and he had not asked why, and she had seen him not ask, and that was where they had left it.

He went over anyway. She was in the end stall with a brush, doing the old mare. Pell's was twenty-one that spring and had gone grey around the eyes and the muzzle, and she stood for the brush with her lower lip hanging and one hind foot cocked, the way she stood for everything now. Shannon brushed her every morning whether she needed it or not.

"You're going," Shannon said.

"We're going."

"Tell Beth I'll be over Sunday. Tell her I've got her pie dish." She was brushing the same place on the mare's shoulder. "Tell Conor—" She stopped.

"Tell him what?"

"Nothing. Tell him I said to rope something for once and leave the irons to Kieran."

"I'll tell him."

He waited a moment longer, in case. She did not turn round. The mare blew through her nose and shifted her weight to the other hind foot.

• • •

They crossed at the ford at six. The river was up with snowmelt from the Snowies and the Little Belts, brown and quick, and the gravel bar at the bend was under a foot of moving water, but the horses had been crossing it all their lives. Thea went first without being told. Nils went second, on the bay mare that was too quiet for Thea and exactly quiet enough for him, with his feet out of the stirrups and his heels up against her shoulders to keep his boots dry, which never worked. Jens came last.

On the far bank the trail went up through the Rourke cottonwoods and across the lower meadow to the ford gate, and beyond the ford gate was the campus road. It came down the Rourke Coulee from the bench and ran along above the river on a raised bank, past the river meadow, to the new bridge at the narrows, where it crossed and went on north through the Rourkes' upper meadow on the Lodgepole side and up the old coulee to the highway. It was fenced on both sides, and it was empty at that hour. A sign on a post by the cattle guard said *Tri-Basin Computing — Musselshell Campus — Authorised Vehicles Only*, and under it in smaller letters that the road was monitored. Above, on the bench, the halls lay in their long rows, eight of them now, grey and windowless, with the steam coming off the cooling towers at the far end in white columns that leaned all one way in the morning air. There had been two in 2032. Jens could remember a time when there had been none, and that time was more than half his life.

Half a mile up the road, on the far side, was the trail gate, where the stock trail came down off the bench. Between the two, on the river side, was the old hay gate into the river meadow, a wire gate with a stick at the end of it. They rode up the verge to it. Thea leaned down from the saddle and opened it and shut it behind them without getting off, which was showing off, and which Jens let go because she did it well. Then they went on up the meadow through the willows and the buffaloberry, along the river.

The Rourke pens were at the home place, a mile up the river. They heard them before they saw them. Calves bawling, three hundred of them, and their mothers answering from the other side of the fence, and over it all a man's voice on a speaker reading out numbers. That was new. Jens could not remember when it had started. Some year after Declan.

• • •

The Rourkes still branded with ropes. It was the one thing on the place that was done the old way and on purpose. Conor said it was because the calves came out of it better, and he could show you the figures, and he did, to anyone who stood still. Everyone else knew it was because Declan had liked it. Declan had been dead five years in March. He had died in his chair on the porch with his hat on, and Beth had found him at noon, and Conor had taken the earpiece out of his father's ear before he called anyone, and had worn it since.

Everything else at the Rourke branding was guided. The calves had been sorted on Thursday in the order the co-op's program had set. Each one had a tag in its ear with a chip in the tag, and the chip told the pen panels which gate to open, and the man on the speaker was reading out the numbers that came up on a screen so that the vaccine crew would know which calf got what. Jens had heard Conor explain it nine times. It meant you did not give a heifer calf the steer's implant. It meant you knew, when you shipped, that every calf in the pot had had what the buyer had paid for.

"Morning, Jens."

"Kieran."

Kieran Rourke was twenty-two and had been roping since he could sit a horse, and he was the only one of them all who did it as if it were easy. He was on a big sorrel with a white face, coiling his rope, and he grinned down at Thea.

"You want to wrestle?"

"I want to rope."

"Can't. Dad's orders. Guests wrestle." He looked at Nils. "You're with the irons, chief. Grandpa's old spot."

"Do I have to touch them?"

"Not the hot end."

The crew was the crew it always was. Ray Dunning was eighty-one and could not wrestle any more, and so he ran the gate and told everyone else how badly they were doing. There were the Sorensens, father and two sons, from Careless Creek. There were four of the Rourke hands and two from town who came every year for the beer. There was Beth at the vaccine table with a cooler and a screen and her reading glasses on a chain, and a small speaker on the table in front of her that she talked to when she wanted to know something, and that answered her in a pleasant voice about doses and lot numbers. Jens had never got used to that. Beth called it Hal. She said she had named it after her grandfather because it was polite and never let anybody finish a sentence.

And there was Conor, at the calf table, where the fire was.

He was sixty-one that year. He had got heavy in the chest and the shoulders and stayed light in the legs, and he moved around the irons like a man much younger, talking the whole time. He had his father's earpiece in his left ear and his own hat on, which he had bought in Las Vegas in 2019 and had been told by every woman in his family to burn. He saw Jens and lifted a hand with a glove on it.

"Tollefsen. You brought me a wrestler."

"I brought you two."

"I see one wrestler and one engineer." Conor grinned at Nils. "We'll put you on the irons, Nils. You can work out a better way to heat them. Your uncle's been doing it with sticks since Moses."

Nils went red and looked at the fire.

• • •

They branded until noon. Kieran roped and the elder Sorensen roped and Jens roped, and he was not as quick as he had been but he was not slow, and his loops went where he sent them. He liked it still. He liked the sorrel horse of the Rourkes' under him, which knew the work and would hold a calf on the end of a rope like a stake in the ground. He liked dragging a calf up to the fire by both hind feet, bawling, and seeing the wrestlers go in on it.

Thea wrestled. She had been told she could not rope and so she wrestled, and by ten o'clock the Rourke hands had stopped making room for her and started taking her calves when they could, because she was quicker on them than they were. She did it the way she did the gate: as if it were the plain thing to do and she could not see why anyone would make a fuss. She went in on the calf's off side and got the front leg and sat down on the neck, all in one motion, and held it with her knee while somebody else took the hind leg, and then she looked up at the fire for the iron before anyone had called for it. She had dirt on her face and blood on her shirt that was not hers. Jens watched her, and then looked at the fire.

Nils worked the irons. He did it carefully. He pulled the right iron and handed it across with both hands, handle first, and watched the man who took it as if he were being tested. Twice he handed over the Rourke iron when Conor had called for the vent iron, and Conor took it from him and put it back in the fire and said, "Other one, chief," without stopping talking. The second time Nils looked at the ground and Jens saw his ears go dark.

At the break they ate at the trestle tables by the house. There was beef, and Beth's beans, and three kinds of pie, and beer in a stock tank full of ice. The Sorensens' younger boy brought Thea a plate without being asked and she took it without seeing him. Nils sat at the far end of the table with his hat in his lap and his tablet in his hand, under the table, where he thought nobody could see.

"He's got a good head," Conor said. He had come up behind Jens with a beer in each hand and gave him one. "He spotted that I'd put the vent iron in upside down. Didn't say anything. Just turned it round."

"He's careful."

"He's careful. She's the one, though." Conor nodded down the table at Thea. "If I had her I'd have her roping by now. I'd have her on the screen with Beth. I'd have her doing the books."

"She does them."

"Yours?"

"Since March. Karin's eyes."

"Well, there you are." Conor drank. "You'll want to tell her she's the one, sometime. Before somebody else does."

Jens turned the can round in his hand and read the label, which he had known by heart since he was fifteen.

"Come round the back," Conor said. "I want a word before Ray starts on us again."

• • •

Behind the calf table there was a strip of trampled ground between the fire and the horse corral. The calves had gone back to their mothers for the noon hour and the pen was quiet, and the fire had burned down to a heap of red coals under the irons. Conor stood with his back to the corral rail. He had taken his hat off and was turning it in his hands, and he had the earpiece in still, and Jens could see by the way his eyes went that something was saying something to him in it. Then it stopped.

"It's about the trail," Conor said.

Jens waited.

"The co-op's done the fire plan for the county. For the whole bench, the river, everything. It came out Monday. You'll have had it." He looked at Jens. "You won't have read it."

"I had it."

"It's got the east bench in it as a fuel break. All of ours from the coulee to the Sorensen line. No stock movement on it from the fifteenth of June to the fifteenth of October. None. They want the grass standing where it's grazed short and short where it's standing, and they don't want gates left open and trucks in the dry and cattle walking the fire lines into dust. I've signed it." He put the hat back on. "My name's on it. So it's closed, Jens. The trail. For the season."

It took a moment. Jens heard the calves start up again in the far pen.

"My cows are on the lease."

"I know they are."

"They went up in May. On the trail. Across your bench. The way they've gone up every May since thirty-two, and come down every October. Your father and mine shook on it in your kitchen."

"I know."

"So how do they come home?"

"By the road. Trucks. In October." Conor spread his hands. "It's eleven loads, maybe twelve. I'll lend you the money for the first four."

"I don't want your money."

"I know you don't. I'm offering it anyway. It's a fire plan, Jens. It's not about you."

"It's got my cattle in it."

"It's got everybody's cattle in it. The Sorensens are trucking. Holmquist's trucking. They've read it." Conor's voice stayed easy. "I'll tell you the rest, because you'll hear it. The co-op's lawyer looked at that trail. He asked me what paper there was on it. I said, none, it was Dad's and your dad's, they shook on it. He said, then it's permission. He said if it's permission I can take it back any day I like, and if I don't take it back in a fire year and the fire comes up that trail in a Lodgepole cow's tracks, it's my insurance and my name. So I've taken it back. For the season. That's all."

"That's all."

"That's all it is."

"Seventeen years," Jens said.

"Seventeen years and not a line written down. You want to blame somebody, blame the two old men." Conor almost smiled. "Your father never could stand to have a thing on paper. He'd sooner lose the east lease than be told the time of day."

Jens hit him.

He did not decide to. His right hand went out and took Conor on the side of the jaw, not hard, not well, an old man's punch with a beer can in it. The beer went everywhere. Conor's head went round and came back, and his hat came off, and for one second they looked at each other in plain astonishment, two men of fifty-six and sixty-one standing behind a calf table with beer running down the front of one of them.

Then Conor hit him back.

He hit harder. He had always hit harder; they had settled that at the junior rodeo in 2005. Jens went back into the corral rail and the rail held him up, and he came off it with his head down and got Conor round the middle, and they went down together into the dirt behind the fire, among the ashes and the dropped gloves and the trampled ground that smelled of burnt hair. Conor got an elbow into his ear. Jens got a fistful of shirt and a fistful of something else and could not let go of either. Somebody was shouting. Something was digging into his hip; he found out later it was the vent iron.

Then there were hands on him, under his arms, lifting, and he was on his feet and somebody had him from behind, both arms pinned, and was saying in his ear, "Uncle Jens. Uncle Jens. That's enough. That's enough now," over and over, in a perfectly level voice.

It was Kieran. He had Jens in one arm and his father in the other, Conor by the back of the collar, and he was holding them apart the way he would hold two calves, without seeming to work at it.

"That's it," Kieran said. "That's done. Dad. *Dad*."

Conor stopped. He was bleeding from the nose into his moustache and he put his hand up to it and looked at the blood. The earpiece had come out and was hanging by its little loop over his collar, and he felt for it, and found it, and held it in his fist.

Jens stood breathing. His right hand had begun to hurt from the knuckles back to the wrist.

There were people at the end of the calf table. The Sorensens. Two of the Rourke hands. Ray Dunning with his hands on his hips. Beth, with her glasses in her hand. They were not saying anything. Over their heads he could see the trestle tables by the house and everyone at them turned round.

Nils was at the end of the table, standing. He had his tablet in one hand, hanging down by his side. He was looking at his father with no expression at all, the way he had looked at the iron he had handed over wrong.

Thea was at the fire. She had not moved. She had the irons in her hands, two of them, and she had pushed them back into the coals while everyone else was looking at the fight, so that they would be hot when the calves came in again. She looked at her father across the fire and then down at the coals.

"That was a stupid thing," Kieran said, to both of them. He let go of his father first and then Jens. "That was a stupid thing at a branding. There's people here."

"He knows what he did," Conor said thickly.

"I know what I did."

"You hit me with a beer."

"I'll hit you with something else next time."

"There won't be a next time," Kieran said. "Not at my mother's table. Dad, go and wash your face. Uncle Jens, sit down. We're branding at one." He picked up his father's hat out of the dirt and knocked it against his leg and held it out. Conor took it. He looked at Jens over it and for a moment Jens thought he would say something more, and then Ray Dunning said, "Well, are we done? Because I'm

eighty-one and I'd like to finish before I'm eighty-two," and somebody laughed, and it was over.

Then Thea said, "Kieran," in a voice none of them had heard from her, and pointed past him with an iron.

Behind the horse corral, where the trampled ground gave out and last year's grass stood grey and dry along the fence, there was smoke. Not much. A thin blue thread of it, and then a second, and then the grass under the bottom rail was moving with something that was not wind, a low orange line no higher than a boot, and the wind came down the river in a gust and laid the smoke over flat and the line went forward along the fence at a walk.

The coals. They had gone down into the fire, the two of them, and kicked half of it out behind them into the dirt, and the wind had done the rest.

Everybody moved at once. Ray Dunning shouted for the hose, and there was no hose, the hydrant was at the house. The horses were tied along the corral rail, a dozen of them, the ropers' horses and the Sorensens', and the first of them smelled it and sat back on its halter rope and the rail shook. Kieran went down the line of them with his knife out, cutting ropes, and they went off across the pen bucking with the halter ends flying. Somebody pulled the saddle blankets off the fence and threw them into the stock tank. Jens had one in his hands before he knew he had moved, wet and heavy and freezing, and he was out past the corner of the corral and beating at the line with it, and Conor was beside him with another, and neither of them looked at the other.

It was a grass fire. It was forty yards of fence line and a strip of dead grass three feet wide, and on any other day it would have been nothing. But the wind kept coming in gusts, and each time it came the fire jumped ahead of them along the fence, and beyond the end of the fence was the Rourke stack yard, two hundred tons of last year's hay in big squares, with a tarp on the near end flapping.

Thea got there first. She had brought the irons. She did not have anything else to bring, and she stood at the corner of the stack yard with the vent iron and the Rourke iron and scraped a line in the dirt with the heels of them, fast, back and forth, a strip of bare ground two feet wide between the grass and the hay. Nils came behind her with a shovel he had found somewhere and threw dirt on what she had scraped. When the fire came down the fence it came to the bare strip and stopped there, and stood there, flaring, and the men came up behind it with the blankets and beat it out.

It took twenty minutes. Afterwards they stood along the black strip with the blankets steaming in their hands and the smoke going away down the river in rags. The fence posts were scorched to the second wire. The tarp on the end of the stack had a hole in it the size of a door where a brand had landed, and under it the bales were black on the outside and smoking, and Ray had two of the hands pulling them off with hay hooks and dragging them out onto the dirt.

Jens looked at his hands. The right one had been bad from Conor's jaw. Now there was a blister across the back of it the length of his thumb where the blanket had slipped, and the skin round it had gone white and shiny.

Conor was beside him, with blood dried in his moustache and soot over it.

"Well," Conor said. He was breathing hard. He looked along the black strip to the stack yard, at the girl with the irons. "There's your fire plan."

"It's your plan," Jens said. He was looking at Thea too. She had put the irons down on the bare ground and was standing with her hands at her sides, black to the elbows, looking at the line she had scraped as if somebody else had made it.

Kieran rang it in, because a fire on Rourke ground had to be rung in, whatever size. The county sent the volunteer truck from Prosper anyway, and it came at half past twelve with its lights going and two

men in yellow who walked the black strip and kicked at the bales and wrote it down. Jens heard one of them say *ignition source* and *branding fire* and *wind event*. He heard Conor say *operator error*, and then, after a moment, *two operators*, and the man in yellow laughed and wrote that down too.

• • •

They branded until four. Jens roped. He roped badly, because his hand had swelled and blistered and would not close properly on the coils, and after the third miss he gave his horse to the younger Sorensen and went and stood with Ray at the gate. Conor worked the irons. He did not look up when Jens's calves came by, and Jens did not look at him.

Nobody said anything about the fight. That was the Rourke way and it was also the Lodgepole way, and between them it made a silence you could have stacked bales on. Beth gave the calves their shots and talked to her speaker about lot numbers. The man on the screen read out the numbers. Kieran roped as if nothing had happened, with his loops going out flat and easy and settling where he put them, and once when a calf ducked and he caught it by one hind foot only he laughed out loud.

At the end of the day they had done two hundred and twelve. Kieran called it out from his horse. Everyone clapped, the way they did. Beth came round with the last of the pie on paper plates, and when she got to Jens she put the plate in his left hand, since the right was no good, and looked at the right one, and looked at him.

"You'll want ice on that," she said.

"I've got ice."

"Shannon has." She looked at him a moment longer over the glasses. She had never been a woman who said much, but she had been married to Conor Rourke for forty-one years and had learned to say a great deal in very little. "He shouldn't have said that about your father. I heard him. I'll tell him so."

"It doesn't matter."

"It does or you wouldn't have hit him." She moved on to the Sorensens.

• • •

They rode home the way they had come, down the river meadow and out through the hay gate onto the road. There was traffic on it now, a pickup and a white van with the Tri-Basin mark on its door, and both of them stopped and waited while the three horses went down the verge to the ford gate. The man in the van lifted two fingers off the wheel. Jens lifted his good hand back.

He looked round from the ford. He had always been able to see the trail from the ford. It came down off the bench to the trail gate across the road, and above the gate it went up the face of the bench in a pale line through the grass, worn a foot deep in places by seventeen years of Lodgepole cows going up in May and coming down in October, and at the top it turned away south across the bench that had been the Tollefsens' east pasture until 2032. It ran south towards the Bull Mountains, which stood at the end of it low and dark with pine.

There was a post at the trail gate that had not been there in May. It was a steel post, new, with a white sign wired to it. He could not read the sign from the river, but he did not need to.

Thea had ridden ahead without speaking. She had not spoken since four. She crossed the ford at a trot and threw the water up in sheets and did not look back, and went up the cutbank on the far side and was gone into the cottonwoods.

Nils rode beside him.

The boy's mare stopped in the middle of the river to drink, and Jens let his own horse stop beside her. The water was pulling at their legs. It was colder than it looked and very loud.

"Was that about the trail?" Nils said.

"Yes."

"Because it's closed."

"Yes."

Nils thought about it. "Why is it closed?"

"Because of fire. Because there's a plan that says it is."

"Is there going to be a fire?"

"No. Maybe. There's always a fire somewhere. It's a plan for if there is."

"So how do the cows come home?"

"Trucks."

"How many?"

"Eleven. Twelve."

"How much is that?"

Jens looked at him. The boy was looking at the water going round the mare's legs, working it out. He would have the figure in a minute, Jens knew, and it would be close.

"Too much," he said. "Come on. Your mother will want to see that hand."

"Your hand."

"My hand. Come on."

The mare had finished drinking. She lifted her head, and the water ran off her muzzle, and she went on across of her own accord, and Nils let her.

• • •

Karin was on the porch when they came in. She had the ledger on her knee and a cup of coffee on the rail. She watched Thea go past to the barn without a word and watched Nils unsaddle the mare by himself, slowly, and saw Jens get down, left side, holding the right hand against his coat.

"How many?"

"Two hundred and twelve."

She wrote it. 5 *June. Rourke branding.* 212. Her hand was not as steady as it had been and the figures came out large.

"And that?"

He looked at the hand. It had gone purple across the knuckles and he could not make a fist.

"Conor."

She looked at him over the glasses for a long moment. Then she bent and wrote again, under the figure, in the same hand. He read it upside down.

J. & C. R., fists, behind the calf table. Trail closed for the season.

"You're putting that in the book?"

"It happened," Karin said. "It goes in." She capped the pen. "Shannon's in the barn. She's had ice out since one. Kieran telephoned."

2

The End Stall

The two sorrels from Grass Range were full brothers, three years old, and as different as two horses out of one mare could be. One of them would stand for anything. The other one had been stood for too long by someone, somewhere, before he came to her, and he had decided about people. Shannon had had him eleven days. On the first day he had struck at her with a front foot when she came into the stall. On the eleventh he let her rub his face with the flat of her hand, and then he bit the sleeve of her coat, not hard, and let go, and looked at her to see what she would do.

She did nothing. She went on rubbing.

"That's it," she said. "That's all it is. That's all I want."

It was a quarter to six in the evening. The light came into the log barn through the west door in a long slant full of dust, and lay across the alley to the end stall, where Pell's was eating her supper with her eyes half shut. Shannon had heard the horses come into the yard ten minutes before. She had heard Thea go by the barn door at a trot without stopping, and the slam of the house door, and then nothing. Then the slower horses, and the creak of a saddle being pulled by somebody who could not quite reach, which was Nils.

Kieran had telephoned at one. He had said, "Aunt Shannon, I thought you'd want to know before they get home," in his father's

voice, almost exactly. Then he had told her, briefly, and fairly, as if he were reading it off a sheet: the fight, and then the fire behind the corral, and Thea at the stack yard with the irons. She had said thank you. She had put the telephone down and stood in the tack room for some time. Then she had filled the cooler with ice from the chest freezer and set it by the door.

She let the sorrel colt go and came out of the stall and latched it.

Jens was standing in the alley with his right hand held against his coat.

"Let me see."

He showed her. It was purple across the first two knuckles and swollen up into the back of the hand, and he could not close it, and there was a blister across the back of it, white and tight, where the blanket had slipped. She took it in both of hers and turned it to the light. She pressed the bones above the knuckles, one at a time, and watched his face.

"That one?"

"That one."

"It's not broken. Or if it is it's a little one." She let go. "Sit down."

He sat on the bale by the tack room door. She got the cooler and put his hand in it, ice and water to the wrist, and held it there with her own hand on top of his, and he hissed through his teeth and then was quiet. She sat on the bucket beside him.

He moved his fingers in the ice one at a time, testing them, and she let him. The colts ate. Pell's had finished and was licking the bottom of her bin with long, scraping strokes that she had been making on the same bin for seventeen years. There was a groove worn in the wood.

"I hit him with a beer," Jens said.

"Kieran said."

"I didn't decide to. It just went."

"It does."

"He said Dad would sooner lose the east lease than be told the time of day."

She held his hand down in the ice.

"He was right," Jens said. "That's the worst thing. He was right about Dad, and he said it to me at a branding with forty people behind the table. And then he hit me a lot harder than I hit him."

"He always did."

"He always did."

"Kieran said Thea kept the irons hot," she said.

He lifted the hand out of the cooler, looked at it, and put it back.

"She did," he said at last. "The whole time. We were rolling in the ashes and she pushed the irons back in so they'd be ready."

"That's Thea."

"That's Thea." He looked at the colts. "Nils just stood there with his tablet."

"He's twelve."

"I know he's twelve."

"He's twelve and he watched his father roll in the dirt with his uncle," Shannon said. "What do you want him to do. Keep the irons hot?"

• • •

She had started the business in the log barn in 2032, in the spring after the storm, with two stalls Jens had dug out with a fork and a mask over his face and a sign she had painted herself. *S. Tollefsen — Colts Started.* The S had been there so that nobody would have to decide whether she was a Rourke or a Tollefsen; it was a thing she could say quickly, at a sale, to a man she did not know. Seventeen years later all twelve stalls were full, and she had a round pen and a waiting list, and a little indoor arena that Jens had put up for her in 2041 out of the insurance on the old machine shed, and she was booked through the next spring. She had never made a great deal of money. She had never lost any, which on that river was the same as being rich.

She had wanted it at fifteen and had said so once, behind the Rourke calf table, to Jens Tollefsen, who had not laughed. She had said it again at thirty-six, to the same man, on a cement slab at the Stampede, and he had not laughed then either. She had married him for that among other things.

Pell's had been the first. Wyatt Pell had started her as a three-year-old in the summer of 2031 and had not finished her, because he had died on the Rourke bench in the April storm the next spring, and his grandfather had come up from Lusk for the funeral and said to tell Shannon to finish the filly. She had finished her. She had ridden her for fifteen years. She had never sold her and never would, and the mare had stood in the end stall of the log barn every night of those years under a brass plate that Jens had cut on the shop grinder in 2033. It said *PELL*'S. It was the only name on any stall in the barn.

• • •

Supper was at seven. It was Karin's kitchen still; she had never given it up and nobody had asked her to. When Arne died in 2041 Jens and Shannon had moved over from the bunkhouse, and Karin had moved downstairs into the room that had been the parlour, and the bunkhouse had become Shannon's office. Nobody had discussed any of it. One spring it was so.

Karin cooked. Shannon did the dishes. It was the arrangement they had come to in 2032 and had never revised. There was roast chicken, because it was Saturday, and potatoes, and the first lettuce from the garden.

Thea came down when she was called. She had washed her face but there was still a line of dirt along her jaw where the calf had been. She sat in her place and ate without looking at her father, quickly and neatly, as she did everything.

Nils came down last. He sat beside his grandmother, as he had since he was three, and put his tablet under his leg on the chair, where everyone could see it.

Jens ate left-handed. He did it badly. Karin cut his chicken for him without saying anything and pushed the plate back across, and he let her.

"Well," he said, after a while. He was looking at Nils. "We'll be cutting the river hay the end of the month. If it holds."

"It'll hold," Thea said. "It's high pressure through the twentieth. Grandma's got the outlook."

He salted his potatoes with his left hand and got most of it on the cloth. "We'll want you on the rake this year, Nils. You're tall enough."

Nils nodded. He had a piece of potato on his fork and was looking at it.

"You know how many acres we put up on the bottom?"

"No."

"Two hundred and ten," Thea said. "Hundred and forty alfalfa-brome, seventy of the grass. We got two point six ton an acre on

the alfalfa last year and one point eight on the grass. Two cuttings on the alfalfa if it rains in July. It won't."

Jens put his fork down.

"I was asking your brother."

"I know."

"Then let him answer."

"He doesn't know," Thea said. She did not say it unkindly. She said it as she would have read the figure off the ledger. "He doesn't care about hay, Dad. He's said. Ask him about water pipes. Ask him about his town."

Nils went red to the hair.

"I care about hay," he said.

"You don't."

"I don't care about it the way you do. That's not the same."

There was a silence. Karin ate a piece of lettuce.

"And the fall?" Jens said, to Nils. He said it carefully, as if it were the only question in the world. "What do you think we'll wean?"

"I don't know."

"Guess."

Nils looked at his plate. Shannon watched him do the arithmetic, or try to: watched him reach for a number he did not have and come up empty. Across the table Thea had her mouth shut tight. She knew. She had the weaning weights for the last eleven years in a column in her head, and the price, and the buyers, and what the co-op had said last year about the market, and what it had been. She knew it by heart, like a song.

"Five-fifty?" Nils said.

"Five-sixty on the steers," Thea said, very low, into her plate. "Five-twenty on the heifers. If we wean the first week of October. If the lease grass holds."

Jens did not look at her.

"Good guess," he said to Nils. "That's not bad. Five-fifty."

• • •

She did the dishes. Karin dried. Thea had gone out to check the colts, which did not need checking; Nils had gone up to his room; Jens was on the porch in the dark with his hand in a bowl of ice that Karin had made him take.

"He'll make himself sick over that boy," Karin said. She dried a plate and put it in the rack. "Arne did it to Dagny. She was the one who wanted the place, and he looked past her at Jens till Jens was forty." Karin put the towel down. "You tell him. He won't hear it from me."

"I've told him."

"Tell him again." She picked up the next plate. "And tell him about Conor's telephone call. Before he finds out from Beth."

Shannon stopped, with her hands in the water.

"How did you know?"

"I was in the hall on Thursday when you took it. I'm old. I'm not deaf." Karin dried the plate. "You said, 'Tell him yourself, Conor. At the table. Not behind it.' And then you stood there looking at the wall for five minutes."

• • •

Thea was in the trouble colt's stall.

Shannon saw her from the barn door and stopped. The girl was standing in the back corner with her shoulders against the logs and her hands at her sides, perfectly still, and the colt was standing at the front of the stall with his head turned round towards her and his ears forward. Neither of them was moving. There was a halter hanging on the peg outside the door, where Shannon had left it.

"Thea."

"He let me in."

"I can see that. Come out."

"In a minute."

"Now. Slowly. Along the wall, not across him."

Thea came along the wall. The colt turned his head to follow her and did not move his feet. She slipped out through the door and latched it behind her, and the colt put his nose over the top and blew at the back of her neck, and she jumped, and then laughed, and put her hand up behind her without looking and let him smell it.

"He struck at me the first day," Shannon said. "At the shoulder. If I'd been a foot closer he'd have had my collarbone."

"He didn't strike at me."

"He didn't this time." Shannon took the halter off the peg and hung it on the other one, out of the way, for no reason except that her hands wanted something to do. "Don't go in with my outside horses without me. Those people are paying for him to come home with the same number of legs he came with. And so are you."

"Okay."

"I mean it."

"I said okay." Thea leaned on the stall door with her arms folded on it. The colt put his chin on her forearm. She let him. "Dad's going to give it to Nils."

Shannon did not answer at once.

"Nobody's giving anything to anybody. It's your grandmother's."

"Grandma's eighty-two."

"Grandma's going to be eighty-two for a good while yet. She told me so."

"It's going to be Nils's." Thea said it to the colt. "That's what Dad wants. He wants it like it was. Grandpa and him. Him and Nils. He asks Nils about the hay so he can pretend it's going to be like that. And Nils doesn't care, Mom. He wants to go to Bozeman and do water. Pipes and pumps. He told me." She rubbed the colt's jaw with her thumb. "I'm going to go to Bozeman and do range like Aunt Dagny, and come back, and Dad'll have sold the place to the campus and gone to live in a trailer in Roundup so he doesn't have to watch me run it."

"And the note?" Shannon said. "It's on page two of that book you keep."

"The note's just the bank. The place makes money. I've seen the columns."

"It's made money four years in ten."

"It made money last year."

"Last year it rained."

Thea shrugged, with the colt's chin on her arm. "So it'll rain."

"He would never sell this place."

"He'd sell it before he'd give it to a girl."

"That's not true."

"Then why won't he look at me?"

Shannon stood with her hand on the halter.

"Have you told him? In words?"

"I tell him every day. I tell him the hay figures. I tell him the weaning weights. I keep the cattle book. I kept the irons hot." Her voice did not change. "What else am I supposed to say?"

"You're supposed to say, Dad, I want the place. Out loud. At the table. So that he has to answer it."

Thea picked a burr out of the colt's forelock and dropped it over the door.

"He's frightened of it," Shannon said. "Of you wanting it."

"That's stupid."

"Yes."

The colt took his chin off Thea's arm and went back to his hay. Thea watched him go.

"Was Uncle Conor right?" she said. "About Grandpa?"

"Yes."

"Is Dad right about the trail?"

"I don't know yet."

"Kieran said the plan's right. He said it's the first fire plan anybody ever made for the bench that had the wind in it." Thea straightened

up off the door. “He said if he was Dad he’d truck them and send Uncle Conor the bill.”

“That sounds like Kieran.”

“He said it to me, not to Dad.”

“Go to bed, Thea.”

She went. At the barn door she turned round.

“I’ll say it,” she said. “When his hand’s better. I’m not going to say it to him when he can’t hit anything.”

• • •

There was a calendar on the wall of the tack room, a feed-store calendar with a picture of a quarter horse for every month, and on it in March there was a date circled in pencil. The fourteenth. Nothing was written beside it. Shannon had circled it every year since 2041, on every new calendar, the day she hung it. She did not look at it often. She knew where it was.

He had been a boy. He had come on the fourteenth of March, nine years ago, a month early, in the hospital in Billings, born still. They had named him Einar, for Jens’s middle name, and buried him in the Prosper cemetery under a stone the size of a cigar box, where Arne was buried beside him the next year. They had not tried again.

Thea had been six and Nils three. Nils did not remember. Thea remembered everything. She had stood in the kitchen doorway the night they came home from Billings without the baby and asked, “Where’s he going to sleep, then?” and Jens had gone out to the barn and not come back until morning.

Shannon went out to the barn at ten. The colts were lying down. Pell’s was standing, asleep, with her lip hanging. She looked at the calendar on the way past and did not stop.

• • •

Jens was in bed with his hand on the outside of the covers, propped on a pillow.

"Thea doesn't need you to look at her," Shannon said. She was standing at the dresser taking her earrings out. "She's fifteen. She doesn't need you to tell her she's good at it. She knows she's good at it. What she needs is for you to stop asking Nils."

He did not answer.

"You asked him about the hay three times. He doesn't know about the hay. He's never going to know about the hay. You know that. You know it better than I do."

"He's twelve."

"So you keep saying."

"I didn't know anything about hay at twelve."

"You did. You knew everything. You told me so at the junior rodeo. You told everybody." She put the earrings in the dish. "You've got a daughter who wants it so badly she kept the irons hot while you were rolling in the dirt. And you won't look at her, Jens. You look past her. You look past her at the boy every time she opens her mouth."

"That's not fair."

"It's not fair to her."

He shifted the bad hand on the pillow, and the bedsprings creaked. She could see his face in the light from the hall. He was looking at the ceiling, as Nils had been looking at the ceiling that morning, as if it might have something else to say.

"She's a girl," he said finally. "On this river. You know what that is."

"I know exactly what that is," Shannon said. "I was one."

She turned off the light and got into bed. She lay on her back. After a while she said into the dark, "Conor rang me. On Thursday."

He did not move.

"He told me about the trail. The plan. He said he'd have to tell you at the branding and he didn't know how." She kept her eyes on the ceiling. "I told him to tell you himself. At the table, in front of everybody, not behind it. I said if he took you round the back you'd think

he was ashamed of it, and you'd be right." She stopped. "He took you round the back."

"You knew."

"I knew on Thursday."

"And you didn't say."

"I said to him. I told him how to do it. It was his to do." She turned her head on the pillow and looked at him. "I'm saying it now."

He reached across with his good hand and turned the alarm clock to face the wall, which was what he did when he meant to lie awake.

"You'd have stopped me going," he said. "If you'd told me."

"I'd have told you he was going to say it. I'd have told you he didn't want to." She found his good hand under the covers. "You'd still have gone. You'd still have hit him. I've known you since you were nine."

"Eleven."

"Nine. You were in the junior rodeo at nine and you fell off a calf in front of the grandstand and cried." She held on to his hand. "I was there. I was seven. I thought you were the bravest boy I'd ever seen, because you got up."

He laughed, once, in the dark, the way he did when something got past him. Then he did not say anything else, and after a while his breathing changed, and she lay and listened to it.

At two she got up and went down to the barn. The colts were up and eating hay. The trouble one put his head over the door and looked at her and did not strike.

Pell's was lying down in the end stall, flat out on her side in the straw, with her legs stretched out and her neck long, the way old horses lie when they sleep hard. Shannon stood at the door and watched her side. It went up, after a while, and down.

She stood there until it had done it six times. Then she went back up to bed.

3

The North Footing

The farrowing barn was two hundred and forty feet long and ran east and west along the top of the rise at the east end of the colony, where the ground was high and drained. It had been built in the summer of 2032 by the colony's own men and three hired concrete finishers from Lewistown, on footings poured in April. It had pits under the slats, and heat, and fans in the gable ends that came on by themselves when the air in the barn went over a figure somebody had set, and for seventeen years it had housed four hundred sows and the litters of four hundred sows. Men came from other colonies to look at it.

Joseph Wipf went past its north end every morning at a quarter to six, on the way from the men's house to the boar barn, and he did not look at it.

He did not need to. He knew the north footing as he knew the back of his own hand. It was a strip of grey concrete eighteen inches wide that came up four inches out of the ground and ran the length of the barn under the bottom of the steel siding. There was a crack in it, sixty feet from the corner, that had opened in the winter of 2036 and been filled with caulk, and the caulk had gone dark. There was a place forty feet from the corner where the grass grew greener in a narrow strip along the concrete, because a downspout emptied

there. And there was a place thirty-one feet from the corner where nothing was different at all, where the concrete was as grey as everywhere else and the grass as dry, and four feet under the grass, inside the footing, between the rebar, there was a guitar in a feed sack.

He knew it was thirty-one feet because Peter Entz had told him. Peter had told him the summer he came home, in 2047, standing in the alley of the farrowing barn with a bucket in each hand, without being asked. "Thirty-one feet," Peter had said. "From the corner. I paced it, after. B-because I wanted you to know where." Then he had gone on down the alley with the buckets.

They had not spoken of it again. Peter was hog boss. Joseph worked under him. They were in the farrowing barn together ten hours a day, six days a week, two men past forty in rubber boots and coveralls, and the guitar was under them the whole time, and neither of them said a word about it. Joseph did not think Peter was ashamed. He thought Peter had said what he needed to say, once, and that it was in the ground now with everything else.

• • •

There was smoke on the sky that June, from Idaho, a brown smear low in the west in the evenings, and at breakfast on the Monday after the Rourke branding Samuel-John read the colony the outlook off the telephone from the shop, standing at the head of the men's table, as their father had read it for sixteen years. Dry. Driest since 2021. Fire danger very high on the Bull Mountains and the breaks. The county asked that every outfit check its water and its pumps.

After the prayer he came down the table to where Joseph sat with the boys.

"The water truck," Samuel-John said. "The old Ford, with the tank. You ran pumps in Billings."

"Pumps and pens."

"Will it pump?"

"No," Joseph said. "The pump's seized. It's been seized since I came home. I looked at it in forty-seven. It wants a new seal kit and an impeller, and somebody to run it once a week so it doesn't seize again."

His brother looked at him.

"You looked at it in forty-seven."

"I look at everything. There isn't much else to do when nobody speaks to you." Joseph wiped his plate with his bread. "Order the kit. I'll put it in. You'll want it before the brothers vote, not after."

"The brothers haven't voted machines for fire."

"They will," Joseph said. "They always do. And when they do, you'll want water in the truck the same day."

Samuel-John stood a moment longer. Then he went back up the table, and that afternoon Joseph saw him in the shop on the telephone, writing a part number on the back of his hand.

• • •

He had come home in March of 2047, the week after his father's stroke.

It had been a Tuesday. His mother had telephoned him at the yard in Billings at four in the morning, at the end of his shift, and said, "Your father is in Great Falls. In the hospital. He has asked for you." She had said it in English, which she never did on the telephone, and he had understood from that how bad it was. He had driven north in the yard truck without asking anyone and been fired by telephone at Harlowton, and he had not cared.

His father had lived. He had come home in May in a wheelchair, with the left side of his face dropped and his left hand curled in his lap like a sleeping animal, and over the summer he had got out of the wheelchair onto a cane, and over the winter he had got his speech back, most of it, in both languages, slowly, a word at a time. He was seventy-eight now. He sat on the bench outside the kitchen in the afternoons with the cane between his knees and watched the

yard. He could not be Haushalter any more. Samuel-John was Haushalter, who was Joseph's elder brother and had been their father's right hand since he was twenty, and who did the work as their father had done it, without fuss and without asking anyone whether he was doing it right.

Joseph had stayed. Nobody had asked him to stay and nobody had told him to go. He had come in March to see his father and in April his father had said to him, from the hospital bed, with half his mouth, "The hogs. Peter needs. A man," and he had gone and worked in the hogs. In May the brothers had met and voted that a man who was not baptised might live in the colony and work in it and eat at its table, as he had done until he was twenty-one, if he came to church and kept the rule, until such time as he asked for baptism or went away. It was not a thing that happened often. It had happened before. Joseph had been told the vote was eleven to three, and he had not asked who the three were. He knew one of them. It was Samuel-John.

• • •

He was watched.

It was worse than he had expected, though nobody said anything. But when he came into the dining hall in the morning and sat at the end of the men's table, among the boys of sixteen and seventeen who were not yet baptised either, there was a small movement down the table, a turning of heads that turned back again, and the boys made room for him as they would have made room for a cousin from another colony, carefully. When he spoke in the barn the men answered him. When he did not speak nobody spoke to him. Two years later it had not changed much. He was the one who went. He would be the one who went if he lived to be ninety and was buried here.

His mother watched him most. She did it without seeming to. She was seventy-one and had been head cook for twenty years, and

from the kitchen window, which looked out on the yard and the dining-hall door and the path to the barns, she could see everyone who came and went on the place. She had told him once, years ago, that she saw a good deal from that window and did not always know what it was. She knew when he came in late from the barns. She knew when he did not eat. She knew, he was fairly sure, that he walked past the north end of the farrowing barn every morning without looking at it.

• • •

The letter came on a Thursday in the middle of June.

The mail came out from Prosper on Tuesdays and Thursdays in a canvas sack, and Samuel-John sorted it on the table in the office and put each family's letters in its box. Joseph had no box. He had never had a letter at Sixmile in his life; the letters he had had in Billings had been bills and a summons for jury duty. Samuel-John brought it to him in the boar barn at eleven, which he had never done for anything, and held it out at arm's length, as if it were a thing that might go off.

"For you."

Joseph wiped his hands on his coveralls and took it.

It was a plain envelope, white, with a stamp with a flag on it, addressed in a careful hand in blue ink. *Joseph Wipf, Sixmile Colony, Prosper, Montana.* There was no street, because there was no street. In the corner it said *A. Waldner, Wolf Creek Colony, Olivet, S.D.*

He looked at it. He looked up. His brother was still standing in the barn door, with the light behind him.

"Anna Waldner," Samuel-John said. "Peter's mother's cousin's girl. From Rachel's wedding." He paused. "Wipf, she is now. She married David Wipf. One of the Wolf Creek Wipfs, no relation. He died. Two years ago, three. It was in the Wolf Creek letter."

"I know who she is."

"I thought you might." Samuel-John looked at the letter in his hand a moment longer. Then he went away, and Joseph heard him say something to the boys in the yard in the dialect, sharply, about a gate.

• • •

He read it at noon, in the farrowing barn office, with the door shut. He read it standing up.

Dear Joseph Wipf,

I am Anna Waldner from Wolf Creek that sat on the bench with you at your sister's wedding. Now I am Anna Wipf. My husband David Wipf died March 2046, the heart, in the shop. I teach the small ones in German school. I was baptised 2033.

Peter's mother wrote at Easter you are home. I write because of my boy. Daniel, he is nine. He has the chickens this year and he is bad at it. He counts them every night and if one is gone he will not eat till it is found, and two times it was a coyote and he did not eat. He will not learn his verses. He learns the parts with animals in and leaves the rest. The teacher says he is stubborn and I say he gets it from me.

He asks me about outside. Not Sioux Falls. Outside. What men do there. Why the one at the wedding went and why he came back. I said I knew a man who went and came home and now he wants to know why. He asks every night at the chickens. I have only been to Sioux Falls and Mitchell and Montana the one time. I do not know what to tell him.

You can say it is not my business. My mother sends greetings to your mother. My father is dead also, 2041. Peter's mother is well.

Anna Wipf (Waldner)

He read it twice. Then he folded it on its folds and put it in the breast pocket of his coveralls and buttoned the pocket, and went out and did the afternoon feeding.

• • •

At four his father was on the bench outside the kitchen, where he sat in the afternoons, with the cane between his knees and his hat on. Joseph came up from the barns to wash for supper and his father lifted the good hand an inch off the cane, which meant sit.

He sat.

The yard was full of light. Two girls were taking washing off the long line by the laundry, folding it into baskets as it came, and a pair of small boys were trying to make a dog sit for a crust of bread. The dog would not. It knew it would get the bread anyway.

"Letter," his father said.

It came out slowly, from the right side of his mouth. He had a way now of saying one word and letting it stand, as if he were setting a post and wanted to see it was plumb before he set the next.

"From Wolf Creek."

"Waldner girl."

"Wipf, now. She was married. He died."

"Know." His father moved the cane a little between his knees. "Good people. Waldners." He breathed. "Her father. Sang bass. Loud."

Joseph waited. The girls had finished one line and started on the next.

"You will ask," his father said. It was not a question. Then, after a while, it was. "For baptism."

"I don't know."

His father looked at the yard. The left side of his face did not move when he looked at things, and so he seemed always to be looking at them with one half of himself and keeping the other half back.

"Ask," he said, "when you know. Not before." He breathed. "Not to please. Me." The good hand tightened on the cane. "Or her."

"I know."

"Do you." His father turned his head, all the way, slowly, to look at him. "Twenty-two years. You did not ask. For anything." The mouth worked. "I thought. Pride. Yours." He breathed. "Mine."

The dog had given up and lain down. The smaller boy gave it the crust anyway.

His father looked away again, up past the barns to the sky over the bench, which was the pale hot blue it had been for three weeks.

"Dry," he said.

"It's dry."

"Too dry. Phone says." He meant the telephone in the shop, the one with the weather on it, which he had said yes to at the meeting in 2031 and which Samuel-John read every morning now as their father had. "Fire, it says. This year. Bull Mountains." He breathed. "Paul says. Machines. For fire. The brothers will meet."

"Will they say yes?"

His father almost smiled, on the one side.

"For fire," he said, "they always say yes."

• • •

He wrote back that night.

He sat at the small table in his room in the men's house, which had been his room until he was twenty-one and had been somebody else's for twenty-two years and was his again, with a lamp and a pad of paper from the office and a pencil, because he did not own a pen. He wrote for an hour. He wrote about Billings. He wrote about the yard, the ten thousand head, the handset on his belt that told him which pen and which animal; about the room on Third Avenue North and the landlady who left soup at his door on Sundays; about the band at the bar on Montana Avenue, the Drifters, which had broken up in 2039 when Russ died; about the guitar he had bought

in Billings his second winter there, which he had never played as well as the one in the footing, and had sold in 2046 for forty dollars. He wrote about his father's stroke and the telephone at four in the morning and the drive north. He wrote that he had come home because his father had asked for him, and he had not known until he was driving that he had been waiting twenty-two years to be asked.

He read it over. It was six pages, both sides. It was the most he had ever written in his life.

He folded it in half and put it in the drawer.

He wrote again. He wrote that she should tell the boy the truth, which was that a man could go outside and earn a wage and have a room and come and go, and that most of it was easier than the colony, and some of it was better, and that none of it was his own. He wrote that you could be told what to do by a machine and it did not care whether you did it gladly, and that he had thought for a long time that this was freedom, and had found out it was only being left alone. He wrote that he did not know if he would have come back if his father had not asked. He wrote that he still did not know whether he was back.

It was two pages. He read it over. It sounded like a man explaining himself to a judge.

He folded it and put it in the drawer with the first.

He sat a long time. The men's house was quiet. Down the hall somebody was snoring. Outside, the fans in the farrowing barn gable came on with a hum, all four at once, as they did at eleven when the air in the barn went over the figure, and ran for a while, and went off.

He took a third sheet.

Dear Anna,

I remember you.

Tell him the man came back because his father asked for him.
Tell him the man had been waiting to be asked, and did not know

it. Tell him that outside there is a great deal of room, and nobody in it.

Tell him to count the chickens twice before he goes without supper.

If he wants to know more he may write to me himself. I will answer.

Joseph Wipf

He read it. It was short. It was nearly true.

He did not have an envelope. In the morning he went to the kitchen at half past five, before the bell, and his mother was there alone with the dough, and he asked her for one.

She wiped her hands on her apron and went to the drawer under the window and took out an envelope and gave it to him. She did not ask what it was for. She watched him write the address on it, against the kitchen counter, in pencil. *Mrs. A. Wipf, Wolf Creek Colony, Olivet, S.D.*

"She is a widow," his mother said. She had gone back to the dough. She did not look round. "David Wipf. His heart. Three years ago in March. They wrote."

"I know. She said."

"She has a boy."

"Daniel. Nine."

His mother folded the dough over and leaned on it with the heels of her hands.

"She teaches the little ones," she said. "Peter's mother says she is good at it. She says the children are a little frightened of her and would walk into the river for her." She turned the dough a quarter turn. "Put a stamp on it. There are stamps in the drawer with the envelopes. It will go out with Thursday's sack."

He found a stamp. He put it on. He held the letter a moment.

"Mother."

"Yes."

"Samuel-John voted against me staying. In forty-seven. Didn't he."

His mother stopped kneading. She stood with her hands flat on the dough.

"Yes," she said. "He did."

"Why?"

"He said you would go again. He said it would be harder on Father the second time." She began again, folding, pressing, turning. "He was wrong. He has said so. Not to you. To your father, last winter. I heard it from the window." She did not look up. "You should eat. You are not eating."

"I'm eating."

"You are not. I can hear it." She nodded at the letter in his hand. "Put it in the box on the office door. Samuel-John takes the sack in."

• • •

He put it in the box on the office door at six. Then he went down past the north end of the farrowing barn to the boar barn, as he did every morning.

He stopped, at thirty-one feet from the corner.

He had not meant to. His feet stopped. He stood on the grass by the footing in his rubber boots with his hands in the pockets of his coveralls and looked down at the concrete, which was grey and dry and had a little moss on it on the north side, the same as everywhere.

It was very early. The sun had not come over the bench yet and the light was flat and blue. The fans were off. Inside, through the steel, he could hear the sows grunting in their crates and the small high noise of the piglets, hundreds of them, and the slats knocking.

Peter Entz came round the corner of the barn with two buckets.

He saw Joseph standing there and stopped. He looked at Joseph and then down at the footing where Joseph was looking. He set the buckets down.

They stood there, the two of them, a few feet apart, in the blue light.

"You've had a letter," Peter said. "From Wolf Creek." He said it carefully, to get it out without the stammer. "Mother had one too. Thursday. She said Anna asked had you come home."

"I wrote back."

"Good." Peter picked up the buckets again. Then he did not go. "She was baptised the year after the wedding. She said, after she met you. She said she'd asked the one who went what he had out there, and he couldn't tell her, so she'd stay and find out for herself." He shifted the buckets in his hands. "Mother told me. In thirty-four. I always thought you should know that."

Joseph took one hand out of his pocket and put it flat on the steel siding of the barn, which was already warm.

"The sows in four are farrowing," Peter said. "Two of them in the night. I'll want you on the heat lamps." He went on down along the barn with the buckets, and in at the door at the far end, and the door shut behind him.

Joseph stood a while longer. Then the bell went, the big one, for breakfast, and the yard filled with people, and he went in.

4

Red Flag

The pack test was three miles on the county gravel with forty-five pounds on your back, and you had forty-five minutes to do it, and you could not run. Lyle Harris had done it every spring from 2033 to 2045, and in 2046, at sixty-two, he had done it in forty-four minutes and ten seconds, and had sat down in the ditch at the end of it and decided that was enough. He was superintendent of Harris Fireline. Superintendents rode in the truck.

He stood at the finish now with a stopwatch on a cord round his neck, though the time was on everybody's wrist, and watched them come in.

There were twelve of them that year. Ten for the hand crew and two for the engines, and Wallace's grandson in front, who ran the crew on the line and called himself Boss, as the crew bosses before him had. He came in at thirty-eight minutes with his pack riding high and easy and his face perfectly calm, and turned round at once and walked back down the road to bring in the others. Behind him there were the two Spotted Elk brothers from Busby, who did everything together and always had; and a girl from Ashland who was nineteen and on her second season and walked like a soldier; and Herbie Two Moons, who was fifty-one and had been on the crew since the first year and would be on it, he said, until they bur-

ied him in his Nomex. They came in by ones and twos. They were sweating through their shirts in the July morning. Nobody spoke. They put their packs down in a row at the edge of the road and stood with their hands on their hips and breathed.

The last one was a boy from Lame Deer, eighteen, new that year, whom Lyle had hired because his mother had come to the house and asked. He came in at forty-four minutes and fifty-one seconds, white in the face, with Boss walking beside him talking low and even, and when he crossed the line he did not stop or sit down. He walked another twenty yards past it, carefully, as if the ground were ice, and was sick in the borrow pit.

"Good," Lyle said. "That's good. Sit down now."

The boy sat down.

"Forty-four fifty-one," Boss said. "He made it."

"He made it."

"I told him he'd make it if he didn't look at his watch." Boss took his own pack off. "He looked at his watch."

• • •

He had built it after 2032. That was how he said it, when anybody asked, as if it had been a barn: *I built it after thirty-two.* What he meant was that in the summer of 2032 he had sold forty-two of his mother's best heifers to the Rourkes to cover a note, and had stood in his own corral and watched a stranger's trailer take them up the road, and had understood that he could not do that twice. The ranch on the Rosebud carried two hundred cows in a good year, and two hundred cows were not enough to pay for themselves and a family and a bank. Everyone on the creek knew it. Most of them had a job in Colstrip, or at the agency, or drove a school bus. Lyle did not want to drive a school bus.

The Tribe had had fire crews since the 1950s. He had been on one every summer from nineteen, for day wages, until he built his own. He knew what a hand crew did and what an engine cost and what

the agencies paid for both, and he knew that every summer for twenty years the agencies had been short. In the spring of 2033 he had gone to the credit union in Lame Deer and borrowed against the house and bought a used Type 6 engine from a volunteer department in Wyoming that was getting a new one, and painted it white, and put HARRIS FIRELINE on the doors in green, and LAME DEER MT under it. He had hired six men he knew. They had gone out on their first fire in August, on the Crow side, and been sent home after two days, and been paid.

Now there were two engines and a crew of ten and a shed by the road with a concrete floor and a compressor and a wall of hand tools, and an office in the back with a desk and a filing cabinet and a computer that his daughter had set up for him in 2040 and that he still did not like. The outfit made more in a good fire year than the cows did in three. In a bad year it lost money. In most years it paid the interest on the ranch and kept the crew in boots, and in the winter he fed cows and sharpened Pulaskis and waited.

