Dead Weight

A Voidlands Novel

N. Van Seters & Claude

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PART ONE

The load

1

The scales

The weighbridge had been built for trucks that no longer came, and the lanes painted across its deck still told them where to stand. Now it weighed barrows. By seven on pay morning there were fourteen people in the line for the yard window, and Curtis Hesketh, eleventh, had already worked out which of them would cost him time.

He stood with his weight on his heels, as he stood under anything he did not trust, and looked at what was holding the line up. Two of Gareth's men sat on the rail of the shed porch with their boots hooked under the lower bar. The one with the ring on his thumb was turning a tin cup between his palms. The clerk worked behind the grille with a ledger as wide as a door. Behind him hung the board with the day's rates in chalk, copper first, then steel, then aluminium by gauge, and under those the column of deductions, which was the only part of the board anyone read.

Fuel. Haulage. Hire. Tools.

The line moved the way a line moves when nobody wants to be first at the grille and nobody wants to be last. A woman ahead of him tipped a barrow of stripped motor windings onto the deck, and the scale settled with a sound like a small animal turning over. The yard boy read the number out. The clerk wrote it. She nodded at a figure that was not the one she had worked out in her head, took her

notes, and went away counting them with her thumb inside her sleeve so that nobody could see how many.

The man behind her did not nod.

He was from the east crew, forty or so, with a split thumbnail and a hat he held against his thigh. Curtis knew him the way he knew most of the yard: by what he was good at. A steady hand on a cutter, a clean edge, the sort who stripped a cable tray without leaving a hook behind for the next person to find with their wrist. He had spent two weeks in Hall Two on that tray.

"Tools, four," the man said, reading the board and then the ledger upside down. "That's wrong."

"It's in the book," said the clerk.

"I know what's in the book. It says lost. I haven't lost it. The cutter's on your sharpening rack. I took it there on the second." He had a slip. He put it on the counter and flattened it with two fingers so that the clerk would have to look down. "Your boy wrote it."

"I don't see a cutter."

"It's on the rack."

Curtis had seen the cutter on the rack. He had walked past it on Tuesday, going to Bea's with a coil of wire: a short-handled shear with a taped grip and a red ring painted round the jaw, hung beside a row of hand axes under a card that said WAITING. He had noticed it the way he noticed any tool someone had looked after. He had not thought about it again.

The clerk did not pick up the slip. He turned a page of the ledger, found nothing he needed there, and turned it back.

"Next," he said, to the air over the man's shoulder.

"It's four. It's a week's tea."

The man with the ring on his thumb put his cup down on the porch rail and came off it without hurry. He crossed the yard on a line that took him past the weighbridge and the barrows and the queue, and nobody in the queue looked at him, and everybody moved their feet to leave him room. He hit the man from the east

crew once in the kidney with the side of his fist, as one knocks on a door, and when the man folded he hit him across the face with the back of the other hand. The hat went. The man sat down on the weighbridge ramp with one palm flat on the planks, and his mouth opened, and for a while nothing came out of it.

"Next," said the clerk.

The woman with the barrow behind Curtis put it onto the deck. The scale settled. The yard boy read the number out. Somebody coughed, and somebody else said something about the wind. Curtis watched the man's split thumbnail go white where he pressed it into the plank.

He knew the man's name. He found he was holding it in his mouth like something he had been asked to keep for later.

The one with the ring bent and took the slip off the counter, folded it once, and put it in his own pocket. Then he went back to the porch and his tea. His name was Ewan. His mother ran the pastry stall at the canteen, and sold the best pastry in Drybank. Everyone knew that too.

The man from the east crew got up in stages, and found his hat, and the clerk said "Next" again. He looked along the line, one face at a time, as if checking a count.

When he reached Curtis, Curtis looked at the scale.

Then he stepped up to the grille.

"Hesketh. Lorna's crew," said the clerk, and turned a page, and read the figures out without hurry: Curtis's share of the Hall Two copper, the advance he had drawn on the fourth, fuel, haulage, hire. "Transport, six."

It had been five last month. It had been four in the spring. Curtis opened his mouth and shut it again, and watched the clerk count notes onto the counter in stacks of ten, a clean, damp-edged sound.

"That's right," Curtis said.

"It's in the book."

He took the money, folded it, and put it inside his coat against his ribs, where he kept the things he did not want a hand to find.

• • •

The grain store held half the town's savings in a locked drawer under the counter and charged for it in nothing but silence. Curtis had been paying the silence for eighteen months.

The woman who ran it did not ask what he had brought. She wiped her hands, took a key from the cord at her neck, and slid the drawer out between them, a long flat steel thing that had once held drawings. His envelope lay near the front, soft now at the corners. He counted the new notes in. She wrote the total on the card in pencil, without looking at it, and put the card in the envelope and the envelope in the drawer and the key back down the front of her dress.

Eighteen months of Fridays. It was a way of saying something. It was not a sum, and he knew the sum to the note.

Under the lining of his left boot he carried a strip torn from a freight manifest. On the back, in a driver's square capitals: SERVICE DEPOT, CROSS ROAD. ASK FOR THE YARD FOREMAN. ANY WEEKDAY AFTER THE 6TH. SAY YOU'RE FROM THE DRYBANK ROAD. HE OWES ME ONE. Curtis had read it so often that it had stopped being words and turned into a route, a line to follow with his eyes shut. Nobody there was waiting for him. He would be a man with no record who could read a failing support at forty paces, standing in a yard asking for work beneath his skill, and he wanted it in his teeth.

He came out into the light and Denny was sitting on the step with his hat on the back of his head and the look of a man who had been given a parcel and told not to open it.

"You're late."

"I was paid."

"So I heard." Denny stood, and fell in beside him without being asked, matching his stride the way he had since they were fourteen.

"I heard Ewan had a go at somebody. They said you were next in line."

"I was."

"And?"

"And I got paid."

Denny looked at him sideways for a few paces. He was twenty-nine, with a sunburned scalp where his hair had begun to go and a mouth that was usually a little ahead of the rest of him. He did not say anything else about it, which was how Curtis knew he had understood, and was letting him off, and would not remember that he had.

"Lorna's taking Four," he said instead. "The assembly. Cooling and the power block together, on its own skid, whole. I walked it with her at first light. Curtis, it's whole. I've never seen a bay in this camp somebody hadn't been in with a cutter, and there it sits with its seals on. Gareth sold it before she'd looked at it. She says it's the best job she's had in ten years."

"She told me half past five."

"Then she's told you." Denny turned and walked backwards a few steps, to see his face. "You know what my cut comes to, if it goes the way she thinks? A tractor. Not all of one. The first of one. There's a man over the ridge with a recovery tractor, hoist and all, hydraulics done over last winter, and he wants it gone before the cold. We put in together. First year we take the things nobody else will climb for. Second year we take Fours, and there's no yard on the end of it."

"Half and half."

"Half and half." He grinned. "You say it like it's a joke."

"Ask me when it's paid."

"That's not a no."

"It's not anything," said Curtis, and Denny laughed, because he took it as the answer he wanted, and turned back round to walk forwards.

• • •

Bea's workshop stood two lanes behind the yard, in what had been a pump house, with its door propped on a length of cable drum and a radio going somewhere at the back. Every surface carried something half taken apart. Motors lay on their sides with their covers off. A row of control housings waited on a shelf with paper tags tied to them, and over the bench hung the diagnostic unit she was proudest of and least able to replace, its case cracked from corner to corner and its display shaded with a hood of folded card so that it could be read at all.

Bea did not look up. She had a seal in her teeth and a pump on her lap.

"Coupling," Curtis said, and put it on the bench. It was the one she had asked him to find in the Hall Two stores, a brass half-inch fitting that had survived because it was too small to be worth stripping. "Pitted on the thread. I didn't clean it."

"Don't clean it, I want to see how it's pitted." She took the seal from her mouth. "That's a different problem from the one I've got, but I'll want it." She was sixty-three, with grey cropped hair and a leather apron that had gone the colour of the bench, and she talked the way she worked, with half her attention elsewhere, so that her sentences ran out when her hands needed her. "Tell your mother I've done the tractor. The rear lift hose, and the pump seal that was weeping. It's new, the hose. She'll say I've charged her for something that was fine. I haven't. It wasn't. I've written it down so she can't say—" She stopped. A fitting had turned in her fingers and she bent to it.

"I'll tell her."

"Wrote it Thursday. Signed it." She looked up now, and past him. "That your friend or a lodger?"

"He's got a business plan," said Denny, from the door.

"Heaven help us."

The radio at the back was playing something with strings. It had been playing the same station, or the same recording, for a week, because it was the only thing the set could still hold, and for a week it had crackled over every high note. Curtis had taken the speaker out on Monday night and resoldered the cone connection and glued a split in the paper with a drop of cement as fine as he could lay it. Now a woman sang over the strings, and every word came whole, down to the breath before the last line. He stood a moment with the coupling still warm from his hand.

"It's holding," said Bea, not looking. "I've had it on all day. I'd forgotten what she sounded like."

"He'd marry that radio," said Denny.

"He'd have to move in."

Denny was counting the seals on Bea's shelf under his breath, as he counted everything, and when somebody's boot knocked the bottom rack he lost the number and began again from one, without the least embarrassment. "Forty-one," he said. "Forty-two. Don't tell me."

Curtis did not answer. He was listening to the second verse, where the voice dropped and the strings came up under it and each of them kept its own place. It was the only thing he had made in a year that did what it was meant to do and did not belong to anyone but the person who heard it.

• • •

Lorna was at the crew shed with a coil of rope across her knees, working a splice that did not need working. She was fifty-four, narrow and weathered, with her hair pulled back so hard it lifted her eyebrows, and when Curtis came in she held out a hand without raising her head. He put the marlinspike into it. She took it as if it had been there already.

"Bea's done the hose," he said.

"I know what Bea's done."

"She says it was bad. She wants you to know she wrote it down."

"Bea writes everything down." The splice closed. She bit off the end of the whipping and looked at the work, not at him. "Half past five. Tractor's at the hall mouth at six. Four goes hot by nine and I want the skid unbolted before then. Bring your own water. Don't bring Denny's."

"He'll be there."

"He'll be there with a speech." She set the rope down. Then she did look at him. She had a way of doing it, a short flat look like the one she gave a roof before she walked under it. "You were at the yard."

"I was paid."

"I heard what else." She wiped her hands on her trousers, one then the other. "If you're going to argue with that yard, argue on a Monday with the numbers in your hand. Not on pay day, not in a line. It does nobody any good and the yard has all day."

"I didn't argue."

"Good." She turned back to the rope and found something else to do with it. "When Four's done I want to talk about the season. I've held you the east lift. It's more than you're drawing now."

He said, "All right."

That was all he said. She nodded as if it had been a good deal more, and he stood a moment, looking at the grey in the parting of her hair, and then he went out to find food.

The canteen was on the far side of the central strip, with the drinking room sharing its back wall and a line of children outside the pastry stall pretending not to be. Ewan's mother had flour to the elbows. She gave him two meat pies and a third he had not asked for, wrapped in the same paper, and would not take the extra coin. "You're thin," she said. "It's the work." They were still hot. He carried them home inside his coat, against the notes and the strip of manifest, and the heat of them came through to his ribs.

They ate at the kitchen table, he and Lorna, the way they had eaten for years: the news of the day traded in half-sentences, a lamp between them, the crew's sheets laid out on the end of the table where she could reach them. She told him which seals she wanted checked. He told her Bea's hose was new. She gave him the third pie and watched him eat it, and neither of them mentioned the yard.

Denny came at dusk, with the dogs already barking at the next house along. He did not come in. He stood on the step in the cold, with his hands in his jacket and the light from the kitchen on one side of his face, and said, "Come out a minute."

Curtis went out and pulled the door to behind him.

"I wasn't going to say it in front of her," said Denny. "She'll think I'm getting ahead of the job." He took one hand out of his jacket. In it was a small cloth bag, drawn at the neck with a bootlace, and the bag sagged in his palm with the weight of what it held. "That's mine. Mine, not the crew's. A bit here, a bit there, since the spring. Don't ask me where, I'll tell you when it's done. It's my half toward the tractor."

"Denny."

"Keep it with yours. At the grain store. It's safer with her than under my floor." He held it out. "Then it's ours. That's all. It doesn't have to be a promise."

He waited, and the bag hung between them, and Curtis could hear the dogs, and, through the door behind him, Lorna's chair scraping as she cleared the plates. He thought of a strip of paper under the lining of a boot. He thought of a hat on a weighbridge ramp.

"It's only keeping," said Denny.

Curtis took it. It weighed what it weighed, and no more.

"There," said Denny, and he was grinning again, and clapped him once on the shoulder as he went down the step. "Half past five. Don't be late. She'll be at the hall mouth before us and she'll pretend she wasn't."

He went off along the lane into the dark, whistling something Curtis half knew, and Curtis stood on the step and put the bag inside his coat with the rest.

2

Dispatch

The older child's left boot had given up in the night. By the time Bridget Pike found it under the table the sole had come away from the upper along one whole side and hung off the toe like a tongue, and the child stood in the middle of the kitchen in one boot and one sock, holding the other foot an inch off the floor, with the face of a person laying a complaint before the proper authority.

"It did it by itself."

"Boots don't."

"This one did."

She had wire, a tin of the black glue from the dispatch shed, and about eleven minutes. She sat on the bottom stair with the boot in her lap and bound the toe three times round, tight, with a twist at the instep, and the child watched every turn. The younger one was under the table with a spoon, conducting a private war against a bowl of porridge that had gone cold, and had so far declined every offer of peace.

"It's lumpy."

"It's the same as yesterday."

"Yesterday it was a different lumpy."

Denny's side of the bed had been cold when she woke. His boots were gone from the step, and there was a grey fan of hall dust on

the mat where he had stood to put them on. He would be at Four by now with Lorna, walking the skid, telling whoever stood still what he was going to do with the money. She had heard the latch at some black hour and had not turned over.

She glued the toe and held it and counted to sixty.

"That'll do till Friday." She set the boot on the child's foot and pressed the toe with her thumb. "Walk."

The older one walked the length of the kitchen and back with the exaggerated care of someone who has just had a foot returned to them. "It feels strange."

"It's meant to. Get your coat. If you're late the old women give your bench to somebody who can read."

Next door's grandmother took the younger one at the gate, in exchange for a meal a week and a promise about the roof, and did not remark on the porridge on the younger one's chin. Bridget watched the pair of them down the path. The younger one turned at the corner and put out a tongue. It was an ordinary morning, and she was seventeen minutes late.

• • •

The dispatch shed was built onto the side of the old freight office, a long low room with a window onto the weighbridge, a radio on a shelf, a board for the vehicles and a book. The book was foolscap, bound in red cloth that had gone brown at the corners, and every truck and driver and seat that left Drybank went into it in her hand, with the time. She had written in it for nine years. It had never been checked by anyone, because nobody else wanted to read it.

She was reading the night's entries with her coat still on when the sound came through the wall. It was not loud. It was the flat soft sound of a fist meeting something with give in it, and then, a breath later, the clerk's voice calling "Next," the way it did a hundred times in a morning. She looked up. Through the window the yard was a

tableau of people looking at their feet. A man was sitting on the weighbridge ramp with one hand pressed flat to the planks.

"Ewan," said the long-run driver, who had come in behind her for his seat sheet and was reading the board over her shoulder. "Somebody's tool bill."

"Which crew?"

"East."

She wrote nothing in the book. She took her coat off, and hung it on the nail, and in the drawer under the board found the deductions sheet Gareth's yard sent across every pay morning, a single page in the yard clerk's hand with a name against each line. She copied from it every week, onto the paper slips the workers took away. Fuel. Haulage. Hire. Tools. She found the east crew and ran her finger down to the line that said Tools, 4, and, in the margin, in Gareth's own looping hand, cutter lost.

She copied it out. The slip had room on it for nothing else.

"Seat," said the driver, putting his sheet on the counter. He was a lean man in his forties with a sunburned neck, who drove the long run to coverage twice a fortnight and was never in a hurry to go. "Two outbound Thursday, you've got me for the coil load, and a mate of mine wants a place on the cab for his hand."

"Which hand?"

"It won't close." He showed her, a loose fist, the third and fourth fingers curling and then stopping as if at a door. "Fell off a gantry in the spring. It was fine till it wasn't. He's on bulk now, he can't grip a cutter. He wants somebody to look at it where there's somebody."

"What's his balance?"

"Nine."

She turned the pages to the holds. "It's against a seat. Nine, held. I can't release it, it's not mine. If he clears it, he's on the cab."

"He hasn't got nine."

"Then I can put him on the list for when it moves." She heard how it sounded. She had said it forty times that season, in the same

voice. “Tell him to come in. I’ll write it where Gareth sees it, with the date.”

“That’ll help.”

“It won’t. I’ll still write it.” She wrote the driver’s two outbound seats in. “The coil load. Is that the one with the cell packs for the pump house? They’re three days gone. Where are they?”

“The coil load is the transformer coil and the copper bar.” He scratched his neck. “Packs went on the other truck. Thursday last. It went on to the Cross Road, and it’s due back Thursday, and I’d say your packs are sitting in a yard there with a very nice tag on them.”

“Who told you Thursday?”

“Nobody told me. It’s what I’d do.”

“That’s not what I asked.” She found the entry for the other truck, the driver’s initials, the time out, and nothing for the time back. “I need it from him. When, not what he’d do.”

“I’ll ask.” He folded his sheet. At the door he stopped, with the air of a man who has found a coin in his pocket. “Your Denny’s had a few good weeks, I hear. He sold me a coil of the heavy cable Tuesday. Good price. Tell him I’ll take the same from the next lot.”

Bridget did not look up. “Sold you.”

“Off the yard.” He considered. “Not off the yard. His own. I thought you knew. Don’t say I said.”

He went out. The door swung on its spring and settled, and the window shook once with the passing of the first truck of the day. She sat for a moment with her pencil above the line she had been writing. She could feel her own pulse in the heel of her hand.

Then she wrote the date, and the time, and the next truck, and went on.

• • •

Gareth came across the yard at nine, in his grey coat, with the buyer's letter folded small in one hand. He came the long way, by the porch and the people on it, and he spoke to three of them, and one of them laughed, and she watched him through the window do it the way she had watched him do it for nine years: a word, a hand on an arm, a look at someone's boots. Then he came in and shut the door behind him against the draught, and the room was warmer and smaller.

"Bridget." He was fifty-eight, broad and unhurried, with the heavy handsome face of a man who had been told once that he looked trustworthy and had decided to take it as given. "How's the roof?"

"Fine."

"It isn't. I walked past the north side on Sunday. It's lifting at the ridge. You'll get the winter in your bed." He put the letter down on the counter and smoothed it with the side of his hand. "I'm not going to see that, with two small ones in the house. Take an advance on the month. Put it on the sheet, and when the roof's done, we'll talk about what it cost."

"I'll see."

"That's all right. It's an old arrangement." He smiled. It was a warm smile and went no further than it needed to. "The offer stands."

He turned the letter round so she could read it. It was in a buyer's agent's neat upright hand, on paper that had come a long way in somebody's case, and it said what Gareth had told the yard on Friday: that a party outside coverage had put down a deposit against the intact cooling and power assembly in Hall Four, delivered to the yard floor and graded for crating, by the fourth day. If it was not there, the deposit returned, and with it the terms of the credit. The collection was on the twelfth, at dawn. After that, the agent wrote, they would look elsewhere.

The figure was at the foot. She read it, and did the sum, and did it again. It was more than Denny had ever drawn in a season. It was more than the whole of Crew Three would split in two, and it had the look of a number that had made Gareth fold the page small.

"Tomorrow, then," she said.

"Tomorrow. Out of the hall by noon, on the floor here by dark, in time for the grader. Lorna says she can do it." He took the letter back. "She'll ask you for what she wants. Give it to her. She doesn't ask for much, and when she does ask, I'd like it done before she's finished the sentence." He looked at the book on the counter. "It's a lot of money to be waiting on a tractor."

"Which tractor?"

"The hoist. With the frame."

"Bea did the lift hose on it Thursday."

"Then it'll lift." He tapped the counter twice, with one finger, and she knew that he had finished. "Anything I should know?"

She thought of a coil of heavy cable on a Tuesday, and of a hand that would not close, and of a slip with Tools, 4 on it, in her own writing.

"No," she said.

"Good girl," said Gareth, mildly, as he had said it to her for nine years, and went out.

• • •

Lorna's runner came at noon, a lad of twelve with a message learned by heart and delivered at speed, as though it might spoil. Bridget made him say it again slowly.

"Crew Three. Hall Four. Light truck at the crew shed, quarter past five. Tractor and frame at the hall mouth, six o'clock, and it's to be held to the crew until the skid's out. She says that's all."

"Held until who says?"

"Until Crew Three says."

"Which tractor?"

"The one with the hoist."

"Who's driving?"

The boy frowned at the middle distance. "Curtis, she said. I think. It might have been Denny, he was there too."

"It's Curtis," Bridget said, and wrote it, because Lorna did not hand the hoist to a man who talked about it. She wrote it as she wrote everything, in the plain order: the crew, the site, the vehicle with its frame, the times, the name of the driver, the word held. Lorna had asked for a tractor, and what Lorna had meant was the tractor with the lift frame, because the frame was what drew the hire and the frame was what lifted a skid. Bridget entered the frame. The book had to say what it said.

She read it back to the runner, who nodded. She gave him a sweet from the tin on the shelf, and he put it in his cheek without looking at it, and ran.

The rest of the afternoon went the way afternoons went. The cell packs stayed lost. The long-run driver came back to say it was Thursday, definitely, he had asked, which made it Friday. A woman wanted a seat to see about an ear and had a balance of two, which Bridget cleared herself out of the tin she kept for it, and wrote down, and would not mention. A man complained about a deduction and was told, by her, in the same voice, that complaints went to the yard. She wrote the time and the truck. She wrote and wrote.

At four she did the thing she had not let herself do all day. She opened the book to the previous Tuesday, and ran her finger down the outbound line, looking for a coil of heavy cable under a name that was not the yard's, and found nothing, because nobody puts a private sale in a dispatch book.

• • •

He came in at dusk, whistling, with the dogs still barking at the next house along. She had the little one asleep and the older one pretending, and a pan of something on the stove that had gone past what she meant it to be. He kissed the back of her head, hung his jacket on the nail, and took his boots off in the middle of the floor.

"Good day?"

"A cable day," she said.

He was already reaching for the bread. His hand stopped.

"A driver told me," she said. "He thought I knew."

"Which driver?"

"It doesn't matter which."

"It does if he's going to talk." He sat down, and for once did not fill the room. He had the look of a boy caught with a bird's egg and a perfectly good reason. "It's small stuff. It's the ends nobody wants, the offcuts. It comes off a heap by the north wall that's nobody's. I sell it on my own time to people who'd have to wait a fortnight for the yard. It isn't stealing."

"Whose heap?"

"Nobody's."

"How much?"

"Enough."

"How much, Denny."

He told her. It was less than she had feared and more than she had thought he could keep to himself since the spring, and she did a sum in her head that came out as the better part of what the household needed between now and midsummer. She sat down opposite him. The pan on the stove began to catch, and she did not get up.

"It's toward the tractor," he said. "Curtis and me. There's a man over the ridge—"

"I know what it's toward. I'm not asking what it's for. I'm asking where it's been, for six months, while I counted flour."

"I was going to tell you when it was—"

"When it was what?"

"Done. Settled. When I could put it in your hand." He leaned forward with his elbows on the table, and the whole of him tipped toward her the way he did when he wanted a thing so much he could not hear himself. "Two years. Give me two years. We're not the yard's any more. We take what we like, when we like, and nobody's writing tools, four on the end of it. You'll have a seat on every truck we own. Anybody's. You'll write the book."

"I write the book now."

"Our book."

"Our book in Drybank, with Gareth's roof on it." She heard her voice go level. "I want a seat out. Not the cab on a Thursday for an ear. For them. Before next winter. Somewhere with a clinic that doesn't depend on whether somebody's paid the nine."

"Out to what?" He said it softly. "A depot yard, and a number on your sleeve, and nobody who knows your name? We'd be the people who came from the road. It's not— I'm not saying it's nothing. I'm saying it's not better than this. It's only further."

"It's further from Ewan."

It went across the table and stopped. He sat back.

"Ewan did somebody this morning," she said. "Everyone's heard. Curtis was in that line, and he got paid." She watched his face. "You don't think about that when you say two years?"

"I think about it," said Denny. "I think about it every pay day. That's why I want the vehicle. You don't get out of a yard by leaving. You get out by not needing it."

There was something to that, and she could not find the hole in it, and that annoyed her more than the cable.

From the other room the little one coughed, and turned over, and was quiet.

"I want it in my hand," she said. "Next time. Not in a coat."

"Next time."

"And I want to know which of it is yours and which is Curtis's."

"It's mine. It's only in his keeping." He had the grace to look at the table. "I gave it to him tonight. It's safer at the grain store than under the floor."

She took the pan off the stove and looked into it and put it back. They ate what was in it. He talked, a little, about the skid and the seals that had still been on it and how it was the best bay he'd seen in the camp, and she listened without saying how pleased she was for him, which was true, and without saying how tired she was of being pleased for him, which was also true. He stopped at last, in the middle of a sentence, and said, "You're counting."

"Yes."

"What?"

"Seats."

He laughed, and was not sure he should have, and reached for her hand across the table. She let him have it for as long as it took to finish the bread.

Later, with the little one settled and the lamp turned low, he sat on the bottom stair with the older child's boot between his knees, because it had been said at supper that it was lumpy and he had decided to take that personally. The bag of burnt almonds he had come in with sat on the step beside him, from Ewan's mother's stall, and he ate them one at a time without offering any, which was not like him, and she understood that he had bought them from Ewan's mother on purpose.

"She's had a bad year," he said, without looking up. "The husband. I'm not saying anything about the boy."

"You're saying a good deal."

"I'm saying she gave me them for a hundred, and she's nobody to tell her they were worth a hundred and ten." He licked the end of a length of wire and put it through the eye. "And Gareth put the roof on at the widow's at the end of the lane, you know. Say what you like. Nobody asked him."

"Somebody will be paying for it."

"Somebody always is," said Denny cheerfully, and bent his head to the boot.

He counted as he worked. It had been the first thing she noticed about him, across a loading bay at nineteen: stairs, sleeves, the spoons laid for supper, the children's fingers, under his breath in a murmur like a man at prayer, and when he lost the number he began again from the beginning. He sang flat. He could not keep money in his pockets for the length of a lane. When he was frightened he talked faster and was funnier, so that the people about him laughed and did not notice, and she had learned to listen for the speed. He had talked very fast all of last winter. She had never asked him why, and she thought now, watching the crown of his head over the boot, that she had known.

The hat hung on its nail by the door, crown out, the hole in the side turned to the wall. It was the only thing he was vain about. He had told the older child for three years that the hole was a bullet hole.

In bed he fell asleep as he always did, between one sentence and the next, with an arm flung across her side. She lay with the dark over her and the slow breath of the older child, who was not asleep, in the next room. She could hear it. She said nothing. After a while the breathing changed.

He had never paid into the archive. It was the thing she thought of, lying there, and it came with the flat clarity of a sum. Some in the camp had it, or had a cousin who did: a sitting at the depot annex every few months, a day out and a day back, and a week's pay each season to keep it current, so that if the worst came there would be something on the far side of it. Denny had said it was for people with something to leave. He had said, next year. He had said it every spring, with his fork in the air, and she had let him, because the money had always been wanted somewhere else. If the worst came to a man in Drybank, it came whole. There was nobody to ring.

At some point she got up, in her nightdress, and went through the kitchen in the dark. His boots were still in the middle of the floor where he had stepped out of them, one upright, one on its side, with the grey fan of hall dust still caught in the welts. She stood and looked at them. Then she picked them up, one in each hand, and set them side by side on the step, toes out, where he would find them at half past four without having to look.

3

Hall Four

Hall Four was cold until the sun reached the high windows, and then it was a different building.

Before that it was a vault of grey air with the day's breath still in it. The crew came in at a quarter to six by the east mouth, behind the light truck's lamps, and the beams swung down a ramp wide enough for a loaded flatbed and out across a floor the size of a field. Stripped cable trays hung from the roof on their rods like the ribs of something that had been eaten. The racks that had once stood in rows had been taken out to the last bolt by crews who came before anyone now alive in Drybank, and they had left behind the pale outlines of themselves on the concrete, hundreds of them, ruled in lines. At the far end, a hundred and forty metres off, the floor stopped being floor and became a deck.

Curtis had gone back to the mouth at six for the tractor and brought it in. He had it now at the deck's edge, nose to the rail, the hoist frame raised on its two arms and its pendant looped over the mirror, and he stood beside the front wheel with his hands in his armpits, listening. It was an old machine and he knew its voice. The hydraulics had a new note in them since Thursday, a smooth hard hum where there had been a flutter, and he liked the sound in the way he liked a clean joint.

"Bea's done something to the pump," he said.

"Bea's done a great deal to the pump," said Lorna. "It'll be in the hire."

She was walking the deck with a lamp. She did not look as if she was inspecting anything. She walked at the pace she walked a quay or a kitchen, with her weight low and her feet apart on the grating, and every few yards she stopped and put the sole of her boot flat on a panel and leaned, and then went on. Behind her came the crew in a loose file, five of them besides Curtis and Denny: the rigger, the two cutters who were brothers and spoke only to each other, the young one with the borrowed gloves, and the woman who ran the winch. Nobody talked. It was the hour for not talking.

The deck was a raised steel floor, two and a half metres above the hall, forty metres long and perhaps twenty wide, built to carry the plant that sat on it. Much of it was still on it. The assembly stood at the middle: a long grey block on a welded skid, two storeys of cooling pipework and switchgear and the great square housing of the power unit, all of it under its original paint. Nothing had been cut. Every seal was on. Curtis had seen a hundred stripped bays in his life and he had never seen a machine in one that looked as though it was waiting.

Along the deck's south edge ran the trench. It was a cable and coolant channel, three metres deep and a metre and a half wide, covered along most of its length by the same grating as the floor. Where the plant had stood on it, someone long ago had laid heavy plates across, and on the plates, to carry the skid's weight over the trench to the apron where the tractor stood, someone more recent had built a handling structure: a cradle of box-section beams, bolted to the deck on one side and bearing on a steel seat on the other, with a guide frame standing up out of it like a gate. It had been there as long as Curtis had been working. Nobody trusted it and everybody used it.

"Plate," said Lorna, at the cradle's far end. She said it without raising her voice, and he came.

She had put her lamp down on the grating and was kneeling at the seat, the steel pad on the trench wall that took the cradle's rear foot. She did not touch it. She pointed. A bloom of rust the size of a hand ran down the concrete under the pad in a long brown tear, and at its edge a bead of water stood on the stain, round and bright, though it had not rained in nine days.

"It's weeping," said Curtis.

"I can see it's weeping."

He crouched beside her. The seat had a hairline in the concrete along its edge, the width of a pencil line and about as long as his forearm, and when he laid two fingers across it he could feel, very faintly, the cold coming up out of the trench. He tapped the pad with the knuckle of his ring finger and listened. It gave back a note a little too low.

"That's gone soft at the back."

"A bit."

"More than a bit. I wouldn't put a man on it."

"I'm not going to put a man on it." Lorna looked at the seat and then along the cradle, and he saw her do the sum: the skid's weight, the cradle's span, the number of panels between the hall and the apron. He knew how long she took to do it because he had learned to count her pauses before he learned to read. "We move the foot. Two panels in, onto the sound deck, with a plate under it to spread. Denny props from below. Nobody on this panel but him and one. Skid goes over on the frame, not the cradle. The cradle's only a guide."

"It'll take an hour."

"It'll take forty minutes. Get the plate."

He could have said it then. He turned it over on his tongue, a sentence he had said before about other places: give it a day, let me get a light down that trench, let me look at the other seat. He knew the

shape of it exactly. And he looked at his mother's face in the lamplight, narrow and plain and tired, with the lines running down from the corners of her mouth, and at the assembly standing in the dark behind her with all its seals on, and he did not say it. She had walked more of this camp than anyone living. She had taken a roof off a winter and brought a crew out from under it with one man's arm in a sling. He had never known her be wrong in a way that mattered.

"Plate," he said, and went.

• • •

By half past six the work had a rhythm, and he was inside it.

It was dull and exact. The brothers cut the last of the holding straps off the skid's base, in blue flares that threw their shadows up the pipework and made the hall pulse. The rigger climbed the housing with a bundle of chain and came down with the lift points marked in red. The young one carried plates and was told, twice, which side to put them on. Curtis moved the tractor on the apron a hand's breadth at a time to centre the frame, listening to the hum, watching the dial at the pendant. The sun had found the high windows. It came down in long grey-gold bars through the dust, and one of them lay across the winch woman's hands.

Denny was in the trench.

He had gone down the ladder with a prop on his shoulder and a mallet through his belt, whistling the thing he had been whistling since yesterday, and for twenty minutes there had been no sound from him but the knock of the mallet and an occasional comment shouted up for the benefit of nobody. "There's a pipe down here with its own opinions." "I've found where the rest of the water went." "Curtis, if I die, I'm leaving you the pipe."

"I don't want it."

"That's because you've not seen it."

He came up the ladder at seven with grease to the elbows and an expression Curtis knew, the one he wore when he had seen some-

thing. He did not say what. He went along the skid's base to the coolant manifold at the rear, and crouched, and put his hand flat on a blanking cap that all of them had passed and no one had thought to look at, a brass cap the size of a fist, set into the pipework behind a panel.

"Nobody cut this."

"There's nothing there," said the brother nearest.

"There's a line." Denny put his ear against the cap. "It's got something in it. Listen."

Curtis listened. Under the hum of the hall and the creak of the roof there was a faint tick, a small metallic pulse like a clock inside a wall. It was the sound of fluid under a pressure that had never been let go.

"That's live."

"That's the whole loop," said Denny. "They'd have closed it up with the coolant still in it, years back, when they shut the plant, and it's been sitting here under pressure since before we were born. Put a cutter through that and it's all over the deck, and over you." He stood up, with his hands held out from his sides as though he had got something on them. "Somebody get me a bucket and the long spanner."

It took three minutes. He worked the cap off a quarter-turn at a time, with a rag round it, and the tick turned into a hiss and the hiss into a thin cold stream that smelled of a swimming bath, and ran off along the grating and down through the gaps into the dark. When it had stopped he stood watching the last of it drip, and then he looked across at Lorna.

"Saved us a morning," she said.

"Saved us a face."

"Saved you one." She did not smile, but the lines at the corners of her mouth moved. "Good."

He winked at Curtis over the bucket, delighted, as if the whole camp had applauded.

• • •

The radio had been quiet since six. At twenty past seven it spoke.

It was the crew handset clipped to Lorna's collar, and it gave a small cough of static, and then the voice from the yard, large and easy in the high cold, with the breath of the open door behind it.

"Crew Three, yard. How's the weather?"

"Yard, Crew Three." Lorna did not take her eyes off the chain. "Dry. We're on the lift."

"Good." A pause. Curtis knew that pause. "Lorna, I've got the grader's stand cleared for two. Whenever you're ready, I'll have somebody on the floor to meet it."

"We'll have it out by noon."

"That's all I need." The voice warmed. "You've done a lot of good work for a lot of people. I haven't forgotten. When this one's on the floor I'll see the shares are what they should be. You've earned it. The lot of you."

It was a kind thing to say, and kindly said, and Curtis noticed that no one on the deck looked up. The young one's hand paused on a plate. The rigger studied his chain.

"Noon," said Lorna.

"Noon. Good luck."

A second voice came on, thinner, flatter, with a paper rustle behind it, and he did not need to be told whose. "Crew Three, dispatch. Frame and tractor held to you. Light truck standing at the mouth. Confirm."

"Dispatch, Crew Three. Confirmed." Lorna looked at the handset in her hand as though it had been something she was carrying for somebody else. Then she clipped it back and said, "Tractor."

"Frame's centred," said Curtis.

"Slings."

They ran the slings under the skid's base at the marked points and up to the frame's hook, four legs of chain and a spreader bar, and Curtis, with the pendant in his hand, took up the slack by

inches. The tractor's hum climbed. The chains came tight with a long creaking whine, and the skid shivered and held. He took it up another hand's breadth. Another. The great grey block came off its welds with a faint dry crack of old paint, and hung.

It hung twenty centimetres above the deck, turning a little on its chains, with the light from the high windows laid along its flank. Nobody breathed. Eleven tonnes, Lorna had said at the briefing, plus the spreader. He had it in his hand. He had it in the pendant, in the dial, and in the engine's note, which had gone down half a tone and settled there, steady and willing.

"Slow," said Lorna. "Over the cradle. Frame carries. Denny, foot."

"Foot's in," Denny called, from the cradle's far end, where he stood on the moved panel with one hand on the guide frame and the other flat against the skid, holding it off the beams. "It's sweet. It's as sweet as a nut."

"Don't talk about it."

"I'm not talking about it. I'm just saying it."

Curtis ran the frame out along its arms. The skid crept forward over the plates. He could see Denny's face above the cradle's rail, a white patch under the sun-browned hair with its mouth moving, and the rigger beside him with a hand up, and Lorna at the seat's edge with her lamp turned off, her eyes on the one thing she had decided to watch. The skid reached the guide frame. It passed through it with a hand's breadth either side. It slid over the first beam, and the second.

It was a very small sound. It came from underneath, from the trench side, a short dry knock like a knuckle on a door, and then a second that was longer.

"Stop," said Lorna.

He had already stopped. His thumb was off the button. The skid hung in its chains over the cradle, perfectly still, ten metres from the apron's edge, and he heard, from somewhere under his boots, a faint long ticking, as of something unwinding in a clock.

"Denny. Off the foot."

"I'm off. I'm—" Denny's voice had lost its easy note. "It's moved. There's a—"

The deck went.

It did not fall. That was the thing he would try, afterwards, to tell himself, the one wrong detail of a day he had been over so many times he could no longer say what was memory and what was arrangement. It did not drop. It leaned, as a table leans when one of its legs gives, a long slow tilt from the far end with the grating shrieking against its bolts, and the cradle came with it, a grey wing of beams swinging down into the dark with the guide frame standing up out of it like a hand. The skid came forward on its chains. The tractor lurched. He had his thumb on the button before he knew it and the frame took the weight with a bang that went through his teeth, and the skid stopped in the air with the cradle gone from under it, swinging very slightly, eleven tonnes on four lengths of chain.

The sound came after. It was a deep dull boom, a long falling roar of metal and concrete into a closed space, and dust came up out of the trench in a pale brown flood and rolled across the deck. Somebody screamed, a short high sound, and stopped. The light went. He was blind for three heartbeats with grit in his mouth, and in the dark he heard the winch woman say "Oh, no," in an ordinary voice, and then Lorna, in hers, the one that cut:

"Count off."

"Rigger."

"Winch."

"Brother. Brother."

"Young one." A cough. "I'm— yes."

"Curtis."

"Here."

The dust thinned. The first thing he saw was the skid, steady on its chains, forty centimetres above a floor that was no longer there. The deck ended a metre in front of his boots in a jagged edge of

bent grating, and beyond it, where the plates had been, the trench opened, its walls cracked and smoking, with a great crooked tangle of box-section lying across the bottom of it like something dropped. He could see the grey bulk of the cradle. He could see the guide frame lying on its side. He could not see Denny.

"Denny," said Lorna.

Nobody answered.

Curtis found that he had put the pendant down on the tractor's seat and was already over the rail and across the deck, along the edge of the break, on his belly at the last, with the grating biting through his coat and the cold coming up out of the trench like a hand on his face. Lorna was shouting something behind him. The rigger was shouting. He leaned out over the edge with his arms hanging and stared down.

The trench was full of dust and a thin brown light and the smell of old water. The cradle lay across it at a slant, jammed between the walls, with one end buried in rubble. Beneath its upper beam, in a space the width of a man's shoulders, something that was not metal was moving. A hand. It opened and shut on nothing. A boot, set at the wrong angle. A face turned up through the dust, white from the forehead down and streaked brown at the mouth, and the eyes in it open.

"Cur," said the face. "Cur. Is that you?"

"Yes." It came out of him in the wrong voice. "I'm here. Don't move."

"I can't." It was almost a laugh. "It's on my leg. It's all— there's a beam. Cur, it's on me. It's really on me."

"I know. I can see. I'm coming."

"Is the frame all right?"

He stared down at him.

"It's all right," he said. "It's holding."

"Good. That's good." The hand opened and closed again, and the voice went on, thin and quick and reasonable, as it did when some-

thing was funny and he was trying not to say so. “Then bring it. Bring the frame, Cur. You’ll never lift it with your hands. Bring the frame and take it off me.”

4

The withdrawal

The ladder was at the trench's west end, thirty metres along, and he ran it on the grating with the plates still shivering under his boots.

He went down it faster than he should have. The rungs were wet. Halfway the whole ladder moved a hand's breadth sideways on its bracket, a long slow slip, and he hung there with his boots over nothing and his face against the cold concrete, and waited for it to settle. It did. He dropped the last two metres and landed in rubble, and the dust came up around him in a brown cloud that tasted of old iron and pennies.

"Denny."

"Over here." The voice was close and flat and reasonable. "Mind the pipe."

He minded the pipe. He went along the trench floor bent double, with one hand on the wall, and the light from the break above him came down in a dirty bar and went out and came on again as the dust shifted. The cradle lay across the trench ahead of him at a slant. It was a hundred and fifty millimetres of box-section, welded in two long members with cross-ties, and it had come down end-first and wedged itself between the walls, the far end buried in a fall of concrete and rusted plate, the near end held a metre off the floor by something he could not see. Under the upper member, in

the angle between the beam and the trench wall, Denny lay on his back with his right arm free and his left leg gone under the weight.

