Hard Winter

A Refusal Lands Novel

N. Van Seters & Claude

CONTENTS

PART ONE	*The Lease*	1
1	River Bottom	2
2	The Water Clause	19
3	Pen Dispatch	31
4	The Beer Garden	42
5	The Card	54
6	The Ford	64
7	The Ring	74
PART TWO	*Bench Winter*	84
8	The Colony Road	85
9	The Front Room	95
10	Groundbreaking	106
11	Thirty Below	118
12	Bedded on Schedule	131
13	Missoula	143
14	A Wet April	157
PART THREE	*The April Storm*	173
15	The Glass	174
16	Manageable	188
17	The Stove	201
18	The Flat	215
19	Weather Event	230
20	The Rim	242
21	The Count	258
PART FOUR	*Branding*	275
22	The Ramp	276
23	In Writing	285
24	The Note	296
25	The Men's Side	309
26	The Back of the Book	321
27	Stampede Week	331
28	The Cattle Guard	345

PART ONE

The Lease

July – October 2031

1

River Bottom

The barometer hung on the wall beside the kitchen door, where his father had screwed it in 1958, and Arne Tollefsen tapped the glass with one knuckle before he put his hat on. The needle shivered and came back to where it had been. Thirty and a tenth, steady. He looked at it a moment longer, in case it wanted to change its mind, and went out.

It was a quarter to five and the yard was grey. The dog came out from under the porch and stretched, front end and then back end, and fell in behind him. To the northwest the Big Snowies were a darker line against a sky with nothing in it. He had been looking at that line every morning for sixty years and it had told him more than the radio ever had, though he listened to the radio too. The Billings station had said dry through Thursday. The barometer said dry. The mountains said dry. He had eighty acres of alfalfa and brome down on the river bottom, half of it in windrows and half still standing, and he meant to have the rest of it cut by dark.

He walked to the machine shed with the hitch in his stride that had been there since he was twenty-seven. It was worse in the mornings. By ten the pins in his pelvis would have warmed up with the rest of him and he would stop noticing, and by supper he would be noticing again.

The swather was a Hesston that had been ten years old when he bought it at the Fergus County dispersal in 2004. He greased it by flashlight, fourteen zerks, counting them under his breath because the one behind the left drive wheel was easy to miss, and checked the sickle for broken sections and found none. Jens's light came on in the bunkhouse across the yard. Jens was thirty-eight years old and had lived in the bunkhouse since he was twenty, when he had announced that a grown man did not sleep down the hall from his mother. Karin had said that a grown man could then do his own washing, and for eighteen years he had.

By the time the sun was on the cottonwoods Arne had made two rounds of the lower field. The hay was heavy. It had gone a little past bloom while he waited on a rain that the Snowies had promised and then kept, and the stems were coarser than he liked, but there was a great deal of it, and it fell behind the machine in a thick green rope that steamed where the light reached it. The Musselshell ran along the south edge of the field behind a screen of willow and Russian olive. On each pass he could see the water through the gaps, low and brown and slow. It was a small river. People from elsewhere who saw it on the map and then saw it from the highway bridge always thought there must be more of it somewhere.

On the far bank the ground was Rourke ground, and had been since 1923.

He was on the third round, coming west along the river with the sun behind him, when the reel dropped.

He heard it before he saw it: a bang, and a clatter that kept time with the reel, and then the left end of the lowest bat swung down into the crop and began beating the standing hay flat ahead of the sickle. He hit the clutch and the header lever together and the machine shuddered and quit turning. In the quiet he could hear the river and a meadowlark somewhere off towards the ditch.

He sat in the seat with both hands on the wheel. Then he climbed down, left leg first and the right one brought after it, holding the grab rail.

It was a three-eighths bolt. It had held the end of the bat to the reel arm for thirty-seven years and this morning it had sheared clean, and the half with the head on it was gone into eighty acres of alfalfa. The bat hung by its other end with the tines pointing at the ground. He lifted it. It was a length of steel tube with wire fingers along it and it weighed almost nothing. There was no reason in the world a man could not put a three-eighths bolt through it and be cutting again in five minutes.

He opened the toolbox behind the cab. There were half-inch bolts in a coffee can, and quarter-inch, and a great many sickle rivets, and two cotter pins, and a spark plug for an engine he no longer owned. There was no three-eighths bolt. He tipped the can out on the platform and went through it with one finger, and then he went through it again.

He had the crescent wrench in his hand. He looked at it, and then he threw it.

It went a good distance for a man of sixty-seven. It turned over in the air above the standing hay with the sun on it and dropped into the field without a sound, some forty yards off, and the alfalfa closed over the place.

Arne stood on the platform breathing through his nose. Across the field, a quarter mile east, the old John Deere had stopped. Jens had been turning yesterday's windrows with the rake and now he was sitting on the tractor with his arms folded on the wheel, looking this way. He did not get down. He had watched his father throw tools into hayfields before, and into stock tanks, and once through the open door of the shop into a snowbank, where the tool had stayed until April. He had learned to give it a few minutes.

There was a spool of baling wire on a nail inside the toolbox lid. Arne took the fencing pliers off his belt and cut two feet of it. He lif-

ted the bat, lined the hole in its end with the hole in the reel arm, threaded the wire through both, brought it around and through again, and then a third time, and twisted the ends together with the pliers until the wire bit into itself and squeaked. He bent the twist flat so it would not catch the crop. He took hold of the bat and shook it. It moved less than the ones that were bolted.

Then he went to look for the wrench.

He paced off forty yards along the line he thought it had taken and found nothing. He walked a circle, and a larger circle. The hay stood to his thighs and was wet to the knee with dew, and a wrench lying in the bottom of it could not be seen from above; a man had to part the stems and look. He got down on his hands and knees. This was a thing the surgeon in Billings had told him in 1991 that he might never do again, and he did it most weeks, and it hurt every time in the place where the two halves of him had been joined back together. He crawled a few yards and parted the hay and crawled again. The dog thought it was a game and went bounding ahead and came back and put its nose in his ear.

"Get out of it," he said.

He heard the pickup before he looked up. Jens had left the tractor and walked back to the gate for the truck, and now he drove down the edge of the cut ground and stopped by the swather and got out. He looked at the wired bat. He looked at his father on all fours in the alfalfa.

"There's a whole bin of three-eighths in the shop," Jens said. "Second shelf. I filled it in March."

"I know where the bolts are."

"I could've been there and back."

"It's fixed."

Jens took hold of the bat and shook it, as Arne had, and said nothing about it, which was as near as either of them would come to agreeing that it was. He was a head taller than his father and built narrower through the shoulders, his mother's family in him, with

her fair hair gone the colour of binder twine under the cap. He walked out into the standing hay, looking down, and went straight to a spot some fifteen yards to the left of where Arne had been searching, and bent, and came up with the wrench.

"You pull left," he said. "You always did. Mom says you pulled left in the Miles City finals and that's why the pickup man couldn't get to you."

"Your mother wasn't at Miles City."

"She's seen the tape."

Arne got up. It took him two tries and he did it by getting the left foot under him and pushing off his own knee, and Jens watched him do it and did not offer a hand, because he had offered one once, in about 2019, and had not forgotten what came of it. Arne took the wrench and wiped it on his trouser leg and put it in the toolbox and shut the lid.

"How's it turning?" he said.

"The top's dry. Underneath it's still tough. I'd give yesterday's another day before we bale it."

"We'll bale it tomorrow afternoon."

"If it's—"

"It'll be ready."

Jens looked off across the river, and Arne looked where he was looking.

On the Rourke side the ground came up from the water in a long bench of native grass, cured yellow already, and along the top of the bench, where yesterday there had been nothing but the fence line and the sky, there was a row of stakes. They were lath, waist high, and the top foot of each one had been sprayed orange. Somebody had tied pink flagging to them and the flagging lifted and fell in a wind too slight to feel down on the bottom. There were nine before the bench curved away behind the cottonwoods. A white pickup with a camper shell was parked up there, and a man beside it was bent over a tripod.

"When did those go in?" Arne said.

"Yesterday afternoon. You were on the far side." Jens leaned on the truck. "They were in the Stockman's on Saturday, two of them. Surveyors out of Bozeman. They didn't mind talking."

"And?"

"It's the computing people. A consortium, they called it." He nodded at the bench. "They want two sections up there to start. Declan's leasing it to them, he's not selling. Ninety-nine years."

Arne had heard some of it. A man could not buy a sack of mineral in Prosper that summer without hearing some of it. There had been a meeting at the county courthouse in May that he had not gone to, and Karin had. He knew what the halls were, in the general way that everyone did. They were where the answers came from. A person asked a question of a telephone or a truck or a kitchen radio, and somewhere in a building without windows a machine worked out what to say, and it took power to do that, and water to carry off the heat. He had seen pictures. He had never asked one a question in his life, and had been told by his daughter that this was no longer a thing to be proud of, and was proud of it anyway.

"Where's it going to get water?" he said. "The river's closed. It's been closed since before you were born. A man can't file on a stock pond."

"Declan's got water."

"Declan's got irrigation water. Eighteen eighty-six, off the old N Bar filing. It's for hay."

"They can change what it's for. There's an application. The surveyor said the lawyers have been at it since Christmas." Jens shrugged. "He said it's the best-watered dry ground they looked at between here and the Dakotas. That's why here."

Arne looked at the stakes. The man at the tripod straightened up and walked to the next one and bent again.

"Their hay's been up two weeks," Jens said. "The Rourkes'. I drove by on the twenty-fourth and it was baled and off the field. All of it."

"I know when their hay was up."

"The advisory told them to cut on the sixteenth. Told them the hour. Conor says it gave them—"

"I don't care what it gave them."

"—the dew point, every night that week. So they'd know when to bale." He said it flatly, as a thing he had heard and was passing on. "They baled from two in the morning till six, with lights. Got it in at fourteen percent, the whole crop."

"And it was half the tonnage. They cut it short."

"It tested twenty-two protein."

"Hay's hay," Arne said. "A cow doesn't read the test." He put a boot on the step of the swather. "You going to turn windrows or stand here?"

Jens got in the truck. He sat a moment with the door open. "I'm only telling you what Conor said."

"You've told me."

He watched the truck go back up the field. Then he climbed onto the platform, right leg dragging after the left, and started the engine and let the header down. The reel came around. The wired bat went past with the others and laid the hay back against the sickle, and he made the rest of that round and the next one watching it, and after that he quit watching.

• • •

At noon he left the swather at the top of the field and took the flatbed up to the east pasture.

It was six miles by the county road and then two more on a track that climbed out of the river breaks onto the bench. The east pasture was two sections of state ground, school-trust land, which the Tollefsens had leased since 1934 and which everyone in the family and most of the county called the east lease, and a deeded half-section of their own beside it. It was the best summer grass on the place. It was also dry. There was a spring in a coulee on the deeded

piece that ran a trickle until about the Fourth of July and a reservoir his father had dozed out below it that held snowmelt until about the same date, and after that there was nothing a cow could drink for three miles in any direction except on Rourke ground.

He drove through the pairs slowly with the window down. A hundred and forty cows up here and their calves, three months old now and slick, bucking away from the truck with their tails up. He looked at eyes and feet and bags. A cow with a bad quarter. A calf that was carrying one ear low, which he would look at again on Thursday. The grass was holding. He had come up meaning to find something wrong and there was nothing wrong, and he drove on to the south fence.

The gate was in the corner. It was a wire gate, five strands and three stays, hung on a railroad tie his father had set, and it stood open against the fence where it had stood open every summer since 1958. A cow trail a foot deep and two feet wide went through it and down the slope on the other side. He stopped the truck in the gateway and got out.

Below him, a half mile down the Rourke side, the reservoir lay in its draw. It was twelve acres at full pool, a great deal of water for that country, held behind an earth dam that Declan's father had built the year after the war in Korea. Forty or fifty Lodgepole cows were standing on the dam and belly-deep at the near edge. Others were strung out along the trail coming and going. They went down in the morning and came back up in the heat and went down again at evening, and they had done it for seventy-three summers, since the afternoon Einar Tollefsen and Francis Rourke had sat on the tailgate of Francis's pickup with the dry spring behind them and agreed on it. Nothing had been written. Einar had sent a beef over every fall for as long as he lived, and Arne had gone on sending one, and there was no more to the arrangement than that. There had been a lawyer in Roundup in the eighties who told Arne he ought to get it on paper. Arne had asked him what paper would do that a

Rourke's hand had not, and the lawyer had not had an answer he could use.

He did not think about Declan Rourke's hand more than he could help. He stood at the gate and looked at his cows in Declan's water. His hip hurt, and under the hip, where it always went when he stood too long on a slope, the old place hurt, the long seam where they had opened him at St. Vincent's and put the plate in. He had been there five weeks. He remembered the ceiling. He remembered the bill, which had come to the house in a long envelope in September of that year, and which had been paid.

A rider was coming up the trail from the dam.

Arne did not know him. He was young, a boy nearly, long in the leg, sitting a bay colt that could not have had thirty rides on it. The colt was looking at everything. It looked at the cows and the truck and at Arne and at the gate lying back against the fence, and each time it looked the boy let it look, and then put it forward again with so little hand that Arne could not see him do it. Twenty yards off the colt stopped dead and blew at the flatbed. The boy sat there. He did not kick and he did not pet. He waited as though he had the whole afternoon, and after a time the colt dropped its head and sighed and walked on up to the gate of its own accord.

"Afternoon," the boy said. He touched his hat.

"You work for Declan."

"Yes sir. Since May." He had a soft way of talking, from somewhere south. Wyoming, or farther. "Mr. Rourke's sister had me ride the fence. Miss Shannon, I mean. Mr. Conor's sister."

"I know who she is. Fence all right?"

"There's a post rotted off about a quarter mile west. I stood it back up and tied it. I'll bring a new one tomorrow." He looked at the gate, and at the trail going through it, and at the Lodgepole cows on the dam below. Arne watched him work it out and decide it was none of his business. "That's a nice set of cows."

"They'll do."

"I didn't touch your gate."

"It's been open longer than your dad's been alive," Arne said. "Leave it how you found it."

"Yes sir."

He turned the colt along the fence. It went sideways for a few steps, wanting to keep an eye on the truck, and then straightened, and the two of them went off west along the wire at a walk with the boy's hand low and quiet. Arne watched longer than he had meant to. He had ridden saddle broncs for nine years and had been considered a hand with a horse by men who knew, and he had never in his life had the patience to sit a colt like that. He wondered where Declan had found him. Then he got back in the truck.

He did not start it. A truck was coming down the far side of the draw towards the dam, a flatbed with a white tank on the back and a pump bolted behind the cab, and he sat and watched it come. It went out along the top of the dam slowly, nosing through his cows, and they gave way to it and stood off along the bank and looked at it. A man got down and dropped a hose over the edge into the water and went back to the pump and pulled the cord. The sound of it came up the draw a moment late.

The water was down. He had not seen it from the gateway because he had not been looking for it, and now he could see nothing else: a band of grey mud all round the near end, a yard wide, two yards at the shallow corner by the dam, cracked where it had dried and shining where it had not. In sixty years he had seen that reservoir low in September. He had never seen it low in July.

A young cow had backed off the end of the dam to get away from the pump. He watched her do it. She went down the soft bank behind her and into the mud at the shallow corner, and her hind legs went in to the hocks, and she lunged and went in to the stifles, and then she stood there with her head up and her eyes showing white and did not try again.

He went through the gate on foot. He took the lariat off the seat and the long shovel off the flatbed and went down the trail through his own cows, past the pump man, who looked at him and at the shovel and went on watching his gauge. By the time Arne reached the shallow corner the cow had tried again and gone deeper. She was in to the flank. Her calf was on the bank, bawling at her.

He went in after her. The mud took him to the knee at the first step and to the thigh at the third, and it was cold under the warm crust and it held on, so that each time he pulled a leg out it came with a sound like a cork and the leg did not want to come at all. He got the rope round her horns. He dug at the mud behind her with the shovel, which was nothing, and he knew it was nothing, and he went on doing it. Down in his hip the old seam began to burn, and then to do more than burn, and he stopped and stood in the mud with both hands on the shovel handle and his breath going in and out of him in short pulls.

A pickup came over the top of the dam fast and stopped short, and Conor Rourke got out of it.

He came along the bank with his hat in his hand and looked down at Arne in the mud and at the cow, and Arne saw him decide not to laugh, which for Conor was something.

"Arne," he said. "You'll put that hip out."

"She's mine."

"I can see she's yours." Conor looked at the pump truck, and at the band of mud round the water, and back at Arne. "Give me the end of your rope."

Arne did not give it to him. Conor came down the bank on his heels and took it out of his hand, and went back up and dallied it round the hitch ball on the pickup, and got in and backed up the bank an inch at a time with his door open and his head out, watching. The rope came tight. The cow bawled. Arne put his shoulder into her hip from behind, because he could not stand there and do nothing, and the mud let go of her all at once and she came out onto

the bank on her knees and got up and stood with her legs shaking, black to the brisket. Her calf went to her. Arne was left in the hole she had made, and it was Conor who came back down with his hand out, and Arne who took it, because he could not have got out without it.

They stood on the bank. Arne's trousers were black and heavy to the waist. The pump went on.

"They take a load a day," Conor said. "For the drilling. Mud for the rig, and they wet the road for the dust. Since the first of the month." He coiled the rope and held it out. "Dad said it was fine."

"It's stock water."

"It's Dad's water, Arne." He said it easily, the way he said everything, and Arne could see that he believed it was a kindness to say it plainly. "It's always been Dad's water. You know that better than me." He put his hat on. "He'll be at the Stampede. He said if I saw you to say he'd like a word."

"He knows where I live."

"He said the Stampede." Conor got into the pickup. He looked at the cow, and at Arne's trousers, and grinned after all, but not unkindly. "I'll not tell anybody you were in the reservoir."

He drove off along the dam. Arne stood with the coiled rope in his hand until the pump stopped and the man pulled his hose and the tank truck went away up the far side of the draw, and then he climbed back up the trail to the gate, slowly, with the mud drying grey on his legs and every step costing him, and got into the flatbed and sat.

From the gateway, before he turned around, he could see a long way south and west across Rourke country, across the bench and the river breaks to the blue line of the Bull Mountains, and there were more of the stakes. He had not seen them from below. They ran along the bench for a mile or better, a line of orange dots, and a second line went off at a right angle towards the county road. Inside the corner they made, somebody had mown a square of the native

grass down to the dirt. A machine was parked on it that he took at first for a drill rig and then saw was a mast, with guy wires, and something turning slowly at the top.

He sat with his arm on the window looking at it until a cow bawled behind him, and then he drove home.

• • •

They cut until the light went. He finished the lower field at twenty to ten with the headlights on and the dew already coming, and drove the swather up to the yard, and Jens came in behind him on the tractor. Neither spoke. They had said what they had to say at eight that morning and neither had found more since.

Karin had kept supper. She put it in front of them, a roast and new potatoes and the first peas, and they ate with their hats on the floor beside their chairs, and when Jens had finished he thanked his mother and went across the yard to the bunkhouse, and his light went on and then, sooner than usual, off.

Arne sat. He was too tired to get up and the chair was the one that suited his hip. Karin cleared the plates and wiped the oilcloth and brought the ledger from the drawer of the sideboard.

It was a green book the size of a serving tray, with a red spine and red corners, and it was the forty-first one. The other forty were in the drawer below, and under them were the ones Arne's mother had kept, and his grandmother before her, back to 1911 in a hand that slanted backwards, the first dozen years of them in Norwegian. Karin had been keeping it since the winter they were married. She had been twenty-three, a banker's daughter from Lewistown with two years at the college in Bozeman, and Arne's mother had handed her the book across this table the week after the wedding and never asked for it back. Karin opened it to the ribbon. She uncapped the pen. She wrote the date, and under it, in the left column, in her small upright figures, the things the day had cost.

"Diesel," she said, not looking up.

"Sixty gallons, about. Jens filled the Deere twice."

She wrote. "The swather."

"What about it?"

"Jens said it broke."

"It's fixed. It didn't cost anything."

"What did you fix it with?"

He did not answer. She waited a moment and then wrote something short in the right-hand column, where she put the things that were not money, and he knew without seeing it that it said *wire*.

"There's a pair of trousers on the porch," she said, still writing.

"I was in the reservoir."

She looked up.

"They're pumping it. For the drilling rig. It's down a yard at the shallow end, and a heifer went in after she'd backed off the dam." He turned his cup a quarter turn. "Conor pulled her out with his pickup."

Karin looked at him a moment longer. Then she wrote in the right-hand column again.

"Conor," she said, writing it.

She was sixty-four. Her hair had been yellow when he met her at a dance in the Lewistown armoury and it was white now, and she wore it cut short, which she had not done until the children were grown. She had her reading glasses on. Past her shoulder the kitchen window gave on the yard and the river bottom and the dark bench on the other side.

"I was up at the east lease," he said.

"How do they look?"

"They look good. There's a cow with a bad quarter. One calf I'll look at again." He turned his coffee cup a quarter turn on the oilcloth. "They've staked the whole bench over there. Clear to the county road. There's a tower up."

"I know."

"You've seen it?"

"I drove to town Friday. You can see it from the bridge." She wrote a line. "It's a weather mast. They have to measure the wind for a year before they can design the cooling. The man at the meeting explained it."

"What else did the man at the meeting explain?"

She put the pen down then and looked at him over the glasses. "I told you in May. You said you didn't care to hear it."

"I'm asking now."

"Two halls to begin with. Two more after, if the first two pay. A power line from Colstrip, since there's line there already with half the plant shut. Three hundred men to build it and forty to run it." She took the glasses off. "And a road. They'll want a road in from the highway that will carry heavy loads, and a bridge, and the county has said it will help."

"A road where?"

"He didn't say where. Down the coulee, I'd think, and across at the narrows. It's the only grade."

The coulee came off the north bench and under the highway and down through the Rourkes' upper meadow, which lay on this side of the river and ran up against the Lodgepole's west fence. In a wet spring it flowed for a week. The water spread out in a slough in the Rourke meadow and stood there until the ground took it, and what came on through the fence onto the Lodgepole's calving flat was never more than a seep. He thought about a road down it and could not see that it came to anything, and let it go.

"And the water," he said.

"Declan's water."

"For hay."

"For whatever the state says it's for, once the state has said." She put the glasses back on. "It's his right, Arne. It's the oldest on this stretch of the river. He can let it to whoever he likes if the change goes through, and it will go through. There were two lawyers at that meeting and neither of them was from Montana."

He looked at the window. There was nothing in it but the kitchen, himself in the chair and Karin with the book, and behind that the black.

"Dagny called," Karin said.

"When?"

"About four. You were on the bottom."

"What did she want?"

"To talk to her mother." She turned a page back, looked at something, turned it forward again. "She's well. She's busy. They've given her all of the Yellowstone valley now, from Laurel to Forsyth. She has two people under her."

Their daughter was thirty-three. She lived in Billings and worked for the grazing co-operative that sold the Rourkes their advisory, and what she did there, as near as he could understand it, was sit between the machine and the men who paid for it and tell each what the other meant. She had been a hand. At fourteen she could sort pairs afoot in an alley faster than Jens could do it horseback. She had gone to the university at Bozeman for range science and had come home for five summers and then for a week at Christmas and then, after a supper at this table in 2026 that neither of them had mentioned since, for an afternoon at a time, when she knew he would be out.

"She ask after the hay?" he said.

"She asked if it was down. I said it was coming down."

"What did she say?"

Karin wrote a figure and blotted it with the side of her hand. "She said you had till Thursday night."

He sat a while longer. Then he got up, in two tries, and carried his cup to the sink and rinsed it and set it in the rack. He took his hat off the floor.

At the door he stopped by the barometer. He only tapped it mornings; his father had said that a man who looked at the glass more than once a day would soon be looking at it every hour, and

would get nothing done. He stood in front of it with his hat in his hand. Thirty and a tenth. Behind him the pen was moving. He opened the door and stood on the step in the dark to let his eyes come up, and when they had, he could make out the bench across the river, and on it one small white light, high up, turning.

2

The Water Clause

The consortium's lawyers had sent the lease as a locked file with the changes switched off, and Shannon Rourke had printed all sixty-one pages of it and taken the staples out.

She had the pages laid in rows on the long table in the ranch office, weighted against the fan with whatever had been in reach: a stapler, a jar of ear tags, a horseshoe, her own coffee cup. Section fourteen was in front of her. It ran to three pages and it was headed *Water*, and she had read it so many times since Monday that she had stopped seeing the words and had to put a ruler under each line to make herself go slowly.

The office was the old cookhouse. Her grandfather had fed twenty men in it at branding, and when the twenty became eight her father had pulled out the range and put in desks. It stood forty yards from the main house, with a window that looked down the yard to the barns and the round pen, and beyond those to the hay meadows along the river, cut and baled and already greening up for a second crop. She had worked in this room since she was twentytwo. She paid the hands and the taxes and the vet. She kept the brand papers and the grazing permits and the breeding records on eleven hundred mother cows, and for six years she had kept the account with the co-operative as well, which meant that every fore-

cast and ration and shipping date the advisory sent to Rourke Land & Cattle passed across her screen before it reached her father's truck. She was thirty-six. On the tax forms she was the office manager. Her brother was the vice-president.

She moved the ruler down.

> 14.3. *Lessor shall convey to Lessee by quitclaim deed all right, title and interest in and to the Water Rights described in Exhibit F, together with all ditches, headgates, easements and appurtenances.*

She had put a pencil line beside it on Monday. Before breakfast today she had put a second line beside the first. She picked up the pencil now and wrote in the margin, in capitals, NO.

The screen door banged. Ray Dunning, the foreman, stood on the mat in his irrigating boots and came no farther, which was a thing her mother had trained him to thirty years ago and which had outlasted her. He wanted a cheque for the parts man in Roundup. He wanted the key to the fuel tank, which was on the nail where it always was. And he wanted to know whether the Pell boy could have the bay colt to ride fence on, since the boy had asked and Ray did not know whose colt it was to say.

"It's Conor's."

"Conor says ask you."

"Then yes. Put him on the east line first." She wrote the cheque. The fan came round and lifted a corner of page thirty, and Ray reached over from the mat and pressed it flat with one wet thumb and looked at what he was holding down.

"That the lease?"

"That's it."

"Lot of paper to rent out some grass."

"It isn't the grass they want."

"No," Ray said. "I didn't suppose." He took the cheque and the key and went, and left two boot-prints on the mat and a thumb-print on the page, and she found her place with the ruler.

Exhibit F was two rights. The larger was the one the ranch stood on: twenty-two cubic feet a second out of the Musselshell, decreed, with a priority date of the fourth of May, 1886. A cow outfit called the N Bar had filed it when there was nobody else on that stretch of the river to object, and when the N Bar went under in the winter of 1919 her great-grandfather had bought the land and the ditch and the filing together with money he had made selling beef to the mines at Butte. It was senior to everything for thirty miles. In a dry August, when the river commissioner drove the ditches shutting headgates one after another in order of date, the Rourke gate was the last one he came to, and in ninety years he had not come to it yet. The hay she could see from the window grew on that water. So did the eleven hundred cows.

The river had been closed to new filings since she was a child. Nobody could get a fresh right on the Musselshell now for any money. A man who wanted water had to find somebody who already held it and apply to the state to change what it was used for, from irrigation to something else, and show that no one downstream would be shorted by the change. The consortium had looked at ground from Billings to Bismarck and it had come here, and she did not think it had come for the view.

It wanted the deed, though. She could see why. A company putting three billion dollars onto leased ground would want to own outright the single thing it could not replace. If she had been its lawyer she would have written 14.3 exactly as it stood.

She pulled a yellow pad towards her and began to write it the other way.

It took her most of the morning. The lessor would keep title to the water, all of it, for ever. The lessee would have the use of a stated quantity, as industrial water, for the term of the ground lease

and not a day longer, and would pay for it by the acre-foot at a price that rose each year with an index she had spent an hour choosing. If the halls shut, or were sold, or stood idle for three years running, the use came back to the ranch and the state would be asked to change it back to hay. The lessee would carry the whole cost of the change application, and of any objection to it, and of every pipe, pump, pond, road, culvert and drain it needed to move the water or get rid of it. She wrote that last part twice, to get the order of the words right. *Lessee shall design, construct and maintain all roads, conveyance and drainage works at its sole expense, and may discharge storm and surface water to the nearest natural drainage. Lessee shall indemnify Lessor against any claim by any third party arising from such works.* The first sentence settled who paid as between the two of them. The second was for everybody else, and she knew it was the weaker. An indemnity would not stop a neighbour from suing a Rourke. It only promised that Denver would pay the Rourke back afterwards, if Denver was still there to pay. She put a small question mark beside it for the lawyer in Helena, whoever that turned out to be, and went on to the next.

The hard one was the dry year. In the consortium's draft, if the river fell short, the halls were served first and in full and the Rourke meadows took what was left. She turned that over for a long while with the pencil in her teeth. She could not get them to accept the reverse; no one would build on those terms. In the end she split it. Below a certain flow at the Harlowton gauge, both would be cut by the same fraction, and for every acre-foot of hay water the ranch gave up the lessee would pay the price of the hay it would have grown, at the Billings market on the first of September. She worked the figures on the back of the pad. In a year like 2021 it came to more than the hay was worth in the stack.

At a quarter to twelve she typed it clean and printed it and laid it over the top of the consortium's page fourteen, so that it covered theirs.

She was pleased with it. She let herself be, for about as long as it took to finish the cold coffee. It was the best piece of work she had done in that room, and no one would know she had done it. The lawyers in Denver would see a redline come back from Rourke Land & Cattle and suppose the old man had hired somebody good.

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Her father came in off the meadows at noon. She heard the truck before she saw it, and then heard him still talking after the engine stopped, and knew he was on the earpiece.

Declan Rourke was seventy-one years old and had been deaf in the left ear since a branding fire in his thirties, and he had resisted the earpiece for two years on the grounds that he already wore one thing in his head and did not mean to wear two. Then the co-operative had sent a model that sat in the bad ear, where the hearing aid could do no good, and he had put it in one morning to try it and had not, as far as Shannon knew, taken it out since except to sleep. He talked to it as he had once talked to his foreman. He did not say please. He asked it things in half a sentence and it answered in less, and he said "Right," and did what it said most times. The rest of the time he did what he had been going to do anyway, and told people afterwards that the thing had agreed with him.

He came through the door sideways, big as he was, and hung his hat on the antelope horns.

"Right," he said, to nobody in the room, and then to her, "Second cutting on the Home Meadow in nineteen days. It wants the water off by Sunday."

"I saw. I've told Ray."

"It says there's a hailstorm going to miss us by six miles on Friday." He lowered himself into the chair across the table. "Six miles. I asked it which side and it said south. I'd like to know how a man is supposed to feel about a hailstorm that's going to miss him."

"Grateful."

"I am. I'd be more grateful if I didn't know about it." He looked at the pages spread on the table. "Is that it?"

"That's it."

"Is it as bad as Tom Brannigan said?"

Brannigan was the family's lawyer in Roundup. He was eighty and had told Declan on the telephone that the document was beyond him and that he would not charge for saying so. "It isn't bad," Shannon said. "It's theirs. It's written for them. Most of it I'd leave. The rent's what you agreed, the term's what you agreed, they fence it and they pay the taxes on what they build. There are six things I'd change and one I wouldn't sign at any price."

"Which one?"

She turned the consortium's page fourteen around and slid it to him with her finger on the line. He got his glasses out of his shirt pocket and read it. He read it again. His face did not alter much; it was a broad red face that had been looking at weather and cattle buyers for fifty years and had learned not to give either of them anything. He set the page down.

"They want me to give them the water."

"Deed it. For a dollar and other consideration."

"My grandfather's water."

"Yes."

"Do they know who they're dealing with?"

"I don't think they've thought about it. It's what they'd put in front of anybody." She slid her own page across. "That's what I'd send back."

He read hers more slowly. She watched his eyes go down it and stop, and go on, and stop. He had not gone past the eighth grade at the school in Prosper and he read a contract as he would read a strange horse, standing off from it, looking for the place it was going to try him. When he reached the dry-year paragraph he put his thumb on it and looked up.

"They pay me for hay I don't grow."

"At Billings price. If the river's short."

"And if it isn't short?"

"Then they pay for the water and you grow the hay as well. There's enough for both in a normal year. I had the co-op run it against the gauge record back to 1950. There were nine years it would have pinched."

"You had the machine run it."

"I had it add up a column. I wrote the question." It came out sharper than she had meant, and he noticed, and let it by. "I'd want Brannigan to find us somebody in Helena to look at it before it goes. A water lawyer. There'll be things I've missed."

"Will there?"

"I don't know. That's why I want somebody to look."

Declan took his glasses off and folded them. He looked out of the window, down the yard. He was pleased; she could tell by the way he was working his jaw. In a minute he would say something about her mother.

"Your mother," he said, "could do the Friday crossword in ink."

"I know she could."

"I never knew where she got it and I don't know where you did." He tapped the page. "Send it. Send it just how it is. If they don't like it they can go and look at North Dakota again."

"I'll send it to Helena first."

"Send it wherever you want. But I'm not deeding anybody that water, and you can tell them it was me that said so." He put a hand flat on the table and pushed himself up. At the door he reached for his hat and stopped with it in his hand, his head a little on one side. He was listening. "Right," he said. "Conor's at the bridge. He's got Kieran with him. Is there anything to eat in the house or do I have to send for it?"

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They ate in the big kitchen, the three of them and the boy. Conor had been in Billings two days seeing the consortium's people and had come back with a new shirt and a model of the halls in a cardboard box, which he set up on the table among the plates. It was white plastic, the size of a cake. There were two long buildings with no windows, and a third, smaller, with a row of fans along the roof, and a square blue pond. Kieran, who was four, was told that he could look and not touch, and stood on his chair with his hands behind his back, looking as hard as he could.

"That's the cooling," Conor said. He was forty-three, their father over again but with more of it gone to belly, and he had their father's way of filling a room. "That's where the water goes. It goes round and round in pipes and takes the heat off, and comes out here, warm, and sits in the pond till it's cool enough to go round again. They only lose what steams off. They say a hall that size uses less in a year than our Home Meadow does in June."

"They say," Declan said.

"I've seen the numbers."

"Shannon's seen them too. She's got them paying us for hay."

Conor looked at her across the model. "Has she?"

"It's a draft," Shannon said. "You'll get it tonight."

"Am I going to like it?"

"You're going to like the money."

He laughed. He had never cared to read a thing through if someone would tell him how it came out, and it had made him easy to work for and hard to work with. He picked a fan off the roof of the plastic building, looked at it, and pressed it back on. "I drove in by the river road," he said. "The Norwegians are still cutting. Still. I counted. It's the eighth of July."

"He waited on a rain," Declan said.

"He waited on that barometer. Dad, you've seen it. It's on the wall by the door like a crucifix. He goes up and knocks on it every morn-

ing to see if anybody's home." Conor rapped the table with a knuckle, twice, and cocked his head. Kieran laughed without knowing why. "Jens told me. He wasn't even ashamed of it. He said his grandfather did it and his great-grandfather would have if he'd had the price of one."

"It's a good instrument," Declan said. "I've got one."

"You've got one in a drawer."

"Their hay's heavy," Shannon said. "I drove past Sunday. They'll get half again what we did off the same ground."

"And it'll test fourteen and be full of stems."

"They've wintered cows on it sixty years."

Conor turned in his chair to look at her properly. "What are you sticking up for Tollefsens for?"

"I'm not. I'm saying it's heavy." She got up and took her plate to the sink. Her face had gone warm and she kept her back to the table until it passed. Her brother had seen nothing; it was only his usual luck to have asked. She ran the water. Behind her their father said that Arne Tollefsen had forgotten more about putting up hay than the co-operative's machine would ever need to know, and that it was a good thing for the Rourkes he was too stubborn to subscribe, and Conor said he would drink to that, and did.

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By seven the heat had gone out of the day and the round pen was in the shadow of the barn.

Her colt was a three-year-old, a sorrel filly out of a mare she had owned since college, and she had been getting on it for a month. It had been a long month. The filly was quick and suspicious and had bucked her off twice, the second time into the fence, and since then Shannon had caught herself finding work to do in the office at this hour of the evening. She had made herself come down tonight. She had her saddle on the top rail and the filly on a long line in the

middle of the pen, and she was sending it around at a trot and asking it to turn, and it was turning with its ears flat and its tail going.

"She's mad at you," Wyatt Pell said.

He was sitting on the fence by the gate. She had not heard him come. He had been on the ranch eight weeks, the newest hand and the youngest; he had turned up in May in a pickup with Niobrara County plates and a saddle in the back, eighteen years old, asking for whatever there was. The foreman had put him to fixing fence. He had fixed it, well and without complaint, and in the evenings, when the others went to the bunkhouse to look at their screens, he had come and sat on this rail and watched her work the filly. He had sat there a week before he said a word.

"I know she's mad at me."

"I don't mean she's mean. I mean she's mad. She thinks you're not listening." He climbed down inside. "Can I say something?"

"Go on."

"You ask her to turn and she turns. Then you ask her again right off. She gave you the thing you wanted and didn't get anything for it." He stood with his hands in his back pockets, watching the filly go by. "Next time she comes around, ask, and when she so much as tips an ear at you, quit. Drop the line. Turn your back on her and count twenty."

"Turn my back."

"Yes ma'am."

She did it. The filly came around, and Shannon lifted her hand, and the inside ear flicked, and she let the line go slack and turned and looked at the barn wall. She counted. It was very hard to do. At twelve she heard the filly stop. At eighteen she heard it take a step, and another, and then there was breath on the back of her neck, warm and smelling of hay.

"There," Wyatt said quietly. "Now she's got something to say and you're letting her say it."

They worked an hour. He left the line in her hands, and she kept it. He stood at her shoulder and talked, low, about where the filly's feet were and where its mind was, which he seemed to think were two different places a person could learn to see. Twice he reached past her and moved her hand an inch. She had started nine colts in her life and had thought herself good at it. She understood now that she had only been stubborn at it, and had stayed on. This boy had something she lacked and could not get by trying, and she was surprised to find how little she minded. She wanted to see what he would do next.

Near dark she saddled the filly and stepped on. It stood. It walked off when she asked and it stopped when she asked, and she rode it around the pen each way and got down while it was still standing square, and Wyatt held the gate.

"Where'd you learn?" she said.

"My granddad, some. He had the mustang contract at Rock Springs. Mostly by getting it wrong." He ran a hand down the filly's neck. "I'd like to do it for a living. Start them for people. There's men in Texas get three thousand a head and a waiting list."

"There's no one doing it here."

"No ma'am. I noticed that."

"Is that why you came?"

"I came because Mr. Rourke was hiring." He smiled, the first time she had seen it. "But I noticed."

She pulled the saddle and he carried it to the tack room without being asked. It was a thing she had thought about herself, in this pen, at this hour, for something like ten years: a barn of her own and six outside colts at a time and nobody's payroll to make but hers. She had never said it aloud on this ranch. She had said it once, years ago, behind the calf table at a neighbour's branding, to Jens Tollefsen, who had not laughed.

"What does it cost?" she said. "To get set up."

"A place to do it. A good pen and a bad pen. Hay." He hung her bridle on its peg and squared it. "I've got five thousand saved. I figure I need twenty. If I stay on through the winter I'll have ten."

"You'll have to ask the foreman about the winter."

"I'd rather ask you. He says you're the one who decides."

"He says that, does he?"

"Yes ma'am. He says the old man signs and Mr. Conor talks and you decide."

She laughed, and the filly, in the dark of the pen behind them, swung her head around at the sound.

She turned the horse out and walked up the yard alone. From the top of it, looking east down the river, there was one light on the Lodgepole, in the bunkhouse, and she stood looking at it until the mosquitoes found her. Her father had left his truck door open and the dash screen was still lit, a pale square with the ranch drawn on it in green and tomorrow's work laid over that in small type, pasture by pasture. She reached in and shut it off.

In the office she gathered the sixty-one pages back into order, with her page fourteen in the place of theirs, and put them in an envelope, and wrote Tom Brannigan's name on it and under that, *For a water lawyer. Helena. This week.* She would not send it down the wire for Conor to open at breakfast. She would drive it to Roundup in the morning herself.

3

Pen Dispatch

At ten past two in the morning the handset on Joseph Wipf's belt buzzed twice against his hip, and he took it out and read it by the light of the bunk lamps.

Pen 31. Tag 4471. Pull to Hospital 2.

Under the words there was a small drawing of an open hand, palm up, which was the mark of the company that had built the system and sold it to the yard. That was all the handset ever showed him: a pen, a number, a place to take it, and the hand. The men on the night crew called the whole arrangement the Hand, as in the Hand wants a steer out of 31, or the Hand's got you on the south alley till five. The day foreman, who was older, called it Dispatch and disliked hearing it called anything else.

Joseph put the handset back and turned the horse.

The feedyard lay on a bench above the Yellowstone twelve miles east of Billings, a mile long and half a mile deep, and from the saddle at night it looked like a town. The pens ran in blocks of ten with alleys between, each pen a hundred and fifty feet square and each with its lamp on a pole, and under the lamps the cattle lay in rows along the mounds or stood at the bunks with their heads through the cables. There were ten thousand and some head on feed that

week. He could have had the exact figure by asking. At the west end the mill stood up white against the dark with steam coming off the flaker, and the feed trucks went out from it and came back, slowly, with no one in the cabs.

He had worked there four years and eight months. He had started on days, riding pens with a crew of six, and each man had been given two blocks of pens to ride every morning and had been expected to look at every animal in them and decide for himself which ones were sick. It took a long time to learn. A steer coming down with pneumonia did not announce it. He stood a little apart. He was a half step slow to the bunk, or he held his head an inch lower than the others, or there was a look to his eye and his flank that a man either saw or did not see, and the old pen riders said it was two years before a new hand was worth his wages. Joseph had been worth his in five months. He had grown up among eight hundred hogs and three hundred cattle and had been put with the cow boss at thirteen, and when he came to the yard he already knew most of what a sick animal looked like.

Then the yard had put a tag in every ear and a camera on every third pole.

The tags took the temperature and counted the steps. The cameras watched each animal walk to water and measured how it carried itself, and the system put the two together, and it knew a steer was sick a day and a half before the best pen rider in Montana could have seen it. It had been explained to the crew at a meeting, with slides. Death loss had been one and a half percent and would be under one. No one was to be let go. There would still be riders, because an animal had to be got out of the pen and walked to the hospital by somebody, and the yard had tried a machine for that and the cattle would not have it. But the riders need not ride every pen. They need only go where they were sent.

All but two of the six had quit inside the year. They had not been asked to. They had found they could not stand it, and Joseph had

understood that and stayed anyway, and moved to nights when nights came open, because nights paid a dollar ten more and because at night there was no one to talk to.

Pen 31 was in the fourth block. He rode up the alley at a walk, and the cattle on either side lifted their heads and watched him go by. They were black, most of them, yearlings off grass from every corner of three states, with a hundred days on feed and sixty to go. The air was warm and it stank, though he had not smelled it for years unless he had been away a day and come back.

He leaned down and slid the gate latch and rode in.

There were a hundred and ten steers in the pen. On his first job here he would have stopped inside the gate and let them settle and then moved through them slowly, quartering, looking. He did that now out of habit. They got up, a few at a time, and stretched, and drifted away from the horse along the fence. He looked at them. A good pen, even, filling out. He looked for the one that stood apart, the slow one, the low head, and for a minute and then a second minute he could not find it. Every animal he could see was a well steer.

He took the handset out. He held it up and turned it across the pen, and on the screen each steer the lens passed wore a small grey number above its back, and one of the numbers was red.

It was a steer on the far side, by the water tank, chewing its cud. He rode over. It looked at him with mild interest. Its eye was bright, its nose was wet, its ears were up; it was breathing easily and its flank was full. He sat on the horse six feet from it and looked for a long time for whatever the tag had found. There was nothing he could see. He would have ridden past it every morning for a week.

He put the horse between the steer and the rest and walked it out along the fence to the gate. It went quietly. In the alley it tried once to turn back and the horse turned with it, and after that it walked ahead of him down to the hospital shed with its head swinging, and he put it up the chute into the squeeze. The gate at the head closed

by itself. An arm came down from the frame with a probe and a needle on it; there was a click, and a hiss, and on the screen above the chute a line of type came up giving the temperature, a hundred and four and a half, and the drug and the dose and the hour. The front gate opened. The steer walked out into the recovery pen and began to eat hay.

Joseph hung the handset back on his belt. He had not touched the animal. He had not decided that it was sick, or what it was sick with, or what to give it, and he would not decide when it was well; in three days or five the handset would buzz and tell him to take 4471 home to Pen 31. He had left Sixmile Colony at twenty-one.

He rode back up the alley. There was a meadowlark that sang under the lamps at night, having been fooled by them. He listened for it and heard it.

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The buzz came nine more times before the shift ended. Two more pulls. A water tank running over in 58, which he shut off by hand because the valve had stuck. A steer down in the south alley that turned out to be asleep. Between times he rode the alleys, which no one had told him to do, and looked at cattle, which he was no longer paid for. Before five the feed trucks began the first delivery. They came down the bunk line one behind another, each stopping at each pen for exactly as long as it took to lay down the weight the system had called for that pen that morning, and the weight was different every day and different for every pen. It changed with how clean the cattle had licked the bunk the night before, and with the heat that was coming, and with the price of corn. A camera read the bunks. There had been a man for that once too, a bunk reader. He was reckoned the most important hand on any yard, since he could make or lose his owner a hundred thousand dollars a year by the handful, and the one here had been named Dale and had gone to drive a propane truck in Laurel.

The sky went grey over the river and then pink. The day crew's pickups came in along the frontage road, three of them. Joseph unsaddled at the barn and turned the horse out and washed at the pump.

He had forty minutes' sleep in the truck before the telephone woke him.

It was lying on the dash, and for a moment he took it for the handset and felt on his belt. Then he saw the number. It was the colony's, the telephone in the kitchen passage, which was the one the women could use.

He let it ring once more.

"Joseph?"

"Rachel."

"Are you awake? Mother said you would be just come off."

"I'm awake."

She was speaking Hutterisch and he answered in it, and it was strange in his mouth, as it was every time. It was a soft, old German full of words from the Tyrol and the Ukraine and Dakota Territory, and he had no one in Billings to speak it to. His sister was twenty. He had last seen her at fourteen, a thin girl in a polka-dot kerchief standing with the other schoolgirls at the end of the lane, forbidden to wave. She had waved.

"Is something wrong?" he said. "Is it Dad?"

"Nothing's wrong. Dad is well. He's seeding the summer fallow. The Minister had his gall bladder out in Great Falls and Dad says he is a changed man, he smiled at the Wurz baby." She was talking fast; she had always talked fast. "Joseph, I have something to tell you and I wanted to tell it myself before you hear it from Mother, because Mother will make it sound like a thing that has happened to her."

"Tell it, then."

"I'm to be married."

He sat up. Through the windshield the mill was sending up its steam in the early sun. "To who?"

"Peter Entz."

"Peter Entz." He had to hunt for him. A boy two years behind him in the German school, big hands, a stammer on his hard letters. He had been the hog boss's helper. "From the last house. With the ears."

"He's grown into the ears." She was laughing. "He's the hog boss now. Since Andreas-Vetter's back went. He doesn't drink and he doesn't shout, Joseph. He spoke to the Minister at Pentecost, and the brothers have said yes to it if we are both baptised at Palm Sunday, and not before."

"An Entz," he said. "From three doors down. You won't even have to leave the place."

"Mother says I am the only girl in Montana who will be married without a suitcase." She did her mother's voice, and it was very like. "The Minister had the books out two evenings. The Entzes came down from Alberta when the colony was made, and we from the mother colony on the Teton, and he went back to the great-great-grandfathers. Fourth cousins, once. That's all there is."

"When?"

"June. Next June, the second Sunday, after seeding is done and before the hay."

"That's a year off."

"There's the house to be made ready. And Palm Sunday must come first."

He said nothing to that. Baptism was at twenty or after, when a person was of an age to choose it, and it was for life. He had gone at twenty-one, the autumn before he would have been asked.

"Are you glad?" he said.

"I am. I'm so glad I can't be still, Mother has sent me out of the kitchen twice." Her voice dropped. "I want you to come."

Two rows over, a man from the day crew was sitting on his tailgate pulling his boots on. Joseph watched him do one and then the other.

"I'd not be let."

"You would. I asked. I went to Dad, and Dad went to the Minister, and the Minister says a brother may come to his sister's wedding." She took a breath, and he could tell that the next part had been given to her to say and that she was getting it by heart. "You may come for the day. For the church and the meal. You would sit with the men. You would not stay the night."

"And after."

"After is as it was."

"Did he say that? The Minister?"

"Dad said it."

"What did he say? Tell me what he said."

She was quiet a moment. Behind her he could hear the kitchen, pans, and someone calling for the cream. It would be half past six there. The women would have been up since five, and the bell would go at seven for breakfast, the men at their tables and the women at theirs, eighty people sitting down together to eat what they had grown. He knew what was on the tables. It was Thursday.

"He said a wedding is a day and a home is a life," Rachel said, "and that you know the road to both."

It was their father's way of speaking exactly, and he could see him say it: standing in the shop door in his black hat with his thumbs in his braces, looking somewhere to the left of whoever he was talking to. Samuel Wipf was the colony's boss, the *Haushalter*, and had been since Joseph was ten. He kept the money for all of them and owned none of it. He could be fair to a hired trucker or a grain buyer or a Rourke without any effort at all, and found it harder with his son.

"I know it," Joseph said.

"So you'll come."

"It's a year, Rachel. I can't say what I'll be doing in a year."

"You'll be doing what you're doing now. What else would you be doing?"

She had not meant anything by it. She had never been farther from Sixmile than the dentist's in Lewistown. She did not know what

a feedyard was, or a shift, or a rented room, and she had asked it as she might have asked what else he would be having for breakfast. He looked at the steam going up.

"I'll come," he said. "If I'm let off work."

"They would not let you off for your sister's wedding?"

"They'll let me off."

"Then you'll come." She laughed again. "Oh, I have to go, there's Katie-Basel looking at me. Joseph. Are you eating?"

"I'm eating."

"Mother says to ask are you eating and do you have a coat. I told her it's July."

"Tell her I have a coat."

When she had gone he held the telephone a while and then set it back on the dash. He tried to sleep again and could not. At eight he drove into town, and ate eggs at the counter of the place on First Avenue where the night men from the refinery went, and paid for them with money that was his own.

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The Switchman was on Montana Avenue across from the old depot, in a block that had been rough when the railroad was running and had been fixed up since and was getting rough again. It had a tin ceiling and a long bar and a stage about the size of a hay wagon. On Thursdays in summer it had a band, and since April Joseph had been the rhythm guitar.

They were called the Yellowstone Drifters. The name had come with the singer, a man of fifty named Russ who sold irrigation pipe and had been fronting some version of the Drifters in that bar since before Joseph was born. There was a steel player who was very good and a drummer who was Russ's brother-in-law. The lead guitar was a boy from the college called Teo, who was better than all of them and would be gone by Christmas. They played what Russ called real country, which meant nothing written since he was thirty, and

people came to dance to it, older couples mostly, who two-stepped in a slow ring around the floor with their eyes half shut.

Joseph stood at the back of the stage on the left, by the drummer, where he had been put.

He had bought the guitar his second winter in Billings, at a pawn shop on Twenty-Seventh Street. It was a Japanese copy of a Martin and it had cost him three hundred and forty dollars, which was the largest sum he had ever spent on a thing for himself, and he had carried it up to his room in its case and not opened it for two days. There was another guitar. It was in the hay loft of the old horse barn at Sixmile, wrapped in a feed sack, behind the third rafter on the north side. He had traded a hired man a pocketknife and a ham for it when he was sixteen, and he had played it up there with a rag stuffed in the sound hole, an hour at a time, when he was supposed to be forking down bedding. No one had ever found it. He did not think anyone had. There was a great deal of singing at Sixmile. There were the old martyr hymns in church, lined out by the Minister and taken up loud and slow by everybody at once, and in the evenings the young people sang on the bench outside the kitchen, English gospel songs out of a book, the girls carrying it. He had sung with them. But there was not an instrument on the place and never had been, and what he had wanted, from about the age of twelve, was to hear one string ring against another.

So he had come to it late, and alone, and with nobody to tell him what he was doing wrong, and at twenty-seven he could hear exactly how far that had left him behind.

Russ counted off. It was a shuffle in A, and Joseph came in on the one with the others and was all right for sixteen bars. He knew the chords. He had known the chords to this one for five years. What he did not have was the thing the steel player called the pocket: his right hand ran a hair ahead of the drummer's foot when he was nervous, and when he heard it and pulled back he would fall a hair behind, and the two of them would go along like a team out of step

until the drummer gave him a look. Tonight it happened in the second verse. He saw the look. He fixed his eyes on the kick pedal and played to that and nothing else, stiff as a post, and came through to the end of the song with every change in the right place and no life in any of it.

Teo took a solo on the next one. He played with his head down and his whole body loose, and the notes came out of him with no trouble at all. He had had lessons from the age of seven. He had told Joseph so, kindly, the night Joseph asked him how he did it.

At the break Joseph stood at the end of the bar with a glass of soda water.

"You're thinking," the steel player said. He was a heavy, quiet man named Gene who drove a school bus. "I can hear you thinking from clear across the stage."

"I'm counting."

"Same thing. Quit it. You know the tunes. Listen to the bass drum and let your arm go."

"I do listen to it."

"You watch it. I've seen you. It's not the same." Gene drank. "Where'd you say you were from?"

"Up north. The Musselshell."

"Ranch?"

"A farm."

"Well. You hit them clean, I'll say that. I never heard a man hit them so clean and get so little out of it." He put a hand on Joseph's shoulder to take the edge off, and left it there a second, and went to see about his amplifier.

The second set was better, a little. There was a waltz he could do. On the last song, a fast one, he lost the change going into the bridge and laid out for two bars and came back in, and nobody on the floor noticed, and Russ thanked them all for coming and reminded them to tip the girl.

He was paid forty dollars, in two twenties, out of the till. He put the guitar in its case and carried it out to the truck. Montana Avenue was empty at one in the morning and still warm, and a freight was going through behind the depot, slowly, coal cars, a long string of them and all empty, heading east to the mines. He stood with his hand on the truck door until the last car had gone by.

He was not on shift until the next night. He had the day to himself, and he could have gone anywhere in it. He thought of his sister in the kitchen passage with the receiver held in both hands. A *wedding is a day*. He would need a black coat, and he had none. He had told his mother a lie about a coat that very morning.

On the seat beside him the handset from the yard, which he had forgotten to leave in its cradle at the barn, lit up by itself and buzzed twice. He looked at it. It was not for him; it was for whoever had the south alley tonight. *Pen 12. Tag 9080.* He turned it face down on the seat and started the truck.

4

The Beer Garden

The Prosper Stampede was held on the third Saturday of July, on the fairgrounds east of town, and it had been held there every year since 1919 except the two the county could not raise the stock contractor's fee.

Arne parked where he always parked, along the back fence by the horse barns. He sat a minute with his hands on the wheel. Karin had the door open on her side already.

"You don't have to watch the bulls," she said.

"I know what I have to do."

"I'm saying you could go and get the pie then. Somebody has to get it before the colony sells out."

"I'll get the pie when I get it."

She got down. He got down after her, on the left leg, and they walked up along the pens.

The grandstand was wood, painted green, with a tin roof that ticked in the heat. It held nine hundred and it was three-quarters full by one o'clock. Arne knew most of them. He nodded to the ones who nodded. He did not stop. Karin stopped twice, and he stood behind her each time with his thumbs in his belt, looking at the arena.

It was a plain dirt oval with a pipe fence. The chutes were at the west end, six of them, under the announcer's stand. They had been

timber when he rode and they were steel now. The ground in front of them had been worked that morning and was dark and soft and level.

He looked at the place in front of chute four. He always did, once. Then he found the bench.

The colony had its table by the gate, under an awning, as it had since he was a boy: bread, pies, new potatoes in paper sacks, jars of pickled beets. Three women in kerchiefs and dark print dresses sold from behind it and did not look at the arena. Six or eight of their boys were on the fence beyond, in black trousers and braces, all looking at nothing else.

"Lyle's mother is here," Karin said.

She was. Evelyn Harris was in the bottom row at the shady end, where she could get up without climbing, with a cushion under her and a girl beside her bent over a telephone. She was a small, straight-backed woman in a blue shirt. She had been coming to see her son rope at Prosper for twenty years, a hundred and ten miles each way. Arne had spoken to her perhaps six times. She lifted one hand off her knee to Karin, and Karin lifted hers.

The team roping was the fourth event. It was a jackpot: thirty-one teams at a hundred dollars a man, winner take half. Jens and Lyle Harris had drawn up nineteenth.

They had roped together since Jens was sixteen and Lyle was a grown man of twenty-five. They had met at a high school rodeo in Hardin, where Lyle was helping in the chutes, and Lyle had watched the boy miss three heel loops running and had come over afterwards and told him why. Arne had not liked it then. He had since had twenty-two years to get used to it. Lyle headed and Jens heeled. Between them they had won this jackpot five times.

They backed into the boxes. Lyle was on a big dun, on the left, forty-seven years old and thick through the chest, sitting as easy as a man in a kitchen chair. Jens was on the right on the roan mare. Lyle looked across. Jens moved his chin about an inch.

The steer came out. The dun came out with it, and Lyle's loop went over both horns before the steer had made thirty feet, and he took his dally and went left. The steer swung round on the end of the rope with its hind feet skipping. Jens was there. He rode up into the corner and laid the loop down under the belly, and the steer hopped into it, both feet, and Jens came tight and the two horses faced.