• • •

The bank telephoned at eleven.

It was the young man from Billings again, the one who had replaced the old man from Lame Deer when the credit union had been bought, three years before, by a bank in Billings that had been bought, two years before that, by a bank in Minneapolis. His name was Josh. He was polite. He had been to the house once, in 2047, and had sat at the kitchen table and eaten one of Evelyn's cookies and said that he understood completely.

"Mr. Harris. I'm sorry to call on a Saturday."

"It's Monday."

"Is it? I'm sorry." A pause. "I'm calling about the review."

Lyle sat down at the desk in the back of the shed. Through the window he could see the crew on the gravel, doing the hose drill, Boss walking up and down beside them.

"I've had your letter."

"Then you'll know where we are. I wanted to talk you through it, in case there was anything—" Josh stopped. "In case I could help. The model's re-scored the whole agricultural book this spring. It's not just you. It's anyone carrying a mixed operation without an advisory on the agricultural side. The fire business counts against you twice, frankly. It's a seasonal income with high variance. The model doesn't like variance."

"Neither do I."

"No sir." Josh laughed a little, and stopped. "So the position is that the note will roll in October only if we see either a paydown of sixty, or a contracted income stream for the fire business that takes the variance out. A standing contract. Not dispatch. Something with a guaranteed floor."

"I know what it says."

"I just—I wanted to say that I put in for an exception. I wrote it up. I said your family'd been customers since 1971, I said—"

"I know you did. I appreciate it."

"It went to the model," Josh said. He sounded unhappy. "It came back the same."

"It would."

"Mr. Harris, do you have anything? A contract? Anything at all I can put in the file?"

Lyle looked at the envelope on the corner of the desk. It had come on Friday by courier, which nobody on the Rosebud had seen in years, from an office in Denver. It had the Tri-Basin mark on it, three wavy lines. He had not opened it.

"I might," he said.

• • •

There was another way, and he spent the afternoon on it.

He could sell cows. Eighty of them, the older end, at the Billings yard in August when the grass ran out, and the sixty would be there

by October with a little over. He went into the office and opened the market page on the computer his daughter had set up and looked at the August futures and the Billings reports and did the sum three times, and it came out. Eighty cows. He would be a hundred-and-twenty-cow outfit on the Rosebud. He would not build them back. Not at sixty-five, not at those prices, not with the grass the way it was.

At four he went out to the shed. The crew had finished the hose drill and were sitting along the edge of the concrete in the shade with their boots off. Boss was oiling a chainsaw. Herbie Two Moons was asleep against the wall with his hat over his face.

"I've got a contract offered," Lyle said. "For the season. Standby on a campus up north, on the Musselshell. Two engines and the crew, the fifteenth of July to the fifteenth of October. Camp on site. Good money." He looked along the row of them. "It means we're not on dispatch. If it burns here, on the reservation, we're not here."

Nobody said anything. Then Herbie took the hat off his face.

"Our own country burns too," he said.

"I know it."

"Every August. Since I was a boy. Lame Deer, Busby, the Tongue. And we go." Herbie sat up. "That's what we're for, I thought."

"The Tribe's got its crews. The agency's got its crews."

"The Tribe's got two crews and a budget for one." Herbie put his hat on. "I'm only saying."

The younger Spotted Elk brother said they could use the money. The girl from Ashland said she did not care where she was as long as she was on the line. The new boy from Lame Deer, who had been sick in the borrow pit, said nothing at all and looked at his feet.

Boss finished with the saw. He wiped the bar down with a rag and set it on the bench.

"What's the other way?" he said.

"Sell eighty cows."

Boss looked at him for a while.

"You won't build them back," he said. "Not at your age. Not at these prices." He picked up the next saw. "Take the contract. We'll be back for the reservation fires in October."

"They'll be out by October."

"Then we'll be back for next year's," Boss said.

• • •

He opened it at the kitchen table after supper.

Evelyn was asleep in her chair by the stove. She had moved into the kitchen two winters ago and had not moved out of it. The chair was her mother's, an oak rocker with a cushion she had made in 1980, and she slept in it most evenings now with a shawl over her knees and her hands folded, and her chin went down slowly, slowly, until it touched her chest, and then she would wake with a small start and look round the kitchen as if she were counting it, and go to sleep again. She had been ninety-two since March. She weighed, the clinic in Lame Deer had said in May, eighty-nine pounds.

The contract was forty-one pages. He read every one of them.

It was for the Musselshell Campus. That was the Tri-Basin site on the Rourke bench, a hundred and ten miles north and west, past Colstrip and over the Bull Mountains, where the halls were. He saw it every July, from the road, driving to the Stampede: eight long grey buildings in rows on the bench above the river, and steam going up, and a fence round all of it. Tri-Basin wanted a contract wildland resource on standby at the campus for the fire season. Two engines and a hand crew. From the fifteenth of July to the fifteenth of October. On site, in a camp the company would build, with a daily standby rate whether anything burned or not, and an incident rate on top of it if anything did.

He read the figures twice. Then he got up and got a pencil and the back of an envelope and did the sum, and then he did it again.

It was enough. It was more than enough. It was the sixty, and the interest, and the crew's wages, and a new set of tyres for the old engine, and something left over.

He went on reading.

Section 7.2. Priority of Protection. The contractor's resources assigned under this Agreement shall be deployed for the protection of the Campus perimeter as defined in Exhibit B, and shall not be deployed for the protection of any other property except on the written release of the Campus Fire Officer.

Section 7.4. Red Flag Conditions. During any period for which the National Weather Service has issued a Red Flag Warning for the Campus area, all contractor resources shall remain within the Campus perimeter. Any resource removed from the perimeter during such a period without the written release of the Campus Fire Officer shall forfeit the daily rate for that resource for the operational period, and the contractor shall be considered in breach of this Section.

He read it again. Then he turned back to Exhibit B, which was a map.

It was a good map. It showed the campus, the eight halls and the two more that were planned, the cooling towers, the substation, the fence. A red line ran round the outside of it all, a few hundred yards out from the fence: the perimeter. North of the campus the bench fell away into the river bottom, and the map showed that too, in grey, without detail. The river. The Rourke meadows. A road coming down a coulee and crossing the river on a bridge. A ranch on the far side, with a name on it in small letters: *Tollefsen*.

The red line did not go near any of it. It ran along the edge of the bench, above the coulee, and turned back.

He sat looking at the map.

He knew that ranch. He had roped with Jens Tollefsen at every jackpot in four counties from 2009 to 2031, and at the Prosper Stampede every July since, and they had won it more years than

they had lost. He had been at Jens's branding fire in June of 2032, with his own horse, when the Tollefsens had nothing much to brand. He had been at his wedding. He had sat on the Lodgepole porch with Jens on a hot night in 2038 and drunk three beers and talked about nothing until two in the morning, and had driven home a hundred and ten miles in the dark with the window down.

He turned back to section seven and read it a third time. The engines would be the campus's, on the campus's ground. They would not be signed into any county incident. A county division supervisor could ask him for an engine. Only the Campus Fire Officer could let him send one.

• • •

"How much?"

He looked up. His mother was awake. She had not moved in the chair; only her eyes were open, and she was looking at him across the kitchen with the stove light on one side of her face.

"How much is it?"

"Enough."

"Enough for the bank?"

He did not answer at once.

"I heard you on the telephone this morning," she said. "In the shed. You had the window open. You should close the window when you talk to the bank, Lyle. The whole creek could hear you."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be sorry. Be quieter." She moved her hands on the shawl. "Sixty?"

"Sixty by October. Or a contract."

"And that's a contract."

"That's a contract."

"Whose?"

He hesitated. "Tri-Basin."

She was quiet. He watched her face. In 2031 a man from Tri-Basin had sat in the front room of this house with a folder on his knees and asked her for an easement for three towers on her grandfather's meadow, and she had kept his figure in the pocket of her apron for nine months and let her son sell his heifers rather than sign it. She had told him that in the end. She had told Mariah first.

"For the fire?" she said.

"For their campus. On the Musselshell. Standby for the season. Two engines and the crew."

"A hundred miles."

"A hundred and ten."

"And who'll be here? If it burns here?"

"Agency crews. The Tribe's. Same as before I had one." He turned a page over. "There's a clause."

"There's always a clause."

He told her. He read her section 7.2 and section 7.4 slowly, in the plain voice he used for the radio, and then he showed her the map, turning it round on the table so that she could see it from the chair. She put on her glasses, which hung on a cord round her neck, and leaned forward, and looked for a long time.

"That's the Tollefsen place," she said.

"Yes."

"That's Jens."

"Yes."

"And the river. And Shannon's horses."

"It's not in the line. The line's up on the bench."

"I can see where the line is." She took her glasses off. "That's what you're looking at. Not the money. You did the money an hour ago on the back of the gas bill. I watched you. You're looking at that."

"I'm looking at the bench," he said. "It's where the cattle are."

"Sign it," his mother said.

He looked at her.

"Sign it. You've got a crew of twelve and two engines and a note, and that's a hundred and ten miles of somebody else's river. The county will have a plan. They always have a plan now. Jens will have a plan." She folded her hands again on the shawl. "You didn't build that outfit to stand in front of other people's houses for nothing. You built it so I could die in my own kitchen. Sign it, and take the money, and if their fire comes, you stand where they've paid you to stand."

"And if it comes down the river?"

"Then they'll let you go," his mother said. "Nobody holds a man to a piece of paper with a house burning. Not in this country. I've seen fires on this creek since I was six years old, and when it comes everybody goes, and nobody asks after who's paying." She shut her eyes. "That's what a clause is for. It's for the lawyers, afterwards."

He sat at the table a long time after she had gone back to sleep.

Then he took the pen out of his shirt pocket and signed the last page, in the two places where the yellow flags were, and initialled the others, forty of them, one at a time.

• • •

Mariah telephoned on the Sunday, as she did every Sunday at six.

She telephoned from Helena, where she had lived for nine years and worked for the state, in the water court, on the adjudication that had been going on in one form or another since 1979 and would go on, she said, after she was dead. She was thirty-five. She had a small house on the west side of town with a garden she did not have time for and a cat that her father had never met. She came home at Christmas and for a week in August, every year, and she telephoned on birthdays as well.

Lyle held the telephone while his mother talked. Evelyn could not hold it long any more; her hands shook. She talked for twenty minutes. She asked about the cat, and the garden, and the judge Mariah worked for, whom she disapproved of on principle because

he was from Missoula. She laughed twice. Lyle stood beside her chair with his arm out and the telephone at her ear and looked out of the window at the creek.

Then she was tired, and he took it into the hall.

"How is she really?" Mariah said.

"She's ninety-two."

"Dad."

"She's tired. She sleeps in the chair. The clinic says her heart's like an old pump; it'll go till it doesn't." He looked down the hall at the kitchen door, half open, and the back of the rocker. "She's sharp as she ever was. She caught me on the telephone with the bank on Monday."

"The bank? What about the bank?"

He stood in the hall.

"Nothing," he said. "The usual. They want to see more paper."

"Dad, are you all right? For money?"

"I've got a contract for the outfit. For the season. It'll see us through."

"What contract?"

"Standby. Up north." He shifted the telephone to the other ear. "It's a good one. Steady money. I'll be away from the middle of July. I've got Herbie's wife to come in and sit with your grandmother days, and the Spotted Elk girl nights. I'll be home every week I can."

There was a silence on the line. He could hear her deciding whether to ask.

"Up north where?"

"The Musselshell."

"That's the campus," Mariah said slowly. "Tri-Basin's campus. On the Rourke ground." She had read the Rourke water change file, he remembered. She had told him once that she had read every page of it in her first summer at Missoula, the year she left home. "You're working for Tri-Basin."

"I'm working for my crew. Tri-Basin's paying."

"Grandma knows?"

"Grandma told me to sign it."

Another silence. Then, unexpectedly, his daughter laughed, low, the way her grandmother did.

"Of course she did," Mariah said. "Of course she did." She was quiet a moment. "Be careful, Dad. On that river. That's a lot of grass and not much water, and I've seen the plan the county filed. It's a very good plan for the campus."

"I've seen it."

"I know you have," she said. "I know you have. Give Grandma my love. Tell her the cat says so."

• • •

They left on the fourteenth of July, a Wednesday, at five in the morning: two engines and the crew carrier and a flatbed with the camp gear, in a line, with their lights on. Evelyn was asleep. Herbie's wife was in the kitchen making coffee.

Lyle drove the first engine. Boss was beside him with the radio in his lap and his boots on the dash.

They went up the creek road in the half dark, past the turn to the Small place, where a light was on, and out onto the highway, and north. They went north to Colstrip, where the stacks of the old plant stood cold against the sky, and then west into the breaks and up over the Bull Mountains in long grades, the engines grinding up them in low gear, and the sun came up behind them over a country of pine ridges and red scoria and hay meadows in the bottoms, and very dry. The grass on the hillsides was already the colour of a lion. It was the fourteenth of July. In a normal year it would have been green till August.

"You read the whole contract?" Boss said.

"Every page."

"Anything I should know?"

Lyle drove for a while.

"Section seven," he said. "Read it tonight. I'll want you to know it as well as I do."

5

A *Tenth*

The Prosper Stampede was held on the third Saturday of July, on the fairgrounds east of town, and it had been held there every year since 1919 except the two the county could not raise the stock contractor's fee. It was the hundred and twenty-ninth. Jens had been carried to his first in a car seat and had never once, in his memory, been to one where it rained.

It did not rain that year either. It was ninety-one degrees at two in the afternoon and the sky was the colour of a blue enamel plate.

He got there at eight with the trailer and the horses and Thea and Nils, and parked where his father had always parked, along the back fence by the horse barns, and sat a minute with his hands on the wheel. His right hand had mended. It had set a little crooked across the first knuckle and would stay that way.

In the trailer, on the grey's saddle, the near-side latigo was new. He had put it on at eleven the night before by the yard light, because the old one was cracked at the buckle and would have gone at a dead run on the second barrel. He had not mentioned it. She had saddled at six and had not noticed, and that was how he wanted it.

"Are we getting out?" Thea said.

"We're getting out."

• • •

The fairgrounds were what they had always been. The grandstand, painted green every third year whether it needed it or not. The arena, with its pipe fence and the bucking chutes at the west end and the roping box at the east. The beer garden on its concrete slab. A trailer that sold lemonade in a cup as big as your head. The Hutterites from Sixmile at their long table in the shade of the exhibit hall, selling pies. The campus people, a hundred of them now, in shorts and good sunglasses, who had been coming since 2034 and were still pointed out by everyone else.

And the Rourkes. Jens saw them from a long way off, as he always had. Beth's red hat. Kieran on the sorrel horse, warming up in the practice pen. Conor in the grandstand, in the third row, where Declan had always sat, with his arm along the back of the bench.

Jens did not go near the grandstand.

• • •

Thea ran barrels at eleven, on the grey, who was not a barrel horse and had never been told so. She had trained him herself through the spring, with three plastic barrels she had bought with her own money from the feed store in Roundup. She had not asked anyone for help. Jens had watched her from the shop door some evenings and had not offered any.

Jens stood at the rail by the out gate. Nils stood beside him with his tablet.

"She did fifteen-forty at home," Nils said. "I timed her with the phone. There's a girl from Billings who'll do fourteen-nine."

The announcer called her name. *Thea Tollefsen, Prosper, Montana, on Pewter.* The grey went in through the gate at a dead run, as if he had been shot out of a cannon, and Thea sat down in the saddle and took him round the first barrel so close her knee brushed it, and Jens stopped breathing.

She did fifteen-forty-two.

She was third. The girl from Billings did fourteen-nine and did not knock a barrel. Thea sat on the grey at the out gate with her chest going up and down and looked at the board, and Jens saw her see the number and see where it was, and her face did not change at all.

He went round to the trailer. She was there before him, getting the saddle off, with her back to him.

"That was good," he said.

"It was third."

"It was a ranch horse. Third's good."

"It wasn't a ranch horse," Thea said. "It was a barrel horse. I made him one." She put the saddle on the rack. "He went wide on the second. I let him. That's two tenths."

"Then you'll know for next year." He looked at the grey, standing hipshot at the trailer with the sweat drying white on him. "Your knee touched the first barrel. I've never seen anybody turn one that close. Not your aunt Dagny. Nobody."

She turned round. She had the saddle blanket in her hands, wet through, and she held it against her chest. There was a white line on her forehead where her hat had been.

"Dad."

"What."

"I'm not letting Nils sell it to the campus."

He stood by the trailer with his hand on the fender.

"The Lodgepole. When it comes to that." She twisted the wet blanket in her hands. "I'll go to Bozeman and do range and I'll come back and run it. Nobody's selling it. It's mine. I want it." Her voice did not shake, but something underneath it did.

A man went by leading a horse. A child was crying over by the carnival.

"We'll talk about it," Jens said. "After shipping."

"That's not an answer."

"It's the one I've got," he said, more roughly than he meant. "You're fifteen, Thea. It's your grandmother's place. Nobody's deciding anything about it but her."

She looked at him for a while. Then she nodded, once, as if he had told her the price of hay, and hung the blanket over the trailer gate to dry.

• • •

At the Sixmile table, at the end, sitting on a folding chair with his hat on his knee beside the cash box, was Joseph Wipf. He had gone grey in the beard since Jens had last seen him close, and his face had got thinner, so that he looked very like his father had looked at that age.

Jens bought a cherry pie from the oldest of the women, who took his twenty without looking at him.

"They've got you selling pies," he said.

"They've got me guarding the money." Joseph almost smiled. "It is thought that a man who has lived in Billings can tell a counterfeit twenty."

"Can you?"

"No." He turned his hat on his knee. "I hear the trail's shut. And that somebody hit somebody with a beer."

"It was a light beer."

"That is what Peter said. He said it was the only thing about it that was light." Joseph looked past him at the arena, where the bareback riders were going down one after another in the dust. "We heard at Easter, in the outlook. Dry. My father has it on the telephone in the shop. If you need riders this fall, for the trucks, for anything, you can ask."

"I'll ask."

"Ask me," Joseph said. "Not the office."

• • •

Lyle Harris came at three, with the dun in a little two-horse trailer, and parked beside the Tollefsen trailer as he had every year since 2009, and shook Jens's hand, and looked at the crooked knuckle.

"I heard you went down in the ashes," he said.

"We both went down in the ashes."

Lyle laughed. He did not laugh often. He was sixty-five and had got thinner every year since sixty, so that his shirts hung on him, but he got on the dun as he had got on horses all his life. He had a radio on his belt, a handheld, the size of a brick.

"You on call?"

"I've taken a contract. For the season. Standby work." Lyle checked the cinch. "If I ride out of the box with this thing squawking, you'll know why."

"Whose contract?"

"Up here. It's good money." He looked at Jens with his pale, level eyes, and said nothing else.

There were thirty-one teams. Kieran Rourke and the elder Sorensen boy drew sixth and went six-seven, clean, and the grandstand came to its feet, and Jens heard Conor's voice over all of it, yelling, as Declan used to yell. He did not look at the grandstand.

When their turn came he backed the horse into the box and nodded for the steer, and it was all as it always was. The gate banged and the steer went out and he went after it, and the loop went out flat over the horns and he dallied and turned off, and Lyle came in on the heels and threw, and it was the best throw Lyle had made in five years. Both feet. The flagger dropped the flag.

Six-eight.

They sat on their horses at the end of the arena and looked at the board. A tenth.

"My loop was slow," Jens said. "I took a swing too many."

"My heel throw was a thing of beauty." Lyle coiled his rope. The radio on his belt crackled and said something about a vehicle at a gate and went quiet. He did not look at it. "We'll get them next year."

• • •

At the lemonade trailer, at six, Jens stood in the line behind three campus girls in sunglasses, and when they had got their lemonades and gone he found that the man in front of them had been Conor.

Conor had his back to him. He was paying. He had two cups the size of a man's head, one in each hand, and he was trying to get his money back into his pocket without putting either of them down.

Jens said, "You'll drop one," before he could stop himself, and Conor did not turn round.

The girl in the trailer window said, "Next," to Jens, and then looked at Conor, who was still standing there, and said, "Sir?"

Conor put one of the cups down on the counter. He pushed it two inches along the counter towards Jens without looking at him. Then he walked away with the other one, towards the grandstand, his hat on the back of his head.

Jens looked at the cup. The girl looked at Jens.

"He paid for two," she said. "Do you want it?"

He took it. It was very cold and had too much sugar in it, and he drank it standing by the trailer, and he did not throw it away.

• • •

The grandstand was full for the bull riding. Jens sat in the fourth row, on the right, among Tollefsens, where his mother had arranged them. Karin had been there since noon, with a cushion and a straw hat and her bag on her knees, and in the bag was the ledger. She had brought it to every Stampede he could remember. Beth Rourke had come up the steps at the break and sat down beside Shannon without asking, as she did every year, with two lemonades, and they had their heads together under the brims of their hats.

Nils had not come into the grandstand. Jens could see him at the rail at the bottom, by the timing booth. It was a little plywood box on stilts at the edge of the arena, painted white, with a window, and in it sat a woman with a headset and a screen and the button for the clock. Nils was standing under it with his tablet, looking up.

Jens went down.

He came and stood beside the boy at the rail. In the arena a bull came out of the chute spinning and threw a boy from Grass Range over its head into the dust, and the clowns ran in.

"He was off at three point two," Nils said. "And the eye at the box. For the roping. It's a laser. When the steer breaks it the clock starts. Did you know that?"

"I knew there was an eye."

"It's accurate to a hundredth. They round it to a tenth." Nils looked up at the booth. "So you didn't really lose by a tenth. It could have been by one hundredth. Or by nineteen."

Jens looked at his son. The boy was looking at the booth with an expression Jens had seen on him before, over the tablet late at night, and over the water pipes in his town, and never once over a cow.

"Nils," he said. "Would you like to rope? Next year? I'd teach you. We'd get you a horse. Something old and quiet. You could heel for me."

The boy was quiet for a long time. Another bull came out and the crowd came up on its feet, and Nils did not look at it.

"Could I do the timing?" he said. "Instead? The lady said they need somebody. She's done it twenty-one years and her eyes are going. She said you have to be sixteen. But I could sit with her." He looked at his father. "I'd still be at the roping. I'd be the one who knows how long it took."

"Sixteen," Jens said. "You're twelve." Then he put his hand on the back of the boy's neck, where the hair grew down, and left it there.

"We'll ask her," he said.

• • •

There was a dance afterwards, on the slab, as there always was. Jens danced with Shannon twice and with his mother once, slowly, because she wanted to. Kieran danced with every woman on the slab between sixteen and eighty. Conor did not dance. He sat in the beer garden with the Sorensens and talked, telling a story with his hands. Once he looked across the slab at Jens. Jens looked back. Then the song ended and somebody stood up between them.

At midnight they drove home. Thea slept against the truck door. Nils was asleep in the back seat with his tablet on his chest, rising and falling. The halls lay along the top of the bench under their own lights.

Karin had the ledger open on her knee in the cab light.

"What was the temperature?" she said. "On the bank sign. Did you see?"

"Ninety-one at two. Seventy-four when we came through."

She wrote it.

17 July. Stampede. 129th. J. & L. H. second, 6.8, by a tenth. T. third in the barrels, 15.42, on Pewter. Ninety-one.

She looked at it. Then she added, in the same hand, smaller:

N. to learn the clock.

She shut the book.

6

The Porch

She rode over on the Sunday after the Stampede, in the evening, when the heat had gone off a little. She took Thea, because Beth had said to, and because Thea had asked to come in a voice that meant she had decided already. They crossed at the ford at six. The river was down to shin depth on the gravel bar and warm, and the horses walked through it slowly with their heads low, drinking as they went.

On the far side Thea pulled up and looked across the road at the trail gate.

There was a padlock on it now. A new one, brass, on a length of chain. The steel post beside it had the white sign wired to it, and from the road you could read it. *EAST BENCH FIRE BREAK. NO LIVESTOCK MOVEMENT 15 JUN – 15 OCT. Rourke Land & Cattle / Yellowstone Valley Grazing Co-operative.* Under that, in smaller type, a number to call.

"He locked it," Thea said.

"I can see."

"There wasn't a lock at the branding."

"There is now." Shannon turned her horse up the road verge towards the hay gate. "Come on."

• • •

The Rourke house had a long porch across the front, facing the river, with a roof over it on posts, and it had been built that way in 1912 so that the man of the house could sit on it in the evening and look at what he owned. Declan had sat on it every evening of his life that he was at home. His chair was still there. It was a big wooden armchair painted green, with a cushion that had gone flat, at the west end where the sun went down, and nobody sat in it. Nobody had said nobody was to sit in it. It had simply turned out that way, in the spring of 2044, and stayed.

Conor sat in the next chair along. He had his boots up on the rail and a glass of something on the floor beside him, and he had his father's earpiece in his left ear. He did not get up when she came up the steps. He had never got up for her in his life.

"Sister."

"Brother."

"You brought the girl."

"She brought herself." Shannon sat down in the chair on his other side, not in Declan's. "She wants to rope with Kieran."

"She can rope with Kieran. Kieran's in the yard, roping a sawhorse with a plastic head on it, which is what Kieran does on a Sunday instead of going to church." He lifted his chin towards the yard. "Go on, Thea. Tell him I said he's to teach you to heel. He's a better heeler than he is a header, but don't tell him I said that either."

Thea went down the steps. They watched her cross the yard. Kieran saw her coming and stopped with the loop in his hand, and said something, and she said something back, and he laughed and held out the rope.

"She's a Rourke, that one," Conor said.

"She's a Tollefsen."

"She's a Rourke with a Tollefsen name. Look at her. She's standing exactly like Mother."

Shannon looked. Thea was standing with her weight on one hip and her arms folded, listening to Kieran explain something, with her head a little on one side as if she were deciding whether to believe him. It was exactly like their mother. She had not seen it before.

• • •

Beth brought coffee. She brought it on a tray with two cups and the pie dish, Shannon's own, clean, and set it all on the little table between the chairs, and put her hand on Shannon's shoulder for a moment.

"You'll stay for supper."

"We'll see."

"You'll stay. I've made too much." Beth looked at Conor. "And you'll behave."

"I always behave."

"You hit your brother-in-law with a beer at a branding."

"He hit me. I hit him back. It was a light—"

"If you say it was a light beer one more time," Beth said, "I'm going to give the Companion the password to your truck and tell it you're not allowed to drive to town." She went back inside. The screen door banged behind her.

They sat. The sun was going down over the Snowies, very red, through a haze that had been lying over the west for a week. Below the porch the river meadows were brown already, and the river was a thread of light along the bottom of them. Across it, on the far bank, the Lodgepole yard. She could see the log barn. She could see the light on in the tack room, where she had left it.

"Kieran told you," Conor said.

"Kieran told me."

"I didn't do it the way you said."

"No."

"I meant to. I had it all ready. I was going to stand up at the table at noon and say it to everybody, the Sorensens and all, so nobody

could say I'd done it behind his back." He looked at his boots on the rail. "And then I saw him. With his plate. Talking to Ray about the hay. And I thought, I'll not do this to him in front of forty people, I'll take him round the back like a man." He picked up the glass off the floor and drank. "And then I said that about Arne."

"Why did you say that?"

"Because it was true."

"It was true. Why did you say it?"

He was quiet a while. A nighthawk went over, booming.

"Because he looked at me," Conor said, "the way Arne used to look at Dad." He put the glass down. "I've had forty years of that look, Shannon. From across that river."

• • •

"Is it a good plan?" she said.

"The fire plan?" Conor turned his head. "It's the only one this county's ever had. Before, we had the sheriff and a telephone tree and three volunteer departments with one engine each, and the plan was everybody drive to Roundup." He moved the earpiece a little with one finger, as if it itched. "This one's got the wind in it. Every fence and gate and culvert on the bench, and how much grass there is on every quarter-section between here and the Bull Mountains." He shook his head. "Dad would have hated it. He'd have read every page."

"And the trail's in it."

"The whole bench is a break. No cattle walking it to dust, no trucks in the dry, no gates. If it comes, they want to hold it at the bench edge, above the river." He looked at her. "I told Jens. It's nothing to do with him."

"It's got his cows in it."

"It's got everybody's cows in it. He can truck them. Everybody's trucking them. I offered him the money for four loads and he told me where to put it." Conor almost smiled. "Like Arne."

"Like Arne."

"And if it comes to it," Conor said. He was looking across the river at the Lodgepole. "If there's fire on the bench, and his cows are up on that lease and he needs to bring them down, I'll drive up there and cut the lock myself. The plan can put it in its report." He shrugged. "But it won't come to it. That's the point of a plan."

She brushed a moth off her knee.

"You don't believe me."

"I believe you'd cut the lock."

"Well, then."

"I don't believe it won't come to it." She drank her coffee. "Look at the west, Conor. Look at that haze. That's Idaho burning. That's three weeks of it."

He looked. He reached down for the glass and found it empty and held it anyway.

"Your clause," he said at last. "Since we're at it. Since we're saying things."

She waited.

"It's costing us hay this year. The river's down to forty percent of the gauge, and your clause cuts us both by the same fraction, them and us, and they pay us for the hay we'd have grown." He picked his glass up and looked into it. "It's the best clause anybody ever wrote on this river. And I'm watching the meadows go brown, and the halls are lit up like Christmas, and we've got a cheque coming. It works exactly how you wrote it."

"I know how I wrote it."

"I know you do," Conor said. He set the glass down. "I'm only saying."

• • •

The earpiece said something to him. She saw him listen, his eyes going away for a second the way they did. Then he said, "Thanks," quietly, to nobody.

"What does it tell you?" she said. "All day. What does it say?"

"The river. Every hour, on the hour, the gauge at the bridge. The co-op's outlook, morning and evening. The price, if I ask. The weather, if I ask. Where Kieran is, if I ask, which I don't, any more." He touched it. "Dad had it reading him the Bible at the end. The Psalms. He said it had a better voice than Father Doyle."

"Does it ever say anything you don't ask it?"

"It says if the river goes under a figure. It says if there's a warning." He looked at her. "It said, last week, red flag, for the Bull Mountains. For Friday. I've never had one in July before. It's always been August."

Then he reached up and took it out of his ear.

He held it for a moment in his palm, a little curved thing, flesh-coloured, the size of a bean, and then he set it down on the porch rail beside his boots, carefully, as he would have set down an egg.

"There," he said. "Now I can hear you. I'm deaf on that side, you know, like Dad. Forty years of standing next to a branding fire with the propane roaring. It does the hearing for me as well as the talking. Half the time I don't know which is which." He settled back in the chair. "Go on. Say something."

"Like what?"

"Anything. Something that's not the plan or the clause or Jens."

She thought.

"You fell off the Shetland," she said. "At the junior rodeo. Not me. You."

He sat up.

"I did not."

"You did. In the grand entry. In front of the grandstand. I was four. You were eleven. Dad had you carrying the flag."

"You fell off the Shetland. You fell off it at the gate, before the entry, and Mother picked you up and put you back on and you bawled the whole way round."

"That was the next year."

"It was the same year. You fell off and I carried the flag and Mother said—" He stopped. Then he made his voice go up and flat and a little Irish, the way their mother's had been, the way it had been when she was tired and the both of them were driving her to distraction. "'Conor Rourke, you put that flag down this minute before you have somebody's eye out with it, and Shannon, if you cry once more I'll give that pony to the Hutterites.'"

Shannon laughed. It came out of her all at once and she could not stop it. She put her coffee cup down on the tray and put both hands over her face.

"She never said that."

"She said it every day of our lives."

"She said it once. And it was about the dog."

"It was about the pony," Conor said, "and it was about you, and you know it." He was grinning at her. He looked twelve. "Where's the Shetland now? That's what I'd like to know. Where'd that pony go?"

"Dad sold him. To the Hutterites."

He stared at her. Then he started to laugh too, helplessly, with his head back against the chair and his hands on his stomach, and in the yard Kieran and Thea stopped roping and looked up at the porch, and Beth came to the screen door with a dish towel and stood there and watched them, and did not come out.

• • •

They stayed to supper. It was cold roast beef and potato salad and Beth's bread, at the long table in the kitchen where Declan had eaten every meal for seventy years with his back to the stove, and where Conor sat now, in the same place, without seeming to know he did it. Beth's Companion read out the river at seven, from the speaker on the counter, in its pleasant voice, and Conor said, "Thank you, Hal," without thinking, and Beth looked at him.

Thea and Kieran sat at the end and talked about heeling with their hands, showing each other loops. Kieran had a way of explain-

ing a thing as if he had only just worked it out himself and was pleased about it, and Thea listened to him with her head on one side, deciding.

Then she turned round in her chair and looked up the table at her uncle.

"Why don't you let Dad bring them down?" she said. "In October. Down the trail. Who'd know?"

Beth put her fork down.

"Thea," Shannon said.

"I'm asking. He said we could say things." Thea did not look away from Conor. "If they came down on the fourteenth of October instead of the fifteenth, who'd know?"

Conor wiped his mouth with his napkin and folded it and put it by his plate. He did not smile. He looked at her as he would have looked at a buyer.

"The plan would know," he said. "There's a camera on that gate. And I'd know." He spread his hands on the table. "I've put my name on a thing that says no stock, Thea. If I say yes to your father I've to say yes to Sorensen and Holmquist and everybody, and then the break's a road. And if it burns, it's my name."

"It's always your name," Thea said. "That's what Dad says. Rourkes put their name on things."

"Your dad's right." Conor picked up his fork again. "We do. Your grandfather Arne never put his name on a thing in his life if he could shake on it instead." He ate a piece of beef.

"No fire at my table," Beth said. "Not in July. I mean it. I've had the outlook in my ear since May and I'll not have it at supper." She passed the bread to Thea. "Ask him about the barrels. He watched every one."

Thea looked at the bread. Then she took a piece.

"You went wide on the second," Conor said. "You let him drift. You sat forward. If you'd sat back on him he'd have come round it like a door on a hinge." He pointed his fork at her. "Two tenths."

"I know," Thea said. "Two tenths. I told Dad."

"What did he say?"

"He said I'd know for next year."

Conor laughed, and Kieran laughed, and after a moment, in spite of herself, so did Thea. Beth got up and cut the pie.

At nine they rode home. Conor walked them down to the hay gate in the last light. He opened it for them and held it, and they rode through onto the road verge, and he latched it behind them and stood with his arms on the top wire.

"Tell Jens," he said.

"Tell him what?"

He thought about it.

"Tell him nothing," he said. "Tell him I sent the pie dish."

"I'll tell him you said you'd cut the lock."

"Don't tell him that. He'll hold me to it." Conor pushed himself off the wire. "Goodnight, sister. Goodnight, Thea Rourke."

"Tollefsen," Thea said.

"Goodnight, Thea Tollefsen, who stands like her grandmother." He went back up the meadow towards the house. His shirt was white in the dusk for a long time.

They rode down the verge to the ford gate. The road was empty. A light breeze had come up out of the south-west, warm, and it smelled of cut hay from somewhere and of something else under it, faint, that Shannon could not place at first, and then could. Smoke. Far off. Idaho, or Oregon. It came every summer now.

At the ford the river was very low and very warm and full of stars. The horses stopped in the middle to drink. Thea sat on the grey with the reins loose and looked back across the road at the trail gate, the lock and the sign, pale in the dark.

"He'd really cut it," she said. "Wouldn't he."

"He'd really cut it."

"Kieran said he would too. He said his dad does the plan exactly till he doesn't, and then he does the opposite exactly." Thea picked up her reins. "He said that's how Grandpa Declan was."

"That's how all of them were," Shannon said. "Come on. Your father will think we've gone over to the Rourkes."

Halfway home she remembered the earpiece, still lying on the Rourke porch rail where he had put it down, by the green chair. He would find it in the morning, wet with dew, and put it back in, and it would read him the river.

7

Three Starts

The lease was forty-one miles from the Lodgepole by road and four by the trail, and for seventeen years Jens had gone up it by the trail, horseback, with salt on a packhorse, and been home by dark. Now the trail was locked. He went by the road.

He loaded the pickup on Friday, the thirtieth of July, after dinner: twelve blocks of salt and four sacks of mineral in the bed, the fencing pliers and a roll of wire behind the seat, and two jugs of water. Nils came because he had been told to. He sat in the passenger seat with his tablet on his knee and a cap pulled down over his eyes and did not say anything until they had gone through Roundup and turned south onto the county road, and the bench fell away behind them and the first pines came up out of the grass.

"How big is it?" he said.

"The lease? Six thousand four hundred acres. Two state sections and the old Holmquist place between them, which the estate leases us along with the state ground. We've had it since thirty-two."

"How many cows?"

"Three hundred pair. Two ninety-six, last count. It'll carry them to October in a normal year."

"Is this a normal year?"

"No."

Nils looked out of the window. The country was changing. The grass gave way to sandstone, in ledges and rims and broken blocks the size of houses, yellow and grey and rust, and the pines came down off the ridges into the draws, ponderosa, tall and far apart, with grass under them that the wind moved. It was a different country from the river. Jens had loved it from the first summer.

"It's dry," Nils said.

"It's July."

"Grandma says it's drier than July. She says the outlook says it's the driest since 2021." The boy looked at his tablet. "It says the thousand-hour fuel moisture's at eight percent. On the ridges."

"Eight percent's bad."

"That's the big stuff. Logs. Thousand-hour means how long it takes a log that size to dry out or wet up." Nils scrolled. "The grass is one-hour. The grass is at four." He looked up. "Did you know that?"

"No."

"It's on the outlook. There's a page that explains it."

• • •

The water lot was at the bottom of the lease, where the trail came in from the north. It was a forty-acre trap fenced with four strands of barbed wire, with a stock pond in the middle of it fed by a spring at the head of a draw, and a steel gate at the north corner where the trail came through. Every October Jens gathered the herd into it and held it a night, so the calves could mother up and drink, and in the morning took them out of the gate and down the trail home. It was the only water on the lease that never went dry. The cattle knew it. In a hot summer they came down to it every afternoon from the high parks and stood in the pond to their knees, and lay round it in the shade of the big pines on the bank.

They were there now. Jens stopped the truck at the gate and they sat and looked. A hundred and fifty pairs, maybe more, standing in the pond and lying under the pines, with their calves in a heap in the

shade, the calves' ears going against the flies. It was half past five and ninety-four degrees on the truck's dash. The pond was down two feet from the spring line and there was a wide band of cracked grey mud round it.

"Which one's the boss?" Nils said.

Jens pointed. "The brockle-face. With the bad horn. She's fourteen. She's led every drive up that trail since she was three. I brought her off the lease in a blizzard when she was two days old. Your grandmother raised her on a bottle."

The brockle-faced cow was standing in the water at the far side of the pond with her head up, looking at the truck. She had a white face with red patches over the eyes and one horn that had grown down and round, and she was very large and very calm. When Jens got out of the truck and climbed the fence and walked towards the pond she watched him come, and then turned and walked out of the water, without hurry, and stood on the bank and let him look at her.

"She knows you," Nils said, behind him.

"She knows the truck. She knows salt."

They put out the salt. They went up into the high parks after, along the two-track, and put out the rest at the old salt grounds on the ridges, and counted. Jens counted from the truck as he drove, by habit, out of the corner of his eye, the way his father had taught him: pairs in a group, singles, the bulls. Nils counted on his tablet. He had some program on it that you pointed at a group of cattle and it counted them for you, and gave you a number with a decimal on it, and when Jens said "Twenty-three" it said "Twenty-three point two" and Nils laughed out loud.

"What's the point two?"

"It's not sure about one of the calves. It thinks it might be two calves in one place."

"It's one calf."

"I know. I can see it." Nils looked at the screen.

• • •

It was after seven when they came back down to the water lot, and the light had gone strange.

Jens noticed it first on the sandstone. The rimrock along the ridge to the west of the lease, which should have been gold at that hour, had gone a dull brass colour, as if somebody had put a sheet of smoked glass in front of the sun. He stopped the truck and got out and looked.

The thunderheads were coming up over the Bull Mountains from the south-west.

He had been watching them build all afternoon without looking at them, the way you watched weather on that country, out of the side of your head. Now they were not building. They were come. There were four of them, or five, standing in a line along the south-western sky from horizon to horizon, enormous, white at the tops where the sun still hit them and the colour of a bruise at the bottoms, and they were moving. Under each one there were long grey streamers hanging down out of the cloud towards the ground, like hair. They did not reach it. The rain was falling out of the clouds and drying in the air before it touched anything.

"Is it going to rain?" Nils said. He had got out of the truck too.

"No."

"There's rain coming out of them."

"It doesn't get to the ground. It's too hot. It's too dry underneath." Jens watched. "That's virga. That's dry. That's the worst thing that can come over this country in July."

"Why?"

Then the first one lit.

It was a long way off, over the far ridges, fifteen miles maybe: a white crack from the cloud to the ground, so bright it left a line on the eye. Then another, nearer, to the right of it. Then the sound came, the first one, long after, low, rolling along the ridges like something heavy being dragged.

Nils had gone very still.

"Count," Jens said. "Between the light and the sound."

"Five seconds a mile," Nils said, before he could. "I know." He counted. The next one lit, to the south. He counted under his breath. "Fourteen. Fifteen. Sixteen—"

"Three miles. More."

"It's coming towards us."

"It's coming along. It's going east." Jens did not take his eyes off the line of cloud. "Get in the truck."

They did not get in the truck. They stood at the gate of the water lot and watched it come. Neither of them could help it. The line of storms came along the south edge of the Bull Mountains like a slow fleet, and the lightning came out of the bottoms of them every few seconds now, sometimes two and three strokes at once, and the thunder never stopped, it was one long sound that rose and fell, and there was no rain. Not a drop. The wind came ahead of it, hot, out of the south-west, and lifted the dust off the two-track in sheets, and the pines on the ridge above the water lot began to roar. In the pond the cattle had all stood up. They were standing in a bunch at the north end, by the gate, with their heads up and their calves pushed in under them, and the brockle-faced cow was at the front, nearest the gate, looking at Jens.

"There," Nils said.

He was pointing. Jens looked.

On a ridge to the south-east, far off, eight or ten miles, where a stroke had come down a minute before, there was a light. It was small. It was orange and it did not flicker the way a lightning stroke did. It stayed. As they watched, a thread of smoke went up from it, grey against the grey, and the wind took the top of the thread and laid it over towards the north-east.

"That's a fire," Nils said.

"That's a start."

"What's the difference?"

"A start's what it is before anybody's had a chance to put it out." Jens took his phone out of his shirt pocket. It had one bar. He opened the county's fire app, which Karin had made him put on it in June and which he had never opened, and it came up red. There was a map. There was a red dot on the map already, south-east of the lease, almost exactly where he was looking, with a time beside it. 19:42. *Lightning start. Reported. Resources assigned.* As he watched, another dot came up, further east. Then another, to the south, beyond the ridge he could see.

He stood looking at it.

"It knows," Nils said. He was looking over his shoulder at the screen. "It already knows. It knew before we did."

"It's got cameras," Jens said. "On the towers. And the satellite."

"Then why did you get the phone out?"

He did not have an answer to that. He put the phone back in his pocket.

• • •

They drove home in the dark by the county road, the long way, through Roundup. The storms had gone on east and the sky behind them over the Bull Mountains was clear and black and full of stars, and there was no moon. But in three places along the southern horizon there was a glow, low down, orange, like a town that should not have been there. Nils watched them out of the back window until they were out of sight.

"Will they put them out?"

"They'll try. There's crews. There's the county and the state and there's air. They'll have planes on them at first light."

"All three?"

"All three if they can."

Nils turned round and sat down properly.

Jens waited for the next one. He knew what it would be. The cows were up there; the trail was closed; how would they come down. He had the answer ready, the one about trucks.

It did not come. When he looked across, the boy was asleep against the door with his cap over his face and the tablet sliding off his knee.

Jens drove on through Roundup in the dark. Somewhere past the grain elevator he asked himself the question the boy had not, how long it would take to get trucks for three hundred pair if everybody on the bench wanted trucks the same week, and found he did not know.

• • •

On Saturday morning he went into Prosper for parts and stopped at the café, as he did every Saturday, and sat at the long table at the back with the old men.

There were seven of them that morning. They had been sitting at that table since before Jens was born, or their fathers had: Holmquists and Brekkes and Sorensens and one old man from Melstone that nobody could remember the name of, who came every Saturday and drank one cup of coffee and listened. They were all over seventy. Most of them were over eighty. They did not run cattle any more, or not many; their sons did, and their sons had the advisory, and so the old men sat at the long table at the back of the café on a Saturday and said what they thought of it.

They were talking about the fire. They had been talking about it since seven.

"Eighty-four," old Holmquist said. "That's what this is. That's what it smells like. Eighty-four."

"Eighty-four started in August."

"Eighty-four started in August because July was wet. July's not wet."

"Hundred and seventy-three thousand acres," somebody said. "Forty-four houses. I was on it. I was nineteen. We were on the Pompeys Pillar side with shovels and they flew us out in a helicopter because it went round behind us. I never been so scared in my life."

"Twelve was worse."

"Twelve was not worse. Twelve was seventy houses but it was all down on the Roundup end. Eighty-four was the whole mountain."

"Seventy houses is worse than forty-four. Ask anybody that lived in one."

"I'm saying it was smaller."

"I'm saying it was worse."

"They shut 87 in twelve," the man from Melstone said. Everybody stopped and looked at him; he had not spoken in months. "Shut the highway. Six hundred people out of Roundup. I drove my mother to Billings in the middle of the night with the sky lit up behind us like the end of the world." He drank his coffee. "Dahl, they called that one. Dahl fire. After the road."

There was a silence.

"Well, they've got two of these out," Holmquist said. "The two south ones. They had planes on them at six. My grandson's on the county. He said they had the two south ones out by eight."

"And the other one?"

"The other one's in the rough. Up Dutchman Draw. South side of the mountain, above the rim. They can't get anybody in there but the planes, and the planes can't see it for the smoke." Holmquist looked down the table at Jens. "That's your side, Tollefsen. That's above your lease."

"It's south of it. And east."

"It's south and east of it this morning," Holmquist said.

• • •

Karin was on the telephone when he got home. She was sitting in the kitchen with the small telephone that Dagny had given her, the one she said she never used, held to her ear, and the ledger open on the table in front of her, turned to the back.

He stood in the door.

"Yes," Karin was saying. "Yes. I've got it. Go slower, I'm writing." She wrote. "Twelve hundred acres. Yes. In the rough. North-east." She wrote. "And the rest of it?"

She listened for a long time. Her pen moved.

"Yes. Thank you, Dag. I'll tell him." She paused. "No. I'll tell him. He's here." She listened again. "I will. You too. Yes." She put the telephone down on the table and sat looking at what she had written.

"That was Dagny," she said.

"I heard."

"She's got the co-op's outlook on the Bull Mountain fire. The one that's not out. They're calling it the Dutchman fire." Karin pushed the ledger across the table to him. "She wanted you to have it. She said to tell you it's what they've given the county this morning, and that it'll change, and that you're to read the second part twice."

He sat down. He pulled the ledger round.

The back pages. He had not looked at them in years. They were in his mother's hand, page after page, from 2031: Dagny's forecasts, written down as they came, every one, with what had happened after, and a tick or a cross in the margin. Thirty-five ticks and two crosses, in the first year. His father's three words, on the front page, for the twelfth of April 2032. He knew all that. He had grown up with that book.

The last page was today's.

31 July 2049. Dutchman fire (lightning, 30 July). 1,200 ac., timber and rock, south side of Bull Mtns above the rim. Not contained. Co-op outlook (Dagny, 8.40 a.m.):

Growth likely through August; no season-ending rain in the outlook before 15 Sept. Spread NE on prevailing SW wind. Bull Mtn grazing (incl. state leases sec. 16 & 36) inside the 30-day probable perimeter, about 60%. River bottom, Musselshell, within 30 days: 9%. Within the season: 22%. Dry cold front is the event to watch. The county plan holds campus and town edges, and may write off the Bull Mtn grazing if the fire grows north.

There was a line under it. Then, in the same hand, smaller:

D. says: Read the last part twice. Tell Jens they will not hold the grazing.

He read it twice.

He sat at the table. His mother took her glasses off and folded them and put them in her apron pocket. Outside the kitchen window the yard was white with heat, and beyond it the river bottom, brown, and beyond that the bench, and the halls, and far off in the south over the Bull Mountains a long low brown smudge on the sky that had not been there yesterday, flat on top, like a smear of dirty thumb.

He closed the ledger.

He put his hand flat on the cover. It was warm from the sun on the table.

"Twenty-two percent," Karin said.

"I read it."

"She's never been wrong about a fire, Jens. She's been wrong about the hay. She's been wrong about the price. She's never once in eighteen years been wrong about weather that could kill something."

"I know."

"I'm only saying."

"I know what you're saying."

He got up and went to the door. The barometer hung beside it. He looked at it. Thirty and one-tenth, steady, high and dry and going nowhere.

He did not tap it.

PART TWO

The Line

1 – 24 August 2049

8

Division Z

The camp was on the bench at the south-east corner of the campus, outside the fence, on a pad of crushed rock that Tri-Basin had laid in a week with three graders and a roller. There were two portable bunkhouses with air conditioning, a shower trailer, a cook trailer with a woman from Roundup in it who made breakfast at four and supper at seven and would not be argued with about either, and a steel shed for the engines with its doors facing the halls. The doors were always open. Lyle had told them that on the first day. If the doors were shut they were not ready.

From the shed door you could see all of Division Z.

That was what the plan called it. The county's plan for the Dutchman fire, which had come out on the third of August and been revised every morning since, divided the country between the Bull Mountains and the river into lettered pieces, and each piece had a supervisor and a set of resources and a box on a chart. Divisions A through H were the fire itself, the line round it in the Bull Mountains, where the state crews and the agency crews and the planes were. Divisions J through M were the towns: Roundup, Musselshell, Melstone, Prosper. Division Z was the campus. It was the last letter in the alphabet and it was, the plan said in its first paragraph, the

highest priority structure group in the planning area after life safety.

Harris Fireline was Division Z. Harris Fireline and the campus's own people, who had a fire brigade of eleven trained on the halls, and a water system that could put two thousand gallons a minute on any roof on the site, and a pond behind the cooling towers the size of a football field. They were good. Lyle had watched them drill. They wore grey Nomex with the Tri-Basin triangle on the shoulder and they drilled fast, every one of them knowing which valve.

His own people went slow and looked at the ground.

• • •

For the first ten days there was nothing to do.

The fire was twenty miles south, in the timber and the rock on the south face of the Bull Mountains, and it was growing every afternoon and lying down every night, as fires did in August. In the mornings there was a brown haze on the southern sky. In the afternoons the haze grew a column, a white thunderhead of smoke that stood up over the mountains and leaned north-east on the wind and spread at the top into a flat brown anvil a hundred miles long. At night you could see the glow. Some nights you could see flames, on the far ridges, small and orange.

They drilled. They cut line round the campus perimeter where the plan said line should be, a scraped strip of bare dirt twenty feet wide along the bench edge above the coulee, and then they cut it again where the campus fire officer said the plan had got it wrong. They mowed. They wet the dry grass along the fence with the engines in the evenings when the humidity came up, and the campus brigade watched them do it from the cooling-tower platform with their arms folded. They ate the cook's breakfast at four and her supper at seven. They slept in the air conditioning, which Herbie Two Moons said was the first time in thirty years of fire he had been cold in August and he did not intend to complain about it.

The campus fire officer was a woman named Wilma Kolb, who had been an engine captain for the BLM in Nevada for twenty years and had come north in 2045 for the money. She was fifty, small, with grey hair cut short as a man's and a voice that carried without being raised. She came down to the shed every morning at six and stood with Lyle and looked at the sky.

"You read the plan," she said, the first morning.

"I read it."

"All of it?"

"I read every page of everything I'm given."

"Then you're the only one on this bench who has." She looked south at the haze. "It's a good plan. I'd have written it different. But it's a good plan."

"Different how?"

"I'd have put more on the river." She said it without emphasis. "The bench edge holds the campus. The campus is rock and steel and a lake of water. It doesn't need what it's got. The river bottom's grass and cottonwood and hay and two ranch yards and a road. It's got one contingency crew from staging, if the forecast turns, and a buffer line on a map." She shrugged. "But the county wrote it. And the county's got the Hand writing it with them, and the Hand's got the wind and the fuel and every house in the county, and it says the probability of anything getting into that bottom before the season's out is twenty-two percent. And there's nineteen other places that are higher."

"Twenty-two's not nothing."

"No," Wilma Kolb said. "Twenty-two's what a plan's for."

• • •

He read the plan again that night. He read it every night. It came to the shed computer as a document of a hundred and twenty pages that changed a little every morning, and he printed the parts that changed and read them in the bunkhouse with his reading glasses on after the others were asleep.

On page eleven there was a table of priorities. *1. Life safety. 2. Critical infrastructure (Division Z, Tri-Basin Musselshell Campus; Division J, Roundup substation). 3. Community structure groups (Divisions J, K, L, M). 4. Rural structures and improvements. 5. Rangeland, timber, grazing.* It was the same table every plan had. He had seen it on the Crow side and on the reservation and in Wyoming.

On page thirty-four there was the map of the river bottom. He had looked at it the first day and looked at it every night since. It showed the river in blue, wandering, and the road coming down the coulee from the bench and crossing it on the bridge, and on either side of the river the meadows and the paddocks and the two ranch yards, the Rourke place and the Lodgepole. Along the river, on the Lodgepole side and the Rourke side, there was a dashed orange line, following the fences.