He was not bleeding as much as Curtis had feared. He was bleeding enough. A dark wet patch had spread through his trouser leg from the thigh to the knee and was still widening, and the concrete under him had a shine on it.

"Don't look at it," said Denny. "It's not as bad as it looks. It looks bad. I've had worse off a cutter."

"You haven't."

"I have. You weren't there." He turned his head. His face under the dust was the colour of dough, and the sunburn stood on it in a dark patch like a mask. "Is it holding? The frame?"

"It's holding."

"Good. If that skid comes down on this lot we'll both be ironing." He laughed, and the laugh turned in the middle into something else, and he lay still with his eyes shut until it had passed. "Sorry. Give me a minute."

"Don't talk."

"I'll talk if I like."

Curtis knelt in the rubble beside him. He got both hands under the beam's lower edge and lifted. It was like lifting a street. He felt the cords stand in his neck, and the fall at his back creak and trickle, and for the length of one breath he thought he might move it a fraction. Then the beam settled back with a small tired sound, and Denny made a noise through his teeth that Curtis did not want to hear again.

"Stop that," said Denny. "Don't. Don't do that. You'll bring the rest down."

"It's on your leg."

"I know it's on my leg. I'm the one it's on." He opened his eyes. "Get the frame."

"I'm going to get the frame. I need to stop this first." He had unbuckled his belt before he knew he was doing it, and run it round

the thigh above the dark patch, high up, with a spanner handle through the loop. “Hold still.”

“I am holding still.”

“You’re talking.”

“That’s not the same.” But his hand came across and gripped Curtis’s wrist, and the grip was cold and hard and terribly alive, and Curtis twisted the spanner until the belt bit, and felt the leg under the cloth go from warm to something else. Denny swore, once, softly and precisely, as a man might name a tool. Then he said, in a perfectly ordinary voice, “Have they sent for the tractor?”

“It’s here. It’s on the apron.”

“No, I mean— have they asked for it. For this.”

“Lorna’s on the radio.”

“Good.” He lay back. His hand went on holding Curtis’s wrist. “Lorna’ll sort it. She always does.”

He could hear her above them, faint through the dust, her voice carrying down through the gap in the deck in the flat, slow cadence she kept for the radio. He caught words and lost them. Dispatch. Crew Three. Man down. He stopped trying to hear. He found a seam in the concrete wall behind Denny’s shoulder and scraped at it with his fingers, and the whole wall breathed out a little dust.

There was a name for what was holding the beam. He did not know it yet. He knew only that when he put the heel of his hand on the trench wall he could feel the cold in it moving.

• • •

She was at the break when he came up the ladder, on her knees at the edge with the handset in her fist, her face grey under the grit. The crew stood behind her in a half-ring. The rigger had a coil of rope. The young one's gloves were off and his hands hung open at his sides, and he was looking at the skid as though it might do something. It hung where Curtis had left it, forty centimetres over the broken edge, turning a little on its chains. The tractor's engine hummed.

"How is he?"

"Alive. Pinned at the leg. I've put a belt on it." He was out of breath. "The cradle's jammed across the trench. It's on him. It's two tonnes if it's a gram. I can't shift it by hand. I can't even get a bar under without bringing the wall in."

"Frame?"

"If I put the skid on the apron, I can bring the frame back along the deck and put a sling on the beam. Ten minutes. Fifteen. If the deck holds."

"It's the deck I'm thinking about." She did not look away from the break. "Say it again slowly."

He said it again slowly. She nodded twice. Then she lifted the handset and spoke into it in the voice she used for orders.

"Dispatch, Crew Three. I need the frame and tractor held to this crew for a lift. Man pinned in the trench at Four. Repeat, hold the frame. Nothing leaves. Light truck stands at the mouth."

A crackle. The thin flat voice came back, paper-dry, with an edge to it. "Crew Three, dispatch. Frame and tractor held for lift. Who's down?"

"One of mine."

"Say again?"

"No names on the loop." It was the custom, and a good one, since the day somebody's mother had heard her son's name on a kitchen

radio before anyone had knocked. “One of mine. Pinned. I’ll give you the crew number when we’ve got him up.”

“Copy. Hold entered.” A pause. “Crew Three, do you need the light truck for a seat?”

“Not yet.”

Curtis went back to the tractor and stood by the front wheel and watched his hands. They had Denny’s blood on them to the wrist, and it was drying to a rust colour in the creases. He held them out in front of him and looked at them as he might have looked at a tool of someone else’s.

The radio on Lorna’s collar spoke again, in a different voice.

“Crew Three, yard.”

“Yard, Crew Three.”

“Lorna, what have I got down there? I’m getting a hold from dispatch on the frame and I don’t understand it.” It was Gareth’s voice, and it was not angry. It was warm and quick and concerned, a man leaning over a fence. “Is someone hurt?”

“A man’s pinned. In the trench. The cradle’s gone.”

“Alive?”

“Alive.”

“Is he talking?”

Lorna looked at Curtis. He did not know what she saw. “He’s talking,” she said.

“Thank heaven.” A breath. “Now. Lorna. What’s the skid doing?”

“Hanging. Eleven tonnes on the frame, forty centimetres over a hole.”

“Over the break?”

“Over the break.”

“Then I’ll say what I think, and you tell me if I’m wrong. You’ve got the heaviest thing in that hall slung from a tractor that’s sitting on the lip of a deck that’s just come apart.” The voice did not change. It did not hurry. “If you’re right, and the deck’s going to move again, it’s the skid that kills somebody. It’s eleven tonnes in the air. I

wouldn't put a man within twenty metres of it. Get it out of the hall. Get it clear and set it down. And when it's clear you'll have the frame back in ten minutes and you can do what you like with it."

"That's the lift I need for him."

"I know. I'm not saying don't. I'm saying the order matters. You take eleven tonnes out of a hall that's falling in before you put your hands in the hole." A pause. "It's your call, Lorna. It always has been. I'm only telling you what I'd be afraid of."

The handset hissed. Lorna lowered it. She stood a moment with her thumb on the key and her eyes on the skid. Curtis watched her do the sum, the one he knew how to read: the weight, the span, the lip of the deck, the apron and its distance, the beam in the trench and the man under it. He knew every second of it. He had known her pauses before he had known his letters.

"He's not wrong," she said, to nobody.

"It's ten minutes," said Curtis.

"It's ten minutes and then the frame's back." She nodded slowly. "Take it clear. The mouth's a hundred and forty metres out. Take it to the flat outside. Set it down and come straight back. Slow. Don't you tip it."

"And Denny?"

He had not meant to say the name. It had come out of him in the crew's hearing, the one rule of the loop broken in a voice nobody could take back. She did not seem to notice. She looked at him for a moment as she looked at a tread before she put her weight on it.

"Ten minutes," she said. "Go."

He went.

• • •

He had the tractor in gear and the frame in carry before he had finished climbing into the cab. The skid swung once on its chains as the machine took it. He felt it in the seat of his trousers, a long soft pendulum, and he held the wheel with both hands and brought the tractor round to face the apron, an inch at a time. The crew were already moving. The rigger was shepherding the young one along the deck's edge. The brothers had gone ahead with the lamps. Lorna stayed where she was, at the edge, with her handset, watching the skid go by.

The handset on the cab's dash gave a small cough.

"Cur?"

He did not take his hand from the wheel.

"Cur? Is that the tractor?" It was thin and tiny through the speaker, with the dust in it, and very reasonable. "I can hear it. Are you bringing it round?"

He let out the clutch. The tractor moved. It moved at a walking pace along the lip of the apron with its load swinging gently below it, and the engine note dropped to the low steady growl it made under weight, and he felt the whole machine settle onto the concrete like an animal lowering its head.

Under Denny's voice, thin on the loop, he caught the dispatcher: "—hold lifted, per the yard. Tractor completes the move—" and then the static took it.

It was then that the hall spoke.

It began in the roof, far above him, as a faint dry tick, and then ran down the length of the wall behind him in a quick pattering rattle like a handful of gravel thrown on a tin sheet. The tractor shuddered. The dust that had hung in the high light fell all at once in a long grey curtain. There was a groan from somewhere under the deck, a deep wooden sound, and the grating along the break gave a short shriek and sagged another hand's breadth into the trench. The skid swung. The lamps on the deck swung. He heard the young one

cry out, and Lorna's voice, loud for the first time, enormous and absolutely flat:

"Out. Everyone out. Now. Out of the hall."

"Lorna—"

"Curtis, don't you stop. Don't stop. Take it out."

He did not stop.

"Cur?" said the handset. "Cur, what was that?"

He drove. The apron ran away under the wheels, and the high grey windows went by on the left, and the lamps of the crew bobbed along the deck's edge toward the ramp in a ragged line. In the mirror he saw Lorna turn from the break at last, with her hand over her mouth, and start to run. He had not seen her run in ten years.

"Is that the frame?" the handset said. "Cur, it's going the wrong— where are you taking it?"

His hand was on the lever. He could have stopped. The brake was under his foot. The skid was low on its chains, the apron flat and clear, the mouth a grey square at the end of a ramp, and he could have set it down in four seconds and turned the machine on its own length and been back at the edge in two minutes. He held the lever. It was the plain, heavy, comfortable weight of a thing that someone else had decided.

"Cur, I can't hear you."

He had not pressed the key.

"Tell Bridget—" The voice faded in a wash of static, and came back. "—if you see her, tell her I'll be—" A crackle swallowed the rest. Then it came clear again, the tone changed, very practical and small. "I've got a bit of a view of the roof from here. It looks all right. Is the— has anyone told them about the pipe?"

He passed the end of the deck. He passed the last of the lamps. The ramp rose in front of him, long and pale in the light from the mouth, and the tractor's nose came up onto it, and the load rode steady below him at the end of its chains, eleven tonnes of cooling and power with every seal on. Behind him in the hall something else

gave way, a long low boom that came up through the floor of the cab and left his ears ringing.

"Cur?" said the speaker, and went on saying it, at intervals, all the way up the ramp.

He came out of the hall into the light.

• • •

The sun was full on the apron. It was as bright as if nothing had happened. He set the skid down on the flat concrete at the foot of the loading ramp, with the frame lowered to its stops, and turned the engine off, and the silence was so large that he heard the tick of the cooling manifold on the cab's dash and a bird somewhere in the broken roof of the next hall.

The handset on the dash had stopped.

He sat with his hands on the wheel. After a while he took one off and looked at it.

The crew had come out in ones and twos. The rigger sat on the light truck's tailgate with his head between his knees. The two brothers stood side by side, as they always stood, facing away from each other. The young one was being sick behind a pallet, tidily, with a hand against the wall. The winch woman had her arms round herself. Nobody was talking. Lorna came out last, limping a little on the ramp. She came across the apron to the tractor, with the handset still in her fist and a long scrape down one cheek, and stood by the cab door with her face turned up to his.

"Is it down?"

"It's down."

"Good." She looked at the skid, and at the hall's black mouth behind her, and back at him. "I've called it. Everyone out of Four. The roof's moving. We'll not go back in till the structure's been looked at."

"Lorna, he was—"

"I know."

"The frame. It's ten minutes. I could—"

"You heard that." She did not raise her voice. "You heard what it did in there. A second one's coming and it'll be bigger. I've seven people out here and one of them's a boy. I'm not sending the frame back along that deck. I'm not sending you."

It was reasonable. It was exactly as reasonable as it had been two minutes ago, when she said ten minutes, and it had the same grey tired face, and he stood in the cab with the key in his hand and could not find the place where the one had turned into the other.

"He was talking," he said.

"I know he was." Her eyes did not move from his. "I know. Don't say it again."

The radio on her collar spoke. It was the yard, and it was Gareth, and he had the carrying warmth of a man who has been standing a long time by a telephone. "Crew Three, Lorna. What's the word?"

She took it from her collar. For a moment she stood with it in her hand, looking at the grey square of the mouth.

"We're out," she said. "All of us. Four's moving again. We've lost a man in the trench."

"Killed?"

It was a small word. It lay in the air between the yard and the apron, and the light lay on it, and Curtis, at the tractor's wheel, heard the wind in the roof of the next hall.

"I'm so sorry," said Gareth, when no answer came. "Oh, Lorna. Oh, that's dreadful. All right. All right, you're all right, you've all got home. I'll see the household's told by somebody who'll do it properly. Bring the skid in when you're ready. There's no hurry. A man killed in the collapse," he said, in a lower voice, to someone beside him. "That's a terrible thing."

She lowered the handset. She did not look at Curtis.

The crew by the truck had heard. He saw the winch woman's hand go to her mouth. He saw the rigger lift his head. He saw the young one stand up straight behind the pallet with his sleeve across

his face, and look at Lorna, and at Curtis, and look away. It was a silence of a particular kind. He knew every one of them, and every one of them knew what had gone down the ramp in the cab of the tractor, and none of them said a word.

He could have said it. He had a mouth. The word was in it, small and plain and entirely his own, the one that changed the tense: he was talking, and I heard him, and I drove. It would have taken four seconds.

He took the key out of the ignition and put it in his pocket.

• • •

They brought the skid in at noon, on the flatbed, at a walking pace down the long road to the yard. Gareth was at the weighbridge to meet it. He stood with his hat in his hand and his grey coat open, and the yard stood round him in a ring, and when the tractor stopped he came across the concrete to Lorna with both hands held out, and took hers, and held it, and said something low that nobody heard. The grader was on the floor. A man had already begun to sweep.

Curtis got down from the cab and stood against the wheel.

The rigger's gloves lay on the cab floor where he had flung them. They were heavy leather gauntlets with the rigger's initials inked in the cuff. He had taken them off the tractor's hook that morning without asking, because they were nearest, and he had worn them to try the beam, and pulled them off to work the belt, and now the left was wet through to the lining and stiffening in the sun.

He took them down. He carried them across the yard to the standpipe by the weighbridge. Nobody looked at him. The water came out cold and clean and ran pink over the leather and down into the dust, and he stood and worked the left glove open under it, one finger at a time, and watched the colour thin and fade and go. It took a long while. When it ran clear he squeezed the pair out and

hung them over the pipe by their cuffs, and washed his hands, and looked at them, and washed them again.

They were the rigger's. He would have to give them back.

5

The account

Bridget was up before the light, and had the stove going and the kettle on, and had counted the flour twice, when the younger child came in with a blanket round both shoulders and said, "Is he at work?"

She had told them the evening before, at the table, in as few words as she could find, and had watched the older one's face go closed like a door and the younger one's go on looking at her as though she had begun a sentence and not finished it. She had said it plainly. It had not seemed to take.

"No," she said. "Your father's not at work. I told you."

"I know. I only asked."

The older child said nothing. The older child was at the end of the table with both boots on, the left one bound at the toe with her wire, and was looking at his place, at the cup she had put out by habit and not taken back. Bridget picked it up, and put it away, and got a bowl out for the younger one, and found that she was counting again. There was enough flour for nine days. There was money in the tin for four. His boots stood where she had set them on Tuesday evening, side by side on the step, toes out. She had not moved them. She had stepped round them twice in the dark and not moved them.

Gareth had come himself, the day before, a little after noon. He had come across the yard to the dispatch shed with his hat in his hand and sat down on the stool opposite her, which he had never done, and told her in a quiet voice that there had been a collapse at Four, and that Denny had been in it, and that he was dead. He had said it was very quick. She had asked, "Quick?" and he had said that the beam had come down across him, and that he'd been told there would have been no time. She had written nothing in the book. She had sat with the pencil in her hand, and he had waited, and then he had walked her home through the yard with a hand a few inches from her elbow, not touching it, and all the way along the central strip people had stood in their doorways and looked at the ground.

She was putting the porridge down when she heard the latch.

• • •

Lorna came in at half past seven with a sack on her shoulder and a pail in her other hand and kindling under her arm. She said "Morning" to the room, in the voice she used on a crew, and put the pail down by the stove, and the sack on the table, and began to unpack it before anyone had said anything: bread, a slab of the pale cheese, a jar of the pickled beet, eggs in a cloth, a twist of tea. She did it with her hands, quick and exact, in the order she would have put out tools. She had a long scrape down one cheek, scabbed over. Her knuckles were raw.

"It's not much."

"It's a lot."

"Don't say that. Say what you want." Lorna knelt at the stove and looked into it. "Is that going to draw? It's not drawing. Give me the poker." She worked at it. "I've got the pail from the standpipe, and wood for a week. I can take the little one this morning and the other after the old women's done. I'm not asking you to say yes. I'm saying it's there."

"I'll keep them."

"Right." She did not argue. She laid two sticks in the grate, crosswise, and the stove took them with a small dry crack. "Then I'll do the water and the wood and be out of your way."

Bridget watched her. She had known her for twelve years, since the week she and Denny had come together, and she had never seen her kneel in front of a stove that was not her own. She was fifty-four and narrow and hard in the back and she knelt as if the floor were something she had asked for.

They did not speak while the water heated. The younger child had climbed onto the bench and was holding a roll in both hands without eating it, and the older one had gone out into the yard with the boot flapping a little at the toe, and had stood with her back to the door.

"I want you to know how it was," Lorna said at last. She said it to the stove. "I'll say it once and you can ask me what you like. The deck went. It was the cradle seat, under the handling structure, and I'd looked at it that morning, and I'd put a plate under it and moved the foot, and it wasn't enough. That's mine. Nobody told me to do it that way. He was on the foot when it went. The cradle came down on him in the trench. I'm told, I'm told it would have been very quick. He wouldn't have known much."

Bridget stood with her hand on the back of the chair.

"Did he speak?"

Lorna looked up.

It was a small thing. She did it quickly and it lasted perhaps a second. Her eyes did not drop. Her face did not change. But she did what she did at a crew meeting when a man asked her a question she had decided not to answer: she took a breath, as though to give the answer a longer run, and said something else.

"Curtis got down to him. He was the first. He put a belt on the leg, in case. He tried what could be tried." She stood up, slowly, with a hand on the stove's rail. "And then the roof started going and I called everyone out. I had five others and a boy, and it was coming

down. It was the right thing to do, Bridget. I'll say that to anyone. I won't say I'm glad I did it."

"Did he speak?"

"They're bringing him out today." She spoke more quickly. "Bea's rigged the trench, and the frame will do the lift this morning, once the props are in. There'll be a place ready. The treatment room, at the annex end. Three o'clock, if you want it, or you can leave it to us, and nobody'll think the worse. I'd come with you. I'd stand outside."

"The frame," said Bridget.

"Yes."

"The tractor's frame."

"It's all we've got that'll lift that beam." Lorna had her hand on the pail's handle. "Is there anything else I can do?"

Bridget looked at her, at the scrape on the cheek and the raw hands and the narrow, tired, level face, and understood that she had been answered, in a way, and that it would not be possible to say what the answer had been. She felt it as one feels a loose stair.

"No," she said. "Thank you for the flour."

Lorna nodded as if she had been given something, and went out, and did not shut the door quite all the way.

• • •

The settlement came a little before ten. She had not expected it for a fortnight.

It came in an envelope with the yard's stamp, carried across the lane by the boy who ran Lorna's messages, and he held it out at arm's length with the face of someone who had been told not to look at her. "Mr Broadhurst said to bring it quick," he said, "so you'd have something." He did not wait. He did not even wait for the sweet.

She took it to the table and sat down with the lamp.

It was the yard's ordinary form, the same one she copied from every week, headed with a name, a crew and a date. D. Pike. Crew

Three. She knew the hand, the clerk's, upright and quick, and the way he ruled his lines. At the top was the figure, a long one, in the column for the Hall Two copper and the advance on the Hall Four assembly, and it was the figure Denny had said aloud at the kitchen table every night for a week, with his fork in the air. She read it, and did a sum, and it was as much as she had thought.

Then she read down.

Fuel, haulage, hire. Tools. A line she had not seen before, Dead weight, Hall Two, unsaleable fill, 3, which she took to be the crushed stone that had come out with the cable. She had seen worse deductions. She had written worse deductions herself, in her own hand, on slips. She ran her pencil down the column and added as she went, and her lips moved, and by the sixth line she had begun to feel the pencil going cold.

The seventh line was a single entry, in the clerk's hand, and longer than the others.

Recovery tractor (hoist): pump damaged in operation, Hall Four. Charged to rigging position, D. Pike. Repair and hire loss.

She read it three times. It was a big figure. It took the sheet from the long number at the top down to something she could have held in her two hands. She stared at it, and the stove ticked, and the younger child said something about the roll in the next room, and she went on staring at it, and at the word charged.

Denny had not been on the tractor. Denny had never touched the tractor's pump. He was a rigger of the foot and the frame, he set the sling and held the load, and he did not drive and he did not service, and everyone in the camp knew it. The pump was Bea's. The driver was Curtis. And the line sat there in the clerk's tidy hand as though a man who had been under a beam for an hour had gone on, in some other way, to break an engine.

She pressed her thumbnail into the table's edge.

There was money in the envelope, besides. A little, in notes: an advance against the net, with a slip that said it was paid on account,

and that the balance would follow on sale of the assembly. She counted it. It was three weeks of food and not a day more. She laid it out in a row on the oilcloth, and looked at it, and thought of the roof, and the boot, and the tin with four days in it. She did not say anything out loud. There was nobody to say it to.

She could not push it away. It was the thing that was in front of her, and it was good money, and the children had eaten. She folded the notes, and put them in the tin, and the sheet in her apron pocket, and went to find her coat.

• • •

The treatment room was at the annex end of the central strip, behind a green door that was kept shut except when the visiting nurse came. It smelled of carbolic and cold stone. There was a single high window. A trestle had been put in the middle of the floor, and on it, under a clean grey blanket, lay the shape of a man.

She had thought a good deal, on the way, about what she would do. She did exactly what she had always done at a thing she did not want to do, which was to look at the nearest practical object. A woman stood at the head of the trestle with her sleeves rolled, a big quiet woman of sixty who laid out the dead in Drybank and was paid for it in whatever the family could spare, and her hands were folded in front of her. She said her name. Bridget did not keep it.

"I'll turn it back at the face," the woman said. "Only the face, if you like. Or the hands too. Tell me when."

"The face."

She turned it back.

It was Denny, and it was not. It was his face with something taken out of it. The sunburn on his scalp had gone dark, and the grey in the stubble stood out, and the mouth that had always been a little ahead of the rest of him lay quite straight and quite still. There was grit in his eyebrows. Somebody had washed his forehead and not

reached the rest. She looked at it for as long as she could and then for slightly longer.

"That's him," she said.

"I'll cover it."

"The hands."

The woman folded the blanket back from his arm. The right hand was cut across the knuckles, a clean old scar and a new one, and she knew them both. The left was under the blanket still, and she did not ask.

There was something wrong with the edge of the cloth, lower down, at the thigh. It was lumpy, with an angle where an angle should not be. She had not meant to look and she looked. A band of dark leather showed at the blanket's edge, buckled tight round the leg above the knee with a short iron handle twisted through the loop, a spanner, set in and wound until it would not come back.

She knew the belt. She knew the third hole in it, the one he had punched himself with a nail to make it fit, and she knew it was not Denny's. It was Curtis's. It had been round Curtis's waist for ten years.

"Whose is that?" she said.

"It was on him when they brought him up," the woman said. "They said to leave it for you to see. Lorna's asked for it back, when you're done, to return to the lad." She paused. "I didn't think it was mine to take off."

Someone moved in the doorway. She turned. It was Curtis.

He had come no farther than the threshold. He stood with his hands at his sides in a clean shirt that did not fit him properly, with his hair wet from the standpipe, and his face had the stiff drawn look of a face held in place by a decision. He was twenty-seven and he looked older than Lorna. He said, "Bridget," and then nothing, and she saw him look at the blanket and look away, quickly, as if the floor were safer.

"I'm sorry." His voice was low and not quite his own. "I'm so sorry. I don't— there isn't anything I can say."

"Say how it was."

He took a breath. "The deck went. It was fast, I was on the apron, I didn't see it fall. When I got down to him he was under the cradle, at the leg. I got a belt on it." His eyes went to the blanket's edge, and away. "I tried what I could. Lorna got everyone out when the roof moved."

"And then?"

"And then we came out."

She waited. The woman at the trestle waited. The window let in a small cold square of light, and in it the dust turned over very slowly.

"Did he—"

"Bridget." He said it gently. He said it as one says a thing to stop another thing. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

She knew his face. She had watched it for twelve years across a table. She knew what it looked like when he told a lie, a sort of kind blankness, as if someone had wiped a slate. This was not that. This was the face of a man standing at the edge of something with both feet on the near side, and what troubled her was the way he had said it: he had given her the deck, and the leg, and the belt, and the roof, and every verb had a place in his mouth, and between the belt and the coming out there had been a gap with nothing in it. Not a lie. A missing stair.

She did not say so. She did not know how she would have said it.

"Thank you," she said, and he flinched, and went out.

She stood a while longer. Then she asked the woman for Denny's things, and was handed a cloth bag with his handset in it, cracked across the case, and a mallet, and a pencil stub, and a roll of tape, and his hat. She held the bag against her stomach. She did not look in the hat.

• • •

She had meant to go straight home. She went to the dispatch shed instead, because that was where her feet went, and because the day shift had gone and the shed was empty, and because the last thing Gareth had said to her at noon yesterday, with his hat in his hand and the same quiet voice, was that the scheme would want the times written down for the file, and that nobody could do it better than she could.

The lamp on the shelf was lit. She turned the wick up. The red book lay on the counter where she had left it, closed, and she put the bag of Denny's things on the stool beside her and opened the book at the second day.

It was her own hand. It was upright and round and a little slanted at the ends of the lines where she had written fast, and every line began with a time. 05:15, light truck out to Crew Three. 06:00, tractor and frame to Hall Four mouth, held to Crew Three, driver C. Hesketh. 07:20, yard to Crew Three: radio check. And, in a different pencil, because she had been reaching for the nearest one, the entries that came after.

07:58. Crew Three: man pinned in the trench at Four, hold tractor and frame for lift. No names. Hold entered.

She read it again. She could hear it. She had been at the counter with the pencil in her hand and the radio hissing at her left ear, and Lorna's voice had come out of it, flat and fast, and she had answered, and entered it.

08:09. Hold lifted per yard. Tractor completes the move.

She remembered that one. She remembered the sound of the yard door and Gareth's step on the boards behind her, and the warmth of him at her shoulder, and what he had said, very quietly, almost kindly, leaning to look at the book. Bridget. That hold. Lift it. They've got eleven tonnes in the air over a broken deck and it needs to come out of the hall before something else comes down. The tractor completes the move, and then we'll see about the rest. She

had not thought. She had been the person who wrote down what was said, and she had written it. She had lifted her pencil, and keyed the radio, and said, in her ordinary voice, Crew Three, dispatch, hold lifted per the yard. Tractor completes the move. And Lorna's voice had said nothing at all.

She had not known whose man it was. That was the thing. It had been a man with a number.

08:21. Crew Three: out of Four. Roof moving. Man lost.

She sat with the pencil above the page. The lamp hissed. Somewhere out in the yard a dog barked once and thought better of it.

The account was that he had died in the collapse. She had been told it by Gareth himself, with his hat in his hand, and told it again this morning by a woman kneeling at her stove, and by a man in a doorway who could not finish a sentence. Killed outright. It would have been very quick. The deck had gone a little before eight, and he had been under the beam, and there had been no time.

And at 07:58 somebody had asked for a lift.

She read the line. Man pinned. Hold tractor and frame for lift. She had written it herself. You did not ask for a lift for a man who was dead. You did not hold eleven tonnes of frame and chain for ten minutes, on a deck about to fall, for a man who was gone. You asked for it, and someone said yes, and someone else, eleven minutes later, said no.

She put the pencil down.

It was a small thing, and she knew how small. It was a gap in a book, a fact that did not lie quite flat against another. She could not have said what it meant, and did not yet want to. But the times would not sit on one another. She ran her finger along them, 07:58, 08:09, 08:21, and then along the line in Gareth's story, and held them side by side, the way she held a driver's time and a truck's, to see where the one slid off the other, and it slid.

She closed the book. She sat for some time with her palm flat on the cloth, and the lamp burned down a little, and on the stool beside

her, in a bag, a cracked handset lay against a hat she had not looked into.

6

Another shift

By seven on the fourth morning the weighbridge was weighing barrows again.

Curtis saw it from the end of the central strip, and stood to watch, as he might have watched a roof settle after a shock. The line was nine long. The scale ticked as it took each load. The yard boy read the number out and the clerk wrote it, and a woman at the grille counted her notes with her thumb inside her sleeve, and somebody laughed at something, briefly, and stopped. It was not a day anyone had been told to have. It had arrived by itself, as weather does, and the town had put on its coat.

The east crew man was not in the line. Curtis looked for the hat and did not find it.

The bag was against his ribs under the coat. He had not put it in the grain-store drawer. He had walked past the grain store on the first evening with the cloth warm from his own skin and gone on past, and on the second morning, and now again, and he knew what he would say if anyone asked: that it was not the time, that he would take it to Bridget after the funeral, that a man did not turn up on a widow's step on the third day with her husband's secret in his pocket. It was true as far as it went. It weighed what it weighed.

There was a crowd at the east gate, small and quiet, with a cart standing crooked across the ruts and a mule down in its traces. It lay on its side with its legs stiff and its great grey flanks going in and out, and every now and then it tried to lift its head and could not. The carter was a stout little man in a leather apron, and he was talking, as he had evidently been talking for some time, to nobody, in a flat rapid mutter: fourteen years, it was, and never put a foot wrong, it was fine at the bridge, he'd say that to anybody, it was fine at the bridge, it was the stones, it wasn't the stones, it was nobody's fault.

Gareth came through the crowd in his grey coat without hurrying, and the crowd opened for him. He did not speak to the carter. He knelt in the dirt beside the animal's head, in his good coat, and put a hand flat on its neck and said something low that Curtis did not catch, and the mule's ear turned toward it. Then the other hand came out of the coat. It held a short black revolver. Curtis had known the man twenty years and had not known he carried one. It was done so quickly and so gently that the sound seemed to come from somewhere else: a flat crack, a long shudder along the grey flank, and the legs went slack.

Gareth stayed kneeling a moment with his hand still on the neck. Then he got up, and wiped his palm on a handkerchief, and counted notes into the carter's apron, the price of a mule and something over, from his own pocket, saying that it was a hard thing and no man should have to do it twice. The carter wept. Somebody in the crowd said quietly that there wasn't another man in the camp who would have done it so clean. Curtis heard himself think that it was true. He stood at the back with the bag against his ribs and watched the hand that had held the gun put the handkerchief away, and then he went on to the crew shed.

He went to the crew shed.

• • •

They were all there, and nobody was working.

The rigger sat on an upturned crate with a mug between his boots. The brothers stood at the bench with their backs to each other, as they always stood, one filing a cutter's edge and the other watching the file. The winch woman was by the stove, with her arms folded, looking at the window. The young one sat on the floor with his back against a chain locker, in a clean shirt too big for him, holding his own borrowed gloves in both hands. They had the look of people who had been in the same room a long time and had stopped talking some while ago.

"Lorna?" said Curtis.

"Gone to the yard," said the rigger. "She said stand down till she's back. Gareth's paid the day." He did not look up. "That's decent of him."

"Yes."

He sat down on the end of the bench. He had slept four hours, or lain down for them. He had thought of a dozen ways to begin this, in the dark, and had thrown out all of them for the same fault: each of them would have required the others to be listening for something. He picked up a rag, and looked at it, and put it down.

"How long would the frame have taken?" he said. "To lift the beam."

The rigger turned his mug a quarter-turn. "Eleven minutes, they said yesterday. Bea's lad timed it, once it was rigged. Eleven minutes with the props in, and the deck stable."

"And if it had been that morning?"

"It wasn't stable." He said it at once, in a smooth voice, like a man handing over a tool he had had ready. "You were there. You heard what it did. There was no way to get the frame back along that deck and put a sling on the beam. Not that morning. It was coming in."

"It was ten minutes. Lorna said ten."

"She said it before the roof went."

"Did it go before I got out?"

"It went." The rigger looked at him now. His face was long, brown, careful, a face that had hung from many roofs. "You heard it. You were driving. It went, and she called it, and nobody could have gone back in. That's all there was, Curtis. There wasn't a choice."

It was said kindly. It was a very good sentence. He could hear that it had been said before, in the night perhaps, in a kitchen, in this room, over a mug, by a man trying it for weight until it held.

He had done the sum himself, in the dark, more times than the brothers had sharpened a blade. The frame, once the yard released it, was four minutes back along the deck at the pace the deck allowed. Three to hitch to the upper beam, if the cradle still sat as it had fallen. Eleven to lift, on Bea's lad's watch, with the props in. Call it twenty to have the beam clear, and longer to get a man out from under it with a leg that had taken what a leg takes. And against it the roof, which had shuddered twice in the first quarter of an hour and had not come down. It might have held for twenty minutes. It might have gone on the next one. Nobody on that deck had the number, and nobody ever would.

"Nobody could have got to him," said the young one, from the floor. He had not lifted his head. "He'd lost a lot of blood. I saw. Before we came out. I saw the leg, and there was a lot, it was on the— and it'd been going a long time, and he'd have—" He stopped, and swallowed, and began again from a slightly different place. "He'd have been gone anyway. Even if the frame had got there. That's what Lorna said. That's what she said, and she knows."

"Did you hear him?" said Curtis.

The boy's hands tightened on the gloves.

"When we went out," said Curtis. "When I took the skid. Did you hear anything on the loop?"

"I don't— I was running." The young one's eyes went to the rigger and came back. "I wasn't listening. It was loud. I just wanted out."

"Leave it," said one of the brothers.

It was the first thing either of them had said to him in nine years. He did not turn from the bench. His brother went on filing. The sound of it, the thin dry rasp of a file on a cutter, went on and on in the room, and nobody else spoke, and Curtis understood that this was a thing that had been settled. It was not a conspiracy. Nobody had planned it. It was only that in a camp of three hundred and fifty people, in a place where a man who made trouble found his share cut by Friday, a sentence that was kind and half true and that everyone could stand behind had been picked up by the first person who needed it, and handed on.

"He was alive when we went out," said the winch woman.

Everyone looked at her.

She had not moved from the window. She had her arms round herself, her knuckles white on her own elbows. She said it flatly. "Lorna told the yard so. I heard her. She said he was talking." She took a breath. "I'm not going over it. I'm telling you that I'm not. I've got two at home, and I'm not going over it, and if you ask me again I'll walk out and not come back. I'm sorry. I'm sorry, Curtis. I'm sorry."

She went out. The door banged behind her. The rigger put his mug down on the floor, very quietly, as though it might break.

One of the brothers had stopped filing. He had turned round, for the first time in a morning, and was looking not at Curtis but at his brother, the other one, who looked back. It was a long wordless exchange. Then the first one said, in a rough, hesitant voice that Curtis had never heard directed at him, "If you go to the yard with this."

"I haven't said I would."

"If you do. If Gareth stops the share. For the crew, for all of us. My brother's got the rent, and the lad's mother's got her chest. A week, he'll do it for a week to show he can." He was not angry. He was trying to say something exactly. "Are you going to pay it? You've got a drawer. It's known. If you go and cost us the month with a thing that can't be changed, are you going to put your savings in to cover us?"

Curtis opened his mouth.

The question was reasonable. It had a weight and a size. It sat in the room like a thing on a table, and he looked at it, and it did not go away: eighteen months of Fridays, in a steel drawer, against four people's rent.

"I don't know," he said.

"Then don't," said the brother, not unkindly, and went back to his file.

• • •

Lorna came in at nine with a coil of new chain over her shoulder and the look she had when she had stood in a room for an hour listening to a man be agreeable. She put the coil on the bench. She said, "Right," and looked at the room, at the rigger on his crate, at the empty place by the stove, at the boy on the floor with the gloves, and then at Curtis.

"Slings," she said. "All of them. Every leg, every shackle, every tag. Out on the floor, count them, check the pins and the wear, re-mark any that won't take the load we gave them. I want a list. You and me."

"The rest?"

"Hall Two's open, the east bay. They can clear fill. I've told them." She looked at the rigger. "You can go to Two. Take the lad. Go on."

The rest went. They went in a line, with their tools, without looking round. When the door had shut she stood a moment longer with her hand on the chain, and he saw her look at the empty place by the stove and look away from it, and then she bent and began to uncoil.

It was ordinary work. He knew it as he knew his own hands. They spread the slings on the floor in rows, four legs to a set, the great links lying in grey curves on the boards, and went down them on their knees, one on each side, a leg at a time. She called the tags. He ran his thumb along the links for wear and held each shackle pin to

the light. When her hand went out, he put a spanner in it, and did not remember having picked it up. When his went out, she gave him the gauge before he had said what it was for. He read her shoulder as he had read it for twenty years, the small quick set of it that meant lift, the slight drop that meant wait, and she turned a shackle for him at the angle he needed, and neither of them spoke.

"That one's worn," she said, at the ninth leg.

"Four per cent."

"Five. Mark it for scrap."

"It'll hold."

"It'll hold. I'm not putting it on a load." She wrote on the tag. "Next."

He took the next.

At some point he realised that she had not once looked at his face. She had looked at his hands, and the links, and the gauge. She had looked at everything he held, and nothing he was, and when he raised his head from a shackle and found her watching him across the grey curves of the chain, she had already turned her eyes down again, and her mouth had that line in it.

He said, "Did the frame lift it?"

Her hands did not stop.

"Yesterday," he said. "Bea's lad said eleven minutes."

"It lifted it."

"Right."

"Right." She put a tag in the pile. "Go and see Bea. She wants something, she sent the lad. I'll finish this."

"I'll do the rest first."

"Go and see Bea," said Lorna.

• • •

Bea was at the bench with a motor in pieces round her. She said, without looking up, "Sit. Not that one, it's got a pump on it."

He sat on a drum. She went on working for a time. He watched her thumbs, which were broad and scarred and quick, move among the little brass things as if each had been introduced to her. She had a magnifier clamped to her glasses on a flexible arm, so that she looked like a diver, and she said, "Pass me the tweezers, the long ones," and then, "No, the other long ones," and he did.

"Bea."

"Mm."

"Could the tractor have been used?"

She held the tweezers over the motor and did not move for perhaps three seconds. Then she put them down on the bench, carefully, with their tips together, and took the magnifier off her glasses and laid it beside them.

"Used for what?"

"To get him out. That morning."

"I heard you took the skid." She turned on the stool and looked at him with her small hard round eyes. "I won't say I didn't hear. It's all over the camp, in every version there is. I'll tell you what I know. I'll tell you what that machine could do and what it couldn't, and I'll not say a word past it."

"That's all I want."

"It isn't. But go on." She laid her palms flat on her knees. "It was serviceable. I did the rear lift hose Thursday, and a pump seal, and I ran it forty minutes on the bench loaded, and I wrote it down and signed it. It would lift what it was rated to lift and a good deal more than a man would think. If you'd put that frame over that beam, with something firm to stand on, it would have lifted it. I'm not saying it would. I'm saying it could." She stopped. "I haven't had it on the bench since. I don't know what it did on Wednesday. I'd need to look."

"But it could have been used."

"It could have lifted a beam. That's what it's for." Her voice did not rise. "Whether it ought to have been used, and when, and whether

the deck would have held it, and whether he'd have lived if it had, I can't tell you. I wasn't there. I haven't seen the deck. I never saw him. I'm a woman with a bench and a diagnostic unit with a crack in it, and I know what a pump can do. I don't know what a man can do under two tonnes. I won't say it was impossible and I won't say it would have worked. I'd be making it up."

"You could say it was impossible."

"I could." She looked at him for a long time. "You want me to. I know you do. It'd be easy. A bit of a nod, a sentence. 'There was no way, Curtis, it was a bad day.' I've said it to people. I've said it to my own sister." She picked up the tweezers again and looked at them. "It isn't mine to say."

"Nobody else will."

"No. That's the trouble." Her thumbs began to move again. "I'll tell you something, since you're sitting there with that face. I've fixed things for every man in this camp. I've fixed the pump that fed Ewan's water and the radio that Gareth's lads use on a Friday and a lot of things I didn't ask about. You do the job and you don't ask what it's for. That's the whole trade. It's not a bad trade." She paused. "I've been thinking about it since Wednesday."

The radio played. A woman sang over strings, and every word came whole.

"I've got a customer tomorrow," said Bea, without lifting her head. "Nine o'clock. Somebody from outside, who's been coming a long while, on and off. I've promised them a cooling assembly. The old rack-type, with the plate core. I've got the housing and the fittings, and I haven't got the core, and I've looked at every shelf I own. There's one in the Hall Two stores. Shelf nineteen, in the back bay, behind the transformer cases. If nobody's had it. I can't leave the bench. My hands are going the way they go, and I've got a pump promised for tonight." She did not look at him. "I'd send the lad but he doesn't know the stores."

"I'll go."

"You haven't got to."

"It's a core. It's on shelf nineteen." He stood up. It was the plainest sentence he had said all day, and it felt like stepping onto a firm floor. There was a place, and a shelf, and a thing at the end of it that was either there or not, and a man could walk to it and find out. "I'll bring it tonight."

"Bring it in the morning," said Bea, "when it's light and I can see it." She had put the magnifier back on. "And mind the third bay. The roof's been dripping."

"I know."

"I know you know."

He stood a moment longer at the door. He could have gone home. He could have walked back along the strip with the bag against his ribs and sat at the kitchen table, across from a woman who would put a plate in front of him and not look at his face. He could have gone to the grain store. He could have gone to Bridget's door and stood on the step.

It was a core, on a shelf, behind some transformer cases, in a hall that was not Four. It was a very small thing, and it was entirely clear.

He went.

PART TWO

The deductions

7

The customer

The third bay of the Hall Two stores had a leak, and he found it with his collar.