The flag dropped.

"Five and eight-tenths," the announcer said. "Five-eight for Harris and Tollefsen, and folks, that is going to be hard to get around."

Nobody got around it. Arne did not clap. He sat with his forearms on his knees and watched his son coil his rope and ride out, saying something sideways to Lyle Harris that made Lyle laugh. He was a hand. Arne had made him one, and then for twenty years had told him what he did wrong. He knew that about himself. It did not seem to be a thing he could stop.

"That's fifteen hundred and fifty apiece," Karin said. She had worked it before the next team was out of the box.

• • •

The bulls were last.

He did not go for the pie. He sat where he was, with Karin's hand lying flat on the plank between them, not touching his.

It had been a saddle bronc, not a bull. People got that wrong. It had been a bay mare called Easy Money, out of chute four, on the twentieth of July, 1991, in front of this grandstand. He had been twenty-seven and married five months. He had drawn her twice before and ridden her both times. She did not buck that day. She reared in the gate as it swung, went straight up, and came over backwards, and the swells of the saddle came down across his hips with twelve hundred pounds of horse on top of them.

He had not heard it. Everyone else had. People told him for years afterwards, as if he would want to know, that they had heard it from the top row.

Jens had drawn a brindle bull called Tax Man. He was the second-oldest man entered, by nine years. He had ridden bulls from the age of fifteen over everything his father could find to say, and he had quit twice, and both times he had entered Prosper the next July all the same. He said he only did the one a year now. He said it was like a man who only smoked at weddings.

The chute was number two. Arne watched the latch. It was a thing he had learned to do. If he watched the latch he saw the gate man's hand and the rope, and he did not have to see his son's face come down over the bull's shoulders, or the nod.

The latch went.

The bull turned back to the left, into Jens's hand, and spun. He was a flat, fast spinner without much kick, and Jens sat down on him and stayed square. Two rounds. Three. Arne's own left hand had shut on his knee. On the fourth round the bull changed direction, which is where they come off, and Jens went to the outside and hung there, one long second, with his free arm reaching.

"Sit up," Arne said. He had not meant to say anything. "Sit *up*."

Jens sat up. The whistle went. He reached down with the free hand and jerked the tail of his rope, and stepped off on the right side and landed running, and the bull went on by and hooked at a clown barrel and trotted out.

Seventy-nine points. It would not win. Jens picked his rope out of the dirt and walked to the fence with his hat still on.

Karin let her breath go. She took her hand off the bench and put it in her lap.

"Now go and get the pie," she said.

He went. The crowd was coming down off the stand and he walked against it, along the fence, to the awning by the gate.

The table was nearly bare. One of the three women was folding the cloth. The one who had the cash box was fifty or a little over, broad in the face and calm, and he knew her: the boss's wife, Sarah Wipf. Her husband had lent the Lodgepole a loader in the spring of 2019 and would take nothing for it but a side of beef.

"Mrs. Wipf."

"Mr. Tollefsen. There is a rhubarb and a saskatoon. The apple went at noon."

"Rhubarb."

She wrapped it in a sheet of newspaper and tied it with string. She had not once turned her head towards the arena all afternoon. "Your son rode," she said.

"You weren't looking."

"I have ears. Eight seconds is a long time to listen to." She set the pie in front of him. "Samuel says to tell you the loader is mended, if you have corrals to clean this fall."

"Tell him I'm obliged."

"You were in Billings in the spring," she said. "For bulls. Samuel told me." She was looking at the string. "It is a big town, I suppose."

"It's big enough."

"A person would not just see another person there. On the street."

He understood her then. He had a daughter in that town himself. "No," he said. "I never have."

"Five dollars," Sarah Wipf said. He gave her a ten, and she counted the change into his hand, and went to help with the cloth.

• • •

There was a dance after. There had always been a dance. It was on the concrete slab between the exhibit hall and the beer garden, with a band on a flatbed trailer and a string of bulbs overhead, and by nine o'clock the whole county was there, and a good part of two others.

Arne did not dance. He could, after a fashion. It was the standing afterwards that cost him. He had a table at the edge of the beer garden, a picnic table under a cottonwood, with his back to the tree. He had a beer in a plastic cup that he had been drinking for an hour. Karin was across the slab talking to the Lutheran pastor's wife. Men came by the table and stood a while and talked about hay, and the price of yearlings, and the computing people. He let them.

Everybody had heard something. Three hundred jobs. No, four. A man from the county road department said the bridge alone would run fourteen million and the consortium was paying for it. A woman who cut hair on Main Street said she had been asked to quote for forty heads a week. Old Halvor Brekke, who had the place below the Lodgepole and was eighty-eight, said he had seen the oil come in '52 and the coal come in '71 and both had gone out again, and he supposed he would be dead before this did.

"What does Declan say?" somebody asked.

"Ask Declan," Arne said.

He could see Declan Rourke from where he sat. He was at the bar end of the garden, a head above the men around him, in a white shirt and the grey hat he wore to funerals and sales. Conor was beside him doing the talking. Every little while Declan would put his head a little to one side, listening to something nobody else could hear, and then he would say a word to Conor.

The band played a waltz. Arne looked for Jens.

He found him on the slab. He was not hard to find; he was taller than most and he had put on the shirt his mother had ironed. He was dancing with Shannon Rourke.

Arne had known her since she was a child on a pony. She had been the one of Declan's with sense. She was a tall woman, dark, built like her mother, in a green dress, and she was dancing with her head back a little so she could see Jens's face, and she was saying something. Jens was listening. He had his hand flat on her back. He

was not looking at his feet or over her shoulder or at anyone else on that floor.

Arne had seen his son dance with twenty women on this slab. He had never seen him listen to one.

He put the cup down.

It was not much. A waltz. They turned at the far end under the bulbs and came back up the near side. When the music quit they did not let go of each other at once, as people did. Then they did, and she laughed, and went off towards the women's side with one look back, and Jens stood where she had left him.

"Arne."

Declan was at the end of the table with a cup in each hand.

He put one down in front of Arne. He put the other down across from it and lowered himself onto the bench, slowly, a big man taking care of his knees. Then he reached up and took the thing out of his left ear, and looked at it, and buttoned it into his shirt pocket.

"Your boy rode well," he said.

"He rode."

"Five-eight in the roping. I couldn't have got my rope down in five-eight."

"You never could rope."

"No, I never could." Declan smiled. He drank. He looked out at the slab, where the band was tuning. "They've put the weight on those calves of yours, up on the east. I was by the reservoir Tuesday."

"They're doing all right."

"Conor says you were in it before me." Declan did not smile at that. "He says the drilling crew put one of yours in the mud."

"They've taken a yard off it since the first of the month."

"They'll be done by August. I told them a load a day and no more." He drank. "But they're doing better than all right, those calves. I told Conor, I said, that's what grass looks like when a man hasn't been at it with a spreadsheet." He turned the cup a little on the plank. "I

want to talk to you about that pasture, Arne. I'd sooner do it here than send a letter."

Arne waited.

"The water's going to the state," Declan said. "Not the water. The paper on it. Everything I've got on that river and everything behind every dam has to be written down for the change. Where it comes from, where it goes, what drinks it. Shannon found a woman in Helena who does nothing else, and she's been through it all with a comb." He was speaking low and evenly. He had worked it out beforehand. "The state doesn't care about your cows. She was clear on that. It's Denver. A man with seventy-three years on that reservoir and not a line on paper is a man who can stand up at the hearing and object. Or say he's got a right of his own by now. She says they'll never file with that hanging, and I had Conor ask their man, and she's right. They want it ended or they want it written. And if it's written it's a use, and it comes off what the halls can have."

"So it's ended."

"It's that or no lease."

"And you picked."

"I picked. I'm not going to tell you I didn't." Declan rubbed his jaw. "I know how long it's been there. My father told it at every branding till he died. I said I'd not do it to a neighbour in the middle of a grazing season and they could write that down too. You've got the summer. You've got till shipping day. After that I have to shut the gate."

The band started up, something fast. Arne heard it from a long way off.

"So that's the one thing," Declan said. "Here's the other. That lease is no good to you dry. You know it and I know it. You'd be hauling water eight miles for six months of the year. I'll take it off you. I'll take the state lease by assignment and I'll buy the deeded half beside it, and I'll give you nine hundred an acre for the deeded and forty thousand for the assignment, and that's more than a dry bench is worth to anybody but me. Brannigan can draw it." He put

both hands flat on the table. “And there’s a place for you in the co-op. I’ve spoken for you. They’ve a waiting list from here to Miles City and I told them you were to go to the top of it. I’d stand your dues the first year.”

“You’d stand them.”

“I would.”

“For a neighbour.”

“That’s right.”

Arne looked at him. He had known that face for sixty years. It was not a liar’s face. Declan Rourke believed every word of what he had said, and that was the trouble with him and always had been. He would take a man’s water with one hand and hold out the other with a present in it, and he would not see why the man did not thank him.

“Who’s it for?” Arne said. “The pasture.”

“It’s for me.”

“You’ve got forty thousand acres. What do you want with two more sections of buffalo grass and no water on it?”

Declan said nothing for a moment. “The line comes across it,” he said. “From Colstrip. Not across it. Along the south edge. They want the corridor in one ownership.”

“So it’s for them.”

“It’s for me to lease to them. It’s the same thing I’ve done on the bench.”

“It’s for them,” Arne said. He had stood up. He did not remember doing it, and his hip had not complained, which told him how angry he was. “You come over here with a beer, and you tell me my cattle are looking well, and you ask after Karin, and then in the same breath you tell me some woman in Helena says my father’s hand wasn’t worth the trouble of shaking, and you want me to sit on this bench and nod at you.”

“That isn’t what I said.”

“And then you’ll buy me out. For a neighbour. So a machine can have a clear run at it.” He had not raised his voice yet, but men at

the next table had turned. “And put me in your co-op, at the top of the list, so the same machine can tell me when to cut my hay.”

“Arne. Sit down.”

“I’ll stand.”

“Sit down and drink your beer. Nobody’s taking anything. I’m offering you a fair—”

“You’re offering me what your grandfather offered mine!”

That was loud. It went across the beer garden and out over the slab. The band was between verses and the steel guitar hung on by itself for a bar and then quit. Arne could see faces turned his way, a field of them, pale under the bulbs. Karin’s, by the exhibit hall. Jens’s.

“Nineteen twenty-three,” he said. He was speaking to all of them now and he knew it and could not stop. “Thirty cents on the dollar for a proved-up homestead. It was a fair price then too. Ask any Rourke. You can keep your co-op, Declan. You can keep your nine hundred an acre. I was putting up hay on that river before your telephone told you which boot went on first, and I’ll be putting it up when your halls are a hole in the ground with the wind blowing through. And you can chain your gate the day it suits you. I won’t ask you for a cupful.”

Nobody spoke. Somebody’s child was crying over by the trailers.

Declan had not got up. He sat with his big hands on the table and his face gone dark, and looked at Arne from under the grey hat. When he did speak it was so quiet that Arne was the only one who heard.

“I have never once,” he said. And stopped.

He did not finish it. He did not have to. Arne stood over him with his blood going in his ears and watched Declan Rourke shut his mouth on the rest, and pick up his cup, and drink.

The long envelope had come in September. St. Vincent Hospital, Billings. Karin had opened it at the kitchen table, twenty-four years old, with the ledger beside her and nothing in the right-hand column but a figure in pencil that was more than the ranch had

cleared in three years. He had been in the front room on the daybed. He had heard her say his name. The page inside had the figure on it, the same figure, and under it a line in purple from a rubber stamp. *Paid in full.* No name.

He had driven to the Rourke place in October, as soon as he could work a clutch. He had gone up the porch steps on crutches. Declan had come to the door with a napkin in his hand. Arne had held out the page and said he would pay it back, every dollar, it might take him ten years. Declan had looked at the paper as if he had never seen one like it. *What bill?* he had said. *I don't know anything about any bill. Come in and eat.*

Arne had not gone in. He had not paid it back, either. He had tried, in '94, with a cheque for the first tenth of it, and the cheque had come back in the mail torn in two with no note. After that there had been the drought, and the children, and cattle at fifty cents. Karin had never written it down in either column. In forty years he had not said one word about it to any living person. Nor had Declan. Until now, and he had only got as far as four words.

"Finish it," Arne said.

Declan shook his head. He stood, in his turn, and put his hat straight. "Shipping day," he said, in an ordinary voice, for the tables. "The offer stands till then. I'll not make it again." He took the thing out of his shirt pocket and fitted it back in his ear, and walked off towards the bar, and the men there opened to let him through.

The band started up.

• • •

Karin drove. She had come across the slab and taken the keys out of his shirt pocket without a word, and he had let her.

They were past the grain elevator before either of them spoke.

"What did he offer?"

"Nine hundred for the deeded. Forty thousand for the lease."

"And the water?"

"Till shipping day."

She drove another mile. The headlights went along the borrow pit, and a jackrabbit sat up in them and was gone.

"That's a fair price," she said.

"I know what it is."

"I'm not saying take it. I'm saying I'll write it down as fair." She slowed for the turn onto the river road. "The whole county heard you."

"They were meant to."

"Jens heard you."

He looked out of the side window. There was nothing in it. "Jens was busy."

"Yes," Karin said. "I saw that too."

The road dropped towards the river. He could smell the hay, the second cutting, coming on.

"Shipping day is the fourteenth of October," she said.

"I know when it is."

5

The Card

Evelyn Harris watched her son rope from the bottom row, at the shady end, with a cushion she had brought from home, and she had counted the house before the first steer was out of the chute.

It was a habit. She had kept the gate at the Busby powwow for thirty years and could not sit down among people without knowing roughly how many there were and who had come with whom. Seven hundred, a little under. The Rourkes across the way in a block, twelve or fourteen of them with their hired men, the old man in the middle in a grey hat. The Tollefsens up behind her and to the left, two only, the wife bareheaded and the husband sitting like a man in a dentist's chair. The colony women at their table by the gate. A row of county commissioners. And down at this end, where they had always sat, the people who had driven up from the south: herself and Mariah, the Small boys from Muddy Creek, a Crow family from Pryor who had a daughter in the barrels. Nine, in a crowd of seven hundred. It had been nine or about nine for as long as she had been coming.

"Is he up yet?" Mariah said, not lifting her head.

"Three more."

"Tell me when."

"You could look. It's free."

"I'm looking. I'm looking with my ears." Her granddaughter was seventeen and had her knees up on the bench in front and her telephone on her knees. She was doing something on it with both thumbs. She was a long, quick girl with her mother's forehead, and she had been somewhere else since about the first of June, even when she was in the room. Evelyn had seen it and had waited to be told. She was still waiting.

Lyle backed the dun into the box.

She did not hold her breath for him any more. He was forty-seven. He had been roping since he could walk; his father had put a rope in his hand before a spoon. She watched as she might have watched him back a trailer, to see it done right. The Tollefsen boy was in the other box on a roan. She called him the boy, though he was close to forty. He had been sixteen and all elbows the first time Lyle brought him home, and he had eaten five pieces of frybread standing up and had called her ma'am, and she had never quite managed to see him as any older.

"Now," she said.

Mariah looked up.

It was over in less time than it takes to tell. Horns, the dally, the corner, both heels. The flag. Lyle sat there on the dun with the steer stretched out between the two horses, and he looked up at the stand, at this end of it. He did not wave. He put two fingers to his hat brim. Then the boy said something to him and he laughed, with his head back, and for a second he was the image of his father.

"Five-eight," Mariah said. "Grandma. That's the fastest they've ever been."

"It's the fastest they've been here."

"It's the fastest ever. I keep the book." She had her thumbs going again. "I'm telling Auntie Rena. She said they were too old."

Evelyn looked over her shoulder. Arne Tollefsen had not moved. He was looking at the arena with his forearms on his knees and no expression at all. She had been in this stand in 1991, six rows up,

with Lyle beside her. He was seven and had a snow cone. She remembered the snow cone because he had dropped it. She remembered the sound, too, though she kept away from that if she could help it. And she remembered a girl in a yellow dress going over the arena fence, all that skirt, before the ambulance men had the gate open. That was the wife. She was up there now with white hair, doing sums.

They were hard people to like, the Tollefsens. She respected them.

• • •

They got home at midnight. Lyle drove and she kept awake to keep him awake. It was the best part of four hours with the trailer, down to Billings and out by Hardin and Crow Agency and over the divide to Busby, with the horses shifting behind. Mariah was asleep across the back seat with her boots off. At Busby they left the highway and went south up the creek, twelve miles of gravel, and the last thing before the house was the cattle guard, which rang under the wheels like a dropped tray, as it always did.

The Harris place was on Rosebud Creek where Thompson Creek came into it. There was a frame house and a set of pole corrals, a hay shed, a horse barn Raymond had built in 1988 and never finished painting. Raymond had been eleven years in the cemetery at Busby. There was bottom ground along the creek for hay and there were hills behind for grass, red shale and sandstone with ponderosa on the north slopes. Lyle ran two hundred and ten cows on it. Some of the ground was his, in trust. More was leased from the Tribe. The rest, the heart of it, the hundred and sixty acres with the house and the hay meadow and the good spring, had been allotted to her grandfather in 1930. It had come down from him. It now had forty-three owners.

She could name thirty-one of them. She had tried, one night, with a pencil. They were cousins and the children of cousins, in Lame

Deer and Billings and Denver and Oklahoma, and a woman in Tacoma nobody had met. Each owned a share of every acre and no acre of their own. Evelyn's share was the largest and it was a little under a fifth. To fence the meadow, or drill a well, or borrow against it, Lyle needed the signatures of enough of them to make half, and the Bureau's stamp on top. He had been buying them out one at a time for fifteen years. He had bought nine. It was the thing he wanted, more than he wanted the roping or a new truck or, she sometimes thought, a wife. He wanted to put a post in the ground and have it be in his own ground all the way down.

She was up at six all the same. She had not slept past six since she was a girl.

• • •

It was the second week of August when she found the letter, and she had not been looking for it.

She was looking for the canner lid. Lyle had put up the last of the second-cutting hay on the Saturday and gone to Lame Deer on the Monday to see the man at the bank, in a clean shirt, and she had not asked him how that went because she had seen his face when he came in. Mariah was at her job. She had a summer job at the tribal college library, shelving, three days a week. That left Evelyn the house and forty pounds of chokecherries.

The canner lid was not with the canner. She went through the pantry and the porch and the cupboard over the refrigerator. Then she thought of the 4-H. Mariah had borrowed the big canner two summers ago for a demonstration at the fair, and things that girl borrowed had a way of ending up on the closet shelf in her room.

She kept out of Mariah's room as a rule. She knocked now, at the door of an empty room, from habit, and went in.

The lid was on the closet shelf. It was under a shoebox. She lifted the box down to get at it, and the box was light and the top was not on straight, and it came off in her hand.

There were ribbons in it, fair ribbons, and a few photographs. A beaded barrette that had been Evelyn's mother's. And on top, flat, a long white envelope with a torn end and a crest in the corner in maroon. *University of Montana. Office of Admissions. Missoula.*

She stood there with the canner lid under one arm.

She had no business reading it. She knew that. She sat down on the edge of the bed and read it.

Dear Mariah. Congratulations. It was dated the twenty-eighth of May. It said that on the strength of her record and her counsellor's letter she had been offered early admission for the autumn of 2032, to the College of Humanities and Sciences. There was a second sheet. The second sheet was about money, and it was not all good. A scholarship for tuition, renewable. A grant. Then a line for housing and board and books with nothing against it, and at the bottom a figure for the first year, *estimated family contribution*, that made Evelyn take her glasses off and wipe them and put them back.

Eleven thousand four hundred dollars.

She read it twice. Then she looked at the envelope again. It had been opened carefully, with a knife. It had been handled a good deal since. The folds were going soft.

May. The girl had had it since May, and had gone to branding with it, and haying, and sat in the truck four hours each way to Prosper with it and said nothing. She had not told her father. Evelyn knew that as surely as she knew the day of the week; Lyle could no more have kept it off his face than he could the bank.

She knew why, too. That was the part that kept her sitting there.

There was eleven thousand four hundred dollars. There was a little more than that. It was in the savings account at the credit union in Lame Deer, in two names, Lyle's and her own. It had taken six years. It was her lease money from the hay meadow and his day wages from fire season, and it was for Cousin Delbert's share and the Tacoma woman's, when the Bureau finished the appraisals. With those two Lyle would hold enough of the allotment to stop asking

permission. Mariah knew all that. She had sat at the supper table and heard it since she was ten. She knew what the account was for, and she could add.

Evelyn folded the letter on its own folds. She put it back in the envelope and laid the envelope on the ribbons as it had been, crest up, torn end to the left. She put the top on the box crooked, as she had found it. She set the box on the shelf.

In the kitchen she fitted the lid on the canner and filled it at the tap and put it on to heat. She stood at the stove waiting for it.

In the spring of 1975 there had been a letter for her. It had come to the post office at Busby, and it was thinner than this one. Eastern Montana College, at Billings. She had wanted to teach school. She was eighteen and first in her class of nineteen at St. Labre, and the sisters had written for her. It offered a place and the fees and a room in a hall with other girls.

Her mother had been sick that year. Her father had two hundred cows and a bad heart, and a quarrel with half the Tribe that he would not explain to her. Her brothers were in Billings and Seattle and the Army. Nobody had asked her to stay. Nobody had needed to. She had read the letter at the post office and again at the kitchen table, and then she had put it in the stove. This stove, or the one that had stood here. She had thought, that summer, that she had decided it.

She had not thought of it in years. She had a son and a granddaughter and a place on the Rosebud that people drove a long way to eat at. She would have said, if asked, that she did not regret it.

The canner began to tick. She went out to the porch for the chokecherries.

• • •

The car came on a Thursday, about four in the afternoon.

She heard the cattle guard first and looked up from the sink. It was not a truck. It was a low grey car, new, the kind that had no

one's name on it, and it came up the lane slowly with the dust standing behind it. It stopped a good way short of the house. The man who got out stood beside it and let the dogs come and look at him. He did not walk up to the door. She gave him that. Somebody had told him how it was done.

She dried her hands and went out on the porch.

He was about thirty, fair, in a pressed shirt and new boots, with a folder under his arm. He took his sunglasses off before he spoke. "Mrs. Harris? I'm sorry to come without calling. I couldn't find a number."

"There's a number."

"Yes, ma'am. I'm sure there is." He smiled. He had a pleasant, open face, and he had been sent because of it. "My name's Kyle Brandvold. I'm with Tri-Basin. The computing consortium, up on the Musselshell. I do land and community relations for them. I wonder if I could have ten minutes."

"Is it my son you want?"

"I was told to ask for you."

"Who told you that?"

"The Realty office at the agency. In Lame Deer. I asked who to talk to about the Thompson Creek allotments and three different people said you."

She looked at him a while. Then she moved her head at the chairs.

He sat where she pointed. He left the folder shut a while, and she gave him that too. He said it was a beautiful place. He said he had grown up at Sidney, on beets, and that his grandmother had kept chokecherries too, and that he could smell them from the car. All of it was likely true.

"There's going to be a power line," he said. "A second one. The first runs from Colstrip to our site, north and west, and that doesn't come near you. That's permitted already. But the plant at Colstrip is two units down and the other two won't run for ever, and the halls need more than is there. So the plan is to bring wind up from

Wyoming. From around Sheridan." He opened the folder now and took out a map, and turned it to face her. "It would follow the Rosebud valley to the Colstrip yard. Here. About forty miles of it would cross the reservation."

There was a red line on the map. It ran up the creek from the south, on the east side, and where Thompson Creek came in it crossed. She found the house. The line went between the house and the hills.

"That's the meadow," she said.

"It would cross the top of it. Two towers on your allotment, maybe three. They're a hundred and forty feet. You can hay under them and graze under them. They'd pay for the easement, a payment up front and then every year after, to every owner according to their share. And they'd pay the Tribe, separately, for the right to cross at all." He was watching her. "I know there are forty-three owners. I know it needs a majority of the interests and the Bureau's consent, and the council's. I know none of that is quick. I'm not here with anything to sign. I was told that if you were against it I could save the company two years by finding that out now."

"And if I was for it?"

"Then I'd have saved two years the other way."

She nearly smiled. She looked at the map instead.

She had seen men like him before. They had not sat so easy then, or known to wait by the car. She had been fourteen, fifteen. They had come up this lane in rented Fords, in good shirts, with folders, and they had gone into the front room with her father and shut the door. The card they left on the table had a name on it in raised blue letters. Peabody. She had run her thumb over it. Her father had taken it off her and put it in his shirt pocket and said it was nothing for her to trouble with.

"How much?" she said.

He told her. It was a real figure. Her share of it, a little under a fifth, would be more in a year than the meadow lease brought in three.

"Who else have you been to?"

"On this allotment, no one. You're first."

"And on the others?"

"I'd rather not say, ma'am, any more than I'd tell them I'd been here."

That was a good answer. She was beginning to wish he was worse at it.

"What else is it?" she said. "You wouldn't drive from the Musselshell to ask an old woman about three towers. They'd send a letter."

He closed the folder. He did it slowly, and squared it on his knee.

"There's the line," he said. "That's what I'm here for. That's all I'm authorised to talk about." He looked off at the creek, at the cottonwoods along it, and then back. "The people I work for plan a long way out. Thirty years. They like to know their neighbours before they need them. The Tribe has rights in this basin that are older than anybody's and firmer than most. It has stored water in the Tongue River Reservoir it has never used. I'm not saying anything about that. It isn't mine to say and this isn't the place. I'd only say that the line's what we're asking about today. And in time, water."

"In time."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Whose time?"

He did not have an answer ready for that one. He took a card from his shirt pocket and laid it on the arm of her chair. It was white, heavy, with a mark on it of three wavy lines, and his name.

"You didn't write anything down," she said.

"No, ma'am."

"The last ones wrote everything down."

"I heard about the last ones." He stood up. "My grandmother used to say you can tell a man's been sent to take something if he gets his pencil out before his hat's off. I've kept that." He put the sunglasses on. "Thank you for the ten minutes. It was fifteen."

"It was twenty-two," Evelyn said.

She watched the car down the lane. It rang over the cattle guard and turned north.

She picked up the card. She ran her thumb across it, and it was smooth; nobody raised the letters any more. She took it into the kitchen and stood with it. The stove was right there. The lid-lifter was on its hook.

On the windowsill over the sink there was a jar where she kept rubber bands and the keys to things that had been sold. She put the card in that.

• • •

Lyle came in at six with Mariah behind him. He had picked her up at the college. He washed at the sink and looked out of the window while he did it, down the lane.

"Somebody's been in," he said. "There's a car track."

"There was a man."

"What man?"

"A man selling something."

"Selling what?"

"He didn't get as far as saying." She put the meat on the table. "Sit down. Mariah, get the bread."

Mariah had the bread in her hands. She did not move. She was looking at her grandmother across the kitchen, quite still, and it was not the car she was asking about. She had been in her room. She had been in her closet. Evelyn had put the box back on the shelf exactly as it was, and the girl had known anyway.

"Sit down," Evelyn said again. "Both of you. It's getting cold."

6

The Ford

They signed on the nineteenth of August, in the big kitchen, because Declan would not sign anything in an office that had been a cookhouse and would not drive to Billings to sign it in theirs.

Shannon had set the table for it as she would have for a meal. Three copies, one at each of three places, with a pen laid across each. The consortium would have been content with a thumb on a screen. Her father had said that a Rourke put his name on ninety-nine years in ink or not at all, and so there was paper, sixty-four pages of it now, bound along the edge in blue.

There were sixty-four because of her. She kept returning to that, privately, as she carried in the coffee. Three of the new pages were section fourteen.

It had gone to Helena in the envelope and come back in nine days with seven words changed. The water lawyer was a woman named Ostrander who billed by the tenth of an hour and wrote in green. She had struck *for ever* and put *in perpetuity*. She had tightened the reversion. Beside the dry-year paragraph she had written, *Who drafted this*? and beside the indemnity, where Shannon had put her question mark, *Correct to ask. It is a promise, not a wall. It is also the most they will give. Take it.* On a separate sheet she had added a page and a half of her own on what the state would want before it

would look at the change. Every right inventoried. Every pond and reservoir and stock tank, and what drank from each. *Informal third-party uses are not unlawful, and the Department will not require you to end them. They are a complication. An unwritten user of long standing is a potential objector and a potential claimant, and Lessee's counsel will say so. I understand there is at least one.*

There was one. Shannon had read that paragraph standing at the post office counter in Prosper. She had known before she got to the end of it what Denver would ask for, and that her father would not wait to be asked, and roughly how Arne Tollefsen would take it. She had been right on all three counts and had heard the third from forty feet away, in a green dress, with the whole county.

Then the draft had gone to Denver, and Denver had been silent for two weeks. On the fifteenth day they had accepted the water clause whole, except the gauge threshold, which they moved by forty cubic feet a second, and which she had set forty high in order to have it to give.

They had added one sub-clause of their own. 14.9. *Lessor shall terminate all unwritten third-party uses of the Water Rights and appurtenant works not later than October 15, 2031. Lessee shall not be obliged to file the Change Application until Lessor has so certified. Neither party shall enter into any written instrument with a terminated user respecting the Water Rights, the works or the Premises until the Change Application is finally determined.* It was the Lodgepole's cows, without the name. She saw the reason for the last sentence without being told. A paper with Arne Tollefsen's signature on it, beside that reservoir, was the first exhibit in any claim that he had a right in the water, and Helena would not grant a change over a claim. She could have fought it. She had sat with the page for an evening and worked out what Denver would want back if she did, and the answer was the deed, and she had initialled it.

"Miss Rourke."

The vice-president for sites was called Lathrop. He was a lean, tanned, agreeable man who had flown into Billings that morning and would fly out tonight, and he had brought the Denver lawyer with him, a grey-haired woman in walking shoes who had so far said nothing and looked at everything. Lathrop had his hand out.

"I'm told we have you to thank for fourteen."

"You have Ms. Ostrander to thank."

"Ms. Ostrander says otherwise. She told our people she'd changed seven words." He was smiling. "I'll be honest with you, we don't usually lose that one. We've done thirty sites. We've had the deed at twenty-eight."

"What happened at the other one?"

"Arizona. A tribe. They kept it too." He let go of her hand. "It cost us two weeks, working out whether to walk. I thought you'd like to know it was that close."

She had not known. She put it away to look at later: two weeks, and thirty sites, and a company that could have gone back to North Dakota and had decided in the end that her terms cost less than another year of looking. It meant she might have asked for more. It meant, equally, that she had asked for exactly as much as the thing would bear, and she would never find out which.

Her father came in from the porch with Conor behind him. He had on a white shirt and his town boots. He had taken the thing out of his ear; she could see it through the cloth of his pocket. He shook hands with Lathrop and with the lawyer and sat down at the head of the table in front of his copy, and put his glasses on, and turned to page one.

"Dad," Conor said. "They've a plane."

"Then they'll want to sit down."

He read it. He read all sixty-four pages, at the pace at which he read anything, with his finger going down the margin. It took fifty minutes. Lathrop was good about it. He talked to Conor about elk and to Shannon about nothing, and drank three cups of coffee, and

once caught the lawyer's eye. Kieran came in and was taken out. The clock over the stove went round. At section fourteen Declan slowed. He put his thumb on the dry-year paragraph and held it there a moment, and went on.

When he had turned the last page he took the cap off the pen.

"My grandfather bought this ground with money he made feeding miners," he said. He was not saying it to anyone in particular. "He never dug an ounce himself. He said the man with the shovel was always broke by Christmas, and the man who sold him his beefsteak was not." He signed. He had a big square hand, the capital R like a gate. "I don't know what you people are digging for up there. I've had it explained to me. But I know which end of it I'm on."

He signed the second copy and the third. Lathrop signed. The lawyer witnessed, and spoke for the first time, to give the date.

Conor had the bottle out before the ink was dry. It was the Jameson their mother had kept for christenings. He poured five glasses and a sixth, short, and looked round for someone to give the sixth to, and that was when Shannon saw Wyatt Pell on the porch.

He was standing at the screen door with his hat in his hand. He had clearly been standing there some time, not liking to knock.

"Come in, then," Conor said. "Come in. You're a witness. To the best-watered dry ground between here and the Dakotas." He raised his glass. "And to my sister, who can read."

They drank. Lathrop laughed, and the lawyer smiled a very little. Declan drank his off and set the glass down and looked at Shannon across the table. He did not say anything about her mother this time.

Wyatt had not come in past the mat. He held the short glass as if it might go off.

"What is it?" Shannon said.

"It'll keep, ma'am. I didn't know you had people."

"We've finished. Say it."

He looked at Declan, and at Conor, and back at her. His ears had gone red. “Ray’s making up the winter crew. He says he’s keeping five and I’m the sixth.” He turned the hat round by the brim. “I wanted to ask if I could stay on. I’d work for the bunk and my feed if it came to that. It’s the filly. She’s about a third of the way to being a horse and I don’t like to leave her there. Somebody else gets on her now and pushes, she’ll go back to where she was in June.”

“You’d work for nothing,” Declan said. “To finish my daughter’s colt.”

“Not for nothing, sir. I’d learn a winter’s worth.” He swallowed. “I never started one that smart. I’d like to see how she comes out.”

Declan looked at him for a time from under his eyebrows. Then he tipped his head towards Shannon. “It’s her payroll.”

She did the sum without meaning to. A sixth man, November to April, at what Ray paid a green hand: nine thousand, a little over, with the bunk. Against that, as of forty minutes ago, the first year’s ground rent on two sections of bench, which was a figure she still could not say aloud in an ordinary voice. She could have kept forty Wyatt Pells.

“You’ll be paid,” she said. “Same as the others. Tell Ray it’s six.”

“Yes ma’am. Thank you.” He remembered the glass and drank it, and coughed, and Conor roared. Wyatt put the hat on and went out. She watched him cross the yard towards the round pen. He was not walking; it was nearer a trot.

“That boy,” her father said, “will be working for himself in five years.”

“He’ll be working for her,” Conor said. “You watch.”

Lathrop was looking at his telephone. The plane was at six.

When the car had gone down the lane her father went out on the porch, and she went after him with the coffee pot, though there was nothing left in it. He was standing at the rail with the earpiece in his fingers, not putting it in.

“He’ll not sell,” Declan said.

"No."

"I gave him a fair price."

"You gave it to him in front of the county."

"He's the one that stood up." He turned the thing over. "Your Helena woman. Is there no way round it? Write him a paper. A dollar a year and a beef at Christmas, the same as it's always been, only on a page."

"Then it's a use, and fourteen-nine says there are none. I agreed fourteen-nine." She made herself say it to his face. "I could have fought it. They'd have come back for the deed. A hundred and forty pair for five months is about two acre-feet. More blows off that reservoir in a windy week. It was never the amount."

"Two acre-feet."

"About."

He looked east, down the river, to where the Lodgepole's roofs showed in the cottonwoods. "My father would have given him ninety."

"Your father didn't have a change application."

"No," Declan said. "He had a neighbour." He fitted the earpiece into his bad ear, and listened, and went down the steps to see about the water on the Home Meadow.

• • •

She left the house at ten.

She left her telephone on the kitchen table, face down, beside the fruit bowl. She had done that each time. Her father's dash and her brother's and the foreman's all drew the ranch in green, with every truck on it and every horse that wore a tag, and a small blue dot for each telephone that belonged to the account. Hers had sat in the kitchen from ten until two on five nights since the Stampede, and nobody looking at the map would have seen her go.

She went on foot; a horse would be missed from the corral. She walked. It was a mile and a quarter down the lane and across the

Home Meadow, through the second cutting, which stood to her knees and soaked her to the thigh. There was no moon. There was starlight, enough.

The ford was at the bend. The river spread out there over a gravel bar forty yards wide, and in August it was shin deep and warm. Cattle had crossed at that place before there were fences. Her great-grandfather had brought his first herd over it, and so had the N Bar before him, and whoever had been there before the N Bar. On the far side the line fence between the two outfits came down to the water. Upstream of it lay the Rourkes' upper meadow. She could see the bales stacked along the wire, and beyond them the pale patch of the slough, dry now and cracked in plates, where the coulee water stood in spring. Downstream of the fence the bank was low, with a stand of old cottonwoods, and past the cottonwoods was the Lodgepole's calving flat. That was Tollefsen ground.

She took her boots off and tied the laces and hung them round her neck. She rolled her jeans. The gravel was round and slick and she went slowly, feeling for each step. She found she was counting them, and that she had done so each time. It was a hundred and thirty-one.

He was sitting on the cottonwood log with his back to her, facing the flat. He had heard her in the water. He turned round only when she was on the bank.

"You're wet," Jens said.

"There's dew."

"You could come by the road. I'd meet you at the bridge."

"With a truck? At midnight, at the county bridge?" She sat down on the log beside him and began to dry her feet with her socks. "You don't know my brother."

"I've known your brother all my life."

"Then you ought to know."

He took one foot out of her hands and dried it himself, on his shirt tail, carefully, and then the other. He had big, slow hands with

a rope burn across the left palm that had been there since he was nineteen. He did most things as he did that. She had watched him at brandings for twenty years, the last man to get excited and the last to quit, and had thought of him as a piece of the far bank, along with the cottonwoods. Then a month ago he had asked her to dance.

She had said, on the slab, with his hand on her back: *I'm going to start horses. For other people. I've never told anyone on our place.* She did not know why she had said it. He had not laughed. He had said, *How many head?* and she had said six at a time, and he had said, *You'd want a second pen.* And then her father and his had stood up in the beer garden.

"They signed today," she said.

"I know. Halvor Brekke saw the car go by. He called Mom." He gave her foot back. "Is it what they say? Ninety-nine years?"

"Ninety-nine."

"I'll be a hundred and thirty-seven."

"You'll be bald."

"I'll be bald at fifty. It's in the family." He leaned back on his hands. An owl was working the far edge of the flat; she could hear it, two notes and a wait. "Dad says nobody'll ever know what's in it. He says that's how they do it, they make it so long no one can read to the end."

"It's sixty-four pages."

"Have you read it?"

"I've read it."

"All of it?"

"All of it."

That was true. She put her socks on.

She had known for five nights that he would ask, and she had not decided what to say. Now she had said it and it had cost her nothing, so far as she could tell. He would never see the document. No one on this side of the river would. Section fourteen was hers, the title and the reversion and the dry-year split, and it was the best

work she had ever done. It was also where the Helena woman's page and a half had come from. That page and a half was why there would be a chain on the reservoir gate on the fifteenth of October. She could follow it link by link from her own pencil to his father standing up at that table.

If she told him, he would say it was not her fault. He was fair in that way. He would say it and mean it, and then he would go home across the flat with it, and it would be at the supper table on the Lodgepole for as long as there was one. *A Rourke wrote it. The one he's seeing.*

"What's the matter?" Jens said.

"Nothing. I'm tired. We had company."

"Was he there? The man from the company?"

"A man called Lathrop. He's done thirty of them."

"What's he like?"

"He's like someone who's done thirty of them." She leaned against his shoulder. It was easier to talk without his face. "How is your father?"

"He's not said a word since the Stampede. Not about that. He talks about the hay." Jens pulled a strip of bark off the log and began to break it up. "He thinks Declan made it up. The deadline. He thinks there's no lawyer in Helena, there's just your dad wanting the east lease for the power line and using the water to squeeze it out of him."

"There's a lawyer in Helena."

"I figured. Your dad wouldn't trouble to invent one." He threw a piece of bark at the dark. "He won't sell. I'll tell you that for nothing. He'll haul water in a bucket first. And Mom'll write down every bucket."

"What would you do?"

He was a while answering. She felt him breathe.

"I'd sell," he said. "It's a fair price for dry ground. I'd take the money and drill on the home place and quit trailing cows eight miles

to grass we can't water. But it's not mine to sell. It won't be for twenty years, the way he's going." He laughed, shortly. "He'll outlive the lease."

"And the co-op?"

"I don't know." He broke another piece. "I'd like to see it. I'd like to see what it says, one time, about our place. I wouldn't have to do it."

"That's what my father said. For two years."

"I know he did."

They sat. The owl had moved off. Down on the flat something large got to its feet and shook, a cow or a horse, and settled again.

"The horse barn's empty at our place," Jens said. "Did you know that? The old one, the log one. It's been empty since Dad sold the last of his bucking stock. Twelve stalls. There's a pen behind it, eighty foot across. The posts are good."

She did not answer.

"I'm only saying it's there."

"I heard what you're saying."

"There'd want to be a second pen."

"Jens."

"I know. I know it." He put his arm round her then. "I've known you all my life too, is the thing. It's not like I'm in a hurry. But I'm thirty-eight years old and I sleep in a bunkhouse."

She laughed. She could not help it. She turned her face into his shirt, which smelled of hay and diesel and the river, and laughed until he started too.

Later, when the Dipper had gone round behind the cottonwoods, he walked her to the water. She hung her boots round her neck.

"Does your father know where you are?" he said.

"My father knows where everything is. It's on his dash."

"And?"

"And my telephone is on the kitchen table," Shannon said, "beside the fruit bowl." She stepped down into the river and began to count.

7

The Ring

They gathered on the Sunday and weaned on the Monday, and nobody on the Lodgepole slept Monday night for the noise.

Four hundred and thirty cows stood along the corral fence bawling for their calves, and their calves bawled back from the other side of it. It went on in the dark without a break. Arne lay and listened. It was the same every October. In three days they would quit, the cows first, and go back to grazing as if nothing had been taken.

He was up at three. Jens already had the lights on in the alley.

They sorted by flashlight and by feel. Steers to the left, heifers to the right, the replacement heifers Karin had marked in the spring cut back a third way through the small gate. Arne worked the gate. Jens brought them up the alley afoot, five and six at a time, calling the sort before they reached him. *Steer. Steer. Heifer. Keep. Steer.* He was never wrong. Arne swung the gate on his voice and did not have to look.

"Steer. Heifer. That's the one with the ear."

"I see him."

"It healed up."

"I said I see him."

Two hundred and twelve steers and a hundred and thirty-one heifers. The trucks came at five, two pots out of Roundup with their

running lights on, and backed to the chute one after the other. The calves went up the ramp with their feet drumming on the aluminium. It was just light when the second truck pulled out. The cows followed it along the fence to the corner and stood there.

Karin came down from the house with a thermos and the brand papers in an envelope.

"Three forty-three head," she said.

"Three forty-three."

"What do they weigh?"

"Steers'll go five-sixty. Five-seventy. They're heavy."

"And what will they bring?"

"Whatever they bring," Arne said. "That's what it's a sale for."

She gave him the envelope. She had on her town coat. She was coming, then. She came about one year in three. He had not asked which kind of year this was.

• • •

Prosper Livestock stood by the railroad tracks at the west end of town, a long white barn with a false front and forty acres of pens behind. It had sold cattle every Tuesday since 1938. Arne's father had sold here, and had bought here, and had once stood in the ring and dressed down an auctioneer for missing his bid. There was a café built onto the side that did breakfast from five. By eight the lot was full of pickups and the pens were full of other men's calves.

They ate in the café first. It went a little quiet when he came through the door, and then picked up again too quickly. He had expected that. He hung his hat on the rack and held Karin's chair.

Halvor Brekke was at the counter with his cane hooked on the rail. "Today's the day, then," he said, to the room.

"It's a Tuesday," Arne said.

"Is Declan getting his pasture?"

"Eat your eggs, Halvor," Karin said, and the old man laughed and did.

The Sorensen boy came over while they were waiting on the bill. He was thirty, with a place up Careless Creek that had been his father's and was now mostly the bank's. He stood by the table turning a toothpick in his fingers.

"I wanted you to hear it from me," he said. "We went in with the co-op. In August. We don't have any calves here today."

"Did I ask?"

"No, sir." He had gone red. "Dad didn't want it. It was the bank. They won't write an operating note any more without they can see the advisory's numbers on the place. They said it straight out." He looked at Karin, and back. "I heard what you said at the Stampede. I'd have liked to say it. I just wanted you to know it wasn't that I didn't."

"How's your father?"

"He won't look at the screen. He makes me read it to him."

"Tell him I asked," Arne said. The boy nodded and went back to his table, and Karin put the money on the bill, to the dollar, and they went through into the barn.

He went through the back first, along the catwalk. He always did. He liked to see what he was selling against.

It was a big run. Twenty-two hundred head, the board said. He looked down into pen after pen. Blacks, mostly, and black baldies. A set of reds from over by Winnett. Some good, some ordinary, one pen of leppy-looking stuff he would not have unloaded. His own were in the north alley, five pens of them. They had been sorted for size by the yard crew, and they stood quiet, looking up at him. They were as good as anything on the place and better than most. He had known that at home. He was glad to see it here.

There were no Rourke cattle. There had not been since 2027.

He knew how it went with them. Everybody did. Sometime in August the co-operative's machine had told Declan what his calves would weigh on the tenth of October and what a yard in Nebraska would give for them, delivered, and Declan had said "Right," and that

was the sale. No ring. No trucking to town. No commission. The buyer never laid eyes on them. The cattle were weighed on the ranch and loaded on the ranch, and the money was in the Rourke account before the trucks reached Billings. Three fifty-two a hundred. Conor had made sure it got around.

Arne went in and found his seat.

The ring was a half circle of sawdust behind a pipe rail, with a gate in on the left and a gate out on the right. The auctioneer's box was above it, and the benches rose up steeply in front. The first two rows were for buyers. They had padded seats, and a shelf to write on, though none of them wrote now. Seven of them this morning. He knew five. They were order buyers, men who owned nothing in the ring and bought on commission for feedyards three and five states away. Every one had a telephone propped on the shelf in front of him and a wire in his ear.

Third row, by the aisle, was where the Rourkes had sat. Francis, and then Declan, for seventy years. Nobody had taken it. People left a gap there still, out of habit.

Karin sat down beside him and took the ledger out of her bag.

He had not known she had it with her. It was the green one, this year's. She opened it on her knee, not at the ribbon. She opened it at the back.

"What's that for?" he said.

"To write in."

The auctioneer came into the box at nine. He was a Lewistown man named Lester Ostby who had cried this sale for twenty-six years. He settled his hat and pulled the microphone to him and looked over the benches. Arne saw him see Karin, and nod.

"All right, boys," Ostby said. "Twenty-two hundred. Let's not be here at supper."

The in-gate banged. Thirty steers came through it in a rush and swung round the ring, and the ring men stepped out with their sorting sticks to keep them turning. The scale was under the floor. The

weight came up on the board over the box in red numbers, five hundred and eighty-one, and Ostby started.

Arne had been hearing it all his life and still could not have said how it was done. It was a kind of singing. There was a number in it, said over and over, and a second number just above the first, held out, asked for. Between the two came a run of sound that was not words and had the beat of a horse trotting. *Three-thirty-now-five*, *would-you-give-five*, *thirty-five*, *now-five*, *bid-and-now-five*. A buyer in the front row moved one finger. A ring man threw up his arm and yelled. The number changed. *Five-now-forty*, *would-you-give-forty*. Another finger. Another yell. It took forty seconds. Ostby's hand came down flat on the desk.

"Sold. Three forty-one. Number sixteen."

The out-gate opened and they were gone, and the in-gate banged again.

He watched the buyers. He always had; a man learned more from them than from the cattle. In his father's time they had been loud men who bought with their whole bodies. They stood up, they argued with the box, they walked off down the row in disgust and came back. He had seen a man from Sioux City give seven cents more than he meant to for a set of calves because another man had laughed at him.

These seven sat still. Each sat with his eyes on the ring and his head a little on one side. Arne knew what that was now. He had watched Declan do it all summer. Somewhere a yard's machine had weighed these calves along with the buyer, off the telephone on the shelf, and worked out what they would cost to feed and what they would hang at in May. It was telling him a number, and when Ostby's chant reached the number the finger stopped.

They all stopped at about the same place. That was what it did to a sale. Seven men had seven ceilings, and the ceilings were within two cents of each other. Nobody got excited or got laughed at, and

nobody gave seven cents too much. Lester Ostby worked the gap between the top two for all it held. It did not hold much.

The first Lodgepole draft came in at twenty past ten.

"Tollefsen," Ostby said. "Lodgepole Ranch. You know these cattle, boys. Straight off the cow, one iron, been doing it a hundred and twenty years. Sixty-two head." The board came up. Five seventy-four. "Look at 'em. Look at the hair on 'em."

They were the top cut of the steers. They went round the ring like one animal, slick and deep and all of a size, and Arne felt it in his chest, as he did every year. A man in the row behind said, "Those are good calves, Arne," and he lifted a hand without turning.

Three-twenty-now-five. The fingers went. *Thirty. Thirty-five.* It climbed quickly, and he let himself think it might go on climbing. At three thirty-six there were three men still in. At three thirty-eight there were two. Ostby hung on thirty-nine for a long time. He leaned out over the desk. He named the buyer by name and asked him, as a friend, whether he had ever in his life seen a better set of Montana calves, and the buyer smiled and kept his hands on the shelf.

"Sold. Three thirty-eight. Number four."

Karin wrote.

The second draft brought three thirty-six and the third three thirty-one. The heifers came after dinner and sold fifteen back of the steers, as heifers did. It was done by two. Arne sat on a while. He watched a set from Winnett sell, and one from the colony at Sixmile, big rough calves that brought a nickel less than his. Then he went down to the office window for the cheque.

Karin had it worked before he got back to the truck. She had the book open on the dash.

"Three thirty-five and a quarter on the steers. Averaged." She turned the book a little, to the light. "Declan got three fifty-two."

"Declan's were lighter."

"Declan's were forty pounds lighter. That's worth eight cents, on today's slide. Call it three forty-four for calves like ours." She put her finger on a line. "So it's nine cents. A little under. On two hundred and twelve steers at five sixty-eight."

"Don't."

"Ten thousand, eight hundred dollars. And the commission, and the trucking, which he didn't pay either." She capped the pen. "I'm not saying anything, Arne. I'm writing it down. It's what the book is for."

He started the truck. He let it idle.

"They're the best calves I ever raised," he said.

"I know they are."

"Ostby said so. In front of everybody."

"He did. It was good of him." She shut the ledger. "Nobody up there was buying on what Lester Ostby said."

They drove out past the pens. The colony's truck was loading at the dock, an old red Kenworth, and two men in black hats were counting calves up the ramp, each on his own, to check the other.

It was the fourteenth of October. He had known all day what day it was. He had not looked for Declan at the sale, since Declan would not be there. He had not gone by the title office, or telephoned Brannigan, or said one word about nine hundred an acre. The sun went down at twenty past six. He ate his supper. He went to bed.

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Jens came for him at seven the next morning. He did not come to the kitchen. He stopped the flatbed in the yard and sat in it with the engine going, and Arne looked at him through the window and put his hat on.

They were silent on the county road, and on the track up through the breaks. Coming out on top Arne could hear them before he could see them.

There were ninety cows at the south fence. They were the dry cows and the late calvers he had turned back up here on Sunday, to use the fall grass. They were standing in the corner in a bunch with their heads over the top wire, and they were bawling. The trail came up to the fence, a foot deep, and went on down the other side.

The gate was shut.

He got out. He had never seen it shut. He had not known it would still reach. But somebody had lifted it out of the grass where it had lain for seventy-three years and walked it across the gap. The old wire had stretched and sagged. They had pulled it tight with a come-along, and dropped the loop over the tie. Then they had wrapped a chain twice round the gate stick and the post, a new chain, bright, three-eighths, and put a brass padlock through it.

There was a paper in a plastic sleeve wired to the top strand. He did not need his glasses. The words were printed, and large. *Rourke Land & Cattle. Stock water at this reservoir is discontinued as of October 15, 2031. Change of use application pending, Mont. DNRC.* Under that, in ballpoint, somebody had written: *Sorry, Mr. Tollefsen. I was told to.* There was no name.

He looked at the ground. It was soft by the post where the cows had been milling, and the tracks went over each other. But along the fence to the west, clear of them, there was one line of horse tracks coming and one going. Small feet, unshod behind. Light on the forehand. A colt.

Below, the reservoir lay flat and grey in its draw with a skin of mist on it. There was not a track on the dam.

Jens had come up beside him. He had the fencing pliers in his hand.

"It's five wires," he said. "I can have it down in a minute. They can't chain the whole fence."

"No."

"They'll go through it anyway by tonight. Look at them. They've been drinking there all their lives." He took a step. "Dad. It's one cut. We put it back up after and say they pushed it."

"Put those away."

"It's our—"

"It's his chain. It's his post his father set and his wire and his water." Arne heard his own voice, and it was flat. "It was never ours. That was the point of it. If it had been ours there'd have been nothing to shake on."

Jens stood with the pliers. A cow leaned on the top wire in front of them and it creaked. She looked at the two men, and at the water, and bawled.

"So what do we do?" Jens said.

"There's the thousand-gallon tank behind the shop. And the poly troughs from the calving lot."

"That's two trips a day. Three, in the cold. That's all winter."

"Then it's all winter."

"Or we bring them home."

"And feed them hay from the first of November? That I'll need in March?" He turned from the gate. The hip caught him, and he waited for it. "Go and get the tank."

Jens went. He put the pliers on the dash, hard, and turned the flatbed round, and Arne stood by the fence with the cows and listened to it go down through the breaks.

It was two hours before the first water came. He spent them walking the fence west to the rotted post. The boy had set a new one there in July, as he had said he would, and tamped it well.

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He got back to the house past noon. Karin was on the telephone.

It was the one in the hall. She had the cord pulled round the door frame and was sitting at the kitchen table with the receiver against

her shoulder and the ledger open in front of her, and she was writing. She looked up when he came in. She did not stop.

"Yes," she said. "Yes. I have that. And the heifers?" She wrote. "No. He's just come in. No, I don't think so, sweetheart. Not today."

He hung his hat up. He washed. Behind him she said goodbye, and the receiver went down in the hall.

When he turned round she was still writing. It was at the back of the book again. He could see from where he stood that there was more than one page of it, a column of dates down the left side and figures against them, in her small upright hand. Some of the dates were a long way off.

"That was Dagny," he said.

"Yes."

"What did she want?"

"She'd seen the sale report." Karin blotted the line. "She says cull cows are going to come up nine cents by the first week of November. There's a packer in Nebraska short. She says if you were thinking of shipping the drys this week, to wait two."

"I was going to ship them Tuesday."

"I know you were."

"I've ninety head on the east with no water. I'm not hauling to dry cows for three weeks to please a telephone."

"No," Karin said. "I told her you wouldn't."

She closed the book and got up to see to his dinner. He looked at the ledger lying on the oilcloth, with the ribbon hanging out of the front, where the year was, and all those pages at the back.

"How long has she been calling?" he said.

Karin had her back to him. "Sit down, Arne. You've been on that hip since seven."

PART TWO

Bench Winter

November 2031 – February 2032

8

The Colony Road

The colony road left the county gravel at a steel sign that said SIXMILE HUTTERIAN BRETHREN, INC. and under that, smaller, EGGS POTATOES CUSTOM WELDING, and it ran north for a mile and a half between stubble fields to a cattle guard and a line of Russian olives.

Joseph stopped the truck at the cattle guard. He turned the engine off.

It ticked as it cooled. Otherwise there was the wind, which on that bench never quite stopped, working at the olive trees and at a loose sheet of tin somewhere on the machine shed. He knew which sheet. It had been loose when he was a boy. He rolled the window down an inch to hear better, and the cold came in.

He had left Billings at ten. It was a hundred and forty miles, north through Roundup and then west along the river, and he had driven it with the radio off. Past Prosper he had begun to know things. The Brekke mailbox. The bend where the school van had gone in the ditch in 2016 with fourteen of them aboard and nobody hurt, and the German teacher had made them sing all the way home on foot. The elevator at Sixmile siding, where there was no longer a siding. He had not been north of Roundup since the eleventh of October, 2025.

He had gone on a Saturday. He had thought about it for a year and then done it in an hour. He had walked down this road at five in the morning with a duffel bag that had belonged to a hired man. In it were two shirts, a razor, and a hundred and sixty dollars he had earned, against the rule, welding a stock rack for a neighbour after hours. He had not taken the guitar. He could not have carried it down the lane past forty windows. At the cattle guard he had looked back once. There was a light in the kitchen, where the women were starting the bread, and one in the third door of the second house. He had told nobody. He learned afterwards from Rachel that their mother had been standing at that window. She had watched him as far as the county road. Then she had gone over to the kitchen and done her week at the bread as usual, and said nothing to anyone until after church.

A trucker had picked him up at the highway. The man had the radio on, a steel guitar, and Joseph had asked him to turn it up.

It was the second Sunday of November, a quarter past two. He had picked the hour with care. Church was at nine and dinner at half past eleven. From dinner until the evening service the colony was as near idle as it ever got: the old people slept, the married men sat in one another's houses, the young ones walked out in pairs along the shelterbelt. Nobody would be in the fields. Nobody would have any reason to come down the road.

He could see all of it from here. He had not known that he would. He had been six years away and had thought of the place as far off. It was a quarter of a mile. The long houses stood in two rows, white, with green roofs, three families to a house, each with its own door and step. The kitchen was between them, where everyone ate, and the church was beside the kitchen, a plain building no different from the rest. Beyond were the shops and the barns, the hog barns low and long, the chicken barn, the geese in their pen making a noise like a crowd at a ball game. The grain bins stood in a row, twelve of them. There had been nine.

The old horse barn was at the east end. It was the one building on the place that was not white: grey boards, a hip roof, a hay door under the peak with the hook still hanging. It had come with the ground in 1961, when the brothers bought out a rancher named Coyle, and the colony had never kept more than a team in it.

A door opened in the second house on the left. It was the third door. He had known it would be that one, but his chest went tight anyway.

His mother came down the step with a box in her arms.