> *River Bottom Buffer (Division N, contingency). To be staffed by one Type 2 IA crew from Roundup staging upon issuance of a Red Flag Warning for frontal passage affecting the planning area. Tactics: hold the paddock fence line; prevent ember ignition of river-bottom fuels; protect structures where safe.*

Division N. It came after M and before Z. It had no supervisor's name in its box. It had a crew from staging, which was a crew that did not exist yet, that would be sent if something happened that had not happened yet.

He took his glasses off and rubbed his eyes.

• • •

In the second week the fire made a run.

It did it on a Tuesday afternoon in a dry wind out of the south-west, and it went seven miles in five hours, up through the timber and over the crest of the Bull Mountains and down the north side into a country of sandstone rims and pine parks, and Lyle watched it from the shed door. The column went up white and then brown and then nearly black at the base, and it built into a tower that stood twenty thousand feet over the mountains and made its own weather, and at four o'clock it collapsed, and ash came down on the campus like grey snow. It came down on the halls and the cooling towers and the engines and the cook trailer and the crew sitting in the shade with their boots off, flakes of it as big as a thumbnail, and some of them still had the shape of the pine needle they had been.

The boy from Lame Deer held one in his palm and looked at it a long time.

That night the plan was eighty pages longer. The fire was forty-one thousand acres. The probability of the river bottom in the season was thirty-one percent.

• • •

He rang his mother every night at nine.

He did it from the end of the engine shed, where the signal was best, standing with his back against the wall and one hand in his pocket, looking north. From there, if he looked past the fence and the halls and over the bench edge, he could see down into the coulee where the campus road went, and beyond it, a mile off and three hundred feet below, the river bottom. At nine in August it was not yet dark. The meadows were brown. The cottonwoods along the river were dark green and very still. On the far side, among the cottonwoods, there was a yard with a white house and a red barn and a long low barn made of logs, and a light in the long barn.

"You're eating," Evelyn said.

"I'm eating. There's a woman from Roundup. She makes pie."

"What kind of pie?"

"Every kind. A different one every night. Tonight it was rhubarb." He watched the light in the log barn. "She says it's the last of the rhubarb. She says she's been saving it for something and the something didn't come, so we got it."

"Is she married?"

"Mom."

"I'm asking."

"She's seventy-one."

"Seventy-one's a girl." His mother laughed, down the telephone, very small. "Is it near you?"

"It's twenty miles. It's in the mountains."

"I can see the smoke from here," Evelyn said. "Out the window. Over the hills, to the north-west. In the evenings it's red. Herbie's wife said it's from your fire." She was quiet a moment, and then he heard her move, and the rocker creak. "Lyle. Can you see Jens's place? From where you are?"

He looked at the light in the log barn.

"I can see it."

"What's it look like?"

"Brown. Dry." He moved the phone to his other ear. "There's a light in the horse barn. Shannon's out there with her colts. It's on every night till ten."

"Good," his mother said. "Good. That's good to know. Tell him I said hello. When you see him."

"I'll tell him."

He did not see Jens. He did not go down. He was Division Z. He had two engines and a crew of twelve and a contract that said where they were to be, and the river bottom was Division N, and Division N had nobody in it.

• • •

On the evening of the seventeenth he drove down.

He had the evening off; Boss had the crew. He took the crew carrier, because it was the vehicle with the least on it, and went out through the campus gate and down the road into the coulee. The road went down in two long switchbacks through sandstone and juniper, with a guardrail on the outside of each bend, and at the bottom it came out of the coulee mouth onto the Rourke river meadow and ran along above the river on its raised bank, fenced on both sides, to the bridge. He drove it slowly. He wanted to see it on the ground.

The meadow on the river side of the road was brush and grass, tall, gone yellow, with willows along the water and draws running back into it from the coulee. On the other side, the bench side, it was pasture, grazed short, and a gate in the fence with a steel post beside it and a white sign. He did not stop to read the sign. Further down there was a wire gate on the river side, an old hay gate with a stick at the end, and then the ford gate, and below that the meadow opened out, grazed down to nothing, to the river. The bridge was concrete, two lanes, built in 2032. On the far side the road turned up the river towards Prosper, and downstream, to the right, through the cottonwoods, he could see the Lodgepole yard.

He pulled onto the verge at the far end of the bridge and got out and stood by the rail.

The river was very low. He could see the gravel bar at the bend where the ford was, nearly dry, with the water going round it in two thin channels. Along the Lodgepole side, below the yard, the paddocks ran down to the river, four or five of them, small, with pole fences and old sheds, and the grass in them was grazed short and brown. Beyond the paddocks was the yard. The white house. The red barn. The long barn made of logs, with its doors open at both ends, and a round pen beside it, and in the round pen a woman on a bay horse, working it in slow circles in the evening light.

There were pink flags on the paddock fences. He had not seen them from the bench. They were survey flags, little squares of pink plastic on wire stakes, every fifty yards along the fence closest to the river. The county had put them in, he supposed, the week before. *River Bottom Buffer.* On the map it was a dashed orange line. On the ground it was a row of pink flags along a pole fence, with nobody standing at any of them.

He stood a long time. The woman in the round pen stopped the bay and sat on it, looking at something across the yard, and then she turned her head and looked towards the bridge, and saw the white truck with HARRIS FIRELINE on its door. She lifted her hand.

He lifted his.

She stayed where she was. He thought for a moment she would ride over, and then the bay threw its head and she had to deal with it, and when she looked up again he was getting back into the truck.

He drove back up the coulee in the dusk. At the second switchback he stopped and looked down. The light had come on in the log barn.

• • •

On the morning of the twentieth, which was a Friday, the plan changed in a way that Lyle noticed and nobody else on the bench seemed to.

It was a small change, on page thirty-four. The box for Division N had acquired a name. It was not a supervisor's name. It was a crew: *Opland IA Crew (contract), Roundup staging, upon RFW.* And under it a new line. *Grazing allotments south of Bench Rd (Bull Mtn allotments incl. state leases 16 and 36): not defended. Lessees advised to remove stock by road where feasible. Co-op notified 08:00.*

He read it standing up, at the printer.

He knew whose cattle were on state lease sections sixteen and thirty-six in the Bull Mountains. Everybody on the river knew. Jens had been taking them up the old trail every May since 2032 and

bringing them down every October, and Lyle had ridden it with him once, the second year, for the pleasure of it, and had thought it the prettiest four miles in Montana.

He folded the page and put it in his shirt pocket.

• • •

Boss found him at the shed door that evening. He had come up from the line with a Pulaski over his shoulder and dirt to the knees, and he leaned the tool against the wall and stood beside Lyle and looked where Lyle was looking, down over the bench edge, at the river bottom, brown in the low sun.

"That's your friend's place," Boss said.

"That's Jens's."

"Herbie says you roped with him twenty years."

"Forty, near enough."

Boss looked a while longer. He was a quiet young man and he had the habit, which Lyle had noticed in him first at nineteen, of looking at a piece of country as though he were reading it, left to right and then down.

"If it went," he said. "Down there. In the bottom. Would they move us?"

"No."

"Even if we were standing here looking at it?"

"Even then." Lyle took the folded page out of his pocket and gave it to him. "Read section seven of the contract tonight, again. Then read that. The bottom's Division N. N gets a crew from Roundup if there's a red flag for a front. We're Z. We stay in Z."

Boss read the page. He read it twice, and then he folded it on its folds and gave it back.

"That's not a crew," he said. "That's a crew that's going to be sent."

"That's what a contingency is."

"I know what a contingency is." Boss picked up the Pulaski. He stood a moment longer with it on his shoulder. "My grandfather

says when you're on a fire you don't look at the thing you can't do anything about. You look at the thing in front of you. He says it's how you get old."

"Your grandfather's right."

"He usually is. He says so." Boss started off towards the bunkhouse. Then he turned round. "You going to call your friend?"

Lyle did not answer at once. Below him, in the bottom, the light had come on in the log barn.

"Not tonight," he said. "He'll have had it from the co-op at eight. He'll be working out what to do. He won't want me telling him I'm sorry."

"Are you?"

"I'm Division Z," Lyle said.

Boss looked at him for a moment longer. Then he went on.

9

Level Two

The warning came on the Wednesday at four in the afternoon, to every telephone in the county at once.

Shannon was in the round pen with the last of the summer colts, a big bay filly from Winnett who had been sent to her because she would not stand to be saddled, and who was standing to be saddled. Her telephone went in her back pocket with the sound it made for nothing else, a long rising tone like a smoke alarm in another room. The filly threw her head up. Across the yard the telephone on the kitchen wall began to ring, the old one, and then Karin's small one in her apron, and then, faintly, from the bunkhouse office, the computer.

She got the filly stood again before she looked.

MUSSELSHELL COUNTY SHERIFF — EVACUATION WARNING (LEVEL 2: GET SET). Dutchman Fire. Zone MU-7 (Musselshell River bottom, Bench Rd to Melstone Rd). Prepare to leave. Know your route. Move livestock early. Your route: tap to open.

She tapped it.

A map came up. It was their own country, from above, the colour of a dry summer, with the river running through it in blue and the roads in white. There was a red shape at the bottom of the screen

that was the fire, much bigger than she had thought, and a pale orange wash over the river bottom from the bridge to Melstone that was the zone. And there was a green line, drawn from the Lodgepole yard out to the county road and north to Prosper, with an arrow on it and a time. *Est. 14 min. Assembly: Prosper Lutheran Church hall.*

Under it, smaller: *Livestock: see county livestock evacuation register. Not registered? Tap here.*

The Lodgepole had never registered. Jens had thrown the letter in the stove in 2039.

• • •

The county meeting was on the Thursday night in the school gym in Prosper.

She took Karin. Jens would not go. He said he knew what they would say and he had cattle to see to, and he went down to the barn with Nils after supper and she heard the shop door, and then the compressor. Thea went to the meeting because her grandmother told her to.

The gym was full. There were folding chairs in rows on the basketball floor and people standing along the walls under the banners of the championship teams, 1987 and 2011 and 2038, girls' volleyball, and there were children running up and down the bleachers until somebody's mother caught them. It was very hot. The big doors at the end were open to the parking lot and the evening came in through them, brown and smelling of smoke. Everyone who lived on the river bottom was there, and everyone who lived in Prosper, and some of the campus people, in a group near the front, with their tablets.

At the front, on the stage where the school did its Christmas play, there was a table with three people at it and a screen behind them with the map on it. The sheriff, who was a heavy, quiet man named Bauer whom Shannon had known since high school. A woman from the state forestry office in a green shirt. And a young man from the

county's emergency office, perhaps thirty, very earnest, who ran the slides and talked fast.

Shannon found three chairs on the aisle, two-thirds of the way back. They had just sat down when Kieran came along the row from the other end, in a clean shirt, and sat down beside Thea.

"Dad's at home," he said. "Mam sent me. He's got the old Farmall's magneto in pieces on the kitchen table and he says he can't hear a thing in a gym anyway. Mam's eating her supper in the front room." He leaned forward and looked along at his aunt and at Karin. "Evening, Mrs. Tollefsen."

"Kieran," Karin said.

"I brought a notebook." He showed it to her. "Dad said to write down anything they say about the bench."

"So did I," Karin said, and took the ledger out of her bag.

• • •

The young man talked for forty minutes.

He talked well. Shannon gave him that. He had the map behind him and he moved it with a little clicker, and he showed them the fire, and how it had grown, day by day, in rings of red getting bigger, and he showed them the wind and the fuel and what the computer said the fire would do in the next week and the next month, in a fan of lines spreading north-east from the mountains like the fingers of a hand. He showed them the plan. The divisions, the letters. The towns and their edges. The campus, which was Z. The river bottom, which was N, and which had a dashed orange line along it, along the paddock fences, on both sides of the river.

"So N's what we call a contingency," he said. "Which is, if we get a red flag with a cold front, and that's kind of the big one we're watching for, folks, then there's a crew comes over from Roundup and sits on that line. On your paddock fences. And honestly the bottom's in pretty good shape, it's grazed down and it's green by the river." He clicked, and the slide did not change, and he clicked again. "Sorry.

There. And before any of that you'll get your Level Three, which is go, and you just follow the route on your phone. They're all worked out so you're not on the same road as the fire trucks. That's the whole idea."

A man stood up at the back. It was old Holmquist's son, who ran the Holmquist cattle now.

"What about the grazing?"

"Sir?"

"The Bull Mountain grazing. The allotments. I've got two hundred pair on state ground up there on the north face, and so's the Sorensens and so's the Tollefsens and half this room. Where's the grazing on your map?"

The young man looked at the table. The woman from forestry leaned forward to her microphone.

"The grazing's in the probable perimeter," she said. She had a flat, careful voice. "It's not in a defended division. We don't have the resources to hold the north face. If the fire moves north, we will not be able to protect livestock on the allotments. Lessees are being advised to remove stock by road, now, while the roads are open."

"By road. With what?"

"With trucks, sir."

"There's no trucks. I've called every outfit from here to Billings. They're all booked out to Wyoming and the Crow side. I've got a man in Lewistown says Thursday week." Holmquist's son looked round the room. "Anybody here got trucks?"

Nobody answered him. Somebody near the front laughed, not unkindly.

"The co-op's working on trucking," the young man said. "For members."

"I'm a member."

"Then you'll have—"

"I've had a text. It says 'working on it.' It's said 'working on it' since Monday."

The sheriff leaned forward.

"Gary," he said. "Sit down a minute. I know. Everybody in here knows." He took his glasses off and put them on the table. "Here's what I've got, and I don't like it any better than you do. The order says no livestock on the county roads in MU-7 without a permit from my office, and the permits are for trucks. Registered haulers. A herd on foot isn't a load and I can't permit it. Anybody drives cattle down the Bench Road or the river road while we're at two, I've got to write them up, and you all know what the Land Board does to a state lease when there's a citation on it. They'll pull it. They pulled Dale Brekke's for a lot less." He put the glasses back on. "And nobody goes up in those mountains after cattle when this thing runs. If it goes to three and you've still got stock up there, you open your gates and let them find their own way, and you come to the church. That's it. That's all I've got."

There was a silence in the gym. A child ran along the top of the bleachers and was caught.

Karin had been writing. She stopped. She put her hand up.

The sheriff saw it. Everyone saw it. Karin Tollefsen had come to every county meeting since 1991 and Shannon had never once seen her put her hand up.

"Mrs. Tollefsen."

Karin stood. She was very small in the aisle, with the ledger held against her front.

"Ralph," she said. "The trail. Across the Rourke bench. The co-op's closed it. It's in your plan as a fire break." She did not raise her voice; she did not need to. "If the stock's to find its own way, it'll find that way. It's the way it knows. Three hundred of ours have walked it every October for seventeen years. If you open the gates on the north face, that's where they'll go. Down the trail. To the bench gate. To the road." She waited. "I'd like to know what your plan has them do when they get there."

The young man looked at the screen. The woman from forestry looked at the young man.

"I'll have to check that, ma'am," the young man said.

"Will you."

"Yes, ma'am. I'll have the—I'll get it modelled."

Karin nodded. She sat down. She opened the ledger and wrote something in it, briefly. Shannon, beside her, read it.

19 Aug. County mtg. Asked about trail. Young man to get it modelled.

Kieran had written it down too. Shannon saw him do it, in his notebook, in his big neat hand: *Trail — cattle — the road?* He underlined *road* twice. Then he looked along the row at Karin, and wrote something else, and covered it with his hand.

• • •

On the way out, in the parking lot, in the heat and the brown light, Kieran walked with them to the truck.

"Dad'll want to hear that," he said. "About the trail."

"Tell him," Shannon said.

"He'll say it's a plan for people, not cattle. He'll say the gate's locked and the cattle'll stop at the gate." Kieran opened the truck door for Karin, and Karin let him help her up into the seat, which she did not let Jens do. "But I'll tell him."

"Kieran," Karin said, from the seat.

"Ma'am."

"Your father said he'd cut that lock. If it came to it. He told Shannon."

Kieran looked at Shannon. She nodded.

"Then he'll cut it," Kieran said. He shut the door gently. Through the window he said, "He always does what he says."

• • •

They drove home in the dusk on the county road. The sky in the south was dark red and there was a long low orange line on the horizon where the mountains were, very thin, like the edge of a stove lid. Thea sat in the back with her knees up and said nothing for eleven miles. Then she said:

"They're not going to do anything about the grazing."

"They said so."

"They said open the gates." Thea's voice was very even. "The Holmquists' cows'll come down the Holmquist draw onto the county road. Ours'll come down the trail. And the trail goes across the campus road. And the plan doesn't know." She looked out of the window. "That boy didn't know."

"He's going to get it modelled," Karin said.

"Grandma."

"I know," Karin said. "I know, Thea. I was there."

• • •

When they came into the yard the stock trailer was hitched to the pickup.

It was parked by the barn with its nose to the road and its gate open, and the floor had been swept and bedded with straw. In the barn alley under the light Jens and Nils were oiling saddles. They had all of them down off the racks, six saddles, and the bridles and the breast collars and the hobbles, and they were sitting on upturned buckets with a tin of neatsfoot and two rags each, and they were working the oil into the leather in long slow strokes. They did not look up when the truck came in.

Shannon left Karin to Thea and went down.

"What's this," she said.

"Saddles." Jens worked the rag along a stirrup leather. "They wanted doing."

"In August."

"They wanted doing in August."

Nils glanced up at her and down again. He had oil to the elbows.

"Nils," she said. "Go up to the house. Grandma wants you."

"She doesn't."

"She will by the time you get there."

He looked at his father. Jens nodded. The boy put the rag down on the bucket, folded, and wiped his hands on his jeans, and went.

Shannon stood in the alley. Pell's put her head over the end stall door and looked at her.

"They're not going to defend the grazing," she said. "The forestry woman said it. If it goes north they let it go. They're telling everybody, take them out by road. There's no trucks. The sheriff said if you can't get them out by road, open the gates and go to the church."

"I know."

"How do you know? You weren't there."

"I know." He put the stirrup leather down and picked up the next one. "Karin rang me from the parking lot. While you were talking to Kieran." He worked the oil in. "She said the boy's going to get the trail modelled."

"She asked him."

"She asked him." Jens almost smiled. "In front of the county. She's never put her hand up in her life."

Shannon looked at the trailer, swept, bedded, with its nose to the road.

"You're going for them."

"If the order comes. If the fire goes north. Yes."

"The plan has us leaving. When the order comes. Level Three. It's got a route on everybody's telephone. Fourteen minutes to the church hall."

"The plan's got my cattle burning." He did not raise his voice. He set the stirrup leather on the bucket and looked at her for the first time. "Three hundred pair, Shannon. On the north face. If it comes

over the rim with a wind behind it they're dead in an afternoon. The plan says open the gates. You know where they'll go if I open the gates. Karin told the county. They'll go to the trail gate and stand there with their noses on the chain till it gets them."

"Then truck them. Now. Before."

"With what? Holmquist's been on the telephone since Monday. Lewistown says Thursday week." He picked the rag up again. "I've got a stock trailer that holds eight pair. That's thirty-seven trips. Forty-one miles each way."

"Then ride up and bring them down the trail now. Tomorrow. Before there's an order. Before anything."

"And put them where? On the flat? In August? There's no grass on the flat, there's no grass on the river, I've got hay for the winter and not a day over." He oiled the leather. "I bring them down now, I'm feeding hay in August and selling them in September for what anybody'll give me. I leave them till it comes, maybe it doesn't come. Twenty-two percent. Maybe it rains."

"Thirty-one," Shannon said. "It's thirty-one now. Since the run on the tenth. It was on the screen."

He stopped.

He sat with the rag in his hand and looked at the stirrup leather. She watched him take the number in, the way he took a price at the ring, without moving his face. Then he went on oiling.

"Thirty-one," he said.

"And there's no trail. It's locked. It's a fire break."

"Kieran says his father'll cut the lock."

"How do you know what Kieran says?"

"Thea texted me. From the truck." He held up his telephone, without looking at it, and put it down again on the bucket. "She texts me everything. She texted me the forestry woman's name and Holmquist's truck man in Lewistown and what Kieran wrote in his notebook. She texted me *the plan doesn't know*." He set the stirrup leather down. "She's right. It doesn't."

Shannon stood in the alley a long time.

"I'll not let you take the children," she said.

"I know."

"I mean it, Jens. Whatever you do. Not Thea. Not Nils. I'll not have them up there."

"I heard you." He picked up the last saddle, the small one, Nils's, the old Hereford-stamp saddle that had been his own when he was twelve, and set it across his knees and began on the skirts. "Go on up. Karin'll want to tell you about the meeting. She'll tell it better than you."

She went. At the barn door she turned round. He was bent over the boy's saddle in the light, working the oil into the leather with his thumb, very slowly, into the stamping, where the dirt got.

• • •

Karin was at the kitchen table with the ledger and the small telephone. Thea had gone up. The window over the sink was open and the smell of smoke came in through the screen with the moths.

"He's oiling saddles," Shannon said.

"I know. I can see the light." Karin did not look up. "Sit down. Dagny rang while you were in the barn."

Shannon sat.

Karin turned the ledger round. It was open at the back. The last entry was in Karin's large unsteady hand, dated that evening, nine-fifteen, and it was longer than the others.

> *19 Aug. Dagny. Co-op outlook for the week. Fire 46,000 ac. North edge 6 mi from S line of lease. Probable perimeter reaches lease within 7 days: 70%. Watch: dry cold front, poss. 24–26 Aug. Front would bring SW wind ahead, then NW behind. "Watch the 24th." River bottom in season now 31%. Co-op to advise lessees by letter Saturday: grazing written off.*

Under it, smaller:

D. says: tell Jens the letter is coming, so he hears it from family first.

Shannon read it twice.

"The twenty-fourth," she said.

"That's Tuesday."

"Does Jens know?"

"He knows. I rang the barn and read it to him. All of it." Karin took her glasses off and folded them. "He said, 'Watch the twenty-fourth.' He said it back to me the way you say a number back at a sale, to be sure you've got it. Then he went to get the trailer."

They sat. The moths were batting at the screen. Down in the barn the compressor came on and ran and stopped.

"He'll go," Shannon said.

"Yes." Karin put her glasses down on the ledger. "The last time that mountain burned to the river was eighty-four. Arne was twenty. He and his mother and Halvor brought the cows off it ahead of the fire, and they lost twelve, and he would never tell me how they came down." She turned the glasses over. "He told Jens. Once. I know that much."

"You could stop him. You're the only one who could. It's your place."

Karin looked at her across the table for a long moment.

"I could," she said. "I've thought about it. I've thought about it since July." She put her hand flat on the open ledger. "And then I think, three hundred cows standing at that chain. And I don't know, Shannon. I've kept this book eighteen years so I'd know, and I don't." She closed it. "I'll go to the church when they tell me. I'll take the book. I'll take Thea. And I'll pray he's as good a stockman as his father thought he was."

"His father never said."

"No," Karin said. "Arne never said a word of it to him. He said it to me, every night for thirty years." She stood up and pushed her chair in. "I should have told Jens that. I'll tell him when this is over."

10

The Bell

The brothers met on the evening of the eleventh of August, the day after the fire made its run over the crest, and voted machines for fire. It took eleven minutes. Joseph was not in the room; an unbaptised man was not. He heard it from his mother, who heard it from the window, who said that the Minister had read the verse about the man whose ox fell into a pit on the Sabbath, and that nobody had needed it read twice.

By then the water truck had pumped for a week.

The seal kit had come from Billings on the fourth, in a cardboard box with the impeller wrapped in newspaper, and Joseph had put it in that night in the shop by the light of a hanging bulb, with his father sitting on an upturned bucket in the door watching him do it. His father did not say anything while he worked. When Joseph had it in and had run the pump on the hose from the shop tap and watched the pressure come up on the gauge and hold, his father said, "Good," and got up off the bucket with the cane, slowly, and went to bed.

The truck was a 1998 Ford with a two-thousand-gallon steel tank on the bed and the pump bolted behind the cab. It had been bought for the colony's spraying in 2009 and replaced for that in 2030 by a newer one that the elevator's contract would have supplied for nothing, if the colony had signed the contract, which it had not. So

the old Ford had sat behind the machine shed for nineteen years with grass growing up through its bumper. Joseph had changed its oil and its belts and its tyres in a week and it ran.

The colony's line was a disced strip forty feet wide round the whole of the home place and the wheat, eleven miles of it, that the men had cut in July with three tractors and the big offset disc. The plan the county had sent said a hundred feet. The brothers had voted forty, because forty was what the disc could do in two passes and they had harvest to bring in. Every evening when the humidity came up Joseph drove the water truck along it, on the inside, slowly, and Samuel-John's boy Andy rode on the back on the hose and wet down the stubble along the edge.

That was the idea. On the first evening Andy could not get the pump to prime.

He was twenty and baptised and very strong and he had never had to make a machine do a thing it did not want to. He stood on the deck of the truck and pulled the starter rope on the pump engine until his face was red, and it ran, and the pump ran, and nothing came out of the hose but air and a cough of rust.

Joseph got out of the cab.

"It's lost its prime."

"I know it's lost its prime." Andy pulled the rope again. "It ran in the shop."

"In the shop it had the tap. Out here it's got to pull from the tank." Joseph climbed up. He showed him. You opened the priming cap on top of the pump housing, there, and filled the housing from the bucket until it ran over, there, and closed the cap, and then you started it, and you opened the discharge slowly, slowly, and you listened, and when the note changed you knew it had caught. He did it once. The note changed. Water came out of the hose in a long brown cough and then clean and hard, and Andy nearly lost the nozzle.

"How'd you know that?"

"Ten thousand head in Billings drank out of a stock tank that a pump filled. When it lost its prime at two in the morning, there was nobody but me." Joseph climbed down. "Do it yourself tomorrow. I'll watch."

Andy looked at him from the deck of the truck with the hose in his hands. He was Samuel-John's eldest and had been taught all his life, Joseph supposed, that his uncle was the one who went.

"Thank you," Andy said.

"Wet the line," Joseph said. "Don't wet me."

• • •

On the fourteenth a letter came from Wolf Creek in a child's hand.

Samuel-John brought it to the barn as he had brought the first one, at arm's length. This time he waited while Joseph opened it.

Dear Joseph Wipf.

My mother says I can write to you. I have 41 chickens. One is gone. It was a red one. I looked by the creek and in the shop. If it is a coyote I will know because there is feathers.

What do men do outside. Do they have chickens. My mother says you had a guitar. I want a guitar. We are not allowed one. Why did you come home.

Daniel Wipf. Age 9.

Joseph read it twice. Then he folded it and put it in his breast pocket with the other one.

"The boy," Samuel-John said.

"The boy."

His brother stood a moment in the barn door. Behind him in the yard the sky over the south was the colour of weak tea.

"He asks a great deal," Samuel-John said. "For nine."

"His mother says he gets it from her."

"I had heard that." Samuel-John looked at the letter in Joseph's pocket. "You will answer him."

"Tonight."

"Answer him that he is to learn his verses," Samuel-John said, and went away.

Joseph answered him that night, at the little table, in pencil.

Dear Daniel,

Outside there are men who ride horses at night in a yard with ten thousand cattle, and a box on their belt tells them which one is sick, and they go and get it. I did that for twenty-two years. There are no chickens. I came home because my father asked me to. You will understand that one day, or you will not need to.

Look for the feathers by the willows, not the creek. Coyotes eat in the willows.

Learn your verses. All of them, not only the ones with animals.

Joseph Wipf

• • •

Samuel-John went to Great Falls on the Saturday morning, the twenty-first, with their father, in the colony van, for the stroke clinic. It was the appointment that came every six months and could not be moved, and the boss went with the old boss because the old boss would go with nobody else. They would stay the night at the colony at Fort Benton, with cousins, and be home Monday night.

At ten the telephone in the shop rang. Joseph was in the shop. He picked it up.

"Sixmile."

"Is that Joseph?"

"It's Joseph."

"It's Jens Tollefsen." There was wind on the line, and an engine. Jens was in a truck somewhere. "You said to ask you. Not the office."

"I said that."

"I've had the co-op's letter. This morning. They've written off the Bull Mountain grazing. The county's not defending it. Lessees to remove stock by road where feasible." Jens read it off flat, as he would a price at the sale barn. "There's no trucks. There's not a truck between here and Billings till Thursday week. I've got three hundred pair on the north face of the Bull Mountains and the fire's six miles off the south line of the lease and the outlook says a front Tuesday."

Joseph waited.

"I want to gather them Monday," Jens said. "Into the water lot at the bottom of the lease. Have them held, have them watered, ready, so if I have to bring them I can bring them in a night. I've got me and Nils. Nils is twelve. I need two more. Two good riders who can sit a horse in the rough and keep their mouths shut and do what they're told." The wind roared on the line. "I'm asking you."

"Bring them how? The trail's locked."

"I'll worry about the trail."

"The sheriff said nobody's to go up there."

"The sheriff said nobody's to go up there when it runs. It's not running. It's Saturday. I'm gathering cattle on my own lease on a Monday." A pause. "I'll have them back in their own beds Monday night. I won't take them up there Tuesday. I'll take Nils."

Joseph stood in the shop with the telephone. Through the window he could see the yard, the laundry line, two little girls on the swing by the school, his mother's window. Across the yard the water truck stood by the shop where he had parked it that morning, full, with the hose coiled on the deck.

He thought of a telephone ringing in a kitchen passage at five o'clock on a Friday evening in April seventeen years before. A woman's voice asking for Samuel Wipf by name. His father putting the telephone down and standing in the passage. His mother, telling him afterwards, with wonder: *Then he rang the bell. He rang it himself.* Nine men and the loader and two trucks, out all night in the

snow, carrying calves into a barn that was not theirs, and his father on the loader making a hash of it and not getting off.

His father was in Great Falls. The boss was in Great Falls. There was no one to ask but the brothers, and the brothers would meet, and the meeting would be Tuesday.

"How early Monday?" he said.

"Five. At my place. They'll want their own horses and a bedroll. I'll feed them."

"They'll come," Joseph said.

• • •

He asked his father first. He had not meant to; he had meant to ask nobody. But at noon, after the van had gone, he went and found the old man's cane leaning by the kitchen bench where his father had forgotten it, and stood holding it, and then he went up to the house and telephoned the stroke clinic in Great Falls and asked for Samuel Wipf, who was in the waiting room, and they brought his father to the telephone.

"Father. It's Joseph."

There was a long breathing on the line.

"Joseph."

"Jens Tollefsen telephoned. For riders. Monday. To gather his cattle on the Bull Mountain lease, before the fire. Two boys."

The breathing went on. Joseph waited. He could hear the waiting room, a television, a child.

"Samuel-John," his father said.

"Samuel-John's with you. He's gone for the papers. I'm asking you."

"Why. Me."

"Because you rang the bell," Joseph said. "In thirty-two."

The breathing stopped for a moment. Then it went on.

"Send," his father said. "Two. Good ones." A breath. "Tell Mother."

"I will."

"And Joseph." The voice came slow, one post at a time. "You. Not. Up there."

"No."

"Good." A pause. "Lost. My cane."

"It's on the kitchen bench."

"Good," his father said again, and somebody took the telephone away.

• • •

He told his mother in the kitchen. She was alone with the noon dishes. She listened with her hands in the water and did not turn round until he had finished.

"Which two?" she said.

"Elias Kleinsasser. And the Stahl boy, Jakob."

She thought about it.

"Elias is seventeen. He rides like his grandfather. He does not talk." She took a plate out of the water. "Jakob is sixteen and talks all the time, and his mother will be on this telephone to me tonight. But he can sit a horse in a gully better than any man on the place." She set the plate in the rack. "And Samuel-John?"

"Samuel-John's in Great Falls. I asked Father."

His mother looked at him over her shoulder for a long time.

"You asked your father," she said.

"Yes."

"Not the boss."

"The boss is in Great Falls."

"The boss is on the end of a telephone, the same as your father was." She turned back to the sink. "You asked the one who would say yes."

Joseph stood in the kitchen door.

"Yes," he said.

"Well." She took the next plate. "At least you know it. That is more than your father did in thirty-two. He said he rang the bell because

he was asked for by name. He rang it because he wanted to, and he had been wanting to for forty years." She rinsed the plate. "Go and tell the boys. Tell them to take their good boots and their oilskins. And tell Jakob Stahl that if he talks to Jens Tollefsen's cows the way he talks in German school, they will stampede to Billings."

• • •

Elias and Jakob were in the hog barns. He found them in the alley with a power washer, doing pens, and he shut the washer off and told them.

Elias listened with his eyes on the floor and when Joseph had finished he nodded once and went to get his boots. Jakob listened with his mouth open and his whole face alight, and when Joseph had finished he said, "On the Bull Mountains? Where the fire is? In the *fire*?" and Joseph said, "Near it. Not in it. Monday only. And you do what Jens Tollefsen tells you and nothing else," and Jakob said, "Yes, yes, I will, I swear it," and Joseph said, "Don't swear," and Jakob laughed out loud in the alley and ran.

• • •

On Monday at four he drove them to the Lodgepole in the colony's cattle truck with their two horses in the back, Elias's black gelding and Jakob's paint mare, through a dawn that was brown and hot and smelled of pine smoke. Nobody spoke on the road. Jakob tried twice and gave it up. Elias sat by the window with his hat on his knees and watched the south.

The Lodgepole yard was lit. Jens was there in the barn door with two saddled horses, and a boy beside him with a cap pulled down. Jens came across the yard and shook Joseph's hand through the truck window and then went round and let the tailgate down, and the boys unloaded their horses and led them down the ramp and Jens looked at them, the black and the paint, carefully, feet and backs and eyes, one and then the other.

"Good," he said. "Good horses."

"Good boys," Joseph said. "Bring them back."

"Tonight. By dark." Jens stood at the truck window. "I owe you."

"You owe my father," Joseph said. "Thirty-two. You can tell him so, Tuesday, when he's home."

He watched them ride out of the yard. Four of them, in a line, across the flat to the ford, and through the ford, the water silver in the brown light, and up the far bank into the cottonwoods. Jens first, then the two colony boys, then Nils at the back with his cap pulled down. They went out of sight among the trees. He sat in the truck a long time after he could not see them.

He had told himself all Saturday night, lying awake, that it was a neighbour's cattle, and that a neighbour asked, and that his father had said send.

He drove home and went into the hog barns. There was nobody else to tell until Monday night, and he would tell Samuel-John then.

• • •

At five the column stood up over the south.

He saw it from the water truck, on the colony line, with Andy on the deck doing the priming himself, carefully, his tongue between his teeth. It went up white over the Bull Mountains and built, and leaned north-east, and spread at the top, and the light in the yard went the colour of a brass lamp. The sows in the farrowing barn grew restless and the fans came on early. Andy got the pump to catch on the first try and turned round on the deck with the hose in his hands and grinned, and Joseph lifted a hand off the wheel to him, and they went on along the line, wetting the stubble, in that brass light, with the ash beginning to come down.

At nine the shop telephone rang. Joseph was on his way past and he went in and took it.

"Joseph. It's Jens." Wind, and a horse blowing. "We've got them. Two hundred and ninety-one pair in the water lot. Five short, I

think. Up in the rough. I won't go back for them." A breath. "Your boys are good. The Stahl boy talks to his horse the whole time in German and the horse does everything he says. The other one never says a word. He turned back forty pair out of a draw on his own when I was on the other side of the ridge."

"Where are you?"

"On the ridge above the water lot. Where there's a signal. It's dark." A pause. "The boys want to stay."

Joseph stood in the shop with the telephone.

"With the herd," Jens said. "At the water lot. The Kleinsasser boy says if nobody's with them tonight they'll walk the fence and somebody'll find the corner where it's down and they'll be scattered up the draws by morning, and he's right, I've had it happen. They've got bedrolls. They've got food. There's the spring." The wind dropped; he was going down off the ridge. "I said I'd have them home tonight. I'm asking you to let me off it. One night. I'll bring them home tomorrow forenoon, or you can come for them."

The line hummed. Outside in the dark yard somebody was calling a dog.

"Samuel-John's not home till Tuesday night now," Joseph said. "Father's tired. They're staying another night at Fort Benton."

"Then I'm asking you."

Joseph thought of the two boys at the water lot under the pines with their horses hobbled and the cattle lowing round the pond and a glow on the southern sky. He thought of Elias Kleinsasser, who never said a word, saying that to Jens Tollefsen.

"One night," he said. "Bring them home in the morning."

"In the morning. I give you my word."

Joseph put the telephone down. He stood in the shop a while with his hand on it.

He did not go and tell his mother. He told himself she would be asleep.

11

The Water Lot

The co-op's letter came on the Saturday, as Dagny had said it would. It came to the mailbox at the road in a long white envelope with the co-op's mark in the corner, and it came to his telephone at the same moment, and to Karin's, so that by the time Jens had driven down to the box for the paper envelope he had read it twice on the screen in the truck.

Yellowstone Valley Grazing Co-operative. To lessees of grazing allotments, Bull Mountains planning area. It was a page. It said that the county's incident plan for the Dutchman fire did not include the defence of grazing allotments south of the Bench Road, and that the co-operative's advisory therefore recommended removal of livestock by road where feasible. It said that members would be offered trucking assistance in order of registration. It said that where removal was not feasible, lessees should open allotment gates to permit livestock to move away from fire, and should not attempt to gather or move livestock in the planning area during fire activity. It said that the co-operative regretted the necessity. It was signed by a man in Billings whose name Jens did not know. In the bottom corner, in small type, it said that the advice had been generated with the assistance of the co-operative's advisory system and reviewed by staff.

Not a member, Jens thought. *Not registered.* He folded the paper envelope in half without opening it and put it on the dash.

He was in the truck still when he rang Sixmile.

• • •

On Monday he was up at three.

He did not need to be. He had been awake since one, lying on his back with the alarm clock turned to the wall, listening to the house. At three he got up and dressed in the dark and went down. The barometer by the kitchen door said thirty and two-hundredths, falling a little, the first time in a month it had fallen. He looked at it and went out.

Shannon was in the barn already. She had the coffee on the hot plate in the tack room and two sandwiches wrapped in waxed paper on the bench, and she was saddling the bay mare for Nils.

"You said he could," she said, without turning round. "Today. A gather on your own lease. On a Monday."

"I said he could."

"And home by dark."

"By dark."

She pulled the cinch up and let it out a hole, and pulled it again. "I'll not have him up there tomorrow. Whatever happens. I've told you."

"I know."

"Tell me you know."

"I know, Shannon."

She turned round then and looked at him, in the light of the tack room bulb, with the cinch strap in her hand.

"You've had the letter," she said.

"I've had it."

"And you're going anyway."

"I'm gathering my cattle. On my lease. Into my water lot." He took the coffee off the hot plate and poured it. "The letter says don't

gather during fire activity. It's not active. It's three in the morning and it lay down at midnight." He drank. "They'll be held, they'll be watered, they'll be in one place. Lewistown's got trucks Thursday week. If it goes to three before then, the gates open and nobody writes me up for what comes down the trail. If I put them on that road today, Ralph cites me and the Land Board takes the state sections, and then there's nothing to bring them back up to."

"That's not all it is."

"It's all it is today," he said.

• • •

The Sixmile truck came into the yard at half past four with its lights on. Joseph was driving. The two boys got down and unloaded their horses, a black gelding and a paint mare, and Jens went over them in the yard light, feet and backs and eyes, and they were good horses, better than his own, colony horses that had worked cattle in the rough every year of their lives. The boys were in black trousers and dark shirts and broad hats and good boots, with oilskins rolled behind their saddles. The older one was tall and fair and did not look at anybody. The younger was short and dark and looked at everything, the barn, the house, the round pen, Pell's in the end stall, Shannon, the halls on the bench lit up like a city, and his mouth was open the whole time.

"Elias," Joseph said. "Jakob."

"Morning," Jens said.

The tall one nodded. The short one said, "Good morning, Mr. Tollefsen, this is my mare, her name is Rose, she is seven, she can go anywhere," all in one breath, in English, and then went red to the ears.

Joseph shook Jens's hand through the truck window.

"Bring them back," he said.

"Tonight. By dark."

• • •

They crossed at the ford at five, four horses in a line, Jens first. The river was almost nothing. On the far side they went up through the cottonwoods and across the lower meadow to the ford gate, and through it, and up the verge of the campus road to the trail gate.

The sign was there on its steel post. *EAST BENCH FIRE BREAK. NO LIVESTOCK MOVEMENT.* The chain was there, round the gate post and through the gate.

The padlock was not.

The chain had been looped back over the post and hooked on itself, loose, so that it would come off again in one movement. There were no cut links. Jens got down and looked. There was no lock on the ground, in the grass, anywhere. In the dust of the gateway there were tyre tracks, a pickup's, wide, from the road to the gate and back, a day old or two.

"Uncle Conor," Nils said behind him.

"Maybe."

"He said he would. If it came to it."

"He said he'd cut it. It's not cut." Jens straightened up. "Could be the campus. They'll have keys to every gate on the bench for their crews. Could be the co-op. Could be the county putting the flags in." He unhooked the chain and swung the gate open. "Doesn't matter who."

"It matters to Uncle Conor."

Jens looked at him. The boy was sitting the bay mare with his cap pulled down and his tablet in the pocket of his shirt, looking at the gate post.

"Get through," Jens said. "I'll shut it."

They went through, and he shut the gate behind them and hooked the chain the way it had been hooked, exactly, and got back on his horse.

• • •

The trail went up the face of the bench in a long diagonal, worn a foot deep in places, and at the top it came out onto the bench and turned south across it.

It was all grass, the bench. Rourke grass now, since 2032, and before that Tollefsen grass for ninety-eight years. It was grazed short where the fire break was, along the edge above the river, and then it was long, and gold, and very dry, as far as you could see, rolling away south in long swells to where the pines began. The trail went across it pale and straight. To the east, a mile off, the halls lay along the bench in their rows behind their fence, with the steam going up from the towers, and the red engines of Harris Fireline parked in the open doors of a steel shed at the corner. Jens looked at them as he rode and did not stop.

To the south the sky was brown.

It was brown from the horizon to halfway up the sky, a flat even brown like the stain a cup leaves on a table, and in the brown the sun came up red and small and had no warmth in it at all at first. The air smelled of pine smoke. It had smelled of pine smoke for three weeks and they had all stopped smelling it, and now, on the bench, in the open, with nothing between them and the mountains, it came back. Nils coughed. The short colony boy said something to his mare in German and the mare flicked an ear back at him.

"What did you say to her?" Nils said.

"I told her it is only smoke," Jakob said. "That it is far. That she should not mind it."

"Is that true?"

Jakob looked at the south.

"It is far," he said. "It is far today."

• • •

The lease began at the foot of the mountains, where the grass gave way to sandstone and pine, and the water lot was in the first draw, where the trail came in. They reached it at a quarter to seven. There were forty pair in it, at the pond, standing in the mud with their calves. The brockle-faced cow was among them. She lifted her head when the horses came through the gate and watched Jens, and he saw her know him, and look past him at the open gate, and then go back to drinking.

"We leave the gate open," Jens said. "We push everything we find down to here. Down the draws. They'll know the way. They come here every afternoon. We just come earlier." He looked at the two colony boys. "Elias. You take the west side, the long ridge and the draws off it. There's a fence at the top of the ridge; don't go past it, it's not ours past it. Jakob, the east side, the parks, Nils with you. I'll take the middle, the high ground. Anything you can't get, leave. Anything that won't come, leave. We'll get what we get. Noon at the salt ground on the middle ridge, I'll be there, and we'll see what we've got." He looked south. "If you see fire, actual fire, flames, you turn round and come straight down here and wait. Don't look at it. Don't go and see. You come down."

Elias nodded. Jakob said, "Yes, sir." Nils said nothing; he was looking at his tablet.

"Nils."

"Yes."

"What's that say?"

"It's the county map. The fire." The boy turned it to him. "It's eight kilometres. From the south fence. It grew two kilometres yesterday afternoon and lay down at night." He looked up. "It says it'll grow this afternoon. It says the wind's south-west, fifteen, gusts to twenty-five."

"Eight kilometres is five miles."

"Five."

"Then it's a long way," Jens said. "Go with Jakob. Do what he does."

• • •

It took all day.

It was always going to take all day. Six thousand four hundred acres of rock and pine and parks and draws was a great deal of country to gather with four riders, and the cattle were scattered all over it in the heat, in the shade, in the bottoms of draws where the springs were and up in the parks where the grass was, in bunches of three and ten and twenty. You found them by looking. By knowing where they would be at that hour on that kind of day. By listening; a calf would bawl somewhere below you in the timber, and you would go down to it and find twelve pair lying in a dry wash in the shade of a sandstone ledge, chewing, and look at you as if you had come to sell them insurance.

You got them up. You did it quietly, without hurrying them; a cow pushed too hard in heat in rough country would turn back on you and go up into the rocks and you would never get her. You got behind them and let them see you, and they got up, slowly, and looked at you, and looked at each other, and one of them, an old one, would decide, and start off, and the rest would string out after her. Down. Always down. Down the draw to the next draw, and the next, and the water.

Jens rode the middle ground. It was the high country, the long rocky spine of the lease, with the parks on either side of it and the pines thick on the north slopes. From the top of it, at ten in the morning, he could see the whole of it, the lease and the mountains beyond it and the brown sky over everything, and to the south, beyond the last ridge before the main crest, the fire.

He had not seen it close before. He had seen the column from the river and the glow at night. Now he saw it. It was a long low line of white smoke lying along the side of a ridge eight miles off, perhaps

more, a line that went on east and west out of sight, and along the bottom of the white there were places where it went orange. They were small at that distance, the orange places. They did not move that he could see. They sat there along the ridge like coals in a stove, and above them the smoke rose straight up in the still morning air and then, high up, caught the wind and leaned north-east towards him.

He sat his horse on the ridge top and watched it for a long time. Then he turned and went on down after a bunch of cows he had seen in a park.

• • •

At noon they met at the salt ground on the middle ridge.

Jens came first, with thirty pair in front of him that he had pushed down into the head of the main draw and left to go on by themselves, which they had. Nils and Jakob came at a quarter past, from the east, with sixty pair strung out ahead of them down the slope towards the draw, and Nils was red in the face and soaked through and grinning, and Jakob was talking, to the mare, to Nils, to the cattle, in English and German both, without stopping.

"He talks to them," Nils said. "The whole time. In German. And they go."

"What do you say to them?" Jens said.

Jakob looked surprised. "I tell them where the water is," he said. "I tell them they are good cows and they are going home." He considered. "Some of them I tell they are stupid."

Elias came at half past. He came alone, from the west, with nothing in front of him, and Jens felt his stomach go. The boy rode up to the salt ground and stopped his black horse and sat it, and said nothing.

"Anything?" Jens said.

Elias nodded. He pointed with his chin back down the west side of the ridge, where the long draw went down towards the water lot.

"How many?"

"A hundred and ten," Elias said. "About." It was the first thing Jens had heard him say. His voice was deeper than Jens had expected. "Some came out of a draw at the top, by the fence. Forty. They were going the wrong way. Up. Towards the fire." He moved his hand. "I went round."

"You went round forty pair in that draw on your own?"

Elias looked at him as if he did not understand the question.

"They were going the wrong way," he said.

• • •

The five were at the south end. Jens knew which five. He had seen them at ten from the ridge top, in a park below the south fence: the old red cow with the bad eye and her calf, and four others with her, lying in the shade of the pines at the bottom of the park, where the spring came out. He had left them because they were at water and they were the farthest, and he had thought the afternoon would bring them down on its own.

At two he sent the boys down the main draw with what they had, and turned the sorrel south.

It was three miles. He did it in forty minutes, faster than he should have, through the pines and across the open parks, with the smoke coming thicker the farther south he went, until he could look straight at the sun. The air had changed. It had a taste now, not a smell. Ash came down on the sorrel's mane and stayed there.

The cows were where he had left them. They were standing now, all five, with their calves, in the bottom of the park with their heads up and their noses south, and he came down the slope towards them slowly, as you did, and they turned and looked at him and did not move.

Then he saw why. Beyond the south fence, on the far side of the next ridge, a quarter of a mile off, there was fire in the grass. It was not the main fire. The main fire was miles yet. It was a spot, some-

thing carried on the wind and dropped, a patch the size of a yard, then the size of a field as he watched, with a low line of flame walking up through the dry grass on the face of the ridge and a white smoke going straight up off it and then bending north towards him.

He came round below the cows to put them up the hill towards the water lot, and the old red cow broke. She went the wrong way. She went south, along the fence, at a run, with her calf at her side and the four others after her, and found the place where the wire was down at a washout and went through it, and up the next slope, towards the smoke.

He went after them. He did not think about it. He put the sorrel at the washout and the horse jumped it, and landed on the far side on a shelf of loose sandstone that went out from under him like a rug, and they went down together, the horse on his side and Jens under the near shoulder, and slid.

He did not remember the slide. He remembered lying on his back on the rock with the sorrel up and standing over him with the reins hanging, blowing, and the sky brown above them both. He could not get his breath. When it came it came with a knife in it, low on the left side, under the arm, and he lay there and took it in small pieces, as small as he could make them.

When he could sit up he looked south. The five were gone over the ridge. The spot fire had reached the top of it and was standing there in a long low line with the smoke going up, and between him and it there was nothing but the slope, and the cows were somewhere in the smoke on the far side, and he was not going to get them.

He got up. It took him a long time and he did it the way his father had got up out of the alfalfa, by getting a foot under him and pushing off his own knee. The sorrel had a cut on the near foreleg above the knee, not deep, and stood on it. He led the horse back through the washout and pulled the down wire up and twisted it round a post, badly, one-handed, because the other hand was holding his

side. Then he got on, from the wrong side, off a rock, and rode north at a walk.

He did not look back until the top of the next park. When he did, the spot fire had gone over the ridge after the cows and the whole of the far slope was smoke.

• • •

By five they had two hundred and ninety-one pair in the water lot.

Jens came in last, at a walk, sitting crooked, with the sorrel favouring the near fore. Nils saw him from the gate and got down off it.

"Dad."

"I'm all right. He slipped." He did not get off. He was not sure he could get back on. "Count them."

Nils counted them. He stood on the top rail of the gate with his tablet and pointed it along the bunched, milling, bawling mass of cattle round the pond, slowly, section by section, and the tablet said 291.4, and he looked at it and then at the cattle and said, "Two ninety-one. There's a calf it thinks is two calves," and Jens said, "Two ninety-one," and wrote it on the back of his hand with a ballpoint.

"Five short," Nils said.

"Five short. The old red cow with the bad eye, and four with her. They went south, through the fence, over the ridge." He breathed in as far as the knife would let him. "Nobody's going back for them."

The column had stood up at three. It had come up out of the south as it had every afternoon, white and then brown and then nearly black at the foot, and leaned towards them, and at four the ash had started to come down, in flakes, onto the cattle and the pond and the horses and the four of them, grey, light as moths. The cattle did not seem to mind it. They stood in the pond and drank. The calves lay down in the dust under the pines. The brockle-faced

cow stood at the water's edge with ash on her back and her ears going.

Jens rode round the fence. It was sound. He had fixed it himself in May. He came back to the gate.

The two colony boys were sitting on the ground in the shade of a pine by the gate, eating, with their hats off. They stood up when he came. Elias put his hat on.

"We'll stay," Elias said.

Jens looked at him.

"With them." The boy nodded at the cattle. "Tonight. They are new in a trap. They will walk the fence all night looking for the corner, and if there is one place it is down, a post rotted, a wire, they will find it, and in the morning they will be up the draws again." He said it slowly, as if he had worked it out in German first and was putting it into English one word at a time. "If somebody is here, riding the fence, once in the night, twice, they will settle. We have bedrolls. There is the spring. We have food from your wife."

"I told Joseph I'd have you home tonight."

"I know." Elias looked at the cattle. "You can tell him we wanted it."

"It's not a matter of what you want. It's what I said."

"I know," Elias said again. He waited.

Jakob had stopped eating. He was looking from one of them to the other with a sandwich in his hand.

Jens looked at the cattle. Two hundred and ninety-one pair, bunched round a shrinking pond in a forty-acre trap at the foot of the Bull Mountains with the ash coming down on them. He thought about the fence in the night. He had had cattle walk a new trap and find the one bad post. He had spent two days in the rough putting them back.

"I'll ring Joseph," he said. "From the ridge, where there's a signal. If he says no, you come down with us."

"He will say yes," Jakob said, with his mouth full.

• • •

He rode up to the ridge and rang from there, and then rode back down, and when he came back into the water lot the boys had their horses hobbled under the pines and a little fire ring of sandstone blocks laid by the spring, which they had not lit, and were sitting on their bedrolls in the dusk with their hats on their knees. He told them Joseph had said one night. Jakob said, "I told you," to Elias, in English, and Elias said something to him in German that made him laugh.

Nils had not got down off the gate rail. He was sitting on the top rail with his tablet on his knee, in the last light, looking down the trail where it went out of the water lot to the north, and down through the draw and out onto the bench, towards the river they could not see.

"How do they come down?" he said. "If they have to. If it's tomorrow. How do they go?"

Jens got down. He found a stick under the pines and squatted in the dust by the gate and drew it. He did not need to; the boy would have the map on the tablet. But he drew it.

"Here's the water lot. Here's the gate." He drew a line north. "Out the gate. Down the draw. Out onto the bench. That's two miles and a little. Across the bench on the trail. The old trail. A mile and a little. They know it. They've walked it seventeen years. The brockle-face'll lead it in the dark with her eyes shut."

He drew the edge of the bench, and a short line down it.