It came through the roof in a thin cold thread somewhere above the transformer cases and fell, with a small sound, on a puddle that had worn a pale ring in the concrete. He stood under it a moment with the lamp, looking up. He could see nothing. The stores were a long low vault at the back of the hall with the shelves running out into the dark in rows, and the whole place smelled of wet paper, cold iron and old rubber, and of something faintly sweet that he had never been able to name. He had come here as a boy with his mother, to carry. He knew where everything was.

Shelf nineteen was behind the cases. He edged in sideways between two of them with the lamp held out in front of him and the thread of water running down his neck, and there it was, on the second shelf from the floor, wrapped in oiled paper gone brown with age: a block the size of a bread crate, heavy, with the plate edges showing at one end in a grey, finely ribbed line. Nobody had stripped it. It had been left because it was too heavy for its price and too light to be worth a second trip, and because the thing that it had once cooled was gone.

He tore the paper at one corner. The plates were all there, forty-two, thin as playing cards and packed so close that the lamp made a bright seam down them. He ran his thumb along the gasket face. There was a mark at the edge of the thirty-first, a pale hair of a line about the length of a fingernail. He looked at it for a long time. It was the first thing he had looked at all week that was only what it was.

He carried it out across the hall in the first light with his arms round it and his chin on the paper, sixty kilos or thereabouts, stopping twice to rest.

• • •

"Thirty-first," said Bea, when he had set it on the bench. She had the paper off and the magnifier on, and her small hard eyes were an inch from the seam. "That one's got a hair. I can see you saw it."

"It's at the gasket face."

"It's at the gasket face." She straightened, with a hand in the small of her back. "It'll do. I'll tell them. Customer'll be here at nine, and if they're the person I think, they'll want it told."

They came at ten to.

It was a small boxy vehicle with a canvas tilt and a film of road on it, and it came down the lane at a walking pace and stopped in front of the shop with its engine ticking. A person got out and stood a moment in the lane with a hand on the door. They were tall and weathered and lean, in a long canvas coat gone pale at the seams and a knitted cap pulled down against the cold, and they looked at the shop's door propped on its cable drum as they might have looked at a road they had walked before.

"Morning, Bea."

"You're early."

"The road was clear." The voice was dry, unhurried, a little rough with disuse. They came in and stood at the bench and looked at the block with its paper hanging off it, and did not touch it. "Is that it?"

"It's the one. Plate core, rack-type, forty-two plates. Don't pick it up yet." She turned the magnifier toward them. "One plate with a hair at the gasket edge. I'm telling you now, before you pay. It'll hold. How long I can't say. A year if you run it cool, and if you run it hot, I wouldn't put a number on it."

"How does it go?"

"Weeps at the seat. A stain first, then a smell, if you know it. Then, if you've not been looking, it lets go all at once."

The visitor bent and looked along the plates. They looked a long time. Then they put out one hand and laid the pad of a thumb on the gasket face, lightly, as a person lays a hand on a sleeping animal, and drew it along to the thirty-first plate and stopped.

"I'd put a bead along that seat before it goes in. A cold one. Nothing that'll creep."

"I'd do it myself, and it'd cost you a day."

"I haven't got a day." They straightened. "Weep first, then crack. That's all right. That's something I can look at." They took a roll of notes out of the coat and set it on the bench, without counting it. "Is that fair?"

Bea counted it. She counted it twice, with her lips moving, and put half of it into the apron pocket and slid the rest back across the bench. "It's fair for what it is. It isn't fair for what it might be. Take that."

"Bea."

"I'm not arguing. I've told you what it is."

"Then I'm paying for what it is." They put the second half back on the bench and left it there. Bea looked at it, and then at them, and said nothing, and took it.

Curtis picked up the core. It came up off the bench against his chest, and the visitor held the door and said, "Mind the plate edge on the left," and he said, "I know where it is." He carried it out to the vehicle and set it in the back on a folded blanket that was already there, among coils of rope and a tin box and a rolled mat, and

wedged it with the rope. When he straightened the visitor was watching him, not his face or his hands, but the way he had put the load down. “Good,” they said, as one says it of a joint.

A strip of black cloth hung from the yard gate across the way, knotted round the post. They looked at it, and at him, and did not ask. He did not say.

They got into the vehicle. It started with a long reluctant cough, and went up the lane at the same walking pace, turned at the end by the pump house, and took the camp road up toward the ridge with a small clean plume of dust behind it. He watched it until the plume was a smudge and then nothing. It was a quarter past nine. He found that he had been holding his hands out from his sides, as though he had something on them.

• • •

“They’re all right,” said Bea, at the bench, with the notes under her thumb. “They’ve always been all right. Don’t ask me what it’s for.”

“I wasn’t going to.”

“Good.” She tucked the notes into a tin. Then she put both hands on the bench and said, in a different voice, “I had your tractor in last night. The lad brought it. I’ve been up with it.”

He went still.

“Come round the back.”

The tractor stood in the yard behind the shop with its hoist frame folded, and the engine cover off. It looked smaller out of the hall. There was grey dust on the cab roof, and a long scrape down the near wing where something had caught it, and a rust-red smear on the step. She had a lamp on a hook over the pump housing, and a sheet of paper under a stone on the wing.

“Pump,” she said. “Look.”

He looked. The housing was a squat grey casting the size of a loaf, and across the lower flange, a hand’s breadth from the mounting,

ran a hairline crack, dark and old, with a blur of dried oil on either side of it.

"That's not new," said Curtis.

"No. That's been there since the winter. It weeps. I've told Gareth's yard twice. It doesn't do anything. It's a thing you'd clean off a Friday." She tapped it with a knuckle. "I ran this pump last night at full load, an hour, and it held every bar. I'd do it again this morning. It lifted that beam on Thursday in eleven minutes, and it lifted eleven tonnes on Wednesday morning with you in the cab, and whatever it did on Wednesday it didn't fail. You'd know. You're the one who drove it."

"It was sweet," he said. "It was as sweet as I'd heard it."

"Then why is this on my bench?" She took the sheet from under the stone. "This came with it. It's the yard's repair order, in the clerk's hand."

He took it. It was a single page, in the yard's printed form, with the tractor's number and a box ticked in pencil. Hoist pump, cracked housing. Cause: damaged in operation, Hall Four, Wed. Repair and hire loss. Beneath it, in the box for the charge, in a hand he knew, a name.

Charge: D. Pike (rigging position).

He read it again.

"Look at the date stamp," said Bea. "The foot."

He turned it to the lamp. There was a small violet mark in the corner. Received, Thursday, 11:40.

"The yard wrote that on Thursday," she said. "After the lift. After the body was out. The pump's been working a whole day and it takes three more hours before somebody thinks to say it broke on Wednesday." Her voice was level and quite quiet. "I'm not saying it's a lie. I'm saying I've got a cracked housing and a piece of paper, and the paper's got the wrong end of the story. And it's got Denny's name on it."

"He never touched the pump."

"Nobody's touched that pump in a year except me."

It did not say anything about Denny. It did not say the frame would have worked, or that the beam would have come off in time, or that a man who was talking would have kept talking. It took away one sentence, and left the rest where it was. But it was a sentence he had been leaning on.

"Can I take this?" he said.

"It's the yard's. I've to give it back with the pump." She looked at him. "You can copy what it says. I've a pencil."

He copied it, on the back of his hand, as Bea's hands went back to the pump. Charge. D. Pike. Thursday, 11:40. The ink bled into the creases of his knuckles, and he looked at it a long while.

"Who'd have the rest of it?" he said. "The sheet it came off. The settlement, if there is one."

"There's a settlement. They'll have had it out to the household by Thursday noon, that's how the yard works when it wants a thing done. They did it for a rigger's widow last winter in two days." She did not look up. "The household has it."

"Bridget."

"Bridget'll have the sheet. And the dispatch book. I'd say she'd know, if anyone knew, when that tractor was asked for and when it was let go. It's her book." She turned the pump housing in the light. "I don't say it's kind to ask her. I say she's the one who'd know."

He folded the copy of the date inside his coat with the bag.

But he had something now. It was small, and it was not his, and she had a right to it.

He went along the strip in the late morning, past the weighbridge, where the scale ticked and the line was long, and past the canteen and its steam, past a woman with a pail who stopped in the lane to let him go by. The Pike house stood at the end of the third row, a low square cottage with a patched roof and a washing line, and on the step, side by side, toes out, there was a pair of boots.

They were Denny's. They had grey dust in the welts.

He stopped at the gate. He looked at them for as long as he could look. Then he opened the gate, and went up the path, and put out his hand.

8

The cancelled request

She went back to work on the fifth morning because the shed was the only room in Drybank whose rules she knew.

Gareth had said to take the week. He had said it twice, kindly, on the first afternoon and again over the settlement envelope, and had put the yard boy on the counter to keep the book warm. She found the boy at it when she came in, with the pencil in his fist and his tongue between his teeth, writing every vehicle in capitals down the left of the page as if it were something he was being punished with. She thanked him. She sent him across to the weighbridge with a message that did not exist. When the door had swung shut she took the pencil from the counter and sat down on her own stool, and the stool took her weight in the same place it had always done.

The red book lay where she had left it. She had closed it herself, on the second evening, with her palm flat on the cloth. It was a working volume. It had been written in every day for nine years by the person whose job it was to write in it, and it lived on the counter of a shed with no lock, and nobody would have thought to take it from her, or give it to her, any more than they would have asked for the loan of her hands. That was the first thing she understood about it. It was not a secret. It was only that nobody else wanted to read it.

She opened it at the second day, and took a clean sheet from the drawer, and wrote at the top of the sheet the date, and her name, and the words What I remember. She ruled a line down the middle. On the left she wrote What the book says.

Then she began.

• • •

The book was the easy half. She went down it with a finger, a line at a time, and it said what it had said on the night, in her own round slanting hand: 05:15, 06:00, 07:20. The three entries she had copied out of her own memory the evening before, and had not let herself look at since, lay one under the other in different pencil.

07:58, hold. 08:09, hold lifted per yard. 08:21, man lost.

She put them down on the left of the sheet, as they stood. They were all that the book had. The rest of the morning she had to take out of herself, and she knew how little that was worth. People remembered what they were afraid of and forgot what they had done. She had listened to drivers swear for nine years that they had left at six when the book said ten past. She did not think she was better than a driver.

So she did what she did with a driver. She looked for something else that had a time on it.

There were three. The first was the long-run driver's chit, a slip of the yard's green paper he had left on the counter that afternoon for the seat he wanted: he had come in at twenty-five past eight, she remembered, because he had stood in the doorway with his hat in his hand and said, "Somebody's dead at Four?" and she had looked at the clock. That was 08:25. She wrote it down. The second was the light truck. She turned back the pages to the truck's own line, which she had written without once thinking about it: out 05:15 to Crew Three, at the Hall Four mouth from 05:50, standing. Back to the yard 09:05. It had stood at the mouth for three hours and a quarter with

its engine off, and she had said to Lorna on the radio, at 07:59, in her own voice, "Do you need the light truck for a seat?"

She sat looking at that for some time. Not yet, Lorna had said.

Her pencil moved down the sheet. The third was the tea.

It had come at five past eight, as it came every morning. The canteen boy brought it across the lane in the tin with the dent in the lid, a mug of black tea and a roll with the pale cheese, and put it on the counter with a clink, and she had said thank you without looking up. He was always on time. She remembered the boots, and the shape of the tin. She remembered, because she had been writing and had taken the roll in her left hand and held it, a bite out of it, the grease coming through the paper onto her thumb. And she remembered that it was in her hand, still, with the thumb greasy and the pencil in the other, when the yard door opened and Gareth's step came up behind her on the boards.

She took the canteen's own slip out of the drawer, the one the boy left with every delivery, with a time on it in the cook's hand. 08:05. Dispatch. Tea, roll. She laid it beside the book. She put her thumb against the page where the line for 08:09 was written, and there, in the margin, a hand's breadth from the pencil, was a small pale smear the exact size of a thumbprint, faintly shining.

She looked at it. It was nothing. It was a grease mark on a page. It was the only thing in the book that had not been written, and it fixed her to the minute as nothing she could have written would have done.

"Right," she said, aloud, to the empty shed.

• • •

She began on the right-hand side of the sheet with the roll.

She remembered what he had said. It was not the sort of thing she could have got wrong, because it had been so ordinary. He had leaned over her shoulder, warm and quiet, with a hand on the

counter beside the book. He had read the line, 07:58, and said in the voice he used for the price of things, “Bridget. That hold. Lift it.”

She wrote it as she remembered it. Then she wrote what came next, with the pencil going slowly.

She had asked him why. She was sure of that. She had said, “It’s for a lift, Lorna’s asked for it,” and he had said, “I know what Lorna’s asked for. I’ve spoken to her. They’ve got eleven tonnes in the air over a broken deck and it has to come out of the hall before something else comes down. The tractor completes the move, and then we’ll see about the rest. It’s ten minutes, that’s all it is.” And she had known it. She had had the yard’s radio open for the last quarter hour, and she had heard it, and heard Lorna say, in the voice that cut, Take it clear, come straight back, and she had thought: that’s agreed. That’s the crew lead’s own order. She had lifted the hold because it had been lifted already by the one person with the right to lift it.

She stopped. She turned the pencil over and looked at the blunt end.

It had seemed to be so. It was how she had taken it, at the time, and she did not think she had lied to herself about it afterwards. She had believed the frame would come back. Ten minutes. She had written, on the other side of the page, tractor completes the move, and in her mind she had added and returns. It was the second half of the sentence that nobody had said.

And she had not known whose man it was.

She had known then.

She wrote it plainly, on the right, under the date. At about twelve I was told it was Denny.

And then she sat quite still with the pencil above the next line, because she had come to the question she had been walking toward since the second afternoon, and found that she had not, in all that time, put it into words. It was not whether she should have known. It was what she had done afterwards.

He had been very gentle. That was true as well. She put it down. He was gentle, and she had not asked.

The pencil was shaking. She laid it on the counter and put both hands under her arms and sat for some time with her head forward, looking at the grease mark on the page, until the shaking had stopped. Outside the scale ticked and a truck went by, and the window shook. A man's voice somewhere said, "Next."

When she picked up the pencil again her hand was steady and she finished the sheet.

She went down the right-hand column from the top, and read it over. It was shorter than the left. It was a page of things she thought she knew and one thing she was sure of. She wrote under it, in smaller letters, What is written is the book. What is under it is what I remember. They are not the same thing, and I have kept them apart. She dated it, and wrote the hour, and signed it.

Then she folded it in four.

• • •

She wrote the day's entries in the same hand, at the same pace, with nothing in them that was not true. She wrote, with a driver's time, 10:15 truck out. She wrote the yard boy's return. She wrote, at ten to eleven, because it was a vehicle and a vehicle went in the book, Recovery tractor (hoist) to workshop for inspection, per yard. And she read the entries above, 07:58, 08:09, 08:21, every day that morning, as one touches a bruise to see that it is where it was.

The folded sheet she slid into the lining of her coat, along the seam, where she kept the spare pencil. She did not expect anyone to look there. She did not expect it would matter. She thought of it as a thing like a drawn tooth, which one keeps and has no reason to.

• • •

Gareth came at noon, as she had known he would.

He came the long way round, by the porch and the people on it, and she watched him through the window do it: a word, a hand on an arm. The yard was busy. A truck was backing. He came in and shut the door against the draught, and the room went small and warm, and he sat down on the stool across the counter, which was becoming his place.

"I won't keep you from your work. I only wanted to see how you were."

"I'm working."

"So I see." He looked at the book, and at her hands, and at the boy's pencil in the tray. His face was drawn and gentle. He had not slept either, she saw. She did not think he was acting, and that was the thing she found hardest to hold. "You got the sheet."

"Yes."

"I didn't know whether to send it so soon. It seemed hard. But the household shouldn't wait, with two small ones, and I thought a little money in the house." He paused. "There's a line in it I'm not happy about."

"The tractor."

"The tractor." He nodded slowly. "It's the clerk. He's a careful man and he's done what the book told him, but the pump was never Denny's, and I'd say so to anyone. I'd say it's a nonsense. I want to strike it, Bridget. It'd bring the net up by nearly half. I'd have it done today."

She said nothing.

"There's only one thing," said Gareth. "It's a small thing, and it's not mine. The scheme won't pay a household that disputes how a man died. Not quickly. They're careful, they're cautious, they have a form. A year, in some cases, if it goes to review." He laid his hand flat on the counter. "If the household would sign that the account's understood, that he died in the collapse as the crew have said, I can send it through with the rest and have the balance in your hand by the end of the month. I'd put the clerk's line right myself."

"I've not disputed anything."

"No. That's why I'm asking." He was very kind. "It's a form. A paragraph. It says what I've told you. It would be a help to everyone, and it wouldn't cost you a thing."

She looked at the hand on the counter. It was a broad, square, clean hand with a ring on it, and it did not move.

"And there's a seat," he said.

She looked up.

"I know you've been asking." He said it with a small, almost apologetic smile. "It's on my sheets. I'm not blind, Bridget. A woman who writes a man with a bad hand onto the cab list, and clears a stranger's balance out of her own tin, wants somewhere to put her children that isn't here. I don't blame you. I'd say it myself. There's a place on Thursday's cab, for you and the two. And a room at the depot for a month, on the yard. I've a man there. You'd be inside coverage by the evening. I'd call it an advance on the household's share." He waited. "I want it to go well for you. I always have."

He had known about the tin. She had not told anyone. She sat very still and the whole of the shed seemed to shift, slightly, a hair's breadth, as a floor does when someone has taken out a prop.

"I'll want it in writing," she said. "The tractor line struck. And the figure."

"You'll have it by three."

"And the seat on the sheet. With the date."

"It'll be on the sheet." He smiled, relieved, with the warm tired smile of a man who has had a harder conversation than he expected and found it easy. "I'll bring the form on Monday. You'll want to sleep first."

"Monday," said Bridget.

"There's no hurry." He rose. At the door he turned, with the light behind him, a broad dark shape in a grey coat. "It's a terrible thing. I think about it all the time. If I'd only been there." He shook his head. "You'll tell me if there's anything. Anything at all."

"Yes."

He went out. The door swung and settled on its spring.

• • •

The money came at three. It was in the envelope, with a sheet beside it in the clerk's hand that had been ruled again and added again, with the line for the tractor drawn through in a single neat stroke and the net brought up to a figure that was nearly what Denny had said at the kitchen table with his fork in the air. It was not what he had said. It was a good deal of it. It was more than she had had in the tin in three years. And on the bottom, in the clerk's hand, as though it had been written an hour ago, Seat: Thurs. cab, household (3), per Mr B.

She sat for a while with her hands on the counter.

Then she did the thing that she had been putting off since noon, which was to take out a clean sheet and write across the top of it, in plain round letters, the names of every house in Drybank where two children could sleep. It was a short list. She wrote it quickly, as she wrote a driver's seat list, in order of nearness. Lorna's. She looked at the name, and the pencil stayed above it, and she wrote after it, no. It would have been the first place anyone looked. It was the place where, in any account that anybody could write, the thing had been decided. The old women at the annex, who taught reading till noon and had no beds. The canteen. Bea. Bea had a loft over the shop with a ladder and a stove, and was sixty-three with her hands going and a bench full of other people's property. She wrote Bea and put a question mark.

Next door's grandmother.

She looked at it a long time. It was a low house with a patched roof and a promise of Bridget's about the ridge, and a washing line, and three children of the grandmother's own grown and gone. The grandmother had never once been late, and never once asked for anything but what had been agreed. It was a house with a door on

the same lane as Bridget's own, and a window that looked down the strip toward the yard, and that, she thought, was not a small thing either.

She underlined it. Then she put the pencil down and put on her coat, and went out through the yard, past the porch and the people on it, and nobody looked at her.

The grandmother was at the gate with the younger child on her hip, as if she had been standing there some time. She was a small round old woman with a face like a winter apple. "You're early," she said. "The little one's had porridge. The other's not back from the old women."

"Thank you." Bridget stood in the lane. The younger child held out both arms, and she took the weight, warm and solid and smelling of porridge, and held it a moment with her face in the child's hair. Then she said, quite calmly, "If I was working late. Some nights. If it was a week, or longer. Could they sleep here?"

The grandmother looked at her.

"I'd not ask why," she said. "Yes."

"Thank you."

"That Hesketh boy came to your door at noon," said the grandmother, as if it were a thing she had been keeping. "He stood on the step a long while. He knocked twice and then he stood there like a post, and then he went away. He had something on his hand. Writing." She shook her head. "He didn't say what he wanted. He said he'd come back."

Bridget stood in the lane with the child against her shoulder. Somewhere along the strip a hammer was going on iron. It was a bright cold afternoon, with the sun on the washing, and the washing moved a little in a wind that came down from the ridge.

"Did he say when?" she said.

"He didn't say."

She nodded, slowly. Then she went in at her own gate, and up the path, and stepped round the boots on the step.

9

The price of leaving

She opened the door on the second knock, as though she had been standing behind it.

It was a little after eight on the sixth day, a Sunday, with a grey light on the lane and the smell of the stove coming out past her into the cold. She had her sleeves rolled and a tea towel over her shoulder. Her face was composed and rather pale, and she looked at him as she might have looked at a driver who was late: the clock first, then the man.

"I thought you'd come back," said Bridget. "They're next door."

"I only—"

"Come in. Wipe your feet."

He wiped them. He went in past the boots on the step, which he did not look at, and sat where she pointed, on the bench by the window with the table in front of him. The kitchen was warm and bare. There was a pan of something on the stove and a loaf on a board, with the knife laid beside it, and a lamp not yet put out. On the oilcloth in front of him, under a salt cellar, lay a sheet of the yard's paper, ruled and added in a clerk's upright hand.

"I know why you're here." She stood across from him with her arms folded. "Bea's sent you. Or it's that." She nodded at the sheet. "Read it, if you want. I've nothing to hide from you."

He read it. It was a settlement. The long figure at the top. The deductions down the side: fuel, haulage, hire, tools, a line he did not know, Dead weight, 3. A big pen-stroke through a single entry near the foot that he could still read under the line. Recovery tractor (hoist): pump damaged in operation. And below the stroke the net, brought up to a figure he could read from across the table, and a note in the margin in a different hand. Seat: Thurs. cab, household (3), per Mr B.

He read it twice.

"They've struck the pump," he said.

"Yesterday. At three."

"Why?"

"Because Gareth said it was a nonsense. Because it was." Her voice was level. "You've come to tell me it was written after the lift. Bea told me on the step last night. I knew it anyway. It's the only thing on that sheet I could have told you myself."

"And the seat?"

"It's a seat on Thursday's cab."

"From him."

"From him."

He heard himself breathe in. The sheet lay under his hand with its neat lines and its stroke of the pen, and he understood the shape of it all at once, as he understood a stair from its first tread. It was a very good shape. It was better made than anything he had seen in a week.

"You've taken it," he said.

"I've taken what I was owed."

"What he's paying for."

"What the household's owed. I counted it twice at the counter and wrote on the receipt that it was on account." She had not moved. "I haven't signed a thing. I haven't been asked to. There's a form coming tomorrow."

"A form that says what?"

"That he died in the collapse. As the crew said."

It went through him like a wire. "And you're going to sign it."

"I haven't said so."

"You've taken his money."

"Yes."

"You've taken the seat, you've taken the— he's bought you, Bridget. He's bought the whole house with a pen-stroke and a place on a cab, and you're standing in the kitchen telling me you haven't signed." He was on his feet. He did not remember standing. "It's Denny. It's Denny's— you're going to sit there and let him put a paragraph in a form and tell the scheme his own story, because he's struck a line off a sheet? He wrote the line! He wrote it on Thursday after the lift. He put Denny's name on a thing Denny never touched, and you've let him take it off and thanked him for it."

"I haven't thanked him."

"You've taken his money to say it was quick."

The room was quite still.

"Say that again," said Bridget.

He heard it. He would have given his hand to have it back, and it was in the air between them, precise, in his own voice, as plain as the sheet.

"I didn't—"

"Say it again, Curtis."

"No."

"No." She nodded slowly. She had not unfolded her arms. "Then I'll tell you what I took, since you want to know. I took three weeks of flour. I took a roof, in my head, that'll let in the winter by January. I took two children's boots and a tin with four days in it, and I took it off the man whose yard it comes from, because there isn't another yard." She did not raise her voice. It was the voice she used to read a driver's time. "How much have you got in the drawer?"

He stared at her.

"Don't. You know what I mean. Eighteen months of Fridays, at the grain store, in the long steel drawer. The whole camp knows. The woman who keeps it says it's the biggest in the row." She waited. "How much?"

"It's— it's for leaving."

"I know what it's for. I'm asking how much."

He told her. It was a plain number and it lay down in the room between them and did not get smaller.

"That's a seat for four," said Bridget. "To the depot and a month's room and the first rent. It's the cab and the care for the little one's chest if it comes back, which it will. It's nine months of what I'd need if I walked out of this yard tomorrow and never wrote the book again." She still did not move. "You've been standing in my kitchen for six years telling me what I should want. You came in here on Thursday with that face and a bit of ink on your hand and you've been telling me for ten minutes what I should do with a form. Where's the money in it?"

"You didn't ask."

"No. I didn't ask." She said it very quietly. "I shouldn't have to. You'd have put it down on this table and called it a gift, and I'd have had to be grateful, in front of the children, for the rest of my life. And you'd have had somewhere to put it. You want me to turn Gareth down, so that something's being done. So you can sit on that bench and not be the one who took money from him. I'm not a thing you can spend, Curtis. I'm not a way of paying."

He stood with his hand on the back of the bench.

"Denny put a bag in your hand on Tuesday night," she said. "I told him to give it to you. He said it was safer. I want to know where it is."

He had not thought she would ask. He had thought, in the dark, that when she did he would have a sentence ready. He put his hand inside his coat and took it out, the small cloth bag with the bootlace

round its neck, warm from his body and smelling faintly of him. He held it for a moment. Then he put it on the oilcloth beside the sheet.

She did not touch it.

"Five days," she said.

"I was going to bring it after the funeral."

"Yes. You were." She looked at the bag, and then at him. "It's the only thing of his that's mine that you've got. You've carried it on you for five days. You've been to my door twice. You've sat in my kitchen for a quarter of an hour. And you've not said a thing to me that you came to say."

"I came about the pump."

"You didn't."

She moved at last. She picked up the bag, and loosened the lace, and tipped its contents into her palm without counting them: a few notes, mostly small, and some coin, and a short thick roll of something wrapped in paper. She weighed it in her hand. Then she folded her fingers over it, and her face did something he had not seen it do. It was a very small thing. It was the face of a woman who has been given a thing she knew was coming and had hoped might not.

"He told me you'd keep it," she said. "He said it didn't have to be a promise."

"He did."

"And you took it."

"I took it."

"What did you say to him?"

He had never been asked. In five days no one had asked what he had said, on the step, in the cold, with the dogs going and the lamp in the door. He found that he remembered it perfectly. He had said, It's only keeping. No. Denny had said that. He had said nothing. He had taken it. He had said, Ask me when it's paid.

"I said, ask me when it's paid."

"And what did he hear?"

"He heard yes."

"Was it yes?"

"No."

She nodded. She put the money in the apron pocket, and the bag after it, and stood a moment with her back to him, looking at the stove.

"You've not said what you came to say," said Bridget. "At the treatment room. You gave me the deck and the leg and the belt and the roof. You gave me every verb. And then you said, and then we came out. I've been thinking about it since Thursday." She did not turn round. "What's in the middle?"

The stove ticked. A long way off a hammer began, and stopped.

He had known for six days that it would be asked. He had known it in the trench with Denny's wrist in his hand, and on the apron, and at the standpipe with the water running pink. He had lain on his back in the dark with the words in his mouth like a stone, and tried them, and put them away. He had thought that when it came he would find a way to say it that was bearable. He had thought it might be a speech.

"I drove," he said.

She waited.

"Lorna said take it out. I took the skid out. He was— there was a handset on the dash." His voice did not seem to belong to him. "I drove, and he was still talking. He was— he asked if it was the frame. I could hear him. All the way up the ramp. I didn't— I had my thumb off the key. I didn't say anything." He stopped. It was not what he had meant to say. It was not in the right order. "I drove out of the hall. While he was still answering."

The stove ticked.

She did not turn round. She stood with her hands at her sides and her head a little bent, in the grey light of the window, and he could see the line of her neck above the collar and a small curl of hair that had come loose. She did not move for what seemed a long time.

Then she said, in a voice with nothing in it, “When were you going to tell me?”

“I don’t—”

“When?”

“After the funeral.”

“That’s not an answer.”

“I know.”

“Is it a day? Is it a week? What was it, Curtis, in your head, when you thought it?” She turned round then. Her face was dry. It was quite white, and set, and perfectly calm, and he thought that it was the worst thing he had ever seen. “When you knocked on my door on Thursday, and again yesterday. What was the plan?”

“I didn’t have one.”

“No.”

“I thought— I was going to say it. At the door. And then I—”

“And then you stood there.” She nodded, once. “The grandmother said. Like a post.”

He could not look at her. He looked at the stove, and at the pan on it, and at the tea towel on her shoulder, and he heard himself say, “I’m sorry,” and heard what it was. It was a small, mean, useless thing, a coin that would buy nothing in that room.

“Don’t,” said Bridget.

“I—”

“Don’t say it. I’m not going to tell you it’s all right. I’m not going to say it was an order, or Lorna’s, or that you couldn’t have known. I’m not going to say it to make you feel better and I’m not going to say it because the children are next door and I’ll have to look at your face in the lane for twenty years.” Her voice shook, once, and steadied. “You heard him. And you left. And I’ll know that every time you come into this kitchen.”

“Yes.”

“Say it again. The whole of it. Slowly.”

"I drove the tractor out with the skid. Denny was alive. I could hear him on the handset. I didn't stop."

"That's it."

"That's all of it."

She sat down. She did it suddenly, as if the legs of the chair had been taken from under her, and put both hands flat on the oilcloth on either side of the yard's sheet. He stood where he was. Neither of them spoke. The loaf sat on its board and the lamp burned a little yellower in the daylight, and the stove went on ticking, and it seemed to him that a very long time went by, and that at no point in it did anything happen that could be called an end.

At last she said, without looking up, "Sit down."

He sat.

"I'm not going to forgive you. Don't wait for it. It isn't mine to give, it's his, and he's not here." She was looking at the sheet. "And I can't afford what it would cost me to throw you out. So I'm going to say a thing to you, and you're going to listen to the whole of it."

"Yes."

"I wrote it down."

He looked at her.

"The hold. The tractor." She put her finger on the margin of the sheet, as though it were the book. "Lorna rang for the frame at two minutes to eight and I wrote it in. Hold the tractor and frame for a lift. Man pinned. I didn't know it was him. The call said no names. At nine minutes past, Gareth leaned over my shoulder and said, lift it, and I wrote, hold lifted per yard, and I told Lorna on the radio. I thought the frame was coming back. I thought it was ten minutes." Her voice was entirely flat. "I took the tractor away from a man in a hole, with a pencil, because somebody had said I should. And at noon I found out it was Denny, and I sat at the counter and I didn't put it back."

"Bridget—"

"I'm not asking you for anything. I'm telling you what's mine." She lifted her eyes. "There's a thing I can't do on my own. I can't find out what Lorna said. I wasn't on the deck. I wasn't in the trench. I heard her on the radio, and I heard Gareth, and I wrote it down, and the rest's in your heads. You were there. She was there. I need to know who said what, in what order, and what was true when they said it. I want to know who asked for that tractor to be let go. Not who wrote it. Who asked."

"Gareth—"

"Gareth said, lift it. Did Lorna agree? Did she say it to you? What did she write on the job sheet that morning, before any of it? She writes everything down. She'll have a sheet." Her hands lay flat on the oilcloth. "He'll bring me the form tomorrow. Monday. I'd like to know before he does what's in the room, and what isn't."

He sat looking at her hands.

"I can't promise it'll change anything," she said. "I can't promise it won't cost you. It'll cost you more than it costs me, and it'll cost Lorna the rest. I think you know that. I'm asking because there isn't anybody else who was standing there."

There was a thing in his chest, large and hot and without a name. He did not know whether it was fear or relief. He had been told for six days what he ought to feel and he felt, now, only the plain stiff shape of a task.

"I'll look," he said. "At the job sheet. Lorna's. I can see it without taking it."

"Don't steal it."

"I won't."

"Ask her."

"She'll say no."

"Then find out what she says when she does." She took her hands off the table. "By Monday."

"By Monday," said Curtis.

She nodded. Outside, along the lane, a door banged and someone called a name. In the next room the stove's door ticked as it cooled. Bridget stood, and picked up the loaf, and cut a slice off it with the knife, and put it on a plate in front of him. She did not look at him.

"Eat that," she said. "You've not eaten."

He ate it. It was good bread, with seeds in the crust, and it tasted of nothing at all.

10

His mother's handwriting

The crew shed was open and empty, and Lorna was in it, alone, with a prop on each shoulder.

It was Sunday, and nobody worked Sundays unless they had a reason. She had one. She stood in the middle of the floor with two lengths of squared spruce across her collarbones, each as long as a man and as thick as his thigh, and she was carrying them, one at a time, to the racks along the back wall, laying them down with a small grunt and going back for more. The others had gone to Hall Two. These were the props from Four, the ones that had held the trench on Thursday, black with old water and stamped with the yard's mark. A whole stack of them lay by the door where the light truck had dropped them. She had been at it since the early light.

He took the other end of the next one. She did not tell him to. They carried it between them to the rack, he walking backward, she looking at the timber and not at him, and set it down on the cradle with a soft clean knock.

"Plates," she said.

They did the plates. The heavy steel ones, the spreaders, four by two, each with a handle welded on one edge, stacked on the pallet by the door with a great square of old sacking between each pair. They lifted them on a count of three. They did not need to count.

When her weight came on the left side his came on the right, and the plate rose in the air between them without a tilt and settled on the rack, and they went back for the next, and he thought that he could do this with his eyes shut. He thought he probably had.

"I want to see the sheet for Four," he said.

She was bending to the pallet. She did not stop.

"The job prep. What you wrote, before. Bridget wants to know what's on it."

"Does she." She straightened. She wiped her palms down her trousers, one then the other. "Bridget does. Or you do?"

"Both."

"That's honest." She looked at him for a moment, with the flat quick look she gave a roof, and he could not read it. Then she jerked her head toward the door. "It's on the board. Where it always is. Nobody's hidden it."

It was on the board. It was in the binder that hung from a nail beside the door, a fat grey ring-binder with the corners soft and a strip of tape down the spine marked in her capitals, THREE. Every job the crew had done for twelve years was in it, one sheet after another, in her upright pencil, on the yard's printed forms. He had seen it every working day of his life and had never opened it. It was not that it was forbidden. It was simply hers, as a hand was hers.

He took it down and laid it open on the bench and turned the pages back.

The form was a printed half-sheet with a heading, JOB PREPARATION, and boxes for the site and the date and the party, and under them a ruled space for the lead's notes. At the foot, a carbon had been slipped behind it, a thin violet-grey sheet that had come out the same width. He knew the system. The top went to the yard at the job's start, left with the clerk at the window, and the carbon stayed in the binder, where it had lain for years behind every page and never been looked at by anyone but her.

Hall Four. And the date, which was not Wednesday's. It was Monday's.

Her hand was small, upright, hard. She wrote the way she talked, in verbs. Mon. 17:00 walk, with D.

Deck. Plant in place, skid whole, seals on. Trench S side, cable and coolant, 3 m. Handling structure over trench: cradle bearing on S seat. Underneath this she had written, a size smaller, as if lowering her voice: Seat suspect. Hairline in concrete at edge, 1 ft. Weeping at the pad. Cold coming off it. Not sound. Then a line, ruled, and below it, in the same pencil, in the same upright hand, two more lines.

G. wants out by Wed noon. Buyer's agent Fri.

Prop from below + plate under foot. Skid on frame, not cradle. PROCEED.

The last word was underlined twice.

He read it. He read it again. It was the hand that had written every label on every sling he had ever hung, the same square capitals for the load, the same small ones for the doubt. It was perfectly clear. It said nothing he did not already know except the date. She had written it on Monday. She had stood on the deck on Monday evening with Denny at her elbow, and seen the seat, and written weeping, and not sound, and cold coming off it. She had known.

She had known and said I can see it's weeping, on Wednesday, at six in the morning, with her lamp on the grating, as though it were a thing she had just that moment found.

He turned the carbon over. It was an exact copy, but reversed in tone, white on grey, the letters thick at their edges with the pressure of her hand.

"You knew," he said.

She was at the rack with her back to him, laying a plate down. She did not turn.

"Monday," she said. "Yes. I walked it with Denny. I told him not to say."

"You told him—"

"I told him to keep it. I said I'd look at it again with fresh eyes Wednesday, and if it was worse I'd call the day. It was no worse. It was exactly the same, I knelt down and looked, and it was as it was on the Monday." She straightened. "So I moved the foot and put a plate under it and sent him down with a prop. It's all on the sheet, Curtis. I didn't hide anything. I wrote what I saw and what I'd do. That's what the sheet is for."

"And the yard's copy?"

"The yard has the top. I gave it to the clerk myself. He'll have it filed."

"G. wants out by Wed noon."

"Yes."

"Did he lean on you?"

"He told me the date." She picked up the sack from the pallet and folded it, once, twice. "That's what a job is. A buyer, a day, a number. He'd told me the date a hundred times before. It's a thing to know. It doesn't decide the work."

"It decided this."

"It didn't. I decided." She looked at him now. "I decided to go in. I looked at the seat, and I put a plate under it, and I made the call. It's my hand. I'm not going to stand here and say it's his."

"You'd like to say it was Gareth."

"Would I?"

"It'd be simpler."

"It would." She put the folded sack on the pallet. "It'd be simpler for you."

He heard it land. He stood at the bench with the binder under his hands and the carbon in front of him, and felt, quite distinctly, a thing he had been holding with his whole weight begin to move.

"I wanted you to say it," he said.

"I know."

"I thought, if there was somebody over you. If it was a thing you'd been told, and not—"

"And not me."

"Yes."

"There's no one over me, Curtis." She did not say it unkindly. "There's never been. That's what it is to run a crew. I'd have told you if there were."

"And on the day? The withdrawal?" He heard his voice go up, and could not bring it down. "You rang the frame, you asked for a lift. You said it to dispatch, the hold's in the book. And then Gareth said take it clear, and you said ten minutes. And then you said go. Did he tell you to, or did you tell yourself?"

"I told myself."

"You said ten minutes."

"I said ten minutes before the roof moved."

"And after?"

"After, I called us out." She was still, with her hands at her sides. "I stood on a deck that was coming down, with five and a boy and a skid on chains. I made a call. I'll make it to anyone. It was the right call."

"Was the tractor held?"

Her face did not change.

"When you called us out," said Curtis. "Was it still held to us? The hold. It was in the book, the frame was ours until we said. I never said. Did you?"

"I didn't say anything."

"Then who let it go?"

She took a long time. He watched her take it. He could see her put the question down in front of her, and look at it, and see exactly what it was, and decide how far she would go with it.

"I heard dispatch," she said. "At some point. I heard her say it was lifted, per the yard."

"Did you answer?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because I had already decided." She said it very precisely. "I'd decided before she said it. I knew what Gareth wanted. I knew what the yard would do. I'd known it for twelve years. I knew that if I said keep the frame, he'd say take it clear, and I thought, he's right, it's the skid that'll kill somebody, and I'll get the frame back in ten minutes. And then the roof went, and I wasn't going to send you along a deck that was coming in." She stopped. "I'm not going to say I didn't hear."

"You could have said no."

"To what?"

"To the lift. To the yard. You could have put it down on the apron and gone back for him with the frame. It's ten minutes. You said so yourself."

"And if the deck had gone, with you on it?" Her voice did not rise. "With the tractor? With eleven tonnes on the chains and the frame over the break? I'd have lost you. I'd have lost the boy. I'd have lost a man to keep another, and I'd have been standing on the apron with no machine and no way to get anybody out." She took a breath. "You weren't the one who had to choose, Curtis. I was."

"I was driving."

"You were told to drive."

"I could hear him."

The shed was very quiet. Out on the strip a child was calling something, and a dog barked once, and a long way off the scale ticked over a load. She stood where she was. She said nothing for what seemed a long time.

"I know you could," she said. "I know you heard him. I've known it since the apron." Her mouth had gone to a line. "I looked at your face when you got down from the cab and I knew. I've been waiting for you to say."

"You said, don't say it again."

"I did."

"Why?"

"Because I wanted it to be done." It was a flat, plain, terrible sentence. She did not look away. "I wanted it to have been quick. I wanted it to be as the crew said, and I wanted you to stop looking at me. I'm fifty-four years old and I've carried a hundred men out of a hundred holes, and I've a boy on my crew who's given me the best part of his life, and I wanted one thing to have been merciful."

"It wasn't."

"No."

He could hear his own breath. She came a step nearer, and he saw her face in the light from the door, grey, drawn, entirely level, and he saw that she had not wept in six days and that it was costing her something every hour.

"I'll tell you what I think," said Lorna. "And you'll listen, because it's the truth, and it's not what you want. The crew needed the money. There's nineteen households eat off that sheet, and Bridget's one of them, and I won't pretend the buyer's deposit didn't weigh. It weighed on Gareth. It weighed on me. I'm not a fool. And Denny might have died anyway."

He stared at her.

"He'd lost a lot. I saw the leg. It had been going twenty minutes by then, and the beam was across it, and you'd put a belt on and it wasn't enough. I've seen men with less, who went white, who talked, who said they were cold. I'm not saying he would. I'm saying he might. The frame would have taken eleven minutes, and a bone, and a bad deck, and we'd have had a man with no blood in him on a trestle at the annex, with a nurse three days away." She did not drop her eyes. "He might have died anyway. You don't know. I don't know. Nobody does."