She walked as she always had, without hurry, leaning a little forward. She wore the black jacket, with the dark kerchief tied under her chin, and her skirt blew against her legs. He counted her steps as far as the kitchen and then lost them. Halfway down the lane she shifted the box to her other hip. He ought to get out and carry it. He stayed where he was. The cattle guard was the line. Nobody had ever said so, but he knew it as he knew the bars of a song.

She came up to it and stopped on her side.

He got out then. He stood on his.

"Joseph."

"Mother."

She looked at him for some time. She was fifty-three, and had borne seven children and buried one. Her face was broad and brown and had hardly a line on it. She looked at his haircut and his jacket, which was canvas, with a corduroy collar, and his boots. He saw her look at his hands, which were empty, and at the left one for a ring.

"You're thin," she said.

"I'm the same as I was."

"You were thin then." She held the box out across the bars. He took it. It was heavy and warm underneath. "There is a goose in it, cooked. We did the geese on Thursday. Three hundred and ten. And bread, and two jars of the beets, and a headcheese. Katie-Basel sent the headcheese. She said to say it was from her, so you would know she is not one of those who will not say your name."

"Tell her thank you."

"I will tell her you looked thin."

He put the box on the hood. She folded her hands in front of her. They stood there with the cattle guard between them, eight feet of pipe laid over a pit.

She gave him the news as she would have counted out change. His brother Samuel-John had a second son. Paul was with the carpenters now and had built the new benches for the church, and they were too high, and the old women's feet did not reach the floor. Dorothea was to be the kindergarten mother's helper after New Year. Little Miriam was not little. She was twelve and had the top marks in the English school, and the teacher from Prosper had said it was a pity.

"A pity of what, I asked her. She could not say."

"And Jakob," Joseph said. It was the one she had buried. He would have been twenty-four. "Do you still go down?"

"On his day. Your father comes." She looked at her hands. "He stands a little off. He has always stood a little off from what he cannot mend."

Joseph looked down at the pipe.

"Rachel wanted to come down," his mother said. "I told her no. She will see you at the wedding, and she has enough in her head." She glanced back at the houses. "Your father is in the shop."

"On Sunday?"

"He is not working. He is standing in it."

Joseph looked. The big door of the machine shop was open about a yard, and in the opening there was a man in a black hat. He was too far off for a face. He had his thumbs in his braces. He was not looking towards the road. He was looking across the yard at the grain bins, and he went on looking at them.

"He knows I'm here."

"He knows. He said, if Sarah wishes to take the air on a Sunday, she may walk where she likes." She did not smile, but something in her face eased. "He asked what was in the box."

"What did you tell him?"

"I told him a goose. He said it was a good one to send, the big gander was tough." She unfolded her hands and folded them the other way. "That is a great deal, from him. You should know it is."

The tin banged on the shed. A dog had come halfway down the lane and sat down in the middle of it. It was a young dog, a collie cross, and he did not know it.

"How is the Minister?" he said.

"Well. He preaches shorter since the operation. Nobody has complained." She tucked a strand of hair under the kerchief. "The brothers met three evenings last month. You will have heard."

"How would I have heard?"

"I thought it might be in the paper. It was about the machine."

He waited.

"The elevator sent a man," she said. "A young one, with a tablet. He ate dinner with us. He said the company has the advisory now, the same as the ranchers' co-operative has, and that it would write the colony a contract for the wheat. For five years. It would tell us in February what to seed on each field, and how much of each, and the day to seed it, and when to spray and with what. And in return it would pay a price for the crop that was set before the seed went in the ground. A good price. Samuel said it was nine percent better than we have ever averaged." She said the figure carefully. "He brought it to the brothers himself. He did not say yes or no. He said, here is what it is."

"And?"

"They said no."

"All of them?"

"It does not matter how many. It was no." She kept her eyes on him. "The Minister said that a man who is told what to plant and

when to plant it and what he will be paid has taken a master. He said we have one already. He read from the fifth of Acts."

Joseph could have said the verse. *We ought to obey God rather than men.* He had heard it read at the meeting over the telephones in 2012, and had been told how it was read over the television in 1999, before he was born.

"That's the contracts," he said.

"Yes."

"You said the machine. Is there more than the contracts?"

"There is the weather." She said it a little too quickly. "The same man offered that too. It is separate. It tells you the weather for your own ground, ten days, hour by hour. Rain, and frost, and hail, and how much. Samuel has it now on the telephone in the shop."

"They said yes to that."

"They said yes to that."

He turned it over, and it would not sit level whichever way he turned it.

"It's the same machine," he said. "Mother. It's the same thing in the same building. It reads the weather and then it works out what to plant. The one is how it does the other."

"I know nothing about how it does it."

"Then why the one and not the other?"

"Because the colony decided."

"That's not a reason."

"It is the reason." She did not raise her voice. She had never needed to. "The weather is the Lord's. Any man may look up at it. If there is a better window to look through, the brothers say we may look. But what we do when we have looked is for the brothers, and nobody else. The Minister made the line there. Your father agreed it. Peter Entz spoke for the contracts and he was heard, and then he voted with the rest."

"Peter did?"

"He is hog boss. He sees the feed bills." She almost smiled. "He will be a good husband to her. He argues and then he does as he is told."

Joseph laughed. It came out short and surprised him. His mother watched him do it, and looked for a second as she had when he was small and had said something clever at table.

Then she looked away, up the road.

"You asked me why," she said. "You were always asking. Why is the combine allowed and the radio not. Why may we have a truck and not a car. I used to tell you, ask the German teacher. And he told you, ask the Minister. And the Minister told you to pray." She shook her head. "I do not think there is a why that would have been enough for you. I have thought about it a good deal. I think you wanted to be the one who drew the line. Well. The brothers draw it. They have always drawn it."

The wind had got inside his collar.

"Is it better?" she said. "Where you are. Do you draw it there?"

He thought of the handset. He thought of the red number over the steer's back.

"I'm paid," he said. "I have a room. I play music, Thursdays, with some men."

"That is not what I asked you."

"No."

She let it go. She had asked, and seen that he had no answer, and she would take that home.

"There is one more thing," she said. "It is only news. They are going to build Peter a new farrowing barn. It was voted the same night. Two hundred and forty feet, with the pits under, and heat. It is to go at the east end, where the ground is high."

It took him a moment.

"At the east end."

"Where the horse barn is. They will pull that down after seeding. The boards are sound; Samuel says the boards will go to line the new shop." She was looking at him closely now. "You went white."

"It's cold."

"It was cold before." She waited. "You were always up in that barn. When you were to be forking bedding. I used to see the loft door open from the kitchen, and no straw coming out of it."

"I liked it up there."

"Is there something of yours in it?"

He could hear the geese. He could hear the tin. Under those he heard a shuffle in A, sixteen bars, with a rag stuffed in the sound hole so that it came out like someone knocking on a wall.

"No," he said.

His mother looked at him a while longer. She had asked him two real questions in six years, both in the last five minutes, and he had answered one of them, with a lie. He thought she knew that. He could not tell what else she knew.

"Then it is only a barn," she said.

She stayed where she was. She looked him over once more, from the boots up.

"What will you wear?" she said. "In June."

"I'll find something."

"You will not find it in a shop. Not that they would let sit with the men." She measured his shoulders with her eye, as she had measured all of them for thirty years, without a tape. "You are your father's width. He has the coat from his own wedding. It has been in the chest since he got stout. I could let the sleeves down."

"He wouldn't lend it."

"I had not thought to ask him. A coat in a chest does not know who is wearing it." She said it quite gravely. "I am not promising. I am telling you there is a coat."

She put one hand out across the bars. She did not reach for him. She laid it flat on the hood of the truck, beside the box, and held it there, and took it back.

"Eat the goose today. It will not keep in a truck." She turned up the lane. After a few steps she said, without turning round, "The second Sunday of June. Nine o'clock. Leave the coat to me."

"Yes."

"Good," Sarah Wipf said, and went on.

He watched her as far as the kitchen. The dog got up and walked with her. She had not reached the step when the bell went.

It was the kitchen bell, the small one, three strokes. Half past two: coffee. He had forgotten it. He had picked his hour by the services, and forgotten that on a Sunday the whole place came out at half past two for coffee and buns.

Doors opened all down both rows. He stood by the truck and could not get into it. They came out in ones and twos and families, the men bareheaded for the short walk, the women tying their kerchiefs, children running ahead. Sixty, seventy people. He knew the walk of every one over twenty. That was old Paul Hofer, the Minister, slow, with his hands behind him. That was Dorothea, surely, grown a foot. There were two boys he could not put a name to, who had been in the kindergarten.

They saw the truck. They could not help but see it. He watched it go through them. A head turned, and then the one beside it. A man put his hand on a child's shoulder and steered it on. Nobody stopped. Nobody pointed. In the space of about a minute every soul on Sixmile Colony looked once at the cattle guard and then looked somewhere else, and went in to coffee.

One stood. She was at the kitchen door, on the top step, a tall girl in a blue polka-dot kerchief with a tray in her hands. She could not wave; she had the tray. She lifted it. She held a tray of buns up over her head with both arms, as high as it would go, and kept it there until somebody behind her spoke, and she went in.

In the door of the machine shop the man in the black hat had turned his head at last, and was looking down the road at the truck. Joseph lifted his hand. The man did not lift his. But he stood there, in the gap of the door, until Joseph had put the box on the seat and backed round and gone.

He ate the goose at a pull-out above the river, with his fingers, and it was not tough at all. There would be a coat. It was his father's, and he could not think how he would feel inside it. The barn would come down after seeding, which was the end of May.

9

The Front Room

Mariah brought the barrette to her on the first Saturday of November, at the kitchen table, while Lyle was out feeding.

She did not make a speech. She put it down on the oilcloth between the salt and the sugar bowl. It was the size of a child's hand, a rosette of cut beads, blue and white and a dark red, on smoked hide gone stiff with age. Evelyn's mother had made it for her own wedding in 1949. Evelyn had given it to the girl at thirteen.

"What's this?"

"It's yours."

"I gave it to you."

"I know. I'm giving it back." Mariah stood with her hands in the pocket of her sweatshirt. She was pale, and she had practised. "I kept it in a box in my closet because I thought that was safe. Apparently it isn't. So you might as well have it where you can find it."

Evelyn looked at the barrette. She did not touch it.

It had been eleven weeks. The girl had said nothing in August and nothing in September. She had gone back to school, and done her chores, and been polite. She had stopped coming into the kitchen in the evenings to do her homework at this table. Evelyn had noticed, and had told herself it was the senior year.

"I was after the canner lid," she said.

"It was under the box. I know. I put it there." Mariah's chin came up. "You could have taken the lid and left."

"I could."

"But you read it."

"I read it."

"Both pages?"

"Both."

The girl breathed in through her nose. She had her father's temper, which was slow, and worse for that.

"Then you know how much," she said. "And you've sat across from Dad every night since August, and passed him the potatoes, and you haven't told him. So now there's two of us lying to him. I had a reason. I was working out how to pay for it before I said anything. What's yours?"

Evelyn found she had been waiting for it since August, and in all that time she had not got an answer ready.

"It wasn't mine to tell."

"It wasn't yours to read."

"No."

"I'd have shown you. If you'd asked me." Her voice cracked on that and she got it back. "I was going to show you first. Before him. I had it planned. You went and took that."

She walked out. She did not slam the door, which Evelyn would have preferred. She heard the girl's feet on the stairs, and then nothing.

She picked up the barrette. The hide was dry and wanted oiling. Two beads were gone from the outer row and had been gone since before she was born. She had never minded them.

She had gone through her granddaughter's things. She had not meant to. It had been a moment's weakness in an empty room, and it had told her nothing she would not have learned in good time. For that she had lost the evenings at this table, and the telling, which

the girl had been saving for her. She put the barrette in her apron pocket. She did not know where else to put it.

• • •

The grey car came on the Tuesday after.

She heard the cattle guard. He stopped short of the house again and waited for the dogs. This time she had the coffee on before he reached the porch. It was too cold for the chairs. She took him into the front room.

It was the room for company. It had her mother's sofa in it and a television nobody watched, and photographs: Raymond in his Army uniform, Lyle on a pony, a row of men in hats in front of the old tribal office at Lame Deer, dated 1961. The stove was lit. Kyle Brandvold sat where she pointed, with his folder on his knees, and looked at the photographs one after another, and did not ask about them.

"I'd have called," he said. "I have the number now. But there's something you ought to hear from a person, and I'd rather it was me than the *Billings Gazette*."

"Go on."

"We wrote to the council last week. Tri-Basin did. It'll be read out at the meeting on Monday, and by Tuesday it'll be all over Lame Deer." He opened the folder and left the papers in it. "It asks for talks. That's all it is. Preliminary talks, about an option on water."

"The Tongue River water."

"Yes, ma'am. The stored water. The Tribe has twenty thousand acre-feet a year in that reservoir under the compact, and the right to sell what it doesn't use, inside the basin. It's never sold a drop. It's never had a buyer." He spoke slowly, as he had on the porch. "Nobody's asking to buy any. The halls on the Musselshell are supplied. They run on an old hay right off a ranch there, changed over to industrial. The rancher's daughter wrote the water clause herself, and the company liked it so well that every water paper it sends out now starts from hers. Yours would too." He turned the folder a little

on his knee. “What the company wants is to be first in line. If it ever does need water in this basin, in ten years or twenty, it wants to have a paper that says the Tribe will talk to it before anyone else. And it would pay for that. Every year, whether it ever took a gallon or not.”

“How much?”

“That’s for the council and the company. I wasn’t told.” He closed the folder again. “I can tell you it wouldn’t be small.”

“For nothing.”

“For being first.”

She poured his coffee. She took her time over it.

She had sat in this room once before while men talked about what was under the reservation. She had been on the stairs, not in the room, with her knees drawn up. That had been coal. They had said the same thing then, very nearly. It was only a permit, to look, and nobody was asking to dig. It would be years. And there would be money every year in the meantime, for nothing.

“You said in August it wasn’t yours to speak about.”

“It wasn’t, in August. They hadn’t decided to write the letter.” He turned the cup on his knee. “I told them they should send somebody round first. To the people who’d be asked what they thought. They said that’s not how it’s done, you go to the government. I said this is a place where the government has grandmothers.” He smiled, a little. “So they sent me. They don’t know I’m telling you the week before the council hears. I’d just as soon they didn’t.”

“Why are you?”

“Because you said twenty-two minutes.”

She looked at him. He was not smiling now.

“There’s the other thing,” he said. “The line. The survey people would like to walk the route before the ground freezes hard. They’d be two days on your meadow, with stakes. They need the consent of whoever’s in possession, and at the agency they say that’s you and your son.” He took a single sheet from the folder and laid it on the

arm of the sofa. He did not hold it out to her. “It commits you to nothing. It says they can walk on it. I put the easement figure on the back, since you asked the last time, worked out for your share. The first payment and the annual.”

She left it lying while he was there.

When the car had gone she turned the sheet over. The first payment, at nineteen and a quarter percent interest, was fourteen thousand two hundred dollars.

She sat down on her mother’s sofa.

Fourteen thousand two hundred. It would be hers and nobody else’s. It was not the savings account, and it was not Delbert’s share or the Tacoma woman’s. It would pay for a room in Missoula and the books and the board, with something over for a bus ticket home at Christmas, and Lyle’s fence posts would not be touched.

She had only to sign for three steel towers across the top of her grandfather’s meadow. And she would have to stand up at the agency and say so, in front of forty-two cousins. They would look at her then as people had once looked at her father.

She put her coat on and walked up to see.

It was half a mile, and she took it slowly. The meadow had been cut twice and grazed off. It lay tan and short under a skin of frost that had not lifted all day. At the top, where the hay ground gave out against the sandstone, there was a corner post her grandfather had set. It was cedar, grey as bone, with a few turns of old wire still stapled to it. She put her hand on it. From here the house was the size of a matchbox and the creek was a line of bare trees.

Three towers. One would stand about where she was standing. She looked up and tried to see it, a hundred and forty feet, and could not. There was nothing in that country so tall but the rimrock. She tried the other thing. She pictured the girl in a room with a window, in a town with a river through it, and a desk. That she could see quite easily. She had seen it for herself once, for about a week.

A magpie went over. She stood until her feet were cold, and then she went down and started the potatoes.

She folded the sheet in three. The card was still in the jar on the windowsill. She put the paper in her apron pocket with the barrette.

• • •

Lyle came in at dark. He had been all day on the Thompson Creek side pulling bulls, and he was cold through and wanted to eat and not talk. She let him eat. Mariah had her supper and took her books upstairs.

"That car was here again," he said, when the girl had gone. "Wallace Small saw it at the turn."

"He was here."

"The man selling something."

"He's with the computing people. On the Musselshell." She had decided, peeling the potatoes, how much of it she would tell. It was most of it. "They want to run a power line up the creek, from Wyoming. It would cross the top of the hay meadow. They want to walk it with stakes."

Lyle put his fork down.

"No," he said.

"I haven't said what I think."

"I don't care what—" He stopped. He rubbed his face with both hands. He was a big, gentle man, slow to speak, and he hated to be short with her. "I'm sorry. Tell me what you think."

"I think they have asked to walk on it, and I have not answered."

"I'll answer. It's no. I've been fifteen years trying to get that ground into one piece. I'm not going to get it there and then look out the window at a row of towers." He picked the fork up and put it down again. "They'd need half. They won't get half. Delbert would sign anything, and the Denver bunch, but that's not half. Not without us."

"No. Not without us."

"So it's no."

"There's more. They've written to the council." She told him about the letter, and the option, and the money every year for being first. She watched his face go still while she told it.

"For water," he said.

"In time."

"Whose water do they think it is?"

"They know whose. That's why they wrote."

He got up and stood at the stove with his back to her. He stood as his father had, with his weight on his heels.

"Wallace says they'll take it," he said. "He says the council's broke, and it's money for nothing, and half of them have never seen that reservoir. He says in twenty years nobody'll remember what the paper said. Only that there's a paper."

"Sit down, Lyle."

"I'm all right."

"Sit. I want to tell you something, and I don't want to tell it to your back."

He sat.

She had not planned to tell it. She had planned the towers and the letter. But he had said nobody would remember, and she had been sixteen.

"You know about the coal," she said.

"I know there was going to be a mine and there wasn't."

"That's what everybody your age knows." She put her hands round her cup. "It was more than a mine. In 1966 the Bureau came to the council and said, you are sitting on five billion tons, and you are poor, and here are some companies. And the council said yes. They weren't fools. There wasn't a paved road south of Lame Deer. Men were going to Billings to wash dishes. So they signed, and they signed again, and by 1971 near half of this reservation was under a permit or a lease to somebody. Peabody. Consolidation. A company from Tulsa nobody had heard of. More than two hundred thousand

acres. For seventeen cents a ton, when the coal was dug, and it hadn't been."

"Seventeen cents."

"Some of it was twelve." She drank. "Then they took some of the council to see a strip mine. In Wyoming, I think, or North Dakota. To show them it was nothing to be afraid of. They came back and were silent for a week. And then a man in the tribal office sat down with the leases and a ruler and read every page. Nobody had done that. The Bureau had said they were in order. He found the Bureau had broken its own rules on nearly every one. Too many acres. No study. No bids."

Lyle was listening as he had when he was small.

"The fifth of March, 1973," she said. "It was a Monday. I was sixteen. My mother drove us in to Lame Deer and we sat in the truck outside the tribal office with the heater on, because it was full. There were people standing in the snow at the windows. It went on five hours. Then the door opened and they came out. Somebody on the steps held up both hands, all his fingers, and then one more."

"Eleven."

"Eleven to nothing. To ask Washington to cancel every lease and every permit on the reservation. All of it. Money that had already been paid, some of it. They voted to give it up." She set the cup down. "It took seven more years. Lawyers and Congress. But that was the day. People cried in the street. My mother did."

"I never knew you were there."

"I was in a truck."

"What did Grandpa say?"

She had seen the question coming. She had known since she began that it lay at the end of this road.

Her father had not been on the council. He had been in the hall. He had stood up in it twice that winter, a cattleman with a bad heart, in his good hat, and he had said that seventeen cents was more than nothing. He had said his sons were in Billings and Seattle

and that he would like to see one of them home before he died. He said the grass would grow back; he had seen it grow back after worse. He had not been shouted down. They had heard him out and thanked him. After the vote he had walked out through the people on the steps, and they had opened to let him by, and he had not spoken on the drive home or for a good while after.

He had not been a bad man. He had been wrong, and the whole Tribe had been there to see it. He was wrong on the biggest day the Tribe had seen in her lifetime, and he had been wrong out of love.

It was fifty-eight years. She had never said a word of it to her husband or her son.

"He wasn't on the council," she said.

"I know. But which side was he?"

"He was a cattleman," Evelyn said. "He was on the side of his cattle." She got up and took the plates. "The survey paper is on the sideboard. You can tear it up yourself if you want. I'd wait until you've slept."

He did not tear it up. He turned it over, as she had known he would, and looked at the back.

The back was blank. She had copied the route onto a clean sheet that afternoon, in her own hand, and signed nothing. The one with the figure on it was in her apron.

"When's the note due?" she said, from the sink. "At the bank."

"The first of April."

"And the appraisal on Delbert's share?"

"They say January. They said October." He put the paper down. "We'll have it, Mom. Both. If I sell the steers right and nothing breaks."

"I know we will," she said. She dried her hands. Through the cloth of the apron she could feel the edge of the folded sheet, and under it the hard little rosette of beads.

• • •

The council met on the Monday, in the chamber at Lame Deer, and she went. Lyle drove her. He had not torn up the paper. He had not signed it either.

It was the new building, brick, with a round room and the flags. There were perhaps eighty people, which was many for November. Word had gone round, as the young man had said it would. She took a chair at the back by the door, and counted. Ten council members at the curved table, and the President. The Small family in a row. Three of her own cousins from the Thompson Creek allotment, who nodded and kept their seats. A reporter from Billings. Two people in good coats she did not know, at the side, who wrote nothing down.

The secretary read the letter. It was a page and a half. *Preliminary and without commitment. A right of first negotiation. An annual consideration to be agreed.* It did not say Tongue River until the last paragraph.

Nobody spoke at first. Then a councilman from Birney asked how much, and the President said the letter did not say. A woman from the Ashland district said that was how they did it, they made you ask. A young man in a tribal college jacket stood up at the back. He said the reservation had four in ten of its people out of work and a reservoir full of water it had never sold, and what exactly was it being saved for. He was heard out. Somebody clapped. Somebody else said, sit down, Darrell, you weren't born.

"Born for what?" the young man said.

"For the last time."

It went on. She had heard all of it before, in another building, in other mouths. One side said the Tribe was poor. The other said it had been poor a long time and still had its ground under it. Both were right. That was why it had been so hard the first time.

An old man got up near the front. He needed two tries and a hand on the chair. It was her mother's cousin Clarence, who was ninety-one. He did not go to the microphone. He spoke from where he

stood, a few sentences in Cheyenne first, and then in English for the young ones.

"I was at the hall in seventy-three," he said. "I was thirty-three years old. I'll tell you what I remember. I remember it was not all one way. People say now it was all one way. It wasn't. There were good men said take it. Cattlemen. Men with sons gone." He turned slowly, looking along the rows, and she saw that he was looking for a face. "Evelyn Harris is here. Her father—"

"Clarence," Evelyn said.

She had not raised her voice. It carried. The room turned round.

"Her father was a cattleman," the old man said, after a moment. He was looking straight at her. His eyes were milky and very kind. "That's all I was going to say. He ran good cattle. Ask her what she thinks. She was there."

Eighty people waited.

"I think they've asked to talk," she said. She had not stood. "I think talking costs nothing, if you write down every word and have somebody read it afterwards with a ruler. And I think whoever sits across from them ought to be somebody who doesn't need the money."

There was some laughter. The President thanked her. The councilman from Birney moved that the letter be referred to the water committee, and it was.

In the truck Lyle said, "What was Clarence going to say? About Grandpa."

"That he ran good cattle."

"It sounded like more than that."

"Clarence is ninety-one," she said. "Everything he says sounds like more than that."

10

Groundbreaking

The consortium broke ground on the second of December, a Tuesday, with the temperature at nine degrees and a wind off the Snowies that took the ribbon out of the commissioner's hand before he could cut it.

Shannon stood with her father and her brother on a plywood platform at the edge of the bench. There were perhaps sixty people. Lathrop had flown in again, in a parka that still had the creases from the box. There were the three county commissioners, and the state senator, and a woman from the governor's office who read a letter. There was a row of men in hard hats and orange vests who were not listening to any of it, since they had been at work since five.

They had been at work for six weeks. That was what struck her. The ribbon was for the newspaper. Behind the platform, where in July there had been a line of lath and a weather mast, there was now a square of bare ground half a mile on a side, scraped level and the colour of a paper bag. Nine scrapers were crossing it in a line, nose to tail, each one cutting its strip and carrying it off to the low corner. She watched the passes for a while. A scraper took five minutes to make the round. The whole line moved a hundred and fifty yards of dirt on each pass, and it had been making passes twelve hours a day since the twentieth of October.

"They don't stop for the frost?" her father said, to Lathrop.

"They rip it. There's a dozer ahead of them with a shank. Below eighteen inches it isn't frozen yet." Lathrop had to raise his voice over the wind. "We pour in January. Under tents, with heat. First hall's closed in by June and taking load by this time next year."

"Who told you that?"

"The schedule."

"And who told the schedule?"

Lathrop laughed. "The same outfit that tells you when to cut hay, Mr. Rourke. More or less. It's built five hundred of these, on paper. It knows what a Montana winter costs to the hour. It allows nineteen weather days between now and March, and so far it's used three."

Declan grunted. He had the earpiece in and his hat pulled down, and he was looking at the scrapers as he might have looked at another man's cattle. She could tell he was impressed and disliked it.

To the southeast, coming over the far rim of the bench, there were the towers.

She had not seen them from the house. They were lattice steel, grey, and each stood straddle-legged with its arms out. They came across the country from Colstrip in a line so straight it looked ruled. The nearest was two miles off. The farthest she could make out was a scratch on the sky by the Bull Mountains, and there were more beyond that. She had seen the route on paper. There were three hundred and eighty-one of them. They had no wire on yet. A helicopter would string it in March.

The line ran along the south edge of the Tollefsens' east lease. She looked for that and found it. A tower stood at each corner of the two sections, on the Rourke side of the fence, by a matter of feet.

"And the road?" Declan was saying.

"Done to subgrade. They'll gravel it this week. You can drive it now, if you don't mind the bumps." Lathrop pointed north, across the river. "Bridge steel comes on the fifteenth. Until then

everything's coming round by the county bridge, and your county's been very patient."

"My county's been paid."

"That too."

They wanted her father to turn the first sod. There was a shovel for it, chromed, with a ribbon on the handle, and a square of ground left unscraped at the foot of the platform so that there would be sod to turn. Declan looked at the shovel for some time.

"I've a man can do that," he said.

"It's for the photograph, Dad," Conor said.

"I know what it's for." He took it. He went down the steps sideways, and put his boot on it, and it went in an inch and stopped. The ground was iron. He leaned on it. Sixty people watched a man of seventy-one fail to dig a hole in his own bench. He straightened up and handed the shovel to the nearest hard hat. He said, clearly enough for the reporter, "That's why I lease."

They laughed. Lathrop laughed loudest. It was in the *Gazette* on Thursday, with the picture, and Declan cut it out.

Shannon looked for faces while the senator spoke. Half of Prosper was there. The woman who cut hair. The Sorensen boy, in an orange vest now, on the grade crew. Halvor Brekke on his cane, who had come to see it for himself and was telling a commissioner about the oil in '52. There was nobody from the Lodgepole. She had not thought there would be. She looked for the colony, and at first saw no one. Then she found them, well back, by the trucks: two men in black hats, one stout and one young, standing with their hands behind them. They had not come to the platform. They watched the scrapers for a quarter of an hour, and spoke to each other once, and left before the letter was finished.

• • •

She drove the road that afternoon. She took the ranch pickup, and she took Wyatt Pell, because Ray had him hauling mineral to the upper meadow and it was on the way.

She drove because Wyatt had put the mineral truck in the borrow pit on Thursday. He could do anything with a horse. He drove like a boy who had learned on two-tracks in Niobrara County with nothing to hit. Ray said he would trust him with a ten-thousand-dollar colt and not with a wheelbarrow.

He did not know the country yet, either. In November he had got turned round on the north pasture in a ground blizzard, with the yard lights in plain view if he had known where to look. He had come in two hours late, across the coulee rim, because it was shorter. Ray had taken him behind the shop. In this country, Ray told him, a man followed the fence home if it was five miles round. He told him why, and he named two men.

They crossed at the county bridge and came back west along the highway. The new road left it at a place where there had been a wire gate and a cattle guard. There was a paved apron now, a hundred feet wide, and a sign on steel posts with the three wavy lines. Past the sign the road went down into the coulee.

She had known the coulee all her life. It was a crooked, brushy draw with chokecherry in the bottom, a place for deer. She did not know it now. The road had been laid down it like a plank. The engineers had cut the bends off, and where the draw had wandered they had filled. The fill was thirty feet deep in places, a clean bank of yellow clay with the tracks of the compactor still on it. The chokecherry was gone. The road came out of the mouth of the coulee onto the upper meadow on a bank of its own, six feet high and forty wide, and ran dead straight across the hay ground to the river, where two concrete piers stood up out of the water waiting for their steel.

She stopped the truck on top of the bank.

"That's a road," Wyatt said.

"That's fourteen million dollars."

"Is that with the bridge?"

"That's the bridge. The road is extra."

He got out to open the stack-yard gate, and she got out after him, to look.

The bank cut the upper meadow in two. On the west side, upstream, lay the slough. It was a shallow dish of ground forty acres across, white now with frost on the dead sedge. In a wet spring the coulee emptied into it and the whole dish filled, and it stood there shining for a month while the ducks came through. The ground took it slowly. Her grandfather had called it the bank account. He said it was July hay, put away in April.

The road went straight through the east side of it.

They had thought of the water. She could see that. A ditch ran along the upstream foot of the bank, deep and newly cut, with the spoil thrown up neatly on the field side. It ran down the grade to the east, towards the river and the line fence. There were three culverts under the road where the ditch met the old low ground. They were corrugated steel, big enough for a calf to walk through. On the downstream side their mouths opened on a second, shorter ditch. That one ran along the foot of the bank for eighty yards and stopped at the Lodgepole's fence. Somebody had laid a fan of broken rock there, to keep it from washing.

She walked down the bank and stood at the rock.

It was well built. She could find nothing wrong with it. The plans had come across her desk in October, forty sheets, stamped by an engineer in Denver, and she had passed them to Ray for the gate locations and signed for the stack yard. *Drainage to nearest natural watercourse per Lease §14.6.* She had written 14.6. The nearest natural watercourse was the river. The ditch pointed at the river. It simply did not go there. It went as far as the consortium had the right to dig, which was the edge of Rourke ground, and stopped.

On the other side of the wire the Lodgepole's calving flat lay brown and level under the cottonwoods. It was dry. It was December.

"Where's that water go?" Wyatt said. He had come down behind her. He was looking at the rock, and then through the fence.

"Downhill."

"Yes ma'am. I mean after that."

"To the river. It's seventy yards."

"It's flat, though." He put his head a little on one side, as he did with a horse.

"It's always found the river before."

"Yes ma'am."

He let it go. She did not. She had not been thinking about the flat. She had been thinking about the slough behind her, and the new ditch along the foot of the bank. She worked it out, and she disliked what it came to. Forty acres of slough, a foot deep in a wet year. Forty acre-feet. It had always stood where it fell and gone into the ground over a month. Now there was a ditch to gather it. It would go through three steel pipes in a day or two and come out here, at a fence, onto another man's flat ground.

It might be nothing. In most years the slough hardly filled. The ditch might carry it. The river was close.

She thought of going to the site office. There was an engineer there, a young woman from Denver with a truck full of rolled drawings. She could say, your outfall is short. And the engineer would say, the outfall is at the property line, as far as our easement runs. To take it to the river we would need to cross the neighbour, and we were told by legal that there was to be nothing in writing with that neighbour. That is your 14.9.

Then it would be in an e-mail. It would have her name on it, and the date, and the words *adjoining owner*. Ostrander would bill a tenth of an hour to tell her what she already knew. A landowner who

has been warned stands differently before a judge than one who has not.

"Ma'am?"

"It's engineered, Wyatt. They've built five hundred of them."

"Yes ma'am." He looked at the flat a moment longer. "I guess they'd know."

He went back up for the mineral. She stayed at the rock until she heard the tailgate drop.

That night, in the office, she got the drawings out again. She found it on sheet thirty-one. *Outfall Detail C.* There was the fan of rock, drawn from above, with every stone. An arrow led from it to a note in small capitals at the edge of the sheet. *RIPRAP APRON AT PROPERTY LINE. CONVEYANCE TO RIVER BY OTHERS (N.I.C.).*

She knew what the letters stood for. Not in contract. The engineer in Denver had seen exactly what Wyatt had seen, from six hundred miles off, and had drawn a line round it and written that it was somebody else's job. The drawing did not say whose. There was no one else it could be.

She had signed the transmittal for these on the ninth of October. Her initials were on the cover sheet, in blue. She rolled them up and put them back in the tube.

• • •

Christmas was at the main house, as it had been every year of her life. Beth cooked. Beth was Conor's wife, a schoolteacher's daughter from Roundup, quiet and exact, who had long ago taken the measure of the Rourke men and fed them accordingly. There were thirteen at the table. Ray and his wife. The six hands who were wintering, in clean shirts. Kieran in a chair with two cushions. Wyatt Pell, the sixth hand, sat at the bottom, next to the boy, cutting his meat for him without being asked.

The filly was going well. Shannon had ridden her outside the pen in November, and down to the river in the first week of December,

and Wyatt had ridden behind on the bay and said nothing the whole way. He said less now than he had in summer. She took that as praise.

He was vain of his hands and knew to the dollar what they were worth. He had told her in October, without being asked, that he would be gone in two years, to Weatherford in Texas, where a man who could start a colt was paid by the head and never fixed a fence; he had the name of a trainer there written inside his hat. He thought Ray Dunning rode like a sack of feed, and had said so in the bunkhouse, where it got back to Ray inside the hour. He would not wash a dish. He had borrowed forty dollars from the Sorensen boy at the Stampede dance and, so far as she knew, still owed it.

After dinner her father got out the cribbage board.

It was a thing he did. He had played every hand who ever wintered on the place, and he had beaten all but two of them, and he remembered the two. He played fast and counted aloud and pegged with a big blunt finger. He looked round the room and settled on Wyatt.

"You play?"

"A little, sir. My granddad did."

"Sit down, then. A dollar a game and a dollar a skunk."

Shannon watched from the sofa with her coffee. She had Kieran asleep against her, and the screen in her lap, dark.

The boy could play. She saw that in the first hand. He counted his cards at a glance, without moving his lips. He threw the right two to the crib every time. In the first game he was six holes ahead at the turn, and her father had begun to breathe through his nose.

Then, on the fourth hand, with a hand she could see from where she sat, Wyatt counted twelve.

It was sixteen. It was a double run and four fifteens. Her father looked at the cards and at the boy and said nothing, and pegged his own. He won by three.

He won the second game by five. In the third Wyatt held a pair he should have broken and missed a flush. Declan counted it for him, sharply, as he would have corrected a man's loop, and Wyatt said, "Yes sir, I see it now." He lost by two.

"Three dollars," Declan said. He was very pleased. "You'll learn. You've a head for it. You want to watch your crib."

"Yes sir."

"My father taught me on that board. He never let me win one. Not one, till I was fourteen."

"No sir. I wouldn't think he would."

Wyatt got three dollar bills out of his shirt pocket and laid them on the table. As he stood, he caught Shannon's eye across the room. He did not wink; he was not the kind. He looked at her for about a second, quite soberly, and then he went to help Beth with the plates.

She sat there with the child's head on her arm. He was eighteen years old. He had worked out, in one evening, what her father needed on Christmas night, and had given it to him, and had paid three dollars of his own money to do it. She had been keeping the old man's books for fourteen years and had never once let him win anything.

Later, when the hands had gone down to the bunkhouse, her father sat on by the fire with the board on his knee, putting the pegs back in their holes.

"That boy threw the first game," he said.

"Did he?"

"Twelve. With a double run in his hand. He thinks I can't count." He shut the little brass door on the pegs. "I'd have called him on it in July. I thought, no. Let him. It's a long time since anybody on this place went to that much trouble over me." He looked at her, not sharply. "You never did."

"You'd have known."

"I knew tonight. I liked it anyway." He put the board on the mantel. "Where is it you go, nights? When your telephone's in the kitchen."

She did not answer.

"I'm not asking who. I can count that too." He bent, with a grunt, to bank the fire. "I'm asking you to take it with you. It's thirty below some nights. I'd like to know which ditch to look in."

• • •

On New Year's Eve she put her telephone in her coat pocket and drove to the Lodgepole by the road.

She had not planned to. She had gone out to the truck meaning to drive to the ford, as she had since the river got too cold to wade, and leave the truck in the willows. At the end of the lane she turned left instead of right. She went over the county bridge and east along the highway with the heater roaring, past the new sign with the wavy lines, and she kept herself from thinking about why.

Jens was in the yard with a lantern. A real one, kerosene. He had heard the truck on the road and had not known whose it was, and when he saw her get down from it, in the yard, in front of the house, he stood quite still.

"You drove in."

"I drove in."

"They're in bed. They go at nine." He looked at the dark windows and back at her. "Dad sleeps on that side."

"Then he'll have heard a truck."

He started to say something and did not. He held the lantern up. "Come and see."

It was the log barn. She had never been inside it. It stood behind the others, low and long, built of pine logs a foot through that his great-grandfather had cut in the Snowies in 1913 and skidded forty miles. The door ran on an iron track. Jens put his shoulder to it.

He had been at work in there. She could smell it: cold, and old manure, and under that fresh shavings and lime. There were twelve stalls, six on a side, with a wide alley between. Ten of them were as the last horse had left them, full of rusted cans and baling twine and a hay rake with no wheels. The two nearest the door were empty and swept. He had limed the floors. The mangers were mended with new boards, yellow against the grey, and there was a bucket hook in each.

He hung the lantern on a nail.

"It's two," he said. "It's a start. I did them nights. The rest'll take a dumpster." He was talking fast, for him. "The pen's out the back. I walked it. There's nine posts want replacing and the gate's off. I priced the lumber for a second one. It's not much."

"Jens."

"I haven't asked him. I'll tell you that now. It's his barn. But he hasn't put a horse in it since 2011 and he won't say no to Mom, and Mom—" He stopped. He took his cap off and put it back on. "I had this worked out and I've started at the wrong end."

"Start at the other one."

He put his hand in his coat pocket. He brought out a box, a small one, dark blue, the corners worn through to the card. He held it a moment unopened. He held it.

"It was my grandmother's. Dad's mother. She kept the book before Mom did." He turned it over. "Mom gave it to me at Thanksgiving. She put it by my plate and said, 'You'll want that for the Rourke girl. Don't lose it in a ditch.' That's all she said. So she knows, and she's known a while. I don't know how. I never told her."

"Mothers count plates."

"I guess they do." He opened the box. It was a thin gold band with a small square stone, worn nearly smooth. "It's not much either. I could do better in Billings."

"Don't."

"Shannon." He was looking at the ring and not at her. "I'm thirty-eight. I've got no land. I won't have for twenty years, and when I do it'll be half Dagny's. I live in a bunkhouse and I work for a man who'd sooner lose a pasture than be told the time of day. That's what I've got. I've got that, and two clean stalls." He looked up. "I'd like you to marry me anyway."

She had known for a month that he would ask. She had not known it would be in here, with the lime.

She thought of fourteen-nine. It came in on its own, as a figure will. *Lessor shall terminate.* She thought of ninety cows on the east bench and a thousand-gallon tank going up through the breaks three times a day in this cold. She had seen the tank from the highway. She thought of a fan of broken rock at a fence.

He did not know any of it. If she said yes, he would not know it tomorrow either, or at the wedding. She would be saying yes on his behalf to something he had not been shown. She had drawn up enough contracts to know what that was called.

"Yes," she said.

He let his breath go. He got the ring on her at the second try; his hands were cold. Then he held on to her, hard, with his face in her hair, in the alley of his great-grandfather's barn, and she held on to him.

"You'll have to tell your father," she said, after a while.

"You'll have to tell yours."

"Mine's known since about ten past nine." She took the telephone out of her pocket and showed it to him. It was lit. "I brought it with me. I'm a blue dot in your yard."

11

Thirty Below

It went to thirty below on the nineteenth of December and stayed there nine days.

Arne tapped the glass each morning. It read thirty and seven-tenths, the highest he had ever seen it, and stayed there. High and cold. The Billings station said an arctic air mass. The sky over the Snowies was pale blue and empty, and the mountains looked close enough to hit with a rock.

He was up at five. Everything took twice as long.

The diesel had gelled in the flatbed's lines on the first night, though he had put in the additive. After that Jens parked it in the shop with a propane heater under the pan. The thousand-gallon tank sat on the bed, a white poly tank, strapped down. They filled it from the yard hydrant, and that took forty minutes with the hose stiff as pipe. The valve at the bottom froze shut every trip. Jens had rigged a weed burner on a ten-foot hose to thaw it.

Three trips a day. Six miles of county road and two of track. The track was drifted in the cuts, and they took a shovel.

There were ninety cows on the east bench. He had shipped none of them. The cull market had come up nine cents in the first week of November, as the telephone had said it would, and he had not

shipped then either. Karin had written something at the back of the book. He had not asked what.

The cows would be waiting at the troughs when the truck came over the rim. They stood in a bunch with their backs to the wind and frost on their faces, and their breath went straight up. They knew the sound of the engine now. They had quit going to the gate.

He looked at the gate, each trip, on the way by. The chain was white with rime. Somebody had been keeping the reservoir open below. He could see the axe-holes along the edge of the ice, fresh each day, and tracks going down to them. Rourke cattle. A couple of hundred head, turned onto the east side since November to use the grass along the new power line.

So the water was there, and it was being drunk. It was just not for his.

"Don't look at it," Jens said, the second day.

"I'll look where I like."

"You look at it every trip. It doesn't help."

"Drive the truck."

They would back up to the troughs. There were five, black poly, two hundred gallons each. Each morning they held a foot of ice. Jens broke it out with the axe and threw the plates clear. Arne worked the burner on the valve until it let go, and then the water came, steaming, and the cows shoved in. A cow will drink fifteen gallons at a go in that cold if she can get it. Ninety cows. Three trips should have been plenty. But the boss cows drank twice and the timid ones stood back, and he had to stand there with a sorting stick and hold a place for them.

His hands split. The seam in his hip ached all the time now, a low grinding, and at night it kept him awake. He did not say so.

"We could bring them home," Jens said. That was the third day. "I'm only saying it once."

"You said it in October."

"It was fifty degrees in October."

"And feed them what? I've got four hundred ton. I've got three hundred and forty cows at home eating it. It comes out to the tenth of April if nothing goes wrong. You've seen your mother's figures."

"I've seen them."

"There's grass up here. It's under a foot of snow, but they can get to it. All they want is water."

"All they want is three hours of our day and eighty dollars of diesel."

"Then that's what they get."

Jens threw a plate of ice. It went a long way and broke. He did not say anything more, and they finished, and drove home with the empty tank booming on the bed.

On the fourth day the truck went off the track in the second cut.

It was his doing. Jens had the flu, or said it was the flu, and had been coughing since Sunday. Arne had told him to stay in and had taken the noon load alone. The wind had filled the cut since morning. He hit the drift too slowly. The front wheels climbed it and the back ones did not. Eight thousand pounds of water shoved the bed sideways, and the flatbed slid off the crown and sat down in the borrow pit to the axle.

He turned the engine off. He said nothing. There was nobody to say it to.

He got the shovel. He dug for forty minutes, on his knees mostly, clearing the wheels and then the pan. The snow was dry and squeaked. He laid the chains from the toolbox under the tyres for something to bite on. He got in and rocked it. It moved a foot and settled deeper.

He could dump the water. That was the sensible thing. A thousand gallons on the ground and the truck would walk out. He stood with his hand on the valve.

Ninety cows had been standing at five empty troughs since seven that morning.

He left the valve shut, and walked. It was a mile and a quarter to the troughs, uphill, and he did it in thirty-five minutes with the axe over his shoulder. He broke the ice out so they could at least lick at what was under it. Then he walked back down past the truck, and on down to the county road, another two miles. He was on the road, with his scarf frozen to his face, when the colony's feed truck came along from the west and stopped.

The driver was a boy of twenty in a black cap. He had another like him on the seat. They did not ask what had happened. They looked at how he was standing, and the first one said, "We have a chain, Mr. Tollefsen," and the second was already out and unhooking it.

They had him on the track in ten minutes. They followed him up to the troughs, though he told them not to. One worked the burner while the other held cows off with a stick, and they did it as if they had been at it all winter. He tried to give them twenty dollars. The first boy put his hands behind his back.

"The Haushalter would ask where we got it," he said.

"Tell him a neighbour."

"Then he would ask why we took it." He nearly smiled. "Good day, Mr. Tollefsen. You should have dumped the water."

"I know it."

He did not tell Jens about the valve. He told him the truck had gone in and the Hutterites had pulled it out. Jens got up off the daybed, grey in the face, and went and put the chains back in the toolbox the right way round.

• • •

They lost the cow on Christmas Eve.

She was a seven-year-old, a good one, number 414. Jens saw she was missing at the noon water. They found her at two, in the head of a draw a half mile north of the troughs. She had gone in there out of the wind. It was drifted, and under the drift there was ice where

the spring had run in the fall and frozen. She had gone down on it with her hind legs out to either side.

Arne knew when he saw her. He had seen it before. A cow that splits like that tears the big muscles on the inside of the leg, and sometimes the nerve, and she cannot bring her legs back under her. She will try. This one had tried. The snow was beaten flat in a circle all round her and there was blood in it from her hocks.

She looked at them and bawled.

"How long?" Jens said.

"Since last night. Look at the snow on her."

"Can we get the tractor in?"

"No. Look at it."

The draw was steep-sided and narrow. They had left the truck on the rim. It was sixty yards down, in snow to the thigh.

They tried anyway. They always did. Jens went back for the hip lifters and a come-along and the two long chains. Arne stayed with her. He got down in the snow by her head, on his knees, and put his back against her shoulder to keep the wind off, and she leaned into him. She was warm still. He could feel her shaking.

"All right," he said. "All right, old girl."

Jens came down the slope in long plunging steps with eighty pounds of iron. They got the lifters on her hip bones and screwed them tight. There was a juniper on the side of the draw, an old one, with a trunk like a man's leg. They ran the chain to that, and hooked the come-along, and Jens began to work the handle.

It lifted her. Her hindquarters came up off the ice, slowly, a click at a time, and hung. Arne got in behind with his shoulder under her tail-head and tried to walk her legs in with his hands. They were dead weight. He got the left one under her. He got the right one nearly under. He shouted, and Jens let off two clicks.

She stood. For about as long as it takes to say it, she stood on her own legs, with her head down.

Then the right one went out again. It simply slid away from her, and she swung on the chain and hit the ice with her whole length, and lay there.

They did it three more times. It was dark by the last one. She had quit trying to help.

Jens was on his knees in the snow with his hands hanging. He had his gloves off; he could not work the handle in them. His fingers were white to the second joint.

"Once more," he said.

"No."

"She had it that first time. She was up."

"She was hung up. It's not the same." Arne got to his feet. He had to use the juniper. "Go and get the rifle."

"Dad—"

"She's been down twenty hours at thirty below. She's tore up inside. If I got her to the barn tonight on a stone boat she wouldn't get up in the morning. You know that." It came out rougher than he had meant, and he made his voice go quiet. "Go on. Put your gloves on. I'll stay."

Jens went.

It was the .30-30 from behind the seat. Arne did it himself. He had never let Jens do that, and he supposed he never would. He put his hand on her poll first. Then he stepped back, and it was very loud in the draw.

They took the lifters off her. They left her where she was; there was no getting her out until spring. Jens coiled the chains. Neither of them spoke on the way up the slope, and Arne stopped twice. It was the hip.

At the truck Jens said, "Four fourteen."

"I know her number."

"She raised a five-ninety calf this year. He was in the first draft."

"I know what she raised."

"She'd have been at the reservoir. That's all. She'd have walked down there in the morning and had her drink and walked back. She'd never have gone looking in that draw." He threw the chains on the bed. His voice was shaking. "That's a twenty-eight hundred dollar cow, and she's dead because there's a chain on a gate."

"She's dead because she went down on ice."

"Is that what Mom's going to write?"

Arne opened the truck door.

"Your mother will write a cow," he said. "And the number. That's what she writes." He got in. "It's Christmas Eve. Drive."

• • •

Christmas was three people at the kitchen table and a ham.

Karin had set a fourth place. She did it every year.

"Who's that for?" he said. He asked every year. It was the nearest they came to talking about it.

"Dagny," Karin said. "In case."

He did not answer. At half past twelve, when they sat down, she took the plate away and put it back in the cupboard.

They ate. Jens had two fingers bandaged on the left hand, where the frost had got them. He could not cut his meat and would not be helped. He sawed at it with the fork.

"Halvor called," Karin said. "He's had word from the boy in Spokane. They want him out there for the winter."

"He won't go."

"He's eighty-eight, Arne. He fell in the yard last week and lay there an hour."

"He got up, didn't he?"

"The mail carrier got him up." She passed the potatoes. "The place would come for sale. If he went. I'm only saying it."

"To who? Who's buying a hundred and sixty acres of river bottom with a house falling down on it?" He knew the answer before it was

out. So did she. There were two outfits on that stretch of river with money, and one of them was a company in Denver.

The telephone rang at two. It was the one in the hall. Karin got up, and stood by it, and let it ring a third time.

"It's for you," she said. "It's Christmas. She'll have dialled this one on purpose."

He sat where he was.

It rang six times. He was looking at his plate, at the fat on the ham going white. On the seventh ring Jens pushed his chair back and went into the hall. Arne heard him say, "Dag? No. It's me. Merry Christmas," and then, lower, "He's right here. He's eating."

He was not eating. He was sitting with his hands on either side of his plate.

It was five years since the supper. She had come home that weekend with a tablet, and after the dishes she had set it on this table and shown him his own ranch. It was all on there, drawn in green. The grass on every pasture, measured from the air. What each one would carry. What his cows had weighed in the fall, against what they could have weighed. She had been excited. She was twenty-eight and had found the thing she was good at, and she had wanted to give it to him. *It's only what you already know, Dad. It just knows it sooner.*

He had said that if a machine in Billings knew his place better than he did, it could come out and calve it. He had said more than that. He had told her to take her picture off his table. He remembered Karin's face. He remembered Dagny folding the cover over the screen, very carefully, as a person closes a hymn book.

She had not shouted. He would have known what to do with shouting.

"She says the cows on the east'll want mineral, with that much snow," Jens said from the door. "She says, tell him the high-mag. She says Merry Christmas."

"Tell her I've been feeding high-mag since November."

"I'm not going to tell her that."

"Then tell her Merry Christmas."

Jens went back. Karin had sat down again. She was cutting Jens's meat for him, small, on his plate, while he was out of the room. She did not look up.

"That's twice this year she's asked for you," she said.

"I heard the telephone."

"Did you."

He went down to Brekke's the next morning, before the first load. He did not say he was going. It was a mile below the Lodgepole on the river road, a grey house with a porch gone soft and one light on in the kitchen.

Halvor had eleven cows. They were old cows, pets nearly, in a lot behind the barn, and they were standing at an empty rack. Arne threw them three bales from the stack, and broke the twine, and spread it. The water hole in the creek had a hand's breadth of ice on it and no axe marks newer than Sunday. He chopped it open. Then he split wood for half an hour, as much as would go on the porch, and stacked it by the door, where a man with a cane could reach it without the steps.

He did not knock. Halvor would have had to ask him in, and give him coffee, and thank him. The old man had been doing for himself on that place since 1961.

He went every morning after that until the chinook, and then every other. He told nobody on the Lodgepole. He supposed Karin would hear of it from the mail carrier in time. She heard of most things.

• • •

It broke on the twenty-eighth. The glass came down a tenth, and then three tenths, and a chinook blew in out of the southwest in the night. By morning it was forty above and the eaves were running.

He walked the calving flat that afternoon, in the thaw, for no reason he could have given. The snow had gone grey and sunk. Water was running under it everywhere, in the cow trails, with a small glassy sound. He went the length of the flat to the west fence.

On the Rourke side there was a new bank he had not seen up close. It was yellow clay, as high as his head, with a road on top and three steel pipes through the bottom. Something was coming out of the pipes already. Not much. A stream as thick as his wrist from each, running down over a pile of broken rock and under the bottom wire, and spreading out on his side into the dead grass.

He watched it. It went thirty feet and soaked in.

He had seen the slough run in a chinook before. It had always come through the fence as a wet place, a seep a man found with his boot. He had never seen it come through as a stream. He thought that the road men had tidied it, as they tidied everything. A cupful more or less on the low end of the flat in December was nothing to him. The cows would not be on it till April.

He went back and stood in front of the glass, though it was afternoon, and did not tap it.

Jens told him on New Year's Day.

He did it in the shop. Arne had the flatbed's fuel filter in pieces on the bench. Jens came in and stood by the vise, and picked up a wrench, and put it down.

"There was a truck in the yard last night," Arne said. He did not look round. "About nine."

"That was Shannon Rourke."

"I know whose truck it was. I've been looking at that truck for ten years."

"I asked her to marry me. She said she would."

Arne held the filter housing up to the window. There was wax in it still, yellow, and he picked at it with a screwdriver.

He had known since July. He had known when he saw the boy's hand on her back. He had turned it over on a good many nights

since, with the hip keeping him up. He had found that he had nothing against the woman. That was the trouble. She was sharp, and she worked. She was past the age for foolishness, and she would be good for Jens, who needed somebody to tell him when he was being slow. If she had been anybody else's daughter he would have shaken his son's hand.

"When?" he said.

"We haven't said. Summer."

"Where'll you live?"

"Here. In the bunkhouse, to start. I'll put a kitchen in." Jens waited. "She wants to start colts. For outside people. I've cleaned out two stalls in the log barn. I'd want to ask you for the rest of it."

"You've already cleaned them."

"I'd still want to ask."

Arne put the screwdriver down.

"Who keeps the books over there?" he said. "At Rourke's."

"She does. You know she does."

"For fourteen years. Every cow and every acre and every dollar. She paid the lawyers. She'll have typed up the paper on that reservoir." He turned round now. "Did she?"

"I don't know."

"You haven't asked her."

"It's not— She does the office. Her dad decides."

"Does he." Arne wiped his hands on a rag. "I'll tell you what I know. I know your mother has kept the book in this house for forty-one years. I've never once told her what to put in it. And there's not a thing I do on this place that doesn't go through her pencil first, whether I like it or not. The one who keeps the book runs the outfit. I don't care whose name is on the gate."

"She's not her father."

"No. She's a good deal smarter than her father." He threw the rag on the bench. "You bring her here, and she'll sit at that table. She'll see what we owe and what we've got and how long the hay lasts. She

can't help but see it. And she goes home for Sunday dinner. A Rourke in the house is a Rourke in the books, Jens. I'm not saying she'd mean to."

"So it's no."

"I didn't say no. You're thirty-eight. I've got no say." He picked up the filter. "You asked for the barn. Take the barn. It's doing nothing."

Jens stood there. He had come in braced for a fight and had been handed what he asked for, and he did not know what to do with his hands.

"Mom gave me the ring," he said. "Grandma's."

"I know she did. The box is gone from the drawer."

"You looked?"

"I didn't have to look. I've been getting the ledger out of that drawer for her for forty years." He bent over the bench. "Go and thaw the hydrant. We've water to haul."

• • •

He went up to the house at noon. He took his boots off on the porch.

Karin was on the telephone. He heard her through the door before he opened it. She was not using the one in the hall. It was the other, the small one Dagny had given her two Christmases ago, that she kept in her apron and said she never used.

"—on the flat, yes. Four hundred and thirty. No, in the open. He always has." A pause. "How sure is it? Give me the number, not the word. Yes. And it could move?" He had his hand on the knob. "Then call me when it moves. Not before. I can't write down a maybe."

He opened the door.

She did not start. She looked at him across the kitchen with the telephone at her ear.

"I have to go, sweetheart," she said. "Your father's in. Yes. I will." She put it in her apron.

The ledger was open on the table. It was open at the back. She did not close it. She put her hand flat on the page, as a person might who was keeping her place, and waited.

He could have asked. He stood in his socks on the linoleum and it was all there to be asked: what was on the flat, and what could move. How long. What his daughter said to her mother that could not be said to him. Karin would have told him. She had never lied to him in her life. If he asked, she would turn the book round.

He found he did not want it turned round.

"Jens told me," he said.

"I thought he would today."

"You gave him my mother's ring."

"I did."

"You might have said."

"You might have asked where it went." She took her hand off the page. She turned to the ribbon, to the front, where the year was, and uncapped her pen. "Sit down. What was the cow's number? I've left the line."

"Four fourteen."

She wrote it. In the right-hand column, where she put the things that were not money, she wrote two words. He was close enough this time to read them. She had not written *ice*. She had written *no water*.

He looked at that for a while. Then he sat down and ate.

12

Bedded on Schedule

The cold was due on Tuesday, and on the Saturday before it the yard began to get ready.

Joseph noticed it first in the feed trucks. They ran a third delivery that night, at ten, which they had never done. He rode down the bunk line behind one and looked at what it was laying out. It was a different ration. There was more roughage in it, chopped hay and stalks, the stuff that makes heat in a steer's belly, and less of the flaked corn. He put his hand in it. It was warm from the mill.