"Down the face of the bench to the trail gate. On the campus road." He drew the road, a long line across the bottom. "Along the road. Half a mile. There's no other way off the bench there; the road's fenced both sides. Down the road to the ford gate. Through the ford gate onto the lower meadow. Across the meadow to the ford." He drew the river. "Through the ford. Home. Four miles, near enough. In the dark, in smoke, four miles is three hours, maybe four."

Nils looked at the drawing in the dust for a long time.

"The road," he said.

"The road."

"What happens if someone needs it?"

"Then they'll wait. It's half a mile. Twenty minutes."

Nils looked at the cattle. He looked at the drawing. He looked at the tablet on his knee, and touched it, and touched it again. Jens watched him. He had seen the boy do it with hay figures he did not care about and with water in his town that he did, and he watched the boy do the sum.

"Six hundred head," Nils said. "Two ninety-one pair is five hundred and eighty-two head. If they're strung out on a road, single file, or two or three across, it's a mile of cattle. More. And they walk at a mile and a half an hour in the dark, you said. In smoke." He looked up. "It's more than twenty minutes, Dad."

"Then they'll wait longer."

"Who?"

"Whoever needs the road."

The boy looked at him from the gate rail. In the dusk his face was hard to read. Then he looked away, south, at the sky, where the glow was coming up now along the bottom of the brown, as it did every evening, red, low, in a thin line.

"Okay," Nils said.

• • •

They rode home in the dark.

They went down the draw by starlight, what starlight came through, and out onto the bench, and across it on the trail. Jens rode first. He did not use the flashlight. He had ridden that trail at night before, in October, bringing cows home late, and the trail was a pale line in the dark grass and the horse knew it better than he did. Behind him he could hear Nils's mare. Behind that, nothing. The bench was very quiet. There was no wind. To the east the halls were

lit along the bench like a long ship at anchor, and the steam went up white from the towers into the dark, and at the corner of the fence there were lights in the steel shed where the engines were.

To the south, behind them, the sky was red along the bottom from one side of the world to the other.

At the top of the bench face he stopped and let the boy come up beside him.

Below them the campus road ran along above the river, and the river was a dark line, and across it the Lodgepole yard had its lights on. The barn light. The kitchen. The light in the log barn, at the end, where Shannon would be.

"Tomorrow," Nils said. "The twenty-fourth. Grandma said watch the twenty-fourth."

"She did."

"What if it comes?"

"Then I'll go up and get them."

"With who?"

Jens did not answer him at once. He sat the horse at the top of the bench in the dark with the boy beside him and looked down at the lights of his own yard.

"With the colony boys," he said. "They're up there already."

"And me."

"Your mother said no."

"I know what Mom said." The boy said it to the mare's neck. "I counted them. I know how many there are. I know where the five are that we left. I know the fence." A pause. "You'll need somebody on drag who knows the count."

Jens turned his head and looked at him. He could not see his son's face, only the shape of him on the mare, and the cap, and the tablet's faint glow from the shirt pocket.

"We'll see what tomorrow is," he said.

They went down the face of the bench to the trail gate. He got down and unhooked the chain and they went through, and he

hooked it again behind them, exactly as it had been, and they rode down the verge of the empty road to the ford gate, and through, and across the meadow, and through the river, black and warm and only a foot deep, and up into the yard, where Shannon was standing in the door of the log barn with a lantern, waiting.

12

Level Three

The red flag warning came at ten in the morning.

> NATIONAL WEATHER SERVICE BILLINGS. RED FLAG WARNING *in effect from 4 PM this afternoon to 4 AM MDT Wednesday for Musselshell, Golden Valley, Yellowstone. Dry cold front. Southwest winds 20 to 30 mph with gusts to 45 ahead of the front this evening, shifting sharply northwest behind the front late tonight. Humidity 8 to 12 percent. Any fires that develop will spread rapidly. Outdoor burning is not recommended.*

Shannon read it on her telephone in the round pen, standing at the bay filly's shoulder, and then she read it again, and then she took the filly's saddle off and turned her out and went up to the house.

Karin was at the table with the ledger open at the back and the small telephone face up beside it. She had written the warning in already. She had written it out in full, all of it, *Any fires that develop will spread rapidly*, and underneath it, in the same hand, *The 24th.*

Jens was standing at the kitchen window with a cup of coffee he was not drinking, looking south.

"The boys," Shannon said.

"I know."

"You said you'd have them home this morning. You told Joseph."

"I was going up at ten to get them." He did not turn round. "I rang Joseph at nine. I told him there's a front tonight and they'll put a red flag on it. I said I'm going up this afternoon to bring the herd down, if it comes, and if it doesn't, I'll bring the boys down before dark either way." He drank the coffee then, all of it, cold. "He said all right."

"He said all right."

"He didn't say anything for a while. I thought I'd lost him. Then he said Samuel-John's home tonight, on the bus from Great Falls at seven. He said it twice." Jens ran the tap into the cup and emptied it. "Then he said, 'Bring them down, Jens. Bring them both down.' And he hung up." Jens put the cup in the sink. "Their horses are there. Their bedrolls. They know the fence. If I bring them down now and go back up at four I've ridden the trail twice and they've ridden it twice, for nothing, with a front coming."

"For nothing."

"You know what I mean."

She knew what he meant, and that he was right about the horses and the trail and the fence. Two boys of sixteen and seventeen from Sixmile were sitting at the foot of the Bull Mountains under a brown sky.

• • •

The owners came for their colts all morning.

They had been coming since Wednesday, since the alert, in ones and twos, with trailers. The Grass Range outfit had come for the two sorrels on Friday. The Winnett people came for the bay filly at eleven, a man and his wife, and the wife stood at the trailer gate with her hand over her mouth looking at the south sky while her husband loaded. They paid in cash. The man counted it out twice on the hood of his truck and then gave her an extra twenty for the hay, and would not take it back. *You guys getting out*? the wife said. *You're*

getting out, right? and Shannon said, *When they tell us*, and the man said, *Oh, they'll tell you. They text you about everything now. I got one about the dump being shut Labor Day*, and his wife said, *Don*, and he got in the truck.

By one o'clock there were eleven horses left in the log barn. Five outside colts whose people were in Lewistown or Billings or Great Falls and could not get there, or had not answered. Her own four. The grey Thea had made into a barrel horse. And Pell's.

At one the telephone went in her back pocket with the long rising tone.

> MUSSELSHELL COUNTY SHERIFF — EVACUATION ORDER (LEVEL 3: GO). *Dutchman Fire. Zone MU-7. Leave now. Follow your route. Do not delay for belongings. Livestock: if you cannot move livestock safely, open gates and leave.*

The map came up by itself. The green line. The arrow. *Est. 14 min. Prosper Lutheran Church hall.*

From the house she heard Karin's telephone go, and then the old one on the kitchen wall, ringing and ringing, and nobody picking it up.

• • •

They had it out in the yard.

They had it out beside the pickup, at half past one, with the sky over the south gone brown and purple and the wind beginning to come up out of the south-west in long warm pushes that lifted the dust off the yard and laid it against the barn. Karin was already in the cab of Shannon's pickup with the ledger in her lap and her straw hat on and her bag at her feet. She had been ready since ten. She had packed the ledger and her pills and a cardigan and the photograph of Arne from the hall, and she sat in the cab with the window down and the door open and watched them.

Thea had saddled the grey.

She had saddled him in the barn while nobody was looking, and led him out, and she stood holding him in the yard with her hat on and her chaps on and her face set like plaster.

"I'm going," she said.

"You're not," Jens said.

"You need riders. You've got two colony boys who don't know the trail in the dark, and Nils, and you. That's four. For three hundred pair. In smoke. You need five. I'm five."

"You're going with your grandmother."

"Grandma can drive herself."

"I can," Karin said, from the cab.

"Thea," Shannon said. "No."

"Why?" Thea turned on her, and then on her father, and her voice cracked down the middle and she let it. "Why? Tell me why. I'm a better rider than Nils. I'm a better rider than you, you said so, at Harlowton, in front of Ray. I know the trail. I know the herd. I know the cattle book better than anybody on this place. Why does Nils go and I don't?"

Jens looked at her.

"Because you'd try to save every one," he said. "You'd go back for the five. You'd go back into the smoke for a calf. I know you. I've watched you since you were four." He swallowed. "Nils counts them and stays where I put him."

"That's not a reason."

"It's mine."

"It's because he's a boy."

"It's because you're the one I can't—" He stopped. He did not finish it. He stood there in the blowing dust with his hands open at his sides and did not finish it.

Thea stood holding the grey. The wind took her hat brim and bent it back and let it go.

"Get in the truck, Thea," Shannon said. "Please. With Grandma. Please."

The girl looked at her mother. Then she looked at her father for a long moment. Then she led the grey back into the barn, and they heard her take the saddle off, and the bridle, and the halter rope run through the ring. She came out without looking at either of them and got into the back seat of the pickup behind her grandmother and shut the door.

• • •

Nils was in the barn alley with the bay mare saddled and his cap on and a bag of sandwiches tied behind the cantle. Shannon had not seen him saddle her. She stood in the barn door and looked at him.

"No," she said.

"Mom."

"I said no. On Thursday. To your father. I said not Thea and not you."

"I know." He held the mare. He was twelve and long and his wrists stuck out of his shirt cuffs, and he looked at her from under the cap with his father's eyes in his own face, which was hers. "I counted them. Two ninety-one. I know where the five are. I know the fence. I know how far it is and how long it takes in the dark. Dad needs somebody on drag who knows the count."

"Your father doesn't need you. He needs to bring them down the road and get off it."

"I know that too." The boy did not raise his voice. "I'm going to tell him how long he's on it."

Jens came into the barn behind her. He had his own horse, the sorrel, saddled, and his rope on it, and a slicker rolled behind, and a canteen. The cut on the sorrel's foreleg was dressed and the horse was sound on it. Jens was not. She had strapped his ribs at midnight with the crepe bandage from the colt box and he had stood still for it, and he held himself now in the way that told her the strapping had not helped. He stood in the alley a moment and looked at the two of them.

"Shannon," he said.

"I said no."

"I heard you." He came past her and put his hand on the boy's shoulder. "He's right. I need him. He'll be on drag every foot of it, behind me, where I can see him. He won't leave my sight." He looked at her over the boy's head. "I'll bring him home."

"You said that about the colony boys."

He took that.

"I'll bring him home," he said again.

She stood in the barn door with the wind pushing at her back.

Then she went to the boy and put her hands on either side of his face, as her own mother had done to her once at a branding when she was twelve, and looked at him, and kissed his forehead under the brim of the cap, hard. He let her.

"Drag," she said. "Every foot. Behind your father. You count them through the ford and you tell me the number when you come in that door."

"Two ninety-one," Nils said.

"Tell me the number when you come in."

• • •

They rode out at a quarter past three.

She watched them from the yard with Karin and Thea in the truck behind her and the engine running. Two horses across the flat towards the river, the sorrel and the bay, at a jog, the man and the boy. Down the cutbank to the ford. Through the ford, a little water thrown up silver in the brown light. Up the far bank into the cottonwoods, and gone.

On the county road at the end of the lane there was a line of traffic going north. She could see it from the yard. Pickups and stock trailers and cars, the Holmquists' big gooseneck, the Brekke grandson's van, a horse trailer she did not know, all of them going

north towards Prosper at a walking pace in a long line, with their headlights on in the middle of the afternoon.

Nobody was going south. Nobody was going towards the river but two people on horseback, and they had already gone.

• • •

She drove Karin and Thea to Prosper.

It took forty minutes. The route on the telephone said fourteen. The line of traffic moved at a walking pace with long stops, and a deputy at the county road junction in a yellow vest was waving people through one at a time, and the dust from the trucks ahead hung in the air in the brown light. Nobody spoke in the cab. Karin had the ledger open on her knee and was not reading it. Thea sat in the back with her arms folded and her face to the window, and halfway to Prosper she took her telephone out and opened something on it and looked at it, and Shannon, in the mirror, saw a map and a small blue dot moving on it, very slowly, south, across a pale space with no roads.

The church hall was the Lutheran one on Third Street. It had been built in 1961 for suppers and funerals and it had cots in it now in rows, and long tables with urns of coffee and plates of sandwiches under cling film, and women from the church behind the tables, and the Red Cross, and a young man with a clipboard at the door taking names. It was full. Old people in chairs along the wall. Children on the cots. The Holmquists, all of them, with their dog on a lead. A man in a campus shirt with a laptop. People Shannon had known all her life sitting very still with their bags at their feet, looking at the door.

She got Karin a chair by the wall, under the window, where there was a little air. Karin sat down in it with the ledger in her lap and looked round the hall.

"Well," she said. "Here we are." She settled the ledger. "He'll be through the ford by seven. Before the front. Arne never put cattle on

a road after dark in his life, and Jens won't either. He'll want them down while there's light to see the gates."

Shannon did not say anything to that.

"I'm going back, Karin."

"I know you are."

"The horses. There's eleven. The trailer takes six."

"I know." Karin took her glasses off. "Pell's won't load."

"She'll load."

"She's never loaded in her life. She didn't load for you in 2032, and she won't load now." Karin put the glasses back on. "Go on. Take the six. Turn the rest out on the flat with the gates open and come back here and sit with your daughter. That's what I'd do."

"Is it?"

Karin looked at her.

"No," she said. "It's what I'd tell you to do. It's not what I'd do."

Thea was at the end of the row of chairs, standing, with her telephone. She had not sat down. She came over now and stood in front of her mother.

"Dad's on the bench," she said. "He's past the trail gate. He's going up the trail. Nils's phone's with him." She held it out. The blue dot, and a second one, almost on top of it. "I'll tell you where they are. All night. I'll watch."

Shannon looked at her daughter.

"Thank you," she said.

"I'm not doing it for you." Thea put the telephone back in her pocket. "Go and get the horses. Go and get Pell's."

• • •

The deputy at the county road junction knew her. He was a Lund, one of old Mrs. Lund's grandsons from out past Melstone, and he had been in Thea's 4-H club, and Shannon had started a colt for his mother in 2040. He was standing in the middle of the southbound lane in his yellow vest with the traffic going past him north, and he held his hand up flat when he saw her truck coming the wrong way.

She stopped and put the window down.

"Mrs. Tollefsen. Hi. I can't let you go down there, I'm sorry."

"I've got eleven horses in my barn, Cody."

"I know. I know you do. But it's a Level Three, and they told us nobody in, and the sergeant's been by twice already."

"I'm not anybody. I'm going to get my horses and come straight back. One trip. Six horses. I'll be back past you in an hour."

He looked down the road towards the river, and then at the sky over the south, which was dark brown now from the ground to halfway up, with a white tower standing in the middle of it like a thunderhead, and the top of the tower flattened out and leaning towards them. The wind was blowing his vest flat against him.

"One hour," he said. "One trip. I didn't see you."

"Thank you, Cody."

"Don't thank me. Just come back past me." He stepped out of the lane. "My mother says you're the only one who could do anything with that grey of hers. I won't have you burnt for a horse."

She drove on south against the traffic. Every truck that passed her going the other way slowed and somebody looked at her through the windscreen.

• • •

The telephone buzzed in the cup holder at the Lodgepole lane. She looked at it at the cattle guard.

Conor: Herd moved Sunday. All on the Home Meadow, on the guided plan. 840 head, all fine. Beth and Kieran at the church. Beth took the good truck, I've got the Ford with no air and the radio stuck on the gospel station out of Billings. I'm on sweep tonight for N — the county's got the volunteers driving the river road checking everybody's out. My route goes past your place. You'd better be out.

She sat at the cattle guard with the engine running and read it. *Horses*, she wrote back. *11. Pell's won't load. Going now.* The answer came before she had got to the barn.

Ride her then. Like Dad said. Get out by six. Front's at eleven, the Hand says, give or take. I'll look in on my way past.

She put the telephone in her shirt pocket and backed the trailer up to the barn door.

• • •

She loaded six. It took twenty minutes. The five outside colts went first, because they were other people's, and they went in like old horses, as if they knew. The sixth was to have been one of her own geldings. She stood at the ramp with his lead rope in her hand and thought of Thea in the church hall with the telephone, watching the blue dots, and she tied the gelding back in his stall and went and got the grey. He went up the ramp after the others without looking at it. She tied him and shut the gate.

That left her own four, and Pell's.

Pell's was in the end stall with her head over the door.

Shannon went down the alley and stood in front of her. The mare put her nose against Shannon's chest and breathed on her, slowly, warm, smelling of hay. She was twenty-one. She had grey round her eyes and her muzzle and a hollow over each eye that had not been there five years ago. She had never been in a trailer in her life.

"Will you," Shannon said.

She put the halter on and led her out of the stall and down the alley and out into the blowing yard to the foot of the ramp, and the old mare stopped at the foot of the ramp and planted all four feet, as she had in 2032, and looked at the dark inside the trailer, and blew.

Shannon stood with the lead rope in her hand.

The wind was coming harder now, out of the south-west, warm as an oven door, and it had a sound in it, a low roar, from the cottonwoods along the river, which were all moving at once. The light had gone orange. Everything in the yard, the barn and the house and the trailer and her own hands, had gone the colour of a copper kettle. There was ash in the air, fine, like flour, and it was settling on the mare's back and on the trailer roof and on the water in the trough.

She looked at her watch. Ten to five.

"All right," she said to the mare. "All right. I know."

She led her back into the barn and put her in the end stall and shut the door, and leaned on it.

Then she went out and got in the truck and drove the six horses to Prosper, to the fairgrounds, where the county had opened the barns and the 4-H stalls for livestock. She unloaded them into the old horse barn by the arena, the one where Jens had parked his trailer every Stampede she could remember, and gave them hay and water, and a girl from the 4-H club wrote their names on a card on each stall door with a marker. Then she got back in the truck and drove to Third Street, and parked across from the church hall with the engine running.

The hall windows were high, set up under the eaves, and all she could see through them was the light, and the tops of the coat racks, and a ceiling fan going round. A woman from the church came out of the side door carrying a tray of coffee cups to a car, and saw her, and lifted the tray an inch, and Shannon lifted her hand off the wheel.

She took out the telephone and wrote to Thea.

Grey's at the fairgrounds. Old horse barn by the arena, he's got a card on his door. I'm going back for the other four and Pell's. Stay with Grandma.

She sat with her thumb over it. The fan went round in the high window. She thought of going in, and of what Thea's face would do when she came through the door, and of sitting on a folding chair under the window beside Karin with her hands in her lap until morning while two people she could see from here on a telephone moved down a mountain in the dark.

She sent it.

The answer came before she had the truck in gear. *ok*

And then, a moment later: *theyre still at the water lot. the dots havent moved in 20 min.*

She put the telephone face down on the seat and pulled out and drove south.

At the county road junction Cody Lund stood in the middle of the lane with his hand up flat and his face white under the brim of his cap, and she stopped, and put the window down, and he looked at her for a long time.

"I've got five horses in that barn," she said. "Four I can haul. And Pell's."

"I know which one's Pell's. Everybody in this county knows which one's Pell's." He looked down the road. The traffic going north had thinned to nothing. There was only the road, white, empty, going south into the brown. "The front's at eleven. The plan says there's a crew going to the bottom when it comes. A contingency crew. They'll be at your fence."

"Then I'll be all right."

"Mrs. Tollefsen, please. My mom'll kill me."

"I'll be out by eight, Cody. I'll lead her out. I'll ride her across the flat to the county road if I have to." She looked at him. "My brother's on the sweep. He's going past my place. He'll look in."

Cody Lund stood in the road a while longer. Then he stepped back out of the lane, and did not say anything, and did not wave her on. He just stood there and let her go.

She drove down the lane into the yard at six, with the sun a dull red coin in the west, very small, and everything under it the colour of rust, and the wind roaring in the cottonwoods along the river. Along the paddock fences below the yard, all the way along, every fifty yards, the little pink flags were standing out straight from their wire stakes, all pointing the same way, north-east, and nobody was standing at any of them.

13

Holding

By five the crew had wet down everything on the campus that would take water.

They started at ten, when the red flag came through, and worked in from the fence. They ran the hose lays out along the north perimeter and charged them and laid the nozzles in the gravel pointing at the grass, and set the portable pumps on the lake with their intakes weighted and floating. They cleared the last of the tumbleweed off the fence wire with pitchforks and threw it in the back of the crew carrier. They wet the roofs of the eight halls with the engine monitors, slowly, back and forth, until the water ran out of the gutters and down the steel walls and darkened the gravel at their feet. They pulled the plastic chairs in from outside the cook trailer and stacked them in the shed. The woman from Roundup who made pie took her washing off the line behind the trailer without being told.

Lyle walked it twice. He walked it once at three with Wilma Kolb and once at five on his own, the whole perimeter, two and a half miles, with a radio on his chest and his hands in his back pockets, looking at the ground. He looked at it the way his father had taught him on the Lame Deer fires when he was fourteen. He looked at where the grass met the gravel, and how wide the gravel was, and

what was on the other side of the fence, and which way the wind would bring it.

At five the wind was out of the south-west at twenty-five, gusting higher. It came off the mountains and across the bench and the campus and through the fence wire with a high thin sound, and it smelled of smoke and hot rock. The column over the Bull Mountains had gone up again at two and was standing now off to the south, very tall, with its top sheared off and blown north-east in a long brown shelf that had covered the sun since four. Under the shelf the light was orange. Everything the crew had wetted shone orange in it.

The front was due at eleven. The Hand had it at eleven-ten. The Weather Service said between ten and midnight. When it came the wind would go round to the north-west in a few minutes and blow forty, and everything that was burning on the north side of the Bull Mountains would turn and go the other way.

The campus was north of the fire, on the bench between the mountains and the river. Behind the front, it would be upwind.

That was the plan's reasoning, and Lyle had read it. Ahead of the front, for six hours, the campus was downwind of everything.

• • •

At six he went to the bench edge with the binoculars.

He went to the place past the end of the engine shed where he stood every night to ring his mother, where the fence ran along the top of the sandstone and the country fell away below it three hundred feet to the coulee and the river. The wind was stronger there. It came across the campus at his back and went out over the edge, and he had to brace his elbows on the top rail of the fence to hold the glasses still.

The river bottom was copper-coloured under the brown shelf. The meadows. The cottonwoods along the river, all moving. The road along its raised bank. The bridge. On the near side, below him,

the Rourke river meadow with nothing on it, the cattle gone, the grass eaten short and the stock tank shining. On the far side of the river, in the cottonwoods, the Tollefsen yard.

There was a pickup and stock trailer coming down the lane into the yard. He watched it come. It came fast for a lane, with dust going up behind it and blowing off sideways, and it went past the house and swung round in the yard and stopped with the trailer by the long log barn, and somebody got out. Small, in a hat. Shannon. She went into the barn without shutting the door of the truck.

He moved the glasses down. Along the paddock fences below the yard, the pink flags were standing straight out, all the way along, every one of them streaming away from him, north-east.

Then he turned round and put the glasses south, over the roofs of the halls and the cooling towers and across the bench, to where the Bull Mountains came up out of it. The north face. The grazing.

There was smoke on it.

The column was miles off, in the mountains. This was close, low, at the foot of the mountains, three or four miles south of the river, a pale grey smoke that came up out of the grass in a broad band and lay over sideways in the wind and went off north-east along the foot of the slope. It was thin. He could see the ground through it. Under it, here and there, he could see a red line, very fine, like a seam.

He watched it for a minute. Then he keyed the radio.

"Wilma. Lyle. You at the shed?"

"Go ahead."

"Come to the bench end. Bring your glasses."

She came round the end of the shed in a couple of minutes, with the wind behind her and one hand on her hat, and stood beside him at the fence and put her glasses up and found it without his pointing. She looked at it for a long time.

"That's on the allotment," she said.

"That's the state sections. And the Holmquist place."

"Spotting. Out ahead of the main fire." She lowered the glasses. "It'll be in the Hand already. They'll have it on the satellite."

"How long till it's at the river?"

"It won't get there." She looked at it again. "Not tonight. Not ahead of the front. That's a north slope, and it's grass, and when the sun goes the air comes down off the mountain and the humidity comes up. It'll lie down. It'll creep around on that bench till eleven, and then the front swings it and shoves it back up the hill into its own black." She lowered the glasses. "I've watched a hundred of those. They always look worse at six than they are."

He looked at the yard. Shannon came out of the barn and went into it again.

"Is there anything still on the allotment?" Wilma said.

"There was a herd. The plan had it there on the twentieth." He put the glasses up on the mountain. He could see the grey band, and the red seam under it, and above it the slope going on up to the rims, brown, empty, with the light on it. He could not see anything moving. At four miles, under that light, he would not have. "The plan said remove them by road."

"The plan says that about every allotment in three counties."

He took out his telephone and rang Jens.

It rang five times and went to the message. *This is Jens. Leave it.* He did not leave it. He put the telephone away and stood with his elbows on the fence.

"You've got her number," Wilma said. "The wife."

"I've got it."

He took the telephone out again and rang Shannon. It rang, and rang, and went to a woman's voice he had not heard before, a machine's, saying the number he had called was not available. He watched the yard. Shannon came out of the barn leading a horse, an old one by the way it moved, and walked it across the yard towards the trailer, and stopped at the ramp.

He put the telephone away.

• • •

At twenty past six the trigger went.

He heard it on the command net, on the chest radio, with Wilma standing beside him. *Dutchman Ops to Opland IA Crew, Roundup staging. Red Flag Warning in effect for frontal passage, planning area. Per IAP, Division N contingency. Respond to River Bottom Buffer. Report on arrival.*

And the crew boss's voice coming back, a young man's, flat, clear, the voice of somebody reading off a clipboard in the cab of a truck. *Opland copies Division N. Rolling in five.*

Lyle let his breath out.

Wilma did not say anything. She put her glasses up again on the mountain.

He took the tablet out of the thigh pocket of his trousers and woke it and turned his back to the wind to read it. The plan had redrawn itself. Division N had gone from grey to green. The buffer line along the paddock fences was a thick green line now, with a small truck on it, and a time beside the truck. ETA 19:05. Under it the river bottom's number had changed. *Probability of ember ignition in buffer, next 12 hrs: 64%. With contingency staffed: 18%.*

"There," he said.

"There," Wilma said.

He watched the yard. Shannon was at the trailer ramp with the old horse. The horse had not gone up it. She stood at its head and the horse stood with its four feet planted and its head up, and the wind blew its mane out sideways, and after a while she led it back into the barn.

• • •

At ten to seven the trigger went the other way.

It came on the command net in the same voice as before, the ops voice, a woman's, very calm. *Dutchman Ops to Opland IA Crew. Hold at staging. Repeat, hold at staging. New spot, Division J, north flank,*

Roundup south edge, Lakeview Road. Structures threatened. Opland IA, you are reassigned to Division J, Roundup staging. Stand by for orders.

A pause. The truck engine, behind the young man's voice.

Opland copies. Holding at staging. Turning round.

Lyle looked at the tablet. It had redrawn itself again. On the north edge of the fire, eighteen miles to the west, where the town of Roundup came down into the Musselshell valley on its south side, there was a new red shape, small, and a ring of yellow round it, and a dozen grey squares in the yellow, which were houses. The little truck had gone from the buffer line and was sitting now in a yellow box marked *Roundup staging*. The thick green line along the paddock fences had gone back to grey.

Division N. Contingency. Unstaffed. Reassess 21:00.

Probability of ember ignition in buffer, next 12 hrs: 64%.

He stood with the tablet in his hand.

"Wilma."

"I see it."

"Sixty-four."

"I see it, Lyle." She did not lower her glasses. "And they've got thirty-one houses on Lakeview Road and a nursing home on the corner of Lakeview and Second with forty people in it who can't walk. They've got one crew on the north flank that isn't committed, and it's sitting at staging two miles from that spot." She lowered the glasses and looked at him. "What would you do?"

He did not answer that. He looked at the tablet.

Then he keyed the chest radio.

"Dutchman Ops, Division Z."

"Division Z, Ops."

"Ops, Z has two engines and twelve on the campus perimeter. Request to know if you want Z resources moved to the Division N buffer."

The pause was very short. He could hear, behind the woman's voice, other voices, and a telephone ringing.

"Division Z, negative. IAP holds Division Z resources on the campus through frontal passage. Campus occupancy tonight is three hundred and eighty. Probability of perimeter ignition with Z resources in place is four percent. Without, thirty-eight. Hold your division."

He stood with his thumb on the button.

He thought about it. He made himself do it properly, the way he would have done it if it were somebody else's division and somebody else's friend, and he looked at the numbers on the tablet and at the campus behind him. The eight halls. The cooling towers. The lights in the long windows of the halls, where three hundred and eighty people would be sitting at night at their desks, or asleep in the dormitory block behind, with the front coming. Two engines. Twelve people. Two and a half miles of fence with grass on the other side of it, and the river bottom below with the wind coming straight up out of it.

If it had been his plan to write, on a quiet day, with a cup of coffee, he would have written it the same.

"Copy, Ops," he said. "Z holding."

"Thank you, Z."

He let go of the button.

Wilma Kolb was looking at him.

"I told you I'd have put more on the river," she said. "The first week."

"You did."

"And tonight?"

"Tonight I'd do what she did." He put the tablet back in his pocket. "There's three hundred and eighty people in those halls."

"Yes."

"And there's two engines."

"Yes." She looked at him a while longer, and he could not tell what she was thinking, and then she nodded once and put her glasses back up on the mountain.

"Who's in the bottom?" he said. "Besides her."

"Sheriff's got volunteers driving the river road. Knocking on doors, making sure people went. They're on the county channel, not ours. They're not in the plan." She kept the glasses up. "Ranchers, mostly. Whoever said yes when Ralph rang them."

He did not ask who. After a moment she said, "It's moved some. The spot. It'll lie down when the sun goes."

• • •

He found Boss at the north perimeter at half past seven with the crew, laying a second hose along the inside of the fence. They had run it from the lake pump and were laying it out by hand, two at a time, the canvas jacket stiff and white with dust, and Boss was at the head of it walking backwards and calling the distance.

He saw Lyle and handed the hose to the girl from Ashland and came over.

"We're holding," Lyle said.

"I heard. Good." Boss wiped his face with the back of his glove. It left a grey stripe across his forehead. "Two engines down there with no hydrant and the river half dry, we'd be two more things to burn. We've got the halls. We've got the lake." He looked north, over the fence and the coulee, at the river bottom, where the light was going. "The Spotted Elk boys want to go down, though. On foot. Just to look. They say it's a mile and they could be at the bridge in twenty minutes."

"No."

"I told them you'd say that."

"Then why are you asking me?"

"Because they asked me to ask you." Boss shrugged. "Now I've asked."

"No," Lyle said. "Nobody leaves the division. Not tonight. Not on foot, not in a truck, not to look." He heard his own voice and made it quieter. "I need every one of you on this fence when that front comes. If I've got two people down in the bottom when the wind goes round, I've got two people in the bottom with a fire coming at them and no way up but the coulee road. You understand me?"

"Yeah. I'll tell them."

"Tell them I said so."

"I'll tell them it was you." Boss picked his glove up off the fence post. "They'll sulk anyway. They sulked all through supper because the pie was rhubarb again."

He went back to the hose. Lyle watched him take it from the girl and walk it on along the fence, backwards, calling the distance. Twenty. Forty. Sixty. The canvas went out flat behind him in the gravel and the crew came after it on their knees, coupling the lengths, and the wind blew the dust off them in long grey streamers towards the north-east.

• • •

He rang his mother at eight.

It was an hour early. He went to the end of the engine shed and stood with his back to the wall, where he always stood, and the signal was good, and he could see the river bottom from there, what was left of it in the light. The yard. The cottonwoods all moving at once. A light in the long log barn. Two lights, now: the barn, and the kitchen window of the white house.

The telephone rang four times and somebody picked it up.

"Hello, this is Evelyn Harris's telephone."

It was a young woman's voice, and he knew it after a moment. She was the aide who came in the afternoons from the clinic at Lame Deer, to help his mother wash and dress and take her pills, and who

had been coming every day now, morning and evening, since the second week of August. Her name was Rosalie Little Bear. She was twenty-four. She had been to school with Boss.

"Rosalie. It's Lyle."

"Oh. Lyle. Hi. Hang on, I've got the kettle going, let me—" He heard it stop whistling, and her move, and a door close, softly. "Sorry. She's sleeping. She went down at seven. She had kind of a hard afternoon."

"What kind of hard?"

"She was tired. She didn't want to eat lunch. She sat in her chair by the window all afternoon looking at the smoke, and she wouldn't let me pull the blind, and around five she started asking for you. She asked was it nine yet." Rosalie stopped. "I told her it was five, and she said, 'He'll ring at nine,' and then about every half hour after that she'd ask again."

"Is she in pain?"

"No. She's comfortable. Dr. Bearchum came by at four. He listened to her chest." A pause. "He said to call you, Lyle. Not tonight. He said in the next week or so you should come home if you can."

Lyle stood with his back against the shed wall.

"Did he say why?"

"He said her heart's tired. He said the smoke doesn't help. He said she's ninety-two." Another pause. "He said she might go on a long time like this. And she might not. He said it's the kind where you want to be here."

"All right."

"I'm sorry."

"No. Thank you, Rosalie." He watched the yard across the river. Shannon came out of the barn, small and dark against the light in the doorway, and stood in the yard. She had something in her hand, a rope, and she stood there with it and looked south, at the bench,

where the smoke was, and then she went back in. "Did she eat any supper?"

"Some soup. Half a bowl. And she had a piece of the bread Herbie's wife made."

"Good."

"She said something before she went down. She said to tell you." Rosalie's voice changed a little; she was reading it. "I wrote it down. She said, 'Tell Lyle I can see his fire, and tell him not to stand too close to it.'"

He did not say anything to that. After a moment he said, "Can you put the telephone by her? Just for a minute. Don't wake her."

"Sure. Hang on."

He heard her walk, and a door open, and the sound changed. A smaller room. A clock ticking. Somewhere outside the room, very faint, a radio playing in another house. Then the telephone being set down on something soft, a pillow or a blanket, close, and his mother breathing.

She breathed slowly, with a catch at the top of each breath and a long, long letting go. He stood against the shed wall with the wind going past the end of it and the telephone hard against his ear, and listened to it. In. The catch. Out, for a long time. In.

He listened for a minute. Then two.

"All right, Mom," he said, very quietly, so that it would not wake her. "I'm here. It's Lyle. I'm not standing close to it."

He listened a little longer. Then he heard Rosalie's step, and the telephone being lifted.

"Lyle?"

"Thank you. Tell her I rang. Tell her I'll ring in the morning."

"I'll tell her."

"Rosalie. If it changes. In the night. Any time."

"I'll call you. I promise."

"Any time," he said again, and she said she knew, and they hung up.

• • •

He stayed at the end of the shed after that. He put the telephone in his shirt pocket and buttoned the pocket and stood against the wall with the radio on his chest and his hands in his back pockets and looked at the river bottom while the light went.

It went slowly, under the brown shelf, from copper to rust to the colour of an old penny, and then to a dull red with no daylight left in it. The cottonwoods along the river went black. The meadows went black. The road along its raised bank was a pale line, and the bridge a darker one across it. The lights in the Tollefsen yard came up very bright in the dark, two of them, the barn and the kitchen, and then a third, a yard light on a pole that he had not known was there, white, with dust blowing through it.

When he turned round and looked south, past the lit halls, the fire on the allotment showed now that the light had gone. It was a line. It ran across the face of the mountains from east to west for what he judged to be two miles, a thin, broken, uneven line of red, very bright in places and dim in others, and it was lower on the slope than it had been at six, and it was coming down.

He took out the telephone and rang Jens again.

Five rings. *This is Jens. Leave it.*

"It's Lyle," he said. He stood with the telephone at his ear and the wind at his back, and looked from the red line on the slope to the three lights in the yard, and for a while he could not think what else to say. "I'm on the campus. On the bench. I can see your place. There's fire on the allotment, coming down. The contingency crew got pulled to Roundup. There's nobody on your fence." He stopped. "If you've got anything left up there, Jens. Ring me."

He hung up.

Behind him, on the far side of the shed, he heard Boss calling the distance on the second hose lay, and the crew answering, and the pump on the lake coming up to speed. He stood there a while

longer, watching the line, and the yard. Then he went round the end of the shed to see how far along they'd got.

PART THREE

The Burn

20:00, 24 August – *dawn*, 25 August 2049

14

Point

Tuesday 24 August, 20:00

They had been at the water lot since half past four, and for three and a half hours Jens had waited for the heat to go out of the day.

You did not trail cows in the heat. A cow with a calf at her side, pushed in the afternoon, would walk a mile and stop under the first tree with her tongue out and not come out for anybody. His father had told him that before he could sit a horse by himself. You started them when the shadows were long, and walked them into the dark, when they would go.

So they had waited. They had ridden the fence, all four of them, once round together and then in pairs. They had watered the horses at the spring. They had eaten Shannon's sandwiches sitting on the ground in the shade of the pines by the gate, and Jakob had talked the whole time about the night: how the grey cow with the one horn had found the place by the north corner where the bottom wire was slack and gone out under it twice, and Elias had put her back twice, in the dark, on foot, the second time with his bare hands on her tail; how they had heard a lion, or something, up in the rocks; how the glow had come right round the sky at two in the morning so that it was red behind them and red in front of them and Jakob had thought the sun was coming up in the wrong place. "And then I

went to sleep," he said, "and Elias did not sleep, he says he did, but he did not."

"I slept," Elias said.

"He sat on that rock all night. With his hat on. Like a heron."

"A what?" Nils said.

"A heron. A bird. In the creek at home, by the dam. It stands on one leg and it does not move and you think it is a stick." Jakob put his arms out stiff and his chin up and held still, and Nils laughed, and Elias looked at the cattle.

At six, while they were eating, the fire came out of the mountains.

• • •

It came out a mile and a half to the west, along the foot of the slope, where the timber thinned into the grass. Jens was looking that way when it did. He had been looking that way all afternoon, because that was where the smoke was thickest, and he had seen it come down through the pines all the afternoon in a brown haze with a darker line at the bottom, and he had told himself it was the evening, it would lie down with the evening, the way it had lain down every evening for three weeks. At six the darker line at the bottom of the haze came out into the grass. It did not look like much at that distance. A seam of red along the foot of the hill, very thin, and above it a low smoke that went off sideways in the wind, north-east, towards the bench, and as it went the grass in front of it caught, and the seam got longer.

He stood up.

Nobody said anything. Jakob stopped eating. The four of them stood in the shade of the pines by the gate and watched it.

"It's coming this way," Nils said.

"It's going north-east. With the wind. We're east of it."

"It's coming along."

"It's coming along the foot," Jens said. "Slow. It's grass. The wind's got it going across, not at us." He looked at the sky in the south-w-

est, which was the colour of a rusted stovepipe, and at the sun in it, which was a red disc, small, still high in the west, that you could look straight at. "It'll lie down when that goes."

"Will it?"

He did not answer the boy. He looked at his watch. It was six minutes past six.

"Saddle up," he said. "Tighten up. Water your horses again. Fill your canteens. We go at eight."

"Why not now?"

"Because they won't go now. Not in this." He looked at the cattle, bunched round the pond in the heat with their heads low. "And the road's got the shift on it till seven. At eight it's ours."

• • •

By half past seven the fire was half a mile closer, and lower on the slope, and it had not lain down.

The sun had gone. It had gone into the brown a long while before it reached the Snowies, and the light it left behind was an orange that came from everywhere at once and threw no shadows. In it, the line of fire along the foot of the mountains was brighter than it had been at six. It ran east-west for perhaps two miles now, broken, uneven, a dull red in some places and in others a bright orange that flared up and went down again, and it was not going across any longer. The wind had come round a little. It was coming down at them.

Jens rode round the outside of the fence on the sorrel and looked at the cattle.

They knew before he did. None of them was lying down. They were bunched at the north end of the trap, by the gate, as far from the fire as the fence would let them get, with their heads up and the calves pushed in among them, and the whole bunch of them was moving, slowly, round and round, like water in a basin. Every now and then one of them bawled. The calves bawled back. The brockle-

faced cow stood at the gate with her nose against the top rail and looked down the trail where it went out of the trap and down the draw, and did not bawl, and did not move.

She was fourteen. He had brought her in off the lease as a heifer calf in a blizzard in 2035 on the saddle in front of him, with her mother dead in the draw behind them, and his own mother had raised her on the bottle in the calving shed with the stove going, and she had been the lead cow on this mountain for ten years. She went up the trail every May at the front of the herd without being told and came down it every October the same way. Every spring Jens thought she would not have another calf, and every spring she did. She had one at her side now, a big brockle-faced bull calf like a copy of her, and he was pressed against her flank with his nose under her belly.

Jens rode back to the gate and got down and stood next to her on his side of the rail.

"Old lady," he said.

She turned her head and looked at him with one eye, white-rimmed, and blew.

• • •

He gave them their places at the gate, at a quarter to eight, with the horses saddled and the canteens full and the light going.

"I'm point." He drew it in the dust with the toe of his boot, as he had drawn the route the night before. "That's the front. I go first and they follow me, or they follow her, and she follows me. Elias, you're left flank. Jakob, right. You ride alongside, out a ways, about the middle. You keep them in a string. Anything breaks out the side, you turn it back in. You don't chase it. You turn it. If you can't turn it, you let it go."

Elias nodded.

"Let it go?" Jakob said.

"If it's going to take you into the rocks in the dark, you let it go. You hear me? I'll not have—" He stopped. That was Shannon's, and he did not know when it had got into his mouth. "I won't have you up in the rocks after a cow. Joseph wants you home. I want you home. You let it go."

"Yes, Mr. Tollefsen."

"Elias."

"Yes."

Jens turned round. Nils was sitting the bay mare a little way off with his cap pulled down, watching.

"You're drag."

"I know."

"Drag's the back. Behind the last calf. You don't go round them and you don't come up past them. If one drops back, you push it on. If you can't push it on, you leave it. If you lose the trail, or you can't see the cattle, or you can't see anything, you stop. Right where you are. And you holler. And you keep hollering, and somebody'll come." He looked up at the boy on the mare. "Jakob'll come. Or me."

"How will you hear me? From the front?"

"I'll hear you."

"It's a mile of cattle."

"I'll hear you," Jens said again.

He had told Shannon the boy would be behind him every foot, where he could see him. He had said it in the barn with his hand on the boy's shoulder, and he had known when he said it that it was not how a drive went. Point was the front and drag was the back and in between there would be two hundred and ninety-one pair of cattle strung out in the dark, and he would not see his son from the time they went out of this gate until the ford. He had known it in the barn.

Nils was looking at him.

"What?" Jens said.

"Nothing." The boy took the tablet out of his shirt pocket. "There's something you should see."

• • •

It was the tablet Shannon had bought him in June, with the satellite thing in it so that it worked on the mountain where telephones did not. Nils turned it so that Jens could see the screen. The glow of it was very bright in the orange dusk.

It was the Hand's map. Jens had never looked at it long. It was the county with its roads and its river and its towns, and over it, in red, the fire, a great shape like a spill of something, and the divisions in their lettered boxes. Now the boy pinched it and pulled it until it was only the bench and the river bottom and the trail, a pale dotted line across the bench, and at the bottom of the bench the campus road.

The campus road was red.

It was a thinner, brighter red than the fire, a line laid along the road itself, from the coulee mouth all the way down along the Rourke river meadow to the bridge. There was a small box beside it with writing in it, and the boy touched the box and it got bigger.

CAMPUS ACCESS ROAD — RESTRICTED. Emergency vehicles only, 18:00 24 Aug – 06:00 25 Aug. Division N access. All other traffic use county routes.

And under that, in smaller writing, because the boy had touched something else:

Livestock, Bull Mtn allotments: do not move. Open allotment gates. Do not gather. Do not drive livestock on restricted routes.

Jens looked at it a long time.

"It came at six," Nils said. "When the fire came out. It's the only way off the bench there. You said. There's no other way down."

"I know what I said."

"So we can't use it."

"We have to use it." Jens looked at the line of red along the road. Half a mile. From the trail gate to the ford gate, half a mile, the only half-mile of road the herd would touch between the mountain and home, and the plan had painted it red. "There's no other way off the bench. There's the road, or there's leaving them here."

The boy said nothing.

Jens looked up from the tablet at the fire along the foot of the mountains. It was a mile off now, perhaps less. The light from it was on the undersides of the smoke. He could hear it. He had not been able to hear it at six. It was a sound like a train a long way off on a trestle, a sound under all the other sounds, the wind in the pines and the cattle bawling and the horses blowing, that you did not notice and then could not stop noticing.

"It's for the trucks," Nils said. "The red. For the fire trucks. For the crew that goes to our fence."

"I know who it's for."

"What if—"

"Give it here."

The boy gave it to him. Jens looked at it a moment more, the road in red and the box with the words in it. Then he switched it off, which took him three tries because he did not know which button, and opened the near saddlebag on the sorrel and put it in, down at the bottom, under the slicker, and buckled the flap.

"You'll have it back at the ford."

Nils looked at the saddlebag. Then he looked at his father.

"Thea's got my dot," he said. "On her phone. She's watching it."

"Then she'll know where you are."

"She'll know where we are on the road," the boy said.

"Good," Jens said, and got back on the sorrel.

• • •

At eight he opened the gate.

He got down and pulled the pin and swung the gate back against the fence, wide, and tied it there with a piggin string, and got back on the sorrel and rode out through the gap and twenty yards down the trail and turned round and sat his horse and waited.

Nothing came.

The cattle stood bunched at the north end of the trap in the orange dark, all of them, with their heads up, and looked at the open gate, and did not come through it. The smoke was thicker now. It had come down off the slope in the last half-hour and lay in the trap like fog in a hollow, waist-high on a horse, brown, and the cattle stood in it and coughed. The calves were bawling, all of them, a high continuous sound. Elias was on the west side of the bunch and Jakob on the east, sitting their horses, waiting, and Nils behind, by the pond.

"Push them," Jens said.

They pushed. Elias came in from the west, slowly, and Jakob from the east, and Nils from behind, waving his hat, and the bunch moved, and swirled, and the front of it came up to the gate and stopped dead in the gap. The cows in front planted their feet. The cows behind came up into them and stopped. And then the whole front of the herd turned, as if somebody had pulled a string, and went back, away from the gate, past Elias, round the pond, into the smoke at the south end of the trap, towards the fire, bawling, and the rest went with them.

Jens sat on the sorrel in the trail and watched them go.

They did not know the trail in the smoke. They knew it in May with the grass green and the sky blue and the brockle-face in front. They did not know it in this. In this all they knew was that the smoke was everywhere and the gate was a hole in the fence where the smoke was going, north-east, with the wind, and the smoke was what they were trying to get away from.

"Again," he said.

They brought them round again. It took ten minutes. Elias got round them at the south end of the trap and turned them, riding the black hard along the fence, and they came back up the east side past Jakob and round the pond, and the boy on drag waved his hat at them and shouted, and they came up to the gate, and stopped, and turned.

This time they did not go far. They went back twenty yards and milled there by the pond in the brown smoke with the calves bawling, round and round, and the dust came up off them into the smoke.

"Mr. Tollefsen," Jakob called. "They will not go."

"They'll go."

"Shall I sing to them? I sing to ours. At home. When they will not go in the shed."

"Sing if you want."

So Jakob sang to them. He sat his paint mare at the east fence in the smoke with his hat pushed back and sang to Jens Tollefsen's cattle in German, something slow, in a high clear voice that cracked on the top notes, and then went on past them, and Jens did not know what it was; a hymn, he thought. Nobody laughed at him. Elias sat the black at the west side of the bunch and looked at the ground. Nils, behind, had stopped waving his hat.

The brockle-faced cow came out of the bunch.

She did not hurry. She came out of the middle of it, pushing between two cows, with her calf at her side, and walked up to the gate by herself, and stopped in the gap and stood there with her head up, looking down the trail, where Jens sat the sorrel in the smoke twenty yards off. She looked at him a long time. She lowered her head and smelled the ground in the gap. Then she walked through, and past the sorrel, close enough that Jens could have put out his hand and touched her back, and on down the trail into the draw, at a walk, with the calf trotting to keep up, as if it were a

morning in October and there was snow coming and she had decided it was time to go home.

Behind her, a cow came out of the bunch and went after her. Then another. Then a pair, the calf in front. Then four. And then the front of the herd was coming through the gap in a string, nose to tail, the calves pressed in at their mothers' sides, bawling, with their eyes white in the smoke, and the herd behind them stretched out after them like a rope being paid out off a coil, and came, and kept coming, and Jakob was still singing.

Jens turned the sorrel and rode down the draw after the old cow, past her, and put himself in front of her, where she could see the horse's tail, and kept the horse at a walk.

He did not need to look back. He could hear them, behind him on the trail, all of them, the bawling and the clatter of hooves on the stones in the draw, and Jakob's voice above it, high and thin, going on with the hymn into the dark, and somewhere at the back of it all, a long way off, too far to see, a boy shouting the cattle on.

15

Eighty-Four

Tuesday 24 August, 20:30

The draw went down out of the water lot for two miles and a little, between sandstone rims, and the herd went down it faster than he had any right to expect.

It was the smoke behind them. Once the brockle-face had gone through the gate and the rest had seen her go, the fire was behind them and the draw was in front of them, and the draw was going away from it, and they went down it at a fast walk, nose to tail, bawling, with the calves trotting. Jens had to hold the sorrel back to stay in front of the old cow. Twice she put her nose on the horse's tail and pushed, and the sorrel laid his ears back and kicked at her, and Jens said, "Easy. Easy. Both of you," and she dropped back half a length and came on.

He knew the draw. He had come up it every May and down it every October for seventeen years, and before that with his father, when the bench was theirs and the lease was the state's and the trail had nobody's name on it. He knew it by its turnings. A left, where the rim on the right came down to a point like the prow of a boat. A long straight, sandy, where the cattle always spread out and had to be pushed back into a string. A right, round a big block of yellow rock that had come down off the rim some winter and lay in the

bottom of the draw on its side, the size of a house, with a juniper growing out of the top of it. He went round the rock in the dark with his left hand out, not touching it, feeling where it was by the cold coming off it, and the old cow came round it behind him, and the herd came round behind her.

At half past eight there was still a little light, enough to see the rims against the sky. It came from the south, from behind them, and it was red, and it lay on the tops of the rims and on the smoke and on nothing else, so that the draw was black and the rims above it were the colour of embers, and when he looked up at them they looked as if they were burning. He knew they were not. They were rock. He looked at them anyway, every few minutes, to be sure.

The smoke came down the draw with them. It came in pushes, with the wind, so that for a minute the air would be almost clear and he could see the old cow's white face behind him and the line of cattle behind her going back into the dark, and then a push would come down the draw like water down a flume and he would not be able to see the sorrel's ears. In the pushes the cattle coughed. The horse coughed. Jens pulled his bandana up over his nose and mouth and rode with his eyes nearly shut, and counted the turnings.

• • •

At ten to nine they came out onto the bench.

The draw opened out. The rims fell away on either side and the ground went flat under the horse, and the smoke had room to spread, and thinned, and he could see. He could see a long way. That surprised him. The bench lay in front of him in the red light, two miles wide and a mile deep to the edge, all grass, short and dry and pale, and on the far side of it, a long way off, the bench edge, a black line, and beyond the edge nothing, the dark where the river bottom was. To the right, east, the campus was lit. It was always lit. The long halls with their rows of windows, and the white steam going up out of the cooling towers and turning pink at the top where

the red light caught it, and at the near corner of the fence, the steel shed, open, with its lights on, and the shapes of the engines inside.

To the left, west, was the Hogback.

It was a ridge. It came out of the foot of the mountains behind them and ran north across the bench towards the edge, a long low back of sandstone and grass a hundred feet high, like an animal lying down with its head towards the river, and the trail ran along the east side of it, at its foot, the whole way. It had always run there. The Hogback kept the wind off it in October, and the snow, and a cow going north along the foot of it with the ridge on her left could not get lost. That was how his father had taught him the trail, at seven, in the dark: *Keep the Hogback on your left hand. If it's on your left you're right. If it's on your right, you've turned round, and you're going back up the mountain.*

He kept it on his left. The glow was behind it. The sky to the south and west was red from end to end, but behind the Hogback it was brightest, so that the ridge stood up against it black and sharp-edged, every rock and every bush on its back cut out against the red as if with scissors, and Jens rode north along the foot of it with the glow on his left hand, behind the ridge, where it belonged.

The trail was a pale line in the grass. He could see it for twenty yards at a time in the red light, and then the smoke would come and he could not, and he went by the fences.

• • •

There were four fences across the bench between the foot of the mountains and the edge. His great-grandfather had built them in the thirties, to cut the bench into pastures, and they were mostly down now. The posts were cedar and the wire was rusted to nothing and had been cut and rolled up and left in coils along the old lines, and in most places you rode across where a fence had been and did not know it. But the corners were still standing. A corner was built to stand. It was a big post, set deep, with a brace post and a brace wire, and the four corners along the foot of the Hogback were still where his great-grandfather had put them, a hundred years on, and his father had shown him every one.

The first was a cedar post with a cream can lid nailed to the top of it, flat, to keep the rain out of the end grain. His father had nailed it there in 1979. The lid had gone grey and then brown and then the colour of the post. Jens found it in the smoke at five to nine with his left hand, as he had found the rock in the draw, by riding close and putting out his hand. It was where it had always been. He felt the edge of the lid with his fingertips, the little lip of it, rough with rust. He did not stop.