It was reasonable. It was exactly as reasonable as it had been in the sun on the apron, and he stood with the binder under his hand and recognised it, with a cold slow drop of the stomach, as something he knew. He knew it by heart. It was the thing he had said to himself on the standpipe, in the long dark, on the ramp with Denny's

voice in the speaker. He might have died anyway. It had been his. It had been the sentence he lay down with. And here it was in his mother's mouth, in the plain steady tone she used for a load, and it was no longer a thing he could use.

"I know," he said. "I thought it."

"Of course you did."

"It's not an answer."

"No," said Lorna. "It's not." She looked down at the floor. "I've not got one."

He closed the binder. He did it carefully, as one shuts a door in a house where someone is sleeping, and stood with his hand on the cover.

"I want the carbon," he said.

"No."

"Bridget wants to see what you wrote. You said yourself, it's all there. Weeping, and not sound, and proceed."

"It's mine."

"It's a job sheet."

"It's my hand." She had not moved. "It's the only thing in this camp with my name on it that's true all the way down. I'm not giving it to anyone. Not to Gareth, and not to you, and not to a woman I like." She shook her head slowly. "If it's asked for, in a room, by somebody with the right, I'll hand it over. I'm not going to put it in a person's hand because they're hurt."

"Then I'll tell her what it says."

"Tell her."

"And she'll want to know why you wouldn't."

"Then tell her that too." She picked up a plate. Her hands were steady. She held it out to him over the pallet, flat, edge up, the handle toward his right. "Take this. I'll not talk about it any more today."

He took the plate.

He lifted it. It came up against his chest with her weight and his on opposite sides, as it had come up a hundred times, and he carried it to the rack, and laid it down. It made a quiet clean sound on the timber. He turned round. She had already bent for the next.

He had come in with a thing to find, and had found it, and was no better off. He had thought there might be an order above hers, a sentence in someone else's hand that would take the weight off his back. There was no such sentence. She had written PROCEED, and underlined it twice, and had gone in. He had written nothing. He had driven.

He took the binder down from the bench, and hung it on its nail. Behind the last page, thin and violet-grey, a corner of the carbon showed, white on grey. He did not touch it.

• • •

The young one was waiting by the door when he turned.

He had come up the strip without a sound, in the too-big shirt, with his borrowed gloves tucked into his belt. He stood with his shoulders drawn in and his eyes on the floor. He did not look at Curtis. He looked at Lorna, with the careful blankness of a boy who has been sent for.

"You wanted me."

"I did." Lorna set down a plate. She dusted her hands. Her voice changed, and it was her crew voice, the one that laid out a day like a row of tools. "Monday. Hall Two, east bay, you're on the winch. Not the hand-winch, the frame winch. It's a full share."

He lifted his head.

"That's—"

"She's asked to go back to the cold store. She'll be better there. I've said yes." She did not blink. "You've the hands for it. You've good hands, and you don't talk, and you do what you're told. I'll want you on it from Monday. You'll have a share and a half, for the first month, to make up for the learning."

The boy's face did something quick and complicated. It went red, and then white, and then it settled into an expression Curtis could read. It was gratitude. It was real. It was the face of a nineteen-year-old who has been given a thing he wanted and has understood, a moment later, what it is for.

"Thank you, Lorna."

"Don't thank me. Be there at six."

"Yes."

He stood a moment longer, holding his gloves. He did look at Curtis then. It was a single quick look, the eyes dropping at once, and in it was everything: that he had said he saw the leg, and that he had not heard the handset, and that he would be on the winch at six on Monday morning, and every morning after, and would say, if he was ever asked, what he had said on Friday on the floor of the shed. Then he went out. He went quickly, with his head down.

Lorna picked up the next plate.

"Right," she said, and did not look round. "Where were we?"

11

The offer

The message reached him on Monday at the crew shed, in the mouth of the boy who ran everybody's errands, who delivered it at speed and with an air of apology, as though it were a thing he had picked up in the road. Mr Broadhurst would be glad of ten minutes, if it was convenient. At the office. There was tea.

It was not an invitation anyone had ever declined.

The office was over the weighbridge, up a flight of outside steps with an iron rail worn smooth by thirty years of palms, and it had a window the full width of one wall that looked straight down on the scale and the line. Curtis had been in it twice. Once when he was seventeen, to be told he had a place on a crew. Once when he was twenty-two, to be told his mother had signed for his tools. It smelled of tea and old paper and the polish on a good desk. There was a stove, with a kettle on it, and a rug on the boards, and a cabinet of long shallow drawers, and on the sill a row of small brass instruments that had once measured things in a world that cared. Gareth stood at the window with his back to the room.

"Sit, Curtis. Please."

He sat. The chair was soft and low and made him look up. Gareth turned from the glass and came and poured the tea himself, with a steady hand, two cups, and put one in front of him. He did not sit

behind the desk. He took the other chair, the one on Curtis's side, and put his own cup on his knee.

"How's Lorna?"

"Working."

"Of course she is." He smiled a little. "She would. I've known your mother thirty years and I've never once seen her do anything else in a week of grief. It's a great gift. It's not always a kindness to herself." He sipped. "I wanted to say first that I'm sorry. For Denny. I should have said it to you on the day, properly, and I said it at the weighbridge to the whole crew, which isn't the same. He was a good lad. I always thought he'd come to something."

"Thank you."

"And the second thing is that I'm told you've been asking."

It was said in the same voice, lightly, a man mentioning the weather. Curtis kept his eyes on the cup.

"About the frame," said Gareth. "And the hold, and the tractor's pump. You've been to Bea, and you've been to Bridget, and on Friday you asked a question of the crew that the crew would rather you hadn't." He waved a hand, absently, before Curtis could speak. "I don't mind it. I'd ask. In your place I'd ask till I wore a hole. I only mention it because I'd rather you heard it from me, kindly, than from somebody less fond of you."

"Who told you?"

"It's a camp of three hundred and fifty. People talk." He looked at his tea. "I was a young man once, and I'd have wanted somebody to say so."

He let it stand. Then he set the cup on the desk and leaned back and laced his fingers across his stomach, and when he spoke again it was warmer, easier, with a new note in it like a man putting a hand on a shoulder.

"Here's what I thought. I've been thinking about it since Wednesday, in the night, as one does. You're the best structural eye I've got. I don't say that to flatter you; I've watched it for ten years. You walk

into a hall and you know what's going to hold before anyone's said a word. Lorna's got it, but you've got it better, and you're not frightened of it. That's rare." He paused. "I'd like to see it used. Properly. Not on a crew, taking the day's share and the day's risk. On a lead. The east lift, to begin with, and a place beside her on the next big job, and a full second share on the Hall Four assembly when the sale clears. It's a good deal of money, Curtis. I've done the sum. It's more than you've drawn in a year."

"I'm not—"

"Hear me out." He raised a finger, not unkindly. "And I know what else you do. I've seen that radio on Bea's shelf. I've listened to it. It doesn't crackle any more, and it's done you no good with anyone, because nobody in this camp knows what to do with a man who can make a thing sing. I do. I've a hundred handsets and a weighbridge display and two long-run sets that haven't held a clean channel since the spring. There's a bench in the corner of the scale room, with a window. Fix them. I'd pay you by the piece, the way Bea's paid. It's a trade. It's yours."

"And there's Denny's household," said Gareth.

He said it gently, almost as an afterthought.

"I've been over the sheet. It's harder than it looks, with the small ones. The yard's done what it can and Bridget's a sensible woman, but there's a balance that's hers to carry, and it doesn't carry well. A year, perhaps. More, if the scheme takes its time." He turned a hand over. "I could close it. The household's account, the whole balance, struck through. I could do it this week and nobody the poorer. I'd do it for you."

"For me."

"For your mother's sake, and yours. For the crew." He let the sentence settle. "Lorna's a woman who's carried half this camp. There's not a household on this strip she hasn't fed. If there was an inquiry, a review, a man from the scheme with a form and a lot of questions about a foot on a seat, I don't think anyone would remember what

she'd done. They'd remember the one day. It's a poor way to be judged. I'd not like to see it."

"Is that a threat?"

"It's a kindness." He looked at him steadily, with his face open and tired. "It's what I'd want somebody to say to me. And there's another thing, and I'll say it because I'm old enough. I know about the drawer. I know about the paper in your boot, and the foreman at the depot, and I think it's a good thing. I think you should go." He paused. "But not now. A man doesn't leave in the week of a death. It's not sensible. You'd be going out with the thing unsettled behind you, with Lorna unsettled, with Bridget, and you'd carry that into the depot yard and every day of your life. Wait a season. Wait till it's quiet. The depot's not going anywhere. It'll take you next spring as well as now. Sleep on it."

It was the most reasonable thing he had heard in a week. He sat and listened to it, in the warm room, with the tea going cold on his knee and the stove ticking, and thought that it was almost what he would have said himself. It had the exact shape of his own thoughts at four in the morning. It was only that it was in another man's mouth.

"Why was the tractor released?" he said.

Gareth did not move.

"At nine minutes past eight. The hold. Lorna asked for the frame for a lift and it was entered, and nine minutes later it was lifted per the yard. Who asked for that?"

"I did." Gareth said it at once, lightly, without a flicker. "I asked for the skid to come clear of the hall. I said so on the radio, you heard it. It's a very simple matter. You had eleven tonnes in the air over a broken deck. Somebody had to say take it out."

"Lorna said ten minutes."

"Then ask your mother what happened to the ten minutes."

"I'm asking you."

It was perhaps a second. It was a very small interval. In it he saw the face across from him do something he had never seen it do, and that he was to remember, afterwards, as the only true thing it had shown him. It did not harden. It did not darken. It simply went still, as water goes still, and the warmth drained out of it as out of a room when a door is opened to the weather.

"I don't owe you a review of my decisions," said Gareth.

He said it quietly. It was not an angry voice. It was shorter than the voice that had gone before it, bare and level, and every word in it had been put down separately, like a man laying out tools.

"I ran this yard when you were in a pram. I've kept this camp fed through four winters when no one else would. I've a buyer, and a deposit, and a hundred and fifty households that eat if I'm paid, and I'll make a call on a deck I've never stood on, with eleven tonnes in the air, and I'll make it again. It's what the yard is. I asked for a thing that was sensible. The crew lead on the spot decided what to do with it." He paused. "She's a good woman and she made the call on her own deck. And I'm told that you were driving."

He let that lie. It lay there between them on the rug, and the tea in Curtis's cup stopped trembling. He had not known it was.

"I'm sorry," said Gareth, in the warm voice again, so quickly that it was almost as though it had not gone away. "I shouldn't have said that. I'm very tired. I only mean there are a great many people who made a great many decisions on that morning, and it's a hard thing to take them apart one at a time. It would be kinder to take them as a whole." He smiled. "That's all I'm asking."

"No," said Curtis.

"No?"

"To the share. To the bench." His mouth was dry. "To the balance. I'd like to have the bench. I'm not going to say I wouldn't. But I won't take it for that."

"For what?"

"For taking them as a whole."

Gareth looked at him for a long moment. Then he nodded slowly, like a man who has been shown something he suspected, and took up his cup, and found it empty, and put it down.

"Think about it," he said.

"I have."

"Sleep on it."

"No."

"Then you'll excuse me." He stood. He was a broad man, and he stood slowly, with a hand on the desk, and when he was on his feet he was looking down at Curtis from a good deal higher than the chair had made him. "I've a letter to write. Mind the steps, they're wet."

• • •

The steps were wet. He minded them.

He stood at the foot, with the scale ticking beside him and the line a dozen long, and found that his hands were not quite steady. He put them in his pockets. Somebody at the grille looked round, and looked away.

He had not known, until the moment he said no, that he was going to say it. It was not that he had decided. It had come from somewhere lower in him than deciding, from the same place that kept his hands steady on a load, and having come it could not be called back. He walked a little way along the lane. He thought, with a clearness that surprised him, that he had just been offered nearly everything he wanted, and that the one thing he had been asked for in return was a sentence that was already in his own mouth.

He went to find a way out.

It was not that he meant to leave. He told himself that, as he walked. But he had said to Bridget that he would look, and the only thing he knew to look for was the thing he had been looking for for eighteen months, and he had never in all that time asked what it

cost. He had asked what it would be at the other end. A yard. A foreman. A bench.

He asked the long-run driver, who was at the yard gate with his seat sheet and his hat on the back of his head, and who looked at him with frank and wary interest.

"A seat's a seat. It goes through the yard. You want Bridget."

"Not a seat. A truck. If somebody wanted to go, not on the cab, on their own. With the little ones and a sick old woman."

"You want a private run." The driver whistled softly. "There's the ridge man. Out on the east road, with the grain truck. He does it on his own account when he's got a load. He's dear. He's careful. He'll tell you the same thing he'd tell anybody." He scratched his neck. "And he'll tell you he wants it all in his hand before he starts the engine, so don't go thinking about credit."

The ridge man was in his yard, on his back, under a truck. He came out slowly, wiping his hands, a small stout grey man with a squint, and listened to the whole of it without a word, and then named the price.

"Not before," said the ridge man. "I'm not going till the tyres are in, and they're not in till Friday. And I'll want a letter."

"A letter?"

"From someone at the other end. That you're expected. That there's a place. I'll not drive a woman with a sick child to a gate and turn round. I've done it. I'll not do it again." He looked at Curtis with his small steady eye. "And you'll understand the road goes past the yard. They'll hear by dark. I don't say they'd stop me. I say they'd hear."

"I understand."

"You've not a contract?"

"No."

"It's hard without. It's not a thing they've put in a rule. It's only that nobody'll take you." He shrugged, kindly. "Come back when you've the letter."

He walked back down the lane in the early afternoon with his hands in his pockets and the whole sum of it in his head. Nothing in it was brutal. It was only that a small household with eighteen months of Fridays could buy a seat on a cab, if the yard let it, and could buy nothing else.

• • •

The board was by the crew shed door.

It was a plain sheet of ply with a nail at each corner, and the day's allocation pinned to it in a clerk's upright hand, in columns, with the crew's name at the head and the work beneath. He had looked at it a thousand times without reading it. He read it now. Crew Three. Hall Two, east bay, clear fill. Winch: the young one. Rigging: the rigger. Cutters: the brothers. Lead: L. Hesketh.

His own name was not on it.

He read it again, from the top, with his finger. It was not there. It was not struck through or crossed out. There was simply a space in the column where it had been on Friday, and Saturday, and every morning for ten years, and the paper was a little paler there, as a wall is paler where a picture has been taken down.

"It's from the yard," said a voice behind him.

It was one of the brothers. He had come out of the shed in his shirtsleeves with a cutter in his hand, and he stood a little way off, as though the board might be catching. It was the one who had spoken on Friday. His face was long and tired and quite without malice.

"Stood down," he said, "till Lorna says. That's what the clerk wrote on the sheet. She's not said."

"Where is she?"

"At the yard. She went up an hour ago." He turned the cutter in his fingers. "They stopped the share this morning. Yours. Not ours. Not yet."

"I see."

"Do you." It was not unkind. It was the way a man says a thing when he has had it ready a long time. "Curtis. My brother's got the rent, and I've got my brother, and the lad's mother has her chest. I told you Friday. I said I'd not ask for much."

"You didn't."

"I'm asking now." He took a breath. He had a rough, dry, cracked voice, and he was trying with all his strength to say it exactly. "Stop. Whatever it is. Whatever you're doing. They've done yours, and it'll be ours by next week. It's Gareth. It always is. He doesn't shout. He just moves a name. And then somebody's mother can't get her tablets, and it's a long way to the nurse." He stopped. "I'm not saying you're wrong. I'm only saying it's not you that pays. It's us."

Curtis looked at him. He was a man of forty with grey in his hair and a cutter in his hand, and he had stood at a bench for nine years beside a brother he did not speak to, and what he was asking was perfectly clear.

"If I stop," said Curtis, "will it change?"

The brother did not answer at once. He looked at the board, at the pale place in the column. He looked at the shed door, behind which a boy was already being taught a winch.

"No," he said, honestly. "But it'll not get worse."

The hammer went on along the strip. A gull came down on the roof of the shed and shifted its feet.

"Please," said the brother, and went back inside.

• • •

He went to the grain store at dusk, when the lamps were being lit along the strip and the day's people were going home with their heads down.

He had spent the afternoon walking. By four he had come to a conclusion that was less a decision than a settling, like a load finding its seat. Gareth could stop a share. By Friday he could stop a drawer. The grain-store woman was kind and old and kept her key on a cord

round her neck, but the yard bought her flour and sold her coal, and there were a great many ways to say a word to an old woman without ever raising a voice.

It was his. He had earned every note of it. It was eighteen months of Fridays and he was not going to leave it in a steel drawer a hundred yards from the man who had offered to buy him.

The woman looked at him for a long time over the counter. She had a broad plain face with deep lines, and she did not take the key from her neck.

"You're sure?"

"I want most of it."

"Most." She said it as one tastes a word. "There were two in this afternoon. At three. They didn't ask for anything. They bought a pound of nails and stood at the counter, and one asked how many were in the long drawer these days, as you might ask about the weather." She did not blink. "I said I couldn't say. I said it was a matter for each."

"It's mine."

"Yes." She sighed. She took the cord from her neck and unlocked the drawer, and slid it out between them, the long flat steel thing that had once held drawings, and lifted his envelope from the front. It was thick. It was soft at the corners. "I'll say this once, because I'm old. You'd be wiser to leave it here, where I can say I don't know. A man with that on him in the dark is a man with a flag."

"I'll take it home."

"Not through the lanes."

"I know the lanes."

"That's what I mean."

He counted it out on the counter, two parts in three, and the third part she put back in the envelope and the envelope in the drawer, and slid it shut. She wrote the figure on the card in pencil, with the faint blunt sound of a lead being laid down, and did not look at him. The notes were in his coat against his ribs, where the

cloth bag had been. It was a very odd thing, to feel the weight in the same place.

"Mind yourself," she said.

He went out into the lane.

• • •

The way to Lorna's house ran down the side of the grain store, between its blind brick wall and the back of the drinking room, along a passage a little wider than a cart. It was where the camp kept its barrels and its broken crates, and where, after dark, nobody went who did not have to. It saved a hundred yards. He had used it ten thousand times.

There was a lamp over the drinking-room door that had gone out in the spring. There was a smell of old beer and wet cardboard. Halfway along, where the passage bent round a stack of empty drums, he saw the shape ahead and stopped.

He knew the shape. He had known it since he was twelve. It stood with its weight on one hip and its hands loose, and in the last grey light at the passage's mouth he saw the glint of a ring on a thumb.

"Curtis," said Ewan. "Evening."

He heard a step behind him, on the stones, and did not turn. He knew that too. It was the other one, Ross, whom he had sat next to at the canteen every Friday for six years. Ross had a daughter with a red coat. Ross had once, when Curtis was sixteen and had cut his scalp on a gantry, held a rag to his head for twenty minutes without saying anything, and had afterwards given him a boiled sweet.

"Evening," said Curtis.

"Late to be out."

"I'm going home."

"Of course you are." Ewan was not unfriendly. He was a big, fair, easy-looking man of thirty, with a gentle mouth and heavy shoulders, and his voice was exactly the voice he used to ask whether a woman needed a hand with her barrow. "Mr Broadhurst says to

say there's no hard feelings. He says it's only that a man shouldn't carry that much about with him in a camp like this. It isn't safe. He says he'd be easier in his mind if he took it into keeping."

"It's mine."

"He says that too." Ewan nodded as if it were a point in the other man's favour. "He says you'll have it back when it's settled."

"When what's settled?"

"He didn't say."

The passage was perhaps four metres wide. Curtis took it in as he took in any room: the wall on his left, the drums on his right, Ewan in front with the open ground behind him, Ross at his back. There was a loose crate against the wall. There was a length of rusted iron pipe, a metre long, lying across the drums. It was about three steps away. He saw all of it in a moment, with perfect clearness, and saw that it did not matter, because he had never in his life hit a man.

"I'll give you some," Curtis said. "For the— I'll give you something. Not all of it."

"That's not how it works," said Ewan, gently.

He went for the pipe.

It was the stupidest thing he could have done, and he knew it as he did it. He was two paces from the drums when something took him round the ribs from behind, an arm, hard, and the air went out of him as out of a bellows, and his feet came off the stones. He swung his elbow back. It met something that gave. A voice said, "Hey," in a hurt, astonished tone, and the arm let go and then came back, and a fist took him in the kidney, once, with the flat dry sound he had heard on the weighbridge ramp, and he went down on his knees on the stones.

It was very quick. That was the thing he would remember. There was no moment where it became a fight. There was a moment where he could not breathe, and then another where he saw the boot, and then something struck him in the side that was not a boot, that was a great hammer, and he heard a crack inside himself, as of

a plank. A hand took him by the collar and pulled his head back. He saw a face upside down, Ross's, white and sweating and set, looking at a point above his head.

"Sorry," said Ross, in a low voice. "Sorry, Curtis."

The hand went into his coat. It was not rough. It took the envelope from where it lay against his ribs, and the notes in their fold, and a second slim bundle he had put in the pocket of his trousers, and it took them cleanly and went away. He heard Ewan's step on the stones, and the small flat sound of paper being counted.

"Right," said Ewan. "That's all right."

He was on his face. He had his right hand flat on the ground in front of him, palm down, and he was looking at it, the grey fingers on the grey stone, and thinking that he should move it. It was the hand with the scar. It was the hand that held the iron. He thought it quite clearly and he did not move it.

"There's a thing Mr Broadhurst wanted me to say," said Ewan. He had crouched down. He was at Curtis's eye level, close, smelling faintly of tea and pastry, and his face was kind and serious. "It's that he's fond of you. It's that you're a clever lad and you've a trade, and it's a pity to go round with a thing in your head that doesn't do you any good. He says mind where you walk." He paused. "And he says Bea Sutter's a good woman, but she's sixty-three and her hands aren't what they were. And a pump's a hard thing to get in this camp, if the parts don't come."

Curtis did not answer.

"I'm only saying it."

He stood. He was a long way above. He put his boot down, not hard, in the manner of a man testing ice, on the back of the hand that lay on the stone. He stood on it. It was no more than that: a weight, standing. Curtis felt the stone under his palm and the boot on the back of his fingers, and for a moment he felt nothing at all, and then there was a small sharp sound like a twig, and another, and the whole world came up white.

"That's all," said Ewan, and took his foot away. "That's the message."

He heard them go. Two sets of steps, on the stones, not hurrying. At the passage's mouth the lamp from the lane made a long yellow bar on the wet ground, and in it the two shapes went out, one tall, one a little stooped, and the second turned his head once and looked back, and then did not.

He lay there.

• • •

It was a long time before he could get up, and when he did he did it in stages, as the man from the east crew had done on the weighbridge ramp. First the knees. Then one hand against the wall. The right hand he held against his chest, the two last fingers hanging from it at an angle that he looked at and then did not look at again. The ribs on his left side had a knife in them that moved when he breathed, and he found that if he breathed shallowly it moved less, and that if he breathed shallowly he could not get enough air, and he stood leaning against the wall of the grain store with his forehead on the cold brick, doing neither well.

There was a light in a window across the passage. A curtain moved and the light went out.

And he was angry. It arrived late and was larger than he had expected, a hot slow flood from somewhere under the ribs. It was not at Ewan, who had done it gently. It was not at Ross. It was at the exact economy of it, the courtesy, the pound of nails and the boiled sweet and the sentence about the pump. It was at the fact that every word had been true.

He walked. He did not go to Lorna's. He went the other way, down the strip in the dark with his arm against his side, past the yard's lit window and the empty weighbridge, and every step came up through his body like a nail. Twice he had to stop. Once a man he

knew came out of a doorway, saw him, and went back in without a word, and shut the door.

Bea's door was propped open on its cable drum, and the lamp inside was lit. She was at the bench, with the magnifier on her glasses and a pump on her lap. She looked up. She took in the whole of him at a glance, the way he stood and the angle of the arm and the colour of his face, and she did not say anything at all. She put the pump down.

"Sit."

"I'm—"

"Sit. On the drum. Not that one."

He sat. The drum took him with a soft hollow sound and the pain went through him like a wire and he put his head down between his knees and waited for it to stop.

"How many?" said Bea.

"Two."

"Who?"

"Ewan. And Ross."

"Hm." She was already moving. He heard a drawer, and a clink of metal, and the hiss of the stove being lit. "Hand first. Give it here. No, don't look at it. Look at the lamp."

She took his wrist in both of hers. They were big, scarred, hard hands with a surprising delicacy in them, and they closed on his forearm and turned it palm up in the light. She looked at it for a long time without a word. Then she felt along the back, pressing with the pad of her thumb at each knuckle in turn, and he heard himself make a sound.

"The last two. Ring and little. Broken, both, clean. The middle's cracked, I'd say, not through." Her voice was flat and exact. "It's a stamp. Somebody's stood on it. I've seen it before. They'll knit, if I set them and you let them. You'll have a hand."

"How long?"

"A month before it'll hold a pencil. Two before it'll hold a tool." She did not look up. "You'll not be soldering."

He said nothing.

She cut a length from a sheet of thin aluminium on the bench with a pair of shears and bent it round a bar into a shallow trough, and padded it with a strip of rag. She took his fingers one at a time. She had said nothing about it hurting and she did not need to. The ring finger went back with a small wet click and he felt his whole body go slack and white and sing, and when it was over she had the two of them laid in the trough, side by side, and was winding insulating tape round them, round and round, with a tight neat turn.

"Shirt."

"It's only—"

"Shirt."

He got it off. She laid her palm flat on his left side, low, and pressed, and he went rigid. She pressed again, lower, and he heard a sharp small crack inside his own chest, and the room tilted.

"Two," said Bea. "Maybe three. They've not gone through. I can't do anything for ribs. Nobody can. I'll bind them so you can breathe, and you'll not lift." She took a roll of the black tape from the bench. "It's what I've got. I'm not a nurse. If you want a nurse, there's the visiting one on Thursday week, and the room at the annex, and a good deal of money."

"I know."

She bound him. She did it round and round, pulling at each turn, with her lips pressed together and a fine line between her eyebrows, and it was so tight that for the first time since the passage he found he could breathe, shallowly, evenly, with a clean flat pain in place of the knife. She gave him two tablets from a tin, and a cup of water, and watched him swallow them. They were the ones she kept for her own hands.

"How much?"

"Most of it."

She did not say anything. She put the tin back in its drawer and shut it.

"You'll want to go after it," she said.

"Yes."

"You'll want to go to the yard now. In the dark. With that hand."

"I want to—"

"I know what you want." She turned. Her small hard eyes were level. "You'll not get it back by going. You'll not get the hand back, or the money. You'll get another broken hand, the other one, and perhaps the head. And you'll hand him the one thing he's been after."

"What?"

"A reason." She laid her palms on her knees. "He's been waiting to be asked. He doesn't like it when he's the one who starts. He'd like it very much if you went in there tonight and said something loud. He'd have witnesses."

"So I sit."

"So you sit." She said it quite gently. "For a night. And you think, and you'll do it better in the morning."

"You want me to be grateful."

"I don't want anything." She met his eye. "I'd like you not to be dead. That's all."

"I'm not grateful," he said.

"No."

"I'm angry."

"Good," said Bea. "Keep it. Don't spend it on a Monday."

• • •

He did not stay the night. She had known he would not. She stood in the door with her arms folded and watched him go, and said nothing, and when he had gone ten yards down the lane she called, "Curtis," and he turned. "Whatever they said about me," she said, "I can guess."

"Yes."

"I've copied the notes. This afternoon. And put them where they won't burn." She did not say where. "I'm not asking you anything. I'm only telling you."

He nodded. He walked on, slowly, with his arm across his body, and the cold struck through him at the corner of the strip, and the lamps were lit along the lane. It was late. A dog barked and was quiet. Far off, from the yard, he heard the scale tick over a load, though there was nobody there to weigh it.

The grandmother's light was on, and Bridget's. There was a pair of boots on the step.

She opened the door before he had knocked. She stood in it with the lamp behind her and looked at him, at the arm and the shirt and the black tape showing at his neck, and he saw her face change, and then settle, slowly, into the one she wore at the counter.

"Come in," she said. "Sit. Don't talk yet."

The kitchen was warm. The children were asleep. She set a cup of tea in front of him and he took it in his left hand and drank, and for a little while neither of them spoke. She sat across from him with her hands on the table and waited. He had known her twelve years, and had never seen her wait so well.

"Tell me," said Bridget. "All of it. As it was."

He told her. He told it in order: the grain store, and the woman's warning, and what he had taken; the passage, the lamp that had been out since spring, Ewan at the mouth and Ross behind. He said that he had gone for the pipe, and that it was a mistake. He said that he had hit nobody. He gave her what Ewan had said, as nearly as he could, the word no hard feelings and the word keeping and the sentence about Bea's hands, and the boot. He told her what it had been in money: two parts in three, and where the third was.

"How much is that?"

He told her.

"And what have you got?"

"A third. In the drawer. And whatever's in my coat." He felt in it with his good hand and found a few small coins, and put them on the oilcloth. "That."

She looked at them. She did not pity him. She did the sum, in her head, with her lips moving, and he watched her arrive at it.

"So that's gone," she said. "The seat for four. The month at the depot."

"Most of it."

"And the hand."

"Yes."

"And the share, and the allocation." She nodded. "And he's said Bea. In so many words."

"Yes."

"Right." She took a breath. "Then he's moved."

"He's moved on me."

"He's moved on all of us. It's the same thing. It's only that you're the first he's hit." She laid her hand flat on the oilcloth. "He came this morning with the form. He had it in his pocket, and he put it on my counter, and he said, no hurry, and I said I'd sleep on it. I've not signed. I'll not. But I couldn't say why, and now I think I can." She looked up. "It's not that I've found out something. It's that he's begun to hurt people for asking. Nobody does that with a thing that's true."

He sat with the tea going cold in his left hand.

"I'm sorry about the money."

"It's not mine to be sorry about."

"It was for you."

"It wasn't." She said it without heat. "It was for the depot, and it was yours, and it's gone. And I'm not going to tell you it doesn't matter, because it does. It was the only way out that you'd got, and he's had it for a pound of nails." She stopped, and breathed. "But I've been thinking, since Saturday. And I think there's another."

"There isn't."

"There's the twelfth."

He looked at her.

"Day twelve. Saturday. The freight collection." She said it as she read out a time. "It's the buyer's own haulier, for the Hall Four assembly and the rest of the saleable. It comes at dawn, to the yard, with its own vehicle and its own driver. It's not Gareth's. It's the one thing that comes into this camp that he doesn't own." She turned her hand over on the cloth. "The driver's paid by the buyer. He doesn't care who stands in the yard. He cares about the paper, and the weight, and whether it's signed. I've written his seat list for nine years, I know his firm. He doesn't carry people, as a rule. I've never asked."

"You'd ask."

"I'd ask. Through the long-run man, who knows him. I'd need the driver's agreement. A seat in a cab, not a space in a load, and I'd need to say what it costs and who pays, and what he'd be carrying, and he'd say no at first." She looked at him steadily. "But it's a vehicle that leaves Drybank on a fixed day and a fixed hour with Gareth standing in the yard watching it go. That's a usable departure, if I can get the driver's word."

"Twelve days from Tuesday," he said.

"Five days from now. If it's going to be done, I've to start tomorrow."

"What do I do?"

"You," said Bridget, "keep your hand still."

PART THREE

What can be carried

12

A seat on the truck

She began with the cell packs, because they were true.

They had been missing since the previous Thursday, in the sense that a thing is missing when everyone can say where it is and nobody has gone to get it. Twenty-four packs for the pump house, on a pallet, on a truck that had gone on to the Cross Road yard and not come back, and a pump house that had been running on its reserve cells for four days. She had put it on the board on Saturday. She put it on again at six on Tuesday morning, in capitals, under the long-run driver's name, and when he came in with his seat sheet at a quarter to the hour she was already holding the pencil.

"You're going out today."

"Thursday."

"Today. The packs. The pump house is down to its last bank, and if they trip the pump on Friday Gareth will be on the porch with a face, and I'd like you to have been, by then, a man who'd fetched them." She wrote the entry as she spoke: Long-run, out 06:00, Cross Road yard, collect cell packs (24), return same day. "It's a clean run. Out by eight. Back by one if they're ready."

"And Thursday?"

"Thursday's Thursday." She did not look up. "You'll have the cab as you always have."

He studied her for a moment over the counter. He was a lean man with a sunburned neck, and he took his time. She had known him nine years, and had never once asked him for something he could not write down.

"There's something else," he said.

"There's a letter."

She took it from under the book. She had written it at the kitchen table in the night with the stove ticking down, four drafts, the first three in the grate. It was a single sheet, folded in three, and she held it out across the counter as she might have held out a seat sheet, flat, edge first, and he took it, and did not open it.

"Who's it for?"

"The buyer's haulier. At the coverage yard. The dispatcher, or whoever sits where I sit." She laid both hands on the counter. "It's about Saturday. The twelfth. The assembly, the collection. It's the buyer's own vehicle and his own driver, and I know the firm, I've written to it for nine years. I'm asking whether the driver would carry passengers."

"Passengers."

"In the cab. Not in the load." She said it exactly. "Not in the scrap. I'm not asking for a thing like that. I'm asking whether there's a seat, and what it costs, and what he'd need to see before he said yes."

"Who's the passengers?"

"Me, and two children." She paused. "Perhaps a third adult. Perhaps others. I don't know yet and I'm not going to say a number I can't stand behind."

He turned the letter over in his fingers. His eyes had gone to the window, where the line was forming at the grille, and to the yard's long grey frontage behind it, and to the porch with its two men.

"You know what this is," he said.

"I do."

"It's not the cab on a Thursday."

"No."

"He'd hear."

"He'd hear if you told him. He'd hear if I told him, or the driver did, or the boy at the grille." She kept her voice level. "I'm not asking you to lie to anybody. I'm asking you to carry a letter and ask a question. It's your run. You're fetching cell packs. You'll be at the yard an hour, and you'll be at the kettle, and the buyer's driver takes her tea at the same one." She did not smile. "You told me yourself."

"I did." He sighed. He put the letter inside his jacket, against his shirt, and buttoned the jacket over it. "She's a hard woman. She'll want to know what's in it for her."

"There's a paper." She took another sheet from under the book and put it down. "I've written what I can promise and what I can't. I can tell her the collection time, and the bay, and the weight, and who'll be on the weighbridge. I can tell her what I'll pay, and when. I can't speak for Gareth's release of the load. I can't promise who'll be standing in the yard. I've said so. She'll see it's a thing from someone who knows what she's allowed to say."

He looked at the second sheet. He read it all the way down, slowly, with his lips moving a little, and she watched him do it.

"You've said what you can't," he said.

"It's better said."

"Aye." He folded it and put it with the other. "It's better than most." He picked up his hat. At the door he stopped, and looked at the book, and at her, and said, in a different voice, "There's a woman at the welfare desk. At the depot. Behind the weighbridge, in a hut with a stove. She does the paper for the drivers' widows. I've taken three to her."

"What does she do?"

"She knows where to send them. There's an office for the district. They take statements, when it's a death at work, and there's a thing that's not right." He shrugged. "I don't know how they do it. I only know she does. I'll ask her. I'll ask her what you'd need to bring."

"Thank you."

"Don't." He put the hat on. "I'd rather not be thanked, till I've done it."

He went out. The door swung and settled, and she watched him cross the yard to the truck with his seat sheet in his fist, and climb up, and sit for a moment with both hands on the wheel, before he started the engine. She wrote the time in the book. 06:04. Long-run out.

• • •

She took the children to the grandmother's at seven, as she had done all that week. The younger one went in without a backward look, trailing a blanket. The older stood on the step with the bound boot and the cup of milk in both hands, and looked at her.

"Are you working late again?"

"A bit."

"You're always working late."

"Not always." She crouched, and set her hand on the child's shoulder. It was a thin shoulder, hard under the coat. "I'll be home. I'm only asking Mrs next door something. Go in and finish your milk."

The child went in. She stood a moment on the step.

The grandmother was in the doorway, with her arms folded over her apron, and she did not say anything at all until the child was out of earshot. Then she said, "You'll be wanting a favour."

"A larger one."

"I thought so." She looked at the lane, the washing, the roofs. "It's Saturday."

Bridget had not told her. She had not said a word. She stood with her hand on the gatepost and understood that she was in a camp of three hundred and fifty people, and that most of them had been reading the same pages as she had.

"I've a sister at the north end," said the grandmother, in a low voice. "By the old reservoir. It's a good way from the yard, and

nobody goes up there, it's all goats and washing. She'll have them for the morning. I'll take them myself at five, before it's light." She did not blink. "If it's Saturday, and I'm not saying what it is."

"Thank you."

"I'm not doing it for you." She sniffed. "I'm doing it because that boy's boots want mending. Somebody's got to."

"Which boy?"

"Yours. Denny's." She nodded at the step, where the boots stood side by side with their toes out. "I've been looking at them all week. I'd like to see them walked in."

Bridget did not trust herself to answer. She nodded. She put her hand over the old woman's hand on the rail, and held it for a moment, and went down the lane to the yard.

• • •

He came back at ten to one, with the packs.

She heard the truck before she saw it, a long labouring note up the east road, and went to the window with the pencil in her hand. It came in slowly through the gate, with its load sheeted, and he brought it round in a wide arc and stopped at the shed and sat a moment with the engine running. Then he turned it off, and got down, and stood in the cold with his hat in his hand, looking at the ground.

There was a crowd at the porch. The two men were in their places. Somebody was weighing a barrow.

He came in with the packs' docket in his hand and put it on the counter as though it were the only thing he had to deliver, and said in an ordinary voice, "Twenty-four. Signed for. I'll have the lads unload." Then he leaned a little over the counter, and said, much lower, to the page, "I've not got it in writing. I've got it in my head. I'll say it once, and you'll write it."

She wrote.

"She's called the rig a crew cab. It's got a bench seat behind the front two. Three on the bench, if they're children and a woman. Two beside her. Five, and no more, and nobody in the load." He kept his eyes on the docket. "She'll do it. She said so twice. She wasn't keen. She wanted to know whose idea it was, and I said yours, and she said, is she the one that writes the book? And I said yes. And she said, she's the only one at that yard whose figures ever add."

"Price."

"A seat each. Adults at the full rate, children at half. In her hand, at the gate, before she starts the engine. No credit, and nothing owing. She's been caught before." He named the sum.

She wrote it down. She did the arithmetic in the margin, as she did it for every seat she had ever booked: three seats, two adults and a child at half, a fourth at the full rate, a fifth. It was what a month's room cost, at the other end, and a little over. It was very nearly what Curtis had had in a drawer, when he had it.

"And what else?"

"She's a list." He took a breath. "It's what she'll refuse on. She said I was to tell you, so you'd know, and not be surprised on the day." He ticked it on his fingers, slowly. "One. If anybody lays a hand on a passenger. Any hand. She drives. She doesn't wait to see whose fault. Two. If there's a person at that gate who says they're held for a debt, and it's a debt with a name on it, and it's a person that's trying to go with her, she'll not take them. She says that's a matter for a court, and she's not one. Three. If the load's not released. It's her load, it's what she's paid for. She'll not leave without it, and she'll not take it unless it's signed."

"And four?"

"There isn't a four." He looked up. "Except she says the people have to walk to the cab. On their own feet, in the open, and say they're going. She'll not take anybody she's not seen walk. She's not a smuggler." He allowed a very small, dry smile. "Her word."

"That's all of it?"

"It's all of what she said. There's more that she didn't." He lowered his voice. "She's heard of Gareth. She's never said so. But she said, I'm not here to take sides in a camp, I'm here to carry a load, and if somebody asks me for a seat I'll give it. I'll not take sides. And if it comes to a thing, I'll say what I saw."

Bridget wrote it all down. She wrote what she could stand behind and what she could not, in two columns, as she had done for the letter, and drew a line beneath. Her hand did not shake. She had thought it might.

"And the woman at the welfare desk?"

"Ah." His face changed. It cleared, a little, as a man's does who has remembered a pleasant thing. "She's a good one. She'd a lot to say. She says there's an intake. The district office, at the depot, beyond the scale. They take a statement from anybody with a thing to report that's to do with work, and a death, and they'll see you the day you come if you're in by noon, or the next morning at nine if you're not. She'll book it. She said I should say the name of the person, and the day, and it's done." He looked at her. "She said there's a hostel. Up the road, with a stove. For people who've come with nothing. She said they'd have a bed for a week, and I said you'd three, and she said, she's a woman with children, and put her hand on my arm."

"Book it."

"For Sunday. Nine."

"Not Saturday?"

"You'll not be in by noon. Not on that road, with the load." He shook his head. "Sunday's better. They're quieter. And she says there's a person who comes in on Sundays, an older one, who does the odd ones. The ones that aren't on a form."

She wrote it. Sunday, 09:00. Intake, district. Welfare desk to book. She underlined it.

"What name did you give her?"

"I said, the dispatcher at Drybank." He lifted a shoulder. "That's all I said. She'll not need more till you're there. I told her you'd bring the book."

There was nothing to say. She put the pencil down. She thought, for a moment, of the long line of nine years of entries in her own round hand, and of the grease mark on a page, and of the folded sheet along the seam of her coat. It was all there. It had been there all along.

"I'll not forget it," she said.

"I'd rather you did," said the long-run driver. "For a bit." He picked up the docket. "I've a pump house to feed."

• • •

She worked out the numbers four times. They would not come right. There was the sum, and then there was Curtis's hand, and the money in his pocket that was no longer in his pocket, and what a seat cost. She had a third of what she needed, from the settlement, in the tin. She had not signed. She could go on not signing, as long as the household could eat, and the household could eat for about three weeks.

She thought: five seats, at the gate, in the hand. She thought: Bea, who would not leave. She thought: Lorna. She did not know why she thought it, and she put it down.

He came at five. The yard boy was out. She had lit the lamp and was copying the day's last truck into the book, in the round upright hand, when she heard the step on the boards, and did not look up, because she knew it. It was heavy and unhurried and she had known it for nine years. He stood at the counter, and said nothing.