The sky was clear. It was twenty-eight degrees, mild for January, and there was no wind at all. In the pens the cattle were lying out flat on the mounds.

On Sunday the bedding came. Six semi loads of big square bales, wheat straw, and a machine he had not seen before that drove itself down the alleys with a bale on its forks. It stopped at each pen, shredded the bale and blew it over the fence in a yellow arc. It did the north-facing pens first. He worked that out by the third block. It laid the straw deepest along the windbreak fences, in the lee, where cattle would bunch.

Nobody had told it to. He asked the day foreman at shift change. The foreman pulled up the screen in the office and showed him a

line of type: *Bedding event initiated 01/10. Trigger: 96-hr forecast, wind chill below minus 40 F, confidence 91%.*

"Ninety-one," the foreman said. "Last year it bedded on an eighty and nothing came. Cost the yard nine thousand in straw. I said so in the log. It doesn't read the log." He scratched his neck. "It'll be right this time, though. You can smell it."

Joseph could not smell anything. He went out and stood in the alley. The cattle were up now, in the new straw, nosing through it. A thousand of them, as far as he could see under the lamps, all bedded and fed for a cold that was still two days north of the Canadian line.

It came on Tuesday at four in the afternoon. He was asleep in his room on Third Avenue and it woke him. The window was shaking in its frame.

He lay and listened to it. The room was on the second floor of a house on Third Avenue North, over a widow named Mrs. Kessler, who kept the heat at sixty-two and had asked him in his first week whether he was one of the Amish. He had a bed and a table and a hot plate. The guitar case stood in the corner by the radiator, where it was bad for it. There was a calendar from the feed company. He had never put a picture up. In six years he had not been able to think what it would be a picture of.

The pipes knocked. Down in the street a car was trying to start, over and over, a dry cough that got slower. At home, with a night like this coming, the bell would have gone at four. Every man on the place would have been out, bedding hogs, draining the lines to the far barns, forty of them, shouting. He had hated the bell. He lay under a quilt Mrs. Kessler had lent him and listened for it.

• • •

By midnight it was thirty-one below with the wind at forty. He rode the pens in everything he owned. He had a silk scarf over his face, a rodeo cowboy's trick somebody had shown him, and his breath froze in it. The horse had ice on its eyelashes.

The handset had gone quiet. He had expected the opposite. He had thought it would run him off his feet. In the first cold snap he ever worked here, the winter of ’27, they had pulled forty head a night and lost nine in a week, and the riders had not slept. Tonight it buzzed twice before two o’clock. A gate blown open in the south alley. A heated waterer tripped in Pen 44.

He rode block after block. The cattle were packed along the windbreaks, tight as cordwood, hock-deep in straw, with their tails to the wind and frost on their backs. They were chewing. He could hear it when the wind dropped, ten thousand jaws going. Steam came off the whole yard and blew flat.

They were all right. They had been bedded two days before they needed it and fed for it three days before that. It was the best piece of stockmanship he had ever seen.

At a quarter past two the handset buzzed. *Receiving. Dock 2. 58 head.*

He turned the horse. It was a bad night to receive cattle. He wondered who would be on the road.

The truck was already backed to the dock when he got there. It was a cab-over Kenworth, red, twenty years old, with a pot trailer, and it was running. The driver was down on the dock in a black coat and a black hat with the earflaps tied under his chin, counting steers down the ramp by the light over the scale house. He was counting aloud. He was counting in German.

Joseph stopped the horse.

Dreißig. Einunddreißig. There was a second man at the foot of the ramp with a sorting stick, older, bent, counting too, a half beat behind. They did it at every sale. Two men, each on his own, so that neither could be wrong alone.

He knew the truck. He had washed it. He got down and tied the horse and walked into the light.

The driver looked up between numbers. He was a broad young man with a red face and a fair beard just started along the jaw, not yet a married man's beard. He had large ears.

"Zweiundvierzig," he said. And then he stopped.

The steers kept coming. The old man at the bottom went on a few numbers by himself and then turned to see what was wrong.

"Joseph Wipf," Peter Entz said.

"Peter."

"I d-didn't know. That it was this yard."

"It's this yard."

They stood there. It was thirty below. Neither of them put a hand out. Joseph did not know whether that was permitted, and from Peter's face, neither did he.

The old man was Andreas Hofer. Andreas-Vetter, whose back had gone. He peered up at Joseph from under his hat for a long moment. Then he said, in the dialect, to nobody, "Forty-two, forty-three," and went back to the steers.

"You've lost count," Joseph said.

"Andreas has it." Peter's breath was smoking. "We were to c-come Wednesday. The Haushalter looked at the weather on the telephone and said, no, the cold is Tuesday at four in the afternoon, go Tuesday early and be home before it. It was right to the hour." He nearly laughed. "We b-blew a brake line at Roundup. We sat nine hours for the part."

"They're colony steers?"

"The yearlings. Samuel sold them here on the b-board. He likes the price."

His father had sold cattle to this yard. His father's name was somewhere in the office, on a screen, and had been for who knew how long. He had ridden past it.

The last steer came down. Andreas shut the gate and said a number. Peter said the same number. The scale house printed a ticket by itself and the handset on Joseph's belt buzzed: *Pen 71.*

"I've to pen them," he said.

"Yes."

"It'll take ten minutes. There's coffee in the scale house. It's a machine but it's hot." He untied the horse. He had his foot in the stirrup. He took it out again.

He had not known he was going to ask. He had driven back from the colony road in November with it sitting in his chest like a stone, and he had gone on working and sleeping and playing on Thursdays with it sitting there. He had told himself there was nobody to ask.

"Peter. The horse barn."

Peter looked at him.

"They're pulling it down. After seeding. For your farrowing barn."

"Yes."

"There's something in the loft. Of mine. It's wrapped in a feed sack." He could not feel his face. "I can't come for it. I wouldn't get past the cattle guard. And if they find it when the roof comes off, it'll be read out. My father would have to stand there." He made himself go on. "I'm asking if you'd take it out. Before. And put it somewhere. In the coulee, I don't care. Under the snow."

Andreas Hofer had turned his back and was looking with great attention at the truck's rear tyres.

Peter took his time. The wind got under the dock light and swung it.

"I'm to be b-baptised," he said. "At Palm Sunday. I have to stand up in front of them and say I've nothing hidden."

"I remember the words."

"If I take it out, I've hidden it."

"I know that too. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have asked." Joseph took hold of the saddle horn. "Forget I did."

"Behind the third rafter," Peter said. "On the north side."

Joseph let go of the horn.

"The hog barn's right under," Peter said. He was looking at his boots. His ears had gone a deep red, and it was not the cold. "The

old one. The north wall of that loft is our south wall. I was in there every evening from when I was twelve. Scraping." He glanced up, and down again. "You played the same one over and over. Dum, da-dum. For about a year. Then you got another one."

"You heard."

"We all heard, Joseph. The hog crew. Andreas-Vetter heard." The old man at the tyres stayed as he was. "He said it was a b-board loose in the wind and that anyone who thought otherwise could take it up with him."

Joseph stood in the wind. Six years. He had carried it for six years as the one thing in that place that had been his alone.

"Why did nobody say?"

"Say what? Then it would have to be d-dealt with." Peter shrugged, a big slow shrug. "It was only at the bedding hour. And you were better, by the end. Rachel used to come and stand in the feed alley."

"Rachel?"

"That's how I started to talk to her."

The handset buzzed again. *Pen 71. Fifty-eight head. Waiting.*

"I can't promise it," Peter said. "I will not tell you yes. I have to think what I can stand up and say." He pulled his earflaps down. "But I know where it is. If that's any use to you."

"It's some."

"Go and pen the steers. They're colony steers. I wouldn't want them standing."

He penned them. When he came back the truck had gone. There was a paper cup of coffee from the machine set on the dock rail, where a man on a horse could reach it, and it had frozen solid.

• • •

The calf died on the Thursday morning.

It was in Pen 9, the receiving pen for the light cattle, bawling calves just off the cow. It was a little red steer with a white face,

three hundred and eighty pounds, from a load that had come up out of Wyoming before the cold. The handset had sent him for it twice already. Tuesday, *pull to Hospital 1.* It was treated, and it was sent back. Wednesday night, again. The arm came down with the needle and the screen said a hundred and five and two-tenths.

At three on Thursday the handset said, *Pen 9. Tag 0338. Observe.*

He had never had that word from it before.

He found the calf down in the straw by the windbreak, away from the others. It was on its chest with its neck stretched out. Each breath was a separate piece of work. He could hear it from the gate, a wet sound, with a catch in it.

He got down. He knelt in the straw and put his hand on its ribs. He had seen this since he was thirteen. It was pneumonia that had got ahead of the drug. In the colony's calf barn they would have carried it in by the stove. They would have got a tube down it with warm electrolytes, and somebody's grandmother would have sat up, and about half the time it lived.

He looked at the handset. *Observe.*

He picked the calf up anyway. It was all legs. He got it across the saddle in front of him and rode to the hospital shed with one arm round it. It was warm in there, forty degrees, and there was a pen with a heat lamp. He laid it under the lamp. He found a tube and a bag in the cabinet and mixed the powder with water from the kettle, and got the tube down, and let it run. The calf swallowed. He sat down in the straw with its head on his knee.

Nothing buzzed. Nothing told him to stop. He understood, after a while, that the system had already written this one off. It had worked the odds on Wednesday night and found them poor. Whatever a rider did now, in his own time, was of no interest to it either way.

The calf breathed. He counted between the breaths. Three. Three. Five. He found he was tapping it on his knee with two fingers, the gaps, without meaning to. Five. Seven.

Its eye was open. It was a dark, mild eye with long lashes, and it was looking at the lamp.

Eleven.

He waited for the next one for a long time.

The handset buzzed against his hip. He took it out. *Tag 0338. Mortality recorded 05:52. Probable cause: BRD. No action required. Rendering pickup scheduled.*

He had not told it. It knew from the tag in the ear, which had felt the heart stop under his hand.

He sat there until the day crew came.

The day foreman found him at seven. He stood in the door of the shed with his coffee and looked at the calf under the lamp, and the bag, and the tube.

"It told you to leave that one," he said.

"It said observe."

"That's what that means." He was not unkind about it. He came in and squatted, with his knees cracking, and put two fingers on the calf's eye, as a man does. "I used to do this. Twenty years. I'd sit up with the bad ones. My wife said I smelled like a hospital." He stood. "You know what the number was, when I started? What we lost? Two and a half in a hundred. I thought that was good. I was proud of it."

"What is it now?"

"Under one. It was point eight last year." He drank some coffee. "So I tell myself, there's three or four hundred head a year walking round out there that I'd have sat up with and lost. And it didn't sit up with any of them. It doesn't have to. It gets there before there's anything to sit up for." He nodded at the calf. "Except now and then."

"What do I put on the sheet?"

"Nothing. It's put it." He looked at Joseph a moment longer. "Don't do it again. I'm not telling you that. I'm telling you it's forty minutes it'll want accounted for, and you were on the clock."

"I'll make it up."

"I know you will. That's not—" He gave it up, and went to see about the bedding machine, which had hung itself on a gatepost in the night.

• • •

The Switchman had a band in on Thursdays through the winter if the roads were open. That Thursday they were paying.

It was Russ who told him, at the door. The owner had counted the bar on the last three nights and decided that the Drifters were worth two hundred dollars. It came to forty a man. Joseph had been getting forty since April, out of the till, as a kindness. Now it was a wage. He did not know why that should make his hands sweat.

He had slept three hours. He had the calf's breathing in his head still, the gaps.

They went on at nine. There were thirty people in the place, which was a crowd for January. Russ counted off the shuffle in A.

Joseph did not look at the kick pedal. He did not decide not to. He was too tired to watch anything. He stood at the back with his eyes on the tin ceiling, and he heard the bass drum as he had heard that calf, as something outside himself that he did not have to keep up with. It would come when it came. His arm went down and the drum was there.

It was there on the next one, too.

He did not think about it. He knew that if he thought about it, it would go. He played the changes. In the second verse he heard the steel come in over the top, a long sliding line, and for the first time he heard where his own part sat underneath it, like a floor.

The drummer looked across. It was a different look.

They played an hour and ten. A waltz, three shuffles, the fast one with the bridge. He went into the bridge and came out the far side of it, and Teo took his solo with his head down, and grinned at him across the stage at the end of it. People danced. An old couple by the jukebox danced every number.

He made one mistake. It was in the waltz. He went to the D a bar early and sat there on it, wrong, for three beats, in front of thirty people. A month ago that would have finished him for the night. He heard it. He heard the others go on by underneath. He waited for them and stepped back on. Nobody turned round. He went over the set afterwards, song by song, and that was the only one, and he found he could not make himself mind it.

At the break Gene came down the bar with two glasses of soda water and put one in front of him.

"Well," Gene said.

"Was it all right?"

"It was all right." Gene drank. He looked at Joseph sidelong. "What'd you do?"

"I don't know. I was tired."

"Stay tired." He clapped him once on the back of the neck with a heavy hand. "That's the first time I've played with you. Up to now I've been playing next to you."

The second set was the same. He was afraid the whole time that it would leave, and it did not.

Afterwards he stood on Montana Avenue with the case in his hand and two twenties in his shirt pocket. It was twenty below. The street was white and empty, and the lights at the crossing were going from green to red for nobody.

He wanted to tell someone. It was a strong want, almost a pain. He got his telephone out. He looked at the names in it. There were nine. The yard office. The day foreman. Russ. Gene. His landlady. A number with no name that rang in a kitchen passage a hundred and forty miles north, where at this hour there would be nobody to pick it up, and where, if there were, he could not have said what he had done. *I played a shuffle in* A *and the drum was where my hand was.* His mother would have asked him if he was eating.

Rachel had stood in the feed alley. He thought of that.

He put the telephone away. He was on shift at ten the next night. He put the guitar on the seat and scraped the windshield and drove home.

• • •

On the first Saturday in February, at a quarter past six, with his shift just done, the day foreman sent him out to a man who had come about the panels.

The yard was replacing its pipe panels with the new kind that had cameras in the top rail, and the old ones were stacked along the fence by the scale house with a price chalked on the end of the stack. The man was standing by them. He was near forty, tall, in a canvas coat, and he had come in a white Ford flatbed with a thousand-gallon tank strapped on the bed. Joseph knew the truck before he knew the man. Everybody north of the Musselshell knew that truck.

"Tollefsen," the man said. "Jens."

"I know."

Jens looked at him, and then at the hat and the coat. "You're Samuel Wipf's boy. The one that—"

"Yes."

"Well." He did not say anything else about it. Joseph would remember that. He walked along the stack and took hold of a top rail and shook it. "These any good, or is that why they're out here?"

"They're sound. It's the cameras they want."

"I don't want cameras. I've got a dad." He shook another one. "Thirty. Not today. March, when I've got the money. What's a windbreak want, two hundred feet?"

"Depends what you put behind it."

"Straw. Small bales, three high." Jens looked out over the pens. A thousand head were lying in the sun on bedding three weeks old. "Fellow in the office says you bedded this whole place two days before the cold. In January."

"Two days. And fed for it three."

"Who decided that?"

"Nobody. The programme." Joseph heard himself go on. "It was right. I never saw cattle stand cold like that. Not at home. Not anywhere."

Jens nodded slowly, as if that were the figure he had come for.

"My father calved through ninety-five in the willows," he said. "He'll do it again. He says if that thing in Billings knows his place so well it can come out and calve it." He let go of the rail. "I'm putting a windbreak across the high end of the flat and he can say what he likes. Hold me thirty."

Joseph chalked *TOLLEFSEN* 30 on the end of the stack. He watched the flatbed go out past the scale house and turn north for the river. He did not think about it again until March, when he loaded the panels onto the flatbed himself.

13

Missoula

The ice went on the fourth of February, on the crossing below the house, with Evelyn at the wheel.

She had driven the feed truck every winter since Lyle was old enough to stand on the back of it with a pitchfork. It was what a woman of her years was for on that place in February: to sit in the cab of the old Dodge in low range with the heater going and her hands on the wheel, and keep it creeping, while her son forked hay off the flatbed in a long line on the snow and the cows came strung out behind. She could do it without looking. She had done it with Mariah in a car seat beside her and with Lyle's father in the back, before. The crossing was where Thompson Creek went under the ice below the house, to get to the far meadow where the cows wintered. There was a bar of gravel there, a foot under the water in summer. In January the ice on it was a foot and a half thick and you could have driven a semi over it.

There had been a chinook. It had come over the divide on the Saturday and blown warm for two days, and the snow had gone off the south slopes and the creek had talked under the ice all night, and then on the Tuesday it had turned cold again, and the ice looked as it had always looked, white and hard and old.

She felt it before she heard it. The front wheels dropped an inch, as if the truck had stepped off a kerb. Then there was a sound under her like a board breaking, and the nose went down, and the cab tipped forward until she was standing on the brake with her whole weight, holding the wheel to keep herself off the windscreen. The engine died. Water came in round the pedals. It was so cold that for a moment she thought it was hot.

"Mom!"

He had gone off the back. She heard him hit the ice, and the ice let him through, and then he was at her door, chest-deep in the creek, with his hat gone and his face grey, pulling on the handle. The door would not come. The water was holding it.

"Window," he said. "Wind the window."

Her hands would not do it. She looked at them on the crank and they were somebody else's. Lyle put his arm through the gap at the top, where the glass had never closed properly since 2019, and got hold of the crank over her fingers and wound it down himself, with the water up to her knees now and the cab full of the sound of the creek. Then he took her under the arms and pulled her through the window as if she were a calf.

She did not remember the ice after that. She remembered being on the bank on her hands and knees in the snow, and Lyle beside her with water running out of his clothes and already freezing on them, white, so that his coat creaked when he moved, and the old Dodge nose-down in the black hole in the creek with its tailgate in the air and the bales sliding off the flatbed one at a time into the water and going away under the ice.

"Can you walk?" he said.

She could. It was two hundred yards to the house. He held her up the whole way, and his teeth were going so hard she could hear them over her own breathing, and the cows came along behind them bawling for the hay that was in the creek.

He put her in the bath. He sat on the kitchen floor in front of the open oven in a blanket, shaking, for an hour, and would not let her ring anyone. When the shaking stopped he went out in dry clothes and fed the cows off the tractor with the loader, a bale at a time, and came back and stood in the kitchen with his hands round a cup.

"I should have checked it," he said. "After the chinook. I should have walked it."

"I should have felt it."

"You can't feel ice from a cab, Mom." He drank. "It's the truck. We're out of it."

Wallace came on the Saturday with his tractor and his son and a chain, and they got the Dodge out of the creek in an afternoon, black water pouring from the doors. The engine had drowned. The man in Lame Deer who looked at it said he could rebuild it for less than another truck would cost, but not much less, and not this month. Lyle wrote the figure on the back of the stock paper and put it under the salt.

He did not let her drive the feed truck again. He fed off the tractor for a week, an hour longer every day, and then Wallace lent him his old flatbed till spring, and Lyle drove it himself, getting down every hundred yards to fork the hay off the back. When she offered he said no, he could manage, in a voice she had last heard him use to his father.

• • •

Mariah told her father on the ninth of February, a Monday, at supper. She had waited until he had finished eating.

Evelyn had not known it would be that night. She knew a minute before, by the girl's back. Mariah had cleared the plates, which she never did unasked, and stacked them, and then she left the tap alone. She stood at the sink with her hands on the edge of it.

"Dad. I've got something to show you."

Lyle looked up from the stock paper.

She had it in the pocket of her sweatshirt. She came round the table and put it down in front of him, on the paper, with the crest up. It was not the same envelope. That one had gone soft. This one was new, and thick.

"What is it?"

"Read it."

He read it. He was not a fast reader and did not pretend to be. Evelyn watched his lips move a little at the hard words. *Congratulations. The College of Humanities and Sciences.* There were more pages than there had been in August. A housing form. A sheet about a deposit, with a date on it in heavy type.

He got to the end and turned back to the first page.

"This says May," he said. "It says, further to our letter of May the twenty-eighth."

"Yes."

"Last May."

"I applied in March. Mrs. Whiteman helped me. It's an early offer. They do it for the top of the class." She was standing very straight. "I've had it since the first week of June."

"Nine months."

"I wanted to work out the money first. I didn't want to come to you with just a letter."

Lyle put the pages down. He squared them, as he did everything. He did not look angry yet. He looked like a man who has been told a horse he rides every day is blind in one eye.

"Missoula," he said.

"Yes."

"That's four hundred miles."

"Four hundred and thirty."

"What for?"

"Hydrology. Water. It's in the science college. You can do it with law, after." It came out fast; she had said it to the mirror. "They've

got a programme with the Salish and Kootenai. There's a woman there who did the compact. Their one. I wrote to her."

"There's a college in Lame Deer."

"I know there is. I work in it. It's two years, Dad, and it doesn't have this."

"Then two years there and go on after."

"They won't hold the scholarship. I asked."

He nodded slowly. He was looking at the housing form.

"I'm not saying it's not a fine thing," he said. "It is. Top of the class. I'm proud of that. I'd have liked to hear it in June." He rubbed his jaw. "But I'd be lying if I said I ever thought you'd go. I thought you'd do your two years at Dull Knife and be here. I've been building this place for you to be on. I thought you knew that."

"I do know it."

"Who's it for, if it's not? I'm forty-eight. Your grandmother's seventy-four. There's two hundred cows and nobody after me." He was not raising his voice. He never did. "I'm not buying out forty cousins so I can die on a nice tidy allotment by myself."

"I'd come back."

"People say that."

"I'm saying it."

"Your mother said it."

That was the first time he had spoken of her at this table in two years. Mariah's face went white and then red.

"That's not fair."

"No. It's not." He let his breath out. "I'm sorry. That's got nothing to do with you."

Nobody spoke. Evelyn had her hands in her lap. The stove ticked.

"How much?" Lyle said. "After the scholarship. There's always an after."

"Eleven thousand four hundred. For the first year. It goes down after that, if I work." She took a second paper out of the pocket. It was in her own writing, columns, very neat. "I've got two thousand

one hundred from the library. I can get a loan for five. I'd be short four thousand three hundred. I've been trying since June to find it and I can't. That's why I'm telling you now. The deposit's due on the first of March, and I can't find it."

He looked at her columns for a long time.

"You know what's in the credit union," he said.

"Yes."

"You know what it's for."

"I've never asked you for that. I'm not asking now. I said a loan."

"A loan for five that you'd be paying till you were thirty. And four more from somewhere." He pushed the paper back across the table, gently. "There isn't a somewhere, Mariah. I wish there was. There's the note on the first of April, and that's the steers. There's the truck, under the salt. There's twelve thousand and some in savings, and the Bureau finally sent Delbert's appraisal. It came Tuesday. Nine thousand eight hundred for his share. He'll take it. He's said so. I've been six years getting him to say so."

"I know."

"If I don't buy it this spring, he'll sell it to the Tribe, or his kids will get it. Six of them. Then it's not one signature I need, it's six." He put both hands flat on the oilcloth. "I can't do both. I've been lying awake since you put that envelope down, trying to see how I can do both. I can't see it."

"I know you can't! I'm not stupid. That's why I didn't—" She stopped. Her eyes were full and she would not let them spill. "I can add. I've sat here my whole life and heard about Delbert's share. I knew what you'd say. I knew you'd be nice about it, too. That's the worst part."

"Then what do you want me to do?"

"I don't know!"

She had shouted it. She put the back of her hand to her mouth.

In the quiet, Evelyn heard herself say, "She can have mine."

They both turned.

She had not planned it. She had been sitting there with a folded sheet of paper in her apron pocket, where it had been since November. Fourteen thousand two hundred. She had taken it out at night more than once and looked at it. She could have put it on the table now. *Here is a somewhere. It costs three towers.* Lyle would have torn it across before she finished the sentence. And he would have known then that she had been carrying it for three months, and had sent the survey men away with her mouth while she kept their figure in her pocket.

She could not do it. She could not stand up in front of the two of them and be her father.

So she had said the other thing.

"Half that account is mine," she said. "It's in two names. Six thousand and something. It's my lease money, off the meadow. I put it there and I can take it out."

"Mom."

"She wants four thousand three hundred. She can have it. And the deposit. I'll write the cheque tomorrow."

Lyle was staring at her.

"That's Delbert's share," he said.

"It's half of Delbert's share."

"It's the half that makes it enough! I can't buy it with six. He won't take six." His voice had come up at last. She had heard it do that perhaps five times since he was grown. "You know that. You sat at this table in October and worked it out with me. You said, we'll have it by spring."

"I did."

"And now you'll hand it to her to go off with."

"Yes."

"Why?"

She looked at her son. He had his father's shoulders and her own father's stubborn mouth. He wanted nothing in the world that was

bad. He wanted a fence with his own ground on both sides of it, and his child at his table.

In the spring of 1975 nobody had asked her to stay. She had been proud of that for fifty years. She saw it differently tonight. They had not asked because they had not thought there was anything to ask. She was the girl, and the youngest. The letter had been in the stove before anyone knew there had been a letter.

Mariah had kept hers nine months in a shoebox. She had worked the columns and written to a woman in Missoula. She had done everything a person could do alone. Then she had come to the table with it and been told, kindly, by a good man, that there was no somewhere.

Evelyn could not say any of that. She had never told him about the letter. If she told him now it would sound as though she were charging him with it.

"Because she'll come back," she said.

"You don't know that."

"No."

"You don't *know* that. You're guessing. You'd put fifteen years of my work on a guess."

"It's my money, Lyle."

"It's our land!"

He stood up. The chair went over behind him. He did not seem to notice. He was looking from one of them to the other, and she saw him understand something. It was in how they were sitting. Neither of them looked surprised enough.

"You knew," he said to her.

She did not answer quickly enough.

"She's known since August," Mariah said. Her voice was clear and much too fast. "She found it in my closet and read it and put it back and never said one word, not to me, not to you, and I only know because she put the lid on wrong, Dad. Backwards. She put it on backwards."

"Mariah."

"Well, you did." The girl turned on her. She was crying now and past caring. "You want to give me your money. Fine. Thank you. But don't sit there like you just thought of it. You've had six months to think of it. You could've told him in August, and then he'd have had the whole winter to get used to it instead of one supper. You could've told *me* you were on my side." She dragged her sleeve across her face. "I've been by myself with this since June. And you were in the next room. Knowing."

It was all true. Evelyn sat and took it.

Lyle had picked up the chair. He set it on its feet and stood behind it with his hands on the back.

"Since August," he said.

"Yes."

"You sat here in November and told me about your mother crying in the street. About the vote. You told me all that. And you had this in your pocket the whole time."

He did not know how near he was. She felt the edge of the paper against her leg.

"I didn't think it was mine to tell," she said.

"You didn't think." He nodded. He went on nodding, slowly. "I've never once kept a thing from you. Not the bank, not the bulls, not when I was seeing that woman in Ashland. You knew before she did." He picked up his hat from the sideboard. "Write your cheque. It's your money. I don't get a say."

"Lyle. Sit down. Eat something."

"I've eaten."

He went out. The door shut quietly. A minute later she heard the feed truck start, and the cattle guard ring.

Mariah was at the sink with her back to the room. Her shoulders were going.

"I didn't mean to say that," the girl said. "About August. I was going to leave it."

"It needed saying."

"He's never going to talk to you again."

"He will. It'll be a while." Evelyn got up. Her knees were not good. She came round the table and stood beside her granddaughter at the sink. She did not put an arm round her. The girl would not have had it.

"You'll want to send that deposit by registered mail," she said. "Not the ordinary. I'll drive you in after school."

"You don't have to."

"I'm driving you."

Mariah ran the water. She washed a plate and held it out, not looking, and Evelyn took it and dried it.

"Why water?" Evelyn said, after the third plate.

"What?"

"You said hydrology. You could have said nursing. Teaching. Why that?"

The girl was a while answering. She scrubbed at the roasting pan.

"That man," she said. "In the grey car. In August." She did not look round. "I found his card. In the rubber-band jar. I look in that jar. It's where you put things you haven't decided about." She rinsed the pan. "Three wavy lines. So I looked them up. And then I looked up what they'd want down here, and it's not hard, there's only the one thing. The compact's on the college computers. All of it. It's ninety pages. I read it in the stacks when I was supposed to be shelving."

"All ninety?"

"Twice. I didn't understand it the first time." She set the pan in the rack. "Grandma, there's nobody here who does. I asked at the water office. There's a man who knows the ditches. There's a lawyer in Boulder they call when there's trouble. That's it. It's twenty thousand acre-feet, and there's nobody on this reservation who can read the paper it's written on." She turned round, with her wet hands held away from her. "They plan thirty years out. It says so, on their

own page. I'll be forty-seven. I thought somebody ought to be ready who's from here."

Evelyn stood with the dishtowel.

She had thought it was a room and a desk. A girl wanting out. She had been ready to give six thousand dollars to that and call it love. It had not crossed her mind that the child might be leaving because of something she had found in a jar on the windowsill, on the Rosebud, at seventeen, and taken seriously.

"You never told your father that."

"He didn't ask why water. He asked what for." Mariah dried her hands on her jeans. "It's not the same question."

• • •

He was silent with her for a week.

He was not rude. He said good morning. He said, pass the salt. He ate what she put in front of him and thanked her for it and took his coffee out to the porch, in February, in his coat, and drank it there. In the evenings he sat in the truck with the dome light on and did his figures.

She wrote the cheque on the Tuesday. Four hundred dollars, to the University of Montana, and under it another, to Mariah Harris, for four thousand three hundred. Her hand was not quite steady on the second. At the credit union the girl at the window looked at the account, and at her, and said, "Mrs. Harris, there's two names on this. I don't need them both. I just want to be sure you know that takes it under eight."

"I know what it takes it to."

She drove Mariah to the post office in Lame Deer. They talked little. On the way back, at the turn, the girl said, "I'm still mad at you."

"I know."

"I'm going to be for a while."

"That's all right."

"I'll oil the barrette," Mariah said. "If you want. It's dry. I saw it on your dresser."

"It's on my dresser because I didn't know where else to put it."

"I know where it goes."

On the Wednesday she took his dinner out to him. He was feeding on the Thompson Creek side, off the back of the flatbed, forking hay to a hundred and forty cows strung out along the creek. She drove the old pickup up behind and sat with the engine running until he had finished the load.

He came over. He took the plate through the window and ate standing, with his back against her door, looking at the cattle.

"They look well," she said.

"They do."

"That brockle-faced cow's bagging up early."

"I saw her."

That was all. He handed the plate back and said thank you. She watched him climb onto the flatbed again. He was forty-eight and he climbed like it. She had been looking at that back since it was two feet long, and she could read it better than his face. He was not sulking. Lyle had never sulked in his life. He was doing what he did when a horse had hurt him, which was to stay off it until he could get on without wanting to hit it.

Wallace Small was at the mailboxes when she went by. He waved her down. He was a big, curious man who knew every vehicle on the creek and where it had been.

"I hear the girl's going to Missoula," he said.

"Where did you hear that?"

"Post office. Registered letter to the university. Loretta weighed it." He leaned on her window. "That's a fine thing, Evelyn. That's a real fine thing. What's Lyle say?"

"Lyle says pass the salt."

Wallace laughed, and then saw her face and stopped. "He'll come round."

"He's not wrong, Wallace. I'd find it easier if he was."

"What's it doing to Delbert's share?"

"You'd better ask Lyle."

"I'm asking you. I've got a reason." He looked up the road and down it. "Delbert called me a while back. Before Christmas. He wanted to know would I go nine-eight if Lyle couldn't. I said I'd no use for a tenth of somebody else's hay meadow. But he's calling round, Evelyn. He wants out. If it's not Lyle it'll be somebody."

"Who else has he called?"

"He didn't say. He said he'd had a letter. From some outfit, about a power line. He said they'd told him his share might be worth more than the Bureau thought, to the right party." Wallace straightened up. "I thought you'd want to know that."

She thanked him. She drove home with both hands on the wheel.

So the young man in the pressed shirt had not waited for her. He had come to her first, as he had said. He had not said he would stop there. He had gone on down the list, through all forty-three, and somewhere on it he had found a cousin in Billings with a tenth of the meadow and a wish to be rid of it. A share like that was worth a good deal to a company that needed half of them to say yes. It did not have to buy him. It had only to see that he sold to somebody who would sign.

She could have told Lyle that night. It was the one thing that would have brought him back to the table. But to tell him how she knew what a share was worth to the right party, she would have had to tell him about the figure.

On the Thursday, Cousin Delbert telephoned from Billings to ask when Lyle would be bringing the cheque. She said he would have to speak to Lyle. On Friday the survey paper came back in the post from the agency, the clean one, the copy in her own hand. Somebody had stamped it. *Consent of occupant not obtained. Route survey deferred.*

She put that in the stove. The other she kept. She did not put it in the jar; she knew now who looked in the jar. She put it under the paper lining of the top drawer of her dresser. It was the only thing in that house now that nobody knew about but her.

On the Sunday night Lyle came in from the truck at ten and stood in the kitchen door.

"He'll take seven," he said. "Delbert. I called him. Seven now and the rest at shipping, with interest." He was looking at the floor. "It leaves us nothing. If a tractor goes, we're done. But he'll take it."

"That's good, Lyle."

"It's not good. It's what there is." He turned to go up. On the bottom stair he stopped. "What did Grandpa do? When you didn't go."

She went still.

"When I didn't go where?"

"Billings. The teachers' college. Auntie Rena told me years ago. She said there was a letter." He had his hand on the newel post. "I asked you about it once. I was fifteen. You sent me out to check heifers."

She remembered sending him. She had not let herself remember what he had asked. So he had known. He had sat through supper on Monday knowing it, and had asked her why, and had waited to see whether she would say it.

"He didn't do anything," she said. "He never knew there was one."

Lyle stood there a moment longer.

"Well," he said. "This one knows." He went up.

14

A Wet April

The advisory came through on the twentieth of February, at ten past seven in the morning, while Shannon was in her father's truck.

They were going up to look at the bulls. Declan drove. He drove as he always had, in the middle of the track with one hand, looking at the country and not the road. The screen in the dash had the ranch on it in green. It made a sound, a single low note, which meant something had been added.

"Read it," he said.

She leaned over. It was at the top of the list, flagged amber, above the day's work.

"Calving advisory. Season outlook, issued today." She scrolled. "Elevated likelihood of a multi-day wet snow event affecting the Musselshell valley between the fourth and the twelfth of April. Sixty-two percent. Accumulation eight to twenty inches. Wind twenty-five to forty. Temperatures thirty to thirty-four. Rapid thaw to follow."

"Wet."

"That's what it says. Heavy wet snow, at or just above freezing."

"That's the worst there is." He had stopped the truck. He did not seem to know he had. "A dry cold you can calve in. They get up and suck and they're all right at ten below. It's the wet. They come out

wet and they lie in it and they can't get dry." He looked at the screen. "Sixty-two."

"It was thirty-five a month ago. I've been watching it move."

"You didn't say."

"Thirty-five is every year. I didn't want to give you a maybe." She scrolled again. "There's a recommendation."

"There always is."

"Covered calving for the mature herd through the window. It wants eight hundred head under a roof from the first of April to the fifteenth. It's worked out the square feet. Pole sheds, open to the south, straw to eighteen inches. It's sited them." There was a map. Three long rectangles, on the Home Meadow, on the high ground by the stack yard. "It's priced it. A hundred and ninety thousand, with labour, if the poles are ordered by Monday."

Declan put his head on one side.

She waited while he listened. She had seen him do it a thousand times and it still irritated her. It was like being in a room while somebody read a letter.

"It says it could move again," he said. "It says it'll know better by the tenth of March."

"The poles won't be here by then if you wait."

"It says that too." He took his hat off and rubbed his head. His hair was white and thin and stood up. "A hundred and ninety thousand dollars. For sheds I'll use two weeks."

"You'd use them every April."

"Every April isn't this. I've calved on that meadow fifty-seven years. I've had three bad storms. '75. '95. Twenty-two." He counted them on the wheel. "In '95 we lost two hundred calves in a night. I was out in it. Your mother was out in it, six months gone with you. We dragged them into the kitchen on a tarp." He put the hat back on. "I'd have given a hundred and ninety thousand dollars that night for a roof. I'd have given the place."

"Then build them."

"It's sixty-two. It's not a hundred. There's thirty-eight chances I've put up three barns to keep the sun off."

"What would you have done in '95? With sixty-two the February before."

He looked at her.

"You know what I'd have done," he said. "I'd have said every April's wet, and gone to look at the bulls."

He put the truck in gear. He did not turn round for the house. He drove on up to the bull pasture, and he looked at every bull, and felt the feet on the one that had been lame. It took an hour. Then he drove home and went into the office and told her to order the poles.

Conor came in while she was on the telephone to the pole yard in Billings. He read the screen over her shoulder.

"A hundred and ninety thousand," he said. "On top of what we pay the co-op to be told."

"Dad's decided."

"Dad decided in the truck. I'm asking what you think." He sat on the corner of the desk. He had been easier with her since New Year, and warier. She was going to be a Tollefsen, and he had not yet worked out what that made her in this room. "It's sixty-two. I've sat in on the co-op calls. They say themselves a season outlook's the softest thing it does. It's good at ten days. It's very good at five. At six weeks it's reading sea temperatures off Japan."

"It was right about the hail in July. And the cold."

"Those were days out."

"So wait till the tenth of March and build in the mud with no poles." She put her hand over the receiver. "It costs a hundred and ninety if it's wrong. I ran what it costs if it's right and we've nothing up. Eight hundred cows, thirty calving a day in that window. At the rate we lost them in '95, that's two hundred and sixty calves. At last fall's price that's close on half a million dollars, before you count a single cow. It's not close, Conor."

"You ran it."

"Somebody has to run something round here besides the machine."

He laughed. He got off the desk.

"And the Norwegians?" he said, at the door. "What's it cost them, if it's right?"

She took her hand off the receiver and ordered the poles.

• • •

The crews started on the Monday. Ray had the six winter hands and hired fourteen more out of Roundup and Prosper. Half of them had been laid off the campus job for the cold. They were glad of it.

She went down each morning to look. She told herself it was to check the invoices.

It went up fast. The poles were treated pine, twenty-two feet, set five feet in the ground on twelve-foot centres. An auger on a skid-steer bored the holes through the frost. By Wednesday there were three long rows of them standing on the high ground. By Friday the rafters were on the first shed and men were walking the purlins with screw guns, laying tin.

Wyatt Pell was on the roof crew. She could pick him out by the shouting. He was the one Ray kept having to yell at. He had no fear of the height and no sense about it either. On Thursday he had let a sheet of tin get away from him in the wind, and it had sailed the length of the stack yard and taken the mirror off the skid-steer.

He came down at noon and found her at the stack yard.

"It's going to be a fine barn," he said. "Three of them. You could winter colts in the end bay, after."

"I'd thought of that."

"I figured you had." He took his gloves off and blew on his hands. "Ma'am, can I ask you something? It's not my place."

"You've never let that stop you."

"No ma'am." He grinned, and then it went. "Mr. Tollefsen's cows. Jens's. They calve on that flat."

"They do."

"Are they building anything?"

"I don't know."

"Because if it's coming here, it's coming there. It's the same storm. It's two miles." He was looking at his gloves. "I'd tell him. If it was me. I rode by him all summer. He wouldn't thank me. He'd likely run me off. But I'd tell him."

"I'm going to. Tonight."

"Yes ma'am." He looked relieved. "That's all right, then."

He put his gloves on and went back up the ladder, and Ray shouted at him to tie off.

She stood in the cold a while. He had not said anything about the ditch. He had asked his one question in December and been answered, and had put it out of his head, as an eighteen-year-old does when someone he respects tells him it is engineered. She had not put it out of hers. It was the same storm, and it was two miles, and between here and there was a slough with three feet of snow in it.

She walked up to the office and shut the door.

She telephoned the site engineer. The number was on the cover sheet of the drawings, under the stamp, and she had dialled it before she had quite decided to.

The engineer answered from the site trailer. Shannon could hear a heater fan, and somebody running a saw.

"It isn't a complaint," Shannon said. "I'm not calling as the lessor. I'm asking a question off the drawing. Sheet thirty-one. Outfall C."

"The apron at the line. Sure." Paper turned. "What about it?"

"Where does the water go after the apron?"

"Sheet flow across the adjoining parcel to the river. Two hundred and ten feet, at about a third of a percent." She said it without hunting for it. She had been asked before, or had asked herself. "It's not pretty. I'd have liked a channel."

"Why isn't there one?"

"Because the adjoining parcel isn't ours and it isn't yours. We'd need an easement from the owner. I asked for one in September. It came back from our legal with a note that there was to be no written instrument with that owner until the change application cleared. He watered stock off your right for seventy years. They won't have his name on a page next to yours while Helena's still reading. So I stopped at the line and wrote *by others*." A pause. "I took that to mean you'd handle it. After."

"What's it designed for?"

"The twenty-five-year storm. It'll pass that. What it changes is the timing. Your slough used to hold a melt for weeks. With the ditch it drains in a day and a half. Most years that's a wet patch on the neighbour for a weekend." The saw stopped. "The year you don't want is a deep pack, and then a warm storm on top of it. Rain on snow. Or that heavy stuff right at freezing that's half water. Then the pack and the storm come off together, and the ground under it's still frozen, so nothing soaks in. That would put some water on him."

"How much?"

"I'd have to run it." She was quiet a moment. "Do you want me to run it? I can open an RFI. Request for information. It goes in the log with your name and the date. I answer it in writing. Then if it shows a problem, we've both got something to take to Denver."

Shannon looked at the window. In the log, with her name and the date.

"What would Denver do with it?"

"Tell me the outfall's at the property line per the lease, and conveyance is by others. And then ask who the others are." She did not say it unkindly. "It'd be you, Ms. Rourke. It's your ground the water leaves."

"And if I don't open it?"

"Then you called to ask how a culvert works, and I told you." The fan ticked. "It's February. There's time to cut a channel, if somebody

gets me a piece of paper from that neighbour. I could have a machine there in a day."

"There can't be a piece of paper. Not until June."

"Then I don't know what to tell you."

"Don't log it," Shannon said.

"You're sure?"

"I'm sure."

She had tried. She had asked, and a competent person had told her that nothing could be done without a paper her own clause forbade. Then she had decided, in about the time it takes to draw a breath, not to have it written down that she had asked. Fourteen-nine did not allow a Rourke to have anything in writing with that neighbour until the state had ruled. She had initialled fourteen-nine.

There was another way. She could say nothing to Denver and something to Jens. *Don't calve the low end.* No reason given. He would do it; he trusted her. And if the water came, and went where she thought, he would remember afterwards that she had told him where not to be.

She put the receiver down. She told herself it was sixty-two percent, and that the slough had filled and drained a hundred times and never hurt anyone.

• • •

She had been to supper at the Lodgepole three times since New Year's. This was the fourth.

She drove in by the road now. She parked beside the flatbed, with the white tank on it. Jens came out of the bunkhouse to meet her. He had cut the doorway for the kitchen, and there was a sheet of plastic over it, breathing in and out.

"I've got something to tell your father," she said. "At the table. I wanted you to hear it first."

She told him in the yard. The window, the percentage, the eight to twenty inches. The sheds. He listened with his head down.

"Sixty-two," he said.

"It could go up. It could go down. It'll firm on the tenth of March."

"And your dad's building."

"He's built. The tin's on two of them."

"What did it cost?"

She told him. He whistled, very low.

"We haven't got that. We haven't got a tenth of it." He looked across the yard at the calving barn. It was a good barn, red, with a hip roof. It held forty head. "There's that, and it's full of heifers from the fifteenth of March. Everything else calves on the flat. Four hundred and thirty cows. They always have."

"I know."

"He moves them to the willows if the glass drops. Along the creek. There's some shelter there."

"How many will the willows hold?"

"A hundred. A hundred and fifty if they're tight." He rubbed his face. "I'll tell him. Let me tell him. It'll come better."

"It's my father's screen. I'll say where it came from."

"He won't like that."

"He doesn't have to like it. He has to hear it."

They went in.

It was a small kitchen, and hot. The table was set on oilcloth, with a jar of spoons in the middle. Karin was at the stove. She turned and wiped her hand and gave it to Shannon, as she had each time, a dry firm grip. She had not once offered her cheek. Shannon did not mind. She had been raised among people who kissed everyone and meant little by it.

Arne was in his chair by the door. He had his boots off. He nodded to her.

"Shannon."

"Mr. Tollefsen."

"You'd better make it Arne. You'll be at it forty years." He did not smile. It was not unkind. "Sit there. That was Dagny's place."

She sat in Dagny's place. There was the barometer on the wall beside the door, at the height of his shoulder. It was brass, in a round oak case, with a white face. *Rain. Change. Fair.* The needle stood a little past Change. She had heard about it all her life and had never seen it.

They ate. It was a pot roast. Arne asked after her father's bulls, and she told him about the lame one. Karin asked whether she liked the new priest at St. Benedict's. Jens ate fast and said nothing. He kept looking at her.

When the plates were nearly clean, he put his fork down.

"Dad. Shannon's got something from the advisory. About April."

Arne went on chewing.

"It came Friday," she said. "It's a calving outlook. It's not a forecast yet, it's a likelihood. I'm telling you what it says and where I got it. It's off my father's dash."

"I didn't suppose you'd made it up."

"It says there's a sixty-two percent chance of a wet storm between the fourth of April and the twelfth. Two or three days. Eight to twenty inches, right at freezing, with wind." She kept her voice level. She gave it as she would have given a figure to the bank. "It recommends getting cows under cover for the window. My father's put up three sheds on the Home Meadow. He started Monday."

"I saw them. From the east road." Arne wiped his mouth. "I wondered what he was at."

"That's what he's at."

"Three sheds." He reached for the bread. "What'd that run him?"

"A hundred and ninety thousand."

"On a sixty-two."

"Yes."

"I'll say this for Declan. When he's told to jump, he doesn't ask how high. He asks what colour." He buttered the bread. "Did it say which day?"

"It gives a window. The fourth to the twelfth."

"That's nine days. In April." He looked at her directly for the first time. His eyes were a pale, hard blue. "I'll give you nine days in April it'll be wet. I'll give you them with my eyes shut. I've calved on that flat since I was nine years old. Every April is wet. Some are wetter. You get them in the willows and you sit up."

"It's not saying wet. It's saying twenty inches."

"It's saying *might*."

"Dad," Jens said. "It called the cold in January. To the day. The yard at Billings bedded on it two days ahead; the Wipf boy that rides nights there told me, when I went to price the panels. And the hay, in June."

"The radio called the cold in January. I heard it in this kitchen."

"Two days out. This had it at five."

"And what would I have done with five? Bought the cows a coat?" He set the knife down. "What do you want me to build, Jens? Tell me. I've got nine thousand dollars in the bank and a note due on calves that aren't born. I've been hauling water since October to ninety head because a neighbour found out what his handshake was worth. I've got a cow dead in a draw. You want sheds for four hundred and thirty? Go and ask your father-in-law for the loan of one of his."

Nobody spoke.

It had been said with her sitting there. He had meant her to hear it. She felt it go in, and she kept her face still. She thought: I wrote that. I am sitting in your daughter's chair, and I wrote the paragraph that killed your cow. And there is a ditch.

"We could do something," Jens said. His voice was tight. "Windbreak. Panels and straw, on the high end of the flat. I priced it. It's five thousand."

"It's five thousand I haven't got."

"I've got it. It's mine. From the roping, and wages."

"That's for your kitchen."

"The kitchen can wait."

"The kitchen's for her." Arne tipped his head at Shannon without looking. "You won't start a marriage by putting the stove money into a snow fence on my say-so. I won't have that." He pushed his chair back. "If the glass drops, I'll move them. I've always moved them. I've never lost more than twenty."

"In '95 you lost sixty," Karin said.

She had not spoken since the priest. She was sitting with her hands round her cup.

"Fifty-eight," Arne said.

"Fifty-eight." She got up. She went to the sideboard and opened the top drawer and took out the ledger.

Shannon had heard about that too.

It was bigger than she had pictured. Green cloth, red corners. Karin laid it on the oilcloth beside her plate and sat down and put her glasses on. She did not open it at the ribbon. She turned it over, and opened it from the back.

There were pages of writing there. Shannon could see that much from across the table and no more. It was close writing, in columns, upside down to her. Dates down the left. Figures against them. And down the right-hand edge a narrow column of small marks, ticks mostly, with here and there a cross. Karin ran her finger to the bottom of a column. She uncapped a pen.

"Sixty-two," she said. "Issued the twentieth."

"Yes," Shannon said.

"And a month ago?"

"Thirty-five."

Karin wrote. It was a short entry. She looked at what she had written, and at the line above it, for a moment. Then she capped the pen and shut the book and folded her hands on the cover.

Arne was watching his wife. He was not watching the book. His face had nothing on it at all.

Shannon had kept books for fourteen years. She knew what a second set looked like. She knew how a person sat who had one. She knew, too, what it meant when somebody kept a column for whether a thing had come true. She looked at Karin Tollefsen's hands, square and spotted, lying on the green cloth. She understood that there was something in this kitchen that had been going on for a long time before she came into it, and that she had no part in it.

"There's pie," Karin said. "Jens, get the plates."

She dried while Karin washed. The men had gone out to look at a heifer. It was the first time the two of them had been alone in a room.

Karin washed as she wrote, without a wasted motion. She did the glasses first.

"You keep your father's books," she said.

"Yes."

"Double entry?"

"Since I took them over. Before that it was a shoebox and Ray's wife."

"What do you do with a thing that isn't money? A favour. A debt nobody would put a figure on."

Shannon thought about it. Nobody had ever asked her. "I don't. There's no column."

"No. There wouldn't be, on a screen." Karin handed her a glass. "I've a column. Arne's mother had it before me. Some years it's the most use of anything in the book." She looked at Shannon for a moment over her glasses. "You'll want to start one. Not on the ranch account. Your own. For the horses, and for whatever else you find you're carrying."

She had said it quite mildly. Shannon could not tell what she knew. She held the glass up to the light, as if there might be a spot on it, until her face was her own again.

• • •

He walked her out. It had clouded over. There was no wind, and the yard light had a ring round it.

"I'm sorry," Jens said. "About the cow. He shouldn't have."

"He's entitled."

"He's not. It wasn't you."

She opened the truck door. She stood inside it with her hand on the frame. Across the yard the flatbed sat with the tank on it, white.

"What does your mother write?" she said. "At the back."

"I don't know. She's done it since the fall. I asked once. She said it was the weather." He kicked at the ice. "I think Dagny tells her things."

"Does he know?"

"He knows there's something. He won't ask." Jens put his hands in his pockets. "That's how they are. He doesn't ask and she doesn't say, and it's been forty years."

She got in. She put the key in.

"Build the windbreak," she said.

"He said no."

"He said not with the stove money. I can cook on a hot plate." She started the engine. "Five thousand's nothing, Jens. Build it. On the high end."

"Why the high end?"

"Because that's where you said."

He looked at her through the open window. He had caught something in her voice, and he did not know what it was.

"Is there something else?" he said. "That it said?"

"No. That's all of it."

It was all the advisory had said. She told herself that on the highway.

• • •

On the tenth of March the outlook firmed to eighty-one percent, and on the night of the twelfth she took Wyatt to the culverts.

She told him what she wanted in the stack yard, where nobody would hear. She did not tell him why. She said the slough had always held its water and she wanted it to hold this spring, and that the culverts could do their work in May, when the ground had thawed and would take it. He looked at her for a while with his head on one side. Then he said, "Yes ma'am," and went for the sandbags.

They had forty of them in the shed from the spring the river came up in '27, rotten at the corners, and a roll of plastic, and two sheets of plywood off the old granary floor. They went down the coulee road at eleven with the lights off for the last half mile. The slough was a white dish under the stars, three feet of old snow on it gone hard as a floor. The ditch along the foot of the bank was drifted level. She found the inlets by probing with a fence post, and they dug them out with shovels in the dark, and stood the plywood across the mouths of two of the three pipes, and wrapped it in plastic, and laid the bags against it two deep. It took them three hours. The third pipe they left, so it would not look like what it was.

"That'll hold some," Wyatt said, when they had finished. He was steaming in the cold. "It'll back up on the bank, though. Against the fill."

"The fill's thirty feet. It'll take it."

"Yes ma'am." He leaned on the shovel. "I'd still tell him."

"I know you would," she said. "Get in the truck."

On the twentieth Lathrop's engineer rang her at the office.

"Somebody's been at my culverts," she said. She did not sound angry. She sounded careful. "Two of the three inlets at Outfall C. Plywood and sandbags, done properly, by somebody who knew what they were doing. The road's got sensors in the fill. They read water against the bank where there shouldn't be any, and the system flagged it at four this morning as a slope risk. I had a crew out at

six. It's cleared." A pause. "I've had to log it. Unauthorised obstruction of a drainage structure. There were tyre tracks to the gate, a ranch pickup, and that's in the log too. I put no name on it, because I don't have one."

"I understand."

"I hope you do. If that bank had let go in a thaw with water behind it, it would have gone through the neighbour's fence in one piece." The fan ticked in the trailer. "I said I'd run it for you in February, Ms. Rourke. The offer stands. In writing."

"No," Shannon said. "Thank you."

The incident report came up on her father's screen that evening, in amber, under the day's work, because he was the lessor and everything on the lease came to him. He read it at supper with his fork in his other hand. He read it twice.

"Somebody's been blocking their pipes," he said. "On our meadow. Ray says it wasn't his crew."

"It wasn't Ray's crew," Shannon said.

Her father looked at her across the table. Conor looked up from his plate.

"If it was one of mine," Declan said, "I'll have his job. They've got it logged as a slope risk to the road. That's a lease default if they want to call it one." He put the fork down. "Find out who."

"I'll find out."

She found Wyatt in the round pen at nine, in the dark, sitting on the top rail with the filly standing under him in the cold. He had heard. Everybody on the place had heard by then.

"I'll say it was me," he said, before she could speak. "I'll say I did it on my own. I thought it was a good idea. Mr. Rourke already thinks I'm soft in the head."

"No."

"It's my job. I can get another one. Weatherford, it don't matter to them." He swung his leg over the rail. "It's your name, ma'am. It's all your name."

"No," she said again, and it came out harder than she had meant. "Nobody's saying anything. Ray didn't do it and you didn't do it, and nobody knows who did. Leave it there."

He looked at her from the rail. The filly reached round and nosed his boot.

"Yes ma'am," he said.

She went back up to the house. In the office she found the drawings and unrolled sheet thirty-one and looked at it a long while, at the fan of rock and the little arrow, and the two letters in capitals at the edge of the sheet. Then she rolled it up again.

PART THREE

The April Storm

March – April 2032

15

The Glass

The heifer went down at ten to two on the morning of the twenty-sixth of March, in the third stall on the left, and Arne knew before he had the gate open that the calf was coming wrong.

He had been watching her since midnight. She was a two-year-old, black, number 2071, one of the forty first-calvers that had been in the barn since the fifteenth. She had been up and down for an hour. Now she lay flat on her side in the straw with her neck stretched out, and strained, and nothing showed.

He hung the flashlight on the nail. He pulled his coat off and his shirt sleeve up past the elbow and poured the disinfectant over his arm from the jug. It was thirty degrees in the barn. The stuff was like ice.

"All right," he said. "Let's see what you've got."

He knelt behind her. It took him two tries to get down. He went in to the wrist, and then to the elbow, feeling.

There was a tail. He found that first, and under it the two hocks, bent, pointing at him. No head. No front feet. The calf was backwards and it had its hind legs tucked up under it, sitting in there like a dog.

He took his arm out and sat back on his heels.

It was a thing he could do. He had done it thirty or forty times. A man had to push the calf back up into her, against her straining, and cup each hind foot in his hand and bring it round and up over the brim of the pelvis without tearing her. Then he had a backwards calf with its feet out, and he had about three minutes to get the rest, because the cord would be pinched before the head was free.

It wanted two men. One to push and one to fish.

He went to the barn door and looked across the yard. The bunkhouse was dark. Jens had done the ten o'clock and the midnight on the flat and had gone in at half past twelve grey with it. He had been at this for twelve days. So had Arne, but Arne was the one who could not sleep anyway.

He went back in and did it by himself.

It took a long time. He lay on his side in the straw behind her, with his cheek against her rump, and pushed. She pushed back. A cow in labour is stronger than a man's arm. He waited for the gap between her pains and shoved the calf forward a few inches, and held it, and when the next pain came he let her crush his forearm against the bone and gave no ground back. He got his fingers round the left hoof. It was soft, a little rubbery slipper, and he folded his hand over the point of it so it would not cut her, and drew it round.

The foot came out. It hung there, wet, pointing up.

The right one took longer. His arm had gone numb to the shoulder. He could not feel what his fingers had hold of. He had to stop, twice, and take the arm out and beat it against his leg.

"Dad."

Jens was in the alley with his boots unlaced and his coat on over his underwear.

"I saw the light," he said. "Why didn't you get me?"

"You'd only just gone in."

"What is it?"

"Backwards. Breech. I've one leg."

Jens was already pouring the jug over his arm. “Get out of there. Let me.”

“I’ve nearly—”

“You can’t feel your hand. I can see it from here. Get the chains.”

Arne got out of there. He stood up by holding the stall post and it was a full minute before his hip would take him across the alley. The chains were on their hook, two short lengths of bright link with a loop at each end, and the handles. He dropped them in the bucket of disinfectant.

Jens had the second leg in the time it took. He had longer arms. He lay where his father had lain and Arne saw his face go blank, as it did when he was listening with his hand. “There,” he said. “Chain.”