The second was half a mile on. It had been a double corner, with two braces, and one of them had come down in the 2032 winter and lay in the grass like a rail, and the old cow knew it was there before he did and stepped over it.

Between the second and the third the smoke came down thick.

It came off the Hogback. It came over the top of the ridge and down the near side of it in a slow brown fall, like a snow cornice letting go, and lay across the trail and the herd and the bench at the foot of the ridge, and Jens rode into it and could not see the horse's head. He could not see his hands. He could hear the cattle behind him, and smell them, and feel the sorrel moving under him and the horse's ears going back and forth, and that was all. He kept the sorrel walking. He did not know what else to do. He kept the Hogback

on his left. He could not see it, but he could feel it, as he would have felt a wall in a dark room, a closeness on the left side, a place the wind was not coming from.

His eyes ran. He wiped them with the back of his glove and they ran again. He coughed, and coughed, and could not stop for a while, and leaned on the horn of the saddle to do it. The sorrel coughed with him. Behind him the old cow coughed, a deep wet sound like a man's, and somewhere behind her a calf was bawling over and over, the same high note, with no breath between.

He counted the sorrel's steps. A hundred. Two hundred. At a walk a horse made about a mile in two thousand steps. He had worked that out as a boy, riding with his father, counting, because his father did not talk and there was nothing else to do. A thousand from the second corner to the third. He counted. Six hundred. Seven.

At eight hundred the smoke thinned, all at once, as if somebody had opened a door, and he could see.

• • •

The glow was on his right.

He sat the sorrel and looked at it.

It was ahead of him and to the right, a mile off, perhaps less, where the bench ran out towards the edge between the trail and the campus. It was low. A line of red, very bright, uneven, along the ground, and above it the smoke lit from underneath, orange, boiling, going north-east in the wind towards the campus fence. It was the bench. The grass on the bench was burning. It was burning in front of him, on the right, between him and the bench edge, and as he watched it a gust came, and the line of red at the foot of the smoke ran forward along the ground a hundred yards in a few seconds, and lay down, and came on.

He turned in the saddle and looked left, west, at the Hogback.

The glow was still there. It was still behind the ridge, and the sky beyond it red. But the ridge did not stand up black against it any

longer. The top of it was lit. There was fire on the top of the Hogback, along its back, a broken line of it, running north, and the ridge he had been steering by for a mile had fire on it and fire on both sides of it.

It had come over. It had come across the bench behind the ridge while he was riding along the foot of it, north, with the wind, faster than the herd, faster than a horse at a walk, and somewhere ahead of them where the Hogback ran down into the bench the wind had thrown it over the ridge, or round the end, or a spark had gone over on the wind a mile, and it had come down on the far side into the grass on the bench, and now it was burning in front of them, across the trail, between the herd and the edge.

He sat the sorrel in the trail and looked at it, and the old cow came up behind him and stopped, and put her nose against the horse's tail, and the herd came up behind her in the dark and stopped, a long way back, a mile of cattle, bawling.

If it's on your right, you've turned round.

He had not turned round. He knew where he was. He was a little short of the third corner, on the trail, at the foot of the Hogback, with the bench edge a mile ahead and the trail gate below it. And the fire was coming to the trail ahead. The line of red on the bench was going north-east, across the trail's line, towards the edge and the campus, and the trail went north-east too, the last mile, slanting across the bench to the head of the slope down to the trail gate, and he would be riding into the side of it with three hundred pair behind him.

He thought: *Eighty-four.*

• • •

His father had shown him the draw in 2008, in October, when Jens was fifteen, coming home with the cows.

They had been riding along the foot of the Hogback, the two of them, at the front of the herd, and at the third corner his father had pulled up, and pointed, without saying anything, ahead and to the left, north-west, along the foot of the ridge, at a notch in the bench edge a half-mile off, where the Hogback ran down to it and a dry draw went down. Jens had looked at it. It was not much. A dip in the edge with some chokecherry in the top of it, and below that the draw going down steep between broken rock, out of sight.

"We came down there in eighty-four," his father had said. "Me and Halvor and your grandmother. With the cows."

Jens had waited. His father did not tell stories. When he said something like that, you waited, and sometimes the rest came.

"Fire came over the Hogback," his father said. "In the afternoon. We were on the trail. Like this." He looked at the ridge. "Halvor said go back up the mountain. Your grandmother said go down. I didn't say anything." He looked at the notch. "She took them down there. On her own horse, in front. Steep. They'll go down it if you let them pick it. You don't push them. You get in front and you go slow and you let them see where your horse is putting his feet."

"What happened?"

"We lost twelve," his father said. "On the rock. Broke their legs. Halvor shot them in the morning." He started the horse again. "The rest came out on the bottom by the road. Under the trail gate. Quarter mile west. You'll see a gate in the bench fence there, I put it in after, so you don't have to go round."

That was all. They had ridden on. Jens had looked back at the notch over his shoulder until the Hogback hid it, and he had never been down the draw, not once, in forty-one years. There had been no reason to. The trail was the way. The draw was something his father had told him once, the way he had told him the name of every corner post and the date he had nailed the lid on the first one.

He did not know if the draw was still passable. He did not know if the gate his father had put in the bench fence was still there, or

wired shut, or gone. He did not know if the Rourkes had put a fence across the top of it when the bench became theirs. He did not know if he could find the notch in the dark.

He looked at the line of fire on the bench in front of him. It was nearer.

He turned the sorrel north-west, off the trail, along the foot of the Hogback, towards where the notch would be.

• • •

The old cow would not follow.

She stood in the trail and looked at him going away from her across the grass, and bawled. It was the first time she had made a sound since the gate. She stood with her nose out towards the trail ahead, north-east, towards the fire, towards the way she had gone home every October of her life, and bawled at him, and did not move.

He rode back to her. He got down. He took her by the halter she did not have, by the loose skin under her jaw, with his glove, and pulled her head round, and she let him. She was fourteen. She had been on a bottle in his mother's calving shed. She let him pull her head round, and then she pulled it back.

"Come on, old lady," he said. "Not that way. This way."

She looked at him with her white eye.

"Elias!" he shouted. "Jakob!"

They came up out of the dark on either side, Elias on the black and Jakob on the paint mare, very fast, with their hats gone and their faces black with smoke and the whites of their eyes showing.

"We go north-west," Jens said. "There." He pointed. "There's a draw down off the edge. I can't see it. It's there. My father took them down it in eighty-four. Jakob, you go ahead, north-west, along the foot of the ridge, and you find me a notch in the edge with chokecherries in the top of it. Holler when you find it. Elias, you come round behind her with me and we push her. Where she goes, they'll go."

"The trail is there," Jakob said, pointing north-east.

"The trail's on fire."

The boy looked at the fire on the bench, and his mouth opened, and then he turned the paint mare without another word and went off west at a lope along the foot of the Hogback into the smoke, and they heard him go, and then they did not hear him.

Jens got back on the sorrel, and he and Elias came round behind the old cow, one on each side, and pushed her. She went. She did not want to, and she bawled the whole way, and twice she tried to turn back north-east and Elias was there, with the black's shoulder against hers, before Jens had seen her move. But she went, north-west, along the foot of the Hogback, towards nothing either of them could see, with her calf at her side, and the herd behind her bawled and milled and turned, slowly, the front of it first and then the middle and then the long tail of it, a mile of cattle turning in the dark like a train on a curve, and came after her.

• • •

Jakob found it at twenty-five past nine.

They heard him first. A long way off in the smoke, high, cracking: "Here! It's here! Mr. Tollefsen, it's here!" And they went towards the voice, and it went on, *here*, *here*, *here*, so that they could steer by it, and after a while the ground under the horses began to slope, very gently, down, and there was brush in the grass, and then they were in chokecherries, the dry leaves rattling against Jens's chaps, and Jakob was sitting the paint mare at the lip of the notch with his hand up, shouting, though they were twenty feet from him now.

"Here," he said, and stopped.

Jens rode past him to the edge and looked down.

He could see nothing. The notch went over the edge and down into black. There was the smell of rock, cold, and dry chokecherry, and below that, far down, the smell of the river bottom, of cotton-

wood and water and cut hay, carried up the draw on the smoke. He could hear the wind going down it.

He looked back. The fire on the bench had reached the trail. He could see where. A low red line had come across the pale stripe of the trail at the third corner, where he had been sitting the sorrel fifteen minutes before, and was going on north-east beyond it, and the corner post his great-grandfather had set was standing in it, black, a cross of black against the red, and as he looked the brace wire caught the light and went red too, and sagged.

He turned the sorrel round and put him at the lip of the draw.

The horse did not want it. He put his head down and smelled the edge and blew, and backed a step, and Jens sat quiet and let him look, and then pressed with his legs, and the horse put one foot over the lip, feeling, and then another, and went down. The ground went out from under them. It was steep. It was steeper than he had thought. It was broken rock, ledges and loose stuff and dry dirt between, going down in steps, and the horse went down it on his hocks, with his hind feet under him and his front feet feeling for every step, and Jens leaned back in the saddle until his shoulders were nearly on the horse's rump and let him pick it.

He did not look back up. He listened. He heard the old cow come to the lip above him, and stop, and bawl, and he called up to her, "Come on. Come on, old lady," in the voice he used in the calving shed at four in the morning, and kept the horse going down, slowly, so she could hear where he was.

He heard her come over.

She came over the lip and down onto the first ledge with a scrape and a clatter of stones, and stopped, and he heard her blowing, and then she came on. He heard her calf come after her. He heard the cattle behind her come up to the lip and bunch there, bawling, and then the first of them come over. Rocks went down past him in the dark, bouncing, small ones, and one big one that went past on the

right with a sound like a door slamming and kept going a long way down.

"Slow," he called back up. "Elias. Jakob. Don't push them. Let them pick it. Let them come."

• • •

The one-horned cow broke back at the lip.

He did not see it. Jakob told him, afterwards, on the bottom. She came up to the edge with her calf at her side, the grey cow that had gone out under the north fence of the water lot twice in the night, and she looked down into the draw, and something in her would not go down into that black. She turned. She went back out of the chokecherries onto the bench, past Elias, past Jakob, who tried to turn her and could not, at a long trot, with her calf beside her, back east across the foot of the Hogback towards the trail, towards the way she knew, towards the fire.

Jakob went after her. He had the paint mare turned and was going, and he heard Jens's voice come up the draw from below, and stopped.

"Let her go!"

"Mr. Tollefsen—"

"Let her go, Jakob! Let her go! Get back on the lip! Bring the rest down!"

The boy sat the paint mare on the bench in the smoke and watched the grey cow go, and the calf, the two shapes getting smaller against the red, going east towards the burning trail, until the smoke came across and he could not see them. Then he turned the mare and rode back to the lip of the draw where the cattle were coming up out of the dark and going over, one after another, in a string, slowly, the way the old cow had, and he sat beside the notch with his hat gone and his hand up and said to every cow that came past him, *Langsam*, *langsam*, *so ist's gut*, *langsam*, until the last of them had gone down.

Jens heard him, from below. He did not know what the words meant. He went on down, on the sorrel, in the dark, with his shoulders on the horse's rump and the old cow behind him, and somewhere far up behind all of them, at the very back, at the lip, where he could not see, his son, on drag, came to the edge of the draw, and stopped, and did not holler, and came down.

16

Section 7.4

Tuesday 24 August, 21:30

The fire came onto the bench at nine o'clock, a mile west of the campus, and by half past it was at the fence.

Lyle had watched it come. He had watched it from the south-west corner of the perimeter, where the fence turned, with the radio on his chest and the glasses on a strap round his neck that he had stopped using because there was nothing they could show him he could not see. It had come round the end of the long ridge on the west side of the bench, the one the Rourkes called the Hogback, and over the top of it in two places, and come down into the bench grass at a run. In a red flag wind bench grass went, and it went across the bench towards the campus in a line a mile long, low, orange, uneven, lying almost flat in front of the wind, with the smoke going over it and ahead of it like a wave going over a reef, and it came at the fence at a walking pace and then faster.

It reached the gravel at twenty-eight minutes past nine. He had the time because he looked.

The gravel held it. That was what the gravel was for. Thirty yards of crushed rock outside the fence, laid by Tri-Basin's graders in a week, with nothing on it to burn, and the fire came up to the edge of it and stopped, the grass burning right to the edge of the rock and

then not, and the flames stood up there in a long line along the outside of the gravel, shoulder-high, roaring, leaning towards the fence with the wind, and could not get across.

The embers could.

They came over the gravel and the fence in the wind like sparks from a forge, thousands of them, small, bright, and landed inside on the campus. On the roads, where they went out. On the gravel round the halls, where they went out. On the strips of lawn the campus kept green by the visitor entrance, where some of them did not, and the hand crew went after those with shovels and the hose lay they had run along the inside of the fence that afternoon. On the roofs of the halls, which were wet, and steel, and where they lay in the water for a moment, red, and went black.

"Spot!" somebody was shouting, down the fence. "Spot, spot, by the tower!"

It was the girl from Ashland. Lyle saw her run, with a shovel, towards the base of the near cooling tower, where something had caught in the gravel against the concrete, a tumbleweed or a wad of paper, and was burning there with a small bright flame, and she put the shovel in it and turned it over and stood on it, and stamped, and it went out. She looked up at him across the gravel and held up the shovel, and he held up his hand.

• • •

At half past nine the radio called him by name.

It was not the ops voice. It was a man's voice he did not know, older, with a Musselshell flatness in it, and the sound of an engine behind it, a pickup, being driven fast on gravel.

"Division Z, Division N supervisor."

He keyed it. "N, Z. Go."

"Z, this is Merle Kautz. I got handed N about twenty minutes ago and I got no resources. I'm on the river road west of the bridge, I'm looking at the Lodgepole and Rourke paddocks, and there's nobody

on that buffer line. I've got your fire coming across the bench towards the coulee, and when it gets to the edge it's going to be throwing embers into the whole bottom. Opland's still sitting at staging on that Roundup spot. Ops says maybe half an hour." The engine noise changed; he had stopped. "Request one Z engine to the buffer till Opland gets there. One. Just to sit on the paddock fence. I'll send it back the minute that crew shows."

Lyle stood at the corner of the fence with the radio in his hand.

He could see it. He did not have to turn round. He knew what Kautz was looking at, because he had looked at it every night for a month. The road coming down the coulee in its two long switchbacks. The bottom of the coulee. The road on its raised bank along the Rourke river meadow, and the river, and the bridge, and on the far side the paddocks along the river, with their pink flags, and the yard among the cottonwoods with its three lights. From the shed to the paddock fence was fourteen minutes by engine, down the coulee. He had driven it on the seventeenth in the crew carrier and timed it.

Fourteen minutes. It would be there by a quarter to ten.

He looked at the fence. The fire was standing along the outside of the gravel the length of the south perimeter, roaring, with the embers going over it. Engine One was at the south-west corner fifty yards from him with Herbie Two Moons on the nozzle, putting water on the gravel where it met the grass, back and forth, slowly, and the steam going up white into the orange smoke. Engine Two was at the south-east gate with the Spotted Elk brothers, doing the same. Between them, along the inside of the fence, the hand crew, ten of them, with shovels and the hose lay, and Boss walking up and down behind them, shouting the spots.

Two engines. Two and a half miles of fence. Three hundred and eighty people in the halls behind him, at their desks, in the dormitory block, asleep, with the lights on.

Section 7.4. Red Flag Conditions. He did not need to take the contract out of his pocket. He had read it so many times that he could see the page. *Any resource removed from the perimeter during such a period without the written release of the Campus Fire Officer shall forfeit the daily rate for that resource for the operational period, and the contractor shall be considered in breach of this Section.*

The daily rate for an engine was four thousand one hundred dollars. A day's rate he could lose. He had lost more on a bad week of hay. The clause was about the last eight words. A contractor in breach could be terminated for cause, and the contract was the guaranteed floor, and the guaranteed floor was why the young man at the bank in Billings had rolled the note in July instead of calling it, and the note was the ranch. His mother's ranch. The heifers he had sold to the Rourkes in 2032 to save it the first time. The house his mother was asleep in tonight, with Rosalie in the kitchen and the telephone on the pillow.

And without the clause, there was the plan. The plan said Z held. The woman on the ops net had said it three hours ago, with numbers, and he had made himself do the arithmetic, and she had been right. Four percent and thirty-eight. And now the fire was at his fence, which it had not been then, and the number would be worse.

"Wilma," he said.

She was beside him. She had been beside him since nine, at the corner, in her grey Nomex and her white helmet, with her own radio, listening to everything. She had heard Kautz.

"I heard him."

"If I ask you."

"If you ask me, I'll sign it." She did not look at him. She was watching Herbie on the nozzle. "Written release. I've got the form on the tablet. It takes a minute." She was quiet a moment. "I don't know if I'd be right to. I've got that fire on my fence and I've got two engines and I'd have one. I don't know. I'd sign it if you asked."

He looked at the bottom.

He could not see it from the corner. The halls were in the way. He could see the smoke over the coulee, going north-east, lit orange from underneath, and above it the sky, brown, with no stars, and the glow along the bench edge where the fire was going over into the river meadow. He could see, on the far side of the river, a long way off, a single point of white light that he knew was the yard light on its pole in the Tollefsen yard.

"Herbie says he heard cattle," Wilma said.

"What?"

"Before. At nine. He said he heard cattle bawling, out on the bench, to the west. When the wind dropped." She shrugged. "I didn't hear anything. Could be. Could be elk. Could be the fire. It makes all kinds of noises."

"There's no cattle on the bench. The Rourkes moved Sunday."

"That's what I told him."

He listened. He heard the fire along the gravel, and the engine pumps, and the water hitting the rock, and Boss shouting, and the wind. He did not hear any cattle.

He keyed the radio.

"Division N, Division Z."

"Go, Z." Kautz's voice had the engine behind it again. He was moving.

"N, negative on the engine." Lyle heard his own voice going out over the net, even and flat, every division on the fire hearing it, the ops woman in the trailer at Roundup, the planes, the Hand. "Z has fire on the south perimeter at this time. Both Z engines committed. Z holding."

There was a pause. Not long.

"Copy, Z," Kautz said. "Holding. N out."

That was all. No argument. Kautz had not expected anything else. He had asked because there was nobody else on the fire to ask.

Lyle let go of the button.

Wilma Kolb was still watching Herbie on the nozzle. She did not say anything for a while. Then she said, "You didn't ask me."

"No."

"All right." She took her radio off her chest and looked at it and put it back. "I'm going to walk the east side. The brigade's got two monitors on Hall Three and I want to see if they're keeping up." She went a few steps, and stopped. "Lyle."

"What."

"I don't know either," she said, and went.

• • •

At twenty to ten the ops voice came on the command net.

Dutchman Ops to Opland IA Crew. You are released from Division J. Roundup spot is contained. Respond Division N, River Bottom Buffer, via Bench Road and campus access road. Report on arrival.

And the young man's voice, the crew boss, very fast, as if he had been sitting with his thumb on the button since seven. *Opland copies. Released J. Rolling to N. Bench Road to the campus road. Ops, what's my ETA?*

Opland, Ops. Hand has you on the buffer at twenty-two twenty-eight.

Copy. Rolling.

Lyle breathed out.

Forty-eight minutes. Twenty of them to the top of the coulee, if the young man drove the Bench Road the way he sounded, and then down the switchbacks, and along the river meadow on the bank to the bridge, and over, and onto the river road, and into the paddocks. He would be on the fence by half past ten. The yard light was still on. The fire was going over the bench edge into the river meadow, but the river meadow was a mile of brush and grass between the

coulee mouth and the bridge, and it had the river on the far side of it, and the paddocks beyond the river. The embers would have to get over the river. The crew would be there before they did.

He keyed the radio and said, "Kautz, Z. You copy Opland?"

"Copy, Z. I heard." Kautz sounded tired. "Half an hour. That's all right. I've got nothing over yet. Hey, Z."

"Go."

"Sorry to bother you. I know you got your own."

"It's all right."

"N out."

• • •

At a quarter to ten a spot caught on the roof of the dormitory block.

It was the one building on the site that was not steel. It had been put up in 2041 for the shift workers, three storeys, with a shingle roof the campus had been meaning to replace, and an ember came over the fence and over the gravel and over the hall in front of it and landed in the gutter on the south side, where the leaves had got in, and caught. Lyle saw it from the corner. A small light, orange, in the gutter, where no light should be, and then a little flame standing up out of it, and then the wind got it and it ran along the gutter for ten feet.

He keyed the radio. "Brigade, Z. Spot, dormitory, south gutter."

They were on it before he had let go of the button. He saw the campus brigade come round the corner of the hall in their grey, four of them, running, with a line, and one of them put the nozzle up and opened it and the water went up in a white arc against the orange smoke and came down on the gutter, and the flame went out in a cloud of steam. They stood there and kept the water on it for a full minute. Then two of them went in with a ladder.

In the windows of the dormitory block, all three storeys, the lights stayed on. He could see people in some of them. Standing at the windows, looking out at the orange sky and the fire along the

gravel and the men with the hoses, as if it were weather. One of them was holding a cup. One of them was holding a child.

He had not known there were children. He looked at the woman with the child for a moment, in the lit window on the second floor. Then he turned back to the fence.

• • •

By ten to ten the fire along the south perimeter had begun to go down.

It had burnt the bench grass to the edge of the gravel the length of the fence, and there was nothing left in front of it to burn. The flames stood lower. In places they went out, and there was only a long black stretch with embers in it, glowing and dimming in the wind like coals blown on. The line had gone on round the campus on both sides, east and west, looking for something more, and it was going on north-east past the campus now, towards the bench edge above the coulee, and over.

Herbie shut the nozzle down on Engine One and leaned on the tailboard and took his helmet off. His face was black except for two clean rings round his eyes where his goggles had been. Boss came up the fence and stood with him, and they did not say anything to each other, and then Boss came on to the corner where Lyle was.

"It's holding," Boss said.

"It's holding."

"The roofs are wet. Brigade's got the dorm. We've got three guys on the east side on spots. There's nothing left out there on the south to burn." Boss looked at the black bench outside the gravel. "That's it, on this side. Unless the front brings it round."

"It'll bring it round."

"Then we'll be here." Boss looked at him. "You told N no."

"I told N no."

"I heard it." Boss put his helmet back on. He did not say anything else about it. He had said in the afternoon that holding was right,

two engines with no hydrant in the bottom would be two more things to burn. He did not say it again. He looked out over the black bench towards the west, where the Hogback was, with the fire still burning along its back in a broken line, and said, "Herbie keeps saying he heard cows."

"I know. Wilma told me."

"I didn't hear any."

"No."

"Herbie hears things." Boss shrugged. "He says his grandmother hears things too. He says it runs in the family." He looked a moment longer. Then he went back along the fence to the crew.

• • •

At five to ten Lyle walked back across the campus to the north side, to the end of the engine shed, where he stood every night at nine to ring his mother.

He did not ring her. He stood with his back against the wall of the shed and looked north, over the bench edge, at the bottom.

The river meadow was burning. The fire had come over the bench edge on both sides of the coulee in a dozen places and was coming down the face of the bench towards the road, in patches, in runs, small fires joining into bigger fires, very bright against the dark. The road ran along the foot of it on its raised bank, a pale line, empty at this end. Beyond the road the river meadow, dark, and the river. Beyond the river the paddocks, dark, with the pink flags in them he could not see, and the cottonwoods, and the yard with its three lights.

Nothing was burning on the far side of the river yet.

On the Bench Road, far off to the west, towards Roundup, a pair of headlights was coming. They were coming fast. He watched them come along the Bench Road in the dark, with a red light going round on top of them, small and bright, turning and turning, and he watched them until they reached the campus gate and slowed for it,

and the radio on his chest said, very fast, in the young man's voice, *Ops*, *Opland*, *at the campus gate*, *starting down the coulee*, and the lights went on past the gate and over the edge and down into the first switchback, and he lost them.

He looked at his watch. It was two minutes to ten.

17

The Hay Gate

Tuesday 24 August, 21:40

His father's gate was gone.

He found the place where it had been at the bottom of the draw, where the rock gave out into the bench pasture and the pasture ran down to the road fence. He found it because his father had said a quarter mile west of the trail gate and because there was a gap in the old cottonwood stumps along the fence line there, where a gate would have been. There was no gate. There was a fence, new, five strands of tight barbed wire on steel posts, the kind the Rourkes had put up along the road in 2033 after the bench was theirs. It ran straight along the road from east to west as far as he could see in the red light, unbroken, and on the far side of it was the road, on its bank, and on the far side of the road another fence, the same, and beyond that the river meadow and the river.

He sat the sorrel at the wire with the old cow behind him and looked at it.

He had wire cutters in the saddlebag. He could cut it. Five strands, a minute. And then three hundred pair would go through a gap in a barbed-wire fence in the dark onto a road with a three-foot bank and a barrow ditch below it, and the first ones would go down the bank and the rest would come on over the top of them.

"East," he said. "Along the fence. To the trail gate."

"Back?" Jakob said. He had come down out of the draw at the head of the herd's right side and was sitting the paint mare beside him. His voice had gone hoarse with the singing. "Towards the fire?"

"A quarter mile. Along the fence. Then we're on the road."

The boy looked east along the fence line. The bench face above the pasture was burning in places, a mile off, where the fire had come over the edge from the bench: patches of light on the dark slope, and smoke going over. It was not on the pasture yet. Between the fire on the face and the fence there was a quarter mile of grass, short, grazed by the Rourkes' cattle until Sunday, pale in the red light.

"Yes, Mr. Tollefsen," Jakob said, and turned the mare.

• • •

The brockle-face reached the trail gate at eight minutes to ten.

He had gone ahead of her along the fence, at a trot, and got down at the gate and was standing with his hand on the chain when she came out of the dark along the fence line with her calf, at a walk, with her head low, and stopped. He unhooked the chain. It came off the hook as it had on Monday, easily, the padlock still gone. Somebody had oiled the hook. He swung the gate open, across the barrow ditch, and tied it back against the fence, and walked back out of the way and got on the sorrel.

She came through. She went across the bridge of dirt over the barrow ditch and up the short ramp of gravel onto the road, and stood on the asphalt for a moment, looking west, along the road, towards the ford gate and the bridge. Her hooves made a sound on it that they did not make on anything else: a hard, hollow, ringing sound, like a horse in a covered bridge. Then she turned west and started down it at a walk, on the crown of the road, as she did every October, as if she had been waiting all night to put her feet on something flat.

Jens rode past her on the right-hand verge and put himself in front of her again, and the herd came out of the bench pasture through the gate behind her, two and three at a time, the cows hesitating on the gravel ramp and then going up it with a scramble, the calves jumping it, and turned west after her onto the asphalt, and the sound of their hooves on the road came up behind him, a hundred and then two hundred and then five hundred hooves, all at once, like rain on a tin roof.

He looked at his watch. The face was too dark to read. He held it up to the red sky and turned it until the hands caught the light. Eight minutes to ten.

Half a mile.

• • •

The road was fenced both sides, tight, five strands, from the coulee mouth to the bridge.

He had known that. He had drawn it in the dust for Nils. He had driven it a thousand times. He had not known what it would be like to have three hundred pair of cattle on it in the dark with a fire on the bench above them, and he learned in the first ten minutes.

On the bench pasture and the trail the herd had spread out to fifty yards wide in the open, and closed up in the draws, and walked in a string where the trail made them, and a cow that wanted to drop back or turn aside had somewhere to go. On the road it had nowhere. The road was twenty feet of asphalt on top of a bank, with a barrow ditch along the foot of the bank on each side, deep, with water in it in the spring and dry grass in it now, and the fence along the outside of each ditch. Between fence and fence there was perhaps forty yards. The cattle filled it. They came along it four and five abreast on the asphalt, and the ones on the outside slid down the bank into the ditches and walked along the ditch bottoms with the grass up to their bellies, bawling, and tried to climb back up onto

the road and could not, because the road was full, and walked on along the ditch.

And they would not stay strung out. They bunched. They came along the road in a long dark mass, close together, shoving, with the calves crushed in among the cows, and every time the front slowed the back ran up into it, and the whole herd stopped, and stood on the road, bawling, until the front went on again.

The calves broke back. That was the worst of it. A calf would lose its mother in the press, and stop, and turn round, and try to go back along the road against the herd, looking for her, bawling, and the cows behind would not let it through, and it would duck down the bank into the ditch and run back along the ditch bottom towards the trail gate, and its mother, somewhere ahead, would hear it and stop and turn round and try to go back after it, against the herd, and the herd behind her would pile into her, and stop. Jens heard it happening behind him all the way down the road. A calf bawling, going away, and a cow answering, and the sound of the herd jamming up, hooves on asphalt, horns knocking, and then Elias or Jakob shouting, and a horse going down the bank into the ditch, and the calf bawling, coming back.

At five to ten a cow went down in the barrow ditch on the river side a hundred yards behind him.

He heard her go. A bawl, different from the others, higher, and a heavy sound in the grass, and then the cattle behind her piling up and stopping. He turned the sorrel and rode back along the verge. Elias was there already, down in the ditch on foot, with the black's reins over his arm. The cow was lying on her side in the bottom of the ditch with her legs uphill against the bank and her head down, where she had slipped, and she could not get her feet under her. She was thrashing. Her calf stood over her on the bank, bawling.

"She is cast," Elias said.

"Get her tail."

The boy gave him the reins and went round her and got her tail in both hands, low down, and Jens got down into the ditch and got her by the head, by the horns, and together they rolled her, the boy hauling her hindquarters round and Jens hauling her head, until her legs were downhill, and she got her front feet under her and heaved and came up all at once in a spray of dry grass and dirt and stood there, shaking, and then went up the bank onto the road to her calf without looking at either of them.

Elias stood in the ditch. He was breathing hard. He wiped his hands on his trousers.

"Good," Jens said.

The boy nodded. He took his reins back and got on the black.

• • •

At two minutes to ten the lights came down the coulee.

He saw them first on the bench face, at the top of the coulee, where the road came over the edge from the campus: a pair of headlights and a red light turning above them, very small, a long way off behind him and above. Then they went into the first switchback and he lost them, and saw them again lower down, coming fast, and lost them again in the second switchback, and then they came out of the coulee mouth onto the flat and along the road towards him, and he heard the engine, and then he heard the brakes.

He did not stop. He kept the sorrel walking at the front of the herd, on the verge, with the old cow behind him. He turned in the saddle and looked back.

The truck had stopped on the road behind the drag. He could see its headlights, a long way back, shining along the road at the backs of the last cattle, so that the tail of the herd was lit up white in front of the lights and everything ahead of it was dark. The red light on the cab roof went round and round. It lit the smoke red and the cattle red and the fence posts on either side red, and went round,

and did it again. It was a crew truck, a big one, a crew carrier with a box on the back, the kind that carried ten people and their tools.

The horn went once. A short blast. The cattle at the back jumped and shoved and the herd shuddered all the way up to the front.

It did not go again.

He turned back round and kept the sorrel walking.

"Mr. Tollefsen." It was Jakob, on the river side, riding up the verge alongside. "There is a truck."

"I know."

"Behind. With a light. It is a fire truck. A crew."

"I know. Go back to your side."

Jakob looked at him. Then he went back.

The old cow walked on behind the sorrel with her nose almost on his tail. The herd came on behind her. The lights stayed where they were, behind the drag, shining along the road. They did not come on. There was nowhere for them to come.

• • •

He saw the man coming at a minute past ten.

There was a flashlight along the right-hand verge, the river side, on the bank between the road and the ditch, coming forward along the herd from the back, swinging with a fast walk. Beside it, slower, higher, there was a second light, smaller, the size of a telephone screen. He knew what that was before he could see who held it.

They came up the length of the herd together, the man on foot on the verge with his flashlight and the boy on the bay mare beside him, riding at a walk to keep pace with him, with his telephone lit in his hand to see by. The cattle on that side shied from the flashlight and pushed into the cattle beside them and the whole herd bent away from it as it passed, like grass in a wind, and straightened again behind it.

They came up beside him at the front of the herd.

The man was young. Thirty, perhaps. Tall, in yellow Nomex and a white helmet, with a radio on his chest and a pack on his back and his face black with smoke round a pair of goggles pushed up on his helmet. He was breathing hard. He had walked six hundred yards along a road full of cattle in the dark at a pace that was nearly a run.

"Sir," he said. "Sir, are you in charge of these cattle?"

"They're mine."

"Okay." The man walked alongside the sorrel. He had to walk fast to keep up, even at a walk. "Okay. I'm Wes Opland. I've got the IA crew in that truck. I need to get through. I need you to—can you stop a minute? Can you stop?"

Jens did not stop. "If I stop the front, the back runs into it. They'll go down. They'll go through the fence."

"Okay. Okay." Opland looked at the herd, and at the road ahead of it, dark, going on between the fences. "Sir, I need a lane. I need to get my truck through. Can you split them? Push half of them off somewhere and let us by and then bring them back?"

"Off where?"

"Anywhere. I don't know. Anywhere off the road."

"It's fenced. Both sides. All the way to the bridge."

"Dad," Nils said.

Jens looked at him. The boy was sitting the bay mare on the verge beside the crew boss, with the telephone in his hand, lit, so that his face was lit from below, white, very young, black round the mouth and nose where the smoke had got under his bandana. He was looking past his father, ahead, down the road.

"Dad," he said. "The hay gate."

Jens looked where the boy was looking.

He knew where it was without looking. On the river side, two hundred yards ahead. Rourke's hay gate, a wire gate in the river--side fence, where Conor took his swather in and out of the river meadow in July. The river meadow on the far side of it was a mile of brush and grass and willows along the old river channel, running

back into the draws under the bench, with the swaths still lying in it where Conor had cut and not baled. In the red light, beyond the fence, he could see the brush on the near side of it moving in the wind, and, a long way back towards the coulee, a patch of light where something had caught.

He looked at the gate. He could see the shape of it now, in the dark. Two hundred yards. Push the front half of the herd through it into the river meadow, close it, let the truck by on the road, open it again, bring them out. That was what the man wanted and the boy had seen. In daylight, with no fire, with dogs and riders who knew the meadow, it would take half an hour to get them in and an hour to get them back out of the brush. Tonight, in the dark, with the fire coming down the bench face on the far side of the meadow and the embers going over, pairs pushed through that gate would go straight into the willows and the draws and scatter, and the calves would lose their mothers in the brush, and he would be in the river meadow with two colony boys and his son on horseback in the dark, hunting cattle in the willows, with the fire coming down to meet them.

And the ones he did not find would be there in the morning, where the fire had been.

"That'd take longer," he said.

"Sir?"

"Splitting them. Pushing them through there." He nodded at the gate. "It's brush in there. Willows. Draws. They'll scatter. I put half of them in there in the dark, I won't get them out. And it'll take you longer to wait for me to push them in than to walk behind them to the ford gate." He looked at the man. "It's a quarter mile to the ford gate for the front of them. Half a mile for the back. They're off the road there, onto the meadow. Thirty minutes. Forty. And you're past us."

Opland looked at him.

"Sir," he said. "I don't have forty minutes."

Jens did not answer.

The crew boss walked alongside the sorrel. The herd came on behind them, the hooves ringing on the asphalt, the cattle bawling, the red light far back behind the drag going round and round. Opland looked back at it, and then at the road ahead, and then at the hay gate, coming up on their right in the dark, and then at Jens. He opened his mouth.

"We're supposed to be on—" he said.

The radio on his chest spoke.

Opland, Ops. Say your status.

He put his hand on it. He did not key it. He walked on beside the sorrel with his hand on the radio and looked at Jens, and Jens looked at the road ahead, at the old cow's white face beside his stirrup, at the gate going past on the right, and did not ask him where it was he was supposed to be.

Opland, Ops. Say your status.

The hay gate went past. Jens did not look at it. He felt the boy look at it, beside him on the mare, and turn his head to keep looking at it as it went past, and then look at his father.

Opland keyed the radio.

"Ops, Opland. I'm stopped on the campus road. I've got livestock on the road. About three hundred head, on horseback, going west towards the bridge, can't get by. Fenced both sides. Owner says half an hour to clear." He let go and waited, walking.

Opland, Ops. Stand by.

He walked. They all walked. The man on foot on the verge, the man on the sorrel, the boy on the bay mare, the old cow, the herd. Thirty yards. Forty. The radio was silent. Jens could hear the fire now, on the bench face to the south, behind the bench pasture, a low roar, and the brush in the river meadow hissing in the wind.

Opland, Ops. Hand has you via the county road round by Prosper, ETA twenty-three thirty. Hold or reroute, your call.

Opland stopped walking.

He stood on the verge in his yellow Nomex and his white helmet and looked at the herd going past him in the dark, cow after cow, calf after calf, close enough to touch, bawling, with their eyes white. He looked at Jens on the sorrel, going away from him at a walk. He looked at the boy.

"Ops, Opland," he said. "Copy. Rerouting. Via Prosper."

He let go of the radio. He stood there a moment longer. Then he said something Jens did not hear, not to anybody, and turned round and went back along the verge towards the lights, fast, at a run now, with the flashlight swinging, and the cattle shying away from it in a long bend that went back down the herd behind him like a wave going down a rope.

• • •

"Go back to drag," Jens said.

Nils did not move. He was sitting the bay mare on the verge where the crew boss had left him, with his telephone in his hand.

"Nils. Go back to drag. Now. They'll be coming apart at the back."

The boy looked at him. In the light of the telephone, from below, his face was white and black and very still, and Jens could not tell what was in it. Then the boy put the telephone in his shirt pocket, and the light went out, and he was a dark shape on a dark horse.

"Okay," Nils said. He turned the mare and went back along the verge towards the back of the herd, towards the lights.

Jens rode on.

At twelve minutes past ten, behind him, the lights moved. He did not turn round. He heard the truck's engine come up, and the gears, and the beeping that a big truck made going backward, very faint at that distance, and the beeping went on for a long time, a hundred yards, two hundred, back up the road towards the coulee mouth.

Then it stopped, and the engine noise changed, and the headlights swung across the bench face above the road, white, once, and pointed up the coulee, and went up it. He saw them in the first switchback. He saw them in the second. He saw the red light going round at the top, small, at the edge of the bench, where the road went over towards the campus and the Bench Road and the long way round. Then it was gone.

Behind the herd the road was dark.

• • •

From where the truck turned back, the last of them had most of half a mile to go to the ford gate. It took them thirty-eight minutes.

Afterwards he could not have said what happened in most of them. He rode at the front of the herd on the verge with the old cow behind him, and the road went on in front of him between its fences, dark, and every few minutes the herd behind him stopped, and he stopped, and waited, and it came on, and he went on. Calves broke back. He heard Elias and Jakob going after them in the ditches. The smoke came down off the bench in pushes and went across the road towards the river, and in the pushes he could not see the old cow's face beside his stirrup, and then it cleared. The fire on the bench face behind the bench pasture came lower. He could see it, when he turned his head, a broken line of light on the slope to the south, and below it, on the pasture, here and there, small fires where the embers had come down in the grass, and the cattle at the back of the herd were walking past them, a hundred yards off, on the other side of the fence, and bawling.

On the river side, in the river meadow, the brush caught. Not near. Back towards the coulee, half a mile behind them, where he had seen the patch of light from the hay gate, there was a bigger light now, and the willows along the old channel inside the hay gate were going up one after another, with a sound like sheets being torn, and the smoke from them came across the road behind the

herd, white, thick, and the drag went into it, and he could not see the drag at all.

He did not go back. He thought about it once. He sat the sorrel at the front of the herd and looked back along the road into the white smoke, where the back of the herd was, where the boy was, and thought about it. Then he faced forward again and kept the old cow walking. If he went back, the front would stop. If the front stopped, the back would run up into the fire.

If you lose the trail, or you can't see the cattle, or you can't see anything, you stop. And you holler.

He listened for the boy to holler. He did not hear him.

• • •

At twenty to eleven he saw the light across the river.

He was nearly at the ford gate. He could see it ahead on the river side, in the dark, the old wooden gate Halvor had built, with the cottonwood beside it that the Tollefsens and the Rourkes had both tied horses to at brandings for fifty years. Beyond it the lower meadow, open, grazed short, pale, running down to the river. Beyond the river, the Lodgepole.

There was a light in his paddocks.

It was small. It was on the far side of the river, a little downstream of the ford, in the paddock grass below the yard, where the first of the pink flags were: a point of orange light, low, on the ground. As he watched, a second one came up beside it. Then a third, further along, by the fence. They were very small at that distance, and they grew, slowly, and joined, and he could see the grass round them catching, a little ring of light spreading out from each one, and the wind laying the light over towards the north-east, towards the yard.

He sat the sorrel at the ford gate and looked at it.

The embers had come across. Over the river at the ford, where the river was a foot deep and a hundred and twenty feet wide and

the bottom on his side was full of fire, and they had come down in the paddock grass on the Lodgepole side, where the plan had drawn its orange line and put its pink flags in the ground every fifty yards, and where the man in the yellow Nomex was supposed to be.

There was nobody there. He could see the paddock line from the ford gate end to end, a mile of it, along the river, dark, with the small fires coming up in it one after another, and nobody on it. No truck. No lights. No men with shovels. Only the fires, and behind them the cottonwoods round the yard, and in the yard the yard light on its pole, white, burning, by itself.

She left it on, he thought.

He got down off the sorrel and opened the ford gate.

• • •

The brockle-face went through first. She went through the gate and off the road onto the lower meadow and stopped on the grass and turned round and stood there, looking back at him, with her calf against her flank, and then she put her head down and began to graze. As if it were October. As if they were home.

The herd came through behind her. They came off the asphalt and through the gate in a rush, shoving, as they did every October coming off the road, and spread out across the lower meadow behind the old cow at a trot, bawling, the calves running to find their mothers in the open where they could find them, and the sound of them on the grass was nothing after the sound of them on the road. The lower meadow was a quarter of a mile of short grass along the river, grazed down by the Rourkes until Sunday, with nothing on it to burn, and the herd spread out over it in the dark and stopped running and stood, and bawled, and then, one by one, began to stop bawling.

He sat the sorrel at the gate and let them go past. He did not try to count them. He could not see to count.

It was ten to eleven when the drag came through.

Elias came first, on the black, out of the smoke on the road, pushing six or seven pairs ahead of him with his hat in his hand, and then Jakob, behind, on the paint mare, with two calves, and then, behind Jakob, alone, the boy on the bay mare, with the telephone lit in his hand again, and the last cow in front of him. She was lame. She was going on three legs, with her calf at her side, and the boy was riding behind her at her pace, very slowly, a step at a time, not pushing her, and he followed her through the gate and onto the meadow and stopped the mare beside his father.

His face was black. His eyes were red. His bandana was gone.

"Two hundred and sixty-six cows," he said.

Jens looked at him.

"I counted them," Nils said. "Through the gate. From the back. I couldn't on the road, it was too dark. I got up on the bank by the gate post and counted them coming past against the light." He nodded across the river at the paddocks. "Two sixty-six. I think. I counted the cows. I couldn't count the calves, they were underneath."

"All right."

"That's twenty-five cows short. With the one-horn cow. And the five at the top."

"I know."

The boy looked across the river at the paddocks, at the little fires in the grass, and the yard light.

"They're on our fence," he said. "The fires."

"I see them."

"Is Mom—"

"Your mother's at the church. With your sister and your grandmother." Jens got back on the sorrel. "She's been there since three."

The boy looked at the yard light a moment longer. Then he looked at the telephone in his hand, at the screen, and Jens saw him touch it with his thumb, and touch it again, and then he put it away in his pocket and the light went out.

• • •

He sent the colony boys home at five to eleven.

He rode over to them where they sat their horses together at the gate, the black and the paint, with their hats in their hands and their faces black and the whites of their eyes showing, and he took his glove off and shook their hands, one and then the other, Elias and then Jakob.

"Go home," he said. "Over the bridge. Up the county road, past the Lund place. Don't go along the river. Joseph's waiting."

"The cattle," Elias said.

"They're on the meadow. They'll stay. There's nothing here to burn. We'll take them over when it's out." He jerked his head at the river. "Go on."

"We can stay," Jakob said. "Mr. Tollefsen. We can help you take them over."

"You've helped." Jens put his glove back on. "You've done everything I asked. Go home. Tell Joseph I said so. Tell him I said you did it right."

Elias looked at him. Then he looked across the river at the paddocks, at the fires in the grass, and the yard light, and back at Jens.

"The truck," he said. "On the road. The man."

"Go home, Elias."

The boy looked at him a moment longer. Then he put his hat on and turned the black, and Jakob turned the paint mare after him, and they rode out of the ford gate onto the empty road and along it west at a lope towards the bridge, in the dark, with the hooves of the two horses ringing on the asphalt, and Jens heard them go onto the bridge, the sound changing, hollow, and then off it, and then he did not hear them.

He rode back across the lower meadow to where the boy was.

Nils was sitting the bay mare at the edge of the herd, near the river, looking across at the Lodgepole. The fires in the paddock grass were bigger now. They had joined in two places and were run-

ning in a line along the paddock fence, towards the yard, with the wind. He could see the fence posts against them, black, and the pink flags, black. He could smell it. He had smelled grass fire all his life, every spring, burning the ditches, and it smelled the same, his own grass, burning.

He reached into the saddlebag under the slicker and took out the tablet and held it out to the boy.

"Here."

Nils took it. He looked at it in his hand, dark. He did not turn it on. He put it in the pocket of his shirt with the telephone and buttoned the pocket.

They sat their horses side by side at the edge of the lower meadow with the herd grazing behind them, on the short grass, in the dark, and watched their place burn.

18

The Far Gate

Tuesday 24 August, 22:50

She had them haltered by half past ten. The four of them in the alley of the log barn, tied short to the rings, two on each side, with their heads up and their eyes white and the whites showing every time the wind hit the barn. And Pell's in the end stall with the door open, loose, because there was no use tying her.

She had done it at half past ten because at half past ten her telephone had stopped.

Up to then she had had Thea. The last message had come at twenty to ten, and she had read it standing in the barn door with the lead rope of the bay gelding in her other hand: *theyre on the bench. but theyve gone west off the trail?? towards the edge. the dots are going really slow.* And then at five past ten: *theyre at the road.* And then nothing. She had written back, *Good. Watch them. Tell me when they're at the ford*, and the telephone had thought about it and said the message could not be sent. She had looked at the top of the screen and there were no bars. *No service.* The tower on the bench above the coulee, the one that served the river bottom, was on the bench, and the bench was on fire.

So she had haltered them, and stood in the barn door, and waited, and watched the ford.

She could not see it. It was a quarter of a mile below the yard, across the paddocks, at the bend, and between the yard and the ford there were the paddocks, five of them, fenced with poles, running down to the river in the dark, and the cottonwoods along the bank, and the smoke. She could see the cottonwoods against the glow on the far side. She could see the glow. The bottom on the far side of the river was lit from behind by it from end to end, the bench face, the river meadow, the coulee, red and orange and moving, and against it the cottonwoods along the river stood up black, every one, like a row of men.

At twenty to eleven she saw the first fire in the paddocks.

It was in the bottom paddock, the one by the ford, in the grass along the river fence. A point of light, very small, low. She did not think it was a fire at first. She thought it was a flashlight, somebody at the ford, Jens, with the cattle, and her heart went up into her throat and she took a step out of the barn door. Then it got bigger. Then there was another one beside it. They were the wrong colour for flashlights.

She went back into the barn and took the binoculars off the nail in the tack room, Jens's, the old ones of Arne's with the strap mended with baling twine, and came out and put them up.

The fires were in the grass along the river fence in the bottom paddock and the next one up. Five of them. Six. Small, spreading, the size of tables, of rooms, joining. The wind was laying them over towards the yard, towards her. Along the river fence, every fifty yards, the pink flags on their wire stakes stood out straight in the wind, lit from below, pink and then orange, and one of them, nearest a fire, went black and curled.

Nobody was standing at any of them.

She moved the glasses along the paddock fences. All five paddocks, the line from end to end, from the ford to the far gate where the paddocks met the river road. Nothing. Nobody. No truck. No lights. No men in yellow with shovels and drip torches and hose.

Only the grass and the poles and the pink flags and the fires coming up in the grass.

Division N, she thought. *River Bottom Buffer. Contingency. Sheet thirty-four. One Type 2 IA crew from Roundup staging upon issuance of a Red Flag Warning for frontal passage affecting the planning area. Hold the paddock fence line. Prevent ember ignition of river-bottom fuels.*

She had read it in the kitchen on the twentieth with Karin, out loud, twice, to make sure of it. She had read it on her telephone in the round pen every morning since. She had it by heart.

The red flag had been in effect since four.

She lowered the glasses.

• • •

She heard the cattle at ten to eleven.

She was in the barn alley, untying the bay gelding, because she had decided. She had stood in the door with the glasses and watched the fires in the bottom paddocks come together into a line, and watched the line begin to come up the slope towards the next fence, slowly, and she had thought about it, carefully, as she would have thought about a horse she did not know, and she had decided. The barn was logs. It had stood since 1913 and she loved it more than the house. It was logs and it had hay in the loft and it was a hundred yards from the paddocks, downwind, and it would go. The house yard was gravel. Fifty yards of it, between the house and the shop and the old machine shed, crushed rock, that she had soaked with the hose at seven o'clock until it was mud, and the house roof had the sprinkler on it that Jens had put up in June, going round, and the shop was steel. She would take them to the yard. She would tie them to the shop wall on the far side, away from the wind, and stand with them.

She was untying the gelding when she heard them. She stopped with her hands on the rope.

Across the river. Bawling. Faint, under the wind and the roar of the fire on the far bench, a long way off, but she knew it. She had heard it every October for seventeen years. Cows bawling for their calves, and calves bawling back, hundreds of them, coming down, and then the sound of it changing, spreading out, going quieter, as it did every October when the herd came off the road onto the meadow.

She ran to the barn door with the rope still in her hand.

She could not see them. She could see the far side of the river, the glow, the cottonwoods, the smoke. But the sound was there, across the river, a little upstream of the ford, where the lower meadow was. Cattle, a great many of them, bawling, on the lower meadow. The herd. He had brought them down. They were across the river from her on the lower meadow, a quarter of a mile away, with a river and a fire between, and he was with them, and the boy was with them, somewhere in that sound, and she could not see them and could not get to them and could not tell them she was here.

She stood in the barn door and listened to it.

Two ninety-one, the boy had said. *Tell me the number when you come in*, she had said. He could not come in. Not through that.

She went back into the barn and untied the gelding.

• • •

She took them two at a time.

The gelding and the brown mare first, the quiet ones, one on each side of her, the lead ropes short, her hands up by their jaws, across the yard from the log barn to the gravel at a fast walk. The wind was at her back, hot, and full of sparks. They went past her, small, bright, in long streams, like snow going sideways in a headlight, and landed on the ground ahead of her and on the horses' backs and in their manes, and she brushed them off as she walked, first one horse and then the other, and the horses shied and threw their heads and she

held them. On the gravel they were better. She took them round the far side of the shop, out of the wind, where it was almost quiet, and tied them to the steel rail along the wall that Jens used for tying the bull, and came back.

The other two were harder. The young sorrel had been fighting the rope since the first fire, and when she went into the alley he pulled back and sat on it, and the ring held, and he came forward again all at once and nearly went over her. She stood at his head and talked to him. She did not know what she said. She talked to him in her mother's voice, the voice for colts, low, the same thing over and over, and after a while he stood. She took him and the grey mare together across the yard with the sparks going past them and the sorrel half-rearing at every gust, and got them round the shop and tied, and leaned on the shop wall a moment with her hands on her knees.

Then she went back for Pell's.

• • •

The truck came along the river road from upriver, from the east, at a quarter past eleven.

She saw its lights from the barn door. She was standing in it with the halter in her hand that she had taken off the hook outside the end stall, Pell's own halter, the old leather one with the brass plate, and Pell's was standing in the end stall with the door open looking at her, and would not come.

The headlights came along the river road from the east, slowly, with a small amber light going round on the roof of the cab. The river road ran along the top of the Lodgepole's flat, past the end of the lane, past the far end of the paddocks where they met the road, and on west towards Prosper. The truck came along it at a walk. It slowed at the end of the lane. Then it came on, slower, along the road above the paddocks, with the fire in the bottom paddocks below it and to the left, and slowed again, at the far gate, where the top paddock met the road. And stopped. And turned in.

She knew the truck. She knew it before the headlights swung round and she saw the shape of it. The old Ford with no air, the one the Rourkes kept for checking water. It had a bent front bumper where Kieran had put it into a gatepost at sixteen. She knew the sound of its engine. She had driven it.

She ran.

She ran out of the barn and down the slope from the yard towards the top paddock, past the round pen, with the halter in her hand, and the wind behind her, and the sparks, and the roar of the fire across the river so loud now that she could not hear her own feet. The truck had stopped inside the far gate, on the headland along the top of the paddock, with its lights on, pointing down the paddock fence towards the river. The driver's door was open. Somebody was getting out.

"Conor!"

He did not hear her. He would not have heard her at ten feet, with the earpiece in, in that wind. He was walking along the top fence of the paddock away from the truck, towards the second gate, the one between the top paddock and the next, with a flashlight in one hand. He was in his good shirt, the white one he wore to sales. He had his hat on. He looked, from behind, exactly like their father.

"Conor!"

He turned round. He saw her. He put up his hand with the flashlight in it and waved it at her, and shouted something she could not hear, and pointed down the paddock at the fire, and then at the second gate, and went on to it.

She got to him at the gate. She got to the top fence and climbed it and dropped into the top paddock and ran along inside the fence to where he was, at the second gate, with the chain in his hand.

"What are you doing?"