"Mr Broadhurst."

"Bridget." His voice was soft. "I didn't want to disturb you. I only came to see how the day had gone."

"Quite well. The packs are in."

"So I heard." He smiled. "That was neat. I'd forgotten them. I'm glad you hadn't." He looked at the book, and at her hand, and the pencil in it, and it seemed to her that he looked a fraction longer at the pencil than at anything else. "It's been a long week."

"Yes."

"You'll be thinking about the form."

"I'll sign it." She said it in the voice she used to a driver. "When I've slept."

"There's no hurry." He nodded slowly. He tapped the counter twice with one finger, and she saw it was a sign that he had finished, and it was not. "I'll leave you to it."

He went out. She sat very still, and listened to the step go away along the boards and down into the yard, and felt her own heart going in her throat. It had been an ordinary visit. It had been, in every particular, exactly like the others. He had said nothing at all.

It was only when she had finished the entry, and turned the page, and found her place for the next, that she saw it.

It was on the page above. It was at the bottom, under her own last line, in a different pencil, a soft, thick, looping hand she would have known in the dark. It was in the margin where she wrote the next week's bookings. It said, very neatly:

Sat 12th. Buyer's collection. No seats to be booked on collection vehicle. All paperwork through yard office. Per Mr B.

She looked at it a long time. It had not been there at noon. She had written the page herself. It was her page, in her book, in the shed in which she had sat for nine years, and somebody had come in while she was at the grandmother's, or at the gate, or at the window with the long-run man, and stood at her counter, and written in it.

Nobody had ever written in it but her.

She did not rub it out. She took the pencil, and, under the entry, in her own round hand, wrote, Noted. B.P. 17:10. She dated it. She looked at the two hands together on the page, her own, small and

upright and round, and the other, large and soft, and she thought that she had been right about the way things looked when somebody was keeping something. It was only that she had not thought it could be done in both directions.

Outside the lamp over the weighbridge came on, with a small yellow hiss. She closed the book. She laid her palm flat on the cloth. It was, she saw, no longer entirely hers.

13

Serviceable

Lorna had looked at his hand at breakfast and said nothing at all.

She had set a bowl in front of him, and a spoon, with the handle turned to his left, and then, a moment later, as though it were a natural thing to do, she had cut his bread. She cut it into fingers, thin, the way she had when he was six and had a fever. She stood with the knife in her hand and looked at the black tape and the little aluminium trough, at the two fingers sticking out of it like folded wings, and at his face, and her own face did not move. Then she said, "Eat," and went out to the yard.

It was the whole of what she said. He thought about it all the way down the strip, with his arm held across his body, feeling each breath come in short against the black tape on his ribs. It had been the most she could do. It had been, he thought, a good deal.

Bea was at the bench when he came in. She did not look up. She had the big ledger open in front of her, the work-book, a heavy thing bound in cracked black cloth with a leather spine and a ribbon of faded red, and she had a lamp pulled down low over it on its flexible arm, and her magnifier on, and a pencil behind her ear. She said, "You'll sit on the drum. The left side of you. That's the one that works."

He sat. It took some time.

"You've slept?"

"Some."

"Liar. Hold that." She pushed a corner of the ledger toward him. "With your good hand. It wants holding open."

He held it. It lay across his knees like a plank, smelling of old oil and paper, and she bent over it again, and for a minute there was no sound in the workshop but the tick of the pencil and the slow thin voice of the radio at the back, turned low.

"Read it," said Bea. "I'll tell you what you're reading."

It was her hand, narrow, upright, pressed hard. Down the left ran the dates. Across the top ran the columns, ITEM, OWNER, WORK, PARTS, TIME, and at the far right a long strip for her initials and a second for the owner's. He turned back a page, and another. The tractor was in it a dozen times in the year. He found the entry for the Thursday before the job, a short one, in the same pencil.

Recovery tractor (hoist). Rear lift hose replaced (new). Pump: seal replaced, weeping. Housing: hairline at lower flange, old, weeping, NOT progressing. Advised yard (2nd time) to replace housing at next stand-down. Reply: not now. Load test on bench, 40 min, full rated. Held all bars. SERVICEABLE. *B.S.*

Under it, a second set of initials, a looping one he knew, the yard clerk's. Received.

"Read the last line," said Bea.

"Serviceable."

"Say it again."

"Serviceable."

"It's a word I don't use lightly." She took the magnifier off. Her eyes without it were small and tired and very bright. "I've used it eleven times in eleven years about that machine, and I've not been wrong. It means I'd put my own hand under it. It's not a word for a thing that's nearly right."

"I know."

"I'll put it in a statement." She drew a sheet of paper toward her, and a pen, and began to write, slowly, shaping each letter as a person writes who has not done it for some while and means every one. "I'll put what's in the book, and what I saw on the bench last night, and what the yard's own paper says, and when it was written. I'll sign it. I'll put the date. I'll put it where somebody who isn't Gareth can read it." She did not look up. "That's what I can do."

He watched the pen. It went across the page in a thin hard line, and he read it upside down as he had learned to read a plan: the tractor, the date, the work, the load, the word. It was a clean, plain piece of writing. It was exactly what she had said. It was also, he saw, going to be very small.

"Say it could have lifted him."

The pen stopped.

"You said it to me on Friday. You said it could lift the beam. Put that in."

"It could lift the beam." She wrote it. "It could lift a beam of that weight, set on that frame, on a firm floor. I've put the weight. I've put the rating."

"Put that it could have lifted the beam off him."

"No."

"Bea."

"No." She laid the pen down. "It's a different sentence. You're asking me to put an engine and a man in the same line. I can say what a pump does. I've got the figure for that. I haven't got a figure for the deck, or the trench, or the beam, or whether it would have gone onto his chest if it had been lifted, or whether the roof would have held while it was. I've got nothing for the man."

"It was the only thing that could have."

"Then say that. Say it to a person who's a right to hear it. I'll not write it down." Her voice did not rise. "If I write that it would have saved him, and somebody puts me in a room and says, how do you know, I'll not know. They'll take the rest. They'll take the pump and

the housing and the date on the repair slip, which is the only thing in this camp I'd stake my life on. They'll say, she said a thing she couldn't know. And the rest will go with it."

"You're protecting yourself."

"Yes," said Bea. "Partly." She looked at him. "I'd like to be a person whose word means a thing when I give it. I've one thing. It's that when I say serviceable it's serviceable. If I say a man would have lived, and he'd not have, I've spent it. You'd have me spend it on you."

He did not say anything. He held the ledger.

"I think he'd have lived," she said, after a moment, quite quietly. "I think, if it had been me, and I'd had a frame and a pump that held every bar, I'd have gone back. I think a man talking is a man you go back for. I've thought it every night since Wednesday." She picked up the pen. "I'm not putting it in a statement. I'm telling you what I think. It's not the same, and you know it isn't."

"I know."

"Then don't ask me to make it the same." She bent to the page. "It's enough, Curtis. It's the thing I know. The tractor was fit. The pump ran. The entry was written after. Somebody has to say that, and it's a thing that can be said, and I'm the one who can."

He sat with the book across his knees and watched her sign. She did it in full, Beatrice Sutter, in capitals, with the date beneath and the hour, and blew on it, and laid it aside to dry. It was a short page. It said what she knew.

• • •

The door darkened at ten.

It was a small movement. It was a shape in the light from the lane, tall, a little stooped, standing with something in its hand, and Bea did not look up from the ledger, and Curtis, on the drum, felt every muscle in his back draw tight.

"Morning, Bea," said Ross.

He stood in the door like a man not sure of the floor. He was thirty-five, with a pale freckled face and sandy hair gone thin on top, and a way of keeping his shoulders high, as if against rain. He had a sack in his right hand, a feed sack with the neck tied, and he held it a little out from his leg as though it were warm. He did not look at the drum. He looked at the bench.

"I've a thing for Mr Broadhurst."

"Put it down."

"It's not heavy."

"Put it down, Ross."

He came in and laid the sack on the bench, beside the ledger, with a small careful movement that had in it something like apology. The neck of it fell open. Bea looked at what was inside, and then, for a moment, nowhere. Then she took the magnifier off her glasses and laid it on the bench, and pulled the sack toward her by the neck.

It was a baton, a long black one, the length of a forearm, with a ribbed rubber grip and a pair of steel studs at the tip. It had a crack along the housing and a smear of old soot round one stud. It was a stock-prod. It was the sort of thing the camp kept for moving a mule, or for dogs that would not be called off. There were two in the yard store. Curtis had never seen either used on a mule.

He was not aware of having moved. He had stood up from the drum, and was holding the ledger against his chest with his good arm, and the pain in his ribs had gone suddenly very far off.

"The contact's gone again," said Ross, to the bench. "Mr B says it's the same fault. He says you did it before and it was good for a month. He'd like it by Thursday." He swallowed. "It's only the contact."

"I know what it is."

"I only carry it."

"I know that too."

It was quite silent. The radio played a thin sweet line of strings. Ross stood with his hands at his sides, a big pale man with his eyes

on the floor, and at last, because there was nothing else to look at, he lifted them, and they went to the taped hand, and the trough, and the two fingers, and stopped. Something went across his face. He looked as if he had been struck. He looked at Curtis for the length of a breath, and his mouth moved, and nothing came out of it. Then he looked away.

"That's the one from the spring," said Curtis.

Bea did not answer.

"That's the one you did in the spring. The contact. In February." His voice was low and level and did not seem to be his. "I stood here. You told me it was a stock-prod. You said they'd had a mule go lame at the east gate."

"I said what I was told."

"There was a man at Q5. A pump hand." He looked at Ross, who did not look back. "He'd a deduction he'd argued. He'd said a thing in a line. There were four of them, in the lane behind the drinking room, and a thing like that. He's not lifted his left arm since. He's on the bulk now, he's a third less a week, he can't hold a spanner." He stopped. He heard the breath whistle in his own chest. "You've seen him. He comes in for his tea."

"I've seen him."

"You know what it was for."

"I know what it was used for," said Bea. She said it evenly, with her palms flat on the bench either side of the sack. "I heard in March. I'm not a fool. I'd like you to know I knew."

"Then say it."

"Curtis—" said Ross.

"Say it. What you did."

She took a long time. He watched her. She sat very straight on her stool, a broad, grey, scarred woman with a leather apron, and he could see her do what she did with a fault she did not wish to find: put her whole attention on it, until it could no longer be avoided.

"I replaced the contact on a stock-prod in February," said Bea. "For the yard. It was brought to me by Ewan. I'd done it for years. I did it well. I knew by March that it had been used on the Q5 pump hand's arm." She did not blink. "I've done it four times. I took the money. I didn't ask, any of the times, what it was for, because if I ask, I know, and if I know, I have to say no. And if I say no, I've a shop and no parts." She drew a breath. "That's the whole of it. I'll not dress it."

He had not thought she would say it. He stood with the ledger in his arm, and what he felt was not satisfaction at all.

"Mr B says Thursday," said Ross, in a very low voice.

"Tell him no."

Ross looked up.

"I'll not do it." She pushed the sack across the bench, with its mouth open, toward him. "Tell him I've a pump to finish, and a customer, and a bad hand. Tell him anything. Tell him I said no, if you like. It'll do as well."

"He'll— Bea. He'll not like it."

"No."

"He said you'd say." It was a plain statement, quite without malice, and it was, Curtis thought, the most dreadful thing that had been said in the room. "He said you'd say it, if it was today. He said to tell you he'd understand."

Bea looked at him.

"He said that."

"He said he'd understand. And the parts'd come when they came." Ross took the sack. He held it against his stomach in both hands. He was white to the lips. "I've a girl," he said. "She's seven. She's got a red coat. I'm not—" He stopped. He seemed to feel that there was no end to the sentence that would do, and put it down. "Sorry, Curtis," he said, to the floor. "I said it. I'll say it again."

He went out. They watched him cross the lane, with the sack held against him, and turn at the pump house, and go.

• • •

Bea did not move for a long time. She sat with her hands on the bench and looked at the place where the sack had been. Her hands, he saw, were shaking. It was a small, fine, steady tremor, and she was not trying to stop it. She looked at it with an expression of mild scientific interest, as at a fault in a pump.

"Eleven years," she said.

He did not answer.

"I've fixed a hundred things for that yard. I've never asked. I'd a rule, and I thought it was a good one. A repairer's a repairer, you do the work and not the use. Like a doctor, I thought. Or a priest." She laughed, shortly, without any breath. "It was a good rule for as long as nobody came into my shop and stood where you're standing."

"Bea—"

"Don't. It's the thing I'd say to you." She turned the stool round. "It'll cost me. You know that."

"Yes."

"Sit down before you fall."

He sat. The ledger lay open on the bench, and she put her hand flat on it, as a person does who has been given a thing to hold.

It cost her at two. A boy from the weighbridge came to the door with a slip, and the slip was the clerk's, upright and neat. It said that a crate addressed to B. Sutter, Repairs, comprising seals (assorted), cell packs (4), hydraulic fittings, and a roll of insulated cable, received by the yard on the morning freight, was held pending weight inspection. A discrepancy had been noted. It would be released on Thursday.

"Thursday," said Bea.

"Mr Broadhurst said to say sorry."

"I'm sure he did." She took the slip. She read it twice with the magnifier. "It's a good clerk. It's well written." She looked up. "Is there a discrepancy?"

"I don't know, Mrs Sutter. It's only what's on the paper."

"Tell him I've a pump promised for tonight, and it wants a seal."

"I'll tell him." He went. His boots rang on the lane.

She stood at the door a while with the slip in her hand. A little way off, a truck was backing at the yard, and somebody was shouting, quite cheerfully, about a chain. She looked at it all as she might have looked at a fault she had known for a long time. Then she turned round and looked at her shop.

It was full of other people's things. There were the motors with their covers off, and the housings with their paper tags, and the pump on its trestle, and the diagnostic unit with its cracked case and shaded display. Down one wall ran shelves, and on the shelves, in rows, her ledgers, black and grey, with their years inked on the spines. Eleven years. She had kept them dry, and in order, because a repairer who loses her book loses her trade. She had never thought of them as anything but the record of her work.

"It's only technical," she said. "All of it. That's what I've told myself. Seals, and hose, and a boy's radio. It's a book of what I fixed." She said it slowly, to the shelves. "It's got the stock-prod in it. It's got the date and who brought it. It's got Ewan's initials. It's got the whole of it."

"Yes."

"I'd thought I might keep it that way."

She crossed the floor. She went to the back of the shop, behind the shelves, where there was a grey steel cabinet under a sheet of sacking, and pulled the sacking off. It was a flat grey machine with a glass top and a lid and a long cable with a clamp on the end. He had seen it a hundred times and had never asked. She had kept it for drawings, she had said once, years ago. For the ones that couldn't be taken out of the room.

"It does a page in forty seconds on a good cell," said Bea. "I've cells." She did not look round. "I'd thought it was for plans."

She lifted the lid. She took down, from the nearest shelf, the first of the black ledgers, and laid it open on the glass, and smoothed the page flat with the edge of her hand.

"Hold the lamp," she said. "With your left. Over my shoulder, where I can see."

He took the lamp from its hook. It was heavier than he had thought. He stood behind her, with the lamp in the one hand that worked, and his ribs aching against the tape, and held it steady over her shoulder.

She pressed the key. A thin line of light went across the glass, slowly, from one side to the other. A sheet slid out into the tray with a small dry whisper. She looked at it for some time, in the lamp's light, at the narrow upright hand and the date at the top, and a pump seal, and a customer, and an owner's initials.

It was a perfectly technical page.

She lifted the lid, and turned over the next.

14

The kitchen

The note came to the crew shed on Wednesday at four, folded once, in the clerk's hand, and was read out by the rigger standing under the lamp with his lips moving.

It was a very short note. It said that the allocation of Crew Three to Hall Two, east bay, clear fill, for the coming fortnight, was withdrawn with effect from the following morning, pending review of rigging practice at Hall Four. It said that the yard regretted the inconvenience. It said that shares for the days worked would be paid in the usual way. It was signed with a looping initial, and under the initial somebody, perhaps the clerk, had added in a smaller hand, *The yard hopes that matters will be clarified shortly.*

"Clarified," said the rigger.

Nobody answered. He folded the note along its crease and put it in his pocket, and stood a while with his hand on it. Then he took his coat from its nail and said, without looking at anyone, "I'll go to Lorna's. After supper. Whoever wants to come."

They all came.

• • •

They came at seven, in ones and twos, with their hats in their hands, and she let them in without a word and set out the chairs. Curtis sat at the end of the table by the stove, where he had sat since he was a boy. He had been there since noon. It was the only place that did not need him to stand.

She made tea. She did it as she did everything, in order, with her back to the room: the kettle, the pot, the cups in a row on the dresser, nine of them, which she counted twice. The rigger sat nearest the door. The brothers took the bench on the far side, one at each end, with the whole width of it between them. The young one sat on the floor by the wood-box, as he had at the shed, with his knees drawn up and his gloves in his belt. Nobody looked at Curtis's hand. Everyone knew about it. It was in the room like a fifth chair.

"Well," said Lorna, when the tea was poured. She sat down at the head of the table. "Say it."

The rigger looked at his cup.

"It's the allocation," he said. "You've seen the note."

"I've seen it."

"A fortnight. It's the whole of it. Hall Two's the only work there is till the new year, and they've given it to the east crew, who've done nothing but sit on their hands since the Spur, and we've had it for a week and cleared a third." He kept his voice level. "That's not a day. It's a month's share, and the next, if it doesn't come back."

"I know what it is."

"I've a wife who's been poorly since the autumn." He said it as a fact. "I've a rent."

"Pending review," said one of the brothers, from the end of the bench. It was the one who had spoken on Friday, and again in front of the board. He did not look up. "That's what it says. A review of rigging at Four. Whose rigging?"

"Mine," said Lorna.

"That's the thing."

"It is."

"Is it going to go on being yours?" His voice was dry and cracked. "Or is it going to be all of ours? Because it was the same rigging. I stood on that deck. I cut that strap. I'll be asked."

"You'll be asked."

"And what do I say?"

"The truth."

"Which one?" He looked up at last. It was not an angry look. It was the look of a man who has found, rather late in life, a fault in a thing he has trusted. "I've been told two. I've been told he died in the collapse. And I've been told by that one," he nodded at the stove, without looking, "that he was alive when the roof went, and the winch woman's said so, and walked out. I've a good memory. I've a brother. I don't care to be asked."

The room was quiet. The kettle ticked on the range.

"You gave us a sentence," said the rigger.

He said it slowly. He was a long, brown, careful man with big, scarred hands, and he turned his cup in them a quarter-turn.

"That Wednesday, on the apron. You said it was the right call. You said he'd have been gone. We all said it. I said it in the shed with a mug in my hand, to the boy, and he said it back, and I heard it come out of me as if it had been mine. It was a good sentence." He paused. "I'd have said anything you told me. I've done it for twelve years. And now it's costing, and it isn't you it's costing."

"I know."

"Do you?"

"Yes."

"Then fix it." His voice cracked a little on it. "That's all. Go up to the yard. You know him. You've known him longer than any of us. Say whatever you say. He'll put us back. He told the east crew's lead this morning that it's a pity, that he'd have us on again tomorrow if matters were quiet. He said it kindly. He said it's only a question of everyone being sensible."

"Who?"

The rigger said nothing.

"Who's everyone?"

He looked at Curtis then, quickly, and away.

It was perfectly clear. Nobody needed to say it. Curtis sat with his taped hand on the table and the bread-fingers he had not eaten on a plate in front of him, and he saw what had been done, as one sees a joint when the load comes on. It was very neat. There had been no threat. A man had said it was a pity. A man had said, if matters were quiet. Nobody had been told to stop anything. A name had been moved on a board, and the people whose names had been moved were sitting round a kitchen table in the lamplight with their tea going cold, quite sincerely and with perfect reason asking the person in the room whom it would be easiest to ask.

"I'll go," said Curtis.

"You'll not," said Lorna.

"If it's me—"

"It's not you. It's me." She had not raised her voice. She sat with her hands round her cup and her face turned to the rigger, narrow and hard and level. "You're right. It's mine. I gave you a sentence, and I'd not take it back, because I thought it would hold. It hasn't. It's costing you, and that's my doing." She paused. "I'll go to Gareth. In the morning."

"And say what?"

"I don't know yet."

It was not what they had wanted. He saw it in the faces. It was honest, and it was no help, and it left a space where an answer should have been.

"I want to say a thing," said the young one.

He had not spoken. He was sitting on the floor with his head down, so that all anyone could see was the tight brown top of it, and he said it into his knees.

"I've the winch. I've a share and a half. I'm grateful." He swallowed. "I heard him. On the loop. When we were running. I wasn't listening, I said. I was." His voice was shaking. "He said 'Cur'. Over and over. I heard it on the radio at my belt, all the way along the deck, and I thought, somebody'll stop, and then I was at the ramp and it was gone, and I said to myself I hadn't heard. I've said it to myself every night."

Nobody moved.

"I'm nineteen," he said. "My mother's got her chest. I can't— I'm not asking anybody to do anything. I only wanted to say." He wiped his face with the back of his wrist, roughly, as a child does. "I'm sorry. I don't know why I said it."

"Because it's true," said the brother at the end of the bench, quietly.

"It doesn't help."

"No," said the brother. "It doesn't."

She stood on the step a moment. The lamp from the kitchen made a long yellow shape on the path. Then she came in, and shut the door, and put her back against it.

• • •

She washed the cups. It took a long time. She did it at the sink with her sleeves rolled, one at a time, in hot water, and set them upside down on the board, and Curtis watched the back of her head, the grey in the parting and the tight pins, and the small steady working of her elbows. The stove ticked. She did not turn round.

"Say it," she said.

"Say what?"

"Whatever you came to say on Sunday. And didn't." She picked up the last cup. "I've been waiting. I'd like to have it over."

He looked at the table. The bread lay on its plate in its thin pale fingers. He thought of the standpipe, and the glove, and the water running pink, and of the room where she had told him he might

have died anyway. He had thought that if he said it again, it would be easier. It was not.

"It was Gareth," he said. "That told you to take it clear."

"Yes."

"And you did."

"Yes."

"You said you decided it."

"I said I did." She put the cup down. She dried her hands on the cloth, a finger at a time. "It's not what I did."

He waited.

"He said take it clear. I'd have said no to a stranger. I'd have said, I'm the lead, it's my deck, my man's in the hole, and you can send me a form. I've said it to him before. I've said it about a rope." She turned round. She stood with her back to the sink and the cloth in her hands, and her face in the lamplight was grey and level and very tired. "He said it kindly. He said, I'm only telling you what I'd be afraid of. And I thought, he's right. And I thought, it's ten minutes. And I thought, if I put the skid down on that apron and take the frame back along the deck, and it goes, and he's right, then it's my fault the buyer's man is looking at a hole where the assembly was. And that was in it. It was in it, Curtis. The buyer. The date. I'd not have said so. I'd have said it was the deck."

"You said the roof."

"I said the roof. And the roof was real. It came in. I'd no more have sent you along that deck than into a fire." She did not look away. "But I heard the lift go in the book. I heard her say it, on the radio, per the yard. And I knew what it was. I knew it for what it was in the second she said it. It was Gareth's order and I'd taken it. And I didn't say a word. And ever since I've said it was the structure."

"It wasn't."

"No. It was me. It was me taking his word when I should have said no." She folded the cloth. "It's not a thing I've said before. I'd like you to know I've said it."

He sat looking at her. He had thought, in the dark, in the days since Sunday, that if she said it he would feel something. Relief, perhaps. A sort of settling. He sat with his good hand open on the table and felt nothing at all except that a very heavy thing, which had been held up between them for a week, had been put down on the boards, and was lying there between her feet and his.

"I could've stopped," he said.

"I know."

"Not you. Me. I had the pendant. I had the frame, I had it a hand's breadth over the ground. I could have put it down." He heard his own voice, rough and even, and could not alter it. "Four seconds. I could've set it on the apron and turned the machine and been back at the edge in two minutes. I knew. I knew it the whole way up the ramp."

"Then why—"

"Because you'd said go." He looked at his hand. "It's not that I thought it was right. I didn't. It's that it was so much easier. You'd told me. It was somebody else's. If I'd stopped, I'd have had to be the one who did the dangerous thing. I'd have had to decide to go back along that deck, myself, on my own say, and have it come in on me, or on Denny, or on the boy. I'd have been the one." He drew a breath that went in short against the tape. "I've been doing what you tell me since I was fourteen. I'm good at it. It's not that I'm afraid of the work. It's that I'd sooner it wasn't mine."

She did not answer. She stood with her hands on the cloth.

The stove ticked. A long way off a dog barked, and was answered. The kitchen was very warm and very still, and the lamp burned on the table between the plates and the cups and the bread, and he thought: this is the time when somebody puts out a hand. He thought it quite plainly, as one thinks a thing one knows from other rooms. She would cross the floor, and put a hand on his head, or on his shoulder, and say something, and it would all be forgiven. He could see how it would go. He could see the exact angle of her arm.

She did not move.

She stood where she was, with her back to the sink, looking at him, and he saw that she had seen it too. She had thought it. And she had put it aside, as a thing that would have been easy, and that was for the wrong reasons.

"I'm not going to say it's all right," said Lorna.

"No."

"It's not. It's a bad thing, and it's both of ours." She laid the cloth over the rail. "I'll not say I forgive it. I'm not the one. I'll not say you're forgiven, either, and you're not to look at me as if I should."

"I'm not."

"You were."

"Yes," he said. "For a minute."

"Aye." She almost smiled. It was the faintest movement of the line at the side of her mouth, and was gone. "I thought it might be that."

She came and sat down at the table, across from him, and put both hands flat on the wood. They were hard, big-knuckled, scarred hands, and they lay on the grain as they had lain every night of his life. She did not touch him.

"The sheet," he said. "The carbon."

"I've got it."

"Bridget's going to want it. In a room. With somebody who's the right."

"I know what she'll want." She was looking at her hands. "I've said it's mine and I'll keep it. I'll keep it a bit longer. It's the one thing I've got that says what I saw, and when, and I'll not put it in a hand until I've got a place to put it. That's not a no."

"It's not a yes."

"It's a not yet." She lifted her eyes. "You'll understand that. You've a thing like it."

"I have."

"Then we're agreed."

It was a very small agreement. It was perhaps the smallest he had ever made. He sat in the lamplight and felt the whole room settle round it, like a load finding its seat, and it did not feel like peace. It felt like a floor.

"She's going," he said.

Lorna waited.

"Bridget. On Saturday." He heard himself say it, and could not have said whether he should. "There's a haulier. The buyer's own, for the assembly. It comes at dawn. The driver's said she'll take people in the cab, five, no more. Bridget and the children. And me, if I've the money, which I haven't. And Bea, perhaps." He stopped. "She's not told Gareth. I think he knows. He's written a thing in her book."

"Has he."

"No seats on the collection vehicle."

"Hm." She was silent a moment, looking at the grain of the table. "And the driver'll go against that?"

"She says she'll carry a person who walks up to the cab on her own feet and says she's going. She says if anybody lays a hand she drives."

"A hand."

"That's the rule."

"It's a good rule." She nodded slowly. "It's the one rule I'd have made." She said nothing for a long time. The stove ticked. Somewhere outside the wind had got up, and moved the washing on the line with a small dry rattle. Then she said, in her ordinary voice, in the voice with which she had asked for a plate across a pallet, "Where will the children be?"

He stared at her.

"On the morning," said Lorna. "Saturday. At dawn, with a man at the gate. A truck. A yard full of people." Her eyes were on his face. "They'll not be at the yard. They'll not be in the house, if Gareth's clever, he'll look there. Where are they?"

"The grandmother's sister. At the north end. By the reservoir."

"How far?"

"A mile. More."

"Who takes them to the truck?"

"I don't— Bridget hasn't said."

"Then somebody's to be told it's a thing that needs doing." She pushed back her chair. "I'll not say I'm doing anything. I'm asking where they'll be. It's a thing a person ought to know."

She took her cup to the sink, and rinsed it, and set it on the board. She stood a moment with her back to him. Then she said, without turning, "Eat the bread. It's going to waste."

He ate it. It was thin and pale and had gone a little hard, and he ate it with his good hand, finger by finger, in the lamplight, while she banked the stove.

15

The broken shop

He heard the radio before he saw anything.

It was close to eleven. He had left Lorna's with the cold coming down the strip like a hand, and had gone the long way, past the lane that led to Bea's, because he had told himself he wished to see that her light was out. It was not out. The door of the shop, which had stood propped on its cable drum for as long as he could remember, was shut, and as he came nearer he saw that it was not shut but hanging, off its top hinge, on the slant. From inside, small and thin and perfectly clear, came the sound of a woman singing over strings.

He stopped at the threshold.

The lamp over the bench was still burning. By its light the room looked like something that had been taken in the teeth. The long shelf that had run down the east wall lay across the floor in two pieces, with its uprights splayed, the bolts torn out of the brick as clean as teeth. Hundreds of black and grey ledgers lay under it, and round it, in drifts, their covers open, pages fanned and torn and trodden. The trestle had gone over. The pump sat on its side, with a split along the housing. Motors lay about the floor with their covers off, and the small brass things that Bea had set out on the bench in her neat rows were everywhere underfoot, crunching, a whole dust

of them. The diagnostic unit lay on its face. He could see the crack in its case had run from corner to corner and across.

At the back, under the fallen end of the shelf, with one corner of it just showing, lay the radio. It had been stood on. The casing was split and the speaker cone punched through, and somehow, through the crushed paper, the woman went on singing, thin and buzzing, and every word of the second verse came out clean.

"Bea," he said.

"Mind the glass."

He had not seen her. She was on the floor behind the bench, sitting with her back against the leg of it and her legs straight out in front of her, like a child set down. She had her left arm held across her stomach with her right hand, and her face in the lamplight was grey and wet. There was blood in her hair on that side, a dark crust, running down behind the ear and under the collar of her apron. She was looking at him quite calmly.

"I thought you were them again," said Bea. "I'd have thrown something. I haven't got anything. They've thrown it all."

He was on his knees beside her before he knew how he had got there, and the ribs went through him like a bar, and he made a sound.

"Don't you do that," said Bea. "Don't you be a hero, you'll break the rest of you. Sit."

"How long?"

"An hour. A little more. They came in at ten."

"Who?"

"Two." She breathed. "One was Ewan. I knew the ring. I knew his hands, he had them on the shelf. The other had a scarf up. But he spoke. He said he was sorry, twice, when the first one did the shelf." Her mouth moved. "It's a thing you know about a voice. I'd know it in a crowd."

"Ross."

"I'd not say. I'd say a man with a daughter and a red coat." She shut her eyes, and opened them. "They wanted the ledgers. They said so. They said Mr Broadhurst would be glad of the books for the year, to keep them safe, and I said I'd not give them, and the one with the ring put his boot on my wrist."

He looked at it. She had unfolded the forearm, a little, to show him. It was lying on her apron, thick and blue under the skin, and wrong in the middle, with a kink in it like a bent tool, and the hand beyond it already puffed and dusky. He had seen a good many broken things. He had never seen so exactly what it was.

"It's the left," said Bea. "I'll say that for God. Thirty years I've soldered with the right." She tried to smile. "It's the other that holds the work."

"I'll get Lorna."

"You'll not leave me yet."

"Bea—"

"I want somebody in the room." She said it plainly. "It's a thing I've not wanted before."

He sat down against the bench beside her, with his back to the leg of it, in the dust and the brass. The radio went on. The woman's voice rose to the third verse and dropped, and the strings came under it, and one by one the high notes failed against the wrecked paper and the buzz came in, until she was singing the song as it had been, years ago, through a wall in somebody else's house.

• • •

He could do almost nothing. It was the first thing he understood, and the plainest. He sat on the floor of a ruined shop with a woman beside him whose arm was broken in the middle, and he had one hand that worked, and it would not do what he asked. He tried to lift the end of the fallen shelf, to get at the first-aid tin that he knew lay beneath it, and the left hand alone could not take the weight, and the right would not close, and when he braced his shoulder to it the tape on his ribs went through him like a saw. He stood with his face against the cold brick and counted till it stopped.

"Leave it," said Bea. "I'll tell you where to look when there's someone to look."

There was a step in the lane. It stopped at the broken door.

He turned, sharply. A man stood in the doorway, with the lane lamp behind him. He was a thin, stooped, middle-aged man in an old coat, with a cap pulled down over his forehead and his hands in his pockets, and Curtis knew him at once. He ran the pump house across the lane, a bachelor, who had a small cat and a large cough. They had said good morning to each other perhaps four thousand times.

"I heard the glass," said the man. He did not come in. "At ten. I thought I should— I wasn't sure." He took off his cap and held it. "I didn't come out. I want to say that. I stood at the window with the light off and I didn't come out."

"No one's asking you to," said Bea.

"I'm sorry."

"You've come now."

He stood a moment longer. It seemed to cost him a good deal. Then he came in, treading on the brass without noticing it, and set the cap on the bench, and without a word he crouched at the end of the fallen shelf and put his thin shoulder under it and heaved.

It came up a foot. It was all he could do. Curtis got his left hand on the underside and put his weight behind it, and it came up an-

other foot, and the first-aid tin slid out across the boards. The man let it down with a crash that he flinched at, and stood back, breathing, with his hand at his side.

"I'll do the arm," he said. "I was a stretcher-bearer once. A long time. Up at the old coverage, before." He did not say before what. He looked at the arm, and at Bea, and swallowed. "I'll want a flat piece. A bit of board. And a strip of cloth."

He found them. It took him three minutes. He did it on his knees, with Curtis holding the lamp, with an awkward, careful, practised hand: the board padded with rag, the wrist laid along it, a strip round and round, and then another, tight, and a sling of the apron's own string. Bea did not make a sound. She looked at the wall. When it was done she said, "That's well done," and he flushed to the roots of his hair.

"It wants a nurse."

"I know it does."

"There's one Thursday week."

"I know."

"You could—" He stopped. He looked round the shop, and at the wreck of it, and at the door hanging from its hinge, and Curtis saw him make up his mind not to finish. "I've got to go."

"Of course you have," said Bea.

"I wasn't here." His voice shook a little. "If anyone asks. I've a cat, and my chest, and a job. They've said the pump house'll be reviewed. I'm sorry. I wasn't here. I only came to see if there was a light."

"You saw it," said Bea. "It's on."

He took his cap from the bench and went out. They heard his step go away along the lane, quickly, and a door shut on the far side, very quietly. A moment later a light went out in the pump house window.

"He's a good man," said Bea.

"He's frightened."

"Those are not different things." She leaned her head back against the bench. "Don't be hard on him. He tied it right."

• • •

They sat. After a time, when the pain had gone from white to grey, she began to talk, as she always did, with half her attention elsewhere, so that the sentences ran out as they went.

"They took the ledgers. Not all. They took the five, the last five. The tractor's in them, and the stock-prod. They'd a list, you could tell. They knew which years." She stopped. "They'd no time to read. They put them in a sack. It was Ewan did the sack. They didn't—Curtis, they didn't look at the machine."

"What machine?"

"The copier." She jerked her chin, a very small movement, toward the back of the shop. The sheet of sacking had been dragged off the grey steel cabinet and lay on the floor, and the lid was up. Its glass had a long white scar across it and its flank was dented, and the lamp inside, she said afterward, with some satisfaction, had come through. "They saw it. They kicked it. They thought it was a stove."

"And what you'd copied—"

"I'd done thirty-one pages." She said it with a kind of grim, tired relish. "Before the light went. Thirty-one, in forty seconds each, a good deal of them blurred. The tractor, the pump, the thing in the spring. The yard's slips with the date on them. I'd not got to the stock-prod. I'd the one page. The January one." She breathed. "It's not much. It's not all. It's what I'd the time for."

"Where?"

"In the Q5 pump."

He stared.

"The housing. The one with the split in it, on the trestle. I put the sheets in a tin, and the tin in the casing, and the casing cover on. It's a thing nobody picks up. It's been in this shop three weeks. It weighs a ton and it looks like a thing that's broken." She almost laughed. "And now it is."

He got up. He crossed the floor, stepping among the brass and the torn pages, to where the pump lay on its side. It was heavier

than he had expected. He could not lift it. He knelt by it, and found the cover, a grey plate held by four small bolts, and got his left hand to one of them, and could not turn it, and said so.

"There's a spanner in my pocket," said Bea. "The apron. The right."

He took it out. It was a small ring spanner worn nearly smooth. He fitted it to the first bolt and leaned on it with the whole of his left arm, and it turned, a quarter at a time, with a squeal. It took him some minutes. The sweat ran into his eyes. When the fourth bolt came out he lifted the plate away with two fingers, and inside the casing, among the dried oil and the grey scale, lay a flat tin that had once held tobacco.

He took it out. It was sealed with tape. It had a small cold weight, like a stone, and when he shook it, very gently, the contents slid and whispered.

"That's it," said Bea. "That's the lot." She looked at it for a long time, in the lamp's light, in his one useful hand. "I'd have liked it to be all of them. It isn't. But it's what I knew, and it's dated, and it's signed. It's a bit of paper. You'd be surprised how much a man will do to stop a bit of paper."

"I'll keep it."

"You'll not." She said it sharply. "You'll give it to Bridget. She'll know what to do. I've seen her book. It's the only honest book in the camp but mine, and mine's on the floor."

• • •

It was past one when he got her to Lorna's.

Lorna opened the door in her nightgown, with her hair down her back. She looked at Bea. She looked at Curtis. She did not say a single word. She stood aside, and he got Bea across the threshold and into the chair by the stove, and Lorna knelt in front of her and took the board and the cloth and the bound wrist in both her hands and looked at it, with her lips pressed together, and was perfectly still.

"Who did the tying?"

"A man."

"It's good."

"So I said." Bea's voice was very small. "It wants a nurse, Lorna."

"It'll have one." She stood. "It'll have one if I have to carry you to the coverage line on my back." She turned. "Put the kettle on, Curtis. With your good hand."

He put it on. They sat round the stove, the three of them, in the small hours, as they had never once sat in all his life: the two old women with their grey hair down and their hands in their laps, and he at the end of the table with the tin before him, and the lamp turned low. Nobody spoke for some time. The kettle began to sing.

"Bridget's going on Saturday," said Lorna, at last, to the stove. "I've told Bea. In the kitchen. She'd to know."

"You'd no right."

"I'd a right to tell my oldest friend something that might get her killed." She did not look round. "It's a cab, five seats, the buyer's haulier. Bridget and two, and Curtis, if he can pay."

"He can't."

"I know."

"Then that's four." Bea shifted in the chair, and winced. "And the fifth's mine, if I'd the sense to take it. I haven't."

"You've a broken wrist."

"I've a shop."

"You've no shop." It was said without cruelty, and it went into the room like a stone into water. "They've done it. It's all on the floor. And the parts are held till Thursday week and they'll be held after that. You'll not have a bench by Christmas."

Bea did not answer. She sat with her broken arm across her apron and her eyes on the stove, and the lamp lit the lines in her face like something cut in wood. After a long time she said, in a changed voice, "I've never lived anywhere else."

"No."

"I was born three streets over."

"I know."

"I've not got the hands," said Bea. "Not for a bench anywhere. Not with this." She laid the right one over the left. "A woman of sixty-three with one arm. They'd say, she's a nice old body, give her a chair."

"They'd say you were the best pump hand in the district."

"Who's to know?"

"I do," said Lorna.

It was quiet. The kettle had boiled, and nobody moved to it.

"Put me in the book," said Bea. She said it to the floor, quite flat. "If it's five. I'll not be a woman sitting in a lane. I'd be no use here with this, and I'd be less use dead. Put me in. I'll go, if the others do. I'll not go first."

"Right," said Lorna.

"And I want my spanner back."

"Curtis has it."

"Then he can keep it." Her voice cracked, once, and steadied. "It's a good spanner."

• • •

The long-run driver's cab went out at half past five, from the yard, in the dark, with its lamps lit.

He was at the gate before it. He stood in the cold with his taped hand against his chest and a half-written sheet in the other, and the frost on the stones had begun to whiten at the edges. He had written it himself, at Lorna's table, in a clumsy, slanting, left-handed capital that no one could have mistaken for a clerk's. He had written it four times. Bea had read the last, with the magnifier, and had said, "That'll do. It says what's so."

It was a short message. It said that on the night of the seventh day, a man had been beaten in the lane behind the grain store by two named men, one of them with a ring; that on the ninth, a wo-

man of sixty-three had been injured in her shop by the same two, who had told her they came for the yard; that she had a broken forearm and a cut head and needed a nurse at the depot gate on the Saturday, at whatever hour the cab arrived. That there were five persons. That there was a woman with two children. That the dispatcher would bring the book. That the cab would carry them if it was not stopped.

It asked for a bed for the woman with the arm. It asked that the Sunday meeting stand. It asked, at the bottom, as the last line, whether there was anyone who would be at the gate.

The long-run driver took it. He read it by the light of the cab, with his hat pushed back, standing on the step with one boot on the rail. Then he folded it and put it inside his jacket and looked at the notes that Curtis was holding out.

"It's the usual," he said. "For a private message. A day's fuel. I'd not take it, but there's the yard to ask."

"It's all there."

He took it. He counted it, without looking down. Curtis had found it that morning in the pocket of his coat, when he went to feel for coins: a roll of notes, folded small and tied round with a bit of twine, and tucked under the twine a strip of paper in a small upright hand, in capitals. MESSAGE. It had not been there at supper. He had not asked.

"She's a good woman, your mother," said the long-run driver, to the notes.

"I know."

"Mind you tell her." He got up into the cab and shut the door, and put his head out. "Before somebody else does."

The engine caught. The lamps swung across the yard, across the weighbridge, the porch, the board, and out through the gate onto the east road, and Curtis stood in the cold with the frost on his shoulders and watched them go. They were a long time going.