Arne passed it. Jens looped it above the fetlock and took a half hitch below. The other leg. The handles.

“When she pushes,” Arne said.

“I know.”

“Down. Pull down, towards her hocks. Not straight.”

“I *know*, Dad.”

She pushed. They pulled, the two of them, a handle each, sitting in the straw with their boots braced against her. The hocks came. The hips came, and stuck, and Jens said something under his breath in Norwegian that his grandmother had taught him and Karin pretended not to understand. They crossed the legs and turned the calf a quarter and the hips let go.

“Now,” Arne said. “Now. All of it. Don’t stop.”

It came in one long slide, ribs and shoulders and the head last, and lay steaming between them. It was a bull calf, black, and it was not breathing.

Jens had it by the hind legs before Arne could move. He stood and swung it, upside down, once, twice, to drain it, and laid it down, and Arne cleared its mouth with two fingers and pushed a straw up its nose.

Nothing.

He rubbed it. He took a handful of straw and scrubbed its ribs hard enough to take the hair off. Jens was kneeling with his hands hanging.

"Come on," Arne said. "Come on, you—"

The calf sneezed. It shook its head, and its ears flapped, wet, and it drew a breath that rattled and then another.

The heifer had her head round. She made a sound low in her chest that she had never made before and had not known she could.

Arne sat back against the stall boards. His arm was red to the shoulder and had begun to hurt as the feeling came into it. Jens sat down beside him. They watched the heifer get up, and turn, and start to lick.

"Seventy-one," Jens said, after a while. "That's forty-three in the barn. Out of forty."

"Three had twins."

"I know. I'm saying we're full." He wiped his arm on the straw. "And it's the twenty-sixth."

Arne did not answer. He knew what day it was.

• • •

By the first of April they had a hundred and ninety calves on the ground.

It was going well. He would not have said so aloud. But the weather had held dry and bright all through March, cold at night and fifty by noon, and the cows had been dropping calves on the flat like apples. They did it as they always had. A cow went off by herself, to the edge of the bunch. She walked a circle and lay down, and in half an hour there was a wet black thing in the grass trying to get its hind end up. He rode through them twice a day on the old gelding with the tagger and the book. He had pulled five. He had lost two, a backwards one that nobody saw in time and one that was simply dead.

Four hundred and thirty cows. Karin kept the count on a card by the telephone, in pencil, and changed it every night. The ninety from the east bench were in it. They had come home down the breaks in the last week of February, thin, and had been on the flat since.

He took the one o'clock check himself, most nights. He liked it. He would not have told anyone that.

He went on foot, with the flashlight and a stick, down the middle of the flat. He did not shine the light about. He kept it on the ground ahead of his boots and let the cattle come up out of the dark as shapes. They knew his walk. A cow lying down would turn her head and watch him go by and not get up. Now and then he swung the beam across a bunch, quickly, and two hundred eyes came back at him green, and he looked for the pair that was off by itself.

There was one, most nights. A cow standing apart with her tail kinked out. He would stop forty yards off and put the light out and wait. It was no good crowding her. He stood in the dark with his weight on the good leg and listened to her breathe and strain. There would be the small wet sounds, and at last the slither, and then the other thing, the low talking a cow does to a calf that she does to nothing else alive.

Then he would put the light on, once, to see it lift its head.

It was cold on those nights, twenty or so, and so clear that the stars went right down to the ground. Across the river the Rourke sheds were lit from end to end, empty, like a fairground before it opens. Farther off, on the bench, there was a glow that had not been there last spring. They were pouring concrete under tents up there, round the clock. He could see the tents some nights, three long pale shapes with light inside them.

He would stand and look at that, too. Then he would walk on to the west fence and back, a mile each way, and tap the frost off his boots on the step, and write a number on Karin's card.

The flat was a mile long and a quarter wide. It lay between the river and the bench, and it was the best piece of ground the Tollefsens had. The east end, by the barns, was the high end, though the difference was nothing a man could see. It was five feet in a mile. At the west end, against the Rourke fence, the creek came down off the bench and wandered across to the river through a belt of willows a hundred yards deep. They were old willows, thick as a man's leg, grown in so close that a cow could stand in the middle of them in a north wind and not have her tail stirred.

That was where the Lodgepole cows had always gone in weather. His father had moved them there, and his grandfather. In April of '95 it had saved all but fifty-eight.

Jens's windbreak was at the other end.

He had built it in the second week of March, in his evenings, with thirty steel panels he had bought used from the yard at Billings, where, Jens said, Samuel Wipf's boy had loaded them onto the flatbed in the dark, and four hundred small bales of straw. Arne had not said yes. He had not been asked again. The panels stood in a line two hundred feet long across the high end of the flat, with a shorter wing at the east, and the bales were stacked against the north side three high. On the south side Jens had spread loose straw a foot deep.

It was well done. Arne had walked the length of it the day it was finished and shaken every panel.

"Whose money?" he had said.

"Mine."

"The stove money."

"Shannon's cooking on a hot plate. She says she likes it."

"It'll drift," Arne said. "I've watched snow do it behind every shed and stack on this place since I was six years old. You put a solid fence across a wind and the snow drops behind it, right where you've got your straw and your calves, and then you're out there with a shovel at four in the morning wondering whose idea it was."

"It's not solid. I left gaps between the bales. It's what the extension people say, forty percent open."

"The extension people."

"I read it, Dad. I didn't ask a machine." Jens had his chin out. "Shannon said the high end."

"Shannon's never calved a cow on this flat."

He had left it there. Some of the cows had found the straw already, and were lying in it with their calves in the sun. He could not see that it did any harm. He could not see that it would do much good either, against the kind of storm the Rourkes had built three barns for. You could not put four hundred and thirty pair behind two hundred feet of anything.

Declan's sheds were finished. He could see the roofs from the east road, three long shining strips on the Home Meadow. He had heard they were bedded already, and empty, waiting.

• • •

The telephone had it at ninety-four percent on the third of April.

Jens told him at breakfast. Shannon had sent it across at six. It had been sixty-two in February and eighty-one on the tenth of March, and now it had a day on it, and an hour.

"Wednesday night," Jens said. He had it written on the back of his hand. "The seventh. Starting as rain about nine, going to snow by midnight. Thursday and Friday the heavy part. Eighteen to twenty-six inches. Wind thirty-five. It says right at freezing the whole time, thirty-one, thirty-three. Then Friday night it warms up and goes back to rain for a few hours, and Saturday it clears off and drops to ten above."

"That's a lot to know," Arne said.

"It's what it says."

"On Saturday."

"Yes."

"Today's Saturday. This Saturday. It's telling you about Saturday week."

"It told the Rourkes about the hail."

Arne buttered his toast. The radio was on, low, on the shelf over the sink. The Billings station had given the weather at five, as it had every morning of his life. *Fair and mild through Tuesday. A chance of rain or snow showers Wednesday night and Thursday as a system moves through. Accumulations of three to six inches possible at higher elevations.* He had listened to it standing in his socks.

"Three to six," he said. "In the mountains."

"That's the government forecast. It's the same satellites, Dad. It's just the government doesn't say till it's sure."

"And yours says when it isn't?"

"Mine says ninety-four."

"It's not yours." Arne looked at him. "Mind that. It's Declan Rourke's, and he pays for it, and it comes to this table by way of a woman who's not married to you yet."

Jens put his fork down. He had a vein in his forehead that came up when he was angry, and it was up.

"What would it take?" he said. "I'm asking. What would it have to say?"

"It doesn't have to say anything. I've got a glass on the wall."

"The glass tells you six hours ahead. If that."

"Six hours is what a man needs. It's what there's ever been." He got up. He went to the door and tapped the barometer. Thirty and two-tenths, and holding. "There. Fair. I'll look again tomorrow. If it drops, I'll move them to the willows, the same as I told you in February."

"And if it's twenty-six inches?"

"Then it's twenty-six inches in the willows."

Karin had not said anything. She was at the stove with her back to them. Her apron pocket was square with the small telephone. When

Jens had gone out, banging the door, she turned the eggs and said, without looking round, "He's not wrong to be frightened."

"I never said he was wrong."

"You said everything else."

He went out to saddle the gelding.

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On the Monday he met Halvor Brekke at the mailboxes.

The old man had driven up in his pickup at five miles an hour, as he did every day at ten, and was sitting in it with the window down and the engine off, reading his mail. He had lost flesh over the winter. His hands on the envelopes were all knuckle.

"You've seen what your neighbour's at," Halvor said.

Arne had seen. He had come along the east road at nine and stopped the truck. They were moving the whole Rourke herd. It was strung out across the Home Meadow in a line half a mile long, eight hundred cows, with riders at the flanks and a man on a four-wheeler at the tail, and the head of the line was going in under the tin of the nearest shed. It was a still, bright morning. A man could have calved in his shirt.

"I've seen."

"Two days ahead of nothing. There's not a cloud between here and Spokane. I had my boy on the telephone, he says it's seventy there." Halvor folded a seed catalogue. "You'd think the man had lost his mind. Only I've known Declan Rourke since he was in short pants, and he never spent a dollar yet that he didn't see two coming."

"He's been told."

"I know he's been told. Everybody's been told. That Sorensen boy came by Saturday to tell *me*. Stood in my kitchen with his telephone held out like a hymn book." He looked at Arne sidelong. "What's your glass say?"

"Fair. Thirty and two."

"Mine too. I've my father's. It's hung by the door since 1934." He was quiet. A magpie walked along the top of the mailboxes. "In '95 I had sixty cows. I put them in the willows on my place, same as you'll do. Same as my father did. I lost thirty calves."

"I lost fifty-eight."

"I know you did. I helped you drag them." He started the pickup. It took three turns. "I've eleven cows now. I've not the legs to move them anywhere. They'll calve where they stand, and I'll be in bed, and whatever comes will come. I'm too old to be told and too old to do anything about it if I was." He put it in gear. "It's a comfort, in its way. You might try it."

He drove off at five miles an hour.

• • •

It dropped on the Tuesday.

He knew before he touched it. He had woken at three with his hip aching in a way that was not the cold. It was a deep, hollow ache, low down, that he had learned to read over forty years as well as he could read the Snowies. Something was coming. He lay and listened. There was no wind. A coyote was going, a long way off, and the cows were quiet.

At half past four he tapped the glass. It read twenty-nine and nine-tenths. The needle jumped under his knuckle and settled at twenty-nine eight.

He stood there.

He tapped it again. He had never done that. Twenty-nine eight, and it trembled.

The sky over the mountains was clear, and full of stars, and the wrong colour. There was a ring round the moon.

The radio came on at five. A *late-season storm system is now expected to affect south-central Montana beginning Wednesday evening. Six to ten inches of heavy wet snow possible in the valleys, locally*

higher. Stockmen with young livestock are advised to take precautions.

Six to ten. Yesterday it had been three to six in the mountains.

Karin had come down in her wrapper. She stood in the kitchen door and looked at him and at the radio. She did not say anything about ninety-four. She said, "I'll put the big kettle on. And I'll want the bathtub scrubbed."

"It's Tuesday. It's not till tomorrow night."

"Then I'll have a day to get towels." She crossed to the stove. "How far has it gone?"

"Four-tenths. Since yesterday."

"Is that a lot?"

"In April, with no wind? It's a lot."

He ate standing. He was at the bunkhouse by a quarter past five, and Jens had the door open before he reached it, dressed, with his boots on.

"I heard the radio," Jens said.

"Then you know. We move them."

"Where?"

"Where I said."

"Dad. Listen. Just listen once." Jens came down the step. He was speaking fast and low. "It's not only the snow. It's Friday night. It goes to rain, on top of two feet of that wet stuff, with the ground froze under it. All of that's got to go somewhere. The willows are the lowest place on the flat. The creek's right there."

"The creek's been right there since 1911."

"It's never had two feet of slush come down it in six hours."

"You don't know that it will."

"I know what she told me! She said the high end. She said it twice. She wouldn't say why, she just—" He stopped. He ran his hand over his face. "She knows something about that end. I can tell. She's not saying it. But she's been at me since February to keep them off the low ground."

Arne looked at him. He thought of a bank of yellow clay, and three pipes, and water coming under the bottom wire in December as thick as his wrist. He had not thought of it since. It came back to him now, whole, and he looked at it for a moment and could make nothing of it. A cupful.

"There's no shelter at the high end," he said. "There's two hundred feet of your straw. There's no wind in the willows. I've stood in them in a blizzard and lit a pipe."

"Then split them."

"What?"

"Split them. I'm not asking you to trust it. I'm asking you not to put every cow we've got in one place." Jens's voice had cracked. He was thirty-eight years old and he was pleading. "Take the heavies to the willows. The ones that haven't calved. They're the ones'll want the shelter. Leave me the pairs. The ones with calves on the ground already. I'll hold them at the windbreak and I'll sit with them. If I'm wrong, I'm wrong on my own."

The gelding blew, across the yard, in the corral.

It went against everything he had been taught. A man did not split a herd in weather. He kept them together where he could ride round them, and he put them in the best place he had. His father had said that. His father had also said that a man who would not listen to his own son deserved the son he got, though he had not said it about cattle.

"How many pairs?"

"Two hundred and six, as of last night."

"That's too many for your fence."

"It's what there is."

"You'll lose calves behind that thing. It'll drift."

"Maybe. And maybe you'll lose them in the willows." Jens held his eye. "I'd sooner we each lost some than one of us lost them all."

It was the most sensible thing either of them had said in a year. Arne knew it. It made him angrier than if the boy had shouted.

"The heavies to the willows," he said. "Two hundred and twenty-four. And the old cows, the ones that know the way. You keep the pairs. And when your fence fills up with snow on Thursday, you'll bring them down to me, and I won't say a word."

"All right."

"I mean it. Not a word."

"I said all right."

They moved them that afternoon, in the last of the sun. It was a strange thing to do, in shirtsleeves, at fifty-five degrees, with the meadowlarks going. Arne took the gelding and the dog and cut the heavy cows out of the bunch one and two at a time, the ones with their bags tight and their tail-heads sunk, and pushed them west along the fence. They went willingly. The old ones knew. They walked the mile with their bellies swinging, and at the creek they turned in under the willows without being asked and stood there in the dapple, looking back at him.

He rode in after them. It was as he remembered. The air was still. The ground was dry and deep in leaves. He could hear the creek, a small sound, running clear over gravel a yard wide.

He rode out the west side, to the fence. He had not meant to.

The bank was there. The rock was there, a grey apron of it, dry. The three pipes looked at him with nothing in them. Beyond the bank he could see the top of the slough, white still, the last snow on the whole river bottom, lying up there in its dish where the sun had not got at it.

He sat the horse and looked at that for some time.

Then a cow bawled behind him, and another answered from far up the flat, and he turned back. There were two hundred and twenty-four head to settle and the light was going.

At the barn Jens was forking straw off the flatbed, behind the panels, as fast as he could throw it.

"I'll take ten and one," Arne said. "You take four."

"You took one last night."

"I'm awake at one. You're not. Take four."

"What about midnight?"

"Your mother can look out the window at midnight. Nothing's coming till tomorrow." He got down. His leg would not hold him and he stood with his arm over the saddle until it would. "Go and eat. And shave. You look like something that's been living under a bridge."

"Shannon's not coming till tomorrow."

"Then shave twice."

16

Manageable

The advisory moved the Rourke herd on the fifth of April, two full days before a cloud showed, and by the evening of the sixth there were eight hundred and eleven cows under tin on the Home Meadow.

Shannon had the count from the gate tags. Every cow that walked through the shed mouth was read, and the number went up on her screen by ones, like water filling a tank. She watched it from the office between telephone calls. Six hundred. Seven. At ten to nine that Tuesday night it stopped at eight hundred and eleven and a green tick came up beside it.

She went down to see.

It was a clear night, mild, without a breath. The yard lights were on, and the sheds had their own, strings of bulbs down each ridge. From the top of the yard they looked like three ships tied up side by side. She could hear the generator and the skid-steers and, under those, the cattle. Eight hundred cows moved off grass into a strange building do not settle quietly.

Ray Dunning was at the mouth of the middle shed with a tablet under his arm and straw to his knees. He had sixteen men. He had been on his feet since Sunday.

"Well, they're in," he said. "I never thought I'd see it. I had two old rips that wouldn't go under a roof for love or money. We had to rope them and drag them with the tractor."

"Where are they now?"

"Standing in the far corner looking at the tin. They think it's going to fall on them." He rubbed his eyes. "It's bedded a foot and a half, as it said. We've five hundred ton of straw in the stack. There's nine calved since noon and all of them up and sucked. It's fifty-one degrees. I feel like the biggest fool in Montana."

"You'll feel better Thursday."

"If it comes."

"It's ninety-six, Ray."

"I've had it in my ear every hour since Friday." He looked up at the sky. There was no moon yet. There were high thin clouds with a soft wide ring of light in them over the yard light. "I've been on this place thirty-nine years. I was here in '95. You know what the forecast was, the day before? Flurries. That's all. Flurries." He shook his head. "And now it tells me the hour. I don't know which scares me worse."

Her father came out of the shed. He had straw on his hat. He had been walking the pens, looking at cows, which he had done every night of every calving since he was fifteen, and which the advisory had told him three times this week he no longer needed to do.

"They're tight," he said. "It's put thirty too many in the east one. I've told it."

"What did it say?"

"It said the density was within tolerance." He took the earpiece out and looked at it. "I said I'd been calving cows before its grandfather was a pocket calculator, and to move thirty. It moved them." He put it back. "It doesn't argue. I'll give it that. I keep waiting for it to argue."

"What's left out?" she said, to Ray.

"The bulls are in the corrals. Horses are in. There's the yearling heifers on the north pasture, the replacement bunch. Hundred and forty. They're not bred, so they're not calving, so it left them."

"In the open?"

"There's the old cottonwood draw up there, and a stack. It's got them down as all right." He turned the tablet round. It was the ranch in green, with the north pasture a paler block at the top, and a line of type. *N. Pasture — yearling hfrs (142). Shelter adequate. Conditions manageable through event. Recommend visual check at onset.* "That's all it wants. Somebody to ride up when it starts and see they've gone to the draw and not piled in a fence corner. Then come home."

"Who?"

"I'll send the kid. He's no use to me in here. He drove the bale processor into a shed post this morning." Ray almost smiled. "He can ride, though. And he knows where the fence is now. I've seen to that."

She looked for Wyatt. He was at the far shed, on foot, carrying a calf across his shoulders with its legs hanging down in front, the cow following with her nose at his back. He was talking to her over his shoulder. He saw Shannon and lifted his chin, since his hands were full.

"How's the filly?" she called.

"I haven't been on her since Saturday, ma'am. She'll be mad."

"She'll keep."

"Yes ma'am. Thursday week, I thought. When this is done. I want to take her up on the bench and let her look at those towers."

He went on into the shed with the calf.

Kieran was in the middle shed. She had not known he was there until she nearly stepped on him. He was sitting on a straw bale just inside the mouth, in pyjamas and a parka and his rubber boots, with his chin on his knees, watching a cow calve. Beth was beside him with her arm round him.

"He wouldn't go to bed," Beth said. "Conor said let him. He said he'll want to be able to say he saw it."

"Saw what?"

"The year Grandpa put the cows in the house." Beth smiled a little. She looked worn out. She had been cooking for thirty since Sunday. "That's what he calls it. He asked me tonight if the cows knew why. I said no. He said, do we?"

"What did you tell him?"

"I said Grandpa has a little bird that tells him things. He said, I know, it's in his ear, I've seen it." She pulled the boy's hood up. "He said, does the bird know? I didn't have anything for that."

Shannon looked at the child. He was five now. He had turned five in March. He would run this place one day. He was watching the calf come, quite calmly, as he might have watched a kettle.

"He'll never know anything else," she said.

"No," Beth said. "I've thought of that."

• • •

She crossed the river on Wednesday at four in the afternoon, by the new bridge.

It had been open a week. It was a plain thing, steel and concrete, forty feet above the water, with a sign at each end that gave the weight limit and the three wavy lines. She had driven it twice. She disliked how the ranch looked from the top of it. It looked small, and exactly like the picture on her father's dash.

From the top of it she could see the site, too. She had not been up there since the groundbreaking. The three tents had come down in March. Where they had stood there were walls now, grey, forty feet high and a quarter of a mile long, without a window, and a crane stood over them with its arm stopped. Nothing was moving. The yard where the concrete trucks turned was empty. There was a line of pickups going out along the bench road towards the county

bridge, nose to tail, with their lights on in the middle of the afternoon.

They had sent the men home. Three hundred of them. Somebody in Denver had looked at the same screen she had on the seat beside her and had shut down a nine-million-dollar pour at noon on a Wednesday, under a sky with nothing in it yet.

She thought of Arne Tollefsen tapping a brass dial.

The sky had changed. It had been blue at noon. Now there was a ceiling over the whole valley, flat and grey-white, lowering as she watched, and the light had gone the colour of dishwater. The Snowies were not there. It was fifty degrees still, and dead calm, and every bird on the river had stopped.

She had the advisory on the seat beside her, on her own screen. It had been updating since dawn. *Onset 19:15. Rain to snow 22:00. Peak rate Thursday 14:00 to Friday 03:00. Storm total 22 to 28 in. Friday 21:00 to Saturday 02:00, rain, 0.6 in. liquid on existing pack. Saturday 06:00, clearing. Saturday night low 8 F.*

She had read the Friday line perhaps thirty times.

The road came off the bridge onto its bank and ran north across the upper meadow. She slowed. She had not meant to stop.

She stopped.

On her left, upstream of the bank, was the slough. It was the only snow left on the bottom. Everything else had gone in March, but the slough lay in the shadow of the bench until noon, and the coulee above it faced north. It was full. She got out and walked to the edge of the road and looked down on it. Forty acres of old snow, grey, settled, with a crust a person could have walked on. She had asked Ray last week. He had put a fence stay down through it by the stack yard. Thirty-four inches.

Up the coulee, where the road came down, there was more. It lay in the cut bends, in the lee of the new fill, in long dirty drifts. Nobody had measured that.

The ditch at the foot of the bank was running.

It was not much. She could hear it before she could see it, a thin unbroken trickle under a lid of rotten ice. It was fifty degrees. The pack was letting go at the edges, as it would on any warm afternoon, and the ditch was gathering what it let go and taking it east. That was what a ditch was for.

She walked along the top of the bank, east, to the culverts. She went down the downstream side, holding the reflector post.

There was water at the mouths of all three. A hand's depth, clear, sliding out over the steel lip and down across the rock. It went under the bottom wire. On the other side it spread, and shone, and lost itself in the grass.

And thirty yards beyond the fence there were cattle.

She had not expected that. She stood at the fence with her hand on the top wire. They were in the willows. She could see them through the bare stems, a great many of them, red and black, standing and lying, as far in as she could make out. Heavy cows. She could tell by the shape of them. They had been put there. Somebody had ridden them down the whole length of the flat yesterday and put them in the lowest place on it, a stone's throw from this pipe.

She had said the high end. She had said it in February and twice since.

She understood what had happened as clearly as if she had been at the table. *There's no wind in the willows.* It was where his father had put them. It was the oldest and best advice on the Lodgepole, and it had been good for a hundred and twenty years, until somebody built a road.

She thought, with great exactness: thirty-four inches of old pack at perhaps a third water. That was eleven inches of water lying on forty acres. Thirty-seven acre-feet. Then twenty-five inches of new wet snow on top of it, on Thursday and Friday, at a quarter water. Six more inches. Twenty more acre-feet. Then at nine o'clock on Friday night, six-tenths of an inch of rain at thirty-five degrees, onto all of it, with the ground beneath frozen like a plate.

It would not all come. Snow held water like a sponge, up to a point. The engineer had said that. Up to a point, and then it let go together.

She was standing at the place where it would come out.

She could cut the fence. She had pliers in the truck. She could walk into those willows now, this minute, and start driving cows east, on foot, by herself, in town shoes. Two hundred head. They would not go. They had been put there by a man they knew, and they would circle back.

She could go to the house and say it. All of it. *I wrote the clause. I saw the drawing. I called the engineer and told her not to write it down. Get your cows out of the willows.* Arne would be in the kitchen. Karin would be scrubbing the bathtub.

She got back in the truck. She sat with her hands on the wheel.

If she said it, the cows might be moved. They might. Or Arne Tollefsen would look at her with those pale eyes and say that a Rourke had now told him where to put his own cattle on his own ground, and that the creek had been there since 1911. He would leave them where they were, out of pure temper, and she would have confessed for nothing. She did not know which. She had sat at his table five times and she did not know him well enough to say.

But Jens would know what she was. That was certain, either way.

It began to rain while she sat there. It was two hours early. A few big drops hit the windshield and ran.

She drove on.

• • •

Jens was at the windbreak. He was on the flatbed with a fork, throwing straw, and he had his shirt off in spite of the rain. There were cattle all round him. The pairs. Two hundred cows with their calves at foot, bedded in the lee of the panels as close as they would pack, and more drifting in from the flat as the light failed.

He jumped down when he saw the truck.

"You're early. It's not six."

"It's started early. It was going to be a quarter past seven." She had the screen in her hand. "It hasn't caught up yet. It still says seven-fifteen. It'll be snow by ten."

"Is it the same otherwise?"

"It's worse. Twenty-two to twenty-eight." She was out of the truck. She had hold of his arm, which was wet and cold. "Jens. The cows in the willows."

"The heavies. I know. I tried." He pulled a shirt on over his head. "We split them. It was the best I could get. He's got two hundred and twenty-four down there and I've got the pairs up here. He's with them now. He's going to sit in the willows all night with a thermos, same as Grandpa did."

"They have to come out."

"They're not coming out. I told you. I went at him for an hour on Tuesday."

"Go at him again. Now. I'll come with you."

He stopped with the shirt half buttoned. He looked at her.

"What is it?" he said.

"It's low."

"I know it's low. I said that to him. I said every word you said to me." He took her by both shoulders. The rain was running off his hair. "Shannon. What is it? You've been on about that end since February. You drove up here white as a sheet. What do you know that I don't?"

She opened her mouth.

There were so many places to begin. The ruler under the line. Sheet thirty-one. *Don't log it.* She could see each of them, and behind each one his face, changing.

"Friday night," she said. "The rain. Nine o'clock. On top of two feet. It all goes down the coulee, and the coulee—"

"The coulee goes into the slough. On your side. It always has. It sits there a month."

"Not any more."

"What do you mean, not any more?"

"The road." She heard herself say it. "They put a ditch along it. It doesn't sit now. It drains. It comes through three culverts at your fence."

He let go of her shoulders.

"Onto the flat."

"Yes."

"Onto the west end. Where the willows are."

"Yes."

He stood quite still. The cattle moved round them. A calf came up and nosed at his knee, and he did not look down.

"How long have you known that?"

She could have said, since this afternoon. She had been standing at the pipe an hour ago.

"I saw the culverts go in," she said. "In December."

"December."

"I didn't know they'd matter. Not for sure. It's only if there's a deep pack and then rain on it. Most years it's nothing."

"But you said the high end. In February. So you thought it might." He was working it out slowly, aloud, as he did everything. "You thought it might, and you didn't say why. You let me go to him with *Shannon says*. With nothing behind it. He'd have listened to a culvert, Shannon. He won't listen to a telephone, but he'd have walked down there and looked at a pipe. He's a practical man."

"I know."

"Why didn't you say?"

"Because it's ours!" It came out too loud. A cow swung her head. "It's on Rourke ground. It's the consortium's ditch, and it's built under the lease, and the lease is— If I'd said it, it would have been a Rourke telling a Tollefsen that Rourke water was going to flood him, in front of witnesses, and my father has a change application in

front of the state. There are lawyers, Jens. I was trying to find a way to—"

She stopped. She could hear it.

He was looking at her as he might have looked at a horse he had ridden for years that had just, for no reason, tried to kick him. He was not angry yet. He was trying to see where it had come from.

"There are lawyers," he said.

"That's not what I meant."

"I think it's just exactly what you meant." He picked the fork up off the ground. He stood it against the flatbed, carefully. "I've got to go and tell him. I've got about two hours of light and it's a mile down there."

"I'll come."

"No."

"Jens—"

"No. He'd see you and he'd dig in. You know he would." He had started to walk. He turned round, walking backwards. "Go home. Your dad's got eight hundred head to calve. Go and help him. I'll call you when I can."

"Will he move them?"

"I don't know."

"If he won't—"

"Then I'll move them myself, in the dark, and he can disown me." He was shouting now, over the rain. "Go *home*, Shannon."

He went. He left the truck; the flat was too soft already. He went at a long lope down through his cattle and out the far side and on across the open ground towards the west, a tall man in a wet shirt, getting smaller.

She watched until she could not tell him from the fence posts.

She had not told him about the clause. She had not told him about the drawing, or the engineer, or *don't log it*. She had told him the one piece that might still move a cow. She had held the rest

back even then, with his hands on her shoulders. She had not known she would do that until she had done it.

It was raining properly now.

• • •

It turned to snow at twenty to ten. She was back on the Home Meadow by then, in the middle shed, with a calf's hind legs in her hands.

Thirty a day, the advisory had said. It was forty that night. Cows that had been holding on for a week let go when the pressure dropped, as they always do, and from nine o'clock on there was hardly a minute without one down somewhere. She worked the east shed with Conor and two of the Roundup men. Her father had the middle. He would not sit down. Beth came out at midnight with soup in a milk can and could not get him to stop long enough to drink it.

Outside it came down without a sound. She went to the shed mouth at one and looked. There was no wind yet. It fell straight, in flakes the size of dollars, so thick that the yard light forty yards off was a brown smear. It was already over her boot.

Under the tin it was dry. That was the thing. It was loud, and it stank, and steam hung in the bulbs, but the straw was dry and the calves that hit it were dry in twenty minutes and up in thirty. She pulled one, a big bull calf with a leg back. She rubbed it down and watched it find the teat. She thought, this one would be dead. Out on the meadow, in this, a wet calf would not have lasted an hour.

Declan came by at two. He was grey. He stood and looked at the calf.

"A hundred and ninety thousand dollars," he said.

"Yes."

"I'd have paid double." He put a hand on the shed post. "Have you heard from across the river?"

"No."

"Did he move them?"

"I don't know."

"He'll not have built anything."

"Jens put up a windbreak. They've split the herd."

"A windbreak." He shut his eyes a moment. "I should have gone over there myself. In February. I should have got down on my knees in that man's kitchen."

"He'd have thrown you out."

"Then I'd have been thrown out. It would have been something to do." He straightened up. He tipped his head, listening. "Right. Ray's sending the Pell boy up to look at the heifers. It's given him the word. He's saddling."

"Now? It's two in the morning."

"It said at onset. It's had him wait till it was properly snowing, so they'd have moved to wherever they were going to move. He's to look and come back. It's got it as an hour and forty, round trip." He listened again. "It says conditions on the north pasture are manageable."

She went to the shed mouth.

He was crossing the yard under the light. He was on the bay colt. She had thought he would take one of the old horses, and she nearly called out, and then she saw why. The bay had been in the corral, saddled, since evening; it was the one he had been using to push cows. He had a slicker on over his coat and a scarf over his hat, tied under his chin. He looked about twelve.

"Wyatt!"

He turned the colt. It danced. It hated the snow in its face.

"Follow the fence," she said. "Up and back. I don't care what's shorter."

"Yes ma'am. Ray said."

"Have you got your telephone?"

He patted his chest. “It’s got me on the map. I’m a little blue dot.” He grinned at her, with snow on his eyelashes. “I’ll be back by four. I’ll want some of that soup.”

He went out past the last light. The colt’s tracks filled behind him as she watched. She stood a minute longer, and then a man shouted from the east shed that there was one coming backwards, and she went.

17

The Stove

Jens Tollefsen telephoned the Harris place on the Tuesday night, at half past nine, and Evelyn answered because Lyle was in the bath.

"Mrs. Harris. It's Jens. Is he there?"

"He's in the water. Is it the roping?"

"No ma'am. It's weather." He sounded as if he had been running. "Tell him there's a storm. Wednesday night into Saturday. I've got it off the Rourkes' advisory. It's two feet, wet, right at freezing, with wind. Then rain Friday night. Then it goes to ten above."

She had the pencil that hung by the telephone. She wrote on the wall, as she had always done, beside forty years of other numbers. *Wed night. 2 ft wet. Rain Fri. 10 Sat.*

"The radio says six to ten inches," she said.

"The radio said three to six yesterday. It'll say twenty by tomorrow night, when it's too late to do anything." He stopped, and she heard him breathe. "I don't know how far south it goes, Mrs. Harris. It's the Musselshell forecast. It might miss you. But Lyle's got heifers calving, he told me at Christmas, and if it was me I'd want somebody to call."

"How sure is it?"

"Ninety-four."

"Out of what?"

"A hundred."

"I see." She underlined *wet*. "And your own father? What's he doing about it?"

There was a silence on the line.

"We've split the herd," Jens said. "It's a long story."

"I expect it is. Thank you, Jens. I'll tell him."

She told Lyle when he came out, in his undershirt, with his hair on end. He read the wall. He read it twice.

"Off the Rourkes' machine," he said.

"That's what he said."

"That's the same outfit as the man in the grey car. Near enough."

"It's the same outfit as the weather. The boy didn't have to call."

Lyle stood there. He had not said six words running to her since February. He ate at the table again; he had stopped taking his coffee to the porch about the middle of March, when calving started and there was no time for it. But it was not mended. It was only that he was too tired to keep it up.

"The radio says six to ten," he said.

"I told him that."

"Six to ten wet, I can calve in. I've done it. Two feet, I can't." He rubbed his neck. "If I believe him, I've got to move the heifers tomorrow. All eighty. Off the creek and up Thompson into the timber draw. That's a day's work and they'll hate it, they're half of them springing."

"And if you don't believe him?"

"Then I leave them on the meadow where I can see them from the house."

"Which do you believe?"

He looked at the wall again.

"I believe Jens," he said. "I don't know about the rest of it. But he ran to the phone. You could hear that?"

"I could hear it."

"Then I'll move them."

She said nothing. She thought that it was the first thing either of them had decided together in two months, and that neither of them had asked for the advice it rested on. It had come down the wire from a ranch she had never seen, by way of a boy who ate frybread standing up.

They moved the heifers on the Wednesday. She went along, to drive the pickup.

It was a bluebird day. That was the foolish part of it. There was not a cloud. The creek was running clear and the cottonwoods had the first green on them, a kind of haze, and Lyle rode in his shirtsleeves with his coat tied behind the saddle.

Eighty heifers. They were on the hay meadow, where they had been since February, a quarter mile from the kitchen window. Twenty-six had calved. The rest were close, heavy and slow, with their bags making up. They did not want to go anywhere.

She drove ahead with six bales on the tailgate, at a walk, and they came after the hay. Lyle rode one side and Mariah the other. She watched them in the mirror. They did not speak. They did not need to. The girl would see a heifer hang back and drift over without being told, and Lyle would shift to cover the gap she had left. They had been moving cattle together since she was small enough to be tied on. It was the one thing between them that February had not touched.

Up Thompson Creek the road gave out, and she stopped. They took the bunch on from there on horseback. She got out and walked after them as far as the mouth of the draw.

She knew it well. It ran back into the hills three hundred yards, narrow, with a steep north wall of red shale and pine, and a floor of good grass. The spring came out under a ledge at the head. It was always warm in there. You could stand at the bottom of it in a north wind and feel nothing but a stirring in the tops of the trees.

Lyle had forked a stack of old hay in at the head, by the spring. The heifers went to it. The calves lay down in the sun.

"That's as good as a barn," he said. He had ridden back to where she stood. It was the longest thing he had said to her in a week. "Better. There's no wind'll find them in there."

"No."

"I'll ride up in the morning and look. If it's coming like he says, I'll stay with them."

"Take the rifle."

"For what?" He nearly smiled. "It's snow, Mom. It's not wolves."

She looked up at the north wall. It was sixty feet, and above it the open divide went on for miles, bare, with nothing on it to stop anything. She had a feeling she could not have put a name to. It was only that the draw was so quiet, and so deep.

"It's a good place," she said.

"It's the best on the creek."

They rode home with the sun on their backs.

• • •

It came on the Thursday, eleven hours after the Musselshell.

She watched it arrive. She was at the kitchen window at seven in the morning with her first coffee, and the sky to the northwest, over the Wolf Mountains, was the colour of a stove lid. There was rain on the glass. By eight it was sleet. At nine she could no longer see the horse barn.

It did not fall. That was what she would remember. On the Rosebud it came sideways, out of the northwest, on a wind that had forty miles of open divide to get up speed. It came in flat white ropes. It hit the north wall of the house with a sound like gravel thrown from a shovel, and went on by.

They had gone at six. Lyle on the dun, Mariah on the little grey mare, with a thermos each and the dog. The heifers were two miles up Thompson Creek, in the draw he had put them in on Wednesday. It was a good draw. She had walked it a hundred times after chokecherries. Steep on the north side, with pine, and a spring at

the head. He had said at breakfast that he would look at them and be back by noon.

"She should stay," Evelyn had said. "It's school."

"There's no school. It was on the radio."

"Then she should stay because I say."

"I'm going, Grandma." The girl was pulling on her father's old chaps. She had not looked up. "There's eighty heifers and one of him. You know there's no one else."

That was true. Wallace Small's boy had helped at branding, and there was a cousin at Busby who came for hay. In calving there was Lyle, and since she was twelve there had been Mariah. Evelyn had stood on the porch and watched the two of them ride out of the yard into the rain, the big man and the long thin girl, not speaking, a horse's length apart. They had hardly spoken for two months either.

Noon came. They were not back.

She put a pot of beans on. She filled the big kettle and the two enamel pans and set them at the back of the stove. She brought in wood, six trips, until the box was heaped and there was a second pile on the porch under a tarp. She found the calf bottles, three of them, and the tube, and the sack of colostrum powder from the freezer, and stood them on the counter in a row.

The power went at ten past one. The refrigerator shuddered and stopped, and the kitchen clock stopped with it, and it was quiet enough to hear the wind in the chimney.

She had lamps. She had been born in this house without a wire to it. She filled two and trimmed them and set one in the window on the lane side, where a person coming down Thompson Creek would see it first.

Then there was nothing more to do, and that was the hardest part.

Wallace Small came at four.

She heard an engine and was at the door before she knew she had moved. It was his big tractor, the green one with the cab, coming up

the lane with its lights on and snow plastered down one side of it. He left it running. He came across the yard bent over, holding his hat, and she got the door shut behind him with her shoulder.

"Are they in?"

"No."

"I thought not. I couldn't see his truck." He stood dripping on her floor. He was a big, curious, talkative man and he was not talking. "I'd have been sooner. I had my own to see to. I've calves, but they're on the flat by the house. It's blowing clean there. It's coming so hard it won't lie. There's bare ground."

"Bare?"

"On the open. It's all going over. It's going somewhere." He looked at her. "Where'd he put those heifers, Evelyn? Loretta said he moved them."

"Up Thompson. The draw with the spring."

Wallace turned his hat round in his hands.

"What?" she said.

"Nothing. It's a good draw."

"Wallace."

"It faces south. The wind's north. It's— I'm not saying anything. I've seen that draw hold in every storm for fifty years." He put the hat on. "I'll go up. I'll take the tractor as far as it'll go."

"It's two miles. It's nearly dark."

"I've got a cab and a heater. I'm better off than they are."

He went. She stood at the window and watched his lights go out of the yard and up the creek, and after a quarter of a mile she could not see them.

He was back in an hour and ten minutes. She heard him before she saw him. He came in grey.

"I got to the fork," he said. "There's a drift across the road there I couldn't see the top of. I got down and tried it on foot and I went in to my chest." He was shaking. He was not a young man. "I shouted. I

blew the horn. I couldn't hear my own horn, Evelyn. I never—I turned round. I'm sorry. I turned round."

"Sit down."

"I should go back."

"You'll sit down and drink this, and then you'll go home to Loretta before your own road goes." She put the cup in his hands and held them round it. "You tried. I'll tell him you tried."

"That draw," Wallace said. He was looking into the coffee. "With that wind. It'll be like pouring sugar in a cup."

She had known it since the mouth of the draw on Wednesday, in the sun. She had not had the word for it then.

"Drink your coffee," she said.

• • •

She counted. It was what she did.

Two miles up. A horse walked four miles an hour in good going. In this, two. So an hour up. They had left at six; they were there by seven, before the worst of it. Say two hours to ride through eighty heifers and see what was calving. Nine. An hour back. Ten. Call it eleven, with a calf to carry.

It was past five now.

So something had kept them. A heifer down. Three heifers down. That was likely; the pressure had dropped like a stone and they would all be going at once. He would not leave a heifer calving in that. He would get down and pull it and get it sucked and under a tree, and by then there would be another.

Or the dun had gone down. Or the girl's mare.

She made herself stop. She got the lamp and went through the house, upstairs and down, checking windows that she knew were shut.

In Mariah's room the bed was made. There was a box on the desk, a new one, cardboard, from the university bookstore. It had come last week. She did not open it. She stood and looked at the outside

of it. There was a list taped to the wall over the desk, in the girl's hand. *Housing form — done. Deposit — done. Immunisation record — ask clinic. FAFSA — Dad has to sign.* That last line had a box beside it and the box was not ticked.

She went downstairs.

The telephone was dead. She had picked it up at one and there had been nothing in it, not even a hum. The cell tower at Busby had been out since the wind came; Mariah's little telephone was on the dresser upstairs, where she had left it charging, with a black screen.

She sat down at the kitchen table. The beans ticked. The wind never let up.

She thought about her father. She did not want to, and there he was. He had gone out in the blizzard of '64 after two hundred cows on the divide, on a horse, alone, because there was nobody else. She had been seven. Her mother had sat in this chair, at this table, with a lamp in that window. She had not counted. She had sung, under her breath, for nine hours, the same five or six songs over and over. Evelyn had asked her to stop, and her mother had looked at her as if she did not know who she was.

He had come in at midnight with his feet frozen and thirty cows. He lost two toes. He had never been the same man on a horse afterwards, and he had never, that she could recall, been warm.

Nine years later he had stood up in the tribal hall and said that seventeen cents was more than nothing.

She had always held those two things apart. She saw now that they were one thing. He had been cold for nine years, and somebody had offered him a way for his sons not to be.

She got up and put wood in.

• • •

The telephone rang at ten minutes to three in the morning.

She had not slept. She had been in the chair with a quilt. She was across the kitchen before the second ring, and she had the receiver in both hands before she remembered that the line was dead.

It was not dead now. There was a roar in it like the sea.

"Lyle?"

"Mrs. Harris?" It was a woman. An old voice, very clear, a long way off. "Is that Evelyn Harris? This is Karin Tollefsen. On the Musselshell."

Evelyn held the receiver.

"I'm sorry for the hour. I've been trying since midnight. Your line was down." The roar rose and fell. "I can't raise Jens on his telephone and he can't raise your son. He's been out since Wednesday night. He asked me, if I got through to anybody, to find out. He wanted to know that Lyle got the message. That he'd moved them."

"He moved them."

"Oh, good. That's good."

"They went up at six yesterday morning. He and the girl. They're not back."

There was a short silence.

"How long is that?"

"Twenty-one hours."

"Yes," Karin Tollefsen said. "I make it twenty-one."

They had seen each other at Prosper every July for twenty years. They had nodded. Evelyn had watched this woman go over an arena fence in a yellow dress in 1991, and had thought of her since, when she thought of her, as the one who did sums.

"Yours?" she said.

"Mine have been out thirty hours. They've been in twice. Arne and Jens. They bring me calves and go out again." Her voice did not shake. It was very tired. "I've fourteen in the kitchen. I had seventeen. I've a bathtub I keep at a hundred and two. You put them in to the neck and hold their heads up, and if they're going to come back they come back in twenty minutes."

"A hundred and two."

"A hundred and two. Hotter and you shock them. I've a thermometer tied to the tap." A breath. "Have you water hot?"

"I've had it hot since noon."

"Then you know. You'll want towels warming. And something sweet for whoever carries them in. They won't eat. Make them."

"I've beans."

"Beans are good." The roar came up and nearly took her. "—the worst of it is not knowing which window to look out of. I've three. I go round them. I've worn a path."

"I put a lamp in one."

"So did I. I felt a fool doing it."

"My mother did it," Evelyn said. "In sixty-four. I thought she was a fool too. I was seven."

"Did he come in?"

"He came in."

"Then it works," Karin said. It was nearly a laugh. "I'll tell Jens your boy got the message. It'll be something for him. He was afraid he'd called too late, or that nobody down there would believe a Rourke forecast off a Tollefsen."

"He believed the Tollefsen."

"Yes. Well. That's more than his own father did." She said it without any heat at all. "I'll let you go. Keep your line clear. He'll try you when he comes in."

"Mrs. Tollefsen."

"Yes?"

"How many has he lost? Your husband."

The line hissed.

"I haven't written it down yet," Karin said. "I'll write it when it stops." And then, more quietly, "It's to turn to rain here tonight. I don't know if that will be better or worse."

She was gone. The roar went with her.

Evelyn stood with the receiver. Then she hung it on its hook and went and put her hand flat against the window, beside the lamp. The glass was cold, and packed white on the far side, and there was nothing to see through it at all.

• • •

They came in at twenty past five, in a grey light, with the snow still blowing sideways.

She heard the dog. She was out on the porch in her stockings.

It was one horse. That was what she saw first, and her heart stopped in her. It was the dun, walking, with its head down level with its knees. Lyle was leading it. He was on foot, bent over, with the reins over his shoulder and one arm across his chest holding something inside his coat. Mariah was in the saddle. She was sitting very straight and stiff, with a calf across her lap in front of her and another behind, tied on with a rope. Her face was white and had no expression at all.

The grey mare was not with them.

Evelyn went down the steps into the mud.

"Take this one," Lyle said. It was all he said. He opened his coat and it was a calf, a red one, wet, with its eyes half shut. She took it against her chest. It weighed nothing. It was cold right through, as a thing is that has been in a creek.

She got them in. She did not remember afterwards quite how. The calves went on towels in front of the stove, three of them, and she had the first in the washtub before Lyle had the door shut. She had not had a thermometer. She had used her elbow. Up to the neck. She held its chin in her palm.

Mariah was standing in the middle of the kitchen with her hands held out in front of her. She had not taken her gloves off. She was looking at them.

"I can't undo them," she said. "Grandma. I can't make my fingers."

Evelyn left the calf to Lyle. She peeled the gloves off, a finger at a time. The girl's hands were white to the wrist, and hard, and the ends of three fingers on the right were a yellow-grey like candle wax.

"Don't rub them."

"I know."

"Sit. There. Put them in this." It was the second enamel pan, lukewarm. She had kept it lukewarm on purpose, all night, and had not let herself think why. "It's going to hurt. In about five minutes it's going to hurt worse than anything you ever felt. You keep them in."

"Okay."

"Where's the mare?"

Mariah's face moved then, for the first time.

"She went through a drift," Lyle said. He was on his knees at the tub. His own hands were the same colour as his daughter's. "In the dark. Coming down. There's that cut bank below the spring. It had drifted level. She walked out onto it and went in to her withers and couldn't get out. She broke something. We could hear it." He turned the calf's head. "I'd left the rifle."

"He used his knife," Mariah said.

Nobody spoke.

"I held her head. Dad said not to. I held it anyway." She was looking at the pan, at her hands under the water. Her voice was quite level. "She was mine. I got her when I was nine. I wasn't going to have her do that without me."

Evelyn put a hand on the back of the girl's neck. It was the first time she had touched her since November. Mariah neither leaned into it nor moved away.

"The heifers," Evelyn said.

Lyle shook his head.

"The draw filled. I've never seen it. It's a good draw. It's the best shelter on the place." He spoke slowly, as if he was reading it off something. "The wind came round in the afternoon. More north. It

took the snow off the whole divide and dropped it in there. Eight, ten feet. They were bunched at the head, by the spring, where I'd left them. I thought they'd be all right. They were out of the wind."

"How many?"

"I don't know." He shook his head again. "We dug till dark. And after. We got nineteen out alive from under. There's more alive in there. I could hear them. I couldn't get to them." He lifted the calf out of the tub, streaming, and laid it on a towel and began to rub. "There were twenty-six calved up there before it hit. I've got three calves. These three."

"And the rest?"

"I don't know, Mom. I can't count it. I keep starting, and I get as far as the ones I could hear." He stopped rubbing. "Ask me when I've had a tractor up there."

He said it to the calf.

"If I'd left them on the meadow," he said. "Where I could see them. It blew clean on the meadow. I rode across it coming in. There's not six inches lying. They'd have been cold, and wet, and I'd have lost some calves. Ten. A dozen."

"Lyle."

"I'm not blaming him. He ran to the phone." He looked up at her. His eyes were red and quite dry. "It came just as he said. Two feet, wet. Nobody told it about that draw."

Mariah made a sound. It was her hands. The feeling had started to come back.

"Keep them in," Evelyn said.

"I am."

"Keep them in. Look at me. Count."

The girl counted. She got to forty before she cried, and she kept her hands in the pan, and went on counting through it.

Evelyn held her by the back of the neck with one hand. With the other she reached for the beans.

"You'll eat," she said, to both of them. "I don't care if you want it. A woman on the Musselshell told me to make you."

18

The Flat

Jens came into the willows at dusk on the Wednesday, running, and Arne heard him a long way off because he was calling as he came.

"Dad! *Dad!*"

Arne was on an upturned bucket under the biggest tree with the thermos between his feet. He had the dog. He had a flashlight, and the calving chains in a feed sack, and a tarp over his shoulders against the rain. Around him two hundred and twenty-four cows stood and lay in the leaves, chewing. It was dry in there still. A few drops came through.

He stood up. Jens came in under the branches bent double, with his shirt stuck to him.

"The culverts," he said. He could hardly get it out. "At the west fence. The road. Shannon says—it drains the slough now. It all comes through. Friday, when it rains. Onto here."

"I know about the culverts."

Jens stared at him.

"I saw them in December. In the chinook. They were running then." Arne picked up the flashlight. "Come on. I'll show you."

It was eighty yards to the fence. They went through the cattle. The pipes were there in the last of the light, three round mouths, and each had a tongue of water coming out of it now as deep as a

man's hand. It slid down the rock and under the wire. On the Lodgepole side it had made a pool the size of a kitchen and was finding its way, slowly, in a few fingers, towards the creek.

"That's the rain," Arne said. "And the thaw, today. It's nothing yet."

"You *saw* this."

"I said so."

"And you put them here anyway."

"I put them where there's no wind." He played the light up the bank. Clay, a road, a reflector post. Beyond it, in the dark, the slough. "How much is up there?"

"Three feet. Old snow. Before whatever comes."

"Who told you that?"

"She did. Just now. She's known since December too." Jens's voice was shaking. "She saw them go in. She never said. She said the high end and she never said *why*, and when I asked her tonight she said there were lawyers."

Arne turned the flashlight off.

He stood in the near-dark with the rain ticking on his tarp. He found that he was not angry at the woman. He had expected to be. He looked for it and it was not there.

"She told you tonight," he said.

"An hour ago."

"Then she told you before I did. I stood at this wire at Christmas and watched it run, and I thought, a cupful. I didn't need a Rourke to explain a pipe to me. I've eyes." He spat. "If there's blame for where these cows are, it's standing here in a tarp."

"So we move them."

"When?"

"*Now*."

"Look at it, Jens. Look at what you're asking." He did not raise his voice. "It's dark. It's raining and it'll be snow in three hours. I've got two hundred and twenty-four cows in here and forty of them will calve tonight, with the glass where it is. You want me to put them

out of the only shelter on the place and drive them a mile into the wind, in the dark, to a fence that's got two hundred pair behind it already. They'll calve on the way. They'll calve in the open."

"They'll drown here."

"On Friday. You said Friday. Nine o'clock at night, your telephone says. This is Wednesday." He put a hand on the top wire. "They can have two days in here. Thursday and Friday morning, the worst of the snow, out of the wind. Friday noon I'll move every cow that's left onto the high ground. I'll have daylight. I'll have nine hours to spare."

"If it's on time."

"It's been on time so far, hasn't it? That's what you keep telling me."

The water ran over the rock.

"It's the best of both," Arne said. "It's your way and mine. Go back to your pairs. You've calves up there with no one watching."

He went. Arne heard him go, slower than he had come.

It was a good plan. He went over it on the bucket, in the dark, as the rain turned to something heavier that hissed in the branches. He could not find the hole in it.

• • •

It snowed all Thursday.

He had never seen the like. He had seen more wind, and he had seen colder. He had not seen snow come down like that, as if somebody were emptying a sack. It was wet. A flake hit his sleeve and was water before he could look at it. By daylight there was a foot on the open flat, and it lay like wet cement; a man lifted his boot out of it with a sucking noise and it filled behind him.

In the willows it was better. The branches took half of it. What came through came in slow heavy clots, and the cows stood under the thickest trees with their backs steaming.

They calved. He had been right about that. Forty-four between midnight and noon. He went from one to the next with the flashlight

in his teeth. Most did it themselves. He pulled three. He dragged each new calf by the hind legs to a dry place under a trunk, on the leaves, and stood over it until the cow had licked it and it was up. A calf born onto dry leaves, out of the wind, at thirty-two degrees, would live. He had known that for sixty years. He watched it be true all morning.

He kept his eyes off the west fence until ten. When he did, the pool was the size of a tennis court, and grey, with a skin of slush.

At noon the tractor came down the flat. He heard it labouring. It was the old Deere with the loader on, and the calf sled behind, a sheet of roofing tin turned up at the front with a chain to it. Karin was driving.

She stopped at the edge of the trees. She had his father's sheepskin coat on, and a scarf, and her glasses were running.

"Jens can't leave," she said. "He's digging."

"Digging what?"

"His fence drifted. About ten this morning. The wind came up and it went in behind the panels all at once. Six feet deep. There were calves bedded in the straw." She was getting down, backwards, feeling for the step. "He's got nine out. Three were dead. He doesn't know how many are under it. The cows won't leave the spot."

Arne closed his eyes.

He had told him. He had stood at that fence in March and told him to the yard where it would happen. He had been waiting, some mean part of him, for exactly this news.

It gave him no pleasure at all. He saw the boy on his knees in six feet of wet snow with his bare hands, and he would have given the east lease twice over to have been wrong.

"I'll go up."

"You'll stay with these. He said to tell you that. He said, tell Dad he was right and to stay where he is." She had a milk can of soup in the bucket of the loader, wrapped in a blanket. "Eat this. Then load me. I've the tub hot. I can take six at a time."

He loaded her. The weakest ones, the ones born in the night that had not stood, or had stood and gone down again. He laid them on the tin, on sacks, with their legs folded. Six. She drove them a mile through that snow at a walk. He could not see how she kept the tractor on the track; there was no track.

She was back in an hour and a quarter for six more.

All that afternoon she went up and down. He lost count of the trips. Each time she came he asked, "How many has he got out?" and she told him. Fourteen. Nineteen. Twenty-two, and seven dead. Each time she left with a sled of his.

At dusk she said, "I've twelve in the kitchen and no floor left. The next go in the front room. I've your mother's good rug rolled up." She wiped her glasses on her scarf, which made them worse. She climbed onto the step. "I've put a lamp in the window. You might look for it, when you come."

Jens came down at midnight.

He came on foot. Arne heard the snow squeak, and then a shape bent in under the branches and stood there. It did not say anything. It sat down on the leaves beside the bucket, all at once, like a dropped sack.

Arne put the flashlight on him.

He had no gloves. He had lost them, or they had gone to pieces. His hands hung between his knees. The skin was off the knuckles of both, and off the heels of the palms, and what was under it was the colour of raw beef.

"You've been digging with those."

"The shovel cuts them. If they're under it. You can't tell where they are." His voice was flat and very hoarse. "You go in with your hands and feel. There's an air space, sometimes. Round the head. The straw holds it open. The ones in the straw were alive. It was the ones that had got up and gone to the cow that—" He stopped.

Arne got the thermos. There was an inch of soup in it, cold. He held it to the boy's mouth and Jens drank, with his eyes shut.

"Say it," Jens said.

"Say what?"

"You know what. You told me in March. You stood there and told me the yard."

"I gave my word I wouldn't."

"I'm letting you off it."

"I don't want off it." He had a towel in the feed sack, with the chains. A clean one; Karin had put it in. He got out his knife and cut it in strips, lengthwise, four of them. "Hold them out."

"Dad—"

"Hold them out."

He wrapped them. He had done it for horses, and for his own ribs once. He had never done it for his son. The boy's hands were big, bigger than his own, and they shook. He took the strip round the palm and between the thumb and up over the knuckles and tied it off at the wrist, not tight. Jens watched him do it. He was crying, without any sound. He probably did not know that he was.

"There," Arne said. "That'll hold a shovel."

"I've got to go back up."

"In ten minutes. Sit."

They sat. The snow came down through the willows in soft clots. A cow got up, twenty feet off, and turned round, and lay down again with a grunt, and from under her came a small wet cough.

"That's one," Arne said. "Just now."

"How many's that?"

"In here? Eighty. Eighty-one."

"And lost?"

"Two."

Jens put his head back against the trunk.

"So you were right both ways," he said. "The fence and the willows."

"So far."

"So far." He laughed, one breath. "It's Thursday. I keep forgetting it's only Thursday."

He went back up at a quarter past. Arne gave him the flashlight. He could find his own cows in the dark.

• • •

Friday broke grey and still coming.

There was two feet on the flat. He measured it with the handle of the calf-puller, at the edge of the trees. Twenty-three inches, and under the top foot it was not snow any more. It was slush, grey, with water standing in the holes his boots left.

He had slept perhaps an hour, sitting against the trunk with the dog on his feet. His hip had locked. He could not get up. He had to roll onto his hands and knees and climb the tree.