"What does it look like?" He had the earpiece in. He shouted it, the way he did with it in, too loud. "I'm opening your gates. What are

you doing? You're meant to be at the church. Beth said you were at the church."

"The horses."

"The horses." He got the chain off and swung the second gate open, into the next paddock, wide, and stood back. "Where's the crew? Where's your man in the yellow?"

"There's no crew."

"There's a crew coming. I heard it on the sweep channel. They're on the county road round by Prosper. Half eleven, they said." He turned his flashlight down the paddocks, towards the fires at the bottom. "Look at that. That's not meant to be over here. That's meant to be over there." He swung the light across the river. "Somebody let it cross."

"Conor, come on. Come up to the yard."

"In a minute. I'm opening your gates. They'll want to get the trucks down the headland to the bottom, and they'll not want to be getting out every fifty yards to undo your chains. Who chains a paddock gate? Your husband chains a paddock gate." He was walking along the fence already, to the third gate. "Where is he? Is he at the church?"

"He's across the river. With the cattle. And Nils."

He stopped.

He turned round and looked at her, and in the light from his own flashlight, held low, she saw his face do something she had not seen it do since their father's funeral.

"With the cattle," he said.

"He brought them down. Off the lease. By the trail." She could hardly hear herself. "I heard them. On the lower meadow. Ten minutes ago."

Conor looked across the river. He could not see the lower meadow any more than she could. He looked at the glow, and the smoke, and the cottonwoods black against it. He stood like that for a long moment, looking, with the flashlight down by his leg.

"Well," he said. "Well. He'll have used the trail gate, then. I took the lock off it for him. Did he tell you?"

"He said it didn't matter who."

"It doesn't." Conor turned back to the third gate. "Go on up to the yard, Shannon. Go on. I'll open the last two and I'll come up and we'll stand in your gravel together like a pair of eejits and wait for the man in the yellow." He had the chain in his hand. "I've had nothing on that radio since Roundup but the gospel station. 'Shall We Gather at the River.' Three times. I counted. If I hear it again I'll drive into the river myself and save them the trouble."

"Conor."

"Go on."

She went.

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She went back along the inside of the top fence and over it and up the slope to the yard. She did not run. She looked back twice. The first time he was at the third gate with the flashlight, working the chain, and the truck's headlights were shining down the headland past him towards the river, and the fires in the bottom paddocks were bigger, and closer, a line of them now along the second fence from the bottom, with the grass going in front of them in long runs, and the wind still out of the south-west, still pushing them towards the yard. The second time she looked back he had the third gate open and was walking on along the fence, away from the truck, towards the fourth.

She came up into the yard and stood at the corner of the log barn and looked back down the slope.

It was twenty past eleven.

The wind stopped.

It had been blowing out of the south-west all day, all evening, hot, hard, like a river, and it stopped as if somebody had shut a door on it, and for a few seconds there was no wind at all. She felt it on her

face. The sparks that had been going past her sideways stopped going sideways and hung in the air, and turned, and began to fall straight down, slowly, all round her, like snow when the wind drops. The roar from across the river went on, but it was different. The smoke over the paddocks stopped moving. It stood. The flames in the paddock grass, which had been lying over towards the yard, stood up straight.

She knew what it was. She had read the warning at ten in the morning in the round pen. *Shifting sharply northwest behind the front late tonight.*

Then it came.

It came out of the north-west, behind her, over the yard, cold. It was cold. She felt it on the back of her neck like water. It came over the yard and the barn and down the slope into the paddocks, hard, harder than the south-west wind had been, all at once, and the flames in the paddock grass, which had been standing up straight, lay down the other way. They lay down towards the south-east. Away from the yard. Towards the river, and along the fence. Along the top fence, the headland, where it ran east towards the far gate and the road.

Where the truck was.

The fire in the second paddock from the top went along the fence line in the new wind as if the fence were a fuse. It went along the dry grass under the bottom pole the length of the paddock, east, in a few seconds, a line of light running, and reached the corner, and went up the headland, and into the grass along the top fence, where the headland ran past the open gates, and on, east, towards the far gate.

He was at the fourth gate.

She saw him. She saw his flashlight turn. She saw him look up, and look round, west, at the fire coming along the fence towards him, too late, because he had not heard it, because he could not have heard it, and she saw him start to run. The top fence was on his

left, between him and the slope, five poles high, and the grass on the slope above it was catching from the sparks. The truck was sixty yards ahead of him along the headland, with its lights on and its door open and the road beyond it. He ran for the truck, east, which was the way the fire was going.

"Conor! No! Up! Come up! Come up the hill!"

She was running. She was halfway down the slope from the yard, running, shouting, and the heat came up the slope at her and stopped her as if she had run into a wall. She could not breathe. She put her arm up over her face and tried to go on into it and could not. Her shirt was hot. Her hair was hot. The grass on the slope in front of her was catching, from the sparks, in a dozen places, small, and she stood in the middle of it with her arm over her face, and she could not go on, and she could not go back, and she could see.

She saw the fire go along the headland past the fourth gate and the third and the second, along the top fence, in the grass, in the cold wind, faster than she could have run. She saw the flashlight going ahead of it, towards the truck. She saw the truck, in the far gate, with its lights on and its door open. She saw the fire come to the truck and go round it and under it, and the smoke come down over it, white, and the headlights go yellow in the smoke and then orange and then go out.

She did not see the flashlight any more.

• • •

She did not know how long she stood there.

When she knew where she was she was back at the corner of the log barn. She did not know how she had got there. Her arm was burnt; she could feel it, along the outside of the forearm, where she had held it up. Her hands were burnt. The halter was in her hand. She had carried Pell's halter all the way down the slope and back again and her fingers had closed on it and would not open.

The fire had gone on past the far gate onto the road, and across the road into the ditch, and was going away east along the ditch with the wind, a long low line of light. Behind it, along the headland, the grass was black. The fence poles were burning, one after another, little standing flames along the top fence like candles. The truck stood in the far gate. It was burning low, inside the cab, a light in the windows, and in the tyres.

The barn behind her was not burning. The wind had gone round. The fire was going away from the yard, south-east, down to the river and along it. The barn stood at her back with its doors open and its lights on and the sparks going over it now the other way, from behind, from the north-west, towards the river, and none of them were landing on it.

Something touched her back.

She turned round.

It was Pell's. The old mare had come out of the end stall by herself, down the alley and out of the door into the yard, loose, with no halter, and walked across the gravel to the corner of the barn, to her. She stood there now with her nose against Shannon's shoulder blade, where she had pushed, and her head low, and blew. Her breath was warm. Her coat was full of ash. She did not look at the fire. She looked at Shannon.

Shannon stood with the halter in her burnt hands and looked at the mare.

She did not put it on her. She could not open her fingers. She stood with it, and after a while she put her other hand, the back of it, the part that was not burnt, against the mare's neck, under the mane, where it was warm, and held it there.

• • •

The crew came at twenty-five to midnight.

They came along the river road from the west, from Prosper, fast, two trucks, the big crew carrier with the box on the back and a

smaller one behind it, with their headlights on and their red lights going round, and they came along the road above the paddocks and slowed at the end of the lane and came on, and saw the far gate, and stopped.

People got out. She saw them in the headlights. Yellow shirts, white helmets, ten of them, more, coming out of the back of the carrier at a run with tools, and somebody shouting, and two of them running to the far gate, to the truck in it, and stopping short of it, because of the heat, and standing there.

One of them, the tall one, turned round and ran back to the carrier and got on the radio. She could see him in the cab light, with the handset at his mouth, and his helmet off, and his other hand flat against the side of his head, as if it hurt. Then he got out again and ran down the headland along the burnt fence line with a flashlight, towards the yard, towards her, shouting something, and she could not hear what, because she was not listening.

She stood at the corner of the barn with Pell's against her shoulder and the halter in her hand and watched him come.

19

Bring Them Down

Wednesday 25 August, 00:02

The line held.

Joseph knew it held at twenty past eleven, when the wind went round. He was on the back of the water truck at the south-east corner of the barley stubble with the pump running and the hose in his hands, and Andy beside him with the spare nozzle, and the wind that had been in his face since four o'clock in the afternoon, hot, full of ash, stopped. For a moment there was nothing. Then it came from behind him, cold, out of the north-west, and pushed at his back, and the sparks that had been coming at them across the river for three hours turned in the air and went the other way.

Andy looked at him.

"That's it," Joseph said. "That's the front. Keep the water on it."

They kept the water on it. They had been keeping the water on it since six. The colony had disced a fireguard round the south fields on the Thursday, sixteen furrows wide, all the way round, two miles, with the big disc behind the Steiger, and they had the water truck and the old tanker from the dairy and every man on the place with a wet sack or a shovel, and the embers had come over the river and the river road into the stubble all evening and every one of them had

been put out. Some had got into the stubble and run. Three had got to the guard. None had got across.

At half past eleven Samuel-John came along the guard in the pickup with the window down and stopped beside the water truck.

"It has turned," he said.

"It's turned."

"Good." He looked across the stubble at the river bottom, where the glow was, south and west, and the smoke going away from them now, towards the Bull Mountains, the way it had come. "Keep the line till two. Then half the men go to bed. The other half at four." He looked at Andy. "You have done well on the pump."

Andy went red.

Samuel-John drove on along the guard. Joseph watched the tail-lights go. He had not spoken to his brother since half past seven, when the bus had come from Great Falls, the van having stayed there with their father, and Samuel-John had got off it at the colony road with his bag and walked up past the kitchen without going in and changed his clothes and come straight out to the line. He had been on the line ever since. He had not asked anybody anything. There had not been time, and he had not asked.

• • •

The radio in the cab of the water truck was the county's. The colony had had it since 2033, when the county gave a radio to every place that ran its own fire equipment, and it sat on the dashboard of the water truck in a cradle Peter Entz had made for it out of a piece of conveyor belt, and it was on all night, every night, in the fire season, turned low.

Joseph had been listening to it since six without meaning to. You could not help it. It went on behind everything, a man's voice and then a woman's and then a man's, numbers and letters and names of roads, and most of it meant nothing to him and he let it go past. Some of it he heard.

At five past ten he had heard it say *livestock on the road.*

He had been at the pump. He had been priming it, after it had lost suction at the dam, and he had his hand on the primer and his ear to the casing, listening to it catch, and the radio had said it behind him in the cab, a young man's voice, fast: *Ops, Opland. I'm stopped on the campus road. I've got livestock on the road. About three hundred head, on horseback, going west towards the bridge.*

He had straightened up from the pump.

Three hundred head. On horseback. He had stood with his hand on the pump casing and his heart going, and thought: *They're down. They're off the bench. They're on the road.* He had thought: *Elias. Jakob.* He had thought, with a kind of shame at the relief in it: *They're nearly home.*

And then the woman's voice, and the young man's again, *copy, rerouting, via Prosper*, and he had not thought about that part. He had thought about the boys on the road. He had got the pump going and gone back to the hose.

At twenty-five to twelve he had heard *Opland on scene Division* N, and had not known what Division N was.

At twenty to twelve he had heard the young man's voice again, and it was not fast any more. It was very slow. It said, *Ops, Opland. I've got a vehicle in the paddock gate on the river road, Lodgepole place. Burnt. There's somebody in it. I need the sheriff. I need the coroner.* And then nothing, for a long time, and then the woman's voice, saying *copy*, and saying it again, as if she had not been sure the first time.

• • •

He went to find his brother at two minutes past twelve.

He left Andy on the corner with the old tanker and took the water truck along the inside of the fireguard in the dark, on the turned earth, with the wind cold on his back now and the sparks gone and the glow over the river bottom falling behind him, a mile, to where

the pickup was parked at the west corner with its lights off and Samuel-John standing beside it, alone, looking at the river.

His brother heard him come. He did not turn round.

"There is a man dead," Samuel-John said. "On the Lodgepole."

"You heard."

"I have the radio in the truck also." Samuel-John looked at the glow. "A vehicle in the gate. On the river road. At the Tollefsen paddocks." He was quiet a moment. "Do you know who?"

"No."

"Tollefsen?"

"I don't know." Joseph stood beside him. "Jens was on the road at ten. With the cattle. On the campus road, across the river. The radio said. I don't know where he was at half past eleven." He stopped. "I don't know who."

Samuel-John said nothing.

The wind came across the stubble behind them, cold, and went on towards the river. Somewhere along the guard a man was calling to another man in the dialect, about a shovel. The pickup's engine ticked, cooling.

"There's something else," Joseph said.

His brother waited.

"Elias Kleinsasser and Jakob Stahl are with him. With Jens. With the cattle." He made himself say it all, in order, as if he were reading it off a sheet. "Jens rang me on Saturday and asked for riders. Two, for the gather. You were in Great Falls. I rang Father at the clinic, and Father said send two, and I took them down on Monday morning at half past four. I said they would be home Monday night. On Monday night Jens rang and asked could they stay with the cattle, one night, in the water lot, and I said yes. I didn't ask Father that time. I didn't ask anybody. On Tuesday morning Jens rang and said there was a red flag and he would bring them down with the herd. I said bring them down." He looked at the glow. "They were on the

road at ten. On the campus road. With the cattle. I don't know where they are now."

He stopped. There was nothing else. He had said it all.

Samuel-John stood a long time without moving.

"Their mothers think I sent them," he said at last.

"Their mothers think Father sent them."

"Their mothers think the boss sent them. I am the boss." Samuel-John turned round, then, and looked at his brother, and in the dark Joseph could not see his face, only the shape of it under the black hat, and the beard. "Elias's mother came to me at the bus. At half past seven. At the road. She said, *Thank you for letting him go, he has wanted to ride cattle like that since he was six.* I did not know what she meant. I said nothing. I thought it was something Father had done, and she would tell me later, and I went to the line." He was quiet a moment. "I thanked her. I said, *You are welcome.*"

Joseph said nothing.

"You will go to the county road," Samuel-John said. "In the water truck. Now. You will wait at the colony gate for them, and if they do not come by one o'clock you will drive to the bridge. I will go to the houses. I will tell their mothers what I know, which is that their sons were with Jens Tollefsen on the road at ten and there is a man dead on the Lodgepole who is not known." He opened the door of the pickup. "And I will not say who sent them. That is for afterwards. Tonight it does not matter who sent them."

"It matters."

"Tonight it does not matter," Samuel-John said again, and got in, and shut the door, and drove away along the guard without his lights.

• • •

He saw them at ten past twelve.

He had brought the water truck round to the colony gate on the county road, and left Andy at the line with the old tanker, and he

was standing in the road in front of the truck with its headlights on, looking south, towards the bridge, when he heard them. Horses. Two horses, on the asphalt, at a trot, a long way off, the sound of their shoes coming up the road in the dark ahead of them.

They came into the headlights.

He did not know them at first. Two riders on two horses so black with ash that he could not tell which horse was the black and which was the paint, with no hats, and their faces black, and their shirts black, and their eyes very white in their faces. They rode up to the truck and stopped in the headlights, and the horses stood with their heads down, blowing, lathered white under the ash where the saddles were, and the two boys sat on them and looked at Joseph.

"We are home," Jakob said.

Joseph went to them. He did not know he was going to. He went across the road in the headlights and put his hands up, one on each of them, on their knees, one boy and the other, and held on.

"Get down," he said. "Get down. Are you hurt? Are you burnt?"

"No," Elias said.

"Jakob."

"I am not hurt. Rose has a burn. On her neck. From a spark. Only small." The younger boy got down off the paint mare and stood holding her, and his legs did not hold him, and he sat down in the road, suddenly, with the reins in his hand, and laughed. "I cannot stand up," he said. "Look. I cannot stand up. My legs are made of bread."

Elias got down. He stood. He held the black and looked at Joseph.

"Mr. Tollefsen said to tell you we did it right," he said. "He said to tell you that."

"Where is he?"

"On the lower meadow. With the cattle. On the Rourke side. By the ford." Elias's voice was very hoarse. "They came through the ford gate at ten to eleven. Two hundred and sixty-six cows, Nils said. Mr.

Tollefsen said go home over the bridge and up the county road and not along the river. So we came."

"Was Nils with him?"

"Yes."

"They were both there? At eleven? On the lower meadow?"

"Yes." Elias looked at him. "Why?"

Joseph did not answer that.

He took the boys' horses and tied them to the back of the water truck, and gave the boys water out of the cooler in the cab, and they drank it, both of them, a whole bottle each, without stopping, with their heads back. Jakob had got up off the road. He leaned on the front of the truck in the headlights and drank and talked, between swallows, the way he talked at the Lodgepole on Monday, all at once, as if it had been building up in him all night and was coming out.

"The fire came out of the mountains at six," he said. "At the water lot. And we waited till eight, because Mr. Tollefsen said cows will not go in the heat, and then they would not go anyway, they would not go through the gate, and I sang to them, I sang 'Nun danket alle Gott,' and then the old cow went, the white-face, by herself, and they all went. And on the bench the fire came over the ridge in front of us, and Mr. Tollefsen said his father went down a draw in nineteen eighty-four, and I found it, I found the draw, it was me, and we went down it in the dark, it was so steep, Joseph, like a roof, and a grey cow went back and he said let her go. And then the road. And the road was the worst. Because of the fences. And a cow went down in the ditch and Elias pulled her tail. And then the truck came."

"What truck?"

"The fire truck. The crew. With a red light." Jakob drank. "It came down the coulee behind us and stopped behind the cattle, behind Nils, and it honked, one time, and then a man got out and walked all the way up the cattle to the front, to Mr. Tollefsen. With a flashlight.

And Nils rode with him. And the man talked to Mr. Tollefsen, walking, because Mr. Tollefsen did not stop. And then the man went back. And the truck went backwards. All the way up to the coulee. Beep, beep, beep." He made the sound. "And turned round and went up and away. And then we went on."

Joseph stood in the road.

"The man talked to Jens," he said.

"Yes."

"What did he say?"

"I do not know. I was on the other side." Jakob looked at Elias. "Elias was on that side."

Joseph looked at Elias.

Elias was standing by the back of the truck with his hand on the black's neck. He had not drunk all of his water. He held the bottle in his other hand. He did not look at Joseph. He looked at the horse.

"He asked Mr. Tollefsen to split the cattle," he said. "To let the truck through. He said he had to get through. There was a gate. Nils said, *Dad, the hay gate.* Mr. Tollefsen said it would take longer. He said they would scatter. In the brush. He kept going." He stopped. "The man said he did not have forty minutes. Then his radio said something, and he said into it that he was going round by Prosper. And he went back."

"Where was he going?" Joseph said. "The man. Did he say where?"

"He started to say," Elias said. "He said, *We are supposed to be on*—and then his radio talked. He did not say."

"Did Jens ask him?"

Elias looked at Joseph then, for the first time, over the horse's neck, in the headlights.

"No," he said.

• • •

He drove them home at twenty past twelve, with the horses tied behind, at a walk, up the colony road, to the houses.

The lights were on. All of them. Every house on the place had a light in the kitchen, and in front of the Kleinsasser house and the Stahl house there were women in the yard in their kerchiefs and their long dresses with shawls over them, standing, and when the water truck came up the road with the two horses behind it they started forward, and stopped, and one of them, Elias's mother, put both hands over her mouth.

Samuel-John was there. He was standing by the Stahl gate with his hat in his hands.

The boys got down. Their mothers came to them. Joseph did not watch. He sat in the cab of the water truck with the engine running and his hands on the wheel and looked through the windscreen at the dark road going on past the houses towards the barns, and heard the women's voices behind him in the dialect, high, and then lower, and then one of them crying, and the boys' voices, and Samuel-John's, saying something short.

After a while somebody untied the horses from the back of the truck and led them away.

After a while Samuel-John came to the cab window. Joseph wound it down.

"They are not hurt," Samuel-John said.

"No."

"The man on the Lodgepole is not Tollefsen. The boy says Tollefsen was on the lower meadow with his son at eleven. The fire came into the paddocks after." He was quiet. "So it is somebody else. We will know in the morning."

"Yes."

Samuel-John stood at the window. He had his hat in his hands still. He turned it, once, round, by the brim.

"Did the boys say anything else?" he said. "About the night. About the road."

Joseph looked through the windscreen at the dark.

He had had the afternoon. He had been at the line with the disc and the water truck from noon, and the radio had been in the cab all afternoon, and his telephone had been in his pocket, and at nine in the morning Jens had rung and said a red flag and he had said *bring them down*, and then he had hung up and gone to the line. At any time in the afternoon he could have rung Jens back. He could have driven the water truck to the Lodgepole at one o'clock, when the Level Three came, and said, *Give me the boys, I'll go up the trail for them on foot if I have to.* He could have said to Jens on Monday night, *No. One night is what I promised. Bring them down.* He had not. Samuel-John was on a bus and his father was in a bed in Great Falls and his mother was in the kitchen and nobody had known but him, and he had said yes, and yes, and *bring them down*, and gone to the line and listened to the radio and been glad when it said *livestock on the road*, because it meant they were nearly home.

He thought of the young man's voice on the radio at twenty to twelve. Very slow. *There's somebody in it.*

He thought of Elias looking at him over the horse's neck. *No.*

"No," Joseph said. "They said it was a long night. They said the old cow took them out of the gate. Jakob sang to her."

Samuel-John looked at him a moment longer.

"Go to bed," he said. "The line is held. I will take the four o'clock."

"I'll take it."

"Go to bed, Joseph." Samuel-John put his hat on. "Tomorrow we will talk about who sent them."

He went away, towards the houses.

Joseph sat in the cab with the engine running. The radio on the dashboard in its cradle of conveyor belt said something about Division K, and a transformer, and a road. He reached over and turned it off.

Through the windscreen, at the top of the road, the light was on in his mother's kitchen. It was always on. She would be at the table with her hands folded, as she was every night he came in late, not

asleep, waiting to see him go past the window. He looked at the light for a long time.

Then he put the truck in gear and drove it down to the shop, the long way, round the back of the barns, past the north end of the farrowing barn, and parked it there in the dark, where the window could not see.

20

Black Ground

Wednesday 25 August, 01:00

At one o'clock the flat across the river had burnt itself out, and he took them over.

He had watched it burn for two hours from the lower meadow. He had sat the sorrel at the edge of the herd by the river with the boy beside him on the bay mare and watched the fire come up through the paddocks in the south-west wind, towards the yard, in long runs along the poles, and he had watched the wind stop, at twenty past eleven, and stand still, and come round out of the north-west, cold, so suddenly that the sorrel had thrown his head up and the cattle behind them had all stopped grazing at once and turned their tails to it. He had watched the fire in the paddocks lie down the other way. He had watched it go along the top fence, the headland, east, towards the river road, fast, in the new wind, and he had seen headlights at the far gate where the top paddock met the road. A pair of headlights, turned in, pointing down the headland. He had seen the fire go along the headland to them and round them, and the smoke come down, and the headlights go orange in it and go out.

He had thought: *That's the crew. That's the first of them. They'll have got out.*

Ten minutes after that the trucks had come along the river road from the west with their red lights going, two of them, and stopped at the end of the lane, and he had seen people get out, a lot of people, with lights, and spread out along the paddock fences with hoses and tools, and he had thought: *There. There's the rest of them.* And he had sat the sorrel and watched them work.

The boy had not said anything for two hours. At midnight he had got down off the mare and sat on the grass with his back against her front legs and his arms round his knees, and she had stood over him and not moved, and Jens had thought he was asleep. He was not. When Jens said, at one o'clock, "We'll take them over," the boy got up at once and got on the mare as if he had been waiting for it.

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The ford was where it had always been.

The river was a foot deep at the bend and a hundred and twenty feet wide, over gravel, and it was black. The water was warm. It had ash on it, a grey skin of ash that broke round the horses' legs as they went in and closed again behind them. The far bank was black. The cottonwoods along it were standing, most of them, with their bark burnt black to the height of a man and their leaves still on above that, brown, curled, and some of them were still burning, high up, in the forks, where the dead wood was, with small flames like lamps.

The old cow went in behind the sorrel without stopping. She waded across with her calf swimming in the deep place at her side, and came up out of the water onto the black bank, and stopped.

The ground was hot. He could feel it through the sorrel. The horse came up out of the river onto the paddock and put his feet down on the black ground and lifted them again, quickly, one after another, as if he were walking on a stove, and snorted, and Jens let him go on at a fast walk up the slope towards the yard, and the old cow came after them, lifting her feet the same way, and the herd came out of the river behind her onto the black, and bawled.

He took them through the yard. He did not know what else to do with them. The paddocks were black and hot and the poles were still burning in places, and there was nowhere on the flat that had not burnt except the yard and the west meadow beyond it, under the pivots, which Jens had watered every night for a month, and which stood up green in the dark beyond the shop like a field in another country. He took them through the yard gate and across the gravel and past the shop and through the west gate onto the green, and they spread out on it, on the wet grass, and stood. They stopped bawling. One by one, all over the meadow, they put their heads down.

He sat the sorrel in the west gate and looked at them.

Then he turned round and looked at the yard.

• • •

The house was standing. The barn was standing. The log barn was standing, with its doors open and its lights on in the alley and nothing in it. The shop. The machine shed. The round pen, with one side of it burnt where the fire had come up to it from the top paddock before the wind went round. The sprinkler on the house roof was still going, round and round, throwing its water out over the shingles in a slow arc, and the water ran off the eaves into the gravel, and the gravel was mud.

There were horses tied along the shop wall.

He saw them when he came back through the west gate. Four, along the steel rail where he tied the bull, out of the wind on the far side of the shop: the brown mare and the bay gelding and the grey mare and the young sorrel, with their heads low and their halters on and buckets of water at their feet. And standing by them, loose, without a halter, the old mare. Pell's. She lifted her head when the sorrel came round the corner of the shop, and looked at him, and put it down again.

He got off the sorrel and stood in the gravel.

"Mom was here," Nils said behind him.

He did not answer. He walked across the yard to the house. The kitchen door was shut. There was a piece of paper on it, held to the glass with a strip of the blue tape Shannon used for marking the colts' halters. It was a page torn out of the tack-room calendar. September, the back of it. He took it off the glass and held it up to the yard light.

It was her writing. It went up and down the page, large, uneven, as if she had written it with her left hand, or with a hand that did not close.

J — Horses watered 12:30. Gone to Prosper with Cody Lund for Thea. Pell's came out by herself. S.

That was all.

He read it again. *Gone to Prosper with Cody Lund.* Cody Lund was a deputy. Cody Lund was old Mrs. Lund's grandson from out past Melstone, who had been in Thea's 4-H club, and was a deputy now, and wore a yellow vest at the county road junction. He read it again. *Horses watered 12:30.* She had been here at half past twelve. She had been here. She had come back from the church for the horses, and she had been here in the yard with the fire coming up through the paddocks at her, and she had tied four horses to the shop wall and watered them, and gone.

He stood at the kitchen door with the paper in his hand.

He looked down the yard, past the log barn, past the round pen, down the slope to the top paddock, black, and along the headland to the far gate where the paddock met the river road.

There was a vehicle in the far gate. He could see it in the light from the crew's trucks, which were parked along the river road past it with their lights on. It was a pickup. It was burnt. It was black and low and the shape of it was wrong, sagged, down on its rims. There was yellow tape round it, on stakes, flapping, and a sheriff's car

parked on the road beside the gate with its lights off and somebody sitting in it.

He looked at it a long time.

That's the crew, he had thought. *They'll have got out.*

He did not go down. He folded the paper in half and put it in his shirt pocket and buttoned the pocket.

"Is Mom all right?" Nils said.

"She's at the church. With Thea." He turned round. The boy was standing by the bay mare in the gravel in the yard light, black-faced, swaying a little where he stood. "She came back for the horses and went again. She's at the church."

"Her writing's funny."

"It's late," Jens said. "Get in the truck."

• • •

He put the boy in the cab of the pickup, where it stood hitched to the stock trailer in the yard with its nose to the road, as it had stood since Thursday. The boy got in on the passenger side and lay down across the seat with his head on the armrest and his boots hanging out of the door, and Jens took the boots off him, one and then the other, and put his legs in, and shut the door. Through the window he saw the boy put his hand into his shirt pocket and take out the tablet and the telephone, and look at them, both of them, dark, and put them back. Then he turned over with his face to the seat back and was still.

Jens unsaddled the sorrel and the bay mare and turned them into the round pen, the side that had not burnt, with water. He took the halters off the four horses at the shop wall and turned them in with the others. He did not touch the old mare. She stood by the shop wall where Shannon had left her and watched him do it, and when he had done it and shut the gate on the round pen she walked over by herself and stood outside it, by the gate, with her head over the top rail, near the others, and did not ask to go in.

Then he went out onto the west meadow to see to the cattle.

• • •

He spent the rest of the night with them.

He went through them on foot, with a flashlight, slowly, as he would have at calving. He did not need the flashlight for most of it; the yard light carried, and the sky over the river was going on burning, low, orange, and lit the meadow from the south. He went through them pair by pair. Most of them were all right. They were black with ash and their eyes were red and running and they coughed, a great many of them, a deep dry cough that went on all over the meadow in the dark like a crowd of old men in a church, but they were on their feet, and grazing, and the calves were with their mothers.

Some were not all right.

Their feet. The ones who had come up out of the river onto the black ground first, and the ones who had walked the road in the ditches through the grass, and the ones who had been at the back of the herd where the willows in the river meadow had gone up, and walked through the edge of it. He found them standing apart, at the edge of the herd, on three legs, holding a foot up off the ground, or standing with all four feet together and their backs humped, rocking, not wanting to put weight on any of them. He put the light on their feet. The hair was burnt off above the hoof. The skin above the hoof, where it met the horn, was red and wet and in some of them it had split. Some of the calves had it worse than the cows; their feet were smaller and softer and they had run.

He counted them as he went. Fourteen cows. Nine calves. He did not know yet which would come right and which would not. Some would. A cow with burnt feet would stand in the wet grass and heal if the burn was not too deep, and in a month you would not know. Some would slough the hoof. He knew what that looked like. He had seen it in 2012 after the Dahl fire, on a neighbour's cows, the whole

horn of the hoof coming off in the mud like a boot, and the neighbour going round with a rifle.

Two of the calves were down. They were lying in the wet grass at the north end of the meadow, side by side, near the fence, where their mothers had brought them, and their mothers were standing over them, bawling, low. He put the light on them. One of them lifted its head and looked at the light and put it down again. Their feet were black.

He stood over them a while.

Then he went back to the house and got the rifle out of the gun cabinet in the hall, and the box of shells, and came back out and sat down on the ground at the north end of the meadow by the fence, near the two calves, with the rifle across his knees, and waited for it to be light enough.

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It was light enough at a quarter to six.

The light came up grey out of the east, through the smoke, slowly, without colour. It came up behind the bench and the campus, where the halls were still lit along the edge, and the steam still went up white from the towers, as it had all night, as if nothing had happened. It came down into the bottom. He watched it come down over the black paddocks and the black cottonwoods and the river, grey, with ash on it, and the lower meadow on the far side where the herd had stood, pale, and the Rourke river meadow beyond it, black, all of it, from the coulee to the bridge, with smoke coming up out of it in a hundred thin lines, straight up, now that the wind had gone down.

He did it at ten to six, when he could see.

He did the first calf and the cow over it jumped back and stood, and bawled, and came back, and put her nose down to it. He waited for her to move. She moved. He did the second.

Then he unloaded the rifle and sat with it a while longer, by the fence, with the two cows standing over their calves in the wet grass, and the herd behind him grazing on the green, coughing.

Then he got up and counted them.

He counted them through the west gate, from the yard back onto the meadow. He had to drive them off the meadow into the yard to do it, and they did not want to go, and he did it on foot, alone, with his hat, walking behind them, slowly, and they went, and stood in the yard on the gravel, and he went and stood in the west gate and let them back through it past him, one at a time, two, and counted.

Two hundred and sixty-three cows. Then he did it again, for the calves, with the cows mothered up and the calves at their sides where he could see them. Two hundred and fifty-nine. Two hundred and fifty-nine pair, and four cows with nothing at their sides: the two at the north fence, and two more who stood at the gate when the rest had gone through and bawled down the road towards the river.

Twenty-eight cows short. Thirty-two calves.

He stood in the gate after the last of them had gone through. He had known it would be about that. The boy had said two sixty-six cows at the ford gate in the dark, and three of those were somewhere else now, in the river or on the lower meadow, or the boy had counted them twice. And the twenty-five before that. On the rock in the draw, in the smoke on the bench, the grey cow with one horn going back east towards the trail. And the five at the top of the lease, in the rough, that had never come down to the water lot at all, and that he had said he would not go back for.

He wrote it on the back of his hand with the ballpoint, under the other number, the one from Monday that had not washed off.

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Kieran's pickup came down the river road at ten past six.

He saw it from the gate. It came from the west, from the direction of Prosper, slowly, with its lights still on in the grey, and it slowed at the far gate where the sheriff's car was, and stopped, and somebody got out of the sheriff's car and went to the pickup's window and stood there. Then the sheriff's man stepped back, and the pickup came on along the road to the end of the Lodgepole lane, and turned in, and came up the lane into the yard, and stopped.

Kieran got out.

He was in the same clean shirt he had worn to the gym on the nineteenth. He had not changed it. It had ash on the shoulders. He stood by the door of the pickup with his hand on the top of it and looked at Jens across the yard, and did not come any further, and Jens walked across the gravel to him.

"Kieran."

"Jens." The young man's voice was very even. Jens had never heard it so even. "Is Nils all right? And the colony boys?"

"Nils is in the truck. Asleep. The boys went home at eleven, over the bridge."

"Good." Kieran nodded. "Good. Shannon said. She said you'd brought them down. She said she heard the cattle on the lower meadow before—" He stopped. He took his hand off the top of the door and put it in his pocket, and took it out again. "Shannon's at the church. With Mam. And Thea. And your mother. Her hands are burnt, Shannon's. Not bad. The Red Cross did them. She's all right."

"What happened?"

Kieran looked at him.

"You don't know," he said.

"I don't know anything. I've been on the lower meadow since eleven. I've got a note on my door. I've got a burnt truck in my gate." Jens heard his own voice go up and brought it down. "What happened, Kieran?"

Kieran looked past him, down the slope, at the far gate.

"That's ours," he said. "The Ford. With the no air." He looked at it a moment longer. "It was Dad. He was on the sweep. For the county. He was driving the river road, checking people were out, and he saw your paddocks going and nobody on them, and he turned in to open your gates, for the crew, so they'd not have to stop for the chains. Shannon was in the yard with the horses. She went down to him. He sent her back up." His voice did not change. "Then the front came. And the wind went round. And it came along the headland. And he went for the truck."

Jens stood in the gravel.

"Shannon saw it," Kieran said. "From the yard. She tried to get down to him. That's her hands."

"Where is he?" Jens said. "Where is he now?" It was the wrong thing, and he heard it as it came out.

Kieran laughed. It came out of him all at once, a bark, and he looked surprised by it. "I offered him mine," he said. "My truck. At the church, at six. I said take mine, Dad, it's got the air and the radio works. He said mine smelled of the dog." He hit the top of the open door with the flat of his hand. "He said it smelled of the dog." He hit it again, the same place, and again, hard, so that the whole pickup rocked on its springs, and went on doing it, with his face quite still, until Jens reached out and took his wrist and held it.

Kieran stood with his wrist in Jens's hand, breathing through his mouth.

"Sorry," he said. "Sorry. I'm all right."

Jens let go.

He looked at the far gate. The sheriff's man had gone back to his car. The burnt truck stood in the gate in the grey light, low, black, on its rims, with the yellow tape round it moving a little in what wind there was. He could see the bent front bumper now. He had been there when Kieran put it into the gatepost. He had laughed.

"I'm going down to him," Kieran said. "To the truck. They've taken him. To Roundup. In the night. But I'm going down." He looked at Jens. "Will you come?"

"In a minute."

"All right." Kieran looked at him a moment longer. Then he turned and walked away down the slope past the round pen, towards the top paddock and the headland, on the black ground, in his clean shirt, with his hands in his pockets, and Jens watched him go all the way down to the yellow tape and stop there and stand.

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The sheriff's man came up the lane at half past six.

He came on foot, up from his car at the far gate, slowly, a heavy man of fifty in a brown uniform and a yellow vest with a radio on his shoulder, whom Jens did not know. He had a clipboard. He came across the yard to where Jens stood by Kieran's pickup and stopped.

"Mr. Tollefsen?"

"Yes."

"Deputy Harlan. Sheriff's office." He did not offer his hand. He looked at the horses in the round pen, and Pell's outside it, and back at Jens. Then he looked down the slope at the far gate, where Kieran was standing at the tape. "I'm sorry about your brother-in-law."

Jens said nothing.

"Your wife was something, last night. With those horses. Cody said." The deputy looked at the clipboard and did not write anything. "I'm going to need you to keep out of that paddock till the coroner's people are done. They'll be back about eight. And keep your stock off it. It's a scene." He looked at the far gate again, and at the paddocks, black, and the fence poles still smoking along the river, and the crew trucks parked along the river road beyond the gate with men asleep in them. "That's a hard thing," he said. "That crew was supposed to be on your fence at half past ten. That's what the plan had. They'd have been here." He looked at the black head-

land. "Whether it'd have made any difference with that wind, I couldn't tell you. Nobody could."

Jens looked at him.

"They got turned back on the campus road," the deputy said. "Over on the Rourke side. Coming down out of the coulee. There was cattle on the road. Somebody's herd, strung all the way down the road from the trail gate to the ford, and they couldn't get by, so they got sent round by Prosper. Over an hour." He shook his head. "Over an hour. On the night." He tucked the clipboard under his arm. "Well. Eight o'clock. Keep out of the paddock."

He went back down the lane towards his car.

Jens stood in the yard.

He stood by Kieran's pickup in the gravel, in the grey light, with the sprinkler on the house roof going round behind him and the water running off the eaves, and the herd on the green grazing, coughing, and the boy asleep in the cab of his own pickup with his face to the seat back, and Kieran standing at the yellow tape at the far gate with his hands in his pockets, and he knew which truck.

He had known it since the deputy said the campus road. He had known it, if he was honest, since he saw the headlights at the far gate at twenty-five past eleven and thought *that's the crew*. He had known it on the road at five past ten when the radio on the young man's chest had said *say your status* and the young man had started to tell him where he was supposed to be, and he had looked at the road ahead and not asked.

We're supposed to be on—

He did not finish it. He did not let it finish in his head.

His telephone buzzed in his shirt pocket.

He took it out. It had found the tower; the tower had come back, somewhere, in the night, and the telephone had found it and was getting everything that had been waiting for it since the afternoon all at once. It buzzed in his hand and buzzed again. Messages. Shan-

non, Shannon, Shannon. Karin. Thea. Joseph. A voice message from a number he knew, from eight o'clock the night before, a minute long. Another from Shannon. Another.

He looked at the screen. He did not open any of them.

He put the telephone back in his pocket and buttoned the pocket over it, and over the folded calendar page, and walked across the gravel to the stock trailer and stood by the cab of his pickup and looked through the window at his son.

Nils was asleep. He had turned over in the night onto his back, with one arm across his face and the other hanging down off the seat to the floor, where his boots were. His face under the arm was black with smoke, and his mouth was open. The tablet and the telephone were in his shirt pocket, buttoned in. The pocket rose and fell.

Jens stood by the cab and watched him sleep.

Down the slope, at the tape, Kieran was still standing. He had not moved. He had taken his hat off.

After a while Jens went down to stand with him.

21

The Roster

Wednesday 25 August, 05:40

The incident command post was at the Roundup fairgrounds, in the exhibit hall where they judged the 4-H lambs, and Lyle got there at twenty to six with the sky going grey behind him over the Bull Mountains.

He had driven in from the campus on the Bench Road with the window down. The red flag had expired at four. The front had gone through at twenty past eleven, as the Hand had said, give or take ten minutes, and the wind had come round out of the north-west and turned the fire on the bench back on its own black, and by two in the morning there had been nothing left on the south side of the campus to burn. The halls had held. The dormitory gutter had been the worst of it. Boss had the crew on mop-up along the south fence, walking the black in a line, feeling the ground with the backs of their hands, and Herbie Two Moons had fallen asleep sitting up on the tailboard of Engine One with a cup of coffee in his hand, and Wilma Kolb had taken the cup out of it and put it on the bumper and let him sleep.

At five she had come to the shed and said, "Planning wants the division leads at the ICP at six for the roster. I'll hold Z. Go on."

He had gone.

On the Bench Road the country on both sides was black. It was black from the road to the foot of the Bull Mountains in the south, and from the road to the bench edge in the north, smoking, in a thousand thin lines that went straight up in the still air, and the fence posts along the road were burnt to stubs, and here and there a juniper on a rim was still burning by itself, like a candle somebody had forgotten. He had passed two deer standing in the ditch, alive, black to the knees, who had watched the truck go by and not moved.

He had driven the eighteen miles without the radio. He had had the radio on all night. He had heard everything there was to hear on it.

At twenty to midnight he had heard the young man's voice, the crew boss, Opland, very slow, say *I've got a vehicle in the paddock gate on the river road, Lodgepole place. Burnt. There's somebody in it.* He had been standing at the end of the engine shed when he heard it, where he stood every night at nine, looking north over the bench edge at the bottom, and he had been able to see it, the far gate, a mile off and three hundred feet down, where the headlights had gone orange and gone out a quarter of an hour before. He had seen that. He had not known what it was. He had thought it was the crew.

There's somebody in it.

He had stood at the end of the shed for an hour after that, listening to the radio for the name. It had not come. It would not come on the command net; the sheriff had his own channel, and the coroner, and they did not put names on the air. He had thought about who drove the river road at half past eleven at night on a Level Three, in a pickup, alone, and turned in at the Lodgepole's paddock gate. He had thought: *Jens.* He had thought: *Shannon.* He had rung Jens's telephone at ten past twelve and it had gone straight to the message without ringing, *This is Jens, leave it*, because the tower on the

bench was down, and he had stood with the telephone in his hand and not left it.

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The exhibit hall was lit with the big overhead lamps they used for the fair. There were folding tables in rows where the lamb pens had been, with laptops on them and printers and cables taped to the concrete floor, and maps on easels, and a coffee urn by the door the size of a milk can, and people. Forty, fifty people. Most of them in Nomex or in county shirts, grey-faced, with their hair flat from helmets, standing or sitting, talking low, or not talking. A woman at the far end of the hall was asleep on a stack of folded tarps with her boots on. The air smelled of coffee and smoke and sheep. Out in the lot, beside the trailers, a cell tower stood on a flatbed with its mast cranked up, which had not been there the day before; somebody had brought it from Billings in the night.

He got a coffee from the urn. He did not want it. He held it.

The planning section was at the back, under a banner that still said *MUSSELSHELL COUNTY FAIR — 4-H RIBBON TABLE*, at two tables pushed together, with a printer going. There was a young woman behind it with a headset round her neck and a stack of paper in front of her, sorting it into piles by division letter, and a line of people waiting.

Lyle got in the line.

The man in front of him was Merle Kautz. He knew him by the voice when Kautz turned round to see who was behind him; he would not have known him by his face. Kautz was older than he had sounded. Seventy, perhaps. A small heavy man with a white moustache and a county cap and a face burnt red by the sun and then grey by the night, and his eyes were red and he had a cup of coffee he was not drinking either.

"Z," Kautz said.

"N."

They stood in the line. Kautz looked at the floor.

"I didn't know him," Kautz said, after a while. "The man. At the gate. I knew the name. I didn't know him."

"Who was it?"

Kautz looked up at him. "You don't know?"

"Nobody put a name on the air."

"Rourke." Kautz said it carefully, as if it were heavy. "Conor Rourke. The Rourke place, across the river from the Tollefsens. He was on the sheriff's sweep. A volunteer. He was driving the river road checking everybody was out, and he saw the Tollefsen paddocks burning and nobody on them, and he turned in to open the gates." Kautz looked at the floor again. "For the crew. So they could get their trucks down the headland. The wind went round. That was all."

Lyle stood in the line with the coffee in his hand.

He had roped with Jens at every jackpot in four counties from 2009 to 2031. He had been at the Rourke brandings; he had held the calves for Conor, twice, in the years when the Lodgepole and the Rourkes still branded together, and Conor had talked the whole time, and done his father's voice, and his father had been standing right there. He had sold Conor forty-two heifers in 2032 to save the ranch.

"His sister was in the yard," Kautz said. "Mrs. Tollefsen. With her horses. She saw it."

"Is she hurt?"

"Her hands. Some. Cody Lund took her to Prosper." Kautz moved up in the line. "Her husband was across the river with the cattle. Brought them off the mountain last night. The crew saw them come across the ford at one in the morning. Most of them, they said." He shook his head. "Off the Bull Mountain grazing. By the old trail. In that."

Lyle said nothing.

"You know them?" Kautz said.

"I know them."

Kautz looked at him a moment. "I'm sorry," he said. Then the young woman at the table said, "Division N," and he turned round and went up to the table.

• • •

He did not hear what Kautz said to the young woman, or what she said to him. He watched Kautz bend over the table and read something on a page she gave him, for a long time, and then take the pen she held out, and sign, and stand there a moment with the pen in his hand after he had signed. Then Kautz put the pen down and went away towards the coffee urn without looking at anybody.

"Division Z," the young woman said.

Lyle went up to the table.

"Harris Fireline?"

"Yes."

"Okay. Morning." She did not look up. She had a pile in front of her marked Z and she took the top sheet off it and turned it round for him. "This is your division's roster for the op period, eighteen hundred to oh-six hundred. Resources, assignments, times. And then the log extract for anything that touched your division. Read it, initial anything you want to flag, sign at the bottom. If it's wrong, tell me now, because this is what goes in the after-action." She pushed a pen across to him. "Sorry. I've done forty of these."

He put the coffee down on the table and picked up the page.

The first half was his. *DIV Z — HARRIS FIRELINE (contract). E-1, E-2, IA hand crew (10). Supt. Harris, L. Crew boss* and then Boss's name, his real name, the one Lyle never used. Assignments, by the hour. *Perimeter. Perimeter. Perimeter. 21:28 fire at S perimeter gravel. 21:45 spot, dormitory, S gutter, knocked down by campus brigade. 23:20 frontal passage. 02:00 S perimeter secure.* It was right. It was all right. He had nothing to flag.

Under it, a line across the page, and LOG EXTRACT — ENTRIES REFERENCING DIV Z.

There were four entries.

18:52. *Ops. Opland IA reassigned Div N to Div J (Roundup S edge, Lakeview Rd). Div N contingency unstaffed.*

19:01. *Div Z requests to know if Z resources wanted at Div N buffer. Ops: negative. IAP holds Z on campus through frontal passage. Campus occupancy 380.*

21:30. *Div N (Kautz) requests 1 engine from Div Z to cover Div N buffer pending Opland arrival. Div Z: negative, fire on S perimeter, both engines committed. Z holding.*

21:40. *Ops. Opland IA released Div J, assigned Div N via Bench Rd / campus access rd. ETA buffer 22:28.*

And then, below it, because the log had not been cut cleanly, or because the young woman's printer took all of a block when it took any of it, there were three more lines that had nothing to do with Division Z.

22:05. *Opland IA: stopped campus access rd below coulee. Livestock on road (approx 300 hd, mounted, westbound), fenced both sides, unable to pass. Owner est. 30 min to clear.*

22:12. *Opland IA: crew rerouted: livestock on access road. Via county rd / Prosper. ETA buffer 23:30.*

23:36. *Opland IA on scene Div N.*

He read them.

He read them again. *ETA buffer 22:28.* Then *on scene 23:36.* An hour and eight minutes.

Livestock on road. Approx 300 hd. Mounted. Westbound.

He did not need to be told whose cattle. There was one herd of three hundred pair on the Bull Mountain grazing on the night of the

twenty-fourth, because the Rourkes had moved Sunday and the Holmquists had been waiting for trucks from Lewistown and the Sorensens had opened their gates and left. There was one man who would bring three hundred pair down off that mountain at night, by the old trail, against the plan, under a red flag. There was one place that trail came down, and it came down onto the campus access road at the trail gate below the bench, a half mile above the ford gate, westbound.

Herbie says he heard cattle, Wilma had said. *Before. At nine. Out on the bench, to the west.*

He stood at the table with the page in his hand.

He thought of the road at five to ten. He had stood at the end of the shed and looked down at it, a pale line on its raised bank along the foot of the bench face, between its fences, empty at his end. He thought of the headlights going down the coulee at two minutes to ten with the red light turning. He had looked at his watch. He had thought: *There. Half past ten.* He had gone back round the shed to the south side to see to the mop-up. He had not watched the road. If he had watched the road he might have seen the lights stop at the bottom of the coulee. He might have seen them stand there for twelve minutes, with the red light going round. He might have seen them go back up.

He thought of fourteen minutes. From the shed to the paddock fence by engine, fourteen minutes. Down the coulee, along the road, over the bridge. At half past nine. It would have been on the fence at a quarter to ten. It would have been on the road ahead of the herd. It would have been at the Lodgepole paddocks when the embers came over at twenty to eleven, and when the wind went round at twenty past, and when Conor Rourke turned in at the far gate to open the chains for a crew that was not there.

And then he did not know. One engine on that fence when the wind went round might have held the headland. It might not. He had pulled crews back off lines in less wind than that, up the slope to the

black, and let a fence go, because a fence was a fence. An engine crew in the Lodgepole paddocks at twenty past eleven might have watched the fire go along the headland exactly as it went, from the yard, and been right to. He would never know which.

Div Z: negative, fire on S perimeter, both engines committed. Z holding.

It was true. There had been fire on the perimeter. Both engines had been committed. He had read the clause and the plan and the note and done the arithmetic, and the arithmetic was right, and he would do it again. He knew he would do it again. That was what he could not get round: he would do it again.

"Sir?" the young woman said. "Is it right?"

He looked at her.

She was very young. She had a headset round her neck and freckles and a county fire shirt two sizes too big for her, and her eyes were red, and she had done forty of these. She was looking at him and waiting.

"These three," he said. He put his finger on them. The twenty-two-oh-five, the twenty-two-twelve, the twenty-three-thirty-six. "They're not Z."

She looked at them. "Oh. No. Sorry. That's the printer. It grabs the block." She took the page from him and looked at it and gave it back. "You can ignore those. They're N. They're on Kautz's sheet. Just sign for yours."

"All right."

"Anything to flag on yours?"

He looked at his own lines. 21:30. *Div N (Kautz) requests 1 engine. Div Z: negative.*

"No," he said.

He took the pen. He signed at the bottom, in the box marked *Division lead*, his name, *L. Harris*, and the date, and the time, which he

read off his watch: 05:52. He initialled nothing. He gave her the pen back.

"Thanks," the young woman said. "Sorry. Long night."

"Yes."

She put the page on the pile marked *DONE*, face down, and said, "Division K," to the man behind him.

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He did not go back to the coffee urn. He left his coffee on the table where he had put it down, full, and walked out of the exhibit hall into the grey light.

On the step of the hall, outside the door, a young man was sitting with his helmet in his lap.

He was in yellow Nomex, burnt brown at the cuffs, and his face was black except for two clean rings round his eyes, and he was sitting on the concrete step with his knees up and his helmet on them and his hands on the helmet, looking at nothing, at the gravel of the fairgrounds lot, where the trucks were. A crew carrier was parked at the end of the row with a box on the back and *OPLAND* stencilled on the door. There was a deputy standing beside him on the step with a notebook, writing, and the young man was talking to him, low, slowly, as if he were reading it off something. Lyle could not hear most of it. He heard the end.

"Write down that I asked him," the young man said. "Will you? Write that down. That I asked."

"I've got it, son," the deputy said.

Lyle stood in the doorway of the exhibit hall behind them.

The young man did not look round. The deputy did, once, and saw a man in Nomex with a coffee-stained Harris Fireline shirt under it standing in the door, and looked back at his notebook.

Lyle went down the step past them, to the side, and across the gravel lot to his truck.

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He drove home.

He did not decide to. He got in the truck and turned out of the fairgrounds onto the highway and went east, through Roundup, past the grain elevator, where the town edge on Lakeview Road had black lawns and three houses gone and the nursing home on the corner of Lakeview and Second standing, white, untouched, with every light on and a nurse in the doorway smoking. He went on east. Past Musselshell. Over the Bull Mountains on the Colstrip road, which was open, through country that had burnt in the first week and was grey now, all of it, rock and ash and the black spars of the pines. Down into Colstrip. South, past the plant. Over the divide. Down the Rosebud.

It was ninety miles. He drove it with the radio off. At Colstrip his telephone found a tower and buzzed in his pocket with everything that had been waiting, and he did not take it out.

He came into his own yard at a quarter to eight.

The house was as he had left it on the second of August. The porch, with his mother's rocker on it. The cottonwood by the gate. The corral, with the horses in it, three, and the hay he had paid the Lame Deer boy's uncle to put out for them every morning. Rosalie's car, a small blue car with a dented door, parked by the porch steps. The kitchen window, with the light on in it, though it was day.

He stopped the truck in the yard and turned the engine off.

He did not get out.

He sat in the truck in the yard with his hands on the wheel. He had done this before. He had sat in this truck, in this place, on a night in August in 2032, with the engine off and his hands on the wheel, after his mother had told him at the kitchen table what she had kept from him about the easement since November, and after Mariah had gone. He had sat in it till morning that time. He remembered the light coming up over the hills to the east. He re-

membered the sound of the engine ticking as it cooled, for a long time, and then not.

It was ticking now.

In the kitchen window, behind the glass, something moved. He saw Rosalie's face come to the window and look out at the truck, and look at him, and go away again. A moment later the kitchen door opened and she came out onto the porch, in her scrubs, with a dish towel in her hand, and stood at the top of the steps.