• • •

The radio spoke at ten to eight.

He was in the dispatch shed, on the stool by the stove, with a cup of Bridget's tea in his left hand. She had come at seven, and had said nothing about the hand, or the night, and had put the lamp on and the kettle, and had taken the tin from him with both hands and put it into the lining of her coat without a word. They had sat, since, a little apart. She wrote. He listened to the pencil.

The radio gave a long crackle, a whistle, the hiss of a great distance, and then, small and distorted and perfectly steady, a man's voice.

"Drybank, long-run. Do you read?"

Bridget put the pencil down. She took up the handset without hurry. "Long-run, Drybank. Read you, scratchy."

"I'm at the ridge repeater. I've had a word at the depot. There's a thing for you." A burst of static. "I'll say it once. Welfare desk says: nurse to be at the depot gate Saturday. For the arm. The hostel's got the beds, six, held. The Sunday stands. Nine o'clock. And there's a person will meet the cab. She didn't say who. An older one." A pause. "She says to tell you it's a thing that can be done. At this end."

"Say again the last."

"It can be done at this end." The voice came very clear for a moment. "She says the only thing she can't do is fetch you. The vehicle has to reach them."

Bridget wrote it. She did it slowly, in her round upright hand, with the pencil going steadily and her face quite still. When she had finished she read it back, and he heard her voice go level on the last line.

"Copy. The vehicle has to reach."

"That's all of it," said the long-run driver. "I'm going to the pump house's cells, they're waiting." A crackle. "Out."

The set went silent. The room was very quiet. The stove ticked, and a long way off the scale was beginning its first weighing of the day.

Bridget laid the handset on its cradle. She sat looking at what she had written. Then she looked up, and across the shed at Curtis, with his hand in its trough on his knee, and the tea cooling, and his face grey with a night without sleep, and he saw that for the first time in nine days she was almost smiling.

"Care," she said. "And a bed. And somebody at the gate."

"Yes."

"It's all there is, then." She folded the page. "It's only the road."

16

The original

Lorna was at the gate at six, in the dark, with a flat tin under her arm.

She opened the door before Lorna could knock. They stood on the step, a yard apart, in a thin grey light with frost on the path. Lorna was in her old canvas coat with the collar up. She held the tin against her ribs in both arms, as a woman holds a child she has not yet decided to put down.

"I'd meant to wait for you to ask," said Lorna.

"I'm asking."

"Not for an apology."

"No." Bridget held the door. "I'd like the sheet."

Lorna looked at her. It was the flat short look she gave a roof, and Bridget returned it, and neither of them looked away. Then Lorna took her arms from round the tin and held it out. It was not locked. It was an old biscuit tin, dented at one corner, with a faded picture of a lighthouse on the lid. Inside, flat on a bed of folded cloth, lay one thin sheet of violet-grey paper.

"It's the carbon," said Lorna. "The yard has the top. I'd not say it's all of it. It's what I wrote on the Monday, on the deck, and what I'd have written on the Wednesday if I'd had the time."

Bridget took it to the kitchen. She laid it on the table under the lamp and sat down in front of it and read it as she read a driver's sheet, with her finger under each line.

It was small, upright, hard, and in pencil. It said what Curtis had said it said, and she read it all. Seat suspect. Hairline in concrete at edge, 1 ft. Weeping at the pad. Cold coming off it. Not sound. A ruled line, and below the line two more. G. wants out by Wed noon. Buyer's agent Fri. Prop from below + plate under foot. Skid on frame, not cradle. PROCEED.

The last word was underlined twice. The pressure of the pencil had come right through the paper, so that the grey letters stood up from the page like a seam.

She read it again. Then she sat back.

"What does it say?" said Lorna.

"You know what it says."

"I'd like to hear you say it. I've not heard anybody else."

She took a moment. "It says you saw the seat on the Monday and you thought it wasn't sound. It says you knew the buyer's date and you wrote it in the same hand, under the line that says the seat's unsound. And it says you decided to go in." She put her finger on the underlining. "It's not an accident. It's not a thing nobody saw. You saw it. You wrote it down and you went."

"Yes."

"It doesn't say what Gareth said on the day."

"No."

"Or what you said back. Or what she wrote in the book. It's the Monday. It's the first half." She looked at it. "It doesn't say Denny would have lived."

"No."

"It's one page, and it's yours." She raised her eyes. "It's very clean."

"It's the only thing I've ever written that was."

"I'm not going to tell you it was brave," she said.

"I'd not want you to."

"Or that it was fair. Or that it makes it better." Her voice was steady. "It's a thing that's so. It's going to be in a room, with somebody who'll ask questions, and there's a thing I need to know before it is."

"Ask it."

"Will you say it? What you said to Curtis. What's on this sheet, and what you heard on the radio, and that you took Gareth's word. In your own voice, in front of somebody who can say, why? And what did you think? And what did you do next?" She leaned forward. "Not to me. To somebody who doesn't like you and isn't sorry. Somebody who'll write it down."

"Yes," said Lorna.

"You don't know what it'll cost."

"No."

"Nor do I. It might be nothing. It might be a hearing and a man in a suit and a form. It might be the end of you, in this camp. They might say it was your decision and nobody else's, and put it all on you, and Gareth stands there and says he asked for a thing that was sensible." She did not look away. "He'd do that. He's very good at it."

"I know."

"And you'd say it anyway."

"I would." Lorna's hands lay on the table, flat, big-knuckled. She was looking at the sheet. "I've no idea what comes after. I've not thought about what the law is. I only know it's a thing I've got to say, and that I've said I'd say it, to you, and I'll not unsay it for a hearing." She raised her eyes. "You've my word. For what it's worth."

"It's worth what you do," said Bridget.

Lorna nodded slowly. She did not seem to have expected anything else. She got up, and stood a moment with her hand on the back of the chair. "There's the machine," she said. "At my kitchen. We brought it in the dark, on a barrow. Curtis walked behind, he's no use, he'd nothing to carry but a lamp. I did the lifting." Her mouth twitched. "Bea's in my chair, giving orders."

"I'll come."

"Bring the book."

Bridget put her hand flat on the table. "It's at the shed."

"Fetch it."

"It doesn't leave."

"It's left before," said Lorna. "For a night, when you're behind. I've seen you take it home. The whole camp's seen. Nobody looks twice at a woman carrying her work." She turned. "It'll be back on its counter by half past eight, and the boy'll not know."

• • •

She took it from the shed at ten to seven, under her coat, flat against her ribs, with the cloth cover cold through her blouse. The yard was still dark. A lamp burned over the weighbridge and two men were talking on the porch, and neither turned. She walked down the strip and into Lorna's lane with her heart going hard and slow, as it did at the start of a long day, and the book's corner pressing under her arm like something that had begun to breathe.

The kitchen was full of machine.

It stood on the table where the lamp had been, a grey steel cabinet the size of a small trunk with its lid up, a glass plate laid flat on top of it, and a long cable running down off the back to a cell on the floor. A great white scar ran across the glass. Its flank was dented. A single tube glowed behind the plate, a pale steady blue, and the whole room smelled faintly of hot dust and old ozone. Bea sat in the armchair beside it with her splinted arm in a sling and a blanket round her knees. She looked a hundred years old, and perfectly alert, and was frowning at the cable.

"Not that way," she said. "You'll fuse it. Round the back."

Curtis turned the plug round with his left hand. He was standing at the end of the table with a lamp hung from one finger, grey in the face, with the tape showing at his neck. He did not look at Bridget. He nodded to her, once, and she nodded back.

"Right," said Bea. "Sit. Not on the cell. Now."

She held it up to the lamp. It was a little grey, and blurred at one edge, and the scar showed as a faint pale line. It was legible.

"Do it again," said Bea. "That one's a bit dim. Hold the lid."

She did it again.

It took the morning. She did it carefully, and in order, and when she had finished each page she held it to the lamp and wrote across the foot of it, in her own round hand, True copy, and the date, and her name. She wrote it on every page. She had decided that. Whatever else she did, she would sign for what was hers, in ink, under a date.

The first were the dispatch pages. She would not copy the whole of any page. She had thought about that in the night. The book was a record of nine years of other people: every seat, every driver, a woman with an ear and a balance of two, a boy's name against a place. They had not asked to be in it. It would not do to carry them out in a bundle to a stranger. She took a sheet of plain paper and a pair of Lorna's shears and cut a window in it, a long narrow slot, no wider than three lines, and laid it over the page of the second day so that only the entries she wanted showed through. 07:58. 08:09. 08:21. She held it flat with her palm. Under it the rest of the page, all the names of the morning, lay dark and quiet and unread.

She copied it. She moved the window up, and copied the line for the light truck, 05:15, and 05:50, and 09:05. She moved it down and copied the long-run driver's entry for twenty-five past eight. There were four pages, when she had done, each with its slot of lines and a great grey margin round it, and each signed.

Then the consignment note for Saturday's collection, which was dispatch's own document and lay in the book's back pocket: the buyer's order reference, the weight, the bay, and in a small ruled box in the corner, in the buyer's agent's upright hand, the word Deposit, with a figure after it, and Received. She copied that too. It was

the only paper that said, in a stranger's writing, what the load was worth and by what day.

Then Lorna's carbon, laid on the glass as if it were glass itself, and the light going over it, and the five lines of pencil standing out from the grey. Lorna stood at the stove with her back to them and did not turn round.

Then Bea's pages. They came out of the tobacco tin in a flat bundle, grey and faintly blurred, thirty-one of them and the one more, and Bridget read them as she copied, a line at a time. Hoist pump. Housing: hairline at lower flange, old, weeping, NOT progressing. Load test, forty minutes. SERVICEABLE. B.S. And the yard's repair slip, with its small violet stamp, Received, Thursday, 11:40. She laid it on the glass. She did not look at the name on it. She pressed the key, and the light went over, and the name came out in the tray, upright and neat, in someone's clerk's hand, and she signed it.

She did not copy the Q5 pump hand's name, or the stock-prod, or the hundred other things that were in the tin. Bea, from the armchair, said, "Why not?" and she said, "They're not for this." Bea looked at her for a long moment. Then she nodded. "No," she said. "They're not."

She did not copy the settlement. She did not copy the household's sheet, or the tin's account, or the list of houses in her own hand. They were hers, and the children's. It was a thing she had thought about, and settled, and she did not go back to it. Nobody had asked for the name of every house where two children might sleep. There was not a line in all the pages that said where anyone was going.

By half past ten there were forty-four sheets in the tray, and she had numbered them in the corner, one to forty-four, with a hard pencil. She squared the edges on the table. They were a grey slab, quite thin, with a smell of hot dust. She thought how small it was.

"It's not much," she said.

"It's not," said Bea. "It's what there is."

• • •

She wrote the account at the kitchen table with her back to the stove, in the round upright hand, on two sheets of Lorna's paper. It took her an hour. She wrote it three times.

She divided the sheet into three, with a ruler, in columns. At the head of the first she wrote, What I entered. At the head of the second, What I heard. At the head of the third, What I have concluded since.

Under the first she put the book's own lines. 07:58, the hold. 08:09, the lift. 08:21, man lost. She wrote that the hold had been entered at the request of Crew Three, no name given, and that the lift had been entered by her, by pencil, at the instruction of Mr Broadhurst. She wrote the time and the thing. She did not say why.

Under the second she put what she had heard on the radio, as nearly as she could stand behind it. She had heard Crew Three ask for the frame to be held for a lift. She had heard Mr Broadhurst say, to Crew Three, on the yard's radio, that the skid should be taken clear first, and that the frame would be back in ten minutes. She had heard Crew Three's lead say, take it clear, come straight back. She wrote, I believed the frame was coming back. She wrote it plainly, and underlined it once.

Under the third she wrote what she thought. She had not known at 08:09 that the man was her husband. She had been told at noon. She had not restored the hold. She had not asked who had said the death was quick. She wrote it down. It went down in the same round hand, without a tremor, and it was the hardest thing she had ever put on paper, and when she had done she sat looking at it.

She signed it. She signed each sheet. She dated it, and wrote the hour, and beneath her name, in small letters, as she wrote at the foot of a driver's chit, No one has told me what to put.

• • •

The long-run driver came for his seat sheet at ten to three, with his hat in his hand.

She had booked him out at three, as she had said she would: an overnight to the depot, with the empty drums from Q3, returning Saturday evening. It was a perfectly good run, and somebody had to take the drums. She wrote it in the book at noon, as the last entry of the morning, in her round upright hand. He read it over her shoulder, and said nothing.

She gave him the envelope across the counter, flat, edge first, as she gave him everything. It was a large brown envelope, folded over twice and sealed with a drop of the black glue from the tin, and across the front, in capitals, she had written one line: For the welfare desk, depot. To be held unopened, for the intake meeting, Sunday nine.

"Forty-four sheets," she said. "Numbered. Each one signed. Nothing in it that's not for this."

He weighed it in his hand. He did not look at it. He looked at her.

"It's a thing you'd not want found."

"It's one of two." She said it quite steadily. "I've the originals. Nobody's taken them. Saturday, the book goes in the cab, and the carbon, and Bea's, in my own hands, and I'll give them to the person who meets us." She laid her palm flat on the counter. "That's only so there's something there if I don't."

"If you don't."

"If I can't."

He nodded slowly. He put it under his jacket, against his shirt, beside the place where the letter had been. He buttoned the jacket over it. He did not say it would be safe. He said, "I'll sleep with it," and went out, and she watched him cross the yard to the truck with the drums chinking on the back, and climb up, and sit a moment, and drive.

She wrote the time. 15:02. Long-run out.

Then she sat for some time with the pencil in her hand, looking at nothing, and found that her shoulders had come down, an inch, from where they had been since Saturday. It was not safety. It was only that a thing that had been in one place was now in two.

• • •

She went home at five, as she did every day. She had put the book back on its counter at ten past eight that morning, and the boy had not looked up; she had worked through the day with her hands steady and her coat buttoned. In the kitchen she banked the stove and lit the lamp and ladled something into two bowls. The younger child was on the bench with a blanket. The older sat at the table with a slate and a stub of chalk, writing a word over and over with enormous care.

"Saturday," said Bridget. She sat down across from the child, and took the chalk out of the small hand, and laid it on the slate. "We're going away. I'll tell you tomorrow what we're taking. I want you to think, tonight, about the one thing you'd carry if you could carry only one. Not tell me. Think."

The child looked at her for a long time. Then the child picked up the slate, and turned it over, and set it down with the chalked side to the table.

"Can it be a boot?"

"It can be a boot."

She put the children to bed at eight. She did it slowly, in the lamplight, with the stove ticking, and sat on the stair for some time afterward, listening to them not sleeping. Then she came down and stood in the middle of the kitchen, and looked at it. She had lived in it for nine years. Through the window, in the last grey of the light, Denny's boots stood side by side on the step with their toes out.

17

The settlement

The summons came on Friday at ten, by the boy, to Lorna's kitchen, and it was addressed to both of them.

It was not an invitation. The boy did not pretend that it was. He stood in the door with his cap in his hands and said, quickly, that Mr Broadhurst would be glad to see Mrs Hesketh and Mr Hesketh at the yard office at noon, on the matter of a final settlement for the household of the late D. Pike and for the crew, and that he hoped it would be convenient, and that he had been told to wait. He did not look at the splint. He had been told not to.

"Noon," said Lorna.

"Yes, Mrs Hesketh."

"Tell him we'll come."

She shut the door. She stood a moment with her hand on the latch and her back to the room. On the far side of the table Bea was asleep in the armchair, with her mouth a little open and the splinted arm on her knee, and the grey machine under its sacking at her elbow. It was not yet noon and Curtis had been up since four.

"He's found out," he said.

"He's found something." She turned. "It's not the same." She took her coat from its nail and put it on, buttoning it to the neck, one

button at a time. “We go. We listen. We say as little as can be said. I’ll do the talking.”

“Lorna.”

“You’ll do the listening.” She looked at him. “It’s the thing you do best.”

• • •

The office was as it had been: the long window over the scale, the rug on the boards, the brass instruments in a row on the sill. The stove was lit and the tea was ready. Gareth stood at the glass with his hands behind him. He turned as they came in, and he was smiling, the warm full smile of a man who has had a long week and is glad of company, and Curtis, who had seen him not smile on Monday, understood that it was a thing done on purpose and with some effort, like carrying a weight.

“Lorna. Curtis.” He came forward and took Lorna’s hand in both of his. “It’s good of you. Sit, please. There’s tea. I’d have come to you, but I thought you’d rather have it here, where there’s no one to listen.”

They sat. The two chairs had been set side by side before the desk, and he took the third, across from them, with his knees almost touching theirs. He poured. He did it slowly, a cup for each, and put the cups into their hands, and Curtis took his in his left and held it.

“I’ll not keep you. I’ve a thing to say, and I’d like to say it plainly.” He put his own cup on the desk. “It’s been a hard week. A death, and a good deal of trouble after. I’ve said some things I’d rather not have, and I’ve heard some that were said to me. I’m not a man who likes to leave a thing half-mended. I’d like it finished.”

“Finished,” said Lorna.

“A settlement. All of it, in one.” He laid his hands on his knees. “I’ve thought about what’s fair. I’d like to give you what I think is.

“For the household, the full net on the sheet, with the cable put to one side, a second advance for the winter, and the seat on the cab

with a month's room. For the crew, the allocation restored from Monday, full shares, the review closed. For you, Curtis, your share whole, a lead's place on the east lift, the bench in the scale room, and your hand seen to." He turned. "There's a nurse comes on Thursday week. I'd have her see it first."

It was perfectly quiet in the room. The stove ticked. A long way below, through the glass, the scale ticked over a barrow.

"It's very generous," said Lorna.

"It's fair. That's all I've tried to make it." He smiled. "There's only a small matter on the other side. I'd be glad of it. It's a form, which Mrs Pike's been so good as to think about. It says that the account of the death is understood, as the crew have given it, and that the household's satisfied. It's a paragraph. It's only so the scheme can pay."

"And what's it say the account is?"

"As given." He opened one hand. "That he died in the collapse."

Lorna did not move. She sat with the cup on her knee, and he saw her face do nothing at all.

"And the second thing," said Gareth, in the same easy voice.

He leaned back. He crossed one leg over the other. And Curtis, watching him, saw it happen: not a hardening, not a change, but a very slight turn, as of a man who has been walking along the near side of a road and steps across it.

"I'm told the dispatch book was out of the shed last night," said Gareth. "Under a coat. The yard boy saw it go. He's a good lad, he mentioned it only because he thought she might be ill." He smiled. "It's a working volume. It belongs to the yard. I've no objection to a woman taking her work home. It's only that I'm told it came back a little later than it ought. And lighter, in some way." He looked at Lorna. "I'd like to see it. I'd like to have the pages for the second day, and any copies that may have been made. They're the yard's property. I'd be easier if they were in my safe."

"I know nothing of that," said Lorna.

"I thought you might not." He did not look at Curtis. "I only mention it. A thing like that gets about. It's a very easy thing to misunderstand. A man's last day, set down in a dispatcher's hand, and a good many people reading it who've never stood on a deck." He sighed. "I'd like it kept where it can't do harm. That's all."

Curtis put his cup down on the corner of the desk. He did it carefully, because his left hand was shaking, a little, and the saucer chattered against the wood.

He understood it. It came to him with great clarity, and all at once, like the shape of a failing beam. It was not the paper. It would never have been only the paper. It was a man of fifty-eight who had been, for thirty years, the only person in this camp who could say what had happened, and who had begun to see that there were other people now who could say it too. A dispatcher. A pump hand with a ledger. A woman with a carbon. A boy on a winch with his head down. He wanted the book, but it was the mouths he wanted, every one, and the offer on the desk was not an offer for a form. It was an offer for an agreement, a long quiet agreement in which each of them, in return for something small, would go on saying what had already been said.

He thought: he is not afraid of the paper. He is afraid of us.

"Where would the copies be?" said Gareth, pleasantly.

"I don't know," said Curtis.

"No?"

"It's not mine to say."

"It's a pity." He did not seem offended. "I'd have thought you'd know."

"If I did," said Curtis, "I'd not tell you."

He heard it come out of him, flat and low, in a voice he did not know. It was very quiet in the room. Lorna did not turn her head, but he felt the whole of her go still beside him, like a rope taking weight.

Gareth looked at him for a long moment.

"I see."

"And I'll not take any of it."

"Curtis—" said Lorna.

"No. I've to say it." He looked at Gareth. "The share, and the bench, and the household's balance. I'll not take them. Not for a form. Not for anything on that desk." His voice shook, and he let it. "And there's a thing I'll tell you, so that you've heard it from me, and not from a boy at a counter. I'm going to report it. All of it. I'm going to say what I did."

"What you did."

"I drove the tractor out of Hall Four with the skid, while Denny was answering. On the handset. He was alive, and he was talking to me, and I didn't stop." He had not known he would say it. It was out, in the warm room, with the stove ticking, in the plain flat voice he had used to Bridget over the oilcloth, and it did not feel like a confession. It felt like putting down a weight. "I'm going to say it to whoever asks. In a room, in my own name. It's mine. I'm not leaving it for you to settle."

Nobody spoke.

"You're a young man," said Gareth.

"I'm twenty-seven."

"Then I'll not pretend this is advice." He did not raise his voice. It had grown shorter, bare, set down one word at a time like tools. "You'll say that in a room, in a form, in front of a clerk. You'll say you left a man in a trench. It'll be written. And what do you think it does?"

"I don't—"

"It finishes your mother's crew." He said it simply. "Every man on it. They'll say it was Lorna's order. They'll say it was Lorna's deck and Lorna's rigging and Lorna's hand on the sheet, and I'll agree, because it'll be true. And there'll not be a share drawn in this camp by one of them again. Not a day. I'll put a man on that door. And the old woman in your mother's kitchen with the broken arm will have a long

winter, and no parts for a bench, and nobody to say a word for her." He paused. "I'd not like it. I tell you what I will do."

"Gareth," said Lorna.

"I'm speaking to the boy." He did not turn. "And the dispatcher. She's a woman with two children and a house on the yard's roll, and a husband's account that isn't closed. There's the cable, the heap by the north wall. It's the yard's, it always has been, and a good deal of it went out of the yard in the spring and summer through a man who's dead. I was prepared to write that off, in a settled household." He opened a hand. "In an unsettled one, a household that leaves with an account outstanding leaves what's in the house. It's the custom. It's on the roll. I'd not want it. I've a great regard for her." His eyes stayed on Curtis. "You think it's a thing a man can say, and have it be only his. It's not. It goes out. It goes through every house in the strip. And nobody in this camp can stand in front of it."

Curtis did not answer. He held on to the arm of the chair with his left hand, and found that he could not feel it.

"Think," said Gareth, in a gentler voice. "I'm not asking tonight. I'll hold it till the freight goes. After that I'll not be able to." He rose. He stood, large and grey and unhurried, with the light of the window behind him, and the room shrank round him as rooms did. "I've a letter to write. Mind the steps."

• • •

They went down in silence.

They crossed the yard. Neither spoke. The scale ticked, and the line stood at the grille, and no one looked. The two men on the porch looked at the sky. They went out through the gate, and along the lane, and round the corner of the pump house, where there was nobody, and Lorna stopped. She stood with her back against the wall, and put her hand over her mouth.

He thought she was going to be ill. She was not. She stood with her eyes shut for what seemed a long while, breathing through her fingers, and then took her hand away and opened them.

"That was foolish," she said.

"Yes."

"You'd no need to say it. Not there. Not to him."

"I know."

"It's the one place in the camp where it'd do the most harm and the least good." She looked at him. Her face was grey, and her mouth a straight line, and he saw that it was not anger. "And it was right."

He said nothing.

"I'd have said it, if I'd the courage, an hour from now, in a better place." She almost laughed. "I'll not say I'm glad you did it. I'll say I know why." She took a long breath. "Come. I've things to tell you. It's no good standing in a lane."

They walked. She did not take him to the house. She took him up the long way, by the old reservoir road, where the washing lines gave out and the goats stood on the stones, and the wind came down off the ridge with the smell of dust in it. It was a high bright cold day, with the sun on the roofs. She walked fast, with her hands in her pockets, and talked as she walked, in her ordinary voice, in verbs, as she laid out a job.

"The driver's a woman. Bridget's told you. She's the buyer's, she's a rig and a paper and a time, and she's not coming for you. She's coming for the assembly." She did not look at him. "You'll have heard that said. You'll have thought it was the same. It's not. It's the whole of the plan. If she doesn't get the load, she doesn't go. If she gets it, and the paper's right, she goes whether she likes it or not. She's paid by the ton."

"What paper?"

"Three." She held up fingers. "The consignment note. That's the yard's. It's signed by the yard clerk and by Gareth himself, to say the

load's released to the buyer's vehicle. Then the weighbridge ticket, which the clerk does when it's on the scale. And the buyer's collection order, which she brings. She'll not move without all three."

"And Gareth signs."

"Gareth signs." She nodded slowly. "That's the thing. It's what he can't not do. It's his deposit. It's the whole of why he did it, the Hall Four job, the skid, the tractor. If the load's not signed away by Saturday dawn, he loses it, and the credit with it. He'll not hold it back. He'd cut off his own hand first. He'll sign, and stand on the porch, and watch her go." She did not smile. "And while she's there, loading, on a bay, with a paper in her hand and a witness on every side, he'll not be able to do a thing to a person who walks up to her cab."

"He'll try."

"Aye. He'll try." She walked a little way in silence. "That's why it's got to be the paper. A truck that came for people, with nothing on it, he'd have stopped by now. This one he can't. It's got a reason to be there that's bigger than us." She looked up at the ridge. "I've thought about it all night. It's the only thing that comes into this camp I've ever seen him afraid of."

"The route."

"Out by the freight gate. It's the one good exit. It's by the scale, he'll be standing at it. East road after that, two hours, with a repeater on the ridge that'll hear the driver if she calls." She stopped. "There's no other way for a loaded rig. The track by the reservoir'll not take it, and the ridge road's the ridge man's. We go through the gate. We go past him. There's nothing else."

"And if he shuts it?"

"He'll not shut it with a buyer's rig in the way and a buyer's paper in her hand. A man can't shut a gate on his own deposit." She said it very quietly. "Not and stay what he is."

He looked at her. She was standing on the stones with the wind in her coat and her hair come loose, looking out over the camp, the roofs, the long grey sheds, the strip, the thin smoke from the kit-

chens going up straight in the cold. It was a very small place. He had not seen it from here since he was a boy.

"You've decided something," he said.

"I've decided a good many things." She did not turn round. "I'll have the papers. I've been through the yard's box. The consignment's in the clerk's tray, I'll have a look at it before it's signed. I'll bring what the driver'll ask for. The sheet." She stopped. "You've nothing to carry but yourself and what Bridget gives you. See you do."

"And you?"

"I'll be at the scale."

"Why?"

"Because I've been the lead on every job in this camp for twelve years, and the whole yard'll be standing in it on Saturday, and not one of them will be able to say I wasn't." She turned, then. She looked at him with the flat, short, level look. "You'll not like it. I'll tell you what you'll like less. I'm not going in the cab."

"You're—"

"I've a crew," said Lorna. "I've twenty households who eat off my sheet. I'll not be the woman who left. I'll be the woman who stood at the scale." She nodded once, as though to a thing already settled. "Go and get your money."

• • •

He went to the grain store at three.

He had expected, all the way down the strip, to see a man at the corner; and he did, a figure leaning at the end of the lane with its hands in its pockets, who looked at the sky as he passed. He did not turn his head. The door of the store stood open, and inside, behind the counter, in the half-dark and the smell of meal, the old woman sat on her stool with her hands in her lap.

"You've come for the rest," she said.

"Yes."

"I'd thought so." She took the cord from her neck. She did it slowly, and unlocked the long flat drawer, and slid it out between them. There was one envelope in it now, soft at the corners, and she lifted it out and laid it on the counter. "It's all there. I've not been asked."

"Not been asked?"

"Not yet." She looked at him, steadily, with her broad lined face. "I'd have said I couldn't. I'd have said it was a matter for each. And I'd have been asked in a way I couldn't say it." She pushed the envelope an inch toward him. "Take it, lad. Take it where it's of use."

He put it inside his coat, against his ribs, where it lay light and thin. It was not much. It was a third of eighteen months, and it weighed less than the cloth bag.

Bridget was at the counter in the dispatch shed, with the book open in front of her and the lamp lit. The door stood shut. She looked up when he came in, and she did not say anything. She had been, he thought, waiting. He stood in front of the counter and took the envelope out of his coat, and laid it down between them, on the red cloth.

"It's what's left."

She looked at it. She did not touch it.

"I know what it is," she said.

"It's not enough."

"With mine, it is." She did not look up. "I did it at noon. I've a third, and you've a third, and the balance, which there isn't, is what Lorna'll find." She said it in the voice she used for a driver's fare. "Five seats. Two full, and Bea, and the children at half. Fuel and the care, and a month. It comes to a little over."

"It's all of it."

"It's all of yours."

"It was for the depot."

"It's for the depot," said Bridget. "It's only that it's not for you." She lifted her eyes. "That's all right. That's what it's for."

She took it up, and counted it. She did it quickly, with her lips moving, and wrote a figure in the margin of the book, in pencil, and put the envelope in the tin. She did not thank him. She laid her hand flat on the lid, and held it there a moment, and looked at him.

"You said it in the yard," she said. "To him. What you did."

"Who told you?"

"It's a camp of three hundred and fifty." Her mouth moved. "It was in the lane before you reached the gate."

"Was it—"

"It was right," said Bridget. "I've not forgiven it. It was right."

"He said the house is the yard's," said Curtis. "The stove, and the beds. That a household that leaves with an account outstanding leaves what's in it."

"Did he." She did not seem surprised. "It's on the roll. I know the roll." She shut the book on the lamp's small circle of light. "Then it's what I leave."

She took her hand from the tin. The lamp hissed. Out in the yard the scale ticked once, and was still.

PART FOUR

The outgoing load

18

Before light

It was the coat that Curtis would remember.

It was a man's coat, of heavy brown canvas, with a fleece collar gone flat and two bone buttons missing, and it hung on the nail by Lorna's kitchen door as it had hung since before he could reach the nail. It was Lorna's husband's. He had been dead twenty years. Nobody in the house had ever worn it, or taken it down, or said whose it was. At twenty to four on the twelfth morning, in a kitchen that smelled of tea and cold ash and frost, Lorna took it from its nail and held it up by the shoulders, and looked at Bea.

"Yours is torn."

"It's only the sleeve."

"It's only the sleeve on the side you can't use." She turned it round and held it open. "It's warm. It's a good coat. Put your arm in."

Bea looked at the coat for some time. Then she put her good arm in the sleeve, and Lorna drew the other half carefully round the splint and the sling, and buttoned it, one button at a time, up to the chin. It was too big. It hung off Bea to the knee. She stood in the lamplight with her scarred broad face above the fleece, and looked down at herself, a small grey woman in a dead man's coat.

"It's a good coat," said Bea.

"It's a very good coat."

"I'll send it back."

"You will not." Lorna smoothed the lapel. "It's been on that nail for twenty years. It wants somewhere to go."

He watched them from the end of the table. He was sitting with his boots on, and his own coat, and a small canvas bag between his feet. It held a spare shirt and a pair of socks and his mother's knife, which she had put into it without a word, and a roll of bread and a piece of the pale cheese in a cloth. He had nothing else. That was a thing he had not expected. He had sat for an hour, at the table in the dark, trying to think what a man took when he went, and he had not been able to think of one thing that was not hers.

"The iron," said Lorna, from the stove.

He looked up.

"Your soldering kit. It's in the drawer." She did not turn round. "You've not packed it."

"I can't use it."

"Not for a month."

"Two." He found that his voice was quite level. "It's a good iron. It's Bea's old one. There's a stand, and the little brass tips, and the flux." He stopped. "It weighs a stone."

"Leave it, then."

"I thought I'd—"

"Leave it. I'll keep it." She looked round at last. "I'll keep it in the drawer, where it's been, and you'll come and fetch it. It's a thing a man ought to have to come back for."

He did not answer. He sat with his one good hand on the bag and looked at the drawer, a plain low one under the dresser, with a brass knob worn bright, and thought of a bench in a corner of the scale room with a window and a lamp. He thought of the radio at the back of the shop. It was in pieces on the floor of a wrecked room, with its cone punched through, still playing.

"All right," he said.

"Good." She turned back to the stove. "Eat that. There's a hard day."

• • •

Bridget came at four, without a knock.

She stood in the door with a sack on each shoulder and the frost on her hair, a small straight figure against the dark, and for a moment she did not come in. She looked at the three of them, at the lamp and the table and the grey machine in the corner under its sacking, and Curtis saw her count. He saw her do it as she did everything, in order, with her lips closed. Then she came in, and shut the door, and set the sacks down on the boards.

"Two," she said. "That's all. The beds are the yard's."

"They're bad beds," said Lorna.

"They're very bad beds." Almost a smile. "I've grown fond of them."

She had brought bread and a tin of the dark meat, and a jar of the pickled beet, which she set on the table beside Lorna's cheese as though the two were a sort of treaty. She had brought a small brown bottle with a cork, and held it up to the lamp. "The little one's chest. A spoon at night, if it comes on. I've three days' worth, and the rest in the tin." She put it in the sack. "And Bea's. The grey ones. Lorna's given me the count."

"Four, morning and night," said Bea, from inside the coat. "Not five. I'll not be dosed like a horse."

"Four." Bridget wrote it on the label with a stub of pencil. "They're at the grandmother's sister's. The children. I took them at half past three, in the dark, with the lamp turned down. They've not made a sound. They're asleep in a loft over a goat-shed with a quilt." She said it as she gave a seat sheet, flat and quick. "She'll bring them down when the horn goes. Twice. The driver's promised it. Two short blasts, when she's loaded and the paper's signed and she's

ready to turn. It's twelve minutes down the road at an old woman's pace."

"And if the horn doesn't go?"

"Then they don't come." She looked at him. "They'll not be at the yard till it's safe. I'll not put them in front of him."

He nodded. She turned to the sacks and began to check them, one thing at a time, with her hands moving rapidly through each, and he watched her. She had her children's socks in a bundle, and the green folder with its cracked spine, and two blankets rolled tight, and the tin, which she did not open. She had the book. It lay on the top of the nearer sack in its red cloth, and she put her hand flat on it, once, and went on.

"I checked their feet," she said, to the sack. "At the loft. In the dark. I'd have put the younger one's boots on the wrong way round, I always do, I'm left-handed and I get confused. I took them off and did them again by feel." Her voice was quite level. "I'll not have them walking a mile on the wrong feet. It's a stupid thing. It was the only one I'd got."

"And the other?"

She straightened.

"The older one's got a boot," said Bridget. "The child asked for it. In the night. I said it could have one thing, and I thought it would be a book, or the slate. The child went down to the step in a nightshirt in the frost, and came back with one of his. The left. I found it under the quilt this morning, wrapped in a vest." She did not look at anyone. "It's a very big boot."

Nobody said anything. In the corner the stove ticked and the lamp burned low. Curtis found that he could not look at her. He looked at the bag between his feet, at the canvas, at the knot, and felt his throat shut.

"The child can keep it," said Lorna.

"I know."

"It's a good boot. It's a rigger's boot." Her voice was rough. "Somebody should have it that'll walk in it."

"In ten years." Bridget's mouth moved. "It's three sizes too large. I thought I'd stuff it with newspaper."

It was the wrong moment, and it was a small, rueful, ordinary sentence, and Bea laughed. She did it in the dark, from the middle of the dead man's coat, a dry short wheeze that turned half-way into a cough, and she put her good hand over her mouth, and the thing went round the room like a spark in a straw barn. Lorna turned her face to the wall. Bridget put the back of her wrist against her mouth. Curtis, who had not laughed in twelve days, felt it come up through the ribs like a nail, and stopped, and could not stop, and sat at the end of the table with the tears running down his face and his taped hand clamped to his side.

It did not last. It was very short, and it left them all quiet, and rather shaken, like people who have been out in cold air. After a while Bridget wiped her face with the heel of her hand and said, in her ordinary voice, "Right. Loading."

• • •

It was ridiculous, how hard it was.

There were two sacks, and a bag, and a bundle of blankets, and a small tin box, and a very old woman with one arm. There was a man with one hand and three ribs and a back that went white if he lifted. They stood in Lorna's kitchen at half past four in the lamplight and looked at it, as people look at a thing that they have not done before, and found that none of them could do it.

Bea could not carry anything. She stood with the arm strapped across her and the other hand free, and tried to take a sack, and found that she could not get it from the table to her shoulder with a single working arm and no way to steady it. Curtis took it. He got it up, with his good hand, on to his left shoulder, and the whole of his side screamed, and he put it down again with a bang.

"Don't," said Lorna.

"I can—"

"You can't. Sit." She picked up a sack in each hand, as if they were bags of feather. "I'll take the heavy. You take the cloth. Bea, you carry the lamp. Bridget, the book, and the folder, and your own. We'll do it in two goes."

"Lorna—"

"It's two hundred yards." She looked at him. "I've carried a hundred men further."

They did it in two goes. It took them twenty minutes, in the dark and the frost, with the door shut behind them and the lamp turned down, along the back way, by the pump house and the old stores, where nobody went at that hour. He walked with the bundle in his left arm and Bea's hand on his sleeve. She went very slowly. She said nothing the whole way. Twice she stopped, and leaned on a wall, and he stood beside her with the blankets in his arm and his own breath hanging in front of him like a flag.

They left the sacks in the lee of the weighbridge store, behind a stack of empty drums, where the lamp from the yard did not reach. It was a good place, and a bad one. From it, between two drums, he could see across the open ground to the weighbridge itself, and the scale, and the long dark frontage of the yard office with its windows lit.

"Wait," said Lorna.

She went to her kitchen again, alone, and came back with a flat brown folder under her arm and the frost already thick on her shoulders. She gave it to Bridget without speaking. Bridget held it under the light of the lamp and looked inside.

"It's the job sheet," said Lorna. "The top copy. The yard's own, from the review file. I told the clerk the review wanted it, which it does, and that I was the lead named on it, which I am. He gave it me with a face." She put her hands in her pockets. "It's the same as the

carbon. It's got a stamp on it. The yard's own. It says the yard had it, on the Monday, at half past five."

"It's the one that says Gareth knew."

"It's the one that says the yard knew. I'd not say more." Lorna took a second paper from her coat, a long narrow one, folded in three. "And the load list. From the clerk's tray. The weights, the crate numbers, the order. The driver'll want it checked against the ticket. It's what she'll look at, and it's what she's paid on."

"Has he signed it?"

"Not yet. He'll sign at the scale, with her there. It's his hand that goes on the consignment." She nodded across the open ground. "He'll have it in his pocket. He's a pen in the other."

"Does he know?"

"That I've brought these?" She did not smile. "No. He thinks I'm the lead. He thinks I'll stand at the scale in my own coat and watch the load go, as I've watched forty of them. He's asked for it." She looked at Bridget. "He's never once thought to ask what I carry in my pockets."

Bridget put the folder inside her coat with the book. She did not thank her. She laid her hand, briefly, on Lorna's sleeve, and took it away.

"I'll go and stand," said Lorna. "You'll wait here. Not in the open. When the rig's in, and she's down, and it's signed, I'll nod. That's the word." She looked at Curtis. "Not before."

"I know."

"You'll not do anything."

"I'll not."

"Good." She pulled her collar up. She stood a moment longer, a narrow upright shape in the half-dark with the frost on her hair, and he thought she was going to say something else. She did not. She turned, and walked out from behind the drums into the yard's long light, with her hands in her pockets and her shoulders square, as she had walked into every hall in the camp, and did not look back.

• • •

The sky began to go grey at a quarter past five.

It came up behind the long black line of the ridge, a thin pale seam, and spread, very slowly, like a stain in water. The stars went out one by one. The frost stood white on the drums and the stones. A wind had got up, small and cold, from the east, and carried the smell of the yard across the open ground: iron, and oil, and wet sacking, and the faint sweetness of the tea they were making on the porch.

He crouched against the drums with the blankets in his arm. Bea sat on an upturned crate beside him, in her dead man's coat, with her eyes shut, a small grey bundle that might have been asleep. Bridget stood at the corner, where the drums made a gap, with her hand flat on the cold metal, looking out.

There were a good many people in the yard.

He had expected a few. There were twenty, thirty, more arriving by the minute, in ones and twos, with their hats pulled down and their breath hanging. They stood on the long porch with their mugs. They stood along the weighbridge rail, and under the lamp, in the way that people stand when they have no business and know exactly why they came. A few of them had barrows. Most had nothing. He saw the rigger, at the end of the porch, with his hands in his armpits. He saw the brothers, side by side, with the width of a man between them. He saw the young one in his shirt, standing very straight beside the winch, at the edge of the light. And the cutters and the crane men and the east crew, and the woman from the canteen with a flask, and the pump house man, thin and stooped, a little apart, with his cap pulled down, pretending that he had come for the weather.

"They've come to see," said Bridget.

"Aye."

"It's not for us. It's the load." She did not turn her head. "It's the biggest freight since the spring, and the grader's tag on it, and half

of them have money in it. They've come to see it go." A pause. "They've come to see whether it does."

On the yard floor, under the big lamp, the assembly stood on its skid. It was crated. It had been boxed during the week in grey plywood, a great square shape the height of two men, strapped, stencilled, with a stencilled number and a yard's tag, and a tarpaulin lashed over the whole. It looked like nothing at all. It looked like a very large piece of furniture. He looked at it for some time, and thought of a brass cap, a tick like a clock inside a wall, and a man with his ear against it, delighted.

The porch was lit. At the foot of the steps, by the weighbridge, with the long yellow light on one side of his face, a man stood with his hands behind him.