A hundred and ten calves in the willows. He had lost five. That was nothing. That was a good day in fair weather. He walked through them in the half-light and they were dry, and on their feet, and sucking, with their tails going. He could have wept.

The pool at the fence had reached the first of the trees.

At eight he heard the tractor, early. It was Jens.

He did not know him at first. He looked like an old man. His face had gone in under the cheekbones and he had three days of beard, and his hands on the wheel were wrapped in strips of towel, brown at the knuckles.

"Thirty-one," Jens said. He did not get down. "I dug out thirty-one. Nineteen alive. There's more under it and they're dead. I moved the rest off the fence into the open last night. They're standing out there in it with their calves under them." He looked at the willows, at the dry cows. "Mom got through to the Rosebud in the night. Lyle moved his heifers, on my call. He and the girl had been out twenty-one hours and weren't back." He shut his eyes and opened them. "You were right. About the fence."

"I know I was. I'd as soon not have been."

"I'm not telling you for that. I'm telling you because it's noon in four hours and we've got to move these, and I don't know where to. The windbreak's a snowbank. The barn's full. There's the open flat, and that's all."

"Then it's the open flat. The high end. East of your fence."

"In this?"

"It's what I said I'd do."

They started at ten, not noon. Arne made that call. The pool had come another twenty yards.

It was the hardest thing he had ever tried to do with cattle.

They would not go. He had known they would not want to, and he had not known the half of it. A cow with a day-old calf, standing dry under a tree, will not walk out into two feet of slush and a thirty-mile wind for any man. He rode the gelding at them and they gave ground, a few yards, and then turned back past him with their heads low. The dog worked until its feet bled. Jens came behind with the tractor, blowing the horn.

The calves could not walk in it. That was the worst. A cow could wade. A calf went in to its chest and stopped, and stood there bawling, and the cow came back to it.

So they carried them. There was nothing else. Jens loaded the sled, eight and ten at a time, live calves piled like cordwood, and drove them east, and the cows followed the sled, bawling, in a long string. That worked. It was slow. It took an hour to load, and haul a mile, and tip them off on the high ground, and come back. Each trip moved ten pair.

By two they had moved forty.

By four they had moved sixty-odd, and Arne had quit being able to feel his feet, and the snow had stopped.

He noticed that only when Jens said it. He looked up. The air was empty. It was lighter in the west, a yellow bar under the cloud. The wind had dropped.

It was warm. He pulled his glove off and held his hand out. It was warmer than it had been in two days.

"It's not five," Jens said. He had his telephone out, in his bandaged fist. "It's changed it. It's moved the rain up. It says six. It says six o'clock now, not nine." He looked at his father. "It was nine this morning."

A drop hit Arne's hand. Another.

"How many left in there?"

"A hundred and sixty. Near enough."

"Get the sled."

• • •

He heard it before he saw it.

It was a quarter to seven and nearly dark, and raining hard, a warm even rain that made the snow hiss. They had got twenty more pair out. He was in the middle of the willows on foot, with the flashlight, working a cow off her calf so he could lift it. He heard a sound to the west.

He thought it was the tractor. Then he thought it was wind. It was low and continuous, and it was getting louder. It sounded like a train on a long grade.

The cows heard it. Every head came up.

He turned the light that way.

The snow between the trees was moving. That was how it looked. The whole surface of it, grey in the beam, was sliding towards him at about the pace of a man walking. There was no wave. It simply came, and rose as it came, and where it met a trunk it went round on both sides and closed. It was not water. It was slush, thick as porridge, with slabs of old crust riding in it. The water was underneath.

It reached his boots. It went over them. It was at his knees before he had taken three steps, and so cold that it burned.

"*Jens!*"

The cows broke. They went east, all of them at once, crashing through the willows, and the calves could not follow. He saw a red calf lifted off its feet and turned over. He got it by a leg. He had another under his arm. He could not carry more than two and there were sixty calves in those trees.

The tractor came in with its lights on, straight through the brush, breaking willows as thick as his arm. Jens was standing at the wheel.

"Throw them on! Throw them!"

They threw them. There was no laying them down. Arne waded from one to the next in slush to his thighs and took hold of whatever he could reach, a leg, an ear, and heaved it at the tin. Jens was off the tractor and doing the same on the other side. The sled was afloat. It swung on its chain. They piled it until calves were sliding off the back, and Jens climbed up and dragged it out through the trees with the water coming over the hitch.

Arne stayed.

He did not remember all of the next hour. He knew he went back and forth to the edge of the willows, to where the ground rose a foot and the slush thinned, carrying two at a time. He knew he fell. The gelding had gone with the cows. The dog was gone. The flashlight died and he worked by the tractor lights when they were there and by nothing when they were not.

The sound went on. It was all the way round him. Under it he could hear the fence, the west fence, singing, with the weight of what was coming through.

The creek had lifted. He found that out by walking into it.

He had been going after a cow. She was an old cow, a brockleface, number 88, fourteen years old, the best mother on the place. She had not run with the rest. She was standing in water to her belly at the far side of the creek with a calf in front of her, a new one, still wet from her, holding its head up between her front legs. She had her nose on it. She would not leave it and she could not move it.

He went towards her. He knew where the creek was. It was a yard wide, with a gravel bottom, and a boy could jump it.

It was not a yard wide. The ice that had roofed it all winter had floated up, in pans, with the slush on top, and it looked like the ground on either side. He stepped onto it. It held for one step. Then it tipped, and he went through between two pans up to his chest.

There was no bottom. That was what he could not understand. It was a creek he had stepped across ten thousand times and there was no bottom to it. The current had him by the legs. It was pulling him under the ice. He got his arms out flat on the pan in front of him and it tipped again and came down on his hands.

He did not shout. There was not the breath. He thought, quite calmly, of the pins in his hip, and that they would be the last warm thing.

Something had him by the collar.

It hauled. It nearly took his head off. The coat came up round his ears and he was dragged backwards over the edge of the ice like a calf out of a heifer, and dumped on his back in two feet of slush with his son standing over him.

"*Get up*!" Jens was screaming it. "Get up! Get *up*!"

He got up. He did not know how. He was on his feet with Jens's fist still wound in his collar.

"The cow," he said.

"Leave her."

"Eighty-eight. She's a calf."

"I see her. I'll get her. Get on the tractor."

"You won't get across. It's gone deep. There's no—"

"Then I'll go round by the fence. *Get on the tractor*, *Dad*!"

He did not get on the tractor. He stood holding the fender while Jens went, wide, upstream, and came at the old cow from the Rourke side, along the wire, where the bank had held. He saw him lift the calf. He saw the cow follow, at last, lunging. They came back the same way. It took ten minutes. Arne's legs had begun to shake by

then in a way he could not stop, a deep hard jumping in the big muscles.

"Now get on," Jens said.

"There's more in there."

"There's forty. I counted them going out. There's forty cows in there, on that rise by the old ford, and they're standing. It's not over their knees. They'll stand till morning."

"And the calves?"

Jens did not answer that.

"Then I'm not done," Arne said.

He let go of the fender. He walked back in.

His trousers had frozen. No, they had not frozen; it was too warm for that. They had gone stiff with slush and they rubbed him raw at each step. He could not feel anything below the thigh. He found a calf by falling over it. It was alive. He got it up against his chest and turned round, and for a moment he had lost which way the tractor was.

He carried that one out, and went back.

He got four more. He counted them afterwards, lying awake. On the fifth trip he was on his knees and did not remember kneeling. He was holding a calf whose head lolled, and trying to make it stand in a foot of water, and talking to it.

A light came across the flat.

It was not the tractor. It was lower, and it bounced. It was the flatbed. It could not have got down there; there were two feet of slush on the flat. It had got down there. It stopped at the edge of the rise with the water round its wheels, and the door opened.

Karin had the sheepskin on over her nightdress, and rubber boots.

She walked into the water. She did not hurry. She came up to him and looked at the calf in his arms and took its chin in her hand and turned its face to the headlights. Then she let it go.

"That one's dead, Arne."

"It's not. It was breathing. I had it—"

"It's dead. Put it down."

He put it down. It went under.

"There's more," he said. "By the creek. I heard one."

"Jens will get it."

"Jens has been up three days."

"So have you. And he's thirty-eight and he didn't go through the ice." She had hold of his arm. She was a small woman. She had him on his feet. "You can't feel your legs. I watched you walk from the truck. You're walking like a man on stilts. In half an hour you'll sit down in this and you won't get up, and then he'll have you to carry as well as the calves. Is that what you want to do to him?"

"I put them here."

"Yes."

"He told me. He ran a mile to tell me. I said Friday noon. I had it all worked out."

"I know you did."

"I'd have had nine hours. If it had come when it said. It said nine."

"It moved." She was walking him. He was going with her. He did not seem to have a say. "It moved this afternoon. I had it from Dagny at two. I sent it down with the soup. I put a note in the can."

"I never opened the can."

"No. I found it on the bucket." She got the truck door open. "Get in."

"Karin."

"Get in the truck, Arne. I've been married to you forty-one years and I have never told you what to do with a cow. I'm telling you now. You're finished. You were finished an hour ago. Get in."

He got in. She had to lift his legs.

She had the heater going. It blew on him and he could not feel it. She came round and got behind the wheel, and sat a moment with her hands on it, looking through the windshield at the tractor's lights swinging through the willows.

"How did you get this down here?" he said.

"I don't know. I put it in low and I didn't stop." She let the clutch out. "I may not get it back."

She got it back. It took twenty minutes. Twice it sank and she rocked it out, with a hand as light on the stick as a girl's. He sat beside her with his teeth going. Through the side window, as they climbed onto the high ground, the headlights went over cattle: cows standing in the slush with their heads down, and beside them, in the trodden places, small dark shapes. Some of the shapes had their heads up.

"How many?" he said.

"I haven't written it."

"You know, though. You always know."

"I know how many are in my kitchen. That's all I've let myself count." She changed down. "It's to clear at six. And go to ten above."

He understood what that meant. Every calf on that flat was wet to the skin. The ones that had been carried out of the water, and the ones that had never been in it, the pairs Jens had moved off his fence into the open. All of them were soaked. At ten above, a wet calf froze where it lay.

"We'll want every one in the barn," he said. "The shop. The bunkhouse. Anywhere there's a roof. Tonight, before it turns."

"Jens knows."

"He can't do it alone."

"He's not going to." She stopped the truck at the porch. The lamp was in the window. "I telephoned Sixmile at five o'clock. I asked for Samuel Wipf. I said we had four hundred head in the open and two men. He said, how many do you need. I said I didn't know." She turned the engine off. "They've been at the top gate since half past six with a loader and two trucks and nine men. I told them to wait for Jens. They wouldn't know the flat in the dark."

He turned his head and looked at her.

"You called the colony."

"I'd have called Declan. He has sixteen men. I had the receiver in my hand." She opened her door. "I thought you'd sooner drown."

She came round for him. He could not get his legs out. She got her shoulder under his arm.

In the kitchen there were calves from wall to wall. They lay on sacks and towels and his shirts. The room was eighty degrees and smelled of wet hair and scour. A few lifted their heads.

The bathroom door was open. He saw it as he went by. The tub was full, and brown, and steaming, with a meat thermometer hung in it from the tap by a bootlace. There was a calf in it. It was a black one. It lay with its chin on a rolled towel on the rim, where she had left it to come for him, and its eye followed them across the room.

"That's twenty minutes," Karin said, to it or to herself. "You'll keep." She walked him through them to the chair by the stove, and sat him in it, and knelt, and took the fencing pliers off his own belt, and began to cut his trousers off from the cuff.

"Wake me in an hour," he said.

"Yes."

"I mean it. An hour. There's the far end of the flat to look at. There's those forty."

"I said yes."

She would let him sleep. He knew she would. He was asleep before she reached the knee.

19

Weather Event

In Billings it snowed nine inches and then rained, and by Friday night the gutters on Montana Avenue were running brown and the Switchman had cancelled the band.

Joseph heard that from Russ, on the telephone, at five. He was not sorry. He was on shift at ten, and he had not slept well.

Mrs. Kessler stopped him on the stairs. She had her cardigan on over her housecoat and the television going behind her.

"Your people," she said. "Up north. Are they in it?"

"I don't know."

"It's all they're showing. There's a man in Ryegate lost everything he had." She looked at him over her glasses. In six years she had asked him perhaps three questions. "You have a mother?"

"Yes."

"Have you called her?"

"It's not—they've one telephone. It's in a passage. It's for the women, mornings."

"Is it morning?"

"No, ma'am."

"Well, then." She seemed to think that settled something. She went back in. A minute later she put her head out again. "You can use mine. In the hall. It's a proper one, on a wire. They say the

towers are down up there but the wires are holding." She shut the door before he could thank her.

He stood in her hall with his hand on the receiver. It was a black telephone, heavy, on a crocheted mat. He did not pick it up. It was half past five on a Friday evening. The bell would have gone for supper. There would be nobody in the passage, and if there were, it would be somebody who would have to decide whether to say his name aloud.

He would try in the morning. He told himself that, and went out to the truck.

He drove out to the yard at half past nine with the wipers going. The frontage road was slush. The river, where he could see it from the overpass, was the colour of coffee and high. There was nothing else to notice. The streetlights were on. A truck stop was open, with six rigs idling in the lot. He had heard on the radio that the highway north was closed at the Musselshell County line and the one east at Custer. He could not have told from here that anything was closed anywhere.

The yard had been ready since Monday.

He had watched it get ready. The bedding machine had gone down the alleys on Monday and Tuesday in bright sun, blowing straw, with the cattle standing in their shirtsleeves, so to speak, staring at it. The ration had changed on Sunday. A drainage crew had come on Tuesday, three men and a small excavator he had never seen before, and cut a shallow swale along the low side of every pen in the south blocks, so that melt would run to the alley and not stand. Nobody on the day crew had ordered that. The men had a work ticket on a tablet and they dug where the tablet said.

On Wednesday afternoon the foreman had called the night riders into the office. There were three of them now.

"It's going to be nothing," he said. "I'll tell you that straight. It's nine inches and some rain. For us. North of here it's a different animal, but we're on the edge of it." He had the screen turned so they

could see. *Weather event 04/07–04/10. Site impact: low. Projected mortality attributable: 2 to 4 head.* "Two to four. Out of ten thousand six hundred. I've lost more than that to a thunderstorm. You'll ride your pens and you'll go where it sends you, and I'd be surprised if it sends you anywhere."

It had not sent him anywhere.

He rode the north blocks on Friday night in a long slicker with the rain running off his hat. The cattle were bedded and dry underneath. They were eating. In Pen 9 the light calves that had come since January were bunched on their mound with steam coming off them. He stopped there longer than he needed to. He looked for one standing apart. There was none.

At midnight the handset buzzed. *Pen 44. Waterer float. Reset.* He rode down and reset it. It took two minutes.

That was the storm.

• • •

There was a radio in the saddle barn. It was an old one, with a dial, that somebody had left on a shelf between the liniment and the hoof picks, and it got the Billings AM station and one from Miles City and not much else. The day crew kept it on the ball game. At night Joseph turned it to whatever was talking.

Tonight it was the farm station. They had thrown out the programme. A man with a slow, careful voice was taking calls.

Joseph stood in the door of the barn with the horse's reins over his arm and listened.

A woman from Ryegate. Eighteen inches by noon Thursday and the power out since Wednesday night. They had sixty pair in a shed and two hundred in the open and they had not been able to get to the two hundred. She did not know yet. Her husband was out there now.

A man from Lavina. He spoke very fast. He had lost forty calves that he knew of. He wanted to tell people that if they had cattle on

bottom ground along the river they should get them off, tonight, the river was coming up with the rain and there was ice in it. He said that twice. He said, "I should have known that. I've lived here my whole life."

"Nobody could have known all of it," the announcer said.

"Some did," the man said. "The big outfits did. They had it a month ago. I could see their sheds going up from my kitchen. I thought they were crazy." He was quiet for a second. "I'm not saying anything against them. I'm saying I could see the sheds."

Then the sheriff's dispatcher from Musselshell County, a young woman, reading from a paper.

"We have one person missing in the storm. This is a ranch employee, male, eighteen years old, last seen at approximately two a.m. Thursday on horseback, leaving the Rourke Land and Cattle headquarters west of Prosper to check livestock on the north pasture. He did not return. Search and rescue has not been able to deploy because of conditions. We expect to begin a ground search at first light Saturday if the weather clears as forecast. We are asking for mounted volunteers who know the country. Do not self-deploy tonight. I'll repeat that. Do not go out tonight. Call the sheriff's office and leave your name."

She gave the number. She gave it again.

Joseph found that he had said it over to himself.

He knew the Rourke north pasture. He had helped the colony trail yearlings across the corner of it, when he was fifteen, to the railroad pens at Sixmile siding. There was a coulee along the east side. It was eighty feet deep in places, with a rim that crumbled.

He was a rider. He was a good one. He knew that bench as well as any man in the county, and he was two hours away, on a horse that belonged to somebody else, with a handset on his belt that had spoken to him once since ten o'clock.

The road was closed at the county line.

He could have gone round. By Harlowton. It was two hundred miles. He would be there by dawn.

He was on shift until six.

He stood in the barn door. The rain came down. Behind him the announcer said that the next caller was from the Rosebud country, down by Busby, and that they would get to her after a word about calf electrolytes.

He stayed for it. He did not know why. He had never been south of the Yellowstone.

She had a low, unhurried voice. She gave her name as Loretta. She said it had come sideways there, off the Wolf Mountains, and that it had not lain on the flats at all; it had blown clean, you could see grass. She said that was the cruel part. Folks had looked out of the window at bare ground and thought it was not so bad.

"It all went in the draws," she said. "Every bit. Where people put their cattle to be out of it. There's a family up Thompson Creek, I won't say who. The man got word from a friend up your way that it was coming, and he did the right thing. He moved his heifers into the best shelter on the place. And it filled. Ten foot. He and his girl were out twenty-three hours digging."

"Did they get them out?"

"Some." She stopped a moment. "I'm not calling to complain. I'm calling because there's people down here who didn't get any word and left their cattle on the open, and they lost a few. And this man got the word and acted on it, and he doesn't know yet what he's lost. It's a lot. I don't know what a person's supposed to do with that. I thought somebody ought to say it on the radio."

"That's hard," the announcer said.

"It's not hard or easy. It's what happened." She said goodbye politely and hung up.

Joseph led the horse out into the rain.

• • •

He telephoned at ten past six, from the truck, with the engine running.

It rang a long time. He thought the line was down. Then somebody picked it up and there was a great deal of noise, voices, a child crying, the clatter of the big kitchen.

"Sixmile." It was a girl. Not Rachel.

"Is Sarah Wipf there? Sarah, Samuel's."

A pause. He heard her put her hand over the mouthpiece. He heard, quite clearly, *It's him.*

Then his mother.

"Joseph. Are you safe?"

"I'm safe. It was nothing here. Mother, are you—"

"We are all well. Every one. We have no lights but the generator, and the lane is drifted to the eaves, but we are well." She was speaking loudly, over the room. "We had the cattle in. Since Tuesday. Your father looked at the telephone in the shop on Monday morning and he came out and he said, everything that walks goes under a roof by tomorrow night. Everything. The cows, the yearlings, the sheep. He had the boys put the geese in the potato shed."

"All the cattle?"

"Three hundred and twelve cows. In the old hog barns, the ones that were to be torn down. It is a mercy they were not torn down. We have eighty calves and we have lost one, and that one was dead before it came." She laughed. It was not quite steady. "I have never seen your father so pleased with himself. He walks up and down the barn. He says, the Minister said we might look through the window, and I looked."

Joseph put his forehead against the wheel.

"That's good," he said. "That's good, Mother."

"It is the Lord's mercy."

"Yes."

"And it is the telephone. I know that too. I am not a fool." Her voice dropped. "I have thought about what you said to me. At the road. That it was the same machine. I thought about it on Wednesday night when the snow began and I could hear our cows under a roof." She was quiet. "I do not know what to think. I only wanted you to know that I had heard you."

He could not answer.

"Your father is not here," she said. "He has gone to the Lodgepole."

"The Tollefsens'?"

"Mrs. Tollefsen telephoned last night at five. She asked for him by name. She had four hundred head in the open and water coming onto the flat, and two men, and one of them was sixty-seven. Samuel put the telephone down and he stood in the passage. Then he rang the bell." She said it with a kind of wonder. "At five in the evening, on a Friday. He rang it himself. He took the loader and two trucks and nine men. Paul went, and Peter, and Samuel-John. They were out all night. They carried calves into that man's barn until five this morning. Peter came back for diesel and said he had never seen such a thing. He said there were calves floating."

"Is Father—"

"He is driving the loader. He would not give it to anyone." A breath. "He has not driven a loader in ten years."

Joseph looked through the windshield. The day crew was coming in along the frontage road, three sets of lights.

He had been dry all night. He had reset a float.

"I should be there," he said.

"You could not get here. The road is shut."

"I could have come round."

"And done what? Stood at the cattle guard?" She said it gently, and it went in. "There are enough hands, Joseph. That is one thing we are never short of."

He shut his eyes.

"There is something else," his mother said. "The horse barn. The snow was too heavy for it. The roof has come in at the north end. Half the loft is open to the sky."

His eyes opened.

"Nobody was hurt. Nobody was in it. But the brothers say it is a danger now, with the children. They will not wait for seeding. Your father says Monday, if the men are back from the Lodgepole. They will put the loader to it."

"Monday."

"Yes."

"The north end."

"I said so." She waited. "Peter was baptised on Palm Sunday. And Rachel. Did I write you that? They stood up together. She wore my mother's kerchief." Her voice was careful now. "The Minister asked each of them had they anything on their conscience that should be said before the church. Rachel said no. Peter said he had one matter, and he would bring it to the Minister alone."

"What matter?"

"I was not told. It is not for me to be told." A very small pause. "The Minister went for a walk that evening. By himself. As far as the east end."

Joseph sat without moving.

"I thought you would want the news," Sarah Wipf said. "About the roof. I must go. There are forty men to feed when they come in, and Katie-Basel has burned the porridge."

"Mother. Is it—did he—"

"I know nothing, Joseph. I have told you what I saw from the kitchen window. I see a good deal from that window. I do not always know what it is." Somebody called her. "Eat something. Are you eating?"

"Yes."

"You are not. I can hear it." And she was gone.

• • •

He sat in the truck until the day foreman knocked on the glass.

"You're off," the foreman said. "Go home. What'd we lose?"

"I don't know. It didn't send me to any."

"Two." He had his tablet. "One in thirty-eight, one in sixty. Both chronic. They'd have gone anyway." He leaned on the door. "Two head. You hear the radio? They're saying a hundred thousand calves, Billings to the Dakotas. They're saying it'll be worse than '22." He shook his head. "And we sat here and lost two. I'll tell you, Wipf, I don't know how to feel. I rode in this morning past a man on the Shepherd road who was dragging dead calves out of a ditch with a pickup. He looked at my truck. He looked at the name on the door. I've known him twenty years."

"What did he say?"

"He didn't say anything. He's a neighbour." The foreman straightened up. "You want overtime? I've got two day men can't get in. It's easy money. There's nothing to do."

"There's a search. On the Musselshell. They want riders."

"I heard." He looked at Joseph more closely. "That your country?"

"It was."

"Road's shut."

"I know it."

"It'd take you till noon, going round. They'll have fifty men out by then. They'll have the dogs." He rubbed his jaw. "And I'd be down three. I'm not telling you no. I'm telling you what it is."

Joseph looked at the yard. It was getting light. The rain had stopped. Steam was coming off ten thousand cattle, and the feed trucks were starting down the bunk line with nobody in them.

It did not need him. It had not needed him all night. He could have slept in the barn.

Somewhere on the Musselshell thirty of this yard's old panels stood across a flat with his chalk still on the end of one, and he did not know whether they had held. The place that might have had a

use for him was two hundred miles away by the long road. He was not allowed past its gate, and its own men were out in the dark doing what he was good at. On Monday they would put a loader to a barn there. Whatever was in the loft would be found, or it would already be gone, and nobody would ever tell him which.

"I'll take the overtime," he said.

"Good man."

"Don't say that."

The foreman looked at him. He let it pass.

He knew what it was. He had told himself for six years that he stayed away because he was not let. This morning there had been a reason to go that nobody at Sixmile could have faulted: a lost man, a search, a call for riders who knew the bench. He had a tank of fuel. He could have stood at the Rourke gate with fifty strangers and nobody would have asked whose son he was.

He had stayed for time and a half. He had been offered a way to stay and he had taken it inside a minute. He did not think it was the money. He thought it was that out there he might be some use, and that if he was, he would have to find out what that felt like and then come back here.

Joseph got down. He caught the horse again and saddled it. His handset was in the cradle, charging. He took it out and hung it on his belt, and it buzzed against his hip before he had the cinch tight.

Pen 12. Bunk camera obscured. Wipe lens.

He found a rag.

• • •

The rendering truck came at ten.

It was a red tandem with a hoist, and it backed up to the dead pen behind the hospital shed where the two steers lay under a tarp. The driver was a lean man of sixty with a cigarette. Joseph had seen him

every week or two for four years and they had never exchanged more than the count.

"Two," Joseph said.

"Two." The man looked round the yard. Ten thousand head, steaming in the sun. "That's it?"

"That's it."

"Is that so." He threw the hook. "I've been on the road since three. I had a call at Shepherd for sixty. I had one at Acton I couldn't get to. The company's sending three more trucks up from Wyoming and it won't touch it." He ran the winch. The first steer came up the ramp on its side. "They've got me on the Musselshell tomorrow, if the road's open. There's a place by Prosper. A Norwegian. They say he's got them laid out behind his barn in rows, like a churchyard. Sixty, eighty, nobody knows yet. Some Hutterites did it. Wouldn't pile them."

Joseph did not say anything.

"I'm not to take them. That's the word. The colony's burying them for him. They want me for a ranch across the river that lost nine." He shook his head. "Nine. I'm to drive a hundred miles for nine, and go right by the other. Because the one's got a contract with the company and the other hasn't."

"Who's burying them? Which of them?"

"How would I know? Fellow on the telephone said the boss himself was on the loader. Old boy with a beard. Said he was making a hash of it and wouldn't get off." The second steer came up. "You all right, son?"

"That's my father."

The man looked at him. He took in the hat, the canvas coat, the handset on the belt. He was not a fool. He had been hauling dead stock out of that country for thirty years and he knew a colony name when he saw the face it went with.

"Is it," he said. "Well." He dropped the tailgate and pinned it. He stood a moment with his hand on the pin. "You want me to say anything? If I see him?"

Joseph thought about it. He thought about it for as long as it took the man to finish his cigarette and tread it out.

"No," he said.

"Sure?"

"There's nothing I'm allowed to send."

The driver nodded. He climbed into the cab. He leaned out of the window. "I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll look at how he's driving it. And next time I'm through, I'll tell you if he's got any better."

He pulled out. Joseph stood by the empty dead pen until the handset buzzed.

20

The Rim

He was to have been back by four.

At ten past four on the Thursday morning Shannon looked at the clock over the shed door and thought, the soup's cold. At half past she walked up to the office in snow to her knees and woke the screen.

The ranch came up in green. The sheds were there, crowded with small tags. The trucks, in a row. And at the top, on the pale block of the north pasture, a single blue dot.

It was at the southeast gate. It had a time beside it. 02:52.

She touched it. *Last position update 02:52. Signal lost.*

She waited for it to move. She waited a full minute, standing, with her wet gloves in her hand.

Then she opened the tower status, which she had never had cause to open, and read that the relay on the bench had dropped out at two minutes to three. *Cause: ice loading.* Under that, in grey: *Estimated restoration: Saturday a.m.*

She ran back to the sheds.

Her father was in the middle one, bent over a cow. She told him. She watched it go into his face and not come out again.

"What time is it?"

"Twenty to five."

"He said four."

"He said four."

Declan stood up. He had blood to the elbow. He did not wipe it. He tipped his head, and she saw his lips move.

"What's it say?"

"I've asked it." He held up a hand. He listened for what felt like a long time. "It says he's most likely with the heifers. It says a rider caught in deteriorating conditions will usually shelter with the stock. There's the draw, and the stack. It says sixty-eight percent."

"Sixty-eight."

"It says wait for light. It says a search now puts more people at risk than it's likely to help." He looked at her. He wanted very badly to believe it; she could see that. He had paid for it for six years, and it had just saved him eight hundred cows. "That's sense, Shannon. He's a ranch kid. He'd dig into that stack. I would."

"His telephone stopped at the gate."

"The tower's down."

"It stopped *before* the tower went. Six minutes before. It stopped moving."

"It was updating every ten. That's nothing." He was arguing with her and with himself. "Sixty-eight. That's two to one."

"It was sixty-two for the storm. In February. You built three barns."

A cow bawled. Somebody was shouting for chains.

"Ray goes at first light," he said. "With two men. On the fence. I'll not send anybody up there in the dark on a number, and I'll not sit on my hands on one either." He bent to the cow again. His hands were not steady. "Go and wake Ray. Tell him to take the old horses."

They held on to sixty-eight until noon. She heard men say it to each other in the sheds. *It's got him at the stack. Two to one.* It was something to have. When Ray rode in at dark and said there was nobody at the stack and never had been, not a track, nobody mentioned the number again.

• • •

That was Thursday. This was Saturday, and she had not been to bed.

She could not have said, afterwards, what order things had happened in. She knew that Ray had gone up at first light Thursday with two men, on the oldest horses on the place, following the fence. It had taken them three hours to make the three miles. They found the heifers. All hundred and forty-two were in the cottonwood draw, packed in under the bank with their tails to the wind, exactly where the advisory had said they would go. They were hungry and they were fine.

There were no tracks. There was a foot of new snow over everything by then and it was still coming.

Ray had ridden the fence all the way round. Seven miles. He came in at dark with his moustache frozen to his scarf and said that he had found nothing, not a glove, and that he had shouted until he had no voice.

"He followed the fence up," Ray said. "He must have. The dot's at the gate. He looked at the heifers and he started back. And then I don't know."

"He'd have come back the same way," Declan said. "I told him. You told him."

"I told him twice."

Shannon had said it then. She had been thinking it for fourteen hours.

"He didn't come back by the fence."

They looked at her.

"It's three miles back by the fence and a mile and a half straight across. He'd been up twenty hours. He was on a green colt that was fighting him. And it was snowing straight down then, there was no wind yet, he could see." She heard how it sounded. "He looked at the heifers and they were all right. He thought, I'll be back in half an hour. He cut the corner."

"Across the coulee," Ray said.

"Along the rim. To the crossing at the old stock dam. It's what he did in November."

"I took him behind the shop for it in November."

"I know you did. He was eighteen, Ray. He said yes sir, and he meant it. And then it was three in the morning."

Nobody answered. Her father was sitting at the office desk with his hat on. He had the earpiece in. He was listening to something, and his face did not change.

"It says search the fence corridor," he said. "It's put a map up. It's got the fence in red. Highest probability, it says. It's worked it from where he was told to go."

"He didn't go where he was told."

"It doesn't know that."

"No," Shannon said. "It wouldn't."

They could not search the rim on Thursday night. They tried. She and Conor took the two best horses and a spotlight and got a mile, and the wind came up out of the north, and they could not see their horses' ears. Conor's horse went in to its belly at the first side draw and nearly did not come out. He turned them back. She fought him. He took hold of her rein.

"I'm not burying two," he said. He was shouting it into her face. "I'll come back at daylight. I'll come back every day till July. But I'm not taking you along that rim in this, and you're not taking me."

And there were the cows. That was the other thing, the thing nobody said aloud. There were eight hundred and eleven cows in three sheds, and they did not stop. A hundred and four calves were born on that place between Thursday midnight and Saturday dawn. Somebody had to pull the ones that needed pulling. Sixteen men were not too many. Ray could spare her three for the search on Friday, and two of those had never been on the north pasture in their lives.

On Friday it rained. The sheriff telephoned to say his people could not get out of Roundup.

She telephoned the Lodgepole that morning. She did it from the tack room, where nobody would hear. It rang nine times.

"Tollefsens."

"Mrs. Tollefsen. It's Shannon."

"Yes."

"Is Jens—did they move them? From the willows?"

"They're moving them now." Karin's voice was level and very tired. There was a noise behind her that Shannon could not place, and then could: calves, a great many, in a small room. "He's on the flat. I'll tell him you rang."

"Is he all right?"

"He's on his feet."

"Mrs. Tollefsen, I need to—there's something I should have—"

"Not now."

She said it without unkindness, and it was as if a door had been shut.

"I've nineteen calves on my kitchen floor and one in the bath," Karin said. "Whatever it is, it has kept this long. It will keep till it stops raining." A pause. "I heard about your boy. Ray's wife called round. I'm sorry for it. I'll tell Jens that too."

She had hung up before Shannon could ask what else she would tell him.

Beth found her there an hour later, sitting on a saddle rack with the receiver in her lap. She did not ask. She took her up to the house and put her on the sofa with a blanket and stood over her until she shut her eyes. Shannon slept ninety minutes. She dreamed that she was reading a contract and that every page was the same page.

So it was Saturday.

• • •

It broke clear, as the advisory had said it would, to the hour. She was at the shed mouth at six with a cup of coffee she could not drink.

The sky was a hard washed blue. The Snowies stood up in the northwest, white from top to bottom, close enough to touch. Everything shone. It was ten above. The slush in the yard had frozen in the night into ridges like a ploughed field, and every twig on every cottonwood had a sleeve of ice.

The relay came back at twenty to seven. She had the screen in her hand. She watched the dot.

It did not move. It was at the gate still. 02:52.

The telephone was dead, then, or under something. She had known that. She found she had been hoping anyway.

They rode out at seven. There were thirty of them. The sheriff had sent nine, with a dog. There were four men from the campus site in orange coats, who had never been asked and had simply come. There was the Sorensen boy. There was a man she did not know at all, on a mule, who said he had heard it on the radio in Harlowton and driven all night.

There was nobody from across the river. She had not expected it. She had heard nothing from there since Wednesday. She had telephoned on Friday morning and had got no farther than Karin.

Her father stayed. He stood at the corral gate and watched them go.

"I'd only be a thing to look after," he said. "I'll keep the radio. It's got the map."

"The map's wrong, Dad."

"I know. I'll tell the sheriff's man where you said." He put his hand on her knee, on the saddle. He had not done that since she was small. "The rim. To the stock dam."

"Yes."

"You're sure."

"No."

"Go on, then."

• • •

They searched the rim on Saturday from the stock dam north, and found nothing.

It was the snow. She had not understood, until she saw it in daylight, what the wind had done. The coulee was eighty feet deep and two hundred across, with a steep wall on the west side, the side they were riding. Thursday's wind had come over the bench from the northwest and dropped everything it carried into the lee of that wall. The coulee was half full. In places the drift came up level with the rim, in a long smooth curve, so that the edge was simply gone. A person riding along it could not have said where the ground stopped.

The dog was no use. It ran out onto the crust and stood there with its tongue out.

They probed. The sheriff's men had poles, ten feet long, jointed. They went along the foot of the wall in a line, on snowshoes, and pushed the poles down every yard, and felt. They found a deer. They found a length of old drill stem.

Conor rode beside her most of the day. He talked little. At noon he handed her a sandwich and watched until she had eaten it.

The helicopter came at one.

They heard it first. It came up the coulee from the south, low, a small yellow machine with a hook under it. It was the one the consortium had brought in to string wire on the Colstrip line. Somebody at the site had sent it without being asked; the men in orange coats knew the pilot. It flew the whole length of the rim, slowly, a hundred feet up, with a man hanging out of the door.

Everybody stopped to watch. Thirty people stood in the snow with their faces turned up.

It went north to the fence and came back. It hovered a long while over the stock dam. Then it rose and tilted and went away across the bench towards the towers, and the sound drew off.

One of the orange coats had a radio. He listened. He shook his head.

"He says it's all one colour," he said. "He says you can't tell the coulee from the bench. He says he flew right over us twice and couldn't see the horses till we looked up."

"He might have made the dam," Conor said. "Crossed, and got turned round on the far side. There's the Sorensen line shack."

"They looked there."

"He might be in a haystack somewhere. People do that. You dig into a stack, you can last three days."

"He hasn't got three days. It's been two and a half."

"Shannon."

"I'm all right."

"You're not. You've been sitting on that horse since seven looking like you did it." He rode a few yards. "You didn't send him. Ray sent him. The machine told Ray. And he was told the fence, by three people, and he didn't."

"Leave it, Conor."

"Then what?"

She did not answer. She could not have explained it to him. She had stood in the yard and said, follow the fence, I don't care what's shorter, and had watched him ride out, and had gone back to the east shed. She had known him. She had known him better than Ray did, or the advisory. She had spent eight months of evenings in a round pen with that boy and she knew exactly how his mind worked: he would do a hard thing right when someone was watching, and when he was alone and tired he would trust himself. It was what made him good with a horse. She had known it at two in the morning. She had said her piece and let him go.

She had known, and had said enough to be able to say she had said it.

He had been the one who believed her when she told him a thing was engineered.

They quit at dark. It went to eight above that night.

• • •

On Sunday it thawed.

The wind went round to the southwest before dawn. By nine the eaves were running, and by noon it was fifty degrees. The whole bench was sinking under them with a sound like a long breath let out.

They rode the rim again, south to north. There were thirty now. The drifts had dropped two feet since yesterday and gone grey and pocked. You could see the lip of the wall in places, a dark line of sandstone coming up through.

In the middle of the afternoon the man on the mule found the hat.

It was a quarter mile north of the dam. It was lying on the snow at the bottom of the coulee, forty feet out from the wall, crown down, with a scarf still tied through it. It had not been there Saturday. The thaw had brought it up.

They probed there until dark. Thirty people in a line. The drift was fourteen feet deep at the wall. They did not reach the bottom of it.

"Tomorrow," the sheriff's sergeant said. He was a grey, tired man who had done this before. "It's dropping a foot every six hours. Tomorrow we won't need the poles."

She did not go home. She sat on the rim above the place, on a saddle blanket, with her back against a sandstone ledge. Conor sat with her till midnight. Then Ray came up, without being asked, and took his place. He had a thermos. He did not say anything for two hours.

"I had a boy," he said, about three. "You wouldn't know that. Before I came here. In Miles City. He'd be forty-four."

"What happened?"

"Nothing happened. His mother took him to Boise. I haven't seen him since he was six." He poured coffee into the lid. "I never had one on a crew I liked as I liked that kid. He couldn't drive a nail. He'd put a skid-steer through a wall. And I'd see him out there at night with your filly, and I'd think, well, there's one that's going to get out of here and be something." He drank. "I sent him because he was no use in the shed. That's the truth of it. I didn't think about it for five seconds."

"It told you to send someone."

"It told me to send someone. It didn't tell me who." He screwed the lid on. "I picked."

"I'd have picked him too," Shannon said.

"Yes. Well."

They sat there. The coulee ticked and settled below them in the dark.

Her father came at five.

She saw the lights. He had driven the ranch pickup up the bench road as far as it would go and walked the rest, half a mile, in the dark, on that knee. He had a flashlight and left it dark. He came along the rim to where they were sitting and stood there, breathing.

"Ray. Go and sleep. I'll stop with her."

Ray went. Declan let himself down onto the blanket. It took him some time.

He looked at the place below them, where thirty people had probed until dark. The snow there was churned and grey.

"I asked it," he said. "Tonight. I said, you told me manageable."

"Dad."

"I wanted to hear what it would say. I've never asked it a thing like that. I ask it when to cut hay." He had the earpiece in his fingers. He was turning it over and over. "It said the assessment was correct. It said conditions on the north pasture stayed within the range it gave. Wind, temperature, visibility. It read me the numbers. It said the

stock came through with no loss, which was what the assessment was for."

She waited.

"It said the subject departed from the assigned route."

"The subject."

"That's the word." He closed his hand. "I've paid for that thing for six years. It knows the name of every cow I own. It knew my wife's birthday; it told me the first year, and I'd forgotten, and I cried in the truck." He was looking straight ahead. "I said, his name is Wyatt. It said, noted."

The sky was going grey in the east. She could make out the far wall.

"It wasn't wrong," Declan said. "That's what I can't get round. It wasn't wrong about one single thing. It was right about the storm to the hour, and it was right about the sheds, and it was right about the heifers. If he'd done what it said, he'd be eating his breakfast." He put the earpiece in his shirt pocket and buttoned it. "And I'd send him again. That's the worst of it. Tomorrow night, same forecast, same word, I'd look at eight hundred cows and sixteen men and I'd say, send the kid, it says it's manageable."

"Would you?"

"I don't know what else I'd go by." He turned his head. He looked old. "Would you have me go back to the glass on the wall? Like him across the river? I hear he's lost a hundred."

"I don't know what I'd have you do."

"No." He nodded. "Nor me."

• • •

They found him at twenty to eight on Monday morning, the twelfth of April.

They did not need the poles. The drift had gone down in the night to five or six feet and pulled away from the wall, and there was a gap along the foot of the sandstone a yard wide, like the gap between a

mattress and a bedstead. Conor saw it first. He was riding the rim ahead of her. He stopped his horse. He sat looking down for what seemed a long time.

Then he got off. He came back and took her bridle.

"Stay up here."

"No."

"Shannon. Stay up here and let me go."

"No."

She went down. There was a place a hundred yards north where the wall had slumped. She slid most of it. Conor was behind her.

The colt was there. She saw that first. It was lying on its side against the foot of the wall, in the gap, with its neck folded under. It was still saddled. One stirrup stuck straight up.

He was a little farther along. He had been thrown clear, or had jumped. He was sitting. That was what she could not take in. He was sitting on the ground with his back against the sandstone and his legs out in front of him, and the left one was wrong below the knee. His slicker was pulled up round his ears. His arms were folded across his chest, with his hands tucked into his armpits. His head was down.

He looked as though he had sat down to wait for somebody.

There was a cutbank above him, an undercut, where the wall leaned out. He had got himself under it. The snow had drifted in on three sides and left a hollow.

Conor went past her. He knelt. He put two fingers inside the boy's collar, and held them there, and took them away.

"He's been gone a while," he said. His voice was thick. "Days. He'd not have—it'd have been quick, Shannon. In that cold. With the leg. He'd have gone to sleep."

She knew that he did not know that. Nobody could know it.

She knelt on the other side. She had to see his face. She put her hand under his chin, and it was like lifting a stone.

He had frost in his eyelashes. His eyes were shut. There was nothing in his face at all. No fear. It was a boy's face, eighteen years old, a little chapped round the mouth.

There was something in the snow by his hip. She picked it up. It was his telephone. He had taken it out of his chest pocket and it had been in his hand, and when the hand went under his arm it had fallen. The screen was black. She pressed it. It was dead. It had been dead since eight minutes to three on Thursday morning, or soon after. It had lain there for four days saying nothing to anyone.

I'm a little blue dot.

She put it in her coat.

"The heifers were all right," she said.

"What?"

"The heifers. A hundred and forty-two. They were in the draw. It was manageable. It was exactly what it said."

"Shannon. Come away."

"He'd looked at them. He was on his way back to tell us." She could not stop. "He did the job. He did what he was sent to do, and it was fine, and then he was coming home."

Conor got her by the shoulders. He was crying. She had not seen him cry since their mother. He pulled her against his coat and held her there, kneeling in the slush at the foot of the wall, and over his shoulder she could see men's heads along the rim, against the sky, with their hats off.

The sergeant came down after a while. He stood a little way off until she had got up.

He had a form on a clipboard. He was apologetic about it. He said the coroner would have to come from Roundup, and that until then nothing could be moved. He said he had to put down a few things while they were fresh.

"Who was his employer?"

"Rourke Land and Cattle," Conor said.

"Who directed him to go out? Thursday morning."

Nobody spoke. Ray had come down the slump behind them. He was standing with his hat in both hands.

"I did," Ray said.

"On whose instruction?"

"The advisory flagged it. A visual check at onset. I picked him."

The sergeant wrote. "And the route? Was a route specified?"

"The fence. I told him the fence. So did she." Ray's voice cracked. "He was told."

"So he'd left the specified route."

"Don't write that," Shannon said.

They all looked at her.

"Ma'am, it's just—"

"I know what it's just. It's what the machine said. *The subject departed from the assigned route.* It's true. It'll go on your form, and then on the insurance, and then that's what happened to him. He departed." She was shaking. "He was eighteen years old and he'd been awake twenty hours and three people who should have known better sent him out on a green horse at two in the morning. Write that down. Put my name on it."

The sergeant looked at her for a moment. He was a tired, decent man, and he had filled in this form before.

"I'll write what I'm told by the people who were there," he said gently. "All of it. That's all I can do. It's not me who decides which line gets read."

He wrote for some time. She did not see what.

• • •

They brought him in on a sled behind the mule. The man from Harlowton led it. He would not let anyone else.

Her father was at the corral gate. He had been there since they left. He took his hat off when the mule came into the yard and held

it against his chest, and he looked at what was on the sled, under the blanket, and his face came apart.

She had never seen that. She looked away.

He stood there until they had carried the boy into the cookhouse, into the office, and laid him on the long table where the lease had been. Then he put his hat on and went up to the house, and she heard the door.

The earpiece was on the gatepost. He had taken it out and set it there, on top, on the flat of the post, and left it.

She picked it up. It was warm from the sun. It was making a very small sound, like an insect. She held it near her ear.

—all north pasture yearlings accounted for. Condition good. Recommend supplemental feed today. Shed three, bedding due—

She closed her hand on it.

She went to the horse barn. She did not know where else to go. The filly was in the end stall, where she had been since Wednesday; somebody had kept her fed. She had her head over the door. She nickered when she heard a step.

Then she saw who it was, and stopped. She looked past Shannon, at the barn door. She was looking for him. She looked for a long time, with her ears up.

Shannon went into the tack room. His saddle was gone; it was on the colt. But his rope was there, coiled on its peg, and a pair of gloves, and a sheet of paper thumbtacked to the wall above them in a round careful hand. *Filly. Week of Apr 12. Bench — towers. River — cross twice. Stand tied 2 hrs. Do NOT push.*

She took it down. She folded it into her coat with the telephone.

The office had the personnel files. She had made them up herself. She went back across the yard and in, past the table, without looking at it, and opened the second drawer. *Pell, Wyatt J. Date of hire* 5/12/31. There was one sheet. On the line for next of kin he had printed, *Earl Pell (granddad). Lusk*, Wyo. and a number.

Her father had not come down. Conor was on the porch with his head in his hands. Ray was in the shed.

She sat at her desk. She dialled it herself.

It rang five times.

"Pell."

It was an old man's voice, dry, from somewhere with a wind in it.

"Mr. Pell," she said. "My name is Shannon Rourke. I'm calling from Montana."

21

The Count

He was not let out of the house until the Monday.

That was Karin's doing, and the doctor's. She had got a doctor. Arne did not know how. The roads were shut and the telephone was out half the time, but on Saturday afternoon a young woman in a parka had come into his kitchen, stepping over calves, and had cut the socks off his feet and looked at what was under them and said a number of things he did not care to hear.

He had not lost any toes. He might yet. They were the colour of plums, and they had blisters on them the size of grapes, and they hurt as nothing in his life had hurt, not excepting the hip. She said that was a good sign. She said the ones that did not hurt were the ones you lost. She bandaged them loose and told him that if he put a boot on before Wednesday she would not answer for it.

So he sat. Karin put the chair at the kitchen window, with a stool for his feet, and he sat there for two days and watched his ranch through a pane of glass.

He saw it clear on Saturday. He saw the cattle on the high ground at first light, four hundred head standing in a frozen field, each cow with her head down over something on the ground. He saw the colony men, in black, going among them with a truck. Nine men. They bent and lifted and carried, bent and lifted and carried. Some

of what they lifted they put in the cab, with the heater. Some they laid on the flatbed, in a row.

He saw Jens. Jens never stopped. He went from the flat to the barn and the barn to the shop and the shop to the flat, with a calf in his arms each time or a sack of milk powder or nothing, and he walked like a man walking in his sleep. Once he stood in the middle of the yard for a full minute with his hands at his sides. Then one of the colony men said something to him, and he went on.

Arne had tried to get up. He had got as far as the door. Karin had not said a word. She had only looked at his feet, and at the floor, where he had left two wet red prints on the linoleum, and he had gone back to the chair.

"You could count," she said. "If you want something to do. I've lost my place."

She gave him a pencil and the back of a feed bill. He counted what went on the flatbed.

By Saturday night it was fifty-seven.

The dog came in on Sunday at first light, on three legs, from the river side. It lay down under the stove among the calves and would not be moved.

On Sunday the colony women came.

There were three of them, in a pickup driven by a boy. They had a washtub of bread and two roasters and a ten-gallon can of soup. They did not knock. The oldest came through the kitchen door with the tub on her hip, and looked at the floor, at forty calves on towels, and at Karin, who was on her knees among them with a bottle and had not been off them since Thursday.

"Mrs. Tollefsen," she said. "You will go and lie down."

"I can't. There's fourteen want feeding every two hours, and that one's scouring, and—"

"I have raised calves for thirty-five years. Rebecca has raised more. Show me which fourteen."

It was Sarah Wipf. Arne knew her by the voice before she turned round.

Karin showed her. It took five minutes. Then she stood up, holding the edge of the table, and looked about her own kitchen as if she had not seen it before. She went up the stairs. He heard the bed take her. He did not hear her turn over.

The women worked without talking. They had the calves sorted in a quarter of an hour, the strong ones by the door and the weak by the stove. One of them scrubbed out the bathtub. One of them found the mop. Sarah Wipf mixed milk powder in the big kettle, tasting it off her wrist, and fed the fourteen, one after another, with a calf's head clamped under her arm like a loaf.

She spoke to him only when she was done. Then she dried her hands and came and stood by his chair. She looked at his feet on the stool.

"You are thin," she said.

"So I'm told."

"I say it to everyone. It is usually true." She glanced at the window, at what he had been watching. "Samuel is on the loader. He is very bad at it. Do not tell him I said so."

"I won't."

"He would not let Paul. He said, I was asked for by name." She folded the towel. "I have been married to him thirty-four years. I did not know he could be asked for. I thought he could only be told."

She went back to the stove. There was a pie on the table when they left. It was rhubarb. Nobody had mentioned it.

• • •

On Monday he put on a pair of his father's overshoes, three sizes too big, over the bandages, and took the two crutches from 1991 out of the porch closet, and went to see.

It was fifty-five degrees. The yard was mud to the ankle. Water ran in every rut. The Snowies were white and the sky had not a mark

on it, and a meadowlark was sitting on the corral gate singing as if nothing had ever been wrong anywhere.

He went to the barn first.

It had been built for forty head. There were a hundred and ninety calves in it. They were in the stalls and the alley and the grain room. They lay on straw a foot deep that somebody had forked in fresh, and most of them had a strip of red or blue tape round the neck with a number on it in marker, to match them to cows that were bawling at the doors. A colony boy was going down the alley with a bucket and a tube. He looked up and nodded and went on.

The shop was the same. The bunkhouse was the same. There were calves in Jens's new kitchen, on the plywood, with the sheet of plastic taken down for bedding.

He went behind the barn.

He had known what would be there. He had counted most of it through a window. It was a different thing to stand beside it.

They had laid them in rows. That was the colony. Jens would have piled them; a man piled them, usually, and did not look. These were in rows of ten, on the bare ground behind the barn where the old bone pile had always been, heads all one way, and the rows went back towards the river. He stood at the end of the first row and looked along it. Black, mostly. Red. Two brockle-faces. Each one had been a wet thing trying to get its hind end up.

There were fourteen rows.

"A hundred and forty."

Jens was behind him. He had come round the corner of the barn with a shovel.

"Hundred and forty," Jens said again. His voice was flat and hoarse. "It was a hundred and thirty-eight till this morning. Two more went in the night. In the barn. Lungs."

"Is that the end of it?"

"I don't know. There's twenty I don't like the look of." He leaned on the shovel. He had shaved, for some reason. It made him look

worse. “You want it broke down? Mom has it. I gave it to her yesterday.”

“Tell me.”

“Twenty-three under the drift. At the windbreak. That’s mine.” He said it without any expression. “Fifty-eight in the willows. Drowned, or chilled in the water and died after. That’s yours. And the rest on the flat, Saturday morning, when it went to ten. Froze where they lay. Pairs I’d moved off the fence on Thursday, and ones we’d hauled out of the willows Friday and tipped off in the open because there was nowhere else.” He looked along the rows. “Fifty-nine. I don’t know whose those are.”

“Cows?”

“Eleven. Six in the creek. Five down and couldn’t get up. I shot four.” He turned the shovel in his hands. “It’s a third. A third of the crop, near enough. If we’d left every cow on the open flat and gone to bed, we’d have lost—I’ve tried to work it out. I can’t. Maybe the same. Maybe more.” He looked at his father. “Declan lost nine calves. Out of eight hundred. The colony lost one.”

“I heard.”

“That’s what a roof does.”

There was nothing to say to it. He stood on his crutches at the end of fourteen rows and it was simply so.

“You were right about the drift,” Jens said.

“And you were right about the willows.”

“So that’s fine, then. We were both right.” He laughed. It was an ugly sound. “I keep thinking, if we’d each had our own way. All the way. If you’d put all four hundred and thirty in the willows, there’d be nothing left. If I’d had them all at the fence, I don’t know. We’d have dug out fifty instead of twenty-three. We split it, so we each got to be half wrong.” He drove the shovel into the mud. “It’s the only sensible thing we did, and I can’t tell if it helped.”

“It helped.”

“How do you know?”

"I don't," Arne said. "I'm saying it."

Halvor Brekke came along the river road at ten, at five miles an hour, and stopped at the gate.

He did not get out. He rolled the window down. Arne went over on the crutches. It was forty yards and took him some time, and the old man sat and watched him come without offering to move the truck closer.

"I heard," Halvor said. "I'd have come sooner. I couldn't get out of my yard till this morning." He looked past Arne, towards the barn. He could not see behind it from there. "How many?"

"A hundred and forty."

"Ah." He shut his eyes. He opened them. "And the cows?"

"Eleven."

"That's bad. That's as bad as I've heard." He put both hands on the wheel. "I'll tell you mine. You'll hear it anyway. I lost none."

Arne looked at him.

"Eleven cows. Nine had calved. Two calved in it. I've eleven calves standing in my lot this morning, sucking." He said it as a man might confess to something. "I never did a thing. I told you I wouldn't. I went to bed Wednesday at eight with the radio on and I got up Saturday. I'd no feed out. I'd no straw down. They were in that lot behind the barn with a board fence on the north side that's half fallen over."

"It blew clean."

"It blew clean. It went right through the gaps in that fence and never stopped. There wasn't three inches lying in the lot. And it's on the high ground; my grandfather built up there for the mosquitoes." He shook his head slowly. "Declan Rourke spent a hundred and ninety thousand dollars and lost nine. You and that boy near killed yourselves and lost a hundred and forty. And I lay in my bed like a dead man and lost none. Now you tell me what that means."

"It doesn't mean anything."

"No. I don't believe it does." He looked at Arne's feet. "I'd give you the eleven, if it would help. I mean that. I've no use for them. I'm going to Spokane in the fall."

"Keep your calves, Halvor."

"I thought you'd say that." He started the pickup. "Somebody's been splitting my wood. All winter. I never caught him at it."

"Is that so."

"He stacks it left-handed. Pulls to the left." Halvor put it in gear. "I'd know that stack anywhere. I helped his father build one just like it in 1958."

He drove on, at five miles an hour, towards town.

• • •

The loader came down from Sixmile at noon.

It was a big yellow Volvo, new, with a four-yard bucket, and it came along the river road at a walk with a pickup behind it. Arne heard it from the porch. He was sitting on the step with his feet out in front of him in the overshoes.

There were two men. The one driving the loader was stout, sixty or so, with a grey beard and a black hat set square. He drove it badly. He rode the brake and he had the bucket too low, and at the gate he had three goes at the turn. The one in the pickup was young, broad, with large ears and a fair beard just coming.

The older man got down. He did it carefully, backwards, as Karin did.

"Mr. Tollefsen."

"Mr. Wipf."

They had known each other forty years, to nod to. They had done business. A loader in 2019. A bull in '24. They had never once sat down in the same room.

"You are on your feet," Samuel Wipf said.

"After a fashion."

"That is good. On Friday night my son told me you were carried in from the flat, and I thought, that man will lose both legs." He looked at the overshoes. "It was not you. It was the other one they carried. I am confusing it. You were in the house."

"I was in the chair."

"Yes." He took his hat off, looked into it, and put it on again. "We have come to dig. You will want it deep, and away from the river. Peter has walked your ground. He says there is a gravel bench behind the stackyard that is dry at twelve feet."

"I'll pay for the diesel. And the time."

"No."

"It's a day's work for that machine. It's three hundred dollars an hour in Billings."

"It is not in Billings." He said it mildly. "You sent a side of beef in 2019. My wife still speaks of it. We are not finished eating it."

"That was thirteen years ago."

"She is a thrifty woman."

Arne looked at him. There was not a line in the man's face to say he was joking. He thought he was.

"Then I'll say thank you," Arne said. It did not come easily. "For the digging. And for Friday. I was not in a state to say it Friday."

"You need not say it to me. Your wife telephoned. It was she who asked." Samuel Wipf looked across the yard at the barn. "It is a hard thing for a man, to be asked for. To have somebody else do the asking. I have thought about that. I would not have liked it."

"I didn't know she'd done it till it was done."