She did not come down. She stood there with the dish towel and looked at him through the windscreen, and he looked at her.

Then she lifted her hand, the one with the towel in it, a little way, and pointed back over her shoulder, into the house, at the room behind the kitchen where his mother's bed was. And she nodded. Once. *She's here. She's awake. She's all right.*

He nodded back.

She went inside and left the door open behind her.

He sat in the truck. The engine ticked. In the corral one of the horses nickered at him, the old bay, and put her head over the rail. Out past the corral the Rosebud ran along the bottom of the yard, low, green, under its willows, and nothing in all that country had burnt. The sky over it was blue. It was the first blue sky he had seen in three weeks.

After a while he took his hands off the wheel.

He took the telephone out of his shirt pocket and looked at it. Eleven messages. Wilma. Boss. Mariah, from Helena, at six in the morning, who would have seen the news. Kautz's number, which he did not know he had. And one, at twenty past seven, from a number he knew better than any of them, that had come in while he was coming over the divide, with no message in it, only the call, unanswered, from the Lodgepole.

He looked at it for a long time.

Then he put the telephone face down on the seat beside him, and opened the door of the truck, and got out, and went up the steps into the house, where his mother was.

PART FOUR

Green-up

September 2049 – May 2050

22

The Third Paragraph

Thea did her buttons.

Shannon stood in the bedroom in her slip and her good black dress, the one she had bought for her father in 2044, and held her hands out in front of her, palms up, as if waiting to be handed something, and her daughter did the buttons up the back one at a time. There were eleven. Shannon counted them. Thea's fingers were cold and quick and sure, and when she got to the top one she did it and stood back and then came forward again and fixed the collar, which had folded under, and smoothed it flat with both hands.

"There," Thea said.

"Thank you."

"Do you want the gloves?"

Shannon looked at her hands. The dressings had come off on Thursday. The nurse at the clinic in Roundup had said they could, and had shown Thea how to put the cream on, and Thea had done it every morning and every night since, sitting on the edge of the bath with the tube, not talking. The backs of both hands were pink and shiny and tight, like the skin on scalded milk, and across the right palm there was a long stripe, darker, where the halter had been. She could close them now. Not all the way.

"No," she said. "No gloves."

Thea nodded. She picked up the hairbrush off the dresser and stood behind her mother and brushed her hair, which nobody had done for her since she was a child, and put it up, badly, with pins, and Shannon let her.

• • •

The paper had come on Friday.

Karin had brought it in from the box at the end of the lane and put it on the kitchen table, folded to the page, and gone out again without saying anything, and Shannon had sat down in front of it with her coffee and read it.

The sheriff-coroner's statement was on the second page, under the photograph of the fire from the Bench Road, the one everybody had seen, the column standing over the Bull Mountains with its top sheared off. It was four paragraphs. It gave Conor's name and his age and his address, and said he had been a volunteer with the county's evacuation sweep since 2041, and said where his vehicle had been found and at what time, and that the cause of death was smoke inhalation and burns, and that the Sheriff-Coroner's office extended its condolences. The third paragraph said what the office had established about his movements on the night. Shannon read the third paragraph twice. Then she turned the paper over, face down, and drank her coffee.

At the bottom of the page, in a box, the county's emergency management office had a notice of its own. *The Musselshell County Evacuation Plan was activated for 1,240 residents on 24 August. All residents ordered to evacuate were accounted for by 06:00 on 25 August.* And under that a telephone number for anybody who needed help with their livestock.

Jens had come in from the barn at seven and seen the paper on the table, face down, and looked at it, and not turned it over.

• • •

St. Columba's was full by half past ten. It was a small church, white, with a tin steeple, on the corner of Main and Fourth in Prosper, across from the Lutheran hall where they had all sat on the night of the twenty-fourth, and it had been built by the Butte families who came down to the Musselshell after the first war, and it had never in its life been full. It was full now. People were standing at the back and along the side walls under the stations of the cross, and on the steps outside, and on the grass, in the heat, with their hats in their hands.

Shannon sat in the front pew with Beth and Kieran. That was where the family sat. Beth on the aisle, then Kieran, then Shannon, and on Shannon's other side Jens, and Thea, and Nils, and Karin at the end with her stick. Across the aisle the Holmquists, and old Ray Dunning in a suit that had been made for a bigger man, and the Lunds, and Cody Lund in his brown uniform with his hat on his knee, who had driven her out of the yard at half past twelve that night and had not let go of her elbow from the yard to the church hall, and had stayed till four.

The coffin was in front of them on its trestles, closed, with a spray of white flowers on it and Conor's hat. His good hat. Beth had found it on the peg by the back door, where he had left it when he went out in the other one.

Father Duggan read the readings. Kieran got up and read one too, from the lectern, in his clean shirt, the Ecclesiastes one, *a time to be born and a time to die*, that their father had wanted at their mother's and Conor had wanted at their father's. He read it without stopping and without looking up, in a voice so even it sounded like somebody else's, and came back and sat down beside his mother, and Beth took his hand and held it on her knee.

Shannon did not hear much of the rest. She sat with her hands in her lap, palms up, because they hurt less that way, and looked at the hat on the coffin.

She thought about the white shirt. The good one he wore to sales. He had put it on to drive the river road for the county in the middle of the night on a Level Three, as if somebody were going to see him.

Near the end, when they stood for the commendation, Thea reached over and took her mother's right hand in hers. Carefully, by the wrist and the fingers, as she would have picked up a bird. Shannon let her. They stood like that, and Father Duggan said the words, and the hand hurt, and she did not take it away.

• • •

They buried him beside their father.

The Rourke graves were at the top of the Catholic cemetery on the hill north of Prosper, in the corner, in a row, under a juniper somebody had planted in 1931: their great-grandfather, who had come down from Butte; their grandparents; their mother, in 2029; their father, in 2044. The stones were all the same grey granite from the yard in Billings. Conor's would come in the spring.

It was hot on the hill. The grass was brown. From up there you could see south across the river bottom to the bench and the Bull Mountains beyond it, black, all of it, from the foot of the mountains to the bench edge, and the coulee, and the black stripe of the Rourke river meadow along the river, and on the near side of the river the Lodgepole flat, black, with the paddock fences gone and the green square of the west meadow standing in the middle of it.

Shannon did not look at it. She looked at the hole in the ground, and at the green carpet the funeral home had laid over the dirt beside it, and at the coffin going down on its straps.

Afterwards, when the priest had gone and people were going back down the hill to their cars in twos and threes, she saw Jens and Kieran at the grave.

They were standing on either side of it. Kieran had a handful of dirt and he dropped it in, and dusted his hand on his trousers, and looked up, and Jens was there, on the other side, with his hat in his

hand. They looked at each other across the hole. She was too far off to hear what they said. She saw Kieran say something short. She saw Jens nod. She saw Kieran say something else, longer, and Jens look away from him, south, towards the river, and back, and say one word, or two.

Then Jens put his hand out across the grave.

Kieran looked at it a long moment. Then he took it. They shook, once, as men shook at a sale when the price was agreed, and let go.

Kieran came round the end of the grave towards her. Jens stayed where he was.

"What did he say?" she said.

Kieran stopped beside her. He looked back at Jens.

"I said there's the trail to talk about. And the bench. And the lease, and the water." His face did not move. "I said after. When the estate's in order. He said after."

"That's all?"

"He said he was sorry about Dad." Kieran put his hat on. "I said I know."

He went on down the hill to where Beth was waiting by the car.

• • •

The hall was the Lutheran hall, because St. Columba's had no hall of its own and never had. The Lutheran women did the lunch. They did it as they had done every funeral lunch in Prosper since 1961 whatever church the dead had gone to, with ham and scalloped potatoes and three kinds of jelly salad and the coffee urn, and it was the same hall, with the same cots folded and stacked against the back wall, and the same high windows under the eaves with the ceiling fan going round.

Shannon could not hold a plate. Thea held one for her and stood beside her with it, and Shannon did not eat anything off it.

People came to her. They came and stood in front of her and said they were sorry, and some of them touched her arm, and looked at

her hands and looked away. Mrs. Holmquist. Ray Dunning, who held her elbow and said, "He was the best roper ever came out of this county," and could not say anything else, and went away. The young man from the sweep coordinator's office, whom she did not know, who said Conor had been the most reliable volunteer on the river road for eight years and had never once missed a shift. A county commissioner, Bill Ostrander, in a tie, who held her hand too long, the burnt one, without noticing, and said, "You know, Shannon, everybody that plan was asked to get out, it got out. Twelve hundred people. I just want you to know that. It did what it was built to do," and she said, "Thank you, Bill," and took her hand back.

Beth found her by the coffee urn.

Beth was small and round and grey and had been born in Roundup and married Conor at nineteen, and she had sat at the front of the church that morning with her back very straight and her son's hand in her lap and had not cried at all. She was not crying now. She had a cup of coffee in her hand, black, which she did not drink, and she came and stood beside Shannon at the urn, facing the room, so that they were side by side, like two women waiting for a bus.

"Did you read it?" Beth said. "In the paper."

"I read it."

"The third part."

"Yes."

Beth looked out at the room. At the long tables, and the people at them, eating ham, and the children under the tables, and the cots against the wall.

"Mr. Rourke departed from the assigned route," Beth said.

She said it in a flat, careful voice, a voice for reading out loud, each word separate, as if the paper were in front of her and she were reading it to somebody who could not see it.

Shannon did not say anything.

"I rang them," Beth said. "The sheriff. Yesterday. I said what does that mean. And he was very kind. He said it means the Hand had a route for Conor, for the sweep, and the route went along the river road past your place and on to Prosper and back, and it did not go into your paddock. He said there's a record of it, of where the truck went, and the truck went off the route at a quarter past eleven and into your gate." She turned the cup round in her hands. "He said they put it in the statement because it's a fact, and they put the facts in. He said it doesn't mean anything else. He said it was so people would know what happened."

"I know what happened," Shannon said.

"I know you do." Beth looked at her then, for the first time, sideways. "I know you do, love. You were there." She looked back at the room. "Forty-one years I was married to that man. He never once in forty-one years went where he was sent. Not to the shop. Not to Mass. He'd go to Roundup for a part and come back by way of Harlowton." She drank some of the coffee, finally. "They could have put that in the paper. That would have been a fact."

They stood at the urn.

"Kieran says there's to be a review," Beth said. "By the state. Of the night. Of all of it. They'll want to talk to you."

"I know."

"Will you talk to them?"

"Yes."

"Good." Beth put her cup down on the table by the urn. "Somebody ought to. He'd not have. He'd have told them a joke and gone home." She put her hand on Shannon's arm, above the wrist, where there was no burn, and held it there a moment. Then she went away across the hall to where Kieran was standing with the priest.

• • •

Lyle Harris had been at the back of the church.

Shannon had seen him when they came out behind the coffin, standing against the back wall under the fourteenth station, in a dark jacket and a white shirt with no tie, with his hat in his hand. He had looked at her as she went past. He had not come to the cemetery. He was not at the hall. Somebody said, at the coffee urn, that he had driven down from the Rosebud that morning, a hundred and ten miles, and driven back again straight after, because his mother was poorly. Somebody else said his mother was ninety-two.

She thought about that, standing at the urn.

• • •

They drove home at four.

Jens drove. Karin in front beside him, and Shannon in the back with the children, as if she were a child herself. Nobody talked. At the end of the lane, at the cattle guard, Jens slowed, as he always slowed, and the pickup went over the guard with the sound it always made, and up the lane, through the cottonwoods, which had their bark burnt black along the river side and their leaves brown and falling, into the yard.

The log barn was standing. The house was standing. The round pen, with its burnt side. Pell's was in the round pen with the others, and she lifted her head when the truck came into the yard and looked at it, and put it down again.

Shannon went into the house.

She went through the kitchen and into the front room and took the ledger off the shelf by the window, where Karin kept it, and brought it back to the kitchen table and sat down.

Karin came in behind her and stood in the kitchen door.

Shannon opened the ledger at the back. At Dagny's forecasts, in Karin's large unsteady hand, and Arne's old entries, and the one from the nineteenth, *Watch the 24th*. She turned past them to the next clean page. She took the pen out of the spine. She held it. Her

fingers would close round it most of the way, and the stripe across her palm, where the halter had been, pulled.

At the top of the page she wrote her name.

Shannon Rourke Tollefsen.

She had never written in the ledger. In seventeen years she had never once written in it; it was Karin's, and Arne's before her, and Dagny's at the back. She looked at her name at the top of the clean page in her own hand, which was not her own hand now, which went up and down.

Under it she wrote the date.

24 August 2049.

She did not write anything else. She sat with the pen in her hand and looked at what she had written, and Karin stood in the kitchen door and looked at her, and neither of them said anything.

Then Shannon put the pen back in the spine of the ledger and shut it, and left it on the table, and went out to the round pen to see to the horses.

23

Learning Review

The woman from the state came on the fifth of October, a Tuesday, at ten in the morning, in a white car with a seal on the door.

Jens saw her come up the lane from the shop. He had been expecting her. She had rung on the Thursday before, a woman's voice, pleasant, with Helena in it, and said her name was Ruth Haugen and she was with the state's wildland fire learning review for the Dutchman fire, and that she was talking to everybody who had been involved on the night of the twenty-fourth, and would it be convenient. He had said yes. He had not known what else to say. She had said it was not an investigation, it was a review; it was not about blame, it was about learning; nothing he said would be used against anybody. She said it as if she had said it at every kitchen table on the fire.

He wiped his hands on a rag and went up to the house.

She was standing by the car looking at the yard. She was a woman of fifty or so, tall, in a fleece jacket and jeans and good boots that had been on burnt ground, with her grey hair cut short and a canvas bag over her shoulder. She was looking at the round pen, at the side of it that had burnt. Then she turned round and looked at him coming across the gravel, and put out her hand.

"Mr. Tollefsen. Ruth Haugen."

"Jens."

"Jens." She shook his hand. She had a good grip, short. "Thank you for seeing me. I know it's calving season. No. It's not. It's shipping. I'm from Helena, I get them backwards." She smiled. "Is the kitchen all right? I've got a recorder. If you don't want it on, I won't."

"It's all right."

• • •

They sat at the kitchen table.

Karin was at the stove, making bread. She had been making bread when the car came up the lane and she went on making it. She said good morning to Ruth Haugen and offered her coffee and gave it to her, and went back to the dough, with her back to the table, kneading, and did not leave the room. Jens had known she would not.

Ruth Haugen put the recorder on the table between them, a small grey box with a red light, and a laptop beside it that she did not open, and a notebook. She explained it all again. The review. What it was for. Who would see it. That he would get a copy of the parts that came from him, to correct, before anything was final. That the final report would be public, a summary of it, and the full file would not, because people had to be able to talk.

"So," she said. "In your own words. As much as you want. Start wherever it starts for you."

He looked at the recorder.

"It starts in July," he said. "The fire was twenty miles south."

• • •

He told it in order. He did not know any other way to tell it.

He told her about the lease and the grazing, and the trail, and the co-op letter on the Saturday that wrote the grazing off. He told her about the sheriff at the gym and the permits that were for trucks only, and the state lease, and what the Land Board did to a lease with a citation on it. He told her about the gather on the Monday,

and the water lot, and the colony boys, and waiting for the heat to go out of the day on the Tuesday, and the fire coming out of the mountains at six. She did not interrupt him. She wrote, now and then, in the notebook, small, and looked up, and let him go on.

He told her about the Hogback and the draw, the 1984 draw. She asked him to show her on a map, and opened the laptop, and he showed her, and she looked at it for a long time.

"You'd never been down it," she said.

"No."

"In the dark."

"Yes."

She wrote something.

He told her about the trail gate, and the road, and the fences on both sides, and the barrow ditches. He told her about the cow that went down in the ditch and the colony boy who got her tail. He told her it was half a mile from the trail gate to the ford gate and it took them fifty-eight minutes.

"And the truck," she said.

"It came down the coulee about ten. Stopped behind the drag. The crew boss walked up."

"What did he say to you?"

"He asked me to split them. Give him a lane."

"And what did you say?"

He looked at the recorder. The little red light.

"I said they were strung out on the road, the length of it, six hundred yards, fenced both sides. Three hundred pair. I said if I split them in the dark in that I'd scatter the pairs. The calves would lose their mothers. They'd go into the brush and I wouldn't get them back out, with the fire coming. I said it'd take him longer waiting for me to split them than walking behind them to the ford gate." He stopped. "Half an hour. I said half an hour."

"Was that right? Half an hour?"

"It was fifty minutes."

She wrote.

"Do you think it was the right call?" she said. "With the cattle. Not about the truck. Just as a stockman. If you were telling another rancher. Would splitting them have scattered them?"

"Yes," he said.

That was true. It had been true on the road and it was true at the kitchen table. Pairs pushed into the willows of the river meadow in the dark, in smoke, with the fire coming down off the bench face, would have scattered. He would have lost calves. He would have lost cows. He would have been in there with two colony boys and his son hunting them in the brush with the willows going up round them. Anybody who had ever moved a pair in the dark knew it.

She did not ask him anything else about the truck.

Behind him, at the stove, Karin turned the dough over on the board and pushed it away from her with the heels of her hands, and folded it, and pushed it again.

• • •

Ruth Haugen asked him about the drag.

"Who was riding drag? When the crew boss came up?"

"My son."

"How old is he?"

"Twelve."

She looked at him. "He was with you the whole night?"

"The whole night. On drag."

"I'd like to talk to him." She said it carefully. "If you and your wife agreed. With you there, or with her. It's entirely up to you. We don't interview anybody under eighteen unless the family asks us to. Some families want it. Some don't. Some kids want to." She put her pen down. "You don't have to decide now."

"He's at school."

"That's fine."

"He doesn't—" Jens stopped. "He doesn't talk much."

"That's fine too." She picked up the pen again. "Think about it. Talk to your wife. If you want me to talk to him, ring me. If you don't, you don't have to do anything."

He nodded.

He did not ring her, or talk to Shannon about it, and afterwards he could not remember deciding not to.

• • •

She told him some things too, before she went. She said she always did; people wanted to know where they fitted. She opened the laptop and showed him a timeline, a long one, with lines across it in different colours for the different crews and divisions, and his own line, which was a thin brown one, *Tollefsen livestock*, that came down off the top of the screen at eight o'clock and ran along to ten to eleven and stopped.

He looked at the other lines. A red one, *Opland IA*, came down out of the top at twenty to ten and ran into his brown one at ten o'clock and stopped there, both of them, side by side, for twelve minutes. Then the red one went back up, and away, a long way round, off to the side of the screen and back, and came down again at twenty-five to midnight at *Div N*.

There was another line. A short one, grey, that came out of the side at half past nine and went nowhere. It said *Div N req. 1 eng. — Div Z*. And then *not released*.

"What's that?" he said.

"Oh. That's the division supervisor in the bottom asking for an engine to sit on your paddocks till the crew got there. From the campus. The campus had two engines on its perimeter." She looked at it. "They had fire on their own fence at the time, and the plan held them there. So it didn't go." She closed the laptop. "There were a lot of those that night. Everybody asking everybody for something. That's what the review is for, really. All the asks that didn't get answered, and why."

He did not say anything.

He knew whose engines held the campus. The whole county had known since July. Two engines. Harris Fireline. Division Z.

If you've got anything left up there, Jens, the voice on his telephone had said. *Ring me.* He had listened to it at last on the third of September, the night before the funeral, sitting in the pickup in the yard, all of it, once, a minute long, and then deleted it, and then sat there.

"Thank you, Jens," Ruth Haugen said, standing. "I'll send you your section. A few weeks. Read it, correct anything I got wrong, sign it, send it back. If there's anything else you think of, anything you think we should know, ring me. Any time."

"There isn't anything else."

"You might think of something." She put the recorder in her bag. "People do. At three in the morning, usually."

She said goodbye to Karin, who said goodbye to her and gave her a loaf of the bread from yesterday wrapped in a tea towel to take back to Helena, and she went out to the white car and drove away down the lane.

Karin went back to the dough.

Jens sat at the table.

• • •

The section came on the twenty-sixth.

It came in a long white envelope with the state seal on it, addressed to him, and Karin brought it in from the box with the rest of the mail and put it on the kitchen table in front of his place at noon, on top, and went to the stove. He came in from the shop at half past twelve and sat down and saw it and opened it with his thumb.

It was eleven pages. A covering letter, one page, from Ruth Haugen, saying what it was and what to do with it. Then nine pages headed *Participant Account: Tollefsen, J. (Draft for Participant Review)*. It was what he had said. She had written it down well. She had

his words, a lot of them, in quotation marks, and between them her own, short, plain, in order. *Mr. Tollefsen stated that the herd was strung out along approximately six hundred yards of fenced road. Mr. Tollefsen stated that splitting the herd in the dark would have scattered the pairs.* It was all there. It was all true. There was nothing in it he had not said, and nothing he had said that was not in it.

The last page was different. It was headed *Preliminary Findings Relevant to This Account (Draft — Not for Distribution)*. It was half a page.

He read it.

The contingency resource assigned to Division N (Opland IA) was delayed approximately 68 minutes en route by livestock on the campus access road and subsequently rerouted. Ember ignition in the river-bottom buffer was first observed at approximately 22:40. Frontal passage occurred at 23:20. The review finds that had the contingency resource arrived as planned (ETA 22:28), it may have been in a position to hold the paddock line at the Lodgepole and adjacent properties during the period of initial ember ignition. The review is unable to determine whether the resource would have been able to hold the line through frontal passage. A civilian fatality occurred in the buffer at approximately 23:24.

He read it again.

May have been in a position to hold the paddock line.

He sat at the table with the page in his hand. The kitchen was warm. The bread was in the oven and the smell of it was in the room, and the radio on the windowsill was on low, the farm report, the Billings sale, steers four-fifty to five-fifty, down eleven on the week, and the clock over the door said twenty to one.

He did not know how long he sat there.

He knew that Karin was at the stove behind him. He knew, without turning round, that she had stopped what she was doing.

He could not hear her doing anything. The radio went on. The clock. The oven ticking. Behind him, there was no sound at all from his mother, and he knew she was looking at him, at the back of his head and his shoulders and the page in his hand, and he knew she had been looking at him since he opened the envelope.

He folded the page. He folded it with the others, on their folds, the eleven pages, and put them back in the long white envelope, and put the envelope in the inside pocket of his jacket, which was on the back of his chair.

Then he ate his dinner. Karin put it in front of him, beef and potatoes and the bread, and he ate it, and she sat down across from him and ate hers, and neither of them said anything, and when he had finished he put his plate in the sink and put on his jacket with the envelope in it and went back out to the shop.

That night he signed the participant's copy at the desk in the front room after everybody had gone to bed. There was nothing to correct. He put it in the envelope she had sent for it, stamped, addressed, and put the envelope in the mailbox at the end of the lane at five the next morning, in the dark, and put the flag up. He put the findings page in the bottom drawer of his father's desk, under the tax papers from 2041, and shut the drawer.

He did not tell Shannon it had come, and she did not know there was anything to ask about.

• • •

On the Thursday he took the cattle book back from Thea.

She had kept it since April. Since calving, when he had been laid up with his back for a week and she had done the night checks and written them down, and then gone on doing it, the tags and the weights and the doctoring and the pasture moves, all through the summer, in her own hand, which was small and very clear and slanted backward. He had let her. He had looked at it now and then.

He had not said anything about it, and neither had she, and it had lived on the shelf in the barn office with her pencil in the spine.

He took it down on the Thursday night, after supper, and brought it into the kitchen, and sat down at the table with it and his reading glasses and a calculator, and opened it at April, and began to go through it.

Thea came in from the barn at eight and saw him.

She stopped in the door. She was in her chore clothes, with hay in her hair, and she stood there and looked at the book open on the table in front of him, and his glasses, and the calculator, and her face did something he did not see because he was not looking at it.

"What are you doing?"

"Checking the figures."

"What figures?"

"The book. Weights. Doctoring." He did not look up. "We're shipping light. I want to know where we are."

"You know where we are. It's all in there. I did the weights on the twenty-eighth of September." She came to the table. "What's wrong with them?"

"Nothing yet."

"Then why are you checking them?"

He turned a page. "Because it's my book."

She stood beside the table. He could feel her standing there. He went on down the column with his finger, adding, and the calculator agreed with her, line after line, and he turned the page and went on.

"It was my book," Thea said. "Since April."

"I know."

"I didn't make any mistakes."

"I know. I haven't found any."

"Then—"

"Thea." He looked up at her then, over his glasses. "Go and wash. There's hay in your hair. Your grandmother's got pie."

She looked at him. She was fifteen and she had her mother's face, the Rourke face, which he had seen across the grave in Kieran on the fourth of September, and it was very still.

Then she turned round and went out of the kitchen, and up the stairs, and he heard her door shut, not hard.

He went on through the book. It took him till eleven. He went through every page from April to October, every weight and every tag and every dose, and checked every one, and she had not made a single mistake. Not one. Her figures were better than his. Her hand was better than his. She had caught a cow in July with a bad quarter that he had missed, and written it down, and doctored it, and written that down, and the cow was in the book in October with four good quarters and a heifer calf at four hundred and sixty pounds.

At eleven he shut the book.

Karin was sitting in the chair by the stove with her knitting. She had been sitting there since Thea went up, three hours, and she had not knitted much. She looked at him over her glasses when he shut the book.

"Well?" she said.

"It's all right."

"All of it?"

"All of it."

Karin looked at him a long time.

"Then give it back to her," she said.

He did not answer. He took the book and his glasses and the calculator and went out through the back door, across the yard in the dark, to the barn office, and put the book on the shelf, and took Thea's pencil out of the spine, and put his own in.

24

The Second Engine

Evelyn died at a quarter to five in the morning on the ninth of December, in the bed in the room behind the kitchen, with the stove going and Lyle in the chair beside her.

He had been in the chair since one. Rosalie had come to the door of his room at one and said, "Lyle," once, in the dark, and he had known from the way she said it, and got up and put his jeans on and come. Rosalie had gone to sit in the kitchen. She had said she would be in the kitchen, and she was; he could hear her, every so often, getting up to put wood in the stove, and the stove door, and her chair. The rest of the time he could hear the clock, and his mother breathing.

She breathed the way she had breathed on the telephone in August. Slowly. With a catch at the top. And a long letting go. Only now the catch was longer, and the letting go was longer, and the space between the end of one and the start of the next went on so long that each time he leaned forward in the chair, and waited, and each time she breathed again.

He held her hand. It was very light. It had always been a big hand for a woman, a working hand, and it had gone small in the last year, as if it were going back into her, and the skin on the back of it was so thin he could see everything under it. He held it in both of his. He

had said what he had to say in the weeks before, a little at a time, in the evenings, when she was awake, and she had said what she had to say to him, and there had not been much of it, either way, and it had been enough.

At a quarter to five she breathed out, a long way, and did not breathe in.

He sat and waited. He waited a long time, leaning forward, with her hand in his. The clock went on. The stove ticked. Out in the kitchen Rosalie's chair scraped, and stopped.

Then he put her hand down on the blanket, on her chest, where it had been before, and got up, and went to the kitchen door, and Rosalie looked up at him from the table, and he nodded.

• • •

She had left instructions.

They were in the box. The one she had kept on the top shelf of the wardrobe for sixty years, with the fair ribbons in it and the photographs and her mother's beaded barrette, and the envelope from the university with the torn end that she had kept for Mariah and given to Mariah and Mariah had given back. On top of the envelope there was a sheet of lined paper folded in four, in her hand, the old hand, from before it shook, and dated 2041.

Lyle, it said. *At Busby, by my mother. Not by your father. He will understand, he is by his. The blue dress. The barrette in my hair. Herbie's grandmother to sing if she is living and if not then whoever she says. The Methodist man can say the words if he wants, short. No flowers, they are dear in winter and they freeze. Feed people. Tell Mariah. — E.*

He read it at the kitchen table at seven in the morning with Rosalie beside him, and then he gave it to her to read, and she read it and gave it back, and said, "She told me about the barrette. In October. She said, *Make sure he finds the paper*," and wiped her eyes with the back of her wrist.

He rang Mariah at half past seven.

She answered on the second ring. She was at her desk in Helena; he could hear it, the quiet of an office early, and a printer somewhere. She said, "Dad," and then she did not say anything, because she knew. He had never once rung her at half past seven in the morning in seventeen years.

"This morning," he said. "At a quarter to five. At home."

"I'll come," Mariah said.

• • •

They buried her on the thirteenth, a Monday, at Busby, in the cold.

It was twenty-two below at nine in the morning. The ground had been frozen three feet down since the middle of November, and the tribal roads crew had brought the ground heater out on the Saturday and set it over the place under a tarp for two days, and on the Monday morning they had opened it with the backhoe, and the dirt came up out of the hole in frozen slabs and lay beside it in a heap with steam coming off it in the sun.

The cemetery was on the hill above the town. There were not many trees. There was snow on the ground, old, crusted, blown into the lee of the stones, and the stones went up the hill in their rows, some granite and some wood and some only a cross, with the names on them that Lyle had grown up with. Two Moons. Spotted Elk. Little Bear. Small. Her mother's was near the top, granite, grey, with a name on it that was not Harris. Next to it was the hole.

There were more people than he had thought there would be. They had come from Lame Deer and Busby and Ashland, and from Billings and Denver and one from Oklahoma, the cousins and the children of cousins, the thirty-one she had once counted with a pencil, or some of them; and the woman from Tacoma, whom nobody had met, who turned out to be small and old and wearing a red coat and to have Evelyn's face exactly. They stood on the hill in the cold in their coats with their breath going up, and the crew

stood among them. Herbie and his wife. The Spotted Elk brothers. Boss, with his grandfather on his arm, who was eighty-six and had come up the hill on foot because he would not be driven. The girl from Ashland. The boy from Lame Deer. Rosalie, with her mother.

Six of them carried her. Herbie, and Boss, and the two Spotted Elk brothers, and two of the cousins from Lame Deer whose names Lyle knew and whose faces he had not seen since they were boys. They carried her up from the hearse to the top of the hill on their shoulders, slowly, through the crusted snow, with their breath going up, and set her down beside her mother.

The Methodist man said the words. They were short.

Then Herbie's grandmother sang.

She was a very old woman, older than Boss's grandfather, in a long dark coat and a scarf over her head, and she stood at the head of the grave in the snow with a young woman holding her elbow on either side, and sang in Cheyenne. Lyle did not have the words. His mother had had some of them. He had heard this, or something like it, on this hill, in 1999, when they buried his grandmother, and he had been fifteen and had not listened, and he listened now. It was not loud. It went up and down, in the cold, and the old woman's voice cracked on it and went on, and the wind took some of it away across the hill towards the town and the river, and the people stood in the snow and listened, and nobody moved until it stopped.

He stood at the foot of the grave with his hat in his hand. His ears were burning with the cold. Mariah was beside him.

She had come on the Saturday, in a small grey car from Helena, and stayed in her old room, and on the Sunday she had sat with him at the kitchen table and helped him with the paper for the funeral home and the paper for the county and the paper for the bank, and asked him questions, exact ones, and written the answers down on a yellow pad in her small clear lawyer's hand, and he had answered. She had not asked him anything else. She had found the box on the top shelf of the wardrobe and sat on the bed in her grandmother's

room with it on her knees for a long time, with the door shut. When she came out she had the university envelope with the torn end in her hand, and she put it in her own bag, and neither of them spoke of it.

Now she stood beside him in a black wool coat that was too thin for Busby in December and a pair of town boots, and he could see her shivering, and he did not know whether he was allowed to put his arm round her. He had not put his arm round her since she was eighteen.

When the old woman stopped singing, Mariah took his arm. She put her hand through it, at the elbow, the way her grandmother had used to on the porch steps, and held it.

They stood like that while the cousins and the crew went past the grave one at a time and dropped their handfuls of frozen dirt on the box.

Afterwards, at the community hall in town, they fed people, as she had said. There was a great deal of food. Rosalie's mother and Herbie's wife and a dozen other women had cooked for two days, and there was fry bread and stew and three turkeys and a ham, and the coffee, and people ate, and talked, and children ran between the tables, and an old man Lyle did not know came and stood in front of him and said, "She was the best rider on this creek in 1975, man or woman, you know that? Best rider on the creek," and shook his hand and went away.

Mariah stayed till the Tuesday.

On the Tuesday morning she stood by the small grey car in the yard at seven, in the dark, with the engine running to warm it, and her bag in the back, and said, "Will you be all right?"

"Yes."

"You're on your own out here now."

"I've got the horses. And Herbie's down the road." He stood with his hands in his coat pockets. "I'll be all right."

She looked at him. She was thirty-five. She had her grandmother's height and her mother's eyes and his own way of standing, with her weight back, as though she were waiting for something to come at her.

"Grandma said you were on the Dutchman," she said. "In August. She said you had the campus."

"Yes."

"I read about it. In the paper. The man who died, at the river." She was quiet a moment. "Was that near you?"

"A mile."

She waited. After a while she nodded, as though he had said something, and opened the car door.

"I'll ring," she said. "On Sundays."

"All right."

She got in and drove away down the lane in the dark with her headlights on the snow, and he stood in the yard and watched them all the way to the county road.

• • •

In January he sat at the kitchen table with the contract.

He sat there in the evenings with the stove going and his mother's chair empty by it, with the Tri-Basin contract and the bank statements and the payment book for the second engine and a pencil and a pad, and he did the figures.

He did them three nights running. He had done them in his head already, in December, standing on the hill at Busby and lying in bed afterwards, and he knew what they would come to, and he did them on paper anyway, slowly, the way his father had taught him to figure a hay crop, every line, so that there would be no mistake.

The first engine was paid for. The second was not. The second had been bought in 2046 on a seven-year note from the bank in Billings, at nine percent, and the payments were two thousand eight hundred and forty a month, and they had been paid, every month,

out of the campus contract. The campus contract was the floor. Without the floor, the outfit was what it had been before the campus: forest service call-when-needed and the state and the reservation, a good summer or a bad one, and you did not know which until September. In a good summer the outfit could carry one engine and the crew and the ranch. In a bad summer it could carry the ranch. It could not carry the second engine in any summer he had ever seen without the floor under it.

He did the figures three times. They came out the same.

On the fourth night he wrote the letter.

It was short. He wrote it out by hand first, on the pad, and then typed it on the laptop Mariah had left him and printed it on the printer in the office, and signed it. *To Tri-Basin Computing, Site Operations, Campus 4. Re: Perimeter Protection Agreement 2049–2052. Harris Fireline gives notice of termination of the Agreement at the end of the current term, 31 March 2050, in accordance with Section 12.2. We thank Tri-Basin for its business. L. Harris.*

He read it over. He did not put a reason in it. Section 12.2 did not require one.

He put it in an envelope and drove it to the post office in Lame Deer the next morning himself, and posted it, and stood on the post office step afterwards in the cold and did not know what he felt. He had stood at the end of the engine shed on the night of the twenty-fourth with the clause in his head and the radio in his hand and done the arithmetic, and the arithmetic had been right, and he would do it again; he knew that as surely as he knew his name. He would hold the campus again.

He sold the second engine in the third week of January to a contractor in Billings named Kessel, who came down with his son and a lowboy and looked it over in the yard in the snow for two hours and offered him sixty-one thousand, which was twenty-eight thousand less than he owed on it. Lyle took it. He paid the bank the sixty-one and wrote a cheque for the twenty-eight out of the ranch account,

which left the ranch account at a figure he did not write down anywhere.

He stood in the yard and watched the lowboy go down the lane with the engine chained on the back of it, red, with *HARRIS FIRELINE* still on the door, and the Kessel boy in the cab waving.

• • •

The after-action packet came on the twenty-fourth of January.

It came in a big brown envelope from the state, addressed to Harris Fireline, with the close-out papers for the campus contract and the operational period summaries and a copy of every roster he had signed in August, for his records. He went through it at the kitchen table. He found the one he wanted near the bottom.

DIV Z — ROSTER — OP PERIOD 24 AUG 18:00 – 25 AUG 06:00. With his signature at the bottom, *L. Harris, 05:52*, in the box marked *Division lead.* And under his own four lines, the three that were not his, that the printer had grabbed with the block. *22:05. 22:12. 23:36.*

Crew rerouted: livestock on access road.

He looked at it for a long time.

Then he folded it in four, along the folds the post had already put in it, and put it in his shirt pocket, and the next morning, the twenty-fifth, a Tuesday, five months to the day, he got in the truck at six and drove the hundred and ten miles to the Lodgepole.

• • •

He got there at half past eight, in a grey light, with the snow coming down small and dry out of a white sky.

He had not been on the Lodgepole since 2038. He had driven past the end of the lane on the river road a hundred times since then, and looked up it, and not turned in. He turned in now. The cattle guard. The cottonwoods along the lane, burnt black on the river side, with snow on the burnt bark. The yard. The house, the shop,

the log barn. And beyond the log barn, new since his day, a long low calving barn with a steel roof and lights on in it, and a pickup parked at the end of it with the engine running and exhaust coming out of the back.

He parked beside the pickup and got out.

Jens was in the cab. He had seen the truck come up the lane; Lyle could tell by the way he was sitting. He was sitting with both hands on the wheel, looking straight ahead through the windscreen at the end wall of the calving barn, and when Lyle came round the front of the pickup he leaned over without looking round and pushed the passenger door open from inside.

Lyle got in and shut the door.

It was warm in the cab. The heater was going. There was a coffee in the cup holder, half drunk, and a flashlight and a calving chain on the dash, and the radio was off. Through the windscreen, through the open door at the end of the calving barn, Lyle could see a heifer in a pen under the lights, lying on her side in the straw, straining, and a calf's front feet, small and yellow, showing.

"She's all right," Jens said. "She'll do it herself. Give her twenty minutes."

They sat and watched her.

"I'm sorry about your mother," Jens said.

"Thank you."

"Shannon saw it in the paper. She said she was ninety-two."

"Ninety-two."

They sat. The heifer strained, and rested, and strained. The snow came down past the windscreen, dry, small, and some of it landed on the glass and stayed.

"You rang me," Lyle said. "That morning. The twenty-fifth. At twenty past seven."

"I know."

"You didn't leave anything."

"No." Jens looked at the heifer. "I don't know what I was going to say. I had the phone in my hand, and your number was on it, from the night. And I rang it. And it rang, and I didn't know what I was going to say, and it went to the message, and I hung up."

Lyle took the roster page out of his shirt pocket.

He did not unfold it. He held it, folded, on his knee, in his hand, where Jens could see it.

"That's the roster," he said. "For my division. For the night. I signed it at the fairgrounds at ten to six that morning." He looked at the page. "At half past nine that night the man on N asked me for an engine. One engine. To sit on your paddock fence till the crew came. I had two. I had fire on my own fence. I had a clause in my contract that would have put me in breach for taking one off the perimeter, and a note at the bank that the contract was holding up, and a plan that said Z held. And I kept it." He turned the page over on his knee. "I kept both of them. It would have been on your fence at a quarter to ten. Fourteen minutes. I timed it in August."

Jens did not say anything for a long time.

The heifer strained. The calf's feet came out further, and a nose, and the tip of a tongue.

"I left the hay gate shut," Jens said.

Lyle waited.

"Rourke's hay gate. On the river side, two hundred yards ahead of me, when the crew boss came up." Jens kept his eyes on the heifer. "My boy saw it. He said, *Dad, the hay gate.* I could have put the front half in the river meadow and let the truck by. I said they'd scatter. They would have. I'd have lost cattle in the brush in the dark, and the willows went up in there later." He was quiet. "And I didn't ask the crew boss where he was going. He started to tell me. His radio cut him off. And I didn't ask."

"Did you know?"

"I knew it was a crew. I knew there was one crew for the bottom." Jens took his hands off the wheel and put them on his knees. "I knew."

They sat.

In the pen under the lights the heifer gave a long push and the calf came, all at once, in a rush, out onto the straw, and lay there, wet and yellow and still. The heifer lay a moment. Then she lifted her head, and looked round at it, and lowered her head and began to lick it, hard, along its face and its neck, and after a while the calf shook its head and sneezed.

"There," Jens said.

They watched the heifer lick the calf.

"There's a review," Lyle said. "The state's. My part's in it. The engine. What I said. That's in the file."

"Mine's in it."

"The hay gate?"

"What I said." Jens looked at the calf. "Not the hay gate."

Lyle looked at the folded page on his knee.

The kitchen door of the house opened across the yard and Shannon came out on the step. She stood on the step in a barn coat with her hands in the pockets, looking at the two pickups by the calving barn in the snow. Then she went back in, and came out again a minute later with two mugs, and came across the yard towards them through the snow in her boots, carefully, holding the mugs out in front of her.

Jens wound his window down.

"Lyle," Shannon said. She handed the mugs in, one and then the other, across Jens, and Lyle took his. Her hands were pink and shiny on the backs. "I'm sorry about Evelyn. I saw it in the Billings paper."

"Thank you."

"Will you come in? There's breakfast."

"In a minute," Jens said. "He's looking at the heifer."

Shannon looked past them through the windscreen at the calving pen. “She’s had it.”

“She’s had it. Bull calf.”

“Good.” Shannon looked at Lyle a moment longer, and he could not tell what she was thinking. Then she said, “Don’t let it get cold,” and went back across the yard to the house, and the door shut behind her.

Jens wound the window up.

They held the mugs. The coffee was hot. Through the windscreen the calf was trying to get its front legs under it, and falling over, and trying again.

“She doesn’t know,” Lyle said.

“No.”

“About the engine. Or the gate.”

“No.”

Jens did not look at the kitchen window. He looked at the calf, getting its front legs under it and falling over and trying again.

“She’s got her hands,” he said. “She’s got Conor. She’s got the review, when it comes out, and the county, and Beth. She’s got Thea.” He put his mug in the cup holder. “She doesn’t need us as well.”

He held out his hand across the cab.

Lyle looked at it. He did not take it.

“I shook your hand on a jackpot in 2009,” he said. “When we split the purse. I’ll not shake it on this.”

Jens’s hand stayed where it was a moment, over the gearstick. Then he took it back and put it on the wheel.

“I’ll not tell her,” Lyle said. “I can’t tell her mine without telling her yours, and yours is yours to tell. You’ve my word on that. You can have it without my hand.” He put the roster page back in his shirt pocket, still folded, and buttoned the pocket. “And you’ll give me yours. If she asks you, you’ll not lie to her.”

“And if she doesn’t ask?”

“Then it’s between you and her. I’ll not be in it.”

Jens looked through the windscreen for a long time. The calf was up. It stood swaying in the straw with the heifer's nose shoving at it, and went down, and got up again.

"All right," he said. "If she asks."

Lyle opened the door. The cold came in, and the snow with it. He set his mug on the dash, half full.

"You'll not stop for breakfast," Jens said.

"No." Lyle got down. "Tell her thank you for the coffee. Tell her I'd a long road."

He walked across the yard to his own truck through the snow and did not look at the kitchen window, though he knew she was in it. He drove down the lane between the burnt cottonwoods and over the cattle guard, and did not stop until Roundup, where he bought diesel and sat in the cab at the pump with the engine off for a quarter of an hour.

That night, at home on the Rosebud, at the kitchen table, Lyle took the page out of his shirt pocket and put it in his wallet, behind his licence, folded in four. He put the wallet on the table and sat with it a while, by his mother's empty chair, with the stove going. Then he went to bed.

25

Delayed En Route

The summary was twenty-two pages, and the sentence was on page fourteen.

Shannon had read it the night it came out, on the thirty-first of January, on the state's website, on her telephone, at the kitchen table, with the wind going round the house and Karin asleep in the chair by the stove. She had read all twenty-two pages. She had read them again the next morning on the laptop in the front room, with a pencil and a pad, and made notes, the way she had read the evacuation plan in August, and the way she read a sale contract or a vet's bill or a lease. She knew how to read a document. She had been reading them since she was twelve and her father had handed her the grazing agreement with the state and said, *Tell me what that says, I can't make head nor tail of it.*

Dutchman Fire Learning Review: Public Summary. There was a map. There was a timeline, much simplified, with coloured bars. There was a section on the weather, which was good, and a section on the fire's behaviour, which was good, and a long section on the evacuation, which said that the evacuation of 1,240 residents of the planning area had been completed without loss of life among those ordered to evacuate, and that this reflected the effectiveness of the

guided evacuation system and the cooperation of residents. There was a section called *Lessons Identified*, with numbered points.

On page fourteen, under *River Bottom Buffer (Division N)*, there were three paragraphs. The first said what the buffer was for. The third said that a civilian volunteer participating in the county's evacuation sweep had died in the buffer area at approximately 23:24, and that the review extended its condolences to his family.

The second paragraph said: *The contingency resource assigned to Division N was activated at 18:20 in accordance with the IAP, reassigned at 18:52 to a higher-priority structure threat, and released back to Division N at 21:40. The resource was delayed en route and arrived on scene at 23:36.*

That was all.

She had read it twenty times. She had read it with the pencil and without. She had looked for the rest of it in the other twenty-one pages and it was not there. *Delayed en route.* By what? For how long? Where? It did not say. It said the resource was released at 21:40 and arrived at 23:36, and she could do the arithmetic, and the arithmetic said an hour and fifty-six minutes for a drive the Hand had given as forty-eight, and the paragraph did not say where the other sixty-eight had gone.

• • •

The commission met on the second Tuesday of every month in the courthouse in Roundup, in the commission room on the second floor, at ten in the morning.

She had asked to be on the agenda in the first week of February: item six, ten minutes. She had written it out over two nights, two pages, and printed fifteen copies at the library in Prosper, because the Lodgepole's printer had been in the shop office and the shop office had lost its window on the twenty-fourth.

She had not asked Jens to come. She had told him, at supper, on the Sunday, that she was going, and what she was going to ask for.

He had listened. He had not said anything. On the Tuesday morning, at seven, he had come in from the barn and washed and put on a clean shirt and his good hat and got the keys to the pickup off the hook, and stood in the kitchen door, and said, "You want to drive, or me?"

She had looked at him.

"I'll come," he had said. "If that's all right."

So he drove. They did not talk on the way. It was eighteen miles to Roundup on the county road, past the black country south of the river, which was white now, under snow, with the black sticking up out of it, fence posts and sage and the burnt trunks of the cottonwoods along the river, like a drawing in charcoal on white paper.

• • •

The three commissioners sat at the front behind folded cards: Bill Ostrander, Carol Bigler from Melstone, and Hank Seidel from out past Musselshell. The county attorney was at the end, and at a side table the emergency planner, the young man from the gym in August with the clicker.

There were twenty people in the chairs. Most of them were there for item four, a road. Kieran was there, at the back, by himself, in his clean shirt. He had nodded to her when she came in. He had not come to sit with her.

Item six came at a quarter to eleven.

She went up to the lectern at the front with her two pages. Her hands were better. The backs of them were still pink, and tight in the cold, but she could hold the paper, and she had stopped hiding them.

"Shannon Tollefsen," she said. "The Lodgepole. On the river road, in MU-7. Thank you for having me."

She gave them the two pages. The clerk took them round. She waited till they each had one.

"I've two things to ask," she said. "Then I'll sit down."

She looked at the first page. “The first is the buffer. Division N in the Dutchman IAP, sheet thirty-four. As written, the buffer was a contingency. It was staffed on a trigger: a Red Flag Warning for frontal passage. The warning was issued at ten in the morning and in effect from four. The crew was activated at twenty past six. It was reassigned at eight minutes to seven, to the Roundup spot, which I don’t dispute, there were houses and the nursing home. It was released back at twenty to ten. It came on scene at twenty-four minutes to midnight. For nearly five hours, with a red flag in effect, the buffer was a line on a map with nobody on it.” She looked at them. “I’m asking that the county change its plan so that the river-bottom buffer is staffed as a standing assignment from the issuance of a Level Two order in any zone that touches it. Staffed from the start, before anybody is told to go, with a crew that doesn’t get pulled for something else. It’s on the first page, with the paragraph numbers in the plan where it would go.”

Bill Ostrander was reading the page. Carol Bigler was writing something.

“The second,” Shannon said, “is the file.”

She put her hand flat on the lectern.

“The public summary says the resource was delayed en route. That’s all it says. It doesn’t say where, or by what, or for how long, and the times in it come to sixty-eight minutes more than the Hand’s own estimate for that drive. My brother died in that buffer at twenty-four minutes past eleven. The crew got there twelve minutes later.” She kept her voice level. It took some doing. “I want to know what delayed it. I’m asking the commission to formally request the full review file from the state, and release it to the family and to the public, with whatever has to be taken out of it for people’s privacy taken out. The second page has the statute the state cited for keeping it closed, and the exception I think applies.”

She stopped.

“That’s all,” she said. “Thank you.”

• • •

Bill Ostrander thanked her, and said nearly what he had said at the funeral, and asked the planner to speak to the first point.

The planner said the staffing change could go in with the spring revision. He said, a little red in the face, that he had been asked in August to model the cattle on the trail, and had, and he wanted to say so in public, because Mrs. Tollefsen's mother-in-law had asked.

Carol Bigler asked about the file. The county attorney said it was the state's, and that learning review files were closed so that people would speak freely.

"Is anybody else wishing to speak on item six?" Bill Ostrander said.

Jens stood up.

Shannon had sat down in the front row. She turned round in her chair. He was standing in the third row with his hat in his hand, and the room was looking at him, because everybody in the room knew who he was, and everybody knew he did not come to commission meetings, had not been to one in twenty years.

"Jens Tollefsen," he said. "The Lodgepole."

Bill Ostrander nodded.

"I'm for the first thing," Jens said. "The crew on the buffer. I'm for that." He looked at the hat in his hands. "I'm not for the second."

The room was quiet.

"I talked to that woman from the state," he said. "In October. At my kitchen table. She told me what she was for. She said it was a review, not an investigation. She said nothing I told her would be used against anybody. She said the file would stay the file." He turned the hat round by the brim. "I don't know what anybody else told her. I don't know what the crews told her, or the man on the radio, or the people at the campus. But they told her because she said that. If you go and open it up now, after, then next time there's a fire and she comes round, nobody tells her anything." He looked up at the commissioners. "That's all. I don't think the county ought to ask."

He sat down.

Shannon looked at him.

He did not look at her. He looked at the commissioners.

She turned back round in her chair. Her face was hot. She knew what it was, she thought, sitting there; she had been married to him seventeen years, and known his father all her life, and she knew what it was. It was the county. It was the letter in 2039 about the livestock register that he had put in the stove without opening, and the man from the conservation district he had run off the place in 2041, and every form from Roundup that had ever come up the lane. And now it was standing up in the commission room in his good hat and saying the county ought not to ask, in front of Kieran, about Conor.

She did not turn round again.

• • •

The commission voted on the first point, and it carried, three to nothing. The planner wrote it down. Bill Ostrander said the revised plan would come back to them in April.

On the second point Hank Seidel moved that the county make no request of the state regarding the review file at this time, in view of the statute, and Carol Bigler seconded it, and it carried, two to one, with Bill Ostrander voting no and saying, as he voted, "I'd want to know. If it was mine. I'm sorry, Shannon."

She said, "Thank you, Bill."

Item seven was the landfill.

• • •

In the corridor outside the commission room, by the stairs, there was a table.

It had been there when they came in. A folding table with a county banner taped to the front of it, *MUSSELSHELL COUNTY LIVESTOCK EVACUATION REGISTER — SIGN UP TODAY*, and a

laptop on it, and a stack of forms, and a young woman from the planner's office sitting behind it with a cup of coffee, looking at her telephone. Nobody was signing up. She looked up hopefully when the door of the commission room opened and people came out.

Shannon stopped at the table.

"Is this the register?" she said.

"Yes, ma'am." The young woman put her telephone down. "It's for anybody with stock in an evacuation zone. You put in your place, what you've got, how many, where they are in what season, what you've got for hauling. And then when there's an order, the Hand's got it. It can route you trucks, or tell you where to take them, or tell the crews where the stock is." She turned the laptop round. "It takes about ten minutes. Or there's a paper form."

"I'll do it on the paper," Shannon said.

She took a form and a pen and sat down on the folding chair in front of the table.

She heard Jens come out of the commission room behind her. She heard him stop.

She did not look round. She filled it in. *Lodgepole Ranch. Tollefsen. River road, MU-7.* The section and township, which she knew by heart. *Cow-calf, 263 cows (2050), plus replacement heifers 41, bulls 9. Horses: 11 (incl. outside training horses, variable).* Summer grazing: Bull Mountain allotment, state sections, Holmquist lease, by the old stock trail. Winter: home. *Hauling: 1 stock trailer 24 ft, 1 horse trailer 6-horse.* Her own telephone number in the box marked *Primary contact*. Under *Notes*, after a moment, she wrote: *Old mare in end stall of log barn will not load. Lead on foot.*

It took her twelve minutes. Her hand hurt by the end of it. She did not hurry.

Jens stood behind her the whole time. She could feel him there, and she knew he was looking at the form over her shoulder, at the place where it said *Lodgepole* in her hand, and the herd, and the trail, and the mare. He had put the register letter in the stove in

2039. He had said at supper, more than once, over ten years, that the day the Lodgepole put its cattle in the county's computer was the day he would sell out and move to town.

She signed it at the bottom. *Shannon R. Tollefsen.* She dated it.

She gave it to the young woman, who said, "Thank you, ma'am. That's great. You're in," and put it on the stack.

Shannon stood up. She turned round.

Jens was standing by the stairs with his hat in his hand. He was looking at the form on the stack. Then he looked at her.