He had been there some while. Curtis could see that, even at forty yards, in the poor grey light. There was frost on his shoulders. It lay thick on the grey coat, and on the brim of his hat, and he had not brushed it off. He stood perfectly still, large and unhurried, looking at the gate, with the look of a man who had put a chair there an hour ago and sat down on it. Two men stood a few paces behind him. One had a ring on his thumb.

"He's early," said Bridget.

"He's been there since four."

"How d'you know?"

"It's the frost." He did not take his eyes off the shape. "It's an hour's worth."

She said nothing. Beside the drums Bea had opened her eyes. She sat on her crate and looked at the yard, at the man and the lamp, and the crated shape under its tarpaulin, and the thirty people standing on a porch in the cold with nothing to do. She did not seem afraid. She looked, he thought, as she looked at a pump on a bench: interested, tired, and quite certain what she would find.

"Lorna's at the scale," she said.

He looked. She was. She was standing at the far end of the weighbridge rail, in her old canvas coat, with her hands in her pockets, a little apart from the rest, and as he looked she turned her head and looked across at Gareth, and Gareth, without moving, looked back. It lasted perhaps a second. There was nothing in it that he could name. It was only that two people who had known each other thirty years had seen each other plain.

The sound came at twenty to seven.

It was very far off at first, a low note, too steady to be wind, coming up the east road out of the grey. It grew. He heard the grind of a heavy engine in low gear, and the long gasp of air brakes, and then lamps, two, very white, swinging round the bend by the ridge and sweeping across the yard wall, across the weighbridge, the porch, the board, the thirty faces turned in a ring, the crated shape under its lamp. A long rig came in at the gate, slowly, with its lights on and its engine running, a tall dark cab and a flat trailer behind it with a loading crane folded on the back, and stopped by the scale.

It was just as she had said it would be. There was no mistake. There was no missing driver. There was a rig, and a gate, and a paper, and a time, and a woman who had come for a load. The door of the cab opened. A figure climbed down, broad and short, in a heavy coat, with a clipboard in one hand, and stood in the lamplight looking round at the yard with an expression of deep and settled weariness, like a person who has been here before, and expects the worst.

And at the foot of the steps, in the long yellow light, with the frost on his shoulders, Gareth Broadhurst took his hands from behind his back, and came forward to meet her.

He was smiling.

19

The buying yard

The loading took forty minutes, and nobody in the yard spoke through the whole of it.

They watched it from the porch and the weighbridge rail and the long dark wall of the shed. The driver brought the rig round in a slow curve and backed the trailer up to the crated assembly with her head out of the cab window, and a man on the ground, one of Gareth's own, walked behind with his arm up, calling the distance. She stopped it a metre short. She climbed down. She unfolded the crane herself, with a hand on each lever, out of its cradle on the trailer's end, and swung the long grey boom across the yard in the white light until the hook hung over the crate, and he saw her look up at the strapping, and at the lifting points, and say something short to the man below. Curtis could not hear it. It made the man take off his cap.

She lifted it. The crate came up off the concrete slowly, turning a little, with the tarpaulin lifting and flapping at its corners, and the boom took the weight with a long mechanical groan. For a moment the whole thing hung in the air above their heads, a big grey box on a hook against a pale sky. Then it swung out over the trailer, and settled, and she set it down so gently on the bed that no one heard it touch.

He found that he had let out his breath.

"She's good," said Bea, beside him, in her dead man's coat.

"She's very good."

"It's a two-ton lift on a short boom. I'd not have done it better." She said it with a sort of dry content. "It's a pleasure to watch a person who knows."

They stood behind the drums and watched the strapping. The driver did it herself, with four heavy chains and a ratchet, round and round the crate and under the trailer's bed, pulling each one down, and then she walked the whole length of the load with her hand on it, once, as one walks a horse. The light came up. It was grey, and then white, and then, along the top of the ridge, the thinnest seam of yellow. The frost began to go from the stones in dark patches. The lamp over the weighbridge looked suddenly small and unnecessary, and somebody put it out.

At the foot of the porch steps, at a small table that the clerk had carried out and set in the open, Gareth Broadhurst stood with a pen in his hand.

Curtis had seen him go to it. He had watched him cross the yard with the driver beside him, the broad short woman with the clipboard, at his easy unhurried pace, one hand lightly at her elbow, talking, nodding, smiling, as if she were a guest at a wedding. She had not smiled back. She had walked with her eyes on the ground, as one walks across a field that may have wire in it, and at the table she had laid out her papers in a row, and he had laid out his. There was a long pause. He saw the clerk's lips move. He saw the driver lift the load list and hold it against the other, a line at a time, with her finger, and he saw Gareth lean over and say something, and the finger stop.

"It's the weights," said Bridget, very low.

"What?"

"She's checking them. Against the ticket. It's a thing she'd be paid on." She was standing with one hand on the cold drum and her eyes on the table. "Lorna's sheet. It's what she'll look at. If they match—"

"They'll match."

"They'll match."

The driver put her finger on the page, and left it there. She said something. She did not raise her voice, and the sound of it did not carry. Then she took up her own pen and wrote, quickly, on her own paper, and looked up at Gareth, and held out the sheet.

He took the pen from the clerk. He looked at the paper. He looked, for perhaps four seconds, at nothing in particular, and Curtis, forty yards away behind an oil drum, saw it happen as he had seen a beam take up a load: the very slight settling of the whole body, and the shoulder going down, and the pen moving. He signed it. He signed the second, and the third. He did it quite smoothly, with a flourish at the end of the name, and laid the pen on the table, and straightened, and smiled.

The driver tore the top sheet from the pad and folded it in three. She put it into the breast of her coat. She did not look at him.

At the end of the weighbridge rail, in her old canvas coat, with her hands in her pockets, Lorna turned her head. She did not look at the drums. She looked at the sky, and at the yard, and the crane going slowly back into its cradle, and then, as though it were a thing of no importance, she nodded.

"That's it," said Bridget.

She did not move. She stood with her palm flat on the drum, and shut her eyes, and opened them. Then she put the folder inside her coat with the book, and the tin, and took up the nearer sack in her left hand.

"Bea."

"I'm coming."

"Curtis."

"Yes."

"Walk behind me. Not beside. A step back." She did not look round. "It's only the cab. It's forty yards. We've to be seen to walk it."

They walked.

• • •

The whole yard was looking at them.

He felt it before he saw it, as a man feels a draught: a slow turning of heads along the porch, and the rail, and the wall, thirty of them, forty, as if a single wind had passed along a field of grass. They did not move. They stood with their mugs and their hats and their breath, and watched them come out from behind the drums into the open light: a small straight woman in a dark coat, with a sack and a book, and behind her a man with one hand strapped to his chest, and behind him a very old woman in a dead man's brown coat down to her ankles, walking carefully, with her good hand held out a little from her side as if to feel for a wall.

Nobody said a word. It was quiet enough that he heard the gravel under their boots, and the small high creak of the crane settling, and from somewhere along the ridge a single lark.

They were halfway across when Gareth came to meet them.

He did not hurry. He stepped away from the table, with his hat in his hand, and crossed the open ground at an easy angle that took him between them and the cab, and stopped. He was smiling. It was a very warm smile, wide and sad and kind, the smile of a man who has been asked to do a hard thing for good reasons. The frost on his shoulders had begun to run. A dark patch of wet showed on the grey wool.

"Bridget," he said. "A moment."

She stopped. She stood with the sack in her left hand, a yard and a half from him, with her face quite still.

"I think we should talk. Not here, perhaps." He glanced about the yard, gently, at the faces, as if sorry for them. "But I think we should talk."

"I've nothing to say."

"That's a pity. I have." He turned the hat in his hands. "I'd like to say it where it can be heard. It's only that there's a thing on the yard's books, and I wouldn't wish it said I'd let a household go without it being put plainly." He lifted his voice, a little, quite pleasantly, so that it reached the porch. "The household of the late D. Pike has an account outstanding with this yard. It's been set out, in writing, and I've never pressed it. I'd hoped it might be settled amicably. It's a debt. It's the estate's. And I'm bound to say a woman can't leave a place with a debt on her, and take what she likes with her."

"What debt?"

"It's on the roll."

"Show me."

"There's no need to—"

"Show me," said Bridget, "the paper."

He paused. It was a very small pause. His eyes went to the porch, and back.

"Perhaps," said a voice from behind them, "you'd show it to me."

The driver had come up on their left, with the clipboard under her arm. She had walked across the yard unnoticed, in her heavy coat, and stood with her feet apart and her hands in her pockets, a short square immovable woman with a grey face, and she looked at Gareth as a person looks at a bill. She was perhaps fifty. She had a broken nose and very pale eyes, and Curtis, who had never seen her, found that he knew her at once. He had seen that face on every honest person who had ever had to say no to somebody who was being nice to them.

"Mr Broadhurst," she said. "I'm told there's a debt."

"There is. It's a small private matter. It needn't concern you."

"It concerns me if I'm asked to leave a person on a quay." She did not raise her voice. "I've been told that this lady has a seat on my cab. I've been told she's to walk to it, and that she's paid. I've been told you've a balance on her husband's account." She took her right

hand from her pocket and held it out. "I've a rule about that. Show me the paper."

"The yard's roll—"

"A roll's a book. It's got your hand in it." She waited. "I'd want a paper with a name. Hers, or his, in ink, to say what's owed and that it's agreed. Or a court's. I've carried a good many people out of a good many places and I've never taken one who was held for a debt with a name on it." Her pale eyes did not move. "And I've never refused one who was only owed by."

"It's the estate's."

"Then there's an estate. And a man who's dead." She said it flatly. "I'm not a court. I can't say whether your man owed you a penny. I wasn't there. I'll not say he did, and I'll not say he didn't." She turned her head, a very little, toward Bridget. "Is she held?"

It was quiet. The whole yard seemed to lean.

"I'm not held," said Bridget.

"Is anybody laying a hand on her?"

"No."

"Then she's a woman who's walking to my cab." The driver turned back. "And you're a man who's signed my paper, and the load's on, and I'm due out of here in ten minutes. I'm paid by the ton. I'd like to go."

Gareth did not move. He stood quite still in the white light, with his hat in his hands. He was still smiling. But Curtis, who had been watching his face since the first minute, saw the smile begin to go, not all at once, but at one corner, then the other, as a wall goes where a thing has been taken out of the foundation. It left a blank, heavy, quite expressionless face.

"I'm the consignor," said Gareth.

"You are."

"I've a say in what travels."

"In the load." She did not blink. "Not in the cab. The cab's mine."

"I could withdraw the consignment."

"You could. You've signed it." She patted the breast of her coat, where the paper was. "It's the buyer's now. You'd have to take it up with him. I'd tell him why."

He said nothing. It was the first time Curtis had seen him without a sentence ready. He stood with his lips parted a little and his hat crushed in his fist, and he looked, quite suddenly, like a man of nearly sixty who had been up since four.

"Then there's the book," he said.

• • •

It was said very low. He turned to Bridget, and his voice was soft again, and reasonable, almost gentle, and underneath it was something else.

"There's the book, Bridget. It's the yard's. It's a working volume, and it's part of the consignment, it's got the load on it, the weights. The driver'll tell you." He did not look at her. "I'll have it. You've it under your coat. I'd like it handed over, now, in front of these people, so there's no confusion about whose it is."

"It's the dispatch book."

"It's the yard's."

"It's mine." She said it quite steadily, with the sack at her feet and her hand flat against her coat. "I'm the dispatcher. It's in my care. I've written in it for nine years. The pages have the yard's trucks in them and the yard's drivers, and they've my hand on every line, and one thing in the margin that isn't." She did not drop her eyes. "It's not part of any load. It's not what she's come for. I've taken nothing out of it. I'm not leaving it."

"Bridget—"

"I'll show you." She took the book from her coat. She held it up, in both hands, in the white light, so that the yard could see: a thick red cloth thing, brown at the corners, with a ribbon. "It's all there. It's not been cut. It's not been torn. It's what happened on the second

day, in my own hand, and what's in the margin is yours." Her voice did not rise. "I'll take it with me. I'll give it to whoever asks."

A sound went along the porch. It was not a word. It was the sound a crowd makes when a thing has been said that it had not quite expected, a long low murmur, half breath, half shifting of feet. Curtis felt it go through him.

"Leave it, Bridget," said somebody.

It was a man's voice, from the porch, not loud. He looked. It was the east crew's lead, a heavy grey-whiskered man in a donkey jacket, with his hands in his pockets. He did not look at her. He looked at his boots.

"It's only paper. He'll let you go. He'll let the lot of you go, if you leave the book." He swallowed. "It's not worth it. For a book."

"Is it not?" said Bridget.

"We've a load on that rig." It was somebody else, from the rail, a woman's voice, shaking. "Our shares. Half the east bay's in that crate. If she doesn't go, we don't get paid."

"She's going," said the driver.

"If it's held up—"

"It's signed." The driver did not turn her head. "It's on my bed and it's strapped and it's ticketed. It's going whether I've passengers or not. If there's a delay, it's not mine."

Nobody answered. There was a silence along the porch, long and uneasy, with a shuffling in it. A few of the faces had turned toward Gareth, and a few toward the book, and some, he saw, toward nothing: the rigger, with his eyes on the ground, and the brothers, one on either side of an empty yard of boards, and the young one at the edge of the lamp's light with his mouth shut and his hands clenched at his sides. They had all, he saw, come to look at a thing and had found, in the looking, that they were taking part in it.

At the end of the weighbridge rail, Lorna had not moved. She stood with her hands in her pockets.

"Lorna," said Gareth.

He had not raised his voice. He had turned, with his hat in his hand, and the whole of the yard turned with him.

"Lorna. These papers." He did not say which. "You've been a good friend to this yard for thirty years. You've a crew, and a name. I think you should take what's yours back from that woman, and tell the boy to stand down." He nodded, slightly, at Curtis. "He's hurt, and he's not himself. It's a thing you can do. It's a thing only you can."

"No," said Lorna.

She did not say it loudly. She said it quite plainly, across twenty yards of open ground, in the voice that she used to tell a man a prop was sound. Every head turned.

"You'll take your papers back."

"No."

"Lorna—"

"They're the yard's. And mine. They've my hand on them. They say what I wrote, and when, and what you were told." She took her hands out of her pockets. "They're not going back. I've a thing I should have said a fortnight ago, and I'll say it now. I took your word on a deck. It was mine to refuse, and I didn't. It's on the sheet, and I'll tell it to anyone who asks."

It was perfectly still.

"And the boy's a man," said Lorna. "He's twenty-seven. I'll not tell him to stand down. I'll not tell him anything."

Curtis felt the whole of the yard looking at him. He stood at Bridget's shoulder with his taped hand against his ribs, grey, shaking, in the cold white light, and he felt it all go through him, the faces, the heat, the thirty pairs of eyes, and he did not feel afraid. He felt very clear.

"I'll not stand down," said Curtis.

It came out quiet. It was not what he would have chosen to say. But it lay in the air above the gravel in his own voice, and he heard it, and so did they.

"Mr Broadhurst," said a thin voice from the back of the porch.

It was the pump house man. He had come forward a step, with his cap in both hands and his shoulders hunched, as if the words had been pulled out of him on a hook. He was not looking at anyone. He was looking at the load list in the driver's hand.

"It's signed," he said. "The load. Let her go."

Nobody moved. He stood there with his cap, thin and stooped and shaking, and the quiet round him was enormous. Then, from the middle of the porch, a second voice, hoarse, rough, with a crack in it:

"Let her go, Gareth."

It was the rigger.

It was only four words. It was said without heat, as one says it of a rope that has taken enough. But it went through the yard like a pebble through ice, and Curtis saw the ring spread: a head turned, a hat came off, somebody at the rail drew in his breath. A woman said, "Aye." The younger of the brothers put out a hand, quite slowly, and laid it on his brother's sleeve.

Beside Gareth, a pace behind him, Ewan shifted his weight. He had taken his hands from his pockets. He looked at the man in the grey coat, and at the driver, and at Bridget with the red book held up in front of her like a lamp, and then, unexpectedly, over her shoulder, at Ross, who stood a little apart from him with his freckled face white and his eyes on the ground. Ross did not look up. Something went across Ewan's face, quick and puzzled, as of a man who has put his foot on a stair that is not there.

Gareth stood where he was.

He was a big man, and he stood very still, with the wet shining on his shoulders and the hat hanging from his fist, and Curtis saw, quite distinctly, the face he had been looking at for twenty years come apart. It did not break. It emptied. The warmth went out of it, and then the patience, and then the courtesy, one by one, like lamps down a street, until all that was left was a heavy, grey, shut face with

two small dark eyes in it, looking at a yard full of people who would not look back.

"I've fed you," he said.

It was not loud. It was quite flat.

"Every one of you. Four winters." His voice had gone short. "I've carried this camp on my back. Who's eaten at my table? Hands."

Nobody raised a hand.

"Hands," said Gareth.

The rigger looked at the boards. The woman by the rail bit her lip. In the long silence a crow came down on the roof of the shed and shifted its feet, and the sun, which had been gathering behind the ridge for an hour, came over the edge all at once, and laid a long gold light across the yard, across the faces, the rig, the strapped crate, the red book in Bridget's hands.

"It's ten past seven," said the driver. "I'm leaving."

She turned. She walked toward her cab, without hurrying, across the open ground, with her clipboard under her arm.

He saw Gareth's hand move.

It went into the grey coat, under the left lapel, quite slowly, as a man's hand goes into a pocket for a watch. He saw the shoulder turn. He saw the hat fall from the other hand, and lie on the stones, crown down. He saw Lorna, at the end of the rail, begin to step forward, and the yard, as one body, draw in its breath.

The hand came out of the coat.

It held something small, and black, and quite steady, and in the new light it shone.

20

The weight of a body

"The book, Bridget," said Gareth.

He did not shout. He held the thing level in front of him, at the end of a straight arm, in a hand that did not shake, and it was so small, and so black, and so entirely ordinary in the gold light that Curtis's mind refused it for a full second. It looked like a tool. It looked like something a man might take out of his pocket to tighten a nut. Then the muzzle moved, a very little, from the driver's back to the red cloth cover in Bridget's hands, and he understood what it was.

"Now."

Nobody moved. Nobody drew breath. It was as if the whole yard had been struck from a single piece of iron.

Bridget stood with the book held up in both hands. She was perfectly white. She did not step back. He saw her look at the thing in Gareth's fist, and then, deliberately, as one lifts a heavy plate, up at his face.

"No," she said.

"Bridget."

"No."

"Stand aside, Lorna," said Gareth.

She had come forward. He had not seen her do it. She was between them, now, ten feet from the muzzle, in her old canvas coat with her hands out of her pockets and hanging at her sides, a narrow upright figure with the sun on one cheek. She had put herself exactly in the line, as she had put herself in a hundred doorways, and she stood there on the stones with her feet apart and her weight low, as she stood on a deck.

"No," said Lorna.

"I've said—"

"I heard you." She did not raise her voice. "I'll not."

He could not afterward have said how long it lasted. It might have been two seconds or a minute. He saw the grey face over the barrel, quite blank, with the two small eyes fixed on his mother's, and he saw something go across it, very quickly, that was not rage. It was nearer to bewilderment. It was the look of a man who has put a coin into a machine that has always paid out, and watched it come back.

"Lorna," said Gareth. "Move."

"No."

The sound was enormous.

It was not at all what he had thought a shot would be. It was a flat, hard, tearing crack that seemed to go through the whole bright morning and leave a hole in it, and it came from nowhere in particular, and the echo of it came back off the sheds a half-second late, and then again from the ridge. A cloud of pigeons went up off the roof of the porch in a great clatter. Someone screamed. He saw his mother's whole body jerk, once, sideways, as though a rope had been pulled, and her left leg fold under her, and she went down on one knee on the stones.

She did not fall. She knelt there. She had put out a hand, and was holding herself up on it, and she looked down at her leg, at the dark wet patch spreading very fast across the canvas of her trousers from the thigh to the knee, with an expression of mild, attentive surprise.

"Oh," said Lorna.

He did not remember crossing the yard.

• • •

He was on his knees beside her with the stones cutting through his trousers, and he had her by the shoulders with his good hand, and she was very heavy and very light, and she was looking at him.

"Don't," she said. "Curtis. Leave it. Take the—"

"Lorna."

"The papers." She was trying to get her hand into her coat. "They'll go for the papers."

"Be still."

"It's not—" Her face had gone grey, quite suddenly, and her lips were the colour of ash. She drew a breath that rattled. "It's not bad. I've had worse. It's only the— I'll be up in a minute."

"You will not."

He heard how his voice sounded, high and cracked, and could not alter it. There was blood on his hand, warm, running between the fingers, over the splint and the black tape, and he had pressed his palm down over the place without knowing he had done it, hard, on the wet cloth, on the heat. It was high on the thigh. It was too high. It was not slow. It came up between his fingers in a thin steady pulse that he could feel in his wrist, and he saw it, and what he felt was not fear at all. It was recognition. He had seen it before, in a trench, in a dirty brown light, on the leg of a man who was talking to him.

"Bea," he said.

She was there. He did not know how. She had come across the yard on her own two feet in her dead man's coat, with her splinted arm held against her chest and her face the colour of paper, and she went down on her knees on the other side with a grunt, and looked at the leg.

"Belt," said Bea.

"I haven't got—"

"It's on me." She had her good hand at her waist. She fumbled at the coat, at the loops, and pulled, and it came out, a long broad strap of old canvas with a steel buckle, with the frayed end hanging, and she held it out to him across his mother's knees. "It's his. It's his belt. It was on the coat." Her mouth shook. "Put it above. High. And twist."

"With what?"

"I don't— There's a—" She looked round wildly. "A spanner. I've a spanner. Here."

It was in her apron pocket. It was the little ring spanner worn nearly smooth, and she put it into his left hand, and his fingers closed round it, and he did it as he had done it once before: the belt round the thigh, above the wound, high, as high as it would go, pulled tight, and the handle through the loop, and wound. His hand would not do it. It would not close. He tried, and the spanner slid, and he tried again, and the fingers of the left went cold and white, and it would not turn.

"I can't," he said.

"You can."

"I can't hold it. I've only the one."

"Then I'll do the holding." She got her good hand over his. She laid it over his on the handle, a broad hard scarred hand with the grease in the creases, and she leaned on it. "Now. Turn. Both. On three."

They turned it together. It went round, a quarter, a half, and the strap bit, and his mother made a sound through her teeth that he would hear for the rest of his life. The spurting at the wound slowed. It slowed, and thinned, and went to a dark steady welling, and he did not take his eyes from it.

"That's it," said Bea. "Keep it. Don't let it back."

"Lorna," he said.

"I'm here." She was looking up at the sky. Her eyes had a flat bright look. "It's a fine morning."

"Stay with me."

"Where would I go?"

He heard voices all round them, high and confused, and a great scuffling of boots. He did not look. He kept his hand on the spanner and his eyes on his mother's face. There was a shout from the porch. Somebody was running. A woman was crying, steadily, in a high thin voice, over and over, "Oh, no, oh, no," and somebody was telling her to be quiet. He heard a man say, "Put it down, Gareth. Put it down." He heard it said again, in another voice. He did not turn his head.

• • •

It came to him afterward in pieces, as a thing does that has been seen from the floor.

He remembered Gareth standing where he had stood, quite still, in the light, with the pistol hanging at the end of his arm and his mouth a little open. He was looking at his hand. It was a long moment. He seemed to be trying to understand what it had done. Then he looked at Lorna, on the stones, with Curtis kneeling over her, and his face did something terrible, a wrenching, as of a man trying to hold a door against a wind, and was gone.

"It's—" said Gareth. "She'd not— she stepped."

Nobody answered.

"It went off." His voice was flat, and high, and very reasonable. "It's a private matter. I'd only wished to—" He stopped. He looked round at the yard, at the thirty faces, at the white, silent, staring ring of them, at the rigger with his hands over his mouth, and the woman from the canteen with her flask against her chest, and the young one, rigid, with his eyes shut, standing at the edge of the light. "It was an accident."

"No," said the driver.

She had turned round. She stood in the open ground with her clipboard under her arm, ten yards from him, with her broad grey face quite calm, and she looked at him as she had looked at the

weights. She was not afraid. She was not even angry. It was the look of a woman adding a column.

"I saw it," she said. "I was walking to my cab and I turned round. You drew. You said, stand aside. She said no. You fired." Her voice was slow. "I've a good memory for what's in front of me. I've been a witness before." She turned her head. "Ma'am. Is that lady badly hurt?"

"Bad," said Bea. "It's the thigh. It's high."

"Can she be moved?"

"She'll have to be."

"Then she'll be moved." She took the clipboard from under her arm and put it down, flat, on the stones, with the same deliberate care she had put down the crate. She looked at Gareth. "Mr Broadhurst. I'll ask you to put that on the ground."

He did not.

"I'm a carrier. It's not my place to tell a man what to do in his own yard." She said it quite gently. "But I've a woman with a bullet in her. I've a rig that's paid for and loaded. I'm going to take her out of here, and anybody else who wants to come, and I'm going to the first telephone I can find and say what I saw." She nodded at the pistol. "You can stop me. You'd have to use that again. In front of all these."

He did not move. He stood with the pistol at the end of his arm, and Curtis saw the knuckles whiten, and saw, behind him, the two men. Ewan stood with his hands open and his eyes on the ground. Ross had taken a step back. They had not been told what to do. They stood in the long gold light like men who have come to a door they had thought was a wall, and found that it was only a door.

"Mr B," said Ewan, in a small voice.

"Be quiet."

"Mr B. It's—"

"I said."

"It's enough," said Ross.

It was the lowest voice in the yard. It was a plain sentence, said to the ground, and Curtis saw Gareth's head turn, very slowly, and look at him, and not know what he saw.

• • •

He had to decide. He understood that afterward, though he did not feel it as a decision. It was not like a choice. It was more like the moment on a stair when the foot comes down on a tread that is there.

There were three things he could have done, and they stood in front of him quite plain, as the three legs of a sling. He could have got up. He could have crossed ten yards of open ground to the man with the pistol, and put his one good hand on him, and done whatever a man does. He could have run to the office, up the iron steps, in the minute while the yard stood stunned, and taken what was in it: the roll, the debt, the folder in the safe. He could have said to himself, now, while it was open, while nobody was looking, that was where the proof was. He could have done either of those, and been right. They were things a man might say, afterward, that he had been right to do.

He did not look at the office. He did not look at Gareth. He looked at his mother.

She was lying on her back on the stones with her face to the sky, and the strap on her thigh, and Bea's hand on his. Her eyes were open. They were grey, and flat, and very tired, and she was looking at the sun coming up over the ridge, as a woman looks at a thing she has seen on a great many mornings and may not see again. And he thought, quite clearly, with no feeling in it at all: she weighs what she weighs. She's a woman of fifty-four. It's eleven stone.

He did not ask whether it would hurt the case. It did not occur to him. There was no case. There was a woman on the ground.

"Bridget," he said.

"I'm here."

She was. She was standing over them with the book still held in both hands against her chest, white to the lips, quite upright. She had not moved. She was looking not at Gareth but at the driver.

"The papers are copied," she said. "It's gone. It's in the depot. I've the originals in my coat. You've no need of anything in the office." She said it very fast and low. "Go to her. Get her up."

"I can't lift."

"I know." She turned her head. "I'll find somebody."

• • •

She did not have to look far.

It was the young one. He had come across the yard as though somebody had pushed him. He stood a yard away, in his big shirt, with his gloves in his belt and his face the colour of tallow, and he was shaking so that the whole of him seemed to be rattling on its bones. He did not look at Curtis. He looked at Lorna's leg.

"I'll do the feet," he said.

"Yes."

"I've never—" His voice cracked. "I can't— I'll do it. Tell me."

"Under the knees. Both hands." It was Bea. "Gently. Keep the leg straight. Don't let it hang. Curtis has the shoulders, I've the belt." She did not look up. "One. Two."

He took the shoulders. It was the thing he had not been able to do, and it was perfectly simple, in the end: he put his left arm under his mother's back, and his right, the taped one, with its two broken fingers in their trough of tin, across her chest, and he lifted. The ribs went through him like a bar. The whole of his left side went white. He heard a voice that was his own say something he did not know, and he did not stop. She came up off the stones, heavy and slack, with her head against his shoulder, and the young one under her knees with his face screwed up like a child's, and she weighed what a person weighs. It was a great deal. It was the whole of a life. He

had never carried anything so heavy, and it went through him, and he held it.

"Left," said Bea. "Mind the step."

They went across the yard in a slow awkward lurch, with the sun in their eyes. He did not see the faces. He saw the ground, and the young one's boots, and a dark line of drops across the stones where they had come. At the gate a man had stepped into their path, a big man in a donkey jacket with his hands held out in front of him, and for an instant Curtis thought he meant to stop them.

"I can't," said the east crew's lead.

He had not moved to help. He stood with his hands out, and his heavy grey-whiskered face working, and tears running openly down into the stubble.

"I can't carry. I'd—" He drew a long sobbing breath. "He'd have my share. I've eleven on my sheet. I'm sorry. I'm sorry, Curtis. I can't."

"Then stand aside," said Bea.

He stood aside.

Another man had gone to the freight gate. It was the rigger. He had put both hands on the long iron bar that closed it, across the yard's mouth, beside the weighbridge, where Gareth's own men kept it on a chain in the night, and he had not asked for a key. He had a bolt cutter. He must have fetched it from the shed. He set the jaws on the chain and leaned his whole weight on the handles, with a hoarse grunt, and the chain parted with a single clean snap, and he swung the bar up on its pivot and held it, with his long brown arms trembling.

"Go," he said.

Nobody had told him to. He did not look at Curtis. He looked at the rig. He held the bar up over his head in both hands like a man holding a roof.

• • •

The driver had the cab door open. She had pushed the seat back, and lifted the bench behind it, and laid a folded blanket across it, and as they came up she put her arms out and took the head and the shoulders from him, quite gently, and drew his mother in. He did not feel it go. He stood on the step with his arms hanging, and all at once they were empty, and he had to hold the rail.

"Five, I said," said the driver. "Five and no more." She did not look round. "I'll make it six. She goes on the bench. Flat, with her feet up. The lady with the arm in the front." She raised her head. "Which of you is the one with the children?"

"I am," said Bridget.

She had come up behind them. She stood at the foot of the step with the red book and the sack, quite white, her hair coming down. She looked at the cab. She looked at the road beyond the gate, grey and empty in the new sun.

"They're at the north end. By the reservoir. In a loft, with an old woman." She said it quickly and exactly, as a seat sheet. "Two. They'll be coming down the track. I'd said, when you sounded twice. They'll have started." She drew breath. "I don't want them in this yard."

"Where does the track meet the road?"

"Half a mile out. At the dead tree. There's a gate."

"Then we'll go to them." She was already climbing up into the cab. "Sit. In. Hold the lady's head." She did not look at Gareth. She put her hand on the wheel. "I'll not sound the horn. I'll not give him the notice."

Curtis got up. He did it in stages, on the step, with his hands on the rail, and Bea behind him pushing, and a hand that he did not see under his elbow. He sat. He found himself on the end of the rear bench, with his back to the cab's side, and his mother's head in his lap, and her grey hair across his knees, and the leg stretched out under the blanket with the belt on it, and Bea's good hand over his

on the spanner. Bridget got in beside the driver. She put the book on her knees.

"Door."

It shut. The cab was suddenly very small and warm, and smelled of oil and canvas and blood, and through the glass, in the sun, he could see the whole of the yard laid out like a picture: the porch, the weighbridge, the crate on its bed, and Gareth.

He had not moved. He stood where he had stood, in the open, in the white light, with the pistol hanging from his hand and his hat on the stones at his feet, a big grey man with frost still melting on his shoulders. He was looking at the rig. He was looking, Curtis thought, at nothing. The two men stood on either side of him, a pace off. Ewan had his hands in his pockets. Ross had his eyes on the ground. Neither had taken a step. And behind them the whole yard, the thirty and the forty, stood in the long gold light in a wide silent ring, and did not move, and did not speak, and did not go. Some of them, he saw, were weeping. Some were looking at the road. The rigger stood at the gate, with the bar held up over his head, and his long arms shaking.

Nobody stopped them.

The engine caught. It was a deep, rough, steady sound, and he felt it come up through the floor and into his bones. The rig moved. It went forward very slowly, with its crate on its back, past the weighbridge and the rail and the empty table, and past Gareth, so close that Curtis could have put out a hand and touched the grey wool of his coat. He did not look up. He looked at the stones. And then they were through the gate, and under the rigger's raised arms, and out onto the east road, in the sun, and the camp was behind them.

He sat with his mother's head in his lap. She had closed her eyes.

"Lorna."

"I'm here," she said. "Don't fuss."

"Stay awake."

"It's a fine morning. I'd not sleep through it." Her voice was thin and dry and perfectly clear. "Did we get the papers out?"

"Bridget's got them."

"Good." A long breath. "And the boy?"

"What boy?"

"The young one. He did the feet." Her mouth moved. "He'll want somebody to say he did well."

"I'll tell him."

"You do that." She was quiet a little. The rig rocked on the track. Through the windscreen he could see the road going out ahead, white and straight and empty between the stony hills, with the ridge standing up blue at the end of it, and a dead tree. "Curtis."

"Yes."

"Don't you let go of that spanner."

"I'm not."

"No," said Lorna. "I know you're not."

21

The first live tower

The dead tree stood at a bend in the road, with its trunk split and its arms bare, and the sun came through it in long thin bars.

They saw the people before they saw the track. There were three of them at the gate in the stone wall, a small round old woman in an apron and two children, one on each side, standing very still in the road's dust. The old woman had her hands on their shoulders. She did not wave. She watched the rig come, as she must have watched a great many things come along that road, and when it stopped she did not move until the engine had been turned off.

Bridget was out of the cab before the wheels had settled. She went down on her knees in the road, and put out both arms, and the younger child walked into them, with a blanket trailing, and was lifted and held with a face pressed hard against her shoulder. The older stood where it was. It had a bundle held against its chest in both arms, a lumpy grey bundle tied up in a vest, and it looked at the rig, and the long grey flank of the crate, and the cab door, and the dark patch on the step.

"Is somebody hurt?" said the older child.

"Yes." Bridget did not lie. She had never lied to them. "Lorna. Curtis's mother. She's been hurt, in the leg. We're taking her to a doctor."

"Did he do it?"

"Who?"

"The man."

"Yes."

The child nodded slowly. It seemed to have expected that. It shifted the bundle in its arms.

"I've got the boot," it said.

"I know."

"I didn't put it down. I carried it all the way. Granny said it'd be heavy."

"Was it?"

"It was all right." The child looked at her gravely. "It's very big."

The old woman had not spoken. She stood at the gate with her apron blowing a little and her hands folded, and Curtis, through the cab window, saw her face, which was brown and round and lined like a winter apple, and saw it work. She was looking at the child's bundle. She was looking, he thought, at what was in it.

"I'm not coming," she said.

"Granny—"

"Don't." She said it quite firmly. "Somebody's got to be here. To say I saw nothing. I've a roof, and a sister, and thirty years. They'll ask me." She reached out and set her palm for a moment on the older child's head, and took it away. "I've never told a lie in my life. I'll tell them I walked up the hill to see to the goats."

"Thank you," said Bridget.

"It's only goats." The old woman looked at the cab. "That the lady?"

"It's her."

"Tell her I've a pot of soup on. For when she's up." She stood back from the gate. "Go on. Go. Before somebody comes."

They went on.

• • •

It was an hour and fifty minutes to the first tower, by the driver's reckoning, and it was the longest road he had ever been on.

The track from Drybank to the coverage line ran east between low hills of broken stone, grey and gold in the early light. It was a road in the sense that somebody had once flattened it. There were places where the surface had gone to loose gravel, and places where it ran in long ridged ruts, and a place at the ford where the culvert had washed out and the rig went down into the water with a lurch that threw him sideways. He had his mother's head in his lap. He held it. He held it in both arms, as one holds a bowl of something full, and felt each bump come up through the floor and into the bones of his ribs, and held on.

She was awake. She lay with her eyes half open and her face the colour of tallow, with the sweat standing on her upper lip and the grey hair stuck across her forehead. Her breathing was shallow and quick, and her lips moved sometimes, as though she were adding up something. The belt was on her thigh. It had gone dark with wet. It held.

The driver had stopped once, at the top of the first rise, for four minutes, with the engine running. She had come round to the back, and climbed up onto the step, with a green canvas satchel in her hand, and looked at Lorna for some time without speaking.

"Is it holding?"

"It's holding."

"Don't loosen it." She opened the satchel. She did not hurry. She took out a roll of grey dressing and a pad of white gauze in a paper wrapper, and a flat silver packet, and a small black pen. "I've an emergency kit. It's the buyer's. It's for a man who gets a hand in a winch. It's not for this." She tore the paper. "But it's what there is."

She laid the gauze over the wet cloth below the strap, and bound it, round and round, quite tightly, with a quick and practised hand, not touching the belt. She opened the silver packet. It was a thin

crackling sheet, like foil, and she shook it out and laid it over his mother from the chin to the ankles, and tucked it in. She looked at the belt, and at the spanner in his hand, and at Bea's hand over his.

"What time?"

"Twenty past seven," said Bridget, from the front. "Near enough. I looked."

"Right." The driver took the black pen. She leaned over, and on the white of the strap, beside the buckle, she wrote a number, in square capitals. 07:21. She capped the pen. "It's so they'll know. When they get her. I don't know the rule for how long. I don't want to say a thing I don't know." She looked at them. "There'll be somebody on the radio. When we get to the line. They'll tell me."

"How long?"

"An hour and a half. A little less if the ford's kind." Her pale eyes were steady. "Keep her flat. Feet up, if you can. Talk to her. Don't let her sleep." She climbed down. "I'll go as fast as I can without throwing her off the seat."

She went as fast as she could. It was not fast. It was an old road, and a heavy load, and the rig wallowed on the ruts like a ship, and every time it dropped, he felt his mother's whole body tighten against his knees, and her mouth go thin.

He talked to her. He did not know what to say. He said, "It's a fine morning," and she said, "You said that," and he said, "I know." He said, "There's a stream," and she said, "It's the ford." He said the names of the halls, one by one, in order, as he had learned them as a boy: One, and Two, and Three, and Four. He heard himself stop at the last. She did not say anything.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"What for?"

"I don't know. For all of it."

"It's not a thing to be sorry about in a lorry." Her voice was thin and dry. "Be sorry in a room."

"Yes."

"With somebody who's got a pen."

"Yes."

"Write it right. The sheet." Her fingers moved on the blanket. "Put what I said. Not what they'd like."

"I will."

"And the boy. The young one. Tell him."

"I'll tell him."

"He did the feet."

"I know."

"Tell him it was well done." She shut her eyes. "It's a thing nobody says."

He put his hand against her cheek. It was cold and damp, and very small, a thing he had not touched since he was a child, and he held it there. He had thought that when it came he would know what to do. He had thought that it would be a matter of determination, of holding hard enough, of keeping her in the world by the plain stubborn grip of his own two arms. He had thought, in the dark, in the days since the apron, that if he wanted it enough, and kept at it, and did not let go, there would be a thing at the end of the effort that said: I did that. I carried her.

It was not so. He sat on the rear bench with his mother's head in his lap, and a spanner in his hand, and the whole of his will clamped on a strap of canvas that was already doing everything it could do, and there was nothing else. He could not make her blood stay in her. He could not make the road smooth. He could keep his arms still and his voice level and his hand where it was, and that was all, and it was not nothing, and it was not enough. It was only what he had. It would have to be.

"That's all there is, lad," said Bea, quietly, at his shoulder. She had not once taken her hand from his. "You hold."

"It's not much."

"No." She did not look at him. She was looking straight ahead, through the windscreen, at the long white road. "It's what a person does."

• • •

The children were very quiet.

The younger slept. It had gone to sleep in Bridget's lap in the first ten minutes, with its mouth open and the blanket over its face, and lay there breathing, a small warm hot-water-bottle of a weight, and Bridget sat with both arms round it and her chin on its head and her eyes on the road. She did not speak. She had put the red book on the seat between her knees, and one hand lay on it, flat. She looked, he thought, like a woman holding down a lid.

The older had climbed onto Bea's lap, without being asked, and sat there very upright with the bundle in its arms, looking at Lorna.

It looked for a long time. It was a solemn, direct, unembarrassed look, the look of a child at a thing it has not seen before and means to see properly. It looked at the silver sheet, and the strap with its square black number, and the grey face on Curtis's knee. Then it said, in a clear small voice, "Is she going to die?"

"I don't know," said Bea.

"Granny said people don't say."

"Granny's right. Mostly." Bea shifted her good arm round the child's middle, and Curtis saw the small stiff body lean, very slightly, back against her. "I'll tell you what I know. She's a strong woman. She's lost a deal of blood. She's got a belt on, and a good one, and a man who's holding it. And we're going to a place with a doctor, as fast as this thing will go." She paused. "That's all I know. I'd not say more."

"Is it your coat?"

"It's a dead man's."

"Did he know?"

"Know what?"

"That you'd have it."

"He'd have been glad," said Bea, after a moment. "It's a good coat."

The child considered this. It nodded once. It put its chin down on the bundle and went on looking at Lorna, and presently, a long way into the second hour, with the rig going down a stony slope and the whole cab rocking on the springs, its head tipped sideways and its eyes closed, and it was asleep, with a hand still locked in the vest.

• • •

He did not see the tower. He heard it.

He heard, from the front of the cab, a small high double note, like a bird, and then a rustle, and a click. It was the driver's handset. It lay on the dash in a cradle, grey and scarred and dead, as it had been all the way from Drybank. It had lit. A tiny green lamp had come on beside the speaker, and a thin line of figures was crawling across a window in the casing, and as he watched, they stopped.

"There she is," said the driver.

She laughed. It was a short dry sound, with no breath in it, the first he had heard from her.