"No. That is how they manage it." He nodded slowly. "We had ours under a roof. All of them. I will not pretend to you that we did not. I looked at the weather on the telephone on Monday and I saw what was coming and I put every animal in a barn. The brothers allowed that, in November. They voted that we might look." He clasped his hands behind him. "I do not say it to boast. I say it because you will hear it, and I would sooner you heard it from me. We

looked, and you did not, and we have eighty calves and you have a hundred and forty to bury. I do not know what that means. The Minister will tell us on Sunday. I am only a farmer."

"It means you were right."

"It means we were dry. I am not sure it is the same." He turned his head. "Peter. Bring the stakes."

The young man came with a bundle of lath. He nodded to Arne. He had a stammer; Arne remembered it from the night, a voice in the dark saying *th-this one's b-breathing, take it.*

They went off towards the stackyard, the two of them. Arne watched them go. He thought of the woman at the pie table, wrapping a rhubarb pie in newspaper. *A person would not just see another person there. On the street.*

He had a daughter in that town.

He called after them. He had not known he was going to.

"Wipf."

The older man stopped.

"Your wife asked me a thing. At the Stampede. About Billings." It was a long way to say it across a yard. He said it. "I told her I'd never seen him. That was so. But I didn't look. I've been to that town twice a year for ten years and I never once looked. For yours or mine."

Samuel Wipf stood quite still. The young one, beside him, was studying the stakes.

"She should not have asked you that," he said at last.

"Maybe not."

"It is not permitted, to ask after him. Not of outsiders."

"She asked."

"Yes. She would." He was silent for a time. A calf bawled in the barn. "He telephoned. On Saturday morning, when I was here. She told me last night. He wished to come. He would have driven round by Harlowton." He looked at the ground. "She told him there were enough hands."

"Were there?"

"There are always enough hands. That is not why a man comes." He lifted his eyes. They were grey, and tired, and gave nothing away. "Have you seen yours?"

"No."

"No," Samuel Wipf said. "Well. We will dig your pit."

• • •

It took the afternoon. Peter Entz ran the loader. He was a great deal better at it. He took the topsoil off and laid it to one side, and then the gravel, and by three there was a trench sixty feet long and twelve deep on the bench behind the stackyard, with a ramp at one end.

They would not let Jens carry. That was Samuel. He said that a man should not have to put his own in the ground, and he and Peter did it between them, with the pickup, ten at a time. It was slow. They did not throw them.

Arne sat on the step. Karin brought him coffee and stood behind him with her hand on the doorframe.

"He says the Rourkes found their man," she said. "This morning. Peter told me."

Arne turned his head.

"What man?"

"I didn't tell you. You were in no state. One of Declan's hands went out Thursday to look at heifers and didn't come back. They've had thirty people on the north pasture since Saturday." She spoke quietly. "They found him at the bottom of the coulee. Under the rim. His horse went over in the drift."

"Which hand?"

"The young one. The boy from Wyoming. Pell." She waited. "You'd have seen him. He rode the east fence last summer."

He did not say anything.

He saw a bay colt, blowing at a flatbed. A boy sitting there, not kicking and not petting, waiting as if he had the whole afternoon. *I didn't touch your gate.*

He saw a paper in a plastic sleeve, wired to a top strand. *Sorry, Mr. Tollefsen. I was told to.*

He had walked that fence in October and looked at a post the boy had set. He had thought, that is a good hand, I wonder where Declan found him. He had never learned his first name.

"How old?" he said.

"Eighteen."

He looked at the trench. Peter Entz was backing the pickup down the ramp.

He had a hundred and forty calves going into the ground, and for two days he had sat at a window thinking that nobody on the Musselshell had been hit as he had. Declan Rourke had nine. Declan had built three barns on the word of a machine, and his cows were dry, and Arne had thought, in that chair, with his feet on a stool, *well, he was told.*

He was told. The boy had written that.

"Arne?"

"I heard you."

"I thought you'd want to know. Before Jens goes over there. He'll have to go, now. Whatever's between them."

"What's between them?"

"I don't know. He won't say her name. He's not called her since Wednesday." She took his cup. "Something happened at the windbreak. Before he came down to you."

He could have told her. *She knew about the pipe. So did I.* He found he could not get it past his teeth. Not today.

"Send him to me," he said. "When he comes in."

She did not go in at once. She stood behind him a moment longer, and then she went and got the ledger and brought it out onto the

porch, which she had never done, and sat down on the step beside him with it on her knees.

She opened it at the ribbon. The page had the date on it, the twelfth, and nothing else. The four pages before it had nothing either. He had never seen her miss a day.

She uncapped the pen.

Calves, dead. 140. She wrote it in the left-hand column, where the costs went. She did not put a figure in dollars. She left that blank. Under it: *Cows, dead. 11.* Under that she wrote the diesel, and the milk powder, and the doctor, and each of those she priced.

Then she moved her hand across to the right-hand column, and stopped.

He watched the pen. It did not come down. She held it over the paper for a long time, and he understood that she was looking for the two words, as she had found *wire*, and *no water*, and that for the first time in forty-one years she could not find them.

She put the cap on.

She turned the book over. She opened it from the back.

He did not look away this time. He was sitting right beside her. He saw the columns, close, in her small hand. Dates. Figures. *Feb 20 — 62%. Mar 10 — 81%. Apr 3 — 94%. Apr 9, 2 p.m. — rain 6 not 9.* And down the right edge, the narrow one, the little marks.

She found the last line. She made a tick beside it.

"What's that for?" he said.

"It was right."

"I know it was right. I've got a hundred and forty reasons behind the barn. What do you tick it for?"

"So I'll know how often." She did not look up. "I've been keeping it since October. Every one she gives me. What it said, and then what came. I wanted to see for myself. I wasn't going to take her word, or Declan's, or yours."

"And?"

"Thirty-one," Karin said. "Out of thirty-three."

He sat with that.

"Show me the two."

"Not today."

"Karin."

"Not today, Arne. You haven't slept and neither have I, and there's two men in the yard burying your calves for nothing." She shut the book. She kept her hands on it. "I'll show you. All of it. I've meant to since Christmas. But I'll pick the day."

She got up and took it back inside.

• • •

Jens did not come in. At five Arne took the crutches and went to find him.

He was at the west fence.

Arne had not been down the flat since Karin drove him off it. It took him forty minutes. The ground was soft and the crutches sank. He passed the windbreak, what was left of it. The panels were flat, and the straw was a brown mat with a drift still lying on it, shrunk and filthy, four feet deep. He did not stop there.

The willows were gone at the west end. He had not been ready for that. They were not all gone; the big ones stood. But the whole lower edge of the grove, sixty yards of it, was laid over flat, pointing east, with slabs of grey ice wedged in the stems as high as his chest. The leaves that had been a foot deep were gone, and the ground was scoured to gravel.

The creek was in a new place.

Jens was standing at the fence. There was no fence. For thirty yards either side of where the three pipes came through, the posts were out of the ground and the wire was balled up in the willows a hundred yards downstream. The apron of rock was gone. In its place there was a hole. It was a gully, raw, five feet deep and twenty wide, cut back into the Lodgepole from the property line as if with a

spade, and at the bottom of it a stream was still running, clear now, over clean stones.

On the Rourke side the bank stood. It was not marked. The three pipes looked out of it.

"Look at it," Jens said. He did not turn round. "It didn't touch them. Not a shovelful. It came down their ditch and through their pipe and it never took an inch of their dirt. It took sixty yards of ours."

"It's marked," Arne said.

He had seen it as he came up. On the upstream face of the bank, where it showed round the end, there was a line. It was a tidemark of sticks and dead sedge, straight as a rule, five feet above the ditch.

"Peter showed me that," Jens said. "That's how high it stood. The pipes choked. Thursday and Friday there was slush and ice packed in the mouths, and hardly a trickle came through, and it all backed up behind their road like a stock dam. Five feet deep at the bank. Then the rain came warm and the plugs let go." He made a short motion with his hand. "All three. Inside a minute, he reckons. That's what you heard."

Arne looked at the line. On Friday morning he had watched the pool on his own side come twenty yards, and had never asked himself what stood on the other.

There were stakes on the far side. New lath, with pink flagging. Somebody had been along the top of the bank since the water went down. There was a tripod-mark in the clay. And tied to the reflector post at the culverts, in a plastic bag, was a card with three wavy lines on it.

"They've been here," Jens said. "This morning. I watched them from the willows. A woman with a camera and a man with a pole. They measured the hole. They took pictures of every pipe." He kicked a stone into the gully. "They didn't come across. They didn't knock at the house. They wrote it all down and got in a truck."

"They'd want their own record."

"Of what? What's it a record of?" He swung round. His eyes were red. "That's what I can't get. Whose is it? It's Declan's ground. It's the company's ditch. She told me that. She stood at my truck and told me whose ditch it was like she was reading it off a form. And she'd known since December." His voice broke. "Who do I go to, Dad? Who did this? I can't even—there's nobody to *hit*."

"I knew since December."

"That's not the same."

"It's exactly the same. I stood where you're standing. I watched it come under the wire."

"You didn't build it!"

"No. I only put two hundred head in front of it." He shifted on the crutches. His feet were on fire. "You want somebody to hit. I'm here."

Jens stared at him. For a second Arne thought he would. He thought he would have let him.

"She's a Rourke," Jens said, lower. "You said it. In the shop. A Rourke in the house is a Rourke in the books. I thought that was the meanest thing I ever heard you say."

"It was."

"And you were right. Again."

"I wasn't right. I said she'd carry our business to her father. That's not what she did. She kept her father's business from us. It's a different sin." He looked at the hole. "I'd have done the same. If it was my name on the deed and my paper in front of the state. I'd have said, there are lawyers. I've said worse for less."

"So I'm to forgive her."

"I didn't say that. I don't know what you're to do. I'm the last man to ask." He was very tired. "I'm telling you not to make her carry my half of it. I've got enough dead calves on my own account. I won't have you hang mine on her."

Jens turned back to the gully. He stood with his hands in his pockets.

"They found that boy," Arne said. "Pell. This morning."

"I know. Peter said."

"She'll have been out there since Saturday. On that rim."

"I know."

"He worked with her horses."

"*I know, Dad.*"

A killdeer was running on the new gravel at the bottom of the hole, crying.

"Lyle called," Jens said, after a time. "While you were with Wipf. From the Rosebud. He doesn't know what he's lost. He's still digging them out. He moved his heifers into a draw on my say-so and it drifted full." He wiped his nose on his wrist. "He said, don't you carry that. He said the call was right and the draw was wrong, and the draw was his. He said the same thing you're saying. I don't know why everybody's so set on telling me what's not my fault."

"What did you say to him?"

"I said I'd see him at the Stampede." He almost laughed. "If there is one. If either of us has a horse left."

Arne looked at the pipes. Three round holes in a bank of yellow clay.

"We'll want this fence up," he said. "Before we turn anything out on this end. I won't have my cows on Rourke ground, whatever else."

"With what? The wire's in the trees."

"There's two spools in the shop."

"And posts?"

"There's the ones your windbreak was hung on. They're no use where they are."

Jens looked at him.

"You can't dig a post hole. You can't stand up."

"I can hold the other end of a wire." He got the crutches under him and turned, a few inches at a time, to face the long walk back. "Tomorrow. First light. Bring the stretcher."

"Dad."

"What?"

"The note. In the soup can. Mom told me." Jens had not moved. "That she sent down the six o'clock forecast. From Dagny. And you never opened it."

"I never opened the can."

"Would you have? If you'd known it was in there?"

Arne stood on his crutches in the wrecked willows. It was a fair question. He had been asking himself, in the chair, for two days.

"I don't know," he said. "Ask me when I can feel my feet."

PART FOUR

Branding

May – August 2032

22

The Ramp

The buyer came on the eleventh of May, a Tuesday, in a white pickup with a stock trailer behind it and a second, bigger truck following.

Evelyn watched them over the cattle guard from the corral fence. She had her arms folded on the top rail. She had been there since seven.

Lyle had the heifers in. He had gathered them on Sunday with Wallace Small's boy, since Mariah could not hold a rein yet, and they stood now in the big pen, sixty-one head, turning their faces to the sound of the trucks. They were what was left. Forty-nine first-calvers that had come out of the draw alive, or had been dug out, or had been found afterwards a mile down Thompson Creek standing in a patch of bare ground with their calves dead beside them. And a dozen older cows he had thrown in, to make the pen look like more.

It had taken until the twenty-sixth of April to know. The draw had held its snow. He had got a tractor up on the fourteenth, with a loader, and had gone at the drift from the bottom, a bucket at a time, careful, because of what was in it. Wallace had helped. So had five men from Busby she had not asked. They found heifers every day for a week. Some had lived nine days under ten feet of snow, in

a hollow their own breath had melted, and walked out blinking. Most had not.

Thirty-one dead. He had said the number once, at supper, and had not said it again. It was written on the wall by the telephone, in his hand, under her own *2 ft wet*. Thirty-one heifers and fifty-four calves, born and unborn. She did not think he had meant to leave it there. He had needed somewhere to put it down.

The white pickup stopped at the corral. The man who got out was fifty or so, heavy in the shoulders, in a clean snap shirt and a cap that said *Yellowstone Valley Grazing Co-operative*. He had a tablet in a leather case.

"Mr. Harris. Curt Mabry. We spoke on the phone." He shook hands. He looked at Evelyn and touched his cap. "Ma'am."

"My mother," Lyle said.

"Pleased to know you." He meant it; he had that kind of face. He looked at the pen. "These are them."

"These are them."

"That's a nice set. That's a real nice set. You can see the breeding from here." He unzipped the case. "I'm sorry for the reason. I'll say that first. I've been on the road since the fifteenth of April and I haven't had one stop I was glad to make."

"Who are you buying for?" Evelyn said.

"The co-op, ma'am. I've orders from six outfits. Members."

"Which is this one for?"

He glanced at Lyle. Lyle was looking at the heifers.

"Rourke Land and Cattle," Mabry said. "On the Musselshell. They want forty bred heifers or young pairs, top end, native. They came through the storm in good shape and they've grass. They're building numbers."

"On whose say?"

"Ma'am?"

"Who told them to build numbers? Three weeks after a storm that killed every third calf from here to Miles City."

"Mom," Lyle said.

"I'm asking the man a question."

Mabry took no offence. He scratched under his cap. "Well, it's the advisory, ma'am. I won't dress it up. It says good young cows are going to be short for five years and they're cheap this month. That's the long and the short of it. Folks have notes due." He said it flatly, as a thing that was nobody's fault. "It's given me a number for each one. I scan the tag, it knows the animal, and it tells me what I can pay. I can't go over. I'd go over for you if I could. I can't."

"And if he had no tags in them?"

"Then I'd have to do it the old way, and guess, and I'd guess low to be safe. The tags help him. They do. It'll pay for what's really there."

She said nothing more then. Lyle opened the gate.

• • •

They ran them down the alley one at a time.

Lyle worked the heifers up from the back. Wallace's boy had the sorting gate. Mabry stood at the head of the alley with the tablet held out in front of him, and as each heifer came by he pointed it at her ear, and it made a small sound, and he looked.

"Left," he said. Or, "Right."

Left was the trailer pen. Right was back to the pasture.

Evelyn had moved along the fence to where she could see the screen. He did not hide it from her. Each time it came up with the animal's number and a row of figures she could not follow, and one she could. A price.

She knew these heifers. She knew every one. She had watched Lyle pick their mothers and their grandmothers for twenty-five years. He had done it with his eye, standing in this corral in the fall with a notebook, keeping back a daughter from every cow that milked well and bred back early and never gave him trouble. He had never used a scale. He said a man who needed a scale to tell him which cow was good had no business owning her.

The tablet agreed with him. That was what she saw. It went left on the deep red heifer out of the old line-back cow, and left on the two blacks with the white tails, and left on the brockle-face. It went right on the dozen old cows, every one. It went right on a tall heifer that looked as good as any, and Lyle said, "She slipped her first calf. Before the storm. How'd it know that?"

"It's in her tag," Mabry said. "Temperature, I guess. I don't know how it knows half of what it knows."

Left. Left. Right. Left.

It took an hour. When the alley was empty there were forty-two heifers in the trailer pen, with nineteen calves at foot, and nineteen cows in the other.

It had taken his best. It had left him the old, the open and the doubtful.

"Forty-two," Mabry said. "I wanted forty. I'll take the two, they're too good to leave." He turned the tablet round. "That's the figure. I can write it now."

Lyle looked at it. His face did not change.

Evelyn came round the end of the fence.

She had not decided to. She was through the gate and standing in the alley, in the dust, between her son and the buyer, before she knew what she was going to say.

"That's not enough."

"Mom."

"It's not. You know what those are. That red heifer's dam weaned a six-hundred-pound calf nine years running. He's selling you twenty-five years."

"Yes ma'am. I can see that he is." Mabry had lowered the tablet. "It's a fair price for today. It's eight percent over what I paid at Lodge Grass yesterday."

"For today. And in five years, when they're short? What are they worth then? Your machine says so itself. It's buying them off him

cheap because it knows what they'll be worth, and he doesn't get to wait and find out."

"That's about right, ma'am," Mabry said gently.

"Then it's robbery."

"It's a market."

"Mom. Stop." Lyle had not raised his voice. He had taken her arm. "Mr. Mabry, would you give us a minute."

"Take all you want. I'll see to the truck."

He went. He had the tact to take Wallace's boy with him.

Lyle let go of her arm. He stood in the alley with his hands on his hips, looking at the ground.

"You've shamed me," he said. "In my own corral. In front of a buyer."

"I told him the truth."

"He knows the truth. I know it. Everybody standing here knows what those heifers are." He looked up. His face was grey under the brown. "What did you want me to do? Send him away? There's the operating note. It was due the first of April and I paid the interest and they rolled it sixty days, because of the storm. That's the first of June. They want half the principal. I've got no calves to borrow on. I've got fifty-four fewer than I had."

"Sell the old cows. Sell the bulls."

"The old cows are worth killing price. He turned them all down; you saw. And then there's Delbert. Seven I've paid him and twenty-eight hundred I owe him at shipping, with interest, on a share of a hay meadow I can't cut hay on this year because I'll have nothing to feed it to."

She did not answer.

"I had the money for Delbert," he said. "You know I did. I had it in February."

There it was. He had not said it in three months. He had been decent about it, and gone on being decent, right up to the edge of a corral full of his best heifers.

"I haven't forgotten where the money went."

"I'm not saying she shouldn't have it. I signed her form. I signed it Sunday; it's on her desk." He rubbed his face. "I'm saying don't stand in my alley and tell a man from the Musselshell he's robbing me, when the reason I've got to sell at all is in a bank in Missoula with my daughter's name on it. You don't get to do both, Mom. You don't get to take the money and then be angry it's gone."

It was the hardest thing he had ever said to her. He said it quietly, and it was true.

She thought of the top drawer of her dresser.

It came to her, standing there, as a physical thing. A sheet of paper folded in three under a lining of old wallpaper. *Fourteen thousand two hundred dollars.* It would have paid the bank its half. It would have paid Delbert. There would have been no white pickup.

She had only to say it. *Lyle, there is another way, and I have had it since November.* She could have stopped the trucks. She could still. Mabry had not written the cheque.

And he would say: since November. He would look at her as he had in February, when he learned about August, and it would be the same again. *You sat there. You let me sell them.* He would be right. And then he would say no to the towers anyway, because he was Lyle. He would sell the heifers on top of knowing, and the only thing that would have changed was what he thought of his mother.

That was what she told herself. She knew, even as she told it, that she was doing sums to get the answer she wanted. It was a thing her father had been good at.

"No," she said. "I don't get to do both."

"All right."

"I'm sorry for what I said. In front of him."

"I know you are." He put his hat on. "Go up to the house. I don't want you watching them load."

"I'll watch."

"Mom."

"I raised their grandmothers on a bottle, some of them. I'll watch."

• • •

She watched.

The big truck backed to the ramp. It was a pot, aluminium, two decks. The driver let down the tailboard with a bang, and the heifers in the pen threw their heads up.

They balked at it. Cattle always do. Lyle and the boy got behind them with flags and they went in a rush, all at once, bunching in the mouth of the chute, climbing over each other. The calves were the trouble. They would not leave the cows, and the cows would not go without them, and there was a great deal of bawling. Lyle picked up the smallest calves and carried them up the ramp himself. He did nineteen. She counted.

He did not look at her.

The red heifer was the last. She stopped at the foot of the ramp and turned round. She looked back across the corral at the pasture, at the creek, at the cottonwoods with their new leaves, and she stood there. The boy lifted his flag. Lyle put his hand out and stopped him.

He walked up to her. He put his hand flat on her hip, as he would have to a horse. He said something. Evelyn could not hear what.

The heifer went up the ramp.

Mabry wrote the cheque on the hood of his pickup. He tore it out and held it by the corner, and Lyle took it and folded it once and put it in his shirt pocket without reading it.

"They'll be branded in June," Mabry said. "At the Rourkes'. They brand the first week. I'll tell them to go easy with the iron; these have nice hides." He seemed to hear how that sounded. "I'm sorry. I don't know why I said that."

"It's all right."

"They'll be well kept. I'll say that. It's a good outfit. They lost a man in the storm, did you hear? A young fellow. Eighteen. The

whole place has gone quiet. The old man's not been off the porch." He opened his door. "They're burying him a week Saturday, in Prosper. I'm told there'll be people from five counties."

"I heard," Lyle said. "Jens Tollefsen told me."

"You know Jens?"

"I rope with him."

"Is that right." Mabry looked at him differently. "He's marrying into them. The daughter. That's what I heard. If it's still on." He got in. "Small country."

The trucks went out over the cattle guard. It rang twice.

Lyle stood in the empty pen. There was a calf's ear tag in the dust, a yellow one, torn out in the crush. He bent and picked it up and turned it over. Then he put it in his pocket with the cheque.

"I'll be up for dinner," he said. "I want to turn these others out."

She went up to the house.

• • •

Mariah was at the kitchen table with her right hand flat on a towel. She was changing the dressing herself. She did it every day, with her teeth and her left hand, and would not be helped.

She had lost the end of one finger. The middle one, to the first joint. The doctor at Lame Deer had taken it on the twentieth of April. The other two had come back, pink and tender and too smooth, and the nails had not grown in yet.

She could hold a pen. She had written her last examinations with the pen jammed between the first finger and the third. She was to give the speech at the graduation on the twenty-eighth.

"I heard the trucks," she said.

"Forty-two."

"The red one?"

"Yes."

Mariah wound the gauze. She tore the tape with her teeth.

"That's my fault," she said.

"It is not."

"It's four thousand seven hundred dollars of my fault. I can add, Grandma. I've been adding since February." She pressed the tape down. "I thought about writing to them. The university. Saying I'd defer a year. I had the letter written."

"Where is it?"

"In the stove." The girl looked up. Her eyes were dry and very level. "Because then he'd have sold them for nothing. They're gone either way. If I stay home now, it's just a waste on top of a loss."

Evelyn sat down across from her. She was tired in a way she had not been since Raymond died.

"Your father signed the form."

"I saw. He left it on my desk. He didn't say anything." Mariah flexed the hand. It did not close all the way. "He doesn't say anything, he says pass the salt, he says did you feed the horses, and I'm like, Dad, yell. Just yell at me. It would be so much better."

"He doesn't yell."

"I know he doesn't. I've lived here all my life." She stood up and put the gauze away in its tin. At the door to the stairs she stopped, with her back to the room. "He loaded her himself, didn't he. The red one."

"Yes."

"He put his hand on her."

"How do you know that?"

"Because he did it to Dolly," Mariah said. "In the draw. Before." She went up.

Evelyn sat at the table. Through the window she could see Lyle on foot, walking the nineteen cows out through the pasture gate. He was not hurrying them. A cow stopped to graze and he stood and waited for her.

The dresser was in the next room. She could see the corner of it through the door.

She got up and put the potatoes on.

23

In Writing

They buried Wyatt Pell on the twenty-second of May, from the Lutheran church in Prosper, because it was the only one in the county that would hold the people.

Shannon had not known there would be so many. She stood on the church steps at half past ten in her mother's black coat and watched them come up Main Street on foot, from wherever they had been able to leave a truck. The whole street was trucks. Ranchers from the Musselshell and from Careless Creek and the Flatwillow, in their funeral hats. The men from the Roundup crew that had built the sheds. The sheriff's sergeant, out of uniform. Forty or fifty from the campus, in clean work clothes, who stood together on the grass and seemed unsure whether they were meant to come in. Colony people, a dozen, the women in a row by the fence. A lean old man on a mule, who had ridden it in from the fairgrounds.

Most of them had never spoken to the boy. He had been in the county twelve months.

"It's the storm," Conor said, beside her. "Half of these never laid eyes on him. They lost calves. They've got to stand somewhere."

"Don't say that to his grandfather."

"I'm not a fool."

Earl Pell had come up from Lusk on the Thursday, alone, in a twenty-year-old pickup with a camper shell. He was seventy-nine. He was a small, dried, upright man with a white moustache, and Wyatt's way of putting his head on one side. He had slept in the camper in the Rourkes' yard and would not be moved into the house. He had asked to see where it happened. Shannon had driven him up to the rim. He had stood at the edge for some time, looking down at the undercut, and then he had said, "Well, he got himself out of the wind," and turned and walked back to the truck.

She had offered to send Wyatt home. He had shaken his head.

"There's nobody there but me. His mother's in Reno, if she's anywhere. I've got a plot beside my wife and I'll be in it directly, and then who's to walk by?" He had looked at the cottonwoods along the river. "He wrote me every Sunday. He liked it here. He said it was the first place he'd been where they let him alone with a horse. Put him where he liked it."

So it was Prosper.

The church was full by eleven. They stood along the walls and out through the doors. The family sat at the front, such as it was: the old man, and on either side of him the Rourkes, because he had said he would not sit by himself. Ray Dunning was behind them with his wife. He had not shaved, and he held his hat on his knees with both hands as if somebody might take it.

She did not look round. She knew who was at the back. She had seen them come in, the three of them, Karin first in a navy coat, and then Arne on a stick, walking as though the floor were hot, and Jens behind. Jens had on the shirt his mother ironed. He had looked at her once, across two hundred people, and then at the floor.

It was seven weeks. He had called once, on the fourteenth of April, to say he was sorry about Wyatt. He had said it formally, as he might have to a neighbour. She had said thank you. He had asked how her father was. Neither of them had said the word *culvert*. Then he had said he had to see to a calf.

The pastor was young and did not try to say too much. He read the psalm about the hills. He said that Wyatt John Pell had been born at Lusk, Wyoming, on the twentieth of April, 2013. He had been raised by his grandparents and had been good with animals from a child. He had come to this valley looking for work and had found, the pastor understood, something more than that.

Then he said that Mr. Rourke would read.

Her father stood up. She had not thought he would get through it and had told him so. He had said that he had hired the boy and he would read over him.

He went up the two steps to the lectern. He had the earpiece in. She saw the pastor notice it. He had a Bible open in front of him, the big one from the house, and a sheet of paper on top of it.

"I'm to read from Ecclesiastes," he said. His voice was rough. He put his glasses on. "I picked it. His granddad said I could."

He read it slowly, with his finger, as he read a contract.

"*I returned, and saw under the sun, that the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favour to men of skill; but time and chance happeneth to them all.*"

He stopped. He took his glasses off.

"I've read that fifty times this month," he said. "I never understood it before. I thought I did." He looked out at them. "I'm a man who's believed in being told. I've a thing in my ear right now that could tell me the temperature in this room and what every one of you paid for your calves."

Nobody moved.

"It told me a storm was coming. Six weeks ahead. It was right. I built three sheds and I've eight hundred calves on the ground that would be dead, and I'm grateful for that. I'll not stand here and say I'm not." His hand was flat on the Bible. "And it told me a pasture was safe to send a man to, and that was right too. It was safe. The

cattle were fine. He looked at them and they were fine, and he was coming home to tell me so."

He stopped again. Shannon saw his jaw working.

"I asked it afterwards how that could be. I wanted it to say it was sorry. I'm an old fool. It had done its sum. There's no number for a tired boy on a green horse who thinks he knows a shorter way." He looked down at the front pew. "Mr. Pell. I had him eleven months. He was the best hand with a colt I ever saw, and I've seen some. He lost at cribbage to me on Christmas night on purpose, so an old man could feel clever. I knew he was doing it. I never told him I knew. I wish I'd—"

That was as far as he got.

He stood there with his mouth open and nothing coming out. His face went, as it had at the corral gate. He put both hands on the lectern and bent over it, a big man folded in half, and the sound he made was not loud, but the church was very quiet.

Nobody knew what to do. The pastor had half risen.

Earl Pell got up. He walked up the two steps. He was a foot shorter than her father. He put a hand on his arm, and stood beside him, and waited, as he might have waited by a horse.

After a time he said, not to the church but so that the front rows heard it, "That's all right. That'll do. You've said it."

He walked him down.

• • •

They put him in the cemetery on the hill east of town, where you could see the river. It was a bright, windy day. The grass was coming.

She stayed away from the house afterwards. Beth had the meal laid on, for two hundred. Shannon stood at the graveside until the last truck had gone down the hill, and then she got in the ranch pickup, in her mother's coat, and drove west over the bridge and up the new road to the bench.

It was a Saturday. The site was working; it had been working seven days since the first of May, to make up April. She parked by the trailers. The engineer's had a number on the door, and a boot scraper, and a pot with a dead geranium in it.

The woman looked up from a drawing. She was about thirty, with a sunburnt nose, in a company fleece. Her name was on a plate on the desk, which was how Shannon learned it at last. *Teresa Vigil, P.E.*

"Ms. Rourke." She stood. She looked at the coat. "I'm sorry. Some of our people went. I had a pour."

"I want to open that request," Shannon said. "The one I told you not to log."

Vigil did not pretend not to understand. She sat down again slowly.

"It's a bit late for a request for information," she said. "Denver's had my pictures of that outfall since the twelfth of April. They know what happened."

"They don't know I asked."

"No."

"I want it in. With the date. The twenty-seventh of February. That I telephoned you, and asked where the water went, and you offered to run the numbers. And that I said don't." She had written it that morning, before the church, at the long table in the office, with the ruler. She put it on the desk. "That's my statement. I've signed it. I want it in your log, and a copy stamped to take away."

Vigil read it twice. "You know what our legal will say. The lease indemnifies you against third-party claims. Everybody on this job's read fourteen; it's famous. But there's a carve-out for anything the lessor knew about and concealed."

"Fourteen-eleven. I wrote it. Ostrander made me put it in. I thought it was for them."

Vigil laid the page down. She squared it with one finger. "Then you're handing him your father's ranch," she said quietly. "If he wants it."

"He doesn't want it. He wants a ditch." Shannon had not sat. "He'll offer an easement across the flat for a channel to the river, and he won't object to the change, and he won't take the money. Fourteen-nine says you can't take an easement from him until the state rules. I'm asking you to tell Denver to waive it. Today."

"And this?" Vigil touched the statement. "If he's not going to sue?"

"That goes in regardless." Shannon put her hands in the pockets of the coat. "A boy asked me where that water went. In December. I told him it was engineered."

After a moment Vigil pulled a pad towards her and wrote a number at the top of the page, and the date, and the time, and her initials.

"RFI two-one-one-seven," she said. "Logged. I'll run the calculation I should have run in February and attach it." She tore off the yellow copy. "I'd have dug it, you know. In September. I had the machine sitting there. I'd have gone two hundred feet across that man's flat in an afternoon and asked him afterwards."

"Why didn't you?"

"Because legal said no instrument, and I thought, well, somebody's read the lease." She handed over the copy. "Somebody had."

• • •

Her father was on the porch when she got back. The meal was over. There were tables on the lawn still, and Beth and two women from town were stacking plates. Earl Pell's camper was gone from the yard.

"He's left?"

"An hour ago. He'd not stay." Declan was in his chair with his town boots off. He had a glass in his hand that he was not drinking from. "He took the rope and the gloves. And the boy's saddle; Ray'd dug it out. He said to tell you to finish the filly. He said don't push her."

"I know."

"He said the boy wrote him about that horse every week. Three pages." He looked at her. "Where've you been? In that coat."

She told him all of it, standing on the step below him, from the ruler under the line in July to the sandbags, and Wyatt on the rail of the round pen offering to take it, and what she had not said to Jens at the windbreak. She gave him the yellow copy. He read it with his finger.

He did not shout. She had thought he would.

"You should have told me in December," he said. "No. April. When there was still a week. I had sixteen men and three empty sheds for two days before it came. He'd have died first, but I could have *asked*."

"I thought I was protecting you. From a lawsuit."

"From *Arne Tollefsen*?" He stared at her. "I've known that man sixty-seven years. He'll stand up in a beer garden and call me a thief in front of the county, and then he'll go home and haul water for six months sooner than cut my wire." He shook his head slowly. "You can see round three corners. And you looked at that man and saw a plaintiff."

It went in. She had no answer to it.

"I wrote the clause," she said.

"And I read it. Fifty minutes. I saw fourteen-nine and I thought, that's Arne's cows, and I'll tell him myself like a man." He put the glass down on the boards. "Don't you take it all. You're not big enough. I'm the lessor."

She sat down on the step. Her legs had gone. He did not touch her. He was not that kind of father.

"It might ruin us," she said.

"I've been ruined before. In '85. I had four hundred cows and eighteen percent money, and I sat on this porch with a shotgun across my knees waiting for the bank. Your mother came out and took it off me and made me eat my dinner." He drank. "Go and see

that boy. He was at the back of the church. If he's not going to marry you, he should say so to your face. And if he is, he should know what he's getting."

• • •

The light was on in the log barn.

She had driven in by the road. She did not know if she was still welcome to. Nobody came out of the house. Karin's shape passed the kitchen window and went on.

He was in the fifth stall. He had done three since New Year's. He had a wheelbarrow and a fork and a mask over his face, and he was digging out forty years of packed manure and baling twine. He had not heard the truck. She stood in the alley and watched him work. He was thinner. His hands had healed in shiny pink patches across the knuckles.

"Jens."

He stopped. He pulled the mask down.

"I thought you'd be at the house," he said. "With the people."

"They've gone."

"I should have come up. After. I couldn't—" He leaned the fork against the boards. "I didn't know what I'd say to your dad."

"He'd not have minded."

"I'd have minded."

She had the yellow sheet. She held it out. He looked at it and did not take it.

"What is it?"

"It's what I didn't tell you. At the windbreak. I told you there was a ditch. I didn't tell you the rest."

"There's a rest."

"Yes."

He took his gloves off, slowly, a finger at a time. He sat down on an upturned bucket. "Go on, then."

She told him. It was the second time that day, and it was no easier. She stood in the alley of his great-grandfather's barn, between the two clean stalls he had limed for her in December, and she began farther back, for him, with the chain on the reservoir gate and fourteen-nine. His cows, without the name. That was why he had hauled water all winter. That was why there had been a cow in the draw on Christmas Eve.

"You knew when I told you," he said. "In January."

"I knew in August. When I crossed the ford the night they signed. You asked me had I read it, and I said all of it."

He closed his eyes. "Go on."

She went on. Fourteen-six. The rock. The drawing. The sandbags. February, the telephone, *don't log it*. He had heard some of it at the windbreak, and she watched him fit the new pieces to the old, slowly, as he did everything.

When she had finished she said, "I logged it today. With my name. The engineer has it and my father has it. If your father wants to sue, it's the first thing his lawyer will find, and there's a part of the lease that says the company doesn't have to stand behind us if I knew. So he can have the ranch. I wanted you to hear that from me and not from Brannigan."

She stopped. There was nothing more.

He did not speak. He sat on the bucket with his forearms on his knees and his healed hands hanging, and looked at the floor of the stall.

It went on a long time. She heard a horse shift in the corral outside. She heard the river.

She did not sit. She did not go to him.

"A hundred and forty," he said at last. He did not look up. "I laid them out. With Peter Entz. In rows."

"I know."

"Fifty-eight of those were in the willows. The rest, I don't know. Some were mine. The fence." He rubbed his thumb along a scar. "If

you'd told me in December. If I'd known what that pipe was. I'd have fought him harder. I wouldn't have split them. I'd have put all four hundred and thirty at the high end and stood on them."

"Yes."

"And the fence would have drifted. On all of them. Not two hundred pair. Four hundred." He lifted his head. His eyes were red. "I've been over it every night for seven weeks. I can't make it come out better. If you'd told me everything, the day you knew it, I think we'd have lost more. I think the only reason we've three hundred calves on the ground is that my father's too stubborn to listen and I was only half sure."

"That doesn't—"

"No. It doesn't. I know it doesn't. It doesn't let you off." He stood up. He was very tall in that low barn. "You lied to me. For a year. You sat on that log with your feet in my shirt and lied, and you went on doing it. I don't know how to get round that. I've tried. I thought if I worked long enough I'd get tired enough to not care. I've done three stalls."

"I saw."

"I did them for you. I kept doing them. I'd think, she watched me water those cows all winter and knew, and I'd pick up the fork." He laughed, a short, bad sound. "I don't know what that makes me."

She could not speak.

"Dad says I'm not to hang his half on you. He said it at the fence. He said he'd seen the pipe himself and he'd have done what you did, with his name on the deed." Jens wiped his face with the back of his wrist. "He's not said a word against you since. Not one. He asks when you're coming to supper. Mom's set your place twice."

"Jens."

"I'm not done." He took a breath. "I'm not going to tell you it's all right. It's not. I don't know when it will be. I don't trust you as I did, and I don't know if I will again, and I'd be lying if I said different. I've had enough of lying in this to last me."

"I understand."

"But I asked you in this barn. On New Year's. I said, here's what I've got. A bunkhouse and two stalls. And you knew all of it then, the clause and the pipe, and you said yes anyway. To a man with nothing, who you'd just—" He stopped. "I've thought about that too. You could have had anybody. You said yes to the one outfit in Montana you'd done harm to, and went and sat at its table. That's not what a person does who's only covering herself."

"I don't know what it is."

"Nor do I." He picked up the fork. He turned it in his hands. "Stampede's the seventeenth of July. Saturday. I'd thought the Friday. On the fairgrounds, by the cottonwoods, before the rodeo people set up."

She stared at him.

"You're still—"

"I said I'd marry you. I didn't say I'd marry you if you turned out to be easy." He drove the fork into the wheelbarrow. "I'm not waiting to find out if I've forgiven you. I might be seventy. I'll do it married. That way you're here, where I can see what you're doing."

It was the least tender thing he had ever said to her. She would have given a great deal for him to cross the alley.

He did not. He pulled his mask up.

"There's a fork by the door," he said, through it. "If you're stopping."

She took off her mother's coat and hung it on a nail.

24

The Note

Eighteen days before the burying, on the fourth of May, the letter from Denver came, registered, and Karin signed for it at the mailbox and brought it up to the house unopened.

Arne was at the table with his feet in a basin. He could wear boots now, for an hour or two. He had lost the nail off each big toe and a piece of the left little one, which the young doctor had taken off in his kitchen with a thing like a pair of side-cutters, talking to him the whole time about her brother's 4-H steer.

"It's from them," Karin said.

"Open it."

"It's addressed to you."

"I've wet hands."

She slit it with the paring knife. There were three pages, on heavy paper, with the wavy lines at the top. She read it standing. He watched her eyes go down it and come back up to the top and go down again.

"Well?"

"They're sorry." She laid the first page on the oilcloth, clear of the basin. "*Tri-Basin Compute Consortium was saddened to learn of livestock losses sustained by a number of operators in the Musselshell valley during the weather event of April 7 to 10.* A number of operators."

"Go on."

"*It has come to our attention that surface runoff during the event crossed the boundary between the Leased Premises and your property. Without admission of liability, and as a gesture of good neighbourly relations, the Consortium is prepared to offer an ex gratia payment.*" She turned the page. "A hundred and thirty thousand dollars."

He said nothing.

"There's a condition. There are three. You sign a release. All claims, known and unknown, against the Consortium and against Rourke Land and Cattle, arising from the works or the event." She was reading slowly now, with her finger. "You agree not to file an objection to Change Application 40A-30161882 or to support any objection by a third party. And you keep the terms confidential."

"A hundred and thirty thousand."

"For fifty-eight calves and six cows. I've it worked. It's a little over what they'd have brought in October." She set the second page beside the first. "It's a fair price, Arne. They've had somebody work it too."

"I know it's fair. Everything they do is fair. That's how you can tell it's them." He lifted one foot out of the water and looked at it. "What's the third page?"

"A form. For your signature. There's a line for mine as witness." She put it down. "There's a date. It lapses on the twenty-eighth."

"Of May."

"Yes."

"That's the day before their state hearing closes. For objections. Brannigan said the twenty-ninth."

"I noticed that," Karin said.

• • •

He drove to Billings on the twelfth. He went alone. Jens had the branding to get ready for, what there was to brand, and Karin said that if she came she would do the talking, and that it was time he heard the numbers from somebody who was not married to him.

The bank was on North Twenty-Seventh Street. It had been the Stockmen's National when his father banked there, and it had had a brass rail and a spittoon. It was something else now, with a name made of initials. The lobby had no tellers in it. There were screens along one wall and a young woman at a desk who asked if he had an appointment.

He had an appointment. He had had the same one, the second week of May, for forty years.

The loan officer was called Tanner. He was thirty-five. He had taken over the agricultural book when old Emmett Roche retired in '29, and he had driven out to the Lodgepole once, that first summer, and walked the hay meadows in good shoes, and had seemed to like it. He stood up and came round the desk to shake hands. He looked at Arne's feet, at the overshoes, and did not ask.

"Mr. Tollefsen. Sit down. I was sorry to hear. I've been hearing it from everybody."

"I expect you have."

"I've seventy operating lines north of the Yellowstone. Forty of them took losses. I haven't slept much." He sat. He turned his screen a little, so that Arne could see it if he wanted to. "I'll tell you where we are. I'd rather you saw it than have me read it to you."

Arne looked. There was the Lodgepole. It was not green, like Declan's; it was a table, in black, with his name at the top. The operating note. The balance. The cattle that secured it, four hundred and thirty cows and their increase. Under that there was a column he had not seen before. It was headed *Projected*, and it ran out five years.

"You have a hundred and forty fewer calves to sell in October," Tanner said. "At last fall's price that's two hundred and sixty-five thousand dollars that isn't going to come in. Your note's two hundred and ten. You've always paid it off the calf cheque and drawn it again in the spring, and it's worked. I've got your father's file. It's worked since 1951."

"It has."

"This year the calf cheque's going to be about four hundred and thirty, once you've held back your heifers. After you've paid your hay and your fuel and your taxes there's a hundred and thirty of it left to put on a two-ten note. So you're eighty short. Before you buy a single replacement for the eleven cows." He was not unkind. He spoke carefully, and looked at Arne when he said the figures. "I can carry eighty. I'd like to. But I can't decide it. It goes in there."

He nodded at the screen.

"What's in there?"

"The bank's credit model. It's been in since '28. Every ag line gets run every quarter." He touched something. The *Projected* column changed colour, from black to a dull orange, year by year, going right. "That's you. That's what it thinks the Lodgepole looks like through '37, on what it knows."

"What does it know?"

"Your cattle. Your land. Your debt. Your prices, back to when we started keeping them." He hesitated. "And how you're run."

"How I'm run."

"Whether you're on an advisory. It's a field in the model. I don't set the weight. I've argued about the weight." He rubbed the back of his neck. "It's got eight years of data now, and the advised places don't have the bad years. They don't get an April like you had."

"Declan Rourke lost nine."

"Yes."

"And a hand."

Tanner looked at the desk. "That's not in the model," he said.

Arne sat. His feet had begun to throb. Out of the window behind the young man he could see the rimrocks, yellow in the sun, and a jet going over.

"So what does it say?"

"It says I can renew you at two-ten with a paydown of eighty by the first of December. Or I can carry the eighty, at two points over, if you're enrolled with the co-op by the first of July." He said it all at once, to get it done. "I'm sorry. I asked for an exception. I wrote three pages. I said, this man has never missed a payment in forty years and his father never missed one in forty before that. It came back in nine seconds. It said payment history was already weighted."

"Two points for being told when to cut my hay."

"That's about what it comes to. Yes, sir."

"And if I'm not enrolled?"

"Then it's eighty by December."

"From where?"

"That's what I'd ask you." Tanner turned the screen back. "I'm not supposed to say this. If it was me, I'd look at what I had that I wasn't using. You've got a state lease on the east side that's been dry since last fall. I saw the brand inspector's note. You hauled water to it all winter."

"You know a great deal."

"It's all in there, Mr. Tollefsen. I don't go looking. It's just there." He picked up a pen and put it down again. "And there's a letter. From Denver. I'm told some of the operators along the river have had one. I don't know what's in yours. But if there was money in it, I'd want my banker to tell me not to be proud."

Arne got up. It took him a moment, on the overshoes.

"Emmett Roche would have carried me," he said.

"Emmett would have. On a handshake. I've read his notes; he wrote them on the backs of envelopes." Tanner had stood too. "He had three bad loans in thirty years and the bank ate them, and

nobody minded. I'm not allowed to have any. That's the difference. It's not that I'm a worse man."

"I never said you were."

"No, sir. I'm saying it." He put out his hand. "July the first. I'll hold the file open till then. I can do that much myself."

• • •

He did not go straight home.

He sat in the truck in the bank's lot for some time with the engine off. Then he drove west on First Avenue, slowly, in the right-hand lane, with people going round him.

He knew where it was. He had known for six years. It was a brick building, two storeys, across from the old sugar plant, with a sign on a post. *Yellowstone Valley Grazing Co-operative. Advisory Services.* He had driven past it twice a year on his way to the bull sale and had kept his eyes on the road.

He parked across the street. He put the window down.

It was five to twelve.

He had no plan. He told himself he was resting his feet. There was a door, glass, and beside it a rack with three bicycles in it. A man came out and went off towards the sandwich place on the corner. Two girls came out together.

At six minutes past, she came out.

He would not have known her walk. That was what struck him. He had taught her to walk. She came down the steps quickly, in a grey jacket, with her hair cut short as her mother's, and she was saying something over her shoulder to a young man behind her, and laughing. She had a lanyard round her neck. She was thinner than he remembered. She looked like a person who was good at her work and knew it.

She was thirty-four in March.

She stopped on the sidewalk to let the young man catch up. She was sixty feet from the truck. She looked up the street, and down it, as people do. Her eyes went across the windshield.

He did not move. He had his hat on. It was a white Ford flatbed with a stock rack and a thousand-gallon tank on the bed, and there was no other like it in Yellowstone County.

She looked at it. He saw her see it. Her face changed, and she took half a step.

Then the young man said something, and touched her elbow. She turned her head to answer him. When she looked back, it was to check for traffic. She crossed at the corner with the others and went into the sandwich place.

She had not been sure. Or she had been sure, and had decided, in the time it took a man to touch her elbow, that if her father had driven a hundred miles to sit across the street from her and not get out, she would let him have what he had come for.

He sat until his hands had stopped shaking. He had told Samuel Wipf that he never once looked.

He put the window up and drove home.

Karin was at the table with the ledger when he came in. She asked what the bank had said, and he told her: two-ten, eighty down by December, or the co-op by July. She wrote it.

"There's the other thing," he said. "I saw Dagny. Outside their building. I sat across the street."

Karin put the pen down.

"Did you speak?"

"No."

"Did she see you?"

"She saw the truck." He hung his hat on the peg. "She went to her dinner."

Karin looked at him a long moment. Then she picked the pen up again, and under the bank's figures, in the margin, she wrote: A. *saw*

D. in Billings. Did not get out. She turned the book so he could read it. He read it, and said it was right.

• • •

Brannigan's office was over the drugstore in Roundup. Arne climbed the stairs on the Thursday. It took him a while.

The old man had the Denver letter on his desk under a glass paperweight with a scorpion in it. He was eighty-one and had been threatening to retire since the first Bush.

"You can sign it," he said. "It's clean. I had the girl in Helena look, the Ostrander woman. She said to tell you she can't advise you, since she's acted for Rourke, but that speaking as a stranger on a train it says what it says and no more."

"And if I don't?"

"Then you've two roads." He held up a crooked finger. "One. You object to the change. You've standing; you're an adjoining owner, and you can say the works that go with it flooded you. The state has to hear it. It needn't agree. But a contested case takes a year, eighteen months, and in that time Tri-Basin can't draw one drop of Declan Rourke's water for those halls. They've two of them built. They're to start taking load in December." A second finger. "Two. You sue. Rourke, since it came off his ground, and Tri-Basin, since they dug it. You'd likely win something. In five or six years. And the first thing you'd learn is that Denver has agreed to stand behind Declan for every nickel. Your neighbour won't pay it. His tenant will, and they've lawyers as you've magpies."

"Who put that in? That they'd stand behind him."

"His daughter, I'm told. It's a nice piece of work." Brannigan looked at him over his glasses. "The one your boy's to marry."

"So I've heard."

"There's a third thing. You'll not like it." He lifted the paperweight and took out a second sheet, a single page, typed. "This came yes-

terday. From Rourke. Not from his lawyers; from the ranch office. It's about the east lease."

Arne took it.

It was three lines. *Rourke Land & Cattle renews its offer of July 19, 2031: $900 per acre for the deeded half-section and $40,000 for assignment of State Lease 4417. The offer is open until June 1.* It was signed in a big square hand, the capital R like a gate.

"He said he wouldn't make it again," Arne said.

"Did he. Well, he's made it." The old man sat back. "Three hundred and twenty-eight thousand dollars. It pays your note and leaves you a hundred and eighteen. You'd not need the bank's eighty, or its two points, or anybody's advisory. You'd not need Denver's money either, unless you wanted it."

"It's the same price."

"To the dollar."

"The lease is worth less now. I've hauled water to it all winter. He knows that. He could have had it for six hundred."

"I'd say he knows that too."

Arne read the three lines again. He thought of Declan on a porch, not coming down. He thought of a torn cheque in an envelope with no note.

"When do I have to say?"

"June the first, on that. May the twenty-eighth on the other." Brannigan folded his hands. "What do you want, Arne? Leave the money. If you could have one thing off these people."

He had no need to think.

"A ditch," he said. "From their pipe to the river. Two hundred and ten feet across my flat, dug right, with rock in it. So I never stand in those willows again and hear that come."

"That needs an easement. From you to them. In writing."

"I know it does."

"And their own lease says they can't take one. Not till the state's ruled." The old man began to smile. It was not a pleasant smile. "Which the state can't do, if somebody's objected."

"That's how I read it."

"You've been talking to your wife."

"She worked it out in April. She's had it written at the back of the book." He stood. "Tell Declan I'll be at the title office in Prosper on the twenty-seventh. Ten o'clock. Tell him to come himself."

• • •

Declan came himself.

The title company was two rooms on Main Street, between the hardware and what had been the Stockman's Bar and was now a place that sold coffee to the men from the campus. A girl sat at the front. She put them in the back room, at a table, with the papers squared in front of each chair, and shut the door.

He was shocked at the look of him. He had not been this near Declan Rourke since the beer garden. The man had been big, red, hard to knock over. He was grey now. The flesh had gone off his face and left the bones. He had his hat on his knee.

He was wearing the earpiece. Arne saw it and saw Declan see him see it.

"I took it out," Declan said. "For two weeks. I couldn't run the place. I didn't know where anything was." He touched it. "I've eleven hundred cows and I stood in my own yard and didn't know which pasture to look in. That's what six years does."

"I didn't ask."

"No. You wouldn't."

They looked at the papers. There was a deed for the half-section and an assignment for the lease. They had been drawn by Brannigan and were two pages each.

"It's the same price," Arne said.

"It is."

"You said you wouldn't offer again."

"I said a good many things that night. So did you." Declan picked up the pen and set it down. "It's worth nine hundred to me. It was in July and it is now. I'll not pay a man less because he's had a bad spring."

"I'll sell."

"I thought you might. I'm sorry for it. I mean that." He cleared his throat. "The co-op's still open to you. I'll say it once more, since we're here. They'd take you tomorrow. I'd still stand the first year."

"No."

"The bank'd give you two points."

"I've been told what the bank would give me. No." He said it without heat. "I'll take your money for the pasture, Declan. I won't take your machine. I'm too old to learn to hear voices."

Declan almost smiled. It did not last.

"There's the other," he said. "Brannigan sent word. You want a channel."

"To the river. Across my ground. I'll sign whatever it takes to let them dig it. Today. And I won't object to your water."

"Fourteen-nine says—"

"I know what it says. Your girl wrote it. You can get them to strike it, or waive it, or whatever the word is. They'll do it. They've two halls sitting dry." He leaned forward. "If I've no easement from them by noon tomorrow, I walk across the street to the post office and I mail my objection to Helena. It's written. Karin wrote it. It's in the truck."

"And the money?"

"I don't want it."

"It's your calves."

"It's their price for my calves. I won't sign a paper that says I've got no claim, for money. I'll sign one that says I've got no claim once the ditch is dug. That's all." He sat back. "They can keep it and spend it on rock."

Declan looked at him for a long time.

"She said you would," he said. "Shannon. She came to me Saturday, after we buried him. She'd been to the site office and put it in writing." His voice was not quite even. "I said, you should have told me in April. She said she knew."

Arne said nothing.

"I'd have dug it myself. With a shovel. If I'd known." He put his hand over his eyes. "That boy asked her where the water went. In December. She told me that too."

They sat. Out in the front room the girl was typing.

"I was sorry about your hand," Arne said.

Declan took his hand down.

"He chained your gate."

"I know he did. He left a note." Arne turned the pen over. "He set a post on the east line last July. I walked by it in the fall. It's the best-set post on that fence. It'll be there when the rest are down."

"He'd have liked to know you said that."

"I should have said it to him."

"Yes," Declan said. "Well. There's a good deal of that going round."

He picked up the pen. He signed where the girl had put the flags, the deed and the assignment, a big square hand, and turned them. Arne signed. It took less than a minute. Two sections and a half of bench that the Tollefsens had run cattle on since 1934, and a wire gate that had stood open for seventy-three summers.

Neither of them said anything about a cheque that had been written and torn.

At the door Declan stopped, with his hat in his hand.

"My girl was at your place Saturday night," he said. "She came home at ten and went up without a word. I'm not asking you what was said."

"I couldn't tell you. They were in the barn."

"No." He put the hat on. "Jens came to the burying. He stood at the back. He didn't come to the house after."

"I was there. I saw where he stood."
"So was I. I didn't see you."
"I was at the back too," Arne said.

25

The Men's Side

The coat came to him in Billings, by post, on the second of June. It was in a flour sack, inside a cardboard box that had held baler twine, and there was no letter with it.

He took it out in his room and held it up to the window.

It was black wool, heavy, cut straight, with hooks and eyes down the front instead of buttons. It had been made in 1998 by his grandmother. The collar stood up. The sleeves had been let down an inch and a half, and he could see the old fold, a paler line, and his mother's stitches along the new hem, so small and even that he had to turn it to the light to find them.

There were trousers, too, and a white shirt without a collar, and a pair of braces. There was a black hat in the bottom of the box, with tissue in the crown.

He put the coat on. It fitted across the shoulders as if it had been made for him. He stood in front of Mrs. Kessler's mirror, in the hall, and a man looked back at him whom he had last seen six years ago in a shop window in Lewistown, and had been running from ever since.

He looked like his father.

Mrs. Kessler came out of her kitchen with a dishcloth and stopped.

"Well," she said. She looked him up and down. "So you were."

"Ma'am?"

"One of them. I asked you the first week. You said no." She did not sound put out. "It suits you. I would not have thought it would. Whose funeral?"

"It's a wedding. My sister's."

"In that?"

"It's what the men wear."

"Then I'm sorry for the bride," Mrs. Kessler said, and went back to her sink.

• • •

He left at four on the Sunday morning, to be there by eight.

He drove it in the dark with the coat on a hanger behind the seat and the hat on the dash. He had the window down. It was the thirteenth of June and the air smelled of cut hay the whole way up the valley. North of Roundup the sun came up on his right, over the Bull Mountains, and laid his shadow and the truck's a quarter mile out across the wheat.

He had not been on this road since November. He had heard about the storm for two months, on the radio, in the saddle barn, from the rendering man, and he had thought the country would be marked. It was green. Every coulee had water in it. There were calves, fewer than there ought to be in some pastures if a person knew to count. By Lavina a new pole shed stood in a field with the price tags still on the tin, and on a bench above the river there was a long mound of raw gravel with nothing growing on it yet. That was all.

At the Sixmile turn he stopped and changed. He did it standing in the borrow pit, with the truck door for a screen, though there was nobody for five miles. He folded his jeans and his canvas jacket and put them on the seat. He put the hat on. He looked at himself in the side mirror and looked away.

The handset was on the dash. He had brought it by mistake again. He put it in the glove box and shut it.

He drove up the colony road at twenty past eight. At the cattle guard he slowed, out of habit. His foot came off the pedal. For a second the truck simply rolled.

Then it rang across, and he was on the other side.

• • •

Nothing happened. That was the strange thing. He had thought there would be a moment. He had rehearsed it for seven months, lying on his bed on Third Avenue: a man at the gate, a word, a hand held up.

There was a boy of about ten in black trousers and braces, who looked at the truck, and at him, and pointed to where the other vehicles were. There were thirty or forty, pickups and vans with the names of other colonies on the doors. Rockport. Miami. Springwater. He parked at the end of the row and got out.

The place was full of people. Two hundred, perhaps, twice what lived there. They stood about the yard in groups, the men in black and the women in every colour of dark print, blue and green and plum, with their good kerchiefs. Children ran between them. Nobody stared. A few men he half knew nodded as he passed, the short, level nod they gave to a grain buyer. An old woman he did not know at all looked straight at him and said in the dialect, to her neighbour, quite loudly, "That is Samuel's Joseph. He has his father's back," and went on with what she had been saying.

He walked up between the houses. He counted the doors without meaning to. The third on the left of the second row was shut.

The east end was different.