"You've put the trail on it," he said. He put his hat on and went down the stairs ahead of her.

• • •

She wrote to the state that week.

She wrote it at the kitchen table in the evenings, by hand first and then on the laptop, to the Department, Fire Protection Division, Learning Review Program, Helena, as the next of kin, and asked under the public records statute for the witness statements in the Dutchman file that related to Division N and to the contingency resource's route between 21:40 and 23:36 on the twenty-fourth, with names taken out if they had to be. She cited the statute. She cited the exception. She sent it registered, from the post office in Prosper.

The answer came on the twenty-sixth. It was a page. It was polite. It said the Department recognised her loss and appreciated her interest in the review. It said that witness statements obtained in the course of a learning review were confidential under the statute, that the confidentiality was essential to the review's purpose, that the individual privacy interests of the participants clearly exceeded the merits of public disclosure, and that redaction would not be sufficient to protect them in a matter where the participants were few and known to the community. It said she had a right to appeal.

She read it twice at the kitchen table, and put it in the ledger, at the back, at the page with her name at the top and the date under it, and shut the ledger on it.

• • •

She did the arithmetic again that night, with the letter in the ledger and the ledger shut.

She did it on the back of an envelope at the kitchen table, after Karin had gone to bed, with the map from the summary open on the laptop. The crew had been at staging in Roundup. Released at 21:40. Roundup to the river bottom was the highway south and then one of two ways down off the bench: the county road and the bridge, which was the long way, eleven miles round, or the coulee road down past the Rourke meadows, which was the short way and the one anybody would take who was in a hurry. The Hand had said forty-eight minutes. That was the coulee road. It could only be the coulee road.

The coulee road, between ten and eleven.

She sat with the pencil in her hand. Through the window the yard light was on, and the snow under it, and the dark shape of the barn.

Jens came in at half past ten. He came in from the barn, where he had been with a heifer, and hung his coat on the hook and ran the tap and stood at the sink drinking water out of his hand, the way he did, and she watched his back.

"Jens."

"Mm."

"Where were you at ten o'clock? That night."

He did not turn round. The tap ran.

"On the coulee road," he said. "You know where I was. Coming down off the bench with the herd. On the asphalt."

"Between the trail gate and the ford gate."

"Yes."

"That's the road the crew would have come. From Roundup. It's the only way that makes forty-eight minutes." She heard her own voice. It was very even. "Was there anything on the road behind you? A truck. Lights."

He turned the tap off. He stood with his wet hand on the edge of the sink.

She had been married to him seventeen years. She knew the back of his neck better than she knew his face. She watched it now and saw it go still, all at once, as a horse goes still in the instant before it decides which way to go, and she felt her heart begin to go hard and slow in her chest, and she thought, quite clearly: he is going to tell me something, and after it nothing in this house will be where it was.

He turned round.

"There were lights all night," he said. "Shannon. There were trucks on that bench all night. The campus had trucks out. The county. Somebody's stock trailer on the county road. I had three hundred pair in front of me and the smoke so thick I couldn't see the lead cow, and Nils on the drag, and the colony boys." He wiped his hand on his shirt. "I couldn't tell you whose lights were whose. I couldn't tell you now."

"Was it them?"

"I don't know whose truck it was."

She looked at him across the kitchen. He looked back. His face had nothing on it at all, and his eyes did not leave hers, and he had never in his life looked at her so long without looking away, and that frightened her.

"If it was them," she said, "and they had to wait—"

She stopped. He waited for her to go on. He stood by the sink and waited, and she understood that he was waiting for something to come down on him, and she did not know what to do with that, and so she did nothing with it.

"They couldn't have waited long," she said. "Could they. It's half a mile."

"No," he said. "Not long."

She folded the envelope in half, with the figures inside, and put it in the ledger with the letter, and shut it. He went up. She sat on at the table with her hand on the green cloth until the stove had gone down and the kitchen was cold, and then she went up after him, and he was lying on his back in the dark with his eyes open, and she lay down beside him without a word, and in the morning there was a heifer to see to.

• • •

Kieran came on the last day of February.

He came up the lane in his own pickup at four in the afternoon and parked by the house and came in through the kitchen door, knocking as he came, as the Rourkes always had, and stood in the kitchen with his hat on and snow on his shoulders. Karin was at the stove. Thea was at the table with her homework. Nils was in the barn.

"Shannon. Mrs. Tollefsen. Thea." He took his hat off. "I'll not stay. I've a thing to tell you and I'd as soon do it standing up."

Shannon got up from the table.

"I saw you at the commission," Kieran said. "I didn't come up after. I wanted to. I'm sorry I didn't." He held his hat in both hands. "I couldn't. The lawyer said not to."

"What lawyer?"

"The estate's lawyer. In Billings." He looked at the hat. "Dad's estate's got a claim. Before the state. Against the state, and the county, and I don't know who else, the lawyer knows. About the night. About the buffer. It was filed in December." He looked up at her. "I can't talk about it. With anybody. Not even you. He said if I talk about it to anybody who might be a witness, it can hurt it. And you were there. You're a witness. You're the witness."

Shannon stood at the table.

"You filed a claim," she said.

"The estate did. I'm the estate." His mouth did something. "I'm twenty-two and I'm the estate. Mam signed it too." He turned the hat round once. "I'm sorry, Shannon. I can't tell you anything. I wanted you to know there was something, so you'd not think I'd let it go. I've not let it go."

"I know you haven't."

"When it's done, I'll tell you all of it. Whatever comes out."

"I know."

Kieran stood a moment longer. He looked at Thea, at the table, who was looking at him with her pencil stopped. He looked at Karin at the stove. He looked out of the window, at the yard, at the barn, where the light was on in the office and a shape was moving in it, which was Jens.

"I'll go," he said.

He put his hat on and went out, and Shannon stood at the window and watched his pickup go down the lane in the snow and out onto the river road.

26

Palm Sunday

He went to the Lodgepole at half past five in the morning, in the dark, in the colony's small pickup, before anybody was up but the cooks.

He had not decided to go until he was in the cab. He had lain awake from three, in his room in the men's house, with his white shirt for the baptism hanging on the back of the door where his mother had hung it on Saturday night, ironed, and the black jacket over it, and he had looked at the shape of them in the dark for two hours. At five he had got up and dressed in his work clothes and gone out past the kitchen, where the light was on and the women were starting the bread, and taken the keys to the small pickup off the board in the shop, and nobody had seen him go but Peter Entz's Rachel, at the kitchen window, who had lifted her hand.

It was nine miles by the county road. The road was clear. There had been snow on Thursday and it had gone, and the fields along the county road were brown, and the river bottom when he came down to it was black, still, under the grey that was beginning in the east, with the green coming up through the black in patches, very faint, that he could not see yet and knew was there.

The light was on in the calving barn. He parked beside it.

• • •

Jens was in the barn. He was in a pen at the far end with a heifer that had calved in the night, on his knees in the straw beside the calf, a big black bull calf, with a bottle, getting it to suck. He looked up when Joseph came in out of the dark and did not look surprised.

"Joseph."

"Jens."

"You're early."

"I'm being baptised at ten." Joseph stood at the gate of the pen. "I wanted to see you before."

Jens looked at him a moment. Then he looked back at the calf, and moved the bottle, and the calf took it, finally, and pulled, with its tail going.

"There," Jens said.

Joseph waited till the calf had finished. It took ten minutes. He stood at the gate of the pen with his hands in the pockets of his coat and watched, and listened to the barn, the heifers shifting in the straw and a calf bawling somewhere and the radio in the office playing low, the farm station out of Billings, a man reading the cattle prices. He had been in this barn once before. In 2047, the summer he came home, with Samuel-John, to look at a bull. Jens had shown them the barn as if it were a cathedral, and Samuel-John had said, after, in the truck, that Jens Tollefsen was the best cattleman in three counties and the worst neighbour, and both were the same thing.

Jens got up off his knees. He put the empty bottle on the post and came out of the pen and shut the gate behind him.

"Coffee?" he said.

"No. Thank you."

They stood in the alley of the barn under the lights.

"The boys," Joseph said. "Elias and Jakob."

Jens did not say anything.

"When they came home that night. At ten past twelve. On the county road." Joseph made himself say it in order, as he had to Samuel-John in August at the edge of the stubble. "Jakob told me about the gather, and the draw, and the road, and the cow in the ditch. And the truck. He said a fire truck came down the coulee behind the cattle and stopped behind the drag, and a man got out and walked up to you, and talked to you, and you didn't stop. And then the man went back and the truck backed all the way up the coulee and went away." He looked at Jens. "Elias was on your side. He said the man asked you to split the cattle and let him through. He said Nils said the hay gate. He said you said it would take longer. He said the man started to say where he was going and you didn't ask him."

Jens stood in the alley.

"I heard it on the radio," Joseph said. "At five past ten. On the county channel. *Livestock on the road.* I didn't know what it meant till they told me. And at twenty to twelve I heard the crew boss say there was somebody in a truck at your paddock gate." He stopped. "I worked it out at the edge of the stubble with the water truck running. I've known since then."

"I know you have," Jens said.

Joseph looked at him.

"Samuel-John came to me on the Sunday after the funeral," Jens said. "In September. He wanted to know what the boys had done. If they'd done right by me. He said you'd told him they'd said nothing, only that it was a long night and Jakob sang to the cow." He looked at Joseph. "I knew then. That you knew. You wouldn't have said it that way otherwise."

"I didn't tell him."

"No."

"I haven't told anybody."

"I know."

Joseph stood in the alley of the calving barn. He had come with something to say and he had said it and Jens had known it already,

all of it, for seven months, and was standing in front of him in his chore coat with straw on his knees, looking at him, and Joseph did not know what came next.

"I'm being asked this morning," he said. "Before the church. Whether there's anything on my conscience that should be said. Before I'm baptised. They'll ask, and I have to answer, in front of everybody."

"I know how it's done," Jens said. "Your father told me. Years ago."

"I don't know what to answer."

Jens looked at him a long time.

Then he took his telephone out of the pocket of his chore coat and looked at it.

"I've the woman's number," he said. "From the state. She left me her card at the table in October, in case I remembered anything else." He turned the telephone over in his hand. "I could ring her Monday. I could drive to Helena and sit in her office and tell her about the gate, and it'd be done. And you could go in there this morning and say there's nothing, and it'd be true."

Joseph waited.

Jens stood with the telephone in his hand. He woke it. Joseph saw the screen light his face from underneath, under the barn bulbs, and saw him look at it, and saw something go out of him, slowly, as the screen went dark again on its own.

He put the telephone away.

"And then it comes out who else was on that road," he said. "The boys. Elias and Jakob. They were on my place against the colony's word. You sent them. Your father said yes from Great Falls and you took them on a Monday and you said one night and then you said another, and nobody at Sixmile knew but you. The brothers had voted machines. Not men. Not boys." He said it without any weight on it, as he would have read off a weight. "If it comes out what they saw on that road, Joseph, it comes out where they were. Why they were there. Who sent them. Who said yes. And then it's not about

me, and the crew, and the road. It's about two boys who went out from Sixmile without the church's leave and saw a man die, near enough. And a man who sent them."

Joseph did not say anything.

"I'm not asking for me," Jens said. "I don't need you for me. The review's done. It's closed. They didn't ask me about the gate and I didn't tell them. If anybody ever asks me, I'll not lie to them." He stopped. "I'm asking for the boys. Elias is to be baptised in two years. Jakob the year after. They did what I asked. They did it right. I told them to tell you that. I don't want them sitting in front of the church at nineteen being asked what they saw on the campus road and who sent them there." He looked at Joseph. "Keep it. For them."

Joseph stood in the barn under the lights.

He thought of Elias in the headlights by the back of the water truck, with his hand on the black's neck, looking at him over it. *No.* He thought of Jakob sitting down in the road because his legs would not hold him, laughing. *My legs are made of bread.* He thought of the two mothers in the yard at half past twelve in their kerchiefs with their shawls over them, and Elias's mother with her hands over her mouth.

"All right," he said.

"You'll keep it?"

"I'll keep it."

Jens held out his hand. Joseph looked at it. Then he took it, and Jens's hand was rough and warm and dry and smelled of the calf's milk, and Joseph held it, and let it go.

"Go and get baptised," Jens said. "You'll be late."

• • •

He drove back by the county road in the grey light with the sun not yet up.

He thought, driving: *I am protecting the boys.* He said it to himself, at the Lund corner, out loud, in the cab, to hear what it sounded

like. *I am protecting the boys.* It sounded true. It was true. Elias was eighteen in May. Jakob was seventeen. Everything Jens had said would happen would happen, if it came out: the questions, and the brotherhood, and the mothers, and the boys sitting on the front bench in the church with everybody looking at them, and Samuel-John's face, and his father's, who had said *send two* from Great Falls with half his mouth. It would come down on them. And on him. And it would not bring back Conor Rourke, and it would not make the crew truck come down the coulee any faster, and the review was closed.

He came up the colony road at a quarter to seven, and parked the small pickup by the shop, and hung the keys on the board.

At the north end of the farrowing barn he stopped.

He had not meant to. He passed the north end every morning on his way to the boar barn and did not look at it. This morning he had come from the shop, the other way, and his feet had stopped, and here he was. The north footing. A strip of grey concrete, eighteen inches wide, coming up four inches out of the ground and running the length of the barn. Dry. With the old stains on it, and the crack at the sixty-foot mark that had been there since 2036, and nothing else to show where anything was.

He stood and looked at it.

Then he went on to the men's house and washed and shaved and put on the white shirt his mother had ironed, and the black jacket, and went to the church.

• • •

The church stood beside the kitchen. It was a long plain room with the benches in rows and the minister's table at the front, and it was full. The women on the left in their dark dresses and their kerchiefs, black for church, and the girls in front of them, in rows, by age. The men on the right in their black jackets. The children at the front, on the low benches. The windows on both sides, with the April light coming in on the floor.

There were five of them to be baptised. Two girls of twenty and a boy of twenty-one and a young man of twenty-three from the Kleinsasser house, Elias's cousin. And Joseph Wipf, forty-five, who had left at twenty-one and come back at forty-three and had taken instruction all winter with the four of them, sitting at the end of the bench in the minister's room every Sunday afternoon among children, saying the answers.

They sat on the front bench, facing the minister's table, with their backs to the room.

He could feel the room behind him. He could feel his mother, on the women's side, in the third row, where she always sat, and his father beside the aisle on the men's side in the chair they brought for him now, with his stick across his knees, and Samuel-John, two rows back, very straight. And on the women's side, near the back, among the visitors, a woman in a dark blue dress and a kerchief who had come from Wolf Creek on Friday with her son, and was staying with Peter Entz's mother, and whom he would marry in June.

He had not looked at her when he came in. He had not trusted himself to.

The minister, Paul Hofer, preached. It was the long sermon, the old one, for Palm Sunday and for baptism, that had been preached on this day in the colonies for three hundred years, and he read it from the book, in the old German, in the old sing-song, and the room listened, and Joseph listened, and did not hear a word of it. He sat on the bench with his hands on his knees and looked at the

minister's table, at the plain wood, the cloth, the basin, the jug of water, and the book.

At the end of the sermon the minister closed the book and stood up.

He asked them the questions. One at a time. The girls first, then the boy, then the Kleinsasser cousin. They stood when they were asked, and answered, and sat down. Joseph had heard the questions all winter. He knew them in German and in English. He knew the answers. *Do you believe. Do you desire. Will you submit. Will you give yourself.* He knew them the way he knew the north footing.

Then it was him.

He stood up.

The minister asked him the questions, and he answered them. He heard his voice going out into the room behind him, in the old German, and the room listening.

And then the last one.

It was not in the book. It was asked in the colonies, before the church, of the ones to be baptised, and it had been asked of his father and his grandfather and of Samuel-John at twenty, and Joseph had heard it asked of other people in this room when he was a boy, and had wondered, every time, what it would be like to stand there and be asked it, and to have something.

"Is there anything on your conscience," Paul Hofer said, in English, because it was Joseph, and because he had been away, and because the old man wanted to be sure he understood, "that you have not confessed, that should be said before the church? Before God and before your brothers and sisters. Anything you have done, or not done, against anybody, that you should bring before us now, before you are baptised."

The room was very quiet.

Joseph stood at the front bench.

He thought of the calving barn. The calf with the bottle, and Jens on his knees in the straw. *Keep it. For them.* He thought of Elias's

mother at the bus at half past seven in August, saying *thank you for letting him go* to Samuel-John, who had not known. He thought of the radio in the water truck, in its cradle of conveyor belt, saying *there's somebody in it*. He thought of the afternoon, all of it, the long afternoon of the twenty-fourth, from nine in the morning when Jens rang and said *red flag* and he said *bring them down*, to ten at night, when he could have rung, any hour of it, and said *send them home now*, and had not, because nobody knew but him, and it had seemed better that way.

He thought: *I am protecting the boys.*

And he thought of the woman in the Lodgepole yard. He had seen her once since August, in Prosper, at the post office, in November, coming out with a parcel held against her chest because her hands would not close on it, and she had said good morning to him as she always had, a Rourke from across the river saying good morning to a colony man, and not known that he knew anything. Keeping it for the boys was keeping it from her. He had known that in the calving barn at six o'clock with Jens's hand in his, and he knew it now, standing at the front bench with the water in the jug on the table in front of him.

He put it down. He did it on purpose, as Peter Entz had once put a thing of his into the north footing for him and smoothed the concrete over it with a trowel, and stood up, and walked away.

"No," Joseph said.

The minister looked at him a moment longer than he had looked at the others.

"No," Joseph said again. "There is nothing."

Paul Hofer nodded.

He came round the table with the jug. Joseph knelt on the floor in front of the bench, on the bare boards, in his white shirt and his black jacket, and bowed his head, and the old man poured the water on it, three times, cold, in the name of the Father and of the Son and

of the Holy Ghost, and it ran down through his hair and over his face and into his collar, and he knelt there with his eyes shut and let it.

Then the minister put his hand on Joseph's head and held it there and said the words, and took it away, and said, "Stand up, brother," and Joseph stood up.

He turned round.

The room was looking at him. His mother, in the third row, with her hands folded in her lap and her face wet. His father, in the chair, with his stick, who had lifted one hand off it, the good one, an inch. Samuel-John, two rows back, very straight, who nodded once.

And at the back, among the visitors, Anna, in the dark blue dress, with her hard mouth, looking at him, not smiling, as if she were looking at a horse she had bought and was making sure it was the horse. And beside her, on the bench, with his feet not reaching the floor, a boy of nine, with his mother's mouth, who had written to him in August about forty-one chickens and a guitar, who was staring at him with his own mouth open, as if he had never seen a man get wet before.

• • •

They had dinner after, in the dining hall, all of them. Five baptisms meant a feast, and the women had been cooking since Thursday. Ducks, and noodles, and the white bread, and the pies.

Anna sat on the women's side. Daniel sat with the boys. Joseph sat with the men, at the end of the men's table, where he had sat alone for three years, and now there was a man on each side of him, and across from him, and they passed him the bread.

After the dinner, in the yard, Daniel came and found him.

"You're baptised now," the boy said. He stood in front of Joseph with his hands behind his back. He spoke English with a Wolf Creek sound in it, very fast. "So you can't ever leave again. Mother says."

"No."

"You have to stay."

"I'm staying."

"And then in June you'll marry Mother and we'll come here."

"Yes."

The boy looked at him. He had his mother's way of looking.

"Have you still got the guitar?" he said. "The one from outside. Mother said you had one."

Joseph looked down at him.

"No," he said. "Not any more."

"What happened to it?"

"It was put somewhere." Joseph looked across the yard, at the long low farrowing barn on the rise at the east end of the colony, and its north side, in the sun. "Somewhere it's safe."

Daniel looked where he was looking, and saw a barn.

"Oh," he said, and went away to find the other boys.

• • •

The brotherhood met that evening, at seven, in the school.

Joseph had never been in the room for a brotherhood meeting. An unbaptised man did not sit in. He sat in now, on the bench at the side, with the other baptised men, thirty-eight of them, from twenty to his father's age, and Samuel-John at the front at the minister's table with the minister and the colony's papers, and he listened.

There was one thing to decide. It had been talked about for two years, since the census in 2048 put Sixmile at a hundred and forty-five souls, and now, with the Wolf Creek marriage, and the Kleinsasser baby due in May, and the Stahl twins, it was a hundred and fifty. A hundred and fifty was the number. It had always been the number. When a colony got to a hundred and fifty it was too big to know itself, and it split, and half of it went and built a daughter colony on new land, and both halves began again small.

Samuel-John laid it out. The numbers. The land the colony could buy, and where, and what it would cost, and how long to build. He did not say where. There was a place he had been looking at, he

said, that would come up for sale, perhaps, in a year or two; he would say more when he could. He spoke in short sentences. He spoke in decisions. He did not ask anybody what they thought until he had finished.

Then they voted, by standing.

Joseph stood. It was the first vote he had ever cast in his life on anything that mattered to anybody. He stood up off the bench at the side of the room with the thirty-seven other men, all of them, his father too, getting up out of his chair on his stick with a man on each side of him, and they stood there in the schoolroom with the April evening coming in through the windows, and Samuel-John counted them, though there was no need, and wrote the number down.

Thirty-eight for. None against.

"Sixmile will divide," Samuel-John said. "We will find the land. The lot will say who goes."

They sat down.

Joseph sat on the bench at the side of the room. His hair was still damp at the back, under the collar, from the morning. He could feel it. He sat with his hands on his knees and listened to Samuel-John go on about the land, and the money, and the building, and looked at the floor of the schoolroom, which was boards, and swept, and had the light on it.

27

Remainder

Margit Lien came up the lane at ten in the morning on the nineteenth of April, a Tuesday, in a brown car with a briefcase on the seat beside her, and Dagny came twenty minutes after her from Billings, and Shannon did not know what either of them had come for until they were both sitting at the kitchen table.

Karin had said, on the Sunday, at supper: "There'll be people Tuesday. At ten. I'll want the kitchen." And then, to Shannon, "I'll want you too. Not for long." And to Jens, "And you."

Jens had looked at her. "What people?"

"Margit Lien. And your sister."

"What for?"

"Paper," Karin had said, and gone on eating.

He had not asked again. Shannon had thought that was strange, at the time, and then had not thought about it. It was calving. Nobody on the Lodgepole thought about anything in April but calving.

• • •

Margit Lien was sixty, small and grey and neat, in a dark suit with a fleece over it, and had been the lawyer in Roundup for everybody who had land on the Musselshell since 2015. She had done Arne's will. She had done Shannon's father's. She sat at the end of the kitchen table with her briefcase open on the chair beside her and laid the papers out in front of her in three piles, square, and a pen on each pile, and her notary's stamp beside them in its little leather case.

Dagny sat on Karin's left. She had driven down from Billings in her good coat and her co-op lanyard still round her neck, which she took off when she sat down and put in her pocket. She was fifty-two, tall, with her mother's eyes, and she had a way of sitting very still at a table that Shannon had seen in her since she was a girl, as if she were listening to something in another room. She had brought coffee cake. It was on the counter in its foil.

Jens sat across from his mother. Shannon sat beside him.

"Thank you all for being here," Margit Lien said. "Karin has asked me to prepare three documents. She's seen drafts of all three, and she's approved them, and I've gone over them with her twice. I'm going to explain each one, and then Karin is going to sign the first one, and I'll notarise it. Then Jens and Karin and Dagny will sign the second. Shannon, you're here as a witness to the signatures, if that's all right with you."

Shannon looked at Karin.

Karin was looking at the papers. She had her glasses on and her hands folded on the table in front of her, the big knuckles, the ring Arne had given her in 1987 worn thin. She did not look up.

"All right," Shannon said.

• • •

The first was a deed.

Margit Lien read it out. Not all of it; the legal description of the land went on for a page and a half, every section and township and range, every parcel, the home place and the flat and the west meadow and the river frontage, the water right, the stock water, all of it, and she said, "That's the Lodgepole," and turned the page. But she read the rest of it. She read it slowly, in a clear dry voice, as if it were a recipe.

Karin Tollefsen, a widow, grants to Thea Tollefsen and Nils Tollefsen, in equal undivided shares as tenants in common, the following described real property, reserving to the grantor a life estate therein. And then the clause about the custodian. *Dagny Tollefsen, as custodian for Thea Tollefsen under the Montana Uniform Transfers to Minors Act, until the said Thea attains the age of twenty-one years. Dagny Tollefsen, as custodian for Nils Tollefsen under the Montana Uniform Transfers to Minors Act, until the said Nils attains the age of twenty-one years.*

Shannon sat at the table.

She heard it. She heard every word of it, and understood it, and for a moment did not understand it at all.

"Karin keeps the place for her lifetime," Margit Lien said. "She lives here, she has the use of it, the income from it, all of it, as long as she lives. That's the life estate. The rest of it, what lawyers call the remainder, goes to the children, now, today, in halves. Each of them owns an undivided half of the Lodgepole from the day this is recorded, subject to Karin's life estate. They can't sell it, or borrow against it, or do anything with it while she's alive without her joining. And because they're under age, Dagny holds it for them, as custodian, until each of them is twenty-one. Thea in 2055. Nils in 2058. Then it's theirs outright."

Nobody said anything.

The clock over the door went. The radio was off. Outside, in the calving pens, a heifer was bawling, and stopped.

Shannon looked at Jens.

He was looking at the deed. He had not moved. He was sitting with his hands flat on the table on either side of his coffee cup, looking at the paper in front of Margit Lien, the top page, the one with *Thea Tollefsen and Nils Tollefsen* on it, and his face had nothing in it at all.

"The second document," Margit Lien said, "is a lease."

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She gave it to Jens.

It was eight pages. She had a copy for each of them. An agricultural lease of the Lodgepole, all of the operating ranch, the land and the improvements and the water, from Karin Tollefsen, as life tenant, and Dagny Tollefsen, as custodian for the remaindermen, to Jens Tollefsen, as lessee, for a term of five years from the first of May 2050, renewable. The rent was in it. Shannon read it upside down across the table: a figure per animal unit month, and a floor, payable in two halves, in November and May. It was a fair rent. It was the rent the co-op's table would have given for river-bottom ground with water in the Musselshell. It was not a family rent.

"Karin's life estate gives her the right to lease the place," Margit Lien said. "But if anything happened to her during the term, the lease would end with the life estate, unless the remaindermen had joined in it. So Dagny joins in it, for the children. So the lease holds. Whatever happens. For five years." She looked at Jens. "It's a standard lease, Jens. I've done thirty of them. It's the form the extension service uses. You'll find it's fair."

Jens read it.

He read it from the first page to the last, slowly, the way he read a sale bill, with his finger going down the margin. He turned the pages. He came to the end, the signature page, with his name on it under *Lessee* and a line, and he stopped there.

Then he turned back to the first page and read it again.

It took him a long time. Nobody said anything. Dagny sat very still. Margit Lien waited, with her hands folded on her own copy. Karin did not look at him. Shannon sat beside him and watched his finger go down the margins a second time, page after page, and stop, sometimes, and go on, and she did not know what he was looking for.

He came to the end again.

He put the lease down on the table and looked across it at his mother.

"Why?" he said.

Karin took her glasses off. She folded them and put them down on the table beside the deed, and looked at him.

"It was mine to do," she said.

"I know it's yours."

"Then I've done it."

"Mom." He did not raise his voice. "Why?"

Karin looked at him for a long moment.

"There's the fire," she said. "There's the hay. You've bought three hundred and forty ton since September at two hundred and sixty a ton, delivered, and it's not paid for, it's on the note. There's the cattle you lost, twenty-eight cows and thirty-two calves, and the ones you sold light in October, and the ones with their feet that won't make another year. There's the fences. There's the shop window. There's the round pen. There's the bank." She put her hand flat on the deed. "There's debts from that night that'll take you five years to pay if it rains, and longer if it doesn't. They're on your note, against the cattle and the machinery. They're not on the land, and they're not going on it. I'm eighty-two. I won't be here in five years, likely. I won't have the land go into an estate with that note sitting next to it and lawyers at it." She looked at him. "So it goes to the children now. Clean. And you farm it, and pay the rent, and pay the debts. And it's theirs."

Jens looked at her.

Shannon looked at her too. She thought it was a good answer. She thought it was a true answer, as far as it went; she had seen the hay bills, she had seen the note. She waited for Jens to argue. She had been married to him seventeen years and she had never once seen him take a thing like that, a thing about the land, from anybody, his father or his mother or the county or her, without arguing it, every line, until the other person was tired. She sat beside him and waited for it.

He turned in his chair and looked at her.

"Did you know?" he said.

"No."

He looked at her a moment longer.

"No," she said again. "Jens. I didn't know. She didn't tell me. I'd have told you."

He nodded. He turned back to the table.

He did not ask Karin again.

Shannon saw him look at his mother across the table, at Karin sitting there with her glasses off and her hand flat on the deed, and she saw him open his mouth, very slightly, as if he were going to say something, and close it again. She saw his hands on the table. She saw his eyes go to the deed, to the names on it, and to Dagny, and back to his mother, and stay there.

And Karin looked back at him, for a long time, across the table, with nothing in her face either.

He did not ask her again.

Shannon did not understand it. She sat at the table and did not understand it, and she knew she did not, and she put it away somewhere, to think about later.

• • •

Karin signed the deed. Margit Lien turned it round for her and showed her where, with the tip of the pen, and Karin put her glasses back on and signed it, slowly, in her large unsteady hand, *Karin Tollefsen*, and the date, and Margit Lien signed under her, and stamped it with the notary's stamp, hard, twice, and Shannon signed where she was shown, as witness.

Her hand was all right. The stripe across the palm pulled when she held the pen, but she could hold it. She signed *Shannon R. Tollefsen*, as she had signed the register in February.

Then the lease.

Dagny signed first, as custodian. She signed it twice, once for Thea and once for Nils, in a small quick upright hand, and the date. Then Karin, as life tenant. Then Margit Lien turned it round and slid it across the table to Jens.

Dagny leaned across and put her finger on the line.

"There," she said. "Under *Lessee*."

Jens looked at his sister's finger on the paper.

He took the pen out of her other hand. He signed. *Jens Tollefsen.* And the date, the nineteenth of April 2050. He did it quickly, without stopping, and did not read it a third time.

Then he put the pen down on the table, and with two fingers slid it back across the table to Dagny.

She looked at it. She looked at him.

"Thank you, Jens," she said.

He did not answer. He got up from the table and took his hat off the peg and went out through the back door, and they heard his boots go across the porch and down the steps and across the gravel towards the calving barn, and the barn door open and shut.

• • •

Margit Lien put the papers in her briefcase, the deed and Karin's copy of the lease and her own, and said she would record the deed at the courthouse in Roundup that afternoon, and shook hands with Karin and Dagny and Shannon, and said, at the door, to nobody in particular, "It's a good thing you've done, Karin. It's what I'd have told you to do," and went out to her brown car.

Dagny stayed for coffee. She cut the coffee cake and put it on plates and nobody ate it.

"You'll want the custodian's copy," Karin said.

"I've got it." Dagny patted the envelope beside her on the bench. "I'll keep it at the office. In the safe. And one at home." She looked at her mother. "Mom. You're sure."

"I've signed it."

"I know you've signed it." Dagny turned her cup round on the table. "That's not what I asked."

Karin looked at her daughter.

"I'm sure," she said.

Dagny nodded. She did not ask anything else. She finished her coffee and stood up and put her coat on and put the envelope inside it, against her chest, and buttoned the coat over it.

"I'll go and see him," she said. "Before I go."

She went out. Shannon watched her through the kitchen window, tall, in her good coat, going across the yard to the calving barn, and in at the door.

Her gloves were on the bench. Good ones, leather, lined. Shannon looked at them for a minute. Then she picked them up and went out after her.

The barn door was not shut. She heard them before she got to it.

"—just ask me," Dagny was saying. "That's all. Ask me. You asked Dad why about everything for forty years. You asked him why he fenced the bench the way he did. You asked him why he sold the

Herefords. You stood in this barn and asked him why he wouldn't put in a pivot till he was blue in the face. So ask me."

Jens said something Shannon did not hear.

"That's not an answer. Is it the money? Is it the bank? Did the bank say something to Mom? Because if the bank's said something I want to know it, I'm the one who's custodian of it now, I'm the one—"

"It's not the bank."

"Then is it Thea? Mom said you took the book off her. In October. Is it that? Did you two have it out? Because Mom wouldn't say, and Thea won't say, and you—"

"Dagny."

"—you signed that thing like a hay ticket, Jens. You didn't even—you read it twice and you didn't say one word. You. Dad would have—"

"Dad's dead."

It came out loud. Shannon stopped in the gravel outside the door.

Inside the barn nobody said anything. A heifer shifted in the straw. A calf bawled and was answered.

"I know he's dead," Dagny said. Her voice had gone thin. "I know he's dead, Jens. I was there. I sat with him. You were out at the calving." Another silence. "I'm not asking about Dad. I'm asking you. I'm your sister and I just took your ranch off you at Mom's kitchen table with a lawyer, and you slid the pen back at me like I'd sold you a load of hay, and I want to know what's going on. That's all. I want to know what's happened to you."

"Nothing's happened."

"Something's happened."

"Go home, Dagny."

"No. Not till—"

"Go home." His voice was quieter now, and worse. "It's done. You've got your copy. Go home."

Shannon stood in the gravel with the gloves in her hand.

After a moment Dagny came out of the barn. She came out fast, with her face red and her eyes wet, and nearly walked into Shannon, and stopped.

"Your gloves," Shannon said.

Dagny looked at them. She took them. She did not put them on.

"Did you hear that?"

"Some."

Dagny looked back at the barn door. Then she looked at Shannon, and opened her mouth, and shut it again, and shook her head, and went to her car with the gloves in her hand and got in and sat there a moment with both hands on the wheel before she started it.

Shannon went back into the house.

Karin was at the window. She had come to stand there while Shannon was out, and she did not turn round.

"Well?" Karin said.

"She asked him why. He wouldn't tell her." Shannon put her hands in her apron pocket. "He shouted at her."

"Jens doesn't shout."

"He did."

Karin did not say anything to that. She watched Dagny's car through the glass.

Shannon looked at her mother-in-law.

"Karin," she said. "Why didn't he argue?"

Karin did not answer for a while. She stood at the window with her hand on the sill, the big knuckles, the ring worn thin, and watched Dagny's car turn round in the yard and start down the lane.

"Because it's done," she said.

That was all she said.

• • •

Dagny's car went down the lane through the cottonwoods, which had leaves coming on them now, small and green and very bright, on the branches above the burnt bark, on the river side, where the black went up the trunks. It went slowly over the ruts. At the bottom of the lane, at the cattle guard, it stopped.

The school bus was coming along the river road from the direction of Prosper. It was yellow and it was early, or the day had gone faster than Shannon had thought, and it came along the road and slowed at the end of the lane where Dagny's car was waiting to pull out, and stopped, and the door folded open.

Thea got off. Then Nils, behind her, with his bag over his shoulder. The bus door folded shut and the bus went on.

Dagny's car did not pull out. It sat at the cattle guard. Then the door opened and Dagny got out, and said something to Thea, and the two of them walked a little way along the river road together, away from the lane, side by side, on the gravel shoulder, Dagny tall in her good coat with her head bent and Thea in her school jacket looking up at her. Nils stood back at the side of the lane with his bag, waiting. They walked to the culvert and stopped there, and stood, a long time, ten minutes or more, and Shannon could not see their faces and could not hear anything.

Then Dagny put her hand on Thea's shoulder, and left it there a moment, and took it away, and walked back to the car alone. Thea stayed by the culvert. Dagny got in. The car pulled out onto the river road and went away towards Billings.

Shannon watched her children come up the lane. Thea in front, walking fast, in her school jacket, with her hair blowing, back from the culvert. Nils behind, slower, looking at the ground, at the ruts, the way he always walked, as if he were counting something. They came up through the cottonwoods with the new leaves on them and into the yard, and Thea went straight across the gravel to the calving barn without coming to the house, and in, and Nils stopped in

the middle of the yard and stood there with his bag over his shoulder, looking at nothing, at the round pen, at the burnt side of it, where the new poles were.

Shannon stood at the kitchen window and looked at them. At the two of them. At the yard and the barns and the flat beyond the yard, black, with the green coming up through it, and the cottonwoods, and the river, and the bench beyond the river, all of it, every section and township and range on the page and a half that Margit Lien had not read out.

It was theirs, or would be by evening, when Margit Lien had been to the courthouse. And as far as Shannon knew, neither of them knew it. She watched Thea's face as she came up the lane, and could not read it.

Behind her, Karin went back to the table and sat down, and picked up her fork, and began, slowly, to eat the coffee cake.

28

Crowns

It came back on his side first.

He had known it would. He had watched it come every spring of his life on every burn he had ever seen, the ditch burns in March and the Dahl fire in 2012 and the grass fires along the railroad when he was a boy, and it always came back the same way, from the bottom up, from the crowns, if the crowns had lived. And the crowns lived where the fire went over them fast. Where the grass was short. Where there was nothing on the ground to hold the heat.

The Lodgepole flat had been grazed. He had put the cows on it in April and May of 2049, before the trail opened, as he did every spring, and they had eaten it down to three inches, and then he had taken them up the trail to the lease and the flat had grown back through June and July, but short, thin, the way it did after a spring grazing, with no old growth in it. There had been nothing on it in August to burn but the year's grass. The fire had gone across it in the night like a hand across a table.

The Rourke river meadow across the river had not been grazed since 2046. Conor had cut it for hay in July and left the swaths lying when the fire came, and under the swaths there had been the aftermath of three summers, never grazed off, matted, grey, a foot deep in the low places along the old channel. The fire had sat in it. It had

burnt down into it for hours and smouldered there for two days after, and when he looked across the river at it now from the ford in the third week of May it was still black. There was green on it, here and there, in the draws, along the river where the willows had been. But it was black.

His side was green.

It was not all green, and not the way it had been, but the green had come up through the black in April, a haze at first, a colour you saw only if you looked along the ground at sunrise, and then in May it had come all at once, after the rain on the ninth, and the flat was green now from the river to the yard. It was green in bunches, in clumps, with the black still showing between them, so that from the yard it looked like a field somebody had painted with a brush that was running out.

• • •

Thea rode it every evening.

She had started at the end of April. She took the grey after school and rode out onto the flat with Karin's ledger in a feed sack tied behind the saddle and a hoop of wire, a yard across, that she had made from an old fence stay, and a pencil behind her ear. She rode out to a place, and got down, and dropped the hoop on the ground, and knelt beside it, and counted.

He had watched her from the shop the first week. He had not asked her what she was doing. He knew what she was doing. He had seen the extension woman do it in 2012 after the Dahl fire, on the neighbour's place, with a hoop and a clipboard: count the crowns of grass inside the hoop, the bunches with green coming out of them, and the ones with no green yet, some of which would come and some of which had burnt down into the root and would not. Do it at the same places every week. Write it down. In a month you knew what you had.

Thea had chosen forty places. He did not know how she had chosen them. She had marked each one with a wire flag, orange, the kind the county used for buried cable, which she must have bought at the farm store in Roundup with her own money, and she rode from one to the next in the same order every evening, and knelt, and counted, and wrote it in the ledger.

She did not write it in the cattle book. The cattle book was on the shelf in the barn office with his pencil in it. She wrote it in her grandmother's ledger, at the back, after Dagny's forecasts and her mother's page with the name and the date on it, in her small clear hand that slanted backward, in columns. He had seen it there, one night, on the kitchen table, open, when she had gone up to bed. *Flag 1. Green 14. None yet 3. Flag 2. Green 11. None yet 6.* Forty of them. A column for every week. And at the bottom of each week a total, and a percentage, in pencil, and a little line under the percentage, ruled.

He had not touched it. He had looked at it and gone to bed.

• • •

On the twentieth of May she came to the shop.

He was under the swather with the grease gun. He heard her come in, and stop, and stand there, and he went on greasing, the last three fittings on the cutter bar, and slid out from under it on the creeper and sat up.

She was standing by the bench with the ledger in her arms, held against her chest, the way her grandmother carried it.

"Dad."

"Thea."

"I want to talk about the flat."

He wiped his hands on the rag. "Go on."

She opened the ledger. She had a page marked with a bit of baling twine and she opened it there and put it on the bench, turned round, so that he could read it, and stood beside it with her finger on the column.

"I've done forty flags," she said. "Every week since the twenty-sixth of April. Four weeks. This is the totals." She ran her finger down. "Week one, sixty-one percent showing green. Week two, sixty-four. Week three, sixty-eight. Week four, seventy." She looked up at him. "It's coming back. It's coming back good. Better than the extension sheet says it should, for a fire that hot. It's because you grazed it in the spring. There wasn't anything on it to burn down into the crowns. I looked it up. It's in the extension sheet. Grazed ground comes back faster."

"I know."

"But it's seventy percent. That's thirty percent with nothing showing yet. Some of those'll still come, the late ones. Some are dead. I can't tell which by looking, nobody can till the middle of June, the sheet says. And it's forty flags, it's not every foot of the flat, I know that." She took a breath. "But the ones that have come are weak. They've only got this year's leaf on them and nothing stored, the fire took all that, and if the cows are on it now, in May, they'll eat the leaf off them before the crowns have put anything back down, and they'll die." She was talking fast now, the way she did. "The extension sheet says rest it. A full growing season after a fire like that. No grazing till after it's set seed. Then light. Then you're back. If you graze it this year it'll be fifty percent next year, maybe less, and it'll be cheatgrass and weeds in the dead places, and it'll take five years to come back, or it won't." She stopped. She took a breath. "I want to rest it. Feed hay in the lots by the calving barn through June and July. Rest the flat. Let it come back."

He looked at the ledger.

He looked at the columns, in her hand. Forty flags. Four weeks. Sixty-one, sixty-four, sixty-eight, seventy. The little ruled line under each one.

"We haven't got the hay," he said.

"We can buy hay."

"We've bought three hundred and forty ton since September. At two-sixty. It's on the note." He put the grease gun down on the bench. "There's no hay on the Musselshell. Everybody burnt. Everybody's buying. Lewistown's at two-ninety now and they want it cash. There's not a ton between here and Great Falls I can get on a truck for less than three hundred, and I've got two hundred and sixty-three cows to feed, and they're thin." He looked at her. "You've seen them. You doctored half of them. They came through the winter on bought hay and they calved thin and they're nursing thin calves, and the grass is here."

"The grass is weak."

"The grass is here," he said again. "It's the only grass on the river that is. The Rourkes haven't got any. The Holmquists haven't got any. The lease is black from the foot of the mountains to the bench and it'll be two years before the state lets anybody on it." He wiped his hands again, though they were clean. "If I feed hay through July, I'm buying another hundred and fifty ton at three hundred, and that's forty-five thousand dollars I haven't got, on top of the note, on top of the rent."

He heard himself say it. *The rent.*

Thea heard it too. He saw her hear it. She stood by the bench with her finger on the column, and something went across her face, very fast, and was gone, and she did not say anything.

She had known since the nineteenth of April. Since the cattle guard, and her aunt getting out of the car and walking her along the river road to the culvert and back, ten minutes, before she drove away to Billings. He did not know what Dagny had told her. He had not asked. Thea had come straight across the yard from the bus to the calving barn that afternoon and stood in the door of it and looked at him, at her father, in the pen with a heifer, and had not said anything, and had gone into the house. She had not said anything since. Neither had he.

"I'm turning them out," he said. "Tomorrow. On the flat."

She looked at him.

"Dad—"

"Tomorrow. First thing. I want them out on it by seven."

She stood there.

He waited for her to argue. He knew how she argued. She would come at him with the extension sheet and the percentages and her grandmother, and the crowns with nothing showing, and cheatgrass, and five years, all of it at once, the way she had come at him in the yard on the twenty-fourth of August with the grey saddled and her hat on. *Why. Tell me why.* He waited for it. He thought he would rather have had it.

She did not argue.

She looked down at the ledger, at her column, at the numbers. She looked at them for a long time.

Then she closed the ledger, carefully, with the twine still in it, and picked it up off the bench and held it against her chest again.

"Okay," she said.

She went out of the shop.

• • •

He turned them out at seven the next morning.

He did it himself, on the sorrel. He had held them in the corrals by the calving barn since the winter, on bought hay, two hundred and sixty-three cows and their calves, and in the morning at a quarter to seven he saddled the sorrel and rode out to the west gate, the one onto the flat, and got down to open it.

Nils was there.

He was standing by the gate in his school clothes, with his bag over his shoulder, at a quarter to seven in the morning, when the bus did not come till eight. He had his hand on the chain. He looked at his father.

Jens stood by the sorrel with the reins in his hand and looked at his son.

Nils unhooked the chain. He swung the gate open, wide, back against the fence, and held it there, and stood beside it. He looked past the cattle and past his father, out at the flat, at the green coming up through the black in its bunches, in the low sun, with the dew on it.

Jens got back on the sorrel. He rode back to the corrals and opened the corral gate and sat the horse beside it, and the brockle-faced cow came out first, as she always did. She was fifteen now. She had a heifer calf at her side, brockle-faced, born on the first of April in the snow, that Thea had pulled. She came out of the corral and stopped, and looked down the lane towards the west gate where the boy was standing, and the flat beyond it. She lifted her head and smelled the air.

Then she went. She went down the lane at a walk, with the calf at her side, past the shop and the round pen and the log barn, past the boy at the gate, out onto the flat. The herd came after her. Two hundred and sixty-three cows and their calves, in a long string, down the lane and through the gate, past Nils, who stood holding it, not counting them, or counting them, Jens could not tell, and out onto the green.

They spread out across it. They put their heads down.

• • •

He sat the sorrel at the west gate after the last of them had gone through and watched them graze.

The sun was up over the bench. The green was very bright in it. The cattle were scattered across the flat in twos and threes and bunches, black against the green and the black, with their heads down, and he could hear them, the tearing sound a cow makes pulling grass, all over the flat, hundreds of them, like rain beginning.

Nils had shut the gate and gone up the lane to wait for the bus.

Thea was on the flat.

He had not seen her ride out. She was on the grey, a quarter of a mile out, at the far side of the herd, near the river, sitting her horse among the cattle with the feed sack tied behind the saddle. She was not counting. She was sitting there. She was looking at the cows grazing round her, at the brockle-face and her calf, at the bunches of green coming up through the black and the cows' mouths going down over them, one after another, pulling.

She had the ledger. He could see the shape of it in the sack.

There was an orange flag near her, by the grey's front feet. One of her forty. He could see it from the gate, very small, very bright, on its wire stem, standing up out of the grass. As he watched, a cow came grazing towards it, slowly, with her head down, pulling the grass in front of her as she came, and grazed up to the flag, and round it, and past it, and went on.

Thea sat the grey and watched the cow.

Then she turned the horse and rode back towards the yard, at a walk, across the flat, among the cattle, towards him. She did not hurry. She came up to the west gate and stopped the grey on the far side of it and sat there, with the gate between them.

They looked at each other over it.

Neither of them said anything.

After a while she got down and opened the gate and led the grey through, and shut it behind her, and hooked the chain, and led the horse up the lane towards the barn, past him, with the feed sack on the saddle and the ledger in it, and her forty flags out on the flat behind her, and the cattle on them.

Epilogue

The Prosper Road

Mariah came home in October 2052, with a small grey car and a rented trailer, and stayed.

She had given notice at the water court in the spring. She had told him on a Sunday, on the telephone, the way she told him most things, as a finished fact with the reasons already arranged behind it: the tribe's water office at Lame Deer was opening the compact water to offers and wanted a lawyer of its own who had sat on the other side of the bench; it would take her to Lame Deer three days a week, and the rest she could do from anywhere with a telephone and a table; the anywhere she had in mind was the Rosebud. *If that's all right with you, Dad.* He had said it was all right. He had stood in the kitchen after she hung up with the telephone in his hand for a while.

She took her grandmother's room. She put her law books on the shelves where the fair ribbons had been and her laptop on the table by the window, and in the evenings she sat at the kitchen table with him and asked him questions about the ranch, exact ones, and wrote the answers down.

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On the third Thursday of October he hauled the calves to Prosper.

He had sold at Prosper for thirty years. Billings was closer and paid the same, most years, and he went to Prosper anyway, because his father had, and because the auctioneer there had known his father. He had not gone in 2049. In 2049 he had sold at Billings, in November, and driven home without stopping.

Mariah came with him. She asked to. She said she wanted to see it. She sat in the cab of the pickup beside him at five in the morning with a thermos between her knees and the stock trailer rattling behind them with forty-four steer calves in it, and they went over the divide in the dark and down past Colstrip and over the Bull Mountains as it got light.

The Bull Mountains were coming back. He had known they would. Three years. The pines were black still, the dead ones, standing on the slopes in their thousands like the bristles of a burnt brush, but under them the ground was green, and there were young pines coming, a foot high, two, in the grass, and the draws were full of chokecherry and wild rose, red now, in October, and the aspen in the wet places had come back yellow.

"I didn't know it would look like this," Mariah said.

"It's three years."

"It was black. In the pictures. All of it." She looked out of the window at the slopes going past. "I thought it would be black for twenty years."

"The trees will. The grass doesn't care."

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She asked him about the fire on the highway east of Roundup, with the sun up.

She asked the way she asked about everything now. She had a way of putting a question that he had first noticed in her at Evelyn's funeral, at the kitchen table, with the yellow pad: she said what she already knew, in order, and then she asked about the gap.

"You had the campus," she said. "In '49. Grandma said. The man who died was a mile from you, at the river. Kieran Rourke's father." She turned the thermos lid in her hands. "And in January you gave up the contract and sold the second engine. And you've never once told me about that night. Not on the telephone. Not when Grandma died. Not since I came home."

He drove. On the long curve past the Musselshell turn-off the trailer shifted behind them, a heavy lurch and a clatter of hooves, and he felt it through the wheel and looked in the mirror. A calf had gone down. He watched the mirror, slowing, until it scrambled up again among the others, and the trailer settled, and he brought the speed back up.

"I'm not asking as a lawyer," she said. "I want to say that. I know how I sound. I'm asking because I'm your daughter, and I live in your house, and I'd like to know what happened to you that summer. Grandma said something happened. She said it in the November, on the telephone, before she got too tired to talk. She said, *Something happened to your father on that fire and he won't say.*"

He drove. The road went along the top of the bench towards Prosper, with the grass on both sides of it yellow and the fence posts new, cedar, and the burnt ones lying in the ditch where the county had pulled them.

"I held the campus," he said.

She waited.

"The man in the bottom asked me for an engine. At half past nine. To sit on the Tollefsen paddocks till the crew came. I had two. I had fire on my own fence, and three hundred and eighty people in the halls, and a clause, and the note, and the plan said hold. I held." He kept his eyes on the road. "That's in the state's file. All of it. What I said, and when. They wrote it down."

"And then you quit."

"And then I quit."

"Because you were wrong?"

"Because I'd do the same." He heard it come out of his mouth, in the cab, with her there, and it sounded worse aloud. "Same night, same numbers, I'd hold the campus. So I took myself off it."

Mariah looked at him for a long time.

"And Grandma," she said.

"Your grandmother was dying. On the telephone, every night at nine, from the end of the engine shed. That night I rang her early. She was asleep. Rosalie put the telephone on the pillow and I listened to her breathe." He stopped. "She'd told Rosalie to tell me not to stand too close to it."

Mariah did not say anything to that. She looked out of the windscreen at the road.

He thought about the wallet in his back pocket. He could feel it against the seat, as he always could; he had carried it for nearly three years and the leather had taken the shape of the page inside it, folded in four, behind his licence. He did not take it out. He did not know any more whether he had been right to give his word on it, and he had given it.

"That's all?" Mariah said.

"That's what's mine."

She looked at him. He could feel her looking at him. She had heard the shape of what he had not said; it was her work. She sat beside him in the cab with the thermos lid in her hands and he waited for her to ask about the gap.

She did not ask.

"All right," she said, after a while. "Thank you, Dad."

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Past the campus, where the Bench Road came to the top of the coulee and began to go down towards the river, there was a place where you could see out over the bench.

He had not looked at it in three years. He looked at it now, because Mariah said, "What's that?", and pointed.

There were buildings going up on the bench. Out to the west, this side of the old Hogback, on the flat ground towards the bench edge where the Rourke pasture had been. A long low building with a steel roof, half framed. Another beside it, roofed, white. Two rows of houses, small, plain, all alike, some with walls and some only floors, and a big shed, and a water tower on legs, and a road going in to it all from the Bench Road, new gravel, pale. There were men on the roofs. Even at that distance he could see they were men in dark clothes, and that some of them had beards, and that there were women among the houses in long dark dresses, and children.

"Hutterites," he said. "A daughter colony. From Sixmile, across the river."

"On the Rourke land?"

"Kieran sold them the bench." He did not know why Kieran had sold.

They went over the edge and down the switchbacks into the coulee, and the bench went out of sight above them.

At the bottom of the coulee the road came out onto the flat and ran along above the river on its raised bank, fenced on both sides, towards the bridge. The river meadow was green. Somebody had baled it. The bales stood in the field in rows, round, wrapped in white, all the way along the river to the bridge. On the far side of the river the cottonwoods along the Lodgepole flat were yellow, the ones that had lived, with the black still on their trunks, and between them he could see the flat, and cattle on it.

He did not slow down.

Mariah looked at the cattle across the river, and at him, and did not say anything, and he drove over the bridge and up the far side towards Prosper with forty-four calves rattling behind him in the trailer, and she poured him coffee out of the thermos, and held it out, and he took it.