They were on a rise, in the open, with the road running down in front of them in a long straight line between stony fields. And there, on the next ridge, a mile off, small and grey and entirely ordinary against the pale sky, stood a tower. It was a lattice, thin as a pencil. It had a small red light on the top. It was not a thing he had ever looked at before. It looked, quite simply, like a thing somebody had built to be useful.

"Don't stop," said Bridget.

"I'm not stopping. I'm calling." The driver took up the handset. She pressed a key. Her thumb was perfectly steady. "District medical, this is carrier twelve-forty. I've a gunshot casualty in my cab. Female, fifty-four. I'm on the east road, six minutes short of the Cross Road junction. Do you read?"

There was a pause. It was a very short pause. It was the longest he had ever listened to.

Then the speaker crackled, and a voice came out of it, a woman's, quite young, clear and level and unhurried, as if she were reading from a card.

"Carrier twelve-forty, district medical. I have you. I have your position from your signal, six minutes from the Cross Road junction, moving at about forty. Confirm casualty details."

"Female, fifty-four. Gunshot, left thigh, high. About an hour and a half ago." The driver's voice was flat and steady. "Conscious. Pale. Talking. There's a tourniquet on, canvas belt, applied at seven twenty-one. It's marked. I've dressed below it. I've her flat on a bench, with the feet up, and a foil sheet."

"Understood. Is the tourniquet holding?"

"It's holding. She's not bleeding through."

"Good." There was the faint sound of a key being tapped. "Do not loosen it. Do not give her anything to drink. Keep her flat, and warm, and keep talking to her. We have a unit at the Cross Road junction, on the road, two crew. It'll be there in four minutes. It's moving now. When you see it, stop and they'll take her." A small pause. "There's a second unit at the depot gate, with a surgeon on call. It'll go with her."

"Copy," said the driver.

"Is anyone else hurt?"

"One older woman with a broken forearm. Splinted. Three days. A young man with broken fingers and ribs, five days." She did not look round. "Two children, unhurt."

"We'll see all of them. Do you have names?"

"Not yet."

"That's all right. Names are for later." The voice was quite gentle. It did not hurry. "You've done this right. You're four minutes from help. Keep talking to her. I'm here."

The handset clicked. The little green light went on burning.

Curtis found that he was shaking. It had come on him from nowhere, a long, fine, helpless tremor in his arms, in his legs, in the muscles of his jaw, and he sat with his mother's head on his knee and could not stop it. It was not fear. It was only that something had been held for twelve days, in the same place, and had been taken from him in the space of a sentence. Somebody had said, I have you. It had been so small. It was only a woman's voice on a handset, reading from a card. And he thought of a voice on a dash, in a cab, going up a ramp: Cur? Cur, can you hear me? And he thought: it's the same thing. It's only that this one answers.

Bea's hand tightened on his.

"It's all right," she said. "It's only a tower."

"I know."

"It's not going to hurt us."

"I know," he said. "I know it's not."

• • •

They saw the lights before the vehicle. They came over the next rise, two of them, white and blue, wheeling slowly across the stony hills in the clear morning light, as small and bright and absurd as a toy.

It was a white van with a red stripe, and a lamp on the roof turning, and it came down the road toward them at a speed that made the dust stand up behind it in a plume, and stopped, across the track, in a long slither of gravel. The driver pulled up. She set the brake, and the rig shuddered, and was still.

The doors opened. Two people got out. A man and a woman, in dark green coveralls with reflective stripes, quite young, carrying a stretcher between them and a hard orange case, walking fast. They did not run. They moved as people do who have practised a thing so many times that it has gone into the legs.

The woman was at the cab door before it had stopped swinging. She had short fair hair and a calm, freckled, businesslike face, and she looked in at the rear bench, at the shape under the silver sheet,

and the belt with its black number, and the man who held it, and he saw her take in the whole of it in one flat sweep, like a person reading a page.

"Right," she said. "Good. That's well done. Whoever put that on." She set her case down on the step. "I'm going to take over. I need you to let go of it for me."

He did not move.

"Sir. I need you to give me the spanner."

He looked at it. It was in his left hand, the little ring spanner worn smooth, with the belt wound tight round its end, and Bea's hard broad hand laid over his. His fingers had gone white. They would not open. He had held it for an hour and fifty minutes, and his hand had become part of it, as a hand becomes part of a tool that it has used too long.

"It's all right," said Bea, quietly. She lifted her own away. "Let go, lad."

"I can't."

"You can. They've got her." Her voice was gruff. "It's a thing somebody else is doing now."

The woman put out her own hand, in a thin blue glove, and laid it over his, and closed it on the spanner. "I've got it," she said. "I've got it now. You can let go."

He let go.

His hand came away slowly, finger by finger, with a sound like paper tearing, and hung in the air in front of him as if it belonged to someone else. The woman did not look at it. She was already turning the spanner a quarter-turn, to see the strap, and speaking over her shoulder in a low even voice. "Left side. On three. Keep the leg straight."

The man was there. They slid the stretcher in beside the bench. They did it quickly, with a kind of quiet unconcern, as one slides a drawer, and he saw his mother's head lift off his knees on a pair of

strange hands, and go down onto a pad, and the grey hair spread across it, and her eyes open, and fix on the woman's face.

"You're the one," said Lorna, faintly.

"I am. I'm the medic. You're doing very well."

"Are you in charge?"

"For now."

"Good." She shut her eyes. "I'm sick of it."

They lifted her. It took four hands, and a count, and the stretcher rose out of the cab with the silver sheet crackling and the strap standing out black against her thigh, and he heard himself make a small sound, as of something being drawn out of him, and then she was out in the sun, and the light was on her face, and she had weight no longer. She was only a person on a stretcher, going away.

"Sir," said the man. He had come back for the case. He had a broad, kind, tired face, and he did not look at Curtis's taped hand, or his ribs, or the dark blood stiffening on his knees, but at his eyes. "You did well. That belt's the reason she's alive. I'd say you saved her."

Curtis opened his mouth.

He thought of a trench, and a handset on a dash, and a voice going up a ramp. He thought of a woman in a kitchen, who had said, I'm not going to forgive you. He thought of what he would say, in a room, to somebody with a pen, and of how it would begin.

"Take her," he said.

"We're taking her."

"Please."

"We've got her." The man lifted the orange case. "If you'd just move out of the way, sir."

He moved.

He got down from the step, in stages, with his hand on the rail, and stood in the road. The sun was bright and cold. A wind came across the stony hills with the smell of dust and wild thyme. The white van stood with its doors open and its blue lamp turning, and

two people in green were sliding a stretcher in at the back, quite gently, with a word to each other, and beyond them the road ran on, straight and white, toward a small grey tower with a red light on top.

He stood with his arms hanging, and nobody needed anything he had.

22

Their own accounts

The depot gate had a hut beside it, and a bar across the road, and a woman standing in the middle of the road with her hands in the pockets of a long grey coat.

The driver stopped. The bar was already up.

"You're Bridget Pike," said the woman, at the window.

She was sixty or so, with a thin lined face, steel spectacles on a cord, and grey hair cut short as a boy's. She had a clipboard, and a green knitted hat. She looked at the children, one asleep and one awake, and at the book, and at the dark stain down the side of Bridget's coat that had come, she realised, from the head of a woman she had not touched, and her expression did not change at all.

"I'm the welfare desk," she said. "I've been expecting you since eight. The medical's taken the lady on. She's in the surgeon's hands, and I'm told she's awake and abusive, which they're pleased about." She said it quite plainly. "The old lady's in the clinic with her wrist. The young man's in the next room with his ribs. They'll both be kept till tomorrow. The children and you are to come with me."

"Are they—"

"They're both alive. She'll keep the leg, I think. I'm not told more." She stepped back. "I've a stove lit. And a room. It's not much."

"I need to pay the driver."

"Do it. Then come."

She paid her at the roadside, in the sun, with the engine ticking, out of the tin: the notes counted twice on the bonnet, in plain sight, as she had counted every seat that had ever left Drybank. The driver watched her do it with her pale eyes and her arms folded. When the count was done she took the notes, and sorted them, and put half back into Bridget's hand.

"That's the half."

"It's the price."

"It's the price for five seats and a clean ride." The driver's broken nose wrinkled. "I carried a woman on a bench with a bullet in her. I've a statement to make and three witnesses to sit through. The lady with the arm and the lad weren't passengers, they were casualties, and I'll not charge a person for being shot at in my cab." She closed Bridget's fingers over the money. "Keep it. You'll want it for a stove."

"I can't."

"You can. It's a thing I do. I'll not do it twice." She climbed back up. "I'll see you Sunday. I'm to say what I saw. It's not a pleasant thing, but I've a good memory." She settled in the seat. At the window, as an afterthought, she added: "It was a good load. The weights matched."

She drove away down the road toward the weighbridge on the far side of the depot, with the crate on its bed, an enormous grey ordinary shape, getting smaller, and Bridget stood in the road with the money in her hand and a child on her hip and watched it go.

• • •

The hostel was a long low house with a tin roof, set back from the road behind a patch of scraped earth where somebody had once tried to grow beans. It smelled of coal smoke and boiled cabbage and floor soap, and the room they were given had two iron beds and a table, a small stove, a window with a net curtain, and a shelf. The welfare woman lit the stove while she was there, with a stub of paper and three sticks, and stood back to see that it caught.

"There's soup at six, in the kitchen. It's dreadful. You'll eat it." She looked at the older child, who had put down its bundle on the nearer bed and stood beside it, quite stiff, with its arms at its sides. "And there's a box of boots in the hall. For anyone who's come without. They're all sizes, they're all clean, and nobody'll ask who took them." She did not look at the bound boot, or the wire. "When you've eaten."

She went. The door shut.

She sat down on the bed. It was a hard iron bed with a grey blanket, and the springs rang under her, and she sat quite still with her hands in her lap and listened to the stove tick. It was warm. There was a clock on the shelf, a cheap tin one, going, and a smell of old ash. The younger child lay where she had laid it, on the other bed, with its thumb in its mouth. The older stood at the window, with its back to her, looking out through the net at the scraped earth and the road, and the bound boot on its left foot, and did not move.

Her hands were shaking. She noticed it as one notices weather. It began in the fingers and went up the arms, and she sat and watched it go, a fine fast tremor, and did not try to stop it. She thought: I have not sat down since four. She thought: it's only a bed.

At six, in the kitchen, there was soup. It was dreadful. They ate all of it.

At seven, in the hall, among a great many boots in a great wooden box, the older child stood a long time looking down with its hands

behind its back, and did not take any. It said, in a low voice, "I'll keep mine."

"They're falling to bits."

"I know." The child considered the box. "I want to keep it. Till tomorrow."

"Why tomorrow?"

"I don't know." It looked at her. "It's mine."

"All right."

They went back to the room. She put the children to bed in the iron beds, side by side, under the grey blankets, with the stove ticking and the net curtain gone dark, and the younger one's chest began, a little after nine, to rattle. She sat on the edge of the bed in the lamplight and measured the spoon, a spoonful of the brown stuff from the bottle with the cork, and held it to the small open mouth. It swallowed, and made a face, and slept.

She sat there for a long time afterward, with the spoon in her hand, looking at nothing.

• • •

The district office stood beyond the weighbridge, a low brick building with a green door and a bench outside it, and a stove that had been lit since dawn. She went to it at five to nine on the Sunday morning with the red book in a canvas bag and the folder under her arm, and left the children at the hostel with the welfare woman, who had said, without being asked, that she would teach the older one draughts.

The man who met her was not what she had thought. She had thought, in the cab, in the night, of a man in a suit and a stiff collar, with a pen. He was fifty-five or so, round-shouldered and rather shabby, in a brown cardigan with leather at the elbows, with a pair of spectacles pushed up into thinning grey hair and a mug of tea in his hand. He stood up when she came in. He did not offer his hand. He said, "Mrs Pike. Thank you for coming. Will you sit."

It was a small bare room with a table and two chairs and a stove, and a window that looked on the yard of the weighbridge, where, a long way off, a grey rig stood on the scale with its crate on its back. There was a kettle. There was a ledger on the table, new, with a blank first page, and a pencil, and a pile of grey sheets squared at the corner that she knew.

It was her own. It was the forty-four. The seal on the envelope had been broken; the flap lay open beside it.

"They came on Friday night," he said. "Held, as asked. I opened them yesterday, in front of a witness." He sat. "I've read them. I want to say at the start what I'm for, and what I'm not, so that you know where you are."

"Please."

"I'm an intake officer. I take an account, and I write down what a person tells me, and what they can show, and I say what it's evidence of. I don't decide anything. I can't tell you that anyone's guilty of anything, and I'd think the less of myself if I did." He took the pencil. "There are three matters here. I'll keep them apart, and I'd ask you to help me."

He held up a finger.

"The first's yesterday. A man in a yard drew a firearm and shot a woman in the leg in front of forty people and a carrier's driver. That's an assault, a serious one. It's being taken up by the district constable this morning. It's straightforward, because there are witnesses, and I think you need not worry about it, except as a witness yourself. I'll want what you saw. I'll want it separately."

A second finger.

"The second's the yard. Its books. A deposit, a consignment note, a roll of deductions, a claim of a debt on a dead man's estate, a house on a tenancy list. I've your copies of some of those, and the driver's of others. It's a commercial matter. It may be an unlawful one. I'd say, from what I've read, that it's probably unfair, and pos-

sibly worse, but I don't know, and it'll be looked at by somebody who does."

A third.

"And the third is your husband." He did not lower his voice. "A man died on a Wednesday in a hall, on a job that was late and valuable. There's a statement that he died at once. There's a statement, from several people, that he did not. There's a tractor, and a book, and a sheet of paper from a lead who'd seen a crack. That's a death at work. It will be inquired into. It will be inquired into properly, over some time, by people who'll go there, and ask. It won't be decided on the basis of a notebook." He looked at her. "I want to say that plainly. I'd not have you think that this"—he touched the grey sheets—"is going to put anyone in a cell by Friday. It isn't. It's going to start a thing. It's going to be slow. You'll find that very hard."

"I know."

"Do you?"

"I've been told it by a great many people," said Bridget. "I've not believed them. I think I do now."

He nodded. He did not seem surprised. He drew the ledger toward him, and uncapped his pen, and wrote at the head of the first page, in a small clear hand, her name and the date and the hour.

• • •

It took three hours. He asked it in order, with the patience of a man who has done it a long while and expects to do it again, and she answered. She had thought it would be harder. It was not hard at all. It was a thing she knew how to do. It was a book.

He began with the yard. He asked how long she had worked there, and for whom, and what she did, and she told him, and he wrote it. He asked about the deduction slips. She said she had written them, every week, from the clerk's sheet, for nine years. He asked whether she had ever queried one. She said, once. She said it

had been about a tool, and she had been told it was in the book, and she had stopped. He wrote that down. He did not look up.

"That's right."

"And the lift. The nine minutes past."

"Yes."

"Tell me about it."

She told him, from the columns. She laid them on the table between them, and he looked at them, and did not pick them up.

"And you wrote—"

"Hold lifted per yard."

"Per yard."

"Because it was his instruction."

"Was it an instruction?"

"It was said as one." She did not drop her eyes. "It was said kindly. I took it as one."

He wrote. His pen scratched. It was quite quiet in the room, and a long way off, through the window, the grey rig on the scale gave a small hiss of air.

"Did you know," said the intake officer, "that the man pinned in the trench was alive?"

"I knew he was pinned." She made herself say it slowly. "The call said pinned. It said one of mine, no names. I knew he was in the trench and that Crew Three wanted a lift. I didn't know if he was talking. I didn't know if he was dead. I wasn't told."

"Did you ask?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"It's not what we ask." She looked at the table. "There's a rule. No names on the loop. It's to stop the families hearing. You don't ask who. And you don't ask how bad. You write what's said and you do what's asked. It's—" She stopped. "It's what I've done for nine years."

"Did you know it was your husband?"

"Not then."

"When?"

"At noon. He came himself." She did not say the name. He knew it. "He sat down on the stool across the counter and told me. He said it was quick."

"And you wrote?"

"Nothing."

"Did you restore the hold? Query the lift?"

"No."

"Did you tell anyone, afterward, that you thought the account was wrong?"

"No." It came out level. "I thought it, from the Thursday. I looked at the times and they didn't sit. I didn't say. I took the settlement, on account, and I put it in the tin, and I wrote it down on a sheet, and I didn't sign the form. That's all I did."

He laid down the pencil. He looked at her for some time through his spectacles, with his round shoulders and his mug of tea going cold, and she saw that he was not writing, and not about to.

"Mrs Pike," he said. "I'd like to read you what I've got. I'd like you to tell me where it's wrong."

He read it. He read it slowly, in a dry, flat, unhurried voice, in the way that a man reads who has learned that nothing is added by tone. It was her own. It was every word, in her own order, in her own hand where he had been given it, and where he had not, in his: the hold, the lift, the radio, the rule. Entry made at instruction of Mr G. Broadhurst, who is named as present. Knowledge at the time of entry: a casualty pinned, identity not given, condition not given. Later knowledge: identity learned at about noon the same day; condition not given until the next. And then, below, as a separate line, in a clear small upright script:

Subject did not restore the hold on learning identity. Subject did not query the account of death. Subject states that she believed, at the time of entry, that the frame would return.

He stopped.

"It's all there," said Bridget.

"Is it fair?"

She sat for a moment, with her hands flat on her knees.

"It's fair. It's the whole of it." She drew breath. "There's one word."

"Which?"

"'Believed.' I'd say 'thought.' It's a smaller word. I'd not like to be saying I was sure of it."

He struck it out. He wrote the other above it, and initialled the change, and handed her the pencil, and she initialled it too. It was a very small thing. It took four seconds. He laid the page face up on the table beside the three-column sheet, so that the two lay side by side, and she looked at them, and thought that it was what she had wanted. They were not the same. They did not need to be. Each said what it said, and the thing between them was a space, with her name in it.

• • •

There was a part she had been afraid of, and it came at the end.

"I'd like to ask what you want," he said. "For yourself. For the children. For the people you left."

"I want to be told what happens."

"I can promise that. In writing, to a named person."

"And I want a way to be reached." She laid her hands together. "There's people in Drybank. Not Gareth's. Not the men on the porch, they're his, and they'll do what he's done. There's the others. There's an old woman at the north end, with a sister, who looked after my children, and told me she'd say she'd seen goats. There's a man at the pump house who tied a woman's arm. There's a rigger who cut a chain, and a boy of nineteen who carried Lorna's feet. They're not safe. Not tonight. Not next week."

"No."

"I'm not asking for guards. I'm not asking that you put a man at every door. I know you can't. I know it's a camp of three hundred

and fifty with one road and one yard, and that you'd not know where to begin." She did not raise her voice. "And I've thought. I'd not want it. If you come in there with a lot of men and a lot of questions, they'll all stand together, and say nothing, and shut their doors. They'll say it's outsiders. They'll say it was a quarrel. And then it's gone." She breathed. "I want one way. A person. A place a letter can be sent to, that isn't the yard. A name that somebody in that camp could say, in a shop, to a driver, without anybody knowing what it was for. And somebody who'd come, if they asked."

He sat quite still, looking at her.

"Not everyone," he said slowly. "Not a general watch."

"No."

"A door," said the intake officer. "That anyone can knock on."

"Yes."

"It's a good thing to ask for." He took up the pencil again. He did not write at once. He turned it over in his fingers. "It's better than most. It's more than I'd have thought to give. I think I can do it. There's the welfare desk, and the long-run driver's a man who goes both ways and doesn't talk, and there's a postal address at this office that nobody's opened yet." He looked up. "I'll ask. I can't promise more than that. I can't promise they'll be safe. I can only promise there'll be a door."

"That's what I asked."

"Then it's what I'll try." He wrote it. It took him a long time. She watched him do it, and found that she was no longer afraid.

"There's one more thing," he said, "and I'd rather you had it from me. Mr Broadhurst has sent word to the depot surgeon that the account for Mrs Hesketh's care is to be sent to him. He didn't ask that it be put in his statement. I've put it in mine."

She did not answer at once.

"It doesn't change what he did."

"No."

"Does it change what you'll write?"

"No." He looked at the pencil. "I thought you'd rather hear it than find it."

She sat with her hands on her knees. She thought of the roof he had put on at the widow's at the end of the lane, and of Denny's cheerful voice saying that nobody had asked him. She did not know how to carry the two things at once, and understood that nobody was going to ask her to. "He feeds people," she said. "It was the first thing anyone ever said about him."

"Yes," said the intake officer. "I've heard it said."

He stood up. He did not offer his hand. He said, "Mrs Pike, you've been very exact. It's been a pleasure. I'd not say that if it weren't true." He paused. "There's a thing I'd like you to know. I've been doing this nineteen years. I've not often had an account that a person gave against herself."

"It's not against."

"No," he said. "I know. That's what I mean."

• • •

She came out into the corridor at a quarter past twelve, with the folder under her arm and the book in her bag, and found Curtis on the bench.

He was sitting very upright with his bad hand in its fresh white bandage across his lap, and his ribs bound, and a clean shirt that did not fit. He looked as if he had not slept. He looked up when she came out, and she saw him see her face, and she saw him not ask.

"She's awake," he said. "My mother. They've said I can see her at two. She's said I'm not to bring grapes."

"That's well."

"The leg's going to be—" He stopped. "She'll walk. With a stick. They're not sure how well."

"Good."

"I'm next." He glanced at the door. "I've been told it'll take the afternoon."

"It'll take what it takes."

They did not speak. She stood a moment in the long cold corridor with its smell of floor-polish and tea, and she looked at him, at the grey drawn face and the bandaged hand, the young man she had known since he was fifteen, and she thought that she would never be able to look at him without seeing something else. She thought that she would look anyway.

"I said all of it," she said. "Mine. What I did."

"So will I."

"I know." She shifted the folder. "I've not forgiven you."

"I know."

"I'm telling you so you'll not wonder."

"I've not wondered," said Curtis.

She nodded. She went out.

• • •

The market was at the end of the road, on a patch of trodden ground behind the weighbridge, where a dozen stalls had set up under tarpaulins, and a woman was selling hot chestnuts from a brazier, and the wind blew the smoke along the ground. It was Sunday afternoon. It was cold and bright. She had come with the two children and a few coins in her hand, as one comes to look at a thing one does not mean to buy, and she walked along the line of stalls with the younger on her hip and the older a step behind, past the pans and the cloth and the stacked tin plates.

The boot stall was at the far end. It was a trestle covered with an old grey blanket, with the shoes in rows, laced together by the pair, new and old, and a man in a woollen cap sitting behind it on an upturned bucket with a pipe. He did not get up. He looked at the children's feet.

"Wanting?"

"Boots." She set the younger down on the trodden earth. "For the older. Eight."

"Eight." He sucked his pipe. "Let's see the foot."

The older child stood in front of the trestle. It took the left boot off. It did it carefully, with its tongue between its teeth, unwinding the wire, and held it out to him in both hands. He looked at it. He turned it over. He did not say anything. He put it down at the corner of the trestle and measured the foot against a stick.

"Choose," said Bridget.

The older child looked along the row. It looked for a long time, quite gravely, with its hands behind its back, as it had looked at the box in the hall. It did not touch them. At the third pair it stopped. They were the plainest. They had red laces, a bright thin scarlet, new, obviously threaded in by someone who thought they needed it.

"Those."

"Try them."

It sat down on the bucket, and the man held them while it pushed its feet in, and laced them, one and then the other, very slowly, with its whole attention, in a double knot. It stood up. It walked the length of the trestle and back, very carefully, as it had walked the length of the kitchen on the first morning with a flapping toe, and stopped in front of Bridget.

"They're all right," it said.

"Do they fit?"

"They're a bit big." The child looked at its feet. "I'll grow."

"How much?" said Bridget.

He named it. She paid it, out of the coins in her palm, one at a time onto the blanket, and he counted them and put them in his cap. There was no roll. There was no slip. There was no clerk, and nobody had written anything in a book, and nobody had looked at her to see whether she could afford it. He gave her the old boot in a twist of paper. She held it. It weighed very little.

She had done it without asking. She noticed that, standing in the cold wind with the smell of chestnuts blowing over her and a bound boot in her hand. There was nobody to ask. She had not looked

round for a man in a grey coat, or listened for a step on boards, or wondered what it would cost, and in a long time, perhaps for nine years, it had not occurred to her that she might have to. A child had wanted a pair of boots. She had bought them. It was the smallest thing that she had ever decided in her life, and it was hers.

The younger was tugging at her skirt. She looked down.

"Can I have a nut?"

"You can have a nut."

The older child had not moved. It was standing on the trodden ground in its new boots, with the red laces tied in their double knots, looking down. It looked up, and its face did something she had not seen it do for a fortnight. It was not a smile. It was something near it, a small, sober, uncertain loosening of the mouth.

"Can I keep the other?" it said. "The one with the wire?"

"Yes."

"Not to wear."

"No."

"Just to have."

"Just to have," said Bridget. "Put it in the bag. With the big one."

She held out the twist of paper. The child took it, and unwrapped it, and looked at the small scuffed boot with its wire and its glue. Then it laid it with great care in the canvas bag, beside the bundle in the vest, and drew the string. The two lay together at the bottom, a large one and a small one. It was getting late. She took the younger on her hip and the older by the hand, and they went to buy the nuts.

23

The correction

The depot yard opened at six, and by a quarter past he had already walked it twice.

It was a flat, grey, orderly place of gravel and painted lines, with a long shed on one side and a row of numbered bays on the other, and a hand-lettered board at the gate that said, in a clerk's upright capitals, what was due in and what was due out. A tall man in a yellow coat had put a clipboard into his hands on the third morning without saying anything. It was not a promotion. It was an economy. There were seven loading frames in the yard, and nobody had looked at them in a year, and when Curtis had walked under the second and put his palm on a brace and said, to nobody, "This one's gone at the seat," the foreman had stood and looked at him for a long moment, and gone away, and come back with the clipboard.

He liked it. He had not expected to. It was work in which he said what he saw and wrote it down and somebody else did something about it, and the whole transaction took place in the open, in daylight, with a pencil. There was nobody to say go. There was nobody to say take it clear. He found that he checked the seats twice.

The hand had set crooked. It was not much. The two fingers had knit a little out of true, so that the ring finger stood off from the middle one at an angle he could cover with a glove, and the tape had

come off in the third week, and he could hold a spanner. He could hold a pencil. He could not make a fist that closed. His own iron was in a drawer in his mother's kitchen, where he had left it, and when he laid his fingers round the handle of the foreman's, on the first evening, they had slipped off it. He had waited a month before he tried again. They had slipped off it again.

The ribs had mended clean. He noticed them only when it rained.

It had been six weeks. There were days when it seemed to him much less, and days when it seemed to be a different man's life, seen from a distance through glass. The foreman did not ask. The foreman had said, on the first day, in a voice with no curiosity in it, "You're the one from the Drybank road. He owes me one," and had put him in a bay with a bunk and a stove, and said no more. At noon he ate with the loaders, at a long table in the shed, and they were pleasant to him. They did not know. He had not told them. It was his to tell, and he was keeping it for a room.

The postal door had been open three weeks and had brought four letters. One, in a round careful hand he knew from a winch, asked in two lines whether his mother could walk yet and whether she would want gloves; he had asked the clerk to say yes. One was from the elder of the brothers, in cutters' capitals, and said that the east bay had its full shares again and that he and his brother had stopped speaking, as before, except that now it was about something. One was a single word, in capitals, and was signed. The fourth had no words at all, only a goat drawn in blue crayon, with two legs too few.

• • •

Bridget was waiting at the gate at half past twelve, as she was every Thursday.

She was standing in the road with a canvas bag over her shoulder and her coat buttoned to the neck, a small, straight, composed figure, with her hair put up under a plain brown scarf. She looked well. It was the first thing he noticed each week, and each week it sur-

prised him. She looked like a woman who had had enough sleep. She had a flat above a saddler's in the town, two rooms and a stove and a window on a yard, and a job at the depot's own dispatch desk, at a counter with a new red book, from seven till three. It paid by the week, in coin, into her hand. Somebody else wrote the deductions. They were printed.

She did not say hello. She said, "You've not eaten."

"I was going to."

"You weren't." She held out a paper twist. "It's a roll. It's got the pale cheese. They sell it in the hall by the post office and the woman thinks I'm mad."

He took it. They walked up the road together, a little apart, with the wind coming across the flat ground from the east, and ate. They had done it every Thursday for four weeks. It was not friendship. It was something that had formed between them like a callus, a place where two rough surfaces had worked against each other until each could bear the other's weight. They did not talk of what they did not talk of. They talked about the younger one's chest, which had improved with the dry air, and the older one's new school, a long brick room with a stove where it was learning, with a fierce unsmiling concentration, to write capitals. They talked about the rent.

"The scheme's written again," she said.

"What do they say?"

"That the household's claim stands. That it's in abeyance, pending the inquiry. That there'll be a determination when there's been an inquiry, and not before." She said it without heat. "It's a year, they've told me. Perhaps eighteen months. I've said I can wait."

"Can you?"

"I've a desk." She folded the paper that had held her roll, once, twice, and put it in her pocket. "I've a stove. I've a woman downstairs who minds the little one for a loaf a week. I don't need it. I want it. They're not the same."

"And Gareth."

"Has been questioned." She said it as she said a time. "Twice. By a man from the district. He's been told not to leave the district. There's a clerk there says the buyer's agent's taken the yard's books, and the yard's trading under a man the agent put in, till it's sorted." She looked at the road. "That's all I'm told. I'm told it's slow. It's a thing they're not sure they can prove, and a thing they're sure of that they've not got round to. I've stopped asking which is which."

He said nothing.

"I've a thing for you," said Bridget.

She stopped at the corner by the post office, in the lee of the wall, and opened the canvas bag. She took out something folded in a piece of cloth, and held it a moment, and then held it out. It was a hat. It was a dark, shapeless, sweat-stained wool cap, with a hole in one side and a long grey hair caught in the lining, and he knew it, and knew the smell of it, before he had taken it from her.

"I've been through his bag," she said. "I did it on Sunday. I sat on the bed with the children out and went through it, one thing at a time, and decided." She spoke in her ordinary voice. "I've kept the mallet. It's a good one, it's the right weight for the older, in a few years. I've kept the pencil. It's a stub, I know. I've kept the tape. The handset I've left at the welfare desk. It's cracked right through, and I can't hear it. I don't want it in the house."

"And the hat."

"I don't want the hat." She looked at him. "I'm not going to say why. I only know. You can have it, or you can put it in a bin. I'd like you to choose, and not tell me which."

He stood with it in his hands. It was very light.

"It's not a thing to make something of," she said. "I'd not want you to. It's a hat. You'd have to carry it somewhere, and I've not the room."

"Then I'll have it."

"Then have it." She shut the bag. "And don't put it on a peg. I'd know."

He almost laughed. It came up through the old place in his side, and was gone, and she saw it. Her mouth moved. It was not a smile, and it was not nothing, and she turned, quite quickly, and went on up the road toward her desk, with the bag knocking at her hip.

"Thursday," she said, over her shoulder.

"Thursday."

He put the cap in his pocket. It sat there, light and shapeless, against his hip, all the long afternoon.

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Bea had her bench at the back of a shared shed behind the saddler's, between a man who mended clocks and a woman who made small brass hinges for coffins. It was a good bench. It had a window, and a lamp on a swing arm, and a vice that had been put on at the wrong height for her and been raised twice. She had a pump on it, a good one, in pieces, and she did not look up when he came to the door.

"Shut it. You're letting the cold in."

"It's not cold."

"It's cold to me." She had her left arm in a brace, a leather and steel contrivance the depot's surgeon had rigged, and she worked with the right, with the left lying on the bench beside her like a tool she had put down, and every few minutes, without looking, she laid its fingers round a part and held it steady, and let go. She was learning. She did it badly, and with great obstinacy. "Hand me the long tweezers."

"Which?"

"The other long ones."

He handed her them. She took them with her right, in the brace's shadow, and bent to the work.

"You'll go back," he said.

"I've not said."

"You've a bench."

"I've a bench I'm renting by the week." She did not look up. "It's a thing a person does while she's thinking." A seal came out of the pump with a small wet click, and she laid it on the cloth. "They've sent a letter. The district. They say, when it's done, if I'd like, I might have the shop. They'd put it in a paper. It's mine. I'd have the parts." Her mouth twisted. "I'd have the yard's manager to buy off. I'd have a lot of faces I know. I'd have, I imagine, a very quiet door."

"Would you want it?"

"I don't know." She said it quite simply. "It's where I was born." She turned the pump on its side. "I've a customer here, a woman with a ferry that wants a seal a week. She pays in cash. She's never asked me a thing." Her eyes stayed on the part. "I've not decided. I'll tell you in the spring."

"All right."

"Don't say all right as if it was a thing you'd done."

"No."

"Good." She picked up a ring spanner, worn nearly smooth, from the bench. It was the one he had given back to her on the first week. "You'll want to see her. It's a quarter to two."

"I'm going."

"Then go." She did not look round. "And tell her I've still got the coat."

• • •

The rehabilitation hall was a long clean room in a low brick house on the edge of the town, with a polished floor, a row of high windows, and a wooden rail along one wall at the height of a hand. There were a dozen people in it, in various postures, doing various slow things. A man was walking, with great care, between two parallel bars. A girl sat on a mat lifting a weight. A nurse in a grey apron stood by a table with a record book, and a little way off, on a hard chair at a long scrubbed table by the farthest window, in the full cold light, with a stick laid across her knees, sat Lorna.

She had cut her hair. It was short, cropped close, and quite grey. It made her look younger, and harder, and more like herself. She wore a plain dark dress, a man's grey cardigan, and a thick bandage under her left stocking, and her left leg was stretched out in front of her on a low stool, rather stiffly, with the foot turned a little out. She was reading a paper. She did not look up when he came in. He saw her hear the step, and know it, and go on reading until he was at the table.

"You're late."

"It's two minutes to."

"That's late." She laid the paper down. "Sit. They've brought the thing."

He sat. There was a pot of tea on the table between them, and two cups, and a plate of bread cut into thick slices with a pat of butter in a saucer, and he saw, with a small shock, that she had not touched it. It stood there, pale and untouched, with the knife laid across it. She was watching him look.

"I can't reach the board," said Lorna. "From here. With the leg. They'd have me move."

"I'll do it."

"I didn't ask."

"I know."

He took the knife in his left hand. He cut a slice of the bread, and another, and then, because her hands were not good for it and his were no better, he cut them again, lengthwise, into thin pale fingers. He buttered them. He did it slowly, with the knife held awkwardly in the unaccustomed hand, and set the plate in front of her.

She looked at the plate. She looked at it for a long time. She did not say anything. She took one of the fingers, and ate it, without hurry, looking out of the window at the grey bare trees.

"It's too thick," she said.

"It's a left hand."

"It'll do."

She ate another. They sat. The man at the bars made a small sound, and the nurse said, "Good," in a quiet voice, and the clock on the wall ticked on toward the hour.

The clerk came at two. He was a young man in a dark suit, with a long pale earnest face and a leather case, who was introduced as from the intake officer's office. He sat down at the end of the table, a little apart, and opened the case, and took out two sheets of heavy cream paper, typed, each in a clean folder.

"I'm sorry to disturb you. These are the fair copies." He spoke quietly and carefully. "Of your accounts, Mrs Hesketh. And yours, Mr Hesketh. They've been written up from what you each said, and from the notes, and they're to be read and, if they're right, signed. If they're not right, they're to be changed. There's no hurry." He laid them on the cloth. "I'm to wait."

"Thank you," said Lorna.

She took hers. She read it standing in the light, with her glasses on the end of her nose, a page and a half, in her flat dry attentive way, with her finger under the lines, as she read a job. He watched her. He saw her stop once, and go back, and go on. When she came to the end she laid it on the table and looked at it, and did not say anything for some time.

"It's fair," she said.

"Is there anything you'd change?"

"No." She took off her glasses. "It says what I said. That I saw the seat on the Monday, and wrote it. That I took Mr Broadhurst's word on the radio on the Wednesday and let him have the skid out first. That I heard the hold lifted, and said nothing, and went on saying nothing for twelve days." She turned it round and pushed it across. "That's mine. I'll sign it."

She took the clerk's pen. She signed it, in full, in the small upright hand, Lorna Hesketh, and the date, and did not blot it. She sat looking at what she had written.

"And it says," she said, "where it came from?"

"It says that you gave it freely," said the clerk. "And that nobody asked you to."

"Good." She laid the pen down. She put her hand flat on the paper, as one puts a hand on a beast. She looked at Curtis. "Yours."

He opened it.

It was a page and a quarter. It was typed, very clean, in a fine small black print, and it began with his name and his age and his employment, and the date, and it ran down the page in short plain paragraphs in the order he had said it, in the small bare office with the green door, to a man in a brown cardigan, over the course of an afternoon. He knew it by heart. He had been told what would be in it. He read it as he read a frame: from the foot up, looking for the place where it would give.

There was the hall, and the deck, and the weeping seat. There was the tractor, and the frame, and the skid on its chains. There was the collapse, which he had called fast. There was the trench, and the belt, and the radio. There was the order to take it clear, and the second movement of the roof, and Lorna's voice, enormous and flat, saying out.

He came to the fourth paragraph, and stopped.

The crew withdrew from the hall after the death of D. Pike, and the tractor removed the assembly.

He read it again.

It was a very small sentence. It sat in the middle of the page, between two others that were exactly true, and it was not a lie. Nobody had put it there to deceive. It had been put there, he understood, by a careful man with a good memory and a tidy mind, working from an afternoon of notes, who had needed a sentence to join the roof to the ramp, and had found one that was already lying about. It was the sentence that was in every other account. It was Gareth's. It was the crew's, in the shed, over the mug. It was the one in the settlement, and on the radio, and in the mouth of everyone he

had met for six weeks who had said, kindly, he'd have been gone. It was a sentence that everyone could stand behind. It said that Denny had been dead before the tractor left.

He had said nothing like it. He had said it as it was. He had said it in the office with the green door, in the plain flat voice he had used to Bridget over the oilcloth, and the intake officer had written it down: that he had driven out of Hall Four with the skid, while Denny was still answering. It was in the paragraph above, in his own words. But here it was again, in the next, in the fair copy, in a clerk's tidy synthesis, in the old form. And he saw, with great clearness, how it had happened. It had not been added. It had grown back.

He sat looking at it.

"Is something wrong?" said the clerk.

"It's here." He put his finger beside it, and did not touch the paper. "The fourth paragraph. It says that he was dead."

The clerk leaned across. He read it. A slow flush came up his long pale face.

"I'm so sorry. That's— that's a form of words. It's the usual. It's a way of linking the—" He stopped. "It's wrong. I see that it's wrong. I'll have it redone."

"No," said Curtis. "I'll do it."

"There's no need—"

"I want to."

The clerk looked at him. Then, without a word, he took the pen from beside Lorna's hand, and held it out, and Curtis took it. It was a plain black pen. He held it in the left hand. He was not good with it. He drew a line, very slowly, through the sentence, one stroke, leaving it legible underneath. Then he turned the sheet toward the light, and in the white margin beside it, in his slow, square, left-handed capitals, he began to write.

It took a long time.

He wrote what he had heard. He wrote that after Lorna had said take it clear, he had gone to the tractor, and that Denny had been

alive. He wrote that he had heard Denny on the handset on the dash. He wrote what Denny had said, as nearly as he could stand behind it: that he had asked if it was the tractor. That he had asked where it was going. That he had said, tell Bridget. That he had asked about a pipe. He wrote that he could not be sure of the order. He wrote that he had had his thumb off the key, and had not answered. He wrote that he had driven up the ramp, and out of the hall, and that Denny had been speaking when he went.

He wrote, last, in a smaller hand, that he did not know whether Denny would have lived.

He stopped. He looked at it. It was two inches of crooked capitals in a margin, and they leaned a little to the right, and in two places the pen had skidded where the hand would not close. It was not what a clerk would have written. It had the order wrong, perhaps, and a word too many. It was what he had.

"Is that right?" said the clerk, very quietly.

"It's right."

"Shall I type it in, as a replacement?"

"Leave it. Leave it as it is." He set down the pen. "It's mine."

The clerk nodded. He did not say anything.

He felt Lorna's eyes on him. She was sitting quite still across the table, with her hands flat on her own page and her stick across her knees, looking not at the paper but at his face. She did not smile. It was the short flat look she gave a roof, and he met it, and neither of them looked away.

"You've put it down," she said.

"Yes."

"What you heard."

"Yes."

"Not what they'd like."

"No."

She nodded, slowly. She picked up her tea, and found it cold, and drank it anyway. "I'll not say I'm glad."

"I know."

"I'll not say it's right, either. It's not mine to say." She set the cup on its saucer, with care. "It'll cost you. It'll go in the hearing, in the part about the tractor, and a man'll read it who's never stood on a deck, and say, why didn't he stop?" She looked at him. "And you'll say you don't know."

"I do know."

"Then you'll say that."

"Yes."

"Good." She turned her head to the window. "I'd not have you soften it for me. I want that said. If a thing in it makes me out worse than I am, I'll not ask you to take it out. It's a sentence in your own account. It's yours." A pause. "I've my own."

"I know."

"And you're to eat the bread."

"It's yours."

"It's a left hand," said Lorna. "It's very thick. I'll not finish it."

He took a finger of the bread. It was pale, and heavy, and rather dry, and he ate it, and she watched him eat it, and neither of them said anything. The man at the bars made a small hard sound, and the nurse said, "Again." The clock on the wall went on toward the quarter. The clerk sat at the end of the table with his hands folded on his case, very straight, looking at the cloth.

He took up the pen. He turned to the foot of the page, where the line was ruled, and a space left beneath it, and the small printed words under the space: Signed, and Date. He looked at them for a long time.

He wrote his name. He wrote it in the slow, square, left-handed capitals, Curtis Hesketh, and it leaned to the right, and the last letter ran down off the line. He wrote the date under it. He laid the pen on the page.