He had known it would be. He had been told. He stopped all the same.

The horse barn was gone. There was no mark of it. Where it had stood, and for a long way to either side, there was a new building. It

was low and white and two hundred and forty feet long, with a green steel roof and a row of fans along the ridge, and a concrete apron in front that still had the broom marks in it. The old hog barns behind had been pulled down too. There was a neat pile of grey boards beside the shop, stacked and stickered. He recognised the hay door among them, flat on top, with its hook.

He stood and looked at the north end of the new barn. The footing showed above the gravel, a foot of clean grey concrete with a chamfered edge.

"It is a good barn."

His brother Paul was beside him. Paul was twenty-two now, and had a beard coming in, and a carpenter's flat thumb. He was looking at the building and not at Joseph.

"Four hundred sows," Paul said. "Heat in the floor. Peter says a pig will be born in there in January and not know it is not July." He put his hands behind his back. "We had the roof on by the tenth of May. Twenty-two days. We worked Saturdays."

"It went up fast."

"It had to. The old one was open to the sky at one end." Paul glanced at him sideways, quickly, and away. "You look well. You look thin."

"So I hear."

"Mother has been cooking since Wednesday. She has made the noodle soup, and the duck, and she has said your name in the kitchen nine times. Katie-Basel counted." He rocked on his heels. "You are to sit by me. At church and at table. Father said."

"Father said that?"

"He said, he will sit with the men. By Paul. That was all he said." Paul nodded towards the church. "It is time. They are going in."

• • •

The church had not changed. It was a long plain room with a pine floor and no picture on any wall. The benches Paul had built were pale and too high. The women sat on the left and the men on the right, oldest at the front, and the children on low forms along the side under the eye of the German teacher.

He followed his brother to the fourth bench on the men's side. He sat. His knees came up against the bench in front. On his left there was Paul, and on his right, at the end, an uncle from Rockport whom he had not seen since he was twelve. The uncle looked at him once and shifted two inches to give him room.

His father was at the front. He sat on the bench that faced the congregation, with the Minister and the other elders, as the Haushalter did. He had his hands on his knees. His beard had gone almost white. He was looking at a point on the back wall a little above the heads of the last row.

He did not look at the fourth bench. Joseph watched him not do it for an hour and a half.

Old Paul Hofer preached. He read the long sermon for a marriage out of the book, as it had been read for three hundred years, in the High German that nobody on the place spoke at home. It was about Tobias and the angel. Joseph had heard it at every wedding of his childhood and had never listened to a word. He listened now. He found he still had it; it came up out of the floor.

They sang. That was the hard part. It was a hymn he knew, one of the old slow ones, forty verses, the Minister giving out each line and two hundred people taking it up after him, loud and without parts, the women high and a little sharp. It filled the room like water. He had not been inside that sound since he was twenty-one. He opened his mouth, and it was there, and he sang.

He sang rhythm guitar. He could not help it. He heard the pulse under the long notes, where no one had ever put one, and he felt his right hand move on his knee.

He stopped it. He held it still with the left.

Then the couple stood up. Peter Entz was at the front of the men's side in a new coat, enormous, scarlet about the ears. Rachel came from the women's. She wore blue, a deep bright blue, with a white apron and their grandmother's kerchief. She did not look left or right. She looked at Peter as if he were the only person in the room and something of a surprise to her.

The Minister asked the questions. They were not the questions the English asked. *Do you take this man in the knowledge that the man is the head of the woman, as Christ is the head of the church? Will you follow him in all that is right? If he should fall into bodily or spiritual need, will you not leave him?* Rachel said yes to each, clearly. She had never in her life had any trouble saying what she thought.

Peter said yes to his. He stammered on *b-brotherhood.* Nobody smiled.

The Minister joined their hands. That was all. There was no ring. They went back to their separate sides and sat down.

Joseph found that his face was wet. He had no handkerchief. The uncle from Rockport passed him one, without turning his head.

• • •

The meal was in the big kitchen. They had set every table. The men ate at theirs and the women at theirs, and the bride and groom sat at a table on a low platform at the end, by themselves, facing the room, and were stared at.

He was put between Paul and Samuel-John. His father was at the next table, with the elders, with his back to him.

It was the noodle soup, and then duck, and cabbage, and new potatoes, and bread. There was wine, the colony's own, in small glasses. Nobody spoke much while they ate. That was the custom. Sixty men bent over their plates and ate fast and seriously, and when a dish was empty a girl appeared at one's shoulder with an-

other. He knew most of the girls. Dorothea brought the potatoes. She set the bowl down by his hand and stood there a half second longer than she needed to, and then went away quickly with her head down.

The bread came along the table from the far end. It was in a basket, sliced thick. It went from hand to hand. When it reached the end of the next table, his father took it, and turned on the bench, and held it out behind him without looking round.

Joseph took the basket.

Their hands did not touch. His father's was broad and brown, with a white scar across the base of the thumb that had not been there six years ago. A loader, perhaps. He let go and turned back to his plate.

That was all there was. A basket of bread, passed backward.

He took a piece and sent the basket on. He could not eat the bread. He held it.

"He drove the loader for the Tollefsens," Samuel-John said, very low, in the dialect, into his soup. "In April. Did Mother tell you?"

"She told me."

"He would not let anyone else. He tore the door off the pickup with it, backing." His brother's mouth twitched. "He has not spoken of it. Nobody speaks of it. The Minister preached the Sunday after on the Samaritan and never once looked at him, and Father sat there like a post." He broke his bread. "We are not to talk about the storm. Not today. It is Rachel's day."

"Nobody's said a word."

"No. They will not." He glanced up at the platform. "Look at her. She has been waiting a year to be looked at and now she cannot stand it."

Afterwards there was singing. The young people gathered at one end and sang for the couple, English hymns and gospel songs out of the book, in harmony now, the girls carrying it. He knew those too. He stood against the wall with the married men and did not sing.

Peter found him there.

He came across the room through the crowd, shaking hands, red, enormous, a head over everyone. People made way. He stopped in front of Joseph and put out his hand.

"B-brother," he said.

"Peter." It was a hand like a shovel. "I wish you joy. I do. She's the best of us."

"I know it." He did not let go. He bent his head a little. He spoke so that it would not carry past the two of them, and he spoke slowly, to get it out whole. "I went up. In March. The night b-before I was to see the Minister. I took it down from the rafter."

Joseph did not breathe.

"I had it under my coat. I d-didn't know what to do. I couldn't keep it; I was to stand up and say I'd nothing hidden. I couldn't b-burn it. I tried. I stood at the incinerator." His grip tightened. "So I took it to him. To Paul-Vetter. I put it on his table in the sack and I said, this was in the old barn, it is not mine, I will not say whose. He knew whose. He's known since you were sixteen."

"What did he do?"

"He looked at it a long time. He took it out of the sack. He turned it over." Peter swallowed. "He said, it is a poor one. He said, the neck is warped. Then he said, Peter, you are the hog boss, you will be pouring a footing this spring. He said, the church has no rule for what is to be done with a thing nobody has confessed to. He said I was to use my judgment."

"Your judgment."

"I'd never b-been told that before. Not once in my life." His eyes were very blue and very earnest. "It's under the north end. Where it was. Six feet from where you sat. I wrapped it in the sack and then in a tarp, and I laid it in the form myself, and I poured over it. Nobody saw. Only him." He let go of Joseph's hand at last. "I couldn't give it back to you. You'd have to have come for it. And I couldn't let them find it and read you out before the whole church, with your

father sitting there. So it's where it always was. It's just that nobody can get at it now."

Joseph stood against the wall.

He had thought of fire. He had thought of the loader's bucket, and splinters, and a feed sack in the mud. He had not thought of this. It was in the ground. It was under four hundred sows and a heated floor, in the dark, with the strings still on it. It would be there when the barn came down in a hundred years.

"Was that right?" Peter said. He looked suddenly very young. "I have not known. I have lain awake."

"I don't know."

"Nor me."

"Thank you," Joseph said. "For not burning it."

"I c-couldn't." Peter looked at the floor. "I used to stop scraping. To listen. I'd have got a b-belt for it." He glanced back at the platform, where Rachel sat alone with her hands in her lap, searching the room for him. "I must go. She'll think I've run off."

He went.

• • •

He needed air. He went out by the side door and round the back of the kitchen, past the wash house, to where there was a bench against the wall in the sun.

There was a girl on it.

She was not one of theirs. He knew that at once by the kerchief, which was tied differently, and by the cut of her jacket. She was about his own age, dark, with a long plain face and very direct eyes. She had her shoes off and her feet on the grass.

She did not get up, or look away, as a Sixmile girl would have.

"You are the one from Billings," she said. Her dialect was a little off, the vowels broader. "The one who went."

"Yes."

"I am Anna Waldner. From Wolf Creek, in Dakota. Peter's mother is my father's cousin. We drove two days." She moved her feet. "You may sit. I am not baptised either. They cannot say anything to us that they are not already saying."

He sat at the other end of the bench.

"They've put you out here?"

"I put myself. I have been looked at since Friday. Every mother with a son of twenty has walked past me and counted my teeth." She said it without resentment. "At home I am the schoolteacher's helper and nobody looks at me at all. It is restful. I did not know until now how restful."

He laughed. It surprised him.

She watched him. She had a way of looking that was like someone reading.

"Can I ask you a thing?" she said. "Nobody here will. They are all dying to and they have been told not to. I have not been told anything; I am from Dakota."

"Ask."

"What is it you are free to do? In Billings."

He opened his mouth.

"I do not mean it to catch you," she said. "I want to know. I have thought of going. Every one of us has, who has any sense. I have lain in bed and thought, I could walk to the highway. And then I think, and do what? I can teach small children their letters in two languages and I can butcher a goose. So I ask you. You have done it. Six years."

He sat. The sun was hot on the black wool. From inside came the singing, and somebody laughing, and the clatter of two hundred plates being washed by forty women.

"It wasn't to be free," he said slowly. "I thought it was. I've been saying that word for six years." He turned the hat round in his hands. "I think it was only that I couldn't stand to be told. By them.

By people I'd have to look at across a table. I would rather be told by a thing that doesn't know my name."

"Is that better?"

"It's easier. It doesn't care if I do it gladly."

"Oh, they care here," she said. "Every one of them. Gladly or not at all." She pulled her stockings towards her and began to put them on. "I am twenty-six, and I am not baptised, and at home they have begun to pray for me by name on Sundays, which is not comfortable."

"What will you do?"

"I do not know. I thought, if I met the one who went, he would tell me." She stood up and stepped into her shoes. She looked down at him, not unkindly. "You have not told me. I have a hard mouth; my mother says so. Good luck with the music, Joseph Wipf."

She went in by the side door. She did not look back.

• • •

He left before the supper.

He found his mother in the passage by the kitchen. She had flour to the elbows and her kerchief had slipped. She took his face in both hands, there, in front of three other women, and looked at it.

"You sang," she said. "I heard you. From the women's side. I would know it in a thousand."

"I couldn't help it."

"No. You never could." She let go. "The coat fits."

"Does he know I've got it?"

"He went to the chest in May for his black hat. It was open. He looked in it." She wiped her hands on her apron. "He said, Sarah, the moths have been at my wedding coat. I said, have they. He said, they have taken the whole coat. I said, they are terrible this year." She almost smiled. "He passed you the bread. I saw it. Rachel saw it; she dropped her spoon."

"He never looked round."

"Joseph. He turned on the bench. In front of the elders. For your father that is the same as another man standing on the table." She put a hand flat on his chest, on the hooks and eyes. "You may keep it. He will not ask for it back. If you are ever to wear it again, you know the day and you know the road."

"Mother. I don't know that I—"

"I did not ask you. I am telling you where the road is." She looked past him, down the passage. "Go and say goodbye to your sister. She is not allowed off the platform and she is going mad."

He went. He stood below the platform, in front of two hundred people, and looked up at her. She looked down. She was laughing and crying. She said, in English, which nobody at the elders' table would admit to understanding, "You came. You *came.* I told them you would. Peter says to tell you the pigs can hear it."

"Hear what?"

"He said you'd know."

He drove out at five. The cattle guard rang.

He stopped at the Sixmile turn and changed back, in the borrow pit, behind the door. He folded the coat. He laid it in the flour sack and the sack in the twine box, and set the hat on top, and put the box on the seat beside him where the guitar case usually rode.

The handset was in the glove box. He could hear it. It had been buzzing in there, on and off, for some time.

He was on at ten. It was a hundred and forty miles. He sat with his hand on the key.

He did not know yet. He had gone up that road thinking he would come back knowing one way or the other. He had come back, and he could not have said which way to turn the truck.

He turned it south. He was on shift. He would see about the rest.

26

The Back of the Book

They branded on the fifth of June, nine days after the pasture was sold, and it took a morning.

In other years it had taken two days. There would be forty people: the Brekkes, and the Sorensens, and cousins of Karin's from Lewistown, and whoever else had a horse and a free Saturday. There were ropers, and wrestlers, and somebody's uncle on the irons, and the women setting out a dinner on plank tables under the cottonwoods that half the county talked about until the next one. Four hundred and twenty calves, dragged to the fire by the heels one after another, and the smoke lying along the river till dark.

This year there were two hundred and eighty-three. They had lost seven more by the end of April, to lungs and scours and one that simply quit.

Arne worked the irons. It was the job he could do sitting down. Jens roped, and Lyle Harris, who had driven up from the Rosebud the night before with his dun in a trailer and had not said why. He said only that he had nothing of his own to brand worth lighting a fire for. The two of them brought calves to the fire as fast as six men could handle them, heading and heeling, without a word between them, and Arne put the Lodgepole on each left hip: a tall L with a bar under it.

He looked at Lyle's hands, once, when he came to the fire for a drink. They were scarred across the knuckles. They looked like Jens's.

"How many'd you lose?" Arne said. "In the end."

"Thirty-one heifers. Fifty-four calves, counting what wasn't born."

"I heard you sold some."

"Forty-two. To your neighbour." Lyle drank. He wiped his mouth. "They'll be getting his iron about now. I thought I'd rather be here than think about it."

"You're welcome here. You know that."

"Yes sir. I do." He screwed the cap on. "Jens called me. Before it came. I won't forget that he did."

"It did you no good."

"It did me no good. But he called." He went back to his horse.

Shannon was there. She had come every day since the funeral, by the road, at seven, and had worked. Nobody had asked her to. She had not been asked to stop. Today she kept the tally and ran the vaccine gun, kneeling in the dust beside each calf with the syringe in her teeth, and when Karin called dinner she went and helped carry.

She and Jens spoke little. Arne watched them. They were careful with each other, as people are round a horse that has kicked. She would hand him a thing and he would say thank you. Once, at the water tank, he said something that made her look up fast, and she nearly smiled, and then neither of them knew what to do about it.

It was not mended. He did not think it would mend this year. But she was there at seven.

They were done by one. The calves went back to the cows, bawling, and the cows licked the burnt places. Lyle loaded the dun. He shook hands with Jens, a long grip, and with Arne.

"Stampede," he said.

"If you've a partner."

"I've got a partner. He's getting married the day before. I'll have to keep him sober." He tipped his hat to Karin and to Shannon, and drove out.

• • •

The cheque came on the Monday. It came through Brannigan, with a covering note in the old man's spider hand, and the recorded deed.

Three hundred and twenty-eight thousand dollars. *Rourke Land & Cattle.* Karin looked at it for some time. Then she put on her town coat and drove it to Billings herself, and came home at five with a receipt from the bank that said the operating note of the Lodgepole Ranch was paid in full, and a balance of a hundred and eighteen thousand and some in an account that had not held six figures since 1989.

She put the receipt on the table in front of him.

"That's it," she said. "That's the first time since my wedding day we've owed nobody."

"Except Declan."

"We don't owe Declan. He bought a pasture."

"At nine hundred. When he could have had it for six."

"That's his affair. He can afford to be sentimental." She took her coat off. "Tanner sends his regards. He asked if you'd thought about July the first. I said you had."

"What did he say?"

"He said he'd thought you would have. He said to tell you he was closing the file with some regret, since you were the only customer he had who made him look anything up."

The ditch was dug that same week. Denver had waived their clause in nineteen hours; the paper had reached the title office at ten to twelve, and the objection had stayed in the truck. A machine came down the Rourke meadow on a Tuesday morning, a long-armed yellow one on tracks, with a young woman in a company fleece walking ahead of it, and by Thursday night there was a chan-

nel across the west end of the flat, two hundred and ten feet, four deep and ten wide at the top, lined with broken rock the size of a man's head. It ran straight from the three pipes to the river. They had seeded the banks. They had put the fence back, with a water gap.

He had signed their easement on the kitchen table. It was one page. It said nothing about claims.

He walked down to look at it on the Friday evening, alone, on his own feet. He stood at the edge. It was dry. It would be dry till next March.

He thought it was well made. He had no feeling about it at all.

• • •

It was the eleventh of June, a Friday. He remembered the date afterwards because it was the last thing she wrote before she turned the book over.

They had eaten. Jens had gone across to the bunkhouse, and there was a light in the log barn, and the sound of somebody forking. It was half past nine and not quite dark. There was a nighthawk booming over the yard.

Karin had the ledger at the table. She entered the day. Fencing staples. A vet call, for the gelding, who had never been right since he ran through the flood. She blotted it.

Then she sat for a moment with her hand flat on the page.

"I said I'd pick the day," she said.

He had been waiting since April. He had not asked. He found that his mouth was dry.

"Is this it?"

"We owe nobody. The calves are branded. You can walk." She took her glasses off and cleaned them on her apron. "And I'm sixty-five, and I've been carrying this since October, and I'm tired of it. Yes. This is it."

She closed the book. She turned it over, face down, with the red spine to the left, and slid it across the oilcloth to him.

"From the back," she said. "It starts at the last page and runs forward."

He opened it.

He had seen four lines of it on the porch, with a pit being dug, and a tick. It ran to nineteen pages, in her small upright hand. She had ruled the columns herself, in pencil. *Date. From. What it said. What came. □ or □.* And a sixth, narrow, at the far right, headed with a dollar sign.

He turned the pages slowly. Cull cows in October. Hay. The cold in December, with the number of the cow he had lost in the money column and nothing else. *Jan 23. D. Tanner's model will reprice unadvised lines in Q2. Expect 2 pts.* He had sat in that young man's office in May and been surprised.

Feb 2. D. Season outlook, calving. Wet snow event Apr 4–12. 35%.

Feb 20. D. 62%. And beside it, in a different ink, added later: *Also from S.R. at supper. Same figure. A. said every April is wet.*

Mar 10. D. 81%. Says build something. Says she will pay for it. I said no.

He looked up.

"She offered to pay."

"For a shed. She has savings. She said she'd wire it to the lumber yard in Roundup and they could tell you it was a mistake on the invoice." Karin's voice was level. "I said you'd know. She said she didn't care if you knew. I said I did."

"Why?"

"Because you'd have torn it down. With your hands. And then I'd have had to choose in front of both of you, and I wasn't ready to."

He went back to the page. His eyes were not working properly. He had to hold it nearer the lamp.

Apr 3. D. 94%. Onset Wed 7th, 21:00. 18–26 in. Rain Fri 21:00. Low 10 Sat. — Says: Mom, please.

Apr 6. D. Onset moved to 19:15 Wed. Rain still Fri 21:00.

Apr 7. D. 22–28 in.

Apr 9, 2 p.m. D. Rain 18:00 not 21:00. Three hours early. Tell him NOW. — Sent in soup can.

Under that, across the whole width of the page, not in any column, she had written one line. It was the only place in forty-one years of ledgers that he had ever seen her hand shake.

He did not open the can.

And the tick.

He sat with his thumb on it.

The nighthawk had stopped. He could hear the fork in the barn, going on, and the stove settling.

"It's all here," he said. "From February. The day and the hour. And I sat there and tapped my glass."

"Yes."

"Why didn't you put it in front of me? Like this? In February?"

She had folded her hands on the oilcloth. She held his eye, and she took her time.

"Because you'd have asked me how I knew it was right, and I'd have said because our daughter says so, and you'd have said she works for them. And you'd have been within your rights." She unfolded her hands and folded them again. "So I kept a book. I thought, in a year I'll know, and I'll have something to put in front of him that he can't call a Rourke's opinion. I didn't know there was an April in it." She nodded at the page. "If I'd walked in here on the third of April with that open at ninety-four, and every tick before it, would you have built a shed?"

He looked at the page. *Mom, please.*

He had been asking himself since the willows. He thought of the morning of the sixth, twenty-nine eight and the ring round the moon, and of what it had taken, with the needle falling in front of his own eyes, to give up half the herd to a boy's snow fence. He owed her the truth. She had kept nineteen pages of it for him.

"No," he said. "I'd have read every line of it and said it's been lucky. And I'd have gone and tapped the glass, and moved them on the sixth, to the willows, the same as I did."

"I know," Karin said. "I've known since February. That's the other reason I never showed you." Her eyes were bright, and she left them so. "I could stand you being wrong because you didn't know. I didn't think I could stand the other."

He put his hand over his face.

She let him. She got up and moved the kettle to the back of the stove, and stood there with her back to him for as long as it took.

• • •

"What are the crosses?" he said, after a while.

She came back and found them for him. One was in January, a mild spell that had not come; Dagny had blamed a satellite. The other was nearly the first thing in the book.

Oct 10. D. says this is from the Rourke side of the system & she should not have seen it. Model has A. selling E. lease to D.R. before deadline. 71%. — Came: did not sell. □.

He read it twice. "It had a number on me."

"It's the one time in the whole book it tried to say what a person would do." She touched the little mark with one finger. "I put that in the morning you found the chain. I was proud of it. I stood at that window and watched you go out for the tank and thought, there. It doesn't know him."

"I sold it on the twenty-seventh of May."

"I've had the pen in my hand twice to change it." She did not take her finger away. "I'd sooner not know. Leave me the one."

At the foot of the narrow column, on the nineteenth page, she had ruled a double line, as she did at the year's end.

$67,500. *Not counting April.*

"That's what it cost," he said. "Doing it my way."

"That's what it would have saved, if you'd done every single thing it said, on the day. Nobody does." She closed the book herself. "I couldn't price April. Some of those calves would have died under a roof. I left the line."

"You wrote the calves in the front. What did you put in the other column?"

"Nothing. It's the only line in forty-one years I haven't been able to fill."

He reached across the table. He took the pen out of her hand. She let it go; she was too surprised not to.

He opened the book from the front. He found the ribbon, and went back to the twelfth of April. *Calves, dead.* 140. The right-hand column was white.

He had never written in it. Not once. His mother had kept it, and then his wife. His father had told him that a man who kept his own ledger was like a man who cut his own hair.

He held the pen over the space for some time.

He could not think what to put either. *Temper.* That was true, and it was too easy on him; it made it sound like weather. *Pride.* That was what Karin would have written, if she had been angrier. *The road.* That was Shannon's, and the company's, and he had told Jens he would not hang his half on them.

He thought of what Halvor had said at the gate. *Now you tell me what that means.*

In the end he wrote three words. He wrote them slowly; his hand was not used to the pen, and it came out larger than hers, and crooked.

I was told.

He turned the book round and pushed it back to her.

Karin read it. She read it for a long while. Then she blotted it with the side of her hand, as she did her own, and shut the ledger and put it in the drawer.

"She'll be at the wedding," she said. "Dagny. Jens asked her. She said she'd come if nobody minded."

"Who'd mind?"

"She meant you."

"I know who she meant." He got up. His feet hurt. They would always hurt, a little; the doctor had said so. He took his cup to the sink and rinsed it and set it in the rack. "Last time she saw the truck and went to her dinner. I don't know what I'll say to her. In July. I've had six years to think of it and I've got nothing."

"You could start with her name."

"I could."

He went to the door. The barometer hung beside it. He looked at it. Thirty and one-tenth. Fair. He did not tap it. It was evening, and his father had said once a day.

"Are you coming up?" Karin said.

"In a minute."

"I'll leave the lamp."

She went up. He heard the boards, and the bed.

He stood on in the kitchen. The light was still on in the log barn, and there were two shadows on the wall of it now, moving, forking. Across the river, low on the bench, the halls were lit from end to end. They had put the roofs on in May. From here they looked like a town.

He turned down the lamp and went up to her. She had left his side turned back.

27

Stampede Week

In the last week of June she wrote her first bill.

It was for the Sorensens, for the paint: thirty days' riding at forty dollars, and a set of shoes. She wrote it at the bench in the tack room of the log barn, on a pad Karin had lent her. The colts were coming here in July, and a bill ought to come from where the work would be done. She had written ten thousand invoices for Rourke Land and Cattle. Her hand was slow over this one.

That morning, at home, she had watched her father from the office window. She watched him most mornings now. He rode out at six on the old grey, through the pairs on the Home Meadow, with the earpiece in. For six years he had talked back to it. He had called it names across the width of the meadow, and the hands had laughed. He rode silent now. He stopped where it told him and looked at the calf it meant, and went on to the next. When he had done the meadow he rode up to the north pasture gate and sat the horse there. Nothing had grazed that pasture since April, and the grass stood to the stirrup. He never opened the gate. He turned the grey and came home to his breakfast, and ate it, and asked her how many bales were in the stack yard, though he had been told already.

Jens came in from the stalls at seven with the fork in his hand. He saw the pad.

"What's that?"

"Sorensens. For the paint."

"Let's see."

She gave it to him. He stood the fork in the corner and read the bill through. Then he took the pencil from behind his ear and went down the column, figure by figure, with his lips moving. She had kept books fourteen years. She sat on the saddle rack with her hands under her knees and let him.

He did it twice.

"Twelve-ninety," he said.

"Yes."

"You've no hay on it."

"It's Rourke hay."

"It's hay. He ate it." He wrote a line under the shoes, in his square hand. *Hay, 30 days, $90.* He struck the total and wrote a new one, and added that twice as well. "Thirteen-eighty. Who gets the ninety?"

"Rourke Land and Cattle. I'll write a receipt."

"And next month?"

"Next month he's in your barn. Your mother gets it."

"She'll want it in writing."

"She'll have it in writing."

He looked at the pad. Something moved at the corner of his mouth and was gone. He tore the sheet off along the gum, carefully, and folded it once, and held it out to her.

"I'd have found it," she said. "If it was wrong."

"I know you would." He picked up the fork. "I'm going to look anyway. A while yet."

"How long?"

"I'll tell you when I've stopped."

He went back down the alley. She sat with the bill in her hand and listened to him fork.

• • •

She was married on the sixteenth of July, a Friday, at four in the afternoon, on the grass between the horse barns and the river at the Prosper fairgrounds, with the stock contractor's trucks backing up to the pens two hundred yards away.

It had been Jens's idea, and she had not argued. Neither family would have to cross the other's threshold. Her father's priest had gone to Great Falls. Karin's pastor was the young one who had buried Wyatt, and he had said he would marry anybody anywhere so long as they did not ask him to ride something.

There were chairs. Beth had hired them, a hundred and twenty, white, and had them set in two blocks with an aisle between. Shannon had stood in the door of the horse barn at half past three in her mother's dress and watched the blocks fill.

They filled as she had known they would. Rourkes on the left: her father, in the front, in his grey hat, with the earpiece in. Conor and Beth and Kieran. Ray Dunning and his wife and the five hands who had wintered, and the Roundup men who had built the sheds. Tollefsens on the right: there were fewer of them. Karin in navy. Halvor Brekke, on his cane, who had come to give his opinion of it. The Sorensens. Lyle Harris, at the end of the second row, in a white shirt, with his mother on one side of him, small and straight, and on the other a long thin girl with her right hand closed in her lap.

And a woman by herself in the third row, in a grey jacket, with her hair cut short.

Shannon had never met Dagny Tollefsen. She had spoken to her on the telephone perhaps fifty times in six years, as the co-op's voice. *Hi, Shannon, it's Dagny in Billings, I've the outlook for your dad.* A quick, exact, friendly voice. She had not known, until Jens told her in March, that when she relayed the calving advisory across the Lodgepole supper table she had been carrying a daughter's forecast to a father who would not take it from the daughter.

Arne was not in his seat. There was an empty chair beside Karin.

"He's at the rail," Conor said. He had come up behind her, in a suit that would not button. "By the pens. He's been there half an hour looking at a bucking horse. Dad's seen him. Dad's about to get up."

"Don't let him."

"I can't stop him. I've never been able to stop him doing anything." He looked at her. "You look like Mom."

"It's her dress."

"It's not the dress." He cleared his throat. "Are you sure about this? I'm asking as your brother. I'll not ask again. He's hardly looked at you since April. I've watched. He works beside you all day and it's like he's got his hand on a hot stove."

"I've noticed."

"Then why?"

"Because he asked me in December, and I said yes knowing what I knew. And he asked again in May, knowing it too." She smoothed the front of the dress. It had been taken in. "That's twice. I'm not going to make him ask a third time."

"That's not a reason to marry a man."

"It's the one I've got. Go and sit down, Conor."

He went. She watched her father get to his feet, in the front row, and put his hat straight, and walk slowly up the side of the chairs towards the pens.

• • •

She could see them from the barn door. She could not hear.

Arne was at the pipe rail of the bronc pen with his forearms on the top bar and one boot on the bottom. He had a suit on. She had never seen him in one. He was looking through the rails at a big bald-faced bay that stood in the corner with its head up.

Her father came up and stopped a yard to his left. He put his own arms on the rail.

They stood like that. Two old men at a fence, looking at a horse. Neither turned his head.

She thought that her father said something. She saw his jaw move. Arne did not answer. A minute went by. The horse swung round and looked at them both.

Then Arne said something. It was short. Her father nodded.

They stood another five minutes without a word. Then Karin sent the Sorensen boy to say that the bride was waiting, and they walked back down the side of the chairs, a yard apart, and sat down on opposite sides of the aisle.

• • •

It was short. She had asked for that.

She walked down by herself. Her father had offered and she had said no; she was thirty-seven, and nobody was giving her to anyone. The grass was dry and had been mown that morning. Behind the pastor the river ran low and brown between the cottonwoods, and beyond it, on the bench, the halls stood up square against the sky. They were to take load in December. The fans were being tried already, and at night now there was a hum.

Jens was waiting. He had the ironed shirt on, and a string tie, and he had cut himself shaving. Lyle Harris stood up beside him. They had roped together for twenty-three years.

He watched her come. He did not smile. He looked at her as he had in the barn in May, levelly, as a man looks at a thing he has decided on and is not yet easy about.

She stopped beside him. She could smell the soap.

The pastor read from Ruth. *Whither thou goest.* It was what everybody had. She had not chosen it; Karin had. She listened to it as she had never listened before. *Thy people shall be my people.* She had done those people a great wrong. She was about to take their name.

"Do you, Jens Einar—"

"I do."

"I haven't asked you yet."

There was a laugh. It went through both blocks of chairs. Jens went red to the hair.

"I do anyway," he said. "Go on."

The pastor went on. He asked her. She said it. Her voice was all right.

There was a ring. It was the thin gold band with the square stone. She had given it back to him in April, by post, in its blue box, with no note, the week after the storm. She had not known what else to do with it. It had come back to her in June the same way. He put it on her now. His hands were warm. The scars across the knuckles had gone white.

"You may—"

He did. It was the first time since the seventh of April. It was brief, and careful, and his mouth was shut.

When he lifted his head he kept hold of her hand. He held it hard enough to hurt. He was looking at the pastor.

• • •

They ate in the exhibit hall. Beth had done it, with Karin. That in itself had been spoken of in Prosper for a week. There was beef, a Lodgepole steer and a Rourke one, cooked in the same pit by Ray Dunning and Halvor Brekke's nephew, and nobody could tell them apart.

Shannon sat at the top table between her husband and her father and could not eat.

She watched the room. It was a thing she did. Rourkes had sat down with Rourkes and Tollefsens with Tollefsens. But the hall was not big, and the tables were close, and as the meal went on it loosened at the edges. She saw Ray talking to the Sorensen boy about a baler. She saw Kieran under a table with two small Tollefsen cousins from Lewistown. She saw Beth stop behind Karin's chair with a coffee pot, and Karin put a hand on her wrist and say some-

thing, and the two of them look across the room together at Conor, who had his tie off.

Lyle Harris's mother was at the end of the Tollefsen table. Karin had put her there, at her own right hand. They were not talking. They sat side by side, two old women with straight backs, each with her hands folded, watching the same room.

The girl was beside them. She had hardly taken her eyes off Shannon.

Dagny Tollefsen was at a table by the door with some people from town. She had come late to the meal. She had not gone up to her parents.

Arne had not moved from his chair. He ate what was put in front of him. Twice Shannon saw his eyes go to the door.

Conor stood up.

He had a glass. He rapped it with a fork until the hall went quiet.

"I'm the brother," he said. "I'm told I'm to say something. I've been warned by my wife what I'm not to say, and by my father, and by my sister, twice. So that's most of my material gone."

A laugh.

"I've known Jens Tollefsen since I was five years old. He hit me with a rock in 2001. I had it coming. I've called him a good many names since, and his family more, and I've made a joke about a barometer that I'm not proud of." He looked down the table at Arne. "I'd take that one back, sir. If I could. It turned out you were looking at it the same morning the rest of us were looking at a telephone, and you moved your cattle the same day we moved ours."

The room was very still.

"I'm not going to talk about April. It's a wedding." His voice had roughened. "I'll say one thing. There was a night in April when my sister was on a rim above a coulee and I was with her. And there was a night the same week when this man here was up to his neck in a creek, and his father with him. We didn't know. We were a mile

apart." He turned the glass in his fingers. "I'd like us to know, the next time. By telephone or by walking over."

He lifted the glass.

"To my sister," he said. "Who can read. And to the man who married her anyway."

They drank. Jens's hand had tightened on hers under the table.

She saw her father look at his son with a kind of astonishment.

Nobody spoke for the Tollefsens. There was a pause where somebody should have. Jens began to get up, and Karin, down the table, shook her head at him very slightly.

Arne stood.

He did it in two tries. He had no glass. He stood with his knuckles on the cloth.

"I'm no hand at this," he said. "I stood up once before, in this town, a year ago, at this Stampede. About a hundred yards from here. Some of you heard it."

A few people shifted.

"I said a number of things. Most of them I'd say again. One I'll take back." He was looking at the cloth. "I said a man's hand wasn't worth the trouble of shaking, or that somebody thought so. I've had cause since to think about what a hand is worth. I'd nine men from Sixmile in my yard at midnight that I never asked for. I'd a man from the Rosebud at my branding fire. I'd a neighbour pay me nine hundred an acre for a thing that was worth six." He lifted his eyes, not to Declan, but to the room. "I don't know that I'd shake on a thing again. I think that's finished. They've made it so a handshake's a risk to the other fellow. But I know what one was."

He stopped. Shannon thought he had done. He had not.

"My son's wife keeps books," he said. He looked at Shannon then, directly, with the pale eyes. "So does mine. I said a hard thing about that in January. I won't say it again."

He sat down.

Karin had her hand over her mouth.

• • •

There was a dance. There was always a dance. She danced with Jens, the first one, a waltz, on the same concrete slab. He held her as if she might break, or bite. He did not look at his feet. He looked at her.

"Say something," she said.

"I'm thinking."

"What about?"

"That I've got twelve stalls done. And a second pen. And nothing to put in them but a filly that's mad at both of us." He turned her. "And that I don't know how to do this. Be married to you. I thought I would. I thought once we'd done it, it would come."

"It hasn't."

"No."

"It might not."

"I know." He was quiet for half a turn. "I'm still glad it's you. I can't make that go with the rest. But it's so."

She put her forehead against his shoulder. He let her.

Over it she saw the door of the hall.

Dagny Tollefsen was standing just outside it, on the gravel, in the light from the bulbs. She had her jacket over her arm. She was leaving; she had her keys in her hand.

Arne was there.

He had got up from the table without anyone seeing him go. He was standing six feet from his daughter with his hat in his hands. He was turning it round by the brim.

Shannon stopped dancing. Jens followed her eyes.

The band came to the end of the number. In the gap, before the fiddle found the next one, they were near enough the door to hear. They saw Dagny's face, which was her mother's face thirty years younger, shut and careful.

"Dag," Arne said. "I was told. I put it in your mother's book."

Dagny said something. It was longer. She was not angry; she said it carefully, as a person says a thing they have had ready a long time, and the fiddle came in over the middle of it. Shannon heard the end.

"—so you can try. That's what I've got tonight, Dad. You can try."

Arne nodded. He went on turning the hat.

His daughter looked at him. She looked for what seemed a full minute. Then she shifted the jacket to her other arm, and reached out, and straightened his tie.

She did not embrace him. She went down the steps to the parking lot, and he stood where she had left him with his hand up at his collar.

"In the book," Jens said. His voice was not quite his own. "He wrote in the book. He's never written a word in it in his life."

Arne had not moved.

• • •

They roped on the Saturday. It was the Stampede.

She sat in the grandstand, on the right, among Tollefsens, for the first time. Karin was on one side of her. On the other, by Karin's arrangement, was Evelyn Harris, with her cushion.

"He's a good header, your son," Shannon said.

"He's a fair header. He's too old for it. They both are." The old woman had her eyes on the boxes. "The girl says they were five-eight last year. She keeps the book."

"Where is she?"

"Down at the pens. Looking at horses. She lost hers." She did not say more. After a moment she said, "You've put your brand on my son's heifers."

Shannon turned.

"I saw the cheque. Rourke Land and Cattle. I'm not complaining of it. He needed it and you paid what your machine said." Her voice was quite even. "I'm telling you I know where they are. Forty-two.

There's a red one, deep in the rib. If she doesn't breed back for you, don't ship her. Send word. I'll find the money."

"I'll see to it. I'll put it on her record."

"Don't put it on a record. Remember it."

"Yes, ma'am."

The steer came out.

It was not five-eight. Lyle's loop was clean. The dun turned off. And Jens, coming up into the corner on the roan, a married man of one day, with his hands half healed, laid his loop down under the steer's belly and caught one hind foot.

One. The flag man held up a finger. Five seconds added.

"Twelve and two," the announcer said. "A leg for Harris and Tollefsen, and that'll put them out of the money, I'm afraid. Tough luck for the bridegroom."

There was a groan, and a laugh, and some clapping.

Jens rode out coiling his rope. He looked up at the stand. He found her, and lifted one shoulder, and rode on.

Karin was writing something on the back of her programme.

• • •

She moved the colts on the Monday.

There were three. A grey gelding of her own, and a paint that belonged to the Sorensens, the first outside horse anybody had ever paid her to start. And the filly.

She had not been on the filly since April. Nobody had. Earl Pell had said finish her, and she had gone down to the round pen a dozen times in May and June and stood at the rail, and the filly had stood on the far side with her hindquarters turned.

She loaded the other two. They went in the trailer like old horses.

The filly would not load.

She tried for an hour. She had Ray with a rope behind, and then without Ray. She had grain. The filly would come to the foot of the

ramp and plant all four feet and look at the dark inside the trailer and blow. When Shannon asked, she went up on her hind legs.

Her father had come down from the porch. He stood at the corral gate with his arms on it, not offering anything.

"She'll not go in a box," Shannon said. She was sweating. "He never hauled her. He rode her everywhere."

"Then ride her."

"She's not been sat on since the third of April."

"She's been sat on." He nodded at the river. "It's a mile and a half. There's the ford."

She looked at the filly. The filly looked at her.

She took the halter off and put a bridle on. She did it slowly. She got the saddle, her own, and set it on, and the filly humped her back under it and then let it down. She did up the cinch a hole at a time.

There was a sheet of paper in her shirt pocket. It had been there since April, folded in four. *Filly. Week of Apr 12. Bench — towers. River — cross twice. Stand tied 2 hrs. Do NOT push.*

She left it there. She knew it.

She led the filly into the middle of the yard. She turned her back on her. She counted twenty.

At fourteen there was breath on her neck.

She got on.

Her father opened the gate. As she rode by he reached up, as he had on the morning of the search, and put his hand on her knee for a moment, and took it away. He had the earpiece in. She had asked him last week why, and he had said that he had tried going without.

She rode down the lane and across the Home Meadow, through the second cutting. The filly looked at everything. She let her look.

At the ford she stopped.

The river was low. It was shin deep over the gravel. Upstream, on the far side, she could see the road on its bank, and the three culverts, and running straight from them to the water a new cut lined

with pale rock, with young grass coming on the sides. It was dry. A killdeer was running in it.

Below the fence the willows were coming back. They had been laid flat, and they were putting up shoots from every joint, green and straight, a foot high already.

The filly dropped her head and smelled the water. She had never crossed it. *River — cross twice.*

Shannon sat still. She did not kick and she did not pet.

It took a long time. A truck went over the new bridge behind her, and another. Then the filly sighed, and put one foot in, and then the other, and walked across to the Lodgepole of her own accord.

Jens had the barn doors open. He was standing in the alley with a fork.

"Where's the trailer?"

"Ray's bringing it. With the other two." She got down. Her legs were shaking. "This one wouldn't load."

He looked at the filly. He looked at the wet on her legs, to the knee.

"You rode her over."

"She walked over. I sat there."

He took the rein from her. He led the filly down the alley, past the clean stalls, to the last one on the left, the big one, which he had bedded that morning. He turned her in and slid the door.

She put her head over it at once. She looked up the alley towards the light.

"She's still looking for him," Jens said.

"Yes."

"How long'll she do that?"

"I don't know. I've not had one do it before."

He stood beside her. Their shoulders were not quite touching.

"What do we call her?" he said. "She's a year on the place and nobody's named her. He just said *the filly*."

"I'm not naming her."

"She's got to have something. For the book. Mom'll want to write her down."

Shannon thought about it.

"Put her down as Pell's," she said. "That's what she is."

He nodded. He went to find a pencil.

28

The Cattle Guard

Mariah left on the twentieth of August, a Friday, and for a week beforehand the house was full of boxes.

They were not many. Evelyn counted them, as she counted everything. Five. The one from the university bookstore, which had sat on the desk since April and was now open and half unpacked again because the girl kept taking things out to look at. One of clothes. One of bedding, with the star quilt Evelyn's mother had made folded on top. One of books. And a small one that had held canning jars, taped shut, with nothing written on it.

"What's in that?"

"Things."

"What things?"

"Grandma." Mariah was on her knees on the floor of her room with a roll of tape. "I'm eighteen. I'm allowed a box."

She was allowed a box. Evelyn went downstairs.

It had been a strange summer. The grass had come as she had never seen it, after all that water. The hay meadow had made two hundred ton on the first cutting, and Lyle had put it up alone, with Wallace's boy, and had nothing to feed it to but nineteen old cows and a hundred and forty that had been on the Thompson Creek side and come through. He had sold forty ton to a man from Broadus,

and said that he had never in his life had hay to sell, and did not care for the feeling. He had not bought back a single heifer. Delbert's twenty-eight hundred was due at shipping.

The towers had not come. The survey had been *deferred*. She had heard from Wallace that the company was looking at another route, east, across the Tongue, and that Cousin Delbert had been approached by a second outfit, and a third. She did not know what was true. The water committee had met five times and had not answered the letter. Clarence had died in June, at ninety-two, and there was nobody left in that room now who had been in the hall in 1973 but herself.

• • •

On the Wednesday she took the girl to Lame Deer for the last things. A lamp. Towels. A pair of boots that were not for riding.

They ate at the café by the tribal office. Mariah had a hamburger and picked at it. She held it in her left hand. The right lay on the table beside her plate. The middle finger ended at the first joint in a smooth pink cap, and she had stopped hiding it about the end of June.

"Does it hurt?" Evelyn said.

"When it's cold. And it itches. Where it isn't." She looked at it. "I can type. I'm faster than I was. I had to learn it over, so I learned it right."

"Will you ride? Up there?"

"There's a team. A rodeo team. I looked." She put the hamburger down. "I don't have a horse, Grandma."

"Your father would find you one."

"With what?"

Evelyn did not answer that.

"I don't want one yet," Mariah said. "I thought I would. I went and looked at some, at Prosper, at the wedding. There was a nice bay mare. I stood at the fence, and she came over, and I couldn't put my

hand out." She turned her water glass. "I held Dolly's head. I told you that. I haven't told you the rest. She knew me. Right to the end. She kept trying to get up for me, because it was me asking."

"You didn't ask her to."

"I was there. That's asking." She was quiet. "Dad says I shouldn't have been. He says he told me to go back to the heifers. He did tell me. I didn't go."

"I know you didn't."

"He's not said a word about it since. Not one. He thinks if he says it he'll make it worse." Her eyes came up. They were Lyle's eyes, dark and slow. "He thinks that about everything. It's why he doesn't talk. It's not that he's angry. He's scared he'll say the wrong thing and I'll take it up there with me and it'll be the last thing he said."

Evelyn looked at her granddaughter.

"When did you work that out?"

"About the Fourth of July. I was watching him rope. He missed one, and he sat there, and he had the same look." Mariah picked up a fried potato and put it down. "I'm not mad at him any more. I was. I'm mad at you a little, still. But not him."

"That's fair."

"I know it's fair. I thought about it." She pushed the plate away.

Evelyn looked past her, out of the window, at the tribal office across the road. The old hall had stood there before they built the new one. She had sat outside it in a truck with the heater on.

"You know about seventy-three," she said.

"Eleven to nothing. You sat in the truck." Mariah had heard it every Christmas since she was four.

"I sat in the truck because my father was inside. He wasn't on the council. He was in the hall. He stood up in it twice that winter, in his good hat, and said the Tribe should take the coal money. Seventeen cents a ton. He said it was more than nothing. He said his sons were gone to Billings and Seattle and he wanted one of them home."

"Grandma."

"He wasn't bought. He believed it. And when the vote came he walked out through the people on the steps, and they opened up to let him by, and nobody said a word to him. I was sixteen. I watched them not say it." She turned her cup on its saucer. "He lived twenty-two years after that, in our house. People were kind. They were always kind. But every time there was a meeting about anything under the ground, somebody looked round for him."

Mariah had put her right hand flat on the table, the short finger and all.

"Your father doesn't know," Evelyn said. "Your grandfather never knew. I'd like it kept so."

"Then why tell me?"

"Because you're the one who'll be sitting across from them. Not now. In twenty years, thirty. You'll have a degree in your hand, and they'll put a paper in front of you with a figure on the back. It'll be a good figure. It always is. And there'll be somebody in your family who needs it."

The girl looked at her a long time.

"I won't tell him," she said.

"Promise me."

"I promise." She pushed her chair back. "Can we go by the water office? Before we go home. I told Mr. Bixby I'd come and say goodbye."

They went by the water office. It was two rooms in the back of the natural resources building, with a map of the reservation on one wall and a map of the Tongue River basin on the other. Mr. Bixby was a heavy, patient man of sixty who knew every headgate on the Rosebud by its number. He gave Mariah a hard hat with the tribal seal on it and a three-ring binder.

"That's the compact," he said. "Annotated. Mine. I've been writing in that margin since 1991. I was going to leave it to the office, but the office can't read my hand." He cleared his throat. "You bring it back."

"I'll bring it back."

"In four years. With a degree on top of it." He looked at Evelyn over the girl's head. "She's been in here every Saturday since February, Mrs. Harris. Did you know that? She asked me things I'd to go and look up."

"I didn't know."

"She said you'd think she was shelving."

Mariah had gone red. She held the binder against her chest with her good hand.

• • •

She gave her the paper on the Thursday night.

She had not planned it. She had gone up at ten to see whether the girl was asleep, and the light was on. Mariah was sitting on the bed in her nightshirt, cross-legged, with the binder open on her knees. The five boxes were stacked by the door.

"You should sleep. It's seven hours."

"I can't." She shut the binder on her finger to keep the place. "I keep reading the same page. Article Two. It's the storage. *The Tribe may use or dispose of its allocation for any beneficial purpose, on or off the Reservation, within the Yellowstone basin.* There's forty years of Mr. Bixby in the margin and I still don't know what *dispose* means. Does it mean sell? Lease? For how long?" She rubbed her eyes with the heel of her hand. "He's written *ask the lawyer* beside it. Three times, in different pens."

Evelyn sat down on the end of the bed.

It was the small bed. The girl had slept in it since she was four. Her feet nearly reached the rail now.

"I've got something for you to take," she said. "I don't know if I'm right to give it to you. I've had it since November."

She had brought it up with her. She had not admitted to herself that she was bringing it. It was in the pocket of her housecoat, folded in three, soft now along the folds as that other letter had been.

She put it on the binder.

Mariah unfolded it. She read the front, the route, the three towers. She turned it over. She read the back.

She did not say anything for some time.

"Fourteen thousand two hundred."

"For my share. The first payment. There's a figure every year after."

"This is November." The girl's voice was very quiet. "This is dated the fourth of November."

"Yes."

"You had this in February. When I told Dad. When I said I was short four thousand three hundred." She looked up. "You had this in your *apron*."

"Yes."

"And you gave me the allotment money instead."

"Yes."

"And he sold the heifers." It was coming up in her face, slowly, as a thing comes up through water. "In May. Forty-two. The red one. He put his hand on her. You stood there. You had fourteen thousand dollars in your dresser and you watched him carry the calves up the ramp."

"I did."

"*Why*?"

It was the question Lyle had asked in February, in the same voice. She had told him, *because she'll come back*, and it had not been the truth, or not the part that counted.

"You know why," Evelyn said. "I told you yesterday."

Mariah looked at the paper. "Because of him."

"I couldn't sign it. I took it out twenty times. Three towers on my grandfather's meadow, and my name at the agency with the cousins from Denver. I couldn't be the second one in this family to stand up and say *take it*." She made herself go on. "And I couldn't tell your father I'd even looked, without telling him why. So I gave you his fence posts. And I let him sell his heifers."

The house was very quiet. A moth was going round the lamp.

"That's a terrible reason," Mariah said.

"Yes."

"He'd have said no to the towers in like a second." Her voice broke. "And I've been up here in the middle with a box."

"I know it."

Mariah looked at the paper for a long time.

Then she folded it, on its folds, and opened the binder at Article Two, and laid it in. She shut the binder.

"I'm taking it," she said.

"I meant you to."

"I'm going to read it with a ruler. Every word on the front and the back, and then the compact, and then I'm going to find out what *dispose* means." She wiped her face with her wrist. "And then I'm going to come home and tell you if you were wrong."

"I'd like to know."

"You'll have to wait four years."

"I've waited fifty-seven. I'll manage four."

The girl laughed, wetly. She put the binder on the floor.

"Are you going to tell him?" she said. "Dad."

"Do you think I should?"

"I think he knows something. He's known since February there was something. He told me once. He said, your grandmother's carrying a thing and she'll put it down when she's ready." She lay back on the pillow. "I think if you told him, he'd say, *is that all*."

"He might."

"And then he'd go out to the truck for two days."

"He would."

"Tell him after I'm gone. I don't want to be here for the two days." She pulled the sheet up. She was nearly asleep; it had come over her all at once, as it does at that age. "Grandma. The barrette. It's in the little box. With the jar tape on. I wasn't going to tell you."

"I thought it might be."

"I oiled it. It's still two beads short."

"It's always been two beads short. Go to sleep."

• • •

Lyle loaded the truck.

It was Wallace Small's old half-ton, lent for the semester, with a cap on the back. He had spent Thursday under it. He had changed the oil and both belts and found two tyres somewhere that were better than the ones on it. He had put a blanket in, and a jack, and a can of gas, and a coffee can with a roll of paper in it, which made Mariah put her face in her hands.

He carried the boxes down. All five. He would not let her take one. He set them in the bed and moved them about until they could not shift, and then he tied a tarp over them, though there was a cap, and though there was not a cloud.

It was six in the morning. The sun was just on the tops of the cottonwoods. The creek was low and clear.

"It pulls left," he said. "Under braking. I couldn't find it. Don't brake hard."

"Okay."

"There's a bad stretch past Three Forks. Trucks. Stay right and let them go."

"Okay, Dad."

"Check the oil at Bozeman. It burns a little."

"I will."

He stood with his hands in his back pockets. He was looking at the left front tyre.

He had not said it. He had signed the form in May and left it on her desk. He had driven her to the graduation and sat in the gym in his good shirt while she gave the speech, and afterwards he had shaken her hand, in front of people, as if she had won something at the fair. He had been gentle with her all summer. He had not once

said that he was glad, or that he was not, or that she should go, or come back.

Evelyn stood on the porch. She did not help him. She had done enough to him.

"Well," Lyle said.

"Well."

"You've got your grandmother's number."

"It's the same number, Dad. It's been the same number since before I was born."

"Call it. Sundays. She'll worry."

"What about you?"

"I'll be feeding."

Mariah looked at him. She was nearly his height. She had the keys in her right hand, the short finger hooked through the ring.

"I'm coming back," she said. "I said it in February and you said people say that. I'm saying it again. I'm going to learn how the water works and then I'm coming back here and I'm going to be a pain in everybody's neck for fifty years."

He nodded. He went on nodding.

"Dad."

"I know," he said. "I know you are." His voice had gone to nothing. "I just—there's the red heifer. I think about her. She stopped on the ramp and looked back. And then she went up, because I asked her."

He could not say any more. He did not try. He stepped forward and put his arms round his daughter, awkwardly, his hat knocked crooked, and held on. She held on to him. Over his shoulder her face was screwed up like a child's.

It was the first time he had touched her since the draw.

He let go first. He set his hat straight. He walked off towards the corrals with his head down, not fast, and never looked round.

"That's all you'll get," Evelyn said.

"I know." Mariah wiped her nose on her sleeve.

She came up the steps. She did not hug her grandmother. She took Evelyn's two hands in hers, the whole one and the short one, and held them.

"Walk me down," she said. "To the cattle guard. I'll drive slow."

• • •

She walked her down.

It was a quarter mile of lane. The girl drove at the pace of a woman of seventy-five, with the window open and her elbow out. Evelyn walked beside the door. Neither of them said anything. There was a meadowlark on every third post. The hay meadow lay on the left, cut and stacked, gold, with the creek along the bottom of it and the sandstone above. At the top, against the rock, she could see the cedar corner post, a grey stroke.

There were no towers. There might never be. There might be, in two years, if Delbert sold to the wrong man. She did not know.

At the cattle guard Mariah stopped. She left the engine running.

"Sundays," she said.

"Sundays."

"I'll be home at Thanksgiving. If the truck lives."

"If it doesn't, call. Your father will come for you. He'd drive to Missoula for a flat tyre and be glad of the reason."

The girl smiled. She put the truck in gear. She looked through the windshield at the road, the gravel going north down the creek to Busby and the highway, and then west.

"Grandma. In seventy-five. If somebody had walked you down to the gate. Would you have gone?"

Evelyn thought about it. She gave it its due.

"I don't know," she said. "Nobody did. I can't tell."

"Okay." Mariah nodded. "I just wondered."

She let the clutch out.

The truck went over the cattle guard. It rang, the old dropped-tray sound, eight bars, and then the tyres were on gravel. Evelyn

stood and watched it go. The dust hung behind it in the still air, gold, a long time. It went round the bend by Wallace's mailbox. She saw it once more, small, crossing the flat by the Thompson Creek fork. Then the cottonwoods had it.

She stood on.

There was no reason to stay. The bars of the cattle guard were warm under her shoes. Beyond them the road was empty in both directions.

She thought that she would tell him at supper. Or tomorrow. She would put it in front of him as she had put the wall by the telephone, and let him go out to the truck for his two days. She had told the girl first. He would mind that more than the paper. She would have to let him mind it.

She was seventy-five. She had been standing at this gate, one way or another, since the spring of 1975, when a thin letter went into a stove and she told herself she had decided.

The day went over. She did the things there were to do. Lyle came in at noon and ate and went out. At six he came in again and washed, and looked out of the window over the sink, down the lane, and she saw him see that there was no car track but the one going out.

"She'll be past Butte," he said.

"About."

"I told her check the oil at Bozeman."

"She'll have checked it."

He dried his hands. He stood a moment. He looked at the jar on the sill, with the rubber bands and the old keys, and then at her.

"There's something," he said. "Isn't there. You've had a look on you since morning."

"There is. Sit down, Lyle. Eat first."

He sat down.

• • •

Afterwards she went out.

It was full dark. He had gone to the truck, as the girl had said he would. She could see the dome light from the porch, and his shape under it, quite still. He had not shouted. He had said, *since November*. Then, after a long while, he had asked whether she would have told him at all if the girl were not leaving, and she had said that she did not know. He had put on his hat.

She walked down the lane. She had not meant to go so far. The night was warm and the moon was full, high over the creek, so bright she could see the colour of the grass.

At the cattle guard she stopped and turned north.

She had looked that way ten thousand times. Down the creek, the dark line of the cottonwoods, and beyond them the long low country running out towards the Yellowstone. On a clear night there had always been the stacks. Four of them, forty miles off, at Colstrip, each with a white light at the top that blinked. She had watched them go up when she was eighteen. She had watched two go dark in 2020. The other two were still lit; they would be lit a few years yet.

Tonight there was something else.

It was to the left of the stacks, and beyond. It began low, near where the plant would be, and it ran away to the northwest in a line. Red lights. Small, unwinking, evenly spaced, one after another after another, climbing out of the Rosebud country and over the divide. She counted fourteen before they went below the hills. Past the last of them, on the very edge of the sky, there was a faint paleness, as of a town, where no town had ever been.

They had lit the line.

It did not come this way. It went north, to the Musselshell, to a place she had never seen and now had forty-two heifers on. It was nothing to do with her meadow. It had not asked her for anything, yet, but twenty-two minutes.

She stood with her hands on the gatepost and looked at it.

West of her, somewhere past Butte, a borrowed truck that pulled to the left was going through the dark with five boxes in it, and a binder. There was a sheet of paper in the binder at Article Two.

Behind her the dome light was still on.

She watched the red lights. They stood there unblinking, in their row, going on over the hill.